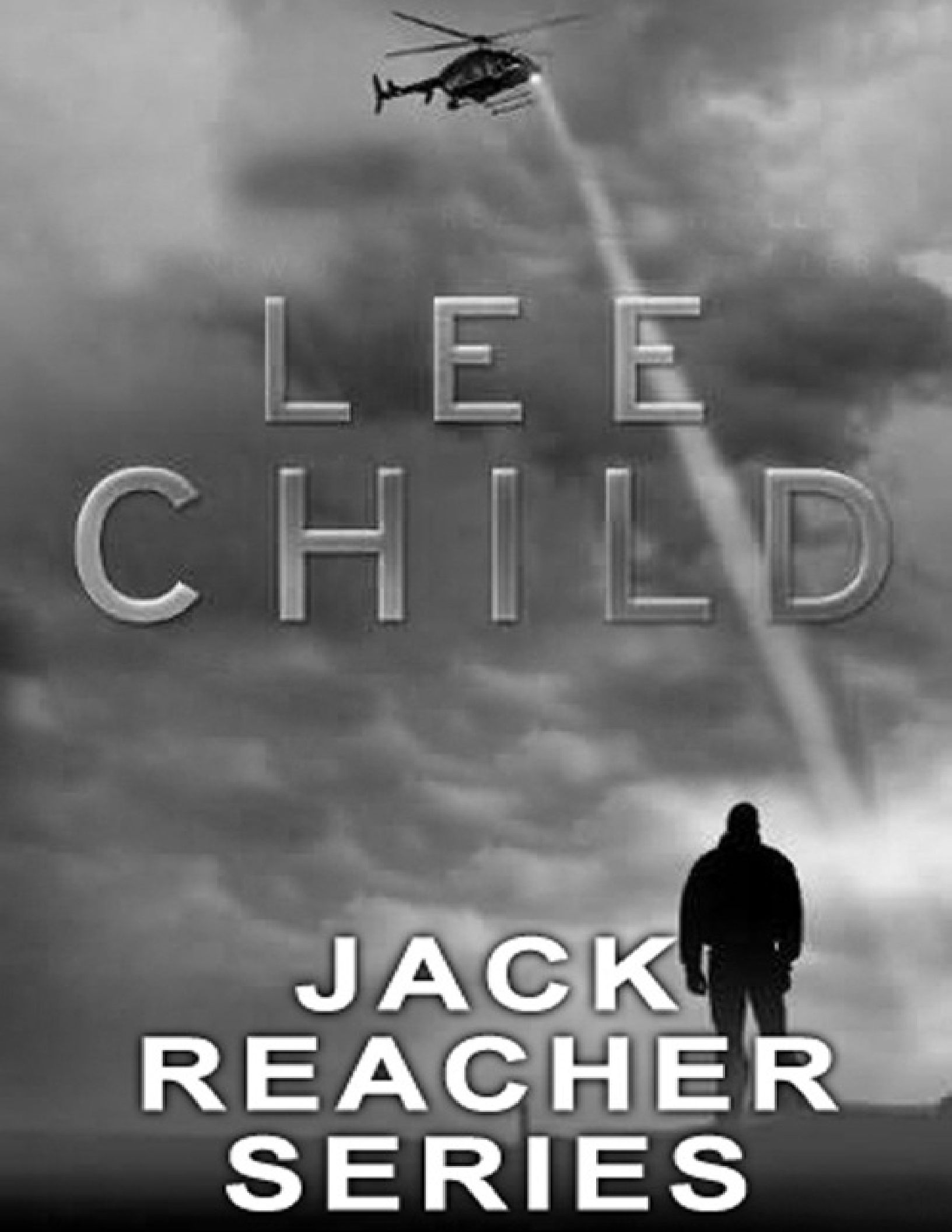
LEE
CHILD
JACK
REACHER
SERIES

Killing Floor

1

I WAS ARRESTED IN ENO'S DINER. AT TWELVE O'CLOCK. I was eating eggs and drinking coffee. A late breakfast, not lunch. I was wet and tired after a long walk in heavy rain. All the way from the highway to the edge of town.

The diner was small, but bright and clean. Brand-new, built to resemble a converted railroad car. Narrow, with a long lunch counter on one side and a kitchen bumped out back. Booths lining the opposite wall. A doorway where the center booth would be.

I was in a booth, at a window, reading somebody's abandoned newspaper about the campaign for a president I didn't vote for last time and wasn't going to vote for this time. Outside, the rain had stopped but the glass was still pebbled with bright drops. I saw the police cruisers pull into the gravel lot. They were moving fast and crunched to a stop. Light bars flashing and popping. Red and blue light in the raindrops on my window. Doors burst open, policemen jumped out. Two from each car, weapons ready. Two revolvers, two shotguns. This was heavy stuff. One revolver and one shotgun ran to the back. One of each rushed the door.

I just sat and watched them. I knew who was in the diner. A cook in back. Two waitresses. Two old men. And me. This operation was for me. I had been in town less than a half hour. The other five had probably been here all their lives. Any problem with any of them and an embarrassed sergeant would have shuffled in. He would be apologetic. He would mumble to them. He would ask them to come down to the station house. So the heavy weapons and the rush weren't for any of them. They were for me. I crammed egg into my mouth and trapped a five under the plate. Folded the abandoned newspaper into a square and shoved it into my coat pocket. Kept my hands above the table and drained my cup.

The guy with the revolver stayed at the door. He went into a crouch and pointed

the weapon two-handed. At my head. The guy with the shotgun approached close. These were fit lean boys. Neat and tidy. Textbook moves. The revolver at the door could cover the room with a degree of accuracy. The shotgun up close could splatter me all over the window. The other way around would be a mistake. The revolver could miss in a close-quarters struggle and a long-range shotgun blast from the door would kill the arresting officer and the old guy in the rear booth as well as me. So far, they were doing it right. No doubt about that. They had the advantage. No doubt about that, either. The tight booth trapped me. I was too hemmed in to do much. I spread my hands on the table. The officer with the shotgun came near.

“Freeze! Police!” he screamed.

He was screaming as loud as he could. Blowing off his tension and trying to scare me. Textbook moves. Plenty of sound and fury to soften the target. I raised my hands. The guy with the revolver started in from the door. The guy with the shotgun came closer. Too close. Their first error. If I had to, I might have lunged for the shotgun barrel and forced it up. A blast into the ceiling perhaps and an elbow into the policeman’s face and the shotgun could have been mine. The guy with the revolver had narrowed his angle and couldn’t risk hitting his partner. It could have ended badly for them. But I just sat there, hands raised. The guy with the shotgun was still screaming and jumping.

“Out here on the floor!” he yelled.

I slid slowly out of the booth and extended my wrists to the officer with the revolver. I wasn’t going to lie on the floor. Not for these country boys. Not if they brought along their whole police department with howitzers.

The guy with the revolver was a sergeant. He was pretty calm. The shotgun covered me as the sergeant holstered his revolver and unclipped the handcuffs from his belt and clicked them on my wrists. The backup team came in through the kitchen. They walked around the lunch counter. Took up position behind me. They patted me down. Very thorough. I saw the sergeant acknowledge the shakes of the heads. No weapon.

The backup guys each took an elbow. The shotgun still covered me. The sergeant stepped up in front. He was a compact, athletic white man. Lean and tanned. My age. The acetate nameplate above his shirt pocket said: Baker. He

looked up at me.

“You are under arrest for murder,” he said. “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be used as evidence against you. You have the right to representation by an attorney. Should you be unable to afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you by the State of Georgia free of charge. Do you understand these rights?”

It was a fine rendition of Miranda. He spoke clearly. He didn’t read it from a card. He spoke like he knew what it meant and why it was important. To him and to me. I didn’t respond.

“Do you understand your rights?” he said again.

Again I didn’t respond. Long experience had taught me that absolute silence is the best way. Say something, and it can be misheard. Misunderstood. Misinterpreted. It can get you convicted. It can get you killed. Silence upsets the arresting officer. He has to tell you silence is your right but he hates it if you exercise that right. I was being arrested for murder. But I said nothing.

“Do you understand your rights?” the guy called Baker asked me again. “Do you speak English?”

He was calm. I said nothing. He remained calm. He had the calm of a man whose moment of danger had passed. He would just drive me to the station house and then I would become someone else’s problem. He glanced round his three fellow officers.

“OK, make a note, he’s said nothing,” he grunted. “Let’s go.”

I was walked toward the door. At the door we formed a single file. First Baker. Then the guy with the shotgun, walking backward, still with the big black barrel pointing at me. His nameplate said: Stevenson. He too was a medium white man in good shape. His weapon looked like a drainpipe. Pointing at my gut. Behind me were the backup guys. I was pushed through the door with a hand flat on my back.

Outside in the gravel lot the heat was up. It must have rained all night and most of the morning. Now the sun was blasting away and the ground was steaming. Normally this would be a dusty hot place. Today it was steaming with that

wonderful heady aroma of drenched pavement under a hot noon sun. I stood face up to the sun and inhaled as the officers regrouped. One at each elbow for the short walk to the cars. Stevenson still on the ball with the pump-action. At the first car he skipped backward a step as Baker opened the rear door. My head was pushed down. I was nudged into the car with a neat hip-to-hip contact from the left-hand backup. Good moves. In a town this far from anywhere, surely the result of a lot of training rather than a lot of experience.

I was alone in the back of the car. A thick glass partition divided the space. The front doors were still open. Baker and Stevenson got in. Baker drove. Stevenson was twisted around keeping me under observation. Nobody talked. The backup car followed. The cars were new. Quiet and smooth riding. Clean and cool inside. No ingrained traces of desperate and pathetic people riding where I was riding.

I looked out of the window. Georgia. I saw rich land. Heavy, damp red earth. Very long and straight rows of low-bushes in the fields. Peanuts, maybe. Belly crops, but valuable to the grower. Or to the owner. Did people own their land here? Or did giant corporations? I didn't know.

The drive to town was short. The car hissed over the smooth soaked tarmac. After maybe a half mile I saw two neat buildings, both new, both with tidy landscaping. The police station and the firehouse. They stood alone together, behind a wide lawn with a statue, north edge of town. Attractive county architecture on a generous budget. Roads were smooth tarmac, sidewalks were red blocks. Three hundred yards south, I could see a blinding white church steeple behind a small huddle of buildings. I could see flagpoles, awnings, crisp paint, green lawns. Everything refreshed by the heavy rain. Now steaming and somehow intense in the heat. A prosperous community. Built, I guessed, on prosperous farm incomes and high taxes on the commuters who worked up in Atlanta.

Stevenson still stared at me as the car slowed to yaw into the approach to the station house. A wide semicircle of driveway. I read on a low masonry sign: Margrave Police Headquarters. I thought: should I be worried? I was under arrest. In a town where I'd never been before. Apparently for murder. But I knew two things. First, they couldn't prove something had happened if it hadn't happened. And second, I hadn't killed anybody.

Not in their town, and not for a long time, anyway.

2

WE PULLED UP AT THE DOORS OF THE LONG LOW BUILDING. Baker got out of the car and looked up and down along the frontage. The backup guys stood by. Stevenson walked around the back of our car. Took up a position opposite Baker. Pointed the shotgun at me. This was a good team. Baker opened my door.

“OK, let’s go, let’s go,” he said. Almost a whisper.

He was bouncing on the balls of his feet, scanning the area. I pivoted slowly and twisted out of the car. The handcuffs didn’t help. Even hotter now. I stepped forward and waited. The backup fell in behind me. Ahead of me was the station house entrance. There was a long marble lintel crisply engraved: Town of Margrave Police Headquarters. Below it were plate-glass doors. Baker pulled one open. It sucked against rubber seals. The backup pushed me through. The door sucked shut behind me.

Inside it was cool again. Everything was white and chrome. Lights were fluorescent. It looked like a bank or an insurance office. There was carpet. A desk sergeant stood behind a long reception counter. The way the place looked, he should have said: how may I help you, sir? But he said nothing. He just looked at me. Behind him was a huge open-plan space. A dark-haired woman in uniform was sitting at a wide, low desk. She had been doing paperwork on a keyboard. Now she was looking at me. I stood there, an officer on each elbow. Stevenson was backed up against the reception counter. His shotgun was pointed at me. Baker stood there, looking at me. The desk sergeant and the woman in uniform were looking at me. I looked back at them.

Then I was walked to the left. They stopped me in front of a door. Baker swung it open and I was pushed into a room. It was an interview facility. No windows. A white table and three chairs. Carpet. In the top corner of the room, a camera. The air in the room was set very cold. I was still wet from the rain.

I stood there and Baker ferreted into every pocket. My belongings made a small pile on the table. A roll of cash. Some coins. Receipts, tickets, scraps. Baker checked the newspaper and left it in my pocket. Glanced at my watch and left it on my wrist. He wasn’t interested in those things. Everything else was swept

into a large Ziploc bag. A bag made for people with more in their pockets than I carry. The bag had a white panel printed on it. Stevenson wrote some kind of a number on the panel.

Baker told me to sit down. Then they all left the room. Stevenson carried the bag with my stuff in it. They went out and closed the door and I heard the lock turning. It had a heavy, well-greased sound. The sound of precision. The sound of a big steel lock. Sounded like a lock that would keep me in.

I FIGURED THEY WOULD LEAVE ME ISOLATED FOR A WHILE. It usually happens that way. Isolation causes an urge to talk. An urge to talk can become an urge to confess. A brutal arrest followed by an hour's isolation is pretty good strategy.

But I figured wrong. They hadn't planned an hour's isolation. Maybe their second slight tactical mistake. Baker unlocked the door and stepped back in. He carried a plastic cup of coffee. Then he signaled the uniformed woman into the room. The one I'd seen at her desk in the open area. The heavy lock clicked behind her. She carried a metal flight case which she set on the table. She clicked it open and took out a long black number holder. In it were white plastic numbers.

She handed it to me with that brusque apologetic sympathy that dental nurses use. I took it in my cuffed hands. Squinted down to make sure it was the right way up and held it under my chin. The woman took an ugly camera out of the case and sat opposite me. She rested her elbows on the table to brace the camera. Sitting forward. Her breasts rested on the edge of the table. This was a good-looking woman. Dark hair, great eyes. I stared at her and smiled. The camera clicked and flashed. Before she could ask I turned sideways on the chair for the profile. Held the long number against my shoulder and stared at the wall. The camera clicked and flashed again. I turned back and held out the number. Two-handed, because of the cuffs. She took it from me with that pursed grin which says: yes, it's unpleasant, but it's necessary. Like the dental nurse.

Then she took out the fingerprint gear. A crisp ten-card, already labeled with a number. The thumb spaces are always too small. This one had a reverse side with two squares for palm prints. The handcuffs made the process difficult. Baker didn't offer to remove them. The woman inked my hands. Her fingers

were smooth and cool. No wedding band. Afterward she handed me a wad of tissues. The ink came off very easily. Some kind of new stuff I hadn't seen before.

The woman unloaded the camera and put the film with the prints card on the table. She repacked the camera into the flight case. Baker rapped on the door. The lock clicked again. The woman picked up her stuff. Nobody spoke. The woman left the room. Baker stayed in there with me. He shut the door and it locked with the same greased click. Then he leaned on the door and looked at me.

"My chief's coming on down," he said. "You're going to have to talk to him. We got a situation here. Got to be cleared up."

I said nothing back to him. Talking to me wasn't going to clear any situation up for anybody. But the guy was acting civilized. Respectful. So I set him a test. Held out my hands toward him. An unspoken request to unlock the cuffs. He stood still for a moment then took out the key and unlocked them. Clipped them back on his belt. Looked at me. I looked back and dropped my arms to my sides. No grateful exhalation. No rueful rubbing of my wrists. I didn't want a relationship with this guy. But I did speak.

"OK," I said. "Let's go meet your chief."

It was the first time I'd spoken since ordering breakfast. Now Baker was the one who looked grateful. He rapped twice on the door and it was unlocked from the outside. He opened it up and signaled me through. Stevenson was waiting with his back to the large open area. The shotgun was gone. The backup crew was gone. Things were calming down. They formed up, one on each side. Baker gripped my elbow, lightly. We walked down the side of the open area and came to a door at the back. Stevenson pushed it open and we walked through into a large office. Lots of rosewood all over it.

A fat guy sat at a big rosewood desk. Behind him were a couple of big flags. There was a Stars and Stripes with a gold fringe on the left and what I guessed was the Georgia state flag on the right. On the wall between the flags was a clock. It was a big old round thing framed in mahogany. Looked like it had decades of polish on it. I figured it must be the clock from whatever old station house they bulldozed to build this new place. I figured the architect had used it to give a sense of history to the new building. It was showing nearly twelve

thirty.

The fat guy at the big desk looked up at me as I was pushed in toward him. I saw him look blank, like he was trying to place me. He looked again, harder. Then he sneered at me and spoke in a wheezing gasp which would have been a shout if it hadn't been strangled by bad lungs.

"Get your ass in that chair and keep your filthy mouth shut," he said.

This fat guy was a surprise. He looked like a real asshole. Opposite to what I'd seen so far. Baker and his arrest team were the business. Professional and efficient. The fingerprint woman had been decent. But this fat police chief was a waste of space. Thin dirty hair. Sweating, despite the chilly air. The blotchy red and gray complexion of an unfit, overweight mess. Blood pressure sky-high. Arteries hard as rocks. He didn't look halfway competent.

"My name is Morrison," he wheezed. As if I cared. "I am chief of the police department down here in Margrave. And you are a murdering outsider bastard. You've come down here to my town and you've messed up right there on Mr. Kliner's private property. So now you're going to make a full confession to my chief of detectives."

He stopped and looked up at me. Like he was still trying to place me. Or like he was waiting for a response. He didn't get one. So he jabbed his fat finger at me.

"And then you're going to jail," he said. "And then you're going to the chair. And then I'm going to take a dump on your shitty little pauper's grave."

He hauled his bulk out of the chair and looked away from me.

"I'd deal with this myself," he said. "But I'm a busy man."

He waddled out from behind his desk. I was standing there between his desk and the door. As he crabbed by, he stopped. His fat nose was about level with the middle button on my coat. He was still looking up at me like he was puzzled by something.

"I've seen you before," he said. "Where was it?"

He glanced at Baker and then at Stevenson. Like he was expecting them to note what he was saying and when he was saying it.

what he was saying and when he was saying it.

“I’ve seen this guy before,” he told them.

HE SLAMMED THE OFFICE DOOR AND I WAS LEFT WAITING with the two cops until the chief of detectives swung in. A tall black guy, not old, but graying and balding. Just enough to give him a patrician air. Brisk and confident. Well-dressed, in an old-fashioned tweed suit. Moleskin vest. Shined shoes. This guy looked like a chief should look. He signaled Baker and Stevenson out of the office. Closed the door behind them. Sat down at the desk and waved me to the opposite chair.

He rattled open a drawer and pulled out a cassette recorder. Raised it high, arm’s length, to pull out the tangle of cords. Plugged in the power and the microphone. Inserted a tape. Pressed record and flicked the microphone with his fingernail. Stopped the tape and wound it back. Pressed play. Heard the thunk of his nail. Nodded. Wound back again and pressed record. I sat and watched him.

For a moment there was silence. Just a faint hum, the air, the lights, or the computer. Or the recorder whirring slowly. I could hear the slow tick of the old clock. It made a patient sound, like it was prepared to tick on forever, no matter what I chose to do. Then the guy sat right back in his chair and looked hard at me. Did the steepled fingers thing, like tall elegant people can.

“Right,” he said. “We got a few questions, don’t we?”

The voice was deep. Like a rumble. Not a southern accent. He looked and sounded like a Boston banker, except he was black.

“My name is Finlay,” he said. “My rank is captain. I am chief of this department’s detective bureau. I understand you have been apprised of your rights. You have not yet confirmed that you understood them. Before we go any further we must pursue that preliminary matter.”

Not a Boston banker. More like a Harvard guy.

“I understand my rights,” I said.

He nodded.

“Good,” he said. “I’m glad about that. Where’s your lawyer?”

“I don’t need a lawyer,” I said.

“You’re charged with murder,” he said. “You need a lawyer. We’ll provide one, you know. Free of charge. Do you want us to provide one, free of charge?”

“No, I don’t need a lawyer,” I said.

The guy called Finlay stared at me over his fingers for a long moment.

“OK,” he said. “But you’re going to have to sign a release. You know, you’ve been advised you may have a lawyer, and we’ll provide one, at no cost to yourself, but you absolutely don’t want one.”

“OK,” I said.

He shuffled a form from another drawer and checked his watch to enter date and time. He slid the form across to me. A large printed cross marked the line where I was supposed to sign. He slid me a pen. I signed and slid the form back. He studied it. Placed it in a buff folder.

“I can’t read that signature,” he said. “So for the record we’ll start with your name, your address and your date of birth.”

There was silence again. I looked at him. This was a stubborn guy. Probably forty-five. You don’t get to be chief of detectives in a Georgia jurisdiction if you’re forty-five and black except if you’re a stubborn guy. No percentage in jerking him around. I drew a breath.

“My name is Jack Reacher,” I said. “No middle name. No address.”

He wrote it down. Not much to write. I told him my date of birth.

“OK, Mr. Reacher,” Finlay said. “As I said, we have a lot of questions. I’ve glanced through your personal effects. You were carrying no ID at all. No driver’s license, no credit cards, no nothing. You have no address, you say. So I’m asking myself, who is this guy?”

He didn’t wait for any kind of a comment on that from me.

“Who was the guy with the shaved head?” he asked me.

I didn’t answer. I was watching the big clock, waiting for the minute hand to move.

“Tell me what happened,” he said.

I had no idea what had happened. No idea at all. Something had happened to somebody, but not to me. I sat there. Didn’t answer.

“What is Pluribus?” Finlay asked.

I looked at him and shrugged.

“The United States motto?” I said. “E Pluribus Unum? Adopted in 1776 by the Second Continental Congress, right?”

He just grunted at me. I carried on looking straight at him. I figured this was the type of a guy who might answer a question.

“What is this about?” I asked him.

Silence again. His turn to look at me. I could see him thinking about whether to answer, and how.

“What is this about?” I asked him again. He sat back and steepled his fingers.

“You know what this is about,” he said. “Homicide. With some very disturbing features. Victim was found this morning up at the Kliner warehouse. North end of the county road, up at the highway cloverleaf. Witness has reported a man seen walking away from that location. Shortly after eight o’clock this morning. Description given was that of a white man, very tall, wearing a long black overcoat, fair hair, no hat, no baggage.”

Silence again. I am a white man. I am very tall. My hair is fair. I was sitting there wearing a long black overcoat. I didn’t have a hat. Or a bag. I had been walking on the county road for the best part of four hours this morning. From eight until about eleven forty-five.

“How long is the county road?” I said. “From the highway all the way down to here?”

Finlay thought about it.

“Maybe fourteen miles, I guess,” he said.

“Right,” I said. “I walked all the way down from the highway into town. Fourteen miles, maybe. Plenty of people must have seen me. Doesn’t mean I did anything to anybody.”

He didn’t respond. I was getting curious about this situation.

“Is that your neighborhood?” I asked him. “All the way over at the highway?”

“Yes, it is,” he said. “Jurisdiction issue is clear. No way out for you there, Mr. Reacher. The town limit extends fourteen miles, right up to the highway. The warehousing out there is mine, no doubt about that.”

He waited. I nodded. He carried on.

“Kliner built the place, five years ago,” he said. “You heard of him?”

I shook my head.

“How should I have heard of him?” I said. “I’ve never been here before.”

“He’s a big deal around here,” Finlay said. “His operation out there pays us a lot of taxes, does us a lot of good. A lot of revenue and a lot of benefit for the town without a lot of mess, because it’s so far away, right? So we try to take care of it for him. But now it’s a homicide scene, and you’ve got explaining to do.”

The guy was doing his job, but he was wasting my time.

“OK, Finlay,” I said. “I’ll make a statement describing every little thing I did since I entered your lousy town limits until I got hauled in here in the middle of my damn breakfast. If you can make anything out of it, I’ll give you a damn medal. Because all I did was to place one foot in front of the other for nearly four hours in the pouring rain all the way through your precious fourteen damn miles.”

That was the longest speech I had made for six months. Finlay sat and gazed at me. I watched him struggling with any detective’s basic dilemma. His gut told

him I might not be his man. But I was sitting right there in front of him. So what should a detective do? I let him ponder. Tried to time it right with a nudge in the right direction. I was going to say something about the real guy still running around out there while he was wasting time in here with me. That would feed his insecurity. But he jumped first. In the wrong direction.

“No statements,” he said. “I’ll ask the questions and you’ll answer them. You’re Jack-none-Reacher. No address. No ID. What are you, a vagrant?”

I sighed. Today was Friday. The big clock showed it was already more than half over. This guy Finlay was going to go through all the hoops with this. I was going to spend the weekend in a cell. Probably get out Monday.

“I’m not a vagrant, Finlay,” I said. “I’m a hobo. Big difference.”

He shook his head, slowly.

“Don’t get smart with me, Reacher,” he said. “You’re in deep shit. Bad things happened up there. Our witness saw you leaving the scene. You’re a stranger with no ID and no story. So don’t get smart with me.”

He was still just doing his job, but he was still wasting my time.

“I wasn’t leaving a homicide scene,” I said. “I was walking down a damn road. There’s a difference, right? People leaving homicide scenes run and hide. They don’t walk straight down the road. What’s wrong about walking down a road? People walk down roads all the damn time, don’t they?”

Finlay leaned forward and shook his head.

“No,” he said. “Nobody has walked the length of that road since the invention of the automobile. So why no address? Where are you from? Answer the questions. Let’s get this done.”

“OK, Finlay, let’s get it done,” I said. “I don’t have an address because I don’t live anywhere. Maybe one day I’ll live somewhere and then I’ll have an address and I’ll send you a picture postcard and you can put it in your damn address book, since you seem so damn concerned about it.”

Finlay gazed at me and reviewed his options. Elected to go the patient route.

Patient, but stubborn. Like he couldn't be deflected.

"Where are you from?" he asked. "What was your last address?"

"What exactly do you mean when you say where am I from?" I asked.

His lips were clamped. I was getting him bad-tempered, too. But he stayed patient. Laced the patience with an icy sarcasm.

"OK," he said. "You don't understand my question, so let me try to make it quite clear. What I mean is, where were you born, or where have you lived for that majority period of your life which you instinctively regard as predominant in a social or cultural context?"

I just looked at him.

"I'll give you an example," he said. "I myself was born in Boston, was educated in Boston and subsequently worked for twenty years in Boston, so I would say, and I think you would agree, that I come from Boston."

I was right. A Harvard guy. A Harvard guy, running out of patience.

"OK," I said. "You've asked the questions. I'll answer them. But let me tell you something. I'm not your guy. By Monday you'll know I'm not your guy. So do yourself a favor. Don't stop looking."

Finlay was fighting a smile. He nodded gravely.

"I appreciate your advice," he said. "And your concern for my career."

"You're welcome," I said.

"Go on," he said.

"OK," I said. "According to your fancy definition, I don't come from anywhere. I come from a place called Military. I was born on a U.S. Army base in West Berlin. My old man was Marine Corps and my mother was a French civilian he met in Holland. They got married in Korea."

Finlay nodded. Made a note.

"I was a military kid," I said. "Show me a list of U.S. bases all around the world

"I was a military kid," I said. "Show me a list of U.S. bases all around the world and that's a list of where I lived. I did high school in two dozen different countries and I did four years up at West Point."

"Go on," Finlay said.

"I stayed in the army," I said. "Military Police. I served and lived in all those bases all over again. Then, Finlay, after thirty-six years of first being an officer's kid and then being an officer myself, suddenly there's no need for a great big army anymore because the Soviets have gone belly-up. So hooray, we get the peace dividend. Which for you means your taxes get spent on something else, but for me means I'm a thirty-six-year-old unemployed ex-military policeman getting called a vagrant by smug civilian bastards who wouldn't last five minutes in the world I survived."

He thought for a moment. Wasn't impressed.

"Continue," he said.

I shrugged at him.

"So right now I'm just enjoying myself," I said. "Maybe eventually I'll find something to do, maybe I won't. Maybe I'll settle somewhere, maybe I won't. But right now, I'm not looking to."

He nodded. Jotted some more notes.

"When did you leave the army?" he asked.

"Six months ago," I said. "April."

"Have you worked at all since then?" he asked.

"You're joking," I said. "When was the last time you looked for work?"

"April," he mimicked. "Six months ago. I got this job."

"Well, good for you, Finlay," I said.

I couldn't think of anything else to say. Finlay gazed at me for a moment.

"What have you been living on?" he asked. "What rank did you hold?"

"What have you been living on?" he asked. "What rank did you hold?"

"Major," I said. "They give you severance pay when they kick you out. Still got most of it. Trying to make it last, you know?"

A long silence. Finlay drummed a rhythm with the wrong end of his pen.

"SO LET'S TALK ABOUT THE LAST TWENTY-FOUR HOURS," he said.

I sighed. Now I was heading for trouble.

"I came up on the Greyhound bus," I said. "Got off at the county road. Eight o'clock this morning. Walked down into town, reached that diner, ordered breakfast and I was eating it when your guys came by and hauled me in."

"You got business here?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"I'm out of work," I said. "I haven't got any business anywhere."

He wrote that down.

"Where did you get on the bus?" he asked me.

"In Tampa," I said. "Left at midnight last night."

"Tampa in Florida?" he asked.

I nodded. He rattled open another drawer. Pulled out a Greyhound schedule. Riffed it open and ran a long brown finger down a page. This was a very thorough guy. He looked across at me.

"That's an express bus," he said. "Runs straight through north to Atlanta. Arrives there nine o'clock in the morning. Doesn't stop here at eight."

I shook my head.

"I asked the driver to stop," I said. "He said he shouldn't, but he did. Stopped specially, let me off."

“You been around here before?” he asked.

I shook my head again.

“Got family down here?” he asked.

“Not down here,” I said.

“You got family anywhere?” he asked.

“A brother up in D.C.,” I said. “Works for the Treasury Department.”

“You got friends down here in Georgia?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

Finlay wrote it all down. Then there was a long silence. I knew for sure what the next question was going to be.

“So why?” he asked. “Why get off the bus at an unscheduled stop and walk fourteen miles in the rain to a place you had absolutely no reason to go to?”

That was the killer question. Finlay had picked it out right away. So would a prosecutor. And I had no real answer.

“What can I tell you?” I said. “It was an arbitrary decision. I was restless. I have to be somewhere, right?”

“But why here?” he said.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Guy next to me had a map, and I picked this place out. I wanted to get off the main drags. Thought I could loop back down toward the Gulf, farther west, maybe.”

“You picked this place out?” Finlay said. “Don’t give me that shit. How could you pick this place out? It’s just a name. It’s just a dot on the map. You must have had a reason.”

I nodded.

“I thought I’d come and look for Blind Blake,” I said.

“Who the hell is Blind Blake?” he said.

I watched him evaluating scenarios like a chess computer evaluates moves. Was Blind Blake my friend, my enemy, my accomplice, conspirator, mentor, creditor, debtor, my next victim?

“Blind Blake was a guitar player,” I said. “Died sixty years ago, maybe murdered. My brother bought a record, sleeve note said it happened in Margrave. He wrote me about it. Said he was through here a couple of times in the spring, some kind of business. I thought I’d come down and check the story out.”

Finlay looked blank. It must have sounded pretty thin to him. It would have sounded pretty thin to me too, in his position.

“You came here looking for a guitar player?” he said.

“A guitar player who died sixty years ago? Why? Are you a guitar player?”

“No,” I said.

“How did your brother write you?” he asked. “When you got no address?”

“He wrote my old unit,” I said. “They forward my mail to my bank, where I put my severance pay. They send it on when I wire them for cash.”

He shook his head. Made a note.

“The midnight Greyhound out of Tampa, right?” he said.

I nodded.

“Got your bus ticket?” he asked.

“In the property bag, I guess,” I said. I remembered Baker bagging up all my pocket junk. Stevenson tagging it.

“Would the bus driver remember?” Finlay said.

“Maybe,” I said. “It was a special stop. I had to ask him.”

Maybe," I said. "It was a special stop. I had to ask him."

I became like a spectator. The situation became abstract. My job had been not that different from Finlay's. I had an odd feeling of conferring with him about somebody else's case. Like we were colleagues discussing a knotty problem.

"Why aren't you working?" Finlay asked.

I shrugged. Tried to explain.

"Because I don't want to work," I said. "I worked thirteen years, got me nowhere. I feel like I tried it their way, and to hell with them. Now I'm going to try it my way."

Finlay sat and gazed at me.

"Did you have any trouble in the army?" he said.

"No more than you did in Boston," I said.

He was surprised.

"What do you mean by that?" he said.

"You did twenty years in Boston," I said. "That's what you told me, Finlay. So why are you down here in this no-account little place? You should be taking your pension, going out fishing. Cape Cod or wherever. What's your story?"

"That's my business, Mr. Reacher," he said. "Answer my question."

I shrugged.

"Ask the army," I said.

"I will," he said. "You can be damn sure of that. Did you get an honorable discharge?"

"Would they give me severance if I didn't?" I said.

"Why should I believe they gave you a dime?" he said. "You live like a damn vagrant. Honorable discharge? Yes or no?"

“Yes,” I said. “Of course.”

He made another note. Thought for a while.

“How did it make you feel, being let go?” he asked.

I thought about it. Shrugged at him.

“Didn’t make me feel like anything,” I said. “Made me feel like I was in the army, and now I’m not in the army.”

“Do you feel bitter?” he said. “Let down?”

“No,” I said. “Should I?”

“No problems at all?” he asked. Like there had to be something.

I felt like I had to give him some kind of an answer. But I couldn’t think of anything. I had been in the service since the day I was born. Now I was out. Being out felt great. Felt like freedom. Like all my life I’d had a slight headache. Not noticing until it was gone. My only problem was making a living. How to make a living without giving up the freedom was not an easy trick. I hadn’t earned a cent in six months. That was my only problem. But I wasn’t about to tell Finlay that. He’d see it as a motive. He’d think I had decided to bankroll my vagrant lifestyle by robbing people. At warehouses. And then killing them.

“I guess the transition is hard to manage,” I said. “Especially since I had the life as a kid, too.”

Finlay nodded. Considered my answer.

“Why you in particular?” he said. “Did you volunteer to muster out?”

“I never volunteer for anything,” I said. “Soldier’s basic rule.”

Another silence.

“Did you specialize?” he asked. “In the service?”

“General duties, initially,” I said. “That’s the system. Then I handled secrets security for five years. Then the last six years, I handled something else.”

Let him ask.

“What was that?” he asked.

“Homicide investigation,” I said.

Finlay leaned right back. Grunted. Did the steepled fingers thing again. He gazed at me and exhaled. Sat forward. Pointed a finger at me.

“Right,” he said. “I’m going to check you out. We’ve got your prints. Those should be on file with the army. We’ll get your service record. All of it. All the details. We’ll check with the bus company. Check your ticket. Find the driver, find the passengers. If what you say is right, we’ll know soon enough. And if it’s true, it may let you off the hook. Obviously, certain details of timing and methodology will determine the matter. Those details are as yet unclear.”

He paused and exhaled again. Looked right at me.

“In the meantime, I’m a cautious man,” he said. “On the face of it, you look bad. A drifter. A vagrant. No address, no history. Your story may be bullshit. You may be a fugitive. You may have been murdering people left and right in a dozen states. I just don’t know. I can’t be expected to give you the benefit of the doubt. Right now, why should I even have any doubt? You stay locked up until we know for sure, OK?”

It was what I had expected. It was exactly what I would have said. But I just looked at him and shook my head.

“You’re a cautious guy?” I said. “That’s for damn sure.”

He looked back at me.

“If I’m wrong, I’ll buy you lunch on Monday,” he said. “At Eno’s place, to make up for today.”

I shook my head again.

“I’m not looking for a buddy down here,” I said.

Finlay just shrugged. Clicked off the tape recorder. Rewound. Took out the tape. Wrote on it. He buzzed the intercom on the big rosewood desk. Asked Baker to

come back in. I waited. It was still cold. But I had finally dried out. The rain had fallen out of the Georgia sky and had soaked into me. Now it had been sucked out again by the dried office air. A dehumidifier had sucked it out and piped it away.

Baker knocked and entered. Finlay told him to escort me to the cells. Then he nodded to me. It was a nod which said: if you turn out not to be the guy, remember I was just doing my job. I nodded back. Mine was a nod which said: while you're covering your ass, there's a killer running about outside.

THE CELL BLOCK WAS REALLY JUST A WIDE ALCOVE OFF THE main open-plan squad room. It was divided into three separate cells with vertical bars. The front wall was all bars. A gate section hinged into each cell. The metalwork had a fabulous dull glitter. Looked like titanium. Each cell was carpeted. But totally empty. No furniture or bed ledge. Just a high-budget version of the old-fashioned holding pens you used to see.

"No overnight accommodation here?" I asked Baker.

"No way," he replied. "You'll be moved to the state facility later. Bus comes by at six. Bus brings you back Monday."

He clanged the gate shut and turned his key. I heard bolts socket home all around the rim. Electric. I took the newspaper out of my pocket. Took off my coat and rolled it up. Lay flat on the floor and crammed the coat under my head.

Now I was truly pissed off. I was going to prison for the weekend. I wasn't staying in a station house cell. Not that I had any other plans. But I knew about civilian prisons. A lot of army deserters end up in civilian prisons. For one thing or another. The system notifies the army. Military policeman gets sent to bring them back. So I'd seen civilian prisons. They didn't make me wild with enthusiasm. I lay angrily listening to the hum of the squad room. Phones rang. Keyboards pattered. The tempo rose and fell. Officers moved about, talking low.

Then I tried to finish reading the borrowed newspaper. It was full of shit about the president and his campaign to get himself elected again for a second term. The old guy was down in Pensacola on the Gulf Coast. He was aiming to get the budget balanced before his grandchildren's hair turned white. He was cutting

things like a guy with a machete blasting his way through the jungle. Down in Pensacola, he was sticking it to the Coast Guard. They'd been running an initiative for the last twelve months. They'd been out in force like a curved shield off Florida's coast every day for a year, boarding and searching all the marine traffic they didn't like the smell of. It had been announced with an enormous fanfare. And it had been successful beyond their wildest dreams. They'd seized all kinds of stuff. Drugs, mostly, but guns as well, illegal migrants from Haiti and Cuba. The interdiction was reducing crime all over the States months later and thousands of miles further down the line. A big success.

So it was being abandoned. It was very expensive to run. The Coast Guard's budget was into serious deficit. The president said he couldn't increase it. In fact, he'd have to cut it. The economy was in a mess. Nothing else he could do. So the interdiction initiative would be canceled in seven days' time. The president was trying to come across like a statesman. Law enforcement big shots were angry, because they figured prevention was better than cure. Washington insiders were happy, because fifty cents spent on beat cops was much more visible than two bucks spent out on the ocean two thousand miles away from the voters. The arguments flew back and forth. And in the smudgy photographs, the president was just beaming away like a statesman saying there was nothing he could do. I stopped reading, because it was just making me angrier.

To calm down, I ran music through my head. The chorus in "Smokestack Lightning." The Howling Wolf version puts a wonderful strangled cry on the end of the first line. They say you need to ride the rails for a while to understand the traveling blues. They're wrong. To understand the traveling blues you need to be locked down somewhere. In a cell. Or in the army. Someplace where you're caged. Someplace where smokestack lightning looks like a faraway beacon of impossible freedom. I lay there with my coat as a pillow and listened to the music in my head. At the end of the third chorus, I fell asleep.

I WOKE UP AGAIN WHEN BAKER STARTED KICKING THE BARS. They made a dull ringing sound. Like a funeral bell. Baker stood there with Finlay. They looked down at me. I stayed on the floor. I was comfortable down there.

"Where did you say you were at midnight last night?" Finlay asked me.

"Getting on the bus in Tampa," I said.

“We’ve got a new witness,” Finlay said. “He saw you at the warehouse facility. Last night. Hanging around. At midnight.”

“Total crap, Finlay,” I said. “Impossible. Who the hell is this new witness?”

“The witness is Chief Morrison,” Finlay said. “The chief of police. He says he was sure he had seen you before. Now he has remembered where.”

3

THEY TOOK ME BACK TO THE ROSEWOOD OFFICE IN HANDCUFFS. Finlay sat at the big desk, in front of the flags, under the old clock. Baker set a chair at the end of the desk. I sat opposite Finlay. He took out the tape machine. Dragged out the cords. Positioned the microphone between us. Tested it with his fingernail. Rolled the tape back. Ready.

“The last twenty-four hours, Reacher,” he said. “In detail.”

The two policemen were crackling with repressed excitement. A weak case had suddenly grown strong. The thrill of winning was beginning to grip them. I recognized the signs.

“I was in Tampa last night,” I said. “Got on the bus at midnight. Witnesses can confirm that. I got off the bus at eight this morning where the county road meets the highway. If Chief Morrison says he saw me at midnight, he’s mistaken. At that time I was about four hundred miles away. I can’t add anything more. Check it out.”

Finlay stared at me. Then he nodded to Baker who opened a buff file.

“Victim is unidentified,” Baker said. “No ID. No wallet. No distinguishing marks. White male, maybe forty, very tall, shaved head. Body was found up there at eight this morning on the ground against the perimeter fence close to the main gate. It was partially covered with cardboard. We were able to fingerprint the body. Negative result. No match anywhere in the database.”

“Who was he, Reacher?” Finlay asked.

Baker waited for some sort of reaction from me. He didn’t get one. I just sat there and listened to the quiet tick of the old clock. The hands crawled around to two thirty. I didn’t speak. Baker riffed through the file and selected another sheet. He glanced up again and continued.

“Victim received two shots to the head,” he said. “Probably a small-caliber automatic with a silencer. First shot was close range, left temple, second was a contact shot behind the left ear. Obviously soft-nosed slugs, because the exit wounds removed the guy’s face. Rain has washed away the powder deposits but

wounds removed the guy's face. Rain has washed away the powder deposits but the burn patterns suggest the silencer. Fatal shot must have been the first. No bullets remained in the skull. No shell cases were found."

"Where's the gun, Reacher?" Finlay said.

I looked at him and made a face. Didn't speak.

"Victim died between eleven thirty and one o'clock last night," Baker said. "Body wasn't there at eleven thirty when the evening gateman went off duty. He confirms that. It was found when the day man came in to open the gate. About eight o'clock. He saw you leaving the scene and phoned it in."

"Who was he, Reacher?" Finlay said again.

I ignored him and looked at Baker.

"Why before one o'clock?" I asked him.

"The heavy rain last night began at one o'clock," he said. "The pavement underneath the body was bone dry. So, the body was on the ground before one o'clock when the rain started. Medical opinion is he was shot at midnight."

I nodded. Smiled at them. The time of death was going to let me out.

"Tell us what happened next," Finlay said, quietly.

I shrugged at him.

"You tell me," I said. "I wasn't there. I was in Tampa at midnight."

Baker leaned forward and pulled another sheet out of the file.

"What happened next is you got weird," he said. "You went crazy."

I shook my head at him.

"I wasn't there at midnight," I said again. "I was getting on the bus in Tampa. Nothing too weird about that."

The two cops didn't react. They looked pretty grim.

“Your first shot killed him,” Baker said. “Then you shot him again, and then you went berserk and kicked the shit out of the body. There are massive postmortem injuries. You shot him and then you tried to kick him apart. You kicked that corpse all over the damn place. You were in a frenzy. Then you calmed down and tried to hide the body under the cardboard.”

I was quiet for a long moment.

“Postmortem injuries?” I said.

Baker nodded.

“Like a frenzy,” he said. “The guy looks like he was run over by a truck. Just about every bone is smashed. But the doctor says it happened after the guy was already dead. You’re a weird guy, Reacher, that’s for damn sure.”

“Who was he?” Finlay asked for the third time.

I just looked at him. Baker was right. It had got weird. Very weird. Homicidal frenzy is bad enough. But postmortem frenzy is worse. I’d come across it a few times. Didn’t want to come across it anymore. But the way they’d described it to me, it didn’t make any sense.

“How did you meet the guy?” Finlay asked.

I carried on just looking at him. Didn’t answer.

“What does Pluribus mean?” he asked.

I shrugged. Kept quiet.

“Who was he, Reacher?” Finlay asked again.

“I wasn’t there,” I said. “I don’t know anything.”

Finlay was silent.

“What’s your phone number?” he said. Suddenly.

I looked at him like he was crazy.

“Finlay, what the hell are you talking about?” I said. “I haven’t got a phone. Don’t you listen? I don’t live anywhere.”

“I mean your mobile phone,” he said.

“What mobile phone?” I said. “I haven’t got a mobile phone.”

A clang of fear hit me. They figured me for an assassin. A weird rootless mercenary with a mobile phone who went from place to place killing people. Kicking their dead bodies to pieces. Checking in with an underground organization for my next target. Always on the move.

Finlay leaned forward. He slid a piece of paper toward me. It was a torn-off section of computer paper. Not old. A greasy gloss of wear on it. The patina paper gets from a month in a pocket. On it was printed an underlined heading. It said: Pluribus. Under the heading was a telephone number. I looked at it. Didn’t touch it. Didn’t want any confusion over fingerprints.

“Is that your number?” Finlay asked.

“I don’t have a telephone,” I said again. “I wasn’t here last night. The more you hassle me, the more time you’re wasting, Finlay.”

“It’s a mobile phone number,” he said. “That we know. Operated by an Atlanta airtime supplier. But we can’t trace the number until Monday. So we’re asking you. You should cooperate, Reacher.”

I looked at the scrap of paper again.

“Where was this?” I asked him.

Finlay considered the question. Decided to answer it.

“It was in your victim’s shoe,” he said. “Folded up and hidden.”

I SAT IN SILENCE FOR A LONG TIME. I WAS WORRIED. I FELT like somebody in a kid’s book who falls down a hole. Finds himself in a strange world where everything is different and weird. Like Alice in Wonderland. Did she fall down a hole? Or did she get off a Greyhound in the wrong place?

I was in a plush and opulent office. I had seen worse offices in Swiss banks. I was in the company of two policemen. Intelligent and professional. Probably had more than thirty years' experience between them. A mature and competent department. Properly staffed and well funded. A weak point with the asshole Morrison at the top, but as good an organization as I had seen for a while. But they were all disappearing up a dead end as fast as they could run. They seemed convinced the earth was flat. That the huge Georgia sky was a bowl fitting snugly over the top. I was the only one who knew the earth was round.

"Two things," I said. "The guy is shot in the head close up with a silenced automatic weapon. First shot drops him. Second shot is insurance. The shell cases are missing. What does that say to you? Professionally?"

Finlay said nothing. His prime suspect was discussing the case with him like a colleague. As the investigator, he shouldn't allow that. He should cut me down. But he wanted to hear me out. I could see him arguing with himself. He was totally still, but his mind was struggling like kittens in a sack.

"Go on," he said eventually. Gravely, like it was a big deal.

"That's an execution, Finlay," I said. "Not a robbery or a squabble. That's a cold and clinical hit. No evidence left behind. That's a smart guy with a flashlight scrabbling around afterward for two small-caliber shell cases."

"Go on," Finlay said again.

"Close range shot into the left temple," I said. "Could be the victim was in a car. Shooter is talking to him through the window and raises his gun. Bang. He leans in and fires the second shot. Then he picks up his shell cases and he leaves."

"He leaves?" Finlay said. "What about the rest of the stuff that went down? You're suggesting a second man?"

I shook my head.

"There were three men," I said. "That's clear, right?"

"Why three?" he said.

"Practical minimum of two, right?" I said. "How did the victim get out there to the warehouses? He drove, right? Too far from anywhere to walk. So where's

the warehouses? He drove, right? Too far from anywhere to walk. So where's his car now? The shooter didn't walk there, either. So the practical minimum would be a team of two. They drove up there together and they drove away separately, one of them in the victim's car."

"But?" Finlay said.

"But the actual evidence points to a minimum of three," I said. "Think about it psychologically. That's the key to this thing. A guy who uses a silenced small-caliber automatic for a neat head shot and an insurance shot is not the type of guy who then suddenly goes berserk and kicks the shit out of a corpse, right? And the type of guy who does get in a frenzy like that doesn't then suddenly calm down and hide the body under some old cardboard. You're looking at three completely separate things there, Finlay. So there were three guys involved."

Finlay shrugged at me.

"Two, maybe," he said. "Shooter could have tidied up afterward."

"No way," I said. "He wouldn't have waited around. He wouldn't like that kind of frenzy. It would embarrass him. And it would worry him because it adds visibility and danger to the whole thing. And a guy like that, if he had tidied up afterward, he'd have done it right. He wouldn't have left the body where the first guy who came along was going to find it. So you're looking at three guys."

Finlay thought hard.

"So?" he said.

"So which one am I supposed to be?" I said. "The shooter, the maniac or the idiot who hid the body?"

Finlay and Baker looked at each other. Didn't answer me.

"So whichever one, what are you saying?" I asked them. "I drive up there with my two buddies and we hit this guy at midnight, and then my two buddies drive away and I choose to stay there? Why would I do that? It's crap, Finlay."

He didn't reply. He was thinking.

"I haven't got two buddies," I said. "Or a car. So the very best you can do is to

say the victim walked there, and I walked there. I met him, and I very carefully shot him, like a pro, then recovered my shell cases and took his wallet and emptied his pockets, but forgot to search his shoes. Then I stashed my weapon, silencer, flashlight, mobile phone, the shell cases, the wallet and all. Then I completely changed my whole personality and kicked the corpse to pieces like a maniac. Then I completely changed my whole personality again and made a useless attempt to hide the body. And then I waited eight hours in the rain and then I walked down into town. That's the very best you can do. And it's total crap, Finlay. Because why the hell would I wait eight hours, in the rain, until daylight, to walk away from a homicide?"

He looked at me for a long moment.

"I don't know why," he said.

A GUY LIKE FINLAY DOESN'T SAY A THING LIKE THAT UNLESS he's struggling. He looked deflated. His case was crap and he knew it. But he had a severe problem with the chief's new evidence. He couldn't walk up to his boss and say: you're full of shit, Morrison. He couldn't actively pursue an alternative when his boss had handed him a suspect on a plate. He could follow up my alibi. That he could do. Nobody would criticize him for being thorough. Then he could start again on Monday. So he was miserable because seventy-two hours were going to get wasted. And he could foresee a big problem. He had to tell his boss that actually I could not have been there at midnight. He would have to politely coax a retraction out of the guy. Difficult to do when you're a new subordinate who's been there six months. And when the person you're dealing with is a complete asshole. And your boss. Difficulties were all over him, and the guy was miserable as hell about it. He sat there, breathing hard. In trouble. Time to help him out.

"The phone number," I said. "You've identified it as a mobile?"

"By the code," he said. "Instead of an area code, they have a prefix which accesses the mobile network."

"OK," I said. "But you can't identify who it belongs to because you have no reverse directories for mobiles and their office won't tell you, right?"

"They want a warrant," he said.

They want a warrant," he said.

"But you need to know whose number it is, right?" I said.

"You know some way of doing that without a warrant?" he asked.

"Maybe," I said. "Why don't you just call it up and see who answers?"

They hadn't thought of that. There was another silence. They were embarrassed. They didn't want to look at each other. Or me. Silence.

Baker bailed out of the situation. Left Finlay holding the ball. He collected the files and mimed going outside to work on them. Finlay nodded and waved him away. Baker got up and went out. Closed the door very quietly indeed. Finlay opened his mouth. And closed it. He needed to save some face. Badly.

"It's a mobile," he said. "If I call it up I can't tell whose it is or where it is."

"Listen, Finlay," I said. "I don't care whose it is. All I care is whose it isn't. Understand? It isn't my phone. So you call it up and John Doe in Atlanta or Jane Doe in Charleston answers it. Then you know it isn't mine."

Finlay gazed at me. Drummed his fingers on the desk. Kept quiet.

"You know how to do this," I said. "Call the number, some bullshit story about a technical fault or an unpaid bill, some computer thing, get the person to confirm name and address. Do it, Finlay, you're supposed to be a damn detective."

He leaned forward to where he had left the number. Slid the paper back with his long brown fingers. Reversed it so he could read it and picked up the phone. Dialed the number. Hit the speakerphone button. The ring tone filled the air. Not a sonorous long tone like a home phone. A high, urgent electronic sound. It stopped. The phone was answered.

"Paul Hubble," a voice said. "How may I help you?"

A southern accent. A confident manner. Accustomed to telephones.

"Mr. Hubble?" Finlay said. He was looking at the desk, writing down the name. "Good afternoon. This is the phone company, mobile division. Engineering manager. We've had a fault reported on your number."

“A fault?” the voice said. “Seems OK to me. I didn’t report a fault.”

“Calling out should be OK,” Finlay said. “It’s reaching you that may have been a problem, sir. I’ve got our signal-strength meter connected right now, and actually, sir, it’s reading a bit low.”

“I can hear you OK,” the voice said.

“Hello?” Finlay said. “You’re fading a bit, Mr. Hubble. Hello? It would help me to know the exact geographic location of your phone, sir, you know, right now, in relation to our transmitting stations.”

“I’m right here at home,” said the voice.

“OK,” Finlay said. He picked up his pen again. “Could you just confirm that exact address for me?”

“Don’t you have my address?” the voice said. Man-to-man jocular stuff. “You seem to manage to send me a bill every month.”

Finlay glanced at me. I was smiling at him. He made a face.

“I’m here in engineering right now, sir,” he said. Also jocular. Just two regular guys battling technology. “Customer details are in a different department. I could access that data, but it would take a minute, you know how it is. Also, sir, you’ve got to keep talking anyway while this meter is connected to give me an exact strength reading, you know? You may as well recite your address, unless you’ve got a favorite poem or anything.”

The tinny speakerphone relayed a laugh from the guy called Hubble.

“OK, here goes, testing, testing,” his voice said. “This is Paul Hubble, right here at home, that’s number twenty-five Beckman Drive, I say again, zero-two-five Beckman Drive, down here in little old Margrave, that’s M-A-R-G-R-A-V-E in the State of Georgia, U.S.A. How am I doing on my signal strength?”

Finlay didn’t respond. He was looking very worried.

“Hello?” the voice said. “Are you still there?”

“Yes, Mr. Hubble,” Finlay said. “I’m right here. Can’t find any problem at all,

sir. Just a false alarm, I guess. Thank you for your help."

"OK," said the guy called Hubble. "You're welcome."

The connection broke and a dial tone filled the room. Finlay replaced the phone. Leaned back and looked up at the ceiling. Spoke to himself.

"Shit," he said. "Right here in town. Who the hell is this Paul Hubble?"

"You don't know the guy?" I said.

He looked at me. A bit rueful. Like he'd forgotten I was there.

"I've only been here six months," he said. "I don't know everybody."

He leaned forward and buzzed the intercom button on the rosewood desk. Called Baker back in.

"Ever heard of some guy called Hubble?" Finlay asked him. "Paul Hubble, lives here in town, twenty-five Beckman Drive?"

"Paul Hubble?" Baker said. "Sure. He lives here, like you say, always has. Family man. Stevenson knows him, some kind of an in-law or something. They're friendly, I think. Go bowling together. Hubble's a banker. Some kind of a financial guy, you know, a big-shot executive type, works up in Atlanta. Some big bank up there. I see him around, time to time."

Finlay looked at him.

"He's the guy on the other end of this number," he said.

"Hubble?" Baker said. "Right here in Margrave? That's a hell of a thing."

Finlay turned back to me.

"I suppose you're going to say you never heard of this guy?" he asked me.

"Never heard of him," I said.

He glared at me briefly. Turned back to Baker.

“You better go on out and bring this Hubble guy in,” he said. “Twenty-five Beckman Drive. God knows what he’s got to do with anything, but we better talk to him. Go easy on him, you know, he’s probably a respectable guy.”

He glared at me again and left the room. Banged the heavy door. Baker reached over and stopped the recording machine. Walked me out of the office. Back to the cell. I went in. He followed and removed the handcuffs. Put them back on his belt. Stepped back out and closed the gate. Operated the lock. The electric bolts snicked home. He walked away.

“Hey, Baker,” I called.

He turned and walked back. A level gaze. Not friendly.

“I want something to eat,” I said. “And coffee.”

“You’ll eat up at the state facility,” he said. “Bus comes by at six.”

He walked away. He had to go and fetch the Hubble guy. He would shuffle up to him apologetically. Ask him to come down to the station house, where Finlay would be polite to him. While I stood in a cell, Finlay would politely ask Hubble why his phone number had been found in a dead man’s shoe.

MY COAT WAS STILL BALLED UP ON THE CELL FLOOR. I shook it out and put it on. I was cold again. Thrust my hands into the pockets. Leaned on the bars and tried to read through the newspaper again, just to pass the time. But I wasn’t taking anything in. I was thinking about somebody who had watched his partner shoot a guy in the head. Who had seized the twitching body and kicked it around the floor. Who had used enough furious force to smash all the dead inert bones. I was standing there thinking about stuff I’d thought I was through with. Stuff I didn’t want to think about anymore. So I dropped the paper on the carpet and tried to think about something else.

I found that if I leaned up in the front far corner of the cell I could see the whole of the open-plan area. I could see over the reception counter and out through the glass doors. Outside, the afternoon sun looked bright and hot. It looked like a dry and dusty place again. The heavy rain had moved on out. Inside was cool and fluorescent. The desk sergeant sat up on a stool. He worked on his keyboard. Probably filing. I could see behind his counter. Underneath were spaces

Probably filing. I could see behind his counter. Underneath were spaces designed not to be seen from the front. Neat compartments contained papers and hardback folders. There were sections with Mace sprays. A shotgun. Panic buttons. Behind the desk sergeant the uniformed woman who'd printed me was busy. Keyboard work. The large room was quiet but it hummed with the energy of investigation.

4

PEOPLE SPEND THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS ON STEREOS. SOMETIMES tens of thousands. There is a specialist industry right here in the States which builds stereo gear to a standard you wouldn't believe. Tubed amplifiers which cost more than a house. Speakers taller than me. Cables thicker than a garden hose. Some army guys had that stuff. I'd heard it on bases around the world. Wonderful. But they were wasting their money. Because the best stereo in the world is free. Inside your head. It sounds as good as you want it to. As loud as you want it to be.

I was leaning up in my corner running a Bobby Bland number through my head. An old favorite. It was cranked up real loud. "Further On Up the Road." Bobby Bland sings it in G major. That key gives it a strange, sunny, cheerful cast. Takes out the spiteful sting from the lyric. Makes it a lament, a prediction, a consolation. Makes it do what the blues is supposed to do. The relaxed G major misting it almost into sweetness. Not vicious.

But then I saw the fat police chief walk by. Morrison, on his way past the cells, toward the big office in back. Just in time for the start of the third verse. I crunched the song down into E flat. A dark and menacing key. The real blues key. I deleted the amiable Bobby Bland. I needed a harder voice. Something much more vicious. Musical, but a real cigarettes-and-whiskey rasp. Maybe Wild Child Butler. Someone you wouldn't want to mess with. I wound the level in my head up higher, for the part about reaping what you sow, further on up the road.

Morrison was lying about last night. I hadn't been there at midnight. For a while I had been prepared to accept the possibility of a mistake. Maybe he had seen someone who looked like me. But that was giving him the benefit of the doubt. Right now I wanted to give him a forearm smash to the face. Burst his fat nose all over the place. I closed my eyes. Wild Child Butler and I promised ourselves it would happen. Further on up the road.

I OPENED MY EYES AND SWITCHED OFF THE MUSIC IN MY head. Standing in front of me on the other side of the bars was the fingerprint officer.

She was on her way back from the coffee hotplate.

“Can I get you a cup of coffee?” she asked me.

“Sure,” I said. “Great. No cream, no sugar.”

She put her own cup down on the nearest desk and went back to the machine. Poured me a cup from the pot and walked back. This was a good-looking woman. About thirty, dark, not tall. But to call her medium would be unfair to her. She had a kind of vitality. It had come across as a sympathetic briskness in that first interview room. A professional bustle. Now she seemed unofficial. Probably was. Probably against the fat chief’s rules to bring coffee to the condemned man. It made me like her.

She passed the cup in through the bars. Up close she looked good. Smelled good. I didn’t recall that from earlier. I remembered thinking of her like a dentist’s nurse. If dentist’s nurses all looked that good, I’d have gone more often. I took the cup. I was glad of it. I was thirsty and I love coffee. Give me the chance and I drink coffee like an alcoholic drinks vodka. I took a sip. Good coffee. I raised the cup like a toast.

“Thank you,” I said.

“You’re welcome,” she said, and she smiled, with her eyes too. I smiled back. Her eyes were like a welcome blast of sunshine on a rotten afternoon.

“So you think I didn’t do it?” I asked her.

She picked up her own cup from where she’d put it down.

“You think I don’t bring coffee to the guilty ones?” she said.

“Maybe you don’t even talk to the guilty ones,” I said.

“I know you’re not guilty of much,” she said.

“How can you tell?” I said. “Because my eyes aren’t too close together?”

“No, fool,” she laughed. “Because we haven’t heard from Washington yet.”

Her laugh was great. I wanted to look at her nameplate over her shirt pocket. But

I didn't want her to think I was looking at her breasts. I remembered them resting on the edge of the table when she took my photograph. I looked. Nice breasts. Her name was Roscoe. She glanced around quickly and moved closer to the bars. I sipped coffee.

"I sent your prints to Washington over the computer link," she said. "That was at twelve thirty-six. Big database there, you know, FBI? Millions of prints in their computer. Prints that get sent in are checked. There's a priority order. You get checked first of all against the top-ten wanted list, then the top hundred, then the top thousand, you understand? If you'd been near the top, you know, active and unsolved, we'd have heard almost right away. It's automatic. They don't want any big fugitive to slip away, so the system gets right back. But you've been in there almost three hours and we haven't heard. So I can tell you're not on record for anything very bad."

The desk sergeant was looking over. Disapproving. She was going to have to go. I drained the coffee and handed her the cup back through the bars.

"I'm not on record for anything at all," I said.

"No," she said. "You don't match the deviance profile."

"I don't?" I said.

"I could tell right away." She smiled. "You got nice eyes."

She winked and walked away. Trashed the cups and moved over to her workstation. She sat down. All I could see was the back of her head. I moved into my corner and leaned up against the hard bars. I'd been a lonely wanderer for six months. I'd learned something. Like Blanche in that old movie, a wanderer depends on the kindness of strangers. Not for anything specific or material. For morale. I gazed at the back of Roscoe's head and smiled. I liked her.

BAKER HAD BEEN GONE MAYBE TWENTY MINUTES. LONG enough to get back from Hubble's place, wherever it was. I figured you could walk there and back in twenty minutes. This was a small town, right? A dot on the map. I figured you could walk anywhere and back in twenty minutes. On your hands.

Although the town limits were pretty weird. Depended whether Hubble lived in town, or somewhere else within the outer boundaries. According to my experience, you were in town even when you were fourteen miles away. If that fourteen miles extended in all directions, then Margrave was about as big as New York City.

Baker had said Hubble was a family man. A banker who worked in Atlanta. That meant a family house somewhere near town. Near schools and friends for the kids. Near shops and the country club for the wife. An easy drive for him up the county road to the highway. Convenient commute up the highway to the office in the big city. The address sounded like a town address. Twenty-five Beckman Drive. Not too close to Main Street. Probably Beckman Drive ran from the center of town out into the countryside. Hubble was a financial guy. Probably rich. Probably had a big white place on a big lot. Shade trees. Maybe a pool. Call it four acres. A square lot covering four acres was about a hundred and forty yards on a side. Homes on the left and the right of the street put number twenty-five about twelve lots out from town. About a mile, maybe.

OUTSIDE THE BIG PLATE-GLASS DOORS THE SUN WAS FALLING away into afternoon. The light was redder. Shadows were longer. I saw Baker's patrol car yaw and bounce into the driveway. No flashing lights. It came slowly around the semicircle and eased to a stop. Bounced once on its springs. Its length filled the view through the plate glass. Baker got out on the far side and walked out of sight as he rounded the car. He reappeared as he approached his passenger's door. He opened it like a chauffeur. He looked all twisted up with conflicting body language. Part deferential, because this was an Atlanta banker. Part friendly, because this was his partner's bowling buddy. Part official, because this was a man whose phone number had been hidden in a corpse's shoe.

Paul Hubble got out of the car. Baker shut the door. Hubble waited. Baker skipped around him and pulled open the big plate-glass door of the station house. It sucked against the rubber seal. Hubble stepped inside.

He was a tall white man. He looked like a page from a magazine. An advertisement. The sort that uses a grainy photograph of money at play. He was in his early thirties. Trim but not strong. Sandy hair, tousled, receding just enough to show an intelligent brow. Just enough to say: yes, I was a preppie, but

hey, I'm a man now. He wore gold-rimmed round eyeglasses. He had a square jaw. A decent tan. Very white teeth. Many of them were on show as he smiled at the desk sergeant.

He wore a faded polo shirt with a small logo and washed chino pants. The sort of clothes that look old when you buy them for five hundred bucks. He had a thick white sweater draped over his back. The arms were loosely tied in front. I couldn't see his feet because the reception desk was in the way. I was certain he would be wearing tan boat shoes. I made a substantial bet with myself he was wearing them without socks. This was a man who wallowed in the yuppie dream like a pig in shit.

He was in a state of some agitation. He placed his palms on the reception desk and then turned and dropped his hands to his sides. I saw sandy forearms and the flash of a heavy gold watch. I could see his natural approach would be to act like a friendly rich guy. Visiting the station house like our campaigning president would visit a factory. But he was distracted. Uptight. I didn't know what Baker had said to him. How much he had revealed. Probably nothing. A good sergeant like Baker would leave the bombshells to Finlay. So Hubble didn't know why he was here. But he knew something. I was a policeman of sorts for thirteen years and I can smell a worried man a mile away. Hubble was a worried man.

I stayed leaning up on the bars, motionless. Baker signaled Hubble to walk with him around the far side of the squad room. Toward the rosewood office in back. As Hubble rounded the end of the reception desk, I saw his feet. Tan boat shoes. No socks. The two men walked out of sight into the office. The door closed. The desk sergeant left his post and went outside to park Baker's cruiser.

He came back in with Finlay at his side. Finlay walked straight back toward the rosewood office where Hubble waited for him. Ignored me as he crossed the squad room. Opened the office door and went inside. I waited in my corner for Baker to come out. Baker couldn't stay in there. Not while his partner's bowling buddy entered the orbit of a homicide investigation. That would not be ethical. Not ethical at all. Finlay struck me as a guy who would go big on ethics. Any guy with a tweed suit like that and a moleskin vest and a Harvard education would go big on ethics. After a moment the door opened and Baker came out. He walked into the big open room and headed for his desk.

"Hey, Baker," I called. He changed course and walked over to the cells. Stood in front of the bars. Where Roscoe had stood.

front of the bars. Where Roscoe had stood.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” I said. “Unless I got to wait until I get up to the big house for that, too?”

He cracked a grin. Grudging, but a grin. He had a gold tooth way back. Gave him a rakish air. A bit more human. He shouted something to the desk guy. Probably a code for a procedure. He took out his keys and activated the electric lock. The bolts popped back. I wondered briefly how they did it if there was a power outage. Could they unlock these gates without electricity? I hoped so. Probably lots of thunderstorms down here. Lots of power lines crashing down.

He pushed the heavy gate inward. We walked to the back of the squad room. Opposite corner to the rosewood office. There was a lobby. Off the lobby were two bathrooms. He reached past me and pushed open the men’s room door.

They knew I wasn’t their guy. They weren’t taking care. No care at all. Out there in the lobby I could have decked Baker and taken his revolver. No problem at all. I could have had his weapon off his belt before he hit the floor. I could have shot my way out of the station house and into a patrol car. They were all parked right out front. Keys in, for sure. I could have got out toward Atlanta before they organized effective opposition. Then I could have disappeared. No problem at all. But I just went into their bathroom.

“Don’t lock it,” Baker said.

I didn’t lock it. They were underestimating me in a big way. I had told them I had been a military policeman. Maybe they believed me, maybe they didn’t. Maybe it didn’t mean much to them either way. But it should. A military policeman deals with military lawbreakers. Those lawbreakers are service guys. Highly trained in weapons, sabotage, unarmed combat. Rangers, Green Berets, marines. Not just killers. Trained killers. Extremely well trained, at huge public expense. So the military policeman is trained even better. Better with weapons. Better unarmed. Baker had to be ignorant of all that. Hadn’t thought about it. Otherwise he would have had a couple of shotguns aimed at me for the trip to the bathroom. If he thought I was their guy.

I zipped up and came back into the lobby. Baker was waiting. We walked back to the cell area. I stepped inside my cell. Leaned up in my corner. Baker pulled the heavy gate shut. Operated the electric lock with his key. The bolts snicked in. He walked away into the squad room.

He walked away into the squad room.

There was silence for the next twenty minutes. Baker worked at a desk. So did Roscoe. The desk sergeant sat up on his stool. Finlay was in the big office with Hubble. There was a modern clock over the front doors. Not as elegant as the antique in the office, but it ticked around just as slowly. Silence. Four thirty. I leaned up against the titanium bars and waited. Silence. Quarter of five.

TIME RESTARTED JUST BEFORE FIVE O'CLOCK. I HEARD A commotion coming out of the big rosewood office in back. Shouting, yelling, things banging. Somebody getting really stirred up. A buzzer sounded on Baker's desk and the intercom crackled. I heard Finlay's voice. Stressed. Asking Baker to get in there. Baker got up and walked over. Knocked and went in.

The big plate-glass door at the entrance sucked open and the fat guy came in. Chief Morrison. He headed straight back to the rosewood office. Baker came out as Morrison went in. Baker hurried over to the reception desk. Whispered a long excited sentence to the desk sergeant. Roscoe joined them. There was a huddle. Some big news. I couldn't hear what. Too far away.

The intercom on Baker's desk crackled again. He headed back to the office. The big front door opened again. The afternoon sun was blazing low in the sky. Stevenson walked into the station house. First time I'd seen him since my arrest. It was like the excitement was sucking people in.

Stevenson spoke to the desk sergeant. He became agitated. The desk sergeant put a hand on Stevenson's arm. Stevenson shook it off and ran toward the rosewood office. He dodged desks like a football player. As he got to the office door it opened. A crowd came out. Chief Morrison. Finlay. And Baker, holding Hubble by the elbow. A light but efficient grip, the same as he'd used on me. Stevenson stared blankly at Hubble and then grabbed Finlay by the arm. Pulled him back into the office. Morrison swiveled his sweating bulk and followed them in. The door slammed. Baker walked Hubble over toward me.

Hubble looked like a different guy. He was gray and sweating. The tan had gone. He looked smaller. He looked like someone had let the air out and deflated him. He was bent up like a man racked with pain. His eyes behind the gold rims were blank and staring with panic and fear. He stood shaking as Baker unlocked the cell next to mine. He didn't move. He was trembling. Baker caught his arm and

cell next to mine. He didn't move. He was trembling. Baker caught his arm and levered him inside. He pulled the gate shut and locked it. The electric bolts snicked in. Baker walked back toward the rosewood office.

Hubble just stood where Baker had left him. Staring blankly into space. Then he slowly walked backward until he reached the rear wall of the cell. He pressed his back against it and slid to the floor. Dropped his head to his knees. Dropped his hands to the floor. I could hear the rattle of his thumb trembling on the stiff nylon carpet. Roscoe stared in at him from her desk. The sergeant at the reception counter gazed across. They were watching a man fall apart.

I HEARD RAISED VOICES IN THE ROSEWOOD OFFICE IN BACK. The tenor of argument. The slap of a palm on a desk. The door opened and Stevenson walked out with Chief Morrison. Stevenson looked mad. He strode down the side of the open area. His neck was rigid with fury. His eyes were fixed on the front doors. He was ignoring the fat police chief. He walked straight past the reception counter and out through the heavy door into the bright afternoon. Morrison followed him.

Baker came out of the office and walked over to my cell. Didn't speak. Just unlocked the cage and gestured me out. I shrugged my coat tighter and left the newspaper with the big photographs of the president in Pensacola on the cell floor. Stepped out and followed Baker back into the rosewood office.

Finlay was at the desk. The tape recorder was there. The stiff cords trailed. The air was still and cool. Finlay looked harassed. His tie was pulled down. He blew out a big lungful of air in a rueful hiss. I sat down in the chair and Finlay waved Baker out of the room. The door closed softly behind him.

"We got us a situation here, Mr. Reacher," Finlay said. "A real situation."

He lapsed into a distracted silence. I had less than a half hour before the prison bus came by. I wanted some conclusions pretty soon. Finlay looked up and focused again. Started talking, rapidly, the elegant Harvard syntax under pressure.

"We bring this Hubble guy in, right?" he said. "You maybe saw him. Banker, from Atlanta, right? Thousand-dollar Calvin Klein outfit. Gold Rolex. Very uptight guy. At first I thought he was just annoyed. Soon as I started talking he

recognized my voice. From the phone call on his mobile. Accuses me of deceitful behavior. Says I shouldn't impersonate phone company people. He's right, of course."

Another lapse into silence. He was struggling with his ethics problem.

"Come on, Finlay, move along," I said. I had less than a half hour.

"OK, so he's uptight and annoyed," Finlay said. "I ask him if he knows you. Jack Reacher, ex-army. He says no. Never heard of you. I believe him. He starts to relax. Like all this is about some guy called Jack Reacher. He's never heard of any guy called Jack Reacher, so he's here for nothing. He's cool, right?"

"Go on," I said.

"Then I ask him if he knows a tall guy with a shaved head," he said. "And I ask him about Pluribus. Well, my God! It's like I stuck a poker up his ass. He went rigid. Like with shock. Totally rigid. Won't answer. So I tell him we know the tall guy is dead. Shot to death. Well, that's like another poker up the ass. He practically fell off the chair."

"Go on," I said. Twenty-five minutes before the prison bus was due.

"He's shaking all over the place," Finlay said. "Then I tell him we know about the phone number in the shoe. His phone number printed on a piece of paper, with the word 'Pluribus' printed above it. That's another poker up the ass."

He stopped again. He was patting his pockets, each one in turn.

"He wouldn't say anything," he went on. "Not a word. He was rigid with shock. All gray in the face. I thought he was having a heart attack. His mouth was opening and closing like a fish. But he wasn't talking. So I told him we knew about the corpse getting beaten up. I asked him who else was involved. I told him we knew about hiding the body under the cardboard. He wouldn't say a damn word. He just kept looking around. After a while I realized he was thinking like crazy. Trying to decide what to tell me. He just kept silent, thinking like mad, must have been forty minutes. The tape was running the whole time. Recorded forty minutes of silence."

Finlay stopped again. This time for effect. He looked at me.

“Then he confessed,” he said. “I did it, he said. I shot him, he said. The guy is confessing, right? On the tape.”

“Go on,” I said.

“I ask him, do you want a lawyer?” he said. “He says no, keeps repeating he killed the guy. So I Mirandize him, loud and clear, on the tape. Then I think to myself maybe he’s crazy or something, you know? So I ask him, who did you kill? He says the tall guy with the shaved head. I ask him, how? He says, shot him in the head. I ask him, when? He says last night, about midnight. I ask him who kicked the body around? Who was the guy? What does Pluribus mean? He doesn’t answer. Goes rigid with fright all over again. Refuses to say a damn word. I say to him, I’m not sure you did anything at all. He jumps up and grabs me. He’s screaming I confess, I confess, I shot him, I shot him. I shove him back. He goes quiet.”

Finlay sat back. Folded his hands behind his head. Looked a question at me. Hubble as the shooter? I didn’t believe it. Because of his agitation. Guys who shoot somebody with an old pistol, in a fight or in a temper, a messy shot to the chest, they get agitated afterward. Guys who put two bullets in the head, with a silencer, then collect up the shell cases, they’re a different class of person. They don’t get agitated afterward. They just walk away and forget about it. Hubble was not the shooter. The way he had been dancing around in front of the reception counter proved it. But I just shrugged and smiled.

“OK,” I said. “You can let me go now, right?”

Finlay looked at me and shook his head.

“Wrong,” he said. “I don’t believe him. There were three guys involved here. You persuaded me of that yourself. So which one is Hubble claiming to be? I don’t think he’s the maniac. I can’t see enough strength in him for that. I don’t see him as the gofer. And he’s definitely not the shooter, for God’s sake. Guy like that couldn’t shoot pool.”

I nodded. Like Finlay’s partner. Worrying away at a problem.

“Got to throw his ass in the can for now,” he said. “No option. He’s confessed, couple of plausible details. But it definitely won’t hold up.”

I could hear in Sorrel the same worry. “Sure,” I said.

I nodded again. Sensed there was something more to come. "Go on," I said. With resignation.

Finlay looked at me. A level gaze.

"He wasn't even there at midnight," he said. "He was at some old couple's anniversary party. A family thing. Not far from where he lives. Got there around eight last night. He'd walked down with his wife. Didn't leave until after two o'clock in the morning. Two dozen people saw him arrive, two dozen people saw him leave. He got a ride home from his sister-in-law's brother-in-law. He got a ride because it was already pouring rain by then."

"Go on, Finlay," I said. "Tell me."

"His sister-in-law's brother-in-law?" he said. "Drove him home, in the rain, two o'clock in the morning? Officer Stevenson."

5

FINLAY LEANED RIGHT BACK IN HIS CHAIR. HIS LONG ARMS were folded behind his head. He was a tall, elegant man. Educated in Boston. Civilized. Experienced. And he was sending me to jail for something I hadn't done. He levered himself upright. Spread his hands on the desk, palms up.

"I'm sorry, Reacher," he said to me.

"You're sorry?" I said. "You're sending two guys who couldn't have done it to jail and you're sorry?"

He shrugged. Looked unhappy about it.

"This is the way Chief Morrison wants it," he said. "He's calling it a done deal. Closing us down for the weekend. And he's the boss man, right?"

"You got to be joking," I said. "He's an asshole. He's calling Stevenson a liar. His own man."

"Not exactly," Finlay shrugged. "He's saying it's maybe a conspiracy, you know, maybe Hubble wasn't literally there, but he recruited you to do it. A conspiracy, right? He reckons the confession is exaggerated because maybe Hubble's afraid of you and is scared to finger you right away. Morrison figures you were on your way down to Hubble's place to get paid when we hauled you in. He figures that's why you waited the eight hours. Figures that's why Hubble was at home today. Didn't go to work because he was waiting around to pay you off."

I was silent. I was worried. Chief Morrison was dangerous. His theory was plausible. Until Finlay did the checking. If Finlay did the checking.

"So, Reacher, I'm sorry," he said. "You and Hubble stay in the bag until Monday. You'll get through it. Over in Warburton. Bad place, but the holding pens are OK. Worse if you go there for a stretch. Much worse. Meantime, I'll work on it before Monday. I'll ask Officer Roscoe to come in Saturday and Sunday. She's the pretty one outside. She's good, the best we got. If what you say is right, you'll be free and clear on Monday. OK?"

I stared at him. I was getting mad.

“No, Finlay, not OK,” I said. “You know I didn’t do a damn thing. You know it wasn’t me. You’re just shit scared of that useless fat bastard Morrison. So I’m going to jail because you’re just a spineless damn coward.”

He took it pretty well. His dark face flushed darker. He sat quietly for a long time. I took a deep breath and glared at him. My glare subsided to a gaze as my temper cooled. Back under control. His turn to glare at me.

“Two things, Reacher,” he said. Precise articulation. “First, if necessary I’ll take care of Chief Morrison on Monday. Second, I am not a coward. You don’t know me at all. Nothing about me.”

I gazed back at him. Six o’clock. Bus time.

“I know more than you think,” I said. “I know you’re a Harvard postgrad, you’re divorced and you quit smoking in April.”

Finlay looked blank. Baker knocked and entered to say the prison bus had arrived. Finlay got up and walked around the desk. Told Baker he would bring me out himself. Baker went back to fetch Hubble.

“How do you know that stuff?” Finlay asked me.

He was intrigued. He was losing the game.

“Easy,” I said. “You’re a smart guy, right? Educated in Boston, you told me. But when you were college age, Harvard wasn’t taking too many black guys. You’re smart, but you’re no rocket scientist, so I figure Boston U. for the first degree, right?”

“Right,” he conceded.

“And then Harvard for postgrad,” I said. “You did well at Boston U., life moved on, you got into Harvard. You talk like a Harvard guy. I figured it straight away. Ph.D. in Criminology?”

“Right,” he said again. “Criminology.”

“And then you got this job in April,” I said. “You told me that. You’ve got a

pension from Boston PD, because you did your twenty. So you've come down here with cash to spare. But you've come down here with no woman, because if you had, she'd have spent some of that spare cash on new clothes for you. She probably hated that wintry tweed thing you're wearing. She'd have junked it and put you in a Sunbelt outfit to start your new life on the right foot. But you're still wearing that terrible old suit, so the woman is gone. She either died or divorced you, so it was a fifty-fifty guess. Looks like I guessed right."

He nodded blankly.

"And the smoking thing is easy," I said. "You were just stressed out and you were patting your pockets, looking for cigarettes. That means you quit fairly recently. Easy guess is you quit in April, you know, new life, new job, no more cigarettes. You figured quit now and you might beat the cancer thing."

Finlay glared at me. A bit grudging.

"Very good, Reacher," he said. "Elementary deduction, right?"

I shrugged. Didn't say anything.

"So deduce who aced the guy up at the warehouse," he said.

"I don't care who aced any guy anywhere," I said. "That's your problem, not mine. And it's the wrong question, Finlay. First you got to find out who the guy was, right?"

"So you got any way to do that, smart guy?" he asked me. "No ID, no face left, nothing from the prints, Hubble won't say diddly?"

"Run the prints again," I said. "I'm serious, Finlay. Get Roscoe to do it."

"Why?" he said.

"Something wrong there," I said.

"What something?" he asked me.

"Run them again, OK?" I said. "Will you do that?"

He just grunted. Didn't say yes or no. I opened the office door and stepped out.

Roscoe had gone. Nobody was there except Baker and Hubble over at the cells. I could see the desk sergeant outside through the front doors. He was writing on a clipboard held by the prison bus driver. As a backdrop behind the two of them was the prison bus. It was stationary in the semicircular driveway. It filled the view through the big plate-glass entrance. It was a school bus painted light gray. On it was written: State of Georgia Department of Corrections. That inscription ran the full length of the bus, under the line of windows. Under the inscription was a crest. The windows had grilles welded over them.

Finlay came out of the office behind me. Touched my elbow and walked me over to Baker. Baker was holding three sets of handcuffs hooked over his thumb. They were painted bright orange. The paint was chipped. Dull steel showed through. Baker snapped a pair of handcuffs onto each of my wrists separately. He unlocked Hubble's cell and signaled the scared banker to come out. Hubble was blank and dazed, but he stepped out. Baker caught the dangling cuff on my left wrist and snapped it onto Hubble's right wrist. He put the third set of cuffs on Hubble's other wrist. Ready to go.

"Take his watch, Baker," I said. "He'll lose it in jail."

He nodded. He knew what I meant. Guy like Hubble could lose a lot in jail. Baker unlatched the heavy Rolex from Hubble's wrist. The bracelet wouldn't slide over the handcuff, so Baker had to fiddle and fuss with taking the handcuff off and putting it back on again. The prison driver cracked the door and glared in. A man with a timetable. Baker dropped Hubble's watch on the nearest desk. Exactly where my friend Roscoe had put her coffee cup.

"OK, guys, let's hit the road," Baker said.

He walked us to the doors. We went out into a dazzling hot bar of sunshine. Handcuffed together. Walking was awkward. Before crossing to the bus, Hubble stopped. He craned his neck and looked around carefully. He was being more vigilant than Baker or the prison driver. Maybe scared of a neighbor seeing him. But there was nobody around. We were three hundred yards north of the town. I could see the church steeple in the distance. We walked over to the bus through the evening warmth. My right cheek tingled in the low sun.

The driver pushed the bus door inward. Hubble shuffled sideways onto the step. I followed him. Made a clumsy turn into the aisle. The bus was empty. The driver directed Hubble into a seat. He slid over the vinyl to the window. I was

driver directed Hubble into a seat. He slid over the vinyl to the window. I was pulled alongside. The driver knelt on the seat in front and clicked our outer wrists to the chromium hoop which ran across the top. He rattled each of our three cuffs in turn. Wanted to know they were secure. I didn't blame him. I've done that job. Nothing worse than driving with prisoners loose behind you.

The driver walked forward to his seat. He started the engine with a loud diesel clatter. The bus filled with vibration. The air was hot. Stifling. There was no air-conditioning. None of the windows opened. I could smell fuel fumes. The gears clashed and ground and the bus moved off. I glanced out to my right. Nobody waving good-bye.

We drove north out of the police lot, turning our backs on the town, heading up toward the highway. We passed Eno's diner after a half mile. His lot was empty. Nobody looking for an early dinner. We carried on north for a spell. Then we turned a tight left off the county road and struck out west down a road between fields. The bus settled to a noisy cruise. Endless rows of bushes flicked past. Endless drills of red earth between. Ahead of me the sun was on the way down. It was a giant red ball heading for the fields. The driver had the large sun visor down. On it were printed manufacturer's instructions about how to operate the bus.

Hubble rocked and bounced beside me. He said nothing. He had slumped down with his face parallel to the floor. His left arm was raised because it was handcuffed to the chrome bar in front of us. His right arm rested inert between us. He still had his expensive sweater draped across his shoulders. Where the Rolex had been was a band of pale skin. The life force had just about drained out of him. He was in the grip of a paralyzing fear.

WE ROCKED AND BOUNCED FOR THE BEST PART OF ANOTHER hour through the huge landscape. A small stand of trees flashed past on my right. Then way in the far distance I saw a structure. It sat alone in a thousand acres of flat farmland. Against the low red sun it looked like a protrusion from hell. Something forced up through the crust of the earth. It was a complex of buildings. Looked like a chemical factory or a nuclear place. Massive concrete bunkers and glittering metal walkways. Tubing running here and there with steam drifting. All surrounded with fencing punctuated by towers. As we drew closer I could see arc lights and razor wire. Searchlights and rifles in the towers.

Layers of fences separated with plowed red earth. Hubble didn't look up. I didn't nudge him. It wasn't the Magic Kingdom up ahead.

The bus slowed as we approached. The outermost fence was about a hundred yards out, forming a giant perimeter. It was a substantial fence. Possibly fifteen feet tall, studded along its entire length with pairs of sodium floodlights. One of each pair was trained inward across the hundred-yard breadth of plowed earth. One was trained out over the surrounding farmland. All the floodlights were lit. The whole complex blazed with yellow sodium light. Up close it was very bright. The yellow light turned the red earth to a ghastly tan.

The bus rattled to a halt. The idling engine set up a vibration. What little ventilation there had been ceased. It was stifling. Hubble finally looked up. He peered out through his gold rims. He looked around him and out the window. He groaned. It was a groan of hopeless dejection. He dropped his head.

The driver was waiting for a signal from the first gate guard. The guard was speaking into a radio. The driver blipped the engine and crunched into gear. The guard signaled to him, using his radio as a baton, waving us through. The bus ground forward into a cage. We passed a long low sign at the curb: Warburton Correctional Facility, State of Georgia Department of Corrections. Behind us a gate swung closed. We were sealed in a wire cage. It was roofed with wire. At the far end a gate swung open. The bus ground through.

We drove the hundred yards to the next fence. There was another vehicle cage. The bus went in, waited and drove on out. We drove right into the heart of the prison. We stopped opposite a concrete bunker. The reception area. The engine noise beat against the concrete surrounding us. Then it shut down and the vibration and clatter died away to silence. The driver swung out of his seat and walked up the aisle, stooping, pulling himself like a climber on the seat backs. He pulled out his keys and unlocked the cuffs fixing us to the seat in front.

"OK, boys, let's go," he grinned. "Party time."

We hauled ourselves out of our seat and shuffled down the bus. My left arm was pulled back by Hubble. The driver stopped us at the front. He removed all three sets of handcuffs and dropped them in a bin next to his cab. Hauled on a lever and sprang the door. We got out of the bus. A door opened opposite and a guard stepped out. Called us over. He was eating a donut and spoke with his mouth full. A sugar mustache frosted his lip. He was a pretty casual guy. We went

through the door into a small concrete chamber. It was filthy. Deal chairs surrounded a painted table. Another guard sat on the table reading from a battered clipboard.

“Sit down, OK?” he said. We sat. He stood up. His partner with the donut locked the outer door and joined him.

“Here’s the deal,” said the clipboard guy. “You guys are Reacher and Hubble. In from Margrave. Not convicted of any crime. In custody pending investigation. No bail application for either of you. Hear what I say? Not convicted of any crime. That’s the important thing. Excuses you from a lot of shit in here, OK? No uniform, no processing, no big deal, you understand? Nice accommodations on the top floor.”

“Right,” said the donut guy. “Thing is, if you were convicts, we’d be poking and prodding and hitting on you, and you’d get the uniform, and we’d shove you on the convict floors with the other animals and we’d just sit back and watch the fun, right?”

“Right,” his partner said. “So what we’re saying is this. We ain’t here to give you a hard time, so don’t you boys be giving us a hard time neither, you understand? This damn facility ain’t got the manpower. Governor laid off about a half of the staff, OK? Got to meet the budget, right? Got to cut the deficit, right? So we ain’t got the men to do the job the way it ought to be done. Trying to do our job with a half a crew on every shift, right? So what I’m saying is we shove you in there, and we don’t want to see you again until we pull you out on Monday. No hassle, right? We ain’t got the manpower for hassle. We ain’t got the manpower for hassle on the convict floors, let alone hassle on the holding floor, you understand? Yo, Hubble, you understand?”

Hubble looked up at him and nodded blankly. Didn’t speak.

“Reacher?” the clipboard guy said. “You understand?”

“Sure,” I said. I understood. This guy was understaffed. Having problems because of a budget. While his friends collected unemployment. Tell me about it.

“Good,” he said. “So the deal is this. The two of us are off duty at seven o’clock. Which is in about one minute’s time. We ain’t staying late for you boys. We

don’t want to and the union wouldn’t let us anyway. So you get a meal, then you’re locked down in here until they got manpower to take you upstairs. No manpower until lights out, maybe ten o’clock, OK? But then no guards will move prisoners around after lights out anyway, right? Union won’t let ’em. So Spivey will come get you himself. Assistant warden. Top boy tonight. About ten o’clock, OK? You don’t like it, you don’t tell me, you tell the governor, OK?”

The donut eater went out into the corridor and came back a long moment later with a tray. On it were covered plates, paper cups and a Thermos. He put the tray on the table and the two of them swung out through the corridor. Locked the door from the outside. It went quiet as a tomb in there.

We ate. Fish and rice. Friday food. Coffee in the Thermos. Hubble didn’t speak. He left most of the coffee for me. Score one for Hubble. I put the debris on the tray and the tray on the floor. Another three hours to waste. I tipped my chair back and put my feet up on the table. Not comfortable, but as good as I was going to get. A warm evening. September in Georgia.

I looked over at Hubble without curiosity. He was still silent. I had never heard him speak except on Finlay’s speakerphone. He looked back at me. His face was full of dejection and fear. He looked at me like I was a creature from another world. He stared at me like I worried him. Then he looked away.

MAYBE I WOULDN’T HEAD BACK TO THE GULF. BUT IT WAS too late in the year to head north. Too cold up there. Maybe skip right down to the islands. Jamaica, maybe. Good music there. A hut on the beach. Live out the winter in a hut on a Jamaica beach. Smoke a pound of grass a week. Do whatever Jamaica people do. Maybe two pounds of grass a week with someone to share the hut. Roscoe kept drifting into the picture. Her uniform shirt was fabulously crisp. A crisp tight blue shirt. I had never seen a shirt look better. On a Jamaica beach in the sun she wouldn’t need a shirt. I didn’t think that would prove to be any kind of a major problem.

It was her wink that did it to me. She took my coffee cup. She said I had nice eyes. And she winked. Got to mean something, right? The eyes thing, I’ve heard that before. An English girl I’d had good times with for a while, she liked my eyes. Said it all the time. They’re blue. Equally people have said they look like icebergs in an Arctic sea. If I concentrate I can stop them blinking. Gives a stare

an intimidating effect. Useful. But Roscoe's wink had been the best part of the day. The only part of the day, really, except Eno's scrambled eggs, which weren't bad. Eggs you can get anywhere. But I'd miss Roscoe. I floated on through the empty evening.

NOT LONG AFTER TEN THE DOOR FROM THE CORRIDOR WAS unlocked. A uniformed man came in. He carried a clipboard. And a shotgun. I looked him over. A son of the South. A heavy, fleshy man. Reddened skin, a big hard belly and a wide neck. Small eyes. A tight greasy uniform straining to contain him. Probably born right there on the farm they commandeered to build the prison. Assistant Warden Spivey. This shift's top boy. Understaffed and harassed. Ushering the short-stay guests around by himself. With a shotgun in his big red farmer's hands.

He studied his clipboard.

"Which one of you is Hubble?" he asked.

He had a high-pitched voice. At odds with his bulk. Hubble raised his hand briefly, like a boy at grade school. Spivey's little eyes flicked over him. Up and down. Like a snake's eyes. He grunted and signaled with the clipboard. We formed up and moved out. Hubble was blank and acquiescent. Like an exhausted trooper.

"Turn left and follow the red line," Spivey said.

He waved left with the shotgun. There was a red line painted on the wall at waist height. It was a fire lane guide. I guessed it must lead outside, but we were going in the wrong direction. Into the prison, not out of it. We followed the red line through corridors, up stairs and around corners. Hubble first, then me. Then Spivey with the shotgun. It was very dark. Just dim emergency lighting. Spivey called a halt on a landing. He overrode an electronic lock with his key. A lock which would spring the fire door when the alarm went.

"No talking," he said. "Rules here say absolute silence at all times after lights out. Cell at the end on the right."

We stepped in through the out door. The foul odor of prison hit me. The night

exhalation of countless dispirited men. It was nearly pitch black. A night-light glowed dimly. I sensed rather than saw rows of cells. I heard the babble of night sounds. Breathing and snoring. Muttering and whimpering. Spivey walked us to the end of the row. Pointed to an empty cell. We crowded in. Spivey swung the bars shut behind us. They locked automatically. He walked away.

The cell was very dark. I could just about see a bunk bed, a sink and a john. Not much floor space. I took off my coat and lobbed it onto the top bunk. Reached up and remade the bed with the pillow away from the bars. I liked it better that way. Worn sheet and blanket, but they smelled clean enough.

Hubble sat quietly on the lower bed. I used the john and rinsed my face at the sink. Pulled myself up into bed. Took off my shoes. Left them on the foot of the bed. I wanted to know where they were. Shoes can get stolen, and these were good shoes. Bought many years ago in Oxford, England. A university town near the airbase where I was stationed. Big heavy shoes with hard soles and a thick welt.

The bed was too short for me, but most beds are. I lay there in the dark and listened to the restless prison. Then I closed my eyes and floated back to Jamaica with Roscoe. I must have fallen asleep there with her because the next thing I knew it was Saturday. I was still in prison. And an even worse day was beginning.

6

I WAS WOKEN UP BY BRIGHT LIGHTS COMING ON. THE PRISON had no windows. Day and night were created by electricity. At seven o'clock the building was suddenly flooded with light. No dawn or soft twilight. Just circuit breakers thrown shut at seven.

The bright light did not make the cell look any better. The front wall was bars. Half would open outward on a hinge to form the door. The two stacked beds occupied just about half the width and most of the length. On the back wall were a steel sink and a steel toilet pan. The walls were masonry. Part poured concrete and part old bricks. All thickly covered with paint. The walls looked massively thick. Like a dungeon. Above my head was a low concrete ceiling. The cell didn't feel like a room bounded by walls, floor, ceiling. It felt like a solid block of masonry with a tiny living space grudgingly burrowed in.

Outside, the restless night mutter was replaced by the clatter of daytime. Everything was metal, brick, concrete. Noises were amplified and echoed around. It sounded like hell. Through the bars I could see nothing. Opposite our cell was a blank wall. Lying in bed I didn't have the angle to see down the row. I threw off the cover and found my shoes. Put them on and laced them up. Lay down again. Hubble was sitting on the bottom bunk. His tan boat shoes were planted on the concrete floor. I wondered if he'd sat like that all night or if he'd slept.

Next person I saw was a cleaner. He moved into view outside our bars. This was a very old guy with a broom. An old black man with a fringe of snow-white hair. Bent up with age. Fragile like a wizened old bird. His orange prison uniform was washed almost white. He must have been eighty. Must have been inside for sixty years. Maybe stole a chicken in the Depression. Still paying his debt to society.

He stabbed the broom randomly over the corridor. His spine forced his face parallel to the floor. He rolled his head like a swimmer to see from side to side. He caught sight of Hubble and me and stopped. Rested on his broom and shook his head. Gave a kind of reflective chuckle. Shook his head again. He was chuckling away. An appreciative, delighted chuckle. Like at long last, after all these years, he'd been granted the sight of a fabled thing. Like a unicorn or a mermaid. He kept trying to speak, raising his hand as if his point was going to

require emphasis. But every time, he'd start up with the chuckling again and need to clutch the broom. I didn't hurry him. I could wait. I had all weekend. He had the rest of his life.

"Well, yes indeed." He grinned. He had no teeth. "Well, yes indeed."

I looked over at him.

"Well, yes what, Granddad?" I grinned back.

He was cackling away. This was going to take a while.

"Yes indeed," he said. Now he had the chuckling under control. "I've been in this joint since God's dog was a puppy, yes sir. Since Adam was a young boy. But here's something I ain't never seen. No sir, not in all those years."

"What ain't you never seen, old man?" I asked him.

"Well," he said, "I been here all these years, and I ain't never seen anybody in that cell wearing clothes like yours, man."

"You don't like my clothes?" I said. Surprised.

"I didn't say that, no sir, I didn't say I don't like your clothes," he said. "I like your clothes just fine. A very fine set of clothes, yes sir, yes indeed, very fine."

"So what's the story?" I asked.

The old guy was cackling away to himself.

"The quality of the clothes ain't the issue," he said. "No sir, that ain't the issue at all. It's the fact you're wearing them, man, like not wearing the orange uniform. I never saw that before, and like I say, man, I been here since the earth cooled, since the dinosaurs said enough is enough. Now I seen everything, I really have, yes sir."

"But guys on the holding floor don't wear the uniform," I said.

"Yes indeed, that sure is true," the old man said. "That's a fact, for sure."

"The guards said so," I confirmed.

“They would say so,” he agreed. “Because that’s the rules, and the guards, they know the rules, yes sir, they know them because they make them.”

“So what’s the issue, old man?” I said.

“Well, like I say, you’re not wearing the orange suit,” he said.

We were going around in circles here.

“But I don’t have to wear it,” I said.

He was amazed. The sharp bird eyes locked in on me.

“You don’t?” he said. “Why’s that, man? Tell me.”

“Because we don’t wear it on the holding floor,” I said. “You just agreed with that, right?”

There was a silence. He and I got the message simultaneously.

“You think this is the holding floor?” he asked me.

“Isn’t this the holding floor?” I asked him at the same time.

The old guy paused a beat. Lifted his broom and crabbed back out of sight. Quickly as he could. Shouting incredulously as he went.

“This ain’t the holding floor, man,” he whooped. “Holding floor is the top floor. Floor six. This here is floor three. You’re on floor three, man. This is lifers, man. This is categorized dangerous people, man. This ain’t even general population. This is the worst, man. Yes, indeed, you boys are in the wrong place. You boys are in trouble, yes indeed. You gonna get visitors. They gonna check you boys out. Oh man, I’m out of here.”

EVALUATE. LONG EXPERIENCE HAD TAUGHT ME TO EVALUATE and assess. When the unexpected gets dumped on you, don’t waste time. Don’t figure out how or why it happened. Don’t recriminate. Don’t figure out whose fault it is. Don’t work out how to avoid the same mistake next time. All of that

you do later. If you survive. First of all you evaluate. Analyze the situation. Identify the downside. Assess the upside. Plan accordingly. Do all that and you give yourself a better chance of getting through to the other stuff later.

We were not in the holding pens on the sixth floor. Not where unconvicted prisoners should be. We were among dangerous lifers on the third. There was no upside. The downside was extensive. We were new boys on a convict floor. We would not survive without status. We had no status. We would be challenged. We would be made to embrace our position at the absolute bottom of the pecking order. We faced an unpleasant weekend. Potentially a lethal one.

I remembered an army guy, a deserter. Young guy, not a bad recruit, went AWOL because he got some nut religion. Got into trouble in Washington, demonstrating. Ended up thrown in jail, among bad guys like on this floor. Died on his first night. Anally raped. An estimated fifty times. And at the autopsy they found a pint of semen in his stomach. A new boy with no status. Right at the bottom of the pecking order. Available to all those above him.

Assess. I could call on some heavy training. And experience. Not intended for prison life, but it would help. I had gone through a lot of unpleasant education. Not just in the army. Stretching right back into childhood. Between grade school and high school military kids like me get to go to twenty, maybe thirty new schools. Some on bases, most in local neighborhoods. In some tough places. Philippines, Korea, Iceland, Germany, Scotland, Japan, Vietnam. All over the world. The first day at each new school, I was a new boy. With no status. Lots of first days. I quickly learned how to get status. In sandy hot schoolyards, in cold wet schoolyards, my brother and I had slugged it out together, back to back. We had got status.

Then in the service itself, that brutality was refined. I was trained by experts. Guys who traced their own training back to World War Two, Korea, Vietnam. People who had survived things I had only read about in books. They taught me methods, details, skills. Most of all they taught me attitude. They taught me that inhibitions would kill me. Hit early, hit hard. Kill with the first blow. Get your retaliation in first. Cheat. The gentlemen who behaved decently weren’t there to train anybody. They were already dead.

AT SEVEN THIRTY THERE WAS A RAGGED CLUNK ALONG THE row of cells. The time switch had unlocked the cages. Our bars sagged open an inch. Hubble sat motionless. Still silent. I had no plan. Best option would be to find a guard. Explain and get transferred. But I didn't expect to find a guard. On floors like this they wouldn't patrol singly. They would move in pairs, possibly in groups of three or four. The prison was understaffed. That had been made clear last night. Unlikely to be enough manpower to provide groups of guards on each floor. Probability was I wouldn't see a guard all day. They would wait in a crew room. Operate as a crash squad responding to emergencies. And if I did see a guard, what would I say? I shouldn't be here? They must hear that all day long. They would ask, who put you here? I would say Spivey, the top boy. They would say, well that's OK then, right? So the only plan was no plan. Wait and see. React accordingly. Objective, survival until Monday.

I could hear the grinding as the other inmates swung back their gates and latched them open. I could hear movement and shouted conversation as they strolled out to start another pointless day. I waited.

Not long to wait. From my tight angle on the bed, head away from the door, I saw our next-door neighbors stroll out. They merged with a small knot of men. They were all dressed the same. Orange prison uniform. Red bandannas tight over shaved heads. Huge black guys. Obviously bodybuilders. Several had torn the sleeves off their shirts. Suggesting that no available garment could contain their massive bulk. They may have been right. An impressive sight.

The nearest guy was wearing pale sunglasses. The sort which darken in the sun. Silver halide. The guy had probably last seen the sun in the seventies. May never see it again. So the shades were redundant, but they looked good. Like the muscles. Like the bandannas and the torn shirts. All image. I waited.

The guy with the sunglasses spotted us. His look of surprise quickly changed to excitement. He alerted the group's biggest guy by hitting his arm. The big man looked round. He looked blank. Then he grinned. I waited. The knot of men assembled outside our cell. They gazed in. The big guy pulled open our gate. The others passed it from hand to hand through its arc. They latched it open.

"Look what they sent us," the big guy said. "You know what they sent us?"

"What they sent us?" the sunglasses guy said.

“They sent us fresh meat,” the big guy answered.

“They sure did, man,” the sunglasses guy said. “Fresh meat.”

“Fresh meat for everybody,” the big guy said.

He grinned. He looked around his gang and they all grinned back. Exchanged low fives. I waited. The big guy stepped half a pace into our cell. He was enormous. Maybe an inch or two shorter than me but probably twice as heavy. He filled the doorway. His dull eyes flicked over me, then Hubble.

“Yo, white boy, come here,” he said. To Hubble.

I could sense Hubble’s panic. He didn’t move.

“Come here, white boy,” the big guy repeated. Quietly.

Hubble stood up. Took half a pace toward the man at the door. The big guy was glaring with that rage glare that is supposed to chill you with its ferocity.

“This is Red Boy territory, man,” the big guy said. Explaining the bandannas. “What’s whitey doing in Red Boy territory?”

Hubble said nothing in reply.

“Residency tax, man,” the big guy said. “Like they got in Florida hotels, man. You got to pay the tax. Give me your sweater, white boy.”

Hubble was rigid with fear.

“Give me your sweater, white boy,” he said again. Quietly.

Hubble unwrapped his expensive white sweater and held it out. The big man took it and threw it behind him without looking.

“Give me the eyeglasses, white boy,” he said.

Hubble flicked a despairing glance up at me. Took off his gold glasses. Held them out. The big man took them and dropped them to the floor. Crunched them under his shoe. Screwed his foot around. The glasses smashed and splintered. The big man scraped his foot back and flicked the wreckage backward into the

corridor. The other guys all took turns stamping on them.

“Good boy,” the big guy said. “You paid the tax.”

Hubble was trembling.

“Now come here, white boy,” said his tormentor.

Hubble shuffled nearer.

“Closer, white boy,” the big man said.

Hubble shuffled nearer. Until he was a foot away. He was shaking.

“On your knees, white boy,” said the big guy.

Hubble knelt.

“Unzip me, whitey,” he said.

Hubble did nothing. Filled with panic.

“Unzip me, white boy,” the big guy said again. “With your teeth.”

Hubble gave a gasp of fear and revulsion and jumped back. He scuttled backward to the rear of the cell. Tried to hide behind the john. He was practically hugging the pan.

Time to intervene. Not for Hubble. I felt nothing for him. But I had to intervene for myself. Hubble’s abject performance would taint me. We would be seen as a pair. Hubble’s surrender would disqualify us both. In the status game.

“Come back, white boy, don’t you like me?” the big guy called to Hubble.

I took a long silent breath. Swung my feet over the side of the bunk and landed lightly in front of the big man. He stared at me. I stared back, calmly.

“You’re in my house, fat boy,” I said. “But I’m going to give you a choice.”

“Choice of what?” said the big guy. Blankly. Surprised.

“A choice of exit strategies, fat boy,” I said.

"A choice of exit strategies, fat boy," I said.

"Say what?" he said.

"What I mean is this," I said. "You're going to leave. That's for sure. Your choice is about how you leave. Either you can walk out of here by yourself, or these other fat boys behind you are going to carry you out in a bucket."

"Oh yeah?" he said.

"For sure," I said. "I'm going to count to three, OK, so you better choose real quick, right?"

He glared at me.

"One," I counted. No response.

"Two," I counted. No response.

Then I cheated. Instead of counting three I headbutted him full in the face. Came off the back foot with a thrust up the legs and whipped my head forward and smashed it into his nose. It was beautifully done. The forehead is a perfect arch in all planes and very strong. The skull at the front is very thick. I have a ridge up there like concrete. The human head is very heavy. All kinds of neck muscles and back muscles balance it. It's like getting hit in the face with a bowling ball. It's always a surprise. People expect punching or kicking. A headbutt is always unexpected. It comes out of the blue.

It must have caved his whole face in. I guess I pulped his nose and smashed both his cheekbones. Jarred his little brain around real good. His legs crumpled and he hit the floor like a puppet with the strings cut. Like an ox in the slaughterhouse. His skull cracked on the concrete floor.

I stared around the knot of men. They were busy reassessing my status.

"Who's next?" I said. "But this is like Vegas now, it's double or quits. This guy is going to the hospital, maybe six weeks in a metal mask. So the next guy gets twelve weeks in the hospital, you understand that? Couple of smashed elbows, right? So who's next?"

There was no reply. I pointed at the guy in sunglasses.

“Give me the sweater, fat boy,” I said.

He bent and picked up the sweater. Passed it to me. Leaned over and held it out. Didn’t want to get too close. I took the sweater and tossed it onto Hubble’s bunk.

“Give me the eyeglasses,” I said.

He bent and swept up the twisted gold wreckage. Handed it to me. I tossed it back at him.

“They’re broken, fat boy,” I said. “Give me yours.”

There was a long pause. He looked at me. I looked at him. Without blinking. He took off his sunglasses and handed them to me. I put them in my pocket.

“Now get this carcass out of here,” I said.

The bunch of men in their orange uniforms and their red bandannas straightened out the slack limbs and dragged the big man away. I crawled back up into my bunk. I was shaking with adrenaline rush. My stomach was churning and I was panting. My circulation had just about shut down. I felt terrible. But not as bad as I would have felt if I hadn’t done it. They’d have finished with Hubble by then and started in on me.

I DIDN’T EAT ANY BREAKFAST. NO APPETITE. I JUST LAY ON the bunk until I felt better. Hubble sat on his bed. He was rocking back and forward. He still hadn’t spoken. After a while I slid to the floor. Washed at the sink. People were strolling up to the doorway and gazing in. Strolling away. The word had gotten around fast. The new guy in the cell at the end had sent a Red Boy to the hospital. Check it out. I was a celebrity.

Hubble stopped his rocking and looked at me. Opened his mouth and closed it again. Opened it for a second time.

“I can’t take this,” he said.

They were the first words I had heard him say since his assured banter on Finlay’s speakerphone. His voice was low, but his statement was definite. Not a whine or a complaint, but a statement of fact. He couldn’t take this. I looked

wimp or a complaint, but a statement of fact. He couldn't take this. I looked over at him. Considered his statement for a long moment.

"So why are you here?" I asked him. "What are you doing?"

"I'm not doing anything," he said. Blankly.

"You confessed to something you didn't do," I said. "You asked for this."

"No," said Hubble. "I did what I said. I did it and I told the detective."

"Bullshit, Hubble," I said. "You weren't even there. You were at a party. The guy who drove you home is a policeman, for God's sake. You didn't do it, you know that, everybody knows that. Don't give me that shit."

Hubble looked down at the floor. Thought for a moment.

"I can't explain it," he said. "I can't say anything about it. I just need to know what happens next."

I looked at him again.

"What happens next?" I said. "You stay here until Monday morning, and then you go back to Margrave. Then I guess they'll let you go."

"Will they?" he said. Like he was debating with himself.

"You weren't even there," I said again. "They know that. They might want to know why you confessed, when you didn't do anything. And they'll want to know why the guy had your phone number."

"What if I can't tell them?" he said.

"Can't or won't?" I asked him.

"I can't tell them," he said. "I can't tell anybody anything."

He looked away and shuddered. Very frightened.

"But I can't stay in here," he said. "I can't stand it."

Hubble was a financial guy. They give out their phone numbers like confetti.

Talking to anybody they meet about hedge funds or tax havens. Anything to transfer some guy's hard-earned dollars their way. But this phone number was printed on a scrap of torn computer paper. Not engraved on a business card. And hidden in a shoe, not stuffed in a wallet. And playing in the background like a rhythm section was the fear coming out of the guy.

"Why can't you tell anybody?" I asked him.

"Because I can't," he said. Wouldn't say anything more.

I was suddenly weary. Twenty-four hours ago I had jumped off a Greyhound at a cloverleaf and walked down a new road. Striding out happily through the warm morning rain. Avoiding people, avoiding involvement. No baggage, no hassle. Freedom. I didn't want it interrupted by Hubble, or by Finlay, or by some tall guy who got himself shot in his shaved head. I didn't want any part of it. I just wanted some peace and quiet and to go looking for Blind Blake. I wanted to find some eighty-year-old who might remember him from some bar. I should be talking to that old guy who swept up around the prison, not Hubble. Yuppie asshole.

He was thinking hard. I could see what Finlay had meant. I had never seen anybody think so visibly. His mouth was working soundlessly and he was fiddling with his fingers. Like he was checking off positives and negatives. Weighing things up. I watched him. I saw him make his decision. He turned and looked over at me.

"I need some advice," he said. "I've got a problem."

I laughed at him.

"Well, what a surprise," I said. "I'd never have guessed. I thought you were here because you were bored with playing golf on the weekend."

"I need help," he said.

"You've had all the help you're going to get," I said. "Without me, you'd be bent forward over your bed right now, with a line of big horny guys forming at the door. And so far you haven't exactly overwhelmed me with gratitude for that."

He looked down for a moment. Nodded.

He looked down for a moment. Nodded.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m very grateful. Believe me, I am. You saved my life. You took care of it. That’s why you’ve got to tell me what to do. I’m being threatened.”

I let the revelation hang in the air for a moment.

“I know that,” I said. “That’s pretty obvious.”

“Well, not just me,” he said. “My family as well.”

He was getting me involved. I looked at him. He started thinking again. His mouth was working. He was pulling on his fingers. Eyes flicking left and right. Like over here was a big pile of reasons, and over there was another big pile of reasons. Which pile was bigger?

“Have you got family?” he asked me.

“No,” I said. What else could I say? My parents were both dead. I had a brother whom I never saw. So I had no family. No idea whether I wanted one, either. Maybe, maybe not.

“I’ve been married ten years,” Hubble said. “Ten years last month. Had a big party. I’ve got two children. Boy, age nine, girl, age seven. Great wife, great kids. I love them like crazy.”

He meant it. I could see that. He lapsed into silence. Misting over as he thought about his family. Wondering how the hell he came to be in here without them. He wasn’t the first guy to sit in this cell wondering that. And he wouldn’t be the last.

“We’ve got a nice place,” he said. “Out on Beckman Drive. Bought there five years ago. A lot of money, but it was worth it. You know Beckman?”

“No,” I said again. He was afraid to get to the point. Pretty soon he’d be telling me about the wallpaper in the downstairs half bath. And how he planned to pay for his daughter’s orthodonture. I let him talk. Prison conversation.

“Anyway,” he said eventually. “It’s all falling apart now.”

He sat there in his chinos and his polo shirt. He had picked up his white sweater and wrapped it around his shoulders again. Without his glasses he looked older, more vacant. People who wear glasses, without them they always look defocused, vulnerable. Out in the open. A layer removed. He looked like a tired old man. One leg was thrust forward. I could see the patterned sole of his shoe.

What did he call a threat? Some kind of exposure or embarrassment? Something that might blow away the perfect life he'd described on Beckman Drive? Maybe it was his wife who was involved in something. Maybe he was covering for her. Maybe she'd been having an affair with the tall dead guy. Maybe lots of things. Maybe anything. Maybe his family was threatened by disgrace, bankruptcy, stigma, cancellation of country club membership. I went around in circles. I didn't live in Hubble's world. I didn't share his frame of reference. I had seen him trembling and shaking with fear. But I had no idea how much it took to make a guy like that afraid. Or how little. When I first saw him at the station house yesterday he had looked upset and agitated. Since then he had been from time to time trembling, paralyzed, staring with fear. Sometimes resigned and apathetic. Clearly very afraid of something. I leaned on the cell wall and waited for him to tell me what.

"They're threatening us," he said again. "If I ever tell anybody what's going on, they said they'll break into our house. Round us all up. In my bedroom. They said they'll nail me to the wall and cut my balls off. Then they'll make my wife eat them. Then they'll cut our throats. They said they'll make our children watch and then they'll do things to them after we're dead that we'll never know about."

7

“SO WHAT SHOULD I DO?” HUBBLE ASKED ME. “WHAT would you do?”

He was staring over at me. Waiting for a reply. What would I do? If somebody threatened me like that, they would die. I’d rip them apart. Either as they spoke, or days or months or years later. I would hunt them down and rip them apart. But Hubble couldn’t do that. He had a family. Three hostages waiting to be taken. Three hostages already taken. Taken as soon as the threat was made.

“What should I do?” he asked me again.

I felt pressure. I had to say something. And my forehead hurt. It was bruising up after the massive impact with the Red Boy’s face. I stepped to the bars and glanced down the row of cells. Leaned against the end of the bunk. Thought for a moment. Came up with the only possible answer. But not the answer Hubble wanted to hear.

“Nothing you can do,” I said. “You’ve been told to keep your mouth shut, so you keep it shut. Don’t tell anybody what’s going on. Ever.”

He looked down at his feet. Dropped his head into his hands. Gave a moan of abject misery. Like he was crushed with disappointment.

“I’ve got to talk to somebody,” he said. “I’ve got to get out of this. I mean it, I’ve got to get out. I’ve got to talk to somebody.”

I shook my head at him.

“You can’t do that,” I said. “They’ve told you to say nothing, so you say nothing. That way you stay alive. You and your family.”

He looked up. Shuddered.

“Something very big is going on,” he said. “I’ve got to stop it if I can.”

I shook my head again. If something very big was going on around people who used threats like that, then he was never going to stop it. He was on board, and

he was going to stay on board. I smiled a bleak smile at him and shook my head for the third time. He nodded like he understood. Like he finally accepted the situation. He went back to rocking and staring at the wall. His eyes were open. Red and naked without the gold rims. He sat silently for a long time.

I COULDN'T UNDERSTAND THE CONFESSION. HE SHOULD have kept his mouth shut. He should have denied any involvement with the dead guy. Should have said he had no idea why his phone number was written down in the guy's shoe. Should have said he had no idea what Pluribus was. Then he could have just gone home.

"Hubble?" I said. "Why did you confess?"

He looked up. Waited a long moment before replying.

"I can't answer that," he said. "I'd be telling you more than I should."

"I already know more than I should," I said. "Finlay asked about the dead guy and Pluribus and you flipped. So I know there's a link between you and the dead guy and whatever Pluribus is."

He gazed at me. Looking vague.

"Is Finlay that black detective?" he said.

"Yes," I said. "Finlay. Chief of detectives."

"He's new," Hubble said. "Never seen him before. It was always Gray. He was there years, since I was a kid. There's only one detective, you know, don't know why they say chief of detectives when there's only one. There's only eight people in the whole police department. Chief Morrison, he's been there years, then the desk man, four uniformed men, a woman, and the detective, Gray. Only now it's Finlay. The new man. Black guy, the first we've ever had. Gray killed himself, you know. Hung himself from a rafter in his garage. February, I think."

I let him ramble on. Prison conversation. It passes the time. That's what it's for. Hubble was good at it. But I still wanted him to answer my question. My forehead hurt and I wanted to bathe it with cold water. I wanted to walk around for a while. I wanted to eat. I wanted coffee. I waited without listening as Hubble

for a while. I wanted to eat. I wanted coffee. I waited without listening as Hubble rambled through the municipal history of Margrave. Suddenly he stopped.

“What were you asking me?” he said.

“Why did you confess to killing the guy?” I repeated.

He looked around. Then he looked straight at me.

“There’s a link,” he said. “That’s all it’s safe to say right now. The detective mentioned the guy, and used the word ‘Pluribus,’ which made me jump. I was startled. I couldn’t believe he knew the connection. Then I realized he hadn’t known there was a connection, but I’d just told him by being startled. You see? I’d given it away. I felt I’d blown it. Given away the secret. And I mustn’t do that, because of the threat.”

He tailed off and went quiet. An echo of the fright and panic he had felt in Finlay’s office was back. He looked up again. Took a deep breath.

“I was terrified,” he said. “But then the detective told me the guy was dead. He’d been shot. I got scared because if they had killed him, they might kill me, too. I can’t really tell you why. But there’s a link, like you worked out. If they got that particular guy, does that mean they are going to get me too? Or doesn’t it? I had to think it out. I didn’t even know for sure who had killed the guy. But then the detective told me about the violence. Did he tell you about that?”

I nodded.

“The injuries?” I said. “Sounded pretty unpleasant.”

“Right,” Hubble said. “And it proves it was who I thought it was. So I was really scared. I was thinking, are they looking for me too? Or aren’t they? I just didn’t know.

I was terrified. I thought for ages. It was going around and around in my head. The detective was going crazy. I didn’t say anything because I was thinking. Seemed like hours. I was terrified, you know?”

He fell back into silence. He was running it through his head again. Probably for the thousandth time. Trying to figure out if his decision had been the right one.

“I could have fixed up a better story,” he said. “I should have said I was

"I suddenly figured out what to do," he said. "I had three problems. If they were after me too, I had to avoid them. Hide, you know? To protect myself. But if they weren't after me, then I had to stay silent, right? To protect my wife and kids. And from their point of view that particular guy needed shooting. Three problems. So I confessed."

I didn't follow his reasoning. Didn't make much sense, the way he was explaining it to me. I looked blankly at him.

"Three separate problems, right?" he said. "I decided to get arrested. Then I was safe if they were after me. Because they can't get at me in here, right? They're out there and I'm in here. That's problem number one solved. But I also figured, this is the complicated bit, if they actually were not after me at all, then why don't I get arrested but don't say anything about them? They would think I had got arrested by mistake or whatever, and they see that I'm not talking. They see, OK? It proves I'm safe. It's like a demonstration that I'm dependable. A sort of proof. Trial by ordeal sort of a thing. That's problem number two solved. And by saying it was me actually killed the guy, it sort of definitely puts me on their side. It's like a statement of loyalty, right? And I thought they might be grateful I'd pointed the heat in the wrong direction for a while. So that was problem number three solved."

I stared at him. No wonder he had clammed up and thought like crazy for forty minutes when he was in with Finlay. Three birds with one stone. That's what he had been aiming for.

The part about proving he could be trusted not to spill his guts was OK. Whoever they were, they would notice that. A spell in jail without talking was a rite of passage. A badge of honor. Counted for a lot. Good thinking, Hubble.

Unfortunately the other part was pretty shaky. They couldn't get to him in here? He had to be joking. No better place in the world to ace a guy than prison. You know where he is, you've got all the time you need. Lots of people who'll do it for you. Lots of opportunity. Cheap, too. On the street, a hit would cost you what? A grand, two grand? Plus a risk. Inside, it costs you a carton of cigarettes. Plus no risk. Because nobody would notice. No, prison was not a safe hiding place. Bad thinking, Hubble. And there was another flaw, too.

"What are you going to do on Monday?" I asked him. "You'll be back home, doing whatever you do. You'll be walking around Margrave or Atlanta or

wherever it is you walk around. If they're after you, won't they get you then?"

He started up with the thinking again. Going at it like crazy. He hadn't thought very far ahead before. Yesterday afternoon it had been blind panic. Deal with the present. Not a bad principle. Except pretty soon the future rolls in and that needs dealing with, too.

"I'm just hoping for the best," Hubble said. "I sort of felt if they wanted to get me, they might cool off after a while. I'm very useful to them. I hope they'll think about that. Right now it's a very tense situation. But it's all going to calm back down very soon. I might just make it through. If they get me, they get me. I don't care anymore. It's my family I'm worried about."

He stopped and shrugged. Blew a sigh. Not a bad guy. He hadn't set out to be some big criminal. It had crept up on the blind side. Sucked him in so gently he hadn't noticed. Until he wanted out. If he was very lucky they wouldn't break all his bones until after he was dead.

"How much does your wife know?" I asked him.

He glanced over. An expression of horror on his face.

"Nothing," he said. "Nothing at all. I haven't told her anything. Not a thing. I couldn't. It's all my secret. Nobody else knows a thing."

"You'll have to tell her something," I said. "She's sure to have noticed you're not at home, vacuuming the pool or whatever you do on the weekend."

I was just trying to lighten it up, but it didn't work out. Hubble went quiet. Misting over again at the thought of his backyard in the early fall sunlight. His wife maybe fussing over rosebushes or whatever. His kids darting about shrieking. Maybe they had a dog. And a three-car garage with European sedans waiting to be hosed off. A basketball hoop over the middle door waiting for the nine-year-old to grow strong enough to dunk the heavy ball. A flag over the porch. Early leaves waiting to be swept. Family life on a Saturday. But not this Saturday. Not for this guy.

"Maybe she'll think it's all a mistake," he said. "Maybe they've told her, I don't know. We know one of the policemen, Dwight Stevenson. My brother married his wife's sister. I don't know what he'll have said to her. I guess I'll deal with that on Monday. I'll say it was some kind of terrible mistake. She'll believe it

that on Monday. I'll say it was some kind of terrible mistake. She'll believe it. Everybody knows mistakes are made."

He was thinking out loud.

"Hubble?" I said. "What did the tall guy do to them that was liable to get himself shot in the head?"

He stood up and leaned on the wall. Rested his foot on the edge of the steel toilet pan. Looked at me. Wouldn't answer. Now for the big question.

"What about you?" I asked him. "What have you done to them liable to get yourself shot in the head?"

He wouldn't answer. The silence in our cell was terrible. I let it crash around for a while. Couldn't think of anything more to say. Hubble clunked his shoe against the metal toilet pan. A rattly little rhythm. Sounded like a Bo Diddley riff.

"You ever heard of Blind Blake?" I asked him.

He stopped clunking and looked up.

"Who?" he said blankly.

"Doesn't matter," I said. "I'm going to find a bathroom. I need to put a wet towel on my head. It hurts."

"I'm not surprised," he said. "I'll come with you."

He was anxious not to be left alone. Understandable. I was going to be his minder for the weekend. Not that I had any other plans.

WE WALKED DOWN THE CELL ROW TO A KIND OF OPEN AREA at the end. I saw the fire door Spivey had used the night before. Beyond it was a tiled opening. Over the opening was a clock. Nearly twelve noon. Clocks in prisons are bizarre. Why measure hours and minutes when people think in years and decades?

The tiled entrance was clogged with men. I pushed through and Hubble followed. It was a large tiled room, square. A strong disinfectant stink. One wall

followed. It was a large tiled room, square. A strong disinfectant stink. One wall had the doorway. On the left was a row of shower stalls. Open. The back wall was a row of toilet cubicles. Open at the front, divided by waist-high partitions. The right wall was a row of washbasins. Very communal. Not a big deal if you'd been in the army all your life, but Hubble wasn't happy. Not what he was used to at all.

All the fittings were steel. Everything that would normally be porcelain was stainless-steel. For safety. A smashed-up porcelain washbasin yields some pretty good shards. A decent-sized sharp piece would make a good weapon. For the same reason the mirrors over the basins were sheets of polished steel. A bit dull, but fit for the purpose. You could see yourself in them, but you couldn't smash them up and stab somebody with a fragment.

I stepped over to a basin and ran cold water. Took a wad of paper towels from the dispenser and soaked them. Held them to my bruised forehead. Hubble stood around doing nothing. I kept the cold towels on for a while and then took some more. Water ran down my face. Felt good. There was no real injury. No flesh there, just skin over solid bone. Not much to injure, and impossible to break. A perfect arch, nature's strongest structure. That's why I avoid hitting anything with my hands. Hands are pretty fragile. All kinds of small bones and tendons in there. A punch big enough to deck that Red Boy would have smashed my hand up pretty good. I'd have joined him in the hospital. Not much point in that.

I patted my face dry and leaned up close to the steel mirror to check out the damage. Not bad. I combed my hair with my fingers. As I leaned against the sink I could feel the sunglasses in my pocket. The Red Boy's shades. The spoils of victory. I took them out and put them on. Gazed at my dull reflection.

As I messed about in front of the steel mirror I saw the start of some kind of a commotion happening behind me. I heard a brief warning from Hubble and I turned around. The sunglasses dimmed the bright light. Five white guys were trawling across the room. Biker types. Orange suits, of course, more torn-off sleeves, but with black leather additions. Caps, belts, fingerless gloves. Big beards. All five were big, heavy men, with that hard, slabby fat which is almost muscle but not quite. All five had crude tattoos on their arms and their faces. Swastikas. On their cheeks under their eyes and on their foreheads. The Aryan Brotherhood. White trash prison gang.

As the five swept the room, the other occupants melted away. Any who didn't

get the message were seized and hustled to the door. Thrown out into the corridor. Even the soapy naked guys from the shower stalls. Within seconds the big bathroom was empty. Except for the five bikers and Hubble and me. The five big men fanned out in a loose arc around us. These were big ugly guys. The swastika tattoos on their faces were scratched in. Roughly inked.

My assumption was they'd come to recruit me. Somehow hijack the fact that I'd knocked over a Red Boy. Claim my bizarre celebrity for their cause. Turn it into a race triumph for the Brotherhood. But I was wrong. My assumption was way out. So I was left unprepared. The guy in the middle of the five was looking back and forth between Hubble and me. His eyes flicked across. They stopped on me.

"OK, he's the one," he said. Looking straight at me.

Two things happened. The end two bikers grabbed Hubble and ran him to the door. And the boss man swung a big fist at my face. I saw it late. Dodged left and it caught me on the shoulder. I was spun around by the blow. Grabbed from behind by the neck. Two huge hands at my throat. Strangling me. The boss man lined up for another shot at my gut. If it landed, I was a dead man. I knew that much. So I leaned back and kicked out. Smashed the boss man's balls like I was trying to punt a football right out of the stadium. The big Oxford shoe crunched him real good. The welt hit him like a blunt ax.

My shoulders were hunched and I was pumping up my neck to resist the strangler. He was wrenching hard. I was losing it. I reached up and broke his little fingers. I heard the knuckles splinter over the roaring in my ears. Then I broke his ring fingers. More splintering. Like pulling a chicken apart. He let go.

The third guy waded in. He was a solid mountain of lard. Sheathed with heavy slabs of meat. Like armor. Nowhere to hit him. He was pounding me with short jabs to the arm and chest. I was jammed back between two sinks. The mountain of lard pressing up. Nowhere to hit him. Except his eyes. I jammed my thumb into his eye. Hooked the tips of my fingers in his ear and squeezed. My thumbnail popped his eyeball sideways. I pushed my thumb in. His eyeball was nearly out. He was screaming and pulling on my wrist. I held on.

The boss man was up on one knee. I kicked hard at his face. Missed. Caught him in the throat instead. Smashed his voice box. He went back down. I went for the big guy's other eye. Missed. I held on with my thumb. Like pushing it through a bloody steak. He went down. I spun away from the wall. The guy with the

broken fingers ran for the door. The guy with the eye out was flopping about on the floor. Screaming. The boss man was choking on his smashed voice box.

I was grabbed from behind again. I twisted away. A Red Boy. Two of them. I was dizzy. I was going to lose it now. But they just grabbed me and ran me to the door. Sirens were going off.

“Get out of here, man,” screamed the Red Boys over the sirens. “This is ours. We did this. Understand? Red Boys did this. We’ll take the fall, man.”

They hurled me into the crowd outside. I understood. They were going to say they did it. Not because they wanted to protect me from the blame. Because they wanted to claim the credit. A race victory.

I saw Hubble bouncing around in the crowd. I saw guards. I saw hundreds of men. I saw Spivey. I grabbed Hubble and we hustled back to the cell. Sirens were blasting. Guards were tumbling out of a door. I could see shotguns and clubs. Boots clattered. Shouting and screaming. Sirens. We raced to the cell. Fell inside. I was dizzy and panting. I had taken a battering. The sirens were deafening. Couldn’t talk. I splashed water on my face. The sunglasses were gone. Must have fallen off.

I heard screaming at the door. I turned and saw Spivey. He was screaming at us to get out. He rushed into the cell. I grabbed my coat from the bunk. Spivey seized Hubble by the elbow. Then he grabbed me and straight-armed both of us out of there. He was screaming at us to run. Sirens were blasting. He ran us to the emergency door where the guards had rushed out. Shoved us through and ran us upstairs. Up and up. My lungs were giving out. There was a door at the top of the last flight painted with a big figure six. We crashed through. He hustled us down a row of cells. Shoved us into an empty cell and flung the iron gate shut. It crashed and locked. He ran off. I collapsed on the bed, eyes tight shut.

WHEN I OPENED THEM AGAIN HUBBLE WAS SITTING ON A bed looking over at me. We were in a big cell. Probably twice as wide as the last one. Two separate beds, one on each side. A sink, a john. A wall of bars. Everything was brighter and cleaner. It was very quiet. The air smelled better. This was the holding floor. This was floor six. This was where we should have been all the time.

“What the hell happened to you in there?” Hubble asked.

I just shrugged at him. A meal cart appeared outside our cell. It was dragged by an old white guy. Not a guard, some kind of an orderly. Looked more like an old steward on an ocean liner. He passed a tray through an oblong slot in the bars. Covered plates, paper cups, Thermos. We ate the food sitting on our beds. I drank all the coffee. Then I paced the cell. Shook the gate. It was locked. The sixth floor was calm and quiet. A big clean cell. Separate beds. A mirror. Towels. I felt much better up here.

Hubble piled the meal debris on the tray and shoved it out under the gate into the corridor. He lay down on his bed. Put his hands behind his head. Stared at the ceiling. Doing time. I did the same. But I was thinking hard. Because they had definitely gone through a selection process. They had looked us both over very carefully and chosen me. Quite definitely chosen me. Then they had tried to strangle me.

They would have killed me. Except for one thing. The guy with his hands around my throat had made a mistake. He had me from behind, which was in his favor, and he was big enough and strong enough. But he hadn’t balled up his fingers. The best way is to use the thumbs on the back of the neck but fold up the fingers. Do it with knuckle pressure, not finger pressure. The guy had left his fingers out straight. So I had been able to reach up and snap them off. His mistake had saved my life. No doubt about that. Soon as he was neutralized, it was two against one. And I’d never had a problem with those kind of odds.

But it was still a straightforward attempt to kill me. They came in, chose me, tried to kill me. And Spivey had just happened to be outside the bathroom. He had set it up. He had employed the Aryan Brotherhood to kill me. He had ordered the attack and waited ready to burst in and find me dead.

And he had planned it yesterday before ten in the evening. That was clear. That’s why he had left us on the wrong floor. On the third, not the sixth. On a convict floor, not the holding floor. Everybody had known we should have been on the holding floor. The two guards last night in the reception bunker, they had been totally clear about it. It had said so on their battered clipboard. But at ten o’clock, Spivey had left us on the third floor where he knew he could have me killed. He’d told the Aryans to attack me at twelve o’clock the next day. He had been waiting outside that bathroom at twelve o’clock ready to burst in. Ready to see my body lying on the tiles.

But then his plan had fouled up. I wasn't killed. The Aryans were beaten off. The Red Boys had piled in to seize the moment. Mayhem had broken out. A riot was starting. Spivey was panicking. He hit the alarms and called the crash squads. Rushed us off the floor, up to the sixth, and left us up here. According to all the paperwork, the sixth floor is where we'd been all the time.

A neat fallback. It made me fireproof as far as investigation went. Spivey had chosen the fallback option which said we were never there. He had a couple of serious injuries on his hands, probably even a dead guy. I figured the boss man must have choked to death. Spivey must know I had done it. But he could never say so now. Because according to him, I was never there.

I lay on the bed and stared at the concrete ceiling. I exhaled gently. The plan was clear. No doubt about Spivey's plan at all. The fallback was coherent. An aborted plan with a neat fallback position. But why? I didn't understand it. Let's say the strangler had balled up his fingers. They would have got me then. I would have been dead. Dumped on the bathroom floor with my big swollen tongue sticking out. Spivey would have rushed in and found me. Why? What was Spivey's angle? What did he have against me? I'd never seen him before. Never been anywhere near him or his damn prison. Why the hell should he operate an elaborate plan to get me dead? I couldn't begin to figure it out.

8

HUBBLE SLEPT FOR A WHILE ON THE COT ACROSS FROM mine. Then he stirred and woke up. Writhed around. Looked disoriented for a moment, until he remembered where he was. Tried to check the time on his watch but saw only a band of pale skin where the heavy Rolex had been. Pushed against the bridge of his nose and remembered he'd lost his eyeglasses. Sighed and flopped his head back onto the striped prison pillow. One very miserable guy.

I could understand his fear. But he also looked defeated. Like he'd just rolled the dice and lost. Like he'd been counting on something to happen, and it hadn't happened, so now he was back in despair.

Then I began to understand that, too.

"The dead guy was trying to help you, wasn't he?" I said.

The question scared him.

"I can't tell you that, can I?" he answered.

"I need to know," I said. "Maybe you approached the guy for help. Maybe you talked to him. Maybe that's why he got killed. Maybe it looks like now you'll start talking to me. Which could get me killed, too."

Hubble nodded and rocked back and forth on his bed. Took a deep breath. Looked straight at me.

"He was an investigator," he said. "I brought him down here because I want this whole thing stopped. I don't want to be involved anymore. I'm not a criminal. I'm scared to death and I want out. He was going to get me out and take down the scam. But he slipped up somehow and now he's dead and I'm never going to get out. And if they find out it was me brought him down here, they'll kill me. And if they don't kill me, I'll probably go to jail for a thousand years anyway, because right now the whole damn thing is very exposed and very dangerous."

"Who was the guy?" I asked him.

"He didn't have a name," Hubble said. "Just a contact code. He said it was safer

that way. I can't believe they got him. He seemed like a capable guy to me. Tell the truth, you remind me of him. You seem like a capable guy to me, too."

"What was he doing up there at the warehouse?" I asked him.

He shrugged and shook his head.

"I don't understand that situation," he said. "I put him together with another guy, and he was meeting with him up there, but wouldn't they have shot the other guy as well? I don't understand why they only got one of them."

"Who was the other guy he was meeting with?" I said.

He stopped and shook his head.

"I've told you way too much already," he said. "I must be crazy. They'll kill me."

"Who's on the inside of this thing?" I asked him.

"Don't you listen?" he said. "I'm not saying another word."

"I don't want names," I said. "Is it a big deal?"

"It's huge," he said. "Biggest thing you ever heard of."

"How many people?" I said.

He shrugged and thought about it. Counted up in his head.

"Ten people," he said. "Not counting me."

I looked at him and shrugged.

"Ten people doesn't sound like a big deal," I said.

"Well, there's hired help," he said. "They're around when they're needed. I mean a core of ten people around here. Ten people in the know, not counting me. It's a very tight situation, but believe me, it's a big deal."

"What about the guy you sent to meet with the investigator?" I said. "Is he one

of the ten people?”

Hubble shook his head.

“I’m not counting him either,” he said.

“So there’s you and him and ten others?” I said. “Some kind of a big deal?”

He nodded glumly.

“Biggest thing you ever heard of,” he said again.

“And right now it’s very exposed?” I asked him. “Why? Because of this investigator poking about?”

Hubble shook his head again. He was writhing around like my questions were tearing him up.

“No,” he said. “For another reason altogether. It’s like a window of vulnerability is wide open right now. An exposure. It’s been very risky, getting worse all the time. But now it could go either way. If we get through it, nobody will ever know anything. But if we don’t get through it, it’ll be the biggest sensation you ever heard of, believe me. Either way, it’s going to be a close call.”

I looked at him. He didn’t look to me much like the sort of a guy who could cause the biggest sensation I ever heard of.

“So how long is this exposure going to last?” I asked him.

“It’s nearly over,” he said. “Maybe a week. A week tomorrow is my guess. Next Sunday. Maybe I’ll live to see it.”

“So after next Sunday you’re not vulnerable anymore?” I said. “Why not? What’s going to happen next Sunday?”

He shook his head and turned his face away. It was like if he couldn’t see me, I wasn’t there, asking him questions.

“What does Pluribus mean?” I asked him.

He wouldn’t answer. Just kept on shaking his head. His eyes were screwed shut with torque.

with terror.

“Is it a code for something?” I said.

He wasn’t hearing me. The conversation was over. I gave it up and we lapsed back into silence. That suited me well enough. I didn’t want to know anything more. I didn’t want to know anything at all. Being an outsider and knowing Hubble’s business didn’t seem to be a very smart combination. It hadn’t done the tall guy with the shaved head a whole lot of good. I wasn’t interested in sharing the same fate as him, dead at a warehouse gate, partially hidden under some old cardboard, two holes in my head, all my bones smashed. I just wanted to pass the time until Monday, and then get the hell out. By next Sunday, I planned to be a very long way away indeed.

“OK, Hubble,” I said. “No more questions.”

He shrugged and nodded. Sat silent for a long time. Then he spoke, quietly, with a lot of resignation in his voice.

“Thanks,” he said. “It’s better that way.”

I WAS ROLLED OVER ON THE NARROW COT TRYING TO FLOAT away into some kind of limbo. But Hubble was restless. He was tossing and turning and blowing tight sighs. He was coming close to irritating me again. I turned to face him.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m very uptight. It was doing me good just to talk to somebody. I’d go crazy in here on my own. Can’t we talk about something else? What about you? Tell me about yourself. Who are you, Reacher?”

I shrugged at him.

“I’m nobody,” I said. “Just a guy passing through. I’ll be gone on Monday.”

“Nobody’s nobody,” he said. “We’ve all got a story. Tell me.”

So I talked for a while, lying on my bed, running through the last six months. He lay on his bed, looking at the concrete ceiling, listening, keeping his mind off his problems. I told him about leaving from the Pentagon. Washington, Baltimore,

Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Chicago. Museums, music, cheap hotels, bars, buses and trains. Solitude. Traveling through the land of my citizenship like a cheap tourist. Seeing most things for the first time. Looking at the history I'd learned in dusty schoolrooms half a world away. Looking at the big things that had shaped the nation. Battlefields, factories, declarations, revolutions. Looking for the small things. Birthplaces, clubs, roads, legends. The big things and the small things which were supposed to represent home. I'd found some of them.

I told Hubble about the long hop through the endless plains and deltas all the way down from Chicago to New Orleans. Sliding around the Gulf Coast as far as Tampa. Then the Greyhound blasting north toward Atlanta. The crazy decision to bail out near Margrave. The long walk in the rain yesterday morning. Following a whim. Following some half-remembered note from my brother saying he'd been through some little place where Blind Blake might have died over sixty years ago. As I told him about it, I felt pretty stupid. Hubble was scuffling with a nightmare and I was following a meaningless pilgrimage. But he understood the urge.

"I did that once," he said. "On our honeymoon. We went to Europe. We stopped off in New York and I spent half a day looking for the Dakota building, you know, where John Lennon was shot. Then we spent three days in England walking around Liverpool, looking for the Cavern Club. Where the Beatles started out. Couldn't find it. I guess they knocked it down."

He talked on for a while. Mostly about traveling. He'd taken plenty of trips with his wife. They'd enjoyed it. Been all over, Europe, Mexico, the Caribbean. All over the States and Canada. Had a great time together.

"Don't you get lonely?" he asked me. "Traveling on your own all the time?"

I told him no, I enjoyed it. I told him I appreciated the solitude, the anonymity. Like I was invisible.

"How do you mean, invisible?" he said. He seemed interested.

"I travel by road," I said. "Always by road. Walk a bit, and ride the buses. Sometimes trains. Always pay cash. That way there's never a paper trail. No credit card transactions, no passenger manifests, nothing. Nobody could trace me. I never tell anybody my name. If I stay in a hotel, I pay cash and give them a

made-up name."

"Why?" he said. "Who the hell's after you?"

"Nobody," I said. "It's just a bit of fun. I like anonymity. I feel like I'm beating the system. And right now, I'm truly pissed at the system."

I saw him fall back to thinking. He thought a long time. I could see him deflate as he struggled with the problems that wouldn't go away. I could see his panic come and go like a tide.

"So give me your advice about Finlay," he said. "When he asks me about the confession, I'll say I was stressed-out because of some business situation. I'll say there was some kind of rivalry, threats against my family. I'll say I don't know anything about the dead guy or anything about the phone number. I'll deny everything. Then I'll just try to settle everything down. What do you think?"

I thought it sounded like a pretty thin plan.

"Tell me one thing," I said. "Without giving me any more details, do you perform a useful function for them? Or are you just some kind of onlooker?"

He pulled on his fingers and thought for a moment.

"Yes, I perform a useful function for them," he said. "Crucial, even."

"And if you weren't there to do it?" I asked him. "Would they have to recruit someone else?"

"Yes, they would," he said. "And it would be moderately difficult to do that, given the parameters of the function."

He was rating his chances of staying alive like he would rate a credit application up at his office.

"OK," I said. "Your plan is as good as you're going to get. Go for it."

I didn't see what else he could do. He was a small cog in some kind of a big operation. But a crucial cog. And nobody wrecks a big operation for no reason. So his future was actually clear-cut. If they ever figured it was him who had brought in the outside investigator, then he was definitely dead. But if they never

found that out, then he was definitely safe. Simple as that. I figured he had a good enough chance, because of one very persuasive fact.

He had confessed because he had thought prison was some kind of a safe sanctuary where they couldn't get him. That had been part of his thinking behind it. It was bad thinking. He'd been wrong. He wasn't safe from attack, quite the reverse. They could have got him if they had wanted to. But the other side of that particular coin was that he hadn't been attacked. As it happened, I had been. Not Hubble. So I figured there was some kind of a proof there that he was OK. They weren't out to get him, because if they had wanted to kill him, they could have killed him by now, and they would have killed him by now. But they hadn't. Even though they were apparently very uptight right now because of some kind of a temporary risk. So it seemed like proof. I began to think he would be OK.

"Yes, Hubble," I said again. "Go for it, it's the best you can do."

The cell stayed locked all day. The floor was silent. We lay on our beds and drifted through the rest of the afternoon. No more talking. We were all talked out. I was bored and wished I had brought that newspaper with me from the Margrave station house. I could have read it all over again. All about the president cutting crime prevention so he could get reelected. Saving a buck on the Coast Guard today so he could spend ten bucks on prisons like this one tomorrow.

At about seven the old orderly came by with dinner. We ate. He came back and picked up the tray. We drifted through the empty evening. At ten the power banged off and we were in darkness. Nightfall. I kept my shoes on and slept lightly. Just in case Spivey had any more plans for me.

AT SEVEN IN THE MORNING THE LIGHTS CAME BACK ON. Sunday. I woke up tired, but I forced myself to get up. Forced myself to do a bit of stretching to ease off my sore body. Hubble was awake, but silent. He was vaguely watching me exercise. Still drifting. Breakfast arrived before eight. The same old guy dragging the meal cart. I ate the breakfast and drank the coffee. As I finished up the flask, the gate lock clunked and sprang the door. I pushed it open and stepped out and bumped into a guard aiming to come in.

"It's your lucky day," the guard said. "You're getting out."

“I am?” I said.

“You both are,” he said. “Reacher and Hubble, released by order of the Margrave PD. Be ready in five minutes, OK?”

I stepped back into the cell. Hubble had hauled himself up onto his elbows. He hadn’t eaten his breakfast. He looked more worried than ever.

“I’m scared,” he said.

“You’ll be OK,” I said.

“Will I?” he said. “Once I’m out of here, they can get to me.”

I shook my head.

“It would have been easier for them to get you in here,” I said. “Believe me, if they were looking to kill you, you’d be dead by now. You’re in the clear, Hubble.”

He nodded to himself and sat up. I picked up my coat and we stood together outside the cell, waiting. The guard was back within five minutes. He walked us along a corridor and through two sets of locked gates. Put us in a back elevator. Stepped in and used his key to send it down. Stepped out again as the doors began to close.

“So long,” he said. “Don’t come back.”

The elevator took us down to a lobby and then we stepped outside into a hot concrete yard. The prison door sucked shut and clicked behind us. I stood face up to the sun and breathed in the outside air. I must have looked like some guy in a corny old movie who gets released from a year in solitary.

There were two cars parked in the yard. One was a big dark sedan, an English Bentley, maybe twenty years old, but it looked brand-new. There was a blond woman in it, who I guessed was Hubble’s wife, because he was on his way over to her like she was the sweetest sight he ever saw. The other car had Officer Roscoe in it.

She got out and walked straight over to me. Looked wonderful. Out of uniform.

Dressed in jeans and a soft cotton shirt. Leather jacket. Calm intelligent face. Soft dark hair. Huge eyes. I'd thought she was nice on Friday. I'd been right.

"Hello, Roscoe," I said.

"Hello, Reacher," she said, and smiled.

Her voice was wonderful. Her smile was great. I watched it for as long as it lasted, which was a good long time. Ahead of us, the Hubbles drove off in the Bentley, waving. I waved back and wondered how things would turn out for them. Probably I would never know, unless they got unlucky and I happened to read about it in a newspaper somewhere.

Roscoe and I got into her car. Not really hers, she explained, just a department unmarked she was using. A brand-new Chevrolet something, big, smooth and quiet. She'd kept the motor running and the air on and inside it was cool. We wafted out of the concrete yard and shunted through the wire vehicle cages. Outside the last cage Roscoe spun the wheel and we blasted away down the road. The nose of the car rose up and the back end squatted down on the soft suspension. I didn't look back. I just sat there, feeling good. Getting out of prison is one of life's good feelings. So is not knowing what tomorrow holds. So is cruising silently down a sunny road with a pretty woman at the wheel.

"SO WHAT HAPPENED?" I SAID AFTER A MILE. "TELL ME."

She told me a pretty straightforward story. They'd started work on my alibi late Friday evening. She and Finlay. A dark squad room. A couple of desk lights on. Pads of paper. Cups of coffee. Telephone books. The two of them cradling phones and chewing pencils. Low voices. Patient enquiries. A scene I'd been in myself a thousand times.

They'd called Tampa and Atlanta and by midnight they'd gotten hold of a passenger from my bus and the ticket clerk at the Tampa depot. Both of them remembered me. Then they got the bus driver as well. He confirmed he'd stopped at the Margrave cloverleaf to let me out, eight o'clock Friday morning. By midnight my alibi was looking rock solid, just like I'd said it would be.

Saturday morning, a long fax was in from the Pentagon about my service record.

Thirteen years of my life, reduced to a few curling fax pages. It felt like somebody else's life now, but it backed my story. Finlay had been impressed by it. Then my prints came back from the FBI database. They'd been matched by the tireless computer at two thirty in the morning. U.S. Army, printed on induction, thirteen years ago. My alibi was solid, and my background checked out.

"Finlay was satisfied," Roscoe told me. "You are who you say you are, and midnight Thursday you were over four hundred miles away. That was nailed down. He called the medical examiner again just in case he had a new opinion on the time of death, but no, midnight was still about right."

I shook my head. Finlay was one very cautious guy.

"What about the dead guy?" I said. "Did you run his prints again?"

She concentrated on passing a farm truck. The first vehicle we'd seen in a quarter hour. Then she looked across and nodded.

"Finlay told me you wanted me to," she said. "But why?"

"They came back too quickly for a negative result," I said.

"Too quickly?" she said.

"You told me there was a pyramid system, right?" I said. "The top ten, then the top hundred, then the top thousand, all the way down, right?"

She nodded again.

"So take me as an example," I said. "I'm in the database, but I'm pretty low down the pyramid. You just said it took fourteen hours to get down to me, right?"

"Right," she said. "I sent your prints in about twelve thirty at lunchtime and they were matched at two thirty in the morning."

"OK," I said. "Fourteen hours. So if it takes fourteen hours to reach nearly to the bottom of the pyramid, it's got to take more than fourteen hours to get all the way down to the bottom. That's logical, right?"

“Right,” she said.

“But what happened with this dead guy?” I said. “The body was found at eight o’clock, so the prints went in when? Eight thirty, earliest. But Baker was already telling me there was no match on file when they were talking to me at two thirty. I remember the time, because I was looking at the clock. That’s only six hours. If it took fourteen hours to find out that I’m in there, how could it take just six hours to say the dead guy’s not in there?”

“God,” she said. “You’re right. Baker must have screwed up. Finlay took the prints and Baker sent them. He must have screwed up the scan. You got to be careful, or it doesn’t transmit clearly. If the scan’s not clear, the database tries to decipher it, then it comes back as unreadable. Baker must have thought that meant a null result. The codes are similar. Anyway, I sent them again, first thing. We’ll know soon enough.”

We drove on east and Roscoe told me she’d pushed Finlay to get me out of Warburton right away yesterday afternoon. Finlay had grunted and agreed, but there was a problem. They’d had to wait until today, because yesterday afternoon Warburton had been just about shut down. They had told Finlay there had been some trouble in a bathroom. One convict was dead, one had lost an eye, and a full-scale riot had started, black and white gangs at war.

I just sat there next to Roscoe and watched the horizon reeling in. I’d killed one guy and blinded another. Now I’d have to confront my feelings. But I didn’t feel much at all. Nothing, in fact. No guilt, no remorse. None at all. I felt like I’d chased two roaches around that bathroom and stomped on them. But at least a roach is a rational, reasonable, evolved sort of a creature. Those Aryans in that bathroom had been worse than vermin. I’d kicked one of them in the throat and he had suffocated on his smashed larynx. Well, tough shit. He started it, right? Attacking me was like pushing open a forbidden door. What waited on the other side was his problem. His risk. If he didn’t like it, he shouldn’t have pushed open the damn door. I shrugged and forgot about it. Looked over at Roscoe.

“Thank you,” I said. “I mean it. You worked hard to help me out.”

She waved away my thanks with a blush and a small gesture and just drove on. I was starting to like her a lot. But probably not enough to stop me getting the hell out of Georgia as soon as I could. Maybe I might just stay an hour or two and then get her to drive me to a bus depot somewhere.

“I want to take you to lunch,” I said. “Kind of a thank-you thing.”

She thought about it for a quarter mile and then smiled across at me.

“OK,” she said.

She jinked the right turn onto the county road and accelerated south toward Margrave. Drove past Eno’s shiny new place and headed down to town.

9

I GOT HER TO DUCK IN AT THE STATION HOUSE AND BRING me out the property bag with my money in it. Then we drove on and she dropped me in the center of Margrave and I arranged to meet her up at the station house in a couple of hours. I stood on the sidewalk in the fierce Sunday morning heat and waved her off. I felt a whole lot better. I was back in motion. I was going to check out the Blind Blake story, then take Roscoe to lunch, then get the hell out of Georgia and never come back.

So I spent a while wandering around looking at the town, doing the things I should have been doing on Friday afternoon. There wasn't really much to the place. The old county road ran straight through, north to south, and for about four blocks it was labeled Main Street. Those four blocks had small stores and offices facing each other across the width of the road, separated by little service alleys which ran around to the back of the buildings. I saw a small grocery, a barbershop, an outfitter's, a doctor's office, a lawyer's office and a dentist's office. In back of the commercial buildings was parkland with white picket fences and ornamental trees. On the street, the stores and offices had awnings over wide sidewalks. There were benches set on the sidewalks, but they were empty. The whole place was deserted. Sunday morning, miles from anywhere.

Main Street ran north, straight as a die, past a few hundred yards of more parkland up to the station house and the firehouse, and a half mile farther on than that was Eno's diner. A few miles beyond Eno's was the turn west out to Warburton where the prison was. North of that junction there was nothing on the county road until you reached the warehouses and the highway cloverleaf, fourteen empty miles from where I stood.

On the south edge of town I could see a little village green with a bronze statue and a residential street running away to the west. I strolled down there and saw a discreet green sign which read: Beckman Drive. Hubble's street. I couldn't see any real distance down it because pretty much straight away it looped left and right around a wide grass square with a big white wooden church set on it. The church was ringed by cherry trees and the lawn was circled by cars with clean quiet paint parked in neat lines. I could just about make out the growl of the organ and the sound of the people singing.

The statue on the village green was of a guy called Caspar Teale who'd done something or other about a hundred years ago. More or less opposite Beckman Drive on the other side of the green was another residential street, running east, with a convenience store standing alone on the corner. And that was it. Not much of a town. Not much going on. Took me less than thirty minutes to look over everything the place had to offer.

But it was the most immaculate town I had ever seen. It was amazing. Every single building was either brand-new or recently refurbished. The roads were smooth as glass, and the sidewalks were flat and clean. No potholes, no cracks, no heave. The little offices and stores looked like they got repainted every week. The lawns and the plantings and the trees were clipped to perfection. The bronze statue of old Caspar Teale looked like somebody licked it clean every morning. The paint on the church was so bright it hurt my eyes. Flags flew everywhere, sparkling white and glowing red and blue in the sun. The whole place was so tidy it could make you nervous to walk around in case you left a dirty footprint somewhere.

THE CONVENIENCE STORE ON THE SOUTHEASTERN CORNER was selling the sort of stuff that gave it a good enough excuse to be open on a Sunday morning. Open, but not busy. There was nobody in there except the guy behind the register. But he had coffee. I sat up at the little counter and ordered a big mug and bought a Sunday newspaper.

The president was still on the front page. Now he was in California. He was explaining to defense contractors why their gravy train was grinding to a halt after fifty glorious years. The aftershock from his Pensacola announcement about the Coast Guard was still rumbling on. Their boats were returning to their harbors on Saturday night. They wouldn't go out again without new funding. The paper's editorial guys were all stirred up about it.

I stopped reading and glanced up when I heard the door open. A woman came in. She took a stool at the opposite end of the counter. She was older than me, maybe forty. Dark hair, very slender, expensively dressed in black. She had very pale skin. So pale, it was almost luminous. She moved with a kind of nervous tension. I could see tendons like slim ropes in her wrists. I could see some kind of an appalling strain in her face. The counter guy slid over to her and she ordered coffee in a voice so quiet I could barely hear it, even though she was

pretty close by and it was a silent room.

She didn't stay long. She got through half her coffee, watching the window all the time. Then a big black pickup truck pulled up outside and she shivered. It was a brand-new truck and obviously it had never hauled anything worth hauling. I caught a glimpse of the driver as he leaned over inside to spring the door. He was a tough-looking guy. Pretty tall. Broad shoulders and a thick neck. Black hair. Black hair all over long knotted arms. Maybe thirty years old. The pale woman slid off her stool like a ghost and stood up. Swallowed once. As she opened the shop door I heard the burble of a big motor idling. The woman got into the truck, but it didn't move away. Just sat there at the curb. I swiveled on my stool to face the counter guy.

"Who is that?" I asked him.

The guy looked at me like I was from another planet.

"That's Mrs. Kliner," he said. "You don't know the Kliners?"

"I heard about them," I said. "I'm a stranger in town. Kliner owns the warehouses up near the highway, right?"

"Right," he said. "And a whole lot more besides. Big deal round here, Mr. Kliner."

"He is?" I said.

"Sure," the guy said. "You heard about the Foundation?"

I shook my head. Finished my coffee and pushed the mug over for a refill.

"Kliner set up the Kliner Foundation," the guy said. "Benefits the town in a lot of ways. Came here five years ago, been like Christmas ever since."

I nodded.

"Is Mrs. Kliner OK?" I asked him.

He shook his head as he filled my mug.

"She's a sick woman," he said. "Very sick. Very pale, right? A very sick

woman. Could be tuberculosis. I seen tuberculosis do that to folks. She used to be a fine-looking woman, but now she looks like something grown in a closet, right? A very sick woman, that's for damn sure."

"Who's the guy in the truck?" I said.

"Stepson," he said. "Kliner's kid by his first wife. Mrs. Kliner's his second. I've heard she don't get along so good with the kid."

He gave me the sort of nod that terminates casual conversations. Moved away to wipe off some kind of a chromium machine behind the other end of the counter. The black pickup was still waiting outside. I agreed with the guy that the woman looked like something grown in a closet. She looked like some kind of a rare orchid starved of light and sustenance. But I didn't agree with him that she looked sick. I didn't think she had tuberculosis. I thought she was suffering from something else. Something I'd seen once or twice before. I thought she was suffering from sheer terror. Terror of what, I didn't know. Terror of what, I didn't want to know. Not my problem. I stood up and dropped a five on the counter. The guy made change all in coins. He had no dollar bills. The pickup was still there, stationary at the curb. The driver was leaning up, chest against the wheel, looking sideways across his stepmother, staring in straight at me.

There was a mirror opposite me behind the counter. I looked exactly like a guy who'd been on an all-night bus and then spent two days in jail. I figured I needed to get cleaned up before I took Roscoe to lunch. The counter guy saw me figuring.

"Try the barbershop," he said.

"On a Sunday?" I said.

The guy shrugged.

"They're always in there," he said. "Never exactly closed. Never exactly open, either."

I nodded and pushed out through the door. I saw a small crowd of people coming out of the church and chatting on the lawns and getting into their cars. The rest of the town was still deserted. But the black pickup was still at the curb, right outside the convenience store. The driver was still staring at me.

I walked north in the sun and the pickup moved slowly alongside, keeping pace. The guy was still hunched forward, staring sideways. I stretched out a couple of steps and the truck sped up to keep station. Then I stopped dead and he overshot. I stood there. The guy evidently decided backing up wasn't on his agenda. He floored it and took off with a roar. I shrugged and carried on. Reached the barbershop. Ducked under the striped awning and tried the door. Unlocked. I went in.

LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE IN MARGRAVE, THE BARBERSHOP looked wonderful. It gleamed with ancient chairs and fittings lovingly polished and maintained. It had the kind of barbershop gear everybody tore out thirty years ago. Now everybody wants it back. They pay a fortune for it because it re-creates the way people want America to look. The way they think it used to look. It's certainly the way I thought it used to look. I would sit in some schoolyard in Manila or Munich and imagine green lawns and trees and flags and a gleaming chrome barbershop like this one.

It was run by two old black guys. They were just hanging out there. Not really open for business, not really closed. But they indicated they would serve me. Like they were there, and I was there, so why not? And I guess I looked like an urgent case. I asked them for the works. A shave, a haircut, a hot towel and a shoe shine. There were framed newspaper front pages here and there on the walls. Big headlines. Roosevelt dies, VJ Day, JFK assassinated, Martin Luther King murdered. There was an old mahogany table radio thumping warmly away. The new Sunday paper was crisply folded on a bench in the window.

The old guys mixed up soapy lather in a bowl, stropped a straight razor, rinsed a shaving brush. They shrouded me with towels and got to work. One guy shaved me with the old straight razor. The other guy stood around doing not much of anything. I figured maybe he came into play later. The busy guy started chatting away, like barbers do. Told me the history of his business. The two of them had been buddies since childhood. Always lived here in Margrave since way back. Started out as barbers way before the World War Two. Apprenticed in Atlanta. Opened a shop together as young men. Moved it to this location when the old neighborhood was razed. He told me the history of the county from a barber's perspective. Listed the personalities who'd been in and out of these old chairs. Told me about all kinds of people.

“So tell me about the Kliners,” I said.

He was a chatty guy, but that question shut him up. He stopped work and thought about it.

“Can’t help you with that inquiry, that’s for sure,” he said. “That’s a subject we prefer not to discuss in here. Best if you ask me about somebody else altogether.”

I shrugged under the shroud of towels.

“OK,” I said. “You ever heard of Blind Blake?”

“Him I heard of, that’s for sure,” the old man said. “That’s a guy we can discuss, no problem at all.”

“Great,” I said. “So what can you tell me?”

“He was here, time to time, way back,” he said. “Born in Jacksonville, Florida, they say, just over the state line. Used to kind of trek on up from there, you know, through here, through Atlanta, all the way up north to Chicago, and then trek all the way back down again. Back through Atlanta, back through here, back home. Very different then, you know. No highway, no automobiles, at least not for a poor black man and his friends. All walking or riding on the freight cars.”

“You ever hear him play?” I asked him.

He stopped work again and looked at me.

“Man, I’m seventy-four years old,” he said. “This was back when I was just a little boy. We’re talking about Blind Blake here. Guys like that played in bars. Never was in no bars when I was a little boy, you understand. I would have got my behind whupped real good if I had been. You should talk to my partner here. He’s a whole lot older than I am. He may have heard him play, only he may not remember it because he don’t remember much. Not even what he ate for breakfast. Am I right? Hey, my old friend, what you eat for breakfast?”

The other old guy creaked over and leaned up on the next sink to mine. He was a gnarled old fellow the color of the mahogany radio.

“I don’t know what I ate for breakfast,” he said. “Don’t even know if I ate any

"I don't know what I ate for breakfast," he said. "Don't even know if I ate any breakfast at all. But listen up. I may be an old guy, but the truth is old guys remember stuff real well. Not recent things, you understand, but old things. You got to imagine your memory is like an old bucket, you know? Once it's filled up with old stuff there ain't no way to get new stuff in. No way at all, you understand? So I don't remember any new stuff because my old bucket is all filled up with old stuff that happened way back. You understand what I'm saying here?"

"Sure I understand," I said. "So way back, did you ever hear him play?"

"Who?" he said.

I looked at both of them in turn. I wasn't sure whether this was some kind of a rehearsed routine.

"Blind Blake," I said. "Did you ever hear him play?"

"No, I never heard him play," the old guy said. "But my sister did. Got me a sister more than about ninety years old or thereabouts, may she be spared. Still alive. She did a little singing way back and she sang with old Blind Blake many a time."

"She did?" I said. "She sang with him?"

"She sure did," said the gnarled old guy. "She sang with just about anybody passing through. You got to remember this old town lay right on the big road to Atlanta. That old county road out there used to come on down through here straight on south into Florida. It was the only route through Georgia north to south. Of course now you got the highway runs right by without stopping off, and you got airplanes and all. No importance to Margrave now, nobody coming on through anymore."

"So Blind Blake stopped off here?" I prompted him. "And your sister sang with him?"

"Everybody used to stop off here," he said. "North side of town was just pretty much a mess of bars and rooming houses to cater to the folks passing through. All these fancy gardens between here and the firehouse is where the bars and rooming houses used to be. All tore down now, or else all fell down. Been no passing trade at all for a real long time. But back then, it was a different kind of a

town altogether. Streams of people in and out, the whole time. Workers, crop pickers, drummers, fighters, hoboes, truckers, musicians. All kinds of those guys used to stop off and play and my old sister would be right in there singing with them all."

"And she remembers Blind Blake?" I asked him.

"She sure does," the old man said. "Used to think he was the greatest thing alive. Says he used to play real sporty. Real sporty indeed."

"What happened to him?" I said. "Do you know?"

The old guy thought hard. Trawled back through his fading memories. He shook his grizzled head a couple of times. Then he took a wet towel from a hot box and put it over my face. Started cutting my hair. Ended up shaking his head with some kind of finality.

"Can't rightly say," he said. "He came back and forth on the road, time to time. I remember that pretty well. Three, four years later he was gone. I was up in Atlanta for a spell, wasn't here to know. Heard tell somebody killed him, maybe right here in Margrave, maybe not. Some kind of big trouble, got him killed stone dead."

I sat listening to their old radio for a while. Then I gave them a twenty off my roll of bills and hurried out onto Main Street. Strode out north. It was nearly noon and the sun was baking. Hot for September. Nobody else was out walking. The black road blasted heat at me. Blind Blake had walked this road, maybe in the noon heat. Back when those old barbers had been boys this had been the artery reaching north to Atlanta, Chicago, jobs, hope, money. Noon heat wouldn't have stopped anybody getting where they were going. But now the road was just a smooth blacktop byway going nowhere at all.

IT TOOK ME A FEW MINUTES IN THE HEAT TO GET UP TO THE station house. I walked across its springy lawn past another bronze statue and pulled open the heavy glass entrance door. Stepped into the chill inside. Roscoe was waiting for me, leaning on the reception counter. Behind her in the squad room, I could see Stevenson talking urgently into a telephone. Roscoe was pale and looking very worried.

“We found another body,” she said.

“Where?” I asked her.

“Up at the warehouse again,” she said. “The other side of the road this time, underneath the cloverleaf, where it’s raised up.”

“Who found it?” I said.

“Finlay,” she said. “He was up there this morning, poking around, looking for something to help us with the first one. Some help, right? All he finds is another one.”

“Do you know who this one is?” I asked her.

She shook her head.

“Unidentified,” she said. “Same as the first one.”

“Where’s Finlay now?” I asked her.

“Gone to get Hubble,” she said. “He thinks Hubble may know something about it.”

I nodded.

“How long was this one up there?” I said.

“Two or three days, maybe,” she said. “Finlay says it could have been a double homicide on Thursday night.”

I nodded again. Hubble did know something about it. This was the guy he had sent to meet with the tall investigator with the shaved head. He couldn’t figure out how the guy had gotten away with it. But the guy hadn’t gotten away with it.

I heard a car in the lot outside and then the big glass door sucked open. Finlay stuck his head in.

“Morgue, Roscoe,” he said. “You too, Reacher.”

We followed him back outside into the heat. We all got into Roscoe’s unmarked

sedan. Left Finlay's car where he'd parked it. Roscoe drove. I sat in the back. Finlay sat in the front passenger seat, twisted around so he could talk to the both of us at once. Roscoe nosed out of the police lot and headed south.

"I can't find Hubble," Finlay said. Looking at me. "There's nobody up at his place. Did he say anything to you about going anywhere?"

"No," I said. "Not a word. We hardly spoke all weekend."

Finlay grunted at me.

"I need to find out what he knows about all this," he said. "This is serious shit and he knows something about it, that's for damn sure. What did he tell you about it, Reacher?"

I didn't answer. I wasn't entirely sure whose side I was on yet. Finlay's, probably, but if Finlay started blundering around in whatever Hubble was mixed up in, Hubble and his family were going to end up dead. No doubt about that. So I figured I should just stay impartial and then get the hell out of there as fast as possible. I didn't want to get involved.

"You try his mobile number?" I asked him.

Finlay grunted and shook his head.

"Switched off," he said. "Some automatic voice came on and told me."

"Did he come by and pick up his watch?" I asked him.

"His what?" he said.

"His watch," I said. "He left a ten-thousand-dollar Rolex with Baker on Friday. When Baker was cuffing us for the ride out to Warburton. Did he come pick it up?"

"No," Finlay said. "Nobody said so."

"OK," I said. "So he's got some urgent business somewhere. Not even an asshole like Hubble's going to forget about a ten-thousand-dollar watch, right?"

"What urgent business?" Finlay said. "What did he tell you about it?"

“He didn’t tell me diddly,” I said. “Like I told you, we hardly spoke.”

Finlay glared at me from the front seat.

“Don’t mess with me, Reacher,” he said. “Until I get hold of Hubble, I’m going to keep hold of you and sweat your ass for what he told you. And don’t make out he kept his mouth shut all weekend, because guys like that never do. I know that and you know that, so don’t mess with me, OK?”

I just shrugged at him. He wasn’t about to arrest me again. Maybe I could get a bus from wherever the morgue was. I’d have to pass on lunch with Roscoe. Pity.

“So what’s the story on this one?” I asked him.

“Pretty much the same as the last one,” Finlay said. “Looks like it happened at the same time. Shot to death, probably the same weapon. This one didn’t get kicked around afterward, but it was probably part of the same incident.”

“You don’t know who it is?” I said.

“His name is Sherman,” he said. “Apart from that, no idea.”

“Tell me about it,” I said. I was asking out of habit. Finlay thought for a moment. I saw him decide to answer. Like we were partners.

“Unidentified white male,” he said. “Same deal as the first one, no ID, no wallet, no distinguishing marks. But this one had a gold wristwatch, engraved on the back: to Sherman, love Judy. He was maybe thirty or thirty-five. Hard to tell, because he’d been lying there for three nights and he was well gnawed by the small animals, you know? His lips are gone, and his eyes, but his right hand was OK because it was folded up under his body, so I got some decent prints. We ran them an hour ago and something may come of that, if we’re lucky.”

“Gunshot wounds?” I asked him.

Finlay nodded.

“Looks like the same gun,” he said. “Small-caliber, soft-nose shells. Looks like maybe the first shot only wounded him and he was able to run. He got hit a couple more times but made it to cover under the highway. He fell down and bled to death. He didn’t get kicked around because they couldn’t find him

bled to death. He didn't get kicked around because they couldn't find him. That's how it looks to me."

I thought about it. I'd walked right by there at eight o'clock on Friday morning. Right between the two bodies.

"And you figure he was called Sherman?" I said.

"His name was on his watch," Finlay said.

"Might not have been his watch," I said. "The guy could have stolen it. Could have inherited it, bought it from a pawnshop, found it in the street."

Finlay just grunted again. We must have been more than ten miles south of Margrave. Roscoe was keeping up a fast pace down the old county road. Then she slowed and slid down a left fork which led straight to the distant horizon.

"Where the hell are we going?" I said.

"County hospital," Finlay said. "Down in Yellow Springs. Next-but-one town to the south. Not long now."

We drove on. Yellow Springs became a smudge in the heat haze on the horizon. Just inside the town limit was the county hospital, standing more or less on its own. Put there back when diseases were infectious and sick people were isolated. It was a big hospital, a warren of wide low buildings sprawled over a couple of acres. Roscoe slowed and swung into the entrance lane. We wallowed over speed bumps and threaded our way around to a spread of buildings clustered on their own in back. The mortuary was a long shed with a big roll-up door standing open. We stopped well clear of the door and left the car in the yard. We looked at each other and went in.

A MEDICAL GUY MET US AND LED US INTO AN OFFICE. HE sat behind a metal desk and waved Finlay and Roscoe to some stools. I leaned on a counter, between a computer terminal and a fax machine. This was not a big-budget facility. It had been cheaply equipped some years ago. Everything was worn and chipped and untidy. Very different from the station house up at Margrave. The guy at the desk looked tired. Not old, not young, maybe Finlay's sort of age. White coat. He looked like the type of guy whose judgment you wouldn't worry

about too much. He didn't introduce himself. Just took it for granted we all knew who he was and what he was for.

"What can I tell you folks?" he said.

He looked at all three of us in turn. Waited. We looked back.

"Was it the same incident?" Finlay asked. His deep Harvard tones sounded out of place in the shabby office. The medical guy shrugged at him.

"I've only had the second corpse for an hour," he said. "But, yes, I would say it's the same incident. It's almost certainly the same weapon. Looks like small-caliber soft-nose bullets in both cases. The bullets were slow, looks like the gun had a silencer."

"Small caliber?" I said. "How small?"

The doctor swiveled his tired gaze my way.

"I'm not a firearms expert," he said. "But I'd vote for a twenty-two. Looks that small to me. I'd say we're looking at soft-nose twenty-two-gauge shells. Take the first guy's head, for example. Two small splintery entry wounds and two big messy exit wounds, characteristic of a small soft-nose bullet."

I nodded. That's what a soft-nose bullet does. It goes in and flattens out as it does so. Becomes a blob of lead about the size of a quarter tumbling through whatever tissue it meets. Rips a great big exit hole for itself. And a nice slow soft-nose .22 makes sense with a silencer. No point using a silencer except with a subsonic muzzle velocity. Otherwise the bullet is making its own sonic boom all the way to the target, like a tiny fighter plane.

"OK," I said. "Were they killed up there where they were found?"

"No doubt about it," the guy said. "Hypostasis is clear in both corpses."

He looked at me. Wanted me to ask him what hypostasis was. I knew what it was, but I felt polite. So I looked puzzled for him.

"Postmortem hypostasis," he said. "Lividity. When you die, your circulation stops, right? Heart isn't beating anymore. Your blood obeys the law of gravity. It settles to the bottom of your body, into the lowest available vessels, usually into

settles to the bottom of your body, into the lowest available vessels, usually into the tiny capillaries in the skin next to the floor or whatever you've fallen down onto. The red cells settle first. They stain the skin red. Then they clot, so the stain is fixed, like a photograph. After a few hours, the stains are permanent. The stains on the first guy are entirely consistent with his position on the warehouse forecourt. He was shot, he fell down dead, he was kicked around in some sort of mad frenzy for a few minutes, then he lay there for around eight hours. No doubt about it."

"What do you make of the kicking?" Finlay asked him.

The doctor shook his head and shrugged.

"Never seen anything like it," he said. "I've read about it in the journals, time to time. Some kind of a psychopathic thing, obviously. No way to explain it. It didn't make any difference to the dead guy. Didn't hurt him, because he was dead. So it must have gratified the kicker somehow. Unbelievable fury, tremendous strength. The injuries are grievous."

"What about the second guy?" Finlay asked.

"He ran for it," the doctor said. "He was hit close up in the back with the first shot, but it didn't drop him, and he ran. He took two more on the way. One in the neck, and the fatal shot in the thigh. Blew away his femoral artery. He made it as far as the raised-up section of highway, then lay down and bled to death. No doubt about that. If it hadn't rained all night Thursday, I'm sure you'd have seen the trail of blood on the road. There must have been about a gallon and a half lying about somewhere, because it sure as hell isn't inside the guy anymore."

We all fell quiet. I was thinking about the second guy's desperate sprint across the road. Trying to reach cover while the bullets smashed into his flesh. Hurling himself under the highway ramp and dying amid the quiet scuffling of the small night animals.

"OK," Finlay said. "So we're safe to assume the two victims were together. The shooter is in a group of three, he surprises them, shoots the first guy in the head twice, mean-while the second guy takes off and gets hit by three shots as he runs, right?"

"You're assuming there were three assailants?" the doctor said.

Finlay nodded across to me. It was my theory, so I got to explain it.

“Three separate personality characteristics,” I said. “A competent shooter, a frenzied maniac, and an incompetent concealer.”

The doctor nodded slowly.

“I’ll buy that,” he said. “The first guy was hit at point-blank range, so maybe we should assume he knew the assailants and allowed them to get next to him?”

Finlay nodded.

“Had to be that way,” he said. “Five guys meeting together. Three of them attack the other two. This is some kind of a big deal, right?”

“Do we know who the assailants were?” the doctor asked.

“We don’t even know who the victims were,” Roscoe said.

“Got any theories on the victims?” Finlay asked the doctor.

“Not on the second guy, apart from the name on his watch,” the doctor said. “I only just got him on the table an hour ago.”

“So you got theories on the first guy?” Finlay said.

The doctor started shuffling some notes on his desk, but his telephone rang. He answered it and then held it out to Finlay.

“For you,” he said. Finlay crouched forward on his stool and took the call. Listened for a moment.

“OK,” he said into the phone. “Just print it out and fax it to us here, will you?”

Then he passed the phone back to the doctor and rocked back on his stool. He had the beginnings of a smile on his face.

“That was Stevenson, up at the station house,” he said. “We finally got a match on the first guy’s prints. Seems like we did the right thing to run them again. Stevenson’s faxing it through to us here in a minute, so tell us what you got, doc, and we’ll put it all together.”

The tired guy in the white coat shrugged and picked up a sheet of paper.

“The first guy?” he said. “I haven’t got much at all. The body was in a hell of a mess. He was tall, he was fit, he had a shaved head. The main thing is the dental work. Looks like the guy got his teeth fixed all over the place. Some of it is American, some of it looks American, some of it is foreign.”

Next to my hip, the fax machine started beeping and whirring. A sheet of thin paper fed itself in.

“So what do we make of that?” Finlay said. “The guy was foreign? Or an American who lived abroad or what?”

The thin sheet of paper fed itself out, covered in writing. Then the machine stopped and went quiet. I picked up the paper and glanced at it. Then I read it through twice. I went cold. I was gripped by an icy paralysis and I couldn’t move. I just couldn’t believe what I was seeing on that piece of fax paper. The sky crashed in on me. I stared at the doctor and spoke.

“He grew up abroad,” I said. “He had his teeth fixed wherever he was living. He broke his right arm when he was eight and had it set in Germany. He had his tonsils out in the hospital in Seoul.”

The doctor looked up at me.

“They can tell all that from his fingerprints?” he said.

I shook my head.

“The guy was my brother,” I said.

10

ONCE I SAW A NAVY FILM ABOUT EXPEDITIONS IN THE FROZEN arctic. You could be walking over a solid glacier. Suddenly the ice would heave and shatter. Some kind of unimaginable stresses in the floes. A whole new geography would be forced up. Massive escarpments where it had been flat. Huge ravines behind you. A new lake in front of you. The world all changed in a second. That's how I felt. I sat there rigid with shock on the counter between the fax machine and the computer terminal and felt like an Arctic guy whose whole world changes in a single step.

They walked me through to the cold store in back to make a formal identification of his body. His face had been blown away by the gunshots and all his bones were broken but I recognized the star-shaped scar on his neck. He'd got it when we were messing with a broken bottle, twenty-nine years ago. Then they took me back up to the station house in Margrave. Finlay drove. Roscoe sat with me in the back of the car and held my hand all the way. It was only a twenty-minute ride, but in that time I lived through two whole lifetimes. His and mine.

My brother, Joe. Two years older than me. He was born on a base in the Far East right at the end of the Eisenhowerera. Then I had been born on a base in Europe, right at the start of the Kennedy era. Then we'd grown up together all over the world inside that tight isolated transience that service families create for themselves. Life was all about moving on at random and unpredictable intervals. It got so that it felt weird to do more than a semester and a half in any one place. Several times we went years without seeing a winter. We'd get moved out of Europe at the start of the fall and go down to the Pacific somewhere and summer would begin all over again.

Our friends kept just disappearing. Some unit would get shipped out somewhere and a bunch of kids would be gone. Sometimes we saw them again months later in a different place. Plenty of them we never saw again. Nobody ever said hello or good-bye. You were just either there or not there.

Then as Joe and I got older, we got moved around more. The Vietnam thing meant the military started shuffling people around the world faster and faster. Life became just a blur of bases. We never owned anything. We were only allowed one bag each on the transport planes.

We were together in that blur for sixteen years. Joe was the only constant thing in my life. And I loved him like a brother. But that phrase has a very precise meaning. A lot of those stock sayings do. Like when people say they slept like a baby. Do they mean they slept well? Or do they mean they woke up every ten minutes, screaming? I loved Joe like a brother, which meant a lot of things in our family.

The truth was I never knew for sure if I loved him or not. And he never knew for sure if he loved me or not, either. We were only two years apart, but he was born in the fifties and I was born in the sixties. That seemed to make a lot more than two years' worth of a difference to us. And like any pair of brothers two years apart, we irritated the hell out of each other. We fought and bickered and sullenly waited to grow up and get out from under. Most of those sixteen years, we didn't know if we loved each other or hated each other.

But we had the thing that army families have. Your family was your unit. The men on the bases were taught total loyalty to their units. It was the most fundamental thing in their lives. The boys copied them. They translated that same intense loyalty onto their families. So time to time you might hate your brother, but you didn't let anybody mess with him. That was what we had, Joe and I. We had that unconditional loyalty. We stood back to back in every new schoolyard and punched our way out of trouble together. I watched out for him, and he watched out for me, like brothers did. For sixteen years. Not much of a normal childhood, but it was the only childhood I was ever going to get. And Joe was just about the beginning and end of it. And now somebody had killed him. I sat there in the back of the police Chevrolet listening to a tiny voice in my head asking me what the hell I was going to do about that.

FINLAY DROVE STRAIGHT THROUGH MARGRAVE AND PARKED up outside the station house. Right at the curb opposite the big plate-glass entrance doors. He and Roscoe got out of the car and stood there waiting for me, just like Baker and Stevenson had forty-eight hours before. I got out and joined them in the noontime heat. We stood there for a moment and then Finlay pulled open the heavy door and we went inside. Walked back through the empty squad room to the big rosewood office.

Finlay sat at the desk. I sat in the same chair I'd used on Friday. Roscoe pulled a chair up and put it next to mine. Finlay rattled open the desk drawer. Took out

the tape recorder. Went through his routine of testing the microphone with his fingernail. Then he sat still and looked at me.

“I’m very sorry about your brother,” he said.

I nodded. Didn’t say anything.

“I’m going to have to ask you a lot of questions, I’m afraid,” he said.

I just nodded again. I understood his position. I’d been in his position plenty of times myself.

“Who would be his next of kin?” he asked.

“I am,” I said. “Unless he got married without telling me.”

“Do you think he might have done that?” Finlay asked me.

“We weren’t close,” I said. “But I doubt it.”

“Your parents dead?”

I nodded. Finlay nodded. Wrote me down as next of kin.

“What was his full name?”

“Joe Reacher,” I said. “No middle name.”

“Is that short for Joseph?”

“No,” I said. “It was just Joe. Like my name is just Jack. We had a father who liked simple names.”

“OK,” Finlay said. “Older or younger?”

“Older,” I said. I gave him Joe’s date of birth. “Two years older than me.”

“So he was thirty-eight?”

I nodded. Baker had said the victim had been maybe forty. Maybe Joe hadn’t worn well.

“Do you have a current address for him?”

I shook my head.

“No,” I said. “Washington, D.C., somewhere. Like I said, we weren’t close.”

“OK,” he said again. “When did you last see him?”

“About twenty minutes ago,” I said. “In the morgue.”

Finlay nodded gently. “Before that?”

“Seven years ago,” I said. “Our mother’s funeral.”

“Have you got a photograph of him?”

“You saw the stuff in the property bag,” I said. “I haven’t got a photograph of anything.”

He nodded again. Went quiet. He was finding this difficult.

“Can you give me a description of him?”

“Before he got his face shot off?”

“It might help, you know,” Finlay said. “We need to find out who saw him around, when and where.”

I nodded.

“He looked like me, I guess,” I said. “Maybe an inch taller, maybe ten pounds lighter.”

“That would make him what, about six-six?” he asked.

“Right,” I said. “About two hundred pounds, maybe.”

Finlay wrote it all down.

“And he shaved his head?” he said.

“Not the last time I saw him,” I said. “He had hair like anybody else.”

"Not the last time I saw him," I said. "He had hair like anybody else."

"Seven years ago, right?" Finlay said.

I shrugged.

"Maybe he started going bald," I said. "Maybe he was vain about it."

Finlay nodded.

"What was his job?" he asked.

"Last I heard, he worked for the Treasury Department," I said. "Doing what, I'm not sure."

"What was his background?" he asked. "Was he in the service too?"

I nodded.

"Military Intelligence," I said. "Quit after a while, then he worked for the government."

"He wrote you that he had been here, right?" he asked.

"He mentioned the Blind Blake thing," I said. "Didn't say what brought him down here. But it shouldn't be difficult to find out."

Finlay nodded.

"We'll make some calls first thing in the morning," he said. "Until then, you're sure you got no idea why he should be down here?"

I shook my head. I had no idea at all why he had come down here. But I knew Hubble did. Joe had been the tall investigator with the shaved head and the code name. Hubble had brought him down here and Hubble knew exactly why. First thing to do was to find Hubble and ask him about it.

"Did you say you couldn't find Hubble?" I asked Finlay.

"Can't find him anywhere," he said. "He's not up at his place on Beckman Drive and nobody's seen him around town. Hubble knows all about this, right?"

I just shrugged. I felt like I wanted to keep some of the cards pretty close to my chest. If I was going to have to squeeze Hubble for something he wasn't very happy to talk about, then I wanted to do it in private. I didn't particularly want Finlay watching over my shoulder while I was doing it. He might think I was squeezing too hard. And I definitely didn't want to have to watch anything over Finlay's shoulder. I didn't want to leave the squeezing to him. I might think he wasn't squeezing hard enough. And anyway, Hubble would talk to me faster than he would talk to a policeman. He was already halfway there with me. So exactly how much Hubble knew was going to stay my secret. Just for now.

"No idea what Hubble knows," I said. "You're the one claims he fell apart."

Finlay just grunted again and looked across the desk at me. I could see him settling into a new train of thought. I was pretty sure what it was. I'd been waiting for it to surface. There's a rule of thumb about homicide. It comes from a lot of statistics and a lot of experience. The rule of thumb says: when you get a dead guy, first you take a good look at his family. Because a hell of a lot of homicide gets done by relatives. Husbands, wives, sons. And brothers. That was the theory. Finlay would have seen it in action a hundred times in his twenty years up in Boston. Now I could see him trying it out in his head down in Margrave. I needed to run interference on it. I didn't want him thinking about it. I didn't want to waste any more of my time in a cell. I figured I might need that time for something else.

"You're happy with my alibi, right?" I said.

He saw where I was going. Like we were colleagues on a knotty case. He flashed me a brief grin.

"It held up," he said. "You were in Tampa when this was going down."

"OK," I said. "And is Chief Morrison comfortable with that?"

"He doesn't know about it," Finlay said. "He's not answering his phone."

"I don't want any more convenient mistakes," I said. "The fat moron said he saw me up there. I want him to know that won't fly anymore."

Finlay nodded. Picked up the phone on the desk and dialed a number. I heard the faint purr of the ring tone from the earpiece. It rang for a long time and cut off

when Finlay put the phone back down.

“Not at home,” he said. “Sunday, right?”

Then he pulled the phone book out of a drawer. Opened it to H. Looked up Hubble’s number on Beckman Drive. Dialed it and got the same result. A lot of ring tone and nobody home. Then he tried the mobile number. An electronic voice started to tell him the phone was switched off. He hung up before it finished.

“I’m going to bring Hubble in, when I find him,” Finlay said. “He knows stuff he should be telling us. Until then, not a lot I can do, right?”

I shrugged. He was right. It was a pretty cold trail. The only spark that Finlay knew about was the panic Hubble had shown on Friday.

“What are you going to do, Reacher?” he asked me.

“I’m going to think about that,” I said.

Finlay looked straight at me. Not unfriendly, but very serious, like he was trying to communicate an order and an appeal with a single stern eye-to-eye gaze.

“Let me deal with this, OK?” he said. “You’re going to feel pretty bad, and you’re going to want to see justice done, but I don’t want any independent action going on here, OK? This is police business. You’re a civilian. Let me deal with it, OK?”

I shrugged and nodded. Stood up and looked at them both.

“I’m going for a walk,” I said.

I LEFT THE TWO OF THEM THERE AND STROLLED THROUGH the squad room. Pushed out through the glass doors into the hot afternoon. Wandered through the parking lot and crossed the wide lawn in front, over as far as the bronze statue. It was another tribute to Caspar Teale, whoever the hell he had been. Same guy as on the village green on the southern edge of town. I leaned up against his warm metal flank and thought.

The United States is a giant country. Millions of square miles. Best part of three hundred million people. I hadn't seen Joe for seven years, and he hadn't seen me, but we'd ended up in exactly the same tiny spot, eight hours apart. I'd walked within fifty yards of where his body had been lying. That was one hell of a big coincidence. It was almost unbelievable. So Finlay was doing me a big favor by treating it like a coincidence. He should be trying to tear my alibi apart. Maybe he already was. Maybe he was already on the phone to Tampa, checking again.

But he wouldn't find anything, because it was a coincidence. No point going over and over it. I was only in Margrave because of a crazy last-minute whim. If I'd taken a minute longer looking at the guy's map, the bus would have been past the cloverleaf and I'd have forgotten all about Margrave. I'd have gone on up to Atlanta and never known anything about Joe. It might have taken another seven years before the news caught up with me. So there was no point getting all stirred up about the coincidence. The only thing I had to do was to decide what the hell I was going to do about it.

I was about four years old before I caught on to the loyalty thing. I suddenly figured I was supposed to watch out for Joe the way he was watching out for me. After a while, it became second nature, like an automatic thing. It was always in my head to scout around and check he was OK. Plenty of times I would run out into some new schoolyard and see a bunch of kids trying it on with the tall skinny newcomer. I'd trot over there and haul them off and bust a few heads. Then I'd go back to my own buddies and play ball or whatever we were doing. Duty done, like a routine. It was a routine which lasted twelve years, from when I was four right up to the time Joe finally left home. Twelve years of that routine must have left faint tracks in my mind, because forever afterward I always carried a faint echo of the question: where's Joe? Once he was grown up and away, it didn't much matter where he was. But I was always aware of the faint echo of that old routine. Deep down, I was always aware I was supposed to stand up for him, if I was needed.

But now he was dead. He wasn't anywhere. I leaned up against the statue in front of the station house and listened to the tiny voice inside my head saying: you're supposed to do something about that.

THE STATION HOUSE DOOR SUCKED OPEN. I SQUINTED through the heat and saw Roscoe step out. The sun was behind her and it lit her hair like a halo. She scanned around and saw me leaning on the statue in the middle of the lawn. Started over towards me. I pushed off the warm bronze.

“You OK?” she asked me.

“I’m fine,” I said.

“You sure?” she said.

“I’m not falling apart,” I said. “Maybe I should be, but I’m not. I just feel numb, to be honest.”

It was true. I wasn’t feeling much of anything. Maybe it was some kind of a weird reaction, but that was how I felt. No point in denying it.

“OK,” Roscoe said. “Can I give you a ride somewhere?”

Maybe Finlay had sent her out to keep track of me, but I wasn’t about to put up a whole lot of objections to that. She was standing there in the sun looking great. I realized I liked her more every time I looked at her.

“Want to show me where Hubble lives?” I asked her.

I could see her thinking about it.

“Shouldn’t we leave that to Finlay?” she said.

“I just want to see if he’s back home yet,” I said. “I’m not going to eat him. If he’s there, we’ll call Finlay right away, OK?”

“OK,” she said. She shrugged and smiled. “Let’s go.”

We walked together back over the lawn and got into her police Chevy. She started it up and pulled out of the lot. Turned left and rolled south through the perfect little town. It was a gorgeous September day. The bright sun turned it into a fantasy. The brick sidewalks were glowing and the white paint was blinding. The whole place was quiet and basking in the Sunday heat. Deserted.

Roscoe hung a right at the little village green and made the turn into Beckman

Drive. Skirted around the square with the church on it. The cars were gone and the place was quiet. Worship was over. Beckman opened out into a wide tree-lined residential street, set on a slight rise. It had a rich feel. Cool and shady and prosperous. It was what real-estate people mean when they talk about location. I couldn't see the houses. They were set far back behind wide grassy shoulders, big trees, high hedges. Their driveways wound out of sight. Occasionally I glimpsed a white portico or a red roof. The farther out we got, the bigger the lots became. Hundreds of yards between mailboxes. Enormous mature trees. A solid sort of a place. But a place with stories hiding behind the leafy facades. In Hubble's case, some sort of a desperate story which had caused him to reach out to my brother. Some sort of a story which had got my brother killed.

Roscoe slowed at a white mailbox and turned left into the drive of number twenty-five. About a mile from town, on the left, its back to the afternoon sun. It was the last house on the road. Up ahead, peach groves stretched into the haze. We nosed slowly up a winding driveway around massed banks of garden. The house was not what I had imagined. I had pictured a big white place, like a normal house, but bigger. This was more splendid. A palace. It was huge. Every detail was expensive. Expanses of gravel drive, expanses of velvet lawn, huge exquisite trees, everything shining and dappled in the blazing sun. But there was no sign of the dark Bentley I'd seen up at the prison. It looked like there was nobody home.

Roscoe pulled up near the front door and we got out. It was silent. I could hear nothing except the heavy buzz of afternoon heat. We rang on the bell and knocked on the door. No response from inside. We shrugged at each other and walked across a lawn around the side of the house. There were acres of grass and a blaze of some kind of flowers surrounding a garden room. Then a wide patio and a long lawn sloping down to a giant swimming pool. The water was bright blue in the sun. I could smell the chlorine hanging in the hot air.

"Some place," Roscoe said.

I nodded. I was wondering if my brother had been there.

"I hear a car," she said.

We got back to the front of the house in time to see the big Bentley easing to a stop. The blond woman I'd seen driving away from the prison got out. She had two children with her. A boy and a girl. This was Hubble's family. He loved

them like crazy. But he wasn't there with them.

The blond woman seemed to know Roscoe. They greeted each other and Roscoe introduced me to her. She shook my hand and said her name was Charlene, but I could call her Charlie. She was an expensive-looking woman, tall, slim, good bones, carefully dressed, carefully looked after. But she had a seam of spirit running through her face like a flaw. Enough spirit there to make me like her. She held on to my hand and smiled, but it was a smile with a whole lot of strain behind it.

"This hasn't been the best weekend of my life, I'm afraid," she said. "But it seems that I owe you a great deal of thanks, Mr. Reacher. My husband tells me you saved his life in prison."

She said it with a lot of ice in her voice. Not aimed at me. Aimed at whatever circumstance it was forcing her to use the words "husband" and "prison" in the same sentence.

"No problem," I said. "Where is he?"

"Taking care of some business," Charlie said. "I expect him back later."

I nodded. That had been Hubble's plan. He'd said he would spin her some kind of a yarn and then try to settle things down. I wondered if Charlie wanted to talk about it, but the children were standing silently next to her, and I could see she wouldn't talk in front of them. So I grinned at them. I hoped they would get all shy and run off somewhere, like children usually do with me, but they just grinned back.

"This is Ben," Charlie said. "And this is Lucy."

They were nice-looking kids. The girl still had that little-girl chubbiness. No front teeth. Fine sandy hair in pigtails. The boy wasn't much bigger than his little sister. He had a slight frame and a serious face. Not a rowdy hooligan like some boys are. They were a nice pair of kids. Polite and quiet. They both shook hands with me and then stepped back to their mother's side. I looked at the three of them and I could just about see the terrible cloud hanging there over them. If Hubble didn't take care, he could get them all as dead as he'd gotten my brother.

"Will you come in for some iced tea?" Charlie asked us.

She stood there, her head cocked like she was waiting for an answer. She was maybe thirty, similar age to Roscoe. But she had a rich woman's ways. A hundred and fifty years ago, she'd have been the mistress of a big plantation.

"OK," I said. "Thanks."

The kids ran off to play somewhere and Charlie ushered us in through the front door. I didn't really want to drink any iced tea, but I did want to stick around in case Hubble got back. I wanted to catch him on my own for five minutes. I wanted to ask him some pretty urgent questions before Finlay started in with the Miranda warnings.

IT WAS A FABULOUS HOUSE. HUGE. BEAUTIFULLY FURNISHED. Light and fresh. Cool creams and sunny yellows. Flowers. Charlie led us through to the garden room we'd seen from the outside. It was like something from a magazine. Roscoe went off with her to help fix the tea. Left me alone in the room. It made me uneasy. I wasn't accustomed to houses. Thirty-six years old and I'd never lived in a house. Lots of service accommodations and a terrible bare dormitory on the Hudson when I was up at the Point. That's where I'd lived. I sat down like an ugly alien on a flowered cushion on a cane sofa and waited. Uneasy, numb, in that dead zone between action and reaction.

The two women came back with the tea. Charlie was carrying a silver tray. She was a handsome woman, but she was nothing next to Roscoe. Roscoe had a spark in her eyes so electric it made Charlie just about invisible.

Then something happened. Roscoe sat down next to me on the cane sofa. As she sat, she pushed my leg to one side. It was a casual thing but it was very intimate and familiar. A numbed nerve end suddenly clicked in and screamed at me: she likes you too. She likes you too. It was the way she touched my leg.

I went back and looked at things in that new light. Her manner as she took the fingerprints and the photographs. Bringing me the coffee. Her smile and her wink. Her laugh. Working Friday night and Saturday so she could get me out of Warburton. Driving all the way over there to pick me up. Holding my hand after I'd seen my brother's broken body. Giving me a ride over here. She liked me too.

All of a sudden I was glad I had jumped off that damn bus. Glad I made that crazy last-minute decision. I suddenly relaxed. Felt better. The tiny voice in my head quieted down. Right then there was nothing for me to do. I'd speak to Hubble when I saw him. Until then I would sit on a sofa with a good-looking, friendly dark-haired woman in a soft cotton shirt. The trouble would start soon enough. It always does.

Charlie Hubble sat down opposite us and started pouring the iced tea from the pitcher. The smell of lemon and spices drifted over. She caught my eye and smiled the same strained smile she'd used before.

"Normally, at this point, I'd ask you how you were enjoying your visit with us here in Margrave," she said, looking at me, strained, smiling.

I couldn't think of a reply to that. I just shrugged. It was clear Charlie didn't know anything. She thought her husband had been arrested because of some kind of a mistake. Not because he was grabbed up in some kind of trouble which had just got two people murdered. One of whom was the brother of the stranger she was busy smiling at. Roscoe rescued the conversation and the two of them started passing the time of day. I just sat there and drank the tea and waited for Hubble. He didn't show up. Then the conversation died and we had to get out of there. Charlie was fidgeting like she had things to do. Roscoe put her hand on my arm. Her touch burned me like electricity.

"Let's go," she said. "I'll give you a ride back to town."

I felt bad I wasn't staying to wait for Hubble. It made me feel disloyal to Joe. But I just wanted to be on my own with Roscoe. I was burning up with it. Maybe some kind of repressed grief was intensifying it. I wanted to leave Joe's problems until tomorrow. I told myself I had no choice anyway. Hubble hadn't shown up. Nothing else I could do. So we got back in the Chevy together and nosed down the winding driveway. Cruised down Beckman. The buildings thickened up at the bottom of the mile. We jinked around the church. The little village green with the statue of old Caspar Teale was ahead.

"Reacher?" Roscoe said. "You'll be around for a while, right? Until we get this thing about your brother straightened out?"

"I guess I will," I said.

"[illegible]?"

"Where are you going to stay?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said.

She pulled over to the curb near the lawn. Nudged the selector into Park. She had a tender look on her face.

"I want you to come home with me," she said.

I felt like I was out of my mind, but I was burning up with it so I pulled her to me and we kissed. That fabulous first kiss. The new and unfamiliar mouth and hair and taste and smell. She kissed hard and long and held on tight. We came up for air a couple of times before she took off again for her place.

She blasted a quarter mile down the street which opened up opposite Beckman Drive. I saw a blur of greenery in the sun as she swooped into her driveway. The tires chirped as she stopped. We more or less tumbled out and ran to the door. She used her key and we went in. The door swung shut and before it clicked she was back in my arms. We kissed and stumbled through to her living room. She was a foot shorter than me and her feet were off the ground.

We tore each other's clothes off like they were on fire. She was gorgeous. Firm and strong and a shape like a dream. Skin like silk. She pulled me to the floor through bars of hot sunlight from the window. It was frantic. We were rolling and nothing could have stopped us. It was like the end of the world. We shuddered to a stop and lay gasping. We were bathed in sweat. Totally spent.

We lay there clasped and caressing. Then she got off me and pulled me up. We kissed again as we staggered through to her bedroom. She pulled back the covers on the bed and we collapsed in. Held each other and fell into a deep afterglow stupor. I was wrecked. I felt like all my bones and sinews were rubber. I lay in the unfamiliar bed and drifted away to a place far beyond relaxation. I was floating. Roscoe's warm heft was snuggled beside me. I was breathing through her hair. Our hands were lazily caressing unfamiliar contours.

She asked me if I wanted to go find a motel. Or to stay there with her. I laughed and told her the only way to get rid of me now would be to go fetch a shotgun from the station house and chase me away. I told her even that might not work. She giggled and pressed even closer.

"I wouldn't fetch a shotgun," she whispered. "I'd fetch some handcuffs. I'd

"I wouldn't fetch a shotgun," she whispered. "I'd fetch some handcuffs. I'd chain you to the bed and keep you here forever."

We dozed through the afternoon. I called the Hubble place at seven in the evening. He still wasn't back. I left Roscoe's number with Charlie and told her to have Hubble call me as soon as he got in. Then we drifted on through the rest of the evening. Fell fast asleep at midnight. Hubble never called.

MONDAY MORNING I WAS VAGUELY AWARE OF ROSCOE GETTING up for work. I heard the shower and I know she kissed me tenderly and then the house was hot and quiet and still. I slept on until after nine. The phone didn't ring. That was OK. I needed some quiet thinking time. I had decisions to make. I stretched out in Roscoe's warm bed and started answering the question the tiny voice in my head was asking me again.

What was I going to do about Joe? My answer came very easily. I knew it would. I knew it had been waiting there since I first stood next to Joe's broken body in the morgue. It was a very simple answer. I was going to stand up for him. I was going to finish his business. Whatever it was. Whatever it took.

I didn't foresee any major difficulties. Hubble was the only link I had, but Hubble was the only link I needed. He would cooperate. He'd depended on Joe to help him out. Now he'd depend on me. He'd give me what I needed. His masters were vulnerable for a week. What had he said? A window of exposure wide open until Sunday? I'd use it to tear them apart. My mind was made up. I couldn't do it any other way. I couldn't leave it to Finlay. Finlay wouldn't understand all those years of history. Finlay wouldn't sanction the sort of punishments that were going to be necessary. Finlay couldn't understand the simple truth I'd learned at the age of four: you don't mess with my brother. So this was my business. It was between me and Joe. It was duty.

I lay there in Roscoe's warm bed and scoped it out. It was going to be a simple process. About as simple as you could get. Getting hold of Hubble wasn't going to be difficult. I knew where he lived. I knew his phone number. I stretched and smiled and filled with restless energy. Got out of bed and found coffee. There was a note propped against the pot. The note said: Early lunch at Eno's? Eleven o'clock? Leave Hubble to Finlay, OK? The note was signed with lots of kisses and a little drawing of a pair of handcuffs. I read it and smiled at the drawing,

but I wasn't going to leave Hubble to Finlay. No way. Hubble was my business. So I looked up the number again and called Beckman Drive. There was nobody home.

I poured a big mug of coffee and wandered through to the living room. The sun was blinding outside. It was another hot day. I walked through the house. It was a small place. A living room, an eat-in kitchen, two bedrooms, one and a half baths. Very new, very clean. Decorated in a cool, simple way. What I would expect from Roscoe. A cool simple style. Some nice Navajo art, some bold rugs, white walls. She must have been to New Mexico and liked it.

It was still and quiet. She had a stereo, a few records and tapes, more sweet and melodic than the howl and buzz that I call music. I got more coffee from her kitchen. Went out back. There was a small yard out there, a neat coarse lawn and some recent evergreen planting. Shredded bark to smother weeds and rough timber edging against the planted areas. I stood in the sun and sipped the coffee.

Then I ducked back inside and tried Hubble's number again. No reply. I showered and dressed. Roscoe had a small shower stall, the head set low, feminine soaps in the dish. I found a towel in a closet and a comb on a vanity. No razor. I put my clothes on and rinsed out the coffee mug. Tried Hubble's number again from the kitchen phone. I let it ring for a long time. Nobody home. I figured I'd get a ride up there from Roscoe after lunch. This thing wasn't going to wait forever. I relocked the back door and went out the front.

It was about ten thirty. A mile and a quarter up to Eno's place. A gentle half hour stroll in the sun. It was already very hot. Well into the eighties. Glorious fall weather in the South. I walked the quarter mile to Main Street up a gently winding rise. Everything was beautifully manicured. There were towering magnolia trees everywhere and late blossom in the shrubs.

I turned at the convenience store and strolled up Main Street. The sidewalks had been swept. I could see crews of gardeners in the little park areas. They were setting up sprinklers and barrowing stuff out of smart green trucks marked "Kliner Foundation" in gold. A couple of guys were painting the picket fence. I waved in at the two old barbers in their shop. They were leaning up inside their doorway, like they were waiting for customers. They waved back and I strolled on.

Eno's came into sight. The polished aluminum siding gleamed in the sun.

Roscoe's Chevrolet was in the lot. Standing next to it on the gravel was the black pickup I'd seen the day before outside the coffee shop. I reached the diner and pushed in through the door. I had been prodded out through it on Friday with Stevenson's shotgun pointed at my gut. I had been in handcuffs. I wondered if the diner people would remember me. I figured they probably would. Margrave was a very quiet place. Not a whole lot of strangers passing through.

Roscoe was in a booth, the same one I'd used on Friday. She was back in uniform and she looked like the sexiest thing on earth. I stepped over to her. She smiled a tender smile up at me and I bent to kiss her mouth. She slid over the vinyl to the window. There were two cups of coffee on the table. I passed hers across.

The driver from the black pickup was sitting at the lunch counter. The Kliner boy, the pale woman's stepson. He'd spun the stool and his back was against the counter. He was sitting legs apart, elbows back, head up, eyes blazing, staring at me again. I turned my back on him and kissed Roscoe again.

"Is this going to ruin your authority?" I asked her. "To be seen kissing a vagrant who got arrested in here on Friday?"

"Probably," she said. "But who cares?"

So I kissed her again. The Kliner kid was watching. I could feel it on the back of my neck. I turned to look back at him. He held my gaze for a second, then he slid off his stool and left. Stopped in the doorway and glared at me one last time. Then he hustled over to his pickup and took off. I heard the roar of the motor and then the diner was quiet. It was more or less empty, just like on Friday. A couple of old guys and a couple of waitresses. They were the same women as on Friday. Both blond, one taller and heavier than the other. Waitress uniforms. The shorter one wore eyeglasses. Not really alike, but similar. Like sisters or cousins. The same genes in there somewhere. Small town, miles from anywhere.

"I made a decision," I said. "I have to find out what happened with Joe. So I just want to apologize in advance in case that gets in the way, OK?"

Roscoe shrugged and smiled a tender smile. Looked concerned for me.

"It won't get in the way," she said. "No reason why it should."

I sipped my coffee. It was good coffee. I remembered that from Friday.

“We got an ID on the second body,” she said. “His prints matched with an arrest two years ago in Florida. His name was Sherman Stoller. That name mean anything at all to you?”

I shook my head.

“Never heard of him,” I said.

Then her beeper started going. It was a little black pager thing clipped to her belt. I hadn’t seen it before. Maybe she was only required to use it during working hours. It was beeping away. She reached around and clicked it off.

“Damn,” she said. “I’ve got to call in. Sorry. I’ll use the phone in the car.”

I slid out of the booth and stepped back to let her by.

“Order me some food, OK?” she said. “I’ll have whatever you have.”

“OK,” I said. “Which one is our waitress?”

“The one with the glasses,” she said.

She walked out of the diner. I was aware of her leaning into her car, using the phone. Then she was gesturing to me from the parking lot. Miming urgency. Miming that she had to get back. Miming that I should stay put. She jumped into the car and took off, south. I waved vaguely after her, not really looking, because I was staring at the waitresses instead. I had almost stopped breathing. I needed Hubble. And Roscoe had just told me Hubble was dead.

11

I STARED BLANKLY OVER AT THE TWO BLOND WAITRESSES. One was perhaps three inches taller than the other. Perhaps fifteen pounds heavier. A couple of years older. The smaller woman looked petite in comparison. Better looking. She had longer, lighter hair. Nicer eyes behind the glasses. As a pair, the waitresses were similar in a superficial kind of a way. But not alike. There were a million differences between them. No way were they hard to distinguish one from the other.

I'd asked Roscoe which was our waitress. And how had she answered? She hadn't said the smaller one, or the one with the long hair, or the blonder one, or the slimmer one, or the prettier one or the younger one. She'd said the one with glasses. One was wearing glasses, the other wasn't. Ours was the one with glasses. Wearing glasses was the major difference between them. It overrode all the other differences. The other differences were matters of degree. Taller, heavier, longer, shorter, smaller, prettier, darker, younger. The glasses were not a matter of degree. One woman wore them, the other didn't. An absolute difference. No confusion. Our waitress was the one with glasses.

That's what Spivey had seen on Friday night. Spivey had come into the reception bunker a little after ten o'clock. With a shotgun and a clipboard in his big red farmer's hands. He had asked which one of us was Hubble. I remembered his high voice in the stillness of the bunker. There was no reason for his question. Why the hell should Spivey care which one of us was which? He didn't need to know. But he'd asked. Hubble had raised his hand. Spivey had looked him over with his little snake eyes. He had seen that Hubble was smaller, shorter, lighter, sandier, balder, younger than me. But what was the major difference he had hung on to? Hubble wore glasses. I didn't. The little gold rims. An absolute difference. Spivey had said to himself that night: Hubble's the one with glasses.

But by the next morning I was the one with glasses, not Hubble. Because Hubble's gold rims had been smashed up by the Red Boys outside our cell. First thing in the morning. The little gold rims were gone. I had taken some shades from one of them as a trophy. Taken them and forgotten about them. I'd leaned up against the sink in that bathroom inspecting my tender forehead in the steel mirror. I'd felt those shades in my pocket. I'd pulled them out and put them on.

They weren't dark because they were supposed to react to sunlight. They looked like ordinary glasses. I'd been standing there with them on when the Aryans came trawling into the bathroom. Spivey had just told them: find the new boys and kill the one with glasses. They'd tried hard. They'd tried very hard to kill Paul Hubble.

They had attacked me because the description they'd been given was suddenly the wrong description. Spivey had reported that back long ago. Whoever had set him on Hubble hadn't given up. They'd made a second attempt. And the second attempt had succeeded. The whole police department had been summoned up to Beckman Drive. Up to number twenty-five. Because somebody had discovered an appalling scene there. Carnage. He was dead. All four of them were dead. Tortured and butchered. My fault. I hadn't thought hard enough.

I RAN OVER TO THE COUNTER. SPOKE TO OUR WAITRESS. THE one with glasses.

"Can you call me a taxi?" I asked her.

The cook was watching from the kitchen hatch. Maybe he was Eno himself. Short, stocky, dark, balding. Older than me.

"No, we can't," he called through. "What do you think this place is? A hotel? This ain't the Waldorf-Astoria, pal. You want a taxi, you find it yourself. You ain't particularly welcome here, pal. You're trouble."

I gazed back at him bleakly. Too drained for any reaction. But the waitress just laughed at him. Put her hand on my arm.

"Don't pay no mind to Eno," she said. "He's just a grumpy old thing. I'll call you the taxi. Just wait out in the parking lot, OK?"

I waited out on the road. Five minutes. The taxi drove up. Brand-new and immaculate, like everything else in Margrave.

"Where to, sir?" the driver asked.

I gave him Hubble's address and he made a wide, slow turn, shoulder to shoulder across the county road. Headed back to town. We passed the firehouse

shoulder across the county road. Headed back to town. We passed the firehouse and the police headquarters. The lot was empty. Roscoe's Chevy wasn't there. No cruisers. They were all out. Up at Hubble's. We made the right at the village green and swung past the silent church. Headed up Beckman. In a mile I would see a cluster of vehicles outside number twenty-five. The cruisers with their light bars flashing and popping. Unmarked cars for Finlay and Roscoe. An ambulance or two. The coroner would be there, up from his shabby office in Yellow Springs.

But the street was empty. I walked into Hubble's driveway. The taxi turned and drove back to town. Then it was silent. That heavy silence you get in a quiet street on a hot, quiet day. I rounded the big banks of garden. There was nobody there. No police cars, no ambulances, no shouting. No clattering gurneys, no gasps of horror. No police photographers, no tape sealing off the access.

The big dark Bentley was parked up on the gravel. I walked past it on my way to the house. The front door crashed open. Charlie Hubble ran out. She was screaming. She was hysterical. But she was alive.

"Hub's disappeared," she screamed.

She ran over the gravel. Stood right in front of me.

"Hub's gone," she screamed. "He's disappeared. I can't find him."

It was just Hubble on his own. They'd taken him and dumped him somewhere. Someone had found the body and called the police. A screaming, gagging phone call. The cluster of cars and ambulances was there. Not here on Beckman. Somewhere else. But it was just Hubble on his own.

"Something's wrong," Charlie wailed. "This prison thing. Something's gone wrong at the bank. It must be that. Hub's been so uptight. Now he's gone. He's disappeared. Something's happened, I know it."

She screwed her eyes tight shut. Started screaming. She was losing it. Getting more and more hysterical. I didn't know how to handle her.

"He got back late last night," she screamed. "He was still here this morning. I took Ben and Lucy to school. Now he's gone. He hasn't gone to work. He got a call from his office telling him to stay home, and his briefcase is still here, his phone is still here, his jacket is still here, his wallet is still here, his credit cards

are in it, his driver's license is in it, his keys are in the kitchen. The front door was standing wide open. He hasn't gone to work. He's just disappeared."

I stood still. Paralyzed. He'd been dragged out of there by force and killed. Charlie sagged in front of me. Then she started whispering to me. The whispering was worse than the screaming.

"His car is still here," she whispered. "He can't have walked anywhere. He never walks anywhere. He always takes his Bentley."

She waved vaguely toward the back of the house.

"Hub's Bentley is green," she said. "It's still in the garage. I checked. You've got to help us. You've got to find him. Mr. Reacher, please. I'm asking you to help us. Hub's in trouble, I know it. He's vanished. He said you might help. You saved his life. He said you knew how to do things."

She was hysterical. She was pleading. But I couldn't help her. She would know that soon enough. Baker or Finlay would come up to the house very soon. They would tell her the shattering news. Probably Finlay would handle it. Probably he was very good at it. Probably he had done it a thousand times in Boston. He had dignity and gravity. He would break the news, gloss over the details, drive her down to the morgue to identify the body. The morgue people would shroud the corpse with heavy gauze to hide the appalling wounds.

"Will you help us?" Charlie asked me.

I decided not to wait with her. I decided to go down to the station house. Find out details like where and when and how. But I'd come back with Finlay. This was my fault, so I should come back.

"You stay here," I said. "You'll have to lend me your car, OK?"

She rooted in her bag and pulled out a big bunch of keys. Handed them to me. The car key had a big letter B embossed on it. She nodded vaguely and stayed where she was. I stepped over to the Bentley and slid into the driver's seat. Backed it up and swung it down the curving driveway. Glided down Beckman in silence. Made the left onto Main Street up toward the station house.

THERE WERE CRUISERS AND UNMARKED UNITS SPRAWLED right across the police parking lot. I left Charlie's Bentley at the curb and stepped inside. They were all milling around the open area. I saw Baker, Stevenson, Finlay. I saw Roscoe. I recognized the backup team from Friday. Morrison wasn't there. Nor was the desk guy. The long counter was unattended. Everybody was stunned. They were all vague and staring. Horrified. Distracted. Nobody would talk to me. They looked over bleakly. Didn't really look away, it was like they didn't see me at all. There was total silence. Finally Roscoe came over. She'd been crying. She walked up to me. Pressed her face against my chest. She was burning up. She put her arms around me and held on.

"It was horrible," she said. Wouldn't say any more.

I walked her around to her desk and sat her down. Squeezed her shoulder and stepped over toward Finlay. He was sitting on a desk, looking blank. I nodded him over to the big office in back. I needed to know, and Finlay was the guy who would tell me. He followed me into the office. Sat down in the chair in front of the desk. Where I had sat in handcuffs on Friday. I sat behind the desk. Roles reversed.

I watched him for a while. He was really shaken up. I went cold inside all over again. Hubble must have been left in a hell of a mess to be getting a reaction like that from Finlay. He was a twenty-year man from a big city. He must have seen all there is to see. But now he was really shaken up. I sat there and burned with shame. Sure, Hubble, I'd said, you look safe enough to me.

"So what's the story?" I said.

He lifted his head up with an effort and looked at me.

"Why should you care?" he said. "What was he to you?"

A good question. One I couldn't answer. Finlay didn't know what I knew about Hubble. I'd kept quiet about it. So Finlay didn't see why Hubble was so important to me.

"Just tell me what happened," I said.

"It was pretty bad," he said. Wouldn't go on.

He was worrying me. My brother had been shot in the head. To a big messy exit

He was worrying me. My brother had been shot in the head. Two big messy exit wounds had removed his face. Then somebody had turned his corpse into a bag of pulp. But Finlay hadn't fallen apart over that. The other guy had been all gnawed up by rats. There wasn't a drop of blood left in him. But Finlay hadn't fallen apart over that, either. Hubble was a local guy, which made it a bit worse, I could see that. But on Friday, Finlay hadn't even known who Hubble was. And now Finlay was acting like he'd seen a ghost. So it must have been some pretty spectacular work.

Which meant that there was some kind of a big deal going down in Margrave. Because there's no point in spectacular work unless it serves a purpose. The threat of it beforehand works on the guy himself. It had certainly worked on Hubble. He had taken a lot of notice of it. That's the point of a threat. But to actually carry out something like that has a different point. A different purpose. Carrying it out is not about the guy himself. It's about backing up the threat against the next guy in line. It says, see what we did to that other guy? That's what we could do to you. So by doing some spectacular work on Hubble, somebody had just revealed there was a high-stakes game going down, with other guys waiting next in line, right there in the locality.

"Tell me what happened, Finlay," I said again.

He leaned forward. Cupped his mouth and nose with his hands and sighed heavily into them.

"OK," he said. "It was pretty horrible. One of the worst I've ever seen. And I've seen a few, let me tell you. I've seen some pretty bad ones, but this was something else. He was naked. They nailed him to the wall. Six or seven big carpentry nails through his hands and up his arms. Through the fleshy parts. They nailed his feet to the floor. Then they sliced his balls off. Just hacked them off. Blood everywhere. Pretty bad, let me tell you. Then they slit his throat. Ear to ear. Bad people, Reacher. These are bad people. As bad as they come."

I was numb. Finlay was waiting for a comment. I couldn't think of anything. I was thinking about Charlie. She would ask if I'd found anything out. Finlay should go up there. He should go up there right now and break the news. It was his job, not mine. I could see why he was reluctant. Difficult news to break. Difficult details to gloss over. But it was his job. I'd go with him. Because it was my fault. No point running away from that.

"Yes," I said to him. "It was pretty bad."

¨Yes,´´ I said to him. ¨It sounds pretty bad.´´

He leaned his head back and looked around. Blew another sigh up at the ceiling. A somber man.

“That’s not the worst of it,” he said. “You should have seen what they did to his wife.”

“His wife?” I said. “What the hell do you mean?”

“I mean his wife,” he said. “It was like a butcher’s shop.”

For a moment I couldn’t speak. The world was spinning backward.

“But I just saw her,” I said. “Twenty minutes ago. She’s OK. Nothing happened to her.”

“You saw who?” Finlay said.

“Charlie,” I said.

“Who the hell is Charlie?” he asked.

“Charlie,” I said blankly. “Charlie Hubble. His wife. She’s OK. They didn’t get her.”

“What’s Hubble got to do with this?” he said.

I just stared at him.

“Who are we talking about?” I said. “Who got killed?”

Finlay looked at me like I was crazy.

“I thought you knew,” he said. “Chief Morrison. The chief of police. Morrison. And his wife.”

12

I WAS WATCHING FINLAY VERY CAREFULLY, TRYING TO DECIDE how far I should trust him. It was going to be a life or death decision. In the end I figured his answer to one simple question would make up my mind for me.

“Are they going to make you chief now?” I asked him.

He shook his head.

“No,” he said. “They’re not going to make me chief.”

“You sure about that?” I said.

“I’m sure,” he said.

“Whose decision is it?” I asked him.

“The mayor’s,” Finlay said. “Town mayor appoints the chief of police. He’s coming over. Guy named Teale. Some kind of an old Georgia family. Some ancestor was a railroad baron who owned everything in sight around here.”

“Is that the guy you’ve got statues of?” I said.

Finlay nodded.

“Caspar Teale,” he said. “He was the first. They’ve had Teales here ever since. This mayor must be the great-grandson or something.”

I was in a minefield. I needed to find a clear lane through.

“What’s the story with this guy Teale?” I asked him.

Finlay shrugged. Tried to find a way to explain it.

“He’s just a southern asshole,” he said. “Old Georgia family, probably a long line of southern assholes. They’ve been the mayors around here since the beginning. I dare say this one’s no worse than the others.”

“Was he upset?” I said. “When you called him about Morrison?”

"Was he upset?" I said. "When you called him about Morrison?"

"Worried, I think," Finlay said. "He hates mess."

"Why won't he make you chief?" I said. "You're the senior guy, right?"

"He just won't," Finlay said. "Why not is my business."

I watched him for a moment longer. Life or death.

"Somewhere we can go to talk?" I said.

He looked over the desk at me.

"You thought it was Hubble got killed, right?" he said. "Why?"

"Hubble did get killed," I said. "Fact that Morrison got killed as well doesn't change it."

WE WALKED DOWN TO THE CONVENIENCE STORE. SAT SIDE by side at the empty counter, near the window. I sat at the same place the pale Mrs. Kliner had used when I was in there the day before. That seemed like a long time ago. The world had changed since then. We got tall mugs of coffee and a big plate of donuts. Didn't look at each other directly. We looked at each other in the mirror behind the counter.

"Why won't you get the promotion?" I asked him.

His reflection shrugged in the mirror. He was looking puzzled. He couldn't see the connection. But he'd see it soon enough.

"I should get it," he said. "I'm better qualified than all the others put together. I've done twenty years in a big city. A real police department. What the hell have they done? Look at Baker, for instance. He figures himself for a smart boy. But what has he done? Fifteen years in the sticks? In this backwater? What the hell does he know?"

"So why won't you get it?" I said.

"It's a personal matter," he said.

"It's a personal matter," he said.

"You think I'm going to sell it to the newspaper?" I asked him.

"It's a long story," he said.

"So tell it to me," I said. "I need to know."

He looked at me in the mirror. Took a deep breath.

"I finished in Boston in March," he said. "Done my twenty years. Unblemished record. Eight commendations. I was one hell of a detective, Reacher. I had retirement on full pension to look forward to. But my wife was going crazy. Since last fall, she was getting agitated. It was so ironic. We were married all through those twenty years. I was working my ass off. Boston PD was a madhouse. We were working seven days a week. All day and all night. All around me guys were seeing their marriages fall apart. They were all getting divorced. One after the other."

He stopped for a long pull on his coffee. Took a bite of donut.

"But not me," he said. "My wife could take it. Never complained, never once. She was a miracle. Never gave me a hard time."

He lapsed back into silence. I thought about twenty years in Boston. Working around the clock in that busy old city. Grimy nineteenth-century precincts. Overloaded facilities. Constant pressure. An endless parade of freaks, villains, politicians, problems. Finlay had done well to survive.

"It started last fall," he said again. "We were within six months of the end. It was all going to be over. We were thinking of a cabin somewhere, maybe. Vacations. Plenty of time together. But she started panicking. She didn't want plenty of time together. She didn't want me to retire. She didn't want me at home. She said she woke up to the fact that she didn't like me. Didn't love me. Didn't want me around. She'd loved the twenty years. Didn't want it to change. I couldn't believe it. It had been my dream. Twenty years and then retire at forty-five. Then maybe another twenty years enjoying ourselves together before we got too old, you know? It was my dream and I'd worked toward it for twenty years. But she didn't want it. She ended up saying the thought of twenty more years with me in a cabin in the woods was making her flesh crawl. It got really bitter. We fell apart. I was a total basket case."

He trailed off again. We got more coffee. It was a sad story. Stories about wrecked dreams always are.

“So obviously, we got divorced,” he said. “Nothing else to do. She demanded it. It was terrible. I was totally out of it. Then in my last month in the department I started reading the union vacancy lists again. Saw this job down here. I called an old buddy in Atlanta FBI and asked him about it. He warned me off. He said forget it. He said it was a Mickey Mouse department in a town that wasn’t even on the map. The job was called the chief of detectives, but there was only one detective. The previous guy was a weirdo who hung himself. The department was run by a fat moron. The town was run by some old Georgia type who couldn’t remember slavery had been abolished. My friend up in Atlanta said forget it. But I was so screwed up I wanted it. I thought I could bury myself down here as a punishment, you know? A kind of penance. Also, I needed the money. They were offering top dollar and I was looking at alimony and lawyer bills, you know? So I applied for it and came down. It was Mayor Teale and Morrison who saw me. I was a basket case, Reacher. I was a wreck. I couldn’t string two words together. It had to be the worst job application in the history of the world. I must have come across as an idiot. But they gave me the job. I guess they needed a black guy to look good. I’m the first black cop in Margrave’s history.”

I turned on the stool and looked straight at him.

“So you figure you’re just a token?” I said. “That’s why Teale won’t make you chief?”

“It’s obvious, I guess,” he said. “He’s got me marked down as a token and an idiot. Not to be promoted further. Makes sense in a way. Can’t believe they gave me the job in the first place, token or not.”

I waved to the counter guy for the check. I was happy with Finlay’s story. He wasn’t going to be chief. So I trusted him. And I trusted Roscoe. It was going to be the three of us, against whoever. I shook my head at him in the mirror.

“You’re wrong,” I said. “That’s not the real reason. You’re not going to be chief because you’re not a criminal.”

I PAID THE CHECK WITH A TEN AND GOT ALL QUARTERS FOR change. The guy still had no dollar bills. Then I told Finlay I needed to see the Morrison place. Told him I needed all the details. He just shrugged and led me outside. We turned and walked south. Passed by the village green and put the town behind us.

“I was the first one there,” he said. “About ten this morning. I hadn’t seen Morrison since Friday and I needed to update the guy, but I couldn’t get him on the phone. It was middle of the morning on a Monday and we hadn’t done anything worth a damn about a double homicide from last Thursday night. We needed to get our asses in gear. So I went up to his house to start looking for him.”

He went quiet and walked on. Revisiting in his mind the scene he’d found.

“Front door was standing open,” he said. “Maybe a half inch. It had a bad feel. I went in, found them upstairs in the master bedroom. It was like a butcher’s shop. Blood everywhere. He was nailed to the wall, sort of hanging off. Both of them sliced up, him and his wife. It was terrible. About twenty-four hours of decomposition. Warm weather. Very unpleasant. So I called in the whole crew and we went over every inch and pieced it all together. Literally, I’m afraid.”

He trailed off again. Just went quiet.

“So it happened Sunday morning?” I said.

He nodded.

“Sunday papers on the kitchen table,” he said. “Couple of sections opened out and the rest untouched. Breakfast things on the table. Medical examiner says about ten o’clock Sunday morning.”

“Any physical evidence left behind?” I asked him.

He nodded again. Grimly.

“Footprints in the blood,” he said. “The place was a lake of blood. Gallons of it. Partly dried up now, of course. They left footprints all over. But they were wearing rubber overshoes, you know? Like you get for the winter up north? No chance of tracing them. They must sell millions every year.”

They had come prepared. They'd known there was going to be a lot of blood. They'd brought overshoes. They must have brought overalls. Like the nylon bodysuits they wear in the slaughterhouse. On the killing floor. Big white nylon suits, hooded, the white nylon splashed and smeared with bright red blood.

"They wore gloves, too," he said. "There are rubbery smears in the blood on the walls."

"How many people?" I asked him. I was trying to build up a picture.

"Four," he said. "The footprints are confused, but I think I can see four."

I nodded. Four sounded right. About the minimum, I reckoned. Morrison and his wife would have been fighting for their lives. It would take four of them, at least. Four out of the ten Hubble had mentioned.

"Transport?" I said.

"Can't really tell," Finlay said. "Gravel driveway, washed into ruts here and there. I saw some wide ruts which look new, maybe. Could have been wide tires. Maybe a big four-wheel-drive or a small truck."

We were a couple of hundred yards south of where Main Street had petered out. We turned west up a gravel driveway which must have been just about parallel with Beckman Drive. At the end of the driveway was Morrison's house. It was a big formal place, white columns at the front, symmetrical evergreen trees dotted about. There was a new Lincoln parked near the door and a lot of police tape strung at waist height between the columns.

"We going in?" Finlay asked.

"May as well," I said.

WE DUCKED UNDER THE TAPE AND PUSHED IN THROUGH Morrison's front door. The house was a wreck. Gray metallic fingerprint powder everywhere. Everything tossed and searched and photographed.

"You won't find anything," Finlay said. "We went over the whole place."

I nodded and headed for the staircase. Went up and found the master bedroom. Stopped at the door and peered in. There was nothing to see except the ragged outline of the nail holes in the wall and the massive bloodstains. The blood was turning black. It looked like somebody had flung buckets of tar around. The carpet was crusty with it. On the parquet in the doorway I could see the footprints from the overshoes. I could make out the intricate pattern of the treads. I headed back downstairs and found Finlay leaning on a porch column out front.

“OK?” he asked me.

“Terrific,” I said. “You search the car?”

He shook his head.

“That’s Morrison’s,” he said. “We just looked for stuff the intruders might have left behind.”

I stepped over to the Lincoln and tried the door. Unlocked. Inside, there was a strong new-car smell and not much else. This was a chief’s car. It wasn’t going to be full of cheeseburger wrappings and soda cans like a patrolman’s would be. But I checked it out. Poked around in the door pockets and under the seats. Found nothing at all. Then I opened the glovebox and found something. There was a switchblade in there. It was a handsome thing. Ebony handle with Morrison’s name in gold-filled engraving. I popped the blade. Double edged, seven inches, Japanese surgical steel. Looked good. Brand-new, never been used. I closed it up and slipped it into my pocket. I was unarmed and facing big trouble. Morrison’s switchblade might make a difference. I slid out of the Lincoln and rejoined Finlay on the gravel.

“Find anything?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “Let’s go.”

We crunched back down the driveway together and turned north on the county road. Headed back to town. I could see the church steeple and the bronze statue in the distance, waiting for us.

13

“SOMETHING I NEED TO CHECK WITH YOU,” I SAID.

Finlay’s patience was running thin. He looked at his watch.

“You better not be wasting my time, Reacher,” he said.

We walked on north. The sun was dropping away from overhead, but the heat was still fierce. I didn’t know how Finlay could wear a tweed jacket. And a moleskin vest. I led him over to the village green. We crossed the grass and leaned up on the statue of old Caspar Teale, side by side.

“They cut his balls off, right?” I said.

He nodded. Looked at me, waiting.

“OK,” I said. “So the question is this: did you find his balls?”

He shook his head.

“No,” he said. “We went over the whole place. Ourselves and the medical examiner. They weren’t there. His testicles are missing.”

He smiled as he said it. He was recovering his cop’s sense of humor.

“OK,” I said. “That’s what I needed to know.”

His smile widened. Reached his eyes.

“Why?” he said. “Do you know where they are?”

“When’s the autopsy?” I asked him.

He was still smiling.

“His autopsy won’t help,” he said. “They were cut off. They’re not connected to him anymore. They weren’t there. They’re missing. So how can they find them at his autopsy?”

“Not his autopsy,” I said. “Her autopsy. His wife’s. When they check what she ate.”

Finlay stopped smiling. Went quiet. Just looked at me.

“Talk, Reacher,” he said.

“OK,” I said. “That’s why we came out here, remember? So answer another question for me. How many homicides have they had in Margrave?”

He thought about it. Shrugged.

“None,” he said. “At least, not for maybe thirty years or so. Not since voter registration days, I guess.”

“And now you’ve had four in four days,” I said. “And pretty soon you’ll find the fifth.”

“Fifth?” he said. “Who’s the fifth?”

“Hubble,” I said. “My brother, this Sherman Stoller guy, the two Morrisons and Hubble makes five. No homicides in thirty years and now you’ve got five all at once. That can’t be any kind of a coincidence, right?”

“No way,” he said. “Of course not. They’re linked.”

“Right,” I said. “Now I’ll tell you some more links. But first of all, you got to understand something, right? I was just passing through here. On Friday and Saturday and Sunday right up to the time those prints came through on my brother, I wasn’t paying the slightest bit of attention to anything at all. I was just figuring I’d wait around and get the hell out of here as soon as possible.”

“So?” he said.

“So I was told stuff,” I said. “Hubble told me things in Warburton, but I didn’t pay a lot of attention. I wasn’t interested in him, OK? He told me things, and I didn’t follow them up with him and I probably don’t recall some of them.”

“Like what things?” Finlay said.

So I told him the things I remembered. I started the same way Hubble had

started. Trapped inside some kind of a racket, terrorized by a threat against himself and his wife. A threat consisting of the same things, word for word, that Finlay had just seen for himself that morning.

“You sure about that?” he said. “Exactly the same?”

“Word for word,” I said. “Totally identical. Nailed to the wall, balls cut off, the wife forced to eat the balls, then they get their throats cut. Word-for-word identical, Finlay. So unless we got two threateners at the same time in the same place making the exact same threat, that’s another link.”

“So Morrison was inside the same scam as Hubble?” he said.

“Owned and operated by the same people,” I said.

Then I told him Hubble had been talking to an investigator. And I told him the investigator had been talking to Sherman Stoller, whoever he had been.

“Who was the investigator?” he asked. “And where does Joe fit in?”

“Joe was the investigator,” I said. “Hubble told me the tall guy with the shaved head was an investigator, trying to get him free.”

“What sort of an investigator was your brother?” Finlay said. “Who the hell was he working for?”

“Don’t know,” I said. “Last I heard he was working for the Treasury Department.”

Finlay pushed off the statue and started walking back north.

“I got to make some calls,” he said. “Time to go to work on this thing.”

“Walk slow,” I said. “I haven’t finished yet.”

FINLAY WAS ON THE SIDEWALK. I WAS IN THE ROAD, STAYING clear of the low awnings in front of every store. There was no traffic on the street to worry about. Monday, two o’clock in the afternoon, and the town was deserted.

“How do you know Hubble’s dead?” Finlay asked me.

So I told him how I knew. He thought about it. He agreed with me.

“Because he was talking to an investigator?” he said.

I shook my head. Stopped outside the barbershop.

“No,” I said. “They didn’t know about that. If they had, they’d have got to him much earlier. Thursday at the latest. I figure they made the decision to waste him Friday, about five o’clock. Because you pulled him in with the phone number in Joe’s shoe. They figured he couldn’t be allowed to talk to cops or prison guards. So they set it up with Spivey. But Spivey’s boys blew it, so they tried over again. His wife said he got a call to wait at home today. They were setting him up for a second attempt. Looks like it worked.”

Finlay nodded slowly.

“Shit,” he said. “He was the only link we had to exactly what the hell is going on here. You should have hit on him while you had the chance, Reacher.”

“Thanks, Finlay,” I said. “If I’d known the dead guy was Joe, I’d have hit on him so hard, you’d have heard him yelling all the way over here.”

He just grunted. We moved over and sat together on the bench under the barbershop window.

“I asked him what Pluribus was,” I said. “He wouldn’t answer. He said there were ten local people involved in the scam, plus hired help in from the outside when necessary. And he said the scam is vulnerable until something happens on Sunday. Exposed, somehow.”

“What happens on Sunday?” Finlay asked.

“He didn’t tell me,” I said.

“And you didn’t press him?” he asked.

“I wasn’t very interested,” I said. “I told you that.”

“And he gave you no idea what the scam is all about?” he asked.

“No idea,” I said.

“Did he say who these ten people are?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

“Christ, Reacher, you’re a big help, you know that?” he said.

“I’m sorry, Finlay,” I said. “I thought Hubble was just some asshole. If I could go back and do it again, I’d do it a lot different, believe me.”

“Ten people?” he said again.

“Not counting himself,” I said. “Not counting Sherman Stoller, either. But I assume he was counting Chief Morrison.”

“Great,” Finlay said. “That only leaves me another nine to find.”

“You’ll find one of them today,” I said.

THE BLACK PICKUP I’D LAST SEEN LEAVING ENO’S PARKING lot pulled up short at the opposite curb. It waited there, motor running. The Kliner kid leaned his head on his forearm and stared out of the window at me from across the street. Finlay didn’t see him. He was looking down at the sidewalk.

“You should be thinking about Morrison,” I said to him.

“What about him?” he said. “He’s dead, right?”

“But dead how?” I said. “What should that be saying to you?”

He shrugged.

“Somebody making an example of him?” he said. “A message?”

“Correct, Finlay,” I said. “But what had he done wrong?”

“Screwed something up, I guess,” he said.

“Correct, Finlay,” I said again. “He was told to cover up what went down at the warehouse Thursday night. That was his task for the day. He was up there at midnight, you know.”

“He was?” Finlay said. “You said that was a bullshit story.”

“No,” I said. “He didn’t see me up there. That part was the bullshit story. But he was up there himself. He saw Joe.”

“He did?” Finlay said. “How do you know that?”

“First time he saw me was Friday, right?” I said. “In the office? He was staring at me like he’d seen me before, but he couldn’t place where. That was because he’d seen Joe. He noticed a resemblance. Hubble said the same thing. He said I reminded him of his investigator.”

“So Morrison was there?” Finlay said. “Was he the shooter?”

“Can’t figure it that way,” I said. “Joe was a reasonably smart guy. He wouldn’t let a fat idiot like Morrison shoot him. The shooter must have been somebody else. I can’t figure Morrison for the maniac, either. That much physical exertion would have dropped him with a heart attack. I think he was the third guy. The clean-up guy. But he didn’t search Joe’s shoes. And because of that, Hubble got hauled in. That got somebody mad. It meant they had to waste Hubble, so Morrison was wasted as a punishment.”

“Some punishment,” Finlay said.

“Also a message,” I said. “So think about it.”

“Think about what?” he said. “Wasn’t a message for me.”

“So who was it a message for?” I said.

“Who is any such message for?” he said. “The next guy in line, right?”

I nodded.

“See why I was worried who was going to be the next chief?” I said.

Finlay dropped his head again and stared at the sidewalk.

“Christ,” he said. “You think the next chief will be in the scam?”

“Got to be,” I said. “Why would they have Morrison inside? Not for his wonderful personality, right? They had him inside because they need the chief on board. Because that’s useful to them in some particular way. So they wouldn’t waste Morrison unless they had a replacement ready. And whoever it is, we’re looking at a very dangerous guy. He’ll be going in there with Morrison’s example staring him in the face. Somebody will have just whispered to him: see what we did to Morrison? That’s what we’ll do to you if you screw up the way he did.”

“So who is it?” Finlay said. “Who’s going to be the new chief?”

“That’s what I was asking you,” I said.

WE SAT QUIET ON THE BENCH OUTSIDE THE BARBERSHOP FOR a moment. Enjoyed the sun creeping in under the edge of the striped awning.

“It’s you, me and Roscoe,” I said. “Right now, the only safe thing is to assume everybody else is involved.”

“Why Roscoe?” he said.

“Lots of reasons,” I said. “But mainly because she worked hard to get me out of Warburton. Morrison wanted me in there as a fall guy for Thursday night, right? So if Roscoe was inside the scam, she’d have left me in there. But she got me out. She pulled in the exact opposite direction from Morrison. So if he was bent, she isn’t.”

He looked at me. Grunted.

“Only three of us?” he said. “You’re a cautious guy, Reacher.”

“You bet your ass I’m a cautious guy, Finlay,” I said. “People are getting killed here. One of them was my only brother.”

We stood up from the bench on the sidewalk. Across the street, the Kliner kid killed his motor and got out of the pickup. Started walking slowly over. Finlay

rubbed his face with his hands, like he was washing without water.

“So what now?” he said.

“You got things to do,” I said. “You need to get Roscoe on one side and fill her in with the details, OK? Tell her to take a lot of care. Then you need to make some calls and find out from Washington what Joe was doing down here.”

“OK,” Finlay said. “What about you?”

I nodded across at the Kliner kid.

“I’m going to have a talk with this guy,” I said. “He keeps looking at me.”

Two things happened as the Kliner kid came near. First, Finlay left in a hurry. He just strode off north without another word. Second, I heard the barbershop blinds coming down in the window behind me. I glanced around. There could have been nobody else on the planet except for me and the Kliner kid.

Up close, the kid was an interesting study. He was no lightweight. Probably six-two, maybe one ninety, shot through with some kind of a restless energy. There was a lot of intelligence in his eyes, but there was also some kind of an eerie light burning in there. His eyes told me this probably wasn’t the most rational character I was ever going to meet in my whole life. He came close and stood in front of me. Just stared at me.

“You’re trespassing,” he said.

“This is your sidewalk?” I said.

“It sure is,” the kid said. “My daddy’s Foundation paid for every inch of it. Every brick. But I’m not talking about the sidewalk. I’m talking about Miss Roscoe. She’s mine. She’s mine, right from when I first saw her. She’s waiting for me. Five years, she’s been waiting for me, until the time is right.”

I gazed back at him.

“You understand English?” I said.

The kid tensed up. He was just about hopping from foot to foot.

“I’m a reasonable guy,” I said. “First time Miss Roscoe tells me she wants you instead of me, I’m out of here. Until then, you back off. Understand that?”

The kid was boiling. But then he changed. It was like he was operated by a remote control and somebody had just hit a button and switched the channel. He relaxed and shrugged and smiled a wide, boyish smile.

“OK,” he said. “No hard feelings, right?”

He stuck out his hand to shake on it and he nearly fooled me. Right at the last split second I pulled my own hand back a fraction and closed around his knuckles, not his palm. It’s an old army trick. They go to shake your hand, but they’re aiming to crush it. Some big macho ritual. The way out is to be ready. You pull back a fraction and you squeeze back. You’re squeezing their knuckles, not the meat of their palm. Their grip is neutralized. If you catch it right, you can’t lose.

He started crushing, but he never stood a chance. He was going for the steady squeeze, so he could stare into my eyes while I sweated it out. But he never got near. I crunched his knuckles once, then twice, a little harder, and then I dropped his hand and turned away. I was a good sixty yards north before I heard the truck start up. It rumbled south and its noise was lost in the buzz of the heat.

14

BACK AT THE STATION HOUSE THERE WAS A BIG WHITE CADILLAC parked right across the entrance. Brand-new, fully loaded. Full of puffy black leather and fake wood. It looked like a Vegas whorehouse after the stern walnut and old hide in Charlie Hubble's Bentley. Took me five strides to get around its hood to the door.

Inside in the chill everybody was milling around a tall old guy with silver hair. He was in an old-fashioned suit. Bootlace tie with a silver clasp. Looked like a real asshole. Some kind of a politician. The Cadillac driver. He must have been about seventy-five years old and he was limping around, leaning on a thick cane with a huge silver knob at the top. I guessed this was Mayor Teale.

Roscoe was coming out of the big office in back. She had been pretty shaken up after being at the Morrison place. Wasn't looking too good now, but she waved and tried a smile. Gestured me over. Wanted me to go into the office with her. I took another quick glance at Mayor Teale and walked over to her.

"You OK?" I said.

"I've had better days," she said.

"You up to speed?" I asked her. "Finlay give you the spread?"

She nodded.

"Finlay told me everything," she said.

We ducked into the big rosewood office. Finlay was sitting at the desk under the old clock. It showed a quarter of four. Roscoe closed the door and I looked back and forth between the two of them.

"So who's getting it?" I said. "Who's the new chief?"

Finlay looked up at me from where he was sitting. Shook his head.

"Nobody," he said. "Mayor Teale is going to run the department himself."

I went back to the door and cracked it open an inch. Peered out and looked at Teale across the squad room. He had Baker pinned up against the wall. Looked like he was giving him a hard time about something. I watched him for a moment.

“So what do you make of that?” I asked them.

“Everybody else in the department is clean,” Roscoe said.

“Looks that way, I guess,” I said. “But it proves Teale himself is on board. Teale’s their replacement, so Teale’s their boy.”

“How do we know he’s just their boy?” she said. “Maybe he’s the big boss. Maybe he’s running the whole thing.”

“No,” I said. “The big boss had Morrison carved up as a message. If Teale was the big boss, why would he send a message to himself? He belongs to somebody. He’s been put in here to run interference.”

“That’s for sure,” Finlay said. “Started already. Told us Joe and Stoller are going on the back burner. We’re throwing everything at the Morrison thing. Doing it ourselves, no outside help, no FBI, no nothing. He says the pride of the department is at stake. And he’s already driving us up a blind alley. Says it’s obvious Morrison was killed by somebody just out of prison. Somebody Morrison himself put away a long time ago, out for revenge.”

“And it’s a hell of a blind alley,” Roscoe said. “We’ve got to trawl through twenty years of old files and cross-check every name in every file against parole records from across the entire country. It could take us months. He’s pulled Ste venson in off the road for it. Until this is over, he drives a desk. So do I.”

“It’s worse than a blind alley,” Finlay said. “It’s a coded warning. Nobody in our files looks good for violent revenge. Never had that sort of crime here. We know that. And Teale knows we know that. But we can’t call his bluff, right?”

“Can’t you just ignore him?” I said. “Just do what needs doing?”

He leaned back in his chair. Blew a sigh at the ceiling and shook his head.

“No,” he said. “We’re working right under the enemy’s nose. Right now, Teale’s got no reason to think we know anything about any of this. And we’ve got to

keep it that way. We've got to play dumb and act innocent, right? That's going to limit our scope. But the big problem is authorization. If I need a warrant or something, I'm going to need his signature. And I'm not going to get it, am I?"

I shrugged at him.

"I'm not planning on using warrants," I said. "Did you call Washington?"

"They're getting back to me," he said. "Just hope Teale doesn't grab the phone before I can."

I nodded.

"What you need is somewhere else to work," I said. "What about that buddy of yours up in Atlanta FBI? The one you told me about? Could you use his office as a kind of private facility?"

Finlay thought about it. Nodded.

"Not a bad idea," he said. "I'll have to go off the record. I can't ask Teale to make a formal request, right? I'll call from home, tonight. Guy called Picard. Nice guy, you'll like him. He's from the Quarter, down in New Orleans. He did a spell in Boston about a million years ago. Great big guy, very smart, very tough."

"Tell him we need it kept very quiet," I said. "We don't want his agents down here until we're ready."

"What are you going to do about Teale?" Roscoe asked me. "He works for the guys who killed your brother."

I shrugged again.

"Depends how involved he was," I said. "He wasn't the shooter."

"He wasn't?" Roscoe said. "How do you know that?"

"Not fast enough," I said. "Limps around with a cane in his hand. Too slow to pull a gun. Too slow to get Joe, anyway. He wasn't the kicker, either. Too old, not vigorous enough. And he wasn't the gofer. That was Morrison. But if he starts messing with me, then he's in deep shit. Otherwise, to hell with him."

starts messing with me, then he's in deep shit. Otherwise, to hell with him.

"So what now?" she said.

I shrugged at her. Didn't reply.

"I think Sunday is the thing," Finlay said. "Sunday is going to solve some kind of a problem for them. Teale being put in here feels so temporary, you know? The guy's seventy-five years old. He's got no police experience. It's a temporary fix, to get them through until Sunday."

The buzzer on the desk went off. Stevenson's voice came over the intercom asking for Roscoe. They had files to check. I opened the door for her. But she stopped. She'd just thought of something.

"What about Spivey?" she said. "Over at Warburton? He was ordered to arrange the attack on Hubble, right? So he must know who gave him the order. You should go ask him. Might lead somewhere."

"Maybe," I said. Closed the door behind her.

"Waste of time," Finlay said to me. "You think Spivey's just going to tell you a thing like that?"

I smiled at him.

"If he knows, he'll tell me," I said to him. "A question like that, it's how you ask it, right?"

"Take care, Reacher," he said. "They see you getting close to what Hubble knew, they'll waste you like they wasted him."

Charlie and her kids flashed into my mind and I shivered. They would figure Charlie was close to what Hubble had known. That was inevitable. Maybe even his kids as well. A cautious person would assume kids could have overheard something. It was four o'clock. The kids would be out of school. There were people out there who had loaded up with rubber overshoes, nylon bodysuits and surgical gloves. And sharp knives. And a bag of nails. And a hammer.

"Finlay, call your buddy Picard right now," I said. "We need his help. We've got to put Charlie Hubble somewhere safe. And her kids. Right now."

Finlay nodded gravely. He saw it. He understood.

“For sure,” he said. “Get your ass up to Beckman. Right now. Stay there. I’ll organize Picard. You don’t leave until he shows up, OK?”

He picked up the phone. Dialed an Atlanta number from memory.

ROSCOE WAS BACK AT HER DESK. MAYOR TEALE WAS HANDING her a thick wad of file folders. I stepped over to her and pulled up a spare chair. Sat down next to her.

“What time do you finish?” I said.

“About six, I guess,” she said.

“Bring some handcuffs home, OK?” I said.

“You’re a fool, Jack Reacher,” she said.

Teale was watching so I got up and kissed her hair. Went out into the afternoon and headed for the Bentley. The sun was dropping away and the heat was gone. Shadows were lengthening up. Felt like the fall was on its way. Behind me I heard a shout. Mayor Teale had followed me out of the building. He called me back. I stayed where I was. Made him come to me. He limped over, tapping his cane, smiling. Stuck out his hand and introduced himself. Said his name was Grover Teale. He had that politician’s knack of fixing you with a look and a smile like a searchlight. Like he was thrilled to bits just to be talking to me.

“Glad I caught you,” he said. “Sergeant Baker has brought me up to date on the warehouse homicides. It all seems pretty clear to me. We made a clumsy mistake in apprehending you, and we’re all very sorry indeed about your brother, and we’ll certainly let you know just as soon as we get to any conclusions. So before you get on your way, I’d be grateful if you’d kindly accept my apology on behalf of this department. I wouldn’t want you to take away a bad impression of us. May we just call it a mistake?”

“OK, Teale,” I said. “But why do you assume I’m leaving?”

He came back smoothly. Not more than a tiny hesitation

He came back smoothly. Not more than a tiny hesitation.

“I understood you were just passing through,” he said. “We have no hotel here in Margrave and I imagined you would find no opportunity to stay.”

“I’m staying,” I said. “I received a generous offer of hospitality. I understand that’s what the South is famous for, right? Hospitality?”

He beamed at me and grasped his embroidered lapel.

“Oh, undoubtedly that’s true, sir,” he said. “The South as a whole, and Georgia in particular, is indeed famous for the warmth of its welcome. However, as you know, just at the present time, we find ourselves in a most awkward predicament. In the circumstances, a motel in Atlanta or Macon would really suit you much better. Naturally, we would keep in close touch, and we would extend you every assistance in arranging your brother’s funeral, when that sad time comes. Here in Margrave, I’m afraid, we’re all going to be very busy. It’ll be boring for you. Officer Roscoe’s going to have a lot of work to do. She shouldn’t be distracted just at the moment, don’t you think?”

“I won’t distract her,” I said evenly. “I know she’s doing vital work.”

He looked at me. An expressionless gaze. Eye to eye, but he wasn’t really tall enough. He’d get a crick in his scrawny old neck. And if he kept on staring at me like that, he’d get his scrawny old neck broken. I gave him a wintry smile and stepped away to the Bentley. Unlocked it and got in. Gunned the big motor and whirred the window down.

“See you later, Teale,” I called as I drove away.

THE END OF THE SCHOOL DAY WAS THE BUSIEST I’D EVER seen the town. I passed two people on Main Street and saw another four in a knot near the church. Some kind of an afternoon club, maybe. Reading the Bible or bottling peaches for the winter. I drove past them and hustled the big car up the sumptuous mile of Beckman Drive. Turned in at the Hubbles’ white mailbox and spun the old Bakelite steering wheel through the driveway curves.

The problem with trying to warn Charlie was I didn’t know how much I wanted to tell her. Certainly I wasn’t about to give her the details. Didn’t even feel right

to tell her Hubble was dead at all. We were stuck in some kind of a limbo. But I couldn't keep her in the dark forever. She needed to know some context. Or else she wouldn't listen to the warning.

I parked her car at her door and rang her bell. The children dashed around from somewhere as Charlie opened up and let me in. She was looking pretty tired and strained. The children looked happy enough. They hadn't picked up on their mother's worries. She chased them off and I followed her back to the kitchen. It was a big, modern room. I got her to make me some coffee. I could see she was anxious to talk, but she was having trouble getting started. I watched her fiddling with the filter machine.

"Don't you have a maid?" I asked her.

She shook her head.

"I don't want one," she said. "I like to do things myself."

"It's a big house," I said.

"I like to keep busy, I guess," she said.

Then we were silent. Charlie switched on the coffee machine and it started with a faint hiss. I sat at a table in a window nook. It overlooked an acre of velvet lawn. She came and sat opposite me. Folded her hands in front of her.

"I heard about the Morrisons," she said at last. "Is my husband involved in all of this?"

I tried to think exactly what I could say to her. She waited for an answer. The coffee machine burbled away in the big silent kitchen.

"Yes, Charlie," I said. "I'm afraid he was. But he didn't want to be involved, OK? Some kind of blackmail was going on."

She took it well. She must have figured it out for herself, anyway. Must have run every possible speculation through her head. This explanation was the one which fit. That was why she didn't look surprised or outraged. She just nodded. Then she relaxed. She looked like it had done her good to hear someone else say it. Now it was out in the open. It was acknowledged. It could be dealt with.

“I’m afraid that makes sense,” she said.

She got up to pour the coffee. Kept talking as she went.

“That’s the only way I can explain his behavior,” she said. “Is he in danger?”

“Charlie, I’m afraid I have no idea where he is,” I said.

She handed me a mug of coffee. Sat down again on the kitchen counter.

“Is he in danger?” she asked again.

I couldn’t answer. Couldn’t get any words out. She moved off the counter and came to sit opposite me again at the table in the window. She cradled her cup in front of her. She was a fine-looking woman. Blond and pretty. Perfect teeth, good bones, slim, athletic. A lot of spirit. I had seen her as a plantation type. What they call a belle. I had said to myself that a hundred and fifty years ago she would have been a slave owner. I began to change that opinion. I felt a crackle of toughness coming from her. She enjoyed being rich and idle, sure. Beauty parlors and lunch with the girls in Atlanta. The Bentley and the gold cards. The big kitchen which cost more than I ever made in a year. But if it came to it, here was a woman who might get down in the dirt and fight. Maybe a hundred and fifty years ago she would have been on a wagon train heading west. She had enough spirit. She looked hard at me across the table.

“I panicked this morning,” she said. “That’s not really like me at all. I must have given you a very bad impression, I’m afraid. After you left, I calmed down and thought things out. I came to the same conclusion you’ve just described. Hub’s blundered into something and he’s got all tangled up in it. So what am I going to do about it? Well, I’m going to stop panicking and start thinking. I’ve been a mess since Friday and I’m ashamed of it. That’s not the real me at all. So I did something, and I hope you’ll forgive me for it?”

“Go on,” I said.

“I called Dwight Stevenson,” she said. “He had mentioned he had seen a fax from the Pentagon about your service as a military policeman. I asked him to find it and read it to me. I thought it was an excellent record.”

She smiled at me. Hitched her chair in closer.

“So what I want to do is to hire you,” she said. “I want to hire you in a private capacity to solve my husband’s problem. Would you consider doing that for me?”

“No,” I said. “I can’t do that, Charlie.”

“Can’t or won’t?” she said.

“There would be a sort of a conflict of interest,” I said. “It might mean I couldn’t do a proper job for you.”

“A conflict?” she said. “In what way?”

I paused for a long moment. Tried to figure out how to explain it.

“Your husband felt bad, OK?” I said. “He got hold of some kind of an investigator, a government guy, and they were trying to fix the situation. But the government guy got killed. And I’m afraid my interest is in the government guy, more than your husband.”

She followed what I was saying and nodded.

“But why?” she asked. “You don’t work for the government.”

“The government guy was my brother,” I told her. “Just a crazy coincidence, I know, but I’m stuck with it.”

She went quiet. She saw where the conflict could lie.

“I’m very sorry,” she said. “You’re not saying Hub betrayed your brother?”

“No,” I said. “That’s the very last thing he would have done. He was depending on him to get him out from under. Something went wrong, is all.”

“May I ask you a question?” she said. “Why do you refer to my husband in the past tense?”

I looked straight at her.

“Because he’s dead,” I said. “I’m very sorry.”

Charlie hung in there. She went pale and clenched her hands until her knuckles shone waxy white. But she didn't fall apart.

"I don't think he's dead," she whispered. "I would know. I would be able to feel it. I think he's just hiding out somewhere. I want you to find him. I'll pay you whatever you want."

I just slowly shook my head at her.

"Please," she said.

"I won't do it, Charlie," I said. "I won't take your money for that. I would be exploiting you. I can't take your money because I know he's already dead. I'm very sorry, but there it is."

There was a long silence in the kitchen. I sat there at the table, nursing the coffee she'd made for me.

"Would you do it if I didn't pay you?" she said. "Maybe you could just look around for him while you find out about your brother?"

I thought about it. Couldn't see how I could say no to that.

"OK," I said. "I'll do that, Charlie. But like I say, don't expect miracles. I think we're looking at something very bad here."

"I think he's alive," she said. "I would know if he wasn't."

I started worrying about what would happen when his body was found. She was going to come face to face with reality the same way a runaway truck comes face to face with the side of a building.

"You'll need expense money," Charlie said.

I wasn't sure about taking it, but she passed me a thick envelope.

"Will that do?" she asked.

I looked in the envelope. There was a thick wad of hundred dollar bills in there. I nodded. That would do.

"And please keep the car," she said. "Use it as long as you need it."

I nodded again. Thought about what else I needed to say and forced myself to use the present tense.

"Where does he work?" I asked her.

"Sunrise International," she said. "It's a bank."

She reeled off an Atlanta address.

"OK, Charlie," I said. "Now let me ask you something else. It's very important. Did your husband ever use the word 'Pluribus'?"

She thought about it and shrugged.

"Pluribus?" she said. "Isn't that something to do with politics? Like on the podium when the president gives a speech? I never heard Hub talking about it. He graduated in banking studies."

"You never heard him use that word?" I asked her again. "Not on the phone, not in his sleep or anything?"

"Never," she said.

"What about next Sunday?" I asked her. "Did he mention next Sunday? Anything about what's going to happen?"

"Next Sunday?" she repeated. "I don't think he mentioned it. Why? What's going to happen next Sunday?"

"I don't know," I said. "That's what I'm trying to find out."

She pondered it again for a long moment, but just shook her head and shrugged, palms upward, like it meant nothing to her.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "Now you've got to do something."

"What do I have to do?" she said.

“You’ve got to get out of here,” I said.

Her knuckles were still white, but she was staying in control.

“I’ve got to run and hide?” she said. “But where to?”

“An FBI agent is coming here to pick you up,” I said.

She stared at me in panic.

“FBI?” she said. She went paler still. “This is really serious, isn’t it?”

“It’s deadly serious,” I said. “You need to get ready to leave right now.”

“OK,” she said, slowly. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

I WALKED OUT OF HER KITCHEN AND INTO THE GARDEN room where we had drunk iced tea the day before. Stepped through the French doors and strolled a slow circuit outside the house. Down the driveway, through the banks of greenery, out onto Beckman Drive. Leaned up on the white mailbox on the shoulder. It was silent. I could hear nothing at all except the dry rustle of the grass cooling under my feet.

Then I could hear a car coming west out of town. It slowed just before the crest of the rise and I heard the automatic box slur a change down as the speed dropped. The car rose up over the crest into view. It was a brown Buick, very plain, two guys in it. They were small dark guys, Hispanic, loud shirts. They were slowing, drifting to the left of the road, looking for the Hubble mailbox. I was leaning on the Hubble mailbox, looking at them. Their eyes met mine. The car accelerated again and swerved away. Blasted on into the empty peach country. I stepped out and watched them go. I saw a dust plume rising as they drove off Margrave’s immaculate blacktop onto the dusty rural roadway. Then I sprinted back up to the house. I wanted Charlie to hurry.

She was inside, flustered, chattering away like a kid going on vacation. Making lists out loud. Some kind of a mechanism to burn off the panic she was feeling. On Friday she’d been a rich idle woman married to a banker. Now on Monday a stranger who said the banker was dead was telling her to hurry up and run for her life.

life.

“Take the mobile phone with you,” I called to her.

She didn’t reply. I just heard a worried silence. Footsteps and closet doors banging. I sat in her kitchen with the rest of the coffee for most of an hour. Then I heard a car horn blow and the crunch of heavy steps on the gravel. A loud knock on the front door. I put my hand in my pocket and closed it around the ebony handle of Morrison’s switchblade. Walked out into the hallway and opened up.

There was a neat blue sedan next to the Bentley and a gigantic black guy standing back from the doorstep. He was as tall as me, maybe even taller, but he must have outweighed me by at least a hundred pounds. Must have been three ten, three twenty. Next to him, I was a featherweight. He stepped forward with the easy elastic grace of an athlete.

“Reacher?” the giant said. “Pleased to meet you. I’m Picard, FBI.”

He shook hands with me. He was enormous. He had a casual competence about him which made me glad he was on my side. He looked like my type of a guy. Like he could be very useful in a tight corner. I suddenly felt a flood of encouragement. I stood aside to let him into Charlie’s house.

“OK,” Picard said to me. “I got all the details from Finlay. Real sorry about your brother, my friend. Real sorry. Somewhere we can talk?”

I led him through to the kitchen. He loped beside me and covered the distance in a couple of strides. Glanced around and poured himself the dregs of the stewed coffee. Then he stepped over next to me and dropped his hand on my shoulder. Felt like somebody had hit me with a bag of cement.

“Ground rules,” he said. “This whole thing is off the record, right?”

I nodded. His voice matched his bulk. It was a low rumble. It was what a brown bear would sound like if it learned to talk. I couldn’t tell how old the guy was. He was one of those big fit men whose peak years stretch on for decades. He nodded and moved away. Rested his giant frame against the counter.

“This is a huge problem for me,” he said. “Bureau can’t act without a call from the responsible official in the local jurisdiction. That would be this guy Teale,

right? And from what Finlay tells me, I assume old Teale's not going to be making that call. So I could end up with my big ass in a sling for this. But I'll bend the rules for Finlay. We go back quite a ways. But you got to remember, this is all unofficial, OK?"

I nodded again. I was happy with that. Very happy. Unofficial help suited me fine. It would get the job done without hanging me up on procedure. I had five clear days before Sunday. This morning, five days had seemed more than generous. But now, with Hubble gone, I felt like I was very short of time. Much too short of time to waste any of it on procedure.

"Where are you going to put them?" I asked him.

"Safe house up in Atlanta," Picard said. "Bureau place, we've had it for years. They'll be secure there, but I'm not going to say exactly where it is, and I'm going to have to ask you not to press Mrs. Hubble about it afterward, OK? I got to watch my back on this thing. I blow a safe house, I'm in really deep shit."

"OK, Picard," I said. "I won't cause you any problems. And I appreciate it."

He nodded, gravely, like he was way out on a limb. Then Charlie and the kids burst in. They were burdened down with badly packed bags. Picard introduced himself. I could see that Charlie's daughter was terrified by the size of the guy.

The little boy's eyes grew round as he gazed at the FBI Special Agent's shield Picard was holding out. Then the five of us carried the bags outside and piled them in the blue sedan's trunk. I shook hands with Picard and Charlie. Then they all got in the car. Picard drove them away. I waved after them.

15

I HEADED OVER TO WARBURTON A DAMN SIGHT FASTER than the prison driver had and I was there in less than fifty minutes. It was a hell of a sight. There was a storm coming in quickly from the west and shafts of low afternoon sun were escaping the clouds and hitting the place. The glittering metal towers and turrets were catching the orange rays. I slowed up and pulled into the prison approach. Stopped outside the first vehicle cage. I wasn't going in there. I'd had enough of that. Spivey was going to have to come out to me. I got out of the Bentley and walked over to the guard. He seemed friendly enough.

"Spivey on duty?" I asked him.

"You want him?" the guard said.

"Tell him Mr. Reacher's here," I said.

The guy ducked under a Perspex hood and made a call. Ducked back out again and shouted over to me.

"He doesn't know any Mr. Reacher," he said.

"Tell him Chief Morrison sent me," I said. "Over from Margrave."

The guy went under the Perspex thing again and started talking. After a minute he was back out.

"OK, drive on through," he said. "Spivey will meet you at reception."

"Tell him he's got to come out here," I said. "Meet me on the road."

I walked away and stood in the dust on the edge of the blacktop. It was a battle of nerves. I was betting Spivey would come on out. I'd know in five minutes. I waited. I could smell rain coming out of the west. In an hour, it was going to roll right over us. I stood and waited.

Spivey came out. I heard the grilles on the vehicle cage grinding across. I turned and saw a dirty Ford driving through. It came out and stopped next to the Bentley. Spivey heaved himself out. He walked over. Big guy, sweating, red

face and hands. His uniform was dirty.

“Remember me?” I asked him.

His small snake eyes flicked around. He was adrift and worried.

“You’re Reacher,” he said. “So what?”

“Right,” I said. “I’m Reacher. From Friday. What was the deal?”

He shifted from foot to foot. He was going to play hard to get. But he’d already showed his hand. He’d come out to meet me. He’d already lost the game. But he didn’t speak.

“What was the deal on Friday?” I said again.

“Morrison is dead,” he said. Then he shrugged and clamped his thin lips. Wouldn’t say any more.

I stepped casually to my left. Just a foot or so, to put Spivey’s bulk between me and the gate guard. So the gate guard couldn’t see. Morrison’s switchblade appeared in my hand. I held it up at Spivey’s eye level for a second. Just long enough for him to read the gold-filled engraving in the ebony. Then the blade popped out with a loud click. Spivey’s small eyes were fixed on it.

“You think I used this on Morrison?” I said.

He was staring at the blade. It shone blue in the stormy sun.

“It wasn’t you,” he said. “But maybe you had good reason.”

I smiled at him. He knew it wasn’t me who killed Morrison. Therefore he knew who had. Therefore he knew who Morrison’s bosses were. Simple as that. Three little words, and I was getting somewhere. I moved the blade a fraction closer to his big red face.

“Want me to use this on you?” I said.

Spivey looked around wildly. Saw the gate guard thirty yards away.

“He’s not going to help you,” I said. “He hates your useless fat guts. He’s just a

guard. You sucked ass and got promotion. He wouldn't piss on you if you were on fire. Why should he?"

"So what do you want?" Spivey said.

"Friday," I said. "What was the deal?"

"And if I tell you?" he said.

I shrugged at him.

"Depends what you tell me," I said. "You tell me the truth, I'll let you go back inside. Want to tell me the truth?"

He didn't reply. We were just standing there by the road. A battle of nerves. His nerves were shot to hell. So he was losing. His little eyes were darting about. They always came back to the blade.

"OK, I'll tell you," he said. "Time to time, I helped Morrison out. He called me Friday. Said he was sending two guys over. Names meant nothing to me. Never heard of you or the other guy. I was supposed to get the Hubble guy killed. That's all. Nothing was supposed to happen to you, I swear it."

"So what went wrong?" I asked him.

"My guys screwed up," he said. "That's all, I swear it. It was the other guy we were after. Nothing was supposed to happen to you. You got out of there, right? No damage done, right? So why give me a hard time?"

I flashed the blade up real quick and nicked his chin. He froze in shock. A moment later a fat worm of dark blood welled out of the cut.

"What was the reason?" I asked him.

"There's never a reason," he said. "I just do what I'm told."

"You do what you're told?" I said.

"I do what I'm told," he said again. "I don't want to know any reasons."

"So who told you what to do?" I said.

“Morrison,” he said. “Morrison told me what to do.”

“And who told Morrison what to do?” I asked him.

I held the blade an inch from his cheek. He was just about whimpering with fear. I stared into his small snake eyes. He knew the answer. I could see that, far back in those eyes. He knew who told Morrison what to do.

“Who told him what to do?” I asked him again.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I swear it, grave of my mother.”

I stared at him for a long moment. Shook my head.

“Wrong, Spivey,” I said. “You do know. You’re going to tell me.”

Now Spivey shook his head. His big red face jerked from side to side. The blood was running down his chin onto his slabby jowls.

“They’ll kill me if I do,” he said.

I flicked the knife at his belly. Slit his greasy shirt.

“I’ll kill you if you don’t,” I said.

Guy like Spivey, he thinks short term. If he told me, he’d die tomorrow. If he didn’t tell me, he’d die today. That’s how he thought. Short term. So he set about telling me. His throat started working up and down, like it was too dry to speak. I stared into his eyes. He couldn’t get any words out. He was like a guy in a movie who crawls up a desert dune and tries to call for water. But he was going to tell me.

Then he wasn’t. Over his shoulder, I saw a dust plume far in the east. Then I heard the faint roar of a diesel engine. Then I made out the gray shape of the prison bus rolling in. Spivey snapped his head around to look at his salvation. The gate guard wandered out to meet the bus. Spivey snapped his head back to look at me. There was a mean gleam of triumph in his eyes. The bus was getting closer.

“Who was it, Spivey?” I said. “Tell me now, or I’ll come back for you.”

But he just backed off and turned and hustled over to his dirty Ford. The bus roared in and blew dust all over me. I closed up the switchblade and put it back in my pocket. Jogged over to the Bentley and took off.

THE COMING STORM CHASED ME ALL THE WAY BACK EAST. I felt I had more than a storm after me. I was sick with frustration. This morning I had been just one conversation away from knowing everything. Now I knew nothing. The situation had suddenly turned sour.

I had no backup, no facilities, no help. I couldn't rely on Roscoe or Finlay. I couldn't expect either of them to agree with my agenda. And they had troubles of their own up at the station house. What had Finlay said? Working under the enemy's nose? And I couldn't expect too much from Picard. He was already way out on a limb. I couldn't count on anybody but myself.

On the other hand, I had no laws to worry about, no inhibitions, no distractions. I wouldn't have to think about Miranda, probable cause, constitutional rights. I wouldn't have to think about reasonable doubt or rules of evidence. No appeal to any higher authority for these guys. Was that fair? You bet your ass. These were bad people. They'd stepped over the line a long time ago. Bad people. What had Finlay said? As bad as they come. And they had killed Joe Reacher.

I rolled the Bentley down the slight hill to Roscoe's house. Parked on the road outside her place. She wasn't home. The Chevrolet wasn't there. The big chrome clock on the Bentley's dash showed ten of six. Ten minutes to wait. I got out of the front seat and got into the back. Stretched out on the big old car's leather bench.

I wanted to get away from Margrave for the evening. I wanted to get out of Georgia altogether. I found a map in a pocket on the back of the driver's seat. I peered at it and figured if we went west for an hour, hour and a half, back past Warburton again, we'd cross the state line into Alabama. That's what I wanted to do. Blast west with Roscoe into Alabama and pull into the first live music bar we came to. Put my troubles on hold until tomorrow. Eat some cheap food, drink some cold beer, hear some dirty music. With Roscoe. My idea of a hell of an evening. I settled back to wait for her. The dark was gathering in. I felt a faint chill in the evening air. About six o'clock huge drops started hammering on the roof of the Bentley. It felt like a big evening thunderstorm was moving in, but it

never really arrived. It never really let loose. Just the big early drops spattering down like the sky was straining to unload but wouldn't let go. It went very dark and the heavy car rocked gently in the damp wind.

ROSCOE WAS LATE. THE STORM HAD BEEN THREATENING FOR about twenty minutes before I saw her Chevy winding down the rise. Her headlights swept and arced left and right. They washed over me as she swung into her driveway. They blazed against her garage door, then died as she cut the power. I got out of the Bentley and stepped over to her. We held each other and kissed. Then we went inside.

"You OK?" I asked her.

"I guess," she said. "Hell of a day."

I nodded. It had been.

"Upset?" I asked her.

She was moving around switching lamps on. Pulling drapes.

"This morning was the worst thing I've ever seen," she said. "By far the worst thing. But I'm going to tell you something I would never tell anyone else. I wasn't upset. Not about Morrison. You can't get upset about a guy like that. But I'm upset about his wife. Bad enough living with a guy like Morrison without dying because of him too, right?"

"What about the rest of it?" I asked her. "Teale?"

"I'm not surprised," she said. "That whole family has been scum for two hundred years. I know all about them. His family and my family go way back together. Why should he be any different? But, God, I'm glad everybody else in the department turned out clean. I was dreading finding out one of those guys had been in it, too. I don't know if I could have faced that."

She went into the kitchen and I followed. She went quiet. She wasn't falling apart, but she wasn't happy. She pulled open the refrigerator door. It was a gesture which said: the cupboard is bare. She smiled a tired smile at me.

“You want to buy me dinner?” she said.

“Sure,” I said. “But not here. In Alabama.”

I told her what I wanted to do. She liked the plan. She brightened up and went to take a shower. I figured I could use a shower too, so I went with her. But we hit a delay because as soon as she started to unbutton her crisp uniform shirt, my priorities shifted. The lure of an Alabama bar receded. And the shower could wait, too. She was wearing black underwear beneath the uniform. Not very substantial items. We ended up in a frenzy on the bedroom floor. The thunderstorm was finally breaking outside. The rain was lashing the little house. Lightning was blazing and the thunder was crashing about.

We finally made it to the shower. By then, we really needed it. Afterward I lay on the bed while Roscoe dressed. She put on faded denims and a silky shirt. We turned off the lamps again and locked up and took off in the Bentley. It was seven thirty and the storm was drifting off to the east, heading for Charleston before boiling out over the Atlantic. Might hit Bermuda tomorrow. We headed west toward a pinker sky. I found the road back out to Warburton. Cruised down the farm roads between the endless dark fields and blasted past the prison. It squatted glowering in its ghastly yellow light.

A half hour after Warburton we stopped to fill the old car’s gigantic tank. Threaded through some tobacco country and crossed the Chattahoochee by an old river bridge in Franklin. Then a sprint down to the state line. We were in Alabama before nine o’clock. We agreed to take a chance and stop at the first bar.

We saw an old roadhouse maybe a mile later. Pulled into the parking lot and got out. Looked OK. Big enough place, wide and low, built from tarred boards. Plenty of neon, plenty of cars in the lot, and I could hear music. The sign at the door said The Pond, live music seven nights a week at nine thirty. Roscoe and I held hands and walked in.

We were hit by bar noise and jukebox music and a blast of beery air. We pushed through to the back and found a wide ring of booths around a dance floor with a stage beyond. The stage was really just a low concrete platform. It might once have been some kind of a loading bay. The ceiling was low and the light was dim. We found an empty booth and slid in. Watched the band setting up while we waited for service. The waitresses were rushing around like basketball

centers. One dived over and we ordered beers, cheese-burgers, fries, onion rings. Pretty much right away she ran back with a tin tray with our stuff on it. We ate and drank and ordered more.

“So what are you going to do about Joe?” Roscoe asked me.

I was going to finish his business. Whatever it was. Whatever it took. That was the decision I had made in her warm bed that morning. But she was a police officer. She was sworn to uphold all kinds of laws. Laws that were designed to get in my way. I didn’t know what to say. But she didn’t wait for me to say anything.

“I think you should find out who it was killed him,” she said.

“And then what?” I asked her.

But that was as far as we got. The band started up. We couldn’t talk anymore. Roscoe gave an apologetic smile and shook her head. The band was loud. She shrugged, saying sorry for the fact that I couldn’t hear her talking. She sketched me a tell-you-later gesture across the table and we turned to face the stage. I wished I could have heard her reply to my question.

THE BAR WAS CALLED THE POND AND THE BAND WAS called Pond Life. They started pretty well. A classic trio. Guitar, bass, drums. Firmly into the Stevie Ray Vaughan thing. Since Stevie Ray died in his helicopter up near Chicago it seemed like you could count up all the white men under forty in the southern states, divide by three, and that was the number of Stevie Ray Vaughan tribute bands. Everybody was doing it. Because it didn’t require much. Didn’t matter what you looked like, didn’t matter what gear you had. All you needed was to get your head down and play. The best of them could match Stevie Ray’s on-a-dime changes from loose bar rock to the old Texas blues.

This lot was pretty good. Pond Life. They lived up to their ironic name. The bass and the drums were big messy guys, lots of hair all over, fat and dirty. The guitar player was a small dark guy, not unlike old Stevie Ray himself. The same gappy grin. He could play, too. He had a black Les Paul copy and a big Marshall stack. Good old-fashioned sound. The loose heavy strings and the big pickups overloading the ancient Marshall tubes, giving that glorious fat buzzy scream

you couldn’t get any other way.

We were having a good time. We drank a lot of beer, sat tight together in the booth. Then we danced for a while. Couldn’t resist it. The band played on and on. The room got hot and crowded. The music got louder and faster. The waitresses sprinted back and forth with long-neck bottles.

Roscoe looked great. Her silky shirt was damp. She wasn’t wearing anything underneath it. I could see that because of the way the damp silk stuck to her skin. I was in heaven. I was in a plain old bar with a stunning woman and a decent band. Joe was on hold until tomorrow. Margrave was a million miles away. I had no problems. I didn’t want the evening to end.

The band played on until pretty late. Must have been way past midnight. We were juiced up and sloppy. Couldn’t face the drive back. It was raining again, lightly. Didn’t want to drive an hour and a half in the rain. Not so full of beer. Might end up in a ditch. Or in jail. There was a sign to a motel a mile further on. Roscoe said we should go there. She was giggly about it. Like we were eloping or something. Like I’d transported her across the state line for that exact purpose. I hadn’t, specifically. But I wasn’t about to put up a whole lot of objections.

So we stumbled out of the bar with ringing ears and got into the Bentley. We rolled the big old car cautiously and slowly down the streaming road for a mile. Saw the motel up ahead. A long, low old place, like something out of a movie. I pulled into the lot and went into the office. Roused the night guy at the desk. Gave him the money and arranged an early morning call. Got the key and went back out to the car. I pulled it around to our cabin and we went in. It was a decent, anonymous place. Could have been anywhere in America. But it felt warm and snug with the rain pattering on the roof. And it had a big bed.

I didn’t want Roscoe to catch a chill. She ought to get out of that damp shirt. That’s what I told her. She giggled at me.

Said she hadn’t realized I had medical qualifications. I told her we’d been taught enough for basic emergencies.

“Is this a basic emergency?” she giggled.

“It will be soon,” I laughed, “if you don’t take that shirt off.”

So she did take it off. Then I was all over her. She was so beautiful, so provocative. She was ready for anything.

Afterward we lay in an exhausted tangle and talked. About who we were, about what we'd done. About who we wanted to be and what we wanted to do. She told me about her family. It was a bad-luck story stretching back generations. They sounded like decent people, farmers, people who had nearly made it but never did. People who had struggled through the hard times before chemicals, before machinery, hostages to the power of nature. Some old ancestor had nearly made it big, but he lost his best land when Mayor Teale's great-grandfather built the railroad. Then some mortgages were called in and the grudge rolled on down the years so that now she loved Margrave but hated to see Teale walking around like he owned it, which he did, and which Teales always had.

I talked to her about Joe. I told her things I'd never told anybody else. All the stuff I'd kept to myself. All about my feelings for him and why I felt driven to do something about his death. And how I was happy to do it. We went through a lot of personal stuff. Talked for a long time and fell asleep in each other's arms.

SEEMED LIKE MORE OR LESS STRAIGHTAWAY THE GUY WAS banging on the door with the early morning call. Tuesday. We got up and staggered around. The early sun was struggling against a damp dawn. Within five minutes we were back in the Bentley rolling east. The rising sun was blinding on the dewy windshield.

Slowly we woke up. We crossed the state line back into Georgia. Crossed the river in Franklin. Settled into a fast cruise through the empty farming country. The fields were hidden under a floating quilt of morning mist. It hung over the red earth like steam. The sun climbed up and set about burning it off.

Neither of us spoke. We wanted to preserve the quiet intimate cocoon as long as possible. Arriving back in Margrave was going to burst the bubble soon enough. So I guided the big stately car down the country roads and hoped. Hoped there'd be plenty more nights like that one. And quiet mornings like this one. Roscoe was curled up on the big hide chair beside me. Lost in thought. She looked very content. I hoped she was.

We blasted past Warburton again. The prison floated like an alien city on the

carpet of low mist. We passed the little copse I'd seen from the prison bus. Passed the rows of bushes invisible in the fields. Reached the junction and turned south onto the county road. Past Eno's diner and the station house and the firehouse. Down onto Main Street. We turned left at the statue of the man who took good land for the railroad. Down the slope to Roscoe's place. I parked at the curb and we got out, yawning and stretching. We grinned briefly at each other. We'd had fun. We walked hand in hand down the driveway.

Her door was open. Not wide open, but an inch or two ajar. It was ajar because the lock was smashed. Someone had used a crowbar on it. The tangle of broken lock and splinters wouldn't allow the door to close all the way. Roscoe put her hand to her mouth and gave a silent gasp. Her eyes were wide. They slid from the door to me.

I grabbed her elbow and pulled her away. We stood flat against the garage door. Crouched down. Stuck close to the walls and circled right around the house. Listened hard at every window and risked ducking our heads up for a quick glance into every room. We arrived back at the smashed front door. We were wet from kneeling on the soaked ground and from brushing against the dripping evergreens. We stood up. Looked at each other and shrugged. Pushed the door open and went inside.

We checked everywhere. There was nobody in the house. No damage. No disturbance. Nothing was stolen. The stereo was still there, the TV was still there. Roscoe checked her closet. The police revolver was still on her belt. She checked her drawers and her bureau. Nothing had been touched. Nothing had been searched. Nothing was missing. We stood back in the hallway and looked at each other. Then I noticed something that had been left behind.

The low morning sun was coming in through the open door and playing a shallow beam over the floor. I could see a line of footprints on the parquet. A lot of footprints. Several people had tracked through from the front door into the living room. The line of prints disappeared on the bold living room rug. Reappeared on the wood floor leading into the bedroom. Came back out, through the living room, back to the front door. They had been made by people coming in from the rainy night. A slight film of muddy rainwater had dried on the wood leaving faint prints. Faint, but perfect. I could see at least four people. In and out. I could see the tread patterns they had left behind. They had been wearing rubber overshoes. Like you get for the winter up north.

16

THEY HAD COME FOR US IN THE NIGHT. THEY HAD COME expecting a lot of blood. They had come with all their gear. Their rubber overshoes and their nylon bodysuits. Their knives, their hammer, their bag of nails. They had come to do a job on us, like they'd done on Morrison and his wife.

They had pushed open the forbidden door. They had made a second fatal mistake. Now they were dead men. I was going to hunt them down and smile at them as they died. Because to attack me was a second attack on Joe. He was no longer here to stand up for me. It was a second challenge. A second humiliation. This wasn't about self-defense. This was about honoring Joe's memory.

Roscoe was following the trail of footprints. Showing a classic reaction. Denial. Four men had come to butcher her in the night. She knew that, but she was ignoring it. Closing it out of her mind. Dealing with it by not dealing with it. Not a bad approach, but she'd fall off the high wire before long. Until then, she was making herself busy tracing the faint footprints on her floors.

They had searched the house for us. They had split up in the bedroom and looked around. Then they had regrouped in the bedroom and left. We looked for tracks outside on the road, but there was nothing. The smooth tarmac was wet and steaming. We went back inside. No evidence at all except the wrenched lock and the faint footprints throughout the house.

Neither of us spoke. I was burning with anger. Still watching Roscoe. Waiting for the dam to break. She'd seen the Morrison corpses. I hadn't. Finlay had sketched in the details for me. That was bad enough. He'd been there. He'd been shaken by the whole thing. Roscoe had been there too. She'd seen exactly what somebody wanted to do to the two of us.

"So who were they after?" she said at last. "Me, you, both of us?"

"They were after both of us," I said. "They figure Hubble talked to me in prison. They figure I've told you all about it. So they think you and I know whatever it was Hubble knew."

She nodded, vaguely. Then she moved away and leaned up near her back door. Looking out at her neat evergreen garden. I saw her go pale. She shuddered. The

Looking out at her neat evergreen garden. I saw her go pale. She shuddered. The defenses crashed down. She pressed herself into the corner by the door. Tried to flatten herself onto the wall. Stared into space like she was seeing all the nameless horrors. Started crying like her heart was broken. I stepped over and held her tight. Pressed her against me and held her as she cried out the fear and the tension. She cried for a long time. She felt hot and weak. My shirt was soaked with her tears.

“Thank God we weren’t here last night,” she whispered.

I knew I had to sound confident. Fear wouldn’t get her anywhere. Fear would just sap her energy. She had to face it down. And she had to face down the dark and the quiet again tonight, and every other night of her life.

“I wish we had been here,” I said. “We could have gotten a few answers.”

She looked at me like I was crazy. Shook her head.

“What would you have done?” she said. “Killed four men?”

“Only three,” I said. “The fourth would have given us the answers.”

I said it with total certainty. Total conviction. Like absolutely no other possibility existed. She looked at me. I wanted her to see this huge guy. A soldier for thirteen long years. A bare-knuckle killer. Icy blue eyes. I was giving it everything I had. I was willing myself to project all the invincibility, all the implacability, all the protection I felt. I was doing the hard, no-blink stare that used to shrivel up drunken marines two at a time. I wanted Roscoe to feel safe. After what she was giving me, I wanted to give her that. I didn’t want her to feel afraid.

“It’s going to take more than four little country boys to get me,” I said. “Who are they kidding? I’ve shit better opponents than that. They come in here again, they’ll go out in a bucket. And I’ll tell you what, Roscoe, someone even thinks about hurting you, they die before they finish thinking.”

It was working. I was convincing her. I needed her to be bright, tough, self-confident. I was willing her to pick it up. It was working. Her amazing eyes were filling with spirit.

“I mean it, Roscoe,” I said. “Stick with me and you’ll be OK.”

She looked at me again. Pushed her hair back.

“Promise?” she said.

“You got it, babe,” I said. Held my breath.

She sighed a ragged sigh. Pushed off the wall and stepped over. Tried a brave smile. The crisis was gone. She was up and running.

“Now we get the hell out of here,” I said. “We can’t stay around like sitting targets. So throw what you need into a bag.”

“OK,” she said. “Are we going to fix my door first?”

I thought about her question. It was an important tactical issue.

“No,” I said. “If we fix it, it means we’ve seen it. If we’ve seen it, it means we know we’re under attack. Better if they figure we don’t know we’re under attack. Because then they’ll figure they don’t need to be too careful next time. So we don’t react at all. We make out we haven’t been back here. We make out we haven’t seen the door. We carry on acting dumb and innocent. If they think we’re dumb and innocent, they’ll get careless. Easier to spot them coming next time.”

“OK,” she said.

She didn’t sound convinced, but she was agreeing.

“So throw what you need into a bag,” I said again.

She wasn’t happy, but she went off to gather up some stuff. The game was starting. I didn’t know exactly who the other players were. I didn’t even know exactly what the game was. But I knew how to play. Opening move was I wanted them to feel like we were always one step behind.

“Should I go to work today?” Roscoe asked.

“Got to,” I said. “Can’t do anything different from normal. And we need to speak with Finlay. He’s expecting the call from Washington. And we need what we can get on Sherman Stoller. But don’t worry, they’re not going to gun us

down in the middle of the squad room. They'll go for somewhere quiet and isolated, probably at night. Teale's the only bad guy up there, so just don't be on your own with him. Stick around Finlay or Baker or Stevenson, OK?"

She nodded. Went to get showered and dressed for work. Within twenty minutes, she came out of the bedroom in her uniform. Patted herself down. Ready for the day. She looked at me.

"Promise?" she said.

The way she said it was like a question, an apology, a reassurance all in one word. I looked back at her.

"You bet your ass," I said, and winked.

She nodded. Winked back. We were OK. We went out the front door and left it slightly open, just like we'd found it.

I HID THE BENTLEY IN HER GARAGE TO MAINTAIN THE ILLUSION that we hadn't been back to her house. Then we got in her Chevy and decided to start with breakfast up at Eno's. She took off and gunned the car up the hill. It felt loose and low after the upright old Bentley. Coming down the hill toward us was a panel van. Smart dark green, very clean, brand-new. It looked like a utility van, but on the side was a sign in fancy gold script. It said: Kliner Foundation. Same as I'd seen the gardeners using.

"What's that truck?" I said to Roscoe.

She wafted through the right at the convenience store. Up onto Main Street.

"Foundation's got a lot of trucks," she said.

"What is it they do?" I asked her.

"Big deal around here," she said. "Old man Kliner. The town sold him the land for his warehouses and part of the deal was he set up a community program. Teale runs it out of the mayor's office."

"Teale runs it?" I said. "Teale's the enemy."

“He runs it because he’s the mayor,” she said. “Not because he’s Teale. The program assigns a lot of money, spends it on public things, roads, gardens, the library, local business grants. Gives the police department a hell of a lot. Gives me a mortgage subsidy, just because I’m with the department.”

“Gives Teale a lot of power,” I said. “And what’s the story with the Kliner boy? He tried to warn me off you. Made out he had a prior claim.”

She shuddered.

“He’s a jerk,” she said. “I avoid him when I can. You should do the same.”

She drove on, looking edgy. Kept glancing around, startled. Like she felt under threat. Like someone was going to jump out in front of the car and gun us down. Her quiet life in the Georgia countryside was over. Four men in the night up at her house had shattered that.

We pulled into Eno’s gravel lot and the big Chevy rocked gently on its soft springs. I slid out of the low seat and we crunched across the gravel together to Eno’s door. It was a gray day. The night rain had chilled the air and left rags of cloud all over the sky. The siding on the diner reflected the dullness. It was cold. It felt like a new season.

We went in. The place was empty. We took a booth and the woman with glasses brought us coffee. We ordered eggs and bacon with all kinds of extras on the side. A black pickup was pulling into the lot outside. Same black pickup as I’d seen three times before. Different driver. Not the Kliner kid. This was an older guy. Maybe approaching sixty, but bone-hard and lean. Iron-gray hair shaved close to his scalp. He was dressed like a rancher in denim. Looked like he lived outdoors in the sun. Even through Eno’s window I could sense his power and feel the glare in his eyes. Roscoe nudged me and nodded at the guy.

“That’s Kliner,” she said. “The old man himself.”

He pushed in through the door and stood for a moment. Looked left, looked right, and moved in to the lunch counter. Eno came around from the kitchen. The two of them talked quietly. Heads bent together. Then Kliner stood up again. Turned to the door. Stopped and looked left, looked right. Rested his gaze on Roscoe for a second. His face was lean and flat and hard. His mouth was a line

carved into it. Then he moved his eyes onto me. I felt like I was being illuminated by a searchlight. His lips parted in a curious smile. He had amazing teeth. Long canines, canted inward, and flat square incisors. Yellow, like an old wolf. His lips closed again and he snapped his gaze away. Pulled the door and crunched over the gravel to his truck. Took off with the roar of a big motor and a spray of small stones.

I watched him go and turned to Roscoe.

“So tell me more about these Kliner people,” I said.

She still looked edgy.

“Why?” she said. “We’re fighting for our lives here and you want to talk about the Kliners?”

“I’m looking for information,” I said. “Kliner’s name crops up everywhere. He looks like an interesting guy. His son is a piece of work. And I saw his wife. She looked unhappy. I’m wondering if all that’s got anything to do with anything.”

She shrugged and shook her head.

“I don’t see how,” she said. “They’re newcomers, only been here five years. The family made a fortune in cotton processing, generations back, over in Mississippi. Invented some kind of a new chemical thing, some kind of a new formula. Chlorine or sodium something, I don’t know for sure. Made a huge fortune, but they ran into trouble with the EPA over there, you know, about five years ago, pollution or something. There were fish dying all the way down to New Orleans because of dumping into the river.”

“So what happened?” I asked her.

“Kliner moved the whole plant,” she said. “The company was his by then. He shut down the whole Mississippi operation and set it up again in Venezuela or somewhere. Then he tried to diversify. He turned up here in Georgia five years ago with this warehouse thing, consumer goods, electronics or something.”

“So they’re not local?” I said.

“Never saw them before five years ago,” she said. “Don’t know much about them. But I never heard anything bad. Kliner’s probably a tough guy, maybe

them. But I never heard anything bad. Kliner's probably a tough guy, maybe even ruthless, but he's OK as long as you're not a fish, I guess."

"So why is his wife so scared?" I said.

Roscoe made a face.

"She's not scared," she said. "She's sick. Maybe she's scared because she's sick. She's going to die, right? That's not Kliner's fault."

The waitress arrived with the food. We ate in silence. The portions were huge. The fried stuff was great. The eggs were delicious. This guy Eno had a way with eggs. I washed it all down with pints of coffee. I had the waitress running back and forth with the refill jug.

"Pluribus means nothing at all to you?" Roscoe asked. "You guys never knew anything about some Pluribus thing? When you were kids?"

I thought hard and shook my head.

"Is it Latin?" she asked.

"It's part of the United States' motto, right?" I said. "E Pluribus Unum. It means out of many, one. One nation built out of many former colonies."

"So Pluribus means many?" she said. "Did Joe know Latin?"

I shrugged.

"I've got no idea," I said. "Probably. He was a smart guy. He probably knew bits and pieces of Latin. I'm not sure."

"OK," she said. "You got no other ideas at all why Joe was down here?"

"Money, maybe," I said. "That's all I can think of. Joe worked for the Treasury Department, as far as I know. Hubble worked for a bank. Their only thing in common would be money. Maybe we'll find out from Washington. If we don't, we're going to have to start from the beginning."

"OK," she said. "You need anything?"

"I'll need that arrest report from Florida," I said.

"I'll need that arrest report from Florida," I said.

"For Sherman Stoller?" she said. "That's two years old."

"Got to start somewhere," I said.

"OK, I'll ask for it," she shrugged. "I'll call Florida. Anything else?"

"I need a gun," I said.

She didn't reply. I dropped a twenty on the laminate tabletop and we slid out and stood up. Walked out to the unmarked car.

"I need a gun," I said again. "This is a big deal, right? So I'll need a weapon. I can't just go to the store and buy one. No ID, no address."

"OK," she said. "I'll get you one."

"I've got no permit," I said. "You'll have to do it on the quiet, OK?"

She nodded.

"That's OK," she said. "There's one nobody else knows about."

WE KISSED A LONG HARD KISS IN THE STATION HOUSE LOT. Then we got out of the car and went in through the heavy glass door. More or less bumped into Finlay rounding the reception counter on his way out.

"Got to go back to the morgue," he said. "You guys come with me, OK? We need to talk. Lot to talk about."

So we went back out into the dull morning. Got back into Roscoe's Chevy. Same system as before. She drove. I sat across the back. Finlay sat in the front passenger seat, twisted around so he could look at the both of us at once. Roscoe started up and headed south.

"Long call from the Treasury Department," Finlay said. "Must have been twenty minutes, maybe a half hour. I was nervous about Teale."

"What did they say?" I asked him.

“Nothing,” he said. “They took a half hour to tell me nothing.”

“Nothing?” I said. “What the hell does that mean?”

“They wouldn’t tell me anything,” he said. “They want a shitload of formal authorization from Teale before they say word one.”

“They confirmed Joe worked there, right?” I said.

“Sure, they went that far,” he said. “He came from Military Intelligence ten years ago. They headhunted him. Recruited him specially.”

“What for?” I asked him.

Finlay just shrugged.

“They wouldn’t tell me,” he said. “He started some new project exactly a year ago, but the whole thing is a total secret. He was some kind of a very big deal up there, Reacher, that’s for sure. You should have heard the way they were all talking about him. Like talking about God.”

I went quiet for a while. I had known nothing about Joe. Nothing at all.

“So that’s it?” I said. “Is that all you got?”

“No,” he said. “I kept pushing until I got a woman called Molly Beth Gordon. You ever heard that name?”

“No,” I said. “Should I have?”

“Sounds like she was very close to Joe,” Finlay said. “Sounds like they may have had a thing going. She was very upset. Floods of tears.”

“So what did she tell you?” I asked him.

“Nothing,” Finlay said. “Not authorized. But she promised to tell you what she can. She said she’ll step out of line for you, because you’re Joe’s little brother.”

I nodded.

“OK,” I said. “That’s better. When do I need to be?”

"OK," I said. "That's better. When do I speak to her?"

"Call her about one thirty," he said. "Lunch break, when her office will be empty. She's taking a big risk, but she'll talk to you. That's what she said."

"OK," I said again. "She say anything else?"

"She let one little thing slip," Finlay said. "Joe had a big debrief meeting scheduled. For next Monday morning."

"Monday?" I said. "As in the day after Sunday?"

"Correct," he said. "Looks like Hubble was right. Something is due to happen on or before Sunday. Whatever the hell he was doing, it looks like Joe knew he would have won or lost by then. But she wouldn't say anything more. She was out of line talking to me at all and she sounded like she was being overheard. So call her, but don't pin your hopes on her, Reacher. She may not know anything. Left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing up there. Big-time secrecy, right?"

"Bureaucracy," I said. "Who the hell needs it? OK, we have to assume we're on our own here. At least for a while. We're going to need Picard again."

Finlay nodded.

"He'll do what he can," he said. "He called me last night. The Hubbles are secure. Right now, he's sitting on it, but he'll stand up for us if we need him."

"He should start tracing Joe," I said. "Joe must have used a car. Probably flew down from Washington, into Atlanta, got a hotel room, rented a car, right? We should look for the car. He must have driven it down here Thursday night. It must have been dumped somewhere in the area. It might lead us back to the hotel. Maybe there would be something in Joe's hotel room. Files, maybe."

"Picard can't do that," Finlay said. "FBI isn't equipped to go looking for abandoned rental cars. And we can't do it ourselves, not with Teale around."

I shrugged.

"We'll have to," I said. "No other way. You can sell Teale some story. You can double bluff him. Tell him you figure the escaped con who he says did the

Morrison thing must have been in a rental car. Tell him you need to check it out. He can't say no to that, or else he's undermining his own cover story, right?"

"OK," Finlay said. "I'll try it. Might work, I guess."

"Joe must have had phone numbers," I said. "The number you found in his shoe was torn off a computer printout, right? So where's the rest of the printout? I bet it's in his hotel room, just sitting there, covered with phone numbers, with Hubble's number torn off the top. So you find the car, then you twist Picard's arm to trace the hotel through the rental company, OK?"

"OK," he said. "I'll do my best."

IN YELLOW SPRINGS WE SLIPPED INTO THE HOSPITAL ENTRANCE lane and slowed over the speed bumps. Nosed around to the lot in back. Parked near the morgue door. I didn't want to go inside. Joe was still in there. I started to think vaguely about funeral arrangements. I'd never had to do it before. The Marine Corps handled my father's. Joe arranged my mother's.

But I got out of the car with the two of them and we walked through the chill air to the door. Found our way back to the shabby office. The same doctor was at the desk. Still in a white coat. Still looking tired. He waved us in and we sat down. I took one of the stools. I didn't want to sit next to the fax machine again. The doctor looked at all of us in turn. We looked back at him.

"What have you got for us?" Finlay said.

The tired man at the desk prepared to answer. Like preparing for a lecture. He picked up three files from his left and dropped them on his blotter. Opened the top one. Pulled out the second one and opened that, too.

"Morrison," he said. "Mr. and Mrs."

He glanced around the three of us again. Finlay nodded to him.

"Tortured and killed," the pathologist said. "The sequence is pretty clear. The woman was restrained. Two men, I'd say, one on each arm, gripping and twisting. Heavy bruising on the forearms and the upper arms, some ligament damage from twisting the arms up her back. Obviously the bruising continued to

damage from twisting the arms up her back. Obviously the bruising continued to develop from the time she was first seized until the time she died. The bruising stops developing when the circulation stops, you understand?"

We nodded. We understood.

"I'd put it at about ten minutes," he said. "Ten minutes, beginning to end. So the woman was being held. The man was being nailed to the wall. I'd guess both were naked by then. They were in nightwear before the attack, right?"

"Robes," Finlay said. "They were having breakfast."

"OK, the robes came off early on," the doctor said. "The man was nailed to the wall, technically to the floor also, through the feet. His genital area was attacked. The scrotum was severed. Postmortem evidence suggests that the woman was persuaded to swallow the amputated testicles."

The office was silent. Silent as a tomb. Roscoe looked at me. Stared at me for a while. Then she looked back at the doctor.

"I found them in her stomach," the doctor said.

Roscoe was as white as the guy's coat. I thought she was going to pitch forward off her stool. She closed her eyes and hung on. She was hearing about what somebody had planned for us last night.

"And?" Finlay said.

"The woman was mutilated," the doctor said. "Breasts severed, genital area attacked, throat cut. Then the man's throat was cut. That was the last wound inflicted. You could see the arterial spray from his neck overlaying all the other bloodstains in the room."

There was dead silence in the room. Lasted quite a while.

"Weapons?" I asked.

The guy at the desk swiveled his tired gaze toward me.

"Something sharp, obviously," he said. A slight grin. "Straight, maybe five inches long."

“A razor?” I said.

“No,” he said. “Certainly something as sharp as a razor, but rigid, not folding, and double-edged.”

“Why?” I said.

“There’s evidence it was used back and forth,” the guy said. He swished his hand back and forth in a tiny arc. “Like this. On the woman’s breasts. Cutting both ways. Like filleting a salmon.”

I nodded. Roscoe and Finlay were silent.

“What about the other guy?” I said. “Stoller?”

The pathologist pushed the two Morrison files to one side and opened up the third. Glanced through it and looked across at me. The third file was thicker than the first two.

“His name was Stoller?” he said. “We’ve got him down as John Doe.”

Roscoe looked up.

“We sent you a fax,” she said. “Yesterday morning. We traced his prints.”

The pathologist rooted around on the messy desk. Found a curled-up fax. Read it and nodded. Crossed out “John Doe” on the folder and wrote in “Sherman Stoller.” Gave us his little grin again.

“I’ve had him since Sunday,” he said. “Been able to do a more thorough job, you know? A bit chewed up by the rats, but not pulped like the first guy, and altogether a lot less mess than the Morrisons.”

“So what can you tell us?” I said.

“We’ve talked about the bullets, right?” he said. “Nothing more to add about the exact cause of death.”

“So what else do you know?” I asked him.

The file was too thick for just the shooting and running and bleeding to death

bits. This guy clearly had more to tell us. I saw him put his fingers on the pages and press lightly. Like he was trying to get vibrations or read the file in Braille.

“He was a truck driver,” he said.

“He was?” I said.

“I think so,” the guy said. Sounded confident.

Finlay looked up. He was interested. He loved the process of deduction. It fascinated him. Like when I’d scored with those long shots about Harvard, his divorce, quitting smoking.

“Go on,” he said.

“OK, briefly,” the pathologist said. “I found certain persuasive factors. A sedentary job, because his musculature was slack, his posture poor, flabby buttocks. Slightly rough hands, a fair bit of old diesel fuel ingrained in the skin. Also traces of old diesel fuel on the soles of his shoes. Internally, a poor diet, high in fat, plus a bit too much hydrogen sulfide in the blood gases and the tissues. This guy spent his life on the road, sniffing other people’s catalytic converters. I make him a truck driver, because of the diesel fuel.”

Finlay nodded. I nodded. Stoller had come in with no ID, no history, nothing but his watch. This guy was pretty good. He watched us nod our approval. Looked pleased. Looked like he had more to say.

“But he’s been out of work for a while,” he said.

“Why?” Finlay asked him.

“Because all that evidence is old,” the doctor said. “Looks to me like he was driving a lot for a long period, but then he stopped. I think he’s done very little driving for nine months, maybe a year. So I make him a truck driver, but an unemployed truck driver.”

“OK, doc, good work,” Finlay said. “You got copies of all that for us?”

The doctor slid a large envelope across the desk. Finlay stepped over and picked it up. Then we all stood up. I wanted to get out. I didn’t want to go back to the cold store again. I didn’t want to see any more damage. Roscoe and Finlay

sensed it and nodded. We hustled out like we were ten minutes late for something. The guy at the desk let us go. He'd seen lots of people rushing out of his office like they were ten minutes late for something.

We got into Roscoe's car. Finlay opened the big envelope and pulled out the stuff on Sherman Stoller. Folded it into his pocket.

"That's ours, for the time being," he said. "It might get us somewhere."

"I'll get the arrest report from Florida," Roscoe said. "And we'll find an address for him somewhere. Got to be a lot of paperwork on a trucker, right? Union, medical, licenses. Should be easy enough to do."

We rode the rest of the way back to Margrave in silence. The station house was deserted, apart from the desk guy. Lunch break in Margrave, lunch break in Washington, D.C. Same time zone. Finlay handed me a scrap of paper from his pocket and stood guard on the door to the rosewood office. I went inside to call the woman who may have been my brother's lover.

THE NUMBER FINLAY HAD HANDED ME REACHED MOLLY Beth Gordon's private line. She answered on the first ring. I gave her my name. It made her cry.

"You sound so much like Joe," she said.

I didn't reply. I didn't want to get into a whole lot of reminiscing. Neither should she, not if she was stepping out of line and was in danger of being overheard. She should just tell me what she had to tell me and get off the line.

"So what was Joe doing down here?" I asked her.

I heard her sniffing, and then her voice came back clear.

"He was running an investigation," she said. "Into what, I don't know specifically."

"But what sort of a thing?" I asked her. "What was his job?"

"Don't you know?" she said

"Don't you know?" she said.

"No," I said. "We found it very hard to keep in touch, I'm afraid. You'll have to start from the beginning for me."

There was a long pause on the line.

"OK," she said. "I shouldn't tell you this. Not without clearance. But I will. It was counterfeiting. He ran the Treasury's anticounterfeiting operation."

"Counterfeiting?" I said. "Counterfeit money?"

"Yes," she said. "He was head of the department. Ran the whole show. He was an amazing guy, Jack."

"But why was he down here in Georgia?" I asked her.

"I don't know," she said. "I really don't. What I aim to do is find out for you. I can copy his files. I know his computer password."

There was another pause. Now I knew something about Molly Beth Gordon. I'd spent a lot of time on computer passwords. Any military cop does. I'd studied the pyschology. Most users make bad choices. A lot of them write the damn word on a Post-it note and stick it on the monitor case. The ones who are too smart to do that use their spouse's name, or their dog's name, or their favorite car or ball player, or the name of the island where they took their honeymoon or balled their secretary. The ones who think they're really smart use figures, not words, but they choose their birthday or their wedding anniversary or something pretty obvious. If you can find something out about the user, you've normally got a better than even chance of figuring their password.

But that would never work with Joe. He was a professional. He'd spent important years in Military Intelligence. His password would be a random mixture of numbers, letters, punctuation marks, upper and lower case. His password would be unbreakable. If Molly Beth Gordon knew what it was, Joe must have told her. No other way. He had really trusted her. He had been really close to her. So I put some tenderness into my voice.

"Molly, that would be great," I said. "I really need that information."

"I know you do," she said. "I hope to get it tomorrow. I'll call you again, soon as

I can. Soon as I know something."

"Is there counterfeiting going on down here?" I asked her. "Is that what this could be all about?"

"No," she said. "It doesn't happen like that. Not inside the States. All that stuff about little guys with green eye-shades down in secret cellars printing dollar bills is all nonsense. Just doesn't happen. Joe stopped it. Your brother was a genius, Jack. He set up procedures years ago for the special paper sales and the inks, so if somebody starts up, he gets nailed within days. One hundred percent foolproof. Printing money in the States just doesn't happen anymore. Joe made sure of that. It all happens abroad. Any fakes we get here are shipped in. That's what Joe spent his time chasing. International stuff. Why he was in Georgia, I don't know. I really don't. But I'll find out tomorrow, I promise you that."

I gave her the station house number and told her to speak to nobody except me or Roscoe or Finlay. Then she hung up in a hurry like somebody had just walked in on her. I sat for a moment and tried to imagine what she looked like.

TEALE WAS BACK IN THE STATION HOUSE. AND OLD MAN Kliner was inside with him. They were over by the reception counter, heads together. Kliner was talking to Teale like I'd seen him talking to Eno at the diner. Foundation business, maybe. Roscoe and Finlay were standing together by the cells. I walked over to them. Stood between them and talked low.

"Counterfeiting," I said. "This is about counterfeit money. Joe was running the Treasury Department's defense for them. You know anything about that sort of a thing down here? Either of you?"

They both shrugged and shook their heads. I heard the glass door suck open. Looked up. Kliner was on his way out. Teale was starting in toward us.

"I'm out of here," I said.

I brushed past Teale and headed for the door. Kliner was standing in the lot, next to the black pickup. Waiting for me. He smiled. Wolf's teeth showing.

"Sorry for your loss," he said.

His voice had a quiet, cultured tone. Educated. A slight hiss on the sibilants. Not the voice to go with his sunbaked appearance.

“You upset my son,” he said.

He looked at me. Something burning in his eyes. I shrugged.

“The kid upset me first,” I said.

“How?” Kliner asked. Sharply.

“He lived and breathed?” I said.

I moved on across the lot. Kliner slid into the black pickup. Fired it up and nosed out. He turned north. I turned south. Started the walk down to Roscoe’s place. It was a half mile through the new fall chill. Ten minutes at a brisk pace. I got the Bentley out of the garage. Drove it back up the slope to town. Made the right onto Main Street and cruised along. I was peering left and right in under the smart striped awnings, looking for the clothes store. Found it three doors north of the barbershop. Left the Bentley on the street and went in. Paid out some of Charlie Hubble’s expenses cash to a sullen middle-aged guy for a pair of pants, a shirt and a jacket. A light fawn color, pressed cotton, as near to formal as I was prepared to go. No tie. I put it all on in the changing cubicle in the back of the store. Bagged up the old stuff and threw it in the Bentley’s trunk as I passed.

I walked the three doors south to the barbershop. The younger of the two old guys was on his way out of the door. He stopped and put his hand on my arm.

“What’s your name, son?” he asked me.

No reason not to tell him. Not that I could see.

“Jack Reacher,” I said.

“You got any Hispanic friends in town?”

“No,” I said.

“Well, you got some now,” he said. “Two guys, looking all over for you.”

I looked at him. He scanned the street.

“Who were they?” I asked him.

“Never saw them before,” the old guy said. “Little guys, brown car, fancy shirts. Been all over, asking for Jack Reacher. We told them we never heard of no Jack Reacher.”

“When was this?” I said.

“This morning,” he said. “After breakfast.”

I nodded.

“OK,” I said. “Thanks.”

The guy held the door open for me.

“Go right in,” he said. “My partner will take care of you. But he’s a bit skittish this morning. Getting old.”

“Thanks,” I said again. “See you around.”

“Sure hope so, son,” he said.

He strolled off down Main Street and I went inside his shop. The older guy was in there. The gnarled old man whose sister had sung with Blind Blake. No other customers. I nodded to the old guy and sat down in his chair.

“Good morning, my friend,” he said.

“You remember me?” I said.

“Sure do,” he said. “You were our last customer. Nobody in between to muddle me up.”

I asked him for a shave and he set about whipping up the lather.

“I was your last customer?” I said. “That was Sunday. Today is Tuesday. Business always that bad?”

The old guy paused and gestured with the razor.

“Been that bad for years,” he said. “Old Mayor Teale won’t come in here, and what the old mayor won’t do, nobody else white will do neither. Except old Mr. Gray from the station house, came in here regular as clockwork three, four times a week, until he went and hung himself, God rest his soul. You’re the first white face in here since last February, yes sir, that’s for sure.”

“Why won’t Teale come in here?” I asked him.

“Man’s got a problem,” the old guy said. “I figure he don’t like to sit all swathed up in the towel while there’s a black man standing next to him with a razor. Maybe worried something bad might happen to him.”

“Might something bad happen to him?” I said.

He laughed a short laugh.

“I figure there’s a serious risk,” he said. “Asshole.”

“So you got enough black customers to make a living?” I asked him.

He put the towel around my shoulders and started brushing on the lather.

“Man, we don’t need customers to make a living,” he said.

“You don’t?” I said. “Why not?”

“We got the community money,” he said.

“You do?” I said. “What’s that?”

“Thousand dollars,” he said.

“Who gives you that?” I asked him.

He started scraping my chin. His hand was shaking like old people do.

“Kliner Foundation,” he whispered. “The community program. It’s a business grant. All the merchants get it. Been getting it five years.”

I nodded.

“That’s good.” I said. “But why would you not have it? It’s better

¨That´s good,´´ I said. ¨But a thousand bucks a year won´t keep you. It´s better than a poke in the eye, but you need customers too, right?”

I was just making conversation, like you do with barbers. But it set the old guy off. He was shaking and cackling. Had a whole lot of trouble finishing the shave. I was staring into the mirror. After last night, it would be a hell of a thing to get my throat cut by accident.

“Man, I shouldn’t tell you about it,” he whispered. “But seeing as you’re a friend of my sister’s, I’m going to tell you a big secret.”

He was getting confused. I wasn’t a friend of his sister’s. Didn’t even know her. He’d told me about her, was all. He was standing there with the razor. We were looking at each other in the mirror. Like with Finlay in the coffee shop.

“It’s not a thousand dollars a year,” he whispered. Then he bent close to my ear. “It’s a thousand dollars a week.”

He started stomping around, chuckling like a demon. He filled the sink and dabbed off the spare lather. Patted my face down with a hot wet cloth. Then he whipped the towel off my shoulders like a conjurer doing a trick.

“That’s why we don’t need no customers,” he cackled.

I paid him and got out. The guy was crazy.

“Say hello to my sister,” he called after me.

17

THE TRIP TO ATLANTA WAS THE BEST PART OF FIFTY MILES. Took nearly an hour. The highway swept me right into the city. I headed for the tallest buildings. Soon as I started to see marble foyers I dumped the car and walked to the nearest corner and asked a cop for the commercial district.

He gave me a half mile walk after which I found one bank after another. Sunrise International had its own building. It was a big glass tower set back behind a piazza with a fountain. That part looked like Milan, but the entranceway at the base of the tower was clad in heavy stone, trying to look like Frankfurt or London. Trying to look like a big heavy-duty bank. Foyer full of dark carpet and leather. Receptionist behind a mahogany counter. Could have been a quiet hotel.

I asked for Paul Hubble's office and the receptionist flipped through a directory. She said she was sorry, but she was new in the job and she didn't recognize me, so would I wait while she got clearance for my visit? She dialed a number and started a low conversation. Then she covered the phone with her hand.

"May I say what it's in connection with?"

"I'm a friend," I said.

She resumed the phone call and then directed me to an elevator. I had to go to reception on the seventeenth floor. I got in the elevator and tapped the button. Stood there while it carried me up.

The seventeenth floor looked even more like a gentleman's club than the entrance foyer had. It was carpeted and paneled and dim. Full of glowing antiques and old pictures. As I waded across the thick pile a door opened and a suit stepped out to meet me. Shook my hand and fussed me back into a little anteroom. He introduced himself as some sort of a manager and we sat down.

"So how may I help you?" he asked.

"I'm looking for Paul Hubble," I said.

"May I know why?"

“He’s an old friend,” I said. “I remembered him saying he works here, so I thought I’d look him up while I’m passing through.”

The guy in the suit nodded. Dropped his gaze.

“Thing is, you see,” he said, “Mr. Hubble doesn’t work here anymore. We had to let him go, I’m afraid, about eighteen months ago.”

I just nodded blankly. Then I sat there in the clubby little office and looked at the guy in the suit and waited. A bit of silence might set him talking. If I asked him questions straight out, he might clam up. He might go all confidential, like lawyers do. But I could see he was a chatty type of a guy. A lot of those managers are. They love to impress the hell out of you, given the chance. So I sat tight and waited. Then the guy started apologizing to me because I was Hubble’s friend.

“No fault of his own, you understand,” he said. “He did an excellent job, but it was in a field we moved out of. A strategic business decision, very unfortunate for the people concerned, but there you are.”

I nodded at him like I understood.

“I haven’t been in touch for a long time,” I said. “I didn’t know. I didn’t even really know what he did here.”

I smiled at him. Tried to look amiable and ignorant. Didn’t take much effort, in a bank. I gave him my best receptive look. Guaranteed to set a chatty guy talking. It had worked for me plenty of times before.

“He was part of our retail operation,” the guy said. “We closed it down.”

I looked inquiringly at him.

“Retail?” I said.

“Over-the-counter banking,” he said. “You know, cash, checks, loans, personal customers.”

“And you closed that down?” I said. “Why?”

“Too expensive,” he said. “Big overhead, small margin. It had to go.”

“And Hubble was a part of that?” I asked him.

He nodded.

“Mr. Hubble was our currency manager,” he said. “It was an important position. He was very good.”

“So what was his exact role?” I asked him.

The guy didn’t know how to explain it. Didn’t know where to start. He made a couple of attempts and gave them up.

“Do you understand cash?” he said.

“I’ve got some,” I said. “I don’t know if I understand it, exactly.”

He got to his feet and gave me a fussy gesture. Wanted me to join him at the window. We peered out together at the people on the street, seventeen floors down. He pointed at a guy in a suit, hurrying along the sidewalk.

“Take that gentleman,” he said. “Let’s make a few guesses, shall we? Probably lives in the outer suburbs, maybe has a vacation cabin somewhere, two big mortgages, two cars, half a dozen mutual funds, IRA provision, some blue chip stock, college plans, five or six credit cards, store cards, charge cards. Net worth about a half million, shall we say?”

“OK,” I said.

“But how much cash does he have?” the guy asked me.

“No idea,” I said.

“Probably about fifty dollars,” he said. “About fifty dollars in a leather billfold which cost him a hundred and fifty dollars.”

I looked at him. I wasn’t following his drift. The guy changed gear. Became very patient with me.

“The U.S. economy is huge,” he said. “Net assets and net liabilities are incalculably large. Trillions of dollars. But almost none of it is actually

represented by cash. That gentleman had a net worth of a half million dollars, but only fifty of it was in actual cash. All the rest of it is on paper or in computers. The fact is, there isn't much actual cash around. There's only about a hundred and thirty billion actual cash dollars inside the whole U.S."

I shrugged at him again.

"Sounds like enough to me," I said.

The guy looked at me severely.

"But how many people are there?" he asked me. "Nearly three hundred million. That's only about four hundred and fifty actual cash dollars per head of population. That's the problem a retail bank has to deal with, day by day. Four hundred and fifty dollars is a very modest cash withdrawal, but if everybody chose to make such a withdrawal, the nation's banks would run out of cash in the blink of an eye."

He stopped and looked at me. I nodded.

"OK," I said. "I see that."

"And most of that cash isn't in banks," he said. "It's in Vegas or at the racetrack. It's concentrated in what we call cash-intensive areas of the economy. So a good currency manager, and Mr. Hubble was one of the very best, has a constant battle just to keep enough paper dollars on hand in our part of the system. He has to reach out and find them. He has to know where to locate them. He has to sniff them out. It's not easy. In the end, it was one of the factors which made retail so expensive for us. One of the reasons why we pulled out. We kept it going as long as we could, but we had to close the operation eventually. We had to let Mr. Hubble go. We were very sorry about it."

"Any idea where he's working now?" I said.

He shook his head.

"I'm afraid not," he said.

"Must be working somewhere, right?" I said.

The guy shook his head again.

The guy shook his head again.

“Professionally, he’s dropped out of sight,” he said. “He’s not working in banking, I’m sure of that. His institute membership lapsed immediately, and we’ve never had an inquiry for a recommendation. I’m sorry, but I can’t help you. If he was working anywhere in banking, I’d know it, I can assure you of that. He must be in something else now.”

I shrugged. Hubble’s trail was stone cold. And the discussion with this guy was over. His body language indicated it. He was shifting forward, ready to get up and get on. I stood up with him. Thanked him for his time. Shook his hand. Stepped through the antique gloom to the elevator. Hit the button for the street and walked out into the dull gray weather.

My assumptions had been all wrong. I had seen Hubble as a banker, doing a straight job. Maybe turning a blind eye to some peripheral con, maybe with half a finger in some dirty pie. Maybe signing off on a few bogus figures. With his arm twisted way up his back. Involved, useful, tainted, but somehow not central. But he hadn’t been a banker. Not for a year and a half. He had been a criminal. Full time. Right inside the scam. Right at the center. Not peripheral at all.

I DROVE STRAIGHT BACK TO THE MARGRAVE STATION house. Parked up and went looking for Roscoe. Teale was stalking around in the open area, but the desk guy winked and nodded me back to a file room. Roscoe was in there. She looked weary. She had an armful of old files. She smiled.

“Hello, Reacher,” she said. “Come to take me away from all this?”

“What’s new?” I said.

She dumped the stack of paper onto a cabinet top. Dusted herself off and flicked her hair back. Glanced at the door.

“Couple of things,” she said. “Teale’s got a Foundation board meeting in ten minutes. I’m getting the fax from Florida soon as he’s out of here. And we’re due a call from the state police about abandoned cars.”

“Where’s the gun you’ve got for me?” I asked her.

She paused. Bit her lip. She was remembering why I needed one.

“It’s in a box,” she said. “In my desk. We’ll have to wait until Teale is gone. And don’t open it here, OK? Nobody knows about it.”

We stepped out of the file room and walked over toward the rosewood office. The squad room was quiet. The two backup guys from Friday were paging through computer records. Neat stacks of files were everywhere. The bogus hunt was on for the chief’s killer. I saw a big new bulletin board on the wall. It was marked Morrison. It was empty. Not much progress was being made.

We waited in the rosewood office with Finlay. Five minutes. Ten. Then we heard a knock and Baker ducked his head around the door. He grinned in at us. I saw his gold tooth again.

“Teale’s gone,” he said.

We went out into the open area. Roscoe turned on the fax machine and picked up the phone to call Florida. Finlay dialed the state police for news on abandoned rental cars. I sat down at the desk next to Roscoe’s and called Charlie Hubble. I dialed the mobile number that Joe had printed out and hidden in his shoe. I got no answer. Just an electronic sound and a recorded voice telling me the phone I was calling was switched off.

I looked across at Roscoe.

“She’s got the damn mobile switched off,” I said.

Roscoe shrugged and moved over to the fax machine. Finlay was still talking to the state police. I saw Baker hanging around on the fringe of the triangle the three of us were making. I got up and went to join Roscoe.

“Does Baker want in on this?” I asked her.

“He seems to,” she said. “Finlay’s got him acting as a kind of a lookout. Should we get him involved?”

I thought about it for a second, but shook my head.

“No,” I said. “Smaller the better, a thing like this, right?”

I sat down again at the desk I was borrowing and tried the mobile number again. Same result. Same patient electronic voice telling me it was switched off.

“Damn,” I said to myself. “Can you believe that?”

I needed to know where Hubble had spent his time for the last year and a half. Charlie might have given me some idea. The time he left home in the morning, the time he got home at night, toll receipts, restaurant bills, things like that. And she might have remembered something about Sunday or something about Pluribus. It was possible she might have come up with something useful. And I needed something useful. I needed it very badly. And she’d switched the damn phone off.

“Reacher?” Roscoe said. “I got the stuff on Sherman Stoller.”

She was holding a couple of fax pages. Densely typed.

“Great,” I said. “Let’s take a look.”

Finlay got off the phone and stepped over.

“State guys are calling back,” he said. “They may have something for us.”

“Great,” I said again. “Maybe we’re getting somewhere.”

We all went back into the rosewood office. Spread the Sherman Stoller stuff out on the desk and bent over it together. It was an arrest report from the police department in Jacksonville, Florida.

“Blind Blake was born in Jacksonville,” I said. “Did you know that?”

“Who’s Blind Blake?” Roscoe asked.

“Singer,” Finlay said.

“Guitar player, Finlay,” I said.

Sherman Stoller had been flagged down by a sector car for exceeding the speed limit on the river bridge between Jacksonville and Jacksonville Beach at a quarter to midnight on a September night, two years ago. He had been driving a small panel truck eleven miles an hour too fast. He had become extremely

agitated and abusive toward the sector car crew. This had caused them to arrest him for suspected DUI. He had been printed and photographed at Jacksonville Central and both he and his vehicle had been searched. He had given an Atlanta address and stated his occupation as truck driver.

The search of his person produced a negative result. His truck was searched by hand and with dogs and produced a negative result. The truck contained nothing but a cargo of twenty new air conditioners boxed for export from Jacksonville Beach. The boxes were sealed and marked with the manufacturer's logo, and each box was marked with a serial number.

After being Mirandized, Stoller had made one phone call. Within twenty minutes of the call, a lawyer named Perez from the respected Jacksonville firm of Zacarias Perez was in attendance, and within a further ten minutes Stoller had been released. From being flagged down to walking out with the lawyer, fifty-five minutes had elapsed.

"Interesting," Finlay said. "The guy's three hundred miles from home, it's midnight, and he gets lawyered up within twenty minutes? With a partner from a respected firm? Stoller was some kind of a truck driver, that's for sure."

"You recognize his address?" I asked Roscoe.

She shook her head.

"Not really," she said. "But I could find it."

The door cracked open and Baker stuck his head in again.

"State police on the line," he said. "Sounds like they got a car for you."

Finlay checked his watch. Decided there was time before Teale got back.

"OK," he said. "Punch it through here, Baker."

Finlay picked up the phone on the big desk and listened. Scribbled some notes and grunted a thank-you. Hung the phone up and got out of his chair.

"OK," he said. "Let's go take a look."

We all three filed out quickly. We needed to be well clear before Teale got back

and started asking questions. Baker watched us go. Called out after us.

“What should I tell Teale?” he said.

“Tell him we traced the car,” Finlay said. “The one the crazy ex-con used to get down to Morrison’s place. Tell him we’re making some real progress, OK?”

THIS TIME FINLAY DROVE. HE WAS USING AN UNMARKED Chevy, identical to Roscoe’s issue. He bounced it out of the lot and turned south. Accelerated through the little town. The first few miles I recognized as the route down toward Yellow Springs, but then we swung off onto a track which struck out due east. It led out toward the highway and ended up in a kind of maintenance area, right below the roadway. There were piles of asphalt and tar barrels lying around. And a car. It had been rolled off the highway and it was lying on its roof. And it was burned out.

“They noticed it Friday morning,” Finlay said. “Wasn’t here Thursday, they’re sure about that. It could have been Joe’s.”

We looked it over very carefully. Wasn’t much left to see. It was totally burned out. Everything that wasn’t steel had gone. We couldn’t even tell what make it had been. By the shape, Finlay thought it had been a General Motors product, but we couldn’t tell which division. It had been a midsize sedan, and once the plastic trim has gone, you can’t tell a Buick from a Chevy from a Pontiac.

I got Finlay to support the front fender and I crawled under the upside-down hood. Looked for the number they stamp on the scuttle. I had to scrape off some scorched flakes, but I found the little aluminum strip and got most of the number. Crawled out again and recited it to Roscoe. She wrote it down.

“So what do you think?” Finlay asked.

“Could be the one,” I said. “Say he rented it Thursday evening up at the airport in Atlanta, full tank of gas. Drove it to the warehouses at the Margrave cloverleaf, then somebody drove it on down here afterward. Couple of gallons gone, maybe two and a half. Plenty left to burn.”

Finlay nodded.

“Makes sense,” he said. “But they’d have to be local guys. This is a great spot to dump a car, right? Pull onto the shoulder up there, wheels in the dirt, push the car off the edge, scramble down and torch it, then jump in with your buddy who’s already down here in his own car waiting for you, and you’re away. But only if you knew about this little maintenance track. And only a local guy would know about this little maintenance track, right?”

We left the wreck there. Drove back up to the station house. The desk sergeant was waiting for Finlay.

“Teale wants you in the office,” he said.

Finlay grunted and was heading back there, but I caught his arm.

“Keep him talking a while,” I said. “Give Roscoe a chance to phone in that number from the car.”

He nodded and carried on to the back. Roscoe and I headed over to her desk. She picked up the phone, but I stopped her.

“Give me the gun,” I whispered. “Before Teale is through with Finlay.”

She nodded and glanced around the room. Sat down and unclipped the keys from her belt. Unlocked her desk and rolled open a deep drawer. Nodded down to a shallow cardboard box. I picked it out. It was an office storage box, about two inches deep, for holding papers. The cardboard was printed with elaborate woodgrain. Someone had written a name across the top. Gray. I tucked it under my arm and nodded to Roscoe. She rolled the drawer shut and locked it again.

“Thanks,” I said. “Now make those calls, OK?”

I walked down to the entrance and levered the heavy glass door open with my back. Carried the box over to the Bentley. I set the box on the roof of the car and unlocked the door. Dumped the box on the passenger seat and got in. Pulled the box over onto my lap. Saw a brown sedan slowing up on the road about a hundred yards to the north.

Two Hispanic men in it. The same car I’d seen outside Charlie Hubble’s place the day before. The same guys. No doubt about that. Their car came to a stop about seventy-five yards from the station house. I saw it settle, like the engine had been turned off. Neither of the guys got out. They just sat there, seventy-five

had been turned off. Neither of the guys got out. They just sat there, seventy-five yards away, watching the station house parking lot. Seemed to me they were looking straight at the Bentley. Seemed to me my new friends had found me. They'd looked all morning. Now they didn't have to look anymore. They didn't move. Just sat there, watching. I watched them back for more than five minutes. They weren't going to get out. I could see that. They were settled there. So I turned my attention back to the box.

It was empty apart from a box of bullets and a gun. A hell of a weapon. It was a Desert Eagle automatic. I'd used one before. They come from Israel. We used to get them in exchange for all kinds of stuff we sent over there. I picked it up. Very heavy, fourteen-inch barrel, more than a foot and a half long, front to back. I clicked out the magazine. This was the eight-shot .44 version. Takes eight .44 Magnum shells. Not what you would call a subtle weapon. The bullet weighs about twice as much as the .38 in a police revolver. It leaves the barrel going way faster than the speed of sound. It hits the target with more force than anything this side of a train wreck. Not subtle at all. Ammunition is a problem. You've got a choice. If you load up with a hard-nose bullet, it goes right through the guy you're shooting and probably right on through some other guy a hundred yards away. So you use a soft-nose bullet and it blows a hole out of your guy about the size of a garbage can. Your choice.

The bullets in the box were all soft-nose. OK with me. I checked the weapon over. Brutal, but in fine condition. Everything worked. The grip was engraved with a name. Gray. Same as the file box. The dead detective, the guy before Finlay. Hanged himself last February. Must have been a gun collector. This wasn't his service piece. No police department in the world would authorize the use of a cannon like this on the job. Altogether too heavy.

I loaded the dead detective's big handgun with eight of his shells. Put the spares back in the box and left the box on the floor of the car. Cocked the gun and clicked the safety catch on. Cocked and locked, we used to call it. Saves you a split-second before your first shot. Saves your life, maybe. I put the gun in the Bentley's walnut glove compartment. It was a tight fit.

Then I sat for a moment and watched the two guys in their car. They were still watching me. We looked at each other from seventy-five yards away. They were relaxed and comfortable. But they were watching me. I got out of the Bentley and locked it up again. Stepped back to the entrance and pulled the door. Glanced back toward the brown sedan. Still there. Still watching.

ROSCOE WAS AT HER DESK, TALKING ON THE PHONE. SHE waved. Looked excited. Held her hand up to tell me to wait. I watched the door to the rosewood office. Hoped Teale wouldn't come out before she finished her call.

He came out just as she hung up. He was all red in the face. Looked mad. Started stamping around the squad room, banging his heavy stick on the floor. Glaring up at the big empty bulletin board. Finlay stuck his head out of the office and nodded me in. I shrugged at Roscoe and went to see what Finlay had to say.

"What was that all about?" I asked him.

He laughed.

"I was winding him up," he said. "He asked what we'd been doing, looking at a car. I said we weren't. Said we'd told Baker we weren't going far, but he'd misheard it as we're looking at a car."

"Take care, Finlay," I said. "They're killing people. This is a big deal."

He shrugged.

"It's driving me crazy," he said. "Got to have some fun, right?"

He'd survived twenty years in Boston. He might survive this.

"What's happening with Picard?" I asked him. "You heard from him?"

"Nothing," he said. "Just standing by."

"No possibility he might have put a couple of guys on surveillance?" I said.

Finlay shook his head. Looked definite about it.

"No way," he said. "Not without telling me first. Why?"

"There's a couple of guys watching this place," I said. "Got here about ten minutes ago. Plain brown sedan. They were at Hubble's yesterday and around town this morning, asking after me."

He shook his head again.

“They’re not Picard’s,” he said. “He’d have told me.”

Roscoe came in and shut the door. Held it shut with her hand like Teale might try to burst in after her.

“I called Detroit,” she said. “It was a Pontiac. Delivered four months ago. Big fleet order for a rental company. DMV is tracing the registration. I told them to get back to Picard up in Atlanta. The rental people might be able to give him the story about where it was rented. We might be getting somewhere.”

I felt I was getting closer to Joe. Like I was hearing a faint echo.

“Great,” I said to her. “Good work, Roscoe. I’m out of here. Meet you back here at six. You two stick close together, OK? Watch your backs.”

“Where are you going?” Finlay said.

“I’m going for a drive in the country,” I said.

I left them there in the office and walked back to the entrance. Pushed the door open and stepped outside. Scanned north up the road. The plain sedan was still there, seventy-five yards away. The two guys were still in it. Still watching. I walked over to the Bentley. Unlocked the door and got in. Nosed out of the parking lot and pulled out onto the county road. Wide and slow. Drove slowly past the two guys and carried on north. In the mirror I saw the plain sedan start up. Saw it pull out and turn in the road. It accelerated north and fell in behind me. Like I was towing it on a long invisible rope. I slowed, it slowed. I sped up, it sped up. Like a game.

18

I DROVE PAST ENO'S DINER AND ROLLED ON NORTH AWAY from town. The plain sedan followed. Forty yards back. No attempt to hide. The two guys just cruised behind me. Gazing forward. I swung west on the road to Warburton. Slowed to a cruise. The plain sedan followed. Still forty yards back. We cruised west. We were the only things moving in that vast landscape. I could see the two guys in the mirror. Gazing at me. They were spotlit by the low afternoon sun. The low, brassy light made them vivid. Young guys, Hispanic, loud shirts, black hair, very neat, very similar. Their car sat steadily in my wake.

I cruised seven or eight miles. I was looking for a place. There were bumpy earth tracks off to the left and right, every half mile or so. They led into the fields. Looped around aimlessly. I didn't know what they were for. Maybe they led to gathering points where farmers parked machinery for the harvest. Whenever that was. I was looking for a particular track I'd seen before. It led around behind a small stand of trees on the right-hand side of the road. The only cover for miles. I'd seen it from the prison bus on Friday. Seen it again driving back in from Alabama. A sturdy stand of trees. This morning it had been floating on the mist. A little oval copse, next to the road, on the right, an earth track looping behind it, then joining up with the road again.

I saw it a couple of miles ahead. The trees were a smudge on the horizon. I drove on toward it. Snapped the glove compartment open and lifted the big automatic out. Wedged it between the squabs on the seat next to me. The two guys followed. Still forty yards back. A quarter mile from the woods I slammed the selector into second and floored the pedal. The old car gulped and shot forward. At the track I hauled the wheel around and bounced and slewed the Bentley off the road. Hurled it around to the back of the copse. Jammed it to a stop. Grabbed the gun and jumped. Left the driver's door swinging open like I'd tumbled out and dived straight left into the trees.

But I went the other way. I went to the right. I danced around the hood and hurled myself fifteen feet into the peanut field and flattened into the ground. Crawled through the bushes and put myself on a level with where their car would have to stop on the track behind the Bentley. Pressed myself up against the brawny stalks, low down under the leaves, on the damp red earth. Then I waited. I figured they'd dropped off maybe sixty or seventy yards. They hadn't

tracked my sudden acceleration. I snicked the safety catch off. Then I heard their brown Buick. I caught the noise of the motor and the groan of the suspension. It bounced into view on the track in front of me. It stopped behind the Bentley, framed against the trees. It was about twenty feet away from me.

They were reasonably smart guys. Not at all the worst I'd ever seen. The passenger had gotten out on the road before they turned in. He thought I was in the woods. He thought he was going to come at me from behind. The driver scrambled across inside the car and rolled out of the passenger door on the far side from the trees. Right in front of me. He was holding a gun and he knelt down in the dirt, his back turned to me, hidden from where he thought I was by the Buick, looking through the car at the woods. I'd have to make him move. I didn't want him to stay next to the car. The car had to stay driveable. I didn't want it damaged.

They were wary of the copse. That had been the idea. Why would I drive all the way to the only woods for miles, and then hide in a field? A classic diversion. They'd fallen for it without even thinking. The guy by the car was staring through at the woods. I was staring at his back. I had the Desert Eagle lined up on him, breathing low. His partner was creeping slowly through the trees, looking for me. Pretty soon he'd get right through and come right out into view.

He arrived after about five minutes. He was holding a gun out in front of him. He dodged around the back of the Buick. Kept distance between himself and the Bentley. He crouched down next to his partner and they exchanged shrugs. Then they started peering at the Bentley. Worried that I was lying on the floor or crouching behind the stately chrome radiator. The guy who'd just come out of the woods crawled along in the dirt, keeping the Buick between himself and the trees, right in front of me, staring under the Bentley, looking for my feet.

He crawled the whole length of the Bentley. I could hear him grunting and gasping as he hauled himself along on his elbows. Then he crawled all the way back and knelt up again beside his partner. They both shuffled sideways and slowly stood up next to the Buick's hood. They stepped over and checked inside the Bentley. They walked together to the edge of the copse and peered into the darkness. They couldn't find me. Then they came back and stood together on the rough track, away from the cars, framed against the orange sky, staring at the trees, their backs to the field, their backs to me.

They didn't know what to do. They were city boys. Maybe from Miami. They

wore Florida clothes. They were used to neon alleys and construction sites. They were used to action under raised highways, in the trash-filled lots the tourists never saw. They didn't know what to do about a small copse standing alone in a million acres of peanuts.

I shot them both in the back as they stood there. Two quick shots. Aimed high up between their shoulder blades. The big automatic made a sound like hand grenades going off. Birds wheeled into the air from all around. The twin crashes rolled over the countryside like thunder. The recoils pounded my hand. The two guys were hurled forward off their feet. Landed on their faces sprawled against the trees on the far side of the earth track. I raised my head and peered over. They had that slack, empty look that is left behind when life has departed.

I held onto the gun and stepped over to them. They were dead. I had seen a lot of dead people, and these two were as dead as any of them. The big Magnum shells had caught them high up on their backs. Where the big arteries and veins are, going on up into the head. The bullets had made quite a mess. I looked down at the two guys in the silence and thought about Joe.

Then I had things to do. I stepped back to the Bentley. Clicked the safety on and tossed the Desert Eagle back on the seat. Stepped over to their Buick and yanked the keys out. Popped the trunk. I guess I was hoping to find something in there. I didn't feel bad about the two boys. But I was going to feel better still if I found something in there. Like a silenced .22 automatic. Or like four pairs of rubber overshoes and four nylon bodysuits. A few five-inch blades. Things like that. But I didn't find things like that. I found Spivey.

He'd been dead a few hours. He'd been shot through the forehead with a .38. From close range. The revolver barrel must have been about six inches from his head. I rubbed my thumb across the skin around the bullet hole. Looked at it. There was no soot, but there were tiny gunpowder particles blasted into the skin. They wouldn't rub off. That kind of tattooing means a fairly close range. Six inches will do it, maybe eight. Somebody had suddenly raised a gun and the slow heavy assistant warden hadn't been quick enough to duck.

There was a scab on his chin where I'd cut him with Morrison's blade. His small snake eyes were open. He was still in his greasy uniform. His white hairy belly showed through where I'd slashed at his shirt. He had been a big guy. To fit him in the trunk, they'd broken his legs. Probably with a shovel. They'd broken them and folded them sideways at the knee to get his body in. I gazed at him and felt

and folded them sideways at the knee to get his body in. I gazed at him and felt angry. He'd known, and he hadn't told me. But they'd killed him anyway. The fact that he hadn't told me hadn't counted for anything. They were panicking. They were silencing everybody, while the clock ticked slowly around to Sunday. I gazed into Spivey's dead eyes, like there was information still in there.

Then I ran back to the bodies on the edge of the copse and searched them. Two wallets and a car rental agreement. A mobile phone. That was all. The rental agreement was for the Buick. Rented at the Atlanta airport, Monday morning at eight. An early flight in from somewhere. I went through the wallets. No airline tickets. Florida driver's licenses, both with Jacksonville addresses. Bland photographs, meaningless names. Credit cards to match. Lots of cash in the wallets. I stole it all. They weren't going to spend it.

I took the battery out of the mobile phone and put the phone in one guy's pocket and the battery in the other's. Then I dragged the bodies over to the Buick and heaved them into the trunk with Spivey. Not easy. They weren't tall guys, but they were floppy and awkward. Made me sweat, despite the chill. I had to shove them around to get them both in the space Spivey was leaving. I scouted around and found their revolvers. Both .38 caliber. One had a full load. The other had fired once. Smelled recent. I pitched the guns into the trunk. Found the passenger's shoes. The Desert Eagle had blown him right out of them. I threw them in the trunk and slammed the lid. Walked back into the field and found my hiding place in the bushes. Where I'd shot them from. Scrabbled around and picked up the two shell cases. Put them in my pocket.

Then I locked up the Buick and left it. Popped the Bentley's trunk. Pulled out the bag with my old clothes in it. My new gear was covered in red mud and streaked with the dead guys' blood. I put the old things back on. Balled up the muddy bloodstained stuff and shoved it in the bag. Threw the bag in the Bentley's trunk and closed the lid on it. Last thing I did was use a tree branch to sweep away all the footprints I could see.

I drove the Bentley slowly back east to Margrave and used the time to calm down. A straightforward ambush, no technical difficulty, no real danger. I had thirteen years of hard time behind me. I should be able to walk through a one-on-two against amateurs in my sleep. But my heart was thumping harder than it should have been and a cold blast of adrenaline was shaking me up. It was the sight of Spiveylying there with his legs folded sideways that had done it. I breathed hard and got myself under control. My right arm was sore. Like

somebody had hit my palm with a hammer. It jarred all the way up to the shoulder. That Desert Eagle had a hell of a recoil. And it made a hell of a noise. My ears were still ringing from the twin explosions. But I felt good. It had been a job well done. Two tough guys had followed me out there. They weren't following me back.

I PARKED UP IN THE STATION HOUSE LOT, FARTHEST SLOT from the door. Put my gun back in the glove compartment and got out of the car. It was getting late. The evening gloom was gathering. The huge Georgia sky was darkening. Turning a deep inky shade. The moon was coming up.

Roscoe was at her desk. She got up when she saw me and walked over. We went back out through the door. Walked a few paces. Kissed.

"Anything from the car rental people?" I asked her.

She shook her head.

"Tomorrow," she said. "Picard's dealing with it. He's doing his best."

"OK," I said. "What hotels you got up at the airport?"

She reeled off a list of hotels. Pretty much the same list you got at any airport. I picked the first name she'd listed. Then I told her what had happened with the two Florida boys. Last week, she'd have arrested me for it. Sent me to the chair. Now, her reaction was different. Those four men who had padded through her place in their rubber shoes had changed her mind about a lot of things. So she just nodded and smiled a tight grim smile of satisfaction.

"Two down," she said. "Good work, Reacher. Were they the ones?"

"From last night?" I said. "No. They weren't local. We can't count them in Hubble's ten. They were hired help from outside."

"Were they any good?" she asked.

I shrugged at her. Rocked my hand from side to side, equivocally.

"Not really," I said. "Not good enough, anyway."

Then I told her what I had found in the Buick's trunk. She shivered again.

"So is he one of the ten?" she asked. "Spivey?"

I shook my head.

"No," I said. "I can't see it. He was outside help, too. Nobody would have a slug like that on the inside."

She nodded. I opened up the Bentley and got the gun out of the glove box. It was too big to go in my pocket. I put it back in the old file box with the bullets. Roscoe put the whole thing in the trunk of her Chevy. I got the carrier bag of stained clothes out. Locked the Bentley up and left it there in the police lot.

"I'm going to call Molly again," I said. "I'm getting in pretty deep. I need some background. There are things I don't understand."

The place was quiet so I used the rosewood office. I dialed the Washington number and got Molly on the second ring.

"Can you talk?" I asked her.

She told me to wait, and I heard her get up and close her office door.

"It's too soon, Jack," she said. "I can't get the stuff until tomorrow."

"I need background," I said. "I need to understand this international stuff Joe was doing. I need to know why things are happening here, if the action is supposed to be overseas."

I heard her figuring out where to start.

"OK, background," she said. "I guess Joe's assumption was it's maybe controlled from this country. And it's a very difficult problem to explain, but I'll try. The forging happens abroad, and the trick is most of it stays abroad. Only a few of the fake bills ever come back here, which is not a huge deal domestically, but obviously it's something we want to stop. But abroad, it presents a completely different type of problem. You know how much cash is inside the U.S., Jack?"

I thought back to what the bank guy had told me.

“A hundred and thirty billion dollars,” I said.

“Right,” she said. “But exactly twice that much is held offshore. That’s a fact. People all over the world are holding onto two hundred and sixty billion dollars’ worth of American cash. It’s in safety deposits in London, Rome, Berlin, Moscow, stuffed into mattresses all over South America, Eastern Europe, hidden under floorboards, false walls, in banks, travel agencies, everywhere. And why is that?”

“Don’t know,” I said.

“Because the dollar is the world’s most trusted currency,” she said. “People believe in it. They want it. And naturally, the government is very, very happy about that.”

“Good for the ego, right?” I said.

I heard her change the phone to the other hand.

“It’s not an emotional thing,” she said. “It’s business. Think about it, Jack. If there’s a hundred-dollar bill in somebody’s bureau in Bucharest, that means somebody somewhere once exchanged a hundred dollars’ worth of foreign assets for it. It means our government sold them a piece of paper with green and black ink on it for a hundred bucks. Good business. And because it’s a trusted currency, chances are that hundred-dollar bill will probably stay in that bureau in Bucharest for many years. The U.S. will never have to deliver the foreign assets back again. As long as the dollar stays trusted, we can’t lose.”

“So what’s the problem?” I asked her.

“Difficult to describe,” Molly said. “It’s all about trust and faith. It’s almost metaphysical. If foreign markets are getting flooded with fake dollars, that doesn’t really matter in itself. But if the people in those foreign markets find out, then it does matter. Because they panic. They lose their faith. They lose their trust. They don’t want dollars anymore. They’ll turn to Japanese yen or German marks to stuff their mattresses with. They’ll get rid of their dollars. In effect, overnight, the government would have to repay a two-hundred-sixty-billion-dollar foreign loan. Overnight. And we couldn’t do that, Jack.”

“Big problem,” I said.

“That’s the truth,” she said. “And a remote problem. The fakes are all made abroad, and they’re mostly distributed abroad. It makes sense that way. The factories are hidden away in some remote foreign region, where we don’t know about them, and the fakes are distributed to foreigners who are happy as long as the stuff looks vaguely like real dollars are supposed to look. That’s why not very many are imported. Only the very best fakes come back to the States.”

“How many come back?” I asked her.

I heard her shrug. A little breath sound, like she had pursed her lips.

“Not many,” she said. “A few billion, now and then, I guess.”

“A few billion?” I said. “That’s not many?”

“A drop in the ocean,” she said. “From a macroeconomic point of view. Compared to the size of the economy, I mean.”

“And what exactly are we doing about it?” I asked her.

“Two things,” she said. “First thing is Joe was trying like mad to stop it from happening. The reason behind that is obvious. Second thing is we’re pretending like mad it isn’t happening at all. So as to keep the faith.”

I nodded. Started to see some shape behind the big-time secrecy going on up there in Washington.

“OK,” I said. “So if I were to call the Treasury and ask them about it?”

“We’d deny everything,” she said. “We’d say, what counterfeiting?”

I WALKED THROUGH THE SILENT SQUAD ROOM AND JOINED Roscoe in her car. Told her to drive out toward Warburton. It was dark when we reached the little stand of trees. Just enough moonlight to pick it out. Roscoe pulled up where I showed her. I kissed her and got out. Told her I’d see her up at the hotel. Slapped lightly on the Chevy’s roof and waved her off. She turned in the road. Drove slowly away.

I pushed directly through the copse. Didn't want to leave footprints on the track. The fat carrier bag made it awkward. It kept snagging in the brush. I came out right by the Buick. Still there. All quiet. I unlocked the driver's door with the key and got in. Started up and bounced down the track. The rear suspension kept bottoming out on the ruts. I wasn't too surprised about that. Must have been about five hundred pounds weight in the trunk.

I jounced out onto the road and drove east toward Margrave. But I turned left at the county road and headed north. Cruised the rest of the fourteen miles up to the highway. Passed by the warehouses and joined the stream north to Atlanta. I didn't drive fast, didn't drive slow. Didn't want to get noticed. The plain Buick was very anonymous. Very inconspicuous. That was how I wanted to keep it.

After an hour I followed the airport signs. Found my way around to the long-term parking. Took a ticket at the little automated barrier and nosed in. It was a huge lot. Couldn't be better. I found a slot near the middle, about a hundred yards from the nearest fence. Wiped off the wheel and the transmission. Got out with the carrier bag. Locked the Buick and walked away.

After a minute, I looked back. Couldn't pick out the car I'd just dumped. What's the best place to hide a car? In an airport long-term lot. Like where's the best place to hide a grain of sand? On the beach. The Buick could sit there for a month. Nobody would think twice.

I walked back toward the entrance barrier. At the first trash can I dumped the carrier bag. At the second I got rid of the parking ticket. At the barrier I caught the little courtesy bus and rode to the departure terminal. Walked in and found a bathroom. Wrapped the Buick keys in a paper towel and dropped them in the garbage. Then I slipped down to the arrivals hall and stepped out into the damp night again. Caught the hotel courtesy bus and rode off to meet Roscoe.

I FOUND HER IN THE NEON GLARE OF A HOTEL LOBBY. I PAID cash for a room. Used a bill I'd taken from the Florida boys. We went up in the elevator. The room was a dingy, dark place. Big enough. Looked out over the airport sprawl. The window had three layers of glass against the jet noise. The place was airless.

"First, we eat," I said.

“First, we shower,” Roscoe said.

So we showered. Put us in a better frame of mind. We soaped up and started fooling around. Ended up making love in the stall with the water beating down on us. Afterward, I just wanted to curl up in the glow. But we were hungry. And we had things to do. Roscoe put on the clothes she’d brought from her place in the morning. Jeans, shirt, jacket. Looked wonderful. Very feminine, but very tough. She had a lot of spirit.

We rode up to a restaurant on the top floor. It was OK. A big panoramic view of the airport district. We sat in candlelight by a window. A cheerful foreign guy brought us food. I crammed it all down. I was starving. I had a beer and a pint of coffee. Started to feel halfway human again. Paid for the meal with more of the dead guys’ money. Then we rode down to the lobby and picked up an Atlanta street map at the desk. Walked out to Roscoe’s car.

The night air was cold and damp and stank of kerosene. Airport smell. We got in the Chevy and pored over the street map. Headed out northwest. Roscoe drove and I tried to direct her. We battled traffic and ended up roughly in the right place. It was a sprawl of low-rise housing. The sort of place you see from planes coming in to land. Small houses on small lots, hurricane fencing, aboveground pools. Some nice yards, some dumps. Old cars up on blocks. Everything bathed in yellow sodium glare.

We found the right street. Found the right house. Decent place. Well looked after. Neat and clean. A tiny one-story. Small yard, small single-car garage. Narrow gate in the wire fence. We went through. Rang the bell. An old woman cracked the door against the chain.

“Good evening,” Roscoe said. “We’re looking for Sherman Stoller.”

Roscoe looked at me after she said it. She should have said we were looking for his house. We knew where Sherman Stoller was. Sherman Stoller was in the Yellow Springs morgue, seventy miles away.

“Who are you?” the old woman asked, politely.

“Ma’am, we’re police officers,” Roscoe said. Half true.

The old lady eased the door and took the chain off.

“You better come in,” she said. “He’s in the kitchen. Eating, I’m afraid.”

“Who is?” said Roscoe.

The old lady stopped and looked at her. Puzzled.

“Sherman,” she said. “That’s who you want, isn’t it?”

We followed her into the kitchen. There was an old guy eating supper at the table. When he saw us, he stopped and dabbed at his lips with a napkin.

“Police officers, Sherman,” the old lady said.

The old guy looked up at us blankly.

“Is there another Sherman Stoller?” I asked him.

The old guy nodded. Looked worried.

“Our son,” he said.

“About thirty?” I asked him. “Thirty-five?”

The old guy nodded again. The old lady moved behind him and put her hand on his arm. Parents.

“He don’t live here,” the old man said.

“Is he in trouble?” the old lady asked.

“Could you give us his address?” Roscoe said.

They fussed around like old people do. Very deferential to authority. Very respectful. Wanted to ask us a lot of questions, but just gave us the address.

“He hasn’t lived here for two years,” the old man said.

He was afraid. He was trying to distance himself from the trouble his son was in. We nodded to them and backed out. As we were shutting their front door, the old man called out after us.

“He moved out there two years ago,” he said.

He moved out there two years ago," he said.

We trooped out through the gate and got back in the car. Looked on the street map again. The new address wasn't on it.

"What did you make of those two?" Roscoe asked me.

"The parents?" I said. "They know their boy was up to no good. They know he was doing something bad. Probably don't know exactly what it was."

"That's what I thought," she said. "Let's go find this new place."

We drove off. Roscoe got gas and directions at the first place we saw.

"About five miles the other way," she said. Pulled the car around and headed away from the city. "New condominiums on a golf course."

She was peering into the gloom, looking for the landmarks the gas station attendant had given her. After five miles she swung off the main drag. Nosed along a new road and pulled up by a developer's sign. It advertised condominiums, top quality, built right on the fairway. It boasted that only a few remained unsold. Beyond the billboard were rows of new buildings. Very pleasant, not huge, but nicely done. Balconies, garages, good details. Ambitious landscaping loomed up in the dark. Lighted pathways led over to a health club. On the other side was nothing. Must have been the golf course.

Roscoe killed the motor. We sat in the car. I stretched my arm along the back of her seat. Cupped her shoulder. I was tired. I'd been busy all day. I wanted to sit like this for a while. It was a quiet, dull night. Warm in the car. I wanted music. Something with an ache to it. But we had things to do. We had to find Judy. The woman who had bought Sherman Stoller's watch and had it engraved. To Sherman, love Judy. We had to find Judy and tell her the man she'd loved had bled to death under a highway.

"What do you make of this?" Roscoe said. She was bright and awake.

"Don't know," I said. "They're for sale, not rental. They look expensive. Could a truck driver afford this?"

"Doubt it," she said. "These probably cost as much as my place, and I couldn't make my payments without the subsidy I get. And I make more than any truck

driver, that's for sure."

"OK," I said. "So our guess is old Sherman was getting some kind of a subsidy, too, right? Otherwise he couldn't afford to live here."

"Sure," she said. "But what kind of a subsidy?"

"The kind that gets people killed," I said.

STOLLER'S BUILDING WAS WAY IN BACK. PROBABLY THE first phase to have been built. The old man in the poor part of town had said his son had moved out two years ago. That could be about right. This first block could be about two years old. We threaded through walkways and around raised-up flower beds. Walked up a path to Sherman Stoller's door. The path was stepping stones set in the wiry lawn. Forced an unnatural gait on you. I had to step short. Roscoe had to stretch her stride from one flagstone to the next. We reached the door. It was blue. No shine on it. Old-fashioned paint.

"Are we going to tell her?" I said.

"We can't not tell her, can we?" Roscoe said. "She's got to know."

I knocked on the door. Waited. Knocked again. I heard the floor creaking inside. Someone was coming. The door opened. A woman stood there. Maybe thirty, but she looked older. Short, nervous, tired. Blond from a bottle. She looked out at us.

"We're police officers, ma'am," Roscoe said. "We're looking for the Sherman Stoller residence."

There was silence for a moment.

"Well, you found it, I guess," the woman said.

"May we come in?" Roscoe asked. Gently.

Again there was silence. No movement. Then the blond woman turned and walked back down the hallway. Roscoe and I looked at each other. Roscoe followed the woman. I followed Roscoe. I shut the door behind us.

The woman led us into a living room. A decent-sized space. Expensive furniture and rugs. A big TV. No stereo, no books. It all looked a bit halfhearted. Like somebody had spent twenty minutes with a catalog and ten thousand dollars. One of these, one of those, two of that. All delivered one morning and just kind of dumped in there.

“Are you Mrs. Stoller?” Roscoe asked the woman. Still gentle.

“More or less,” the woman said. “Not exactly Mrs., but as near as makes no difference anyhow.”

“Is your name Judy?” I asked her.

She nodded. Kept on nodding for a while. Thinking.

“He’s dead, isn’t he?” Judy said.

I didn’t answer. This was the part I wasn’t good at. This was Roscoe’s part. She didn’t say anything, either.

“He’s dead, right?” Judy said again, louder.

“Yes, he is,” Roscoe said. “I’m very sorry.”

Judy nodded to herself and looked around the hideous room. Nobody spoke. We just stood there. Judy sat down. She waved us to sit as well. We sat, in separate chairs. We were all sitting in a neat triangle.

“We need to ask you some questions,” Roscoe said. She was sitting forward, leaning toward the blond woman. “May we do that?”

Judy nodded. Looked pretty blank.

“How long did you know Sherman?” Roscoe asked.

“About four years, I guess,” Judy said. “Met him in Florida, where I lived. Came up here to be with him four years ago. Lived up here ever since.”

“What was Sherman’s job?” Roscoe asked.

Judy shrugged miserably.

“He was a truck driver,” she said. “He got some kind of a big driving contract up here. Supposed to be long-term, you know? So we bought a little place. His folks moved in too. Lived with us for a while. Then we moved out here. Left his folks in the old house. He made good money for three years. Busy all the time. Then it stopped, a year ago. He hardly worked at all since. Just an odd day, now and then.”

“You own both the houses?” Roscoe said.

“I don’t own a damn thing,” Judy said. “Sherman owned the houses. Yes, both of them.”

“So he was doing well for the first three years?” Roscoe asked her.

Judy gave her a look.

“Doing well?” she said. “Grow up, for God’s sake. He was a thief. He was ripping somebody off.”

“You sure?” I said.

Judy swung her gaze my way. Like an artillery piece traversing.

“It don’t need much brains to figure it out,” she said. “In three years he paid cash for two houses, two lots of furniture, cars, God knows what. And this place wasn’t cheap, either. We got lawyers and doctors and all sorts living here. And he had enough saved so he didn’t have to work at all since last September. If he did all that on the level, then I’m the First Lady, right?”

She was giving us a defiant stare. She’d known about it all along. She’d known what would happen when he was found out. She was challenging us to deny her the right to blame him.

“Who was his big contract with?” Roscoe asked her.

“Some outfit called Island Air-conditioning,” she said. “He spent three years hauling air conditioners. Taking them down to Florida. Maybe they went on to the islands, I don’t know. He used to steal them. There’s two old boxes in the garage right now. Want to see?”

She didn't wait for a reply. Just jumped up and stalked out. We followed. We all went down some back stairs and through a basement door. Into a garage. It was empty except for a couple of old cartons dumped against a wall. Cardboard cartons, could have been a year or two old. Marked with a manufacturer's logo. Island Air-conditioning, Inc. This End Up. The sealing tape was torn and hanging off. Each box had a long serial number written on by hand. Each box must have held a single unit. The sort you jam in your window frame, makes a hell of a noise. Judy glared at the boxes and glared at us. It was a glare which said: I gave him a gold watch and he gave me a shitload of worry.

I walked over and looked at the cartons. They were empty. I smelled a faint, sour odor in them. Then we went back upstairs. Judy got an album out of a cupboard. Sat and looked at a photograph of Sherman.

"What happened to him?" she asked.

It was a simple question. Deserved a simple answer.

"He was shot in the head," I lied. "Died instantly."

Judy nodded. Like she wasn't surprised.

"When?" she asked.

"On Thursday night," Roscoe told her. "At midnight. Did he say where he was going on Thursday night?"

Judy shook her head.

"He never told me much," she said.

"Did he ever mention meeting an investigator?" Roscoe asked.

Judy shook her head again.

"What about Pluribus?" I asked her. "Did he ever use that word?"

She looked blank.

"Is that a disease?" she said. "Lungs or something?"

“What about Sunday?” I said. “This Sunday coming? Did he ever say anything about that?”

“No,” Judy said. “He never said much about anything.”

She sat and stared at the photographs in the album. The room was quiet.

“Did he know any lawyers in Florida?” Roscoe asked her.

“Lawyers?” Judy said. “In Florida? Why should he?”

“He was arrested in Jacksonville,” Roscoe said. “Two years ago. It was a traffic violation in his truck. A lawyer came to help him out.”

Judy shrugged, like two years ago was ancient history to her.

“There are lawyers sniffing everywhere, right?” she said. “No big deal.”

“This guy wasn’t an ambulance-chaser,” Roscoe said. “He was a partner in a big firm down there. Any idea how Sherman could have gotten hold of him?”

Judy shrugged again.

“Maybe his employer did it,” she said. “Island Air-conditioning. They gave us good medical insurance. Sherman let me go to the doctor, any old time I needed to.”

We all went quiet. Nothing more to say. Judy sat and gazed at the photographs in the album.

“Want to see his picture?” she said.

I walked around behind her chair and bent to look at the photograph. It showed a sandy, rat-faced man. Small, slight, with a grin. He was standing in front of a yellow panel van. Grinning and squinting at the camera. The grin gave it poignancy.

“That’s the truck he drove,” Judy said.

But I wasn’t looking at the truck or Sherman Stoller’s poignant grin. I was

looking at a figure in the background of the picture. It was out of focus and turned half away from the camera, but I could make out who it was. It was Paul Hubble.

I waved Roscoe over and she bent beside me and looked at the photograph. I saw a wave of surprise pass over her face as she recognized Hubble. Then she bent closer. Looked harder. I saw a second wave of surprise. She had recognized something else.

“When was this picture taken?” she asked.

Judy shrugged.

“Summer last year, I guess,” she said.

Roscoe touched the blurred image of Hubble with her fingernail.

“Did Sherman say who this guy was?”

“The new boss,” Judy said. “He was there six months, then he fired Sherman’s ass.”

“Island Air-conditioning’s new boss?” Roscoe said. “Was there a reason he laid Sherman off?”

“Sherman said they didn’t need him no more,” Judy said. “He never said much.”

“Is this where Island Air-conditioning is based?” Roscoe asked. “Where this picture was taken?”

Judy shrugged and nodded her head, tentatively.

“I guess so,” she said. “Sherman never told me much about it.”

“We need to keep this photograph,” Roscoe told her. “We’ll let you have it back later.”

Judy fished it out of the plastic. Handed it to her.

“Keep it,” she said. “I don’t want it.”

Roscoe took the picture and put it in her inside jacket pocket. She and I moved back to the middle of the room and stood there.

“Shot in the head,” Judy said. “That’s what happens when you mess around. I told him they’d catch up with him, sooner or later.”

Roscoe nodded sympathetically.

“We’ll keep in touch,” she said to her. “You know, the funeral arrangements, and we might want a statement.”

Judy glared at us again.

“Don’t bother,” she said. “I’m not going to his funeral. I wasn’t his wife, so I’m not his widow. I’m going to forget I ever knew him. That man was trouble from beginning to end.”

She stood there glaring at us. We shuffled out, down the hall, out through the door. Across the awkward path. We held hands as we walked back to the car.

“What?” I asked her. “What’s in the photograph?”

She was walking fast.

“Wait,” she said. “I’ll show you in the car.”

19

WE GOT IN THE CHEVY AND SHE SNAPPED ON THE DOME light. Pulled the photograph out of her pocket. Leaned over and tilted the picture so the light caught the shiny surface. Checked it carefully. Handed it to me.

“Look at the edge,” she said. “On the left.”

The picture was of Sherman Stoller standing in front of a yellow truck. Paul Hubble was turned away, in the background. The two figures and the truck filled the whole frame apart from a wedge of blacktop at the bottom. And a thin margin of background to the left. The background slice was even more out of focus than Hubble was, but I could see the edge of a modern metal building, with silver siding. A tall tree beyond. The frame of a door. It was a big industrial door, rolled up. The frame was a dark red color. Some kind of baked-on industrial coating. Partly decorative, partly preservative. Some kind of a shed door. There was gloom inside the shed.

“That’s Kliner’s warehouse,” she said. “At the top of the county road.”

“Are you sure?” I said.

“I recognize the tree,” she said.

I looked again. It was a very distinctive tree. Dead on one side. Maybe split by lightning.

“That’s Kliner’s warehouse,” she said again. “No doubt about that.”

Then she clicked her car phone on and took the photograph back. Dialed DMV in Atlanta and called in the number from the front of Stoller’s truck. Waited a long moment, tapping her index finger on the steering wheel. I heard the crackle of the response in the earpiece. Then she clicked the phone off and turned to me.

“The truck is registered to Kliner Industries,” she said. “And the registered address is Zacarias Perez, Attorneys-at-Law, Jacksonville, Florida.”

I nodded. She nodded back. Sherman Stoller’s buddies. The ones who had got him out of Jacksonville Central in fifty-five minutes flat, two years ago.

“OK,” she said. “Put it all together. Hubble, Stoller, Joe’s investigation. They’re printing counterfeit money down in Kliner’s warehouse, right?”

I shook my head.

“Wrong,” I said. “There’s no printing going on inside the States. It all happens abroad. Molly Beth Gordon told me that, and she ought to know what she’s talking about. She said Joe had made it impossible. And whatever Stoller was doing, Judy said he stopped doing it a year ago. And Finlay said Joe only started this whole thing a year ago. Around the same time Hubble fired Stoller.”

Roscoe nodded. Shrugged.

“We need Molly’s help,” she said. “We need a copy of Joe’s file.”

“Or Picard’s help,” I said. “We might find Joe’s hotel room and get hold of the original. It’s a race to see who’s going to call us first, Molly or Picard.”

Roscoe clicked off the dome light. Started the car for the ride back to the airport hotel. I just sprawled out beside her, yawning. I could sense she was getting uptight. She had run out of things to do. Run out of distractions. Now she had to face the quiet vulnerable hours of the night. The first night after last night. The prospect was making her agitated.

“You got that gun, Reacher?” she asked.

I squirmed around in the seat to face her.

“It’s in the trunk,” I said. “In that box. You put it in there, remember?”

“Bring it inside, OK?” she said. “Makes me feel better.”

I grinned sleepily in the dark. Yawned.

“Makes me feel better too,” I said. “It’s a hell of a gun.”

Then we lapsed back into silence. Roscoe found the hotel lot. We got out of the car and stood stretching in the dark. I opened the trunk. Lifted the box out and slammed the lid. Went in through our lobby and up in the elevator.

In the room we just crashed out. Roscoe laid her shiny .38 on the carpet on her side of the bed. I reloaded my giant .44 and laid it on my side. Cocked and locked. We wedged a chair under the door handle. Roscoe felt safer that way.

I WOKE EARLY AND LAY IN BED, THINKING ABOUT JOE. Wednesday morning. He'd been dead five days. Roscoe was already up. She was standing in the middle of the floor, stretching. Some kind of a yoga thing. She'd taken a shower and she was only half dressed. She had no trousers on. Just a shirt. She had her back to me. As she stretched, the shirt was riding way up. Suddenly I wasn't thinking about Joe anymore.

"Roscoe?" I said.

"What?" she said.

"You've got the most wonderful ass on the planet," I said.

She giggled. I jumped on her. Couldn't help it. Couldn't do anything else. She drove me crazy. It was the giggle that did it to me. It made me crazy. I hauled her back into the big hotel bed. The building could have fallen down and we wouldn't have noticed it. We finished in an exhausted tangle. Lay there for a while. Then Roscoe got up again and showered for the second time that morning. Got dressed again. Trousers and everything. Grinned at me as if to say she was sparing me from any further temptation.

"So did you mean it?" she said.

"Mean what?" I said, with a smile.

"You know what." She smiled back. "When you told me I had a cute ass."

"I didn't say you had a cute ass," I said. "I've seen plenty of cute asses. I said yours was the most wonderful ass on the whole damn planet."

"But did you mean it?" she said.

"You bet I meant it," I said. "Don't underestimate the attraction of your ass, Roscoe, whatever you do."

I called room service for breakfast. Removed the chair from under the door handle ready for the little cart. Pulled the heavy drapes. It was a glorious morning. A bright blue sky, no clouds at all, brilliant fall sunshine. The room was flooded with light. We cracked the window and let in the air and the smells and the sounds of the day. The view was spectacular. Right over the airport and to the city beyond. The cars in the lots caught the sun and looked like jewels on beige velvet. The planes clawed their way into the air and wheeled slowly away like fat, important birds. The buildings downtown grew tall and straight in the sun. A glorious morning. But it was the sixth straight morning my brother wasn't alive to see.

ROSCOE USED THE PHONE TO CALL FINLAY DOWN IN MARGRAVE. She told him about the photograph of Hubble and Stoller standing in the sun on the warehouse forecourt. Then she gave him our room number and told him to call us if Molly got back to us from Washington. Or if Picard got back to us with information from the car rental people about the burned Pontiac. I figured we should stay in Atlanta in case Picard beat Molly and we got a hotel trace on Joe. Chances were he stayed in the city, maybe near the airport. No point in us driving all the way back down to Margrave and then having to drive all the way back up to Atlanta again. So we waited. I fiddled with the radio built into the nightstand thing. Came up with a station playing something halfway decent. Sounded like they were playing through an early Canned Heat album. Bouncy and sunny and just right for a bright empty morning.

Breakfast came and we ate it. The whole bit. Pancakes, syrup, bacon. Lots of coffee in a thick china jug. Afterward, I lay back on the bed. Pretty soon started feeling restless. Started feeling like it had been a mistake to wait around. It felt like we weren't doing anything. I could see Roscoe was feeling the same way. She propped the photograph of Hubble and Stoller and the yellow van on the nightstand and glared at it. I glared at the telephone. It wasn't ringing. We wandered around the room, waiting. Then I stooped to pick up the Desert Eagle off the floor by the bed. Hefted it in my hand. Traced the engraved name on the grip with my finger. Looked across at Roscoe. I was curious about the guy who'd bought that massive automatic.

"What was Gray like?" I asked.

"Grav?" she said. "He was so thorough. You want to get Joe's files? You should

see Gray's paperwork. There are twenty-five years of his files in the station house. All meticulous, all comprehensive. Gray was a good detective."

"Why did he hang himself?" I asked her.

"I don't know," she said. "I never understood it."

"Was he depressed?" I said.

"Not really," she said. "I mean, he was always sort of depressed. Lugubrious, you know? A very dour sort of guy. And bored. He was a good detective, and he was wasted in Margrave. But no worse in February than any other time. It was a total surprise to me. I was very upset."

"Were you close?" I asked her.

She shrugged.

"Yes, we were," she said. "In a way, we were pretty close. He was a dour guy, you know, not really that close to anybody. Never married, always lived alone, no relatives. He was a teetotaler, so he would never come out for a beer or anything. He was quiet, messy, a little overweight. No hair and a big straggly beard. A very self-contained, comfortable type of a guy. A loner, really. But he was as close to me as he was ever going to get to anybody. We liked each other, in a quiet sort of a way."

"And he never said anything?" I asked her. "Just hanged himself one day?"

"That's how it was," she said. "A total shock. I'll never understand it."

"Why did you have his gun in your desk?" I said.

"He asked if he could keep it in there," she said. "He had no space in his own desk. He generated a lot of paperwork. He just asked if I could keep a box for him with the gun hidden in it. It was his private weapon. He said he couldn't get it approved by the department because the caliber was too big. He made it feel like some kind of a big secret."

I put the dead man's secret gun down on the carpet again and the silence was shattered by the phone ringing. I sprinted for the nightstand and answered it. Heard Finlay's voice. I gripped the phone and held my breath.

Heard Finlay's voice. I gripped the phone and held my breath.

"Reacher?" Finlay said. "Picard got what we need. He traced the car."

I breathed out and nodded to Roscoe.

"Great, Finlay," I said. "So what's the story?"

"Go to his office," he said. "He'll give you the spread, face to face. I didn't want too much conversation on the phones down here."

I closed my eyes for a second and felt a surge of energy.

"Thanks, Finlay," I said. "Speak to you later."

"OK," he said. "Take care, right?"

Then he hung up and left me sitting there holding the phone, smiling.

"I thought he'd never call," Roscoe laughed. "But I guess eighteen hours isn't too bad, even for the Bureau, right?"

THE ATLANTA FBI WAS HOUSED IN A NEW FEDERAL BUILDING downtown. Roscoe parked at the curb outside. The Bureau reception called upstairs and told us Special Agent Picard would come right down to meet with us. We waited for him in the lobby. It was a big hall, with a brave stab at decoration, but it still had the glum atmosphere government buildings have. Picard came out of an elevator within three minutes. He loped over. He seemed to fill the whole hall. He nodded to me and took Roscoe's hand.

"Heard a lot about you from Finlay," he said to her.

His bear's voice rumbled. Roscoe nodded and smiled.

"The car Finlay found?" he said. "Rental Pontiac. Booked out to Joe Reacher, Atlanta airport, Thursday night at eight."

"Great, Picard," I said. "Any guess about where he was holed up?"

"Better than a guess, my friend," Picard said. "They had the exact location. It

"Better than a guess, my friend," Picard said. "They had the exact location. It was a prebooked car. They delivered it right to his hotel."

He mentioned a place a mile the other way from the hotel we were using.

"Thanks, Picard," I said. "I owe you."

"No problem, my friend," he said. "You take care now, OK?"

He loped off back to the elevator and we raced back south to the airport. Roscoe swung onto the perimeter road and accelerated into the flow. Across the divider, a black pickup flashed by. Brand-new. I spun around and caught a glimpse of it disappearing behind a raft of trucks. Black. Brand-new. Probably nothing. They sell more pickups down here than anything else.

ROSCOE PULLED HER BADGE AT THE DESK WHERE PICARD said Joe had checked in on Thursday. The clerk did some keyboard work and told us he had been in 621, sixth floor, far end of the corridor. She said a manager would meet us up there. So we went up in the elevator and walked the length of a dark corridor. Stood waiting outside the door to Joe's room.

The manager came by more or less straight away and opened the room up with his passkey. We stepped in. The room was empty. It had been cleaned and tidied. It looked like it was ready for new occupants.

"What about his stuff?" I said. "Where is it all?"

"We cleared it out Saturday," the manager said. "The guy was booked in Thursday night, supposed to vacate by eleven Friday morning. What we do is we give them an extra day, then if they don't show, we clear them out, down to housekeeping."

"So his stuff is in a closet somewhere?" I asked.

"Downstairs," the manager said. "You should see the stuff we got down there. People leave things all the time."

"So can we go take a look?" I said.

"Basement," he said. "Use the stairs from the lobby. You'll find it."

Basement," he said. "Use the stairs from the lobby. You'll find it."

The manager strolled off. Roscoe and I walked the length of the corridor again and rode back down in the elevator. We found the service staircase and went down to the basement. Housekeeping was a giant hall stacked with linens and towels. There were hampers and baskets full of soap and those free sachets you find in the showers. Maids were pulling in and out with the trolleys they use for servicing the rooms. There was a glassed-in office cubicle in the near corner with a woman at a small desk. We walked over and rapped on the glass. She looked up. Roscoe held out her badge.

"Help you?" the woman said.

"Room six-two-one," Roscoe said. "You cleared out some belongings, Saturday morning. You got them down here?"

I was holding my breath again.

"Six-two-one?" the woman said. "He came by for them already. They're gone."

I breathed out. We were too late. I went numb with disappointment.

"Who came by?" I asked. "When?"

"The guest," the woman said. "This morning, maybe nine, nine thirty."

"Who was he?" I asked her.

She pulled a small book off a shelf and thumbed it open. Licked a stubby finger and pointed to a line.

"Joe Reacher," she said. "He signed the book and took the stuff."

She reversed the book and slid it toward us. There was a scrawled signature on the line.

"What did this Reacher guy look like?" I asked her.

She shrugged.

"Foreign," she said. "Some kind of a Latino. Maybe from Cuba? Little dark guy, slender, nice smile. Very polite sort of a guy, as I recall."

slender, nice smile. Very polite sort of a guy, as I recall.

“You got a list of the stuff?” I said.

She slid the stubby finger further along the line. There was a small column filled with tight handwriting. It listed a garment bag, eight articles of clothing, a toilet bag, four shoes. The last item listed was: one briefcase.

We just walked away from her and found the stairs back to the lobby. Walked out into the morning sun. It didn’t feel like such a great day anymore.

We reached the car. Leaned side by side on the front fender. I was weighing up in my mind whether Joe would have been smart enough and careful enough to do what I would have done. I figured maybe he would have been. He’d spent a long time around smart and careful people.

“Roscoe?” I said. “If you were the guy walking out of here with Joe’s stuff, what would you do?”

She stopped with the car door half open. Thought about it. “I’d keep the briefcase,” she said. “Take it wherever I was supposed to take it. The rest of the stuff, I’d get rid of it.”

“That’s what I would do as well,” I said. “Where would you get rid of it?”

“First place I saw, I guess,” she said.

There was a service road running between the hotel and the next one in line. It looped behind the hotels and then out onto the perimeter road. There was a line of Dumpsters along a twenty-yard stretch of it. I pointed.

“Suppose he drove out that way?” I said. “Suppose he stopped and lobbed the garment bag straight into one of those Dumpsters?”

“But he’d have kept the briefcase, right?” Roscoe said.

“Maybe we aren’t looking for the briefcase,” I said. “Yesterday, I drove miles and miles out to that stand of trees, but I hid in the field. A diversion, right? It’s a habit. Maybe Joe had the same habit. Maybe he carried a briefcase but kept his important stuff in the garment bag.”

Roscoe shrugged. Wasn’t convinced. We started walking down the service road

Roscoe shrugged. Wasn't convinced. We started walking down the service road. Up close, the Dumpsters were huge. I had to lever myself up on the edge of each one and peer in. The first one was empty. Nothing in it at all, except the baked-on kitchen dirt from years of use. The second one was full. I found a length of studding from some demolished drywall and poked around with it. Couldn't see anything. I heaved myself down and walked to the next one.

There was a garment bag in it. Lying right on top of some old cartons. I fished for it with the length of wood. Hauled it out. Tossed it onto the ground at Roscoe's feet. Jumped down next to it. It was a battered, well-traveled bag. Scuffed and scratched. Lots of airline tags all over it. There was a little nameplate in the shape of a miniature gold credit card fastened to the handle. It said: Reacher.

"OK, Joe," I said to myself. "Let's see if you were a smart guy."

I was looking for the shoes. They were in the outside pocket of the bag. Two pairs. Four shoes, just like it said on the housekeeper's list. I pulled the inner soles out of each one in turn. Under the third one, I found a tiny Ziploc bag. With a sheet of computer paper folded up inside it.

"Smart as a whip, Joe," I said to myself, and laughed.

20

ROSCOE AND I DANCED AROUND THE SERVICE ALLEY TOGETHER like players in the dugout watching the winning run soar out of sight. Then we hustled over to the Chevy and raced the mile back to our hotel. Ran into the lobby, into the elevator. Unlocked our room and fell in. The telephone was ringing. It was Finlay, on the line from Margrave again. He sounded as excited as we were.

“Molly Beth Gordon just called,” he said. “She did it. She’s got the files we need. She’s flying down here, right now. She told me it was amazing stuff. Sounded high as a kite. Atlanta arrivals, two o’clock. I’ll meet you there. Delta, from Washington. Picard give you anything?”

“Sure did,” I said. “He’s quite a guy. I got the rest of the printout, I think.”

“You think?” Finlay said. “You don’t know?”

“Only just got back,” I said. “Haven’t looked at it yet.”

“So look at it, for Christ’s sake,” he said. “It’s important, right?”

“See you later, Harvard guy,” I said.

We sat down at the table over by the window. Unzipped the little plastic bag and pulled out the paper. Unfolded it carefully. It was a sheet of computer paper. The top inch had been torn off the right-hand corner. Half the heading had been left behind. It said: Operation E Unum.

“Operation E Unum Pluribus,” Roscoe said.

Underneath was a triple-spaced list of initials with telephone numbers opposite. The first set of initials was P.H. The phone number was torn off.

“Paul Hubble,” Roscoe said. “His number and the other half of the heading was what Finlay found.”

I nodded. Then there were four more sets of initials. The first two were W.B. and K.K. They had phone numbers alongside. I recognized a New York area code

against K.K. The W.B. area code I figured I'd have to look up. The third set of initials was J.S. The code was 504. New Orleans area. I'd been there less than a month ago. The fourth set of initials was M.B.G. There was a phone number with a 202 area code. I pointed to it, so Roscoe could see it.

"Molly Beth Gordon," she said. "Washington, D.C."

I nodded again. It wasn't the number I had called from the rosewood office. Maybe her home number. The final two items on the torn paper were not initials, and there were no corresponding phone numbers. The second-to-last item was just two words: Stollers' Garage. The last item was three words: Gray's Kliner File. I looked at the careful capital letters and I could just about feel my dead brother's neat, pedantic personality bursting off the page.

Paul Hubble we knew about. He was dead. Molly Beth Gordon we knew about. She'd be here at two o'clock. We'd seen the garage up at Sherman Stoller's place on the golf course. It held nothing but two empty cartons. That left the underlined heading, three sets of initials with three phone numbers, and the three words: Gray's Kliner File. I checked the time. Just past noon. Too early to sit back and wait for Molly Beth to arrive. I figured we should make a start.

"First we think about the heading," I said. "E Unum Pluribus."

Roscoe shrugged.

"That's the U.S. motto, right?" she said. "The Latin thing?"

"No," I said. "It's the motto backwards. This more or less means out of one comes many. Not out of many comes one."

"Could Joe have written it down wrong?" she said.

I shook my head.

"I doubt it," I said. "I don't think Joe would make that kind of a mistake. It must mean something."

Roscoe shrugged again.

"Doesn't mean anything to me," she said. "What else?"

“Gray’s Kliner File,” I said. “Did Gray have a file on Kliner?”

“Probably,” Roscoe said. “He had a file on just about everything. Somebody spat on the sidewalk, he’d put it in a file.”

I nodded. Stepped back to the bed and picked up the phone. Called Finlay down in Margrave. Baker told me he’d already left. So I dialed the other numbers on Joe’s printout. The W.B. number was in New Jersey. Princeton University. Faculty of modern history. I hung up straight away. Couldn’t see the connection. The K.K. number was in New York City. Columbia University. Faculty of modern history. I hung up again. Then I dialed J.S. in New Orleans. I heard one ring tone and a busy voice.

“Fifteenth squad, detectives,” the voice said.

“Detectives?” I said. “Is that the NOPD?”

“Fifteenth squad,” the voice said again. “Can I help you?”

“You got somebody there with the initials J.S.?” I asked.

“J.S.?” the voice said. “I got three of them. Which one do you want?”

“Don’t know,” I said. “Does the name Joe Reacher mean anything to you?”

“What the hell is this?” the voice said. “Twenty Questions or something?”

“Ask them, will you?” I said. “Ask each J.S. if they know Joe Reacher. Will you do that? I’ll call back later, OK?”

Down in New Orleans, the fifteenth squad desk guy grunted and hung up. I shrugged at Roscoe and put the phone back on the nightstand.

“We wait for Molly?” she said.

I nodded. I was a little nervous about meeting Molly. It was going to be like meeting a ghost connected to another ghost.

WE WAITED AT THE CRAMPED TABLE IN THE WINDOW. Watched the

sun fall away from its noontime peak. Wasted time passing Joe's torn printout back and forth between us. I stared at the heading. E Unum Pluribus. Out of one comes many. That was Joe Reacher, in three words. Something important, all bound up in a wry little pun.

"Let's go," Roscoe said.

We were early, but we were anxious. We gathered up our things. Rode the elevator to the lobby and let the dead guys settle up for our phone calls. Then we walked over to Roscoe's Chevy. Started threading our way around to arrivals. It wasn't easy. The airport hotels were planned for people heading out of arrivals or heading into departures. Nobody had thought of people going our way.

"We don't know what Molly looks like," Roscoe said.

"But she knows what I look like," I said. "I look like Joe."

The airport was vast. We saw most of it as we crabbed over to the right quarter. It was bigger than some cities I'd been in. We drove for miles. Found the right terminal. Missed a lane change and passed the short-term parking. Came around again and lined up at the barrier. Roscoe snatched the ticket and eased into the lot.

"Go left," I said.

The lot was packed. I was craning over, looking for spaces. Then I saw a vague black shape slide by in the line on my right. I caught it out of the corner of my eye.

"Go right, go right," I said.

I thought it was the rear end of a black pickup. Brand-new. Sliding by on my right. Roscoe hauled the wheel over and we swung into the next aisle. Caught a flash of red brake lights in black sheetmetal. A pickup swung out of sight. Roscoe howled down the aisle and cornered hard.

The next aisle was empty. Nothing moving. Just ranks of automobiles standing quiet in the sun. Same thing in the next aisle. Nothing on the move. No black pickup. We drove all over the lot. Took us a long time. We were held up by the cars moving in and out. But we covered the whole area. Couldn't find a black pickup anywhere.

pickup anywhere.

But we did find Finlay. We parked up in an empty space and started the long walk to the terminal. Finlay had parked in a different quarter and was walking in on a different diagonal. He walked the rest of the way with us.

The terminal was very busy. And it was huge. Built low, but it spread horizontally over acres. The whole place was crowded. Flickering screens high up announced the arrivals. The two o'clock Delta from Washington was in and taxiing. We walked down toward the gate. Felt like a half-mile walk. We were in a long corridor with a ribbed rubber floor. A pair of moving walkways ran down the center of the corridor. On the right was an endless row of bright gaudy advertisements about the attractions of the Sunbelt. Business or pleasure, it was all down here, that's for sure. On the left was a glass partition, floor to ceiling, with a white etched stripe at eye level to stop people trying to walk through the glass.

Behind the glass were the gates. There was an endless sequence of them. The passengers came out of the planes and walked along on their side of the glass. Half of them disappeared sideways into the baggage claim areas. Then they came out again and found exit doors in the glass partition which let them out into the main corridor. The other half were the short-haul fliers with no checked baggage. They went straight to the doors. Each set of doors was mobbed by big knots of meeters and greeters. We pushed our way through them as we headed down.

Passengers were spilling out of the doors, every thirty yards. Friends and relatives were moving in close and the two streams of people were colliding. We fought through eight separate crowds before we got to the right gate. I just pushed my way through. I felt anxious. The glimpse of the black pickup in the lot had unsettled me.

We reached the gate. We walked on our side of the glass right past the doors. Right down to level with the end of the jetway. People were already coming off the plane. I watched them spilling out of the jetway and turning to walk up toward the baggage area and the exit doors. On our side of the glass, people were walking down to the gates farther on. They were pushing at us as they passed. We were being dragged down the corridor. Like swimming in a heavy sea. We were stepping backward all the time just to stay standing still.

There was a stream of people behind the glass. I saw a woman coming in who could have been Molly. She was about thirty-five, dressed well in a business suit, carrying a briefcase and a garment bag. I was standing there, trying to get recognized, but she suddenly saw somebody else and pointed and gave a silent shriek behind the glass and blew a kiss to a guy ten yards from me. He shouldered backward toward the doors to wait for her.

Then it seemed like just about any of the women could be Molly. There must have been a couple of dozen candidates. There were blondes and brunettes, tall ones, short ones, pretty ones, homely ones. All dressed for business, all carrying efficient luggage, all striding in with the weary purposeful manner of tired executives in the middle of a busy day. I watched them all. They flowed with the tide behind the glass, some of them peering out for husbands, lovers, drivers, business contacts, some of them looking straight ahead. All of them carried along in the swarming crowd.

One of them had matching burgundy leather luggage, a heavy briefcase in one hand and a carry-on which she was wheeling on a long handle with the other. She was small, blond, excited. She slowed as she turned out of the jetway and scanned the crowd through the glass. Her eyes flashed past me. Then they snapped back. She looked straight at me. Stopped. People piled up behind her. She was pushed forward. She fought her way over to the glass. I moved in close on my side. She stared at me. Smiled.

“Molly?” I mouthed through the glass at her.

She held up the heavy briefcase like a trophy. Nodded toward it. Smiled a big wide smile of excited triumph. She was pushed in the back. Borne along by the crowd toward the exit. She looked back to see if I was following. Roscoe and Finlay and I struggled after her.

On Molly’s side of the glass, the flow was with her. Our side, it was against us. We were being separated at double speed. There was a solid mob of college kids bearing down on us. Aiming to fly out of a gate farther down. Big, well-fed kids, clumsy luggage, rowdy. The three of us were shoved backward five yards. Through the glass, Molly was way ahead. I saw her blond head disappear. I fought sideways and vaulted over onto the moving walkway. It was going the wrong way. I was carried another five yards before I made it over the moving handgrip onto the other side.

Now I was going in the right direction, but the walkway was a solid mass of people just standing still on it. Content with the snail's pace the rubber floor was carrying them. They were standing three abreast. No way through at all. I climbed up onto the narrow handrail and tried to walk along it like a tightrope. I had to crouch because I couldn't balance. I fell heavily to my right. Got carried five yards the wrong way before I could struggle up. I looked around in panic. Through the glass, I could see Molly was being crowded into the baggage claim. I could see Roscoe and Finlay were way behind me. I was moving slowly the wrong way.

I didn't want Molly to go into the baggage claim. She'd flown down here in a hurry. She had urgent news. No way would she have packed a big valise. No way would she have checked any luggage. She shouldn't be going into the baggage claim. I put my head down and ran. Barged people out of the way. I was traveling against the pace of the walkway. The rubber floor was grabbing at my shoes. Each impact was costing me time. People were yelling in outrage. I didn't care. I tore through them and left them sprawling. Vaulted off the walkway and clawed through the crowd at the exit doors.

The baggage claim was a wide low hall, lit with dull yellow lights. I fought my way in through the exit lane. Looking everywhere for Molly. Couldn't find her. The hall was jammed with people. There must have been a hundred passengers standing around the carousel, three deep. The belt was grinding around under a heavy load of bags. There were ragged lines of luggage carts on the side wall. People were lining up to put quarters in a slot and pull them free. They were wheeling them away through the crowd. Carts were clashing and tangling. People were pushing and shoving.

I waded into the mass. Shouldered my way through and spun people around, searching for Molly. I'd seen her go in. I hadn't seen her come out. But she wasn't in there. I checked every face. I trawled through the whole hall. I let myself be carried outside on the relentless tide. Fought ahead to the exit door. Roscoe was holding tight to the doorframe, battling the flow.

"She come out?" I said.

"No," she said. "Finlay's gone to the end of the corridor. He's waiting there. I'm waiting here."

We stood there with people pouring past us. Then the crowd coming toward us

from the gate was suddenly thinning. The whole planeload was just about through. The last stragglers were strolling down. An old woman in a wheelchair was bringing up the rear. She was being pushed along by an airline employee. The guy had to pause and maneuver his way around something lying in the entrance to the baggage hall. It was a burgundy leather carry-on. It was lying on its side. Its extending handle was still pulled out. From fifteen feet away, I could read the fancy gold monogram on the front. It read: M.B.G.

Roscoe and I dived back into the baggage claim. In the few minutes I'd been out of there, the place had just about emptied. Not more than a dozen people still in there. Most of them were already hauling their bags off the belt and heading out as we headed in. Within a minute, the hall was deserted. The luggage belt was grinding round, empty. Then it stopped. The hall fell silent. Roscoe and I stood in the sudden quiet and looked at each other.

The hall had four walls and a floor and a ceiling. There was an entrance door and an exit door. The carousel snaked in through a hole a yard square and snaked out again through a hole a yard square. Both holes were draped with black rubber curtains cut into slats a few inches wide. Next to the carousel was a cargo door. On our side, it was blank. No handle. Locked.

Roscoe darted back and grabbed Molly Beth's carry-on. Opened it up. It held a change of clothes and a toilet bag. And a photograph. Eight by ten, in a brassed frame. It was Joe. He looked like me, but a little thinner. A shaved, tanned scalp. A wry, amused smile.

The hall was filled with the shriek of a warning siren. It sounded for a moment and then the luggage belt graunched back into motion. We stared at it. Stared at the shrouded hole it was coming through. The rubber curtains bellied. A briefcase came out. Burgundy leather. The straps were slashed through. The case was open. It was empty.

It wobbled mechanically around toward us. We stared at it. Stared at the cut straps. They had been severed with a sharp blade. Severed by somebody in too much of a hurry to click open the catches.

I leapt onto the moving carousel. Ran back against the belt's lurching motion and dove like a swimmer headfirst through the rubber slats shrouding the yard-square hole. I landed hard and the belt started to drag me back out. I scrambled and crawled like a kid on my hands and knees. Rolled off and jumped up. I was

in a loading bay. Deserted. The afternoon blazed outside. There was a stink of kerosene and diesel fuel from the baggage trains hauling in from the planes on the tarmac.

All around me were tall piles of forlorn cargo and forgotten suitcases. They were all stacked in three-sided storage bays. The rubber floor was littered with old labels and long bar codes. The place was like a filthy maze. I dodged and skidded about, hopelessly looking for Molly. I ran behind one tall pile after another. Into one bay and then the next. I grabbed at the metal racking and heaved myself around the tight corners. Glancing around desperately. Nobody there. Nobody anywhere. I ran on, sliding and skidding on the litter.

I found her left shoe. It was lying on its side at the entrance to a dark bay. I plunged in. Nothing there. I tried the next bay. Nothing there. I held onto the shelving, breathing hard. I had to organize. I ran to the far end of the corridor. Started ducking into each bay in turn. Left and right, left and right, working my way back as fast as I could, in a desperate breathless zigzag.

I found her right shoe three bays from the end. Then I found her blood. At the entry to the next bay, it was pooled on the floor, sticky, spreading. She was slumped at the back of the bay, on her back in the gloom, jammed between two towers of crates. Just sprawled there on the rubber floor. Blood was pouring out of her. Her gut was torn open. Somebody had jammed a knife in her and ripped it savagely upward under her ribs.

But she was alive. One pale hand was fluttering. Her lips were flecked with bright bubbles of blood. Her head was still, but her eyes were roving. I ran to her. Cradled her head. She gazed at me. Forced her mouth to work.

“Got to get in before Sunday,” she whispered.

Then she died in my arms.

21

I STUDIED CHEMISTRY IN MAYBE SEVEN DIFFERENT HIGH schools. Didn't learn much of it. Just came away with general impressions. One thing I remember is how you can throw some little extra thing into a glass tube and make everything blow up with a bang. Just some little powder, produces a result way bigger than it should.

That was how I felt about Molly. I'd never met her before. Never even heard of her. But I felt angry, way out of all proportion. I felt worse about her than I felt about Joe. What happened to Joe was in the line of his duty. Joe knew that. He would have accepted that. Joe and I knew about risk and duty right from the moment we first knew about anything at all. But Molly was different.

The other thing I remember from the chemistry lab is stuff about pressure. Pressure turns coal into diamonds. Pressure does things. It was doing things to me. I was angry and I was short of time. In my mind I was seeing Molly coming out of that jetway. Striding out, determined to find Joe's brother and help him. Smiling a wide smile of triumph. Holding up a briefcase of files she shouldn't have copied. Risking a lot. For me. For Joe. That image in my mind was building up like massive pressure on some old geological seam. I had to decide how to use that pressure. I had to decide whether it was going to crush me or turn me into a diamond.

We were leaning on the front fender of Roscoe's car in the airport short-term lot. Stunned and silent. Wednesday afternoon, nearly three o'clock. I had hold of Finlay's arm. He had wanted to stay inside and get involved. He had said it was his duty. I had screamed at him that we didn't have time. I had dragged him out of the terminal by force. I had marched him straight to the car, because I knew what we did in the next few moments was going to make the difference between winning and losing.

"We've got to go get Gray's file," I said. "It's the next best thing."

Finlay shrugged. Gave up the struggle.

"It's all we got," he said.

Roscoe nodded

Roscoe nodded.

“Let’s go,” she said.

She and I drove down together in her car. Finlay was in front of us all the way. She and I didn’t speak a single word. But Finlay was talking to himself through the whole trip. He was shouting and cursing. I could see his head jerking back and forth in his car. Cursing and shouting and yelling at his windshield.

TEALE WAS WAITING JUST INSIDE THE STATION HOUSE doors. Back against the reception counter. Stick clutched in his spotty old hand. He saw the three of us coming in and limped away into the big open squad room. Sat down at a desk. The desk nearest to the file room door.

We walked past him into the rosewood office. Sat down to wait it out. I pulled Joe’s torn printout from my pocket and passed it across the desk. Finlay scanned it through.

“Not much, is it?” he said. “What does the heading mean? E Unum Pluribus? That’s backwards, right?”

I nodded.

“Out of one comes many,” I said. “I don’t get the significance.”

He shrugged. Started reading it through again. I watched him study it. Then there was a loud knock on the office door and Baker came in.

“Teale’s on his way out of the building,” he said. “Talking to Stevenson in the parking lot. You guys need anything?”

Finlay handed him the torn printout.

“Get me a Xerox of this, will you?” he said.

Baker stepped out to do it and Finlay drummed his fingers on the desk.

“Who are all those initials?” he said.

“We only know the dead ones,” I said. “Hubble and Molly Beth. Two are

"We only know the dead ones," I said. "Hubble and Molly Beth. Two are college numbers. Princeton and Columbia. Last one is a detective down in New Orleans."

"What about Stoller's garage?" he said. "You get a look at that?"

"Nothing," I said. "Just a couple of empty air conditioner cartons from last year when he was hauling them to Florida and stealing them."

Finlay grunted and Baker came back in. Handed me Joe's paper with a copy of it. I kept the original and gave the copy to Finlay.

"Teale's gone," Baker said.

We hustled out of the office. Caught a glimpse of the white Cadillac easing out of the lot. Pushed open the file room door.

Margrave was a tiny town in the middle of nowhere but Gray had spent twenty-five years filling that file room with paper. There was more paper in there than I'd seen in a long time. All four walls had floor-to-ceiling cabinets with doors in crisp white enamel. We pulled open all the doors. Each cabinet was full of rows of files. There must have been a thousand letter-size boxes in there. Fiberboard boxes, labels on the spines, little plastic loops under the labels so you could pull the boxes out when you needed them. Left of the door, top shelf, was the A section. Right of the door, low down, the last Z. The K section was on the wall facing the door, left of center, eye level.

We found a box labeled "Kliner." Right between three boxes labeled "Klan" and one labeled "Klipspringer v. State of Georgia." I put my finger in the little loop. Pulled the box out. It was heavy. I handed it to Finlay. We ran back to the rosewood office. Laid the box on the rosewood desk. Opened it up. It was full of old yellowing paper.

But it was the wrong paper. It had nothing to do with Kliner. Nothing at all. It was a three-inch pile of ancient police department memos. Operational stuff. Stuff that should have been junked decades ago. A slice of history. Procedures to be followed if the Soviet Union aimed a missile at Atlanta. Procedures to be followed if a black man wanted to ride in the front of the bus. A mass of stuff. But none of the headings began with the letter K. Not one word concerned Kliner. I gazed at the three-inch pile and felt the pressure build up.

“Somebody beat us to it,” Roscoe said. “They took out the Kliner stuff and substituted this junk instead.”

Finlay nodded. But I shook my head.

“No,” I said. “Doesn’t make any sense. They’d have pulled the whole box and just thrown it in the trash. Gray did this himself. He needed to hide the stuff, but he couldn’t bring himself to spoil his sequence in the file room. So he took the contents out of the box and put in this old stuff instead. Kept everything neat and tidy. You said he was a meticulous guy, right?”

Roscoe shrugged.

“Gray hid it?” she said. “He could have done it. He hid his gun in my desk. He didn’t mind hiding things.”

I looked at her. Something she had said was ringing a warning bell.

“When did he give you the gun?” I asked her.

“After Christmas,” she said. “Not long before he died.”

“There’s something wrong with that,” I said. “The guy was a detective with twenty-five years in the job, right? A good detective. A senior, respected guy. Why would a guy like that feel his choice of off-duty weapon should have to be a secret? That wasn’t his problem. He gave you the box because it held something needed hiding.”

“He was hiding the gun,” Roscoe said. “I told you that.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t believe that. The gun was a decoy, to make sure you kept the box in a locked drawer. He didn’t need to hide the gun. Guy like that could have a nuclear warhead for an off-duty weapon if he wanted to. The gun wasn’t the big secret. The big secret was something else in the box.”

“But there isn’t anything else in the box,” Roscoe said. “Certainly no files, right?”

We stood still for a second. Then we ran for the doors. Crashed through and ran over to Roscoe’s Chevy in the lot. Pulled Gray’s file box out of the trunk. Opened it up. I handed the Desert Eagle to Finlay. Examined the box of bullets

Opened it up. Handed the Desert Eagle to Finlay. Examined the box of bullets. Nothing there. There was nothing else in the file box. I shook it out. Examined the lid. Nothing there. I tore the box apart. Forced the glued seams and flattened the cardboard out. Nothing there. Then I tore the lid apart. Hidden under the corner flap there was a key. Taped to the inside face. Where it could never be seen. Where it had been carefully hidden by a dead man.

WE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THE KEY FIT. WE DISCOUNTED ANYTHING in the station house. Discounted anything in Gray's home. Felt those places were too obvious for a cautious man to choose. I stared at the key and felt the pressure building. Closed my eyes and built a picture of Gray easing back the corner of that lid and taping his key under it. Handing the box to his friend Roscoe. Watching her put it in her drawer. Watching the drawer roll shut. Watching her lock it. Relaxing. I built that picture into a movie and ran it in my head twice before it told me what the key fitted.

"Something in the barbershop," I said.

I snatched the Desert Eagle back from Finlay and hustled him and Roscoe into the car. Roscoe drove. She fired it up and slewed out of the lot. Turned south toward town.

"Why?" she said.

"He used to go in there," I said. "Three, four times a week. The old guy told me that. He was the only white guy ever went in there. It felt like safe territory. Away from Teale and Kliner and everybody else. And he didn't need to go in there, did he? You said he had a big messy beard and no hair. He wasn't going in there to get barbered. He was going in there because he liked the old guys. He turned to them. Gave them the stuff to hide."

Roscoe jammed the Chevy to a stop on the street outside the barbershop and we jumped out and ran in. There were no customers in there. Just the two old guys sitting in their own chairs, doing nothing. I held up the key.

"We've come for Gray's stuff," I said.

The younger guy shook his head.

“Can’t give it to you, my friend,” he said.

He walked over and took the key from me. Stepped over and pressed it into Roscoe’s palm.

“Now we can,” he said. “Old Mr. Gray told us, give it up to nobody except his friend Miss Roscoe.”

He took the key back from her. Stepped back to the sink and stooped down to unlock a narrow mahogany drawer built in underneath. Pulled out three files. They were thick files, each in an old furred buff paper cover. He handed one to me, one to Finlay and one to Roscoe. Then he signaled his partner and they walked through to the back. Left us alone. Roscoe sat on the upholstered bench in the window. Finlay and I hitched ouselves into the barber chairs. Put our feet up on the chrome rests. Started reading.

MY FILE WAS A THICK STACK OF POLICE REPORTS. THEY HAD all been Xeroxed and faxed. Doubly blurred. But I could read them. They formed a dossier put together by Detective James Spirenza, Fifteenth Squad, New Orleans Police Department, Homicide Bureau. Spirenza had been assigned a homicide, eight years ago. Then he had been assigned seven more. He had ended up with a case involving eight homicides. He hadn’t cleared any of them. Not one. A total failure.

But he’d tried hard. His investigation had been meticulous. Painstaking. The first victim had been the owner of a textile plant. A specialist, involved in some new chemical process for cotton. The second victim was the first guy’s foreman. He’d left the first guy’s operation and was trying to raise seed money to start up on his own.

The next six victims were government people. EPA employees. They had been running a case out of their New Orleans office. The case concerned pollution in the Mississippi Delta. Fish were dying. The cause was traced two hundred and fifty miles upriver. A textile processing plant in Mississippi State was pumping chemicals into the river, sodium hydroxide and sodium hypochlorite and chlorine, all mixing with the river water and forming a deadly acidic cocktail.

All eight victims had died the same way. Two shots to the head with a silenced

automatic pistol. A .22 caliber. Neat and clinical. Spirenza had assumed they were professional hits. He went after the shooter two ways. He called in every favor he could and shook all the trees. Professional hit men are thin on the ground. Spirenza and his buddies talked to them all. None of them knew a thing.

Spirenza's second approach was the classic approach. Figure out who is benefiting. Didn't take him long to piece it together. The textile processor up in Mississippi State looked good. He was under attack from the eight who died. Two of them were attacking him commercially. The other six were threatening to close him down. Spirenza pulled him apart. Turned him inside out. He was on his back for a year. The paperwork in my hand was a testimony to that. Spirenza had pulled in the FBI and the IRS. They'd searched every cent in every account for unexplained cash payments to the elusive shooter.

They'd searched for a year and found nothing. On the way, they turned up a lot of unsavory stuff. Spirenza was convinced the guy had killed his wife. Plain beat her to death was his verdict. The guy had married again and Spirenza had faxed the local police department with a warning. The guy's only son was a psychopath. Worse than his father, in Spirenza's view. A stone-cold psychopath. The textile processor had protected his son every step of the way. Covered for him. Paid his way out of trouble. The boy had records from a dozen different institutions.

But nothing would stick. New Orleans FBI had lost interest. Spirenza had closed the case. Forgotten all about it, until an old detective from an obscure Georgia jurisdiction had faxed him, asking for information on the Kliner family.

FINLAY CLOSED HIS FILE. SPUN HIS BARBER CHAIR TO FACE mine.

"The Kliner Foundation is bogus," he said. "Totally bogus. It's a cover for something else. It's all here. Gray bust it wide open. Audited it from top to bottom. The Foundation is spending millions every year, but its audited income is zero. Precisely zero."

He selected a sheet from the file. Leaned over. Passed it over to me. It was a sort of balance sheet, showing the Foundation's expenditures.

"See that?" he said. "It's incredible. That's what they're spending."

I looked at it. The sheet contained a huge figure. I nodded.

“Maybe a lot more than that,” I said. “I’ve been down here five days, right? Prior to that I was all over the States for six months. Prior to that I was all over the world. Margrave is by far the cleanest, best maintained, most manicured place I’ve ever seen. It’s better looked after than the Pentagon or the White House. Believe me, I’ve been there. Everything in Margrave is either brand-new or else perfectly renovated. It’s completely perfect. It’s so perfect it’s frightening. That must cost an absolute fortune.”

He nodded.

“And Margrave is a very weird place,” I said. “It’s deserted most of the time. There’s no life. There’s practically no commercial activity in the whole town. Nothing ever goes on. Nobody is earning any money.”

He looked blank. Didn’t follow.

“Think about it,” I said. “Look at Eno’s, for example. Brand-new place. Gleaming, state-of-the-art diner. But he never has any customers. I’ve been in there a couple of times. There were never more than a couple of people in the place. The waitresses outnumber the customers. So how is Eno paying the bills? The overhead? The mortgage? Same goes for everywhere in town. Have you ever seen lines of customers rushing in and out of any of the stores?”

Finlay thought about it. Shook his head.

“Same goes for this barbershop,” I said. “I was in here Sunday morning and Tuesday morning. The old guy said they’d had no customers in between. No customers in forty-eight hours.”

I stopped talking then. I thought about what else the old guy had said. That gnarled old barber. I suddenly thought about it in a new light.

“The old barber,” I said. “He told me something. It was pretty weird. I thought he was crazy. I asked him how they make a living with no customers. He said they don’t need customers to make a living because of the money they get from the Kliner Foundation. So I said, what money? He said a thousand bucks. He said all the merchants get it. So I figured he meant some kind of a business grant, a thousand bucks a year, right?”

Finlay nodded. Seemed about right to him.

“I was just chatting,” I said. “Like you do in the barber’s chair. So I said a thousand bucks a year is OK, but it’s not going to keep the wolf from the door, something like that, right? You know what he said then?”

He shook his head and waited. I concentrated on remembering the old guy’s exact words. I wanted to see if he would dismiss it as easily as I had done.

“He made it sound like a big secret,” I said. “Like he was way out on a limb even to mention it. He was whispering to me. He said he shouldn’t tell me, but he would, because I knew his sister.”

“You know his sister?” Finlay asked. Surprised.

“No, I don’t,” I said. “He was acting very confused. On Sunday, I’d been asking him about Blind Blake, you know, the old guitar player, and he said his sister had known the guy, sixty years ago. From that, he’d got mixed up, must have thought I’d said I knew his sister.”

“So what was the big secret?” he said.

“He said it wasn’t a thousand dollars a year,” I said. “He said it was a thousand dollars a week.”

“A thousand dollars a week?” Finlay said. “A week? Is that possible?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “At the time, I assumed the old guy was crazy. But now, I think he was just telling the truth.”

“A thousand a week?” he said again. “That’s a hell of a business grant. That’s fifty-two thousand bucks a year. That’s a hell of a lot of money, Reacher.”

I thought about it. Pointed at the total on Gray’s audit.

“They’d need figures like that,” I said. “If this is how much they’re spending, they’d need figures like that just to get rid of it all.”

Finlay was pensive. Thinking it through.

“They’ve bought the whole town,” he said. “Very slowly, very quietly. They’ve

bought the whole town for a grand a week, here and there."

"Right," I said. "The Kliner Foundation has become the golden goose. Nobody will run the risk of killing it. They all keep their mouths shut and look away from whatever needs looking away from."

"Right," he said. "The Kliners could get away with murder."

I looked at him.

"They have got away with murder," I said.

"So what do we do about it?" Finlay said.

"First we figure out exactly what the hell they're doing," I said.

He looked at me like I was crazy.

"We know what they're doing, right?" he said. "They're printing a shitload of funny money up in that warehouse."

I shook my head at him.

"No, they're not," I said. "There's no serious manufacture of counterfeit money in the U.S. Joe put a stop to all that. The only place it happens is abroad."

"So what's going on?" Finlay asked. "I thought this was all about counterfeit money. Why else would Joe be involved?"

Roscoe looked over at us from the bench in the window.

"It is all about counterfeit money," she said. "I know exactly what it's all about. Every last little detail."

She held up Gray's file in one hand.

"Part of the answer is in here," she said.

Then she picked up the barbers' daily newspaper with the other hand.

"And the rest of the answer is in here," she said.

Finlay and I joined her on the bench. Studied the file she'd been reading. It was a surveillance report. Gray had hidden out under the highway cloverleaf and watched the truck traffic in and out of the warehouses. Thirty-two separate days. The results were carefully listed, in three parts. On the first eleven occasions, he'd seen one truck a day incoming from the south, arriving early in the morning. He'd seen outgoing trucks all day long, heading north and west. He'd listed the outgoing trucks by destination, according to their license plates. He must have been using field glasses. The list of destinations was all over the place. A complete spread, from California all the way up and over to Massachusetts. Those first eleven days, he'd logged eleven incoming trucks and sixty-seven outgoing. An average of one truck a day coming in, six going out, small trucks, maybe a ton of cargo in a week.

The first section of Gray's log covered the first calendar year. The second section covered the second calendar year. He'd hid out on nine separate occasions. He'd seen fifty-three outgoing trucks, the same six a day as before, with a similar list of destinations. But the log of incoming trucks was different. In the first half of the year, one truck a day was coming in, like normal. But in the second half of the year, the deliveries picked up. They built up to two trucks a day incoming.

The final twelve days of his surveillance were different again. They were all from the final five months of his life. Between last fall and February, he was still logging about six trucks a day going out to the same wide spread of destinations. But there were no incoming trucks listed at all. None at all. From last fall, stuff was being moved out, but it wasn't coming in.

"So?" Finlay asked Roscoe.

She sat back and smiled. She had it all figured.

"It's obvious, right?" she said. "They're bringing counterfeit money into the country. It's printed in Venezuela, some place Kliner set up alongside his new chemical place there. It comes in by boat and they're hauling it up from Florida to the warehouse in Margrave. Then they're trucking it north and west, up to the big cities, L.A., Chicago, Detroit, New York, Boston. They're feeding it into the cash flows in the big cities. It's an international counterfeit money distribution network. It's obvious, Finlay."

"Is it?" he said.

“Of course it is,” she said again. “Think of Sherman Stoller. He drove up and down to Florida to meet the boat coming in from the sea, at Jacksonville Beach. He was on his way out there to meet the boat when he got picked up for speeding on the bridge, right? That’s why he was so agitated. That’s why he got the fancy lawyer out so fast, right?”

Finlay nodded.

“It all fits,” she said. “Think of a map of the States. The money is printed in South America, comes here by sea. Lands in Florida. Flows up the southeast, and then sort of branches out from Margrave. Flows on out to L.A. in the west, up to Chicago in the middle, New York and Boston in the east. Separate branches, right? It looks like a candelabra or a menorah. You know what a menorah is?”

“Sure,” Finlay said. “It’s that candlestick Jewish people use.”

“Right,” she said. “That’s how it looks on a map. Florida to Margrave is the stem. Then the individual arms lead out and up to the big cities, L.A. across to Chicago across to Boston. It’s an import network, Finlay.”

She was giving him plenty of help. Her hands were tracing menorah shapes in the air. The geography sounded OK to me. It made sense. An import flow, rolling north in trucks, up from Florida. It would need to use that knot of highways around Atlanta to branch itself out and head for the big cities in the north and west. The menorah idea was good. The left-hand arm of the candlestick would have to be bent out horizontally, to reach L.A. Like somebody had dropped the thing and somebody else had accidentally stepped on it. But the idea made sense. Almost certainly Margrave itself was the pivot. Almost certainly that warehouse was the actual distribution center. The geography was right. Using a sleepy nowhere place like Margrave as the distribution center would be smart. And they would have a huge amount of available cash. That was for sure. Forged cash, but it would spend just the same. And there was a lot of it. They were shipping a ton a week. It was an industrial-scale operation. Huge. It would explain the Kliner Foundation’s massive spending. If they ever ran short, they could just print some more. But Finlay still wasn’t convinced.

“What about the last twelve months?” he said. “There’s been no import flow at all. Look at Gray’s list. The incoming deliveries didn’t happen. They stopped

exactly a year ago. Sherman Stoller got laid off, right? There's been nothing coming up for a year. But they're still distributing something. There were still six trucks a day going out. Nothing coming in, but six trucks a day going out? What does that mean? What kind of an import flow is that?"

Roscoe just grinned at him and picked up the newspaper.

"The answer's in here," she said. "It's been in the papers since Friday. The Coast Guard. Last September, they started their big operation against smuggling, right? There was a lot of advance publicity. Kliner must have known it was coming. So he built up a stockpile ahead of time. See Gray's list? For the six months before last September, he doubled the incoming deliveries. He was building up a stockpile in the warehouse. He's kept on distributing it all year. That's why they've been panicking about exposure. They've been sitting there on top of a massive stockpile of counterfeit money for a year. Now the Coast Guard is going to abandon its operation, right? So they can start importing again as usual. That's what's going to happen on Sunday. That's what poor Molly meant when she said we have to get in before Sunday. We have to get in the warehouse while the last of the stockpile is still in there."

22

FINLAY NODDED. HE WAS CONVINCED. THEN HE SMILED. HE stood up from the bench in the barbershop window and took Roscoe's hand. Shook it very formally.

"Good work," he said to her. "A perfect analysis. I always said you were smart, Roscoe. Right, Reacher? Didn't I tell you she's the best we got?"

I nodded and smiled and Roscoe blushed. Finlay held on to her hand and kept on smiling. But I could see him combing backward and forward through her theory, looking for loose ends. He only found two.

"What about Hubble?" he asked. "Where did he fit in? They wouldn't recruit a bank executive just to load trucks, would they?"

I shook my head.

"Hubble used to be a currency manager," I said. "He was there to get rid of the fake money. He was feeding it into the system. He knew where it could be slipped in. Where it was needed. Like his old job, but in reverse."

He nodded.

"What about the air conditioners?" he asked. "Sherman Stoller was hauling them to Florida. That woman told you. We know that's for real because you saw two old cartons in her garage. And his truck was full of them when the Jacksonville PD searched it. What was that all about?"

"Legitimate business, I guess," I said. "Like a decoy. It concealed the illegal part. Like camouflage. It explained the truck movements up and down to Florida. They would have had to run south empty otherwise."

Finlay nodded.

"Smart move, I guess," he said. "No empty run. Makes sense. Sell a few air conditioners, it makes money both ways, right?"

He nodded again and let go of Roscoe's hand.

“We need samples of the money,” he said.

I smiled at him. I had suddenly realized something.

“I’ve got samples,” I said. I put my hand in my pocket and pulled out my thick roll of hundreds. Pulled one off the back of the roll and one off the front. Gave the two banknotes to Finlay.

“These are their counterfeits?” he said.

“Got to be,” I said. “Charlie Hubble gave me a wad of hundreds for expense money. She probably got them from Hubble. Then I took another wad from those guys who were out looking for me Tuesday.”

“And that means they’re counterfeit?” Finlay said. “Why?”

“Think about it,” I said. “Kliner needs operating cash, why should he use real money? I bet he paid Hubble in counterfeit money. And I bet he gave those Jacksonville boys counterfeit money for their operating expenses, too.”

Finlay held the two hundreds right up to the bright light in the window. Roscoe and I crowded him for a look.

“Are you sure?” Roscoe said. “They look real to me.”

“They’re fakes,” I said. “Got to be. Stands to reason, right? Hundreds are what fakers like to print. Anything bigger is hard to pass, anything smaller isn’t worth the effort. And why should they spend real bucks when they’ve got truckloads of forgeries available?”

We took a good look at them. Peered at them, felt them, smelled them, rubbed them between our fingers. Finlay opened up his billfold and pulled out a hundred of his own. We compared the three notes. Passed them back and forth. Couldn’t see any difference at all.

“If these are fakes, they’re damn good,” Finlay said. “But what you said makes sense. Probably the whole of the Kliner Foundation is funded with fakes. Millions every year.”

He put his own hundred back in his billfold. Slid the fakes into his pocket.

“I’m going back to the station house,” he said. “You two come in tomorrow, about noon. Teale will be gone for lunch. We’ll take it from there.”

ROSCOE AND I DROVE FIFTY MILES SOUTH, TO MACON. I wanted to keep on the move. It’s a basic rule for safety. Keep moving around. We chose an anonymous motel on the southeastern fringe. As far from Margrave as you can get in Macon, with the city sprawl between us and our enemies. Old Mayor Teale had said a motel in Macon would suit me. Tonight, he was right.

We showered in cold water and fell into bed. Fell into a restless sleep. The room was warm. We tossed around fitfully most of the night. Gave it up and got up again with the dawn. Stood there yawning in the half light. Thursday morning. Felt like we hadn’t slept at all. We groped around and got dressed in the dark. Roscoe put her uniform on. I put my old things on. I figured I’d need to buy some new stuff soon. I’d do it with Kliner’s forgeries.

“What are we going to do?” Roscoe said.

I didn’t answer. I was thinking about something else.

“Reacher?” she said. “What are we going to do about all this?”

“What did Gray do about it?” I said.

“He hung himself,” she said.

I thought some more.

“Did he?” I asked her.

There was a silence.

“Oh God,” Roscoe said. “You think there’s some doubt about that?”

“Maybe,” I said. “Think about it. Suppose he confronted one of them? Suppose he was found poking around somewhere he shouldn’t have been?”

“You think they killed him?” she asked. There was panic in her voice.

“Maybe,” I said again. “I think they killed Joe and Stoller and the Morrisons and Hubble and Molly Beth Gordon. I think they tried to kill you and me. If somebody is a threat, they kill him. That’s how Kliner operates.”

Roscoe was quiet for a while. Thinking about her old colleague. Gray, the dour and patient detective. Twenty-five years of meticulous work. A guy like that was a threat. A guy who took thirty-two patient days to cross-check a suspicion was a threat. Roscoe looked up and nodded.

“He must have made a wrong move,” she said.

I nodded gently at her.

“They lynched him,” I said. “Made it look like suicide.”

“I can’t believe it,” she said.

“Was there an autopsy?” I asked her.

“Guess so,” she said.

“Then we’ll check it out,” I said. “We’ll have to speak to that doctor again. Down in Yellow Springs.”

“But he’d have said, right?” she asked me. “If he’d had doubts, wouldn’t he have raised them at the time?”

“He’d have raised them with Morrison,” I said. “Morrison would have ignored them. Because his people had caused them in the first place. We’ll have to check it out for ourselves.”

Roscoe shuddered.

“I was at his funeral,” she said. “We were all there. Chief Morrison made a speech on the lawn outside the church. So did Mayor Teale. They said he was a fine officer. They said he was Margrave’s finest. But they killed him.”

She said it with a lot of feeling. She’d liked Margrave. Her family had toiled there for generations. She was rooted. She’d liked her job. Enjoyed the sense of contribution. But the community she’d served was rotten. It was dirty and corrupted. It wasn’t a community. It was a swamp, wallowing in dirty money

and blood. I sat and watched her world crumble.

WE DROVE NORTH ON THE ROAD BETWEEN MACON AND MARGRAVE. Halfway home Roscoe hung a right and we headed for Yellow Springs down a back road. Over toward the hospital. I was hungry. We hadn't eaten breakfast. Not the best state for revisiting the morgue. We swung into the hospital lot. Took the speed bumps slowly and nosed around to the back. Parked up a little way from the big metal roller door.

We got out of the car. Stretched our legs on a roundabout route to the office door. The sun was warming the day up. It would have been pleasant to stay outside. But we ducked in and went looking for the doctor. We found him in his shabby office. He was at his chipped desk. Still looking tired. Still in a white coat. He looked up and nodded us in.

"Morning, folks," he said. "What can I do for you?"

We sat down on the same stools as Tuesday. I stayed away from the fax machine. I let Roscoe do the talking. Better that way. I had no official standing.

"February this year," she said. "My chief of detectives up at the Margrave PD killed himself. Do you remember?"

"Was that some guy called Gray?" the doctor said.

Roscoe nodded and the doctor got up and walked around to a file cabinet. Pulled open a drawer. It was tight and made a screeching sound. The doctor ran his fingers backward over the files.

"February," he said. "Gray."

He pulled a file and carried it back to his desk. Dropped it on his blotter. Sat back down heavily and opened it up. It was a thin file. Not much in it.

"Gray," he said again. "Yes, I remember this guy. Hung himself, right? First time we had a Margrave case in thirty years. I was called up to his house. In the garage, wasn't it? From a rafter?"

"That's right," Roscoe said. She went quiet.

"That's right," Roscoe said. She went quiet.

"So how can I help you?" the doctor said.

"Anything wrong with it?" she asked.

The doctor looked at the file. Turned a page.

"Guy hangs himself, there's always something wrong with it," he said.

"Anything specially wrong with it?" I said.

The doctor swung his tired gaze over from Roscoe to me.

"Suspicious?" he said.

He was nearly smiling the same little smile he'd used on Tuesday.

"Was there anything suspicious about it?" I asked him.

He shook his head.

"No," he said. "Suicide by hanging. Open and shut. He was on a kitchen stool in his garage. Made himself a noose, jumped off the stool. Everything was consistent. We got the background story from the local people up there. I couldn't see a problem."

"What was the background story?" Roscoe asked him.

He swung his gaze back to her. Glanced through the file.

"He was depressed," he said. "Had been for a while. The night it happened he was out drinking with his chief, who was the Morrison guy we just had in here, and the town mayor up there, some guy called Teale. The three of them were drowning their sorrows over some case Gray had screwed up on. He got falling down drunk and they had to help him home. They got him in to his house and left him there. He must have felt bad. He made it to the garage and hung himself."

"That was the story?" Roscoe said.

"Morrison signed a statement," the doctor said. "He was real upset. Felt he

should have done more, you know, stayed with him or something."

"Did it sound right to you?" she asked him.

"I didn't know Gray at all," he said. "This facility deals with a dozen police departments. I'd never seen anybody from Margrave before then. Quiet sort of a place, right? At least, it used to be. But what happened with this guy is consistent with what usually happens. Drinking sets people off."

"Any physical evidence?" I asked him.

The doctor looked back in the file. Looked over at me.

"Corpse stank of whiskey," he said. "Some fresh bruising on the upper and lower arms. Consistent with him being walked home by two men while inebriated. I couldn't see a problem."

"Did you do a postmortem?" Roscoe asked him.

The doctor shook his head.

"No need," he said. "It was open and shut, we were very busy. Like I say, we have more to worry about down here than suicides over in Margrave. February, we had cases all over the place. Up to our eyes. Your Chief Morrison asked for minimum fuss. I think he sent us a note. Said it was kind of sensitive. Didn't want Gray's family to know that the old guy had been blind drunk. Wanted to preserve some kind of dignity. It was OK with me. I couldn't see a problem and we were very busy, so I released the body for cremation right away."

Roscoe and I sat looking at each other. The doctor stepped back to the cabinet and put the file away. Closed the drawer with a screech.

"OK, folks?" he said. "If you'll excuse me, I've got things to do."

We nodded and thanked him for his time. Then we shuffled out of the cramped office. Got back out into the warm fall sunshine. Stood around blinking. We didn't speak. Roscoe was too upset. She'd just heard about her old friend getting murdered.

"I'm sorry," I said.

“A bullshit story from beginning to end,” she said. “He hadn’t just screwed up on a case. He never screwed up on any case. He wasn’t especially depressed. And he didn’t drink. Never touched a drop. So he certainly wasn’t falling down drunk. And he would never socialize with Morrison. Or the damn mayor. He just wouldn’t. He didn’t like them. Never in a million years would he spend a social evening with them. And he had no family. So all that stuff about his family and sensitivity and dignity is total bullshit. They killed him and bullshitted the coroner so he wouldn’t look too closely.”

I sat there in the car and let the rage pour out of her. Then she was quiet and still. She was figuring out how they’d done it.

“Do you think it was Morrison and Teale?” she asked me.

“And somebody else,” I said. “There were three guys involved. I figure the three of them went around to his place and knocked on the door. Gray opened up and Teale pulled a gun. Morrison and the third guy grabbed him and held him by the arms. That explains the bruising. Teale maybe poured a bottle of whiskey down his throat, or at least splashed it all over his clothes. They hustled him off to the garage and strung him up.”

Roscoe started the car and eased it out of the hospital lot. She drove slowly over the speed bumps. Then she swung the wheel and blasted up the road through the countryside toward Margrave.

“They killed him,” she said. Just a simple statement. “Like they killed Joe. I think I know how you must be feeling.”

I nodded.

“They’ll pay for it,” I said. “For both of them.”

“You bet your ass,” she said.

We fell silent. Sped north for a while, then merged with the county road. A straight twelve miles up to Margrave.

“Poor old Gray,” she said. “I can’t believe it. He was so smart, so cautious.”

“Not smart enough,” I said. “Or cautious enough. We’ve got to remember that. You know the rules, right? Don’t be on your own. If you see somebody coming

You know the rules, right? Don't be on your own. If you see somebody coming, run like hell. Or shoot the bastard. Stick with Finlay if you can, OK?"

She was concentrating on driving. She was doing a hell of a speed up the straight road. Thinking about Finlay.

"Finlay," she repeated. "You know what I can't figure?"

"What?" I said.

"There's the two of them, right?" she said. "Teale and Morrison. They run the town for Kliner. They run the police department. Between them, they run everything. Their chief of detectives is Gray. An old guy, a wise head, smart and stubborn. He's been there for twenty-five years, since well before any of this shit started up. They inherited him and they can't get rid of him. So sure enough, one day their smart and stubborn detective sniffs them out. He's found out that something is going on. And they find out that he's found out. So they put him out of the way. They murder him to keep it all safe. Then what do they do next?"

"Go on," I said.

"They hire in a replacement," she said. "Finlay, down from Boston. A guy who is even smarter and even more stubborn than Gray was. Why the hell would they do that? If Gray was a danger to them, then Finlay would be twice as dangerous. So why did they do that? Why did they hire somebody even smarter than the last guy?"

"That's easy," I said. "They thought Finlay was really dumb."

"Dumb?" she said. "How the hell could they think that?"

So I told her the story Finlay had told me on Monday over donuts at the convenience store counter. About his divorce. About his mental state at the time. What had he said? He was a basket case. An idiot. Couldn't string two words together.

"Chief Morrison and Mayor Teale interviewed him," I told her. "He thought it was the worst job application in history. He thought he had come across as an idiot. He was totally amazed they gave him the job. Now I understand why they did. They really were looking for an idiot."

Roscoe laughed. That made me feel better.

“God,” she said. “That’s ironic. They must have sat down and planned it out. Gray was a problem, they said. Better replace him with a fool, they said. Better pick the worst candidate who applies, they said.”

“Right,” I said. “And they did. They picked a shell-shocked idiot from Boston. But by the time he turns up to start work, he’s calmed down and turned back into the cool and intelligent guy he always was.”

She smiled about that for two miles. Then we crested a slight rise and began the long sweep down into Margrave. We were tensed up. It was like entering the battle zone. We’d been out of it for a while. Sweeping back into it didn’t feel good. I had expected to feel better when I had identified the opposing players. But it wasn’t what I had expected. It wasn’t me against them, played out against a neutral background. The background wasn’t neutral. The background was the opposition. The whole town was in it. The whole place was bought and paid for. Nobody would be neutral. We were barreling down the rise at seventy miles an hour toward a dangerous mess. More dangerous than I had expected.

Roscoe slowed up at the town limit. The big Chevy glided onto Margrave’s glassy blacktop. The magnolia and dogwood scrub to the left and right was replaced by velvet lawns and ornamental cherries. Those trees with smooth shiny trunks. Like the bark was buffed by hand. In Margrave, it probably was. The Kliner Foundation was probably paying somebody a handsome salary to do it.

We passed the neat blocks of stores, all of them empty and complacent, floating on an unearned thousand a week. We jinked around the village green with the statue of Caspar Teale. Wafted past the turn down to Roscoe’s house with its smashed front door. Past the convenience store. Past the benches under the smart awnings. Past the parkland where the bars and rooming houses had been, back when Margrave was honest. Then up to the station house. We pulled off into the lot and parked up. Charlie Hubble’s Bentley was still there where I’d left it.

Roscoe killed the motor and we sat for a minute. Didn’t want to get out. We squeezed hands, her right, my left. A brief good luck gesture. We got out of the car. Into battle.

THE STATION HOUSE WAS COOL AND DESERTED EXCEPT FOR Baker at his desk and Finlay on his way out of the rosewood office in back. He saw us and hurried over.

“Teale’s back in ten minutes,” he said. “And we got a slight problem.”

He hustled us back to the office. We went in and he shut the door.

“Picard called,” he said.

“So what’s the problem?” I said.

“It’s the safe house,” he said. “Where Charlie and the kids are hiding out? That situation has to stay unofficial, right?”

“He told me that,” I said. “He’s out on a limb up there.”

“Exactly,” he said. “That’s the problem. He can’t staff it. He needs somebody to be up there with Charlie. He’s been doing duty himself. But he can’t do any more. Can’t take any more time out. And he feels it’s not appropriate, you know, Charlie being a woman, and the little girl and all. Kid’s terrified of him.”

He looked over at Roscoe. She saw where the conversation was going.

“He wants me up there?” she asked.

“Just for twenty-four hours,” Finlay said. “That’s what he’s asking for. Will you do it for him?”

Roscoe shrugged. Smiled.

“Of course I will,” she said. “No problem. I can spare a day. As long as you promise to get me back when the fun starts, OK?”

“That’s automatic,” Finlay said. “Fun can’t start until we’ve got the detail, and as soon as we’ve got the detail, Picard goes official and he puts his own agents into the safe house. You come back here.”

“OK,” Roscoe said. “When do I go?”

“Right now,” Finlay said. “He’ll be here any minute.”

She grinned at him.

“So you already figured I’d agree to it?” she said.

He grinned back at her.

“Like I told Reacher,” he said. “You’re the best we got.”

She and I went back through the squad room and out through the glass doors. Roscoe took her valise out of the Chevy and set it on the curb.

“See you tomorrow, I guess,” she said.

“You going to be OK?” I asked her.

“Sure,” she said. “I’m going to be fine. Can’t get much safer than an FBI safe house, right? But I’m going to miss you, Reacher. I didn’t figure to spend time apart just yet.”

I squeezed her hand. She kissed me on the cheek. Just stretched up for a quick peck. Finlay pushed the station house door open. I heard the suck of the rubber seal. He stuck his head out and called over to Roscoe.

“You better give Picard an update, OK?” he said.

Roscoe nodded to him. Then we stood waiting in the sun. Didn’t have to wait long. Picard’s blue sedan squealed into the lot within a couple of minutes. Bounced to a stop right next to us. The big guy folded himself out of the seat and stood up. Just about blotted out the sun.

“I appreciate this, Roscoe,” he said to her. “You’re really helping me out.”

“No problem,” she said. “You’re helping us out, right? Where is this place I’m going?”

Picard grinned a harassed grin. Nodded toward me.

“I can’t say where it is,” he told her. “Not in front of civilians, right? I’m way out of line already. And I’m going to have to ask you not to tell him afterward, OK? And Reacher, don’t you press her about it, or Charlie, OK?”

“OK,” I said. I wouldn’t press her about it. She’d tell me anyway.

“Good,” Picard said.

He nodded a busy good-bye and picked up Roscoe’s bag. Threw it onto his rear seat. Then the two of them got into the blue sedan and drove off. Nosed out of the lot and headed north. I waved after them. Then the car was lost to sight.

23

DETAILS. EVIDENCE GATHERING. SURVEILLANCE. IT'S THE basis of everything. You've got to settle down and watch long enough and hard enough to get what you need. While Roscoe made cups of coffee for Charlie Hubble and Finlay sat in the rosewood office, I was going to have to watch the warehouse operation. Long enough and hard enough until I got a feel for exactly how they did it. It could take me a full twenty-four hours. Could be Roscoe would get back before I did.

I got in the Bentley and cruised up the fourteen miles to the cloverleaf. Slowed down as I passed the warehouses. I needed to scout out a vantage point. The northbound on-ramp dived under the southbound off-ramp. There was a kind of low overpass. Short, wide concrete pillars hoisted the road overhead. I figured the thing to do would be to hole up behind one of those pillars. I would be well hidden in the gloom and the slight elevation would give me a good view of the whole warehouse area. That was my spot.

I accelerated the Bentley up the ramp and carried on north to Atlanta. Took an hour. I was picking up a rough idea of the geography. I wanted the low-rent shopping area and I found it easily enough. Saw the sort of street I wanted. Automobile customizers, pool table wholesalers, repossessed office furniture. I parked on the street in front of a storefront mission. Opposite me were two survival shops. I picked the left-hand one and went in.

The door worked a bell. The guy at the counter looked up. He was the usual type of guy. White man, black beard, camouflage fatigues, boots. He had a huge gold hoop in one ear. Looked like some kind of a pirate. He might have been a veteran. Might just have wanted to be one. He nodded to me.

He had the stuff I needed. I picked up olive fatigue pants and a shirt. Found a camouflage jacket big enough to fit. Looked at the pockets carefully. I had to get the Desert Eagle in there. Then I found a water canteen and some decent field glasses. Humped the whole lot over to the cash desk and piled it up. Pulled out my wad of hundreds. The guy with the beard looked at me.

"I could use a sap," I said.

He looked at me and looked at my wad of hundreds. Then he ducked down and

He looked at me and looked at my wad of hundreds. Then he ducked down and hoisted a box up. Looked heavy. I chose a fat sap about nine inches long. It was a leather tube. Taped at one end for a grip. Built around a plumber's spring. The thing they put inside pipes before they bend them. It was packed around with lead shot. An efficient weapon. I nodded. Paid for everything and left. The bell rang again as I pushed open the door.

I moved the Bentley along a hundred yards and parked up in front of the first automobile shop I saw advertising window tinting. Leaned on the horn and got out to meet the guy coming out of the door.

"Can you put tints on this for me?" I asked him.

"On this thing?" he said. "Sure I can. I can put tints on anything."

"How long?" I said.

The guy stepped up to the car and ran his finger down the silky coachwork.

"Thing like this, you want a first-rate job," he said. "Take me a couple of days, maybe three."

"How much?" I said.

He carried on feeling the paint and sucked air in through his teeth, like all car guys do when you ask them how much.

"Couple of hundred," he said. "That's for a first-rate job, and you don't want anything less on a thing like this."

"I'll give you two fifty," I said. "That's for a better than first-rate job, and you loan me a car the two or three days it's going to take you to do it, OK?"

The guy sucked in some more air and then slapped lightly on the Bentley's hood.

"It's a done deal, my friend," he said.

I took the Bentley key off Charlie's ring and exchanged it for an eight-year-old Cadillac the color of an old avocado pear. It seemed to drive pretty well and it was about as anonymous as you could hope to get. The Bentley was a lovely automobile, but it was not what I needed if the surveillance went mobile. It was

about as distinctive as the most distinctive thing you could ever think of.

I CLEARED THE SOUTHERN RIM OF THE CITY AND STOPPED AT a gas station. Brimmed the old Cadillac's big tank and bought candy bars and nuts and bottles of water. Then I used their toilet cubicle to get changed. I put on the military surplus gear and threw my old stuff into the towel bin. Went back out to the car. Put the Desert Eagle in the long inside pocket of my new jacket. Cocked and locked. Poured the spare bullets into the outside top pocket. Morrison's switchblade was in the left side pocket and I put the sap in the right.

I shared the nuts and the candy bars around the other pockets. Poured a bottle of water into the canteen and went to work. Took me another hour to get back to Margrave. I drove the old Cadillac right around the cloverleaf. Up the on-ramp again, heading north. Backed up about a hundred yards along the shoulder and stopped right in the no-man's-land between the off-ramp and the on-ramp. Where nobody would pass either leaving or joining the highway. Nobody would see the car except people shooting right past Margrave. And they wouldn't care.

I popped the hood and propped it open. Locked up the car and left it like that. It made it invisible. Just a broken-down old sedan on the shoulder. A sight so ordinary, you don't see it. Then I climbed over the low concrete wall at the edge of the shoulder. Scrambled down the high bank. Ran south and sprinted across the on-ramp. Carried on running for the shelter of the low overpass. I ran under the width of the highway to the other side and holed up behind a broad pillar. Over my head, the trucks coming off the highway rumbled around to the old county road. Then they ground their gears and branched right for the warehouses.

I settled back and got comfortable behind the pillar. I had a pretty good vantage point. Maybe two hundred yards distant, maybe thirty feet of elevation. The whole place was laid out below me like a diagram. The field glasses I'd bought were clear and powerful. There were actually four separate warehouses. All identical, built in a tight line, running away from me at an oblique angle. The whole area was ringed by a serious fence. Plenty of razor wire at the top. Each of the four compounds had its own inner fence. Each inner fence had its own gate. The outer fence held the main gate, fronting onto the road. The whole place was swarming with activity.

The first compound was totally innocent. The big roller door stood open. I could see local farm trucks rattling in and out. People were loading and unloading in plain view. Sturdy burlap sacks bulging with something or other. Maybe produce, maybe seed or fertilizer. Whatever farmers use. I had no idea. But there was nothing secret. Nothing hidden. All the trucks were local. Georgia plates on all of them. No out-of-state vehicles. Nothing big enough to roll south to north along the height of the nation. The first compound was clean, no doubt about that.

Same went for the second and third. Their gates stood open, their doors were up. All their activity was a cheerful swarm on their forecourts. Nothing secret. All in plain view. Different type of trucks, but all local. Couldn't see what they were hauling. Wholesale stuff for the little country stores, maybe. Possibly manufactured goods going somewhere. Some kind of oil drums in the third shed. But nothing to get excited about.

The fourth warehouse was the one I was looking for. The one at the end of the row. No doubt about it. It was a smart location. Made a lot of sense. It was screened by the chaos on the first three forecourts. But because it was the last in line, none of the local farmers or merchants would ever need to pass it by. Nobody would get a look at it. A smart location. It was definitely the one. Beyond it, maybe seventy-five yards away in a field, was the blasted tree. The one Roscoe had picked out of the photograph of Stoller and Hubble and the yellow truck. A camera on the forecourt would pick up the tree just beyond the far corner of the structure. I could see that. This was the place, no doubt about it.

The big roller door across the front was closed. The gate was closed. There were two gatemen hanging around on the forecourt. Even from two hundred yards, the field glasses picked up their alert glances and the wary tension in their walks. Some kind of a security role. I watched them for a while. They strode around, but nothing was happening. So I shifted around to watch the road. Waited for a truck bound for the fourth compound.

IT WAS A GOOD LONG WAIT. I WAS UPTIGHT ABOUT THE TIME ticking away, so I sang to myself. I went through every version of "Rambling on My Mind" that I knew. Everybody has a version. It's always listed as a traditional song. Nobody knows whose it was. Nobody knows where it came

from. Probably from way back in the Delta. It's a song for people who can't stay around. Even though maybe there's a good reason to. People like me. I'd been around Margrave practically a week. Longest I'd ever stayed anywhere voluntarily. I should stay forever. With Roscoe, because she was good for me. I was beginning to imagine a future with her. It felt good.

But there were going to be problems. When Kliner's dirty money was taken out, the whole town was going to fall apart. There wouldn't be anyplace left to stay around in. And I had to wander. Like the song I was singing in my head. I had to ramble. A traditional song. A song that could have been written for me. In my heart, I believed Blind Blake had made it up. He had wandered. He had walked right by this place, when the concrete pillars were old shade trees. Sixty years ago, he had walked down the road I was watching, maybe singing the song I was singing.

Joe and I used to sing that old song. We'd sing it as an ironic comment on army family life. We'd stumble off a plane somewhere and ride to an airless empty base house. Twenty minutes after moving in, we'd start up singing that song. Like we'd been there long enough and we were ready to move on again. So I leaned back on the concrete pillar and sang it for him, as well as for me.

Took me thirty-five minutes to run through every version of that old song, once for me and once for Joe. During that time I saw maybe a half dozen trucks pull into the warehouse approach. All local guys. All little dusty Georgia trucks. Nothing with long-haul grime blasted all over it. Nothing headed for the end building. I sang softly for thirty-five minutes and picked up no information at all.

But I did get some applause. I finished the last song and heard a slow ironic hand clap coming out of the darkness behind me. I whipped around the broad concrete pillar and stared into the gloom. The clapping stopped and I heard a shuffling sound. Picked up the vague shape of a man crawling toward me. The shape firmed up. Some kind of a hobo. Long gray matted hair and layers of heavy clothing. Bright eyes burning in a seamed and dirty face. The guy stopped out of reach.

"Who the hell are you?" I asked him.

He swiped his curtain of hair aside and grinned at me.

"Who the hell are you?" he said. "Coming to my place and bawling like that?"

“This is your place?” I said. “You live under here?”

He settled on his haunches and shrugged at me.

“Temporarily,” he said. “Been here a month. You got a problem with that?”

I shook my head. I had no problem with that. The guy had to live somewhere.

“Sorry to disturb you,” I said. “I’ll be out of here by tonight.”

His smell was drifting over to me. Wasn’t pleasant. This guy smelled like he’d been on the road all his life.

“Stay as long as you like,” he said. “We just decided to move on. We’re vacating the premises.”

“We?” I said. “There’s somebody else here?”

The guy looked at me oddly. Turned and pointed to the air beside him. There was nobody there. My eyes had adjusted to the gloom. I could see all the way back to the concrete cantilever under the elevated road. Just empty space.

“My family,” he said. “We’re pleased to meet you. But we got to go. Time to move on.”

He reached behind him and dragged a canvas kit bag out of the gloom. Army issue. There was a faint stencil on it. Pfc something, with a serial number and a unit designation. He pulled it up close and shuffled away.

“Wait up,” I said. “Were you here last week? Thursday?”

The guy stopped and half-turned back.

“Been here a month,” he said. “Didn’t see anything last Thursday.”

I looked at him and his kit bag. A soldier. Soldiers don’t volunteer anything. Their basic rule. So I eased off the concrete and pulled a candy bar out of my pocket. Wrapped it in a hundred dollar bill. Tossed it over to him. He caught it and put it in his coat. Nodded to me, silently.

“So what didn’t you see last Thursday?” I asked him.

He shrugged.

“I didn’t see anything,” he said. “That’s the honest truth. But my wife did. She saw plenty of things.”

“OK,” I said, slowly. “Will you ask her what things she saw?”

He nodded. Turned and had a whispered conversation with the air beside him. Turned back to me.

“She saw aliens,” he said. “An enemy starship, disguised like a shiny black truck. Two aliens disguised like regular earth guys in it. She saw lights in the sky. Smoke. Spaceship comes down, turns into a big car, starfleet commander comes out dressed as a cop, short fat guy. Then a white car comes off the highway, but it’s really a starfighter landing, two guys in it, earth guys, pilot and copilot. They all do a dance, right there by the gate, because they come from another galaxy. She said it was exciting. She loves that stuff. Sees it everywhere she goes.”

He nodded at me. He meant it.

“I missed the whole thing,” he said. Gestured to the air beside him. “The baby needed her bath. But that’s what my wife saw. She loves that stuff.”

“She hear anything?” I asked him.

He asked her. Got her reply and shook his head like I was crazy.

“Space beings don’t make sound,” he said. “But the starfighter copilot got all shot up with stun phasers, crawled in here later. Bled to death right where you’re sitting. We tried to help him, but there’s really nothing you can do about stun phasers, right? The medics got him out Sunday.”

I nodded. He crawled off, dragging his kit bag. I watched him go and then slid back around the pillar. Watched the road. Picked through his wife’s story. An eyewitness report. The guy wouldn’t have convinced the Supreme Court, but he sure as hell convinced me. It wasn’t the Supreme Court’s brother who had flown down in a starfighter and done a dance at the warehouse gate.

IT WAS ANOTHER HOUR BEFORE ANYTHING SHOWED UP. I'D eaten a candy bar and sipped most of a pint of water. I was just sitting and waiting. A decent-sized panel truck rolled in, coming south. It slowed up at the warehouse approach. I saw New York commercial plates through the field glasses. Dirty white rectangles. The truck nosed along the tarmac and waited at the fourth gate. The guys in the compound swung open the gate and signaled the truck through. It stopped again and the two guys swung the gate shut behind it. Then the driver backed up to the roller door and stopped. Got out of the truck. One of the gatemen climbed into the truck and the other ducked into a side door and cranked the roller open. The truck backed into the dark and the roller came down again. The New York driver was left on the forecourt, stretching in the sun. That was it. About thirty seconds, beginning to end. Nothing on show.

I watched and waited. The truck was in there eighteen minutes. Then the roller door winched open again and the gateman drove the truck back out. As soon as it was clear, the roller came down again and the gateman jumped down from the cab. The New York guy hoisted himself back into the seat while the gateman ran ahead to swing the gates. The truck passed through and rattled out and back onto the county road. It turned north and passed by twenty yards from where I was leaning up on the concrete overpass pillar. It swung onto the on-ramp and roared up to join the northbound traffic stream.

Pretty much straightaway another truck was rumbling down the off-ramp, leaving the traffic stream coming down from the north. It was a similar truck. Same make, same size, same highway grime. It lumbered and bounced into the warehouse approach. I squinted through the field glasses. Illinois plates. It went through the same ritual. Paused at the gates. Backed up to the roller door. The driver was replaced by the gateman. The roller came up just long enough to swallow the truck into the gloom inside. Quick and efficient. About thirty seconds again, beginning to end. And secret. The long-haul drivers weren't allowed into the warehouse. They had to wait outside.

The Illinois truck was out quicker. Sixteen minutes. The driver reclaimed his place at the wheel and headed out, back to the highway. I watched him pass by, twenty yards away.

Our theory said both trucks had been loaded up with some of the stockpile and were grinding their way north. Thundering their way back to the big cities up there, ready to unload. So far, our theory looked good. I couldn't fault it.

The next hour, nothing happened. The fourth compound stayed closed up tight. I started to get bored. I started to wish the hobo hadn't left. We could have chatted awhile. Then I saw the third truck of the day come heading in. I raised the field glasses and saw California plates. Same type of truck, dirty red color, rumbling in off the highway, heading for the end compound. It went through a different routine from the first two. It went in through the gates, but there was no change of driver. The truck just reversed straight in through the roller door. This guy was obviously authorized to see inside the shed. Then a wait. I timed it at twenty-two minutes. Then the roller door winched up and the truck came back out. Drove straight back out through the gates and headed for the highway.

I took a fast decision. Time to go. I wanted to see inside one of those trucks. So I scrambled to my feet and grabbed the field glasses and the water canteen. Ran under the overpass to the northbound side. Clawed my way up the steep bank and leapt the concrete wall. Back to the old Cadillac. I slammed the hood shut and got in. Started up and rolled along the shoulder. Waited for a gap and gunned the big motor. Nudged the wheel and accelerated north.

I figured the red truck might be three or four minutes ahead. Not much more than that. I hopped past bunches of vehicles and pushed the big old car on. Then settled back to a fast cruise. I figured I was gaining all the time. After a few miles I spotted the truck. Eased off and sat well back, maybe three hundred yards behind him. Kept a half-dozen vehicles between him and me. I settled back and relaxed. We were going to L.A., according to Roscoe's menorah theory.

We cruised slowly north. Not much more than fifty miles an hour. The Cadillac's tank was near enough full. Might get me three hundred miles, maybe three fifty. At this slow cruise, maybe more. Acceleration was the killer. Gunning the worn eight-year-old V-8 would use gas faster than coffee comes out of a pot. But a steady cruise would give me reasonable mileage. Might get me up to four hundred miles. Enough to get as far west as Memphis, maybe.

We rolled on. The dirty red truck sat up big and obvious, three hundred yards ahead. It bore left around the southern fringe of Atlanta. Setting itself to strike out west, across the country. The distribution theory was looking good. I slowed down and hung back through the interchange. Didn't want the driver to get suspicious about being followed. But I could see by the way he was handling his lane changes this was not a guy who made much use of his rearview mirrors. I closed up a little tighter.

The red truck rolled on. I stayed eight cars behind it. Time rolled by. It got late in the afternoon. It got to be early evening. I ate candy and sipped water for dinner as I drove. I couldn't work the radio. It was some kind of a fancy Japanese make. The guy at the auto shop must have transplanted it. Maybe it was busted. I wondered how he was doing with tinting the Bentley's windows. I wondered what Charlie was going to say about getting her car back with black glass. I figured maybe that was going to be the least of her worries. We rolled on.

We rolled on for almost four hundred miles. Eight hours. We drove out of Georgia, right through Alabama, into the northeast corner of Mississippi. It got pitch dark. The fall sun had dropped away up ahead. People had switched their lights on. We drove on through the dark for hours. It felt like I had been following the guy all my life. Then, approaching midnight, the red truck slowed down. A half-mile ahead, I saw it pull off into a truck stop in the middle of nowhere. Near a place called Myrtle. Maybe sixty miles short of the Tennessee state line. Maybe seventy miles shy of Memphis. I followed the truck into the lot. Parked up well away from it.

I saw the driver get out. A tall, thickset type of a guy. Thick neck and wide, powerful shoulders. Dark, in his thirties. Long arms, like an ape. I knew who he was. He was Kliner's son. A stone-cold psychopath. I watched him. He did some stretching and yawning in the dark standing by his truck. I stared at him and pictured him Thursday night, at the warehouse gate, dancing.

THE KLINER KID LOCKED UP THE TRUCK AND AMBLED OFF toward the buildings. I waited a spell and followed him. I figured he would have gone straight for the bathroom, so I hung around the newsstand in the bright neon and watched the door. I saw him come out and watched him amble into the diner area. He settled at a table and stretched again. Picked up the menu with the expansive air of a guy who was taking his time. He was there for a late dinner. I figured he'd take twenty-five minutes. Maybe a half hour.

I headed back out to the parking lot. I wanted to break into the red truck and get a look inside. But I saw there was no chance of doing it out there in the lot. No chance at all. People were walking around and a couple of police cruisers were loafing about. The whole place was lit up with bright lights. Breaking into that truck was going to have to wait.

I walked back to the buildings. Crammed myself into a phone booth and dialed the station house in Margrave. Finlay answered right away. I heard his deep Harvard tones. He'd been sitting by the phone, waiting for me to check in.

"Where are you?" he said.

"Not far from Memphis," I said. "I watched a truck load up and I'm sticking with it until I get a chance to look inside. The driver's the Kliner kid."

"OK," he said. "I heard from Picard. Roscoe's safely installed. Fast asleep now, if she's got any sense. He said she sends her love."

"Send mine back if you get the chance," I said. "Take care, Harvard guy."

"Take care yourself," he said. Hung up.

I strolled back to the Cadillac. Got in and waited. It was a half hour before the Kliner kid came out again. I saw him walk back toward the red truck. He was wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Looked like he'd had a good dinner. Certainly taken him long enough. He walked out of sight. A minute later the truck rattled by and lurched onto the exit road. But the kid didn't head back to the highway. He ducked a left onto a service road. He was going around to the motel. He was going to stay overnight.

He drove right up to the row of motel cabins. Parked the red truck up against the second cabin from the end. Right in the glow of a big light on a pole. He got out and locked up. Took a key from his pocket and opened up the cabin. Went in and shut the door. I saw the light go on and the blind come down. He'd had the key in his pocket. He hadn't gone into the office. He must have booked the room when he was inside for dinner. He must have paid for it and picked up the key. That's what had taken him so damn long in there.

It gave me a problem. I needed to see inside the truck. I needed the evidence. I needed to know I was in the right. And I needed to know soon. Sunday was forty-eight hours away. I had things to do before Sunday. A lot of things. I was going to have to break into the truck, right there in the glare of the light on the pole. While the psychopathic Kliner kid was ten feet away in his motel room. Not the safest thing in the world to do. I was going to have to wait a while to do it. Until the kid was sound asleep and wouldn't hear the boom and scrape as I

went to work.

I waited a half hour. Couldn't wait anymore. I started the old Cadillac and moved it through the stillness. The tappets were out and the pistons were slapping. The motor was making a hell of a noise in the silence. I parked the car tight up to the red truck. Nose in, facing the kid's motel room door. I climbed out across the passenger seat. Stood still and listened. Nothing.

I took Morrison's switchblade from my jacket pocket and stepped up onto the Cadillac's front fender. Stepped onto the hood and up over the windshield. Up onto the Cadillac's roof. Stood still, up high. Listened hard. Nothing. I leaned over to the truck and hauled myself upward onto its roof.

A panel truck like that has a translucent roof. It's some kind of a fiberglass sheet. They make the roof out of it, or at least a sort of skylight set into the sheetmetal. It's there to let a dim light down into the cargo area. Helps with loading and unloading. Maybe it's lighter in weight. Maybe cheaper. Manufacturer will do anything to save a buck. The roof is the best way into a truck like that.

My upper body was flat on the fiberglass panel and my feet were scrabbling for the Cadillac's gutter. I reached out as far as I could and sprang the switchblade. Stabbed it down through the plastic panel, right in the center of the roof. Used the blade to saw a flap about ten inches deep, eighteen inches wide. I could push it down and peer in. Like looking down through a shallow slot.

The light in the motel room snapped on. The window blind threw a yellow square of light out over the Cadillac. Over the side of the red truck. Over my legs. I grunted and pushed off. Swam out onto the truck's roof. Lay flat and silent. Held my breath.

The motel room door opened. The Kliner kid came out. Stared at the Cadillac. Stooped and looked inside. Walked around and checked the truck. Checked the cab doors. Tugged the handles. The vehicle shook and rocked under me. He walked around to the back and tried the rear doors. Tugged the handles. I heard the doors rattle against their locks.

He walked a circuit of the truck. I lay there and listened to the crack of his footsteps below. He checked the Cadillac again. Then he went back inside. The room door slammed. The light snapped off. The yellow square of light died.

I waited five minutes. Just lay there up on the roof and waited. Then I hauled myself up onto my elbows. Reached for the slot in the fiberglass that I'd just cut. Forced the flap down and hooked my fingers in. Dragged myself over and peered through.

The truck was empty. Totally empty. Nothing in it at all.

24

IT WAS OVER FOUR HUNDRED MILES BACK TO THE MARGRAVE station house. I drove all of them as fast as I dared. I needed to see Finlay. Needed to lay out a brand-new theory for him. I slotted the old Cadillac into a space right next to Teale's brand-new model. Went inside and nodded to the desk guy. He nodded back.

"Finlay here?" I asked him.

"In back," he told me. "The mayor's with him."

I skirted the reception counter and ran through the squad room to the rosewood office. Finlay was in there with Teale. Finlay had bad news for me. I could see it in the slope of his shoulders. Teale looked at me, surprised.

"You back in the army, Mr. Reacher?" he said.

Took me a second to catch on. He was talking about my fatigues and the camouflage jacket. I looked him up and down. He was in a shiny gray suit with embroidered patterns all over it. Bootlace tie with a silver clasp.

"Don't you be talking to me about clothes, asshole," I said.

He looked down at himself in surprise. Brushed off a speck that hadn't been there. Glared up at me.

"I could have you arrested for language like that," he said.

"And I could tear your head off," I said to him. "And then I could stick it up your ratty old ass."

We stood and glared at each other for what seemed like a long time. Teale gripped his heavy cane like he wanted to raise it up and hit me with it. I could see his hand tightening around it and his glance darting toward my head. But in the end he just stalked out of the office and slammed the door. I reopened it a crack and peered out after him. He was picking up a phone at one of the squad room desks. He was going to call Kliner. He was going to ask him when the hell he was going to do something about me. I shut the door again and turned to

Finlay.

“What’s the problem?” I asked him.

“Serious shit,” he said. “But did you get a look in the truck?”

“I’ll get to that in a minute,” I said. “What’s the problem here?”

“You want the small problem first?” he said. “Or the big problem?”

“Small first,” I said.

“Picard’s keeping Roscoe another day,” he said. “No option.”

“Shit,” I said. “I wanted to see her. She happy with that?”

“According to Picard she is,” he said.

“Shit,” I said again. “So what’s the big problem?”

“Somebody’s ahead of us,” he whispered.

“Ahead of us?” I asked him. “What do you mean?”

“Your brother’s list?” he said. “The initials and the note about Sherman Stoller’s garage? First thing is there’s a telex in from the Atlanta PD this morning. Stoller’s house burned down in the night. Out by the golf course, where you went with Roscoe? Totally destroyed, garage and all. Torched. Somebody threw gasoline all over the place.”

“Christ,” I said. “What about Judy?”

“Neighbor says she bailed out Tuesday night,” he said. “Right after you spoke to her. Hasn’t been back. The house was empty.”

I nodded.

“Judy’s a smart woman,” I said. “But that doesn’t put them ahead of us. We already saw the inside of the garage. If they were trying to hide something, they were too late. Nothing to hide anyway, right?”

"The initials?" he said. "The colleges? I identified the Princeton guy this morning. W.B. was Walter Bartholomew. Professor. He was killed last night, outside his house."

"Shit," I said. "Killed how?"

"Stabbed," he said. "Jersey police are calling it a mugging. But we know better than that, right?"

"Any more good news?" I asked him.

He shook his head.

"Gets worse," he said. "Bartholomew knew something. They got to him before he could talk to us. They're ahead of us, Reacher."

"He knew something?" I said. "What?"

"Don't know," Finlay said. "When I called the number, I got some research assistant guy, works for Bartholomew. Seems Bartholomew was excited about something, stayed at his office late last night, working. This assistant guy was ferrying him all kinds of old material. Bartholomew was checking it through. Late on, he packed up, e-mailed Joe's computer and went home. He ran into the mugger, and that was that."

"What did the e-mail say?" I asked him.

"It said stand by for a call in the morning," he told me. "The assistant guy said it felt like Bartholomew had hit on something important."

"Shit," I said again. "What about the New York initials? K.K.?"

"Don't know yet," he said. "I'm guessing it's another professor. If they haven't gotten to him yet."

"OK," I said. "I'm going to New York to find him."

"Why the panic?" Finlay asked. "Was there a problem with the truck?"

"There was one major problem," I said. "The truck was empty."

There was silence in the office for a long moment.

There was silence in the office for a long moment.

“It was going back empty?” Finlay said.

“I got a look inside just after I called you,” I said. “It was empty. Nothing in it at all. Just fresh air.”

“Christ,” he said.

He looked upset. He couldn’t believe it. He’d admired Roscoe’s distribution theory. He’d congratulated her. Shook her hand. The menorah shape. It was a good theory. It was so good, he couldn’t believe it was wrong.

“We’ve got to be right,” he said. “It makes so much sense. Think of what Roscoe said. Think of the map. Think of Gray’s figures. It all fits together. It’s so obvious, I can just about feel it. I can just about see it. It’s a traffic flow. It can’t be anything else. I’ve been over it so many times.”

“Roscoe was right,” I agreed. “And everything you just said is right. The menorah shape is right. Margrave is the center. It’s a traffic flow. We only got one little detail wrong.”

“What detail?” he said.

“We got the direction wrong,” I said. “We got it ass-backward. The flow goes exactly the opposite direction. Same shape, but it’s flowing down here, not out of here.”

He nodded. He saw it.

“So they’re not loading up here,” he said. “They’re unloading here. They’re not dispersing a stockpile. They’re building up a stockpile. Right here in Margrave. But a stockpile of what? You’re certain they’re not printing money somewhere and bringing it down here?”

I shook my head.

“Doesn’t make any sense,” I said. “Molly said there’s no printing going on in the States. Joe stopped it.”

“So what are they bringing down here?” he said.

“We need to figure that out,” I said. “But we know it adds up to about a ton a week. And we know it fits into air conditioner boxes.”

“We do?” Finlay said.

“That’s what changed last year,” I said. “Before last September, they were smuggling it out of the country. That’s what Sherman Stoller was doing. The air conditioner runs weren’t a decoy operation. They were the actual operation itself. They were exporting something boxed up in air conditioner cartons. Sherman Stoller was driving them down to Florida every day to meet a boat. That’s why he got so up-tight when he was flagged down for speeding. That’s why the fancy lawyer came running over. Not because he was on his way to load up. Because he was on his way to unload. He had the Jacksonville police sniffing around a full load for fifty-five minutes.”

“But a full load of what?” Finlay said.

“I don’t know,” I said. “The cops didn’t think to look. They saw a load of sealed-up air conditioner cartons, brand-new, serial numbers and everything, and they just assumed it was kosher. The air conditioner cartons were damn good cover. Very plausible product to be hauling south. Nobody would be suspicious of brand-new air conditioners heading south, right?”

“But they stopped a year ago?” he said.

“Correct,” I said. “They knew the Coast Guard thing was coming, so they got as much out as they could ahead of time. Remember the double runs in Gray’s notes? Then they stopped altogether, a year ago. Because they felt just as vulnerable smuggling outward past the Coast Guard as we figured they’d feel smuggling inward.”

Finlay nodded. Looked displeased with himself.

“We missed that,” he said.

“We missed a lot of things,” I said. “They fired Sherman Stoller because they didn’t need him anymore. They decided just to sit on the stuff and wait for the Coast Guard thing to stop. That’s why they’re vulnerable right now. That’s why they’re panicking, Finlay. It’s not the last remains of a stockpile they’ve got in there until Sunday. It’s the whole damn thing.”

FINLAY STOOD GUARD AT THE FFICE DOOR. I SAT AT THE rosewood desk and called Columbia University in New York. The number reached the modern history department. The early part of the call was very easy. I got a helpful woman in their administrative office. I asked if they had a professor with the initials K.K. Straightaway she identified a guy called Kelvin Kelstein. Been there many years. Sounded like he was a very eminent type of a guy. Then the call got very difficult. I asked if he would come to the phone. The woman said no he wouldn't. He was very busy and could not be disturbed again.

"Again?" I said. "Who's been disturbing him already?"

"Two detectives from Atlanta, Georgia," she said.

"When was this?" I asked her.

"This morning," she said. "They came in here asking for him and they wouldn't take no for an answer."

"Can you describe these two men to me?" I asked her.

There was a pause as she tried to remember.

"They were Hispanic," she said. "I don't recall any details. The one who did the talking was very neat, very polite. Unremarkable, really, I'm afraid."

"Have they met with him yet?" I asked her.

"They made a one o'clock appointment," she said. "They're taking him to lunch somewhere, I believe."

I held the phone tighter.

"OK," I said. "This is very important. Did they ask for him by name? Or by the initials K.K.? Like I just did?"

"They asked exactly the same question you did," she said. "They asked if we had any faculty with those initials."

"Listen to me," I said. "Listen very carefully. I want you to go see Professor

Kelstein. Right now. Interrupt him, whatever he's doing. Tell him this is life or death. Tell him those Atlanta detectives are bogus. They were at Princeton last night and they murdered Professor Walter Bartholomew."

"Are you kidding?" the woman said. Almost a scream.

"This is for real," I said. "My name is Jack Reacher. I believe Kelstein had been in touch with my brother, Joe Reacher, from the Treasury Department. Tell him my brother was murdered also."

The woman paused again. Swallowed. Then she came back, calm.

"What should I tell Professor Kelstein to do?" she said.

"Two things," I said. "First, he must not, repeat, must not meet with the two Hispanic men from Atlanta. At any time. Got that?"

"Yes," she said.

"Good," I said. "Second, he must go right now to the campus security office. Right now, OK? He must wait there for me. I'll be there in about three hours. Kelstein must sit in the security office and wait for me with a guard right next to him until I get there. Can you make absolutely sure he does that?"

"Yes," she said again.

"Tell him to call Princeton from the security office," I said. "Tell him to ask after Bartholomew. That should convince him."

"Yes," the woman said again. "I'll make sure he does what you say."

"And give my name to your security desk," I said. "I don't want any problem getting in when I arrive. Professor Kelstein can ID me. Tell him I look like my brother."

I hung up. Shouted across the room to Finlay.

"They've got Joe's list," I said. "They've got two guys up in New York. One of them is the same guy who got Joe's briefcase. Neat, polite guy. They've got the list."

“But how?” he said. “The list wasn’t in the briefcase.”

A clang of fear hit me. I knew how. It was staring me in the face.

“Baker,” I said. “Baker’s inside the scam. He made an extra Xerox copy. You sent him to copy Joe’s list. He made two copies and gave one to Teale.”

“Christ,” Finlay said. “Are you sure?”

I nodded.

“There were other indications,” I said. “Teale’s pulled a bluff. We figured everybody in the department was clean. But he was just keeping them hidden. So now we don’t know who the hell is involved and who the hell isn’t. We’ve got to get out of here, right now. Let’s go.”

We ran out of the office. Through the squad room. Out through the big plate-glass doors and into Finlay’s car.

“Where to?” he said.

“Atlanta,” I told him. “The airport. I’ve got to get to New York.”

He started up and headed out north along the county road.

“Baker was in it from the start,” I said. “It was staring me in the face.”

I WENT THROUGH IT WITH HIM AS HE DROVE. STEP BY STEP. Last Friday I had been alone in the small white interview room at the station house with Baker. I had held out my wrists to him. He’d removed my handcuffs. He’d taken the cuffs off a guy he was supposed to believe was a murderer. A murderer who had pulped his victim’s body. He was willing to put himself alone in a room with such a guy. Then later I had called him over and made him escort me to the bathroom. He had been sloppy and careless. I’d had opportunities to disarm him and escape. I’d taken it as a sign he’d listened to me answering Finlay’s questions and slowly become convinced I was innocent.

But he’d always known I was innocent. He knew exactly who was innocent and exactly who wasn’t. That’s why he had been so casual. He knew I was just a

convenient fall guy. He knew I was just an innocent passerby. Who worries about taking the cuffs off an innocent passerby? Who takes a whole lot of precautions escorting an innocent passerby to the bathroom?

And he had brought Hubble in for questioning. I'd noticed his body language. He was all twisted up with conflict. I had figured he was feeling awkward because Hubble was Stevenson's buddy and his relative by marriage. But it wasn't that. He was all twisted up because he was caught in a trap. He knew bringing Hubble in was a disaster. But he couldn't disobey Finlay without alerting him. He was trapped. Damned if he did, damned if he didn't.

And there had been a deliberate attempt to conceal Joe's identity. Baker had deliberately screwed up the prints thing with the computer so that Joe would remain unidentified. He knew Joe was a government investigator. He knew Joe's prints would be in the Washington database. So he tried to make damn sure they didn't get matched. But he had blown his cover by announcing the null result far too early. It was inexperience. He'd always left the technical work to Roscoe. So he didn't know the system. But I hadn't put two and two together. I had been too overwhelmed when the second attempt with the prints had brought back my brother's name.

Since then, he had been poking and prying, hovering around on the edge of our hidden investigation. He had wanted in and he had been a willing helper. Finlay had used him on lookout duty. And all the time he was running to Teale with the snippets he was getting from us.

Finlay was blasting north at a hell of a speed. He flung the Chevy around the cloverleaf and mashed the pedal. The big car hurtled forward up the highway.

"Could we try the Coast Guard?" he said. "Get them to stand by Sunday for when they start shipping out? Some kind of an extra patrol?"

"You're joking," I said. "The political flak the president's taken over that, he's not going to reverse himself the very first day, just because you ask him to."

"So what do we do?" he said.

"Call Princeton back," I told him. "Get hold of that research assistant again. He may be able to piece together what Bartholomew figured out last night. Hole up somewhere safe and get busy."

He laughed.

“Where the hell’s safe now?” he said.

I told him to use the Alabama motel we’d used Monday. It was in the middle of nowhere and it was as safe as he needed to get. I told him I’d find him there when I got back. Asked him to bring the Bentley to the airport and to leave the key and the parking claim at the arrivals information desk. He repeated all the arrangements back to me to confirm he was solid. He was doing more than ninety miles an hour, but he was turning his head to look at me every time he spoke.

“Watch the road, Finlay,” I said. “No good to anybody if you kill us in a damn car.”

He grinned and faced forward. Jammed his foot down harder. The big police Chevy eased up over a hundred. Then he turned again and looked straight into my eyes for about three hundred yards.

“Coward,” he said.

25

NO EASY WAY TO GET THROUGH THE AIRPORT SECURITY hoops with a sap and a knife and a big metal gun, so I left my camouflage jacket in Finlay's car and told him to transfer it to the Bentley. He ducked into departures with me and put the best part of seven hundred bucks on his credit card for my round trip ticket on Delta to New York. Then he took off to find the Alabama motel and I went through to the gate for the plane to La Guardia.

I was airborne for a shade over two hours and in a cab for thirty-five minutes. Arrived in Manhattan just after four-thirty. I'd been there in May and it looked pretty much the same in September. The summer heat was over and the city was back to work. The cab took me over the Triborough Bridge and headed west on 116th. Slid around Morningside Park and dropped me at Columbia University's main entrance. I went in and found my way to the campus security office. Knocked on the glass.

A campus policeman checked a clipboard and let me in. Led me through to a room in back and pointed to Professor Kelvin Kelstein. I saw a very old guy, tiny, wizened with age, sporting a huge shock of white hair. He looked exactly like that cleaner I'd seen on the third floor at Warburton, except he was white.

"The two Hispanic guys been back?" I asked the college cop.

He shook his head.

"Haven't seen them," he said. "The old guy's office told them that the lunch date was canceled. Maybe they went away."

"I hope so," I said. "Meanwhile, you're going to have to watch over this guy for a spell. Give it until Sunday."

"Why?" he said. "What's going on?"

"Not sure, exactly," I said. "I'm hoping the old guy can tell me."

The guard walked us back to Kelstein's own office and left us there. It was a small and untidy room crammed full to the ceiling with books and thick journals. Kelstein sat in an old armchair and gestured me to sit opposite him in another.

“What exactly happened to Bartholomew?” he asked.

“I don’t know exactly,” I said. “Jersey police say he got stabbed during a mugging outside his home.”

“But you remain skeptical?” Kelstein asked.

“My brother made a list of contacts,” I said. “You’re the only one of them still alive.”

“Your brother was Mr. Joe Reacher?” he said.

I nodded.

“He was murdered last Thursday,” I said. “I’m trying to find out why.”

Kelstein inclined his head and peered out of a grimy window.

“I’m sure you know why,” he said. “He was an investigator. Clearly he was killed in the course of an investigation. What you need to know is what he was investigating.”

“Can you tell me what that was?” I said.

The old professor shook his head.

“Only in the most general terms,” he said. “I can’t help you with specifics.”

“Didn’t he discuss specifics with you?” I said.

“He used me as a sounding board,” he said. “We were speculating together. I enjoyed it tremendously. Your brother Joe was a stimulating companion. He had a keen mind and a very attractive precision in the manner in which he expressed himself. It was a pleasure to work with him.”

“But you didn’t discuss specifics?” I said again.

Kelstein cupped his hands like a man holding an empty vessel.

“We discussed everything,” he said. “But we came to no conclusions.”

“OK,” I said. “Can we start at the beginning? The discussion was about counterfeit currency, right?”

Kelstein tilted his great head to one side. Looked amused.

“Obviously,” he said. “What else would Mr. Joe Reacher and I find to discuss?”

“Why you?” I asked him bluntly.

The old professor smiled a modest smile which faded into a frown. Then he came up with an ironic grin.

“Because I am the biggest counterfeiter in history,” he said. “I was going to say I was one of the two biggest in history, but after the events of last night at Princeton, sadly now I alone remain.”

“You and Bartholomew?” I said. “You were counterfeiters?”

The old guy smiled again.

“Not by choice,” he said. “During the Second World War, young men like Walter and me ended up with strange occupations. He and I were considered more useful in an intelligence role than in combat. We were drafted into the SIS, which as you know was the very earliest incarnation of the CIA. Other people were responsible for attacking the enemy with guns and bombs. We were handed the job of attacking the enemy with economics. We derived a scheme for shattering the Nazi economy with an assault on the value of its paper currency. Our project manufactured hundreds of billions of counterfeit reichsmarks. Spare bombers littered Germany with them. They came down out of the sky like confetti.”

“Did it work?” I asked him.

“Yes and no,” he said. “Certainly, their economy was shattered. Their currency was worthless very quickly. But of course, much of their production used slave labor. Slaves aren’t interested one way or the other whether the content of somebody else’s wage packet is worth anything. And of course, alternative currencies were found. Chocolate, cigarettes, anything. Altogether, it was only a partial success. But it left Walter and me two of history’s greatest forgers. That is, if you use sheer volume as a measure. I can’t claim any great talent for the inky end of the process.”

inky end of the process.

“So Joe was picking your brains?” I asked him.

“Walter and I became obsessed,” Kelstein said. “We studied the history of money forging. It started the day after paper money was first introduced. It’s never gone away. We became experts. We carried on the interest after the war. We developed a loose relationship with the government. Finally, some years ago, a Senate subcommittee commissioned a report from us. With all due modesty, I can claim that it became the Treasury’s anticounterfeiting bible. Your brother was familiar with it, of course. That’s why he was talking to Walter and me.”

“But what was he talking to you about?” I said.

“Joe was a new broom,” Kelstein said. “He was brought in to solve problems. He was a very talented man indeed. His job was to eradicate counterfeiting. Now, that’s an impossible job. Walter and I told him that. But he nearly succeeded. He thought hard, and he applied strokes of appealing simplicity. He just about halted all illicit printing within the United States.”

I sat in his crowded office and listened to the old guy. Kelstein had known Joe better than I had. He had shared Joe’s hopes and plans. Celebrated his successes. Sympathized over his setbacks. They had talked at length, animatedly, sparking off each other. The last time I had spoken to Joe face to face was very briefly after our mother’s funeral. I hadn’t asked him what he was doing. I’d just seen him as my older brother. Just seen him as Joe. I hadn’t seen the reality of his life as a senior agent, with hundreds of people under him, trusted by the White House to solve big problems, capable of impressing a smart old bird like Kelstein. I sat there in the armchair and felt bad. I’d lost something I never knew I’d had.

“His systems were brilliant,” Kelstein said. “His analysis was acute. He targeted ink and paper. In the end, it all boils down to ink and paper, doesn’t it? If anybody bought the sort of ink or paper that could be used to forge a banknote, Joe’s people knew within hours. He swept people up within days. Inside the States, he reduced counterfeiting activity by ninety percent. And he tracked the remaining ten percent so vigorously he got almost all of them before they’d even distributed the fakes. He impressed me greatly.”

“So what was the problem?” I asked him.

"So what was the problem?" I asked him.

Kelstein made a couple of precise little motions with his small white hands, like he was moving one scenario aside and introducing another.

"The problem lay abroad," he said. "Outside the United States. The situation there is very different. Did you know there are twice as many dollars outside the U.S. as inside?"

I nodded. I summarized what Molly had told me about foreign holdings. The trust and the faith. The fear of a sudden collapse in the desirability of the dollar. Kelstein was nodding away like I was his student and he liked my thesis.

"Quite so," he said. "It's more about politics than crime. In the end, a government's primary duty is to defend the value of its currency. We have two hundred and sixty billion dollars abroad. The dollar is the unofficial currency of dozens of nations. In the new Russia, for instance, there are more dollars than rubles. In effect, it's like Washington has raised a massive foreign loan. Raised any other way, that loan would cost us twenty-six billion dollars a year in interest payments alone. But this way, it costs us nothing at all except what we spend on printing pictures of dead politicians on little pieces of paper. That's what it's all about, Mr. Reacher. Printing currency for foreigners to buy is the best racket a government can get into. So Joe's job in reality was worth twenty-six billion dollars a year to this country. And he pursued it with an energy appropriate to those high stakes."

"So where was the problem?" I said. "Geographically?"

"Two main places," Kelstein said. "First, the Middle East. Joe believed there was a plant in the Bekaa Valley that turned out fake hundreds which were practically perfect. But there was very little he could do about it. Have you been there?"

I shook my head. I'd been stationed in Beirut for a while. I had known a few people who had gone out to the Bekaa Valley for one reason or another. Not too many of them had come back.

"Syrian-controlled Lebanon," Kelstein said. "Joe called it the badlands. They do everything there. Training camps for the world's terrorists, drug processing laboratories, you name it, they've got it. Including a pretty good replica of our own Bureau of Printing and Engraving."

own Bureau of Printing and Engraving.

I thought about it. Thought about my time there.

“Protected by who?” I asked him.

Kelstein smiled at me again. Nodded.

“A perceptive question,” he said. “You instinctively grasp that an operation of that size is so visible, so complex, that it must be in some way sponsored. Joe believed it was protected by, or maybe even owned by, the Syrian government. Therefore his involvement was marginal. His conclusion was that the only solution was diplomatic. Failing that, he was in favor of air strikes against it. We may live to see such a solution one day.”

“And the second place?” I asked him.

He pointed his finger at his grimy office window. Aiming south down Amsterdam Avenue.

“South America,” he said. “The second source is Venezuela. Joe had located it. That is what he was working on. Absolutely outstanding counterfeit hundred-dollar bills are coming out of Venezuela. But strictly private enterprise. No suggestion of government involvement.”

I nodded.

“We got that far,” I said. “A guy called Kliner, based down in Georgia where Joe was killed.”

“Quite so,” Kelstein said. “The ingenious Mr. Kliner. It’s his operation. He’s running the whole thing. We knew that for certain. How is he?”

“He’s panicking,” I said. “He’s killing people.”

Kelstein nodded sadly.

“We thought Kliner might panic,” he said. “He’s protecting an outstanding operation. The very best we’ve ever seen.”

“The best?” I said.

Kelstein nodded enthusiastically.

“Outstanding,” he said again. “How much do you know about counterfeiting?”

I shrugged at him.

“More than I did last week,” I said. “But not enough, I guess.”

Kelstein nodded and shifted his frail weight forward in his chair. His eyes lit up. He was about to start a lecture on his favorite subject.

“There are two sorts of counterfeiters,” he said. “The bad ones and the good ones. The good ones do it properly. Do you know the difference between intaglio and lithography?”

I shrugged and shook my head. Kelstein scooped up a magazine from a pile and handed it to me. It was a quarterly bulletin from a history society.

“Open it,” he said. “Any page will do. Run your fingers over the paper. It’s smooth, isn’t it? That’s lithographic printing. That’s how virtually everything is printed. Books, magazines, newspapers, everything. An inked roller passes over the blank paper. But intaglio is different.”

He suddenly clapped his hands together. I jumped. The sound was very loud in his quiet office.

“That’s intaglio,” he said. “A metal plate is smashed into the paper with considerable force. It leaves a definite embossed feel to the product. The printed image looks three dimensional. It feels three dimensional. It’s unmistakable.”

He eased himself up and took his wallet out of his hip pocket. Pulled out a ten-dollar bill. Passed it over to me.

“Can you feel it?” he asked. “The metal plates are nickel, coated with chromium. Fine lines are engraved into the chromium and the lines are filled with ink. The plate hits the paper and the ink is printed onto its topmost surface. Understand? The ink is in the valleys of the plate, so it’s transferred to the ridges on the paper. Intaglio printing is the only way to get that raised image. The only way to make the forgery feel right. It’s how the real thing is done.”

“What about the ink?” I said.

"What about the ink?" I said.

"There are three colors," he said. "Black, and two greens. The back of the bill is printed first, with the darker green. Then the paper is left to dry, and the next day, the front is printed with the black ink. That dries, and the front is printed again, with the lighter green. That's the other stuff you see there on the front, including the serial number. But the lighter green is printed by a different process, called letterpress. It's a stamping action, the same as intaglio, but the ink is stamped into the valleys on the paper, not onto the peaks."

I nodded and looked at the ten-dollar bill, front and back. Ran my fingers over it carefully. I'd never really studied one before.

"So, four problems," Kelstein said. "The press, the plates, the inks, and the paper. The press can be bought, new or used, anywhere in the world. There are hundreds of sources. Most countries print money and securities and bonds on them. So the presses are obtainable abroad. They can even be improvised. Joe found one intaglio operation in Thailand which was using a converted squid-processing machine. Their hundreds were absolutely immaculate."

"What about the plates?" I asked him.

"Plates are problem number two," he said. "But it's a matter of talent. There are people in the world who can forge Old Master paintings and there are people who can play a Mozart piano concerto after hearing it once. And certainly there are engravers who can reproduce banknotes. It's a perfectly logical proposition, isn't it? If a human being in Washington can engrave the original, certainly there's a human being somewhere else who can copy it. But they're rare. Really good copyists, rarer still. There are a few in Armenia. The Thai operation using the squid-processor got a Malaysian to make the plates."

"OK," I said. "So Kliner has bought a press, and he's found an engraver. What about the inks?"

"The inks are problem number three," he said. "You can't buy anything vaguely like them in the U.S. Joe saw to that. But abroad, they're available. As I said, virtually every country in the world has its own banknote printing industry. And obviously, Joe couldn't enforce his systems in every country in the world. So the inks are easy enough to find. The greens are only a question of color. They mix them and experiment until they get them right. The black ink is magnetic, did you know that?"

you know that.

I shook my head again. Looked at the sawbuck closely. Kelstein smiled.

“You can’t see it,” he said. “A liquid ferrous chemical is mixed with the black ink. That’s how electronic money counters work. They scan the engraving down the center of the portrait, and the machine reads the signal it gives off, like a tape head reads the sounds on a music cassette.”

“And they can get that ink?” I said.

“Anywhere in the world,” he said. “Everybody uses it. We lag behind other countries. We don’t like to admit we worry about counterfeiting.”

I remembered what Molly had said. Faith and trust. I nodded.

“The currency must look stable,” Kelstein said. “That’s why we’re so reluctant to change it. It’s got to look reliable, solid, unchanging. Turn that ten over and take a look.”

I looked at the green picture on the back of the ten. The Treasury Building was standing in a deserted street. Only one car was driving past. It looked like a Model-T Ford.

“Hardly changed since 1929,” Kelstein said. “Psychologically, it’s very important. We choose to put the appearance of dependability before security. It made Joe’s job very difficult.”

I nodded again.

“Right,” I said. “So we’ve covered the press, the plates, and the inks. What about the paper?”

Kelstein brightened up and clasped his small hands like we’d reached the really interesting part.

“Paper is problem number four,” he said. “Actually, we should really say it’s problem number one. It’s by far the biggest problem. It’s the thing Joe and I couldn’t understand about Kliner’s operation.”

“Why not?” I asked him.

“Because their paper is perfect,” he said. “It’s one hundred percent perfect. Their paper is better than their printing. And that is absolutely unheard of.”

He started shaking his great white head in wonderment. Like he was lost in admiration for Kliner’s achievement. We sat there, knee to knee in the old armchairs in silence.

“Perfect?” I prompted him.

He nodded and started up with the lecture again.

“It’s unheard of,” he said again. “The paper is the hardest part of the whole process. Don’t forget, we’re not talking about some amateur thing here. We’re talking about an industrial-scale operation. In a year, they’re printing four billion dollars’ worth of hundreds.”

“That many?” I said, surprised.

“Four billion,” he said again. “About the same as the Lebanon operation. Those were Joe’s figures. He was in a position to know. And that makes it inexplicable. Four billion in hundreds is forty million banknotes. That’s a lot of paper. That’s a completely inexplicable amount of paper, Mr. Reacher. And their paper is perfect.”

“What sort of paper would they need?” I asked him.

He reached over and took the ten-dollar bill back from me. Crumpled it and pulled it and snapped it.

“It’s a blend of fibers,” he said. “Very clever and entirely unique. About eighty percent cotton, about twenty percent linen. No wood pulp in it at all. It’s got more in common with the shirt on your back than with a newspaper, for instance. It’s got a very clever chemical colorant in it, to give it a unique cream tint. And it’s got random red and blue polymer threads pulped in, as fine as silk. Currency stock is wonderful paper. Durable, lasts for years, won’t come apart in water, hot or cold. Absolutely precise absorbency, capable of accepting the finest engraving the platemakers can achieve.”

“So the paper would be difficult to copy?” I said.

“Virtually impossible,” he said. “In a way, it’s so difficult to copy that even the

"Virtually impossible," he said. "In a way, it's so difficult to copy that even the official government supplier can't copy it. They have tremendous difficulty just keeping it consistent, batch to batch, and they're by far the most sophisticated papermaker in the entire world."

I ran it all through in my head. Press, plates, ink and paper.

"So the paper supply is really the key to all this?" I said.

Kelstein nodded ruefully.

"That was our conclusion," he said. "We agreed the paper supply was crucial, and we agreed we had no idea how they were managing it. That's why I can't really help you. I couldn't help Joe, and I can't help you. I'm terribly sorry."

I looked at him.

"They've got a warehouse full of something," I said. "Could that be paper?"

He snorted in derision. Snapped his great head around toward me.

"Don't you listen?" he said. "Currency stock is unobtainable. Completely unobtainable. You couldn't get forty sheets of currency stock, never mind forty million sheets. The whole thing is a total mystery. Joe and Walter and I racked our brains for a year and we came up with nothing."

"I think Bartholomew came up with something," I said.

Kelstein nodded sadly. He levered himself slowly out of his chair and stepped to his desk. Pressed the replay button on his telephone answering machine. The room was filled with an electronic beep, then with the sound of a dead man's voice.

"Kelstein?" the voice said. "Bartholomew here. It's Thursday night, late. I'm going to call you in the morning and I'm going to tell you the answer. I knew I'd beat you to it. Goodnight, old man."

The voice had excitement in it. Kelstein stood there and gazed into space as if Bartholomew's spirit was hanging there in the still air. He looked upset. I couldn't tell if that was because his old colleague was dead, or because his old colleague had beaten him to the answer.

“Poor Walter,” he said. “I knew him fifty-six years.”

I sat quietly for a spell. Then I stood up as well.

“I’ll figure it out,” I said.

Kelstein put his head on one side and looked at me sharply.

“Do you really think you will?” he said. “When Joe couldn’t?”

I shrugged at the old guy.

“Maybe Joe did,” I said. “We don’t know what he’d figured out before they got him. Anyway, right now I’m going back to Georgia. Carry on the search.”

Kelstein nodded and sighed. He looked stressed.

“Good luck, Mr. Reacher,” he said. “I hope you finish your brother’s business. Perhaps you will. He spoke of you often. He liked you, you know.”

“He spoke of me?” I said.

“Often,” the old guy said again. “He was very fond of you. He was sorry your job kept you so far away.”

For a moment I couldn’t speak. I felt unbearably guilty. Years would pass, I wouldn’t think about him. But he was thinking about me?

“He was older, but you looked after him,” he said. “That’s what Joe told me. He said you were very fierce. Very tough. I guess if Joe wanted anybody to take care of the Kliners, he’d have nominated you.”

I nodded.

“I’m out of here,” I said.

I shook his frail hand and left him with the cops in the security office.

I WAS TRYING TO FIGURE WHERE KLINER WAS GETTING HIS perfect

paper, and I was trying to figure if I could get the six o'clock flight back to Atlanta if I hurried, and I was trying to ignore what Kelstein had told me about Joe speaking fondly of me. The streets were clogged and I was busy thinking about it all and scanning for an empty cab, which was why I didn't notice two Hispanic guys strolling up to me. But what I did notice was the gun the leading guy showed me. It was a small automatic held in a small hand, concealed under one of those khaki raincoats city people carry on their arms in September.

He showed me the weapon and his partner signaled to a car waiting twenty yards away at the curb. The car lurched forward and the partner stood ready to open a door like the top-hatted guys do outside the expensive apartment houses up there. I was looking at the gun and looking at the car, making choices.

"Get into the car," the guy with the gun said softly. "Or I'll shoot you."

I stood there and all that was passing through my mind was that I might miss my flight. I was trying to remember when the next non-stop left. Seven o'clock, I thought.

"In the car," the guy said again.

I was pretty sure he wouldn't fire the gun on the street. It was a small gun, but there was no silencer on it. It would make a hell of a noise, and it was a crowded street. The other guy's hands were empty. He maybe had a gun in his pocket. There was just the driver in the car. Probably a gun on the seat beside him. I was unarmed. My jacket with the blackjack and the knife and the Desert Eagle was eight hundred miles away in Atlanta. Choices.

I chose not to get into the car. I just stood there in the street, gambling with my life that the guy wouldn't shoot in public. He stood there, holding the raincoat out toward me. The car stopped next to us. His partner stood on the other side of me. They were small guys. The both of them wouldn't have made one of me. The car waited, idling at the curb. Nobody moved. We were just frozen there like some kind of a display in a store window. Like new fashions for the fall, old army fatigues put with Burberry raincoats.

It gave the two guys a big problem. In a situation like that, there's a split-second opportunity to carry out your threat. If you say you're going to shoot, you've got to shoot. If you don't, you're a spent force. Your bluff is called. If you don't shoot, you're nothing. And the guy didn't shoot. He just stood there, twisted up

with indecision. People swirled around us on the busy sidewalk. Cars were blasting their horns at the guy stopped at the curb.

They were smart guys. Smart enough not to shoot me on a busy New York street. Smart enough to know I'd called their bluff. Smart enough to never again make a threat they weren't going to keep. But not smart enough to walk away. They just stood there.

So I swayed backward, as if I was going to take a step away. The gun under the raincoat prodded forward at me. I tracked the movement and grabbed the little guy's wrist with my left hand. Pulled the gun around behind me and hugged the guy close with my right arm around his shoulders. We looked like we were dancing the waltz together or we were lovers at a train station. Then I fell forward and crushed him against the car. All the time I was squeezing his wrist as hard as I could, with my nails dug in. Left-handed, but it was hurting him. My weight leaning up on him was giving him a struggle to breathe.

His partner still had his hand on the car door. His glance was darting back and forth. Then his other hand was going for his pocket. So I jackknifed my weight back and rolled around my guy's gun hand and threw him against the car. And then I ran like hell. In five strides I was lost in the crowd. I dodged and barged my way through the mass of people. Ducked in and out of doorways and ran through shrieking and honking traffic across the streets. The two guys stayed with me for a spell, but the traffic eventually stopped them. They weren't taking the risks I was taking.

I GOT A CAB EIGHT BLOCKS AWAY FROM WHERE I HAD started and made the six o'clock non-stop, La Guardia to Atlanta. Going back it took longer, for some reason. I was sitting there for two and a half hours. I thought about Joe all the way through the airspace above Jersey, Maryland and Virginia. Above the Carolinas and into Georgia, I thought about Roscoe. I wanted her back. I missed her like crazy.

We came down through storm clouds ten miles thick. The Atlanta evening gloom was turned to pitch black by the clouds. Looked like an enormous weather system was rolling in from somewhere. When we got off the plane, the air in the little tunnel was thick and heavy, and smelled of storm as well as kerosene.

I picked up the Bentley key from the information counter in the arrivals hall. It was in an envelope with a parking claim. I walked out to find the car. Felt a warm wind blowing out of the north. The storm was going to be a big one. I could feel the voltage building up for the lightning. I found the car in the short-term lot. The rear windows were all tinted black. The guy hadn't gotten around to doing the front side glass or the windshield. It made the car look like something royalty might use, with a chauffeur driving them. My jacket was laid out in the trunk. I put it on and felt the reassuring weight of the weaponry in the pockets again. I got in the driver's seat and nosed out of the lot and headed south down the highway in the dark. It was nine o'clock, Friday evening. Maybe thirty-six hours before they could start shipping the stockpile out on Sunday.

IT WAS TEN O'CLOCK WHEN I GOT BACK TO MARGRAVE. Thirty-five hours to go. I had spent the hour thinking about some stuff we had learned back in Staff College. We'd studied military philosophies, mostly written by those old Krauts who loved all that stuff. I hadn't paid much attention, but I remember some big thing which said sooner or later, you've got to engage the enemy's main force. You don't win the war unless you do that. Sooner or later, you seek out their main force, and you take it on, and you destroy it.

I knew their main force had started with ten people. Hubble had told me that. Then there were nine, after they ditched Morrison. I knew about the two Kliners, Teale, and Baker. That left me five more names to find. I smiled to myself. Pulled off the county road into Eno's gravel lot. Parked up on the far end of the row and got out. Stretched and yawned in the night air. The storm was holding off, but it was going to break. The air was still thick and heavy. I could still feel the voltage in the clouds. I could still feel the warm wind on my back. I got into the back of the car. Stretched out on the leather bench and went to sleep. I wanted to get an hour, hour and a half.

I started dreaming about John Lee Hooker. In the old days, before he got famous again. He had an old steel-strung guitar, played it sitting on a little stool. The stool was placed on a square of wooden board. He used to press old beer bottle caps into the soles of his shoes to make them noisy. Like homemade tap shoes. He'd sit on his stool and play that guitar with his bold, choppy style. All the while pounding on the wooden board with his noisy shoes. I was dreaming of him pounding out the rhythm with his shoes on that old board.

him pounding out the rhythm with his shoes on that old board.

But it wasn't John Lee's shoes making the noise. It was somebody knocking on the Bentley's windshield. I snapped awake and struggled up. Sergeant Baker was looking in at me. The big chrome clock on the dash showed ten thirty. I'd slept a half hour. That was all I was going to get.

First thing I did was to change my plan. A much better one had fallen right into my lap. The old Krauts would have approved. Tactical flexibility was big with them. Second thing I did was to put my hand in my pocket and snick the safety off the Desert Eagle. Then I got out of the opposite door and looked along the car roof at Baker. He was using his friendly grin, gold tooth and all.

"How you doing?" he said. "Sleeping in a public place, around here you could get arrested for vagrancy."

I grinned a friendly grin right back at him.

"Highway safety," I said. "They tell you don't drive if you're tired. Pull off and take a nap, right?"

"Come on in and I'll buy you a cup of coffee," he said. "You want to wake up, Eno's coffee should do it for you."

I locked the car. Kept my hand in my pocket. We crunched over the gravel and into the diner. Slid into the end booth. The woman with the glasses brought us coffee. We hadn't asked. She just seemed to know.

"So how you doing?" Baker said. "Feeling bad about your brother?"

I shrugged at him. Drank my coffee left-handed. My right hand was wrapped around the Desert Eagle in my pocket.

"We weren't close," I said.

Baker nodded.

"Roscoe still helping the Bureau out?" he said.

"Guess so," I said.

"And where's old Finlay tonight?" he asked.

"And where's old Finlay tonight?" he asked.

"Jacksonville," I said. "He had to go to Florida, check something out."

"Jacksonville?" he said. "What does he need to check out in Jacksonville?"

I shrugged again. Sipped my coffee.

"Search me," I said. "He doesn't tell me anything. I'm not on the payroll. I'm just an errand boy. Now he's got me running up to Hubble's place to fetch him something."

"Hubble's place?" Baker said. "What you got to fetch from there?"

"Some old papers," I said. "Anything I can find, I guess."

"Then what?" he said. "You going to Florida too?"

I shook my head. Sipped more coffee.

"Finlay told me to stick them in the mail," I said. "Some Washington address. I'm going to sleep up at Hubble's place and mail them in the morning."

Baker nodded slowly. Then he flashed his friendly grin again. But it was forced. We finished up our coffee. Baker dropped a couple of bucks on the table and we slid out and left. He got into his patrol car. Waved at me as he drove off. I let him go ahead and strolled over the gravel to the Bentley. I rolled south to the end of the dark little town and made the right turn up Beckman Drive.

26

I HAD TO BE VERY CAREFUL ABOUT WHERE I PUT THE BENTLEY. I wanted it to look like it was just casually dumped. But it had to be left so nobody could get past it. I inched it back and forth for a while. Left it at the top of Hubble's driveway with the wheels turned away. It looked like I'd driven up in a hurry and just slewed to a stop.

I wanted the house to look like I was in there. Nothing is more obvious than an empty building. That quiet, abandoned look is a giveaway. There's a stillness. No human vibrations. So I opened the front door with the key from the big bunch Charlie had given me. Walked through and turned on some random lights. In the den, I switched the television set on and left it at a low murmur. Same thing with the radio in the kitchen. Pulled a few drapes. Went back outside. It looked pretty good. Looked like there might be someone in there.

Then the first stop was the coat closet off the main hallway. I was looking for gloves. Not easy to find in the Sunbelt. Not much call for them. But Hubble had some. Two pairs, lying neatly on a shelf. One was a pair of ski gloves. Lime green and lilac. Not much good to me. I wanted something dark. The other pair was what I wanted. Dressy things in thin black leather. Banker's gloves. Very soft. Like a second skin.

The ski gloves made me look for a hat. If the Hubbles had taken trips up to Colorado, they'd have had all the gear. I found a box of hats. There was a kind of watch cap in there, some sort of a synthetic fiber. The bottom part rolled down to make earflaps. The hat was printed up in a dark green pattern. It would do.

Next stop was the master bedroom. I found Charlie's vanity table. It was bigger than some of the rooms I'd lived in. She had a mass of cosmetics. All kinds of things. I took a tube of waterproof mascara into the bathroom. Smeared it all over my face. Then I fastened the jacket, put on the hat, put on the gloves. I walked back into the bedroom and checked the result in the full-length mirrors on the closet doors. Not bad. Just about right for night work.

I went back outside. Locked up the front door again. I could feel the huge storm clouds clamping down overhead. It was very dark. I stood by the front door and

checked myself over. Put the pistol in the inside jacket pocket. Moved the zip down and checked the draw. Came out OK. Loaded, cocked. Safety on. Spare shells in the outside top right pocket. Switchblade in the left side pocket. Blackjack in the right side pocket. Shoes tightly laced.

I walked down the driveway, away from the house, past the parked Bentley, twelve or fifteen yards. Pushed through the greenery and settled in a spot where I could just about see up and down the drive. I sat on the cold earth and got ready to wait. In an ambush situation, waiting is what wins the battle. If the other guy is wary, he'll come early or late. When he figures you won't be expecting him. So however early he might make it, you've got to be ready earlier. However late he might leave it, you've got to wait it out. You wait in a kind of trance. You need infinite patience. No use fretting or worrying. You just wait. Doing nothing, thinking nothing, burning no energy. Then you burst into action. After an hour, five hours, a day, a week. Waiting is a skill like anything else.

IT WAS A QUARTER TO MIDNIGHT WHEN I SETTLED IN FOR the wait. I could feel the storm boiling up overhead. The air was like soup. It was pitch dark. About midnight, the storm broke. Heavy drops the size of quarters spattered the leaves around me. They built into a deluge within seconds. It was like sitting in a shower stall. Awesome thunderclaps crashed about. They ripped and banged and the lightning blazed in sheets. The garden around me was lit up like day for seconds at a time. I sat under the lashing rain and waited. Ten minutes. Fifteen.

They came for me at twenty minutes past midnight. The rain was still bad and the thunder was still crashing and rolling. I didn't hear their truck until it was well up the driveway. I heard it crunching over the gravel about forty feet away. It was a dark green panel truck. Gold lettering. Kliner Foundation. Like the one I'd seen near Roscoe's place on Tuesday morning. It crunched past me, about six feet away. Wide tires on the gravel. That's what Finlay had seen up at the Morrison place. Marks in the gravel made by wide tires.

The truck stopped a few yards beyond me. It pulled up sharp just behind the Bentley. Couldn't get past. Just where I wanted it. I heard the engine stop and the parking brake ratchet on.

First guy out was the driver. He was wearing a white nylon bodysuit. It had a

hood pulled tight around his face. Over his face was a surgical mask. He was wearing thin rubber gloves. On his feet, rubber overshoes. He vaulted out of the driver's seat and walked around to the rear doors. I knew that walk. I knew that tall, heavy build. I knew those long powerful arms. It was the Kliner kid. The Kliner kid himself had come to kill me.

He slapped his palm on the rear door. It made a hollow boom. Then he turned the handle and opened up. Four men came out. All dressed the same. White nylon bodysuits, hoods pulled tight, masks, gloves, rubber overshoes. Two were carrying bags. Two had long fat shotguns. A total of five men. I'd expected four. Five was going to be harder. But more productive.

The rain was lashing down on them. I could hear the brittle spatter as it hit their stiff nylon suits. I could hear the metallic clang as the heavy drops bounced off the roof of their truck. I saw them caught by a lightning flash. They looked like banshees. Like something escaped from hell. They were a terrifying sight. For the first time, I doubted if I would have beaten them on Monday night. But I was going to beat them tonight. Tonight, I would have the advantage of surprise. I would be an invisible nightmare figure let loose among them.

The Kliner kid was organizing them. He reached into the back of the truck and pulled out a crowbar. Pointed to three of his soldiers and walked off with them through the downpour to the house. The fifth guy was going to wait with the truck. Because of the rain, he was going to get back in the cab. I saw him glance up at the black sky and glance forward at the driver's seat. I pulled out the sap. Forced my way through the bushes. The guy couldn't hear me. The rain was roaring in his ears.

He turned his back and took a step toward the driver's door. I shut my eyes for a second and pictured Joe lying on the slab at the morgue with no face. Pictured Roscoe shaking with horror as she stared at the footprints on her hallway floor. Then I crashed out of the bushes. Skipped up behind the guy. Smashed the sap across the back of his skull. It was a big sap and I gave it all I had. I felt the bone explode under it. The guy went down on the gravel like a tree. He lay facedown and the rain hammered on his nylon suit. I broke his neck with a single mighty kick. One down.

I dragged the body across the gravel and left it at the back of the truck. Walked around and pulled the keys out of the ignition. Crept on up to the house. I put the sap back in my pocket. Popped the switchblade and carried it in my right hand. I

didn’t want to use the gun in the house. Too noisy, even with the thunder crashing outside. I stopped inside the front door. The lock was forced and the wood was splintered. I saw the crowbar on the hallway floor.

It was a big house. It was going to take them some time to search it. My guess was they’d stick together as a group of four. They’d search together. Then they’d split up. I could hear them tramping through the upper floor. I stepped back outside to wait for one of them to come down into the hallway. I waited, pressed against the wall, next to the broken door. I was sheltered by the overhang of the roof. The rain was still torrential. It was as bad as a tropical storm.

I waited nearly five minutes before the first one came downstairs. I heard the creak of his tread in the hallway. Heard him open the coat closet door. I stepped inside the house. His back was to me. He was one of the shotgun carriers, tall, lighter than me. I fell in behind him. Reached over the top of his head with my left hand. Stuck my fingers in his eyes. He dropped the shotgun. It thudded onto the carpet. I pulled him backward and turned him and ran him out through the door. Into the downpour. Dug my fingers deeper into his eyes. Hauled his head back. Cut his throat. You don’t do it with one elegant swipe. Not like in the movies. No knife is sharp enough for that. There’s all kinds of tough gristle in the human throat. You have to saw back and forth with a lot of strength. Takes a while. But it works. It works well. By the time you’ve sawed back to the bone, the guy is dead. This guy was no exception. His blood hosed out and mixed with the rain. He sagged against my grip. Two down.

I dragged the body over to the lawn by the top of his hood. No good picking him up under the knees and shoulders. His head would have lolled back and fallen off. I left him on the grass. Ran back inside. Picked up the shotgun and grimaced. It was a serious weapon. An Ithaca Mag-10. I’d seen them in the army. They fire an enormous cartridge. People call them the Roadblocker. There’s enough power in them to kill people through the side of a soft-skinned vehicle. Face to face, they’re devastating. They only hold three cartridges, but like we used to say, by the time you’ve fired three rounds, the battle is definitely over.

I kept the blade out as my weapon of choice. Silent. But the shotgun would be better than the Desert Eagle as backup. Thing is with a shotgun, aiming is a luxury. A shotgun sprays a wide cone of lead. With a Mag-10, as long as it’s pointed vaguely in the right direction, you’re going to score.

I stepped back out through the splintered door and pressed against the wall, out of the deluge. I waited. Now my guess was they'd start coming out of the house. They wouldn't find me in there and they'd miss the guy I'd just dropped. So they'd start coming out. It was inevitable. They couldn't stay in there forever. I waited. Ten minutes. I could hear creaking from the floor inside. Ignored it. Sooner or later, they'd come out.

They came out. Two guys together. They came as a pair. That made me hesitate a fraction. They stepped out into the downpour and I heard the rain start roaring against their nylon hoods. I pulled out the sap again. Swapped it into my right hand. The first guy went down easily enough. I caught him square on the back of his neck with the heavy sap and his head nearly came off. But the second guy reacted and twisted away so that I missed with the next swing. The sap just smashed his collarbone and dropped him to his knees. I stabbed him left-handed in the face. Lined up for another shot with the sap. Took me two more blows to break his neck. He was a wiry guy. But not wiry enough. Four down.

I dragged the two bodies through the lashing rain to the lawn at the edge of the gravel drive. Piled them with the other guy. I had four down and one shotgun captured. The truck keys in my pocket. The Kliner kid with a shotgun still on the loose.

I couldn't find him. I didn't know where he was. I stepped into the house, out of the rain, and listened. Couldn't hear a thing. The roar of the rain on the roof and on the gravel outside was too much. It was putting up a mask of white noise over everything else. If the kid was alerted and creeping around, I wouldn't hear him. It was going to be a problem.

I crept into the garden room. The rain was hammering on the roof. I stood still and listened hard. Heard the kid in the hallway. He was on his way out. He was going out the front door. If he turned right, he was going to trip over his three dead grunts piled on the lawn. But he turned left. He walked past the garden room windows. He was headed across the soaking lawn to the patio area. I watched him walk by, through the deluge, maybe eight feet away. Looked like a ghost from hell. A ghost from hell holding a long black shotgun out in front of him.

I had the garden room key in my pocket, on the Bentley ring. I unlocked the door and stepped out. The rain hit me like a drenching from a fire hose. I crept around to the patio. The Kliner kid was standing there, looking down toward the big

swimming pool. I crouched in the rain, and watched him. From twenty feet, I could hear the downpour thrashing against his white nylon bodysuit. Lightning was searing the sky and the thunder was a continuous crashing.

I didn't want to shoot him with the Mag-10 I was holding. I had to dispose of the bodies. I had to leave old man Kliner unsettled. I had to keep him guessing about what had happened. About where his boy had disappeared to. It would unbalance him. And it was crucial to my own safety. I couldn't afford to leave the slightest shred of evidence behind. Using the big Ithaca against the kid would make a hell of a mess. Disposing of his body would be a severe problem. Finding all of it would be difficult. I waited.

The kid set off down the long sloping lawn to the pool. I looped around, staying on the wet grass. The kid walked slowly. He was worried. He was on his own. His vision wasn't good. The tight hood around his face was limiting his field of view. He kept turning his head from side to side, stiff-necked, like a mechanical thing. He stopped at the edge of the pool. I was a yard behind him. I was swaying left and right, left and right, staying out of the edge of his vision as he swung his gaze from side to side. His massive shotgun was traversing left and right over the teeming pool.

The books I used to read, the movies people see, I should have fought him nobly. I was here to stand up for my brother. And right in front of me was the guy who'd kicked his body around like a bundle of rags. We should have duked it out, face to face. He should have been made aware of who his opponent was. He should have been made aware of why he had to die. All that noble, man-to-man stuff. But real life wasn't like that. Joe would have laughed at all that.

I swung the sap with all my strength at his head. Just as he turned to walk back to the house. The sap glanced off the slick nylon and the momentum of the heavy lead-filled tube pulled me hopelessly off balance. I was falling like a man on ice. The kid spun and raised the shotgun. Pumped a shell into the chamber. I flung my arm up and knocked the barrel aside. Rolled right under his field of fire. He squeezed the trigger and there was an enormous explosion, louder than the worst of the thunder. I heard leaves tearing and ripping as the shot smashed into the trees beyond us.

The ferocious recoil rocked him back, but he pumped the second shell. I heard the menacing double crunch-crunch of the mechanism. I was on my back on the poolside tiles, but I lunged up and grabbed the gun with both hands. Forced the

poolside tiles, but I lunged up and grabbed the gun with both hands. Forced the barrel up and the stock down and he fired into the air again. Another terrifying explosion. This time I pulled with the recoil and tore the gun out of his hands. Thrust up and jabbed the stock at his face. It was a poor blow. The Ithaca has a big rubber pad on the stock. It protects the shooter's shoulder from the savage recoil. Now it protected the kid's head from my jab. He just rocked back. I dove at his legs and slammed him backward. Swiped at his feet and tripped him into the pool. He splashed in on his back. I jumped in on top of him.

We were in the deep end of the pool, thrashing about for the winning hold. The rain was hammering. Chlorine was burning my eyes and nose. I fought on until I got his throat. Tore the nylon hood back and got my hands right on his neck. Locked my arms and thrust the kid's head far under the water. I was crushing his throat with all my strength. That biker in Warburton had thought he was doing a job on me, but that had been like a lover's caress compared to what I was doing to the Kliner kid. I was tearing his head off. I squeezed and wrenched and held him a yard underwater until he died. Didn't take long. Never does, in that situation. The first guy under stays under. It could have been me.

I was treading water and gasping through the chlorine stink. The rain was chopping up the surface. It was impossible to tell where the water ended and the air began. I let his body float off and swam to the side. Clung on and got my breath. The weather was a nightmare. The thunder was now a continuous roar and the lightning blazed in sheets. The rain was a relentless downpour. It would have kept me drier to stay in the pool. But I had things to do.

I swam back to fetch the kid's body. It was floating a yard down. I towed it back to the side. Hauled myself out. Grabbed a bunch of nylon in each hand and dragged the body out after me. It weighed a ton. It lay on the poolside with water gushing out of the suit at the wrists and ankles. I left it there and staggered back up toward the garage.

Walking was not easy. My clothes were soaking wet and cold. It was like walking in chain mail. But I made it to the garage and found the key. Unlocked the door and hit the light. It was a three-car garage. Just the other Bentley in there. Hubble's own car, same vintage as Charlie's. Gorgeous dark green, lovingly polished to a deep gloss. I could see my reflection in the paint as I moved about. I was looking for a wheelbarrow or a garden truck. Whatever gardeners use. The garage was full of garden gear. A big ride-on mower, hoses, tools. In the far corner, a sort of a barrow thing with big spoke wheels like a

bicycle.

I wheeled it out into the storm and down to the pool. Scrabbled around and found the two shotguns and the wet sap. Dropped the shotguns in the barrow and put the sap back in my pocket. Checked that the kid's corpse still had its shoes on and heaved it into the barrow. Wheeled it up to the house and down the driveway. Squeezed it past the Bentley and rolled it around to the back of the truck. I opened the rear doors and heaved the corpse inside. Scrambled up and dragged it well in. The rain was clattering on the roof. Then I lifted the first guy's body in and dragged it up next to the Kliner kid. Threw the shotguns in on top of them. Two stowed.

Then I took the barrow up to where I'd piled the other three. They were sprawled on the soaking lawn with the rain roaring on their hideous suits. I wheeled them back to the truck they'd come in. Got all five laid out inside.

Then I ran the barrow back through the deluge to the garage. Put it back in the corner where I'd found it. Took a flashlight from the workbench. I wanted to get a look at the four boys young Kliner had brought with him. I ran back through the rain to the truck and stepped up inside. Switched on the flashlight and crouched over the forlorn row of corpses.

The Kliner kid, I knew. The other four, I pulled back their hoods and tore away their masks. Played the flashlight beam over their faces. Two of them were the gatemen from the warehouse. I'd watched them through the field glasses on Thursday and I was sure of it. Maybe I wouldn't have sworn to it in a court-martial, but I wasn't interested in that kind of a judicial procedure tonight.

The other two, I did know for sure. No doubt about it. They were police. They were the backup crew from Friday. They'd come with Baker and Stevenson to the diner to arrest me. I'd seen them around the station house a few times since. They had been inside the scam. More of Mayor Teale's concealed troops.

I scrambled out of the truck again and took the flashlight back to the garage. Locked up the doors and ran through the rain to the front of the house. Scooped up the two bags they'd brought. Dumped them inside Hubble's hallway and hit the light. Looked through the bags. Spare gloves and masks. A box of 10-gauge shotgun shells. A hammer. A bag of six-inch nails. And four knives. Medical type of thing. They could cut you just looking at them.

I picked up the crowbar from where they'd dropped it after breaking the lock. Put it in one of the bags. Carried the bags down to the truck and hurled them in on top of the five bodies. Then I shut and locked the rear doors and ran through the lashing rain up to the house again.

I ran through and locked up the garden room. Ran back to the kitchen. I opened the oven door and emptied my pockets. Laid everything out on the floor. Found a couple of baking sheets in the next cupboard. I stripped down the Desert Eagle and laid the parts carefully on one of the trays. Piled the spare bullets next to them. Put the knife, the sap, the Bentley keys and my money and papers on the other tray. I put the trays in the oven and turned the heat on very low.

I went out the front and pulled the splintered door as far shut as it would go. Ran past the Bentley and got into the Kliner Foundation truck. Fiddled with the unfamiliar key and started it up. Reversed carefully down the driveway and swung backward out onto Beckman Drive. Rolled down the slope to town. The windshield wipers beat furiously against the rain. I skirted the big square with the church. Made the right turn at the bottom and headed south. The place was deserted. Nobody else on the road.

Three hundred yards south of the village green, I turned into Morrison's driveway. Drove the truck up to the house and parked it next to his abandoned Lincoln. Locked the door. Ran over to Morrison's boundary fence and hurled the keys far into the field beyond. Shrugged my jacket tight around me and started walking back through the rain. Started thinking hard.

SATURDAY WAS ALREADY MORE THAN AN HOUR OLD. Therefore Sunday was less than a day away. The shape of the thing was clear. I had three facts, for sure. Fact one, Kliner needed special paper. Fact two, it wasn't obtainable in the States. But fact three, the warehouse was jammed with something.

And the writing on those air conditioner boxes was bothering me. Not the Island Air-conditioning, Inc. Not the printed bit. The other writing. The serial numbers. The boxes I'd seen had handwritten serial numbers in printed rectangles. I'd seen them quite clearly. The Jacksonville cops had described the same thing on the boxes in Stoller's speeding truck. Long handwritten serial numbers. But why? The boxes themselves were good cover. Good camouflage. Hauling

something secret to Florida and beyond in air conditioner boxes was a smart move. No product was more plausible for the markets down there. The boxes had fooled the Jacksonville cops. They hadn't thought twice about it. But the serial numbers bothered me. If there were no electrical appliances in the boxes, why write serial numbers on them? That was taking camouflage to absurd lengths. So what the hell did the serial numbers mean? What the hell had been in those damn boxes?

That was the question I was asking myself. In the end, it was Joe who answered it for me. I was walking along in the rain thinking about what Kelstein had said about precision. He had said Joe had a very attractive precision in the manner in which he expressed himself. I knew that. I was thinking about the neat little list he'd printed out for himself. The proud capital letters. The rows of initials. The column of telephone numbers. The two notes at the bottom. Stollers' Garage. Gray's Kliner File. I needed to check the list again. But I was suddenly sure Joe was telling me if I wanted to know what Kliner had been putting into those boxes, it might be worth going up to the Stollers' garage and taking a look.

27

FIRST THING I DID BACK AT THE HOUSE WAS ROOT AROUND in Charlie Hubble's expensive kitchen for coffee. Started the machine burbling away. Then I opened up the oven. Got all my things out. They had been warmed for the best part of an hour and they were bone dry. The leather on the sap and the key ring had stiffened up some. Other than that, no damage. I put the gun back together and loaded it. Left it on the kitchen table. Cocked and locked.

Then I checked Joe's computer printout for the confirmation I thought was there. But there was a problem. A major problem. The paper was bone dry and crisp, but the writing had gone. The paper was completely blank. The swimming pool water had washed all the ink off. There were very faint blurred smudges, but I couldn't make out the words. I shrugged to myself. I'd read it through a hundred times. I'd rely on my memory of what it had said.

Next stop was the basement. I fiddled around with the furnace until it kicked in. Then I stripped off and shoved all my clothes in Charlie's electric dryer. Set it on low for an hour. I had no idea what I was doing. In the army, some corporal had done my laundry. Took it away, brought it back clean and folded. Since then, I always bought cheap stuff and just junked it.

I walked upstairs naked and went into Hubble's bathroom. Took a long hot shower and scrubbed the mascara off my face. Stood for a long time in the hot water. Wrapped myself up in a towel and went down for the coffee.

I couldn't go up to Atlanta that night. I couldn't get there before maybe three thirty in the morning. That was the wrong time to be sure of talking my way inside. I had no ID to show and no proper status. A night visit could turn into a problem. I would have to leave it until tomorrow, first thing. No choice.

So I thought about sleeping. I turned the kitchen radio off and wandered through to Hubble's den. Turned the television off. Looked around. It was a dark, snug room. Lots of wood paneling and big leather chairs. Next to the television was a stereo. Some kind of a Japanese thing. Rows of compact discs and cassette tapes. Big emphasis on the Beatles. Hubble had said he'd been interested in John Lennon. He'd been to the Dakota in New York City and to Liverpool in England. He had just about everything. All the albums, a few bootlegs, that

singles collection on CD they sold in a wooden box.

Over the desk was a bookshelf. Stacks of professional periodicals and a row of heavy books. Technical banking journals and reports. The professional periodicals took up a couple of feet of shelf space. They looked pretty deadly. Random copies of something calling itself the Banking Journal. A couple of issues of a solid magazine called Bank Management. One called Banker. Banker's Magazine, Banker's Monthly, Business Journal, Business Week, Cash Management Bulletin, The Economist, The Financial Post. All filed in line with the alphabet, all in neat date order. Just random copies, ranging back over the last few years. No complete sets. At the end of the row were some U.S. Treasury Department dispatches and a couple of issues of something calling itself World of Banking. A curious collection. Seemed very selective. Maybe they were especially heavy issues. Maybe Hubble had read them through when he couldn't sleep.

I wasn't going to have any trouble sleeping. I was on my way out of the den, off to find a bed to borrow, when something occurred to me. I stepped back to the desk and peered at the bookshelf again. Ran my finger along the row of magazines and journals. Checked the dates printed on the spines, under the pompous titles. Some of them were recent issues. The random sequence continued right up to the latest issue of a couple of them. More than a dozen were from this year. Fully a third of them were published after Hubble had left his job at the bank. After he had been let go. They were published for bankers, but by then Hubble hadn't been a banker anymore. But he had still been ordering up these heavy professional journals. He had still been getting them. Still reading all this complicated stuff. Why?

I pulled out a couple of the periodicals. Looked at the covers. They were thick, glossy magazines. I held them in my fingers at the top and bottom of the spines. They fell open at the pages Hubble had consulted. I looked at those pages. Pulled out some more issues. Let them fall open. I sat down in Hubble's leather chair. I sat there wrapped in his towel, reading. I read right through the shelf. From left to right, from beginning to end. All the periodicals. It took me an hour.

Then I started in on the books. I ran my finger along the dusty row. Stopped with a little shock when I spotted a couple of names I knew. Kelstein and Bartholomew. A big old volume. Bound in red leather. Their Senate subcommittee report. I pulled it out and started flicking through. It was an amazing publication. Kelstein had modestly described it as the

anticounterfeiter's bible. And it was. He'd been too modest. It was totally exhaustive. It was a painstaking history of every known forging technique. Copious examples and instances were taken from every racket ever discovered. I hefted the heavy volume onto my lap. Read for another solid hour.

At first I concentrated on paper problems. Kelstein had said that paper was the key. He and Bartholomew had provided a long appendix about paper. It expanded on what he'd told me face to face. The cotton and linen fibers, the chemical colorant, the introduction of the red and blue polymer threads. The paper was produced in Dalton, Massachusetts, by an outfit called Crane and Company. I nodded to myself. I'd heard of them. Seemed to me I'd bought some Christmas cards made by them. I remembered the thick heavy card and the creamy rag envelopes. I'd liked them. The company had been making currency stock for the Treasury since 1879. For over a century, it had been trucked down to Washington under heavy guard in armored cars. None had ever been stolen. Not a single sheet.

Then I flipped backward from the appendix and started looking at the main text. I piled Hubble's little library on his desk. Trawled through it all again. Some things I read twice, three times. I kept diving back into the untidy sprawl of dense articles and reports. Checking, cross-referencing, trying to understand the arcane language. I kept going back to the big red Senate report. There were three paragraphs I read over and over again. The first was about an old counterfeiting ring in Bogotá, Colombia. The second was about a much earlier Lebanese operation. The Christian Phalangists had teamed up with some Armenian engravers during an old civil war. The third was some basic stuff about chemistry. Lots of complicated formulas, but there were a few words I recognized. I read the three paragraphs time and time again. I wandered through to the kitchen. Picked up Joe's blank list. Stared at it for a long time. Wandered back to the dark quiet den and sat in a pool of light and thought and read halfway through the night.

IT DIDN'T PUT ME TO SLEEP. IT HAD EXACTLY THE OPPOSITE effect. It woke me up. It gave me a hell of a buzz. It left me shaking with shock and excitement. Because by the time I had finished, I knew exactly how they were getting their paper. I knew exactly where they were getting it from. I knew what had been in those air conditioner boxes last year. I didn't need to go up to

Atlanta and look. I knew. I knew what Kliner was stockpiling at his warehouse. I knew what all those trucks were bringing in every day. I knew what Joe's heading had meant. E Unum Pluribus. I knew why he'd chosen that reversed motto. I knew everything, with twenty-four hours still to go. The whole thing, from beginning to end. From top to bottom. From the inside out. And it was one hell of a clever operation. Old Professor Kelstein had said the paper was unobtainable. But Kliner had proved him wrong. Kliner had found a way of obtaining it. A very simple way.

I jumped up from the desk and ran down to the basement. Wrenched open the dryer door and pulled my clothes out. Dressed hopping from foot to foot on the concrete floor. Left the towel where it fell. Ran back up to the kitchen. Loaded up my jacket with the things I was going to need. Ran outside, leaving the splintered door swinging. Ran over the gravel to the Bentley. Started it up and threaded it backward down the drive. Roared off down Beckman and squealed a left onto Main Street. Gunned it through the silent town and out beyond the diner. Howled another left onto the Warburton road and pushed the stately old car along as fast as I dared.

The Bentley's headlights were dim. Twenty-year-old design. The night was patchy. Dawn was hours away and the last of the trailing storm clouds were scudding across the moon. The road was never quite straight. The camber was off and the surface was lumpy. And slick with storm water. The old car was sliding and wallowing. So I cut the speed back to a cruise. Figured it was smarter to take an extra ten minutes than to go plowing off into a field. I didn't want to join Joe. I didn't want to be another Reacher brother who knew, but who was dead.

I passed the copse of trees. It was just a darker patch against the dark sky. Miles away, I could see the perimeter lights of the prison. They were blazing out over the night landscape. I cruised past. Then for miles I could see their glow in the mirror, behind me. Then I was over the bridge, through Franklin, out of Georgia, into Alabama. I rushed past the old roadhouse Roscoe and I had been in. The Pond. It was closed up and dark. Another mile, I was at the motel. I left the motor running and ducked into the office to rouse the night guy.

"You got a guest called Finlay here?" I asked him.

He rubbed his eyes and looked at the register.

“Eleven,” he said.

The whole place had that night look on it. Slowed down and silent and asleep. I found Finlay’s cabin. Number eleven. His police Chevy was parked up outside. I made a lot of noise banging on his door. Had to keep banging for a while. Then I heard an irritated groan. Couldn’t make out any words. I banged some more.

“Come on, Finlay,” I called.

“Who’s there?” I heard him shout.

“It’s Reacher,” I said. “Open the damn door.”

There was a pause. Then the door opened. Finlay was standing there. I’d woken him up. He was wearing a gray sweatshirt and boxer shorts. I was amazed. I realized I had expected him to be sleeping in his tweed suit. With the mole-skin vest.

“What the hell do you want?” he said.

“Something to show you,” I told him.

He stood yawning and blinking.

“What the hell time is it?” he said.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Five o’clock, six, maybe. Get dressed. We’re going somewhere.”

“Going where?” he said.

“Atlanta,” I said. “Something to show you.”

“What something?” he said. “Just tell me, can’t you?”

“Get dressed, Finlay,” I said again. “Got to go.”

He grunted, but he went to get dressed. Took him a while. Fifteen minutes, maybe. He disappeared into the bathroom. Went in there looking like a normal sort of a guy, just woken up. Came out looking like Finlay. Tweed suit and all.

“OK,” he said. “This better be damn good, Reacher.”

We went out into the night. I walked over to the car while he locked his cabin door. Then he joined me.

“You driving?” he said.

“Why?” I said. “You got a problem with that?”

He looked irritable as hell. Glared at the gleaming Bentley.

“Don’t like people driving me,” he said. “You want to let me drive?”

“I don’t care who drives,” I said. “Just get in the damn car, will you?”

He got in the driver’s side and I handed him the keys. I was happy enough to do that. I was very tired. He started the Bentley up and backed it out of the lot. Swung east. Settled in for the drive. He went fast. Faster than I had. He was a hell of a good driver.

“SO WHAT’S GOING ON?” HE SAID TO ME.

I looked across at him. I could see his eyes in the glow from the dash.

“I figured it out,” I said. “I know what it’s all about.”

He glanced back again.

“So are you going to tell me?” he said.

“Did you call Princeton?” I asked him.

He grunted and slapped the Bentley’s wheel in irritation.

“I was on the phone for an hour,” he said. “The guy knew a hell of a lot, but in the end he knew nothing at all.”

“What did he tell you?” I asked him.

“He gave me the whole thing,” he said. “He was a smart guy. History postgrad

"He gave me the whole thing," he said. "He was a smart guy. History postgrad, working for Bartholomew. Turns out Bartholomew and the other guy, Kelstein, were the big noises in counterfeiting research. Joe had been using them for background."

I nodded across at him.

"I got all that from Kelstein," I said.

He glanced over again. Still irritable.

"So why are you asking me about it?" he said.

"I want your conclusions," I told him. "I want to see where you got to."

"We didn't get to anywhere," he said. "They all talked for a year and decided there was no way Kliner could be getting so much good paper."

"That's exactly what Kelstein said," I told him. "But I figured it out."

He glanced over at me again. Surprise on his face. In the far distance I could see the glow of the prison lights at Warburton.

"So tell me about it," he said.

"Wake up and figure it out for yourself, Harvard guy," I said.

He grunted again. Still irritable. We drove on. We hurtled into the pool of light spilling from the prison fence. Passed by the prison approach. Then the fierce yellow glare was behind us.

"So start me off with a clue, will you?" he said.

"I'll give you two clues," I said. "The heading Joe used on his list. E Unum Pluribus. And then think about what's unique about American currency."

He nodded. Thought about it. Drummed his long fingers on the wheel.

"E Unum Pluribus," he said. "It's a reversal of the U.S. motto. So we can assume it means out of one comes many, right?"

"Correct," I said. "And what's unique about American banknotes, compared to

any other country in the world?"

He thought about it. He was thinking about something so familiar he wasn't spotting it. We drove on. Shot past the stand of trees on the left. Up ahead, a faint glimmer of dawn in the east.

"What?" he said.

"I've lived all over the world," I said. "Six continents, if you count a brief spell in an air force weather hut in Antarctica. Dozens of countries. I've had lots of different sorts of paper money in my pocket. Yen, deutschmarks, pounds, lire, pesos, wons, francs, shekels, rupees. Now I've got dollars. What do I notice?"

Finlay shrugged.

"What?" he said.

"Dollars are all the same size," I said. "Fifties, hundreds, tens, twenties, fives and ones. All the same size. No other country I've seen does that. Anywhere else, the high-value notes are bigger than the small-value notes. There's a progression, right? Anywhere else, the one is a small bill, the five is bigger, the ten is bigger and so on. The biggest value bills are usually great big sheets of paper. But American dollars are all the same size. The hundred-dollar bill is the same size as the one-dollar bill."

"So?" he asked.

"So where are they getting their paper from?" I asked him.

I waited. He glanced out of his window. Away from me. He wasn't getting it and that was irritating him.

"They're buying it," I said. "They're buying the paper for a buck a sheet."

He sighed and gave me a look.

"They're not buying it, for God's sake," he said. "Bartholomew's guy made that clear. It's manufactured up in Dalton and the whole operation is as tight as a fish's asshole. They haven't lost a single sheet in a hundred and twenty years. Nobody's selling it off on the side, Reacher."

“Wrong, Finlay,” I said. “It’s for sale on the open market.”

He grunted again. We drove on. Came to the turn onto the county road. Finlay slowed and swung left. Headed north toward the highway. Now the glimmer of dawn was on our right. It was getting stronger.

“They’re scouring the country for one-dollar bills,” I said. “That was the role Hubble took over a year and a half ago. That used to be his job at the bank, cash management. He knew how to get hold of cash. So he arranged to obtain one-dollar bills from banks, malls, retail chains, supermarkets, racetracks, casinos, anywhere he could. It was a big job. They needed a lot of them. They’re using bank checks and wire transfers and bogus hundreds and they’re buying in genuine one-dollar bills from all over the U.S. About a ton a week.”

Finlay stared across at me. Nodded. He was beginning to understand.

“A ton a week?” he said. “How many is that?”

“A ton in singles is a million dollars,” I said. “They need forty tons a year. Forty million dollars in singles.”

“Go on,” he said.

“The trucks bring them down to Margrave,” I said. “From wherever Hubble sourced them. They come in to the warehouse.”

Finlay nodded. He was catching on. He could see it.

“Then they got shipped out again in the air conditioner cartons,” he said.

“Correct,” I said. “Until a year ago. Until the Coast Guard stopped them. Nice new fresh boxes, probably ordered from some cardboard box factory two thousand miles away. They packed them up, sealed them with tape, shipped them out. But they used to count them first, before shipping them.”

He nodded again.

“To keep the books straight,” he said. “But how the hell do you count a ton of dollar bills a week?”

“They weighed them,” I said. “Every time they filled a box, they stuck it on a

scale and weighed it. With singles, an ounce is worth thirty bucks. A pound is worth four hundred and eighty. I read about all that last night. They weighed it, they calculated the value, then they wrote the amount on the side of the box."

"How do you know?" he said.

"The serial numbers," I said. "Showed how much money was in the box."

Finlay smiled a rueful smile.

"OK," he said. "Then the boxes went to Jacksonville Beach, right?"

I nodded.

"Got put on a boat," I said. "Got taken down to Venezuela."

Then we fell silent. We were approaching the warehouse complex up at the top of the old county road. It loomed up on our left like the center of our universe. The metal siding reflected the pale dawn. Finlay slowed. We looked over at the place. Our heads swiveled around as we drove past. Then we swung up the ramp onto the highway. Headed north for Atlanta. Finlay mashed the pedal and the stately old car hummed along faster.

"What's in Venezuela?" I asked him.

He shrugged across at me.

"Lots of things, right?" he said.

"Kliner's chemical works," I said. "It relocated there after the EPA problem."

"So?" he said.

"So what does it do?" I asked him. "What's that chemical plant for?"

"Something to do with cotton," he said.

"Right," I said. "Involving sodium hydroxide, sodium hypochlorite, chlorine and water. What do you get when you mix all those chemicals together?"

He shrugged. The guy was a cop, not a chemist.

“Bleach,” I said. “Bleach, pretty strong, specially for cotton fiber.”

“So?” he said again.

“What did Bartholomew’s guy tell you about currency paper?” I asked him.

Finlay inhaled sharply. It was practically a gasp.

“Christ,” he said. “Currency paper is mostly cotton fiber. With a bit of linen. They’re bleaching the dollar bills. My God, Reacher, they’re bleaching the ink off. I don’t believe it. They’re bleaching the ink off the singles and giving themselves forty million sheets of genuine blank paper to play with.”

I grinned at him and he held out his right hand. We smacked a high five and whooped at each other, alone in the speeding car.

“You got it, Harvard guy,” I said. “That’s how they’re doing it. No doubt about that. They’ve figured out the chemistry and they’re reprinting the blank bills as hundreds. That’s what Joe meant. E Unum Pluribus. Out of one comes many. Out of one dollar comes a hundred dollars.”

“Christ,” Finlay said again. “They’re bleaching the ink off. This is something else, Reacher. And you know what this all means? Right now, that warehouse is stuffed full to the ceiling with forty tons of genuine dollar bills. There’s forty million dollars in there. Forty tons, all piled up, waiting for the Coast Guard to pull back. We’ve caught them with their pants down, right?”

I laughed, happily.

“Right,” I said. “Their pants are down around their ankles. Their asses are hanging out in the breeze. That’s what they were so worried about. That’s why they’re panicking.”

Finlay shook his head. Grinned at the windshield.

“How the hell did you figure this out?” he asked.

I didn’t answer right away. We drove on. The highway was hoisting us through the gathering sprawl of Atlanta’s southern edge. Blocks were filling up. Construction and commerce were busy confirming the Sunbelt’s growing strength. Cranes stood ready to shore up the city’s southern wall against the rural

strength. Cranes stood ready to shore up the city's southern wall against the rural emptiness outside.

"We're going to take this one step at a time," I said.

"First of all, I'm going to prove it to you. I'm going to show you an air conditioner box stuffed with genuine one-dollar bills."

"You are?" he said. "Where?"

I glanced across at him.

"In the Stollers' garage," I said.

"Christ's sake, Reacher," he said. "It got burned down. And there was nothing in it, right? Even if there was, now it's got the Atlanta PD and fire chiefs swarming all over it."

"I've got no information says it got burned down," I said.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he said. "I told you, it was on the telex."

"Where did you go to school?" I asked him.

"What's that got to do with anything?" he said.

"Precision," I said. "It's a habit of mind. It can get reinforced by good schooling. You saw Joe's computer printout, right?"

Finlay nodded.

"You recall the second-to-last item?" I asked him.

"Stollers' Garage," he said.

"Right," I said. "But think about the punctuation. If the apostrophe was before the final letter, it would mean the garage belonging to one person called Stoller. The singular possessive, they call it in school, right?"

"But?" he said.

"It wasn't written like that," I said. "The apostrophe came after the final letter. It

meant the garage belonging to the Stollers. The plural possessive. The garage belonging to two people called Stoller. And there weren't two people called Stoller living at the house out by the golf course. Judy and Sherman weren't married. The only place we're going to find two people called Stoller is the little old house where Sherman's parents live. And they've got a garage."

Finlay drove on in silence. Trawled back to his grade-school grammar.

"You think he stashed a box with his folks?" he said.

"It's logical," I said. "The boxes we saw in his own place were empty. But Sherman didn't know he was going to die last Thursday. So it's reasonable to assume he had more savings stashed away somewhere else. He thought he was going to live for years without working."

We were just about into Atlanta. The big interchange was coming up.

"Loop around past the airport," I told him.

We skirted the city on a raised ribbon of concrete. We passed near the airport. I found my way back to the poor part of town. It was nearly seven thirty in the morning. The place looked pretty good in the soft morning light. The low sun gave it a spurious glow. I found the right street, and the right house, crouching inoffensively behind its hurricane fencing.

We got out of the car and I led Finlay through the gate in the wire fence. Along the straight path to the door. I nodded to him. He pulled his badge and pounded on the door. We heard the hallway floor creak. We heard bolts and chains snapping and clinking. Then the door opened. Sherman Stoller's mother stood there. She looked awake. Didn't look like we'd got her out of bed. She didn't speak. Just stared out at us.

"Morning, Mrs. Stoller," I said. "Remember me?"

"You're a police officer," she said.

Finlay held his badge out toward her. She nodded.

"Better come in," she said.

We followed her down the hall into the cramped kitchen.

We followed her down the hall into the cramped kitchen.

“What can I do for you?” the old lady asked.

“We’d like to see the inside of your garage, ma’am,” Finlay said. “We have reason to believe your son may have placed some stolen property there.”

The woman stood silently in her kitchen for a moment. Then she turned and took a key off a nail on the wall. Handed it to us without a word. Walked off down the narrow hallway and disappeared into another room. Finlay shrugged at me and we went back out the front door and walked around to the garage.

It was a small tumbledown structure, barely big enough for a single car. Finlay used the key on the lock and swung the door open. The garage was empty except for two tall cartons. They were stacked side by side against the end wall. Identical to the empty boxes I’d seen at Sherman Stoller’s new house. Island Air-conditioning, Inc. But these were still sealed with tape. They had long handwritten serial numbers. I took a good look at them. According to those numbers, there was a hundred thousand dollars in each box.

Finlay and I stood there looking at the boxes. Just staring at them. Then I walked over and rocked one out from the wall. Took out Morrison’s knife and popped the blade. Pushed the point under the sealing tape and slit the top open. Pulled up the flaps on the top and pushed the box over.

It landed with a dusty thump on the concrete floor. An avalanche of paper money poured out. Cash fluttered over the floor. A mass of paper money. Thousands and thousands of dollar bills. A river of singles, some new, some crumpled, some in thick rolls, some in wide bricks, some loose and fluttering. The carton spilled its contents and the flood tide of cash reached Finlay’s polished shoes. He crouched down and plunged his hands into the lake of money. He grabbed two random fistfuls of cash and held them up. The tiny garage was dim. Just a small dirty windowpane letting in the pale morning light. Finlay stayed down on the floor with his big hands full of dollar bills. We looked at the money and we looked at each other.

“How much was in there?” Finlay asked.

I kicked the box over to find the handwritten number. More cash spilled out and fluttered over the floor.

“Nearly a hundred thousand,” I told him.

“What about the other one?” he said.

I looked over at the other box. Read the long hand written number.

“A hundred grand plus change,” I said. “Must be packed tighter.”

He shook his head. Dropped the dollar bills and started swishing his hands through the pile. Then he got up and started kicking it around. Like a kid does with fall leaves. I joined him. We were laughing and kicking great sprays of cash all over the place. The air was thick with it. We were whooping and slapping each other on the back. We were smacking high tens and dancing around in a hundred thousand dollars on a garage floor.

FINLAY REVERSED THE BENTLEY UP TO THE GARAGE DOOR. I kicked the cash into piles and started stuffing it back into the air conditioner box. It wouldn’t all go in. Problem was the tight rolls and bricks had sprung apart. It was just a mess of loose dollar bills. I stood the box upright and crushed the money down as far as I could, but it was hopeless. I must have left about thirty grand on the garage floor.

“We’ll take the sealed box,” Finlay said. “Come back for the rest later.”

“It’s a drop in the bucket,” I said. “We should leave it for the old folks. Like a pension fund. An inheritance from their boy.”

He thought about it. Shrugged, like it didn’t matter. The cash was just lying around like litter. There was so much of it, it didn’t seem like anything at all.

“OK,” he said.

We dragged the sealed box out into the morning light. Heaved it into the Bentley’s trunk. It wasn’t easy. The box was very heavy. A hundred thousand dollars weighs about two hundred pounds. We rested up for a moment, panting. Then we shut the garage door. Left the other hundred grand in there.

“I’m going to call Picard,” Finlay said.

He went back into the old couple's house to borrow their phone. I leaned against the Bentley's warm hood and enjoyed the morning sun. Two minutes, he was back out again.

"Got to go to his office," he said. "Strategy conference."

He drove. He threaded his way out of the untidy maze of little streets toward the center. Spun the big Bakelite wheel and headed for the towers.

"OK," he said. "You proved it to me. Tell me how you figured it."

I squirmed around in the big leather seat to face him.

"I wanted to check Joe's list," I said. "That punctuation thing with the Stollers' garage. But the list had gotten soaked in chlorinated water. All the writing had bleached off."

He glanced across.

"You put it together from that?" he said.

I shook my head.

"I got it from the Senate report," I said. "There were a couple of little paragraphs. One was about an old scam in Bogotá. There was another about an operation in Lebanon years ago. They were doing the same thing, bleaching real dollar bills so they could reprint the blank paper."

Finlay ran a red light. Glanced over at me.

"So Kliner's idea isn't original?" he asked.

"Not original at all," I said. "But those other guys were very small scale. Very low-level stuff. Kliner built it up to a huge scale. Sort of industrial. He's the Henry Ford of counterfeiting. Henry Ford didn't invent the automobile, right? But he invented mass production."

He stopped at the next red light. There was traffic on the cross street.

"The bleaching thing was in the Senate report?" he said. "So how come Bartholomew or Kelstein didn't get it? They wrote the damn thing, right?"

“I think Bartholomew did get it,” I said. “I think that’s what he finally figured out. That’s what the e-mail was about. He’d just remembered it. It was a very long report. Thousands of pages, written a long time ago. The bleaching thing was just one tiny footnote in a mass of other stuff. And it referred to very small-scale operations. No comparison at all with the volume Kliner’s into. Can’t blame Bartholomew or Kelstein. They’re old guys. No imagination.”

Finlay shrugged. Parked up next to a hydrant in a tow zone.

28

PICARD MET US IN HIS DOUR LOBBY AND TOOK US OFF INTO a side room. We ran through what we knew. He nodded and his eyes gleamed. He was looking at a big case.

“Excellent work, my friends,” he said. “But who are we dealing with now? I think we got to say all these little Hispanic guys are outsiders. They’re the hired help. They’re not concealed. But locally, we still got five out of the original ten hidden away. We haven’t identified them. That could make things very tricky for us. We know about Morrison, Teale, Baker and the two Kliners, right? But who are the other five? Could be anybody down there, right?”

I shook my head at him.

“We only need to ID one more,” I said. “I sniffed out four more last night. There’s only the tenth guy we don’t know.”

Picard and Finlay both sat up.

“Who are they?” Picard said.

“The two gatemen from the warehouse,” I said. “And two more cops. The backup crew from last Friday.”

“More cops?” Finlay said. “Shit.”

Picard nodded. Laid his giant hands palm down on the table.

“OK,” he said. “You guys head back to Margrave right now. Try to stay out of trouble, but if you can’t, then make the arrests. But be very careful of this tenth guy. Could be anybody at all. I’ll be right behind you. Give me twenty minutes to go get Roscoe back, and I’ll see you down there.”

We all stood up. Shook hands all round. Picard headed upstairs and Finlay and I headed back out to the Bentley.

“How?” he asked me.

“Baker,” I said. “He bumped into me last night. I spun him a yarn about going up to Hubble’s place looking for some documentation, then I went up there and waited to see what would happen. Along came the Kliner kid and four of his pals. They came to nail me to Hubble’s bedroom wall.”

“Christ,” he said. “So what happened?”

“I took them out,” I said.

He did his thing of staring sideways at me at ninety miles an hour.

“You took them out?” he said. “You took the Kliner kid out?”

I nodded. He was quiet for a while. Slowed to eighty-five.

“How did it go down?” he asked.

“I ambushed them,” I said. “Three of them, I hit on the head. One of them, I cut his throat. The Kliner kid, I drowned in the swimming pool. That’s how Joe’s list got soaked. Washed all the writing off.”

“Christ,” he said again. “You killed five men. That’s a hell of a thing, Reacher. How do you feel about that?”

I shrugged. Thought about my brother Joe. Thought about him as a tall gawky eighteen-year-old, just off to West Point. Thought about Molly Beth Gordon, holding up her heavy burgundy leather briefcase, smiling at me. I glanced across at Finlay and answered his question with one of my own.

“How do you feel when you put roach powder down?” I asked him.

He shook his head in a spasm like a dog clearing its coat of cold water.

“Only four left,” he said.

He started kneading the old car’s steering wheel like he was a baker making a pastry twist. He looked through the windshield and blew a huge sigh.

“Any feeling for this tenth guy?” he said.

“Doesn’t really matter who it is,” I said. “Right now he’s up at the warehouse

with the other three. They're short of staff now, right? They'll all be on guard duty overnight. Loading duty tomorrow. All four of them."

I flicked on the Bentley's radio. Some big chrome thing. Some kind of a twenty-year-old English make. But it worked. It pulled in a decent station. I sat listening to the music, trying not to fall asleep.

"Unbelievable," Finlay said. "How the hell did a place like Margrave start up with a thing like this?"

"How did it start?" I said. "It started with Eisenhower. It's his fault."

"Eisenhower?" he said. "What's he got to do with it?"

"He built the interstates," I said. "He killed Margrave. Way back, that old county road was the only road. Everybody and everything had to pass through Margrave. The place was full of rooming houses and bars, people were passing through, spending money. Then the highways got built, and air travel got cheap, and suddenly the town died. It withered away to a dot on the map because the highway missed it by fourteen miles."

"So it's the highway's fault?" he said.

"It's Mayor Teale's fault," I said. "The town sold the land for the warehouses to earn itself some new money, right? Old Teale brokered the deal. But he didn't have the courage to say no when the new money turned out to be bad money. Kliner was fixing to use it for the scam he was setting up, and old Teale jumped straight into bed with him."

"He's a politician," Finlay said. "They never say no to money. And it was a hell of a lot of money. Teale rebuilt the whole town with it."

"He drowned the whole town with it," I said. "The place is a cesspool. They're all floating around in it. From the mayor right down to the guy who polishes the cherry trees."

We stopped talking again. I fiddled with the radio dial and heard Albert King tell me if it wasn't for bad luck, he wouldn't have no luck at all.

"But why Margrave?" Finlay said again.

Old Albert told me bad luck and trouble's been his only friend.

"Geography and opportunity," I said. "It's in the right place. All kinds of highways meet down here and it's a straight run on down to the boatyards in Florida. It's a quiet place and the people who ran the town were greedy scumbags who'd do what they were told."

He went quiet. Thinking about the torrent of dollar bills rushing south and east. Like a storm drain after a flood. A little tidal wave. A small and harassed workforce in Margrave keeping it rolling on. The slightest hitch and tens of thousands of dollars would back up and jam. Like a sewer. Enough money to drown a whole town in. He drummed his long fingers on the wheel. Drove the rest of the way in silence.

WE PARKED UP IN THE SLOT NEAREST THE STATION HOUSE door. The car was reflected in the plate glass. An antique black Bentley, worth a hundred grand on its own. With another hundred grand in the trunk. The most valuable vehicle in the State of Georgia. I popped the trunk lid. Laid my jacket on top of the air conditioner box. Waited for Finlay and walked up to the door.

The place was deserted apart from the desk sergeant. He nodded to us. We skirted the reception counter. Walked through the big quiet squad room to the rosewood office in back. Stepped in and closed the door. Finlay looked uneasy.

"I want to know who the tenth guy is," he said. "It could be anybody. Could be the desk sergeant. There's been four cops in this already."

"It's not him," I said. "He never does anything. Just parks his fat ass on that stool. Could be Stevenson, though. He was connected to Hubble."

He shook his head.

"No," he said. "Teale pulled him in off the road when he took over. He wanted him where he could see him. So it's not Stevenson. I guess it could be anybody. Could be Eno. Up at the diner? He's a bad-tempered type of a guy."

I looked at him.

"You're a bad-tempered type of a guy, Finlay," I said. "Bad temper never made

"You're a bad-tempered type of a guy, Finlay," I said. "Bad temper never made anybody a criminal."

He shrugged. Ignored the jibe.

"So what do we do?" he said.

"We wait for Roscoe and Picard," I said. "We take it from there."

I sat on the edge of the big rosewood desk, swinging my leg. Finlay paced up and down on the expensive carpet. We waited like that for about twenty minutes and then the door opened. Picard stood there. He was so big, he filled the whole doorway. I saw Finlay staring at him, like there was something wrong with him. I followed his gaze.

There were two things wrong with Picard. First, he didn't have Roscoe with him. Second, he was holding a government-issue .38 in his giant hand. He was holding it rock steady, and he was pointing it straight at Finlay.

29

"YOU?" FINLAY GASPED.

Picard smiled a cold smile at him.

"None other," he said. "The pleasure's all mine, believe me. You've been very helpful, both of you. Very considerate. You've kept me in touch every step of the way. You've given me the Hubbles, and you've given me Officer Roscoe. I really couldn't have asked for anything more."

Finlay was rooted to the spot. Shaking.

"You?" he said again.

"Should have spotted it Wednesday, asshole," Picard said. "I sent the little guy to Joe's hotel two hours before I told you about it. You disappointed me. I expected to be doing this scene way before now."

He looked at us and smiled. Finlay turned away. Looked at me. I couldn't think of anything to say to him. I couldn't think about anything at all. I just looked at Picard's huge bulk in the doorway and had a strong feeling that this was going to be the last day of my life. Today, it would end.

"Get over there," Picard said to me. "Next to Finlay."

He had taken two giant strides into the room and he was pointing the gun straight at me. I noticed mechanically that it was a new .38 with a short barrel. I calculated automatically that it would be accurate over such a short distance. But that a .38 couldn't be relied on to put a target down. And there were two of us and one of him. And Finlay had a weapon in a shoulder holster under the tweed jacket. I spent a fraction of a second weighing up the odds. Then I abandoned the calculation because Mayor Teale stepped through the open door behind Picard. He had his heavy cane in his left hand. But in his right hand he was carrying a police-issue shotgun. It was an Ithaca Mag-10. Didn't really matter where he was pointing it.

"Get over there," Picard said to me again.

“Where’s Roscoe?” I said to him.

He laughed at me. Just laughed and gestured with the gun barrel that I should stand up and move over next to Finlay. I heaved myself off the desk and stepped over. I felt like I was weighted down with lead. I clamped my lips and moved with the grim determination of a cripple trying to walk.

I stood next to Finlay. Teale covered us with the giant scatter gun. Picard darted his hand up under Finlay’s jacket. Took the revolver out of his holster. Slipped it into the pocket of his own enormous jacket. The jacket flapped open under the weight. It was the size of a tent. He stepped sideways and patted me down. I was unarmed. My jacket was outside in the Bentley’s trunk. Then he stepped back and stood side by side with Teale. Finlay stared at Picard like his heart was breaking.

“What’s this all about?” Finlay said. “We go back a long way, right?”

Picard just shrugged at him.

“I told you to stay away,” he said. “Back in March, I tried to stop you coming down here. I warned you off. That’s true, right? But you wouldn’t listen, would you, you stubborn asshole? So you get what you get, my friend.”

I listened to Picard’s growl and felt worse for Finlay than I did for myself. But then Kliner stepped in through the door. His bone-hard face was cracked into a grin. His feral teeth glittered. His eyes bored into me. He was carrying another Ithaca Mag-10 in his left hand. In his right hand, he was carrying the gun that had killed Joe. It was pointed straight at me.

It was a Ruger Mark II. A sneaky little .22-caliber automatic. Fitted with a fat silencer. It was a gun for a killer who enjoys getting close. I stared at it. Nine days ago, the end of that silencer had touched my brother’s temple. There was no doubt about that. I could feel it.

Picard and Teale moved around behind the desk. Teale sat in the chair. Picard towered over his shoulder. Kliner was gesturing Finlay and me to sit. He was using his shotgun barrel as a baton. Short jerky movements to move us around. We sat. We were side by side in front of the big rosewood desk. We stared straight at Teale. Kliner closed the office door and leaned on it. He held the shotgun one-handed, at his hip. Pointed at the side of my head. The silenced .22

was pointing at the floor.

I looked hard at the three of them in turn. Old Teale was staring at me with all kinds of hate showing in his leathery old face. He was shaken up. He looked like a man under terrible stress. He looked desperate. Like he was near collapse. He looked twenty years older than the smooth old guy I'd met on Monday. Picard looked better. He had the calm of a great athlete. Like a football star or an Olympic champion on a visit to his old high school. But there was a tightening around his eyes. And he was rattling his thumb against his thigh. There was some strain there.

I stared sideways at Kliner. Looked hard at him. But there was nothing on show. He was lean and hard and dried out. He didn't move. He was absolutely still. His face and body betrayed nothing. He was like a statue hewn from teak. But his eyes burned with a kind of cruel energy. They sneered at me out of his blank, bone-hard face.

Teale rattled open a drawer in the rosewood desk. Pulled out the cassette recorder Finlay had used on me. Handed it to Picard, behind him. Picard put his revolver down on the desk and fiddled with the stiff cords. He plugged in the power. Didn't bother with the microphone. They weren't going to record anything. They were going to play us something. Teale leaned forward and thumbed the intercom button on the desk. In the stillness, I heard the buzzer sound faintly outside in the squad room.

"Baker?" Teale said. "In here, please."

Kliner moved off the door and Baker came in. He was in his uniform. A .38 in his holster. He looked at me. Didn't grin. He was carrying two cassettes. Teale took them from him. Selected the second one.

"A tape," he said. "Listen up. You're going to find this interesting."

He fiddled the cassette in and clicked the little door shut. Pressed play. The motor whirred and the speaker hissed. Underneath the hiss, I could hear a boomy acoustic. Then we heard Roscoe's voice. It was loud with panic. It filled the silent office.

"Reacher?" Roscoe's voice said. "This is a message for you, OK? The message is you better do what they tell you, or I'm in trouble. The message is if you're in

any doubt about what kind of trouble, you should go back down to the morgue and pull Mrs. Morrison's autopsy report. That's the kind of trouble I'm going to be in. So help me out, OK? End of message, Reacher."

Her voice tailed off into the boomy hiss. I heard a faint gasp of pain as if she'd been roughly dragged away from the microphone. Then Teale snapped the recorder off. I stared at him. My temperature had dropped away to nothing. I didn't feel human anymore.

Picard and Baker were looking at me. Beaming in satisfaction. Like they were holding the winning hole card. Teale clicked the little door open and took the tape out. Laid it on one side on the desk. Held up the other tape for me to see and then put it in the machine. Closed the little door again and pressed play.

"Another one," he said. "Listen up."

We heard the same hiss. The same boomy acoustic. Then we heard Charlie Hubble's voice. She sounded hysterical. Like she had on Monday morning, standing out on her bright gravel driveway.

"Hub?" Charlie's voice said. "This is Charlie. I've got the children with me. I'm not at home, you understand what that means? I've got to give you a message. If you don't come back, something will happen to the children. They tell me you know what that something is. It's the same thing they said would happen to you and me, but it'll be the children instead. So you have to come back straightaway, OK?"

The voice ended on a rising note of panic and then died away in the boomy hiss. Teale stabbed the stop button. Took the tape out and placed it carefully on the edge of the desk. Right in front of me. Then Kliner walked around into my field of vision and spoke.

"You're going to take that with you," he said to me. "You're going to take it to wherever you've hidden Hubble and you're going to play it to him."

Finlay and I looked at each other. Just stared at each other in blank astonishment. Then I snapped back and stared at Kliner.

"You killed Hubble already," I said.

Kliner hesitated for a second.

“Don’t try that shit,” he said. “We were going to, but you got him out of the way. You’re hiding him. Charlie told us.”

“Charlie told you?” I said.

“We asked her where he was,” he said. “She promised us you’d be able to find him. She was most insistent about it. We had a knife between her little girl’s legs at the time. She became very anxious to convince us that her husband was not beyond our reach. She said you’d given him all sorts of advice and guidance. She said you’d given him all sorts of help. She said you’d be able to find him. I hope for everybody’s sake she wasn’t lying.”

“You killed him,” I said again. “I don’t know anything about it.”

Kliner nodded and sighed. His voice was low.

“Let’s cut the crap,” he said. “You’re hiding him, and we need him back. We need him back right away. It’s a matter of urgency to us. We’ve got a business to run. So we’ve got a number of options. We could beat it out of you. We discussed that. It’s a tactical problem, right? But we figured you might send us off in the wrong direction, because time is tight right now. You might figure that was your best option, right?”

He waited for some kind of a comment from me. He didn’t get one.

“So what we’re going to do is this,” he said. “Picard is going to go with you to pick him up. When you get wherever he is, Picard is going to call me. On my mobile. He knows the number. Then you all three come on back here. OK?”

I didn’t respond.

“Where is he?” Kliner asked suddenly.

I started to speak, but he held up his hand and stopped me.

“Like I told you, let’s cut the crap,” he said. “For instance, you’ve been sitting there thinking as hard as you can. No doubt you were trying to figure some way you might be able to take Picard out. But you won’t be able to do that.”

I shrugged. Said nothing.

I shrugged. Said nothing.

“Two problems,” Kliner said. “I doubt if you could take Picard out. I doubt if anybody could. Nobody ever has. And my mobile number isn’t written down. It’s in Picard’s head.”

I shrugged again. Kliner was a smart guy. The worst sort.

“Let me add a couple of factors,” he said. “We don’t know exactly how far away Hubble is. And you’re not going to tell us the truth about that. So I’ll tell you what we’re going to do. We’re going to give you a time limit.”

He stopped talking and walked around to where Finlay was sitting. He raised the .22 and put the tip of the silencer in Finlay’s ear. Pushed it in hard until Finlay was tilting over in his chair.

“The detective here is going in a cell,” he said. “He’s going to be handcuffed to the bars. If Picard hasn’t called me by one hour before dawn tomorrow, I’m going to aim my shotgun into the detective’s cell and blow him apart. Then I’m going to make the delightful Officer Roscoe clean his guts off the back wall with a sponge. Then I’m going to give you another hour. If Picard hasn’t called me by the time the sun comes up, I’m going to start in on the delightful Officer Roscoe herself. She’ll end up in a lot of pain, Reacher. But first there will be a great deal of sexual interference. A great deal. You have my word on that, Reacher. It’ll be very messy. Very messy indeed. Mayor Teale and I have spent a pleasant hour discussing just exactly what we’re going to do to her.”

Kliner was forcing Finlay practically out of the chair with the pressure of the automatic in his ear. Finlay’s lips were clamped. Kliner was sneering at me. I smiled at him. Kliner was a dead man. He was as dead as a man who has just jumped off a high building. He hadn’t hit the ground yet. But he’d jumped.

“Understand?” Kliner said to me. “Call it six o’clock tomorrow morning to save Mr. Finlay’s life, seven o’clock to save Miss Roscoe’s life. And don’t go messing with Picard. Nobody else knows my phone number.”

I shrugged at him again.

“Do you understand?” he repeated.

“I think so,” I said. “Hubble’s run away and you don’t know how to find him,

right? Is that what you're telling me?"

Nobody spoke.

"You can't find him, can you?" I said. "You're useless, Kliner. You're a useless piece of shit. You think you're some kind of a smart guy, but you can't find Hubble. You couldn't find your asshole if I gave you a mirror on a stick."

I could hear that Finlay wasn't breathing. He thought I was playing with his life. But old man Kliner left him alone. Moved across into my field of vision again. He had gone pale. I could smell his stress. I was just about getting used to the idea that Hubble was still alive. He'd been dead all week, and now he was alive again. He was alive, and hiding out somewhere. He'd been hiding out somewhere all week, while they looked for him. He was on the run. He hadn't been dragged out of his house on Monday morning. He'd walked out by himself. He'd taken that stay-at-home call and smelled a rat and run for his life. And they couldn't find him. Paul Hubble had given me the tiny edge I was going to need.

"What's Hubble got that you want so much?" I said.

Kliner shrugged at me.

"He's the only loose end left," he said. "I've taken care of everything else. And I'm not going out of business just because an asshole like Hubble is running around somewhere shooting his stupid mouth off. So I need him at home. Where he belongs. So you're going to get him for me."

I leaned forward and stared right into his eyes.

"Can't your son get him for you?" I said, quietly.

Nobody spoke. I leaned forward some more.

"Tell your boy to go pick him up," I said.

Kliner was silent.

"Where's your son, Kliner?" I asked him.

He didn't say anything.

“What happened to him?” I said. “Do you know?”

He knew, but he didn’t know. I could see that. He hadn’t accepted it. He’d sent his boy after me, and his boy hadn’t come back. So he knew, but he hadn’t admitted it to himself. His hard face went slack. He wanted to know. But he couldn’t ask me. He wanted to hate me for killing his boy. But he couldn’t do that either. Because to do that would be to admit it was true.

I stared at him. He wanted to raise that big shotgun and blow me into a red dew. But he couldn’t. Because he needed me to get Hubble back. He was churning away inside. He wanted to shoot me right then. But forty tons of money was more important to him than his son’s life.

I stared into his dead eyes. Unblinking. Spoke softly.

“Where’s your son, Kliner?” I said.

There was silence in the office for a long time.

“Get him out of here,” Kliner said. “If you’re not out of here in one minute, Reacher, I’ll shoot the detective right now.”

I stood up. Looked around the five of them. Nodded to Finlay. Headed out. Picard followed me and closed the door quietly.

30

PICARD AND I WALKED OUT TOGETHER THROUGH THE SQUAD room. It was deserted. Quiet. The desk sergeant was gone. Teale must have sent him away. The coffee machine was on. I could smell it. I saw Roscoe's desk. I saw the big bulletin board. The Morrison investigation. It was still empty. No progress. I dodged around the reception counter. Pushed open the heavy glass door against its stiff rubber seal. Stepped out into the bright afternoon.

Picard signaled with the stubby gun barrel that I should get in the Bentley and drive. I didn't argue with the guy. Just headed across the lot to the car. I was closer to panic than I'd ever been in my whole life. My heart was thumping and I was taking little short breaths. I was putting one foot in front of the other and using every ounce of everything I had just to stay in control. I was telling myself that when I arrived at that driver's door, I better have some damn good idea about what the hell I was going to do next.

I got into the Bentley and drove up to Eno's diner. Reached around to the seat pocket and found the map. Walked over through the bright afternoon sun and pushed in through Eno's door. Slid into an empty booth. Ordered coffee and eggs.

I was screaming at myself to listen to what I'd learned through thirteen hard years. The shorter the time, the cooler you've got to be. If you've only got one shot, you've got to make it count. You can't afford to miss because you screwed up the planning. Or because you ran out of blood sugar and got sick and dizzy in the small hours of the morning. So I forced the eggs down and drank the coffee. Then I pushed the empty mug and the plate aside and spread the map on the table. Started looking for Hubble. He could be anywhere. But I had to find him. I had one shot at it. I couldn't rush around from place to place. I had to find him inside my head. It had to be a thought process. I had to find him inside my head first and then go straight to him. So I bent over Eno's table. Stared at the map. Stared at it for a long time.

I SPENT THE BEST PART OF AN HOUR WITH THE MAP. THEN I folded it up and squared it on the table. Picked up the knife and the fork from the egg

plate. Palmed them into my trouser pocket. Looked around me. The waitress walked over. The one with glasses.

“Planning a trip, honey?” she asked me.

I looked up at her. I could see myself reflected in her glasses. I could see Picard’s huge bulk glowering in the booth behind me. I could just about feel his hand wrapping tight around the butt of his .38. I nodded at the woman.

“That’s the idea,” I said. “A hell of a trip. The trip of a lifetime.”

She didn’t know what to say to that.

“Well, you take care, OK?” she said.

I got up and left one of Charlie’s hundreds on the table for her. Maybe it was real, maybe it wasn’t. It would spend just the same. And I wanted to leave her a big tip. Eno was getting a dirty grand a week, but I didn’t know if he was passing much of it on. Probably not, looking at the guy.

“See you again, mister,” the one with glasses said.

“Maybe,” I said.

Picard pushed me out through the door. It was four o’clock. I hustled over the gravel to the Bentley. Picard followed me with his hand in his pocket. I slid in and fired it up. Eased out of the lot and scooted north up the old county road. Blasted the fourteen miles away in about twelve minutes.

Picard had made me use the Bentley. Not his own car. Had to be a reason for that. Not just because he wanted the extra legroom. Because it was a very distinctive car. Which meant there was going to be extra insurance. I looked in the mirror and picked up a plain sedan. About a hundred yards behind. Two guys in it. I shrugged to myself. Slowed and glanced left at the warehouses at the top of the county road. Swooped up the ramp and round the cloverleaf. Hit the highway going as fast as I dared. Time was crucial.

The road skirted us around the southeast corner of the Atlanta sprawl. I threaded through the interchanges. Headed due east on I-20. Cruised on, with the two guys in their plain sedan a hundred yards back, mile after mile.

“So where is he?” Picard asked me.

It was the first time he’d spoken since leaving the station house. I glanced across at him and shrugged.

“No idea,” I said. “Best I can do is go find a friend of his in Augusta.”

“Who’s this friend?” he said.

“Guy called Lennon,” I said.

“In Augusta?” he said.

“Augusta,” I said. “That’s where we’re going.”

Picard grunted. We cruised on. The two guys stayed behind us.

“So who is this guy in Augusta?” Picard said. “Lennon?”

“Friend of Hubble’s,” I said. “Like I told you.”

“He doesn’t have a friend in Augusta,” he said. “Don’t you think we check things like that?”

I shrugged. Didn’t reply.

“You better not be bullshitting, my friend,” Picard said. “Kliner wouldn’t like that. It’ll make it worse for the woman. He’s got a cruel streak in him a mile wide. Believe me, I’ve seen him in action.”

“Like when?” I said.

“Lots of times,” he said. “Like Wednesday, at the airport. That woman, Molly Beth. Screamer, he enjoys that. Like Sunday. Up at the Morrison place.”

“Kliner was there Sunday?” I said.

“He loved it,” Picard said. “Him and his damn son. You did the world a favor, taking that kid out. You should have seen him on Sunday. We gave those two cops the day off. Didn’t seem right they should off their own chief. The Kliners and I stood in for them. The old man loved every minute of it. Cruel streak, a

mile wide, like I said. You better make sure I get to make that call on time, or your woman friend's in a lot of trouble."

I went quiet for a moment. I'd seen the Kliner kid on Sunday. He'd picked his stepmother up from the coffee shop. About ten thirty. He'd been staring at me. He'd been on his way back from dismembering the Morrisons.

"Did old man Kliner shoot my brother?" I asked Picard.

"Thursday night?" he said. "Sure. That's his weapon, the .22 with the suppressor."

"And then the kid kicked him around?" I said.

Picard shrugged.

"The kid was berserk," he said. "Wrong in the head."

"And then Morrison was supposed to clean up?" I said.

"Supposed to," Picard grunted. "Asshole was supposed to burn the bodies in the car. But he couldn't find Stoller's body. So he just left both of them there."

"And Kliner killed eight guys in Louisiana, right?" I said.

Picard laughed.

"Eight they know about," he said. "That asshole Spirenza was on his back for a year. Looking for payments to a shooter. But there never was a shooter. Kliner did it all himself. Like a hobby, right?"

"You knew Kliner back then?" I said.

"I've always known Kliner," he said. "Got myself assigned as Spirenza's Bureau liaison. Kept everything neat and tidy."

We drove on in silence for a mile or two. The two guys in the plain sedan kept station a hundred yards behind the Bentley. Then Picard looked at me.

"This guy Lennon?" he said. "He's not another damn Treasury spook working for your brother, right?"

“Friend of Hubble’s,” I said.

“Like hell,” he said. “We checked, he’s got no friends in Augusta. Hell, he’s got no friends anywhere. He thought Kliner was his damn friend, giving him a job and all.”

Picard started chuckling to himself in the passenger seat. His giant frame was shaking with mirth.

“Like Finlay thought you were his friend, right?” I said.

He shrugged.

“I tried to keep him away,” he said. “I tried to warn him off. So what should I do? Get myself killed on his behalf?”

I didn’t answer that. We cruised on in silence. The plain sedan sat steady, a hundred yards back.

“We need gas,” I said.

Picard craned over and peered at the needle. It was nudging the red.

“Pull over at the next place,” he said.

I saw a sign for gas near a place called Madison. I pulled off and drove the Bentley over to the pumps. Chose the furthest island and eased to a stop.

“Are you going to do this for me?” I asked Picard.

He looked at me in surprise.

“No,” he said. “What the hell do you think I am? A damn pump jockey? Do it yourself.”

That was the answer I wanted to hear. I got out of the car. Picard got out on the other side. The plain sedan pulled up close by and the two guys got out. I looked them over. They were the same two I’d scuffled with in New York, on that crowded sidewalk outside Kelstein’s college. The smaller guy had his khaki raincoat on. I nodded amiably to the two of them. I figured they had less than an hour to live. They strolled over and stood with Picard in a knot of three. I

unhooked the nozzle and shoved it in the Bentley's tank.

It was a big tank. Well over twenty gallons. I trapped my finger under the trigger on the nozzle so that it wouldn't pump at full speed. I held it in a casual backhand grip and leaned against the car as the gas trickled in. I wondered whether I should start whistling. Picard and the two Hispanics lost interest. There was a breeze coming up and they shuffled about in the slight evening chill.

I slipped Eno's flatware out of my pocket and pressed the tip of the knife into the tire tread next to my right knee. From where Picard was standing, it looked like I was maybe rubbing my leg. Then I took the fork and bent one of the tines outward. Pressed it into the cut I'd made and snapped it off. Left a half inch sticking into the tire. Then I finished up pumping the gas and latched the nozzle back into the pump.

"You paying for this?" I called to Picard.

He looked around and shrugged. Peeled a bill off his roll and sent the guy in the raincoat off to pay. Then we got back into the car.

"Wait," Picard said.

I waited until the plain sedan had started up behind me and flashed its headlights twice. Then I moved out and accelerated gently back onto the highway and settled into the same steady cruise. Kept on going and the signs started flashing past. Augusta, seventy miles. Augusta, sixty miles. Augusta, forty miles. The old Bentley hummed along. Rock steady. The two guys followed. The setting sun behind me was red in the mirror. The horizon up ahead was black. It was already night far out over the Atlantic Ocean. We drove on.

The rear tire went flat about twenty miles out from Augusta. It was past seven thirty and it was getting dark. We both felt the rumbling from the wheel and the car wouldn't track straight.

"Shit," I said. "Flat tire."

"Pull over," Picard said.

I slowed to a stop well over on the shoulder. The plain sedan pulled over and stopped behind us. We all four got out. The breeze had freshened up to a cold

stopped behind us. We all four got out. The breeze had freshened up to a cold wind blowing in from the east. I shivered and popped the trunk. Picked up my jacket and put it on, like I was grateful for the warmth.

“Spare wheel’s under the trunk floor,” I said to Picard. “Want to help me get this box out?”

Picard stepped over and looked at the box of dollar bills.

“We burned the wrong house,” he said, and laughed.

He and I heaved the heavy box out and set it on its end on the highway shoulder. Then he pulled his gun out and showed it to me. His huge jacket was flapping in the wind.

“We’ll let the little guys change the wheel,” he said. “You stand still, right there, next to the box.”

He waved the two Hispanics over and told them to do the work. They found the jack and the wrench for the bolts. Jacked up the car and took the wheel off. Then they lined up the spare and lifted it into place. Bolted it carefully on. I was standing there next to the carton of money, shivering in the wind, wrapping my coat tight around me. Thrusting my hands deep in the pockets and stamping from foot to foot, trying to look like a guy who was getting cold standing around doing nothing.

I waited until Picard stepped around to check the bolts were tight. He put his weight on the lever and I could hear the metal graunching. I came out with Morrison’s switchblade already open and sliced up one side of the air conditioner box. Then across the top. Then down the other side. Before Picard could line up his gun, the box fell open like a steamer trunk and the wind caught a hundred thousand dollar bills and blew them all over the highway like a blizzard.

Then I dove over the concrete wall at the edge of the shoulder and rolled down the shallow bank. Pulled out the Desert Eagle. Shot at the guy with the raincoat as he came over the wall after me, but I missed my aim and just blew his leg away. Beyond him I saw a truck with dollar bills plastered all over its windshield run off the road and smash into the plain sedan behind the Bentley. Picard was batting away the snowstorm of cash and dancing over to the wall. I could hear tires shrieking as cars on the highway braked and swerved to avoid the wreckage

tires shrieking as cars on the highway braked and swerved to avoid the wreckage of the truck. I rolled over and aimed up the bank and shot the second Hispanic guy. Caught him through the chest and he came crashing down toward me. The guy with the raincoat was rolling around at the top of the slope, screaming, clutching his shattered leg, trying to free the small automatic he'd shown me in New York. I fired a third time and shot him through the head. I could see Picard aiming his .38 down at me. All the time the wind was howling and cars were sliding to a stop on the highway. I could see drivers getting out and jumping around, snatching at the money swirling in the air. It was chaos.

"Don't shoot me, Picard," I yelled. "You won't get Hubble if you do."

He knew that. And he knew he was a dead man if he didn't get Hubble. Kliner wouldn't tolerate failure. He stood there with his .38 aimed at my head. But he didn't shoot. I ran up the bank and circled the car, forcing him out toward the traffic with the Desert Eagle.

"You don't shoot me, either," Picard screamed. "My phone call is the only way you're going to save that woman. That's for sure. You better believe it."

"I know that, Picard," I yelled back. "I believe it. I'm not going to shoot you. Are you going to shoot me?"

He shook his head over the .38.

"I'm not going to shoot you, Reacher," he said.

It looked like a stalemate. We circled the Bentley with our fingers white on the triggers, telling each other we weren't going to shoot.

He was telling the truth. But I was lying. I waited until he was lined up with the wreckage of the truck and I was next to the Bentley. Then I pulled the trigger. The .44 shell caught him and smashed his huge bulk backward into the tangled metal. I didn't wait around for a second shot. I slammed the trunk lid and jumped for the driver's seat. Fired the car up and burned rubber. I peeled away from the shoulder and dodged the people running around after the dollar bills. Jammed my foot down and hurtled east.

Twenty miles to go. Took me twenty minutes. I was gasping and shaky with adrenaline. I forced my heartbeat down and took big gulps of air. Then I yelled to myself in triumph. Screamed and yelled out loud. Picard was gone.

31

IT WAS DARK WHEN I HIT THE OUTLYING AUGUSTA SUBURBS. I pulled off the highway as soon as the taller buildings started to thicken up. Drove down the city streets and stopped at the first motel I saw. Locked the Bentley up and dodged into the office. Stepped over to the desk. The clerk looked up.

“Got a room?” I asked him.

“Thirty-six bucks,” the guy said.

“Phone in the room?” I asked him.

“Sure,” he said. “Air-conditioning and cable TV.”

“Yellow Pages in the room?” I asked him.

He nodded.

“Got a map of Augusta?” I said.

He jerked his thumb over to a rack next to a cigarette machine. It was stuffed with maps and brochures. I peeled off thirty-six bucks from the roll in my trouser pocket. Dropped the cash on the desk. Filled in the register. I put my name down as Roscoe Finlay.

“Room twelve,” the guy said. Slid me the key.

I stopped to grab a map and hustled out. Ran down the row to room twelve. Let myself in and locked the door. I didn’t look at the room. Just looked for the phone and the Yellow Pages. I lay on the bed and unfolded the map. Opened up the Yellow Pages to H for hotels.

There was a huge list. In Augusta, there were hundreds of places where you could pay for a bed for the night. Literally hundreds. Pages and pages of them. So I looked at the map. Concentrated on a wedge a half mile long and four blocks deep, either side of the main drag in from the west. That was my target area. I downgraded the places right on the main drag. I upgraded the places a

block or two off. Prioritized the places between a quarter mile and a half mile out. I was looking at a rough square, a quarter mile long and a quarter mile deep. I put the map and the phone book side by side and made a hit list.

Eighteen hotels. One of them was the place I was lying there in. So I picked up the phone and dialed zero for the desk. The clerk answered.

“You got a guy called Paul Lennon registered?” I asked him.

There was a pause. He was checking the book.

“Lennon?” he said. “No, sir.”

“OK,” I said. Put the phone down.

I took a deep breath and started at the top of my list. Dialed the first place.

“You got a guy called Paul Lennon registered?” I asked the guy who answered.

There was a pause.

“No, sir,” the guy said.

I worked down the list. Dialed one place after another.

“You got a guy called Paul Lennon registered?” I asked each clerk.

There was always a pause while they checked their registers. Sometimes I could hear the pages turning. Some of them had computers. I could hear keyboards pattering.

“No, sir,” they all said. One after the other.

I lay there on the bed with the phone balanced on my chest. I was down to number thirteen out of the eighteen on my list.

“You got a guy called Paul Lennon registered?” I asked.

There was a pause. I could hear pages turning.

“No, sir,” the thirteenth clerk said.

“OK,” I said. Put the phone down.

I picked it up again and stabbed out the fourteenth number. Got a busy signal. So I dabbed the cradle and stabbed out the fifteenth number.

“You got a guy called Paul Lennon registered?” I asked.

There was a pause.

“Room one twenty,” the fifteenth clerk said.

“Thank you,” I said. Put the phone down.

I lay there. Closed my eyes. Breathed out. I put the phone back on the nightstand thing and checked the map. The fifteenth hotel was three blocks away. North of the main drag. I left the room key on the bed and went back out to the car. The engine was still warm. I’d been in there about twenty-five minutes.

I had to drive three blocks east before I could make a left. Then three blocks north before I could make another. I went around a kind of jagged spiral. I found the fifteenth hotel and parked at the door. Went into the lobby. It was a dingy sort of a place. Not clean, not well lit. It looked like a cave.

“Can I help you?” the desk guy asked.

“No,” I said.

I followed an arrow down a warren of corridors. Found room one twenty. Rapped on the door. I heard the rattle of the chain going on. I stood there. The door cracked open.

“Hello, Reacher,” he said.

“Hello, Hubble,” I said.

HE WAS SPILLING OVER WITH QUESTIONS FOR ME, BUT I JUST hustled him out to the car. We had four hours on the road for all that stuff. We had to get going. I was over two hours ahead of schedule. I wanted to keep it that

way. I wanted to put those two hours in the bank. I figured I might need them later.

He looked OK. He wasn't a wreck. He'd been running for six days and it had done him good. It had burned off that complacent gloss he'd had. Left him looking a little more tight and rangy. A bit tougher. More like my type of a guy. He was dressed up in cheap chainstore clothes and he was wearing socks. He was using an old pair of spectacles made from stainless steel. A seven-dollar digital watch covered the band of pale skin where the Rolex had been. He looked like a plumber or the guy who runs your local muffler franchise.

He had no bags. He was traveling light. He just glanced around his room and walked out with me. Like he couldn't believe his life on the road was over. Like he might be going to miss it to a degree. We stepped through the dark lobby and out into the night. He stopped when he saw the car parked at the door.

"You came in Charlie's car?" he said.

"She was worried about you," I told him. "She asked me to find you."

He nodded. Looked blank.

"What's with the tinted glass?" he said.

I grinned at him and shrugged.

"Don't ask," I said. "Long story."

I started up and eased away from the hotel. He should have asked me right away how Charlie was, but something was bothering him. I had seen when he cracked the hotel room door that a tidal wave of relief had hit him. But he had a tiny reservation. It was a pride thing. He'd been running and hiding. He'd thought he'd been doing it well. But he hadn't been, because I had found him. He was thinking about that. He was relieved and disappointed all at the same time.

"How the hell did you find me?" he asked.

I shrugged at him again.

"Easy," I said. "I've had a lot of practice. I've found a lot of guys. Spent years picking up deserters for the army."

picking up deserters for the army?

I was threading through the grids, working my way back to the highway. I could see the line of lights streaming west, but the on-ramp was like the prize at the center of a maze. I was unwinding the same jagged spiral I'd been forced around on the way in.

"But how did you do it?" he said. "I could have been anywhere."

"No, you couldn't," I said. "That was the exact point. That's what made it easy. You had no credit cards, no driver's license, no ID. All you had was cash. So you weren't using planes or rental cars. You were stuck with the bus."

I found the on-ramp. Concentrated on the lane-change and nudged the wheel. Accelerated up the ramp and merged with the flow back toward Atlanta.

"That gave me a start," I said to him. "Then I put myself in your shoes, psychologically. You were terrified for your family. So I figured you'd circle around Margrave at a distance. You'd want to feel you were still connected, consciously or subconsciously. You took the taxi up to the Atlanta bus depot, right?"

"Right," he said. "First bus out of there was to Memphis, but I waited for the next one. Memphis was too far. I didn't want to go that far away."

"That's what made it easy," I said. "You were circling Margrave. Not too close, not too far. And counterclockwise. Give people a free choice, they always go counterclockwise. It's a universal truth, Hubble. All I had to do was to count the days and study the map and predict the hop you'd take each time. I figure Monday you were in Birmingham, Alabama. Tuesday was Montgomery, Wednesday was Columbus. I had a problem with Thursday. I gambled on Macon, but I thought it was maybe too close to Margrave."

He nodded.

"Thursday was a nightmare," he said. "I was in Macon, some terrible dive, didn't sleep a wink."

"So Friday morning you came out here to Augusta," I said. "My other big gamble was you stayed here two nights. I figured you were shaken up after Macon, maybe running out of energy. I really wasn't sure. I nearly went up to

Greenville tonight, up in South Carolina. But I guessed right."

Hubble went quiet. He'd thought he'd been invisible, but he'd been circling Margrave like a beacon flashing away in the night sky.

"But I used a false name," he said. Defiantly.

"You used five false names," I said. "Five nights, five hotels, five names. The fifth name was the same as the first name, right?"

He was amazed. He thought back and nodded.

"How the hell did you know that?" he said again.

"I've hunted a lot of guys," I said. "And I knew a little about you."

"Knew what?" he said.

"You're a Beatles guy," I said. "You told me about visiting the Dakota building and going to Liverpool in England. You've got just about every Beatles CD ever made in your den. So the first night, you were at some hotel desk and you signed Paul Lennon, right?"

"Right," he said.

"Not John Lennon," I said. "People usually stick with their own first name. I don't know why, but they usually do. So you were Paul Lennon. Tuesday, you were Paul Mc-Cartney. Wednesday, you were Paul Harrison. Thursday, you were Paul Starr. Friday in Augusta, you started over again with Paul Lennon, right?"

"Right," he said. "But there's a million hotels in Augusta. Conventions, golf. How the hell did you know where to look?"

"I thought about it," I said. "You got in Friday, late morning, coming in from the west. Guy like you walks back the way he's already seen. Feels safer that way. You'd been on the bus four hours, you were cramped up, you wanted the air, so you walked a spell, maybe a quarter mile. Then you got panicky and dived off the main drag a block or two. So I had a pretty small target area. Eighteen places. You were in number fifteen."

He shook his head. Mixed feelings. We barreled on down the road in the dark. The big old Bentley loped along, a hair over the legal limit.

“How are things in Margrave now?” he asked me.

That was the big question. He asked it tentatively, like he was nervous about it. I was nervous about answering it. I backed off the gas a little and slowed down. Just in case he got so upset that he grabbed at me. I didn’t want to wreck the car. Didn’t have time for that.

“We’re in deep shit,” I told him. “We’ve got about seven hours to fix it.”

I saved the worst part for last. I told him Charlie and the kids had gone with an FBI agent back on Monday. Because of the danger. And then I told him the FBI agent had been Picard.

There was silence in the car. I drove on three, four miles in the silence. It was more than a silence. It was a crushing vacuum of stillness. Like all the atmosphere had been sucked off the planet. It was a silence that roared and buzzed in my ears.

He started clenching and unclenching his hands. Started rocking back and forth on the big leather chair beside me. But then he went quiet. His reaction never really got going. Never really took hold. His brain just shut down and refused to react anymore. Like a circuit breaker clicking open. It was too big and too awful to react to. He just looked at me.

“OK,” he said. “Then you’ll have to get them back, won’t you?”

I sped up again. Charged on toward Atlanta.

“I’ll get them back,” I said. “But I’ll need your help. That’s why I picked you up first.”

He nodded again. He had crashed through the barrier. He had stopped worrying and started relaxing. He was up on that plateau where you just did whatever needed doing. I knew that place. I lived there.

TWENTY MILES OUT FROM AUGUSTA WE SAW FLASHING lights up ahead and guys waving danger flares. There was an accident on the other side of the divider. A truck had plowed into a parked sedan. A gaggle of other vehicles were slewed all over the place. There were drifts of what looked like litter lying around. A big crowd of people was milling about, collecting it up. We crawled past in a slow line of traffic. Hubble watched out the window.

“I’m very sorry about your brother,” he said. “I had no idea. I guess I got him killed, didn’t I?”

He slumped down in the seat. But I wanted to keep him talking. He had to stay on the ball. So I asked him the question I’d been waiting a week to ask.

“How the hell did you get into all this?” I said.

He shrugged. Blew a big sigh at the windshield. Like it was impossible to imagine any way of getting into it. Like it was impossible to imagine any way of staying out of it.

“I lost my job,” he said. A simple statement. “I was devastated. I felt angry and upset. And scared, Reacher. We’d been living a dream, you know? A golden dream. It was a perfect, idyllic life. I was earning a fortune and I was spending a fortune. It was totally fabulous. But then I started hearing things. The retail operation was under threat. My department was under review. I suddenly realized I was just one paycheck away from disaster. Then the department got shut down. I got canned. And the paychecks stopped.”

“And?” I said.

“I was out of my head,” he said. “I was so angry. I had worked my butt off for those bastards. I was good at my job. I had made them a fortune. And they just slung me out like suddenly I was shit on their shoe. And I was scared. I was going to lose it all, right? And I was tired. I couldn’t start again at the bottom of something else. I was too old and I had no energy. I just didn’t know what to do.”

“And then Kliner turned up?” I said.

He nodded. Looked pale.

“He had heard about it,” he said. “I guess Teale told him. Teale knows

"He had heard about it," he said. "I guess Teale told him. Teale knows everything about everybody. Kliner called me within a couple of days. I hadn't even told Charlie at that point. I couldn't face it. He called me and asked me to meet him up at the airport. He was in a private jet, on his way back from Venezuela. He flew me out to the Bahamas for lunch, and we talked. I was flattered, to be honest."

"And?" I said.

"He gave me a lot of crap," Hubble said. "He was telling me to look at it as an opportunity to get out. He was saying I should dump the corporate thing, I should come and do a real job, make some real money, with him. I didn't know much about him. I knew about the family fortune and the Foundation, obviously, but I'd never met him face to face. But he was clearly a very rich and successful guy. And very, very smart. And there he was, sitting in a private jet, asking me to work with him. Not for him, with him. I was flattered and I was desperate and I was worried and I said yes."

"And then?" I said.

"He called me again the next day," Hubble said. "He was sending the plane for me. I had to fly down to the Kliner plant in Venezuela to meet with him. So I did. I was only there one day. Didn't get to see anything. Then he flew me to Jacksonville. I was in the lawyer's office for a week. After that, it was too late. I couldn't get out."

"Why not?" I asked him.

"It was a hell of a week," he said. "It sounds like a short time, right? Just a week. But he did a real job on me. First day, it was all flattery. All temptation. He signed me up to a huge salary, bonuses, whatever I wanted. We went to clubs and hotels and he was spending money like it was out of a faucet. Tuesday, I started work. The actual job was a challenge. It was very difficult after what I'd been doing at the bank. It was so specialized. He wanted cash, of course, but he wanted dollars only. Nothing but singles. I had no idea why. And he wanted records. Very tight books. But I could handle it. And he was a relaxed boss. No pressures, no problems. The problems started Wednesday."

"How?" I said.

"Wednesday, I asked him what was going on," he said. "And he told me. He just

"Wednesday, I asked him what was going on," he said. "And he told me. He just told me exactly what he was doing. But he said now I was doing it too. I was involved. I had to stay quiet. Thursday, I was getting really unhappy. I couldn't believe it. I told him I wanted out. So he drove me down to some awful place. His son was there. He had two Hispanic guys there with him. There was this other guy chained up in a back room. Kliner said this was a guy who had stepped out of line. He told me to watch carefully. His son just kicked the guy to a pulp. All over the room, right in front of me. Then the Hispanic guys got their knives out and just hacked the poor guy apart. There was blood everywhere. It was horrible. I couldn't believe it. I threw up all over the place."

"Go on," I said.

"It was a nightmare," Hubble said. "I couldn't sleep that night. I thought I'd never sleep again, any night. Friday morning, we flew home. We sat together on the little jet and he told me what would happen. He said it wouldn't be just me who got cut up. It would be Charlie too. He was discussing it with me. Which of her nipples would he slice off first? Left or right? Then after we were dead, which of the children would he start with? Lucy or Ben? It was a nightmare. He said they'd nail me to the wall. I was shitting myself. Then we landed and he called Charlie and insisted we go to dinner with him. He told her we were doing business together. Charlie was delighted because Kliner is such a big deal in the county. It was a total nightmare because I had to pretend there was nothing wrong. I hadn't even told Charlie I'd lost my job. I had to pretend I was still at the bank. And the whole evening that bastard was asking politely after Charlie and the children and smiling at me."

We went quiet. I skirted around the southeast corner of Atlanta again, looking for the highway south. The big city glowed and glittered on the right. To the left was the dark empty mass of the rural southeast. I found the highway and accelerated south. Down toward one little dot in that dark empty mass.

"Then what?" I asked him.

"I started work at the warehouse," he said. "That's where he wanted me."

"Doing what?" I said.

"Managing the supply," he said. "I had a little office in there, and I had to arrange to get the dollars, and then I'd supervise the loading and shipping."

“Sherman Stoller was the driver?” I asked him.

“Right,” he said. “He was trusted to do the Florida run. I’d send him out with a million dollar bills a week. Sometimes the gatemen did it if Sherman had a day off. But it was usually him. He helped me with the boxes and the loading. We had to work like crazy. A million dollars in singles is a hell of a sight. You’ve got no idea. It was like trying to empty a swimming pool with a shovel.”

“But Sherman was stealing, right?” I said.

He nodded. I saw the flash of his steel glasses in the glow from the dash.

“The money got counted properly in Venezuela,” he said. “I used to get accurate totals back after about a month or so. I used them to cross-check my weighing formula. Many times, we were about a hundred grand down. No way had I made that kind of mistake. It was a trivial amount, because we were generating four billion in excellent fakes at the other end, so who cared? But it was about a boxful every time. That would be a large margin of error, so I figured Sherman was stealing the occasional box.”

“And?” I said.

“I warned him off,” Hubble said. “I mean, I wasn’t going to tell anybody about it. I just told him to take care, because Kliner would kill him if he found out. Might get me into trouble as well. I was already worried enough about what I was doing. The whole thing was insane. Kliner was importing a lot of the fakes. He couldn’t resist it. I thought it made the whole thing way too visible. Teale was spending the fakes like confetti, prettying up the town.”

“And what about the last twelve months?” I asked him.

He shrugged and shook his head.

“We had to stop the shipping,” he said. “The Coast Guard thing made it impossible. Kliner decided to stockpile instead. He figured the interdiction couldn’t last. He knew the Coast Guard budget wouldn’t stand it for long. But it just lasted and lasted. It was a hell of a year. The tension was awful. And now the Coast Guard’s finally pulling back, it’s caught us by surprise. Kliner figured it’s lasted this long, it would last until after the election in November. We’re not ready to ship. Not ready at all. It’s all just piled up in there. It’s not boxed yet.”

“When did you contact Joe?” I asked him.

“Joe?” he said. “Was that your brother’s name? I knew him as Polo.”

I nodded.

“Palo,” I said. “It’s where he was born. It’s a town on Leyte. Philippine Islands. The hospital was converted from an old cathedral. I had malaria shots there when I was seven.”

He went quiet for a mile, like he was paying his respects.

“I called Treasury a year ago,” he said. “I didn’t know who else to call. Couldn’t call the police because of Morrison, couldn’t call the FBI because of Picard. So I called Washington and tipped off this guy who called himself Polo. He was a smart guy. I thought he’d get away with it. I knew his best chance was to strike while they were stockpiling. While there was evidence in there.”

I saw a sign for gas and took a last-minute decision to pull off. Hubble filled the tank. I found a plastic bottle in a trash can and got him to fill that, too.

“What’s that for?” he asked me.

I shrugged at him.

“Emergencies?” I said.

He didn’t come back on that. We just paid at the window and pulled back onto the highway. Carried on driving south. We were a half hour from Margrave. It was approaching midnight.

“So what made you take off on Monday?” I asked him.

“Kliner called me,” he said. “He told me to stay home. He said two guys would be coming by. I asked him why, and he said there was a problem at the Florida end and I had to go sort it out.”

“But?” I said.

“I didn’t believe him,” he said. “Soon as he mentioned two guys, it flashed into my mind what had happened down in Jacksonville that first week. I panicked. I

called the taxi and ran."

"You did good, Hubble," I said. "You saved your life."

"You know what?" he said.

I glanced a question at him.

"If he'd said one guy, I wouldn't have noticed," he said. "You know, if he'd said stay home, a guy is coming by, I'd have fallen for it. But he said two guys."

"He made a mistake," I said.

"I know," Hubble said. "I can't believe it. He never makes mistakes."

I shook my head. Smiled in the dark.

"He made a mistake last Thursday."

THE BIG CHROME CLOCK ON THE BENTLEY'S DASH SAID MIDNIGHT. I needed this whole deal over and done by five in the morning. So I had five hours. If all went well, that was way more than I needed. If I screwed up, it didn't matter if I had five hours or five days or five years. This was a once only thing. In and out. In the service we used to say: do it once and do it right. Tonight I was going to add: and do it quickly.

"Hubble?" I said. "I need your help."

He roused himself and looked over at me.

"How?" he asked.

I spent the last ten minutes of the highway cruise going over it. Over and over it, until he was totally solid. I swung off the highway where it met the county road. Blasted past the warehouses and on down the fourteen miles to town. Slowed as I passed the station house. It was quiet, lights off. No cars in the lot. The firehouse next door looked OK. The town was silent and deserted. The only light showing in the whole place was in the barbershop.

I made the right onto Beckman and drove up the rise to Hubble's place. Turned in at the familiar white mailbox and spun the wheel through the curves up the driveway. Pulled up at the door.

"My car keys are in the house," Hubble said.

"It's open," I said.

He went to check it out. Pushed at the splintered door gingerly, with one finger, like it might be booby-trapped. I saw him go in. A minute later, he was back out. He had his keys, but he didn't walk round to the garage. He came back over to me and leaned into the car.

"It's a hell of a mess in there," he said. "What's been going on?"

"I used this place for an ambush," I said. "Four guys were tramping all over the place looking for me. It was raining at the time."

He leaned down and looked in at me.

"Were they the ones?" he said. "You know, the ones Kliner would have sent if I'd talked?"

I nodded.

"They had all their gear with them," I said.

I could see his face in the dim glow from the old dials on the dash. His eyes were wide open, but he wasn't seeing me. He was seeing what he'd seen in his nightmares. He nodded slowly. Then he reached in and put his hand on my arm. Squeezed it. Didn't speak. Then he ducked back out and was gone. I was left sitting there, wondering how the hell I'd ever hated the guy a week ago.

I used the time to reload the Desert Eagle. I replaced the four shells I'd used out there on the highway near Augusta. Then I saw Hubble drive his old green Bentley around from the garage. The engine was cold and he was trailing a cloud of white vapor. He gave me a thumbs-up as he passed, and I followed the white cloud down the driveway and down Beckman. We passed by the church and turned left onto Main Street in stately procession. Two fine old cars, nose to tail through the sleeping town, ready to do battle.

Hubble pulled up forty yards shy of the station house. Pulled in to the curb just where I'd told him to. Killed his lights and waited, motor running. I wafted past him and nosed into the police department lot. Parked up in the end slot and got out. Left all four doors unlocked. Pulled the big automatic out of my pocket. The night air was cold and the silence was crushing. I could hear Hubble's motor idling from forty yards away. I unlatched the Desert Eagle's safety and the click sounded deafening in the stillness.

I ran to the station house wall and dropped to the ground. Slid forward until I could see in through the bottom of the heavy glass door. Watched and listened. Held my breath. I watched and listened long enough to be sure.

I stood up and clicked the safety back on. Put the gun back in my pocket. Stood there and made a calculation. The firehouse and the station house stood together three hundred yards from the north end of Main Street. Further on up the road, Eno's was eight hundred yards away. I figured the earliest anybody could get to us would be maybe three minutes. Two minutes to react, and a minute for a fast jog up from Main Street. So we had three minutes. Halve that for a margin of safety, call it ninety seconds, beginning to end.

I ran out to the middle of the county road and waved a signal to Hubble. I saw his car pull away from the curb and I ran over to the firehouse entrance. Stood to the side of the big red door and waited.

Hubble drove up and slewed his old Bentley in a tight turn across the road. Ended up at a right angle, just about lined up with the firehouse entrance, facing away from me. I saw the car lurch as he slammed the shift into reverse. Then he hit the gas and the big old sedan shot backward toward me.

It accelerated all the way and smashed backward into the firehouse door. That old Bentley must have weighed two tons and it tore the metal door right off its mountings with no trouble at all. There was a tremendous crashing and tearing of metal and I heard the rear lights smash and the clang of the fender as it fell off and bounced on the concrete. I was through the gap between the door and the frame before Hubble slammed into drive and dragged clear of the wreckage. It was dark in there, but I found what I was looking for. It was clipped to the side of the fire truck, horizontally, at head height. A bolt cutter, a huge thing, must have been four feet long. I wrenched it out of its mountings and ran for the door.

Soon as Hubble saw me come out, he pulled a wide circle across the road. The

back end of his Bentley was wrecked. The trunk lid was flapping and the sheet metal was crunched and screeching. But he did his job. He made the wide turn and lined up with the station house entrance. Paused for a second and floored the gas. Accelerated straight toward the heavy glass doors. This time head on.

The old Bentley smashed through the doors in a shower of glass and demolished the reception desk. Plowed on into the squad room and stopped. I ran in right behind it. Finlay was standing in the middle cell. Frozen in shock. He was handcuffed by his left wrist to the bars separating him from the end cell. Well to the back. Couldn't have been better.

I tore and shoved at the wreckage of the reception counter and cleared a path behind Hubble. Waved him back. He spun the wheel and reversed into the space I'd cleared. I hauled and shoved the squad room desks out of the way to give him a clear run in front. Turned and gave him the signal.

The front end of his car was as bad as the back. The hood was buckled and the radiator was smashed. Green water was pouring out of the bottom and steam was hissing out of the top. The headlights were smashed and the fender was rubbing the tire. But Hubble was doing his job. He was holding the car on the brake and speeding the motor. Just like I'd told him to.

I could see the car shuddering against the brake. Then it shot forward and hurtled toward Finlay in the middle cell. Smashed into the titanium bars at an angle and ripped them open like a swung ax on a picket fence. The Bentley's hood flew up and the windshield exploded. Torn metal clanged and screeched. Hubble came to a stop a yard short of where Finlay was standing. The wrecked car settled in a loud hiss of steam. The air was thick with dust.

I dived through the gap into the cell and clamped the bolt cutter on the link fixing Finlay's wrist to the bars. Leaned on the four-foot levers until the handcuffs sheared through. I gave Finlay the bolt cutter and hauled him through the gap and out of the cell. Hubble was climbing out of the Bentley's window. The impact had distorted the door and it wouldn't open. I pulled him out and leaned in and yanked the keys. Then we all three ran through the shattered squad room and crunched over the shards of plate glass where the big doors had been. Ran over to the car and dove in. I started it up and howled backward out of the lot. Slammed into drive and took off down the road toward town.

Finlay was out. Ninety seconds, beginning to end.

32

I SLOWED DOWN AT THE NORTH END OF MAIN STREET AND rolled gently south through the sleeping town. Nobody spoke. Hubble was lying on the rear bench, shaken up. Finlay was beside me in the front passenger seat. Just sitting there, rigid, staring out through the windshield. We were all breathing heavily. We were all in that quiet zone which follows an intense blast of danger.

The clock on the dash showed one in the morning. I wanted to hole up until four. I had a superstitious thing about four o'clock in the morning. We used to call it KGB time. Story was it was the time they chose to go knocking on doors. Four o'clock in the morning. Story was it had always worked well for them. Their victims were at a low ebb at that hour. Progress was easy. We had tried it ourselves, time to time. It had always worked well for me. So I wanted to wait until four, one last time.

I jinked the car left and right, down the service alleys behind the last block of stores. Switched the running lights off and pulled up in the dark behind the barbershop. Killed the motor. Finlay glanced around and shrugged. Going to the barber at one in the morning was no more crazy than driving a hundred-thousand-dollar Bentley into a building. No more crazy than getting locked in a cell for ten hours by a madman. After twenty years in Boston and six months in Margrave, there wasn't a whole lot left that Finlay was ever going to raise an eyebrow at.

Hubble leaned forward from the backseat. He was pretty shaken up. He'd deliberately driven into three separate crashes. The three impacts had left him battered and jarred. And drained. It had taken a lot to keep his foot jammed down on the gas, heading for one solid object after another. But he'd done it. Not everybody would have. But he was suffering for it now. I slid out of the seat and stood in the alley. Gestured Hubble out of the car. He joined me in the dark. Stood there, a bit unsteady.

"You OK?" I asked him.

He shrugged.

"I guess," he said. "I banged my knee and my neck hurts like hell."

“Walk up and down,” I said. “Don’t stiffen up.”

I walked him up and down the dark alley. Ten paces up and back, a couple of times. He was pecking his stride on the left. Maybe the door had caved in and hit his left knee. He was rolling his head around, loosening the jarred muscles in his neck.

“OK?” I said.

He smiled. Changed it to a grimace as a tendon graunched.

“I’ll live,” he said.

Finlay got out and joined us in the alley. He was coming round. He was stretching like he was waking up. Getting excited. He smiled at me in the dark.

“Good job, Reacher,” he said. “I was wondering how the hell you were going to get me out. What happened to Picard?”

I made a gun with my fingers, like a child’s mime. He nodded a sort of partner’s nod to me. Too reserved to go any further. I shook his hand. Seemed like the right thing to do. Then I turned and rapped softly on the service door at the back of the barbershop. It opened up straightaway. The older guy was standing there like he’d been waiting for us to knock. He held the door like some kind of an old butler. Gestured us in. We trooped single file down a passage into a storeroom. Waited next to shelves piled high with barber stuff. The gnarled old man caught up to us.

“We need your help,” I said.

The old guy shrugged. Held up his mahogany palm in a wait gesture. Shuffled through to the front and came back with his partner. The younger old guy. They discussed my request in loud rasping whispers.

“Upstairs,” the younger guy said.

We filed up a narrow staircase. Came out in an apartment above the shop. The two old barbers showed us through to the living room. They pulled the blinds and switched on a couple of dim lamps. Waved us to sit. The room was small and threadbare, but clean. It had a cozy feel. I figured if I had a room, I’d want it to look like that. We sat down. The younger guy sat with us and the older guy

to look like that. We sat down. The younger guy sat with us and the older guy shuffled out again. Closed the door. The four of us sat there looking at each other. Then the barber leaned forward.

“You boys ain’t the first to hide out with us,” he said.

Finlay glanced around. Appointed himself spokesman.

“We’re not?” he said.

“No sir, you’re not,” the barber said. “We’ve had lots of boys hiding out with us. And girls too, tell the truth.”

“Like who?” Finlay asked.

“You name it, we had it,” the old guy said. “We’ve had farmworkers’ union boys from the peanut farms. We’ve had farmworkers’ union boys from the peach growers. We’ve had civil rights girls from the voter registration. We’ve had boys who didn’t want their ass sent to Vietnam. You name it, we had it.”

Finlay nodded.

“And now you’ve got us,” he said.

“Local trouble?” the barber asked.

Finlay nodded again.

“Big trouble,” he said. “Big changes coming.”

“Been expecting it,” the old guy said. “Been expecting it for years.”

“You have?” Finlay said.

The barber nodded and stood up. Stepped over to a large closet. Opened the door and waved us over to take a look. It was a big closet, fitted with deep shelves. The shelves were stacked with money. Bricks and bricks of cash held together with rubber bands. It filled the closet from floor to ceiling. Must have been a couple of hundred thousand dollars in there.

“Kliner Foundation’s money,” the old guy said. “They just keep on throwing it at us. Something wrong with it. I’m seventy-four years old. Seventy years

at us. Something wrong with it. I'm seventy-four years old. Seventy years, people are pissing all over me. Now people are throwing money all over me. Something wrong with that, right?"

He closed the door on the cash.

"We don't spend it," he said. "We don't spend a cent we don't earn. We just put it in the closet. You boys going after the Kliner Foundation?"

"Tomorrow there won't be any Kliner Foundation," I said.

The old guy just nodded. Glanced at the closet door as he passed by and shook his head. Closed the door on us and left us alone in the small cozy room.

"NOT GOING TO BE EASY," FINLAY SAID. "THREE OF US AND three of them. They hold four hostages. Two of the hostages are children. We're not even certain where they're holding them."

"They're at the warehouse," I said. "That's for sure. Where else would they be? No manpower available to hold them anyplace else. And you heard that tape. That boomy echo? That was the warehouse, for sure."

"What tape?" Hubble asked.

Finlay looked at him.

"They had Roscoe make a tape for Reacher," he said. "A message. To prove they were holding her."

"Roscoe?" Hubble said. "What about Charlie?"

Finlay shook his head.

"Just Roscoe," he lied. "Nothing from Charlie."

Hubble nodded. Smart move, Harvard guy, I thought. The image of Charlie being held down at a microphone with a sharp knife at her throat would have tipped Hubble right over the edge. Right off the plateau, back down to where panic would make him useless.

“The warehouse is where they are,” I said again. “No doubt about it.”

Hubble knew the warehouse well. He’d been working up there most days for a year and a half. So we got him to go over and over it, describing the layout. We found paper and pencil and got him to draw plans. We went over and over the plans, putting in all the doors, the stairs, the distances, the details. We ended up with the sort of drawing an architect would have been proud of.

The warehouse stood in its own compound at the end of the row of four. It was very close in line with the third shed, which was a farmers’ operation. There was a fence running between the two with just a path’s width between it and the metal siding. The other three sides were ringed by the main fence running around the whole complex. That fence ran close to the warehouse across the back and down the far end, but there was plenty of space in front for trucks to turn.

The big roller door covered just about the whole of the front wall. There was a small staff door just around the far corner which gave on to the main floor. There was a cage just inside the staff door where the roller door winch was sited. Go in the staff door and turn left, there was an open metal staircase running up to an office. The office was cantilevered way up into the top back corner of the huge shed, hanging there about forty feet above the main floor. The office had big windows and a railed balcony looking down into the shed for supervision. In back, the office had a door leading out to an external fire escape which was another open metal staircase bolted to the outside back wall.

“OK,” I said. “Clear enough, right?”

Finlay shrugged.

“I’m worried about reinforcements,” he said. “Guards on the exterior.”

I shrugged back.

“There won’t be reinforcements,” I said. “I’m more worried about the shotguns. It’s a big space. And there are two kids in there.”

Finlay nodded. Looked grim. He knew what I was saying. Shotguns spray a cone of lead over a big wide angle. Shotguns and children don’t mix. We went quiet. It was nearly two in the morning. An hour and a half to wait. We would leave at

three thirty. Get up there at four. My favorite attack time.

THE WAITING PERIOD. LIKE SOLDIERS IN A DUGOUT. LIKE PILOTS before a raid. It was silent. Finlay dozed. He had done this before. Probably many times. He sprawled in his chair. His left arm hung over the side. Half of the shattered handcuff dangled from his wrist. Like a silver bracelet.

Hubble sat upright. He hadn't done this before. He just fidgeted around, burning energy. Couldn't blame him. He kept looking over at me. Questions in his eyes. I just kept on shrugging back at him.

Two thirty, there was a knock on the door. Just a soft tap. The door opened a foot. The older of the two old barbers was there. He pointed a gnarled and trembling finger into the room. Aimed straight at me.

"Someone to see you, son," he said.

Finlay sat up and Hubble looked scared. I signaled them both to stay put. Stood up and pulled the big automatic out of my pocket. Clicked the safety off. The old guy flapped his hand at me and fussed.

"You don't need that, son," he said. "Don't need that at all."

He was impatient, beckoning me out to join him. I put the gun away again. Shrugged at the other two and went with the old guy. He led me into a tiny kitchen. There was a very old woman in there, sitting on a stool. Same mahogany color as the old guy, stick thin. She looked like an old tree in winter.

"This is my sister," the old barber said. "You boys woke her up, chattering."

Then he stepped over to her. Bent down and spoke right in her ear.

"This is the boy I told you about," he said.

She looked up and smiled at me. It was like the sun coming out. I caught a flash of the beauty she must have had, long ago. She held out her hand and I took it. Felt like thin wires in a soft dry glove. The old barber left us alone together in the kitchen. Stopped as he passed me.

“Ask her about him,” he said.

The old guy shuffled out. I still had the old lady’s hand in mine. I squatted down next to her. She didn’t try to pull her hand away. Just left it nestled there, like a brown twig in my huge paw.

“I don’t hear so good,” she said. “You got to lean close.”

I spoke in her ear. She smelled like an old flower. Like a faded bloom.

“How’s this?” I said.

“That’s good, son,” she said. “I can hear that OK.”

“I was asking your brother about Blind Blake,” I said.

“I know that, son,” she said. “He told me all about it.”

“He told me you knew him,” I said, in her ear.

“I sure did,” she said. “I knew him real well.”

“Will you tell me about him?” I asked her.

She turned her head and gazed at me sadly.

“What’s to tell?” she said. “He’s been gone a real long time.”

“What was he like?” I said.

She was still gazing at me. Her eyes were misting over as she trawled backward sixty, seventy years.

“He was blind,” she said.

She didn’t say anything more for a while. Her lips fluttered soundlessly and I could feel a strong pulse hammering in her bony wrist. She moved her head as if she was trying to hear something from far away.

“He was blind,” she said again. “And he was a sweet boy.”

She was more than ninety years old. She was as old as the twentieth century. So

She was more than ninety years old. She was as old as the twentieth century. So she was remembering back to her twenties and thirties. Not to her childhood or her teens. She was remembering back to her womanhood. And she was calling Blake a sweet boy.

“I was a singer,” she said. “And he played the guitar. You know that old expression, he could play the guitar just like ringing a bell? That’s what I used to say about Blake. He would pick up that old instrument of his and the notes would just come tumbling out, faster than you could sing them. But each note was just a perfect little silver bell, floating off into the air. We’d sing and play all night long, then in the morning I’d lead him out into a meadow, and we’d sit under some old shade tree, and we’d sing and play some more. Just for the joy of it. Just because I could sing and he could play.”

She hummed a couple of bars of something under her breath. Her voice was about a fifth lower pitched than it ought to have been. She was so thin and fragile, you’d have expected a high, faltering soprano. But she was singing with a low, breathy contralto. I thought back with her and put the two of them in an old Georgia meadow. The heavy smell of wildflower blossom, the buzz of lazy noontime insects, the two of them, backs against a tree, singing and playing for the joy of it. Belting out the wry, defiant songs that Blake had made up and that I loved so much.

“What happened to him?” I asked her. “Do you know?”

She nodded.

“Two people on this earth know that,” she whispered. “I’m one of them.”

“Will you tell me?” I said. “I sort of came down here to find out.”

“Sixty-two years,” she said. “I never told a soul in sixty-two years.”

“Will you tell me?” I asked her again.

She nodded. Sadly. Tears in her misty old eyes.

“Sixty-two years,” she said. “You’re the first person ever asked me.”

I held my breath. Her lips fluttered and her hand scrabbled in my palm.

“He would die.” she said. “But he was never to You know that, don’t you? It

"He was blind," she said. "But he was sporty. You know that word? Sporty? It means kind of uppity. Uppity with a smile and a grin is sporty. Blake was sporty. Had a lot of spirit and energy. Walked fast and talked fast, always moving, always smiling his sweet fool head off. But one time, we came out of a place in town here, walking down the sidewalk, laughing. Nobody else around but for two white folks coming toward us on the sidewalk. A man and a boy. I saw them and ducked off the sidewalk, like we were supposed to. Stood in the dirt to let them pass. But poor Blake was blind. Didn't see them. Just crashed into the white boy. A white boy, maybe ten years old, maybe twelve. Blake sent him flying into the dirt. White boy cut his head on a stone, set up such a hollering like you never heard. The white boy's daddy was there with him. I knew him. He was a big important man in this town. His boy was screaming fit to burst. Screaming at his daddy to punish the nigger. So the daddy lost his temper and set about Blake with his cane. Big silver knob on the top. He beat poor Blake with that cane until his head was just split open like a burst watermelon. Killed him stone dead. Picked up the boy and turned to me. Sent me over to the horse trough to wash poor Blake's hair and blood and brains off from the end of his cane. Told me never to say a word about it, or he'd kill me too. So I just hid out and waited until somebody else found poor Blake there on the sidewalk. Then I ran out screaming and hollering with the rest of them all. Never said a word about it to another living soul, that day to this."

Big wet tears were welling out of her eyes and rolling slowly down her thin cheeks. I reached over and smudged them dry with the back of my finger. Took her other hand in mine.

"Who was the boy?" I asked her.

"Somebody I seen around ever since," she said. "Somebody I seen sneering around just about every day since, reminding me of my poor Blake lying there with his head split open."

"Who was he?" I said.

"It was an accident," she said. "Anybody could have seen that. Poor Blake was a blind man. Boy didn't have to set up such a hollering. He wasn't hurt so bad. He was old enough to know better. It was his fault for hollering and screaming like he did."

"Who was the boy?" I asked her again.

She turned to me and stared into my eyes. Told me the sixty-two-year-old secret.

“Grover Teale,” she said. “Grew up to be mayor, just like his old daddy. Thinks he’s king of the damn world, but he’s just a screaming brat who got my poor Blake killed for no reason at all except he was blind and he was black.”

33

WE PILED BACK INTO CHARLIE'S BLACK BENTLEY IN THE alley behind the barbershop. Nobody spoke. I fired it up. Swung out and rolled north. Kept the lights off and drove slow. The big dark sedan rolled north through the night like a stealthy animal leaving its lair. Like a big black submarine slipping its mooring and gliding out into icy water. I drove through the town and pulled up shy of the station house. Quiet as a tomb.

"I want to get a weapon," Finlay said.

We picked our way through the shattered wreckage of the entrance. Hubble's own Bentley was sitting in the squad room, inert in the gloom. The front tires had blown and it had settled nose-down, buried in the wreckage of the cells. There was a stink of gasoline. The tank must have split. The trunk lid was up because of the way the rear end was smashed in. Hubble didn't even glance at it.

Finlay picked his way past the wrecked car to the big office in back. Disappeared inside. I waited with Hubble in the heap of shards that had been the entrance doors. Finlay came back out of the dark with a stainless-steel revolver and a book of matches. And a grin. He waved the two of us out to the car and struck a match. Threw it under the rear of the wrecked green Bentley and crunched on out to join us.

"Diversion, right?" he said.

We saw the fire start as we nosed out of the lot. Bright blue flames were rolling across the carpet like a wave on the beach. The fire took hold of the splintered wood and rolled outward, feeding itself on the huge gasoline stain. The flames changed to yellow and orange and the air started sucking in through the hole where the entrance had been. Within a minute, the whole place was burning. I smiled and took off up the county road.

I used headlights for most of the fourteen miles. Drove fast. Took maybe twelve minutes. Doused the lights and pulled up a quarter mile short of the target. Turned around in the road and backed up a little way. Left the car facing south. Down toward town. Doors unlocked. Keys in.

Hubble carried the big bolt cutter. Finlay checked the revolver he'd taken from

Hubble carried the big bolt cutter. Finlay checked the revolver he'd taken from the office. I reached under the seat and pulled out the plastic bottle we'd filled with gas. Slipped it into my pocket with the sap. It was heavy. Pulled my jacket down on the right and brought the Desert Eagle up high on my chest. Finlay gave me the matches. I put them in the other pocket.

We stood together in the dark in the dirt on the side of the road. Exchanged tight nods. Struck out over the field to the blasted tree. It was silhouetted against the moon. Took us a couple of minutes to get there. We slogged over the soft earth. Paused against the distorted tree trunk. I took the bolt cutter from Hubble and we nodded again and headed for the fence where it ran close to the back of the warehouse. It was ten to four in the morning. Nobody had spoken since leaving the burning police building.

It was seventy-five yards from the tree to the fence. Took us a minute. We kept on going until we were opposite the bottom of the fire escape. Right where it was bolted down to the concrete path which ran around the whole building. Finlay and Hubble grabbed the chain-link to put some tension on it and I bit through each strand in turn with the bolt cutter. Went through it like it was licorice. I cut a big piece out, seven feet high, right up to where the razor wire started, maybe eight feet wide.

We stepped through the gap. Walked over to the bottom of the stairs. Waited. I could hear sounds inside. Movement and scraping, muffled to a dull boom by the huge space. I took a deep breath. Motioned the others to flatten themselves against the metal siding. I still wasn't sure about exterior guards. My gut said there wouldn't be any reinforcements. But Finlay was worried about it. And I'd learned a long time ago to take account of what people like Finlay worried about.

So I motioned the others to stay put and I crept around to the corner of the massive building. Crouched down and dropped the bolt cutter onto the concrete path from a height of about a foot. It made just about the right amount of noise. It sounded like somebody trying to break into the compound. I flattened myself against the wall and waited with the sap in my right hand.

Finlay was right. There was an exterior guard. And I was right. There were no reinforcements. The exterior guard was Sergeant Baker. He was on duty patrolling outside the shed. I heard him before I saw him. I heard his tense breathing and his feet on the concrete. He came around the corner of the building

and stopped a yard away from me. He stood and stared at the bolt cutter. He had his .38 in his hand. He looked at the bolt cutter and then swung his gaze along the fence as far as the missing panel. Then he started to run toward it.

Then he died. I swung the sap and hit him. But he didn't go down. He dropped his revolver. Danced a circle on rubber legs. Finlay came up behind me. Caught him by the throat. Looked like a country boy wringing a chicken's neck. Made a fine job of it. Baker was still wearing his acetate nameplate above his uniform pocket. First thing I'd noticed, nine days ago. We left his body on the path. Waited five minutes. Listened hard. Nobody else came.

We went back to where Hubble was waiting. I took another deep breath. Stepped onto the fire escape. Went up. Planted each foot carefully and silently on each step. Eased my way up. The staircase was cast from some kind of iron or steel. Open treads. The whole thing would ring like a damn bell if we were clumsy. Finlay was behind me, gripping the handrail with his right hand, gun in his left. Behind him came Hubble, too scared to breathe.

We crept up. Took us minutes to do the forty feet. We were very cautious. We stood on the little platform at the top. I pressed my ear to the door. Quiet. No sound. Hubble pulled out his office keys. Clenched in his hand to stop them jingling. He selected the right one, slowly, carefully. Inched it into the lock. We held our breath. He turned the key. The lock clicked back. The door sagged open. We held our breath. No sound. No reaction. Quiet. Hubble eased the door back, slowly, carefully. Finlay took it from him and eased it further. Passed it to me. I eased it back flat against the wall. Propped it all the way open with the bottle of gasoline from my pocket.

Light was flooding out of the office, spilling over the fire escape and laying a bright bar down on the fence and the field forty feet below. Arc lamps were lit inside the body of the warehouse and they were flooding in through the big office windows. I could see everything in the office. And what I saw made my heart stop.

I'd never believed in luck. Never had any cause to. Never relied on it, because I never could. But now I was lucky in a big way. Thirty-six years of bad luck and trouble were wiped away in one single bright glance. The gods were sitting on my shoulder, whooping and driving me on. In that one single bright glance, I knew that I had won.

Because the children were asleep on the office floor. Hubble's kids. Ben and Lucy. Sprawled out on a pile of empty burlap sacks. Fast asleep, wide open and innocent like only sleeping children can be. They were filthy and ragged. Still dressed in their school clothes from Monday. They looked like ragamuffins in a sepia picture of old New York. Sprawled out, fast asleep. Four o'clock in the morning. My lucky time.

The children had been worrying the hell out of me. They were what made this whole damn thing just about impossible. I'd thought it through a thousand times. I'd run war games through my head, trying to find one that would work. I hadn't found one. I'd always come up with some kind of a bad outcome. What the staff colleges call unsatisfactory results. I'd always come up with the children splattered all over the place by the big shotguns. Children and shotguns don't mix. And I'd always visualized the four hostages and the two shotguns in the same place at the same time. I'd visualized panicking children and Charlie screaming and the big Ithacas booming. All in the same place. I hadn't come up with any kind of a solution. If I could have given anything I ever had or ever would have, I'd have given it to have the children fast asleep somewhere else on their own. And it had happened. It had happened. The elation roared in my ears like a hysterical crowd in a huge stadium.

I turned to the other two. Cupped a hand behind each of their heads and pulled them close to mine. Spoke in the faintest of whispers.

"Hubble, take the girl," I whispered. "Finlay, take the boy. Put a hand over their mouths. No sound at all. Carry them back to the tree. Hubble, take them on back to the car. Stay there with them and wait. Finlay, come back here. Do it now. Do it quietly."

I pulled out the Desert Eagle and clicked the safety off. Clamped my wrist against the door frame and aimed across the office at the inner door. Finlay and Hubble crept into the office. They did it right. They kept low. They kept quiet. They clamped their palms over the little mouths. Scooped the children up. Crept back out. Straightened up and looped past the barrel of my big .44. The children woke up and struggled. Their wide eyes stared at me. Hubble and Finlay carried them to the top of the long staircase. Eased their way quietly down. I backed out of the doorway to the far corner of the metal platform. Found an angle to cover them all the way. Watched them pick their way slowly down the fire escape, to the ground, to the fence, through the gap and away. They stepped through the bright bar of light spilling over the field, forty feet below me, and vanished into

the night.

I RELAXED. LOWERED THE GUN. LISTENED HARD. HEARD nothing but the faint noises scraping up from inside the huge metal shed. I crept into the office. Crawled over the floor to the windows. Slowly raised my head up and looked out and down. Saw a sight I would never ever forget.

There were a hundred arc lights bolted up inside the roof of the warehouse. They lit the place up brighter than day. It was a big space. Must have been a hundred feet long, maybe eighty deep. Maybe sixty feet high. And it was full of dollar bills. A gigantic dune of money filled the whole shed. It was piled maybe fifty feet high into the back far corner. It sloped down to the floor like a mountainside. It was a mountain of cash. It reared up like a gigantic green iceberg. It was huge.

I saw Teale at the far end of the shed. He was sitting on the lower slope of the mountain, maybe ten feet up. Shotgun across his knees. He was dwarfed by the huge green pile rearing above him. Fifty feet closer to me, I saw old man Kliner. Sitting higher up on the slope. Sitting on forty tons of money. Shotgun across his knees.

The two shotguns were triangulated on Roscoe and Charlie Hubble. They were tiny figures forty feet below me. They were being made to work. Roscoe had a snow shovel. One of those curved things they use in the snow states to clear their driveways. She was pushing drifts of dollars toward Charlie. Charlie was scooping them into air conditioner cartons and tamping them in firmly with a garden rake. There was a line of sealed boxes behind the two women. In front of them was the huge stockpile. They toiled away far below me, dwarfed like two ants below the mountain of dollar bills.

I held my breath. I was transfixed. It was an utterly unbelievable sight. I could see Kliner's black pickup truck. It was backed in, just inside the roller door. Next to it was Teale's white Cadillac. Both were big automobiles. But they were nothing next to the mountain of cash. They were just like toys on the beach. It was awesome. It was a fantastic scene from a fairy tale. Like a huge underground cavern in an emerald mine from some glittering fable. All brightly lit by the hundred arc lights. Tiny figures far below. I couldn't believe it. Hubble had said a million dollars in singles was a hell of a sight. I was looking at forty

million. It was the height of the drift that did it to me. It towered way up. Ten times higher than the two tiny figures working at floor level. Higher than a house. Higher than two houses. It was incredible. It was a huge warehouse. And it was full of a solid mass of money. Full of forty million genuine one-dollar bills.

The two women were moving with the dullness of extreme fatigue, like exhausted troopers at the end of some cruel maneuver. Asleep on their feet, moving about automatically while their minds screamed for rest. They were packing armful after armful of dollars from the gigantic stockpile into the boxes. It was a hopeless task. The Coast Guard retreat had caught Kliner by surprise. He wasn't ready. The warehouse was hopelessly jammed. Roscoe and Charlie were being worked like exhausted slaves. Teale and Kliner were watching them like overseers, listlessly, like they knew they were at the end of the road. The enormous drift of cash was going to bury them. It was going to engulf them and choke them to death.

I heard the faint clang of Finlay's feet on the fire escape. I crawled back out of the office and met him on the metal platform outside.

"They're back at the car," he whispered to me. "How we doing here?"

"Two shotguns out and ready," I whispered. "Roscoe and Charlie look OK."

He glanced in toward the bright light and the faint noises.

"What are they all doing in there?" he asked me in a whisper.

"Come take a look," I said softly. "But hold your breath."

We crawled in together. Crawled over the floor to the windows. Slowly popped our heads up. Finlay looked down at the fantastic scene below. He stared down for a long time. His eyes flicked all over the place. Ended up staring at me. Holding his breath.

"Christ," he whispered.

I nodded him back out. We crawled to the fire escape platform.

"Christ," he whispered again. "Can you believe that?"

I shook my head.

“No,” I whispered back to him. “I can’t believe it.”

“What are we going to do?” he asked me.

I held my hand up to make Finlay wait on the platform. Crawled back inside and peered down through the window. I looked all over the place. Looked at where Teale was sitting, looked at the office inner door, checked Kliner’s field of fire, guessed where Roscoe and Charlie might end up. I calculated angles and estimated distances. I came up with one definite conclusion. It was a hell of a problem.

Old man Kliner was the nearest person to us. Roscoe and Charlie were working between him and Teale. Teale was the dangerous one because he was at the far end of the warehouse. When I came out at the top of the inside stairs, they were all four going to look up at me. Kliner was going to raise his shotgun. Teale was going to raise his shotgun. They were both going to shoot at me.

Kliner had a straight shot, sixty degrees upward, like a duck hunter. But Roscoe and Charlie were down there between Teale and me. Teale was going to be shooting on a fairly shallow angle. He was already perched ten feet up the slope. He would be looking for another thirty feet of elevation from a distance of a hundred feet. A shallow angle. Maybe fifteen or twenty degrees. His big Ithaca was designed to cover a much wider spread than fifteen or twenty degrees. His shot was going to catch the women in a murderous spray. His shot was going to kill them. When Teale looked up at me and fired, Roscoe and Charlie were going to die.

I CRAWLED BACK OUT OF THE OFFICE AND JOINED FINLAY on the fire escape. Bent down and picked up the plastic bottle of gasoline. Handed it to him with the matchbook. Leaned close and told him what to do. We whispered together and he set off slowly back down the long flight of metal steps. I crawled through the office and laid the Desert Eagle carefully on the floor by the inner door. Safety off. Crawled back under the window. Eased my head up and waited.

Three minutes went by. I was staring at the far end of the roller door. Staring and waiting. Watching the crack between the bottom of the door and the concrete,

right at the far end, diagonally opposite me across the whole huge space. I stared and waited. Four minutes had gone by. The tiny figures below toiled on. Roscoe and Charlie stuffing boxes, under Teale's careful gaze. Kliner clambering his way over the mountainside to kick a new river of dollars down the slope toward the women. Five minutes had gone by. Kliner had put his shotgun down. He was thirty feet away from it, scrabbling in the pile, starting a small avalanche which rolled down to Roscoe's feet. Six minutes had gone by. Seven.

Then I saw the dark wet stain of gasoline seeping under the roller door. It flowed into a semicircular pool. It kept coming. It reached the bottom of the enormous dune of dollars, ten feet below where Teale was sprawled on the lower slopes. It kept growing outward. A dark stain on the concrete. Kliner was still working, forty feet across the mountain from Teale. Still thirty feet away from his weapon.

I crawled back to the inner door. Eased the handle down. The door came free of the catch. I picked up my gun. Eased the door halfway open. Crawled back to the window. Watched the growing pool of gasoline.

I had been afraid Teale would smell it straightaway. That was the weak part of the plan. But he couldn't smell it. Because the whole shed was full of a powerful, appalling stink. It had hit me like a hammer as soon as I opened the door. A heavy, sour, greasy smell. The smell of money. Millions and millions of crumpled and greasy dollar bills were seeping out the stink of sweaty hands and sour pockets. The smell hung in the air. It was the same smell I had noticed in the empty boxes in Sherman Stoller's garage. The sour smell of used money.

Then I saw the flame bloom under the door. Finlay had dropped the match. It was a low blue flame. It raced in under the door and bloomed out over the wide stain like a flower opening. It reached the bottom of the huge green mountain. I saw Teale snap his head around and stare at it, frozen in horror.

I stepped to the door and squeezed out. Aimed the gun. Braced my wrist against the balcony railing. Pulled the trigger and blew Teale's head off, a hundred feet away. The big bullet caught him in the temple and exploded his skull all over the metal siding behind him.

Then everything went wrong. I saw it happen in that terrible slow motion you get when your mind is racing faster than you can move. My gun hand was drifting left to track Kliner on his way back to his own weapon. But Kliner dived

to the right. He launched himself in a desperate leap down the mountainside to the spot where Teale had dropped his shotgun. He wasn't going back for his own gun. He was going to use Teale's weapon. He was going to use the same lethal geometry that Teale would have used. I saw my hand reverse its direction. It was cutting a graceful smooth arc through the air just behind Kliner tumbling and sliding down in a great spray of dollars. Then I heard the crash of the staff door bursting open below. The crash of the door fought with the echo of the roar of the shot which had killed Teale and I saw Picard stagger onto the warehouse floor.

His jacket was gone and I saw blood soaking his enormous white shirt. I saw him taking giant lurching strides toward the women. His head was turning and his right arm was windmilling upward to point at me. I saw his .38 dwarfed in his hand. A hundred feet from him I saw Kliner reach Teale's shotgun where it had fallen and buried itself in the cash pile.

I saw the blue flames bursting upward at the bottom of the huge dune of dollars. I saw Roscoe spinning slowly to look up at me. I saw Charlie Hubble spinning slowly the other way to look at Teale. I saw her start to scream. Her hands were slowly moving up to her face and her mouth was opening and her eyes were closing. The sound of her screaming drifted gently up to me and fought the dying echo of the Desert Eagle's bullet and the crash of the door.

I grasped the balcony railing in front of me and hauled myself one-handed toward it. Swung my gun hand vertically down and fired and hit Picard through the right shoulder a tiny fraction before his .38 came to rest on me. I saw him hit the floor in an explosion of blood as I hauled my aim back over to Kliner.

My mind was detached. Just treating it like a purely mechanical problem. I had locked my shoulder so that the big automatic's recoil would kick it upward. That won me a tiny fraction as I hauled the sights over to the other end of the warehouse. I felt the smack in my palm as the burnt gases hurled the spent shell case out and crashed the next bullet in. Kliner had the Ithaca barrel on the way up in a slow motion flurry of dollar bills and he was pumping the shell. I heard the double crunch-crunch of the mechanism over the roar of the shot that had stopped Picard.

My detached mind computed that Kliner would fire just slightly above the horizontal to hit me with the top of the spray and that the bottom of the spray would decapitate Roscoe and Charlie. It told me my bullet would take a hair

over seven hundredths of a second to cover the length of the warehouse and that I should aim high up on his right side to rotate the shotgun away from the women.

After that, my brain just shut down. Handed me all that information and sat back to mock my attempt to haul my arm up faster than Kliner could haul the Ithaca's barrel up. It was a race in agonizing slow motion. I was leaning half off the balcony slowly bringing my arm up as if I was lifting an enormous weight. A hundred feet away Kliner was slowly raising the shotgun barrel as if it was mired in molasses. They came up together, slowly, inch by inch, degree by degree. Up and up. It took forever. It took the whole of my lifetime. Flames were bursting and exploding at the bottom of the mountain. They were spreading upward and outward through the money. Kliner's yellow teeth were parting in a wolfish smile. Charlie was screaming. Roscoe was slowly floating down toward the concrete floor like gossamer. My arm and Kliner's shotgun were traveling slowly upward together, inch by ghastly inch.

My arm got there first. I fired and hit Kliner in the right upper chest and the huge .44 slug hurled him off his feet. The Ithaca barrel whipped sideways as he pulled the trigger. The shotgun boomed and fired point-blank into the enormous mountain of money. The air was instantly thick with tiny scraps of paper. Shreds and fragments of dollar bills were blasted all over the place. They swirled like a thick blizzard and burst into flames as they settled into the fire.

Then time restarted and I was racing down the stairs to the warehouse floor. Flames were ripping through the greasy mountain faster than a man could run. I fought through the smoke and caught Roscoe under one arm and Charlie under the other. Spun them off their feet and carried them back toward the staircase. I could feel a gale of oxygen sucking in under the roller door to feed the fire. The whole huge shed was bursting into flame. The enormous dune of money was exploding. I was running flat out for the stairs, dragging the two women with me.

I ran straight into Picard. He reared up off the floor in front of me and the impact sent me sprawling. He stood there like a wounded giant bellowing in fury. His right shoulder was shattered and pumping blood. His shirt was soaked an appalling crimson. I staggered up off the floor and he hit me with his left hand. It was a shuddering impact and it rocked me back. He followed it up with another swinging left that hit me on the arm and sent the Desert Eagle clattering over the concrete. The fire was billowing around us and my lungs were burning and I

concrete. The fire was billowing around us and my lungs were burning and I could hear Charlie Hubble screaming hysterically.

Picard had lost his revolver. He stood unsteadily in front of me, rocking back and forth, swinging his massive left arm ready for another blow. I threw myself inside the swing and hit him in the throat with my elbow. I hit him harder than I had ever hit anything before in my life. But he just shook himself and stepped nearer. Swung his enormous left fist and knocked me sideways into the fire.

I was breathing pure smoke as I rolled out. Picard stepped nearer. He was standing in a burning drift of money. He leaned forward and kicked me in the chest. Like being hit by a truck. My jacket caught fire. I tore it off and hurled it at him. But he just swatted it aside and swung his leg back for the kick that was going to kill me. Then his body started jerking like somebody was behind him, hitting him with a hammer. I saw Finlay standing there shooting Picard with the handgun he'd gotten from the station house. He fired six shots into Picard's back. Picard turned and looked at him. Took a step toward him. Finlay's gun clicked empty.

I scrabbled for my big Israeli automatic. Swept it up off the hot concrete and shot Picard through the back of the head. His skull exploded under the impact of the huge bullet. His legs crumpled and he started falling. I fired my last four shells into him before he hit the floor.

Finlay grabbed Charlie and raced away through the flames. I hauled Roscoe off the floor and hurled myself at the stairs and dragged her up and out through the office. Out and down the fire escape as the flames boiled out through the door after us. We hurled ourselves through the gap in the fence. I hoisted Roscoe high into my arms and ran across the field to the tree.

Behind us the superheated air blew the roof off the shed and flames burst a hundred feet into the night sky. All around us burning fragments of dollar bills were drifting down. The warehouse was blasting like a furnace. I could feel the heat on my back and Roscoe was beating away the flaming paper that was landing on us. We raced for the tree. Didn't stop. Raced on to the road. Two hundred yards. A hundred yards. Behind me I could hear screeching and tearing as the metal shed distorted and burst. Up ahead Hubble was standing next to the Bentley. He flung open the rear doors and raced for the driver's seat.

The four of us crammed into the back and Hubble stamped on the gas. The car shot forward and the doors slammed shut. The children were in the front. Both

shot forward and the doors slammed shut. The children were in the front. Both screaming. Charlie was screaming. Roscoe was screaming. I noticed with a kind of detached curiosity that I was screaming, too.

Hubble blasted a mile down the road. Then he jammed to a stop and we untangled ourselves and fell out of the car. Stumbled about. Hugged and kissed and cried, staggering about in the dirt at the side of the old county road. The four Hubbles clung together. Roscoe and Finlay and I clung together. Then Finlay was dancing around, yelling and laughing like a madman. All his old Boston reserve was gone. Roscoe was huddled in my arms. I was watching the fire, a mile away. It was getting worse. It was getting higher. It was spreading to the farmers' sheds next in line. Bags of nitrogen fertilizer and drums of tractor oil were exploding like bombs.

We all turned to watch the inferno and the explosions. Seven of us, in a ragged line on the road. From a mile away, we watched the firestorm. Great spouts of flame were leaping a thousand feet. Exploding oil drums were blowing up like mortar shells. The night sky was full of burning banknotes like a million orange stars. It looked like hell on earth.

"Christ," Finlay said. "Did we do that?"

"You did that, Finlay," I said. "You dropped the match."

We laughed and hugged. We danced and laughed and slapped each other's backs. We swung the children up in the air and hugged them and kissed them. Hubble hugged me and pounded me on the back. Charlie hugged me and kissed me. I lifted Roscoe off her feet and kissed her long and hard. On and on. She wrapped her legs around my waist and locked her arms behind my head. We kissed like we would die if we stopped.

Then I drove slowly and quietly back to town. Finlay and Roscoe squeezed together with me in the front. The four Hubbles squeezed into the back. Soon as we lost the glow of the fire behind us, we picked up the glow of the station house burning in front of us. I slowed as we drove past. Burning fiercely. It was going to burn to the ground. Hundreds of people were milling about in a ragged circle, watching it. Nobody was doing anything about it.

I picked up speed again and we rolled through the silent town. Made the right up Beckman opposite the statue of old Caspar Teale. Jinked around the silent white church. Drove the mile up to the familiar white mailbox at number twenty-five. I

church. Drove the mile up to the familiar white mailbox at number twenty-five. I turned in and wound my way up the driveway. Stopped at the door just long enough for the Hubbles to spill out. Hauled the old car around and back down the driveway. Rolled down Beckman again and stopped at the bottom.

“Out, Finlay,” I said.

He grinned and got out. Walked off into the night. I drove across the bottom of Main Street and coasted down to Roscoe’s place. Stopped on her drive. We stumbled into the house. Dragged a chest of drawers down the hallway and shoved it up against the splintered door. Sealed ourselves off from the world.

34

IT DIDN'T WORK OUT FOR ROSCOE AND ME. IT NEVER REALLY stood a chance. There were too many problems. It lasted a hair over twenty-four hours, and then it was over. I was back on the road.

It was five o'clock Sunday morning when we hauled that chest of drawers over and shoved it up against the broken door. We were both exhausted. But the adrenaline was still boiling through us. So we couldn't sleep. Instead, we talked. And the more we talked, the worse it got.

Roscoe had been a prisoner the best part of sixty-four hours. She hadn't been mistreated. She told me they hadn't touched her. She'd been terrified, but they'd just worked her like a slave. Thursday, Picard had driven her off in his car. I had watched them go. I'd waved them off. She'd updated him with our progress. A mile up the county road, he'd pulled his gun on her. Disarmed her, handcuffed her, driven her up to the warehouse. He'd driven right in through the roller door and she'd been put straight to work with Charlie Hubble. The two of them had been in there working the whole time I'd been sitting under the highway, watching the place. Roscoe herself had unloaded the red truck the Kliner kid had brought in. Then I'd followed it out to that truck stop near Memphis and wondered why the hell it was empty.

Charlie Hubble had been in there working five and a half days. Since Monday evening. Kliner had already started panicking by then. The Coast Guard retreat was coming too soon for him. He knew he had to work fast to clear the stockpile. So Picard had brought the Hubbles straight to the warehouse. Kliner had made the hostages work. They'd slept just a few hours a night, lying down on the dune of dollars, handcuffed to the bottom of the office stairs.

Saturday morning, when his son and the two gatemen hadn't come back, Kliner had gone crazy. Now he had no staff at all. So he worked the hostages around the clock. They didn't sleep at all Saturday night. Just plowed on with the hopeless task of trying to box up the huge pile. They were falling further and further behind. Every time an incoming truck spilled a new load out on the warehouse floor, Kliner had become more and more frantic.

So Roscoe had been a slave the best part of three days. In fear for her life, in

danger, exhausted and humiliated for three long days. And it was my fault. I told her that. The more I told her, the more she said she didn't blame me. It was my fault, I was saying. It wasn't your fault, she was saying. I'm sorry, I was saying. Don't be, she was telling me.

We listened to each other. We accepted what was being said. But I still thought it was my fault. Wasn't a hundred percent sure she didn't think so, too. Despite what she was saying. We didn't fall out about it. But it was the first faint sign of a problem between us.

We showered together in her tiny stall. Stayed in there the best part of an hour. We were soaping off the stink of the money and the sweat and the fire. And we were still talking. I was telling her about Friday night. The ambush in the storm up at Hubble's place. I told her all about it. I told her about the bags with the knives and the hammer and the nails. I told her what I'd done to the five of them. I thought she'd be happy about it.

And that was the second problem. Not a big deal as we stood there with the hot water beating down on us. But I heard something in her voice. Just a tiny tremor. Not shock or disapproval. Just a hint of a question. That maybe I had gone too far. I could hear it in her voice.

I felt somehow I'd done it all for her and Joe. I hadn't done it because I had wanted to do it. It was Joe's business and it was her town and these were her people. I'd done it because I'd seen her trying to melt into her kitchen wall, crying like her heart was breaking. I'd done it for Joe and Molly. At the same time as feeling I needed no justification at all, I had been justifying it to myself like that.

It didn't feel like a problem at the time. The shower loosened us up. Steamed some glow back into us. We went to bed. Left the drapes open. It was a glorious day. The sun was up in a bright blue sky and the air looked fresh and clean. It looked like it should look. Like a new day.

We made love with great tenderness, great energy, great joy. If somebody had told me then that I'd be back on the road the next morning, I'd have thought they were crazy. I told myself there were no problems. I was imagining them. And if there were problems, there were good reasons for them. Maybe the aftereffects of the stress and the adrenaline. Maybe the deep fatigue. Maybe because Roscoe had been a hostage. Maybe she was reacting like a lot of hostages do. They feel

some kind of a faint jealousy against anybody who hadn't been a hostage with them. Some kind of a faint resentment. Maybe that was feeding the guilt I was carrying for letting her get captured in the first place. Maybe a lot of things. I fell asleep certain we'd wake up happy and I'd stay there forever.

WE DID WAKE UP HAPPY. WE SLEPT THROUGH UNTIL LATE afternoon. Then we spent a gorgeous couple of hours with the afternoon sun streaming in the window, dozing and stretching, kissing and laughing. We made love again. We were fueled up with the joy of being safe and alive and alone together. It was the best lovemaking we ever had. It was also the last. But we didn't know that at the time.

Roscoe took the Bentley up to Eno's for some food. She was gone an hour and came back with news. She'd seen Finlay. She was talking about what was going to happen next. That was the big problem. It made the other tiny problems look like nothing at all.

"You should see the station house," she said. "Nothing left more than a foot high."

She put the food on a tray and we ate it sitting on the bed. Fried chicken.

"All four warehouses burned down," she said. "There was debris exploding all over the highway. The state police got involved. They had to get fire trucks all the way from Atlanta and Macon."

"State police are involved?" I said.

She laughed.

"Everybody's involved," she said. "It sort of snowballed. The Atlanta fire chief called in the bomb squad because of the explosions, because he didn't know for sure what they were. The bomb squad can't go anywhere without notifying the FBI, in case it's terrorism, so the Bureau is interested. Then the National Guard got involved this morning."

"The National Guard?" I said. "Why?"

"This is the best part," she said. "Finlay says when the roof blew off the

warehouse last night, the sudden updraft of air blew the money all over the place. Remember those burning pieces that kept landing on us? There are millions of dollar bills all over the place. Miles around. The wind blew them everywhere, in the fields, all over the highway. Most of them are partially burned, of course, but some of them aren't. Soon as the sun came up, thousands of people came out of nowhere, swarming around all over the place, picking all the money up. So the National Guard was ordered in to disperse the crowds."

I ate some food. Thought about it.

"Governor calls in the Guard, right?" I asked her.

She nodded. Mouth full of chicken wing.

"The governor's involved," she said. "He's in town right now. And Finlay called the Treasury Department, because of Joe. They're sending a team down here. I told you, it sort of snowballed."

"What the hell else?" I said.

"Big problems here, of course," she said. "Rumors are flying around. Everybody seems to know the Foundation is finished. Finlay says half of them are pretending they never knew what was going on, and the other half are mad as hell their thousand dollars a week is going to stop. You should have seen old Eno, when I picked up the food. Looked like he's furious."

"Finlay worried?" I said.

"He's OK," she said. "Busy, of course. We're down to a four-person police department. Finlay, me, Stevenson and the desk man. Finlay says that's half of what we need, because of the crisis, but twice as many as we can afford, because the Foundation subsidy is going to stop. But anyway, there's nothing anybody can do about hiring and firing without the mayor's approval, and we haven't got a mayor anymore, have we?"

I sat there on the bed, eating. The problems started bearing down on me. I hadn't really seen them clearly before. But I was seeing them now. A huge question was forming in my mind. It was a question for Roscoe. I wanted to ask it straightaway and get her honest, spontaneous response. I didn't want to give her any time to think about her answer.

“Roscoe?” I said.

She looked up at me. Waited.

“What are you going to do?” I asked her.

She looked at me like it was an odd question.

“Work my butt off, I guess,” she said. “There’s going to be a lot to do. We’re going to have to rebuild this whole town. Maybe we can make something better out of it, create something worthwhile. And I can play a big part in it. I’ll move up the totem pole a couple of notches. I’m really excited. I’m looking forward to it. This is my town and I’m going to be really involved in it. Maybe I’ll get on the town board. Maybe I’ll even run for mayor. That would be a hell of a thing, wouldn’t it? After all these years, a Roscoe for mayor, instead of a Teale?”

I looked at her. It was a great answer, but it was the wrong answer. Wrong for me. I didn’t want to try to change her mind. I didn’t want to put any kind of pressure on her at all. That’s why I had asked her straight out, before I told her what I was going to have to do. I had wanted her honest, natural response. And I had got it. It was right for her. This was her town. If anybody could fix it, she could. If anybody should stick around, working her butt off, she should.

But it was the wrong answer for me. Because I knew by then I had to go. I knew by then that I had to get out fast. The problem was what was going to happen next. The whole thing had gotten out of hand. Before, it had all been about Joe. It had been private. Now it was public. It was like those half-burnt dollar bills. It was scattered all over the damn place.

Roscoe had mentioned the governor, the Treasury Department, the National Guard, the state police, the FBI, Atlanta fire investigators. A half-dozen competent agencies, all looking at what had gone on in Margrave. And they’d be looking hard. They’d be calling Kliner the counterfeiter of the century. They’d find out the mayor had disappeared. They’d find out that four police officers had been involved. The FBI would be looking for Picard. Interpol would get involved because of the Venezuela connection. The heat would be tremendous. There would be six agencies competing like mad to get a result. They’d tear the place apart.

And one or another of them would snarl me up. I was a stranger in the wrong

place at the wrong time. It would take about a minute and a half to realize I was the brother of the dead government investigator who had started the whole thing off. They'd look at my agenda. Somebody would think: revenge. I would be hauled in, and they would go to work on me.

I wouldn't be convicted. There was no risk of that. There was no evidence hanging around. I'd been careful every step of the way. And I knew how to bullshit. They could talk to me until I grew a long white beard and they wouldn't get anything from me. That was for sure. But they'd try. They'd try like crazy. They'd keep me two years in Warburton. Two years up there on the holding floor. Two years of my life. That was the problem. No way could I stand still for that. I'd only just got my life back. I'd had six months of freedom in thirty-six years. Those six months had been the happiest months I'd ever had.

So I was getting out. Before any of them ever knew I'd been there in the first place. My mind was made up. I had to become invisible again. I had to get far away from the Margrave spotlight, where those diligent agencies would never look. It meant my dreams of a future with Roscoe were going to be snuffed out before they were even started. It meant I had to tell Roscoe she wasn't worth gambling two years of my life for. I had to tell her that.

We talked about it all night. We didn't fall out over it. Just talked about it. She knew what I was going to do was right for me. I knew what she was going to do was right for her. She asked me to stay. I thought hard, but said no. I asked her to come with me. She thought hard, but said no. Nothing more to say.

Then we talked about other things. We talked about what I would be doing, and what she would be doing. And I slowly realized that staying there would tear me apart just as much as leaving was going to. Because I didn't want the stuff she was talking about. I didn't want elections and mayors and votes and boards and committees. I didn't want property taxes and maintenance and chambers of commerce and strategies. I didn't want to be sitting there all bored and chafing. Not with the tiny resentments and guilts and disapprovals growing bigger and bigger until they choked us. I wanted what I was talking about. I wanted the open road and a new place every day. I wanted miles to travel and absolutely no idea where I was going. I wanted to ramble. I had rambling on my mind.

We sat around talking, miserable, until dawn. I asked her to do one last thing for me. I asked her to arrange a funeral for Joe. I told her I wanted Finlay to be there, and the Hubbles, and the two old barbers, and her. I told her to ask the old

guy's sister to be there and sing a sad song for Joe. I told her to ask the old lady where the meadow was where she'd sung along with Blind Blake's guitar, sixty-two years ago. I asked her to scatter Joe's ashes on the grass there.

ROSCOE DROVE ME DOWN TO MACON IN THE BENTLEY. Seven in the morning. We hadn't slept at all. The trip took us an hour. I sat in the back, behind the new black glass. I didn't want anybody to see me. We drove up the rise from her place and threaded through traffic. The whole town was getting packed. Even before we got up to Main Street, I could see the place was swarming. There were dozens of cars parked up everywhere. There were television trucks from the networks and CNN. I hunched down in the back of the car. People were crowding everywhere, even at seven in the morning. There were ranks of dark blue government sedans all over. We turned at the corner where the coffee shop was. People were lining up on the sidewalk, waiting to get in for breakfast.

We drove through the sunny town. Main Street was parked solid. There were vehicles up on the sidewalks. I saw fire chiefs' cars and state police cruisers. I glanced into the barbershop as we crawled past, but the old guys weren't there. I would miss them. I would miss old Finlay. I would always wonder how things turned out for him. Good luck, Harvard guy, I thought. Good luck, too, to the Hubbles. This morning was the start of a long road for them. They were going to need a lot of luck. Good luck, too, to Roscoe. I sat there, silently wishing her the best of everything. She deserved it. She really did.

She drove me all the way south to Macon. She found the bus depot. Parked up. Handed me a small envelope. Told me not to open it right away. I put it in my pocket. Kissed her good-bye. Got out of the car. Didn't look back. I heard the sound of the big tires on the pavement and I knew she was gone. I walked into the depot. Bought a ticket. Then I crossed the street to a cheap store and bought new clothes. Changed in their cubicle, left the filthy old fatigues in their garbage can. Then I strolled back and got on a bus for California.

I had tears in my eyes for more than a hundred miles. Then the old bus rattled over the state line. I looked out at the southeast corner of Alabama. Opened Roscoe's envelope. It was the photograph of Joe. She'd taken it from Molly Beth's valise. Taken it out of the frame. Trimmed it with scissors to fit my pocket. On the back she had written her telephone number. But I didn't need

pocket. On the back she had written her telephone number. But I didn't need that. I had already committed it to memory.

Die Trying

1

NATHAN RUBIN DIED because he got brave. Not the sustained kind of thing that wins you a medal in a war, but the split-second kind of blurting outrage that gets you killed on the street.

He left home early, as he always did, six days a week, fifty weeks a year. A cautious breakfast, appropriate to a short round man aiming to stay in shape through his forties. A long walk down the carpeted corridors of a lakeside house appropriate to a man who earned a thousand dollars on each of those three hundred days he worked. A thumb on the button of the garage-door opener and a twist of the wrist to start the silent engine of his expensive imported sedan. A CD into the player, a backward sweep into his gravel driveway, a dab on the brake, a snick of the selector, a nudge on the gas, and the last short drive of his life was under way. Six forty-nine in the morning, Monday.

The only light on his route to work was green, which was the proximate cause of his death. It meant that as he pulled into his secluded slot behind his professional building the prelude ahead of Bach's B Minor Fugue still had thirty-eight seconds left to run. He sat and heard it out until the last organ blast echoed to silence, which meant that as he got out of his car the three men were near enough for him to interpret some kind of intention in their approach. So he glanced at them. They looked away and altered course, three men in step, like dancers or soldiers. He turned toward his building. Started walking. But then he stopped. And looked back. The three men were at his car. Trying the doors.

"Hey!" he called.

It was the short universal sound of surprise, anger, challenge. The sort of instinctive sound an earnest, naive citizen makes when something should not be happening. The sort of instinctive sound which gets an earnest, naive citizen killed. He found himself heading straight back to his car. He was outnumbered three to one, but he was in the right, which swelled him up and gave him confidence. He strode back and felt outraged and fit and commanding.

But those were illusory feelings. A soft suburban guy like him was never going to be in command of a situation like that. His fitness was just health club tone. It counted for nothing. His tight abdominals ruptured under the first savage blow. His face jerked forward and down and hard knuckles pulped his lips and smashed his teeth. He was caught by rough hands and knotted arms and held

upright like he weighed nothing at all. His keys were snatched from his grasp and he was hit a crashing blow on the ear. His mouth filled with blood. He was dropped onto the blacktop and heavy boots smashed into his back. Then his gut. Then his head. He blacked out like a television set in a thunder-storm. The world just disappeared in front of him. It collapsed into a thin hot line and sputtered away to nothing.

So he died, because for a split second he got brave. But not then. He died much later, after the split second of bravery had faded into long hours of wretched gasping fear, and after the long hours of fear had exploded into long minutes of insane screaming panic.

JACK REACHER STAYED alive, because he got cautious. He got cautious because he heard an echo from his past. He had a lot of past, and the echo was from the worst part of it.

He had served thirteen years in the Army, and the only time he was wounded it wasn't with a bullet. It was with a fragment of a Marine sergeant's jawbone. Reacher had been stationed in Beirut, in the U.S. compound out by the airport. The compound was truck-bombed. Reacher was standing at the gate. The Marine sergeant was standing a hundred yards nearer the explosion. The jawbone fragment was the only piece left of the guy. It hit Reacher a hundred yards away and went tumbling through his gut like a bullet. The Army surgeon who patched Reacher up told him afterward he was lucky. He told him a real bullet in the gut would have felt much worse. That was the echo Reacher was hearing. And he was paying a whole lot of attention to it, because thirteen years later he was standing there with a handgun pointing straight at his stomach. From a range of about an inch and a half.

The handgun was a nine-millimeter automatic. It was brand-new. It was oiled. It was held low, lined up right on his old scar. The guy holding it looked more or less like he knew what he was doing. The safety mechanism was released. There was no visible tremor in the muzzle. No tension. The trigger finger was ready to go to work. Reacher could see that. He was concentrating hard on that trigger finger.

He was standing next to a woman. He was holding her arm. He had never seen her before. She was staring at an identical nine-millimeter pointed at her own gut. Her guy was more tensed up than his. Her guy looked uneasy. He looked worried. His gun was trembling with tension. His fingernails were chewed. A nervous, jumpy guy. The four of them were standing there on the street, three of them still like statues and the fourth hopping slightly from foot to foot.

They were in Chicago. Center of the city, a busy sidewalk, a Monday, last day of

June. Broad daylight, bright summer sunshine. The whole situation had materialized in a split second. It had happened in a way that couldn't have been choreographed in a million years. Reacher had been walking down the street, going nowhere, not fast, not slow. He had been about to pass the exit door of a store-front dry cleaner. The door had opened up in his face and an old metal walking cane had clattered out on the sidewalk right in front of him. He'd glanced up to see a woman in the doorway. She was about to drop an armful of nine dry-cleaning bags. She was some way short of thirty, expensively dressed, dark, attractive, self-assured. She had some kind of a bad leg. Some kind of an injury. Reacher could see from her awkward posture it was causing her pain. She'd thrown him a would-you-mind look and he'd thrown her a no-problem look and scooped up the metal cane. He'd taken the nine bags from her with one hand and given her the cane with the other. He'd flicked the bags up over his shoulder and felt the nine wire hangers bite into his finger. She had planted the cane on the sidewalk and eased her forearm into the curved metal clip. He had offered his hand. She had paused. Then she had nodded in an embarrassed fashion and he had taken her arm and waited a beat, feeling helpful but awkward. Then they had turned together to move away. Reacher had figured he would maybe stroll a few steps with her until she was steady on her feet. Then he would let her arm go and hand back her garments. But he'd turned straight into the two men with the nine-millimeter automatics.

The four of them stood there, face-to-face in pairs. Like four people eating together in a tight booth in a diner. The two guys with the guns were white, well fed, vaguely military, vaguely alike. Medium height, short brown hair. Big hands, muscular. Big, obvious faces, bland pink features. Tense expressions, hard eyes. The nervous guy was smaller, like he burned up his energy worrying. They both wore checked shirts and poplin windbreakers. They stood there, pressed together. Reacher was a lot taller than the other three. He could see all around them, over their heads. He stood there, surprised, with the woman's dry cleaning slung over his shoulder. The woman was leaning on her crutch, just staring, silent. The two men were pointing the guns. Close in. Reacher felt they'd all been standing like that for a long time. But he knew that feeling was deceptive. It probably hadn't been more than a second and a half.

The guy opposite Reacher seemed to be the leader. The bigger one. The calmer one. He looked between Reacher and the woman and jerked his automatic's barrel toward the curb.

"In the car, bitch," the guy said. "And you, asshole."

He spoke urgently, but quietly. With authority. Not much of an accent. Maybe from California, Reacher thought. There was a sedan at the curb. It had been waiting there for them. A big car, black, expensive. The driver was leaning

waiting there for them. A big car, black, expensive. The driver was leaning across and behind the front passenger seat. He was stretching over to pop the rear door. The guy opposite Reacher motioned with the gun again. Reacher didn't move. He glanced left and right. He figured he had about another second and a half to make some kind of an assessment. The two guys with the nine-millimeter automatics didn't worry him too much. He was one-handed, because of the dry cleaning, but he figured the two guys would go down without too much of a problem. The problems lay beside him and behind him. He stared up into the dry cleaner's window and used it like a mirror. Twenty yards behind him was a solid mass of hurrying people at a crosswalk. A couple of stray bullets would find a couple of targets. No doubt about that. No doubt at all. That was the problem behind him. The problem beside him was the unknown woman. Her capabilities were an unknown quantity. She had some kind of a bad leg. She would be slow to react. Slow to move. He wasn't prepared to go into combat. Not in that environment, and not with that partner.

The guy with the California accent reached up and grabbed Reacher's wrist where it was pinned against his collar by the weight of the nine clean garments hanging down his back. He used it to pull him toward the car. His trigger finger still looked ready to go to work. Reacher was watching it, corner of his eye. He let the woman's arm go. Stepped over to the car. Threw the bags into the rear seat and climbed in after them. The woman was pushed in behind him. Then the jumpy guy crowded in on them and slammed the door. The leader got in front on the right. Slammed the door. The driver nudged the selector and the car moved smoothly and quietly away down the street.

THE WOMAN WAS gasping in pain and Reacher figured she had the jumpy guy's gun jammed in her ribs. The leader was twisted around in the front seat with his gun hand resting against the thick leather headrest. The gun was pointed straight at Reacher's chest. It was a Glock 17. Reacher knew all about that weapon. He had evaluated the prototype for his unit. That had been his assignment during his light-duty convalescence after the Beirut wound. The Glock was a tough little weapon. Seven and a half inches long from firing pin to muzzle tip. Long enough to make it accurate. Reacher had hit thumbtack heads at seventy-five feet with it. And it fired a decent projectile. It delivered quarter-ounce bullets at nearly eight hundred miles an hour. Seventeen rounds to a magazine, hence the name. And it was light. For all its power, it weighed under two pounds. The important parts were steel. The rest of it was plastic. Black polycarbonate, like an expensive camera. A fine piece of craftsmanship.

But he hadn't liked it much. Not for the specialized requirements of his unit. He'd recommended rejection. He'd supported the Beretta 92F instead. The

He'd recommended rejection. He'd supported the Beretta 92F instead. The Beretta was also a nine-millimeter, a half-pound heavier, an inch longer, two fewer rounds in the magazine. But it had about ten percent more stopping power than the Glock. That was important to him. And it wasn't plastic. The Beretta had been Reacher's choice. His unit commander had agreed. He had circulated Reacher's paper and the Army as a whole had backed his recommendation. The same week they promoted him and pinned on his Silver Star and his Purple Heart, they ordered Berettas even though the Beretta was more expensive and NATO was crazy for the Glock and Reacher had been just about a lone voice and was not long out of West Point. Then he had been assigned elsewhere and served all around the world and hadn't really seen a Glock 17 since. Until now. Twelve years later, he was getting a pretty damn good second look at one.

He switched his attention away from the gun and took a second look at the guy holding it. He had a decent tan which whitened near his hairline. A recent haircut. The driver had a big shiny brow, thinning hair swept back, pink and vivid features, the smirk that pig-ugly guys use when they think they're handsome. Same cheap chain store shirt, same windbreaker. Same corn-fed bulk. Same in-charge confidence, edged around with a slight breathlessness. Three guys, all of them maybe thirty or thirty-five, one leader, one solid follower, one jumpy follower. All of them tense but rehearsed, racing through some kind of a mission. A puzzle. Reacher glanced past the steady Glock into the leader's eyes. But the guy shook his head.

"No talking, asshole," he said. "Start talking, I'll shoot you. That's a damn promise. Keep quiet, you could be OK."

Reacher believed him. The guy's eyes were hard and his mouth was a tight line. So he said nothing. Then the car slowed and pulled onto a lumpy concrete forecourt. It headed around behind an abandoned industrial building. They had driven south. Reacher figured they were now maybe five miles south of the Loop. The driver eased the big sedan to a stop with the rear door lined up with the back of a small panel truck. The truck was standing alone on the empty lot. It was a Ford Econoline, dirty white, not old, but well used. There had been some kind of writing on the side. It had been painted over with fresh white paint which didn't exactly match the bodywork. Reacher scanned around. The lot was full of trash. He saw a paint can discarded near the truck. A brush. There was nobody in sight. The place was deserted. If he was going to make some kind of a move, this was the right time to make it, and the right location. But the guy in front smiled a thin smile and leaned right over into the back of the car. Caught Reacher's collar with his left hand and ground the tip of the Glock's muzzle into Reacher's ear with his right.

"Sit still, asshole," the guy said.

"Sit still, asshole," the guy said.
The driver got out of the car and skipped around the hood. Pulled a new set of keys from his pocket and opened up the rear doors of the truck. Reacher sat still. Jamming a gun into a person's ear is not necessarily a smart move. If the person suddenly jerks his head around toward it, the gun comes out. It rolls around the person's forehead. Then even a quick trigger finger won't do much damage. It might blow a hole in the person's ear, just the outside flap, and it's sure to shatter the person's eardrum. But those are not fatal wounds. Reacher spent a second weighing those odds. Then the jumpy guy dragged the woman out of the car and hustled her straight into the back of the truck. She hopped and limped across the short distance. Straight out of one door and in through the other. Reacher watched her, corner of his eye. Her guy took her pocketbook from her and tossed it back into the car. It fell at Reacher's feet. It thumped heavily on the thick carpet. A big pocketbook, expensive leather, something heavy in it. Something metal. Only one metal thing women carry could make a heavy thump like that. He glanced across at her, suddenly interested.
She was sprawled in the back of the truck. Impeded by her leg. Then the leader in the front pulled Reacher along the leather seat and passed him on to the jumpy guy. As soon as one Glock was out of his ear, the other was jammed into his side. He was dragged over the rough ground. Across to the rear of the truck. He was pushed inside with the woman. The jumpy guy covered them both with the trembling Glock while the leader reached into the car and pulled out the woman's metal crutch. He walked over and tossed it into the truck. It clanged and boomed on the metal siding. He left her dry cleaning in the back of the sedan with her handbag. Then he pulled a set of handcuffs from the pocket of his jacket. He caught the woman's right wrist and cuffed it with half the handcuff. Pulled her roughly sideways and caught Reacher's left wrist. Snapped the other half of the cuff onto it. Shook the cuff to check it was secure. Slammed the truck's left rear door. Reacher saw the driver emptying plastic bottles into the sedan. He caught the pale color and the strong smell of gasoline. One bottle into the backseat, one into the front. Then the leader swung the truck's right rear door shut. Last thing Reacher saw before darkness enveloped him was the driver, pulling a matchbook from his pocket.

2

ONE THOUSAND SEVEN hundred and two miles from Chicago by road, guest quarters were being prepared. They took the form of a single room. The room was following an unconventional design, specified by a thorough man after a great deal of careful thought. The design called for several unusual features. The quarters were designed for a specific purpose, and for a specific guest. The nature of the purpose and the identity of the guest had dictated the unusual features. The construction was concentrated on the second floor of an existing building. A corner room had been selected. It had a series of large windows on the two outside walls. They faced south and east. The glass had been smashed out and was replaced by heavy plywood sheeting nailed to the remaining window frames. The plywood was painted white on the outside, to match the building's siding. On the inside, the plywood was left unfinished.

The corner room's ceiling was torn out. It was an old building, and the ceiling had been made of heavy plaster. It had been pulled down in a shower of choking dust. The room was now open to the rafters. The interior walling was torn off. The walls had been paneled in old pine, worn smooth with age and polish. That was all gone. The framing of the building and the heavy old tar paper behind the exterior siding was exposed. The floorboards were pulled up. The dusty ceiling of the room below was visible under the heavy joists. The room was just a shell. The old plaster from the ceiling and the boards from the walls and the floor had been thrown out through the windows before they were covered over with the plywood. The two men who had done the demolition work had shoveled all that debris into a large pile, and they had backed their truck up to the pile ready to cart the trash away. They were very anxious to leave the place looking neat and tidy. This was the first time they had worked for this particular employer, and there had been hints of more work to come. And looking around, they could see that there was plenty more needed doing. All in all, an optimistic situation. New contracts were hard to find, and this particular employer had shown no concern over price. The two men felt that to make a good first impression was very much in their long-term interest. They were hard at work loading their truck with every last plaster fragment when the employer himself stopped by.

"All done?" he asked.

The employer was a huge guy, freakishly bloated, with a high voice and two nickel-sized red spots burning on his pale cheeks. He moved lightly and quietly, like a guy a quarter his size. The overall effect was a guy people looked away from and answered quickly

from and answered quickly.
“Just clearing up,” the first guy said to him. “Where do we dump this stuff?”
“I’ll show you,” the employer said. “You’ll need to make two trips. Bring those boards separately, right?”
The second guy nodded. The floorboards were eighteen inches wide, from back when lumbermen had the pick of any tree they wanted. No way would they fit into the flatbed with the rest of the junk. They finished loading the plaster and their employer squeezed into their truck with them. He was such a big guy, it made for a tight fit. He pointed beyond the old building.
“Drive north,” he said. “About a mile.”
The road led them straight out of town and then wound upward through some steep bends. The employer pointed to a place.
“In there,” he said. “All the way in back, OK?”
He strolled quietly away and the two guys unloaded their truck. Drove it back south and heaved the old pine boards in. Followed the winding bends again and unloaded. They carried the boards inside and stacked them neatly. All the way in back of the dark space. Then the employer stepped out of the shadows. He had been waiting for them. He had something in his hand.
“We’re all done,” the first guy said.
The employer nodded.
“You sure are,” he said.
His hand came up. He was holding a gun. A dull black automatic. He shot the first guy in the head. The crash of the bullet was deafening. Blood and bone and brain sprayed everywhere. The second guy froze in terror. Then he ran. He launched himself sideways in a desperate sprint for cover. The employer smiled. He liked it when they ran. He dropped his huge arm to a shallow angle. Fired and put a bullet through the back of the guy’s knee. Smiled again. Now it was better. He liked it when they ran, but he liked it better when they were squirming on the floor. He stood and listened to the guy’s yelping for a long moment. Then he strolled quietly over and took careful aim. Put a bullet through the other knee. He watched for a while, then he tired of the game. Shrugged and put a final bullet through the guy’s head. Then he laid the gun on the ground and rolled the two bodies over and over until they were stacked neatly in line with the old floorboards.

3

THEY HAD BEEN on the road an hour and thirty-three minutes. Some urban crawling, then an acceleration to a steady cruise. Maybe sixty miles covered. But in the noisy darkness inside the panel truck Reacher had no idea which direction those sixty miles were taking him.

He was handcuffed to the young woman with the bad leg and within the first few minutes of their forced acquaintance they had worked out how to get as comfortable as they were ever going to get. They had crabbed around inside the truck until they were sitting sideways on the floor, legs straight out, propped against the big wheel well on the right, braced against the motion. The woman sat against the rear side and Reacher sat on the forward side. Their cuffed wrists lay together on the flat top of the metal bulge like they were lovers idling their time away in a café.

At first, they hadn't spoken. They just sat for a long time in stunned silence. The immediate problem was the heat. It was the middle of the last day of June in the Midwest. They were shut into an enclosed metal space. There was no ventilation. Reacher figured the rush of air over the outside of the truck's body must be cooling it to an extent, but nowhere near enough.

He just sat there in the gloom and used the hot dead time thinking and planning like he was trained to do. Staying calm, staying relaxed, staying ready, not burning his energy away with useless speculation. Assessing and evaluating. The three guys had shown a measure of efficiency. No great talent, no real finesse, but no significant mistakes. The jumpy guy with the second Glock was the weakest component of the team, but the leader had covered for him pretty well. An efficient threesome. Not at all the worst he'd ever seen. But at that point, he wasn't worrying. He'd been in worse situations and survived them. Much worse situations, and more than once. So he wasn't worrying yet.

Then he noticed something. He noticed that the woman was not worrying yet, either. She was calm, too. She was just sitting there, swaying, cuffed to his wrist, thinking and planning like maybe she was trained to do, as well. He glanced across at her in the gloom and saw her looking steadily at him. A quizzical stare, calm, in control, faintly superior, faintly disapproving. The confidence of youth. She met his gaze. Held it for a long moment. Then she stuck out her cuffed right hand, which jarred his left wrist, but it was an encouraging gesture. He reached around and shook her hand and they smiled brief ironic smiles together at their mutual formality.

"Holly Johnson," she said

"Holly Johnson," she said.
She was assessing him carefully. He could see her eyes traveling around his face. Then they flicked down to his clothing, and back up to his face. She smiled again, briefly, like she had decided he merited some kind of courtesy.
"Nice to meet you," she said.
He looked back at her. Looked at her face. She was a very good-looking woman. Maybe twenty-six, twenty-seven. He looked at her clothes. A line from an old song ran through his head: hundred-dollar dresses, that I ain't paid for yet. He waited for the next line, but it didn't come. So he smiled back at her and nodded.
"Jack Reacher," he said. "Pleasure's all mine, Holly, believe me."
It was difficult to speak, because the truck was cruising noisily. The sound of the engine was fighting with the roar from the road. Reacher would have been happy to sit quiet for a time, but Holly wasn't.
"I need to get rid of you," she said.
A confident woman, well in control of herself. He made no reply. Just glanced at her and glanced away. The next line was: cold, cold-blooded woman. A dying fall, a sad poignant line. An old Memphis Slim song. But the line was not right for her. Not right at all. This was not a cold-blooded woman. He glanced over again and shrugged at her. She was staring at him. Impatient with his silence.
"You understand exactly what's happening?" she asked him.
He watched her face. Watched her eyes. She was staring straight at him. Astonishment on her face. She thought she was stuck in there with an idiot. She thought he didn't understand exactly what was happening.
"It's pretty clear, right?" he said. "From the evidence?"
"What evidence?" she said. "It was all over in a split second."
"Exactly," he said. "That's all the evidence I need, right? Tells me more or less what I need to know."
He stopped talking and started resting again. Next opportunity to get away would be the next time the truck stopped. Could be some hours away. He felt he could be in for a long day. Felt he should be prepared to conserve his resources.
"So what do you need to know?" the woman said.
Her eyes were steady on his.
"You've been kidnapped," he said. "I'm here by accident."
She was still looking at him. Still confident. Still thinking. Still not sure whether or not she was cuffed to an idiot.
"It's pretty clear, right?" he said again. "It wasn't me they were after."
She made no reply. Just arched a fine eyebrow.
"Nobody knew I was going to be there," he said. "I didn't even know I was going to be there. Until I got there. But it was a well-planned operation. Must have taken time to set up. Based on surveillance, right? Three guys, one in the

car, two on the street. The car was parked exactly level. They had no idea where I was going to be. But obviously they knew for sure where you were going to be. So don't be looking at me like I'm the idiot here. You're the one made the big mistake."
"Mistake?" the woman said.
"You're too regular in your habits," Reacher said. "They studied your movements, maybe two or three weeks, and you walked right into their arms. They weren't expecting anybody else to be there. That's clear, right? They only brought one set of handcuffs."
He raised his wrist, which raised hers too, to make his point. The woman went quiet for a long moment. She was revising her opinion of him. Reacher rocked with the motion of the vehicle and smiled.
"And you should know better," he said. "You're a government agent of some sort, right? DEA, CIA, FBI, something like that, maybe a Chicago PD detective? New in the job, still fairly dedicated. And fairly wealthy. So somebody is either looking for a ransom, or you've already become a potential problem to somebody, even though you're new, and either way you should have taken more care of yourself."
She looked across at him. Nodded, eyes wide in the gloom. Impressed.
"Evidence?" she asked.
He smiled at her again.
"Couple of things," he said. "Your dry cleaning? My guess is every Monday lunch break you take last week's clothes in to get them cleaned, and you pick up this week's clothes to wear. That means you must have about fifteen or twenty outfits. Looking at that thing you got on, you're not a cheap dresser. Call it four hundred bucks an outfit, you've got maybe eight grand tied up in things to wear. That's what I call moderately wealthy, and that's what I call too regular in your habits."
She nodded slowly.
"OK," she said. "Why am I a government agent?"
"Easy enough," he said. "You had a Glock 17 shoved at you, you were bundled into a car, you were thrown in a truck, handcuffed to a complete stranger and you've got no idea where the hell they're taking you, or why. Any normal person would be falling apart over all that, screaming the place down. But not you. You're sitting there quite calmly, which suggests some kind of training, maybe some kind of familiarity with upsetting or dangerous situations. And maybe some kind of sure knowledge there'll be a bunch of people looking to get you back soon as they can."
He stopped and she nodded for him to continue.

“Also, you had a gun in your bag,” he said. “Something fairly heavy, maybe a thirty-eight, long barrel. If it was a private weapon, a dresser like you would choose something dainty, like a snub twenty-two. But it was a big revolver, so you were issued with it. So you’re some kind of an agent, maybe a cop.”
The woman nodded again, slowly.
“Why am I new in the job?” she asked.
“Your age,” Reacher said. “What are you? Twenty-six?”
“Twenty-seven,” she said.
“That’s young for a detective,” he said. “College, a few years in uniform? Young for the FBI, DEA, CIA, too. So whatever you are, you’re new at it.”
She shrugged.
“OK,” she said. “Why am I fairly dedicated?”
Reacher pointed, left-handed, rattling their shared handcuff.
“Your injury,” he said. “You’re back to work after some kind of an accident, before you’re really recovered. You’re still using that crutch for your bad leg. Most people in your position would be staying home and drawing sick pay.”
She smiled.
“I could be handicapped,” she said. “Could have been born this way.”
Reacher shook his head in the gloom.
“That’s a hospital crutch,” he said. “They loaned it to you, short-term, until you’re over your injury. If it was a permanent thing, you’d have bought your own crutch. Probably you’d have bought a dozen. Sprayed them all different to match all your expensive outfits.”
She laughed. It was a pleasant sound above the drone and boom of the truck’s engine and the roar of the road.
“Pretty good, Jack Reacher,” she said. “I’m an FBI Special Agent. Since last fall. I just ripped up my cruciate ligaments playing soccer.”
“You play soccer?” Reacher said. “Good for you, Holly Johnson. What kind of an FBI agent since last fall?”
She was quiet for a beat.
“Just an agent,” she said. “One of many at the Chicago office.”
Reacher shook his head.
“Not just an agent,” he said. “An agent who’s doing something to somebody who maybe wants to retaliate. So who are you doing something to?”
She shook her head back at him.
“I can’t discuss that,” she said. “Not with civilians.”
He nodded. He was comfortable with that.
“OK,” he said.
“Any agent makes enemies,” she said.

“Naturally,” he replied.
“Me as much as anybody,” she said.
He glanced across at her. It was a curious remark. Defensive. The remark of a woman trained and eager and ready to go, but chained to a desk since last fall.
“Financial section?” he guessed.
She shook her head.
“I can’t discuss it,” she said again.
“But you already made enemies,” he said.
She gave him a half-smile which died fast. Then she went quiet. She looked calm, but Reacher could feel in her wrist that she was worried for the first time. But she was hanging in there. And she was wrong.
“They’re not out to kill you,” he said. “They could have killed you in that vacant lot. Why haul you away in this damn truck? And there’s your crutch, too.”
“What about my crutch?” she said.
“Doesn’t make any sense,” he said. “Why would they toss your crutch in here if they’re going to kill you? You’re a hostage, Holly, that’s what you are. You sure you don’t know these guys? Never saw them before?”
“Never,” she said. “I don’t know who the hell they are, or what the hell they want from me.”
He stared at her. She sounded way too definite. She knew more than she was telling him. They went quiet in the noise. Rocked and bounced with the movement of the truck. Reacher stared into the gloom. He could feel Holly making decisions, next to him. She turned sideways again.
“I need to get you out of here,” she said again.
He glanced at her. Glanced away and grinned.
“Suits me, Holly,” he said. “Sooner the better.”
“When will somebody miss you?” she asked.
That was a question he would have preferred not to answer. But she was looking hard at him, waiting. So he thought about it, and he told her the truth.
“Never,” he said.
“Why not?” she asked. “Who are you, Reacher?”
He looked across at her and shrugged.
“Nobody,” he said.
She kept on looking at him, quizzically. Maybe irritated.
“OK, what kind of nobody?” she asked.
He heard Memphis Slim in his head: got me working in a steel mill.
“I’m a doorman,” he said. “At a club in Chicago.”
“Which club?” she asked.
“A blues place on the South Side,” he said. “You probably don’t know it.”

She looked at him and shook her head.
“A doorman?” she said. “You’re playing this pretty cool for a doorman.”
“Doormen deal with a lot of weird situations,” he said.
She looked like she wasn’t convinced and he put his face down near his wristwatch to check the time. Two-thirty in the afternoon.
“And how long before somebody misses you?” he asked.
She looked at her own watch and made a face.
“Quite a while,” she said. “I’ve got a case conference starting at five o’clock this afternoon. Nothing before then. Two and a half hours before anybody even knows I’m gone.”

4

RIGHT INSIDE THE shell of the second-floor room, a second shell was taking shape. It was being built from brand-new softwood two-by-fours, nailed together in the conventional way, looking like a new room growing right there inside the old room. But the new room was going to be about a foot smaller in every dimension than the old room had been. A foot shorter in length, a foot narrower in width, and a foot shorter in height.

The new floor joists were going to be raised a foot off the old joists with twelve-inch lengths of the new softwood. The new lengths looked like a forest of short stilts, ready to hold the new floor up. More short lengths were ready to hold the new framing a foot away from the old framing all the way around the sides and the ends. The new framing had the bright yellowness of new wood. It gleamed against the smoky honey color of the old framing. The old framing looked like an ancient skeleton which was suddenly growing a new skeleton inside itself.

Three men were building the new shell. They were stepping from joist to joist with practiced skill. They looked like men who had built things before. And they were working fast. Their contract demanded they finish on time. The employer had been explicit about it. Some kind of a rush job. The three carpenters were not complaining about that. The employer had accepted their first bid. It had been an inflated bid, with a large horse-trading margin built in. But the guy had not eaten into that margin. He had not negotiated at all. He had just nodded and told them to start work as soon as the wrecking crew had finished. Work was hard to find, and employers who accepted your first price were even harder to find. So the three men were happy to work hard, and work fast, and work late. They were anxious to make a good first impression. Looking around, they could see the potential for plenty more employment.

So they were giving it their best shot. They ran up and down the stairs with tools and fresh lumber. They worked by eye, marking cut-lines in the wood with their thumb-nails, using their nail guns and their saws until they ran hot. But they paused frequently to measure the gap between the old framing and the new. The employer had made it clear that dimension was critical. The old framing was six inches deep. The new framing was four. The gap was twelve inches.

“Six and four and twelve,” one guy said. “Twenty-two inches total.”

“OK?” the second guy asked the crew chief.

“Ideal,” the crew chief said. “Exactly what he told us.”

5

HOLLY JOHNSON'S FIVE o'clock case conference was allocated to the Chicago FBI office's third-floor meeting room. This was a large room, better than forty feet by twenty, and it was more or less filled by a long polished table flanked by thirty chairs, fifteen on each side. The chairs were substantial and leather, and the table was made of fine hardwood, but any tendency for the place to look like a corporate boardroom was defused by the scruffy government wall covering and the cheap carpet. There were ninety square yards of carpet on the floor, and the whole ninety together had probably cost less than just one of the chairs.

Five o'clock in the summer, the afternoon sun streamed in through the wall of windows and gave the people arriving in the room a choice. If they sat facing the windows, they got the sun in their eyes and squinted through the meeting and ended up with a blinding headache. And the sun overpowered the air conditioning, so if they sat backs to the window, they got heated up to a point where it got uncomfortable and they started worrying about whether their deodorant was still OK at five o'clock in the afternoon. A tough choice, but the top option was to avoid the headache and take the risk of heating up. So the early attendees took the seats on the window side.

First into the room was the FBI lawyer with special responsibility for financial crime. He stood for a moment and made a judgment about the likely duration of the meeting. Maybe forty-five minutes, he thought, knowing Holly, so he turned and tried to assess which seat might get the benefit of the shade from the slim pillar splitting the wall of windows into two. The bar of shadow was lying to the left of the third chair in the row, and he knew it would inch toward the head of the table as time passed. So he spilled his pile of folders onto the table in front of the second chair and shrugged his jacket off and claimed the place by dropping it onto the chair. Then he turned again and strolled to the credenza at the end of the room for a cup of coffee from the filter machine.

Next in were two agents working on cases that might be tied into the mess that Holly Johnson was dealing with. They nodded to the lawyer and saw the place he'd claimed. They knew there was no point in choosing between the other fourteen chairs by the window. They were all going to get equally hot. So they just dumped their portfolios at the nearest two places and lined up for coffee.

"She not here yet?" one of them said to the lawyer.

"Haven't seen her all day," the lawyer said.

"Your loss, right?" the other guy said

"Your loss, right?" the other guy said.
Holly Johnson was a new agent, but talented, and that was making her popular. In the past, the Bureau would have taken no pleasure at all in busting the sort of businessmen that Holly was employed to chase down, but times had changed, and the Chicago office had gotten quite a taste for it. The businessmen now looked like scumbags, not solid citizens, and the agents were sick and tired of looking at them as they rode the commuter trains home. The agents would be getting off the train miles before the bankers and the stockbrokers were anywhere near their expensive suburbs. They would be thinking about second mortgages and even second jobs, and they'd be thinking about the years of private detective work they were going to have to put in to boost up the mean government pension. And the executives would be sitting there with smug smiles. So when one or two of them started to take a fall, the Bureau was happy enough about it. When the ones and twos turned into tens and twenties, and then hundreds, it became a blood sport.
The only drawback was that it was hard work. Probably more difficult to nail than anything else. That was where Holly Johnson's arrival had made things easier. She had the talent. She could look at a balance sheet and just know if anything was wrong with it. It was like she could smell it. She'd sit at her desk and look at the papers, and cock her head slightly to one side, and think. Sometimes, she'd think for hours, but when she stopped thinking, she'd know what the hell was going on. Then she'd explain it all in the case conference. She'd make it all sound easy and logical, like there was no way anybody could be in any kind of doubt about it. She was a woman who made progress. She was a woman who made her fellow agents feel better on those commuter trains at night. That's what was making her popular.
Fourth person into the third-floor meeting room was the agent assigned to help Holly out with the fetching and carrying until she recovered from her soccer injury. His name was Milosevic. A slight frame, a slight West Coast accent. Less than forty, casually dressed in expensive designer khaki, gold at his neck and on his wrist. He was also a new arrival, recently transferred in to the Chicago office, because that was where the Bureau found it needed its financial people. He joined the line for coffee and looked around the room.
"She's late?" he said.
The lawyer shrugged at him and Milosevic shrugged back. He liked Holly Johnson. He had worked with her five weeks, since the accident on the soccer field, and he had enjoyed every minute of it.
"She's not usually late for anything," he said.
Fifth person in was Brogan, Holly's section head. Irish, from Boston via California. The young side of middle age. Dark hair, red Irish face. A tough guy,

handsomely dressed in an expensive silk jacket, ambitious. He'd come to Chicago the same time as Milosevic, and he was pissed it wasn't New York. He was looking for the advancement he was sure he deserved. There was a theory that Holly's arrival in his section was enhancing his chances of getting it.
"She not here yet?" he said.
The other four shrugged at him.
"I'll kick her ass," Brogan said.
Holly had been a stock analyst on Wall Street before applying to join the FBI. Nobody was clear why she'd made the change. She had some kind of exalted connections, and some kind of an illustrious father, and the easy guess was she wanted to impress him somehow. Nobody knew for sure whether the old guy was impressed or not, but the feeling was he damn well ought to be. Holly had been one of ten thousand applicants in her year, and she'd passed in right at the top of the four hundred who made it. She'd creamed the recruitment criteria. The Bureau had been looking for college graduates in law or accountancy, or else graduates in flimsier disciplines who'd then worked somewhere for three years at least. Holly had qualified in every way. She had an accountancy degree from Yale, and a master's from Harvard, and three years on Wall Street on top of all that. She'd blitzed the intelligence tests and the aptitude assessments. She'd charmed the three serving agents who'd grilled her at her main interview. She'd sailed through the background checks, which was understandable on account of her connections, and she'd been sent to the FBI Academy at Quantico. Then she'd really started to get serious. She was fit and strong, she learned to shoot, she murdered the leadership reaction course, she scored outstanding in the simulated shoot-outs in Hogan's Alley. But her major success was her attitude. She did two things at once. First, she bought into the whole Bureau ethic in the biggest way possible. It was totally clear to everybody that here was a woman who was going to live and die for the FBI. But second, she did it in a way which avoided the slightest trace of bullshit. She tinged her attitude with a gentle mocking humor which saved people from hating her. It made them love her instead. There was no doubt the Bureau had signed a major new asset. They sent her to Chicago and sat back to reap the benefits.

LAST INTO THE third-floor conference room was a bunch of men who came in together. Thirteen agents and the Agent-in-Charge, McGrath. The thirteen agents were clustered around their boss, who was conducting a sort of rolling policy review as he walked. The thirteen agents were hanging on to every word. McGrath had every advantage in the book. He was a man who'd been to the top, and then come back down again into the field. He'd spent three years in the

Hoover Building as an Assistant Director of the FBI, and then he'd applied for a demotion and a pay cut to take him back to a Field Office. The decision had cost him ten thousand dollars a year in income, but it had bought him back his sanity, and it had bought him undying respect and blind affection from the agents he worked with.

An Agent-in-Charge in a Field Office like Chicago is like the captain on a great warship. Theoretically, there are people above him, but they're all a couple of thousand miles away in Washington. They're theoretical. The Agent-in-Charge is real. He runs his command like the hand of God. That's how the Chicago office looked at McGrath. He did nothing to undermine the feeling. He was remote, but he was approachable. He was private, but he made his people feel he'd do anything at all for them. He was a short, stocky man, burning with energy, the sort of tireless guy who radiates total confidence. The sort of guy who makes a crew better just by leading it. His first name was Paul, but he was always called Mack, like the truck.

He let his thirteen agents sit down, ten of them backs to the window and three of them with the sun in their eyes. Then he hauled a chair around and stuck it at the head of the table ready for Holly. He walked down to the other end and hauled another chair around for himself. Sat sideways on to the sun. Started getting worried.

"Where is she?" he said. "Brogan?"

The section head shrugged, palms up.

"She should be here, far as I know," he said.

"She leave a message with anybody?" McGrath asked. "Milosevic?"

Milosevic and the other fifteen agents and the Bureau lawyer all shrugged and shook their heads. McGrath started worrying more. People have a pattern, a rhythm, like a behavioral fingerprint. Holly was only a minute or two late, but that was so far from normal that it was setting the bells ringing. In eight months, he had never known her to be late. It had never happened. Other people could be five minutes late into the meeting room and it would seem normal. Because of their pattern. But not Holly. At three minutes past five in the afternoon, McGrath stared at her empty chair and knew there was a problem. He stood up again in the quiet room and walked to the credenza on the opposite wall. There was a phone next to the coffee machine. He picked it up and dialed his office.

"Holly Johnson call in?" he asked his secretary.

"No, Mack," she said.

So he dabbed the cradle and dialed the reception counter, two floors below.

"Any messages from Holly Johnson?" he asked the agent at the door.

"No, chief," the agent said. "Haven't seen her."

He hit the button again and called the main switchboard.
“Holly Johnson call in?” he asked.
“No, sir,” the switchboard operator said.
He held the phone and gestured for pen and paper. Then he spoke to the switchboard again.
“Give me her pager number,” he said. “And her cell phone, will you?”
The earpiece crackled and he scrawled down the numbers. Cut the switchboard off and dialed Holly’s pager. Just got a long low tone telling him the pager was switched off. Then he tried the cell phone number. He got an electronic bleep and a recorded message of a woman telling him the phone he was dialing was unreachable. He hung up and looked around the room. It was ten after five, Monday afternoon.

6

SIX-THIRTY ON REACHER'S watch, the motion inside the truck changed. Six hours and four minutes they'd cruised steadily, maybe fifty-five or sixty miles an hour, while the heat peaked and fell away. He'd sat, hot and rocking and bouncing in the dark with the wheel well between him and Holly Johnson, ticking off the distance against a map inside his head. He figured they'd been taken maybe three hundred and ninety miles. But he didn't know which direction they were headed. If they were going east, they would be right through Indiana and just about out of Ohio by now, maybe just entering Pennsylvania or West Virginia. South, they would be out of Illinois, into Missouri or Kentucky, maybe even into Tennessee if he'd underestimated their speed. West, they'd be hauling their way across Iowa. They might have looped around the bottom of the lake and headed north up through Michigan. Or straight out northwest, in which case they could be up near Minneapolis.

But they'd gotten somewhere, because the truck was slowing. Then there was a lurch to the right, like a pull off a highway. There was gear noise and thumping over broken pavement. Cornering forces slammed them around. Holly's crutch slid and rattled side to side across the ridged metal floor. The truck whined up grades and down slopes, paused at invisible road junctions, accelerated, braked hard, turned a tight left, and then drove slowly down a straight lumpy surface for a quarter hour.

"Farming country somewhere," Reacher said.

"Obviously," Holly said. "But where?"

Reacher just shrugged at her in the gloom. The truck slowed almost to a stop and turned a tight right. The road surface got worse. The truck bounced forward maybe a hundred and fifty yards and stopped. There was the sound of the passenger door opening up in front. The engine was still running. The passenger door slammed shut. Reacher heard a big door opening and the truck moved slowly forward. The engine noise boomed against metal walls. Reacher heard the door noise again and the engine noise echoed louder. Then it shut down and died away into stillness.

"We're in some sort of a barn," Reacher said. "With the door closed."

Holly nodded impatiently.

"I know that," she said. "A cow barn. I can smell it." Reacher could hear muffled conversation outside the truck. Footsteps walking around to the rear doors. A key going into the lock. The handle turning. A blinding flood of light as the door opened. Reacher blinked against the sudden electric brightness and

the door opened. Reacher blinked against the sudden electric brightness and stared out across Holly at three men, two Glocks and a shotgun.
“Out,” the leader said.
They struggled out, handcuffed together. Not easy. They were stiff and sore and cramped from bracing themselves against the wheel well for six solid hours. Holly’s knee had gone altogether. Reacher started back for her crutch.
“Leave it there, asshole,” the leader said.
The guy sounded tired and irritable. Reacher gave him a steady look and shrugged. Holly stiffened and tried her weight on her leg. Gasped in pain and gave it up. Glanced impersonally at Reacher like he was some kind of a tree and stretched around with her free left hand to hold on tight around his neck. It was the only way she could stay upright.
“Excuse me, please,” she muttered.
The leader gestured with his Glock over to his left. They were in a large cow barn. No cows, but they hadn’t been long absent, judging by the odor. The truck was parked in a wide central aisle. Either side were cow stalls, roomy, made up from galvanized steel piping efficiently welded together. Reacher twisted and held Holly’s waist and the two of them hopped and staggered over to the stall the guy with the Glock was pointing at. Holly seized a railing and held on, embarrassed.
“Excuse me,” she muttered again.
Reacher nodded and waited. The driver with the shotgun covered them and the leader walked away. He heaved the big door open and stepped through. Reacher caught a glimpse of darkening sky. Cloudy. No clue at all to their location.
The leader was gone five minutes. There was silence in the barn. The other two guys stood still, weapons out and ready. The jumpy guy with the Glock was staring at Reacher’s face. The driver with the shotgun was staring at Holly’s breasts. Smiling a half-smile. Nobody spoke. Then the leader stepped back in. He was carrying a second pair of handcuffs and two lengths of heavy chain.
“You’re making a big mistake here,” Holly said to him. “I’m an FBI agent.”
“I know that, bitch,” the guy said. “Now be quiet.”
“You’re committing a serious crime,” Holly said.
“I know that, bitch,” the guy said again. “And I told you to be quiet. Another word out of you, I’ll shoot this guy in the head. Then you can spend the night with a corpse chained to your wrist, OK?”
He waited until she nodded silently. Then the driver with the shotgun took up position behind them and the leader unlocked their cuff and freed their wrists. He looped one of the chains around the stall railing and locked the ends into the spare half of the cuff dangling from Reacher’s left arm. Pulled it and rattled it to check it was secure. Then he dragged Holly two stalls away and used the new

cuffs and the second length of chain to lock her to the railing, twenty feet from Reacher. Her knee gave way and she fell heavily with a gasp of pain onto the dirty straw. The leader ignored her. Just walked back to where Reacher was chained up. Stood right in front of him.
“So who the hell are you, asshole?” he said.
Reacher didn’t reply. He knew the keys to both cuffs were in this guy’s pocket. He knew it would take him about a second and a half to snap his neck with the loop of chain hanging off his wrist. But the other two guys were out of reach. One Glock, one shotgun, too far away to grab before he’d unlocked himself, too near to get a chance to do that. He was dealing with a reasonably efficient set of opponents. So he just shrugged and looked at the straw at his feet. It was clogged with dung.
“I asked you a damn question,” the guy said.
Reacher looked at him. In the corner of his eye, he saw the jumpy guy ratchet his Glock upward a degree or two.
“I asked you a question, asshole,” the leader said again, quietly.
The jumpy guy’s Glock was jutting forward. Then it was straight out, shoulder-high. Aimed right at Reacher’s head. The muzzle was trembling through a small jerky circle, but probably not trembling enough to make the guy miss. Not from that sort of a close distance. Reacher looked from one guy to the other. The guy with the shotgun tore his attention away from Holly’s breasts. He raised the weapon to his hip. Pointed it in Reacher’s direction. It was an Ithaca 37. Twelve-bore. The five-shot version with the pistol grip and no shoulder stock. The guy racked a round into the chamber. The crunch-crunch of the mechanism was loud in the barn. It echoed off the metal walls. Died into silence. Reacher saw the trigger move through the first eighth-inch of its short travel.
“Name?” the leader asked.
The shotgun trigger tightened another eighth. If it fired on that trajectory, Reacher was going to lose both his legs and most of his stomach.
“Name?” the leader asked for the second time.
It was a twelve-bore, wouldn’t kill him outright, but he’d bleed to death in the dirty straw. Femoral artery gone, about a minute, maybe a minute and a half. In those circumstances, no real reason to make a big deal out of giving this guy a name.
“Jack Reacher,” he said.
The leader nodded in satisfaction, like he’d achieved a victory.
“You know this bitch?” he asked.
Reacher glanced across at Holly.
“Better than I know some people,” he said. “I just spent six hours handcuffed to

her."
"You some kind of a wise guy, asshole?" the leader asked.
Reacher shook his head.
"Innocent passerby," he said. "I never saw her before."
"You with the Bureau?" the guy asked.
Reacher shook his head again.
"I'm a doorman," he said. "Club back in Chicago."
"You sure, asshole?" the guy said.
Reacher nodded.
"I'm sure," he said. "I'm a wise enough guy that I can recall what I do for a living, one day to the next."
There was silence for a long moment. Tension. Then the jumpy guy with the Glock came out of his shooting stance. The driver with the shotgun swung his weapon down toward the straw on the floor. He turned his head and went back to staring at Holly's breasts. The leader nodded at Reacher.
"OK, asshole," he said. "You behave yourself, you stay alive for now. Same for the bitch. Nothing's going to happen to anybody. Not just yet."
The three men regrouped in the center aisle and walked out of the barn. Before they locked the door, Reacher saw the sky again, briefly. Darker. Still cloudy. No stars. No clues. He tested the chain. It was securely fastened to the handcuff at one end and the railing at the other. Maybe seven feet long. He could hear Holly doing the same experiment. Tightening her chain and scoping out the radius it gave her to move through.
"Would you mind looking away?" she called across.
"Why?" he called back.
There was a short silence. Then a sigh. Part embarrassed, part exasperated.
"Do you really need to ask?" she called. "We were in that truck six hours, and it didn't have a bathroom, did it?"
"You going in the next stall?" he asked.
"Obviously," she said.
"OK," he said. "You go right and I'll go left. I won't look if you won't."

THE THREE MEN came back to the barn within an hour with food. Some kind of a beef stew in a metal messtin, one for each of them. Mostly rare steak chunks and a lot of hard carrots. Whoever these guys were, cooking was not their major talent. Reacher was clear on that. They handed out an enamel mug of weak coffee, one for each of them. Then they got in the truck. Started it up and backed it out of the barn. Turned the bright lights off. Reacher caught a glimpse of dim emptiness outside. Then they pulled the big door shut and locked it. Left their

prisoners in the dark and the quiet.
“Gas station,” Holly called from twenty feet away. “They’re filling up for the rest of the ride. Can’t do it with us inside. They figure we’d be banging on the side and shouting out for help.”
Reacher nodded and finished his coffee. Sucked the fork from the stew clean. Bent one of the prongs right out and put a little kink into the end with pressure from his thumb-nail. It made a little hook. He used it to pick the lock on his handcuff. Took him eighteen seconds, beginning to end. He dropped the cuff and the chain in the straw and walked over to Holly. Bent down and unlocked her wrist. Twelve seconds. Helped her to her feet.
“Doorman, right?” she said.
“Right,” he said. “Let’s take a look around.”
“I can’t walk,” she said. “My crutch is in the damn truck.”
Reacher nodded. She stayed in her stall, clinging to the railing. He scouted around the big empty barn. It was a sturdy metal structure, built throughout with the same flecked galvanized metal as the stall railings. The big door was locked from the outside. Probably a steel bar padlocked into place. No problem if he could get at the padlock, but he was inside and the padlock was outside.
The walls met the floor with a right-angle flange bolted firmly into the concrete. The walls themselves were horizontal metal panels maybe thirty feet long, maybe four feet tall. They were joined together with more right-angle flanges bolted together. Each flange gave a lip about six inches deep. Like a giant stepladder, with the treads four feet apart.
He climbed the wall, hauling himself quickly upward, flange to flange, four feet at a time. The way out of the barn was right there at the top of the wall, seven sections up, twenty-eight feet off the ground. There was a ventilation slot between the top of the wall and the overhanging slope of the metal roof. About eighteen inches high. A person could roll horizontally through the gap like an old-fashioned high jumper, hang down outside and drop twenty feet to the ground below.
He could do that, but Holly Johnson couldn’t. She couldn’t even walk over to the wall. She couldn’t climb it and she sure as hell couldn’t hang down outside and drop twenty feet onto a set of wrecked cruciate ligaments.
“Get going,” she called up to him. “Get out of here, right now.”
He ignored her and peered out through the slot into the darkness. The overhanging eaves gave him a low horizon. Empty country as far as the eye could see. He climbed down and went up the other three walls in turn. The second side gave out onto country just as empty as the first. The third had a view of a farmhouse. White shingles. Lights in two windows. The fourth side of the

barn looked straight up the farm track. About a hundred and fifty yards to a featureless road. Emptiness beyond. In the far distance, a single set of headlight beams. Flicking and bouncing. Widely spaced. Growing larger. Getting nearer. The truck, coming back.

"Can you see where we are?" Holly called up to him.

"No idea," Reacher called back. "Farming country somewhere. Could be anywhere. Where do they have cows like this? And fields and stuff?"

"Is it hilly out there?" Holly called. "Or flat?"

"Can't tell," Reacher said. "Too dark. Maybe a little hilly."

"Could be Pennsylvania," Holly said. "They have hills and cows there."

Reacher climbed down the fourth wall and walked back to her stall.

"Get out of here, for Christ's sake," she said to him. "Raise the alarm."

He shook his head. He heard the diesel slowing to turn into the track.

"That may not be the best option," he said.

She stared at him.

"Who the hell gave you an option?" she said. "I'm ordering you. You're a civilian and I'm FBI and I'm ordering you to get yourself to safety right now."

Reacher just shrugged and stood there.

"I'm ordering you, OK?" Holly said again. "You going to obey me?"

Reacher shook his head again.

"No," he said.

She glared at him. Then the truck was back. They heard the roar of the diesel and the groan of the springs on the rough track outside. Reacher locked Holly's cuff and ran back to his stall. They heard the truck door slam and footsteps on the concrete. Reacher chained his wrist to the railing and bent the fork back into shape. When the barn door opened and the light came on, he was sitting quietly on the straw.

7

THE MATERIAL USED to pack the twenty-two-inch cavity between the outside of the old walls and the inside of the new walls was hauled over from its storage shed in an open pickup truck. There was a ton of it, and it took four trips. Each consignment was carefully unloaded by a team of eight volunteers. They worked together like an old-fashioned bucket brigade attending a fire. They passed each box along, hand to hand, into the building, up the stairs to the second floor. The boxes were stacked in the hallway outside the modified corner room. The three builders opened each box in turn and carried the material into the room. Then they stacked it carefully into the wide spaces behind the new softwood framing. The unloaders generally paused for a moment and watched them, grateful for a moment of rest.

The process lasted most of the afternoon, because of the amount of material and the care they took in moving it. When the last of the four loads was stacked upstairs, the eight volunteers dispersed. Seven of them headed for the mess hall. The eighth stretched in the last of the afternoon sun and strolled off. It was his habit. Four or five times a week, he would take a long walk on his own, especially after a period of heavy work. It was assumed to be his way of relaxing.

He strolled in the forest. There was a beaten path running west through the silence. He followed it for a half-mile. Then he paused and stretched again. He used the weary twisting motion of a tired man easing a sore back to glance around a complete circle. Then he stepped sideways off the path. Stopped strolling. Started an urgent walk. He dodged trees and followed a wide looping course west, then north. He went straight for a particular tree. There was a large flat rock bedded in needles at its base. He stood still and waited. Listened hard. Then he ducked down and heaved the rock to one side. Underneath was a rectangular shape wrapped in oilcloth. He unfolded the cloth and took out a small handheld radio. Pulled the stubby antenna and hit a button and waited. Then he whispered a long and excited message.

WHEN THE OLD building was quiet again, the employer stopped by with some strange new instructions. The three builders asked no questions. Just listened carefully. The guy was entitled to get what he wanted. The new instructions meant a certain amount of work would have to be redone. In the circumstances, not a problem. Even less of a problem when the employer offered a cash bonus on top of the bid price.

on top of the bid price.
The three builders worked fast and it took them less time than it might have. But it was already evening by the time they finished. The junior man stayed behind to pack tools and coil cables. The crew chief and the other guy drove north in the dark and parked exactly where the employer had told them to. Got out of their truck and waited in the silence.
“In here,” a voice called. The employer. “All the way in back.”
They went in. The place was dark. The guy was waiting for them, somewhere in the shadows.
“These boards any use to you?” the employer asked.
There was a stack of old pine boards, way in back.
“They’re good lumber,” the employer said. “Maybe you can use them. Like recycling, you know?”
There was something else on the ground beside the stack of boards. Something strange. The two carpenters stared. Strange humped shapes. The two carpenters stared at the strange humped shapes, then they stared at each other. Then they turned around. The employer smiled at them and raised a dull black automatic.

THE RESIDENT AGENT at the FBI’s remote satellite station was a smart enough guy to realize it was going to be important. He didn’t know exactly how or why it was going to be important, but an undercover informant doesn’t risk a radio message from a concealed location for no reason. So he copied the details into the FBI computer system. His report flashed across the computer network and lodged in the massive mainframe on the first floor of the FBI’s Hoover Building in Washington, D.C. The Hoover Building database handles more new reports in a day than there are seconds, so it took a long moment for the FBI software to scan through and pick out the key words. Once it had done so, it lodged the bulletin high in its memory and waited.
At exactly the same time, the system was logging a message from the FBI Field Office in Chicago. The bureau chief up there, Agent-in-Charge McGrath, was reporting that he’d lost one of his people. Special Agent Holly Johnson was missing, last seen twelve o’clock Chicago time, whereabouts currently unknown, contact attempted but not achieved. And because Holly Johnson was a pretty special case, the message carried an eyes-only code which kept it off every terminal in the building except the one all the way upstairs in the Director’s office.

THE DIRECTOR OF the FBI got out of a budget review meeting just before seven-thirty in the evening. He walked back to his office suite and checked his messages. His name was Harland Webster and he had been with the Bureau

thirty-six years. He had one more year to run on his term as Director, and then he'd be gone. So he wasn't looking for trouble, but he found it glowing on the monitor of his desktop terminal. He clicked on the report and read it through twice. He sighed at the screen.
"Shit," he said. "Shit, shit, shit."
The report in from McGrath in Chicago was not the worst news Webster had ever had in thirty-six years, but it came pretty damn close. He buzzed the intercom on his desk and his secretary answered.
"Get me McGrath in Chicago," he said.
"He's on line one," his secretary told him. "He's been waiting for you."
Webster grunted and hit the button for line one. Put the call on the speakerphone and leaned back in his chair.
"Mack?" he said. "So what's the story?"
McGrath's voice came in clear from Chicago.
"Hello, chief," he said. "There is no story. Not yet. Maybe we're worrying too early, but I got a bad feeling when she didn't show. You know how it is."
"Sure, Mack," Webster said. "You want to confuse me with some facts?"
"We don't have any facts," McGrath said. "She didn't show for a five o'clock case conference. That struck me as unusual. There were no messages from her anywhere. Her pager and her cell phone are out of commission. I asked around and the last anybody saw of her was about twelve o'clock."
"She was in the office this morning?" Webster asked.
"All morning," McGrath said.
"Any appointments before this five o'clock thing?" Webster said.
"Nothing in her diary," McGrath said. "I don't know what she was doing or where she was doing it."
"Christ, Mack," Webster said. "You were supposed to take care of her. You were supposed to keep her off the damn streets, right?"
"It was her lunch break," McGrath said. "What the hell could I do?"
There was a silence in the Director's suite, broken only by the faint hum on the speakerphone. Webster drummed his fingers on his desk.
"What was she working on?" he asked.
"Forget it," McGrath said. "We can assume this is not interference by a Bureau suspect, right? Doesn't make any kind of sense in her case."
Webster nodded to himself.
"In her case, I agree, I guess," he said. "So what else are we looking at?"
"She was injured," McGrath said. "Tore up her knee playing ball. We figure maybe she fell, made it worse, maybe ended up in the ER. We're checking the hospitals now."

Webster grunted.
“Or else there’s a boyfriend we don’t know about,” McGrath said. “Maybe they’re in a motel room somewhere, getting laid.”
“For six hours?” Webster said. “I should be so lucky.”
There was silence again. Then Webster sat forward.
“OK, Mack,” he said. “You know what to do. And you know what not to do, case like hers, right? Keep in touch. I’ve got to go to the Pentagon. I’ll be back in an hour. Call me then if you need me.”
Webster broke the connection and buzzed his secretary to call his car. Then he walked out to his private elevator and rode down to the underground parking lot. His driver met him there and they walked together over to the Director’s bulletproof limousine.
“Pentagon,” Webster said to his driver.

TRAFFIC WASN’T BAD, seven-thirty on a June Monday evening. Took about eleven minutes to do the two and a half miles. Webster spent the time making urgent calls on his mobile. Calls to various locations within such a tight geographical radius that he could probably have reached them all by shouting. Then the big car came up to the Pentagon River Entrance and the Marine sentry stepped over. Webster clicked off his phone and buzzed his window down for the identification ritual.
“The Director of the FBI,” he said. “To see the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.”
The sentry snapped a salute and waved the limousine through. Webster buzzed the window back up and waited for the driver to stop. Then he got out and ducked in through the personnel door. Walked through to the Chairman’s suite. The Chairman’s secretary was waiting for him.
“Go right through, sir,” she said. “The General will be along in a moment.”
Webster walked into the Chairman’s office and stood waiting. He looked out through the window. The view was magnificent, but it had a strange metallic tint. The window was made of one-way bulletproof Mylar. It was a great view, but the window was on the outside of the building, right next to the River Entrance, so it had to be protected. Webster could see his car, with his driver waiting beside it. Beyond the car was a view of the Capitol, across the Potomac. Webster could see sailboats in the Tidal Basin, with the last of the evening sun glinting low on the water. Not a bad office, Webster thought. Better than mine, he thought.
Meeting with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was a problem for the Director of the FBI. It was one of those Beltway oddities, a meeting where there

was no cast-iron ranking. Who was superior? Both were presidential appointees. Both reported to the President through just one intermediary, the Defense Secretary or the Attorney General. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was the highest-ranking military post that the nation had to offer. The Director of the FBI was the highest-ranking law enforcement post. Both men were at the absolute top of their respective greasy poles. But which greasy pole was taller? It was a problem for Webster. In the end, it was a problem for him because the truth was his pole was shorter. He controlled a budget of two billion dollars and about twenty-five thousand people. The Chairman oversaw a budget of two hundred billion and about a million people. Two million, if you added in the National Guard and the Reserves. The Chairman was in the Oval Office about once a week. Webster got there twice a year, if he was lucky. No wonder this guy's office was better.

The Chairman himself was impressive, too. He was a four-star general whose rise had been spectacular. He had come from nowhere and blitzed upward through the Army just about faster than his tailor could sew the ribbons on his uniform. The guy had ended up lopsided with medals. Then he had been hijacked by Washington and moved in and made the place his own, like it was some military objective. Webster heard his arrival in the anteroom and turned to greet him as he came into the office.

"Hello, General," he said.

The Chairman sketched a busy wave and grinned.

"You want to buy some missiles?" he said.

Webster was surprised.

"You're selling them?" he said. "What missiles?"

The Chairman shook his head and smiled.

"Just kidding," he said. "Arms limitation. Russians have gotten rid of a bomber base in Siberia, so now we've got to get rid of the missiles we assigned against it. Treaty compliance, right? Got to play fair. The big stuff, we're selling to Israel. But we've still got about a couple hundred little ones, you know, Stingers, shoulder-launch surface-to-air things. All surplus. Sometimes I think we should sell them to the dope dealers. God knows they've got everything else they want. Better weapons than we've got, most of them."

The Chairman talked his way around to his chair and sat down. Webster nodded. He'd seen Presidents do a similar thing, tell a joke, tell a lighthearted story, man to man, get the ice broken, make the meeting work. The Chairman leaned back and smiled.

"So what can I do for you, Director?" he asked.

"We got a report in from Chicago," Webster said. "Your daughter is missing."

8

BY MIDNIGHT IN Chicago, the third-floor conference room was set up as a command center. FBI technicians had swarmed all evening, running phone lines into the room and installing computer terminals in a line down the center of the hardwood table. Now at midnight it was dark and cool and quiet. Shiny blackness outside the wall of glass. No scramble to decide which side of the table was better.

Nobody had gone home. There were seventeen agents sprawled in the leather chairs. Even the Bureau lawyer was still there. No real reason for that, but the guy was feeling the same triple-layered response they all were. The Bureau looks after its own. That was layer number one. The Chicago Field Office looks after Holly Johnson. That was layer number two. Not just because of her connections. That had nothing to do with it. Holly was Holly. And if layer number three was what McGrath wanted, McGrath got. If McGrath was worried about Holly, then they all were worried, and they all were going to stay worried until she was found, safe and sound. So they were all still there. Quiet, and worried. Until McGrath came loudly and cheerfully into the room, making a big entrance, smoking like his life depended on it.

“Good news, people, listen up, listen up,” he called out.

He dodged his way through to the head of the table. Murmuring died into sudden silence. Eighteen pairs of eyes followed him.

“We found her,” he called out. “We found her, OK? She’s safe and well. Panic’s over, folks. We can all relax now.”

Eighteen voices started talking all at once. All asking the same urgent questions. McGrath held his hands up for quiet, like a nominee at a rally.

“She’s in the hospital,” he said. “What happened is her surgeon got a window for this afternoon he wasn’t expecting. He called her, she went right over, they took her straight to the OR. She’s fine, she’s convalescing, and she’s embarrassed as all hell for the fuss she’s caused.”

The eighteen voices started up again, and McGrath let them rumble on for a moment. Then he held his hands up again.

“So, panic over, right?” he called out again, smiling.

The rumbling got lighter in tone as relief fueled the voices.

“So, people, home to bed,” McGrath said. “Full working day tomorrow, right? But thanks for being here. From me, and from Holly. Means a lot to her. Brogan and Milosevic, you stay awhile, share out her workload for the rest of the week. The rest of you, goodnight, sleep well, and thanks again, gentlemen.”

The rest of you, goodnight, sleep well, and thanks again, gentlemen.”
Fifteen agents and the lawyer smiled and yawned and stood up. Jostled cheerfully and noisily out of the room. McGrath and Brogan and Milosevic were left scattered in random seats, far from each other. McGrath walked over in the sudden silence to the door. Closed it quietly. Turned back and faced the other two.
“That was all bullshit,” he said. “As I’m sure you both guessed.”
Brogan and Milosevic just stared at him.
“Webster called me,” McGrath said. “And I’m sure you can both guess why. Major, major D.C. involvement. They’re going apeshit down there. VIP kidnap, right? Webster’s been given personal responsibility. He wants total secrecy and minimum numbers. He wants everybody up here off this case right now except me plus a team of two. My choice. I picked the two of you, because you know her best. So it’s the three of us. We deal direct with Webster, and we don’t talk to anybody else at all, OK?”
Brogan stared at him and nodded. Milosevic nodded in turn. They knew they were the obvious choices for the job. But to be chosen by McGrath for any reason was an honor. They knew it, and they knew McGrath knew they knew it. So they nodded again, more firmly. Then there was silence for a long moment. McGrath’s cigarette smoke mingled with the silence up near the ceiling. The clock on the wall ticked around toward half past midnight.
“OK,” Brogan said finally. “So what now?”
“We work all night, is what,” McGrath said. “All day, all night, every day, every night, until we find her.”
He glanced at the two of them. Reviewed his choices. An adequate team, he thought. A good mixture. Brogan was older, drier, a pessimist. A compact man with a tidy, ordered approach, laced with enough imagination to make him useful. An untidy private life, with a girlfriend and a couple of ex-wives somewhere, all costing him big bucks and worry, but it never interfered with his work. Milosevic was younger, less intuitive, flashier, but solid. A permanent sidekick, which was not necessarily a fault. A weakness for big expensive four-wheel-drives, but everybody needs some kind of a hobby. Both of them were medium-term Bureau veterans, with mileage on their clocks and scalps on their belts. Both of them were focused, and neither of them ever bitched about the work or the hours. Or the salary, which made them just about unique. An adequate team. They were new to Chicago, but this investigation was not going to stay in Chicago. McGrath was just about sure of that.
“Milo, you figure out her movements,” he said. “Every step, every minute from twelve noon.”
Milosevic nodded vaguely, like he was already lost in doing that.

“Brogan, background checks,” McGrath said. “We need to find some reason here.”
Brogan nodded dourly, like he knew the reason was going to be the beginning and the end of the whole thing.
“I start with the old guy?” he asked.
“Obviously,” McGrath said. “That’s what I would do.”
“OK, which one?” Brogan asked.
“Whichever one,” McGrath replied. “Your choice.”

SEVENTEEN HUNDRED AND two miles away, another executive decision had been taken. A decision about the third carpenter. The employer drove back to the white building in the crew chief’s pickup. The third carpenter had finished up stacking the tools and he took a step forward when he saw the vehicle approaching. Then he stopped in puzzlement when he saw the huge figure at the wheel. He stood, uncertain, while the employer pulled up at the curb and heaved himself out.
“OK?” the employer said to him.
“Where are the guys?” the carpenter asked.
“Something came up,” the employer said.
“Problem?” the guy asked.
He went quiet, because he was thinking about his share of the price. A minority share, for sure, because he was the junior guy, but a minority share of that price was still more cash than he’d seen in a long time.
“You got a saw there?” the employer asked.
The guy just looked at him.
“Dumb question, right?” the employer said. “You’re a carpenter and I’m asking you if you got a saw? Just show me your best saw.”
The guy stood still for a moment, then he ducked down and pulled a power saw from the stack of tools. A big thing in dull metal, wicked circular blade, fresh sawdust caked all around it.
“Crosscut?” the employer asked. “Good for ripping through real tough stuff?”
The guy nodded.
“It does the job,” he said, cautiously.
“OK, here’s the deal,” the employer said. “We need a demonstration.”
“Of the saw?” the guy asked.
“Of the room,” the employer said.
“The room?” the guy repeated.
“Supposed to be nobody can get out of it,” the employer said. “That’s the idea behind it, right?”

“You designed it,” the guy said.
“But did you build it right?” the employer said. “That’s what I’m asking here. We need a trial run. A demonstration to prove it serves its purpose.”
“OK, how?” the guy asked.
“You go in there,” the employer said. “See if you can get out by morning. You built it, right? So you know all the weak spots. If anybody can get out, you can, that’s for damn sure, right?”
The guy was quiet for a long moment. Trying to understand.
“And if I can?” he asked.
The employer shrugged.
“Then you don’t get paid,” he said. “Because you didn’t build it right.”
The guy went quiet again. Wondering if the employer was joking.
“You spot the flaw in my logic?” the employer asked. “The way you’re figuring it right now, it’s in your interest just to sit there on your ass all night, then tomorrow you say to me no sir, I couldn’t get out of there, no sir, not at all.”
The carpenter laughed a short nervous laugh.
“That’s how I was thinking,” he said.
“So what you need is an incentive,” the employer said. “Understand? To make sure you try real hard to get out.”
The carpenter glanced up at the blanked-off second-story corner. When he glanced back down, there was a dull black automatic in the employer’s hand.
“There’s a sack in the truck,” the employer said. “Go get it, OK?”
The carpenter just looked around, astonished. The employer pointed the gun at his head.
“Get the sack,” he said quietly.
There was nothing in the pickup bed. There was a burlap sack on the passenger seat. Wrapped into a package maybe a foot and a half long. It was heavy. Felt like reaching into a freezer at the market and pulling out a side of pig.
“Open it up,” the employer called. “Take a look.”
The carpenter peeled back the burlap. First thing he saw was a finger. Icy white, because the blood had drained. Yellow workman’s calluses standing out, big and obvious.
“I’m going to put you in the room now,” the employer called to him. “You don’t get out by morning, I’m going to do that to you, OK? With your own damn saw, because mine went dull doing those.”

9

REACHER LAY QUIETLY on the dirty straw in his stall in the cow barn. Not asleep, but his body was shut down to the point where he might as well have been. Every muscle was relaxed and his breathing was slow and even. His eyes were closed because the barn was dark and there was nothing to see. But his mind was wide awake. Not racing, but just powering steadily along with that special nighttime intensity you get in the absence of any other distractions.

He was doing two things at once. First, he was keeping track of time. It was nearly two hours since he had last looked at his watch, but he knew what time it was to within about twenty seconds. It was an old skill, born of many long wakeful nights on active service. When you're waiting for something to happen, you close your body down like a beach house in winter and you let your mind lock onto the steady pace of the passing seconds. It's like suspended animation. It saves energy and it lifts the responsibility for your heartbeat away from your unconscious brain and passes it on to some kind of a hidden clock. Makes a huge black space for thinking in. But it keeps you just awake enough to be ready for whatever you need to be ready for. And it means you always know what time it is.

The second simultaneous thing Reacher was doing was playing around with a little mental arithmetic. He was multiplying big numbers in his head. He was thirty-seven years and eight months old, just about to the day. Thirty-seven multiplied by three hundred and sixty-five was thirteen thousand five hundred and five. Plus twelve days for twelve leap years was thirteen thousand five hundred and seventeen. Eight months counting from his birthday in October forward to this date in June was two hundred and forty-three days. Total of thirteen thousand seven hundred and sixty days since he was born. Thirteen thousand seven hundred and sixty days, thirteen thousand seven hundred and sixty nights. He was trying to place this particular night somewhere on that endless scale. In terms of how bad it was.

Truth was, it wasn't the best night he had ever passed, but it was a long way from being the worst. A very long way. The first four or so years of his life, he couldn't remember anything at all, which left about twelve thousand three hundred nights to account for. Probability was, this particular night was up there in the top third. Without even trying hard, he could have reeled off thousands of nights worse than this one. Tonight, he was warm, comfortable, uninjured, not under any immediate threat, and he'd been fed. Not well, but he felt that came from a lack of skill rather than from active malice. So physically he had no

from a lack of skill rather than from active malice. So physically he had no complaints.
Mentally, it was a different story. He was suspended in a vacuum just as impenetrable as the darkness inside the cow barn. The problem was the total lack of information. He was not a guy who necessarily felt uncomfortable with some lack of information. He was the son of a Marine officer and he had lived the military life literally all the way since birth. Therefore confusion and unpredictability were what he was accustomed to. But tonight, there was just too much missing.
He didn't know where he was. Whether by accident or by design, the three kidnappers had given him absolutely no clue at all where they were headed. It made him feel adrift. His particular problem was, living the military life from birth, out of those thirteen thousand seven hundred and sixty days of his life, he'd spent probably much less than a fifth of them actually inside the United States. He was as American as the President, but he'd lived and served all over the world most of his life. Outside the United States. It had left him knowing his own country about as well as the average seven-year-old knows it. So he couldn't decode the subtle rhythms and feel and smells of America as well as he wanted to. It was possible that somebody else could interpret the unseen contours of the invisible landscape or the feel of the air or the temperature of the night and say yes, I'm in this state now or that state now. It was possible people could do that. But Reacher couldn't. It gave him a problem.
Added to that he had no idea who the kidnappers were. Or what their business was. Or what their intentions were. He'd studied them closely, every opportunity he'd had. Conclusions were difficult. The evidence was all contradictory. Three of them, youngish, maybe somewhere between thirty and thirty-five, fit, trained to act together with a measure of efficiency. They were almost military, but not quite. They were organized, but not official. Their appearance shrieked: amateurs.
Because they were so neat. They all had new clothes, plain chain store cottons and poplins, fresh haircuts. Their weapons were fresh out of the box. The Glocks were brand-new. The shotgun was brand-new, packing grease still visible. Those factors meant they weren't any kind of professionals. Because professionals do this stuff every day. Whoever they are, Special Forces, CIA, FBI, detectives, it's their job. They wear working clothes. They use weapons they signed out last year, the year before, tried and trusted weapons, chipped weapons, scratched weapons, working tools. Put three professionals together on any one day, and you'll see last night's pizza on one guy's shirt, another guy won't have shaved, the third guy will be wearing the awful old pants his buddies make jokes about behind his back. It's possible you'll see a new jacket once in a while, or a fresh

gun, or new shoes, but the chances of seeing everything new all at once on three working professionals on the same day are so slim as to be absurd.
And their attitude betrayed them. Competent, but jumpy, uptight, hostile, rude, tense. Trained to some degree, but not practiced. Not experienced. They'd rehearsed the theory, and they were smart enough to avoid any gross errors, but they didn't have the habituation of professionals. Therefore these three were some kind of amateurs. And they had kidnapped a brand-new FBI agent. Why? What the hell could a brand-new FBI agent have done to anybody? Reacher had no idea. And the brand-new FBI agent in question wasn't saying. Just another component he couldn't begin to figure. But not the biggest component. The biggest component he couldn't begin to figure was why the hell he was still there.
He had no problem with how he had gotten grabbed up in the first place. Just a freak of chance had put him alongside Holly Johnson at the exact time the snatch was going down. He was comfortable with that. He understood freak chances. Life was built out of freak chances, however much people would like to pretend otherwise. And he never wasted time speculating about how things might have been different, if this and if that. Obviously if he'd been strolling on that particular Chicago street a minute earlier or a minute later, he'd have been right past that dry cleaner and never known a damn thing about all this. But he hadn't been strolling a minute earlier or a minute later, and the freak chance had happened, and he wasn't about to waste his time wondering where he would be now if it hadn't.
But what he did need to pin down was why he was still there, just over fourteen hours later, according to the clock inside his head. He'd had two marginal chances and one cast-iron certainty of getting out. Right away, on the street, he could have made it. Probably. The possibility of collateral damage had stopped him. Then in the abandoned lot, getting into the white truck, he might have made it. Probably. Three against one, both times, but they were three amateurs against Jack Reacher, and he felt comfortable enough about those odds.
The cast-iron certainty was he could have been out of the cow barn, say an hour after the three guys returned from the gas station with the truck. He could have slipped the cuff again, climbed the wall and dropped down into the barnyard and been away. Just jogged over to the road and walked away and disappeared. Why hadn't he done that?
He lay there in the huge inky blackness of relaxation and realized it was Holly that was keeping him there. He hadn't bailed out because he couldn't take the risk. The three guys could have panicked and wasted her and run. Reacher didn't want that to happen. Holly was a smart, spirited woman. Sharp, impatient,

confident, tough as hell. Attractive, in a shy, unforced sort of a way. Dark, slim, a lot of intelligence and energy. Great eyes. Eyes were Reacher's thing. He was lost in a pair of pretty eyes.

But it wasn't her eyes that were doing it to him. Not her looks. Or her intelligence or her personality. It was her knee. That's what was doing it to him. Her guts and her dignity. The sight of a good-looking spirited woman cheerfully fighting an unaccustomed disability seemed like a brave and noble thing to Reacher. It made her his type of person. She was coping with it. She was doing it well. She wasn't complaining. She wasn't asking for his help. And because she wasn't asking for it, she was going to get it.

10

FIVE-THIRTY TUESDAY MORNING FBI Special Agent Brogan was alone in the third-floor meeting room, using one of the newly installed phone lines for an early call to his girlfriend. Five-thirty in the morning is not the best time to deliver an apology for a broken date from the night before, but Brogan had been very busy, and he anticipated being busier still. So he made the call. He woke her and told her he had been tied up, and probably would be for the rest of the week. She was sleepy and annoyed, and made him repeat it all twice. Then she chose to interpret the message as a cowardly prelude to some kind of a brush-off. Brogan got annoyed in turn. He told her the Bureau had to come first. Surely she understood that? It was not the best point to be making to a sleepy annoyed woman at five-thirty in the morning. They had a short row and Brogan hung up, depressed.

His partner Milosevic was alone in his own office cubicle. Slumped in his chair, also depressed. His problem was a lack of imagination. It was his biggest weakness. McGrath had told him to trace Holly Johnson's every move from noon yesterday. But he hadn't come up with anything. He had seen her leaving the FBI building. Stepping out of the door, onto the street, forearm jammed into the curved metal clip of her hospital cane. He had seen her getting that far. But then the picture just went blank. He'd thought hard all night, and told McGrath nothing.

Five-forty, he went to the bathroom and got more coffee. Still miserable. He walked back to his desk. Sat down, lost in thought for a long time. Then he glanced at the heavy gold watch on his wrist. Checked the time. Smiled. Felt better. Thought some more. Checked his watch again. He nodded to himself. Now he could tell McGrath where Holly Johnson had gone at twelve o'clock yesterday.

SEVENTEEN HUNDRED AND two miles away, panic had set in. Numb shock had carried the carpenter through the first hours. It had made him weak and acquiescent. He had let the employer hustle him up the stairs and into the room. Then numb shock had made him waste his first hours, just sitting and staring. Then he had started up with a crazy optimism that this whole thing was some kind of bad Halloween joke. That made him waste his next hours convinced nothing was going to happen. But then, like prisoners everywhere locked up alone in the cold small hours of the night, all his defenses had stripped away and left him shaking and desperate with panic.

left him shaking and desperate with panic.
With half his time gone, he burst into frantic action. But he knew it was hopeless. The irony was crushing him. They had worked hard on this room. They had built it right. Dollar signs had danced in front of their eyes. They had cut no corners. They had left out all their usual shoddy carpenter's tricks. Every single board was straight and tight. Every single nail was punched way down below the grain. There were no windows. The door was solid. It was hopeless. He spent an hour running around the room like a madman. He ran his rough palms over every square inch of every surface. Floor, ceiling, walls. It was the best job they had ever done. He ended up crouched in a corner, staring at his hands, crying.

"THE DRY CLEANER'S," McGrath said. "That's where she went."
He was in the third-floor conference room. Head of the table, seven o'clock, Tuesday morning. Opening a fresh pack of cigarettes.
"She did?" Brogan said. "The dry cleaner's?"
McGrath nodded.
"Tell him, Milo," he said.
Milosevic smiled.
"I just remembered," he said. "I've worked with her five weeks, right? Since she busted up her knee? Every Monday lunchtime, she takes in her cleaning. Picks up last week's stuff. No reason for it to be any different yesterday."
"OK," Brogan said. "Which cleaner's?"
Milosevic shook his head.
"Don't know," he said. "She always went on her own. I always offered to do it for her, but she said no, every time, five straight Mondays. OK if I helped her out on Bureau business, but she wasn't about to have me running around after her cleaning. She's a very independent type of a woman."
"But she walked there, right?" McGrath said.
"Right," Milosevic said. "She always walked. With maybe eight or nine things on hangers. So we're safe to conclude the place she used is fairly near here."
Brogan nodded. Smiled. They had some kind of a lead. He pulled the Yellow Pages over and opened it up to D.
"What sort of a radius are we giving it?" he said.
McGrath shrugged.
"Twenty minutes there, twenty minutes back," he said. "That would be about the max, right? With that crutch, I can't see her doing more than a quarter-mile in twenty-minutes. Limping like that? Call it a square, a half-mile on a side, this building in the center. What does that give us?"
Brogan used the AAA street map. He made a crude compass with his thumb and

forefinger. Adjusted it to a half-mile according to the scale in the margin. Drew a square across the thicket of streets. Then he flipped back and forth between the map and the Yellow Pages. Ticked off names with his pencil. Counted them up.
“Twenty-one establishments,” he said.
McGrath stared at him.
“Twenty-one?” he said. “Are you sure?”
Brogan nodded. Slid the phone book across the shiny hardwood.
“Twenty-one,” he said. “Obviously people in this town like to keep their clothes real clean.”
“OK,” McGrath said. “Twenty-one places. Hit the road, guys.”
Brogan took ten addresses and Milosevic took eleven. McGrath issued them both with large color blowups of Holly Johnson’s file photograph. Then he nodded them out and waited in his chair at the head of the conference room table, next to the telephones, slumped, staring into space, smoking, drumming a worried little rhythm with the blunt end of his pencil.

HE HEARD FAINT sounds much earlier than he thought he should. He had no watch and no windows, but he was certain it was not yet morning. He was certain he had another hour. Maybe two. But he could hear noise. People moving in the street outside. He held his breath and listened. Maybe three or four people. He quartered the room again. Frozen with indecision. He should be pounding and kicking at the new pine boards. He knew that. But he wasn’t. Because he knew it was hopeless, and because he felt in his gut he must be silent. He had become sure of that. Convinced. If he was silent, they might leave him alone. They might forget he was in there.

MILOSEVIC FOUND THE right place, the seventh of the eleven establishments on his list. It was just opening up for business, seven-forty in the morning. Just a store-front place, but elegant, not really aimed at the typical commuter’s cheap worsteds. It advertised all kinds of specialized processes and custom treatments. There was a Korean woman in charge of the store. Milosevic showed her his FBI shield and placed Holly’s file picture flat on the counter in front of her.
“You ever see this person?” he asked her.
The Korean woman looked at the picture, politely, with concentration, her hands clasped together behind her back.
“Sure,” she said. “That’s Miss Johnson, comes in every Monday.”
Milosevic stepped closer to the counter. He leaned up close to the woman.
“She come in yesterday?” Milosevic asked her.
The woman thought about it and nodded.

“Sure,” she said. “Like I told you, she comes in every Monday.”
“What kind of time?” he asked.
“Lunch hour,” the woman said. “Always lunch hour.”
“About twelve?” he said. “Twelve-thirty, something like that?”
“Sure,” the woman said. “Always lunch hour on a Monday.”
“OK, yesterday,” Milosevic said. “What happened?”
The woman shrugged.
“Nothing happened,” she said. “She came in, she took her garments, she paid, she left some garments to be cleaned.”
“Anybody with her?” he asked.
“Nobody with her,” the woman said. “Nobody ever with her.”
“Which direction was she headed?” Milosevic asked.
The woman pointed back toward the Federal Building.
“She came from that direction,” she said.
“I didn’t ask you where she came from,” Milosevic said. “Where did she head when she left?”
The woman paused.
“I didn’t see,” she said. “I took her garments through to the back. I heard the door open, but I couldn’t see where she went. I was in back.”
“You just grabbed her stuff?” Milosevic said. “Rushed through to the back before she was out of here?”
The woman faltered, like she was being accused of an impoliteness.
“Not rushed,” she said. “Miss Johnson was walking slow. Bad leg, right? I felt I shouldn’t stare at her. I felt she was embarrassed. I walked her clothes through to the back so she wouldn’t feel I was watching her.”
Milosevic nodded and tilted his head back and sighed up at the ceiling. Saw a video camera mounted high above the counter.
“What’s that?” he said.
The Korean woman twisted and followed his gaze.
“Security,” she said. “Insurance company says we got to have it.”
“Does it work?” he asked.
“Sure it works,” the woman said. “Insurance company says it’s got to.”
“Does it run all the time?” Milosevic asked.
The woman nodded and giggled.
“Sure it does,” she said. “It’s running right now. You’ll be on the tape.”
Milosevic checked his watch.
“I need yesterday’s tape,” he said. “Immediately.”
The woman faltered again. Milosevic pulled his shield for the second time.
“This is an FBI investigation,” he said. “Official federal business. I need that

tape, right now, OK?”
The woman nodded and held up her hand to make him wait. Stepped through a door to the rear of the establishment. Came back out after a long moment with a blast of chemical smell and a videocassette in her hand.
“You let me have it back, OK?” she said. “Insurance company says we got to keep them for a month.”

MILOSEVIC TOOK IT straight in, and by eight-thirty the Bureau technicians were swarming all over the third-floor conference room again, hooking up a standard VHS player to the bank of monitors piled down the middle of the long table. There was a problem with a fuse, and then the right wire proved too short, so a computer had to be moved to allow the video player to get nearer to the center of the table. Then the head tech handed McGrath the remote and nodded.
“All yours, chief,” he said.
McGrath sent him out of the room and the three agents crowded around the screens, waiting for the picture to roll. The screens faced the wall of windows, so they all three had their backs to the glass. But at that time of day, there was no danger of anybody getting uncomfortable, because right then the bright morning sun was blasting the other side of the building.

THAT SAME SUN rolled on seventeen hundred and two miles from Chicago and made it bright morning outside the white building. He knew it had come. He could hear the quiet ticking as the old wood frame warmed through. He could hear muffled voices outside, below him, down at street level. The sound of people starting a new day.
His fingernails were gone. He had found a gap where two boards were not hard together. He had forced his fingertips down and levered with all his strength. His nails had torn off, one after the other. The board had not moved. He had scuttled backward into a corner and curled up on the floor. He had sucked his bloodied fingers and now his mouth was smeared all around with blood, like a child’s with cake.
He heard footsteps on the staircase. A big man, moving lightly. The sound halted outside the door. The lock clicked back. The door opened. The employer looked in at him. Bloated face, two nickel-sized red spots burning high on his cheeks.
“You’re still here,” he said.
The carpenter was paralyzed. Couldn’t move, couldn’t speak.
“You failed,” the employer said.
There was silence in the room. The only sound was the slow ticking of the wood frame as the morning sun slid over the roof.

“So what shall we do now?” the employer asked.
The carpenter just stared blankly at him. Didn’t move. Then the employer smiled a relaxed, friendly smile. Like he was suddenly surprised about something.
“You think I meant it?” he said, gently.
The carpenter blinked. Shook his head, slightly, hopefully.
“You hear anything?” the employer asked him.
The carpenter listened hard. He could hear the quiet ticking of the wood, the song of the forest birds, the silent sound of sunny morning air.
“You were just kidding around?” he asked.
His voice was a dry croak. Relief and hope and dread were jamming his tongue into the roof of his mouth.
“Listen,” the employer said.
The carpenter listened. The frame ticked, the birds sang, the warm air sighed. He heard nothing else. Silence. Then he heard a click. Then he heard a whine. It started slow and quiet and stabilized up at a familiar loud pitch. It was a sound he knew. It was the sound of a big power saw being run up to speed.
“Now do you think I meant it?” the employer screamed.

11

HOLLY JOHNSON HAD been mildly disappointed by Reacher's assessment of the cash value of her wardrobe. Reacher had said he figured she had maybe fifteen or twenty outfits, four hundred bucks an outfit, maybe eight grand in total. Truth was she had thirty-four business suits in her closet. She'd worked three years on Wall Street. She had eight grand tied up in the shoes alone. Four hundred bucks was what she had spent on a blouse, and that was when she felt driven by native common sense to be a little economical.

She liked Armani. She had thirteen of his spring suits. Spring clothes from Milan were just about right for most of the Chicago summer. Maybe in the really fierce heat of August she'd break out her Moschino shifts, but June and July, September too if she was lucky, her Armanis were the thing. Her favorites were the dark peach shades she'd bought in her last year in the brokerage house. Some mysterious Italian blend of silks. Cut and tailored by people whose ancestors had been fingering fine materials for hundreds of years. They look at it and consider it and cut it and it just falls into marvelous soft shapes. Then they market it and a Wall Street broker buys it and loves it and is still wearing it two years into the future when she's a new FBI agent and she gets snatched off a Chicago street. She's still wearing it eighteen hours later after a sleepless night on the filthy straw in a cow barn. By that point, the thing is no longer something that Armani would recognize.

The three kidnappers had returned with the truck and backed it into the cow barn's central concrete aisle. Then they had locked the barn door and disappeared. Holly guessed they had spent the night in the farmhouse. Reacher had slept quietly in his stall, chained to the railing, while she tossed and turned in the straw, sleepless, thinking urgently about him.

His safety was her responsibility. He was an innocent passerby, caught up in her business. Whatever else lay ahead for her, she had to take care of him. That was her duty. He was her burden. And he was lying. Holly was absolutely certain he was not a blues club doorman. And she was pretty certain what he was. The Johnson family was a military family. Because of her father, Holly had lived on Army bases her whole life, right up to Yale. She knew the Army. She knew the soldiers. She knew the types and she knew Reacher was one. To her practiced eye, he looked like one. Acted like one. Reacted like one. It was possible a doorman could pick locks and climb walls like an ape, but if a doorman did go ahead and do that, he would do it with an air of unfamiliarity and daring and breathlessness which would be quite distinctive. He wouldn't do it like it came

breathlessness which would be quite distinctive. He wouldn't do it like it came as naturally as blinking. Reacher was a quiet, contained man, relaxed, fit, clearly trained to the point of some kind of superhuman calm. He was probably ten years older than she was, but somewhere less than forty, about six feet five, huge, maybe two-twenty, blue eyes, thinning fair hair. Big enough to be a doorman, and old enough to have been around, that was for sure, but he was a soldier. A soldier, claiming to be a doorman. But why?

Holly had no idea. She just lay there, uncomfortable, listening to his quiet breathing, twenty feet away. Doorman or soldier, ten years older or not, it was her responsibility to get him to safety. She didn't sleep. Too busy thinking, and her knee was too painful. At eight-thirty on her watch, she heard him wake up. Just a subtle change in the rhythm of his breathing.

"Good morning, Reacher," she called out.

"Morning, Holly," he said. "They're coming back."

It was silent, but after a long moment she heard footsteps outside. Climbs like an ape, hears like a bat, she thought. Some doorman.

"You OK?" Reacher called to her.

She didn't answer. His welfare was her responsibility, not the other way around. She heard a rattle as the barn door was unlocked. It rolled open and daylight flooded in. She caught a glimpse of empty green country. Pennsylvania, maybe, she thought. The three kidnappers walked in and the door was pulled shut.

"Get up, bitch," the leader said to her.

She didn't move. She was seized by an overpowering desire not to be put back inside the truck. Too dark, too uncomfortable, too tedious. She didn't know if she could take another day in there, swaying, jolting, above all totally unaware of where the hell she was being taken, or why, or by who. Instinctively, she grabbed the metal railing and held on, arm tensed, like she was going to put up a struggle. The leader stood still and pulled out his Glock. Looked down at her.

"Two ways of doing this," he said. "The easy way, or the hard way."

She didn't reply. Just sat there in the straw and held on tight to the railing. The ugly driver took three steps nearer and started smiling, staring at her breasts again. She felt naked and revolted under his gaze.

"Your choice, bitch," the leader said.

She heard Reacher moving in his stall.

"No, it's your choice," she heard him call to the guy. "We need to be a little mutual here. Cooperative, right? You want us to get back in your truck, you need to make it worth our while."

His voice was calm and low. Holly stared across at him. Saw him sitting there, chained up, unarmed, facing a loaded automatic weapon, totally powerless by any reasonable definition of the word, three hostile men staring down at him.

“We need some breakfast,” Reacher said. “Toast, with grape jelly. And coffee, but make it a lot stronger than last night’s crap, OK? Good coffee is very important to me. You need to understand that. Then put a couple of mattresses in the truck. One queen-size, one twin. Make us a sofa in there. Then we’ll get in.”
There was total silence. Holly glanced between the two men. Reacher was fixing the leader with a calm, level gaze from the floor. His blue eyes never blinked. The leader was staring down at him. Tension visible in the air. The driver had torn his gaze away from her body and was looking at Reacher. Anger in his eyes. Then the leader snapped around and nodded the other two out of the barn with him. Holly heard the door locking behind them.
“You eat toast?” Reacher said to her.
She was too breathless to answer.
“When they bring it, send it back,” he said. “Make them do it over. Say it’s too pale or too burnt or something.”
“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she asked.
“Psychology,” Reacher said. “We need to start getting some dominance here. Situation like this, it’s very important.”
She stared at him.
“Just do it, OK?” he said, calmly.

SHE DID IT. The jumpy guy brought the toast. It was just about perfect, but she rejected it. She looked at it with the disdain she’d use on a sloppy balance sheet and said it was too well-done. She was standing with all her weight on one foot, looking like a mess, dung all over her peach Armani, but she managed enough haughty contempt to intimidate the guy. He went back to the farmhouse kitchen and made more.
It came with a pot of strong coffee and Holly and Reacher ate their separate breakfasts, chains clanking, twenty feet apart, while the other two guys hauled mattresses into the barn. One queen, one twin. They pulled them up into the back of the truck and laid the queen out on the floor and stood the twin at right angles to it, up against the back of the cab bulkhead. Holly watched them do it and felt a whole lot better about the day. Then she suddenly realized exactly where Reacher’s psychology had been aimed. Not just at the three kidnappers. At her, too. He didn’t want her to get into a fight. Because she’d lose. He’d risked doing what he’d done to defuse a hopeless confrontation. She was amazed. Totally amazed. She thought blankly: for Christ’s sake, this guy’s got it ass backward. He’s trying to take care of me.
“You want to tell us your names?” Reacher asked, calmly. “We’re spending some time together, we can be a little civilized about it, right?”

Holly saw the leader just looking at him. The guy made no reply.
“We’ve seen your faces,” Reacher said. “Telling us your names isn’t going to do you any harm. And we might as well try to get along.”
The guy thought about it and nodded.
“Loder,” he said.
The little jumpy guy shifted feet.
“Stevie,” he said.
Reacher nodded. Then the ugly driver realized all four were looking at him. He ducked his head.
“I’m not telling you my name,” he said. “Hell should I?”
“And let’s be real clear,” the guy called Loder said. “Civilized is not the same thing as friendly, right?”
Holly saw him aim his Glock at Reacher’s head and hold it there for a long moment. Nothing in his face. Not the same thing as friendly. Reacher nodded. A small cautious movement. They left their toast plates and their coffee mugs lying on the straw and the guy called Loder unlocked their chains. They met in the central aisle. Two Glocks and a shotgun aimed at them. The ugly driver leering. Reacher looked him in the eye and ducked down and picked Holly up like she weighed nothing at all. Carried her the ten paces to the truck. Put her down gently inside. They crawled forward together to the improvised sofa. Got themselves comfortable.
The truck’s rear doors slammed and locked. Holly heard the big barn door open up. The truck’s engine turned over and caught. They drove out of the barn and bounced a hundred and fifty yards over the rough track. Turned an invisible right angle and cruised straight and slow down a road for fifteen minutes.
“We aren’t in Pennsylvania,” Holly said. “Roads are too straight. Too flat.”
Reacher just shrugged at her in the dark.
“We aren’t in handcuffs anymore, either,” he said. “Psychology.”

12

“HELL IS THIS?”Agent-in-Charge McGrath said.
He thumbed the remote and rewound the tape. Then he pressed play and watched it again. But what he saw meant nothing at all. The video screens were filled with jerky speeding images and shashy white snow.
“Hell is going on here?” he asked again.
Brogan crowded in and shook his head. Milosevic pushed closer to look. He’d brought the tape in, so he felt personally responsible for it. McGrath hit rewind again and tried once more. Same result. Just a blur of disjointed flashing pictures.
“Get the damn tech guy back in here,” he shouted.
Milosevic used the phone on the credenza next to the coffeepot. Called upstairs to tech services. The head tech was in the room within a minute. The tone of Milosevic’s voice had told him to hurry more effectively than any words could have.
“Damn tape won’t run properly,” McGrath told him.
The technician took the remote in his hand with that blend of familiarity and unfamiliarity that tech guys use the world over. They’re all at home with complex equipment, but each individual piece has its own peculiarities. He peered at the buttons and pressed rewind, firmly, with a chewed thumb. The tape whirred back and he pressed play and watched the disjointed stream of flashing images and video snow.
“Can you fix that?” McGrath asked him.
The tech stopped the tape and hit rewind again. Shook his head.
“It’s not broken,” he said. “That’s how it’s supposed to be. Typical cheap surveillance video. What it does is record a freeze-frame, probably every ten seconds or so. Just one frame, every ten seconds. Like a sequence of snapshots.”
“Why?” McGrath asked him.
“Cheap and easy,” the guy said. “You can get a whole day on one tape that way. Low-cost, and you don’t have to remember to change the cassette every three hours. You just change it in the morning. And assuming a stickup takes longer than ten seconds to complete, you’ve got the perp’s face right there on tape, at least once.”
“OK,” McGrath said impatiently. “So how do we use it?”
The tech used two fingers together. Pressed play and freeze at the same time. Up on the screen came a perfect black-and-white still picture of an empty store. In the bottom left corner was Monday’s date and the time, seven thirty-five in the

the bottom left corner was Monday's date and the time, seven thirty-five in the morning. The tech held the remote out to McGrath and pointed to a small button.
"See this?" he said. "Frame-advance button. Press this and the tape rolls on to the next still. Usually for sports, right? Hockey? You can see the puck go right in the net. Or for porn. You can see whatever you need to see. But on this type of a system, it jumps you ahead ten seconds. Like on to the next snapshot, right?"
McGrath calmed down and nodded.
"Why's it in black and white?" he said.
"Cheap camera," the tech guy said. "The whole thing is a cheap system. They only put them in because the insurance companies tell them they got to."
He handed the remote to McGrath and headed back for the door.
"You want anything else, you let me know, OK?" he called.
He got no reply because everybody was staring at the screen as McGrath started inching his way through the tape. Every time he hit the frame-advance button, a broad band of white snow scrolled down the screen and unveiled a new picture, same aspect, same angle, same dim monochrome gray, but with the time code at the bottom jumped ahead ten seconds. The third frame showed a woman behind the counter. Milosevic touched the screen with his finger.
"That's the woman I spoke to," he said.
McGrath nodded.
"Wide field of view," he said. "You can see all the way from behind the counter right out into the street."
"Wide-angle lens on the camera," Brogan said. "Like a fisheye sort of thing. The owner can see everything. He can see the customers coming in and out, and he can see if the help is fiddling the register."
McGrath nodded again and trawled through Monday morning, ten seconds at a time. Customers jumped in and out of shot. The woman behind the counter jumped from side to side, fetching and carrying and ringing up the payments. Outside, cars flashed in and out of view.
"Fast-forward to twelve o'clock," Milosevic said. "This is taking way too long."
McGrath nodded and fiddled with the remote. The tape whirred forward. He pressed stop and play and freeze and came up with four o'clock in the afternoon.
"Shit," he said.
He wound back and forward a couple of times and came up with eleven forty-three and fifty seconds.
"Close as we're going to get," he said.
He kept his finger hard on the frame-advance button and the white snow scrolled continuously down the screen. One hundred and fifty-seven frames later, he stopped.
"There she is." he said.

Milosevic and Brogan shouldered together for a closer look. The still frame showed Holly Johnson on the far right of the picture. She was outside, on the sidewalk, crutch in one hand, clothes on hangers in the other. She was hauling the door open with a spare finger. The time in the bottom left of the frame was stopped at ten minutes and ten seconds past twelve noon.
“OK,” McGrath said quietly. “So let’s see.”
He hit the button and Holly jumped halfway over to the counter. Even frozen on the misty monochrome screen, her awkward posture was plain to see. McGrath hit the button again and the snow rolled over and Holly was at the counter. Ten seconds later the Korean woman was there with her. Ten seconds after that, Holly had folded back a hem on one of her suits and was showing the woman something. Probably the position of a particular stain. The two women stayed like that for a couple of minutes, heads together for twelve frames, jumping slightly from one shot to the next. Then the Korean woman was gone and the clothes were off the counter and Holly was standing alone for five frames. Fifty seconds. Behind her on the left, a car nosed into shot on the second frame and stayed there for the next three, parked at the curb.
Then the woman was back with an armful of clean clothes in bags. She was frozen in the act of laying them flat on the counter. Ten seconds later she had torn five tags off the hangers. Ten seconds after that, she had another four lined up next to the register.
“Nine outfits,” McGrath said.
“That’s about right,” Milosevic said. “Five for work, Monday to Friday, and I guess four for evening wear, right?”
“What about the weekend?” Brogan said. “Maybe it’s five for work, two for evening wear and two at the weekend?”
“Probably wears jeans at the weekend,” Milosevic said. “Jeans and a shirt. Just throws them in the machine, maybe.”
“God’s sake, does it matter?” McGrath said.
He pressed the button and the Korean woman’s fingers were caught dancing over the register keys. The next two stills showed Holly paying in cash and accepting a couple of dollars change.
“How much is all that costing her?” Brogan asked out loud.
“Nine garments?” Milosevic said. “Best part of fifty bucks a week, that’s for damn sure. I saw the price list in there. Specialized processes and gentle chemicals and all.”
The next frame showed Holly starting toward the exit door on the left of the picture. The top of the Korean woman’s head was visible, on her way through to the back of the store. The time was showing at twelve fifteen exactly. McGrath

hitched his chair closer and stuck his face a foot from the glowing monochrome screen.
“OK,” he said. “So where did you go now, Holly?”
She had the nine cleaned garments in her left hand. She was holding them up, awkwardly, so they wouldn’t drag on the floor. Her right elbow was jammed into the curved metal clip of her crutch, but her hand wasn’t gripping the handle. The next frame showed it reaching out to push the door open. McGrath hit the button again.
“Christ,” he shouted.
Milosevic gasped out loud and Brogan looked stunned. There was no doubt about what they were seeing. The next frame showed an unknown man attacking Holly Johnson. He was tall and heavy. He was seizing her crutch with one hand and her cleaning with the other. No doubt about it. Both his arms were extended and he was taking her crutch and her cleaning away from her. He was caught in a perfect snapshot through the glass door. The three agents stared at him. There was total silence in the conference room. Then McGrath hit the button again. The time code jumped ahead ten seconds. There was another gasp as they caught their breath simultaneously.
Holly Johnson was suddenly surrounded by a triangle of three men. The tall guy who had attacked her had been joined by two more. The tall guy had Holly’s cleaning slung up over his shoulder and he had seized Holly’s arm. He was staring straight up into the store window like he knew a camera was in there. The other two guys were facing Holly head-on.
“They pulled guns on her,” McGrath shouted. “Son of a bitch, look at that.”
He thumbed the button again until the bar of snow cleared away from the bottom of the frame and the whole picture stabilized into perfect sharpness. The two new guys had their right arms bent at ninety degrees, and there was tension showing in their shoulder muscles.
“The car,” Milosevic said. “They’re going to put her in the car.”
Beyond Holly and the triangle of men was the car which had parked up fourteen frames ago. It was just sitting there at the curb. McGrath hit the button again. The bar of white snow scrolled down. The small knot of people on the screen jumped sideways ten feet. The tall guy who had attacked Holly was leading the way into the back of the car. Holly was being pushed in after him by one of the new guys. The other new guy was opening the front passenger door. Inside the car, a fourth man was plainly visible through the side glass, sitting at the wheel. McGrath hit the button again. The bar of snow scrolled down. The street was empty. The car was gone. Like it had never been there at all.

13

“WE NEED TO talk,” Holly said.
“So talk,” Reacher replied.
They were sprawled out on the mattresses in the gloom inside the truck, rocking and bouncing, but not much. It was pretty clear they were heading down a highway. After fifteen minutes of a slow straight road, there had been a deceleration, a momentary stop, and a left turn followed by steady acceleration up a ramp. Then a slight sway as the truck nudged left onto the pavement. Then a steady droning cruise, maybe sixty miles an hour, which had continued ever since and was feeling like it would continue forever.
The temperature inside the dark space had slowly climbed higher. Now it was pretty warm. Reacher had taken his shirt off. But the truck had started to cool, from the night in the cow barn, and Reacher felt as long as it kept moving through the air, it was going to be tolerable. The problem would come if they stopped for any length of time. Then the truck would heat up like a pizza oven and it would get as bad as it had gotten the day before.
The twin-sized mattress had been standing upright on its long edge, up against the forward bulkhead, and the queen-size had been flat on the floor, jammed up against it, making a crude sofa. But the ninety-degree angle between the seat and the back had made the whole thing uncomfortable. So Reacher had slid the queen-size backward, with Holly riding on it like a sled, and laid the twin flat next to it. Now they had an eight-foot by six-six flat padded area. They were lying down on their backs, heads together so they could talk, bodies apart in a decorous V shape, rocking gently with the motion of the ride.
“You should do what I tell you,” Holly said. “You should have gotten out.”
He made no reply.
“You’re a burden to me,” she said. “You understand that? I’ve got enough on my hands here without having to worry about you.”
He didn’t reply. They lay rocking in silence. He could smell yesterday morning’s shampoo in her hair.
“So you’ve got to do what I tell you from now on,” she said. “Are you listening to me? I just can’t afford to be worrying about you.”
He turned his head to look at her, close up. She was worrying about him. It came as a big surprise, out of nowhere. A shock. Like being on a train, stopped next to another train in a busy railroad station. Your train begins to move. It picks up speed. And then all of a sudden it’s not your train moving. It’s the other train. Your train was stationary all the time. Your frame of reference was wrong. He

Your train was stationary all the time. Your frame of reference was wrong. He thought his train was moving. She thought hers was.
“I don’t need your help,” she said. “I’ve already got all the help I need. You know how the Bureau works? You know what the biggest crime in the world is? Not bombing, not terrorism, not racketeering. The biggest crime in the world is messing with Bureau personnel. The Bureau looks after its own.”
Reacher stayed quiet for a spell. Then he smiled.
“So then we’re both OK,” he said. “We just lay back here, and pretty soon a bunch of agents is going to come bursting in to rescue us.”
“I trust my people,” Holly said to him.
There was silence again. The truck droned on for a couple of minutes. Reacher ticked off the distance in his head. About four hundred fifty miles from Chicago, maybe. East, west, north, or south. Holly gasped and used both hands to shift her leg.
“Hurting?” Reacher said.
“When it gets out of line,” she said. “When it’s straight, it’s OK.”
“Which direction are we headed?” he asked.
“Are you going to do what I tell you?” she asked.
“Is it getting hotter or colder?” he said. “Or staying the same?”
She shrugged.
“Can’t tell,” she said. “Why?”
“North or south, it should be getting hotter or colder,” he said. “East or west, it should be staying more or less the same.”
“Feels the same to me,” she said. “But inside here, you can’t really tell.”
“Highway feels fairly empty,” Reacher said. “We’re not pulling out to pass people. We’re not getting slowed down by anybody. We’re just cruising.”
“So?” Holly said.
“Might mean we’re not going east,” he said. “There’s a kind of barrier, right? Cleveland to Pittsburgh to Baltimore. Like a frontier. Gets much busier. We’d be hitting more traffic. What is it, Tuesday? About eleven o’clock in the morning? Roads feel too empty for the East.”
Holly nodded.
“So we’re going north or west or south,” she said.
“In a stolen truck,” he said. “Vulnerable.”
“Stolen?” she said. “How do you know that?”
“Because the car was stolen too,” he said.
“How do you know that?” she repeated.
“Because they burned it,” he said.
Holly rolled her head and looked straight at him.
“Think about it,” he said. “Think about their plan. They came to Chicago in their

own vehicle. Maybe some time ago. Could have taken them a couple of weeks to stake you out. Maybe three."
"Three weeks?" she said. "You think they were watching me three weeks?"
"Probably three," he said. "You went to the cleaners every Monday, right? Once a week? Must have taken them a while to confirm that pattern. But they couldn't grab you in their own vehicle. Too easy to trace, and it probably had windows and all, not suitable for long-distance transport of a kidnap victim. So I figure they stole this truck, in Chicago, probably yesterday morning. Painted over whatever writing was on the side. You notice the patch of white paint? Fresh, didn't match the rest? They disguised it, maybe changed the plates. But it was still a hot truck, right?> And it was their getaway vehicle. So they didn't want to risk it on the street. And people getting into the back of a truck looks weird. A car is better. So they stole the black sedan and used that instead. Switched vehicles in that vacant lot, burned the black car, and they're away."
Holly shrugged. Made a face.
"Doesn't prove they stole anything," she said.
"Yes it does," Reacher said. "Who buys a new car with leather seats, knowing they're going to burn it? They'd have bought some old clunker instead."
She nodded, reluctantly.
"Who are these people?" she said, more to herself than to Reacher.
"Amateurs," Reacher said. "They're making one mistake after another."
"Like what?" she said.
"Burning is dumb," he said. "Attracts attention. They think they've been smart, but they haven't. Probability is they burned their original car, as well. I bet they burned it right near where they stole the black sedan."
"Sounds smart enough to me," Holly said.
"Cops notice burning cars," Reacher said. "They'll find the black sedan, they'll find out where it was stolen from, they'll go up there and find their original vehicle, probably still smoldering. They're leaving a trail, Holly. They should have parked both cars in the long-term lot at O'Hare. They would have been there a year before anybody noticed. Or just left them both down on the South Side somewhere, doors open, keys in. Two minutes later, two residents down there got themselves a new motor each. Those cars would never have been seen again. That's how to cover your tracks. Burning feels good, feels like it's real final, but it's dumb as hell."
Holly turned her face back and stared up at the hot metal roof. She was asking herself: Just who the hell is this guy?

14

THIS TIME, MCGRATH did not make the tech chief come down to the third floor. He led the charge himself up to his lab on the sixth, with the videocassette in his hand. He burst in through the door and cleared a space on the nearest table. Laid the cassette in the space like it was made of solid gold. The guy hurried over and looked at it.

“I need photographs made,” McGrath told him.

The guy picked up the cassette and took it across to a bank of video machines in the corner. Flicked a couple of switches. Three screens lit up with white snow.

“You tell absolutely nobody what you’re seeing, OK?” McGrath said.

“OK,” the guy said. “What am I looking for?”

“The last five frames,” McGrath said. “That should just about cover it.”

The tech chief didn’t use a remote. He stabbed at buttons on the machine’s own control panel. The tape rolled backward and the story of Holly Johnson’s kidnap unfolded in reverse.

“Christ,” he said.

He stopped on the frame showing Holly turning away from the counter. Then he inched the tape forward. He jumped Holly to the door, then face-to-face with the tall guy, then into the muzzles of the guns, then to the car. He rolled back and did it for a second time. Then a third.

“Christ,” he said again.

“Don’t wear the damn tape out,” McGrath said. “I want big photographs of those five frames. Lots of copies.”

The tech chief nodded slowly.

“I can give you laser prints right now,” he said.

He punched a couple of buttons and flicked a couple of switches. Then he ducked away and booted up a computer on a desk across the room. The monitor came up with Holly leaving the dry cleaner’s counter. He clicked on a couple of menus.

“OK,” he said. “I’m copying it to the hard disk. As a graphics file.”

He darted back to the video bank and nudged the tape forward one frame. Came back to the desk and the computer captured the image of Holly making to push open the exit door. He repeated the process three more times. Then he printed all five graphics files on the fastest laser he had. McGrath stood and caught each sheet as it flopped into the output bin.

“Not bad,” he said. “I like paper better than video. Like it really exists.”

The tech chief gave him a look and peered over his shoulder

The tech chief gave him a look and peered over his shoulder.
“Definition’s OK,” he said.
“I want blowups,” McGrath told him.
“No problem, now it’s in the computer,” the tech said. “That’s why the computer is better than paper.”
He sat down and opened the fourth file. The picture of Holly and the three kidnappers in a tight knot on the sidewalk scrolled onto the screen. He clicked the mouse and pulled a tight square around the heads. Clicked again. The monitor redrew into a large blowup. The tall guy was staring straight out of the screen. The two new guys were caught at an angle, staring at Holly.
The tech hit the print button and then he opened the fifth file. He zoomed in with the mouse and put a tight rectangle around the driver, inside the car. He printed that out, too. McGrath picked up the new sheets of paper.
“Good,” he said. “Good as we’re going to get, anyway. Shame your damn computer can’t make them all look right at the camera.”
“It can,” the tech chief said.
“It can?” McGrath said. “How?”
“In a manner of speaking,” the guy said. He touched the blowup of Holly’s face with his finger. “Suppose we wanted a face-front picture of her, right? We’d ask her to move around right in front of the camera and look right up at it. But suppose for some reason she can’t move at all. What would we do? We could move the camera, right?> Suppose you climbed up on the counter and unbolted the camera off the wall and moved it down and around a certain distance until it was right in front of her. Then you’d be seeing a face-front picture, correct?”
“OK,” McGrath said.
“So what we do is we calculate,” the tech said. “We calculate that if we did hypothetically move that camera right in front of her, we’d have to move it what? Say six feet downward, say ten feet to the left, and turn it through about forty degrees, and then it would be plumb face-on to her. So we get those numbers and we enter them into the program and the computer will do a kind of backward simulation, and draw us a picture, just the same as if we’d really moved the actual camera right around in front of her.”
“You can do that?” McGrath said. “Does it work?”
“Within its limitations,” the tech chief said. He touched the image of the nearer gunman. “This guy, for instance, he’s pretty much side-on. The computer will give us a full-face picture, no problem at all, but it’s going to be just guessing what the other side of his face looks like, right? > It’s programmed to assume the other side looks pretty much like the side it can see, with a little bit of asymmetry built in. But if the guy’s got one ear missing or something, or a big scar. it can’t tell us that.”

“OK,” McGrath said. “So what do you need?”
The chief tech picked up the wide shot of the group. Pointed here and there on it with a stubby forefinger.
“Measurements,” he said. “Make them as exact as possible. I need to know the camera position relative to the doorway and the sidewalk level. I need to know the focal length of the camera lens. I need Holly’s file photograph for calibration. We know exactly what she looks like, right? I can use her for a test run. I’ll get it set up so she comes out right, then the other guys will come out right as well, assuming they’ve all got two ears and so on, like I said. And bring me a square of tile off the store’s floor and one of those smocks the counter woman was wearing.”
“What for?” McGrath said.
“So I can use them to decode the grays in the video,” the tech said. “Then I can give you your mug shots in color.”

THE COMMANDER SELECTED six women from that morning’s punishment detail. He used the ones with the most demerits, because the task was going to be hard and unpleasant. He stood them at attention and drew his huge bulk up to its full height in front of them. He waited to see which of them would be the first to glance away from his face. When he was satisfied none of them dared to, he explained their duties. The blood had sprayed all over the room, hurled around by the savage centrifugal force of the blade. Chips of bone had spattered everywhere. He told them to heat water in the cookhouse and carry it over in buckets. He told them to draw scrubbing brushes and rags and disinfectant from the stores. He told them they had two hours to get the room looking pristine again. Any longer than that, they would earn more demerits.

IT TOOK TWO hours to get the data. Milosevic and Brogan went out to the dry-cleaning establishment. They closed the place down and swarmed all over it like surveyors. They drew a plan with measurements accurate to the nearest quarter-inch. They took the camera off the wall and brought it back with them. They tore up the floor and took the tiles. They took two smocks from the woman and two posters off the wall, because they thought they might help with the colorizing process. Back on the sixth floor of the Federal Building, the chief tech took another two hours to input the data. Then he ran the test, using Holly Johnson to calibrate the program.
“What do you think?” he asked McGrath.
McGrath looked hard at the full-face picture of Holly. Then he passed it around. Milosevic got it last and stared at it hardest. Covered some parts with his hand

and frowned.
“Makes her look too thin,” he said. “I think the bottom right quarter is wrong. Not enough width there, somehow.”
“I agree,” McGrath said. “Makes her jaw look weird.”
The chief tech exited to a menu screen and adjusted a couple of numbers. Ran the test again. The laser printer whirred. The sheet of stiff paper came out.
“That’s better,” McGrath said. “Just about on the nose.”
“Color OK?” the tech asked.
“Should be a darker peach,” Milosevic said. “On her dress. I know that dress. Some kind of an Italian thing.”
The tech exited to a color palette.
“Show me,” he said.
Milosevic pointed to a particular shade.
“More like that,” he said.
They ran the test again. The hard disk chattered and the laser printer whirred.
“That’s better,” Milosevic said. “Dress is right. Hair color is better as well.”
“OK,” the tech said. He saved all the parameters to disk. “Let’s go to work here.”
The FBI never uses latest-generation equipment. The feeling is it’s better to use stuff that has been proven in the field. So the tech chief’s computer was actually a little slower than the computers in the rich kids’ bedrooms up and down the North Shore. But not much slower. It gave McGrath five prints within forty minutes. Four mug shots of the four kidnappers, and a close-up side view of the front half of their car. All in glowing color, all with the grain enhanced and smoothed away. McGrath thought they were the best damn pictures he had ever seen.
“Thanks, chief,” he said. “These are brilliant. Best work anybody has done around here for a long time. But don’t say a word. Big secret, right?”
He clapped the tech on the shoulder and left him feeling like the most important guy in the whole building.

THE SIX WOMEN worked hard and finished just before their two hours were up. The tiny cracks between the boards were their biggest problem. The cracks were tight, but not tight enough to stop the blood seeping in. But they were too tight to get a brush down in there. They had to sluice them out with water and rag them dry. The boards were turning a wet brown color. The women were praying they wouldn’t warp as they dried. Two of them were throwing up. It was adding to their workload. But they finished in time for the commander’s inspection. They stood rigidly at attention on the damp floor and waited. He

checked everywhere, with the wet boards creaking under his bulk. But he was satisfied with their work and gave them another two hours to clean the smears off the corridor and the staircase, where the body had been dragged away.

THE CAR WAS easy. It was quickly identified as a Lexus. Four-door. Late-model. The pattern of the alloy wheel dated it exactly. Color was either black or dark gray. Impossible to be certain. The computer process was good, but not good enough to be definitive about dark automotive paint standing in bright sunshine.

"Stolen?" Milosevic said.

McGrath nodded.

"Almost certainly," he said. "You do the checking, OK?"

Fluctuations in the value of the yen had put the list price of a new Lexus four-door somewhere up there with Milosevic's annual salary, so he knew which jurisdictions were worth checking with and which weren't. He didn't bother with anywhere south of the Loop. He put in calls to the Chicago cops, and then all the departments on the North Shore right up to Lake Forest.

He got a hit just before noon. Not exactly what he was looking for. Not a stolen Lexus. But a missing Lexus. The police department in Wilmette came back to him and said a dentist up there had driven his brand-new Lexus to work, before seven on Monday morning, and parked it in the lot behind his professional building. A chiropractor from the next office suite had seen him turn into the lot. But the dentist had never made it into the building. His nurse had called his home and his wife had called the Wilmette PD. The cops had taken the report and sat on it. It wasn't the first case of a husband disappearing they'd ever heard of. They told Milosevic the guy's name was Rubin and the car was the new shade of black, mica flecks in the paint to make it sparkle, and it had vanity plates reading: ORTHO 1.

Milosevic put the phone down on that call and it rang again straightaway with a report from the Chicago Fire Department. A unit had attended an automobile fire which was putting up a cloud of oily smoke into the land-side flight path into Meigs Field Airport. The fire truck had arrived in an abandoned industrial lot just before one o'clock Monday and found a black Lexus burning fiercely. They had figured it was burned to the metal anyway, not much more smoke to come, so they had saved their foam and just left it to burn out. Milosevic copied the location and hung up. Ducked into McGrath's office for instructions.

"Check it out," McGrath told him.

Milosevic nodded. He was always happy with road work. It gave him the chance to drive his own brand-new Ford Explorer, which he liked to use in preference to

one of the Bureau's clunky sedans. And the Bureau liked to let him do exactly that, because he never bothered to claim for his personal gas. So he drove the big shiny four-wheel-drive five miles south and found the wreck of the Lexus, no trouble at all. It was parked at an angle on a lumpy concrete area behind an abandoned industrial building. The tires had burned away and it was settled on the rims. The plates were still readable: ORTHO 1. He poked through the drifts of ash inside, still slightly warm, and then he pulled the shaft of the burned key from the ignition and popped the trunk. Then he staggered four steps away and threw up on the concrete. He retched and spat and sweated. He pulled his cellular phone from his pocket and fired it up. Got straight through to McGrath in the Federal Building.

"I found the dentist," he said.

"Where?" McGrath asked.

"In the damn trunk," Milosevic said. "Slow-roasted. Looks like he was alive when the fire started."

"Christ," McGrath said. "Is it connected?"

"No doubt about that," he said.

"You sure?" McGrath asked him.

"No doubt about it," Milosevic said again. "I found other stuff. Burned, but it's all pretty clear. There's a thirty-eight right in the middle of what looks like a metal hinge, could be from a woman's pocketbook, right? Coins, and a lipstick tube, and the metal parts from a mobile phone and a pager. And there are nine wire hangers on the floor. Like you get from a dry cleaner?"

"Christ," McGrath said again. "Conclusions?"

"They stole the Lexus up in Wilmette," Milosevic said.

"Maybe the dentist guy disturbed them in the act. So he went for them and they overpowered him and put him in the trunk. Burned him along with the rest of the evidence."

"Shit," McGrath said. "But where's Holly? Conclusions on that?"

"They took her to Meigs Field," Milosevic said. "It's about a half-mile away. They put her in a private plane and dumped the car right here. That's what they did, Mack. They flew her out somewhere. Four guys, capable of burning another guy up while he was still alive, they've got her alone somewhere, could be a million miles away from here by now."

15

THE WHITE TRUCK droned on, steadily, another hour, maybe sixty more miles. The clock inside Reacher's head ticked around from eleven to twelve noon. The first faint stirrings of worry were building inside him. They had been gone a day. Nearly a full twenty-four hours. Out of the first phase, into the middle phase. No progress. And he was uncomfortable. The air inside the vehicle was about as hot as air could get. They were still lying flat on their backs on the hot mattress, heads together. The horsehair padding was overheating them. Holly's dark hair was damp and spread out. On her left, it was curled against Reacher's bare shoulder.

"Is it because I'm a woman?" she asked. Tense. "Or because I'm younger than you? Or both?"

"Is what because?" he asked back. Wary.

"You think you've got to take care of me," she said. "You're worrying about me, because I'm young and a woman, right? You think I need some older man's help."

Reacher stirred. He didn't really want to move. He wasn't comfortable, but he guessed he was happy enough where he was. In particular, he was happy with the feel of Holly's hair against his shoulder. His life was like that. Whatever happened, there were always some little compensations available.

"Well?" she asked.

"It's not a gender thing, Holly," he said. "Or an age thing. But you do need help, right?"

"And I'm a younger woman and you're an older man," she said. "Therefore obviously you're the one qualified to give it. Couldn't be the other way around, right?"

Reacher shook his head, lying down.

"It's not a gender thing," he said again. "Or an age thing. I'm qualified because I'm qualified, is all. I'm just trying to help you out."

"You're taking stupid risks," she said. "Pushing them and antagonizing them is not the way to do this, for God's sake. You'll get us both killed."

"Bullshit," Reacher said. "They need to see us as people, not cargo."

"Says who?" Holly snapped. "Who suddenly made you the big expert?"

He shrugged at her.

"Let me ask you a question," he said. "If the boot was on the other foot, would you have left me alone in that barn?"

She thought about it

She thought about it.
“Of course I would have,” she said.
He smiled. She was probably telling the truth. He liked her for it.
“OK,” he said. “Next time you tell me, I’m gone. No argument.”
She was quiet for a long moment.
“Good,” she said. “You really want to help me out, you do exactly that.”
He shrugged. Moved a half-inch closer to her.
“Risky for you,” he said. “I get away, they might figure on just wasting you and disappearing.”
“I’ll take the risk,” she said. “That’s what I’m paid for.”
“So who are they?” he asked her. “And what do they want?”
“No idea,” she said.
She said it too quickly. He knew she knew.
“They want you, right?” he said. “Either because they want you personally, or because they want any old FBI agent and you were right there on the spot. How many FBI agents are there?”
“Bureau has twenty-five thousand employees,” she said. “Of which ten thousand are agents.”
“OK,” he said. “So they want you in particular. One out of ten thousand is too big a coincidence. This is not random.”
She looked away. He glanced at her.
“Why, Holly?” he asked.
She shrugged and shook her head.
“I don’t know,” she said.
Too quickly. He glanced at her again. She sounded sure, but there was some big defensive edge there in her reply.
“I don’t know,” she said again. “All I can figure is maybe they mistook me for somebody else from the office.”
Reacher laughed and turned his head toward her. His face touched her hair.
“You’re joking, Holly Johnson,” he said. “You’re not the type of woman gets confused with somebody else. And they watched you three weeks. Long enough to get familiar.”
She smiled away from him, up at the metal roof, ironically.
“Once seen, never forgotten, right?” she said. “I wish.”
“You in any doubt about that?” Reacher said. “You’re the best-looking person I saw this week.”
“Thanks, Reacher,” she said. “It’s Tuesday. You first saw me Monday. Big compliment, right?”
“But you get my drift,” he said.
She sat up, straight from the waist like a gymnast, and used both hands to flip

her leg sideways. Propped herself on one elbow on the mattress. Hooked her hair behind her ear and looked down at him.
“I don’t get anything about you,” she said.
He looked back up at her. Shrugged.
“You got questions, you ask them,” he said. “I’m all in favor of freedom of information.”
“OK,” she said. “Here’s the first question: who the hell are you?”
He shrugged again and smiled.
“Jack Reacher,” he said. “No middle name, thirty-seven years and eight months old, unmarried, club doorman in Chicago.”
“Bullshit,” she said.
“Bullshit?” he repeated. “Which part? My name, my age, my marital status, or my occupation?”
“Your occupation,” she said. “You’re not a club doorman.”
“I’m not?” he said. “So what am I?”
“You’re a soldier,” she said. “You’re in the Army.”
“I am?” he said.
“It’s pretty obvious,” she said. “My dad is Army. I’ve lived on bases all my life. Everybody I ever saw was in the Army, right up until I was eighteen years old. I know what soldiers look like. I know how they act. I was pretty sure you were one. Then you took your shirt off, and I knew for definite.”
Reacher grinned.
“Why?” he said. “Is that a really uncouth, soldierly kind of a thing to do?”
Holly grinned back at him. Shook her head. Her hair came loose. She swept it back behind her ear, one finger bent like a small pale hook.
“That scar on your stomach,” she said. “Those awful stitches. That’s a MASH job for sure. Some field hospital somewhere, took them about a minute and a half. Any civilian surgeon did stitches like that, he’d get sued for malpractice so fast he’d get dizzy.”
Reacher ran his finger over the lumpy skin. The stitches looked like a plan of the ties at a railroad yard.
“The guy was busy,” he said. “I thought he did pretty well, considering the circumstances. It was in Beirut. I was a long way down the priority list. I was only bleeding to death slowly.”
“So I’m right?” Holly said. “You’re a soldier?”
Reacher smiled up at her again and shook his head.
“I’m a doorman,” he said. “Like I told you. Blues joint on the South Side. You should try it. Much better than the tourist places.”
She glanced between his huge scar and his face. Clamped her lips and slowly

shook her head. Reacher nodded at her, like he was conceding the point.
“I used to be a soldier,” he said. “I got out, fourteen months ago.”
“What unit?” she asked.
“Military police,” he said.
She screwed her face up in a mock grimace.
“The baddest of the bad,” she said. “Nobody likes you guys.”
“Tell me about it,” Reacher said.
“Explains a lot of things,” she said. “You guys get a lot of special training. So I guess you really are qualified. You should have told me, damn it. Now I guess I have to apologize for what I said.”
He made no reply to that.
“Where were you stationed?” she asked.
“All over the world,” he said. “Europe, Far East, Middle East. Got so I didn’t know which way was up.”
“Rank?” she asked.
“Major,” he said.
“Medals?” she asked.
He shrugged.
“Dozens of the damn things,” he said. “You know how it is. Theater medals, of course, plus a Silver Star, two Bronzes, Purple Heart from Beirut, campaign things from Panama and Grenada and Desert Shield and Desert Storm.”
“A Silver Star?” she asked. “What for?”
“Beirut,” he said. “Pulled some guys out of the bunker.”
“And you got wounded doing that?” she said. “That’s how you got the scar and the Purple Heart?”
“I was already wounded,” he said. “Got wounded before I went in. I think that was what impressed them.”
“Hero, right?” she said.
He smiled and shook his head.
“No way,” he said. “I wasn’t feeling anything. Wasn’t thinking. Too shocked. I didn’t even know I was hit until afterward. If I’d known, I’d have fallen down in a dead faint. My intestine was hanging out. Looked really awful. It was bright pink. Sort of squashy.”
Holly was quiet for a second. The truck droned on. Another twenty miles covered. North or south or west. Probably.
“How long were you in the service?” she asked.
“All my life,” he said. “My old man was a Marine officer, served all over. He married a Frenchwoman in Korea. I was born in Berlin. Never even saw the States until I was nine years old. Five minutes later we were in the Philippines.

Round and round the world we went. Longest I was ever anywhere was four years at West Point. Then I joined up and it started all over again. Round and round the world."
"Where's your family now?" she asked.
"Dead," he said. "The old man died, what? Ten years ago, I guess. My mother died two years later. I buried the Silver Star with her. She won it for me, really. Do what you're supposed to do, she used to tell me. About a million times a day, in a thick French accent."
"Brothers and sisters?" she said.
"I had a brother," he said. "He died last year. I'm the last Reacher on earth, far as I know."
"When did you muster out?" she said.
"April last year," he said. "Fourteen months ago."
"Why?" she asked.
Reacher shrugged.
"Just lost interest, I guess," he said. "The defense cuts were happening. Made the Army seem unnecessary, somehow. Like if they didn't need the biggest and the best, they didn't need me. Didn't want to be part of something small and second-rate. So I left. Arrogant, or what?"
She laughed.
"So you became a doorman?" she said. "From a decorated Major to a doorman? Isn't that kind of second-rate?"
"Wasn't like that," he said. "I didn't set out to be a doorman, like it was a new career move or anything. It's only temporary. I only got to Chicago on Friday. I was planning to move on, maybe Wednesday. I was thinking about going up to Wisconsin. Supposed to be a nice place, this time of year."
"Friday to Wednesday?" Holly said. "You got a problem with commitment or something?"
"I guess," he said. "Thirty-six years I was always where somebody else told me to be. Very structured sort of a life. I suppose I'm reacting against it. I love moving around when I feel like it. It's like a drug. Longest I've ever stayed anywhere was ten consecutive days. Last fall, in Georgia. Ten days, out of fourteen months. Apart from that, I've been on the road, more or less all the time."
"Making a living by working the door at clubs?" she asked.
"That was unusual," he said. "Mostly I don't work at all, just live off my savings. But I came up to Chicago with a singer, one thing led to another, I got asked to work the door at the club the guy was headed for."
"So what do you do if you don't work?" she asked.

“I look at things,” he said. “You got to remember, I’m a thirty-seven-year-old American, but I’ve never really been in America much. You been up the Empire State Building?”
“Of course,” she said.
“I hadn’t,” he said. “Not before last year. You been to the Washington museums?”
“Sure,” she said.
“I hadn’t,” he said again. “Not before last year. All that kind of stuff. Boston, New York, Washington, Chicago, New Orleans, Mount Rushmore, the Golden Gate, Niagara. I’m like a tourist. Like I’m catching up, right?”
“I’m the other way around,” Holly said. “I like to travel overseas.”
Reacher shrugged.
“I’ve seen overseas,” he said. “Six continents. I’m going to stay here now.”
“I’ve seen the States,” she said. “My dad traveled all the time, but we stayed here, apart from two tours to Germany.”
Reacher nodded. Thought back to the time he’d spent in Germany, man and boy. Many years, in total.
“You picked up on the soccer in Europe?” he asked.
“Right,” Holly said. “Really big deal there. We were stationed one time near Munich, right? I was just a kid, eleven maybe. They gave my father tickets to some big game in Rotterdam, Holland. European Cup, the Bayern Munich team against some English team, Aston Villa, you ever heard of them?”
Reacher nodded.
“From Birmingham, England,” he said. “I was stationed near a place called Oxford at one point. About an hour away.”
“I hated the Germans,” Holly said. “So arrogant, so overpowering. They were so sure they were going to cream these Brits. I didn’t want to go and watch it happen. But I had to, right? NATO protocol sort of a thing, would have been a big scandal if I’d refused. So we went. And the Brits creamed the Germans. The Germans were so furious. I loved it. And the Aston Villa guys were so cute. I was in love with soccer from that night on. Still am.”
Reacher nodded. He enjoyed watching soccer, to an extent. But you had to be exposed early and gradually. It looked very free-form, but it was a very technical game. Full of hidden attractions. But he could see how a young girl could be seduced by it, long ago in Europe. A frantic night under floodlights in Rotterdam. Resentful and unwilling at first, then hypnotized by the patterns made by the white ball on the green turf. Ending up in love with the game afterward. But something was ringing a warning bell. If the eleven-year-old daughter of an American serviceman had refused to go, it would have caused

some kind of an embarrassment within NATO? Was that what she had said?
“Who was your father?” he asked her. “Sounds like he must have been an important sort of a guy.”
She turned her head away. Wouldn’t answer. Reacher stared at her. Another warning bell was ringing.
“Holly, who the hell is your father?” he asked urgently.
The defensive tone that had been in her voice spread to her face. No answer.
“Who, Holly?” Reacher asked again.
She looked away from him. Spoke to the metal siding of the truck. Her voice was almost lost in the road noise. Defensive as hell.
“General Johnson,” she said quietly. “At that time, he was C-in-C Europe. Do you know him?”
Reacher stared up at her. General Johnson. Holly Johnson. Father and daughter.
“I’ve met him,” he said. “But that’s not the point, is it?”
She glared at him. Furious.
“Why?” she said. “What exactly is the damn point?”
“That’s the reason,” he said. “Your father is the most important military man in America, right? That’s why you’ve been kidnapped, Holly, for God’s sake. These guys don’t want Holly Johnson, FBI agent. The whole FBI thing is incidental. These guys want General Johnson’s daughter.”
She looked down at him like he had just slapped her hard in the face.
“Why?” she said. “Why the hell does everybody assume everything that ever happens to me is because of who my damn father is?”

16

MCGRATH BROUGHT BROGAN with him and met Milosevic at Meigs Field Airport in Chicago. He brought the four computer-aided mug shots and the test picture of Holly Johnson. He came expecting total cooperation from the airport staff. And he got it. Three hyped-up FBI agents in the grip of fear about a colleague are a difficult proposition to handle with anything other than total cooperation.

Meigs Field was a small commercial operation, right out in the lake, water on three sides, just below the 12th Street beach, trying to make a living in the gigantic shadow of O'Hare. Their record keeping was immaculate and their efficiency was first-class. Not so they could be ready to handle FBI inquiries on the spur of the moment, but so they could keep on operating and keep on getting paid right under the nose of the world's toughest competitor. But their records and their efficiency helped McGrath. Helped him realize within about thirty seconds that he was heading up a blind alley.

The Meigs Field staff were certain they had never seen Holly Johnson or any of the four kidnappers at any time. Certainly not on Monday, certainly not around one o'clock. They were adamant about it. They weren't overdoing it. They were just sure about it, with the quiet certainty of people who spend their working days being quietly sure about things, like sending small planes up into the busiest air lanes on the planet.

And there were no suspicious takeoffs from Meigs Field, nowhere between noon and, say, three o'clock. That was clear. The paperwork was explicit on the subject. The three agents were out of there as briskly as they had entered. The tower staff nodded to themselves and forgot all about them before they were even back in their cars in the small parking lot.

"OK, square one," McGrath said. "You guys go check out this dentist situation up in Wilmette. I've got things to do. And I've got to put in a call to Webster. They must be climbing the walls down there in D.C."

SEVENTEEN HUNDRED AND two miles from Meigs Field the young man in the woods wanted instructions. He was a good agent, well trained, but as far as undercover work was concerned he was new and relatively inexperienced. Demand for undercover operators was always increasing. The Bureau was hard put to fill all the slots. So people like him got assigned. Inexperienced people. He knew as long as he always remembered he didn't have all the answers, he'd be OK. He had no ego problem with it. He was always willing to ask for

be OK. He had no ego problem with it. He was always willing to ask for guidance. He was careful. And he was realistic. Realistic enough to know he was now in over his head. Things were turning bad in a way which made him sure they were about to explode into something much worse. How, he didn't know. It was just a feeling. But he trusted his feelings. Trusted them enough to stop and turn around before he reached his special tree. He breathed hard and changed his mind and set off strolling back the way he had come.

WEBSTER HAD BEEN waiting for McGrath's call. That was clear. McGrath got him straightaway, like he'd been sitting there in his big office suite just waiting for the phone to ring.
"Progress, Mack?" Webster asked.
"Some," McGrath said. "We know exactly what happened. We got it all on a security video in a dry cleaner's store. She went in there at twelve-ten. Came out at twelve-fifteen. There were four guys. Three on the street, one in a car. They grabbed her."
"Then what?" Webster asked.
"They were in a stolen sedan," McGrath said. "Looks like they killed the owner to get it. Drove her five miles south, torched the sedan. Along with the owner in the trunk. They burned him alive. He was a dentist, name of Rubin. What they did with Holly, we don't know yet."
In Washington, Harland Webster was silent for a long time.
"Is it worth searching the area?" he asked, eventually.
McGrath's turn to be quiet for a second. Unsure of the implications. Did Webster mean search for a hideout, or search for another body?
"My gut says no," he said. "They must know we could search the area. My feeling is they moved her somewhere else. Maybe far away."
There was silence on the line again. McGrath could hear Webster thinking.
"I agree with you, I guess," Webster said. "They moved her out. But how, exactly? By road? By air?"
"Not air," McGrath said. "We covered commercial flights yesterday. We just hit a private field. Nothing doing."
"What about a helicopter?" Webster said. "In and out, secretly?"
"Not in Chicago, chief," McGrath said. "Not right next door to O'Hare. More radar here than the Air Force has got. Any unauthorized choppers in and out of here, we'd know about it."
"OK," Webster said. "But we need to get this under control. Abduction and homicide, Mack, it's not giving me a good feeling. You figure a second stolen vehicle? Rendezvoused with the stolen sedan?"
"Probably," McGrath said. "We're checking now."

“Any ideas who they were?” Webster said.
“No,” McGrath told him. “We got pretty good pictures off the video. Computer enhancements. We’ll download them to you right away. Four guys, white, somewhere between thirty and forty, three of them kind of alike, ordinary, neat, short hair. The fourth guy is real tall, computer says he’s maybe six five. I figure him for the ringleader. He was the one got to her first.”
“You got any feeling for a motive yet?” Webster asked.
“No idea at all,” McGrath said.
There was silence on the line again.
“OK,” Webster said. “You keeping it real tight up there?”
“Tight as I can,” McGrath said. “Just three of us.”
“Who are you using?” Webster asked.
“Brogan and Milosevic,” McGrath said.
“They any good?” Webster asked.
McGrath grunted. Like he would choose them if they weren’t?
“They know Holly pretty well,” he said. “They’re good enough.”
“Moaners and groaners?” Webster asked. “Or solid, like people used to be?”
“Never heard them complain,” McGrath said. “About anything. They do the work, they do the hours. They don’t even bitch about the pay.”
Webster laughed.
“Can we clone them?” he said.
The levity peaked and died within a couple of seconds. But McGrath appreciated the attempt at morale.
“So how you doing down there?” he asked.
“In what respect, Mack?” Webster said, serious again.
“The old man,” McGrath said. “He giving you any trouble?”
“Which one, Mack?” Webster asked.
“The General?” McGrath said.
“Not yet,” Webster said. “He called this morning, but he was polite. That’s how it goes. Parents are usually pretty calm, the first day or two. They get worked up later. General Johnson won’t be any different. He may be a big shot, but people are all the same underneath, right?”
“Right,” McGrath said. “Have him call me, if he wants firsthand reports. Might help his situation.”
“OK, Mack, thanks,” Webster said. “But I think we should keep this dentist thing away from everybody, just for the moment. Makes the whole deal look worse. Meantime, send me your stuff. I’ll get our people working on it. And don’t worry. We’ll get her back. Bureau looks after its own, right? Never fails.”
The two Bureau chiefs let the lie die into silence and hung up their phones

together.

THE YOUNG MAN strolled out of the forest and came face-to-face with the commander. He was smart enough to throw a big salute and look nervous, but he kept it down to the sort of nervousness any grunt showed around the commander. Nothing more, nothing suspicious. He stood and waited to be spoken to.
“Job for you,” the commander said. “You’re young, right? Good with all this technical shit?”
The man nodded cautiously.
“I can usually puzzle stuff out, sir,” he said.
The commander nodded back.
“We got a new toy,” he said. “Scanner, for radio frequencies. I want a watch kept.”
The young man’s blood froze hard.
“Why, sir?” he asked. “You think somebody’s using a radio transmitter?”
“Possibly,” the commander said. “I trust nobody and I suspect everybody. I can’t be too careful. Not right now. Got to look after the details. You know what they say? Genius is in the details, right?”
The young man swallowed and nodded.
“So get it set up,” the commander said. “Make a duty rota. Two shifts, sixteen hours a day, OK? Constant vigilance is what we need right now.”
The commander turned away. The young man nodded and breathed out. Glanced instinctively back in the direction of his special tree and blessed his feelings.

MILOSEVIC DROVE BROGAN north in his new truck. They detoured via the Wilmette post office so Brogan could mail his twin alimony checks. Then they went looking for the dead dentist’s building. There was a local uniform waiting for them in the parking lot in back. He was unapologetic about sitting on the report from the dentist’s wife. Milosevic started giving him a hard time about that, like it made the guy personally responsible for Holly Johnson’s abduction.
“Lots of husbands disappear,” the guy said. “Happens all the time. This is Wilmette, right? Men are the same here as anywhere, only here they got the money to make it all happen. What can I say?”
Milosevic was unsympathetic. The cop had made two other errors. First, he had assumed that it was the murder of the dentist that had brought the FBI out into his jurisdiction. Second, he was more uptight about covering his own ass on the issue than he was about four killers snatching Holly Johnson right off the street. Milosevic was out of patience with the guy. But then the guy redeemed himself.

“What is it with people?” he said. “Burning automobiles? Some asshole burned a car out by the lake. We got to get it moved. Residents are giving us noise.”
“Where exactly?” Milosevic asked him.
The cop shrugged. He was anxious to be very precise.
“That turnout on the shore,” he said. “On Sheridan Road, just this side of Washington Park. Never saw such a thing before, not in Wilmette.”
Milosevic and Brogan went to check it out. They followed the cop in his shiny cruiser. He led them to the place. It wasn’t a car. It was a pickup, a ten-year-old Dodge. No license plates. Doused with gasoline and pretty much totally burned out.
“Happened yesterday,” the cop said. “Spotted about seven-thirty in the morning. Commuters were calling it in, on their way to work, one after the other.”
He circled around and looked over the wreck, carefully.
“Not local,” he said. “That’s my guess.”
“Why not?” Milosevic asked him.
“This is ten years old, right?” the guy said. “Around here, there are a few pickups, but they’re toys, you know? Big V-8s, lots of chrome? An old thing like this, nobody would give it room on their driveway.”
“What about gardeners?” Brogan asked. “Pool boys, something like that?”
“Why would they burn it?” the cop said. “They needed to change it, they’d chop it in against a new one, right? Nobody burns a business asset, right?”
Milosevic thought about it and nodded.
“OK,” he said. “This is ours. Federal investigation. We’ll send a flatbed for it soon as we can. Meanwhile, you guard it, OK? And do it properly, for God’s sake. Don’t let anybody near it.”
“Why?” the cop asked.
Milosevic looked at him like he was a moron.
“This is their truck,” he said. “They dumped it here and stole the Lexus for the actual heist.”
The Wilmette cop looked at Milosevic’s agitated face and then he looked across at the burned truck. He wondered for a moment how four guys could fit across the Dodge’s bench seat. But he didn’t say anything. He didn’t want to risk more ridicule. He just nodded.

17

HOLLY WAS SITTING up on the mattress, one knee under her chin, the injured leg straight out. Reacher was sitting up beside her, hunched forward, worried, one hand fighting the bounce of the truck and the other hand plunged into his hair.
“What about your mother?” he asked.
“Was your father famous?” Holly asked him back.
Reacher shook his head.
“Hardly,” he said. “Guys in his unit knew who he was, I guess.”
“So you don’t know what it’s like,” she said. “Every damn thing you do, it happens because of your father. I got straight A’s in school, I went to Yale and Harvard, went to Wall Street, but it wasn’t me doing it, it was this weird other person called General Johnson’s daughter doing it. It’s been just the same with the Bureau. Everybody assumes I made it because of my father, and ever since I got there half the people are still treating me especially nice, and the other half are still treating me especially tough just to prove how much they’re not impressed.”
Reacher nodded. Thought about it. He was a guy who had done better than his father. Forged ahead, in the traditional way. Left the old man behind. But he’d known guys with famous parents. The sons of great soldiers. Even the grandsons. However bright they burned, their light was always lost in the glow.
“OK, so it’s tough,” he said. “And the rest of your life you can try to ignore it, but right now it needs dealing with. It opens up a whole new can of worms.”
She nodded. Blew an exasperated sigh. Reacher glanced at her in the gloom.
“How long ago did you figure it out?” he asked.
“Immediately, I guess,” she said. “Like I told you, it’s a habit. Everybody assumes everything happens because of my father. Me too.”
“Well, thanks for telling me so soon,” Reacher said.
She didn’t reply to that. They lapsed into silence. The air was stifling and the heat was somehow mixing with the relentless drone of the noise. The dark and the temperature and the sound were like a thick soup inside the truck. Reacher felt like he was drowning in it. But it was the uncertainty that was doing it to him. Many times he’d traveled thirty hours at a stretch in transport planes, worse conditions than these. It was the huge new dimension of uncertainty that was unsettling him.
“So what about your mother?” he asked her again.
She shook her head

She shook her head.
“She died,” she said. “I was twenty, in school. Some weird cancer.”
“I’m sorry,” he said. Paused, nervously. “Brothers and sisters?”
She shook her head again.
“Just me,” she said.
He nodded, reluctantly.
“I was afraid of that,” he said. “I was kind of hoping this could be about something else, you know, maybe your mother was a judge or you had a brother or a sister who was a congressman or something.”
“Forget it,” she said. “There’s just me. Me and Dad. This is about Dad.”
“But what about him?” he said. “What the hell is this supposed to achieve? Ransom? Forget about it. Your old man’s a big deal, but he’s just a soldier, been clawing his way up the Army pay scales all his life. Faster than most guys, I agree, but I know those pay scales. I was on those scales thirteen years. Didn’t make me rich and they won’t have made him rich. Not rich enough for anybody to be thinking about a ransom. Somebody wanted a ransom out of kidnapping somebody’s daughter, there are a million people ahead of you in Chicago alone.”
Holly nodded.
“This is about influence,” she said. “He’s responsible for two million people and two hundred billion dollars a year. Scope for influence there, right?”
Reacher shook his head.
“No,” he said. “That’s the problem. I can’t see what this is liable to achieve.”
He got to his knees and crawled forward along the mattresses.
“Hell are you doing?” Holly asked him.
“We got to talk to them,” he said. “Before we get where we’re going.”
He lifted his big fist and started pounding on the bulkhead. Hard as he could. Right behind where he figured the driver’s head must be. He kept on pounding until he got what he wanted. Took a while. Several minutes. His fist got sore. But the truck lurched off the pavement and started slowing. He felt the front wheels washing into gravel. The brakes bit in. He was pressed up against the bulkhead by the momentum. Holly rolled a couple of feet along the mattress. Gasped in pain as her knee twisted against the motion.
“Pulled off the highway,” Reacher said. “Middle of nowhere.”
“This is a big mistake, Reacher,” Holly said.
He shrugged and took her hand and helped her into a sitting position, back against the bulkhead. Then he slid forward and put himself between her and the rear doors. He heard the three guys getting out of the cab. Doors slammed. He heard their footsteps crunching over the gravel. Two coming down the right flank, one down the left. He heard the key sliding into the lock. The handle turned.

The left-hand rear door opened two inches. First thing into the truck was the muzzle of the shotgun. Beyond it, Reacher saw a meaningless sliver of sky. Bright blue, small white clouds. Could have been anywhere in the hemisphere. Second thing into the truck was a Glock 17. Then a wrist. The cuff of a cotton shirt. The Glock was rock-steady. Loder.
“This better be good, bitch,” he called.
Hostile. A lot of tension in the voice.
“We need to talk,” Reacher called back.
The second Glock appeared in the narrow gap. Shaking slightly.
“Talk about what, asshole?” Loder called.
Reacher listened to the stress in the guy’s voice and watched the second Glock trembling through its random zigzags.
“This isn’t going to work, guys,” he said. “Whoever told you to do this, he isn’t thinking straight. Maybe it felt like some kind of a smart move, but it’s all wrong. It isn’t going to achieve anything. It’s just going to get you guys in a shitload of trouble.”
There was silence at the rear of the truck. Just for a second. But long enough to tell Reacher that Holly was right. Long enough to know he’d made a bad mistake. The steady Glock snapped back out of sight. The shotgun jerked, like it had just changed ownership. Reacher flung himself forward and smashed Holly down flat on the mattress. The shotgun barrel tipped upward. Reacher heard the small click of the trigger a tiny fraction before an enormous explosion. The shotgun fired into the roof. A huge blast. A hundred tiny holes appeared in the metal. A hundred tiny points of blue light. Spent shot rattled and bounced down and ricocheted around the truck like hail. Then the sound of the gun faded into the hum of temporary deafness.
Reacher felt the slam of the door. The sliver of daylight cut off. He felt the rock of the vehicle as the three men climbed back into the cab. He felt the shake as the rough diesel caught. Then a forward lurch and a yaw to the left as the truck pulled back onto the highway.

FIRST THING REACHER heard as his hearing came back was a quiet keening as the air whistled out through the hundred pellet holes in the roof. It grew louder as the miles rolled by. A hundred high-pitched whistles, all grouped together a couple of semitones apart, fighting and warbling like some kind of demented birdsong.
“Insane, right?” Holly said.
“Me or them?” he said.
He nodded an apology. She nodded back and struggled up to a sitting position.

Used both hands to straighten her knee. The holes in the roof were letting light through. Enough light that Reacher could see her face clearly. He could interpret her expression. He could see the flicker of pain. Like a blind coming down in her eyes, then snapping back up. He knelt and swept the spent pellets off the mattress. They rattled across the metal floor.
“Now you’ve got to get out,” she said. “You’ll get yourself killed soon.”
The highlights in her hair flashed under the random bright illumination.
“I mean it,” she said. “Qualified or not, I can’t let you stay.”
“I know you can’t,” he said.
He used his discarded shirt to sweep the pellets into a pile near the doors. Then he straightened the mattresses and lay back down. Rocked gently with the motion. Stared at the holes in the sheet metal above him. They were like a map of some distant galaxy.
“My father would do what it takes to get me back,” Holly said.
Talking was harder than it had been before. The drone of the motor and the rumble of the road were complicated by the high-pitched whistle from the roof. A full spectrum of noise. Holly lay down next to Reacher. She put her head next to his. Her hair fanned out and brushed his cheek and fell to his neck. She squirmed her hips and straightened her leg. There was still space between their bodies. The decorous V shape was still there. But the angle was a little tighter than it had been before.
“But what can he do?” Reacher said. “Talk me through it.”
“They’re going to make some kind of demand,” she said. “You know, do this or do that, or we hurt your girl.”
She spoke slowly and there was a tremor in her voice. Reacher let his hand drop into the space between them and found hers. He took it and squeezed gently.
“Doesn’t make any sense,” he said. “Think about it. What does your father do? He implements long-term policy, and he’s responsible for short-term readiness. Congress and the President and the Defense Secretary thrash out the long-term policy, right? So if the Joint Chairman tried to stand in their way, they’d just replace him. Especially if they know he’s under this kind of pressure, right?”
“What about short-term readiness?” she said.
“Same sort of a thing,” Reacher said. “He’s only chairman of a committee. The individual Chiefs of Staff are in there, too. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines. If they’re all singing a different song from what your father is reporting upward, that’s not going to stay a secret for long, is it? They’ll just replace him. Take him out of the equation altogether.”
Holly turned her head. Looked straight at him.
“Are you sure?” she said. “Suppose these guys are working for Iraq or

something? Suppose Saddam wants Kuwait again. But he doesn't want another Desert Storm. So he has me kidnapped, and my father says sorry, can't be done, for all kinds of invented reasons?"
Reacher shrugged.
"The answer's right there in the words you used," he said. "The reasons would be invented. Fact is, we could do Desert Storm again, if we had to. No problem. Everybody knows that. So if your father started denying it, everybody would know he was bullshitting, and everybody would know why. They'd just sideline him. The military is a tough place, Holly, no room for sentiment. If that's the strategy these guys are pursuing, they're wasting their time. It can't work."
She was quiet for a long moment.
"Then maybe this is about revenge," she said slowly. "Maybe somebody is punishing him for something in the past. Maybe I'm going to Iraq. Maybe they want to make him apologize for Desert Storm. Or Panama, or Grenada, or lots of things."
Reacher lay on his back and rocked with the motion. He could feel slight breaths of air stirring, because of the holes in the roof. He realized the truck was now a lot cooler, because of the new ventilation. Or because of his new mood.
"Too arcane," he said. "You'd have to be a pretty acute analyst to blame the Joint Chairman for all that stuff. There's a string of more obvious targets. Higher-profile people, right? The President, the Defense Secretary, Foreign Service people, field generals. If Baghdad was looking for a public humiliation, they'd pick somebody their people could identify, not some paper shuffler from the Pentagon."
"So what the hell is this about?" Holly said.
Reacher shrugged again.
"Ultimately, nothing," he said. "They haven't thought it through properly. That's what makes them so dangerous. They're competent, but they're stupid."

THE TRUCK DRONED on another six hours. Another three hundred and fifty miles, according to Reacher's guess. The inside temperature had cooled, but Reacher wasn't trying to estimate their direction by the temperature anymore. The pellet holes in the roof had upset that calculation. He was relying on dead reckoning instead. A total of eight hundred miles from Chicago, he figured, and not in an easterly direction. That left a big spread of possibilities. He trawled clockwise around the map in his head. Could be in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana. Could be in Texas, Oklahoma, the southwest corner of Kansas. Probably no farther west than that. Reacher's mental map had brown shading there, showing the eastern slopes of the mountains, and the truck wasn't

laboring up any grades. Could be in Nebraska or South Dakota. Maybe he was going to pass right by Mount Rushmore, second time in his life. Could have kept on past Minneapolis, into North Dakota. Eight hundred miles from Chicago, anywhere along a giant arc drawn across the continent.

THE LIGHT COMING in through the pellet holes had been gone for hours when the truck slowed and steered right. Up a ramp. Holly stirred and turned her head. Looked straight at Reacher. Questions in her eyes. Reacher shrugged back and waited. The truck paused and swung a right. Cruised down a straight road, then hung a left, a right, and continued on straight, slower. Reacher sat up and found his shirt. Shrugged himself into it. Holly sat up.

"Another hideout," she said. "This is a well-planned operation, Reacher."

This time it was a horse farm. The truck bumped down a long track and turned. Backed up. Reacher heard one of the guys getting out. His door slammed. The truck lurched backward into another building. Reacher heard the exhaust noise beat against the walls. Holly smelled horse smell. The engine died. The other two guys got out. Reacher heard the three of them grouping at the rear of the truck. Their key slid into the lock. The door cracked open. The shotgun poked in through the gap. This time, not pointing upward. Pointing level.

"Out," Loder called. "The bitch first. On its own."

Holly froze. Then she shrugged at Reacher and slid across the mattresses. The door snapped wide open and two pairs of hands seized her and dragged her out. The driver moved into view, aiming the shotgun straight in at Reacher. His finger was tight on the trigger.

"Do something, asshole," he said. "Please, just give me a damn excuse."

Reacher stared at him. Waited five long minutes. Then the shotgun jabbed forward. A Glock appeared next to it. Loder gestured. Reacher moved slowly forward toward the two muzzles. Loder leaned in and snapped a handcuff onto his wrist. Looped the chain into the free half and locked it. Used the chain to drag him out of the truck by the arm. They were in a horse barn. It was a wooden structure. Much smaller than the cow barn at their previous location. Much older. It came from a different generation of agriculture. There were two rows of stalls flanking an aisle. The floor was some kind of cobbled stone. Green with moss.

The central aisle was wide enough for horses, but not wide enough for the truck. It was backed just inside the door. Reacher saw a frame of sky around the rear of the vehicle. A big, dark sky. Could have been anywhere. He was led like a horse down the cobbled aisle. Loder was holding the chain. Stevie was walking sideways next to Reacher. His Glock was jammed high up against Reacher's

temple. The driver was following, with the shotgun pressed hard into Reacher's kidney. It bumped with every step. They stopped at the end stall, farthest from the door. Holly was chained up in the space opposite. She was wearing a handcuff, right wrist, chain looped through the spare half into an iron ring bolted into the back wall of the stall.
The two guys with the guns fanned out in a loose arc and Loder shoved Reacher into his stall. Opened the cuff with the key. Looped the chain through the iron ring bolted into the timber on the back wall, looped it again, twice, and relocked it into the cuff. He pulled at it and shook it to confirm it was secure.
"Mattresses," Reacher said. "Bring us the mattresses out of the truck."
Loder shook his head, but the driver smiled and nodded.
"OK," he said. "Good idea, asshole."
He stepped up inside and dragged the queen-size out. Struggled with it all the way down the aisle and flopped it into Holly's stall. Kicked it straight.
"The bitch gets one," he said. "You don't."
He started laughing and the other two joined in. They strolled away down the aisle. The driver pulled the truck forward out of the barn and the heavy doors creaked shut behind it. Reacher heard a heavy crossbeam slamming down into its retaining brackets on the outside and the rattle of another chain and a padlock. He glanced across at Holly. Then he looked down at the damp stone floor.

REACHER WAS SQUATTED down, jammed into the far angle of the stall's wooden walls. He was waiting for the three guys to come back with dinner. They arrived after an hour. With one Glock and the shotgun. And one metal messtin. Stevie walked in with it. The driver took it from him and handed it to Holly. He stood there leering at her for a second and then turned to face Reacher. Pointed the shotgun at him.
"Bitch eats," he said. "You don't."
Reacher didn't get up. He just shrugged through the gloom.
"That's a loss I can just about survive," he said.
Nobody replied to that. They just strolled back out. Pushed the heavy wooden doors shut. Dropped the crossbeam into place and chained it up. Reacher listened to their footsteps fade away and turned to Holly.
"What is it?" he asked.
She shrugged across the distance at him.
"Some sort of a thin stew," she said. "Or a thick soup, I guess. One or the other. You want some?"
"They give you a fork?" he asked.
"No, a spoon," she said.
"Shit," he said. "Can't do anything with a damn spoon."

"Shit," he said. "Can't do anything with a damn spoon."
"You want some?" she asked again.
"Can you reach?" he said.
She spent some time eating, then she stretched out. One arm tight against the chain, the other pushing the messtin across the floor. Then she swiveled and used her good foot to slide the tin farther across the stone. Reacher slid forward, feet first, as far as his chain would let him go. He figured if he could stretch far enough, he could hook his foot around the tin and drag it in toward him. But it was hopeless. He was six five, and his arms were about the longest the Army tailors had ever seen, but even so he came up four feet short. He and Holly were stretched out in a perfect straight line, as near together as their chains would let them get, but the messtin was still way out of his reach.
"Forget it," he said. "Get it back while you can."
She hooked her own foot around the tin and pulled it back.
"Sorry," she said. "You're going to be hungry."
"I'll survive," he said. "Probably awful, anyway."
"Right," she said. "It's shit. Tastes like dog food."
Reacher stared through the dark at her. He was suddenly worried.

HOLLY LAY DOWN apologetically on her mattress and calmly went to sleep, but Reacher stayed awake. Not because of the stone floor. It was cold and damp, and hard. The cobblestones were wickedly lumpy. But that was not the reason. He was waiting for something. He was ticking off the minutes in his head, and he was waiting. His guess was it would be about three hours, maybe four. Way into the small hours, when resistance is low and patience runs out.
A long wait. The thirteen-thousand-seven-hundred-and-sixty-first night of his life, way down there in the bottom third of the scale, lying awake and waiting for something to happen. Something bad. Something he maybe had no chance of preventing. It was coming. He was certain of that. He'd seen the signs. He lay and waited for it, ticking off the minutes. Three hours, maybe four.

IT HAPPENED AFTER three hours and thirty-four minutes. The nameless driver came back into the barn. Wide awake and alone. Reacher heard his soft footsteps on the track outside. He heard the rattle of the padlock and the chain. He heard him lift the heavy crossbar out of its brackets. The barn door opened. A bar of bright moonlight fell across the floor. The driver stepped through it. Reacher saw a flash of his pink pig's face. The guy hurried down the aisle. No weapon in his hand.
"I'm watching you," Reacher said, quietly. "You back off, or you're a dead man."

man.
The guy stopped opposite. He wasn't a complete moron. He stayed well out of range. His bright eyes traveled up from the handcuff on Reacher's wrist, along the chain, and rested on the iron ring in the wall. Then he smiled.
"You watch if you want to," he said. "I don't mind an audience. And you might learn something."
Holly stirred and woke up. Raised her head and glanced around, blinking in the dark.
"What's going on?" she said.
The driver turned to her. Reacher couldn't see his face. It was turned away. But he could see Holly's.
"We're going to have us a little fun, bitch," the driver said. "Just you and me, with your asshole friend here, watching and learning."
He put his hands down to his waist and unbuckled his belt. Holly stared at him. Started to sit up.
"Got to be joking," she said. "You come near me, I'll kill you."
"You wouldn't do that," the driver said. "Now would you? After I gave you a mattress and all? Just so we could be comfortable while we're doing it?"
Reacher stood up in his stall. His chain clanked loudly in the silent night.
"I'll kill you," he called. "You touch her, you're a dead man."
He said it once, and then he said it again. But it was like the guy wasn't hearing him. Like he was deaf. Reacher was hit with a clang of fear. If the guy wasn't going to listen to him, there was nothing he could do. He shook his chain. It rattled loudly through the silence of the night. It had no effect. The guy was just ignoring him.
"You come near me, I'll kill you," Holly said again.
Her leg was slowing her down. She was trapped in an awkward struggle to stand up. The driver darted into her stall. Raised his foot and stamped it down on her knee. She screamed in agony and collapsed and curled into a ball.
"You do what I tell you, bitch," the driver said. "Exactly what I tell you, or you'll never walk again."
Holly's scream died into a sob. The driver pulled his foot back and carefully kicked her knee like he was aiming for a field goal right at the end of the last quarter. She screamed again.
"You're a dead man," Reacher yelled.
The driver turned around and faced him. Smiled a wide smile.
"You keep your mouth tight shut," he said. "One more squeak out of you, it'll be harder on the bitch, OK?"
The ends of his belt were hanging down. He balled his fists and propped them on his hips. His big vivid face was glowing. His hair was bushed up like he'd just

his lips. His big vivid face was glowing. His hair was bushed up like he'd just washed it and combed it back. He turned his head and spoke to Holly over his shoulder.
"You wearing anything under that suit?" he asked her.
Holly didn't speak. Silence in the barn. The guy turned to face her. Reacher saw her tracking his movements.
"I asked you a question, bitch," he said. "You want another kick?"
She didn't reply. She was breathing hard. Fighting the pain. The driver unzipped his pants. The sound of the zip was loud. It fought with the rasping of three people breathing hard.
"You see this?" he asked. "You know what this is?"
"Sort of," Holly muttered. "It looks a little like a penis, only smaller."
He stared at her, blankly. Then he bellowed in rage and rushed into her stall, swinging his foot. Holly dodged away. His short wide leg swung and connected with nothing. He staggered off balance. Holly's eyes narrowed in a gleam of triumph. She dodged back and smashed her elbow into his stomach. She did it right. Used his own momentum against him, used all her weight like she wanted to punch his spine right out through his back. Caught him with a solid blow. The guy gasped and spun away.
Reacher whooped in admiration. And relief. He thought: couldn't have done it better myself, kid. The guy was heaving. Reacher saw his face, crumpled in pain. Holly was snarling in triumph. She scrambled on one knee after him. Going for his groin. Reacher willed her on. She launched herself at him. The guy turned and took it on the thigh. Holly had planned for that. It left his throat open to her elbow. Reacher saw it. Holly saw it. She lined it up. The killing blow. A vicious arcing curve. It was going to rip his head off. She swung it in. Then her chain snapped tight and stopped her short. It clanked hard against the iron ring and jerked her backward.
Reacher's grin froze on his face. The guy staggered out of range. Stooped and panted and caught his breath. Then he straightened up and hitched his belt higher. Holly faced him, one-handed. Her chain was tight against the wall, vibrating with the tension she had on it.
"I like a fighter," the guy gasped. "Makes it more interesting for me. But make sure you save yourself some energy for later. I don't want you just lying there."
Holly glared at him, breathing hard. Crackling with aggression. But she was one-handed. The guy stepped in again and she swung a stinging punch. Fast and low. He crowded left and blocked it. She couldn't deliver the follow-up. Her other arm was pinned back. He raised his foot and kicked for her stomach. She arched around it. He kicked out again and stumbled straight into an elbow, hard against his ear. It was the wrong elbow, with no force behind it because of her

impossible position. A poor blow. It left her off balance. The driver stepped close and kicked her in the gut. She went down. He kicked out again and caught her knee. Reacher heard it crunch. She screamed in agony. Collapsed on the mattress. The driver breathed fast and stood there.
“I asked you a damn question,” he said.
Holly was deathly white and trembling. She was writhing around on the mattress, one arm pinned behind her, gasping with the pain. Reacher saw her face, flashing through the bar of bright moonlight.
“I’m waiting, bitch,” the guy said.
Reacher saw her face again. Saw she was beaten. The fight was out of her.
“Want another kicking?” the driver said.
There was silence in the barn again.
“I’m waiting for an answer,” the guy said.
Reacher stared over, waiting. There was still silence. Just the rasping of three people breathing hard in the quiet. Then Holly spoke.
“What was the question?” she said quietly.
The guy smiled down at her.
“You wearing anything under that suit?” he said.
Holly nodded. Didn’t speak.
“OK, what?” the guy said to her.
“Underwear,” she said, quietly.
The guy cupped a hand behind his ear.
“Can’t hear you, bitch,” he said.
“I’m wearing, underwear, you bastard,” she said, louder.
The guy shook his head.
“Bad name,” he said. “I’m going to need an apology for that.”
“Screw you,” Holly said.
“I’ll kick you again,” the guy said. “In the knee. I do that, you’ll never walk without a stick, the whole rest of your life, you bitch.”
Holly looked away.
“Your choice, bitch,” the guy said.
He raised his foot. Holly stared down at her mattress.
“OK, I apologize,” she said. “I’m sorry.”
The guy nodded, happily.
“Describe your underwear to me,” he said. “Lots of detail.”
She shrugged. Turned her face away and spoke to the wooden wall.
“Bra and pants,” she said. “Victoria’s Secret. Dark peach.”
“Skimpy?” the driver asked.
She shrugged again, miserably, like she knew for sure what the next question

was going to be.
“I guess,” she said.
“Want to show it to me?” the guy said.
“No,” she said.
The driver took a step closer.
“So you do want another kicking?” he said.
She didn’t speak. The guy cupped his hand behind his ear again.
“Can’t hear you, bitch,” he said.
“What was the question?” Holly muttered.
“You want another kicking?” the guy said.
Holly shook her head.
“No,” she said again.
“OK,” he said. “Show me your underwear, and you won’t get one.”
He raised his foot. Holly raised her hand. It went to the top button on her suit. Reacher watched her. There were five buttons down the front of the suit. Reacher willed her to undo each of them slowly and rhythmically. He needed her to do that. It was vital. Slowly and rhythmically, Holly, he pleaded silently. He gripped his chain with both hands. Four feet from where it looped into the iron ring on the back wall. He tightened his hands around it.
She undid the top button. Reacher counted: one. The driver leered down. Her hand slid to the next button. Reacher tightened his grip again. She undid the second button. Reacher counted: two. Her hand slid down to the third button. Reacher turned square-on to face the rear wall of his stall and took a deep breath. Turned his head and watched over his shoulder. Holly undid the third button. Her breasts swelled out. Dark peach brassiere. Skimpy and lacy. The driver shuffled from foot to foot. Reacher counted: three. He exhaled right from the bottom of his lungs. Holly’s hand slid down to the fourth button. Reacher took a deep breath, the deepest breath of his life. He tightened his hold on the chain until his knuckles shone white. Holly undid the fourth button. Reacher counted: four. Her hand slid down. Paused a beat. Waited. Undid the fifth button. Her suit fell open. The driver leered down and made a small sound. Reacher jerked back and smashed his foot into the wall. Right under the iron ring. He smashed his weight backward against the chain, two hundred and twenty pounds of coiled fury exploding against the force of his kick. Splinters of damp wood burst out of the wall. The old planks shattered. The bolts tore right out of the timber. Reacher was hurled backward. He swarmed up to his feet, his chain whipping and flailing angrily behind him.
“Five!” he screamed.
He seized the driver by the arm and hurled him into his stall. Threw him against

the back wall. The guy smashed into it and hung like a broken doll. He staggered forward and Reacher kicked him in the stomach. The guy jackknifed in the air, feet right off the ground, and smashed flat on his face on the cobblestones. Reacher doubled his chain and swung it through the air. Aimed the lethal length at the guy's head like a giant metal whip. The iron ring centrifuged out like an old medieval weapon. But at the last second Reacher changed his mind. Wrenched the chain out of its trajectory and let it smash and spark into the stones on the floor. He grabbed the driver, one hand on his collar and one hand in his hair. Lifted him bodily across the aisle to Holly's mattress. Jammed his ugly face down into the softness and leaned on him until he suffocated. The guy bucked and thrashed, but Reacher just planted a giant hand flat on the back of his skull and waited patiently until he died.

HOLLY WAS STARING at the corpse and Reacher was sitting next to her, panting. He was spent and limp from the explosive force of tearing the iron ring out of the wall. It felt like a lifetime of physical effort had gone into one split second. A lifetime supply of adrenaline was boiling through him. The clock inside his head had stopped. He had no idea how long they had been sitting there. He shook himself and staggered to his feet. Dragged the body away and left it in the aisle, up near the open door. Then he wandered back and squatted next to Holly. His fingers were bruised from his desperate grip on the chain, but he forced them to be delicate. He did up all her buttons, one by one, right to the top. She was taking quick short breaths. Then she flung her arms round his neck and held on tight. Her breathing sucked and blew against his shirt.
They held each other for a long moment. He felt the fury drain out of her. They let each other go and sat side by side on the mattress, staring into the gloom. She turned to him and put her small hand lightly on top of his.
"Now I guess I owe you," she said.
"My pleasure," Reacher said. "Hey, believe me."
"I needed help," she said quietly. "I've been fooling myself."
He flipped his hand over and closed it around hers.
"Bullshit, Holly," he said, gently. "Time to time, we all need help. Don't feel bad about it. If you were fit, you'd have slaughtered him. I could see that. One arm and one leg, you were nearly there. It's just your knee. Pain like that, you've got no chance. Believe me, I know what it's like. After the Beirut thing, I couldn't have taken candy from a baby, best part of a year."
She smiled a slight smile and squeezed his hand. The clock inside his head started up again. Getting close to dawn.

18

SEVEN-TWENTY WEDNESDAY MORNING East Coast time, General Johnson left the Pentagon. He was out of uniform, dressed in a lightweight business suit, and he walked. It was his preferred method of getting around. It was a hot morning in Washington, and already humid, but he stepped out at a steady speed, arms swinging loosely through a small arc, head up, breathing hard.

He walked north through the dust on the shoulder of George Washington Boulevard, along the edge of the great cemetery on his left, through Lady Bird Johnson Park, and across the Arlington Memorial Bridge. Then he walked clockwise around the Lincoln Memorial, past the Vietnam Wall, and turned right along Constitution Avenue, the reflecting pool on his right, the Washington Monument up ahead. He walked past the National Museum of American History, past the National Museum of Natural History, and turned left onto 9th Street. Exactly three and a half miles, on a glorious morning, an hour's brisk walk through one of the world's great capital cities, past landmarks the world's tourists flock to photograph, and he saw absolutely nothing at all except the dull mist of worry hanging just in front of his eyes.

He crossed Pennsylvania Avenue and entered the Hoover Building through the main doors. Laid his hands palms down on the reception counter.

"The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," he said. "To see the Director."

His hands left two palm-shaped patches of dampness on the laminate. The agent who came down to show him upstairs noticed them. Johnson was silent in the elevator. Harland Webster was waiting for him at the door to his private suite. Johnson nodded to him. Didn't speak. Webster stood aside and gestured him into the inner office. It was dark. There was a lot of mahogany paneling, and the blinds were closed. Johnson sat down in a leather chair and Webster walked around him to his desk.

"I don't want to get in your way," Johnson said.

He looked at Webster. Webster worked for a moment, decoding that sentence. Then he nodded, cautiously.

"You spoke with the President?" he asked.

Johnson nodded.

"You understand it's appropriate for me to do so?" he asked.

"Naturally," Webster said. "Situation like this, nobody should worry about protocol. You call him or go see him?"

"I went to see him," Johnson said. "Several times. I had several long

"I went to see him," Johnson said. "Several times. I had several long conversations with him."
Webster thought: face-to-face. Several long conversations. Worse than I thought, but understandable.
"And?" he asked.
Johnson shrugged.
"He told me he'd placed you in personal command," he said.
Webster nodded.
"Kidnapping," he said. "It's Bureau territory, whoever the victim is."
Johnson nodded, slowly.
"I accept that," he said. "For now."
"But you're anxious," Webster said. "Believe me, General, we're all anxious."
Johnson nodded again. And then he asked the question he'd walked three and a half miles to ask.
"Any progress?" he said.
Webster shrugged.
"We're into the second full day," he said. "I don't like that at all."
He lapsed into silence. The second full day of a kidnap is a kind of threshold. Any early chance of a resolution is gone. The situation starts to harden up. It starts to become a long, intractable set-piece. The danger to the victim increases. The best time to clear up a kidnap is the first day. The second day, the process gets tougher. The chances get smaller.
"Any progress?" Johnson asked again.
Webster looked away. The second day is when the kidnappers start to communicate. That had always been the Bureau's experience. The second day, sick and frustrated about missing your first and best chance, you sit around, hoping desperately the guys will call. If they don't call on the second day, chances are they aren't going to call at all.
"Anything I can do?" Johnson asked.
Webster nodded.
"You can give me a reason," he said. "Who would threaten you like this?"
Johnson shook his head. He had been asking himself the same question since Monday night.
"Nobody," he said.
"You should tell me," Webster said. "Anything secret, anything hidden, better you tell me right now. It's important, for Holly's sake."
"I know that," Johnson said. "But there's nothing. Nothing at all."
Webster nodded. He believed him, because he knew it was true. He had reviewed the whole of Johnson's Bureau file. It was a weighty document. It started on page one with brief biographies of his maternal great-grandparents,

They had come from a small European principality which no longer existed.
“Will Holly be OK?” Johnson asked quietly.
The recent file pages recounted the death of Johnson’s wife. A surprise, a vicious cancer, no more than six weeks, beginning to end. Covert psychiatric opinion commissioned by the Bureau had predicted the old guy would hold up because of his daughter. It had proven to be a correct diagnosis. But if he lost her too, you didn’t need to be a psychiatrist to know he wouldn’t handle it well.
Webster nodded again and put some conviction into his voice.
“She’ll be fine,” he said.
“So what have we got so far?” Johnson asked.
“Four guys,” Webster said. “We’ve got their pickup truck. They abandoned it prior to the snatch. Burned it and left it. We found it north of Chicago. It’s being airlifted down here to Quantico, right now. Our people will go over it.”
“For clues?” Johnson said. “Even though it burned?”
Webster shrugged.
“Burning is pretty dumb,” he said. “It doesn’t really obscure much. Not from our people, anyway. We’ll use that pickup to find them.”
“And then what?” Johnson asked.
Webster shrugged again.
“Then we’ll go get your daughter back,” he said. “Our Hostage Rescue Team is standing by. Fifty guys, the best in the world at this kind of thing. Waiting right by their choppers. We’ll go get her, and we’ll tidy up the guys who grabbed her.”
There was a short silence in the dark quiet room.
“Tidy them up?” Johnson said. “What does that mean?”
Webster glanced around his own office and lowered his voice. Thirty-six years of habit.
“Policy,” he said. “A major D.C. case like this? No publicity. No media access. We can’t allow it. This sort of thing gets on TV, every nut in the country is going to be trying it. So we go in quietly. Some weapons will get discharged. Inevitable in a situation like this. A little collateral damage here and there.”
Johnson nodded slowly.
“You’re going to execute them?” he asked, vaguely.
Webster just looked at him, neutrally. Bureau psychiatrists had suggested to him the anticipation of deadly revenge could help sustain self-control, especially with people accustomed to direct action, like other agents, or soldiers.
“Policy,” he said again. “My policy. And like the man says, I’ve got personal command.”

THE CHARRED PICKUP was lifted onto an aluminum platform and secured with nylon ropes. An Air Force Chinook hammered over from the military compound at O'Hare and hovered above it, its downdraft whipping the lake into a frenzy. It winched its chain down and eased the pickup into the air. Swung around over the lake and dipped its nose and roared back west to O'Hare. Set its load down right in front of the open nose of a Galaxy transport. Air Force ground crew winched the platform inside. The cargo door closed on it and four minutes later the Galaxy was taxiing. Four minutes later again it was in the air, groaning east toward Washington. Four hours after that, it was roaring over the capital, heading for Andrews Air Force Base. As it landed, another borrowed Chinook took off and waited in midair. The Galaxy taxied to its apron and the pickup was winched out. The Chinook swooped down and swung it into the air. Flew it south, following I-95 into Virginia, forty miles, all the way to Quantico. The Chinook set it down gently on the tarmac right outside the vehicle lab. Bureau techs ran out, white coats flapping in the fierce downdraft, and dragged the platform in through the roller door. They winched the wreck off the platform and pulled it into the center of the large shed. They rolled arc lights into a rough circle around it and lit them up. Then they stood there for a second, looking exactly like a team of pathologists getting ready to go to work on a corpse.

GENERAL JOHNSON RETRACED his steps exactly. He made it down 9th Street, past Natural History, past American History, his mouth forced into a tense rigid oval, breathing hard. He walked the length of the reflecting pool with his throat clamping and gagging. He swung left onto Constitution Avenue and made it as far as the Vietnam Wall. Then he stopped. There was a fair crowd, stunned and quiet, as always. He looked at them. He looked at himself in the black granite. He didn't stand out. He was in a lightweight gray suit. It was OK. So he let his vision blur with his tears and he moved forward and turned and sat against the base of the wall, sobbing and crying with his back pressed against the golden names of boys who had died thirty years ago.

19

REACHER BALLED HIS loose chain into his hand and slipped out of the barn into the predawn twilight. He walked twenty paces and stopped. Freedom. The night air was soft and infinite around him. He was unconfined. But he had no idea where he was. The barn stood alone, isolated fifty yards from a clutch of farm buildings of similar old vintage. There was a house, and a couple of small sheds, and an open structure with a new pickup parked in it. Next to the pickup was a tractor. Next to the tractor, ghostly white in the moonlight, was the truck. Reacher walked over the rocky track toward it. The front doors were locked. The rear doors were locked. He ran back to the horse barn and searched through the dead driver's pockets. Nothing except the padlock key from the barn door. No keys to the truck.

He ran back, squeezing the mass of chain to keep it from making a sound, past the motor barn, and looked at the house. Walked right around it. The front door was locked tight. The back door was locked tight. And there was a dog behind it. Reacher heard it move in its sleep. He heard a low, sleepy growl. He walked away.

He stood on the track, halfway back to the horse barn, and looked around. He trained his eyes on the indistinct horizon and turned a full circle in the dark. Some kind of a huge, empty landscape. Flat, endless, no discernible features. The damp night smell of a million acres of something growing. A pale streak of dawn in the east. He shrugged and ducked back inside. Holly raised herself on one elbow and looked a question at him.

"Problems," he said. "The handcuff keys are in the house. So are the truck keys. I can't go in for them because there's a dog in there. It's going to bark and wake everybody up. There's more than the two others in there. This is some kind of a working farm. There's a pickup and a tractor. Could be four or five armed men in there. When that damn dog barks, I've had it. And it's nearly daylight."

"Problems," Holly said.

"Right," he said. "We can't get at a vehicle, and we can't just walk away, because you're chained up and you can't walk and we're about a million miles from anywhere, anyway."

"Where are we?" she asked.

He shrugged.

"No idea," he said.

"I want to see," she said. "I want to see outside. I'm sick of being closed in. Can't you get this chain off?"

Can't you get this chain off?
Reacher ducked behind her and looked at the iron ring in her wall. The timber looked a little better than his had been. Closer-grained. He shook the ring and he knew it was hopeless. She nodded, reluctantly.
"We wait," she said. "We wait for a better chance."
He hurried back to the middle stalls and checked the walls, low down, where it was dampest and the siding was made from the longest boards. He tapped and kicked at them. Chose one particular place and pressed hard with his foot. The board gave slightly and opened a gap against its rusty nail. He worked the gap and sprung the next board, and the next, until he had a flap which would open tall enough to crawl through. Then he ducked back into the center aisle and piled the loose end of his chain onto the dead driver's stomach. Fished in the trouser pocket and pulled out the padlock key. Held it in his teeth. Bent down and picked up the body and the chain together. Carried it out through the open door. He carried it about twenty-five yards. Away from the house. Then he rested the body on its feet, supporting it by the shoulders, like he was dancing with a drunken partner. Ducked forward and jacked it up onto his shoulder. Caught the chain with one hand and walked away down the track.
He walked fast for twenty minutes. More than a mile. Along the track to a road. Turned left down the road and out into the empty countryside. It was horse country. Railed paddocks ran left and right beside the road. Endless flat grassland, cool and damp in the last of the night. Occasional trees looming through the dark. A narrow, straight, lumpy road surface.
He walked down the center of the road. Then he ducked onto the grassy shoulder and found a ditch. It ran along the base of the paddock rail. He turned a complete circle, with the dead driver windmilling on his shoulder. He could see nothing. He was more than a mile from the farm and he could have been more than a hundred from the next one. He bent over and dropped the body into the ditch. It flopped down through the long grass and landed facedown in mud. Reacher turned and ran the mile back to the farm. The streak of dawn was lightening the sky.
He turned into the rough track. There were lights in the windows of the farmhouse. He sprinted for the barn. Pushed the heavy wooden doors closed from the outside. Lifted the crossbeam into its supports and locked it in place with the padlock key. Ran back to the track and hurled the key far into the field. Wednesday was flaming up over the horizon. He sprinted for the far side of the barn and found the gap he'd sprung in the siding. Pushed his chain in ahead of him. Squeezed his shoulders through and forced his way back inside. Pulled the boards back flush with the old timbers, best as he could. Then he came back into the aisle and stood bent over, breathing hard.

“All done,” he said. “They’ll never find him.”
He scooped up the metal messtin with the cold remains of the soup in it. Scratched around in his stall for the fallen bolts. He gathered as many wood splinters as he could find. Slopped them around in the cold soup and forced them back into the ragged bolt holes. He walked over to Holly’s stall and put the tin back on the ground. Kept the spoon. He assembled the bolts through the holes in the base of the iron ring, hanging there off his length of chain. Forced them home among the sticky splinters. Used the back of the spoon to press them firmly in. He ran the chain through the loop until it was hanging straight down and resting on the stone floor. Minimum stress on the fragile assembly.
He tossed the spoon back to Holly. She caught it one-handed and put it back in the tin. Then he ducked down and listened through the boards. The dog was outside. He could hear it snuffling. Then he heard people. Footsteps on the track. They ran to the doors of the barn. They shook and rattled the crossbeam. Retreated. There was shouting. They were calling a name, over and over again. The crack around the barn door was lighting up with morning. The timbers of the barn were creaking as the sun flooded over the horizon and warmed them through.
The footsteps ran back to the barn. The padlock rattled and the chain came off. The crossbeam thumped to the ground. The door groaned open. Loder stepped inside. He had the Glock in his hand and strain showing in his face. He stood just inside the door. His eyes were flicking back and forth between Reacher and Holly. The strain in his face was edged by anger. Some kind of a cold light in his eyes. Then the jumpy guy stepped in behind him. Stevie. He was carrying the driver’s shotgun. And smiling. He crowded past Loder and ran down the central cobbled aisle. Raised the shotgun and pointed it straight at Reacher. Loder started after him. Stevie crunched a round into the chamber. Reacher shifted a foot to his left, so the iron ring was hidden from view behind him.
“What’s the problem?” he asked.
“You are, asshole,” Loder said. “Situation has changed. We’re a man short. So you just became one person too many.”
Reacher was on his way to the floor as Stevie pulled the trigger. He landed flat on the hard cobbles and hurled himself forward as the shotgun boomed and the stall blew apart. The air was instantly thick with splinters of damp wood and the stink of gunpowder. The plank holding the iron ring fell out of the shattered wall and the chain clattered to the floor. Reacher rolled over and glanced up. Stevie lifted the shotgun vertical and crunched another round into the chamber. Swung the barrel down and aimed again.
“Wait!” Holly screamed.

Stevie glanced at her. Impossible not to.
“Don’t be a damn fool,” she yelled. “Hell are you doing? You don’t have the time for this.”
Loder turned to face her.
“He’s run, right?” she said. “Your driver? Is that what happened? He bailed out and ran for it, right? So you need to get going. You don’t have time for this.”
Loder stared at her.
“Right now you’re ahead of the game,” Holly said urgently. “But you shoot this guy, you got the local cops a half hour behind you. You need to get going.”
Reacher gasped up at her from the floor. She was magnificent. She was sucking all their attention her way. She was saving his life.
“Two of you, two of us,” she said urgently. “You can handle it, right?”
There was silence. Dust and powder drifted in the air. Then Loder stepped back, covering them both with his automatic. Reacher watched the disappointment on Stevie’s face. He stood slowly and pulled the chain clear of the wreckage. The iron ring fell out of the smashed wood and clanked on the stones.
“Bitch is right,” Loder said. “We can handle it.”
He nodded to Stevie. Stevie ran for the door and Loder turned and pulled his key and unlocked Holly’s wrist. Dropped her cuff on her mattress. The weight of the chain pulled it back toward the wall. It pulled off the edge of the mattress and slid onto the cobblestones with a loud metallic sound.
“OK, asshole, real quick,” Loder said. “Before I change my mind.”
Reacher looped his chain into his hand. Ducked down and picked Holly up, under her knees and shoulders. They heard the truck start up. It slewed backward into the entrance. Jammed to a stop. Reacher ran Holly to the truck. Laid her down inside. Climbed in after her. Loder slammed the doors and shut them into darkness.

“NOW I GUESS I owe you.” Reacher said quietly.
Holly just waved it away. An embarrassed little gesture. Reacher stared at her. He liked her. Liked her face. He gazed at it. Recalled it white and disgusted as the driver taunted her. Saw the smooth swell of her breasts under his filthy drooling gaze. Then the picture changed to Stevie smiling and shooting at him, chained to the wall. Then he heard Loder say: the situation has changed. Everything had changed. He had changed. He lay and felt the old anger inside him grinding like gears. Cold, implacable anger. Uncontrollable. They had made a mistake. They had changed him from a spectator into an enemy. A bad mistake to make. They had pushed open the forbidden door, not knowing what would come bursting back out at them. He lay there and felt like a ticking bomb they

were carrying deep into the heart of their territory. He felt the flood of anger, and thrilled with it, and savored it, and stored it up.

NOW THERE WAS only one mattress inside the truck. It was only three feet wide. And Stevie was a very erratic driver. Reacher and Holly were lying down, pressed tight together. Reacher's left wrist still had the cuff and the chain locked onto it. His right arm was around Holly's shoulders. He was holding her tight. Tighter than he really needed to.
"How much farther?" she asked.
"We'll be there before nightfall," he said, quietly. "They didn't bring your chain. No more overnight stops."
She was silent for a moment.
"I don't know if I'm glad or not," she said. "I hate this truck, but I don't know if I want to actually arrive anywhere."
Reacher nodded.
"It reduces our chances," he said. "Rule of thumb is escape while you're on the move. It gets much harder after that."
The motion of the truck indicated they were on a highway. But either the terrain was different, or Stevie couldn't handle the truck, or both, because they were swaying violently. The guy was swinging late into turns and jamming the vehicle from side to side, like he was having a struggle staying between the lane markers. Holly was getting thrown against Reacher's side. He pulled her closer and held her tighter. She snuggled in close, instinctively. He felt her hesitate, like she realized she'd acted without thinking, then he felt her decide not to pull away again.
"You feel OK?" she asked him. "You killed a man."
He was quiet for a long moment.
"He wasn't the first," he said. "And I just decided he won't be the last."
She turned her head to speak at the same time he did. The truck swayed violently to the left. Their lips were an inch apart. The truck swayed again. They kissed. At first it was light and tentative. Reacher felt the new soft lips on his, and the unfamiliar new taste and smell and feel. Then they kissed harder. Then the truck started hammering through a series of sharp curves, and they forgot all about kissing and just held on tight, trying not to be thrown right off the mattress onto the ridged metal floor.

20

BROGAN WAS THE guy who made the breakthrough in Chicago. He was the third guy that morning to walk past the can of white paint out there on the abandoned industrial lot, but he was the first to realize its significance.
“The truck they stole was white,” Brogan said. “Some kind of ID on the side. They painted over it. Got to be that way. The can was right there, with a brush, about ten feet from the Lexus. Stands to reason they would park the Lexus right next to the truck, right? Therefore the paint can was next to where the truck had been.”
“What sort of paint?” McGrath asked.
“Ordinary household paint,” Brogan said. “A quart can. Two-inch brush. Price tag still on it, from a hardware store. And there are fingerprints in the splashes on the handle.”
McGrath nodded and smiled.
“OK,” he said. “Go to work.”

BROGAN TOOK THE computer-aided mug shots with him to the hardware store named on the paintbrush handle. It was a cramped, family-owned place, two hundred yards from the abandoned lot. The counter was attended by a stout old woman with a mind like a steel trap. Straightaway she identified the picture of the guy the video had caught at the wheel of the Lexus. She said the paint and the brush had been purchased by him about ten o’clock Monday morning. To prove it, she rattled open an ancient drawer and pulled out Monday’s register roll. Seven-ninety-eight for the paint, five-ninety-eight for the brush, plus tax, right there on the roll.
“He paid cash,” she said.
“You got a video system in here?” Brogan asked her.
“No,” she said.
“Doesn’t your insurance company say you got to?” he asked.
The stout old woman just smiled.
“We’re not insured,” she said.
Then she leaned under the counter and came up with a shotgun.
“Not by no insurance company, anyway,” she said.
Brogan looked at the weapon. He was pretty sure the barrel was way too short for the piece to be legal. But he wasn’t about to start worrying over such a thing. Not right then.
“OK,” he said. “You take care now.”

"OK," he said. "You take care now."

MORE THAN SEVEN million people in the Chicago area, something like ten million road vehicles, but only one white truck had been reported stolen in the twenty-four-hour period between Sunday and Monday. It was a white Ford Econoline. Owned and operated by a South Side electrician. His insurance company made him empty the truck at night, and store his stock and tools inside his shop. Anything left inside the truck was not covered. That was the rule. It was an irksome rule, but on Monday morning when the guy came out to load up and the truck was gone, it started to look like a rule which made a whole lot of sense. He had reported the theft to the insurance broker and the police, and he was not expecting to hear much more about it. So he was duly impressed when two FBI agents turned up, forty-eight hours later, asking all kinds of urgent questions.

"OK," MCGRATH SAID. "We know what we're looking for. White Econoline, new paint on the sides. We've got the plates. Now we need to know where to look. Ideas?"
"Coming up on forty-eight hours," Brogan said. "Assume an average speed of fifty-five? That would make the max range somewhere more than twenty-six hundred miles. That's effectively anywhere on the North American continent, for God's sake."
"Too pessimistic," Milosevic said. "They probably stopped nights. Call it six hours' driving time on Monday, maybe ten on Tuesday, maybe four so far today, total of twenty hours, that's a maximum range of eleven hundred miles."
"Needle in a haystack," Brogan said.
McGrath shrugged.
"So let's find the haystack," he said. "Then we'll go look for the needle. Call it fifteen hundred maximum. What does that look like?"
Brogan pulled a road atlas from the stack of reference material on the table. He opened it up to the early section where the whole country was shown all at once, all the states splattered over one page in a colorful mosaic. He checked the scale and traced his fingernail in a circle.
"That's anywhere shy of California," he said. "Half of Washington State, half of Oregon, none of California and absolutely all of everywhere else. Somewhere around a zillion square miles."
There was a depressed silence in the room.
"Mountains between here and Washington State, right?" McGrath said. "So let's assume they're not in Washington State yet. Or Oregon. Or California. Or Alaska or Hawaii. So we've cut it down already. Only forty-five states to call.

right? Let's go to work."
"They might have gone to Canada," Brogan said. "Or Mexico, or a boat or a plane."
Milosevic shrugged and took the atlas from him.
"You're too pessimistic," he said again.
"Needle in a damn haystack," Brogan said back.

THREE FLOORS ABOVE them, the Bureau fingerprint technicians were looking at the paintbrush Brogan had brought in. It had been used once only, by a fairly clumsy guy. The paint was matted up in the bristles, and had run onto the mild steel ferrule which bound the bristles into the wooden handle. The guy had used an action which had put his thumb on the back of the ferrule, and his first two fingers on the front. It was suggestive of a medium-height guy reaching up and brushing paint onto a flat surface, level with his head, maybe a little higher, the paintbrush handle pointing downward. A Ford Econoline was just a fraction less than eighty-one inches tall. Any sign writing would be about seventy inches off the ground. The computer could not calculate this guy's height, because it had only seen him sitting down inside the Lexus, but the way the brush had been used, he must have been five eight, five nine, reaching up and brushing just a little above his eye level. Brushing hard, with some lateral force. There wasn't going to be a lot of finesse in the finished job.
Wet paint is a pretty good medium for trapping fingerprints, and the techs knew they weren't going to have a lot of trouble. But for the sake of completeness, they ran every process they had, from fluoroscopy down to the traditional gray powder. They ended up with three and a half good prints, clearly the thumb and the first two fingers of the right hand, with the extra bonus of a lateral half of the little finger. They enhanced the focus in the computer and sent the prints down the digital line to the Hoover Building in Washington. They added a code instructing the big database down there to search with maximum speed.

IN THE LABS at Quantico, the hunters were divided into two packs. The burned pickup had been torn apart, and half the staff was examining the minute physical traces unique to that particular vehicle. The other half was chasing through the fragmented records held by the manufacturers, listening out for the faint echoes of its construction and subsequent sales history.
It was a Dodge, ten years old, built in Detroit. The chassis number and the code stamped into the iron of the engine block were both original. The numbers enabled the manufacturer to identify the original shipment. The pickup had rolled out of the factory gate one April and had been loaded onto a railroad

wagon and hauled to California. Then it had been driven to a dealership in Mojave. The dealer had paid the invoice in May, and beyond that, the manufacturer had no further knowledge of the vehicle.
The dealership in Mojave had gone belly-up two years later. New owners had bought the franchise. Current records were in their computer. Ancient history from before the change in ownership was all in storage. Not every day that a small automotive dealership on the edge of the desert gets a call from the FBI Academy at Quantico, so there was a promise of rapid action. The sales manager himself undertook to get the information and call right back.
The vehicle itself was pretty much burned out. All the soft clues were gone. There were no plates. There was nothing significant in the interior. There were no bridge tokens, no tunnel tokens. The windshield stickers were gone. All that was left was the mud. The vehicle technicians had cut away both of the rear wheel wells, the full hoop of sheet metal right above the driven tires, and carried them carefully across to the Materials Analysis Unit. Any vehicle writes its own itinerary in the layers of mud it throws up underneath. Bureau geologists were peeling back the layers and looking at where the pickup had been, and where it had come from.
The mud was baked solid by the burning tires. Some of the softer crystals had vitrified into glass. But the layers were clear. The outer layers were thin. The geologists concluded they had been deposited during a long journey across the country. Then there was a couple of years' worth of mixed rock particles. The particular mixture was interesting. There was such a combination of sands there that identifying their exact origin should be easy enough. Under that mixture was a thick base layer of desert dust. Straightaway, the geologists agreed that the truck had started its life out near the Mojave Desert.

EVERY SINGLE LAW enforcement agency in forty-five states had the description and the plate number of the stolen white Econoline. Every single officer on duty in the whole nation had been briefed to look for it, parked or mobile, burned or hidden or abandoned. For a short time that Wednesday, that white Econoline was the most hunted vehicle on the planet.
McGrath was sitting at the head of the table in the quiet conference room, smoking, waiting. He was not optimistic. If the truck was parked and hidden, it would most likely never be found. The task was too huge. Any closed garage or building or barn could hide it forever. If it was still somewhere on the road, the chances were better. So the biggest gamble of his life was: after forty-eight hours, had they gotten where they were going, or were they still on their way?

TWO HOURS AFTER starting the patient search, the fingerprint database brought back a name: Peter Wayne Bell. There was a perfect match, right hand, thumb and first two fingers. The computer rated the match on the partial from the little finger as very probable.
“Thirty-one years old,” Brogan said. “From Mojave, California. Two convictions for sex offenses. Charged with a double rape, three years ago, didn’t go down. Victims were three months in the hospital. This guy Bell had an alibi from three of his friends. Victims couldn’t make the ID, too shaken up by the beatings.”
“Nice guy,” McGrath said.
Milosevic nodded.
“And he’s got Holly,” he said. “Right there in the back of his truck.”
McGrath said nothing in reply to that. Then the phone rang. He picked it up. Listened to a short barked sentence. He sat there and Brogan and Milosevic saw his face light up like a guy who sees his teams all win the pennant on the same day, baseball and football and basketball and hockey, all on the same day that his son graduates summa cum laude from Harvard and his gold stocks go through the roof.
“Arizona,” he shouted. “It’s in Arizona, heading north on U.S. 60.”

AN OLD HAND in an Arizona State Police cruiser had spotted a white panel truck making bad lane changes round the sharp curves on U.S. 60 as it winds away from the town of Globe, seventy miles east of Phoenix. He had pulled closer and read the plate. He saw the blue oval and the Econoline script on the back. He had thumbed his mike and called it in. Then the world had gone crazy. He was told to stick with the truck, no matter what. He was told that helicopters would be coming in from Phoenix and Flagstaff, and from Albuquerque way over in New Mexico. Every available mobile unit would be coming in behind him from the south. Up ahead, the National Guard would be assembling a roadblock. Within twenty minutes, he was told, you’ll have more backup than you’ve ever dreamed of. Until then, he was told, you’re the most important lawman in America.

THE SALES MANAGER from the Dodge dealership in Mojave, California, called Quantico back within an hour. He’d been over to the storage room and dug out the records for the sales made ten years ago by the previous franchise owners. The pickup in question had been sold to a citrus farmer down in Kendall, fifty miles south of Mojave, in May of that year. The guy had been back for servicing and emissions testing for the first four years, and after that,

they'd never seen him again. He had bought on a four-year time payment plan and his name was Dutch Borken.

A HALF-HOUR LATER, the stolen white Econoline was twenty-eight miles farther north on U.S. 60 in Arizona and it was the tip of a long teardrop shape of fifty vehicles cruising behind it. Above it, five helicopters were hammering through the air. In front of it, ten miles to the north, the highway was closed and another forty vehicles were stationary on the pavement, parked up in a neat arrowhead formation. The whole operation was being coordinated by the Agent-in-Charge from the FBI's Phoenix office. He was in the lead helicopter, staring down through the clear desert air at the roof of the truck. He was wearing a headset with a throat mike, and he was talking continuously.

"OK, people," he said. "Let's go for it, right now. Go go go!"

His lead chopper swooped upward out of the way and two others arrowed down. They hovered just in front of the truck, low down, one on each side, keeping pace. The police cars behind fanned out across the whole width of the highway and they all hit their lights and sirens together. A third chopper swung down and flew backward, right in front of the truck, eight feet off the ground, strobes flashing, rotors beating the air. The copilot started a sequence of clear gestures, hands wide, palms out, like he was personally slowing the truck. Then the sirens all stopped and the enormous bullhorn on the front of the helicopter fired up. The copilot's voice boomed out, amplified grotesquely beyond the point of distortion, clearly audible even over the thrashing and hammering of the rotor blades.

"Federal agents," his voice screamed. "You are commanded to stop at once. I repeat, you are commanded to stop your vehicle at once."

The truck kept on going. The helicopter right in front of it swung and wobbled in the air. Then it settled again, even closer to the windshield, flying backward, not more than ten feet away.

"You are surrounded," the copilot shouted through the huge bullhorn. "There are a hundred police officers behind you. The road is closed ahead. You have no option. You must slow your vehicle and come to a complete stop. You must do that right now."

The cruisers all lit up their sirens again and two of them pulled alongside. The truck was locked into a solid raft of hostile traffic. It sped on for a long moment, then it slowed. Behind it, the frantic convoy braked and swerved. The helicopters rose up and kept pace. The truck slowed more. Police cruisers pulled alongside, two deep, door to door, bumper to bumper. The truck coasted to a halt. The helicopters held station overhead. The lead cars swerved around in

front and jammed to a stop, inches from the truck's hood. All around, officers jumped out. The highway was thick with police. Even over the beating of the helicopter rotors, the crunching of shotgun mechanisms and the clicking of a hundred revolver hammers were clearly audible.

IN CHICAGO, MCGRATH did not hear the shotguns and the revolvers, but he could hear the Phoenix Agent-in-Charge shouting over the radio. The output from the throat mike in his helicopter was patched through Washington and was crackling out through a speaker on the long hardwood table. The guy was talking continuously, excited, half in a stream of instructions to his team, half as a running commentary on the sight he was seeing on the road below. McGrath was sitting there, hands cold and wet, staring at the noisy speaker like if he stared at it hard enough, it would change into a crystal ball and let him see what was going down.

"He's stopping, he's stopping," the guy in the helicopter was saying. "He's stationary now, he's stopped on the road, he's surrounded. Hold your fire, wait for my word, they're not coming out, open the doors, open the damn doors and drag them out, OK, we got two guys in the front, two guys, one driver, one passenger, they're coming out, they're out, secure them, put them in a car, get the keys, open up the back, but watch out, there are two more in there with her. Ok, we're going to the back, we're going around to the rear, the doors are locked back there, we're trying the key. You know what? There's still writing on the side of this truck. The writing is still there. It says Bright Spark Electrics. I thought it was supposed to be blanked out, right? Painted over or something?"

In Chicago, a deathly hush fell over the third-floor conference room. McGrath went white. Milosevic looked at him. Brogan stared calmly out of the window.

"And why is it heading north?" McGrath asked. "Back toward Chicago?"

The crackling from the speaker was still there. They turned back toward it. Listened hard. They could hear the thump of the rotor blades behind the urgent voice.

"The rear doors are open," the voice said. "The doors are open, they're open, we're going in, people are coming out, here they come, what the hell is this? There are dozens of people in there. There are maybe twenty people in there. They're all coming out. They're still coming out. There are twenty or thirty people in there. What the hell is going on here?"

The guy broke off. Evidently he was listening to a report radioed up from the ground. McGrath and Brogan and Milosevic stared at the hissing speaker. It stayed quiet for a long time. Nothing coming through at all except the guy's loud breathing and the hammering of the blades and the waterfall of static. Then the voice came back.

voice came back.
“Shit,” it said. “Shit, Washington, you there? You listening to this? You know what we just did? You know what you sent us to do? We just busted a load of wetbacks. About thirty illegals from Mexico. Just got picked up from the border. They’re on their way up to Chicago. They say they all got jobs promised up there.”

21

THE WHITE ECONOLINE droned on. It was moving faster than it had been before. But it was out of the curves. It had lurched around the last of the tight bends, and it had settled to a fast, straight cruise. Noisier than before, because of the extra speed and the whine of the slipstream through the hundred random holes in the roof.

Reacher and Holly were tight together on the three-foot mattress. They were lying on their backs, staring up at the holes. Each hole was a bright point of light. Not blue, just a point of light so bright it had no color at all. Just a bright point in the dark. Like a mathematical proposition. Total light against the total dark of the surrounding sheet metal. Light, the opposite of dark. Dark, the absence of light. Positive and negative. Both propositions were contrasted vividly up there on the metal roof.

“I want to see the sky,” Holly said.

It was warm in the truck. Not hot, like it had been the first day and a half. The whistling slipstream had solved that problem. The rush of air was keeping it comfortable. But it was warm enough that Reacher had taken his shirt off. He had balled it up and crammed it under his head.

“I want to see the whole sky,” Holly said. “Not just little bits of it.”

Reacher said nothing in reply. He was counting the holes.

“What time is it?” Holly asked him.

“Hundred and thirteen,” Reacher said.

Holly turned her head to him.

“What?” she said.

“Hundred and thirteen holes in the roof,” he said.

“Great,” she said. “What time is it?”

“Three-thirty, Central,” he said.

She snuggled closer. She moved her weight onto her side. Her head was resting on his right shoulder. Her leg was resting on his. His thigh was jammed between hers.

“Wednesday, right?” she said.

“Wednesday,” he said.

She was physically closer to him than many women had allowed themselves to get. She felt lithe and athletic. Firm, but soft. Young. Scented. He was drifting away and enjoying the sensation. He was slightly breathless. But he wasn’t kidding himself about her motivation. She was relaxed about it, but she was doing it to rest her painful knee, and to keep herself from rolling off the mattress

doing it to rest her painful knee, and to keep herself from rolling off the mattress onto the floor.
“Fifty-one hours,” she said. “Fifty-one hours, and I haven’t seen the sky.”
One hundred and thirteen was a prime number. You couldn’t make it by multiplying any other numbers together. Hundred and twelve, you could make by multiplying fifty-six by two, or twenty-eight by four, or fourteen by eight. Hundred and fourteen, you could make by multiplying fifty-seven by two or nineteen by six, or thirty-eight by three. But one hundred and thirteen was prime. No factors. The only way to make a hundred and thirteen was by multiplying a hundred and thirteen by one. Or by firing a shotgun into a truck in a rage.
“Reacher, I’m getting worried,” Holly said.
Fifty-one hours. Fifty-one was not a prime number. You could make fifty-one by multiplying seventeen by three. Three tens are thirty, three sevens are twenty-one, thirty and twenty-one make fifty-one. Not a prime number. Fifty-one had factors. He dragged the weight of the chain up with his left wrist and held her tight, both arms around her.
“You’ll be OK,” he said to her. “They’re not going to hurt you. They want to trade you for something. They’ll keep you fit and well.”
He felt her shake her head against his shoulder. Just one small shake, but it was very definite.
“I’m not worried about me,” she said. “I’m worried about you. Who the hell’s going to trade something for you?”
He said nothing. Nothing he could say to that. She snuggled closer. He could feel the scratch of her eyelashes against the skin on the side of his chest as she blinked. The truck roared on, faster than it wanted to go. He could feel the driver pushing it against its natural cruising speed.
“So I’m getting a little worried,” she said.
“You look out for me,” he said. “And I’ll look out for you.”
“I’m not asking you to do that,” she said.
“I know you’re not,” he said.
“Well, I can’t let you do that,” she said.
“You can’t stop me,” he said. “This is about me now, too. They made it that way. They were going to shoot me down. I’ve got a rule, Holly: people mess with me at their own risk. I try to be patient about it. I had a teacher once, grade school somewhere. Philippines, I think, because she always wore a big white hat. So it was somewhere hot. I was always twice the size of the other kids, and she used to say to me: count to ten before you get mad, Reacher. And I’ve counted way past ten on this one. Way past. So you may as well face it, win or lose, now we do it together.”
They went quiet. The truck roared on.

“Reacher?” Holly said.
“What?” he said.
“Hold me,” she said.
“I am holding you,” he said.
He squeezed her gently, both arms, to make his point. She pressed closer.
“Reacher?” she said again.
“Yes?” he said.
“You want to kiss me again?” she said. “Makes me feel better.”
He turned his head and smiled at her in the dark.
“Doesn’t do me a whole lot of harm, either,” he said.

EIGHT HOURS AT maybe sixty-five or seventy miles an hour. Somewhere between five hundred and five hundred and fifty miles. That’s what they’d done. That was Reacher’s estimation. And it was beginning to give him a clue about where they were.
“We’re somewhere where they abolished the speed limit,” he said.
Holly stirred and yawned.
“What?” she said.
“We’ve been going fast,” he said. “Up to seventy miles an hour, probably, for hours. Loder is pretty thorough. He wouldn’t let Stevie drive this fast if there was any danger of getting pulled over for it. So we’re somewhere where they raised the limit, or abolished it altogether. Which states did that?”
She shrugged.
“I’m not sure,” she said. “Mainly the western states, I think.”
Reacher nodded. Traced an arc on the map in his head.
“We didn’t go east,” he said. “We figured that already. So I figure we’re in Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, or Montana. Maybe as far as Idaho, Utah, Nevada, or Arizona. Not in California yet.”
The truck slowed slightly, and they heard the engine note harden up. Then they heard the crunch as the driver came down out of fifth gear into fourth.
“Mountains,” Holly said.
It was more than a hill. More than an upgrade. It was a smooth, relentless climb. A highway through the mountains. Clearly engineered to help out the laboring traffic, but they were adding hundreds of feet, every mile they drove. Reacher felt the lurch as the truck pulled out to pass slower vehicles. Not many, but a few. It stayed in fourth gear, the guy’s foot hard down, hammering uphill, then relaxing, changing up to fifth, then down again, charging upward.
“We could run out of gas,” Holly said.
“It’s diesel, not gas,” Reacher said. “We used these things in the Army. Thirty-

five-gallon tank. Diesel will do maybe twenty-five to the gallon, highway mileage. Best part of nine hundred miles, before they run out."
"That could get us all the way out of the States," she said.

THEY CRUISED ON. The truck roared through the mountains for hours, then it left the highway. Night had fallen. The bright holes in the roof had dimmed. Then they had disappeared. They had turned darker than the roof itself. Positive and negative. They felt the lurch as the truck pulled to the right, off the highway, and they felt the tires grabbing at the pavement as the truck hauled around a tight right. Then there was a confusing blur of turns and stops and starts. Bumpy downhill bends and tight uphill turns with the truck grinding in a low gear. Periods of cruising down gently winding roads, bad surfaces, good surfaces, gradients, gravel under the wheels, potholes in the road. Reacher could imagine the headlight beams flicking left and right and bouncing up and down.
The truck slowed almost to a stop. Turned a tight right. Pattered over some kind of a wooden bridge. Then it yawed and bumped its way along a rutted track. It was moving slowly, shuddering from side to side. It felt like they were driving up a dry riverbed. Some kind of a stony narrow track. It felt like this was the very last leg of the journey. It felt like they were very close to their destination. The urgency had gone out of the guy's driving. It felt like the truck was nearly home.
But the final leg took a long time. The speed was low and the road was bad. Stones and small rocks were popping under the tires. The tires were squirming sideways across the loose surface. The truck ground on for forty minutes. Fifty minutes. Reacher got cold. He sat up and shook out his shirt. Put it on. An hour on the bumpy track. At this speed, maybe fifteen miles, maybe twenty.
Then they were there. The truck lurched up over a final heave and leveled out. Rolled forward another few yards and stopped. The engine noise died. It was replaced by an awesome silence. Reacher could hear nothing at all except a vast emptiness and the ticking of the muffler as it cooled. He could hear the two guys in front, sitting quiet and exhausted. Then they got out. He heard their doors open, and their seat springs bounce. He heard their feet on gravel. Their doors slammed, enormously loud metallic clangs in the stillness. He heard them crunch around to the rear. He could hear the sound of the keys swinging gently in the driver's hand.
The key slid into the lock. The lock clicked back. The handle turned. The door swung open. Loder propped it back with the metal stay. Then he opened the other door. Propped it back. Gestured them out with the Glock. Reacher helped Holly along the ridged floor. He stepped down. The chain on his wrist clattered

to the earth. He lifted Holly down beside him. They stood together, leaning back against the edge of the truck's ridged metal floor. Looking out and around.
Holly had wanted to see the sky. She was standing there under the vastest sky Reacher had ever seen. It was a dark inky blue, almost black, and it was huge. It stretched up to an infinite height. It was as big as a planet. It was peppered with a hundred billion bright stars. They were far away, but they were unnaturally vivid. They dusted back to the far cold reaches of the universe. It was a gigantic night sky and it stretched on forever.
They were in a forest clearing. Reacher could smell a heavy scent of pines. It was a strong smell. Clean and fresh. There was a black mass of trees all around. They covered the jagged slopes of mountains. They were in a forest clearing, surrounded by mountainous wooded slopes. It was a big clearing, infinitely dark, silent. Reacher could see the faint black outlines of buildings off to his right. They were long, low huts. Some kind of wooden structures, crouching in the dark.
There were people on the edge of the clearing. Standing among the nearest trees. Reacher could see their vague shapes. Maybe fifty or sixty people. Just standing there, silent. They were in dark clothing. They had darkened faces. Their faces were smudged with night camouflage. He could see their eyes, white against the black trees. They were holding weapons. He could see rifles and machine guns. Slung casually over the shoulders of the silent, staring people. They had dogs. Several big dogs, on thick leather leashes.
There were children among the people. Reacher could make them out. Children, standing together in groups, silent, staring, big sleepy eyes. They were clustered behind the adults, still, their shoulders facing diagonally away in fear and perplexity. Sleepy children, woken up in the middle of the night to witness something.
Loder turned himself around in a slow circle and waved the silent staring people nearer. He moved his arm in a wide inclusive gesture, like a ringmaster in a circus.
"We got her," he yelled into the silence. "The federal bitch is here."
His voice boomed back off the distant mountains.
"Where the hell are we?" Holly asked him.
Loder turned back and smiled at her.
"Our place, bitch," he said, quietly. "A place where your federal buddies can't come get you."
"Why not?" Holly asked him. "Where the hell are we?"
"That could be hard for you to understand," Loder said.
"Why?" Holly said. "We're somewhere, right? Somewhere in the States?"

Loder shook his head.
“No,” he said.
Holly looked blank.
“Canada?” she said.
The guy shook his head again.
“Not Canada, bitch,” he said.
Holly glanced around at the trees and the mountains. Glanced up at the vast night sky. Shuddered in the sudden chill.
“Well, this isn’t Mexico,” she said.
The guy raised both arms in a descriptive little gesture.
“This is a brand-new country,” he said.

22

THE ATMOSPHERE IN the Chicago Field Office Wednesday evening was like a funeral, and in a way it was a funeral, because any realistic hope of getting Holly back had died. McGrath knew his best chance had been an early chance. The early chance was gone. If Holly was still alive, she was a prisoner somewhere on the North American continent, and he would not get even the chance to find out where until her kidnappers chose to call. And so far, approaching sixty hours after the snatch, they had not called.

He was at the head of the long table in the third-floor conference room. Smoking. The room was quiet. Milosevic was sitting to one side, back to the windows. The afternoon sun had inched its way around to evening and fallen away into darkness. The temperature in the room had risen and fallen with it, down to a balmy summer dusk. But the two men in there were chilled with anticlimax. They barely looked up as Brogan came in to join them. He was holding a sheaf of computer printouts. He wasn't smiling, but he looked reasonably close to it.

"You got something?" McGrath asked him.

Brogan nodded purposefully and sat down. Sorted the printouts into four separate handfuls and held them up, each one in turn.

"Quantico," he said. "They've got something. And the crime database in D.C. They've got three somethings. And I had an idea."

He spread his papers out and looked up.

"Listen to this," he said. "Graphic granite, interlocking crystals, cherts, gneisses, schists, shale, foliated metamorphics, quartzites, quartz crystals, red-bed sandstones, Triassic red sand, acidic volcanics, pink feldspar, green chlorite, ironstone, grit, sand, and silt. You know what all that stuff is?"

McGrath and Milosevic shrugged and shook their heads.

"Geology," Brogan said. "The people down in Quantico looked at the pickup. Geologists, from the Materials Analysis Unit. They looked at the shit thrown up under the wheel arches. They figured out what the stuff is, and they figured out where that pickup has been. Little tiny pieces of rock and sediment stuck to the metal. Like a sort of a geological fingerprint."

"OK, so where has it been?" McGrath asked.

"Started out in California," Brogan said. "Citrus grower called Dutch Borken bought it, ten years ago, in Mojave. The manufacturer traced that for us. That part is nothing to do with geology. Then the scientists say it was in Montana for a couple of years. Then they drove it over here, northern route, through North

a couple of years. Then they drove it over here, northern route, through North Dakota, Minnesota, and Wisconsin."
"They sure about this?" McGrath said.
"Like a trucker's logbook," Brogan said. "Except written with shit on the underneath, not with a pen on paper."
"So who is this Dutch Borken?" McGrath asked. "Is he involved?"
Brogan shook his head.
"No," he said. "Dutch Borken is dead."
"When?" McGrath asked.
"Couple of years ago," Brogan said. "He borrowed money, farming went all to hell, the bank foreclosed, he stuck a twelve-bore in his mouth and blew the top of his head all over California."
"So?" McGrath said.
"His son stole the pickup," Brogan said. "Technically, it was the bank's property, right? The son took off in it, never been seen again. The bank reported it, and the local cops looked for it, couldn't find it. It's not licensed. DMV knows nothing about it. Cops gave up on it, because who cares about a ratty old pickup? But my guess is this Borken boy stole it and moved to Montana. The pickup was definitely in Montana two years, scientists are dead sure about that."
"We got anything on this Borken boy?" McGrath asked him.
Brogan nodded. Held up another sheaf of paper.
"We got a shitload on him," he said. "He's all over our database like ants at a picnic. His name is Beau Borken. Thirty-five years old, six feet in height and four hundred pounds in weight. Big guy, right? Extreme right-winger, paranoid tendencies. Now a militia leader. Balls-out fanatic. Links to other militias all over the damn place. Prime suspect in a robbery up in the north of California. Armored car carrying twenty million in bearer bonds was hit. The driver was killed. They figured militia involvement, because the bad guys were wearing bits and pieces of military uniforms. Borken's outfit looked good for it. But they couldn't make it stick. Files are unclear as to why not. And also, what's good for us is before all that, Beau Borken was one of the alibis Peter Wayne Bell used to get off the rape bust. So he's a documented associate of somebody we can place on the scene."
Milosevic looked up.
"And he's based in Montana?" he said.
Brogan nodded.
"We can pinpoint the exact region, more or less," he said. "The scientific guys at Quantico are pretty hot for a couple of particular valleys, northwest corner of Montana."
"They can be that specific?" Milosevic said.

Brogan nodded again.
“I called them,” he said. “They said this sediment in the wheel arches was local to a particular type of a place. Something to do with very old rock getting scraped up by glaciers about a million years ago, lying there nearer the surface than it should be, all mixed up with the regular rock which is still pretty old, but newer than the old rock, you know what I mean? A particular type of a mixture? I asked them, how can you be so sure? They said they just recognize it, like I would recognize my mother fifty feet away on the sidewalk. They said it was from one of a couple of north-south glacial valleys, northwest corner of Montana, where the big old glaciers were rolling down from Canada. And there was some sort of crushed sandstone in there, very different, but it’s what the Forest Service use on the forest tracks up there.”
“OK,” McGrath said. “So our guys were in Montana for a couple of years. But have they necessarily gone back there?”
Brogan held up the third of his four piles of paper. Unfolded a map. And smiled for the first time since Monday.
“You bet your ass they have,” he said. “Look at the map. Direct route between Chicago and the far corner of Montana takes you through North Dakota, right? Some farmer up there was walking around this morning. And guess what he found in a ditch?”
“What?” McGrath asked.
“A dead guy,” Brogan said. “In a ditch, horse country, miles from anywhere. So naturally the farmer calls the cops, the cops print the corpse, the computer comes back with a name.”
“What name?” McGrath asked.
“Peter Wayne Bell,” Brogan said. “The guy who drove away with Holly.”
“He’s dead?” McGrath said. “How?”
“Don’t know how,” Brogan said. “Maybe some kind of a falling out? This guy Bell kept his brains in his jockey shorts. We know that, right? Maybe he went after Holly, maybe Holly aced him. But put a ruler on the map and take a look. They were all on their way back to Montana. That’s for damn sure. Has to be that way.”
“In what?” McGrath said. “Not in a white truck.”
“Yes in a white truck,” Brogan said.
“That Econoline was the only truck missing,” McGrath said.
Brogan shook his head. He held up the fourth set of papers.
“My new idea,” he said. “I checked if Rubin rented a truck.”
“Who?” McGrath said.
“Rubin is the dead dentist,” Brogan said. “I checked if he rented a truck.”

McGrath looked at him.
“Why should the damn dentist rent a truck?” he said.
“He didn’t,” Brogan said. “I figured maybe the guys rented the truck, with the dentist’s credit cards, after they captured him. It made a lot of sense. Why risk stealing a vehicle if you can rent one with a stolen wallet full of credit cards and driver’s licenses and stuff? So I called around. Sure enough, Chicago-You-Drive, some South Side outfit, they rented an Econoline to a Dr. Rubin, Monday morning, nine o’clock. I ask them, did the photo on the license match the guy? They say they never look. As long as the credit card goes through the machine, they don’t care. I ask them, what color was the Econoline? They say all our trucks are white. I ask them, writing on the side? They say sure, Chicago-You-Drive, green letters, head height.”
McGrath nodded.
“I’m going to call Harland Webster,” he said. “I want to get sent to Montana.”

“GO TO NORTH Dakota first,” Webster said.
“Why?” McGrath asked him.
There was a pause on the line.
“One step at a time,” Webster said. “We need to check out this Peter Wayne Bell situation. So stop off in North Dakota first, OK?”
“You sure, chief?” McGrath said.
“Patient grunt work,” Webster said. “That’s what’s going to do it for us. Work the clues, right? It’s worked so far. Your boy Brogan did some good work. I like the sound of him.”
“So let’s go with it, chief,” McGrath said. “All the way to Montana, right?”
“No good rushing around until we know something,” Webster said back. “Like who and where and why. That’s what we need to know, Mack.”
“We know who and where,” he said. “This Beau Borken guy. In Montana. It’s clear enough, right?”
There was another pause on the line.
“Maybe,” Webster said. “But what about why?”
McGrath jammed the phone into his shoulder and lit up his next cigarette.
“No idea,” he said, reluctantly.
“We looked at the mug shots,” Webster said. “I sent them over to the Behavioral Science Unit. Shrinks looked them over.”
“And?” McGrath asked.
“I don’t know,” Webster said. “They’re a pretty smart bunch of people down there, but how much can you get from gazing at a damn photograph?”
“Any conclusions at all?” McGrath asked.

“Some,” Webster said. “They felt three of the guys belonged together, and the big guy was kind of separate. The three looked the same. Did you notice that? Same kind of background, same looks, same genes maybe. They could all three be related. This guy Bell was from California. Mojave, right? Beau Borken, too. The feeling is the three of them are probably all from the same area. All West Coast types. But the big guy is different. Different clothes, different stance, different physically. The anthropologists down there in Quantico think he could be foreign, at least partly, or maybe second-generation. Fair hair and blue eyes, but there’s something in his face. They say maybe he’s European. And he’s big. Not pumped up at the gym, just big, like naturally.”
“So?” McGrath asked. “What were their conclusions?”
“Maybe he is European,” Webster said. “A big tough guy, maybe from Europe, they’re worried he’s some kind of a terrorist. Maybe a mercenary. They’re checking overseas.”
“A terrorist?” McGrath said. “A mercenary? But why?”
“That’s the point,” Webster said. “The why part is what we need to nail down. If this guy really is a terrorist, what’s his purpose? Who recruited who? Who is the motivating force here? Did Borken’s militia hire him to help them out, or is it the other way around? Is this his call? Did he hire Borken’s militia for local color inside the States?”
“What the hell is going on?” McGrath asked.
“I’m flying up to O’Hare,” Webster said. “I’ll take over day-to-day from here, Mack. Case this damn big, I’ve got to, right? The old guy will expect it.”
“Which old guy?” McGrath asked sourly.
“Whichever, both,” Webster said.

BROGAN DROVE OUT to O’Hare, middle of the evening, six hours after the debacle with the Mexicans in the truck in Arizona. McGrath sat beside him in the front seat, Milosevic in the back. Nobody spoke. Brogan parked the Bureau Ford on the military-compound tarmac, inside the wire fence. They sat in the car, waiting for the FBI Lear from Andrews. It landed after twenty minutes. They saw it taxi quickly over toward them. Saw it come to a halt, caught in the glare of the airport floodlights, engines screaming. The door opened and the steps dropped down. Harland Webster appeared in the opening and looked around. He caught sight of them and gestured them over. A sharp, urgent gesture. Repeated twice.
They climbed inside the small plane. The steps folded in and the door sucked shut behind them. Webster led them forward to a group of seats. Two facing two across a small table. They sat, McGrath and Brogan facing Webster, Milosevic

next to him. They buckled their belts and the Lear began to taxi again. The plane lurched through its turn onto the runway and waited. It quivered and vibrated and then rolled forward, accelerating down the long concrete strip before suddenly jumping into the air. It tilted northwest and throttled back to a loud cruise.

"OK, try this," Webster said. "The Joint Chairman's daughter's been snatched by some terrorist group, some foreign involvement. They're going to make demands on him. Demands with some kind of a military dimension."

McGrath shook his head.

"That's crap," he said. "How could that possibly work? They'd just replace him. Old soldiers willing to sit on their fat asses in the Pentagon aren't exactly thin on the ground."

Brogan nodded cautiously.

"I agree, chief," he said. "That's a nonviable proposition."

Webster nodded back.

"Exactly," he said. "So what does that leave us with?"

Nobody answered that. Nobody wanted to say the words.

THE LEAR CHASED the glow of the setting sun west and landed at Fargo in North Dakota. An agent from the Minneapolis Field Office was up there to meet them with a car. He wasn't impressed by Brogan or Milosevic, and he was too proud to show he was impressed by the Chicago Agent-in-Charge. But he was fairly tense about meeting with Harland Webster. Tense, and determined to show him he meant business.

"We found their hideout, sir," the guy said. "They used it last night and moved on. It's pretty clear. About a mile from where the body was found."

He drove them northwest, two hours of tense darkening silence as the car crawled like an insect through endless gigantic spreads of barley and wheat and beans and oats. Then he swung a right and his headlights opened up a vista of endless grasslands and dark gray sky. The sun was gone in the west. The local guy threaded through the turns and pulled up next to a ranch fence. The fence disappeared onward into the dark, but the headlights caught police tape strung between a couple of trees, and a police cruiser, and a coroner's wagon waiting twenty yards away.

"This is where the body was found," the local guy said.

He had a flashlight. There wasn't much to see. Just a ditch between the blacktop and the fence, overgrown with grass, trampled down over a ten-yard stretch. The body was gone, but the medical examiner had waited with the details.

"Pretty weird," the doctor said. "The guy was suffocated. That's for sure. He

was smothered, pushed facedown into something soft. There are petechiae all over the face, and in the eyes. Small pinpoint hemorrhages, which you get with asphyxia."
McGrath shrugged.
"What's weird about that?" he said. "I'd have suffocated the scumbag myself, given half a chance."
"Before and after," the doctor said. "Extreme violence before. Looks to me like the guy was smashed against a wall, maybe the side of a truck. The back of his skull was cracked, and he broke three bones in his back. Then he was kicked in the gut. His insides are a mess. Just slopping around in there. Extreme violence, awesome force. Whoever did that, I wouldn't want him to get mad at me, that's for damn sure."
"What about after?" McGrath said.
"The body was moved," the doctor said. "Hypostasis pattern is all screwed up. Like somebody beat on the guy, suffocated him, left him for an hour, then thought better of it and moved the body out here and dumped it."
Webster and McGrath and Brogan all nodded. Milosevic stared down into the ditch. They regrouped on the shoulder and stood looking at the vast dark landscape for a long moment and then turned together back to the car.
"Thank you, doc," Webster said vaguely. "Good work."
The doctor nodded. The car doors slammed. The local agent started up and continued on down the road, west, toward where the sun had set.
"The big guy is calling the shots," Webster said. "It's clear, right? He hired the three guys to do a job of work for him. Peter Wayne Bell stepped out of line. He started to mess with Holly. A helpless, disabled woman, young and pretty, too much of a temptation for an animal like that, right?"
"Right," Brogan said. "But the big guy is a professional. A mercenary or a terrorist or something. Messing with the prisoner was not in his game plan. So he got mad and offed Bell. Enforcing some kind of discipline on the troops."
Webster nodded.
"Had to be that way," he said. "Only the big guy could do that. Partly because he's the boss, therefore he's got the authority, and partly because he's physically powerful enough to do that kind of serious damage."
"He was protecting her?" McGrath said.
"Protecting his investment," Webster said back, sourly.
"So maybe she's still OK," McGrath said.
Nobody replied to that. The car turned a tight left after a mile and bounced down a track. The headlight beams jumped over a small cluster of wooden buildings.
"This was their stopping place," the local guy said. "It's an old horse farm."
"Inhabited?" McGrath asked.

inhabited?" McGrath asked.
"It was until yesterday," the guy said. "No sign of anybody today."
He pulled up in front of the barn. The five men got out into the dark. The barn door stood open. The local guy waited with the car and Webster and McGrath and Brogan and Milosevic stepped inside. Searched with their flashlights. It was dark and damp. Cobbled floor, green with moss. Horse stalls down both sides. They walked in. Down the aisle to the end. The stall on the right had been peppered with a shotgun blast. The back wall had just about disintegrated. Planks had fallen out. Wood splinters lay all around, crumbling with decay. The end stall on the left had a mattress in it. Laid at an angle on the mossy cobbles. There was a chain looped through an iron ring on the back wall. The ring had been put there a hundred years ago to hold a horse by a rope. But last night it had held a woman, by a chain attached to her wrist. Webster ducked down and came up with the bright chrome handcuff, locked into the ends of the loop of chain. Brogan knelt and picked long dark hairs off the mattress. Then he rejoined Milosevic and searched through the other stalls in turn. McGrath stared at them. Then he walked out of the barn. He turned to face west and stared at the point where the sun had fallen over the horizon. He stood and stared into the infinite dark in that direction like if he stared long enough and hard enough he could focus his eyes five hundred miles away and see Holly.

23

NOBODY COULD SEE Holly because she was alone, locked in the prison room that had been built for her. She had been taken from the forest clearing by four silent women dressed in dull green fatigues, night camouflage smearing their faces, automatic weapons slung at their shoulders, ammunition pouches chinking and rattling on their belts. They had pulled her away from Reacher and dragged her in the dark across the clearing, into the trees, through a gauntlet of hissing, spitting, jeering people. Then a painful mile down a stony path, out of the forest again and over to the large white building. They had not spoken to her. Just marched her in and pushed her up the stairs to the second floor. They had pulled open the stout new door and pushed her up the step into the room. The step was more than a foot high, because the floor inside the room was built up higher than the floor in the hallway outside. She crawled up and in and heard the door slamming and the key turning loudly behind her.

There were no windows. A bulb in the ceiling behind a wire grille lit the room with a vivid hot yellow light. All four walls and the floor and the ceiling were made from new pine boards, unfinished, smelling strongly of fresh lumber. At the far end of the room was a bed. It had a simple iron frame and a thin crushed mattress. Like an Army bed, or a prison cot. On the bed were two sets of clothing. Two pairs of fatigue pants and two shirts. Dull green, like the four silent women had been wearing. She limped over to the bed and touched them. Old and worn, but clean. Pressed. The creases in the pants were like razors.

She turned back and inspected the room, closely. It was not small. Maybe sixteen feet square. But she sensed it was smaller than it should have been. The proportions were odd. She had noticed the raised floor. It was more than a foot higher than it should have been. She guessed the walls and the ceiling were the same. She limped to the wall and tapped the new boarding. There was a dull sound. A cavity behind. Somebody had built this simple timber shell right inside a bigger room. And they had built it well. The new boards were tight and straight. But there was damp in the tiny cracks between them. She stared at the damp and sniffed the air. She shivered. The room smelled of fear.

One corner was walled off. There was a door set in a simple diagonal partition. She limped over to it and pulled it open. A bathroom. A john, a sink. A trash can, with a new plastic liner. And a shower over a tub. Cheap white ceramic, but brand-new. Carefully installed. Neat tiling. Soap and shampoo on a shelf. She leaned on the doorjamb and stared at the shower. She stared at it for a long time. Then she shrugged off her filthy Armani suit. She balled it up and threw it in the

Then she shrugged off her filthy Armani suit. She balled it up and threw it in the trash can. She started the shower running and stepped under the torrent of water. She washed her hair three times. She scrubbed her aching body all over. She stood in the shower for the best part of an hour.
Then she limped back to the bed and selected a set of the old fatigues. They fit her just about perfectly. She lay down on the bed and stared at the pine ceiling and listened to the silence. For the first time in more than sixty hours, she was alone.

REACHER WAS NOT alone. He was still in the forest clearing. He was twenty feet from the white Econoline, chained to a tree, guarded by six silent men with machine guns. Dogs were padding free through the clearing. Reacher was leaning back on the rough bark, waiting, watching his guards. He was cold. He could feel pine resin sticking to his thin shirt. The guards were cautious. They were standing in a line, six feet away from him, weapons pointed at him, eyes gleaming white out of darkened faces. They were dressed in olive fatigues. There were some kind of semicircular flashes on their shoulders. It was too dark for Reacher to read them.
The six men were all maybe forty years old. They were lean and bearded. Comfortable with their weapons. Alert. Silent. Accustomed to night duty. Reacher could see that. They looked like the survivors of a small infantry platoon. Like they had stepped into the forest on night patrol twenty years ago as young recruits, and had never come back out again.
They snapped to attention at the sound of footsteps approaching behind them. The sounds were grotesquely loud in the still night. Boots smashed into shale and gun stocks slapped into palms. Reacher glanced into the clearing and saw a seventh man approaching. Younger, maybe thirty-five. A tall man, clean-shaven, no camouflage on his face, crisp fatigues, shiny boots. Same semicircular flashes at the shoulder. Some kind of an officer.
The six forty-year-old grunts stood back and saluted and the new guy crunched up face-to-face with Reacher. He took a cigarette pack from his pocket and a cigarette from the pack. Lit it and kept the lighter burning to illuminate Reacher's face. Stared over the wavering flame with an expressionless gaze. Reacher stared back at him. The guy had a small head on wide shoulders, a thin hard face starved into premature lines and crevices. In the harsh shadow of the flame, it looked like he had no lips. Just a slit, where his mouth should be. Cold eyes, burning under the thin skin stretched over his brow. A military buzz cut, maybe a week old, just growing out. He stared at Reacher and let the flame die. Ran a hand across his scalp. Reacher heard the loud rasp of the stubble passing under his palm in the still night air.

“I’m Dell Fowler,” the guy said. “I’m chief of staff here.”
A quiet voice. West Coast. Reacher looked back at him and nodded, slowly.
“You want to tell me what staff you’re chief of?” he said.
“Loder didn’t explain?” the guy called Fowler asked.
“Loder didn’t explain anything,” Reacher said. “He had his hands full just getting us here.”
Fowler nodded and smiled a chilly smile.
“Loder’s an idiot,” he said. “He made five major mistakes. You’re one of them. He’s in all kinds of deep shit now. And so are you.”
He gestured to one of the guards. The guard stepped forward and handed him a key from his pocket. The guard stood with his weapon ready and Fowler unlocked Reacher’s chain. It clattered down the tree trunk to the ground. Metal on wood, a loud sound in the forest night. A dog padded near and sniffed. People moved in the trees. Reacher pushed away from the trunk and squeezed some circulation back into his forearm. All six guards took a pace forward. Weapons slapped back to the ready position. Reacher watched the muzzles and Fowler caught his arm and turned him. Cuffed his hands together again, behind his back. Nodded. Two guards melted away into the trees. A third jabbed the muzzle of his gun into Reacher’s back. A fourth took up position to the rear. Two walked point out in front. Fowler fell in beside Reacher and caught his elbow. Walked him across toward a small wooden hut on the opposite edge of the clearing. Clear of the trees, the moonlight was brighter. Reacher could make out the writing on Fowler’s shoulder flash. It read: Montana Militia.
“This is Montana?” he said. “Loder called it a brand-new country.”
Fowler shrugged as he walked.
“He was premature,” he said. “Right now, this is still Montana.”
They reached the hut. The point men opened the door. Yellow light spilled out into the darkness. The guard with the weapon in Reacher’s back used it to push him inside. Loder was standing against the far wall. His hands were cuffed behind him. He was guarded by another lean, bearded man with a machine gun. This guy was a little younger than the other grunts, neater beard. A livid scar running laterally across his forehead.
Fowler walked around and sat behind a plain desk. Pointed to a chair. Reacher sat down, handcuffed, six soldiers behind him. Fowler watched him sit and then transferred his attention across to Loder. Reacher followed his gaze. First time he’d seen Loder on Monday, he’d seen a degree of calm competence, hard eyes, composure. That was all gone. The guy was shaking with fear. His cuffs were rattling behind him. Reacher watched him and thought: this guy is terrified of his leaders.

“So, five mistakes,” Fowler said.
His voice was still quiet. And it was confident. Relaxed. The quiet confident voice of a person very secure about his power. Reacher heard the voice die into silence and listened to the creak of boots on wood behind him.
“I did my best,” Loder said. “She’s here, right?”
His voice was supplicant and miserable. The voice of a man who knows he’s in deep shit without really understanding exactly why.
“She’s here, right?” he said again.
“By a miracle,” Fowler replied. “You caused a lot of stress elsewhere. People had their work cut out covering for your incompetence.”
“What did I do wrong?” Loder asked.
He pushed forward off the wall, hands cuffed behind him, and moved into Reacher’s view. Glanced desperately at him, like he was asking for a testimonial.
“Five mistakes,” Fowler said again. “One, you burned the pickup, and two, you burned the car. Way too visible. Why didn’t you just put an ad in the damn paper?”
Loder made no reply. His mouth was working, but no sound was coming out.
“Three, you snarled this guy up,” Fowler said.
Loder glanced at Reacher again and shook his head vigorously.
“This guy’s a nobody,” he said. “No heat coming after him.”
“You should still have waited,” Fowler said. “And four, you lost Peter. What exactly happened to him?”
Loder shrugged again.
“I don’t know,” he said.
“He got scared,” Fowler said. “You were making so many mistakes, he got scared and he ran. That’s what happened. You got any other explanation?”
Loder was just staring blankly.
“And five, you killed the damn dentist,” Fowler said. “They’re not going to overlook that, are they? This was supposed to be a military operation, right? Political? You added an extra factor there.”
“What dentist?” Reacher asked.
Fowler glanced at him and smiled a lipless smile, indulgent, like Reacher was an audience he could use to humiliate Loder a little more.
“They stole the car from a dentist,” he said. “The guy caught them at it. They should have waited until he was clear.”
“He got in the way,” Loder said. “We couldn’t bring him with us, could we?”
“You brought me,” Reacher said to him.
Loder stared at him like he was a moron.

“The guy was a Jew,” he said. “This place isn’t for Jews.”
Reacher glanced around the room. Looked at the shoulder flashes. Montana Militia, Montana Militia, Montana Militia. He nodded slowly. A brand-new country.
“Where have you taken Holly?” he asked Fowler.
Fowler ignored him. He was still dealing with Loder.
“You’ll stand trial tomorrow,” he told him. “Special tribunal. The commander presiding. The charge is endangering the mission. I’m prosecuting.”
“Where’s Holly?” Reacher asked him again.
Fowler shrugged. A cool gaze.
“Close by,” he said. “Don’t you worry about her.”
Then he glanced up over Reacher’s head and spoke to the guards.
“Put Loder on the floor,” he said.
Loder offered no resistance at all. Just let the younger guy with the scar hold hire upright. The nearest guard reversed his rifle and smashed the butt into Loder’s stomach. Reacher heard the air punch out of him. The younger guy dropped him and stepped neatly over him. Walked out of the hut, alone, duty done. The door slammed noisily behind him. Then Fowler turned back to Reacher.
“Now let’s talk about you,” he said.
His voice was still quiet. Quiet, and confident. Secure. But it was not difficult to be secure holed up in the middle of nowhere with six armed subordinates surrounding a handcuffed man on a chair. A handcuffed man who has just witnessed a naked display of power and brutality. Reacher shrugged at him.
“What about me?” he said. “You know my name. I told Loder. No doubt he told you. He probably got that right. There isn’t much more to say on the subject.”
There was silence. Fowler thought about it. Nodded.
“This is a decision for the commander,” he said.

IT WAS THE shower which convinced her. She based her conclusions on it. Some good news, some bad. A brand-new bathroom, cheaply but carefully fitted out in the way a pathetic house-proud woman down on her luck in a trailer park would choose. That bathroom communicated a lot to Holly.
It meant she was a hostage, to be held long-term, but to be held with a certain measure of respect. Because of her value in some kind of a trade. There were to be no doubts about her day-to-day comfort or safety. Those factors were to be removed from the negotiation. Those factors were to be taken for granted. She was to be a high-status prisoner. Because of her value. Because of who she was. But not because of who she was. Because of who her father was. Because of the connections she had. She was supposed to sit in this crushing, fear-filled room

and be somebody's daughter. Sit and wait while people weighed her value, one way and the other. While people reacted to her plight, feeling a little reassured by the fact that she had a shower all to herself.
She eased herself off the bed. To hell with that, she thought. She was not going to sit there and be negotiated over. The anger rose up inside her. It rose up and she turned it into a steely determination. She limped to the door and tried the handle for the twentieth time. Then she heard footsteps on the stairs. They clattered down the corridor. Stopped at her door. A key turned the lock. The handle moved against her grip. She stepped back and the door opened.
Reacher was pushed up into the room. A blur of camouflaged figures behind him. They shoved him up through the door and slammed it shut. She heard it locking and the footsteps tramping away. Reacher was left standing there, gazing around.
"Looks like we have to share," he said.
She looked at him.
"They were only expecting one guest," he added.
She made no reply to that. She just watched his eyes examining the room. They flicked around the walls, the floor, the ceiling. He twisted and glanced into the bathroom. Nodded to himself. Turned back to face her, waiting for her comment.
She was pausing, thinking hard about what to say and how to say it.
"It's only a single bed," she said at last.
She tried to make the words count for more. She tried to make them like a long speech. Like a closely reasoned argument. She tried to make them say: OK, in the truck, we were close. OK, we kissed. Twice. The first time, it just happened. The second time, I asked you to, because I was looking for comfort and reassurance. But now we've been apart for an hour or two. Long enough for me to get to feeling a little silly about what we did. She tried to make those five words say all that, while she watched his eyes for his reaction.
"There's somebody else, right?" he said.
She saw that he said it as a joke, as a throwaway line to show her he agreed with her, that he understood, as a way to let them both off the hook without getting all heavy about it. But she didn't smile at him. Instead, she found herself nodding.
"Yes, there is somebody," she said. "What can I say? If there wasn't, maybe I would want to share."
She thought: He looks disappointed.
"In fact, I probably would want to," she added. "But there is somebody, and I'm sorry. It wouldn't be a good idea."
It showed in his face, and she felt she had to say more.
"I'm sorry," she said again. "It's not that I wouldn't want to."

She watched him. He just shrugged at her. She saw he was thinking: it's not the end of the world. And then he was thinking: it just feels like it. She blushed. She was absurdly gratified. But ready to change the subject.
"What's going on here?" she asked. "They tell you anything?"
"Who's the lucky guy?" Reacher asked.
"Just somebody," she said. "What's going on here?"
His eyes were clouded. He looked straight at her.
"Lucky somebody," he said.
"He doesn't even know," she said.
"That you're gone?" he asked.
She shook her head.
"That I feel this way," she said.
He stared at her. Didn't reply. There was a long silence in the room. Then she heard footsteps again. Hurrying, outside the building. Clattering inside. Coming up the stairs. They stopped outside the door. The key slid in. The door opened. Six guards clattered inside. Six machine guns. She took a painful step backward. They ignored her completely.
"The commander is ready for you, Reacher," the point man said.
He signaled him to turn around. He clicked handcuffs on, behind his back. Tightened them hard. Pushed him to the door with the barrel of his gun and out into the corridor. The door slammed and locked behind the gaggle of men.

FOWLER PULLED THE headphones off and stopped the tape recorder.
"Anything?" the commander asked him.
"No," Fowler said. "She said it's only a single bed, and he sounded pissed, like he wants to get in her pants. So she said she's got another boyfriend."
"I didn't know that," the commander said. "Did she say who?"
Fowler shook his head.
"But it works OK?" the commander asked him.
"Clear as a bell," Fowler said.

REACHER WAS PUSHED down the stairs and back out into the night. Back the way he had come, a mile up a stony path. The point man gripped his elbow and hustled him along. They were hurrying. Almost running. They were using their gun muzzles like cattle prods. They covered the distance in fifteen minutes. They crunched across the clearing to the small wooden hut. Reacher was pushed roughly inside.
Loder was still on the floor. But there was somebody new sitting at the plain wooden desk. The commander. Reacher was clear on that. He was an extraordinary figure. Maybe six feet tall, probably four hundred pounds. Maybe

extraordinary figure. Maybe six feet tall, probably four hundred pounds. Maybe thirty-five years old, thick hair, so blond it was nearly white, cut short at the sides and brushed long across the top like a German schoolboy's. A smooth pink face, bloated tight by his bulk, bright red nickel-sized spots burning high up on the cheeks. Tiny colorless eyes forced into slits between the cheeks and the white eyebrows. Wet red lips pursed above a chin strong enough to hold its shape in the blubber.

He was wearing an enormous black uniform. An immaculate black shirt, military cut, no insignia except a pair of the same shoulder flashes everybody else was wearing. A wide leather belt, gleaming like a mirror. Crisp black riding pants, flared wide at the top, tucked into high black boots which matched the belt for shine.

"Come in and sit down," he said, quietly.

Reacher was pushed over to the chair he had occupied before. He sat, with his hands crushed behind him. The guards stood to rigid attention all around him, not daring to breathe, just staring blankly into space.

"I'm Beau Borken," the big man said. "I'm the commander here."

His voice was high. Reacher stared at the guy and felt some kind of an aura radiating out of him, like a glow. The glow of total authority.

"I have to make a decision," Borken said. "I need you to help me with it."

Reacher realized he was looking away from the guy. Like the glow was overpowering him. He forced himself to turn his head slowly and stare directly into the big white face.

"What decision?" he asked.

"Whether you should live," Borken said. "Or whether you should die."

HOLLY PULLED THE side panel off the bath. She had known plumbers leave trash under the tub, out of sight behind the panel. Offcuts of pipe, scraps of wood, even tools. Used blades, lost wrenches. Stuff that could prove useful. Some apartments she'd had, she'd found all kinds of things. But there was nothing. She lay down and felt right into the back recesses and came up with nothing at all.

And the floor was solid all the way under the fixtures. The plumbing ran down through tight holes. It was an expert job. It was possible she could force a lever down alongside the big pipe running down out of the john. If she had a pry bar she might get a board loose. But there was no pry bar in the room. Nor any substitute. The towel bar was plastic. It would bend and break. There was nothing else. She sat on the floor and felt the disappointment wash over her.

Then she heard more footsteps outside her door.

This time, they were quiet. They were muffled, not clattering. Somebody

This time, they were quiet. They were muffled, not clattering. Somebody approaching quietly and cautiously. Somebody with no official business. She stood up slowly. Stepped out of the bathroom and pulled the door to hide the dismantled tub. Limped back toward the bed as the lock clicked and the door opened.

A man came into the room. He was a youngish man, dressed in camouflage fatigues, black smears on his face. A vivid red scar running laterally across his forehead. A machine gun slung at his shoulder. He turned and closed the door, quietly. Turned back with his fingers to his lips.

She stared at him. Felt her anger rising. This time, she wasn't chained up. This time, the guy was going to die. She smiled a crazy smile at the logic of it. The bathroom was going to save her. She was a high-status prisoner. Supposed to be held with dignity and respect. Somebody came in to abuse her, and she killed him, they couldn't argue with that, could they?

But the guy with the scar just held his fingers to his lips and nodded toward the bathroom. He crept quietly over and pushed the door. Gestured for her to follow. She limped after him. He glanced down at the side panel on the floor and shook his head. Reached in and started the shower. Set it running hard against the empty tub.

"They've got microphones," the guy said. "They're listening for me."

"Who the hell are you?" she asked.

He squatted down and put the panel back on the bath.

"No good," he said. "There's no way out."

"Got to be," she said.

The guy shook his head.

"They had a trial run," he said. "The commander put one of the guys who built this place in here. Told him if he didn't get out, he'd cut his arms off. So I assume he tried real hard."

"And what happened?" she asked.

The guy shrugged.

"The commander cut his arms off," he said.

"Who the hell are you?" she asked again.

"FBI," the guy said. "Counterterrorism. Undercover. I guess I'm going to have to get you out."

"How?" she asked.

"Tomorrow," he said. "I can get a jeep. We'll have to make a run for it. I can't call in for assistance because they're scanning for my transmitter. We'll just get the jeep and head south and hope for the best."

"What about Reacher?" she asked. "Where have they taken him?"

"Forget him," the guy said. "He'll be dead by morning."

"Forget him," the guy said. "He'll be dead by morning."
Holly shook her head.
"I'm not going without him," she said.

"LODER DISPLEASED ME," Beau Borken said.
Reacher glanced downward. Loder had squirmed up into a sideways sitting position, crammed into the angle between the floor and the wall.
"Did he displease you?" Borken asked.
Reacher made no reply.
"Would you like to kick him?" Borken asked.
Reacher kept quiet. He could see where this game was going. If he said yes, he'd be expected to hurt the guy badly. Which he had no objection to in principle, but he'd prefer to do it on his own terms. If he said no, Borken would call him a coward with no sense of natural justice and no self-respect. An obvious game, with no way to win. So he kept quiet, which was a tactic he'd used a thousand times before: when in doubt, just keep your mouth shut.
"In the face?" Borken asked. "In the balls, maybe?"
Loder was staring up at Reacher. Something in his face. Reacher saw what it was. His eyes widened in surprise. Loder was pleading with him to give him a kicking, so that Borken wouldn't.
"Loder, lie down again," Borken said.
Loder squirmed his hips away from the wall and dropped his shoulders to the floor. Wriggled and pushed until he was lying flat on his back. Borken nodded to the nearest guard.
"In the face," he said.
The guard stepped over and used the sole of his boot to force Loder's head sideways, so his face was presented to the room. Then he stepped back and kicked out. A heavy blow from a heavy boot. Loder's head snapped backward and thumped into the wall. Blood welled from his nose. Borken watched him bleed for a long moment, mildly interested. Then he turned back to Reacher.
"Loder's one of my oldest friends," he said.
Reacher said nothing.
"Begs two questions, doesn't it?" Borken said. "Question one: why am I enforcing such strict discipline, even against my old friends? And question two: if that's how I treat my friends, how the hell do I treat my enemies?"
Reacher said nothing. When in doubt, just keep your mouth shut.
"I treat my enemies a hell of a lot worse than that," Borken said. "So much worse, you really don't want to think about it. You really don't, believe me. And why am I being so strict? Because we're two days away from a unique moment in history. Things are going to happen which will change the world. Plans are

made and operations are under way. Therefore I have to bring my natural caution to a new pitch. My old friend Loder has fallen victim to a historical force. So, I'm afraid, have you."
Reacher said nothing. He dropped his gaze and watched Loder. He was unconscious. Breathing raggedly through clotting blood in his nose.
"You got any value to me as a hostage?" Borken asked.
Reacher thought about it. Made no reply. Borken watched his face and smiled. His red lips parted over small white teeth.
"I thought not," he said. "So what should I do with a person who's got no value to me as a hostage? During a moment of great historical tension?"
Reacher stayed silent. Just watching. Easing his weight forward, ready.
"You think you're going to get a kicking?" Borken asked.
Reacher tensed his legs, ready to spring.
"Relax," Borken said. "No kicking for you. When the time comes, it'll be a bullet through the head. From behind. I'm not stupid, you know. I've got eyes, and a brain. What are you, six-five? About two-twenty? Clearly fit and strong. And look at you, tension in your thighs, getting ready to jump up. Clearly trained in some way. But you're not a boxer. Because your nose has never been broken. A heavyweight like you with an unbroken nose would need to be a phenomenal talent, and we'd have seen your picture in the newspapers. So you're just a brawler, probably been in the service, right? So I'll be cautious with you. No kicking, just a bullet."
The guards took their cue. Six rifles came down out of the slope and six fingers hooked around six triggers.
"You got felony convictions?" Borken asked.
Reacher shrugged and spoke for the first time.
"No," he said.
"Upstanding citizen?" Borken asked.
Reacher shrugged again.
"I guess," he said.
Borken nodded.
"So I'll think about it," he said. "Live or die, I'll let you know, first thing in the morning, OK?"
He lifted his bulky arm and snapped his fingers. Five of the six guards moved. Two went to the door and opened it. A third went out between them. The other two waited. Borken stood up with surprising grace for a man of his size and walked out from behind the desk. The wooden floor creaked under his bulk. The four waiting guards fell in behind him and he walked straight out into the night without a backward glance.

HE WALKED ACROSS the clearing and into another hut. Fowler was waiting for him, the headphones in his hand.
“I think somebody went in there,” he said.
“You think?” Borken said.
“The shower was running,” Fowler said. “Somebody went in there who knows about the microphones. She wouldn’t need another shower. She just had one, right? Somebody went in there and ran the shower to mask the talking.”
“Who?” Borken asked.
Fowler shook his head.
“I don’t know who,” he said. “But I can try to find out.”
Borken nodded.
“Yes, you can do that,” he said. “You can try to find out.”

IN THE ACCOMMODATION huts, men and women were working in the gloom, cleaning their rifles. The word about Loder had traveled quickly. They all knew about the tribunal. They all knew the likely outcome. Any six of them could be selected for the firing squad. If there was going to be a firing squad. Most people figured there probably was. An officer like Loder, the commander might limit it to a firing squad. Probably nothing worse. So they cleaned their rifles, and left them locked and loaded next to their beds.
Those of them with enough demerits to be on tomorrow’s punishment detail were trying to get some sleep. If he didn’t limit it to a firing squad, they could be in for a lot of work. Messy, unpleasant work. And even if Loder got away with it, there was always the other guy. The big guy who had come in with the federal bitch. There wasn’t much chance of him surviving past breakfast time. They couldn’t remember the last time any stray stranger had lasted longer than that.

HOLLY JOHNSON HAD a rule. It was a rule bred into her, like a family motto. It had been reinforced by her long training at Quantico. It was a rule distilled from thousands of years of military history and hundreds of years of law enforcement experience. The rule said: hope for the best, but plan for the worst. She had no reason to believe she would not be speeding south in a jeep just as soon as her new ally could arrange it. He was Bureau-trained, the same as she was. She knew that if the tables were turned, she would get him out, no problem at all. So she knew she could just sit tight and wait. But she wasn’t doing that. She was hoping for the best, but she was planning for the worst.
She had given up on the bathroom. No way out there. Now she was going over the room itself, inch by inch. The new pine boarding was nailed tight to the

frame, all six surfaces. It was driving her crazy. Inch-thick pine board, the oldest possible technology, used for ten thousand years, and there was no way through it. For a lone woman without any tools, it might as well have been the side of a battleship.
So she concentrated on finding tools. It was like she was personally speeding through Darwin's evolutionary process. Apes came down from the trees and they made tools. She was concentrating on the bed. The mattress was useless. It was a thin, crushed thing, no wire springs inside. But the bed frame was more promising. It was bolted together from iron tubes and flanges. If she could take it apart, she could put one of the little right-angle flanges in the end of the longest tube and make a pry bar seven feet long. But the bolts were all painted over. She had strong hands, but she couldn't begin to move them. Her fingers just bruised and slipped on her sweat.

LODER HAD BEEN dragged away and Reacher was locked up alone with the last remaining guard from the evening detail. The guard sat behind the plain desk and propped his weapon on the wooden surface with the muzzle pointing directly at him sitting on his chair. His hands were still cuffed behind him. He had decisions to make. First was no way could he sit all night like that. He glanced calmly at the guard and eased himself up and slid his hands underneath. Pressed his chest down onto his thighs and looped his hands out under his feet. Then he sat up and leaned back and forced a smile, hands together in his lap.
"Long arms," he said. "Useful."
The guard nodded slowly. He had small piercing eyes, set back in a narrow face. They gleamed out above the big beard, through the camouflage smudges, but the gleam looked innocent enough.
"What's your name?" Reacher asked him.
The guy hesitated. Shuffled in his seat. Reacher could see some kind of natural courtesy was prompting a reply. But there were obvious tactical considerations for the guy. Reacher kept on forcing the smile.
"I'm Reacher," he said. "You know my name. You got a name? We're here all night, we may as well be a little civilized about it, right?"
The guy nodded again, slowly. Then he shrugged.
"Ray," he said.
"Ray?" Reacher said. "That your first name or your last?"
"Last," the guy said. "Joseph Ray."
Reacher nodded.
"OK, Mr. Ray," he said. "Pleased to meet you."
"Call me Joe," Joseph Ray said.

Reacher forced the smile again. The ice was broken. Like conducting an interrogation. Reacher had done it a thousand times. But never from this side of the desk. Never when he was the one wearing the cuffs.
“Joe, you’re going to have to help me out a little,” he said. “I need some background here. I don’t know where I am, or why, or who all you guys are. Can you fill me in on some basic information?”
Ray was looking at him like he was maybe having difficulty knowing where to start. Then he was glancing around the room like maybe he was wondering whether he was allowed to start at all.
“Where exactly are we?” Reacher asked him. “You can tell me that, right?”
“Montana,” Ray said.
Reacher nodded.
“OK,” he said. “Where in Montana?”
“Near a town called Yorke,” Ray said. “An old mining town, just about abandoned.”
Reacher nodded again.
“OK,” he said. “What are you guys doing here?”
“We’re building a bastion,” Ray said. “A place of our own.”
“What for?” Reacher asked him.
Ray shrugged. An inarticulate guy. At first, he said nothing. Then he sat forward and launched into what seemed to Reacher like a mantra, like something the guy had rehearsed many times. Or like something the guy had been told many times.
“We came up here to escape the tyranny of America,” he said. “We have to draw up our borders and say, it’s going to be different inside here.”
“Different how?” Reacher asked him.
“We have to take America back, piece by piece,” Ray said. “We have to build a place where the white man can live free, unmolested, in peace, with proper freedoms and proper laws.”
“You think you can do that?” Reacher said.
“It happened before,” Ray said. “It happened in 1776.
People said enough is enough. They said we want a better country than this. Now we’re saying it again. We’re saying we want our country back. And we’re going to get it back. Because now we’re acting together. There were a dozen militias up here. They all wanted the same things. But they were all acting alone. Beau’s mission was to put people together. Now we’re unified and we’re going to take our country back. We’re starting here. We’re starting now.”
Reacher nodded. Glanced to his right and down at the dark stain where Loder’s nose had bled onto the floor.
“Like this?” he said. “What about voting and democracy? All that kind of stuff? You should be trying to change things through the political system, right?”

You should vote people out and vote new people in, right?"
Ray smiled sadly and shook his head.
"We've been voting for two hundred and twenty years," he said. "Gets worse all the time. Government's not interested in how we vote. They've taken all the power away from us. Given our country away. You know where the government of this country really is?"
Reacher shrugged.
"D.C., right?" he said.
"Wrong," Ray said. "It's in New York. The United Nations building. Ever asked yourself why the UN is so near Wall Street? Because that's the government. The United Nations and the banks. They run the world. America's just a small part of it. The President is just one voice on a damn committee. That's why voting is no damn good. You think the United Nations and the world banks care what we vote?"
"You sure about all this?" Reacher asked.
Ray nodded, vigorously.
"Sure I'm sure," he said. "I've seen it at work. Why do you think we send billions of dollars to the Russians when we got poverty here in America? You think that's the free choice of an American government? We send it because the world government tells us to send it. You know we got camps here? Hundreds of camps all over the country? Most of them are for United Nations troops. Foreign troops, waiting to move in when we start any trouble. But forty-three of them are concentration camps. That's where they're going to put us when we start speaking out."
"You sure?" Reacher said again.
"Sure I'm sure," Ray said again. "Beau's got the documents. We've got the proof. There are things going on you wouldn't believe. You know it's a secret federal law that all babies born in the hospital get a microchip implanted just under their skin? When they take them away, they're not weighing them and cleaning them up. They're implanting a microchip. Pretty soon the whole population is going to be visible to secret satellites. You think the space shuttle gets used for science experiments? You think the world government would authorize expenditure for stuff like that? You got to be kidding. The space shuttle is there to launch surveillance satellites."
"You're joking, right?" Reacher said.
Ray shook his head.
"No way," he said. "Beau's got the documents. There's another secret law, guy in Detroit sent Beau the stuff. Every car built in America since 1985 has a secret radio transmitter box in it, so the satellites can see where it's going. You buy a car, the radar screens in the UN building know where you are, every minute of

car, the radar screens in the UN building know where you are, every minute of the day and night. They've got foreign forces training in America, right now, ready for the official takeover. You know why we send so much money to Israel? Not because we care what happens to the Israelis. Why should we care? We send the money because that's where the UN is training the secret world army. It's like an experimental place. Why do you think the UN never stops the Israelis from invading people? Because the UN has told them what to do in the first place. Training them for the world takeover. There are three thousand helicopters right now, at airbases round the U.S., all ready for them to use. Helicopters, painted flat black, no markings."

"You sure?" Reacher said again. He was keeping his voice somewhere between worried and skeptical. "I never heard about any of this stuff."

"That proves it, right?" Ray said.

"Why?" Reacher asked.

"Obvious, right?" Ray said. "You think the world government is going to allow media access to that stuff? World government controls the media, right? They own it. So it's logical that whatever doesn't appear in the media is what is really happening, right? They tell you the safe stuff, and they keep the secrets away from you. It's all true, believe me. I told you, Beau's got the documents. Did you know every U.S. highway sign has a secret mark on the back? You drive out and take a look. A secret sign, to direct the world troops around the country. They're getting ready to take over. That's why we need a place of our own."

"You think they're going to attack you?" Reacher asked.

"No doubt about it," Ray said. "They're going to come right after us."

"And you figure you can defend yourselves?" Reacher said. "A few guys in some little town in Montana?"

Joe Ray shook his head.

"Not a few guys," he said. "There are a hundred of us."

"A hundred guys?" Reacher said. "Against the world government?"

Ray shook his head again.

"We can defend ourselves," he said. "Beau's a smart leader. This territory is good. We're in a valley here. Sixty miles north to south, sixty miles east to west. Canadian border along the northern edge."

He swept his hand through the air, above eye level, left to right like a karate chop, to demonstrate the geography. Reacher nodded. He was familiar with the Canadian border. Ray used his other hand, up and down the left edge of his invisible map.

"Rapid River," he said. "That's our western border. It's a big river, completely wild. No way to cross it."

He moved the Canadian border hand across and rubbed a small circle in the air

He moved the Canadian border hand across and rubbed a small circle in the air, like he was cleaning a pane of glass.
"National forest," he said. "You seen it? Fifty miles, east to west. Thick virgin forest, no way through. You want an eastern border, that forest is as good as you're going to get."
"What about the south?" Reacher asked.
Ray chopped his hand sideways at chest level.
"Ravine," he said. "Natural-born tank trap. Believe me, I know tanks. No way through, except one road and one track. Wooden bridge takes the track over the ravine."
Reacher nodded. He remembered the white truck pattering over a wooden structure.
"That bridge gets blown," Ray said. "No way through."
"What about the road?" Reacher asked.
"Same thing," Ray said. "We blow the bridge, and we're safe. Charges are set right now."
Reacher nodded slowly. He was thinking about air attack, artillery, missiles, smart bombs, infiltration of Special Forces, airborne troops, parachutes. He was thinking about Navy SEALs bridging the river or Marines bridging the ravine. He was thinking about NATO units rumbling straight down from Canada.
"What about Holly?" he asked. "What do you want with her?"
Ray smiled. His beard parted and his teeth shone out as bright as his eyes.
"Beau's secret weapon," he said. "Think about it. The world government is going to use her old man to lead the attack. That's why they appointed him. You think the President appoints those guys? You got to be joking. Old man Johnson's a world government guy, just waiting for the secret command to move. But when he gets here, what's he going to find?"
"What?" Reacher asked.
"He comes up from the south, right?" Ray said. "First building he sees is that old courthouse, southeast corner of town. You were just there. She's up on the second floor, right? You notice the new construction? Special room, double walls, twenty-two inches apart. The space is packed with dynamite and blasting caps from the old mine stores. The first stray shell will blow old man Johnson's little girl to kingdom come."
Reacher nodded again, slowly. Ray looked at him.
"We're not asking much," he said. "Sixty miles by sixty miles, what is that? Thirty-six hundred square miles of territory."
"But why now?" Reacher asked. "What's the big hurry?"
"What's the date?" Ray asked back.
Reacher shrugged.

Reacher shrugged.
“July something?” he said.
“July second,” Ray said. “Two days to go.”
“To what?” Reacher said.
“Independence Day,” Ray said. “July fourth.”
“So?” Reacher asked.
“We’re declaring independence,” Ray said. “Day after tomorrow. The birth of a brand-new nation. That’s when they’ll come for us, right? Freedom for the little guys? That’s not in their plan.”

24

THE BUREAU LEAR refueled at Fargo and flew straight southwest to California. McGrath had argued again in favor of heading straight for Montana, but Webster had overruled him. One step at a time was Webster's patient way, so they were going to check out the Beau Borken story in California, and then they were going to Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado to meet with General Johnson, McGrath was about the only Bureau guy alive capable of shouting at Webster, and he had, but arguing is not the same thing as winning, so they were all in the air heading first for Mojave, McGrath and Webster and Brogan and Milosevic, all overtired, overanxious and morose in the hot noisy cabin.

"I need all the background I can get," Webster said. "They put me in personal charge and these are not the type of guys I can be vague with, right?"

McGrath glared at him and thought: don't play your stupid Beltway games with Holly's life, Webster. But he said nothing. Just sat tight until the tiny plane started arrowing down toward the airfield on the edge of the desert.

They were on the ground just after two o'clock in the morning, West Coast time. The Mojave Agent-in-Charge met them on the deserted tarmac in his own car. Drove them south through the sleeping town.

"The Borkens were a Kendall family," he said. "Small town, fifty miles from here. Farming place, mostly citrus. One-man police department. The sheriff is waiting for us down there."

"He know anything?" McGrath asked.

The guy at the wheel shrugged.

"Maybe," he said. "Small town, right?"

Fifty miles through the desert night at eighty-five took them just thirty-six minutes. Kendall was a small knot of buildings adrift in a sea of groves. There was a gas station, a general store, a growers' operation and a low cement building with whip antennas spearing upward from the roof. A smart black-and-white was parked up on the apron outside. It was marked: Kendall County Sheriff. There was a single light in the office window behind the car.

The five agents stretched and yawned in the dry night air and trooped single file into the cement building. The Kendall County sheriff was a guy about sixty, solid, gray. He looked reliable. Webster waved him back into his seat and McGrath laid the four glossy mug shots on his desk in front of him.

"You know these guys?" he asked.

The sheriff slid the photographs nearer and looked at each of them in turn. He picked them up and shuffled them into a new order. Laid them back down on the

picked them up and shuffled them into a new order. Laid them back down on the desk like he was dealing a hand of giant playing cards. Then he nodded and reached down to his desk pedestal. Rolled open a drawer. Lifted out three buff files. He placed the files underneath three of the photographs. Laid a stubby finger on the first face.
“Peter Wayne Bell,” he said. “Mojave kid, but he was down here a lot. Not a very nice boy, as I believe you know.”
He nodded across to his monitor screen on a computer cart at the end of the desk. A page from the National Crime Center Database was glowing green. It was the report from the North Dakota cops about the identity of the body they had found in a ditch. The identity, and the history.
The sheriff moved his wrist and laid a finger on the next photograph. It was the gunman who had pushed Holly Johnson into the back of the Lexus.
“Steven Stewart,” he said. “Called Stevie, or Little Stevie. Farm boy, a couple of bushels short of a wagonload, know what I mean? Jumpy, jittery sort of a boy.”
“What’s in his file?” Webster asked.
The sheriff shrugged.
“Nothing too serious,” he said. “The boy was just too plain dumb for his own good. Group of kids would go out and mess around, and guess who’d be the one still stood there when I roll up? Little Stevie, that’s who. I locked him up a dozen times, I guess, but he never did much of what you would want to call serious shit.”
McGrath nodded and pointed to the photograph of the gunman who had gotten into the front seat of the Lexus.
“This guy?” he asked.
The sheriff moved his finger and laid it on the guy’s glossy throat.
“Tony Loder,” he said. “This is a fairly bad guy. Smarter than Stevie, dumber than you or me. I’ll give you the file. Maybe it won’t keep you Bureau guys awake nights, but it sure won’t help you sleep any better than you were going to anyhow.”
“What about the big guy?” Webster asked.
The sheriff jumped his finger along the row and shook his grizzled head.
“Never saw this guy before,” he said. “That’s for damn sure. I’d remember him if I had.”
“We think maybe he’s a foreigner,” Webster said. “Maybe European. Maybe had an accent. That ring any bells with you?”
The sheriff just kept on shaking his head.
“Never saw him before,” he said again. “I’d remember.”
“OK,” McGrath said. “Bell, Little Stevie Stewart, Tony Loder and the mystery man. Where do these Borken guys fit in?”

The sheriff shrugged.
“Old Dutch Borken never fit in nowhere,” he said. “That was his problem. He was in Nam, infantry grunt, moved out here when he got out of the service. Brought a pretty wife and a little fat ten-year-old boy with him, started growing citrus, did pretty well for a long while. He was a strange guy, a loner, never saw much of him. But he was happy enough, I guess. Then the wife took sick and died, and the boy started acting weird, the market took a couple of hits, profits were down, the growers all started getting into the banks for loans, interest went up, land went down, the collateral was disappearing, irrigation water got expensive, they all started going belly-up one after the other. Borken took it bad and swallowed his shotgun.”
Webster nodded.
“The little fat ten-year-old was Beau Borken?” he asked.
The sheriff nodded.
“Beau Borken,” he said. “Very strange boy. Very smart. But obsessed.”
“With what?” McGrath asked.
“Mexicans started coming up,” the sheriff said. “Cheap labor. Young Beau was dead set against it. He started hollering about keeping Kendall white. Joined the John Birch types.”
“So he was a racist?” McGrath said.
“At first,” the sheriff said. “Then he got into all that conspiracy stuff. Talking about the Jews running the government. Or the United Nations, or both, or some damn thing. The government was all Communists, taking over the world, secret plans for everything. Big conspiracy against everybody, especially him. Banks controlled the government, or was it the government controlled the banks? So the banks were all Communists and they were out to destroy America. He figured the exact reason the bank loaned his father the money was so it could default him later and give the farm to the Mexicans or the blacks or some damn thing. He was raving about it, all the time.”
“So what happened?” Webster said.
“Well, of course, the bank did end up defaulting him,” the sheriff said. “The guy wasn’t paying the loan, was he? But they didn’t give his land to the Mexicans. They sold it on to the same big corporation owns everything else around here, which is owned by the pension funds, which probably means it’s owned by you and me, not Communists or Mexicans or anybody else, right?”
“But the boy blamed the conspiracy for his father’s death?” Brogan asked.
“He sure did,” the sheriff said. “But the truth is it was Beau himself who did for the old man. I figure old Dutch could have faced just about anything, except his only boy had turned out to be a complete lunatic. A cruel, selfish, weird boy.

That's why he swallowed the damn shotgun, if you want to know the truth."
"So where did Beau go?" Webster asked.
"Montana," the sheriff said. "That's what I heard. He was into all those right-wing groups, you know, the militias. Built himself up to leader. Said the white man was going to have to stand and fight."
"And those other guys went with him?" Brogan asked.
"The three of them for sure," the sheriff said. "This big guy, I never saw before. But Little Stevie and Loder and Peter Bell, they were all in awe of Beau, like little robots. They all went up there together. They had a little cash, and they stripped the Borken place of anything they could carry, and they headed north. Figured to buy some cheap land up there and defend themselves, you know, although against who I can't say, because the way I hear it there ain't nobody up there, and if there is they're all white people anyway."
"What's in his file?" Webster asked.
The sheriff shook his head.
"Just about nothing," he said. "Beau's way too smart to get caught doing anything bad."
"But?" McGrath said. "He's doing stuff without getting caught?"
The sheriff nodded.
"That armored car robbery?" he said. "North of the state somewhere? I heard about that. Didn't stick to him, did it? I told you, way too smart."
"Anything else we should know?" Webster asked.
The sheriff thought for a while and nodded again.
"There was a fifth guy," he said. "Name of Odell Fowler. He'll turn up alongside of Beau, for sure. You can bet on that. Loder and Stevie and Bell get sent out doing mischief, you can be damn sure Borken and Fowler are sitting there in the shadows pulling their strings."
"Anything else?" Webster said again.
"Originally there was a sixth guy," the sheriff said. "Guy named Packer. Six of them, all thick as thieves. But Packer took up with a Mexican girl. Couldn't help himself, I guess, just plain fell in love with her. Beau told him to stop seeing her. They fell out about it, a lot of tension going on. One day, Packer's not around anymore, and Beau is all smiling and relaxed. We found Packer out in the scrub, nailed to a big wooden cross. Crucified. Dead for a couple of days."
"And you figure Borken did it?" Brogan asked.
"Couldn't prove it," the sheriff replied. "But I'm sure of it. And I'm sure he talked the others into helping him do it. He's a born leader. He can talk anybody into doing anything, I can promise you that."

KENDALL BACK TO Mojave was fifty miles by car. Mojave to Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado was another eight hundred and thirty miles by Lear. Three hours of travel, door to door, which put them down at Peterson through the gorgeous mountain dawn. It was the kind of sight people pay money to see, but the four FBI men took no notice at all. Thursday July third, the fourth day of the crisis, and no proper rest and no proper nutrition had left them ragged and focused on nothing except the job in hand.

General Johnson himself was not available to meet them. He was elsewhere on the giant base, on duty glad-handing the returning night patrols. His aide saluted Webster, shook hands with the other three, and walked them all over to a crew room reserved for their use. There was a huge photograph on the table, black-and-white, crisply focused. Some kind of a landscape. It looked like the surface of the moon.

“That’s Anadyr, in Siberia,” the aide said. “Satellite photograph. Last week, there was a big air base there. A nuclear bomber base. The runway was aimed straight at our missile silos in Utah. Arms reduction treaty required it to be blown up. The Russians complied last week.”

The four agents bent for another look. There was no trace of any man-made structure in the picture. Just savage craters.

“Complied?” McGrath said. “Looks like they did an enthusiastic job of work.”

“So?” Webster said.

The aide pulled a map from the portfolio. Unfolded it and stepped around so that the agents could share his view. It was a slice of the world, eastern Asia and the western United States, with the mass of Alaska right in the center and the North Pole right at the top. The aide stretched his thumb and finger apart and spanned the distance from Siberia southeast down to Utah.

“Anadyr was here,” he said. “Utah is here. Naturally we knew all about the bomber base, and we had countermeasures in place, which included big missile bases in Alaska, here, and then a chain of four small surface-to-air facilities strung out north to south all the way underneath Anadyr’s flight path into Utah, which are here, here, here and here, straddling the line between Montana and the Idaho panhandle.”

The agents ignored the red dots in Idaho. But they looked closely at the locations in Montana.

“What sort of bases are these?” Webster asked.

The aide shrugged.

“They were kind of temporary,” he said. “Thrown together in the sixties, just sort of survived ever since. Frankly, we didn’t expect to have to use them. The Alaska missiles were more than adequate. Nothing would have gotten past them.

But you know how it was, right? Couldn't be too ready."
"What sort of weapons?" McGrath asked.
"There was a Patriot battery at each facility," the aide said. "We pulled those out a while back. Sold them to Israel. All that's left is Stingers, you know, shoulder-launch infantry systems."
Webster looked at the guy.
"Stingers?" he said. "You were going to shoot Soviet bombers down with infantry systems?"
The aide nodded. Looked definite about it.
"Why not?" he said. "Don't forget, those bases were basically window dressing. Nothing was supposed to get past Alaska. But the Stingers would have worked. We supplied thousands of them to Afghanistan. They knocked down hundreds of Soviet planes. Mostly helicopters, I guess, but the principle is good. A heat seeker is a heat seeker, right? Makes no difference if it gets launched off a truck or off a GI's shoulder."
"So what happens now?" Webster asked him.
"We're closing the bases down," the guy said. "That's why the General is here, gentlemen. We're pulling the equipment and the personnel back here to Peterson, and there's going to be some ceremonies, you know, end-of-an-era stuff."
"Where are these bases?" McGrath asked. "The Montana ones? Exactly?"
The aide pulled the map closer and checked the references.
"Southernmost one is hidden on some farmland near Missoula," he said.
"Northern one is hidden in a valley, about forty miles south of Canada, near a little place called Yorke. Why? Is there a problem?"
McGrath shrugged.
"We don't know yet," he said.

THE AIDE SHOWED them where to get breakfast and left them to wait for the General. Johnson arrived after the eggs but before the toast, so they left the toast uneaten and walked back together to the crew room. Johnson looked a lot different from the glossy guy Webster had met with Monday evening. The early hour and three days' strain made him look twenty pounds thinner and twenty years older. His face was pale and his eyes were red. He looked like a man on the verge of defeat.
"So what do we know?" he asked.
"We think we know most of it," Webster answered.
"Right now our operational assumption is your daughter's been kidnapped by a militia group from Montana. We know their location, more or less. Somewhere

in the northwestern valleys.´´
Johnson nodded slowly.
“Any communication?” he asked.
Webster shook his head.
“Not yet,” he said.
“So what’s the reason?” Johnson asked. “What do they want?”
Webster shook his head again.
“We don’t know that yet,” he said.
Johnson nodded again, vaguely.
“Who are they?” he asked.
McGrath opened the envelope he was carrying.
“We’ve got four names,” he said. “Three of the snatch squad, and there’s pretty firm evidence about who the militia leader is. A guy named Beau Borken. That name mean anything to you?”
“Borken?” Johnson said. He shook his head. “That name means nothing.”
“OK,” McGrath said. “What about this guy? His name’s Peter Bell.”
McGrath passed Johnson the computer print of Bell at the wheel in the Lexus.
Johnson took a long look at it and shook his head.
“He’s dead,” McGrath said. “Didn’t make it back to Montana.”
“Good,” Johnson said.
McGrath passed him another picture.
“Steven Stewart?” he said.
Johnson paid the print some attention, but ended up shaking his head.
“Never saw this guy before,” he said.
“Tony Loder?” McGrath asked.
Johnson stared at Loder’s face and shook his head.
“No,” he said.
“Those three and Borken are all from California,” McGrath said. “There may be another guy called Odell Fowler. You heard that name?”
Johnson shook his head.
“And there’s this guy,” McGrath said. “We don’t know who he is.”
He passed over the photograph of the big guy. Johnson glanced at it, then glanced away. But then his gaze drifted back.
“You know this one?” McGrath asked him.
Johnson shrugged.
“He’s vaguely familiar,” he said. “Maybe somebody I once saw?”
“Recently?” McGrath asked.
Johnson shook his head.
“Not recently,” he said. “Probably a long time ago.”
“Military?” Webster asked.

Military?" Webster asked.
"Probably," Johnson said again. "Most of the people I see are military."
His aide crowded his shoulder for a look.
"Means nothing to me," he said. "But we should fax this to the Pentagon. If this guy is military, maybe there'll be somebody somewhere who served with him."
Johnson shook his head.
"Fax it to the military police," he said. "This guy's a criminal, right? Chances are he was in trouble before, in the service. Somebody there will remember him."

25

THEY CAME FOR him an hour after dawn. He was dozing on his hard chair, hands cuffed in his lap, Joseph Ray awake and alert opposite him. He had spent most of the night thinking about dynamite. Old dynamite, left over from abandoned mining operations. He imagined hefting a stick in his hand. Feeling the weight. Figuring the volume of the cavity behind Holly's walls. Picturing it packed with old dynamite. Old dynamite, rotting, the nitroglycerin sweating out, going unstable. Maybe a ton of unstable old dynamite packed in all around her, still not so far gone it would explode with random movement, but gone bad enough it would explode under the impact of a stray artillery shell. Or a stray bullet. Or even a sharp blow with a hammer.

Then there was a rattle of feet on shale as a detachment of men halted outside the hut. The door flung open and Reacher turned his head and saw six guards. The point man clattered inside and hauled him up by the arm. He was dragged outside into the bright morning sun to face five men, line abreast, automatic rifles at the slope. Camouflage fatigues, beards. He stood and squinted in the light. The rifle muzzles jerked him into rough formation and the six men marched him across the diameter of the clearing to a narrow path running away from the sun into the forest.

Fifty yards in, there was another clearing. A rough scrubby rectangle, small in area. Two plywood-and-cedar structures. Neither had any windows. The guards halted him and the point man used his rifle barrel to indicate the left-hand building.

"Command hut," he said.

Then he pointed to the right.

"Punishment hut," he said. "We try to avoid that one."

The six men laughed with the secure confidence of an elite detachment and the point man knocked on the command hut door. Paused a beat and opened it. Reacher was shoved inside with a rifle muzzle in the small of his back.

The hut was blazing with light. Electric bulbs added to green daylight from mossy skylights set into the roof. There was a plain oak desk and matching chairs, big old round things like Reacher had seen in old movies about newspaper offices or country banks. There was no decor except flags and banners nailed to the walls. There was a huge red swastika behind the desk, and several similar black-and-white motifs on the other walls. There was a detailed map of Montana pinned to a board on the back wall. A tiny portion of the northwest corner of the state was outlined in black. There were bundles of

northwest corner of the state was outlined in black. There were bundles of pamphlets and manuals stacked on the bare floor. One was titled: Dry It, You'll Like It. It claimed to show how food could be preserved to withstand a siege. Another claimed to show how guerrillas could derail passenger trains. There was a polished mahogany bookcase, incongruously fine, packed with books. The bar of daylight from the door fell across them and illuminated their cloth spines and gold-blocked titles. They were standard histories of the art of war, translations from German and Japanese. There was a whole shelf with texts about Pearl Harbor. Texts that Reacher himself had studied, elsewhere and a long time ago.
He stood still. Borken was behind the desk. His hair gleamed white in the light. The black uniform showed up gray. Borken was just staring silently at him. Then he waved him to a chair. Motioned the guards to wait outside.
Reacher sat heavily. Fatigue was gnawing at him and adrenaline was burning his stomach. The guards tramped across the floor and stepped outside. They closed the door quietly. Borken moved his arm and rolled open a drawer. Took out an ancient handgun. Laid it on the desktop with a loud clatter.
"I made my decision," he said. "About whether you live or die."
Then he pointed at the old revolver lying on the desk.
"You know what this is?" he asked.
Reacher glanced at it through the glare and nodded.
"It's a Marshal Colt," he said.
Borken nodded.
"You bet your ass it is," he said. "It's an original 1873 Marshal Colt, just like the U.S. Cavalry were given. It's my personal weapon."
He picked it up, right-handed, and hefted it.
"You know what it fires?" he said.
Reacher nodded again.
"Forty-fives," he said. "Six shots."
"Right first time," Borken said. "Six forty-fives, nine hundred feet per second out of a seven-and-a-half-inch barrel. You know what those bullets could do to you?"
Reacher shrugged.
"Depends if they hit me or not," he said.
Borken looked blank. Then he grinned. His wet mouth curled upward and his tight cheeks nearly forced his eyes shut.
"They'd hit you," he said. "If I'm firing, they'd hit you."
Reacher shrugged again.
"From there, maybe," he said.
"From anywhere," Borken said. "From here, from fifty feet, from fifty yards, if I'm firing, they'd hit you."

“Hold up your right hand,” Reacher said.
Borken looked blank again. Then he put the gun down and held up his huge white hand like he was waving to a vague acquaintance or taking an oath.
“Bullshit,” Reacher said.
“Bullshit?” Borken repeated.
“For sure,” Reacher said. “That gun’s reasonably accurate, but it’s not the best weapon in the world. To hit a man at fifty yards with it, you’d need to practice like crazy. And you haven’t been.”
“I haven’t?” Borken said.
“No, you haven’t,” Reacher said. “Look at the damn thing. It was designed in the 1870s, right? You seen old photographs? People were much smaller. Scrappy little guys, just immigrated from Europe, been starving for generations. Small people, small hands. Look at the stock on that thing. Tight curve, way too small for you. You grab that thing, your hand looks like a bunch of bananas around it. And that stock is hundred-and-twenty-year-old walnut. Hard as a rock. The back of the stock and the end of the frame below the hammer would be pounding you with the recoil. You used that gun a lot, you’d have a pad of callus between your thumb and forefinger I could see from here. But you haven’t, so don’t tell me you’ve been practicing with it, and don’t tell me you can be a marksman without practicing with it.”
Borken looked hard at him. Then he smiled again. His wet lips parted and his eyes closed into slits. He rolled open the opposite drawer and lifted out another handgun. It was a Sig-Sauer nine-millimeter. Maybe five years old. Well used, but well maintained. A big boxy grip for a big hand.
“I lied,” he said. “This is my personal weapon. And now I know something. I know my decision was the right one.”
He paused, so Reacher could ask him about his decision. Reacher stayed silent. Clamped his lips. He wasn’t about to ask him about anything, not even if it would be the last sentence he would ever live to say.
“We’re serious here, you know,” Borken said to him. “Totally serious. We’re not playing games. And we’re correct about what’s going on.”
He paused again, so Reacher could ask him what was going on. Reacher said nothing. Just sat and stared into space.
“America has got a despotic government,” Borken said. “A dictatorship, controlled from abroad by our enemies. Our current President is a member of a world government which controls our lives in secret. His federal system is a smokescreen for total control. They’re planning to disarm us and enslave us. It’s started already. Let’s be totally clear about that.”
He paused. Picked up the old revolver again. Reacher saw him checking the fit

of the stock in his hand. Felt the charisma radiating out of him. Felt compelled to listen to the soft, hypnotic voice.
“Two main methods,” Borken said. “The first is the attempt to disarm the civilian population. The Second Amendment guarantees our right to bear arms, but they’re going to abolish that. The gun laws, all this beefing about crime, homicides, drug wars, it’s all aimed at disarming people like us. And when we’re disarmed, they can do what they like with us, right? That’s why it was in the Constitution in the first place. Those old guys were smart. They knew the only thing that could control a government was the people’s willingness and ability to shoot them down.”
Borken paused again. Reacher stared up at the swastika behind his head.
“Second method is the squeeze on small business,” Borken said. “This is a personal theory of mine. You don’t hear it much around the Movement. But I spotted it. It puts me way ahead of the others in my understanding.”
Borken waited, but Reacher still stayed silent. Looking away.
“It’s obvious, right?” Borken said to him. “World government is basically a communistic type of government. They don’t want a strong small-business sector. But that’s what America had. Millions of people, all working hard for themselves and making a living. Too many just to murder out of hand, when the time comes. So the numbers have to be reduced in advance. So the federal government was instructed to squeeze the small businessman. They put on all kinds of regulations, all kinds of laws and taxes, they rig the markets, they bring the small guy to his knees, then they order the banks to come sniffing around with attractive loans, and as soon as the ink is dry on the loan papers they jack up the interest, and rig the market some more, until the poor guy defaults. Then they take away his business, and so that’s one less for the gas ovens when the time comes.”
Reacher glanced at him. Said nothing.
“Believe it,” Borken said. “It’s like they’re solving a corpse-disposal problem in advance. Get rid of the middle class now, they don’t need so many concentration camps later.”
Reacher was just staring at Borken’s eyes. Like looking at a bright light. The fat red lips were smiling an indulgent smile.
“I told you, we’re way ahead of the others,” he said. “We’ve seen it coming. What else is the Federal Reserve for? That’s the key to this whole thing. America was basically a nation founded on business, right? Control business, you control everything. How do you control business? You control the banks. How do you control the banks? You set up a bullshit Federal Reserve system. You tell the banks what to do. That’s the key. The world government controls

everything, through the Fed. I've seen it happen."
His eyes were open wide. Shining with no color.
"I saw them do it to my own father," he screamed. "May his poor soul rest in peace. The Fed bankrupted him."
Reacher tore his gaze away. Shrugged at the corner of the room. Said nothing. He started trying to recall the sequence of titles in Borken's fine mahogany bookcase. Warfare from ancient China through Renaissance Italy through Pearl Harbor. He concentrated on naming the titles to himself, left to right, trying to resist the glare of Borken's attention.
"We're serious here," Borken was saying again. "You may look at me and think I'm some kind of a despot, or a cult leader, or whatever the world would want to label me. But I'm not. I'm a good leader, I won't deny that. Even an inspired leader. Call me intelligent and perceptive, I won't argue with you. But I don't need to be. My people don't need any encouraging. They don't need much leading. They need guidance, and they need discipline, but don't let that fool you. I'm not coercing anybody. Don't make the mistake of underestimating their will. Don't ignore their desire for a change for the better."
Reacher was silent. He was still concentrating on the books, skimming in his mind through the events of December 1941, as seen from the Japanese point of view.
"We're not criminals here, you know," Borken was saying. "When a government turns bad, it's the very best people who stand up against it. Or do you think we should all just act like sheep?"
Reacher risked another glance at him. Risked speaking.
"You're pretty selective," he said. "About who's here and who's not."
Borken shrugged.
"Like unto like," he said. "That's nature's way, isn't it? Black people have got the whole of Africa. White people have got this place."
"What about Jewish dentists?" Reacher asked. "What place have they got?"
Borken shrugged again.
"That was an operational error," he said. "Loder should have waited until he was clear. But mistakes happen."
"Should have waited until I was clear, too," Reacher said.
Borken nodded.
"I agree with you," he said. "It would have been better for you that way. But they didn't, and so here you are among us."
"Just because I'm white?" Reacher said.
"Don't knock it," Borken replied. "White people got precious few rights left."
Reacher stared at him. Stared around the bright, hate-filled room. Shuddered.

“I’ve made a study of tyranny,” Borken said. “And how to combat it. The first rule is you make a firm decision, to live free or die, and you mean it. Live free or die. The second rule is you don’t act like a sheep. You stand up and you resist them. You study their system and you learn to hate it. And then you act. But how do you act? The brave man fights back. He retaliates, right?”
Reacher shrugged. Said nothing.
“The brave man retaliates,” Borken repeated. “But the man who is both brave and clever acts differently. He retaliates first. In advance. He strikes the first blows. He gives them what they don’t expect, when and where they don’t expect it. That’s what we’re doing here. We’re retaliating first. It’s their war, but we’re going to strike the first blows. We’re going to give them what they don’t expect. We’re going to upset their plans.”
Reacher glanced back at the bookcase. Five thousand classic pages, all saying the same thing: don’t do what they expect you to do.
“Go look at the map,” Borken said.
Reacher thrust his cuffed hands forward and lifted himself awkwardly out of the chair. Walked over to the map of Montana on the wall. He found Yorke in the top left-hand corner. Well inside the small black outline. He checked the scale and looked at the contour shading and the colors. The river Joseph Ray had talked about lay thirty miles to the west, on the other side of high mountains. It was a thick blue slash running down the map. There were enormous brown heights shown to the north, all the way up to Canada. The only road ran north through Yorke and terminated at some abandoned mine workings. A few haphazard tracks ran through solid forest to the east. To the south, contour lines merged together to show a tremendous east-west ravine.
“Look at that terrain, Reacher,” Borken said quietly. “What does it tell you?”
Reacher looked at it. It told him he couldn’t get out. Not on foot, not with Holly. There were weeks of rough walking east and north. Natural barriers west and south. The terrain made a better prison than wire fences or mine-fields could have. He had once been in Siberia, after glasnost, following up on ancient stories about Korean MIAs. The gulags had been completely open. No wire, no barriers. He had asked his hosts: but where are the fences? The Russians had pointed out over the miles of snow and said: there are the fences. Nowhere to run. He looked up at the map again. The terrain was the barrier. To get out was going to require a vehicle. And a lot of luck.
“They can’t get in,” Borken said. “We’re impregnable. We can’t be stopped. And we mustn’t be stopped. That would be a disaster of truly historic proportions. Suppose the redcoats had stopped the American Revolution in 1776?”

Reacher glanced around the tiny wooden room and shuddered.
“This isn’t the American Revolution,” he said.
“Isn’t it?” Borken asked. “How is it different? They wanted freedom from a tyrannical government. So do we.”
“You’re murderers,” Reacher said.
“So they were in 1776,” Borken said. “They killed people. The established system called that murder, too.”
“You’re racists,” Reacher said.
“Same in 1776,” Borken said. “Jefferson and his slaves? They knew black people were inferior. Back then, they were exactly the same as we are now. But then they became the new redcoats. Slowly, over the years. It’s fallen to us to get back to how it should have stayed. Live free or die, Reacher. It’s a noble aim. Always has been, don’t you think?”
He was leaning forward with his great bulk pressing tight against the desk. His hands were in the air. His colorless eyes were shining.
“But there were mistakes made in 1776,” he said. “I’ve studied the history. War could have been avoided if both sides had acted sensibly. And war should always be avoided, don’t you think?”
Reacher shrugged.
“Not necessarily,” he said.
“Well, you’re going to help us avoid it,” Borken said. “That’s my decision. You’re going to be my emissary.”
“Your what?” Reacher said.
“You’re independent,” Borken said. “Not one of us. No ax to grind. An American like them, an upstanding citizen, no felony convictions. A clever, perceptive man. You notice things. They’ll listen to you.”
“What?” Reacher said again.
“We’re organized here,” Borken said. “We’re ready for nationhood. You need to understand that. We have an army, we have a treasury, we have financial reserves, we have a legal system, we have democracy. I’m going to show all that to you today. I’m going to show you a society ready for independence, ready to live free or die, and just a day away from doing so. Then I’m going to send you south to America. You’re going to tell them our position is strong and their position is hopeless.”
Reacher just stared at him.
“And you can tell them about Holly,” Borken said quietly. “In her special little room. You can tell them about my secret weapon. My insurance policy.”
“You’re crazy,” Reacher said.
The hut went silent. Quieter than silent.
“Why?” Borken whispered. “Why am I crazy? Exactly?”

"Why?" Borken whispered. "Why am I crazy? Exactly?
"You're not thinking straight," Reacher said. "Don't you realize that Holly counts for nothing? The President will replace Johnson faster than you can blink an eye. They'll crush you like a bug and Holly will be just another casualty. You should send her back out with me."
Borken was shaking his bloated head, happily, confidently.
"No," he said. "That won't happen. There's more to Holly than who her father is. Hasn't she told you that?"
Reacher stared at him and Borken checked his watch.
"Time to go," he said. "Time for you to see our legal system at work."

HOLLY HEARD THE quiet footsteps outside her door and eased off the bed. The lock clicked back and the young soldier with the scarred forehead stepped up into the room. He had his finger to his lips and Holly nodded. She limped to the bathroom and set the shower running noisily into the empty tub. The young soldier followed her in and closed the door.
"We can only do this once a day," Holly whispered. "They'll get suspicious if they hear the shower too often."
The young guy nodded.
"We'll get out tonight," he said. "Can't do it this morning. We're all on duty at Loder's trial. I'll come by just after dusk, with a jeep. We'll make a run for it in the dark. Head south. Risky, but we'll make it."
"Not without Reacher," Holly said.
The young guy shook his head.
"Can't promise that," he said. "He's in with Borken now. God knows what's going to happen to him."
"I go, he goes," Holly said.
The young guy looked at her nervously.
"OK," he said, "I'll try."
He opened the bathroom door and crept out. Holly watched him go and turned the shower off. Stared after him.

HE LOOPED NORTH and west and took a long route back through the woods, same way as he had come. The sentry Fowler had hidden in the trees fifteen feet off the main path never saw him. But the one he had hidden in the back-woods did. He caught a glimpse of a camouflage uniform hustling through the undergrowth. Spun around fast, but was too late to make the face. He shrugged and thought hard. Figured he'd keep it to himself. Better to ignore it than report he'd failed to make the actual ID.
So the young man with the scar hurried all the way and was back in his hut two

So the young man with the scar hurried all the way and was back in his hut two minutes before he was due to escort his commander down to the tribunal hearing.

IN THE DAYLIGHT, the courthouse on the southeast corner of the abandoned town of Yorke looked pretty much the same as a hundred others Reacher had seen all over rural America. Built early in the century. Big, white, pillared, ornate. Enough square solidity to communicate its serious purpose, but enough lightness in its details to make it a handsome structure. He saw a fine cupola floating off the top of the building, with a fine clock in it, probably paid for by a public subscription held long ago among a long-forgotten generation. More or less the same as a hundred others, but the roof was steeper-pitched than some, and heavier built. He guessed it had to be that way in the north of Montana. That roof could be carrying a hundred tons of snow all winter long.

But this was the third morning of July, and there was no snow on the roof. Reacher was warm after walking a mile in the pale northern sun. Borken had gone ahead separately and Reacher had been marched down through the forest by the same six elite guards. Still in handcuffs. They marched him straight up the front steps and inside. The first-floor interior was one large space, interrupted by pillars holding up the second floor, paneled in broad smooth planks sawed from huge pines. The wood was dark from age and polish, and the panels were stern and simple in their design.

Every seat was taken. Every bench was full. The room was a sea of camouflage green. Men and women. Sitting rigidly upright, rifles exactly vertical between their knees. Waiting expectantly. Some children, silent and confused. Reacher was led in front of the crowd, over to a table in the well of the court. Fowler was waiting there. Stevie next to him. He nodded to a chair. Reacher sat. The guards stood behind him. A minute later, the double doors opened and Beau Borken walked over to the judge’s bench. The old floor creaked beneath his bulk. Every person in the room except Reacher stood up. Stood to attention and saluted, as if they were hearing an inaudible cue. Borken was still in his black uniform, with belt and boots. He had added a large holster to hold his Sig-Sauer. He held a slim leatherbound book. He came in with six armed men in a loose formation. They took up station in front of the bench and stood at rigid attention, gazing forward, looking blank.

The people sat down again. Reacher glanced up at the ceiling and quartered it with his eyes. Worked out which was the southeast corner. The doors opened again and the crowd drew breath. Loder was pushed into the room. He was surrounded by six guards. They pushed him to the table opposite Fowler’s. The accused’s table. The guards stood behind him and forced him into the chair with

accused's table. The guards stood behind him and forced him into the chair with their hands on both his shoulders. His face was white with fear and crusted with blood. His nose was broken and his lips were split. Borken stared across at him. Sat down heavily in the judge's chair and placed his big hands, palms down, on the bench. Looked around the quiet room and spoke.
"We all know why we're here," he said.

HOLLY COULD SENSE there was a big crowd in the room below her. She could feel the faint rumble of a body of people holding themselves still and quiet. But she didn't stop working. No reason to believe her Bureau contact would fail, but she was still going to spend the day preparing. Just in case.
Her search for a tool had led her to the one she had brought in with her. Her metal crutch. It was a one-inch aluminum tube, with an elbow clip and a handle. The tube was too wide and the metal was too soft to act as a pry bar. But she realized that maybe if she pulled the rubber foot off, the open end of the tube could be molded into a makeshift wrench. She could maybe crush the tube around the shape of the bolts holding the bed together. Then she could bend the tube at a right angle, and maybe use the whole thing like a flimsy tire iron.
But first she had to scrape away the thick paint on the bolts. It was smooth and slick, and it welded the bolts to the frame. She used the edge of the elbow clip to flake the top layers. Then she scraped at the seams until she saw bright metal.
Now her idea was to limp back and forth from the bathroom with a towel soaked in hot water. She would press the towel hard on the bolts and let the heat from the water expand the metal and crack its grip. Then the soft aluminum of the crutch might just prove strong enough to do the job.

"RECKLESS ENDANGERMENT OF the mission," Beau Borken said.
His voice was low and hypnotic. The room was quiet. The guards in front of the judge's bench stared forward. The guard at the end was staring at Reacher. He was the younger guy with the trimmed beard and the scar on his forehead Reacher had seen guarding Loder the previous night. He was staring at Reacher with curiosity.
Borken held up the slim leatherbound volume and swung it slowly, left to right, like it was a searchlight and he wanted to bathe the whole of the room with its bright beam.
"The Constitution of the United States," he said. "Sadly abused, but the greatest political tract ever devised by man. The model for our own constitution."
He turned the pages of the book. The rustle of stiff paper was loud in the quiet room. He started reading.
"The Bill of Rights," he said. "The Fifth Amendment specifies no person shall

be held to answer for a capital crime without a grand jury indictment except in cases arising in the militia in times of public danger. It says no person shall be deprived of life or liberty without due process of law. The Sixth Amendment specifies the accused shall have the right to a speedy public trial in front of a local jury. It says the accused has the right to assistance of counsel."

Borken stopped again. Looked around the room. Held up the book.

"This book tells us what to do," he said. "So we need a jury. Doesn't say how many. I figure three men will do. Volunteers?"

There was a flurry of hands. Borken pointed randomly here and there and three men walked across the pine floor. They stacked their rifles and filed into the jury box. Borken turned in his seat and spoke to them.

"Gentlemen," he said. "This is a militia matter and this is a time of public danger. Are we agreed on that?"

The new jurymen all nodded and Borken turned and looked down from the bench toward Loder, alone at his table.

"You had counsel?" he said.

"You offering me a lawyer now?" Loder asked.

His voice was thick and nasal. Borken shook his head.

"There are no lawyers here," he said. "Lawyers are what went wrong with the rest of America. We're not going to have lawyers here. We don't want them. The Bill of Rights doesn't say anything about lawyers. It says counsel. Counsel means advice. That's what my dictionary says. You had advice? You want any?"

"You got any?" Loder said.

Borken nodded and smiled a cold smile.

"Plead guilty," he said.

Loder just shook his head and dropped his eyes.

"OK," Borken said. "You've had counsel, but you're pleading not guilty?"

Loder nodded. Borken looked down at his book again. Turned back to the beginning.

"The Declaration of Independence," he said. "It is the right of the people to alter or to abolish the old government and to institute new government in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness."

He stopped and scanned the crowd.

"You all understand what that means?" he said. "The old laws are gone. Now we have new laws. New ways of doing things. We're putting right two hundred years of mistakes. We're going back to where we should have been all along. This is the first trial under a brand-new system. A better system. A system with a far stronger claim to legitimacy. We have the right to do it, and what we are doing is right."

There was a slight murmur from the crowd. Reacher detected no disapproval in the sound. They were all hypnotized. Basking in Borken's bright glow like reptiles in a hot noontime sun. Borken nodded to Fowler. Fowler stood up next to Reacher and turned to the jury box.
"The facts are these," Fowler said. "The commander sent Loder out on a mission of great importance to all our futures. Loder performed badly. He was gone for just five days, but he made five serious mistakes. Mistakes which could have wrecked the whole venture. Specifically, he left a trail by burning two vehicles. Then he mistimed two operations and thereby snarled up two civilians. And finally he allowed Peter Bell to desert. Five serious mistakes."
Fowler stood there. Reacher stared at him, urgently. "I'm calling a witness," Fowler said. "Stevie Stewart." Little Stevie stood up fast and Fowler nodded him across to the old witness box, alongside and below the judge's bench. Borken leaned down and handed him a black book. Reacher couldn't see what book it was, but it wasn't a Bible. Not unless they had started making Bibles with swastikas on the cover.
"You swear to tell the truth here?" Borken asked.
Stevie nodded.
"I do, sir," he said.
He put the book down and turned to Fowler, ready for the first question.
"The five mistakes I mentioned?" Fowler said. "You see Loder make them?"
Stevie nodded again.
"He made them," he said.
"He take responsibility for them?" Fowler asked.
"Sure did," Stevie said. "He played the big boss the whole time we were away."
Fowler nodded Stevie back to the table. The courtroom was silent. Borken smiled knowingly at the jurymen and glanced down at Loder.
"Anything to say in your defense?" he asked quietly.
The way he said it, he made it seem absurd that anybody could possibly dream up any kind of defense to those kinds of charges. The courtroom stayed silent. Still. Borken was watching the crowd. Every pair of eyes was locked onto the back of Loder's head.
"Anything to say?" Borken asked him again.
Loder stared forward. Made no reply. Borken turned toward the jury box and looked at the three men sitting on the old worn benches. Looked a question at them. The three men huddled for a second and whispered. Then the guy on the left stood up.
"Guilty, sir," he said. "Definitely guilty."
Borken nodded in satisfaction.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” he said.
The crowd set up a buzz. He turned to quell it with a look.
“I am required to pass sentence,” he said. “As many of you know, Loder is an old acquaintance of mine. We go back a long way. We were childhood friends. And friendship means a great deal to me.”
He paused and looked down at Loder.
“But other things mean more,” he said. “Performance of my duties means more. My responsibility to this emerging nation means more. Sometimes, statesmanship must be put above every other value a man holds dear.”
The crowd was silent. Holding its breath. Borken sat for a long moment. Then he glanced over Loder’s head at the guards behind him and made a small, delicate motion with his head. The guards grabbed Loder’s elbows and hauled him to his feet. They formed up and hustled him out of the room. Borken stood and looked at the crowd. Then he turned and walked to the doors and was gone. The people in the public benches shuffled to their feet and hurried out after him.
Reacher saw the guards walking Loder to a flagpole on the patch of lawn outside the courthouse. Borken was striding after them. The guards reached the flagpole and shoved Loder hard up against it, facing it. They held his wrists and pulled, so he was pressed up against the pole, hugging it, face tight against the dull white paint. Borken came up behind him. Pulled the Sig-Sauer from its holster. Clicked the safety catch. Cocked a round into the chamber. Jammed the muzzle into the back of Loder’s neck and fired. There was an explosion of pink blood and the roar of the shot cannoned back off the mountains.

26

“HIS NAME IS Jack Reacher,” Webster said.
“Good call, General,” McGrath said. “I guess they remembered him.”
Johnson nodded.
“Military police keeps good records,” he said.
They were still in the commandeered crew room inside Peterson Air Force Base. Ten o’clock in the morning, Thursday July third. The fax machine was rolling out a long reply to their inquiry. The face in the photograph had been identified immediately. The subject’s service record had been pulled straight off the Pentagon computer and faxed along with the name.
“You recall this guy now?” Brogan asked.
“Reacher?” Johnson repeated vaguely. “I don’t know. What did he do?”
Webster and the General’s aide were crowding the machine, reading the report as the paper spooled out. They twisted it right side up and walked slowly away to keep it up off the floor.
“What did he do?” McGrath asked them urgently.
“Nothing,” Webster said.
“Nothing?” McGrath repeated. “Why would they have a record on him if he didn’t do anything?”
“He was one of them,” Webster said. “Major Jack Reacher, military police.”
The aide was racing through the length of paper.
“Silver Star,” he said. “Two Bronzes, Purple Heart. This is a hell of a record, sir. This guy was a hero, for God’s sake.”
McGrath opened up his envelope and pulled out the original video pictures of the kidnap, black-and-white, un-enlarged, grainy. He selected the first picture of Reacher’s involvement. The one catching him in the act of seizing Holly’s crutch and pulling the dry cleaning from her grasp. He slid the photograph across the table.
“Big hero,” he said.
Johnson bent to study the picture. McGrath slid over the next. The one showing Reacher gripping Holly’s arm, keeping her inside the tight crush of attackers. Johnson picked it up and stared at it. McGrath wasn’t sure whether he was staring at Reacher, or at his daughter.
“He’s thirty-seven,” the General’s aide read aloud. “Mustered out fourteen months ago. West Point, thirteen years’ service, big heroics in Beirut right at the start. Sir, you pinned a Bronze on him, ten years ago. This is an absolutely outstanding record throughout. He’s the only non-Marine in history to win the

outstanding record throughout. He's the only non-Marine in history to win the Wimbledon."
Webster looked up.
"Tennis?" he said.
The aide smiled briefly.
"Not Wimbledon," he said. "The Wimbledon. Marine Sniper School runs a competition, the Wimbledon Cup. For snipers. Open to anybody, but a Marine always wins it, except one year Reacher won it."
"So why didn't he serve as a sniper?" McGrath asked.
The aide shrugged.
"Beats me," he said. "Lots of puzzles in this record. Like why did he leave the service at all? Guy like this should have made it all the way to the top."
Johnson had a picture in each hand and he was staring closely at them.
"So why did he leave?" Brogan asked. "Any trouble?"
The aide shook his head. Scanned the paper.
"Nothing in the record," he said. "No reason given. We were shedding numbers at the time, but the idea was to cull the no-hopers. A guy like this shouldn't have been shaken out."
Johnson switched the photographs into the opposite hands, like he was looking for a fresh perspective.
"Anybody know him real well?" Milosevic asked. "Anybody we can talk to?"
"We can dig up his old commander, I guess," the aide said. "Might take us a day to get hold of him."
"Do it," Webster said. "We need information. Anything at all will help."
Johnson put the photographs down and slid them back to McGrath.
"He must have turned bad," he said. "Sometimes happens. Good men can turn bad. I've seen it myself, time to time. It can be a hell of a problem."
McGrath reversed the photographs on the shiny table and stared at them.
"You're not kidding," he said.
Johnson looked back at him.
"Can I keep that picture?" he said. "The first one?"
McGrath shook his head.
"No," he said. "You want a picture, I'll take one myself. You and your daughter standing together in front of a headstone, this asshole's name on it."

27

FOUR MEN WERE dragging Loder's body away and the crowd was dispersing quietly. Reacher was left standing on the courthouse steps with his six guards and Fowler. Fowler had finally unlocked the handcuffs. Reacher was rolling his shoulders and stretching. He had been cuffed all night and all morning and he was stiff and sore. His wrists were marked with red weals where the hard metal had bitten down.
"Cigarette?" Fowler asked.
He was holding his pack out. A friendly gesture. Reacher shook his head.
"I want to see Holly," he said.
Fowler was about to refuse, but then he thought some more and nodded.
"OK," he said. "Good idea. Take her out for some exercise. Talk to her. Ask her how we're treating her. That's something you're sure to be asked later. It'll be very important to them. We don't want you giving them any false impressions."
Reacher waited at the bottom of the steps. The sun had gone pale and watery. Wisps of mist were gathering in the north. But some of the sky was still blue and clear. After five minutes, Fowler brought Holly down. She was walking slowly, with a little staccato rhythm as her good leg alternated with the thump of her crutch. She walked through the door and stood at the top of the steps.
"Question for you, Reacher," Fowler called down. "How far can you run in a half hour with a hundred and twenty pounds on your back?"
Reacher shrugged.
"Not far enough, I guess," he said.
Fowler nodded.
"Right," he said. "Not far enough. If she's not standing right here in thirty minutes, we'll come looking for you. We'll give it a two-mile radius."
Reacher thought about it and nodded. A half hour with a hundred and twenty pounds on his back might get him more than two miles. Two miles was probably pessimistic. But he thought back to the map on Borken's wall. Thought about the savage terrain. Where the hell would he run? He made a show of checking his watch. Fowler walked away, up behind the ruined office building. The guards slung their weapons over their shoulders and stood easy. Holly smoothed her hair back. Stood face up to the pale sun.
"Can you walk for a while?" Reacher asked her.
"Slowly," she said.
She set off north along the middle of the deserted street. Reacher strolled beside her. They waited until they were out of sight. They glanced at each other. Then

her. They waited until they were out of sight. They glanced at each other. Then they turned and flung themselves together. Her crutch toppled to the ground and he lifted her a foot in the air. She wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his neck.
“I’m going crazy in there,” she said.
“I’ve got bad news,” he said.
“What?” she said.
“They had a helper in Chicago,” he said.
She stared up at him.
“They were only gone five days,” he said. “That’s what Fowler said at the trial. He said Loder had been gone just five days.”
“So?” she said.
“So they didn’t have time for surveillance,” he said. “They hadn’t been watching you. Somebody told them where you were going to be, and when. They had help, Holly.”
The color in her face drained away. It was replaced by shock.
“Five days?” she said. “You sure?”
Reacher nodded. Holly went quiet. She was thinking hard.
“So who knew?” he asked her. “Who knew where you’d be, twelve o’clock Monday? A roommate? A friend?”
Her eyes were darting left and right. She was racing through the possibilities.
“Nobody knew,” she said.
“Were you ever tailed?” he asked.
She shrugged helplessly. Reacher could see she desperately wanted to say yes, I was tailed. Because he knew to say no was too awful for her to contemplate.
“Were you?” he asked again.
“No,” she said quietly. “By a bozo like one of these? Forget it. I’d have spotted them. And they’d have had to hang around all day outside the Federal Building, just waiting. We’d have picked them up in a heartbeat.”
“So?” he asked.
“My lunch break was flexible,” she said. “It varied, sometimes by a couple of hours either way. It was never regular.”
“So?” he asked again.
She stared at him.
“So it was inside help,” she said. “Inside the Bureau. Had to be. Think about it, no other possibility. Somebody in the office saw me leave and dropped a dime.”
He said nothing. Just watched the dismay on her face. “A mole inside Chicago,” she said. A statement, not a question. “Inside the Bureau. No other possibility. Shit, I don’t believe it.”
Then she smiled. A brief. bitter smile.

“And we’ve got a mole inside here,” she said. “Ironic, right? He identified himself to me. Young guy, big scar on his forehead. He’s undercover for the Bureau. He says we’ve got people in a lot of these groups. Deep undercover, in case of emergency. He called it in when they put the dynamite in my walls.”
He stared back at her.
“You know about the dynamite?” he said.
She grimaced and nodded.
“No wonder you’re going crazy in there,” he said.
Then he stared at her in a new panic.
“Who does this undercover guy call in to?” he asked urgently.
“Our office in Butte,” Holly said. “It’s just a satellite office. One resident agent. He communicates by radio. He’s got a transmitter hidden out in the woods. But he’s not using it now. He says they’re scanning the frequencies.”
He shuddered.
“So how long before the Chicago mole blows his cover?” he said.
Holly went paler.
“Soon, I guess,” she said. “Soon as somebody figures we were headed out in this direction. Chicago will be dialing up the computers and trawling for any reports coming out of Montana. His stuff will be top of the damn pile. Christ, Reacher, you’ve got to get to him first. You’ve got to warn him. His name is Jackson.”
They turned back. Started hurrying south through the ghost town.
“He says he can break me out,” Holly said. “Tonight, by jeep.”
Reacher nodded grimly.
“Go with him,” he said.
“Not without you,” she said.
“They’re sending me anyway,” he said. “I’m supposed to be an emissary. I’m supposed to tell your people it’s hopeless.”
“Are you going to go?” she asked.
He shook his head.
“Not if I can help it,” he said. “Not without you.”
“You should go,” she said. “Don’t worry about me.”
He shook his head again.
“I am worrying about you,” he said.
“Just go,” she said. “Forget me and get out.”
He shrugged. Said nothing.
“Get out if you get the chance, Reacher,” she said. “I mean it.”
She looked like she meant it. She was glaring at him.
“Only if you’re gone first,” he said finally. “I’m sticking around until you’re out of here. I’m definitely not leaving you with these maniacs.”

“But you can’t stick around,” she said. “If I’m gone, they’ll go apeshit. It’ll change everything.”
He looked at her. Heard Borken say: she’s more than his daughter.
“Why, Holly?” he said. “Why will it change everything? Who the hell are you?”
She didn’t answer. Glanced away. Fowler strolled into view, coming north, smoking. He walked up to them. Stopped right in front of them. Pulled his pack.
“Cigarette?” he asked.
Holly looked at the ground. Reacher shook his head.
“She tell you?” Fowler asked. “All the comforts of home?”
The guards were standing to attention. They were in a sort of honor guard on the courthouse steps. Fowler walked Holly to them. A guard took her inside. At the door, she glanced back at Reacher. He nodded to her. Tried to make it say: see you later, OK? Then she was gone.

“NOW FOR THE grand tour,” Fowler said. “You stick close to me. Beau’s orders. But you can ask any questions you want, OK?”
Reacher glanced vaguely at him and nodded. Glanced at the six guards behind him. He walked down the steps and paused. Looked over at the flagpole. It was set dead center in the remains of a fine square of lawn in front of the building. He walked across to it and stood in Loder’s blood and looked around.
The town of Yorke was pretty much dead. Looked like it had died some time ago. And it looked like it had never been much of a place to begin with. The road came through north to south, and there had been four developed blocks flanking it, two on the east side and two on the west. The courthouse took up the whole of the southeastern block and it faced what might have been some kind of a county office on the southwestern block. The western side of the street was higher. The ground sloped way up. The foundation of the county office building was about level with the second floor of the courthouse. It had started out the same type of structure, but it had fallen into ruin, maybe thirty years before. The paint was peeled and the siding showed through iron-gray. There was no glass in any window. The sloping knoll surrounding it had returned to mountain scrub. There had been an ornamental tree dead center. It had died a long time ago, and it was now just a stump, maybe seven feet high, like an execution post.
The northern blocks were rows of faded, boarded-up stores. There had once been tall ornate frontages concealing simple square buildings, but the decay of the years had left the frontages the same dull brown as the boxy wooden structures behind. The signs above the doors had faded to nothing. There were no people on the sidewalks. No vehicle noise, no activity, no nothing. The place was a ghost. It looked like an abandoned cowboy town from the Old West.

“This was a mining town,” Fowler said. “Lead, mostly, but some copper, and a couple of seams of good silver for a while. There was a lot of money made here, that’s for damn sure.”
“So what happened?” Reacher asked.
Fowler shrugged.
“What happens to any mining place?” he said. “It gets worked out, is what. Fifty years ago, people were registering claims in that old county office like there was no tomorrow, and they were disputing them in that old courthouse, and there were saloons and banks and stores up and down the street. Then they started coming up with dirt instead of metal, and they moved on, and this is what got left behind.”
Fowler was looking around at the dismal view and Reacher was following his gaze. Then he transferred his eyes upward a couple of degrees and took in the giant mountains rearing on the horizon. They were massive and indifferent, still streaked with snow on the third of July. Mist hung in the passes and floated through the dense conifers. Fowler moved and Reacher followed him up a track launching steeply northwest behind the ruined county office. The guards followed in single file behind. He realized this was the track he’d stumbled along twice in the dark the night before. After a hundred yards, they were in the trees. The track wound uphill through the forest. Progress was easier in the filtered green daylight. After a mile of walking they had made maybe a half mile of straight-line progress and they came out in the clearing the white truck had driven into the previous night. There was a small sentry squad, armed and immaculate, standing at attention in the center of the space. But there was no sign of the white truck. It had been driven away.
“We call this the Bastion,” Fowler said. “These were the very first acres we bought.”
In the clear daylight, the place looked different. The Bastion was a big tidy clearing in the brush, nestled in a mountain bowl three hundred feet above the town itself. There was no man-made perimeter. The perimeter had been supplied a million years ago by the great glaciers grinding down from the Pole. The north and west sides were mountainous, rearing straight up to the high peaks. Reacher saw snow again, packed by the wind into the high north-facing gullies. If it was there in July, it had to be there twelve months of the year.
To the southeast, the town was just visible below them through the gaps in the trees where the track had been carved out. Reacher could see the ruined county building and the white courthouse set below it like models. Directly south, the mountain slopes fell away into the thick forest. Where there were no trees, there were savage ravines. Reacher gazed at them, quietly. Fowler pointed.

“Hundred feet deep, some of those,” he said. “Full of elk and bighorn sheep. And we got black bears roaming. A few of the folk have seen mountain lions on the prowl. You can hear them in the night, when it gets real quiet.”
Reacher nodded and listened to the stunning silence. Tried to figure out how much quieter the nights could be. Fowler turned and pointed here and there.
“This is what we built,” he said. “So far.”
Reacher nodded again. The clearing held ten buildings. They were all large utilitarian wooden structures, built from plywood sheet and cedar, resting on solid concrete piles. There was an electricity supply into each building from a loop of heavy cable running between them.
“Power comes up from the town,” Fowler said. “A mile of cable. Running water, too, piped down from a pure mountain lake through plastic tubing, installed by militia labor.”
Reacher saw the hut he’d been locked into most of the night. It was smaller than the others.
“Administration hut,” Fowler said.
One of the huts had a whip antenna on the roof, maybe sixty feet high. Shortwave radio. And Reacher could see a thinner cable, strapped to the heavy power line. It snaked into the same hut, and didn’t come out again.
“You guys are on the phone?” he asked. “Unlisted, right?”
He pointed and Fowler followed his gaze.
“The phone line?” he said. “Runs up from Yorke with the power cable. But there’s no telephone. World government would tap our calls.”
He gestured for Reacher to follow him over to the hut with the antenna, where the line terminated. They pushed in together through the narrow door. Fowler spread his hands in a proud little gesture.
“The communications hut,” he said.
The hut was dark and maybe twenty feet by twelve. Two men inside, one crouched over a tape recorder, listening to something on headphones, the other slowly turning the dial of a radio scanner. Both long sides of the hut had crude wooden desks built into the walls. Reacher glanced up at the gable and saw the telephone wire running in through a hole drilled in the wall. It coiled down and fed a modem. The modem was wired into a pair of glowing desktop computers.
“The National Militia Internet,” Fowler said.
A second wire bypassed the desktops and fed a fax machine. It was whirring away to itself and slowly rolling a curl of paper out.
“The Patriotic Fax Network,” Fowler said.
Reacher nodded and walked closer. The fax machine sat on the counter next to another computer and a large shortwave radio.
“This is the shortwave radio,” Fowler said. “It’s how we call this our

"This is the shadow media," Fowler said. "We depend on all this equipment for the truth about what's going on in America. You can't get the truth any other way."
Reacher took a last look around and shrugged.
"I'm hungry," he said. "That's the truth about me. No dinner and no breakfast. You got someplace with coffee?"
Fowler looked at him and grinned.
"Sure," he said. "Mess hall serves all day. What do you think we are? A bunch of savages?"
He dismissed the six guards and gestured again for Reacher to follow him. The mess hall was next to the communications hut. It was about four times the size, twice as long and twice as wide. Outside, it had a sturdy chimney on the roof, fabricated from bright galvanized metal. Inside, it was full of rough trestle tables in neat lines, simple benches pushed carefully underneath. It smelled of old food and the dusty smell that large communal spaces always have.
There were three women working in there. They were cleaning the tables. They were dressed in olive fatigues, and they all had long, clean hair and plain, unadorned faces, red hands and no jewelry. They paused when Fowler and Reacher walked in. They stopped working and stood together, watching. Reacher recognized one of them from the courtroom. She gave him a cautious nod of greeting. Fowler stepped forward.
"Our guest missed breakfast," he said.
The cautious woman nodded again.
"Sure," she said. "What can I get you?"
"Anything," Reacher said. "As long as it's got coffee with it."
"Five minutes," the woman said.
She led the other two away through a door where the kitchen was bumped out in back. Fowler sat down at a table and Reacher took the bench opposite.
"Three times a day, this place gets used for meals," Fowler said. "The rest of the time, afternoons and evenings mainly, it gets used as the central meeting place for the community. Beau gets up on the table and tells the folk what needs doing."
"Where is Beau right now?" Reacher asked.
"You'll see him before you go," Fowler said. "Count on it."
Reacher nodded slowly and focused through the small window toward the mountains. The new angle gave him a glimpse of a farther range, maybe fifty miles distant, hanging there in the clear air between the earth and the sky. The silence was still awesome.
"Where is everybody?" he asked.
"Working," Fowler said. "Working and training."

"Working," Fowler said. "Working, and training."
"Working?" Reacher said. "Working at what?"
"Building up the southern perimeter," Fowler said. "The ravines are shallow in a couple of places. Tanks could get through. You know what an abatis is?"
Reacher looked blank. He knew what an abatis was. Any conscientious West Pointer who could read knew what an abatis was. But he wasn't about to let Fowler know exactly how much he knew about anything. So he just looked blank.
"You fell some trees," Fowler said. "Every fifth or sixth tree, you chop it down. You drop it facing away from the enemy. The trees around here, they're mostly wild pines, the branches face upward, right? So when they're felled, the branches are facing away from the enemy. Tank runs into the chopped end of the tree, tries to push it along. But the branches snag against the trees you left standing. Pretty soon, that tank is trying to push two or three trees over. Then four or five. Can't be done. Even a big tank like an Abrams can't do it. Fifteen-hundred-horsepower gas turbine on it, sixty-three tons, it's going to stall when it's trying to push all those trees over. Even if they ship the big Russian tanks in against us, it can't be done. That's an abatis, Reacher. Use the power of nature against them. They can't get through those damn trees, that's for sure. Soviets used it against Hitler, Kursk, World War Two. An old Commie trick. Now we're turning it around against them."
"What about infantry?" Reacher said. "Tanks won't come alone. They'll have infantry right there with them. They'll just skip ahead and dynamite the trees."
Fowler grinned.
"They'll try," he said. "Then they'll stop trying. We've got machine gun positions fifty yards north of the abatises. We'll cut them to pieces."
The cautious woman came back out of the kitchen carrying a tray. She put it down on the table in front of Reacher. Eggs, bacon, fried potatoes, beans, all on an enamel plate. A metal pint mug of steaming coffee. Cheap flatware.
"Enjoy," she said.
"Thank you," Reacher said.
"I don't get coffee?" Fowler said.
The cautious woman pointed to the back.
"Help yourself," she said.
Fowler tried a man-to-man look at Reacher and got up. Reacher kept on looking blank. Fowler walked back to the kitchen and ducked in the door. The woman watched him go and laid a hand on Reacher's arm.
"I need to talk to you," she whispered. "Find me after lights-out, tonight. I'll meet you outside the kitchen door, OK?"
"Talk to me now," Reacher whispered back. "I could be gone by then."

"Talk to me now," Reacher whispered back. "I could be gone by then."
"You've got to help us," the woman whispered.
Then Fowler came back out into the hall and the woman's eyes clouded with terror. She straightened up and hurried away.

THERE WERE SIX bolts through each of the long tubes in the bed frame. Two of them secured the mesh panel which held up the mattress. Then there were two at each end, fixing the long tube to the right-angle flanges attached to the legs. She had studied the construction for a long time, and she had spotted an improvement. She could leave one flange bolted to one end. It would stand out like a rigid right-angled hook. Better than separating the flange and then jamming it into the open end. More strength.
But it still left her with six bolts. She would have to take the flange off the leg. An improvement, but not a shortcut. She worked fast. No reason to believe Jackson would fail, but his odds had just worsened. Worsened dramatically.

NEXT TO THE mess hall were the dormitories. There were four large buildings, all of them immaculate and deserted. Two of them were designated as barracks for single men and single women. The other two were subdivided by plywood partitions. Families lived there, the adults in pairs in small cubicles behind the partitions, the children in an open dormitory area. Their beds were three-quarter-size iron cots, lined up in neat rows. There were half-size foot-lockers at the ends of the cots. No drawings on the walls, no toys. The only decor was a tourist poster from Washington, D.C. It was an aerial photograph taken from the north on a sunny spring day, with the White House in the right foreground, the Mall in the middle and the Capitol end-on to the left. It was framed in plastic and the tourist message had been covered over with paper and a new title had been hand-lettered in its place. The new title read: This Is Your Enemy.
"Where are all the kids right now?" Reacher asked.
"In school," Fowler said. "Winter, they use the mess hall. Summer, they're out in the woods."
"What do they learn?" Reacher asked.
Fowler shrugged.
"Stuff they need to know," he said.
"Who decides what they need to know?" Reacher asked.
"Beau," Fowler said. "He decides everything."
"So what has he decided they need to know?" Reacher asked.
"He studied it pretty carefully," Fowler said. "Comes down to the Bible, the Constitution, history, physical training, woodsmanship, hunting, weapons."
"Who teaches them all that stuff?" Reacher asked.

"Who teaches them all that stuff?" Reacher asked.
"The women," Fowler replied.
"The kids happy here?" Reacher asked.
Fowler shrugged again.
"They're not here to be happy," he said. "They're here to survive."
The next hut was empty, apart from another computer terminal, standing alone on a desk in a corner. Reacher could see a big keyboard lock fastened to it.
"I guess this is our Treasury Department," Fowler said. "All our funds are in the Caymans. We need some, we use that computer to send it anywhere we want."
"How much you got?" Reacher asked.
Fowler smiled, like a conspirator.
"Shitloads," he said. "Twenty million in bearer bonds. Less what we've spent already. But we got plenty left. Don't you worry about us getting short."
"Stolen?" Reacher asked.
Fowler shook his head and grinned.
"Captured," he said. "From the enemy. Twenty million."
The final two buildings were storehouses. One stood in line with the last dormitory. The other was set some distance away. Fowler led Reacher into the nearer shed. It was crammed with supplies. One wall was lined with huge plastic drums filled with water.
"Beans, bullets and bandages," Fowler said. "That's Beau's motto. Sooner or later we're going to face a siege. That's for damn sure. And it's pretty obvious the first thing the government is going to do, right? They're going to fire artillery shells armed with plague germs into the lake that feeds our water system. So we've stockpiled drinking water. Twenty-four thousand gallons. That was the first priority. Then we got canned food, enough for two years. Not enough if we get a lot of people coming in to join us, but it's a good start."
The storage shed was crammed. One floor-to-ceiling bay was packed with clothing. Familiar olive fatigues, camouflage jackets, boots. All washed and pressed in some Army laundry, packed up and sold off by the bale.
"You want some?" Fowler asked.
Reacher was about to move on, but then he glanced down at what he was wearing. He had been wearing it continuously since Monday morning. Three days solid. It hadn't been the best gear to start with, and it hadn't improved with age.
"OK," he said.
The biggest sizes were at the bottom of the pile. Fowler heaved and shoved and dragged out a pair of pants, a shirt, a jacket. Reacher ignored the shiny boots. He liked his own shoes better. He stripped and dressed, hopping from foot to foot on the bare wooden floor. He did up the shirt buttons and shrugged into the jacket.

The fit felt good enough. He didn't look for a mirror. He knew what he looked like in fatigues. He'd spent enough years wearing them.
Next to the door, there were medical supplies ranged on shelves. Trauma kits, plasma, antibiotics, bandages. All efficiently laid out for easy access. Neat piles, with plenty of space between. Borken had clearly rehearsed his people in rushing around and grabbing equipment and administering emergency treatment.
"Beans and bandages," Reacher said. "What about the bullets?"
Fowler nodded toward the distant shed.
"That's the armory," he said. "I'll show you."
The armory was bigger than the other storage shed. Huge lock on the door. It held more weaponry than Reacher could remember seeing in a long time. Hundreds of rifles and machine guns in neat rows. The stink of fresh gun oil everywhere. Floor-to-ceiling stacks of ammo boxes. Familiar wooden crates of grenades. Shelves full of handguns. Nothing heavier than an infantryman could carry, but it was still a hell of an impressive sight.

THE TWO BOLTS securing the mesh base were the easiest. They were smaller than the others. The big bolts holding the frame together took all the strain. The mesh base just rested in there. The bolts holding it down were not structural. They could have been left out altogether, and the bed would have worked just the same.
She flaked and scraped the paint back to the bare metal. Heated the bolt heads with the towel. Then she pulled the rubber tip off her crutch and bent the end of the aluminum tube into an oval. She used the strength in her fingers to crush the oval tight over the head of the bolt. Used the handle to turn the whole of the crutch like a giant socket wrench. It slipped off the bolt. She cursed quietly and used one hand to crush it tighter. Turned her hand and the crutch together as a unit. The bolt moved.

THERE WAS A beaten earth path leading out north from the ring of wooden buildings. Fowler walked Reacher down it. It led to a shooting range. The range was a long, flat alley painstakingly cleared of trees and brush. It was silent and unoccupied. It was only twenty yards wide, but over a half-mile long. There was matting laid at one end for the shooters to lie on, and far in the distance Reacher could see the targets. He set off on a slow stroll toward them. They looked like standard military-issue plywood cutouts of running, crouching soldiers. The design dated right back to World War II. The crude screen-printing depicted a German infantryman, with a coal-scuttle helmet and a savage snarl. But as he got closer Reacher could see these particular targets had crude painted additions of

their own. They had new badges daubed on the chests in yellow paint. Each new badge had three letters. Four targets had: FBI. Four had: ATF. The targets were staggered backward over distances ranging from three hundred yards right back to the full eight hundred. The nearer targets were peppered with bullet holes.
“Everybody has to hit the three-hundred-yard targets,” Fowler said. “It’s a requirement of citizenship here.”
Reacher shrugged. Wasn’t impressed. Three hundred yards was no kind of a big deal. He kept on strolling down the half-mile. The four-hundred-yard targets were damaged, the five-hundred-yard boards less so. Reacher counted eighteen hits at six hundred yards, seven at seven hundred, and just two at the full eight hundred.
“How old are these boards?” he asked.
Fowler shrugged.
“A month,” he said. “Maybe two. We’re working on it.”
“You better,” Reacher said.
“We don’t figure to be shooting at a distance,” Fowler replied. “Beau’s guess is the UN forces will come at night. When they think we’re resting up. He figures they might succeed in penetrating our perimeter to some degree. Maybe by a half-mile or so. I don’t think they will, but Beau’s a cautious guy. And he’s the one with all the responsibility. So our tactics are going to be nighttime outflanking maneuvers. Encircle the UN penetration in the forest and mow it down with cross fire. Up close and personal, right? That training’s going pretty well. We can move fast and quiet in the dark, no lights, no sound, no problem at all.”
Reacher looked at the forest and thought about the wall of ammunition he’d seen. Thought about Borken’s boast: impregnable. Thought about the problems an army faces fighting committed guerrillas in difficult terrain. Nothing is ever really impregnable, but the casualties in taking this place were going to be spectacular.
“This morning,” Fowler said. “I hope you weren’t upset.”
Reacher just looked at him.
“About Loder, I mean,” Fowler said.
Reacher shrugged. Thought to himself: it saved me a job of work.
“We need tough discipline,” Fowler said. “All new nations go through a phase like this. Harsh rules, tough discipline. Beau’s made a study of it. Right now, it’s very important. But it can be upsetting, I guess.”
“It’s you should be upset,” Reacher said. “You heard of Joseph Stalin?”
Fowler nodded.
“Soviet dictator,” he said.

“Right,” Reacher said. “He used to do that.”
“Do what?” Fowler asked.
“Eliminate his potential rivals,” Reacher said. “On trumped-up charges.”
Fowler shook his head.
“The charges were fair,” he said. “Loder made mistakes.”
Reacher shrugged.
“Not really,” he said. “He did a reasonable job.”
Fowler looked away.
“You’ll be next,” Reacher said. “You should watch your back. Sooner or later, you’ll find you’ve made some kind of a mistake.”
“We go back a long way,” Fowler said. “Beau and me.”
“So did Beau and Loder, right?” Reacher said. “Stevie will be OK. He’s no threat. Too dumb. But you should think about it. You’ll be next.”
Fowler made no reply. Just looked away again. They walked together back down the grassy half-mile. Took another beaten track north. They stepped off the path to allow a long column of children to file past. They were marching in pairs, boys and girls together, with a woman in fatigues at the head of the line and another at the tail. The children were dressed in cut-down military surplus gear and they were carrying tall staffs in their right hands. Their faces were blank and acquiescent. The girls had untrimmed straight hair, and the boys had rough haircuts done with bowls and blunt shears. Reacher stood and watched them pass. They stared straight ahead as they walked. None of them risked a sideways glance at him.
The new path ran uphill through a thin belt of trees and came out on a flat area fifty yards long and fifty yards wide. It had been leveled by hand. Discarded fieldstone had been painted white and laid at intervals around the edge. It was quiet and deserted.
“Our parade ground,” Fowler said, sourly.
Reacher nodded and scanned around. To the north and west, the high mountains. To the east, thick virgin forest. South, he could see over the distant town, across belts of trees, to the fractured ravines beyond. A cold wind lifted his new jacket and grabbed at his shirt, and he shivered.

THE BIGGER BOLTS were much harder. Much more contact area, metal to metal. Much more paint to scrape. Much more force required to turn them. The more force she used, the more the crushed end of the crutch was liable to slip off. She took off her shoe and used it to hammer the end into shape. She bent and folded the soft aluminum around the head of the bolt. Then she clamped it tight with her fingers. Clamped until the slim tendons in her arm stood out like

ropes and sweat ran down her face. Then she turned the crutch, holding her breath, waiting to see which would give first, the grip of her fingers or the grip of the bolt.

THE WIND GRABBING at Reacher's shirt also carried some faint sounds to him. He glanced at Fowler and turned to face the western edge of the parade ground. He could hear men moving in the trees. A line of men, bursting out of the forest.

They crashed out of the trees, six men line abreast, automatic rifles at the slope. Camouflage fatigues, beards. The same six guards who had stood in front of the judge's bench that morning. Borken's personal detail. Reacher scanned across the line of faces. The younger guy with the scar was at the left-hand end of the line. Jackson, the FBI plant. They paused and reset their course. Rushed across the leveled ground toward Reacher. As they approached, Fowler stood back, leaving Reacher looking like an isolated target. Five of the men fanned out into a loose arc. Five rifles aimed at Reacher's chest. The sixth man stepped up in front of Fowler. No salute, but there was a deference in his stance which was more or less the same thing.

"Beau wants this guy back," the soldier said. "Something real urgent."

Fowler nodded.

"Take him," he said. "He's beginning to piss me off."

The rifle muzzles jerked Reacher into a rough formation and the six men hustled him south through the thin belt of trees, moving fast. They passed through the shooting range and followed the beaten earth path back to the Bastion. They turned west and walked past the armory and on into the forest toward the command hut. Reacher lengthened his stride and sped up. Pulled ahead. Let his foot hit a root and went down heavily on the stones. First guy to reach him was Jackson. Reacher saw the scarred forehead. He grabbed Reacher's arm.

"Mole in Chicago," Reacher breathed.

"On your feet, asshole," Jackson shouted back.

"Hide out and run for it tonight," Reacher whispered. "Maximum care, OK?"

Jackson glanced at him and replied with a squeeze of his arm. Then he pulled him up and shoved him ahead down the path into the smaller clearing. Beau Borken was framed in his command hut doorway. He was dressed in huge baggy camouflage fatigues, dirty and disheveled. Like he had been working hard. He stared at Reacher as he approached.

"I see we gave you new clothes," he said.

Reacher nodded.

"So let me apologize for my own appearance," Borken said. "Busy day."

¨Fowler told me,´´ Reacher said. ¨You´ve been building abatises.´´
“Abatises?” Borken said. “Right.”
Then he went quiet. Reacher saw his big white hands, opening and closing.
“Your mission is canceled,” Borken said quietly.
“It is?” Reacher said. “Why?”
Borken eased his bulk down out of the doorway and stepped close. Reacher’s gaze was fixed on his blazing eyes and he never saw the blow coming. Borken hit him in the stomach, a big hard fist on the end of four hundred pounds of body weight. Reacher went down like a tree and Borken smashed a foot into his back.

28

“HIS NAME IS Jackson,” Webster said.
“How long has he been in there?” Milosevic asked.
“Nearly a year,” Webster said.
Eleven o’clock in the morning, Thursday July third, inside Peterson. The section head at Quantico was faxing material over from Andrews down the Air Force’s own secure fax network as fast as the machines could handle it. Milosevic and Brogan were pulling it off the machines and passing it to Webster and McGrath for analysis. On the other side of the table, General Johnson and his aide were scanning a map of the northwest corner of Montana.
“You got people undercover in all these groups?” Johnson asked.
Webster shook his head and smiled.
“Not all of them,” he said. “Too many groups, not enough people. I think we just got lucky.”
“I didn’t know we had people in this one,” Brogan said.
Webster was still smiling.
“Lots of things lots of people don’t know,” he said. “Safer that way, right?”
“So what is this Jackson guy saying?” Brogan asked.
“Does he mention Holly?” Johnson asked.
“Does he mention what the hell this is all about?” Milosevic asked.
Webster blew out his cheeks and waved his hand at the stack of curling fax paper. McGrath was busy sifting through it. He was separating the papers into two piles. One pile for routine stuff, the other pile for important intelligence. The routine pile was bigger. The important intelligence was sketchy.
“Analysis, Mack?” Webster said.
McGrath shrugged.
“Up to a point, pretty much normal,” he said.
Johnson stared at him.
“Normal?” he said.
Webster nodded.
“This is normal,” he said. “We got these militia groups all over the country, which is why we can’t cover them all. Too damn many. Our last count was way over four hundred groups, all fifty states. Most of them are just amateur wackos, but some of them we consider pretty serious antigovernment terrorists.”
“This bunch?” Johnson asked.
McGrath looked at him.
“This bunch is totally serious,” he said. “One hundred people, hidden out in the

"This bunch is totally serious," he said. "One hundred people, hidden out in the forest. Very well armed, very well organized, very self-contained. Very well funded, too. Jackson has reported mail fraud, phony bank drafts, a little low-grade counterfeiting. Probably armed robbery as well. The feeling is they stole twenty million bucks in bearer bonds, armored car heist up in the north of California. And, of course, they're selling videos and books and manuals to the rest of the wackos, mail order. Big boom industry right now. And naturally they decline to pay income tax or license their vehicles or anything else that might cost them anything."
"Effectively, they control Yorke County," Webster said.
"How is that possible?" Johnson asked.
"Because nobody else does," Webster said. "You ever been up there? I haven't. Jackson says the whole place is abandoned. Everything pulled out, a long time ago. He says there's just a couple dozen citizens still around, spread out over miles of empty territory, bankrupt ranchers, leftover miners, old folk. No effective county government. Borken just eased his way in and took it over."
"He's calling it an experiment," McGrath said. "A prototype for a brand-new nation."
Johnson nodded, blankly.
"But what about Holly?" he said.
Webster stacked the paper and laid his hand on it.
"He doesn't mention her," he said. "His last call was Monday, the day she was grabbed up. They were building a prison. We have to assume it was for her."
"This guy calls in?" Brogan said. "By radio?"
Webster nodded.
"He's got a transmitter concealed in the forest," he said. "He wanders off when he can, calls in. That's why it's all so erratic. He's been averaging one call a week. He's pretty inexperienced and he's been told to be cautious. We assume he's under surveillance. Brave new world up there, that's for damn sure."
"Can we call him?" Milosevic asked.
"You're kidding," Webster said. "We just sit and wait."
"Who does he report to?" Brogan asked.
"Resident Agent at Butte," Webster said.
"So what do we do?" Johnson asked.
Webster shrugged. The room went quiet.
"Right now, nothing," he said. "We need a position."
The room stayed quiet and Webster just looked hard at Johnson. It was a look between one government man and another and it said: you know how it is. Johnson stared back for a long time, expressionless. Then his head moved through a fractional nod. Just enough to say: for the moment, I know how it is.

Johnson's aide coughed into the silence.
"We've got missiles north of Yorke," he said. "They're moving south right now, on their way back here. Twenty grunts, a hundred Stingers, five trucks. They'll be heading straight through Yorke, anytime now. Can we use them?"
Brogan shook his head.
"Against the law," he said. "Military can't participate in law enforcement."
Webster ignored him and glanced at Johnson and waited. They were his men, and Holly was his daughter. The answer was better coming straight from him.
There was a silence, and then Johnson shook his head.
"No," he said. "We need time to plan."
The aide spread his hands wide.
"We can plan," he said. "We've got radio contact, ground-to-ground. We should go for it, General."
"Against the law," Brogan said again.
Johnson made no reply. He was thinking hard. McGrath riffled through the pile of papers and pulled the sheet about the dynamite packing Holly's prison walls. He held it facedown on the shiny table. But Johnson shook his head again.
"No," he said again. "Twenty men against a hundred? They're not frontline troops. They're not infantry. And their Stingers won't help us. I assume these terrorists don't have an air force, right? No, we wait. Bring the missile unit right back here, fastest. No engagement."
The aide shrugged and McGrath slipped the dynamite report back into the pile.
Webster looked around and slapped both palms lightly on the tabletop.
"I'm going back to D.C.," he said. "Got to get a position."
Johnson shrugged his shoulders. He knew nothing could start without a trip back to D.C. to get a position. Webster turned to McGrath.
"You three move up to Butte," he said. "Get settled in the office there. If this guy Jackson calls, put him on maximum alert."
"We can chopper you up there," the aide said.
"And we need surveillance," Webster said. "Can you get the Air Force to put some camera planes over Yorke?"
Johnson nodded.
"They'll be there," he said. "Twenty-four hours a day. We'll give you a live video feed into Butte. A rat farts, you'll see it."
"No intervention," Webster said. "Not yet."

29

SHE HEARD FOOTSTEPS in the corridor at the exact moment the sixth bolt came free. A light tread. Not Jackson. Not a man treading carefully. A woman, walking normally. The steps halted outside her door. There was a pause. She rested the long tube back on the frame. A key went into the lock. She pulled the mattress back into place. Dragged the blanket over it. Another pause. The door opened.

A woman came into the room. She looked like all of them looked, white, lean, long straight hair, strong plain face, no makeup, no adornment, red hands. She was carrying a tray, with a white cloth mounded up over it. No weapon.

“Lunch,” she said.

Holly nodded. Her heart was pounding. The woman was standing there, the tray in her hands, looking around the room, staring hard at the new pine walls.

“Where do you want this?” she asked. “On the bed?”

Holly shook her head.

“On the floor,” she said.

The woman bent and placed the tray on the floor.

“Guess you could use a table,” she said. “And a chair.”

Holly glanced down at the flatware and thought: tools.

“You want me to get them to bring you a chair?” the woman asked.

“No,” Holly said.

“Well, I could use one,” the woman said. “I’ve got to wait and watch you eat. Make sure you don’t steal the silverware.”

Holly nodded vaguely and circled around the woman. Glanced at the open door. The woman followed her gaze and grinned.

“Nowhere to run,” she said. “We’re a long way from anywhere, and there’s some difficult terrain in the way. North, you’d reach Canada in a couple of weeks, if you found enough roots and berries and bugs to eat. West, you’d have to swim the river. East, you’d get lost in the forest or eaten by a bear, and even if you didn’t, you’re still a month away from Montana. South, we’d shoot you. The border is crawling with guards. You wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“The road is blocked?” Holly asked.

The woman smiled.

“We blew the bridge,” she said. “There is no road, not anymore.”

“When?” Holly asked her. “We drove in.”

“Just now,” the woman said. “You didn’t hear it? I guess you wouldn’t, not with these walls.”

these walls.
“So how does Reacher get sent out?” Holly asked. “He’s supposed to be carrying some sort of a message.”
The woman smiled again.
“That plan has changed,” she said. “Mission canceled. He’s not going.”
“Why not?” Holly asked.
The woman looked straight at her.
“We found out what happened to Peter Bell,” she said.
Holly went quiet.
“Reacher killed him,” the woman said. “Suffocated him. In North Dakota. We were just informed. But I expect you know all about it, right?”
Holly stared at her. She thought: Reacher’s in big trouble. She saw him, handcuffed and alone somewhere.
“How did you find out?” she asked quietly.
The woman shrugged.
“We have a lot of friends,” she said.
Holly kept on staring at her. She thought: the mole. They know we were in North Dakota. Takes a map and a ruler to figure out where we are now. She saw computer keyboards clicking and Jackson’s name scrolling up on a dozen screens.
“What’s going to happen to Reacher?” she asked.
“A life for a life,” the woman said. “That’s the rule here. Same for your friend Reacher as for anybody else.”
“But what’s going to happen to him?” Holly asked again.
The woman laughed.
“Doesn’t take much imagination,” she said. “Or maybe it does. I don’t expect it’s going to be anything real simple.”
Holly shook her head.
“It was self-defense,” she said. “The guy was trying to rape me.”
The woman looked at her, scornfully.
“So how is that self-defense?” she said. “Wasn’t trying to rape Reacher, was he? And you were probably asking for it, anyhow.”
“What?” Holly said.
“Shaking your tail at him?” the woman said. “We know all about smart little city bitches like you. Poor old Peter never stood a chance.”
Holly just stared at her. Then she glanced at the door.
“Where is Reacher now?” she asked.
“No idea,” the woman said. “Chained to a tree somewhere, I guess.”
Then she grinned.
“But I know where he’s going,” she said. “The parade ground. That’s where they

usually do that sort of stuff. We're all ordered up there to watch the fun."
Holly stared at her. Then she swallowed. Then she nodded.
"Will you help me with this bed?" she asked. "Something wrong with it."
The woman paused. Then she followed her over.
"What's wrong with it?" she asked.
Holly pulled the blanket back and heaved the mattress onto the floor.
"The bolts seem a little loose," she said.
"Where?" the woman said.
"Here," Holly said.
She used both hands on the long tube. Whipped it upward and spun and smashed it like a blunt spear into the side of the woman's head. The flange hit her like a metal fist. Skin tore and a neat rectangle of bone punched deep into her brain and she bounced off the mattress and was dead before she hit the floor. Holly stepped carefully over the tray of lunch and limped calmly toward the open door.

30

HARLAND WEBSTER GOT back to the Hoover Building from Colorado at three o'clock Thursday afternoon, East Coast time. He went straight to his office suite and checked his messages. Then he buzzed his secretary.
"Car," he said.
He went down in his private elevator to the garage and met his driver. They walked over to the limousine and got in.
"White House," Webster said.
"You seeing the President, sir?" the driver asked, surprised.
Webster scowled forward at the back of the guy's head. He wasn't seeing the President. He didn't see the President very often. He didn't need reminding of that, especially not by a damn driver sounding all surprised that there even was such a possibility.
"Attorney General," he said. "White House is where she is right now."
His driver nodded silently. Cursed himself for opening his big mouth. Drove on smoothly and unobtrusively. The distance between the Hoover Building and the White House was exactly sixteen hundred yards. Less than a mile. Not even far enough to click over the little number in the speedometer on the limousine's dash. It would have been quicker to walk. And cheaper. Firing up the cold V-8 and hauling all that bulletproof plating sixteen hundred yards really ate up the gas. But the Director couldn't walk anywhere. Theory was he'd get assassinated. Fact was, there were probably about eight people in the city who would recognize him. Just another D.C. guy in a gray suit and a quiet tie. Anonymous. Another reason old Webster was never in the best of tempers, his driver thought.

WEBSTER KNEW THE Attorney General pretty well. She was his boss, but his familiarity with her did not come from their face-to-face meetings. It came instead from the background checks the Bureau had run prior to her confirmation. Webster probably knew more about her than anybody else on earth did. Her parents and friends and ex-colleagues all knew their own separate perspectives. Webster had put all of those together and he knew the whole picture. Her Bureau file took up as much disk space as a short novel. Nothing at all in the file made him dislike her. She had been a lawyer, faintly radical at the start of her career, built up a decent practice, grabbed a judgeship, never annoyed the law enforcement community, without ever becoming a rabid foaming-at-the-mouth pain in the ass. An ideal appointment, sailed through her confirmation with no problem at all. Since then, she had proven to be a good boss and a great

with no problem at all. Since then, she had proven to be a good boss and a great ally. Her name was Ruth Rosen and the only problem Webster had with her was that she was twelve years younger than him, very good-looking, and a whole lot more famous than he was.
His appointment was for four o'clock. He found Rosen alone in a small room, two floors and eight Secret Service agents away from the Oval Office. She greeted him with a strained smile and an urgent inclination of her elegant head.
"Holly?" she asked.
He nodded. He gave her the spread, top to bottom. She listened hard and ended up pale, with her lips clamped tight.
"We totally sure this is where she is?" she asked.
He nodded again.
"Sure as we can be," he said.
"OK," she said. "Wait there, will you?"
She left the small room. Webster waited. Ten minutes, then twenty, then a half hour. He paced. He gazed out of the window. He opened the door and glanced out into the corridor. A Secret Serviceman glanced back at him. Took a pace forward. Webster shook his head in answer to the question the guy hadn't asked and closed the door again. Just sat down and waited.
Ruth Rosen was gone an hour. She came back in and closed the door. Then she just stood there, a yard inside the small room, pale, breathing hard, some kind of shock on her face. She said nothing. Just let it dawn on him that there was some kind of a big problem happening.
"What?" he asked.
"I'm out of the loop on this," she said.
"What?" he asked again.
"They took me out of the loop," she said. "My reactions were wrong. Dexter is handling it from here."
"Dexter?" he repeated. Dexter was the President's White House Chief of Staff. A political fixer from the old school. As hard as a nail, and half as sentimental. But he was the main reason the President was sitting there in the Oval Office with a big majority of the popular vote.
"I'm very sorry, Harland," Ruth Rosen said. "He'll be here in a minute."
He nodded sourly and she went back out the door and left him to wait again.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN the rest of the FBI and the Field Office in Butte, Montana, is similar to the relationship between Moscow and Siberia, proverbially speaking. It's a standard Bureau joke. Screw up, the joke goes, and you'll be working out of Butte tomorrow. Like some kind of an internal exile. Like KGB foul-ups were supposedly sent out to write parking tickets in Siberia.

But on that Thursday July third, the Field Office in Butte felt like the center of the universe for McGrath and Milosevic and Brogan. It felt like the most desirable posting in the world. None of the three had ever been there before. Not on business, not on vacation. None of them would have ever considered going there. But now they were peering out of the Air Force helicopter like kids on their way to the Magic Kingdom. They were looking at the landscape below and swiveling their gaze northwest toward where they knew Yorke County was hiding under the distant hazy mist.

The Resident Agent at Butte was a competent Bureau veteran still reeling after a personal call from Harland Webster direct from the Hoover Building. His instructions were to drive the three Chicago agents to his office, brief them on the way, get them installed, rent them a couple of jeeps, and then get the hell out and stay the hell out until further notice. So he was waiting at the Silver Bow County airport when the dirty black Air Force chopper clattered in. He piled the agents into his government Buick and blasted back north to town.

"Distances are big around here," he said to McGrath. "Don't ever forget that. We're still two hundred forty miles shy of Yorke. On our roads, that's four hours, absolute minimum. Me, I'd get some mobile units and move up a lot closer. Basing yourselves down here won't help you much, not if things start to turn bad up there."

McGrath nodded.

"You hear from Jackson again?" he asked.

"Not since Monday," the Resident Agent said. "The dynamite thing."

"Next time he calls, he speaks to me, OK?" McGrath said.

The Butte guy nodded. Fished one-handed in his pocket while he drove. Pulled out a small radio receiver. McGrath took it from him. Put it into his own pocket.

"Be my guest," the Butte guy said. "I'm on vacation. Webster's orders. But don't hold your breath. Jackson doesn't call often. He's very cautious."

The Field Office was just a single room, second floor of a two-floor municipal building. A desk, two chairs, a computer, a big map of Montana on the wall, a lot of filing space, and a ringing telephone. McGrath answered it. He listened and grunted. Hung up and waited for the Resident Agent to take the hint.

"OK, I'm gone," the old guy said. "Silver Bow Jeep will bring you a couple of vehicles over. Anything else you guys need?"

"Privacy," Brogan said.

The old guy nodded and glanced around his office. Then he was gone.

"Air Force has put a couple of spy planes up there," McGrath said. "Satellite gear is coming in by road. The General and his aide are coming here. Looks like they're going to be our guests for the duration. Can't really argue with that,

right?"
Milosevic was studying the map on the wall.
"Wouldn't want to argue with that," he said. "We're going to need some favors. You guys ever seen a worse-looking place?"
McGrath and Brogan joined him in front of the map. Milosevic's finger was planted on Yorke. Ferocious green and brown terrain boiled all around it.
"Four thousand square miles," Milosevic said. "One road and one track."
"They chose a good spot," Brogan said.

"I SPOKE WITH the President," Dexter said.
He sat back and paused. Webster stared at him. What the hell else would he have been doing? Pruning the Rose Garden? Dexter was staring back. He was a small guy, burned up, dark, twisted, the way a person gets to look after spending every minute of every day figuring every possible angle.
"And?" Webster said.
"There are sixty-six million gun owners in this country," Dexter said.
"So?" Webster asked.
"Our analysts think they all share certain basic sympathies," Dexter said.
"What analysts?" Webster said. "What sympathies?"
"There was a poll," Dexter said. "Did we send you a copy? One adult in five would be willing to take up arms against the government, if strictly necessary."
"So?" Webster asked again.
"There was another poll," Dexter said. "A simple question, to be answered intuitively, from the gut. Who's in the right, the government or the militias?"
"And?" Webster said.
"Twelve million Americans sided with the militias," Dexter said.
Webster stared at him. Waited for the message.
"So," Dexter said. "Somewhere between twelve and sixty-six million voters."
"What about them?" Webster asked.
"And where are they?" Dexter asked back. "You won't find many of them in D.C. or New York or Boston or L.A. It's a skewed sample. Some places they're a tiny minority. They look like weirdos. But other places, they're a majority. Other places, they're absolutely normal, Harland."
"So?" he said.
"Some places they control counties," Dexter said. "Even states."
Webster stared at him.
"God's sake, Dexter, this isn't politics," he said. "This is Holly."
Dexter paused and glanced around the small White House room. It was painted a subtle off-white. It had been painted and repainted that same subtle color every

few years, while Presidents came and went. He smiled a connoisseur's smile.
"Unfortunately, everything's politics," he said.
"This is Holly," Webster said again.
Dexter shook his head. Just a slight movement.
"This is emotion," he said. "Think about innocent little emotional words, like patriot, resistance, crush, underground, struggle, oppression, individual, distrust, rebel, revolt, revolution, rights. There's a certain majesty to those words, don't you think? In an American context?"
Webster shook his head doggedly.
"Nothing majestic about kidnapping women," he said. "Nothing majestic about illegal weapons, illegal armies, stolen dynamite. This isn't politics."
Dexter shook his head again. The same slight movement.
"Things have a way of becoming politics," he said. "Think about Ruby Ridge. Think about Waco, Harland. That wasn't politics, right? But it became politics pretty damn soon. We hurt ourselves with maybe sixty-six million voters there. And we were real dumb about it. Big reactions are what these people want. They figure that harsh reprisals will upset people, bring more people into their fold. And we gave them big reactions. We fueled their fire. We made it look like big government was just about itching to crush the little guy."
The room went silent.
"The polls say we need a better approach," Dexter said. "And we're trying to find one. We're trying real hard. So how would it look if the White House stopped trying just because it happens to be Holly who's involved? And right now? The Fourth of July weekend? Don't you understand anything? Think about it, Harland. Think about the reaction. Think about words like vindictive, self-interested, revenge, personal, words like that, Harland. Think about what words like those are going to do to our poll numbers."
Webster stared at him. The off-white walls crushed in on him.
"This is about Holly, for God's sake," he said. "This is not about poll numbers. And what about the General? Has the President said all this to him?"
Dexter shook his head.
"I've said it all to him," he said. "Personally. A dozen times. He's been calling every hour, on the hour."
Webster thought: now the President won't even take Johnson's calls anymore. Dexter has really fixed him.
"And?" he asked.
Dexter shrugged.
"I think he understands the principle," he said. "But naturally, his judgment is kind of colored right now. He's not a happy man."

Webster lapsed into silence. Started thinking hard. He was a smart enough bureaucrat to know if you can't beat them, you join them. You force yourself to think like they think.
"But busting her out could do you good," he said. "A lot of good. It would look tough, decisive, loyal, no-nonsense. Could be advantageous. In the polls."
Dexter nodded.
"I totally agree with you," he said. "But it's a gamble, right? A real big gamble. A quick victory is good, a foul-up is a disaster. A big gamble, with big poll numbers at stake. And right now, I'm doubting if you can get the quick victory. Right now, you're half-cocked. So right now my money would be on the foul-up."
Webster stared at him.
"Hey, no offense, Harland," Dexter said. "I'm paid to think like this, right?"
"So what the hell are you saying here?" Webster asked him. "I need to move the Hostage Rescue Team into place right now?"
"No," Dexter said.
"No?" Webster repeated incredulously.
Dexter shook his head.
"Permission denied," he said. "For the time being."
Webster just stared at him.
"I need a position," he said.
The room stayed silent. Then Dexter spoke to a spot on the off-white wall, a yard to the left of Webster's chair.
"You remain in personal command of the situation," he said. "Holiday weekend starts tomorrow. Come talk to me Monday. If there's still a problem."
"There's a problem now," Webster said. "And I'm talking to you now."
Dexter shook his head again.
"No, you're not," he said. "We didn't meet today, and I didn't speak with the President today. We didn't know anything about it today. Tell us all about it on Monday, Harland, if there's still a problem."
Webster just sat there. He was a smart enough guy, but right then he couldn't figure if he was being handed the deal of a lifetime, or a suicide pill.

JOHNSON AND HIS aide arrived in Butte an hour later. They came in the same way, Air Force helicopter from Peterson up to the Silver Bow County airport. Milosevic took an air-to-ground call as they were on approach and went out to meet them in a two-year-old Grand Cherokee supplied by the local dealership. Nobody spoke on the short ride back to town. Milosevic just drove and the two military men bent over charts and maps from a large leather case the aide was

carrying. They passed them back and forth and nodded, as if further comment was unnecessary.
The upstairs room in the municipal building was suddenly crowded. Five men, two chairs. The only window faced southeast over the street. The wrong direction. The five men were instinctively glancing at the blank wall opposite. Through that wall was Holly, two hundred and forty miles away.
“We’re going to have to move up there,” General Johnson said.
His aide nodded.
“No good staying here,” he said.
McGrath had made a decision. He had promised himself he wouldn’t fight turf wars with these guys. His agent was Johnson’s daughter. He understood the old guy’s feelings. He wasn’t going to squander time and energy proving who was boss. And he needed the old guy’s help.
“We need to share facilities,” he said. “Just for the time being.”
There was a short silence. The General nodded slowly. He knew enough about Washington to decode those five words with a fair degree of accuracy.
“I don’t have many facilities available,” he said in turn. “It’s the holiday weekend. Exactly seventy-five percent of the U.S. Army is on leave.”
Silence. McGrath’s turn to do the decoding and the slow nodding.
“No authorization to cancel leave?” he asked.
The General shook his head.
“I just spoke with Dexter,” he said. “And Dexter just spoke with the President. Feeling was this thing is on hold until Monday.”
The crowded room went silent. The guy’s daughter was in trouble, and the White House fixer was playing politics.
“Webster got the same story,” McGrath said. “Can’t even bring the Hostage Rescue Team up here yet. Time being, we’re on our own, the three of us.”
The General nodded to McGrath. It was a personal gesture, individual to individual, and it said: we’ve leveled with each other, and we both know what humiliation that cost us, and we both know we appreciate it.
“But there’s no harm in being prepared,” the General said. “Like the little guy suspects, the military is comfortable with secret maneuvers. I’m calling in a few private favors that Mr. Dexter need never know about.”
The silence in the room eased. McGrath looked a question at him.
“There’s a mobile command post already on its way,” the General said.
He took a large chart from his aide and spread it out on the desk.
“We’re going to rendezvous right here,” he said.
He had his finger on a spot northwest of the last habitation in Montana short of Yorke. It was a wide curve on the road leading into the county, about six miles shy of the bridge over the ravine.

shy of the bridge over the ravine.
“The satellite trucks are heading straight there,” he said. “I figure we move in, set up the command post, and seal off the road behind us.”
McGrath stood still, looking down at the map. He knew that to agree was to hand over total control to the military. He knew that to disagree was to play petty games with his agent and this man’s daughter. Then he saw that the General’s finger was resting a half-inch south of a much better location. A little farther north, the road narrowed dramatically. It straightened to give a clear view north and south. The terrain tightened. A better site for a roadblock. A better site for a command post. He was amazed that the General hadn’t spotted it. Then he was flooded with gratitude. The General had spotted it. But he was leaving room for McGrath to point it out. He was leaving room for give-and-take. He didn’t want total control.
“I would prefer this place,” McGrath said.
He tapped the northerly location with a pencil. The General pretended to study it. His aide pretended to be impressed.
“Good thinking,” the General said. “We’ll revise the rendezvous.”
McGrath smiled. He knew damn well the trucks were already heading for that exact spot. Probably already there. The General grinned back. The ritual dance was completed.
“What can the spy planes show us?” Brogan asked.
“Everything,” the General’s aide said. “Wait until you see the pictures. The cameras on those babies are unbelievable.”
“I don’t like it,” McGrath said. “It’s going to make them nervous.”
The aide shook his head.
“They won’t even know they’re there,” he said. “We’re using two of them, flying straight lines, east to west and west to east. They’re thirty-seven thousand feet up. Nobody on the ground is even going to be aware of them.”
“That’s seven miles up,” Brogan said. “How can they see anything from that sort of height?”
“Good cameras,” the aide said. “Seven miles is nothing. They’ll show you a cigarette pack lying on the sidewalk from seven miles. The whole thing is automatic. The guys up there hit a button, and the camera tracks whatever it’s supposed to track. Just keeps pointing at the spot on the ground you chose, transmitting high-quality video by satellite, then you turn around and come back, and the camera swivels around and does it all again.”
“Undetectable?” McGrath asked.
“They look like airliners,” the aide said. “You look up and you see a tiny little vapor trail and you think it’s TWA on the way somewhere. You don’t think it’s the Air Force checking whether you polished your shoes this morning, right?”

the Air Force checking whether you polished your shoes this morning, right?"
"Seven miles, you'll see the hairs on their heads," Johnson said. "What do you think we spent all those defense dollars on? Crop dusters?"
McGrath nodded. He felt naked. Time being, he had nothing to offer except a couple of rental jeeps, two years old, waiting at the sidewalk.
"We're getting a profile on this Borken guy," he said. "Shrinks at Quantico are working it up now."
"We found Jack Reacher's old CO," Johnson said. "He's doing desk duty in the Pentagon. He'll join us, give us the spread."
McGrath nodded.
"Forewarned is forearmed," he said.
The telephone rang. Johnson's aide picked it up. He was the nearest.
"When are we leaving?" Brogan asked.
McGrath noticed he had asked Johnson direct.
"Right now, I guess," Johnson said. "The Air Force will fly us up there. Saves six hours on the road, right?"
The aide hung up the phone. He looked like he'd been kicked in the gut.
"The missile unit," he said. "We lost radio contact, north of Yorke."

31

HOLLY PAUSED IN the corridor. Smiled. The woman had left her weapon propped against the wall outside the door. That had been the delay. She had used the key, put the tray on the floor, unslung her weapon, propped it against the wall, and picked up the tray again before nudging open the door.
She swapped the iron tube for the gun. Not a weapon she had used before. Not one she wanted to use now. It was a tiny submachine gun. An Ingram MAC 10. Obsolete military issue. Obsolete for a reason. Holly's class at Quantico had laughed about it. They called it the phone booth gun. It was so inaccurate you had to be in a phone booth with your guy to be sure of hitting him. A grim joke. And it fired way too quickly. A thousand rounds per minute. One touch on the trigger and the magazine was empty.
But it was a better weapon than part of an old iron bed frame. She checked the magazine. It was full, thirty shells. The chamber was clean. She clicked the trigger and watched the mechanism move. The gun worked as well as it was ever going to. She smacked the magazine back into position. Straightened the canvas strap and slung it tight over her shoulder. Clicked the cocking handle to the fire position and closed her hand around the grip. Took a firm hold on her crutch and eased to the top of the stairs.
She stood still and waited. Listened hard. No sound. She went down the stairs, slowly, a step at a time, the Ingram out in front of her. At the bottom, she waited and listened again. No sound. She crossed the lobby and arrived at the doors. Eased them open and looked outside.
The street was deserted. But it was wide. It looked like a huge city boulevard to her. To reach safety on the other side was going to take her minutes. Minutes out there in the open, exposed to the mountain slopes above. She estimated the distance. Breathed hard and gripped her crutch. Jabbed the Ingram forward. Breathed hard again and took off at a lurching run, jamming the crutch down, leaping ahead with her good leg, swinging the gun left and right to cover both approaches.
She threw herself at the mound in front of the ruined county office. Scrabbled north around behind it and fought through grabbing undergrowth. Entered the forest parallel to the main track, but thirty yards from it. Leaned on a tree and bent double, gasping with exertion and fear and exhilaration.
This was the real thing. This was what the whole of her life had led her to. She could hear her father's war stories in her head. The jungles of Vietnam. The breathless fear of being hunted in the green undergrowth. The triumph of each

breathless fear of being hunted in the green undergrowth. The triumph of each safe step, of each yard gained. She saw the faces of the tough quiet men she had known on the bases as a child. The instructors at Quantico. She felt the disappointment of her posting to a safe desk in Chicago. All the training wasted, because of who she was. Now it was different. She straightened up. Took a deep breath. Then another. She felt her genes boiling through her. Before, they'd felt like resented intruders. Now they felt warm and whole and good. Her father's daughter? You bet your ass.

REACHER WAS CUFFED around the trunk of a hundred-foot pine. He had been dragged down the narrow track to the Bastion. Burning with fury. One punch and one kick was more than he had yielded since his early childhood. The rage was burying the pain. And blurring his mind. A life for a life, the fat bastard had said. Reacher had twisted on the floor and the words had meant nothing to him.

But they meant something now. They had come back to him as he stood there. Men and women had strolled up to him and smiled. Their smiles were the sort of smiles he had seen before, long ago. The smiles of bored children living on an isolated base somewhere, after they had been told the circus was coming to town.

SHE THOUGHT HARD. She had to guess where he was. And she had to guess where the parade ground was. She had to get herself halfway between those two unknown locations and set up an ambush. She knew the ground sloped steeply up to the clearing with the huts. She remembered being brought downhill to the courthouse. She guessed the parade ground had to be a large flat area. Therefore it had to be farther uphill, to the northwest, where the ground leveled out in the mountain bowl. Some distance beyond the huts. She set off uphill through the trees.

She tried to figure out where the main path was running. Every few yards, she stopped and peered south, turning left and right to catch a glimpse of the gaps in the forest canopy where the trees had been cleared. That way, she could deduce the direction of the track. She kept herself parallel to it, thirty or forty yards away to the north, and fought through the tough whippy stems growing sideways from the trunks. It was all uphill, and steep, and it was hard work. She used her crutch like a boatman uses a pole, planting it securely in the soil and thrusting herself upward against it.

In a way, her knee helped her. It made her climb slowly and carefully. It made her quiet. And she knew how to do this. From old Vietnam stories, not from Quantico. The Academy had concentrated on urban situations. The Bureau had

taught her how to stalk through a city street or a darkened building. How to stalk through a forest came from an earlier layer of memory.

SOME PEOPLE STROLLED up and strolled away, but some of them stayed. After a quarter hour, there was a small crowd of maybe fifteen or sixteen people, mostly men, standing aimlessly in a wide semicircle around him. They kept their distance, like rubberneckers at a car wreck, behind an invisible police line. They stared at him, silently, not much in their faces. He stared back. He let his gaze rest on each one in turn, several seconds at a time. He kept his arms hitched as high behind him as he could manage. He wanted to keep his feet free for action, in case any of them felt like starting the show a little early.

SHE SMELLED THE first sentry before she saw him. He was moving upwind toward her, smoking. The odor of the cigarette and the unwashed uniform drifted down to her and she pulled silently to her right. She looped a wide circle around him and waited. He walked on down the hill and was gone.
The second sentry heard her. She sensed it. Sensed him stopping and listening. She stood still. Thought hard. She didn't want to use the Ingram. It was too inaccurate. She was certain to miss with it. And the noise would be fatal. So she bent down and scratched up two small stones. An old jungle trick she had been told about as a child. She tossed the first stone twenty feet to her left. Waited. Tossed the second thirty feet. She heard the sentry figure something was moving slowly away to the left. Heard him drift in that direction. She drifted right. A wide circle, and onward, up the endless hill.

FOWLER SHOULDERED THROUGH the small semicircle of onlookers. Stepped up face-to-face with him. Stared hard at him. Then six guards were coming through the crowd. Five of them had rifles leveled and the sixth had a length of chain in his hand. Fowler stood aside and the five rifles jammed hard into Reacher's gut. He glanced down at them. The safety catches were off and they were all set to automatic fire.
"Time to go," Fowler said.
He vanished behind the sturdy trunk and Reacher felt the cuffs come off. He leaned forward off the tree and the muzzles tracked back, following the motion. Then the cuffs went back on, with the chain looped into them. Fowler gripped the chain and Reacher was dragged through the Bastion, facing the five guards. They were all walking backward, their rifles leveled a foot from his head. People were lined into a tight cordon. He was dragged between them. The people hissed and muttered at him as he passed. Then they broke ranks and ran ahead of him,

up toward the parade ground.

THE THIRD SENTRY caught her. Her knee let her down. She had to scale a high rocky crag, and because of her leg, she had to do it backward. She sat on the rock like it was a chair and used her good leg and the crutch to push herself upward, a foot at a time. She reached the top and rolled over on her back on the ground, gasping from the effort, and then she squirmed upright and stood, face-to-face with the sentry.

For a split second, she was blank with surprise and shock. He wasn't. He had stood at the top of the bluff and watched every inch of her agonizing progress. So he wasn't surprised. But he was slow. An opponent like Holly, he should have been quick. He should have been ready. Her reaction clicked in before he could get started. Basic training took over. It came without thinking. She balled her fist and threw a fast low uppercut. Caught him square in the groin. He folded forward and down and she wrapped her left arm around his throat and crunched him in the back of his neck with her right forearm. She felt his vertebrae smash and his body go slack. Then she clamped her palms over his ears and twisted his head around, savagely, one way and then the other. His spinal cord severed and she turned him and dropped him over the crag. He thumped and crashed his way down over the rocks, dead limbs flailing. Then she cursed and swore, bitterly. Because she should have taken his rifle. It was worth a dozen Ingrams. But there was no way she was going to climb all the way down to get it. Climbing back up again would delay her too long.

THE PARADE GROUND was full of people. All standing in neat ranks. Reacher guessed there were maybe a hundred people there. Men and women. All in uniform. All armed. Their weapons formed a formidable array of firepower. Each person had either a fully automatic rifle or a machine gun slung over their left shoulder. Each person had an automatic pistol on their belt. They all had ammunition pouches and grenades hung regulation-style from loops on their webbing. Many of them had smeared night camouflage on their faces.

Their uniforms were adapted from U.S. Army surplus. Camouflage jackets, camouflage pants, jungle boots, forage caps. Same stuff as Reacher had seen piled up in the storehouse. But each uniform had additions. Each jacket had an immaculate shoulder flash, woven in maroon silk, spelling out Montana Militia in an elegant curve. Each jacket had the wearer's name stenciled onto olive tape and sewn above the breast pocket. Some of the men had single chromium stars punched through the fabric on the breast pocket. Some kind of rank.

Beau Borken was standing on an upturned wooden crate, west edge of the

leveled area, his back to the forest, his massive bulk looming over his troops. He saw Fowler and Reacher and the guards arriving through the trees.
“Attention!” he called.
There was a shuffling as the hundred militia members snapped into position. Reacher caught a smell of canvas on the breeze. The smell of a hundred Army-surplus uniforms. Borken waved a bloated arm and Fowler used the chain to drag Reacher up toward the front of the gathering. The guards seized his arms and shoulders and he was turned and maneuvered so he was left standing next to the box, suddenly isolated, facing the crowd.
“We all know why we’re here,” Borken called out to them.

SHE HAD NO idea how far she had come. It felt like miles. Hundreds of feet uphill. But she was still deep in the woods. The main track was still forty yards south on her left. She felt the minutes ticking away and her panic rising. She gripped the crutch and moved on northwest again, as fast as she dared.
Then she saw a building ahead of her. A wooden hut, visible through the trees. The undergrowth petered out into stony shale. She crept to the edge of the wood and stopped. Listened hard over the roar of her breathing. Heard nothing. She gripped the crutch and raised the Ingram tight against the strap. Limped across the shale to the corner of the hut. Looked out and around.
It was the clearing where they had arrived the night before. A wide circular space. Stony. Ringed with huts. Deserted. Quiet. The absolute silence of a recently abandoned place. She came out from behind the hut and limped to the center of the clearing, pirouetting on her crutch, jabbing the Ingram in a wide circle, covering the trees on the perimeter. Nothing. Nobody there.
She saw two paths, one running west, a wider track running north. She swung north and headed back into the cover of the trees. She forgot all about trying to stay quiet and raced north as fast as she could move.

“WE ALL KNOW why we’re here,” Borken called out again.
The orderly crowd shuffled, and a wave of whispering rose to the trees. Reacher scanned the faces. He saw Stevie in the front rank. A chromium star through his breast pocket. Little Stevie was an officer. Next to Stevie he saw Joseph Ray. Then he realized Jackson was not there. No scarred forehead. He double-checked. Scanned everywhere. No sign of him anywhere on the parade ground. He clamped his teeth to stop a smile. Jackson was hiding out. Holly might still make it.

SHE SAW HIM. She stared out of the forest over a hundred heads and saw him

standing next to Borken. His arms were cuffed behind him. He was scanning the crowd. Nothing in his face. She heard Borken say: we all know why we're here. She thought: yes, I know why I'm here. I know exactly why I'm here. She looked left and right. A hundred people, rifles, machine guns, pistols, grenades. Borken on the box with his arms raised. Reacher, helpless beside him. She stood in the trees, heart thumping, staring. Then she took a deep breath. Set the Ingram to the single-shot position and fired into the air. Burst out of the trees. Fired again. And again. Three shots into the air. Three bullets gone, twenty-seven left in the magazine. She clicked the Ingram back to full auto and moved into the crowd, parting it in front of her with slow menacing sweeps of her gun hand. She was one woman moving slowly through a crowd of a hundred people. They parted warily around her, and then as she passed them by, they unslung their weapons and cocked them and leveled them at her back. A wave of loud mechanical noises trailed behind her like a slow tide. By the time she reached the front rank, she had a hundred loaded weapons trained on her from behind.
"Don't shoot her!" Borken screamed. "That's an order! Nobody fire!"
He jumped down off the box. Panic in his face. He raised his arms out wide and danced desperately around her, shielding her body with his huge bulk. Nobody fired. She limped away from him and turned to face the crowd.
"Hell are you doing?" Borken screamed at her. "You think you can shoot a hundred people with that little pop-gun?"
Holly shook her head.
"No," she said quietly.
Then she reversed the Ingram and held it to her chest.
"But I can shoot myself," she said.

32

THE CROWD WAS silent. Their breathing was swallowed up by the awesome mountain silence. Everybody was staring at Holly. She was holding the Ingram reversed, the muzzle jammed into a spot above her heart. Thumb backward on the trigger, tensed. Borken's bloated face was greased with panic. His huge frame was shaking and trembling. He was hopping around next to his upturned box, staring wide-eyed at her. She was looking back at him, calmly.
"I'm a hostage, right?" she said to him. "Important to them, important to you, because of who I am. All kinds of importance to all kinds of people. You expect them to do stuff to keep me alive. So now it's your turn. Let's talk about what stuff you're prepared to do to keep me alive."
Borken saw her glance at Reacher.
"You don't understand," he screamed at her. Wild urgency in his voice. "I'm not going to kill this guy. This guy stays alive. The situation has changed."
"Changed how?" she asked, calmly.
"I'm commuting his sentence," Borken said. Still panic in his voice. "That's why we're here. I was just going to announce it. We know who he is. We just found out. We were just informed. He was in the Army. Major Jack Reacher. He's a hero. He won the Silver Star."
"So?" Holly asked.
"He saved a bunch of Marines," Borken said urgently. "In Beirut. Ordinary fighting men. He pulled them out of a burning bunker. Marines will never attack us while he's here. Never. So I'm going to use him as another hostage. He's good insurance, against the damn Marines. I need him."
She stared at him. Reacher stared at him.
"His sentence is commuted," Borken said again. "Five years on punishment detail. That's all. Nothing else. No question about it. I need him alive."
He stared at her with a salesman's beam like the problem was solved. She stared back and forth between him and Reacher. Reacher was watching the crowd. The crowd was angry. The circus had left town before the performance. Reacher felt like they had all taken a step toward him. They were testing Borken's power over them. Holly glanced at him, fear in her eyes. Nodded to him. An imperceptible movement of her head. She would be safe, she was saying, whatever happened. Her identity protected her like an invisible magic cloak. Reacher nodded back. Without turning around, he judged the distance to the trees behind him. Maybe twenty feet. Shove Fowler at the front rank, drag the chain, sprint like hell, he might be in the trees before anybody could aim a

chain, sprint like hell, he might be in the trees before anybody could aim a weapon. Twenty feet, standing start, using the momentum of shouldering Fowler away to help him, maybe four or five strides, maybe three seconds, maybe four. In the trees, he would stand a chance against the bullets. He imagined them smacking into the trunks either side of him as he ran and dodged. A forest is a fugitive's best friend. It takes a lot of luck to hit a guy running through trees. He shifted his weight and felt his ham-strings tighten. Felt the flood of adrenaline. Fight or flight. But then Borken flung his arms wide again. Held them out like an angel's wings and used the awesome power of his eyes on his people.
"I have made my decision," he called. "Do you understand?"
There was a long pause. It went on for seconds. Then a hundred heads snapped back.
"Yes sir!" a hundred voices yelled.
"Do you understand?" he called again.
A hundred heads snapped back again.
"Yes sir!" a hundred voices yelled.
"Five years on punishment detail," Borken called. "But only if he can prove who he is. We are informed this man is the only non-Marine in history to win the Marine Sniper competition. We are told this man can put six bullets through a silver dollar a thousand yards away. So I'm going to shoot against him. Eight hundred yards. If he wins, he lives. If he loses, he dies. Do you understand?"
A hundred heads snapped back.
"Yes sir!" a hundred voices yelled.
The rumble from the crowd started up again. This time, they sounded interested. Reacher smiled inwardly. Smart move, he thought. They wanted a spectacle, Borken was giving them one. Fowler breathed out and pulled a key from his pocket. Ducked around and unlocked the handcuffs. The chain fell to the floor. Reacher breathed out and rubbed his wrists.
Then Fowler stepped over to Holly in the press of people. Stepped right in front of her. She paused for a long moment and glanced at Borken. He nodded.
"You have my word," he said, with as much dignity as he could recover.
She glanced at Reacher. He shrugged and nodded. She nodded back and looked down at the Ingram. Clicked the safety on and looped the strap off her shoulder. Grinned and dropped the gun to the floor. Fowler bent at her feet and scooped it up. Borken raised his arms for quiet.
"To the rifle range," he called out. "Orderly fashion. Dismiss."
Holly limped over and walked next to Reacher.
"You won the Wimbledon?" she asked, quietly.
He nodded.
"So can vou win this?" she asked.

He nodded again.
“With my head in a bag,” he said.
“Is that such a good idea?” she asked quietly. “Guy like this, he’s not going to be happy to get beat.”
Reacher shrugged.
“He wants a big performance, he’s going to get one,” he said. “He’s all shaken up. You started it. I want to keep it going. Long run, it’ll do us good.”
“Well, take care,” she said.
“Watch me,” Reacher said.

TWO BRAND-NEW TARGETS were placed side by side at the extreme end of the range. Borken’s was on the left, with ATF daubed across its chest. Reacher’s was on the right, with FBI over its heart. The rough matting was pulled back to give maximum distance. Reacher figured he was looking at about eight hundred and thirty yards. Fifty yards shy of a full half-mile. A hell of a long way.
The swarm of people had settled into a rough semicircle, behind and beside the matting. The nearer targets were flung into the undergrowth to clear their view. Several people had field glasses. They peered up the range and then their noise faded as one after the other they settled into quiet anticipation.
Fowler made the trip to the armory in the clearing below. He walked back with a rifle in each hand. One for Borken, one for Reacher. Identical guns. The price of a small family car in each hand. They were .50-inch Barrett Model 90s. Nearly four feet long, over twenty-two pounds in weight. Bolt-action repeaters, fired a bullet a full half-inch across. More like an artillery shell than a rifle bullet.
“One magazine each,” Borken said. “Six shots.”
Reacher took his weapon and laid it on the ground at his feet. Little Stevie marshaled the crowd backward to clear the matting. Borken checked his rifle and flicked the bipod legs out. Smacked the magazine into place. He set the weapon down gently on the matting.
“I shoot first,” he said.
He dropped to his knees and forced his bulk down behind the rifle. Pulled the stock to him and snuggled it in close. Dragged the bipod legs an inch to the left and swung the butt a fraction to the right. He smacked the bolt in and out and pressed himself close to the ground. Eased his cheek against the stock and put his eye to the scope. Joseph Ray stepped from the edge of the crowd and offered Reacher his field glasses. Reacher nodded silently and took them. Held them ready. Borken’s finger tightened against the trigger. He fired the first shot.
The Barrett’s huge muzzle brake blasted gas sideways and downward. Dust blasted back up off the matting. The rifle kicked and boomed. The sound crashed

through the trees and came back off the mountains, seconds later. A hundred pairs of eyes flicked from Borken to the target. Reacher raised the field glasses and focused eight hundred and thirty yards up the range.
It was a miss. The target was undamaged. Borken peered through the scope and grimaced. He hunkered down again and waited for the dust to clear. Reacher watched him. Borken was just waiting. Steady breathing. Relaxed. Then his finger tightened again. He fired the second shot. The rifle kicked and crashed and the dust blasted upward. Reacher raised the field glasses again. A hit. There was a splintered hole on the target's right shoulder.
There was a murmur from the crowd. Field glasses were passed from hand to hand. The whispers rose and fell. The dust settled. Borken fired again. Too quickly. He was still wriggling. Reacher watched him making the mistake. He didn't bother with the field glasses. He knew that half-inch shell would end up in Idaho.
The crowd whispered. Borken glared through the scope. Reacher watched him do it all wrong. His relaxation was disappearing. His shoulders were tensed. He fired the fourth. Reacher handed the field glasses back to Joseph Ray on the edge of the crowd. He didn't need to look. He knew Borken was going to miss with the rest. In that state, he'd have missed at four hundred yards. He'd have missed at two hundred. He'd have missed across a crowded room.
Borken fired the fifth and then the sixth and stood up slowly. He lifted the big rifle and used the scope to check what everybody already knew.
"One hit," he said.
He lowered the rifle and looked across at Reacher.
"Your shot," he said. "Life or death."
Reacher nodded. Fowler handed him his magazine. Reacher used his thumb to test the spring. He pressed down on the first bullet and felt the smooth return. The bullets were shiny. Polished by hand. Sniper's bullets. He bent and lifted the heavy rifle. Held it vertical and clicked the magazine into place. He didn't smack at it, like Borken had done. He pressed it home gently with his palm.
He opened the bipod legs, one at a time. Clicked them against their detents. Glanced up the range and laid the rifle on the matting. Squatted next to it and lay down, all in one fluid motion. He lay like a dead man, arms flung upward around the gun. He wanted to lie like that for a long time. He was tired. Deathly tired. But he stirred and laid his cheek gently against the stock. Snuggled his right shoulder close to the butt. Clamped his left hand over the barrel, fingers under the scope. Eased his right hand toward the trigger. Moved his right eye to the scope. Breathed out.
Firing a sniper rifle over a long distance is a confluence of many things. It starts

with chemistry. It depends on mechanical engineering. It involves optics and geophysics and meteorology. Governing everything is human biology.
The chemistry is about explosions. The powder behind the bullet in the shell case has to explode perfectly, predictably, powerfully, instantly. It has to smash the projectile down the barrel at maximum speed. The half-inch bullet in the Barrett chamber weighs a hair over two ounces. One minute it's stationary. A thousandth of a second later, it's doing nearly nineteen hundred miles an hour, leaving the barrel behind on its way to the target. That powder has to explode fast, explode completely, and explode hard. Difficult chemistry. Weight for weight, that explosion has got to be the best explosion on the planet.
Then mechanical engineering takes over for a spell. The bullet itself has to be a perfect little artifact. It's got to be as good as any manufactured article has ever been. It has got to be cast better than any jewelry. It must be totally uniform in size and weight. Perfectly round, perfectly streamlined. It has to accept ferocious rotation from the rifling grooves inside the barrel. It has to spin and hiss through the air with absolutely no wobble, no bias.
The barrel has to be tight and straight. No good at all if a previous shot has heated and altered the barrel shape. The barrel has to be a mass of perfect metal, heavy enough to remain inert. Heavy enough to kill the tiny vibrations of the bolt and the trigger and the firing pin. That's why the Barrett Reacher was holding cost as much as a cheap sedan. That's why Reacher's left hand was loosely clamped over the top of the gun. He was damping any residual shock with it.
Optics play a big part. Reacher's right eye was an inch behind a Leupold & Stevens scope. A fine instrument. The target was showing small, behind the fine data lines etched into the glass. Reacher stared hard at it. Then he eased the stock down and saw the target disappear and the sky swim into view. He breathed out again and stared at the air.
Because geophysics are crucial. Light travels in a straight line. But it's the only thing that does. Bullets don't. Bullets are physical things which obey the laws of nature, like any other physical things. They follow the curvature of the earth. Eight hundred and thirty yards is a significant piece of curvature. The bullet comes out of the barrel and rises above the line of sight, then it passes through it, then it falls below it. In a perfect curve, like the earth.
Except it's not a perfect curve, because the very first millisecond the bullet is gone, gravity is plucking at it like a small insistent hand. The bullet can't ignore it. It's a two-ounce copper-jacketed lead projectile traveling at nearly nineteen hundred miles an hour, but gravity has its way. Not very successfully, at first, but its best ally soon chips in. Friction. From the very first millisecond of its

travel, air friction is slowing the bullet down and handing gravity a larger and larger say in its destiny. Friction and gravity work together to haul that bullet down.
So you aim way high. You aim maybe ten feet directly above the target and eight hundred and thirty yards later the curvature of the earth and the pull of its gravity bring that bullet home to where you want it.
Except you don't aim directly above the target. Because that would be to ignore meteorology. Bullets travel through air, and air moves. It's a rare day when the air is still. The air moves one way or another. Left or right, up or down, or any combination. Reacher was watching the leaves on the trees, and he could see a slow steady breeze coming out of the north. Dry air, moving slowly right to left across his line of sight. So he was aiming about eight feet to the right and ten feet above where he wanted to put the bullet. He was going to launch that projectile and let nature curve it left and down.
Human biology was all that stood in the way. Snipers are people. People are quivering, shuddering masses of flesh and muscle. The heart is beating away like a giant pump, and the lungs are squeezing huge volumes of air in and out. Every nerve and every muscle is trembling with microscopic energy. Nobody is ever still. Even the calmest person is vibrating like crazy. Say there's a yard between the rifle's firing pin and the muzzle. If the muzzle moves a tiny fraction, then eight hundred and thirty yards later, the bullet is going to miss by eight hundred and thirty tiny fractions. A multiplying effect. If the shooter's vibration disturbs the muzzle by even a hundredth of an inch, the bullet will be eight-point-three inches off target. About the width of a man's head.
So Reacher's technique was to wait. Just to gaze through the sight until his breathing was regular and his heartbeat was slow. Then to tighten the trigger finger slowly and wait some more. Then to count the heartbeats. One-and-two-and-three-and-four. Keep on waiting until the rhythm was slow. Then to fire between beats. Right when the vibration was as small as a human being could get it.
He waited. He breathed out, long and slow. His heart beat once. It beat again. He fired. The stock jumped against his shoulder and his view was obliterated by the blast of dust from the matting under the muzzle. The heavy thump of the shot crashed off the mountainsides and came back to him with a wave of whispering from the crowd. He had missed. The running, crouching screen-print with FBI daubed on its chest was undamaged.
He let the dust settle and checked the trees. The wind was steady. He breathed out and let his heart rate drop. He fired again. The big rifle kicked and crashed. The dust flew. The crowd stared and whispered. Another miss.

Two misses. He breathed steadily and fired again. A miss. And again. Another miss. He paused for a long time. Picked up his rhythm again and fired the fifth. He missed the fifth. The crowd was restless. Borken lumbered nearer.
“All on the last shot,” he said, grinning.
Reacher made no reply. No way could he afford the physical disturbance involved in speaking. The disruption to his breathing, the muscular contraction of his lungs and throat would be fatal. He waited. His heart beat. And again. He fired the sixth. He missed. He dropped the sight and stared at the plywood target. Undamaged.
Borken was staring at him. Questions in his eyes. Reacher got to his knees and lifted the rifle. Snapped the empty magazine out. Pushed the bolt home. Traced a finger along the neat engraving on the side of the stock. Folded the bipod legs. Laid the warm gun neatly on the matting. He stood up and shrugged. Borken stared at him. Glanced at Fowler. Fowler glanced back, puzzled. They had watched a man shooting for his life, and they had watched him miss every shot.
“You knew the rules,” Borken said quietly.
Reacher stood still. Ignored him. Gazed up at the blue sky. A pair of vapor trails were crawling across it, like tiny chalk lines far overhead in the stratosphere.
“Wait, sir,” Joseph Ray called loudly.
He came forward out of the crowd. Bristling with urgency. Self-important. Things to say. He was one of the few men in the Bastion with any actual military service behind him, and he prided himself on seeing things that other people missed. He thought it gave him an edge. Made him useful in special ways.
He looked hard at the matting and lay himself down exactly where Reacher had lain. Glanced down the range to the targets. Closed one eye and stared through half his field glasses like a telescope. Focused on the screen-print of the running man. Moved his line of sight a fraction and focused just beyond the hunch of the target’s shoulder. Stared into the distance and nodded to himself.
“Come on,” he said.
He got to his feet and started jogging down the range. Fowler went with him. Eight hundred and thirty yards later, Ray passed the target without a second glance. Kept on jogging. Fowler followed. Fifty yards. A hundred. Ray dropped to his knees and stared backward. Aligned himself with the target and the matting, way back in the far distance. Turned and pointed forward, using his whole arm and finger like a rifle barrel. Stood up again and walked fifty more yards to a particular tree.
It was an orphan silver birch. A straggly wild survivor, forcing its way up alongside the tall pines. Its trunk was contorted as it fought for light and air, one way and then the next. It was narrow, not more than seven or eight inches across. Six feet from the ground, it had six bullet holes in it. Big fresh half-inch holes.

Six feet from the ground, it had six bullet holes in it. Big fresh half-inch holes. Three of them were in a perfect straight vertical line maybe seven inches high. The other three were curled in a loose curve to the right, running from the top hole out and back to the middle hole and out and back again to the bottom hole. Joseph Ray stared hard at them. Then he realized what they were. He grinned. The six holes made a perfect capital B, right there on the white bark. The letter covered an area of maybe seven inches by five. About the dimensions of a fat man's face.

Fowler shouldered past Ray and turned and leaned on the trunk. Stood and pressed the back of his head against the ragged holes. Raised his field glasses and looked back down the range toward the matting. He figured he was more than a hundred and fifty yards behind the target. The target had been more than eight hundred yards from the matting. He did the math in his head.

"A thousand yards," he breathed.

Fowler and Joseph Ray paced it out together on the way back to Borken. Ray kept his stride long, just about exactly a yard. Fowler counted. Nine hundred and ninety strides, nine hundred and ninety yards. Borken knelt on the matting and used Ray's field glasses. He closed one eye and stared across the distance. He could barely even see the white tree. Reacher watched him try to keep the surprise out of his face. Thought to himself: you wanted a big performance, you got one. You like it, fat boy?

"OK," Borken said. "So let's see how damn smart you're going to act now."

TH E FIVE GUARDS that had been six when Jackson was with them formed up in a line. They moved forward and took up position around Reacher and Holly. The crowd started filing away, quietly. Their feet crunched and slid on the stony ground. Then that sound was gone and the rifle range was quiet.

Fowler stooped and picked up the guns. He hefted one in each hand and walked away through the trees. The five guards unslung their weapons with the loud sound of palms slapping on wood and metal.

"OK," Borken said again. "Punishment detail."

He turned to Holly.

"You too," he said. "You're not too damn valuable for that. You can help him. He's got a task to perform for me."

The guards stepped forward and marched Reacher and Holly behind Borken, slowly down through the trees to the Bastion and on along the beaten earth track to the command hut clearing. They halted there. Two of the guards peeled off and walked to the stores. They were back within five minutes with their weapons shouldered. The first guard was carrying a long-handled shovel in his left hand and a crowbar in his right. The second was carrying two olive fatigue shirts

and a crowbar in his right. The second was carrying two olive fatigue shirts. Borken took them from him and turned to face Reacher and Holly.
“Take your shirts off,” he said. “Put these on.”
Holly stared at him.
“Why?” she said.
Borken smiled.
“All part of the game,” he said. “You’re not back by nightfall, we turn the dogs loose. They need your old shirts for the scent.”
Holly shook her head.
“I’m not undressing,” she said.
Borken looked at her and nodded.
“We’ll turn our backs,” he said. “But you only get one chance. You don’t do it, these boys will do it for you, OK?”
He gave the command and the five guards fanned out in a loose arc, facing the trees. Borken waited for Reacher to turn away and then swiveled on his heels and stared up in the air.
“OK,” he said. “Get on with it.”
The men heard unbuttoning sounds and the rasp of cotton. They heard the old shirt fall to the ground and the new one slipping on. They heard fingernails clicking against buttons.
“Done,” Holly muttered.
Reacher took off his jacket and his shirt and shivered in the mountain breeze. He took the new shirt from Borken and shrugged it on. Slung the jacket over his shoulder. Borken nodded and the guard handed Reacher the shovel and the crowbar. Borken pointed into the forest.
“Walk due west a hundred yards,” he said. “Then north another hundred. You’ll know what to do when you get there.”
Holly looked at Reacher. He looked back and nodded. They strolled together into the trees, heading west.

THIRTY YARDS INTO the woods, as soon as they were out of sight, Holly stopped. She planted her crutch and waited for Reacher to turn and rejoin her.
“Borken,” she said. “I know who he is. I’ve seen his name in our files. They tagged him for a robbery, northern California somewhere. Twenty million dollars in bearer bonds. Armored car driver was killed. Sacramento office investigated, but they couldn’t make it stick.”
Reacher nodded.
“He did it,” he said. “That’s for damn sure. Fowler admitted it. Says they’ve got twenty million in the Caymans. Captured from the enemy.”
Holly grimaced.

Holly grimaced.
“It explains the mole in Chicago,” she said. “Borken can afford a pretty handsome bribe with twenty million bucks in the bank, right?”
Reacher nodded again, slowly.
“Anybody you know would take a bribe?” he asked.
She shrugged.
“They all bitch about the salary,” she said.
He shook his head.
“No,” he said. “Think of somebody who doesn’t bitch about it. Whoever’s got Borken’s bearer bonds behind him isn’t worried about money anymore.”
“Some of them don’t grumble,” she said. “Some of them just put up with it. Like me, for instance. But I guess I’m different.”
He looked at her. Walked on.
“You’re different,” he repeated. “That’s for damn sure.”
He said it vaguely, thinking about it. They walked on for ten yards. He was walking slower than his normal pace and she was limping at his side. He was lost in thought. He was hearing Borken’s high voice claiming: she’s more than his daughter. He was hearing her own exasperated voice asking: why the hell does everybody assume everything that ever happens to me is because of who my damn father is? Then he stopped walking again and looked straight at her.
“Who are you, Holly?” he asked.
“You know who I am,” she said.
He shook his head again.
“No, I don’t,” he said. “At first I thought you were just some woman. Then you were some woman called Holly Johnson. Then you were an FBI agent. Then you were General Johnson’s daughter. Then Borken told me you’re even more than that. She’s more than his daughter, he said. That stunt you pulled, he was shitting himself. You’re some kind of a triple-A gold-plated hostage, Holly. So who the hell else are you?”
She looked at him. Sighed.
“Long story,” she said. “Started twenty-eight years ago. My father was made a White House Fellow. Seconded to Washington. They used to do that, with the fast-track guys. He got friendly with another guy. Political analyst, aiming to be a congressman. My mother was pregnant with me, his wife was pregnant, he asked my parents to be godparents, my father asked them to be godparents. So this other guy stood up at my christening.”
“And?” Reacher said.
“The guy got into a career,” Holly said. “He’s still in Washington. You probably voted for him. He’s the President.”

REACHER WALKED ON in a daze. Kept glancing at Holly, gamely matching him stride for stride. A hundred yards west of the punishment hut, there was an outcrop of rock, bare of trees. Reacher and Holly turned there and walked north, into the breeze.

“Where are we going?” Holly said. Her voice had an edge of worry.

Reacher stopped suddenly. He knew where they were going. The answer was on the breeze. He went cold. His skin crawled. He stared down at the implements in his hands like he’d never seen such things before.

“You stay here,” he said.

She shook her head.

“No,” she said. “I’m coming with you, wherever it is.”

“Please, Holly,” he said. “Stay here, will you?”

She looked surprised by his voice, but she kept on shaking her head.

“I’m coming with you,” she said again.

He gave her a bleak look and they walked on north. He forced himself onward, toward it. Fifty yards. Each step required a conscious effort of will. Sixty yards. He wanted to turn and run. Just run and never stop. Hurl himself across the wild river and get the hell out. Seventy yards. He stopped.

“Stay here, Holly,” he said again. “Please.”

“Why?” she asked.

“You don’t need to see this,” he said, miserably.

She shook her head again and walked on. He caught her up. They smelled it long before they saw it. Faint, sweet, unforgettable. One of the most common and one of the most terrible smells in mankind’s long and awful history. The smell of fresh human blood. Twenty paces after they smelled it, they heard it. The buzzing of a million flies.

Jackson was crucified between two young pines. His hands had been dragged apart and nailed to the trees through the palms and wrists. He had been forced up onto his toes and his feet had been nailed flat against the base of the trunks. He was naked and he had been mutilated. He had taken several minutes to die. Reacher was clear on that.

He stood immobile, staring at the crawling mass of blue shiny flies. Holly had dropped her crutch and her face was white. Ghastly staring white. She fell to her knees and retched. Spun herself away from the dreadful sight and fell forward on her face. Her hands clawed blindly in the forest dirt. She bucked and screamed into the buzzing forest silence. Screamed and cried.

Reacher watched the flies. His eyes were expressionless. His face was impassive. Just a tiny muscle jumping at the corner of his jaw gave anything

away. He stood still for several minutes. Holly went silent, on the forest floor beside him. He dropped the crowbar. Slung his jacket over a low branch. Stepped over directly in front of the body and started digging.
He dug with a quiet fury. He smashed the shovel into the earth as hard as he could. He chopped through tree roots with single savage blows. When he hit rocks, he heaved them out and hurled them into a pile. Holly sat up and watched him. She watched the blazing eyes in his impassive face and the bulging muscles in his arms. She followed the relentless rhythm of the shovel. She said nothing. The work was making him hot. The flies were checking him out. They left Jackson's body and buzzed around his head. He ignored them. Just strained and gasped his way six feet down into the earth. Then he propped the shovel against a tree. Wiped his face on his sleeve. Didn't speak. Took the crowbar and stepped close to the corpse. Batted away the flies. Levered the nails out of the left hand. Jackson's body flopped sideways. The left arm pointed grotesquely down into the pit. The flies rose in an angry cloud. Reacher walked around to the right hand. Pried the nails out. The body flopped forward into the hole. Reacher extracted the nails from the feet. The body tumbled free into the grave. The air was dark with flies and loud with their sound. Reacher slid down into the hole and straightened the corpse out. Crossed the arms over the chest.
He climbed back out. Without pausing he picked up the shovel and started filling the hole. He worked relentlessly. The flies disappeared. He worked on. There was too much dirt. It mounded up high when he had finished, like graves always do. He pounded the mound into a neat shape and dropped the shovel. Bent and picked up the rocks he'd cleared. Used them to shore up the sides of the mound. Placed the biggest one on top, like some kind of a headstone.
Then he stood there, panting like a wild man, streaked with dirt and sweat. Holly watched him. Then she spoke for the first time in an hour.
"Should we say a prayer?" she asked.
Reacher shook his head.
"Way too late for that," he said quietly.
"You OK?" she asked.
"Who's the mole?" he asked in turn.
"I don't know," she said.
"Well, think about it, will you?" he said, angrily.
She glared up at him.
"Don't you think I have been?" she said. "What the hell else do you think I was doing for the last hour?"
"So who the hell is it?" he asked. Still angry.
She paused. Went quiet again.

“Could be anybody,” she said. “There are a hundred agents in Chicago.”
She was sitting on the forest floor, small, miserable, defeated. She had trusted her people. She had told him that. She had been full of naive confidence. I trust my people, she had said. He felt a wave of tenderness for her. It crashed over him. Not pity, not concern, just an agonizing tenderness for a good person whose bright new world was suddenly dirty and falling apart. He stared at her, hoping she would see it. She stared back, eyes full of tears. He held out his hands. She took them. He lifted her to her feet and held her. He lifted her off the ground and crushed her close. Her breasts were against his pounding chest. Her tears were against his neck.
Then her hands were behind his head, pulling him close. She squirmed her face up and kissed him. She kissed him angrily and hungrily on the mouth. Her arms were locking around his neck. He felt her wild breathing. He knelt and laid her gently on the soft earth. Her hands burrowed at his shirt buttons. His at hers. They made love naked on the forest floor, urgently, passionately, greedily, as if they were defying death itself. Then they lay panting and spent in each other’s arms, gazing up at the sunlight spearing down through the leaves.

HE STROKED HER hair and felt her breathing slow down. He held her silently for a long time, watching the dust motes dancing in the sunbeams over her head.
“Who knew your movements on Monday?” he asked softly.
She thought about it. Made no reply.
“And which of them didn’t know about Jackson then?” he asked.
No reply.
“And which of them isn’t short of money?” he asked.
No reply.
“And which of them is recent?” he asked. “Which of them could have come close enough to Beau Borken somewhere to get bought off? Sometime in the past? Maybe investigating the robbery thing in California?”
She shuddered in his arms.
“Four questions, Holly,” he said. “Who fits?”
She ran through all the possibilities. Like a process of elimination. An algorithm. She boiled the hundred names down. The first question eliminated most of them. The second question eliminated a few more. The third question eliminated a handful. It was the fourth question which proved decisive. She shuddered again.
“Only two possibilities,” she said.

33

MILOSEVIC AND BROGAN were strapped side by side in the rear of the Air Force chopper. McGrath and Johnson and the General's aide were crushed into the middle row of seats. The aircrew were shoulder to shoulder in the front. They lifted off from Silver Bow and clattered away northwest over the town of Butte, nose down, low altitude, looking for maximum airspeed. The helicopter was an old Bell, rebuilt with a new engine, and it was pushing a hundred and twenty miles an hour, which made for a lot of noise inside. Consequently McGrath and Johnson were screaming into their radio mikes to make themselves understood. McGrath was patched through to the Hoover Building. He was trying to talk to Harland Webster. He had one hand cupped over the mike and the other was clamping the earphone to his head. He was talking about the missile unit. He didn't know if Webster was hearing him. He just repeated his message over and over, as loud as he could. Then he flicked the switch and tore off the headset. Tossed it forward to the copilot.
Johnson was talking to Peterson. Radio contact had not been restored. He limited himself to requesting an update by secure landline direct to the mobile command post in two hours' time. He failed to decipher the reply. He pulled off his headset and looked a question at McGrath. McGrath shrugged back at him. The helicopter clattered onward.

HARLAND WEBSTER HEARD the shrieking din cut off. He hung up his phone in the sudden silence of his office. Leaned forward and buzzed his secretary.
"Car," he said.
He walked through to the elevator and rode down to the garage. Walked over to his limousine. His driver was holding the door for him.
"White House," he said.
This time, the driver said nothing. Just fired it up and eased out of the garage. Bumped up and out into the afternoon rush. Crawled the sixteen hundred yards west in silence. Webster was directed to the same off-white room. He waited there a quarter hour. Dexter came in. Clearly not pleased to see him back so soon.
"They've stolen some missiles," Webster said.
"What missiles?" Dexter asked.
He described everything as well as he could. Dexter listened. Didn't nod. Didn't ask any questions. Didn't react. Just told him to wait in the room.

ask any questions. Didn't react. Just told him to wait in the room.

THE AIR FORCE Bell put down on a gravel turnout two hundred yards south of where the road into Yorke narrowed and straightened into the hills. The pilot kept the engine turning and the five passengers ducked out and ran bent over until they were out of the fierce downdraft. There were vehicles on the road ahead. A random pattern of military vehicles slewed across the blacktop. One of them was turning slowly in the road. It turned in the narrow space between the rocky walls and straightened as it approached. It slowed and halted fifty yards away. General Johnson stepped out into view. The car moved forward and stopped in front of him. It was a new Chevrolet, sprayed a dull olive green. There were white stenciled letters and figures on the hood and along the sides. An officer slid out. He saluted the General and skipped around to open all the doors. The five men squeezed in and the car turned again and rolled the two hundred yards north to the mess of vehicles.
"The command post is on its way, sir," the officer said. "Should be here inside forty minutes. The satellite trucks are an hour behind it. I suggest you wait in the car. It's getting cold outside."
"Word from the missile unit?" Johnson asked.
The officer shook his head in the gloom.
"No word, sir," he said.

WEBSTER WAITED MOST of an hour. Then the door of the small off-white room cracked open. A Secret Service agent stood there. Blue suit, curly wire running up out of his collar to his earpiece.
"Please come with me, sir," the agent said.
Webster stood up and the guy raised his hand and spoke into his cuff. Webster followed him along a quiet corridor and into an elevator. The elevator was small and slow. It took them down to the first floor. They walked along another quiet corridor and paused in front of a white door. The agent knocked once and opened it.
The President was sitting in his chair behind his desk. The chair was rotated away and he had his back to the room. He was staring out through the bulletproof windows at the darkness settling over the garden. Dexter was in an armchair. Neither asked him to sit down. The President didn't turn around. As soon as he heard the door click shut, he started speaking.
"Suppose I was a judge," he said. "And suppose you were some cop and you came to me for a warrant?"
Webster could see the President's face reflected in the thick glass. It was just a pink smudge.

“OK, sir, suppose I was?” he said.
“What have you got?” the President asked him. “And what haven’t you got? You don’t even know for sure Holly’s there at all. You’ve got an undercover asset in place and he hasn’t confirmed it to you. You’re guessing, is all. And these missiles? The Army has lost radio contact. Could be temporary. Could be any number of reasons for that. Your undercover guy hasn’t mentioned them.”
“He could be experiencing difficulties, sir,” Webster said. “And he’s been told to be cautious. He doesn’t call in with a running commentary. He’s undercover, right? He can’t just disappear into the forest any old time he wants to.”
The President nodded. The pink smudge in the glass moved up and down. There was a measure of sympathy there.
“We understand that, Harland,” he said. “We really do. But we have to assume that with matters of this magnitude, he’s going to make a big effort, right? But you’ve heard nothing. So you’re giving us nothing but speculation.”
Webster spread his hands. Spoke directly to the back of the guy’s head.
“Sir, this is a big deal,” he said. “They’re arming themselves, they’ve taken a hostage, they’re talking about secession from the Union.”
The President nodded.
“Don’t you understand, that’s the problem?” he said. “If this were about three weirdos in a hut in the woods with a bomb, we’d send you in there right away. But it isn’t. This could lead to the biggest constitutional crisis since 1860.”
“So you agree with me,” Webster said. “You’re taking them seriously.”
The President shook his head. Sadly, like he was upset but not surprised Webster didn’t get the point.
“No,” he said. “We’re not taking them seriously. That’s what makes this whole thing so damn difficult. They’re a bunch of deluded idiots, seeing plots everywhere, conspiracies, muttering about independence for their scrubby little patch of worthless real estate. But the question is: how should a mature democratic nation react to that? Should it massacre them all, Harland? Is that how a mature nation reacts? Should it unleash deadly force against a few deluded idiot citizens? We spent a generation condemning the Soviets for doing that. Are we going to do the same thing?”
“They’re criminals, sir,” Webster said.
“Yes, they are,” the President agreed, patiently. “They’re counterfeiters, they own illegal weapons, they don’t pay federal taxes, they foment racial hatred, maybe they even robbed an armored car. But those are details, Harland. The broad picture is they’re disgruntled citizens. And how do we respond to that? We encourage disgruntled citizens in Eastern Europe to stand up and declare their nationhood, right? So how do we deal with our own disgruntled citizens,

Harland? Declare war on them?"
Webster clamped his jaw. He felt adrift. Like the thick carpets and the quiet paint and the unfamiliar scented air inside the Oval Office were choking him.
"They're criminals," he said again. It was all he could think of to say.
The President nodded. Still a measure of sympathy.
"Yes, they are," he agreed again. "But look at the broad picture, Harland. Look at their main offense. Their main offense is they hate their government. If we deal with them harshly for that, we could face a crisis. Like we said, there are maybe sixty million Americans ready to be tipped over the edge. This Administration is very aware of that, Harland. This Administration is going to tread very carefully."
"But what about Holly?" he asked. "You can't just sacrifice her."
There was a long silence. The President kept his chair turned away.
"I can't react because of her, either," he said quietly. "I can't allow myself to make this personal. Don't you see that? A personal, emotional, angry response would be wrong. It would be a bad mistake. I have to wait and think. I've talked it over with the General. We've talked for hours. Frankly, Harland, he's pissed at me, and again frankly, I don't blame him. He's just about my oldest friend, and he's pissed at me. So don't talk to me about sacrifice, Harland. Because sacrifice is what this office is all about. You put the greater good in front of friendship, in front of all your own interests. You do it all the time. It's what being President means."
There was another long silence.
"So what are you saying to me, Mr. President?" Webster asked.
Another long silence.
"I'm not saying anything to you," the President said. "I'm saying you're in personal command of the situation. I'm saying come see Mr. Dexter Monday morning, if there's still a problem."

NOBODY WAITED IN the car. Too restless for that. They got out into the chill mountain air and milled aimlessly around. Johnson and his aide strolled north with the driver and looked at the proposed location for the command post. McGrath and Brogan and Milosevic kept themselves apart as a threesome. McGrath smoked, lost in thought. Time to time, he would duck back into the Army Chevrolet and use the car phone. He called the Montana State Police, the power company, the phone company, the Forest Service.
Brogan and Milosevic strolled north. They found an armored vehicle. Not a tank, some kind of a personnel carrier. There was the officer who had met them with the car and maybe eight soldiers standing near it. Big, silent men, pitching tents

on the shoulder in the lee of the rocks. Brogan and Milosevic nodded a greeting to them and strolled back south. They rejoined McGrath and waited.
Within forty minutes they all heard the faint roar of heavy diesels far to the south. The noise built and then burst around the curve. There was a small convoy of trucks. Big, boxy vehicles, mounted high on exaggerated drivetrains, big wheels, huge tires, axles grinding around. They roared nearer, moving slow in low gear. The officer from the car ran to meet them. Pointed them up to where he wanted them. They roared slowly past and stopped two abreast in the road where it straightened into the rock cutting.
There were four vehicles. Black and green camouflage, rolls of netting on the flanks, stenciled numbers and big single stars in white. The front two trucks bristled with antennas and small dishes. The rear two were accommodations. Each vehicle had hydraulic jacks at each corner. The drivers lowered the jacks and the weight came up off the tires. The jacks pushed against the camber of the road and leveled the floors. Then the engines cut off and the loud diesel roaring died into the mountain silence.
The four drivers vaulted down. They ran to the rear of their trucks and opened the doors. Reached in and folded down short aluminum ladders. Went up inside and flicked switches. The four interiors lit up with green light. The drivers came back out. Regrouped and saluted the officer.
“All yours, sir,” the point man said.
The officer nodded. Pointed to the Chevy.
“Drive back in that,” he said. “And forget you were ever here.”
The point man saluted again.
“Understood, sir,” he said.
The four drivers walked to the Chevy. Their boots were loud in the silence. They got in the car and fired it up. Turned in the road and disappeared south.

BACK IN HIS office, Webster found the Borken profile on his desk and a visitor waiting for him. Green uniform under a khaki trench coat, maybe sixty, sixty-two, iron-gray stubble on part of his head, battered brown leather briefcase under his arm, battered canvas suit carrier on the floor at his feet.
“I understand you need to talk to me,” the guy said.
“I’m General Garber. I was Jack Reacher’s CO for a number of years.”
Webster nodded.
“I’m going to Montana,” he said. “You can talk to me there.”
“We anticipated that,” Garber said. “If the Bureau can fly us out to Kalispell, the Air Force will take us on the rest of the way by helicopter.”
Webster nodded again. Buzzed through to his secretary. She was off duty.

“Shit,” Webster said.
“My driver is waiting,” Garber said. “He’ll take us out to Andrews.”
Webster called ahead from the car and the Bureau Lear was waiting ready. Twenty minutes after leaving the White House, Webster was in the air heading west over the center of the city. He wondered if the President could hear the scream of his engines through his thick bulletproof glass.

THE AIR FORCE technicians arrived with the satellite trucks an hour after the command post had been installed. There were two vehicles in their convoy. The first was similar to the command post itself, big, high, boxy, hydraulic jacks at each corner, a short aluminum ladder for access. The second was a long flatbed truck with a big satellite dish mounted high on an articulated mechanism. As soon as it was parked and level, the mechanism kicked in and swung the dish up to find the planes, seven miles up in the darkening sky. It locked on and the delicate electronics settled down to tracking the moving signals. There was a continuous motor sound as the dish moved through a subtle arc, too slowly for the eye to detect. The techs hauled out a cable the thickness of a sapling’s trunk from the flatbed and locked it into a port on the side of the closed truck. Then they swarmed up inside and fired up the monitors and the recorders.
McGrath hitched a ride with the soldiers in the armored carrier. They rumbled a mile south and met a waiting Montana State Police cruiser on the road. The state guy conferred with McGrath and opened his trunk. Pulled out a box of red danger flares and an array of temporary road signs. The soldiers jogged south and put a pair of flares either side of a sign reading: Danger, Road Out. They came back north and set up a trio of flares in the center of the blacktop with a sign reading: Bridge Out Ahead. Fifty yards farther north, they blocked the whole width of the road with more flares. They strung Road Closed signs across behind them. When the state guy had slalomed his way back south and disappeared, the soldiers took axes from their vehicle and started felling trees. The armored carrier nudged them over and pushed them across the road, engine roaring, tires squealing. It lined them up in a rough zigzag. A vehicle could get through, but only if it slowed to a dead crawl and threaded its way past. Two soldiers were posted as sentries on the shoulders. The other six rode back north with McGrath.
Johnson was in the command vehicle. He was in radio contact with Peterson. The news was bad. The missile unit had been out of radio contact for more than eight hours. Johnson had a rule of thumb. He had learned it by bitter experience in the jungles of Vietnam. The rule of thumb said: when you’ve lost radio contact with a unit for more than eight hours, you mark that unit down as a total

loss.

WEBSTER AND GARBER did not talk during the plane ride. That was Webster's choice. He was experienced enough as a bureaucrat to know that whatever he heard from Garber, he'd only have to hear all over again when the full team was finally assembled. So he sat quietly in the noisy jet whine and read the Borken profile from Quantico. Garber was looking questions at him, but he ignored them. Explain it to Garber now, and he'd only have to do it all over again for McGrath and Johnson.

The evening air at Kalispell was cold and gray for the short noisy walk across the apron to the Air Force Bell. Garber identified himself to the copilot who dropped a short ladder to the tarmac. Garber and Webster scrambled up inside and sat where they were told. The copilot signaled with both hands that they should fasten their harnesses and that the ride would take about twenty-five minutes. Webster nodded and listened to the beat of the rotor as it lifted them all into the air.

GENERAL JOHNSON HAD just finished another long call to the White House when he heard the Bell clattering in. He stood framed in the command post doorway and watched it put down on the same gravel turnout, two hundred yards south. He saw two figures spill out and crouch away. He saw the chopper lift and yaw and turn south.

He walked down and met them halfway. Nodded to Garber and pulled Webster to one side.

"Anything?" he asked.

Webster shook his head.

"No change," he said. "White House is playing safe. You?"

"Nothing," Johnson said.

Webster nodded. Nothing more to say.

"What we got here?" he asked.

"Far as the White House knows, nothing," Johnson said. "We've got two camera planes in the air. Officially, they're on exercises. We've got eight Marines and an armored car. They're on exercises, too. Their COs know where they are, but they don't know exactly why, and they're not asking."

"You sealed the road?" Webster asked.

Johnson nodded.

"We're all on our own up here," he said.

34

REACHER AND HOLLY sat alone in the forest, backs to two adjacent pines, staring at the mound above Jackson's grave. They sat like that until the afternoon light faded and died. They didn't speak. The forest grew cold. The time for the decision arrived.
"We're going back," Holly said.
It was a statement, not a question. A lot of resignation in her voice. He made no reply. He was breathing low, staring into space, lost in thought. Reliving in his mind her taste and smell. Her hair and her eyes. Her lips. The feel of her, strong and lithe and urgent underneath him.
"Nightfall," she said.
"Not just yet," he said.
"We have to," she said. "They'll send the dogs after us."
He didn't speak again. Just sat there, eyes locked into the distance.
"There's nowhere else to go," she said.
He nodded slowly and stood up. Stretched and caught his breath as his tired muscles cramped. Helped Holly up and took his jacket down off the tree and shrugged it on. Left the crowbar lying in the dirt next to the shovel.
"We leave tonight," he said. "Shit's going to hit the fan tomorrow. Independence Day."
"Sure, but how?" she asked.
"I don't know yet," he said.
"Don't take risks on my account," she said.
"You'd be worth it," he said.
"Because of who I am?" she asked.
He nodded.
"Because of who you are," he said. "Not because of who your father is. Or your damn godfather. And no, I didn't vote for him."
She stretched up and kissed him on the mouth.
"Take care, Reacher," she said.
"Just be ready," he said. "Maybe midnight."
She nodded. They walked the hundred yards south to the rocky outcrop. Turned and walked the hundred yards east to the clearing. Came out of the woods straight into a semicircle of five guards waiting for them. Four rifles. Center man was Joseph Ray. He was in charge of the detail, with a Glock 17 in his hand.
"She goes back to her room," Ray said. "You go in the punishment hut."
The guards formed up. Two of them stepped either side of Holly. Her eyes were

The guards formed up. Two of them stepped either side of Holly. Her eyes were blazing and they didn't try to take her elbows. Just walked slowly beside her. She turned and glanced back at Reacher.
"See you later, Holly," Reacher called.
"Don't you bet on that, Ms. Johnson," Joseph Ray said, and laughed.
He escorted Reacher to the door of the punishment hut. Took out a key and unlocked the door. Swung it open. Pushed Reacher through, gun out and ready. Then he pulled the door closed again and relocked it.
The punishment hut was the same size and shape as Borken's command hut. But it was completely empty. Bare walls, no windows, lights meshed with heavy wire. On the floor near one end was a perfect square of yellow paint, maybe twelve inches by twelve. Apart from that, the hut was featureless.
"You stand on that square," Ray said.
Reacher nodded. He was familiar with that procedure. Being forced to stand at attention, hour after hour, never moving, was an effective punishment. He had heard about it, time to time. Once, he'd seen the results. After the first few hours, the pain starts. The back goes, then the agony spreads upward from the shins. By the second or third day, the ankles swell and burst and the thighbones strike upward and the neck collapses.
"So stand on it," Ray said.
Reacher stepped to the corner of the hut and bent to the floor. Made a big show of brushing the dust away with his hand. Turned and lowered himself gently so he was sitting comfortably in the angle of the walls. Stretched his legs out and folded his hands behind his head. Crossed his ankles and smiled.
"You got to stand on the square," Ray said.
Reacher looked at him. He had said: believe me, I know tanks. So he had been a soldier. A grunt, in a motorized unit. Probably a loader, maybe a driver.
"Stand up," Ray said.
Give a grunt a task, and what's the thing he's most afraid of? Getting chewed out by an officer for failing to do it, that's what.
"Stand up, damn it," Ray said.
So either he doesn't fail, or if he does, he conceals it. No grunt in the history of the world has ever just gone to his officer and said: I couldn't do it, sir.
"I'm telling you to stand up, Reacher," Ray said quietly.
If he fails, he keeps it a big secret. Much better that way.
"You want me to stand up?" Reacher asked.
"Yeah, stand up," Ray said.
Reacher shook his head.
"You're going to have to make me, Joe," he said.
Ray was thinking about it. It was a reasonably slow thought process. Its progress

was visible in his body language. First, the Glock came up. Then it went back down. Shooting at the prisoner was its own admission of failure. It was the same thing as saying: I couldn't make him do it, sir. Then he glanced at his hands. Glanced across at Reacher. Glanced away. Unarmed combat was rejected. He stood there, in a fog of indecision.
"Where did you serve?" Reacher asked him.
Ray shrugged.
"Here and there," he said.
"Like where and where?" Reacher asked.
"I was in Germany twice," Ray said. "And I was in Desert Storm."
"Driver?" Reacher asked.
"Loader," Ray answered.
Reacher nodded.
"You boys did a good job," he said. "I was in Desert Storm. I saw what you boys did."
Ray nodded. He took the opening, like Reacher knew he would. If you can't let them beat you, you let them join you. Ray moved casually to his left and sat down on the floor, back against the door, Glock resting against his thigh. He nodded again.
"We whupped them," he said.
"You sure did," Reacher said. "You whupped them real good. So, Germany and the desert. You liked it there?"
"Not much," Ray said.
"You liked their systems?" Reacher asked.
"What systems?" Ray asked back.
"Their governments," Reacher said. "Their laws, their liberties, all that stuff."
Ray looked mystified.
"Never noticed," he said. "Never paid any attention."
"So how do you know they're better than ours?" Reacher asked.
"Who says they're better?" Ray said.
"You do," Reacher said. "Last night you were telling me how bad it is here in America. Got to be better everywhere else, right?"
Ray shook his head.
"I never told you that," he said.
"So is it or isn't it?" Reacher asked.
"I don't know," Ray said. "Probably. Lot of things wrong with America."
Reacher nodded.
"Lot of things," he said. "I agree with you. But I'll tell you something. It's better in America than everyplace else. I know, because I've been everyplace else.

Everyplace else is worse. A lot worse. Lot of things wrong in America, but plenty more things wrong everyplace else. You guys should think about that."
Ray looked across through the gloom.
"You think we're wrong?" he asked.
Reacher nodded.
"I know you're wrong," he said. "For certain. All that stuff you were telling me is bullshit. All of it. It's not happening."
"It is happening," Ray said. "Beau says so."
"Think about it, Joe," Reacher said. "You were in the service. You saw how it all operated. You think those guys could organize all that stuff and keep it a secret? They ever even give you a pair of boots the right size?"
Ray laughed.
"Not hardly," he said.
"Right," Reacher said. "So if they can't organize your damn boots, how can they organize all this other stuff Beau is talking about? What about these transmitters hidden in all the new cars? You think Detroit can do all that stuff? They'd be recalling them all because they didn't work right. You a gambling man, Joe?"
"Why?" he asked.
"What are the odds?" Reacher said. "Against they could organize a huge massive conspiracy like that and keep it all a secret for years and years?"
A slow smile spread across Ray's face and Reacher saw that he was losing. Like talking to the wall. Like teaching a chimpanzee to read.
"But they haven't kept it a secret," Ray said triumphantly. "We found out about it. I told you, Beau's got the proof. He's got the documents. It's not a secret at all. That's why we're here. Beau's right, no doubt about it. He's a smart guy."
Reacher closed his eyes and sighed.
"You better hope so," he said. "He's going to need to be."
"He's a smart guy," Ray said again. "And he's got staying power. He's putting us all together. There were a dozen groups up here. Their leaders quit and left. All their people came and joined Beau, because they trust him. He's a smart guy, Reacher, and he's our only hope left. You won't change anybody's mind about him. You can forget about that. Far as we're concerned, we love him, and we trust him to do right."
"What about Jackson?" Reacher asked. "You think he did right about that?"
Ray shrugged.
"Jackson was a spy," he said. "Shit like that happens. Beau's studied the history. It happened in 1776, right? Redcoats had spies all over. We hanged them then, just the same. Plenty of old ladies back east got old oak trees in their front yards, famous for being where they strung up the redcoat spies. Some of them charge

you a buck and a half just to take a look at them. I know, I went there once."
"What time is lights-out here?" Reacher asked.
"Ten o'clock," Ray said. "Why?"
Reacher paused. Stared at him. Thought back over their conversation. Gazed at his lean, mobile face. Looked into his crazy eyes, burning deep under his brow.
"I got to be someplace else after lights-out," Reacher said.
Ray laughed again.
"And you think I'm going to let you?" he said.
Reacher nodded.
"If you want to live," he said.
Ray lifted the pistol off his thigh and pointed it one-handed at Reacher's head.
"I'm the one got the gun here," he said.
"You wouldn't live to pull the trigger," Reacher said.
"Trigger's right here," Ray said. "You're all the way over there."
Reacher waved him a listen-up gesture. Leaned forward and spoke quietly.
"I'm not really supposed to tell you this," he said. "But we were warned we'd meet a few guys smarter than the average, and we're authorized to explain a couple of things to them, if the operational circumstances make it advisable."
"What circumstances?" Ray asked. "What things?"
"You were right," Reacher said. "Most of the things you've said are correct. A couple of inaccuracies, but we spread a little disinformation here and there."
"What are you talking about?" Ray asked.
Reacher lowered his voice to a whisper.
"I'm World Army," he said. "Commander of the advance party. I've got five thousand UN troops in the forest. Russians, mostly, a few Chinese. We've been watching you on the satellite surveillance. Right now, we've got an X-ray camera on this hut. There's a laser beam pointed at your head. Part of the SDI technology."
"You're kidding," Ray said.
Reacher shook his head. Deadly serious.
"You were right about the microchips," he said. "Look at this."
He stood up slowly and pulled his shirt up to his chest. Turned slightly so Ray could see the huge scar on his stomach.
"Bigger than the modern ones," he said. "The latest ones go in with no mess at all. The ones we put in the babies? But these old ones work just the same. The satellites know where I am at all times, like you said. You start to pull that trigger, the laser blows your head off."
Ray's eyes were burning. He looked away from Reacher's scar and glanced nervously up at the roof.

“Suis pas américain,” Reacher said. *“Suis soldat français, agent du gouvernement mondial depuis plusieurs années, parti en mission clandestine il y a deux mois. Il faut évaluer l’élément de risque que votre bande représente par ici.”*
He spoke as fast as he could and ended up sounding exactly like an educated Parisian woman. Exactly like he recalled his dead mother sounding. Ray nodded slowly.
“You foreign?” he asked.
“French,” Reacher said. “We operate international brigades. I said I’m here to check out the degree of risk you people represent to us.”
“I saw you shooting,” Reacher said. “I spotted it. A thousand yards.”
“Guided by satellite,” Reacher said. “I told you, SDI technology, through the microchip. We can all shoot two miles, perfect score every time.”
“Christ,” Ray said.
“I need to be out in the open at ten o’clock,” Reacher said. “It’s a safety procedure. You got a wife here?”
Ray nodded.
“What about kids?” Reacher asked. “Any of these kids yours?”
Ray nodded again.
“Sure,” he said. “Two boys.”
“If I’m not out by ten, they all die,” Reacher said. “If I get taken prisoner, the whole place gets incinerated. Can’t afford for my microchip to get captured. I told them you guys wouldn’t understand how it works, but my chief said some of you could be smarter than I thought. Looks like my chief was right.”
Ray nodded proudly and Reacher checked his watch.
“It’s seven-thirty, right?” he said. “I’m going to sleep two and a half hours. The satellite will wake me at ten exactly. You wait and see.”
He lay back down on the floor and curled his arm under his head. Set the alarm in his head for two minutes to ten. Said to himself: don’t let it fail me tonight.

35

“I REFUSE TO believe it,” General Garber said.
“He’s involved,” Webster said in reply. “That’s for damn sure. We got the pictures, clear as day.”
Garber shook his head.
“I was promoted lieutenant forty years ago,” he said. “Now I’m a three-star general. I’ve commanded thousands of men. Tens of thousands. Got to know most of them well. And out of all of them, Jack Reacher is the single least likely man to be involved in a thing like this.”
Garber was sitting ramrod-straight at the table in the mobile command post. He had shed his khaki raincoat to reveal an old creased uniform jacket. It was a jacket which bore the accumulated prizes of a lifetime of service. It was studded with badges and ribbons. It was the jacket of a man who had served forty years without ever making a single mistake.
Johnson was watching him carefully. Garber’s grizzled old head was still. His eyes were calm. His hands were laid comfortably on the table. His voice was firm, but quiet. Definite, like he was being asked to defend the proposition that the sky was blue and the grass was green.
“Show the General the pictures, Mack,” Webster said.
McGrath nodded and opened his envelope. Slid the four stills over the table to Garber. Garber held each one up in turn, tilted to catch the green light from the overhead. Johnson was watching his eyes. He was waiting for the flicker of doubt, then the flicker of resignation. He saw neither.
“These are open to interpretation,” Garber said.
His voice was still calm. Johnson heard an officer loyally defending a favored subordinate. Webster and McGrath heard a policeman of sorts expressing a doubt. They figured forty years’ service had bought the guy the right to be heard.
“Interpretation how?” Webster asked.
“Four isolated moments out of a sequence,” Garber said. “They could be telling us the wrong story.”
Webster leaned over and pointed at the first still.
“He’s grabbing her stuff,” he said. “Plain as day, General.”
Garber shook his head. There was silence. Just electronic hum throughout the vehicle. Johnson saw a flicker of doubt. But it was in McGrath’s eyes, not Garber’s. Then Brogan rattled his way up the ladder. Ducked his head into the truck.
“Surveillance tapes, chief,” he said. “We’ve been reviewing the stuff the planes

"Surveillance tapes, chief," he said. "We've been reviewing the stuff the planes got earlier. You should come see it."
He ducked out again and the four men glanced at each other and got up. Walked the short distance through the cold evening to the satellite truck and up the ladder. Milosevic was in shirtsleeves, bathed in the blue light from a bank of video screens. He shuttled a tape back and pressed play. Four screens lit up with a perfect clear overhead view of a tiny town. The quality of the picture was magnificent. Like a perfect movie picture, except filmed vertically downward, not horizontal.
"Yorke," Milosevic said. "The old courthouse, bottom right. Now watch."
He hit fast wind and watched the counter. Slowed the tape and hit play again.
"This is a mile and a quarter away," he said. "The camera tracked northwest. There's a parade ground, and this rifle range."
The camera had zoomed out for a wide view of the area. There were two clearings with huts to the south, and a flat parade ground to the north. In between was a long narrow scar in the undergrowth, maybe a half-mile long and twenty yards wide. The camera zoomed right out for a moment, to establish the scale, then it tightened in on a crowd at the eastern end of the range. Then it tightened further to a small knot of people standing on some brown matting. There were four men clearly visible. And one woman. General Johnson gasped and stared at his daughter.
"When was this?" he asked.
"Few hours ago," Milosevic said. "She's alive and well."
He froze the picture and tapped his fingernail four times on the glass.
"Reacher," he said. "Stevie Stewart. We figure this one is Odell Fowle. And the fat guy is Beau Borken. Matches his file photo from California."
Then he hit play again. The camera held steady on the matting, from seven miles up in the sky. Borken pressed his bulk to the floor and lay motionless. Then a silent puff of dust was seen under the muzzle of his rifle.
"They're shooting a little over eight hundred yards," Milosevic said. "Some kind of a competition, I guess."
They watched Borken's five final shots, and then Reacher picked up his rifle.
"That's a Barrett," Garber said.
Reacher lay motionless and then fired six silent shots, well spaced. The crowd milled around, and eventually Reacher was lost to sight in the trees to the south.
"OK," Webster said. "How do you want to interpret that, General Garber?"
Garber shrugged. A dogged expression on his face.
"He's one of them, no doubt about it," Webster said. "Did you see his clothes? He was in uniform. Showing off on the range? Would they give him a uniform and a rifle to play with if he wasn't one of their own?"

Johnson spooled the tape back and froze it. Looked at Holly for a long moment. Then he walked out of the trailer. Called over his shoulder to Webster.
“Director, we need to go to work,” he said. “I want to make a contingency plan well ahead of time. No reason for us not to be ready for this.”
Webster followed him out. Brogan and Milosevic stayed at the video console. McGrath was watching Garber. Garber was staring at the blank screen.
“I still don’t believe it,” he said.
He turned and saw McGrath looking at him. Nodded him out of the trailer. The two men walked together into the silence of the night.
“I can’t prove it to you,” Garber said. “But Reacher is on our side. I’ll absolutely guarantee that, personally.”
“Doesn’t look that way,” McGrath said. “He’s the classic type. Fits our standard profile perfectly. Unemployed ex-military, malcontent, dislocated childhood, probably full of all kinds of grievances.”
Garber shook his head.
“He’s none of those things,” he said. “Except unemployed ex-military. He was a fine officer. Best I ever had. You’re making a big mistake.”
McGrath saw the look on Garber’s face.
“So you’d trust him?” he asked. “Personally?”
Garber nodded grimly.
“With my life,” he said. “I don’t know why he’s there, but I promise you he’s clean, and he’s going to do what needs doing, or he’s going to die trying.”

EXACTLY SIX MILES north, Holly was trusting to the same instinct. They had taken her disassembled bed away, and she was lying on the thin mattress on the floorboards. They had taken the soap and the shampoo and the towel from the bathroom as a punishment. They had left the small pool of blood from the dead woman’s head untouched. It was there on the floor, a yard from her makeshift bed. She guessed they thought it would upset her. They were wrong. It made her happy. She was happy to watch it dry and blacken. She was thinking about Jackson and staring at the stain like it was a Rorschach blot telling her: you’re coming out of the shadow now, Holly.

WEBSTER AND JOHNSON came up with a fairly simple contingency plan. It depended on geography. The exact same geography they assumed had tempted Borken to choose Yorke as the location for his bastion. Like all plans based on geography, it was put together using a map. Like all plans put together using a map, it was only as good as the map was accurate. And like most maps, theirs was way out of date.

They were using a large-scale map of Montana. Most of its information was reliable. The main features were correct. The western obstacle was plain to see.
“We assume the river is impassable, right?” Webster said.
“Right,” Johnson agreed. “The spring melts are going to be in full flow. Nothing we can do there before Monday. When we get some equipment.”
The roads were shown in red like a man had placed his right hand palm-down on the paper. The small towns of Kalispell and Whitefish nestled under the palm. Roads fanned out like the four fingers and the thumb. The index finger ran up through a place called Eureka to the Canadian border. The thumb ran out northwest through Yorke and stopped at the old mines. That thumb was now amputated at the first knuckle.
“They assume you’ll come up the road,” Johnson said. “So you won’t. You’ll loop east to Eureka and come in through the forest.”
He ran his pencil down the thumb and across the back of the hand. Back up the index finger and stopped it at Eureka. Fifty miles of forest lay between Eureka and Yorke. The forest was represented on the map by a large green stain. Deep and wide. They knew what that green stain meant. They could see what it meant by looking around them. The area was covered in virgin forest. It ran rampant up and down the mountainsides. Most places, the vegetation was so dense a man could barely squeeze between the tree trunks. But the green stain to the east of Yorke was a national forest. Owned and operated by the Forest Service. The green stain showed a web of threads running through it. Those threads were Forest Service tracks.
“I can get my people here in four hours,” Webster said. “The Hostage Rescue Team. On my own initiative, if it comes to it.”
Johnson nodded.
“They can walk right through the woods,” he said. “Probably drive right through.”
Webster nodded.
“We called the Forest guys,” he said. “They’re bringing us a detailed plan.”
“Perfect,” Johnson said. “If things turn bad, you call your team in, send them direct to Eureka, we’ll all make a little noise on the southern flank, and they muscle in straight through from the east.”
Webster nodded again. The contingency plan was made. Until the National Forests guy came up the short aluminum ladder into the command post. McGrath brought him inside with Milosevic and Brogan. Webster made the introductions and Johnson asked the questions. Straightaway the Forest guy started shaking his head.
“Those tracks don’t exist,” he said. “At least, most of them don’t.”

Johnson pointed to the map.
“They’re right here,” he said.
The Forest guy shrugged. He had a thick book of topographical plans under his arm. He opened it up to the correct page. Laid it over the map. The scale was much larger, but it was obvious the web of threads was a different shape.
“Mapmakers know there are tracks,” the guy said. “So they just show them any old place.”
“OK,” Johnson said. “We’ll use your maps.”
The Forest guy shook his head.
“These are wrong, too,” he said. “They might have been right at some stage, but they’re wrong now. We spent years closing off most of these tracks. Had to stop the bear hunters getting in. Environmentalists made us do it. We bulldozed tons of dirt into the openings of most of the through tracks. Ripped up a lot of the others. They’ll be totally overgrown by now.”
“OK, so which tracks are closed?” Webster asked. He had turned the plan and was studying it.
“We don’t know,” the guy said. “We didn’t keep very accurate records. Just sent the bulldozers out. We caught a lot of guys closing the wrong tracks, because they were nearer, or not closing them at all, because that was easier. The whole thing was a mess.”
“So is there any way through?” Johnson asked.
The Forest guy shrugged.
“Maybe,” he said. “Maybe not. No way of knowing, except to try it. Could take a couple of months. If you do get through, keep a record and let us know, OK?”
Johnson stared at him.
“Let me get this straight,” he said. “You’re the damn Forest Service, and you want us to tell you where your own tracks are?”
The guy nodded.
“That’s about the size of it,” he said. “Like I told you, our records are lousy. The way we figured it, who the hell would ever care?”
The General’s aide walked him back to the roadblock. There was silence in the command vehicle. McGrath and Brogan and Milosevic studied the map.
“We can’t get through, they can’t get through,” McGrath said. “We’ve got them bottled up. We need to start exploiting that.”
“How?” Webster said.
“Control them,” McGrath said. “We already control their road. We can control their power and their telephone line, too. The lines more or less follow the road. Separate spurs up out of Kalispell. We should cut the phone line so it terminates right here, in this vehicle. Then they can’t communicate with anybody except us.

Then we tell them we control their power. Threaten to cut it off if they don't negotiate."
"You want a negotiation?" Johnson asked.
"I want a stalling tactic," McGrath said. "Until the White House loosens up."
Webster nodded.
"OK, do it," he said. "Call the phone company and get the line run in here."
"I already did," McGrath said. "They'll do it first thing in the morning."
Webster yawned. Checked his watch. Gestured to Milosevic and Brogan.
"We should get a sleeping rota going," he said. "You two turn in first. We'll sleep two shifts, call it four hours at a time."
Milosevic and Brogan nodded. Looked happy enough about it.
"See you later," McGrath said. "Sleep tight."
They left the trailer and closed the door quietly. Johnson was still fiddling with the map. Twisting it and turning it on the table.
"Can't they do the phone thing faster?" he asked. "Like tonight?"
Webster thought about it and nodded. He knew fifty percent of any battle is keeping the command structure harmonious.
"Call them again, Mack," he said. "Tell them we need it now."
McGrath called them again. He used the phone at his elbow. Had a short conversation which ended with a chuckle.
"They're sending the emergency linemen," he said. "Should be done in a couple of hours. But we'll get an invoice for it. I told them to send it to the Hoover Building. The guy asked me where that was."
He got up and waited in the doorway. Johnson and Webster stayed at the table. They huddled together over their map. They looked at the southern ravine. It had been formed a million years ago when the earth shattered under the weight of a billion tons of ice. They assumed it was accurately represented on paper.

36

REACHER WOKE UP exactly two minutes before ten o'clock. He did it in his normal way, which was to come round quickly, motionless, no change in his breathing. He felt his arm curled under his head and opened his eyes the smallest fraction possible. The other side of the punishment hut, Joseph Ray was still sitting against the door. The Glock was on the floor beside him. He was checking his watch.

Reacher counted off ninety seconds in his head. Ray was glancing between the roof of the hut and his watch. Then he looked across at Reacher. Reacher snapped upright in one fluid movement. Pressed his palm against his ear like he was listening to a secret communication. Ray's eyes were wide. Reacher nodded and stood up.

"OK," he said. "Open the door, Joe."

Ray took out the key from his pocket. Unlocked the door. It swung open.

"You want to take the Glock?" Ray asked.

He held the gun out, butt first. Anxiety in his eyes. Reacher smiled. He had expected nothing less. Ray was dumb, but not that dumb. He had been given two and a half hours to scope it out. This was a final test. If he took the gun, he was bullshitting. He was certain it was unloaded and the clip was in Ray's pocket.

"Don't need it," Reacher said. "We've got the whole place covered. I got weapons at my disposal more powerful than a nine-millimeter, believe me, Joe."

Ray nodded and straightened up.

"Don't forget the laser beams," Reacher said. "You step out of this hut, you're a dead man. Nothing I can do about that right now. *Vous comprenez, mon ami?*"

Ray nodded again. Reacher slipped out into the night. Ray swung the door closed. Reacher backtracked silently and waited around the corner of the hut. Knelt down and found a small rock. Hefted it in his hand and waited for Ray to follow him.

He didn't come. Reacher waited eight minutes. Long experience had taught him: if they don't come after six minutes, they aren't coming at all. People think in five-minute segments, because of the way clocks are laid out. They say: I'll wait five minutes. Then, because they're cautious, they add another minute. They think it's smart. Reacher waited the first five, then the extra one, then added two more for the sake of safety. But Ray didn't come. He wasn't going to.

Reacher avoided the clearing. He kept to the trees. He skirted the area in the forest. Ignored the beaten earth paths. He wasn't worried about the dogs. They weren't out. Fowler had talked about mountain lions roaming. Nobody leaves

weren't out. Fowler had talked about mountain lions roaming. Nobody leaves dogs out at night where there are mountain lions on the prowl. That's a sure way of having no dogs left in the morning.
He made a complete circuit of the Bastion, hidden in the trees. The lights were all out and the whole place was still and silent. He waited in the trees behind the mess hall. The kitchen was a square hut, awkwardly connected to the back of the main structure. There were no lights on, but the door was open, and the woman who had served him breakfast was waiting in the shadows. He watched her from the trees. He waited five minutes. Then six. No other movement anywhere. He tossed his small rock onto the path to her left. She jumped at the sound. He called softly. She came out of the shadows. Alone. She walked over to the trees. He took her elbow and pulled her back into the darkness.
"How did you get out of there?" she whispered to him.
It was impossible to tell how old she was. Maybe twenty-five, maybe forty-five. She was a handsome woman, lean, long straight hair, but careworn and worried. A flicker of spirit and resilience underneath. She would have been comfortable a hundred years ago, stumbling down the Oregon Trail.
"How did you get out?" she whispered again.
"I walked out the door," Reacher whispered back.
The woman just looked at him blankly.
"You've got to help us," she whispered.
Then she stopped and wrung her hands and twisted her head left and right, peering into the dark, terrified.
"Help how?" he asked. "Why?"
"They're all crazy," the woman said. "You've got to help us."
"How?" he asked again.
She just grimaced, arms held wide, like it was obvious, or like she didn't know where to start, or how.
"From the beginning," he said.
She nodded, twice, swallowing, collecting herself.
"People have disappeared," she said.
"What people?" he asked. "How did they disappear?"
"They just disappeared," she said. "It's Borken. He's taken over everything. It's a long story. Most of us were up here with other groups, just surviving on our own, with our families, you know? I was with the Northwestern Freemen. Then Borken started coming around, talking about unity? He fought and argued. The other leaders disagreed with his views. Then they just started disappearing. They just left. Borken said they couldn't stand the pace. They just disappeared. So he said we had to join with him. Said we had no choice. Some of us are more or less prisoners here."

Reacher nodded.
“And now things are happening up at the mines,” she said.
“What things?” he asked her.
“I don’t know,” she said. “Bad things, I guess. We’re not allowed to go up there. They’re only a mile up the road, but they’re off limits. Something was going on there today. They said they were all working in the south, on the border, but when they came back for lunch, they came from the north. I saw them from the kitchen window. They were smiling and laughing.”
“Who?” Reacher asked.
“Borken and the ones he trusts,” she said. “He’s crazy. He says they’ll attack us when we declare independence and we have to fight back. Starting tomorrow. We’re all scared. We got families, you know? But there’s nothing we can do. You oppose him, and you either get banished, or he raves at you until you agree with him. Nobody can stand up to him. He controls us, totally.”
Reacher nodded again. The woman sagged against him. Tears were on her cheeks.
“And we can’t win, can we?” she said. “Not if they attack us. There’s only a hundred of us, trained up. We can’t beat an army with a hundred people, can we? We’re all going to die.”
Her eyes were wide and white and desperate. Reacher shrugged. Shook his head and tried to make his voice sound calm and reassuring.
“It’ll be a siege,” he said. “That’s all. A standoff. They’ll negotiate. It’s happened before. And it’ll be the FBI, not the Army. The FBI know how to do this kind of a thing. You’ll all be OK. They won’t kill you. They won’t come here looking to kill anybody. That’s just Borken’s propaganda.”
“Live free or die,” she said. “That’s what he keeps saying.”
“The FBI will handle it,” he said again. “Nobody’s looking to kill you.”
The woman clamped her lips and screwed her wet eyes shut and shook her head wildly.
“No, Borken will kill us,” she said. “He’ll do it, not them. Live free or die, don’t you understand? If they come, he’ll kill us all. Or else he’ll make us all kill ourselves. Like a mass suicide thing? He’ll make us do it, I know he will.”
Reacher just stared at her.
“I heard them talking,” she said. “Whispering about it all the time, making secret plans. They said women and children would die. They said it was justifiable. They said it was historic and important. They said the circumstances demanded it.”
“You heard them?” Reacher asked. “When?”
“All the time,” she whispered again. “They’re always making plans. Borken and

the ones he trusts. Women and children have to die, they said. They're going to make us kill ourselves. Mass suicide. Our families. Our children. At the mines. I think they're going to make us go in the mines and kill ourselves."

HE STAYED IN the woods until he was well north of the parade ground. Then he tracked east until he saw the road, running up out of Yorke. It was potholed and rough, gleaming gray in the moonlight. He stayed in the shadow of the trees and followed it north.

The road wound up a mountainside in tight hairpin bends. A sure sign it led to something worthwhile, otherwise the labor consumed in its construction would have been meaningless. After a mile of winding and a thousand feet of elevation, the final curve gave out onto a bowl the size of a deserted stadium. It was part natural, part blasted, hanging there in the belly of the giant peaks. The back walls of the bowl were sheer rock faces. There were semicircular holes blasted into them at intervals. They looked like giant mouse holes. Some of them had been built out with waste rock, to provide sheltered entrances. Two of the entrances had been enlarged into giant stone sheds, roofed with timber.

The bowl was floored with loose shale. There were piles of earth and spoil everywhere. Ragged weeds and saplings were forcing their way through. Reacher could see the rusted remains of rail tracks, starting nowhere and running a few yards. He squatted against a tree, well back in the woods, and watched. There was nothing happening. The whole place was deserted and silent. Quieter than silent. It had that total absence of sound that gets left behind when a busy place is abandoned. The natural sounds were long gone. The swaying trees cleared, the rushing streams diverted, the rustling vegetation burned off, replaced by clattering machines and shouting men. Then when the men and the machines leave, there is nothing left behind to replace their noise. Reacher strained his ears, but heard nothing at all. Silent as the moon.

He stayed in the woods. To approach from the south meant to approach uphill. He skirted around to the west and gained an extra hundred feet of height. Paused and looked down into the bowl from a new perspective.

Still nothing. But there had been something. Some recent activity. The moonlight was showing vehicle tracks in the shale. There was a mess of ruts in and out of one of the stone sheds. A couple of years' worth. The motor pool. There were newer ruts into the other stone shed. The bigger shed. Bigger ruts. Somebody had driven some large vehicles into that shed. Recently.

He scrambled down out of the woods and onto the shale. His shoes on the small flat stones sounded like rifle shots in the silent night. The crunch of his steps came back off the sheer walls like thunder. He felt tiny and exposed, like a man

in a bad dream walking naked across a football field. He felt like the surrounding mountains were a huge crowd in the bleachers, staring silently at him. He stopped behind a pile of rock and squatted and listened. The echo of his footsteps crashed and died into silence. He heard nothing. Just a total absence of sound.

He crept noisily to the doors of the smaller shed. Up close, it was a big structure. Probably built to shelter giant machines and pumping engines. The doors were twelve feet high. They were built out of peeled logs, strapped together with iron. They were like the sides of a log house, hinged into a mountainside.

There was no lock. It was hard to imagine how there could have been. No lock Reacher had ever seen could have matched the scale of those doors. He put his back against the right-hand door and levered the left-hand one open a foot. The iron hinge moved easily on a thick film of grease. He slid sideways through the gap and stepped inside.

It was pitch-dark. He could see nothing. He stood and waited for his night vision to build. But it never came. Your eyes can open wider and wider, wide as they can get, but if there's no light at all, you won't see anything. He could smell a strong smell of damp and decay. He could hear the silence vanishing backward into the mountain, like there was a long chamber or tunnel in front of him. He moved inward, hands held out in front of him like a blind man.

He found a vehicle. His shin hit the front fender before his hands hit the hood. It was high. A truck or a pickup. Civilian. Smooth-gloss automotive spray. Not matte military paint. He trailed his fingers round the edge of the hood. Down the side. A pickup. He felt his way around the back and up the other side. Felt for the driver's door. Unlocked. He opened it. The courtesy light blazed like a million-candlepower searchlight. Bizarre shadows were thrown all around. He was in a giant cavern. It had no back. It opened right into the hillside. The rock roof sloped down and became a narrow excavated seam, running far out of sight.

He reached into the pickup cab and switched the headlights on. The beams were reflected off the rock. There were a dozen vehicles parked in neat lines. Old sedans and pickups. Surplus jeeps with crude camouflage. And the white Ford Econoline with the holes in the roof. It looked sad and abandoned after its epic journey from Chicago. Worn out and low on its springs. There were workbenches with old tools hanging above them. Cans of paint and drums of oil. Bald tires in piles and rusted tanks of welding gas.

He searched the nearest vehicles. Keys in all of them. A flashlight in the glove box of the third sedan he checked. He took it. Stepped back to the pickup and killed its headlights. Walked back to the big wooden doors and out into the night.

He waited and listened. Nothing. He swung the motor pool door closed and set off for the larger shed. A hundred yards across the noisy shale. The larger shed had the same type of log doors. Even bigger. And they were locked. The lock was the crudest thing he had ever seen. It was an old warped log laid across two iron brackets and chained into place. The chains were fastened with two big padlocks. Reacher ignored them. No need to fiddle with the padlocks. He could see that the warp in the old log would let him in.

He forced the doors apart where they met at the bottom. The curve in the log in the brackets let them gap by about a foot. He put his arms inside, then his head, then his shoulders. He scrabbled with his feet and pushed his way through. Stood up inside and flicked the flashlight on.

It was another giant cavern. Same darkness. Same strong smell of damp and decay. Same sloping roof running backward to a low seam. The same hush, like all the sound was sucking back deep into the mountain. The same purpose. A vehicle store. But these vehicles were all identical. Five of them. Five current-issue U.S. Army trucks. Marked with the white stencils of the Army Air Artillery. Not new trucks, but well maintained. Neat canvas siding at the rear. Reacher walked around to the back of the first truck. Stepped up onto the tow-hitch and looked over the tailgate. Empty. It had slatted wooden benches running forward along each side. A troop carrier. Reacher couldn’t begin to count the miles he’d traveled on benches like those, swaying, staring at the steel floor, waiting to get where he was going.

The steel floor was stained. At odds with the clean exterior. There were black stains on the floor. Some kind of a thick liquid, dried into pools. Reacher stared at them. Couldn’t begin to count the number of stains like that he’d seen. He jumped down and ran to the second vehicle. Stepped up and leaned in with the flashlight.

There were no benches in the rear of the second vehicle. Instead, there were racks bolted to both sides. Precisely constructed racks, welded up out of angle iron and fitted with steel clips and thick rubber pads to hold their delicate cargo. The left-hand rack held five missile launchers. Slim steel tubes, six feet long, dull black metal, with a large box of electronics and an open sight and a pistol grip bolted to the forward end. Five of them, precisely parallel, neatly aligned. The right-hand rack held twenty-five Stinger missiles. Inches apart, side by side in their rubber mountings, control surfaces folded back, ready to load. Dull alloy, with batch numbers stenciled on, and a broad band of garish orange paint wrapping the fuel section.

Reacher ran to the other three trucks. Each was the same. Five launchers, twenty-five missiles. A total of twenty launchers and one hundred missiles. The

entire ordnance requirement of a whole Air Artillery mobile unit. A unit which deployed twenty men. He walked back to the first truck and stared in at the blood on the floor. Then he heard the rats. At first he thought it was footsteps outside on the shale. He snapped the flashlight off. Then he realized the sounds were nearer, and behind him. There were rats scuffling at the rear of the cavern. He lit the flashlight up again and jogged into the cave and found the twenty men. They were heaped into a large pile of corpses just before the roof got too low for a man to stand. Twenty dead soldiers. A hell of a mess. They had all been shot in the back. Reacher could see that. They had been standing together in a group somewhere, and they had been mown down with heavy machine gun fire from the rear. He bent and grunted and turned a couple of them over. Not the toughest guys he'd ever seen. Docile, reservist types, deployed to a lonely base deep inside friendly territory. Ambushed and murdered for their weapons.

But how? He knew how. An old ground-to-air unit, nearing obsolescence, stationed in the far north of Montana. A leftover from Cold War paranoia. Certainly due for decommissioning. Probably already in the process of decommissioning. Probably on its way south to Peterson in Colorado. Final orders probably transmitted in clear by radio. He recalled the radio scanner back in the communications hut. The operator beside it, patiently turning the dial. He imagined the recall order being accidentally intercepted, the operator running to Borken, Borken's bloated face lighting up with an opportunistic smile. Then some hasty planning and a brutal ambush somewhere in the hills. Twenty men shot down, thrown into their own truck, piled into this cavern. He stood and gazed at the appalling sight. Then he snapped the flashlight off again.

Because he had been right about the noise. It was the noise of footsteps on the shale outside. He heard them again. They were getting closer. They were building to a deafening crunching sound in the night. They were heading straight for the shed. On the shale, no way of telling how many people there were.

He heard them stop outside the massive doors. Heard the jingle of keys. Heard the padlocks rattle. The chains were pulled off and the log lifted aside. The doors sagged open. He dropped to the ground. Lay facedown and pressed himself up against the pile of cold and oozing bodies.

Four feet. Two voices. Voices he knew well. Fowler and Borken. Talking quietly, walking confidently. Reacher let his body sag against the pile. A rat ran over his hand.

"Did he say when?" Fowler was asking.

His voice was suddenly loud against the rock.

"First thing tomorrow morning," Borken was saying. "Phone company starts its linemen when? About eight o'clock? Maybe seven-thirty?"

"Let's be cautious," Fowler said. "Let's call it seven-thirty. First thing they do is

"Let's be cautious," Fowler said. "Let's call it seven-thirty. First thing they do is cut the line."
They had flashlights. The beams flicked and swung as they walked.
"No problem," Borken said. "Seven o'clock here is nine o'clock on the East Coast. Perfect timing. We'll do it at seven. D.C. first, then New York, then Atlanta. Should be all done by ten past. Ten minutes that shook the world, right? Twenty minutes to spare."
They stopped at the second truck. Unbolted the tailgate. It came down with a loud metallic clang.
"Then what?" Fowler asked.
"Then we wait and see," Borken replied. "Right now, they've only got eight Marines up here. They don't know what to do. They're not sure about the forest. White House is pussyfooting, like we thought. Give them twelve hours for a decision, they can't try anything before dark tomorrow, earliest. And by then this place will be way down their list of priorities."
They were leaning into the truck. Their voices were muffled by the thick canvas siding.
"Does he need the missile as well?" Fowler asked.
"Just the launcher," Borken answered. "It's in the electronic part."
Reacher lay among the scuffling rats and heard the sound of the clips being undone. Then the squeak of the rubber as a launcher came out of its mountings. Then the rattle of the tailgate bolts ramming home. The footsteps receded. The flashlight beams flicked back toward the doors.
The hinges creaked and the bulky timber doors thumped shut. Reacher heard the launcher being laid gently on the shale and the gasps as the two men lifted the old log back into the brackets. The rattle of the chain and the click of the padlocks. The crunch of the footsteps crossing the shale.
He rolled away from the corpses and hit out at a rat. Caught it with an angry backhand and sent it squealing off into the dark. He sat up and waited. Walked slowly to the door. Listened hard. Waited six minutes. Put his hands into the gap at the bottom of the doors and pulled them apart.
They wouldn't move more than an inch. He laid his palms flat on the smooth timbers and bunched up his shoulders and heaved. They were rock-solid. Like trying to push over a tree. He tried for a minute. He was straining like a weight lifter. The doors were jammed. Then he suddenly realized why. They had put the warped old log back in the brackets the other way around. The curve pointing in toward him, not out away from him. Clamping the doors with extra efficiency, instead of allowing the foot of loose movement it had allowed before.
He pictured the log as he had seen it. More than a foot thick, warped, but dried like iron. Curving away, it was no problem. Curving in, it would be immovable

like iron. Carving away, it was no problem. Carving in, it would be immovable. He glanced at the Army trucks. Gave it up. There was no space to hit the doors with any kind of momentum. The truck would be pressing on them with all the torque of a big diesel engine, but it wouldn't be enough. He couldn't imagine how much force it would take to shatter that old log.

He thought about using a missile. Gave it up. Too noisy, and it wouldn't work anyway. They didn't arm themselves until they were thirty feet into the air. And they only carried six and a half pounds of explosive. Enough to smash a jet engine in flight, but six and a half pounds of explosive against those old timbers would be like scratching at them with a nail file. He was trapped inside, and Holly was waiting.

It was not in his nature to panic. Never had been. He was a calm man, and his long training had made him calmer. He had been taught to assess and evaluate, and to use pure force of will to succeed. You're Jack Reacher, he had been told. You can do anything. First his mother had told him, then his father, then the quiet deadly men in the training schools. And he had believed them.

But at the same time, he hadn't believed them. Part of his mind always said: you've just been lucky. Always lucky. And in the quiet times, he would sit and wait for his luck to run out. He sat on the stony ground with his back against the timbers of the door and asked himself: has it run out now?

He flicked the flashlight beam around the cavern. The rats were staying away from him. They were interested in the darkness in back. They're deserting me, he thought. Deserting the sinking ship. Then his mind clicked in again. No, they're interested in the tunnels, he thought. Because tunnels lead places. He remembered the giant mouse holes blasted into the rock face, north wall of the bowl. Maybe all interconnected by these narrow seams in back.

He ran back into the depth of the cavern, past the trucks, past the grotesque heap of corpses. Back to where he could no longer stand. A rat disappeared into the seam to his left. He dropped to his stomach and flicked the flashlight on. Crawled after it.

He crawled into a skeleton. He scrabbled with his feet and came face-to-face with a grinning skull. And another. There were four or five skeletons jammed into the excavated seam. Jumbled bones in a pile. He gasped in shock and backed off a foot. Looked carefully. Used the flashlight close up.

All males. He could see that from the five pelvises. The skulls showed gunshot wounds. All in the temples. Neat entry wounds, neat exit holes. Jacketed high-velocity handgun bullets. Fairly recent, certainly within a year. The flesh hadn't decayed. It had been eaten off. He could see the parallel scrape marks on the bones from rodent teeth.

The bones were all disturbed. The rats had hauled them away to eat. There were

The bones were all disturbed. The rats had hauled them away to eat. There were scraps of clothing material here and there. Some of the rib cages were still covered. Rats don't disturb clothing much. Not on the torso. Why should they? They eat their way in through the inside. The soft parts first. They come to the ribs from the back.

The clothing material was khaki and olive green. Some black and gray camouflage. Reacher saw a colored thread. Traced it back to a shoulder flash hidden under a gnawed shoulder blade. It was a curved felt badge embroidered in silk. It said: Northwestern Freemen. He pulled at the skeleton's jacket. The rib cage collapsed. The breast pocket had three chromium stars punched through. Reacher made a thorough search, lying on his stomach, up to his armpits in bones. He pieced together five separate uniforms. He found two more badges. One said: White Christian Identity. The other said: Montana Constitutional Militia. He lined up the five splintered skulls. Checked the teeth. He was looking at five men, middle-aged, maybe between forty and fifty. Five leaders. The leaders who had disappeared. The leaders who could not stand the pace. The leaders who had abandoned their members to Beau Borken.

The roof was too low for Reacher to climb over the bones. He had to push them aside and crawl through them. The rats showed no interest. These bones were picked clean. Their new feast lay back inside the cavern. They swarmed back in that direction. He held the flashlight out in front of him and pushed on into the mountain against the squealing tide.

He lost his sense of direction. He hoped he was going roughly west, but he couldn't tell. The roof came down to a couple of feet. He was crawling through an old geological seam, excavated long ago for its ore. The roof came down even more. Down to a foot and a half. It was cold. The seam narrowed. His arms were out in front of him. The seam became too narrow to pull them back. He was crawling down a slim rock tube, a billion tons of mountain above him, no idea where he was going. And the flashlight was failing. The battery was spent. Its light was fading to a dull orange glow.

He was breathing hard. And shaking. Not from exertion. From dread. From terror. This was not what he had expected. He had visualized a stroll down a spacious abandoned gallery. Not this narrow crack in the rock. He was pushing himself headfirst into his worst childhood nightmare. He was a guy who had survived most things, and he was a guy who was rarely afraid. But he had known since his early boyhood that he was terrified of being trapped in the dark in a space too small to turn his giant frame. All his damp childhood nightmares had been about being closed into tight spaces. He lay on his stomach and screwed his eyes shut. Lay and panted and gagged. Forced the air in and out through his clamping throat. Then he inched himself slowly onward into the nightmare.

The glow from the flashlight finally died a hundred yards into the tunnel. The darkness was total. The seam was narrowing. It was pushing his shoulders down. He was forcing himself into a space that was way too small for him. His face was forced sideways. He fought to stay calm. He remembered what he had said to Borken: people were smaller then. Scrappy little guys, migrating west, seeking their fortune in the bowels of the mountain. People half the size of Reacher, squirming along, maybe on their backs, chipping the bright veins out of the rock roof.

He was using the dead flashlight like a blind man uses a white cane. It smashed on solid rock two feet ahead of his face. He heard the tinkle of glass over the rasping of his breath. He struggled ahead and felt with his hands. A solid wall. The tunnel went no farther. He tried to move backward. He couldn't move at all. To push himself backward with his hands, he had to raise his chest to get leverage. But the roof was too low to let him do that. His shoulders were jammed up hard against it. He could get no leverage. His feet could push him forward, but they couldn't pull him backward. He went rigid with panic. His throat clamped solid. His head hit the roof and his cheek hit the grit floor. He fought a scream by breathing fast.

He had to go back. He hooked his toes into the grit. Turned his hands inward and planted his thumbs on the floor. Pulled with his toes and pushed with his thumbs. He moved backward a fraction and then the rock clamped hard against his sides. To slide his weight backward, his shoulder muscles were bunching and jamming against the rock. He breathed out and let his arms go limp. Pulled with his toes. They scrabbled uselessly in the grit. He helped them with his thumbs. His shoulders bunched and jammed again. He jerked his hips from side to side. He had a couple of inches to spare. He smashed his hands into the shale and heaved backward. His body jammed solid, like a wedge in a door. He tilted sideways and banged his cheek on the roof. Jerked back down and caught his other cheek on the floor. The rock was crushing in on his ribs. This time, he couldn't fight the scream. He had to let it go. He opened his mouth and wailed in terror. The air in his lungs crushed his chest against the floor and his back against the roof.

He couldn't tell if his eyes were open or shut. He pushed forward with his feet and regained the inch he'd moved back. He stretched with his arms. Felt up ahead again. His shoulders were jammed so tight he couldn't move his hands through much of an angle. He spread his fingers and scrabbled them left and right, up and down. Solid rock ahead. No way to go forward. No way to move backward.

He was going to die trapped inside the mountain. He knew it. The rats knew it. They were sniffing up behind him. Coming closer. He felt them at his feet. He

kicked out and sent them squealing away. But they came back. He felt their weight on his legs. They were swarming over him. They burrowed up around his shoulders. Slid under his armpits. He felt cold oily fur on his face as they forced their way past. The flick of their tails as they ran ahead.
To where? He let them run over his arm, to estimate their direction. They were moving ahead of him, into the blind darkness. He felt with his hands. Felt them flowing left. Their passage was stirring the air. The air was cool. He felt it move, a faint breeze, on the sweat on the left side of his face. He jammed himself hard against the right-hand wall and moved his left arm sideways, ahead of him. Felt for the left-hand wall. It wasn't there. He was stuck at a junction in the tunnels. A new seam ran at a right angle away from the end of the seam he was in. A tight, narrow right angle. Ninety degrees. He forced himself backward as far as his thumbs would push him. He scraped his face on the end wall and jammed his side into the rock. Folded himself arms first around the corner and dragged his legs behind him.
The new seam was no better. It was no wider. The roof was no higher. He hauled himself along, gasping and sweating and shaking. He propelled himself with his toes, an inch at a time. The rats forced their way past him. The rock tore at his sides and his back. But there was still a slight breeze on his face. The tunnel was heading somewhere. He was gasping and panting. He crawled on. Then the new seam widened. Still very low. A flat, low crack in the rock. He crawled on through it, exhausted. Fifty yards. A hundred. Then he felt the roof soar away above him. He pushed on with his toes and suddenly he felt the air change and he was lying halfway into the motor pool cavern. He realized his eyes were wide open and the white Econoline was right there in front of him in the dark.
He rolled onto his back and lay gasping on the grit. Gasping and shaking. Staggered to his feet and looked back. The seam was invisible. Hidden in the shadow. He made it as far as the white truck and collapsed against its side. The luminous figures on his watch showed he'd been in the tunnels nearly three hours. Most of the time jammed there sweating in panic. A three-hour screaming nightmare come to life. His pants and his jacket were shredded. Every muscle in his body was on fire. His face and hands and elbows and knees were bleeding. But it was the fear that had done it to him. The fear of not getting through. He could still feel the rock pressing down on his back and pressing up on his chest. He could feel it clamping inward on his ribs. He got up again and limped to the doors. Pushed them open and stood in the moonlight, arms out, eyes crazy, mouth open, breathing in lungfuls of the sweet night air.

HE WAS HALFWAY across the bowl before he started thinking straight. So he

ran back and ducked into the motor pool once more. Found what he wanted. He found it on one of the jeep's tow-hook assemblies. Some heavy stiff wire, ready to feed a trailer's electric circuits. He wrenched it out and stripped the insulation with his teeth. Ran back to the moonlight.

He kept close to the road, all the way back to Yorke. Two miles, twenty minutes at a slow agonizing jog through the trees. He looped around behind the ruined northeastern block and approached the courthouse from the rear. Circled it silently in the shadows. Waited and listened.

He tried to think like Borken. Complacent. Happy with his perimeter. Constant information from inside the FBI. Reacher locked into the punishment hut, Holly locked into her prison room. Would he post a sentry? Not tonight. Not when he was expecting heavy action tomorrow and beyond. He would want his people fresh. Reacher nodded to himself and gambled he was right.

He arrived at the courthouse steps. Deserted. He tried the door. Locked. He smiled. Nobody posts a sentry behind a locked door. He bent the wire into a shallow hook and felt for the mechanism. An old two-lever. Eight seconds. He stepped inside. Waited and listened. Nothing. He went up the stairs.

The lock on Holly's door was new. But cheap. He worked quietly, which delayed him. Took him more than thirty seconds before the last tumbler clicked back. He pulled the door open slowly and stepped onto the built-up floor. Glanced apprehensively at the walls. She was on a mattress on the floor. Fully dressed and ready. Awake and watching him. Huge eyes bright in the gloom. He gestured her outside. Turned and climbed down and waited in the corridor for her. She picked up her crutch and limped to the door. Climbed carefully down the step and stood next to him.

"Hello, Reacher," she whispered. "How are you doing?"

"I've felt better," he whispered back. "Time to time."

She turned and glanced back into her room. He followed her gaze and saw the dark stain on the floor.

"Woman who brought me lunch," she whispered.

He nodded.

"What with?" he whispered back.

"Part of the bed frame," she said.

He saw the satisfaction on her face and smiled.

"That should do it," he said, quietly. "Bed frames are good for that."

She took a last look at the room and gently closed the door. Followed him through the dark and slowly down the stairs. Across the lobby and through the double doors and out into the bright silent moonlight.

"Christ," she said, urgently. "What happened to you?"

He glanced down and checked himself over in the light of the moon. He was gray from head to foot with dust and grit. His clothing was shredded. He was streaked with sweat and blood. Still shaky.
“Long story,” he said. “You got somebody in Chicago you can trust?”
“McGrath,” she said immediately. “He’s my Agent-in-Charge. Why?”
They crossed the wide street arm in arm, looking left and right. Skirted the mound in front of the ruined office building. Found the path running northwest.
“You need to send him a fax,” he said. “They’ve got missiles. You need to warn him. Tonight, because their line is going to be cut first thing in the morning.”
“The mole tell them that?” she asked.
He nodded.
“How?” she asked. “How is he communicating?”
“Shortwave radio,” Reacher said. “Has to be. Anything else is traceable.”
He swayed and leaned on a tree. Gave her the spread, everything, beginning to end.
“Shit,” she said. “Ground-to-air missiles? Mass suicide? A nightmare.”
“Not our nightmare,” he said. “We’re out of here.”
“We should stay and help them,” she said. “The families.”
He shook his head.
“Best help is for us to get out,” he said. “Maybe losing you will change their plan. And we can tell them about the layout around here.”
“I don’t know,” she said.
“I do,” he said. “First rule is stick to priorities. That’s you. We’re out of here.”
She shrugged and nodded.
“Now?” she asked.
“Right now,” he said.
“How?” she asked.
“Jeep through the forest,” he said. “I found their motor pool. We get up there, steal a jeep, by then it should be light enough to find our way through. I saw a map in Borken’s office. There are plenty of tracks running east through the forest.”
She nodded and he pushed off the tree. They hustled up the winding path to the Bastion. A mile, in the dark. They stumbled on the stones and saved their breath for walking. The clearing was dark and silent. They worked their way around beyond the mess hall to the back of the communications hut. They came out of the trees and Reacher stepped close and pressed his ear to the plywood siding. There was no sound inside.
He used the wire again and they were inside within ten seconds. Holly found paper and pen. Wrote her message. Dialed the Chicago fax number and fed the

sheet into the machine. It whirred obediently and pulled the paper through. Fed it back out into her waiting hand. She hit the button for the confirmation. Didn't want to leave any trace behind. Another sheet fed out. It showed the destination number correct. Timed the message at ten minutes to five, Friday morning, the fourth of July. She shredded both papers small and buried the pieces in the bottom of a trash-can.

Reacher rooted around on the long counter and found a paper clip. Followed Holly back out into the moonlight and relocked the door. Dodged around and found the cable leading down from the shortwave whip into the side of the hut. Took the paper clip and worried at it until it broke. Forced the broken end through the cable like a pin. Pushed it through until it was even, a fraction showing at each side. The metal would short-circuit the antenna by connecting the wire inside to the foil screen. The signal would come down out of the ether, down the wire, leak into the foil and run away to ground without ever reaching the shortwave unit itself. The best way to disable a radio. Smash one up, it gets repaired. This way, the fault is un-traceable, until an exhausted technician finally thinks to check.

"We need weapons." Holly whispered to him.

He nodded. They crept together to the armory door. He looked at the lock. Gave it up. It was a huge thing. Unpickable.

"I'll take the Glock from the guy guarding me," he whispered.

She nodded. They ducked back into the trees and walked through to the next clearing. Reacher tried to think of a story to explain his appearance to Joseph Ray. Figured he might say something about being beamed over to the UN. Talk about how high-speed beaming can rip you up a little. They crept around behind the punishment hut and listened. All quiet. They skirted the corner and Reacher pulled the door. Walked straight into a nine-millimeter. This time, it wasn't a Glock. It was a Sig-Sauer. Not Joseph Ray's. It was Beau Borken's. He was standing just inside the door with Little Stevie at his side, grinning.

37

FOUR-THIRTY IN THE morning, Webster was more than ready for the watch change. Johnson and Garber and the General's aide were dozing in their chairs. McGrath was outside with the telephone linemen. They were just finishing up. The job had taken much longer than they had anticipated. Some kind of interface problem. They had physically cut the phone line coming out of Yorke, and bent the stiff copper down to a temporary terminal box they had placed at the base of a pole. Then they had spooled cable from the terminal box down the road to the mobile command vehicle. Connected it into one of the communications ports. But it didn't work. Not right away. The linemen had fussed with multimeters and muttered about impedances and capacitances. They had worked for three solid hours. They were ready to blame the Army truck for the incompatibility when they thought to go back and check their own temporary terminal box. The fault lay there. A failed component. They wired in a spare and the whole circuit worked perfectly. Four thirty-five in the morning, McGrath was shaking their hands and swearing them to silence when Webster came out of the trailer. The two men stood and watched them drive away. The noise of their truck died around the curve. Webster and McGrath stayed standing in the bright moonlight. They stood there for five minutes while McGrath smoked. They didn't speak. Just gazed north into the distance and wondered.

"Go wake your boys up," Webster said. "We'll stand down for a spell."

McGrath nodded and walked down to the accommodation trailers. Roused Milosevic and Brogan. They were fully dressed on their bunks. They got up and yawned. Came down the ladder and found Webster standing there with Johnson and his aide. Garber standing behind them.

"The telephone line is done," Webster said.

"Already?" Brogan said. "I thought it was being done in the morning."

"We figured sooner was better than later," Webster said. He inclined his head toward General Johnson. It was a gesture which said: he's worried, right?

"OK," Milosevic said. "We'll look after it."

"Wake us at eight," Webster said. "Or earlier if necessary, OK?"

Brogan nodded and walked north to the command vehicle. Milosevic followed. They paused together for a look at the mountains in the moonlight. As they paused, the fax machine inside the empty command trailer started whirring. It fed its first communication face upward into the message tray. It was ten to five in the morning, Friday the fourth of July.

BROGAN WOKE GENERAL Johnson an hour and ten minutes later, six o'clock exactly. He knocked loudly on the accommodation trailer door and got no response, so he went in and shook the old guy by the shoulder.
"Peterson Air Force Base, sir," Brogan said. "They need to talk to you."
Johnson staggered up to the command vehicle in his shirt and pants. Milosevic joined Brogan outside in the predawn glow to give him some privacy. Johnson was back out in five minutes.
"We need a conference," he called.
He ducked back into the trailer. Milosevic walked down and roused the others. They came forward, Webster and the General's aide yawning and stretching, Garber ramrod-straight. McGrath was dressed and smoking. Maybe hadn't tried to sleep at all. They filed up the ladder and took their places around the table, bleak red eyes, hair fuzzed on the back from the pillows.
"Peterson called," Johnson told them. "They're sending a helicopter search-and-rescue out, first light, looking for the missile unit."
His aide nodded.
"That would be standard procedure," he said.
"Based on an assumption," Johnson said. "They think the unit has suffered some kind of mechanical and electrical malfunction."
"Which is not uncommon," his aide said. "If their radio fails, their procedure would be to repair it. If a truck also broke down at the same time, their procedure would be to wait as a group for assistance."
"Circle the wagons?" McGrath asked.
The aide nodded again.
"Exactly so," he said. "They would pull off the road and wait for a chopper."
"So do we tell them?" McGrath asked.
The aide sat forward.
"That's the question," he said. "Tell them what exactly? We don't even know for sure that these maniacs have got them at all. It's still possible it's just a radio problem and a truck problem together."
"Dream on," Johnson said.
Webster shrugged. He knew how to deal with such issues.
"What's the upside?" he said.
"There is no upside," Johnson said. "We tell Peterson the missiles have been captured, the cat's out of the bag, we lose control of the situation, we're seen to have disobeyed Washington by making an issue out of it before Monday."
"OK, so what's the downside?" Webster asked.
"Theoretical," Johnson said. "We have to assume they've been captured, so we

also have to assume they've been well hidden. In which case the Air Force will never find them. They'll just fly around for a while and then go home and wait."
Webster nodded.
"OK," he said. "No upside, no downside, no problem."
There was a short silence.
"So we sit tight," Johnson said. "We let the chopper fly."
McGrath shook his head. Incredulous.
"Suppose they use them to shoot the chopper down?" he asked.
The General's aide smiled an indulgent smile.
"Can't be done," he said. "The IFF wouldn't allow it."
"IFF?" McGrath repeated.
"Identify Friend or Foe," the aide said. "It's an electronic system. The chopper will be beaming a signal. The missile reads it as friendly, refuses to launch."
"Guaranteed?" McGrath asked.
The aide nodded.
"Foolproof," he said.
Garber glowered at him. But he said nothing. Not his field of expertise.
"OK," Webster said. "Back to bed. Wake us again at eight, Brogan."

ON THE TARMAC at Peterson, a Boeing CH-47D Chinook was warming its engines and sipping the first of its eight hundred and fifty-eight gallons of fuel. A Chinook is a giant aircraft, whose twin rotors thump through an oval of air a hundred feet long and sixty wide. It weighs more than ten tons empty, and it can lift another eleven. It's a giant flying box, the engines and the fuel tanks strapped to the top and the sides, the crew perched high at the front. Any helicopter can search, but when heavy equipment is at stake, only a Chinook can rescue.
Because of the holiday weekend, the Peterson dispatcher assigned a skeleton crew of two. No separate spotter. He figured he didn't need one. How difficult could it be to find five Army trucks on some shoulder in Montana?>
"YOU SHOULD HAVE stayed here," Borken said. "Right, Joe?"
Reacher glanced into the gloom inside the punishment hut. Joseph Ray was standing to attention on the yellow square. He was staring straight ahead. He was naked. Bleeding from the mouth and nose.
"Right, Joe?" Borken said again.
Ray made no reply. Borken walked over and crashed his fist into his face. Ray stumbled and fell backward. Staggered against the back wall and scrambled to regain his position on the square.
"I asked you a question," Borken said.
Ray nodded. The blood poured off his chin.

"Reacher should have stayed here," he said.
Borken hit him again. A hard straight right to the face. Ray's head snapped back. Blood spurted. Borken smiled.
"No talking when you're on the square, Joe," he said. "You know the rules."
Borken stepped back and placed the muzzle of the Sig-Sauer in Reacher's ear. Used it to propel him out into the clearing. Gestured Stevie to follow.
"You stay on the square, Joe," he called over his shoulder.
Stevie slammed the door shut. Borken reversed his direction and used the Sig-Sauer to shove Reacher toward him.
"Tell Fowler to get rid of this guy," he told him. "He's outlived his usefulness, such as it ever was. Put the bitch back in her room. Put a ring of sentries right around the building. We got things to do, right? No time for this shit. Parade ground at six-thirty. Everybody there. I'm going to read them the proclamation, before we fax it."

MCGRATH COULDN'T SLEEP. He walked back to the accommodations trailer with the others and got back on his bunk, but he gave it up after ten minutes. Quarter to seven in the morning, he was back in the command vehicle with Brogan and Milosevic.
"You guys take a break if you want," he said. "I'll look after things here."
"We could go organize some breakfast," Brogan said. "Diners in Kalispell should be open by now."
McGrath nodded vaguely. Started into his jacket for his wallet.
"Don't worry about it," Brogan said. "I'll pay. My treat."
"OK, thanks," McGrath said. "Get coffee. Lots of it."
Brogan and Milosevic stood up and left. McGrath stood in the doorway and watched them drive an Army sedan south. The sound of the car faded and he was left with the silent humming of the equipment behind him. He turned to sit down. The clock ticked around to seven. The fax machine started whirring.

HOLLY SMOOTHED HER hands over the old mattress like Reacher was there on it. Like it was really his body under her, scarred and battered, hot and hard and muscular, not a worn striped cotton cover stuffed with ancient horsehair. She blinked the tears out of her eyes. Blew a deep sigh and focused on the next decision. No Reacher, no Jackson, no weapon, no tools, six sentries in the street outside. She glanced around the room for the thousandth time and started scoping it out all over again.

MCGRATH WOKE THE others by thumping on the sides of the accommodations trailer with both fists. Then he ran back to the command post

accommodations trailer with both fists. Then he ran back to the command post and found a third copy of the message spooling out of the machine. He already had two. Now he had three.
Webster was the first into the trailer. Then Johnson, a minute behind. Then Garber, and finally the General's aide. They rattled up the ladder one by one and hurried over to the table. McGrath was absorbed in reading.
"What, Mack?" Webster asked him.
"They're declaring independence," McGrath said. "Listen to this."
He glanced around the four faces. Started reading out loud.
"'Governments are instituted among men,' " he read. " 'Deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. It is the right of the people to alter or abolish them after a long train of abuses and usurpations.' "
"They're quoting from the original," Webster said.
"Paraphrasing," Garber said.
McGrath nodded.
"Listen to this," he said again. " 'The history of the present government of the United States is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations all designed to establish an absolute tyranny over the people.' "
"What the hell is this?" Webster said. "1776 all over again?"
"It gets worse," McGrath said. " 'We therefore are the representatives of the Free States of America, located initially in what was formerly Yorke County in what was formerly Montana, and we solemnly publish and declare that this territory is now a free and independent State, which is absolved of allegiance to the United States, with all political connection totally dissolved, and that as a free and independent State has full power to levy war, conclude peace, defend its land borders and its airspace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all other things as all independent States may do.' "
He looked up. Shuffled the three copies into a neat stack and laid them on the table in silence.
"Why three copies?" Garber asked.
"Three destinations," McGrath said. "If we hadn't intercepted them, they'd be all over the place by now."
"Where?" Webster asked.
"First one is a D.C. number," McGrath said. "I'm guessing it's the White House."
Johnson's aide scooted his chair to the computer terminal. McGrath read him the number. He tapped it in, and the screen scrolled down. He nodded.
"The White House," he said. "Next?"
"New York somewhere," McGrath said. Read out the number from the second sheet.

sheet.
“United Nations,” the aide said. “They want witnesses.”
“Third one, I don’t know,” McGrath said. “Area code is 404.”
“Atlanta, Georgia,” Garber said.
“What’s in Atlanta, Georgia?” Webster asked.
The aide was busy at the keyboard.
“CNN,” he said. “They want publicity.”
Johnson nodded.
“Smart moves,” he said. “They want it all on live TV. Christ, can you imagine? The United Nations as umpires and round-the-clock coverage on the cable news? The whole world watching?”
“So what do we do?” Webster asked.
There was a long silence.
“Why did they say airspace?” Garber asked out loud.
“They were paraphrasing,” Webster said. “1776, there wasn’t any airspace.”
“The missiles,” Garber said. “Is it possible they’ve disabled the IFF?”
There was another long silence. They heard a car pull up. Doors slammed. Brogan and Milosevic rattled up the ladder and stepped into the hush. They carried brown bags and Styrofoam cups with plastic lids.

THE GIANT SEARCH-AND-RESCUE Chinook made it north from Peterson in Colorado to Malmstrom Air Force Base outside of Great Falls in Montana without incident. It touched down there and fuel bowsers came out to meet it. The crew walked to the mess for coffee. Walked back twenty minutes later. Took off again and swung gently in the morning air before lumbering away northwest.

38

“WE’RE GETTING NO reaction,” Fowler said. “Makes us wonder why.”
Reacher shrugged at him. They were in the command hut. Stevie had dragged him through the trees to the Bastion, and then Fowler had dragged him back again with two armed guards. The punishment hut was unavailable. Still occupied by Joseph Ray. They used the command hut instead. They sat Reacher down and Fowler locked his left wrist to the arm of the chair with a handcuff. The guards took up position on either side, rifles sloped, watchful. Then Fowler walked up to join Borken and Stevie for the ceremony on the parade ground. Reacher heard faint shouting and cheering in the distance as the proclamation was read out. Then he heard nothing. Ninety minutes later, Fowler came back to the hut alone. He sat down behind Borken’s desk and lit a cigarette, and the armed guards remained standing.
“We faxed it an hour ago,” Fowler said. “No reaction.”
Reacher smelled his smoke and gazed at the banners on the walls. Dark reds and dull whites, vivid crooked symbols in black.
“Do you know why we’re getting no reaction?” Fowler asked.
Reacher just shook his head.
“You know what I think?” Fowler said. “They cut the line. Phone company is colluding with the federal agents. We were told it would happen at seven-thirty. It obviously happened earlier.”
Reacher shrugged again. Made no reply.
“We would expect to be informed about a thing like that,” Fowler said.
He picked up his Glock, and propped it in front of him, butt on the desktop, swiveling it like naval artillery left and right.
“And we haven’t been,” he said.
“Maybe your pal from Chicago has given you up,” Reacher said.
Fowler shook his head. His Glock came to rest, aimed at Reacher’s chest.
“We’ve been getting a stream of intelligence,” he said. “We know where they are, how many of them there are, what their intentions are. But now, when we still need information, we aren’t getting it. Communication has been interrupted.”
Reacher said nothing.
“We’re investigating,” Fowler said. “We’re checking the radio right now.”
Reacher said nothing.
“Anything you want to tell us about the radio?” Fowler asked.
“What radio?” Reacher said

"What radio?" Reacher said.
"It worked OK yesterday," Fowler said. "Now it doesn't work at all, and you were wandering around all night."
He ducked down and rolled open the drawer where Borken kept the Colt Marshal. But he didn't come out with a revolver. He came out with a small black radio transmitter.
"This was Jackson's," he said. "He was most anxious to show us where it was hidden. In fact he was begging to show us. He screamed and cried and begged. Just about tore his fingernails off digging it up, he was so anxious."
He smiled and put the unit carefully in his pocket.
"We figure we just switch it on," he said. "That should put us straight through to the federal scum, person to person. This stage of the process, we need to talk direct. See if we can persuade them to restore our fax line."
"Terrific plan," Reacher said.
"The fax line is important, you see," Fowler said. "Vital. The world must be allowed to know what we're doing here. The world must be allowed to watch and witness. History is being made here. You understand that, right?"
Reacher stared at the wall.
"They've got cameras, you know," Fowler said. "Surveillance planes are up there right now. Now it's daylight again, they can see what we're doing. So how can we exploit that fact?"
Reacher shook his head.
"You can leave me out of it," he said.
Fowler smiled.
"Of course we'll leave you out of it," he said. "Why would they care about seeing you nailed to a tree? You're nothing but a piece of shit, to us and to them. But Holly Johnson, there's a different story. Maybe we'll call them up on their own little transmitter and tell them to watch us do it with their own spy cameras. That might make them think about it. They might trade a fax line for her left breast."
He ground out his cigarette. Leaned forward. Spoke quietly.
"We're serious here, Reacher," he said. "You saw what we did to Jackson. We could do that to her. We could do that to you. We need to be able to communicate with the world. We need that fax line. So we need the shortwave to confirm what the hell they've done with it. We need those things very badly. You understand that, right? So if you want to avoid a lot of unnecessary pain, for you and for her, you better tell me what you did to the radio."
Reacher was twisted around, looking at the bookcase. Trying to recall the details of the inexpert translations of the Japanese Pearl Harbor texts he'd read.
"Tell me now," Fowler said softly. "I can keep them away from you and from

her. No pain for either of you. Otherwise, nothing I can do about it."
He laid his Glock on the desk.
"You want a cigarette?" he asked.
He held out the pack. Smiled. The good cop. The friend. The ally. The protector. The oldest routine in the book. Requiring the oldest response. Reacher glanced around. Two guards, one on each side of him, the right-hand guard nearer, the left-hand guard back almost against the side wall. Rifles held easy in the crook of their arms. Fowler behind the desk, holding out the pack. Reacher shrugged and nodded. Took a cigarette with his free right hand. He hadn't smoked in ten years, but when somebody offers you a lethal weapon, you take it.
"So tell me," Fowler said. "And be quick."
He thumbed his lighter and held it out. Reacher bent forward and lit his cigarette from the flame. Took a deep draw and leaned back. The smoke felt good. Ten years, and he still enjoyed it. He inhaled deeply and took another lungful.
"How did you disable our radio?" Fowler asked.
Reacher took a third pull. Trickled the smoke out of his nose and held the cigarette like a sentry does, between the thumb and forefinger, palm hooded around it. Take quick deep pulls, and the coal on the end of a cigarette heats up to a couple of thousand degrees. Lengthens to a point. He rotated his palm, like he was studying the glowing tip while he thought about something, until the cigarette was pointing straight forward like an arrow.
"How did you disable our radio?" Fowler asked again.
"You'll hurt Holly if I don't tell you?" Reacher asked back.
Fowler nodded. Smiled his lipless smile.
"That's a promise," he said. "I'll hurt her so bad, she'll be begging to die."
Reacher shrugged unhappily. Sketched a listen-up gesture. Fowler nodded and shuffled on his chair and leaned close. Reacher snapped forward and jammed the cigarette into his eye. Fowler screamed and Reacher was on his feet, the chair cuffed to his wrist clattering after him. He wind-milled right and the chair swung through a wide arc and smashed against the nearer guard's head. It splintered and jerked away as Reacher danced to his left. He caught the farther guard with a forearm smash to the throat as his rifle came up. Snapped back and hit Fowler with the wreckage of the chair. Used the follow-through momentum to swing back to the first guard. Finished him with an elbow to the head. The guy went down. Reacher grabbed his rifle by the barrel and swung straight back at the other guard. Felt skull bones explode under the butt. He dropped the rifle and spun and smashed the chair to pieces against Fowler's shoulders. Grabbed him by the ears and smashed his face into the desktop, once, twice, three times. Took a leg from the broken chair and jammed it crossways under his throat. Folded his

elbows around each exposed end and locked his hands together. Tested his grip and bunched his shoulders. Jerked hard, once, and broke Fowler's neck against the chair leg with a single loud crunch.

He took both rifles and the Glock and the handcuff key. Out the door and around to the back of the hut. Straight into the trees. He put the Glock in his pocket. Took the handcuff off his wrist. Put a rifle in each hand. Breathing hard. He was in pain. Swinging the heavy wooden chair had opened the red weal on his wrist into a wound. He raised it to his mouth and sucked at it and buttoned the cuff of his shirt over it.

Then he heard a helicopter. The faint bass thumping of a heavy twin-rotor machine, a Boeing, a Sea Knight or a Chinook, far to the southeast. He thought: last night Borken talked about eight Marines. They've only got eight Marines, he said. The Marines use Sea Knights. He thought: they're going for a frontal assault. Holly's paneled walls flashed into his mind and he set off racing through the trees.

He got as far as the Bastion. The thumping from the air built louder. He risked stepping out onto the stony path. It was a Chinook. Not a Sea Knight. Search-and-rescue markings, not Marine Corps. It was following the road up from the southeast, a mile away, a hundred feet up, using its vicious downdraft to part the surrounding foliage and aid its search. It looked slow and ponderous, hanging nose down in the air, yawing slightly from side to side as it approached. Reacher guessed it must be pretty close to the town of Yorke itself.

Then he glanced into the clearing and saw a guy, fifty yards away. A grunt, camouflage fatigues. A Stinger on his shoulder. Turning and aiming through the crude open sight. He saw him acquire the target. The guy steadied himself and stood with his feet apart. His hand fumbled for the activator. The missile's infrared sensor turned on. Reacher waited for the IFF to shut it down. It didn't happen. The missile started squealing its high-pitched tone. It was locked on the heat from the Chinook's engines. The guy's finger tightened on the trigger. Reacher dropped the rifle in his left hand. Swung the other one up and clicked the safety off with his thumb as he did so. Stepped to his left and leaned his shoulder on a tree. Aimed at the guy's head and fired.

But the guy fired first. A fraction of a second before Reacher's bullet killed him, he pulled the Stinger's trigger. Two things happened. The Stinger's rocket motor lit up. It exploded along its launch tube. Then the guy was hit in the head. The impact knocked him sideways. The launcher caught the rear of the missile and flipped it. It came out and stalled tail down in the air like a javelin, cushioned on the thrust of its launch, virtually motionless.

Then it corrected itself. Reacher watched in horror as it did exactly what it was

designed to do. Its eight little wings popped out. It hung almost vertical until it acquired the helicopter again. Then its second-stage rocket lit up and it blasted into the sky. Before the guy's body hit the ground, it was homing in on the Chinook at a thousand miles an hour.

The Chinook was lumbering steadily northwest. A mile away. Following the road. The road ran straight up through the town. Between the abandoned buildings. On the southeast corner the first building it passed was the courthouse. The Chinook was closing on it at eighty miles an hour. The Stinger was heading in to meet it at a thousand miles an hour.

One mile at a thousand miles an hour. One thousandth of an hour. A fraction over three and a half seconds. It felt like a lifetime to Reacher. He watched the missile all the way. A wonderful, brutal weapon. A simple, unshakable purpose. Designed to recognize the exact heat signature of aircraft exhaust, designed to follow it until it either got there or ran out of fuel. A simple three-and-a-half-second mission.

The Chinook pilot saw it early. He wasted the first second of its flight, frozen. Not in horror, not in fear, just in simple disbelief that a heat-seeking missile had been fired at him from a small wooded clearing in Montana. Then his instinct and training took over. Evade and avoid. Evade the missile, avoid crashing on settlements below. Reacher saw him throw the nose down and the tail up. The big Chinook wheeled away and spewed a wide fan of exhaust into the atmosphere. Then the tail flipped the other way, engines screaming, superheated fumes spraying another random arc. The missile patiently followed the first curve. Tightened its radius. The Chinook dropped slowly and then rose violently in the air. Spiraled upward and away from the town. The missile turned and followed the second arc. Arrived at where the heat had been a split second before. Couldn't find it. It turned a full lazy circle right underneath the helicopter. Caught an echo of the new maneuver and set about climbing a relentless new spiral.

The pilot won an extra second, but that was all. The Stinger caught him right at the top of his desperate climb. It followed the trail of heat all the way into the starboard engine itself. Exploded hard against the exhaust nacelle.

Six and a half pounds of high explosive against ten tons of aircraft, but the explosive always wins. Reacher saw the starboard engine disintegrate, then the rear rotor housing blow off. Shattered fragments of the drivetrain exploded outward like shrapnel and the rotor detached and spun away in terrible slow motion. The Chinook stalled in the air and fell, tail down, checked only by the screaming forward rotor, and slowly spun to the earth, like a holed ship slips slowly below the sea.

HOLLY HEARD THE helicopter. She heard the low-frequency beat pulsing faintly through her walls. She heard it grow louder. Then she heard the explosion and the shriek of the forward rotor grabbing the air. Then she heard nothing. She jammed her elbow into her crutch and limped across to the diagonal partition. The prison room was completely empty except for the mattress. So her search was going to have to start again in the bathroom.

"ONLY ONE QUESTION,"Webster said. "How long can we keep the lid on this?"
General Johnson said nothing in reply. Neither did his aide. Webster moved his gaze across to Garber. Garber was looking grim.
"Not too damn long," he said.
"But how long?" Webster asked. "A day? An hour?"
"Six hours," Garber said.
"Why?" McGrath asked.
"Standard procedure," Garber said. "They'll investigate the crash, obviously. Normally they'd send another chopper out. But not if there's a suspicion of ground fire. So they'll come by road from Malmstrom. Six hours."
Webster nodded. Turned to Johnson.
"Can you delay them, General?" he asked.
Johnson shook his head.
"Not really," he said. His voice was low and resigned. "They just lost a Chinook. Crew of two. I can't call them and say, do me a favor, don't investigate that. I could try, I guess, and they might agree at first, but it would leak, and then we'd be back where we started. Might gain us an hour."
Webster nodded.
"Seven hours, six hours, what's the difference?" he said.
Nobody replied.
"We've got to move now," McGrath said. "Forget the White House. We can't wait any longer. We need to do something right now, people. Six hours from now, the whole situation blows right out of control. We'll lose her."
Six hours is three hundred and sixty minutes. They wasted the first two sitting in silence. Johnson stared into space. Webster drummed his fingers on the table. Garber stared at McGrath, a wry expression on his face. McGrath was staring at the map. Milosevic and Brogan were standing in the silence, holding the brown bags of breakfast and the Styrofoam cups.
"Coffee here, anybody wants it," Brogan said.
Garber waved him over.

“Eat and plan,” he said.
“Map,” Johnson said.
McGrath slid the map across the table. They all sat forward. Back in motion. Three hundred and fifty-eight minutes to go.
“Ravine’s about four miles north of us,” the aide said. “All we got is eight Marines in a LAV-25.”
“That tank thing?” McGrath asked.
The aide shook his head.
“Light armored vehicle,” he said. “LAV. Eight wheels, no tracks.”
“Bulletproof?” Webster asked.
“For sure,” the aide said. “They can drive it all the way to Yorke.”
“If it gets through the ravine,” Garber said.
Johnson nodded.
“That’s the big question,” he said. “We need to go take a look.”

THE LIGHT ARMORED vehicle looked just like a tank to McGrath’s hasty civilian glance, except there were eight wheels on it instead of tracks. The hull was welded up out of brutal sloping armor plates and there was a turret with a gun. The driver sat forward, and the commander sat in the turret. In the rear, two rows of three Marines sat back to back, facing weapon ports. Each port had its own periscope. McGrath could visualize the vehicle rumbling into battle, invulnerable, weapons bristling out of those ports. Down into the ravine, up the other side, along the road to Yorke to the courthouse. He pulled Webster to one side and spoke urgently.
“We never told them,” he said. “About the dynamite in the walls.”
“And we’re not going to,” Webster said quietly. “The old guy would freak out. He’s close to falling apart right now. I’m going to tell the Marines direct. They’re going in there. They’ll have to deal with it. Makes no difference if Johnson knows in advance or not.”
McGrath intercepted Johnson and Webster ran over to the armored vehicle. McGrath saw the Marine commander leaning down from the turret. Saw him nodding and grimacing as Webster spoke. Then the General’s aide fired up the Army Chevrolet. Johnson and Garber crammed into the front with him. McGrath jumped in back. Brogan and Milosevic crushed in alongside him.
Webster finished up and raced back to the Chevy. Squeezed in next to Milosevic. The LAV fired up its big diesel with a blast of black smoke. Then it crunched into gear and lumbered off north. The Chevy accelerated in its wake.

FOUR MILES NORTH, they crested a slight rise and entered a curve. Slowed

and jammed to a stop in the lee of a craggy outcrop. The Marine commander vaulted down from the turret and ran north on the road. Webster and Johnson and McGrath got out and hurried after him. They paused together in the lee of the rock face and crept around the curve. Stared out and down into the ravine. It was an intimidating sight.

It ran left to right in front of them, more or less straight. And it was not just a trench. It was a trench and a step. The whole crust of the earth had fractured, and the southern plate had fallen below the level of the northern plate. Like adjacent sections of an old concrete highway, where a car thumps up an inch at the seam. Expanded to geological size, that inch was a fifty-foot disparity.

Where the earth had fractured and fallen, the edges had broken up into giant boulders. The scouring of the glaciers had tumbled those boulders south. The ice and the heave and the weather over a million years had raked out the fracture and turned it into a trench. It had cut back the rock plates to where they became solid again. Some places, it had carved a hundred-yard width. Other places, tougher seams of rock had kept the gap down to twenty yards.

Then the roots of a thousand generations of trees and the frozen water of the winters had eroded the edges until there was a steep ragged descent to the bottom and a steep ragged rise back up the northern side to the top, fifty feet higher than the starting point. There were stunted trees and tangled undergrowth and rock slides. The road itself was lifted progressively on concrete trestles and rose gently across a bridge. Then more concrete trestles set it down on the level ground to the north and it snaked away through the forest into the mountains.

But the bridge was blown. Charges had been exploded against the two center trestles. A twenty-foot section of the center span had fallen a hundred feet into the trench. The four men in the lee of the outcrop could see fragments of the road lying shattered in the bottom of the ravine.

“What do you think?” Johnson asked urgently.

The Marine commander was giving it a fast sweep through his field glasses. Left and right, up and down, examining the exact terrain.

“I think it’s shit, sir,” he said.

“Can you get through?” Johnson asked him.

The guy lowered his field glasses and shook his head.

“Not a hope in hell,” he said.

He stepped across shoulder to shoulder with the General, so Johnson could share the same line of sight. Started talking rapidly and pointing as he did so.

“We could get down to the bottom,” he said. “We could go in right there, where the rock slide gives us a reasonable descent. But getting up the other side is the problem, sir. The LAV can’t climb much more than forty-five degrees. Most of the north face looks a lot steeper than that. Some places, it’s near enough

the north face looks a lot steeper than that. Some places, it's near enough vertical. Any gentle slopes are overgrown. And they've felled trees. See there, sir?"
He pointed to a wooded area on the slope opposite. Trees had been felled and left lying with their chopped ends facing south.
"Abatises," the Marine said. "The vehicle is going to stall against them. No doubt about that. Coming uphill, slowly, those things would stop a tank. We go in there, we'll be trapped in the ditch, no doubt at all."
"So what the hell do we do?" Johnson said.
The Marine officer shrugged.
"Bring me some engineers," he said. "The gap they blew is only about twenty feet wide. We can bridge that."
"How long will that take?" Webster asked.
The Marine shrugged again.
"All the way up here?" he said. "Six hours? Maybe eight?"
"Way too long," Webster said.
Then the radio receiver in McGrath's pocket started crackling.

39

REACHER WAS HIDING out in the woods. Worried about the dogs. They were the only thing he wasn't certain about. People, he could handle. Dogs, he had very little experience.

He was in the trees, north of the Bastion, south of the rifle range. He had heard the Chinook hit the ground from a mile away. It hit tail first, smashing and tearing into the wooded slope. It looked to have slipped sideways in the air and missed the courthouse by two hundred yards. No explosions. Not from the courthouse or from the chopper itself. No sound of fuel tanks going up. Reacher was reasonably optimistic for the crew. He figured the trees and the collapse of the big boxy body might have cushioned the impact for them. He had known chopper crews survive worse.

He had an M-16 rifle in his hand and a Glock in his pocket. The Glock was fully loaded. Seventeen shells. The M-16 had the short clip. Twenty shells, less the one that had killed the guy with the missile. The second M-16 had the long clip. A full load of thirty. But it was hidden in the trees. Because Reacher had a rule: choose the weapon you know for certain is in working order.

He felt instinctively that the focus of attention would be in the southeast direction. That was where Holly was being held, and that was where the Chinook had come down. That was where the opposition forces would be massing. He felt people would be turning to face southeast, apprehensively, staring down into the rest of the United States, waiting. So he turned his back and headed northwest.

He moved cautiously. The bulk of the enemy was elsewhere, but he knew there were squads out looking for him. He knew they had already discovered Fowler's body. He had seen two separate patrols, searching the woods. Six men in each, heavily armed, crashing through the undergrowth, searching. Not difficult to avoid. But the dogs would be difficult to avoid. That was why he was worried. That was why he was moving cautiously.

He stayed in the trees and skirted the western end of the rifle range. Tracked back east around the parade ground. Fifty yards north, he turned again and paralleled the road up to the mines. He stayed in the trees and moved at a fast jog. Used the time to start laying out some priorities. And a timescale. He figured he had maybe three hours. Bringing down the Chinook was going to provoke some kind of a violent reaction. No doubt about that. But in all his years in the service, he had never known anything to happen faster than three hours. So he had three hours, and a lot of ground to cover.

So he had three hours, and a lot of ground to cover.
He slowed to a fast walk when the rocky ground started rising under his feet. Followed a wide uphill circle west and cut straight in to the edge of the bowl where the mine entrances were. He heard diesel engines idling. He bent double and crept across to the cover of a rock. Looked out and down.
He was just above halfway up the slope surrounding the bowl. Looking more or less due east across its diameter. The log doors of the farther shed were standing open. Four of the missile unit's trucks were standing on the shale. The four with the weapon racks in back. The troop carrier was still inside.
There was a handful of men in the bowl. They were set in an approximate circle around the cluster of trucks. Reacher counted eight guys. Fatigues, rifles, tense limbs. What had the kitchen woman said? The mines were off limits. Except to the people Borken trusted. Reacher watched them. Eight trusted lieutenants, acting out a reasonable imitation of sentry duty.
He watched them for a couple of minutes. Slid his rifle to his shoulder. He was less than a hundred yards away. He could hear the rattle of the shale as the sentries moved around. He clicked the selector to the single-shot position. He had nineteen shells in the box, and he needed to fire a minimum of eight. He needed to be cautious with ammunition.
The M-16 is a good rifle. Easy to use, easy to maintain. Easy to aim. The carrying handle has a grooved top which lines up with an identical groove in the front sight. At a hundred yards, you squint down the handle groove and let it merge with the front groove, and what you see is what you hit. Reacher rested his weight on the rock and lined up the first target. Practiced the slight sweep that would take him onto the second. And the third. He rehearsed the full sequence of eight shots. He didn't want his elbow snagging somewhere in the middle.
He returned to the first target. Waited a beat and fired. The sound of the shot crashed through the mountains. The right front tire of the first truck exploded. He swept the sights onto the left front. Fired again. The truck dropped to its rims like a stunned ox falling to its knees.
He kept firing steadily. He had fired five shots and hit five tires before anybody reacted. As he fired the sixth he saw in the corner of his eye the sentries diving for cover. Some were just dropping to the ground. Others were running for the shed. He fired the seventh. Paused before the eighth. The farthest tire was the hardest shot. The angle was oblique. The sidewall was unavailable to him. He was going to have to fire at the treads. Possible that the shell might glance off. He fired. He hit. The tire burst. The front of the last truck dropped.
The nearest sentry was still on his feet. Not heading for the shed. Just standing and staring toward the rock Reacher was behind. Raising his rifle. It was an M-

16, same as Reacher's. Long magazine, thirty shells. The guy was standing there, sighting it in on the rock. A brave man, or an idiot. Reacher crouched and waited. The guy fired. His weapon was set on automatic. He loosed off a burst of three. Three shots in a fifth of a second. They smashed into the trees fifteen feet above Reacher's head. Twigs and leaves drifted down and landed near him. The guy ran ten yards closer. Fired again. Three more shells. Way off to Reacher's left. He heard the whine of the bullets and the thunking as they hit the trees before he heard the muzzle blast. Bullets which travel faster than sound do that. You hear it all in reverse order. The bullet gets there before the sound of the shot.

Reacher had decisions to make. How close was he going to let this guy get? And was he going to fire a warning shot? The next burst of three was nearer. Low, but nearer. Not more than six feet way. Reacher decided: not much damn closer, and no warning shot. The guy was all pumped up. No percentage in trying a warning shot. This guy was not going to get calmed down in any kind of a hurry. He lay on his side. Straightened his legs and came out at the base of the rock. Fired once and hit the guy in the chest. He went down in a heap on the shale. The rifle flew off to his right. Reacher stayed where he was. Watched carefully. The guy was still alive. So Reacher fired again. Hit him through the top of the head. Kinder not to leave him with a sucking chest wound for the last ten minutes of his life.

The echoes of the brief firefight died into the mountain silence and then the air was still. The other seven guys were nowhere. The trucks were all resting nose down on their front rims. Disabled. Maybe they could be driven out of the bowl, but the first of the mountain hairpins was going to strip the blown tires right off. The trucks were neutralized. No doubt about that.

Reacher crawled backward ten yards and stood up in the trees. Jogged down the slope and headed back toward the Bastion. Seventeen shells in the Glock, nine in the rifle. Progress, at a price.

THE DOGS FOUND him halfway back. Two big rangy animals. German shepherds. He saw them at the same time as they saw him. They were loping along with that kind of infinite energy big dogs display. Long bounding strides, eager expressions, wet mouths gaping. They stopped short on stiff front legs and switched direction in a single fluid stride. Thirty yards away. Then twenty. Then ten. Acceleration. New energy in their movement. Snarls rising in their throats. People, Reacher was certain about. Dogs were different. People had freedom of choice. If a man or a woman ran snarling toward him, they did so because they chose to. They were asking for whatever they got. His response was their

problem. But dogs were different. No free will. Easily misled. It raised an ethical problem. Shooting a dog because it had been induced to do something unwise was not the sort of thing Reacher wanted to do.
He left the Glock in his pocket. The rifle was better. It was about two and a half feet longer than the handgun. An extra two and a half feet of separation seemed like a good idea. The dogs stopped short of him. The fur on their shoulders was raised. The fur down their backs was raised, following their spines. They crouched, front feet splayed, heads down, snarling loudly. They had yellow teeth. Lots of them. Their eyes were brown. Reacher could see fine dark eyelashes, like a girl's.
One of them was forward of the other. The leader of the pack. He knew dogs had to have a pecking order. Two dogs, one of them had to be superior to the other. Like people. He didn't know how dogs worked it out for themselves. Posturing, maybe. Maybe smell. Maybe fighting. He stared at the forward dog. Stared into its eyes. Time to time, he had heard people talking about dogs. They said: never show fear. Stare the dog down. Don't let it know you're afraid. Reacher wasn't afraid. He was standing there with an M-16 in his hands. The only thing he was worried about was having to use it.
He stared silently at the dog like he used to stare at some service guy gone bad. A hard, silent stare like a physical force, like a cold, crushing pressure. Bleak, cold eyes, unblinking. It had worked a hundred times with people. Now it was working with the lead dog.
The dog was only partially trained. Reacher could see that. It could go through the motions. But it couldn't deliver. It hadn't been trained to ignore its victim's input. It was eye to eye with him, backing off fractionally like his glare was a painful weight on its narrow forehead. Reacher turned up the temperature. Narrowed his eyes and bared his own teeth. Sneered like a tough guy in a bad movie. The dog's head dropped. Its eyes swiveled upward to maintain contact. Its tail dropped down between its legs.
"Sit," Reacher said. He said it calmly but firmly. Plenty of emphasis on the plosive consonant at the end of the word. The dog moved automatically. Shuffled its hind legs inward and sat. The other dog followed suit, like a shadow. They sat side by side and stared up at him.
"Lie down," Reacher said.
The dogs didn't move. Just stayed sitting, looking at him, puzzled. Maybe the wrong word. Not the command they were accustomed to.
"Down," Reacher said.
They slid their front paws forward and dropped their bellies to the forest floor. Looking up at him.

“Stay,” Reacher said.
He gave them a look like he meant it and moved off south. Forced himself to walk slow. Five yards into the trees, he turned. The dogs were still on the ground. Their necks were twisted around, watching him walk away.
“Stay,” he called again.
They stayed. He walked.

HE COULD HEAR people in the Bastion. The sound of a fair-sized crowd trying to keep quiet. He heard it when he was still north of the parade ground. He skirted the area in the trees and walked around the far end of the rifle range. Came through the trees behind the mess hall. Opposite the kitchen door. He walked a circle deep in the woods behind the buildings until he got an angle. Crept forward to take a look.
There were maybe thirty people in the Bastion. They were standing in a tight group. Edging forward into a cluster. All men, all in camouflage fatigues, all heavily armed. Rifles, machine guns, grenade launchers, pockets bulging with spare magazines. The crowd ebbed and flowed. Shoulders touched and parted. Reacher glimpsed Beau Borken in the center of the mass of people. He was holding a small black radio transmitter. Reacher recognized it. It was Jackson’s. Borken had retrieved it from Fowler’s pocket. He was holding it up to his ear. Staring into space like he’d just switched it on and was waiting for a reply.

40

MCGRATH SNATCHED THE radio from his pocket. Flipped it open and stared at it. It was crackling loudly in his hand. Webster stepped forward and took it from him. Ducked back to the cover of the rock face and clicked the button.
“Jackson?” he said. “This is Harland Webster.”
McGrath and Johnson crowded in on him. The three men crouched against the rock wall. Webster moved the unit an inch from his ear so the other two could listen in. In the cover of the rock, in the silence of the mountains, they could hear it crackling and hissing and the fast breathing of a person on the other end. Then they heard a voice.
“Harland Webster?” the voice said. “Well, well, the head man himself.”
“Jackson?” Webster said again.
“No,” the voice said. “This is not Jackson.”
Webster glanced at McGrath.
“So who is it?” he asked.
“Beau Borken,” the voice said. “And as of today, I guess that’s President Borken. President of the Free States of America. But feel free to speak informally.”
“Where’s Jackson?” Webster asked.
There was a pause. Nothing to hear except the faint electronic sound of FBI telecommunications technology. Satellites and microwaves.
“Where’s Jackson?” Webster asked again.
“He died,” the voice said.
Webster glanced at McGrath again.
“How?” he asked.
“Just died,” Borken said. “Relatively quickly, really.”
“Was he sick?” Webster asked.
There was another pause. Then there was the sound of laughter. A high, tinny sound. A loud, shrieking laugh which overloaded Webster’s earpiece and spilled into distortion and bounced off the rock wall.
“No, he wasn’t sick, Webster,” Borken said. “He was pretty healthy, up until the last ten minutes.”
“What did you do to him?” Webster asked.
“Same as I’m going to do to the General’s little girl,” Borken said. “Listen up, and I’ll tell you the exact details. You need to pay attention, because you need to know what you’re dealing with here. We’re serious here. We mean business, you understand? You listening?”

understand? You listening?
Johnson pushed in close. White and sweating.
“You crazy bastards,” he yelled.
“Who’s that?” Borken asked. “That the General himself?”
“General Johnson,” Webster said.
There was a chuckle on the radio. Just a short, satisfied sound.
“A full house,” Borken said. “The Director of the FBI and the Joint Chairman. We’re flattered, believe me. But I guess the birth of a new nation deserves nothing less.”
“What do you want?” Webster asked.
“We crucified him,” Borken said. “We found a couple of trees a yard apart, and we nailed him up. We’re going to do that to your daughter, General, if you step out of line. Then we cut his balls off. He was pleading and screaming for us not to, but we did it anyway. We can’t do that to your kid, her being a woman and all, but we’ll find some equivalent, you know what I mean? Do you think she’ll be screaming and pleading, General? You know her better than me. Personally, I’m betting she will be. She likes to think she’s a tough cookie, but when she sees those blades coming close, she’s going to change her damn tune pretty quick, I’m just about sure of that.”
Johnson turned whiter. All his blood just drained away. He fell back and sat heavily against the rock. His mouth was working soundlessly.
“What the hell do you bastards want?” Webster yelled.
There was another silence. Then the voice came back, quiet and firm.
“I want you to stop yelling,” it said. “I want you to apologize for yelling at me. I want you to apologize for calling me a rude name. I’m the President of the Free States, and I’m owed some courtesy and deference, wouldn’t you say?”
His voice was quiet, but McGrath heard it clearly enough. He looked across at Webster in panic. They were close to losing, before they had even started. First rule was to negotiate. To keep them talking, and gradually gain the upper hand. Establish dominance. Classic siege theory. But to start out by apologizing for yelling was to kiss goodbye any hope of dominance. That was to lie down and roll over. From that point on, you were their plaything. McGrath shook his head urgently. Webster nodded back. Said nothing. Just held the radio without speaking. He knew how to do this. He had been in this situation before. Several times. He knew the protocol. Now, the first one to speak was the weaker one. And it wasn’t going to be him. He and McGrath gazed at the ground and waited.
“You still there?” Borken asked.
Webster kept on staring down. Saying nothing.
“You there?” Borken said again.
“What’s on your mind, Beau?” Webster asked, calmly.

There was angry breathing over the air.
“You cut my phone line,” Borken said. “I want it restored.”
“No, we didn’t,” Webster said. “Doesn’t your phone work?”
“My faxes,” Borken said. “I got no response.”
“What faxes?” Webster said.
“Don’t bullshit me,” Borken said. “I know you cut the line. I want it fixed.”
Webster winked at McGrath.
“OK,” he said. “We can do that. But you’ve got to do something for us first.”
“What?” Borken asked.
“Holly,” Webster said. “Bring her down to the bridge and leave her there.”
There was another silence. Then the laughter started up again. High and loud.
“No dice,” Borken said. “And no deals.”
Webster nodded to himself. Lowered his voice. Sounded like the most reasonable man on earth.
“Listen, Mr. Borken,” he said. “If we can’t deal, how can we help each other?”
Another silence. McGrath stared at Webster. The next reply was crucial. Win or lose.
“You listen to me, Webster,” the voice said. “No deals. You don’t do exactly what I say, Holly dies. In a lot of pain. I hold all the cards, and I’m not doing deals. You understand that?”
Webster’s shoulders slumped. McGrath looked away.
“Restore the fax line,” the voice said. “I need communications. The world must know what we’re doing here. This is a big moment in history, Webster. I won’t be denied by your stupid games. The world must witness the first blows being struck against your tyranny.”
Webster stared at the ground.
“This decision is too big for you alone,” Borken said. “You need to consult with the White House. There’s an interest there too, wouldn’t you say?”
Even over the tinny handheld radio, the force of Borken’s voice was obvious. Webster was flinching like a physical weight was against his ear. Flinching and gasping, as his heart and lungs fought each other for space inside his chest.
“Make your decision,” Borken said. “I’ll call back in two minutes.”
Then the radio went dead. Webster stared at it like he had never seen such a piece of equipment before. McGrath leaned over and clicked the button off.
“OK,” he said. “We stall, right? Tell him we’re fixing the line. Tell him it will take an hour, maybe two. Tell him we’re in contact with the White House, the UN, CNN, whoever. Tell him whatever the hell he wants to hear.”
“Why is he doing this?” Webster asked, vaguely. “Escalating everything? He’s making it so we have to attack him. So we have to, right? Like he wants us to.

He's giving us no choice. He's provoking us."
"He's doing it because he's crazy," McGrath said.
"He must be," Webster said. "He's a maniac. Otherwise I just can't understand why he's trying to attract so much attention. Because like he says, he holds all the cards already."
"We'll worry about that later, chief," McGrath said. "Right now, we just need to stall him."
Webster nodded. Forced himself back to the problem in hand.
"But we need longer than two hours," he said. "Hostage Rescue will take at least four to get over here. Maybe five, maybe six."
"OK, it's the Fourth of July," McGrath said. "Tell him the linemen are all off duty. Tell him it could take us all day to get them back."
They stared at each other. Glanced at Johnson. He was right out of it. Just slumped against the rock face, white and inert, barely breathing. Ninety hours of mortal stress and emotion had finally broken him. Then the radio in Webster's hand crackled again.
"Well?" Borken asked, when the static cleared.
"OK, we agree," Webster said. "We'll fix the line. But it's going to take some time. Linemen are off duty for the holidays."
There was a pause. Then a chuckle.
"Independence Day," Borken said. "Maybe I should have chosen another date."
Webster made no reply.
"I want your Marines where I can see them," Borken said.
"What Marines?" Webster said.
There was another short laugh. Short and complacent.
"You got eight Marines," Borken said. "And an armored car. We got lookouts all over the place. We've been watching you. Like you're watching us with those damn planes. You're lucky Stingers don't shoot that high, or you'd have more than a damn helicopter on the ground by now."
Webster made no reply. Just scanned the horizon. McGrath was doing the same thing, automatically, looking for the glint of the sun on field glasses.
"I figure you're close to the bridge right now," Borken said. "Am I right?"
Webster shrugged. McGrath prompted him with a nod.
"We're close to the bridge," Webster said.
"I want the Marines on the bridge," Borken said. "Sitting on the edge in a neat little row. Their vehicle behind them. I want that to happen now, you understand? Or we go to work on Holly. Your choice, Webster. Or maybe it's the General's choice. His daughter, and his Marines, right?"
Johnson roused himself and glanced up. Five minutes later the Marines were

sitting on the fractured edge of the roadway, feet dangling down into the abyss. Their LAV was parked up behind them. Webster was still in the lee of the rock face with McGrath and Johnson. The radio still pressed to his ear. He could hear muffled sounds. Like Borken had pressed his hand over the microphone and was using a walkie-talkie. He could hear his muffled voice alternating with crackly replies. Then he heard the hand come away and the voice come back again, loud and clear in the earpiece.

"OK, Webster, good work," Borken said to him. "Our scouts can see all eight of them. So can our riflemen. If they move, they die. Who else have you got there with you?"

Webster paused. McGrath shook his head urgently.

"Can't you see?" Webster asked. "I thought you were watching us."

"Not right now," Borken said. "I pulled my people back a little. Into our defensive positions."

"There's nobody else here," Webster said. "Just me and the General."

There was another pause.

"OK, you two can join the Marines," Borken said. "On the bridge. On the end of the line."

Webster waited for a long moment. A blank expression on his face. Then he got up and nodded to Johnson. Johnson got up unsteadily and the two of them walked forward together around the curve. Left McGrath on his own, crouched in the lee of the rock.

MCGRATH WAITED THERE two minutes and crawled back south to the Chevrolet. Garber and Johnson's aide were in front and Milosevic and Brogan were in back. They were all staring at him.

"What the hell happened?" Brogan asked.

"We're in deep, deep shit," McGrath said.

Two minutes of hurried explanation, and the others agreed with him.

"So what now?" Garber asked.

"We go get Holly," McGrath said. "Before he realizes we're bullshitting him."

"But how?" Brogan asked.

McGrath glanced at him. Glanced at Milosevic.

"The three of us," he said. "End of the day, this is a Bureau affair. Call it whatever you want, terrorism, sedition, kidnapping, it's all FBI territory."

"We're going to do it?" Milosevic said. "Just the three of us? Right now?"

"You got a better way?" McGrath said. "You want something done properly, you do it yourself, right?"

Garber was twisted around, scanning along the three faces on the rear seat.

“So go do it,” he said.
McGrath nodded and held up his right hand, the thumb and the first two fingers sticking out.
“I’m the thumb,” he said. “I go in east of the road. Brogan, you’re the first finger. You walk a mile west of the road and go in from there. Milo, you’re the second finger. You walk two miles west and go north from there. We infiltrate separately, spaced out a mile between each of us. We meet up back on the road a half-mile shy of the town. Clear?”
Brogan made a face. Then he nodded. Milosevic shrugged. Garber glanced at McGrath and the General’s aide started the Chevy and rolled it gently south. He stopped it again after four hundred yards, where the road came back out of the rock cover and there was clear access left and right into the countryside. The three FBI men checked their weapons. They each had a government-issue .38 in a shiny brown leather shoulder holster. Full load of six, plus another six in a speedloader in their pockets.
“Try to capture a couple of rifles,” McGrath said. “Don’t worry about taking prisoners. You see somebody, you shoot the bastard down, OK?”
Milosevic had the longest walk, so he was first to go. He ducked across the road and struck out due west across the mountain scrub. He made it to a small stand of trees and disappeared. McGrath lit a cigarette and sent Brogan after him. Garber waited until Brogan was in the trees, then he turned back to McGrath.
“Don’t forget what I told you about Reacher,” he said. “I’m not wrong about that guy. He’s on your side, believe me.”
McGrath shrugged and said nothing. Smoked in silence. Opened the Chevy’s door and slid out. Ground out the cigarette under his shoe and walked away east, across the grassy shoulder and onto the scrub.

MCGRATH WAS NOT far off fifty, and a heavy smoker, but he was a fit man. He had that type of mongrel constitution that age and smoke could not hurt. He was short at five seven, but sturdy. About one-sixty, made up of that hard slabby muscle which needs no maintenance and never fades into fat. He felt the same as he had as a kid. No better, no worse. His Bureau training had been a long time ago, and fairly rudimentary compared to what people were getting now. But he’d aced it. Physically, he’d been indestructible. Not the fastest guy in his class, but easily the best stamina. The training runs in the early days of Quantico had been crude. Around and around in the Virginia woods, using natural obstacles. McGrath would come in maybe third or fourth every time. But if they were sent around again, he could do the same exact time, just about to the second. The faster guys would be struggling at his side as he pounded relentlessly onward.

Then they would fall back. Second time around, McGrath would come in first. Third time around, he would be the only guy to finish.

So he was jogging comfortably as he approached the southern edge of the ravine. He had worked about three hundred yards east to a point where the slopes were reasonable and not directly overlooked. He went straight down without pausing. Short, stiff strides against the incline. The footing was loose. He skidded on small avalanches of gravel and used the stunted trees to check his speed. He dodged around the litter of rocks in the bottom of the trench and started up the northern slope.

Going up was harder. He kicked his toes into the gravel for grip and hauled himself upward with handfuls of grass. He zigzagged between the small trees and bushes, looking for leverage. The extra fifty feet on the northern rim was a punishment. He tracked right to where a small landslide had created a straight path at a kinder angle. Slipped and slid upward through the crushed rock to the top.

He waited in the overhang, where the earth had fallen away beneath the crust of roots. Listened hard. Heard nothing except silence. He lifted himself onto the rim. Stood there with his chest against the earth, head and shoulders exposed, looking north into enemy territory. He saw nothing. Just the gentle initial slopes, then the hills, then the giant mountains glowering in the far distance. Blue sky, a million trees, clean air, total silence. He thought: you're a long way from Chicago, Mack.

Ahead of him was a belt of scrub where the ancient rock was too close to the surface for much to grow. Then a ragged belt of trees, interrupted at first by rocky outcrops, then growing denser into the distance. He could see the curved gap in the treetops where the road must run. Three hundred yards to his left. He rolled up onto the grass and ran for the trees. Worked left toward the road and shadowed it north in the forest.

He jogged along, dodging trees like a slow-motion parody of a wide receiver heading for the end zone. The map was printed in his mind. He figured he had maybe three miles to go. Three miles at a slow jog, not much better than a fast walk, maybe forty-five, fifty minutes. The ground was rising gently under his feet. Every fourth or fifth stride, his feet hit the floor a fraction sooner than they should have as the gradient lifted him into the hills. He tripped a couple of times on roots. Once, he slammed into a pine trunk. But he pounded on, relentlessly.

After forty minutes, he stopped. He figured Brogan and Milosevic were having a similar journey, but they were dealing with extra distance because they had tracked west at the outset. So he expected a delay. With luck, they would be about twenty minutes behind him. He walked deeper into the woods and sat down against a trunk. Lit a cigarette. He figured he was maybe a half-mile shy of

down against a trunk. Lit a cigarette. He figured he was maybe a half-mile shy of the rendezvous. The map in his head said the road was about due to arrow up into the town.
He waited fifteen minutes. Two cigarettes. Then he stood up and walked on. He went cautiously. He was getting close. He made two diversions to his left and found the road. Just crept through the trees until he caught the gleam of sun on the gray cement. Then he dodged back and continued north. He walked until he saw the forest thinning ahead. He saw sunlight on open spaces beyond the last trees. He stopped and stepped left and right to find a view. He saw the road running up to the town. He saw buildings. A gray ruin on a knoll on the left. The courthouse on the right. Better preserved. Gleaming white in the sunshine. He stared through the trees at it for a long moment. Then he turned back. Paced five hundred yards back into the woods. Drifted over toward the road until he could just make out the gray gleam through the trees. Leaned on a trunk and waited for Brogan and Milosevic.

THIS TIME, HE resisted the attraction of another cigarette. He had learned a long time ago that to smoke while in hiding was not a smart thing to do. The smell drifts, and a keen nose can detect it. So he leaned on the tree and stared down in frustration. Stared at his shoes. They were ruined from the scramble up the north face of the ravine. He had jabbed them hard into the rocky slope and they were scratched to pieces. He stared at the ruined toe caps and instantly knew he had been betrayed. Panic rose in his throat. His chest seized hard. It hit him like a prison door swinging gently shut. It swung soundlessly inward on greased hinges and clanged shut right in his face.
What had Borken said on the radio? He had said: like you're watching us with those damn planes. But what had the General's aide told him back in the Butte office? You look up and you see a tiny vapor trail and you think it's TWA. You don't think it's the Air Force checking if you've shined your shoes this morning. So how did Borken know there were surveillance planes in the sky? Because he had been told. But by who? Who the hell knew?
He glanced around wildly and the first thing he saw was a dog coming at him from dead ahead. Then another. They bounded through the trees at him. He heard a sound from behind him. The crunch of feet and the flick of branches. Then the same sound from his right. The snicking and slapping of a weapon from his left. The dogs were at his feet. He spun in a panic-stricken circle. All around him men were coming at him through the trees. Lean, bearded men, in camouflage gear, carrying rifles and machine guns. Grenades slung from their webbing. Maybe fifteen or twenty men. They stepped forward calmly and purposefully. They were in a complete ring, right around him. He turned one

purposefully. They were in a complete ring, right around him. He turned one way, then the other. He was surrounded. They were raising their weapons. He had fifteen or twenty automatic weapons pointing straight at him like spokes in a wheel.

They stood silent, weapons ready. McGrath glanced from one to the next, in a complete wide circle. Then one of them stepped forward. Some kind of an officer. His hand went straight in under McGrath's jacket. Jerked the .38 out of his holster. Then the guy's hand went into McGrath's pocket. Closed over the speedloader and pulled it out. The guy slipped both items into his own pocket and smiled. Swung his fist and hit McGrath in the face. McGrath staggered and was prodded back forward with the muzzle of a rifle. Then he heard tires on the road. The grumble of a motor. He glanced left and caught a flash of olive green in the sun. A jeep. Two men in it. The soldiers pressed in and forced him out of the forest. They jostled him through the trees and onto the shoulder. He blinked in the sun. He could feel his nose was bleeding. The jeep rolled forward and stopped alongside him. The driver stared at him with curiosity. Another lean, bearded man in uniform. In the passenger seat was a huge man wearing black. Beau Borken. McGrath recognized him from his Bureau file photograph. He stared at him. Then Borken leaned over and grinned.

"Hello, Mr. McGrath," he said. "You made good time."

43

FOR THE FIRST time in twenty years, General Garber had killed a man. He hadn't meant to. He had meant to lay the man out and take his weapon. That was all. The man was part of an inner screen of sentries. They were posted at haphazard intervals in a line a hundred yards south of the courthouse. Garber had trawled back and forth in the woods and scoped them out. A ragged line of sentries, maybe forty or fifty yards between each one, two on the shoulders of the road and the rest in the forest.

Garber had selected the one nearest to a straight line between himself and the big white building. The man was going to have to move. Garber needed direct access. And he needed a weapon. So he had selected the man and worked nearer to him. He had scraped up a fist-sized rock from the damp forest floor. He had worked around behind him.

Their lack of training made the whole thing easy. A sentry screen should be mobile. They should be moving side to side along the length of the perimeter they are told to defend. That way, they cover every inch of the territory, and they find out if the next man in line has been ambushed and dumped on the floor. But these men were static. Just standing there. Watching and listening. Bad tactic.

The selected man was wearing a forage cap. It was camouflaged with the wrong camouflage. It was a black and gray interrupted pattern. Carefully designed to be very effective in an urban environment. Useless in a sun-dappled forest. Garber had come up behind the man and swung the rock. Hit him neatly on the back of the head.

Hit him too hard. Problem was, people are different. There's no set amount of impact that will do it. Not like playing pool. You want to roll the ball into the corner pocket, you know just about exactly how hard you need to cue. But skulls are different. Some are hard. This man's wasn't. It cracked like an eggshell and the spinal cord severed right up at the top and the man was dead before he hit the ground.

"Shit," Garber breathed.

He wasn't worried about the ethics of the situation. Not worried about that at all. Thirty years of dealing with hard men gone bad had defined a whole lot of points for him, ethically. He was worried about buzzards. Unconscious men don't attract them. Dead men do. Buzzards circling overhead spread information. They tell the other sentries: one of your number is dead.

So Garber changed his plan slightly. He took the dead man's M-16 and moved forward farther than he really wanted to. He moved up to within twenty yards of

forward farther than he really wanted to. He moved up to within twenty yards of where the trees petered out. He worked left and right until he saw a rock outcrop, ten yards beyond the edge of the woods. That would be the site of his next cautious penetration. He slipped behind a tree and squatted down. Stripped the rifle and checked its condition. Reassembled it, and waited.

HARLAND WEBSTER ROLLED back the videotape for the fourth time and watched the action again. The puff of pink mist, the guard going down, the second guard taking off, the camera's sudden jerked zoom out to cover the whole of the clearing, the second guard silently sprawling. Then a long pause. Then Reacher's crazy sprint. Reacher tossing bodies out of the way, slashing at the ropes, bundling McGrath to safety.
"We made a mistake about that guy," Webster said.
General Johnson nodded.
"I wish Garber was still here," he said. "I owe him an apology."
"Planes are low on fuel," the aide said into the silence.
Johnson nodded again.
"Send one back," he said. "We don't need both of them up there anymore. Let them spell each other."
The aide called Peterson and within half a minute three of the six screens in the vehicle went blank as the outer plane peeled off and headed south. The inner plane relaxed its radius and zoomed its camera out to cover the whole area. The close-up of the clearing fell away to the size of a quarter and the big white courthouse swam into view, bottom right-hand corner of the screens. Three identical views on three glowing screens, one for each of them. They hunched forward in their chairs and stared. The radio in Webster's pocket started crackling.
"Webster?" Borken's voice said. "You there?"
"I'm here," Webster replied.
"What's with the plane?" Borken said. "You losing interest or something?"
For a second, Webster wondered how he knew. Then he remembered the vapor trails. They were like a diagram, up there in the sky.
"Who was it?" he asked. "Brogan or Milosevic?"
"What's with the plane?" Borken asked again.
"Low fuel," Webster said. "It'll be back."
There was a pause. Then Borken's voice came back.
"OK," he said.
"So who was it?" Webster asked again. "Brogan or Milosevic?"
But the radio just went dead on him. He clicked the button off and caught Johnson looking at him. Johnson's face was saying: the military man turned out

good and the Bureau guy turned out bad. Webster shrugged. Tried to make it rueful. Tried to make it mean: we both made mistakes. But Johnson's face said: you should have known.
"Could be a problem, right?" the aide said. "Brogan and Milosevic? Whichever one is the good guy, he still thinks Reacher's his enemy. And whichever one is the bad guy, he knows Reacher's his enemy."
Webster looked away. Turned back to the bank of screens.

BORKEN PUT THE radio back in the pocket of his black uniform. Drummed his fingers on the judge's desk. Looked at the people looking back at him.
"One camera is enough," he said.
"Sure," Milosevic said. "One is as good as two."
"We don't need interference right now," Borken said. "So we should nail Reacher before we do anything else."
Milosevic glanced around, nervously.
"Don't look at me," he said. "I'm staying in here. I just want my money."
Borken looked at him. Still thinking.
"You know how to catch a tiger?" he asked. "Or a leopard or something? Out in the jungle?"
"What?" Milosevic asked.
"You tether a goat to a stake," Borken said. "And lie in wait."
"What?" Milosevic asked again.
"Reacher was willing to rescue McGrath, right?" Borken said. "So maybe he's willing to rescue your pal Brogan, too."

GENERAL GARBER HEARD the commotion and risked moving up a few yards. He made it to where the trees thinned out and he crouched. Shuffled sideways to his left to get a better view. The courthouse was dead ahead up the rise. The south wall was face-on to him, but he had a narrow angle down the front. He could see the main entrance. He could see the steps up to the door. He saw a gaggle of men come out. Six men. There were two flanking point men, alert, scanning around, rifles poised. The other four were carrying somebody, spread-eagled, facedown. The person had been seized by the wrists and the ankles. It was a man. Garber could tell by the voice. He was bucking and thrashing and screaming. It was Brogan.
Garber went cold. He knew what had happened to Jackson. McGrath had told him. He raised his rifle. Sighted in on the nearer point man. Tracked him smoothly as he moved right to left. Then his peripheral vision swept the other five. Then he thought about the sentry screen behind him. He grimaced and

lowered the rifle. Impossible odds. He had a rule: stick to the job in hand. He'd preached it like a gospel for forty years. And the job in hand was to get Holly Johnson out alive. He crept backward into the forest and shrugged at the two men beside him.

The Chinook crew had clambered out of their wrecked craft and stumbled away into the forest. They had thought they were heading south, but in their disorientation they had moved due north. They had passed straight through the sentry screen without knowing anything about it and come upon a three-star general sitting at the base of a pine. The general had hauled them down and told them to hide. They thought they were in a dream, and they were hoping to wake up. They said nothing and listened as the screaming faded behind the ruined county offices.

REACHER AND MCGRATH heard it minutes later. Faintly, at first, deep in the forest to their left. Then it built louder. They moved together level with a gap between huts where they could see across the Bastion to the mouth of the track. They were ten feet into the forest, far enough back to be well concealed, far enough forward to observe.

They saw the two point men burst out into the sunlight. Then four more men, walking in step, rifles slung, leaning outward, arms counterbalancing something heavy they were carrying. Something that was bucking and thrashing and screaming.

"Christ," McGrath whispered. "That's Brogan."

Reacher stared for a long time. Silent. Then he nodded.

"I was wrong," he said. "Milosevic is the bad guy."

McGrath clicked the Glock's trigger to release the safety device.

"Wait," Reacher whispered.

He moved right and signaled McGrath to follow. They stayed deep in the trees and paralleled the six men and Brogan across the clearing. The men were moving slow across the shale, and Brogan's screaming was getting louder. They looped past the bodies and the tent pegs and the cut ropes and walked on.

"They're going to the punishment hut," Reacher whispered.

They lost sight of them as the trees closed around the path to the next clearing. But they could still hear the screaming. Sounded like Brogan knew exactly what was going to happen to him. McGrath remembered recounting Borken's end of the conversation on the radio. Reacher remembered burying Jackson's mangled body.

They risked getting a little closer to the next clearing. Saw the six men head for the windowless hut and stop at the door. The point men turned and covered the

area with their rifles. The guy gripping Brogan's right wrist fumbled the key out of his pocket with his spare hand. Brogan yelled for help. He yelled for mercy. The guy unlocked the door. Swung it open. Stopped in surprise on the threshold and shouted.
Joseph Ray came out. Still naked, his clothes balled in his arms. Dried blood all over the bottom of his face like a mask. He danced and stumbled over the shale in his bare feet. The six men watched him go.
"Who the hell's that?" McGrath whispered.
"Just some asshole," Reacher whispered back.
Brogan was dropped onto the ground. Then he was hauled upright by the collar. He was staring wildly around and screaming. Reacher saw his face, white and terrified, mouth open. The six men threw him into the hut. They stepped in after him. The door slammed. McGrath and Reacher moved closer. They heard screams and the thump of a body hitting the walls. Those sounds went on for several minutes. Then it went quiet. The door opened. The six men filed out, smiling and dusting their hands. The last man darted back for a final kick. Reacher heard the blow land and Brogan scream. Then the guy locked the door and hustled after the others. They crunched over the stones and were gone. The clearing fell silent.

HOLLY LIMPED ACROSS the raised floor to the door. Pressed her ear onto it and listened. All quiet. No sound. She limped back to her mattress and picked up the spare pair of fatigue trousers. Used her teeth to pick the seams. Tore the material apart until she had separated the front panel of one of the legs. It gave her a piece of canvas cloth maybe thirty inches long and six wide. She took it into the bathroom and ran the sink full of hot water. Soaked the strip of cloth in it. Then she took off her trousers. Squeezed the soaking canvas out and bound it as tight as she could around her knee. Tied it off and put her trousers back on. Her idea was the hot wet cloth might shrink slightly as it dried. It might tighten more. It was as near as she was going to get to solving her problem. Keeping the joint rigid was the only way to kill the pain.
Then she did what she'd been rehearsing. She pulled the rubber foot off the bottom of her crutch. Smashed the metal end into the tile in the shower. The tile shattered. She reversed the crutch and used the end of the curved elbow clip to pry the shards off the wall. She selected two. Each was a rough triangle, narrow at the base and pointed. She used the edge of the elbow clip to scrape away the clay at the leading point. Left the vitrified white surface layer intact, like the blade of a knife.
She put her weapons in two separate pockets. Pulled the shower curtain to

conceal the damage. Put the rubber foot back on the crutch. Limped back to her mattress, and sat down to wait.

THE PROBLEM WITH using just one camera was that it had to be set to a fairly wide shot. That was the only way to cover the whole area. So any particular thing was small on the screen. The group of men carrying something had shown up like a large insect crawling across the glass.
“Was that Brogan?” Webster asked out loud.
The aide ran the video back and watched again.
“He’s facedown,” he said. “Hard to tell.”
He froze the action and used the digital manipulator to enlarge the picture. Adjusted the joystick to put the spread-eagled man in the center of the screen. Zoomed right in until the image blurred.
“Hard to tell,” he said again. “It’s one of them, that’s for sure.”
“I think it was Brogan,” Webster said.
Johnson looked hard. Used his finger and thumb against the screen to estimate the guy’s height, head to toes.
“How tall is he?” he asked.

“HOW TALL IS he?” Reacher asked suddenly.
“What?” McGrath said.
Reacher was behind McGrath in the trees, staring out at the punishment hut. He was staring at the front wall. The wall was maybe twelve feet long, eight feet high. Right to left, there was a two-foot panel, then the door, thirty inches wide, hinged on the right, handle on the left. Then a panel probably seven and a half feet wide running down to the end of the building.
“How tall is he?” Reacher asked again.
“Christ, does it matter?” McGrath said.
“I think it does,” Reacher said.
McGrath turned and stared at him.
“Five nine, maybe five ten,” he said. “Not an especially big guy.”
The cladding was made up of horizontal eight-by-fours nailed over the frame. There was a seam halfway up. The floor was probably three-quarters board laid over two-by-fours. Therefore the floor started nearly five inches above the bottom of the outside cladding. About an inch and a half below the bottom of the doorway.
“Skinny, right?” Reacher said.
McGrath was still staring at him.
“Thirty-eight regular, best guess,” he said.

Reacher nodded. The walls would be two-by-fours clad inside and out with the plywood. Total thickness five and a half inches, maybe less if the inside cladding was thinner. Call it the inside face of the end wall was five inches in from the corner, and the floor was five inches up from the bottom.
“Right-handed or left-handed?” Reacher asked.
“Speak to me,” McGrath hissed.
“Which?” Reacher said.
“Right-handed,” McGrath said. “I’m pretty sure.” The two-by-fours would be on sixteen-inch centers. That was the standard dimension. But from the corner of the hut to the right-hand edge of the door, the distance was only two feet. Two feet less five inches for the thickness of the end wall was nineteen inches. There was probably a two-by-four set right in the middle of that span. Unless they skimped it, which was no problem. The wall would be stuffed with Fiberglas wadding, for insulation.
“Stand back,” Reacher whispered.
“Why?” McGrath said.
“Just do it,” Reacher replied.
McGrath moved out of the way. Reacher put his eyes on a spot ten inches in from the end of the hut and just shy of five feet up from the bottom. Swayed left and rested his shoulder on a tree. Raised his M-16 and sighted it in.
“Hell are you doing?” McGrath hissed.
Reacher made no reply. Just waited for his heart to beat and fired. The rifle cracked and the bullet punched through the siding a hundred yards away. Ten inches from the corner, five feet from the ground.
“Hell are you doing?” McGrath hissed again.
Reacher just grabbed his arm and pulled him into the woods. Dragged him north and waited. Two things happened. The six men burst back into the clearing. And the door of the punishment hut opened. Brogan was framed in the doorway. His right arm was hanging limp. His right shoulder was shattered and pumping blood. In his right hand, he was holding his Bureau .38. The hammer was back. His finger was tight on the trigger.
Reacher snicked the M-16 to burst fire. Stitched five bursts of three shells into the ground, halfway across the clearing. The six men skidded away, like they were suddenly facing an invisible barrier or a drop off a tall cliff. They ran for the woods. Brogan stepped out of the hut. Stood in a bar of sunshine and tried to lift his revolver. His arm wouldn’t work. It hung uselessly.
“Decoy,” Reacher said. “They thought I’d go in after him. He was waiting behind the door with his gun. I knew he was the bad guy. But they had me fooled for a moment.”
McGrath nodded slowly. Stared at the government issue .38 in Brogan’s hand.

McGrath nodded slowly. Stared at the government-issue .38 in Brogan's hand. Remembered his own being confiscated. He raised the Glock and wedged his wrist against a tree. Sighted down the barrel.
"Forget it," Reacher said.
McGrath kept his eyes on Brogan and shook his head.
"I'm not going to forget it," he said quietly. "Bastard sold Holly out."
"I meant forget the Glock," Reacher said. "That's a hundred yards. Glock won't get near. You'd be lucky to hit the damn hut from here."
McGrath lowered the Glock and Reacher handed him the M-16. Watched with interest as McGrath sighted it in.
"Where?" Reacher asked.
"Chest," McGrath said.
Reacher nodded.
"Chest is good," he said.
McGrath steadied himself and fired. He was good, but not really good. The rifle was still set to burst fire, and it loosed three rounds. The first hit Brogan in the upper left of his forehead, and the other two stitched upward and blasted fragments off the door frame. Good, but not very. But good enough to do the job. Brogan went down like a marionette with the strings cut. He just telescoped into the ground, right in front of the doorway. Reacher took the M-16 back and sprayed the trees on the edge of the clearing until the magazine clicked empty. Reloaded and handed the Glock back to McGrath. Nodded him east through the forest. They turned together and walked straight into Joseph Ray. He was unarmed and half dressed. Blood dried on his face like brown paint. He was fumbling with his shirt buttons. They were done up into the wrong holes.
"Women and children are going to die," he said.
"You all got an hour, Joe," Reacher said back to him. "Spread the word. Anybody wants to stay alive, better head for the hills."
The guy just shook his head.
"No," he said. "We've got to assemble on the parade ground. Those are our instructions. We've got to wait for Beau there."
"Beau won't be coming," Reacher said.
Ray shook his head again.
"He will be," he said. "You won't beat Beau, whoever you are. Can't be done. We got to wait for him. He's going to tell us what to do."
"Run for it, Joe," Reacher said. "For Christ's sake, get your kids out of here."
"Beau says that they have to stay here," Ray said. "Either to enjoy the fruits of victory, or to suffer the consequences of defeat."
Reacher just stared at him. Ray's bright eyes shone out. His teeth flashed in a brief defiant smile. He ducked his head and ran away.

brief defiant smile. He ducked his head and ran away.
“Women and children are going to die?” McGrath repeated.
“Borken’s propaganda,” Reacher said. “He’s got them all convinced compulsory suicide is the penalty for getting beat around here.”
“And they’re standing still for it?” McGrath asked.
“He controls them,” Reacher said. “Worse than you can imagine.”
“I’m not interested in beating them,” McGrath said. “Right now, I just want to get Holly out.”
“Same thing,” Reacher said.
They walked on in silence, through the trees in the direction of the Bastion.
“How did you know?” McGrath asked. “About Brogan?”
Reacher shrugged.
“I just felt it,” he said. “His face, I guess. They like hitting people in the face. They did it to you. But Brogan was unmarked. I saw his face, no damage, no blood. I figured that was wrong. The excitement of an ambush, the tension, they’d have worked it off by roughing him up a little. Like they did with you. But he was theirs, so he just walked in, handshakes all around.”
McGrath nodded. Put his hand up and felt his nose.
“But what if you were wrong?” he said.
“Wouldn’t have mattered,” Reacher said. “If I was wrong, he wouldn’t have been standing behind the door. He’d have been down on the floor with a bunch of broken ribs, because all that thumping around would have been for real.”
McGrath nodded again.
“And all that shouting,” Reacher said. “They paraded along, real slow, with the guy shouting his head off. They were trying to attract my attention.”
“They’re good at that,” McGrath said. “Webster’s worried about it. He doesn’t understand why Borken seems so set on getting attention, escalating this whole thing way bigger than he needs to.”
They were in the woods. Halfway between the small clearing and the Bastion. Reacher stopped. Like the breath had been knocked out of him. His hands went up to his mouth. He stood breathless, like all the air had been sucked off the planet.
“Christ, I know why,” he said. “It’s a decoy.”
“What?” McGrath asked.
“I’m getting a bad feeling,” Reacher said.
“About what?” McGrath asked him, urgently.
“Borken,” Reacher said. “Something doesn’t add up. His intentions. Strike the first blow. But where’s Stevie? You know what? I think there are two first blows, McGrath. This stuff up here and something else, somewhere else. A surprise attack. Like Pearl Harbor, like his damn war books. That’s why he’s set

surprise attack. Like Pearl Harbor, like his damn war books. That's why he's set on escalating everything. Holly, the suicide thing. He wants all the attention up here."

41

REACHER WATCHED THE whole thing happen. He was a hundred and fifty yards away in the trees. Northwest of the ambush, high up the slope on the other side of the road. There was a dead sentry at his feet. The guy was lying in the dirt with his head at right angles to his neck. Reacher had his field glasses raised to his eyes. Watching. Watching what, he wasn't exactly sure.

He had caught the gist of the radio conversation in the Bastion. He had heard Borken's side. He had guessed the replies. He had heard the southern lookouts calling in on the walkie-talkies. He knew about the Marines on the bridge. He knew about Webster and Johnson sitting there alongside them, on the end of the line.

He had wondered who else was down there. Maybe more military, maybe more FBI. The military wouldn't come. Johnson would have ordered them to sit tight. If anybody came, it would be the FBI. He figured they might have substantial numbers standing by. He figured they would be coming in, sooner or later. He needed to exploit them. Needed to use them as a diversion while he got Holly out. So he had moved southeast to wait for their arrival. Now, an hour later, he was gazing down at the short stocky guy getting loaded into the jeep. Dark suit, white shirt, town shoes. FBI, for sure.

But not the Hostage Rescue Team. This guy had no equipment. The HRT came in all loaded down with paramilitary gear. Reacher was familiar with their procedures. He had read some of their manuals. Heard about some of their training. He knew guys who had been in and out of Quantico. He knew how the HRT worked. They were a high-technology operation. They looked like regular soldiers, in blue. They had vehicles. This guy he was watching was on foot in the forest. Dressed like he had just stepped out of a meeting.

It was a puzzle. Eight Marines. No Hostage Rescue Team. An unarmed search-and-rescue Chinook. Then Reacher suddenly thought maybe he understood. Maybe this was a very clandestine operation. Low-profile. Invisible. They had tracked Holly all the way west from Chicago, but for some reason they maybe weren't gathering any kind of a big force. They were dealing with it alone. Some tactical reason. Maybe a political reason. Maybe something to do with Holly and the White House. Maybe the policy was to deal with this secretly, deal with it hard, tackle it with a tight little team. So tight the right hand didn't know what the left was doing. Hence the unarmed search-and-rescue chopper. It had come in blind. Hadn't known what it was getting into.

In which case this ambushed guy he was watching was direct from Chicago. Part

If which case this ambushed guy he was watching was direct from Chicago. Part of the original operation that must have started up back on Monday. He looked like a senior guy. Maybe approaching fifty. Could be Brogan, Holly's section head. Could even be McGrath, the top boy. In either case that made Milosevic the mole. Question was, was he up here as well, or was he still back in Chicago?
The jeep turned slowly in the road. The Bureau guy in the suit was in back, jammed between two armed men. His nose was bleeding and Reacher could see a swelling starting on his face. Borken had twisted his bulk around and was talking at him. The rest of the ambush squad was forming up in the road. The jeep drove past them, north toward town. Passed by thirty yards from where Reacher was standing in the trees. He watched it go. Turned and picked up his rifle. Strolled through the woods, deep in thought.
His problem was priority order. He had a rule: stick to the job in hand. The job in hand was getting Holly away safe. Nothing else. But this Bureau guy was in trouble. He thought about Jackson. The last Bureau guy they'd gotten hold of. Maybe this new guy was heading for the same fate. In which case, he ought to intervene. And he liked the look of the guy. He looked tough. Small, but strong. A lot of energy. Some kind of charisma there. Maybe an ally would be a smart thing to have. Two heads, better than one. Two pairs of hands. Four trigger fingers. Useful. But his rule was: stick to the job in hand. It had worked for him many times over the years. It was a rule which had served him well. Should he bend that rule? Or not? He stopped and stood concealed in the forest while the ambush squad marched by on the road. Listened to the sound of their footsteps die away. Stood there and thought about the guy some more and forced himself toward a tough decision.

GENERAL GARBER WATCHED the whole thing happen, too. He was a hundred and fifty yards south of the ambush. West side of the road, behind a rocky outcrop, exactly three hundred yards south of where Reacher had been. He had waited three minutes and then followed McGrath in through the ravine. Garber was also a reasonably fit man, but a lot older, and it had cost him a lot to keep pace with McGrath. He had arrived at the rocky outcrop and collapsed, out of breath. He figured he had maybe fifteen or twenty minutes to recover before the rendezvous took place. Then his plan was to follow behind the three agents and see what was going to happen. He didn't want anybody making mistakes about Jack Reacher.
But the rendezvous had never happened. He had watched the ambush and realized a lot of mistakes had been made about a lot of things.

"YOU'RE GOING TO die." Borken said.

McGrath was jammed between two soldiers on the back seat of the jeep. He was bouncing around because the road was rough. But he couldn't move his arms, because the seat was not really wide enough for three people. So he put the shrug into his injured face instead.
"We're all going to die," he said. "Sooner or later."
"Sooner or later, right," Borken said. "But for you, it's going to be sooner, not later."
Borken was twisted around in the front seat, staring. McGrath looked past him at the vast blue sky. He looked at the small white clouds and thought: Who was it? Who knew? Air Force operational personnel, he guessed, but that link was ludicrous. Had to be somebody nearer and closer. Somebody more involved. The only possibilities were Johnson or his aide, or Webster himself, or Brogan, or Milosevic. Garber, conceivably. He seemed pretty hot on excusing this Reacher guy. Was this some military police conspiracy to overthrow the Joint Chiefs?
"Who was it, Borken?" he asked.
"Who was what, dead man?" Borken asked back.
"Who's been talking to you?" McGrath said.
Borken smiled and tapped his finger on his temple.
"Common cause," he said. "This sort of issue, there are a lot more people than you think on our side."
McGrath glanced back to the sky and thought about Dexter, safe in the White House. What had Webster said he'd said? Twelve million people? Or was it sixty-six million? > "You're going to die," Borken said again.
McGrath shifted his focus back.
"So tell me who it was, before I do," he said.
Borken grinned at him.
"You'll find out," he said. "It's going to be a big surprise."
The jeep pulled up in front of the courthouse. McGrath twisted and looked up at it. There were six soldiers standing guard outside the building. They were fanned into a rough arc, facing south and east.
"She in there?" he asked.
Borken nodded and smiled.
"Right now she is," he said. "I may have to get her out later."
The walkie-talkie on his belt burst into life. A loud burst of static and a quick distorted message. He pressed the key and bent his head down. Acknowledged the information without unclipping the unit. Then he pulled the radio transmitter from his pocket. Flipped it open and pulled up the short antenna. Pressed the send button.
"Webster?" he said. "You lied to me. Twice. First, there were three of your

agents down there with you. We just rounded them all up."
He listened to the response. Kept the radio tight against his ear. McGrath could not hear what Webster was saying.
"Doesn't matter anyway," Borken said. "They weren't all on your side. Some people in this world will do anything for money."
He paused for a response. Apparently there was none.
"And you bullshitted me," Borken said. "You weren't going to fix the line at all, were you? You were just stringing me along."
Webster was starting a reply, but Borken cut him off.
"You and Johnson," he said. "You can get off the bridge now. The Marines stay there. We're watching. You and Johnson walk back to your trucks. Get yourselves in front of those TVs. Should be some interesting action pretty soon."
He clicked off the radio and folded it back into his pocket. A big wide smile on his face.
"You're going to die," he said to McGrath for the third time.
"Which one?" McGrath asked. "Brogan or Milosevic?"
Borken grinned again.
"Guess," he said. "Figure it out for yourself. You're supposed to be the big smart federal investigator. Agent-in-Charge, right?"
The driver jumped down and pulled a pistol from his holster. Aimed it two-handed at McGrath's head. The left-hand guard squeezed out and unslung his rifle. Held it ready. The right-hand guy did the same. Then Borken eased his bulk down.
"Out," he said. "We walk from here."
McGrath shrugged and eased himself down into the circle of weapons. Borken stepped behind him and caught his arms. Cuffed his wrists together behind his back. Then he shoved him forward. Pointed beyond the ruined county office.
"Up there, dead man," he said.
They left the jeep behind them next to the courthouse. The two guards formed up. McGrath stumbled across the street and up onto the lumpy knoll. He was pushed past the dead tree. He was pushed left until he found the path. He followed it around behind the old building. The rough ground bit up through the thin soles of his ruined city shoes. He might as well have been walking barefoot.
"Faster, asshole," Borken grunted at him.
The guards were behind him, prodding him forward with the muzzles of their rifles. He picked up the pace and stumbled on through the woods. He felt the blood clotting on his lip and nose. After a mile, he came out into the clearing he recognized from the surveillance pictures. It looked bigger. From seven miles overhead, it had looked like a neat hole in the trees, with a tidy circle of

buildings. From ground level, it looked as big as a stadium. Rough shale on the floor of the clearing, big wooden huts propped expertly on solid concrete piles.
“Wait here,” Borken said.
He walked away and the two guards took up station either side of McGrath as he gazed around. He saw the communications hut, with the phone wire and the whip antenna. He saw the other buildings. Smelled stale institutional food coming out of the largest. Saw the farthest hut, standing on its own. Must be their armory, he thought.
He glanced up and saw the vapor trails in the sky. The urgency of the situation was written up there, white on blue. The planes had abandoned their innocent east-west trawling. Their trails had tightened into continuous circles, one just inside the other. They were flying around and around, centered seven miles above his head. He stared up at them and mouthed: help! He wondered if their lenses were good enough to pick that out. Wondered if maybe Webster or Johnson or Garber or Johnson’s gofer could lip-read. His best guess was: yes, and no.

REACHER’S PROBLEM WAS a hell of an irony. For the first time in his life, he wished his opponents were better shots. He was concealed in the trees a hundred yards northwest of the courthouse. Looking down at six sentries. They were ranged in a loose arc, to the south and east beyond the big white building. Reacher’s rifle was trained on the nearest man. But he wasn’t shooting. Because if he did, the six men were going to shoot back. And they were going to miss. Reacher was happy with an M-16 and a range of a hundred yards. He could pretty much absolutely guarantee to hit what he wanted with that weapon at that range. He would bet his life on it. Many times, he had. And normally, the worse shots his opponents were, the happier he’d be about it. But not in this situation. He would be shooting from a northwest direction. His opponents would be shooting back from the southeast. They would hear his shots, maybe see some muzzle flash, they would take aim, and they would fire. And they would miss. They would shoot high and wide. The targets on the rifle range were mute evidence for that conclusion. There had been some competent shooting at three and four hundred yards. The damaged targets bore witness to that fact. But Reacher’s experience was that guys who could shoot just about competently at three or four hundred yards on a range would be useless in a firefight. Lying still on a mat and sighting in on a target in your own time was one thing. Shooting into a noisy confused hailstorm of bullets was a very different thing. A different thing entirely. The guy defending the missile trucks had proved that. His salvos had been all over the place. And that was the problem. Shooting back from the

southeast, these guys' stray rounds were going to be all over the place, too. Up and down, left and right. The down rounds and the left rounds were no problem. They were just going to damage the scrubby vegetation. But the up rounds and the right rounds were going to hit the courthouse.
The M-16 uses bullets designated M855. Common NATO rounds, 5.56 millimeters in caliber, just a fraction under a quarter-inch wide. Fairly heavy for their size, because they are a sandwich of lead and steel, inside a copper jacket. Designed for penetration. Those stray rounds which hit the courthouse were going to impact the siding at two thousand miles an hour. They were going to punch through the old wood like it wasn't there at all. They were going to smash through the unstable dynamite like a train wreck. The energy of their impact was going to act like a better blasting cap than anything any mining company had ever possessed. That was what those bullets were designed to do. Some committee had asked for a bullet capable of shooting through the sides of ammunition trucks. And that's what had been delivered.
So Reacher wasn't shooting. Three sentries, he might have risked it. He figured he could get off three aimed shots in maybe three seconds. Too fast for any reaction. But six was too many. They were too spaced out. Too much physical movement was required between rounds. The later targets would have time to react. Not much time. Certainly not enough to be accurate. That was the problem.
Reversing the geometry would be no help, either. He could work himself right around to the south. It would take him maybe twenty minutes to skirt around in the trees and come back at them from the opposite direction. But then what? He would be looking at his targets, uphill. The courthouse would be right behind them. He could hit each of them in the head, no problem at all. But he couldn't ask the bullets just to stop there in midair. He couldn't prevent those high-energy copper-jackets bursting on out of the back of those skulls and heading on their uphill trajectories straight toward the courthouse's second-story walls. He shook his head and lowered his rifle.

MCGRATH SAW BORKEN conferring with somebody on the edge of the clearing. It was the guy who had led the ambush squad. The guy who had taken his gun and his bullets and punched him in the face. The two of them were glancing at their watches and glancing up at the sky. They were nodding. Borken slapped the guy on the shoulder and turned away. Ducked into the trees and disappeared back toward the town. The ambush leader started in toward McGrath. He was smiling. He was unslinging his rifle.
"Showtime," he called.

He stepped near and reversed the rifle in his hands as he did so. Smashed the butt into McGrath's stomach. McGrath went down on the shale. One guard jammed the muzzle of his rifle into McGrath's throat. The other jammed his into McGrath's stomach, right where the blow had landed.
"Lie still, asshole," the unit leader said. "I'll be back in a minute."
McGrath could not move his head because of the rifle in his throat, but he followed the guy with his eyes. He was going into the next-to-last hut in line. Not the armory, which stood on its own. Some kind of an equipment store. He came out with a mallet and ropes and four metal objects. Dull-green, Army issue. As he got nearer, McGrath recognized what they were. They were tent pegs. Maybe eighteen inches long, designed for some kind of big mess tent. The guy dropped his load on the shale. The metal pegs clinked on the stones. The guy nodded to the soldier with the gun in McGrath's belly, who straightened up and stepped away. The unit leader took his place. Used his own weapon to keep McGrath pinned down.
The soldier got busy. He seemed to know what he was supposed to do. He used the mallet to drive the first peg into the ground. The ground was stony and the guy had to work hard. He was swinging the mallet in a big arc and using a lot of force. He drove the peg down until it was two-thirds buried. Then he paced off maybe eight feet and started driving the second. McGrath followed him with his eyes. When the second peg was in, the guy paced another eight feet at a right angle and hammered the third peg in. The fourth peg completed an exact square, eight feet on a side. McGrath had a pretty good idea what that square was for.
"We normally do this in the woods," the unit leader said. "We normally do it vertically, with trees."
Then the guy pointed upward at the sky.
"But we need to let them see," he said. "They can't see properly in the woods. This time of year, too many leaves in the way, right?"
The guard who had driven the tent pegs into the ground was panting from the exertion. He changed places with his leader again. Jammed his rifle into McGrath's gut and leaned on it, recovering. McGrath gasped and squirmed under the pressure. The leader squatted down and sorted through the ropes. Untangled one and caught McGrath by the ankle. Looped the rope around and tied it off, hard. Used the rope to drag McGrath by the leg into the approximate center of the square. Then he tied the loose end to the fourth peg. Tied it tight and tested it.
The second length of rope went around McGrath's other ankle. It was tied off to the third peg. McGrath's legs were forced apart at a right angle. His hands were still cuffed behind his back, crushed against the rocky ground. The leader used the sole of his boot to roll McGrath's upper body sideways. Ducked down and

the sole of his boot to roll McGrath's upper body sideways. Ducked down and unlocked the cuff. Caught a wrist and looped a rope around. Tied it tight and hauled the wrist up to the second peg. He pulled on it until McGrath's arm was stretched tight, in a perfect straight line with the opposite leg. Then he tied it tight to the peg and reached down for the other wrist. The soldiers jammed their muzzles in tighter. McGrath stared up at the vapor trails and gasped in pain as his arm was stretched tight and he was tied into a perfect cross.
The two soldiers jerked their rifles away and stepped back. They stood with their leader. Gazing down. McGrath lifted his head and looked wildly around. Pulled on the ropes, and then realized he was only pulling the knots tighter. The three men stepped farther back and glanced up at the sky. McGrath realized they were making sure the cameras got an uninterrupted view.

THE CAMERAS WERE getting an uninterrupted view. Seven miles in the sky, the pilots were flying circles, one on a tight radius of a few miles, the other outside him on a wider path. Their cameras were trained downward, under the relentless control of their computers. The inside plane was focusing tight on the clearing where McGrath was spread-eagled. The outer camera was zoomed wider, taking in the whole of the area from the courthouse in the south to the abandoned mines in the north. Their real-time video signals were bouncing down more or less vertically to the dish vehicle parked behind the mobile command post. The dish was focusing the datastream and feeding it through the thick armored cable into the observation truck. Then the decoding computers were feeding the large color monitors. Their phosphor screens were displaying the appalling truth. General Johnson and his aide and Webster were motionless in front of them. Motionless, silent, staring. Video recorders were whirring away, dispassionately recording every second's activity taking place six miles to the north. The whole vehicle was humming with faint electronic energy. But it was as silent as a tomb.
"Can you zoom in?" Webster asked quietly. "On McGrath?"
The General's aide twisted a black rubber knob. Stared at the screen. He zoomed in until the individual pixels in the picture began to clump together and distort. Then he backed off a fraction.
"Close as we can get," he said.
It was close enough. McGrath's spread-eagled figure just about filled the screens. The unit leader could be seen from directly above, stepping over the lengths of rope as he circled. He had a knife in his hand. A black handle, a shiny blade, maybe ten inches long. It looked like a big kitchen knife. The sort of thing a gourmet cook might buy. Useful for slicing a tough cut of steak into strips. The sort of tool that would get set out on the kitchen counter by someone making a

sort of tool that would get set out on the kitchen counter by someone making a stew or a stroganoff.

They saw the guy lay the knife flat on McGrath's chest. Then he used both hands to fold back the flaps on McGrath's jacket. He loosened McGrath's tie and pulled it sideways, almost up under his ear. Then he grasped the shirt and tore it open. The cotton pulled apart under the knife, leaving the knife where it was, now next to the skin. The guy pulled the tails out of the waistband and tucked the shirt right back to the sides. Carefully, well out of the way, like he was a surgeon faced with a difficult emergency procedure.

They saw the guy pick up the knife again. He was squatted down to McGrath's right, leaning over slightly, holding the knife. He was holding it point down, close to McGrath's belly. The electronic pink of McGrath's skin was reflected in the faces of the watchers inside the observation vehicle.

They saw the guy raise the knife an inch. They saw his index finger slide along the back of the blade, like he was adjusting his grip for extra precision. They saw the blade move down. The pale sun glinted on the steel. Then their view was disrupted. A silent puff of pink mist obscured the picture. When it cleared, the knife was still in the guy's hand. But the guy had no head. His whole head was a shattered pink wound, and he was toppling slowly sideways.

42

THE LEFT-HAND GUARD went down easily enough, too. Reacher put a bullet through the side of his head, just above the ear, and he fell heavily, right on top of the spread-eagled Bureau guy. But the right-hand guard reacted. He spun away and hurdled the taut ropes, racing for the trees. Reacher paused a beat and dropped him ten feet away. The guy sprawled and slid noisily through the shale and put up a slick of dust. Twitched once and died.

Then Reacher waited. The last staccato echo of the three shots came back off the farthest mountains and faded into quiet. Reacher watched the trees, all around the Bastion. Watched for movement. The sunlight was bright. Too bright to be sure. There was a lot of contrast between the brightness of the clearing and the dark of the forest. So he waited.

Then he came out from behind the radio hut at a desperate run. He sprinted straight across the clearing to the mess in the middle. Hauled the bodies out of the way. The guard was sprawled right on top of the Bureau guy. The unit leader was across his legs. He dumped them out of the way and found the knife. Sawed through the four coarse ropes. Dragged the Bureau guy upright and pushed him off back the way he'd come. Then he grabbed the two nearest rifles and sprinted after him. Caught him up halfway. The guy was just tottering along. So Reacher caught him under the arms and bundled him to safety. Threw him well into the trees behind the huts and stood bent over, panting. Then he took the magazines off the new rifles and put one in his pocket and one on his own gun. They were both the elongated thirty-shot versions. He'd been down to six rounds. Now he had sixty. A tenfold increase. And he had another pair of hands.

"Are you Brogan?" he asked. "Or McGrath?"

The guy answered stiffly and neutrally. There was fear and panic and confusion in his face.

"McGrath," he said. "FBI."

Reacher nodded. The guy was shaken up, but he was an ally. He took Fowler's Glock out of his pocket and held it out to him, butt first. McGrath was panting quietly and glancing wildly toward the deep cover of the trees. There was aggression in his stance. His hands were balled into fists.

"What?" Reacher asked him, concerned.

McGrath darted forward and snatched the Glock and stepped back. Raised it and went into a shooting stance and pointed it two-handed. At Reacher's head. The cut ends of the ropes trailed down from his wrists. Reacher just stared blankly at him.

.....
“Hell are you doing?” he asked.
“You’re one of them,” McGrath said back. “Drop the rifle, OK?”
“What?” Reacher said again.
“Just do it, OK?” McGrath said.
Reacher stared at him, incredulous. Pointed through the trees at the sprawled bodies in the Bastion.
“What about that?” he asked. “Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”
The Glock did not waver. It was rock-steady, pointed straight at his head, at the apex of a perfect braced position. McGrath looked like a picture in a training manual, except for the ropes hanging like streamers from his wrists and ankles.
“Doesn’t that count for something?” Reacher asked again, pointing.
“Not necessarily,” McGrath growled back. “You killed Peter Bell, too. We know that. Just because you don’t allow your troops to rape and torture your hostages doesn’t necessarily put you on the side of the angels.”
Reacher looked at him for a long moment, astonished. Thought hard. Then he nodded cautiously and dropped the rifle exactly halfway between the two of them. Drop it right at his own feet, McGrath would just tell him to kick it over toward him. Drop it too near McGrath’s feet, and it wouldn’t work. This guy was an experienced agent. From the look of his shooting stance, Reacher was expecting at least a basic level of competence from him.
McGrath glanced down. Hesitated. He clearly didn’t want Reacher near him. He didn’t want him stepping nearer to nudge the rifle on toward him. So he slid his own foot forward to drag the weapon back close. He was maybe ten inches shorter than Reacher, all told. Aiming the Glock at Reacher’s head from six feet away, he was aiming it upward at a fairly steep angle. As he slid his foot forward, he decreased his effective height by maybe an inch, which automatically increased the upward slope of his arms by a proportionate degree. And as he slid his foot forward, it brought him slightly closer to Reacher, which increased the upward angle yet more. By the time his toe was scrabbling for the weapon, his upper arms were near his face, interfering with his vision. Reacher waited for him to glance down again.
He glanced down. Reacher let his knees go and fell vertically. Lashed back upward with his forearm and batted the Glock away. Swiped a wide arc with his other arm behind McGrath’s knees and dumped him flat on his back in the dirt. Closed his hand over McGrath’s wrist and squeezed gently until the Glock shook free. He picked it up by the barrel and held it the wrong way around.
“Look at this,” he said.
He shook his cuff back and exposed the crusted weal on his left wrist.
“I’m not one of them.” he said. “Thev had me handcuffed most of the time.”

Then he held the Glock out, butt first, offering it again. McGrath stared at it, and then stared back into the clearing. He ducked his head left and right to take in the bodies. Glanced back at Reacher, still confused.
“We had you down as a bad guy,” he said.
Reacher nodded.
“Evidently,” he said. “But why?”
“Video in the dry cleaner’s,” McGrath said. “Looked just like you were snatching her up.”
Reacher shook his head.
“Innocent passerby,” he said.
McGrath kept on looking hard at him. Quizzically, thinking. Reacher saw him arrive at a decision. He nodded in turn and accepted the Glock and laid it on the forest floor, exactly between them, like its positioning was a symbol, a treaty. He started fumbling at his shirt buttons. Cut ends of rope flailed at his wrists and ankles.
“OK, can we start over?” he said, embarrassed.
Reacher nodded and stuck out his hand.
“Sure,” he said. “I’m Reacher, you’re McGrath. Holly’s Agent-in-Charge. Pleased to meet you.”
McGrath smiled ruefully and shook hands limply. Then he started fumbling at the knots on his wrist, one-handed.
“You know a guy called Garber?” McGrath asked.
Reacher nodded.
“Used to work for him,” he said.
“Garber told us you were clean,” McGrath said. “We didn’t believe him.”
“Naturally,” Reacher said. “Garber always tells the truth. So nobody ever believes him.”
“So I apologize,” McGrath said. “I’m sorry, OK? But just try and see it my way. You’ve been public enemy number one for five days.”
Reacher waved the apology away and stood up and helped McGrath to his feet. Bent back down to the dirt and picked up the Glock and handed it to him.
“Your nose OK?” he asked.
McGrath slipped the gun into his jacket pocket. Touched his nose gently and grimaced.
“Bastard hit me,” he said. “I think it’s broken. Just turned and hit me, like they couldn’t wait.”
There was a noise in the woods, off to the left. Reacher caught McGrath’s arm and pulled him deeper into the forest. Pushed through the brush and got facing east. He stood silently and listened for movement. McGrath was taking the ropes

off his ankles and winding himself up to ask a question.
“So is Holly OK?” he said.
Reacher nodded. But grimly.
“So far,” he said. “But it’s going to be a hell of a problem getting her out.”
“I know about the dynamite,” McGrath said. “That was the last thing Jackson called in. Monday night.”
“It’s a problem,” Reacher said again. “One stray round, and she’s had it. And there are a hundred trigger-happy people up here. Whatever we do, we need to do it carefully. Have you got reinforcements coming in? Hostage Rescue?”
McGrath shook his head.
“Not yet,” he said. “Politics.”
“Maybe that’s good,” Reacher said. “They’re talking about mass suicide if they look like getting beat. Live free or die, you know?”
“Whichever,” McGrath said. “Their choice. I don’t care what happens to them. I just care about Holly.”
They fell silent and crept together through the trees. Stopped deep in the woods, about level with the back of the mess hall. Now Reacher was winding himself up to ask a question. But he waited, frozen, a finger to his lips. There was noise to his left. A patrol, sweeping the fringe of the forest. McGrath made to move, but Reacher caught his arm and stopped him. Better to stand stock-still than to risk making noise of their own. The patrol came nearer. Reacher raised his rifle and switched it to rapid fire. Smothered the sound of the click with his palm.
McGrath held his breath. The patrol was visible, ten feet away through the trees. Six men, six rifles. They were glancing rhythmically as they walked, left and right, left and right, between the edge of the sunny clearing and the dark green depths of the woods. Reacher breathed out, silently. Amateurs, with poor training and bad tactics. The bright sun in their eyes on every second glance was ruining their chances of seeing into the gloom of the forest. They were blind. They passed by without stopping. Reacher followed the sound of their progress and turned back to McGrath.
“Where are Brogan and Milosevic?” he whispered.
McGrath nodded, morosely.
“I know,” he said, quietly. “One of them is bent. I finally figured that out about half a second before they grabbed me up.”
“Where are they?” Reacher asked again.
“Up here somewhere,” McGrath said. “We came in through the ravine together, a mile apart.”
“Which one is it?” Reacher asked.
McGrath shrugged.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Can’t figure it out. I’ve been going over and over it. They both did good work. Milosevic found the dry cleaner. He brought the video in. Brogan did a lot of work tracing it all back here to Montana. He traced the truck. He liaised with Quantico. My gut says neither one is bent.”
“When was I ID’d?” Reacher asked.
“Thursday morning,” McGrath said. “We had your complete history.”
Reacher nodded.
“He called it in right away,” he said. “These people suddenly knew who I was, Thursday morning.”
McGrath shrugged again.
“They were both there at the time,” he said. “We were all down at Peterson.”
“Did you get Holly’s fax?” Reacher asked.
“What fax?” McGrath said. “When?”
“This morning,” Reacher said. “Early, maybe ten to five? She faxed you a warning.”
“We’re intercepting their line,” McGrath said. “In a truck, down the road here. But ten to five, I was in bed.”
“So who was minding the store?” Reacher asked.
McGrath nodded.
“Milosevic and Brogan,” he said, sourly. “The two of them. Ten to five this morning, they’d just gone on duty. Whichever one of them it is must have gotten the fax and concealed it. But which one, I just don’t know.”
Reacher nodded back.
“We could figure it out,” he said. “Or we could just wait and see. One of them will be walking around best of friends and the other will be in handcuffs, or dead. We’ll be able to tell the difference.”
McGrath nodded, sourly.
“I can’t wait,” he said.
Then Reacher stiffened and pulled him ten yards farther into the woods. He had heard the patrol coming back through the trees.

INSIDE THE COURTROOM. Borken had heard the three shots. He was sitting in the judge’s chair, and he heard them clearly. They went: crack crack . . . crack and repeated a dozen times as each of the distant slopes cannoned the echo back toward him. He sent a runner back to the Bastion. A mile there, a mile back on the winding path through the woods. Twenty minutes wasted, and then the runner got back panting with the news. Three corpses, four cut ropes.
“Reacher,” Borken said. “I should have wasted him at the beginning.”
Milosevic nodded in agreement.

“I want him kept away from me,” Milosevic said. “I heard the autopsy report on your friend Peter Bell. I just want my money and safe passage out of here, OK?”
Borken nodded. Then he laughed. A sharp, nervous laugh that was part excitement, part tension. He stood up and walked out from behind the bench. Laughed and grinned and slapped Milosevic on the shoulder.

HOLLY JOHNSON KNEW no more than most people do about dynamite. She couldn’t remember its exact chemical composition. She knew ammonium nitrate and nitrocellulose were in there somewhere. She wondered about nitroglycerin. Was that mixed in too? Or was that some other kind of explosive? Either way, she figured dynamite was some kind of a sticky fluid, soaked into a porous material and molded into sticks. Heavy sticks, quite dense. If her walls were packed with heavy dense sticks, they would absorb a lot of sound. Like a soundproofing layer in a city apartment. Which meant the shots she’d heard had been reasonably close.
She’d heard: crack crack . . . crack. But she didn’t know who was shooting at who, or why. They weren’t handgun shots. She knew the flat bark of a handgun from her time at Quantico. These were shots from a long gun. Not the heavy thump of the big Barretts from the rifle range. A lighter weapon than that. Somebody firing a medium-caliber rifle three times. Or three people firing once, in a ragged volley. But whichever it was, something was happening. And she had to be ready.

GARBER HEARD THE shots, too. Crack crack . . . crack, maybe a thousand yards northwest of him, maybe twelve hundred. Then a dozen spaced echoes coming back from the mountainsides. He was in no doubt about what they represented. An M-16, firing singles, the first pair in a tight group of two which the military called a double tap. The sound of a competent shooter. The idea was to get the second round off before the first shell case hit the ground. Then a third target, or maybe an insurance shot into the second. An unmistakable rhythm. Like a signature. The audible signature of somebody with hundreds of hours of weapons training behind him. Garber nodded to himself and moved forward through the trees.

“IT MUST BE Brogan,” Reacher whispered.
McGrath looked surprised.
“Why Brogan?” he asked.
They were squatted down, backs to adjacent trunks, thirty yards into the woods, invisible. The search patrol had tracked back and missed them again. McGrath

had given Reacher the whole story. He had rattled through the important parts of the investigation, one professional to another, in a sort of insider's shorthand. Reacher had asked sharp questions and McGrath had given short answers.
"Time and distance," Reacher said. "That was crucial. Think about it from their point of view. They put us in the truck, and they raced off straight to Montana. What's that? Maybe seventeen hundred miles? Eighteen hundred?"
"Probably," McGrath allowed.
"And Brogan's a smart guy," Reacher said. "And he knows you're a smart guy. He knows you're smart enough to know that he's smart enough. So he can't dead-end the whole thing. But what he can do is keep you all far enough behind the action to stop you being a problem. And that's what he did. He managed the flow of information. The communication had to be two-way, right? So Monday, he knew they'd rented a truck. But right through Wednesday, he was still focusing you on stolen trucks, right? He wasted a lot of time with that Arizona thing. Then he finally makes the big breakthrough with the rental firm and the stuff with the mud, and he looks like the big hero, but in reality what he's done is keep you way behind the chase. He's given them all the time they need to get us here."
"But he still got us here, right?" McGrath said. "A ways behind them, OK, but he brought us right here all the same."
"No loss to him," Reacher said. "Borken was just itching to tell you where she was, soon as she was safely here, right? The destination was never going to be a secret, was it? That was the whole point. She was a deterrent to stop you attacking. No point in that, without telling you exactly where she was."
McGrath grunted. Thinking about it. Unconvinced.
"They bribed him," Reacher said. "You better believe it. They've got a big war chest, McGrath. Twenty million dollars, stolen bearer bonds."
"The armored car robbery?" McGrath asked. "Northern California somewhere? They did that?"
"They're boasting about it," Reacher said.
McGrath ran it through his head. Went pale. Reacher saw it and nodded.
"Right," he said. "Let me make a guess: Brogan was never short of money, was he? Never groused about the salary, did he?"
"Shit," McGrath said. "Two alimony checks every month, girlfriend, silk jackets, and I never even thought twice about it. I was just so grateful he wasn't one of the moaners."
"He's collecting his next payment right now," Reacher said. "And Milosevic is dead or locked up somewhere."
McGrath nodded slowly.
"And Brogan worked out of California," he said. "Before he came to me. Shit. I

"And Brogan worked out of California," he said. "Before he came to me. Shit, I never thought twice. A buck gets ten he was the exact agent who went after Borken. He said Sacramento couldn't make it stick. Said the files were unclear as to why not. Why not is because Borken was handing him bucketfuls of dollars to make sure it didn't stick. And the bastard was taking them."
Reacher nodded. Said nothing.
"Shit," McGrath said again. "Shit, shit, shit. My fault."
Still Reacher said nothing. More tactful just to keep quiet. He understood McGrath's feelings. Understood his position. He had been in the same position himself, time to time in the past. He had felt the knife slip in, right between the shoulder blades.
"I'll deal with Brogan later," McGrath said finally. "After we go get Holly. She mention me at all? She realize I'd come get her? She mention that?"
Reacher nodded.
"She told me she trusted her people," he said.

44

HOLLY WAS STANDING upright and facing her door when they came for her. The tight wrap on her knee was drying stiff. So she had to stand, because her leg would no longer bend. And she wanted to stand, because that was the best way to do it.
She heard the footsteps in the lobby. Heard them clatter up the stairs. Two men, she estimated. She heard them halt outside her door. Heard the key slide in and the lock click back. She blinked once and took a breath. The door opened. Two men crowded in. Two rifles. She stood upright and faced them. One stepped forward.
“Outside, bitch,” he said.
She gripped her crutch. Leaned on it heavily and limped across the floor. Slowly. She wanted to be outside before anybody realized she could move better than they thought. Before anybody realized she was armed and dangerous.

“STRIKE THE FIRST blow,” Reacher said. “I interpreted that all wrong.”
“Why?” McGrath asked urgently.
“Because I haven’t seen Stevie,” Reacher said. “Not since early this morning. Stevie’s not here anymore. Stevie’s gone somewhere else.”
“Reacher, you’re not making any sense,” McGrath said.
Reacher shook his head like he was clearing it and snapped back into focus. Set off racing east through the trees. Talking quiet, but urgently.
“I was wrong,” he said. “Borken said they were going to strike the first blow. Against the system. I thought he meant the declaration of independence. I thought that was the first blow. The declaration, and the battle to secure this territory. I thought that was it. On its own. But they’re doing something else as well. Somewhere else. They’re doing two things at once. Simultaneous.”
“What are you saying?” McGrath asked.
“Attention,” Reacher said. “The declaration of independence is focusing attention up here in Montana, right?”
“Sure,” McGrath said. “They planned to have CNN and the United Nations up here watching it happen. That’s a lot of attention.”
“But they’d have been in the wrong place,” Reacher said. “Borken had a bookcase full of theory telling him not to do what they expect. A whole shelf all about Pearl Harbor. And I overheard him talking in the mine. When he was fetching the missile launcher. Fowler was with him. Borken told Fowler by tonight this place will be way down the list of priorities. So they’re doing

tonight this place will be way down the list of priorities. So they're doing something else someplace else as well. Something different, maybe something bigger. Twin blows against the system."
"But what?" McGrath asked. "And where? Near here?"
"No," Reacher said. "Probably far away. Like Pearl Harbor was. They're reaching out, trying to land a killer blow somewhere. Because there's a time factor here. It's all coordinated."
McGrath stared at him.
"They planned it well," Reacher said. "Getting everybody's attention fixed up here. Independence. That stuff they were going to do with you. They were going to kill you slowly, with the cameras watching. Then the threats of mass suicide, women and children dying. A high-stakes siege. So nobody would be looking anywhere else. Borken's cleverer than I thought. Twin blows, each one covering for the other. Everybody's looking up here, then something big happens someplace else, everybody's looking down there, and he consolidates his new nation back up here."
"But where is it happening, for God's sake?" McGrath asked. "And what the hell is it?"
Reacher stopped and shook his head.
"I just don't know," he said.
Then he froze. There was a crashing noise up ahead and a patrol of six men burst around a tight thicket of pines and stopped dead in front of them. They had M-16s in their hands, grenades on their belts, and surprise and delight on their faces.
BORKEN HAD DEPLOYED every man he had to the search for Reacher, except for the two he had retained to deal with Holly. He heard them start down the courthouse stairs. He pulled the radio from his pocket and flipped it open. Extended the stubby antenna and pressed the button.
"Webster?" he said. "Get focused in, OK? We'll talk again in a minute."
He didn't wait for any reply. Just snapped the radio off and turned his head as he tracked the sound of the footsteps on their way outside.

FROM SEVENTY-FIVE YARDS south, Garber saw them come out the door and down the steps. He had moved out of the woods. He had moved forward and crouched behind the outcrop of rock. He figured that was safe enough, now he had backup of a sort. The Chinook crewmen were thirty yards behind him, well separated, well hidden, instructed to yell if anybody approached from the rear. So Garber was resting easy, staring up the slope at the big white building.
He saw two armed men, bearded, starting down the steps. They were dragging a smaller figure with a crutch. A halo of dark hair, neat green fatigues. Holly

Johnson. He had never seen her before. Only in the photographs the Bureau men had shown him. The photographs had not done her justice. Even from seventy-five yards, he could feel the glow of her character. Some kind of radiant energy. He felt it, and pulled his rifle closer.

THE M-16 IN Reacher's hands was a 1987 product manufactured by the Colt Firearms Company in Hartford, Connecticut. It was the A2 version. Its principal new feature was the replacement of automatic fire with burst fire. For the sake of economy, the trigger relocked after each burst of three shells. The idea was to waste less ammunition.

Six targets, three shells each from the fresh magazine, a total of eighteen shells and six trigger pulls. Each burst of three shells took a fifth of a second, so the firing sequence itself amounted to just one and a fifth seconds. It was pulling the trigger over and over again which wasted the time. It wasted so much time for Reacher that he ran into trouble after the fourth guy was down. He wasn't aiming. He was just tracking a casual left-to-right arc, close range into the bodies in front of him. The opposing rifles were coming up as a unit. The first four never got there. But the fifth and the sixth were already raised horizontal by the time the fourth went back down, two and a quarter seconds into the sequence. So Reacher gambled. It was the sort of instinctive gamble you take so fast that to call it a split-second decision is to understate the speed by an absurd factor. He skipped his M-16 straight to the sixth guy, totally sure that McGrath would take the fifth guy with the Glock. The sort of instinctive gamble you take based on absolutely nothing at all except a feeling, which is itself based on absolutely nothing at all except the look of the guy, and how he compares with the look of other people worth trusting in the past.

The flat crack of the Glock was lost under the rattle of the M-16, but the fifth guy went down simultaneous with the sixth. Reacher and McGrath crashed sideways together into the brush and flattened into the ground. Stared through the sudden dead silence at the cordite smoke rising gently through the shafts of sunlight. No movement. No survivors. McGrath blew a big sigh and stuck out his hand, from flat on the ground. Reacher twisted around and shook it.

"You're pretty quick for an old guy," he said.

"That's how I got to be an old guy," McGrath said back.

They stood up slowly and ducked back farther into the trees. Then they could hear more people moving toward them in the forest. A stream of people was moving northwest out of the Bastion. McGrath raised the Glock again and Reacher snicked the M-16 back to singles. He had twelve shells left. Too few to waste, even with the A2's economy measure. Then they saw women through the trees. Women and children. Some men with them. Family groups. They were

marching in columns of two. Reacher saw Joseph Ray, a woman at his side, two boys marching blankly in front of him. He saw the woman from the mess kitchen, marching side by side with a man. Three children walking stolidly in front of them.
“Where are they going?” McGrath whispered.
“The parade ground,” Reacher said. “Borken ordered it, right?”
“Why don’t they just run for it?” McGrath said.
Reacher shrugged and said nothing. He had no explanation. He stood concealed and watched the blank faces pass through the dappled woods. Then he touched McGrath’s arm and they sprinted on through the trees and came out behind the mess hall. Reacher glanced cautiously around. Stretched up and grabbed at the roof overhang. Put a foot on the window ledge and hauled himself up onto the shingles. Crawled up the slope of the roof and steadied himself against the bright metal chimney. Raised the stolen field glasses and trained them southeast, down toward the town, thinking: OK, but what the hell else is happening? And where?

GENERAL JOHNSON’SAIDE had the most aptitude with the computer controls, either from familiarity with such things, or from being younger. He used the rubber knobs and the joystick to focus on the area in front of the courthouse steps. Then he zoomed out a touch to frame the view. He had the western face of the courthouse on the right of the screen and the eastern face of the ruined county office on the left. In between were the two lawns, one abandoned and scrubby, the other still reasonably flat. The road ran vertically up the center of the picture, like a map. The jeep which had brought McGrath in was still there where they had dumped it. The aide used it to check his focus. It came in crisp and clear. It was a military-surplus vehicle. Smudged white stencils. They could see the windshield folded down, and a canvas map case, and a jerrican for fuel and a short-handled shovel clipped on the rear.
They all saw the two men bring Holly out. From above, they were in a perfect straight diagonal line, with Holly alone in the middle, like the shape you see when a die rolls a three. They brought her out and waited. Then they saw a huge figure lumbering down the courthouse steps behind them. Borken. He stepped into the road and looked up. Right into the camera, invisible seven miles above him. He stared and waved. Raised his right hand high. There was a black gun in it. Then he looked down and fiddled with something in his left hand. Raised it to his ear. The radio on the desk in front of Webster crackled. Webster picked it up and flipped it open.
“Yes?” he said.
They saw Borken waving up at the camera again.

“See me?” he said.
“We see you,” Webster said quietly.
“See this?” Borken said.
He raised the gun again. The General’s aide zoomed in tight. Borken’s huge bulk filled the screen. Upturned pink face, black pistol held high.
“We see it,” Webster said.
The aide zoomed back out. Borken resumed his proper perspective.
“Sig-Sauer P226,” Borken said. “You familiar with that weapon?”
Webster paused. Glanced around.
“Yes,” he said.
“Nine-millimeter,” Borken said. “Fifteen shots to a clip.”
“So?” Webster asked.
Borken laughed. A loud sound in Webster’s ear.
“Time for some target practice,” Borken said. “And guess what the target is?”
They saw the two men move toward Holly. Then they saw Holly’s crutch come up. She held it level with both hands. She smashed it hard into the first man’s gut. She whipped it back and swung it. Spun and hit the second man in the head. But it was light aluminum. No weight behind it. She dropped it and her hands went to her pockets. Came out with something in each palm. Things that glinted and caught the sun. She skipped forward and slashed desperately at the face in front of her. Danced and whirled and swung the glinting weapons.
The aide jerked the zoom control. The first man was down, clutching at his throat and face. Blood on his hands. Holly was spinning fast circles, slashing at the air like a panther in a cage, turning on a stiff leg, the other foot dancing in and out as she darted left and right. Webster could hear distorted breathing and gasping through the earpiece. He could hear shouting and screaming. He stared at the screen and pleaded silently: go left, Holly, go for the jeep.
She went right. Swung her left hand high and held her right hand low, like a boxer. Darted for the second man. He raised his rifle, but crossways, in a sheer panic move to ward off the slashing blow. He punched the rifle up to meet her arm, and her wrist cracked against the barrel. Her weapon flew off into the air. She kicked hard under the rifle and caught him in the groin. He wheeled away and collapsed. She darted for Borken. Her glittering hand swung a vicious arc. Webster heard a shriek in his ear. The camera showed Borken ducking away. Holly swarming after him.
But the first man was up again, behind her. Hesitating. Then he was swinging his rifle like a bat. He caught her with the stock flat on the back of her head. She went limp. Her leg stayed stiff. She collapsed over it like she was falling over a gate and sprawled on the road at Borken’s feet.

TWO DOWN. ONE of them was Holly. Reacher adjusted the field glasses and stared at her. Two still standing. A grunt with a rifle, and Borken with a handgun and the radio. All in a tight knot, visible through the trees twelve hundred yards southeast and three hundred feet below. Reacher stared at Holly, inert on the ground. He wanted her. He loved her for her courage. Two armed men and Borken, and she'd gone for it. Hopeless, but she'd gone for it. He lowered the field glasses and hitched his legs around the chimney. Like he was riding a metal horse. The chimney was warm. His upper body was flat on the slope of the roof. His head and shoulders were barely above the ridge. He raised the field glasses again, and held his breath, and waited.

THEY SAW BORKEN'Sagitated gestures and then the injured man was getting up and moving in with the other who had hit her. They saw them pinning her arms behind her and dragging her to her feet. Her head was hanging down. One leg was bent, and the other was stiff. They propped her on it and paused. Borken signaled them to move. They dragged her away across the road. Then Borken's voice came back in Webster's ear, loud and breathy.
"OK, fun's over," he said. "Put her old man on."
Webster handed the radio to Johnson. He stared at it. Raised it to his ear.
"Anything you want," he said. "Anything at all. Just don't hurt her."
Borken laughed. A loud, relieved chuckle.
"That's the kind of attitude I like," he said. "Now watch this."
The two men dragged Holly up the knoll in front of the ruined office building. Dragged her over to the stump of the dead tree. They turned her and walked her until her back thumped against the wood. They wrapped her arms around the stump behind her. Her head came up. She shook it, in a daze. One man held both wrists while the other fumbled with something. Handcuffs. He locked her wrists behind the tree. The two men stepped away, back toward Borken. Holly fell and slid down the stump. Then she pushed back and stood up. Shook her head again and gazed around.
"Target practice," Borken said into the radio.
Johnson's aide fiddled with the zoom and made the picture bigger. Borken was walking away. He walked twenty yards south and turned, the Sig-Sauer pointing at the ground, the radio up at his face.
"Here goes," he said.
He turned side-on and raised his arm. Held it out absolutely straight, shoulders turned like a duelist in an old movie. Squinted down the barrel and fired. The pistol kicked silently and there was a puff of dust in the ground, three feet from

where Holly was standing still.
Borken laughed again.
“Bad shot,” he said. “I need the practice. Might take me a while to get close. But I’ve got fourteen more shells, right?”
He fired again. A puff of dust from the earth. Three feet the other side of the stump.
“Thirteen left,” Borken said. “I guess CNN is your best bet, right? Call them and tell them the whole story. Make it an official statement. Get Webster to back you up. Then patch them through on this radio. You won’t give me my fax line, I’m going to have to communicate direct.”
“You’re crazy,” Johnson said.
“You’re the one who’s crazy,” Borken said. “I’m a force of history. I can’t be stopped. I’m shooting at your daughter. The President’s godchild. You don’t understand, Johnson. The world is changing. I’m changing it. The world must be my witness.”
Johnson was silent. Stunned.
“OK,” Borken said. “I’m going to hang up now. You make that call. Thirteen bullets left. I don’t hear from CNN, the last one kills her.”
Johnson heard the line go dead and looked up at the screens and saw Borken drop the radio on the ground. Saw him raise the Sig-Sauer two-handed. Saw him sight it in. Saw him put a round right between his daughter’s feet.

REACHER RESTED AGAINST the warm chimney and lowered the glasses. Ran a desperate calculation through his head. A calculation involving time and distance. He was twelve hundred yards away to the northwest. He couldn’t get there in time. And he couldn’t get there silently. He lay chest down on the roof of the mess hall and called down to McGrath. His voice was already quiet and relaxed. Like he was ordering in a restaurant.
“McGrath?” he said. “Go break into the armory. It’s the hut on the end, apart from the others.”
“OK,” McGrath called. “What do you want?”
“You know what a Barrett looks like?” Reacher called. “Big black thing, scope, big muzzle brake on it. Find a full magazine. Probably next to them.”
“OK,” McGrath said again.
“And hurry,” Reacher said.

GARBER’S VIEW UP from the south cleared when the two soldiers came back around and stood behind Beau Borken. They hung back, like they didn’t want to put him off his aim. Borken was maybe sixty feet from Holly, shooting up the

rise of the knoll. Garber was seventy yards away down the steep slope. Holly was just left of straight ahead. Borken was just to the right. His black bulk was perfectly outlined against the whiteness of the south wall of the courthouse. Garber saw that somebody had blanked the upper-story windows with new white wood. Borken's head was framed dead center against one of the new rectangles. Garber smiled. It would be like shooting for a small pink bull's-eye on a sheet of white paper. He snicked the M-16 to burst fire and checked it visually. Then he raised it to his shoulder.

MCGRATH STRETCHED UP on his toes and passed the Barrett up toward Reacher. Reacher stretched his hand down and pulled it up. Glanced at it and passed it back down.
"Not this one," he said. "Find one with the serial number ending in five-zero-two-four, OK?"
"Why?" McGrath called.
"Because I know for sure it shoots straight," Reacher said. "I used it before."
"Christ," McGrath said. He set off again at a dead run. Reacher lay back on the roof, trying to keep his heartbeat under control.

BORKEN'S TENTH SHOT was still wide, but not by much. Holly jumped as far as her cuffs would allow. Borken took to pacing back and forth in delight. He was pacing and laughing and stopping to shoot. Garber was tracking his huge bulk left and right against the whiteness of the building. Just waiting for him to stop moving. Because Garber had a rule: make the first shot count.

MCGRATH FOUND THE rifle Reacher had used before and passed it up to the roof. Reacher took it and checked the number. Nodded. McGrath ran like crazy for the mouth of the stony track. Disappeared down it at a sprint. Reacher watched him go. Thumbed the big bullets in the magazine and checked the spring. Pressed the magazine home gently with his palm. Raised the Barrett to his shoulder and balanced it carefully on the ridgeline. Pulled the stock in and ducked his eye to the scope. Used his left thumb to ease the focus out to twelve hundred yards. It racked the lens right out to the stop. He laid his left palm over the barrel. Operated the silky mechanism and put a round in the breech. Stared down at the scene below.
The telescope on the rifle bunched it all up, but the geometry was fine. Holly was up on the knoll, slightly to the right of dead ahead. Handcuffed to the dead tree. He stared at her face for a long moment. Then he nudged the scope. Borken was below her, maybe sixty feet farther on, firing up the rise at her, slightly to the left. He was walking short arcs, back and forth. But crazy there he chose to

the left. He was walking short arcs, back and forth. But anywhere he chose to stop, there was a hundred miles of empty country behind his head. The courthouse walls were well away from Reacher's trajectory. Safe enough. Safe, but not easy. Twelve hundred yards was a hell of a distance. He breathed out and waited for Borken to stop pacing.

Then he froze. In the corner of his eye, he caught the gleam of sun on dull metal. Maybe seventy yards farther on down the slope. A rock. A man behind the rock. A rifle. A familiar head, grizzled hair on some of it. General Garber. Garber, with an M-16, behind a rock, moving the muzzle side to side as he tracked his target, who was walking short arcs seventy yards directly in front of him. Reacher breathed out and smiled. He felt a warm flood of gratitude. Garber. He had backup. Garber, shooting from just seventy yards. In that split second, he knew Holly was safe. The warm flood of gratitude coursed through him.

Then it changed to an icy blast of panic. His brain kicked in. The compressed geometry below him exploded into a dreadful diagram. Like something on a page, like a textbook explanation of a disaster. From Garber's angle, the courthouse was directly behind Borken. When Borken stopped moving, Garber was going to fire at him. He might hit, or he might miss. Either way, his bullet was going to hit the courthouse wall. Probably right up there in the southeastern corner, second floor. The ton of old dynamite would go up in a percussive fireball a quarter-mile wide. It would vaporize Holly and shred Garber himself. The shock wave would probably knock Reacher right off the mess hall roof, twelve hundred yards away. How the hell could Garber not know?

Borken stopped pacing. Stood sideways on and steadied himself. Reacher blew out a lungful of air. He moved the Barrett. He put the crosshairs dead center on Holly Johnson's temple, right where the soft dark hair billowed down toward her eyes. He kept his lungs empty and waited for the next thump of his heart. Then he squeezed the trigger.

GARBER WATCHED BORKEN'S arm come up. Waited until he had steadied. Squinted down the M-16's sighting grooves and put the pink and white head dead center. It sat there, big and obvious against the blur of sunny white wall behind it. He waited like he'd been taught to a lifetime ago. Waited until his breath was out and his heart was between beats. Then he pulled the trigger.

GENERAL JOHNSON HAD closed his eyes. His aide was staring at the screen. Webster was watching through a lattice of fingers, mouth open, like a child with a new babysitter watching a horror movie on television, way after his bedtime.

FIRST THING OUT of the barrel of Reacher's Barrett was a blast of hot gas

FIRST THING OUT of the barrel of Reacher's Barrett was a blast of hot gas. The powder in the cartridge exploded in a fraction of a millionth of a second and expanded to a superheated bubble. That bubble of gas hurled the bullet down the barrel and forced ahead of it and around it to explode out into the atmosphere. Most of it was smashed sideways by the muzzle brake in a perfectly balanced radial pattern, like a doughnut, so that the recoil moved the barrel straight back against Reacher's shoulder without deflecting it either sideways or up or down. Meanwhile, behind it, the bullet was starting to spin inside the barrel as the rifling grooves grabbed at it.

Then the gas ahead of the bullet was heating the oxygen in the air to the point where the air caught fire. There was a brief flash of flame and the bullet burst out through the exact center of it, spearing through the burned air at nineteen hundred miles an hour. A thousandth of a second later, it was a yard away, followed by a cone of gunpowder particles and a puff of soot. Another thousandth of a second later, it was six feet away, and its sound was bravely chasing after it, three times slower.

The bullet took five hundredths of a second to cross the Bastion, by which time the sound of its shot had just passed Reacher's ears and cleared the ridge of the roof. The bullet had a hand-polished copper jacket, and it was flying straight and true, but by the time it passed soundlessly over McGrath's head it had slowed a little. The friction of the air had heated it and slowed it. And the air was moving it. It was moving it right to left as the gentle mountain breeze tugged imperceptibly at it. Half a second into its travel, the bullet had covered thirteen hundred feet and it had moved seven inches to the left.

And it had dropped seven inches. Gravity had pulled it in. The more gravity pulled, the more the bullet slowed. The more it slowed, the more gravity deflected it. It speared onward in a perfect graceful curve. A whole second after leaving the barrel, it was nine hundred yards into its journey. Way past McGrath's running figure, but still over the trees. Still three hundred yards short of its target. Another sixth of a second later, it was clear of the trees and alongside the ruined office building. Now it was a slow bullet. It had pulled four feet left, and five feet down. It passed well clear of Holly and was twenty feet beyond her before she heard the hiss in the air. The sound of its shot was still to come. It had just about caught up with McGrath, running through the trees.

Then there was a second bullet in the air. And a third, and a fourth. Garber fired a full second and a quarter later than Reacher. His rifle was set to auto. It fired a burst of three. Three shells in a fifth of a second. His bullets were smaller and lighter. Because they were lighter, they were faster. They came in at well over two thousand miles an hour. He was nearer the target. Because his bullets were faster and lighter and he was nearer, friction and gravity never really chipped in

faster and lighter and he was nearer, friction and gravity never really chipped in. His three bullets stayed pretty straight.

Reacher's bullet hit Borken in the head a full second and a third after he fired it. It entered the front of his forehead and was out of the back of his skull three ten-thousandths of a second later. In and out without really slowing much more at all, because Borken's skull and brains were nothing to a two-ounce lead projectile with a needle point and a polished copper jacket. The bullet was well on over the endless forest beyond before the pressure wave built up in Borken's skull and exploded it.

The effect is mathematical and concerns kinetic energy. The way it had been explained to Reacher, long ago, was all about equivalents. The bullet weighed only two ounces, but it was fast. Equivalent to something heavy, but slow. Two ounces moving at a thousand miles an hour was maybe similar to something weighing ten pounds moving at three miles an hour. Maybe something like a sledgehammer swinging hard in a man's hand. That was pretty much the effect.

Reacher was watching it through the scope. Heart in his mouth. A full second and a third is a long time to wait. He watched Borken's skull explode like it had been burst from the inside with a sledgehammer. It came apart like a diagram. Reacher saw curved shards of bone bursting outward and red mist blooming. But what he couldn't see were Garber's three bullets, hurtling through the mess unimpeded, and flying straight on toward the courthouse wall.

45

THE CLASSIC MISTAKE in firing an automatic weapon is to let the recoil from the first bullet jerk the barrel upward, so that the second bullet goes high, and the third higher still. But Garber did not make that mistake. He had enough hours on the range to be reliable from seventy yards. He had been through enough edgy situations to know how to stay cool and concentrated. He put all three bullets right through the exact center of the pink cloud that had been Borken's head.

They spent two ten-thousandths of a second traveling through it and flew on uninterrupted. They smashed through the new plywood sheeting in the window frame. The leading bullet was distorted slightly by the impact and jerked left, tearing through the inner pine siding twenty-two inches later. It crossed Holly's room and reentered the wall to the left of the doorway. Smashed right through and buried itself in the far wall of the corridor.

The second bullet came in through the first bullet's hole and therefore traversed the twenty-two inch gap in a straight line. It came out through the inner siding and was thrown to the right. Crossed the room and smashed on through the bathroom partition and shattered the cheap white ceramic toilet.

The third shell was rising just a fraction. It hit a nail in the outer wall and turned a right angle. Drilled itself sideways and down through eight of the new two-by-fours like a demented termite before its energy was expended. It ended up looking like a random blob of lead pressed into the back of the new pine boarding.

REACHER SAW GARBER'S muzzle flash through his scope. Knew he must be firing triples. Knew he must have hit the courthouse wall. He stared down from twelve hundred yards away and gripped the ridge of the roof and shut his eyes. Waited for the explosion.

GARBER KNEW HIS shots hadn't killed Borken. There hadn't been time. Even dealing with tiny fractions of a second, there's a rhythm. Fire . . . hit. Borken had been hit before his bullets could possibly have gotten there. So somebody else was up and shooting. There was a team in action. Garber smiled. Fired again. Pumped his trigger finger nine more times and stitched Borken's two soldiers all over the courthouse wall with his remaining twenty-seven shells.

MILOSEVIC CAME OUT of the courthouse lobby and down the steps at a run

MILOSEVIC CAME OUT of the courthouse lobby and down the steps at a run. He had his Bureau .38 held high in his right hand and his gold shield in his left.
“FBI agent!” he screamed. “Everybody freeze!”
He glanced to his right at Holly and then at Garber on his way up to meet him and at McGrath racing around from behind the office building. McGrath went straight for Holly. He hugged her tight against the dead tree. She was laughing. She couldn’t hug back, because her arms were still cuffed behind the post. McGrath let her go and ran down the slope. Smacked a high five with Milosevic.
“Who’s got the keys?” McGrath yelled.
Garber pointed over toward the two dead soldiers. McGrath ran to them and searched through the oozing pockets. Came out with a key and ran back up to the knoll. Ducked around to the back of the stump and unlocked Holly’s wrists. She staggered away and McGrath darted forward and grabbed her arm. Milosevic found her crutch on the road and tossed it over. McGrath caught it and handed it to her. She got steady and came down the rise, arm in arm with McGrath. They made it to level ground and stood there together, gazing around in the sudden deafening quiet.
“Who do I thank?” Holly asked.
She was holding McGrath’s arm, staring at the remains of Borken, lying sixty feet away. The corpse was flat on its back, high and wide. It had no head.
“This is General Garber,” McGrath said. “Top boy in the military police.”
Garber shook his head.
“Wasn’t me,” he said. “Somebody beat me to it.”
“Wasn’t me,” Milosevic said.
Then Garber nodded behind them.
“Probably this guy,” he said.
Reacher was on his way down the knoll. Out of breath. A frame six five high and two hundred and twenty pounds in weight is good for a lot of things, but not for sprinting a mile.
“Reacher,” Holly said.
He ignored her. Ignored everybody. Just ran on south and turned to stare up at the white wall. He saw bullet holes. A lot of bullet holes. Probably thirty holes, most of them scattered over the second floor in the southeastern corner. He stared at them for a second and ran for the jeep parked at the curb. Snatched the shovel from its clips under the spare fuel can. Sprinted for the steps. Crashed through the door and up the stairs to Holly’s room. Ran for the front wall.
He could see at least a dozen exit holes punched through the wood. Ragged splintered holes. He smashed the blade of the shovel into one of them. Split the pine board lengthways and used the shovel to wrench it off. Smashed the shovel behind the next and tore it away from the nails securing it. By the time McGrath

was in the room, he had exposed four feet of studding. By the time Holly joined them, they were staring into an empty cavity.
“No dynamite,” she said, quietly.
Reacher ducked away to the adjacent wall. Tore enough boards off to be sure.
“There never was any,” Holly said. “Shit, I can’t believe it.”
“There was some,” McGrath said. “Jackson called it in. Described the whole thing. I saw his report. He unloaded the truck with seven other guys. He carried it up here. He saw it going into the walls, for God’s sake. A ton of dynamite. Kind of a hard thing to be confused about.”
“So they put it in,” Reacher said. “And then they took it out. They let people see it going in, then they took it out again secretly. They used it somewhere else.”
“Took it out again?” Holly repeated.
“Women and children have to die,” Reacher said, slowly.
“What?” Holly asked. “What are you saying?”
“But not here,” he said. “Not these women and children.”
“What?” Holly said again.
“Not mass suicide,” Reacher said. “Mass murder.”
Then he just went blank. He was silent. But in his head, he was hearing something. He was hearing the same terrible blast he had heard thirteen years before. The sound of Beirut. The sound of the Marine compound, out near the airport. He was hearing it all over again, and it was deafening him.
“Now we know what it is,” he muttered through the shattering roar.
“What is it?” McGrath asked.
“Low on its springs,” Reacher said. “But we don’t know where it’s gone.”
“What?” Holly said again.
“Women and children have to die,” Reacher repeated. “Borken said so. He said the historical circumstances justified it. But he didn’t mean these women and these children up here.”
“What the hell are you talking about?” McGrath said.
Reacher glanced at him, and then at Holly, surprised, like he was seeing them both for the first time.
“I was in the motor pool,” he said. “I saw the truck. Our truck? It was parked up, low on its springs, like it had a heavy weight inside.”
“What?” Holly said again.
“They’ve made themselves a truck bomb,” Reacher said. “Stevie’s delivering it somewhere, some public place. That’s the other attack. They’re going to explode it in a crowd. There’s a whole ton of dynamite in it. And he’s six hours ahead of us.”
McGrath was first down the stairs.

“Into the jeep,” he yelled.
Garber ran for the jeep. But Milosevic was much nearer. He vaulted in and fired it up. Then McGrath was helping Holly into the front seat. Reacher was on the sidewalk, staring south, lost in thought. Milosevic was drawing his revolver. He was thumbing the hammer back. Garber stopped. Raised his rifle and aimed. Milosevic leaned across in front of Holly. McGrath jumped away. Milosevic stamped on the gas and roared away one-handed with the muzzle jammed into Holly’s side. One-handed over the rough road, the jeep was all over the place. No chance of hitting Milosevic. Garber could see that. He lowered his rifle and watched them go.

BOTH OF THEM?” Webster said to himself. “Please, God, no.”
“We could use another chopper right now,” the aide said. “I don’t think we have to worry about the missiles anymore.”
He panned the camera north and west and zoomed in on the mountain bowl in front of the mine entrances. The four missile trucks were sitting inert. The sprawled body of the dead sentry was nearby.
“OK, call in a chopper,” Johnson said.
“Better coming direct from you, sir,” the aide said.
Johnson turned sideways to use the phone. Then he spun back to watch as the jeep drove into shot. It bounced up out of the last hairpin into the bowl and raced across the shale. Swerved around the dead trucks and slewed to a stop in front of the left-hand shed. Milosevic jumped out and danced around the hood. Revolver steady on Holly as he approached. He pulled her out by the arm and dragged her to the big wooden doors. Levered one open with his foot and pushed her inside. He followed her in and the huge door swung shut. Webster glanced away from the screen.
“Call the chopper, sir,” the aide said.
“Make it a fast one,” Webster added.

QUICKEST WAY TO the mines was a shortcut through the Bastion. It was deserted and quiet. They ran through it and headed north across the rifle range toward the parade ground. Stopped short in the woods. The whole remaining militia population was standing silently in neat ranks, quiet fearful faces turned to the front, where Borken’s upturned box still awaited his arrival.
Reacher ignored them and led the others around in the trees. Then in a straight line to the road. Straight north along it. Reacher was carrying the big Barrett. He had retrieved it from the mess hall roof, because he liked it. Garber was hurrying at his side. McGrath was pushing ahead as fast as he could, desperate to get to

Holly.
They ducked back into the woods before the last hairpin and Reacher scouted ahead. He holed up behind the rock he'd used before and covered every inch of the bowl with the Barrett's scope. Then he waved the other two up to join him.
"They're in the motor pool," he said. "Left-hand shed."
He pointed with the fat barrel of the sniper rifle and the others saw the abandoned jeep and nodded. He ran over the shale and crouched behind the hood of the first missile truck. Garber sent McGrath next. Then he ran over. They crouched together behind the truck and stared at the log doors.
"What now?" Garber asked. "Frontal assault?"
"He's got a gun to her head," McGrath said. "I don't want her hurt, Reacher. She's precious to me, OK?"
"Any other way in?" Garber asked.
Reacher stared at the doors and the roaring of the Beirut bomb receded and was replaced by the quiet whimpering of an earlier nightmare. He spent a minute trawling desperately for an alternative. He thought about the rifles and the missiles and the trucks. Then he gave it up.
"Keep him occupied," he said. "Talk to him, anything."
He left the Barrett and took the Glock back from McGrath. Dodged to the next truck, and the next, all the way level with the entrance to the other cavern. The charnel house, full of bodies and skeletons and rats. He heard McGrath calling to Milosevic in a faint faraway voice and he ran to the big log doors. Ducked in through the gap and moved back into the dark.
He had no flashlight. He felt his way around the troop carrier and eased on into the mountain. He held his hand above his head and felt the roof come down. Felt for the bodies in the pile and skirted them. Crouched and headed left for the skeletons. The rats were hearing him and smelling him and squealing angry warnings all the way back to their nests. He dropped to his knees and then lay down and swam through the pile of damp bones. Felt the roof of the tunnel lower and the sides press in. Took a deep breath and felt the fear come back.

THE FASTEST HELICOPTER available on that day was a Marine Corps Night Hawk stationed at Malmstrom. It was a long, fat, humped machine, but it was quick. Within minutes of Johnson's call, it was spinning up and receiving orders to head west and north to a gravel turnout on the last road in Montana. Then it was in the air. The Marine pilot found the road and followed it north, fast and low, until he spotted a cluster of Army command vehicles parked tight into a rock cutting. He swung back and put down on the turnout and waited. Saw three men racing south toward him. One was a civilian, and two were Army. One was

a Colonel and the other was the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The pilot shrugged at his crewman who pointed upward through the Plexiglas canopy. There was a lone vapor trail maybe thirty-six thousand feet up. Some big jet was unwinding a tight spiral and streaking south. The pilot shrugged again and figured whatever was happening, it was happening to the south. So he made a provisional course calculation and was surprised when the brass clambered aboard and ordered him to head north into the mountains.

REACHER WAS LAUGHING. He was hauling himself along through the tunnel and laughing out loud. Shaking and crying with laughter. He was no longer afraid. The tight clamp of the rock on his body was like a caress. He had done this once, and survived it. It was possible. He was going to get through. The fear had disappeared as suddenly as it had come. He had pushed through the pile of bones in the dark and stretched out and felt the rock clamp down against his back. His chest had seized and his throat had gagged tight. He had felt the hot damp flush of panic and pressed himself into the ground. He had felt his strength drain away. Then he had focused. The job in hand. Holly. Milosevic's revolver pushed against the dark billow of her hair, her fabulous eyes dull with despair. He had seen her in his mind at the end of the tunnel. Holly. Then the tunnel seemed to straighten and become a warm smooth tube. An exact fit for his bulky shoulders. Like it was tailored for him, and him alone. A simple horizontal journey. He had learned a long time ago that some things were worth being afraid of. And some things were not. Things that he had done before and survived did not justify fear. To be afraid of a survivable thing was irrational. And whatever else he was, Reacher knew he was a rational man. In that split second the fear disappeared and he felt himself relax. He was a fighter. An avenger. And Holly was waiting for him. He thrust his arms forward like a swimmer diving for the water and swarmed through the mountain toward her. He charged along with a tidy rhythm. Like marching out on the open road, but doing it lying down in the dark. Small deft movements of hands and feet. Head lowered. Laughing with relief. He felt the tunnel get smaller and hug him. He slid on through. He felt the blank wall ahead and folded himself neatly around the corner. Breathed easily and stopped laughing. Told himself it was time for quiet. He crawled on as fast as he could. Slowed up when he sensed the roof soaring away above him. Crept forward until the smell of the air told him he was nearly through.

Then he heard the helicopter. He heard the faint thumping of the rotors in the distance. He heard feet scuffling forty yards in front of him. The inarticulate sound of surprise and panic. He heard Milosevic's voice. High-pitched West

Coast accent.
“Keep that chopper away from here,” Milosevic screamed through the door.
The noise was getting nearer. Growing louder.
“Keep it away, you hear?” Milosevic screamed. “I’ll kill her, McGrath. That’s a promise, you hear?”
It was totally dark. There were vehicles between Reacher and the cracks of light around the door. But not the white truck. That was gone. He rolled up into the space where it had been and pulled the Glock from his pocket. The thumping of the rotor blades was very close. It was battering the doors and filling the cavern.
“I’ll trade her with you,” Milosevic screamed through the door. “I get out of here unharmed, you get her back, OK? McGrath? You hear me?”
If there was a reply, Reacher didn’t hear it.
“I’m not with these guys,” Milosevic screamed. “This whole thing is nothing to do with me. Brogan got me into it. He made me do it.”
The noise was shattering. The heavy doors were shaking.
“I did it for the money, that’s all,” Milosevic screamed. “Brogan was giving me money. Hundreds of thousands of dollars, McGrath. You’d have done the exact same thing. Brogan was making me rich. He bought me a Ford Explorer. The Limited Edition. Thirty-five grand. How the hell else was I ever going to get one?”
Reacher listened to the screaming voice in the darkness. He didn’t want to shoot him. For one crazy moment, he felt absurdly grateful to him, because he had banished his childhood nightmare. He had forced him to confront it and defeat it. He had made him a better man. He wanted to run up to him and shake him by the hand. He could picture himself doing it. But then the picture changed. He needed to run up to him and shake him by the throat and ask him if he knew where Stevie had taken the white truck. That was what he needed to do. That was why he didn’t want to shoot him. He crept forward in the deafening noise and skirted around the vehicles.
He was operating in a one-dimensional world. He could see nothing, because of the darkness. He could hear nothing, because of the helicopter. He sensed movement near the doors. Came out from behind a pickup and saw a shape framed against the cracks of light. A shape that should have been two shapes. Wide at the top, four legs, Milosevic with his arm around Holly’s throat, his gun at her head. He waited for his vision to build. Their faces faded in from black to gray. Holly in front of Milosevic. Reacher raised the Glock. Circled left to get an angle. His shin caught a fender. He staggered and backed into a pile of paint cans. They crashed silently to the rock floor, inaudible in the crushing noise from outside. He sprinted closer to the light.
Milosevic sensed it and turned. Reacher saw his mouth open in a silent shout.

Milosevic sensed it and turned. Reacher saw his mouth open in a silent shout. Saw him twist and push Holly out in front of him like a shield. Saw him stall with indecision, his revolver up in the air. Reacher dodged right, then danced back left. He saw Milosevic track him both ways. Saw Holly use the sway to tear herself out of his grip. The rotor noise was shattering. He saw Milosevic glancing left and right. Saw him making his decision. Reacher was armed, Holly was not. Milosevic lunged forward. The .38 flashed silently in the noise. The brief white flame was blinding in the dark. Reacher lost his sense of where Holly was. He cursed and held his fire. He saw Milosevic aim again. Beyond him, he saw Holly's arm come up and stretch around his head from behind. He saw her hand touch his face with gentle precision. He saw him stumble. Then the door heaved open and Holly staggered away from the shattering flood of noise and sunlight and crashed straight into his arms.

The sunlight fell in a bright bar across Milosevic. He was lying on his back. His .38 was in his hand. The hammer was back. There was a shard of bathroom tile sticking out of his head where his left eye should have been. It was maybe three inches in and three inches out. A small worm of blood was running away from the point of entry.

Then the open door was crowded with people. Reacher saw McGrath and Garber standing in a blast of dust. A Night Hawk was landing behind them. Three men were spilling out and running over. A civilian and a Colonel. And General Johnson. Holly twisted and saw them and buried her face back in Reacher's chest.

Garber was the first to them. He pulled them out into the light and the noise. They stumbled awkwardly, four-legged. The downdraft tore at them. Dust blasted off the shale. McGrath stepped near and Holly pulled herself from Reacher's grip and threw herself at him and hugged him hard. Then General Johnson was moving in on her through the crowd.

"Holly," he mouthed through the din.

She straightened in the light. Grinned at him. Hooked her hair back behind her ears. Pulled away from McGrath and hugged her father close.

"Still stuff for me to do, Dad," she screamed over the engines. "I'll tell you everything later, OK?"

46

REACHER MADE A twirling signal with his hand to tell the helicopter pilot to keep the engines spinning and ran through the noise and the eddying dust to take the Barrett back from Garber. He waved the others toward the machine. Hustled them up the ladder and followed them in through the sliding door. Laid the Barrett on the metal floor and dumped himself into a canvas chair. Pulled his headset on. Thumbed the button and called through to the pilot.
“Stand by, OK?” he said. “I’ll give you a course as soon as I’ve got one.”
The pilot nodded and ran the engines up out of idle. The rotor thumped faster and the noise built louder. The weight of the aircraft came up off the tires.
“Where the hell are we going?” Webster shouted.
“We’re chasing Stevie, chief,” McGrath shouted back. “He’s driving the truck. The truck is full of dynamite. He’s going to explode it somewhere. Remember what the Kendall sheriff said? Stevie always got sent out to do the dirty work? You want me to draw you a damn picture?”
“But he can’t have gotten out of here,” Webster yelled. “The bridge is blown. And there are no tracks through the forest. They closed them all.”
“Forest Service guy didn’t say that,” McGrath yelled back. “They closed some of them. He wasn’t sure which ones, was all. What he said was maybe there’s a way through, maybe there isn’t.”
“They had two years to spy it out,” Reacher shouted. “You said the pickup had spent time on Forest Service tracks, right? Crushed sandstone all over the underside? They had two whole years to find a way through the maze.”
Webster glanced to his left, east, over to where the forest lay beyond the giant mountain. He nodded urgently, eyes wide.
“OK, so we got to stop him,” he yelled. “But where has he gone?”
“He’s six hours ahead of us,” Reacher shouted. “We can assume the forest was pretty slow. Call it two hours? Then four hours on the open road. Maybe two hundred miles? Diesel Econoline, hauling a ton, can’t be averaging more than about fifty.”
“But which damn direction?” Webster yelled through the noise.
Holly glanced at Reacher. That was a question they had asked each other a number of times, in relation to that exact same truck. Reacher opened up the map in his head and trawled around it all over again, clockwise.
“Could have gone east,” he shouted. “He’d still be in Montana, past Great Falls. Could be down in Idaho. Could be in Oregon. Could be halfway to Seattle.”
“No,” Garber yelled. “Think about it the other way around. That’s the key to this

"No," Garber yelled. "Think about it the other way around. That's the key to this thing. Where has he been ordered to go? What would the target be?"
Reacher nodded slowly. Garber was making sense. The target.
"What does Borken want to attack?" Johnson yelled.
Borken had said: you study the system and you learn to hate it. Reacher thought hard and nodded again and thumbed his mike and called through to the pilot.
"OK, let's go," he said. "Straight on south of here should do it."
The noise increased louder and the Night Hawk lifted heavily off the ground. It swung in the air and rose clear of the cliffs. Slipped south and banked around. Dropped its nose and accelerated hard. The noise moved up out of the cabin and settled to a deep roar inside the engines. The ground tilted and flashed past below. Reacher saw the mountain hairpins unwinding and the parade ground sliding past. The knot of tiny people was breaking up. They were drifting away into the trees and being swallowed up under the green canopy. Then the narrow slash of the rifle range was under them, then the broad stony circle of the Bastion. Then the aircraft rose sharply as the ground fell away so that the big white courthouse slipped by underneath as small as a dollhouse. Then they were over the ravine, over the broken bridge, and away into the vast forested spaces to the south.
Reacher tapped the pilot on the shoulder and spoke through the intercom.
"What speed are we doing?" he asked.
"Hundred and sixty," the pilot said.
"Course?" Reacher asked.
"Dead on south," the pilot said.
Reacher nodded. Closed his eyes and started to calculate. It was like being back in grade school. He's two hundred miles ahead, doing fifty miles an hour. You're chasing him at a hundred and sixty. How long before you catch him? Grade school math had been OK for Reacher. So had fighting in the yard. The fighting part had stayed with him better than the math. He was sure there must be some kind of a formula for it. Something with *x* and *y* all over the damn page. Something equaling something else. But if there was a formula, he had long ago forgotten it. So he had to do it by trial and error. Another hour, Stevie would be two hundred and fifty miles from home. The Night Hawk would have done one hundred and sixty. Way behind. An hour after that, Stevie would be three hundred miles out, and the Night Hawk would be three hundred and twenty. Overshot. Therefore they were going to catch him somewhere near the top of the second hour. If they were headed in the right direction.
Flathead Lake came into view, far ahead and far below. Reacher could see the roads snaking across the rugged terrain. He thumbed the button on his mike.
"Still south?" he asked.

“Dead on,” the pilot said.
“Still one-sixty?” Reacher asked.
“Dead on,” the pilot said again.
“OK, stick with it,” Reacher said. “Hour and fifty minutes, maybe.”
“So where is he going?” Webster asked.
“San Francisco,” Reacher said.
“Why?” McGrath asked.
“Or Minneapolis,” Reacher said. “But I’m gambling on San Francisco.”
“Why?” McGrath asked again.
“San Francisco or Minneapolis,” Reacher said. “Think about it. Other possibilities would be Boston, New York, Philly, Cleveland, Richmond in Virginia, Atlanta, Chicago, St. Louis, and Kansas City in Missouri, or Dallas in Texas.”
McGrath just shrugged blankly. Webster looked puzzled. Johnson glanced at his aide. Garber was motionless. But Holly was smiling. She smiled and winked at Reacher. He winked back and the Night Hawk thumped on south over Missoula at a hundred and sixty miles an hour.

“CHRIST, IT’S THE Fourth of July,” Webster said suddenly.
“Tell me about it,” Reacher said. “Lots of people gathered in public places. Families, kids and all.”
Webster nodded grimly.
“OK, where exactly in San Francisco?” he asked.
“I’m not sure,” Reacher said.
“North end of Market,” Holly said. “Right near Embarcadero Plaza. That’s where, chief. I’ve been there on the Fourth. Big parade in the afternoon, fireworks over the water at night. Huge crowds all day long.”
“Huge crowds everywhere on the Fourth,” Webster said. “You better be guessing right, people.”
McGrath looked up. A slow smile was spreading over his bruised face.
“We are guessing right,” he said. “It’s San Francisco for sure. Not Minneapolis or anyplace else.”
Reacher smiled back and winked. McGrath had gotten it.
“You want to tell me why?” Webster asked him.
McGrath was still smiling.
“Go figure,” he said. “You’re the damn Director.”
“Because it’s the nearest?” Webster asked.
McGrath nodded.
“In both senses,” he said, and smiled again.

“What both senses?” Webster asked. “What are we talking about?”
Nobody answered him. The military men were quiet. Holly and McGrath were staring out through the windows at the ground, two thousand feet below. Reacher was craning up, looking ahead through the pilot’s Plexiglas canopy.
“Where are we?” he asked him.
The pilot pointed down at a concrete ribbon below.
“That’s U.S. 93,” he said. “Just about to leave Montana and enter Idaho. Still heading due south.”
Reacher nodded.
“Great,” he said. “Follow 93. It’s the only road goes south, right? We’ll catch him somewhere between here and Nevada.”

HE STARTED WORRYING near the top of the second hour. Started worrying badly. Started desperate revisions to his grade school calculations. Maybe Stevie was driving faster than fifty. He was a fast driver. Faster than Bell had been. Maybe he was doing nearer sixty. Where did that put him? Three hundred and sixty miles out. In which case they wouldn’t catch him until two hours fifteen minutes had elapsed. What if he was doing seventy? Could that Econoline sustain seventy, hour after hour, with a ton in back? Maybe. Probably. In which case he was four hundred and twenty miles out. A total of two hours forty minutes before they overhauled him. That was the envelope. Somewhere between one hour fifty minutes and two hours forty minutes, somewhere between Montana and Nevada. A whole fifty minutes of rising panic. More than a hundred miles of concrete ribbon to watch before he could know for sure he was wrong and they had to peel off hopelessly northeast toward Minnesota.
The helicopter was flying nose down, top speed, straight along U.S. 93. The seven passengers were craned forward, staring down at the road. They were over a town called Salmon. The pilot was calling out information like a tour guide. The giant peak of Mount McGuire, ten thousand feet, way off to the right. Twin Peaks, ten and a half thousand feet, up ahead to the right. Borah Peak, highest of all, twelve and a half thousand feet, way ahead to the left. The aircraft rose and fell a thousand feet above the terrain. Hurtled along lower than the surrounding peaks, nose down to the highway like a bloodhound.
Time ticked away. Twenty minutes. Thirty. The road was pretty much empty. It connected Missoula in the north to Twin Falls in Idaho, three hundred miles to the south. Neither was a booming metropolis and this was a holiday. Everybody had already gotten where they were going. There was an occasional automobile and an occasional trucker working overtime. No white Econoline. There had been two white vehicles, but they were both pickups. There had been one panel

truck, but it was dark green. That was all. Nothing else. No white truck. Sometimes the road was empty all the way to the horizon in front of them. The time was ticking away. Like a bomb. Forty minutes. Fifty.
“I’m going to call Minneapolis,” Webster said. “We blew it.”
McGrath waited, hoping. He shook his head.
“Not yet,” he said. “That’s a desperation move. Mass panic. Can you imagine the crowds? The evacuation? People are going to get trampled.”
Webster peered out and down. Stared at the road for a full minute. Fifty-four minutes into the fifty-minute envelope.
“Get worse than trampled if that damn truck’s already up there,” he said. “You want to imagine that?”
Time ticked away. Fifty-eight minutes. An hour. The road stayed empty.
“There’s still time,” Garber said. “San Francisco or Minneapolis, either one, he’s still got to be a long way short.”
He glanced at Reacher. Doubt and trust visible in his eyes, in approximately equal measures. More time ticked away. An hour and five minutes. The road still stayed empty, all the way to the distant horizon. The speeding helicopter reeled it in, only to reveal a new horizon, still empty.
“He could be anywhere,” Webster said. “San Francisco’s wrong, maybe Minneapolis is wrong, too. He could be in Seattle already. Or anywhere.”
“Not Seattle,” Reacher said.
He stared forward. Stared on and on. Fear and panic had him by the throat. He checked his watch again and again. An hour and ten minutes. Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen. Fourteen. An hour and fifteen minutes. He stared at the watch and the empty ribbon below. Then he sat back and went quiet. Chilled with terror. He had hung on as long as he could, but they had reached the point where the math went absurd. To be this far south without passing him, Stevie would need to be driving at a hundred miles an hour. Or a hundred and twenty. Or a hundred and fifty. He glanced at the others and spoke in a voice which didn’t sound like his own.
“I blew it,” he said. “It must have been Minneapolis.”
Then the thump of the engines faded and for the second time that day the huge bass roar of the bomb came back. He kept his eyes wide open so he wouldn’t have to see it, but he saw it anyway. Not Marines this time, not hard men camped out in the heat to do a job, but soft people, women and children, small and smaller, camped out in a city park to watch fireworks, vaporizing and bursting into a hazy pink dew like his friends had done thirteen years before. The bone fragments coming out of children and hissing away through the burning air and hitting other children a hundred yards farther on. Hitting them and tearing

through their soft guts like shrapnel and putting the luckiest ones in the hospital for a whole agonizing year.
They were all staring at him. He realized tears were rolling down his cheeks and splashing onto his shirt.
“I’m sorry,” he said.
They looked away.
“I got calls to make,” Webster said. “Why is it Minneapolis now? Why was it ever San Francisco?”
“Federal Reserve branches,” Reacher said quietly. “There are twelve of them. The nearest two to Montana are San Francisco and Minneapolis. Borken hated the Fed. He thought it was the main instrument of the world government. He thought it was a big conspiracy to eliminate the middle classes. It was his special theory. He said it put him ahead in his understanding. And he believed the Fed ordered his father’s bank to finagle the old guy into taking a loan so they could deliberately default him later.”
“So Borken’s attacking the Fed?” Johnson asked urgently. Reacher nodded.
“Twin blows,” he said. “In the war against the world government. Attack the old system with a surprise move, like Pearl Harbor. At the same time as setting up a brand-new system for converts to flock to. One bird with two stones.”
He stopped talking. Too tired to continue. Too dispirited. Garber was staring at him. Real pain in his face. The beating of the engines was so loud it sounded like total silence.
“The declaration of independence was only half of it,” McGrath said. “Double decoy. We were supposed to be focused up there, worried about Holly, worried about a suicide pact, going crazy, while they bombed the Fed behind our backs. I figured San Francisco because of Kendall, remember? I figured Borken would target the nearest branch to where his old man’s farm was.”
Webster nodded.
“Hell of a plan,” he said. “Holiday weekend, agents on leave, big strategic decisions to make, everybody looking in the wrong place. Then the whole world looking at the bombing while Borken secures his territory back up there.”
“Where is the Fed in Minneapolis?” Johnson asked urgently.
Webster shrugged vaguely.
“No idea,” he said. “I’ve never been to Minneapolis. I imagine it’s a big public building, probably in a nice spot, parks all around, maybe on the river or something. There’s a river in Minneapolis, right?”
Holly nodded.
“It’s called the Mississippi,” she said.
“No,” Reacher said.

"It damn well is," Holly said. "Everybody knows that."
"No," Reacher said again. "It's not Minneapolis. It's San Francisco."
"Mississippi goes nowhere near San Francisco," Holly said.
Then she saw a giant smile spreading across Reacher's face. A final gleam of triumph in his tired eyes.
"What?" she said.
"San Francisco was right," he said.
Webster grunted in irritation.
"We'd have passed him already," he said. "Miles back."
Reacher thumbed his mike. Shouted up to the pilot.
"Turn back," he said. "A big wide loop."
Then he smiled again. Smiled and closed his eyes.
"We did pass him," he said. "Miles back. Right over his damn head. They painted the truck green."
The Night Hawk swung away into a high banked loop. The passengers swung their gaze from window to window as the landscape rotated below.
"There was paint in the motor pool," Reacher said. "I tripped over the cans. Probably camouflage base coat. They slapped it on this morning. Damn stuff is probably still wet."
They saw a Kenworth they had passed minutes ago. It was snuffling along a thousand feet below. Then a long stretch of empty pavement. Then a white pickup. More empty road. Then a dark green panel truck, speeding south.
"Down, down," Reacher was calling through.
"Is that it?" McGrath asked.
The gap between the panel truck and the pickup in front was lengthening. The truck was falling back. There was nothing behind it, all the way to the horizon. The Night Hawk was losing height. It was dropping toward the truck the way an eagle heads for a baby rabbit.
"Is that it?" McGrath asked again.
"That's it," Reacher said.
"It sure is," Holly whooped.
"You positive?" McGrath asked.
"Look at the roof," Holly told him.
McGrath looked. The roof was streaked with dark green paint, but he could see it was peppered with tiny holes. Like somebody had fired a shotgun right through it.
"We stared at those damn holes for two whole days," Holly said. "I'll remember them the rest of my life."
"There are a hundred and thirteen of them," Reacher said. "I counted. It's a prime number."

prime number.
Holly laughed and leaned over. Smacked a joyous high five with him.
“That’s our truck,” she said. “No doubt about it.”
“Can you see the driver?” McGrath asked.
The pilot tilted down and rocked sideways for a close look.
“It’s Stevie,” Holly shouted back. “For sure. We’ve got him.”
“This thing got weapons?” Webster asked.
“Two big machine guns,” the pilot called through. “But I’m not going to use them. That I can’t do. Military can’t get involved in law enforcement.”
“Can you fly this thing straight and level?” Reacher asked him. “Fifty miles an hour? Maybe sixty? Without asking too many questions?”
The pilot laughed. It came through the headsets tinny and distorted.
“I can fly this thing any old way you want me to,” he said. “With the General’s permission, of course.”
Johnson nodded cautiously. Reacher leaned down and picked the Barrett up off the floor. Unfastened his harness and stood up into a crouch. Waved to Holly to change seats with him. She crawled across in front of McGrath and Reacher eased into her place. He could feel the Night Hawk slowing and dropping in the air. He put some length into Holly’s harness and fastened it loosely around his waist. Stretched back for the door release. Tugged at the handle and the door slid back on its runners.
Then there was a gale of air coming in as the slipstream howled through the opening and the aircraft was turning half sideways, sliding through the air like a car skids through snow. The green truck was below and behind, maybe two hundred feet down. The pilot was stabilizing his speed until he matched the truck’s progress and tilting the aircraft so that Reacher’s eyeline was pointing straight down at the road.
“How’s this?” the pilot asked.
Reacher thumbed his mike button.
“Dead on,” he said. “Anything up ahead?”
“One vehicle coming north,” the copilot said. “When that’s through, you got nothing at all for ten miles.”
“Anything behind?” Reacher asked. He saw the north-bound vehicle streak by below.
McGrath stuck his head out into the gale. Ducked back in and nodded.
“Clear behind,” he said.
Reacher raised the Barrett to his shoulder. Put a round in the breech. Shooting at a moving vehicle from another moving vehicle is not a great recipe for accuracy, but he was looking at a distance of less than seventy yards and a target about twenty feet long and seven feet wide, so he wasn’t worrying about it. He put the

twenty feet long and seven feet wide, so he wasn't worrying about it. He put the crosshairs on a point two-thirds of the way down the length of the roof. He figured the forward movement of the truck and the backward movement of the air might put the bullet dead center through the load compartment. He wondered vaguely whether the three-foot mattress was still in there.
"Wait," Webster shouted. "What if you're wrong? What if it's empty? You're only guessing, right? This whole thing is guesswork. We need proof, Reacher. We need some kind of corroboration here."
Reacher didn't glance back. Kept his eye on the scope.
"Bullshit," he said, quietly, concentrating. "This is going to be all the corroboration we need."
Webster grabbed his arm.
"You can't do this," he said. "You could be killing an innocent man."
"Bullshit," Reacher said again. "If he's an innocent man, I won't be killing him, will I?"
He shook Webster's hand off his arm. Turned to face him.
"Think about it, Webster," he said. "Relax. Be logical. The proof comes after I shoot, right? If he's hauling a bomb, we'll know all about it. If he's hauling fresh air, nothing bad will happen to him. He'll just get another hole in his damn truck. Number one hundred and fourteen."
He turned back to the door. Raised the rifle again. Acquired the target. Out of sheer habit, he waited for his breath to be out and his heart to be between beats. Then he pulled the trigger. It took a thousandth of a second for the sound of the shot to hit his ear, and seventy times as long as that for the big heavy bullet to hit the truck. Nothing happened for a second. Then the truck ceased to exist. It was suddenly a blinding fireball rolling down the highway like a hot white tumbleweed. A gigantic concussion ring blasted outward. The helicopter was hit by a violent shock wave and tossed sideways and five hundred feet higher in the air. The pilot caught it at the top and slewed back. Steadied it in the air and swung around. Dropped the nose. There was nothing to see on the highway except a roiling cloud of thin smoke slowing into a teardrop shape three hundred yards long. No debris, no metal, no hurtling wheels, no clattering wreckage. Nothing at all except microscopic invisible particles of vapor accelerating into the atmosphere way faster than the speed of sound.

THE PILOT STUCK around at a hover for a long moment and then drifted east. Put his craft gently down on the scrub, a hundred yards from the shoulder. Shut the engines down. Reacher sat in the deafening silence and unclipped his belt. Laid the Barrett on the floor and vaulted out through the open door. Walked slowly toward the highway.

slowly toward the highway.
A ton of dynamite. A whole ton. A hell of a bang. There was nothing left at all. He guessed there were flattened grasses for a half-mile all around, but that was it. The terrible energy of the explosion had blasted outward and met absolutely nothing at all in its path. Nothing soft, nothing vulnerable. It had blasted outward and then weakened and slowed and died to a puff of breeze miles away and it had hurt nothing. Nothing at all. He stood in the silence and closed his eyes.
Then he heard footsteps behind him. It was Holly. He heard her good leg alternating with her bad leg. A long stride, then a shuffle. He opened his eyes and looked at the road. She walked around in front of him and stopped. Laid her head on his chest and put her arms around him. Squeezed him tight and held on. He raised his hand to her head and smoothed her hair behind her ear, like he had seen her do.
"All done," she said.
"Get a problem, solve a problem," he said. "That's my rule."
She was quiet for a long time.
"I wish it was always that easy," she said.
The way she said it, after the delay, it was like a long speech. Like a closely reasoned argument. He pretended not to know which problem she was talking about.
"Your father?" he said. "You're way, way out of his shadow now."
She shook her head against his chest.
"I don't know," she said.
"Believe it," he said. "That thing you did for me on the parade ground was the smartest, coolest, bravest thing I ever saw anybody do, man or woman, young or old. Better than anything I ever did. Better than anything your old man ever did. He'd give his front teeth for guts like that. So would I. You're way out of anybody's shadow now, Holly. Believe it."
"I thought I was," she said. "I felt like it. I really did. For a while. But then when I saw him again, I felt just the same as I always did. I called him Dad."
"He is your dad," Reacher said.
"I know," she replied. "That's the problem."
He was quiet for a long moment.
"So change your name," he said. "That might do it."
He could feel her holding her breath.
"Is that a proposal?" she asked.
"It's a suggestion," he said.
"You think Holly Reacher sounds good?" she asked.
His turn to stay quiet for a long time. His turn to catch his breath. And finally, his turn to talk about the real problem.

“It sounds wonderful,” he said. “But I guess Holly McGrath sounds better.”
She made no reply.
“He’s the lucky guy, right?” he said.
She nodded. A small motion of her head against his chest.
“So tell him,” he said.
She shrugged in his arms.
“I can’t,” she said. “I’m nervous.”
“Don’t be,” he said. “He might have something similar to tell you.”
She looked up. He squinted down at her.
“You think so?” she asked.
“You’re nervous, he’s nervous,” Reacher said. “Somebody should say something. I’m not about to do it for either of you.”
She squeezed him harder. Then she stretched up and kissed him. Hard and long on the mouth.
“Thank you,” she said.
“For what?” he asked.
“For understanding,” she said.
He shrugged. It wasn’t the end of the world. Just felt like it.
“Coming?” she asked.
He shook his head.
“No,” he said.
She left him on the shoulder of U.S. 93, right there in Idaho. He watched her all the way back to the Night Hawk. Watched her climb the short ladder. She paused and turned. Looked back at him. Then she ducked up and in. The door closed. The rotor thumped. He knew he would never see her again. His clothes tore at him and the dust swirled all around him as the helicopter took off. He waved it away. Watched it until it was lost to sight. Then he took a deep breath and looked left and right along the empty highway. Friday, the Fourth of July. Independence Day.

SATURDAY THE FIFTH and Sunday the sixth, Yorke County was sealed off and secret Army units were moving in and out around the clock. Air Artillery squads recovered the missile unit. They took it south in four Chinooks. Quartermasters went in and recovered all the ordnance they could find. They collected enough for a small war.
Medical corpsmen removed the bodies. They found the twenty men from the missile unit in the cave. They found the skeletons Reacher had crawled through. They found five mutilated bodies in another cave. Dressed like workmen. Like builders or carpenters. They took Fowler out of the command hut and Borken

from the road in front of the courthouse. They brought Milosevic down from the mountain bowl and Brogan out of the small clearing west of the Bastion. They found Jackson's rough grave in the forest and dug him up. They laid eighteen dead militiamen and one dead woman side by side on the rifle range and helicoptered them away.

One of Garber's military investigators flew in alone and took the hard disk out of the financial computer and put it on a chopper for transport to Chicago. Engineers moved in and dynamited the mine entrances. Sappers moved into the Bastion and disabled the water supply and tore down the power lines. They set fire to the huts and watched as they burned. Late Sunday night, when the last of the smoke was rising, they marched back to their choppers and lifted away south.

Early Monday morning, Harland Webster was back in the off-white parlor inside the White House. Ruth Rosen was smiling at him and asking how his holiday weekend had been. He was smiling back at her and saying nothing. An hour later, the morning sun was rolling west to Chicago and three agents were arresting Brogan's girlfriend. They grilled her for thirty minutes and advised her to get out of town, leaving behind anything he had ever bought her. Then the same agents took Milosevic's brand-new Ford Explorer out of the Federal Building's parking lot and drove it five miles south. They left it on a quiet street, doors unlocked, keys in. By the time it had been stolen, Holly Johnson was arriving at the knee clinic for an early appointment. An hour after that, she was back at her desk. Before lunch, the missing money from the bearer bond robbery was following a route of her own choosing out of the Caymans. Six o'clock Monday evening she was home and packing. She threw her bags into her car and drove north. Moved into McGrath's house up in Evanston.

Tuesday morning, there were three separate stories on the National Militia Internet. Refugees from an isolated valley in Montana had drifted south and west to new settlements with reports of a recent world government maneuver. Foreign troops had wiped out a band of militia heroes. The foreign battalion had been led by a French mercenary. He had succeeded only because he had used classified SDI technology, including satellites and lasers and microchips. Journalists picked up on the story and called the Hoover Building. Late Tuesday evening, in a prepared statement, an FBI spokesperson denied all knowledge of any such events.

Early Wednesday morning, after five hitched rides and four buses through seven states, Reacher was finally in Wisconsin. It was where he had aimed to be exactly a week before. He liked it there. It struck him as a fine place to be in July. He stayed until Friday afternoon.

Tripwire

Prologue

HOOK HOBIE OWED the whole of his life to a secret nearly thirty years old. His liberty, his status, his money, everything. And like any cautious guy in his particular situation, he was ready to do what was necessary to protect his secret. Because he had a lot to lose. The whole of his life.

The protection he relied on for nearly thirty years was based on just two things. The same two things anybody uses to protect against any danger. The same way a nation protects itself against an enemy missile, the same way an apartment dweller protects himself against a burglar, the same way a boxer guards against a knockout blow. Detection and response. Stage one, stage two. First you spot the threat, and then you react.

Stage one was the early-warning system. It had changed over the years, as other circumstances had changed. Now it was well rehearsed and simplified. It was made up of two layers, like two concentric tripwires. The first tripwire was eleven thousand miles from home. It was an early, early warning. A wake-up call. It would tell him they were getting close. The second tripwire was five thousand miles nearer, but still six thousand miles from home. A call from the second location would tell him they were about to get very close. It would tell him stage one was over, and stage two was about to begin.

Stage two was the response. He was very clear on what the response had to be. He had spent nearly thirty years thinking about it, but there was only ever one viable answer. The response would be to run. To disappear. He was a realistic guy. The whole of his life, he had been proud of his courage and his cunning, and his toughness and his fortitude. He had always done what was necessary, without a second thought. But he knew when he heard the warning sounds from those distant tripwires, he had to get out. Because no man could survive what was coming after him. No man. Not even a man as ruthless as he was.

The danger had ebbed and flowed like a tide for years. He had spent long periods certain it was about to wash over him at any time. And then long periods certain it would never reach him at all. Sometimes, the deadening sensation of time made him feel safe, because thirty years is an eternity. But other times it felt like the blink of an eye. Sometimes he waited for the first call on an hourly basis. Planning, sweating, but always knowing he could be forced to run at any

moment.

He had played it through his head a million times. The way he expected it, the first call would come in maybe a month before the second call. He would use that month to prepare. He would tie up the loose ends, close things down, cash in, transfer assets, settle scores. Then when the second call came in, he would take off. Immediately. No hesitation. Just get the hell out, and stay the hell out. But the way it happened, the two calls came in on the same day. The second call came first. The nearer tripwire was breached an hour before the farther one. And Hook Hobie didn't run. He abandoned thirty years of careful planning and stayed to fight it out.

1

JACK REACHER SAW the guy step in through the door. Actually, there was no door. The guy just stepped in through the part of the front wall that wasn't there. The bar opened straight out onto the sidewalk. There were tables and chairs out there under a dried-up old vine that gave some kind of nominal shade. It was an inside-outside room, passing through a wall that wasn't there. Reacher guessed there must be some kind of an iron grille they could padlock across the opening when the bar closed. If it closed. Certainly Reacher had never seen it closed, and he was keeping some pretty radical hours.

The guy stood a yard inside the dark room and waited, blinking, letting his eyes adjust to the gloom after the hot whiteness of the Key West sun. It was June, dead-on four o'clock in the afternoon, the southernmost part of the United States. Way farther south than most of the Bahamas. A hot white sun and a fierce temperature. Reacher sat at his table in back and sipped water from a plastic bottle and waited.

The guy was looking around. The bar was a low room built from old boards dried to a dark color. They looked like they had come from old broken-up sailing ships. Random pieces of nautical junk were nailed to them. There were old brass things and green glass globes. Stretches of old nets. Fishing equipment, Reacher guessed, although he had never caught a fish in his life. Or sailed a boat. Overlaying everything were ten thousand business cards, tacked up over every spare square inch, including the ceiling. Some of them were new, some of them were old and curled, representing ventures that had folded decades ago.

The guy stepped farther into the gloom and headed for the bar. He was old. Maybe sixty, medium height, bulky. A doctor would have called him overweight, but Reacher just saw a fit man some way down the wrong side of the hill. A man yielding gracefully to the passage of time without getting all stirred up about it. He was dressed like a northern city guy on a short-notice trip to somewhere hot. Light gray pants, wide at the top, narrow at the bottom, a thin, crumpled beige jacket, a white shirt with the collar spread wide open, blue-white skin showing at his throat, dark socks, city shoes. New York or Chicago, Reacher guessed, maybe Boston, spent most of his summertime in air-conditioned buildings or cars, had these pants and this jacket stashed away in the back of his closet ever since he bought them twenty years ago, brought them out and used them occasionally as appropriate.

The guy reached the bar and went into his jacket and pulled out a wallet. It was a small, overloaded old item in fine black leather. The sort of wallet that molds

small, overloaded old item in fine black leather. The sort of wallet that molds itself tight around the stuff crammed inside. Reacher saw the guy open it with a practiced flick and show it to the bartender and ask a quiet question. The bartender glanced away like he'd been insulted. The guy put the wallet away and smoothed his wisps of gray hair into the sweat on his scalp. He muttered something else and the bartender came up with a beer from a chest of ice. The old guy held the cold bottle against his face for a moment and then took a long pull. Belched discreetly behind his hand and smiled like a small disappointment had been assuaged.

Reacher matched his pull with a long drink of water. The fittest guy he had ever known was a Belgian soldier who swore the key to fitness was to do whatever the hell you liked as long as you drank five liters of mineral water every day. Reacher figured five liters was about a gallon, and since the Belgian was a small whippy guy half his size, he should make it two gallons a day. Ten full-size bottles. Since arriving in the heat of the Keys, he had followed that regimen. It was working for him. He had never felt better. Every day at four o'clock he sat at this dark table and drank three bottles of still water, room temperature. Now he was as addicted to the water as he had once been to coffee.

The old guy was side-on to the bar, busy with his beer. Scanning the room. Reacher was the only person in it, apart from the bartender. The old guy pushed off with his hip and stepped over. Waved his beer in a vague gesture that said may I? Reacher nodded to the opposite chair and broke the plastic seal on his third bottle. The guy sat heavily. He overwhelmed the chair. He was the sort of guy who keeps keys and money and handerkerchiefs in his pants pockets so that the natural width of his hips is way exaggerated.

"Are you Jack Reacher?" he asked across the table.

Not Chicago or Boston. New York, for sure. The voice sounded exactly like a guy Reacher had known, spent the first twenty years of his life never more than a hundred yards from Fulton Street.

"Jack Reacher?" the old guy asked again.

Up close, he had small wise eyes under an overhanging brow. Reacher drank and glanced across at him through the clear water in his bottle.

"Are you Jack Reacher?" the guy asked for the third time.

Reacher set his bottle on the table and shook his head.

"No," he lied.

The old guy's shoulders slumped a fraction in disappointment. He shot his cuff and checked his watch. Moved his bulk forward on the chair like he was about to get up, but then he sat back, like suddenly there was time to spare.

"Five after four," he said.

Reacher nodded. The guy waved his empty beer bottle at the bartender who

ducked around with a fresh one.
“Heat,” he said. “Gets to me.”
Reacher nodded again and sipped water.
“You know a Jack Reacher around here?” the guy asked.
Reacher shrugged.
“You got a description?” he asked back.
The guy was into a long pull on the second bottle. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand and used the gesture to hide a second discreet belch.
“Not really,” he said. “Big guy, is all I know. That’s why I asked you.”
Reacher nodded.
“There are lots of big guys here,” he said. “Lots of big guys everywhere.”
“But you don’t know the name?”
“Should I?” Reacher asked. “And who wants to know?”
The guy grinned and nodded, like an apology for a lapse in manners.
“Costello,” he said. “Pleased to meet you.”
Reacher nodded back, and raised his bottle a fraction in response.
“Skip tracer?” he asked.
“Private detective,” Costello said.
“Looking for a guy called Reacher?” Reacher asked. “What’s he done?”
Costello shrugged. “Nothing, far as I know. I just got asked to find him.”
“And you figure he’s down here?”
“Last week he was,” Costello said. “He’s got a bank account in Virginia and he’s been wiring money to it.”
“From down here in Key West?”
Costello nodded.
“Every week,” he said. “For three months.”
“So?”
“So he’s working down here,” Costello said. “Has been, for three months. You’d think somebody would know him.”
“But nobody does,” Reacher said.
Costello shook his head. “I asked all up and down Duval, which seems to be where the action is in this town. Nearest I got was a titty bar upstairs someplace, girl in there said there was a big guy been here exactly three months, drinks water every day at four o’clock in here.”
He lapsed into silence, looking hard at Reacher, like he was issuing a direct challenge. Reacher sipped water and shrugged back at him.
“Coincidence,” he said.
Costello nodded.
“I guess,” he said quietly.

He raised the beer bottle to his lips and drank, keeping his wise old eyes focused tight on Reacher's face.
"Big transient population here," Reacher said to him. "People drift in and out, all the time."
"I guess," Costello said again.
"But I'll keep my ears open," Reacher said.
Costello nodded.
"I'd appreciate it," he said, ambiguously.
"Who wants him?" Reacher asked.
"My client," Costello said. "Lady called Mrs. Jacob."
Reacher sipped water. The name meant nothing to him. Jacob? Never heard of any such person.
"OK, if I see him around, I'll tell him, but don't hold your breath. I don't see too many people."
"You working?"
Reacher nodded.
"I dig swimming pools," he said.
Costello pondered, like he knew what swimming pools were, but like he had never considered how they got there.
"Backhoe operator?"
Reacher smiled and shook his head.
"Not down here," he said. "We dig them by hand."
"By hand?" Costello repeated. "What, like with shovels?"
"The lots are too small for machinery," Reacher said. "Streets are too narrow, trees are too low. Get off Duval, and you'll see for yourself."
Costello nodded again. Suddenly looked very satisfied.
"Then you probably won't know this Reacher guy," he said. "According to Mrs. Jacob, he was an Army officer. So I checked, and she was right. He was a major. Medals and all. Military police bigshot, is what they said. Guy like that, you won't find him digging swimming pools with a damn shovel."
Reacher took a long pull on his water, to hide his expression.
"So what would you find him doing?"
"Down here?" Costello said. "I'm not sure. Hotel security? Running some kind of a business? Maybe he's got a cruiser, charters it out."
"Why would he be down here at all?"
Costello nodded, like he was agreeing with an opinion.
"Right," he said. "Hell of a place. But he's here, that's for certain. He left the Army two years ago, put his money in the nearest bank to the Pentagon and disappeared. Bank account shows money wiring out all over the damn place,

then for three months money wiring back in from here. So he drifted for a spell, then he settled down here, making some dough. I'll find him."
Reacher nodded.
"You still want me to ask around?"
Costello shook his head. Already planning his next move.
"Don't you worry about it," he said.
He eased his bulk up out of the chair and pulled a crumpled roll from his pants pocket. Dropped a five on the table and moved away.
"Nice meeting you," he called, without looking back.
He walked out through the missing wall into the glare of the afternoon. Reacher drained the last of his water and watched him go. Ten after four in the afternoon.

AN HOUR LATER Reacher was drifting down Duval Street, thinking about new banking arrangements, choosing a place to eat an early dinner, and wondering why he had lied to Costello. His first conclusion was that he would cash up and use a roll of bills in his pants pocket. His second conclusion was that he would follow his Belgian friend's advice and eat a big steak and ice cream with another two bottles of water. His third conclusion was that he had lied because there had been no reason not to.
There was no reason why a private investigator from New York should have been looking for him. He had never lived in New York. Or any big northern city. He had never really lived anywhere. That was the defining feature of his life. It made him what he was. He had been born the son of a serving Marine Corps officer, and he had been dragged all over the world from the very day his mother carried him out of the maternity ward of a Berlin infirmary. He had lived nowhere except in an endless blur of different military bases, most of them in distant and inhospitable parts of the globe. Then he had joined the Army himself, military police investigator, and lived and served in those same bases all over again until the peace dividend had closed his unit down and cut him loose. Then he had come home to the United States and drifted around like a cheap tourist until he had washed up on the extreme tip of the nation with his savings running out. He had taken a couple of days' work digging holes in the ground, and the couple of days had stretched into a couple of weeks, and the weeks had stretched into months, and he was still there.
He had no living relatives anywhere capable of leaving him a fortune in a will. He owed no money. He had never stolen anything, never cheated anybody. Never fathered any children. He was on as few pieces of paper as it was possible for a human being to get. He was just about invisible. And he had never known anybody called Jacob. Never. He was sure of that. So whatever Costello wanted,

he wasn't interested in it. Certainly not interested enough to come out from under and get involved with anything.
Because being invisible had become a habit. In the front part of his brain, he knew it was some kind of a complex, alienated response to his situation. Two years ago, everything had turned upside down. He had gone from being a big fish in a small pond to being nobody. From being a senior and valued member of a highly structured community to being just one of 270 million anonymous civilians. From being necessary and wanted to being one person too many. From being where someone told him to be every minute of every day to being confronted with three million square miles and maybe forty more years and no map and no schedule. The front part of his brain told him his response was understandable, but defensive, the response of a man who liked solitude but was worried by loneliness. It told him it was an extremist response, and he should take care with it.
But the lizard part of his brain buried behind the frontal lobes told him he liked it. He liked the anonymity. He liked his secrecy. It felt warm and comfortable and reassuring. He guarded it. He was friendly and gregarious on the surface, without ever saying much about himself. He liked to pay cash and travel by road. He was never on any passenger manifests or credit card carbons. He told nobody his name. In Key West, he had checked into a cheap motel under the name Harry S. Truman. Scanning back through the register, he had seen he wasn't unique. Most of the forty-one presidents had stayed there, even ones nobody had heard of, like John Tyler and Franklin Pierce. He had found names did not mean much in the Keys. People just waved and smiled and said hello. They all assumed everybody had something to be private about. He was comfortable there. Too comfortable to be in any hurry to leave.
He strolled for an hour in the noisy warmth and then ducked off Duval toward a hidden courtyard restaurant where they knew him by sight and had his favorite brand of water and would give him a steak that hung off both sides of the plate at once.

THE STEAK CAME with an egg and fries and a complicated mix of some sort of warm-weather vegetables, and the ice cream came with hot chocolate sauce and nuts. He drank another quart of water and followed it with two cups of strong black coffee. Pushed back from the table and sat there, satisfied.
"OK now?" the waitress smiled.
Reacher grinned back at her and nodded.
"It hit the spot," he said.
"And it looks good on you."
"

"It feels good on me."
It was true. His next birthday was going to be his thirty-ninth, but he felt better than ever. He had always been fit and strong, but the last three months had brought him to a new peak. He was six feet five tall, and he had weighed 220 when he left the Army. A month after joining the swimming pool gang, the work and the heat had burned him down to 210. Then the next two months, he had built back all the way to about 250, all of it pure, hard muscle. His workload was prodigious. He figured to shift about four tons of earth and rock and sand every day. He had developed a technique of digging and scooping and twisting and throwing the dirt with his shovel so that every part of his body was working out all day long. The result was spectacular. He was burned a deep brown by the sun and he was in the best shape of his life. Like a condom crammed with walnuts, is what some girl had said. He figured he needed to eat about ten thousand calories a day just to stay level, as well as the two gallons of water he needed to drink.
"So you working tonight?" the waitress asked.
Reacher laughed. He was earning money for doing a fitness regime most people would pay a fortune for at any shiny city gymnasium, and now he was headed for his evening job, which was something else he got paid for that most men would gladly do for free. He was the bouncer in the nude bar Costello had mentioned. On Duval. He sat in there all night with no shirt on, looking tough, drinking free drinks and making sure the naked women didn't get hassled. Then somebody gave him fifty bucks for it.
"It's a chore," he said. "But somebody's got to do it, I guess."
The girl laughed with him, and he paid his check and headed back to the street.

FIFTEEN HUNDRED MILES to the north, just below Wall Street in New York City, the chief executive officer took the elevator down two floors to the finance director's suite. The two men went into the inner office together and sat side by side behind the desk. It was the kind of expensive office and expensive desk that get specified and paid for when times are good and then sit there like a sullen reproach when times turn bad. It was a high-floor office, dark rosewood all over the place, cream linen window blinds, brass accents, a huge slab of a desk, an Italian table light, a big computer that had cost more than it needed to. The computer was glowing and waiting for a password. The CEO typed it in and hit ENTER and the screen redrew into a spreadsheet. It was the only spreadsheet that told the truth about the company. That was why it was protected by a password.
"Are we going to make it?" the CEO asked.
That day had been D-Day. D stood for downsizing. Their human resources manager out at the manufacturing plant on Long Island had been busy since

manager out at the manufacturing plant on Long Island had been busy since eight o'clock that morning. His secretary had rustled up a long line of chairs in the corridor outside his office, and the chairs had been filled with a long line of people. The people had waited most of the day, shuffling up one place every five minutes, then shuffling off the end of the line into the human resources manager's office for a five-minute interview that terminated their livelihoods, thank you and good-bye.

"Are we going to make it?" the CEO asked again.

The finance director was copying large numbers onto a sheet of paper. He subtracted one from another and looked at a calendar. He shrugged.

"In theory, yes," he said. "In practice, no."

"No?" the CEO repeated.

"It's the time factor," the finance director said. "We did the right thing out at the plant, no doubt about that. Eighty percent of the people gone, saves us ninety-one percent of the payroll, because we only kept the cheap ones. But we paid them all up to the end of next month. So the cash-flow enhancement doesn't hit us for six weeks. And in fact right now the cash flow gets much worse, because the little bastards are all out there cashing a six-week paycheck."

The CEO sighed and nodded.

"So how much do we need?"

The finance director used the mouse and expanded a window.

"One-point-one million dollars," he said. "For six weeks."

"Bank?"

"Forget it," the finance director said. "I'm over there every day kissing ass just to keep what we already owe them. I ask for more, they'll laugh in my face."

"Worse things could happen to you," the CEO said.

"That's not the point," the finance director said. "The point is they get a sniff we're still not healthy, they'll call those loans. In a heartbeat."

The CEO drummed his fingers on the rosewood and shrugged.

"I'll sell some stock," he said.

The finance director shook his head.

"You can't," he said, patiently. "You put stock in the market, the price will go through the floor. Our existing borrowing is secured on stock, and if it gets any more worthless, they'll close us down tomorrow."

"Shit," the CEO said. "We're six weeks away. I'm not going to lose all this for six lousy weeks. Not for a lousy million bucks. It's a trivial amount."

"A trivial amount we haven't got."

"Got to be somewhere we can get it."

The finance director made no reply to that. But he was sitting there like he had something more to say.

something more to say.
“What?” the CEO asked him.
“I heard some talk,” he said. “Guys I know, gossiping. There’s maybe somewhere we can go. For six weeks, it might be worth it. There’s an outfit I heard about. A lender-of-last-resort type of thing.”
“On the level?”
“Apparently,” the finance director said. “Looks very respectable. Big office over in the World Trade Center. He specializes in cases like this.”
The CEO glared at the screen.
“Cases like what?”
“Like this,” the finance director repeated. “Where you’re almost home and dry, but the banks are too tight-assed to see it.”
The CEO nodded and gazed around the office. It was a beautiful place. And his own office was two floors higher, on a comer, and even more beautiful.
“OK,” he said. “Do it.”
“I can’t do it,” the finance director said. “This guy won’t deal below CEO level. You’ll have to do it.”

IT STARTED OUT a quiet night in the nude bar. A midweek evening in June, way too late for the snowbirds and the spring breakers, too early for the summer vacationers who came down to roast. Not more than maybe forty people in all night, two girls behind the bar, three girls out there dancing. Reacher was watching a woman called Crystal. He assumed that was not her real name, but he had never asked. She was the best. She earned a lot more than Reacher had ever earned as a major in the military police. She spent a percentage of her income running an old black Porsche. Reacher sometimes heard it in the early afternoons, rumbling and blatting around the blocks where he was working.
The bar was a long, narrow upstairs room with a runway and a small circular stage with a shiny chrome pole. Snaking around the runway and the stage was a line of chairs. There were mirrors everywhere, and where there weren’t, the walls were painted flat black. The whole place pulsed and pounded to loud music coming out of a half dozen speakers serious enough to drown out the roar of the air-conditioning.
Reacher was at the bar, back-to, a third of the way into the room. Near enough the door to be seen straight away, far enough into the room that people wouldn’t forget he was there. The woman called Crystal had finished her third spot and was hauling a harmless guy backstage for a twenty-buck private show when Reacher saw two men emerge at the top of the stairs. Strangers, from the north. Maybe thirty years old, bulky, pale. Menacing. Northern tough guys, in thousand-dollar suits and shined shoes. Down here in some kind of a big hurry.

thousand-dollar suits and shined shoes. Down here in some kind of a big hurry, still dressed for their city office. They were standing at the desk, arguing about the three-buck cover charge. The girl at the desk glanced anxiously at Reacher. He slid off his stool. Walked over.

"Problem, guys?" he asked.

He had used what he called his college-kid walk. He had noticed that college boys walk with a curious tensed-up, limping motion. Especially on the beach, in their shorts. As if they were so tremendously muscle-bound they couldn't quite make their limbs operate in the normal way. He thought it made 130-pound teenagers look pretty comical. But he had learned it made a 250-pound six-foot-five guy look pretty scary. The college-kid walk was a tool of his new trade. A tool that worked. Certainly the two guys in their thousand-dollar suits looked reasonably impressed by it.

"Problem?" he asked again.

That one word was usually enough. Most guys backed off at that point. But these two didn't. Up close, he felt something coming off them. Some kind of a blend of menace and confidence. Some arrogance in there, maybe. A suggestion they normally got their own way. But they were far from home. Far enough south of their own turf to act a little circumspect.

"No problem, Tarzan," the left-hand guy said.

Reacher smiled. He had been called a lot of things, but that was a new one.

"Three bucks to come in," he said. "Or it's free to go back downstairs."

"We just want to speak with somebody," the right-hand guy said.

Accents, from both of them. From somewhere in New York. Reacher shrugged.

"We don't do too much speaking in here," he said. "Music's too loud."

"What's your name?" the left-hand guy asked.

Reacher smiled again.

"Tarzan," he said.

"We're looking for a guy called Reacher," the guy said back. "Jack Reacher. You know him?"

Reacher shook his head.

"Never heard of him," he said.

"So we need to talk to the girls," the guy said. "We were told they might know him."

Reacher shook his head again.

"They don't," he said.

The right-hand guy was looking past Reacher's shoulder into the long, narrow room. He was glancing at the girls behind the bar. He was figuring Reacher for the only security on duty.

"OK, Tarzan, step aside," he said. "We're coming in now."

“Can you read?” Reacher asked him. “Big words and all?”
He pointed up at a sign hanging above the desk. Big Day-Glo letters on a black background. It read Management Reserves the Right to Refuse Admission.
“I’m management,” Reacher said. “I’m refusing you admission.”
The guy glanced between the sign and Reacher’s face.
“You want a translation?” Reacher asked him. “Words of one syllable? It means I’m the boss and you can’t come in.”
“Save it, Tarzan,” the guy said.
Reacher let him get level, shoulder to shoulder on his way past. Then he raised his left hand and caught the guy’s elbow. He straightened the joint with his palm and dug his fingers into the soft nerves at the bottom of the guy’s tricep. It’s like getting a continuous pounding on the funny bone. The guy was jumping around like he was getting flooded with electricity.
“Downstairs,” Reacher said softly.
The other guy was busy calculating the odds. Reacher saw him doing it and figured full and fair disclosure was called for. He held his right hand up, eye level, to confirm it was free and ready for activity. It was a huge hand, brown, callused from the shovel handle, and the guy got the message. He shrugged and started down the stairs. Reacher straight-armed his pal after him.
“We’ll see you again,” the guy said.
“Bring all your friends,” Reacher called down. “Three bucks each to get in.”
He started back into the room. The dancer called Crystal was standing right there behind him.
“What did they want?” she asked.
He shrugged.
“Looking for somebody.”
“Somebody called Reacher?”
He nodded.
“Second time today,” she said. “There was an old guy in here before. He paid the three bucks. You want to go after them? Check them out?”
He hesitated. She swept his shirt off the barstool and handed it to him.
“Go for it,” she said. “We’re OK in here for a spell. Quiet night.”
He took the shirt. Pulled the sleeves right side out.
“Thanks, Crystal, he said.”
He put the shirt on and buttoned it. Headed for the stairs.
“You’re welcome, Reacher,” she called after him.
He spun around, but she was already walking back toward the stage. He looked blankly at the desk girl and headed down to the street.

KEY WEST AT eleven in the evening is about as lively as it gets. Some people are halfway through their night, others are just starting out. Duval is the main street, running the length of the island east to west, bathed in light and noise. Reacher wasn't worried about the guys waiting for him on Duval. Too crowded. If they had revenge on their minds, they'd pick a quieter location. Of which there was a fair choice. Off Duval, especially to the north, it gets quiet quickly. The town is miniature. The blocks are tiny. A short stroll takes you twenty blocks up into what Reacher thought of as the suburbs, where he dug pools into the tiny yards behind the small houses. The street lighting gets haphazard and the bar noise fades into the heavy buzz of nighttime insects. The smell of beer and smoke is replaced by the heavy stink of tropical plants blooming and rotting in the gardens.

He walked a sort of spiral through the darkness. Nobody around. He walked in the middle of the road. Anybody hiding in a doorway, he wanted to give them ten or fifteen feet of open space to cover. He wasn't worried about getting shot at. The guys had no guns. Their suits proved it. Too tight to conceal weapons. And the suits meant they'd come south in a hurry. Flown down. No easy way to get on a plane with a gun in your pocket.

He gave it up after a mile or so. A tiny town, but still big enough for a couple of guys to lose themselves in. He turned left along the edge of the graveyard and headed back toward the noise. There was a guy on the sidewalk against the chain-link fence. Sprawled out and inert. Not an unusual sight in Key West, but there was something wrong. And something familiar. The wrong thing was the guy's arm. It was trapped under his body. The shoulder nerves would be shrieking hard enough to cut through however drunk or stoned the guy was. The familiar thing was the pale gleam of an old beige jacket. The top half of the guy was light, the bottom half was dark. Beige jacket, gray pants. Reacher paused and glanced around. Stepped near. Crouched down.

It was Costello. His face was pounded to pulp. Masked in blood. There were crusty brown rivulets all over the triangle of blue-white city skin showing through at the neck of his shirt. Reacher felt for the pulse behind the ear. Nothing. He touched the skin with the back of his hand. Cool. No rigor, but then it was a hot night. The guy was dead maybe an hour.

He checked inside the jacket. The overloaded wallet was gone. Then he saw the hands. The fingertips had been sliced off. All ten of them. Quick efficient angled cuts, with something neat and sharp. Not a scalpel. A broader blade. Maybe a linoleum knife.

2

“’IT’S MY FAULT,“ Reacher said.
Crystal shook her head.
“You didn’t kill the guy,” she said.
Then she looked up at him, sharply. “Did you?”
“I got him killed,” Reacher said. “Is there a difference?”
The bar had closed at one o’clock and they were side by side on two chairs next to the empty stage. The lights were off and there was no music. No sound at all, except the hum of the air-conditioning running at quarter speed, sucking the stale smoke and sweat out into the still, night air of the Keys.
“I should have told him,” Reacher said. “I should have just told him sure, I’m Jack Reacher. Then he’d have told me whatever he had to tell me, and he’d be back home by now, and I could have just ignored it all anyway. I’d be no worse off, and he’d still be alive.”
Crystal was dressed in a white T-shirt. Nothing else. It was a long T-shirt, but not quite long enough. Reacher was not looking at her.
“Why do you care?” she asked.
It was a Keys question. Not callous, just mystified at his concern about a stranger down from another country. He looked at her.
“I feel responsible,” he said.
“No, you feel guilty,” she said.
He nodded.
“Well, you shouldn’t,” she said. “You didn’t kill him.”
“Is there a difference?” he asked again.
“Of course there is,” she said. “Who was he?”
“A private detective,” he said. “Looking for me.”
“Why?”
He shook his head.
“No idea,” he said.
“Were those other guys with him?”
He shook his head again.
“No,” he said. “Those other guys killed him.”
She looked at him, startled. “They did?”
“That’s my guess,” he said. “They weren’t with him, that’s for sure. They were younger and richer than he was. Dressed like that? Those suits? Didn’t look like his subordinates. Anyway, he struck me as a loner. So the two of them were working for somebody else. Probably told to follow him down here, find out

working for somebody else. Probably told to follow him down here, find out what the hell he was doing. He must have stepped on some toes up north, given somebody a problem. So he was tailed down here. They caught up with him, beat out of him who he was looking for. So then they came looking, too."
"They killed him to get your name?"
"Looks that way," he said.
"Are you going to tell the cops?"
Another Keys question. Involving the cops with anything was a matter for long and serious debate. He shook his head for the third time.
"No," he said.
"They'll trace him, then they'll be looking for you, too."
"Not right away," he said. "There's no ID on the body. And no fingerprints, either. Could be weeks before they even find out who he was."
"So what are you going to do?"
"I'm going to find Mrs. Jacob," he said. "The client. She's looking for me."
"You know her?"
"No, but I want to find her."
"Why?"
He shrugged.
"I need to know what's going on," he said.
"Why?" she asked again.
He stood up and looked at her in a mirror on the wall. He was suddenly very restless. Suddenly more than ready to get right back to reality.
"You know why," he said to her. "The guy was killed because of something to do with me, so that makes me involved, OK?"
She stretched a long, bare leg onto the chair he had just vacated. Pondered his feeling of involvement like it was some kind of an obscure hobby. Legitimate, but strange, like folk dancing.
"OK, so how?" she asked.
"I'll go to his office," he said. "Maybe he had a secretary. At least there'll be records there. Phone numbers, addresses, client agreements. This Mrs. Jacob was probably his latest case. She'll probably be top of the pile."
"So where's his office?"
"I don't know," he said. "New York somewhere, according to the way he sounded. I know his name, I know he was an ex-cop. An ex-cop called Costello, about sixty years old. Can't be too hard to find."
"He was an ex-cop?" she asked. "Why?"
"Most private dicks are, right?" he said. "They retire early and poor, they hang out a shingle, they set up as one-man bands, divorce and missing persons. And that thing about my bank? He knew all the details. No way to do that, except

through a favor from an old buddy still on the job."
She smiled, slightly interested. Stepped over and joined him near the bar. Stood next to him, close, her hip against his thigh.
"How do you know all this complicated stuff?"
He listened to the rush of the air through the extractors.
"I was an investigator myself," he said. "Military police. Thirteen years. I was pretty good at it. I'm not just a pretty face."
"You're not even a pretty face," she said back. "Don't flatter yourself. When do you start?"
He looked around in the darkness.
"Right now, I guess. Certain to be an early flight out of Miami."
She smiled again. This time, warily.
"And how are you going to get to Miami?" she asked. "This time of night?"
He smiled back at her. Confidently.
"You're going to drive me," he said.
"Do I have time to get dressed?"
"Just shoes," he said.
He walked her around to the garage where her old Porsche was hidden. He rolled the door open and she slid into the car and fired it up. She drove him the half mile north to his motel, taking it slowly, waiting until the oil warmed through. The big tires banged on broken pavement and thumped into potholes. She eased to a stop opposite his neon lobby and waited, the motor running fast against the choke. He opened his door, and then he closed it again, gently.
"Let's just go," he said. "Nothing in there I want to take with me."
She nodded in the glow from the dash.
"OK, buckle up," she said.
She snicked it into first and took off through the town. Cruised up North Roosevelt Drive. Checked the gauges and hung a left onto the causeway. Switched on the radar detectors. Mashed the pedal into the carpet and the rear end dug in hard. Reacher was pressed backward into the leather like he was leaving Key West on board a fighter plane.

SHE KEPT THE Porsche above three figures all the way north to Key Largo. Reacher was enjoying the ride. She was a great driver. Smooth, economical in her movements, flicking up and down the box, keeping the motor wailing, keeping the tiny car in the center of her lane, using the cornering forces to catapult herself out into the straightaways. She was smiling, her flawless face illuminated by the red dials. Not an easy car to drive fast. The heavy motor is

slung out way behind the rear axle, ready to swing like a vicious pendulum, ready to trap the driver who gets it wrong for longer than a split second. But she was getting it right. Mile for mile, she was covering the ground as fast as a light plane.
Then the radar detectors started screaming and the lights of Key Largo appeared a mile ahead. She braked hard and rumbled through the town and floored it again and blasted north toward the dark horizon. A tight curving left, over the bridge, onto the mainland of America, and north toward the town called Homestead on a flat, straight road cut through the swamp. Then a tight right onto the highway, high speed all the way, radar detectors on maximum, and they were at Miami Departures just before five o'clock in the morning. She eased to a stop in the drop-off lane and waited, motor running.
"Well, thanks for the ride," Reacher said to her.
She smiled.
"Pleasure," she said. "Believe me."
He opened the door and stared forward.
"OK," he said. "See you later, I guess."
She shook her head.
"No you won't," she said. "Guys like you never come back. You leave, and you don't come back."
He sat in the warmth of her car. The motor popped and burbled. The mufflers ticked as they cooled. She leaned toward him. Dipped the clutch and shoved the gearshift into first so that she had room to get close. Threaded an arm behind his head and kissed him hard on the lips.
"Good-bye, Reacher," she said. "I'm glad I got to know your name, at least."
He kissed her back, hard and long.
"So what's your name?" he asked.
"Crystal," she said, and laughed.
He laughed with her and lifted himself up and out of the car. She leaned across and pulled the door behind him. Gunned the motor and drove away. He stood by himself on the curb and watched her go. She turned in front of a hotel bus and was lost to sight. Three months of his life disappeared with her like the haze of her exhaust.

FIVE O'CLOCK IN the morning, fifty miles north of New York City, the CEO was lying in bed, wide awake, staring at the ceiling. It had just been painted. The whole house had just been painted. He had paid the decorators more than most of his employees earned in a year. Actually, he hadn't paid them. He had fudged their invoice through his office and his company had paid them. The expense

was hidden somewhere in the secret spreadsheet, part of a seven-figure total for buildings maintenance. A seven-figure total on the debit side of the accounts, pulling his business down like heavy cargo sinks a listing ship. Like a straw breaks a camel's back.

His name was Chester Stone. His father's name had been Chester Stone, and his grandfather's. His grandfather had established the business, back when a spreadsheet was called a ledger and written by hand with a pen. His grandfather's ledger had been heavy on the credit side. He had been a clock maker who spotted the coming appeal of the cinema very early. He had used his expertise with gearwheels and intricate little mechanisms to build a projector. He had taken on board a partner who could get big lenses ground in Germany. Together they had dominated the market and made a fortune. The partner had died young with no heirs. Cinema had boomed from coast to coast. Hundreds of movie theaters. Hundreds of projectors. Then thousands. Then tens of thousands. Then sound. Then CinemaScope. Big, big entries on the credit side of the ledger. Then television. Movie houses closing down, and the ones that stayed open hanging on to their old equipment until it fell apart. His father, Chester Stone II, taking control. Diversifying. Looking at the appeal of home movies. Eight-millimeter projectors. Clockwork cameras. The vivid era of Kodachrome. Zapruder. The new manufacturing plant. Big profits ticking up on the slow, wide tape of an early IBM mainframe.

Then the movies coming back. His father dying, the young Chester Stone III at the helm, multiplexes everywhere. Four projectors, six, twelve, sixteen where there had been just one before. Then stereo. Five-channel, Dolby, Dolby Digital. Wealth and success. Marriage. The move to the mansion. The cars.

Then video. Eight-millimeter home movies deader than the deadest thing that ever died. Then competition. Cutthroat bidding from new outfits in Germany and Japan and Korea and Taiwan, taking the multiplex business out from underneath him. The desperate search for anything to make out of small pieces of sheet metal and precision-cut gears. Anything at all. The ghastly realization that mechanical things were yesterday's things. The explosion of solid-state microchips, RAM, games consoles. Huge profits being made from things he had no idea how to manufacture. Big deficits piling up inside the silent software on his desktop machine.

His wife stirred at his side. She blinked open her eyes and turned her head left and right, first to check the clock and then to look at her husband. She saw his stare, fixed on the ceiling.

"Not sleeping?" she asked quietly.

He made no reply. She looked away. Her name was Marilyn. Marilyn Stone. She

had been married to Chester for a long time. Long enough to know. She knew it all. She had no real details, no real proof, no inclusion, but she knew it all anyway. How could she not know? She had eyes and a brain. It was a long time since she had seen her husband's products proudly displayed in any store. It was a long time since any multiplex owner had dined them in celebration of a big new order. And it was a long time since Chester had slept a whole night through. So she knew.

But she didn't care. For richer, for poorer was what she had said, and it was what she had meant. Rich had been good, but poor could be good, too. Not that they would ever be poor, like some people are poor. Sell the damn house, liquidate the whole sorry mess, and they would still be way more comfortable than she had ever expected to be. They were still young. Well, not young, but not old, either. Healthy. They had interests. They had each other. Chester was worth having. Gray, but still trim and firm and vigorous. She loved him. He loved her. And she was still worth having, she knew that. Forty-something, but twenty-nine in her head. Still slim, still blond, still exciting. Adventurous. Still worth having, in any old sense of the phrase. It was all going to be OK. Marilyn Stone breathed deeply and rolled over. Pressed herself into the mattress. Fell back to sleep, five-thirty in the morning, while her husband lay quietly beside her and stared at the ceiling.

REACHER STOOD INSIDE the departures terminal, breathing the canned air, his tan turning yellow in the fluorescence, listening to a dozen conversations in Spanish, checking a television monitor. New York was at the top of the list, as he had thought it would be. First flight of the day was Delta to LaGuardia, via Atlanta, in half an hour. Second was Mexicana heading south, third was United, also to LaGuardia, but direct, leaving in an hour. He headed to the United ticket desk. Asked about the price of a one-way coach. Nodded and walked away.

He walked to the bathroom, and stood in front of the mirror. Pulled his cash roll from his pocket and assembled the price he had just been quoted from the smallest bills he had. Then he buttoned his shirt all the way up and smoothed his hair down with his palm. Walked back out and over to the Delta counter.

The ticket price was the same as United's. He knew it would be. It always is, somehow. He counted the money out, ones and tens and fives, and the counter girl took it all and straightened the bills and shuffled them into denominations.

"Your name, sir?" she asked.

"Truman," Reacher said. "Like the president."

The girl looked blank. She was probably born overseas during Nixon's final days. Maybe during Carter's first year. Reacher didn't care. He had been born

overseas at the start of Kennedy's term. He wasn't about to say anything. Truman was ancient history to him, too. The girl typed the name into her console and the ticket printed out. She put it in a folder with a red-and-blue world on it, then she tore it straight back out.
"I can check you in right now," she said.
Reacher nodded. The problem with paying cash for an airline ticket, especially at Miami International, is the war on drugs. If he had swaggered up to the desk and pulled his roll of hundreds, the girl would have been obliged to tread on a small secret button on the floor under her counter. Then she would have fiddled with her keyboard until the police came in, left and right. The police would have seen a big rough guy with a tan and a big wad of cash and figured him for a courier, straight off the bat. Their strategy is to chase the drugs, for sure, but to chase the money, too. They won't let you put it in the bank, they won't let you spend it without getting all concerned about it. They assume normal citizens use plastic cards for big purchases. Especially for travel. Especially at the airport desk twenty minutes before takeoff. And that assumption would lead to delay and hassle and paperwork, which were three things Reacher was always keen to avoid. So he had evolved a careful act. He made himself look like a guy who couldn't even get a credit card if he wanted one, like a down-on-his-luck insolvent roughneck. Buttoning the shirt and carefully fingering the small bills were what did it. It gave him a shy, embarrassed look. It put the counter clerks on his side. They were all underpaid and struggling with their own maxed-out plastic. So they looked up and saw a guy just a little farther down the road than they were, and sympathy was their instinctive reaction, not suspicion.
"Gate B6, sir," the girl said. "I've given you a window."
"Thanks," Reacher said.
He walked to the gate and fifteen minutes later was accelerating down the runway with pretty much the same feeling as being back in Crystal's Porsche, except he had a lot less legroom and the seat next to him was empty.

CHESTER STONE GAVE it up at six o'clock. He shut off the alarm a half hour before it was due to sound and slid out of bed, quietly, so as not to wake Marilyn. He took his robe from the hook and padded out of the bedroom and downstairs to the kitchen. His stomach was too acid to contemplate breakfast, so he made do with coffee and headed for the shower in the guest suite where it didn't matter if he made noise. He wanted to let Marilyn sleep, and he didn't want her to know that he couldn't. Every night she woke and made some comment about him lying there, but she never followed up on it, so he figured she didn't remember it by the morning, or else she put it down to some kind of a

dream. He was pretty sure she didn't know anything. And he was happy to keep it that way, because it was bad enough dealing with the problems, without worrying about her worrying about them as well.

He shaved and spent his shower time thinking about what to wear and how to act. Truth was he would be approaching this guy practically on his knees. A lender of last resort. His last hope, his last chance. Somebody who held the whole of his future in the palm of his hand. So how to approach such a guy? Not on his knees. That was not how the game of business is played. If you look like you really need a loan, you don't get it. You only get it if you look like you don't really need it. Like it's a matter of very little consequence to you. Like it's a fifty-fifty decision whether you even allow the guy to climb on board with you and share a little wedge of the big exciting profits just around the next comer. Like your biggest problem is deciding exactly whose loan offer you're even going to consider.

A white shirt, for sure, and a quiet tie. But which suit? The Italians were maybe too flashy. Not the Armani. He had to look like a serious man. Rich enough to buy a dozen Armanis, for sure, but somehow too serious to consider doing that. Too serious and too preoccupied with weighty affairs to spend time shopping on Madison Avenue. He decided heritage was the feature to promote. An unbroken three-generation heritage of business success, maybe reflected in a dynastic approach to dressing. Like his grandfather had taken his father to his tailor and introduced him, then his father had taken him in turn. Then he thought about his Brooks Brothers suit. Old, but nice, a quiet check, vented, slightly warm for June. Would Brooks Brothers be a clever double bluff? Like saying, I'm so rich and successful it really doesn't matter to me what I wear? Or would he look like a loser?

He pulled it off the rack and held it against his body. Classic, but dowdy. He looked like a loser. He put it back. Tried the gray Savile Row from London. Perfect. It made him look like a gentleman of substance. Wise, tasteful, infinitely trustworthy. He selected a tie with just a hint of pattern and a pair of solid black shoes. Put it all on and twisted left and right in front of the mirror. Couldn't be better. Looking like that, he might almost trust himself. He finished his coffee, dabbed his lips, and slipped through to the garage. Fired up the Benz and was on an uncongested Merritt Parkway by six forty-five.

REACHER SPENT FIFTY minutes on the ground in Atlanta, then took off again and swung east and north toward New York. The sun was up out over the Atlantic and was coming in through the right-hand windows with the freezing brightness of high-altitude dawn. He was drinking coffee. The stewardess had

offered him water, but he'd taken the coffee instead. It was thick and strong, and he was drinking it black. He was using it to fuel his brain. Trying to figure who the hell Mrs. Jacob could be. And why she had paid Costello to scour the country for him.

They stacked up over LaGuardia. Reacher loved that. Low lazy circles over Manhattan in the bright morning sun. Like a million movies, without the soundtrack. The plane rocking and tilting. The tall buildings sliding by under them, tinted gold by the sun. The Twin Towers. The Empire State Building. The Chrysler, his favorite. Citicorp. Then they were looping around and diving for the north shore of Queens, and landing. The buildings of Midtown across the river raked past the tiny windows as they turned to taxi in to the terminal.

HIS APPOINTMENT WAS for nine o'clock. He hated that. Not because of the time. Nine o'clock was halfway through the morning for most of the Manhattan business community. The hour was not upsetting him. It was the fact that he had an appointment at all. It was a very long time indeed since Chester Stone had made an appointment to see anybody. In fact he couldn't accurately recall ever making an appointment to see anybody. Maybe his grandfather had, in the very early days. Since then it had always worked the other way around. All three Chester Stones, be it first, second, or third, had secretaries who graciously tried to fit supplicants into a busy schedule. Many times people had waited days for a provisional window, and then hours in an anteroom. But now it was different. And it was burning him up.

He was early, because he was anxious. He had spent forty minutes in his office reviewing his options. He had none. Whichever way he cut it, he was one-point-one million dollars and six weeks short of success. And that was choking him, too. Because it wasn't a spectacular crash and burn. Not a total disaster. It was a measured and realistic response to the market that was almost all the way there, but not quite. Like a heroic drive off the tee that lands an inch short of the green. Very, very close, but not close enough.

Nine o'clock in the morning, the World Trade Center on its own is the sixth largest city in New York State. Bigger than Albany. Only sixteen acres of land, but a daytime population of 130,000 people. Chester Stone felt like most of them were swirling around him as he stood in the plaza. His grandfather would have been standing in the Hudson River. Chester himself had watched from his own office window as the landfill inched out into the water and the giant towers had risen from the dry riverbed. He checked his watch and went inside. Took an elevator to the eighty-eighth floor and stepped out into a quiet deserted corridor. The ceiling was low and the space was narrow. There were locked doors leading

into offices. They had small rectangular wired-glass portholes set off center. He found the right door and glanced through the glass and pressed the buzzer. The lock clicked back and he went inside to a reception area. It looked like a normal office suite. Surprisingly ordinary. There was a brass-and-oak counter, an attempt at opulence, and a male receptionist sitting behind it. Chester paused and straightened his back and stepped over toward him.

"Chester Stone," he said firmly. "I've got a nine o'clock with Mr. Hobie."

The male receptionist was the first surprise. He had expected a woman. The second surprise was that he was shown straight in. He was not kept waiting. He had expected to sit for a spell, out there in reception in an uncomfortable chair. That's how he would have done it. If some desperate person was coming to him for a last-ditch loan, he'd have let him sweat for twenty minutes. Surely that was an elementary psychological move?

The inner office was very large. Walls had been removed. It was dark. One wall was all windows, but they were covered with vertical blinds, open no more than narrow slits. There was a big desk. Facing it were three sofas completing a square. There were lamp tables at each end of each sofa. A huge square coffee table in the middle, brass and glass, standing on a rug. The whole thing looked like a living room display in a store window.

There was a man behind the desk. Stone started the long walk in toward him. He dodged between the sofas and crabbed around the coffee table. Approached the desk. Stuck out his right hand.

"Mr. Hobie?" he said. "I'm Chester Stone."

The man behind the desk was burned. He had scar tissue all the way down one side of his face. It was scaly, like a reptile's skin. Stone stared away from it in horror, but he was still seeing it in the comer of his eye. It was textured like an overcooked chicken's foot, but it was unnaturally pink. There was no hair growing where it ran up over the scalp. Then there were crude tufts, shading into proper hair on the other side. The hair was gray. The scars were hard and lumpy, but the skin on the unburned side was soft and lined. The guy was maybe fifty or fifty-five. He was sitting there, his chair pushed in close to the desk, his hands down in his lap. Stone was standing there, forcing himself not to look away, his right hand stuck out over the desk.

It was a very awkward moment. There is nothing more awkward than standing there ready to shake hands while the gesture is ignored. Foolish to keep standing there like that, but somehow worse to pull your hand back. So he kept it extended, waiting. Then the man moved. He used his left hand to push back from the desk. Brought his right hand up to meet Stone's. But it wasn't a hand. It was a glittering metal hook. It started way up under his cuff. Not an artificial

hand, not a clever prosthetic device, just a simple hook, the shape of a capital letter J, forged from shiny stainless steel and polished like a sculpture. Stone nearly went to grasp it anyway, but then he pulled back and froze. The man smiled a brief generous smile with the mobile half of his face. Like it meant nothing to him at all.
“They call me Hook Hobie,” he said.
He sat there with his face rigid and the hook held up like an object for examination. Stone swallowed and tried to recover his composure. Wondered if he should offer his left hand instead. He knew some people did that. His great-uncle had had a stroke. The last ten years of his life, he always shook left-handed.
“Take a seat,” Hook Hobie said.
Stone nodded gratefully and backed away. Sat on the end of the sofa. It put him sideways on, but he was happy just to be doing something. Hobie looked at him and laid his arm on the desktop. The hook hit the wood with a quiet metallic sound.
“You want to borrow money,” he said.
The burned side of his face did not move at all. It was thick and hard like a crocodile’s back. Stone felt his stomach going acid and he looked straight down at the coffee table. Then he nodded and ran his palms over the knees of his trousers. Nodded again, and tried to remember his script.
“I need to bridge a gap,” he said. “Six weeks, one-point-one million.”
“Bank?” Hobie asked.
Stone stared at the floor. The tabletop was glass, and there was a patterned rug under it. He shrugged wisely, as if he were including a hundred fine points of arcane business strategy in a single gesture, communicating with a man he wouldn’t dream of insulting by suggesting he was in any way ignorant of any of them.
“I prefer not to,” he said. “We have an existing loan package, of course, but I beat them down to a hell of a favorable rate based on the premise that it was all fixed-amount, fixed-term stuff, with no rolling component. You’ll appreciate that I don’t want to upset those arrangements for such a trivial amount.”
Hobie moved his right arm. The hook dragged over the wood.
“Bullshit, Mr. Stone,” he said quietly.
Stone made no reply. He was listening to the hook.
“Were you in the service?” Hobie asked him.
“Excuse me?”
“Were you drafted? Vietnam?”
Stone swallowed. The burns, and the hook.
“I missed out,” he said. “Deferred for college. I was very keen to go, of course

"I missed out," he said. "Deferred, for college. I was very keen to go, of course, but the war was over by the time I graduated."
Hobie nodded, slowly.
"I went," he said. "And one of the things I learned over there was the value of intelligence gathering. It's a lesson I apply in my business."
There was silence in the dark office. Stone nodded. Moved his head and stared at the edge of the desk. Changed the script.
"OK," he said. "Can't blame me for trying to put a brave face on it, right?"
"You're in relatively deep shit," Hobie said. "You're actually paying your bank top points, and they'll say no to any further funds. But you're doing a reasonably good job of digging yourself out from under. You're nearly out of the woods."
"Nearly," Stone agreed. "Six weeks and one-point-one million away, is all."
"I specialize," Hobie said. "Everybody specializes. My arena is cases exactly like yours. Fundamentally sound enterprises, with temporary and limited exposure problems. Problems that can't be solved by the banks, because they specialize, too, in other arenas, such as being dumb and unimaginative as shit."
He moved the hook again, scraping it across the oak.
"My charges are reasonable," he said. "I'm not a loan shark. We're not talking about hundreds-of-percent interest here. I could see my way to advancing you one-point-one, say six percent to cover the six weeks."
Stone ran his palms over his thighs again. Six percent for six weeks? Equivalent to an annual rate of what? Nearly 52 percent. Borrow one-point-one million now, pay it all back plus sixty-six thousand dollars in interest six weeks from now. Eleven thousand dollars a week. Not quite a loan shark's terms. Not too far away, either. But at least the guy was saying yes.
"What about security?" Stone asked.
"I'll take an equity position," Hobie said.
Stone forced himself to raise his head and look at him. He figured this was some kind of a test. He swallowed hard. Figured he was so close, honesty was the best policy.
"The stock's worth nothing," he said quietly.
Hobie nodded his terrible head, like he was pleased with the reply.
"Right now it isn't," he said. "But it will be worth something soon, right?"
"Only after your exposure is terminated," Stone said. "Catch-22, right? The stock only goes back up after I repay you. When I'm out of the woods."
"So I'll benefit then," Hobie said. "I'm not talking about a temporary transfer. I'm going to take an equity position, and I'm going to keep it."
"Keep it?" Stone said. He couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice. Fifty-two percent interest and a gift of stock?
"I always do," Hobie said. "It's a sentimental thing. I like to have a little part of

"I always do," Hobie said. "It's a sentimental thing. I like to have a little part of all the businesses I help. Most people are glad to make the arrangement."
Stone swallowed. Looked away. Examined his options. Shrugged.
"Sure," he said. "I guess that's OK."
Hobie reached to his left and rolled open a drawer. Pulled out a printed form. Slid it across to the front of the desk.
"I prepared this," he said.
Stone crouched forward off the sofa and picked it up. It was a loan agreement, one-point-one million, six weeks, 6 percent, and a standard stock-transfer protocol. For a chunk that was worth a million dollars not long ago, and might be again, very soon. He blinked.
"Can't do it any other way," Hobie said. "Like I told you, I specialize. I know this comer of the market. You won't get better anyplace else. Fact is, you won't get a damn thing anyplace else."
Hobie was six feet away behind the desk, but Stone felt he was right next to him on the sofa with his awful face jammed in his and the glittering hook ripping through his guts. He nodded, just a faint silent movement of his head, and went into his coat for his fat Mont Blanc fountain pen. Stretched forward and signed in both places against the cold hard glass of the coffee table. Hobie watched him, and nodded in turn.
"I assume you want the money in your operating account?" he asked. "Where the other banks won't see it?"
Stone nodded again, in a daze.
"That would be good," he said.
Hobie made a note. "It'll be there in an hour."
"Thank you," Stone said. It seemed appropriate.
"So now I'm the one who's exposed," Hobie said. "Six weeks, no real security. Not a nice feeling at all."
"There won't be a problem," Stone said, looking down.
Hobie nodded.
"I'm sure there won't," he said. He leaned forward and pressed the intercom in front of him. Stone heard a buzzer sounding faintly outside in the anteroom.
"The Stone dossier, please," Hobie said into the microphone.
There was silence for a moment, and then the door opened. The male receptionist walked over to the desk. He was carrying a thin green file. He bent and placed it in front of Hobie. Walked back out and closed the door quietly.
Hobie used his hook to push the file over to the front edge of the desk.
"Take a look," he said.
Stone crouched forward and took the file. Opened it up. There were photographs in it. Several big eight-by-tens, in glossy black and white. The first photograph

in it. Several big eight-by-tens, in glossy black and white. The first photograph was of his house. Clearly taken from inside a car stopped at the end of his driveway. The second was of his wife. Marilyn. Shot with a long lens as she walked in the flower garden. The third was of Marilyn coming out of her beauty parlor in town. A grainy, long-lens image. Covert, like a surveillance photograph. The fourth picture was a close-up of the license plate of her BMW. The fifth photograph was also of Marilyn. Taken at night through their bedroom window. She was dressed in a bathrobe. Her hair was down, and it looked damp. Stone stared at it. To get that picture, the photographer had been standing on their back lawn. His vision blurred and his ears hummed with silence. Then he shuffled the pictures together and closed the file. Put it back on the desk, slowly. Hobie leaned forward and pressed the tip of his hook into the thick paper. He used it to pull the file back toward him. The hook rasped across the wood, loudly in the silence.

"That's my security, Mr. Stone," he said. "But like you just told me, I'm sure there won't be a problem."

Chester Stone said nothing. Just stood up and threaded his way by all the furniture and over to the door. Through the reception area and into the corridor and into the elevator. Down eighty-eight floors and back outside, where the bright morning sun hit him in the face like a blow.

3

THAT SAME SUN was on the back of Reacher's neck as he made his way into Manhattan in the rear seat of a gypsy cab. He preferred to use unlicensed operators, given the choice. It suited his habit. No reason at all why anyone should ever want to trace his movements by checking with cabdrivers, but a cabdriver who couldn't admit to being one was the safest kind there was. And it gave the opportunity for a little negotiation about the fare. Not much negotiating to be done with the meter in a yellow taxi.
They came in over the Triborough Bridge and entered Manhattan on 125th Street. Drove west through traffic as far as Roosevelt Square. Reacher had the guy pull over there while he scanned around and thought for a moment. He was thinking about a cheap hotel, but he wanted one with working phones. And intact phone books. His judgment was he couldn't meet all three requirements in that neighborhood. But he got out anyway, and paid the guy off. Wherever he was going, he'd walk the last part. A cut-out period, on his own. It suited his habit.

THE TWO YOUNG men in the crumpled thousand-dollar suits waited until Chester Stone was well clear. Then they went into the inner office and threaded by the furniture and stood quietly in front of the desk. Hobie looked up at them and rolled open a drawer. Put the signed agreements away with the photographs and took out a new pad of yellow paper. Then he laid his hook on the desktop and turned in his chair so the dim light from the window caught the good side of his face.
"Well?"
"We just got back," the first guy said.
"You get the information I asked for?"
The second guy nodded. Sat down on the sofa.
"He was looking for a guy called Jack Reacher."
Hobie made a note of the name on the yellow pad. "Who's he?"
There was a short silence.
"We don't know," the first guy said.
Hobie nodded, slowly. "Who was Costello's client?"
Another short silence.
"We don't know that either," the guy said.
"Those are fairly basic questions," Hobie said.
The guy just looked at him through the silence, uneasy

The guy just looked at him through the silence, uneasy.
“You didn’t think to ask those fairly basic questions?”
The second guy nodded. “We asked them. We were asking them like crazy.”
“But Costello wouldn’t answer?”
“He was going to,” the first guy said.
“But?”
“He died on us,” the second guy said. “He just upped and died. He was old, overweight. It was maybe a heart attack, I think. I’m very sorry, sir. We both are.”
Hobie nodded again, slowly. “Exposure?”
“Nil,” the first guy said. “He’s unidentifiable.”
Hobie glanced down at the fingertips of his left hand. “Where’s the knife?”
“In the sea,” the second guy said.
Hobie moved his arm and tapped a little rhythm on the desktop with the point of his hook. Thought hard, and nodded again, decisively.
“OK, not your fault, I guess. Weak heart, what can you do?”
The first guy relaxed and joined his partner on the sofa. They were off the hook, and that had a special meaning in this office.
“We need to find the client,” Hobie said into the silence.
The two guys nodded and waited.
“Costello must have had a secretary, right?” Hobie said. “She’ll know who the client was. Bring her to me.”
The two guys stayed on the sofa.
“What?”
“This Jack Reacher,” the first guy said. “Supposed to be a big guy, three months in the Keys. Costello told us people were talking about a big guy, been there three months, worked nights in a bar. We went to see him. Big tough guy, but he said he wasn’t Jack Reacher.”
“So?”
“Miami airport,” the second guy said. “We took United because it was direct. But there was an earlier flight just leaving, Delta to Atlanta and New York.”
“And?”
“The big guy from the bar? We saw him, heading down to the gate.”
“You sure?”
The first guy nodded. “Ninety-nine percent certain. He was a long way ahead, but he’s a real big guy. Difficult to miss.”
Hobie started tapping his hook on the desk again. Lost in thought.
“OK, he’s Reacher,” he said. “Has to be, right? Costello asking around, then you guys asking on the same day, it spooks him and he runs. But where? Here?”
The second guy nodded. “If he stayed on the plane in Atlanta, he’s here.”

“But why?” Hobie asked. “Who the hell is he?”
He thought for a moment and answered his own question.
“The secretary will tell me who the client is, right?”
Then he smiled.
“And the client will tell me who this Reacher guy is.”
The two guys in the smart suits nodded quietly and stood up. Threaded their way around the furniture and walked out of the office.

REACHER WAS WALKING south through Central Park. Trying to get a grip on the size of the task he had set himself. He was confident he was in the right city. The three accents had been definitive. But there was a huge population to wade through. Seven and a half million people spread out over the five boroughs, maybe altogether 18 million in the metropolitan area. Eighteen million people close enough to focus inward when they want a specialized urban service like a fast and efficient private detective. His gut assumption was Costello may have been located in Manhattan, but it was entirely possible that Mrs. Jacob was suburban. If you’re a woman living somewhere in the suburbs and you want a private detective, where do you look for one? Not next to the supermarket or the video rental. Not in the mall next to the dress shops. You pick up the Yellow Pages for the nearest major city and you start calling. You have an initial conversation and maybe the guy drives out to you, or you get on the train and come in to him. From anywhere in a big dense area that stretches hundreds of square miles.
He had given up on hotels. He didn’t necessarily need to invest a lot of time. Could be he’d be in and out within an hour. And he could use more information than hotels had to offer. He needed phone books for all five boroughs and the suburbs. Hotels wouldn’t have all of those. And he didn’t need to pay the kind of rates hotels like to charge for phone calls. Digging swimming pools had not made him rich.
So he was heading for the public library. Forty-second Street and Fifth. The biggest in the world? He couldn’t remember. Maybe, maybe not. But certainly big enough to have all the phone books he needed, and big, wide tables and comfortable chairs. Four miles from Roosevelt Square, an hour’s brisk walk, interrupted only by traffic on the cross streets and a quick diversion into an office-supply store to buy a notebook and a pencil.

THE NEXT GUY into Hobie’s inner office was the receptionist. He stepped inside and locked the door behind him. Walked over and sat down on the end of

the sofa nearest the desk. Looked at Hobie, long and hard, and silently.
“What?” Hobie asked him, although he knew what.
“You should get out,” the receptionist said. “It’s risky now.”
Hobie made no reply. Just held his hook in his left hand and traced its wicked metal curve with his remaining fingers.
“You planned,” the receptionist said. “You promised. No point planning and promising if you don’t do what you’re supposed to do.”
Hobie shrugged. Said nothing.
“We heard from Hawaii, right?” the receptionist said. “You planned to run as soon as we heard from Hawaii.”
“Costello never went to Hawaii,” Hobie said. “We checked.”
“So that just makes it worse. Somebody else went to Hawaii. Somebody we don’t know.”
“Routine,” Hobie said. “Had to be. Think about it. No reason for anybody to go to Hawaii until we’ve heard from the other end. It’s a sequence, you know that. We hear from the other end, we hear from Hawaii, step one, step two, and then it’s time to go. Not before.”
“You promised,” the guy said again.
“Too early,” Hobie said. “It’s not logical. Think about it. You see somebody buy a gun and a box of bullets, they point the gun at you, are you scared?”
“Sure I am.”
“I’m not,” Hobie said. “Because they didn’t load it. Step one is buy the gun and the bullets, step two is load it. Until we hear from the other end, Hawaii is an empty gun.”
The receptionist laid his head back and stared up at the ceiling.
“Why are you doing this?”
Hobie rolled open his drawer and pulled out the Stone dossier. Took out the signed agreement. Tilted the paper until the dim light from the window caught the bright blue ink of his twin signatures.
“Six weeks,” he said. “Maybe less. That’s all I need.”
The receptionist craned his head up again and squinted over.
“Need for what?”
“The biggest score of my life,” Hobie said.
He squared the paper on the desk and trapped it under his hook.
“Stone just handed me his whole company. Three generations of sweat and toil, and the stupid asshole just handed me the whole thing on a plate.”
“No, he handed you shit on a plate. You’re out one-point-one million dollars in exchange for some worthless paper.”
Hobie smiled.

“Relax, let me do the thinking, OK? I’m the one who’s good at it, right?”
“OK, so how?” the guy asked.
“You know what he owns? Big factory out on Long Island and a big mansion up in Pound Ridge. Five hundred houses all clustered around the factory. Must be three thousand acres all told, prime Long Island real estate, near the shore, crying out for development.”
“The houses aren’t his,” the guy objected.
Hobie nodded. “No, they’re mostly mortgaged to some little bank in Brooklyn.”
“OK, so how?” the guy asked again.
“Just think about it,” Hobie said. “Suppose I put this stock in the market?”
“You’ll get shit for it,” the guy said back. “It’s totally worthless.”
“Exactly, it’s totally worthless. But his bankers don’t really know that yet. He’s lied to them. He’s kept his problems away from them. Why else would he come to me? So his bankers will have it rammed under their noses exactly how worthless their security is. A valuation, straight from the Exchange. They’ll be told: This stock is worth exactly less than shit. Then what?”
“They panic,” the guy said.
“Correct,” Hobie said. “They panic. They’re exposed, with worthless security. They shit themselves until Hook Hobie comes along and offers them twenty cents on the dollar for Stone’s debt.”
“They’d take that? Twenty cents on the dollar?”
Hobie smiled. His scar tissue wrinkled.
“They’ll take it,” he said. “They’ll bite my other hand off to get it. And they’ll include all the stock they hold, part of the deal.”
“OK, then what? What about the houses?”
“Same thing,” Hobie said. “I own the stock, I own the factory out there, I close it down. No jobs, five hundred defaulted mortgages. The Brooklyn bank will get real shaky over that. I’ll buy those mortgages for ten cents on the dollar, foreclose everybody and sling them out. Hire a couple of bulldozers, and I’ve got three thousand acres of prime Long Island real estate, right near the shore. Plus a big mansion up in Pound Ridge. Total cost to me, somewhere around eight-point-one million dollars. The mansion alone is worth two. That leaves me down six-point-one for a package I can market for a hundred million, if I pitch it right.”
The receptionist was staring at him.
“That’s why I need six weeks,” Hobie said.
Then the receptionist was shaking his head.
“It won’t work,” he said. “It’s an old family business. Stone still holds most of the stock himself. It’s not all traded. His bank’s only got some of it. You’d only

be a minority partner. He wouldn't let you do all that stuff."
Hobie shook his head in turn.
"He'll sell out to me. All of it. The whole nine yards."
"He won't."
"He will."

THERE WAS GOOD news and bad news at the public library. Plenty of people called Jacob listed in the phone books for Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, Long Island, Westchester, the Jersey shore, Connecticut. Reacher gave it an hour's radius from the city. People an hour away turn instinctively to the city when they need something. Farther out than that, maybe they don't. He made marks with his pencil in his notebook and counted 129 potential candidates for the anxious Mrs. Jacob.
But the Yellow Pages showed no private investigators called Costello. Plenty of private Costellos in the white pages, but no professional listings under that name. Reacher sighed. He was disappointed, but not surprised. It would have been too good to be true to open up the book and see Costello Investigations—We Specialize in Finding Ex-MPs Down in the Keys.
Plenty of the agencies had generic names, a lot of them competing for the head of the alphabetical listings with a capital A as their first letter. Ace, Acme, A-One, AA Investigators. Others had plain geographical connotations, like Manhattan or the Bronx. Some were heading upmarket by using the words Paralegal Services. One was claiming the heritage trade by calling itself Gumshoe. Two were staffed only by women, working only for women.
He pulled the White Pages back and turned the page in his notebook and copied fifteen numbers for the NYPD. Sat for a while, weighing his options. Then he walked outside, past the giant crouching lions and over to a pay phone on the sidewalk. He propped his notebook on top of the phone with all the quarters he had in his pocket and started down his list of precinct houses. Each one, he asked for administration. He figured he would get some grizzled old desk sergeant who would know everything worth knowing.
He got the hit on his fourth call. The first three precincts were unable to help, without sounding any too regretful about it. The fourth call started the same way, a ring tone, a quick transfer, a long pause, then a wheezing acknowledgment as the phone was answered deep in the bowels of some grimy file room.
"I'm looking for a guy called Costello," he said. "Retired from the job and set up private, maybe on his own, maybe for somebody else. Probably about sixty."
"Yeah, who are you?" a voice replied. Identical accent. Could have been Costello himself on the line.
"Name's Carter," Reacher said. "Like the president."

"Name's Carter," Reacher said. "Like the president."
"So what you want with Costello, Mr. Carter?"
"I got something for him, but I lost his card," Reacher said. "Can't find his number in the book."
"That's because Costello ain't in the book. He only works for lawyers. He don't work for the general public."
"So you know him?"
"Know him? Of course I know him. He worked detective out of this building fifteen years. Not surprising I would know him."
"You know where his office is?"
"Down in the Village someplace," the voice said, and stopped.
Reacher sighed away from the phone. Like pulling teeth.
"You know where in the Village?"
"Greenwich Avenue, if I recall."
"You got a street number?"
"No."
"Phone number?"
"No."
"You know a woman called Jacob?"
"No, should I?"
"Just a long shot," Reacher said. "She was his client."
"Never heard of her."
"OK, thanks for your help," Reacher said.
"Yeah," the voice said.
Reacher hung up and walked back up the steps and inside. Checked the Manhattan white pages again for a Costello on Greenwich Avenue. No listing. He put the books back on the shelf and went back out into the sun and started walking.

GREENWICH AVENUE WAS a long, straight street running diagonally southeast from Fourteenth Street and Eighth to Eighth Street and Sixth. It was lined on both sides with pleasant low-rise Village buildings, some of them with scooped-out semibasement floors in use as small stores and galleries. Reacher walked the northern side first, and found nothing. Dodged the traffic at the bottom and came back on the other side and found a small brass plaque exactly halfway up the street, fixed to the stone frame of a doorway. The plaque was a well-polished rectangle, one of a cluster, and it said Costello. The door was black, and it was open. Inside was a small lobby with a notice board, ridged felt pressin white plastic letters, indicating the building was subdivided into ten

small office suites. Suite five was marked Costello. Beyond the lobby was a glass door, locked. Reacher pressed the buzzer for five. No reply. He used his knuckle and leaned on it, but it got him nowhere. So he pressed six. A voice came back, distorted.

"Yes?"

"UPS," he said, and the glass door buzzed and clicked open.

It was a three-floor building, four if you counted the separate basement. Suites one, two and three were on the first floor. He went up the stairs and found suite four on his left, six on his right, and five right at the back of the building with its door tucked under the angle of the staircase as it wound up to the third story. The door was a polished mahogany affair, and it was standing open. Not wide open, but open enough to be obvious. Reacher pushed it with his toe, and it swung on its hinges to reveal a small quiet reception area the size of a motel room. It was decorated in a pastel color somewhere between light gray and light blue. Thick carpet on the floor. A secretary's desk in the shape of the letter L, with a complicated telephone and a sleek computer. A filing cabinet and a sofa. There was a window with pebbled glass and another door leading straight ahead to an inner office.

The reception area was empty, and it was quiet. Reacher stepped inside and closed the door behind him with his heel. The lock was latched back, like the office had been opened up for business. He padded across the carpet to the inner door. Wrapped his hand in his shirttail and turned the knob. Stepped through into a second room of equal size. Costello's room. There were framed black-and-white photographs of younger versions of the man he had met in the Keys standing with police commissioners and captains and local politicians Reacher did not recognize. Costello had been a thin man, many years ago. The pictures showed him getting fatter as he got older, like a diet advertisement in reverse. The photographs were grouped on a wall to the right of a desk. The desk held a blotter and an old-fashioned inkwell and a telephone and behind it was a leather chair, crushed into the shape of a heavy man. The left-hand wall held a window with more obscure glass and a line of locked cabinets. In front of the desk was a pair of client chairs, neatly arranged at a comfortable and symmetrical angle.

Reacher stepped back to the outer office. There was a smell of perfume in the air. He threaded around the secretary's desk and found a woman's bag, open, neatly stowed against the vanity panel to the left of the chair. The flap was folded back, revealing a soft leather wallet and a plastic pack of tissues. He took out his pencil and used the eraser end to poke the tissues aside. Underneath them was a clutter of cosmetics and a bunch of keys and the soft aroma of expensive cologne.

The computer monitor was swirling with a watery screensaver. He used the pencil to nudge the mouse. The screen crackled and cleared and revealed a half-finished letter. The cursor was blinking patiently in the middle of an uncompleted word. That morning's date sat underneath a letterhead. Reacher thought about Costello's body, sprawled out on the sidewalk next to the Key West graveyard, and he glanced between the tidy placement of the absent woman's bag, the open door, the uncompleted word, and he shivered.

Then he used the pencil to exit the word processor. A window opened and asked him if he wanted to save the changes to the letter. He paused and hit *no.* Opened the file manager screen and checked the directories. He was looking for an invoice. It was clear from looking around that Costello ran a neat operation. Neat enough to invoice for a retainer before he went looking for Jack Reacher. But when did that search start? It must have followed a clear sequence. Mrs. Jacob's instructions coming at the outset, nothing except a name, a vague description about his size, his Army service. Costello must then have called the military's central storage facility, a carefully guarded complex in St. Louis that holds every piece of paper relating to every man and woman who has ever served in uniform. Carefully guarded in two ways, physically with gates and wire, and bureaucratically with a thick layer of obstruction designed to discourage frivolous access. After patient inquiries he would have discovered the honorable discharge. Then a puzzled pause, staring at a dead end. Then the long shot with the bank account. A call to an old buddy, favors called in, strings pulled. Maybe a blurry faxed printout from Virginia, maybe a blow-by-blow narrative of credits and debits over the telephone. Then the hurried flight south, the questions up and down Duval, the two guys, the fists, the linoleum knife.

A reasonably short sequence, but St. Louis and Virginia would have been major delays. Reacher's guess was getting good information out of the records office would take three days, maybe four, for a citizen like Costello. The Virginia bank might not have been any quicker. Favors aren't necessarily granted immediately. The timing has got to be right. Call it a total of seven days' bureaucratic fudge, separated by a day's thinking time, plus a day at the start and a day at the end. Maybe altogether ten days since Mrs. Jacob set the whole thing in motion.

He clicked on a subdirectory labeled INVOICES. The right-hand side of the screen came up with a long field of file names, stacked alphabetically. He ran the cursor down the list and spooled them up from the bottom. No Jacob in the Js. Mostly they were just initials, long acronyms maybe standing for law firm names. He checked the dates. Nothing from exactly ten days ago. But there was one nine days old. Maybe Costello was faster than he thought, or maybe his secretary was slower. It was labeled SGR&T-09. He clicked on it and the hard

drive chattered and the screen came up with a thousand-dollar retainer against a missing persons inquiry, billed to a Wall Street firm called Spencer Gutman Ricker and Talbot. There was a billing address, but no phone number.
He quit file manager and entered the database. Searched for SGR&T again and came up with a page showing the same address, but this time with numbers for phone, fax, telex and E-mail. He leaned down and used his fingers and thumb to pull a couple of tissues from the secretary's pack. Wrapped one around the telephone receiver and opened the other flat and laid it across the keypad. Dialed the number by pressing through it. There was ring tone for a second, and then the connection was made.
"Spencer Gutman," a bright voice said. "How may we help you?"
"Mrs. Jacob, please," Reacher said, busily.
"One moment," the voice said.
There was tinny music and then a man's voice. He sounded quick, but deferential. Maybe an assistant.
"Mrs. Jacob, please," Reacher said again.
The guy sounded busy and harrassed. "She already left for Garrison, and I really don't know when she'll be in the office again, I'm afraid."
"Do you have her address in Garrison?"
"Hers?" the guy said, surprised. "Or his?"
Reacher paused and listened to the surprise and took a chance.
"His, I mean. I seem to have lost it."
"Just as well you did," the voice said back. "It was misprinted, I'm afraid. I must have redirected at least fifty people this morning."
He recited an address, apparently from memory. Garrison, New York, a town about sixty miles up the Hudson River, more or less exactly opposite West Point, where Reacher had spent four long years.
"I think you'll have to hurry," the guy said.
"Yes, I will," Reacher said, and hung up, confused.
He closed the database and left the screen blank. Took one more glance at the missing secretary's abandoned bag and caught one more breath of her perfume as he left the room.

THE SECRETARY DIED five minutes after she gave up Mrs. Jacob's identity, which was about five minutes after Hobie started in on her with his hook. They were in the executive bathroom inside the office suite on the eighty-eighth floor. It was an ideal location. Spacious, sixteen feet square, way too big for a bathroom. Some expensive decorator had put shiny gray granite tiling over all six surfaces, walls and floor and ceiling. There was a big shower stall, with a

clear plastic curtain on a stainless steel rail. The rail was Italian, grossly overspecified for the task of holding up a clear plastic curtain. Hobie had discovered it could take the weight of an unconscious human, handcuffed to it by the wrists. Time to time, heavier people than the secretary had hung there, while he asked them urgent questions or persuaded them as to the wisdom of some particular course of action.

The only problem was soundproofing. He was pretty sure it was OK. It was a solid building. Each of the Twin Towers weighs more than half a million tons. Plenty of steel and concrete, good thick walls. And he had no inquisitive neighbors. Most of the suites on eighty-eight were leased by trade missions from small obscure foreign nations, and their skeleton staffs spent most of their time up at the UN. Same situation on eighty-seven and eighty-nine. That was why he was where he was. But Hobie was a man who never took an extra risk if he could avoid it. Hence the duct tape. Before starting, he always lined up some six-inch strips, stuck temporarily to the tiling. One of them would go over the mouth. When whoever it was started nodding wildly, eyes bulging, he would tear off the strip and wait for the answer. Any screaming, he would slam the next strip on and go to work again. Normally he got the answer he wanted after the second strip came off.

Then the tiled floor allowed a simple sluicing operation. Set the shower running hard, throw a few bucketfuls of water around, get busy with a mop, and the place was safe again as fast as water drains down eighty-eight floors and away into the sewers. Not that Hobie ever did the mopping himself. A mop needs two hands. The second young guy was doing the mopping, with his expensive pants rolled up and his socks and shoes off. Hobie was outside at his desk, talking to the first young guy.

“I’ll get Mrs. Jacob’s address, you’ll bring her to me, OK?”

“Sure,” the guy said. “What about this one?”

He nodded toward the bathroom door. Hobie followed his glance.

“Wait until tonight,” he said. “Put some of her clothes back on, take her down to the boat. Dump her a couple of miles out in the bay.”

“She’s likely to wash back in,” the guy said. “Couple of days.”

Hobie shrugged.

“I don’t care,” he said. “Couple of days, she’ll be all bloated up. They’ll figure she fell off a motorboat. Injuries like that, they’ll put it down to propeller damage.”

THE COVERT HABIT had advantages, but it also had problems. Best way to get up to Garrison in a hurry would be to grab a rental car and head straight out.

But a guy who chooses not to use credit cards and won't carry a driver's license loses that option. So Reacher was back in a cab, heading for Grand Central. He was pretty sure the Hudson Line ran a train up there. He guessed commuters sometimes lived as far north as that. If not, the big Amtraks that ran up to Albany and Canada might stop there.
He paid off the cab and pushed through the crowd to the doors. Down the long ramp and out into the giant concourse. He glanced around and craned his head to read the departures screen. Tried to recall the geography. Croton-Harmon trains were no good. They terminated way too far south. He needed Poughkeepsie at the minimum. He scanned down the list. Nothing doing. No trains out of there inside the next hour and a half that would get him to Garrison.

THEY DID IT the usual way. One of them rode ninety floors down to the underground loading bay and found an empty carton in the trash pile. Refrigerator cartons were best, or soda machines, but once he'd done it with the box from a thirty-five-inch color television. This time, he found a filing cabinet carton. He used a janitor's trolley from the loading ramp and wheeled it into the freight elevator. Rode with it back up to the eighty-eighth floor.
The other guy was zipping her into a body bag in the bathroom. They folded it into the carton and used the remaining duct tape to secure the carton shut. Then they hefted it back on the trolley and headed for the elevator once more. This time, they rode down to the parking garage. Wheeled the box over to the black Suburban. Counted to three and heaved it into the back. Slammed the tailgate shut and clicked the lock. Walked away and glanced back. Deep tints on the windows, dark garage, no problem.
"You know what?" the first guy said. "We fold the seat down, we'll get Mrs. Jacob in there along with her. Do it all in one trip, tonight. I don't like going on that boat any more times than I have to."
"OK," the second guy said. "Were there more boxes?"
"That was the best one. Depends if Mrs. Jacob is big or small, I guess."
"Depends if she's finished by tonight."
"You got any doubts on that score? The mood he's in today?"
They strolled together to a different slot and unlocked a black Chevy Tahoe. Little brother to the Suburban, but still a giant vehicle.
"So where is she?" the second guy asked.
"A town called Garrison," the first guy said. "Straight up the Hudson, a ways past Sing Sing. An hour, hour and a half."
The Tahoe backed out of the slot and squealed its tires on its way around the garage. Bumped up the ramp into the sunshine and headed out to West Street,

where it made a right and accelerated north.

4

WEST STREET BECOMES Eleventh Avenue right opposite Pier 56, where the westbound traffic spills out of Fourteenth Street and turns north. The big black Tahoe was caught in the congestion and added its horn to the frustrated blasts cannoning off the high buildings and echoing out over the river. It crawled nine blocks and made a left at Twenty-third Street, then swung north again on Twelfth. It got above walking speed until it passed the back of the Javits Convention Center, and then it got jammed up again in the traffic pouring out of West Forty-second. Twelfth became the Miller Highway and it was still solid, all the way over the top of the huge messy acreage of the old rail yards. Then the Miller became the Henry Hudson Parkway. Still a slow road, but the Henry Hudson was technically Route 9A, which would become Route 9 up in Crotonville and take them all the way north to Garrison. A straight line, no turns anywhere, but they were still in Manhattan, stuck in Riverside Park, a whole half hour after setting out.

IT WAS THE word processor that meant the most. The cursor, patiently blinking in the middle of a word. The open door and the abandoned bag were persuasive, but not critical. Office workers usually take their stuff and close their doors, but not always. The secretary might have just stepped across the hall and gotten involved in something, a quest for bond paper or a plea for help with somebody's copying machine, leading to a cup of coffee and a juicy story about last night's date. A person expecting to be absent two minutes might leave her bag behind and her door open and end up being gone a half hour. But nobody leaves computer work unsaved. Not even for a minute. And this woman had. The machine had asked him DO YOU WANT TO SAVE THE CHANGES? Which meant she had gotten up from her desk without clicking on the save icon, which is a habit just about as regular as breathing for people who spend their days fighting with software.
Which put a very bad complexion on the whole thing. Reacher was through in Grand Central's other big hall, with a twenty-ounce cup of black coffee he had bought from a vendor. He jammed the lid down tight and squeezed the cash roll in his pocket. It was thick enough for what he was going to have to do. He ran back and around to the track where the next Croton train was waiting to leave.

THE HENRY HUDSON Parkway splits into a tangle of curling ramps around

170th Street and the north lanes come out again labeled Riverside Drive. Same road, same direction, no turn, but the complex dynamic of heavy traffic means that if one driver slows down more than the average, then the highway can back up dramatically, with hundreds of people stalled way behind, all because some out-of-towner a mile ahead became momentarily confused. The big black Tahoe was brought to a complete halt opposite Fort Washington and was reduced to a lurching stop-start crawl all the way under the George Washington Bridge. Then Riverside Drive broadens out and it got itself up into third gear before the label changed back to the Henry Hudson and the traffic in the toll plaza stopped it again. It waited in line to pay the money that let it off the island of Manhattan and away north through the Bronx.

THERE ARE TWO types of trains running up and down the Hudson River between Grand Central and Croton-Harmon: locals and expresses. The expresses do not run any faster in terms of speed, but they stop less often. They make the journey last somewhere between forty-nine and fifty-two minutes. The locals stop everywhere, and the repeated braking and waiting and accelerating spin the trip out to anywhere between sixty-five and seventy-three minutes. A maximum advantage for the express of up to twenty-four minutes.
Reacher was on a local. He had given the trainman five and a half bucks for an off-peak one-way and was sitting sideways on an empty three-person bench, wired from too much coffee, his head resting on the window, wondering exactly where the hell he was going, and why, and what he was going to do when he got there. And whether he would get there in time to do it, anyway, whatever it was.

ROUTE 9A BECAME 9 and curved gracefully away from the river to run behind Camp Smith. Up in Westchester, it was a fast enough road. Not exactly a racetrack, because it curved and bounced around too much for sustained high speed, but it was clear and empty, a patchwork of old sections and new stretches carved through the woods. There were housing developments here and there beyond the shoulders, high timber fencing and neatly painted siding and optimistic names carved into imposing boulders flanking the entrance gates. The Tahoe hustled along, one guy driving and the other with a map across his knees. They passed Peekskill and started hunting a left turn. They found it and swung head-on toward the river, which they sensed ahead of them, an empty break in the landscape. They entered the township of Garrison, and started hunting the address. Not easy to find. The residential areas were scattered. You could have a Garrison zip code and live way in the back of beyond. That was clear. But they found the right road and made all the correct turns and found the right street.

Slowed and cruised through the thinning woods above the river, watching the mailboxes. The road curved and opened out. They cruised on. Then they spotted the right house up ahead and slowed abruptly and pulled in at the curb.

REACHER GOT OFF of the train at Croton, seventy-one minutes after getting in. He ran up the stairs and across and down to the taxi rank. There were four operators lined up, all nose-in to the station entrance, all of them using old-model Caprice wagons with fake wood on the sides. The first driver to react was a stout woman who tilted her head up like she was ready to pay attention.
“You know Garrison?” Reacher asked her.
“Garrison?” she said. “That’s a long way, mister, twenty miles.”
“I know where it is,” he said.
“Could be forty bucks.”
“I’ll give you fifty,” he said. “But I need to be there right now.”
He sat in front, next to her. The car stank like old taxis do, sweet cloying air freshener and upholstery cleaner. There were a million miles on the clock and it rode like a boat on a swell as the woman hustled through the parking lot and up onto Route 9 and headed north.
“You got an address for me?” she asked, watching the road.
Reacher repeated what the assistant in the law firm had told him. The woman nodded and settled to a fast cruise.
“Overlooks the river,” she said.
She cruised for a quarter hour, passed by Peekskill and then slowed, looking for a particular left. Hauled the huge boat around and headed west. Reacher could feel the river up ahead, a mile-wide trench in the forest. The woman knew where she was going. She went all the way to the river and turned north on a country road. The rail tracks ran parallel between them and the water. No trains on them. The land fell away and Reacher could see West Point ahead and on his left, a mile away across the blue water.
“Should be along here someplace,” she said.
It was a narrow country road, domesticated with ranch fencing in rough timber and tamed with mowed shoulders and specimen plantings. There were mailboxes a hundred yards apart and poles that hung cables through the treetops.
“Whoa,” the woman said, surprised. “I guess this is it.”
The road was already narrow, and now it became just about impassable. There was a long line of cars parked up on the shoulder. Maybe forty automobiles, many of them black or dark blue. All neat late-model sedans or big sport-utilities. The woman eased the taxi into the driveway. The line of parked cars stretched nose-to-tail all the way to the house. Another ten or twelve cars were

parked together on the apron in front of the garage. Two of them were plain Detroit sedans, in flat green. Army vehicles. Reacher could spot Defense Department issue a mile away.
“OK?” the woman asked him.
“I guess,” he said, cautiously.
He peeled a fifty off his roll and handed it to her. Got out and stood in the driveway, unsure. He heard the taxi whine away in reverse. He walked back up to the road. Looked at the long line of cars. Looked at the mailbox. There was a name spelled out in little aluminum letters along the top of it. The name was Garber. A name he knew as well as his own.

The house was set in a large lot, casually landscaped, placed somewhere comfortable in the region between natural and neglected. The house itself was low and sprawling, dark cedar siding, dark screens at the windows, big stone chimney, somewhere between suburban modest and cozy cottage. It was very quiet. The air smelled hot and damp and fecund. He could hear insects massing in the undergrowth. He could sense the river beyond the house, a mile-wide void dragging stray sounds away to the south.
He walked closer and heard muted conversation behind the house. People talking low, maybe a lot of people. He walked down toward the sound and came out around the side of the garage. He was at the top of a flight of cement steps, looking west across the backyard to the river, blue and blinding in the sun. A mile away in the haze, slightly northwest to his right, was West Point, low and gray in the distance.
The backyard was a flat area cleared out of the woods on the top of the bluff. It was covered in coarse grass, mowed short, and there was a solemn crowd of a hundred people standing in it. They were all dressed in black, men and women alike, black suits and ties and blouses and shoes, except for a half dozen Army officers in full dress uniform. They were all talking quietly, soberly, juggling paper buffet plates and glasses of wine, sadness in the slope of their shoulders.
A funeral. He was gate-crashing a funeral. He stood there awkwardly, looming against the skyline in the gear he had thrown on yesterday in the Keys, faded chinos, creased pale yellow shirt, no socks, scuffed shoes, sun-bleached hair sticking out all over the place, a day’s beard on his face. He gazed down at the group of mourners and as if he had suddenly clapped his hands they all fell silent and turned to look up at him. He froze. They all stared at him, quietly, inquiringly, and he looked back at them, blankly. There was silence. Stillness.
Then a woman moved. She handed her paper plate and her glass to the nearest bystander and stepped forward.
She was a young woman, maybe thirty, dressed like the others in a severe black

She was a young woman, maybe thirty, dressed like the others in a severe black suit. She was pale and strained, but very beautiful. Achingly beautiful. Very slim, tall in her heels, long legs in sheer dark nylon. Fine blond hair, long and un-styled, blue eyes, fine bones. She moved delicately across the lawn and stopped at the bottom of the cement steps, like she was waiting for him to come down to her.

"Hello, Reacher," she said, softly.

He looked down at her. She knew who he was. And he knew who she was. It came to him suddenly like a stop-motion film blasting through fifteen years in a single glance. A teenage girl grew up and blossomed into a beautiful woman right in front of his eyes, all in a split second. Garber, the name on the mailbox. Leon Garber, for many years his commanding officer. He recalled their early acquaintance, getting to know each other at backyard barbecues on hot, wet evenings in the Philippines. A slender girl gliding in and out of the shadows around the bleak base house, enough of a woman at fifteen to be utterly captivating but enough of a girl to be totally forbidden. Jodie, Garber's daughter. His only child. The light of his life. This was Jodie Garber, fifteen years later, all grown up and beautiful and waiting for him at the bottom of a set of cement steps.

He glanced at the crowd and went down the steps to the lawn.

"Hello, Reacher," she said again.

Her voice was low and strained. Sad, like the scene around her.

"Hello, Jodie," he said.

Then he wanted to ask *who died?* But he couldn't frame it in any way which wasn't going to sound callous, or stupid. She saw him struggling, and nodded.

"Dad," she said simply.

"When?" he asked.

"Five days ago," she said. "He was sick the last few months, but it was sudden at the end. A surprise, I guess."

He nodded slowly.

"I'm very sorry," he said.

He glanced at the river and the hundred faces in front of him became a hundred faces of Leon Garber. A short, squat, tough man. A wide smile he always used whether he was happy or annoyed or in danger. A brave man, physically and mentally. A great leader. Honest as the day is long, fair, perceptive. Reacher's role model during his vital formative years. His mentor and his sponsor. His protector. He had gone way out on a limb and promoted him twice in an eighteen-month span which made Reacher the youngest peacetime major anybody could remember. Then he had spread his blunt hands wide and smiled and disclaimed any credit for his ensuing successes.

and disclaimed any credit for his ensuing successes.
“I’m very sorry, Jodie,” he said again.
She nodded, silently.
“I can’t believe it,” he said. “I can’t take it in. I saw him less than a year ago. He was in good shape then. He got sick?”
She nodded again, still silent.
“But he was always so tough,” he said.
She nodded, sadly. “He was, wasn’t he? Always so tough.”
“And not old,” he said.
“Sixty-four.”
“So what happened?”
“His heart,” she said. “It got him in the end. Remember how he always liked to pretend he didn’t have one?”
Reacher shook his head. “Biggest heart you ever saw.”
“I found that out,” she said. “When Mom died, we were best friends for ten years. I loved him.”
“I loved him, too,” Reacher said. “Like he was my dad, not yours.”
She nodded again. “He still talked about you all the time.”
Reacher looked away. Stared out at the unfocused shape of the West Point buildings, gray in the haze. He was numb. He was in that age zone where people he knew died. His father was dead, his mother was dead, his brother was dead. Now the nearest thing to a substitute relative was dead, too.
“He had a heart attack six months ago,” Jodie said. Her eyes clouded and she hooked her long, straight hair behind her ear. “He sort of recovered for a spell, looked pretty good, but really he was failing fast. They were considering a bypass, but he took a turn for the worse and went down too quickly. He wouldn’t have survived the surgery.”
“I’m very sorry,” he said, for the third time.
She turned alongside him and threaded her arm through his.
“Don’t be,” she said. “He was always a very contented guy. Better for him to go fast. I couldn’t see him being happy lingering on.”
Reacher had a flash in his mind of the old Garber, bustling and raging, a fireball of energy, and he understood how desperate it would have made him to become an invalid. Understood too how that overloaded old heart had finally given up the struggle. He nodded, unhappily.
“Come and meet some people,” Jodie said. “Maybe you know some of them.”
“I’m not dressed for this,” he said. “I feel bad. I should go.”
“Doesn’t matter,” she said. “You think Dad would care?”
He saw Garber in his old creased khaki and his battered hat. He was the worst-dressed officer in the U.S. Army, all thirteen years Reacher had served under

dressed officer in the U.S. Army, all thirteen years Reacher had served under him. He smiled, briefly.
“I guess he wouldn’t mind,” he said.
She walked him onto the lawn. There were maybe six people out of the hundred he recognized. A couple of the guys in uniform were familiar. A handful in suits were men he’d worked with here and there in another lifetime. He shook hands with dozens of people and tried to listen to the names, but they went in one ear and out the other. Then the quiet chatter and the eating and the drinking started up again, the crowd closed around him, and the sensation of his untidy arrival was smoothed over and forgotten. Jodie still had hold of his arm. Her hand was cool on his skin.
“I’m looking for somebody,” he said. “That’s why I’m here, really.”
“I know,” she said. “Mrs. Jacob, right?”
He nodded.
“Is she here?” he asked.
“I’m Mrs. Jacob,” she said.

THE TWO GUYS in the black Tahoe backed it out of the line of cars, out from under the power lines so the car phone would work without interference. The driver dialed a number and the ring tone filled the quiet vehicle. Then the call was answered sixty miles south and eighty-eight floors up.
“Problems, boss,” the driver said. “There’s some sort of a wake going on here, a funeral or something. Must be a hundred people milling around. We got no chance of grabbing this Mrs. Jacob. We can’t even tell which one she is. There are dozens of women here, she could be any one of them.”
The speaker relayed a grunt from Hobie. “And?”
“The guy from the bar down in the Keys? He just showed up here in a damn taxi. Got here about ten minutes after we did, strolled right in.”
The speaker crackled. No discernible reply.
“So what do we do?” the driver asked.
“Stick with it,” Hobie’s voice said. “Maybe hide the vehicle and lay up someplace. Wait until everybody leaves. It’s her house, as far as I can tell. Maybe the family home or a weekend place. So everybody else will leave, and she’ll be the one who stays. Don’t you come back here without her, OK?”
“What about the big guy?”
“If he leaves, let him go. If he doesn’t, waste him. But bring me this Jacob woman.”

“YOU’RE MRS. JACOB?“ Reacher asked.
Jodie Garber nodded.

“Am, was,” she said. “I’m divorced, but I keep the name for work.”
“Who was he?”
She shrugged.
“A lawyer, like me. It seemed like a good idea at the time.”
“How long?”
“Three years, beginning to end. We met at law school, got married when we got jobs. I stayed on Wall Street, but he went to a firm in D.C., couple of years ago. The marriage didn’t go with him, just kind of petered out. The papers came through last fall. I could hardly remember who he was. Just a name, Alan Jacob.”
Reacher stood in the sunny yard and looked at her. He realized he was upset that she had been married. She had been a skinny kid, but totally gorgeous at fifteen, self-confident and innocent and a little shy about it all at the same time. He had watched the battle between her shyness and her curiosity as she sat and worked up the courage to talk to him about death and life and good and evil. Then she would fidget and tuck her bony knees up under her and work the conversation around to love and sex and men and women. Then she would blush and disappear. He would be left alone, icy inside, captivated by her and angry at himself for it. Days later he would see her somewhere around the base, still blushing furiously. And now fifteen years later she was a grown woman, college and law school, married and divorced, beautiful and composed and elegant, standing there in her dead father’s yard with her arm linked through his.
“Are you married?” she asked him.
He shook his head. “No.”
“But are you happy?”
“I’m always happy,” he said. “Always was, always will be.”
“Doing what?”
He shrugged.
“Nothing much,” he said.
He glanced over the top of her head and scanned the faces in the crowd. Subdued busy people, substantial lives, big careers, all of them moving steadily from A to Z. He looked at them and wondered if they were the fools, or if he was. He recalled the expression on Costello’s face.
“I was just in the Keys,” he said. “Digging swimming pools with a shovel.”
Her face didn’t change. She tried to squeeze his forearm with her hand, but her hand was too small and his arm was too big. It came out as a gentle pressure from her palm.
“Costello find you down there?” she asked.

He didn't find me to invite me to a *funeral*, he thought.
"We need to talk about Costello," he said.
"He's good, isn't he'?"
Not good enough, he thought. She moved away to circulate through the crowd. People were waiting to offer their second-layer condolences. They were getting loose from the wine, and the buzz of talk was getting louder and more sentimental. Reacher drifted over to a patio, where a long table with a white cloth held food. He loaded a paper plate with cold chicken and rice and took a glass of water. There was an ancient patio furniture set, ignored by the others because it was all spotted with little gray-green botanical droppings from the trees. The sun umbrella was stiff and faded white. Reacher ducked under it and sat quietly in a dirty chair on his own.
He watched the crowd as he ate. People were reluctant to leave. The affection for old Leon Garber was palpable. A guy like that generates affection in others, maybe too much to express to his face, so it has to all come out later. Jodie was moving through the crowd, nodding, clasping hands, smiling sadly. Everybody had a tale to tell her, an anecdote about witnessing Garber's heart of gold peeping out from under his gruff and irascible exterior. He could add a few stories. But he wouldn't, because Jodie didn't need it explained to her that her father had been one of the good guys. She knew. She was moving with the serenity of a person who had loved the old guy all her life, and had been loved back. There was nothing she had neglected to tell him, nothing he had neglected to tell her. People live, and then they die, and as long as they do both things properly, there's nothing much to regret.

THEY FOUND A place on the same road that was obviously a weekend cottage, closed up tight and unoccupied. They backed the Tahoe around behind the garage where it was hidden from the street, but ready for pursuit. They took the nine-millimeters out of the glove box and stowed them in their jacket pockets. Walked back down to the road and ducked into the undergrowth.
It was hard going. They were just sixty miles north of Manhattan, but they might as well have been in the jungles of Borneo. There were ragged vines tangled everywhere, grabbing at them, tripping them, whipping their faces and hands. The trees were second-growth native broadleafs, growing wild, basically weeds, and their branches came out of them at crazy low angles. They took to walking backward, forcing their way through. When they got level with the Garber driveway, they were panting and gasping and smeared with moss and green pollen dust. They pushed through onto the property and found a depression in the ground where they were concealed. They ducked left and right to get a view

of the pathway leading up from the backyard. People were heading out, getting ready to leave.
It was becoming obvious which one was Mrs. Jacob. If Hobie was right and this was her place, then she was the thin blond shaking hands and saying good-bye like all these departing people had been her guests. They were leaving, she was staying. She was Mrs. Jacob. They watched her, the center of attention, smiling bravely, embracing, waving. People filed up the driveway, ones and twos, then larger groups. Cars were starting. Blue exhaust haze was drifting. They could hear the hiss and groan of power steering as people eased out of the tight line. The rub of tires on pavement. The burble of motors accelerating away down the road. This was going to be easy. Pretty soon she was going to be standing there all by herself, all choked up and sad. Then she was going to get a couple of extra visitors. Maybe she would see them coming and take them for a couple of mourners arriving late. After all, they were dressed in dark suits and ties. What fits in Manhattan's financial district looks just about right for a funeral.

REACHER FOLLOWED THE last two guests up the cement steps and out of the yard. One was a colonel and the other was a two-star general, both in immaculate dress uniform. It was what he had expected. A place with free food and drink, the soldiers will always be the last to leave. He didn't know the colonel, but he thought he vaguely recognized the general. He thought the general recognized him, too, but neither of them pursued it. No desire on either part to get into long and complicated so-what-are-you-doing-now explanations. The brass shook hands quite formally with Jodie and then they snapped to attention and saluted. Crisp parade-ground moves, gleaming boots smashing into the blacktop, eyes rigidly to the front, thousand-yard stares, all quite bizarre in the green stillness of a suburban driveway. They got into the last car left on the garage apron, one of the flat green sedans parked nearest to the house. First to arrive, last to leave. Peacetime, no Cold War, nothing to do all day. It was why Reacher had been happy when they cut him loose, and as he watched the green car turn and head out, he knew he was right to be happy.
Jodie stepped sideways to him and linked her arm through his again.
"So," she said quietly. "That's that."
Then there was just building silence as the noise from the green car faded and died along the road.
"Where's he buried?" Reacher asked.
"The town cemetery," she said. "He could have chosen Arlington, of course, but he didn't want that. You want to go up there?"
He shook his head.

"No, I don't do stuff like that. Makes no difference to him now, does it? He knew I'll miss him, because I told him so, a long time ago."
She nodded. Held his arm.
"We need to talk about Costello," he said again.
"Why?" she asked. "He gave you the message, right?"
He shook his head.
"No, he found me, but I was wary. I said I wasn't Jack Reacher."
She looked up at him, astonished. "But why?"
He shrugged.
"Habit, I guess. I don't go around looking for involvement. I didn't recognize the name Jacob, so I just ignored him. I was happy, living quiet down there."
She was still looking at him.
"I guess I should have used Garber," she said. "It was Dad's business anyway, not mine. But I did it through the firm, and I never even thought about it. You'd have listened to him if he'd said Garber, right?"
"Of course," he said.
"And you needn't have worried, because it was no kind of a big deal."
"Can we go inside?" he asked.
She was surprised again. "Why?"
"Because it was some kind of a very big deal."

THEY SAW HER lead him in through the front door. She pulled the screen and he held it while she turned the knob and opened up. Some kind of a big front door, dull brown wood. They went inside and the door closed behind them. Ten seconds later a dim light came on in a window, way off to the left. Some kind of a sitting room or den, they guessed, so shaded by the runaway plantings outside that it needed lights on even in the middle of the day. They crouched in their damp hollow and waited. Insects were drifting through the sunbeams all around them. They glanced at each other and listened hard. No sound.
They pushed through to the driveway. Ran crouched to the comer of the garage. Pressed up against the siding and slid around to the front. Across the front toward the house. They went into their jackets for the pistols. Held them pointed at the ground and went one at a time for the front porch. They regrouped and eased slowly over the old timbers. Ended up squatting on the floor, backs pressed against the house, one on either side of the front door, pistols out and ready. She'd gone in this way. She'd come back out. Just a matter of time.

"SOMEBODY KILLED HIM?" Jodie repeated.
"And his secretary, probably," Reacher said.
"I don't believe it," she said. "Why?"

"I don't believe it," she said. "Why?"
She had led him through a dark hallway to a small den in the far corner of the house. A tiny window and dark wood paneling and heavy brown leather furniture made it gloomy, so she switched on a desk lamp, which changed it into a cozy man's space like the pre-war bars Reacher had seen in Europe. There were shelves of books, cheap editions bought by subscription decades ago, and curled faded photographs thumbtacked to the front edges of the shelves. There was a plain desk, the sort of place where an old underemployed man does his bills and taxes in imitation of how he used to work when he had a job.
"I don't know why," Reacher said. "I don't know anything. I don't even know why you sent him looking for me."
"Dad wanted you," she said. "He never really told me why. I was busy, I had a trial, complex thing, lasted months. I was preoccupied. All I know is, after he got sick he was going to the cardiologist, right? He met somebody there and got involved with something. He was worried about it. Seemed to me he felt he was under some kind of a big obligation. Then later when he got worse, he knew he would have to drop it, and he started saying he should find you and let you take a look at it, because you were a person who could maybe do something about it. He was getting all agitated, which was really not a good idea, so I said I'd get Costello to locate you. We use him all the time at the firm, and it felt like the least I should do."
It made some kind of sense, but Reacher's first thought was why me? He could see Garber's problem. In the middle of something, health failing, unwilling to abandon an obligation, needing help. But a guy like Garber could get help anywhere. The Manhattan Yellow Pages were full of investigators. And if it was something too arcane or too personal for a city investigator, then all he had to do was pick up the phone and a dozen of his friends from the military police would come running. Two dozen. A hundred. All of them willing and anxious to repay his many kindnesses and favors that stretched right back through their whole careers. So Reacher was sitting there asking himself *why me in particular?*
"Who was the person he met at the cardiologist?"
She shrugged, unhappily.
"I don't know. I was preoccupied. We never really went into it."
"Did Costello come up here? Discuss it directly with him?"
She nodded. "I called him and told him we'd pay him through the firm, but he was to come here and get the details. He called me back a day or two later, said he'd discussed it with Dad, and it all boiled down to finding you. He wanted me to retain him officially, on paper, because it could get expensive. So naturally I did that, because I didn't want Dad worrying about the cost or anything."
"Which is why he told me his client was Mrs. Jacob," Reacher said. "Not Leon

"Which is why he told me his client was Mrs. Jacob," Reacher said. "Not Leon Garber. Which is why I ignored him. Which is how I got him killed."
She shook her head and looked at him sharply, like he was some kind of a new associate who had just done a piece of sloppy drafting. It took him by surprise. He was still thinking of her as a fifteen-year-old girl, not a thirty-year-old lawyer who spent her time getting preoccupied with long and complex trials.
"Non sequitur," she said. "It's clear what happened, right? Dad told Costello the story, Costello tried some kind of a shortcut before he went looking for you, whereby he turned over the wrong stone and got somebody alerted. That somebody killed him to find out who was looking, and why. Makes no difference if you'd played ball right away. They'd still have gotten to Costello to ask him exactly who put him on the trail. So it's me who got him killed, ultimately."
Reacher shook his head. "It was Leon. Through you."
She shook her head in turn. "It was the person at the cardiology clinic. Him, through Dad, through me."
"I need to find that person," he said.
"Does it matter now?"
"I think it does," he said. "If Leon was worried about something, then I'm worried about it, too. That's how it worked for us."
Jodie nodded quietly. Stood up quickly and stepped over to the bookshelves. Pincered her fingernails and levered the thumbtack out of one of the photographs. Looked hard at it and then passed it across to him.
"Remember that?" she asked.
The photograph must have been fifteen years old, the colors fading to pale pastels the way old Kodak does with age and sunlight. It had the harsh bright sky of Manila above a dirt yard. Leon Garber was on the left, about fifty, dressed in creased olive fatigues. Reacher himself was on the right, twenty-four years old, a lieutenant, a foot taller than Garber, smiling with all the blazing vigor of youth. Between the two of them was Jodie, fifteen, in a sundress, one bare arm around her father's shoulders, the other around Reacher's waist. She was squinting in the sun, smiling, leaning toward Reacher like she was hugging his waist with all the strength in her skinny brown frame.
"Remember? He'd just bought the Nikon in the PX? With the self-timer? Borrowed a tripod and couldn't wait to try it out?"
Reacher nodded. He remembered. He remembered the smell of her hair that day, in the hot Pacific sun. Clean, young hair. He remembered the feel of her body against his. He remembered the feel of her long, thin arm around his waist. He remembered screaming at himself *hold on, pal, she's only fifteen and she's your*

CO's daughter.
"He called that his family picture," she said. "Always did."
He nodded again. "That's why. That's how it worked for us."
She gazed at the photograph for a long moment, something in her face.
"And there's the secretary," he said to her. "They'll have asked her who the client was. She'll have told them. And even if she didn't, they'll find out anyway. Took me thirty seconds and one phone call. So now they're going to come looking for you, to ask you who's behind all of this."
She looked blank and put the old photograph on the desk.
"But I don't know who."
"You think they're going to believe that?"
She nodded vaguely and glanced toward the window.
"OK, so what do I do?"
"You get out of here," he said. "That's for damn sure. Too lonely, too isolated. You got a place in the city?"
"Sure," she said. "A loft on lower Broadway."
"You got a car here?"
She nodded. "Sure, in the garage. But I was going to stay here tonight. I've got to find his will, do the paperwork, close things down. I was going to leave tomorrow morning, early."
"Do all that stuff now," he said. "As fast as you can, and get out. I mean it, Jodie. Whoever these people are, they're not playing games."
The look on his face told her more than words. She nodded quickly and stood up.
"OK, the desk. You can give me a hand."
From his high school ROTC until his ill-health demobilization Leon Garber had done almost fifty years of military service of one sort or another. It showed right there in his desk. The upper drawers contained pens and pencils and rulers, all in neat rows. The lower drawers were double height, with concertina files hanging on neat rods. Each was labeled in careful handwriting. Taxes, phone, electricity, heating oil, yardwork, appliance warranties. There was a label with newer handwriting in a different color: LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT. Jodie flicked through the files and ended up lifting the whole concertina out of each drawer. Reacher found a battered leather suitcase in the den closet and they loaded the concertinas straight into it. Forced the lid down tight and snapped it shut. Reacher picked up the old photograph from the desk and looked at it again.
"Did you resent it?" he asked. "The way he thought about me? Family?"
She paused in the doorway and nodded.
"I resented it like crazy," she said. "And one day I'll tell you exactly why."

He just looked at her and she turned and disappeared down the hallway.
“I’ll get my things,” she called. “Five minutes, OK?”
He stepped over to the bookshelf and tacked the old picture back in its original position. Then he snapped the light off and carried the suitcase out of the room. Stood in the quiet hallway and looked around. It was a pleasant house. It had been expanded in size at some stage in its history. That was clear. There was a central core of rooms that made some kind of sense in terms of layout, and then there were more rooms off the doglegged hallway he was standing in. They branched out from arbitrary little inner lobbies. Too small to be called a warren, too big to be predictable. He wandered through to the living room. The windows overlooked the yard and the river, with the West Point buildings visible at an angle from the fireplace end. The air was still and smelled of old polish. The decor was faded, and had been plain to start with. Neutral wood floors, cream walls, heavy furniture. An ancient TV, no video. Books, pictures, more photographs. Nothing matched. It was an undesigned place, evolved, comfortable. It had been lived in.
Garber must have bought it thirty years ago. Probably when Jodie’s mother got pregnant. It was a common move. Married officers with a family often bought a place, often near their first service base or near some other location they imagined was going to be central to their lives, like West Point. They bought the place and usually left it empty while they lived overseas. The point was to have an anchor, somewhere identifiable they knew they would come back to when it was all over. Or somewhere their families could live if the overseas posting was unsuitable, or if their children’s education demanded consistency.
Reacher’s parents had not taken that route. They had never bought a place. Reacher had never lived in a house. Grim service bungalows and army bunkhouses were where he had lived, and since then, cheap motels. And he was pretty sure he never wanted anything different. He was pretty sure he didn’t want to live in a house. The desire just passed him by. The necessary involvement intimidated him. It was a physical weight, exactly like the suitcase in his hand. The bills, the property taxes, the insurance, the warranties, the repairs, the maintenance, the decisions, new roof or new stove, carpeting or rugs, the budgets. The yard work. He stepped over and looked out of the window at the lawn. Yard work summed up the whole futile procedure. First you spend a lot of time and money making the grass grow, just so you can spend a lot of time and money cutting it down again a little while later. You curse about it getting too long, and then you worry about it staying too short and you sprinkle expensive water on it all summer, and expensive chemicals all fall.
Crazy. But if any house could change his mind, maybe Garber’s house might do

it. It was so casual, so undemanding. It looked like it had prospered on benign neglect. He could just about imagine living in it. And the view was powerful. The wide Hudson rolling by, reassuring and physical. That old river was going to keep on rolling by, whatever anybody did about the houses and the yards that dotted its banks.

"OK, I'm ready, I guess," Jodie called.

She appeared in the living room doorway. She was carrying a leather garment bag and she had changed out of her black funeral suit. Now she was in a pair of faded Levi's and a powder blue sweatshirt with a small logo Reacher couldn't decipher. She had brushed her hair, and the static had kicked a couple of strands outward. She was smoothing them back with her hand, hooking them behind her ear. The powder blue shirt picked up her eyes and emphasized the pale honey of her skin. The last fifteen years had done her no harm at all.

They walked through to the kitchen and bolted the door to the yard. Turned off all the appliances they could see and screwed the faucets tight shut. Came back out into the hallway and opened the front door.

5

REACHER WAS FIRST out through the door, for a number of reasons. Normally he might have let Jodie go out ahead of him, because his generation still carried with it the last vestiges of American good manners, but he had learned to be wary about displaying chivalry until he knew exactly how the woman he was with was going to react. And it was her house, not his, which altered the dynamic anyway, and she would need to use the key to lock the door behind them. So for all those reasons he was the first person to step out to the porch, and so he was the first person the two guys saw.

Waste the big guy and bring me Mrs. Jacob, Hobie had told them. The guy on the left went for a snapshot from a sitting position. He was tensed up and ready, so it took his brain a lot less than a second to process what his optic nerve was feeding it. He felt the front door open, he saw the screen swing out, he saw somebody stepping onto the porch, he saw it was the big guy coming first, and he fired.

The guy on the right was in a dumb position. The screen creaked open right in his face. In itself it was no kind of an obstacle, because tight nylon gauze designed to stop insects is not going to do a lot about stopping bullets, but he was a right-handed guy and the frame of the screen was moving on a direct collision course with his gun hand as it swung around into position. That made him hesitate fractionally and then scramble up and forward around the arc of the frame. He grabbed it backhanded with his left and pulled it into his body and folded himself around it with his right hand swinging up and into position.

By then Reacher was operating unconsciously and instinctively. He was nearly thirty-nine years old, and his memory stretched back through maybe thirty-five of those years to the dimmest early fragments of his childhood, and that memory was filled with absolutely nothing except military service, his father's, his friends' fathers', his own, his friends'. He had never known stability, he had never completed a year in the same school, he had never worked nine to five, Monday to Friday, he had never counted on anything at all except surprise and unpredictability. There was a portion of his brain developed way out of all proportion, like a grotesquely over-trained muscle, which made it seem to him entirely reasonable that he should step out of a door in a quiet New York suburban town and glance down at two men he had last seen two thousand miles away in the Keys crouching and swinging nine-millimeter pistols up in his direction. No shock, no surprise, no gasping freezing fear or panic. No pausing, no hesitation, no inhibitions. Just instant reaction to a purely mechanical

no hesitation, no inhibitions. Just instant reaction to a purely mechanical problem laid out in front of him like a geometric diagram involving time and space and angles and hard bullets and soft flesh.
The heavy suitcase was in his left hand, swinging forward as he labored with it over the threshold. He did two things at once. First he kept the swing going, using all the new strength in his left shoulder to kick the case onward and outward. Second he windmilled his right arm backward and shoved Jodie in the chest, smashing her back inside the hallway. She staggered back a step and the moving suitcase caught the first bullet. Reacher felt it kick in his hand. He jerked it right to the end of its swing, leaning out into the porch like a hesitant diver over a cold pool, and it hit the left-hand guy a glancing blow in the face. He was half up and half down, crouching, unstable, and the blow from the case rolled him over and backward and out of the picture.
But Reacher didn't see him go down, because his eyes were already on the other guy looping around the screen with his gun about fifteen degrees away from ready. Reacher used the momentum of the swinging suitcase to hurl himself forward. He let the handle pull out through his hooked fingertips and flip him into a dive with his right arm accelerating back past him straight out across the porch. The gun swung around and smacked him flat on his chest. He heard it fire and felt the muzzle blast sear his skin. The bullet launched sideways under his raised left arm and hit the distant garage about the same time his right elbow hit the guy in the face.
An elbow moving fast ahead of 250 pounds of diving body weight does a lot of damage. It glanced off the frame of the screen and caught the guy in the chin. The shock wave went back and up through the hinge of the jaw, which is a sturdy enough joint that the force was carried undiminished up into the guy's brain. Reacher could tell from the rubbery way he fell across his back that he was out for a spell. Then the screen door was creaking shut against its spring and the left-hand guy was scrabbling sideways across the porch floorboards for his gun, which was skittering away from him. Jodie was framed in the doorway, bent double, hands clasped to her chest, gasping for breath. The old suitcase was toppling end over end out onto the front lawn.
Jodie was the problem. He was separated from her by about eight feet, and the left-hand guy was between the two of them. If he grabbed the skittering gun and lined it up to his right, he would be lined up on her. Reacher heaved the unconscious guy out of the way and threw himself at the door. Batted the screen back and fell inside. Dragged Jodie a yard into the hallway and slammed the door shut. It kicked and banged three times as the guy fired after him and dust and wood splinters blasted out into the air. He clicked the lock and pulled Jodie across the floor to the kitchen.

“Can we get to the garage?”
“Through the breezeway,” she gasped.
It was June, so the storm windows were down and the breezeway was nothing but a wide passage with floor-to-ceiling screens on both sides. The left-hand guy was using an M9 Beretta, which would have started the day with fifteen rounds in the box. He’d fired four, one into the suitcase and three into the door. Eleven left, which was not a comforting thought when all that stood between you and them was a few square yards of nylon mesh.
“Car keys?”
She fumbled them out of her bag. He took them and closed them into his fist. The kitchen door had a glass panel with a view straight through the breezeway to an identical door exactly opposite, which led into the garage.
“Is that door locked?”
She nodded breathlessly. “The green one. Green for garage.”
He looked at the bunch of keys. There was an old Yale, dotted with a smear of green paint. He eased the kitchen door open and knelt and eased his head out, lower than would be expected. He craned around, both ways. No sign of the guy waiting outside. Then he selected the green key and held it pointed out in front of him like a tiny lance. Pushed to his feet and sprinted. Checked and slammed the key into the hole and turned it and yanked it back out. Pushed the door open and waved Jodie across after him. She fell into the garage and he slammed the door behind her. Locked it and listened. No sound.
The garage was a large, dark space, open rafters, open framing, smelling of old motor oil and creosote. It was full of garage things, mowers and hoses and lawn chairs, but they were all old things, the belongings of a man who stopped buying new gizmos twenty years ago. So the main doors were just manual rollers that ran upward in curving metal tracks. No mechanism. No electric opener. The floor was smooth poured concrete, aged and swept to a shine. Jodie’s car was a new Oldsmobile Bravada, dark green, gold accents. It was crouched there in the dark, nose-in to the back wall. Badges on the tailgate, boasting about four-wheel drive and a V-6 engine. The four-wheel drive would be useful, but how fast that V-6 started would be crucial.
“Get in the back,” he whispered. “Down on the floor, OK?”
She crawled in headfirst, and lay down across the transmission hump. He crossed the garage and found the key to the door out to the yard. Opened it up and peered out and listened. No movement, no sound. Then he came back to the car and slid the key in and switched on the ignition so he could rack the electric seat all the way back to the end of its runners.
“I’ll be there in a minute,” he whispered.

Garber's tool area was as tidy as his desk had been. There was an eight-by-four pegboard with a full set of household tools neatly arranged on it. Reacher selected a heavy carpenter's hammer and lifted it down. Stepped out of the door to the yard and threw the hammer overarm, diagonally right over the house, to send it crashing into the undergrowth he had seen at the front. He counted to five to give the guy time to hear it and react to it and run toward it from wherever he was currently hiding. Then he ducked back inside to the car. Stood alongside the open door and turned the key, arm's length. Fired it up. The engine started instantly. He dodged backward and flung the roller door up. It crashed along its metal track. He threw himself into the driver's seat and smashed the selector into reverse and stamped on the pedal. All four tires howled and then bit on the smooth concrete and the vehicle shot backward out of the garage. Reacher glimpsed the guy with the Beretta, way off to his left on the front lawn, spinning to look at them. He accelerated all the way up the driveway and lurched backward into the road. Braked fiercely and spun the wheel and found drive and took off in a haze of blue tire smoke.

He accelerated hard for fifty yards and then lifted off the gas. Coasted to a gentle stop just beyond the neighbor's driveway. Selected reverse again and idled backward into it and down into the plantings. Straightened up and killed the motor. Behind him, Jodie struggled up off the floor and stared.

"Hell are we doing *here?"* she said.

"Waiting."

"For what?"

"For them to get out of there."

She gasped, halfway between outrage and astonishment.

"We're not *waiting*, Reacher, we're going straight to the police with this."

He turned the key again to give him power to operate the window. Buzzed it all the way down, so he could listen to the sounds outside.

"I can't go to the police with this," he said, not looking at her.

"Why the hell can't you?"

"Because they'll start looking at me for Costello."

"You didn't kill Costello."

"You think they'll be ready and willing to believe that?"

"They'll have to believe it, because it wasn't you, simple as that."

"Could take them time to find somebody looks better for it."

She paused. "So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying it's all-around advantageous I stay away from the police."

She shook her head. He saw it in the mirror.

"No, Reacher, we *need* the police for this."

He kept his eyes on hers, in the mirror.
“Remember what Leon used to say? He used to say hell, I am the police.”
“Well, he was, and you were. But that was a long time ago.”
“Not so long ago, for either of us.”
She went quiet. Sat forward. Leaned toward him. “You don’t *want* to go to the police, right? That’s it, isn’t it? Not that you *can’t*, you just damn well don’t *want* to.”
He half turned in the driver’s seat so he could look straight at her. He saw her eyes drop to the burn on his shirt. There was a long teardrop shape there, a black sooty stain, gunpowder particles tattooed into the cotton. He undid the buttons and pulled the shirt open. Squinted down. The same teardrop shape was burned into his skin, the hairs frizzed and curled, a blister already puffing up, getting red and angry. He licked his thumb and pressed it on the blister and grimaced.
“They mess with me, they answer to me.”
She stared at him. “You’re totally unbelievable, you know that? You’re just as bad as my father was. We should go to the police, Reacher.”
“Can’t do it,” he said. “They’ll throw me in jail.”
“We should,” she said again.
But she said it weakly. He shook his head and said nothing back. Watched her closely. She was a lawyer, but she was also Leon’s daughter, and she knew how things worked outside in the real world. She was quiet for a long spell, and then she shrugged helplessly and put her hand on her breastbone, like it was tender.
“You OK?” he asked her.
“You hit me kind of hard,” she said.
I could rub it better, he thought.
“Who were those guys?” she asked.
“The two who killed Costello,” he said.
She nodded. Then she sighed. Her blue eyes glanced left and right.
“So where *are* we going?”
He relaxed. Then he smiled. “Where’s the last place they’ll look for us?”
She shrugged. Took her hand off her chest and used it to smooth her hair.
“Manhattan?” she said.
“The house,” he said. “They saw us run, they won’t expect us to double back.”
“You’re crazy, you know that?”
“We need the suitcase. Leon might have made notes.”
She shook her head, dazed.
“And we need to close the place up again. We can’t leave the garage open. It’ll end up full of raccoons. Whole families of the bastards.”
Then he held up his hand. Put his finger to his lips. There was the sound of a

motor starting up. Maybe a big V-8, maybe two hundred yards away. There was the rattle of big tires on a distant stony driveway. The burble of acceleration. Then a black shape flashed across their view. A big black jeep, aluminum wheels. A Yukon or a Tahoe, depending on whether it said GMC on the back, or Chevrolet. Two guys in it, dark suits, one of them driving and the other slumped back in his seat. Reacher stuck his head all the way out of the window and listened to the sound as it died to silence in the direction of town.

CHESTER STONE WAITED in his own office suite more than an hour, and then he called downstairs and had the finance director contact the bank and check on the operating account. It showed a one-point-one-million-dollar credit, wired in fifty minutes ago from the Cayman office of a Bahamas-owned trust company.

"It's there," the finance guy said. "You did the trick, chief."

Stone gripped the phone and wondered exactly what trick he had done.

"I'm coming down," he said. "I want to go over the figures."

"The figures are good," the finance guy said. "Don't worry about it."

"I'm coming down anyway," Stone said.

He rode the elevator two floors down and joined the finance guy in his plush inner office. Entered the password and called up the secret spreadsheet. Then the finance guy took over and typed in the new balance available in the operating account. The software ran the calculation and came up exactly level, six weeks into the future.

"See?" the guy said. "Bingo."

"What about the interest payment?" Stone asked.

"Eleven grand a week, six weeks? Kind of steep, isn't it?"

"Can we pay it?"

The guy nodded confidently. "Sure we can. We owe two suppliers seventy-three grand. We got it, ready to go. If we lose the invoices, get them to re-submit, we free that cash up for a spell."

He tapped the screen and indicated a provision against received invoices.

"Seventy-three grand, minus eleven a week for six weeks, gives us seven grand to spare. We should go out to dinner a couple of times."

"Run it again, OK?" Stone said. "Double-check."

The guy gave him a look, but he ran it again. He took out the one-point-one, ended up in the red, put it back in again, and ended up balanced. He canceled the provision against the invoices, subtracted eleven thousand every seven days, and ended the six-week period with an operating surplus of seven thousand dollars.

"Close," he said. "But the right side of close."

"How long can you keep the principal?" Stone asked. "It's not a question of millions

"How do we repay the principal?" Stone asked. "We need one-point-one million available at the end of the six weeks."
"No problem," the guy said. "I've got it all figured. We'll have it in time."
"Show me, OK?"
"OK, see here?" He was tapping the screen on a different line, where payments due in from customers were listed. "These two wholesalers owe us exactly one-point-one-seven-three, which exactly matches the principal plus the lost invoices, and it's due exactly six weeks from now."
"Will they pay on time?"
The guy shrugged. "Well, they always have."
Stone stared at the screen. His eyes moved up and down, left and right.
"Run it all again. Triple-check."
"Don't sweat it, chief. It adds up."
"Just do it, OK?"
The guy nodded. It was Stone's company, after all. He ran it again, the whole calculation, beginning to end, and it came out just the same. Hobie's one-point-one disappeared as the blizzard of paychecks cleared, the two suppliers went hungry, the interest got paid, the payments came in from the wholesalers, Hobie got his one-point-one back, the suppliers got paid late, and the sheet ended up showing the same trivial seven-thousand-dollar surplus in their favor.
"Don't sweat it," the guy said again. "It works out."
Stone was staring at the screen, wondering if that spare seven grand would buy Marilyn a trip to Europe. Probably not. Not a six-week trip, anyway. And it would alert her. It would worry her. She'd ask him why he was making her go. And he'd have to tell her. She was very smart. Smart enough to get it out of him, one way or another. And then she would refuse to go to Europe, and she would end up lying awake every night for six weeks, too.

THE SUITCASE WAS still there, lying on the front lawn. There was a bullet hole punched in one end. No exit hole. The bullet must have gone through the leather, through the sturdy plywood carcass, and burned to a stop against the packed paper inside. Reacher smiled and carried it back to join Jodie over at the garage.
They left the jeep on the blacktop apron and went in the same way they had come out. Closed up the roller door and walked through to the breezeway. Locked the inside door behind them with the green key and walked through to the kitchen. Locked that door behind them and stepped past Jodie's abandoned garment bag in the hallway. Reacher carried the suitcase into the living room. More space and more light there than in the den.
He opened the case and lifted the concertina files out onto the floor. The bullet

He opened the case and lifted the concertina files out onto the floor. The bullet fell out with them and bounced on the rug. It was a standard nine-millimeter Parabellum, full copper jacket. Slightly flattened on the nose from the impact with the old plywood, but otherwise unmarked. The paper had slowed it to a complete stop in the space of about eighteen inches. He could see the hole punched all the way through half the files. He weighed the bullet in his palm, and then he saw Jodie at the door, watching him. He tossed the bullet to her. She caught it, one-handed.
“Souvenir,” he said.
She juggled it like it was hot and dropped it in the fireplace. Joined him on the rug, kneeling hip to hip beside him in front of the mass of paper. He caught her perfume, something he did not recognize, but something subtle and intensely feminine. The sweatshirt was too big on her, large and shapeless, but somehow it emphasized her figure. The sleeves finished halfway down the backs of her hands, almost at her fingers. Her Levi’s were cinched in tight around her tiny waist with a belt, and her legs left them slightly empty. She looked fragile, but he could remember the strength in her arms. Thin, but wiry. She bent to look at the files, and her hair fell forward, and he caught the same soft smell he recalled from fifteen years previously.
“What are we looking for?” she asked.
He shrugged. “We’ll know when we find it, I guess.”
They looked hard, but they found nothing. There was nothing there. Nothing current, nothing significant. Just a mass of household paper, looking suddenly old and pathetic as it charted its way through a domestic life that was now over. The most recent item was the will, on its own in a separate slot, sealed into an envelope with neat writing on it. Neat, but slightly slow and shaky, the writing of a man just back from the hospital after his first heart attack. Jodie took it out to the hallway and slipped it into the pocket of her garment bag.
“Any unpaid bills?” she called.
There was a slot marked PENDING. It was empty.
“Can’t see any,” he called back. “There’ll be a few coming in, I guess, right? Do they come in monthly?”
She gave him a look from the doorway and smiled.
“Yes, they do,” she said. “Monthly, every month.”
There was a slot marked MEDICAL. It was overstuffed with receipted bills from the hospital and the clinic and sheaves of efficient correspondence from the insurance provider. Reacher leafed through it all.
“Christ, is that what this stuff costs?”
Jodie came back and bent to look.
“Sure it is,” she said. “Have you got insurance?”

"Sure it is," she said. "Have you got insurance?"
He looked at her, blankly.
"I think maybe the VA gives it to me, at least for a period."
"You should check it out," she said. "Make sure."
He shrugged. "I feel OK."
"So did Dad," she said. "For sixty-three and a half straight years."
She knelt beside him again, and he saw her eyes cloud over. He laid his hand on her arm, gently.
"Hell of a day, right?" he said.
She nodded and blinked. Then she came up with a small, wry smile.
"Unbelievable," she said. "I bury the old man, I get shot at by a couple of murderers, I break the law by failing to report so many felonies I can't even count them, and then I get talked into hooking up with some wild man aiming to run some kind of a vigilante deal. You know what Dad would have said to me?"
"What?"
She pursed her lips and lowered her voice into a close imitation of Garber's good-natured growl. "*All in a day's work, girl, all in a day's work.* That's what he would have said to me."
Reacher grinned back at her and squeezed her arm again. Then he leafed through the medical junk and picked out a letterhead.
"Let's go find this clinic," he said.

THERE WAS A lot of debate going on inside the Tahoe about whether they should go back at all. Failure was not a popular word in Hobie's vocabulary. It might be better just to take off and disappear. Just get the hell out. It was an attractive prospect. But they were pretty sure Hobie would find them. Maybe not soon, but he would find them. And that was not an attractive prospect.
So they turned their attention to damage limitation. It was clear what they had to do. They made the necessary stops and wasted a plausible amount of time in a diner just off the southbound side of Route 9. By the time they had battled the traffic back down to the southern tip of Manhattan, they had their whole story straight.
"It was a no-brainer," the first guy said. "We waited for hours, which is why we're so late back. Problem was there was a whole bunch of soldiers there, kind of ceremonial, but they had rifles all over the place."
"How many?" Hobie asked.
"Soldiers?" the second guy said. "At least a dozen. Maybe fifteen. They were all milling around, so it was hard to count them exactly. Some kind of honor guard."
"She left with them," the first guy said. "They must have escorted her down

"She left with them," the first guy said. "They must have escorted her down from the cemetery, and then she went back somewhere with them afterward."
"You didn't think to follow?"
"No way we could," the second guy said. '"They were driving slow, a long line of cars. Like a funeral procession? They'd have made us in a second. We couldn't just tag on the end of a funeral procession, right?"
"What about the big guy from the Keys?"
"He left real early. We just let him go. We were watching for Mrs. Jacob. It was pretty clear by then which one she was. She stayed around, then she left, all surrounded by this bunch of military."
"So what did you do then?"
"We checked the house," the first guy said. "Locked up tight. So we went into the town and checked the property title. Everything's listed in the public library. The place was registered to a guy called Leon Garber. We asked the librarian what she knew, and she just handed us the local newspaper. Page three, there was a story about the guy. Just died, heart trouble. Widower, only surviving relative is his daughter, Jodie, the former Mrs. Jacob, who is a young but very eminent financial attorney with Spencer Gutman Ricker and Talbot of Wall Street, and who lives on lower Broadway right here in New York City."
Hobie nodded slowly, and tapped the sharp end of his hook on the desk, with a jittery little rhythm.
"And who was this Leon Garber, exactly? Why all the soldiers at his wake?"
"Military policeman," the first guy said.
The second guy nodded. "Mustered out with three stars and more medals than you can count, served forty years, Korea, Vietnam, everywhere."
Hobie stopped tapping. He sat still and the color drained out of his face, leaving his skin dead white, all except for the shiny pink burn scars that glowed vivid in the gloom.
"Military policeman," he repeated quietly.
He sat for a long time with those words on his lips. He just sat and stared into space, and then he lifted his hook off the desk and rotated it in front of his eyes, slowly, examining it, allowing the thin beams of light from the blinds to catch its curves and contours. It was trembling, so he took it in his left hand and held it still.
"Military policeman," he said again, staring at the hook. Then he transferred his gaze to the two men on the sofas.
"Leave the room," he said to the second guy.
The guy glanced once at his partner and went out and closed the door softly behind him. Hobie pushed back in his chair and stood up. Came out from behind the desk and stepped over and stopped still, directly behind the first guy, who

just sat there on his sofa, not moving, not daring to turn around and look.
He wore a size sixteen collar, which made his neck a fraction over five inches in diameter, assuming a human neck is more or less a uniform cylinder, which was an approximation Hobie had always been happy to make. Hobie's hook was a simple steel curve, like a capital letter J, generously sized. The inside diameter of the curve was four and three-quarter inches. He moved fast, darting the hook out and forcing it over the guy's throat from behind. He stepped back and pulled with all his strength. The guy threw himself upward and backward, his fingers scrabbling under the cold metal to relieve the gagging pressure. Hobie smiled and pulled harder. The hook was riveted to a heavy leather cup and a matching shaped corset, the cup over the remains of his forearm, the corset buckled tight over his bicep above his elbow. The forearm assembly was just a stabilizer. It was the upper corset, smaller than the bulge of his elbow joint, that took all the strain and made it impossible for the hook to be separated from the stump. He pulled until the gagging turned to fractured wheezing and the redness in the guy's face began to turn blue. Then he eased off an inch and bent close to the guy's ear.
"He had a big bruise on his face. What the hell was that about?"
The guy was wheezing and gesturing wildly. Hobie twisted the hook, which relieved the pressure on the guy's voice box, but brought the tip up into the soft area under his ear.
"What the hell was that about?" he asked again.
The guy knew that with the hook at that angle any extra rearward pressure was going to put the tip right through his skin into that vulnerable triangle behind the jaw. He didn't know much about anatomy, but he knew he was a half inch away from dying.
"I'll tell you," he wheezed. "I'll tell you."
Hobie kept the hook in position, twisting it every time the guy hesitated, so the whole true story took no longer than three minutes, beginning to end.
"You failed me," Hobie said.
"Yes, we did," the guy gasped. "But it was his fault. He got all tangled up behind the screen door. He was useless."
Hobie jerked the hook.
"As opposed to what? Like he's useless and you're useful?"
"It was his fault," the guy gasped again. "I'm still useful."
"You're going to have to prove that to me."
"How?" the guy wheezed. "Please, how? Just tell me."
"Easy. You can do something for me."
"Yes," the guy gasped. "Yes, anything, please."

“Bring me Mrs. Jacob,” Hobie screamed at him.
“Yes,” the guy screamed back.
“And don’t screw up again,” Hobie screamed.
“No,” the guy gasped. “No, we won’t, I promise.”
Hobie jerked the hook again, twice, in time with his words.
“Not *we*. Just *you*. Because you can do something else for me.”
“What?” the guy wheezed. “Yes, what? Anything.”
“Get rid of your useless partner,” Hobie whispered. “Tonight, on the boat.”
The guy nodded as vigorously as the hook would allow his head to move. Hobie leaned forward and slipped the hook away. The guy collapsed sideways, gasping and retching into the fabric on the sofa.
“And bring me his right hand,” Hobie whispered. “To prove it.”

THEY FOUND THAT the clinic Leon had been attending was not really a place in its own right, but just an administrative unit within a giant private hospital facility serving the whole of lower Putnam County. There was a ten-story white building set in parkland, with medical practices of every description clustered around its base. Small roads snaked through tasteful landscaping and led to little cul-de-sacs ringed with low offices for the doctors and the dentists. Anything the professions couldn’t handle in the offices got transferred to rented beds inside the main building. Thus the cardiology clinic was a notional entity, made up of a changing population of doctors and patients depending on who was sick and how bad they were. Leon’s own correspondence showed he had been seen in several different physical locations, ranging from the ICU at the outset to the recovery ward, then to one of the outpatient offices, then back to the ICU for his final visit.
The name of the supervising cardiologist was the only constant feature throughout the paperwork, a Dr. McBannerman, who Reacher pictured in his mind as a kindly old guy, white hair, erudite, wise and sympathetic, maybe of ancient Scottish extraction, until Jodie told him she had met with her several times and she was a woman from Baltimore aged about thirty-five. He was driving Jodie’s jeep around the small, curving roads, while she was scanning left and right for the correct office. She recognized it at the end of a cul-de-sac, a low brick structure, white trim, somehow glowing with an antiseptic halo like medical buildings do. There were a half dozen cars parked outside, with one spare slot which Reacher backed into.
The receptionist was a heavy old busybody who welcomed Jodie with a measure of sympathy. She invited them to wait in McBannerman’s inner office, which earned them glares from the other patients in the waiting room. The inner office

was an inoffensive place, pale and sterile and silent, with a token examination table and a large colored cutaway diagram of the human heart on the wall behind the desk. Jodie was staring up at it like she was asking so which part *finally* failed? Reacher could feel his own heart, huge and muscular and thumping gently in his chest. He could feel the blood pumping and the pulses ticking in his wrists and his neck.

They waited like that for ten minutes, and then the inner door opened and Dr. McBannerman stepped in, a plain dark-haired woman in a white coat, a stethoscope around her neck like a badge of office, and concern in her face.

"Jodie," she said, "I'm terribly sorry about Leon."

It was 99 percent genuine, but there was a stray edge of worry there, too. *She's worried about a malpractice suit,* Reacher thought. The patient's daughter was a lawyer, and she was right there in her office straight from the funeral ceremony. Jodie caught it, too, and she nodded, a reassuring little gesture.

"I just came to say thank you. You were absolutely wonderful, every step of the way. He couldn't have had better care."

McBannerman relaxed. The one percent of worry washed away. She smiled and Jodie glanced up at the big diagram again.

"So which part finally failed?" she asked.

McBannerman followed her gaze and shrugged gently.

"Well, all of it, really, I'm afraid. It's a big complex muscle, it beats and it beats, thirty million times a year. If it lasts twenty-seven hundred million beats, which is ninety years, we call it old age. If it lasts only eighteen hundred million beats, sixty years, we call it premature heart disease. We call it America's biggest health problem, but really all we're saying is sooner or later, it just stops going."

She paused and looked directly at Reacher. For a second he thought she had spotted some symptom he was displaying. Then he realized she was waiting for an introduction.

"Jack Reacher," he said. "I was an old friend of Leon's."

She nodded slowly, like a puzzle had just been solved.

"The famous Major Reacher. He spoke about you, often."

She sat and looked at him, openly interested. She scanned his face, and then her eyes settled on his chest. He wasn't sure if that was because of her professional specialty, or if she was looking at the scorch mark from the muzzle blast.

"Did he speak about anything else?" Jodie asked. "I got the impression he was concerned about something."

McBannerman turned to her, puzzled, like she was thinking *well, all of my patients are concerned about something, like life and death.*

"What sort of thing?"

“I don’t really know,” Jodie said. “Maybe something one of the other patients might have involved him with?”
McBannerman shrugged and looked blank, like she was about to dismiss it, but then they saw her remember.
“Well, he did mention something. He told me he had a new task.”
“Did he say what it was?”
McBannerman shook her head.
“He mentioned no details. Initially, it seemed to bore him. He was reluctant about it, at first. Like somebody had landed him with something tedious. But then he got a lot more interested, later. It got to where it was overstimulating him. His EKGs were way up, and I wasn’t at all happy about it.”
“Was it connected to another patient?” Reacher asked her.
She shook her head again.
“I really don’t know. It’s possible, I guess. They spend a lot of time together, out there in reception. They talk to each other. They’re old people, often bored and lonely, I’m afraid.”
It sounded like a rebuke. Jodie blushed.
“When did he first mention it?” Reacher asked, quickly.
“March?” McBannerman said. “April? Soon after he became an outpatient, anyway. Not long before he went to Hawaii.”
Jodie stared at her, surprised. “He went to Hawaii? I didn’t know that.”
McBannerman nodded. “He missed an appointment and I asked him what had happened, and he said he’d been to Hawaii, just a couple of days.”
“Hawaii? Why would he go to Hawaii without telling me?”
“I don’t know why he went,” McBannerman said.
“Was he well enough to travel?” Reacher asked her.
She shook her head.
“No, and I think he knew it was silly. Maybe that’s why he didn’t mention it.”
“When did he become an outpatient?” Reacher asked.
“Beginning of March,” she said.
“And when did he go to Hawaii?”
“Middle of April, I think.”
“OK,” he said. “Can you give us a list of your other patients during that period? March and April? People he might have talked to?”
McBannerman was already shaking her head.
“No, I’m sorry, I really can’t do that. It’s a confidentiality issue.”
She appealed to Jodie with her eyes, doctor to lawyer, woman to woman, a you-know-how-it-is sort of a look. Jodie nodded, sympathetically.
“Maybe you could just ask your receptionist? You know, see if she saw Dad

talking with one of the others out there? That would just be conversational, third-party, no confidentiality issues involved. In my opinion, certainly."
McBannerman recognized an impasse when she saw one. She buzzed the intercom and asked the receptionist to step inside. The woman was asked the question, and she started nodding busily and answering before it was even finished.
"Yes, of course, Mr. Garber was always talking to that nice elderly couple, you know, the man with the dodgy valve? Upper right ventricle? Can't drive anymore so his wife brings him in every time? In that awful old car? Mr. Garber was doing something for them, I'm absolutely sure of it. They were always showing him old photographs and pieces of paper."
"The Hobies?" McBannerman asked her.
"That's right, they all got to be thick as thieves together, the three of them, Mr. Garber and old Mr. and Mrs. Hobie."

6

HOOK HOBIE WAS alone in his inner office, eighty-eight floors up, listening to the quiet background sounds of the giant building, thinking hard, changing his mind. He was not an inflexible guy. He prided himself on that. He admired the way he could change and adapt and listen and learn. He felt it gave him his edge, made him distinctive.

He had gone to Vietnam more or less completely unaware of his capabilities. More or less completely unaware of everything, because he had been very young. And not just very young, but also straight out of a background that was repressed and conducted in a quiet suburban vacuum that held no scope for anything much in the way of experience.

Vietnam changed him. It could have broken him. It broke plenty of other guys. All around him, there were guys going to pieces. Not just the kids like him, but the older guys, too, the long-service professionals who had been in the Army for years. Vietnam fell on people like a weight, and some of them cracked, and some of them didn't.

He didn't. He just looked around, and changed and adapted. Listened and learned. Killing was easy. He was a guy who had never seen anything dead before apart from roadkill, the chipmunks and the rabbits and the occasional stinking skunk on the leafy lanes near his home. First day in-country in 'Nam he saw eight American corpses. It was a foot patrol neatly triangulated by mortar fire. Eight men, twenty-nine pieces, some of them large. A defining moment. His buddies were going quiet and throwing up and groaning in sheer abject miserable disbelief. He was unmoved.

He started out as a trader. Everybody wanted something. Everybody was moaning about what they didn't have. It was absurdly easy. All it took was a little listening. Here was a guy who smoked but didn't drink. There was a guy who loved beer but didn't smoke. Take the cigarettes from the one guy and exchange them for the other guy's beer. Broker the deal. Keep a small percentage back for yourself. It was so easy and so obvious he couldn't believe they weren't doing it for themselves. He didn't take it seriously, because he was sure it couldn't last. It wasn't going to take long for them all to catch on, and cut him out as middle-man.

But they never caught on. It was his first lesson. He could do things other people couldn't. He could spot things they couldn't. So he listened harder. What else did they want? Lots of things. Girls, food, penicillin, records, duty at base camp, but not latrine duty. Boots, bug repellent, side arms plated with chromium, dried

but not latrine duty. Boots, bug repellent, side arms plated with chromium, dried ears from VC corpses for souvenirs. Marijuana, aspirin, heroin, clean needles, safe duty for the last hundred days of a tour. He listened and learned and searched and skimmed.

Then he made his big breakthrough. It was a conceptual leap he always looked back on with tremendous pride. It served as a pattern for the other giant strides he made later. It came as a response to a couple of problems he was facing. First problem was the sheer hard work everything was causing him. Finding specific physical things was sometimes tricky. Finding undiseased girls became very difficult, and finding virgins became impossible. Getting hold of a steady supply of drugs was risky. Other things were tedious. Fancy weapons, VC souvenirs, even decent boots all took time to obtain. Fresh new officers on rotation were screwing up his sweet-heart deals in the safe noncombat zones.

The second problem was competition. It was coming to his attention that he wasn't unique. Rare, but not unique. Other guys were getting in the game. A free market was developing. His deals were occasionally rejected. People walked away, claiming a better trade was available elsewhere. It shocked him.

Change and adapt. He thought it through. He spent an evening on his own, lying in his narrow cot in his hooch, thinking hard. He made the breakthrough. Why chase down specific physical things that were already hard to find, and could only get harder? Why trek on out to some medic and ask what he wanted in exchange for a boiled and stripped Charlie skull? Why then go out and barter for whatever damn thing it was and bring it back in and pick up the skull? Why deal in all that stuff? Why not just deal in the commonest and most freely available commodity in the whole of Vietnam?

American dollars. He became a moneylender. He smiled about it later, ruefully, when he was convalescing and had time to read. It was an absolutely classic progression. Primitive societies start out with barter, and then they progress to a cash economy. The American presence in Vietnam had started out as a primitive society. That was for damn sure. Primitive, improvised, disorganized, just crouching there on the muddy surface of that awful country. Then as time passed it became bigger, more settled, more mature. It grew up, and he was the first of his kind to grow up with it. The first, and for a very long time, the only. It was a source of huge pride to him. It proved he was better than the rest. Smarter, more imaginative, better able to change and adapt and prosper.

Cash money was the key to everything. Somebody wanted boots or heroin or a girl some lying gook swore was twelve and a virgin, he could go buy it with money borrowed from Hobie. He could gratify his desire today, and pay for it next week, plus a few percent in interest. Hobie could just sit there, like a fat lazy spider in the center of a web. No legwork. No hassle. He put a lot of thought

into it. Realized early the psychological power of numbers. Little numbers like nine sounded small and friendly. Nine percent was his favorite rate. It sounded like nothing at all. Nine, just a little squiggle on a piece of paper. A single figure. Less than ten. Really nothing at all. That's how the other grunts looked at it. But 9 percent a week was 468 percent a year. Somebody let the debt slip for a week, and compound interest kicked in. That 468 ramped up to 1,000 percent pretty damn quickly. But nobody looked at that. Nobody except Hobie. They all saw the number nine, single figure, small and friendly.

The first defaulter was a big guy, savage, ferocious, pretty much subnormal in the head. Hobie smiled. Forgave him his debt and wrote it off. Suggested that he might repay this generosity by getting alongside him and taking on the role of enforcer. There were no more defaulters after that. The exact method of deterrence was tricky to establish. A broken arm or leg just sent the guy way back behind the lines to the field hospital, where he was safe and surrounded by white nurses who would probably put out if he came up with some kind of heroic description about how he got the injury. A bad break might even get him invalided out of the service altogether and returned Stateside. No kind of deterrence in that. No kind of deterrence at all. So Hobie had his enforcer use punji spikes. They were a VC invention, a small sharp wooden spike like a meat skewer, coated with buffalo dung, which was poisonous. The VC concealed them in shallow holes, so GIs would step on them and get septic crippling wounds in the feet. Hobie's enforcer aimed to use them through the defaulter's testicles. The feeling amongst Hobie's clientele was the long-term medical consequences were not worth risking, even in exchange for escaping the debt and getting out of uniform.

By the time he got burned and lost his arm, Hobie was a seriously rich man. His next coup was to get the whole of his fortune home, undetected and complete. Not everybody could have done it. Not in the particular set of circumstances he found himself in. It was further proof of his greatness. As was his subsequent history. He arrived in New York after a circuitous journey, crippled and disfigured, and immediately felt at home. Manhattan was a jungle, no different from the jungles of Indochina. So there was no reason for him to start acting any different. No reason to change his line of business. And this time, he was starting out with a massive capital reserve. He wasn't starting out with nothing.

He loan-sharked for years. He built it up. He had the capital, and he had the image. The burn scars and the hook meant a lot, visually. He attracted a raft of helpers. He fed off whole identifiable waves and generations of immigrants and poor people. He fought off the Italians to stay in business. He paid off whole squads of cops and prosecutors to stay invisible.

Then he made his second great breakthrough. Similar to the first. It was a process of deep radical thought. A response to a problem. The problem was the sheer insane scale. He had millions on the street, but it was all nickel-and-dime. Thousands of separate deals, a hundred bucks here, a hundred fifty there, 9 or 10 percent a week, 500 or a 1,000 percent a year. Big paperwork, big hassles, running fast all the time just to keep up. Then he suddenly realized *less could be more.* It came to him in a flash. Five percent of some corporation's million bucks was worth more in a week than 500 percent of street-level shit. He got in a fever about it. He froze all new lending and turned the screws to get back everything he was owed. He bought suits and rented office space. Overnight, he became a corporate lender.

It was an act of pure genius. He had sniffed out that gray margin that lies just to the left of conventional commercial practice. He had found a huge constituency of borrowers who were just slipping off the edge of what the banks called acceptable. A huge constituency. A desperate constituency. Above all, a soft constituency. Soft targets. Civilized men in suits coming to him for a million bucks, posing much less of a risk than somebody in a dirty undershirt wanting a hundred in a filthy tenement block with a rabid dog behind the door. Soft targets, easy to intimidate. Unaccustomed to the harsh realities of life. He let his enforcers go, and sat back and watched as his clientele shrank down to a handful, his average loan increased a millionfold, his interest rates dropped back into the stratosphere, and his profits grew bigger than he could ever imagine. *Less is more.*

It was a wonderful new business to be in. There were occasional problems, of course. But they were manageable. He changed his deterrence tactic. These civilized new borrowers were vulnerable through their families. Wives, daughters, sons. Usually, the threat was enough. Occasionally, action had to be taken. Often, it was fun. Soft suburban wives and daughters could be amusing. An added bonus. A wonderful business. Achieved through a constant willingness to change and adapt. Deep down, he knew his talent for flexibility was his greatest strength. He had promised himself never ever to forget that fact. Which was why he was alone in his inner office, up there on the eighty-eighth floor, listening to the quiet background sounds of the giant building, thinking hard, and changing his mind.

FIFTY MILES AWAY to the north, in Pound Ridge, Marilyn Stone was changing her mind, too. She was a smart woman. She knew Chester was in financial trouble. It couldn't be anything else. He wasn't having an affair. She knew that. There are signs husbands give out when they're having affairs, and Chester wasn't giving them out. There was nothing else he could be worried

about. So it was financial trouble.
Her original intention had been to wait. Just to sit tight and wait until the day he finally needed to get it off his chest and told her all about it. She had planned to wait for that day and then step in. She could manage the situation from there on in, however far it went exactly, debt, insolvency, even bankruptcy. Women were good at managing situations. Better than men. She could take the practical steps, she could offer whatever consolation was needed, she could pick her way through the ruins without the ego-driven hopelessness Chester was going to be feeling.
But now she was changing her mind. She couldn't wait any longer. Chester was killing himself with worry. So she was going to have to go ahead and do something about it. No use talking to him. His instinct was to conceal problems. He didn't want to upset her. He would deny everything and the situation would keep on getting worse. So she had to go ahead and act alone. For his sake, as well as hers.
The obvious first step was to place the house with a realtor. Whatever the exact degree of trouble they were in, selling the house might be necessary. Whether it would be enough, she had no way of telling. It might solve the problem on its own, or it might not. But it was the obvious place to start.
A rich woman living in Pound Ridge like Marilyn has many contacts in the real estate business. One step down the status ladder, where the women are comfortable without being rich, a lot of them work for realtors. They keep it part-time and try to make it look like a hobby, like it was more connected with an enthusiasm for interior decoration than mere commerce. Marilyn could immediately list four good friends she could call. Her hand was resting on the phone as she tried to choose between them. In the end, she chose a woman called Sheryl, who she knew the least well of the four, but who she suspected was the most capable. She was taking this seriously, and her realtor needed to, as well. She dialed the number.
"Marilyn," Sheryl answered. "How nice to talk to you. Can I help?"
Marilyn took a deep breath.
"We might be selling the house," she said.
"And you've come to me? Marilyn, thank you. But why on earth are you guys thinking of selling? It's so lovely where you are. Are you moving out of state?"
Marilyn took another deep breath. "I think Chester's going broke. I don't really want to talk about it, but I figure we need to start making contingency plans."
There was no pause. No hesitation, no embarrassment.
"I think you're very wise," Sheryl said. "Most people hang on way too long, then they have to sell in a hurry, and they lose out."

“Most people? This happens a lot?”
“Are you kidding? We see this all the time. Better to face it early and pick up the true value. You’re doing the right thing, believe me. But then women usually do, Marilyn, because we can handle this stuff better than men, can’t we?”
Marilyn breathed out and smiled into the phone. Felt like she was doing exactly the right thing, and like this was exactly the right person to be doing it with.
“I’ll list it right away,” Sheryl said. “I suggest an asking price a dollar short of two million, and a target of one-point-nine. That’s achievable, and it should spark something pretty quickly.”
“How quickly?”
“Today’s market?” Sheryl said. “With your location? Six weeks? Yes, I think we can pretty much guarantee an offer inside six weeks.”

DR. MCBANNERMAN WAS still pretty uptight about confidentiality issues, so although she gave up old Mr. and Mrs. Hobie’s address, she wouldn’t accompany it with a phone number. Jodie saw no legal logic in that, but it seemed to keep the doctor happy, so she didn’t bother arguing about it. She just shook hands and hustled back through the waiting area and outside to the car, with Reacher following behind her.
“Bizarre,” she said to him. “Did you see those people? In reception?”
“Exactly,” Reacher replied. “Old people, half-dead.”
“That’s what Dad looked like, toward the end. Just like that, I’m afraid. And I guess this old Mr. Hobie won’t look any different. So what were they up to together that people are getting killed over it?”
They got into the Bravada together and she leaned over from the passenger seat and unhooked her car phone. Reacher started the motor to run the air. She dialed information. The Hobies lived north of Garrison, up past Brighton, the next town on the railroad. She wrote their number in pencil on a scrap of paper from her pocketbook and then dialed it immediately. It rang for a long time, and then a woman’s voice answered.
“Yes?” the voice said, hesitantly.
“Mrs. Hobie?” Jodie asked.
“Yes?” the voice said again, wavering. Jodie pictured her, an old, infirm woman, gray, thin, probably wearing a flowery housecoat, gripping an ancient receiver in an old dark house smelling of stale food and furniture wax.
“Mrs. Hobie, I’m Jodie Garber, Leon Garber’s daughter.”
“Yes?” the woman said again.
“He died, I’m afraid, five days ago.”
“Yes, I know,” the old woman said. She sounded sad about it. “Dr.

McBannerman´s receptionist told us at yesterday´s appointment. I was very sorry to hear about it. He was a good man. He was very nice to us. He was helping us. And he told us about you. You're a lawyer. I'm very sorry for your loss."
"Thank you," Jodie said. "But can you tell me about whatever it was he was helping you with?"
"Well, it doesn't matter now, does it?"
"Doesn't it? Why not?"
"Well, because your father died," the woman said. "You see, I'm afraid he was really our last hope."
The way she said it, it sounded like she meant it. Her voice was low. There was a resigned fall at the end of the sentence, a sort of tragic cadence, like she'd given up on something long cherished and anticipated. Jodie pictured her, a bony hand holding the phone up to her face. a wet tear on a thin pale cheek.
"Maybe he wasn't," she said. "Maybe I could help you."
There was a silence on the line. Just a faint hiss.
"Well, I don't think so," the woman said. "I'm not sure it's the kind of thing a lawyer would normally deal with, you see."
"What kind of thing is it?"
"I don't think it matters now," the woman said again.
"Can't you give me some idea?"
"No, I think it's all over now," the woman said, like her old heart was breaking.
Then there was silence again. Jodie glanced out through the windshield at McBannerman's office. "But how was my father able to help you? Was it something he especially knew about? Was it because he was in the Army? Is that what it was? Something connected with the Army?"
"Well, yes, it was. That's why I'm afraid you wouldn't be able to help us, as a lawyer. We've tried lawyers, you see. We need somebody connected with the Army, I think. But thank you very much for offering. It was very generous of you."
"There's somebody else here," Jodie said. "He's with me, right now. He used to work with my father, in the Army. He'd be willing to help you out, if he can."
There was silence on the line again. Just the same faint hiss, and breathing. Like the old woman was thinking. Like she needed time to adjust to some new considerations.
"His name is Major Reacher," Jodie said into the silence. "Maybe my father mentioned him? They served together for a long time. My father sent for him, when he realized he wouldn't be able to carry on any longer."
"He sent for him?" the woman repeated.
"Yes, I think he thought he would be able to come and take over for him, you

“Yes, I think he thought he would be able to come and take over for him, you know, keep on with helping you out.”
“Was this new person in the military police, too?”
“Yes, he was. Is that important?”
“I’m really not sure,” the woman said.
She went quiet again. She was breathing close to the phone.
“Can he come here to our house?” she asked suddenly.
“We’ll both come,” Jodie said. “Would you like us to come right away?”
There was silence again. Breathing, thinking.
“My husband’s just had his medication,” the woman said. “He’s sleeping now. He’s very sick, you know.”
Jodie nodded in the car. Opened and closed her spare hand in frustration.
“Mrs. Hobie, can’t you tell us what this is about?”
Silence. Breathing, thinking.
“I should let my husband tell you. I think he can explain it better than me. It’s a long story, and I sometimes get confused.”
“OK, when will he wake up?” Jodie asked. “Should we come by a little later?”
There was another pause.
“He usually sleeps right through, after his medication,” the old woman said. “It’s a blessing, really, I think. Can your father’s friend come first thing in the morning?”

HOBIE USED THE tip of his hook to press the intercom buzzer on his desk. Leaned forward and called through to his receptionist. He used the guy’s name, which was an unusual intimacy for Hobie, generally caused by stress.
“Tony?” he said. “We need to talk.”
Tony came in from his brass-and-oak reception counter in the lobby and threaded his way around the coffee table to the sofa.
“It was Garber who went to Hawaii,” he said.
“You sure?” Hobie asked him.
Tony nodded. “On American, White Plains to Chicago, Chicago to Honolulu, April fifteenth. Returned the next day, April sixteenth, same route. Paid by Amex. It’s all in their computer.”
“But what did he do there?” Hobie said, more or less to himself.
“We don’t know,” Tony muttered. “But we can guess, can’t we?”
There was an ominous silence in the office. Tony watched the unburned side of Hobie’s face, waiting for a response.
“I heard from Hanoi,” Hobie said, into the silence.
“Christ, when?”
“Ten minutes ago.”

Ten minutes ago.
“Jesus, Hanoi?” Tony said. “Shit, shit, shit.”
“Thirty years,” Hobie said. “And now it’s happened.”
Tony stood up and walked around behind the desk. Used his fingers to push two slats of the window blind apart. A bar of afternoon sunlight fell across the room.
“So you should get out now. Now it’s way, way too dangerous.”
Hobie said nothing. He clasped his hook in the fingers of his left hand.
“You promised,” Tony said urgently. “Step one, step two. And they’ve happened. Both steps have happened now, for God’s sake.”
“It’ll still take them some time,” Hobie said. “Won’t it? Right now, they still don’t know anything.”
Tony shook his head. “Garber was no fool. He knew something. If he went to Hawaii, there was a good reason for it.”
Hobie used the muscle in his left arm to guide the hook up to his face. He ran the smooth, cold steel over the scar tissue there. Time to time, pressure from the hard curve could relieve the itching.
“What about this Reacher guy?” he asked. “Any progress on that?”
Tony squinted out through the gap in the blind, eighty-eight floors up.
“I called St. Louis,” he said. “He was a military policeman, too, served with Garber the best part of thirteen years. They’d had another inquiry on the same subject, ten days ago. I’m guessing that was Costello.”
“So why?” Hobie asked. “The Garber family pays Costello to chase down some old Army buddy? Why? What the hell for?”
“No idea,” Tony said. “The guy’s a drifter. He was digging swimming pools down where Costello was.”
Hobie nodded, vaguely. He was thinking hard.
“A military cop,” he said to himself. “Who’s now a drifter.”
“You should get out,” Tony said again.
“I don’t like the military police,” Hobie said.
“I know you don’t.”
“So what’s the interfering bastard doing here?”
“You should get out,” Tony said for the third time.
Hobie nodded.
“I’m a flexible guy,” he said. “You know that.”
Tony let the blind fall back into place. The room went dark. “I’m not asking you to be flexible. I’m asking you to stick to what you planned all along.”
“I changed the plan. I want the Stone score.”
Tony came back around the desk and took his place on the sofa. “Too risky to stick around for it. Both calls are in now. Vietnam and Hawaii, for Christ’s sake.”

sake.
“I know that,” Hobie said. “So I changed the plan again.”
“Back to what it was?”
Hobie shrugged and shook his head. “A combination. We get out, for sure, but only after I nail Stone.”
Tony sighed and laid his hands palm-up on the upholstery. “Six weeks is way, way too long. Garber already went to Hawaii, for Christ’s sake. He was some kind of a hotshot general. And obviously he knew stuff, or why would he go out there?”
Hobie was nodding. His head was moving in and out of a thin shaft of light that picked up the crude gray tufts of his hair. “He knew stuff, I accept that. But he took sick and died. The stuff he knew died with him. Otherwise why would his daughter resort to some half-assed private dick and some unemployed drifter?”
“So what are you saying?”
Hobie slipped his hook below the level of the desktop and cupped his chin with his good hand. He let the fingers spread upward, over the scars. It was a pose he used subconsciously, when he was aiming to look accommodating and unthreatening.
“I can’t give up on the Stone score,” he said. “You can see that, right? It’s just sitting there, begging to be eaten up. I give up on that, I couldn’t live with myself the whole rest of my life. It would be cowardice. Running is smart, I agree with you, but running too early, earlier than you really need to, that’s cowardice. And I’m not a coward, Tony, you know that, right?”
“So what are you saying?” Tony asked again.
“We do both things together, but accelerated. Because I agree with you, six weeks is way too long. We need to get out before six weeks. But we aren’t going without the Stone score, so we speed things up.”
“OK, how?”
“I put the stock in the market today,” Hobie said. “It’ll hit the floor ninety minutes before the closing bell. That should be long enough to get the message through to the banks. Tomorrow morning, Stone will be coming here all steamed up. I won’t be here tomorrow, so you’ll tell him what we want, and what we’ll do if we don’t get it. We’ll have the whole nine yards within a couple of days, tops. I’ll presell the Long Island assets so we don’t hit any delay out there. Meanwhile, you’ll close things down here.”
“OK, how?” Tony asked again.
Hobie looked around the dim office, all four corners.
“We’ll just walk away from this place. Wastes six months of lease, but what the hell. Those two assholes playing at being my enforcers will be no problem. One of them is wasting the other tonight, and you’ll work with him until he gets hold

of this Mrs. Jacob for me, whereupon you'll waste her and him together. Sell the boat, sell the vehicles, and we're out of here, no loose ends. Call it a week. Just a week. I think we can give ourselves a week, right?"
Tony nodded. Leaned forward, relieved at the prospect of action.
"What about this Reacher guy? He's still a loose end."
Hobie shrugged in his chair. "I've got a separate plan for him."
"We won't find him," Tony said. "Not just the two of us. Not within a week. We don't have the time to go out searching around for him."
"We don't need to."
Tony stared at him. "We do, boss. He's a loose end, right?"
Hobie shook his head. Then he dropped his hand away from his face and came out from under the desktop with his hook. "I'll do this the efficient way. No reason to waste my energy finding him. I'll let him find me. And he will. I know what military cops are like."
"And then what?"
Hobie smiled.
"Then he leads a long and happy life," he said. "Thirty more years at least."

"SO WHAT NOW?" Reacher asked.
They were still in the lot outside McBannerman's long, low office, engine idling, air roaring to combat, the sun beating down on the Bravada's dark green paint. The vents were angled all over the place, and he was catching Jodie's subtle perfume mixed in with the freon blast. Right at that moment, he was a happy guy, living an old fantasy. Many times in the past he'd speculated about how it would feel to be within touching distance of her when she was all grown up. It was something he had never expected to experience. He had assumed he would lose track of her and never see her again. He had assumed his feelings would just die away, over time. But there he was, sitting right next to her, breathing in her fragrance, taking sideways glances at her long legs sprawling down into the foot well. He had always assumed she would grow up pretty spectacular. Now he was feeling a little guilty for underestimating how beautiful she would become. His fantasies had not done her justice.
"It's a problem," she said. "I can't go up there tomorrow. I can't take more time out. We're very busy right now, and I've got to keep on billing the hours."
Fifteen years. Was that a long time or a short time? Does it change a person? It felt like a short time to him. He didn't feel radically different from the person he had been fifteen years before. He was the same person, thinking the same way, capable of the same things. He had acquired a thick gloss of experience during those years, he was older, more burnished, but he was the same person. He felt

she had to be different. Had to be, surely. Her fifteen years had been a greater leap, through bigger transitions. High school, college, law school, marriage, divorce, the partnership track, hours to bill. So now he felt he was in uncharted waters, unsure of how to relate to her, because he was dealing with three separate things, all competing in his head: the reality of her as kid, fifteen years ago, and then the way he had imagined she would turn out, and then the way she really had turned out. He knew all about two of those things, but not the third. He knew the kid. He knew the adult he'd invented inside his head. But he didn't know the reality, and it was making him unsure, because suddenly he wanted to avoid making any stupid mistakes with her.
"You'll have to go by yourself," she said. "Is that OK?"
"Sure," he said. "But that's not the issue here. You need to take care."
She nodded. Pulled her hands up inside her sleeves, and hugged herself. He didn't know why.
"I'll be OK, I guess," she said.
"Where's your office?"
"Wall Street and lower Broadway."
"That's where you live, right? Lower Broadway?"
She nodded. "Thirteen blocks. I usually walk."
"Not tomorrow," he said. "I'll drive you."
She looked surprised. "You will?"
"Damn right I will," he said. "Thirteen blocks on foot? Forget about it, Jodie. You'll be safe enough at home, but they could grab you on the street. What about your office? Is it secure?"
She nodded again. "Nobody gets in, not without an appointment and ID."
"OK," he said. "So I'll be in your apartment all night, and I'll drive you door-to-door in the morning. Then I'll come back up here and see these Hobie people, and you can stay right there in the office until I come get you out again, OK?"
She was silent. He tracked back and reviewed what he'd said.
"I mean, you got a spare room, right?"
"Sure," she said. "There's a spare room."
"So is that OK?"
She nodded, quietly.
"So what now?" he asked her. She turned sideways on her seat. The blast of air from the center vents caught her hair and blew it over her face. She smoothed it back behind her ear and her eyes flicked him up and down. Then she smiled.
"We should go shopping," she said.
"Shopping? What for? What do you need?"
"Not what I need," she said. "What you need."

He looked at her, worried. “What do I need?”
“Clothes,” she said. “You can’t go visiting with those old folks looking like a cross between a beach bum and the wild man of Borneo, can you?”
Then she leaned sideways and touched the mark on his shirt with her fingertip. “And we should find a pharmacy. You need something to put on that burn.”

“WHAT THE HELL are you doing?” the finance director screamed.
He was in Chester Stone’s office doorway, two floors above his own, gripping the frame with both hands, panting with exertion and fury. He hadn’t waited for the elevator. He had raced up the fire stairs. Stone was staring at him, blankly.
“You idiot,” he screamed. “I told you not to do this.”
“Do what?” Stone said back.
“Put stock in the market,” the finance guy yelled. “I told you not to do that.”
“I didn’t,” Stone said. “There’s no stock in the market.”
“There damn well is,” the guy said. “A great big slice, sitting there doing absolutely nothing at all. You got people shying away from it like it’s radioactive or something.”
“What?”
The finance guy breathed in. Stared at his employer. Saw a small, crumpled man in a ridiculous British suit sitting at a desk that alone was now worth a hundred times the corporation’s entire net assets.
“You asshole, I told you not to do this. Why not just take a page in *The Wall Street Journal* and say, ‘Hey people, my company’s worth exactly less than jack shit’?”
“What are you talking about?” Stone asked.
“I’ve got the banks on the phone,” the guy said. “They’re watching the ticker. Stone stock popped up an hour ago, and the price is unwinding faster than the damn computers can track it. It’s unsalable. You’ve sent them a message, for God’s sake. You’ve told them you’re insolvent. You’ve told them you owe them sixteen million dollars against security that isn’t worth sixteen damn cents.”
“I didn’t put stock in the market,” Stone said again.
The finance guy nodded sarcastically.
“So who the hell did? The tooth fairy?”
“Hobie,” Stone said. “Has to be. Jesus, why?”
“Hobie?” the guy repeated.
Stone nodded.
“Hobie?” the guy said again, incredulous. “Shit, you gave him stock?”
“I had to,” Stone said. “No other way.”
“Shit,” the guy said again, panting. “You see what he’s doing here?”

Stone looked blank, and then he nodded, scared. “What can we do?”
The finance director dropped his hands off the doorframe and turned his back. “Forget *we*. There’s no we here anymore. I’m resigning. I’m out of here. You can fix it yourself.”
“But you recommended the guy,” Stone yelled.
“I didn’t recommend giving him stock, you asshole,” the guy yelled back. “What are you? A moron? If I recommended you visit the aquarium to see the piranha fish, would you stick your damn finger in the tank?”
“You’ve got to help me,” Stone said.
The guy just shook his head. “You’re on your own. I’m resigning. Right now my recommendation is you go down to what was my office and get started. There’s a line of phones on what was my desk, all ringing. My recommendation is you start with whichever one is ringing the loudest.”
“Wait up,” Stone yelled. “I need your help here.”
“Against Hobie?” the guy yelled back. “Dream on, pal.”
Then he was gone. He just turned and strode out through the secretarial pen and disappeared. Stone came out from behind his desk and stood in the doorway and watched him go. The suite was silent. His secretary had left. Earlier than she should have. He walked out into the corridor. The sales department on the right was deserted. The marketing suite on the left was empty. The photocopiers were silent. He called the elevator and the mechanism sounded very loud in the hush. He rode down two floors, alone. The finance director’s suite was empty. Drawers were standing open. Personal belongings had been taken away. He wandered through to the inner office. The Italian desk light was glowing. The computer was turned off. The phones were off their hooks, lying on the rosewood desktop. He picked one of them up.
“Hello?” he said into it. “This is Chester Stone.”
He repeated it twice into the electronic silence. Then a woman came on and asked him to hold. There were clicks and buzzes. A moment of soothing music.
“Mr. Stone?” a new voice said. “This is the Insolvency Unit.”
Stone closed his eyes and gripped the phone.
“Please hold for the director,” the voice said.
There was more music. Fierce baroque violins, scraping away, relentlessly.
“Mr. Stone?” a deep voice said. “This is the director.”
“Hello,” Stone said. It was all he could think of to say.
“We’re taking steps,” the voice said. “I’m sure you understand our position.”
“OK,” Stone said. He was thinking what steps? Lawsuits? Prison?
“We should be out of the woods, start of business tomorrow,” the voice said.
“Out of the woods? How?”
“We’re calling the debt and suing you.”

"We're selling the debt, obviously."
"Selling it?" Stone repeated. "I don't understand."
"We don't want it anymore," the voice said. "I'm sure you can understand that. It's moved itself way outside of the parameters that we feel happy with. So we're selling it. That's what people do, right? They got something they don't want anymore, they sell it, best price they can get."
"Who are you selling it to?" Stone asked, dazed.
"A trust company in the Caymans. They made an offer."
"So where does that leave us?"
"Us?" the voice repeated, puzzled. "It leaves us nowhere. Your obligation to us is terminated. There is no *us.* Our relationship is over. My only advice is that you never try to resurrect it. We would tend to regard that as insult added to injury."
"So who do I owe now?"
"The trust company in the Caymans," the voice said patiently. "I'm sure whoever's behind it will be contacting you very soon, with their repayment proposals."

JODIE DROVE. REACHER got out and walked around the hood and got back in on the passenger side. She slid over the center console and buzzed the seat forward. Cruised south through the sunny Croton reservoirs, down toward the city of White Plains. Reacher was twisting around, scanning behind them. No pursuers. Nothing suspicious. Just a perfect lazy June afternoon in the suburbs. He had to touch the blister through his shirt to remind himself that anything had happened at all.
She headed for a big mall. It was a serious building the size of a stadium, crowding proudly against office towers its own height, standing inside a knot of busy roads. She drifted left and right across the traffic lanes and followed a curved ramp underground to the parking garage. It was dark down there, dusty oil-stained concrete, but there was a brass-and-glass doorway in the distance, leading directly into a store and blazing with white light like a promise. Jodie found a slot fifty yards from it. She eased in and went away to do something with a machine. Came back and laid a small ticket on the dash, where it could be read through the windshield.
"OK," she said. "Where to first?"
Reacher shrugged. This was not his area of expertise. He had bought plenty of clothes in the last two years, because he had developed a habit of buying new stuff instead of washing the old stuff. It was a defensive habit. It defended him against carrying any kind of a big valise, and it defended him against having to learn the exact techniques of laundering. He knew about laundromats and dry cleaners, but he was vaguely worried about being alone in a laundromat and

cleaners, but he was vaguely worried about being alone in a laundromat and finding himself unsure of the correct procedures. And giving stuff to a dry cleaner implied a commitment to be back in the same physical location at some future time, which was a commitment he was reluctant to make. The most straightforward practice was to buy new and junk the old. So he had bought clothes, but exactly where he had bought them was hard for him to pin down. Generally he just saw clothes in a store window, went in and bought them, and came out again without really being sure of the identity of the establishment he had visited.

"There was a place I went in Chicago," he said. "I think it was a chain store, short little name. Hole? Gap? Something like that. They had the right sizes."

Jodie laughed. Linked her arm through his.

"The Gap," she said. "There's one right in here."

The brass-and-glass doorway led straight into a department store. The air was cold and stank of soap and perfume. They passed through the cosmetics into an area with tables piled high with summer clothes in pastel cottons. Then out into the main thoroughfare of the mall. It was oval like a racetrack, ringed with small stores, the whole arrangement repeated on two more levels above them. The walks were carpeted and music was playing and people were swarming everywhere.

"I think the Gap's upstairs," Jodie said.

Reacher smelled coffee. One of the units opposite was done out as a coffee bar, like a street place in Italy. The inside walls were painted like outside walls, and the ceiling was flat black, so it would disappear like the sky. An inside place looking like an outside place, in an inside mall that was trying to look like an outside shopping street, except it had carpets.

"You want to get coffee?" he asked.

Jodie smiled and shook her head. "First we shop, then we get coffee."

She led him toward an escalator. He smiled. He knew how she was feeling. He had felt the same, fifteen years before. She had come with him, nervous and tentative, on a routine visit to the glass house in Manila. Familiar territory to him, just routine, really nothing at all. But new and strange to her. He had felt busy and happy, and somehow educational. It had been fun being with her, showing her around. Now she was feeling the same thing. All this mall stuff was nothing to her. She had come home to America a long time ago and learned its details. Now he was the stranger in her territory.

"What about this place?" she called to him.

It wasn't the Gap. It was some one-off store, heavily designed with weathered shingles and timbers rescued from some old barn. The clothes were made from heavy cottons and dyed in subdued colors, and they were artfully displayed in

heavy cottons and dyed in subdued colors, and they were artfully displayed in the beds of old farm carts with iron-banded wheels.
He shrugged. “Looks OK to me.”
She took his hand. Her palm felt cool and slim against his. She led him inside and put her hair behind her ears and bent and started looking through the displays. She did it the way he’d seen other women do it. She used little flicks of her wrist to put together assemblages of different items. A pair of pants, still folded, laid over the bottom half of a shirt. A jacket laid sideways over both of them, with the shirt peeping out at the top, and the pants showing at the bottom. Half-closed eyes, pursed lips. A shake of the head. A different shirt. A nod. Real shopping.
“What do you think?” she asked.
She had put together a pair of pants, khaki, but a little darker than most chinos. A shirt in a quiet check, greens and browns. A thin jacket in dark brown which seemed to match the rest pretty well. He nodded.
“Looks OK to me,” he said again.
The prices were handwritten on small tickets attached to the garments with string. He flicked one over with his fingernail.
“Christ,” he said. “Forget about it.”
“It’s worth it,” she said. “Quality’s good.”
“I can’t afford it, Jodie.”
The shirt on its own was twice what he had ever paid for a whole outfit. To dress in that stuff was going to cost him what he had earned in a day, digging pools. Ten hours, four tons of sand and rock and earth.
“I’ll buy them for you.”
He stood there with the shirt in his hands, uncertain.
“Remember the necklace?” she asked.
He nodded. He remembered. She had developed a passion for a particular necklace in a Manila jeweler’s. It was a plain gold thing, like a rope, vaguely Egyptian. Not really expensive, but out of her league. Leon was into some self-discipline thing with her and wouldn’t spring for it. So Reacher had bought it for her. Not for her birthday or anything, just because he liked her and she liked it.
“I was so happy,” she said. “I thought I was going to burst. I’ve still got it, I still wear it. So let me pay you back, OK?”
He thought about it. Nodded.
“OK,” he said.
She could afford it. She was a lawyer. Probably made a fortune. And it was a fair trade, looking at it in proportion, cost-versus-income, fifteen years of inflation.
“OK,” he said again. “Thanks, Jodie.”
“You need socks and things, right?”

“You need socks and things, right?”
They picked out a pair of khaki socks and a pair of white boxers. She went to a till and used a gold card. He took the stuff into a changing cubicle and tore off the price tickets and put everything on. He transferred his cash from his pants pocket and left the old clothes in the trash can. The new stuff felt stiff, but it looked pretty good in the mirror, against his tan. He came back out.
“Nice,” Jodie said. “Pharmacy next.”
“Then coffee,” he said.
He bought a razor and a can of foam and a toothbrush and toothpaste. And a small tube of burn ointment. Paid for it all himself and carried it in a brown paper bag. The walk to the pharmacy had taken them near a food court. He could see a rib place that smelled good.
“Let’s have dinner,” he said. “Not just coffee. My treat.”
“OK,” she said, and linked her arm through his again.
The dinner for two cost him the price of the new shirt, which he thought was not outrageous. They had dessert and coffee, and then some of the smaller stores were closing up for the day.
“OK, home,” he said. “And we play it real cautious from here.”
They walked through the department store, through the displays in reverse, first the pastel summer cottons and then the fierce smell of the cosmetics. He stopped her inside the brass-and-glass doors and scanned ahead out in the garage, where the air was warm and damp. A million-to-one possibility, but worth taking into account. Nobody there, just people hustling back to their cars with bulging bags. They walked together to the Bravada and she slid into the driver’s seat. He got in beside her.
“Which way would you normally go?”
“From here? FDR Drive, I guess.”
“OK,” he said. “Head out for LaGuardia, and we’ll come in down through Brooklyn. Over the Brooklyn Bridge.”
She looked at him. “You sure? You want to do the tourist thing, there are better places to go than the Bronx and Brooklyn.”
“First rule,” he said. “Predictability is unsafe. If you’ve got a route you’d normally take, today we take a different one.”
“You serious?”
“You bet your ass. I used to do VIP protection for a living.”
“I’m a VIP now?”
“You bet your ass,” he said again.

AN HOUR LATER it was dark, which is the best condition for using the

Brooklyn Bridge. Reacher felt like a tourist as they swooped around the ramp and up over the hump of the span and lower Manhattan was suddenly there in front of them with a billion bright lights everywhere. One of the world's great sights, he thought, and he had inspected most of the competition.
"Go a few blocks north," he said. "We'll come in from a distance. They'll be expecting us to come straight home."
She swung wide to the right and headed north on Lafayette. Hung a tight left and another and came back traveling south on Broadway. The light at Leonard was red. Reacher scanned ahead in the neon wash.
"Three blocks," Jodie said.
"Where do you park?"
"Garage under the building."
"OK, turn off a block short," he said. "I'll check it out. Come around again and pick me up. If I'm not waiting on the sidewalk, go to the cops."
She made the right on Thomas. Stopped and let him out. He slapped lightly on the roof and she took off again. He walked around the comer and found her building. It was a big square place, renovated lobby with heavy glass doors, big lock, a vertical row of fifteen buzzers with names printed behind little plastic windows. Apartment twelve had *Jacob/* Garber, like there were two people living there. There were people on the street, some of them loitering in knots, some of them walking, but none of them interesting. The parking garage entrance was farther on down the sidewalk. It was an abrupt slope into darkness. He walked down. It was quiet and badly lit. There were two rows of eight spaces, fifteen altogether because the ramp up to the street was where the sixteenth would be. Eleven cars parked up. He checked the full length of the place. Nobody hiding out. He came back up the ramp and ran back to Thomas. Dodged the traffic and crossed the street and waited. She was coming south through the light toward him. She saw him and pulled over and he got back in alongside her.
"All clear," he said.
She made it back out into the traffic and then pulled right and bumped down the ramp. Her headlights bounced and swung. She stopped in the center aisle and backed into her space. Killed the motor and the lights.
"How do we get upstairs?" he asked.
She pointed. "Door to the lobby."
There was a flight of metal steps up to a big industrial door, which had a steel sheet riveted over it. The door had a big lock, same as on the glass doors to the street. They got out and locked the car. He carried her garment bag. They walked to the steps and up to the door. She worked the lock and he swung it open. The

lobby was empty. A single elevator opposite them.
“I’m on four,” she said.
He pressed five.
“We’ll come down the stairs from above,” he said. “Just in case.”
They used the fire stairs and came back down to four. He had her wait on the landing and peered out. A deserted hallway. Tall and narrow. Apartment ten to the left, eleven to the right, and twelve straight ahead.
“Let’s go,” he said.
Her door was black and thick. Spy hole at eye level, two locks. She used the keys and they went inside. She locked up again and dropped an old hinged bar into place, right across the whole doorway. Reacher pressed it down in its brackets. It was iron, and as long as it was there, nobody else was going to get in. He put her garment bag against a wall. She flicked switches and the lights came on. She waited by the door while Reacher walked ahead. Hallway, living room, kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, bedroom, bathroom, closets. Big rooms, very high. Nobody in them. He came back to the living room and shrugged off his new jacket and threw it on a chair and turned back to her and relaxed.
But she wasn’t relaxed. He could see that. She was looking directly away from him, more tense than she’d been all day. She was just standing there with her sweatshirt cuffs way down over her hands, in the doorway to her living room, fidgeting. He had no idea what was wrong with her.
“You OK?” he asked.
She ducked her head forward and back in a figure eight to drop her hair behind her shoulders.
“I guess I’ll take a shower,” she said. “You know, hit the sack.”
“Hell of a day, right?”
“Unbelievable.”
She crabbed right around him on her way through the room, keeping her distance. She gave him a sort of shy wave, just her fingers peeping out from the sweatshirt sleeve.
“What time tomorrow?” he asked.
“Seven-thirty will do it,” she said.
“OK,” he said. “Good night, Jodie.”
She nodded and disappeared down the inner hallway. He heard her bedroom door open and close. He stared after her for a long moment, surprised. Then he sat on the sofa and took off his shoes. Too restless to sleep right away. He padded around in his new socks, looking at the apartment.
It wasn’t really a loft, as such. It was an old building with very high ceilings, was all. The shell was original. It had probably been industrial. The outside walls

were sandblasted brick, and the inner walls were smooth, clean plaster. The windows were huge. Probably put there to illuminate the sewing machine operation or whatever was there a hundred years ago.

The parts of the walls that were brick were a warm natural brick color, but everything else was white, except for the floor, which was pale maple strips. The decor was cool and neutral, like a gallery. There was no sign that more than one person had ever lived there. No sign of two tastes competing. The whole place was very unified. White sofas, white chairs, bookshelves built in simple cubic sections, painted with the same white paint that had been used on the walls. Big steam pipes and ugly radiators, all painted white. The only definite color in the living room was a life-size Mondrian copy on the wall above the largest sofa. It was a proper copy, done by hand in oil on canvas, with the proper colors. Not garish reds and blues and yellows, but the correct dulled tones, with authentic little cracks and crazings in the white, which was nearer a gray. He stood and looked at it for long time, totally astonished. Piet Mondrian was his favorite painter of all time, and this exact picture was his favorite work of all time. The title was *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue.* Mondrian had painted the original in 1930 and Reacher had seen it in Zurich, Switzerland.

There was a tall cabinet opposite the smallest sofa, painted the same white as everything else. There was a small TV in it, a video, a cable box, a CD player with a pair of large headphones plugged into the jack. A small stack of CDs, mostly fifties jazz, stuff he liked without really being crazy about.

The windows gave out over lower Broadway. There was a constant wash of traffic hum, neon blaze from up and down the street, an occasional siren wailing and booping and blasting loud as it came out through the gaps between blocks. He tilted the blind with a clear plastic wand and looked down at the sidewalk. There were still the same knots of people hanging around. Nothing to make him nervous. He tilted the blind back and closed it up tight.

The kitchen was huge and tall. All the cupboards were wood, painted white, and the appliances were industrial sizes in stainless steel, like pizza ovens. He had lived in places smaller than the refrigerator. He pulled it open and saw a dozen bottles of his favorite water, the same stuff he had grown to love in the Keys. He took the seal off one of them and carried it into the guest bedroom.

The bedroom was white, like everything else. The furniture was wood, which had started out with a different finish, but which was now white like the walls. He put the water on the night table and used the bathroom. White tiles, white sink, white tub, all old enamel and tiling. He closed the blinds and stripped and folded his new clothes onto the closet shelf. Threw back the cover and slid into bed and fell to thinking.

Illusion and reality. What was nine years, anyway? A lot, he guessed, when she was fifteen and he was twenty-four, but what was it now? He was thirty-eight, and she was either twenty-nine or thirty, he wasn't exactly sure which. Where was the problem with that? *Why wasn't he doing something?* Maybe it wasn't the age thing. Maybe it was Leon. She was his daughter, and always would be. It gave him the guilty illusion she was somewhere between his kid sister and his niece. That obviously gave him a very inhibiting feeling, but it was just an illusion, right? She was the relative of an old friend, was all. An old friend who was now dead. So why the hell did he feel so bad about looking at her and seeing himself peeling off her sweatshirt and undoing the belt from around her waist? *Why wasn't he just doing it?* Why the hell was he in the guest room instead of on the other side of the wall in bed with her? Like he'd ached to be through countless forgotten nights in the past, some of them shameful, some of them wistful?

Because presumably her realities were rooted in the same kind of illusions. For kid sister and niece, call it big brother and uncle. Favorite uncle, for sure, because he knew she liked him. There was a lot of affection there. But that just made it worse. Affection for favorite uncles was a specific type of affection. Favorite uncles were there for specific types of things. Family things, like shopping and spoiling, one way or the other. Favorite uncles were not there to put the moves on you. That would come out of the blue like some kind of a shattering betrayal. Horrifying, unwelcome, incestuous, psychologically damaging.

She was on the other side of the wall. But there was nothing he could do about it. Nothing. It was never going to happen. He knew it was going to drive him crazy, so he forced his mind away from her and started thinking about other things. Things that were realities for sure, not just illusions. The two guys, whoever they were. They would have her address by now. There were a dozen ways of discovering where a person lives. They could be outside the building right at that moment. He scanned through the apartment building in his head. The lobby door, locked. The door from the parking garage, locked. The door to the apartment, locked and barred. The windows, all closed up, the blinds all drawn. So tonight, they were safe. But tomorrow morning was going to be dangerous. Maybe very dangerous. He concentrated on fixing the two guys in his mind as he fell asleep. Their vehicle, their suits, their build, their faces.

BUT AT THAT exact moment, only one of the two guys had a face. They had sailed together ten miles south of where Reacher lay, out into the black waters of lower New York Harbor. They had worked together to unzip the rubber body

bag and lower the secretary's cold corpse down into the oily Atlantic swell. One guy had turned to the other with some cheap joke on his lips and was shot full in the face with a silenced Beretta. Then again, and again. The slow fall of his body put the three bullets all in different places. His face was all one big fatal wound, black in the darkness. His arm was levered up across the mahogany rail and his right hand was severed at the wrist with a stolen restaurant cleaver. Five blows were required. It was messy and brutal work. The hand went into a plastic bag and the body slipped into the water without a sound, less than twenty yards from the spot where the secretary was already sinking.

7

JODIE WOKE EARLY that morning, which was unusual for her. Normally she slept soundly right up to the point when her alarm went off and she had to drag herself out of bed and into the bathroom, sleepy and slow. But that morning, she was awake an hour before she had to be, alert, breathing lightly, heart racing gently in her chest.

Her bedroom was white, like all her rooms, and her bed was a king with a white wood frame, set with the head against the wall opposite her window. The guest room was back to back with her room, laid out in exactly the same way, symmetrically, but in reverse, because it faced in the opposite direction. Which meant that his head was about eighteen inches away from hers. Just through the wall.

She knew what the walls were made of. She had bought the apartment before it was finished. She had been in and out for months, watching over the conversion. The wall between the two bedrooms was an original wall, a hundred years old. There was a great balk of timber lying crossways on the floor, with bricks built up on top of it, all the way to the ceiling. The builders had simply patched the bricks where they were weak, and then plastered over them the way the Europeans do it, giving a solid hard stucco finish. The architect felt it was the right way to do it. It added solidity to the shell, and it gave better fireproofing and better soundproofing. But it also gave a foot-thick sandwich of stucco and brick and stucco between her and Reacher.

She loved him. She was in no doubt about that. No doubt at all. She always had, right from the start. But was that OK? Was it OK to love him the way she did? She had agonized over that question before. She had lain awake nights about it, many years ago. She had burned with shame about her feelings. The nine-year age gap was obscene. Shameful. She knew that. A fifteen-year-old should not feel that way about her own father's fellow officer. Army protocol had made it practically incestuous. It was like feeling that way about an uncle. Almost like feeling that way about her father himself. But she loved him. There was no doubt about it.

She was with him whenever she could. Talking with him whenever she could, touching him whenever she could. She had her own print of the self-timer photograph from Manila, her arm around his waist. She had kept it pressed in a book for fifteen years. Looked at it countless times. For years, she had fed off the feeling of touching him, hugging him hard for the camera. She still remembered the exact feel of him, his broad hard frame, his smell

remembered the exact feel of him, his broad hard frame, his smell.
The feelings had never really gone away. She had wanted them to. She had wanted it just to be an adolescent thing, a teenage crush. But it wasn't. She knew that from the way the feelings endured. He had disappeared, she had grown up and moved on, but the feelings were always there. They had never receded, but they had eventually moved parallel to the main flow of her life. Always there, always real, always strong, but not necessarily connected with her day-to-day reality anymore. Like people she knew, lawyers or bankers, who had really wanted to be dancers or ballplayers. A dream from the past, unconnected with reality, but absolutely defining the identity of the person involved. A lawyer, who had wanted to be a dancer. A banker, who had wanted to be a ballplayer. A divorced thirty-year-old woman, who had wanted to be with Jack Reacher all along.
Yesterday should have been the worst day of her life. She had buried her father, her last relative on earth. She had been attacked by men with guns. People she knew were in therapy for much less. She should be prostrate with misery and shock. But she wasn't. Yesterday had been the best day of her life. He had appeared like a vision on the steps, behind the garage, above the yard. The noon sun directly over his head, illuminating him. Her heart had thumped and the old feelings had swarmed back into the center of her life, fiercer and stronger than ever, like a drug howling through her veins, like claps of thunder.
But it was all a waste of time. She knew it. She had to face it. He looked at her like a niece or a kid sister. Like the nine-year gap still counted for something. Which it no longer did. A couple aged fifteen and twenty-four would certainly have been a problem. But thirty and thirty-nine was perfectly OK. There were thousands of couples with gaps bigger than that. Millions of couples. There were guys aged seventy with twenty-year-old wives. But it still counted for something with him. Or maybe he was just too used to seeing her as Leon's kid. Like a niece. Like the CO's daughter. The rules of society or the protocol of the Army had blinded him to the possibility of seeing her any other way. She had always burned with resentment about that. She still did. Leon's affection for him, his claiming of him as his own, had taken him away from her. It had made it impossible from the start.
They had spent the day like brother and sister, like uncle and niece. Then he had turned all serious, like a bodyguard, like she was his professional responsibility. They had had fun, and he cared about her physical safety, but nothing more. There never would be anything more. And there was nothing she could do about it. Nothing. She had asked guys out. All women her age had. It was permissible. Accepted, even normal. But what could she say to him? What? What can a sister say to a brother or a niece to an uncle without causing outrage and shock and

disgust? So it wasn't going to happen, and there was absolutely nothing she could do about it.
She stretched out in her bed and brought her hands up above her head. Laid her palms gently against the dividing wall and held them there. At least he was in her apartment, and at least she could dream.

THE GUY GOT less than three hours in the sack, by the time he sailed the boat single-handed back to the slip and closed it down and got back across town to bed. He was up again at six and back on the street by six-twenty, with a quick shower and no breakfast. The hand was wrapped in the plastic, parceled up in yesterday's Post and carried in a Zabar's bag he had from the last time he bought ingredients and made his own dinner at home.
He used the black Tahoe and made quick time past all the early-morning delivery people. He parked underground and rode up to the eighty-eighth floor. Tony the receptionist was already at the brass-and-oak counter. But he could tell from the stillness nobody else was in. He held up the Zabar's bag, like a trophy.
"I've got this for the Hook," he said.
"The Hook's not here today," Tony said.
"Great," the guy said, sourly.
"Stick it in the refrigerator," Tony said.
There was a small office kitchen off the reception lobby. It was cramped and messy, like office kitchens are. Coffee rings on the counters, mugs with stains on the inside. The refrigerator was a miniature item under the counter. The guy shoved milk and a six-pack aside and folded the bag into what space was left.
"Target for today is Mrs. Jacob," Tony said. He was now in the kitchen doorway. "We know where she lives. Lower Broadway, north of City Hall. Eight blocks from here. Neighbors say she always leaves at seven-twenty, walks to work."
"Which is where exactly?" the guy asked.
"Wall Street and Broadway," Tony said. "I'll drive, you grab her."

CHESTER STONE HAD driven home at the normal time and said nothing to Marilyn. There was nothing he could say. The speed of the collapse had left him bewildered. His whole world had turned inside out in a single twenty-four-hour period. He just couldn't get a handle on it. He planned to ignore it until the morning and then go see Hobie and try and talk some sense. In his heart he didn't believe he couldn't save himself. The corporation was ninety years old, for God's sake. Three generations of Chester Stones. There was too much there

for it all to disappear overnight. So he said nothing and got through the evening in a daze.
Marilyn Stone said nothing to Chester, either. Too early for him to know she had taken charge. The circumstances had to be right for that discussion. It was an ego thing. She just bustled about, doing her normal evening things, and then tried to sleep while he lay awake beside her, staring at the ceiling.

WHEN JODIE PLACED her palms flat on the dividing wall. Reacher was in the shower. He had three distinct routines worked out for showering, and every morning he made a choice about which one to use. The first was a straight shower, nothing more. It took eleven minutes. The second was a shave and a shower, twenty-two minutes. The third was a special procedure, rarely used. It involved showering once, then getting out and shaving, and then showering all over again. It took more than a half hour, but the advantage was moisturization. Some girl had explained the shave was better if the skin was already thoroughly moisturized. And she had said it can't hurt any to shampoo twice.
He was using the special procedure. Shower, shave, shower. It felt good. Jodie's guest bathroom was big and tall, and the showerhead was set high enough for him to stand upright under it, which was unusual. There were bottles of shampoo, neatly lined up. He suspected they were brands she had tried and hadn't liked, relegated to the guest room. But he didn't care. He found one that claimed to be aimed at dry, sun-damaged hair. He figured that was exactly what he needed. He ladled it on and lathered up. Scrubbed his body all over with some kind of yellow soap and rinsed. Dripped all over the floor as he shaved at the sink. He did it carefully, right up from his collarbones, around the bottom of his nose, sideways, backward, forward. Then back into the shower all over again. He spent five minutes on his teeth with the new toothbrush. The bristles were hard, and it felt like they were doing some good in there. Then he dried off and shook the creases out of his new clothes. Put the pants on without the shirt and wandered through to the kitchen for something to eat.
Jodie was in there. She was fresh from the shower, too. Her hair was dark with water and hanging straight down. She was wearing an oversize white T-shirt that finished an inch above her knees. The material was thin. Her legs were long and smooth. Her feet were bare. She was very slender, except where she shouldn't be. He caught his breath.
"Morning, Reacher," she said.
"Morning, Jodie," he said back.
She was looking at him. Her eyes were all over him. Something in her face.
"That blister," she said. "Looks worse."

He squinted down. It was still red and angry. Spreading slightly, and puffy.
“You put the ointment on?” she asked.
He shook his head.
“Forgot,” he said.
“Get it,” she said.
He went back to his bathroom and found it in the brown bag. Brought it back to the kitchen. She took it from him and unscrewed the cap. Pierced the metal seal with the plastic spike and squeezed a dot of the salve onto the pad of her index finger. She was concentrating on it, tongue between her teeth. She stepped in front of him and raised her hand. Touched the blister gently and rubbed with her fingertip. He stared rigidly over her head. She was a foot away from him. Naked under her shirt. Rubbing his bare chest with her fingertip. He wanted to take her in his arms. He wanted to lift her off her feet and crush her close. Kiss her gently, starting with her neck. He wanted to turn her face up to his and kiss her mouth. She was rubbing small gentle circles on his chest. He could smell her hair, damp and glossy. He could smell her skin. She was tracing her finger the length of the burn. A foot away from him, naked under her shirt. He gasped and clenched his hands. She stepped away.
“Hurting?” she asked.
“What?”
“Was I hurting you?”
He saw her fingertip, shiny from the grease.
“A little,” he said.
She nodded.
“I’m sorry,” she said. “But you needed it.”
He nodded back.
“I guess,” he said.
Then the crisis was past. She screwed the cap back on the tube and he moved away, just to be moving. He pulled the refrigerator door and took a bottle of water. Found a banana in a bowl on the counter. She put the tube of ointment on the table.
“I’ll go get dressed,” she said. “We should get moving.”
“OK,” he said. “I’ll be ready.”
She disappeared back into her bedroom and he drank the water and ate the fruit. Wandered back to his bedroom and shrugged the shirt on and tucked it in. Found his socks and shoes and jacket. Strolled through to the living room to wait. He pulled the blind all the way up and unlocked the window and pushed it up. Leaned right out and scanned the street four floors below.
Very different in the early daylight. The shiny neon wash was gone, and the sun

was coming over the buildings opposite and bouncing around in the street. The lazy nighttime knots of people were gone, too, replaced by purposeful striding workers heading north and south with paper cups of coffee and muffins clutched in napkins. Cabs were grinding down through the traffic and honking at the lights to make them change. There was a gentle breeze and he could smell the river.

The building was on the west side of lower Broadway. Traffic was one-way, to the south, running left to right under the window. Jodie's normal walk to work would give her a right turn out of her lobby, walking with the traffic. She would keep to the right-hand sidewalk, to stay in the sun. She would cross Broadway at a light maybe six or seven blocks down. Walk the last couple of blocks on the left-hand sidewalk and then make the left turn, east down Wall Street to her office.

So how would they aim to grab her up? Think like the enemy. Think like the two guys. Physical, unsubtle, favoring a direct approach, willing and dangerous, but not really schooled beyond the point of amateur enthusiasm. It was pretty clear what they would do. They would have a four-door vehicle waiting in a side street maybe three blocks south, parked in the right lane, facing east, ready to swoop out and hang the right on Broadway. They would be waiting together in the front seats, silent. They would be scanning left to right through the windshield, watching the crosswalk in front of them. They would expect to see her hurrying across, or pausing and waiting for the signal. They would wait a beat and ease out and make the right turn. Driving slow. They would fall in behind her. Pull level. Pull ahead. Then the guy in the passenger seat would be out, grabbing her, opening the rear door, forcing her inside, cramming himself in after her. One smooth, brutal movement. A crude tactic, but not difficult. Not difficult at all. More or less guaranteed to succeed, depending on the target and the level of awareness. Reacher had done the same thing, many times, with targets bigger and stronger and more aware than Jodie. Once, he had done it with Leon himself at the wheel.

He bent forward from the waist and put his whole upper body out through the window. Craned his head around to the right and gazed down the street. Looked hard at the corners, two and three and four blocks south. It would be one of those.

"Ready," Jodie called to him.

THEY RODE DOWN ninety floors together to the underground garage. Walked through to the right zone and over to the bays leased along with Hobie's office suite.

"We should take the Suburban," the enforcer said. "Bigger."

"We should take the Suburban," the enforcer said. "Bigger."
"OK," Tony said. He unlocked it and slid into the driver's seat. The enforcer hoisted himself into the passenger seat. Glanced back at the empty load bed. Tony fired it up and eased out toward the ramp to the street.
"So how do we do this?" Tony asked.
The guy smiled confidently. "Easy enough. She'll be walking south on Broadway. We'll wait around a corner until we see her. Couple of blocks south of her building. We see her pass by on the crosswalk, we pull around the comer, get alongside her, and that's that, right?"
"Wrong," Tony said. "We'll do it different."
The guy looked across at him. "Why?"
Tony squealed the big car up and out into the sunlight.
"Because you're not very smart," he said. "If that's how you'd do it, there's got to be a better way, right? You screwed up in Garrison. You'll screw up here. She's probably got this Reacher guy with her. He beat you there, he'll beat you here. So whatever you figure is the best way to do it, that's the last thing we're going to do."
"So how are we going to do it?"
"I'll explain it to you real careful," Tony said. "I'll try to keep it real simple."
REACHER SLID THE window back down. Clicked the lock and rattled the blind down into position. She was standing just inside the doorway, hair still darkened by the shower, dressed in a simple sleeveless linen dress, bare legs, plain shoes. The dress was the same color as her wet hair, but would end up darker as her hair dried. She was carrying a purse and a large leather briefcase, the size he had seen commercial pilots using. It was clearly heavy. She put it down and ducked away to her garment bag, which was on the floor against a wall, where he had dumped it the previous night. She slid the envelope containing Leon's will out of the pocket and unclicked the lid of the briefcase and stowed it inside.
"Want me to carry that?" he asked.
She smiled and shook her head.
"Union town," she said. "Bodyguarding doesn't include drayage around here."
"It looks pretty heavy," he said.
"I'm a big girl now," she replied, looking at him.
He nodded. Lifted the old iron bar out of its brackets and left it upright. She leaned past him and turned the locks. The same perfume, subtle and feminine. Her shoulders in the dress were slim, almost thin. Small muscles in her left arm were bunching to balance the heavy case.
"What sort of law you got in there?" he asked.
"Financial," she said.

"Financial," she said.
He eased the door open. Glanced out. The hallway was empty. The elevator indicator was showing somebody heading down to the street from three.
"What sort of financial?"
They stepped across and called the elevator.
"Debt rescheduling, mostly," she said. "I'm more of a negotiator than a lawyer, really. More like a counselor or a mediator, you know?"
He didn't know. He had never been in debt. Not out of any innate virtue, but simply because he had never had the opportunity. All the basics had been provided for him by the Army. A roof over his head, food on his plate. He had never gotten into the habit of wanting much more. But he'd known guys who had run into trouble. They bought houses with mortgages and cars on time payment plans. Sometimes they got behind. The company clerk would sort it out. Talk to the bank, deduct the necessary provision straight from the guy's paycheck. But he guessed that was small-time, compared to what she must deal with.
"Millions of dollars?" he asked.
The elevator arrived. The doors slid open.
"At least," she said. "Usually tens of millions, sometimes hundreds."
The elevator was empty. They stepped inside.
"Enjoy it?" he asked.
The elevator whined downward.
"Sure," she said. "A person needs a job, it's as good as she's going to get."
The elevator settled with a bump.
"You good at it?"
She nodded.
"Yes," she said simply. "Best there is on Wall Street, no doubt about that."
He smiled. She was Leon's daughter, that was for damn sure.
The elevator doors slid open. An empty lobby, the street door sucking shut, a broad woman heading slowly down the steps to the sidewalk.
"Car keys?" he said.
She had them in her hand. A big bunch of keys on a brass ring.
"Wait here," he said. "I'll back it up to the stairs. One minute."
The door from the lobby to the garage opened from the inside with a push bar. He went through and down the metal steps and scanned ahead into the gloom as he walked. Nobody there. At least, nobody visible. He walked confidently to the wrong car, a big dark Chrysler something, two spaces from Jodie's jeep. He dropped flat to the floor and looked across, under the intervening vehicles. Nothing there. Nobody hiding on the floor. He got up again and squeezed around the Chrysler's hood. Around the next car. He dropped to the floor again, jammed

the Chrysler's hood. Around the next car. He dropped to the floor again, jammed up in the space between the Oldsmobile's tailgate and the wall. Craned his head down and looked for wires where there shouldn't be wires. All clear. No booby traps.

He unlocked the door and slid in. Fired it up and eased into the aisle. Backed up level with the bottom of the stairs. Leaned across inside and sprang the passenger door as she came through from the lobby behind him. She skipped down the steps and climbed straight in the car, all one smooth fluid movement. She slammed the door and he took off forward and made the right up the ramp and the right on the street.

The morning sun in the east flashed once in his eyes, and then he was through it, heading south. The first corner was thirty yards ahead. Traffic was slow. Not stopped, just slow. The light caught him three cars back from the turn. He was in the right lane, and he had no angle to see into the mouth of the cross street. Traffic poured right to left out of it, ahead of him, three cars away. He could see the far stream was slowed, spilling around some kind of obstacle. Maybe a parked vehicle. Maybe a parked four-door, just waiting there for something. Then the sideways flow stopped, and the light on Broadway went green.

He drove across the intersection with his head turned, half an eye ahead, and the rest of his attention focused sideways. Nothing there. No parked four-door. The obstruction was a striped sawhorse placed against an open manhole. There was a power company truck ten yards farther down the street. A gaggle of workmen on the sidewalk, drinking soda from cans. The traffic ground on. Stopped again, for the next light. He was four cars back.

This was not the street. The traffic pattern was wrong. It was flowing west, left to right in front of him. He had a good view out to his left. He could see fifty yards down the street. Nothing there. Not this one. It was going to be the next one.

Ideally he would have liked to do more than just drive straight by the two guys. A better idea would be to track around the block and come up behind them. Ditch the jeep a hundred yards away and stroll up on them from the rear. They would be craning forward, watching the crosswalk through the windshield. He could take a good look at them, as long as he wanted. He could even get right in their car with them. The rear doors would be unlocked, for sure. The guys would be staring straight ahead. He could slip in behind them and plant a hand on the side of each head and bang them together like a bandsman letting rip with the cymbals. Then he could do it again, and again, and again, until they started answering some basic questions.

But he wasn't going to do that. *Concentrate on the job in hand* was his rule. The

job in hand was getting Jodie to her office, safe and secure. Bodyguarding was about defense. Start mixing offense in with it, and neither thing gets done properly. Like he had told her, he used to do this for a living. He was trained in it. Very well trained, and very experienced. So he was going to stay defensive, and he was going to count it a major victory to see her walking in through her office door, all safe and secure. And he was going to stay quiet about how much trouble she was in. He didn't want her worrying about it. No reason why whatever Leon had started should end up giving her any kind of anguish. Leon would not have wanted that. Leon would have just wanted him to handle everything. So that was how he was going to do it. Deliver her to the office door, no long explanations, no gloomy warnings.

The light went green. The first car took off, then the second. Then the third. He eased forward. Checked the gap ahead of him and craned his head right. Were they there? The cross street was narrow. Two lanes of stopped traffic, waiting at the light. Nothing parked up in the right lane. Nothing waiting. They weren't there. He moved slowly through the whole width of the intersection, scanning right. Nobody there. He breathed out and relaxed and faced forward. There was a huge metallic bang. A tremendous loud metallic punch in his back. Tearing sheet metal, instant violent acceleration. The jeep was hurled forward and smashed into the vehicle ahead and stopped dead. The airbags exploded. He saw Jodie bouncing off her seat and crashing against the tension of her belt, her body stopping abruptly, her head still cannoning forward. Then it was bouncing backward off the airbag and whipping and smashing into the headrest behind her. He noticed her face was fixed in space exactly alongside his, with the inside of the car blurring and whirling and spinning past it, because his head was doing exactly the same things as hers.

The twin impacts had torn his hands off the wheel. The airbag was collapsing in front of him. He dragged his eyes to the mirror and saw a giant black hood buried in the back of the jeep. The top of a shiny chrome grille, bent out of shape. Some huge four-wheel-drive truck. One guy in it, visible behind the tinted screen. Not a guy he knew. Cars were honking behind them and traffic was pulling left and steering around the obstruction. Faces were turning to stare. There was a loud hissing somewhere. Steam from his radiator, or maybe ringing from his ears after the enormous sudden sounds. The guy behind was getting out of the four-wheel-drive. Hands held up in apology, worry and fright in his face. He was folding himself around his door, out there in the slow traffic stream, walking up toward Reacher's window, glancing sideways at the tangle of sheet metal as he passed. A woman was getting out of the sedan in front, looking dazed and angry. The traffic was snarling around them. The air was shimmering

from overheated motors and loud with horns blasting. Jodie was upright in her seat, feeling the back of her neck with her fingers.
“You OK?” he asked her.
She thought about it for a long moment, and then she nodded.
“I’m OK,” she said. “You?”
“Fine,” he said.
She poked at the collapsed airbag with her finger, fascinated.
“These things really work, you know that?”
“First time I ever saw one deploy,” he said.
“Me too.”
Then there was rapping on the driver’s-side window. The guy from behind was standing there, knocking urgently with his knuckles. Reacher stared out at him. The guy was gesturing for him to open up, urgently, like he was anxious about something.
“Shit,” Reacher yelled.
He stamped on the gas. The jeep struggled forward, pushing against the woman’s wrecked sedan. It made a yard, slewing to the left, sheet metal screeching.
“Hell are you doing?” Jodie screamed.
The guy had his hand on the door handle. His other hand in his pocket.
“Get down,” Reacher shouted.
He found reverse and howled back the yard he’d made and smashed into the four-wheel-drive behind. The new impact won him another foot. He shoved the selector into drive and spun the wheel and barged left. Smashed into the rear quarter of the sedan in a new shower of glass. Traffic behind was swerving and slewing all over again. He glanced right and one of the guys he’d seen in Key West and Garrison was at the window with his hand on Jodie’s door. He stamped on the gas and hurled the jeep backward, spinning the wheel. The guy kept tight hold, jerked backward by his arm, flung off his feet by the violent motion. Reacher smashed all the way backward into the black truck and bounced off again forward, screaming the motor, spinning the wheel. The guy was up again, still gripping the door handle, jerking and hauling, spare arm and legs flailing, like he was a wrangler and the jeep was a wild young steer in a desperate fight out of a trap. Reacher mashed the pedal and angled out forward close to the rear comer of the woman’s wrecked sedan and scraped the guy off against the trunk. The fender took him at the knees and he somersaulted and his head came down on the rear glass. In the mirror Reacher saw a blur of flailing arms and legs as his momentum carried him up over the roof. Then he was gone, sprawling back to the sidewalk.

“Watch out!” Jodie screamed.
The guy from the truck was still there at the driver’s window. Reacher was out in the traffic stream, but the traffic stream was slow and the guy was just running fast beside him, struggling to free something from his pocket. Reacher swerved left and came in parallel to a panel truck in the next lane. The guy was still running, skipping sideways, holding the door handle, coming out with something from his pocket. Reacher jammed left again and thumped him hard against the side of the truck. He heard a dull boom as the guy’s head hit the metal and then he was gone. The truck jammed to a panic stop and Reacher hauled left and got in front of it. Broadway was a solid mass of traffic. Ahead of him was a shimmering patchwork of metallic colors, sedan roofs winking in the sun, dodging left, dodging right, crawling forward, fumes rising, horns blasting. He hauled left again and turned and went through a crosswalk against the light, a crowd of jostling people skittering out of his way. The jeep was juddering and bouncing and pulling hard to the right. The temperature gauge was off the scale. Steam was boiling up through the gaps around the buckled hood. The collapsed airbag was hanging down to his knees. He jerked forward and hauled left again and jammed into an alley full of restaurant waste. Boxes, empty drums of cooking oil, rough wooden trays piled with spoiled vegetables. He buried the nose in a pile of cartons. They spilled down on the wrecked hood and bounced off the windshield. He killed the motor and pulled the keys.
He had put it too close to the wall for Jodie’s door to open. He grabbed her briefcase and her purse and threw them out through his door. Squeezed out after them and turned back for her. She was scrambling across the seats behind him. Her dress was riding up. He grabbed her around the waist and she ducked her head to his shoulder and he lifted her through the gap. She clung on hard, bare legs around his waist. He turned and ran her six feet away. She weighed nothing at all. He set her on her feet and ducked back for her bags. She was smoothing her dress over her thighs. Breathing hard. Damp hair all over the place.
“How did you know?” she gasped. “That it wasn’t an accident?”
He gave her the purse and carried the heavy briefcase himself. Led her by the hand back down the alley to the street, panting with adrenaline rush.
“Talk while we walk,” he said.
They turned left and headed east for Lafayette. The morning sun was in their eyes, the river breeze in their faces. Behind them, they could hear the traffic snarl on Broadway. They walked together fifty yards, breathing hard, calming down.
“How did you know?”
“Statistics, I guess. What were the chances we’d be in an accident on the exact same morning as figured there were guys out looking for us? Million to one, at

same morning we figured there were guys out looking for us? Million to one, at best."
She nodded. A slight smile on her face. Head up, shoulders back, recovering fast. No trace of shock. She was Leon's daughter, that was for damn sure.
"You were great," she said. "You reacted so fast."
He shook his head as he walked.
"No, I was shit," he said. "Dumb as hell. One mistake after another. They changed personnel. Some new guy in charge. I never even thought about that. I was figuring what the original pair of assholes might do, never even thought about them putting in somebody smarter. And whoever that guy was, he was pretty smart. It was a good plan, almost worked. I never saw it coming. Then when it happened, I still wasted a shitload of time talking to you about the damn airbags deploying."
"Don't feel bad," she said.
"I do feel bad. Leon had a basic rule: Do it right. Thank God he wasn't there to see that screwup. He'd have been ashamed of me."
He saw her face cloud over. Realized what he'd said.
"I'm sorry. I just can't make myself believe he's dead."
They came out on Lafayette. Jodie was at the curb, scanning for a cab.
"Well, he is," she said, gently. "We'll get used to it, I guess."
He nodded. "And I'm sorry about your car. I should have seen it coming."
She shrugged. "It's only leased. I'll get them to send another one just like it. Now I know it stands up in a collision, right? Maybe a red one."
"You should report it stolen," he said. "Call the cops and say it wasn't there in the garage when you went for it this morning."
"That's fraud," she said.
"No, that's smart. Remember I can't afford for the cops to be asking me questions about this. I don't even carry a driver's license."
She thought about it. Then she smiled. *Like a kid sister smiles when she's forgiving her big brother for some kind of waywardness*, he thought.
"OK," she said. "I'll call them from the office."
"The office? You're not going to the damn office."
"Why not?" she said, surprised.
He waved vaguely west, back toward Broadway. "After what happened there? I want you where I can see you, Jodie."
"I need to go to work, Reacher," she said. "And be logical. The office hasn't become unsafe just because of what happened over there. It's a completely separate proposition, right? The office is still as safe now as it always was. And you were happy for me to go there before, so what's changed?"

He looked at her. He wanted to say *everything's changed*. Because whatever Leon started with some old couple from a cardiology clinic has now got halfway-competent professionals mixed in with it. Halfway-competent professionals who were about half a second away from winning this morning. And he wanted to say: I love you and you're in danger and I don't want you anyplace I can't be looking out for you. But he couldn't say any of that. Because he had committed himself to keeping it all away from her. All of it, the love and the danger. So he just shrugged, lamely.
"You should come with me," he said.
"Why? To help?"
He nodded. "Yes, help me with these old folks. They'll talk to you, because you're Leon's daughter."
"You want me with you because I'm Leon's daughter?"
He nodded again. She spotted a cab and waved it down.
"Wrong answer, Reacher," she said.

HE ARGUED WITH her, but he got nowhere. Her mind was made up, and she wouldn't change it. The best he could do was to get her to solve his immediate problem and rent him a car, with her gold card and her license. They took the cab up to midtown and found a Hertz office. He waited outside in the sun for a quarter hour and then she came around the block in a brand-new Taurus and picked him up. She drove all the way back downtown on Broadway. They passed by her building and passed by the scene of the ambush three blocks south. The damaged vehicles were gone. There were shards of glass in the gutter and oil stains on the blacktop, but that was all. She drove on south and parked next to a hydrant opposite her office door. Left the motor running and racked the seat all the way back, ready for the change of driver.
"OK," she said. "You'll pick me up here, about seven o'clock?"
"That late?"
"I'm starting late," she said. "I'll have to finish late."
"Don't leave the building, OK?"
He got out on the sidewalk and watched her all the way inside. There was a broad paved area in front of the building. She skipped across it, bare legs flashing and dancing under the dress. She turned and smiled and waved. Pushed sideways through the revolving door, swinging her heavy case. It was a tall building, maybe sixty stories. Probably dozens of suites rented to dozens of separate firms, maybe hundreds. But the situation looked like it might be safe enough. There was a wide reception counter immediately inside the revolving door. A line of security guys sitting behind it, and behind them was a solid glass

screen, wall to wall, floor to ceiling, with one opening in it, operated by a buzzer under their counter. Behind the screen were the elevators. No way in, unless the security guys saw fit to let you in. He nodded to himself. It might be safe enough. Maybe. It would depend on the diligence of the doormen. He saw her talking to one of them, head bent, blond hair falling forward. Then she was walking to the door in the screen, waiting, pushing it. She went through to the elevators. Hit a button. A door slid open. She backed in, levering her case over the threshold with both hands. The door slid shut.

He waited out on the paved area for a minute. Then he hurried across and shouldered in through the revolving door. Strode over to the counter like he did it every day of his life. Picked on the oldest security guy. The oldest ones are usually the most sloppy. The younger ones still entertain hopes of advancement.

"They want me up at Spencer Gutman," he said, looking at his watch.

"Name?" the old guy asked.

"Lincoln," Reacher said.

The guy was grizzled and tired, but he did what he was supposed to do. He picked a clipboard out of a slot and studied it.

"You got an appointment?"

"They just paged me," Reacher said. "Some kind of a big hurry, I guess."

"Lincoln, like the car?"

"Like the president," Reacher said.

The old guy nodded and ran a thick finger down a long list of names.

"You're not on the list," he said. "I can't let you in, without your name on the list."

"I work for Costello," Reacher said. "They need me upstairs, like right now."

"I could call them," the guy said. "Who paged you?"

Reacher shrugged. "Mr. Spencer, I guess. He's who I usually see."

The guy looked offended. Placed the clipboard back in its slot.

"Mr. Spencer died ten years ago," he said. "You want to come in, you get yourself a proper appointment, OK?"

Reacher nodded. The place was safe enough. He turned on his heel and headed back to the car.

MARILYN STONE WAITED until Chester's Mercedes was out of sight and then she ran back to the house and got to work. She was a serious woman, and she knew a possible six-week gap between listing and closing was going to need some serious input.

Her first call was to the cleaning service. The house was already perfectly clean, but she was going to move some furniture out. She took the view that presenting

a house slightly empty of furniture created an impression of spaciousness. It made it seem even larger than it was. And it avoided trapping a potential buyer into preconceptions about what would look good, and what wouldn't. For instance, the Italian credenza in the hallway was the perfect piece for that hallway, but she didn't want a potential buyer to think the hallway wouldn't work any other way. Better to just have nothing there, and let the buyer's imagination fill the gap, maybe with a piece she already had.

So if she was going to move furniture out, she needed the cleaning service to attend to the spaces left behind. A slight lack of furniture created a spacious look, but obvious gaps created a sad look. So she called them, and she called the moving and storage people, too, because she was going to have to put the displaced stuff somewhere. Then she called the pool service, and the gardeners. She wanted them there every morning until further notice, for an hour's work every day. She needed the yard looking absolutely at its best. Even at this end of the market, she knew curb appeal was king.

Then she tried to remember other stuff she'd read, or things people had told her about. Flowers, of course, in vases, all over the place. She called the florist. She remembered somebody saying saucers of window cleaner neutralized all the little stray smells any house generates. Something to do with the ammonia. She remembered reading that putting a handful of coffee beans in a hot oven made a wonderful welcoming smell. So she put a new packet in her utensil drawer, ready. She figured if she put some in the oven each time Sheryl called to say she was on her way over with clients, that would be timing it about right, in terms of aroma.

8

CHESTER STONE'S DAY started out in the normal way. He drove to work at the usual time. The Benz was as soothing as ever. The sun was shining, as it should be in June. The drive into the city was normal. Normal traffic, no more, no less. The usual rose vendors and paper sellers in the toll plazas. The slackening congestion down the length of Manhattan, proving he'd timed it just right, as he usually did. He parked in his normal leased slot under his building and rode the elevator up to his offices. Then his day stopped being normal.
The place was deserted. It was as if his company had vanished overnight. The staff had all disappeared, instinctively, like rats from a sinking ship. A single phone was trilling on a distant desk. Nobody was sitting there to answer it. The computers were all turned off. The monitor screens were dull gray squares, reflecting the strip lights in the ceiling. His own inner office was always quiet, but now there was a strange hush lying over it. He walked in and heard a sound like a tomb.
"I'm Chester Stone," he said into the silence.
He said it just to be making some noise in the place, but it came out like a croak. There was no echo, because the thick carpeting and the fiberboard walls soaked up the sound like a sponge. His voice just disappeared in the void.
"Shit," he said.
He was angry. Mostly with his secretary. She had been with him a long time. She was the sort of employee he expected to stand up and be loyal, with a shy hand on his shoulder, a gleam in her eye, a promise to stay and beat the odds whatever the hell they were. But she'd done the same thing as all the others. She'd heard the rumors coming out of the finance department, the company was bust, the paychecks would bounce, and she'd dumped some old files out of a carton and boxed up the photos of her damn nephews in their cheap brass frames and her ratty old spider plant from her desk and her junk from her drawers and carried it all home on the subway to her neat little apartment, wherever the hell that was. Her neat little apartment, decorated and furnished with his paychecks from when the times were good. She would be sitting there now, in her bathrobe, drinking coffee slowly, an unexpected morning off, never to return to him, maybe leafing through the vacancies in the back of the newspaper, choosing her next port of call.
"Shit," he said again.
He turned on his heel and barged out through the secretarial pen and back out all the way to the elevator. Rode down to the street and strode out into the sun

the way to the elevator. Rode down to the street and strode out into the sun. Turned west and set out walking fast, in a fury, with his heart thumping. The enormous glittering bulk of the Twin Towers loomed over him. He hurried across the plaza and inside to the elevators. He was sweating. The chill of the lobby air struck through his jacket. He rode the express up to eighty-eight. Stepped out and walked through the narrow corridor and into Hobie's brass-and-oak lobby for the second time in twenty-four hours.

The male receptionist was sitting behind his counter. On the other side of the lobby a thickset man in an expensive suit was coming out of a small kitchen, carrying two mugs in one hand. Stone could smell coffee. He could see steam rising and brown froth swirling in the mugs. He glanced between the two men.

"I want to see Hobie," he said.

They ignored him. The thickset man walked over to the counter and set one of the mugs in front of the receptionist. Then he walked back behind Stone and put himself nearer the lobby door than Stone was. The receptionist leaned forward and rotated the coffee mug, carefully adjusting the angle of the handle until it was presented comfortably to his grasp.

"I want to see Hobie," Stone said again, looking straight ahead.

"My name is Tony," the receptionist said to him.

Stone just turned and stared at him, blankly. The guy had a red mark on his forehead, like a fresh bruise. The hair on his temple was newly combed but wet, like he'd pressed a cold cloth to his head.

"I want to see Hobie," Stone said for the third time.

"Mr. Hobie's not in the office today," Tony said. "I'll be dealing with your affairs for the time being. We have matters to discuss, don't we?"

"Yes, we do," Stone said.

"So shall we go inside?" Tony said, and stood up.

He nodded to the other guy, who slid around the counter and took up position in the chair. Tony came out and stepped across to the inner door. Held it open and Stone walked through into the same gloom as the day before. The blinds were still closed. Tony padded ahead through the dark to the desk. He walked around it and sat down in Hobie's chair. The sprung base creaked once in the silence. Stone followed after him. Then he stopped and glanced left and right, wondering where he should sit.

"You'll remain standing," Tony said to him.

"What?" Stone said back.

"You'll remain standing for the duration of the interview."

"What?" Stone said again, astonished.

"Right in front of the desk."

Stone just stood there, his mouth clamped shut.

“Arms by your sides,” Tony said. “Stand straight and don’t slump.”
He said it calmly, quietly, in a matter-of-fact voice, not moving at all. Then there was silence. Just faint background noises booming elsewhere in the building, and thumping in Stone’s chest. His eyes were adjusting to the gloom. He could see the score marks on the desktop from Hobie’s hook. They made an angry tracery, deep in the wood. The silence was unsettling him. He had absolutely no idea how to react to this. He glanced at the sofa to his left. It was humiliating to stand. Doubly so, when told to by a damn receptionist. He glanced at the sofa to his right. He knew he should fight back. He should just go ahead and sit down on one of the sofas. Just step left or right and sit down. Ignore the guy. *Just do it.* Just sit down, and show the guy who was boss. Like hitting a winning return or trumping an ace. *Sit down, for* God’s sake, he told himself. But his legs would not move. It was like he was paralyzed. He stood still, a yard in front of the desk, rigid with outrage and humiliation. And fear.
“You’re wearing Mr. Hobie’s jacket,” Tony said. “Would you take it off, please?”
Stone stared at him. Then he glanced down at his jacket. It was his Savile Row. He realized that for the first time in his life, he’d accidentally worn the same thing two days running.
“This is my jacket,” he said.
“No, it’s Mr. Hobie’s.”
Stone shook his head. “I bought it in London. It’s definitely my jacket.”
Tony smiled in the dark.
“You don’t understand, do you?” he said.
“Understand what?” Stone said, blankly.
“That Mr. Hobie owns you now. You’re his. And everything you have is his.”
Stone stared at him. There was silence in the room. Just the faint background noises from the building and the thumping in Stone’s chest.
“So take Mr. Hobie’s jacket off,” Tony said, quietly.
Stone was just staring at him, his mouth opening and closing, no sound coming out of it.
“Take it off,” Tony said. “It’s not your property. You shouldn’t be standing there wearing another man’s jacket.”
His voice was quiet, but there was menace in it. Stone’s face was rigid with shock, but then suddenly his arms were starting to move, like they were outside of his conscious control. He struggled off with the jacket and held it out by the collar, like he was in the menswear department, handing back a garment he’d tried and hadn’t liked.
“On the desk, please,” Tony said.

Stone laid the jacket flat on the desk. He straightened it and felt the fine wool snagging over the rough surface. Tony pulled it closer and went into the pockets, one after the other. He assembled the contents in a small pile in front of him. Balled up the jacket and tossed it casually over the desk onto the left-hand sofa. He picked up the Mont Blanc fountain pen. Made an appreciative little shape with his mouth and slipped it into his own pocket. Then he picked up the bunch of keys. Fanned them on the desktop and picked through them, one at a time. Selected the car key, and held it up between his finger and thumb.
“Mercedes?”
Stone nodded, blankly.
“Model?”
“500SEL,” Stone muttered.
“New?”
Stone shrugged. “A year old.”
“Color?”
“Dark blue.”
“Where?”
“At my office,” Stone muttered. “In the lot.”
“We’ll pick it up later,” Tony said.
He opened a drawer and dropped the keys into it. Pushed the drawer shut and turned his attention to the wallet. He held it upside down and shook it and raked the contents out with his finger. When it was empty, he tossed it under the desk. Stone heard it clang into a trash can. Tony glanced once at the picture of Marilyn and pitched it after the wallet. Stone heard a fainter clang as the stiff photographic paper hit the metal. Tony stacked the credit cards with three fingers and slid them to one side like a croupier.
“Guy we know will give us a hundred bucks for these,” he said.
Then he riffed the paper money together and sorted it by denomination. Counted it up and clipped it together with a paper clip. Dropped it into the same drawer as the keys.
“What do you guys want?” Stone asked.
Tony looked up at him. “I want you to take Mr. Hobie’s tie off,” he said.
Stone shrugged, helplessly.
“No, seriously, what do you guys want from me?”
“Seventeen-point-one million dollars. That’s what you owe us.”
Stone nodded. “I know. I’ll pay you.”
“When?” Tony asked.
“Well, I’ll need a little time,” Stone said.
Tony nodded. “OK, you’ve got an hour.”

Stone stared at him. “No, I need more than an hour.”
“An hour is all you’ve got.”
“I can’t do it in an hour.”
“I know you can’t,” Tony said. “You can’t do it in an hour, or a day, or a week, or a month, or a year, because you’re a useless piece of shit who couldn’t manage his way out of a wet grocery sack, aren’t you?”
“What?”
“You’re a disgrace, Stone. You took a business your grandfather slaved over and your father built bigger and you flushed it all straight down the toilet, because you’re totally stupid, aren’t you?”
Stone shrugged, blankly. Then he swallowed.
“OK, so I took some hits,” he said. “But what could I do?”
“Take the tie off,” Tony screamed at him.
Stone jumped and flung his hands up. Struggled with the knot.
“Get it off, you piece of shit,” Tony screamed.
He tore it off. Dropped it on the desk. It lay there in a tangle.
“Thank you, Mr. Stone,” Tony said quietly.
“What do you guys want?” Stone whispered.
Tony opened a different drawer and came out with a handwritten sheet of paper. It was yellow and filled with a dense untidy scrawl. Some kind of a list, with figures totaled at the bottom of the page.
“We own thirty-nine percent of your corporation,” he said. “As of this morning. What we want is another twelve percent.”
Stone stared at him. Did the math in his head. “A controlling interest?”
“Exactly,” Tony said. “We hold thirty-nine percent, another twelve gives us fifty-one, which would indeed represent a controlling interest.”
Stone swallowed again and shook his head.
“No,” he said. “No, I won’t do that.”
“OK, then we want seventeen-point-one million dollars within the hour.”
Stone just stood there, glancing wildly left and right. The door opened behind him and the thickset man in the expensive suit came in and padded soundlessly across the carpet and stood with his arms folded, behind Tony’s left shoulder.
“The watch, please,” Tony said.
Stone glanced at his left wrist. It was a Rolex. It looked like steel, but it was platinum. He had bought it in Geneva. He unlatched it and handed it over. Tony nodded and dropped it in another drawer.
“Now take Mr. Hobie’s shirt off.”
“You can’t make me give you more stock,” Stone said.
“I think we can. Take the shirt off, OK?”

“Look, I won’t be intimidated,” Stone said, as confidently as he could.
“You’re already intimidated,” Tony said back. “Aren’t you? You’re about to make a mess in Mr. Hobie’s pants. Which would be a bad mistake, by the way, because we’d only make you clean them up.”
Stone said nothing. Just stared at a spot in the air between the two men.
“Twelve percent of the equity,” Tony said gently. “Why not? It’s not worth anything. And you’d still have forty-nine percentleft.”
“I need to speak with my lawyers,” Stone said.
“OK, go ahead.”
Stone looked around the room, desperately. “Where’s the phone?”
“There’s no phone in here,” Tony said. “Mr. Hobie doesn’t like phones.”
“So how?”
“Shout,” Tony said. “Shout real loud, and maybe your lawyers will hear you.”
“What?”
“Shout,” Tony said again. “You’re real slow, aren’t you, Mr. Stone? Put two and two together and draw a conclusion. There’s no phone in here, you can’t leave the room, you want to talk with your lawyers, so you’ll have to shout.”
Stone stared blankly into space.
“Shout, you useless piece of shit,” Tony screamed at him.
“No, I can’t,” Stone said helplessly. “I don’t know what you mean.”
“Take the shirt off,” Tony screamed.
Stone shook violently. Hesitated, with his arms halfway in the air.
“Get it off, you piece of shit,” Tony screamed again.
Stone’s hands leapt up and unbuttoned it, all the way down. He tore it off and stood there holding it, shaking in his undershirt.

“Fold it neatly, please,” Tony said. “Mr. Hobie likes his things neat.”
Stone did his best. He shook it out by the collar and folded it in half, and half again. He bent and laid it square on top of the jacket on the sofa.
“Give up the twelve percent,” Tony said.
“No,” Stone said back, clenching his hands.
There was silence. Silence and darkness.
“Efficiency,” Tony said quietly. “That’s what we like here. You should have paid more attention to efficiency, Mr. Stone. Then maybe your business wouldn’t be in the toilet. So what’s the most efficient way for us to do this?”
Stone shrugged, helplessly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”
“Then I’ll explain,” Tony said. “We want you to comply. We want your signature on a piece of paper. So how do we get that?”
“You’ll never get it, you bastard,” Stone said. “I’ll go bankrupt first, damn it.

Chapter eleven. You won't get a damn thing from me. Not a thing. You'll be in court five years, minimum."
Tony shook his head patiently, like a grade-school teacher hearing the wrong answer for the hundredth time in a long career.
"Do whatever you want," Stone said to him. "I won't give you my company."
"We could hurt you," Tony said.
Stone's eyes dropped through the gloom to the desktop. His tie was still lying there, right on top of the rough gouges from the hook.
"Take Mr. Hobie's pants off," Tony screamed.
"No, I won't, damn it," Stone screamed back.
The guy at Tony's shoulder reached under his arm. There was a squeak of leather. Stone stared at him, incredulous. The guy came out with a small black handgun. He used one arm and aimed it, eye-level, straight out. He advanced around the desk toward Stone. Nearer and nearer. Stone's eyes were wide and staring. Fixed on the gun. It was aimed at his face. He was shaking and sweating. The guy was stepping quietly, and the gun was coming closer, and Stone's eyes were crossing, following it in. The gun came to rest with the muzzle on his forehead. The guy was pressing with it. The muzzle was hard and cold. Stone was shaking. Leaning backward against the pressure. Stumbling, trying to focus on the black blur that was the gun. He never saw the guy's other hand balling into a fist. Never saw the blow swinging in. It smashed hard into his gut and he went down like a sack, legs folding, squirming and gasping and retching.
"Take the pants off, you piece of shit," Tony screamed down at him.
The other guy landed a savage kick and Stone yelped and rolled around and around on his back like a turtle, gasping, gagging, wrenching at his belt. He got it loose. Scrabbled for the buttons and the zip. He tore the pants down over his legs. They snagged on his shoes and he wrenched them free and pulled them off inside out.
"Get up, Mr. Stone," Tony said, quietly.
Stone staggered to his feet and stood, unsteadily, leaning forward, head down, panting, his hands on his knees, his stomach heaving, thin, white hairless legs coming down out of his boxers, ludicrous dark socks and shoes on his feet.
"We could hurt you," Tony said. "You understand that now, right?"
Stone nodded and gasped. He was pressing both forearms into his gut. Heaving and gagging.
"You understand that, right?" Tony asked again.
Stone forced another nod.
"Say the words, Mr. Stone," Tony said. "Say we could hurt you."
"You could hurt me," Stone gasped.
"But we won't. That's not how Mr. Hobie likes things to be done."

But we won't. That's not how Mr. Hobie likes things to be done.
Stone raised a hand and swiped tears from his eyes and looked up, hopefully.
"Mr. Hobie prefers to hurt the wives," Tony said. "Efficiency, you see? It gets faster results. So at this point, you really need to be thinking about Marilyn."
THE RENTED TAURUS was much faster than the Bravada had been. On dry June roads, there was no contest. Maybe in the snows of January or the sleet of February he would have appreciated the full-time four-wheel drive, but for a fast trip up the Hudson in June, a regular sedan had it all over a jeep, that was for damn sure. It was low and stable, it rode well, it tracked through the bends like an automobile should. And it was quiet. He had its radio locked onto a powerful city station behind him, and a woman called Wynonna Judd was asking him *why not me?* He felt he shouldn't be liking Wynonna Judd as much as he was, because if somebody had asked him if he'd enjoy a country vocalist singing plaintively about love, he'd have probably said no he wouldn't, based on his preconceptions. But she had a hell of a voice, and the number had a hell of a guitar part. And the lyric was getting to him, because he was imagining it was Jodie singing to him, not Wynonna Judd. She was singing *why not me when you're growing old? Why not me?* He started singing along with it, his rough bass rumble underneath the soaring contralto, and by the time the number faded and the commercial started, he was figuring if he ever had a house and a stereo like other people did, he'd buy the record. *Why not me?*
He was heading north on Route 9, and he had a Hertz map open beside him which went up far enough to show him Brighton was halfway between Peekskill and Poughkeepsie, over to the west, right on the Hudson. He had the old couple's address beside it, written on a sheet from a medical pad from McBannerman's office. He had the Taurus moving at a steady sixty-five, fast enough to get him there, slow enough to get him there unmolested by the traffic cops, who he assumed were hiding out around every wooded comer, waiting to boost their municipal revenues with their radar guns and their books of blank tickets.
It took him an hour to get level with Garrison again, and he figured he would head on north to a big highway he remembered swinging away west over the river toward New-burgh. He should be able to come off that road just short of the Hudson and fall on Brighton from above. Then it was just a question of hunting down the address, which might not be easy.
But it was easy, because the road that dropped him south into Brighton from the east-west highway was labeled with the same name as was in the second line of the old folks' address. He cruised south, watching for mailboxes and house numbers. Then it started to get harder. The mailboxes were grouped in sixes, clustered hundreds of yards apart, standing on their own, with no obvious

clustered hundreds of yards apart, standing on their own, with no obvious connection to any particular houses. In fact, there were very few houses visible at all. It seemed like they were all up little rural tracks, gravel and patched blacktop, running off left and right into the woods like tunnels.
He found the right mailbox. It was set on a wooden post that the weather was rotting and the frost heave was canting forward. Vigorous green vines and thorny creepers were twisting up around it. It was a large-size box, dull green, with the house number painted on the side in faded but immaculate freehand script. The door was hanging open, because the box was completely stuffed with mail. He took it all out and squared it on the passenger seat beside him. Squeaked the door closed and saw a name painted on the front in the same faded neat hand: Hobie.
The mailboxes were all on the right side of the road, for the convenience of the mail carrier, but the tracks ran off in both directions. There were four of them visible from where he was stopped, two of them to the left and two to the right. He shrugged and headed down the first of them, leading to the right, over toward the river.
It was the wrong track. There were two houses down there, one north and one south. One of them had a duplicate name-plate on the gates: *Kozinsky.* The other had a bright red Pontiac Firebird parked under a new basketball hoop on the garage gable. Children's bicycles were sprawled on a lawn. Not persuasive evidence of aged and infirm people living there.
The first track on the left was wrong, too. He found the right place on the second right-hand track. There was an overgrown driveway running away south, parallel with the river. There was an old rusted mailbox at the gate, back from when the postal service was prepared to come a little nearer to your house. Same dull green color, but even more faded. Same neat painted script, faded like a ghost: Hobie. There were power lines and a phone cable running in, swarming with vines which hung down like curtains. He swung the Taurus into the driveway, brushing vegetation on both sides, and came to a stop behind an old Chevy sedan, parked at an angle under a carport. The old car was a full-size, hood and trunk like flight decks, turning the same pitted dull brown that all old cars turn. He killed the motor and got out in the silence. Ducked back in and grabbed the stack of mail and stood there, holding it. The house was a low one-story, running away from him to the west toward the river. The house was the same brown as the car, ancient boards and shingles. The yard was a riot. It was what a tended garden becomes in fifteen untouched years of wet springs and hot summers. There had been a wide path running around from the carport to the front door, but it was narrowed like a gangplank with encroaching brush. He looked around and figured an infantry platoon equipped with flame-throwers would be more

and figured an infantry platoon equipped with flame-throwers would be more use there than gardeners.
He made it to the door, with the brush grabbing and snatching at his ankles. There was a bell-push, but it was rusted solid. He leaned forward and rapped on the wood with his knuckles. Then he waited. No response. He rapped again. He could hear the jungle seething behind him. Insect noise. He could hear the muffler ticking as it cooled underneath the Taurus over on the driveway. He knocked again. Waited. There was the creak of floorboards inside the house. The sound was carrying ahead of somebody's footsteps and spilling out to him. The footsteps halted on the other side of the door and he heard a woman's voice, thin and muffled by the wood.
"Who's there?" it called out.
"Reacher," he called back. "General Garber's friend."
His voice was loud. Behind him, he heard panicked scurrying in the brush. Furtive animals were fleeing. In front of him, he heard a stiff lock turning and bolts easing back. The door creaked open. Darkness inside. He stepped forward into the shadow of the eaves and saw an old woman waiting. She was maybe eighty, stick thin, white hair, stooped, wearing a faded floral-print dress that flared right out from the waist over nylon petticoats. It was the sort of dress he'd seen in photographs of women at suburban garden parties in the fifties and the sixties. The sort of dress that was normally worn with long white gloves and a wide-brimmed hat and a contented bourgeois smile.
"We were expecting you," she said.
She turned and stood aside. He nodded and went in. The radius of the skirt meant he had to push past its flare with a loud rustle of nylon.
"I brought your mail," he said to her. "Your box was full."
He held up the thick stack of curled envelopes and waited.
"Thank you," she said. "You're very kind. It's a long walk out there, and we don't like to stop the car to get it, in case we get rear-ended. It's a very busy road. People drive terribly fast, you know. Faster than they should, I think."
Reacher nodded. It was about the quietest road he had ever seen. A person could sleep the night out there right on the yellow line, with a good chance of surviving until morning. He was still holding the mail. The old lady showed no curiosity over it.
"Where would you like me to put it?"
"Would you put it in the kitchen?"
The hallway was a dark space, paneled in gloomy wood. The kitchen was worse. It had a tiny window, glassed in with yellow reeded glass. There was a collection of freestanding units in muddy dark veneer, and curious old enamel appliances, speckled in mint greens and grays, standing up on short legs. The whole room

smelled of old food and a warm oven, but it was clean and tidy. A rag rug on worn linoleum. There was a chipped china mug with a pair of thick eyeglasses standing vertically in it. He put the stack of mail next to the mug. When her visitor was gone, she would use her eyeglasses to read her mail, right after she put her best frock back in the closet with the mothballs.
“May I offer you cake?” she asked.
He glanced at the stovetop. There was a china plate there, covered over with a worn linen cloth. She’d baked something for him.
“And coffee?”
Next to the stove top was an ancient percolator, mint green enamel, green glass knob on the top, connected to the outlet by a cord insulated with frayed fabric.
He nodded.
“I love coffee and cake,” he said.
She nodded back, pleased. Bustled forward, crushing her skirt against the oven door. She used a thin trembling thumb and operated the switch on the percolator. It was already filled and ready to go.
“It takes a moment,” she said. Then she paused and listened. The old percolator started a loud gulping sound. “So come and meet Mr. Hobie. He’s awake now, and very anxious to see you. While we’re waiting for the machine.”
She led him through the hallway to a small parlor in back. It was about twelve by twelve and heavily furnished with armchairs and sofas and glass-fronted chest-high cabinets filled with china ornaments. There was an old guy in one of the chairs. He was wearing a stiff serge suit, blue, worn and shiny in places, and at least three sizes too big for his shrunken body. The collar of his shirt was a wide stiff hoop around a pale scrawny neck. Random silky tufts of white were all that was left of his hair. His wrists were like pencils protruding from the cuffs of his suit. His hands were thin and bony, laid loosely on the arms of the chair. He had clear plastic tubes looped over his ears, running down under his nose. There was a bottle of oxygen on a wheeled cart, parked behind him. He looked up and took a long, loud sniff of the gas to fuel the effort of lifting his hand.
“Major Reacher,” he said. “I’m very pleased to meet you.”
Reacher stepped forward and grasped the hand and shook it. It was cold and dry, and it felt like a skeleton’s hand wrapped in flannel. The old guy paused and sucked more oxygen and spoke again.
“I’m Tom Hobie, Major. And this lovely lady is my wife, Mary.”
Reacher nodded.
“Pleased to meet you both,” he said. “But I’m not a major anymore.”
The old guy nodded back and sucked the gas through his nose.
“You served,” he said. “Therefore I think you’re entitled to your rank.”

There was a fieldstone fireplace, built low in the center of one wall. The mantel was packed tight with photographs in ornate silver frames. Most of them were color snaps showing the same subject, a young man in olive fatigues, in a variety of poses and situations. There was one older picture among them, airbrushed black-and-white, a different man in uniform, tall and straight and smiling, a private first class from a different generation of service. Possibly Mr. Hobie himself, before his failing heart started killing him from the inside, although it was hard for Reacher to tell. There was no resemblance.
“That’s me,” Hobie confirmed, following his gaze.
“World War Two?” Reacher asked.
The old man nodded. Sadness in his eyes.
“I never went overseas,” he said. “I volunteered well ahead of the draft, but I had a weak heart, even back then. They wouldn’t let me go. So I did my time in a storeroom in New Jersey.”
Reacher nodded. Hobie had his arm behind him, fiddling with the cylinder valve, increasing the oxygen flow.
“I’ll bring the coffee now,” the old lady said. “And the cake.”
“Can I help you with anything?” Reacher asked her.
“No, I’ll be fine,” she said, and swished slowly out of the room.
“Sit down, Major, please,” Tom Hobie said.
Reacher nodded and sat down in the silence, in a small armchair near enough to catch the old guy’s fading voice. He could hear the rattle of his breathing. Nothing else, just a faint hiss from the top of the oxygen bottle and the clink of china from the kitchen. Patient domestic sounds. The window had a venetian blind, lime green plastic, tilted down against the light. The river was out there somewhere, presumably beyond an overgrown yard, maybe thirty miles upstream of Leon Garber’s place.
“Here we are,” Mrs. Hobie called from the hallway.
She was on her way back into the room with a wheeled cart. There was a matching china set stacked on it, cups and saucers and plates, with a small milk jug and a sugar bowl. The linen cover was off the platter, revealing a pound cake, drizzled with some kind of yellow icing. Maybe lemon. The old percolator was there, smelling of coffee.
“How do you like it?”
“No milk, no sugar,” Reacher said.
She poured coffee into a cup, her thin wrist quivering with the effort. The cup rattled in its saucer as she passed it across. She followed it with a quarter of the cake on a plate. The plate shook. The oxygen bottle hissed. The old man was rehearsing his story, dividing it up into bites, taking in enough oxygen to fuel

each one of them.
“I was a printer,” he said suddenly. “I ran my own shop. Mary worked for a big customer of mine. We met and were married in the spring of ‘47. Our son was born in the June of ‘48.”
He turned away and ran his glance along the line of photographs.
“Our son, Victor Truman Hobie.”
The parlor fell quiet, like an observance.
“I believed in duty,” the old man said. “I was unfit for active service, and I regretted it. Regretted it bitterly, Major. But I was happy to serve my country any way I could, and I did. We brought our son up the same way, to love his country and to serve it. He volunteered for Vietnam.”
Old Mr. Hobie closed his mouth and sucked oxygen through his nose, once, twice, and then he leaned down to the floor beside him and came up with a leather-bound folder. He spread it across his bony legs and opened it up. Took out a photograph and passed it across. Reacher juggled his cup and his plate and leaned forward to take it from the shaking hand. It was a faded color print of a boy in a backyard. The boy was maybe nine or ten, stocky, toothy, freckled, grinning, wearing a metal bowl upside down on his head, with a toy rifle shouldered, his stiff denim trousers tucked into his socks to resemble the look of fatigues buckled into gaiters.
“He wanted to be a soldier,” Mr. Hobie said. “Always. It was his ambition. I approved of it at the time, of course. We were unable to have other children, so Victor was on his own, the light of our lives, and I thought that to be a soldier and to serve his country was a fine ambition for the only son of a patriotic father.”
There was silence again. A cough. A hiss of oxygen. Silence.
“Did you approve of Vietnam, Major?” Hobie asked suddenly.
Reacher shrugged.
“I was too young to have much of an opinion,” he said. “But knowing what I know now, no, I wouldn’t have approved of Vietnam.”
“Why not?”
“Wrong place,” Reacher said. “Wrong time, wrong reasons, wrong methods, wrong approach, wrong leadership. No real backing, no real will to win, no coherent strategy.”
“Would you have gone?”
Reacher nodded.
“Yes, I would have gone,” he said. “No choice. I was the son of a soldier, too. But I would have been jealous of my father’s generation. Much easier to go to World War Two.”

“Victor wanted to fly helicopters,” Hobie said. “He was passionate about it. My fault again, I’m afraid. I took him to a county fair, paid two bucks for him to have his first flight in one. It was an old Bell, a crop duster. After that, all he wanted to be was a helicopter pilot. And he decided the Army was the best place to learn how.”
He slid another photograph out of the folder. Passed it across. It showed the same boy, now twice the age, grown tall, still grinning, in a new fatigues, standing in front of an Army helicopter. It was an H-23 Hiller, an old training machine.
“That’s Fort Wolters,” Hobie said. “All the way down in Texas. U.S. Army Primary Helicopter School.”
Reacher nodded. “He flew choppers in ‘Nam?”
“He passed out second in his class,” Hobie said. “That was no surprise to us. He was always an excellent student, all the way through high school. He was especially gifted in math. He understood accountancy. I imagined he’d go to college and then come into partnership with me, to do the book work. I looked forward to it. I struggled in school, Major. No reason to be coy about it now. I’m not an educated man. It was a constant delight for me to see Victor doing so well. He was a very smart boy. And a very good boy. Very smart, very kind, a good heart, a perfect son. Our only son.”
The old lady was silent. Not eating the cake, not drinking the coffee.
“His passing out was at Fort Rucker,” Hobie said. “Down in Alabama. We made the trip to see it.”
He slid across the next photograph. It was a duplicate of one of the framed prints from the mantel. Faded pastel grass and sky, a tall boy in dress uniform, cap down over his eyes, his arm around an older woman in a print dress. The woman was slim and pretty. The photograph was slightly out of focus, the horizon slightly tilted. Taken by a fumbling husband and father, breathless with pride.
“That’s Victor and Mary,” the old man said. “She hasn’t changed a bit, has she, that day to this?”
“Not a bit,” Reacher lied.
“We loved that boy,” the old woman said quietly. “He was sent overseas two weeks after that photograph was taken.”
“July of ‘68,” Hobie said. “He was twenty years old.”
“What happened?” Reacher asked.
“He served a full tour,” Hobie said. “He was commended twice. He came home with a medal. I could see right away the idea of keeping the books for a print shop was too small for him. I thought he would serve out his time and get a job flying helicopters for the oil rigs. Down in the Gulf, perhaps. They were paying

big money then, for Army pilots. Or Navy, or Air Force, of course."
"But he went over there again," Mrs. Hobie said. "To Vietnam again."
"He signed on for a second tour," Mrs. Hobie said. "He didn't have to. But he said it was his duty. He said the war was still going on, and it was his duty to be a part of it. He said that's what patriotism meant."
"And what happened?" Reacher asked.
There was a long moment of silence.
"He didn't come back," Hobie said.
The silence was like a weight in the room. Somewhere a clock was ticking. It grew louder and louder until it was filling the air like blows from a hammer.
"It destroyed me," Hobie said quietly.
The oxygen wheezed in and out, in and out, through a constricted throat.
"It just destroyed me. I used to say: I'll exchange the whole rest of my life, just for one more day with him."
"The rest of my life," his wife echoed. "For just one more day with him."
"And I meant it," Hobie said. "And I still would. I still would, Major. Looking at me now, that's not much of a bargain, is it? I haven't got much life left in me. But I said it then, and I said it every day for thirty years, and as God is my witness, I meant it every single time I said it. The whole rest of my life, for one more day with him."
"When was he killed?" Reacher asked, gently.
"He wasn't killed," Hobie said. "He was captured."
"Taken prisoner?"
The old man nodded. "At first, they told us he was missing. We assumed he was dead, but we clung on, hoping. He was posted missing, and he stayed missing. We never got official word he was killed."
"So we waited," Mrs. Hobie said. "We just kept on waiting, for years and years. Then we started asking. They told us Victor was missing, presumed killed. That was all they could say. His helicopter was shot down in the jungle, and they never found the wreckage."
"We accepted that then," Hobie said. "We knew how it was. Plenty of boys died without a known grave. Plenty of boys always have, in war."
"Then the memorial went up," Mrs. Hobie said. "Have you seen it?"
"The Wall?" Reacher said. "In D.C.? Yes, I've been there. I've seen it. I found it very moving."
"They refused to put his name on it," Hobie said.
"Why?"
"They never explained. We asked and we begged, but they never told us exactly why. They just said he's no longer considered a casualty."
"So we asked them what he is considered as," Mrs. Hobie said. "They just told

"So we asked them what he is considered as," Mrs. Hobie said. "They just told us missing in action."
"But the other MIAs are on the Wall," Hobie said.
There was silence again. The clock hammered away in another room.
"What did General Garber say about this?" Reacher asked.
"He didn't understand it," Hobie said. "Didn't understand it at all. He was still checking for us when he died."
There was silence again. The oxygen hissed and the clock hammered.
"But we know what happened," Mrs. Hobie said.
"You do?" Reacher asked her. "What?"
"The only thing that fits," she said. "He was taken prisoner."
"And never released," Hobie said.
"That's why the Army is covering it up," Mrs. Hobie said. "The government is embarrassed about it. The truth is some of our boys were never released. The Vietnamese held on to them, like hostages, to get foreign aid and trade recognition and credits from us, after the war. Like blackmail. The government held out for years, despite our boys still being prisoners over there. So they can't admit it. They hide it instead, and won't talk about it."
"But we can prove it now," Hobie said.
He slid another photograph from the folder. Passed it across. It was a newer print. Vivid glossy colors. It was a telephoto shot taken through tropical vegetation. There was barbed wire on bamboo fence posts. There was an Oriental figure in a brown uniform, with a bandanna around his forehead. A rifle in his hands. It was clearly a Soviet AK-47. No doubt about it. And there was another figure in the picture. A tall Caucasian, looking about fifty, emaciated, gaunt, bent, gray, wearing pale, rotted fatigues. Looking half away from the Oriental soldier, flinching.
"That's Victor," Mrs. Hobie said. "That's our son. That photograph was taken last year."
"We spent thirty years asking about him," Hobie said. "Nobody would help us. We asked everybody. Then we found a man who told us about these secret camps. There aren't many. Just a few, with a handful of prisoners. Most of them have died by now. They've grown old and died, or been starved to death. This man went to Vietnam and checked for us. He got close enough to take this picture. He even spoke to one of the other prisoners through the wire. Secretly, at night. It was very dangerous for him. He asked for the name of the prisoner he'd just photographed. It was Vic Hobie, First Cavalry helicopter pilot."
"The man had no money for a rescue," Mrs. Hobie said. "And we'd already paid him everything we had for the first trip. We had no more left. So when we met General Garber at the hospital, we told him our story and asked him to try and

General Garber at the hospital, we told him our story and asked him to try and get the government to pay."
Reacher stared at the photograph. Stared at the gaunt man with the gray face. "Who else has seen this picture?"
"Only General Garber," Mrs. Hobie answered. "The man who took it told us to keep it a secret. Because it's very sensitive, politically. Very dangerous. It's a terrible thing, buried in the nation's history. But we had to show it to General Garber, because he was in a position to help us."
"So what do you want me to do?" Reacher asked.
The oxygen hissed in the silence. In and out, in and out, through the clear plastic tubes. The old man's mouth was working.
"I just want him back," he said. "I just want to see him again, one more day before I die."

AFTER THAT, THE old couple were done talking. They turned together and fixed misty gazes on the row of photographs on the mantel. Reacher was left sitting in the silence. Then the old man turned back and used both hands and lifted the leather-bound folder off his bony knees and held it out. Reacher leaned forward and took it. At first he assumed it was so he could put the three photographs back inside. Then he realized the baton had been passed to him. Like a ceremony. Their quest had become Leon's, and now it was his.
The folder was thin. Apart from the three photographs he had seen, it contained nothing more than infrequent letters home from their son and formal letters from the Department of the Army. And a sheaf of paperwork showing the liquidation of their life savings and the transfer by certified check of eighteen thousand dollars to an address in the Bronx, to fund a reconnaissance mission to Vietnam led by a man named Rutter.
The letters from the boy started with brief notes from various locations in the South, as he passed through Dix, and Polk, and Wolters, and Rucker, and Belvoir and Benning on his way through his training. Then there was a short note from Mobile in Alabama, as he boarded ship for the month-long voyage through the Panama Canal and across the Pacific to Indochina. Then there were flimsy Army Mailgrams from Vietnam itself, eight from the first tour, six from the second. The paper was thirty years old, and it was stiff and dry, like ancient papyrus. Like something discovered by archaeologists.
He hadn't been much of a correspondent. The letters were full of the usual banal phrases a young soldier writes home. There must have been a hundred million parents in the world with treasured old letters like these, different times, different wars, different languages, but the same messages: the food, the weather, the rumor of action, the reassurances.

rather of action, the reassurances.
The responses from the Department of the Army marched through thirty years of office technology. They started out typed on old manual machines, some letters misaligned, some wrongly spaced, some with red haloes above them where the ribbon had slipped. Then electric typewriters, crisper and more uniform. Then word processors, immaculately printed on better paper. But the messages were all the same. No information. Missing in action, presumed killed. Condolences. No further information.
The deal with the guy called Rutter had left them penniless. There had been some modest mutual funds and a little cash on deposit. There was a sheet written in a shaky hand Reacher guessed was the old woman's, totaling their monthly needs, working the figures again and again, paring them down until they matched the Social Security checks, freeing up their capital. The mutuals had been cashed in eighteen months ago and amalgamated with the cash holdings and the whole lot had been mailed to the Bronx. There was a receipt from Rutter, with the amount formally set off against the cost of the exploratory trip, due to leave imminently. There was a request for any and all information likely to prove helpful, including service number and history and any existing photographs. There was a letter dated three months subsequently, detailing the discovery of the remote camp, the risky clandestine photography, the whispered talk through the wire. There was a prospectus for a rescue mission, planned in great detail, at a projected cost to the Hobies of forty-five thousand dollars. Forty-five thousand dollars they didn't have.
"Will you help us?" the old woman asked through the silence. "Is it all clear? Is there anything you need to know?"
He glanced across at her and saw she had been following his progress through the dossier. He closed the folder and stared down at its worn leather cover. Right then the only thing he needed to know was *why the hell hadn't Leon told these people the truth?*

9

MARILYN STONE MISSED lunch because she was busy, but didn't mind because she was happy about the way the place was starting to look. She found herself regarding the whole business in a very dispassionate manner, which surprised her a little, because after all it was her *home* she was getting ready to sell, her own home, the place she'd chosen with care and thought and excitement not so many years ago. It had been the place of her dreams. Way bigger and better than anything she'd ever expected to have. It had been a physical thrill back then, just thinking about it. Moving in felt like she'd died and gone to heaven. Now she was just looking at the place like a showpiece, like a marketing proposition. She wasn't seeing rooms she'd decorated and lived in and thrilled to and enjoyed. There was no pain. No wistful glances at places where she and Chester had fooled around and laughed and ate and slept. Just a brisk and businesslike determination to bring it all up to a whole new peak of irresistibility.

The furniture movers had arrived first, just as she'd planned. She had them take the credenza out of the hallway, and then Chester's armchair out of the living room. Not because it was a bad piece, but because it was definitely an extra piece. It was his favorite chair, chosen in the way men choose things, for comfort and familiarity rather than for style and suitability. It was the only piece they'd brought from their last house. He'd put it next to the fireplace, at an angle. Day to day, she rather liked it. It gave the room a comfortable lived-in quality. It was the touch that changed the room from a magazine showpiece to a family home. Which was exactly why it had to go.

She had the movers carry out the butcher's block table from the kitchen, too. She had thought long and hard about that table. It certainly gave the kitchen a no-nonsense look. Like it was a proper workplace, speaking of serious meals planned and executed there. But without it, there was an uninterrupted thirty-foot expanse of tiled floor running all the way to the bay window. She knew that with fresh polish on the tile, the light from the window would flood the whole thirty-foot span into a sea of space. She had put herself in a prospective buyer's shoes and asked herself: Which would impress you more? A serious kitchen? Or a drop-dead spacious kitchen? So the butcher's block was in the mover's truck.

The TV from the den was in there, too. Chester had a problem with television sets. Video had killed the home-movie side of his business and he had no enthusiasm for buying the latest and best of his competitors' products. So the TV was an obsolete RCA, not even a console model. It had shiny fake chrome

was an obsolete RCA, not even a console model. It had shiny fake chrome around the screen, and it bulged out like a gray fishbowl. She had seen better sets junked on the sidewalk, looking down from the train when it eased into the 125th Street station. So she'd had the movers clear it out of the den and bring the bookcase down from the guest suite to fill its space. She thought the room looked much better for it. With just the bookcase and the leather couches and the dark lampshades, it looked like a cultured room. An intelligent room. It made it an aspirational space. Like a buyer would be buying a lifestyle, not just a house. She spent some time choosing books for the coffee tables. Then the florist arrived with flat cardboard boxes full of blooms. She had the girl wash all her vases and then left her alone with a European magazine and told her to copy the arrangements. The guy from Sheryl's office brought the for-sale sign and she had him plant it in the shoulder next to the mailbox. Then the garden crew arrived at the same time the movers were leaving, which required some awkward maneuvering out on the driveway. She led the crew chief around the garden, explaining what had to be done, and then she ducked back inside the house before the roar of the mowers started up. The pool boy came to the door at the same time as the cleaning service people arrived. She was caught glancing left and right between them, momentarily overcome and unsure of who to start first. But then she nodded firmly and told the cleaners to wait and led the boy around to the pool and showed him what needed doing. Then she ran back to the house, feeling hungry, realizing she'd missed her lunch, but glowing with satisfaction at the progress she was making.

THEY BOTH MADE it down the hallway to see him leave. The old man worked on the oxygen long enough to get himself up out of his chair, and then he wheeled the cylinder slowly ahead of him, partly leaning on it like a cane, partly pushing it like a golf trolley. His wife rustled along in front of him, her skirt brushing both doorjambs and both sides of the narrow passageway. Reacher followed behind them, with the leather folder tucked up under his arm. The old lady worked the lock on the door and the old man stood panting and gripping the handle of the cart. The door opened and sweet fresh air blew in.
"Any of Victor's old friends still around here?" Reacher asked.
"Is that important, Major?"
Reacher shrugged. He had learned a long time ago the best way to prepare people for bad news was by looking very thorough, right from the start. People listened better if they thought you'd exhausted every possibility.
"I just need to build up some background," he said.
They looked mystified, but like they were ready to think about it, because he was their last hope. He held their son's life in his hands, literally.

“Ed Steven, I guess, at the hardware store,” Mr. Hobie said eventually. “Thick as thieves with Victor, from kindergarten right through twelfth grade. But that was thirty-five years ago, Major. Don’t see how it can matter now.”
Reacher nodded, because it didn’t matter now.
“I’ve got your number,” he said. “I’ll call you, soon as I know anything.”
“We’re relying on you,” the old lady said.
Reacher nodded again.
“It was a pleasure to meet you both,” he said. “Thank you for the coffee and the cake. And I’m very sorry about your situation.”
They made no reply. It was a hopeless thing to say. Thirty years of agony, and he was sorry about their situation? He just turned and shook their frail hands and stepped back outside onto their overgrown path. Picked his way back to the Taurus, carrying the folder, looking firmly ahead.
He reversed down the driveway, catching the vegetation on both sides, and eased out of the track. Made the right and headed south on the quiet road he’d left to find the house. The town of Brighton firmed up ahead of him. The road widened and smoothed out. There was a gas station and a fire-house. A small municipal park with a Little League diamond. A supermarket with a large parking lot, a bank, a row of small stores sharing a common frontage, set back from the street. The supermarket’s parking lot seemed to be the geographic center of the town. He cruised slowly past it and saw a nursery, with lines of shrubs in pots under a sprinkler which was making rainbows in the sun. Then a large shed, dull red paint, standing in its own lot: Steven’s Hardware. He swung the Taurus in and parked next to a timber store in back.
The entrance was an insignificant door set in the end wall of the shed. It gave onto a maze of aisles, packed tight with every kind of thing he’d never had to buy. Screws, nails, bolts, hand tools, power tools, garbage cans, mailboxes, panes of glass, window units, doors, cans of paint. The maze led to a central core, where four shop counters were set in a square under bright fluorescent lighting. Inside the corral were a man and two boys, dressed in jeans and shirts and red canvas aprons. The man was lean and small, maybe fifty, and the boys were clearly his sons, younger versions of the same face and physique, maybe eighteen and twenty.
“Ed Steven?” Reacher asked.
The man nodded and set his head at an angle and raised his eyebrows, like a guy who has spent thirty years dealing with inquiries from salesmen and customers.
“Can I talk to you about Victor Hobie?”
The guy looked blank for a second, and then he glanced sideways at his boys, like he was spooling backward all the way through their lives and far beyond,

back to when he last knew Victor Hobie.
“He died in ‘Nam, right?” he said.
“I need some background.”
“Checking for his folks again?” He said it without surprise, and there was an edge of weariness in there, too. Like the Hobies’ problems were well known in the town, and gladly tolerated, but no longer exciting any kind of urgent sympathy.
Reacher nodded. “I need to get a feel for what sort of a guy he was. Story is you knew him pretty well.”
Steven looked blank again. “Well, I did, I guess. But we were just kids. I only saw him once, after high school.”
“Want to tell me about him?”
“I’m pretty busy. I’ve got unloading to see to.”
“I could give you a hand. We could talk while we’re doing it.”
Steven started to say a routine no, but then he glanced at Reacher, saw the size of him, and smiled like a laborer who’s been offered the free use of a forklift.
“OK,” he said. “Out back.”
He came out from the corral of counters and led Reacher through a rear door. There was a dusty pickup parked in the sun next to an open shed with a tin roof. The pickup was loaded with bags of cement. The shelves in the open shed were empty. Reacher took his jacket off and laid it on the hood of the truck.
The bags were made of thick paper. He knew from his time with the pool gang that if he used two hands on the middle of the bags, they would fold themselves over and split. The way to do it was to clamp a palm on the comer and lift them one-handed. That would keep the dust off his new shirt, too. The bags weighed a hundred pounds, so he did them two at a time, one in each hand, holding them out, counterbalanced away from his body. Steven watched him, like he was a side-show at the circus.
“So tell me about Victor Hobie,” Reacher grunted.
Steven shrugged. He was leaning on a post, under the tin roof, out of the sun.
“Long time ago,” he said. “What can I tell you? We were just kids, you know? Our dads were in the chamber of commerce together. His was a printer. Mine ran this place, although it was just a lumberyard back then. We were together all the way through school. We started kindergarten on the same day, graduated high school on the same day. I only saw him once after that, when he was home from the Army. He’d been in Vietnam a year, and he was going back again.”
“So what sort of a guy was he?”
Steven shrugged again. “I’m kind of wary about giving you an opinion.”
“Why? Some kind of bad news in there?”

“No, no, nothing like that,” Steven said. “There’s nothing to hide. He was a good kid. But I’d be giving you one kid’s opinion about another kid from thirty-five years ago, right? Might not be a reliable opinion.”
Reacher paused, with a hundred-pound bag in each hand. Glanced back at Steve. He was leaning on his post in his red apron, lean and fit, the exact picture of what Reacher assumed was a typical cautious small-town Yankee businessman. The sort of guy whose judgment might be reasonably solid. He nodded.
“OK, I can see that. I’ll take it into account.”
Steven nodded back, like the ground rules were clear. “How old are you?”
“Thirty-eight,” Reacher said.
“From around here?”
Reacher shook his head. “Not really from around anywhere.”
“OK, couple of things you need to understand,” Steven said. “This is a small small suburban town, and Victor and I were born here in ‘48. We were already fifteen years old when Kennedy got shot, and sixteen before the Beatles arrived, and twenty when there was all that rioting in Chicago and L.A. You know what I’m saying here?”
“Different world,” Reacher said.
“You bet your ass it was,” Steven said back. “We grew up in a different world. Our whole childhood. To us, a real daring guy was one who put baseball cards in the wheels of his Schwinn. You need to bear that in mind, when you hear what I say.”
Reacher nodded. Lifted the ninth and tenth bag out of the pickup bed. He was sweating lightly, and worrying about the state of his shirt when Jodie next saw it.
“Victor was a very straight kid,” Steven said. “A very straight and normal kid. And like I say, for comparative purposes, that was back when the rest of us thought we were the bee’s knees for staying out until half past nine on a Saturday night, drinking milk shakes.”
“What was he interested in?” Reacher asked.
Steven blew out his cheeks and shrugged. “What can I tell you? Same things as all the rest of us, I guess. Baseball, Mickey Mantle. We liked Elvis, too. Ice cream, and the Lone Ranger. Stuff like that. Normal stuff.”
“His dad said he always wanted to be a soldier.”
“We all did. First it was cowboys and Indians, then it was soldiers.”
“So did you go to ‘Nam?”
Steven shook his head. “No, I kind of moved on from the soldier thing. Not because I disapproved. You got to understand, this was way, way before all that longhair stuff arrived up here. Nobody objected to the military. I wasn’t afraid of it, either. Back then there was nothing to be afraid of. We were the U.S., right?

We were going to whip the ass off those slanty-eyed gooks, six months maximum. Nobody was worried about going. It just seemed old-fashioned. We all respected it, we all loved the stories, but it seemed like yesterday's thing, you know what I mean? I wanted to go into business. I wanted to build my dad's yard up into a big corporation. That seemed like the thing to do. To me, that seemed like more of an American thing than going into the military. Back then, it seemed just as patriotic."

"So you beat the draft?" Reacher asked.

Steven nodded. "Draft board called me, but I had college applications pending and they skipped right over me. My dad was close to the board chairman, which didn't hurt any, I guess."

"How did Victor react to that?"

"He was fine with it. There was no issue about it. I wasn't antiwar or anything. I supported Vietnam, same as anybody else. It was just a personal choice, yesterday's thing or tomorrow's thing. I wanted tomorrow's thing, Victor wanted the Army. He kind of knew it was kind of, well, staid. Truth is, he was pretty much influenced by his old man. He was four-F in World War Two. Mine was a foot soldier, went to the Pacific. Victor kind of felt his family hadn't done its bit. So he wanted to do it, like a duty. Sounds stuffy now, right? Duty? But we all thought like that, back then. No comparison at all with the kids of today. We were all pretty serious and old-fashioned around here, Victor maybe slightly more than the rest of us. Very serious, very earnest. But not really a whole lot out of the ordinary."

Reacher was three-quarters through with the bags. He stopped and rested against the pickup door. "Was he smart?"

"Smart enough, I guess," Steven said. "He did well in school, without exactly setting the world on fire. We had a few kids here, over the years, gone to be lawyers or doctors or whatever. One of them went to NASA, a bit younger than Victor and me. Victor was smart enough, but he had to work to get his grades, as I recall."

Reacher started with the bags again. He had filled the farthest shelves first, which he was glad about, because his forearms were starting to burn.

"Was he ever in any kind of trouble?"

Steven looked impatient. "Trouble? You haven't been listening to me, mister. Victor was straight as an arrow, back when the worst kid would look like a complete angel today."

Six bags to go. Reacher wiped his palms on his pants.

"What was he like when you last saw him? Between the two tours?"

Steven paused to think about it. "A little older, I guess. I'd grown up a year, it

seemed like he'd grown up five. But he was no different. Same guy. Still serious, still earnest. They gave him a parade when he came home, because he had a medal. He was real embarrassed about it, said the medal was nothing. Then he went away again, and he never came back."
"How did you feel about that?"
Steven paused again. "Pretty bad, I guess. This was a guy I'd known all my life. I'd have preferred him to come back, of course, but I was real glad he didn't come back in a wheelchair or something, like a lot of them did."
Reacher finished the work. He butted the last bag into position on the shelf with the heel of his hand and leaned on the post opposite Steven.
"What about the mystery? About what happened to him?"
Steven shook his head and smiled, sadly. "There's no mystery. He was killed. This is about two old folks refusing to accept three unpleasant truths, is all."
"Which are?"
"Simple," Steven said. "Truth one is their boy died. Truth two is he died out there in some godforsaken impenetrable jungle where nobody will ever find him. Truth three is the government got dishonest around that time, and they stopped listing the MIAs as casualties, so they could keep the numbers reasonable. There were what? Maybe ten boys on Vic's chopper when it went down? That's ten names they kept off the nightly news. It was a policy, and it's too late for them to admit to anything now."
"That's your take?"
"Sure is," Steven said. "The war went bad, and the government went bad with it. Hard enough for my generation to accept, let me tell you. You younger guys are probably more at home with it, but you better believe the old folk like the Hobies are never going to square up to it."
He lapsed into silence, and glanced absently back and forth between the empty pickup and the full shelves. "That's a ton of cement you shifted. You want to come in and wash up and let me buy you a soda?"
"I need to eat," Reacher said. "I missed lunch."
Steven nodded, and then he smiled, ruefully. "Head south. There's a diner right after the train station. That's where we used to drink milk shakes, half past nine Saturday night, thinking we were practically Frank Sinatra."

THE DINER HAD obviously changed many times since daring boys with baseball cards in the wheels of their bicycles had sipped milk shakes there on Saturday nights. Now it was a seventies-style eaterie, low and square, a brick facade, green roof, with a nineties-style gloss in the form of elaborate neon signs in every window, hot pinks and blues. Reacher took the leather-bound folder

with him and pulled the door and stepped into chilly air smelling of freon and burgers and the strong stuff they squirt on the tables before wiping them down. He sat at the counter and a cheerful heavy girl of twenty-something boxed him in with flatware and a napkin and handed him a menu card the size of a billboard with photographs of the food positioned next to the written descriptions. He ordered a half-pounder, Swiss, rare, slaw and onion rings, and made a substantial wager with himself that it wouldn't resemble the photograph in any way at all. Then he drank his ice water and got a refill before opening the folder.

He concentrated on Victor's letters to his folks. There were twenty-seven of them in total, thirteen from his training postings and fourteen from Vietnam. They bore out everything he'd heard from Ed Steven. Accurate grammar, accurate spelling, plain, terse phrasing. The same handwriting used by everybody educated in America between the twenties and the sixties, but with a backward slant. A left-handed person. None of the twenty-seven letters ran more than a few lines over the page. A dutiful person. A person who knew it was considered impolite to end a personal letter on the first page. A polite, dutiful, left-handed, dull, conventional, normal person, solidly educated, but no kind of a rocket scientist.

The girl brought him the burger. It was adequate in itself, but very different from the gigantic feast depicted in the photograph on the menu. The slaw was floating in whitened vinegar in a crimped paper cup, and the onion rings were bloated and uniform, like small brown automobile tires. The Swiss was sliced so thin it was transparent, but it tasted like cheese.

The photograph taken after the passing-out parade down at Rucker was harder to interpret. The focus was off, and the peak of his cap put Victor's eyes into deep shadow. His shoulders were back, and his body was tense. Bursting with pride, or embarrassed by his mother? It was hard to tell. In the end, Reacher voted for pride, because of the mouth. It was a tight line, slightly down at the edges, the sort of mouth that needs firm control from the facial muscles to stop a huge joyful grin. This was a photograph of a guy at the absolute peak of his life so far. Every goal attained, every dream realized. Two weeks later, he was overseas.

Reacher shuffled through the letters for the note from Mobile. It was written from a bunk, before sailing. Mailed by a company clerk in Alabama. Sober phrases, a page and a quarter. Emotions tightly checked. It communicated nothing at all.

He paid the check and left the girl a two-dollar tip for being so cheerful. Would she have written home a page-and-a-quarter of tight-assed nothingness the day she was sailing off to war? No, but she would never sail off to war. Victor's helicopter went down maybe seven years before she was born, and Vietnam was

just something she had suffered through in eleventh-grade history class.
It was way too early to head straight back to Wall Street. Jodie had said seven o'clock. At least two hours to kill, minimum. He slid into the Taurus and put the air on high to blow the heat away. Then he flattened the Hertz map on the stiff leather of the folder and traced a route away from Brighton. He could take Route 9 south to the Bear Mountain Parkway, the Bear east to the Taconic, the Taconic south to the Sprain, and the Sprain would dump him out on the Bronx River Parkway. That road would take him straight down to the Botanical Gardens, which was a place he had never been, and a place he was pretty keen to visit.

MARILYN GOT TO her lunch a little after three o'clock. She had checked the cleaning crew's work before she let them leave, and they had done a perfect job. They had used a steam-cleaner on the hall rug, not because it was dirty, but because it was the best way of raising up the dents in the pile left by the credenza's feet. The steam swelled the wool fibers, and after a thorough vacuuming nobody was ever going to know a heavy piece of furniture had once rested there.
She took a long shower and wiped out the stall with a kitchen towel to leave the tiling dry and shiny. She combed her hair and left it to air-dry. She knew the June humidity would put a slight curl in it. Then she got dressed, which involved one garment only. She put on Chester's favorite thing, a dark pink silk sheath which worked best with nothing on underneath. It came just above the knee, and although it wasn't exactly tight, it clung in all the right places, as if it had been made for her, which in fact it had been, although Chester wasn't aware of that. He thought it was just a lucky off-the-peg accident. She was happy to let him think that, not because of the money, but because it felt a little, well, brazen to admit to having such a sexy thing custom-made. And the effect on him was, frankly, brazen. It was like a trigger. She used it when she thought he needed rewarding. Or deflecting. And he was going to need deflecting tonight. He was going to arrive home and find his house up for sale and his wife in charge. Any old way she looked at it, it was going to be a difficult evening, and she was prepared to use any advantage she could to get through it, brazen or not.
She chose the Gucci heels which matched the sheath's color and made her legs look long. Then she went down to the kitchen and ate her lunch, which was an apple and a square of reduced-fat cheese, and then she went back upstairs and brushed her teeth again and thought about makeup. Being naked under the dress and with her hair down in a natural style, the way to go was really no makeup at all, but she was prepared to admit she was just a little way past being able to get away with that, so she set out on the long haul of making herself up so she would

look like she hadn't troubled to.
It took her twenty minutes; and then she did her nails, toes too, because she felt that counted when it was likely her shoes would be coming off early. Then she dabbed her favorite perfume on, enough to be noticed without being overwhelming. Then the phone rang. It was Sheryl.
"Marilyn?" she said. "Six hours on the market, and you've got a nibble!"
"I have? But who? And how?"
"I know, the very first day, before you're even listed anywhere, isn't it wonderful? It's a gentleman who's relocating with his family, and he was cruising the area, getting a feel for it, and he saw your sign. He came straight over here for the particulars. Are you ready? Can I bring him right over?"
"Wow, right now? Already? This is quick, isn't it? But yes, I guess I'm ready. Who is it, Sheryl? You think he's a serious buyer?"
"Definitely I do, and he's only here today. He has to go back west tonight."
"OK, well, bring him on over, I guess. I'll be ready."
She realized she must have been rehearsing the whole routine, unconsciously, without really being aware of it. She moved fast, but she wasn't flustered. She hung up the phone and ran straight down to the kitchen and switched the oven on low. Spooned a heap of coffee beans onto a saucer and placed them on the middle shelf. Shut the oven door and turned to the sink. Dropped the apple core into the waste disposal and stacked the plate in the dishwasher. Wiped the sink down with a paper towel and stood back, hands on hips, scanning the room. She walked to the window and angled the blind until the light caught the shine on the floor.
"Perfect," she said to herself.
She ran back up the stairs and started at the top of the house. She ducked into every room, scanning, checking, adjusting flowers, angling blinds, plumping pillows. She turned lamps on everywhere. She had read that to turn them on after the buyer was already in the room was a clear message the house was gloomy. Better to have them on from the outset, which was a clear message of cheerful welcome.
She ran back down the stairs. In the family room, she opened the blind all the way to show off the pool. In the den, she turned on the reading lamps and tilted the blind almost closed, to give a dark, comfortable look. Then she ducked into the living room. Shit, Chester's side-table was still there. right next to where his armchair had been. How could she have missed that? She grabbed it two-handed and ran with it to the basement stairs. She heard Sheryl's car on the gravel. She opened the basement door and ran down and dumped the table and ran back up. Closed the door on it and ducked into the powder room. Straightened the guest towel and dabbed at her hair and checked herself in the mirror. God! She was

towel and dabbed at her hair and checked herself in the mirror. God! She was wearing her silk sheath. With nothing underneath. The silk was clinging to her skin. What the hell was this poor guy going to think?
The doorbell rang. She was frozen. Did she have time to change? Of course not. They were at the door, right now, ringing the bell. A jacket or something? The doorbell rang again. She took a breath and shook her hips to loosen the fabric and walked down the hall. Took another breath and opened the door.
Sheryl beamed in at her, but Marilyn was already looking at the buyer. He was a tallish man, maybe fifty or fifty-five, gray, in a dark suit, standing side-on, looking out and back at the plantings along the driveway. She glanced down at his shoes, because Chester always said wealth and breeding shows up on the feet. These looked pretty good. Heavy Oxfords, polished to a shine. She started a smile. Was this going to be it? Sold within six hours? That would be a hell of a thing. She smiled a quick conspirator's smile with Sheryl and turned to the man. "Come in," she said brightly, and held out her hand.
He turned back from the garden to face her. He stared straight at her, frankly and blatantly. She felt naked under his gaze. She practically was naked. But she found herself staring right back at him, because he was terribly burned. One side of his head was just a mass of shiny pink scars. She kept her polite smile frozen in place and kept her hand extended toward him. He paused. Brought his hand up to meet it. But it wasn't a hand. It was a shining metal hook. Not an artificial hand, not a clever prosthetic device, just a wicked metal curve made of gleaming steel.

REACHER WAS AT the curb outside the sixty-story building on Wall Street ten minutes before seven o'clock. He kept the motor running and scanned a triangle that had its point on the building's exit door and spread sideways across the plaza past the distance where somebody could get to her before he could. There was nobody inside the triangle who worried him. Nobody static, nobody watching, just a thin stream of office workers jostling out to the street, jackets over their arms, bulky briefcases in their hands. Most of them were making a left on the sidewalk, heading for the subway. Some of them were threading through the cars at the curb, looking for cabs out in the traffic stream.
The other parked cars were harmless. There was a UPS truck two places ahead, and a couple of livery vehicles with drivers standing next to them, scanning for their passengers. Innocent bustle, at the weary end of a busy day. Reacher settled back in his seat to wait, his eyes flicking left and right, ahead and behind, always returning to the revolving door.
She came out before seven, which was sooner than he expected. He saw her through the glass, in the lobby. He saw her hair, and her dress, and the flash of

through the glass, in the lobby. He saw her hair, and her dress, and the flash of her legs as she skipped sideways to the exit. He wondered for a second if she had just been waiting up on her high floor. The timing was plausible. She could have seen the car from her window, gone straight to the elevator. She pushed the door and spilled out onto the plaza. He got out of the car and moved around the hood to the sidewalk and stood waiting. She was carrying the pilot's case. She skipped through a shaft of sun and her hair lit up like a halo. Ten yards from him, she smiled.
"Hello, Reacher," she called.
"Hello, Jodie," he said.
She knew something. He could see it in her face. She had big news for him, but she was smiling like she was going to tease him with it.
"What?" he asked.
She smiled again and shook her head. "You first, OK?"
They sat in the car and he ran through everything the old couple had told him. Her smile faded and she turned somber. Then he gave her the leather-bound folder and left her to scan through it while he fought the traffic in a narrow counterclockwise square that left them facing south on Broadway, two blocks from her place. He pulled in at the curb outside an espresso bar. She was reading the reconnaissance report from Rutter and studying the photograph of the emaciated gray man and the Asian soldier.
"Incredible," she said, quietly.
"Give me your keys," he said back. "Get a coffee and I'll walk up for you when I know your building's OK."
She made no objection. The photograph had shaken her up. She just went into her bag for her keys and got out of the car and skipped straight across the sidewalk and into the coffee shop. He watched her inside and then eased south down the street. He turned directly into her garage. It was a different car, and he figured if anybody was waiting down there they would hesitate long enough to give him all the advantage he would need. But the garage was quiet. Just the same group of parked vehicles, looking like they hadn't moved all day. He put the Taurus in her slot and went up the metal stairs to the lobby. Nobody there. Nobody in the elevator, nobody in the fourth-floor hallway. Her door was undamaged. He opened it up and stepped inside. Quiet, still air. Nobody there. He used the fire stairs to get back to the lobby and went out the glass doors to the street. Walked the two blocks north and ducked into the coffee shop and found her alone at a chrome table, reading Victor Hobie's letters, an espresso untouched at her elbow.
"You going to drink that?" he asked.
She stacked the jungle photograph on top of the letters

She stacked the jungle photograph on top of the letters.
“This has big implications,” she said.
He took that for a no, and pulled the cup over and swallowed the coffee in one mouthful. It had cooled slightly and was wonderfully strong.
“Let’s go,” she said. She let him carry her case and took his arm for the two-block walk. He gave back her keys at the street door and they went in through the lobby together and up in the elevator in silence. She unlocked the apartment door and went inside ahead of him.
“So it’s government people after us,” she said.
He made no reply. Just shrugged off his new jacket and dropped it on the sofa under the Mondrian copy.
“Has to be,” she said.
He walked to the windows and cracked the blinds. Shafts of daylight poured in and the white room glowed.
“We’re close to the secret of these camps,” she said. “So the government is trying to silence us. CIA or somebody.”
He walked through to the kitchen. Pulled the refrigerator door and took out a bottle of water.
“We’re in serious danger,” she said. “You don’t seem very worried about it ”
He shrugged and took a swallow of water. It was too cold. He preferred it room temperature.
“Life’s too short for worrying,” he said.
“Dad was worrying. It was making his heart worse.”
He nodded. “I know. I’m sorry.”
“So why aren’t you taking it seriously? Don’t you believe it?”
“I believe it,” he said. “I believe everything they told me.”
“And the photograph proves it, right? The place obviously exists.”
“I know it exists,” he said. “I’ve been there.”
She stared at him. “You’ve been there? When? How?”
“Not long ago,” he said. “I got just about as close as this Rutter guy got.”
“Christ, Reacher,” she said. “So what are you going to do about it?”
“I’m going to buy a gun.”
“No, we should go to the cops. Or the newspapers, maybe. The government can’t do this.”
“You wait for me here, OK?”
“Where are you going?”
“I’m going to buy a gun. Then I’ll buy us some pizza. I’ll bring it back.”
“You can’t buy a gun, not in New York City, for God’s sake. There are laws. You need ID and permits and things and you’ve got to wait five days anyway.”
“I can buy a gun anywhere,” he said. “Especially New York City. What do you

want on the pizza?"
"Have you got enough money?"
"For the pizza?"
"For the gun," she said.
"The gun will cost me less than the pizza," he said. "Lock the door behind me, OK? And don't open it unless you see it's me in the spy hole."
He left her standing in the center of the kitchen. He used the fire stairs to the lobby and stood in the bustle on the sidewalk long enough to get himself lined up with the geography. There was a pizza parlor on the block to the south. He ducked inside and ordered a large pie, half anchovies and capers, half hot pepperoni, to go in thirty minutes. Then he dodged traffic on Broadway and struck out east. He'd been in New York enough times to know what people say is true. Everything happens fast in New York. Things change fast. Fast in terms of chronology, and fast in terms of geography. One neighborhood shifts into another within a couple of blocks. Sometimes, the front of a building is a middle-class paradise, and around the back bums are sleeping in the alley. He knew a fast ten-minute walk was going to take him worlds away from Jodie's expensive apartment block.
He found what he was looking for in the shadows under the approach to the Brooklyn Bridge. There was a messy tangle of streets crouching there, and a giant housing project sprawling to the north and east. Some ragged cluttered stores, and a basketball court with chains under the hoops instead of nets. The air was hot and damp and filled with fumes and noise. He turned a comer and stood leaning on the chain-link with the basketball noises behind him, watching two worlds collide. There was a rapid traffic flow of vehicles driving and people walking fast, and an equal quantity of cars stopped and idling and people standing around in bunches. The moving cars tacked around the stopped ones, honking and swerving, and the walking people pushed and complained and dodged into the gutter to pass the knots of loiterers. Sometimes a car would stop short and a boy would dart forward to the driver's window. There would be a short conversation and money would change hands like a conjuring trick and the boy would dart back to a doorway and disappear. He would reappear a moment later and hustle back to the car. The driver would glance left and right and accept a small package and force back into the traffic in a burble of exhaust and a blast of horns. Then the boy would return to the sidewalk and wait.
Sometimes the trade was on foot, but the system was always the same. The boys were the cut-outs. They carried the money in and the packages out, and they were too young to go to trial. Reacher was watching them use three doorways in particular, spaced out along the block frontage. The center of the three was doing

the busiest trade. About two-to-one, in terms of commercial volume. It was the eleventh building, counting up from the south corner. He pushed off the fence and turned east. There was a vacant lot ahead which gave him a glimpse of the river. The bridge soared over his head. He turned north and came up behind the buildings in a narrow alley. Scanned ahead as he walked and counted eleven fire escapes. Dropped his glance to ground level and saw a black sedan jammed into the narrow space outside the eleventh rear entrance. There was a boy of maybe nineteen sitting on the trunk lid, with a mobile phone in his hand. The back-door guard, one step up the promotion ladder from his baby brothers shuttling back and forward across the sidewalk.

There was nobody else around. The boy was on his own. Reacher stepped into the alley. The way to do it is to walk fast and focus on something way beyond your target. Make the guy feel like he's got nothing to do with anything. Reacher made a show of checking his watch and glancing far ahead into the distance. He hustled along, almost running. At the last minute, he dropped his gaze to the car, like he was suddenly dragged back into the present by the obstacle. The boy was watching him. Reacher dodged left, where he knew the angle of the car wouldn't let him through. He pulled up in exasperation and dodged right, turning with the pent-up fury of a hurrying man balked by a nuisance. He swung his left arm with the turn and hit the kid square in the side of the head. The kid toppled and he hit him again, right-handed, just a short-arm jab, relatively gentle. No reason to put him in the hospital.

He let him fall off the trunk lid unaided, to see how far away he'd put him. A conscious person will always break his fall. This kid didn't. He hit the alley floor with a dusty thump. Reacher rolled him over and checked his pockets. There was a gun in there, but it wasn't the sort of thing he was going to bear home in triumph. It was a Chinese .22, some imitation of a Soviet imitation of something that was probably useless to start with. He pitched it out of reach under the car. He knew the back door of the tenement would be unlocked, because that's the point of a back door when you're doing a roaring trade about 150 yards south of Police Plaza. They come in the front, you need to be able to get out the back without fumbling for the key. He inched it open with his toe and stood gazing into the gloom. There was an inner door off the back hallway, leading to the right, into a room with a light on inside. It was about ten paces away.

No point in waiting. They weren't about to take a dinner break. He walked ahead ten paces and stopped at the door. The building stank of decay and sweat and urine. It was quiet. An abandoned building. He listened. There was a low voice inside the room. Then an answer to it. Two people, minimum.

Swinging the door open and standing and taking stock of the scene inside is not

the way to do it. The guy who pauses even for a millisecond is the guy who dies earlier than his classmates. Reacher's guess was the tenement was maybe fifteen feet wide, of which three were represented by the hallway he was standing in. So he aimed to be the other twelve feet into the room before they even knew he was there. They would still be looking at the door, wondering who else was coming in after him.

He took a breath and burst through the door like it wasn't there at all. It crashed back against the hinge and he was across the room in two huge strides. Dim light. A single electric bulb. Two men. Packages on the table. Money on the table. A handgun on the table. He hit the first guy a wide swinging roundhouse blow square on the temple. The guy fell sideways and Reacher drove through him with a knee in the gut on his way back to the second man, who was coming up out of his chair with his eyes wide and his mouth open in shock. Reacher aimed high and smacked him with a forearm smash exactly horizontal between his eyebrows and his hairline. Do it hard enough, and the guy goes down for an hour, but his skull stays in one piece. This was supposed to be a shopping trip, not an execution.

He stood still and listened through the door. Nothing. The guy in the alley was sleeping and the noise on the street was occupying the kids on the sidewalk. He glanced at the table and glanced away again, because the handgun lying there was a Colt Detective Special. A six-shot, .38-caliber revolver in blued steel with black plastic grips. Stubby little two-inch barrel. No good at all. Nowhere near the sort of thing he was looking for. The short barrel was a drawback, and the caliber was a disappointment. He remembered a Louisiana cop he'd met, a police captain from some small jurisdiction out in the bayou. The guy had come to the military police for firearms advice and Reacher had been detailed to deal with him. The guy had all kinds of tales of woe about the .38-caliber revolvers his men were using. He said *you just can't rely on them to put a guy down, not if he's coming at you all pumped up on angel dust.* He told a story about a suicide. The guy needed five shots to the head with a .38 to put himself away. Reacher had been impressed by the guy's unhappy face and he had decided then and there to stay away from .38s, which was a policy he was not about to change now. So he turned his back on the table and stood still and listened again. Nothing. He squatted next to the guy he'd hit in the head and started through his jacket.

The busiest dealers make the most money, and the most money buys the best toys, which was why he was in this building, and not in one of the slower rivals up or down the street. He found exactly what he wanted in the guy's left-hand inner pocket. Something a whole lot better than a puny .38 Detective Special. It

was a big black automatic, a Steyr GB, a handsome nine-millimeter which had been a big favorite of his Special Forces friends through most of his career. He pulled it out and checked it over. The magazine had all eighteen shells in it and the chamber smelled like it had never been fired. He pulled the trigger and watched the mechanism move. Then he reassembled the gun and jammed it under his belt in the small of his back and smiled. Stayed down next to the unconscious guy and whispered, “I’ll buy your Steyr for a buck. Just shake your head if you’ve got a problem with that, OK?”

Then he smiled again and stood up. Peeled a dollar bill off his roll and left it weighted down on the tabletop under the Detective Special. Stepped back to the hallway. All quiet. He made the ten paces to the back and came out into the light. Checked left and right up and down the alley and stepped over to the parked sedan. Opened the driver’s door and found the lever and popped the trunk. There was a black nylon sports bag in there, empty. A small cardboard box of nine-millimeter reloads under a tangle of red and black jump leads. He put the ammunition in the bag and walked away with it. The pizza was waiting for him when he arrived back on Broadway.

IT WAS SUDDEN. It happened without warning. As soon as they were inside and the door was closed, the man hit Sheryl, a vicious backhand blow to the face with whatever was inside his empty sleeve. Marilyn was frozen with shock. She saw the man twisting violently and the hook swinging through its glittering arc and she heard the wet crunch as his arm hit Sheryl’s face and she clamped both hands over her mouth as if it were somehow vitally important she didn’t scream. She saw the man spinning back toward her and reaching up under his right armpit and coming out with a gun in his left hand. She saw Sheryl going over backward and sprawling on the rug, right where it was still damp from the steam cleaning. She saw the gun arcing at her along the exact same radius he had used before, but in the reverse direction, coming straight at her. The gun was made of dark metal, gray, dewed with oil. It was dull, but it shone. It stopped level with her chest, and she stared down at its color, and all she could think was: *that’s what they mean when they say gunmetal.*

“Step closer,” the man said.

She was paralyzed. Her hands were clamped to her face and her eyes were open so wide she thought the skin on her face would tear.

“Closer,” the man said again.

She stared down at Sheryl. She was struggling up on her elbows. Her eyes were crossed and blood was running from her nose. Her top lip was swelling and the blood was dripping off her chin. Her knees were up and her skirt was rucked.

She could see her panty hose change from thin to thick at the top. Her breathing was ragged. Then her elbows gave way again and slid forward and her knees splayed out. Her head hit the floor with a soft thump and rolled sideways.
“Step closer,” the man said.
She stared at his face. It was rigid. The scars looked like hard plastic. One eye was hooded under an eyelid as thick and coarse as a thumb. The other was cold and unblinking. She stared at the gun. It was a foot away from her chest. Not moving. The hand that held it was smooth. The nails were manicured. She stepped forward a quarter step.
“Closer.”
She slid her feet forward until the gun was touching the fabric of her dress. She felt the hardness and the coldness of the gray metal through the thin silk.
“Closer.”
She stared at him. His face was a foot away from hers. On the left the skin was gray and lined. The good eye was webbed with lines. The right eye blinked. The eyelid was slow and heavy. It went down, then up, deliberately, like a machine. She leaned forward an inch. The gun pressed into her breast.
“Closer.”
She moved her feet. He answered with matching pressure on the gun. The metal was pressing hard into the softness of her flesh. It was crushing her breast. The silk was yielding into a deep crater. It was pulling her nipple sideways. It was hurting her. The man raised his right arm. The hook. He held it up in front of her eyes. It was a plain steel curve, rubbed and polished until it shone. He rotated it slowly, with an awkward movement of his forearm. She heard leather inside his sleeve. The tip of the hook was machined to a point. He rotated the tip away and laid the flat of the curve against her forehead. She flinched. It was cold. He scraped it down her forehead and traced the curve of her nose. In under her nose. He pressed it against her top lip. Brought it down and in and pressed until her mouth opened. He tapped it gently against her teeth. It caught on her bottom lip, because her lip was dry. He dragged her lip down with the steel until the soft rubbery flesh pulled free. He traced over the curve of her chin. Down under her chin to her throat. Up again an inch, and back, under the shelf of her jaw, until he was forcing her head up with the strength in his shoulder. He stared into her eyes.
“My name is Hobie,” he said.
She was up on tiptoes, trying to take the weight off her throat. She was starting to gag. She couldn’t remember taking a breath since she had opened the door.
“Did Chester mention me?”
Her head was tilting upward. She was staring at the ceiling. The gun was digging into her breast. It was no longer cold. The heat of her body had warmed it. She

into her breast. It was no longer cold. The heat of her body had warmed it. She shook her head, a small urgent motion, balanced on the pressure of the hook.
“He didn’t mention me?”
“No,” she gasped. “Why? Should he have?”
“Is he a secretive man?”
She shook her head again. The same small urgent motion, side to side, the skin of her throat snagging left and right against the metal.
“Did he tell you about his business problems?”
She blinked. Shook her head again.
“So he is a secretive man.”
“I guess,” she gasped. “But I knew anyway.”
“Does he have a girlfriend?”
She blinked again. Shook her head.
“How can you be sure?” Hobie asked. “If he’s a secretive man?”
“What do you want?” she gasped.
“But I guess he doesn’t need a girlfriend. You’re a very beautiful woman.”
She blinked again. She was up on her toes. The Gucci heels were off the ground.
“I just paid you a compliment,” Hobie said. “Oughtn’t you say something in response? Politely?”
He increased the pressure. The steel dug into the flesh of her throat. One foot came free of the ground.
“Thank you,” she gasped.
The hook eased down. Her eye line came back to the horizontal and her heels touched the rug. She realized she was breathing. She was panting, in and out, in and out.
“A very beautiful woman.”
He dropped the hook away from her throat. It touched her waist. Traced down over the curve of her hip. Down over her thigh. He was staring at her face. The gun was jammed hard in her flesh. The hook turned, and the flat face of the curve lifted off her thigh, leaving just the point behind. It traced downward. She felt it slide off the silk onto her bare leg. It was sharp. Not like a needle. Like a pencil point. It stopped moving. It started back up. He was pressing with it, gently. It wasn’t cutting her. She knew that. But it was furrowing against the firmness of her skin. It moved up. It slid under the silk. She felt the metal on the skin of her thigh. It moved up. She could feel the silk of her dress bunching and gathering in the radius of the hook. The hook moved up. The back of the hem was sliding up the backs of her legs. Sheryl stirred on the floor. The hook stopped moving and Hobie’s awful right eye swiveled slowly across and down.
“Put your hand in my pocket,” he said.
She stared at him.

She stared at him.
“Your left hand,” he said. “My right pocket.”
She had to move closer and reach over and down between his arms. Her face was close to his. He smelled of soap. She felt around to his pocket. Darted her fingers inside and closed them over a small cylinder. Slid it out. It was a used roll of duct tape, an inch in diameter. Silver. Maybe five yards remaining. Hobie stepped away from her.
“Tape Sheryl’s wrists together,” he said.
She wriggled her hips to make the hem of her dress fall down into place. He watched her do it and smiled. She glanced between the roll of silver tape and Sheryl, down on the floor.
“Turn her over,” he said.
The light from the window was catching the gun. She knelt next to Sheryl. Pulled on one shoulder and pushed on the other until she flopped over on her front.
“Put her elbows together,” he said.
She hesitated. He raised the gun a fraction, and then the hook, arms wide, a display of superior weaponry. She grimaced. Sheryl stirred again. Her blood had pooled on the rug. It was brown and sticky. Marilyn used both hands and forced her elbows together, behind her back. Hobie looked down.
“Get them real close,” he said.
She picked at the tape with her nail and got a length free. Wrapped it around and around Sheryl’s forearms, just below her elbows.
“Tight,” he said. “All the way up.”
She wound the tape around and around, up above her elbows and down to her wrists. Sheryl was stirring and struggling.
“OK, sit her up,” Hobie said.
She dragged her into a sitting position with her taped arms behind her. Her face was masked in blood. Her nose was swollen, going blue. Her lips were puffy.
“Put tape on her mouth,” Hobie said.
She used her teeth and bit off a six-inch length. Sheryl was blinking and focusing. Marilyn shrugged unhappily at her, like a helpless apology, and stuck the tape over her mouth. It was thick tape, with tough reinforcing threads baked into the silver plastic coating. It was shiny, but not slippery, because of the raised crisscross threads. She rubbed her fingers side to side across them to make it stick. Sheryl’s nose started bubbling and her eyes opened wide in panic.
“God, she can’t breathe,” Marilyn gasped.
She went to rip the tape off again, but Hobie kicked her hand away.
“You broke her nose,” Marilyn said. “She can’t breathe.”
The gun was pointing down at her head. Held steady. Eighteen inches away.

The gun was pointing down at her head. Held steady. Eighteen inches away.
“She’s going to die,” Marilyn said.
“That’s for damn sure,” Hobie said back.
She stared up at him in horror. Blood was rasping and bubbling in Sheryl’s fractured airways. Her eyes were staring in panic. Her chest was heaving.
Hobie’s eyes were on Marilyn’s face.
“You want me to be nice?” he asked.
She nodded wildly.
“Are you going to be nice back?”
She stared at her friend. Her chest was convulsing, heaving for air that wasn’t there. Her head was shaking from side to side. Hobie leaned down and turned the hook so the point was rasping across the tape on Sheryl’s mouth as her head jerked back and forth. Then he jabbed hard and forced the point through the silver. Sheryl froze. Hobie moved his arm, left and right, up and down. Pulled the hook back out. There was a ragged hole left in the tape, with air whistling in and out. The tape sucked and blew against her lips as Sheryl gasped and panted.
“I was nice,” Hobie said. “So now you owe me, OK?”
Sheryl’s breathing was sucking hard through the hole in the tape. She was concentrating on it. Her eyes were squinting down, like she was confirming there was air in front of her to use. Marilyn was watching her, sitting back on her heels, cold with terror.
“Help her to the car,” Hobie said.

10

CHESTER STONE WAS alone in the bathroom on the eighty-eighth floor. Tony had forced him to go in there. Not physically. He had just stood there and pointed silently, and Stone had scuttled across the carpet in his undershirt and shorts, with his dark socks and polished shoes on his feet. Then Tony had lowered his arm and stopped pointing and told him to stay in there and closed the door on him. There had been muffled sounds out in the office, and after a few minutes the two men must have left, because Stone heard doors shutting and the nearby whine of the elevator. Then it had gone dark and silent.

He sat on the bathroom floor with his back against the gray granite tiling, staring into the silence. The bathroom door was not locked. He knew that. There had been no fiddling or clicking when the door closed. He was cold. The floor was hard tile, and the chill was striking up through the thin cotton of his boxers. He started shivering. He was hungry, and thirsty.

He listened carefully. Nothing. He eased himself up off the floor and stepped to the sink. Turned the faucet and listened again over the trickle of water. Nothing. He bent his head and drank. His teeth touched the metal of the faucet and he tasted the chlorine taste of city water. He held a mouthful unswallowed and let it soak into his dry tongue. Then he gulped it down and turned the faucet off.

He waited an hour. A whole hour, sitting on the floor, staring at the unlocked door, listening to the silence. It was hurting where the guy had hit him. A hard ache, where the fist had glanced off his ribs. Bone against bone, solid, jarring. Then a soft, nauseated feeling in his gut where the blow had landed. He kept his eyes on the door, trying to tune out the pain. The building boomed and rumbled gently, like there were other people in the world, but they were far away. The elevators and the air-conditioning and the rush of water in the pipes and the play of the breeze on the windows added and canceled to a low, comfortable whisper, just below the point of easy audibility. He thought he could hear elevator doors opening and closing, maybe eighty-eight floors down, faint bass thumps shivering upward through the shafts.

He was cold, and cramped, and hungry, and hurting, and scared. He stood up, bent with cramps and pain, and listened. Nothing. He slid his leather soles across the tile. Stood with his hand on the doorknob. Listened hard. Still nothing. He opened the door. The huge office was dim and silent. Empty. He padded straight across the carpet and stopped near the door out to the reception area. Now he was nearer the elevator banks. He could hear the cars whining up and down inside the shafts. He listened at the door. Nothing. He opened the door. The

inside the shafts. He listened at the door. Nothing. He opened the door. The reception area was dim and deserted. The oak gleamed pale and there were random gleams coming off the brass accents. He could hear the motor running inside a refrigerator in the kitchen to his right. He could smell cold stale coffee. The door out to the lobby was locked. It was a big, thick door, probably fire-resistant in line with severe city codes. It was faced in pale oak, and he could see the dull gleam of steel in the gap where it met the frame. He shook the handle, and it didn't move at all. He stood there for a long time, facing the door, peering out through the tiny wired-glass window, thirty feet away from the elevator buttons and freedom. Then he turned back to the counter.

It was chest-high, viewed from the front. In back, there was a desktop level, and the chest-high barrier was made up of cubbyholes with office stationery and folders stacked neatly inside. There was a telephone on the desktop part, in front of Tony's chair. The telephone was a complicated console, with a handset on the left and buttons on the right under a small oblong window. The window was a gray LCD readout that read OFF. He picked up the handset and heard nothing except the blood hissing in his ear. He pressed random buttons. Nothing. He quartered the console, tracing his finger left-to-right across every button, searching. He found a button marked OPERATE. He pressed it and the little screen changed to ENTER CODE. He pressed random numbers and the screen changed back to off.

There were cupboards under the desktop. Little oak doors. They were all locked. He shook each of them in turn and heard little metal tongues striking metal plates. He walked back into'Hobie's office. Walked through the furniture to the desk. There was nothing on the sofas. His clothes were gone. Nothing on the desktop. The desk drawers were locked. It was a solid desk, expensive, ruined by the gouges from the hook, and the drawer locks felt tight. He squatted down, ridiculous in his underwear, and pulled at the handles. They moved a fraction, then stopped. He saw the trash can under the desk. It was a brass cylinder, not tall. He tilted it over. His wallet was in there, empty and forlorn. The picture of Marilyn was next to it, facedown. The paper was printed over and over on the back: *Kodak.* He reached into the can and picked it up. Turned it over. She smiled out at him. It was a casual head-and-shoulders shot. She was wearing the silk dress. The sexy one, the one she'd had custom-made. She didn't know he knew she'd had it made. He had been home alone when the store called. He'd told them to call back, and let her believe he thought it was off-the-rack. In the photo, she was wearing it for the first time. She was smiling shyly, her eyes animated with daring, telling him not to go too low with the lens, not down to where the thin silk clung to her breasts. He cradled the picture in his palm and

stared at it, and then he placed it back in the can, because he had no pockets. He stood up urgently and stepped around the leather chair to the wall of windows. Pushed the slats of the blinds apart with both hands and looked out. *He had to do something.* But he was eighty-eight floors up. Nothing to see except the river and New Jersey. No neighbors opposite to gesture urgently at. Nothing at all opposite, until the Appalachians reached Pennsylvania. He let the blinds fall back and paced every inch of the office, every inch of the reception area, and back into the office to do it all over again. *Hopeless.* He was in a prison. He stood in the center of the floor, shivering, focusing on nothing.

He was hungry. He had no idea what time it was. The office had no clock and he had no watch. The sun was getting low in the west. Late afternoon or early evening, and he hadn't eaten lunch. He crept to the office door. Listened again. Nothing except the comfortable hum of the building and the rattle of the refrigerator motor. He stepped out and crossed to the kitchen. He paused with his finger on the light switch, and then he dared to turn it on. A fluorescent tube kicked in. It flickered for a second and threw a flat glare across the room and added an angry buzz from its circuitry. The kitchen was small, with a token stainless steel sink and an equal length of counter. Rinsed mugs upside down, and a filter machine tarred with old coffee. A tiny refrigerator under the counter. There was milk in there, and a six-pack of beer, and a Zabar's bag, neatly folded shut. He pulled it out. There was something wrapped in newspaper. It was heavy, and solid. He stood up and unrolled the paper on the counter. There was a plastic bag inside. He gripped the bottom, and the severed hand thumped out on the counter. The fingers were white and curled, and there was spongy purple flesh and splintered white bone and empty blue tubes trailing at the wrist. Then the glare of the fluorescent light spun around and tilted past his gaze as he fainted to the floor.

REACHER PUT THE pizza box on the elevator floor and took the gun out of his belt and zipped it into the sports bag with the spare shells. Then he crouched and picked up the pizza again in time for the elevator door to slide back on the fourth floor. The apartment opened up as soon as he stepped within range of the fish-eye in the door. Jodie was standing just inside the hallway, waiting for him. She was still in the linen dress. It was slightly creased across the hips, from sitting all day. Her long brown legs were scissored, one foot in front of the other.

"I brought dinner," he said.

She looked at the sports bag instead.

"Last chance, Reacher. We should talk with somebody about all of this."

"No," he said.

He put the bag on the floor and she stepped behind him to lock the door.
“OK,” she said. “If this is the government doing something, maybe you’re right. Maybe we should stay away from the cops.”
“Right,” he said.
“So I’m with you on this.”
“Let’s eat,” he said.
He walked through to the kitchen with the pizza. She had set the table. There were two place settings, opposite each other. Plates, knives and forks, paper napkins, glasses of ice water. Like two people were resident in the apartment. He put the box on the counter and opened it up.
“You choose,” he said.
She was standing close behind him. He could feel her there. He could smell her perfume. He felt the flat of her hand touch his back. It burned. She left it there for a second, then she used it to move him out of the way.
“Let’s split it,” she said.
She balanced the box on her arm and carried it back to the table. Pulled the slices off each other while the box canted and wobbled. Shared them between the plates. He sat and sipped the water and watched her. She was slender and energetic and could make any mundane activity look like a graceful ballet. She turned away and dumped the greasy box and turned back. The dress twisted and flowed with her. She sat down. He heard the whisper of linen on skin and her foot hit his knee under the table.
“Sorry,” she said.
She wiped her fingers on the napkin and tossed her hair behind her shoulders and held her head at an angle for the first bite. She ate left-handed, rolling the wedge into a point, attacking it hungrily.
“No lunch,” she said. “You told me not to leave the building.”
She darted her tongue out and caught a thread of cheese. Smiled self-consciously as she hooked it back between her lips. They shone with the oil. She took a long drink of water. “Anchovies, my favorite. How did you know? But they make you thirsty later, don’t they? So salty.”
Her dress was sleeveless and he could see her arms, all the way down from the little knob of bone at the top of the shoulder. They were slim and brown and narrow. Almost no muscle there at all, just tiny biceps like tendons. She was gorgeous and she took his breath away, but she was a puzzle, physically. She was tall, but she was so tiny he didn’t see how there was room for all the essential organs inside her. She was as thin as a stick, but looked vibrant and firm and strong. A puzzle. He remembered the feel of her arm around his waist, fifteen years before. Like somebody was tightening a thick rope around his

middle.
“I can’t stay here tonight,” he said.
She looked across at him. “Why not? You got something to do, I’ll come do it, too. Like I said, I’m with you on this.”
“No, I just can’t stay,” he said.
“Why not?” she asked again.
He took a deep breath and held it. Her hair was shimmering in the light.
“It’s not appropriate that 1 should stay here,” he said.
“But why not?”
He shrugged, embarrassed. “Just because, Jodie. Because you’re thinking of me like a brother or an uncle or something, because of Leon, but I’m not that, am I?”
She was staring at him.
“I’m sorry,” he said.
Her eyes were wide. “What?”
“This is not right,” he said gently. “You’re not my sister or my niece. That’s just an illusion because I was close to your dad. To me, you’re a beautiful woman, and I can’t be here alone with you.”
“Why not?” she asked again, breathless.
“Christ, Jodie, why not? Because it’s not appropriate, that’s why not. You don’t need to hear all the details. You’re not my sister or my niece, and I can’t keep on pretending you are. It’s driving me crazy, pretending.”
She was very still. Staring at him. Still breathless.
“How long have you felt this way?” she asked.
He shrugged, embarrassed again. “Always, I guess. Since I first met you. Give me a break, Jodie, you weren’t a kid. I was nearer your age than Leon’s.”
She was silent. He held his breath, waiting for the tears. The outrage. The trauma. She was just staring at him. He was already regretting having spoken. He should have just kept his damn mouth shut. Bitten his damn lip and gotten through it. He had been through worse, although he couldn’t exactly remember where or when.
“I’m sorry,” he said again.
Her face was blank. Wide blue eyes, staring at him. Her elbows were on the table. The dress fabric was bunching at the front and cupping forward. He could see the strap of her bra, thin and white against the skin of her shoulder. He stared at her anguished face and closed his eyes and sighed in despair. *Honesty was the best policy?* Forget about it.
Then she did a curious thing. She stood up slowly, and turned and hauled her chair out of the way. Stepped forward and gripped the table edge, both hands, slim muscles standing out like cords. She dragged the table off to one side. Then

slim muscles standing out like cords. She dragged the table off to one side. Then she changed position and turned and butted it with her thighs until it was hard back against the counter. Reacher was left sitting on his chair, suddenly isolated in the middle of the room. She stepped back and stood in front of him. His breath froze in his chest.
"You're thinking about me like just a woman?" she asked, slowly.
He nodded.
"Not like a kid sister? Not like your niece?"
He shook his head. She paused.
"Sexually?" she asked quietly.
He nodded, still embarrassed, resigned. "Of course sexually. What do you think? Look at yourself. I could hardly sleep last night."
She just stood there.
"I had to tell you," he said. "I'm really sorry, Jodie."
She closed her eyes. Screwed them tight shut. Then he saw a smile. It spread across her whole face. Her hands clenched at her side. She exploded forward and hurled herself at him. She landed on his lap and her arms clamped tight behind his head and she kissed him like she would die if she stopped.
IT WAS SHERYL'S car, but he made Marilyn drive it. He sat in back, behind Marilyn, with Sheryl next to him with her arms crushed behind her. The tape was still on her mouth, and she was breathing hard. He kept the hook resting on her lap, with the point dug in against the skin of her thigh. His left hand held the gun. He touched it to the back of Marilyn's neck often enough that she never forgot it was there.
Tony met them in the underground garage. Office hours were over and the place was quiet. Tony handled Sheryl and Hobie took Marilyn and the four of them rode up in the freight elevator. Hobie unlocked the door from the corridor and stepped into the reception area. The kitchen light was on. Stone was sprawled on the floor, in his underwear. Marilyn gasped and ran to him. Hobie watched the sway of her body under the thin dress and smiled. Turned back and locked the door. Pocketed the keys and the gun. Marilyn had stopped short and was staring into the kitchen, hands up at her mouth again, eyes wide, horror in her face. Hobie followed her gaze. The hand was lying on the counter, palm up, fingers curled like a beggar's. Then Marilyn was looking downward in terror.
"Don't worry," Hobie said. "It's not one of his. But it's a thought, isn't it? I could cut his hand off if he doesn't do what I want."
Marilyn stared at him.
"Or I could cut yours off," he said to her. "I could make him watch. Maybe I could make him do it for me."
"You're insane," Marilyn said.

"You're insane," Marilyn said.
"He would, you know," Hobie said. "He'd do anything. He's pathetic. Look at him, in his underwear. You think he looks good in his underwear?"
She said nothing.
"What about you?" Hobie asked. "Do you look good in your underwear? You want to take that dress off and show me?"
She stared at him in panic.
"No?" he said. "OK, maybe later. But what about your real-estate agent? You think she'd look good in her underwear?"
He turned to Sheryl. She was backing away against the door, leaning hard on her taped arms. She stiffened.
"What about it?" he said to her. "You look good in your underwear?"
She stared and shook her head wildly. Her breathing whistled through the hole in the tape. Hobie stepped nearer and pinned her against the door and forced the tip of his hook under the waistband of her skirt.
"Let's check it out."
He wrenched with the hook and Sheryl staggered off-balance and the fabric tore open. Buttons scattered and she fell to her knees. He raised his foot and used the flat of his sole to push her all the way over. He nodded to Tony. Tony ducked down and pulled the torn skirt down off her thrashing legs.
"Panty hose," Hobie said. "God, I hate panty hose. So unromantic."
He stooped and used the tip of the hook to tear the nylon to shreds. Her shoes came off. Tony balled the skirt and the shoes and the torn nylon and carried it to the kitchen. Dropped it into the trash. Sheryl scrabbled her bare legs under her and sat there gasping through the tape. She was wearing tiny white panties and was trying to make the tails of her blouse fall down over them. Marilyn was watching her, openmouthed in horror.
"OK, now we're having fun," Hobie said. "Aren't we?"
"You bet," Tony said. "But not as much fun as we're going to have."
Hobie laughed and Stone stirred. Marilyn ducked down and helped him to a sitting position on the kitchen floor. Hobie stepped over and picked up the severed hand from the countertop.
"This came off the last guy who annoyed me," he said.
Stone was opening and closing his eyes like he could make the scene change by wiping it away. Then he stared out at Sheryl. Marilyn realized he had never met her before. He didn't know who she was.
"Into the bathroom," Hobie said.
Tony pulled Sheryl to her feet and Marilyn helped Chester. Hobie walked behind them. They filed into the big office and crossed to the bathroom door.
"Inside," Hobie said.

"Inside," Hobie said.
Stone led the way. The women followed him. Hobie watched them go and stood at the door. Nodded in at Stone. "Tony's going to sleep the night out here, on the sofa. So don't come out again. And spend your time fruitfully. Talk things over with your wife. We're going to do the stock transfer tomorrow. Much better for her if we do it in an atmosphere of mutual agreement. Much better. Any other way, there could be bad consequences. You get my meaning?"
Stone just stared at him. Hobie let his glance linger on the women and then he waved the severed hand in farewell and pulled the door closed.

JODIE'S WHITE BEDROOM was flooded with light. For five minutes every evening in June, the sun dropped away to the west and found a slim straight path through Manhattan's tall buildings and hit her window with its full force. The blind burned like it was incandescent and the walls picked it up and bounced it around until the whole place was glowing like a soft white explosion. Reacher thought it was entirely appropriate. He was lying on his back, happier than he could ever remember getting.
If he'd thought about it, he might have worried. He could remember mean little proverbs that said things like *pity the man who gets what he wants.* And *it's better to travel hopefully than to arrive.* To get something you want after fifteen years of wanting it could have felt strange. But it didn't. It had felt like a blissful rocket trip to somewhere he had no idea existed. It had been everything he had dreamed it would be, multiplied by a million. She wasn't a myth. She was a living breathing creature, hard and strong and sinewy and perfumed, warm and shy and giving.
She lay nestled in the crook of his arm, with her hair over his face. It was in his mouth as he breathed. His hand was resting on her back. He was rocking it back and forth over her ribs. Her backbone was in a cleft formed by long, shallow muscle. He traced his finger down the groove. Her eyes were closed and she was smiling. He knew that. He had felt the scrape of her lashes on his neck, and his shoulder could feel the shape of her mouth. It could decode the feel of the muscles in her face. She was smiling. He moved his hand. Her skin was cool and soft.
"I should be crying now," she said, quietly. "I always thought I would be. I used to think, if this ever, ever happens, I'll cry afterward."
He squeezed her tighter. "Why should we cry?"
"Because of all those wasted years," she said.
"Better late than never," he said.
She came up on her elbows. Climbed half on top of him, her breasts crushed into his chest. "That stuff you said to me. I could have said to you, exactly word for

word. I wish I had, a long time ago. But I couldn't."
"I couldn't, either," he said. "It felt like a guilty secret."
"Yes," she said. "My guilty secret."
She climbed up all the way and sat astride him, back straight, smiling.
"But now it's not a secret," she said.
"No," he said.
She stretched her arms up high and started a yawn that ended in a contented smile. He put his hands on her tiny waist. Traced them upward to her breasts.
Her smile broadened to a grin. "Again?"
He nudged her sideways with his hips and rolled her over and laid her down gently on the bed. "We're playing catch-up, right? All those wasted years."
She nodded. Just a tiny motion, smiling, rubbing her hair against the pillow.

MARILYN TOOK charge She felt she was the strong one. Chester and Sheryl were dazed, which she felt was understandable, because they were the two who had suffered the abuse. She could guess how vulnerable they must be feeling, half-dressed. She felt half-dressed herself, but she wasn't going to worry about that now. She pulled the tape off Sheryl's mouth and held her while she cried. Then she ducked behind her and worked the binding free from her wrists and unwound it up to her elbows. She balled up the sticky mass and dropped it in the trash and went back to help massage some feeling back into her shoulders. Then she found a washcloth and ran hot water into the sink and sponged the crusted blood off Sheryl's face. Her nose was swollen and going black. She started worrying about getting her to a doctor. She started rehearsing things in her head. She had seen movies where hostages get taken. Somebody always elects herself spokesman and says no police and gets the sick released to the hospital. But how exactly do they do it?
She took the towels from the bar and gave Sheryl a bath sheet to use as a skirt. Then she divided up the remainder into three piles and laid them on the floor. She could see the tiles were going to be cold. Thermal insulation was going to be important. She slid the three piles into a row against the wall. She sat with her back against the door, and put Chester on her left and Sheryl on her right. She took their hands and squeezed them hard. Chester squeezed back.
"I'm so sorry," he said.
"How much do you owe?" she asked.
"More than seventeen million."
She didn't bother to ask if he could pay it back. He wouldn't be half-naked on a bathroom floor if he could pay it back.
"What does he want?" she asked.

He shrugged at her side, miserably.
“Everything,” he said. “He wants the whole company.”
She nodded, and focused on the plumbing under the sink.
“What would that leave us with?”
He paused and then shrugged again. “Whatever crumb he would feel like throwing us. Probably nothing at all.”
“What about the house?” she asked. “We’d still have that, right? I put it on the market. This lady is the broker. She says it’ll sell for nearly two million.”
Stone glanced across at Sheryl. Then he shook his head. “The house belongs to the company. It was a technical thing, easier to finance that way. So Hobie will get it, along with everything else.”
She nodded and stared into space. On her right, Sheryl was sleeping, sitting up. The terror had exhausted her.
“You go to sleep, too,” she said. “I’ll figure something out.”
He squeezed her hand again and leaned his head back. Closed his eyes.
“I’m so sorry,” he said again.
She made no reply. Just smoothed the thin silk down over her thighs and stared straight ahead, thinking hard.

THE SUN WAS gone before they finished for the second time. It became a bright bar sliding sideways off the window. Then it became a narrow horizontal beam, playing across the white wall, traveling slowly, dust dancing through it. Then it was gone, shut off like a light, leaving the room with the cool, dull glow of evening. They lay spent and nuzzling in a tangle of sheets, bodies slack, breathing low. Then he felt her smile again. She came up on one elbow and looked at him with the same teasing grin he’d seen outside her office building.
“What?” he asked.
“I’ve got something to tell you,” she said.
He waited.
“In my official capacity.”
He focused on her face. She was still smiling. Her teeth were white and her eyes were bright blue, even in the new cool dimness. He thought *what official capacity?* She was a lawyer who cleaned up the mess when somebody owed somebody else a hundred million dollars.
“I don’t owe money,” he said. “And I don’t think anybody owes me.”
She shook her head. Still smiling. “As executor of Dad’s will.”
He nodded. It made sense that Leon should appoint her. A lawyer in the family, the obvious choice.
“I opened it up and read it,” she said. “Today, at work.”

“So what’s in it? He was a secret miser? A closet billionaire?”
She shook her head again. Said nothing.
“He knows what happened to Victor Hobie and wrote it all down in his will?”
She was still smiling. “He left you something. A bequest.”
He nodded again, slowly. That made sense, too. That was Leon. He’d remember, and he’d pick out some little thing, for the sake of sentiment. But what? He scanned back. Probably a souvenir. Maybe his medals? Maybe the sniper rifle he brought home from Korea. It was an old Mauser, originally German, presumably captured by the Soviets on the Eastern Front and sold on ten years later to their Korean customers. It was a hell of a piece of machinery. Leon and he had speculated on the action it must have seen, many times. It would be a nice thing to have. A nice memory. But where the hell would he keep it?
“He left you his house,” she said.
“His what?”
“His house,” she said again. “Where we were, up in Garrison.”
He stared at her blankly. “His house?”
She nodded. Still smiling.
“I don’t believe it,” he said. “And I can’t accept it. What would I do with it?”
“What would you do with it? You’d live in it, Reacher. That’s what houses are for, right?”
“But I don’t live in houses,” he said. “I’ve never lived in a house.”
“Well, you can live in one now.”
He was silent. Then he shook his head. “Jodie, I just can’t accept it. It should be yours. He should have left it to you. It’s your inheritance.”
“I don’t want it,” she said simply. “He knew that. I like the city better.”
“OK, so sell it. But it’s yours, right? Sell it and keep the money.”
“I don’t need money. He knew that, too. It’s worth less than I make in a year.”
He looked at her. “I thought that was an expensive area, right by the river?”
She nodded. “It is.”
He paused, confused.
“His house?” he said again.
She nodded.
“Did you know he was doing this?”
“Not specifically,” she said. “But I knew he wasn’t leaving it to me. I thought he might want me to sell it, give the money to charity. Old soldiers, or something.”
“OK, so you should do that instead.”
She smiled again. “Reacher, I can’t. It’s not up to me. It’s a binding instruction in his will. I’ve got to obey it.”
“His house,” he said vaguely. “He left me his house?”

“He was worried about you. For two years, he was worrying. Since they cut you loose. He knew how it could be, you spend the whole of your life in the service, and suddenly you find you’ve got nothing at the end of it. He was concerned about how you were living.”
“But he didn’t know how I was living,” he said.
She nodded again. “But he could guess, right? He was a smart old guy. He knew you’d be drifting around somewhere. He used to say, drifting around is great, maybe three or four years. But what about when he’s fifty? Sixty? Seventy? He was thinking about it.”
Reacher shrugged, flat on his back, naked, staring at the ceiling.
“I was never thinking about it. ‘One day at a time’ was my motto.”
She made no reply. Just ducked her head and kissed his chest.
“I feel like I’m stealing from you,” he said. “It’s your inheritance, Jodie. You should have it.”
She kissed him again. “It was his house. Even if I wanted it, we’d have to respect his wishes. But the fact is I don’t want it. I never did. He knew that. He was totally free to do whatever he wanted with it. And he did. He left it to you because he wanted you to have it.”
He was staring at the ceiling, but he was wandering through the house in his mind. Down the driveway, through the trees, the garage on his right, the breezeway, the low bulk of the place on his left. The den, the living room, the wide slow Hudson rolling by. The furniture. It had looked pretty comfortable. Maybe he could get a stereo. Some books. A house. His house. He tried the words in his head: *my* house. My-house. He barely knew how to say them. *My house.* He shivered.
“He wanted you to have it,” she said again. “It’s a bequest. You can’t argue against it. It’s happened. And it’s not any kind of a problem to me, I promise, OK?”
He nodded, slowly.
“OK,” he said. “OK, but weird. Really, truly weird.”
“You want coffee?” she asked.
He turned and focused on her face. He could get his own coffee machine. In his kitchen. In his house. Connected to the electricity. His electricity.
“Coffee?” she asked again.
“I guess,” he said.
She slid off the bed and found her shoes.
“Black, no sugar, right?”
She was standing there, naked except for her shoes. Patent, with heels. She saw him looking at her.
“Kitchen floor, fucked, I do you on the kitchen floor.”

"Kitchen floor feels cold. I always wear shoes in there."
"Forget the coffee, OK?"

THEY SLEPT IN her bed, all night, way past dawn. Reacher woke first and eased his arm out from under her and checked his watch. Almost seven. He had slept nine hours. The finest sleep of his life. The best bed. He had slept in a lot of beds. Hundreds, maybe even thousands. This was the best of all of them. Jodie was asleep beside him. She was on her front and had thrown the sheet off during the night. Her back was bare, all the way down to her waist. He could see the swell of her breast under her. Her hair spilled over her shoulders. One knee was pulled up, resting on his thigh. Her head was bent forward on the pillow, curving in, following the direction of her knee. It gave her a compact, athletic look. He kissed her neck. She stirred.
"Morning, Jodie," he said.
She opened her eyes. Then she closed them, and opened them again. She smiled. A warm, morning smile.
"I was afraid I'd dreamed it," she said. "I used to, once."
He kissed her again. Tenderly, on the cheek. Then less tenderly, on the mouth. Her arms came around behind him and he rolled over with her. They made love again, the fourth time in fifteen years. Then they showered together, the first time ever. Then breakfast. They ate like they were starving.
"I need to go to the Bronx," he said.
She nodded. "This Rutter guy? I'll drive. I know roughly where it is."
"What about work? I thought you had to go in."
She looked at him, mystified.
"You told me you had hours to bill," he said. "You sounded real busy."
She smiled, shyly. "I made that up. I'm well ahead, really. They said I should take the whole week off. I just didn't want to be hanging around with you, feeling what I was feeling. That's why I just ran off to bed, the first night. I should have shown you the guest room, you know, like a proper little hostess. But I didn't want to be alone in a bedroom with you. It would have driven me crazy. So near, but so far, you know what I mean?"
He nodded. "So what did you do in the office all day?"
She giggled. "Nothing. Just sat there all day, doing nothing."
"You're nuts," he said. "Why didn't you just tell me?"
"Why didn't you just tell me?"
"I did tell you."
"Eventually," she said. "After fifteen years."
He nodded. "I know, but I was worried about it. I thought you'd be hurt or something. I thought it would be the last thing you wanted to hear."

something. I thought it would be the last thing you wanted to hear.
“Same here,” she said. “I thought you’d hate me forever.”
They looked at each other and they smiled. Then they grinned. Then they laughed, and kept on laughing for five solid minutes.
“I’m going to get dressed,” she said, still laughing. He followed her through to the bedroom and found his clothes on the floor. She was halfway into her closet, selecting something clean. He watched her, and started wondering if Leon’s house had closets. No, if his house had them. Of course it did. All houses had closets, right? So did that mean he’d have to start assembling stuff to fill them all with?
She chose jeans and a shirt, dressed up with a leather belt and expensive shoes. He took his new jacket out to the hallway and loaded it with the Steyr from the sports bag. He poured twenty loose refills into the opposite pocket. All the metal made the jacket feel heavy. She came out to join him with the leather-bound folder. She was checking Rutter’s address.
“Ready?” she asked.
“As I’ll ever be,” he said.
He made her wait at every stage while he checked ahead. The exact same procedures he had used the day before. Her safety had felt important then. Now it felt vital. But everything was clean and quiet. Empty hallway, empty elevator, empty lobby, empty garage. They got in the Taurus together and she drove it around the block and headed back north and east.
“East River Drive to 1-95 OK with you?” she asked. “Going east, it’s the Cross Bronx Expressway.”
He shrugged and tried to recall the Hertz map. “Then take the Bronx River Parkway north. We need to go to the zoo.”
“The zoo? Rutter doesn’t live near the zoo.”
“Not the zoo, exactly. The Botanical Gardens. Something you need to see.”
She glanced sideways at him and then concentrated on driving. Traffic was heavy, just past the peak of rush hour, but it was moving. They followed the river north and then northwest to the George Washington Bridge and turned their backs on it and headed east into the Bronx. The expressway was slow, but the parkway north was faster, because it was leading out of town and New York was sucking people inward at that hour. Across the barrier, the southbound traffic was snarled.
“OK, where to?” she asked.
“Go past Fordham University. Past the conservatory, and park at the top.”
She nodded and made the lane changes. Fordham slid by on the left, and then the conservatory on the right. She used the museum entrance and found the lot just beyond it. It was mostly empty.

beyond it. It was mostly empty.
“Now what?”
He took the leather-bound folder with him.
“Just keep an open mind,” he said.
The conservatory was a hundred yards ahead of them. He had read all about it in a free leaflet, the day before. It was named for somebody called Enid Haupt and had cost a fortune to build in 1902, and ten times as much to renovate ninety-five years later, which was money well spent because the result was magnificent. It was huge and ornate, the absolute definition of urban philanthropy expressed in iron and milky white glass.
It was hot and damp inside. Reacher led Jodie around to the place he was looking for. The exotic plants were massed in huge beds bounded by little walls and railings. There were benches set on the edges of the walkways. The milky glass filtered the sunlight to a bright overcast. There was a strong smell of heavy damp earth and pungent blooms.
“What?” she asked. She was partly amused, partly impatient. He found the bench he was looking for and stepped away from it, close to the low wall. He stepped half a pace left, then another, until he was sure.
“Stand here,” he said.
He took her shoulders from behind and moved her into the same position he had just occupied. Ducked his head to her level and checked.
“Stand on tiptoes,” he told her. “Look straight ahead.”
She made herself taller and stared ahead. Her back was straight and her hair was spilled on her shoulders.
“OK,” he said. “Tell me what you see.”
“Nothing,” she said. “Well, plants and things.”
He nodded and opened the leather folder. Took out the glossy photograph of the gray emaciated Westerner, flinching away from his guard’s rifle. He held it out, arm’s length in front of her, just on the edge of her vision. She looked at it.
“What?” she asked again, half-amused, half-frustrated.
“Compare,” he said.
She kept her head still and flicked her eyes left and right between the photograph and the scene in front of her. Then she snatched the picture from him and held it herself, arm’s length in front of her. Her eyes widened and her face went pale.
“Christ,” she said. “Shit, this picture was taken here? Right here? It was, wasn’t it? All these plants are exactly the same.”
He ducked down again and checked once more. She was holding the picture so the shapes of the plants corresponded exactly. A mass of some kind of palm on the left, fifteen feet high, fronds of fern to the right and behind in a tangled spray. The two figures would have been twenty feet into the dense flower bed

spray. The two figures would have been twenty feet into the dense flower bed, picked out by a telephoto lens that compressed the perspective and threw the nearer vegetation out of focus. Well to the rear was a jungle hardwood, which the camera had blurred with distance. It was actually growing in a different bed.
"Shit," she said again. "Shit, I don't believe it."
The light was right, too. The milky glass way above them gave a pretty good impersonation of jungle overcast. Vietnam is a mostly cloudy place. The jagged mountains suck the clouds down, and most people remember the fogs and the mists, like the ground itself is always steaming. Jodie stared between the photo and the reality in front of her, dodging fractionally left and right to get a perfect fit.
"But what about the wire? The bamboo poles? It looks so real."
"Stage props," he said. "Three poles, ten yards of barbed wire. How difficult is that to get? They carried it in here, probably all rolled up."
"But when? How?"
He shrugged. "Maybe early one morning? When the place was still closed? Maybe they know somebody who works here. Maybe they did it while the place was closed for the renovations."
She was staring at the picture, close up to her eyes. "Wait a damn minute. You can see that bench. You can see the corner of that bench over there."
She showed him what she meant, with her fingernail placed precisely on the glossy surface of the photograph. There was a tiny square blur, white. It was the comer of an iron bench, off to the right, behind the main scene. The telephoto lens had been framed tight, but not quite tight enough.
"I didn't spot that," he said. "You're getting good at this."
She turned around to face him. "No, I'm getting good and mad, Reacher. This guy Rutter took eighteen thousand dollars for a faked photograph."
"Worse than that. He gave them false hope."
"So what are we going to do?"
"We're going to pay him a visit," he said.
They were back at the Taurus sixteen minutes after leaving it. Jodie threaded back toward the parkway, drumming her fingers on the wheel and talking fast.
"But you told me you believed it. I said the photo proved the place existed, and you agreed it did. You said you'd been there, not long ago, got about as close as Rutter had."
"All true," Reacher said. "I believed the Botanical Gardens existed. I'd just come back from there. And I got as close as Rutter did. I was standing right next to the little wall where he must have taken the picture from."
"Jesus, Reacher, what is this? A game?"
He shrugged. "Yesterday I didn't know what it was. I mean in terms of how

much I needed to share with you."
She nodded and smiled through her exasperation. She was remembering the difference between yesterday and today. "But how the hell did he expect to get away with it? The greenhouse in the New York Botanical Gardens, for God's sake?"
He stretched in his seat. Eased his arms all the way forward to the windshield. "Psychology," he said. "It's the basis of any scam, right? You tell people what they want to hear. Those old folks, they wanted to hear their boy was still alive. So he tells them their boy probably is. So they invest a lot of hope and money, they're waiting on pins three whole months, he gives them a photo, and basically they're going to see whatever they want to see. And he was smart. He asked them for the exact name and unit, he wanted existing pictures of the boy, so he could pick out a middle-aged guy roughly the right size and shape for the photo, and he fed them back the right name and the right unit. Psychology. They see what they want to see. He could have had a guy in a gorilla suit in the picture and they'd have believed it was representative of the local wildlife."
"So how did you spot it?"
"Same way," he said. "Same psychology, but in reverse. I wanted to disbelieve it, because I knew it couldn't be true. So I was looking for something that seemed wrong. It was the fatigues the guy was wearing that did it for me. You notice that? Old worn-out U.S. Army fatigues? This guy went down thirty years ago. There is absolutely no way a set of fatigues would last thirty years in the jungle. They'd have rotted off in six weeks."
"But why there? What made you look in the Botanical Gardens?"
He spread his fingers against the windshield glass, pushing to ease the tension in his shoulders. "Where else would he find vegetation like that? Hawaii, maybe, but why spend the airfare for three people when it's available free right on his doorstep?"
"And the Vietnamese boy?"
"Probably a college kid," he said. "Probably right here at Fordham. Maybe Columbia. Maybe he wasn't Vietnamese at all. Could have been a waiter from a Chinese restaurant. Rutter probably paid him twenty bucks for the photo. He's probably got four friends playing the American captives. A big white guy, a small white guy, a big black guy, a small black guy, all the bases covered. All of them bums, so they look thin and haggard. Probably paid them in bourbon. Probably took all the pictures at the same time, uses them as appropriate. He could have sold that exact same picture a dozen times over. Anyone whose missing boy was tall and white, they get a copy. Then he swears them all to secrecy with this government-conspiracy shit, so nobody will ever compare

notes afterward."
"He's disgusting," she said.
He nodded. "That's for damn sure. BNR families are still a big, vulnerable market, I guess, and he's feeding off it like a maggot."
"BNR?" she asked.
"Body not recovered," he said. "That's what they are. KIA/ BNR. Killed in action, body not recovered."
"Killed? You don't believe there are still any prisoners?"
He shook his head.
"There are no prisoners, Jodie," he said. "Not anymore. That's all bullshit "
"You sure?"
"Totally certain."
"How can you be certain?"
"I just know," he said. "Like I know the sky is blue and the grass is green and you've got a great ass."
She smiled as she drove. "I'm a lawyer, Reacher. That kind of proof just doesn't do it for me."
"Historical facts," he said. "The story about holding hostages to get American aid is all baloney, for a start. They were planning to come running south down the Ho Chi Minh Trail as soon as we were out of there, which was right against the Paris Accords, so they knew they were never going to get any aid no matter what they did. So they let all the prisoners go in '73, a bit slowly, I know, but they let them go. When we left in '75, they scooped up about a hundred stragglers, and then they handed them all straight back to us, which doesn't jibe with any kind of a hostage strategy. Plus they were desperate for us to de-mine their harbors, so they didn't play silly games."
"They were slow about returning remains," she said. "You know, our boys killed in plane crashes or battles. They played silly games about that."
He nodded. "They didn't really understand. It was important to us. We wanted two thousand bodies back. They couldn't understand why. They'd been at war more than forty years, Japanese, French, the U.S., China. They probably lost a million people missing in action. Our two thousand was a drop in the bucket. Plus they were Communists. They didn't share the value we put on individuals. It's a psychological thing again. But it doesn't mean they kept secret prisoners in secret camps."
"Not a very conclusive argument," she said dryly.
He nodded again. "Leon's the conclusive argument. Your old man, and people just like him. I know those people. Brave, honorable people, Jodie. They fought there, and then they rose to power and prominence later. The Pentagon is stuffed

full of assholes, I know that as well as anybody, but there were always enough people like Leon around to keep them honest. You answer me a question: If Leon had known there were still prisoners kept back in ‘Nam, what would he have done?”
She shrugged. “I don’t know. Something, obviously.”
“You bet your ass something,” he said. “Leon would have torn the White House apart brick by brick, until all those boys were safely back home. But he didn’t. And that’s not because he didn’t know. Leon knew everything there was to know. There’s no way they could have kept a thing like that a secret from all the Leons, not all the time. A big conspiracy lasting six administrations? A conspiracy people like Leon couldn’t sniff out? Forget about it. The Leons of this world never reacted, so it was never happening. That’s conclusive proof, as far as I’m concerned, Jodie.”
“No, that’s faith,” she said.
“Whatever, it’s good enough for me.”
She watched the traffic ahead, and thought about it. Then she nodded, because in the end, faith in her father was good enough for her, too.
“So Victor Hobie’s dead?”
Reacher nodded. “Has to be. Killed in action, body not recovered.”
She drove on, slowly. They were heading south, and the traffic was bad.
“OK, no prisoners, no camps,” she said. “No government conspiracy. So they weren’t government people who were shooting at us and crashing their cars into us.”
“I never thought it was,” he said. “Most government people I met were a lot more efficient than that. I was a government person, in a manner of speaking. You think I’d miss two days in a row?”
She slewed the car right and jammed to a stop on the shoulder. Turned in her seat to face him, blue eyes wide.
“So it must be Rutter,” she said. “Who else can it be? He’s running a lucrative scam, right? And he’s prepared to protect it. He thinks we’re going to expose it. So he’s been looking for us. And now we’re planning to walk right into his arms.”
Reacher smiled.
“Hey, life’s full of dangers,” he said.

MARILYN REALIZED SHE must have fallen asleep, because she woke up stiff and cold with noises coming through the door at her. The bathroom had no window, and she had no idea what time it was. Morning, she guessed, because she felt like she had been asleep for some time. On her left, Chester was staring

into space, his gaze fixed a thousand miles beyond the fixtures under the sink. He was inert. She turned and looked straight at him, and got no response at all. On her right, Sheryl was curled on the floor. She was breathing heavily through her mouth. Her nose had turned black and shiny and was swollen. Marilyn stared at her and swallowed. Turned again and pressed her ear to the door. Listened hard.

There were two men out there. The sound of two deep voices, talking low. She could hear elevators in the distance. A very faint traffic rumble, with occasional sirens vanishing into stillness. Aircraft noise, like a big jet from JFK was wheeling away west across the harbor. She eased herself off the floor.

Her shoes had come off during the night. She found them scuffed under her pile of towels. She slipped them on and walked quietly to the sink. Chester was staring straight through her. She checked herself in the mirror. Not too bad, she thought. The last time she had spent the night on a bathroom floor was after a sorority party more than twenty years before, and she looked no worse now than she had then. She combed her hair with her fingers and patted water on her eyes. Then she crept back to the door and listened again.

Two men, but she was pretty sure Hobie wasn't one of them. There was some equality in the tenor of the voices. It was back-and-forth conversation, not orders and obedience. She slid the pile of towels backward with her foot and took a deep breath and opened the door.

Two men stopped talking and turned to stare at her. The one called Tony was sitting sideways on the sofa in front of the desk. Another she had not seen before was squatted next to him on the coffee table. He was a thickset man in a dark suit, not tall, but heavy. The desk was not occupied. No sign of Hobie. The window blinds were closed to a crack, but she could see bright sun outside. It was later than she thought. She glanced back to the sofa and saw Tony smiling at her.

"Sleep well?" he asked.

She made no reply. Just kept a neutral look fixed on her face until Tony's smile died away. Score one, she thought.

"I talked things over with my husband," she lied.

Tony looked at her, expectantly, waiting for her to speak again. She let him wait. Score two, she thought.

"We agree to the transfer," she said. "But it's going to be complicated. It's going to take some time. There are factors I don't think you appreciate. We'll do it, but we're going to expect some minimum cooperation from you along the way."

Tony nodded. "Like what?"

"I'll discuss that with Hobie," she said. "Not with you."

There was silence in the office. Just faint noises from the world outside. She concentrated on her breathing. In and out, in and out.
"OK," Tony said.
Score three, she thought.
"We want coffee," she said. "Three cups, cream and sugar."
More silence. Then Tony nodded and the thickset man stood up. He looked away and walked out of the office toward the kitchen. *Score four,* she thought.

THE RETURN ADDRESS on Rutter's letter corresponded to a dingy storefront some blocks south of any hope of urban renewal. It was a clapboard building sandwiched between crumbling four-story brick structures that may have been factories or warehouses before they were abandoned decades ago. Rutter's place had a filthy window on the left and an entrance in the center and a roll-up door standing open on the right revealing a narrow garage area. There was a brand-new Lincoln Navigator squeezed into the space. Reacher recognized the model from advertisements he'd seen. It was a giant four-wheel-drive Ford, with a thick gloss of luxury added in order to justify its elevation to the Lincoln division. This one was metallic black, and it was probably worth more than the real estate wrapped around it.
Jodie drove right past the building, not fast, not slow, just plausible city-street speed over the potholed road. Reacher craned his head around, getting a feel for the place. Jodie made a left and came back around the block. Reacher glimpsed a service alley running behind the row, with rusted fire escapes hanging above piles of garbage.
"So how do we do this?" Jodie asked him.
"We walk right in," he said. "First thing we do is we watch his reaction. If he knows who we are, we'll play it one way. If he doesn't, we'll play it another."
She parked two spaces south of the storefront, in the shadow of a blackened brick warehouse. She locked the car and they walked north together. From the sidewalk they could make out what was behind the dirty window. There was a lame display of Army-surplus equipment, dusty old camouflage jackets and water canteens and boots. There were field radios and MRE rations and infantry helmets. Some of the stuff was already obsolete before Reacher graduated from West Point.
The door was stiff and it worked a bell when it opened. It was a crude mechanical system whereby the moving door flicked a spring that flicked the bell and made the sound. The store was deserted. There was a counter on the right with a door behind it to the garage. There was a display of clothing on a circular chrome rack and more random junk piled high on a single shelf. There

was a rear door out to the alley, locked shut and alarmed. In a line next to the rear door were five padded vinyl chairs. Scattered all around the chairs were cigarette butts and empty beer bottles. The lighting was dim, but the dust of years was visible everywhere.
Reacher walked ahead of Jodie. The floor creaked under him. Two paces inside, he could see a trapdoor open beyond the counter. It was a sturdy door, made from old pine boards, hinged with brass and rubbed to a greasy shine where generations of hands had folded it back. Floor joists were visible inside the hole, and a narrow staircase built from the same old wood was leading down toward hot electric light. He could hear feet scraping on a cement cellar floor below him.
“I’ll be right there, whoever the hell you are,” a voice called up from the hole. It was a man’s voice, middle-aged, suspended somewhere between surprise and bad temper. The voice of a man not expecting callers. Jodie looked at Reacher and Reacher closed his hand around the butt of the Steyr in his pocket.
A man’s head appeared at floor level, then his shoulders, then his torso, as he came on up the ladder. He was a bulky figure and had difficulty climbing out of the hole. He was dressed in faded olive fatigues. He had greasy gray hair, a ragged gray beard, a fleshy face, small eyes. He came out on hands and knees and stood up.
“Help you?” he said.
Then another head and shoulders appeared behind him. And another. And another. And another. Four men stamped up the ladder from the cellar. Each one straightened and paused and looked hard at Reacher and Jodie and then stepped away to the line of chairs. They were big men, fleshy, tattooed, dressed in similar old fatigues. They sat with big arms crossed against big stomachs.
“Help you?” the first guy said again.
“Are you Rutter?” Reacher asked.
The guy nodded. There was no recognition in his eyes. Reacher glanced at the line of men on their chairs. They represented a complication he had not anticipated.
“What do you want?” Rutter asked.
Reacher changed his plan. Took a guess about the true nature of the store’s transactions and what was stacked up down in the cellar.
“I want a silencer,” he said. “For a Steyr GB.”
Rutter smiled, real amusement in the set of his jaw and the light in his eyes.
“Against the law for me to sell you one, against the law for you to own one.” The singsong way he said it was an outright confession that he had them and sold them. There was a patronizing undercurrent in the tone that said *I’ve* got

something you want, and that makes me better than you. There was no caution in his voice. No suspicion that Reacher was a cop trying to set him up. Nobody ever thought Reacher was a cop. He was too big and too rough. He didn't have the precinct pallor or the urban furtiveness people subconsciously associate with cops. Rutter was not worried about him. He was worried about Jodie. He didn't know what she was. He had spoken to Reacher but looked at her. She was looking back at him, steadily.
"Against whose law?" she asked dismissively.
Rutter scratched at his beard. "Makes them expensive."
"Compared to what?" she asked.
Reacher smiled to himself. Rutter wasn't sure about her, and with two answers, just six words, she had him adrift, thinking she could be anything from a Manhattan socialite worried about a kidnap threat against her kids, to a billionaire's wife intending to inherit early, to a Rotary wife aiming to survive a messy love triangle. She was looking at him like she was a woman used to getting her own way without opposition from anybody. Certainly not from the law, and certainly not from some squalid little Bronx trader.
"Steyr GB?" Rutter asked. "You want the proper Austrian piece?"
Reacher nodded, like he was the guy who dealt with the trivial details. Rutter clicked his fingers and one of the heavy men peeled off from the line of chairs and dropped down the hole. He came back up a long moment later with a black cylinder wrapped in paper that gun oil had turned transparent.
"Two thousand bucks," Rutter said.
Reacher nodded. The price was almost fair. The pistol was no longer manufactured, but he figured it probably last retailed around eight or nine hundred bucks. Final factory price for the suppressor was probably more than two hundred. Two grand for illegal supply ten years later and four thousand miles from the factory gate was almost reasonable.
"Let me see it," he said.
Rutter wiped the tube on his pants. Handed it over. Reacher came out with the gun and clicked the tube in place. Not like in the movies. You don't hold it up to your eyes and screw it on, slowly and thoughtfully and lovingly. You use light, fast pressure and a half-turn and it clicks on like a lens fits a camera.
It improved the weapon. Improved its balance. Ninety-nine times in a hundred, a handgun gets fired high because the recoil flips the muzzle upward. The weight of the silencer was going to counteract that likelihood. And a silencer works by dispersing the blast of gas relatively slowly, which weakens the recoil in the first place.
"Does it work real good?" Reacher asked.

“Sure it does,” Rutter said. “It’s the genuine factory piece.”
The guy who had brought it upstairs was back on his chair. Four guys, five chairs. The way to take out a gang is to hit the leader first. It’s a universal truth. Reacher had learned it at the age of four. Figure out who the leader is, and put him down first, and put him down hard. This situation was going to be different. Rutter was the leader, but he had to stay in one piece for the time being, because Reacher had other plans for him.
“Two thousand bucks,” Rutter said again.
“Field test,” Reacher said.
There is no safety catch on a Steyr GB. The first pull needs a pressure of fourteen pounds on the trigger, which is judged to be enough to avoid an accidental discharge if the gun is dropped, because fourteen pounds is a very deliberate pull. So there is no separate safety mechanism. Reacher flicked his hand left and pulled the fourteen pounds. The gun fired and the empty chair blew apart. The sound was loud. Not like in the movies. It’s not a little cough. Not a polite little spit. It’s like taking the Manhattan phone book and raising it way over your head and smashing it facedown on a desk with all your strength. Not a quiet sound. But quieter than it could be.
The four guys were frozen with shock. Shredded vinyl and dirty horsehair stuffing were floating in the air. Rutter was staring, motionless. Reacher hit him hard, left-handed in the stomach, and kicked his feet away and dumped him on the floor. Then he lined up the Steyr on the guy next to the shattered chair.
“Downstairs,” he said. “All of you. Right now, OK?”
Nobody moved. So Reacher counted out loud *one, two,* and on *three* he fired again. The same loud blast. The floorboards splintered at the first guy’s feet. *One, two,* and Reacher fired again. And again, one, two, and fire. Dust and wood splinters were bursting upward. The noise of the repeated shots was crushing. There was the strong stink of burned powder and hot steel wool inside the suppressor. The men moved all at once after the third bullet. They fought and crowded to the hatch. Crashed and tumbled through. Reacher dropped the door closed on them and dragged the counter over the top of it. Rutter was up on his hands and knees. Reacher kicked him over on his back and kept on kicking him until he had scrambled all the way backward and his head was jammed up hard against the displaced counter.
Jodie had the faked photograph in her hand. She crouched and held it out to him. He blinked and focused on it. His mouth was working, just a ragged hole in his beard. Reacher ducked down and caught his left wrist. Dragged his hand up and took hold of the little finger.
“Questions,” he said. “And I’ll break a finger every time you lie to me.”

Rutter started struggling, using all his strength to twist up and away. Reacher hit him again, a solid blow to the gut, and he went back down.
“You know who we are?”
“No,” Rutter gasped.
“Where was this picture taken?”
“Secret camps,” Rutter gasped. “Vietnam.”
Reacher broke his little finger. He just wrenched it sideways and snapped the knuckle. Sideways is easier than bending it all the way back. Rutter shrieked in pain. Reacher took hold of the next finger. There was a gold ring on it.
“Where?”
“Bronx Zoo,” Rutter gasped.
“Who’s the boy?”
“Just some kid.”
“Who’s the man?”
“Friend,” Rutter gasped.
“How many times have you done it?”
“Fifteen, maybe,” Rutter said.
Reacher bent the ring finger sideways.
“That’s the truth,” Rutter screamed. “No more than fifteen, I promise. And I never did anything to you. I don’t even know you.”
“You know the Hobies?” Reacher asked. “Up in Brighton?”
He saw Rutter searching through a mental list, dazed. Then he saw him remember. Then he saw him struggling to comprehend how those pathetic old suckers could possibly have brought all this down on his head.
“You’re a disgusting piece of shit, right?”
Rutter was rolling his head from side to side in panic.
“Say it, Rutter,” Reacher yelled.
“I’m a piece of shit,” Rutter whimpered.
“Where’s your bank?”
“My bank?” Rutter repeated blankly.
“Your bank,” Reacher said.
Rutter hesitated. Reacher put some weight back on the ring finger.
“Ten blocks,” Rutter shrieked.
“Title deed for your truck?”
“In the drawer.”
Reacher nodded to Jodie. She stood up and went around behind the counter. Rattled open the drawers and came out with a sheaf of paperwork. She flicked through and nodded. “Registered in his name. Cost forty thousand bucks.”
Reacher switched his grip and caught Rutter by the neck. Bunched his shoulder and pushed hard until the crook of his hand was forcing up under Rutter’s jaw.

and pushed hard until the web of his hand was forcing up under Rutter's jaw.
"I'll buy your truck for a dollar," he said. "Just shake your head if you've got a problem with that, OK?"
Rutter was totally still. His eyes were popping under the force of Reacher's grip on his throat.
"And then I'll drive you to your bank," he said. "In my new truck. You'll take out eighteen thousand dollars in cash and I'll give it back to the Hobies."
"No," Jodie called. "Nineteen-six-fifty. It was in a safe mutual. Call it six percent, for a year and a half compounded."
"OK," Reacher said. He increased the pressure. "Nineteen-six-fifty for the Hobies, and nineteen-six-fifty for us."
Rutter's eyes were searching Reacher's face. Pleading. Not understanding.
"You cheated them," Reacher said. "You told them you'd find out what happened to their boy. You didn't do that. So now we'll have to do it for them. So we need expense money."
Rutter was turning blue in the face. His hands were clamped hard on Reacher's wrist, desperately trying to ease the pressure.
"OK," Reacher asked. "So that's what we're going to do. Just shake your head if you've got any kind of a problem with any part of it."
Rutter was dragging hard on Reacher's wrist, but his head stayed still.
"Think of it like a tax," Reacher said. "A tax on cheating little pieces of shit."
He jerked his hand away and stood up. Fifteen minutes later, he was in Rutter's bank. Rutter was nursing his left hand in his pocket and signing a check with his right. Five minutes after that, Reacher had $39,300 cash zipped into the sports bag. Fifteen minutes after that, he left Rutter in the alley behind his store, with two dollar bills stuffed in his mouth, one for the silencer, and one for the truck. Five minutes after that, he was following Jodie's Taurus up to the Hertz return at LaGuardia. Fifteen minutes after that, they were in the new Lincoln together, heading back to Manhattan.

11

EVENING FALLS IN Hanoi a full twelve hours earlier than in New York, so the sun which was still high as Reacher and Jodie left the Bronx had already slipped behind the highlands of northern Laos, two hundred miles away to the west of Noi Bai Airport. The sky was glowing orange and the long shadows of late afternoon were replaced by the sudden dull gloom of tropical dusk. The smells of the city and the jungle were masked under the reek of kerosene, and the noises of car horns and nighttime insects were blown away by the steady whine of jet engines idling.

A giant U.S. Air Force C-141 Starlifter transport was standing on the apron, a mile from the crowded passenger terminals, next to an unmarked hangar. The plane's rear ramp was down, and its engines were running fast enough to power the interior lighting. Inside the unmarked hangar, too, lights were on. There were a hundred arc lights, slung high up under the corrugated metal roof, washing the cavernous space with their bright yellow glow.

The hangar was as large as a stadium, but it held nothing except seven caskets. Each one of them was six and a half feet long, made from ribbed aluminum polished to a high shine and shaped roughly like a coffin, which is exactly what each one of them was. They were standing in a neat row, on trestles, each one draped with an American flag. The flags were newly laundered and crisply pressed, and the center stripe of each flag was precisely aligned with the center rib of each casket.

There were nine men and two women in the hangar, standing next to the seven aluminum caskets. Six of the men were there as the honor guard. They were regular soldiers of the United States Army, newly showered, newly shaved, dressed in immaculate ceremonial uniforms, holding themselves at rigid attention, away from the other five people. Three of those were Vietnamese, two men and a woman, short, dark, impassive. They were dressed in uniform, too, but theirs were everyday uniforms, not ceremonial. Dark olive cloth, worn and creased, badged here and there with the unfamiliar insignia of their rank.

The last two people were Americans, dressed in civilian clothes, but the sort of civilian clothes that indicate military status as clearly as any uniform. The woman was young, with a mid-length canvas skirt and a long-sleeved khaki blouse, with heavy brown shoes on her feet. The man was tall, silver-haired, maybe fifty-five years old, dressed in tropical khakis under a lightweight belted raincoat. He was carrying a battered brown leather briefcase in his hand, and there was a garment bag of similar vintage on the ground at his feet.

there was a garment bag of similar vintage on the ground at his feet.
The tall silver-haired man nodded to the honor guard, a tiny signal, almost imperceptible. The senior soldier spoke a muted command and the six men formed up in two lines of three. They slow-marched forward, and right-turned, and slow-marched again until they were lined up precisely, three each side of the first casket. They paused a beat and stooped and lifted the casket to their shoulders in a single fluid movement. The senior man spoke again, and they slow-marched forward toward the hangar door, the casket supported exactly level on their linked arms, the only sounds the crunch of their boots on the concrete and the whine of the waiting engines.
On the apron, they turned right and wheeled a wide, slow semicircle through the hot jet wash until they were lined up with the Starlifter's ramp. They slow-marched forward, up the exact center of the ramp, feeling carefully with their feet for the metal ribs bolted there to help them, and on into the belly of the plane. The pilot was waiting for them. She was a U.S. Air Force captain, trim in a tropical-issue flight suit. Her crew was standing at attention with her, a copilot, a flight engineer, a navigator, a radio operator. Opposite them were the loadmaster and his crew, silent in green fatigues. They stood face-to-face in two still lines, and the honor guard filed slowly between them, all the way up to the forward loading bay. There they bent their knees and gently lowered the casket onto a shelf built along the fuselage wall. Four of the men stood back, heads bowed. The forward man and the rear man worked together to slide the casket into place. The loadmaster stepped forward and secured it with rubber straps. Then he stepped back and joined the honor guard and held a long silent salute.
It took an hour to load all seven caskets. The people inside the hangar stood silent throughout, and then they followed the seventh casket onto the apron. They matched their walk to the honor guard's slow pace, and waited at the bottom of the Starlifter's ramp in the hot, noisy damp of the evening. The honor guard came out, duty done. The tall silver-haired American saluted them and shook hands with the three Vietnamese officers and nodded to the American woman. No words were exchanged. He shouldered his garment bag and ran lightly up the ramp into the plane. A slow, powerful motor whirred and the ramp closed shut behind him. The engines ran up to speed and the giant plane came off its brakes and started to taxi. It wheeled a wide cumbersome left and disappeared behind the hangar. Its noise grew faint. Then it grew loud again in the distance and the watchers saw it come back along the runway, engines screaming, accelerating hard, lifting off. It yawed right, climbing fast, turning, dipping a wing, and then it was gone, just a triangle of winking lights tiny in the distance and a vague smudge of black kerosene smoke tracing its curved path into the night air.

The honor guard dispersed in the sudden silence and the American woman shook hands with the three Vietnamese officers and walked back to her car. The three Vietnamese officers walked in a different direction, back to theirs. It was a Japanese sedan, repainted a dull military green. The woman drove, and the two men sat in back. It was a short trip to the center of Hanoi. The woman parked in a chain-link compound behind a low concrete building painted the color of sand. The men got out without a word and went inside through an unmarked door. The woman locked the car and walked around the building to a different entrance. She went inside and up a short flight of stairs to her office. There was a bound ledger open on her desk. She recorded the safe dispatch of the cargo in neat handwriting and closed the ledger. She carried it to a file cabinet near her office door. She locked it inside, and glanced through the door, up and down the corridor. Then she returned to her desk and picked up her telephone and dialed a number eleven thousand miles away in New York City.

MARILYN WOKE UP Sheryl and brought Chester around into some sort of consciousness before the thickset man came into the bathroom with the coffee. It was in mugs, and he was holding two in one hand and one in the other, unsure of where to leave them. He paused and stepped to the sink and lined them up on the narrow granite ledge under the mirror. Then he turned without speaking and walked back out. Pulled the door closed after him, firmly, but without slamming it.

Marilyn handed out the mugs one at a time, because she was trembling and pretty sure she was going to spill them if she tried them two at a time. She squatted down and gave the first one to Sheryl, and helped her take the first sip. Then she went back for Chester's. He took it from her blankly and looked at it like he didn't know what it was. She took the third for herself and stood against the sink and drank it down, thirstily. It was good. The cream and the sugar tasted like energy.

"Where are the stock certificates?" she whispered.

Chester looked up at her, listlessly. "At my bank, in my box."

Marilyn nodded. Came face-to-face with the fact she didn't know which was Chester's bank. Or where it was. Or what stock certificates were for.

"How many are there?"

He shrugged. "A thousand, originally. I used three hundred for security against the loans. I had to give them up to the lender, temporarily."

"And now Hobie's got those?"

He nodded. "He bought the debt. They'll messenger the security to him, today, maybe. They don't need it anymore. And I pledged him another ninety. They're

still in the box. I guess I was due to deliver them soon."
"So how does the transfer actually happen?"
He shrugged again, wearily, vaguely. "I sign the stock over to him, he takes the certificates and registers them with the Exchange, and when he's got five hundred and one registered in his name, then he's the majority owner."
"So where's your bank?"
Chester took his first sip of coffee. "About three blocks from here. About five minutes' walk. Then another five minutes to the Exchange. Call it ten minutes beginning to end, and we're penniless and homeless on the street."
He set the mug on the floor and lapsed back into staring. Sheryl was listless. Not drinking her coffee. Her skin looked clammy. Maybe concussed, or something. Maybe still in shock. Marilyn didn't know. She had no experience. Her nose was awful. Black and swollen. The bruising was spreading under her eyes. Her lips were cracked and dry, from breathing through her mouth all night.
"Try some more coffee," she said. "It'll be good for you." She squatted beside her and guided her hand up to her mouth. Tilted the mug. Sheryl took a sip. Some of the hot liquid ran down her chin. She took another sip. She glanced up at Marilyn, with something in her eyes. Marilyn didn't know what it was, but she smiled back anyway, bright with encouragement.
"We'll get you to the hospital," she whispered.
Sheryl closed her eyes and nodded, like she was suddenly filled with relief. Marilyn knelt beside her, holding her hand, staring at the door, wondering how she was going to deliver on that promise.

"ARE YOU GOING to keep this thing?" Jodie asked.
She was talking about the Lincoln Navigator. Reacher thought about it as he waited. They were jammed up on the approach to the Triborough.
"Maybe," he said.
It was more or less brand new. Very quiet and smooth. Black metallic outside, tan leather inside, four hundred miles on the clock, still reeking of new hide and new carpet and the strong plastic smell of a box-fresh vehicle. Huge seats, each one identical with the driver's chair, lots of fat consoles with drinks holders and little lids suggestive of secret storage spaces.
"I think it's gross," she said.
He smiled. "Compared to what? That tiny little thing you were driving?"
"That was much smaller than this."
"You're much smaller than me."
She was quiet for a beat.
"It was Rutter's," she said. "It's tainted."

The traffic moved, and then stopped again halfway over the Harlem River. The buildings of midtown were faraway to his left, and hazy, like a vague promise.
“It’s just a tool,” he said. “Tools have no memory.”
“I hate him,” she said. “I think more than I’ve ever hated anybody.”
He nodded.
“I know,” he said. “The whole time we were in there I was thinking about the Hobies, up there in Brighton, alone in their little house, the look in their eyes. Sending your only boy off to war is a hell of a thing, and to be lied to and cheated afterward, Jodie, there’s no excuse for that. Swap the chronology, it could have been my folks. And he did it fifteen times. I should have hurt him worse.”
“As long as he doesn’t do it again,” she said.
He shook his head. “The list of targets is shrinking. Not too many BNR families left now to fall for it.”
They made it off the bridge and headed south on Second Avenue. It was fast and clear ahead for sixty blocks.
“And it wasn’t him coming after us,” she said quietly. “He didn’t know who we were.”
Reacher shook his head again. “No. How many fake photographs do you have to sell to make it worth trashing a Chevy Suburban? We need to analyze it right from the beginning, Jodie. Two full-time employees get sent to the Keys and up to Garrison, right? Two full-time salaries, plus weapons and airfare and all, and they’re riding around in a Tahoe, then a third employee shows up with a Suburban he can afford to just dump on the street? That’s a lot of money, and it’s probably just the visible tip of some kind of an iceberg. It implies something worth maybe millions of dollars. Rutter was never making that kind of money, ripping off old folks for eighteen thousand bucks a pop.”
“So what the hell is this about?”
Reacher just shrugged and drove, and watched the mirror all the way.

HOBIE TOOK THE call from Hanoi at home. He listened to the Vietnamese woman’s short report and hung up without speaking. Then he stood in the center of his living room and tilted his head to one side and narrowed his good eye like he was watching something physical happening in front of him. Like he was watching a baseball soaring out of the diamond, looping upward into the glare of the lights, an outfielder tracking back under it, the fence getting closer, the glove coming up, the ball soaring, the fence looming, the outfielder leaping. Will the ball clear the fence? Or not? Hobie couldn’t tell.
He stepped across the living room and out to the terrace. The terrace faced west

across the park, from thirty floors up. It was a view he hated, because all the trees reminded him of his childhood. But it enhanced the value of his property, which was the name of the game. He wasn't responsible for the way other people's tastes drove the market. He was just there to benefit from them. He turned and looked left, to where he could see his office building, all the way downtown. The Twin Towers looked shorter than they should, because of the curvature of the earth. He turned back inside and slid the door closed. Walked through the apartment and out to the elevator. Rode down all the way to the parking garage.

His car was not modified in any way to help him with his handicap. It was a late-model Cadillac sedan with the ignition and the selector on the right of the steering column. Using the key was awkward, because he had to lean across with his left hand and jab it in backward and twist. But after that, he never had much of a problem. He put it in drive by using the hook on the selector and drove out of the garage one-handed, using his left, the hook resting down in his lap.

He felt better once he was south of Fifty-ninth Street. The park disappeared and he was deep in the noisy canyons of midtown. The traffic comforted him. The Cadillac's air-conditioning relieved the itching under his scars. June was the worst time for that. Some particular combination of heat and humidity acted together to drive him crazy. But the Cadillac made it better. He wondered idly whether Stone's Mercedes would be as good. He thought not. He had never trusted the air on foreign cars. So he would turn it into cash. He knew a guy in Queens who would spring for it. But it was another chore on the list. A lot to do, and not much time to do it in. The outfielder was right there, under the ball, leaping, with the fence at his back.

He parked in the underground garage, in the slot previously occupied by the Suburban. He reached across and pulled the key and locked the Cadillac. Rode upstairs in the express elevator. Tony was at the reception counter.

"Hanoi called again," Hobie told him. "It's in the air."

Tony looked away.

"What?" Hobie asked him.

"So we should just abandon this Stone thing."

"It'll take them a few days, right?"

"A few days might not be enough," Tony said. "There are complications. The woman says she's talked it over with him, and they'll do the deal, but there are complications we don't know about."

"What complications?"

Tony shook his head. "She wouldn't tell me. She wants to tell you, direct."

Hobie stared at the office door. "She's kidding, right? She damn well better be

kidding. I can't afford any kind of complications now. I just presold the sites, three separate deals. I gave my word. The machinery is in motion. What complications?"
"She wouldn't tell me," Tony said again.
Hobie's face was itching. There was no air-conditioning in the garage. The short walk to the elevator had upset his skin. He pressed the hook to his forehead, looking for some relief from the metal. But the hook was warm, too.
"What about Mrs. Jacob?" he asked.
"She was home all night," Tony said. "With this Reacher guy. I checked. They were laughing about something this morning. I heard them from the corridor. Then they drove somewhere, north on the FDR Drive. Maybe going back to Garrison."
"I don't need her in Garrison. I need her right here. And him."
Tony was silent.
"Bring Mrs. Stone to me," Hobie said.
He walked into to his office and across to his desk. Tony went the opposite way, toward the bathroom. He came out a moment later, pushing Marilyn in front of him. She looked tired. The silk sheath looked ludicrously out of context, like she was a partygoer caught out by a blizzard and stranded in town the morning after. Hobie pointed to the sofa.
"Sit down, Marilyn," he said.
She remained standing. The sofa was too low. Too low to sit on in a short dress, and too low to achieve the psychological advantage she was going to need. But to stand in front of his desk was wrong, too. Too supplicant. She walked around to the wall of windows. Eased the slats apart and gazed out at the morning. Then she turned and propped herself against the ledge. Made him rotate his chair to face her.
"What are these complications?" he asked.
She looked at him and took a deep breath.
"We'll get to that," she said. "First we get Sheryl to the hospital."
There was silence. No sound at all, except the rumbling and booming of the populated building. Faraway to the west, a siren sounded faintly. Maybe all the way over in Jersey City.
"What are these complications?" he asked again. He used the same exact voice, the same exact intonation. Like he was prepared to overlook her mistake.
"The hospital first."
The silence continued. Hobie turned back to Tony.
"Get Stone out of the bathroom," he said.
Stone stumbled out, in his underwear, with Tony's knuckles in his back, all the way to the desk. He hit his shins on the coffee table and gasped in pain.

way to the desk. He hit his shins on the coffee table and gasped in pain.
“What are these complications?” Hobie asked him.
He just glanced wildly left and right, like he was too scared and disoriented to speak. Hobie waited. Then he nodded.
“Break his leg,” he said. He turned to look at Marilyn. There was silence. No sound, except Stone’s ragged breathing and the faint boom of the building. Hobie stared on at Marilyn. She stared back at him.
“Go ahead,” she said quietly. “Break his damn leg. Why should I care? He’s made me penniless. He’s ruined my life. Break both his damn legs if you feel like it. But it won’t get you what you want any quicker. Because there are complications, and the sooner we get to them, the better it is for you. And we won’t get to them until Sheryl is in the hospital.”
She leaned back on the window ledge, palms down, arms locked from the shoulder. She hoped it made her look relaxed and casual, but she was doing it to keep herself from falling on the floor.
“The hospital first,” she said again. She was concentrating so hard on her voice, it sounded like somebody else’s. She was pleased with it. It sounded OK. A low, firm voice, steady and quiet in the silent office.
“Then we deal,” she said. “Your choice.”
The outfielder was leaping, glove high, and the ball was dropping. The glove was higher than the fence. The trajectory of the ball was too close to call. Hobie tapped his hook on the desk. The sound was loud. Stone was staring at him. Hobie ignored him and glanced up at Tony.
“Take the bitch to the hospital,” he said sourly.
“Chester goes with them,” Marilyn said. “For verification. He needs to see her go inside to the ER, alone. I stay here, as surety.”
Hobie stopped tapping. Looked at her and smiled. “Don’t you trust me?”
“No, I don’t trust you. We don’t do it this way, you’ll just take Sheryl out of here and lock her up someplace else.”
Hobie was still smiling. “Farthest thing from my thoughts. I was going to have Tony shoot her and dump her in the sea.”
There was silence again. Marilyn was shaking inside.
“You sure you want to do this?” Hobie asked her. “She says one word to the hospital people, she gets you killed, you know that, right?”
Marilyn nodded. “She won’t say anything to anybody. Not knowing you’ve still got me here.”
“You better pray she doesn’t.”
“She won’t. This isn’t about us. It’s about her. She needs to get help.”
She stared at him, leaning back, feeling faint. She was searching his face for a sign of compassion. Some acceptance of his responsibility. He stared back at

sign of compassion. Some acceptance of his responsibility. He stared back at her. There was no compassion in his face. Nothing there at all, except annoyance. She swallowed and took a deep breath.
“And she needs a skirt. She can’t go out without one. It’ll look suspicious. The hospital will get the police involved. Neither of us wants that. So Tony needs to go out and buy her a new skirt: ‘
“Lend her your dress,” Hobie said. “Take it off and give it to her.”
There was a long silence.
“It wouldn’t fit her,” Marilyn said.
“That’s not the reason, is it?”
She made no reply. Silence. Hobie shrugged.
“OK,” he said.
She swallowed again. “And shoes.”
“What?”
“She needs shoes,” Marilyn said. “She can’t go without shoes.”
“Jesus,” Hobie said. “What the hell next?”
“Next, we deal. Soon as Chester is back here and tells me he saw her walk in alone and unharmed, then we deal.”
Hobie traced the curve of his hook with the fingers of his left hand.
“You’re a smart woman,” he said.
I know I am, Marilyn thought. *That’s the first of your complications.*

REACHER PLACED THE sports bag on the white sofa underneath the Mondrian copy. He unzipped it and turned it over and spilled out the bricks of fifties. Thirty-nine thousand, three hundred dollars in cash. He split it in half by tossing the bricks alternately left and right to opposite ends of the sofa. He finished up with two very impressive stacks.
“Four trips to the bank,” Jodie said. “Under ten thousand dollars, the reporting rules don’t apply, and we don’t want to be answering any questions about where we got this from, right? We’ll put it in my account and cut the Hobies a cashier’s check for nineteen-six-fifty. Our half, we’ll access through my gold card, OK?”
Reacher nodded. “We need airfare to St. Louis, Missouri, plus a hotel. Nineteen grand in the bank, we can stay in decent places and go business class.”
“It’s the only way to fly,” she said. She put her arms around his waist and stretched up on tiptoes and kissed him on the mouth. He kissed her back, hard.
“This is fun, isn’t it?” she said.
“For us, maybe,” he said. “Not for the Hobies.”
They made three trips together to three separate banks and wound up at a fourth, where she made the final deposit and bought a cashier’s check made out to Mr. T. and Mrs. M. Hobie in the sum of $19,650. The bank guy put it in a creamy

T. and Mrs. M. Noble in the sum of $15,000. The bank guy put it in a creamy envelope and she zipped it into her pocketbook. Then they walked back to Broadway together, holding hands, so she could pack for the trip. She put the bank envelope in her bureau and he got on the phone and established that United from JFK was the best bet for St. Louis, that time of day.
"Cab?" she asked.
He shook his head. "We'll drive."
The big V-8 made a hell of a sound in the basement garage. He blipped the throttle a couple of times and grinned. The torque rocked the heavy vehicle, side to side on its springs.
"The price of their toys," Jodie said.
He looked at her.
"You never heard that?" she said. "Difference between the men and the boys is the price of their toys?"
He blipped the motor and grinned again. "Price on this was a dollar."
"And you just blipped away two dollars in gas," she said.
He shoved it in drive and took off up the ramp. Worked around east to the Midtown Tunnel and took 495 to the Van Wyck and down into the sprawl of JFK.
"Park in short-term," she said. "We can afford it now, right?"
He had to leave the Steyr and the silencer behind. No easy way to get through the airport security hoops with big metal weapons in your pocket. He hid them under the driver's seat. They left the Lincoln in the lot right opposite the United building and five minutes later were at the counter buying two business-class one-ways to St. Louis. The expensive tickets entitled them to wait in a special lounge, where a uniformed steward served them good coffee in china cups with saucers, and where they could read *The Wall Street Journal* without paying for it. Then Reacher carried Jodie's bag down the jetway into the plane. The business-class seats were two-on-a-side, the first half-dozen rows. Wide, comfortable seats. Reacher smiled.
"I never did this before," he said.
He slid into the window seat. He had room to stretch out a little. Jodie was lost in her seat. There was room enough for three of her, side by side. The attendant brought them juice before the plane even taxied. Minutes later they were in the air, wheeling west across the southern tip of Manhattan.

TONY CAME BACK into the office with a shiny red Talbot's bag and a brown Bally carrier hanging by their rope handles from his clenched fist. Marilyn carried them into the bathroom and five minutes later Sheryl came out. The new

skirt was the right size, but the wrong color. She was smoothing it down over her hips with vague movements of her hands. The new shoes didn't match the skirt and they were too big. Her face looked awful. Her eyes were blank and acquiescent, like Marilyn had told her they should be.
"What are you going to tell the doctors?" Hobie called to her.
Sheryl looked away and concentrated on Marilyn's script. "I walked into a door," she said.
Her voice was low and nasal. Dull, like she was still in shock.
"Are you going to call the cops?"
She shook her head. "No, I'm not going to do that."
Hobie nodded. "What would happen if you did?"
"I don't know," she replied. Blank and dull.
"Your friend Marilyn would die, in terrible pain. You understand that?"
He raised the hook and let her focus on it from across the room. Then he came out from behind the desk. Walked around and stood directly behind Marilyn. Used his left hand to lift her hair aside. His hand brushed her skin. She stiffened. He touched her cheek with the curve of the hook. Sheryl nodded, vaguely.
"Yes, I understand that," she said.

I HAD TO be done quickly, because although Sheryl was now in her new skirt and shoes, Chester was still in his boxers and undershirt. Tony made them both wait in reception until the freight elevator arrived, and then he hustled them along the corridor and inside. He stepped out in the garage and scanned ahead. Hustled them over to the Tahoe and pushed Chester into the backseat and Sheryl into the front. He fired it up and locked the doors. Took off up the ramp and out to the street.
He could recall offhand maybe two dozen hospitals in Manhattan, and as far as he knew most of them had emergency rooms. His instinct was to drive all the way north, maybe up to Mount Sinai on 100th Street, because he felt it would be safer to put some distance between themselves and wherever Sheryl was going to be. But they were tight for time. To drive all the way uptown and back was going to take an hour, maybe more. An hour they couldn't spare. So he decided on St. Vincent's on Eleventh Street and Seventh Avenue. Bellevue, over on Twenty-seventh and First, was better geographically, but Bellevue was usually swarming with cops, for one reason or another. That was his experience. They practically lived there. So St. Vincent's it would be. And he knew St. Vincent's had a big, wide area facing the ER entrance, where Greenwich Avenue sliced across Seventh. He remembered the layout from when they had gone out to capture Costello's secretary. A big, wide area, almost like a plaza. They could

watch her all the way inside, without having to stop too close.
The drive took eight minutes. He eased into the curb on the west side of Seventh and clicked the button to unlock the doors.
“Out,” he said.
She opened the door and slid down to the sidewalk. Stood there, uncertain. Then she moved away to the crosswalk, without looking back. Tony leaned over and slammed the door behind her. Turned in his seat toward Stone.
“So watch her,” he said.
Stone was already watching her. He saw the traffic stop and the walk light change. He saw her step forward with the crowd, dazed. She walked slower than the others, shuffling in her big shoes. Her hand was up at her face, masking it. She reached the opposite sidewalk well after the walk light changed back to DON’T. An impatient truck pulled right and eased around her. She walked on toward the hospital entrance. Across the wide sidewalk. Then she was in the ambulance circle. A pair of double doors ahead of her. Scarred, floppy plastic doors. A trio of nurses standing next to them, on their cigarette break, smoking. She walked past the nurses, straight to the doors, slowly. She pushed at them, tentatively, both hands. They opened. She stepped inside. The doors fell shut behind her.
“OK, you see that?”
Stone nodded. “Yes, I saw it. She’s inside.”
Tony checked his mirror and fought his way out into the traffic stream. By the time he was a hundred yards south, Sheryl was waiting in the triage line, going over and over in her head what Marilyn had told her to do.

IT WAS A short and cheap cab ride from the St. Louis Airport to the National Personnel Records Center building, and familiar territory for Reacher. Most of his Stateside tours of duty had involved at least one trip through the archives, searching backward in time for one thing or another. But this time, it was going to be different. He would be going in as a civilian. Not the same thing as going in dressed in a major’s uniform. Not the same thing at all. He was clear on that. Public access is controlled by the counter staff in the lobby. The whole archive is technically part of the public record, but the staff take a lot of trouble to keep that fact well obscured. In the past Reacher had agreed with that tactic, no hesitation. Military records can be very frank, and they need to be read and interpreted in strict context. He’d always been very happy they were kept away from the public. But now he was the public, and he was wondering how it was going to play. There were millions of files piled up in dozens of huge storerooms, and it would be very easy to wait days or weeks before anything got

found, even with the staff running around like crazy and looking exactly like they were doing their absolute best. He had seen it happen before, from the inside, many times. It was a very plausible act. He had watched it, with a wry smile on his face.

So they paused in the hot Missouri sunshine after they paid off the cab and agreed on how to do it. They walked inside and saw the big sign: One File at a Time. They lined up in front of the clerk and waited. She was a heavy woman, middle-aged, dressed in a master sergeant's uniform, busy with the sort of work designed to achieve nothing at all except to make people wait until it was done. After a long moment she pushed two blank forms across the counter and pointed to where a pencil was tied down to a desk with a piece of string.

The forms were access requests. Jodie filled in her last name as Jacob and requested all and any information on *Major Jack-none-Reacher, U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Division.* Reacher took the pencil from her and asked for all and any information on *Lieutenant General Leon Jerome Garber.* He slid both forms back to the master sergeant, who glanced at them and dropped them in her out-tray. She rang a bell at her elbow and went back to work. The idea was some private would hear the bell, come pick up the forms, and start the patient search for the files.

"Who's working supervisor today?" Reacher asked.

It was a direct question. The sergeant looked for a way to avoid answering it, but she couldn't find one.

"Major Theodore Conrad," she said, reluctantly.

Reacher nodded. Conrad? Not a name he recalled.

"Would you tell him we'd like to meet with him, just briefly? And would you have those files delivered to his office?"

The way he said it was exactly halfway between a pleasant, polite request and an unspoken command. It was a tone of voice he had always found very useful with master sergeants. The woman picked up the phone and made the call.

"He'll have you shown upstairs," she said, like in her opinion she was amazed Conrad was doing them such a massive favor.

"No need," Reacher said. "I know where it is. I've been there before."

He showed Jodie the way, up the stairs from the lobby to a spacious office on the second floor. Major Theodore Conrad was waiting at the door. Hot-weather uniform, his name on an acetate plate above his breast pocket. He looked like a friendly guy, but maybe slightly soured by his posting. He was about forty-five, and to still be a major on the second floor of the NPRC at forty-five meant he was going nowhere in a hurry. He paused, because a private was racing along the hallway toward him with two thick files in his hand. Reacher smiled to himself. They were getting the A-grade service. When this place wanted to be quick, it

They were getting the A-grade service. When this place wanted to be quick, it could be real quick. Conrad took the files and dismissed the runner.
"So what can I do for you folks?" he asked. His accent was slow and muddy, like the Mississippi where it originated, but it was hospitable enough.
"Well, we need your best help, Major," Reacher said. "And we're hoping if you read those files, maybe you'll feel willing to give it up."
Conrad glanced at the files in his hand and stood aside and ushered them into his office. It was a quiet, paneled space. He showed them to a matched pair of leather armchairs and stepped around his desk. Sat down and squared the files on his blotter, one on top of the other. Opened the first, which was Leon's, and started skimming.
It took him ten minutes to see what he needed. Reacher and Jodie sat and gazed out of the window. The city baked under a white sun. Conrad finished with the files and studied the names on the request forms. Then he glanced up.
"Two very fine records," he said. "Very, very impressive. And I get the point. You're obviously Jack-none-Reacher himself, and I'm guessing Mrs. Jodie Jacob here is the Jodie Garber referred to in the file as the general's daughter. Am I right?"
Jodie nodded and smiled.
"I thought so," Conrad said. "And you think being family, so to speak, will buy you better and faster access to the archive?"
Reacher shook his head solemnly.
"It never crossed our minds," he said. "We know all access requests are treated with absolute equality."
Conrad smiled, and then he laughed out loud.
"You kept a straight face," he said. "Very, very good. You play much poker? You damn well should, you know. So how can I help you folks?"
"We need what you've got on a Victor Truman Hobie," Reacher said.
"Vietnam?"
"You familiar with him?" Reacher asked, surprised.
Conrad looked blank. "Never heard of him. But with Truman for a middle name, he was born somewhere between 1945 and 1952, wasn't he? Which makes him too young for Korea and too old for the Gulf."
Reacher nodded. He was starting to like Theodore Conrad. He was a sharp guy. He would have liked to pull his file to see what was keeping him a major, behind a desk out in Missouri at the age of forty-five.
"We'll work in here," Conrad said. "My pleasure."
He picked up the phone and called directly to the storerooms, bypassing the master sergeant at the front desk. He winked at Reacher and ordered up the Hobie file. Then they sat in comfortable silence until the runner came in with the

Hobie file. Then they sat in comfortable silence until the runner came in with the folder five minutes later.
“That was quick,” Jodie said.
“Actually it was a little slow,” Conrad said back. “Think about it from the private’s point of view. He hears me say H for Hobie, he runs to the H section, he locates the file by first and middle initials, he grabs it, he runs up here with it. My people are subject to the Army’s normal standards for physical fitness, which means he could probably run most of a mile in five minutes. And although this is a very big place, there was a lot less than a mile to cover in the triangle between his desk and the H section and this office, believe me. So he was actually a little slow. I suspect the master sergeant interrupted him, just to frustrate me.”
Victor Hobie’s file jacket was old and furred, with a printed grid on the cover where access requests were noted in neat handwriting. There were only two. Conrad traced the names with a finger.
“Requests by telephone,” he said. “General Garber himself, in March of this year. And somebody called Costello, calling from New York, beginning of last week. Why all the sudden interest?”
“That’s what we hope to find out,” Reacher said.
A combat soldier has a thick file, especially a combat soldier who did his fighting thirty years ago. Three decades is long enough for every report and every note to end up in exactly the right place. Victor Hobie’s paperwork was a compressed mass about two inches deep. The old furred jacket was molded tight around it. It reminded Reacher of Costello’s black leather wallet, which he’d seen in the Keys bar. He hitched his chair closer to Jodie’s and closer to the front edge of Conrad’s desk. Conrad laid the file down and reversed it on the shiny wood and opened it up, like he was displaying a rare treasure to interested connoisseurs.

MARILYN’S INSTRUCTIONS HAD been precise, and Sheryl followed them to the letter. The first step was get treatment. She went to the desk and then waited on a hard plastic chair in the triage bay. The St. Vincent’s ER was less busy than it sometimes is and she was seen within ten minutes by a woman doctor young enough to be her daughter.
“How did this happen?” the doctor asked.
“I walked into a door,” Sheryl said.
The doctor led her to a curtained area and sat her down on the examination table. Started checking the reflex responses in her limbs.
“A door? You absolutely sure about that?”
Sheryl nodded. Stuck to her story. Marilyn was counting on her to do that.

Sheryl nodded. Stuck to her story. Marilyn was counting on her to do that.
"It was half-open. I turned around, just didn't see it."
The doctor said nothing and shone a light into Sheryl's left eye, then her right.
"Any blurring of your vision?"
Sheryl nodded. "A little."
"Headache?"
"Like you wouldn't believe."
The doctor paused and studied the admission form.
"OK, we need X rays of the facial bones, obviously, but I also want a full skull film and a CAT scan. We need to see what exactly happened in there. Your insurance is good, so I'm going to get a surgeon to take a look at you right away, because if you're going to need reconstructive work it's a lot better to start on that sooner rather than later, OK? So you need to get into a gown and lie down. Then I'll put you on a painkiller to help with the headache."
Sheryl heard Marilyn insist *make the call before the painkiller, or you'll fuzz out and forget.*
"I need to get to a phone," she said, worried.
"We can call your husband, if you want," the doctor said, neutrally.
"No, I'm not married. It's a lawyer. I need to call somebody's lawyer."
The doctor looked at her and shrugged.
"OK, down the hall. But be quick."
Sheryl walked to the bank of phones opposite the triage bay. She called the operator and asked for collect, like Marilyn had told her to. Repeated the number she'd memorized. The phone was answered on the second ring.
"Forster and Abelstein," a bright voice said. "How may we help you?"
"I'm calling on behalf of Mr. Chester Stone," Sheryl said. "I need to speak with his attorney."
"That would be Mr. Forster himself," the bright voice said. "Please hold."
While Sheryl was listening to the hold music, the doctor was twenty feet away, at the main desk, also making a call. Her call featured no music. Her call was to the NYPD's Domestic Violence Unit.
"This is St. Vincent's," she was saying. "I've got another one for you. This one says she walked into a damn door. Won't even admit she's married, much less he's beating on her. You can come on down and talk to her anytime you want."

THE FIRST ITEM in the file was Victor Hobie's original application to join the Army. It was brown at the edges and crisp with age, handwritten in the same neat left-handed schoolboy script they had seen in the letters home to Brighton. It listed a summary of his education, his desire to fly helicopters, and not very

much else. On the face of it, not an obvious rising star. But around that time for every one boy stepping up to volunteer, there were two dozen others buying one-way tickets on the Greyhound to Canada, so the Army recruiters had grabbed Hobie with both hands and sent him straight to the doctor.

He had been given a flight medical, which was a tougher examination than standard, especially concerning eyesight and balance. He had passed A-1. Six feet one inch, 170 pounds, twenty-twenty vision, good lung capacity, free of infectious diseases. The medical was dated early in the spring, and Reacher could picture the boy, pale from the New York winter, standing in his boxers on a bare wooden floor with a tape measure tight around his chest.

Next item in the file showed he was given travel vouchers and ordered to report to Fort Dix in two weeks' time. The following batch of paperwork originated from down there. It started with the form he signed on his arrival, irrevocably committing himself to loyal service in the United States Army. Fort Dix was twelve weeks of basic training. There were six proficiency assessments. He scored well above average in all of them. No comments were recorded.

Then there was a requisition for travel vouchers to Fort Polk, and a copy of his orders to report there for a month of advanced infantry training. There were notes about his progress with weapons. He was rated good, which meant something at Polk. At Dix, you were rated good if you could recognize a rifle at ten paces. At Polk, such a rating spoke of excellent hand-to-eye coordination, steady muscle control, calm temperament. Reacher was no expert on flying, but he guessed the instructors would have been fairly sanguine about eventually letting this guy loose with a helicopter.

There were more travel vouchers, this time to Fort Wolters in Texas, where the U.S. Army Primary Helicopter School was located. There was a note attached from the Polk CO indicating Hobie had turned down a week's leave in favor of heading straight there. It was just a bald statement, but it carried an approving resonance, even after all those years. Here was a guy who was just about itching to get going.

The paperwork thickened up at Wolters. It was a five-month stay, and it was serious stuff, like college. First came a month of preflight training, with heavy academic concentration on physics and aeronautics and navigation, taught in classrooms. It was necessary to pass to progress. Hobie had creamed it. The math talent his father had hoped to turn toward accountancy ran riot through those textbook subjects. He passed out of preflight top of his class. The only negative was a short note about his attitude. Some officer was criticizing him for trading favors for coaching. Hobie was helping some strugglers through the complex equations and in return they were shining his boots and cleaning his kit.

Reacher shrugged to himself. The officer was clearly an asshole. Hobie was training to be a helicopter pilot, not a damn saint.

The next four months at Wolters were airborne for primary flight training, initially on H-23 Hillers. Hobie's first instructor was a guy called Lanark. His training notes were written in a wild scrawl, very anecdotal, very un-military. Sometimes very funny. He claimed learning to fly a helicopter was like learning to ride a bike as a kid. You screwed it up, and you screwed it up, and you screwed it up, and then all of a sudden it came right and you never again forgot how to do it. In Lanark's opinion, Hobie had maybe taken longer than he ought to master it, but thereafter his progress moved from excellent to outstanding. He signed him off the Hiller and onto the H-19 Sikorsky, which was like moving up to a ten-speed English racer. He performed better on the Sikorsky than he had on the Hiller. He was a natural, and he got better the more complicated the machines became.

He finished Wolters overall second in his class, rated outstanding, just behind an ace called A. A. DeWitt. More travel vouchers had them heading out together, over to Fort Rucker in Alabama, for another four months in advanced flight training.

"Have I heard of this guy DeWitt?" Reacher asked. "The name rings a bell."

Conrad was following progress upside down.

"Could be General DeWitt," he said. "He runs the Helicopter School back at Wolters now. That would be logical, right? I'll check it out."

He called direct to the storeroom and ordered up *Major General A. A. DeWitt.* Checked his watch as the phone went back down. "Should be faster, because the D section is nearer his desk than the H section. Unless the damn master sergeant interferes with him again."

Reacher smiled briefly and rejoined Jodie thirty years in the past. Fort Rucker was the real thing, with brand-new front-line assault helicopters replacing the trainers. Bell UH-1 Iroquois, nicknamed *Hueys.* Big, fierce machines, gas turbine engines, the unforgettable *wop-wop-wop* sound of a rotor blade forty-eight feet long and twenty-one inches wide. Young Victor Hobie had hurled one around the Alabama skies for seventeen long weeks, and then he passed out with credits and distinctions at the parade his father had photographed.

"Three minutes forty seconds," Conrad whispered.

The runner was on his way in with the DeWitt jacket. Conrad leaned forward and took it from him. The guy saluted and went back out.

"I can't let you see this," Conrad said. "The general's still a serving officer, right? But I'll tell you if it's the same DeWitt."

He opened the file at the beginning and Reacher saw flashes of the same paper

as in Hobie's. Conrad skimmed and nodded. "Same DeWitt. He survived the jungle and stayed on board afterward. Total helicopter nut. My guess is he'll serve out his time down at Wolters."
Reacher nodded. Glanced out of the window. The sun was falling away into afternoon.
"You guys want some coffee?" Conrad asked.
"Great," Jodie said. Reacher nodded again.
Conrad picked up the phone and called the storeroom.
"Coffee," he said. "That's not a file. It's a request for refreshment. Three cups, best china, OK?"
The runner brought it in on a silver tray, by which time Reacher was up at Fort Belvoir in Virginia, with Victor Hobie and his new pal A. A. DeWitt reporting to the 3rd Transportation Company of the First Cavalry Division. The two boys were there two weeks, long enough for the Army to add *air-mobile* to their unit designation, and then to change it completely to Company B, 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion. At the end of the two weeks, the renamed company sailed away from the Alabama coast, part of a seventeen-ship convoy on a thirty-one-day sea voyage to Long Mai Bay, twenty miles south of Qui Nhon and eleven thousand miles away in Vietnam.
Thirty-one days at sea is a whole month, and the company brass invented make-work to keep boredom at bay. Hobie's file indicated he signed up for maintenance, which meant endlessly rinsing and greasing the disassembled Hueys to beat the salt air down in the ship's hold. The note was approving, and Hobie stepped onto the Indochina beach a first lieutenant, after leaving the States a Second, and thirteen months after joining the Army as an officer candidate. Merited promotions for a worthy recruit. One of the good kids. Reacher recalled Ed Steven's words, in the hot sunshine outside the hardware store: *very serious, very earnest, but not really a whole lot out of the ordinary.*
"Cream?" Conrad asked.
Reacher shook his head, in time with Jodie.
"Just black," they said, together.
Conrad poured and Reacher kept on reading. There were two variants of Hueys in use at that time: one was a gunship, and the other was a transport chopper nicknamed a *slick.* Company B was assigned to fly slicks, servicing First Cavalry's battlefield transport needs. The slick was a transport hack, but it was not unarmed. It was a standard Huey, with the side doors stripped off and a heavy machine gun hung on a bungee cord in each open doorway. There were a pilot and a copilot, two gunners, and a crew chief acting as an all-purpose engineer and mechanic. The slick could lift as many grunts as could pack

themselves into the boxy space between the two gunners' backs, or a ton of ammunition, or any combination.

There was on-the-job training to reflect the fact that Vietnam was very different from Alabama. There was no formal grading attached to it, but Hobie and DeWitt were the first new pilots assigned to the jungle. Then the requirement was to fly five combat missions as a copilot, and if you handled that, you took the pilot's seat and got your own copilot. Then the serious business started, and it was reflected in the file. The whole second half of the jacket was stuffed with mission reports on flimsy onion-skin paper. The language was dry and matter-of-fact. They were not written by Hobie himself. They were the work of the company dispatch clerk.

It was very episodic fighting. The war was boiling all around him unabated, but Hobie spent a long time on the ground, because of the weather. For days at a time, the fogs and mists of Vietnam made it suicidal to fly a helicopter low-level into the jungle valleys. Then the weather would suddenly clear and the reports would clump together all under the same date: three, five, sometimes seven missions a day, against furious enemy opposition, inserting, recovering, supplying and resupplying the ground troops. Then the mists would roll back in, and the Hueys would wait inert once more in their laagers. Reacher pictured Hobie, lying in his hooch for days on end, frustrated or relieved, bored or tense, then bursting back into terrifying action for frantic exhausting hours of combat. The reports were separated into two halves by paperwork documenting the end of the first tour, the routine award of the medal, the long furlough back in New York, the start of the second tour. Then more combat reports. Same exact work, same exact pattern. There were fewer reports from the second tour. The very last sheet in the file recorded Lieutenant Victor Hobie's 991st career combat mission. Not routine First Cavalry business. It was a special assignment. He took off from Pleiku, heading east for an improvised landing zone near the An Khe Pass. His orders were to fly in as one of two slicks and exfiltrate the personnel waiting on the landing zone. DeWitt was flying backup. Hobie got there first. He landed in the center of the tiny landing zone, under heavy machine-gun fire from the jungle. He was seen to take on board just three men. He took off again almost immediately. His Huey was taking hits to the airframe from the machine guns. His own gunners were returning fire blind through the jungle canopy. DeWitt was circling as Hobie was heading out. He saw Hobie's Huey take a sustained burst of heavy machine-gun fire through the engines. His formal report as recorded by the dispatch clerk said he saw the Huey's rotor stop and flames appear in the fuel tank area. The helicopter crashed through the jungle canopy four miles west of the landing zone, at a low angle and at a speed estimated by

DeWitt to be in excess of eighty miles an hour. DeWitt reported a green flash visible through the foliage, which was normally indicative of a fueltank explosion on the forest floor. A search-and-rescue operation was mounted and aborted because of weather. No fragments of wreckage were observed. Because the area four miles west of the pass was considered inaccessible virgin jungle, it was procedure to assume there were no NVA troops on foot in the immediate vicinity. Therefore there had been no risk of immediate capture by the enemy. Therefore the eight men in the Huey were listed as missing in action.
"But why?" Jodie asked. "DeWitt saw the thing blow up. Why list them as missing? They were obviously all killed, right?"
Major Conrad shrugged.
"I guess so," he said. "But nobody knew it for sure. DeWitt saw a flash through the leaves, is all. Could theoretically have been an NVA ammo dump, hit by a lucky shot from the machine as it went down. Could have been anything. They only ever said killed in action when they knew for damn sure. When somebody literally eyeballed it happening. Fighter planes went down alone two hundred miles out in the ocean, the pilot was listed as missing, not killed, because perhaps he could have swum away somewhere. To list them as killed, someone had to see it happen. I could show you a file ten times thicker than this one, packed with orders defining and redefining exactly how to describe casualties."
"Why?" Jodie asked again. "Because they were afraid of the press?"
Conrad shook his head. "No, I'm talking about internal stuff here. Anytime they were afraid of the press, they just told lies. This all was for two reasons. First, they didn't want to get it wrong for the next of kin. Believe me, weird things happened. It was a totally alien environment. People survived things you wouldn't expect them to survive. People turned up later. They found people. There was a massive search-and-recovery deal running, all the time. People got taken prisoner, and Charlie never issued prisoner lists, not until years later. And you couldn't tell folks their boy was killed, only to have him turn up alive later on. So they were anxious to keep on saying missing, just as long as they could."
Then he paused for a long moment.
"Second reason is yes, they were afraid. But not of the press. They were afraid of themselves. They were afraid of telling themselves they were getting beat, and beat bad."
Reacher was scanning the final mission report, picking out the copilot's name. He was a second lieutenant named F. G. Kaplan. He had been Hobie's regular partner throughout most of the second tour.
"Can I see this guy's jacket?" he asked.
"K section?" Conrad said. "Be about four minutes."

They sat in silence with the cold coffee until the runner brought F. G. Kaplan's life story to the office. It was a thick, old file, similar size and vintage as Hobie's. There was the same printed grid on the front cover, recording access requests. The only note less than twenty years old showed a telephone inquiry had been made last April by Leon Garber. Reacher turned the file facedown and opened it up from the back. Started with the second-to-last sheet of paper. It was identical to the last sheet in Hobie's jacket. The same mission report, with the same eyewitness account from DeWitt, written up by the same clerk in the same handwriting.

But the final sheet in Kaplan's file was dated exactly two years later than the final mission report. It was a formal determination made after due consideration of the circumstances by the Department of the Army that F. G. Kaplan had been killed in action four miles west of the An Khe Pass when the helicopter he was copiloting was brought down by enemy ground-to-air fire. No body had been recovered, but the death was to be considered as actual for purposes of memorializing and payment of pensions. Reacher squared the sheet of paper on the desk.

"So why doesn't Victor Hobie have one of these?"

Conrad shook his head. "I don't know."

"I want to go to Texas," Reacher said.

NOI BAI AIRPORT outside Hanoi and Hickam Field outside Honolulu share exactly the same latitude, so the U.S. Air Force Starlifter flew neither north nor south. It just followed a pure west-east flight path across the Pacific, holding comfortably between the Tropic of Cancer and the Twentieth Parallel. Six thousand miles, six hundred miles an hour, ten hours' flight time, but it was on approach seven hours before it took off, at three o'clock in the afternoon of the day before. The Air Force captain made the usual announcement as they crossed the date line and the tall silver-haired American in the rear of the cockpit wound his watch back and added another bonus day to his life.

Hickam Field is Hawaii's main military air facility, but it shares runway space and air-traffic control with Honolulu International, so the Starlifter had to turn a wide, weary circle above the sea, waiting for a JAL 747 from Tokyo to get down. Then it turned in and flattened and came down behind it, tires shrieking, engines screaming with reverse thrust. The pilot was not concerned with the niceties of civilian flying, so she jammed the brakes on hard and stopped short enough to get off the runway on the first taxiway. There was a standing request from the airport to keep the military planes away from the tourists. Especially the Japanese tourists. This pilot was from Connecticut and had no real interest in Hawaii's staple industry or Oriental sensitivities, but the first taxiway gave her a

Hawaii's staple industry or Oriental sensitivities, but the first taxiway gave her a shorter run to the military compound, which is why she always aimed to take it. The Starlifter taxied slowly, as was appropriate, and stopped fifty yards from a long, low cement building near the wire. The pilot shut down her engines and sat in silence. Ground crew in full uniform marched slowly toward the belly of the plane, dragging a fat cable behind them. They latched it into a port under the nose and the plane's systems kicked in again under the airfield's own power. That way, the ceremony could be conducted in silence.

The honor guard at Hickam that day was the usual eight men in the usual mosaic of four different full-dress uniforms, two from the United States Army, two from the United States Navy, two from the United States Marine Corps, and two from the United States Air Force. The eight slow-marched forward and waited in silent formation. The pilot hit the switch and the rear ramp came whining down. It settled against the hot blacktop of American territory and the guard slow-marched up its exact center into the belly of the plane. They passed between the twin lines of silent aircrew and moved forward. The loadmaster removed the rubber straps and the guard lifted the first casket off the shelves and onto their shoulders. They slow-marched back with it through the darkened fuselage and down the ramp and out into the blazing afternoon, the shined aluminum winking and the flag glowing bright in the sun against the blue Pacific and the green highlands of Oahu. They right-wheeled on the apron and slow-marched the fifty yards to the long, low cement building. They went inside and bent their knees and laid the casket down. They stood in silence, hands folded behind them, heads bowed, and then they about-turned and slow-marched back toward the plane.

It took an hour to unload all seven of the caskets. Only when the task was complete did the tall silver-haired American leave his seat. He used the pilot's stairway, and paused at the top to stretch his weary limbs in the sun.

12

STONE HAD TO wait five minutes behind the black glass in the rear of the Tahoe, because the loading dock under the World Trade Center was busy. Tony loitered nearby, leaning on a pillar in the noisy dark, waiting until a delivery truck moved out in a blast of diesel and there was a moment before the next one could move in. He used that moment to hustle Stone across the garage to the freight elevator. He hit the button and they rode up in silence, heads down, breathing hard, smelling the strong smell of the tough rubber floor. They came out in the back of the eighty-eighth floor lobby and Tony scanned ahead. The way was clear to the door of Hobie's suite.

The thickset man was at the reception counter. They walked straight past him into the office. It was dark, as usual. The blinds were pulled tight and it was quiet. Hobie was at the desk, sitting still and silent, gazing at Marilyn, who was on the sofa with her legs tucked underneath her.

"Well?" he asked. "Mission accomplished?"

Stone nodded. "She got inside OK."

"Where?" Marilyn asked. "Which hospital?"

"St. Vincent's," Tony said. "Straight into the ER."

Stone nodded to confirm it and he saw Marilyn smile a slight smile of relief.

"OK," Hobie said into the silence. "'That's the good deed for the day. Now we do business. What are these complications I need to know about?"

Tony shoved Stone around the coffee table to the sofa. He sat down heavily next to Marilyn and stared straight ahead, focusing on nothing.

"Well?" Hobie said again.

"The stock," Marilyn said. "He doesn't own it outright."

Hobie stared at her. "Yes he damn well does. I checked it at the Exchange."

She nodded. "Well, yes, he owns it. What I mean is, he doesn't control it. He doesn't have free access to it."

"Why the hell not?"

"There's a trust. Access is regulated by the trustees."

"What trust? Why?"

"His father set it up, before he died. He didn't trust Chester to handle it all outright. He felt he needed supervision."

Hobie stared at her.

"Any major stock disposals need to be co-signed," she said. "By the trustees."

There was silence.

"Both of them," she said

"Both of them," she said.
Hobie switched his gaze to Chester Stone. It was like a searchlight beam flicking sideways. Marilyn watched his good eye. Watched him thinking. Watched him buying into the lie, like she knew he would, because it jibed with what he thought he already knew. Chester's business was failing, because he was a bad businessman. A bad businessman would have been spotted early by a close relative like a father. And a responsible father would have protected the family heritage with a trust.
"It's unbreakable," she said. "God knows we've tried often enough."
Hobie nodded. Just a slight movement of his head. Almost imperceptible.
Marilyn smiled inside. Smiled with triumph. Her final comment had done it to him. A trust was a thing to be broken. It had to be fought. Therefore the attempts to fight it proved it existed.
"Who are the trustees?" he asked quietly.
"I'm one of them," she said. "The other is the senior partner at his law firm."
"Just two trustees?"
She nodded.
"And you're one of them?"
She nodded again. "And you've already got my vote. I just want to get rid of the whole damn thing and get you off our backs."
Hobie nodded back to her. "You're a smart woman."
"Which law firm?" Tony asked.
"Forster and Abelstein," she said. "Right here in town."
"Who's the senior partner?" Tony asked.
"A guy called David Forster," Marilyn said.
"How do we set up the meeting?" Hobie asked.
"I call him," Marilyn said. "Or Chester does, but I think right now it would be better if I did."
"So call him, set it up for this afternoon."
She shook her head. "Won't be that quick. Could be a couple of days."
There was silence. Just the boom and shudder of the giant building breathing.
Hobie tapped his hook on the desk. He closed his eyes. The damaged eyelid stayed open a fraction. The eyeball rolled up and showed white, like a crescent moon.
"Tomorrow morning," he said quietly. "At the very latest. Tell him it's a matter of considerable urgency to you."
Then his eyes snapped open.
"And tell him to fax the trust deeds to me," he whispered. "Immediately. I need to know what the hell I'm dealing with."
Marilyn was shaking inside. She pushed down on the soft upholstery, trying to

ground herself. “There won’t be a problem. It’s really just a formality.”
“So let’s go make the call,” Hobie said.
Marilyn was unsteady on her feet. She stood swaying, smoothing the dress down over her thighs. Chester touched her elbow, just for a second. A tiny gesture of support. She straightened and followed Hobie out to the reception counter.
“Dial nine for a line,” he said.
She moved behind the counter and the three men watched her. The phone was a small console. She scanned across the buttons and saw no speakerphone facility. She relaxed a fraction and picked up the handset. Pressed nine and heard a dial tone.
“Behave yourself,” Hobie said. “You’re a smart woman, remember, and right now you need to stay smart.”
She nodded. He raised the hook. It glittered in the artificial light. It looked heavy. It was beautifully made and lovingly polished, mechanically simple and terribly brutal. She saw him inviting her to imagine the things that could be done with it.
“Forster and Abelstein,” a bright voice said in her ear. “How may we help you?”
“Marilyn Stone,” she said. “For Mr. Forster.”
Her throat was suddenly dry. It made her voice low and husky. There was a snatch of electronic music and then the boomy acoustic of a large office.
“Forster,” a deep voice said.
“David, it’s Marilyn Stone.”
There was dead silence for a second. In that second, she knew Sheryl had done it right.
“Are we being overheard?” Forster asked quietly.
“No, I’m fine,” Marilyn said, brightness in her voice. Hobie rested the hook on the counter, the steel glittering chest high, eighteen inches in front of her eyes.
“You need the police for this,” Forster said.
“No, it’s just about a trustees’ meeting. What’s the soonest we can do?”
“Your friend Sheryl told me what you want,” Forster said. “But there are problems. Our staff people can’t handle this sort of stuff. We’re not equipped for it. We’re not that sort of law firm. I’ll have to find you a private detective.”
“Tomorrow morning would be good for us,” she said back. “There’s an element of urgency, I’m afraid.”
“Let me call the police for you,” Forster said.
“No, David, next week is really too late. We need to move fast, if we can.”
“But I don’t know where to look. We’ve never used private detectives.”
“Hold on a moment, David.” She covered the mouthpiece with the heel of her hand and glanced up at Hobie. “If you want it tomorrow, it’s got to be at their

offices."
Hobie shook his head. "It has to be here, on my turf."
She took her hand away. "David, what about the day after tomorrow? It really needs to be here, I'm afraid. It's a delicate negotiation."
"You really don't want the police? You absolutely sure about that?"
"Well, there are complications. You know how things can be sometimes, sort of delicate?"
"OK, but I'm going to have to find somebody suitable. It could take me some time. I'll have to ask around for recommendations."
"That's great, David," she said.
"OK," Forster said again. "If you're sure you're sure, I'll get on it right away. But I'm really not clear exactly what you're hoping to achieve."
"Yes, I agree," she said. "You know we've always hated the way Dad set it up. Outside interference can change things, can't it?"
"Two in the afternoon," Forster said. "Day after tomorrow. I don't know who it'll be, but I'll get you someone good. Will that be OK?"
"Day after tomorrow, two in the afternoon," she repeated. She recited the address. "That's great. Thanks, David."
Her hand was shaking and the phone rattled in the cradle as she hung it up.
"You didn't ask for the trust deeds," Hobie said.
She shrugged nervously.
"There was no need. It's a formality. It would have made him suspicious."
There was silence. Then Hobie nodded.
"OK," he said. "Day after tomorrow. Two in the afternoon."
"We need clothes," she said. "It's supposed to be a business meeting. We can't be dressed like this."
Hobie smiled. "I like you dressed like that. Both of you. But I guess old Chester here can borrow my suit back for the meeting. You'll stay as you are."
She nodded, vaguely. She was too drained to push it.
"Back in the bathroom," Hobie said. "You can come out again day after tomorrow, two o'clock. Behave yourselves and you'll eat twice a day."
They walked silently ahead of Tony. He closed the bathroom door on them and walked back through the dark office and rejoined Hobie in the reception area.
"Day after tomorrow is way too late," he said. "For God's sake, Hawaii is going to know today. Tomorrow, at the very latest, right?"
Hobie nodded. The ball was dropping through the glare of the lights. The outfielder was leaping. The fence was looming.
"Yes, it's going to be tight, isn't it?" he said.
"It's going to be crazy tight. You should just get the hell out."

“I can’t, Tony. I’ve given my word on the deal, so I need that stock. But it’ll be OK. Don’t you worry about it. Day after tomorrow at two-thirty, the stock will be mine, it’ll be registered by three, it’ll be sold on by five, we’ll be out of here by suppertime. Day after tomorrow, it’ll all be over.”
“But it’s crazy. Involving a lawyer? We can’t let a lawyer in here.”
Hobie stared at him.
“A lawyer,” he repeated slowly. “You know what the basis of justice is?”
“What?”
“Fairness,” Hobie said. “Fairness and equality. They bring a lawyer, we should bring a lawyer, too, shouldn’t we? Keep things fair?”
“Christ, Hobie, we can’t have two lawyers in here.”
“We can,” Hobie said. “In fact, I think we should.”
He walked around the reception counter and sat down where Marilyn had sat. The leather was still warm from her body. He took the Yellow Pages from a cubbyhole and opened it up. Picked up the phone and hit nine for a line. Then he used the tip of the hook in seven precise little motions to dial the number.
“Spencer Gutman,” a bright voice said in his ear. “How may we help you?”

SHERYL WAS ON her back on a bed, with an IV needle taped into a vein in her left hand. The IV was a square polyethylene bag hanging off a curled steel stand behind her. The bag contained liquid, and she could feel the pressure as it seeped down into her hand. She could feel it pushing her blood pressure higher than usual. There was hissing in her temples, and she could feel the pulses behind her ears. The liquid in the bag was clear, like thick water, but it was doing the job. Her face had stopped hurting. The pain had just faded away, leaving her feeling calm and sleepy. She had almost called out to the nurse that she could manage without the painkiller now, because the pain had gone away anyhow, but then she caught herself and realized it was the drug that was taking it away, and it would come right back if the IV stopped. She tried to giggle at her confusion, but her breathing was too slow to get much of a sound out. So she just smiled to herself and closed her eyes and swam down into the warm depths of the bed.
Then there was a sound somewhere in front of her. She opened her eyes and saw the ceiling. It was white and illuminated from above. She swiveled her gaze toward her feet. It was a big effort. There were two people standing at the end of the bed. A man, and a woman. They were looking at her. They were dressed in uniforms. Short-sleeved blue shirts, long dark pants, big comfortable shoes for walking. Their shirts were all covered in badges. Bright embroidered badges and metal signs and plates. They had belts, all loaded down with equipment. There were nightsticks and radios and handcuffs. Revolvers with big wooden handles

were strapped into holsters. They were police officers. Both of them were old. Quite short. Quite broad. The heavy loaded belts made them ungainly.
They were looking at her, patiently. She tried to giggle again. They were looking at the patient, patiently. The man was balding. The illuminated ceiling was reflected in his shiny forehead. The woman had a tight perm, dyed orange, like a carrot. She was older than he was. She must have been fifty. She was a mother. Sheryl could tell that. She was gazing down with a kind expression, like a mother would.
“Can we sit down?” the woman asked.
Sheryl nodded. The thick liquid was buzzing in her temples, and it was confusing her. The woman scraped a chair across the floor and sat down on Sheryl’s right, away from the IV stand. The man sat directly behind her. The woman leaned toward the bed, and the man leaned the other way, so his head was visible in a line behind hers. They were close, and it was a struggle to focus on their faces.
“I’m Officer O’Hallinan,” the woman said.
Sheryl nodded again. The name suited her. The gingery hair, the heavy face, the heavy body, she needed an Irish name. And a lot of New York cops were Irish. Sheryl knew that. Sometimes it was like a family trade. One generation would follow the other.
“I’m Officer Sark,” the man said, from behind her.
He was pale. He had the sort of pale white skin that looks papery. He had shaved, but there was gray shadow showing. His eyes were deep set, but kindly. They were in a web of lines. He was an uncle. Sheryl was sure of that. He had nephews and nieces who liked him.
“We want you to tell us what happened,” the woman called O’Hallinan said.
Sheryl closed her eyes. She couldn’t really remember what happened. She knew she had stepped in through Marilyn’s door. She remembered the smell of rug shampoo. She remembered thinking that was a mistake. Maybe the client would wonder what needed covering up. Then she was suddenly on her back on the hallway floor with agony exploding from her nose.
“Can you tell us what happened?” the man called Sark asked.
“I walked into a door,” she whispered. Then she nodded, like she was confirming it to them. It was important. Marilyn had told her *no police.* Not yet.
“Which door?”
She didn’t know which door. Marilyn hadn’t told her. It was something they hadn’t talked about. Which door? She panicked.
“Office door,” she said.
“Is your office here in the city?” O’Hallinan asked.

Sheryl made no reply. She just stared blankly into the woman's kindly face.
"Your insurance carrier says you work up in Westchester," Sark said. "At a real estate broker in Pound Ridge."
Sheryl nodded, cautiously.
"So you walked into your office door in Westchester," O'Hallinan said. "And now you're in the hospital fifty miles away in New York City."
"How did that happen, Sheryl?" Sark asked.
She made no reply. There was silence inside the curtain area. Hissing and buzzing in her temples.
"We can help, you know," O'Hallinan said. "That's why we're here. We're here to help you. We can make sure this doesn't happen again."
Sheryl nodded again, cautiously.
"But you have to tell us how it came about. Does he do this often?"
Sheryl stared at her, confused.
"Is that why you're down here?" Sark asked. "You know, new hospital, no records from the other times? If we were to ask up in Mount Kisco or White Plains, what would we find? Would we find they know you up there? From before, maybe? From the other times he's done this to you?"
"I walked into a door," Sheryl whispered.
O'Hallinan shook her head. "Sheryl, we know you didn't."
She stood up and peeled the X-ray films off the light box on the wall. Held them up to the light from the ceiling, like a doctor would.
"Here's your nose," she said, pointing. "Here's your cheekbones, and here's your brow, and here's your chin. See here? Your nose is broken, and your cheekbones, Sheryl. There's a depressed fracture. That's what the doctor is calling it. A depressed fracture. The bones are pushed down below the level of your chin and your brow. But your chin and your brow are OK. So this was done by something horizontal, wasn't it? Something like a bat? Swinging sideways?"
Sheryl stared at the films. They were gray and milky. Her bones looked like vague blurred shapes. Her eye sockets were enormous. The painkiller buzzed in her head, and she felt weak and sleepy.
"I walked into a door," she whispered.
"The edge of a door is vertical," Sark said, patiently. "There would be damage to your chin and your brow as well, wouldn't there? It stands to reason, doesn't it? If a vertical thing had depressed your cheekbones, it would have hit your brow and your chin pretty hard as well, wouldn't it?"
He gazed at the X rays, sadly.
"We can help you," O'Hallinan said. "You tell us all about it, and we can keep it from happening again. We can keep him from doing this to you again."
"I want to sleep now," Sheryl whispered.

"I want to sleep now," Sheryl whispered.
O'Hallinan leaned forward and spoke softly. "Would it help if my partner left? You know, just you and me talking?"
"I walked into a door," Sheryl whispered. "Now I want to go to sleep."
O'Hallinan nodded, wisely and patiently. "I'll leave you my card. So if you want to talk to me when you wake up, you can just call me, OK?"
Sheryl nodded vaguely and O'Hallinan slipped a card from her pocket and bent down and placed it on the cabinet next to the bed.
"Don't forget, we can help you," she whispered.
Sheryl made no reply. She was either asleep, or pretending to be. O'Hallinan and Sark pulled the curtain and walked away to the desk. The doctor looked up at them. O'Hallinan shook her head.
"Complete denial," she said.
"Walked into a door," Sark said. "A door who was probably juiced up, weighs about two hundred pounds and swings a baseball bat."
The doctor shook her head. "Why on earth do they protect the bastards?"
A nurse looked up. "I saw her come in. It was really weird. I was on my cigarette break. She got out of a car, way on the far side of the street. Walked herself all the way in. Her shoes were too big, you notice that? There were two guys in the car, watched her every step of the way, and then they took off in a big hurry."
"What was the car?" Sark asked.
"Big black thing," the nurse said.
"You recall the plate?"
"What am I, Mr. Memory?"
O'Hallinan shrugged and started to move away.
"But it'll be on the video," the nurse said suddenly.
"What video?" Sark asked.
"Security camera, above the doors. We stand right underneath it, so the management can't clock how long we take out there. So what we see, it sees, too."
The exact time of Sheryl's arrival was recorded in the paperwork at the desk. It took just a minute to wind the tape back to that point. Then another minute to run her slow walk in reverse, backward across the ambulance circle, across the plaza, across the sidewalk, through the traffic, into the front of a big black car.
O'Hallinan bent her head close to the screen.
"Got it," she said.

JODIE CHOSE THE hotel for the night. She did it by finding the travel section in the nearest bookstore to the NPRC building. She stood there and leafed

through the local guides until she found a place recommended in three of them.
“It’s funny, isn’t it?” she said. “We’re in St. Louis here, and the travel section has more guides to St. Louis than anyplace else. So how is that a travel section? Should be called the stay-at-home section.”
Reacher was a little nervous. This method was new to him. The sort of places he normally patronized never advertised in books. They relied on neon signs on tall poles, boasting attractions that had stopped being attractions and had become basic human rights about twenty years ago, such as air and cable and a pool.
“Hold this,” she said.
He took the book from her and kept his thumb on the page while she squatted down and opened her carry-on. She rooted around and found her mobile phone. Took the book back from him and stood right there in the aisle and called the hotel. He watched her. He had never called a hotel. The places he stayed always had a room, no matter when. They were delirious if their occupancy rates ever made it above 50 percent. He listened to Jodie’s end of the conversation and heard her mentioning sums of money that would have bought him a bed for a month, given a little haggling.
“OK,” she said. “We’re in. It’s their honeymoon suite. Four-poster bed. Is that neat, or what?”
He smiled. The honeymoon suite.
“We need to eat,” he said. “They serve dinner there?”
She shook her head and thumbed through the book to the restaurant section.
“More fun to go someplace else for dinner,” she said. “You like French?”
He nodded. “My mother was French.”
She checked the book and used the mobile again and reserved a table for two at a fancy place in the historic section, near the hotel.
“Eight o’clock,” she said. “Gives us time to look around a little. Then we can check in at the hotel and get freshened up.”
“Call the airport,” he said. “We need early flights out. Dallas-Fort Worth should do it.”
“I’ll do that outside,” she said. “Can’t call the airport from a bookstore.”
He carried her bag and she bought a gaudy tourist map of St. Louis and they stepped out into the heat of the late-afternoon sun. He looked at the map and she called the airline from the sidewalk and reserved two business-class seats to Texas, eight-thirty in the morning. Then they set out to walk the banks of the Mississippi where it ran through the city.
They strolled arm in arm for ninety minutes, which took them about four miles, all the way around to the historic part of town. The hotel was a medium-sized old mansion set on a wide, quiet street lined with chestnut trees. It had a big door

painted shiny black and oak floors the color of honey. Reception was an antique mahogany desk standing alone in the corner of the hallway. Reacher stared at it. The places he normally stayed, reception was behind a wire grille or boxed in with bulletproof Plexiglas. An elegant lady with white hair ran Jodie's card through the swipe machine and the charge slip came chattering out. Jodie bent to sign it and the lady handed Reacher a brass key.
"Enjoy your stay, Mr. Jacob," she said.
The honeymoon suite was the whole of the attic. It had the same honey oak floor, thickly varnished to a high shine, with antique rugs scattered across it. The ceiling was a complicated geometric arrangement of slopes and dormer windows. There was a sitting room at one end with two sofas in pale floral patterns. The bathroom was next, and then the bedroom area. The bed was a gigantic four-poster, swathed in the same floral fabric and high off the ground. Jodie jumped up and sat there, her hands under her knees, her legs swinging in space. She was smiling and the sun was in the window behind her. Reacher put her bag down on the floor and stood absolutely still, just looking at her. Her shirt was blue, somewhere between the blue of a cornflower and the blue of her eyes. It was made from soft material, maybe silk. The buttons looked like small pearls. The first two were undone. The weight of the collar was pulling the shirt open. Her skin showed through at the neck, paler honey than the oak floor. The shirt was small, but it was still loose around her body. It was tucked deep into her belt. The belt was black leather, cinched tight around her tiny waist. The free end was long, hanging down outside the loops on her jeans. The jeans were old, washed many times and immaculately pressed. She wore her shoes on bare feet. They were small blue penny loafers, fine leather, low heels, probably Italian. He could see the soles as she swung her legs. The shoes were new. Barely worn at all.
"What are you looking at?" she asked.
She held her head at an angle, shy and mischievous.
"You," he said.
The buttons were pearls, exactly like the pearls from a necklace, taken off the string and sewn individually onto the shirt. They were small and slippery under his clumsy fingers. There were five of them. He fiddled four of them out through their buttonholes and gently tugged the shirt out of the waistband of her jeans and undid the fifth. She held up her hands, left and right in turn, so he could undo the cuffs. He eased the shirt backward off her shoulders. She was wearing nothing underneath it.
She leaned forward and started on his buttons. She started from the bottom. She was dextrous. Her hands were small and neat and quick. Quicker than his had

been. His cuffs were already open. His wrists were too wide for any storebought cuff to close over them. She smoothed her hands up over the slab of his chest and pushed the shirt away with her forearms. It fell off his shoulders and she tugged it down over his arms. It fell to the floor with the sigh of cotton and the lazy click of buttons on wood. She traced her finger across the teardrop-shaped burn on his chest.

"You bring the salve?"

"No," he said.

She locked her arms around his waist and bent her head down and kissed the wound. He felt her mouth on it, firm and cool against the tender skin. Then they made love for the fifth time in fifteen years, in the four-poster bed at the top of the old mansion while the sun in the window fell away west toward Kansas.

THE NYPD'S DOMESTIC Violence Unit borrowed squad-room space wherever it could find it, which was currently in a large upstairs room above the administrative offices at One Police Plaza. O'Hallinan and Sark got back there an hour before the end of their shift. That was the paperwork hour, and they went straight to their desks and opened their notebooks to the start of the day and began typing.

They reached their visit to the St. Vincent's ER with fifteen minutes to go. They wrote it up as a probable incident with a non-cooperative victim. O'Hallinan spooled the form out of her typewriter and noticed the Tahoe's plate number scrawled at the bottom of her notebook page. She picked up the phone and called it in to the Department of Motor Vehicles.

"Black Chevrolet Tahoe," the clerk told her. "Registered to Cayman Corporate Trust with an address in the World Trade Center."

O'Hallinan shrugged to herself and wrote it all down in her notebook. She was debating whether to put the form back in the typewriter and add the information to it when the DMV clerk came back on the line.

"I've got another tag here," he said. "Same registered owner abandoned a black Chevrolet Suburban on lower Broadway yesterday. Three-vehicle moving traffic incident. Fifteenth Precinct towed the wreck."

"Who's dealing with it? You got a name at Fifteenth?"

"Sorry, no."

O'Hallinan hung up and called traffic in the Fifteenth Precinct, but it was shift change at the end of the day and she got no further with it. She scrawled a reminder to herself and dropped it in her in-tray. Then the clock ticked around to the top of the hour and Sark stood up opposite her.

"And we're out of here," he said. "All work and no play makes us dull people, right?"

"Right," she said. "You want to get a beer?"

"Right," she said. "You want to get a beer?"
"At least a beer," Sark said. "Maybe two beers."
"Steady," she said.

THEY TOOK A long shower together in the honeymoon suite's spacious bathroom. Then Reacher sprawled in his towel on a sofa and watched her get ready. She went into her bag and came out with a dress. It was the same line as the yellow linen shift she'd worn to the office, but it was midnight blue and silk. She slipped it over her head and wriggled it down into place. It had a simple scoop neck and came just above the knee. She wore it with the same blue loafers. She patted her hair dry with the towel and combed it back. Then she went into the bag again and came out with the necklace he'd bought her in Manila.
"Help me with this?"
She lifted her hair away from her neck and he bent to fasten the clasp. The necklace was a heavy gold rope. Probably not real gold, not at the price he'd paid, although anything was possible in the Philippines. His fingers were wide and his nails were scuffed and broken from the physical labor with the shovel. He held his breath and needed two attempts to close the catch. Then he kissed her neck and she let her hair fall back into place. It was heavy and damp and smelled like summer.
"Well, I'm ready at least," she said.
She grinned and tossed him his clothes from the floor and he put them on, with the cotton dragging against his damp skin. He borrowed her comb and ran it through his hair. In the mirror he caught a glimpse of her behind him. She looked like a princess about to go out to dinner with her gardener.
"They might not let me in," he said.
She stretched up and smoothed the back of his collar down over the new exaggerated bulk of his deltoid muscle.
"How would they keep you out? Call the National Guard?"
It was a four-block walk to the restaurant. A June evening in Missouri, near the river. The air was soft and damp. The stars were out above them, in an inky sky the color of her dress. The chestnut trees rustled in a slight, warm breeze. The streets got busier. There were the same trees, but cars were moving and parking under them. Some of the buildings were still hotels, but some of them were smaller and lower, with painted signs showing restaurant names in French. The signs were lit with aimed spotlights. No neon anywhere. The place she'd picked was called La Prefecture. He smiled and wondered if lovers in a minor city in France were eating in a place called "the Municipal Offices," which was the literal translation, as far as he recalled.

literal translation, as far as he recalled.
But it was a pleasant enough place. A boy from somewhere in the Midwest trying a French accent greeted them warmly and showed them to a table in a candlelit porch overlooking the rear garden. There was a fountain with underwater lighting playing softly and the trees were lit with spotlamps fastened to their trunks. The tablecloth was linen and the silverware was silver. Reacher ordered American beer and Jodie ordered Pernod and water.
“This is nice, isn’t it?” she said.
He nodded. The night was warm and still, and calm.
“Tell me how you feel,” he said.
She looked at him, surprised. “I feel good.”
“Good how?”
She smiled, shyly. “Reacher, you’re fishing.”
He smiled back. “No, I’m just thinking about something. You feel relaxed?”
She nodded.
“Safe?”
She nodded again.
“Me too,” he said. “Safe and relaxed. So what does that mean?”
The boy arrived with the drinks on a silver tray. The Pernod was in a tall glass and he served it with an authentic French water jug. The beer was in a frosted mug. No long-neck bottles in a place like this.
“So what does it mean?” Jodie asked.
She splashed water into the amber liquid and it turned milky. She swirled the glass to mix it. He caught the strong aniseed smell.
“It means whatever is happening is small,” he said. “A small operation, based in New York. We felt nervous there, but we feel safe here.”
He took a long sip of the beer.
“That’s just a feeling,” she said. “Doesn’t prove anything.”
He nodded. “No, but feelings are persuasive. And there’s some hard evidence. We were chased and attacked there, but nobody out here is paying any attention to us.”
“You been checking?” she asked, alarmed.
“I’m always checking,” he said. “We’ve been walking around, slow and obvious. Nobody’s been after us.”
“No manpower?”
He nodded again. “They had the two guys who went to the Keys and up to Garrison, and the guy driving the Suburban. My guess is that’s all they’ve got, or they’d be out here looking for us. So it’s a small unit, based in New York.”
She nodded.
“I think it’s Victor Hobie,” she said.

"I think it's Victor Hobie," she said.
The waiter was back, with a pad and a pencil. Jodie ordered pate and lamb, and Reacher ordered soup and *porc aux pruneaux*, which had always been his Sunday lunch as a kid, anytime his mother could find pork and prunes in the distant places they were stationed. It was a regional dish from the Loire, and although his mother was from Paris she liked to make it for her sons because she felt it was a kind of shorthand introduction to her native culture.
"I don't think it's Victor Hobie," he said.
"I think it is," she said. "I think he survived the war somehow, and I think he's been hiding out somewhere ever since, and I think he doesn't want to be found."
He shook his head. "I thought about that, too, right from the start. But the psychology is all wrong. You read his record. His letters. I told you what his old buddy Ed Steven said. This was a straight-arrow kid, Jodie. Totally dull, totally normal. I can't believe he'd leave his folks hanging like that. For thirty years? Why would he? It just doesn't jibe with what we know about him."
"Maybe he changed," Jodie said. "Dad always used to say Vietnam changed people. Usually for the worse."
Reacher shook his head.
"He died," he said. "Four miles west of An Khe, thirty years ago."
"He's in New York," Jodie said. "Right now, trying to stay hidden."

HE WAS ON his terrace, thirty floors up, leaning on the railing with his back to the park. He had a cordless phone pressed to his ear, and he was selling Chester Stone's Mercedes to the guy out in Queens.
"There's a BMW, too," he was saying. "Eight-series coupe. It's up in Pound Ridge right now. I'll take fifty cents on the dollar for cash in a bag, tomorrow."
He stopped and listened to the guy sucking in air through his teeth, like car guys always do when you talk to them about money.
"Call it thirty grand for the both of them, cash in a bag, tomorrow."
The guy grunted a yes, and Hobie moved on down his mental list.
"There's a Tahoe and a Cadillac. Call it forty grand, you can add either one of them to the deal. Your choice."
The guy paused and picked the Tahoe. More resale in a four-wheel-drive, especially some way south, which is where Hobie knew he was going to move it.
He clicked the phone off and went inside through the sliders to the living room. He used his left hand to open his little leather diary and kept it open by flattening it down with the hook. He clicked the button again and dialed a real estate broker who owed him serious money.
"I'm calling the loan," he said.
He listened to the swallowing sounds as the guy started panicking. There was

desperate silence for a long time. Then he heard the guy sit down, heavily.
“Can you pay me?”
There was no reply.
“You know what happens to people who can’t pay me?”
More silence. More swallowing.
“Don’t worry,” he said. “We can work something out. I got two properties to sell. A mansion up in Pound Ridge, and my apartment on Fifth. I want two million for the house, and three-point-five for the apartment. You get me that and I’ll write off the loan against your commission, OK?”
The guy had no choice but to agree. Hobie had him copy down the bank details in the Caymans and told him to wire the proceeds within a month.
“A month is pretty optimistic,” the guy said.
“How are your kids?” Hobie asked.
More swallowing.
“OK, a month,” the guy said.
Hobie clicked the phone off and wrote five *million five hundred forty thousand dollars* on the page where he had scored out three automobiles and two residences. Then he called the airline and inquired about flights to the coast, evening of the day after tomorrow. There was plenty of availability. He smiled. The ball was soaring right over the fence, heading for the fifth row of the bleachers. The outfielder was leaping like crazy, but he was absolutely nowhere near it.

WITH HOBIE GONE. Marilyn felt safe enough to take a shower. She wouldn’t have done it with him out there in the office. There was too much in his leer. She would have felt he could see right through the bathroom door. But the one called Tony was not such a problem. He was anxious and obedient. Hobie had told him to make sure they didn’t come out of the bathroom. He would do that, for sure, but nothing more. He wouldn’t come in and hassle them. He would leave them alone. She was confident of that. And the other guy, the thickset one who had brought the coffee, he was doing what Tony told him. So she felt safe enough, but she still had Chester stand by the door with his hand on the handle.
She leaned in and set the shower running hot and stripped off her dress and her shoes. She folded the dress neatly over the curtain rail, out of the water stream, but near enough for the steam to take the creases out. Then she stepped into the stall and washed her hair and soaped herself from head to foot. It felt good. It was relaxing. It took away the tension. She stood faceup and soaked for a long time. Then she left the water running and stepped out and took a towel and changed places with Chester.

“Go ahead,” she said. “It’ll do you good.”
He was numb. He just nodded and let the door handle go. Stood for a second and stripped off his undershirt and his boxers. Sat naked on the floor and took off his shoes and socks. She saw the yellow bruise on his side.
“They hit you?” she whispered.
He nodded again. Stood up and stepped into the stall. He stood under the torrent with his eyes closed and his mouth open. Then the water seemed to revive him. He found the soap and the shampoo and washed himself all over.
“Leave the water running,” she said. “It’s warming the place up.”
It was true. The hot water was making the room comfortable. He stepped out and took a towel. Dabbed his face with it and wrapped it around his waist.
“And the noise means they can’t hear us talking,” she said. “And we need to talk, right?”
He shrugged, like there wasn’t much to talk about. “I don’t understand what you’re doing. There are no trustees. He’s going to find that out, and then he’ll just get mad.”
She was toweling her hair. She stopped and looked at him through the gathering cloud of steam. “We need a witness. Don’t you see that?”
“A witness to what?”
“To what happens,” she said. “David Forster will send some private detective over here, and what can Hobie do? We’ll just admit there is no trust, and then we’ll all of us go down to your bank, and we’ll hand Hobie the stock. In a public place, with a witness. A witness, and a sort of bodyguard. Then we can just walk away.”
“Will that work?”
“I think so,” she said. “He’s in some kind of a hurry. Can’t you see that? He’s got some kind of a deadline. He’s panicking. Our best bet is to delay as long as we can, and then just slip away, with a witness watching the whole thing and guarding us. Hobie will be too uptight about time to react.”
“I don’t understand,” he said again. “You mean this private dick will testify we were acting under duress? You mean so we can sue Hobie to get the stock back?”
She was quiet for a beat. Amazed. “No, Chester, we’re not going to sue anybody. Hobie gets the stock, and we forget all about it.”
He stared at her through the steam. “But that’s no good. That won’t save the company. Not if it means Hobie gets the stock and we’ve got no comeback.”
She stared back at him. “God’s sake, Chester, don’t you understand anything? The company is gone. The company is history, and you better face it. This is not about saving the damn company. This is about saving our lives.”

THE SOUP WAS wonderful and the pork was even better. His mother would have been proud of it. They shared a half bottle of Californian wine and ate in contented silence. The restaurant was the sort of place that gave you a long pause between the entree and the dessert. No rush to get you out and reclaim the table. Reacher was enjoying the luxury. Not something he was used to. He sprawled back in his chair and stretched his legs out. His ankles were rubbing against Jodie's, under the table.

"Think about his parents," he said. "Think about him, as a kid. Open up the encyclopedia to N for 'normal American family' and you're going to see a picture of the Hobies, all three of them, staring right out at you. I accept that 'Nam changed people. I can see it kind of expanding his horizons a little. They knew that, too. They knew he wasn't going to come back and work for some dumb little print shop in Brighton. They saw him going down to the rigs, flying around the gulf for the oil companies. But he would have kept in touch, right? To some extent? He wouldn't have just abandoned them. That's real cruelty, cold and consistent for thirty straight years. You see anything in his record that makes him that kind of a guy?"

"Maybe he did something," she said. "Something shameful. Maybe something like My Lai, you know, a massacre or something? Maybe he was ashamed to go home. Maybe he's hiding a guilty secret."

He shook his head impatiently. "It would be in his record. And he didn't have the opportunity, anyway. He was a helicopter pilot, not an infantryman. He never saw the enemy close up."

The waiter came back with his pad and pencil.

"Dessert?" he asked. "Coffee?"

They ordered raspberry sorbet and black coffee. Jodie drained the last of her wine. It shone dull red in the glass in the candlelight.

"So what do we do?"

"He died," Reacher said. "We'll get the definitive evidence, sooner or later. Then we'll go back and tell the old folks they've wasted thirty years fretting about it."

"And what do we tell ourselves? We were attacked by a ghost?"

He shrugged and made no reply to that. The sorbet arrived and they ate it in silence. Then the coffee came, and the check in a padded leather folder bearing the restaurant logo printed in gold. Jodie laid her credit card on it without looking at the total. Then she smiled.

"Great dinner," she said.

He smiled back. "Great company."

“Let’s forget all about Victor Hobie for a while,” she said.
“Who?” he asked, and she laughed.
“So what shall we think about instead?” she said.
He smiled. “I was thinking about your dress.”
“You like it?”
“I think it’s great,” he said.
“What?”
“But it could look better. You know, maybe thrown in a heap on the floor.”
“You think so?”
“I’m pretty sure,” he said. “But that’s just a guess, right now. I’d need some experimental data. You know, a before-and-after comparison.”
She sighed in mock exhaustion. “Reacher, we need to be up at seven. Early flights, right?”
“You’re young,” he said. “If I can take it, you sure as hell can.”
She smiled. Scraped her chair back and stood up. Stepped away from the table and turned a slow turn in the aisle. The dress moved with her. It looked wonderful from the back. Her hair was gold against it in the candlelight. She stepped close and bent down and whispered in his ear.
“OK, that’s the before part. Let’s go before you forget the comparison.”

SEVEN O’CLOCK IN the morning in New York happened an hour before seven o’clock in the morning in St. Louis, and O’Hallinan and Sark spent that hour in the squad room planning their shift. The overnight messages were stacked deep in the in-trays. There were calls from the hospitals, and reports from night-shift beat cops who had gone out to domestic disturbances. They all needed sifting and evaluating, and an itinerary had to be worked out, based on geography and urgency. It had been an average night in New York City, which meant O’Hallinan and Sark compiled a list of twenty-eight brand-new cases that required their attention, which meant the call to the Fifteenth Precinct traffic squad got delayed until ten minutes to eight in the morning. O’Hallinan dialed the number and reached the desk sergeant on the tenth ring.
“You towed a black Suburban,” she said. “It got wrecked on lower Broadway couple of days ago. You doing anything about it?”
There was the sound of the guy scraping through a pile of paperwork.
“It’s in the pound. You got an interest in it?”
“We got a woman with a busted nose in the hospital, got delivered there in a Tahoe owned by the same people.”
“Maybe she was the driver. We had three vehicles involved, and we only got one driver. There was the Suburban that caused the accident, driver disappeared.

Then there was an Olds Bravada which drove away into an alley, driver and passenger disappeared. The Suburban was corporate, some financial trust in the district."
"Cayman Corporate Trust?" O'Hallinan asked. "That's who owns our Tahoe."
"Right," the guy said. "The Bravada is down to a Mrs. Jodie Jacob, but it was reported stolen prior. That's not your woman with the busted nose, is it?"
"Jodie Jacob? No, our woman is Sheryl somebody."
"OK, probably the Suburban driver. Is she small?"
"Small enough, I guess," O'Hallinan said. "Why?"
"The airbag deployed," the guy said. "Possible a small woman could get injured that way, by the airbag. It happens."
"You want to check it out?"
"No, our way of thinking, we got their vehicle, they want it, they'll come to us."
O'Hallinan hung up and Sark looked at her inquiringly.
"So what's that about?" he asked. "Why would she say she walked into a door if it was really a car wreck?"
O'Hallinan shrugged. "Don't know. And why would a real-estate woman from Westchester be driving for a firm out of the World Trade Center?"
"Could explain the injuries," Sark said. "The airbag, maybe the rim of the steering wheel, that could have done it to her."
"Maybe," O'Hallinan said.
"So should we check it out?"
"We should try, I guess, because if it was a car wreck it makes it a closed instead of a probable."
"OK, but don't write it down anywhere, because if it wasn't a car wreck it'll make it open and pending again, which will be a total pain in the ass later."
They stood up together and put their notebooks in their uniform pockets. Used the stairs and enjoyed the morning sun on the way across the yard to their cruiser.
THE SAME SUN rolled west and made it seven o'clock in St. Louis. It came in through an attic dormer and played its low beam across the four-poster from a new direction. Jodie had gotten up first, and she was in the shower. Reacher was alone in the warm bed, stretching out, aware of a muffled chirping sound somewhere in the room.
He checked the nightstand to see if the phone was ringing, or if Jodie had set an alarm clock he hadn't noticed the night before. Nothing there. The chirping kept on going, muffled but insistent. He rolled over and sat up. The new angle located the sound inside Jodie's carry-on bag. He slid out of bed and padded naked across the room. Unzipped the bag. The chirping sounded louder. It was her mobile telephone. He glanced at the bathroom door and pulled out the phone. It

mobile telephone. He glanced at the bathroom door and pulled out the phone. It was chirping loudly in his hand. He studied the buttons on it and pressed SEND. The chirping stopped.
“Hello?” he said.
There was a pause. “Who’s that? I’m trying to reach Mrs. Jacob.”
It was a man’s voice, young, busy, harassed. A voice he knew. Jodie’s secretary at the law firm, the guy who had dictated Leon’s address.
“She’s in the shower.”
“Ah,” the voice said.
There was another pause.
“I’m a friend,” Reacher said.
“I see,” the voice said. “Are you still up in Garrison?”
“No, we’re in St. Louis, Missouri.”
“Goodness, that complicates things, doesn’t it? May I speak with Mrs. Jacob?”
“She’s in the shower,” Reacher said again. “She could call you back. Or I could take a message, I guess.”
“Would you mind?” the guy said. “It’s urgent, I’m afraid.”
“Hold on,” Reacher said. He walked back to the bed and picked up the little pad and the pencil the hotel had placed on the nightstand next to the telephone. Sat down and juggled the mobile into his left hand.
“OK, shoot,” he said. The guy ran through his message. It was very nonspecific. The guy was choosing his words carefully to keep the whole thing vague. Clearly a friend couldn’t be trusted with any secret legal details. He put the pad and pencil down again. He wasn’t going to need them.
“I’ll have her call you back if that’s not clear,” he said, ambiguously.
“Thank you, and I’m sorry to interrupt, well, whatever it is I’m interrupting.”
“You’re not interrupting anything,” Reacher said. “Like I told you, she’s in the shower right now. But ten minutes ago might have been a problem.”
“Goodness,” the guy said again, and the phone went dead.
Reacher smiled and studied the buttons again and pressed END. He dropped the phone on the bed and heard the water cut off in the bathroom. The door opened and she came out, wrapped in a towel and a cloud of steam.
“Your secretary just called on your mobile,” he said. “I think he was a little shocked when I answered.”
She giggled. “Well, there goes my reputation. It’ll be all over the office by lunchtime. What did he want?”
“You’ve got to go back to New York.”
“Why? He give you the details?”
He shook his head.
“No, he was very confidential, very proper, like a secretary should be. I guess

"No, he was very confidential, very proper, like a secretary should be, I guess. But you're an ace lawyer, apparently. Big demand for your services."
She grinned. "I'm the best there is. Didn't I tell you that? So who needs me?"
"Somebody called your firm. Some financial corporation with something to handle. Asked for you personally. Presumably because you're the best there is."
She nodded and smiled. "He say what the problem is?"
He shrugged. "Your usual, I guess. Somebody owes somebody else some money, sounds like they're all squabbling over it. You have to go to a meeting tomorrow afternoon and try to talk some sense into one side or the other."

ANOTHER OF THE thousands of phone calls taking place during the same minute in the Wall Street area was a call from the law offices of Forster and Abelstein to the premises of a private detective called William Curry. Curry was a twenty-year veteran of the NYPD's detective squads, and he had taken his pension at the age of forty-seven and was looking to pay his alimony by working private until his ex-wife got married again or died or forgot about him. He had been in business for two lean years, and a personal call from the senior partner of a white-shoe Wall Street law firm was a breakthrough event, so he was pleased, but not too surprised. He had done two years of good work at reasonable rates with the exact aim of creating some kind of reputation, so if the reputation was finally spreading and the big hitters were finally calling, he was pleased about it without being astonished by it.
But he was astonished by the nature of the job.
"I have to impersonate you?" he repeated.
"It's important," Forster told him. "They're expecting a lawyer called David Forster, so that's what we have to give them. There won't be any law involved. There probably won't be anything involved at all. Just being there will keep the lid on things. It'll be straightforward enough. OK?"
"OK, I guess," Curry said. He wrote down the names of the parties involved and the address where the performance was due to take place. He quoted double his normal fee. He didn't want to look cheap, not in front of these Wall Street guys. They were always impressed by expensive services. He knew that. And given the nature of the job, he figured he would be earning it. Forster agreed the price without hesitation and promised a check in the mail. Curry hung up the phone and started through his closets in his head, wondering what the hell he could wear to make himself look like the head of a big Wall Street firm.

13

ST. LOUIS TO DALLAS-Fort Worth is 568 miles by air, and it took a comfortable ninety minutes, thirty of them climbing hard, thirty of them cruising fast, and thirty of them descending on approach. Reacher and Jodie were together in business class, this time on the port side of the plane, among a very different clientele than had flown with them out of New York. Most of the cabin was occupied by Texan businessmen in sharkskin suits in various shades of blue and gray, with alligator boots and big hats. They were larger and ruddier and louder than their East Coast counterparts, and they were working the stewardesses harder. Jodie was in a simple rust-colored dress like something Audrey Hepburn might have worn, and the businessmen were stealing glances at her and avoiding Reacher's eye. He was on the aisle, in his crumpled khakis and his ten-year-old English shoes, and they were trying to place him. He saw them going around in circles, looking at his tan and his hands and his companion, figuring him for a roughneck who got lucky with a claim, then figuring that doesn't really happen anymore, then starting over with new speculations. He ignored them and drank the airline's best coffee from a china cup and started thinking about how to get inside Wolters and get some sense out of DeWitt.

A military policeman trying to get some sense out of a two-star general is like a guy tossing a coin. Heads brings you a guy who knows the value of cooperation. Maybe he's had difficulties in the past inside some unit or another, and maybe he's had them solved for him by the MPs in an effective and perceptive manner. Then he's a believer, and his instinct goes with you. You're his friend. But tails brings you a guy who has maybe caused his own difficulties. Maybe he's botched and blundered his way through some command and maybe the MPs haven't been shy about telling him so. Then you get nothing from him except aggravation. Heads or tails, but it's a bent coin, because on top of everything any institution despises its own policemen, so it comes down tails a lot more than it comes up heads. That had been Reacher's experience. And, worse, he was a military policeman who was now a civilian. He had two strikes against him before he even stepped up to the plate.

The plane taxied to the gate and the businessmen waited and ushered Jodie down the aisle ahead of them. Either plain Texan courtesy or they wanted to watch her legs and her ass as she walked, but Reacher couldn't mount any serious criticism on that issue because he wanted to do exactly the same thing. He carried her bag and followed her down the jetway and into the terminal. He stepped alongside her and put his arm around her shoulders and felt a dozen pairs of eyes drilling

her and put his arm around her shoulders and felt a dozen pairs of eyes drilling into his back.
“Claiming what’s yours?” she asked.
“You noticed them?” he asked back.
She threaded her arm around his waist and pulled him closer as they walked.
“They were kind of hard to miss. I guess it would have been easy enough to get a date for tonight.”
“You’d have been beating them off with a stick.”
“It’s the dress. Probably I should have worn trousers, but I figured it’s kind of traditional down here.”
“You could wear a Soviet tank driver’s suit, all gray-green and padded with cotton, and they’d still have their tongues hanging out.”
She giggled. “I’ve seen Soviet tank drivers. Dad showed me pictures. Two hundred pounds, big mustaches, smoking pipes, tattoos, and that was just the women.”
The terminal was chilled with air-conditioning and they were hit with a forty-degree jump in temperature when they stepped out to the taxi line. June in Texas, just after ten in the morning, and it was over a hundred and humid.
“Wow,” she said. “Maybe the dress makes sense.”
They were in the shade of an overhead roadway, but beyond it the sun was white and brassy. The concrete baked and shimmered. Jodie bent and found some dark glasses in her bag and slipped them on and looked more like a blond Audrey Hepburn than ever. The first taxi was a new Caprice with the air going full blast and religious artifacts hanging from the rearview mirror. The driver was silent and the trip lasted forty minutes, mostly over concrete highways that shone white in the sun and started out busy and got emptier.
Fort Wolters was a big, permanent facility in the middle of nowhere with low elegant buildings and landscaping kept clean and tidy in the sterile way only the Army can achieve. There was a high fence stretching miles around the whole perimeter, taut and level all the way, no weeds at its base. The inner curb of the road was whitewashed. Beyond the fence internal roads faced with gray concrete snaked here and there between the buildings. Windows winked in the sun. The taxi rounded a curve and revealed a field the size of a stadium with helicopters lined up in neat rows. Squads of flight trainees moved about between them.
The main gate was set back from the road, with tall white flagpoles funneling down toward it. Their flags hung limp in the heat. There was a low, square gatehouse with a red-and-white barrier controlling access. The gatehouse was all windows above waist level and Reacher could see MPs inside watching the approach of the taxi. They were in full service gear, including the white helmets. Regular Army MPs. He smiled. This part was going to be no problem. They

were going to see him as more their friend than the people they were guarding.
The taxi dropped them in the turning circle and drove back out. They walked through the blinding heat to the shade of the guardhouse eaves. An MP sergeant slid the window back and looked at them inquiringly. Reacher felt the chilled air spilling out over him.
“We need to get together with General DeWitt,” he said. “Is there any chance of that happening, Sergeant?”
The guy looked him over. “Depends who you are, I guess.”
Reacher told him who he was and who he had been, and who Jodie was and who her father had been, and a minute later they were both inside the cool of the guardhouse. The MP sergeant was on the phone to his opposite number in the command office.
“OK, you’re booked in,” he said. “General’s free in half an hour.”
Reacher smiled. The guy was probably free right now, and the half hour was going to be spent checking that they were who they said they were.
“What’s the general like, Sergeant?” he asked.
“We’d rate him SAS, sir,” the MP said, and smiled.
Reacher smiled back. The guardhouse felt surprisingly good to him. He felt at home in it. SAS was MP code for “stupid asshole sometimes,” and it was a reasonably benevolent rating for a sergeant to give a general. It was the kind of rating that meant if he approached it right, the guy might cooperate. On the other hand, it meant he might not. It gave him something to ponder during the waiting time.
After thirty-two minutes a plain green Chevy with neat white stencils pulled up inside the barrier and the sergeant nodded them toward it. The driver was a private soldier who wasn’t about to speak a word. He just waited until they were seated and turned the car around and headed slowly back through the buildings.
Reacher watched the familiar sights slide by. He had never been to Wolters, but he knew it well enough because it was identical to dozens of other places he had been. The same layout, the same people, the same details, like it was built to the same master plan. The main building was a long two-story brick structure facing a parade ground. Its architecture was exactly the same as the main building on the Berlin base where he was born. Only the weather was different.
The Chevy eased to a stop opposite the steps up into the building. The driver moved the selector into park and stared silently ahead through the windshield.
Reacher opened the door and stepped out into the heat with Jodie.
“Thanks for the ride, soldier,” he said.
The boy just sat in park with the motor running and stared straight ahead.
Reacher walked with Jodie to the steps and in through the door. There was an

MP private stationed in the cool of the lobby, white helmet, white gaiters, a gleaming M-16 held easy across his chest. His gaze was fixed on Jodie's bare legs as they danced in toward him.
"Reacher and Garber to see General DeWitt," Reacher said.
The guy snapped the rifle upright, which was symbolic of removing a barrier. Reacher nodded and walked ahead to the staircase. The place was like every other place, built to a specification poised uneasily somewhere between lavish and functional, like a private school occupying an old mansion. It was immaculately clean, and the materials were the finest available, but the decor was institutional and brutal. At the top of the stairs was a desk in the corridor. Behind it was a portly MP sergeant, swamped with paperwork. Behind him was an oak door with an acetate plate bearing DeWitt's name, his rank, and his decorations. It was a large plate.
"Reacher and Garber to see the general," Reacher said.
The sergeant nodded and picked up his telephone. He pressed a button.
"Your visitors, sir," he said into the phone.
He listened to the reply and stood up and opened the door. Stepped aside to allow them to walk past. Closed the door behind them. The office was the size of a tennis court. It was paneled in oak and had a huge, dark rug on the floor, thread-bare with vacuuming. The desk was large and oak, and DeWitt was in the chair behind it. He was somewhere between fifty and fifty-five, dried out and stringy, with thinning gray hair shaved down close to his scalp. He had half-closed gray eyes and he was using them to watch their approach with an expression Reacher read as halfway between curiosity and irritation.
"Sit down," he said. "Please."
There were leather visitor chairs drawn up near the desk. The office walls were crowded with mementoes, but they were all battalion and division mementos, war-game trophies, battle honors, old platoon photographs in faded monochrome. There were pictures and cutaway diagrams of a dozen different helicopters. But there was nothing personal to DeWitt on display. Not even family snaps on the desk.
"How can I help you folks?" he asked.
His accent was the bland Army accent that comes from serving all over the world with people from all over the country. He was maybe a midwesterner, originally. Maybe from somewhere near Chicago, Reacher thought.
"I was an MP major," he said, and waited.
"I know you were. We checked."
A neutral reply. Nothing there at all. No hostility. But no approval, either.
"My father was General Garber," Jodie said.

DeWitt nodded without speaking.
“We’re here in a private capacity,” Reacher said.
There was a short silence.
“A civilian capacity, in fact,” DeWitt said slowly.
Reacher nodded. *Strike one.*
“It’s about a pilot called Victor Hobie. You served with him in Vietnam.”
DeWitt looked deliberately blank. He raised his eyebrows.
“Did I?” he said. “I don’t remember him.”
Strike two. Uncooperative.
“We’re trying to find out what happened to him.”
Another short silence. Then DeWitt nodded, slowly, amused.
“Why? Was he your long-lost uncle? Or maybe he was secretly your father? Maybe he had a brief, sad affair with your mother when he was her pool boy. Or did you buy his old childhood home and find his long-lost teenage diaries hidden behind the wainscoting with a 1968 issue of *Playboy* magazine?”
Strike three. Aggressively uncooperative. The office went silent again. There was the thumping of rotor blades somewhere in the far distance. Jodie hitched forward on her chair. Her voice was soft and low in the quiet room.
“We’re here for his parents, sir. They lost their boy thirty years ago, and they’ve never known what happened to him. They’re still grieving, General.”
DeWitt looked at her with gray eyes and shook his head.
“I don’t remember him. I’m very sorry.”
“He trained with you right here at Wolters,” Reacher said. “You went to Rucker together and you sailed to Qui Nhon together. You served the best part of two tours together, flying slicks out of Pleiku.”
“Your old man in the service?” DeWitt asked.
Reacher nodded. “The Corps. Thirty years, Semper Fi.”
“Mine was Eighth Air Force,” DeWitt said. “World War Two, flying bombers out of East Anglia in England all the way to Berlin and back. You know what he told me when I signed up for helicopters?”
Reacher waited.
“He gave me some good advice,” DeWitt said. “He told me, don’t make friends with pilots. Because they all get killed, and it just makes you miserable.”
Reacher nodded again. “You really can’t recall him?”
DeWitt just shrugged.
“Not even for his folks?” Jodie asked. “Doesn’t seem right they’ll never know what happened to their boy, does it?”
There was silence. The distant rotor blades faded to nothing. DeWitt gazed at Jodie. Then he spread his small hands on the desk and sighed heavily.

“Well, I guess I can recall him a little,” he said. “Mostly from the early days. Later on, when they all started dying, I took the old man’s advice to heart. Kind of closed in on myself, you know?”
“So what was he like?” Jodie asked.
“What was he like?” DeWitt repeated. “Not like me, that’s for sure. Not like anybody else I ever knew, either. He was a walking contradiction. He was a volunteer, you know that? I was, too, and so were a lot of the guys. But Vic wasn’t like the others. There was a big divide back then, between the volunteers and the drafted guys. The volunteers were all rahrah boys, you know, going for it because they believed in it. But Vic wasn’t like that. He volunteered, but he was about as mousy quiet as the sulkiest draftee you ever saw. But he could fly like he was born with a rotor blade up his ass.”
“So he was good?” Jodie prompted.
“Better than good,” DeWitt replied. “Second only to me in the early days, which is saying something, because I was definitely born with a rotor blade up my ass. And Vic was smart with the book stuff. I remember that. He had it all over everybody else in the classroom.”
“Did he have an attitude problem with that?” Reacher asked. “Trading favors for help?”
DeWitt swung the gray eyes across from Jodie.
“You’ve done your research. You’ve been in the files.”
“We just came from the NPRC,” Reacher said.
DeWitt nodded, neutrally. “I hope you didn’t read my jacket.”
“Supervisor wouldn’t let us,” Reacher said.
“We were anxious not to poke around where we’re not wanted,” Jodie said.
DeWitt nodded again.
“Vic traded favors,” he said. “But they claimed he did it in the wrong way. There was a little controversy about it, as I recall. You were supposed to do it because you were glad to help your fellow candidates, you know? For the good of the unit, right? You remember how that shit went?”
He stopped and glanced at Reacher, amused. Reacher nodded. Jodie’s being there was helping him. Her charm was inching him back toward approval.
“But Vic was cold about it,” DeWitt said. “Like it was all just another math equation. Like x amount of lift moves the chopper off the ground, like this much help with that complicated formula gets his boots bulled up. They saw it as cold.”
“Was he cold?” Jodie asked.
DeWitt nodded. “Emotionless, the coldest guy I ever saw. It always amazed me. At first I figured it was because he came from some little place where he’d never

done anything or seen anything. But later I realized he just felt nothing. Nothing at all. It was weird. But it made him a hell of a tremendous flyer."
"Because he wasn't afraid?" Reacher asked.
"Exactly," DeWitt said. "Not courageous, because a courageous guy is somebody who feels the fear but conquers it. Vic never felt it in the first place. It made him a better war flyer than me. I was the one passed out of Rucker head of the class, and I've got the plaque to prove it, but when we got in-country, he was better than me, no doubt about it."
"In what kind of a way?"
DeWitt shrugged, like he couldn't explain it. "We learned everything as we went along, just made it all up. Fact is, our training was shit. It was like being shown a little round thing and being told 'this is a baseball,' and then getting sent straight out to play in the major leagues. That's something I'm trying to put right now that I'm here running this place. I never want to send boys out as unprepared as we were."
"Hobie was good at learning on the job?" Reacher asked.
"The best," DeWitt said. "You know anything about helicopters in the jungle?"
Reacher shook his head. "Not a lot."
"First main problem is the LZ," DeWitt said. "LZ, landing zone, right? You got a desperate bunch of tired infantry under fire somewhere, they need exfiltrating, they get on the radio and our dispatcher tells them sure, make us an LZ and we'll be right over to pull you out. So they use explosives and saws and whatever the hell else they got and they blast a temporary LZ in the jungle. Now a Huey with the rotor turning needs a space exactly forty-eight feet wide and fifty-seven feet nine-point-seven inches long to land in. But the infantry is tired and in a big hurry and Charlie is raining mortars down on them and generally they don't make the LZ big enough. So we can't get them out. This happened to us two or three times, and we're sick about it, and one night I see Vic studying the leading edge of the rotor blade on his Huey. So I say to him, 'What are you looking at?' And he says, 'These are metal.' I'm thinking, like what else would they be? Bamboo? But he's looking at them. Next day, we're called to a temporary LZ again, and sure enough the damn thing is too small, by a couple of feet all around. So I can't get in. But Vic goes down anyway. He spins the chopper around and around and cuts his way in with the rotor. Like a gigantic flying lawn mower? It was awesome. Bits of tree flying everywhere. He pulls out seven or eight guys and the rest of us go down after him and get all the rest. That became SOP afterward, and he invented it, because he was cold and logical and he wasn't afraid to try. That maneuver saved hundreds of guys over the years. Literally hundreds, maybe even thousands."
"Impressive," Reacher said.

"Impressive," Reacher said.
"You bet your ass impressive," DeWitt said back. "Second big problem we had was weight. Suppose you were out in the open somewhere, like a field. The infantry would come swarming in on you until the damn chopper was too heavy to take off. So your own gunners would be beating them off and leaving them there in the field, maybe to die. Not a nice feeling. So one day Vic lets them all on board, and sure enough he can't get off the ground. So he shoves the stick forward and sort of skitters horizontally along the field until the airspeed kicks in under the rotor and unsticks him. Then he's up and away. The running jump. It became another SOP, and he invented it, too. Sometimes he would do it downhill, even down the mountainsides, like he was heading for a certain crash, and then up he went. Like I told you, we were just making it up as we went along, and the truth is a lot of the good stuff got made up by Victor Hobie."
"You admired him," Jodie said.
DeWitt nodded. "Yes, I did. And I'm not afraid to admit it."
"But you weren't close."
He shook his head. "Like my daddy told me, don't make friends with the other pilots. And I'm glad I didn't. Too many of them died."
"How did he spend his time?" Reacher asked. "The files show a lot of days you couldn't fly."
"Weather was a bitch. A real bitch. You got no idea. I want this facility moved someplace else, maybe Washington State, where they get some mists and fogs. No point training down in Texas and Alabama if you want to go fighting someplace you get weather."
"So how did you spend the downtime?"
"Me? I did all kinds of things. Sometimes I partied, sometimes I slept. Sometimes I took a truck out and went scavenging for things we needed."
"What about Vic?" Jodie asked. "What did he do?"
DeWitt just shrugged again. "I have no idea. He was always busy, always up to something, but I don't know what it was. Like I told you, I didn't want to mix with the other flyers."
"Was he different on the second tour?" Reacher asked.
DeWitt smiled briefly. "Everybody was different second time around."
"In what way?" Jodie asked.
"Angrier," DeWitt said. "Even if you signed up again right away it was nine months minimum before you got back, sometimes a whole year. Then you got back and you figured the place had gone to shit while you were away. You figured it had gotten sloppy and half-assed. Facilities you'd built would be all falling down, trenches you'd dug against the mortars would be half full of water, trees you'd cleared away from the helicopter parking would be all sprouting up

trees you'd cleared away from the helicopter parking would be all sprouting up again. You'd feel your little domain had been ruined by a bunch of know-nothing idiots while you were gone. It made you angry and depressed. And generally speaking it was true. The whole 'Nam thing went steadily downhill, right out of control. The quality of the personnel just got worse and worse."
"So you'd say Hobie got disillusioned?" Reacher asked.
DeWitt shrugged. "I really don't remember much about his attitude. Maybe he coped OK. He had a strong sense of duty, as I recall."
"What was his final mission about?"
The gray eyes suddenly went blank, like the shutters had just come down.
"I can't remember."
"He was shot down," Reacher said. "Shot out of the air, right alongside you. You can't recall what the mission was?"
"We lost eight thousand helicopters in 'Nam," DeWitt said. "Eight thousand, Mr. Reacher, beginning to end. Seems to me I personally saw most of them go down. So how should I recall any particular one of them?"
"What was it about?" Reacher asked again.
"Why do you want to know?" DeWitt asked back.
"It would help me."
"With what?"
Reacher shrugged. "With his folks, I guess. I want to be able to tell them he died doing something useful."
DeWitt smiled. A bitter, sardonic smile, worn and softened at the edges by thirty years of regular use. "Well, my friend, you sure as hell can't do that."
"Why not?"
"Because none of our missions were useful. They were all a waste of time. A waste of lives. We lost the war, didn't we?"
"Was it a secret mission?"
There was a pause. Silence in the big office.
"Why should it be secret?" DeWitt asked back, neutrally.
"He only took on board three passengers. Seems like a special sort of a deal to me. No running jump required there."
"I don't remember," DeWitt said again.
Reacher just looked at him, quietly. DeWitt stared back.
"How should I remember? I hear about something for the first time in thirty years and I'm supposed to remember every damn detail about it?"
"This isn't the first time in thirty years. You were asked all about it a couple of months ago. In April of this year."
DeWitt was silent.
"General Garber called the NPRC about Hobie," Reacher said. "It's

"General Garber called the NTSB about Hobie," Reacher said. "It's inconceivable he didn't call you afterward. Won't you tell us what you told him?"
DeWitt smiled. "I told him I didn't remember."
There was silence again. Distant rotor blades, coming closer.
"On behalf of his folks, won't you tell us?" Jodie asked softly. "They're still grieving for him. They need to know about it."
DeWitt shook his head. "I can't."
"Can't or won't?" Reacher asked.
DeWitt stood up slowly and walked to the window. He was a short man. He stood in the light of the sun and squinted left, across to where he could see the helicopter he could hear, coming in to land on the field.
"It's classified information," he said. "I'm not allowed to make any comment, and I'm not going to. Garber asked me, and I told him the same thing. No comment. But I hinted he should maybe look closer to home, and I'll advise you to do the exact same thing, Mr. Reacher. Look closer to home."
"Closer to home?"
DeWitt put his back to the window. "Did you see Kaplan's jacket?"
"His copilot?"
DeWitt nodded. "Did you read his last-but-one mission?"
Reacher shook his head.
"You should have," DeWitt said. "Sloppy work from somebody who was once an MP major. But don't tell anybody I suggested it, because I'll deny it, and they'll believe me, not you."
Reacher looked away. DeWitt walked back to his desk and sat down.
"Is it possible Victor Hobie is still alive?" Jodie asked him.
The distant helicopter shut off its engines. There was total silence.
"I have no comment on that," DeWitt said.
"Have you been asked that question before?" Jodie said.
"I have no comment on that," DeWitt said again.
"You saw the crash. Is it possible anybody survived it?"
"I saw an explosion under the jungle canopy, is all. He was way more than half-full with fuel. Draw your own conclusions, Ms. Garber."
"Did he survive?"
"I have no comment on that."
"Why is Kaplan officially dead and Hobie isn't?"
"I have no comment on that."
She nodded. Thought for a moment and regrouped exactly like the lawyer she was, boxed in by some recalcitrant witness. "Just theoretically, then. Suppose a young man with Victor Hobie's personality and character and background

survived such an incident, OK? Is it possible a man like that would never even have made contact with his own parents again afterward?"
DeWitt stood up again. He was clearly uncomfortable.
"I don't know, Ms. Garber. I'm not a damn psychiatrist. And like I told you, I was careful not to get to know him too well. He seemed like a real dutiful guy, but he was cold. Overall, I guess I would rate it as very unlikely. But don't forget, Vietnam changed people. It sure as hell changed me, for instance. I used to be a nice guy."

OFFICER SARK WAS forty-four years old, but he looked older. His physique was damaged by a poor childhood and ignorant neglect through most of his adult years. His skin was dull and pale, and he had lost his hair early. It left him looking sallow and sunken and old before his time. But the truth was he had woken up to it and was fighting it. He had read stuff the NYPD's medical people were putting about concerning diet and exercise. He had eliminated most of the fats from his daily intake, and he had started sunbathing a little, just enough to take the pallor off his skin without provoking the risk of melanomas. He walked whenever he could. Going home, he would get off the subway a stop short and hike the rest of the way, fast enough to get his breath going and his heartbeat raised, like the stuff he'd read said he should. And during the workday, he would persuade O'Hallinan to park the prowl car somewhere that would give them a short walk to wherever it was they were headed.
O'Hallinan had no interest in aerobic exercise, but she was an amiable woman and happy enough to cooperate with him, especially during the summer months, when the sun was shining. So she put the car against the curb in the shadow of Trinity Church and they approached the World Trade Center on foot from the south. It gave them a brisk six-hundred-yard walk in the sun, which made Sark happy, but it left the car exactly equidistant from a quarter of a million separate postal addresses, and with nothing on paper in the squad room it left nobody with any clue about which one of them they were heading for.

YOU WANT A ride back to the airport?" DeWitt asked.
Reacher interpreted the offer as a dismissal mixed in with a gesture designed to soften the stonewall performance the guy had been putting up. He nodded. The Army Chevrolet would get them there faster than a taxi, because it was already waiting right outside with the motor running.
"Thanks," he said.
"Hey, my pleasure," DeWitt said back.
He dialed a number from his desk and spoke like he was issuing an order.

“Wait right here,” he said. “Three minutes.”
Jodie stood up and smoothed her dress down. Walked to the windows and gazed out. Reacher stepped the other way and looked at the mementoes on the wall. One of the photographs was a glossy reprint of a famous newspaper picture. A helicopter was lifting off from inside the embassy compound in Saigon, with a crowd of people underneath it, arms raised like they were trying to force it to come back down for them.
“You were that pilot?” Reacher asked, on a hunch.
DeWitt glanced over and nodded.
“You were still there in ‘75?”
DeWitt nodded again. “Five combat tours, then a spell on HQ duty. Overall, I guess I preferred the combat.”
There was noise in the distance. The bass thumping of a powerful helicopter, coming closer. Reacher joined Jodie at the window. A Huey was in the air, drifting over the distant buildings from the direction of the field.
“Your ride,” DeWitt said.
“A helicopter?” Jodie said.
DeWitt was smiling. “What did you expect? This is the helicopter school, after all. That’s why these boys are down here. It ain’t driver’s ed.”
The rotor noise was building to a loud *wop-wop-wop*. Then it slowly blended to a higher-pitched *whip-whip-whip* as it came closer and the jet whine mixed in.
“Bigger blade now,” DeWitt shouted. “Composite materials. Not metal anymore. I don’t know what old Vic would have made of it.”
The Huey was sliding sideways and hovering over the parade ground in front of the building. The noise was shaking the windows. Then the helicopter was straightening and settling to the ground.
“Nice meeting you,” DeWitt shouted.
They shook his hand and headed out. The MP sergeant at the desk nodded to them through the noise and went back to his paperwork. They went down the stairs and outside into the blast of heat and dust and sound. The copilot was sliding the door for them. They ran bent-over across the short distance. Jodie was grinning and her hair was blowing everywhere. The copilot offered his hand and pulled her up inside. Reacher followed. They strapped themselves into the bench seat in back and the copilot slid the door closed and climbed through to the cabin. The familiar shudder of vibration started up as the craft hauled itself into the air. The floor tilted and swung and the buildings rotated in the windows, and then their roofs were visible, and then the outlying grassland, with the highways laid through it like gray pencil lines. The nose went down and the engine noise built to a roar as they swung on course and settled to a hundred-

mile-an-hour cruise.

THE STUFF SARK had read called it “power walking,” and the idea was to push yourself toward a speed of four miles an hour. That way your heartbeat was raised, which was the key to the aerobic benefit, but you avoided the impact damage to your shins and knees that you risked with proper jogging. It was a convincing proposition, and he believed in it. Doing it properly, six hundred yards at four miles an hour should have taken a fraction over five minutes, but it actually took nearer eight, because he was walking with O’Hallinan at his side. She was happy to walk, but she wanted to do it slowly. She was not an unfit woman, but she always said *I’m* built for comfort, not for speed. It was a compromise. He needed her cooperation to get to walk at all, so he never complained about her pace. He figured it was better than nothing. It had to be doing him some kind of good.
“Which building?” he asked.
“The south, I think,” she said.
They walked around to the main entrance of the south tower and inside to the lobby. There were guys in security uniforms behind a counter, but they were tied up with a knot of foreign men in gray suits, so Sark and O’Hallinan stepped over to the building directory and consulted it direct. Cayman Corporate Trust was listed on the eighty-eighth floor. They walked to the express elevator and stepped inside without the security force being aware they had ever entered the building.
The elevator floor pressed against their feet and sped them upward. It slowed and stopped at eighty-eight. The door slid back and a muted bell sounded and they stepped out into a plain corridor. The ceilings were low and the space was narrow. Cayman Corporate Trust had a modem oak door with a small window and a brass handle. Sark pulled the door and allowed O’Hallinan to go inside ahead of him. She was old enough to appreciate the courtesy.
There was an oak-and-brass reception area with a thickset man in a dark suit behind a chest-high counter. Sark stood back in the center of the floor, his loaded belt emphasizing the width of his hips, making him seem large and commanding. O’Hallinan stepped up to the counter, planning her approach. She wanted to shake something loose, so she tried the sort of frontal attack she had seen detectives use.
“We’ve come about Sheryl,” she said.

“I NAVE TO go home, I guess,” Jodie said.
“No, you’re coming to Hawaii, with me.”

They were back inside the freezing terminal at Dallas-Fort Worth. The Huey had put down on a remote apron and the copilot had driven them over in a golf cart painted dull green. He had shown them an unmarked door that led them up a flight of stairs into the bustle of the public areas.
“Hawaii? Reacher, I can’t go to Hawaii. I need to be back in New York.”
“You can’t go back there alone. New York is where the danger is, remember? And I need to go to Hawaii. So you’ll have to come with me, simple as that.”
“Reacher, I can’t,” she said again. “I have to be in a meeting tomorrow. You know that. You took the call, right?”
“Tough, Jodie. You’re not going back there alone.”
Checking out of the St. Louis honeymoon suite that morning had done something to him. The lizard part of his brain buried deep behind the frontal lobes had shrieked: *The hon*eymoon *is over, pal. Your life is changing and the problems* start now. He had ignored it. But now he was paying attention to it. For the first time in his life, he had a hostage to fortune. He had somebody to worry about. It was mostly a pleasure, but it was a burden.
“I have to go back, Reacher,” she said. “I can’t let them down.”
“Call them, tell them you can’t make it. Tell them you’re sick or something.”
“I can’t do that. My secretary knows I’m not sick, right? And I’ve got a career to think about. It’s important to me.”
“You’re not going back there alone,” he said again.
“Why do you need to go to Hawaii anyway?”
“Because that’s where the answer is,” he said.
He stepped away to a ticket counter and took a thick time-table from a small chrome rack. Stood in the cold fluorescence and opened it up to D for the Dallas-Fort Worth departures and ran his finger down the list of destinations as far as H for Honolulu. Then he flipped ahead to the Honolulu departures and checked the flights going back to New York. He double-checked, and then he smiled with relief.
“We can make it anyway, do both things. Look at this. There’s a twelve-fifteen out of here. Flight time minus the time change going west gets us to Honolulu at three o’clock. Then we get the seven o’clock back to New York, flight time plus the time change coming back east gets us into JFK at twelve noon tomorrow. Your guy said it was an afternoon meeting, right? So you can still make it.”
“I need to get briefed in,” she said. “I have no idea what it’s about.”
“You’ll have a couple of hours. You’re a quick study.”
“It’s crazy. Only gives us four hours in Hawaii.”
“All we need. I’ll call ahead, set it up.”
“We’ll be on a plane all night. I’ll be going to my meeting after a sleepless night

on a damn plane."
"So we'll go first-class," he said. "Rutter's paying, right? We can sleep in first class. The chairs look comfortable enough."
She shrugged and sighed. "Crazy."
"Let me use your phone," he said.
She handed him the mobile from her bag and he called long-distance information and asked for the number. Dialed it and heard it ring six thousand miles away. It rang eight times and the voice he wanted to hear answered it.
"This is Jack Reacher," he said. "You going to be in the office all day?"
The answer was slow and sleepy, because it was very early in the morning in Hawaii, but it was the answer he wanted to hear. He clicked the phone off and turned back to Jodie. She sighed at him again, but this time there was a smile mixed in with it. She stepped to the counter and used the gold card to buy two first-class tickets, Dallas-Fort Worth to Honolulu to New York. The guy at the counter made the seat assignments on the spot, slightly bewildered in front of people spending the price of a used sportscar to buy twenty hours on a plane and four on the ground on Oahu. He handed the wallets over and twenty minutes later Reacher was settling into an enormous leather-and-sheepskin chair with Jodie safely a yard away at his side.

THERE WAS A routine to be followed in this situation. It had never before been employed, but it had been rehearsed often and thoroughly. The thickset man at the chest-high counter moved his hand casually sideways and used his index finger on one button and his middle finger on another. The first button locked the oak door out to the elevator lobby. There was an electromagnetic mechanism that clicked the steel tongue into place, silently and unobtrusively. Once it was activated, the door stayed locked until the mechanism was released again, no matter what anybody did with the latch or the key. The second button set a red light flashing in the intercom unit on Hobie's desk. The red light was bright and the office was always dark, and it was impossible to miss it.
"Who?" the thickset guy said.
"Sheryl," O'Hallinan repeated.
"I'm sorry," the guy said. "There's nobody called Sheryl working here. Currently we have a staff of three, and they're all men."
He moved his hand to the left and rested it on a button marked TALK, which activated the intercom.
"You operate a black Tahoe?" O'Hallinan asked him.
He nodded. "We have a black Tahoe on the corporate fleet."
"What about a Suburban?"
"Yes, I think we have one of those, too. Is this about a traffic violation?"

"Yes, I think we have one of those, too. Is this about a traffic violation?"
"It's about Sheryl being in the hospital," O'Hallinan said.
"Who?" the guy asked again.
Sark came up behind O'Hallinan. "We need to speak with your boss."
"OK," the guy said. "I'll see if that can be arranged. May I have your names?"
"Officers Sark and O'Hallinan, City of New York Police Department."
Tony opened the inner office door, and stood there, inquiringly.
"May I help you, Officers?" he called.
In the rehearsals, the cops would turn away from the counter and look at Tony. Maybe take a couple of steps toward him. And that is exactly what happened. Sark and O'Hallinan turned their backs and walked toward the middle of the reception area. The thickset man at the counter leaned down and opened a cupboard. Unclipped the shotgun from its rack and held it low, out of sight.
"It's about Sheryl," O'Hallinan said again.
"Sheryl who?" Tony asked.
"The Sheryl in the hospital with the busted nose," Sark said. "And the fractured cheekbones and the concussion. The Sheryl who got out of your Tahoe outside St. Vincent's ER."
"Oh, I see," Tony said. "We didn't get her name. She couldn't speak a word, because of the injuries to her face."
"So why was she in your car?" O'Hallinan asked.
"We were up at Grand Central, dropping a client there. We found her on the sidewalk, kind of lost. She was off the train from Mount Kisco, and just kind of wandering about. We offered her a ride to the hospital, which seemed to be what she needed. So we dropped her at St. Vincent's, because it's on the way back here."
"Bellevue is nearer Grand Central," O'Hallinan said.
"I don't like the traffic over there," Tony said neutrally. "St. Vincent's was more convenient."
"And you didn't wonder about what had happened to her?" Sark asked. "How she came by the injuries?"
"Well, naturally we wondered," Tony said. "We asked her about it, but she couldn't speak, because of the injuries. That's why we didn't recognize the name."
O'Hallinan stood there, unsure. Sark took a step forward.
"You found her on the sidewalk?"
Tony nodded. "Outside Grand Central."
"She couldn't speak?"
"Not a word."
"So how do you know she was off the Kisco train?"

"So how do you know she was on the Risco train?"
The only gray area in the rehearsals had been picking the exact moment to drop the defense and start the offense. It was a subjective issue. They had trusted that when it came, they would recognize it. And they did. The thickset man stood up and crunched a round into the shotgun's chamber and leveled it across the counter.
"Freeze!" he screamed.
A nine-millimeter pistol appeared in Tony's hand. Sark and O'Hallinan stared at it and glanced back at the shotgun and jerked their arms upward. Not a rueful little gesture like in the movies. They stretched them violently upward as if their lives depended on touching the acoustic tile directly above their heads. The guy with the shotgun came up from the rear and jammed the muzzle hard into Sark's back and Tony stepped around behind O'Hallinan and did the same thing with his pistol. Then a third man came out from the darkness and paused in the office doorway.
"I'm Hook Hobie," he said.
They stared at him. Said nothing. Their gazes started on his disfigured face and traveled slowly down to the empty sleeve.
"Which of you is which?" Hobie asked.
No reply. They were staring at the hook. He raised it and let it catch the light.
"Which of you is O'Hallinan?"
O'Hallinan ducked her head in acknowledgment. Hobie turned.
"So you're Sark."
Sark nodded. Just a fractional inclination of his head.
"Undo your belts," Hobie said. "One at a time. And be quick."
Sark went first. He was quick. He dropped his hands and wrestled with his buckle. The heavy belt thumped to the floor at his feet. He stretched up again for the ceiling.
"Now you," Hobie said to O'Hallinan.
She did the same thing. The heavy belt with the revolver and the radio and the handcuffs and the nightstick thumped on the carpet. She stretched her hands back up, as far as they would go. Hobie used the hook. He leaned down and swept the point through both buckles and swung the belts up in the air, posing like a fisherman at the end of a successful day on the riverbank. He reached around and used his good hand to pull the two sets of handcuffs out of their worn leather cups.
"Turn around."
They turned and faced the guns head-on.
"Hands behind you."
It is possible for a one-armed man to put handcuffs on a victim, if the victim

It is possible for a one-armed man to put handcuffs on a victim, if the victim stands still, wrists together. Sark and O'Hallinan stood very still indeed. Hobie clicked one wrist at a time, and then tightened all four cuffs against their ratchets until he heard gasps of pain from both of them. Then he swung the belts high enough not to drag on the floor and walked back inside the office.
"Come in," he called.
He walked around behind the desk and laid the belts on it like items for close examination. He sat heavily in his chair and waited while Tony lined up the prisoners in front of him. He left them in silence while he emptied their belts. He unstrapped their revolvers and dropped them in a drawer. Took out their radios and fiddled with the volume controls until they were hissing and crackling loudly. He squared them together at the end of the desktop with their antennas pointed toward the wall of windows. He inclined his head for a moment and listened to the squelch of radio atmospherics. Then he turned back and pulled both nightsticks out of the loops on the belts. He placed one on the desk and hefted the other in his left hand and examined it closely. It was the modern kind, with a handle, and a telescopic section below. He peered at it, interested.
"How does this work, exactly?"
Neither Sark or O'Hallinan replied. Hobie played with the stick for a second, and then he glanced at the thickset guy, who jabbed the shotgun forward and hit Sark in the kidney.
"I asked you a question," Hobie said to him.
"You swing it," he muttered. "Swing it, and sort of flick it."
He needed space, so he stood up. Swung the stick and flicked it like he was cracking a whip. The telescopic section snapped out and locked into place. He grinned with the unburned half of his face. Collapsed the mechanism and tried again. Grinned again. He took to pacing big circles around the desk, swinging the stick and cracking it open. He did it vertically, and then horizontally. He used more and more force. He spun tight circles, flashing the stick. He whipped it backhanded and the mechanism sprang open and he whirled around and smashed it into O'Hallinan's face.
"I like this thing," he said.
She was swaying backward, but Tony jabbed her upright with his pistol. Her knees gave way and she fell forward in a heap, pressed up against the front of the desk, arms cuffed tight behind her, bleeding from the mouth and nose.
"What did Sheryl tell you?" Hobie asked.
Sark was staring down at O'Hallinan.
"She said she walked into a door," he muttered.
"So why the hell are you bothering me? Why are you here?"
Sark moved his gaze upward. Looked Hobie full in the face.

“Because we didn’t believe her. It was clear somebody beat on her. We followed up on the Tahoe plate, and it looks like it led us to the right place.”
The office went silent. Nothing except the hiss and the squelch from the police radios on the end of the desk. Hobie nodded.
“Exactly the right place,” he said. “There was no door involved.”
Sark nodded back. He was a reasonably courageous man. The Domestic Violence Unit was no kind of safe refuge for cowards. By definition it involved dealing with men who had the capacity for brutal violence. And Sark was as good at dealing with them as anybody.
“This is a big mistake,” he said quietly.
“In what way?” Hobie asked, interested.
“This is about what you did to Sheryl, is all. It doesn’t have to be about anything else. You really shouldn’t mix anything else in with it. It’s a big step up to violence against police officers. It might be possible to work something out about the Sheryl issue. Maybe there was provocation there, you know, some mitigating circumstance. But you keep on messing with us, then we can’t work anything out. Because you’re just digging yourself into bigger trouble.”
He paused and watched carefully for the response. The approach often worked. Self-interest on the part of the perpetrator often made it work. But there was no response. from Hobie. He said nothing. The office was silent. Sark was shaping the next gambit on his lips when the radios crackled and some distant dispatcher came over the air and sentenced him to death.
“Five one and five two, please confirm your current location. ”
Sark was so conditioned to respond that his hand jerked toward where his belt had been. It was stopped short by the handcuff. The radio call died into silence. Hobie was staring into space.
“Five one, five two, I need your current location, please. ”
Sark was staring at the radios in horror. Hobie followed his gaze and smiled.
“They don’t know where you are,” he said.
Sark shook his head. Thinking fast. A courageous man.
“They know where we are. They know we’re here. They want confirmation, is all. They check we’re where we’re supposed to be, all the time.”
The radios crackled again. “Five one, five two, respond please. ”
Hobie stared at Sark. O’Hallinan was struggling to her knees and staring toward the radios. Tony moved his pistol to cover her.
“Five one, five two, do you copy?”
The voice slid under the sea of static and then came back stronger.
“Five one, five two, we have a violent domestic emergency at Houston and

Avenue D. Are you anywhere near that vicinity?"
Hobie smiled.
"That's two miles from here," he said. "They have absolutely no idea where you are, do they?"
Then he grinned. The left side of his face folded into unaccustomed lines, but on the right the scar tissue stayed tight, like a rigid mask.

14

FOR THE FIRST time in his life, Reacher was truly comfortable in an airplane. He had been flying since birth, first as a soldier's kid and then as a soldier himself, millions of miles in total, but all of them hunched in roaring spartan military transports or folded into hard civilian seats narrower than his shoulders. Traveling first-class on a scheduled airline was a completely new luxury.

The cabin was dramatic. It was a calculated insult to the passengers who filed down the jetway and glanced into it before shuffling along the aisle to their own mean accommodations. It was cool and pastel in first class, with four seats to a row where there were ten in coach. Arithmetically, Reacher figured that made each seat two and a half times as wide, but they felt better than that. They felt enormous. They felt like sofas, wide enough for him to squirm left and right without bruising his hips against the arms. And the legroom was amazing. He could slide right down and stretch right out without touching the seat in front. He could hit the button and recline almost horizontally without bothering the guy behind. He operated the mechanism a couple of times like a kid with a toy, and then he settled on a sensible halfway position and opened the in-flight magazine, which was crisp and new and not creased and sticky like the ones they were reading forty rows back.

Jodie was lost in her own seat, with her shoes off and her feet tucked up under her, the same magazine open on her lap and a glass of chilled champagne at her elbow. The cabin was quiet. They were a long way forward of the engines, and their noise was muted to a hiss no louder than the hiss of the air coming through the vents in the overhead. There was no vibration. Reacher was watching the sparkling gold wine in Jodie's glass, and he saw no tremor on its surface.

"I could get accustomed to this," he said.

She looked up and smiled.

"Not on your wages," she said.

He nodded and went back to his arithmetic. He figured a day's earnings from digging swimming pools would buy him fifty miles of first-class air travel. Cruising speed, that was about five minutes' worth of progress. Ten hours of work, all gone in five minutes. He was spending money 120 times faster than he had been earning it.

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "When this is all over?"

"I don't know," he said.

The question had been in the back of his mind ever since she told him about the house. The house itself sat there in his imagination, sometimes benign

house. The house itself sat there in his imagination, sometimes benign, sometimes threatening, like a trick picture that changed depending on how you tilted it against the light. Sometimes it sat there in the glow of the sun, comfortable, low and spreading, surrounded by its amiable jungle of a yard, and it looked like home. Other times, it looked like a gigantic millstone, requiring him to run and run and run just to stay level with the starting line. He knew people with houses. He had talked to them, with the same kind of detached interest he would talk to a person who kept snakes as pets or entered ballroom dancing competitions. Houses forced you into a certain lifestyle. Even if somebody gave you one for nothing, like Leon had, it committed you to a whole lot of different things. There were property taxes. He knew that. There was insurance, in case the place burned down or was blown away in a high wind. There was maintenance. People he knew with houses were always doing something to them. They would be replacing the heating system at the start of the winter, because it had failed. Or the basement would be leaking water, and complicated things with excavations would be required. Roofs were a problem. He knew that. People had told him. Roofs had a finite life span, which surprised him. The shingles needed stripping off and replacing with new. Siding, also. Windows, too. He had known people who had put new windows in their houses. They had deliberated long and hard about what type to buy.

"Are you going to get a job?" Jodie asked.

He stared out through the oval window at southern California, dry and brown seven miles below him. What sort of a job? The house was going to cost him maybe ten thousand dollars a year in taxes and premiums and maintenance. And it was an isolated house, so he would have to keep Rutter's car, too. It was a free car, like the house, but it would cost him money just to own. Insurance, oil changes, inspections, title, gasoline. Maybe another three grand a year. Food and clothes and utilities were on top of all of that. And if he had a house, he would want other things. He would want a stereo. He would want Wynonna Judd's record, and a whole lot of others, too. He thought back to old Mrs. Hobie's handwritten calculations. She had settled on a certain sum of money she needed every year, and he couldn't see getting it any lower than she had gotten it. The whole deal added up to maybe thirty thousand dollars a year, which meant earning maybe fifty, to take account of income taxes and the cost of five days a week traveling back and forth to wherever the hell he was going to earn it.

"I don't know," he said again.

"Plenty of things you could do."

"Like what?"

"You've got talents. You're a hell of an investigator, for instance. Dad always used to say you're the best he ever saw."

“That was in the Army.” he said. “That’s all over now.”
“Skills are portable, Reacher. There’s always demand for the best.”
Then she looked up, a big idea in her face. “You could take over Costello’s business. He’s going to leave a void. We used him all the time.”
“That’s great. First I get the guy killed, then I steal his business.”
“It wasn’t your fault,” she said. “You should think about it.”
So he looked back down at California and thought about it. Thought about Costello’s well-worn leather chair and his aging, comfortable body. Thought about sitting in his pastel room with its pebble glass windows, spending his whole life on the telephone. Thought about the cost of running the Greenwich Avenue office and hiring a secretary and providing her with new computers and telephone consoles and health insurance and paid vacations. All on top of running the Garrison place. He would be working ten months of the year before he got ahead by a single dollar.
“I don’t know,” he said again. “I’m not sure I want to think about it.”
“You’re going to have to.”
“Maybe,” he said. “But not necessarily right now.”
She smiled like she understood and they lapsed back into silence. The plane hissed onward and the stewardess came back with the drinks cart. Jodie got a refill of champagne and Reacher took a can of beer. He flipped through the airline magazine. It was full of bland articles about nothing much in particular. There were advertisements for financial services and small, complicated gadgets, all of which were black and ran on batteries. He arrived at the section where the airline’s operational fleet was pictured in little colored drawings. He found the plane they were on and read about its passenger capacity and its range and the power of its engines. Then he arrived at the crossword in back. It filled a page and looked pretty hard. Jodie was already there in her own copy, ahead of him.
“Look at eleven down,” she said.
He looked.
“They can weigh heavy,” he read. “Sixteen letters.”
“Responsibilities,” she said.

MARILYN AND CHESTER Stone were huddled together on the left-hand sofa in front of the desk, because Hobie was in the bathroom, alone with the two cops. The thickset man in the dark suit sat on the opposite sofa with the shotgun resting in his lap. Tony was sprawled out next to him with his feet on the coffee table. Chester was inert, just staring into the gloom. Marilyn was cold and hungry, and terrified. Her eyes were darting all around the room. There was total

silence from the bathroom.
“What’s he doing in there with them?” she whispered.
Tony shrugged. “Probably just talking to them right now.”
“About what?”
“Well, asking them questions about what they like and what they don’t. In terms of physical pain, you understand. He likes to do that.”
“God, why?”
Tony smiled. “He feels it’s more democratic, you know, letting the victims decide their own fate.”
Marilyn shuddered. “Oh God, can’t he just let them go? They thought Sheryl was a battered wife, that’s all. They didn’t know anything about him.”
“Well, they’ll know something about him soon,” Tony said. “He makes them pick a number. They never know whether to pick high or low, because they don’t know what it’s for. They think they might please him, you know, if they pick right. They spend forever trying to figure it out.”
“Can’t he just let them go? Maybe later?”
Tony shook his head.
“No,” he said. “He’s very tense right now. This will relax him. Like therapy.”
Marilyn was silent for a long moment. But then she had to ask.
“What is the number for?” she whispered.
“How many hours it takes them to die,” Tony said. “The ones who pick high get real pissed when they find that out.”
“You bastards.”
“Some guy once picked a hundred, but we let him off with ten.”
“You bastards.”
“But he won’t make you pick a number. He’s got other plans for you.”
Total silence from the bathroom.
“He’s insane,” Marilyn whispered.
Tony shrugged. “A little, maybe. But I like him. He’s had a lot of pain in his life. I think that’s why he’s so interested in it.”
Marilyn stared on at him in horror. Then the buzzer sounded at the oak door out to the elevator lobby. Very loud in the awful silence. Tony and the thickset man with the shotgun spun around and stared in that direction.
“Check it out,” Tony said.
He went into his jacket and came out with his gun. He held it steady on Chester and Marilyn. His partner with the shotgun jacked himself up out of the low sofa and stepped around the table to the door. He closed it behind him and the office went quiet again. Tony stood up and walked to the bathroom door. Knocked on it with the butt of his gun and opened it a fraction and ducked his head inside.

“Visitors,” he whispered.
Marilyn glanced left and right. Tony was twenty feet from her, and he was the nearest. She jumped to her feet and snatched a deep breath. Hurdled the coffee table and scrambled around the opposite sofa and made it all the way to the office door. She wrenched it open. The thickset man in the dark suit was on the far side of the reception area, talking to a short man framed in the doorway out to the elevator lobby.
“Help us!” she screamed to him.
The man stared over at her. He was dressed in dark blue pants and a blue shirt, with a short jacket open over it, the same blue as the pants. Some kind of uniform. There was a small design on the jacket, left side of the chest. He was carrying a brown grocery sack cradled in his arms.
“Help us!” she screamed again.
Two things happened. The thickset man in the dark suit darted forward and bundled the visitor all the way inside and slammed the door after him. And Tony grabbed Marilyn from behind with a strong arm around her waist. He dragged her backward into the office. She arched forward against the pressure of his arm. She was bending herself double and fighting.
“God’s sake, help us!”
Tony lifted her off her feet. His arm was bunching under her breasts. The short dress was riding up over her thighs. She was kicking and struggling. The short man in the blue uniform was staring. Her shoes came off. Then the short man was smiling. He walked forward into the office after her, stepping carefully over her abandoned shoes, carrying his grocery sack.
“Hey, I’d like to get me a piece of that,” he said.
“Forget it,” Tony gasped from behind her. “This one’s off limits, time being.”
“Pity,” the new guy said. “Not every day you see a thing like that.”
Tony struggled with her all the way back to the sofa. Dumped her down next to Chester. The new guy shrugged wistfully and emptied the grocery sack on the desk. Bricks of cash money thumped out on the wood. The bathroom door opened and Hobie stepped into the room. His jacket was off and his shirtsleeves were rolled up to the elbow. On the left was a forearm. It was knotted with muscle and thick with dark hair. On the right was a heavy leather cup, dark brown, worn and shiny, with straps riveted to it running away up into the shirtsleeve. The bottom of the cup was narrowed to a neck, with the bright steel hook coming down out of it, running straight for six or eight inches and then curving around to the point.
“Count the money, Tony,” Hobie said.
Marilyn jerked upright. Turned to face the new guy.

“He’s got two cops in there,” she said urgently. “He’s going to kill them.”
The guy shrugged at her.
“Suits me,” he said. “Kill them all, is what I say.”
She stared at him blankly. Tony moved behind the desk and sorted through the bricks of money. He stacked them neatly and counted out loud, moving them from one end of the desk to the other.
“Forty thousand dollars.”
“So where are the keys?” the new guy asked.
Tony rolled open the desk drawer. “These are for the Benz.”
He tossed them to the guy and went into his pocket for another bunch.
“And these are for the Tahoe. It’s in the garage downstairs.”
“What about the BMW?” the guy asked.
“Still up in Pound Ridge,” Hobie called across the room.
“Keys?” the guy asked.
“In the house, I guess,” Hobie said. “She didn’t bring a pocketbook, and it doesn’t look like she’s concealing them about her person, does it?”
The guy stared at Marilyn’s dress and smiled an ugly smile, all lips and tongue.
“There’s something in there, that’s for damn sure. But it don’t look like keys.”
She looked at him in disgust. The design on his jacket read Mo’s Motors. It was embroidered in red silk. Hobie walked across the room and stood directly behind her. He leaned forward and brought the hook around into her line of vision. She stared at it, close up. She shuddered.
“Where are the keys?” he asked.
“The BMW is mine,” she said.
“Not anymore it isn’t.”
He moved the hook closer. She could smell the metal and the leather.
“I could search her,” the new guy called. “Maybe she is concealing them after all. I can think of a couple of interesting places to look.”
She shuddered.
“Keys,” Hobie said to her softly.
“Kitchen counter,” she whispered back.
Hobie took the hook away and walked around in front of her, smiling. The new guy looked disappointed. He nodded to confirm he’d heard the whisper and walked slowly to the door, jingling the Benz keys and the Tahoe keys in his hand.
“Pleasure doing business,” he said as he walked.
Then he paused at the door and looked back, straight at Marilyn.
“You completely sure that’s off limits, Hobie? Seeing as how we’re old friends and all? Done a lot of business together?”
Hobie shook his head like he meant it. “Forget about it. This one’s mine.”

Hobie shook his head like he meant it. "Forget about it. This one's mine."
The guy shrugged and walked out of the office, swinging the keys. The door closed behind him and they heard the second thump of the lobby door a moment later. Then there was elevator whine and the office fell silent again. Hobie glanced at the stacks of dollar bills on the desk and headed back to the bathroom. Marilyn and Chester were kept side by side on the sofa, cold, sick, and hungry. The light coming in through the chinks in the blinds faded away to the yellow dullness of evening, and the silence from the bathroom continued until a point Marilyn guessed was around eight o'clock in the evening. Then it was shattered by screaming.

I HE PLANE CHASED the sun west but lost time all the way and arrived on Oahu three hours in arrears, in the middle of the afternoon. The first-class cabin was emptied ahead of business class and coach, which meant Reacher and Jodie were the first people outside the terminal and into the taxi line. The temperature and the humidity out there were similar to Texas, but the damp had a saline quality to it because of the Pacific close by. And the light was calmer. The jagged green mountains and the blue of the sea bathed the island with the jeweled glow of the tropics. Jodie put her dark glasses on again and gazed beyond the airport fences with the mild curiosity of somebody who had passed through Hawaii a dozen times in her father's service days without ever really stopping there. Reacher did the same. He had used it as a Pacific stepping-stone more times than he could count, but he had never served in Hawaii.

The taxi waiting at the head of the line was a replica of the one they'd used at Dallas-Fort Worth, a clean Caprice with the air roaring full blast and the driver's compartment decorated halfway between a religious shrine and a living room. They disappointed the guy by asking him for the shortest ride available on Oahu, which was the half-mile hop around the perimeter road to the Hickam Air Force Base entrance. The guy glanced backward at the line of cars behind him, and Reacher saw him thinking about the better fares the other drivers would get.

"Ten-dollar tip in it for you," he said.

The guy gave him the same look the ticket clerk at Dallas-Fort Worth had used. A fare that was going to leave the meter stuck on the basic minimum, but a ten-dollar tip? Reacher saw a photograph of what he guessed was the guy's family, taped to the vinyl of the dash. A big family, dark, smiling children and a dark, smiling woman in a cheerful print dress, all standing in front of a clean simple home with something vigorous growing in a dirt patch to the right. He thought about the Hobies, alone in the dark silence up in Brighton with the hiss of the oxygen bottle and the squeak of the worn wooden floors. And Rutter, in the dusty squalor of his Bronx storefront.

"Twenty dollars," he said. "If we get going right now. OK?"

"Twenty dollars," he said. "If we get going right now, OK?"
"Twenty dollars?" the guy repeated, amazed.
"Thirty. For your kids. They look nice."
The guy grinned in the mirror and touched his fingers to his lips and laid them gently on the shiny surface of the photograph. He swung the cab through the lane changes onto the perimeter track and came off again more or less immediately, eight hundred yards into the journey, outside a military gate which looked identical to the one fronting Fort Wolters. Jodie opened the door and stepped out into the heat and Reacher went into his pocket and came out with his roll of cash. Top bill was a fifty, and he peeled it off and pushed it through the little hinged door in the Plexiglas.
"Keep it."
Then he pointed at the photograph. "That your house?"
The driver nodded.
"Is it holding up OK? Anything need fixing on it?"
The guy shook his head. "Tip-top condition."
"The roof OK?"
"No problems at all."
Reacher nodded. "Just checking."
He slid across the vinyl and joined Jodie on the blacktop. The taxi moved off through the haze, back toward the civilian terminal. There was a breeze coming off the ocean. Salt in the air. Jodie pushed the hair off her face and looked around.
"Where are we going?"
"CIL-HI," Reacher said. "It's right inside here."
He pronounced it phonetically, and it made her smile.
"Silly?" she repeated. "So what's that?"
"C,I,L,H,I," he said. "Central Identification Laboratory, Hawaii. It's the Department of the Army's main facility."
"For what?"
"I'll show you for what," he said.
Then he paused. "At least I hope I will."
They walked up to the gatehouse and waited at the window. There was a sergeant inside, same uniform, same haircut, same suspicious expression on his face as the guy at Wolters. He made them wait in the heat for a second, and then he slid the window back. Reacher stepped forward and gave their names.
"We're here to see Nash Newman," he said.
The sergeant looked surprised and picked up a clipboard and peeled thin sheets of paper back. He slid a thick finger along a line and nodded. Picked up a phone and dialed a number. Four digits. An internal call. He announced the visitors and

and dialed a number. Four digits. An internal call. He announced the visitors and listened to the reply, and then he looked puzzled. He covered the phone with his palm and turned back to Jodie.
“How old are you, miss?” he asked.
“Thirty,” Jodie said, puzzled in turn.
“Thirty,” the MP repeated into the phone. Then he listened again and hung it up and wrote something on the clipboard. Turned back to the window.
“He’ll be right out, so come on through.”
They squeezed through the narrow gap between the gatehouse wall and the heavy counterweight on the end of the vehicle barrier and waited on the hot pavement six feet away from where they had started, but now it was military pavement, not Hawaii Department of Transportation pavement, and that made a lot of difference to the look on the sergeant’s face. The suspicion was all gone, replaced by frank curiosity about why the legendary Nash Newman was in such a big hurry to get these two civilians inside the base.
There was a low concrete building maybe sixty yards away with a plain personnel door set in the blank end wall. The door opened up and a silver-haired man stepped out. He turned back to close it and lock it and then set out at a fast walk toward the gatehouse. He was in the pants and the shirt of an Army tropical-issue uniform, with a white lab coat flapping open over them. There was enough metal punched through the collar of the shirt to indicate he was a high-ranking officer, and nothing in his distinguished bearing to contradict that impression. Reacher moved to meet him and Jodie followed. The silver-haired guy was maybe fifty-five, and up close he was tall, with a handsome patrician face and a natural athletic grace in his body that was just beginning to yield to the stiffness of age.
“General Newman,” Reacher said. “This is Jodie Garber.”
Newman glanced at Reacher and took Jodie’s hand, smiling.
“Pleased to meet you, General,” she said.
“We already met,” Newman said.
“We did?” she said, surprised.
“You wouldn’t recall it,” he said. “At least I’d be terribly surprised if you did. You were three years old at the time, I guess. In the Philippines. It was in your father’s backyard. I remember you brought me a glass of planter’s punch. It was a big glass, and a big yard, and you were a very little girl. You carried it in both hands, with your tongue sticking out, concentrating. I watched you all the way, with my heart in my mouth in case you dropped it.”
She smiled. “Well, you’re right, I’m afraid I don’t recall it. I was three? That’s an awful long time ago now.”
Newman nodded. “That’s why I checked how old you looked. I didn’t mean for

the sergeant to come right out and ask you straight. I wanted his subjective impression, is all. It's not the sort of thing one should ask a lady, is it? But I was wondering if you could really be Leon's daughter, come to visit me."
He squeezed her hand and let it go. Turned to Reacher and punched him lightly on the shoulder.
"Jack Reacher," he said. "Damn, it's good to see you again."
Reacher caught Newman's hand and shook it hard, sharing the pleasure.
"General Newman was my teacher," he said to Jodie. "He did a spell at staff college about a million years ago. Advanced forensics, taught me everything I know."
"He was a pretty good student," Newman said to her. "Paid attention at least, which is more than most of them did."
"So what is it you do, General?" she asked.
"Well, I do a little forensic anthropology," Newman said.
"He's the best in the world," Reacher said.
Newman waved away the compliment. "Well, I don't know about that."
"Anthropology?" Jodie said. "But isn't that studying remote tribes and things? How they live? Their rituals and beliefs and so on?"
"No, that's cultural anthropology," Newman said. "There are many different disciplines. Mine is forensic anthropology, which is a part of physical anthropology."
"Studying human remains for clues," Reacher said.
"A bone doctor," Newman said. "That's about what it amounts to."
They were drifting down the sidewalk as they talked, getting nearer the plain door in the blank wall. It opened up and a younger man was standing there waiting for them in the entrance corridor. A nondescript guy, maybe thirty years old, in a lieutenant's uniform under a white lab coat. Newman nodded toward him. "This is Lieutenant Simon. He runs the lab for me. Couldn't manage without him."
He introduced Reacher and Jodie and they shook hands all around. Simon was quiet and reserved. Reacher figured him for a typical lab guy, annoyed at the disruption to the measured routine of his work. Newman led them inside and down the corridor to his office, and Simon nodded silently to him and disappeared.
"Sit down," Newman said. "Let's talk."
"So you're a sort of pathologist?" Jodie asked him.
Newman took his place behind his desk and rocked his hand from side to side, indicating a disparity. "Well, a pathologist has a medical degree, and we anthropologists don't. We studied anthropology, pure and simple. The physical

structure of the human body, that's our field. We both work postmortem, of course, but generally speaking if a corpse is relatively fresh, it's a pathologist's job, and if there's only a skeleton left, then it's our job. So I'm a bone doctor."
Jodie nodded.
"Of course, that's a slight simplification," Newman said. "A fresh corpse can raise questions concerning its bones. Suppose there's dismemberment involved? The pathologist would refer to us for help. We can look at the saw marks on the bones and help out. We can say how weak or strong the perpetrator was, what kind of saw he used, was he left-handed or right-handed, things like that. But ninety-nine times out of a hundred, I'm working on skeletons. Dry old bones." Then he smiled again. A private, amused smile. "And pathologists are useless with dry old bones. Really, really hopeless. They don't know the first thing about them. Sometimes I wonder what the hell they teach them in medical school."
The office was quiet and cool. No windows, indirect lighting from concealed fixtures, carpet on the floor. A rosewood desk, comfortable leather chairs for the visitors. And an elegant clock on a low shelf, ticking quietly, already showing three-thirty in the afternoon. Just three and a half hours until the return flight.
"We're here for a reason, General," Reacher said. "This isn't entirely a social call, I'm afraid."
"Social enough to stop calling me General and start calling me Nash, OK? And tell me what's on your mind."
Reacher nodded. "We need your help, Nash."
Newman looked up. "With the MIA lists?"
Then he turned to Jodie, to explain.
"That's what I do here," he said. "Twenty years, I've done nothing else."
She nodded. "It's about a particular case. We sort of got involved in it."
Newman nodded back, slowly, but this time the light was gone from his eyes.
"Yes, I was afraid of that," he said. "There are eighty-nine thousand, one hundred twenty MIA cases here, but I bet I know which one you're interested in."
"Eighty-nine thousand?" Jodie repeated, surprised.
"And a hundred twenty. Two thousand, two hundred missing from Vietnam, eight thousand, one hundred seventy missing from Korea, and seventy-eight thousand, seven hundred fifty missing from World War Two. We haven't given up on any single one of them, and I promise you we never will."
"God, why so many?"
Newman shrugged, a bitter sadness suddenly there in his face.
"Wars," he said. "High explosive, tactical movement, airplanes. Wars are fought,

some combatants live, some die. Some of the dead are recovered, some of them aren't. Sometimes there's nothing left to recover. A direct hit on a man by an artillery shell will reduce him to his constituent molecules. He's just not there anymore. Maybe a fine red mist drifting through the air, maybe not even that, maybe he's completely boiled off to vapor. A near miss will blow him to pieces. And fighting is about territory, isn't it? So even if the pieces of him are relatively large, enemy tank movement or friendly tank movement back and forth across the disputed territory will plow the pieces of him into the earth, and then he's gone forever."

He sat in silence, and the clock ticked slowly around.

"And airplanes are worse. Many of our air campaigns have been fought over oceans. A plane goes down in the ocean and the crew is missing until the end of time, no matter how much effort we expend in a place like this."

He waved his arm in a vague gesture that took in the office and all the unseen space beyond and ended up resting toward Jodie, palm up, like a mute appeal.

"Eighty-nine thousand," she said. "I thought the MIA stuff was just about Vietnam. Two thousand or so."

"Eighty-nine thousand, one hundred twenty," Newman said again. "We still get a few from Korea, the occasional one from World War Two, the Japanese islands. But you're right, this is mostly about Vietnam. Two thousand, two hundred missing. Not so very many, really. They lost more than that in a single morning during World War One, every morning for four long years. Men and boys blown apart and mashed into the mud. But Vietnam was different. Partly because of things like World War One. We won't take that wholesale slaughter anymore, and quite rightly. We've moved on. The population just won't stand for those old attitudes now."

Jodie nodded quietly.

"And partly because we lost the war in Vietnam," Newman said quietly. "That makes it very different. The only war we ever lost. Makes it all feel a hell of a lot worse. So we try harder to resolve things."

He made the gesture with his hand again, indicating the unseen complex beyond the office door, and his voice ended on a brighter note.

"So that's what you do here?" Jodie asked. "Wait for skeletons to be discovered overseas and then bring them back here to identify? So you can finally tick the names off the missing lists?"

Newman rocked his hand again, equivocating. "Well, we don't wait, exactly. Where we can, we go out searching for them. And we don't always identify them, although we sure as hell try hard."

"It must be difficult," she said.

He nodded. “Technically, it can be very challenging. The recovery sites are usually a mess. The field-workers send us animal bones, local bones, anything. We sort it all out here. Then we go to work with what we’ve got. Which sometimes isn’t very much. Sometimes all that’s left of an American soldier is just a handful of bone fragments you could fit in a cigar box.”
“Impossible,” she said.
“Often,” he said back. “We’ve got a hundred part-skeletons here right now, unidentified. The Department of the Army can’t afford mistakes. They demand a very high standard of certainty, and sometimes we just can’t meet it.”
“Where do you start?” she asked.
He shrugged. “Well, wherever we can. Medical records, usually. Suppose Reacher here was an MIA. If he’d broken his arm as a boy, we’d be able to match the old X ray against a healed break in the bones we found. Maybe. Or if we found his jaw, we could match the work on his teeth with his dental charts.”
Reacher saw her looking at him, imagining him reduced to dry yellowing bones on a jungle floor, scraped out of the dirt and compared to brittle fading X rays taken thirty years earlier. The office went silent again, and the clock ticked around.
“Leon came here in April,” Reacher said.
Newman nodded. “Yes, he visited with me. Foolish of him, really, because he was a very sick man. But it was good to see him.”
Then he turned to Jodie, sympathy on his face.
“He was a fine, fine man. I owed him a lot.”
She nodded. It wasn’t the first time she’d heard it, and it wouldn’t be the last.
“He asked you about Victor Hobie,” Reacher said.
Newman nodded again. “Victor Truman Hobie.”
“What did you tell him?”
“Nothing,” Newman said. “And I’m going to tell you nothing, too.”
The clock ticked on. A quarter to four.
“Why not?” Reacher asked.
“Surely you know why not.”
“It’s classified?”
“Twice over,” Newman said.
Reacher moved in the silence, restless with frustration. “You’re our last hope, Nash. We’ve already been all over everything else.”
Newman shook his head. “You know how it is, Reacher. I’m an officer in the U.S. Army, damn it. I’m not going to reveal classified information.”
“Please, Nash,” Reacher said. “We came all this way.”
“I can’t,” Newman said.

"No such word," Reacher said.
Silence.
"Well, I guess you could ask me questions," he said. "If a former student of mine comes in here and asks me questions based on his own skills and observations, and I answer them in a purely academic fashion, I don't see that any harm can come to anybody."
It was like the clouds shifting away from the sun. Jodie glanced at Reacher. He glanced at the clock. Seven minutes to four. Less than three hours to go.
"OK, Nash, thanks," he said. "You're familiar with this case?"
"I'm familiar with all of them. This one especially, since April."
"And it's classified twice over?"
Newman just nodded.
"At a level that kept Leon out of the loop?"
"That's a pretty high level," Newman hinted. "Wouldn't you agree?"
Reacher nodded. Thought hard. "What did Leon want you to do?"
"He was in the dark," Newman said. "You need to bear that in mind, right?"
"OK," Reacher said. "What did he want you to do?"
"He wanted us to find the crash site."
"Four miles west of An Khe."
Newman nodded. "I felt badly for Leon. No real reason for him to be out of the loop on this, and there was nothing I could do to alter the classification code. But I owed that man a lot, way more than I can tell you about, so I agreed to find the site."
Jodie leaned forward. "But why wasn't it found before? People seem to know roughly where it is."
Newman shrugged. "It's all incredibly difficult. You have no idea. The terrain, the bureaucracy. We lost the war, remember. The Vietnamese dictate the terms over there. We run a joint recovery effort, but they control it. The whole thing is constant manipulation and humiliation. We're not allowed to wear our uniforms over there, because they say the sight of a U.S. Army uniform will traumatize the village populations. They make us rent their own helicopters to get around, millions and millions of dollars a year for ratty old rust buckets with half the capability of our own machines. Truth is, we're buying those old bones back, and they set the price and the availability. Bottom line right now is the United States is paying more than three million dollars for every single identification we make, and it burns me up."
Four minutes to four. Newman sighed again, lost in thought.
"But you found the site?" Reacher prompted.
"It was scheduled for sometime in the future," Newman said. "We knew roughly where it was, and we knew exactly what we'd find when we got there, so it

where it was, and we knew exactly what we'd find when we got there, so it wasn't much of a high priority. But as a favor to Leon, I went over there and bargained to move it up the schedule. I wanted it next item on the list. It was a real bitch to negotiate. They get wind you want something in particular, they go stubborn as all hell. You've got no idea. Inscrutable? Tell me about it."
"But you found it?" Jodie asked.
"It was a bitch, geographically," Newman said. "We talked to DeWitt over at Wolters, and he helped us pin down the exact location, more or less. Remotest place you ever saw. Mountainous and inaccessible. I can guarantee you no human being has ever set foot there, no time in the history of the planet. It was a nightmare trip. But it was a great site. Completely inaccessible, so it wasn't mined."
"Mined?" Jodie repeated. "You mean they booby-trap the sites?"
Newman shook his head. "No, mined, as in excavated. Anything accessible, the population was all over it thirty years ago. They took dog tags, ID cards, helmets, souvenirs, but mostly they were after the metals. Fixed-wing sites, mostly, because of the gold and platinum."
"What gold?" she asked.
"In the electrical circuits," Newman said. "The F-4 Phantoms, for instance, they had about five thousand dollars' worth of precious metals in the connections. Population used to hack it all out and sell it. You buy cheap jewelry in Bangkok, probably it's made out of old U.S. fighter-bomber electronics."
"What did you find up there?" Reacher asked.
"A relatively good state of preservation," Newman said. "The Huey was smashed up and rusted, but it was recognizable. The bodies were completely skeletonized, of course. Clothing was rotted and gone, long ago. But nothing else was missing. They all had dog tags. We packed them up and helicoptered them to Hanoi. Then we flew them back here in the Starlifter, full honors. We only just got back. Three months, beginning to end, one of the best we've ever done in terms of time scale. And the IDs are going to be a total formality, because we've got the dog tags. No role for a bone doctor on this one. Open and shut. I'm just sorry Leon didn't live to see it. It would have put his mind at rest."
"The bodies are here?" Reacher asked.
Newman nodded. "Right next door."
"Can we see them?" Reacher asked.
Newman nodded again. "You shouldn't, but you need to."
The office went quiet and Newman stood up and gestured toward the door with both hands. Lieutenant Simon walked past. He nodded a greeting.
"We're going into the lab," Newman said to him.
"Yes, sir," Simon said back. He moved away into his own office cubicle and

"Yes, sir," Simon said back. He moved away into his own office cubicle and Reacher and Jodie and Newman walked in the other direction and paused in front of a plain door set in a blank cinder block wall. Newman took keys from his pocket and unlocked it. He pulled it open and repeated the same formal gesture with both his hands. Reacher and Jodie preceded him into the lab.

SIMON WATCHED THEM go inside from his cubicle. When the door closed and locked behind them, he picked up his phone and dialed nine for a line and then a ten-figure number starting with the New York City area code. The number rang for a long time because it was already the middle of the evening six thousand miles to the east. Then it was answered.
"Reacher's here," Simon whispered. "Right now, with a woman. They're in the lab, right now. Looking."
Hobie's voice came back low and controlled. "Who's the woman?"
"Jodie Garber," Simon said. "General Garber's daughter."
"Alias Mrs. Jacob."
"What do you want me to do?"
There was silence on the line. Just the whistle of the long-distance satellite.
"You could give them a ride back to the airport, maybe. The woman's got an appointment in New York tomorrow afternoon, so I guess they'll be trying to make the seven o'clock flight. Just make sure they don't miss it."
"OK," Simon said, and Hobie broke the connection.

THE LAB WAS a wide, low room, maybe forty feet by fifty. There were no windows. The lighting was the bland wash of fluorescent tubes. There was the faint hiss of efficient air circulation, but there was a smell in the room, somewhere between the sharp tang of strong disinfectant and the warm odor of earth. At the far end of the space was an alcove filled with racks. On the racks were rows of cardboard boxes, marked with reference numbers in black. Maybe a hundred boxes.
"The unidentified," Reacher said.
Newman nodded at his side.
"As of now," he said, quietly. "We won't give up on them."
Between them and the distant alcove was the main body of the room. The floor was tile, swabbed to a shine. Standing on it were twenty neat wooden tables set in precise rows. The tables were waist high and topped with heavy polished slabs. Each table was a little shorter and a little narrower than an Army cot. They looked like sturdy versions of the tables decorators use for wallpaper pasting. Six of them were completely empty. Seven of them had the lids of seven polished aluminum caskets laid across them. The final seven tables held the

polished aluminum caskets laid across them. The final seven tables held the seven aluminum caskets themselves, in neat alternate rows, each one adjacent to the table bearing its lid. Reacher stood silent with his head bowed, and then he drew himself up to attention and held a long, silent salute for the first time in more than two years.
“Awful,” Jodie whispered.
She was standing with her hands clasped behind her, head bowed, like she was at a graveside ceremony. Reacher released his salute and squeezed her hand.
“Thank you,” Newman said quietly. “I like people to show respect in here.”
“How could we not?” Jodie whispered.
She was staring at the caskets, with tears starting in her eyes.
“So, Reacher, what do you see?” Newman asked in the silence.
Reacher’s eyes were wandering around the bright room. He was too shocked to move.
“I see seven caskets,” he said quietly. “Where I expected to see eight. There were eight people in that Huey. Crew of five, and they picked up three. It’s in DeWitt’s report. Five and three make eight.”
“And eight minus one makes seven,” Newman said.
“Did you search the site? Thoroughly?”
Newman shook his head. “No.”
“Why not?”
“You’ll have to figure that out.”
Reacher shook himself and took a step forward. “May I?”
“Be my guest,” Newman replied. “Tell me what you see. Concentrate hard, and we’ll see what you’ve remembered, and what you’ve forgotten.”
Reacher walked to the nearest casket and turned so that he was looking down into it along its length. The casket held a rough wooden box, six inches smaller in every dimension than the casket itself.
“That’s what the Vietnamese make us use,” Newman said. “They sell those boxes to us and make us use them. We put them in our own caskets in the hangar at the airfield in Hanoi.”
The wooden box had no lid. It was just a shallow tray. There was a jumble of bones in it. Somebody had arranged them in roughly the correct anatomical sequence. There was a skull at the top, yellowed and old. It grinned up with a grotesque smile. There was a gold tooth in the mouth. The empty eye sockets stared. The vertebrae of the neck were lined up neatly. Below them the shoulder blades and the collarbones and the ribs were laid out in their correct places above the pelvis. The arm bones and the leg bones were stacked to the sides. There was the dull glint of a metal chain draped over the vertebrae of the neck, running away under the flatness of the left shoulder blade.

“May I?” Reacher asked again.
Newman nodded. “Please.”
Reacher stood silent for a long moment and then leaned in and hooked his finger under the chain and eased it out. The bones stirred and clicked and moved as the dog tags caught. He pulled them out and brought them up and rubbed the ball of his thumb across their faces. Bent down to read the stamped name.
“Kaplan,” he said. “The copilot.”
“How did he die?” Newman asked.
Reacher draped the tags back across the bony ribs and looked hard for the evidence. The skull was OK. No trace of damage to the arms or legs or chest. But the pelvis was smashed. The vertebrae toward the bottom of the spine were crushed. And the ribs at the back were fractured, eight of them on both sides, counting upward from the bottom.
“Impact, when the Huey hit the ground. He took a big hit in the lower back. Massive internal trauma and hemorrhage. Probably fatal within a minute.”
“But he was strapped in his seat,” Newman said. “Head-on crash into the ground, how does that injure him from behind?”
Reacher looked again. He felt the way he had years before in the classroom, nervous about screwing up in front of the legendary Nash Newman. He looked hard, and he put his hands lightly on the dry bones, feeling them. But he had to be right. This was a crushing impact to the lower back. There was no other explanation.
“The Huey spun,” he said. “It came in at a shallow angle and the trees spun it around. It separated between the cabin and the tail and the cabin hit the ground traveling backward.”
Newman nodded. “Excellent. That’s exactly how we found it. It hit backward. Instead of his harness saving him, his chair killed him.”
Reacher moved on to the next casket. There was the same shallow wooden tray, the same jumble of yellow bones. The same grotesque, accusing, grinning skull. Below it, the neck was broken. He eased the dog tags out from between the shards of cracked bone.
“Tardelli,” he read.
“The starboard side gunner,” Newman said.
Tardelli’s skeleton was a mess. The gunners stood on a slick stand in the open doorway, basically unsecured, juggling with the heavy machine gun swinging on a bungee cord. When the Huey went down, Tardelli had been thrown all over the cabin.
“Broken neck,” Reacher said. “Crushing to the upper chest.”
He turned the awful yellow skull over. It was fractured like an eggshell.

“Head trauma also. I’d say he died instantaneously. Wouldn’t like to say which exact injury killed him.”
“Neither would I,” Newman said. “He was nineteen years old.”
There was silence. Nothing in the air except the faint sweet aroma of loam.
“Look at the next one,” Newman said.
The next one was different. There was a single injury to the chest. The dog tags were tangled into splintered bones. Reacher couldn’t free them. He had to bend his head to get the name.
“Bamford.”
“The crew chief,” Newman said. “He would have been sitting on the cabin bench, facing the rear, opposite the three guys they picked up.”
Bamford’s bony face grinned up at him. Below it, his skeleton was complete and undamaged, except for the narrow crushing injury sideways across the upper body. It was like a three-inch trench in his chest. The sternum had been punched down to the level of the spine and had gone on and knocked three vertebrae out of line. Three ribs had gone with it.
“So what do you think?” Newman asked.
Reacher put his hand into the box and felt the dimensions of the injury. It was narrow and horizontal. Three fingers wouldn’t fit into it, but two would.
“Some kind of an impact,” he said. “Something between a sharp instrument and a blunt instrument. Hit him sideways in the chest, obviously. It would have stopped his heart immediately. Was it the rotor blade?”
Newman nodded. “Very good. The way it looked, the rotor folded up against the trees and came down into the cabin. It must have struck him across the upper body. As you say, a blow like that would have stopped his heart instantaneously.”
In the next casket, the bones were very different. Some of them were the same dull yellow, but most of them were white and brittle and eroded. The dog tags were bent and blackened. Reacher turned them to throw the embossing into relief against the ceiling lights and read: Soper.
“The port side gunner,” Newman said.
“’There was a fire,” Reacher said.
“How can you tell?” Newman asked, like the teacher he was.
“Dog tags are burned.”
“And?”
“The bones are calcinated,” Reacher said. “At least, most of them are.”
“Calcinated?” Newman repeated.
Reacher nodded and went back fifteen years to his textbooks.
“The organic components burned off, leaving only the inorganic compounds

behind. Burning leaves the bones smaller, whiter, veined, brittle, and eroded."
"Good," Newman said.
"The explosion DeWitt saw," Jodie said. "It was the fuel tank."
Newman nodded. "Classic evidence. Not a slow fire. A fuel explosion. It spills randomly and bums quickly, which explains the random nature of the burned bones. Looks to me like Soper caught the fuel across his lower body, but his upper body was lying outside of the fire."
His quiet words died to silence and the three of them were lost in imagining the terror. The bellowing engines, the hostile bullets smashing into the airframe, the sudden loss of power, the spurt of spilling fuel, the fire, the tearing smashing impact through the trees, the screaming, the rotor scything down, the shuddering crash, the screeching of metal, the smashing of frail human bodies into the indifferent jungle floor where no person had ever walked since the dawn of time. Soper's empty eye sockets stared up into the light, challenging them to imagine.
"Look at the next one," Newman said.
The next casket held the remains of a man called Allen. No burning. Just a yellow skeleton with bright dog tags around the broken neck. A noble, grinning skull. Even, white teeth. A high, round, undamaged cranium. The product of good nutrition and careful upbringing in the America of the fifties. His whole back was smashed, like a dead crab.
"Allen was one of the three they picked up," Newman said.
Reacher nodded, sadly. The sixth casket was a burn victim. His name was Zabrinski. His bones were calcinated and small.
"He was probably a big guy in life," Newman said. "Burning can shrink your bones by fifty percent, sometimes. So don't write him off as a midget."
Reacher nodded again. Stirred through the bones with his hand. They were light and brittle. Like husks. The veining left them sharp with microscopic ribbing.
"Injuries?" Newman asked.
Reacher looked again, but he found nothing.
"He burned to death," he said.
Newman nodded.
"Yes, I'm afraid he did," he said.
"Awful," Jodie whispered.
The seventh and final casket held the remains of a man named Gunston. They were terrible remains. At first Reacher thought there was no skull. Then he saw it was lying in the bottom of the wooden box. It was smashed into a hundred pieces. Most of them were no bigger than his thumbnail.
"What do you think?" Newman asked.
Reacher shook his head.

“I don’t want to think,” he whispered. “I’m all done thinking.”
Newman nodded, sympathetic. “Rotor blade hit him in the head. He was one of the three they picked up. He was sitting opposite Bamford.”
“Five and three,” Jodie said quietly. “So the crew was Hobie and Kaplan, pilot and copilot, Bamford the crew chief, Soper and Tardelli the gunners, and they went down and picked up Allen and Zabrinski and Gunston.”
Newman nodded. “That’s what the files tell us.”
“So where’s Hobie?” Reacher asked.
“You’re missing something,” Newman said. “Sloppy work, Reacher, for somebody who used to be good at this.”
Reacher glanced at him. DeWitt had said something similar. He had said sloppy work for somebody who was once an *MP* major. And he had said look closer to home.
“They were MPs, right?” he said suddenly.
Newman smiled. “Who were?”
“Two of them,” Reacher said. “Two out of Allen and Zabrinski and Gunston. Two of them were arresting the other one. It was a special mission. Kaplan had put two MPs in the field the day before. His last-but-one mission, flying solo, the one I didn’t read. They were going back to pick them up, plus the guy they’d arrested.”
Newman nodded. “Correct.”
“Which was which?”
“Pete Zabrinski and Joey Gunston were the cops. Carl Allen was the bad guy.”
Reacher nodded. “What had he done?”
“The details are classified,” Newman said. “Your guess?”
“In and out like that, a quick arrest? Fragging, I suppose.”
“What’s fragging?” Jodie asked.
“Killing your officer,” Reacher said. “It happened, time to time. Some gung ho lieutenant, probably new in-country, gets all keen on advancing into dangerous positions. The grunts don’t like it, figure he’s after a medal, figure they’d rather keep their asses in one piece. So he says ‘charge,’ and somebody shoots him in the back, or throws a grenade at him, which was more efficient, because it didn’t need aiming and it disguised the whole thing better. That’s where the name comes from, fragging, fragmentation device, a grenade.”
“So was it fragging?” Jodie asked.
“The details are classified,” Newman said again. “But certainly there was fragging involved, at the end of a long and vicious career. According to the files, Carl Allen was definitely not flavor of the month.”
Jodie nodded. “But why on earth is that classified? Whatever he did, he’s been

dead thirty years. Justice is done, right?"
Reacher had stepped back to Allen's casket. He was staring down into it.
"Caution," he said. "Whoever the gung ho lieutenant was, his family was told he died a hero, fighting the enemy. If they ever find out any different, it's a scandal. And the Department of the Army doesn't like scandals."
"Correct," Newman said again.
"But where's Hobie?" Reacher asked again.
"You're still missing something. One step at a time, OK?"
"But what is it?" Reacher asked. "Where is it?"
"In the bones," Newman said.
The clock on the laboratory wall showed five-thirty. Not much more than an hour to go. Reacher took a breath and walked back around the caskets in reverse order. Gunston, Zabrinski, Allen, Soper, Bamford, Tardelli, Kaplan. Six grinning skulls and one headless bony set of shoulders stared back up at him. He did the round again. The clock ticked on. He stopped next to each casket and gripped the cold aluminum sides and leaned over and stared in, desperate to spot what he was missing. In the bones. He started each search at the top. The skull, the neck, the collarbones, the ribs, the arms, the pelvis, the legs, the feet. He took to rummaging through the boxes, lightly, delicately sorting the dry bones, looking for it. A quarter to six. Ten to six. Jodie was watching him, anxiously. He did the round for the third time, starting again with Gunston, the cop. He moved on to Zabrinski, the other cop. On to Allen, the criminal. On to Soper, the gunner. On to Bamford, the crew chief. He found it right there in Bamford's box. He closed his eyes. It was obvious. It was so obvious it was like it was painted in Day-Glo paint and lit up with a searchlight. He ran back around the other six boxes, counting, double-checking. He was right. He had found it. Six o'clock in the evening in Hawaii.
"There are seven bodies," he said. "But there are fifteen hands."

SIX O'CLOCK IN the evening in Hawaii is eleven o'clock at night in New York City, and Hobie was alone in his apartment, thirty floors above Fifth Avenue, in the bedroom, getting ready to go to sleep. Eleven o'clock was earlier than his normal bedtime. Usually he would stay awake, reading a book or watching a film on cable until one or two in the morning. But tonight he was tired. It had been a fatiguing day. There had been a certain amount of physical activity, and some mental strain.
He was sitting on the edge of his bed. It was a king-size bed, although he slept alone, and always had. There was a thick comforter in white. The walls were white and the blinds were white. Not because he had wanted any kind of artistic consistency in his decor, but because white things were always the cheapest

consistency in his decor, but because white things were always the cheapest. Whatever you were dealing with, bed linen or paint or window coverings, the white option was always priced lowest. There was no art on the walls. No photographs, no ornaments, no souvenirs, no hangings. The floor was plain oak strips. No rug.

His feet were planted squarely on the floor. His shoes were black Oxfords, polished to a high shine, planted exactly at right angles to the oak strips. He reached down with his good hand and undid the laces, one at a time. Eased the shoes off, one at a time. Pushed them together with his feet and picked them up both together and squared them away under the bed. He slid his thumb into the top of his socks, one at a time, and eased them off his feet. Shook them out and dropped them on the floor. He unknotted his tie. He always wore a tie. It was a source of great pride to him that he could knot a tie with one hand.

He picked up the tie and stood and walked barefoot to his closet. Slid the door open and worked the thin end of the tie down behind the little brass bar where it hung at night. Then he dropped his left shoulder and let his jacket slide off his arm. Used the left hand to pull it off on the right. He reached into the closet and came out with a hanger and slid the jacket onto it, one-handed. He hung it up on the rail. Then he unbuttoned his pants and dropped the zip. Stepped out of them and crouched and straightened them on the shiny oak floor. No other way for a one-armed man to fold trousers. He put the cuffs together one on top of the other and trapped them under his foot and pulled the legs straight. Then he stood up and took a second hanger from the closet and bent down and flipped the bar under the cuffs and slid it along the floor to the knees. Then he stood up again and shook the hanger and the pants fell into perfect shape. He hung them alongside the jacket.

He curled his left wrist around the starched buttonholes and undid his shirt. He opened the right cuff. He shrugged the shirt off his shoulders and used his left hand to pull it down over his hook. Then he leaned sideways and let it fall down his left arm. Trapped the tail under his foot and pulled his arm up through the sleeve. The sleeve turned inside out as it always did and his good hand squeezed through the cuff. The only modification he had been forced to make in his entire wardrobe was to move the cuff buttons on his shirts to allow them to pass over his left hand while they were still done up.

He left the shirt on the floor and pulled at the waistband of his boxers and wriggled them down over his hips. Stepped out of them and grasped the hem of his undershirt. This was the hardest part. He stretched the hem and ducked and whipped it up over his head. Changed his grip to the neck and pulled it up over his face. He pulled it down on the right and eased his hook out through the armhole. Then he cracked his left arm like a whip until the undershirt came off it

armhole. Then he cracked his left arm like a whip until the undershirt came off it and landed on the floor. He bent and scooped it up with the shirt and the boxers and the socks and carried them into the bathroom and dumped them all in the basket.

He walked naked back to the bed and sat down again on the edge. Reached across his chest with his left hand and unbuckled the heavy leather straps around his right bicep. There were three straps, and three buckles. He eased the leather corset apart and squeezed it backward off his upper arm. It creaked in the silence as it moved. The leather was thick and heavy, much thicker and heavier than any shoe leather. It was built up in shaped layers. It was brown and shiny with wear. Over the years it had molded itself like steel to his shape. It crushed the muscle as he eased it back. He fiddled the riveted straps clear of his elbow. Then he took the cold curve of the hook in his left hand and pulled gently. The cup sucked off the stump and he pulled it away. Clamped it vertically between his knees, the hook pointing downward to the floor and the cup facing upward. He leaned over to his nightstand and took a wad of tissues from a box and a can of talc from a drawer. He crushed the tissues in his left palm and pushed them down into the cup, twisting the wad like a screw to wipe away the sweat of the day. Then he shook the can of talc and powdered all around the inside. He took more tissues and polished the leather and the steel. Then he laid the whole assembly on the floor, parallel with the bed.

He wore a thin sock on the stump of his right forearm. It was there to stop the leather from chafing the skin. It was not a specialist medical device. It was a child's sock. Just tubular, no heel, the sort of thing mothers choose before their babies can walk. He bought them a dozen pairs at a time from department stores. He always bought white ones. They were cheaper. He eased the sock off the stump and shook it out and laid it next to the box of tissues on the nightstand. The stump itself was shriveled. There was some muscle left, but with no work to do it had wasted away to nothing. The bones were filed smooth on the cut ends, and the skin had been sewn down tight over them. The skin was white, and the stitches were red. They looked like Chinese writing. There was black hair growing on the bottom of the stump, because the skin there had been stretched down from the outside of his forearm.

He stood up again and walked to the bathroom. A previous owner had installed a wall of mirror above the sink. He looked at himself in it, and hated what he saw. His arm didn't bother him. It was just missing. It was his face he hated. The burns. The arm was a wound, but the face was a disfigurement. He turned half sideways so he didn't have to look at it. He cleaned his teeth and carried a bottle of lotion back to the bed. Squeezed a drop onto the skin of the stump and worked it in with his fingers. Then he placed the lotion next to the baby's sock on the

it in with his finger. Then he placed the lotion next to the baby's bed on the nightstand and rolled under the covers and clicked the light off.

"LEFT OR RIGHT?" Jodie asked. "Which did he lose?"
Reacher was standing over Bamford's bright casket, sorting through bones.
"His right," he said. "The extra hand is a right hand."
Newman moved across to Reacher's shoulder and leaned in and separated two splintered shards of bone, each one about five inches in length.
"He lost more than his hand," he said. "These are the radius and the ulna from his right arm. It was severed below the elbow, probably by a fragment of the rotor blade. There would have been enough left to make a decent stump."
Reacher picked up the bones and ran his fingers across the splintered ends.
"I don't understand, Nash," he said. "Why didn't you search the area?"
"Why should we?" Newman said back, neutrally.
"Because why just assume he survived? He was grievously injured. The impact, the severed arm? Maybe other injuries, maybe internal? Massive blood loss at least? Maybe he was burned, too. There was burning fuel everywhere. Think about it, Nash. Probability is he crawled out from the wreck, bleeding from his arteries, maybe on fire, he dragged himself twenty yards away and collapsed in the undergrowth and died. Why the hell didn't you look for him?"
"Ask yourself the question," Newman said. "Why didn't we look for him?"
Reacher stared at him. Nash Newman, one of the smartest guys he had ever known. A man so picky and precise he could take a fragment of skull an inch wide and tell you who it had belonged to, how he had lived, how he had died. A man so professional and meticulous he had run the longest-lasting and most complicated forensic investigation ever known in history and had received nothing but praise and plaudits all along the way. How could Nash Newman have made such an elementary mistake? Reacher stared at him, and then he breathed out and closed his eyes.
"Christ, Nash," he said slowly. "You *know* he survived, don't you? You actually *know* it. You didn't look for him because you know it for sure."
Newman nodded. "Correct."
"But how do you know?"
Newman glanced around the lab. Lowered his voice.
"Because he turned up afterward," he said. "He crawled into a field hospital fifty miles away and three weeks later. It's all in their medical files. He was racked with fever, serious malnutrition, terrible bums to one side of his face, no arm, maggots in the stump. He was incoherent most of the time, but they identified him by his dog tags. Then he came around after treatment and told the story, no other survivors but himself. That's why I said we knew exactly what we were

going to find up there. That's why it was such a low priority, until Leon got all agitated about it."
"So what happened?" Jodie asked. "Why all the secrecy?"
"The hospital was way north," Newman said. "Charlie was pushing south and we were retreating. The hospital was getting ready for evacuation."
"And?" Reacher asked.
"He disappeared the night before they were due to move him to Saigon."
"He disappeared?"
Newman nodded. "Just ran away. Got himself out of his cot and lit out. Never been seen since."
"Shit," Reacher said.
"I still don't understand the secrecy," Jodie said.
Newman shrugged. "Well, Reacher can explain it. More his area than mine."
Reacher still had hold of Hobie's bones. The radius and the ulna from his right arm, neatly socketed on the lower end like nature intended, savagely smashed and splintered at the upper end by a fragment of his own rotor blade. Hobie had studied the leading edge of that blade and seen that it was capable of smashing through tree limbs as thick as a man's arm. He had used that inspiration to save other men's lives, over and over again. Then that same blade had come folding and whirling down into his own cockpit and taken his hand away.
"He was a deserter," he said. "Technically, that's what he was. He was a serving soldier and he ran away. But a decision was taken not to go after him. Had to be that way. Because what could the Army do? If they caught him, what next? They would be prosecuting a guy with an exemplary record, nine hundred ninety-one combat missions, a guy who deserted after the trauma of a horrendous injury and disfigurement. They couldn't do that. The war was unpopular. You can't send a disfigured hero to Leavenworth for deserting under those circumstances. But equally you can't send out the message that you're letting deserters get away with it. That would have been a scandal of a different sort. They were still busting plenty of guys for deserting. The undeserving ones. They couldn't reveal they had different strokes for different folks. So Hobie's file was closed and sealed and classified secret. That's why the personnel record ends with the last mission. All the rest of it is in a vault, somewhere in the Pentagon."
Jodie nodded.
"And that's why he's not on the Wall," she said. "They know he's still alive."
Reacher was reluctant to put the arm bones down. He held them, and ran his fingers up and down their length. The good ends were smooth and perfect, ready to accept the subtle articulation of the human wrist.
"Have you logged his medical records?" he asked Newman. "His old X rays and

dental charts and all that stuff?"
Newman shook his head. "He's not MIA. He survived and deserted."
Reacher turned back to Bamford's casket and laid the two yellow shards gently in one comer of the rough wooden box. He shook his head. "I just can't believe it, Nash. Everything about this guy says he didn't have a deserter's mentality. His background, his record, everything. I know about deserters. I hunted plenty of them."
"He deserted," Newman said. "It's a fact, it's in the files from the hospital."
"He survived the crash," Reacher said. "I guess I can't dispute that anymore. He was in the hospital. Can't dispute that, either. But suppose it wasn't really desertion? Suppose he was just confused, or groggy from the drugs or something? Suppose he just wandered away and got lost?"
Newman shook his head. "He wasn't confused."
"But how do you know that? Loss of blood, malnutrition, fever, morphine?"
"He deserted," Newman said.
"It doesn't add up," Reacher said.
"War changes people," Newman said.
"Not that much," Reacher said back.
Newman stepped closer and lowered his voice again.
"He killed an orderly," he whispered. "The guy spotted him on the way out and tried to stop him. It's all in the file. Hobie said 'I'm not going back,' and hit the guy in the head with a bottle. Broke his skull. They put the guy in Hobie's bed and he didn't survive the trip back to Saigon. That's what the secrecy is all about, Reacher. They didn't just let him get away with deserting. They let him get away with murder."
There was total silence in the lab. The air hissed and the loamy smell of the old bones drifted. Reacher laid his hand on the shiny lip of Bamford's casket, just to keep himself standing upright.
"I don't believe it," he said.
"You should," Newman said back. "Because it's true."
"I can't tell his folks that," Reacher said. "I just can't. It would kill them."
"Hell of a secret," Jodie said. "They let him get away with murder?"
"Politics," Newman said. "The politics over there stunk to high heaven. Still do, as a matter of fact."
"Maybe he died later," Reacher said. "Maybe he got away into the jungle and died there later. He was still very sick, right?"
"How would that help you?" Newman asked.
"I could tell his folks he was dead, you know, gloss over the exact details."
"You're clutching at straws," Newman said.

“We have to go,” Jodie said. “We need to make the plane.”
“Would you run his medical records?” Reacher asked. “If I got hold of them from his family? Would you do that for me?”
There was a pause.
“I’ve already got them,” Newman said. “Leon brought them with him. The family released them to him.”
“So will you run them?” Reacher asked.
“You’re clutching at straws,” Newman said again.
Reacher turned around and pointed at the hundred cardboard boxes stacked in the alcove at the end of the room. “He could be already here, Nash.”
“He’s in New York,” Jodie said. “Don’t you see that?”
“No, I want him to be dead,” Reacher said. “I can’t go back to his folks and tell them their boy is a deserter and a murderer and has been running around all this time without contacting them. I need him to be dead.”
“But he isn’t,” Newman said.
“But he could be, right?” Reacher said. “He could have died later. Back in the jungle, someplace else, maybe faraway, on the run? Disease, malnutrition? Maybe his skeleton was found already. Will you run his records? As a favor to me?”
“Reacher, we need to go now,” Jodie said.
“Will you run them?” Reacher asked again.
“I can’t,” Newman said. “Christ, this whole thing is classified, don’t you understand that? I shouldn’t have told you anything at all. And I can’t add another name to the MIA lists now. The Department of the Army wouldn’t stand for it. We’re supposed to be reducing the numbers here, not adding to them.”
“Can’t you do it unofficially? Privately? You can do that, right? You run this place, Nash. Please? For me?”
Newman shook his head. “You’re clutching at straws, is all.”
“Please, Nash,” Reacher said.
There was silence. Then Newman sighed.
“OK, damn it,” he said. “For you, I’ll do it, I guess.”
“When?” Reacher asked.
Newman shrugged. “First thing tomorrow morning, OK?”
“Call me as soon as you’ve done it?”
“Sure, but you’re wasting your time. Number?”
“Use the mobile,” Jodie said.
She recited the number. Newman wrote it on the cuff of his lab coat.
“Thanks, Nash,” Reacher said. “I really appreciate this.”
“Waste of time,” Newman said again.

“We need to go,” Jodie called.
Reacher nodded vaguely and they all moved toward the plain door in the cinder-block wall. Lieutenant Simon was waiting on the other side of it with the offer of a ride around the perimeter road to the passenger terminals.

15

FIRST-CLASS OR NOT, the flight back was miserable. It was the same plane, going east to New York along the second leg of a giant triangle. It was cleaned and perfumed and checked and refueled, and it had a new crew on board. Reacher and Jodie were in the same seats they had left four hours earlier. Reacher took the window again, but it felt different. It was still two and a half times as wide as normal, still sumptuously upholstered in leather and sheepskin, but he took no pleasure in sitting in it again.

The lights were dimmed, to represent night. They had taken off into an outrageous tropical sunset boiling away beyond the islands, and then they had turned away to fly toward darkness. The engines settled to a muted hiss. The flight attendants were quiet and unobtrusive. There was only one other passenger in the cabin. He was sitting two rows ahead, across the aisle. He was a tall, spare man, dressed in a seersucker short-sleeve shirt printed with pale stripes. His right forearm was laid gently on the arm of the chair, and his hand hung down, limp and relaxed. His eyes were closed.

"How tall is he?" Jodie whispered.

Reacher leaned over and glanced ahead. "Maybe six one."

"Same as Victor Hobie," she said. "Remember the file?"

Reacher nodded. Glanced diagonally across at the pale forearm resting along the seat. The guy was thin, and he could see the prominent knob of bone at the wrist, standing out in the dimness. There was slim muscle and freckled skin and bleached hair. The radius bone was visible, running all the way back to the elbow. Hobie had left six inches of his radius bone behind at the crash site. Reacher counted with his eyes. up from the guy's wrist joint. Six inches took him halfway to the elbow.

"About half and half, right?" Jodie said.

"A little more than half," Reacher said. "The stump would have needed trimming. They'd have filed it down where it was splintered, I guess. If he survived."

The guy two rows ahead turned sleepily and pulled his arm in close to his body and out of sight, like he knew they were talking about it.

"He survived," Jodie said. "He's in New York, trying to stay hidden."

Reacher leaned the other way and rested his forehead on the cold plastic of the porthole.

"I would have bet my life he isn't," he said.

He kept his eyes open, but there was nothing to see out of the window. Just black

He kept his eyes open, but there was nothing to see out of the window. Just black night sky all the way down to the black night ocean, seven miles below.
"Why does it bother you so much?" she asked, in the quiet.
He turned forward and stared at the empty seat six feet in front of him.
"Lots of reasons," he said.
"Like what?"
He shrugged. "Like everything, like a great big depressing spiral. It was a professional call. My gut told me something, and it looks like I was wrong."
She laid her hand gently on his forearm, where the muscle narrowed a little above his wrist. "Being wrong isn't the end of the world."
He shook his head. "Sometimes it isn't, sometimes it is. Depends on the issue, right? Somebody asks me who's going to win the Series, and I say the Yankees, that doesn't matter, does it? Because how can I know stuff like that? But suppose I was a sportswriter who was supposed to know stuff like that? Or a professional gambler? Suppose baseball was my life? Then it's the end of the world if I start to screw up."
"So what are you saying?"
"I'm saying judgments like that are my life. It's what I'm supposed to be good at. I used to be good at it. I could always depend on being right."
"But you had nothing to go on."
"Bullshit, Jodie. I had a whole lot to go on. A whole lot more than I sometimes used to have. I met with the guy's folks, I read his letters, I talked with his old friend, I saw his record, I talked with his old comrade-in-arms, and everything told me this was a guy who definitely could not behave the way he clearly did behave. So I was just plain wrong, and that bums me up, because where does it leave me now?"
"In what sense?"
"I've got to tell the Hobies," he said. "It'll kill them stone dead. You should have met them. They worshiped that boy. They worshiped the military, the patriotism of it all, serving your country, the whole damn thing. Now I've got to walk in there and tell them their boy is a murderer and a deserter. And a cruel son who left them twisting in the wind for thirty long years. I'll be walking in there and killing them stone dead, Jodie. I should call ahead for an ambulance."
He lapsed into silence and turned back to the black porthole.
"And?" she said.
He turned back to face her. "And the future. What am I going to do? I've got a house, I need a job. What kind of a job? I can't put myself about as an investigator anymore, not if I've started getting things completely ass-backward all of a sudden. The timing is wonderful, right? My professional capabilities have turned to mush right at the exact time I need to find work. I should go back

to the Keys and dig pools the rest of my life."
"You're being too hard on yourself. It was a feeling, was all. A gut feeling that turned out wrong."
"Gut feelings should turn out right," he said. "Mine always did before. I could tell you about a dozen times when I stuck to gut feelings, no other reason than I felt them. They saved my life, time to time."
She nodded, without speaking.
"And statistically I should have been right," he said. "You know how many men were officially unaccounted for after 'Nam? Only about five. Twenty-two hundred missing, but they're dead, we all know that. Eventually Nash will find them all, and tick them all off. But there were five guys left we can't categorize. Three of them changed sides and stayed on in the villages afterward, gone native. One disappeared in Thailand. One of them was living in a hut under a bridge in Bangkok. Five loose ends out of a million men, and Victor Hobie is one of them, and I was wrong about him."
"But you weren't really wrong," she said. "You were judging the old Victor Hobie, is all. All that stuff was about Victor Hobie before the war and before the crash. War changes people. The only witness to the change was DeWitt, and he went out of his way not to notice it."
He shook his head again. "I took that into account, or at least I tried to. I didn't figure it could change him that much."
"Maybe the crash did it," she said. "Think about it, Reacher. What was he, twenty-one years old? Twenty-two, something like that? Seven people died, and maybe he felt responsible. He was the captain of the ship, right? And he was disfigured. He lost his arm, and he was probably burned, too. That's a big trauma for a young guy, physical disfigurement, right? And then in the field hospital, he was probably woozy with drugs, terrified of going back."
"They wouldn't have sent him back to combat," Reacher said.
Jodie nodded. "Yes, but maybe he wasn't thinking straight. The morphine, it's like being high, right? Maybe he thought they were going to send him straight back. Maybe he thought they were going to punish him for losing the helicopter. We just don't know his mental state at the time. So he tried to get away, and he hit the orderly on the head. Then later he woke up to what he'd done. Probably felt terrible about it. That was my gut feeling, all along. He's hiding out, because of a guilty secret. He should have turned himself in, because nobody was going to convict him of anything. The mitigating circumstances were too obvious. But he hid out, and the longer it went on, the worse it got. It kind of snowballed."
"Still makes me wrong," he said. "You've just described an irrational guy. Panicky, unrealistic, a little hysterical. I had him down as a plodder. Very sane,

very rational, very normal. I'm losing my touch."
The giant plane hissed on imperceptibly. Six hundred miles an hour through the thin air of altitude, and it felt like it was suspended immobile. A spacious pastel coccoon, hanging there seven miles up in the night sky, going nowhere at all.
"So what are you going to do?" she asked.
"About what?"
"The future?"
He shrugged again. "I don't know."
"What about the Hobies?"
"I don't know," he said again.
"You could try to find him," she said. "You know, convince him no action would be taken now. Talk some sense into him. Maybe you could get him to meet with his folks again."
"How could I find him? The way I feel right now, I couldn't find the nose on my face. And you're so keen on making me feel better, you're forgetting something."
"What?"
"He doesn't *want* to be found. Like you figured, he wants to stay hidden. Even if he started out real confused about it, he evidently got the taste for it later. He had Costello killed, Jodie. He sent people after us. So he could stay hidden."
Then the stewardess dimmed the cabin lights right down to darkness, and Reacher gave up and laid his seat back and tried to sleep, with his last thought uppermost in his mind: *Victor Hobie had Costello killed, so he could stay hidden.*

THIRTY FLOORS ABOVE Fifth Avenue, he woke up just after six o'clock in the morning, which for him was about normal, depending on how bad the fire dream had been. Thirty years is nearly eleven thousand days, and eleven thousand days have eleven thousand nights attached to them, and during every single one of those nights he had dreamed about fire. The cockpit broke away from the tail section, and the treetops flipped it backward. The fracture in the airframe split the fuel tank. The fuel hurled itself out. He saw it coming at him every night, in appalling slow motion. It gleamed and shimmered in the gray jungle air. It was liquid and globular and formed itself into solid shapes like giant distorted raindrops. They twisted and changed and grew, like living things floating slowly through the air. The light caught them and made them strange and beautiful. There were rainbows in them. They got to him before the rotor blade hit his arm. Every night he turned his head in the exact same convulsive jerk, but every night they still got to him. They splashed on his face. The liquid

was warm. It puzzled him. It looked like water. Water should be cold. He should feel the thrill of cold. But it was warm. It was sticky. Thicker than water. It smelled. A chemical smell. It splashed across the left side of his head. It was in his hair. It plastered the hair to his forehead and ran slowly down into his eye. Then he turned his head back, and he saw that the air was on fire. There were fingers of flame pointing down the floating rivulets of fuel like accusations. Then the fingers were mouths. They were eating the floating liquid shapes. They ate fast, and they left the shapes bigger and blazing with heat. Then the separate globules in the air were bursting into flames ahead of each other. There was no connection anymore. No sequence. They were just exploding. He jerked his head down eleven thousand separate times, but the fire always hit him. It smelled hot, like burning, but it felt cold, like ice. A sudden ice-cold shock on the side of his face, in his hair. Then the black shape of the rotor blade, arcing down. It broke against the chest of the guy called Bamford and a fragment smacked him edge-on, precisely halfway along the length of his forearm.

He saw his hand come off. He saw it in detail. That part was never in the dream, because the dream was about fire, and he didn't need to dream about his hand coming off, because he could remember seeing it happen. The edge of the blade had a slim aerodynamic profile, and it was dull black. It punched through the bones of his arm and stopped dead against his thigh, its energy already expended. His forearm just fell in two. His watch was still strapped to the wrist. The hand and the wrist fell to the floor. He raised the severed forearm and touched his face with it, to try and find out why the skin up there felt so cold but smelled so hot.

He realized some time later that action had saved his life. When he could think straight again, he understood what he had done. The intense flames had cauterized his open forearm. The heat had seared the exposed flesh and sealed the arteries. If he hadn't touched his burning face with it, he would have bled to death. It was a triumph. Even in extreme danger and confusion, he had done the right thing. The smart thing. He was a survivor. It gave him a deadly assurance he had never lost.

He stayed conscious for about twenty minutes. He did what he had to do inside the cockpit and crawled away from the wreck. He knew nobody was crawling with him. He made it into the undergrowth and kept on going. He was on his knees, using his remaining hand ahead of him, walking on the knuckles like an ape. He ducked his head to the ground and jammed his burned skin into the earth. Then the agony started. He survived twenty minutes of it and collapsed.

He remembered almost nothing of the next three weeks. He didn't know where he went, or what he ate, or what he drank. He had brief flashes of clarity, which

were worse than not remembering. He was covered in leeches. His burned skin came off and the flesh underneath stank of rot and decay. There were things living and crawling in his raw stump. Then he was in the hospital. One morning he woke up floating on a cloud of morphine. It felt better than anything had felt in his whole life. But he pretended to be in agony throughout. That way, they would postpone sending him back.

They applied burn dressings to his face. They cleaned the maggots out of his wound. Years later, he realized the maggots had saved his life, too. He read a report about new medical research. Maggots were being used in a revolutionary new treatment for gangrene. Their tireless eating consumed the gangrenous flesh before the rot could spread. Experiments had proven successful. He had smiled. He knew.

The evacuation of the hospital caught him by surprise. They hadn't told him. He overheard the orderlies making plans for the morning. He got out immediately. There were no guards. Just an orderly, by chance loitering on the perimeter. The orderly cost him a precious bottle of water broken across his head, but didn't delay him by more than a second.

His long journey home started right there, a yard into the undergrowth outside the hospital fence. First task was to retrieve his money. It was buried fifty miles away, in a secret spot outside his last base camp, inside a coffin. The coffin was just a lucky chance. It had been the only large receptacle he could lay his hands on at the time, but later it would prove to be a stroke of absolute genius. The money was all in hundreds and fifties and twenties and tens, and there was a hundred and seventy pounds of it. A plausible weight to find in a coffin. Just under two million dollars.

By then the base camp was abandoned and far behind enemy lines. But he got himself there, and faced the first of his many difficulties. How does a sick one-armed man dig up a coffin? At first, with blind perseverance. Then later, with help. He had already shifted most of the earth when he was discovered. The coffin lid was plainly visible, lying in the shallow grave. The VC patrol crashed in on him out of the trees, and he expected to die. But he didn't. Instead, he made a discovery. It ranked with the other great discoveries he made in his life. The VC stood back, fearful and muttering and uncertain. He realized they didn't know who he was. They didn't know *what* he was. The terrible bums robbed him of his identity. He was wearing a torn and filthy hospital night-shirt. He didn't look American. He didn't look like anything. He didn't look human. He learned that the combination of his terrible looks and his wild behavior and the coffin had an effect on anybody who saw him. Distant atavistic fears of death and corpses and madness made them passive. He learned in an instant if he was

prepared to act like a madman and cling to his coffin, these people would do anything for him. Their ancient superstitions worked in his favor. The VC patrol completed the excavation for him and loaded the coffin onto a buffalo cart. He sat up high on top of it and raved and gibbered and pointed west and they took him a hundred miles toward Cambodia.

Vietnam is a narrow country, side to side. He was passed from group to group and was in Cambodia within four days. They fed him rice and gave him water to drink and clothed him in black pajamas, to tame him and assuage their primitive fears. Then Cambodians took him onward. He bounced and jabbered like a monkey and pointed west, west, west. Two months later, he was in Thailand. The Cambodians manhandled the coffin over the border and turned and ran.

Thailand was different. When he passed the border, it was like stepping out of the Stone Age. There were roads, and vehicles. The people were different. More modern. But they had the same old fears deep down inside. The babbling scarred man with the coffin was an object for wary pity and concern. He was not a threat. He got rides on old Chevrolet pickups and in old Peugeot trucks left over from the French days and within two weeks he found himself washed up with all the other Far Eastern flotsam in the sewer they called Bangkok.

He lived in Bangkok for a year. He reburied the coffin in the yard behind the shack he rented, working furiously all through his first night with a black-market entrenching tool stolen from the U.S. Army. He could manage an entrenching tool. It was designed to be used one-handed, while the other hand held a rifle. Once his money was safe again, he went looking for doctors. There was a large supply in Bangkok. Gin-soaked remnants of an empire, fired from every other job they ever had, but reasonably competent on the days they were sober. There wasn't much they could do with his face. A surgeon rebuilt his eyelid so it would almost close, and that was it. But they were thorough with his arm. They opened the wound again and filed the bones round and smooth. They stitched the muscle down and folded the skin over tight and sealed it all back up. They told him to let it heal for a month, and then they sent him to a man who built false limbs.

The man offered him a choice of styles. They all involved the same corset to be worn around the bicep, the same straps, the same cup molded to the exact contours of his stump. But there were different appendages. There was a wooden hand, carved with great skill and painted by his daughter. There was a three-pronged thing like some kind of a gardening tool. But he chose the simple hook. It appealed to him, though he couldn't explain why. The man forged it from stainless steel and polished it for a week. He welded it to a funnel-shaped steel sheet and built the sheet into the heavy leather cup. He carved a wooden replica of the stump and beat the leather into shape over it, and then he soaked it in

resins to make it stiff. He sewed the corset and attached the straps and buckles. He fitted it carefully and charged five hundred American dollars for it.
He lived out the year in Bangkok. At first the hook chafed and was clumsy and uncontrollable. But he got better with it. With practice, he got along. By the time he dug up the coffin again and booked passage to San Francisco on a tramp steamer, he had forgotten all about ever having two hands. It was his face that continued to bother him.
He landed in California and retrieved the coffin from the cargo sheds and used a small portion of its contents to buy a used station wagon. A trio of frightened longshoremen loaded the coffin inside and he drove it cross-country all the way to New York City, and twenty-nine years later he was still there, with the Bangkok craftsman's handiwork lying on the floor beside his bed, where it had lain every night for the last eleven thousand nights.
He rolled over onto his front and reached down with his left hand and picked it up. Sat up in bed and laid it across his knees and reached out to take the baby's sock from his nightstand. Ten past six in the morning. Another day of his life.

WILLIAM CURRY WOKE up at six-fifteen. It was an old habit from working the day shift on the detective squads. He had inherited the lease on his grandmother's apartment two floors above Beekman Street. It wasn't a great apartment, but it was cheap, and it was convenient for most of the precinct houses below Canal. So he had moved in after his divorce and stayed there after his retirement. His police pension covered the rent and the utilities and the lease on his one-room office on Fletcher. So the income from his fledgling private bureau had to cover his food and his alimony. And then when he got established and built it up bigger, it was supposed to make him rich.
Six-fifteen in the morning, the apartment was cool. It was shaded from the early sun by taller buildings nearby. He put his feet on the linoleum and stood up and stretched. Went to the kitchen counter and set the coffee going. Headed to the bathroom and washed up. It was a routine that had always gotten him to work by seven o'clock, and he stuck to it.
He came back to the closet with coffee in his hand and stood there with the door open, looking at what was on the rail. As a cop, he had always been a pants-and-jacket type of guy. Gray flannels, checked sportcoat. He had favored tweed, although he wasn't strictly Irish. In the summer, he had tried linen jackets, but they wrinkled too easily and he had settled on thin polyester blends. But none of those outfits was going to do on a day when he had to show up somewhere looking like David Forster, high-priced attorney. He was going to have to use his wedding suit.

It was a plain black Brooks Brothers, bought for family weddings and christenings and funerals. It was fifteen years old, and being Brooks Brothers didn't look a whole lot different from contemporary items. It was a little loose on him, because losing his wife's cooking had brought his weight down in a hurry. The pants were a little wide by East Village standards, but that was OK because he planned on wearing two ankle holsters. William Curry was a guy who believed in being prepared. David Forster had said *probably won't be anything involved at all*, and if it worked out that way he would be happy enough, but a twenty-year man from the NYPD's worst years tends to get cautious when he hears a promise like that. So he planned on using both ankle holsters and putting his big .357 in the small of his back.

He put the suit in a plastic cover he had picked up somewhere and added a white shirt and his quietest tie. He threaded the .357 holster onto a black leather belt and put it in a bag with the two ankle holsters. He put three handguns in his briefcase, the .357 long-barreled Magnum and two .38 snub-nosed Smith and Wessons for the ankles. He sorted twelve rounds for each gun into a box and packed it beside the guns. He stuffed a black sock into each of his black shoes and stowed them with the holsters. He figured he would get changed after an early lunch. No point in wearing the stuff all morning and showing up looking like a limp rag.

He locked up the apartment and walked south to his office on Fletcher, carrying his luggage, stopping only to get a muffin, banana and walnut, reduced fat.

MARILYN STONE WOKE up at seven o'clock. She was bleary-eyed and tired. They had been kept out of the bathroom until well after midnight. It had to be cleaned. The thickset guy in the dark suit did it. He came out in a bad temper and made them wait until the floor dried. They sat in the dark and the silence, numb and cold and hungry, too sickened to think about asking for something to eat. Tony made Marilyn plump up the sofa pillows. She guessed he planned to sleep there. Bending over in her short dress and preparing his bed was a humiliation. She patted the pillows into place while he smiled at her.

The bathroom was cold. It was damp everywhere and smelled of disinfectant. The towels had been folded and stacked next to the sink. She put them in two piles on the floor and she and Chester curled up on them without a word. Beyond the door, the office was silent. She didn't expect to sleep. But she must have, because she awoke with a clear sense of a new day beginning.

There were sounds in the office. She had rinsed her face and was standing upright when the thickset guy brought coffee. She took her mug without a word and he left Chester's on the ledge under the mirror. Chester was still on the floor,

not asleep, just lying there inert. The guy stepped right over him on his way out.
“Nearly over,” she said.
“Just starting, you mean,” Chester said back. “Where do we go next? Where do we go tonight?”
She was going to say *home, thank God,* but then she remembered he’d already realized that after about two-thirty they would have no home.
“A hotel, I guess,” she said.
“They took my credit cards.”
Then he went quiet. She looked at him. “What?”
“It’s never going to be over,” he said. “Don’t you see that? We’re witnesses. To what they did to those cops. And Sheryl. How can they just let us walk away?”
She nodded, a small, vague movement of her head, and looked down at him with disappointment. She was disappointed because he finally understood. Now he was going to be worried and frantic all day, and that would just make it harder.

IT TOOK FIVE minutes to get the knot in the necktie neat, and then he slipped his jacket on. Dressing was the exact reverse of undressing, which meant the shoes came last. He could tie laces just about as fast as a two-handed person. The trick was to trap the loose end under the hook against the floor.
Then he started in the bathroom. He rammed all the dirty laundry into a pillowcase and left it by the apartment door. He stripped the bed and balled the linen into another pillowcase. He put all the personal items he could find into a supermarket carrier. He emptied his closet into a garment bag. He propped the apartment door open and carried the pillowcases and the carrier to the refuse chute. Dropped them all down and clanged the slot closed after them. Dragged the garment bag out into the hallway and locked up the apartment and put the keys in an envelope from his pocket.
He detoured to the concierge’s desk and left the envelope of keys for the real-estate guy. Used the stairway to the parking garage and carried the garment bag over to the Cadillac. He locked it into the trunk and walked around to the driver’s door. Slid inside and leaned over with his left hand and fired it up. Squealed around the garage and up into the daylight. He drove south on Fifth, carefully averting his eyes until he was clear of the park and safe in the bustling canyons of Midtown.
He leased three bays under the World Trade Center, but the Suburban was gone, and the Tahoe was gone, so they were all empty when he arrived. He put the Cadillac in the middle slot and left the garment bag in the trunk. He figured he would drive the Cadillac to LaGuardia and abandon it in the long-term parking lot. Then he would take a cab to JFK, carrying the bag, looking like any other

transfer passenger in a hurry. The car would sit there until the weeds grew up under it, and if anybody ever got suspicious they would comb through the LaGuardia manifests, not JFK's. It meant writing off the Cadillac along with the lease on the offices, but he was always comfortable about spending money when he got value for it, and saving his life was about the best value he could think of getting.

He used the express elevator from the garage and was in his brass-and-oak reception area ninety seconds later. Tony was behind the chest-high counter, drinking coffee, looking tired.

"Boat?" Hobie asked him.

Tony nodded. "It's at the broker's. They'll wire the money. They want to replace the rail, where that asshole damaged it with the cleaver. I told them OK, just deduct it from the proceeds."

Hobie nodded back. "What else?"

Tony smiled, at an apparent irony. "We got more money to move. The first interest payment just came in from the Stone account. Eleven thousand dollars, right on time. Conscientious little asshole, isn't he?"

Hobie smiled back. "Robbing Peter to pay Paul, only now Peter and Paul are the same damn guy. Wire it down to the islands at start of business, OK?"

Tony nodded and read a note. "Simon called from Hawaii again. They made the plane. Right now they're over the Grand Canyon somewhere."

"Has Newman found it yet?" Hobie asked.

Tony shook his head. "Not yet. He's going to start looking this morning. Reacher pushed him into doing it. Sounds like a smart guy."

"Not smart enough," Hobie said. "Hawaii's five hours behind, right?"

"It'll be this afternoon. Call it he starts at nine, spends a couple of hours looking, that's four o'clock our time. We'll be out of here."

Hobie smiled again. "I told you it would work out. Didn't I tell you it would work out? Didn't I tell you to relax and let me do the thinking?"

REACHER WOKE UP at seven o'clock on his watch, which was still set to St. Louis time as far as he could remember, which made it three o'clock in the morning back in Hawaii, and six in Arizona or Colorado or wherever they were seven miles above, and already eight in New York. He stretched in his seat and stood up and stepped over Jodie's feet. She was curled in her chair, and a stewardess had covered her with a thin plaid blanket. She was fast asleep, breathing slow, her hair over her face. He stood in the aisle for a moment and watched her sleep. Then he went for a walk.

He walked through business class, and on into coach. The lights were dimmed and it got more crowded the farther back he walked. The tiny seats were packed

and it got more crowded the farther back he walked. The tiny seats were packed with people huddled under blankets. There was a smell of dirty clothes. He walked right down to the rear of the plane and looped around through the galley past a quiet huddle of cabin staff leaning on the aluminum lockers. He walked back up the other aisle, through coach, into business class. He paused there a second and scanned the passengers. There were men and women in suits, jackets discarded, ties pulled down. There were laptop computers open. Briefcases stood on unoccupied seats, bulging with folders with plastic covers and comb bindings. Reading lights were focused on tray tables. Some of the people were still working, late in the night or early in the morning, depending on where you measured it from.

He guessed these were middle-ranking people. A long way from the bottom, but nowhere near the top. In Army terms, these were the majors and the colonels. They were the civilian equivalents of himself. He had finished a major, and might be a colonel now if he'd stayed in uniform. He leaned on a bulkhead and looked at the backs of the bent heads and thought *Leon made me, and now he's changed me.* Leon had boosted his career. He hadn't created it, but he had made it what it became. There was no doubt about that. Then the career ended and the drifting began, and now the drifting was ended, too, because of Leon. Not just because of Jodie. Because of Leon's last will and testament. The old guy had bequeathed him the house, and the bequest had sat there like a time bomb, waiting to anchor him. Because the vague promise was enough to do it. Before, settling down had seemed theoretical. It was a distant country he knew he would never visit. The journey there was too long to manage. The fare was too high. The sheer difficulty of insinuating himself into an alien lifestyle was impossibly great. But Leon's bequest had kidnapped him. Leon had kidnapped him and dumped him right on the border of that distant country. Now his nose was pressed right up against the fence. He could see life waiting for him on the other side. Suddenly it seemed insane to turn back and hike the impossible distance in the other direction. That would turn drifting into a conscious choice, and conscious choice would turn drifting into something else completely. The whole point of drifting was happy, passive acceptance of no alternatives. Having alternatives ruined it. And Leon had handed him a massive alternative. It sat there, still and amiable above the rolling Hudson, waiting for him. Leon must have smiled as he sat and wrote out that provision. He must have grinned and thought *let's see how you get out of this one, Reacher.*

He stared at the laptops and the comb-bound folders and winced inside. How was he going to cross the border of the distant country without getting issued with all this stuff? The suits and the ties and the black plastic battery-driven devices? The lizard-skin cases and the memorandums from the main office? He

devices? The lizard-skin cases and the memorandums from the main office? He shuddered and found himself paralyzed against the bulkhead, panicking, not breathing, completely unable to move. He recalled a day not more than a year ago, stepping out of a truck at a crossroads near a town he had never heard of in a state he had never been. He had waved the driver away and thrust his hands deep in his pockets and started walking, with a million miles behind him and a million miles ahead of him. The sun was shining and the dust was kicking up off his feet as he walked and he had smiled with the joy of being alone with absolutely no idea where he was headed.

But he also recalled a day nine months after that. Realizing he was running out of money, thinking hard. The cheapest motels still required some small amount of dollars. The cheapest diners, likewise. He had taken the job in the Keys, intending to work a couple of weeks. Then he had taken the evening job, too, and he was still working both of them when Costello came calling three whole months later. So the reality was that drifting was already over. *He was already a working* man. No point in denying it. Now it was just a question of where and how much and for who. He smiled. *Like* prostitution, he thought. No going back. He relaxed a little and pushed off the bulkhead and padded back through to first class.

The guy with the striped shirt and the arms the same length as Victor Hobie's was awake and watching him. He nodded a greeting. Reacher nodded back and headed for the bathroom. Jodie was awake when he got back to his seat. She was sitting up straight, combing her hair with her fingers.

"Hi, Reacher," she said.

"Hey, Jodie," he said back.

He bent and kissed her on the lips. Stepped over her feet and sat down.

"Feel OK?" he asked.

She ducked her head in a figure eight to put her hair behind her shoulders.

"Not bad. Not bad at all. Better than I thought I would. Where did you go?"

"I took a walk," he said. "I went back to see how the other half lives."

"No, you were thinking. I noticed that about you fifteen years ago. You always go walking when you have something to think about."

"I do?" he said, surprised. "I didn't know that."

"Of course you do," she said. "I noticed it. I used to watch every detail about you. I was in love with you, remember?"

"What else do I do?"

"You clench your left hand when you're angry or tense. You keep your right hand loose, probably from weapons training. When you're bored, you play music in your head. I could see it in your fingers, like you're playing along on a piano or something. The tip of your nose moves a little bit when you talk."

plane or something. The tip of your nose moves a little bit when you talk.
"It does?"
"Sure it does," she said. "What were you thinking about?"
He shrugged.
"This and that," he said.
"The house, right?" she said. "It's bothering you, isn't it? And me. Me and the house, tying you down, like that guy in the book, Gulliver? You know that book?"
He smiled. "He's a guy gets captured by tiny little people when he's asleep. They peg him down flat with hundreds of tiny little ropes."
"You feel that way?"
He paused a beat. "Not about you."
But the pause had been a fraction of a second too long. She nodded.
"It's different than being alone, right?" she said. "I know, I was married. Somebody else to take into account all the time? Somebody to worry about?"
He smiled. "I'll get used to it."
She smiled back. "And there's the house, right?"
He shrugged. "Feels weird."
"Well, that's between you and Leon," she said. "I want you to know I'm not putting demands on you, either way. About anything. It's your life, and your house. You should do exactly what you want, no pressure."
He nodded. Said nothing.
"So you going to look for Hobie?"
He shrugged again. "Maybe. But it's a hell of a task."
"Bound to be angles," she said. "Medical records and things? He must have a prosthesis. And if he's burned, too, there'll be records of that. And you wouldn't miss him in the street, would you? A one-armed man, all burned up?"
He nodded. "Or I could just wait for him to find me. I could just hang out in Garrison until he sends his boys back."
Then he turned to the window and stared out at his pale reflection against the darkness and realized *I'm just accepting he's alive. I'm just accepting I was wrong.* He turned back to Jodie.
"Will you give me the mobile? Can you manage without it today? In case Nash finds something and calls me? I want to hear right away, if he does."
She held his gaze for a long moment, and then she nodded. Leaned down and unzipped her carry-on. Took out the phone and handed it to him.
"Good luck," she said.
He nodded and put the phone in his pocket.
"I never used to need luck," he said.

NASH NEWMAN DID not wait until nine o'clock in the morning to start the search. He was a meticulous man, attentive to tiny detail as much in his ethics as in his professional speciality. This was an unofficial search, undertaken out of compassion for a troubled friend, so it couldn't be done on company time. A private matter had to be settled privately.

So he got out of bed at six, watching the faint red glow of tropical dawn starting beyond the mountains. He made coffee and dressed. By six-thirty he was in his office. He figured he would give it two hours. Then he would have breakfast in the mess and start his proper work on time at nine.

He rolled open a desk drawer and lifted out Victor Hobie's medical records. Leon Garber had assembled them after patient inquiries in doctors' and dentists' offices in Putnam County. He had bundled them into an old military police folder and secured it shut with an old canvas strap. The strap had been red, but age had faded it to dusty pink. There was a fiddly metal buckle.

He undid the buckle. Opened the folder. The top sheet was a release signed by both the Hobie parents in April. Underneath it was ancient history. He had scanned thousands of files similar to this one, and he could effortlessly place the boys they referred to in terms of their age, their geographic location, their parents' income, their ability at sports, all the numerous factors that affect a medical history. Age and location worked together. A new dental treatment might start out in California and sweep the country like a fashion, so the thirteen-year-old boy getting it in Des Moines had to have been born five years later than the thirteen-year-old boy getting it in Los Angleles. Their parents' income dictated whether they got it at all. The high school football stars had treatment for torn shoulders, the softball players had cracked wrists, the swimmers had chronic ear infections.

Victor Truman Hobie had very little at all. Newman read between the lines and pictured a healthy boy, properly fed, conscientiously cared for by dutiful parents. His health had been good. There had been colds and flu, and a bout of bronchitis at the age of eight. No accidents. No broken bones. Dental treatment had been very thorough. The boy had grown up through the era of aggressive dentistry. In Newman's experience, it was absolutely typical of any he had seen from the New York metropolitan area in the fifties and early sixties. Dentistry through that era consisted of a war on cavities. Cavities had to be hunted down. They were hunted with powerful X rays, and when they were found they were enlarged with the drill and filled with amalgam. The result was a lot of trips to the dentist's office, which no doubt had been miserable for the young Victor Hobie, but from Newman's point of view the process had left him with a thick

sheaf of films of the boy's mouth. They were good enough and clear enough and numerous enough to be potentially definitive.
He stacked the films and carried them out into the corridor. Unlocked the plain door in the cinder-block wall and walked past the aluminum caskets to the alcove at the far end. There was a computer terminal on a wide shelf, out of sight around a corner. He booted it up and clicked on the search menu. The screen scrolled down and revealed a detailed questionnaire.
Filling out the questionnaire was a matter of simple logic. He clicked on ALL BONES and entered NO CHILDHOOD BREAKS, POTENTIAL ADULT BREAKS. The kid didn't break his leg playing football in high school, but he might have broken it later in a training accident. Service medical records were sometimes lost. He spent a lot of time on the dental section of the questionnaire. He entered a full description of each tooth as last recorded. He marked the filled cavities, and against each good tooth he entered POTENTIAL CAVITY. It was the only way to prevent mistakes. Simple logic. A good tooth can go bad later and need treatment, but a filled cavity can't ever disappear. He stared at the X rays and against SPACING he entered EVEN, and against SIZE he entered EVEN again. The rest of the questionnaire he left blank. Some diseases show up in the skeleton, but not colds and flu and bronchitis.
He reviewed his work and at seven o'clock exactly he hit SEARCH. The hard disk whirred and chattered in the morning silence and the software started its patient journey through the database.

THEY LANDED TIN minutes ahead of schedule, just before the peak of noon, East Coast time. They came in low over the glittering waters of Jamaica Bay and put down facing east before turning back and taxiing slowly to the terminal. Jodie reset her watch and was on her feet before the plane stopped moving, which was a transgression they don't chide you for in first class.
"Let's go," she said. "I'm real tight for time."
They were lined up by the door before it opened. Reacher carried her bag out into the jetway and she hurried ahead of him all the way through the terminal and outside. The Lincoln Navigator was still there in the short-term lot, big and black and obvious, and it cost fifty-eight of Rutter's dollars to drive it out.
"Do I have time for a shower?" she asked herself.
Reacher put his comment into hustling faster than he should along the Van Wyck. The Long Island Expressway was moving freely west to the tunnel. They were in Manhattan within twenty minutes of touching down and heading south on Broadway near her place within thirty.
"I'm still going to check it out," he told her. "Shower or no shower."

She nodded. Being back in the city had brought back the worry.
“OK, but be quick.”
He limited it to stopping on the street outside her door and making a visual check of the lobby. Nobody there. They dumped the car and went up to five and down the fire stairs to four. The building was quiet and deserted. The apartment was empty and undisturbed. The Mondrian copy glowed in the bright daylight. Twelve-thirty in the afternoon.
“Ten minutes,” she said. “Then you can drive me to the office, OK?”
“How will you get to the meeting?”
“We have a driver,” she said. “He’ll take me.”
She ran through the living room to the bedroom, shedding clothes as she went.
“You need to eat?” Reacher called after her.
“No time,” she called back.
She spent five minutes in the shower and five minutes in the closet. She came out with a charcoal dress and a matching jacket.
“Find my briefcase, OK?” she yelled.
She combed her hair and used a hair dryer on it. Limited her makeup to a touch of eyeliner and lipstick. Checked herself in the mirror and ran back to the living room. He had her briefcase waiting for her. He carried it down to the car.
“Take my keys,” she said. “Then you can get back in. I’ll call you from the office and you can come pick me up.”
It took seven minutes to get opposite the little plaza outside her building. She slid out of the car at five minutes to one.
“Good luck,” Reacher called after her. “Give them hell.”
She waved to him and skipped across to the revolving door. The security guys saw her coming and nodded her through to the elevator bank. She was upstairs in her office before one o’clock. Her secretary followed her inside with a thin file in his hand.
“There you go,” he said, ceremoniously.
She opened it up and flipped through eight sheets of paper.
“Hell is this?” she said.
“They were thrilled about it at the partners’ meeting,” the guy said.
She went back through the pages in reverse order. “I don’t see why. I never heard of either of these corporations and the amount is trivial.”
“That’s not the point, though, is it?” the guy said.
She looked at him. “So what is the point?”
“It’s the creditor who hired you,” he said. “Not the guy who owes all the money. It’s a preemptive move, isn’t it? Because word is getting around. The creditor knows if you get alongside the guy who owes him money, you can cause him a big problem. So he hired you first, to keep that from happening. It means you’re

big problem. So he hired you first, to keep that from happening. It means you're famous. That's what the partners are thrilled about. You're a big star now, Mrs. Jacob."

16

REACHER DROVE SLOWLY back to lower Broadway. He bumped the big car down the ramp to the garage. Parked it in Jodie's slot and locked it. He didn't go upstairs to the apartment. He walked back up the ramp to the street and headed north in the sun to the espresso bar. He had the counter guy put four shots in a cardboard cup and sat at the chromium table Jodie had used when he was checking the apartment the night he had gotten back from Brighton. He had walked back up Broadway and found her sitting there, staring at Rutter's faked photograph. He sat down in the same chair she had used and blew on the espresso foam and smelled the aroma and took the first sip.

What to tell the old folks? The only humane thing to do would be to go up there and tell them nothing at all. Just tell them he had drawn a blank. Just leave it completely vague. It would be a kindness. Just go up there, hold their hands, break the news of Rutter's deception, refund their money, and then describe a long and fruitless search backward through history that ended up absolutely nowhere. Then plead with them to accept he must be long dead, and beg them to understand nobody would ever be able to tell them where or when or how. Then disappear and leave them to live out the short balance of their lives with whatever dignity they could find in being just two out of the tens of millions of parents who gave up their children to the night and the fog swirling through a ghastly century.

He sipped his way through the coffee, with his left hand clenched on the table in front of him. He would lie to them, but out of kindness. Reacher had no great experience of kindness. It was a virtue that had always run parallel to his life. He had never been in the sort of position where it counted for anything. He had never drawn duty breaking bad news to relatives. Some of his contemporaries had. After the Gulf, duty squads had been formed, a senior officer from the unit concerned teamed up with a military policeman, and they had visited the families of the casualties, walking up long, lonely driveways, walking upstairs in apartment houses, breaking the news that their formal uniformed arrival had already announced in advance. He guessed kindness counted for a lot during that type of duty, but his own career had been locked tight inside the service itself, where things were always simple, either happening or not happening, good or bad, legal or not legal. Now two years after leaving the service, kindness was suddenly a factor in his life. And it would make him lie.

But he would find Victor Hobie. He unclenched his hand and touched the burn

scar through his shirt. He had a score to settle. He tilted the cup until he felt the espresso mud on his teeth and tongue. Then he dropped the cup in the trash and stepped back out to the sidewalk. The sun was full on Broadway, coming slightly from the south and west of directly overhead. He felt it on his face and turned toward it and walked down to Jodie's building. He was tired. He had slept only four hours on the plane. Four hours, out of more than twenty-four. He remembered reclining the enormous first-class seat and falling asleep in it. He had been thinking about Hobie then, like he was thinking about him now. *Victor Hobie had Costello killed, so he could stay hidden.*

Crystal floated into his memory. The stripper, from the Keys. He shouldn't be thinking about her again. But he was saying something to her, in the darkened bar. She was wearing a T-shirt and nothing else. Then Jodie was talking to him, in the dim study at the back of Leon's house. *His house.* She was saying the same thing he was saying to Crystal. He was saying *he must have stepped on some toes up north, given* somebody a problem. She was saying he must have tried some kind of a shortcut, got somebody *alerted.*

He stopped dead on the street with his heart thumping. Leon. Costello. Leon and Costello, together, talking. Costello had gone up to Garrison and talked with Leon just before he died. Leon had run down the problem for him. *Find a guy called Jack Reacher because I want him to check on a guy called Victor Hobie,* Leon must have said. Costello, calm and businesslike, must have listened well. He had gone back to the city and scoped out the job. He had thought hard and tried a shortcut. *Costello had gone looking for the guy called Hobie before he had gone looking for the guy called Reacher.*

He ran the last block to Jodie's parking garage. Then lower Broadway to Greenwich Avenue was two and three-quarter miles, and he got there in eleven minutes by slipstreaming behind the taxis heading up to the west side of midtown. He dumped the Lincoln on the sidewalk in front of the building and ran up the stone steps into the lobby. He glanced around and pressed three random buttons.

"UPS," he called.

The inner screen buzzed open and he ran up the stairs to suite five. Costello's mahogany door was closed, just as he had left it four days ago. He glanced around the hallway and tried the knob. The door opened. The lock was still latched back, open for business. The pastel reception area was undisturbed. The impersonal city. Life swirled on, busy and oblivious and uncaring. The air inside felt stale. The secretary's perfume had faded to a trace. But her computer was still turned on. The watery screensaver was swirling away, waiting patiently for her return.

He stepped to her desk and nudged the mouse with his finger. The screen cleared and revealed the database entry for Spencer Gutman Ricker and Talbot, which was the last thing he had looked at before calling them, back when he had never heard of anybody called Mrs. Jacob. He exited the entry and went back to the main listing without any real optimism. He had looked for JACOB on it and gotten nowhere. He didn't recall seeing HOBIE there either, and *H* and *J* are pretty close together in the alphabet.

He spooled it up from bottom to top and back again, but there was nothing in the main listing. No real names in it at all, just acronyms for corporations. He stepped out from behind the desk and ran through to Costello's own office. No papers on the desk. He walked around behind it and saw a metal trash can in the kneehole space. There were crumpled papers in it. He squatted down and spilled them out on the floor. There were opened envelopes and discarded forms. A greasy sandwich wrapper. Some sheets of lined paper, torn out from a perforated book. He straightened them on the carpet with his palm. Nothing hit him in the eye, but they were clearly working notes. They were the kind of jottings a busy man makes to help him organize his thoughts. But they were all recent. Costello was clearly a guy who emptied his trash on a regular basis. There was nothing from more than a couple of days before he died in the Keys. Any shortcuts involving Hobie, he would have taken them twelve or thirteen days ago, right after talking with Leon, right at the outset of the investigation.

Reacher opened the desk drawers, each one in turn, and found the perforated book in the top on the left-hand side. It was a supermarket notebook, partly used up, with a thick backbone on the left and half the pages remaining on the right. He sat down in the crushed leather chair and leafed through the book. Ten pages in, he saw the name *Leon Garber.* It leapt out at him from a mess of penciled notes. He saw *Mrs. Jacob, SGR&T.* He saw *Victor Hobie.* That name was underlined twice, with the casual strokes a pensive man uses while he is thinking hard. It was circled lightly with overlapping oval shapes, like eggs. Next to it, Costello had scrawled *CCT??* There was a line running away across the page from *CCT??* to a note saying *9am; 9am* was circled, too, inside more oval scrawlings. Reacher stared at the page and saw an appointment with Victor Hobie, at a place called CCT, at nine o'clock in the morning. Presumably at nine o'clock in the morning of the day he was killed.

He bounced the chair backward and scrambled around the desk. Ran back to the computer. The database listing was still there. The screensaver had not cut in. He scrolled the list to the top and looked at everything between *B* and D. CCT was right there, jammed between CCR&W and CDAG&Y. He moved the mouse and clicked on it. The screen scrolled down and revealed an entry for CAYMAN

CORPORATE TRUST. There was an address listed in the World Trade Center. There were telephone and fax numbers. There were notes listing inquiries from law firms. The proprietor was listed as Mr. Victor Hobie. Reacher stared at the display and the phone started ringing.

He tore his eyes from the screen and glanced at the console on the desk. It was silent. The ringing was in his pocket. He fumbled Jodie's mobile out of his jacket and clicked the button.

"Hello?" he said.

"I've got some news," Nash Newman replied.

"News about what?"

"About what? What the hell do you think?"

"I don't know," Reacher said. "So tell me."

So Newman told him. Then there was silence. Just a soft hiss from the phone representing six thousand miles of distance and a soft whirring from the fan inside the computer. Reacher took the phone away from his ear and stared between it and the screen, left and right, left and right, dazed.

"You still there?" Newman asked. It came through faint and electronic, just a faraway squawk from the earpiece. Reacher put the phone back to his face.

"You sure about this?" he asked.

"I'm sure," Newman said. "One hundred percent certain. It's totally definitive. Not one chance in a billion that I'm wrong. No doubt about it."

"You sure?" Reacher asked again.

"Positive," Newman said. "Totally, utterly positive."

Reacher was silent. He just stared around the quiet empty office. Light blue walls where the sun was coming through the pebbled glass of the window, light gray where it wasn't.

"You don't sound very happy about it," Newman said.

"I can't believe it," Reacher said. "Tell me again."

So Newman told him again.

"I can't believe it," Reacher said. "You're absolutely, totally sure about this?"

Newman repeated it all. Reacher stared at the desk, blankly.

"Tell me again," he said. "One more time, Nash."

So Newman went through it all for the fourth time.

"There's absolutely no doubt about it," he added. "Have you ever known me to be wrong?"

"Shit," Reacher said. "Shit, you see what this means? You see what happened? You see what he did? I've got to go, Nash. I need to get back to St. Louis, right now. I need to get into the archive again."

"You do indeed, don't you?" Newman said. "St. Louis would certainly be my

first port of call. As a matter of considerable urgency, too."
"Thanks, Nash," Reacher said, vaguely. He clicked the phone off and jammed it back in his pocket. Then he stood up and wandered slowly out of Costello's office suite to the stairs. He left the mahogany door standing wide open behind him.

TONY CAME INTO the bathroom carrying the Savile Row suit on a wire hanger inside a dry cleaner's bag. The shirt was starched and folded in a paper wrapper jammed under his arm. He glanced at Marilyn and hung the suit on the shower rail and tossed the shirt into Chester's lap. He went into his pocket and came out with the tie. He pulled it out along its whole length, like a conjuror performing a trick with a concealed silk scarf. He tossed it after the shirt.
"Show time," he said. "Be ready in ten minutes."
He went back out and closed the door. Chester sat on the floor, cradling the packaged shirt in his arms. The tie was draped across his legs, where it had fallen. Marilyn leaned down and took the shirt from him.
"Nearly over," she said, like an incantation.
He looked at her neutrally and stood up. Took the shirt from her and pulled it on over his head. She stepped in front of him and snapped the collar up and fixed his tie.
"Thanks," he said.
She helped him into the suit and came around in front of him and tweaked the lapels.
"Your hair," she said.
He went to the mirror and saw the man he used to be in another life. He used his fingers and smoothed his hair into place. The bathroom door opened again and Tony stepped inside. He was holding the Mont Blanc fountain pen.
"We'll lend this back to you, so you can sign the transfer."
Chester nodded and took the pen and slipped it into his jacket.
"And this. We need to keep up appearances, right? All these lawyers everywhere?" It was the platinum Rolex. Chester took it from him and latched it on his wrist. Tony left the room and closed the door. Marilyn was at the mirror, styling her hair with her fingers. She put it behind her ears and pursed her lips together like she'd just used lipstick, although she hadn't. She had none to use. It was just an instinct. She stepped away to the middle of the floor and smoothed her dress down over her thighs.
"You ready?" she asked.
Chester shrugged. "For what? Are you?"
"I'm ready," she said.

SPENCER GUTMAN RICKER and Talbot's driver was the husband of one of the firm's longest-serving secretaries. He had been a dead-wood clerk somewhere who hadn't survived his company's amalgamation with a lean and hungry competitor. Fifty-nine and unemployed with no skills and no prospects, he had sunk his payoff into a used Lincoln Town Car and his wife had written a proposal showing it would be cheaper for the firm to contract him exclusively rather than keep a car service account. The partners had turned a blind eye to the accounting mistakes in the proposal and hired him anyway, looking at it somewhere halfway between pro bono and convenience. Thus the guy was waiting in the garage with the motor running and the air on high when Jodie came out of the elevator and walked over to him. He buzzed his window down and she bent to speak.

"You know where we're going?" she asked.

He nodded and tapped the clipboard lying on the front passenger sheet.

"I'm all set," he said.

She got in the back. By nature she was a democratic person who would have preferred to ride in front with him, but he insisted passengers take a rear seat. It made him feel more official. He was a sensitive old man, and he had caught the whiff of charity around his hiring. He felt that to act very properly would raise his perceived status. He wore a dark suit and a chauffeur's cap he had found in an outfitter's in Brooklyn.

As soon as he saw in the mirror that Jodie was settled, he moved away around the garage and up the ramp and outside into the daylight. The exit was at the back of the building and it put him on Exchange Place. He made the left onto Broadway and worked across the lanes in time for the right into the Trinity Street dogleg. He followed it west and turned, coming up on the World Trade Center from the south. Traffic was slow past Trinity Church, because two lanes were blocked by a police tow truck stopped alongside an NYPD cruiser parked at the curb. Cops were peering into the windows, as if they were unsure about something. He eased past and accelerated. Slowed and pulled in again alongside the plaza. His eyes were fixed at street level, and the giant towers loomed over him unseen. He sat with the motor running, silent and deferential.

"I'll be waiting here," he said.

Jodie got out of the car and paused on the sidewalk. The plaza was wide and crowded. It was five minutes to two, and the lunch crowd was returning to work. She felt unsettled. She would be walking through a public space without Reacher watching over her, for the first time since things went crazy. She glanced around and joined a knot of hurrying people and walked with them all the way to the

south tower.
The address in the file was the eighty-eighth floor. She joined the line for the express elevator behind a medium-sized man in an ill-fitting black suit. He was carrying a cheap briefcase upholstered with brown plastic stamped to make it look like crocodile skin. She squeezed into the elevator behind him. The car was full and people were calling their floor numbers to the woman nearest the buttons. The guy in the bad suit asked for eighty-eight. Jodie said nothing.
The car stopped at most floors in its zone and people jostled out. Progress was slow. It was dead-on two o'clock when the car arrived on eighty-eight. Jodie stepped out. The guy in the bad suit stepped out behind her. They were in a deserted corridor. Undistinguished closed doors led into office suites. Jodie went one way and the guy in the suit went the other, both of them looking at the plates fixed next to the doors. They met up again in front of an oak slab marked Cayman Corporate Trust. There was a wired-glass porthole set off-center in it. Jodie glanced through it and the guy in the suit leaned past her and pulled it open.
"We in the same meeting?" Jodie asked, surprised.
She followed him inside to a brass-and-oak reception area. There were office smells. Hot chemicals from copying machines, stewed coffee somewhere. The guy in the suit turned back to her and nodded.
"I guess we are," he said.
She stuck out her hand as she walked.
"I'm Jodie Jacob," she said. "Spencer Gutman. For the creditor."
The guy walked backward and juggled his plastic briefcase into his left and smiled and shook hands with her.
"I'm David Forster," he said. "Forster and Abelstein."
They were at the reception counter. She stopped and stared at him.
"No, you're not," she said blankly. "I know David very well."
The guy looked suddenly tense. The lobby went silent. She turned the other way and saw the guy she had last seen clinging to the door handle of her Bravada as Reacher hauled away from the collision on Broadway. He was sitting there calmly behind the counter, looking straight back at her. His left hand moved and touched a button. In the silence she heard a click from the entrance door. Then his right hand moved. It went down empty and came back up with a gun the color of dull metal. It had a wide barrel like a tube and a metal handgrip. The barrel was more than a foot long. The guy in the bad suit dropped his plastic case and jerked his hands in the air. Jodie stared at the weapon and thought: but *that's* a shotgun.
The guy holding it moved his left hand again and hit another button. The door to

the inner office opened. The man who had crashed the Suburban into them was standing there framed in the doorway. He had another gun in his hand. Jodie recognized the type from movies she'd seen. It was an automatic pistol. On the cinema screen it fired loud bullets that smashed you six feet backward. The Suburban driver was holding it steady on a point to her left and the other guy's right, like he was ready to jerk his wrist either way.

The guy with the shotgun came out from behind the counter and pushed past Jodie. Went up behind the guy with the bad suit and rammed the shotgun barrel into the small of his back. There was a hard sound, metal on metal, muffled by cloth. The guy with the shotgun put his hand up under the jacket and came out with a big chromium revolver. He held it up, like an exhibit.

"Unusual accessory for a lawyer," the man in the doorway said.

"He's not a lawyer," his partner said. "The woman says she knows David Forster very well and this ain't him."

The man in the doorway nodded.

"My name is Tony," he said. "Come inside, both of you, please."

He stepped to one side and covered Jodie with the automatic pistol while his partner pushed the guy claiming to be Forster in through the open door. Then he beckoned with the gun and Jodie found herself walking toward him. He stepped close and pushed her through the door with a hand flat on her back. She stumbled once and regained her balance. Inside was a big office, spacious and square. Dim light from shaded windows. There was living-room furniture arranged in front of a desk. Three identical sofas, with lamp tables. A huge brass-and-glass coffee table filled the space between the sofas. There were two people sitting on the left-hand sofa. A man and a woman. The man wore an immaculate suit and tie. The woman wore a wrinkled silk party dress. The man looked up, blankly. The woman looked up in terror.

There was a man at the desk. He was sitting in the gloom, in a leather chair. He was maybe fifty-five years old. Jodie stared at him. His face was divided roughly in two, like an arbitrary decision, like a map of the western states. On the right was lined skin and thinning gray hair. On the left was scar tissue, pink and thick and shiny like an unfinished plastic model of a monster's head. The scars touched his eye, and the lid was a ball of pink tissue, like a mangled thumb.

He was wearing a neat suit, which fell over broad shoulders and a wide chest. His left arm was laid comfortably on the desk. There was the cuff of a white shirt, snowy in the gloom, and a manicured hand, palm down, the fingers tapping an imperceptible rhythm on the desktop. His right arm was laid exactly symmetrical with his left. There was the same fine summer-weight wool of the suit coat, and the same snowy white shirt cuff, but they were collapsed and empty. There was no hand. Just a simple steel hook protruding at a shallow

empty. There was no hand. Just a simple steel hook protruding at a shallow angle, resting on the wood. It was curved and polished like a miniature version of a sculpture from a public garden.
“Hobie,” she said.
He nodded slowly, just once, and raised the hook like a greeting.
“Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Jacob. I’m just sorry it took so long.”
Then he smiled.
“And I’m sorry our acquaintance will be so brief.”
He nodded again, this time to the man called Tony, who maneuvered her alongside the guy claiming to be Forster. They stood side by side, waiting.
“Where’s your friend Jack Reacher?” Hobie asked her.
She shook her head. “I don’t know.”
Hobie looked at her for a long moment.
“OK,” he said. “We’ll get to Jack Reacher later. Now sit down.”
He was pointing with the hook to the sofa opposite the staring couple. She stepped over and sat down, dazed.
“This is Mr. and Mrs. Stone,” Hobie said to her. ”Chester and Marilyn, to be informal. Chester ran a corporation called Stone Optical. He owes me more than seventeen million dollars. He’s going to pay me in stock.”
Jodie glanced at the couple opposite. They both had panic in their eyes. Like something had just gone terribly wrong.
“Put your hands on the table,” Hobie called. “All three of you. Lean forward and spread your fingers. Let me see six little starfish.”
Jodie leaned forward and laid her palms on the low table. The couple opposite did the same thing, automatically.
“Lean forward more,” Hobie called.
They all slid their palms toward the center of the table until they were leaning at an angle. It put their weight on their hands and made them immobile. Hobie came out from behind the desk and stopped opposite the guy in the bad suit.
“Apparently you’re not David Forster,” he said.
The guy made no reply.
“I would have guessed, you know,” Hobie said. “In an instant. A suit like that? You’ve really got to be kidding. So who are you?”
Again the guy said nothing. Jodie watched him, with her head turned sideways. Tony raised his gun and pointed it at the guy’s head. He used both hands and did something with the slide that made a menacing metallic sound in the silence. He tightened his finger on the trigger. Jodie saw his knuckle turn white.
“Curry,” the guy said quickly. “William Curry. I’m a private detective, working for Forster.”
Hobie nodded slowly. “OK, Mr. Curry.”

Hobie nodded, slowly. "OK, Mr. Curry."
He walked back behind the Stones. Stopped directly behind the woman.
"I've been misled, Marilyn," he said.
He balanced himself with his left hand on the back of the sofa and leaned all the way forward and snagged the tip of the hook into the neck of her dress. He pulled back against the strength of the fabric and hauled her slowly upright. Her palms slid off the glass and left damp shapes where they had rested. Her back touched the sofa and he slipped the hook around in front of her and nudged her lightly under the chin like a hairdresser adjusting the position of her head before starting work. He raised the hook and brought it back down gently and used the tip to comb through her hair, lightly, front to back. Her hair was thick and the hook plowed through it, slowly, front to back, front to back. Her eyes were screwed shut in terror.
"You deceived me," he said. "I don't like being deceived. Especially not by you. I protected you, Marilyn. I could have sold you with the cars. Now maybe I will. I had other plans for you, but I think Mrs. Jacob just usurped your position in my affections. Nobody told me how beautiful she was."
The hook stopped moving and a thin thread of blood ran down out of Marilyn's hair onto her forehead. Hobie's gaze shifted across to Jodie. His good eye was steady and unblinking.
"Yes," he said to her. "I think maybe you're New York's parting gift to me."
He pushed the hook hard against the back of Marilyn's head until she leaned forward again and put her hands back on the table. Then he turned around.
"You armed, Mr. Curry?"
Curry shrugged. "I was. You know that. You took it."
The guy with the shotgun held up the shiny revolver. Hobie nodded.
"Tony?"
Tony started patting him down, across the tops of his shoulders, under his arms. Curry glanced left and right and the guy with the shotgun stepped close and jammed the barrel into his side.
"Stand still," he said.
Tony leaned forward and smoothed his hands over the guy's belt area and between his legs. Then he slid them briskly downward and Curry twisted violently sideways and tried to knock the shotgun away with his arm, but the guy holding it was firmly grounded with his feet well apart and he stopped Curry short. He used the muzzle like a fist and hit him in the stomach. Curry's breath coughed out and he folded up and the guy hit him again, on the side of the head, hard with the stock of the shotgun. Curry went down on his knees and Tony rolled him over with his foot.
"Asshole," he sneered.

"Asshole," he sneered.
The guy with the shotgun leaned down one-handed and rammed the muzzle into Curry's gut with enough weight on it to hurt. Tony squatted and fiddled under the legs of the pants and came back up with two identical revolvers. His left forefinger was threaded through the trigger guards and he was swinging them around. The metal clicked and scratched and rattled. The revolvers were small. They were made from stainless steel. Like shiny toys. They had short barrels. Almost no barrels at all.
"Stand up, Mr. Curry," Hobie said.
Curry rolled onto his hands and knees. He was clearly dazed from the blow to the head. Jodie could see him blinking, trying to focus. Shaking his head. He reached out for the back of the sofa and hauled himself upright. Hobie stepped a yard closer and turned his back on him. He looked at Jodie and Chester and Marilyn like they were an audience. He held his left palm flat and started butting the curve of the hook into it. He was butting with the right and slapping with the left, and the impacts were building.
"A simple question of mechanics," he said. "The impact on the end of the hook transfers up to the stump. The shock waves travel. They dissipate against what's left of the arm. Naturally the leatherwork was built by an expert, so the discomfort is minimized. But we can't beat the laws of physics, can we? So in the end the question is: Who does the pain get to first? Him or me?"
He spun on the ball of his foot and punched Curry full in the face with the blunt outside curve of the hook. It was a hard punch thrown all the way from the shoulder, and Curry staggered back and gasped.
"I asked you if you were armed," Hobie said quietly. "You should have told the truth. You should have said, 'Yes, Mr. Hobie, I've got a revolver on each ankle.' But you didn't. You tried to deceive me. And like I told Marilyn, I don't like to be deceived."
The next punch was a jab to the body. Sudden and hard.
"Stop it," Jodie screamed. She pushed back and sat upright. "Why are you doing this? What the hell happened to you?"
Curry was bent over and gasping. Hobie turned away from him to face her.
"What happened to me?" he repeated.
"You were a decent guy. We know all about you."
He shook his head slowly.
"No, you don't," he said.
Then the buzzer sounded at the door out to the elevator lobby. Tony glanced at Hobie, and slipped his automatic into his pocket. He took Curry's two small revolvers off his finger and stepped over and pressed one of them into Hobie's left hand. Then he leaned in close and slipped the other into the pocket of

Hobie's jacket. It was a curiously intimate gesture. Then he walked out of the office. The guy with the shotgun stepped back and found an angle to cover all four prisoners. Hobie moved in the opposite direction and triangulated his aim.
"Be very quiet, everybody," he whispered.
They heard the lobby door open. There was the low sound of conversation and then it closed again. A second later Tony walked back into the gloom with a package under his arm and a smile on his face.
"Messenger from Stone's old bank. Three hundred stock certificates."
He held up the package.
"Open it," Hobie said.
Tony found the plastic thread and tore open the envelope. Jodie saw the rich engraving of equity holdings. Tony flicked through them. He nodded. Hobie stepped back to his chair and laid the small revolver on the desktop.
"Sit down, Mr. Curry," he said. "Next to your legal colleague."
Curry dropped heavily into the space next to Jodie. He slid his hands across the glass and leaned forward, like the others. Hobie used the hook in a circular gesture.
"Take a good look around, Chester," he said. "Mr. Curry, Mrs. Jacob, and your dear wife, Marilyn. Good people all, I'm sure. Three lives, full of their own petty concerns and triumphs. Three lives, Chester, and now they're entirely in your hands."
Stone's head was up, moving in a circle as he looked at the other three at the table. He ended up looking straight across the desk at Hobie.
"Go get the rest of the stock," Hobie said to him. "Tony will accompany you. Straight there, straight back, no tricks, and these three people will live. Anything else, they'll die. You understand that?"
Stone nodded, silently.
"Pick a number, Chester," Hobie said to him.
"One," Stone said back.
"Pick two more numbers, Chester."
"Two and three," Stone said.
"OK, Marilyn gets the three," Hobie said, "if you decide to be a hero."
"I'll get the stock," Stone said.
Hobie nodded.
"I think you will," he said. "But you need to sign the transfer first."
He rolled open a drawer and swept the small shiny revolver into it. Then he pulled out a single sheet of paper. Beckoned to Stone who slid himself upright and stood, shakily. He threaded around the desk and signed his name with the Mont Blanc pen from his pocket.

“Mrs. Jacob can be the witness,” Hobie said. “She’s a member of the New York State Bar, after all.”
Jodie sat still for a long moment. She stared left at the guy with the shotgun, and straight ahead at Tony, and then right at Hobie behind the desk. She pulled herself upright. Stepped to the desk and reversed the form and took Stone’s pen from him. Signed her name and wrote the date on the line next to it.
“Thank you,” Hobie said. “Now sit down again and keep completely still.”
She went back to the sofa and leaned forward over the table. Her shoulders were starting to hurt. Tony took Stone’s elbow and moved him toward the door.
“Five minutes there, five back,” Hobie called. “Don’t be a hero, Chester.”
Tony led Stone out of the office and the door closed gently behind them. There was the thump of the lobby door and the faraway whine of the elevator, and then there was silence. Jodie was in pain. The grip of the glass on her clammy palms was pulling the skin away from under her fingernails. Her shoulders were burning. Her neck was aching. She could see on their faces the others were suffering, too. There were sudden breaths and gasps. The beginnings of low moans.
Hobie gestured to the guy with the shotgun and they changed places. Hobie strolled nervously around the office and the shotgun guy sat at the desk with the weapon resting on its grips, swiveling randomly left and right like a prison searchlight. Hobie was checking his wristwatch, counting the minutes. Jodie saw the sun slipping southwest, lining up with the gaps in the window blinds and shooting steep angled beams into the room. She could hear the ragged breathing of the two others near her and she could feel the faint shudder of the building coming through the table under her hands.
Five minutes there and five back add up to ten, but at least twenty minutes passed. Hobie paced and checked his watch a dozen times. Then he walked through into reception and the guy with the shotgun followed him to the office door. He kept the weapon pointed into the room, but his head was turned, watching his boss.
“Is he planning to let us go?” Curry whispered.
Jodie shrugged and lifted up onto her fingertips, hunching her shoulders and ducking her head to ease the pain.
“I don’t know,” she whispered back.
Marilyn had her forearms pinched tight together, with her head resting on them. She looked up and shook her head.
“He killed two cops,” she whispered. “We were witnesses.”
“Stop talking,” the guy called from the door.
They heard the whine of the elevator again and the faint bump through the floor

as it stopped. There was a moment's quiet and then the lobby door opened and suddenly there was noise in reception, Tony's voice, and then Hobie's, loud and fueled with relief. Hobie came back into the office carrying a white package and smiling with the mobile half of his face. He clamped the package under his right elbow and tore it open as he walked and Jodie saw more engraving on thick parchment. He took the long way around to the desk and dumped the certificates on top of the three hundred he already had. Stone followed Tony like he had been forgotten and stood gazing at the life's work of his ancestors piled casually on the scarred wood. Marilyn looked up and walked her fingers backward across the glass, jacking herself upright with her hands because she had no strength left in her shoulders.

"OK, you got them all," she said quietly. "Now you can let us go."

Hobie smiled. "Marilyn, what are you, a moron?"

Tony laughed. Jodie looked from him to Hobie. She saw they were very nearly at the end of some long process. Some goal had been in sight, and now it was very close. Tony's laughter was about release after days of strain and tension.

"Reacher is still out there," she said quietly, like a move in a game of chess.

Hobie stopped smiling. He touched the hook to his forehead and rubbed it across his scars and nodded.

"Reacher," he said. "Yes, the last piece of the puzzle. We mustn't forget about Reacher, must we? He's still out there. But out where, exactly?"

She hesitated.

"I don't know, exactly," she said.

Then her head came up, defiant.

"But he's in the city," she said. "And he'll find you."

Hobie met her gaze. Stared at her, contempt in his face.

"You think that's some kind of threat?" he sneered. "Truth is I want him to find me. Because he has something I require. Something vital. So help me out, Mrs. Jacob. Call him and invite him right over."

She was silent for a moment.

"I don't know where he is," she said.

"Try your place," Hobie said back. "We know he's been staying there. He's probably there right now. You got off the plane at eleven-fifty, right?"

She stared at him. He nodded, complacently.

"We check these things. We own a boy called Simon, who I believe you've met. He put you on the seven o'clock flight from Honolulu, and we called JFK and they told us it landed at eleven-fifty exactly. Old Jack Reacher was all upset in Hawaii, according to our boy Simon, so he's probably still upset. And tired. Like you are. You look tired, Mrs. Jacob, you know that? But your friend Jack

Reacher is probably in bed at your place, sleeping it off, while you're here having fun with the rest of us. So call him, tell him to come over and join you."
She stared down at the table. Said nothing.
"Call him. Then you can see him one more time before you die."
She was silent. She stared down at the glass. It was smeared with her handprints. She wanted to call him. She wanted to see him. She felt like she had felt a million times over fifteen long years. She wanted to see him *again.* His lazy, lopsided grin. His tousled hair. His arms, so long they gave him a greyhound's grace even though he was built like the side of a house. His eyes, cold, icy blue like the Arctic. His hands, giant battered mitts that bunched into fists the size of footballs. She wanted to see those hands again. She wanted to see them around Hobie's throat.
She glanced around the office. The sunbeams had crawled an inch across the desk. She saw Chester Stone, inert. Marilyn, trembling. Curry, white in the face and breathing hard next to her. The guy with the shotgun, relaxed. Reacher would break him in half without even thinking about it. She saw Tony, his eyes fixed on hers. And Hobie, caressing his hook with his manicured hand, smiling at her, waiting. She turned and looked at the closed door. She imagined it bursting open with a crash and Jack Reacher striding in through it. She wanted to see that happen. She wanted it more than she had ever wanted anything.
"OK," she whispered. "I'll call him."
Hobie nodded. "Tell him I'll be here a few more hours. But tell him if he wants to see you again, he better come quick. Because you and I have a little date in the bathroom, about thirty minutes from now."
She shuddered and pushed off the glass table and stood upright. Her legs were weak and her shoulders were on fire. Hobie came around and took her elbow and led her to the door. Led her over behind the reception counter.
"This is the only telephone in the place," he said. "I don't like telephones."
He sat down in the chair and pressed nine with the tip of his hook. Handed the phone across to her. "Come closer, so I can hear what he says to you. Marilyn deceived me with the phone, and I'm not going to let that happen to me again."
He made her stoop down and put her face next to his. He smelled of soap. He put his hand in his pocket and came out with the tiny revolver Tony had slipped in there. He touched it to her side. She held the phone at an angle with the earpiece upward between them. She studied the console. There was a mass of buttons. A speed-dial facility for 911. She hesitated for a second and then dialed her own home number. It rang six times. Six long, soft purrs. With each one, she willed him: be there, be there. But it was her own voice that came back to her, from her machine.
"H[illegible]

"He´s not there,´´ she said blankly.
Hobie smiled.
"That's too bad," he said.
She was stooped over next to him, numb with shock.
"He's got my mobile," she said suddenly. "I just remembered."
"OK, press nine for a line."
She dabbed the cradle and dialed nine and then her mobile number. It rang four times. Four loud urgent electronic squawks. Each one, she prayed: answer, answer, answer, *an*swer. Then there was a click in the earpiece.
"Hello?" he said.
She breathed out.
"Hi, Jack," she said.
"Hey, Jodie," he said. "What's new?"
"Where are you?"
She realized there was urgency in her voice. It made him pause.
"I'm in St. Louis, Missouri," he said. "Just flew down. I had to go to the NPRC again, where we were before."
She gasped. St. Louis? Her mouth went dry.
"You OK?" he asked her.
Hobie leaned across and put his mouth next to her ear.
"Tell him to come right back to New York," he whispered. "Straight here, soon as he can."
She nodded nervously and he pressed the gun harder against her side.
"Can you come back?" she asked. "I sort of need you here, soon as possible."
"I'm booked on the six o'clock," he said. "Gets me in around eight-thirty, East Coast time. Will that do?"
She could sense Hobie grinning next to her.
"Can you make it anytime sooner? Like maybe right away?"
She could hear talking in the background. Major Conrad, she guessed. She remembered his office, dark wood, worn leather, the hot Missouri sun in the window.
"Sooner?" he said. "Well, I guess so. I could be there in a couple of hours, depending on the flights. Where are you?"
"Come to the World Trade Center, south tower, eighty-eighth floor, OK?"
"Traffic will be bad. Call it two and a half hours, I'll be there."
"Great," she said.
"You OK?" he asked again.
Hobie brought the gun around into her view.
"I'm fine," she said. "I love you."
Hobie leaned over and hit the cradle with the tip of his hook. The earpiece

Hobie leaned over and hit the cradle with the tip of his hook. The earpiece clicked and filled with dial tone. She put the phone down, slowly and carefully onto the console. She was shattered with shock and disappointment, numb, still stooped over the counter, one hand laid flat on the wood propping her weight, the other hand shaking in the air an inch above the phone.
"Two and a half *hours,"* Hobie said to her, with exaggerated sympathy. "Well, it looks like the cavalry ain't going to arrive in time for you, Mrs. Jacob."
He laughed to himself and put the gun back in his pocket. Got out of the chair and caught the arm that was supporting her weight. She stumbled and he dragged her toward the of fice door. She caught the edge of the counter and held on tight. He hit her, backhanded with the hook. The curve caught her high on the temple and she lost her grip on the counter. Her knees gave way and she fell and he dragged her to the door by the arm. Her heels scuffed and kicked. He swung her around in front of him and straight-armed her back into the office. She sprawled on the carpet and he slammed the door.
"Back on the sofa," he snarled.
The sunbeams were off the desk. They were inching around the floor and creeping across the table. Marilyn Stone's splayed fingernails were vivid in their light. Jodie crawled to her hands and knees and pulled herself up on the furniture and staggered all the way back to her place alongside Curry. She put her hands back where they had been before. There was a narrow pain in her temple. It was an angry throb, hot and alien where the metal had thumped against bone. Her shoulder was twisted. The guy with the shotgun was watching her. Tony was watching her, the automatic pistol back in his hand. Reacher was far away from her, like he had been most of her life.
Hobie was back at the desk, squaring the stack of equity certificates into a pile. They made a brick four inches tall. He butted each side in turn with the hook. The heavy engraved papers slid neatly into place.
"UPS will be here soon," he said happily. "Then the developers get their stock, and I get my money, and I've won again. About half an hour, probably, and then it's all over, for me, and for you."
Jodie realized he was talking to her alone. He had selected her as a conduit for information. Curry and the Stone couple were staring at her, not him. She looked away and gazed down through the glass at the rug on the floor. It had the same pattern as the faded old item in DeWitt's office in Texas, but it was much smaller and much newer. Hobie left the brick of paper where it was and walked around behind the square of furniture and took the shotgun away from the guy holding it.
"Go bring me some coffee," he said to him.
The guy nodded and walked out to the lobby. Closed the door gently behind him

The guy nodded and walked out to the lobby. Closed the door gently behind him. The office went silent. There was just tense breathing and the faint rumble of the building underneath it. The shotgun was in Hobie's left hand. It was pointing at the floor. Swinging gently, back and forth through a tiny arc. A loose grip. Jodie could hear the rub of metal on the skin of his hand. She saw Curry glancing around. He was checking Tony's position. Tony had stepped back a yard. He had put himself outside the shotgun's field of fire and he was aiming directly across it at a right angle. His automatic was raised. Jodie felt Curry testing the strength in his shoulders. She felt him moving. She saw his arms bunching. She saw him glance ahead at Tony, maybe twelve feet in front of him. She saw him glance left at Hobie, maybe eight feet to the side. She saw the sunbeams, exactly parallel with the brass edges of the table. She saw Curry push up onto his fingertips.

"No," she breathed.

Leon had always simplified his life with rules. He had a rule for every situation. As a kid, they had driven her crazy. His catchall rule for everything from her term papers to his missions to legislation in Congress was do it once *and* do it right. Curry had no chance of doing it right. No chance at all. He was triangulated by two powerful weapons. His options were nonexistent. If he jumped up and hurdled the table and headed for Tony, he would catch a bullet in the chest before he was even halfway there, and probably a shotgun blast in the side as well which would kill the Stone couple along with himself. And if he headed for Hobie first, then maybe Tony wouldn't fire for fear of hitting his boss, but Hobie would fire for sure, and the shotgun blast would shred Curry into a hundred small pieces, and she was in a direct line right behind him. Another of Leon's rules was *hopeless is hopeless and don't ever pretend it ain't.*

"Wait," she breathed.

She felt a fractional nod from Curry and she saw his shoulders go slack again. They waited. She stared down through the glass at the rug and fought the pain, minute by minute. Her torn shoulder was shrieking against her weight. She folded her fingers and rested on her knuckles. She could hear Marilyn Stone breathing hard opposite her. She looked defeated. Her head was resting sideways on her arms, and her eyes were closed. The sunbeams had moved away from parallel and were creeping toward her edge of the table.

"What the hell is that guy doing out there?" Hobie muttered. "How long does it take to fetch me a damn cup of coffee?"

Tony glanced at him, but he made no reply. Just kept the automatic held forward, favoring Curry more than anybody. Jodie turned her hands and leaned on her thumbs. Her head throbbed and burned. Hobie kicked the shotgun up and rested the muzzle on the back of the sofa in front of him. He brought the hook up

rested the muzzle on the back of the sofa in front of him. He brought the hook up and rubbed the flat of the curve over his scars.
"Christ," he said. "What's taking so long? Go give him a hand, OK?"
Jodie realized he was looking straight at her. "Me?"
"Why not? Make yourself useful. Coffee is woman's work, after all."
She hesitated.
"I don't know where it is," she said.
"Then I'll show you.
He was staring at her, waiting. She nodded, suddenly glad to get a chance just to move a little. She straightened her fingers and eased her hands backward and pushed herself upright. She felt weak and she stumbled once and caught her shin on the table's brass frame. She walked uneasily through Tony's field of fire. Up close, his automatic was huge and brutal. He tracked her with it all the way as she approached Hobie. Back there, she was beyond the reach of the sunbeams. Hobie led her through the gloom and juggled the shotgun up under his arm and grasped the handle and pulled the door open.
Check the outer door first, and then the telephone. That was what she had been rehearsing as she walked. If she could get out into the public corridor, she might have a chance. Failing that, there was the 911 speed-dial. Knock the handset out of the cradle, hit the button, and even if she got no opportunity to speak the automatic circuitry would give the cops a location. *The door, or the phone*. She rehearsed looking ahead at the door, looking left at the phone, the precise turn of her head in between. But when it came to it she looked at neither thing. Hobie stopped dead in front of her and she stepped alongside him and just looked at the guy who had gone to fetch the coffee.
He was a thickset man, shorter than Hobie or Tony, but broad. He was wearing a dark suit. He was lying on his back on the floor precisely centered in front of the office door. His legs were straight. His feet were turned out. His head was propped at a steep angle on a stack of phone books. His eyes were wide open. They stared forward, sightlessly. His left arm was dragged up and back, and the hand was resting palm-out on another stack of books in a grotesque parody of greeting. His right arm was pulled straight, at a shallow angle away from his body. His right hand was severed at the wrist. It was lying on the carpet six inches away from his shirt cuff, arranged in a precise straight line with the arm it had come from. She heard Hobie making a small sound in his throat and turned to see him dropping the shotgun and clutching at the door with his good hand. The burn scars were still vivid pink, but the rest of his face was turning a ghastly white.

17

REACHER HAD BEEN named Jack by his father, who was a plain New Hampshire Yankee with an implacable horror of anything fancy. He had walked into the maternity ward one late October Tuesday, the morning after the birth, and he had handed his wife a small bunch of flowers and told her *we'll call him Jack.* There was no middle name. Jack Reacher was the whole of it, and it was already on the birth certificate, because he had visited the company clerk on his way to the infirmary and the guy had written it down and reported it by telex to the Berlin Embassy. Another United States citizen, born overseas to a serving soldier, name of Jack-none-Reacher.

His mother made no objection. She loved her husband for his ascetic instincts, because she was French and they gave him a kind of European sensibility that made her feel more at home with him. She had found an enormous gulf between America and Europe in those postwar decades. The wealth and excess of America contrasted uneasily with the exhaustion and poverty of Europe. But her very own New Hampshire Yankee had no use for wealth and excess. No use at all. Plain simple things were what he liked, and that was absolutely fine with her, even if it did extend all the way to her babies' names.

He had called her firstborn Joe. Not Joseph, just Joe. No middle name. She loved the boy, of course, but the name was hard for her. It was very short and abrupt, and she struggled with the initial *J* because of her accent. It came out like zh. Like the boy was called *Zhoe.* Jack was much better. Her accent made it sound like Jacques, which was a very traditional old French name. Translated, it meant James. Privately, she always thought of her second boy as James.

But paradoxically nobody ever called him by his first name. Nobody knew how it came about, but Joe was always called Joe and Jack was always called Reacher. She did it herself, all the time. She had no idea why. She would stick her head out of some service bungalow window and yell *Zhoe! Come get your lunch! And bring Reacher with you!* And her two sweet little boys would come running inside for something to eat.

The exact same thing happened in school. It was Reacher's own earliest memory. He was an earnest, serious boy, and he was puzzled why his names were backward. His brother was called by his first name first and his last name last. Not him. There was a schoolyard softball game and the kid who owned the bat was choosing up sides. He turned to the brothers and called out *I'll have Joe and Reacher.* All the kids did the same thing. The teachers, too. They called him

Reacher, even in kindergarten. And somehow it traveled with him. Like any Army kid, he changed elementary schools dozens of times. First day in some new place somewhere, maybe even on a new continent, some new teacher would be yelling come here, *Reacher!*

But he got used to it fast and had no problem living his whole life behind a one-word name. He was Reacher, always had been, always would be, to everybody. The first girl he ever dated was a tall brunette who sidled shyly up to him and asked *what's your name? Reacher,* he replied. The loves of his life had all called him that. *Mmm, Reacher, I love you,* they had whispered in his ear. All of them. Jodie herself had done the exact same thing. He had appeared at the top of the concrete steps in Leon's yard and she had looked up at him and said *hello, Reacher.* After fifteen long years, she still knew exactly what he was called.

But she hadn't called him Reacher on the mobile. He had clicked the button and said hello and she had said *Hi, Jack.* It went off in his ear like a siren. Then she had asked *where are* you? and she had sounded so tense about it he panicked and his mind started racing and for a second he missed exactly what she meant. His given name, just a lucky chance. Hi, *Jack* meant *hijack.* It took him a second to catch on. She was in trouble. Big trouble, but she was still Leon's daughter, smart enough to think hard and warn him with two little syllables at the start of a desperate phone call.

Hijack. An alert. A combat warning. He blinked once and crushed down the fear and went to work. First thing he did was lie to her. Combat is about time and space and opposing forces. Like a huge four-dimensional diagram. First step is misinform the enemy. Let him think your diagram is a completely different shape. You assume all communications are penetrated, and then you use them to spread lies and deceit. You buy yourself an advantage.

He wasn't in St. Louis. Why should he be? Why fly himself all the way down there when there were telephones in the world and he had already built a working relationship with Conrad? He called him from the Greenwich Avenue sidewalk and told him what he needed and Conrad called back just three minutes later because the file in question was right there in the A section nearest the harassed runner's desk. He listened with the pedestrians swirling around him and Conrad read the file aloud and twelve minutes later he clicked the phone off with all the information he was ever going to need.

Then he hustled the Lincoln south on Seventh and dumped it in a garage a block north of the Twin Towers. He hurried down and crossed the plaza and he was already inside the south tower's lobby when Jodie called. Just eighty-eight floors below her. He was talking to the security guy at the desk, which was the voice she heard in the background. His face went blank with panic and he clicked the

phone off and took the express elevator to eighty-nine. He stepped out and breathed hard and forced himself to calm down. *Stay calm and plan.* His guess was eighty-nine would be laid out the same as eighty-eight. It was quiet and empty. Corridors ran around the elevator cores, narrow, lit by bulbs in the ceiling. There were doors opening into the individual office suites. They had rectangular wired-glass portholes set off-center at a short person's eye level. Each suite door had a metal plate listing the name of the occupant and a buzzer to press for entry.

He found the fire stairs and ran down one level. The stairwell was utilitarian. No finesse in the decor. Just plain, dusty concrete with metal handrails. Behind every fire door was an extinguisher. Above the extinguisher was a bright red cabinet with a red-painted ax clipped into place behind glass. On the wall next to the cabinet was a giant stencil in red, marking the floor number.

He came out into the eighty-eighth-floor corridor. It was equally quiet. Identical narrow width, identical lighting, same layout, same doors. He ran the wrong way and came around to CCT last. It had a light oak door, with a brass plate next to it, and a brass push button for the buzzer. He pulled the door, gently. It was locked tight. He stooped and looked in through the wired-glass porthole. He saw a reception area. Bright lights. Brass-and-oak decor. A counter to his right. Another door, straight ahead. That door was shut, and the reception area was deserted. He stood and stared through at the closed inner door and felt panic rising in his throat.

She was in there. She was in the inner office. He could feel it. She was in there, alone, a prisoner, and she needed him. She was in there and he should be in there with her. *He should have gone with her.* He stooped down and put his forehead against the cold glass and stared through at the office door. Then he heard Leon in his head, starting up with another of his golden rules. *Don't worry about why it went wrong. Just damn well put it right.*

He stepped back and glanced left and right along the corridor. Put himself underneath the light nearest the door. Reached up and unscrewed the bulb until it went out. The hot glass burned his fingers. He winced and stepped back to the door and checked again, a yard from the porthole, well out in the corridor. The reception area was brightly lit and the corridor was now dark. He could see in, but nobody would see out. You can see from a dark place into a light place, but you can't see from a light place into a dark place. A crucial difference. He stood and waited.

The inner door opened and a thickset guy stepped out of the office into reception. Closed the door gently behind him. A thickset guy in a dark suit. The guy he'd pushed down the stairs in the Key West bar. The guy who had fired the

Beretta up in Garrison. The guy who had clung to the Bravada's door handle. He walked through reception and disappeared from view. Reacher stepped forward again and studied the inner door through the glass. It stayed closed. He knocked gently on the outer door. The guy came to the porthole and peered through. Reacher stood up straight and turned his shoulder so his brown jacket filled the view.

"UPS," he said softly.

It was an office building and it was dark and it was a brown jacket, and the guy opened the door. Reacher stepped around the arc of its swing and shot his hand in and caught the guy by the throat. Do it fast enough and hard enough and you numb the guy's voice box before he can get going with any sounds. Then you dig your fingers in and keep him from falling over. The guy went heavy against his grip and Reacher ran him all the way along the corridor to the fire door and threw him backward into the stairwell. The guy bounced off the far wall and went down on the concrete, with a cracked rasping sound coming from his throat.

"Time to choose," Reacher whispered. "You help me, or you die."

A choice like that, there's only one sensible thing to do, but the guy didn't do it. He struggled up to his knees and made like he was going to fight it out. Reacher tapped him on the top of the head, just enough to send some shock down through his neck bones, and then stepped back and asked him again.

"Help me out," he said. "Or I'll kill you."

The guy shook his head to clear it and launched himself across the floor. Reacher heard Leon say *ask once, ask twice if you must, but for God's sake don't ask three times.* He kicked the guy in the chest and spun him around backward and wedged his forearm across the top of his shoulders and put a hand under his chin and wrenched once and broke his neck.

One down, but he was down without releasing any information, and in combat information is king. His gut still told him this was a small operation, but two guys or three or five could equally be called small, and there was a hell of a big difference between going in blind against two or three or five opponents. He paused in the stairwell and glanced at the fire ax in the red cabinet. Next best thing to solid information is some kind of an arresting diversion. Something to make them worried and unsettled. Something to make them pause.

He did it as quietly as he could and checked the corridor was truly empty before dragging the body back. He swung the door open soundlessly and got the guy arranged in the middle of the lobby floor. Then he closed the door again and dodged down behind the reception counter. It was chest-high, and more than ten feet long. He lay on the floor behind it and eased the silenced Steyr out of his

jacket and settled down to wait.
It felt like a long wait. He was pressed to the thin office carpet, and he could feel the unyielding concrete under it, alive with the tiny vibrations of a giant building at work. He could feel the faint bass shudder of the elevators stopping and starting. He could feel the tingle of the tension in their cables. He could feel the hum of air-conditioning and the tremor of the wind. He hooked his toes back against the resistance of the nylon pile and bunched his legs against them, ready for action.
He felt the fall of footsteps a second before he heard the click of the latch. He knew the inner door had opened because he heard the change in the acoustic. The reception area was suddenly open to a larger space. He heard four feet on the carpet and he heard them stop, like he knew they would. He waited. Present somebody with an astonishing sight, and it takes about three seconds for the maximum effect to develop. That was Reacher's experience. They look at it, they see it, their brain rejects it, their eyes bounce it back again, and it sinks in. Three whole seconds, beginning to end. He counted silently *one, two, three,* and pushed out at the base of the counter, pressed to the floor, leading with the long black silencer on the end of the Steyr. He got his arms out, then his shoulders, then his eyes.
What he saw was a disaster. The guy with the hook and the burned face was dropping a weapon and gasping and clutching at the doorframe, but he was on the wrong side of Jodie. The far side. He was on Jodie's right and the reception counter was on her left. She was a foot nearer than he was. She was much shorter, but Reacher was down on the floor looking up at an angle that put her head directly in front of his head, her body directly in front of his body. There was no clear shot. No clear shot anywhere. Jodie was in the way.
The guy with the hook and the face was making sounds in his throat and Jodie was staring down at the floor. Then there was a second guy behind them in the open doorway. The Suburban driver. He stopped behind Jodie's shoulder and stared. He was carrying a Beretta in his right hand. He stared forward and down at the floor and then he stepped alongside Jodie and pushed his way past her. He stepped a yard into the room. He stepped into clear air.
Reacher squeezed the trigger, fourteen whole pounds of pressure, and the silencer banged loud and the guy's face blew apart. It took the nine-millimeter bullet in the exact center and exploded. Blood and bone hit the ceiling and sprayed the far wall behind him.
Jodie froze in direct line with the guy with the hook. And the guy with the hook was very fast. Faster than he should have been for a crippled fifty-year-old. He went one way with his left arm and scooped the shotgun off the floor. He went the other way with his right arm and folded it around Jodie's waist. The steel

the other way with his right arm and folded it around Jodie's waist. The steel hook was bright against her suit. He was moving her before the other guy had even hit the floor. He clamped his right arm hard around her and lifted her off her feet and dragged her backward. The crash of the shot from the Steyr was still rumbling.
"How many?" Reacher screamed.
She was as fast as Leon ever was.
"Two down, one up," she screamed back.
So the guy with the hook was the only one, but he was already swinging the shotgun around. It arced up through the air and he used the momentum to crunch the pump. Reacher was caught half-exposed, low down, scrambling out from behind the counter. It was only a tiny fractional opportunity, but the guy went right ahead and took it. He fired low and the gun flashed and boomed and the reception counter splintered into ten thousand pieces. Reacher ducked his head but sharp needles of wood and metal and hot stray pellets smashed him in the side of the face like a blow from a sledgehammer, all the way from his cheek to his forehead. He felt the dull crump and the sharp agonizing sting of serious injury. It was like falling from a window and hitting the ground headfirst. He rolled up dazed and the guy was hauling Jodie backward through the doorway, crunching the pump once more against the shotgun's weight as it moved. Reacher was dull and motionless against the back wall and the muzzle was coming up on him. His forehead was numb and icy. There was terrible pain there.
He raised the Steyr. The silencer pointed straight at Jodie. He jerked it a fraction left and right. It still pointed at Jodie. The guy was making himself small behind her. He was craning around with his left hand, leveling the shotgun. His finger was tightening on the trigger. Reacher was immobile against the wall. He stared at Jodie, fixing her face in his mind before he died. Then a fair-haired woman was suddenly behind her, shouldering desperately into the guy's back, pushing him off-balance. He staggered and whirled and clubbed at her with the shotgun barrel. Reacher caught a glimpse of a pink dress as she went down.
Then the shotgun was swinging back toward him. But Jodie was bouncing and wrestling against the guy's arm. She was stamping and kicking. The guy was staggering around against her energy. He blundered with her all the way back out into the reception area and tripped against the Suburban driver's legs. He fell with Jodie and the shotgun fired against the corpse. There was deafening sound and smoke and the obscene bloom and spray of dead blood and tissue. The guy came up on his knees and Reacher tracked him all the way with the Steyr. The guy dropped the shotgun and went for his pocket and came back with a shiny short-barrel revolver. He thumbed the hammer. The click was loud. Jodie was

short-barrel revolver. He thumbed the hammer. The click was loud. Jodie was heaving left and right against his arm tight around her waist. Left and right, left and right, furiously, randomly. Reacher had no clear shot. Blood was pouring into his left eye. His forehead was pounding and bleeding. He closed the useless eye against the wetness and squinted with the right. The shiny revolver came all the way up and jammed hard into Jodie's side. She gasped and stopped moving and the guy's face came out from behind her head, smiling savagely.
"Drop the gun, asshole," he panted.
Reacher kept the Steyr exactly where it was. One eye open, one eye closed, jagged bolts of pain hammering in his head, the length of the silencer trained on the guy's distorted grin.
"I'll shoot her," the guy snarled.
"Then I'll shoot you," Reacher said. "She dies, you die."
The guy stared. Then he nodded.
"Impasse," he said.
Reacher nodded back. It looked that way. He shook his head to clear it. It just made the pain worse. Stalemate. Even if he could fire first, the guy might still get a shot off. With his finger tense on the trigger like that and the gun hard in her side, the pulse of death would probably be enough to do it. It was too much to risk. He kept the Steyr where it was and stood up slowly and pulled his shirttail out and wiped his face with it, all the time squinting one-eyed down the barrel. The guy took a breath and stood up, too, hauling Jodie with him. She tried to ease away from the pressure of the gun, but he kept her pulled in tight with his right arm. He turned his elbow outward and the hook pivoted and the point dug in against her waist.
"So we need to deal," he said.
Reacher stood and mopped his eye and said nothing. His head was buzzing with pain. Buzzing and screaming. He was beginning to understand and he was in serious trouble.
"We need to deal," the guy said again.
"No deal," Reacher replied.
The guy twisted the hook a little more and jammed the revolver in a little harder. Jodie gasped. It was a Smith and Wesson Model 60. Two-inch barrel, stainless steel, .38 caliber, five shots in the cylinder. The sort of thing a woman carries in her purse or a man conceals on his body. The barrel was so short and the guy was digging it in so hard his knuckles were hard up against Jodie's side. She was hanging forward against the pressure of his arm. Her hair was falling over her face. Her eyes were looking up straight at Reacher, and they were the loveliest eyes he had ever seen.
"Nobody says no deal to Victor Hobie," the guy snarled.

"Nobody says no deal to Victor Hobie," the guy snarled.
Reacher fought the pain and kept the Steyr steady and level on the guy's forehead, right where the pink scars met the gray skin.
"You're not Victor Hobie," he said. "You're Carl Allen, and you're a piece of shit."
There was silence. Pain was hammering in his head. Jodie was staring harder at him, questions in her eyes.
"You're not Victor Hobie," he said again. "You're Carl Allen."
The name hung in the air and the guy seemed to recoil away from it. He dragged Jodie backward, stepping over the corpse of the thickset guy, turning her to keep her body between himself and Reacher, walking slowly backward into the dark office. Reacher followed unsteadily with the Steyr held high and level. There were people in the office. Reacher saw dimmed windows and living-room furniture and three people milling around, the fair-haired woman in the silk dress and two men in suits. They were all staring at him. Staring at his gun, and the silencer, and his forehead, and the blood pouring down onto his shirt. Then they were regrouping themselves like automatons and moving toward a tight square group of sofas. They threaded their separate ways inside and sat down and placed their hands on the glass coffee table which was filling the space. Six hands on the table, three faces turned toward him, expressions of hope and fear and astonishment visible on each of them.
"You're wrong," the guy with the hook said.
He backed away with Jodie in a wide circle until he was behind the farthest sofa. Reacher moved with them all the way and stopped opposite. His Steyr was leveled right over the heads of the three cowering people leaning on the coffee table. His blood was dripping off his chin onto the back of the sofa below him.
"No, I'm right," he said. "You're Carl Allen. Born April eighteenth, 1949, south of Boston, some leafy suburb. Normal little family, going nowhere. You got drafted in the summer of 1968. Private soldier, capabilities rated below average in every category. Sent to Vietnam as an infantryman. A grunt, a humble foot soldier. War changes people, and when you got there you turned into a real bad guy. You started scamming. Buying and selling, trading drugs and girls and whatever else you could get your filthy hands on. Then you started lending money. You turned really vicious. You bought and sold favors. You lived like a king for a long time. Then somebody got wise. Pulled you out of your cozy little situation and put you in-country. The jungle. The real war. A tough unit, with a tough officer riding you. It pissed you off. First chance you got, you fragged the officer. And then his sergeant. But the unit turned you in. Very unusual. They didn't like you, did they? Probably owed you money. They called it in and two cops called Gunston and Zabrinski came out to pick you up. You want to deny

anything yet?"
The guy said nothing. Reacher swallowed. His head was hurting badly. There was real pain digging in deep behind the cuts. Real serious pain.
"They came in a Huey," he said. "A decent young kid called Kaplan was flying it. Next day he came back, flying copilot for an ace named Victor Hobie. Gunston and Zabrinski had you ready and waiting on the ground. But Hobie's Huey was hit on takeoff. It went down again, four miles away. He was killed, along with Kaplan and Gunston and Zabrinski and three other crew called Bamford and Tardelli and Soper. But you survived. You were burned and you lost your hand, but you were alive. And your evil little brain was still ticking over. You swapped dog tags with the first guy you got to. Happened to be Victor Hobie. You crawled away with his tags around your neck. Left yours on his body. Right then and there Carl Allen and his criminal past ceased to exist. You made it to a field hospital, and they thought they were treating Hobie. They wrote his name down in their records. Then you killed an orderly and got away. You said I'm not going back, because you knew as soon as you arrived anywhere somebody would realize you weren't Hobie. They'd find out who you were, and you'd be back in the shit. So you just disappeared. A new life, a new name. A clean slate. You want to deny anything yet?"
Allen tightened his grip on Jodie.
"It's all bullshit," he said.
Reacher shook his head. Pain flashed in his eye like a camera.
"No, it's all true," he said. "Nash Newman just identified Victor Hobie's skeleton. It's lying in a casket in Hawaii with your dog tags around its neck."
"Bullshit," Allen said again.
"It was the teeth," Reacher said. "Mr. and Mrs. Hobie sent their boy to the dentist thirty-five times, to give him perfect teeth. Newman says they're definitive. He spent an hour with the X rays, programming the computer. Then he recognized the exact same skull when he walked back past the casket. Definitive match."
Allen said nothing.
"It worked for thirty years," Reacher said. "Until those two old people finally made enough noise and somebody poked around. And now it's not going to work any longer, because you've got me to answer to."
Allen sneered. It made the unmarked side of his face as ugly as the burns.
"Why the hell should I answer to you?"
Reacher blinked the blood out of his eye over the unwavering Steyr.
"A lot of reasons," he said quietly. "I'm a representative. I'm here to represent a lot of people. Like Victor Truman Hobie. He was a hero, but because of you he

was written off as a deserter and a murderer. His folks have been in agony, thirty long years. I represent them. And I represent Gunston and Zabrinski, too. They were both MP lieutenants, both twenty-four years old. I was an MP lieutenant when I was twenty-four. They were killed because of what you did wrong. That's why you're going to answer to me, Allen. Because I'm them. Scum like you gets people like me killed."

Allen's eyes were blank. He shifted Jodie's weight to keep her directly in front of him. Twisted the hook and jammed the gun in harder. He nodded, just a fractional movement of his head.

"OK, I was Carl Allen," he said. "I admit it, smart guy. I was Carl Allen, and then that was over. Then I was Victor Hobie. I was Victor Hobie for a real long time, longer than I was ever Carl Allen, but I guess that's over now, too. So now I'm going to be Jack Reacher."

"What?"

"That's what you've got," Allen said. "That's the deal. That's your trade. Your name, for this woman's life."

"What?" Reacher said again.

"I want your identity," Allen said. "I want your name."

Reacher just stared at him.

"You're a drifter, no family," Allen said. "Nobody will ever miss you."

"Then what?"

"Then you die," Allen said. "We can't have two people with the same name running around, can we? It's a fair trade. Your life, for the woman's life."

Jodie was staring straight at Reacher, waiting.

"No deal," Reacher said.

"I'll shoot her," Allen said.

Reacher shook his head again. The pain was fearsome. It was building stronger and spreading behind both his eyes.

"You won't shoot her," he said. "Think about it, Allen. Think about yourself. You're a selfish piece of shit. The way you are, you're always number one. You shoot her, I'll shoot you. You're twelve feet away from me. I'm aiming at your head. You pull your trigger, I pull mine. She dies, you die one-hundredth of a second later. You won't shoot me either, because you start to line up on me, you go down before you're even halfway there. Think about it. Impasse."

He stared him down through the pain and the gloom. A classic standoff. But there was a problem. A serious flaw in his analysis. He knew that. It came to him in a cold flash of panic. It came to Allen at the exact same moment. Reacher knew that, too, because he saw it settle in his eyes, complacently.

"You're miscalculating," Allen said. "You're missing something."

Reacher made no response.
“Right now it’s a stalemate,” Allen said. “And it always will be, as long as I’m standing here and you’re standing there. But how long are you going to be standing there?”
Reacher swallowed against the pain. It was hammering at him.
“I’ll be standing here as long as it takes,” he said. “I’ve got plenty of time. Like you figured, I’m a drifter. I don’t have any pressing appointments to get to.”
Allen smiled.
“Brave words,” he said. “But you’re bleeding from the head. You know that? You’ve got a piece of metal sticking in your head. I can see it from here.”
Jodie nodded desperately, eyes full of terror.
“Check it out, Mr. Curry,” Allen said. “Tell him.”
The guy on the sofa underneath the Steyr crabbed around and knelt up. He kept well away from Reacher’s gun arm and craned his head around to look. Then his face creased in horror.
“It’s a nail,” he said. “A woodworking nail. You’ve got a nail in your head.”
“From the reception desk,” Allen said.
The guy called Curry ducked down again and Reacher knew it was true. As soon as the words were spoken, the pain doubled and quadrupled and exploded. It was a piercing agony centered in his forehead, an inch above his eye. The adrenaline had masked it for a long time. But adrenaline doesn’t last forever. He forced his mind away from it with all the power of his will, but it was still there. Bad pain, razor-sharp and nausea-dull all at the same time, booming and throbbing through his head, sending brilliant lightning strikes into his eyes. The blood had soaked his shirt, all the way down to his waist. He blinked, and saw nothing at all with his left eye. It was full of blood. Blood was running down his neck and left arm and dripping off his fingertips.
“I’m fine,” he said. “Don’t anybody worry about me.”
“Brave words,” Allen said again. “But you’re in pain and you’re losing a lot of blood. You won’t outlast me, Reacher. You think you’re tough, but you’re nothing next to me. I crawled away from that helicopter with no hand. Severed arteries. I was on fire. I survived three weeks in the jungle like that. Then I got myself home free. Then I lived with danger for thirty years. So I’m the tough guy here. I’m the toughest guy in the world. Mentally and physically. You couldn’t outlast me even if you didn’t have a nail in your damn head. So don’t kid yourself, OK?”
Jodie was staring at him. Her hair was golden in the faint diffused light from the window blinds. It was hanging forward over her face, parted by the sweep of her brow. He could see her eyes. Her mouth. The curve of her neck. Her slim strong

body, tense against Allen's arm. The hook, shining against the color of her suit. The pain was hammering in his head. His soaked shirt was cold against his skin. There was blood in his mouth. It tasted metallic, like aluminum. He was feeling the first faint tremors in his shoulder. The Steyr was starting to feel heavy in his hand.

"And I'm motivated," Allen said. "I've worked hard for what I've got. I'm going to keep it. I'm a genius and a survivor. You think I'm going to let you take me down? You think you're the first person who ever tried?"

Reacher swayed against the pain.

"Now let's up the stakes a little," Allen called to him.

He forced Jodie upward with all the strength in his arm. Jammed the gun in so hard she bent away from it, folding forward against the arm and sideways against the gun. He hauled her up so he was invisible behind her. Then the hook moved. The arm came up from crushing her waist to crushing her chest. The hook plowed over her breasts. She gasped in pain. The hook moved up until the arm was at a steep angle crushing her body and the hook was resting on the side of her face. Then the elbow turned out and the steel tip dug into the skin of her cheek.

"I could rip her open," Allen said. "I could tear her face off, and there's nothing you could do about it except feel worse. Stress makes it worse, right? The pain? You're starting to feel faint, right? You're on your way out, Reacher. You're going down. And when you're down, the stalemate is over, believe me."

Reacher shuddered. Not from the pain, but because he knew Allen was right. He could feel his knees. They were there, and they were strong. But a fit man never feels his knees. They're just a part of him. Feeling them valiantly holding up 250 pounds of body weight means that pretty soon they won't be. It's an early warning.

"You're going down, Reacher," Allen called again. "You're shaking, you know that? You're slipping away from us. Couple of minutes, I'll walk right over and shoot you in the head. All the time in the world."

Reacher shuddered again and scoped it out. It was hard to think. He was dizzy. He had an open head wound. His skull was penetrated. Nash Newman flashed into his mind, holding up bones in a classroom. Maybe Nash would explain it, many years in the future. *A sharp object penetrated the frontal lobe—here—and pierced the meninges and caused a hemorrhage.* His gun hand was shaking.

Then Leon was there, scowling and muttering *if plan A doesn't work, move on to plan B.*

Then the Louisiana cop was there, the guy from years ago in another life, talking about his .38-caliber revolvers, saying *you just can't rely on them to put a guy*

down, not if he's coming at you all pumped up on angel dust. Reacher saw the guy's unhappy face. *You can't rely on a .38 to put a man down.* And a short-barrel .38, worse still. Hard to hit a target with a short barrel. And with a struggling woman in your arms, harder still. *Although her struggling might put the bullet dead center by accident.* His head spun. It was being pounded by a giant with a jackhammer. His strength was draining out of him from the inside. His right eye was jacked open and it was dry and stinging, like needles were in it. *Five more minutes, maybe,* he was thinking. *Then I'm done for.*

He was in a rented car, next to Jodie, driving back from the zoo. He was talking. It was warm in the car. There was sun and glass. He was saying *the basis of any scam is show them what they want to see.* The Steyr wobbled in his hand and he thought *OK, Leon, here's plan B. See how you like it.*

His knees buckled and he swayed. He came back upright and brought the Steyr back to the only thin sliver of Allen's head he could make out. The muzzle wavered through a circle. A small circle at first, then a larger one as the weight of the gun overwhelmed the control in his shoulder. He coughed and pushed blood out of his mouth with his tongue. The Steyr was coming down. He watched the front sight dropping like a strong man was pulling on it. He tried to bring it up, but it wouldn't come. He forced his hand upward, but it just moved sideways, like an invisible force was deflecting it. His knees went again and he jerked back upright like a spasm. The Steyr was miles away. It was hanging down to the right. It was pointing at the desk. His elbow was locked against its weight and his arm was bending. *Allen's hand was moving.* He watched it one-eyed and wondered *is what I feel for Jodie as good as being pumped up on angel dust?* The barrel snagged out from a fold of cloth and came free of her jacket. *Am I going to make it?* His knees were going and he started shaking. *Wait. Just wait.*

Allen's wrist snapped forward. He saw it move. It was very quick. He saw the black hole in the stainless barrel. *It was clear of her body.* She smashed her head down and he whipped the Steyr back and got it pretty close to the target before Allen fired. It was within a couple of inches. That was all. A couple of lousy inches. *Fast,* he thought, *but not fast* enough. He saw the revolver hammer click forward and then a flower of bright flame bloomed out from the barrel and a freight train hit him in the chest. The roar of the shot was completely lost behind the immense physical impact of the bullet hitting him. It was a blow from a giant hammer the size of a planet. It thumped and crashed and deafened him from the inside. There was no pain. No pain at all. Just a huge cold numbness in his chest and a silent vacuum of total calm in his mind. He thought hard for a split second and fought to stay firm on his feet and he kept his eye wide open long enough to

concentrate on the puff of soot coming from the Steyr's silencer. Then he moved his eye the last little fraction and watched Allen's head burst open twelve feet away. There was an explosion of blood and bone in the air, a cloud three or four feet wide, and it was spreading like a mist. He asked himself *is he dead now?* and when he heard himself answer *surely he must be* he let himself go and rolled his eye up in his head and fell backward through perfect still silent blackness that continued forever and ended nowhere.

18

HE KNEW HE was dying because faces were coming toward him and all of them were faces he recognized. They came in a long stream, unending, ones and twos together, and there were no strangers among them. He had heard it would be like this. Your life was supposed to flash before your eyes. Everybody said so. And now it was happening. So he was dying.

He guessed when the faces stopped, that was it. He wondered who the last one would be. There were a number of candidates. He wondered who chose the order. Whose decision was it? He felt mildly irritated he wasn't allowed to specify. And what would happen next? When the last face was gone, what then?

But something was going seriously wrong. A face loomed up who he didn't know. It was then he realized the Army was in charge of the parade. It had to be. Only the Army could accidentally include someone he had never seen before. A complete stranger, in the wrong place at the wrong time. He supposed it was fitting. He had lived most of his life under the control of the Army. He supposed it was pretty natural they would take charge of organizing this final part. And one mistake was tolerable. Normal, even acceptable, for the Army.

But this guy was touching him. Hitting him. Hurting him. He suddenly realized the parade had finished *before* this guy. This guy *wasn't in* the parade at all. He came *after* it. Maybe this guy was there to finish him off. Yes, that was it. Had to be that way. This guy was here to make sure he died on schedule. The parade was over, and the Army couldn't let him survive it. Why should they go to all the trouble of putting it on and then have him survive it? That would be no good. No good at all. That would be a serious lapse in procedure. He tried to recall who had come before this guy. The second-to-last person, who was really the last person. He didn't remember. He hadn't paid attention. He slipped away and died without remembering who had been the last face in his parade.

HE WAS DEAD, but he was still thinking. Was that OK? Was this the afterlife? That would be a hell of a thing. He had lived nearly thirty-nine years assuming there was no afterlife. Some people had agreed with him, others had argued with him. But he'd always been adamant about it. Now he was right there in it. Somebody was going to come sneering up to him and say *told you* so. He would, if the boot was on the other foot. He wouldn't let somebody get away with being absolutely wrong about something, not without a little friendly ribbing at least.

He saw Jodie Garber. She was going to tell him. No, that wasn't possible. She

wasn't dead. Only a dead person could yell at you in the afterlife, surely. A live person couldn't do it. That was pretty obvious. A live person wasn't in the afterlife. And Jodie Garber was a live person. He'd made certain of it. That had been the whole damn point. And anyway, he was pretty sure he had never discussed the afterlife with Jodie Garber. Or had he? Maybe many years ago, when she was still a kid? But it *was* Jodie Garber. And she *was* going to speak to him. She sat down in front of him and pushed her hair behind her ears. Long blond hair, small ears.

"Hi, Reacher," she said.

It was her voice. No doubt about it. No mistake. So maybe she was dead. Maybe it had been an automobile accident. That would be a hell of an irony. Maybe she was hit by a speeding truck on lower Broadway, on her way home from the World Trade Center.

"Hey, Jodie," he said.

She smiled. There was communication. So she was dead. Only a dead person could hear another dead person speak, surely. But he had to know.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"St. Vincent's," she said.

Saint Peter he had heard of. He was the guy at the gates. He had seen pictures. Well, not really pictures, but cartoons, at least. He was an old guy in a robe, with a beard. He stood at a lectern and asked questions about why you should be let in. But he didn't remember Saint Peter asking him any questions. Maybe that came later. Maybe you had to go out again, and then try to get back in.

But who was Saint Vincent? Maybe he was the guy who ran the place you stayed while you were waiting for Saint Peter's questions. Like the boot camp part. Maybe old Vincent ran the Fort Dix equivalent. Well, that would be no problem. He'd murdered boot camp. Easiest time he'd ever done. He could do it again. But he was annoyed about it. He'd finished up a major, for God's sake. He'd been a star. He had medals. Why the hell should he do boot camp all over again?

And why was Jodie here? She was supposed to be alive. He realized his left hand was clenching. He was intensely irritated. He'd saved her life, because he loved her. So why was she dead now? What the hell was going on? He tried to struggle upright. Something was tying him down. What the hell? He was going to get some answers or he was going to knock some heads together.

"Take it easy," Jodie said to him.

"I want to see Saint Vincent," he said. "And I want to see him right now. Tell him to get his sorry ass in this room inside five minutes or I'm going to be seriously pissed off."

She looked at him and nodded.
“OK,” she said.
Then she looked away and stood up. She disappeared from his sight and he lay back down. This wasn’t any kind of a boot camp. It was too quiet, and the pillows were soft.

LOOKING BACK, IT should have been a shock. But it wasn’t. The room just swam into focus and he saw the decor and the shiny equipment and he thought *hospital*. He changed from being dead to being alive with the same little mental shrug a busy man gives when he realizes he’s wrong about what day it is.
The room was bright with sun. He moved his head and saw he had a window. Jodie was sitting in a chair next to it, reading. He kept his breathing low and watched her. Her hair was washed and shiny. It fell past her shoulders, and she was twirling a strand between her finger and thumb. She was wearing a yellow sleeveless dress. Her shoulders were brown with summer. He could see the little knobs of bone on top. Her arms were long and lean. Her legs were crossed. She was wearing tan penny loafers that matched the dress. Her ankles glowed brown in the sun.
“Hey, Jodie,” he said.
She turned her head and looked at him. Searched his face for something and when she found it she smiled.
“Hey yourself,” she said. She dropped the book and stood up. Walked three paces and bent and kissed him gently on the lips.
“St. Vincent’s,” he said. “You told me, but I was confused.”
She nodded.
“You were full of morphine,” she said. “They were pumping it in like crazy. Your bloodstream would have kept all the addicts in New York happy.”
He nodded. Glanced at the sun in the window. It looked like afternoon.
“What day is it?”
“It’s July. You’ve been out three weeks.”
“Christ, I ought to feel hungry.”
She moved around the foot of the bed and came up on his left. Laid her hand on his forearm. It was turned palm-up and there were tubes running into the veins of his elbow.
“They’ve been feeding you,” she said. “I made sure you got what you like. You know, lots of glucose and saline.”
He nodded.
“Can’t beat saline,” he said.
She went quiet.

"What?" he asked.
"Do you remember?"
He nodded again.
"Everything," he said.
She swallowed.
"I don't know what to say," she whispered. "You took a bullet for me."
"My fault," he said. "I was too slow, is all. I was supposed to trick him and get him first. But apparently I survived it. So don't say anything. I mean it. Don't ever mention it."
"But I have to say thank you," she whispered.
"Maybe I should say thank you," he said. "Feels good to know somebody worth taking a bullet for."
She nodded, but not because she was agreeing. It was just random physical motion designed to keep her from crying.
"So how am I?" he asked.
She paused for a long moment.
"I'll get the doctor," she said quietly. "He can tell you better than me."
She went out and a guy in a white coat came in. Reacher smiled. It was the guy the Army had sent to finish him off at the end of his parade. He was a small, wide, hairy man who could have found work wrestling.
"You know anything about computers?" he asked.
Reacher shrugged and started worrying this was a coded lead-in to bad news about a brain injury, impairment, loss of memory, loss of function.
"Computers?" he said. "Not really."
"OK, try this," the doctor said. "Imagine a big Cray supercomputer humming away. We feed it everything we know about human physiology and everything we know about gunshot wounds and then we ask it to design us a male person best equipped to survive a thirty-eight in the chest. Suppose it hums away for a week. What does it come up with?"
Reacher shrugged again. "I don't know."
"A picture of you, my friend," the doctor said. "That's what. The damn bullet didn't even make it into your chest. Your pectoral muscle is so thick and so dense it stopped it dead. Like a three-inch kevlar vest. It popped out the other side of the muscle wall and smashed a rib, but it went no farther."
"So why was I out three weeks?" Reacher asked immediately. "Not for a muscle wound or a broken rib, that's for damn sure. Is my head OK?"
The doctor did a weird thing. He clapped his hands and punched the air. Then he stepped closer, beaming all over his face.
"I was worried about it," he said. "Real worried about it. Bad wound. I would

have figured it for a nail gun, until they told me it was shotgun debris from manufactured furniture. It penetrated your skull and was about an eighth inch into your brain. Frontal lobe, my friend, bad place to have a nail. If I had to have a nail in my skull, the frontal lobe would definitely not be my first choice. But if I had to see a nail in anybody *else's* frontal lobe I'd pick yours, I guess, because you've got a skull thicker than Neanderthal man's. Anybody normal, that nail would have been all the way in, and that would have been thank you and good night."
"So am I OK?" Reacher asked again.
"You just saved us ten thousand dollars in tests," the doctor said happily. "I told you the news about the chest, and what did you do? Analytically? You compared it with your own internal database, realized it wasn't a very serious wound, realized it couldn't have needed three weeks of coma, remembered your other injury, put two and two together and asked the question you asked. Immediately. No hesitation. Fast, logical thinking, assembly of pertinent information, rapid conclusion, lucid questioning of the source of a possible answer. Nothing wrong with your head, my friend. Take that as a professional opinion."
Reacher nodded slowly. "So when can I get out of here?"
The doctor took the medical chart off the foot of the bed. There was a mass of paper clipped to a metal board. He riffed it through. "Well, your health is excellent in general, but we better watch you a while. Couple more days, maybe."
"Nuts to that," Reacher said. "I'm leaving tonight."
The doctor nodded. "Well, see how you feel in an hour."
He stepped close and stretched up to a valve on the bottom of one of the IV bags. Clicked it a notch and tapped a tube with his finger. Watched carefully and nodded and walked back out of the room. He passed Jodie in the doorway. She was walking in with a guy in a seersucker jacket. He was about fifty, pale, short gray hair. Reacher watched him and thought *a buck gets ten this is the Pentagon guy.*
"Reacher, this is General Mead," Jodie said.
"Department of the Army," Reacher said.
The guy in the jacket looked at him, surprised. "Have we met?"
Reacher shook his head. "No, but I knew one of you would be sniffing around, soon as I was up and running."
Mead smiled. "We've been practically camped out here. To put it bluntly, we'd like you to keep quiet about the Carl Allen situation."
"Not a chance," Reacher said.
Mead smiled again and waited. He was enough of an Army bureaucrat to know

the steps. Leon used to say *something for nothing, that's a foreign language.*
"The Hobies," Reacher said. "Fly them down to D.C. first class, put them up in a five-star hotel, show them their boy's name on the Wall and make sure there's a shitload of brass in full-dress uniform saluting like crazy the whole time they're doing it. Then I'll keep quiet."
Mead nodded.
"It'll be done," he said. He got up unbidden and went back outside. Jodie sat down on the foot of the bed.
"Tell me about the police," Reacher said. "Have I got questions to answer?"
She shook her head.
"Allen was a cop killer," she said. "You stick around NYPD territory and you'll never get another ticket in your life. It was self-defense, everybody's cool."
"What about my gun? It was stolen."
"No, it was Allen's gun. You wrestled it away from him. Roomful of witnesses saw you do it."
He nodded slowly. Saw the spray of blood and brains all over again as he shot him. A pretty good shot, he thought. Dark room, stress, a nail in his head, a .38 slug in his chest, bull's-eye. Pretty damn close to the perfect shot. Then he saw the hook again, up at Jodie's face, hard steel against the honey of her skin.
"You OK?" he asked her.
"I'm fine," she said.
"You sure? No bad dreams?"
"No bad dreams. I'm a big girl now."
He nodded again. Recalled their first night together. A big girl. Seemed like a million years ago.
"But are *you* OK?" she asked him back.
"The doctor thinks so. He called me Neanderthal man."
"No, seriously."
"How do I look?"
"I'll show you," she said.
She ducked away to the bathroom and came back with the mirror from the wall. It was a round thing, framed in plastic. She propped it on his legs and he steadied it with his right hand and looked. He still had a fearsome tan. Blue eyes. White teeth. His head had been shaved. The hair had grown back an eighth of an inch. On the left of his face was a peppering of scars. The nail hole in his forehead was lost among the debris of a long and violent life. He could make it out because it was redder and newer than the rest, but it was no bigger than the mark a half-inch away where his brother, Joe, had caught him with a shard of glass in some long-forgotten childhood dispute over nothing, in the same exact year

Hobie's Huey went down. He tilted the mirror and saw broad strapping over his chest, snowy white against the tan. He figured he had lost maybe thirty pounds. Back to 220, his normal weight. He handed the mirror back to Jodie and tried to sit up. He was suddenly dizzy.
"I want to get out of here," he said.
"You sure?" she asked.
He nodded. He was sure, but he felt very sleepy. He put his head back on the pillow, just temporarily. He was warm and the pillow was soft. His head weighed a ton and his neck muscles were powerless to move it. The room was darkening. He swiveled his eyes upward and saw the IV bags hanging in the far distance above him. He saw the valve the doctor had adjusted. He had clicked it. He remembered the plastic sound. There was writing on the IV bag. The writing was upside down. He focused on it. Concentrated hard. The writing was green. It read *Morphine.*
"Shit," he whispered, and the room spun away into total darkness.

WHEN HE OPENED his eyes again, the sun had moved backward. It was earlier in the day. Morning, not afternoon. Jodie was sitting in her chair by the window, reading. The same book. She was a half-inch farther through it. Her dress was blue, not yellow.
"It's tomorrow," he said.
She closed the book and stood up. Stepped over and bent and kissed his lips. He kissed her back and clamped his teeth and pulled the IV needles out of his arm and dropped them over the side of the bed. They started a steady drip onto the floor. He hauled himself upright against the pillows and smoothed a hand over his bristly scalp.
"How do you feel?" she asked.
He sat still in the bed and concentrated on a slow survey up his body, starting with his toes and ending with the top of his head.
"Fine," he said.
"There are people here to see you," she said. "They heard you'd come around."
He nodded and stretched. He could feel the chest wound. It was on the left. There was weakness there. He reached up with his left hand to the IV stand. It was a vertical stainless steel bar with a spiral curl at the top where the bags slipped on. He put his hand over the curl and squeezed hard. He felt bruising in his elbow where the needles had been and sensitivity in his chest where the bullet had been, but the steel spiral still flattened from round to oval. He smiled.
"OK, send them in," he said.
He knew who they were before they got inside. He could tell by the sound. The

wheels on the oxygen cart squeaked. The old lady stood aside and let her husband enter first. She was wearing a brand-new dress. He was in the same old blue serge suit. He wheeled the cart past her and paused. He kept hold of the handle with his left hand and drew his right up into a trembling salute. He held it for a long moment and Reacher replied with the same. He threw his best parade-ground move and held it steady, meaning every second of it. Then he snapped it down and the old guy wheeled the cart slowly toward him with his wife fussing behind.

They were changed people. Still old, still feeble, but serene. Knowing your son is dead is better than not knowing, he guessed. He tracked back to Newman's windowless lab in Hawaii and recalled Allen's casket with Victor Hobie's skeleton in it. Victor Hobie's old bones. He remembered them pretty well. They were distinctive. The smooth arch of the brow, the high round cranium. The even white teeth. The long, clean limbs. It was a noble skeleton.

"He was a hero, you know."

The old man nodded.

"He did his duty."

"Much more than that," Reacher replied. "I read his record. I talked with General DeWitt. He was a brave flyer who did more than his duty. He saved a lot of lives with his courage. If he'd lived, he'd have three stars now. He'd be General Victor Truman Hobie, with a big command somewhere, or a big job in the Pentagon."

It was what they needed to hear, but it was still true. The old woman put her thin pale hand over her husband's and they sat in silence, eyes moist and focused eleven thousand miles away. They were telling themselves stories of what might have been. The past stretched away straight and uncomplicated and now it was neatly amputated by a noble combat death, leaving only honest dreams ahead of it. They were recounting those dreams for the first time, because now they were legitimate. Those dreams were fortifying them just like the oxygen hissing in and out of the bottle in time with the old man's ragged breathing.

"I can die happy now," he said.

Reacher shook his head.

"Not yet you can't," he said. "You have to go see the Wall. His name will be there. I want you to bring me a photograph of it."

The old man nodded and his wife smiled a watery smile.

"Miss Garber told us you might be living over in Garrison," she said. "You might be our neighbor."

Reacher nodded.

"It's possible," he said.

"Miss Garber is a fine young woman."

"Miss Garber is a fine young woman."
"Yes, ma'am, she is."
"Stop your nonsense," the old man said to her. Then they told him they couldn't stay, because their neighbor had driven them down and had to get back. Reacher watched them all the way out to the corridor. Soon as they were gone, Jodie came back in, smiling.
"The doctor says you can leave."
"So can you drive me? Did you get a new car yet?"
She shook her head. "Just a rental. No time for shopping. Hertz brought me a Mercury. It's got satellite navigation."
He stretched his arms above his head and flexed his shoulders. They felt OK. Surprisingly good. His ribs were fine. No pain.
"I need clothes," he said. "I guess those old ones got ruined."
She nodded. "Nurses sliced them off with scissors."
"You were here for that?"
"I've been here all the time," she said. "I'm living in a room down the hall."
"What about work?"
"Leave of absence," she said. "I told them, agree or I quit."
She ducked down to a laminate cupboard and came out with a stack of clothes. New jeans, new shirt, new jacket, new socks and shorts, all folded and piled together, his old shoes squared on top, Army-style.
"They're nothing special," she said. "I didn't want to take too much time out. I wanted to be with you when you woke up."
"You sat around here for three weeks?"
"Felt like three years," she said. "You were all scrunched up. Comatose. You looked awful. In a real bad way."
"This satellite thing," he said. "Does it have Garrison on it?"
"You going up there?"
He shrugged.
"I guess. I need to take it easy, right? Country air might do me good."
Then he looked away from her.
"Maybe you could stay with me awhile, you know, help me recover."
He threw back the sheet and slid his feet to the floor. Stood up, slow and unsteady, and started to dress, while she held his elbow to keep him from falling.

The Visitor

1

PEOPLE SAY THAT *knowledge is power. The more knowledge, the more power. Suppose you knew the winning numbers for the lottery? All of them? Not guessed them, not dreamed them, but really knew them? What would you do? You would run to the store. You would mark those numbers on the play card. And you would win.*

Same for the stock market. Suppose you really knew what was going to go way up? You're not talking about a hunch or a gut feeling. You're not talking about a trend or a percentage game or a whisper or a tip. You're talking about knowledge. Real, hard knowledge. Suppose you had it? What would you do? You would call your broker. You would buy. Then later you'd sell, and you'd be rich. Same for basketball, same for the horses, whatever. Football, hockey, next year's World Series, any kind of sports at all, if you could predict the future, you'd be home free. No question. Same for the Oscars, same for the Nobel prize, same for the first snowfall of winter. Same for anything.

Same for killing people.

Suppose you wanted to kill people. You would need to know ahead of time how to do it. That part is not too difficult. There are many ways. Some of them are better than others. Most of them have drawbacks. So you use what knowledge you've got, and you invent a new way. You think, and you think, and you think, and you come up with the perfect method.

You pay a lot of attention to the setup. Because the perfect method is not an easy method, and careful preparation is very important. But that stuff is meat and potatoes to you. You have no problem with careful preparation. No problem at all. How could you, with your intelligence? After all your training?

You know the big problems will come afterward. How do you make sure you get away with it? You use your knowledge. You know more than most people about how the cops work. You've seen them on duty, many times, sometimes close-up. You know what they look for. So you don't leave anything for them to find. You go through it all in your head, very precisely and very exactly and very carefully. Just as carefully as you would mark the play card you knew for sure was going to win you a fortune.

People say that knowledge is power. The more knowledge, the more power. Which makes you just about the most powerful person on earth. When it comes

to killing people. And then getting away with it.

LIFE IS FULL of decisions and judgments and guesses, and it gets to the point where you're so accustomed to making them you keep right on making them even when you don't strictly need to. You get into a *what if* thing, and you start speculating about what you would do if some problem was yours instead of somebody else's. It gets to be a habit. It was a habit Jack Reacher had in spades. Which was why he was sitting alone at a restaurant table and gazing at the backs of two guys twenty feet away and wondering if it would be enough just to warn them off or if he would have to go the extra mile and break their arms.

It was a question of dynamics. From the start the dynamics of the city meant that a brand-new Italian place in Tribeca like the one Reacher was in was going to stay pretty empty until the food guy from the *New York Times* wrote it up or an *Observer* columnist spotted some celebrity in there two nights in a row. But neither thing had happened yet and the place was still uncrowded, which made it the perfect choice for a lonely guy looking to eat dinner near his girlfriend's apartment while she worked late at the office. The dynamics of the city. They made it inevitable Reacher would be in there. They made it inevitable the two guys he was watching would be in there, too. Because the dynamics of the city meant any bright new commercial venture would sooner or later get a visit on behalf of somebody wanting a steady three hundred bucks a week in exchange for not sending his boys in to smash it up with baseball bats and ax handles.

The two guys Reacher was watching were standing close to the bar, talking quietly to the owner. The bar was a token affair built across the corner of the room. It made a neat sharp triangle about seven or eight feet on a side. It was not really a bar in the sense that anybody was ever going to sit there and drink anything. It was just a focal point. It was somewhere to keep the liquor bottles. They were crowded three-deep on glass shelves in front of sandblasted mirrors. The register and the credit card machine were on the bottom shelf. The owner was a small nervous guy and he had backed away into the point of the triangle and was standing with his backside jammed against the cash drawer. His arms were folded tight across his chest, defensively. Reacher could see his eyes. They were showing something halfway between disbelief and panic and they were darting all around the room.

It was a large room, easily sixty feet by sixty, exactly square. The ceiling was high, maybe twenty or twenty-five feet. It was made of pressed tin, sandblasted back to a dull glow. The building was more than a hundred years old, and the room had probably been used for everything, one time or another. Maybe it had started out as a factory. The windows were certainly large enough and numerous enough to illuminate some kind of an industrial operation back when the city

was only five stories tall. Then maybe it had become a store. Maybe even an automobile showroom. It was big enough. Now it was an Italian restaurant. Not a checked-red-tablecloth and Mama's-sauce type of Italian restaurant, but the type of place which has three hundred thousand dollars invested up front in bleached avant-garde decor and which gives you seven or eight handmade ravioli parcels on a large plate and calls them a meal. Reacher had eaten there ten times in the four weeks it had been open and he always left feeling hungry. But the quality was so good he was telling people about it, which really had to mean something, because Reacher was no kind of a gourmet. The place was named Mostro's, which as far as he understood Italian translated as *monster's*. He wasn't sure what the name referred to. Certainly not the size of the portions. But it had some kind of a resonance, and the whole place with its pale maple and white walls and dull aluminum accents was an attractive space. The people who worked there were amiable and confident. There were whole operas played beginning to end through excellent loudspeakers placed high on the walls. In Reacher's inexpert opinion he was watching the start of a big reputation.

But the big reputation was obviously slow to spread. The spare avant-garde decor made it OK to have only twenty tables in a sixty-by-sixty space, but in four weeks he had never seen more than three of them occupied. Once he had been the only customer during the whole ninety-minute span he spent in the place. Tonight there was just one other couple eating, five tables away. They were sitting face-to-face across from each other, side-on to him. The guy was medium-sized and sandy. Short sandy hair, fair mustache, light brown suit, brown shoes. The woman was thin and dark, in a skirt and a jacket. There was an imitation-leather briefcase resting against the table leg next to her right foot. They were both maybe thirty-five and looked tired and worn and slightly dowdy. They were comfortable enough together, but they weren't talking much.

The two guys at the bar were talking. That was for sure. They were leaning over, bending forward from the waist, talking fast and persuading hard. The owner was against the register, bending backward by an equal amount. It was like the three of them were trapped in a powerful gale blowing through the room. The two guys were a lot bigger than medium-sized. They were dressed in identical dark wool coats which gave them breadth and bulk. Reacher could see their faces in the dull mirrors behind the liquor bottles. Olive skin, dark eyes. Not Italians. Syrians or Lebanese maybe, with their Arab scrappiness bred out of them by a generation of living in America. They were busy making one point after another. The guy on the right was making a sweeping gesture with his hand. It was easy to see it represented a bat plowing through the bottles on the shelf. Then the hand was chopping up and down. The guy was demonstrating

how the shelves could be smashed. *One blow could smash them all, top to bottom* , he was suggesting. The owner was going pale. He was glancing sideways at his shelves.
Then the guy on the left shot his cuff and tapped the face of his watch and turned to leave. His partner straightened up and followed him. He trailed his hand over the nearest table and knocked a plate to the floor. It shattered on the tile, loud and dissonant against the opera floating in the air. The sandy guy and the dark woman sat still and looked away. The two guys walked slowly to the door, heads up, confident. Reacher watched them all the way out to the sidewalk. Then the owner came out from behind the bar and knelt down and raked through the fragments of the broken plate with his fingertips.
“You OK?” Reacher called to him.
Soon as the words were out, he knew it was a dumb thing to say. The guy just shrugged and put an all-purpose miserable look on his face. He cupped his hands on the floor and started butting the shards into a pile. Reacher slid out of his chair and stepped away from the table and squared his napkin on the tile next to him and started collecting the debris into it. The couple five tables away was watching him.
“When are they coming back?” Reacher asked.
“An hour,” the guy said.
“How much do they want?”
The guy shrugged again and smiled a bitter smile.
“I get a start-up discount,” he said. “Two hundred a week, goes to four when the place picks up.”
“You want to pay?”
The guy made another sad face. “I want to stay in business, I guess. But paying out two bills a week ain’t exactly going to help me do that.”
The sandy guy and the dark woman were looking at the opposite wall, but they were listening. The opera fell away to a minor-key aria and the diva started in on it with a low mournful note.
“Who were they?” Reacher asked quietly.
“Not Italians,” the guy said. “Just some punks.”
“Can I use your phone?”
The guy nodded.
“You know an office-supply store open late?” Reacher asked.
“Broadway, two blocks over,” the guy said. “Why? You got business to attend to?”
Reacher nodded.
“Yeah, business,” he said.

He stood up and slid around behind the bar. There was a new telephone next to a new reservations book. The book looked like it had never been opened. He picked up the phone and dialed a number and waited two beats until it was answered a mile away and forty floors up.
“Hello?” she said.
“Hey, Jodie,” he said.
“Hey, Reacher, what’s new?”
“You going to be finished anytime soon?”
He heard her sigh.
“No, this is an all-nighter,” she said. “Complex law, and they need an opinion like yesterday. I’m real sorry.”
“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “I’ve got something to do. Then I guess I’ll head back on up to Garrison.”
“OK, take care of yourself,” she said. “I love you.”
He heard the crackle of legal documents and the phone went down. He hung up and came out from behind the bar and stepped back to his table. He left forty dollars trapped under his espresso saucer and headed for the door.
“Good luck,” he called.
The guy crouched on the floor nodded vaguely and the couple at the distant table watched him go. He turned his collar up and shrugged down into his coat and left the opera behind him and stepped out to the sidewalk. It was dark and the air was chill with fall. Small haloes of fog were starting up around the lights. He walked east to Broadway and scanned through the neon for the office store. It was a narrow place packed with items marked with prices on large pieces of fluorescent card cut in the shape of stars. Everything was a bargain, which suited Reacher fine. He bought a small labeling machine and a tube of superglue. Then he hunched back down in his coat and headed north to Jodie’s apartment.
His four-wheel-drive was parked in the garage under her building. He drove it up the ramp and turned south on Broadway and west back to the restaurant. He slowed on the street and glanced in through the big windows. The place gleamed with halogen light on white walls and pale wood. No patrons. Every single table was empty and the owner was sitting on a stool behind the bar. Reacher glanced away and came around the block and parked illegally at the mouth of the alley that ran down toward the kitchen doors. He killed the motor and the lights and settled down to wait.
The dynamics of the city. The strong terrorize the weak. They keep on at it, like they always have, until they come up against somebody stronger with some arbitrary humane reason for stopping them. Somebody like Reacher. He had no real reason to help a guy he hardly knew. There was no logic involved. No

agenda. Right then in a city of eight million souls there must be hundreds of strong people hurting weak people, maybe even thousands. Right then, at that exact moment. He wasn't going to seek them all out. He wasn't mounting any kind of a big campaign. But equally he wasn't about to let anything happen right under his nose. He couldn't just walk away. He never had.

He fumbled the label machine out of his pocket. Scaring the two guys away was only half the job. What mattered was *who* they thought was doing the scaring. A concerned citizen standing up alone for some restaurant owner's rights was going to cut no ice at all, no matter how effective that concerned citizen might be at the outset. Nobody is afraid of a lone individual, because a lone individual can be overwhelmed by sheer numbers, and anyway sooner or later a lone individual dies or moves away or loses interest. What makes a big impression is an *organization*. He smiled and looked down at the machine and started to figure out how it worked. He printed his own name as a test and pinched the tape off and inspected it. *Reacher*. Seven letters punched through in white on a blue plastic ribbon, a hair over an inch long. That was going to make the first guy's label about five inches long. And then about four, maybe four and a half for the second guy. Ideal. He smiled again and clicked and printed and laid the finished ribbons on the seat next to him. They had adhesive on the back under a peel-off paper strip, but he needed something better than that, which is why he had bought the superglue. He unscrewed the cap off the tiny tube and pierced the metal foil with the plastic spike and filled the nozzle ready for action. He put the cap back on and dropped the tube and the labels into his pocket. Then he got out of the car into the chill air and stood in the shadows, waiting.

The dynamics of the city. His mother had been scared of cities. It had been part of his education. She had told him *cities are dangerous places. They're full of tough, scary guys*. He was a tough boy himself but he had walked around as a teenager ready and willing to believe her. And he had seen that she was right. People on city streets were fearful and furtive and defensive. They kept their distance and crossed to the opposite sidewalk to avoid coming near him. They made it so obvious he became convinced the scary guys were always right behind him, at his shoulder. Then he suddenly realized *no, I'm the scary guy. They're scared of me*. It was a revelation. He saw himself reflected in store windows and understood how it could happen. He had stopped growing at fifteen when he was already six feet five and two hundred and twenty pounds. A giant. Like most teenagers in those days he was dressed like a bum. The caution his mother had drummed into him was showing up in his face as a blank-eyed, impassive stare. *They're scared of me*. It amused him and he smiled and then people stayed even farther away. From that point onward he knew cities were

just the same as every other place, and for every city person he needed to be scared of there were nine hundred and ninety-nine others a lot more scared of him. He used the knowledge like a tactic, and the calm confidence it put in his walk and his gaze redoubled the effect he had on people. The dynamics of the city.

Fifty-five minutes into the hour he moved out of the shadows and stood on the corner, leaning back against the brick wall of the restaurant building, still waiting. He could hear the opera, just a faint breath of sound coming through the glass next to him. The traffic thumped and banged through potholes on the street. There was a bar on the opposite corner with an extractor roaring and steam drifting outward through the neon glare. It was cold and the people on the sidewalk were hurrying past with their faces ducked deep into scarves. He kept his hands in his pockets and leaned on one shoulder and watched the traffic flow coming toward him.

The two guys came back right on time in a black Mercedes sedan. It parked a block away with one tire hard against the curb and the lights went out and the two front doors opened in unison. The guys stepped out with their long coats flowing and reached back and opened the rear doors and pulled ball bats off the rear seat. They slipped the bats under their coats and slammed the doors and glanced around once and started moving. They had ten yards of sidewalk, then the cross street, then ten more yards. They moved easily. Big, confident guys, moving easily, striding long. Reacher pushed off the wall and met them as they stepped up onto his curb.

“In the alley, guys,” he said.

Up close, they were impressive enough. As a pair, they certainly looked the part. They were young, some way short of thirty. They were heavy, padded with that dense flesh which isn’t quite pure muscle but which works nearly as well. Wide necks, silk ties, shirts and suits that didn’t come out of a catalog. The bats were upright under the left side of their coats, gripped around the meat of the wood with their left hands through their pocket linings.

“Who the hell are you?” the right-hand guy said.

Reacher glanced at him. The first guy to speak is the dominant half of any partnership, and in a one-on-two situation you put the dominant one down first.

“The hell are you?” the guy said again.

Reacher stepped to his left and turned a fraction, blocking the sidewalk, channeling them toward the alley.

“Business manager,” he said. “You want to get paid, I’m the guy who can do it for you.”

The guy paused. Then he nodded. “OK, but screw the alley. We’ll do it inside.”

Reacher shook his head. “Not logical, my friend. We’re paying you to stay out of the restaurant, starting from now, right?”
“You got the money?”
“Sure,” Reacher said. “Two hundred bucks.”
He stepped in front of them and walked into the alley. Steam was drifting up to meet him from the kitchen vents. It smelled of Italian food. There was trash and grit underfoot and the crunch of his steps echoed off the old brick. He stopped and turned and stood like an impatient man bemused by their reluctance to follow him. They were silhouetted against the red glare of traffic waiting at the light behind them. They looked at him and looked at each other and stepped forward shoulder to shoulder. Walked into the alley. They were happy enough. Big confident guys, bats under their coats, two on one. Reacher waited a beat and moved through the sharp diagonal division between the light and the shadow. Then he paused again. Stepped back like he wanted them to precede him. Like a courtesy. They shuffled forward. Came close.
He hit the right-hand guy in the side of the head with his elbow. Lots of good biological reasons for doing that. Generally speaking the human skull is harder than the human hand. A hand-to-skull impact, the hand gets damaged first. The elbow is better. And the side of the head is better than the front or the back. The human brain can withstand front-to-back displacement maybe ten times better than side-to-side displacement. Some kind of a complicated evolutionary reason. So it was the elbow, and the side of the head. It was a short hard blow, well delivered, but the guy stayed upright on rubber knees for a long second. Then he let the bat go. It slid down inside his coat and hit the ground end-on with a loud wooden *clonk*. Then Reacher hit him again. Same elbow. Same side of the head. Same snap. The guy went down like a trapdoor had opened up under his feet.
The second guy was almost on the ball. He got his right hand on the bat handle, then his left. He got it clear of his coat and swung it ready, but he made the same mistake most people make. He swung it way too far back, and he swung it way too low. He went for a massive blow aimed at the middle of Reacher’s body. Two things wrong with that. A big backswing takes time to get into. And a blow aimed at the middle of the body is too easy to defend against. Better to aim high at the head or low at the knees.
The way to take a blow from a bat is to get near, and get near early. The force of the blow comes from the weight of the bat multiplied by the speed of the swing. A mathematical thing. *Mass times velocity equals momentum*. Nothing you can do about the mass of the bat. The bat is going to weigh exactly the same wherever the hell it is. So you need to kill the speed. You need to get close and take it as it comes off the backswing. While it’s still in the first split second of

acceleration. While it's still slow. That's why a big backswing is a bad idea. The farther back you swing it, the later it is before you can get it moving forward again. The more time you give away.
Reacher was a foot from it before the swing came in. He watched the arc and caught the bat in both hands, low down in front of his gut. A foot of swing, there's no power there at all. Just a harmless smack in the palms. Then all the momentum the guy is trying to put into it becomes a weapon to use against him. Reacher swung with him and jacked the handle up and hurled the guy off balance. Kicked out at his ankles and tore the bat free and jabbed him with it. The jab is the move to use. No backswing. The guy went down on his knees and butted his head into the restaurant wall. Reacher kicked him over on his back and squatted down and jammed the bat across his throat, with the handle trapped under his foot and his right hand leaning hard on the business end. He used his left hand to go into each pocket in turn. He came out with an automatic handgun, a thick wallet, and a mobile phone.
"Who are you from?" he asked.
"Mr. Petrosian," the guy gasped.
The name meant nothing to Reacher. He had heard of a Soviet chess champion called Petrosian. And a Nazi tank general of the same name. But neither of them was running protection rackets in New York City. He smiled incredulously.
"Petrosian?" he said. "You have *got* to be kidding."
He put a lot of sneer in his voice, like out of all the whole spectrum of worrisome rivals his bosses could possibly think of, Petrosian was so far down the list he was just about totally invisible.
"You're kidding us, right?" he said. "Petrosian? What is he, crazy?"
The first guy was moving. His arms and legs were starting a slow-motion scrabble for grip. Reacher crunched the bat for a second and then jerked it away from the second guy's neck and used it to tap the first guy on the top of the head. He had it back in place within a second and a half. The second guy started gagging under the force of the wood on his throat. The first guy was limp on the floor. Not like in the movies. Three blows to the head, nobody keeps on fighting. Instead, they're sick and dizzy and nauseous for a week. Barely able to stand.
"We've got a message for Petrosian," Reacher said softly.
"What's the message?" the second guy gasped.
Reacher smiled again.
"You are," he said.
He went into his pocket for the labels and the glue.
"Now lie real still," he said.
The guy lay real still. He moved his hand to feel his throat, but that was all.

Reacher tore the backing strip off the label and eased a thick worm of glue onto the plastic and pressed the label hard on the guy's forehead. He ran his finger side to side across it, twice. The label read *Mostro's has protection already*.
"Lie still," he said again.
He took the bat with him and turned the other guy face upward with a hand in his hair. Used plenty of glue and smoothed the other label into place on his brow. This one read *don't start a turf war with us*. He checked the pockets and came out with an identical haul. An automatic handgun, a wallet, and a telephone. Plus a key for the Benz. He waited until the guy started moving again. Then he glanced back at the second guy. He was crawling up to his hands and knees, picking at the label on his head.
"It won't come off," Reacher called. "Not without taking a bunch of skin with it. Go give our best regards to Mr. Petrosian, and then go to the hospital."
He turned back. Emptied the tube of glue into the first guy's palms and crushed them together and counted to ten. Chemical handcuffs. He hauled the guy upright by his collar and held him while he relearned how to stand. Then he tossed the car key to the second guy.
"I guess you're the designated driver," he said. "Now beat it."
The guy just stood there, eyes jerking left and right. Reacher shook his head.
"Don't even think about it," he said. "Or I'll rip your ears off and make you eat them. And don't come back here either. Not ever. Or we'll send somebody a lot worse than me. Right now I'm the best friend you got, OK? You clear on that?"
The guy stared. Then he nodded, cautiously.
"So beat it," Reacher said.
The guy with the glued hands had a problem moving. He was out of it. The other guy had a problem helping him. There was no free arm to hold. He puzzled over it for a second and then ducked down in front of him and came back up between the glued hands, piggybacking him. He staggered away and paused in the mouth of the alley, silhouetted against the glare of the street. He bent forward and jacked the weight onto his shoulders and turned out of sight.
The handguns were M9 Berettas, military-issue nine-millimeters. Reacher had carried an identical gun for thirteen long years. The serial number on an M9 is etched into the aluminum frame, right underneath where *Pietro Beretta* is engraved on the slide. The numbers on both guns had been erased. Somebody had used a round-tipped file, rubbing from the muzzle toward the trigger guard. Not a very elegant job of work. Both magazines were full of shiny copper Parabellums. Reacher stripped the guns in the dark and pitched the barrels and the slides and the bullets into the Dumpster outside the kitchen door. Then he laid the frames on the ground and scooped grit into the firing mechanisms and

worked the triggers in and out until the grit jammed the mechanisms. Then he pitched them into the Dumpster and smashed the phones with the bats and left the pieces where they lay.

The wallets held cards and licenses and cash. Maybe three hundred bucks in total. He rolled the cash into his pocket and kicked the wallets away into a corner. Then he straightened and turned and walked back to the sidewalk, smiling. Glanced up the street. No sign of the black Mercedes. It was gone. He walked back into the deserted restaurant. The orchestra was blazing away and some tenor was winding up to a heroic high note. The owner was behind the bar, lost in thought. He looked up. The tenor hit the note and the violins and cellos and basses swarmed in behind him. Reacher peeled a ten from the stolen wad and dropped it on the bar.

"For the plate they broke," he said. "They had a change of heart."

The guy just looked at the ten and said nothing. Reacher turned again and walked back out to the sidewalk. Across the street, he saw the couple from the restaurant. They were standing on the opposite sidewalk, watching him. The sandy guy with the mustache and the dark woman with the briefcase. They were standing there, muffled up in coats, watching him. He walked to his four-wheel-drive and opened the door. Climbed in and fired it up. Glanced over his shoulder at the traffic stream. They were still watching him. He pulled out into the traffic and gunned the motor. A block away, he used the mirror and saw the dark woman with the briefcase stepping out to the curb, craning her head, watching him go. Then the neon wash closed over her and she was lost to sight.

2

GARRISON IS A place on the east bank of the Hudson River, up in Putnam County, about fifty-eight road miles north from Tribeca. Late on a fall evening, traffic is not a problem. One toll plaza, empty parkways, average speed can be as high as you dare to make it. But Reacher drove cautiously. He was new to the concept of driving a regular journey from A to B. He was new to even *having* an A or a B. He felt like an alien in a settled landscape. And like any alien, he was anxious to stay out of trouble. So he drove slow enough not to be noticed and let the late commuters in their fast sedans scurry past him on the left and the right. The fifty-eight miles took him an hour and seventeen minutes.

His street was very dark, because it was buried deep in an underpopulated rural area. The contrast with the brassy glow of the city was total. He turned into his driveway and watched his headlight beams bounce and flick over the massed plantings crowding the asphalt. The leaves were turning dry brown and they looked vivid and unreal in the electric light. He rounded the last curve and the beams swung toward the garage door and washed over two cars waiting nose-out in front of it. He jammed to a panic stop and their lights came on and blazed in his face and blinded him just as his mirror filled with bright light from behind. He ducked his head away from the glare and saw people running at him from the side with powerful flashlight beams bouncing in front of them through the dark. He swiveled and saw two sedans crunching to a stop behind him, headlights swinging and blazing. People were spilling out and running toward him. His car was pinned motionless in a bright matrix of light. People were flashing through light and darkness, coming at him. They had guns and dark vests over their coats. They were surrounding his car. He saw that some of the flashlights were strapped to shotgun barrels. The crowding people were lit from behind by the harsh beams from their cars. Fog was drifting up from the river and hanging in the air. The lights were cutting through the fog and the beams were crisscrossing in crazy moving horizontal patterns.

A figure stepped close to his car. A hand came up and rapped on the glass next to his head. The hand opened. It was a small hand, pale and slim. A woman’s hand. A flashlight beam turned directly on it and showed it was cupping a badge. The badge was shaped like a shield. It was bright gold. There was a gold eagle perched on the top of the shield with its head cocked to the left. The flashlight moved closer and Reacher saw raised lettering on the shield, gold on gold. He stared at it. It said *Federal Bureau of Investigation. U.S. Department of Justice*.

The woman pressed the shield against the window. It touched the glass with a cold metallic click. She shouted in at him. He heard her voice coming at him out of the darkness.
“Turn off the engine,” she was shouting.
He could see nothing except beams of light aimed at him. He killed the motor and heard nothing but fog hanging in the air and the crunch of restless boots on his driveway.
“Place both hands on the wheel,” the woman’s voice shouted.
He placed both hands on the wheel and sat still, head turned, watching the door. It was opened from the outside and the light clicked on and spilled out over the dark woman from the restaurant. The sandy guy with the fair mustache was at her shoulder. She had the FBI badge in one hand and a gun in the other. The gun was pointed at his head.
“Out of the vehicle,” she said. “Nice and slow.”
She stepped back, with the gun tracking the movement of his head. He twisted and swung his legs out of the footwell and paused, one hand on the seatback, the other on the wheel, his weight ready to slide his feet to the ground. He could see a half-dozen men in front of him caught in the glare of headlights. There would be more behind him. Maybe more near the house. Maybe more at the mouth of the driveway. The woman stepped back another pace. He stepped down to the ground in front of her.
“Turn around,” she said. “Place your hands on the vehicle.”
He did as he was told. The sheet metal was cold to the touch and slimy with night dew. He felt hands on every inch of his body. They took his wallet from his coat and the stolen cash from his pants pocket. Somebody pushed past his shoulder and leaned in and took his keys from the ignition.
“Now walk to the car,” the woman called.
She pointed with the badge. He half turned and saw headlight beams trapped in the fog, missing his legs by a yard. One of the sedans near the garage. He walked toward it. He heard a voice behind him shouting *search his vehicle*. A guy in a dark blue Kevlar vest was waiting at the car near the garage. He opened the rear door and stepped back. The woman’s briefcase was upright on the rear seat. Imitation leather, with a clumsy coarse grain stamped into its surface. He folded himself inside next to it. The guy in the vest slammed the door on him and simultaneously the opposite door opened up and the woman slid in alongside him. Her coat was open and he saw her blouse and her suit. The skirt was dusty black and short. He heard the whisper of nylon and saw the gun again, still pointing at his head. The front door opened and the sandy guy knelt in on the seat and stretched back for the briefcase. Reacher saw pale hairs on his wrist.

The strap of a watch. The guy flipped the case open and pulled out a sheaf of papers. He juggled a flashlight and played the beam over them. Reacher saw dense print and his own name in bold letters near the top of the first page.
"Search warrant," the woman said to him. "For your house."
The sandy guy ducked back out and slammed the door. The car went silent. Reacher heard footsteps through the fog. They grew faint. For a second the woman was backlit by the glare outside. Then she reached up and forward and clicked on the dome light. It was hot and yellow. She was sitting sideways, her back against the door, her knees toward him, resting her gun arm along the seatback. The arm was bent, with the elbow on the parcel shelf so the gun was canted comfortably forward, pointing at him. It was a SIG-Sauer, big and efficient and expensive.
"Keep your feet flat on the floor," she said.
He nodded. He knew what she wanted. He kept his back against his own door and shoved his feet underneath the front seat. It put an awkward sideways twist in his body that meant if he wanted to start moving he would be slow enough at it to get his head blown off before he got anywhere.
"Hands where I can see them," she said.
He straightened his arms and cupped his palms around the headrest on the seat in front of him and rested his chin on his shoulder. He was looking sideways at the SIG-Sauer's muzzle. It was rock-steady. Beyond it her finger was tight on the trigger. Beyond that was her face.
"OK, now sit still," she said.
Her face was impassive.
"You're not asking what this is about," she said.
It's not about what happened an hour and seventeen minutes ago, he said to himself. *No way was this all organized in an hour and seventeen minutes*. He kept quiet and absolutely still. He was worried about the whiteness in the woman's knuckle where it wrapped around the SIG-Sauer's trigger. Accidents can happen.
"You don't want to know what this is about?" she asked.
He looked at her, blankly. *No handcuffs*, he thought. *Why not?* The woman shrugged at him. *OK have it your own way*, she was saying. Her face settled to a stare. It was not a pretty face, but it was interesting. Some character there. She was about thirty-five, which is not old, but there were lines in her skin, like she spent time making animated expressions. *Probably more frowns than smiles*, he thought. Her hair was jet-black but thin. He could see her scalp. It was white. It gave her a tired, sickly look. But her eyes were bright. She glanced beyond him, out into the darkness through the car window, out to where her men were doing

things in his house.
She smiled. Her front teeth were crossed. The right one was canted sideways and it overlaid the left one by a fraction. An interesting mouth. It implied some kind of a decision. Her parents hadn't had the flaw corrected, and later neither had she. She must have had the opportunity. But she had decided to stick with nature. Probably the right choice. It made her face distinctive. Gave it character. She was slim under her bulky coat. There was a black jacket that matched the skirt, and a cream blouse loose over small breasts. The blouse looked like polyester that had been washed many times. It spiraled down into the waist-band of the skirt. She was twisted sideways and the skirt was halfway up her thighs. Her legs were thin and hard under black nylon. Her knees were pressed together, but there was a gap between her thighs.
"Would you stop doing that, please?" she said.
Her voice had gone cold, and the gun moved.
"Doing what?" Reacher asked.
"Looking at my legs."
He switched his gaze up to her face. "Somebody points a gun at me, I'm entitled to check them out head to toe, wouldn't you say?"
"You like doing that?"
"Doing what?"
"Looking at women."
He shrugged. "Better than I like looking at some things, I guess."
The gun moved closer. "This isn't funny, asshole. I don't like the way you're looking at me."
He stared at her.
"What way am I looking at you?" he asked.
"You know what way."
He shook his head.
"No, I don't," he said.
"Like you're making advances," she said. "You're disgusting, you know that?"
He listened to the contempt in her voice and stared at her thin hair, her frown, her crooked tooth, her hard dried-up body in its ludicrous cheap businesswoman's uniform.
"You think I'm making advances to you?"
"Aren't you? Wouldn't you like to?"
He shook his head again.
"Not while there are dogs on the street," he said.
THEY SAT IN crackling hostile silence for the best part of twenty minutes. Then the sandy guy with the mustache came back to the car and slid into the

front passenger seat. The driver's door opened and a second man got in. He had keys in his hand. He watched the mirror until the woman nodded and then fired up the motor and eased past Reacher's parked truck and headed out toward the road.

"Do I get to make a phone call?" Reacher asked. "Or doesn't the FBI believe in stuff like that?"

The sandy guy was staring straight ahead, at the windshield.

"At some point within the first twenty-four hours," he said. "We'll make sure you're not denied your constitutional rights."

The woman kept the SIG-Sauer's muzzle close to Reacher's head all the way back to Manhattan, fifty-eight fast miles through the dark and the fog.

3

THEY PARKED UNDERGROUND someplace south of mid-town and forced him out of the car into a white-painted garage full of bright light and dark sedans. The woman turned a full circle on the concrete floor with her shoes scraping in the silence. She was examining the whole crowded space. A cautious approach. Then she pointed toward a single black elevator door located in a distant corner. There were two more guys waiting there. Dark suits, white shirts, quiet ties. They watched the woman and the sandy guy all the way in across the diagonal. There was deference in their faces. They were junior guys. But they were also comfortable, and a little proud. Like they were some kind of *hosts*.
Reacher suddenly understood the woman and the sandy guy were not New York agents. They were visitors from somewhere else. They were on somebody else's turf. The woman hadn't examined the whole garage simply because she was cautious. She had done it because she didn't know where the elevator was.
They put Reacher in the center of the elevator car and crowded in around him. The woman, the sandy guy, the driver, the two local boys. Five people, five weapons. The four men took a corner each and the woman stood in the center, close to Reacher, like she was claiming him as hers. One of the local boys touched a button and the door rolled shut and the elevator took off.
It traveled upward for a long time and stopped hard with *21* showing on the floor indicator. The door thumped back and the local boys led the way out into a blank corridor. It was gray. Thin gray carpet, gray paint, gray light. It was quiet, like everyone except the hard-core enthusiasts had gone home hours before. There were closed doors spaced along the corridor wall. The guy who had driven the sedan down from Garrison paused in front of the third and opened it up. Reacher was maneuvered to the doorway and looked in at a bare space, maybe twelve by sixteen, concrete floor, cinder-block walls, all covered in thick gray paint like the side of a battleship. The ceiling was unfinished, and the ducting was all visible, square trunking made from thin flecked metal. Fluorescent fittings hung from chains and threw a flat glare across the gray. There was a single plastic garden chair in the corner. It was the only thing in the room.
"Sit down," the woman said.
Reacher walked away from the chair to the opposite corner and sat on the floor, wedged into the angle of the cinder-block walls. The cinder block was cold and the paint was slick. He folded his arms over his chest and stretched his legs out straight and crossed his ankles. Rested his head on the wall, forty-five degrees to his shoulders, so he was gazing straight at the people standing by the door. They

his shoulders, so he was gazing straight at the people standing by the door. They backed out into the corridor and closed the door on him. There was no sound of a lock turning, but there didn't need to be, because there was no handle on the inside.

He felt the faint shudder of footsteps receding through the concrete floor. Then he was left with nothing but silence floating on a whisper of air from the vents above his head. He sat in the silence for maybe five minutes and then he felt more footsteps outside and the door opened again and a man stuck his face inside the room and stared straight in at him. It was an older face, big and red and bloated with strain and puffy with blood pressure, full of hostility, and its frank stare said *so you're the guy, huh?* The stare lasted three or four long seconds and then the face ducked back out and the door slammed and the silence came back again.

The same thing happened over again five minutes later. Footsteps in the corridor, a face around the door, the same frank stare. *So you're the guy*. This time the face was leaner and darker. Younger. Shirt and tie below it, no jacket. Reacher stared back, three or four seconds. The face disappeared and the door slammed. This time the silence lasted longer, somewhere around twenty minutes. Then a third face came to stare. Footsteps, the rattle of the handle, the door opening, the stare. *This is the guy, huh?* This third face was older again, a man somewhere in his fifties, a competent expression, a thatch of gray hair. He wore thick glasses and behind them his eyes were calm. Serious speculation in both of them. He looked like a guy with responsibilities. Maybe some kind of a Bureau chief. Reacher stared back at him, wearily. No words were spoken. No communication took place. The guy just stared for a spell and then his face disappeared and the door closed again.

Whatever was happening outside kept on happening for the best part of an hour. Reacher was left alone in the room, sitting comfortably on the floor, just waiting. Then the waiting was over. A whole crowd of people came back together, noisy in the corridor, like an anxious herd. Reacher felt the stamp and shuffle of footsteps. Then the door opened and the gray-haired guy with the eyeglasses stepped into the room. He kept his trailing foot near the threshold and leaned his weight inside at an angle.

"Time to talk," he said.

The two junior agents pushed in behind him and took up station like an escort. Reacher waited a beat and then he jacked himself upright and stepped away from his corner.

"I want to make a call," he said.

The gray-haired guy shook his head.

"Calling comes later," he said. "Talking comes first. OK?"

Reacher shrugged. The problem with getting your rights abused was that somebody had to witness it for it to mean anything. Somebody had to see it happen. And the two young agents were seeing nothing. Or maybe they were seeing Moses himself coming down and reading the whole Constitution off of big tablets of stone. Maybe that's what they would swear to later.

"So let's go," the gray-haired guy said.

Reacher was crowded out into the gray corridor and into a big knot of people. The woman was there, and the sandy guy with the mustache, and the older guy with the blood pressure, and the younger guy with the lean face and the shirtsleeves. They were buzzing. It was late in the evening, but they were all pumped up with excitement. They were up on their toes, weightless with the intoxication of *progress*. It was a feeling Reacher recognized. It was a feeling he had experienced, more times than he cared to remember.

But they were divided. There were two clear teams. There was tension between them. It became obvious as they walked. The woman stuck close to his left shoulder, and the sandy guy and the blood pressure guy stuck close to her. That was one team. On his right shoulder was the guy with the lean face. He was the second team, alone and outnumbered and unhappy about it. Reacher felt his hand near his elbow, like he was ready to make a grab for his prize.

They walked down a narrow gray corridor like the bowels of a battleship and spilled into a gray room with a long table filling most of the floor space. The table was curved on both long edges and chopped off straight at the ends. On one long side, backs to the door, were seven plastic chairs in a line, well spaced out, with the curve of the table edge focusing them all across toward a single identical chair placed in the exact center of the opposite side.

Reacher paused in the doorway. Not too difficult to work out which chair was his. He looped around the end of the table and sat down in it. It was flimsy. The legs squirmed under his weight and the plastic dug into the muscle under his shoulder blades. The room was cinder block, painted gray like the first one, but this ceiling was finished. There was stained acoustic tile in warped framing. There was track lighting bolted to it, with large can-shaped fixtures angled down and toward him. The tabletop was cheap mahogany, thickly lacquered with shiny varnish. The light bounced off the varnish and came up into his eyes from below. The two junior agents had taken up position against the walls at opposite ends of the table, like sentries. Their jackets were open and their shoulder holsters were visible. Their hands were folded comfortably at their waists. Their heads were turned, watching him. Opposite him, the two teams were forming up. Seven chairs, five people. The gray-haired guy took the center chair. The light caught his eyeglasses and turned them into blank mirrors. Next to him on his right-hand

side was the guy with the blood pressure, and next to him was the woman, and next to her was the sandy guy. The guy with the lean face and the shirtsleeves was alone in the middle chair of the left-hand three. A lop-sided inquisition, hunching toward him, indistinct through the glare of the lights.
The gray-haired guy leaned forward, sliding his forearms onto the shiny wood, claiming authority. And subconsciously separating the factions to his left and right.
"We've been squabbling over you," he said.
"Am I in custody?" Reacher asked.
The guy shook his head. "No, not yet."
"So I'm free to go?"
The guy looked over the top of his eyeglasses. "Well, we'd rather you stayed right here, so we can keep this whole thing civilized for a spell."
There was silence for a long moment.
"So make it civilized," Reacher said. "I'm Jack Reacher. Who the hell are you?"
"What?"
"Let's have some introductions. That's what civilized people do, right? They introduce themselves. Then they chat politely about the Yankees or the stock market or something."
More silence. Then the guy nodded.
"I'm Alan Deerfield," he said. "Assistant Director, FBI. I run the New York Field Office."
Then he turned his head to his right and stared at the sandy guy on the end of the line and waited.
"Special Agent Tony Poulton," the sandy guy said, and glanced to his left.
"Special Agent Julia Lamarr," the woman said, and glanced to her left.
"Agent-in-Charge Nelson Blake," the guy with the blood pressure said. "The three of us are up here from Quantico. I run the Serial Crimes Unit. Special Agents Lamarr and Poulton work for me there. We came up here to talk to you."
There was a pause and the guy called Deerfield turned the other way and looked toward the man on his left.
"Agent-in-Charge James Cozo," the guy said. "Organized Crime, here in New York City, working on the protection rackets."
More silence.
"OK now?" Deerfield asked.
Reacher squinted through the glare. They were all looking at him. The sandy guy, Poulton. The woman, Lamarr. The hypertensive, Blake. All three of them from Serial Crimes down in Quantico. *Up here to talk to him*. Then Deerfield, the New York Bureau chief, a heavyweight. Then the lean guy, Cozo, from

Organized Crime, *working on the protection rackets*. He glanced slowly left to right, and right to left, and finished up back on Deerfield. Then he nodded.
"OK," he said. "Pleased to meet you all. So what about those Yankees? You think they need to trade?"
Five different people facing him, five different expressions of annoyance. Poulton turned his head like he had been slapped. Lamarr snorted, a contemptuous sound in her nose. Blake tightened his mouth and got redder. Deerfield stared and sighed. Cozo glanced sideways at Deerfield, lobbying for intervention.
"We're not going to talk about the Yankees," Deerfield said.
"So what about the Dow? We going to see a big crash anytime soon?"
Deerfield shook his head. "Don't mess with me, Reacher. Right now I'm the best friend you got."
"No, Ernesto A. Miranda is the best friend I got," Reacher said. "Miranda versus Arizona, Supreme Court decision in June of 1966. They said his Fifth Amendment rights were infringed because the cops didn't warn him he could stay silent and get himself a lawyer. "
"So?"
"So you can't talk to me until you read me my Miranda rights. Whereupon you can't talk to me anyway because my lawyer could take some time to get here and then she won't let me talk to you even when she does."
The three agents from Serial Crime were smiling broadly. Like Reacher was busy proving something to them.
"Your lawyer is Jodie Jacob, right?" Deerfield asked. "Your girlfriend?"
"What do you know about my girlfriend?"
"We know everything about your girlfriend," Deerfield said. "Just like we know everything about you, too."
"So why do you need to talk to me?"
"She's at Spencer Gutman, right?" Deerfield said. "Big reputation as an associate. They're talking about a partnership for her, you know that?"
"So I heard."
"Maybe real soon."
"So I heard," Reacher said again.
"Knowing you isn't going to help her, though. You're not exactly the ideal corporate husband, are you?"
"I'm not any kind of a husband."
Deerfield smiled. "Figure of speech, is all. But Spencer Gutman is a real white-shoe operation. They consider stuff like that, you know. And it's a financial firm, right? Real big in the world of banking, we all know that. But not much

expertise in the field of criminal law. You sure you want her for your attorney? Situation like this?"
"Situation like what?"
"Situation you're in."
"What situation am I in?"
"Ernesto A. Miranda was a moron, you know that?" Deerfield said. "A couple of smokes short of a pack? That's why the damn court was so soft on him. He was a subnormal guy. He needed the protection. You a moron, Reacher? You a subnormal guy?"
"Probably, to be putting up with this shit."
"Rights are for guilty people, anyway. You already saying you're guilty of something?"
Reacher shook his head. "I'm not saying anything. I've got nothing to say."
"Old Ernesto went to jail anyhow, you know that? People tend to forget that fact. They retried him and convicted him just the same. He was in jail five years. Then you know what happened to him?"
Reacher shrugged. Said nothing.
"I was working in Phoenix at the time," Deerfield said. "Down in Arizona. Homicide detective, for the city. Just before I made it to the Bureau. January of 1976, we get a call to a bar. Some piece of shit lying on the floor, big knife handle sticking up out of him. The famous Ernesto A. Miranda himself, bleeding all over the place. Nobody fell over themselves rushing to call any medics. Guy died a couple minutes after we got there."
"So?"
"So stop wasting my time. I already wasted an hour stopping these guys fighting over you. So now you owe me. So you'll answer their questions, and I'll tell you when and if you need a damn lawyer."
"What are the questions about?"
Deerfield smiled. "What are any questions about? Stuff we need to know, is what."
"What stuff do you need to know?"
"We need to know if we're interested in you."
"Why would you be interested in me?"
"Answer the questions and we'll find out."
Reacher thought about it. Laid his hands palms up on the table.
"OK," he said. "What are the questions?"
"You know Brewer versus Williams, too?" the guy called Blake said. He was old and overweight and unfit, but his mouth worked fast enough.
"Or Duckworth versus Eagan?" Poulton asked.

Reacher glanced across at him. He was maybe thirty-five, but he looked younger, like one of those guys who stay looking young forever. Like some kind of a graduate student, preserved. His suit was an awful color in the orange light, and his mustache looked false, like it was stuck on with glue.
"You know Illinois and Perkins?" Lamarr asked.
Reacher stared at them both. "What the hell is this? Law school?"
"What about Minnick versus Mississippi?" Blake asked.
Poulton smiled. "McNeil and Wisconsin?"
"Arizona and Fulminante?" Lamarr said.
"You know what those cases are?" Blake asked.
Reacher looked for the trick, but he couldn't see it.
"More Supreme Court decisions," he said. "Following on from Miranda. Brewer was 1977, Duckworth 1989, Perkins 1990, Minnick 1990, McNeil 1991, Fulminante 1991, all of them modifying and restating the original Miranda decision."
Blake nodded. "Very good."
Lamarr leaned forward. The light scatter off the shiny tabletop lit her face from below, like a skull.
"You knew Amy Callan pretty well, didn't you?" she asked.
"Who?" Reacher said.
"You heard, you son of a bitch."
Reacher stared at her. Then a woman called Amy Callan came back at him from the past and slowed him just enough to allow a contented smile to settle on Lamarr's bony face.
"But you didn't like her much, did you?" she said.
There was silence. It built around him.
"OK, my turn," Cozo said. "Who are you working for?"
Reacher swung his gaze slowly to his right and rested it on Cozo.
"I'm not working for anybody," he said.
"Don't start a turf war with us," Cozo quoted. "*Us* is a plural word. More than one person. Who is *us*, Reacher?"
"There is no us."
"Bullshit, Reacher. Petrosian put the arm on that restaurant, but you were already there. So who sent you?"
Reacher said nothing.
"What about Caroline Cooke?" Lamarr called. "You knew her too, right?"
Reacher turned slowly back to face her. She was still smiling.
"But you didn't like her either, did you?" she said.
"Callan and Cooke," Blake repeated. "Give it up Reacher, from the beginning, OK?"

OK?"
Reacher looked at him. "Give what up?"
More silence.
"Who sent you to the restaurant?" Cozo asked again. "Tell me right now, and maybe I can cut you a deal."
Reacher turned back the other way. "Nobody sent me anywhere."
Cozo shook his head. "Bullshit, Reacher. You live in a half-million-dollar house on the river in the Garrison and you drive a six-month-old forty-five-thousand-dollar sport-utility vehicle. And as far as the IRS knows, you haven't earned a cent in nearly three years. And when somebody wanted Petrosian's best boys in the hospital, they sent you to do it. Put all that together, you're working for somebody, and I want to know who the hell it is."
"I'm not working for anybody," Reacher said again.
"You're a loner, right?" Blake asked. "Is that what you're saying?"
Reacher nodded. "I guess."
He turned his head. Blake was smiling, satisfied.
"I thought so," he said. "When did you come out of the Army?"
Reacher shrugged. "About three years ago."
"How long were you in?"
"All my life. Officer's kid, then an officer myself."
"Military policeman, right?"
"Right."
"Several promotions, right?"
"I was a major."
"Medals?"
"Some."
"Silver Star?"
"One."
"First-rate record, right?"
Reacher said nothing.
"Don't be modest," Blake said. "Tell us."
"Yes, my record was good."
"So why did you muster out?"
"That's my business."
"Something to hide?"
"You wouldn't understand."
Blake smiled. "So, three years. What have you been doing?"
Reacher shrugged again. "Nothing much. Having fun, I guess."
"Working?"
"Not often."

Not often.
“Just bumming around, right?”
“I guess.”
“Doing what for money?”
“Savings.”
“They ran out three months ago. We checked with your bank.”
“Well, that happens with savings, doesn’t it?”
“So now you’re living off of Ms. Jacob, right? Your girlfriend, who’s also your lawyer. How do you feel about that?”
Reacher glanced through the glare at the worn wedding band crushing Blake’s fat pink finger.
“No worse than your wife does, living off of you, I expect,” he said.
Blake grunted and paused. “So you came out of the Army, and since then you’ve done nothing much, right?”
“Right.”
“Mostly on your own.”
“Mostly.”
“Happy with that?”
“Happy enough.”
“Because you’re a loner.”
“Bullshit, he’s working for somebody,” Cozo said.
“The man says he’s a loner, damn it,” Blake snarled.
Deerfield’s head was turning left and right between them, like a spectator at a tennis game. The reflected light was flashing in the lenses of his glasses. He held up his hands for silence and fixed Reacher with a quiet gaze.
“Tell me about Amy Callan and Caroline Cooke,” he said.
“What’s to tell?” Reacher asked.
“You knew them, right?”
“Sure, way back. In the Army.”
“So tell me about them.”
“Callan was small and dark, Cooke was tall and blond. Callan was a sergeant, Cooke was a lieutenant. Callan was a clerk in Ordnance, Cooke was in War Plans.”
“Where was this?”
“Callan was at Fort Withe near Chicago, Cooke was at NATO headquarters in Belgium.”
“Did you have sex with either of them?” Lamarr asked.
Reacher turned to stare at her. “What kind of a question is that?”
“A straightforward one.”
“Well, no, I didn’t.”

"Well, no, I didn't."
"They were both pretty, right?"
Reacher nodded. "Prettier than you, that's for damn sure."
Lamarr looked away and went quiet. Blake turned dark red and stepped into the silence. "Did they know each other?"
"I doubt it. There's a million people in the Army, and they were serving four thousand miles apart at different times."
"And there was no sexual relationship between you and either of them?"
"No, there wasn't."
"Did you attempt one? With either of them?"
"No, I didn't."
"Why not? Afraid they'd rebuff you?"
Reacher shook his head. "I was with somebody else on both occasions, if you really want to know, and one at a time is usually enough for me."
"Would you like to have had sex with them?"
Reacher smiled, briefly. "I can think of worse things."
"Would they have said yes to you?"
"Maybe, maybe not."
"What's your best guess?"
"Were you ever in the Army?"
Blake shook his head.
"Then you don't know how it is," Reacher said. "Most people in the Army would have sex with anything that moves."
"So you don't think they'd have rebuffed you?"
Reacher kept his gaze tight on Blake's eyes. "No, I don't think it would have been a serious worry."
There was a long pause.
"Do you approve of women in the military?" Deerfield asked.
Reacher's eyes moved across to him. "What?"
"Answer the question, Reacher. You approve of women in the military?"
"What's not to approve?"
"You think they make good fighters?"
"Stupid question," Reacher said. "You already know they do."
"I do?"
"You were in 'Nam, right?"
"I was?"
"Sure you were," Reacher said. "Homicide detective in Arizona in 1976? Made it to the Bureau shortly afterward? Not too many draft dodgers could have managed that, not there, not back then. So you did your tour, maybe 1970, 1971. Eyesight like that, you weren't a pilot. Those eyeglasses probably put you right

in the infantry. In which case you spent a year getting your ass kicked all over the jungle, and a good third of the people kicking it were women. Good snipers, right? Very committed, the way I heard it."
Deerfield nodded slowly. "So you like women fighters? "
Reacher shrugged. "You need fighters, women can do it the same as anybody else. Russian front, World War Two? Women did pretty well there. You ever been to Israel? Women in the front line there too, and I wouldn't want to put too many U.S. units up against the Israeli defenses, at least not if it was going to be critical who won."
"So, you got no problems at all?"
"Personally, no."
"You got problems otherwise than personally?"
"There are military problems, I guess," Reacher said. "Evidence from Israel shows an infantryman is ten times more likely to stop his advance and help a wounded buddy if the buddy is a woman rather than a man. Slows the advance right down. It needs training out of them."
"You don't think people should help each other?" Lamarr asked.
"Sure," Reacher said. "But not if there's an objective to capture first."
"So if you and I were advancing together, you'd just leave me if I got wounded?"
Reacher smiled. "In your case, without a second thought."
"How did you meet Amy Callan?" Deerfield asked.
"I'm sure you already know," Reacher said.
"Tell me anyway. For the record."
"Are we on the record?"
"Sure we are."
"Without reading me my rights?"
"The record will show you had your rights, any old time I say you had them."
Reacher was silent.
"Tell me about Amy Callan," Deerfield said again.
"She came to me with a problem she was having in her unit," Reacher said.
"What problem?"
"Sexual harassment."
"Were you sympathetic?"
"Yes, I was."
"Why?"
"Because I was never abused because of my gender. I didn't see why she should have to be."
"So what did you do?"

“I arrested the officer she was accusing.”
“And what did you do then?”
“Nothing. I was a policeman, not a prosecutor. It was out of my hands.”
“And what happened?”
“The officer won his case. Amy Callan left the service. ”
“But the officer’s career was ruined anyway.”
Reacher nodded. “Yes, it was.”
“How did you feel about that?”
Reacher shrugged. “Confused, I guess. As far as I knew, he was an OK guy. But in the end I believed Callan, not him. My opinion was he was guilty. So I guess I was happy he was gone. But it shouldn’t work that way, ideally. A not-guilty verdict shouldn’t ruin a career.”
“So you felt sorry for him?”
“No, I felt sorry for Callan. And I felt sorry for the Army. The whole thing was a mess. Two careers were ruined, where either way only one should have been.”
“What about Caroline Cooke?”
“Cooke was different.”
“Different how?”
“Different time, different place. It was overseas. She was having sex with some colonel. Had been for a year. It looked consensual to me. She only called it harassment later, when she didn’t get promoted.”
“How is that different?”
“Because it was unconnected. The guy was screwing her because she was happy to let him, and he didn’t promote her because she wasn’t good enough at her job. The two things weren’t connected.”
“Maybe she saw the year in bed as an implied bargain. ”
“Then it was a contractual issue. Like a hooker who gets bilked. That’s not harassment.”
“So you did nothing?”
Reacher shook his head. “No, I arrested the colonel, because by then there were rules. Sex between people of different rank was effectively outlawed.”
“And?”
“And he was dishonorably discharged and his wife dumped him and he killed himself. And Cooke quit anyway.”
“And what happened to you?”
“I transferred out of NATO HQ.”
“Why? Upset?”
“No, I was needed someplace else.”
“You were needed? Why you?”

“Because I was a good investigator. I was wasted in Belgium. Nothing much happens in Belgium.”
“You see much sexual harassment after that?”
“Sure. It became a very big thing.”
“Lots of good men getting their careers ruined?” Lamarr asked.
Reacher turned to face her. “Some. It became a witch-hunt. Most of the cases were genuine, in my opinion, but some innocent people were caught up. Plenty of normal relationships were suddenly exposed. The rules had suddenly changed on them. Some of the innocent victims were men. But some were women, too.”
“A mess, right?” Blake said. “All started by pesky little women like Callan and Cooke?”
Reacher said nothing. Cozo was drumming his fingers on the mahogany.
“I want to get back to the business with Petrosian,” he said.
Reacher swiveled his gaze the other way. “There is no business with Petrosian. I never heard of anybody called Petrosian.”
Deerfield yawned and looked at his watch. He pushed his glasses up onto his forehead and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles.
“It’s past midnight, you know that?” he said.
“Did you treat Callan and Cooke with courtesy?” Blake asked.
Reacher squinted through the glare at Cozo and then turned back to Blake. The hot yellow light from the ceiling was bouncing off the red tint of the mahogany and making his bloated face crimson.
“Yes, I treated them with courtesy.”
“Did you see them again after you turned their cases over to the prosecutor?”
“Once or twice, I guess, in passing.”
“Did they trust you?”
Reacher shrugged. “I guess so. It was my job to make them trust me. I had to get all kinds of intimate details from them.”
“You had to do that kind of thing with many women?”
“There were hundreds of cases. I handled a couple dozen, I guess, before they set up special units to deal with them all.”
“So give me a name of another woman whose case you handled.”
Reacher shrugged again and scanned back through a succession of offices in hot climates, cold climates, big desks, small desks, sun outside the window, cloud outside, hurt and outraged women stammering out the details of their betrayal.
“Rita Scimeca,” he said. “She would be a random example.”
Blake paused and Lamarr reached down to the floor and came up with a thick file from her briefcase. She slid it sideways. Blake opened it and turned pages. Traced down a long list with a thick finger and nodded.

“OK,” he said. “What happened with Ms. Scimeca?”
“She was Lieutenant Scimeca,” Reacher said. “Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The guys called it hazing, she called it gang rape.”
“And what was the outcome?”
“She won her case. Three men spent time in military prison and were dishonorably discharged.”
“And what happened to Lieutenant Scimeca?”
Reacher shrugged again. “At first she was happy enough. She felt vindicated. Then she felt the Army had been ruined for her. So she mustered out.”
“Where is she now?”
“I have no idea.”
“Suppose you saw her again someplace? Suppose you were in some town somewhere and you saw her in a store or a restaurant? What would she do?”
“I have no idea. She’d probably say hello, I guess. Maybe we’d talk awhile, have a drink or something.”
“She’d be pleased to see you?”
“Pleased enough, I guess.”
“Because she would remember you as a nice guy?”
Reacher nodded. “It’s a hell of an ordeal. Not just the event itself, but the process afterward, too. So the investigator has to build up a bond. The investigator has to be a friend and a supporter.”
“So the victim becomes your friend?”
“If you do it right, yes.”
“What would happen if you knocked on Lieutenant Scimeca’s door?”
“I don’t know where she lives.”
“Suppose you did. Would she let you in?”
“I don’t know.”
“Would she recognize you?”
“Probably.”
“And she’d remember you as a friend?”
“I guess.”
“So you knock on her door, she’d let you in, right? She’d open up the door and see this old friend of hers, so she’d let you right in, offer you coffee or something. Talk a while, catch up on old times.”
“Maybe,” Reacher said. “Probably.”
Blake nodded and stopped talking. Lamarr put her hand on his arm and he bent to listen as she whispered in his ear. He nodded again and turned to Deerfield and whispered in turn. Deerfield glanced at Cozo. The three agents from Quantico sat back as he did so, just an imperceptible movement, but with enough

body language in it to say *OK, we're interested*. Cozo stared back at Deerfield in alarm. Deerfield leaned forward, staring straight through his glasses at Reacher.
"This is a very confusing situation," he said.
Reacher said nothing back. Just sat and waited.
"Exactly what happened at the restaurant?" Deerfield asked.
"Nothing happened," Reacher said.
Deerfield shook his head. "You were under surveillance. My people have been following you for a week. Special Agents Poulton and Lamarr joined them tonight. They saw the whole thing."
Reacher stared at him. "You've been following me for a week?"
Deerfield nodded. "Eight days, actually."
"Why?"
"We'll get to that later."
Lamarr stirred and reached down again to her briefcase. She pulled out another file. Opened it and took out a sheaf of papers. There were four or five sheets clipped together. They were covered in dense type. She smiled icily at Reacher and reversed the sheets and slid them across the table to him. The air caught them and riffed them apart. The clip dragged on the wood and stopped them exactly in front of him. In them Reacher was referred to as *the subject*. They were a list of everything he had done and everywhere he had been in the previous eight days. They were complete to the last second. And they were accurate to the last detail. Reacher glanced from them to Lamarr's smiling face and nodded.
"Well, FBI tails are obviously pretty good," he said. "I never noticed."
There was silence.
"So what happened in the restaurant?" Deerfield asked again.
Reacher paused. *Honesty is the best policy,* he thought. He scoped it out. Swallowed. Then he nodded toward Blake and Lamarr and Poulton. "These law school buffs would call it *imperfect necessity*, I guess. I committed a small crime to stop a bigger one happening. "
"You were acting alone?" Cozo asked.
Reacher nodded. "Yes, I was."
"So what was *don't start a turf war with us* all about?"
"I wanted it to look convincing. I wanted Petrosian to take it seriously, whoever the hell he is. Like he was dealing with another organization."
Deerfield leaned all the way over the table and retrieved Lamarr's surveillance log. He reversed it and riffed through it.
"This shows no contact with anybody at all except Ms. Jodie Jacob. She's not running protection rackets. What about the phone log?"

“You’re tapping my phone?” Reacher asked.
Deerfield nodded. “We’ve been through your garbage, too.”
“Phone log is clear,” Poulton said. “He spoke to nobody except Ms. Jacob. He lives a quiet life.”
“That right, Reacher?” Deerfield asked. “You live a quiet life?”
“Usually,” Reacher said.
“So you were acting alone,” Deerfield said. “Just a concerned citizen. No contact with gangsters, no instructions by phone.”
He turned to Cozo, a question in his eyes. “You comfortable with that, James?”
Cozo shrugged and nodded. “I’ll have to be, I guess.”
“Concerned citizen, right, Reacher?” Deerfield said.
Reacher nodded. Said nothing.
“Can you prove that to us?” Deerfield asked.
Reacher shrugged. “I could have taken their guns. If I was connected, I would have. But I didn’t.”
“No, you left them in the Dumpster.”
“I disabled them first.”
“With grit in the mechanisms. Why did you do that?”
“So nobody could find them and use them.”
Deerfield nodded. “A concerned citizen. You saw an injustice, you wanted to set it straight.”
Reacher nodded back. “I guess.”
“Somebody’s got to do it, right?”
“I guess,” Reacher said again.
“You don’t like injustice, right?”
“I guess not.”
“And you can tell the difference between right and wrong.”
“I hope so.”
“You don’t need the intervention of the proper authorities, because you can make your own decisions.”
“Usually.”
“Confident with your own moral code.”
“I guess.”
There was silence. Deerfield looked through the glare.
“So why did you steal their money?” he asked.
Reacher shrugged. “Spoils of battle, I guess. Like a trophy.”
Deerfield nodded. “Part of the code, right?”
“I guess.”
“You play to your own rules, right?”
“Usually.”

"Usually."
"You wouldn't mug an old lady, but it was OK to take money off of a couple of hard men."
"I guess."
"When they step outside what's acceptable to you, they get what they get, right?"
"Right."
"A personal code."
Reacher said nothing. The silence built.
"You know anything about criminal profiling?" Deerfield asked suddenly.
Reacher paused. "Only what I read in the newspaper. "
"It's a science," Blake said. "We developed it at Quantico, over many years. Special Agent Lamarr here is currently our leading exponent. Special Agent Poulton is her assistant."
"We look at crime scenes," Lamarr said. "We look at the underlying psychological indicators, and we work out the type of personality which could have committed the crime."
"We study the victims," Poulton said. "We figure out to whom they could have been especially vulnerable."
"What crimes?" Reacher asked. "What scenes?"
"You son of a bitch," Lamarr said.
"Amy Callan and Caroline Cooke," Blake said. "Both homicide victims."
Reacher stared at him.
"Callan was first," Blake said. "Very distinctive MO, but one homicide is just one homicide, right? Then Cooke was hit. With the exact same MO. That made it a serial situation."
"We looked for a link," Poulton said. "Between the victims. Not hard to find. Army harassment complainants who subsequently quit."
"Extreme organization at the crime scene," Lamarr said. "Indicative of military precision, maybe. A bizarre, coded MO. Nothing left behind. No clues of any kind. The perpetrator was clearly a precise person, and clearly a person familiar with investigative procedures. Possibly a good investigator himself."
"No forced entry at either abode," Poulton said. "The killer was admitted to the house in both cases, by the victims, no questions asked."
"So the killer was somebody they both knew," Blake said.
"Somebody they both trusted," Poulton said.
"Like a friendly visitor," Lamarr said.
There was silence in the room.
"That's what he was," Blake said. "A visitor. Somebody they regarded as a friend. Somebody they felt a bond with."

friend. Somebody they felt a bond with."
"A friend, visiting," Poulton said. "He knocks on the door, they open it up, they say hi, so nice to see you again."
"He walks in," Lamarr said. "Just like that."
There was silence in the room.
"We explored the crime, psychologically," Lamarr said. "Why were those women making somebody mad enough to kill them? So we looked for an Army guy with a score to settle. Maybe somebody outraged by the idea of pesky women ruining good soldiers' careers, and then quitting anyway. Frivolous women, driving good men to suicide?"
"Somebody with a clear sense of right and wrong," Poulton said. "Somebody confident enough in his own code to set these injustices right by his own hand. Somebody happy to act without the proper authorities getting in the way, you know?"
"Somebody both women knew," Blake said. "Somebody they knew well enough to let right in the house, no questions asked, like an old friend or something."
"Somebody decisive," Lamarr said. "Maybe like somebody organized enough to think for a second and then go buy a label machine and a tube of glue, just to take care of a little *ad hoc* problem."
More silence.
"The Army ran them through their computers," Lamarr said. "You're right, they never knew each other. They had very few mutual acquaintances. Very few. But you were one of them."
"You want to know an interesting fact?" Blake said. "Perpetrators of serial homicide used to drive Volkswagen Bugs. Almost all of them. It was uncanny. Then they switched to minivans. Then they switched to sport-utilities. Big four-wheel-drives, exactly like yours. It's a hell of an indicator."
Lamarr leaned across and pulled the sheaf of papers back from Deerfield's place at the table. She tapped them with a finger.
"They live solitary lives," she said. "They interact with one other person at most. They live off other people, often relatives or friends, often women. They don't do much normal stuff. Don't talk much on the phone, they're quiet and furtive."
"They're law enforcement buffs," Poulton said. "They know all kinds of stuff. Like all kinds of obscure legal cases defining their rights."
More silence.
"Profiling," Blake said. "It's an exact science. It's regarded as good enough evidence to get an arrest warrant in most states of the Union."
"It never fails," Lamarr said. She stared at Reacher and then she sat back with her crooked teeth showing in a satisfied smile. Silence settled over the room.
"So?" Reacher said.

"So?" Reacher said.
"So somebody killed two women," Deerfield said.
"And?"
Deerfield nodded to his right, toward Blake and Lamarr and Poulton. "And these agents think it was somebody exactly like you."
"So?"
"So we asked you all those questions."
"And?"
"And I think they're absolutely right. It was somebody exactly like you. Maybe it even *was* you."

4

"NO, IT WASN'T me," Reacher said.
Blake smiled. "That's what they all say."
Reacher stared at him. "You're full of shit, Blake. You've got two women, is all. The Army thing is probably a coincidence. There are hundreds of women out there, harassed out of the Army, maybe thousands. Why jump on that connection?"
Blake said nothing.
"And why a guy like me?" Reacher asked. "That's just a guess, too. And that's what this profiling crap comes down to, right? You say a guy like me did it because you *think* a guy like me did it. No evidence or anything."
"There is no evidence," Blake said.
"The guy didn't leave any behind," Lamarr said. "And that's how we work. The perpetrator was obviously a smart guy, so we looked for a smart guy. You saying you're not a smart guy?"
Reacher stared at her. "There are thousands of guys as smart as me."
"No, there are millions, you conceited son of a bitch," she said. "But then we started narrowing it down some. A smart guy, a loner, Army, knew both victims, movements unaccounted for, a brutal vigilante personality. That narrowed it down from millions to thousands to hundreds to tens, maybe all the way on down to you."
There was silence.
"Me?" Reacher said to her. "You're crazy."
He turned to Deerfield, who was sitting silent and impassive.
"*You* think I did it?"
Deerfield shrugged. "Well, if you didn't, it was somebody exactly like you. And I *know* you put two guys in the hospital. You're already in big trouble for that. This other matter, I'm not familiar with the case. But the Bureau trusts its experts. That's why we hire them, after all."
"They're wrong," Reacher said.
"But can you prove that?"
Reacher stared at him. "Do I have to? What about innocent until proven guilty?"
Deerfield just smiled. "Please, let's stay in the real world, OK?"
There was silence.
"Dates," Reacher said. "Give me dates, and places."
More silence. Deerfield stared into space.
"Callan was seven weeks ago," Blake said. "Cooke was four."

"Gillan was seven weeks ago," Blake said. "Cooke was four."
Reacher scanned back in time. Four weeks was the start of fall, seven took him into late summer. Late summer, he had done nothing at all. He had been battling the yard. Three months of unchecked growth had seen him outdoors every day with scythes and hoes and other unaccustomed tools in his hands. He had gone days at a time without even seeing Jodie. She had been tied up with legal cases. She had spent a week overseas, in England. He couldn't recall for sure which week it had been. It was a lonely spell, his time absorbed with beating back rampant nature, a foot at a time.
The start of fall, he'd transferred his energies inside the house. There were things to be done. But he'd done them all alone. Jodie had stayed in the city, working her way up the greasy pole. There were random nights together. But that was all. No trips anywhere, no ticket stubs, no hotel registers, no stamps in his passport. No alibis. He looked at the seven agents ranged against him.
"I want my lawyer now," he said.
THE TWO LOCAL sentries took him back to the first room. His status had changed. This time they stayed inside with him, one standing on each side of the closed door. Reacher sat in the plastic garden chair and ignored them. He listened to the tireless fluttering of the ventilation inside the exposed trunking in the ceiling, and waited, thinking about nothing.
He waited almost two hours. The two sentries stood patiently by the door, not looking at him, not speaking, never moving. He stayed in his chair, leaning back, staring at the ducts above his head. There were twin systems up there. One blew fresh air into the room and the other sucked stale air out. The layout was clear. He traced the flow with his eyes and imagined big lazy fans outside on the roof, turning slowly in opposite directions, making the building breathe like a lung. He imagined the spent breath from his body floating away into the Manhattan night sky and out toward the Atlantic. He imagined the damp molecules drifting and diffusing in the atmosphere, catching in the breeze. Two hours, they could be twenty miles offshore. Or thirty. Or forty. It would depend on the conditions. He couldn't remember if it had been a windy night. He guessed not. He recalled the fog. Fog would blow away if there was a decent wind. So it was a still night, and therefore his spent breath was probably hanging sullenly in the air right above the lazy fans.
Then there were people in the corridor outside and the door opened and the sentries stepped out and Jodie walked in. She blazed against the gray walls. She was wearing a pastel peach dress with a wool coat over it, a couple of shades darker. Her hair was still lightened from the summer sun. Her eyes were bright blue, and her skin was the color of honey. It was the middle of the night, and she looked as fresh as morning.

“Hey, Reacher,” she said.
He nodded and said nothing. He could see worry in her face. She stepped close and bent down and kissed him on the lips. She smelled like a flower.
“You talk to them?” he asked her.
“I’m not the right person to deal with this,” she said. “Financial law, yes, but criminal law, I’ve got no idea.”
She waited in front of his chair, tall and slim, head cocked to one side, all her weight on one foot. Every new time he saw her, she looked more beautiful. He stood up and stretched, wearily.
“There’s nothing to deal with,” he said.
She shook her head. “Yes, there damn well is.”
“I didn’t kill any women.”
She stared at him. “Of course you didn’t. I know that. And *they* know that, or they’d have put you in handcuffs and leg irons and taken you straight down to Quantico, not dumped you in here. This must be about the other thing. They *saw* you do that. You put two guys in the hospital, with them watching.”
“It’s not about that. They reacted too fast. This was set up before I even *did* the other thing. And they don’t care about the other thing. I’m not working the rackets. That’s all Cozo’s interested in, organized crime.”
She nodded. “Cozo’s happy. Maybe more than happy. He’s got two punks off the street, no cost to himself. But it’s turned into a catch-22, don’t you see that? To convince Cozo, you had to make yourself out as a vigilante loner, and the more you made yourself out as a vigilante loner, the more you pushed yourself into this profile from Quantico. So whatever reason they brought you in for, you’re starting to confuse them.”
“The profile is bullshit.”
“They don’t think so.”
“It has to be bullshit. It came up with me.”
She shook her head. “No, it came up with somebody like you.”
“Whatever, I should just walk out of here.”
“You can’t do that. You’re in big trouble. Whatever else, they *saw* you beat on those guys, Reacher. FBI agents, on *duty*, for Christ’s sake.”
“Those guys deserved it.”
“Why?”
“Because they were picking on somebody who didn’t need picking on.”
“See? Now you’re making their case for them. A vigilante, with his own code.”
He shrugged and looked away.
“I’m not the right person for this,” she said again. “I don’t do criminal law. You need a better lawyer.”

“I don’t need any lawyer,” he said.
“Yes, Reacher, you need a lawyer. That’s for damn sure. This is for real. This is the *FBI*, for God’s sake.”
He was silent for a long moment.
“You have to take this seriously,” she said.
“I can’t,” he said. “It’s bullshit. I didn’t kill any women.”
“But you made yourself fit the profile. And now proving them wrong is going to be tough. Proving a negative always is. So you need a proper lawyer.”
“They said I’m damaging your career. They said I’m not an ideal corporate husband.”
“Well, that’s bullshit too. And even if it was true, I wouldn’t care. I’m not saying get a different lawyer for my sake. I’m saying it for yours.”
“I don’t want *any* lawyer.”
“So why did you call me?”
He smiled. “I thought you might cheer me up.”
She stepped into his arms and stretched up and kissed him, hard.
“I love you, Reacher,” she said. “I really do, you know that, right? But you need a better lawyer. I don’t even understand what this is *about*.”
There was a long silence. Just ventilation flutter above their heads, the faint noise of air against metal, the quiet sound of time passing. He listened to it.
“They gave me a copy of the surveillance report,” she said.
He nodded. “I thought they would.”
“Why?”
“Because it eliminates me from the investigation,” he said.
“How?”
“Because this is not about two women,” he said.
“It isn’t?”
“No, it’s about *three* women. Has to be.”
“Why?”
“Because whoever’s killing them, he’s working to a timetable. You see that? He’s on a three-week cycle. Seven weeks ago, four weeks ago, so the next one has already happened, this past week. They put me under surveillance to eliminate me from the investigation.”
“So why did they haul you in? If you’re eliminated?”
“I don’t know,” he said.
“Maybe the timetable fell apart. Maybe he stopped at two.”
“Nobody stops at two. You do more than one, you do more than two.”
“Maybe he fell ill and took a break. Could be months before the next one.”
He was silent.

“Maybe he was arrested for something else,” she said. “That happens, time to time. Something unconnected, you know? He could be in jail ten years. They’ll never know it was him. You need a good lawyer, Reacher. Somebody better than me. This isn’t going to be easy.”
"You were supposed to cheer me up, you know that?”
“No, I was supposed to give you advice.”
He stared at her, suddenly uncertain.
“There’s the other thing too,” she said. “The two guys. You’re in trouble for that, whatever.”
“They should thank me for that.”
“Doesn’t work that way,” she said.
He was silent.
“This is not the Army, Reacher,” she said. “You can’t just drag a couple of guys behind the motor pool and beat some sense into them anymore. This is New York. This is civilian stuff now. They’re looking at you for something bad and you can’t just pretend they’re not.”
“I didn’t do anything.”
“Wrong, Reacher. You put two guys in the hospital. *They watched you do it*. Bad guys, for sure, but there are *rules* here. You broke them.”
Then there were footsteps in the corridor outside, loud and heavy. Maybe three men, hurrying. The door opened. Deerfield stepped into the room. The two local boys crowded his shoulder. Deerfield ignored Reacher and spoke directly to Jodie.
“Your client conference is over, Ms. Jacob,” he said.
Deerfield led the way back to the room with the long table. The two local agents sandwiched Reacher between them and followed him. Jodie trailed the four of them through the door. She blinked in the glare of the lights. A second chair had been placed over on the far side. Deerfield stood and pointed at it, silently. Jodie glanced at him and moved around the end of the table and sat down with Reacher. He squeezed her hand under the cover of the shiny mahogany slab.
The two local boys took up station against the walls. Reacher stared forward through the glare. The same lineup was ranged against him. Poulton, Lamarr, Blake, Deerfield, and then Cozo, sitting isolated between two empty chairs. Now there was a squat black audio recorder on the table. Deerfield leaned forward and pressed a red button. He announced the date and the time and the place. He identified the nine occupants of the room. He placed his hands in front of him.
“This is Alan Deerfield speaking to the suspect Jack Reacher,” he said. “You are now under arrest on the following two counts.”
He paused.

“One, for aggravated assault and robbery,” he said. “Against two persons yet to be definitively identified.”
James Cozo leaned forward. “Two, for aiding and abetting a criminal organization engaged in the practice of extortion.”
Deerfield smiled. “You are not obliged to say anything. If you do say anything, it will be recorded and may be used as evidence against you in a court of law. You are entitled to be represented by an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you by the state of New York.”
He leaned forward to the recording machine and pressed the stop button.
“So did I get it right? Seeing as how you’re the big expert on Miranda?”
Reacher said nothing. Deerfield smiled again and pressed the red button and the machine hummed back into life.
“Do you understand your rights?” he asked.
“Yes,” Reacher said.
“Do you have anything to say at this point?”
“No.”
“That it?” Deerfield asked.
“Yes,” Reacher said.
Deerfield nodded. “Noted.”
He reached forward and clicked the recording machine to off.
“I want a bail hearing,” Jodie said.
Deerfield shook his head.
“No need,” he said. “We’ll release him on his own recognizance.”
Silence in the room.
“What about the other matter?” Jodie asked. “The women?”
“That investigation is continuing,” Deerfield said. “Your client is free to go.”

5

HE WAS OUT of there just after three in the morning. Jodie was agitated, torn between staying with him and getting back to the office to finish her all-nighter. He convinced her to calm down and go do her work. One of the local guys drove her down to Wall Street. They gave him back his possessions, except for the wad of stolen cash. Then the other local guy drove him back to Garrison, hustling hard, fifty-eight miles in forty-seven minutes. He had a red beacon on the dash connected to the cigar lighter with a cord, and he kept it flashing the whole way. The beam swept through the fog. It was the middle of the night, dark and cold, and the roads were damp and slick. The guy said nothing. Just drove and then jammed to a stop at the end of Reacher's driveway in Garrison and took off again as soon as the passenger door slammed shut. Reacher watched the flashing light disappear into the river mist and turned to walk down to his house.

He had inherited the house from Leon Garber, who was Jodie's father and his old commanding officer. It had been a week of big surprises, both good and bad, back at the start of the summer. Meeting Jodie again, finding out she'd been married and divorced, finding out old Leon was dead, finding out the house was his. He had been in love with Jodie for fifteen years, since he first met her, on a base in the Philippines. She had been fifteen herself then, right on the cusp of spectacular womanhood, and she was his CO's daughter, and he had crushed his feelings down like a guilty secret and never let them see the light of day. He felt they would have been a betrayal of her, and of Leon, and betraying Leon was the last thing he would have ever done, because Leon was a rough-and-ready prince among men, and he loved him like a father. Which made him feel Jodie was his sister, and you don't feel that way about your sister.

Then chance had brought him to Leon's funeral, and he had met Jodie again, and they had sparred uneasily for a couple of days before she admitted she felt the exact same things and was concealing her feelings for the exact same reasons. It was a thunderclap, a glorious sunburst of happiness in a summer week of big surprises.

So meeting Jodie again was the good surprise and Leon dying was the bad one, no doubt about it. But inheriting the house was both good *and* bad. It was a half-million-dollar slice of prime real estate standing proudly on the Hudson opposite West Point, and it was a comfortable building, but it represented a big problem. It *anchored* him in a way which made him profoundly uncomfortable. Being static disconcerted him. He had moved around so often in his life it confused

him to spend time in any one particular place. And he had never lived in a house before. Bunkhouses and service bungalows and motels were his habitat. It was ingrained.

And the idea of property worried him. His whole life, he had never owned more than would fit into his pockets. As a boy he had owned a baseball and not much else. As an adult he had once gone seven whole years without owning anything at all except a pair of shoes he preferred to the Defense Department issue. Then a woman bought him a wallet with a clear plastic window with her photograph in it. He lost touch with the woman and junked the photograph, but kept the wallet. Then he went the remaining six years of his service life with just the shoes and the wallet. After mustering out he added a toothbrush. It was a plastic thing that folded in half and clipped into his pocket like a pen. He had a wristwatch. It was Army issue, so it started out theirs and became his when they didn't ask for it back. And that was it. Shoes on his feet, clothes on his back, small bills in his pants, big bills in his wallet, a toothbrush in his pocket, and a watch on his wrist.

Now he had a house. And a house is a complicated thing. A big, complicated, physical thing. It started with the basement. The basement was a huge dark space with a concrete floor and concrete walls and floor joists exposed overhead like bones. There were pipes and wires and machines down there. A furnace. Buried outside somewhere was an oil tank. There was a well for the water. Big round pipes ran through the wall to the septic system. It was a complex interdependent machine, and he didn't know how it worked.

Upstairs looked more normal. There was a warren of rooms, all of them amiably shabby and unkempt. But they all had secrets. Some of the light switches didn't work. One of the windows was jammed shut. The range in the kitchen was too complicated to use. The whole place creaked and cracked at night, reminding him it was real and there and needed thinking about.

And a house has an existence beyond the physical. It's also a bureaucratic thing. Something had come in the mail about *title*. There was insurance to consider. Taxes. Town tax, school tax, inspection, assessment. There was a bill to pay for garbage collection. And something about a scheduled propane delivery. He kept all that kind of mail in a drawer in the kitchen.

The only thing he had bought for the house was a gold-colored filter cone for Leon's old coffee machine. He figured it was easier than always running to the store to buy the paper kind. Ten past four that morning, he filled it with coffee from a can and added water and set the machine going. Rinsed out a mug at the sink and set it on the counter, ready. Sat on a stool and leaned on his elbows and watched the dark liquid sputtering into the flask. It was an old machine, inefficient, maybe a little furred up inside. It generally took five minutes to

finish. Somewhere during the fourth of those five minutes, he heard a car slowing on the road outside. The hiss of damp pavement. The crunch of tires on his asphalt drive. *Jodie couldn't stand to stay at work*, he thought. That hope endured about a second and a half, until the car came around the curve and the flashing red beam started sweeping over his kitchen window. It washed left to right, left to right, cutting through the river mist, and then it died into darkness and the motor noise died into silence. Doors opened and feet touched the ground. Two people. Doors slammed shut. He stood up and killed the kitchen light. Looked out of the window and saw the vague shapes of two people peering into the fog, looking for the path that led up to his front door. He ducked back to the stool and listened to their steps on the gravel. They paused. The doorbell rang.
There were two light switches in the hallway. One of them operated a porch light. He wasn't sure which one. He gambled and got it right and saw a glow through the fanlight. He opened the door. The bulb out there was a spotlight made of thick glass tinted yellow. It threw a narrow beam downward from high on the right. The beam caught Nelson Blake first, and then the parts of Julia Lamarr that weren't in his shadow. Blake's face was showing nothing except strain. Lamarr's face was still full of hostility and contempt.
"You're still up," Blake said. A statement, not a question.
Reacher nodded.
"Come on in, I guess," he said.
Lamarr shook her head. The yellow light caught her hair.
"We'd rather not," she said.
Blake moved his feet. "There someplace we can go? Get some breakfast?"
"Four thirty in the morning?" Reacher said. "Not around here."
"Can we talk in the car?" Lamarr asked.
"No," Reacher said.
Impasse. Lamarr looked away and Blake shuffled his feet.
"Come on in," Reacher said again. "I just made coffee. "
He walked away, back to the kitchen. Pulled a cupboard door and found two more mugs. Rinsed the dust out of them at the sink and listened to the creak of the hallway floor as Blake stepped inside. Then he heard Lamarr's lighter tread, and the sound of the door closing behind her.
"Black is all I got," he called. "No milk or sugar in the house, I'm afraid."
"Black is fine," Blake said.
He was in the kitchen doorway, moving sideways, staying close to the hallway, unwilling to trespass. Lamarr was moving alongside him, looking around the kitchen with undisguised curiosity.
"Nothing for me," she said.

“Drink some coffee, Julia,” Blake said. “It’s been a long night.”
The way he said it was halfway between an order and paternalistic concern. Reacher glanced at him, surprised, and filled three mugs. He took his own and leaned back on the counter, waiting.
“We need to talk,” Blake said.
“Who was the third woman?” Reacher asked.
"Lorraine Stanley. She was a quartermaster sergeant. ”
"Where?”
“She served in Utah someplace. They found her dead in California, this morning.”
“Same MO?”
Blake nodded. “Identical in every respect.”
“Same history?”
Blake nodded again. “Harassment complainant, won her case, but quit anyway.”
“When?”
“The harassment thing was two years ago, she quit a year ago. So that’s three out of three. So the Army thing is not a coincidence, believe me.”
Reacher sipped his coffee. It tasted weak and stale. The machine was obviously all furred up with mineral deposits. There was probably a procedure for cleaning it out.
“I never heard of her,” he said. “I never served in Utah.”
Blake nodded. “Somewhere we can talk?”
“We’re talking here, right?”
“Somewhere we can sit?”
Reacher nodded and pushed off the counter and led the way into the living room. He set his mug on the side table and pulled up the blinds to reveal pitch dark outside. The windows faced west over the river. It would be hours until the sun got high enough to lighten the sky out there.
There were three sofas in a rectangle around a cold fireplace full of last winter’s ash. The last cheery blazes Jodie’s father had ever enjoyed. Blake sat facing the window and Reacher sat opposite and watched Lamarr as she fought her short skirt and sat down facing the hearth. Her skin was the same color as the ash.
“We stand by our profile,” she said.
“Well, good for you.”
“It was somebody exactly like you.”
“You think that’s plausible?” Blake asked.
“Is what plausible?” Reacher asked back.
“That this could be a soldier?”
“You’re asking me if a soldier could be a killer?”

Blake nodded. "You got an opinion on that?"
"My opinion is it's a really stupid question. Like asking me if I thought a jockey could ride a horse."
There was silence. Just a muffled *whump* from the basement as the furnace caught, and then rapid creaking as the steam pipes heated through and expanded and rubbed against the floor joists under their feet.
"So you were a plausible suspect," Blake said. "As far as the first two went."
Reacher said nothing.
"Hence the surveillance," Blake said.
"Is that an apology?" Reacher asked.
Blake nodded. "I guess so."
"So why did you haul me in? When you already proved it wasn't me?"
Blake looked embarrassed. "We wanted to show some progress, I guess."
"You show progress by hauling the wrong guy in? I don't buy that."
"I already apologized," Blake said.
More silence.
"You got anybody who knew all three?" Reacher asked.
"Not yet," Lamarr said.
"We're thinking maybe previous personal contact isn't too significant," Blake said.
"You were thinking it *was*, couple of hours ago. You were telling me how I was this big friend of theirs, I knock on the door, they let me right in."
"Not you," Blake said. "Somebody like you, is all. And now we're thinking maybe we were wrong. This guy is killing by category, right? Female harassment complainants who quit afterward? So maybe he's not personally known to them, maybe he's just in a *category* known to them. Like the military police."
Reacher smiled. "So now you think it was me again?"
Blake shook his head. "No, you weren't in California. "
"Wrong answer, Blake. It wasn't me because I'm not a killer."
"You never killed anybody?" Lamarr said, like she knew the answer.
"Only those who needed it."
She smiled in turn. "Like I said, we stand by our profile. Some self-righteous son of a bitch just like you."
Reacher saw Blake glance at her, half supportive, half disapproving. The light from the kitchen was coming through the hallway behind her, turning her thin hair to a wispy halo, making her look like a death's-head. Blake sat forward, trying to force Reacher's attention his way. "What we're saying is, it's possible this guy is or was a military policeman."
Reacher looked away from Lamarr and shrugged.

Reacher looked away from Lamarr and shrugged.
“Anything’s possible,” he said.
Blake nodded. “And, you know, we kind of understand that maybe your loyalty to the service makes that hard to accept.”
“Actually, common sense makes that hard to accept. ”
“In what way?”
“Because you seem to think trust and friendship is important to the MO in some way. And nobody in the service trusts an MP. Or likes them much, in my experience. ”
“You told us Rita Scimeca would remember you as a friend.”
“I was different. I put the effort in. Not many of the guys did.”
Silence again. The fog outside was dulling sound, like a blanket over the house. The water forcing through the radiators was loud.
“There’s an *agenda* here,” Blake said. “Like Julia says, we stand behind our techniques, and the way we read it, there’s an Army involvement. The victim category is way too narrow for this to be random.”
“So?”
“As a rule, the Bureau and the military don’t get along too well.”
“Well, there’s a big surprise. Who the hell *do* you guys get along with?”
Blake nodded. He was in an expensive suit. It made him look uncomfortable, like a college football coach on alumni day.
“Nobody gets on with anybody,” he said. “You know how it is, with all the rivalries. When you were serving, did you ever cooperate with civilian agencies? ”
Reacher said nothing.
“So you know how it is,” Blake said again. “Military hates the Bureau, the Bureau hates CIA, everybody hates everybody else.”
There was silence.
“So we need a go-between,” Blake said.
“A what?”
“An adviser. Somebody to help us.”
Reacher shrugged. “I don’t know anybody like that. I’ve been out too long.”
Silence. Reacher drained his coffee and set the empty mug back on the table.
“You could do it,” Blake said.
“Me?”
“Yes, you. You still know your way around, right?”
“No way.”
“Why not?”
Reacher shook his head. “Because I don’t want to.”

“But you *could* do it.”
“I could, but I won’t.”
“We got your record. You were a hell of an investigator, in the service.”
“That’s history.”
“Maybe you still got friends there, people who remember you. Maybe people who still owe you favors.”
“Maybe, maybe not.”
“You could help us.”
“Maybe I could, but I won’t.”
He leaned back into his sofa and spread his arms wide across the tops of the cushions and straightened his legs.
“Don’t you feel anything?” Blake asked. “For these women getting killed? Shouldn’t be happening, right?”
“There’s a million people in the service,” Reacher said. “I was in thirteen years. Turnover during that period was what? Maybe twice over? So there’s two million people out there who used to be in with me. Stands to reason a few of them will be getting killed, just like a few of them will be winning the lottery. I can’t worry about all of them.”
“You knew Callan and Cooke. You liked them.”
“I liked Callan.”
“So help us catch her killer.”
“No.”
“Without somebody like you, we’re just running blind.”
“No.”
“I’m asking for your help here.”
“No.”
“You son of a bitch,” Lamarr said.
Reacher looked at Blake. “You seriously think I would want to work with her? And can’t she think of anything else to call me except *son of a bitch*?”
“Julia, go fix some more coffee,” Blake said.
She colored red and her mouth set tight, but she struggled up out of the sofa and walked through to the kitchen. Blake sat forward and talked low.
“She’s real uptight,” he said. “You need to cut her a little slack.”
“I do?” Reacher said. “Why the hell should I? She’s sitting here drinking my coffee, calling me names.”
“Victim category is pretty specific here, right? And maybe smaller than you think. Female harassment complainants who subsequently quit the service? You said hundreds, maybe thousands, but Defense Department says there’s only ninety-one women who fit those parameters.”

“So?”
“We figure the guy might want to work his way through all of them. So we have to assume he’s going to, until he’s caught. If he’s caught. And he’s done three already.”
“So?”
“Julia’s sister is one of the other eighty-eight.”
Silence again, apart from domestic noises in the kitchen.
“So she’s worried,” Blake said. “Not really panicked, I guess, because one in eighty-eight isn’t bad odds, but it’s bad enough for her to be taking it real personal.”
Reacher nodded, slowly.
“Then she shouldn’t be working the case,” he said. “She’s too involved.”
Blake shrugged. “She insisted. It was my judgment call. I’m happy with it. Pressure can produce results.”
“Not for her. She’s a loose cannon.”
“She’s my lead profiler. She’s effectively driving this case. So I need her, involved or not. And she needs you as a go-between, and I need results, so you need to cut her a little slack.”
He sat back and stared at Reacher. A fat old man, uncomfortable in his suit, sweating in the nighttime chill, with something uncompromising in his face. *I need results*. Reacher had no problem with people who needed results. But he said nothing. There was a long silence. Then Lamarr came back into the room, carrying the pot from the machine. Her face was pale again. She had recovered her composure.
“I’m standing by my profile,” she said. “The guy’s somebody exactly like you. Maybe somebody you used to know. Maybe somebody you worked with.”
Reacher looked up at her. “I’m sorry about your personal situation.”
“I don’t need your sympathy. I need to catch the guy.”
“Well, good luck.”
She bent and poured coffee into Blake’s mug, and then walked over to Reacher’s.
“Thank you,” he said.
“You going to help us?” she asked.
He shook his head. “No.”
“What about an advisory role?” Blake asked. “Purely consultative? Deep background?”
Reacher shook his head again. “No, not interested.”
“What about something entirely passive?” Blake asked. “Just brainstorming? We feel you could be close to the guy. At least maybe close to the *type* of guy.”

“Not my bag,” Reacher said.
There was silence.
“Would you agree to be hypnotized?” Blake asked.
“Hypnotized? Why?”
“Maybe you could recall something buried. You know, some guy making some threats, some adverse comments. Something you didn’t pay too much attention to at the time. Might come back to you. Might help us piece something together.”
“You still do hypnotism?”
“Sometimes,” Blake said. “It can help. Julia’s an expert. She’d do it.”
“In that case, no thanks. She might make me walk down Fifth Avenue naked.”
Silence again. Blake looked away, then he turned back.
“Last time, Reacher,” he said. “The Bureau is asking for your help. We employ advisers all the time. You’d get paid and everything. Yes or no?”
“This is what hauling me in was all about, right?”
Blake nodded. “Sometimes it works.”
“How?”
Blake paused, and then he decided to answer. Reacher saw a guy prepared to be frank, in the interests of being persuasive.
“It shakes people up,” Blake said. “You know, make them feel they’re the prime suspect, then tell them they’re not, the emotional flip-flop can make them feel a sort of gratitude toward us. Makes them want to help us out.”
“That’s your experience?”
Blake nodded again. “It works, more often than not.”
Reacher shrugged. “I never studied much psychology. ”
“Psychology is our trade, manner of speaking,” Blake said.
“Kind of cruel, don’t you think?”
“The Bureau does what it has to do.”
“Evidently.”
“So, yes or no?”
“No.”
Silence in the room.
“Why not?”
“Because your emotional flip-flop didn’t work on me, I guess.”
“Can we have a formal reason, for the record?”
“Ms. Lamarr is the formal reason. She pisses me off.”
Blake spread his hands, helplessly. “But she’s only pissing you off to make the flip-flop work. It’s a technique. ”
Reacher made a face.
“Well, she’s a little too convincing,” he said. “Take her off the case and I might

"Well, she's a little too convincing," he said. "Take her off the case and I might consider it."
Lamarr glowered and Blake shook his head.
"I won't do that," he said. "That's my call and I won't be dictated to."
"Then my answer is no."
Silence. Blake turned the corners of his mouth down.
"We talked with Deerfield before we came up here," he said. "You can understand we'd do that, right? As a courtesy? He authorized us to tell you Cozo will drop the racketeering charge if you play ball."
"I'm not worried about the racketeering charge."
"You should be. Protection rackets stink, you know that? They ruin businesses, they ruin lives. If Cozo scripts it right, some local jury of Tribeca traders is going to hate your guts."
"I'm not worried about it," Reacher said again. "I'll beat it in a second. I stopped it, remember? I didn't start it. Jury of Tribeca merchants, I'll look like Robin Hood."
Blake nodded and ducked his head and wiped his lips with his fingers.
"Problem is it could be more than a racketeering charge. One of those guys is critical. We just heard from Bellevue. Broken skull. He dies, it's a homicide charge."
Reacher laughed. "Good try, Blake. But nobody got a broken skull tonight. Believe me, I want to break somebody's skull, I know how to do it. It wouldn't happen by accident. So let's hear the rest of them."
"The rest of what?"
"The big threats. Bureau does what it has to do, right? You're willing to move right on into the gray areas. So let's hear what other big threats you've got lined up for me."
"We just want you to play ball here."
"I know that. And I want to hear how far you're prepared to go."
"We'll go as far as we have to. We're the Bureau, Reacher. We're under pressure here. We're not going to waste time. We got none to waste."
Reacher sipped his coffee. It tasted better than when he made it. Maybe she used more grounds. Or less. "So give me the bad news."
"IRS audit."
"You think I'm worried about an IRS audit? I've got nothing to hide. They find some income I've forgotten about, I'll be extremely grateful, is all. I could use the cash."
"Your girlfriend, too."
Reacher laughed again. "Jodie's a Wall Street lawyer, for God's sake. Big firm, nearly a partner. She'll tie the IRS in a knot without even thinking about it."

nearly a partner. She'll tie the IRS in a knot without even thinking about it.
"We're serious, Reacher."
"Not so far, you're not."
Blake looked at the floor. "Cozo's got guys on the street, working undercover. Petrosian's going to be asking who did his boys last night. Cozo's guys could let your name slip."
"So?"
"They could tell him where you live."
"And that's supposed to scare me? Look at me, Blake. Get real. There's maybe ten people on the planet I need to be scared of. Extremely unlikely this guy Petrosian happens to be one of them. So he wants to come up here for me, I'll float him back to town in a box, all the way down the river."
"He's a hard guy, is what I hear."
"I'm sure he's real hard. But is he hard enough?"
"Cozo says he's a sexual deviant. His executions always involve some sexual element. And the corpses are always explicitly displayed, naked, mutilated, really bizarre. Men or women, he doesn't care. Deerfield told us all about that. We talked to him about it."
"I'll take my chances."
Blake nodded. "We thought you'd say that. We're good judges of character. That's our trade, in a manner of speaking. So we asked ourselves how you'd react to something else. Suppose it's not *your* name and address Cozo leaks to Petrosian? What if it's your girlfriend's name and address?"

6

"WHAT ARE YOU going to do?" Jodie asked.
“I don’t know,” Reacher said.
“I can’t believe they’re acting like this.”
They were in Jodie’s kitchen, four floors above lower Broadway in Manhattan. Blake and Lamarr had left him in Garrison and twenty restless minutes later he had driven south to the city. Jodie came home at six in the morning looking for breakfast and a shower and found him waiting in her living room.
“Are they serious?”
“I don’t know. Probably.”
“Shit, I can’t believe it.”
“They’re desperate,” he said. “And they’re arrogant. And they like to win. And they’re an elite group. Put it all together, this is how they behave. I’ve seen it before. Some of our guys were exactly the same. They did what it takes.”
“How long have you got?”
“I have to call them by eight. With a decision.”
“So what are you going to do?”
“I don’t know,” he said again.
Her coat was over the back of a kitchen chair. She was pacing nervously, back and forth in her peach dress. She had been awake and alert for twenty-three straight hours, but there was nothing to prove it except a faint blue tinge at the inside corners of her eyes.
“They can’t get away with this, can they?” she said. “Maybe they’re not serious.”
“Maybe they’re not,” he said. “But it’s a game, right? A gamble? One way or the other, we’re going to worry about it. Forever.”
She dropped into a chair and crossed her legs. Put her head back and shook her hair until it fell behind her shoulders. She was everything Julia Lamarr was not. A visitor from outer space would categorize them both as *women*, with the same parts in the same quantities, hair and eyes and mouths and arms and legs, but one was a dream and the other was a nightmare.
“It just went too far,” he said. “My fault, absolutely. I was jerking them around, because I just didn’t like her at all, from the start. So I figured I’d tease them a little, keep it going, and then eventually say yes. But they dropped this on me, before I could get around to it.”
“So get them to take it back. Start over. Cooperate.”

He shook his head. “No, threatening me is one thing. *You*, that’s way over the line. They’re prepared to even *think* a thing like that, then to hell with them.”
“But were they really serious?” she said again.
“Safest strategy is assume they might be.”
She nodded. “So I’m scared. And I guess I’d still be a little scared, even if they took it back.”
“Exactly,” he said. “What’s done is done.”
“But why? Why are they so desperate? Why the threats?”
“History,” he said. “You know what it’s like. Everybody hates everybody else. Blake said that to me. And it’s true. MPs wouldn’t piss on Quantico if it was on fire. Because of Vietnam. Your dad could have told you all about it. He’s an example.”
“What happened about Vietnam?”
“There was a rule of thumb, draft dodgers were the Bureau’s business, and deserters were ours. Different categories, right? And we knew how to handle deserters. Some of them went to the slammer, but some of them got a little TLC. The jungle wasn’t a lot of fun for the grunts, and the recruiting depots weren’t exactly bulging at the seams, remember? So the MPs would calm the good ones down and send them back, but nine times out of ten the Bureau would arrest them again anyway, on the way to the airport. Drove the MPs crazy. Hoover was unbearable. It was a turf war like you never saw. Result was a perfectly reasonable guy like Leon would hardly even speak to the FBI ever again. Wouldn’t take calls, didn’t bust a gut answering the mail.”
“And it’s still the same?”
He nodded. “Institutions have long memories. That stuff is like yesterday. Never forgive, never forget.”
“Even though women are in danger?”
He shrugged. “Nobody ever said institutional thinking is rational.”
“So they really need somebody?”
“If they want to get anywhere.”
“But why you?”
“Lots of reasons. I was involved with a couple of the cases, they could find me, I was senior enough to know where to look for things, senior enough that the current generation probably still owes me a few favors. ”
She nodded. “So put it all together, they probably *are* serious.”
He said nothing.
“So what are we going to do?”
He paused.
“We could think laterally,” he said into the silence.

“How?”
“You could come with me.”
She shook her head. “They wouldn’t *let* me come with you. And I can’t, anyway. Could be weeks, right? I have to work. The partnership decision is coming up.”
He nodded. “We could do it another way.”
“OK, how?”
“I could go take Petrosian out.”
She stared at him. Said nothing.
“No more threat,” he said. “Like trumping their ace.”
She turned her stare to the ceiling, and then she shook her head again, slowly.
“We have a thing at the firm,” she said. “We call it the *so what else* rule. Suppose we’ve got some bankrupt guy we’re looking after. Sometimes we dig around and find he’s got some funds stashed away that he’s not telling us about. He’s hiding them from us. He’s cheating. First thing we do, we say *so what else*? What else is he doing? What else has he got?”
“So?”
“So what are they really doing here? Maybe this is not about the women at all. Maybe this is about Petrosian. He’s presumably a smart, slippery guy. Maybe there’s nothing to pin on him. No evidence, no witnesses. So maybe Cozo is using Blake and Lamarr to get you to get Petrosian. They profiled you, right? Psychologically? They know how you think. They know how you’ll react. They know if they use Petrosian to threaten me, your very first thought will be to go get Petrosian. Then he’s off the street without a trial, which they probably couldn’t win anyway. And nothing is traceable back to the Bureau. Maybe they’re using you as an assassin. Like a guided missile or something. They wind you up, and off you go.”
He said nothing.
“Or maybe it’s something else,” she said. “This guy killing these women sounds pretty smart too, right? No evidence anywhere? Sounds like it’s going to be a difficult case to prove. So maybe the idea is you eliminate him. There might not be enough proof to satisfy the courts, but there might be enough to satisfy you. In which case you fix him, on behalf of the women you knew. Job done, cheap and quick, nothing traceable back. They’re using you like a magic bullet. They fire it here in New York, and it hits home wherever and whenever.”
Reacher was silent.
“Maybe you were never a suspect at all,” she said. “Maybe they weren’t looking for a killer. Maybe they were looking for somebody who would *kill* a killer.”
There was silence in the room. Outside, the street sounds of early morning were starting up. It was dark gray dawn, and traffic was building.

"Could be both things," Reacher said. "Petrosian and this other guy."
"They're smart people," Jodie said.
He nodded. "They sure as hell are."
"So what are you going to do?"
"I don't know. All I know is I can't go to Quantico and leave you here alone in the same city as Petrosian. I just can't do that."
"But maybe they're not serious. Would the FBI really do something like that?"
"You're going around in a circle. The answer is, we just don't know. And that's the whole point. That's the effect they wanted. Just *not knowing* is enough, isn't it?"
"And if you don't go?"
"Then I stay here and guard you every minute of every day until we get fed up with it to the point where I go after Petrosian anyway, irrespective of whether they were kidding in the first place or not."
"And if you do go?"
"Then they keep me on the ball with the threat against you. And in their opinion *on the ball* means what? Can I stop after I find the guy? Or do they make me go all the way and rub him out?"
"Smart people," she said again.
"Why didn't they just ask me straight?"
"They can't just *ask* you. It would be a hundred percent illegal. And you mustn't do it, anyway."
"I can't?"
"No, not Petrosian or the killer. You mustn't do either thing they want."
"Why not?"
"Because then they own you, Reacher. Two vigilante homicides, with their *knowledge*? Right under their noses? The Bureau would *own* you, the whole rest of your life."
He leaned his hands on the window frame and stared at the street below.
"You're in a hell of a spot," she said. "We both are."
He said nothing.
"So what are you going to do?" she asked again.
"I'm going to think," he said. "I've got until eight o'clock."
She nodded. "Think carefully."
JODIE WENT BACK to work. The partnership track beckoned. Reacher sat alone in her apartment and thought hard for thirty minutes, and then he was on the phone for twenty. Blake had said *maybe there are people who still owe you favors*. Then at five minutes to eight he called the number Lamarr had given him. She answered, first ring.
"I'm in," he said. "I'm not happy about it, but I'll do it."

"I'm in," he said. "I'm not happy about it, but I'll do it."
There was a brief pause. He imagined the crooked teeth, revealed in a smile.
"Go home and pack a bag," she said. "I'll pick you up in two hours exactly."
"No, I'm going to see Jodie. I'll meet you at the airport."
"We're not going by plane."
"We're not?"
"No, I never fly. We're driving."
"To Virginia? How long will that take?"
"Five, six hours."
"Six hours? In a car with you? Shit, I'm not doing that."
"You're doing what you're told, Reacher. Garrison, in two hours."
JODIE'S OFFICE WAS on the fortieth floor of a sixty-floor tower on Wall Street. The lobby had twenty-four-hour security and Reacher had a pass from Jodie's firm that let him through, day or night. She was alone at her desk, reviewing morning information from the markets in London.
"You OK?" he asked her.
"Tired," she said.
"You should go back home."
"Right, like I'm really going to sleep."
He moved to the window and looked out at a sliver of lightening sky.
"Relax," he said. "There's nothing to worry about."
She made no reply.
"I decided what to do," he said.
She shook her head. "Well, don't tell me about it. I don't need to know."
"It'll work out. I promise."
She sat still for a second, and then she joined him at the window. Nuzzled into his chest and held him tight, her cheek against his shirt.
"Take care," she said.
"I'll take care," he said. "Don't worry about it."
"Don't do anything stupid."
"Don't worry about it," he said again.
She turned her face up and they kissed. He kept it going, long and hard, figuring the feeling was going to have to last him into the foreseeable future.
HE DROVE FASTER than usual and was back at his house ten minutes before Lamarr's two hours were up. He took his folding toothbrush from the bathroom and clipped it into his inside pocket. He bolted the basement door and turned the thermostat down. Turned all the faucets off hard and locked the front door. Unplugged the phone in the den and went outside through the kitchen.
He walked to the end of the yard through the trees and looked down at the river. It was gray and sluggish, lined with morning mist like a quilt. On the opposite

It was gray and sluggish, filled with morning mist like a quilt. On the opposite bank, the leaves were starting to turn, shading from tired green to brown and pale orange. The buildings of West Point were barely visible.

The sun was coming over the ridge of his roof, but it was watery, with no warmth in it. He walked back to the house and skirted the garage and came out on his driveway. Hunched into his coat and walked out to the street. He didn't look back at the house. *Out of sight, out of mind*. That was the way he wanted it. He crossed the shoulder and leaned on his mailbox, watching the road, waiting.

7

LAMARR ARRIVED EXACTLY on time in a new Buick Park Avenue with shined paint and Virginia plates. She was alone and looked small in it. She eased to a stop and pressed a button and the trunk lid opened. There was a chrome *supercharged* label on the lip. Reacher closed the trunk again and opened the passenger door and slid inside.
“Where’s your bag?” she asked.
“I don’t have a bag,” he said.
She looked blank for a second. Then she looked away from him like she was dealing with a social difficulty and eased away down the street. She paused at the first junction, unsure.
“What’s the best way south?” she asked.
“On a plane,” he said.
She looked away again and made a left, away from the river. Then another, which set her heading north on Route 9.
“I’ll pick up I-84 in Fishkill,” she said. “Go west to the Thruway, south to the Palisades, pick up the Garden State.”
He was silent. She glanced at him.
“Whatever,” he said.
“Just making conversation.”
“No need.”
“You’re not being very cooperative.”
He shrugged. “You told me you wanted my help with the Army. Not with the basic geography of the United States.”
She raised her eyebrows and made a shape with her mouth like she was disappointed, but not surprised. He looked away and watched the scenery from his window. It was warm in the car. She had the heater on high. He leaned over and turned his side down by five degrees.
“Too hot,” he said.
She made no comment. Just drove on in silence. I-84 took them across the Hudson River and through Newburgh. Then she turned south on the Thruway and squirmed back in her seat, like she was settling in for the trip.
“You never fly?” he asked.
“I used to, years ago,” she said. “But I can’t now.”
“Why not?”
“Phobia,” she said simply. “I’m terrified, is all.”
“You carrying your gun?” he asked

"You carrying your gun?" he asked.
She lifted a hand from the wheel and pulled back the flap of her jacket. He saw the straps of a shoulder holster, stiff and brown and shiny, curving next to her breast.
"Would you use it?"
"Of course, if I had to."
"Then you're dumb to be scared of flying. Driving a car and getting in gunfights are a million times more likely to kill you."
She nodded. "I guess I understand that, statistically."
"So your fear is irrational," he said.
"I guess," she said.
There was silence. Just the hum of the motor.
"The Bureau got many irrational agents?" he asked.
She made no reply. Just reddened slightly under the pallor. He sat in the silence, watching the road reel in ahead. Then he started to feel bad for riding her. She was under pressure, from more than one direction.
"I'm sorry about your sister," he said.
"Why?" she asked.
"Well, I know you're worried about her."
She kept her eyes on the road. "Blake tell you that? While I was making the coffee?"
"He mentioned it."
"She's my stepsister, actually," she said. "And any worrying I do about her situation is strictly professional, OK?"
"Sounds like you don't get along."
"Does it? Why should it? Should I care more just because I'm close to one of the potential victims?"
"You expected *me* to. You expected me to be ready to avenge Amy Callan, just because I knew her and liked her."
She shook her head. "That was Blake. I would have expected you to care anyway, as a human being, except in your case I wouldn't, actually, because you match the killer himself for profile."
"Your profile is wrong. Sooner you face up to that, sooner you'll catch the guy."
"What do *you* know about profiling?"
"Nothing at all. But I didn't kill those women, and I wouldn't have, either. Therefore you're wasting your time looking for a guy like me, because I'm exactly the wrong type of a guy to be looking for. Stands to reason, right? Borne out by the facts."
"You like facts?"
He nodded. "A lot better than I like bullshit."

“OK, try these facts,” she said. “I just caught a killer in Colorado, without ever even being there. A woman was raped and murdered in her house, blows to the head with a blunt instrument, left posed on her back with her face covered by a cloth. A violent sexual crime, spontaneously committed, no forced entry, no damage or disruption to the house. The woman was smart and young and pretty. I reasoned the perpetrator was a local man, older, lived within walking distance, knew the victim, had been in the house many times before, was sexually attracted to the victim, but was either inadequate or repressed as to communicating it to her appropriately.”
“And?”
“I issued that profile and the local police department made an arrest within an hour. The guy confessed immediately. ”
Reacher nodded. “He was a handyman. He killed her with his hammer.”
For the first time in thirty minutes, her eyes left the road. She stared at him.
“You can’t possibly know that. It hasn’t been in the paper here.”
“Educated guess. The cloth over her face means she knew him and he knew her, and he was ashamed to leave her uncovered. Probably made him feel remorseful, maybe like she was watching him from beyond the grave or something. That kind of semifunctional thinking is indicative of a low IQ. The lack of forced entry and the lack of disruption to the house both mean he was familiar with the place. He’d been there many times before. Easy enough to figure.”
“Why easy?”
“Because what kind of a guy with a low IQ has been visiting with a smart and pretty girl many times before? Got to be a gardener or a handyman. Probably not a gardener, because they work outside and they tend to come at least in pairs. So I figured a handyman, probably tormented by how young and cute she was. One day he can’t stand it anymore, he makes some kind of a clumsy advance, she’s embarrassed by it, she rejects it, maybe even laughs at it, he freaks out and rapes her and kills her. He’s a handyman, got his tools with him, he’s accustomed to using them, he’d use a hammer for a thing like that.”
Lamarr was silent. Reddening again, under the pallor.
“And you call that profiling?” Reacher asked. “It’s just common sense.”
“That was a very simple case,” she said quietly.
He laughed. “You guys get paid for this? You study it in college and all?”
They entered New Jersey. The blacktop improved and the shoulder plantings got tidier, like they always do. Every state puts a lot of effort into the first mile of its highways, to make you feel you’re entering a better place from a worse one. Reacher wondered why they didn’t put the effort into the *last* mile instead. That

way, you'd miss the place you were leaving.
"We need to talk," Lamarr said.
"So talk. Tell me about college."
"We're not going to talk about college."
"Why not? Tell me about Profiling 101. You pass?"
"We need to discuss the cases."
He smiled. "You did go to college, right?"
She nodded. "Indiana State."
"Psychology major?"
She shook her head.
"So what was it? Criminology?"
"Landscape gardening, if you must know. My professional training is from the FBI Academy at Quantico. "
"Landscape gardening? No wonder the Bureau snapped you up in a big hurry."
"It was relevant. It teaches you to see the big picture, and to be patient."
"And how to grow things. That could be useful, killing time while your bullshit profiles are getting you nowhere."
She was silent again.
"So are there many irrational phobic landscape gardeners at Quantico? Any bonsai enthusiasts scared of spiders? Orchid growers who won't step on the cracks in the sidewalk?"
Her pallor was whitening. "I hope you're real proud of yourself, Reacher, making jokes while women are dying."
He went quiet and looked out of the window. She was driving fast. The road was wet and there were gray clouds ahead. They were chasing a rainstorm south.
"So tell me about the cases," he said.
She gripped the wheel and used the leverage to adjust her position in the seat.
"You know the victim group," she said. "Very specific, right?"
He nodded. "Apparently."
"Locations are obviously random. He's chasing particular victims, and he goes where he has to. Crime scenes have all been the victim's residence, so far. Residences have been basically various. Single-family housing in all cases, but varying degrees of isolation."
"Nice places, though."
She glanced at him. He smiled. "The Army paid them all off, right? When they quit? Scandal avoidance, they call it. A big chunk of money like that, a chance to settle down after a few footloose years, they probably bought nice houses."
She nodded as she drove. "Yes, and all in neighborhoods, so far."
"Makes sense," he said. "They want community. What about husbands and

families?”
“Callan was separated, no kids. Cooke had boyfriends, no kids. Stanley was a loner, no attachments.”
“You look at Callan’s husband?”
“Obviously. Any homicide, first thing we do is look at family. Any married woman, we look at the husband. But he was alibied, nothing suspicious. And then with Cooke, the pattern became clear. So we knew it wasn’t a husband or a boyfriend.”
“No, I guess it wasn’t.”
“First problem is how he gets in. No forced entry. He just walks in the door.”
“You think there was surveillance first?”
She shrugged. “Three victims is not a large number, so I’m wary of drawing conclusions. But yes, I think he must have been watching them. He needed them to be alone. He’s efficient and organized. I don’t think he would have left anything to chance. But don’t overestimate the surveillance. It would be pretty obvious pretty quickly that they were alone during the day.”
“Any evidence of a stakeout? Cigarette butts and soda cans piled up under a nearby tree?”
She shook her head. “This guy is leaving no evidence of anything.”
“Neighbors see anything?”
“Not so far.”
“And all three were done during the day?”
“Different times, but all during daylight hours.”
“None of the women worked?”
“Like you don’t. Very few of you ex-Army people seem to work. It’s a snippet I’m going to file away.”
He nodded and glanced at the weather. The roadway was streaming. The rain was a mile ahead.
“Why don’t you people work?” she asked.
“Us *people*?” he repeated. “In my case because I can’t find anything I want to do. I thought about landscape gardening, but I wanted a challenge, not something that would take me a second and a half to master.”
She went silent again and the car hissed into a wall of rain. She set the wipers going and switched on the headlights and backed off the speed a little.
“Are you going to insult me all the time?” she asked.
“Making a little fun of you is a pretty small insult compared to how you’re threatening my girlfriend. And how you’re so ready and willing to believe I’m the type of guy could kill two women.”
“So was that a yes or a no?”

"It was a maybe. I guess an apology from you would help turn it into a no."
"An apology? Forget about it, Reacher. I stand by my profile. If it wasn't you, it was some scumbag just like you."
The sky was turning black and the rain was intense. Up ahead, brake lights were shining red through the deluge on the windshield. The traffic was slowing to a crawl. Lamarr sat forward and braked sharply.
"Shit," she said.
Reacher smiled. "Fun, right? And right now your risk of death or injury is ten thousand times higher than flying, conditions like these."
She made no reply. She was watching her mirror, anxious the people behind her should slow down as smartly as she had. Ahead, the brake lights made a red chain as far as the eye could see. Reacher found the electric switch on the side of his seat and racked it back. He stretched out and got comfortable.
"I'm going to take a nap," he said. "Wake me up when we get someplace."
"We're not through talking," Lamarr said. "We have a deal, remember? Think about Petrosian. I wonder what he's doing right now."
Reacher glanced to his left, looking across her and out her window. Manhattan lay in that direction, but he could barely see the far shoulder of the highway.
"OK, we'll keep on talking," he said.
She was concentrating, riding the brake, crawling forward into the deluge.
"Where were we?" she said.
"He's staked them out sufficient to know they're alone, it's daylight, somehow he walks right in. Then what?"
"Then he kills them."
"In the house?"
"We think so."
"You *think* so? Can't you tell?"
"There's a lot we can't tell, unfortunately."
"Well, that's wonderful."
"He leaves no evidence," she said. "It's a hell of a problem."
He nodded. "So describe the scenes for me. Start with the plantings in their front yards."
"Why? You think that's important?"
He laughed. "No, I just thought you'd feel better telling me something you *did* know a little about."
"You son of a bitch."
The car was crawling forward. The wipers beat slowly across the glass, back and forth, back and forth. There were flashing red and blue lights up ahead.
"Accident," he said.
"He leaves no evidence," she said again. "Absolutely nothing. No trace

"He leaves no evidence," she said again. "Absolutely nothing. No trace evidence, no fibers, no blood, no saliva, no hair, no prints, no DNA, no nothing."
Reacher locked his arms behind his head and yawned. "That's pretty hard to do."
Lamarr nodded, eyes fixed on the windshield. "It sure is. We've got lab tests now like you wouldn't believe, and he's beating all of them."
"How would a person do that?"
"We don't really know. How long have you been in this car?"
He shrugged. "Feels like most of my life."
"It's been about an hour. By now, your prints are all over everything, the door handles, the dash, the seat-belt buckle, the seat switch. There could be a dozen of your hairs on the headrest. A ton of fiber from your pants and your jacket all over the seat. Dirt from your backyard coming off your shoes onto the carpet. Maybe old fibers from your rugs at home."
He nodded. "And I'm just sitting here."
"Exactly. The violence associated with homicide, all that stuff would be spraying all over the place, plus blood maybe, saliva too."
"So maybe he's not killing them in the house."
"He leaves the bodies in there."
"So at least he'd have to drag them back inside."
She nodded. "We know for sure he spends time in the house. There's proof of that."
"Where does he leave the bodies?"
"In the bathroom. In the tub."
The Buick inched past the accident. An old station wagon was crumpled nose-first into the back of a sport-utility exactly like Reacher's own. The station wagon's windshield had two head-shaped holes broken through it. The front doors had been crowbarred open. An ambulance was waiting to U-turn through the divider. Reacher turned his head and stared at the sport-utility. It wasn't his. Not that he thought it could be. Jodie wouldn't be driving anywhere. Not if she had any sense.
"In the tub?" he repeated.
Lamarr nodded at the wheel. "In the tub."
"All three of them?" he asked.
Lamarr nodded again. "All three of them."
"Like a signature?"
"Right," she said.
"How does he know they've all got tubs?"
"You live in a house, you've got a tub."
"How does he know they all live in houses? He's not selecting them on the basis of where they live. It's random, right? They could live anyplace. Like I live in

of where they live. It's random, right? They could live anyplace. Like I live in motels. And some of them just have showers."
She glanced across at him. "You don't live in motels. You live in a house in Garrison."
He glanced down, like he had forgotten.
"Well, now I do, I guess," he said. "But I was on the road, before. How does he know these women weren't?"
"That's a catch-22," she said. "If they were homeless, they wouldn't be on his list. I mean, to be on his list, they need to live somewhere, so he can find them."
"But how does he know they all have tubs?"
She shrugged. "You live somewhere, you've got a tub. Takes a pretty small studio to have just a shower stall."
Reacher nodded. This was not his area of expertise. Real estate was pretty much foreign terrain to him. "OK, they're in the tub."
"Naked. And their clothes are missing."
She was clear of the crash site and was accelerating into the rain. She put the windshield wipers on high.
"He takes their clothes with him?" he asked. "Why?"
"Probably as a trophy. Taking trophies is a very common phenomenon in serial crimes like these. Maybe it's symbolic. Maybe he thinks they should still be in uniform, so he robs them of their civilian gear. As well as their lives."
"He take anything else?"
She shook her head. "Not as far as we can tell. There was nothing obviously removed. No big spaces anywhere. Cash and cards were all still where they should be."
"So he takes their clothes and leaves nothing behind. "
She was quiet for a beat.
"He does leave something behind," she said. "He leaves paint."
"Paint?"
"Army camouflage green. Gallons of it."
"Where?"
"In the tub. He puts the body in there, naked, and then he fills the tub with paint."
Reacher stared past the beating wipers into the rain. "He drowns them? In paint?"
She shook her head again. "He doesn't drown them. They're already dead. He just covers them with paint afterward."
"How? Like he paints them all over?"
She was gunning it hard, making up for lost time. "No, he doesn't paint them. He just fills the tub with the paint, right up to the rim. Obviously it covers the

He just fills the tub with the paint, right up to the rim. Obviously it covers the bodies."
"So they're floating in a tub full of green paint?"
She nodded. "That's how they were all found."
He fell silent. He turned away and stared through his window and stayed silent for a long time. To the west, the weather was clearer. It was brighter. The car was moving fast. Rain hissed under the tires and beat on the underbody. He stared blankly at the brightness in the west and watched the endless road reel in and realized he was *happy*. He was heading somewhere. He was on the move. His blood was stirring like an animal at the end of winter. The old hobo demon was talking to him, quietly, whispering in his head. *You're happy now*, it was saying. *You're happy, aren't you? You even forgot for a moment you're stuck in Garrison, didn't you?*
"You OK?" Lamarr asked.
He turned toward her and tried to fill his mind with her face, the white pallor, the thin hair, the sneering teeth.
"Tell me about the paint," he said quietly.
She looked at him, oddly.
"It's Army camouflage basecoat," she said. "Flat green. Manufactured in Illinois by the hundred thousand gallons. Produced sometime within the last eleven years, because it's new process. Beyond that, we can't trace it."
He nodded, vaguely. He had never used it, but he had seen a million square yards of stuff daubed with it.
"It's messy," he said.
"But the crime scenes are immaculate. He doesn't spill a drop anywhere."
"The women were already dead," he said. "Nobody was fighting. No reason to spill any. But it means he must carry it into the house. How much does it take to fill a tub?"
"Somewhere between twenty and thirty gallons."
"That's a lot of paint. It must mean a hell of a lot to him. You figured out any significance to it?"
She shrugged. "Not really, not beyond the obvious military significance. Maybe removing the civilian clothes and covering the body with Army paint is some kind of reclamation, you know, putting them back where he thinks they belong, in the military, where they should have stayed. It traps them, you see. Couple of hours, the surface is skinning over. It goes hard, and the stuff underneath jellifies. Leave it long enough, I guess the whole tub might dry solid, with them inside. Like people put their baby's shoe in a Perspex cube?"
Reacher stared ahead through the windshield. The horizon was bright. They were leaving the weather behind. On his right, Pennsylvania looked green and

sunny.
“The paint is a hell of a thing,” he said. “Twenty or thirty gallons? That’s a major load to haul around. It implies a big vehicle. A lot of exposure obtaining it. Exposure just carrying it into the house. Very visible. Nobody saw anything?”
“We canvassed, door to door. Nobody reported anything. ”
He nodded, slowly. “The paint is the key. Where’s he getting it from?”
“We have no idea. The Army is not being especially helpful.”
“I’m not surprised. The Army hates you. And it’s embarrassing. Makes it likely it’s a serving soldier. Who else could get that much camouflage paint?”
She made no reply. She just drove, south. The rain was gone and the wipers were squealing over dry glass. She switched them off with a small definite movement of her wrist. He fell to thinking about a soldier somewhere, loading cans of paint. Ninety-one women on his list, some skewed mental process reserving twenty or thirty gallons for each one of them. A potential total of two, two and a half thousand gallons. Tons of it. Truckloads of it. Maybe he was a quartermaster.
“How is he killing them?” he asked.
She slid her hands to a firmer grip on the wheel. Swallowed hard and kept her eyes on the road.
“We don’t know,” she said.
“You don’t *know*?” he repeated.
She shook her head. "They’re just dead. We can’t figure out how.”

8

THERE ARE NINETY-ONE altogether, and you need to do exactly six of them in total, which is three more, so what do you do now? You keep on thinking and planning, is what. Think, think, think, that's what you do. Because it's all based on thinking. You need to outwit them all. The victims, and the investigators. Layers and layers of investigators. More and more investigators all the time. Local cops, state cops, the FBI, the specialists the FBI brings in. New angles, new approaches. You know they're there. They're looking for you. They'll find you if they can.

The investigators are tough, but the women are easy. Just about as easy as you expected them to be. There was no overconfidence there. None at all. The victims go down exactly as you imagined. You planned long and hard, and the planning was perfect. They answer the door, they let you in, they fall for it. They're so damn keen to fall for it, their tongues are practically hanging out. They're so stupid, they deserve it. And it's not difficult. No, not difficult at all. It's meticulous, is what it is. It's like everything else. If you plan it properly, if you think it through, if you prepare correctly, if you rehearse, then it's easy. It's a technical process, just like you knew it would be. Like a science. It can't be anything else. You do this, and then you do this, and then you do this, and then you're done, home free. Three more. That's all. That'll do it. The hard part is over. But you keep on thinking. Think, think, think. It worked once, it worked twice, it worked three times, but you know there are no guarantees in life. You know that, better than anybody. So you keep on thinking, because the only thing that can get you now is your own complacency.

" YOU DON'T KNOW?" Reacher said again.

Lamarr was startled. She was staring straight ahead, tired, concentrating, gripping the wheel, driving like a machine.

"Know what?" she said.

"How they died."

She sighed and shook her head. "No, not really."

He glanced across at her. "You OK?"

"Don't I look OK?"

"You look exhausted."

She yawned. "I'm a little weary, I guess. It was a long night."

"Well, take care."

"You worrying about me now?"

He shook his head. "No. I'm worrying about myself. You could fall asleep, run

He shook his head. "No, I'm worrying about myself. You could fall asleep, run us off the road."
She yawned again. "Never happened before."
He looked away. Found himself fingering the airbag lid in front of him.
"I'm OK," she said again. "Don't worry about it."
"Why don't you know how they died?"
She shrugged. "You were an investigator. You saw dead people."
"So?"
"So what did you look for?"
"Wounds, injuries."
"Right," she said. "Somebody's full of bullet holes, you conclude they've been shot to death. Somebody's got their head smashed in, you call it trauma with a blunt object."
"But?"
"These three were in bathtubs full of drying paint, right? The crime scene guys take the bodies out, and the pathologists clean them up, and they don't find anything. "
"Nothing at all?"
"Nothing obvious, not at first. So then naturally they look harder. They still don't find anything. They know they didn't drown. When they open them up, they find no water or paint in the lungs. So then they search for external injuries, microscopically. They can't find anything. "
"No hypodermic marks? Bruising?"
She shook her head. "Nothing at all. But remember, they've been coated in paint. And that military stuff wouldn't pass too many HUD regulations. Full of all kinds of chemicals, and fairly corrosive. It damages the skin, postmortem. It's conceivable the paint damage might be obscuring some tiny marks. But whatever killed them was very subtle. Nothing gross."
"What about internal damage?"
She shook her head again. "Nothing. No subcutaneous bruising, no organ damage, no nothing."
"Poison?"
"No. Stomach contents were OK. They hadn't ingested the paint. Toxicology was completely clear."
Reacher nodded, slowly. "No sexual interference either, I guess, because Blake was happy both Callan and Cooke would have slept with me if I'd wanted them to. Which means the perpetrator was feeling no sexual resentment, therefore no rape, or else you'd be looking for somebody who'd been rebuffed by them, one time or another."
Lamarr nodded. "That's our profile. Sexuality wasn't an issue. The nakedness is

about humiliation, we think. Punishment. The whole thing was about punishment. Retribution, or something."
"Weird," Reacher said. "That definitely makes the guy a soldier. But it's a very unsoldierly way to kill somebody. Soldiers shoot or stab or hit or strangle. They don't do subtle things."
"We don't know exactly what he did."
"But there's no *anger* there, right? If this guy is into some retribution thing, where's the anger? It sounds too clinical."
Lamarr yawned and nodded, all at once. "That troubles me too. But look at the victim category. What else can the motive be? And if we agree on the motive, what else can the perp be except an angry soldier?"
They lapsed into silence. The miles rolled by. Lamarr held the wheel, thin tendons in her wrists standing out like cords. Reacher watched the road reeling in, and tried not to feel happy about it. Then Lamarr yawned again, and she saw him glance sharply at her.
"I'm OK," she said.
He looked at her, long and hard.
"I'm OK," she said again.
"I'm going to sleep for an hour," he said. "Try not to kill me."
WHEN HE WOKE up, they were still in New Jersey. The car was quiet and comfortable. The motor was a faraway hum and there was a faint tenor rumble from the tires. A faint rustle of wind. The weather was gray. Lamarr was rigid with exhaustion, gripping the wheel, staring down the road with red unblinking eyes.
"We should stop for lunch," he said.
"Too early."
He checked his watch. It was one o'clock. "Don't be such a damn hero. You should get a pint of coffee inside you."
She hesitated, ready to argue. Then she gave it up. Her body suddenly went slack and she yawned again.
"OK," she said. "So let's stop."
She drove on for a mile and coasted into a rest area in a clearing in the trees behind the shoulder. She put the car in a slot and turned the motor off and they sat in the sudden silence. The place was the same as a hundred others Reacher had seen, low-profile Federal architecture of the fifties colonized by fast-food operations that lodged behind discreet counters and spread their messages outward with gaudy advertisements.
He got out first and stretched his cramped frame in the cold, damp air. The highway traffic was roaring behind him. Lamarr was inert in the car, so he

strolled away to the bathroom. Then she was nowhere to be seen, so he walked inside the building and lined up for a sandwich. She joined him within a minute.
“You’re not supposed to do that,” she said.
“Do what?”
“Stray out of my sight.”
“Why not?”
“Because we have rules for people like you.”
She said it without any trace of softness or humor. He shrugged. “OK, next time I go to the bathroom I’ll invite you right inside with me.”
She didn’t smile. “Just tell me, and I’ll wait at the door.”
The line shuffled forward and he changed his selection from cheese to crabmeat, because he figured it was more expensive and he assumed she was paying. He added a twenty-ounce cup of black coffee and a plain doughnut. He found a table while she fiddled with her purse. Then she joined him and he raised his coffee in an ironic toast.
“Here’s to a few fun days together,” he said.
“It’ll be more than a few days,” she said. “It’ll be as long as it takes.”
He sipped his coffee and thought about time.
“What’s the significance of the three-week cycle?” he asked.
She had chosen cheese on whole-wheat and was pecking a crumb from the corner of her mouth with her little finger.
“We’re not entirely sure,” she said. “Three weeks is an odd interval. It’s not lunar. There’s no calendar significance to three weeks.”
He did the math in his head. “Ninety-one targets, one every three weeks, it would take him five and a quarter years to get through. That’s a hell of a long project.”
She nodded. “We think that proves the cycle is imposed by something external. Presumably he’d work faster if he could. So we think he’s on a three-week work pattern. Maybe he works two weeks on, one week off. He spends the week off staking them out, organizing it, and then doing it.”
Reacher saw his chance. Nodded.
“Possible,” he said.
“So what kind of soldier works that kind of pattern?”
“That regular? Maybe a rapid-response guy, two weeks on readiness, one week stood down.”
“Who’s on rapid response?”
“Marines, some infantry,” he said.
Then he swallowed. “And some Special Forces.”
Then he waited to see if she’d take the bait.

She nodded. “Special Forces would know subtle ways to kill, right?”
He started on the sandwich. The crabmeat could have been tuna fish. “Silent ways, unarmed ways, improvised ways, I guess. But I don’t know about *subtle* ways. This is about concealment, right? Special Forces are interested in getting people dead, for sure, but they don’t care about leaving anybody puzzled afterward about how they did it.”
“So what are you saying?”
He put his sandwich down. “I’m saying I don’t have a clue about who’s doing what, or why, or how. And I don’t see how I should. You’re the big expert here. You’re the one studied landscape gardening in school.”
She paused, with her sandwich in midair. “We need more from you than this, Reacher. And you know what we’ll do if we don’t get it.”
“I know what you *say* you’ll do.”
“You going to take the chance we won’t?”
“She gets hurt, you know what I’ll do to you, right?”
She smiled. “Threatening me, Reacher? Threatening a federal agent? You just broke the law again. Title 18, paragraph A-3, section 4702. Now you’re *really* stacking up the charges against yourself, that’s for sure.”
He looked away and made no reply.
“Stay on the ball, and everything will be OK,” she said.
He drained his cup, and looked at her over the rim. A steady, neutral gaze. “The ethics bothering you here?” she asked.
“Are there ethics involved?” he asked back.
Then her face changed. A hint of embarrassment crept into it. A hint of softening. She nodded. “I know, it used to bother me too. I couldn’t believe it, when I got out of the Academy. But the Bureau knows what it’s doing. I learned that, pretty quick. It’s a practical thing. It’s about the greatest good for the greatest number. We need cooperation, we ask for it first, but you better believe we make damn sure we get it.”
Reacher said nothing.
“It’s a policy I believe in, now,” Lamarr said. “But I want you to know using your girlfriend as a threat wasn’t my idea.”
Reacher said nothing.
“That was Blake,” she said. “I’m not about to criticize him for it, but I wouldn’t have gone down that road myself.”
“Why not?”
“Because we don’t need *more* women in danger here.”
“So why did you let him do it?”
“Let him? He’s my boss. And this is law enforcement. Emphasis on the

enforcement. But I need you to know it wouldn't have been my way. Because we need to be able to work together."
"Is this an apology?"
She said nothing.
"Is it? Finally?"
She made a face. "Close as you'll get from me, I guess."
Reacher shrugged. "OK, whatever."
"Friends now?" she said.
"We'll never be friends," Reacher said. "You can forget about that."
"You don't like me," she said.
"You want me to be honest with you?"
She shrugged. "Not really, I guess. I just want you to help me out."
"I'll be a go-between," he said. "That's what I agreed to. But you need to tell me what you want."
She nodded. "Special Forces sound promising to me. First thing you'll do is check them out."
He looked away, and clenched his teeth to keep himself from smiling.
THEY SPENT A whole hour at the rest stop. Toward the end of it Lamarr started to relax. Then she seemed reluctant to get back on the road.
"You want me to drive?" Reacher asked.
"It's a Bureau car," she said. "You're not permitted."
But the question jogged her back on track. She gathered her purse and stood up from the table. Reacher took the trash to the receptacle and joined her at the door. They walked back to the Buick in silence. She fired it up and eased it out of the slot and merged onto the highway.
The hum of the motor came back, and the faint noise from the road and the muted rush of the air, and within a minute it was like they had never stopped at all. Lamarr was in the same position, upright and tense behind the wheel, and Reacher was sprawled on her right, watching the view flash by.
"Tell me about your sister," he said.
"My stepsister."
"Whatever, tell me about her."
"Why?"
He shrugged. "You want me to help, I need background. Like where did she serve, what happened to her, stuff like that."
"She's a rich girl who wanted adventure."
"So she joined the Army?"
"She believed the advertisements. You seen those, in magazines? They make it look tough and glamorous. "

“Is she tough?”
Lamarr nodded. “She’s very physical, you know? She loves all that stuff, rock climbing, biking, skiing, hiking, windsurfing. She thought the Army was going to be all rappelling down cliffs with a knife between your teeth.”
“And it wasn’t?”
“You know damn well it wasn’t. Not back then, not for a woman. They put her in a transport battalion, made her drive a truck.”
“Why didn’t she quit, if she’s rich?”
“Because she’s not a quitter. She did great in basic training. She was pushing for something better.”
“And?”
“She saw some jerk of a colonel five times, trying to make some progress. He suggested if she was naked throughout the sixth interview, that might help.”
“And?”
“She busted him. Whereupon they gave her the transfer she wanted. Infantry close-support unit, about as near the action as a woman was going to get.”
“But?”
“You know how it works, right? Rumors? No smoke without fire? The assumption was she *had* screwed the guy, you know, even though she had busted him and he was canned, which made it completely illogical. In the end, she couldn’t stand the whispers, and she did finally quit.”
“So what’s she doing now?”
“Nothing. She’s feeling a little sorry for herself.”
“You close to her?”
She paused.
“Not very, to be honest,” she said. “Not as close as I’d maybe want to be.”
“You like her?”
Lamarr made a face. “What’s not to like? She’s very likable. She’s a great person, actually. But I made mistakes, right from the start. Handled it all wrong. I was young, my dad was dead, we were real poor, this rich guy fell in love with my mother and finished up adopting me. I was full of resentment that I was being *rescued* , I guess. So I figured it didn’t mean I had to fall in love with *her*. She’s only my *stepsister*, I said to myself.”
“You never got past it?”
She shook her head. “Not totally. My fault, I admit it. My mother died early, which left me feeling a little isolated and awkward. I didn’t handle it well. So now my stepsister is basically just a nice woman I know. Like a close acquaintance. I guess we both feel that way. But we get along OK, what we see of each other.”

He nodded. "If they're rich, are you rich too?"
She glanced sideways. Smiled. The crossed teeth flashed, briefly.
"Why?" she said. "You like rich women? Or maybe you think rich women shouldn't hold down jobs? Or *any* women?"
"Just making conversation."
She smiled again. "I'm richer than you'd think. My stepfather has lots of money. And he's very fair with us, even though I'm not really his daughter and she is."
"Lucky you."
She paused.
"And we're going to be a lot richer soon," she said. "Unfortunately. He's real sick. He's been fighting cancer for two years. Tough old guy, but now he's going to die. So there's a big inheritance coming our way."
"I'm sorry he's sick," Reacher said.
She nodded. "Yes, so am I. It's sad."
There was silence. Just the hum of the miles passing under the wheels.
"Did you warn your sister?" Reacher asked.
"My stepsister."
He glanced at her. "Why do you always emphasize she's your stepsister?"
She shrugged at the wheel. "Because Blake will pull me off if he thinks I'm too involved. And I don't want that to happen."
"You don't?"
"Of course I don't. Somebody close to you is in trouble, you want to take care of it yourself, right?"
Reacher looked away.
"You better believe it," he said.
She was quiet for a beat.
"And the family thing is very awkward for me," she said. "All those mistakes came home to haunt me. When my mother died, they could have cut me off, but they just *didn't*. They still both treat me exactly right, all the way, very loving, very generous, very fair and equal, and the more they do, the more I feel really guilty for calling myself a Cinderella at the beginning."
Reacher said nothing.
"You think I'm being irrational again," she said.
He said nothing. She drove on, eyes fixed on the windshield.
"Cinderella," she said. "Although you'd probably call me the ugly sister."
He made no reply to that. Just watched the road.
"Whatever, did you warn her?" he asked again.
She glanced sideways at him and he saw her haul herself back to the present.
"Yes, of course I warned her," she said. "Soon as Cooke made the pattern clear, I've called her over and over again. She should be safe enough. She spends a lot

I've called her over and over again. She should be safe enough. She spends a lot of time at the hospital with her father, and when she's at home I've told her not to let anybody through the door. Nobody at all, not anybody, no matter who they are."
"She pay attention?"
"I made sure she did."
He nodded. "OK, she's safe enough. Only eighty-seven others to worry about."
AFTER NEW JERSEY came eighty miles of Maryland, which took an hour and twenty minutes to cover. It was raining again, prematurely dark. Then they skirted the District of Columbia and entered Virginia and settled in for the final forty miles of I-95, all the way down to Quantico. The buildings of the city receded behind them and gentle forest built ahead. The rain stopped. The sky lightened. Lamarr cruised fast and then slowed suddenly and turned off the highway onto an unmarked road winding through the trees. The surface was good, but the curves were tight. After a half-mile, there was a neat clearing with parked military vehicles and huts painted dark green.
"Marines," she said. "They gave us sixty acres of land for our place."
He smiled. "That's not how they see it. They figure you stole it."
More curves, another half-mile, and there was another clearing. Same vehicles, same huts, same green paint.
"Camouflage basecoat," Reacher said.
She nodded. "Creepy."
More curves, two more clearings, altogether two miles deep into the woods. Reacher sat forward and paid attention. He had never been to Quantico before. He was curious. The car rounded a tight bend and came clear of the trees and stopped short at a checkpoint barrier. There was a red-and-white striped pole across the roadway and a sentry's hutch made from bullet-proof glass. An armed guard stepped forward. Over his shoulder in the distance was a long, low huddle of honey stone buildings. A couple of squat high-rises standing among them. The buildings crouched alone on undulating lawns. The lawns were immaculate and the way the low buildings spread into them meant their architect hadn't been worried about consuming space. The place looked very peaceful, like a minor college campus or a corporate headquarters, except for the razor-wire perimeter and the armed guard.
Lamarr had the window down and was rooting in her purse for ID. The guy clearly knew who she was, but rules are rules and he needed to see her plastic. He nodded as soon as her hand came clear of the bag. Then he switched his gaze across to Reacher.
"You should have paperwork on him," Lamarr said.
The guy nodded again. "Yeah. Mr. Blake took care of it."

The guy nodded again. "Yeah, Mr. Blake took care of it.
He ducked back to his hutch and came out with a laminated plastic tag on a chain. He handed it through the window and Lamarr passed it on. It had Reacher's name and his old service photograph on it. The whole thing was overprinted with a pale red V.
"V for visitor," Lamarr said. "You wear it at all times."
"Or?" Reacher asked.
"Or you get shot. And I'm not kidding."
The guard was back in his hutch, raising the barrier. Lamarr buzzed her window up and accelerated through. The road climbed the undulations and revealed parking lots in the dips. Reacher could hear gunfire. The flat bark of heavy handguns, maybe two hundred yards away in the trees.
"Target practice," Lamarr said. "Goes on all the time."
She was bright and alert. Like proximity to the mother ship was reviving her. Reacher could see how that could happen. The whole place was impressive. It nestled in a natural bowl, deep in the forest, miles away from anywhere. It felt isolated and secret. Easy to see how it could breed a fierce, loyal spirit in the people fortunate enough to be admitted to it.
Lamarr drove slowly over speed bumps to a parking lot in front of the largest building. She eased nose-first into a slot and shut it down. Checked her watch.
"Six hours ten minutes," she said. "That's real slow. The weather, I guess, plus we stopped too long for lunch."
Silence in the car.
"So now what?" Reacher asked.
"Now we go to work."
The plate-glass doors at the front of the building opened up and Poulton walked out. The sandy-haired little guy with the mustache. He was wearing a fresh suit. Dark blue, with a white button-down and a gray tie. The new color made him less insignificant. More formal. He stood for a second and scanned the lot and then set his course for the car. Lamarr got out to meet him. Reacher sat still and waited. Poulton let Lamarr take her own bag from the trunk. It was a suit carrier in the same black imitation leather as her briefcase.
"Let's go, Reacher," she called.
He ducked his head and slipped the ID chain around his neck. Opened his door and slid out. It was cold and windy. The breeze was carrying the sound of dry leaves tossing, and gunfire.
"Bring your bag," Poulton called.
"I don't have a bag," Reacher said.
Poulton glanced at Lamarr, and she gave him an *I've had this all day* look. Then

they turned together and walked toward the building. Reacher glanced at the sky and followed them. The undulating ground gave him a new view with each new step. The land fell away to the left of the buildings, and he saw squads of trainees walking purposefully, or running in groups, or marching away into the woods with shotguns. Standard apparel seemed to be dark blue sweats with *FBI* embroidered in yellow on the front and back, like it was a fashion label or a major-league franchise. To his military eye, it all looked irredeemably civilian. Then he realized with a little chill of shame that that was partly because a healthy percentage of the people doing the walking and running and carrying were women.

Lamarr opened the plate-glass door and walked inside. Poulton waited for Reacher on the threshold.

"I'll show you to your room," he said. "You can stow your stuff."

Up close in daylight, he looked older. There were faint lines in his face, barely visible, like a forty-year-old was wearing a twenty-year-old's skin.

"I don't have any stuff," Reacher said to him. "I just told you that."

Poulton hesitated. There was clearly an itinerary. A timetable to be followed.

"I'll show you anyway," he said.

Lamarr walked away with her bag and Poulton led Reacher to an elevator. They rode together to the third floor and came out on a quiet corridor with thin carpet on the floor and worn fabric on the walls. Poulton walked to a plain door and took a key from his pocket and opened it up. Inside was a standard-issue motel room. Narrow entryway, bathroom on the right, closet on the left, queen bed, table and two chairs, bland decor.

Poulton stayed out in the corridor. "Be ready in ten."

The door sucked shut. There was no handle on the inside. Not quite a standard-issue motel room. There was a view of the woods from the window, but the window didn't open. The frame was welded shut and the handle had been removed. There was a telephone on the nightstand. He picked it up and heard a dial tone. Hit 9 and heard more. He dialed Jodie's private office line. Let it ring eighteen times before trying her apartment. Her machine cut in. He tried her mobile. It was switched off.

He put his coat in the closet and unclipped his toothbrush from his pocket and propped it in a glass on the bathroom vanity. Rinsed his face at the sink and pushed his hair into some kind of shape. Then he sat down on the edge of the bed and waited.

9

EIGHT MINUTES LATER he heard a key in the lock and looked up and expected to see Poulton at the door. But it wasn't Poulton. It was a woman. She looked about sixteen. She had long fair hair in a loose ponytail. White teeth in an open, tanned face. Bright blue eyes. She was wearing a man's suit, extensively tailored to fit. A white shirt and a tie. Small black shoes with low heels. She was over six feet tall, long-limbed, and very slim. And completely spectacular. And she was smiling at him.
"Hi," she said.
Reacher made no reply. Just stared at her. Her face clouded and her smile turned a little embarrassed.
"So you want to do the FAQs right away?"
"The what?" "The FAQs. Frequently asked questions."
"I'm not sure I have any questions."
"Oh, OK."
She smiled again, relieved. It gave her a frank, guileless look.
"What are the frequently asked questions?" he asked.
"Oh, you know, the stuff most new guys around here ask me. It's really, really tedious."
She meant it. He could see that. But he asked anyway.
"What kind of stuff?" he said.
She made a face, resigned.
"I'm Lisa Harper," she said. "I'm twenty-nine, yes really, I'm from Aspen, Colorado, I'm six feet one, yes really, I've been at Quantico two years, yes I date guys, no I dress like this just because I like it, no I'm not married, no I don't currently have a boyfriend, and no I don't want to have dinner with you tonight."
She finished with another smile and he smiled back.
"Well, how about tomorrow night?" he said.
She shook her head. "All you need to know is I'm an FBI agent, on duty."
"Doing what?"
"Watching you," she said. "Where you go, I go. You're classified SU, status unknown, maybe friendly, maybe hostile. Usually that means an organized-crime plea bargain, you know, some guy ratting out his bosses. Useful to us, but not reliable."
"I'm not organized crime."
"Our file says you might be."
"Then the file is bullshit."

"Then the file is bullshit."
She nodded, and smiled again. "I looked Petrosian up separately. He's a Syrian. Therefore his rivals are Chinese. And *they* never employ anybody except other Chinese. Implausible they'd use an American WASP like you."
"You point that out to anybody?"
"I'm sure they already know. They're just trying to get you to take the threat seriously."
"Should I take it seriously?"
She nodded. Stopped smiling.
"Yes, you should," she said. "You should think very carefully about Jodie."
"Jodie's in the file?"
She nodded again. "Everything's in the file."
"So why don't I have a handle on my door? My file shows I'm not the guy."
"Because we're very cautious and your profile is very bad. The guy will turn out to be very similar to you."
"You a profiler too?"
She shook her head. The ponytail moved with it. "No, I'm operational. Assigned for the duration. But I listen carefully. Listen and learn, right? So let's go."
She held the door. It closed softly behind him as they walked to a different elevator. This one had buttons for five basement floors in a line beneath 3, 2, and 1. Lisa Harper pressed the bottom button. Reacher stood beside her and tried not to breathe in her scent. The elevator settled with a bump and the door slid back on a gray corridor bright with fluorescent light.
"We call this the Bunker," Harper said. "It used to be our nuclear shelter. Now it's BS."
"That's for damn sure," Reacher said.
"Behavioral Science. And that's a very old joke."
She led him to the right. The corridor was narrow, and clean, but not public-area clean. It was a working place. It smelled faintly of sweat and old coffee and office chemicals. There were notice boards on the walls and random stacks of stationery cartons in the corners. There was a line of doors in the left-hand wall.
"Here," Harper said.
She stopped him in front of a door with a number on it and reached across him and knocked. Then she used the handle and opened it up for him.
"I'll be right outside," she said.
He went in and saw Nelson Blake behind a crowded desk in a small untidy office. There were maps and photographs taped carefully to the walls. Piles of paper everywhere. No visitor chair. Blake was glowering. His face was red with blood pressure and pale with strain, all at the same time. He was watching a

muted television set. It was tuned to a political cable channel. A guy in shirtsleeves was reading something to a committee. The caption read *Director of the FBI*.
"Budget hearings," Blake muttered. "Singing for our damn supper."
Reacher said nothing. Blake kept his eyes on the television.
"Case conference in two minutes," he said. "So listen up for the rules. Consider yourself somewhere between a guest and a prisoner here, OK?"
Reacher nodded. "Harper already explained that."
"Right. She stays with you, all the time. Everything you do, everywhere you go, you're supervised by her. But don't get the wrong idea. You're still Lamarr's boy, only she stays here, because she won't fly. And you'll need to get around some. Whereupon we need to keep an eye on you, so Harper goes too. The only time you're alone is when you're locked in your room. Your duties are what Lamarr tells you they are. You wear your ID at all times."
"OK."
"And don't get ideas about Harper. Thing with her is, she looks nice, but you start messing with her, then she's the bitch from hell, OK?"
"OK."
"Anything else?"
"Is my phone tapped?"
"Of course it is." Blake riffed through papers. Slid a thick finger down a printout. "You just called your girlfriend, private office line, apartment, mobile. No answer. "
"Where is she?"
Blake shrugged. "Hell should I know?"
Then he scrabbled in the pile of paper on his desk and came up with a large brown envelope. Held it out.
"With Cozo's compliments," he said.
Reacher took the envelope. It was stiff and heavy. It contained photographs. Eight of them. They were color glossies, eight by ten. Crime scene photographs. They looked like stuff from a cheap skin magazine, except the women were all dead. The corpses were displayed in limp imitations of centerfolds. They were mutilated. Pieces were missing. Things had been inserted into them, here and there.
"Petrosian's handiwork," Blake said. "Wives and sisters and daughters of people who pissed him off."
"So how come he's still running around?"
There was silence for a second.
"There's proof, and then there's *proof*, right?" Blake said.

Reacher nodded. “So where’s Jodie?”
“Hell should I know?” Blake said again. “We’ve got no interest in her as long as you play ball. We’re not tailing her. Petrosian can find her himself, if it comes to that. We’re not going to deliver her to him. That would be illegal, right?”
“So would breaking your neck.”
Blake nodded. “Stop with the threats, OK? You’re in no position.”
“I know this whole thing was your idea.”
Blake shook his head. “I’m not worried about you, Reacher. Deep down, you think you’re a good person. You’ll help me, and then you’ll forget all about me.”
Reacher smiled. “I thought you profilers were supposed to be real insightful.”
THREE WEEKS IS *a nice complicated interval, which is exactly why you chose it. It has no obvious significance. They’ll drive themselves mad, trying to understand a three-week interval. They’ll have to dig real, real deep before they see what you’re doing. Too deep to be feasible. The closer they get to it, the less it will mean. The interval leads nowhere. So the interval makes you safe.*
But does it have to be maintained? Maybe. A pattern is a pattern. It ought to be a very strict thing. Very precise. Because that’s what they’re expecting. Strict adherence to a pattern. It’s typical in this sort of case. The pattern protects you. It’s important. So it should be maintained. But then again, maybe it shouldn’t. Three weeks is a pretty long interval. And pretty boring. So maybe you should speed it up. But anything less would be very tight, given the work required. Soon as one was done, the next would have to be prepared. A treadmill. Difficult work, on a tight schedule. Not everybody could do it. But you could.
THE CASE CONFERENCE was held in a long low room a floor above Blake’s office. There was light brown fabric on the walls, worn shiny where people had leaned on it or brushed against it. One long wall had four recesses let into it, with blinds and concealed lighting simulating windows, even though the room was four stories underground. There was a silent television mounted high on the wall, with the budget hearings playing to nobody. There was a long table made of expensive wood, surrounded by cheap chairs set at forty-five degree angles so they faced the head of the table, where there was a large empty blackboard set against the end wall. The blackboard was modern, like it came from a well-endowed college. The whole place was airless and quiet and isolated, like a place where serious work was done, like a postgraduate seminar room.
Harper led Reacher to a seat at the far end from the blackboard. The back of the class. She sat one place nearer the action, so he had to look past her shoulder. Blake took the chair nearest the board. Poulton and Lamarr came in together, carrying files, absorbed in low conversation. Neither of them glanced anywhere except at Blake. He waited until the door closed behind them and then stood up

and flipped the blackboard over.
The top right quarter was occupied by a large map of the United States, dotted with a forest of flags. Ninety-one of them, Reacher guessed, without trying to count them all. Most of them were red, but three of them were black. Opposite the map on the left was an eight-by-ten color photograph, cropped and blown up from a casual snapshot taken through a cheap lens onto grainy film. It showed a woman, squinting against the sun and smiling. She was in her twenties, and pretty, a plump happy face framed by curly brown hair.
“Lorraine Stanley, ladies and gentlemen,” Blake said. “Recently deceased in San Diego, California.”
Underneath the smiling face were more eight-by-tens pinned up in a careful sequence. The crime scene. They were crisper photographs. Professional. There was a long shot of a small Spanish-style bungalow, taken from the street. A close-up of the front door. Wide shots of a hallway, a living room, the master bedroom. The master bathroom. The back wall was all mirror above twin sinks. The photographer was reflected in the mirror, a large person bundled into a white nylon coverall, a shower cap on his head, latex gloves on his hands, a camera at his eye, the bright halo of the strobe caught by the mirror. There was a shower stall on the right, and a tub on the left. The tub was low, with a wide lip. It was full of green paint.
“She was alive three days ago,” Blake said. “Neighbor saw her wheeling her garbage to the curb, eight forty-five in the morning, local time. She was discovered yesterday, by her cleaner.”
“We got a time of death?” Lamarr asked.
“Approximate,” Blake said. “Sometime during the second day.”
“Neighbors see anything?”
Blake shook his head. “She took her garbage can back inside, the same day. Nobody saw anything after that.”
“MO?”
“Exactly identical to the first two.”
“Evidence?”
“Not a damn thing, so far. They’re still looking, but I’m not optimistic.”
Reacher was focusing on the picture of the hallway. It was a long narrow space leading past the mouth of the living room, back to the bedrooms. On the left was a narrow shelf at waist height, crowded with tiny cactus plants in tiny terra-cotta pots. On the right were more narrow shelves, fixed to the wall at random heights and in random lengths. They were packed with small china ornaments. Most of them looked like dolls, brightly painted to represent national or regional costumes. The sort of things a person buys when she’s dreaming of having a home of her own.

home of her own.
“What did the cleaner do?” he asked.
Blake looked all the way down the table. “Screamed a bit, I guess, and then called the cops.”
“No, before that. She has her own key?”
“Obviously.”
“Did she go straight to the bathroom?”
Blake looked blank and opened a file. Leafed through it and found a faxed copy of an interview report. “Yes, she did. She puts stuff in the toilet bowl, leaves it to work while she does the rest of the house, comes back to it last.”
“So she found the body right away, before she did any cleaning?”
Blake nodded.
“OK,” Reacher said.
“OK what?”
“How wide is that hallway?”
Blake turned and examined the picture. “Three feet? It’s a small house.”
Reacher nodded. “OK.”
“OK what?”
“Where’s the violence? Where’s the anger? She answers the door, this guy somehow forces her back through the hallway, through the master bedroom, into the bathroom, and then carries thirty gallons of paint through after her, and he doesn’t knock anything off those shelves.”
“So?”
Reacher shrugged. “Seems awful quiet to me. I couldn’t wrestle somebody down that hallway without touching all that stuff. No way. Neither could you.”
Blake shook his head. “He doesn’t do any wrestling. Medical reports show the women probably aren’t touched at all. It’s a quiet scene, because there *is* no violence.”
“You happy with that? Profile-wise? An angry soldier looking for retribution and punishment, but there’s no uproar?”
“He *kills* them, Reacher. The way I see it, that’s retribution enough.”
There was silence. Reacher shrugged again. “Whatever. ”
Blake faced him down the length of the table. “You’d do it differently?”
“Sure I would. Suppose you keep on pissing me off and I come after you. I don’t see myself being especially gentle about it. I’d probably smack you around a little. Maybe a lot. If I was mad with you, I’d have to, right? That’s what being mad is all about.”
“So?”
“And what about the paint? How does he bring it to the house? We should go to the store and check out what thirty gallons looks like. He must have a car parked

the store and check out what thirty gallons looks like. He must have a car parked outside for twenty, thirty minutes at least. How does nobody see it? A parked car, or a wagon, or a truck?"
"Or a sport-utility, rather like yours."
"Maybe totally identical to mine. But how come nobody sees it?"
"We don't know," Blake said.
"How does he kill them without leaving any marks?"
"We don't know."
"That's a lot you don't know, right?"
Blake nodded. "Yes, it is, smart guy. But we're working on it. We've got eighteen days. And with a genius like you helping us, I'm sure that's all we're going to need."
"You've got eighteen days if he sticks to his interval, " Reacher said. "Suppose he doesn't?"
"He will."
"You hope."
Silence again. Blake looked at the table, and then at Lamarr. "Julia?"
"I stand by my profile," she said. "Right now I'm interested in Special Forces. They're stood down one week in three. I'm sending Reacher to poke around."
Blake nodded, reassured. "OK, where?"
Lamarr glanced at Reacher, waiting. He looked at the three black flags on the map.
"Geography is all over the place," he said. "This guy could be stationed anywhere in the United States."
"So?"
"So Fort Dix would be the best place to start. There's a guy I know there."
"Who?"
"A guy called John Trent," Reacher said. "He's a colonel. If anybody's going to help me, he might."
"Fort Dix?" Blake said. "That's in New Jersey, right?"
"It was last time I was there," Reacher said.
"OK, smart guy," Blake said. "We'll call this Colonel Trent, get it set up."
Reacher nodded. "Make sure you mention my name loud and often. He won't be very interested unless you do."
Blake nodded. "That's exactly why we brought you on board. You'll leave with Harper, first thing in the morning."
Reacher nodded, and looked straight at Lorraine Stanley's pretty face.
YES , MAYBE IT'S *time to throw them a curve. Maybe tighten the interval, just a little bit. Maybe tighten it a lot. Maybe cancel it altogether. That would really*

unsettle them. That would show them how little they know. Keep everything else the same, but alter the interval. Make it all a little unpredictable. How about it? You need to think.
Or maybe let a little of the anger show, too. Because anger is what this is about, right? Anger, and justice. Maybe it's time to make that a little clearer, a little more obvious. Maybe it's time to take the gloves off. A little violence never hurt anybody. And a little violence could make the next one a little more interesting. Maybe a lot more interesting. You need to think about that, too.
So what's it to be? A shorter interval? Or more drama at the scene? Or both? How about both? Think, think, think.
LISA HARPER TOOK Reacher up to ground level and outside into the chill air just after six in the evening. She led him down an immaculate concrete walkway toward the next building in line. There were knee-high lights set on both sides of the path, a yard apart, already turned on against the gloom of evening. Harper walked with an exaggerated long stride. Reacher wasn't sure if she was trying to match his, or if it was something she'd learned in deportment class. Whatever, it made her look pretty good. He found himself wondering what she'd look like if she was running. Or lying down, with nothing on.
"Cafeteria's in here," she said.
She was ahead of him at another double set of glass doors. She pulled one open and waited until he went inside in front of her.
"To the left," she said.
There was a long corridor with the clattering sound and the vegetable smell of a communal dining room at the end of it. He walked ahead of her. It was warm inside the building. He could sense her at his shoulder.
"OK, help yourself," she said. "Bureau's paying."
The cafeteria was a big double-height room, brightly lit, with molded-plywood chairs at plain tables. There was a service counter along one side. A line of personnel, waiting with trays in their hands. Big groups of trainees in dark blue sweats, separated by senior agents in suits standing in ones and twos. Reacher joined the end of the line, with Harper at his side.
The line shuffled up and he was served a filet mignon the size of a paperback book by a cheerful Spanish guy with ID around his neck. He moved on and got vegetables and fries from the next server in line. He filled a cup with coffee from an urn. He took silverware and a napkin and looked around for a table.
"By the window," Harper said.
She led him to a table for four, standing empty by the glass. The bright light in the room made it full dark outside. She put her tray on the table and took her jacket off. Draped it on the back of her chair. She wasn't thin, but her height

made her very slender. Her shirt was fine cotton, and she wore nothing underneath it. That was pretty clear. She undid her cuffs and rolled her sleeves to the elbow, one by one. Her forearms were smooth and brown.
“Nice tan,” Reacher said.
She sighed.
"FAQs again?” she said. “Yes, it’s all over, and no, I don’t especially want to prove it.”
He smiled.
“Just making conversation,” he said.
She looked straight at him.
“I’ll talk about the case,” she said. “If you want conversation. ”
“I don’t know much about the case. Do you?”
She nodded. “I know I want this guy caught. Those women were pretty brave, making a stand like that.”
“Sounds like the voice of experience.”
He cut into his steak and tasted it. It was pretty good. He’d paid forty bucks for worse in city restaurants.
“It’s the voice of cowardice,” she said. “I haven’t made a stand. Not yet anyway.”
“You getting harassed?”
She smiled. “Are you kidding?” Then she blushed. “I mean, can I say that without sounding big-headed or anything?”
He smiled back. “Yes, in your case I think you can.”
“It’s nothing real serious,” she said. “Just talk, you know, just comments. Loaded questions, and innuendo. Nobody’s said I should sleep with them to get promotion or anything. But it still gets to me. That’s why I dress like this now. I’m trying to make the point, you know, I’m just the same as them, really.”
He smiled again. “But it’s gotten worse, right?”
She nodded, “Right. Much worse.”
He made no reply.
“I don’t know why,” she said.
He looked at her over the rim of his cup. Egyptian cotton button-down, pure white, maybe a thirteen-inch collar, a blue tie knotted neatly in place and rising gently over her small mobile breasts, men’s trousers with big darts taken out of them to curve in around her tiny waist. Tanned face, white teeth, great cheekbones, blue eyes, the long blond hair.
“Is there a camera in my room?” he asked.
“A what?”
“A camera,” he said again. “You know, video surveillance. ”

"Why?"
"I'm just wondering if this is a backup plan. In case Petrosian doesn't pan out."
"What do you mean?"
"Why isn't Poulton looking after me? He doesn't seem to have much else to do."
"I don't follow."
"Yes you do. That's why Blake assigned *you*, right? So you could get real close to me? All this vulnerable little-girl-lost stuff? *I don't know why?* So maybe if Blake wants to stop banging on about Petrosian, he's got something else to twist my arm with, like a nice intimate little scene, you and me in my room, on a nice little videocassette he can say he'll send to Jodie."
She blushed. "I wouldn't do a thing like that."
"But he asked you to, right?"
She was quiet for a long time. Reacher looked away and drained his coffee, staring at his own reflection in the glass.
"He practically challenged me to try," he said. "Told me you're the bitch from hell, if anybody puts the moves on."
She was still silent.
"But I wouldn't fall for it, anyway," he said. "Because I'm not stupid. I'm not about to give them any more ammunition."
She was quiet another minute. Then she looked at him and smiled.
"So can we relax?" she said. "Get past it?"
He nodded. "Sure, let's relax. Let's get past it. You can put your jacket back on now. You can stop showing me your breasts."
She blushed again. "I took it off because I was warm. No other reason."
"OK, I'm not complaining."
He turned away again and watched the dark through the window.
"You want dessert?" she asked.
He turned back and nodded. "And more coffee."
"You stay here. I'll get it."
She walked back to the serving counter. The room seemed to fall silent. Every eye was on her. She came back with a tray bearing two ice cream sundaes and two cups of coffee. A hundred people watched her all the way.
"I apologize," Reacher said.
She bent and slid the tray onto the table. "For what?"
He shrugged. "For looking at you the way I've been looking at you, I guess. You must be sick of it. Everybody looking at you all the time."
She smiled. "Look at me as much as you like, and I'll look at you right back, because you aren't the ugliest thing I ever saw either. But that's as far as it's going to go, OK?"
He smiled back. "Deal."

He smiled back. "Deal."
The ice cream was excellent. It had hot fudge sauce all over it. The coffee was strong. If he narrowed his eyes and cut out the rest of the room, he could rate this place about as highly as he had rated Mostro's.
"What do people do here in the evenings?" he asked.
"Mostly they go home," Harper said. "But not you. You go back to your room. Blake's orders."
"We're following Blake's orders now?"
She smiled. "Some of them."
He nodded. "OK, so let's go."
SHE LEFT HIM on the side of the door without the handle. He stood there and heard her footsteps recede across the carpet outside. Then the thump of the elevator door. Then the whine of the car going down. Then the floor fell silent.
He walked to the nightstand and dialed Jodie's apartment. The machine cut in. He dialed her office. No answer. He tried her mobile. It was not in service.
He walked to the bathroom. Somebody had supplemented his toothbrush with a tube of toothpaste and a disposable razor and a can of shaving cream. There was a bottle of shampoo on the rim of the tub. There was soap in the dish. Fluffy white towels on the rack. He stripped and hung his clothes on the back of the door. Set the shower to hot and stepped under the water.
He stood there for ten minutes and then shut it off. Toweled himself dry. Walked naked to the window and pulled the drapes. Lay down on the bed and scanned the ceiling. He found the camera. The lens was a black tube the diameter of a nickel, wedged deep in a crack in the molding where the wall met the ceiling. He turned back to the phone. Dialed all the same numbers again. Her apartment. He got the machine. Her office. No reply. Her mobile. Switched off.

10

HE SLEPT BADLY and woke himself up before six in the morning and rolled toward the nightstand. Flicked on the bedside light and checked the exact time on his watch. He was cold. He had been cold all night. The sheets were starched, and the shiny surfaces pulled heat away from his skin.

He reached for the phone and dialed Jodie's apartment. He got the machine. No answer in her office. Her mobile was switched off. He held the phone to his ear for a long time, listening to her cellular company telling him so, over and over again. Then he hung up and rolled out of bed.

He walked to the window and pulled the drapes open. The view faced west and it was still dark night outside. Maybe there was a sunrise behind him on the other side of the building. Maybe it hadn't happened yet. He could hear the distant sound of hard rain on dying leaves. He turned his back on it and walked to the bathroom.

He used the toilet and shaved slowly. Spent fifteen minutes in the shower with the water as hot as he could stand it, getting warm. Then he washed his hair with the FBI's shampoo and toweled it dry. Carried his clothes out of the steam and dressed standing by the bed. Buttoned his shirt and hung his ID around his neck. He figured room service was unlikely, so he just sat down to wait.

He waited forty-five minutes. There was a polite knock at the door, followed by the sound of a key going into the lock. Then the door opened and Lisa Harper was standing there, backlit by the brightness of the corridor. She was smiling, mischievously. He had no idea why.

"Good morning," she said.

He raised his hand in reply. Said nothing. She was in a different suit. This one was charcoal gray, with a white shirt and a dark red tie. An exact parody of the unofficial Bureau uniform, but a whole lot of cloth had been cut out of it to make it fit. Her hair was loose. There was a wave in it, and it hung front and back of her shoulders, very long. It looked golden in the light from the corridor.

"We've got to go," she said. "Breakfast meeting."

He took his coat from the closet as he passed. They rode down to the lobby together and paused at the doors. It was raining hard outside. He pulled his collar up and followed her out. The light had changed from black to gray. The rain was cold. She sprinted down the walkway, and he followed a pace behind, watching her run. She looked pretty good doing it.

Lamarr and Blake and Poulton were waiting for them in the cafeteria. They were in three of five chairs crowded around a four-place table by the window. They

in three of five chairs crowded around a four-place table by the window. They were watching him carefully as he approached. There was a white coffee jug in the center of the table, surrounded by upside-down mugs. A basket of sugar packets and little pots of cream. A pile of spoons. Napkins. A basket of doughnuts. A pile of morning newspapers. Harper took a chair and he squeezed in next to her. Lamarr was watching him, something in her eyes. Poulton looked away. Blake looked amused, in a sardonic kind of a way.
"Ready to go to work?" he asked.
Reacher nodded. "Sure, after I've had some coffee."
Poulton turned the mugs over and Harper poured.
"We called Fort Dix last night," Blake said. "Spoke with Colonel Trent. He said he'll give you all day today. "
"That should do it."
"He seems to like you."
"No, he owes me, which is different."
Lamarr nodded. "Good. You need to exploit that. You know what you're looking for, right? Concentrate on the dates. Find somebody whose stand-down weeks match. My guess is he's doing it late in the week. Maybe not exactly the last day, because he's got to get back to base and calm down afterward."
Reacher smiled. "Great deduction, Lamarr. You get paid for this?"
She just looked at him and smiled back, like she knew something he didn't.
"What?" he asked.
"Just keep a civil tongue in your head," Blake said. "You got a problem with what she's suggesting?"
Reacher shrugged. "We do it by dates alone, we're going to come up with maybe a thousand names."
"So narrow it down some. Get Trent to cross-reference against the women. Find somebody who served with one of them."
"Or served with one of the men who got canned," Poulton said.
Reacher smiled again. "Awesome brainpower around this table. It could make a guy feel real intimidated."
"You got better ideas, smart guy?" Blake asked.
"I know what I'm going to do."
"Well, just remember what's riding on it, OK? Lots of women in danger, one of them yours."
"I'll take care of it."
"So get going."
Harper took the cue and stood up. Reacher eased out of his seat and followed her. The three at the table watched him go, something in their eyes. Harper was waiting for him at the cafeteria door, looking back at him, watching him

approach, smiling at him. He stopped next to her.
“Why’s everybody looking at me?” he asked.
“We checked the tape,” she said. “You know, the surveillance camera.”
"So?”
She wouldn’t answer. He reviewed his time in the room. He’d showered twice, walked around some, pulled the drapes, slept, opened the drapes, walked around some more. That was all.
“I didn’t do anything,” he said.
She smiled again, wider. “No, you didn’t.”
“So what’s the big deal?”
“Well, you know, you don’t seem to have brought any pajamas.”
A MOTOR POOL guy brought a car to the doors and left it there with the motor running. Harper watched Reacher get in and then slid into the driver’s seat. They drove out through the rain, past the checkpoint, through the Marine perimeter, out to I-95. She blasted north through the spray and a fast forty minutes later turned east across the southern edge of D.C. Cruised hard for ten more minutes and made an abrupt right into the north gate of Andrews Air Force Base.
“They assigned us the company plane,” she said.
Two security checks later they were at the foot of an unmarked Learjet’s cabin steps. They left the car on the tarmac and climbed inside. It was taxiing before they had their seat belts fastened.
“Should be a half hour to Dix,” Harper said.
“McGuire,” Reacher corrected. “Dix is a Marine Corps base. We’ll land at McGuire Air Force Base.”
Harper looked worried. “They told me we’re going straight there.”
“We are. It’s the same place. Different names, is all.”
She made a face. “Weird. I guess I don’t understand the military.”
“Well, don’t feel bad about it. We don’t understand you either.”
They were on approach thirty minutes later with the sharp, abrupt motions a small jet makes in rough air. There was cloud almost all the way down, then the ground was suddenly in sight. It was raining in Jersey. Dim, and miserable. An Air Force base is a gray place to start with, and the weather wasn’t helping any. McGuire’s runway was wide enough and long enough to let giant transports struggle into the air, and the Lear touched down and stopped in less than a quarter of its length, like a hummingbird coming to rest on an interstate. It turned and taxied and stopped again on a distant corner of tarmac. A flat-green Chevy was racing through the rain to meet it. By the time the cabin steps were down, the driver was waiting at the bottom. He was a Marine lieutenant, maybe twenty-five, and he was getting wet.

“Major Reacher?” he asked.
Reacher nodded. “And this is Agent Harper, from the FBI.”
The lieutenant ignored her completely, like Reacher knew he would.
“The colonel is waiting, sir,” he said.
“So let’s go. Can’t keep the colonel waiting, right?”
Reacher sat in the front of the Chevy with the lieutenant and Harper took the back. They drove out of McGuire into Dix, following narrow roadways with whitewashed curbstones through blocks of warehouses and barracks. They stopped at a huddle of brick offices a mile from McGuire’s runway.
“Door on the left, sir,” the lieutenant said.
The guy waited in the car, like Reacher knew he would. Reacher got out and Harper followed him, staying close to his shoulder, huddling against the weather. The wind was blowing the rain horizontal. The office building had a group of three unmarked personnel doors in the center of a blank brick wall. Reacher took the left-hand door and led Harper into a spacious anteroom full of metal desks and file cabinets. It was antiseptically clean and obsessively tidy. Brightly lit against the gloom of the morning. Three sergeants worked at separate desks. One of them glanced up and hit a button on his telephone.
“Major Reacher is here, sir,” he said into it.
There was a moment’s pause and then the inner office door opened and a man stepped out. He was tall, built like a greyhound, short black hair silvering at the temples. He had a lean hand extended, ready to shake.
“Hello, Reacher,” John Trent said.
Reacher nodded. Trent owed the second half of his career to a paragraph Reacher had omitted from an official report ten years before. Trent had assumed the paragraph was written and ready to go. He had come to see Reacher, not to plead for its deletion, not to bargain, not to bribe, but just to explain, officer to officer, how he’d made the mistake. Simply because he had needed Reacher to understand it *was* a mistake, not malice or dishonesty. He had left without asking for a thing, and then sat still and waited for the ax. It never came. The report was published and the paragraph wasn’t in it. What Trent didn’t know was that Reacher had never even written it. Then ten years had passed and the two men hadn’t really spoken since. Not until the previous morning, when Reacher had made the first of his urgent calls from Jodie’s apartment.
“Hello, Colonel,” Reacher said. “This is Agent Harper, from the FBI.”
Trent was politer than his lieutenant. His rank meant he had to be. Or maybe he was just more impressed by tall damp blondes dressed like men. Either way, he shook hands. And maybe held on to the shake longer than was necessary. And maybe smiled, just a fraction.

“Pleased to meet you, Colonel,” Harper said. “And thanks in advance.”
“I haven’t done anything yet,” Trent said.
“Well, we’re always grateful for cooperation anyplace we can get it, sir.”
Trent released her hand. “Which is a strictly limited number of places, I expect.”
“Fewer than we’d like,” she said. “Considering we’re all on the same side.”
Trent smiled again.
“That’s an interesting concept,” he said. “I’ll do what I can, but the cooperation will be limited. As I’m sure you anticipated. We’re going to be examining personnel records and deployment listings that I’m just not prepared to share with you. Reacher and I will do it on our own. There are issues of national and military security at stake. You’re going to have to wait out here.”
“All day?” she said.
Trent nodded again. “As long as it takes. You comfortable with that?”
It was clear she wasn’t. She looked at the floor and said nothing.
“You wouldn’t let me see confidential FBI stuff,” Trent said. “I mean, you don’t really like us any more than we like you, right?”
Harper glanced around the room. “I’m supposed to watch over him.”
“I understand that. Your Mr. Blake explained your role to me. But you’ll be right here, outside my office. There’s only one door. The sergeant will give you a desk.”
A sergeant stood up unbidden and showed her to an empty desk with a clear view of the inner office door. She sat down slowly, unsure.
"You’ll be OK there,” Trent said. "This could take us some time. It’s a complicated business. I’m sure you know how paperwork can be.”
Then he led Reacher into the inner office and closed the door. It was a large room, windows on two walls, bookcases, cabinets, a big wooden desk, comfortable leather chairs. Reacher sat down in front of the desk and leaned back.
“Give it two minutes, OK?” he said.
Trent nodded. “Read this. Look busy.”
He handed over a thick file in a faded green folder from a tall stack. Reacher opened it up and bent to examine it. There was a complicated chart inside, detailing projected aviation-fuel requirements for the coming six-month period.
Trent walked back to the door. Opened it wide.
“Ms. Harper?” he called. “Can I get you a cup of coffee?”
Reacher glanced over his shoulder and saw her staring in at him, taking in the chairs, the desk, the stack of files.
“I’m all set, right now,” she called back.
“OK,” Trent said. “You want anything, just tell the sergeant.”

He closed the door again. Walked to the window. Reacher took off his ID tag and laid it on the desk. Stood up. Trent unlatched the window and opened it as wide as it would go.
“You didn’t give us much time,” he whispered. “But I think we’re in business.”
“They fell for it right away,” Reacher whispered back. “A lot sooner than I thought they would.”
“But how did you know you’d have the escort?”
“Hope for the best, plan for the worst. You know how it is.”
Trent nodded. Stuck his head out of the window and checked both directions.
“OK, go for it,” he said. “And good luck, my friend.”
“I need a gun,” Reacher whispered.
Trent stared at him and shook his head again, firmly.
“No,” he said. “That, I can’t do.”
“You have to. I need one.”
Trent paused. He was agitated. Getting nervous.
“Christ, OK, a gun,” he said. “But no ammunition. My ass is already way out on a limb on this thing.”
He opened a drawer and took out a Beretta M9. Same weapon as Petrosian’s boys had carried, except Reacher could see this one still had its serial number intact. Trent took the clip out and thumbed the bullets back into the drawer, one by one.
“Quiet,” Reacher whispered urgently.
Trent nodded and clicked the empty clip back into the grip. Handed the gun to Reacher, butt-first. Reacher took it and put it in his coat pocket. Sat on the window ledge. Turned and swiveled his legs outside.
“Have a nice day,” he whispered.
“You too. Take care,” Trent whispered back.
Reacher braced himself with his hands and dropped to the ground. He was in a narrow alley. It was still raining. The lieutenant was waiting in the Chevy, ten yards away, motor running. Reacher sprinted for the car and it was rolling before his door was closed. The mile back to McGuire took little over a minute. The car raced out onto the tarmac and headed straight for a Marine Corps helicopter. Its belly door was standing open and the rotor blade was turning fast. The rain in the air was whipping up into spiral patterns.
“Thanks, kid,” Reacher said.
He stepped out of the car and across to the chopper’s ramp and ran up into the dark. The door whirred shut behind him and the engine noise built to a roar. He felt the machine come off the ground and two pairs of hands grabbed him and pushed him into his seat. He buckled his harness and a headset was thrust at him.

He put it on and the intercom crackle started at the same time as the interior lights came on. He saw he was sitting in a canvas chair between two Marine load-masters.
“We’re going to the Coast Guard heliport in Brooklyn, ” the pilot called through. “Close as we can get without filing a flight plan, and filing a flight plan ain’t exactly on the agenda today, OK?”
Reacher thumbed his mike. “Suits me, guys. And thanks.”
“Colonel must owe you big,” the pilot said.
“No, he just likes me,” Reacher said.
The guy laughed and the helicopter swung in the air and settled to a bellowing cruise.

11

THE COAST GUARD heliport in Brooklyn is situated on the eastern edge of Floyd Bennett Field, facing an island in Jamaica Bay called Ruffle Bar, exactly sixty air miles north and east from McGuire. The Marine pilot kept his foot on the loud pedal all the way and made the trip in thirty-seven minutes. He touched down in a circle with a giant letter H painted inside it and dropped the engines down to idle.

“You’ve got four hours,” he said. “Any longer than that, we’re out of here and you’re on your own, OK?”

“OK,” Reacher said. He unstrapped himself and slipped the headset off and followed the ramp down as it opened. There was a dark blue sedan with Navy markings waiting on the tarmac with its motor running and its front passenger door open.

“You Reacher?” the driver yelled.

Reacher nodded and slid in alongside him. The guy stamped on the gas.

“I’m Navy Reserve,” he said. “We’re helping the colonel out. A little interservice cooperation.”

“I appreciate it,” Reacher said.

"Don’t think twice,” the guy said. “So where we headed?”

“Manhattan. Aim for Chinatown. You know where that is?”

“Do I? I eat there three times a week.”

He took Flatbush Avenue and the Manhattan Bridge. Traffic was light, but ground transportation still seemed awful slow, after the Lear and the helicopter. It was thirty minutes before Reacher was anywhere near where he wanted to be. A whole eighth of his available time gone. The guy came off the bridge approach and stopped short on a hydrant.

“I’ll be waiting right here,” he said. “Facing the other direction, exactly three hours from now. So don’t be late, OK?”

Reacher nodded.

“I won’t,” he said.

He slid out of the car and slapped twice on the roof. Crossed the street and headed south. It was cold in New York, and damp, but it wasn’t actually raining. There was no sun visible. Just a vague sullen light in the sky where the sun ought to have been. He stopped walking and stood still for a moment. He was twenty minutes from Jodie’s office. He started walking again. It was twenty minutes he didn’t have. *First things first.* That was his rule. And maybe they’d

be watching her place. No way could he be seen in New York today. He shook his head and walked on. Forced himself to concentrate. Glanced at his watch. It was late morning and he started worrying he was too early. On the other hand, he might be timing it just right. There was no way of telling. He had no experience.

After five minutes, he stopped walking again. If any street was going to do it for him, this was the one. It was lined on both sides with Chinese restaurants, crowded together, bright gaudy facades in reds and yellows. There was a forest of signs in Oriental script. Pagoda shapes everywhere. The sidewalks were crowded. Delivery trucks double-parked tight against cars. Crates of vegetables and drums of oil piled on the curbs. He walked the length of the street twice, up and down, carefully inspecting the terrain, learning it. Looking at the alleys. Then he touched the gun in his pocket and set off strolling again, looking for his targets. They would be around somewhere. If he wasn't too early. He leaned on a wall and watched. They would be in a pair. Two of them, together. He watched for a long time. There were plenty of people in pairs, but they weren't the right people. They weren't them. None of them. He was too early.

He glanced at his watch and saw his time ticking away. He pushed off the wall and strolled again. He looked into doorways as he passed. Nothing. He watched the alleys. Nothing. Time ticked on. He walked a block south and a block west and tried another street. Nothing. He waited on a corner. Still nothing. He went another block south, another block west. Nothing. He leaned on a skinny tree and waited, with the watch on his wrist hammering like a machine. Nothing. He walked back to his starting point and leaned on his wall and watched the lunch crowd build to a peak. Then he watched it ebb away. Suddenly more people were coming out of the restaurants than were going in. His time was ebbing away with them. He moved to the end of the street. Checked his watch again. He had been waiting two whole hours. He had one hour left.

Nothing happened. The lunch crowd died away to nothing and the street went quiet. Trucks drove in, stopped, unloaded, drove out again. A light drizzle started, and then it stopped. Low clouds moved across the narrow sky. Time ticked away. He walked east and south. Nothing there. He came back again and walked up one side of the street and down the other. Waited at the corner. Checked his watch, over and over. He had forty minutes left. Then thirty. Then twenty.

Then he saw them. And he suddenly understood why it was now, and not before. They had been waiting for the lunch-hour cash flow to be neatly stashed in the registers. There were two guys. Chinese, of course, young, shiny black hair worn long on their collars. They wore dark pants and light windbreakers, with scarves

at their necks, like a uniform.
They were very blatant. One carried a satchel and the other carried a notebook with a pen trapped in the spiral binding. They strolled into each restaurant in turn, slow and casual. Then they strolled out again, with one guy zipping the satchel and the other guy noting something in his book. One restaurant, then two, then three, then four. Fifteen minutes ticked away. Reacher watched. He crossed the street and moved ahead of them. Waited near a restaurant door. Watched them go in. Watched them approach an old guy at the register. They just stood there. Said nothing. The old guy reached into the cash drawer and took out a wad of folded bills. The agreed amount, ready and waiting. The guy with the book took them and handed them to his partner. Wrote something in the book as the money disappeared into the satchel.
Reacher stepped ahead, up to where a narrow alley separated two buildings. He ducked in and waited with his back to the wall, where they wouldn't see him until it was too late. He checked his watch. He had less than five minutes. He timed the two guys in his head. He built a mental picture of their lazy, complacent pace. Followed their rhythm in his mind. Waited. Waited. Then he stepped out of the alley and met them head on. They bumped right into him. He seized a bunch of windbreaker in each hand and leaned backward and swung them through a complete explosive half-circle and smashed them back-first into the alley wall. The guy in his right hand followed the wider arc, and therefore hit harder, and therefore bounced farther. Reacher caught him solidly with his elbow as he came forward off the wall and he went down on the floor. Didn't come back up again. He was the guy with the satchel.
The other guy dropped the book and went for his pocket, but Reacher had Trent's Beretta out first. He stood close and held it angled low, down in the tails of his coat, down toward the guy's kneecap.
"Be smart, OK?" he said.
He reached down with his left and racked the slide. The sound was muffled by the cloth of his coat, but to his practiced ear it sounded horribly empty. No final click of the shell case smacking home. But the Chinese guy didn't notice. Too dizzy. Too shocked. He just pressed himself to the wall like he was trying to back right through it. Put all his weight on one foot, unconsciously preparing for the bullet that would blow his leg away.
"You're making a mistake, pal," he whispered.
Reacher shook his head. "No, we're making a *move,* asshole."
"Who's we?"
"Petrosian," Reacher said.
"Petrosian? You're kidding me."

"No way," Reacher said. "I'm serious. Real serious. This street is Petrosian's now. As of today. As of right now. All of it. The whole street. You clear on that?"
"This street is ours."
"Not anymore. It's Petrosian's. He's taking it over. You want to lose a leg arguing about it?"
"Petrosian?" the guy repeated.
"Believe it," Reacher said, and slammed him left-handed in the stomach. The guy folded forward and Reacher tapped him above the ear with the butt of the gun and dropped him neatly on top of his partner. He clicked the trigger to free the slide and put the gun back in his pocket. Picked up the satchel and tucked it under his arm. Walked out of the alley and turned north.
He was already late. If his watch was a minute slow and the Navy guy's was a minute fast, then the rendezvous was already gone. But he didn't run. Running in the city was too conspicuous. He walked away as fast as he could, stepping one pace to the side for every three paces forward, threading his way along the sidewalks. He turned a corner and saw the blue car, *USNR* painted discreetly on its flank. He saw it moving away from the curb. Saw it lurching out into the traffic stream. Now he ran.
He got to where it had been parked four seconds after it left. Now it was three cars ahead, accelerating to catch the light. He stared after it. The light changed to red. The car accelerated faster. Then the guy chickened out and hit the brakes. The car slammed to a neat stop a foot into the crosswalk. Pedestrians swarmed out in front of it. Reacher breathed again and ran to the intersection and pulled open the passenger door. Dumped himself into the seat, panting. The driver nodded to him. Didn't say a word. Didn't offer any kind of an apology for not waiting. Reacher didn't expect one. When the Navy says three hours, it means three hours. One hundred and eighty minutes, not a second more, not a second less. *Time and tide wait for no man*. The Navy was built on all kinds of bullshit like that.
THE JOURNEY BACK to Trent's office at Dix was the exact reverse of the journey out. Thirty minutes in the car through Brooklyn, the waiting helicopter, the raucous flight back to McGuire, the lieutenant in the staff Chevy waiting on the tarmac. Reacher spent the flight time counting the money in the satchel. There was a total of twelve hundred dollars in there, six folded wads of two hundred each. He gave the money to the load-masters for their next unit party. He tore the satchel along its seams and dropped the pieces through the flare hatch, two thousand feet above Lakewood, New Jersey.
It was still raining at Dix. The lieutenant drove him back to the alley and he walked to Trent's window and rapped softly on the glass. Trent opened it up and

walked to Trent's window and rapped softly on the glass. Trent opened it up and he climbed back inside the office.
"We OK?" he asked.
Trent nodded. "She's just been sitting out there, quiet as a mouse, all day. Must be real impressed with our dedication. We worked right through lunch."
Reacher nodded and handed back the empty gun. Took off his jacket. Sat down in his chair. Slipped his ID around his neck again and picked up a file. Trent had moved the stack right to left across the desk, like it had been minutely examined.
"Success?" Trent asked.
"I think so. Time will tell, right?"
Trent nodded and looked out at the weather. He was restless. He had been trapped in his office all day.
"Let her in, if you want," Reacher said. "Show's over now."
"You're all wet," Trent said. "Show's not over until you're dried out."
It took twenty minutes to dry out. He used Trent's phone and called Jodie's numbers. The private office line, the apartment, the mobile. No reply, no reply, out of service. He stared at the wall. Then he read an unclassified file about proposed methods of getting mail to the Marines if they had to go serve in the Indian Ocean. The time he spent on it put him lower in his chair and put a glazed look on his face. When Trent finally opened the door and Harper got her second peek of the day, he was slumped and inert. Exactly like a man looks after an arduous day with paperwork.
"Progress?" she called.
He looked up and sighed at the ceiling. "Maybe."
"Six solid hours, you must have gotten somewhere."
"Maybe," he said again.
There was silence for a moment.
"OK, so let's go," she said.
She stood up behind her desk and stretched. She put her arms way above her head, palms flat, reaching for the ceiling. Some kind of a yoga thing. She arched her face upward and tilted her head and her hair cascaded down her back. Three sergeants and one colonel stared at her.
"So let's go," Reacher said.
"Don't forget your notes," Trent said.
He handed over a sheet of paper. There was a list of maybe thirty names printed on it. Probably Trent's high school football team. Reacher put the list in his pocket and put his coat on and shook Trent's hand. Walked through the anteroom and outside into the rain and stood there breathing for a second like a man who has been sitting down all day. Then Harper nudged him toward the lieutenant's car for the drive back to the Lear.

lieutenant's car for the drive back to the Lear.
BLAKE AND POULTON and Lamarr were waiting for them at the same table in the Quantico cafeteria. It was just as dark outside, but now the table was set for dinner, not breakfast. There was a jug of water and five glasses, salt and pepper, bottles of steak sauce. Blake ignored Reacher and glanced at Harper, who nodded back to him, like a reassurance. Blake looked satisfied.
"So, you found our guy yet?" he asked.
"Maybe," Reacher said. "I've got thirty names. He could be one of them."
"So let's see them."
"Not yet. I need more."
Blake stared at him. "Bullshit, you need more. We need to get tails on these guys."
Reacher shook his head. "Can't be done. These guys are in places where you can't go. You even want a warrant on these guys, you're going to have to go to the Secretary of Defense, right after you've been to the judge. And Defense is going to go straight to the Commander-in-Chief, who was the President last time I looked, so you're going to need a damn sight more than I can give you right now."
"So what are you saying?"
"I'm saying let me boil it down some."
"How?"
Reacher shrugged. "I want to go see Lamarr's sister. "
"My stepsister," Lamarr said.
"Why?" Blake asked.
Reacher wanted to say *because I'm just killing time, asshole, and I'd rather do it on the road than stuck in here,* but he composed his face into a serious look and shrugged again.
"Because we need to think laterally," he said. "If this guy is killing by category, we need to know why. He can't be mad at a whole *category*, just like that. One of these women must have sparked him off, first time around. Then he must have transferred his rage from the personal to the general, right? So who was it? Lamarr's sister could be a good place to start asking. She got a transfer between units. Two very different units. That doubles her potential contacts, profile-wise."
It sounded professional enough. Blake nodded.
"OK," he said. "We'll set it up. You'll go tomorrow. "
"Where does she live?"
"Washington State," Lamarr said. "Someplace outside of Spokane, I think."
"You think? You don't know?"
"I've never been there," she said. "I sure as hell don't get enough vacation time

"I've never been there," she said. "I sure as hell don't get enough vacation time to drive all the way out and drive all the way back."
Reacher nodded. Turned to Blake.
"You should be guarding these women," he said.
Blake sighed heavily. "Do the arithmetic, for God's sake. Eighty-eight women, and we don't know which one is next, seventeen days to go, *if* he sticks to his cycle, three agents every twenty-four hours, that's more than a hundred thousand man-hours, random locations all around the country. We just can't do it. We don't have the agents. We warned the local police departments, of course, but what can *they* do? Like outside of Spokane, Washington, for instance, the local police department is probably one man and a German shepherd. They drive by, time to time, I guess, but that's all we got."
"Have you warned the women, too?"
Blake looked embarrassed and shook his head. "We can't. If we can't guard them, we can't warn them. Because what would we be saying? You're in danger, but sorry girls, you're entirely on your own? Can't be done."
"We need to catch this guy," Poulton said. "That's the only sure way to help these women."
Lamarr nodded. "He's out there, somewhere. We need to bring him in."
Reacher looked at them. Three psychologists. They were trying to push all the right buttons. Trying to make it a challenge. He smiled. "I get the message."
"OK, you go to Spokane tomorrow," Lamarr said. "Meanwhile I'll work the files some more. You'll review them the day after tomorrow. That gives you the stuff you got from Trent, plus the stuff you get in Spokane, plus what we've already gotten. At which point we'll expect some real progress from you."
Reacher smiled again. "Whatever, Lamarr."
"So eat and get to bed," Blake said. "It's a long way to Spokane. Early start tomorrow. Harper will go with you, of course."
"To bed?"
Blake was embarrassed again. "To Spokane, asshole. "
Reacher nodded. "Whatever, Blake."
THE PROBLEM WAS, it *was* a challenge. He was sealed in his room, lying alone on the bed, staring up at the blind eye of the hidden camera. But he wasn't seeing it. His gaze had dissolved just like it used to, into a blur. A *green* blur, like the whole of America had disappeared and returned to grassland and forest, the buildings gone, the roads gone, the noise gone, the population all gone, except for one man, somewhere. Reacher stared into the silent blur, a hundred miles, a thousand miles, three thousand miles, his gaze roving north and south, east and west, looking for the faint shadow, waiting for the sudden movement.

He’s out there, somewhere. We need to catch this guy. He was walking around right now, or sleeping, or planning, or preparing, and he was thinking he was just about the smartest guy on the whole continent.

Well, we’ll see about that, Reacher thought. He stirred. He ought to get seriously involved. Or on the other hand, maybe not. It was a big decision, waiting to be made, but it wasn’t made yet. He rolled over and closed his eyes. He could think about it later. He could make the decision tomorrow. Or the next day. Whenever.

THE DECISION WAS *made. About the interval. The interval was history. Time to speed things up a little. Three weeks was way too long to wait now. This sort of thing, you let the idea creep up on you, you look at it, you consider it, you see its value, you see its appeal, and the decision is really made for you, isn’t it? You can’t get the genie back in the bottle, not once it’s out. And this genie is out. All the way out. Up and running. So you run with it.*

12

THERE WAS NO breakfast meeting the next morning. The day started too early. Harper opened the door before Reacher was even dressed. He had his pants on and was smoothing the wrinkles out of his shirt with his palm against the mattress.
“Love those scars,” she said.
She took a step closer, looking at his stomach with undisguised curiosity.
“What’s that one from?” she asked, pointing to his right side.
He glanced down. The right side of his stomach had a violent tracery of stitches in the shape of a twisted star. They bulged out above the muscle wall, white and angry.
“My mother did it,” he said.
“Your *mother*?”
“I was raised by grizzly bears. In Alaska.”
She rolled her eyes and moved them up to the left side of his chest. There was a .38 caliber bullet hole there, punched right into the pectoral muscle. The hair was missing from around it. It was a big hole. She could have lost her little finger in it, right up to the first knuckle.
“Exploratory surgery,” he said. “Checking if I had a heart.”
“You’re happy this morning,” she said.
He nodded. “I’m always happy.”
“Did you get Jodie yet?”
He shook his head. “I haven’t tried since yesterday.”
“Why not?”
“Waste of time. She’s not there.”
“Are you worried?”
He shrugged. “She’s a big girl.”
“I’ll tell you if I hear anything.”
He nodded. “You better.”
“Where are they really from?” she asked. “The scars?”
He buttoned his shirt.
“The gut is from bomb shrapnel,” he said. “The chest, somebody shot me.”
“Dramatic life.”
He took his coat from the closet.
“No, not really. Pretty normal, wouldn’t you say? For a soldier? A soldier figuring to avoid physical violence is like a CPA figuring to avoid adding numbers.”

numbers.”
“Is that why you don’t care about these women?”
He looked at her. “Who says I don’t care?”
“I thought you’d be more agitated about it.”
“Getting agitated won’t achieve anything.”
She paused. “So what will?”
“Working the clues, same as always.”
“There aren’t any clues. He doesn’t leave any.”
He smiled. “That’s a clue in itself, wouldn’t you say?”
She used her key from the inside and opened the door.
“That’s just talking in riddles,” she said.
He shrugged. “Better than talking in *bullshit*, like they do downstairs.”
THE SAME MOTOR pool guy brought the same car to the doors. This time he stayed in the driver’s seat, sitting square-on like a dutiful chauffeur. He drove them north on I-95 to the National Airport. It was before dawn. There was a halfhearted glow in the sky somewhere three hundred miles to the east, all the way out over the Atlantic Ocean. The only other illumination was from a thousand headlights streaming north toward work. The headlights were mostly on old-model cars. Old, therefore cheap, therefore owned by low-grade people aiming to be at their desks an hour before their bosses, so they would look good and get promotion, whereupon they could drive newer cars to work an hour later in the day. Reacher sat still and watched their shadowed faces as the Bureau driver sped past them, one by one.
Inside the airport terminal, it was reasonably busy. Men and women in dark raincoats walked quickly from one place to another. Harper collected two coach tickets from the United desk and carried them over to the check-in counter.
“We could use some legroom,” she said to the guy behind the counter.
She used her FBI pass for photo ID. She snapped it down like a poker player completing a flush. The guy hit a few keys and came up with an upgrade. Harper smiled, like she was genuinely surprised.
First class was half-empty. Harper took an aisle seat, trapping Reacher against the window like a prisoner. She stretched out. She was in a third different suit, this one a fine check in a muted gray. The jacket fell open and showed a hint of nipple through the shirt, and no shoulder holster.
“Left your gun at home?” Reacher asked.
She nodded. “Not worth the hassle. Airlines want too much paperwork. A Seattle guy is meeting us. Standard practice is he’d bring a spare, should we need one. But we won’t, not today.”
“You hope.”
She nodded. “I hope.”

They taxied on time and took off a minute early. Reacher pulled the magazine out and started leafing through. Harper had her tray unfolded, ready for breakfast.
“What did you mean?” she asked. “When you said it’s a clue in itself?”
He forced his mind back an hour and tried to remember.
“Just thinking aloud, I guess,” he said.
“Thinking about what?”
He shrugged. He had time to kill. “The history of science. Stuff like that.”
“Is that relevant?”
“I was thinking about fingerprinting. How old is that?”
She made a face. “Pretty old, I think.”
“Turn of the century?”
She nodded. “Probably.”
“OK, a hundred years old,” he said. “That was the first big forensic test, right? Probably started using microscopes around the same time. And since then, they’ve invented all kinds of other stuff. DNA, mass spectrometry, fluorescence. Lamarr said you’ve got tests I wouldn’t believe. I bet they can find a rug fiber, tell you where and when somebody bought it, what kind of flea sat on it, what kind of dog the flea came off. Probably tell you what the dog’s name is and what brand of dog food it ate for breakfast.”
“So?”
“Amazing tests, right?”
She nodded.
“Real science-fiction stuff, right?”
She nodded again.
“OK,” he said. “Amazing, science-fiction tests. But this guy killed Amy Callan and beat *all* of those tests, right?”
“Right.”
“So what do you call that type of a guy?”
“What?”
“A very, very clever guy, is what.”
She made a face. “Among other things.”
“Sure, a lot of other things, but whatever else, a very clever guy. Then he did it again, with Cooke. Now what do we call him?”
“What?”
“A very, *very* clever guy. Once might have been luck. Twice, he’s damn good.”
“So?”
“Then he did it *again*, with Stanley. Now what do we call him?”
“A very, very, very clever guy?”

Reacher nodded. “Exactly.”
“So?”
“So that’s the clue. We’re looking for a very, very, very clever guy.”
“I think we *know* that already.”
Reacher shook his head. “I don’t think you do. You’re not factoring it in.”
“In what sense?”
“You think about it. I’m only an errand boy. You Bureau people can do all the hard work.”
The stewardess came out of the galley with the breakfast trolley. It was first class, so the food was reasonable. Reacher smelled bacon and egg and sausage. Strong coffee. He flipped his tray open. The cabin was half-empty, so he got the girl to give him two breakfasts. Two airline meals made for a pleasant snack. She caught on quick and kept his coffee cup full.
“How aren’t we factoring it in?” Harper asked.
“Figure it out for yourself,” Reacher said. “I’m not in a helpful mood.”
“Is it that he’s not a soldier?”
He turned to stare at her. “That’s great. We agree he’s a really smart guy, and so you say well, then he’s obviously not a soldier. Thanks a bunch, Harper.”
She looked away, embarrassed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. I just can’t see how we’re not factoring it in.”
He said nothing in reply. Just drained his coffee and climbed over her legs to get to the bathroom. When he got back, she was still looking contrite.
“Tell me,” she said.
“No.”
“You should, Reacher. Blake’s going to ask me about your attitude.”
“My attitude? Tell him my attitude is if a hair on Jodie’s head gets hurt, I’ll tear his legs off and beat him to death with them.”
She nodded. “You really mean that, right?”
He nodded back. “You bet your ass I do.”
“That’s what I don’t understand. Why aren’t you feeling a little bit of the same way about these women? You liked Amy Callan, right? Not the same way as Jodie, but you liked her.”
“I don’t understand you, either. Blake wanted to use you like a hooker, and you’re acting like he’s still your best buddy.”
She shrugged. “He was desperate. He gets like that. He’s under a lot of stress. He gets a case like this, he’s just desperate to crack it.”
“And you admire that?”
She nodded. “Sure I do. I admire dedication.”
“But you don’t share it. Or you wouldn’t have said no to him. You’d have

seduced me on camera, for the good of the cause. So maybe it's you who doesn't care enough about these women."
She was quiet for a spell. "It was immoral. It annoyed me."
He nodded. "And threatening Jodie was immoral, too. It annoyed *me*."
"But I'm not letting my annoyance get in the way of justice."
"Well, I am. And if you don't like that, tough shit."
THEY DIDN'T SPEAK again, all the way to Seattle. Five hours, without a word. Reacher was comfortable enough with that. He was not a compulsively sociable guy. He was happier *not* talking. He didn't see anything odd about it. There was no strain involved. He just sat there, not talking, like he was making the journey on his own.
Harper was having more trouble with it. He could see she was worried about it. She was like most people. Put her alongside somebody she was acquainted with, she felt she had to be conversing. For her, it was unnatural not to be. But he didn't relent. Five hours, without a single word.
Those five hours were reduced to two by the West Coast clocks. It was still about breakfast time when they landed. The Sea-Tac terminals were filled with people starting out on their day. The arrivals hall had the usual echelon of drivers holding placards up. There was one guy in a dark suit, striped tie, short hair. He had no placard, but he was their guy. He might as well have had *FBI* tattooed across his forehead.
"Lisa Harper?" he said. "I'm from the Seattle Field Office."
They shook hands.
"This is Reacher," she said.
The Seattle agent ignored him completely. Reacher smiled inside. *Touché*, he thought. But then the guy might have ignored him anyway even if they were best buddies, because he was pretty much preoccupied with paying a whole lot of attention to what was under Harper's shirt.
"We're flying to Spokane," he said. "Air taxi company owes us a few favors."
He had a Bureau car parked in the tow lane. He used it to drive a mile around the perimeter road to General Aviation, which was five acres of fenced tarmac filled with parked planes, all of them tiny, one and two engines. There was a cluster of huts with low-budget signs advertising transportation and flying lessons. A guy met them outside one of the huts. He wore a generic pilot's uniform and led them toward a clean white six-seat Cessna. It was a medium-sized walk across the apron. Fall in the Northwest had brighter light than in D.C., but it was just as cold.
The interior of the plane was about the same size Lamarr's Buick had been, and a whole lot more spartan. But it looked clean and well maintained, and the

engines started first touch on the button. It taxied out to the runway with the same sensation of tiny size Reacher had felt in the Lear at McGuire. It lined up behind a 747 bound for Tokyo the way a mouse lines up behind an elephant. Then it wound itself up and was off the ground in seconds, wheeling due east, settling to a noisy cruise a thousand feet above the ground.

The airspeed indicator showed more than a hundred and twenty knots, and the plane flew on for two whole hours. The seat was cramped and uncomfortable, and Reacher started wishing he'd thought of a better way to waste his time. He was going to spend fourteen hours in the air, all in one day. Maybe he should have stayed and worked on the files with Lamarr. He imagined a quiet room somewhere, like a library, a stack of papers, a leather chair. Then he pictured Lamarr herself and glanced across at Harper and figured he'd maybe taken the right option after all.

The airfield at Spokane was a modest, modern place, larger than he had expected. There was a Bureau car waiting on the tarmac, identifiable even from a thousand feet up, a clean dark sedan with a man in a suit leaning on the fender.

"From the Spokane satellite office," the Seattle guy said.

The car rolled over to where the plane parked and they were on the road within twenty seconds of the pilot shutting down. The local guy had the destination address written on a pad fixed to his windshield with a rubber suction cup. He seemed to know where the place was. He drove ten miles east toward the Idaho panhandle and turned north on a narrow road into the hills. The terrain was moderate, but there were giant mountains in the middle distance. Snow gleamed on the peaks. The road had a building every mile or so, separated by thick forest and broad meadow. The population density was not encouraging.

The address itself might have been the main house of an old cattle ranch, sold off long ago and refurbished by somebody looking for the rural dream but unwilling to forget the aesthetics of the city. It was boxed into a small lot by new ranch fencing. Beyond the fencing was grazing land, and inside the fencing the same grass had been fed and mowed into a fine lawn. There were trees on the perimeter, contorted by the wind. There was a small barn with garage doors punched into the side and a path veering off from the driveway to the front door. The whole structure stood close to the road and close to its own fencing, like a suburban house standing close to its neighbors, but this one stood close to nothing. The nearest man-made object was at least a mile away north or south, maybe twenty miles away east or west.

The local guys stayed in the car, and Harper and Reacher got out and stood stretching on the shoulder. Then the engine shut down behind them and the stunning silence of the empty country fell on them like a weight. It hummed and

hissed and echoed in their ears.
“I’d feel better if she lived in a city apartment,” Reacher said.
Harper nodded. “With a doorman.”
There was no gate. The ranch fencing just stopped either side of the mouth of the driveway. They walked together toward the house. The driveway was shale. Reassuringly noisy, at least. There was a slight breeze. Reacher could hear it in the power lines. Harper stopped at the front door. There was no bell push. Just a big iron knocker in the shape of a lion’s head with a heavy ring held in its teeth. There was a fisheye spyhole above it. The spyhole was new. There were burrs of clean wood where the drill had chipped the paint. Harper grasped the iron ring and knocked twice. The ring thumped on the wood. The sound was loud and dull, and it rolled out over the grassland. Came back seconds later from the hills. There was no response. Harper knocked again. The sound boomed out. They waited. There was a creak of floorboards inside the house. Footsteps. The sound approached unseen and stopped behind the door.
“Who is it?” a voice called. A woman’s voice, apprehensive.
Harper went into her pocket and came out with her badge. It was backed with a slip of leather, the same type of gold-on-gold shield Lamarr had clicked against Reacher’s car window. The eagle at the top, head cocked to the left. She held it up, six inches in front of the spyhole.
“FBI, ma’am,” she announced. “We called you yesterday, made an appointment.”
The door opened with the creak of old hinges and revealed an entrance hall with a woman in it. She was holding the doorknob, smiling with relief.
“Julia’s got me so damn nervous,” she said.
Harper smiled back in a sympathetic way and introduced herself and Reacher. The woman shook hands with both of them.
“Alison Lamarr,” she said. “Really pleased to meet you.”
She led the way inside. The hall was square and as large as a room, walled and floored in old pine, which had been stripped and waxed to a fresh color a shade darker than the gold on Harper’s badge. There were curtains in yellow checked gingham. Sofas with feather-filled pillows. Old oil lamps converted to take electric bulbs.
“Can I get you guys coffee?” Alison Lamarr asked.
“I’m all set right now,” Harper said.
“Yes, please,” Reacher said.
She led them through to the kitchen, which was the whole rear quarter of the first floor. It was an attractive space, waxed floor polished to a shine, new cabinets in unostentatious timber, a big country range, a line of gleaming machines for washing clothes and dishes, electric gadgets on the countertops, more yellow

washing clothes and dishes, electric gadgets on the countertops, more yellow gingham at the windows. An expensive renovation, he guessed, but designed to impress only herself.
“Cream and sugar?” she asked.
“Just black,” he said.
She was medium height, dark, and she moved with the bounce of a fit, muscular woman. Her face was open and friendly, tanned like she lived outdoors, and her hands were worn, like she maybe installed her own ranch fencing for herself. She smelled of lemon scent and was dressed in clean denim which had been carefully pressed. She wore tooled cowboy boots with clean soles. It looked like she’d made an effort for her visitors.
She poured coffee from a machine into a mug. Handed it to Reacher and smiled. The smile was a mixture of things. Maybe she was lonely. But it proved there was no blood relationship with her stepsister. It was a pleasant smile, interested, friendly, smiled in a way Julia Lamarr had no idea existed. It reached her eyes, which were dark and liquid. Reacher was a connoisseur of eyes, and he rated these two as more than acceptable.
“Can I look around?” he asked.
“Security check?” she said.
He nodded. “I guess.”
“Be my guest.”
He took his coffee with him. The two women stayed in the kitchen. The house had four rooms on the first floor, entrance, kitchen, parlor, living room. The whole place was solidly built out of good timber. The renovations were excellent quality. All the windows were new storm units in stout wood frames. The weather was cold enough that the screens were out and stored. Each window had a key. The front door was original, old pine two inches thick and aged like steel. Big hinges and a city lock. There was a back hallway with a back door, similar vintage and thickness. Same lock.
Outside there were thick thorny foundation plantings he guessed were chosen for wind resistance, but were as good as anything for stopping people spending time trying to get in the windows. There was a steel cellar door with a big padlock latched through the handles. The garage was a decent barn, less well maintained than the house, but not about to fall down anytime soon. There was a new Jeep Cherokee inside, and a stack of cartons proving the renovations had been recent. There was a new washing machine, still boxed up and sealed. A workbench with power saws and drills stored neatly on a shelf above it.
He went back into the house and up the stairs. Same windows as elsewhere. Four bedrooms. Alison’s was clearly the back room on the left, facing west over empty country as far as the eye could see. It would be dark in the mornings, but

empty country as far as the eye could see. It would be dark in the mornings, but the sunsets would be spectacular. There was a new master bathroom, stealing space from the next-door bedroom. It held a toilet, and a sink, and a shower. And a tub.
He went back down to the kitchen. Harper was standing by the window, looking out at the view. Alison Lamarr was sitting at the table.
“OK?” she said.
Reacher nodded. “Looks good to me. You keep the doors locked?”
“I do now. Julia made such a fuss about it. I lock the windows, I lock the doors, I use the spyhole, I put 911 on the speed dial.”
“So you should be OK,” Reacher said. “This guy isn’t into breaking doors down, apparently. Don’t open up to anybody, nothing can go wrong.”
She nodded. “That’s how I figure it. You need to ask me some questions now?”
“That’s why they sent me, I guess.”
He sat down opposite her. Focused on the gleaming machines on the other side of the room, desperately trying to think of something intelligent to say.
“How’s your father doing?” he asked.
“That’s what you want to know?”
He shrugged. “Julia mentioned he was sick.”
She nodded, surprised. “He’s been sick two years. Cancer. Now he’s dying. Almost gone, just hanging on day by day. He’s in the hospital in Spokane. I go there every afternoon.”
“I’m very sorry.”
“Julia should come out. But she’s awkward with him.”
“She doesn’t fly.”
Alison made a face. “She could get over that, just once in two years. But she’s all hung up on this step-family thing, as if it really matters. Far as I’m concerned, she’s my sister, pure and simple. And sisters take care of each other, right? She should know that. She’s going to be the only relative I’ve got. She’ll be my next of kin, for God’s sake.”
“Well, I’m sorry about all that, too.”
She made another face. “Right now, that’s not too important. What can I help you with?”
“You got any feeling for who this guy could be?”
She smiled. “That’s rather a basic question.”
“It’s rather a basic issue. You got any instinct?”
“It’s some guy who thinks it’s OK to harass women. Or maybe not *OK*, exactly. Could be some guy who just thinks the fallout should be kept behind closed doors.”
“Is that an option?” Harper asked. She sat down, next to Reacher.

"Is that an option?" Harper asked. She sat down, next to Reacher.
Alison glanced at her. "I don't really know. I'm not sure there is any middle ground. Either you swallow it, or it goes public in a big way."
"Did you look for the middle ground?"
She shook her head. "I'm the living proof. I just went ballistic. There was no middle ground *there*. At least, I couldn't see any."
"Who was your guy?" Reacher asked.
"A colonel called Gascoigne," she said. "He was always full of shit about coming to him if anything was bothering you. I went to him about getting reassigned. I saw him five times. I wasn't pleading the feminist case or anything. It wasn't a political thing. I just wanted something more interesting to do. And frankly I thought the Army was wasting a good soldier. Because I was good."
Reacher nodded. "So what happened with Gascoigne? "
Alison made a face.
"I didn't see it coming," she said. "At first I thought he was just kidding around."
She paused. Looked away.
"He said I should try next time without my uniform on," she said. "I thought he was asking for a date, you know, meet him in town, some bar, off duty, plain clothes. But then he made it clear, no, he meant right there in his office, stripped off."
Reacher nodded. "Not a very nice suggestion."
She made another face. "Well, he led up to it pretty slow, and he was pretty jokey about it, at first. It was like he was flirting. I almost didn't *notice*, you know? Like he's a man, I'm a woman, it's not a huge surprise, right? But clearly he figured I wasn't getting the message, so then all of a sudden he got *obscene*. He described what I'd have to do, you know? One foot on this corner of his desk, the other foot on the other corner, hands behind my head, motionless for thirty minutes. Then bending over, you know? Like a porno movie. Then it *did* hit me, the rage, all in a split second, and I just went nuclear."
Reacher nodded. "And you busted him?"
"Sure I did."
"How did he react?"
She smiled. "He was puzzled, more than anything. I'm sure he'd done it lots of times before, and gotten away with it. I think he was kind of surprised the rules had changed on him."
"Could he be the guy?"
She shook her head. "No. This guy is *deadly*, right? Gascoigne wasn't like that. He was an old, sad man. Tired, and ineffectual. Julia says this guy is a piece of

work. I don't see Gascoigne having that kind of *initiative* , you know?"
Reacher nodded again. "If your sister's profile is correct, this is probably a guy from the background somewhere. "
"Right," Alison said. "Maybe not connected with any specific incident. Maybe some kind of distant observer, turned avenger."
"If Julia's profile is correct," Reacher said again.
There was a short silence.
"Big *if*," Alison said.
"You got doubts?"
"You know I have," she said. "And I know you have, too. Because we both know the same things."
Harper sat forward. "What are you saying?"
Alison made a face. "I just can't see a soldier going to all this *trouble*, not over this issue. It just doesn't work like that. The Army changes the rules *all the time*. Go back fifty years, it's OK to harass blacks, then it's not. It's OK to shoot gook babies, then it's not. A million things like that. Hundreds of men were canned one after the other, for some new invented offense. Truman integrated the Army, nobody started killing the blacks who filed complaints. This is some kind of *new* reaction. I can't understand it."
"Maybe men versus women is more fundamental," Harper said.
Alison nodded. "Maybe it is. I really don't know. But at the end of the day, like Julia says, the target group is so specific, it *has* to be a soldier. Who else could even *identify* us? But it's a very weird soldier, that's for damn sure. Not like any I ever met."
"Really?" Harper said. "Nobody at all? No threats, no comments, while it was all happening?"
"Nothing significant. Nothing more than casual bullshit. Nothing that I recall. I even flew out to Quantico and let Julia hypnotize me, in case there was something buried there, but she said I came up with nothing."
Silence again. Harper swept imaginary crumbs from the table and nodded. "OK. Wasted trip, right?"
"Sorry, guys," Alison said.
"Nothing's ever wasted," Reacher said. "Negatives can be useful too. And the coffee was great."
"You want more?"
"No, he doesn't," Harper said. "We've got to get back."
"OK." She stood up and followed them out of her kitchen. Crossed the hall and opened her front door.
"Don't let anybody in," Reacher said.

Alison smiled. “I don’t plan to.”
“I mean it,” Reacher said. “It looks like there’s no force involved. This guy is just walking in. So you might know him. Or he’s some kind of a con artist, with some kind of a plausible excuse. Don’t fall for it.”
“I don’t plan to,” she said again. “Don’t worry about me. And call me if you need anything. I’ll be at the hospital afternoons, as long as it takes, but any other time is good. And best of luck.”
Reacher followed Harper through the front door, out onto the shale path. They heard the door close behind them, and then the loud sound of the lock turning.
THE LOCAL BUREAU guy saved them two hours’ flying time by pointing out that they could hop from Spokane to Chicago and then change there for D.C. Harper did the business with the tickets and found out it was more expensive, which was presumably why the Quantico travel desk hadn’t booked it that way in the first place. But she authorized the extra money herself and decided to have the argument later. Reacher admired her for it. He liked impatience and wasn’t keen on another two hours in the Cessna. So they sent the Seattle guy back west alone and boarded a Boeing for Chicago. This time there was no upgrade, because the whole plane was coach. It put them close together, elbows and thighs touching all the way.
“So what do you think?” Harper asked.
“I’m not paid to think,” Reacher said. “In fact, so far I’m not getting paid at all. I’m a consultant. So you ask me questions and I’ll answer them.”
“I did ask you a question. I asked you what you think.”
He shrugged. “I think it’s a big target group and three of them are dead. You can’t guard them, but if the other eighty-eight do what Alison Lamarr is doing, they should be OK.”
“You think locked doors are enough to stop this guy?”
“He chooses his own MO. Apparently he doesn’t touch anything. If they don’t open the door for him, what’s he going to do?”
“Maybe change his MO.”
“In which case you’ll get him, because he’ll have to start leaving some hard evidence behind.”
He turned to look out of the window.
“That’s it?” Harper said. “We should just tell the women to lock their doors?”
He nodded. “I think you should be warning them, yes.”
“That doesn’t catch the guy.”
“You can’t catch him.”
“Why not?”
“Because of this profiling bullshit. You’re not factoring in how smart he is.”

She shook her head. "Yes, we are. I've seen the profile. It says he's real smart. And profiling works, Reacher. Those people have had some spectacular successes. "
"Among how many failures?"
"What do you mean?"
Reacher turned back to face her. "Suppose I was in Blake's position? He's effectively a nationwide homicide detective, right? Gets to hear about everything. So suppose I was him, getting notified about every single homicide in America. Suppose every single time I said the likely suspect was a white male, age thirty and a half, wooden leg, divorced parents, drives a blue Ferrari. Every single time. Sooner or later, I'd be right. The law of averages would work for me. Then I could shout out hey, I was right. As long as I keep quiet about the ten thousand times I was wrong, I look pretty good, don't I? Amazing deduction."
"That's not what Blake's doing."
"Isn't it? Have you read stuff about his unit?"
She nodded. "Of course I have. That's why I applied for the assignment. There are all kinds of books and articles."
"I've read them too. Chapter one, successful case. Chapter two, successful case. And so on. No chapters about all the times they were wrong. Makes me wonder about how many times that was. My guess is a lot of times. Too many times to want to write about them."
"So what are you saying?"
"I'm saying a scattergun approach will always look good, as long as you put the spotlight on the successes and sweep the failures under the rug."
"That's not what they're doing."
He nodded. "No, it isn't. Not exactly. They're not just guessing. They try to work at it. But it's not an exact science. It's not rigorous. And they're one unit among many, fighting for status and funding and position. You know how organizations work. They've got the budget hearings right now. First, second, and third duty is protecting their own ass against cuts by proclaiming their successes and concealing their failures."
"So you think the profile is worthless?"
He nodded. "I know it is. It's internally flawed. It makes two statements that are incompatible."
"What two statements?"
He shook his head. "No deal, Harper. Not until Blake apologizes for threatening Jodie and pulls Julia Lamarr off the case."
"Why would he do that? She's his best profiler."
"Exactly."

"Exactly."
THE MOTOR POOL guy was at the National Airport in D.C. to pick them up. It was late when they arrived back at Quantico. Julia Lamarr met them, alone. Blake was in a budget meeting, and Poulton had signed out and gone home.
"How was she?" Lamarr asked.
"Your sister?"
"My stepsister."
"She was OK," Reacher said.
"What's her house like?"
"Secure," he said. "Locked up tight as Fort Knox."
"But isolated, right?"
"Very isolated," he said.
She nodded. He waited.
"So she's OK?" she said again.
"She wants you to visit," he said.
She shook her head. "I can't. It would take me a week to get there."
"Your father is dying."
"My stepfather."
"Whatever. She thinks you should go out there."
"I can't," she said again. "She still the same?"
Reacher shrugged. "I don't know what she was like before. I only just met her today."
"Dressed like a cowboy, tanned and pretty and sporty?"
He nodded. "You got it."
She nodded again, vaguely. "Different from me."
He looked her over. Her cheap black city suit was dusty and creased, and she was pale and thin and hard. Her mouth was turned down. Her eyes were blank.
"Yes, different from you," he said.
"I told you," she said. "I'm the ugly sister."
She walked away without speaking again. Harper took him to the cafeteria and they ate a late supper together. Then she escorted him up to his room. Locked him inside without a word. He listened to her footsteps fade away in the corridor and undressed and showered. Then he lay down on the bed, thinking, and hoping. And waiting. Above all, waiting. Waiting for the morning.

13

THE MORNING CAME, but it was the wrong morning. He knew it as soon as he reached the cafeteria. He had been awake and waiting thirty minutes before Harper showed up. She unlocked his door and breezed in, looking elegant and refreshed, wearing the same suit as the first day. Clearly she had three suits and wore them in strict rotation. Three suits was about right, he figured, given her likely salary. It was three suits more than he had, because it was a whole salary more than he had.

They rode down in the elevator together and walked between buildings. The whole campus was very quiet. It had a weekend feel. He realized it was Sunday. The weather was better. No warmer, but the sun was out and it wasn't raining. He hoped for a moment it was a sign that this was his day. But it wasn't. He knew that as soon as he walked into the cafeteria.

Blake was at the table by the window, alone. There was a jug of coffee, three upturned mugs, a basket of cream and sugar, a basket of Danish and doughnuts. The bad news was the pile of Sunday newspapers, opened and read and scattered, with the *Washington Post* and *USA Today* and worst of all the *New York Times* just sitting right there in plain view. Which meant there was no news from New York. Which meant it hadn't worked yet, which meant he was going to have to keep on waiting until it did.

With three people at the table instead of five, there was more elbow room. Harper sat down opposite Blake and Reacher sat opposite nobody. Blake looked old and tired and very strained. He looked ill. The guy was a heart attack waiting to happen. But Reacher felt no sympathy for him. Blake had broken the rules.

"Today you work the files," Blake said.

"Whatever," Reacher said.

"They're updated with the Lorraine Stanley material. So you need to spend today reviewing them and you can give us your conclusions at the breakfast meeting tomorrow. Clear?"

Reacher nodded. "Crystal."

"Any preliminaries I should know about?"

"Preliminary what?"

"Conclusions. You got any thoughts yet?"

Reacher glanced at Harper. This was the point where a loyal agent would inform her boss about his objections. But she said nothing. Just looked down and concentrated on stirring her coffee.

"Let me read the files," he said. "Too early to say anything right now."

"Let me read the files," he said. "Too early to say anything right now."
Blake nodded. "We've got sixteen days. We need to start making some real progress real soon."
Reacher nodded back. "I get the message. Maybe tomorrow we'll get some good news."
Blake and Harper looked at him like it was an odd thing to say. Then they took coffee and Danish and doughnuts and sections of the papers and lingered like they had time to kill. It was Sunday. And the investigation was stalled. That was clear. Reacher recognized the signs. However urgent a thing is, there comes a point where there are no more places to go. The urgency burns out, and you sit there like you've got all the time in the world, while the world rages on around you.
AFTER BREAKFAST HARPER took him to a room pretty much the same as he'd imagined while bucketing along in the Cessna. It was aboveground, quiet, filled with light oak tables and comfortable padded chairs faced with leather. There was a wall of windows, and the sun was shining outside. The only negative was one of the tables held a stack of files about a foot high. They were in dark blue folders, with *FBI* printed on them in yellow letters.
The stack was split into three bundles, each one secured with a thick rubber band. He laid them out on the table, side by side. Amy Callan, Caroline Cooke, Lorraine Stanley. Three victims, three bundles. He checked his watch. Ten twenty-five. A late start. The sun was warming the room. He felt lazy.
"You didn't try Jodie," Harper said.
He shook his head and said nothing.
"Why not?"
"No point. She's obviously not there."
"Maybe she went to your place. Where her father used to live."
"Maybe," he said. "But I doubt it. She doesn't like it there. Too isolated."
"Did you try it?"
He shook his head. "No."
"Worried?"
"I can't worry about something I can't change."
She said nothing. There was silence. He pulled a file toward him.
"You read these?" he asked her.
She nodded. "Every night. I read the files and the summaries."
"Anything in them?"
She looked at the bundles, each one of them four inches thick. "Plenty in them."
"Anything significant?"
"That's your call," she said.
He nodded reluctantly and stretched the rubber band off the Callan file. Opened

up the folder. Harper took her jacket off and sat down opposite. Rolled up her shirtsleeves. The sun was directly behind her and it made her shirt transparent. He could see the outside curve of her breast. It swelled gently past the strap of her shoulder holster and fell away to the flatness of her waist. It moved slightly as she breathed.

"Get to work, Reacher," she said.

THIS IS THE *tense time. You drive by, not fast, not slow, you look carefully, you keep on going up the road a little, and then you stop and you turn around and you drive back. You park at the curb, leaving the car facing the right direction. You switch the engine off. You take the keys out and put them in your pocket. You put your gloves on. It's cold outside, so the gloves will look OK.*

You get out of the car. You stand still for a second, listening hard, and then you turn a complete circle, slowly, looking again. This is the tense time. This is the time when you must decide to abort or proceed. Think, think, think. You keep it dispassionate. It's just an operational judgment, after all. Your training helps. You decide to proceed. You close the car door, quietly. You walk into the driveway. You walk to the door. You knock. You stand there. The door opens. She lets you in. She's glad to see you. Surprised, a little confused at first, then delighted. You talk for a moment. You keep on talking, until the time is right. You'll know the moment, when it comes. You keep on talking.

The moment comes. You stand still for a second, testing it. You make your move. You explain she has to do exactly what you tell her. She agrees, of course, because she has no choice. You tell her you'd like her to look like she's having fun while she's doing it. You explain that'll make the whole thing more agreeable for you. She nods happily, willing to please. She smiles. The smile is forced and artificial, which spoils it somewhat, but it can't be helped. Something is better than nothing.

You make her show you the master bathroom. She stands there like a real estate agent, showing it off. The tub is fine. It's like a lot of tubs you've seen. You tell her to bring the paint inside. You supervise her all the way. It takes her five trips, in and out of the house, up and down the stairs. There's a lot to carry. She's huffing and puffing. She's starting to sweat, even though the fall weather is cold. You remind her about the smile. She puts it back in place. It looks more like a grimace.

You tell her to find something to lever the lids off with. She nods happily and tells you about a screwdriver in the kitchen drawer. You walk with her. She opens the drawer and finds the screwdriver. You walk with her, back to the bathroom. You tell her to take the lids off, one by one. She's calm. She kneels

next to the first can. She works the tip of the screwdriver in under the metal flange of the lid and eases it upward. She works around it in a circle. The lid sucks off. The chemical smell of the paint fills the air.

She moves on to the next can. Then the next. She's working hard. Working quickly. You tell her to be careful. Any mess, she'll be punished. You tell her to smile. She smiles. She works. The last lid comes off.

You pull the folded refuse sack from your pocket. You tell her to place her clothes in it. She's confused. Which clothes? The clothes you're wearing, you tell her. She nods and smiles. Kicks off her shoes. Their weight pulls the folded bag into shape. She's wearing socks. She tugs them off. Drops them in the bag. She unbuttons her jeans. Hops from foot to foot, taking them off. They go in the bag. She unbuttons her shirt. Shrugs it off. Drops it in the bag. She reaches back and fiddles with the catch on a her bra. Pulls it off. Her breasts are swinging free. She slips her underpants down and balls them with the bra and drops them in the bag. She's naked. You tell her to smile.

You make her carry the bag down to the front door. You walk behind her. She props the bag against the door. You take her back to the bathroom. You make her empty the cans into the tub, slowly, carefully, one by one. She concentrates hard, tongue between her teeth. The cans are heavy and awkward. The paint is thick. It smells. It runs slowly into the tub. The level creeps up, green and oily. You tell her she's done well. You tell her you're pleased. The paint is in the tub, and there are no drips anywhere. She smiles, delighted at the praise. Then you tell her the next part is harder. She has to take the empty cans back where she got them. But now she's naked. So she has to make sure nobody can see. And she has to run. She nods. You tell her now the cans are empty they weigh less, so she can carry more each trip. She nods again. She understands. She threads them onto her fingers, five empty cans in each hand. She carries them downstairs. You make her wait. You ease the door open and check. Look and listen. You send her out. She runs all the way there. She replaces the cans. She runs all the way back, breasts bouncing. It's cold outside.

You tell her to stand still and get her breath. You remind her about the smile. She bobs her head apologetically and comes back with the grimace. You take her up to the bathroom again. The screwdriver is still on the floor. You ask her to pick it up. You tell her to make marks on her face with it. She's confused. You explain. Deep scratches will do, you tell her. Three or four of them. Deep enough to draw blood. She smiles and nods. Raises the screwdriver. Scrapes it down the left side of her face, with the blade turned so the point is digging in. A livid red line appears, five inches long. Make the next one harder, you say. She nods. The next line bleeds. Good, you say. Do another. She scratches another.

And another. Good, you say. Now make the last one really hard. She nods and smiles. Drags the blade down. The skin tears. Blood flows. Good girl, you say. She's still holding the screwdriver. You tell her to get into the bath, slowly and carefully. She puts her right foot in. Then her left. She's standing in the paint, up to her calves. You tell her to sit down, slowly. She sits. The paint is up over her waist. Touching the underside of her breasts. You tell her to lie back, slowly and carefully. She slides down into the paint. The level rises, two inches below the lip of the tub. Now you smile. Just right.

You tell her what to do. She doesn't understand at first, because it's a very odd thing to be asked. You explain carefully. She nods. Her hair is thick with paint. She slides down. Now only her face is showing. She tilts her head back. Her hair floats. She uses her fingers to help her. They're slick and dripping with paint. She does exactly what she's been told. She gets it right first time. Her eyes jam open with panic, and then she dies.

You wait five minutes. Just leaning over the tub, not touching anything. Then you do the only thing she can't do for herself. It gets paint on your right glove. Then you press down on her forehead with a fingertip and she slips under the surface. You peel your right glove off inside out. Check the left one. It's OK. You put your right hand in your pocket for safety and you keep it there. This is the only time your prints are exposed.

Your carry the soiled glove in your left hand and walk downstairs in the silence. Slip the glove into the refuse sack with her clothes. Open the door. Listen and watch. Carry the sack outside. Turn around and close the door behind you. Walk down the driveway to the road. Pause behind the car and slip the clean glove in the sack, too. Pop the trunk lid and place the sack inside. Open the door and slide in behind the wheel. Take the keys from your pocket and start the engine. Buckle your belt and check the mirror. Drive away, not fast, not slow.

THE CALLAN FILE started with a summary of her military career. The career was four years long and the summary ran to forty-eight lines of type. His own name was mentioned once, in connection with the debacle at the end. He found he remembered her pretty well. She had been a small, round woman, cheerful and happy. He guessed she had joined the Army with no very clear idea of *why*. There's a definite type of person who takes the same route. Maybe from a large family, comfortable with sharing, good at team sports in school, academically proficient without being a scholar, they just drift toward it. They see it as an extension of what they've already known. Probably they don't see themselves as fighters, but they know for every person who holds a gun the Army offers a hundred other niches where there are trades to be learned and qualifications to be earned.

Callan had passed out of basic training and gone straight to the ordnance storerooms. She was a sergeant within twenty months. She shuffled paper and sent consignments around the world pretty much like her contemporaries back home, except her consignments were guns and shells instead of tomatoes or shoes or automobiles. She worked at Fort Withe near Chicago in a warehouse full of the stink of gun oil and the noise of clattering forklifts. She had been content at first. Then the rough banter had gotten too much, and her captain and her major had started stepping over the line and talking dirty and acting physical. She was no shrinking violet, but the pawing and the leering eventually brought her to Reacher's office.

Then after she quit she went to Florida, to a beach town on the Atlantic forty miles north of where it stopped being too expensive. She got married there, got separated there, lived there a year, then died there. The file was full of notes and photographs about where and nothing much about how. Her house was a modern one-story crouching under an overhanging roof made of orange tile. The crime scene photographs showed no damage to any doors or windows, no disruption inside, a white-tiled bathroom with a tub full of green paint and a slick indeterminate shape floating in it.

The autopsy showed nothing at all. The paint was designed to be tough and weatherproof and it had a molecular structure designed to cling and penetrate anything it was slapped onto. It covered a hundred percent of the body's external area and it had seeped into the eyes and the nose and the mouth and the throat. Removing it removed the skin. There was no evidence of bruising or trauma. The toxicology was clear. No phenol injection to the heart. No air embolisms. There are many clever ways to kill a person, and the Florida pathologists knew all of them, and they couldn't find any evidence of any of them.

"Well?" Harper said.

Reacher shrugged. "She had freckles. I remember that. A year in the Florida sun, she must have looked pretty good."

"You liked her."

He nodded. "She was OK."

The final third of the file was some of the most exhaustive crime scene forensics he had ever heard of. The analysis was microscopic, literally. Every particle of dust or fiber in her house had been vacuumed up and analyzed. But there was no evidence of any intruder. Not the slightest sign.

"A very clever guy," Reacher said.

Harper said nothing in reply. He pushed Callan's folder to one side and opened Cooke's. It followed the same format in its condensed narrative structure. She was different from Callan in that she had obviously aimed for the Army right

from the start. Her grandfather and her father had been Army men, which creates a kind of military aristocracy, the way certain families see it. She had recognized the clash between her gender and her career intention pretty early, and there were notes about her demands to join her high school ROTC. She had begun her battles early.
She had been an officer candidate, and had started out a second lieutenant. She had gone straight to War Plans, which is where the brainy people waste their time assuming that when push comes to shove your friends stay your friends and your enemies stay your enemies. She had been promoted first lieutenant and posted to NATO in Brussels and started a relationship with her colonel. When she didn't get promoted captain early enough, she complained about him. Reacher remembered it well. There was no harassment involved, certainly not in the sense that Callan had endured. No strangers had pinched her or squeezed her or made lewd gestures at her with oily gun barrels. But the rules had changed, so that sleeping with somebody you commanded was no longer allowed, so Cooke's colonel went down, and then ate his pistol. She quit and flew home from Belgium to a lakeside cottage in New Hampshire, where she was eventually found dead in a tub full of setting paint.
The New Hampshire pathologists and forensic scientists told the same story their Florida counterparts had, which was absolutely no story at all. The notes and the photographs were the same but different. A gray cedar house crowded by trees, an undamaged door, an undisturbed interior, folksy bathroom decor dominated by the dense green contents of the tub. Reacher skimmed through and closed the folder.
"What do you think?" Harper asked.
"I think the paint is weird," Reacher said.
"Why?"
He shrugged. "It's so *circular*, isn't it? It eliminates evidence on the bodies, which reduces risk, but getting it and transporting it creates risk."
"And it's like a deliberate clue," Harper said. "It underlines the motive. It's definite confirmation it's an Army guy. It's like a taunt."
"Lamarr says it has psychological significance. She says he's reclaiming them for the military."
Harper nodded. "By taking their clothes, too."
"But if he hates them enough to kill them, why would he want to reclaim them?"
"I don't know. A guy like this, who knows how he thinks?"
"Lamarr thinks she knows how he thinks," Reacher said.
Lorraine Stanley's file was the last of the three. Her history was similar to Callan's, but more recent. She was younger. She had been a sergeant, bottom of the totem pole in a giant quartermaster facility in Utah, the only woman in the

the totem pole in a giant quartermaster facility in Utah, the only woman in the place. She had been pestered since day one. Her competence had been questioned. One night her barrack was broken into and all her uniform trousers were stolen. She reported for duty the next morning wearing her regulation skirt. The next night, all her underwear was stolen. The next morning she was wearing the skirt and nothing underneath. Her lieutenant called her into his office. Made her stand easy in the middle of the room, one foot either side of a large mirror laid on the floor, while he yelled at her for a paperwork snafu. The whole of the personnel roster filed in and out of the office throughout, getting a good look at the reflection in the mirror. The lieutenant ended up in prison and Stanley ended up serving out another year and then living alone and dying alone in San Diego, in the little bungalow shown in the crime scene photographs, in which the California pathologists and forensics people had found absolutely nothing at all.
“How old are you?” Reacher asked.
“Me?” Harper said. “Twenty-nine. I told you that. It’s an FAQ.”
“From Colorado, right?”
“Aspen.”
“Family?”
“Two sisters, one brother.”
“Older or younger?”
“All older. I’m the baby.”
“Parents?”
“Dad’s a pharmacist, Mom helps him out.”
“You take vacations when you were kids?”
She nodded. “Sure. Grand Canyon, Painted Desert, all over. One year we camped in Yellowstone.”
“You drove there, right?”
She nodded again. “Sure. Big station wagon full of kids, happy family sort of thing. What’s this about?”
“What do you remember about the drives?”
She made a face. “They were endless.”
“Exactly.”
“Exactly what?”
“This is a real big country.”
“So?”
“Caroline Cooke was killed in New Hampshire and Lorraine Stanley was killed three weeks later in San Diego. That’s about as far apart as you can get, right? Maybe thirty-five hundred miles by road. Maybe more.”
“Is he traveling by road?”
Reacher nodded. “He’s got hundreds of gallons of paint to haul around.”

Reacher nodded. "He's got hundreds of gallons of paint to haul around."
"Maybe he's got a stockpile stashed away someplace. "
"That just makes it worse. Unless his stash just happened to be on a direct line between where he's based now and New Hampshire *and* southern California, he'd have to detour to get it. It would add distance, maybe a lot of distance."
"So?"
"So he's got a three-, four-thousand-mile road trip, plus surveillance time on Lorraine Stanley. Could he do that in a week?"
Harper made a face. "Call it seventy hours at fifty-five miles an hour."
"Which he couldn't average. He'd pass through towns and road construction. And he wouldn't break the speed limit. A guy this meticulous isn't going to risk some trooper sniffing around his vehicle. Hundreds of gallons of camouflage basecoat is going to arouse some suspicions these days, right?"
"So call it a hundred hours on the road."
"At least. Plus a day or two surveillance when he gets there. That's more than a week, in practical terms. It's ten or eleven days. Maybe twelve."
"So?"
"You tell me."
"This is not some guy working two weeks on, one week off."
Reacher nodded. "No, it's not."
THEY WALKED OUTSIDE and around toward the block with the cafeteria in it. The weather had settled to what fall should be. The air was ten degrees warmer, but still crisp. The lawns were green and the sky was a shattering blue. The dampness had blown away and the leaves on the surrounding trees looked dry and two shades lighter.
"I feel like staying outside," Reacher said.
"You need to work," Harper said.
"I read the damn files. Reading them over again isn't going to help me any. I need to do some thinking."
"You think better outside?"
"Generally."
"OK, come to the range. I need to qualify on handguns. "
"You're not qualified already?"
She smiled. "Of course I am. We have to requalify every month. Regulations."
They took sandwiches from the cafeteria and ate as they walked. The outdoor pistol range was Sunday-quiet, a large space the size of a hockey rink, bermed on three sides with high earth walls. There were six separate firing lanes made out of shoulder-high concrete walls running all the way down to six separate targets. The targets were heavy paper, clipped into steel frames. Each paper was printed with a picture of a crouching felon, with target rings radiating out from

printed with a picture of a crouching felon, with target rings radiating out from his heart. Harper signed in with the rangemaster and handed him her gun. He reloaded it with six shells and handed it back, together with two sets of ear defenders.
“Take lane three,” he said.
Lane three was in the center. There was a black line painted on the concrete floor.
“Seventy-five feet,” Harper said.
She stood square-on and slipped the ear defenders into position. Raised the gun two-handed. Her legs were apart and her knees slightly bent. Her hips were forward and her shoulders back. She loosed off the six shots in a stream, half a second between them. Reacher watched the tendons in her hand. They were tight, rocking the muzzle up and down a fraction each time she pulled.
“Clear,” she said.
He looked at her.
“That means you go get the target,” she said.
He expected to see the hits arranged on a vertical line maybe a foot long, and when he got down to the other end of the lane, that is exactly what he found. There were two holes in the heart, two in the next ring, and two in the ring connecting the throat with the stomach. He unclipped the paper and carried it back.
“Two fives, two fours, two threes,” she said. “Twenty-four points. I pass, just.”
“You should use your left arm more,” he said.
“How?”
“Take all the weight with your left, and just use your right for pulling the trigger.”
She paused.
“Show me,” she said.
He stepped close behind her and stretched around with his left arm. She raised the gun in her right and he cupped her hand in his.
“Relax the arm,” he said. “Let me take the weight.”
His arms were long, but hers were too. She shuffled backward and pressed hard against him. He leaned forward. Rested his chin on the side of her head. Her hair smelled good.
“OK, let it float,” he said.
She clicked the trigger on the empty chamber a couple of times. The muzzle was rock steady.
“Feels good,” she said.
“Go get some more shells.”
She peeled away from in front of him and walked back to the rangemaster’s

cubicle and got another clip, part loaded with six. He moved into the next lane, where there was a new target. She met him there and nestled back against him and raised her gun hand. He reached around her and cupped it and took the weight. She leaned back against him. Fired twice. He saw the holes appear in the target, maybe an inch apart in the center ring.
“See?” he said. “Let the left do the work.”
“Sounds like a political statement.”
She stayed where she was, leaning back against him. He could feel the rise and fall of her breathing. He stepped away from behind her and she tried again, by herself. Two shots, fast. The shell cases rang on the concrete. Two more holes appeared in the heart ring. There was a tight cluster of four, in a diamond shape a business card would have covered.
She nodded. “You want the last two?”
She stepped close and handed him the pistol, butt-first. It was a SIG-Sauer, identical to the one Lamarr had held next to his head throughout the car ride into Manhattan. He stood with his back to the target and weighed the gun in his hand. Then he spun abruptly and fired the two bullets, one into each of the target’s eyes.
“That’s how I’d do it,” he said. “If I was real mad with somebody, that’s what I’d do. I wouldn’t mess around with a damn tub and twenty gallons of paint.”
THEY MET BLAKE on the way back to the library room. He looked aimless and agitated all at the same time. There was worry in his face. He had a new problem.
“Lamarr’s father died,” he said.
“Stepfather,” Reacher said.
“Whatever. He died, early this morning. The hospital in Spokane called for her. Now I’ve got to call her at home.”
“Give her our condolences,” Harper said.
Blake nodded vaguely and walked away.
“He should take her off the case,” Reacher said.
Harper nodded. “Maybe he should, but he won’t. And she wouldn’t agree, anyway. Her job is all she’s got.”
Reacher said nothing. Harper pulled the door and ushered him back into the room with the oak tables and the leather chairs and the files. Reacher sat down and checked his watch. Three twenty. Maybe two more hours of daydreaming and then he could eat and escape to the solitude of his room.
IT WAS THREE hours, in the end. And it wasn’t daydreaming. He sat and stared into space and thought hard. Harper watched him, anxious. He took the file folders and arranged them on the table, Callan’s at the bottom right,

Stanley's at the bottom left, Cooke's at the top right, and stared at them, musing about the geography again. He leaned back and closed his eyes.
"Making any progress?" Harper asked.
"I need a list of the ninety-one women," he said.
"OK," she said.
He waited with his eyes closed and heard her leave the room. Enjoyed the warmth and the silence for a long moment, and then she was back. He opened his eyes and saw her leaning over near him and handing him another thick blue file.
"Pencil," he said.
She backed away to a drawer and found a pencil. Rolled it across the table to him. He opened the new file and started reading. First item was a Defense Department printout, four pages stapled together, ninety-one names in alphabetical order. He recognized some of them. Rita Scimeca was there, the woman he'd mentioned to Blake. She was next to Lorraine Stanley. Then there was a matching list with addresses, most of them obtained through the VA's medical insurance operation or mail-forwarding instructions. Scimeca lived in Oregon. Then there was a thick sheaf of background information, Army postdischarge intelligence reports, extensive for some of the women, sketchy for others, but altogether enough for a basic conclusion. Reacher flipped back and forth between pages and went to work with the pencil and twenty minutes later counted up the marks he'd made.
"It was eleven women," he said. "Not ninety-one."
"It was?" Harper said.
He nodded.
"Eleven," he said again. "Eight left, not eighty-eight. "
"Why?"
"Lots of reasons. Ninety-one was always absurd. Who would seriously target ninety-one women? Five and a quarter years? It's not credible. A guy this smart would break it down into something manageable, like eleven."
"But how?"
"By limiting himself to what's feasible. A subcategory. What else did Callan and Cooke and Stanley have in common?"
"What?"
"They were alone. Positively and unequivocally alone. Unmarried or separated, single-family houses in the suburbs or the countryside."
"And that's crucial?"
"Of course it is. Think about the MO. He needs somewhere quiet and lonely and isolated. No interruptions. And no witnesses nearby. He has to get all that paint

into the house. So look at this list. There are married women, women with new babies, women living with family, parents, women in apartment houses and condos, farms, communes even, women gone back to college. But he wants women who live alone, in houses."
Harper shook her head. "There are more than eleven of those. We did the research. I think it's more than thirty. About a third."
"But you had to check. I'm talking about women who are *obviously* living alone and isolated. At first glance. Because we have to assume the guy hasn't got anybody doing research for him. He's working alone, in secret. All he's got is this list to study."
"But that's *our* list."
"Not exclusively. It's his, too. All this information came straight from the military, right? He had this list before you did."
FORTY-THREE MILES AWAY, slightly east of north, the exact same list was lying open on a polished desk in a small windowless office in the darkness of the Pentagon's interior. It was two Xerox generations newer than Reacher's version, but it was otherwise identical. All the same pages were there. And they had eleven marks on them, against eleven names. Not hasty check marks in pencil, like Reacher had scrawled, but neat underlinings done with a fountain pen and a beveled ruler held away from the paper so the ink wouldn't smudge.
Three of the eleven names had second lines struck through them.
The list was framed on the desk by the uniformed forearms of the office's occupant. They were flat on the wood, and the wrists were cocked upward to keep the hands clear of the surface. The left hand held a ruler. The right hand held a pen. The left hand moved and placed the ruler exactly horizontal along the inked line under a fourth name. Then it slid upward a fraction and rested across the name itself. The right hand moved and the pen scored a thick line straight through it. Then the pen lifted off the page.
"SO WHAT DO we do about it?" Harper asked.
Reacher leaned back and closed his eyes again.
"I think you should gamble," he said. "I think you should stake out the surviving eight around the clock and I think the guy will walk into your arms within sixteen days."
She sounded uncertain.
"Hell of a gamble," she said. "It's very tenuous. You're guessing about what he's guessing about when he looks at the list."
"I'm supposed to be representative of the guy. So what I guess should be what he guesses, right?"
"Suppose you're wrong?"

“As opposed to what? The progress you’re making?”
She still sounded uncertain. “OK. I guess it’s a valid theory. Worth pursuing. But maybe they thought of it already.”
“Nothing ventured, nothing gained, right?”
She was quiet for a second. “OK, talk to Lamarr, first thing tomorrow.”
He opened his eyes. “You think she’ll be here?”
Harper nodded. “She’ll be here.”
“Won’t there be a funeral for her father?”
Harper nodded again. “There’ll have to be a funeral, obviously. But she won’t go. She’d miss her *own* funeral, a case like this.”
“OK, but you do the talking, and talk to Blake instead. Keep it away from Lamarr.”
“Why?”
“Because her sister clearly lives alone, remember? So her odds just went all the way down to eight to one. Blake will have to pull her off now.”
“If he agrees with you.”
“He should.”
“Maybe he will. But he won’t pull her off.”
“He should.”
“Maybe, but he won’t.”
Reacher shrugged. “Then don’t bother telling him anything. I’m just wasting my time here. The guy’s an idiot.”
“Don’t say that. You need to cooperate. Think about Jodie.”
He closed his eyes again and thought about Jodie. She seemed a long way away. He thought about her for a long time.
“Let’s go eat,” Harper said. “Then I’ll go talk to Blake.”
FORTY-THREE MILES AWAY, slightly east of north, the uniformed man stared at the paper, motionless. There was a look on his face appropriate to a man making slow progress through a complicated undertaking. Then there was a knock at his door.
“Wait,” he called.
He clicked the ruler down onto the wood and capped his pen and clipped it into his pocket. Folded the list and opened a drawer in his desk and slipped the list inside and weighted it down with a book. The book was a Bible, King James Version, black calfskin binding. He placed the ruler flat on top of the Bible and slid the drawer closed. Took keys from his pocket and locked the drawer. Put the keys back in his pocket and moved in his chair and straightened his jacket.
“Come,” he called.
The door opened and a corporal stepped inside and saluted.
“Yes, sir, I have a Colonel” he said

"Your car is here, Colonel," he said.
"OK, Corporal," the colonel said.
THE SKIES ABOVE Quantico were still clear, but the crispness in the air was plummeting toward a real night chill. Darkness was creeping in from the east, behind the buildings. Reacher and Harper walked quickly and the lights along the path came on in sequence, following their pace, as if their passing was switching the power. They ate alone, at a table for two in a different part of the cafeteria. They walked back to the main building through full darkness. They rode the elevator and she unlocked his door with her key.
"Thanks for your input," she said.
He said nothing.
"And thanks for the handgun tutorial," she said.
He nodded. "My pleasure."
"It's a good technique."
"An old master sergeant taught it to me."
She smiled. "No, not the shooting technique. The tutorial technique."
He nodded again, remembering her back pressed close against his chest, her hips jammed against his, her hair in his face, her feel, her smell.
"Showing is always better than telling. I guess," he said.
"Can't beat it," she replied.
She closed the door on him and he heard her walk away.

14

HE WOKE EARLY, before daybreak. Stood at the window for a spell, wrapped in a towel, staring out into the darkness. It was cold again. He shaved and showered. He was halfway through the Bureau's bottle of shampoo. He dressed standing next to the bed. Took his coat from the closet and put it on. Ducked back into the bathroom and clipped his toothbrush into the inside pocket. Just in case today was the day.

He sat on the bed with the coat wrapped around him against the cold and waited for Harper. But when the key went into the lock and the door opened, it wasn't Harper standing there. It was Poulton. He was keeping his face deliberately blank, and Reacher felt the first stirrings of triumph.

"Where's Harper?" he asked.

"Off the case," Poulton said.

"Did she talk to Blake?"

"Last night."

"And?"

Poulton shrugged. "And nothing."

"You're ignoring my input?"

"You're not here for *input*."

Reacher nodded. "OK. Ready for breakfast?"

Poulton nodded back. "Sure."

The sun was coming up in the east and sending color into the sky. There was no cloud. No damp. No wind. It was a pleasant walk through the early gloom. The place felt busy again. Monday morning, the start of a new week. Blake was at the usual table in the cafeteria, over by the window. Lamarr was sitting with him. She was wearing a black blouse in place of her customary cream. It was slightly faded, like it had been washed many times. There was coffee on the table, and mugs, and milk and sugar, and doughnuts. But no newspapers.

"I was sorry to hear the news from Spokane," Reacher said.

Lamarr nodded, silently.

"I offered her time off," Blake said. "She's entitled to compassionate leave."

Reacher looked at him. "You don't need to explain yourself to me."

"In the midst of life is death," Lamarr said. "That's something you learn pretty quickly around here."

"You're not going to the funeral?"

Lamarr took a teaspoon and balanced it across her forefinger. Stared down at it. "Alison hasn't called me," she said. "I don't know what the arrangements are

"Alison hasn't called me," she said. "I don't know what the arrangements are going to be."
"You didn't call her?"
She shrugged. "I'd feel like I was intruding."
"I don't think Alison would agree with that."
She looked straight at him. "But I just don't know."
There was silence. Reacher turned a mug over and poured coffee.
"We need to get to work," Blake said.
"You didn't like my theory?" Reacher said.
"It's a guess, not a theory," Blake said back. "We can all guess, as much as we want to. But we can't turn our backs on eighty women just because we enjoy guessing."
"Would they notice the difference?" Reacher asked.
He took a long sip of coffee and looked at the doughnuts. They were wrinkled and hard. Probably Saturday's.
"So you're not going to pay attention?" he asked.
Blake shrugged. "I gave it some consideration."
"Well, give it some more. Because the next woman to die will be one of the eleven I marked, and it'll be on your head."
Blake said nothing and Reacher pushed his chair back.
"I want pancakes," he said. "I don't like the look of those doughnuts."
He stood up before they could object and stepped away toward the center of the room. Stopped at the first table with a *New York Times* on it. It belonged to a guy on his own. He was reading the sports. The front section was discarded to his left. Reacher picked it up. The story he was waiting for was right there, front page, below the fold.
"Can I borrow this?" he asked.
The guy with the interest in sports nodded without looking. Reacher tucked the paper under his arm and walked to the serving counter. Breakfast was set out like a buffet. He helped himself to a stack of pancakes and eight rashers of bacon. Added syrup until the plate was swimming. He was going to need the nutrition. He had a long journey ahead, and he was probably going to be walking the first part of it.
He came back to the table and squatted awkwardly to get the plate down without spilling the syrup or dropping the newspaper. He propped the paper in front of his plate and started to eat. Then he pretended to notice the headline.
"Well, look at that," he said, with his mouth full.
The headline read *Gang Warfare Explodes in Lower Manhattan, Leaves Six Dead*. The story recounted a brief and deadly turf war between two rival

protection rackets, one of them allegedly Chinese, the other allegedly Syrian. Automatic firearms and machetes had been used. The body count ran four to two in favor of the Chinese. Among the four dead on the Syrian side was the alleged gang leader, a suspected felon named Almar Petrosian. There were quotes from the NYPD and the FBI, and background reporting about the hundred-year history of protection rackets in New York City, the Chinese tongs, the jockeying between different ethnic groups for their business, which reputedly ran to billions of dollars nationwide.

"Well, look at that," Reacher said again.

They had already looked at it. That was clear. They were all turned away from him. Blake was staring through the window at the streaks of dawn in the sky. Poulton had his eyes fixed on the back wall. Lamarr was still studying her teaspoon.

"Cozo call you to confirm it?" Reacher asked.

Nobody said a thing, which was the same as a yes. Reacher smiled.

"Life's a bitch, right?" he said. "You get a hook into me, and suddenly the hook isn't there anymore. Fate's a funny thing, isn't it?"

"Fate," Blake repeated.

"So let me get this straight," Reacher said. "Harper wouldn't play ball with the femme fatale thing, and now old Petrosian is dead, so you got no more cards to play. And you're not listening to a word I say anyway, so is there a reason why I shouldn't walk right out of here?"

"Lots of reasons," Blake said.

There was silence.

"None of them good enough," Reacher said.

He stood up and stepped away from the table again. Nobody tried to stop him. He walked out of the cafeteria and out through the glass doors into the chill of dawn. Started walking.

HE WALKED ALL the way out to the guardhouse on the perimeter. Ducked under the barrier and dropped his visitor's pass on the road. Walked on and turned the corner and entered Marine territory. He kept to the middle of the pavement and reached the first clearing after a half-mile. There was a cluster of vehicles and a number of quiet, watchful men. They let him go on. Walking was unusual, but not illegal. He reached the second clearing thirty minutes after leaving the cafeteria. He walked through it and kept on going.

He heard the car behind him five minutes later. He stopped and turned and waited for it. It came near enough for him to see past the dazzle of its running lights. It was Harper, which is what he had expected. She was alone. She drew level with him and buzzed her window down.

“Hello, Reacher,” she said.
He nodded. Said nothing.
“Want a ride?” she asked.
“Out or back?”
“Wherever you decide.”
“I-95 on-ramp will do it. Going north.”
“Hitchhiking?”
He nodded. “I’ve got no money for a plane.”
He slid in next to her and she accelerated gently away, heading out. She was in her second suit and her hair was loose. It spilled all over her shoulders.
“They tell you to bring me back?” he asked.
She shook her head. “They decided you’re useless. Nothing to contribute, is what they said.”
He smiled. “So now I’m supposed to get all boiled up with indignation and storm back in there and prove them wrong?”
She smiled back. “Something like that. They spent ten minutes discussing the best approach. Lamarr decided they should appeal to your ego.”
“That’s what happens when you’re a psychologist who studied landscape gardening in school.”
“I guess so.”
They drove on, through the wooded curves, past the last Marine clearing.
“But she’s right,” he said. “I’ve got nothing to contribute. Nobody’s going to catch this guy. He’s too smart. Too smart for me, that’s for damn sure.”
She smiled again. “A little psychology of your own? Trying to leave with a clear conscience?”
He shook his head. “My conscience is always clear.”
“Is it clear about Petrosian?”
“Why shouldn’t it be?”
“Hell of a coincidence, don’t you think? They threaten you with Petrosian, and he’s dead within three days.”
“Just dumb luck.”
“Yeah, luck. You know I didn’t tell them I was *outside* Trent’s office all day?”
“Why not?”
“I was covering my ass.”
He looked at her. "And what’s Trent’s office got to do with anything?”
She shrugged. “I don’t know. But I don’t like coincidences. ”
“They happen, time to time. Obviously.”
“Nobody in the Bureau likes coincidences.”
“So?”

She shrugged again. “So they could, you know, dig around. Might make it hard for you, later.”
He smiled again. “This is phase two of the approach, right?”
She smiled back, and then the smile exploded into a laugh. “Yeah, phase two. There are about a dozen still to go. Some of them are real good. You want to hear them all?”
“Not really. I’m not going back. They’re not listening. ”
She nodded and drove on. Paused before the junction with the interstate, and then swooped north up the ramp.
“I’ll take you to the next one,” she said. “Nobody uses this one except Bureau people. And none of them is going to give you a ride.”
He nodded. “Thanks, Harper.”
“Jodie’s home,” she said. “I called Cozo’s office. Apparently they had a little surveillance going. She’s been away. She got back this morning, in a taxi. Looked like she’d come from the airport. Looks like she’s working from home today.”
He smiled. “OK, so now I’m definitely out of here.”
“We need your input, you know.”
“They’re not listening.”
“You need to make them listen,” she said.
“This is phase three?”
“No, this is me. I mean it.”
He was silent for a long moment. Then he nodded.
“So why *won’t* they listen?”
“Pride, maybe?” she said.
“They need somebody’s input,” he said. “That’s for sure. But not mine. I don’t have the resources. And I don’t have the authority.”
“To do what?”
“To take it out of their hands. They’re wasting their time with this profiling shit. It won’t get them anywhere. They need to work the clues.”
“There aren’t any clues.”
“Yes, there are. How smart the guy is. And the paint, and the geography, and how quiet the scenes are. They’re all clues. They should work them. They’ve got to mean something. Starting with the motive is starting at the wrong end.”
“I’ll pass that on.”
She pulled off the highway and stopped at the cross street.
“You going to get into trouble?” he asked.
“For failing to bring you back?” she said. “Probably. ”
He was silent. She smiled.
“That was phase ten,” she said. “I’ll be perfectly OK.”

"That was phase ten," she said. "I'll be perfectly OK."
"I hope so," he said, and got out of the car. He walked north across the street to the ramp and stood all alone and watched her car slide under the bridge and turn back south.
A MALE HITCHHIKER standing six feet five and weighing two hundred and thirty pounds is on the cusp of acceptability for easy rides. Generally, women won't stop for him, because they see a threat. Men can be just as nervous. But Reacher was showered and shaved and clean, and dressed quietly. That shortened the odds, and there were enough trucks on the road with big confident owner-drivers that he was back in New York City within seven hours of starting out.
He was quiet most of the seven hours, partly because the trucks were too noisy for conversation, and partly because he wasn't in the mood for talking. The old hobo demon was whispering to him again. *Where are you going?* Back to Jodie, of course. *OK, smart guy, but what else? What the hell else? Yardwork behind your house? Painting the damn walls?* He sat next to a succession of kindly drivers and felt his brief unsatisfactory excursion into freedom ebb away. He worked on forgetting about it, and felt he succeeded. His final ride was from a New Jersey vegetable truck delivering to Greenwich Village. It rumbled in through the Holland Tunnel. He got out and walked the last mile on Canal and Broadway, all the way down to Jodie's apartment house, concentrating hard on his desire to see her.
He had his own key to her lobby, and he went up in the elevator and knocked on her door. The peephole went dark and light again and the door opened and she was standing there, in jeans and a shirt, tall and slim and vital. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. But she wasn't smiling at him.
"Hey, Jodie," he said.
"There's an FBI agent in my kitchen." she replied.
"Why?"
"Why?" she repeated. "You tell me."
He followed her into the apartment, through to the kitchen. The Bureau guy was a short young man with a wide neck. Blue suit, white shirt, striped tie. He was holding a cell phone up to his face, reporting Reacher's arrival to somebody else.
"What do you want?" Reacher asked him.
"I want you to wait here, sir," the guy said. "About ten minutes, please."
"What's this about?"
"You'll find out, sir. Ten minutes, is all."
Reacher felt like walking out, just to be contrary, but Jodie sat down. There was something in her face. Something halfway between concern and annoyance. The

New York Times was open on the countertop. Reacher glanced at it.
"OK," he said. "Ten minutes."
He sat down, too. They waited in silence. It was nearer fifteen minutes than ten. Then the buzzer from the street sounded and the Bureau guy went to answer it. He clicked the door release and moved out to the hallway. Jodie sat still and passive, like a guest in her own apartment. Reacher heard the whine of the elevator. He heard it stop. He heard the apartment door open. He heard footsteps on the maple floor.
Alan Deerfield walked into the kitchen. He was in a dark raincoat with the collar turned up. He was moving energetically and he had sidewalk grit on the soles of his shoes and it made him loud and invasive.
"I got six people dead in my city," he said. He saw the *Times* on the counter and walked over and folded it back to reveal the headline. "So I got a couple questions, naturally."
Reacher looked at him. "What questions?"
Deerfield looked back. "Delicate questions."
"So ask them."
Deerfield nodded. "First question is for Ms. Jacob."
Jodie stirred in her chair. Didn't look up.
"What's the question?" she said.
"Where have you been, the last few days?"
"Out of town," she said. "On business."
"Where out of town?"
"London. Client conference."
"London, England?"
"As opposed to what other Londons?"
Deerfield shrugged. "London, Kentucky? London, Ohio? There's a London somewhere in Canada too, I believe. Ontario, maybe."
"London, England," Jodie said.
"You got clients in London, England?"
Jodie was still looking at the floor. "We've got clients everywhere. Especially in London, England."
Deerfield nodded. "You go by the Concorde?"
She looked up. "Yes I did, as a matter of fact."
"Real quick, right?"
Jodie nodded. "Quick enough."
"But expensive."
"I guess."
"But worth it for a partner on important business."

Jodie looked at him. “I’m not a partner.”
Deerfield smiled. “Even better, right? They put an associate on the Concorde, got to mean something. Must mean they like you. Must mean you’ll be a partner real soon. If nothing comes along and gets in the way.”
Jodie said nothing in reply.
“So, London,” Deerfield said. “Reacher knew you were there, right?”
She shook her head. “No, I didn’t tell him.”
There was a pause.
“Scheduled trip?” Deerfield asked.
Jodie shook her head again. “Last-minute.”
“And Reacher didn’t know?”
“I already told you that.”
“OK,” Deerfield said. “Information is king, is what I say.”
“I don’t have to tell him where I go.”
Deerfield smiled. “I’m not talking about what information you give Reacher. I’m talking about what information I get out of a situation. Right now I’m getting he didn’t know where you were.”
“So?”
“That should have worried him. And it did worry him. Right after he got to Quantico, he was trying to get you on the phone. Office, home, mobile. That night, same thing again. Calling, calling, calling, couldn’t get you. A worried man.”
Jodie glanced up at Reacher. Concern in her face, maybe a little apology.
“I should have told him, I guess.”
“Hey, that’s up to you. I don’t go around telling people how to conduct their relationships. But the interesting thing is, then he stops calling you. Suddenly he’s not calling you anymore. Now why is that? Did he find out you were safe over there in London, England? ”
She started to reply, and then she stopped.
“I’ll take that for a no,” Deerfield said. “You were worried about Petrosian, so you told people in your office to clam up about where you were. So as far as Reacher knew, you were still right here in town. But he’s suddenly not worried anymore. He doesn’t know you’re safe and sound in London, England, but maybe he does know you’re safe and sound because of some other reason, such as maybe he knows Petrosian isn’t going to be around for very much longer.”
Jodie’s eyes were back on the floor again.
“He’s a smart guy,” Deerfield said. “My guess is he whistled up some pal of his to set the cat among the pigeons up here in Chinatown, and then he sat back and waited for the tongs to do what they always do when somebody starts messing

with them. And he figures he's safe. He knows we'll never find his busy little pal, and he figures those Chinese boys aren't going to tell us diddly, not in a million years, and he knows the exact moment old Petrosian is getting the good news with the machete, he's locked into a room down in Quantico. A smart guy."
Jodie said nothing.
"But a very confident guy," Deerfield said. "He stopped calling you two days before Petrosian finally bought the farm."
There was silence in the kitchen. Deerfield turned to Reacher.
"So am I on the money?" he asked.
Reacher shrugged. "Why should anybody have been worrying about Petrosian?"
Deerfield smiled again. "Oh, sure, we can't talk about that. We'll never admit Blake said a word to you on that subject. But like I told Ms. Jacob, information is king. I just want to be a hundred percent sure what I'm dealing with here. If you stirred it up, just tell me and maybe I'll pat you on the back for a job well done. But if by some chance it was a genuine dispute, we need to know about it."
"I don't know what you're talking about," Reacher said.
"So why did you stop calling Ms. Jacob?"
"That's my business."
"No, it's everybody's business," Deerfield said. "Certainly it's Ms. Jacob's business, right? And it's mine too. So tell me about it. And don't go thinking you're out of the woods yet, Reacher. Petrosian was a piece of shit for sure, but he's still a homicide, and we can crank up a pretty good motive for you anyway, based on what was witnessed by two credible witnesses the other night in the alley. We could call it a conspiracy with persons unknown. Careful preparation of the case, you could be inside two years, just waiting for the trial. Jury might let you go in the end, but then who really knows what a jury might do?"
Reacher said nothing. Jodie stood up.
"You should leave now, Mr. Deerfield," she said. "I'm still his lawyer, and this is an inappropriate forum for this discussion."
Deerfield nodded slowly, and looked around the kitchen, like he was seeing it for the first time.
"Yes, it sure is, Ms. Jacob," he said. "So maybe we'll have to continue this discussion someplace more appropriate at some future time. Maybe tomorrow, maybe next week, maybe next year. Like Mr. Blake pointed out, we know where you both live."
He turned on the spot, with the grit on his shoes loud in the silence. They heard him walk through the living room and they heard the apartment door open and slam shut.

slam shut.
“So you took Petrosian out,” Jodie said.
“I never went near him,” Reacher replied.
She shook her head. “Save that stuff for the FBI, OK? You arranged it or provoked it or engineered it or whatever the correct phrase would be. You took him out, as surely as if you were standing right next to him with a gun.”
Reacher said nothing.
“And I told you not to do that,” she said.
Reacher said nothing.
“Deerfield knows you did it,” she said.
“He can’t prove it.”
“That doesn’t matter,” she said. “Don’t you see that? He can *try* to prove it. And he’s not kidding about the two years in jail. A suspicion of gang warfare? A thing like that, the courts will back him up all the way. Denial of bail, continuances, the prosecutors will really go to bat for him. It’s not an empty threat. He owns you now. Like I told you he would.”
Reacher said nothing.
“Why did you do it?”
He shrugged. “Lots of reasons. It needed doing.”
There was a long silence.
“Would my father have agreed with you?” Jodie asked.
“Leon?” Reacher said. He recalled the photographs in Cozo’s packet. The photographs of Petrosian’s handiwork. The dead women, displayed like centerfolds. Pieces missing, things inserted. “Are you kidding? Leon would have agreed with me in a heartbeat.”
“And would he have gone ahead and done what you did?”
“Probably.”
She nodded. “Yes, he probably would. But look around you, OK?”
“At what?”
“At everything. What do you see?”
He looked around. “An apartment.”
She nodded. “My apartment.”
“So?”
“Did I grow up here?”
“Of course not.”
“So where did I grow up?”
He shrugged. “All over the place, on Army bases, like I did.”
She nodded. “Where did you first meet me?”
“You know where. Manila. On the base.”
“Remember that bungalow?”

Remember that bungalow?"
"Sure I do."
She nodded. "So do I. It was tiny, it stank, and it had cockroaches bigger than my hand. And you know what? That was the best place I ever lived as a kid."
"So?"
She was pointing at her briefcase. It was a leather pilot's case, stuffed with legal paper, parked against the wall just inside the kitchen door. "What's that?"
"Your briefcase."
"Exactly. Not a rifle, not a carbine, not a flame-thrower. "
"So?"
"So I live in a Manhattan apartment instead of base quarters, and I carry a briefcase instead of infantry weapons."
He nodded. "I know you do."
"But do you know why?"
"Because you want to, I guess."
"Exactly. *Because I want to*. It was a conscious choice. *My* choice. I grew up in the Army, just like you did, and I could have joined up if I'd wanted to, just like you did. But I didn't want to. I wanted to go to college and law school instead. I wanted to join a big firm and make partner. And why was that?"
"Why?"
"Because I wanted to live in a world with rules."
"Plenty of rules in the Army," he said.
"The wrong rules, Reacher. I wanted civilian rules. *Civilized* rules."
"So what are you saying?"
"I'm saying I left the military all those years ago and I don't want to be back in it now."
"You're not back in it."
"But you make me feel that I am. *Worse* than the military. This thing with Petrosian? I don't want to be in a world with rules like that. You know I don't."
"So what should I have done?"
"You shouldn't have gotten into it in the first place. That night in the restaurant? You should have walked away and called the cops. That's what we do here."
"Here?"
"In the civilized world."
He sat on her kitchen stool and leaned his forearms on her countertop. Spread his fingers wide and placed his palms down flat. The countertop was cold. It was some kind of granite, gray and shiny, milled to reveal tiny quartz speckles throughout its surface. The corners and angles were radiused into perfect quarter-circles. It was an inch thick, and probably very expensive. It was a civilized product. It belonged right there in a world where people agree to labor

civilized product. It belonged right there in a world where people agree to labor forty hours, or a hundred, or two hundred, and then exchange the remuneration they get for installations they hope will make their kitchens look nice, inside their expensive remodeled buildings high above Broadway.
“Why did you stop calling me?” she asked.
He looked down at his hands. They lay on the polished granite like the rough exposed roots of small trees.
“I figured you were safe,” he said. “I figured you were hiding out someplace.”
“You figured,” she repeated. “But you didn’t know.”
“I assumed,” he said. “I was taking care of Petrosian, I assumed you were taking care of yourself. I figured we know each other well enough to trust assumptions like that.”
“Like we were comrades,” she said softly. “In the same unit, a major and a captain maybe, in the middle of some tight dangerous mission, absolutely relying on each other to do our separate jobs properly.”
He nodded. “Exactly.”
“But I’m not a captain. I’m not in some unit. I’m a lawyer. A lawyer, in New York, all alone and afraid, caught up in something I don’t want to be caught up in.”
He nodded again. “I’m sorry.”
“And you’re not a major,” she said. “Not anymore. You’re a civilian. You need to get that straight.”
He nodded. Said nothing.
“And that’s the big problem, right?” she said. “We’ve both got the same problem. You’re getting me caught up in something I don’t want to be caught up in, and I’m getting you caught up in something you don’t want to be caught up in either. The civilized world. The house, the car, living somewhere, doing ordinary things.”
He said nothing.
“My fault, probably,” she said. “I *wanted* those things. God, did I want them. Makes it kind of hard for me to accept that maybe you *don’t* want them.”
“I want you,” he said.
She nodded. “I know that. And I want *you*. You know that too. But do we want each other’s lives?”
The hobo demon erupted in his head, cheering and screaming like a fan watching the winning run soar into the bleachers, bottom of the ninth. *She said it! She said it! Now it’s right there, out in the open! So go for it! Jump on it! Just gobble it right up!*
“I don’t know,” he said.
“We need to talk about it.” she said.

But there was no more talking to be done, not then, because the buzzer from the lobby started up an insistent squawk, like somebody was down there on the street leaning on the button. Jodie stood up and hit the door release and moved into the living room to wait. Reacher stayed on his stool at the granite counter, looking at the quartz sparkles showing between his fingers. Then he felt the elevator arrive and heard the apartment door open. He heard urgent conversation and fast light footsteps through the living room and then Jodie was back in the kitchen with Lisa Harper standing at her side.

15

HARPER WAS STILL in her second suit and her hair was still loose on her shoulders, but those were the only similarities with the last time he had seen her. Her long-limbed slowness was all wiped away by some kind of feverish tension, and her eyes were red and strained. He guessed she was as near to distraught as she was ever going to get.
“What?” he asked.
“Everything,” she said. “It’s all gone crazy.”
“Where?”
“Spokane,” she said.
“No,” he said.
“Yes,” she said. “Alison Lamarr.”
There was silence.
“Shit,” he whispered.
Harper nodded. “Yeah, shit.”
“When?”
“Sometime yesterday. He’s speeding up. He didn’t stick to the interval. The next one should have been two weeks away.”
“How?”
“Same as all the others. The hospital was calling her because her father died, and there was no reply, so eventually they called the cops, and the cops went out there and found her. Dead in the tub, in the paint, like all the others.”
More silence.
“But how the hell did he get in?”
Harper shook her head. “Just walked right in the door.”
“Shit, I don’t believe it.”
“They’ve sealed the place off. They’re sending a crime scene unit direct from Quantico.”
“They won’t find anything.”
Silence again. Harper glanced around Jodie’s kitchen, nervously.
“Blake wants you back on board,” she said. “He’s signed up for your theory in a big way. He believes you now. Eleven women, not ninety-one.”
Reacher stared at her. “So what am I supposed to say to that? Better late than never?”
“He wants you back,” Harper said again. “This is getting way out of control. We need to start cutting some corners with the Army. And he figures you’ve demonstrated a talent for cutting corners.”

demonstrated a talent for cutting corners.
It was the wrong thing to say. It fell across the kitchen like a weight. Jodie switched her gaze from Harper to the refrigerator door.
“You should go, Reacher,” she said.
He made no reply.
“Go cut some corners,” she said. “Go do what you’re good at.”
HE WENT. HARPER had a car waiting at the curb on Broadway. It was a Bureau car, borrowed from the New York office, and the driver was the same guy who had driven him down from Garrison with a gun at his head. But if the guy was confused about Reacher’s recent change of status, he didn’t show it. Just lit up his red light and took off west toward Newark.
The airport was a mess. They fought through crowds to the Continental counter. The reservation was coming in direct from Quantico as they waited at the desk. Two coach seats. They ran to the gate and were the last passengers to board. The purser was waiting for them at the end of the jetway. She put them in first class. Then she stood near them and used a microphone and welcomed everybody joining her for the trip to Seattle-Tacoma.
“Seattle?” Reacher said. “I thought we were going to Quantico.”
Harper felt behind her for the seat-belt buckle and shook her head. “First we’re going to the scene. Blake thought it could be useful. We saw the place two days ago. We can give him some direct before-and-after comparisons. He thinks it’s worth a try. He’s pretty desperate.”
Reacher nodded. “How’s Lamarr taking it?”
Harper shrugged. “She’s not falling apart. But she’s real tense. She wants to take complete control of everything. But she won’t join us out there. Still won’t fly.”
The plane was taxiing, swinging wide circles across the tarmac on its way to the takeoff line. The engines were whining up to pitch. There was vibration in the cabin.
“Flying’s OK,” Reacher said.
Harper nodded. “I know, crashing is the problem.”
“Hardly ever happens, statistically.”
“Like a Powerball win. But somebody always gets lucky.”
“Hell of a thing, not flying. A country this size, it’s kind of limiting, isn’t it? Especially for a federal agent. I’m surprised they let her get away with it.”
She shrugged again. “It’s a known quantity. They work around it.”
The plane swung onto the runway and stopped hard against the brakes. The engine noise built louder and the plane rolled forward, gently at first, then harder, accelerating all the way. It came up off the ground with no sensation at all and the wheels whined up into their bays and the ground tilted sharply below them.

“Five hours to Seattle,” Harper said. “All over again.”
“Did you think about the geography?” Reacher asked. “Spokane is the fourth corner, right?”
She nodded. “Eleven potential locations now, all random, and he takes the four farthest away for his first four hits. The extremities of the cluster.”
“But why?”
She made a face. “Demonstrating his reach?”
He nodded. “And his speed, I guess. Maybe that’s why he abandoned the interval. To demonstrate his efficiency. He was in San Diego, then he’s in Spokane a couple of days later, checking out a new target.”
“He’s a cool customer.”
Reacher nodded vaguely. “That’s for damn sure. He leaves an immaculate scene in San Diego, then he drives north like a madman and leaves what I bet is another immaculate scene in Spokane. A cool, cool customer. I wonder who the hell he is?”
Harper smiled, briefly and grimly. “We *all* wonder who the hell he is, Reacher. The trick is to find out.”
YOU’RE A GENIUS, is who you are. An absolute genius, a prodigy, a superhuman talent. Four down! One, two, three, four down. And the fourth was the best of all. Alison Lamarr herself! You go over and over it, replaying it like a video in your head, checking it, testing it, examining it. But also savoring it. Because it was the best yet. The most fun, the most satisfaction. The most impact. The look on her face as she opened the door! The dawning recognition, the surprise, the welcome!
There were no mistakes. Not a single one. It was an immaculate performance, from the beginning to the end. You replay your actions in minute detail. You touched nothing, left nothing behind. You brought nothing to her house except your still presence and your quiet voice. The terrain helped, of course, isolated in the countryside, nobody for miles around. It made it a real safe operation. Maybe you should have had more fun with her. You could have made her sing. Or dance! You could have spent longer with her. Nobody could have heard anything.
But you didn’t, because patterns are important. Patterns protect you. You practice, you rehearse in your mind, you rely on the familiar. You designed the pattern for the worst case, which was probably the Stanley bitch in her awful little subdivision down in San Diego. Neighbors all over the place! Little cardboard houses all crowded on top of each other! Stick to the pattern, that’s the key. And keep on thinking. Think, think, think. Plan ahead. Keep on planning.

You've done number four, and sure, you're entitled to replay it over and over, to enjoy it for a spell, to savor it, but then you have to just put it away and close the door on it and prepare for number five.

THE FOOD ON the plane was appropriate for a flight that left halfway between lunch and dinner and was crossing all the time zones the continent had to offer. The only sure thing was it wasn't breakfast. Most of it was a sweet pastry envelope with ham and cheese inside. Harper wasn't hungry, so Reacher ate hers along with his own. Then he fueled up on coffee and fell back to thinking. Mostly he thought about Jodie. *But do we want each other's lives?* First, define your life. *Hers* was easy enough to pin down, he guessed. Lawyer, owner, resident, lover, lover of fifties jazz, lover of modern art. A person who wanted to be settled, precisely because she knew what it was like to be rootless. If anybody in the whole world should live on the fourth floor of an old Broadway building with museums and galleries and cellar clubs all around her, it was Jodie.

But what about him? What made him happy? Being with her, obviously. There was no doubt about that. No doubt at all. He recalled the day in June he had walked back into her life. Just recalling it re-created the exact second he laid eyes on her and understood who she was. He had felt a flood of feeling as powerful as an electric shock. It buzzed through him. He was feeling it again, just because he was thinking about it. It was something he had rarely felt before. Rarely, but not never. He had felt the same thing on random days since he left the Army. He remembered stepping off buses in towns he had never heard of in states he had never visited. He remembered the feel of sun on his back and dust at his feet, long roads stretching out straight and endless in front of him. He remembered peeling crumpled dollar bills off his roll at lonely motel desks, the feel of old brass keys, the musty smell of cheap rooms, the creak of springs as he dropped down on anonymous beds. Cheerful curious waitresses in old diners. Ten-minute conversations with drivers who stopped to pick him up, tiny random slices of contact between two of the planet's teeming billions. The drifter's life. Its charm was a big part of him, and he missed it when he was stuck in Garrison or holed up in the city with Jodie. He missed it bad. Real bad. About as bad as he was missing her right now.

"Making progress?" Harper asked him.

"What?" he said.

"You were thinking hard. Going all misty on me."

"Was I?"

"So what were you thinking about?"

He shrugged. "Rocks and hard places."

She stared at him. "Well, that's not going to get us anywhere. So think about

something else, OK?"
"OK," he said.
He looked away and tried to put Jodie out of his mind. Tried to think about something else.
"Surveillance," he said suddenly.
"What about surveillance?"
"We're assuming the guy watches the houses first, aren't we? At least a full day? He might have already been hiding out somewhere, right when we were there."
She shivered. "Creepy. But so what?"
"So you should check motel registers, canvass the neighborhood. Follow up. That's how you're going to do this, by working. Not by trying to do magic five floors underground in Virginia."
"There *was* no neighborhood. You saw the place. We've got nothing to work on. I keep on telling you that."
"And I keep on telling you there's always something to work on."
"Yeah, yeah, he's very smart, the paint, the geography, the quiet scenes."
"Exactly. I'm not kidding. Those four things will lead you to him, sure as anything. Did Blake go to Spokane?"
She nodded. "We're meeting him at the scene."
"So he's going to have to do what I tell him, or I'm not sticking around."
"Don't push it, Reacher. You're Army liaison, not an investigator. And he's pretty desperate. He can make you stick around."
"He's fresh out of threats."
She made a face. "Don't count on it. Deerfield and Cozo are working on getting those Chinese boys to implicate you. They'll ask INS to check for illegals, whereupon they'll find about a thousand in the restaurant kitchens alone. Whereupon they'll start talking about deportations, but they'll also mention that a little cooperation could make the problem go away, whereupon the big guys in the tongs will tell those kids to spill whatever beans we want them to spill. Greatest good for the greatest number, right?"
Reacher made no reply.
"Bureau always gets what it wants," Harper said.
BUT THE PROBLEM *with sitting there rerunning it like a video over and over again is that little doubts start to creep in. You go over it and over it and you can't remember if you really did all the things you should have done. You sit there all alone, thinking, thinking, thinking, and it all goes a little blurry and the more you question it, the less sure you get. One tiny little detail. Did you do it? Did you say it? You know you did at the Callan house. You know that for sure. And at Caroline Cooke's place. Yes, definitely. You know that for sure, too. And*

at Lorraine Stanley's place in San Diego. But what about Alison Lamarr's place? Did you do it? Or did you make her do it? Did you say it? Did you? You're completely sure you did, but maybe that's just in the rerun. Maybe that's the pattern kicking in and making you assume something happened because it always happened before. Maybe this time you forgot. You become terribly afraid about it. You become sure you forgot. You think hard. And the more you think about it, the more you're sure you didn't do it yourself. Not this time. That's OK, as long as you told her to do it for you. But did you? Did you tell her? Did you say the words? Maybe you didn't. What then?

You shake yourself and tell yourself to calm down. A person of your superhuman talent, unsure and confused? Ridiculous. Absurd! So you put it out of your mind. But it won't go away. It nags at you. It gets bigger and bigger, louder and louder. You end up sitting all alone, cold and sweating, absolutely sure you've made your first small mistake.

THE BUREAU'S OWN Learjet had ferried Blake and his team from Andrews direct to Spokane and he had sent it over to Sea-Tac to collect Harper and Reacher. It was waiting on the apron right next to the Continental gates, and the same guy as before had been hauled out of the Seattle Field Office to meet them at the head of the jetway and point them down the external stairs and outside. It was raining lightly, and cold, so they ran for the Lear's steps and hustled straight inside. Four minutes later, they were back in the air.

Sea-Tac to Spokane was a lot faster in the Lear than it had been in the Cessna. The same local guy in the same car was waiting for them. He still had Alison Lamarr's address written on the pad attached to his windshield. He drove them the ten miles east toward Idaho and then turned north onto the narrow road into the hills. Fifty yards in, there was a roadblock with two parked cars and yellow tape stretched between trees. Above the trees in the far distance were the mountains. It was raining and gray on the western peaks, and in the east the sun was slanting down through the edge of the clouds and gleaming off the tiny threads of snow in the high gullies.

The guy at the roadblock looped the tape off the trees and the car crawled through. It climbed onward, past the isolated houses every mile or so, all the way to the bend before the Lamarr place, where it stopped.

"You need to walk from here," the driver said.

He stayed in the car, and Harper and Reacher stepped out and started walking. The air was damp, full of a kind of suspended drizzle that wasn't really rain but wasn't dry weather either. They rounded the curve and saw the house on the left, crouching low behind its fence and its wind-battered trees, with the road snaking by on the right. The road was blocked by a gaggle of cars. There was a local

police black-and-white with its roof lights flashing aimlessly. A pair of plain dark sedans and a black Suburban with black glass. A coroner's wagon, standing with all its doors open. The vehicles were all beaded with raindrops.
They walked closer and the front passenger door on the Suburban opened up and Nelson Blake slid out to meet them. He was in a dark suit with the coat collar turned up against the damp. His face was nearer gray than red, like shock had knocked his blood pressure down. He was all business. No greeting. No apologies, no pleasantries. No I-was-wrong-and-you-were-right.
"Not much more than an hour of daylight left, up here," he said. "I want you to walk me through what you did the day before yesterday, tell me what's different."
Reacher nodded. He suddenly wanted to find something. Something important. Something crucial. Not for Blake. For Alison. He stood and gazed at the fence and the trees and the lawn. They were cared for. They were just trivial rearrangements of an insignificant portion of the planet's surface, but they were motivated by the honest tastes and enthusiasms of a woman now dead. Achieved by her own labors.
"Who's been in there already?" he asked.
"Just the local uniformed guy," Blake said. "The one that found her."
"Nobody else?"
"Nobody."
"Not even you guys or the coroner?"
Blake shook his head. "I wanted your input first."
"So she's still in there?"
"Yes, I'm afraid she is."
The road was quiet. Just a hiss of breeze in the power lines. The red and blue light from the police cruiser's light bar washed over the suit on Blake's back, rhythmically and uselessly.
"OK," Reacher said. "The uniformed guy mess with anything?"
Blake shook his head again. "Opened the door, walked around downstairs, went upstairs, found his way to the bathroom, came right out again and called it in. His dispatcher had the good sense to keep him from going back inside."
"Front door was unlocked?"
"Closed, but unlocked."
"Did he knock?"
"I guess."
"So his prints will be on the knocker, too. And the inside door handles."
Blake shrugged. "Won't matter. Won't have smudged our guy's prints, because our guy doesn't leave prints."
Reacher nodded. "OK."

Reacher nodded. "OK."
He walked past the parked vehicles and on past the mouth of the driveway. He walked twenty yards up the road.
"Where does this go?" he called.
Blake was ten yards behind him. "Back of beyond, probably."
"It's narrow, isn't it?"
"I've seen wider," Blake allowed.
Reacher strolled back to join him. "So you should check the mud on the shoulders, maybe up around the next bend."
"What for?"
"Our guy came in from the Spokane road, most likely. Cruised the house, kept on going, turned around, came back. He'd want his car facing the right direction, before he went in and got to work. A guy like this, he'll have been thinking about the getaway."
Blake nodded. "OK. I'll put somebody on it. Meantime, take me through the house."
He called instructions to his team and Reacher joined Harper in the mouth of the driveway. They stood and waited for Blake to catch up with them.
"So walk me through it," he said.
"We paused here for a second," Harper said. "It was awful quiet. Then we walked up to the door, used the knocker."
"Was the weather wet or dry?" Blake asked her.
She glanced at Reacher. "Dry, I guess. A little sunny. Not hot. But not raining."
"The driveway was dry," Reacher said. "Not dusty dry, but the shale had drained."
"So you wouldn't have picked up grit on your shoes?"
"I doubt it."
"OK."
They were at the door.
"Put these on your feet," Blake said. He pulled a roll of large-sized food bags from his coat pocket. They put a bag over each shoe and tucked the plastic edges down inside the leather.
"She opened up, second knock," Harper said. "I showed her my badge in the spyhole."
"She was pretty uptight," Reacher said. "Told us Julia had been warning her."
Blake nodded sourly and nudged the door with his bagged foot. The door swung back with the same creak of old hinges Reacher remembered from before.
"We all paused here in the hallway," Harper said. "Then she offered us coffee and we all went through to the kitchen to get it."
"Anything different in here?" Blake asked.

"Anything different in here?" Blake asked.
Reacher looked around. The pine walls, the pine floors, the yellow gingham curtains, the old sofas, the converted oil lamps.
"Nothing different," he said.
"OK, kitchen," Blake said.
They filed into the kitchen. The floor was still waxed to a shine. The cabinets were the same, the range was cold and empty, the machines under the counter were the same, the gadgets sitting out were undisturbed. There were dishes in the sink and one of the silverware drawers was open an inch.
"The view is different," Harper said. She was standing at the window. "Much grayer today."
"Dishes in the sink," Reacher said. "And that drawer was closed."
They crowded the sink. There was a single plate, a water glass, a mug, a knife and a fork. Smears of egg and toast crumbs on the plate, coffee mud in the mug.
"Breakfast?" Blake said.
"Or dinner," Harper answered. "An egg on toast, that could be dinner for a single woman."
Blake pulled the drawer with the tip of his finger. There was a bunch of cheap flatware in there, and a random assortment of household tools, small screwdrivers, wire strippers, electrical tape, fuse wire.
"OK, then what?" Blake asked.
"I stayed here with her," Harper said. "Reacher looked around."
"Show me," Blake said.
He followed Reacher back to the hallway.
"I checked the parlor and the living room," Reacher said. "Looked at the windows. I figured they were secure. "
Blake nodded. "Guy didn't come in the windows."
"Then I went outside, checked the grounds and the barn."
"We'll do the upstairs first," Blake said.
"OK."
Reacher led the way. He was very conscious of where he was going. Very conscious that maybe thirty hours ago the guy had followed the same path.
"I checked the bedrooms. Went into the master suite last."
"Let's do it," Blake said.
They walked the length of the master bedroom. Paused at the bathroom door.
"Let's do it," Blake said again.
They looked inside. The place was immaculate. No sign that anything had ever happened there, except for the tub. It was seven-eighths full of green paint, with the shape of a small muscular woman floating just below the surface, which had skinned over into a slick plastic layer, delineating her body and trapping it there

skinned over into a slick plastic layer, delineating her body and trapping it there. Every contour was visible. The thighs, the stomach, the breasts. The head, tilted backward. The chin, the forehead. The mouth, held slightly open, the lips drawn back in a tiny grimace.
"Shit," Reacher said.
"Yeah, shit," Blake said back.
Reacher stood there and tried to read the signs. Tried to *find* the signs. But there were none there. The bathroom was exactly the same as it had been before.
"Anything?" Blake asked.
He shook his head. "No."
"OK, we'll do the outside."
They trooped down the stairs, silent. Harper was waiting in the hallway. She looked up at Blake, expectant. Blake just shook his head, like he was saying *nothing there*. Maybe he was saying *don't go up there*. Reacher led him out through the back door into the yard.
"I checked the windows from outside," he said.
"Guy didn't come in the damn window," Blake said for the second time. "He came in the door."
"But how the hell?" Reacher said. "When we were here, you'd called her ahead on the phone, and Harper was flashing her badge and shouting *FBI, FBI*, and she *still* practically hid out in there. And then she was shaking like a leaf when she eventually opened up. So how did this guy get her to do it?"
Blake shrugged. "Like I told you right at the beginning, these women *know* this character. They trust him. He's some kind of an old friend or something. He knocks on the door, they check him out in the spyhole, they get a big smile on their faces, and they open their doors right up."
The cellar door was undisturbed. The big padlock through the handles was intact. The garage door in the side of the barn was closed but not locked. Reacher led Blake inside and stood in the gloom. The new Jeep was there, and the stacks of cartons. The big washing machine carton was there, flaps slightly open, sealing tape trailing. The workbench was there, with the power tools neatly laid out on it. The shelves were undisturbed.
"Something's different," Reacher said.
"What?"
"Let me think."
He stood there, opening and closing his eyes, comparing the scene in front of him with the memory in his head, like he was checking two photographs side by side.
"The car has moved," he said.
Blake sighed, like he was disappointed. "It would have. She drove to the hospital

Blake sighed, like he was disappointed. "It would have. She drove to the hospital after you left."
Reacher nodded. "Something else."
"What?"
"Let me think."
Then he saw it.
"Shit," he said.
"What?"
"I missed it. I'm sorry, Blake, but I missed it."
"Missed what?"
"That washing machine carton. She already had a washing machine. Looked brand-new. It's in the kitchen, under the counter."
"So? It must have come right out of that carton. Whenever it was installed."
Reacher shook his head. "No. Two days ago that carton was new and sealed up. Now it's been opened."
"You sure?"
"I'm sure. Same carton, exact same place. But it was sealed up then and it's open now."
Blake stepped toward the carton. Took a pen from his pocket and used the plastic barrel to raise the flap. Stared down at what he saw.
"This carton was here already?"
Reacher nodded. "Sealed up."
"Like it had been shipped?"
"Yes."
"OK," Blake said. "Now we know how he transports the paint. He delivers it ahead of time in washing machine cartons."
YOU SIT THERE *cold and sweating for an hour and at the end of it you know for certain you forgot to reseal the carton. You didn't do it, and you didn't make her do it. That's a fact now, and it can't be denied, and it needs dealing with. Because resealing the cartons guaranteed a certain amount of delay. You know how investigators work. A just delivered appliance carton in the garage or the basement was going to attract no interest at all. It was going to be way down on the list of priorities. It would be just another part of the normal household clutter they see everywhere. Practically invisible. You're smart. You know how these people work. Your best guess was the primary investigators would never open it at all. That was your prediction, and you were proved absolutely right three times in a row. Down in Florida, up in New Hampshire, down in California, those boxes were items on somebody's inventory, but they hadn't been opened. Maybe much later when the heirs came to clear out the houses*

they'd open them up and find all the empty cans, whereupon the shit would really hit the fan, but by then it would be way too late. A guaranteed delay, weeks or even months.
But this time, it would be different. They'd do a walk-through in the garage, and the flaps on the box would be up. Cardboard does that, especially in a damp atmosphere like they have up there. The flaps would be curling back. They'd glance in, and they wouldn't see Styrofoam packaging and gleaming white enamel, would they?
THEY BROUGHT IN portable arc lights from the Suburban and arrayed them around the washing machine carton like it was a meteor from Mars. They stood there, bent forward from the waist like the whole thing was radioactive. They stared at it, trying to decode its secrets.
It was a normal-sized appliance carton, built out of sturdy brown cardboard folded and stapled the way appliance cartons are. The brown board was screenprinted with black ink. The manufacturer's name dominated each of the four sides. A famous name, styled and printed like a trademark. There was the model number of the washing machine below it, and a crude picture representing the machine itself.
The sealing tape was brown, too. It had been slit along the top to allow the box to open. Inside the box was nothing at all except ten three-gallon paint cans. They were stacked in two layers of five. The lids were resting on the tops of the cans like they had been laid back into position after use. They were distorted here and there around the circumference where an implement had been used to lever them off. The rims of the cans each had a neat tongue-shaped run of dried color where the paint had been poured out.
The cans themselves were plain metal cylinders. No manufacturer's name. No trademark. No boasts about quality or durability or coverage. Just a small printed label stenciled with a long number and the small words *Camo/Green*.
"These normal?" Blake asked.
Reacher nodded. "Standard-issue field supply."
"Who uses them?"
"Any unit with vehicles. They carry them around for small repairs and touch-ups. Vehicle workshops would use bigger drums and spray guns."
"So they're not rare?"
Reacher shook his head. "The exact opposite of rare."
There was silence in the garage.
"OK, take them out," Blake said.
A crime scene technician wearing latex gloves leaned over and lifted the cans out of the carton, one by one. He lined them up on Alison Lamarr's workbench.

Then he folded the flaps of the carton back. Angled a lamp to throw light inside. The bottom of the box had five circular imprints pressed deep into the cardboard.
“The cans were full when they went in there,” the tech said.
Blake stepped back, out of the pool of blazing light, into the shadow. He turned his back on the box and stared at the wall.
“So how did it get here?” he asked.
Reacher shrugged. “Like you said, it was delivered, ahead of time.”
“Not by the guy.”
“No. He wouldn’t come twice.”
“So by who?”
“By a shipping company. The guy sent it on ahead. FedEx or UPS or somebody.”
“But appliances get delivered by the store where you buy them. On a local truck.”
“Not this one,” Reacher said. “This didn’t come from any appliance store.”
Blake sighed, like the world had gone mad. Then he turned back and stepped into the light again. Stared at the box. Walked all around it. One side showed damage. There was a shape, roughly square, where the surface of the cardboard had been torn away. The layer underneath showed through, raw and exposed. The angle of the arc lights emphasized its corrugated structure.
“Shipping label,” Blake said.
“Maybe one of those little plastic envelopes,” Reacher said. “You know, ‘Documents enclosed.’ ”
“So where is it? Who tore it off? Not the shipping company. They don’t tear them off.”
“The guy tore it off,” Reacher said. “Afterward. So we can’t trace it back.”
He paused. He’d said *we*. Not *you. So we can’t trace it back*. Not *so you can’t trace it back*. Blake noticed it too, and glanced up.
“But how can the delivery happen?” he asked. “In the first place? Say you’re Alison Lamarr, just sitting there at home, and UPS or FedEx or somebody shows up with a washing machine you never ordered? You wouldn’t accept the delivery, right?”
“Maybe it came when she was out,” Reacher said. “Maybe when she was up at the hospital with her dad. Maybe the driver just wheeled it into the garage and left it.”
“Wouldn’t he need a signature?”
Reacher shrugged again. “I don’t know. I’ve never had a washing machine delivered. I guess sometimes they don’t need a signature. The guy who sent it probably specified no signature required.”

“But she’d have seen it right there, next time she went in the garage. Soon as she stashed her car, when she got back.”
Reacher nodded. “Yes, she must have. It’s big enough.”
“So what then?”
"She calls UPS or FedEx or whoever. Maybe she tore off the envelope herself. Carried it into the house, to the phone, to give them the details.”
“Why didn’t she unpack it?”
Reacher made a face. “She figures it’s not really hers, why would she unpack it? She’d only have to box it up again.”
“She mention anything to you or Harper? Anything about unexplained deliveries?”
“No. But then she might not have connected it. Foul-ups happen, right? Normal part of life.”
Blake nodded. “Well, if the details are in the house, we’ll find them. Crime scene people are going to spend some time in there, soon as the coroner is through.”
“Coroner won’t find anything,” Reacher said.
Blake looked grim. “This time, he’ll have to.”
“So you’re going to have to do it differently,” Reacher said. He concentrated on the *you*. “You should take the whole tub out. Take it over to some big lab in Seattle. Maybe fly it all the way back to Quantico.”
“How the hell can we take the whole tub out?”
“Tear the wall out. Tear the roof off, use a crane.”
Blake paused and thought about it. “I guess we could. We’d need permission, of course. But this must be Julia’s house now, in the circumstances, right? She’s next of kin, I guess.”
Reacher nodded. “So call her. Ask her. Get permission. And get her to check the field reports from the other three places. This delivery thing might be a one-shot deal, but if it isn’t, it changes everything.”
“Changes everything how?”
“Because it means it isn’t a guy with time to drive a truck all over the place. It means it could be anybody, using the airlines, in and out quick as you like.”
BLAKE WENT BACK to the Suburban to make his calls, and Harper found Reacher and walked him fifty yards up the road to where agents from the Spokane office had spotted tire marks in the mud on the shoulders. It had gone dark and they were using flashlights. There were four separate marks in the mud. It was clear what had happened. Somebody had swung nose-in to the left shoulder, wound the power steering around, backed across the road and put the rear tires on the right shoulder, and then swooped away back the way he had come. The front tire marks were scrubbed into fan shapes by the operation of the

come. The front-tire marks were scrubbed into fan shapes by the operation of the steering, but the rear-tire marks opposite were clear enough. They were not wide, not narrow.
“Probably a midsize sedan,” the Spokane guy said. “Fairly new radial tires, maybe a 195/70, maybe a fourteen-inch wheel. We’ll get the exact tire from the tread pattern. And we’ll measure the width between the marks, maybe get the exact model of the car.”
“You think it’s the guy?” Harper asked.
Reacher nodded. “Got to be, right? Think about it. Anybody else hunting the address sees the house a hundred yards ahead and slows enough to check the mailbox and stop. Even if they don’t, they overshoot a couple of yards and just back right up. They don’t overshoot fifty yards and wait until they’re around the corner to turn. This was a guy cruising the place, watching out, staying cautious. It was him, no doubt about it.”
They felt the Spokane guys setting up miniature waterproof tents over the marks and walked back toward the house. Blake was standing by the Suburban, waiting, lit from behind by the dome light inside.
“We’ve got appliance cartons listed at all three scenes,” he said. “No information about contents. Nobody thought to look. We’re sending local agents back to check. Could be an hour. And Julia says we should go ahead and rip the tub out. I’m going to need some engineers, I guess.”
Reacher nodded vaguely and paused, immobilized by a new line of thought.
“You should check on something else,” he said. “You should get the list of the eleven women, call the seven he hasn’t gotten to yet. You should ask them.”
Blake looked at him. “Ask them what? Hi, you still alive?”
“No, ask them if they’ve had any deliveries they weren’t expecting. Any appliances they never ordered. Because if this guy is speeding up, maybe the next one is all ready and set to go.”
Blake looked at him some more, and then he nodded and ducked back inside the Suburban and took the car phone out of its cradle.
“Get Poulton to do it,” Reacher called. “Too emotional for Lamarr.”
Blake just stared at him, but he asked for Poulton anyway. Told him what he wanted and hung up within a minute.
“Now we wait,” he said.
"SIR!” THE CORPORAL said.
The list was in the drawer, and the drawer was locked. The colonel was motionless at his desk, staring into the electric gloom of his windowless office, focusing on nothing, thinking hard, trying to recover. The best way to recover would be to talk to somebody. He knew that. *A problem shared is a problem*

halved. That's how it works inside a giant institution like the Army. But he couldn't talk to anybody about *this*, of course. He smiled a bitter smile. Stared at the wall, and kept on thinking. *Faith in yourself*, that's what would do it. He was concentrating so hard on recapturing it he must have missed the knock at the door. Afterward he figured it must have been repeated several times, and he was glad he had the list in the drawer, because when the corporal eventually came in he couldn't have hidden it. He couldn't have done anything. He was just motionless, and evidently he was looking blank, because right away the corporal started acting worried.

"Sir?" he said again.

He didn't reply. Didn't move his gaze from the wall.

"Colonel?" the corporal said.

He moved his head like it weighed a ton. Said nothing.

"Your car is here, sir," the corporal said.

THEY WAITED AN hour and a half, crowded inside the Suburban. The evening crept toward night, and it grew very cold. Dense night dew misted the outside of the windshield and the windows. Breathing fogged the inside. Nobody talked. The world around them grew quieter. There was an occasional animal noise in the far distance, howling down at them through the thin mountain air, but there was nothing else at all.

"Hell of a place to live," Blake muttered.

"Or to die," Harper said.

EVENTUALLY YOU RECOVER, and then you relax. You've got a lot of talent. Everything was backed up, double-safe, triple-safe. You put in layer upon layer upon layer of concealment. You know how investigators work. You know they won't find anything beyond the obvious. They won't find where the paint came from. Or who obtained it. Or who delivered it. You know they won't. You know how these people work. And you're too smart for them. Way, way too smart. So you relax.

But you're disappointed. You made a mistake. And the paint was a lot of fun. And now you probably can't use it anymore. But maybe you can think of something even better. Because one thing is for damn sure. You can't stop now.

THE PHONE RANG inside the Suburban. It was a loud electronic blast in the silence. Blake fumbled it out of the cradle. Reacher heard the indistinct sound of a voice talking fast. A man's voice, not a woman's. Poulton, not Lamarr. Blake listened hard with his eyes focused nowhere. Then he hung up and stared at the windshield.

"What?" Harper asked.

"Local guys went back and checked the appliance cartons," Blake said. "They

were all sealed up tight, like new. But they opened them anyway. Ten paint cans in each of them. Ten empty cans. Used cans, exactly like we found."
"But the boxes were sealed?" Reacher said.
"Resealed," Blake said. "They could tell, when they looked closely. The guy resealed the boxes, afterward."
"Smart guy," Harper said. "He knew a sealed carton wouldn't attract much attention."
Blake nodded to her. "A *very* smart guy. He knows how we think."
"But not totally smart anymore," Reacher said. "Or he wouldn't have forgotten to reseal this one, right? His first mistake."
"He's batting about nine hundred," Blake said. "That makes him smart enough for me."
"No shipping labels anywhere?" Harper asked.
Blake shook his head. "All torn off."
"Figures," she said.
"Does it?" Reacher asked her. "So here, why should he remember to tear off the label but forget to reseal the box?"
"Maybe he got interrupted here," she said.
"How? This isn't exactly Times Square."
"So what are you saying? You're downgrading how smart he is? How smart he is seemed awful important to you before. You were going to use how damn smart he is to prove us all wrong."
Reacher looked at her and nodded. "Yes, you are all wrong." Then he turned to Blake. "We really need to talk about this guy's motive."
"Later," Blake said.
"No, now. It's important."
"Later," Blake said again. "You haven't heard the really good news yet."
"Which is what?"
"The other little matter you came up with."
Silence inside the vehicle.
"Shit," Reacher said. "One of the other women got a delivery, right?"
Blake shook his head.
"Wrong," he said. "All *seven* of them got a delivery."

16

"SO YOU'RE GOING to Portland, Oregon," Blake said. "You and Harper."
"Why?" Reacher asked.
"So you can visit with your old friend Rita Scimeca. The lady lieutenant you told us about? Got raped down in Georgia? She lives near Portland. Small village, east of the city. She's one of the eleven on your list. You can get down there and check out her basement. She says there's a brand-new washing machine in there. In a box."
"Did she open it?" Reacher asked.
Blake shook his head. "No, Portland agents checked with her on the telephone. They told her not to touch it. Somebody's on the way over right now."
"If the guy's still in the area, Portland could be his next call. It's close enough."
"Correct," Blake said. "That's why there's somebody on the way over."
Reacher nodded. "So now you're guarding them? What's that thing about barn doors and horses bolting? "
Blake shrugged. "Hey, only seven left alive, makes the manpower much more feasible."
It was a cop's sick humor in a car full of cops of one kind or another, but still it fell a little flat. Blake colored slightly and looked away.
"Losing Alison gets to me, much as anybody," he said. "Like family, right?"
"Especially to her sister, I guess," Reacher said.
"Tell me about it," Blake said. "She was burned as hell when the news came in. Practically hyperventilating. Never seen her so agitated."
"You should take her off the case."
Blake shook his head. "I need her."
"You need something, that's for damn sure."
"Tell me about it."
SPOKANE TO THE small village east of Portland measured about three hundred and sixty miles on the map Blake showed them. They took the car the local agent had used to bring them in from the airport. It still had Alison Lamarr's address handwritten on the top sheet of the pad attached to the windshield. Reacher stared at it for a second. Then he tore it off and balled it up and tossed it into the rear footwell. Found a pen in the glove box and wrote directions on the next sheet: *90W-395S-84W-35S-26W*. He wrote them big enough to see them in the dark when they were tired. Underneath the big figures, he could still see Alison Lamarr's address, printed through by the pressure of the

local guy's ballpoint.
"Call it six hours," Harper said. "You drive three and I'll drive three."
Reacher nodded. It was completely dark when he started the engine. He turned around in the road, shoulder to shoulder, spinning the wheel, exactly like he was sure the guy had done, but two days later and two hundred yards south. Rolled through the narrow downhill curves to Route 90 and turned right. Once the lights of the city were behind them the traffic density fell away and he settled to a fast cruise west. The car was a new Buick, smaller and plainer than Lamarr's boat, but maybe a little faster because of it. That year must have been the Bureau's GM year. The Army had done the same thing. Staff car purchasing rotated strictly between GM, Ford, and Chrysler, so none of the domestic manufacturers could get pissed at the government.
The road ran straight southwest through hilly terrain. He put the headlights on bright and eased the speed upward. Harper sprawled to his right, her seat reclined, her head tilted toward him. Her hair spilled down and glowed red and gold in the lights from the dash. He kept one hand on the wheel, the other resting down in his lap. He could see lights in his mirror. Halogen headlights, on bright, swinging and bouncing a mile behind him. They were closing, fast. He accelerated to more than seventy.
"The Army teach you to drive this fast?" Harper asked.
He made no reply. They passed a town called Sprague and the road straightened. Blake's map had shown it dead straight all the way to a town called Ritzville, twenty-something miles ahead. Reacher eased up toward eighty miles an hour, but the headlights behind were still closing fast. A long moment later a car blasted past them, a long low sedan, a wide maneuver, turbulent slip-stream, a full quarter-mile in the opposite lane. Then it eased back right and pulled on ahead like the FBI's Buick was crawling through a parking lot.
"*That's* fast," Reacher said.
"Maybe that's the guy," Harper said sleepily. "Maybe he's heading down to Portland too. Maybe we'll get him tonight."
"I've changed my mind," Reacher said. "I don't think he drives. I think he flies."
But he eased the speed a little higher anyway, to keep the distant taillights in sight.
"And then what?" Harper said. "He rents a car at the local airport?"
Reacher nodded in the dark. "That's my guess. Those tire prints they found? Very standard size. Probably some anonymous midsize midrange sedan the rental companies have millions of."
"Risky," Harper said. "Renting cars leaves a paper trail."
Reacher nodded again. "So does buying airplane tickets. But this guy is real

organized. I'm sure he's got cast-iron false ID. Following the paper trail won't get anybody anywhere."
"Well, we'll do it anyway, I guess. And it means he's been face-to-face with people at the rental counters. "
"Maybe not. Maybe he books ahead and gets express pickup."
Harper nodded. "The return guy would see him, though."
"Briefly."
The road was straight enough to see the fast car a mile ahead. Reacher found himself easing up over ninety, pacing himself behind it.
"How long does it take to kill a person?" Harper asked.
"Depends how you do it," Reacher said.
"And we don't know how he's doing it."
"No, we don't. That's something we need to figure. But whatever way, he's pretty calm and careful about it. No mess anywhere, no spilled paint. My guess is it's got to be twenty, thirty minutes, minimum."
Harper nodded and stretched. Reacher caught a breath of her perfume as she moved.
"So think about Spokane," she said. "He gets off the plane, picks up the car, drives a half hour to Alison's place, spends a half hour there, drives a half hour back, and gets the hell out. He wouldn't hang around, right?"
"Not near the scene, I guess," Reacher said.
"So the rental car could be returned within less than two hours. We should check real short rentals from the airports local to the scenes, see if there's a pattern."
Reacher nodded. "Yes, you should. That's how you'll do this thing, regular hard work."
Harper moved again. Turned sideways in her seat. "Sometimes you say *we* and sometimes you say *you*. You haven't made up your mind, but you're softening a little, you know that?"
"I liked Alison, I guess, what I saw of her."
"And?"
"And I like Rita Scimeca too, what I remember of her. I wouldn't want anything to happen."
Harper craned her head and watched the taillights a mile ahead.
"So keep that guy in sight," she said.
"He flies," Reacher said. "That's not the guy."
IT WASN'T THE guy. At the far limit of Ritzville he stayed on Route 90, swinging west toward Seattle. Reacher peeled off south onto 395, heading straight for Oregon. The road was still empty, but it was narrower and twistier, so he took some of the urgency out of his pace and let the car settle back to its

natural cruise.
“Tell me about Rita Scimeca,” Harper said.
Reacher shrugged at the wheel. “She was a little like Alison Lamarr, I guess. Didn’t look the same, but she had the same feel about her. Tough, sporty, capable. Very unfazed by anything, as I recall. She was a second lieutenant. Great record. She blitzed the officer training. ”
He fell silent. He was picturing Rita Scimeca in his mind, and imagining her standing shoulder to shoulder with Alison Lamarr. Two fine women, as good as any the Army would ever get.
“So here’s another puzzle,” he said. “How is the guy controlling them?”
“Controlling?” Harper repeated.
Reacher nodded. “Think about it. He gets into their houses, and thirty minutes later they’re dead in the tub, naked, not a mark on them. No disturbance, no mess. How is he doing that?”
“Points a gun, I guess.”
Reacher shook his head. “Two things wrong with that. If he’s coming in by plane, he doesn’t have a gun. You can’t bring a gun on a plane. You know that, right? You didn’t bring yours.”
“*If* he’s coming in by plane. That’s only a guess right now.”
“OK, but I was just thinking about Rita Scimeca. She was a real tough cookie. She was raped, which is how she got on this guy’s list, I guess, because three men went to prison and got canned for it. But *five* guys came to get her that night. Only three of them got as far as raping her, because one guy got a broken pelvis and another guy got two broken arms. In other words, she fought like hell.”
“So?”
“So wouldn’t Alison Lamarr have done the same thing? Even if the guy did have a gun, would Alison Lamarr have been meek and passive for thirty straight minutes?”
“I don’t know,” Harper said.
“You saw her. She was no kind of a wallflower. She was Army. She had infantry training. Either she’d have gotten mad and started a fight, or she’d have bided her time and tried to nail the guy somewhere along the way. But she didn’t, apparently. Why not?”
“I don’t know,” Harper said again.
“Neither do I,” Reacher said back.
“We have to find this guy.”
Reacher shook his head. “You’re not going to.”
“Why not?”
“Because you’re all so blinded by this profiling shit you’re wrong about the

"Because you're all so blinded by this profiling shit you're wrong about the motive, is why not."
Harper turned away and stared out of the window at the blackness speeding past.
"You want to amplify that?" she said.
"Not until I get Blake and Lamarr sitting still and paying attention. I'm only going to say it once."
THEY STOPPED FOR gas just after they crossed the Columbia River outside of Richland. Reacher filled the tank and Harper went inside to the bathroom. Then she came out again and got into the car on the driver's side, ready for her three hours at the wheel. She slid her seat forward while he slid his backward. Raked her hair behind her shoulders and adjusted the mirror. Twisted the key and fired it up. Took off again south and eased her way up to a cruise.
They crossed the Columbia again after it looped away west and then they were in Oregon. I-84 followed the river, right on the state line. It was a fast, empty highway. Up ahead, the vastness of the Cascade Range loomed unseen in the blackness. The stars burned cold and tiny in the sky. Reacher lay back in his seat and watched them through the curve of the side glass, where it met the roof. It was nearly midnight.
"You need to talk to me," Harper said. "Or I'll fall asleep at the wheel."
"You're as bad as Lamarr," Reacher said.
Harper grinned in the dark. "Not quite."
"No, not quite, I guess," Reacher said.
"But talk to me anyway. Why did you leave the Army?"
"That's what you want to talk about?"
"It's a topic, I guess."
"Why does everybody ask me that?"
She shrugged. "People are curious."
"Why? Why shouldn't I leave the Army?"
"Because I think you enjoyed it. Like I enjoy the FBI."
"A lot of it was very irritating."
She nodded. "Sure. The Bureau's very irritating too. Like a husband, I guess. Good points and bad points, but they're *my* points, you know what I mean? You don't get a divorce because of a little irritation."
"They downsized me out of there," he said.
"No, they didn't. We read your record. They downsized *numbers*, but they didn't target you. You volunteered to go."
He was quiet for a mile or two. Then he nodded.
"I got scared," he said.
She glanced at him. "Of what?"
"I liked it the way it was. I didn't want it to change."

I liked it the way it was. I didn't want it to change."
"Into what?"
"Something smaller, I guess. It was a huge, huge thing. You've got no idea. It stretched all around the world. They were going to make it smaller. I'd have gotten promotion, so I would have been higher up in a smaller organization."
"What's wrong with that? Big fish in a small pond, right?"
"I didn't want to be a big fish," he said. "I liked being a small fish."
"You weren't a small fish," she said. "A major isn't small."
He nodded. "OK, I liked being a medium-sized fish. It was comfortable. Kind of anonymous."
She shook her head. "That's not enough reason to quit."
He looked up at the stars. They were stationary in the sky, a billion miles above him.
"A big fish in a small pond has no place to swim," he said. "I'd have been in one place, years at a time. Some big desk someplace, then five years on, another bigger desk some other place. Guy like me, no political skills, no social graces, I'd have made full colonel and no farther. I'd have served out my time stuck there. Could have been fifteen or twenty years."
"But?"
"But I wanted to keep moving. All my life, I've been moving, literally. I was scared to stop. I didn't know what being stuck somewhere would feel like, but my guess was I'd hate it."
"And?"
He shrugged. "And now I *am* stuck someplace."
"And?" she said again.
He shrugged again and said nothing. It was warm in the car. Warm, and comfortable.
"Say the words, Reacher," she said. "Get it out. You're stuck someplace, and?"
"And nothing."
"Bullshit, nothing. And?"
He took a deep breath. "And I'm having a problem with it."
The car went quiet. She nodded, like she understood. "Jodie doesn't want to keep moving around, I guess."
"Well, would *you*?"
"I don't know."
He nodded. "Problem is, she *does* know. She and I grew up the same, always moving, base to base to base, all around the world, a month here, six months there. So she lives the life she lives because she went out there and created it for herself, because it's exactly what she wants. She knows it's exactly what she

wants because she knows exactly what the alternative is."
"She could move around a little. She's a lawyer. She could change jobs, time to time."
He shook his head. "Doesn't work that way. It's about career. She'll make partner sometime real soon, the way she's going, and then she'll probably work at the same firm her whole life. And anyway, I'm not talking about a couple of years here, three years there, buy a house, sell a house. I'm talking about if I wake up in Oregon tomorrow and I feel like going to Oklahoma or Texas or somewhere, I just go. With no idea about where I'm going the next day."
"A wanderer."
"It's important to me."
"How important, though?"
He shrugged. "I don't know, exactly."
"How are you going to find out?"
"Problem is, I *am* finding out."
"So what are you going to do?"
He was quiet for another mile.
"I don't know," he said.
"You might get used to it."
"I might," he said. "But I might not. It feels awful deep in my blood. Like right now, middle of the night, heading down the road someplace I've never been, I feel real good. I just can't explain how good I feel."
She smiled. "Maybe it's the company."
He smiled back. "Maybe it is."
"So will you tell me something else?"
"Like what?"
"Why are we wrong about this guy's motive?"
He shook his head. "Wait until we see what we find in Portland."
"What are we going to find in Portland?"
"My guess is a carton full of paint cans, with absolutely no clue as to where they came from or who sent them there."
"So?"
"So then we put two and two together and make four. The way you guys have got it, you ain't making four. You're making some big inexplicable number that's a long, long way from four."
REACHER RACKED HIS seat back a little more and dozed through most of Harper's final hour at the wheel. The second-to-last leg of the trip took them up the northern flank of Mount Hood on Route 35. The Buick changed down to third gear to cope with the gradient, and the jerk from the transmission woke him

again. He watched through the windshield as the road looped around behind the peak. Then Harper found Route 26 and swung west for the final approach, down the mountainside, toward the city of Portland.
The nighttime view was spectacular. There was broken cloud high in the sky, and a bright moon, and starlight. There was snow piled in the gullies. The world was like a jagged sculpture in gray steel, glowing below them.
“I can see the attraction of wandering,” Harper said. “Sight like this.”
Reacher nodded. “It’s a big, big planet.”
They passed through a sleeping town called Rhododendron and saw a sign pointing ahead to Rita Scimeca’s village, five miles farther down the slope. When they got there, it was nearly three in the morning. There was a gas station and a general store on the through road. Both of them were closed up tight. There was a cross street running north into the lower slope of the mountain. Harper nosed up it. The cross street had cross streets of its own. Scimeca’s was the third of them. It ran east up the slope.
Her house was easy to spot. It was the only one on the street with lights in the windows. And the only one with a Bureau sedan parked outside. Harper stopped behind the sedan and turned off her lights and the motor died with a little shudder and silence enveloped them. The rear window of the Bureau car was misted with breath and there was a single head silhouetted in it. The head moved and the sedan door opened and a young man in a dark suit stepped out. Reacher and Harper stretched and unclipped their belts and opened their doors. Slid out and stood in the chill air with their breath clouding around them.
“She’s in there, safe and sound,” the local guy said to them. “I was told to wait out here for you.”
Harper nodded. “And then what?”
“Then I stay out here,” the guy said. “You do all the talking. I’m security detail until the local cops take over, eight in the morning.”
“The cops going to cover twenty-four hours a day?” Reacher asked.
The guy shook his head, miserably.
“Twelve,” he said. “I do the nights.”
Reacher nodded. *Good enough*, he thought. The house was a big square clapboard structure, built side-on to the street so the front faced the view to the west. There was a generous front porch with gingerbread railings. The slope of the street made room for a garage under the house at the front. The garage door faced sideways, under the end of the porch. There was a short driveway. Then the land sloped upward, so that the rest of the basement would be dug into the hillside. The lot was small, surrounded with tall hurricane fencing marching up the rise. The yard was cultivated, with flowers everywhere, the color taken out of

them by the silver moonlight.
“She awake?” Harper asked.
The local guy nodded. "She’s in there waiting for you.”

17

A WALKWAY CAME off the driveway on the left and looped through the dark around some rockery plantings to a set of wide wooden steps in the center of the front porch. Harper skipped up them but Reacher's weight made them creak in the night silence and before the echo of the sound came back from the hills the front door was open and Rita Scimeca was standing there watching them. She had one hand on the inside doorknob and a blank look on her face.
"Hello, Reacher," she said.
"Scimeca," he said back. "How are you?"
She used her free hand to push her hair off her brow.
"Reasonable," she said. "Considering it's three o'clock in the morning and the FBI has only just gotten around to telling me I'm on some kind of hit list with ten of my sisters, four of whom are already dead."
"Your tax dollars at work," Reacher said.
"So why the hell are you hanging with them?"
He shrugged. "Circumstances didn't leave me a whole lot of choice."
She gazed at him, deciding. It was cold on the porch. The night dew was beading on the painted boards. There was a thin low fog in the air. Behind Scimeca's shoulder the lights inside her house burned warm and yellow. She looked at him a moment longer.
"Circumstances?" she repeated.
He nodded. "Didn't leave me a whole lot of choice."
She nodded back. "Well, whatever, it's kind of good to see you, I guess."
"Good to see you, too."
She was a tall woman. Shorter than Harper, but then most women were. She was muscular, not the compact way Alison Lamarr had been, but the lean, marathon-runner kind of way. She was dressed in clean jeans and a shapeless sweater. Substantial shoes on her feet. She had medium-length brown hair, worn in long bangs above bright brown eyes. She had heavy frown lines all around her mouth. It was nearly four years since he had last seen her, and she looked the whole four years older.
"This is Special Agent Lisa Harper," he said.
Scimeca nodded once, warily. Reacher watched her eyes. A male agent, she'd have thrown him off the porch.
"Hi," Harper said.
"Well, come on in, I guess," Scimeca said.
She still had hold of the doorknob. She was standing on the threshold, leaning

She still had hold of the doorknob. She was standing on the threshold, leaning forward, unwilling to step out. Harper stepped in and Reacher filed after her. The door closed behind them. They were in the hallway of a decent little house, newly painted, nicely furnished. Very clean, obsessively tidy. It looked like a home. Warm and cozy. A personal space. There were wool rugs on the floor. Polished antique furniture in gleaming mahogany. Paintings on the walls. Vases of flowers everywhere.
"Chrysanthemums," Scimeca said. "I grow them myself. You like them?"
Reacher nodded.
"I like them," he said. "Although I couldn't spell them."
"Gardening's my new hobby," Scimeca said. "I've gotten into it in a big way."
Then she pointed toward a front parlor.
"And music," she said. "Come see."
The room had quiet wallpaper and a polished wood floor. There was a grand piano in the back corner. Shiny black lacquer. A German name inlaid in brass. A big stool was placed in front of it, handsome buttoned leather in black. The lid of the piano was up, and there was music on the stand above the keyboard, a dense mass of black notes on heavy cream paper.
"Want to hear something?" she asked.
"Sure," Reacher said.
She slid between the keyboard and the stool and sat down. Laid her hands on the keys and paused for a second and then a mournful minor-key chord filled the room. It was a warm sound, and low, and she modulated it into the start of a funeral march.
"Got anything more cheerful?" Reacher asked.
"I don't feel cheerful," she said.
But she changed it anyway, into the start of the Moonlight Sonata.
"Beethoven," she said.
The silvery arpeggios filled the air. She had her foot on the damper and the sound was dulled and quiet. Reacher gazed out of the window at the plantings, gray in the moonlight. There was an ocean ninety miles to the west, vast and silent.
"That's better," he said.
She played it through to the end of the first movement, apparently from memory, because the music open on the stand was labeled Chopin. She kept her hands on the keys until the last chord died away to silence.
"Nice," Reacher said. "So, you're doing OK?"
She turned away from the keyboard and looked him in the eye. "You mean have I recovered from being gang-raped by three guys I was supposed to trust with my life?"

Reacher nodded. “Something like that, I guess.”
“I thought I’d recovered,” she said. “As well as I ever expected to. But now I hear some maniac is fixing to kill me for complaining about it. That’s taken the edge off it a little bit, you know?”
“We’ll get him,” Harper said, in the silence.
Scimeca just looked at her.
“So can we see the new washing machine in the basement?” Reacher asked.
“It’s not a washing machine, though, is it?” Scimeca asked. “Not that anybody tells *me* anything.”
“It’s probably paint,” Reacher said. “In cans. Camouflage green, Army issue.”
“What for?”
“The guy kills you, dumps you in your bathtub and pours it over you.”
“Why?”
Reacher shrugged. “Good question. There’s a whole bunch of pointy heads working on that right now.”
Scimeca nodded and turned to Harper. “You a pointy head?”
“No, ma’am, I’m just an agent,” Harper said.
“You ever been raped?”
Harper shook her head. “No, ma’am, I haven’t.”
Scimeca nodded again.
“Well, don’t be,” she said. “That’s my advice.”
There was silence.
“It changes your life,” Scimeca said. “It changed mine, that’s for damn sure. Gardening and music, that’s all I’ve got now.”
“Good hobbies,” Harper said.
“Stay-at-home hobbies,” Scimeca said back. “I’m either in this room or within sight of my front door. I don’t get out much and I don’t like meeting people. So take my advice, don’t let it happen to you.”
Harper nodded. “I’ll try not to.”
“Basement,” Scimeca said.
She led the way out of the parlor to a door tucked under the stairs. It was an old door, made up of pine planks painted many times. There was a narrow staircase behind it, leading down toward cold air smelling faintly of gasoline and tire rubber.
“We have to go through the garage,” Scimeca said.
There was a new car filling the space, a long low Chrysler sedan, painted gold. They walked single file along its flank and Scimeca opened a door in the garage wall. The musty smell of a basement bloomed out at them. Scimeca pulled a cord and a hot yellow light came on.

“There you are,” she said.
The basement was warm from a furnace. It was a large square space with wide storage racks built on every wall. Fiberglass insulation showed between the ceiling joists. There were heating pipes snaking up through the floorboards. There was a carton standing alone in the middle of the floor. It was at an angle to the walls, untidy against the neat shelving surrounding it. It was the same carton. Same size, same brown board, same black printing, same picture, same manufacturer’s name. It was taped shut with shiny brown tape and it looked brand-new.
“Got a knife?” Reacher asked.
Scimeca nodded toward a work area. There was pegboard screwed to the wall, and it was filled with tools hanging in neat rows. Reacher took a linoleum knife off a peg, carefully, because in his experience the peg usually came out with the tool. But not this one. He saw that each peg was secured to the board with a neat little plastic device.
He came back to the box and slit the tape. Reversed the knife and used the handle to ease the flaps upward. He saw five metal circles, glowing yellow. Five paint can lids, reflecting the overhead light. He poked the knife handle under one of the wire hoops and lifted one of the cans up to eye level. Rotated it in the light. It was a plain metal can, unadorned except for a small white label printed with a long number and the words *Camo/Green*.
“We’ve seen a few of those in our time,” Scimeca said. “Right, Reacher?”
He nodded. “A few.”
He lowered the can back into the box. Pushed the flaps down and walked over and hung the knife back where it had been. Glanced across at Scimeca.
“When did this come?” he asked.
“I don’t remember,” she said.
“Roughly?”
“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe a couple months ago.”
“A couple of *months*?” Harper said.
Scimeca nodded. “I guess. I don’t really remember.”
“You didn’t order it, right?” Reacher said.
Scimeca shook her head. “I already have one. It’s over there.”
She pointed. There was a laundry area in the corner. Washer, dryer, sink. A vacuumed rug in the angle of the corner. White plastic baskets and detergent bottles lined up precisely on a countertop.
“Thing like this, you’d remember,” Reacher said. “Wouldn’t you?”
“I assumed it’s for my roommate, I guess,” she said.
“You have a roommate?”

“Had. She moved out, couple of weeks ago.”
“And you figured this is hers?”
“Made sense to me,” Scimeca said. “She’s setting up housekeeping on her own, she needs a washing machine, right?”
“But you didn’t ask her?”
“Why should I? I figured it’s not for me, who else could it be for?”
“So why did she leave it here?”
“Because it’s heavy. Maybe she’s getting help to move it. It’s only been a couple of weeks.”
“She leave anything else behind?”
Scimeca shook her head. “This is the last thing.”
Reacher circled the carton. Saw the square shape where the packing documents had been torn away.
“She took the paperwork off,” he said.
Scimeca nodded again. “She would, I guess. She’d need to keep her affairs straight.”
They stood in silence, three people surrounding a tall cardboard carton, vivid yellow light, jagged dark shadows.
“I’m tired,” Scimeca said. “Are we through? I want you guys out of here.”
“One last thing,” Reacher said.
“What?”
“Tell Agent Harper what you did in the service.”
“Why? What’s that got to do with anything?”
“I just want her to know.”
Scimeca shrugged, puzzled. “I was in armaments proving.”
“Tell her what that was.”
“We tested new weapons incoming from the manufacturer. ”
“And?”
“If they were up to spec, we passed them to the quartermasters.”
Silence. Harper glanced at Reacher, equally puzzled.
“OK,” he said. “Now we’re out of here.”
Scimeca led the way through the door to the garage. Pulled the cord and killed the light. Led them past her car and up the narrow staircase. Out into the foyer. She crossed the floor and checked the spyhole in the front door. Opened it up. The air outside was cold and damp.
“Good-bye, Reacher,” she said. “It was nice to see you again.”
Then she turned to Harper.
“You should trust him,” she said. “I still do, you know. Which is one hell of a recommendation, believe me.”

The front door closed behind them as they walked down the path. They heard the sound of the lock turning from twenty feet away. The local agent watched them get into their car. It was still warm inside. Harper started the motor and put the blower on high to keep it that way.
“She had a roommate,” she said.
Reacher nodded.
“So your theory is wrong. Looked like she lived alone, but she didn’t. We’re back to square one.”
“Square two, maybe. It’s still a subcategory. Has to be. Nobody targets ninety-one women. It’s insane.”
“As opposed to what?” Harper said. “Putting dead women in a tub full of paint?”
Reacher nodded again.
“So now what?” he said.
“Back to Quantico,” she said.
IT TOOK NEARLY nine hours. They drove to Portland, took a turboprop to Sea-Tac, Continental to Newark, United to D.C., and a Bureau driver met them and drove them south into Virginia. Reacher slept most of the way, and the parts when he was awake were just a blur of fatigue. He struggled into alertness as they wound through Marine territory. The FBI guard on the gate reissued his visitor’s tag. The driver parked at the main doors. Harper led the way inside and they took the elevator four floors underground to the seminar room with the shiny walls and the fake windows and the photographs of Lorraine Stanley pinned to the blackboard. The television was playing silently, reruns of the day on the Hill. Blake and Poulton and Lamarr were at the table with drifts of paper in front of them. Blake and Poulton looked busy and harassed. Lamarr was as white as the paper in front of her, her eyes deep in her head and jumping with strain.
“Let me guess,” Blake said. “Scimeca’s box came a couple of months ago and she was kind of vague about why. And there was no paperwork on it.”
“She figured it was for her roommate,” Harper said. “She didn’t live alone. So the list of eleven doesn’t mean anything.”
But Blake shook his head.
“No, it means what it always meant,” he said. “Eleven women who *look* like they live alone to somebody studying the paperwork. We checked with all the others on the phone. Eighty calls. Told them we were customer services people with a parcel company. Took us hours. But none of them knew anything about unexpected cartons. So there are eighty women out of the loop, and eleven in it. So Reacher’s theory still holds. The roommates surprised him, they’ll surprise the guy.”

Reacher glanced at him, gratified. And a little surprised.
“Hey, credit where it’s due?” Blake said.
Lamarr nodded and moved and wrote a note on the end of a lengthy list.
“I’m sorry for your loss,” Reacher said to her.
“Maybe it could have been avoided,” she said. “You know, if you’d cooperated like this from the start.”
There was silence.
“So we’ve got seven out of seven,” Blake said. “No paperwork, vague women.”
“We’ve got one other roommate situation,” Poulton said. “Then three of them have been getting regular misdeliveries and they’ve gotten slow about sorting them out. The other two were just plain vague.”
“Scimeca was pretty vague, for sure,” Harper said.
“She was traumatized,” Reacher said. “She’s doing well to function at all.”
Lamarr nodded. A small, sympathetic motion of her head.
“Whatever, she’s not leading us anywhere, right?” she said.
“What about the delivery companies?” Reacher asked. “You chasing them?”
“We don’t know who they were,” Poulton said. “The paperwork is missing, seven cartons out of seven.”
“There aren’t too many possibilities,” Reacher said.
"Aren’t there?” Poulton said back. "UPS, FedEx, DHL, Airborne Express, the damn United States Postal Service, whoever, plus any number of local subcontractors. ”
“Try them all,” Reacher said.
Poulton shrugged. “And ask them what? Out of all the ten zillion packages you delivered in the last two months, can you remember the one we’re interested in?”
“You have to try,” Reacher said. “Start with Spokane. Remote address like that, middle of nowhere, the driver might recall it.”
Blake leaned forward and nodded. “OK, we’ll try it up there. But only there. Gets impossible, otherwise.”
“Why are the women so vague?” Harper asked.
“Complex reasons,” Lamarr answered. “Like Reacher said, they’re traumatized, all of them, at least to some extent. A large package, coming into their private territory unasked, it’s an invasion of sorts. The mind blocks it out. It’s what I would expect to see in cases like these.”
Her voice was low and strained. Her bony hands were laid on the table in front of her.
“I think it’s weird,” Harper said.
Lamarr shook her head, patiently, like a teacher.
“No, it’s what I would expect,” she said again. “Don’t look at it from your own perspective. These women were assaulted, figuratively, literally, both. That does

perspective. These women were assaulted, figuratively, literally, both. That does things to a person."
"And they're all worried now," Reacher said. "Guarding them meant telling them. Certainly Scimeca looked pretty shaken. And she should be. She's pretty isolated out there. If I was the guy, I'd be looking at her next. I'm sure she's capable of arriving at the same conclusion."
"We need to catch this guy," Lamarr said.
Blake nodded. "Not going to be easy, now. Obviously we'll keep round-the-clock security on the seven who got the packages, but he'll spot that from a mile away, so we won't catch him at a scene."
"He'll disappear for a while," Lamarr said. "Until we take the security off again."
"How long are we keeping the security on?" Harper asked.
There was silence.
"Three weeks," Blake said. "Any longer than that, it gets crazy."
Harper stared at him.
"Has to be a limit," he said. "What do you want here? Round-the-clock guards, the rest of their damn lives?"
Silence again. Poulton butted his papers into a pile.
"So we've got three weeks to find the guy," he said.
Blake nodded and laid his hands on the table. "Plan is we spell each other twenty-four hours a day, three weeks, starting now. One of us sleeps while the others work. Julia, you get the first rest period, twelve hours, starting now."
"I don't want it."
Blake looked awkward. "Well, want it or not, you got it."
She shook her head. "No, I need to stay on top of this. Let Poulton go first."
"No arguments, Julia. We need to get organized."
"But I'm fine. I need to work. And I couldn't sleep now, anyway."
"Twelve hours, Julia," Blake said. "You're entitled to time off anyway. Compassionate leave of absence, twice over."
"I won't go," she said back.
"You will."
"I can't," she said. "I need to be involved right now."
She sat there, implacable. Resolution in her face. Blake sighed and looked away.
"Right now, you can't be involved," he said.
"Why not?"
Blake looked straight at her. "Because they just flew your sister's body in for the autopsy. And you can't be involved in that. I can't let you."
She tried to answer. Her mouth opened and closed twice, but no sound came out. Then she blinked once and looked away.

Then she blinked once and looked away.
“So, twelve hours,” Blake said.
She stared down at the table.
“Will I get the data?” she asked quietly.
Blake nodded.
“Yes, I’m afraid you’ll have to,” he answered.

18

THE LOCAL BUREAU team in Spokane had worked hard through the night and gotten good cooperation from a construction business and a crane-hire operation and a trucking crew and an air cargo operator. The construction workers tore Alison Lamarr's bathroom apart and disconnected the plumbing. Bureau crime scene specialists wrapped the whole tub in heavy plastic while the builders took out the window and removed the end wall down to floor level. The crane crew fixed canvas slings under the wrapped tub and brought their hook in through the hole in the end of the building and eased the heavy load out into the night. It swung through the chill air and dropped slowly down to a wooden crate lashed to a flatbed truck idling on the road. The truckers pumped expanding foam into the crate to cushion the cargo and nailed the lid down tight and drove straight to the airport in Spokane. The crate was loaded into a waiting plane and flown direct to Andrews Air Force Base, where a helicopter collected it and took it on down to Quantico. Then it was off-loaded by a forklift and set down gently in a laboratory loading bay and left waiting there for an hour while the Bureau's forensic experts figured out exactly how to proceed.

"At this point, the cause of death is all I want," Blake said.

He was sitting on one side of a long table in the pathology conference room, three buildings and five floors away from the Behavioral Science facility. Harper was sitting next to him, and then Poulton next to her, and then Reacher at the end of the row. Opposite them was Quantico's senior pathologist, a doctor called Stavely, which was a name Reacher thought he recognized from somewhere. Clearly the guy had some kind of a famous reputation. Everybody was treating him with deference. He was a large red-faced man, oddly cheerful. His hands were big and red and looked clumsy, although presumably they weren't. Next to him was his chief technician, a quiet thin man who looked preoccupied.

"We read the stuff from your other cases," Stavely said, and stopped.

"Meaning?" Blake asked.

"Meaning I'm not exactly filled with optimism," Stavely said. "New Hampshire is a little remote from the action, I agree, but they see plenty down in Florida and California. I suspect if there was anything to find, you'd know about it by now. Good people, down there."

"Better people up here," Blake said.

Stavely smiled. "Flattery will get you anywhere, right?"

"It's not flattery."

Stavely was still smiling. "If there's nothing to find, what can we do?"

Stavely was still smiling. "If there's nothing to find, what can we do?"
"Got to be something," Blake said. "He made a mistake this time, with the box."
"So?"
"So maybe he made more than one mistake, left something you'll find."
Stavely thought about it. "Well, don't hold your breath, is all I'm saying."
Then he stood up abruptly and knitted his thick fingers together and flexed his hands. Turned to his technician. "So are we ready?"
The thin guy nodded. "We're assuming the paint will be dried hard on the top surface, maybe an inch, inch and a half. If we cut it away from the tub enamel all around we should be able to slide a body bag in and scoop her out."
"Good," Stavely said. "Keep as much paint around her as you can. I don't want her disturbed."
The technician hurried out and Stavely followed him, evidently assuming the other four would file out behind him, which they did, with Reacher last in line.
THE PATHOLOGY LAB was no different from the others Reacher had seen. It was a large low space, brightly lit by an illuminated ceiling. The walls and the floor were white tile. In the middle of the room was a large examination table sculpted from gleaming steel. The table had a drain canal pressed into the center. The drain was plumbed straight into a steel pipe running down through the floor. The table was surrounded by a cluster of wheeled carts loaded with tools. Hoses hung from the ceiling. There were cameras on stands, and scales, and extractor hoods. There was a low hum of ventilation and a strong smell of disinfectant. The air was still and cold.
"Gowns, and gloves," Stavely said.
He pointed to a steel cupboard filled with folded nylon gowns and boxes of disposable latex gloves. Harper handed them out.
"Probably won't need masks," Stavely said. "My guess is the paint will be the worst thing we smell."
They smelled it as soon as the gurney came in through the door. The technician was pushing it and the body bag lay on it, bloated and slick and smeared with green. Paint seeped from the closure and ran down the steel legs to the wheels and left parallel tracks across the white tile. The technician walked between the tracks. The gurney rattled and the bag rolled and wobbled like a giant balloon filled with oil. The technician's arms were smeared with paint to his shoulders.
"Take her to X ray first," Stavely said.
The guy steered the gurney in a new direction and headed for a closed room off the side of the lab. Reacher stepped ahead and pulled the door for him. It felt like it weighed a ton.
"Lined with lead," Stavely said. "We really zap them in there. Big, big doses, so we can see everything we want to see. Not like we have to worry about their

long-term health, is it?"
The technician was gone for a moment and then he stepped back into the lab and eased the heavy door closed behind him. There was a distant powerful hum which lasted a second and then stopped. He went back and came out pushing the gurney again. It was still making tracks across the tile. He stopped it alongside the examination table.
"Roll her off," Stavely said. "I want her facedown."
The technician stepped beside him and leaned across the table and grasped the nearer edge of the bag with both hands and lifted it half off the gurney, half onto the table. Then he walked around to the other side and took the other edge and flipped it up and over. The bag flopped zipper-side down and the mass inside it sucked and rolled and wobbled and settled. Paint oozed out onto the polished steel. Stavely looked at it and beyond it to the floor, which was all crisscrossed with green tracks.
"Overshoes, people," he said. "It'll get everywhere."
They stepped away and Harper found pairs of plastic footwear in a locker and handed them out. Reacher slipped his on and stepped back and watched the paint. It seeped out through the zipper like a thick slow tide.
"Get the film," Stavely said.
The technician ducked back to the X-ray room and came out with large gray squares of film which mapped Alison Lamarr's body. He handed them to Stavely. Stavely fanned through them and held them up against the light from the ceiling.
"Instant," he said. "Like Polaroid. The benefits of scientific progress."
He shuffled them like a dealer and separated one of them and held it up. Ducked away to a light box on the wall and hit the switch and held the film against the light with his big fingers splayed.
"Look at that," he said.
It was a photograph of the midsection from just below the sternum to just above the pubic area. Reacher saw the outlines of ghostly gray bones, ribs, spine, pelvis, with a forearm and a hand lying across them at an angle. And another shape, dense and so bright it shone pure white. Metal. Slim and pointed, about as long as the hand.
"A tool of some sort," Stavely said.
"The others didn't have anything like that," Poulton said.
"Doc, we need to see it right away," Blake said. "It's important."
Stavely shook his head. "It's underneath her body right now, because she's upside down. We'll get there, but it won't be real soon."
"How long?"

“Long as it takes,” Stavely said. “This is going to be messy as hell.”
He clipped the gray photographs in sequence on the light box. Then he walked the length of the ghostly display and studied them.
“Her skeleton is relatively undamaged,” he said. He pointed to the second panel. “Left wrist was cracked and healed, probably ten years ago.”
“She was into sports,” Reacher said. “Her sister told us.”
Stavely nodded. “So we’ll check the collarbone.”
He moved left and studied the first panel. It showed the skull and the neck and the shoulders. The collarbones gleamed and swooped down toward the sternum.
"Small crack,” Stavely said, pointing. "It’s what I’d expect. An athlete with a cracked wrist will usually have a cracked collarbone too. They fall off their bike or their Rollerblades or whatever, throw out their arm to break their fall, end up breaking their bones instead.”
“But no fresh injuries?” Blake asked.
Stavely shook his head. “These are ten years old, maybe more. She wasn’t killed by blunt trauma, if that’s what you mean.”
He hit the switch and the light behind the X rays went out. He turned back to the examination table and knitted his fingers again and his knuckles clicked in the silence.
“OK,” he said. “Let’s go to work.”
He pulled a hose from a reel mounted on the ceiling and turned a small faucet built into its nozzle. There was a hissing sound and a stream of clear liquid started running. A heavy, slow liquid with a sharp, strong smell.
“Acetone,” Stavely said. “Got to clear this damn paint.”
He used the acetone sluice on the body bag and on the steel table. The technician used handfuls of kitchen towel, wiping the bag and pushing the thick liquid into the drain. The chemical stink was overpowering.
“Ventilator,” Stavely said.
The technician ducked away and twisted a switch behind him and the fans in the ceiling changed up from a hum to a louder roar. Stavely held the nozzle closer and the bag began to turn from wet green to wet black. Then he held the hose low down on the table and set up a swirling rinse under the bag straight into the drain.
“OK, scissors,” he said.
The technician took scissors from a cart and snipped a corner of the bag. Green paint flooded out. The acetone swirl caught it and it eddied sluggishly to the drain. It kept on coming, two minutes, three, five. The bag settled and drooped as it emptied. The room went quieter under the roar of the fan and the hiss of the hose.

“OK, the fun starts here,” Stavely said.
He handed the hose to the technician and used a scalpel from the cart to slit the bag lengthwise from end to end. He made sideways cuts top and bottom and peeled the rubber back slowly. It lifted and sucked away from skin. He folded it back in two long flaps. Alison Lamarr’s body was revealed, lying facedown, slimy and slick with paint.
Stavely used the scalpel and slit the rubber around the feet, up alongside the legs, around the contours of the hips, up her flanks, close to her elbows, around her shoulders and head. He pulled away the strips of rubber until the bag was gone, all except for the front surface, which was trapped between the crust of paint and the steel of the table.
The crust of paint was top down to the table, because she was upside down. Its underside was bubbled and jellified. It looked like the surface of a distant alien planet. Stavely started rinsing its edges, where it was stuck to her skin.
“Won’t that damage her?” Blake asked.
Stavely shook his head. “It’s the same stuff as nail polish remover.”
The skin turned greenish white where the paint washed off. Stavely used his gloved fingertips to peel the crust away. The strength in his hands moved the body. It lifted and fell, slackly. He pushed the hose underneath her, probing for stubborn adhesions. The technician stood next to him and lifted her legs. Stavely reached under them and cut the crust and the rubber together, peeling it away up to her thighs. The acetone ran continuously, rinsing the green stream into the drain.
Stavely moved up to the head. Placed the hose against the nape of her neck and watched as the chemical flooded her hair. Her hair was a nightmare. It was matted and crusted with paint. It had floated up around her face like a stiff tangled cage.
“I’m going to have to cut it,” he said.
Blake nodded, somber.
“I guess so,” he said.
“She had nice hair,” Harper said. Her voice was quiet under the noise from the fan. She half turned and backed off a step. Her shoulder touched Reacher’s chest. She left it there a second longer than she needed to.
Stavely took a fresh scalpel from the cart and traced through the hair, as close to the paint crust as he could get. He slid a powerful arm under the shoulders and lifted. The head came free, leaving hair matted into the crust like mangrove roots tangled into a swamp. He cut through the crust and the rubber and pulled another section free.
“I hope you catch this guy,” he said.

“That’s the plan,” Blake said back, still somber.
“Roll her over,” Stavely said.
She moved easily. The acetone mixed with the slick paint was like a lubricant against the dished steel of the table. She slid face up and lay there, ghastly under the lights. Her skin was greenish white and puckered, stained and blotched with paint. Her eyes were open, the lids rimed with green. She wore the last remaining square of the body bag stuck to her skin from her breasts to her thighs, like an old-fashioned bathing suit protecting her modesty.
Stavely probed with his hand and found the metal implement under the rubber. He cut through the bag and wormed his fingers inside and pulled the object out in a grotesque parody of surgery.
“A screwdriver,” he said.
The technician washed it in an acetone bath and held it up. It was a quality tool with a heavy plastic handle and a handsome chromed-steel shaft with a crisp blade.
“Matches the others,” Reacher said. “From her kitchen drawer, remember?”
“She’s got scratches on her face,” Stavely said suddenly.
He was using the hose, washing her face. Her left cheek had four parallel incisions running down from the eye to the jaw.
“Did she have these before?” Blake asked.
“No,” Harper and Reacher said together.
“So what’s that about?” Blake said.
“Was she right-handed?” Stavely asked.
“I don’t know,” Poulton said.
Harper nodded. “I think so.”
Reacher closed his eyes and trawled back to her kitchen, watched her pouring coffee from the jug.
“Right-handed,” he said.
“I agree,” Stavely said. He was examining her arms and hands. “Her right hand is larger than the left. The arm is heavier.”
Blake was leaning over, looking at the damaged face. “So?”
“I think they’re self-inflicted,” Stavely said.
“Are you sure?”
Stavely was circling the head of the table, looking for the best light. The wounds were swelled by the paint, raw and open. Green, where they should have been red.
“I can’t be sure,” he said. “You know that. But probability suggests it. If the guy did them, what are the chances he would have put them in the only place she could have put them herself?”
“He made her do it.” Reacher said.

"He made her do it," Reacher said.
"How?" Blake asked.
"I don't know how. But he makes them do a hell of a lot. I think he makes them put the paint in the tub themselves."
"Why?"
"The screwdriver. It's to get the lids off with. The scratches were an afterthought. If he'd been thinking about the scratches, he'd have made her get a knife from the kitchen instead of the screwdriver. Or as well as the screwdriver."
Blake stared at the wall. "Where are the cans right now?"
"Materials Analysis," Poulton said. "Right here. They're examining them."
"So take the screwdriver over there. See if there are any marks that match."
The technician put the screwdriver in a clear plastic evidence bag and Poulton shrugged off his gown and kicked off his overshoes and hurried out of the room.
"But why?" Blake said. "Why make her scratch herself like that?"
"Anger?" Reacher said. "Punishment? Humiliation? I always wondered why he wasn't more violent."
"These wounds are very shallow," Stavely said. "I guess they bled a little, but they didn't hurt much. The depth is absolutely consistent, all the way down each of them. So she wasn't flinching."
"Maybe ritual," Blake said. "Symbolic, somehow. Four parallel lines mean anything?"
Reacher shook his head. "Not to me."
"How did he kill her?" Blake asked. "That's what we need to know."
"Maybe he stabbed her with the screwdriver," Harper said.
"No sign of it," Stavely said. "No puncture wounds visible anyplace that would kill a person."
He had the final section of the body bag peeled back and was washing paint away from her midsection, probing with his gloved fingers under the acetone jet. The technician lifted the rubber square away and then she lay naked under the lights, collapsed and limp and utterly lifeless. Reacher stared at her and remembered the bright vivacious woman who had smiled with her eyes and radiated energy like a tiny sun.
"Is it possible you can kill somebody and a pathologist can't tell how?" he asked.
Stavely shook his head.
"Not this pathologist," he said.
He shut off the acetone stream and let the hose retract into its reel on the ceiling. Stepped back and turned the ventilation fan back to normal. The room turned quiet again. The body lay on the table, as clean as it was ever going to get. The pores and folds of skin were stained green and the skin itself was lumpy and

pores and folds of skin were stained green and the skin itself was lumpy and white like something that lives at the bottom of the sea. The hair was spiky with residue, roughly hacked around the scalp, framing the dead face.
“Fundamentally two ways to kill a person,” Stavely said. “Either you stop the heart, or you stop the flow of oxygen to the brain. But to do either thing without leaving a mark is a hell of a trick.”
“How would you stop the heart?” Blake asked.
“Short of firing a bullet through it?” Stavely said. “Air embolism would be the best way. A big bubble of air, injected straight into the bloodstream. Blood circulates surprisingly fast, and an air bubble hits the inside of the heart like a stone, like a tiny internal bullet. The shock is usually fatal. That’s why nurses hold up the hypodermic and squirt a little liquid out and flick it with their nail. To be sure there’s no air in the mix.”
“You’d see the hypodermic hole, right?”
“Maybe, maybe not. And definitely not on a corpse like this. The skin is ruined by the paint. But you’d see the internal damage to the heart. I’ll check, of course, when I open her up, but I’m not optimistic. They didn’t find anything like that on the other three. And we’re assuming a consistent MO here, right?”
Blake nodded. “What about oxygen to the brain?”
“Suffocation, in layman’s terms,” Stavely said. “It can be done without leaving much evidence. Classic thing would be an old person, wasted and weak, gets a pillow held over the face. Pretty much impossible to prove. But this isn’t an old person. She’s young and strong.”
Reacher nodded. He had suffocated a man once, way back in his long and checkered career. He had needed all of his considerable strength to hold the guy’s face down on a mattress, while he bucked and thrashed and died.
“She’d have fought like crazy,” he said.
“Yes, I think she would,” Stavely said. “And look at her. Look at her musculature. She wouldn’t have been a pushover.”
Reacher looked away instead. The room was silent and cold. The awful green paint was everywhere.
“I think she was alive,” he said. “When she went in the tub.”
“Reasoning?” Stavely asked.
“There was no mess,” Reacher said. “None at all. The bathroom was immaculate. What was she, one twenty? One twenty-five? Hell of a dead weight to heave into the tub without making some kind of a mess.”
“Maybe he put the paint in afterward,” Blake said. “On top of her.”
Reacher shook his head. “It would have floated her up, surely. It looks like she slipped right in there, like you get into a bath. You know, you point your toe, you get under the water.”

you get under the water.”
“We’d need to experiment,” Stavely said. “But I think I agree she died in the tub. The first three, there was no evidence they were touched at all. No bruising, no abrasions, no nothing. No postmortem damage either. Moving a corpse usually damages the ligaments in the joints, because there’s no muscle tension there to protect them. At this point, my guess is they did whatever they did strictly under their own power.”
“Except kill themselves,” Harper said.
Stavely nodded. “Suicide in bathtubs is pretty much limited to drowning while drunk or drugged, or opening your veins into warm water. Obviously, this isn’t suicide.”
“And they weren’t drowned,” Blake said.
Stavely nodded again. “The first three weren’t. No fluid of any kind in the lungs. We’ll know about this one soon as she’s opened up, but I would bet against it.”
“So how the hell did he do it?” Blake said.
Stavely stared down at the body, something like compassion in his face.
“Right now, I have no idea,” he said. “Give me a couple of hours, maybe three, I might find something.”
“No idea at all?”
“Well, I had a theory,” Stavely said. “Based on what I read about the other three. Problem is, now I think the theory is absurd.”
“What theory?”
Stavely shook his head. “Later, OK? And you need to leave now. I’m going to cut her up, and I don’t want you here for that. She needs privacy, time like this.”

19

THEY LEFT THEIR gowns and overshoes in a tangle by the door and turned left and right through walkways and corridors to the pathology building's front exit. They took the long way around through the parking lots to the main building, as if brisk motion through chill fall air would rid them of the stink of paint and death. They rode the elevator four floors underground in silence. Walked through the narrow corridor and spilled into the seminar room and found Julia Lamarr sitting alone at the table, looking up at the silent television screen.
"You're supposed to be out of here," Blake said to her.
"Any conclusions?" she asked quietly. "From Stavely? "
Blake shook his head. "Later. You should have gone home."
She shrugged. "I told you. I can't go home. I need to be on top of this."
"But you're exhausted."
"You saying I'm not effective?"
Blake sighed. "Julia, give me a break. I've got to organize. You collapse with exhaustion, you're no good to me."
"Not going to happen."
"It was an order, you realize that?"
Lamarr waved a hand, like a gesture of refusal. Harper stared at her.
"It was an order," Blake said again.
"And I ignored it," Lamarr said. "So what are you going to do? We need to work. We've got three weeks to catch this guy. That's not a lot of time."
Reacher shook his head. "That's plenty of time."
Harper turned her stare on him.
"If we talk about his motive, right now," he said.
There was silence. Lamarr stiffened in her seat.
"I think his motive is clear," she said.
There was ice in her voice. Reacher turned to face her, softening his expression, trying to defer to the fact that her family had been wiped out in the space of two days.
"It isn't to me," he said.
Lamarr turned to Blake, appealing.
"We can't start arguing this all over again," she said. "Not now."
"We have to," Reacher said.
"We've done this work already," she snapped.
"Relax, people," Blake called. "Just relax. We've got three weeks, and we're not going to waste any of it arguing."

going to waste any of it arguing.
“You’re going to waste all of it, if you keep on like this,” Reacher said.
There was suddenly tension in the air. Lamarr stared down at the table. Blake was silent. Then he nodded.
“You’ve got three minutes, Reacher,” he said. “Tell us what’s on your mind.”
“You’re wrong about his motive,” Reacher said. “That’s what’s on my mind. It’s keeping you away from looking in the right places.”
“We’ve done this work already,” Lamarr said again.
“Well, we need to do it over,” Reacher said, gently. “Because we won’t find the guy if we’re looking in the wrong places. That stands to reason, right?”
“Do we need this?” Lamarr said.
“Two minutes and thirty seconds,” Blake said. “Give us what you’ve got. Reacher.”
Reacher took a breath. “This is a very smart guy, right? Very, very smart. Smart in a very particular way. He’s committed four homicides, bizarre, elaborate scenarios, and he hasn’t left the slightest shred of evidence behind. He’s only made one mistake, by leaving one box open. And that was a fairly trivial mistake, because it’s not getting us anywhere. So we’ve got a guy who’s successfully handled a thousand decisions, a thousand details, under urgent and stressful conditions. He’s killed four women and so far we don’t even know *how*.”
“So?” Blake said. “What’s your point?”
“His intelligence,” Reacher said. “It’s a specific type. It’s practical, efficient, real-world. He’s got his feet on the ground. He’s a planner, and he’s pragmatic. He’s a problem solver. He’s intensely rational. He deals with *reality*.”
“So?” Blake said again.
“So let me ask you a question. You got a problem with black people?”
“What?”
“Just answer the question.”
“No, I don’t.”
“Good or bad as anybody, right?”
“Sure. Good or bad.”
“What about women? Good or bad as anybody, right?”
Blake nodded. “Sure.”
“So what if some guy is saying to you that black people are no good, or women are no good?”
“I’d say he’s wrong.”
“You’d *say* he’s wrong, and you’d *know* he’s wrong, because deep down you know what the truth of the matter is.”
Blake nodded again. “Sure. So?”

“So that’s my experience, too. Racists are fundamentally wrong. Sexists, too. No room for argument about it. Fundamentally, it’s a completely irrational position to hold. So think about it. Any guy who gets in a big tantrum about this harassment issue is a guy who’s *wrong*. Any guy who blames the victims is *very* wrong. And any guy who goes around looking for revenge against the victims is *very* wrong. He’s got a screw loose. His brain doesn’t function right. He’s not rational. He’s not dealing with reality. He’s can’t be. Deep down, he’s some kind of an idiot.”
“So?”
“But our guy isn’t an idiot. We just agreed he’s very smart. Not eccentric smart, not lunatic smart, but real-world smart, rational and pragmatic and practical. He’s dealing with reality. We just agreed on that.”
“So?”
“So he’s not motivated by anger at these women. He can’t be. It’s not possible. You can’t be real-world smart and real-world dumb, all at the same time. You can’t be rational *and* irrational. You can’t deal with reality and simultaneously *not* deal with it.”
There was silence again.
“We *know* what his motive is,” Lamarr said. “What else could it be? The target group is too exact for it to be anything else.”
Reacher shook his head. “Like it or not, the way you’re describing his motive, you’re calling him deranged. But a deranged guy couldn’t commit these crimes.”
Lamarr clamped her teeth. Reacher heard them click and grind. He watched her. She shook her head. Her thin hair moved with it, stiff, like it was full of lacquer.
“So what’s his real motive, smart guy?” she asked, her voice low and quiet.
“I don’t know,” Reacher said.
“You don’t know? You better be kidding. You question my expertise and you don’t *know*?”
“It’ll be something simple. It always is, right? Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, the simple thing is the correct thing. Maybe doesn’t work like that for you guys down here, but that’s how it works out there in the real world.”
Nobody said a word. Then the door opened and Poulton walked into the silence, small and sandy with a faint smile hanging there under his mustache. The smile disappeared as soon as the atmosphere hit him. He sat down quietly next to Lamarr and pulled a stack of paper in front of him, defensively.
“What’s going on?” he asked.
Blake nodded toward Reacher. “Smart guy here is challenging Julia’s reading of the motive.”
“So what’s wrong about the motive?”

“Smart guy is about to tell us. You’re just in time for the expert seminar.”
“What about the screwdriver?” Reacher asked. “Any conclusions?”
Poulton’s smile came back. “Either that screwdriver or an identical one was used to lever the lids off. The marks match perfectly. But what’s all this about the motive?”
Reacher took a breath and looked around the faces opposite him. Blake, hostile. Lamarr, white and tense. Harper, curious. Poulton, blank.
“OK, smart guy, we’re listening,” Blake said.
“It’ll be something simple,” Reacher said again. “Something simple and obvious. And common. And lucrative enough to be worth protecting.”
“He’s protecting something?”
Reacher nodded. “That’s my guess. I think maybe he’s eliminating witnesses to something.”
“Witnesses to what?”
“Some kind of a racket, I suppose.”
“What kind of a racket?”
Reacher shrugged. “Something big, something systematic, I guess.”
There was silence.
“Inside the Army?” Lamarr asked.
“Obviously,” Reacher said.
Blake nodded.
“OK,” he said. “A big systematic racket, inside the Army. What is it?”
“I don’t know.” Reacher said.
There was silence again. Then Lamarr buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders started moving. She started rocking back and forward in her chair. Reacher stared at her. She was sobbing, like her heart was breaking. He realized it a moment later than he should have, because she was doing it absolutely silently.
“Julia?” Blake called. “You OK?”
She took her hands away from her face. Gestured helplessly with her hands, *yes*, *no*, *wait*. Her face was white and contorted and anguished. Her eyes were closed. The room was silent. Just the rasp of her breathing.
“I’m sorry,” she gasped.
“Don’t be sorry,” Blake said. “It’s the stress.”
She shook her head, wildly. “No, I made a terrible mistake. Because I think Reacher’s right. He’s got to be. So I was wrong, all along. I screwed up. I missed it. I should have seen it before.”
“Don’t worry about it now,” Blake said.
She lifted her head and stared at him. “Don’t *worry* about it? Don’t you see? All

the time we wasted?"
"Doesn't matter," Blake said, limply.
She stared on at him. "Of course it *matters*. Don't you see? My sister died because I wasted all this time. It's my fault. *I killed her*. Because I was wrong."
Silence again. Blake stared at her, helplessly.
"You need to take time out," he said.
She shook her head. Wiped her eyes. "No, no, I need to work. I already wasted too much time. So now I need to think. I need to play catch-up."
"You should go home. Take a couple of days."
Reacher watched her. She was collapsed in her chair like she had taken a savage beating. Her face was blotched red and white. Her breathing was shallow, and her eyes were blank and vacant.
"You need rest," Blake said.
She stirred and shook her head.
"Maybe later," she said.
There was silence again. Then she hauled herself upright in her chair and fought to breathe.
"Maybe later I'll rest," she said. "But first I *work*. First, we *all* work. We've got to think. We've got to think about the Army. What's the racket?"
"I don't know," Reacher said again.
"Well think, for God's sake," she snapped. "What racket is he protecting?"
"Give us what you've got, Reacher," Blake said. "You didn't go this far without something on your mind."
Reacher shrugged.
"Well, I had half an idea," he said.
"Give us what you've got," Blake said again.
"OK, what was Amy Callan's job?"
Blake looked blank and glanced at Poulton.
"Ordnance clerk," Poulton said.
"Lorraine Stanley's?" Reacher asked.
"Quartermaster sergeant."
Reacher paused.
"Alison's?" he asked.
"Infantry close-support," Lamarr said, neutrally.
"No, before that."
"Transport battalion," she said.
Reacher nodded. "Rita Scimeca's job?"
Harper nodded. "Weapons proving. Now I see why you made her tell me."
"Why?" Blake asked.

“Because what’s the potential link?” Reacher asked. “Between an ordnance clerk, a quartermaster sergeant, a transport driver, a weapons prover?”
“You tell me.”
“What did I take from those guys at the restaurant?”
Blake shrugged. “I don’t know. That’s James Cozo’s business, in New York. I know you stole their money.”
“They had handguns,” Reacher said. “M9 Berettas, with the serial numbers filed off. What does that mean?”
“They were illegally obtained.”
Reacher nodded. "From the Army. M9 Berettas are military-issue.”
Blake looked blank. “So what?”
“So if this is some Army guy protecting a racket, the racket most likely involves theft, and if the stakes are high enough for killing people, the theft most likely involves weapons, because that’s where the money is. And these women were all in a position where they could have witnessed weapons theft. They were right there in the chain, transporting and testing and warehousing weapons, all day long.”
There was silence. Then Blake shook his head.
“You’re crazy,” he said. “It’s too coincidental. The overlap is ridiculous. What are the chances all these witnesses would also be harassment victims?”
“It’s only an idea,” Reacher said. “But the chances are actually pretty good, the way I see it. The only *real* harassment victim was Julia’s sister. Caroline Cooke doesn’t count, because that was a technicality.”
“What about Callan and Stanley?” Poulton asked. “You don’t call that harassment?”
Reacher shook his head. But Lamarr beat him to the punch. She was leaning forward, fingers drumming on the table, life back in her eyes, completely on the ball.
“No, think about it, people,” she said. “Think about it *laterally*. They weren’t harassment victims *and* witnesses. They were harassment victims *because* they were witnesses. If you’re some Army racketeer and you’ve got a woman in your unit who’s not turning a blind eye to what you need her to be turning a blind eye to, what do you do about it? You get rid of her, is what. And what’s the quickest way to do that? You make her uncomfortable, sexually.”
There was silence. Then Blake shook his head again.
“No, Julia,” he said. “Reacher’s seeing ghosts, is all. It’s still way too coincidental. Because what are the chances he’d just happen to be in a restaurant alley one night and stumble across the back end of the same racket that’s killing our women? A million to one, minimum. ”

"A billion to one," Poulton said.
Lamarr stared at them.
"*Think*, for God's sake," she said. "Surely he's not saying he saw the *same* racket that's killing our women. Probably he saw a completely different racket. Because there must be hundreds of rackets in the Army. Right, Reacher?"
Reacher nodded.
"Right," he said. "The restaurant thing set me thinking along those lines, is all, in general terms."
There was silence again. Blake colored red.
"There are hundreds of rackets?" he said. "So how does that help us? Hundreds of rackets, hundreds of Army people involved, how are we going to find the right one? Needle in a damn haystack. It'll take three years. We've got three weeks."
"And what about the paint?" Poulton asked. "If he's eliminating witnesses, he'd walk up and shoot them in the head, silenced .22. He wouldn't mess with all this other stuff. All this ritual is classic serial homicide."
Reacher looked at him.
"Exactly," he said. "Your perception of the motive is defined by the *manner* of the killings. Think about it. If they *had* all got a silenced .22 in the head, what would you have thought?"
Poulton said nothing. But there was doubt in his eyes. Blake sat forward and put his hands on the table.
"We'd have called them executions," he said. "Wouldn't have altered our assessment of the motive."
"No, be honest with me," Reacher said. "I think you'd have been a little more open-minded. You'd have cast your net a little wider. Sure, you'd have considered the harassment angle, but you'd have considered other things too. More ordinary things. Bullets to the head, I think you'd have considered more routine reasons."
Blake sat there, hesitant and silent. Which was the same thing as a confession.
"Bullets to the head are kind of *normal*, right?" Reacher said. "In your line of work? So you'd have looked at *normal* reasons too. Like eliminating witnesses to a crime. Bullets to the head, I think right now you'd be all over the Army scams, looking for some efficient enforcer. But the guy deflected you by dressing it up with all this bizarre bullshit. He hid his true motive. He smoke-screened it. He camouflaged it. He pushed you into this weird psychological arena. He manipulated you, because he's very smart."
Blake was still silent.
"Not that you needed much manipulation," Reacher said.
"This is just speculation," Blake said.

"This is just speculation," Blake said.
Reacher nodded. "Of course it is. I told you, it's only half an idea. But that's what you do down here, right? You sit here all day long wearing the seat out of your pants, speculating about half-ideas."
Silence in the room.
"It's bullshit," Blake said.
Reacher nodded again. "Yes, maybe it is. But maybe it isn't. Maybe it's some Army guy making big bucks out of some scam these women knew about. And he's hiding behind this harassment issue, by dressing it up like a psychodrama. He knew you'd jump right on it. He knew he could make you look in the wrong place. Because he's very smart."
Silence.
"Your call," Reacher said.
There was silence.
"Julia?" Blake said.
The silence continued. Then Lamarr nodded, slowly. "It's a viable scenario. Maybe more than viable. It's possible he could be exactly right. Possible enough that I think we should check it out, maximum effort, immediately. "
The silence came back.
"I think we shouldn't waste any more time," Lamarr whispered.
"But he's wrong," Poulton said.
He was riffing through paper, and his voice was loud and joyful.
"Caroline Cooke makes him wrong," he said. "She was in War Plans at NATO. High-level office work. She was never anywhere near weapons or warehouses or quartermasters."
Reacher said nothing. Then the silence was broken by the door. It opened up and Stavely hurried into the room, big and busy and intrusive. He was dressed in a white lab coat, and his wrists were smeared green where the paint had lapped up above his gloves. Lamarr stared at the marks and went whiter than his coat. She stared for a long moment and then closed her eyes and swayed like she was about to faint. She gripped the tabletop in front of her, thumbs underneath, pale fingers above, spread outward with the thin tendons standing out like quivering wires.
"I want to go home now," she said, quietly.
She reached down and gathered up her bag. Threaded the strap onto her shoulder and pushed back her chair and stood up. Walked slowly and unsteadily to the door, her eyes fixed on the remnants of her sister's last moments of life daubed across Stavely's stained wrists. Her head turned as she walked to keep them in view. Then she wrenched her gaze away and opened the door. Passed through it and let it close silently behind her.

and let it close silently behind her.
“What?” Blake said.
“I know how he kills them,” Stavely said. “Except there’s a problem.”
“What problem?” Blake asked.
“It’s impossible.”

20

"I CUTA few corners," Stavely said. "You need to understand that, OK? You guys are in a big hurry, and we think we're dealing with a consistent MO, so all I did was look at the questions that the first three left behind. I mean, we all know what it *isn't*, right?"
"It isn't everything, far as we know," Blake said.
"Right. No blunt trauma, no gunshots, no stab wounds, no poison, no strangulation."
"So what is it?"
Stavely moved a complete circle around the table and sat down at an empty chair, on his own, three seats from Poulton and two from Reacher.
"Did she drown?" Poulton asked.
Stavely shook his head. "No, just like the first three didn't. I took a look at her lungs, and they were completely clear."
"So what is it?" Blake asked again.
"Like I told you," Stavely said. "You stop the heart, or you deny oxygen to the brain. So first, I looked at her heart. And her heart was perfect. Completely undamaged. Same as the other three. And these were fit women. Great hearts. It's easier to spot the damage on a good heart. An older person might have a bad heart, with preexisting damage, you know, furring or scarring from previous cardiac trouble, and that can hide new damage. But these were perfect hearts, like athletes. Any trauma, it would have stuck out a mile. But there wasn't any. So he didn't stop their hearts."
"So?" Blake asked.
"So he denied them oxygen," Stavely said. "It's the only remaining possibility."
"How?"
"Well, that's the big question, isn't it? Theoretically he could have sealed off the bathroom and pumped the oxygen out and replaced it with some inert gas."
Blake shook his head. "That's absurd."
"Of course it is," Stavely said. "He'd have needed equipment, pumps, tanks of gas. And we'd have found residue in the tissues. Certainly in the lungs. There aren't any gases we wouldn't have detected."
"So?"
"So he choked off their airways. It's the only possibility. "
"You said there are no signs of strangulation."
Stavely nodded. "There aren't. That's what got me interested. Strangulation normally leaves massive trauma to the neck. All kinds of bruising, internal

normally leaves massive trauma to the neck. All kinds of bruising, internal bleeding. It sticks out a mile. Same for garroting."
"But?"
"There's something called gentle strangulation."
"Gentle?" Harper said. "Awful phrase."
"What is it?" Poulton asked.
"A guy with a big arm," Stavely said. "Or a padded coat sleeve. Gentle consistent pressure, that will do it."
"So is that it?" Blake asked.
Stavely shook his head. "No, it isn't. No external marks, but to get far enough to kill them, you leave internal damage. The hyoid bone would be broken, for instance. Certainly cracked, at least. Other ligament damage too. It's a very fragile area. The voice box is there."
"And you're going to tell me there was no damage, I guess," Blake said.
"Nothing gross," Stavely said. "Did she have a cold, when you met with her?"
He looked at Harper, but Reacher answered.
"No," he said.
"Sore throat?"
"No."
"Husky voice?"
"She seemed pretty healthy to me."
Stavely nodded. Looked pleased. "There was some very, very slight swelling inside the throat. It's what you'd get recovering from a head cold. Mucus drip might do it, or a very mild strep virus. Ninety-nine times in a hundred, I'd ignore it completely. But the other three had it too. That's a little coincidental for me."
"So what does it mean?" Blake asked.
"It means he pushed something down their throats," Stavely said.
Silence in the room.
"Down their throats?" Blake repeated.
Stavely nodded. "That was my guess. Something soft, something which would slip down and then expand a little. Maybe a sponge. Were there sponges in the bathrooms?"
"I didn't see one in Spokane," Reacher said.
Poulton was back in the piles of paper. "Nothing on the inventories."
"Maybe he removed them," Harper said. "He took their clothes."
"Bathrooms without sponges," Blake said slowly. "Like the dog that didn't bark."
"No," Reacher said. "There wasn't a sponge *before*, is what I meant."
"You sure?" Blake asked.
Reacher nodded. "Totallv."

“Maybe he brings one with him,” Harper said. “The type he prefers.”
Blake looked away, back to Stavely. “So that’s how he’s doing it? Sponges down their throats?”
Stavely stared at his big red hands, resting on the tabletop.
“It has to be,” he said. “Sponges, or something similar. Like Sherlock Holmes, right? First you eliminate the impossible, and whatever you’re left with, however improbable, has *got* to be the answer. So the guy is choking them to death by pushing something soft down their throats. Something soft enough not to cause blunt trauma internally, but something dense enough to block the air.”
Blake nodded, slowly. “OK, so now we know.”
Stavely shook his head. “Well, no, we don’t. Because it’s impossible.”
“Why?”
Stavely just shrugged miserably.
“Come here, Harper,” Reacher said.
She looked at him, surprised. Then she smiled briefly and stood up and scraped her chair back and walked toward him.
“Show, don’t tell, right?” she said.
“Lie on the table, OK?” he asked.
She smiled again and sat on the edge of the table and swiveled into position.
Reacher pulled Poulton’s pile of paper over and pushed it under her head.
“Comfortable?” he asked.
She nodded and fanned her hair and lay back like she was at the dentist. Pulled her jacket closed over her shirt.
“OK,” Reacher said. “She’s Alison Lamarr in the tub.”
He pulled the top sheet of paper out from under her head and glanced at it. It was the inventory from Caroline Cooke’s bathroom. He crumpled it into a ball.
“This is a sponge,” he said. Then he glanced at Blake. “Not that there was one in the room.”
“He brought it with him,” Blake said.
“Waste of time if he did,” Reacher said. “Because watch.”
He put the crumpled paper to Harper’s lips. She clamped them tight.
“How do I get her to open her mouth?” he asked. “In the full and certain knowledge that what I’m doing is going to kill her?”
He leaned close and used his left hand under her chin, his fingers and thumb up on her cheeks. “I could squeeze, I guess. Or I could clamp her nose until she had to breathe. But what would *she* do?”
“This,” Harper said, and threw a playful roundhouse right which caught Reacher high on the temple.
“Exactly,” he said. “Two seconds from now, we’re fighting, and there’s a gallon

of paint on the floor. Another gallon all over me. To get anywhere with this, I'd have to get right in the tub with her, behind her or on top of her."
"He's right," Stavely said. "It's just impossible. They'd be fighting for their lives. No way to force something into somebody's mouth against their will, without leaving bruises on their cheeks, their jaws, all over them. Flesh would tear against their teeth, their lips would be bruised and cut, maybe the teeth themselves would loosen. And they'd be biting and scratching and kicking. Traces under their nails. Bruised knuckles. Defensive injuries. It would be a fight to the death, right? And there's no evidence of fighting. None at all."
"Maybe he drugged them," Blake said. "Made them passive, you know, like that date-rape thing."
Stavely shook his head.
"Nobody was drugged," he said. "Toxicology is absolutely clear, all four cases."
The room went silent again and Reacher pulled Harper upright by the hands. She slid off the table and dusted herself down. Walked back to her seat.
"So you've got no conclusions?" Blake asked.
Stavely shrugged. "Like I said, I've got a great conclusion. But it's an impossible conclusion."
Silence.
"I told you, this is a very smart guy," Reacher said. "Too smart for you. Way too smart. Four homicides, and you *still* don't know how he's doing it."
"So what's the answer, smart guy?" Blake said. "You going to tell us something four of the nation's best pathologists can't tell us?"
Reacher said nothing.
"What's the answer?" Blake asked again.
"I don't know," Reacher said.
"Great. You don't know."
"But I'll find out."
"Yeah, like how?"
"Easy. I'll go find the guy, and I'll ask him."
FORTY-ONE MILES AWAY, slightly east of north, the colonel was two miles from his office, after a ten-mile journey. He had taken the shuttle bus from the Pentagon's parking lot and gotten off near the Capitol. Then he had hailed a cab and headed back over the river to the National Airport's main terminal. His uniform was in a leather one-suiter slung on his shoulder, and he was cruising the ticket counters at the busiest time of day, completely anonymous in a teeming crush of people.
"I want Portland, Oregon," he said. "Open roundtrip, coach."
A clerk entered the code for Portland and his computer told him he had plenty of

availability on the next nonstop.
“Leaves in two hours,” he said.
“OK,” the colonel said.
"YOU THINK YOU’LL find the guy?” Blake repeated.
Reacher nodded. “I’ll have to, won’t I? It’s the only way.”
There was silence in the conference room for a moment. Then Stavely stood up.
“Well, good luck to you, sir,” he said.
He walked out of the room and closed the door softly behind him.
“You *won’t* find the guy,” Poulton said. “Because you’re wrong about Caroline Cooke. She never served in ordnance warehousing or weapons testing. She proves your theory is shit.”
Reacher smiled. “Do I know all about FBI procedures? ”
“No, you don’t.”
“So don’t talk to me about the Army. Cooke was an officer candidate. Fast-track type. Had to be, to finish up in War Plans. People like that, they send them all over the place first, getting an overview. That summary you’ve got in your file is incomplete.”
"It is?”
Reacher nodded. “Has to be. If they listed everywhere she was posted, you’d have ten pages before she made first lieutenant. You check back with Defense, get the details, you’ll find she was someplace that could tie her in.”
The silence came back. There was a faint rush from the forced-air heating and a buzz from a failing fluorescent tube. A high-pitched whistle from the silent television. That was all. Nothing else. Poulton stared at Blake. Harper stared at Reacher. Blake looked down at his fingers, which were tapping on the table with silent fleshy impacts.
“*Can* you find him?” he asked.
“Somebody’s got to,” Reacher said. “You guys aren’t getting anywhere.”
“You’ll need resources.”
Reacher nodded. “A little help would be nice.”
“So I’m gambling here.”
“Better than putting all your chips behind a loser.”
“I’m gambling big-time. With a lot at stake.”
“Like your career?”
“Seven women, not my career.”
“Seven women *and* your career.”
Blake nodded, vaguely. “What are the odds?”
Reacher shrugged. “With three weeks to do it in? It’s a certainty.”
“You’re an arrogant bastard, you know that?”

“No, I’m realistic, is all.”
“So what do you need?”
“Remuneration,” Reacher said.
“You want to get paid?”
“Sure I do. You’re getting paid, right? I do all the work, only fair I get something out of it too.”
Blake nodded. “You find the guy, I’ll speak to Deerfield up in New York, get the Petrosian thing forgotten about.”
“Plus a fee.”
“How much?”
“Whatever you think is appropriate.”
Blake nodded again. “I’ll think about it. And Harper goes with you, because right now the Petrosian thing ain’t forgotten about.”
“OK. I can live with that. If she can.”
“She doesn’t get a choice,” Blake said. “What else?”
“Set me up with Cozo. I’ll start in New York. I’ll need information from him.”
Blake nodded. “I’ll call him. You can see him tonight. ”
Reacher shook his head. “Tomorrow morning. Tonight, I’m going to see Jodie.”

21

THE MEETING BROKE up in a sudden burst of energy. Blake took the elevator one floor down, back to his office to place the call to James Cozo in New York. Poulton had calls of his own to make to the Bureau office in Spokane, where the local guys were checking with parcel carriers and car rental operations. Harper went up to the travel desk to organize airline tickets. Reacher was left alone in the seminar room, sitting at the big table, ignoring the television, staring at a fake window like he was looking out at a view.

He sat like that for nearly twenty minutes, just waiting. Then Harper came back in. She was carrying a thick sheaf of new paperwork.

"More bureaucracy," she said. "If we pay you, we've got to insure you. Travel desk regulations."

She sat down opposite him and took a pen from her inside pocket.

"Ready for this?" she said.

He nodded.

"Full name?" she asked.

"Jack Reacher," he said.

"That the whole thing?"

He nodded. "That's it."

"Not a very long name, is it?"

He shrugged. Said nothing. She wrote it down. Two words, eleven letters, in a space which ran the whole width of the form.

"Date of birth?"

He told her. Saw her calculating his age. Saw surprise in her face.

"Older or younger?" he asked.

"Than what?"

"Than you thought."

She smiled. "Oh, older. You don't look it."

"Bullshit," he said. "I look about a hundred. Certainly I feel about a hundred."

She smiled again. "You probably clean up pretty good. Social Security number?"

His generation of servicemen, it was the same as his military ID. He rattled through it in the military manner, random monotone sounds representing whole numbers between zero and nine.

"Full address?"

"No fixed abode," he said.

"You sure?"

"You sure?"
"Why wouldn't I be?"
"What about Garrison?"
"What about it?"
"Your house," she said. "That would be your address, right?"
He stared at her. "I guess so. Sort of. I never really thought about it."
She stared back. "You own a house, you've got an address, wouldn't you say?"
"OK, put Garrison."
"Street name and number?"
He dredged it up from his memory and told her.
"Zip?"
He shrugged. "I don't know."
"You don't know your own zip code?"
He was quiet for a second. She looked at him.
"You've got it real bad, haven't you?" she said.
"Got what?"
"Whatever. Call it denial, I guess."
He nodded, slowly. "Yes, I guess I've got it real bad."
"So what are you going to do about it?"
"I don't know. Maybe I'll get used to it."
"Maybe you won't."
"What would *you* do?"
"People should do what they really want," she said. "I think that's important."
"Is that what you do?"
She nodded. "My folks wanted me to stay in Aspen. They wanted me to be a teacher or something. I wanted to be in law enforcement. It was a big battle."
"It's not my parents doing this to me. They're dead."
"I know. It's Jodie."
He shook his head. "No, it's not Jodie. It's me. I'm doing this to myself."
She nodded again. "OK."
The room went quiet.
"So what should I do?" he asked.
She shrugged, warily. "I'm not the person to ask."
"Why not?"
"I might not give the answer you want."
"Which is?"
"You want me to say you should stay with Jodie. Settle down and be happy."
"I do?"
"I think so."
"But you can't say that?"

She shook her head.
“No, I can’t,” she said. “I had a boyfriend. It was pretty serious. He was a cop in Aspen. There’s always tension, you know, between cops and the Bureau. Rivalry. Silly, really, no reason for it, but it’s there. It spread into personal things. He wanted me to quit. Begged me. I was torn, but I said no.”
“Was that the right choice?”
She nodded. “For me, yes, it was. You have to do what you really want.”
“Would it be the right choice for me?”
She shrugged. “I can’t say. But probably.”
“First I need to figure out what I really want.”
“You know what you really want,” she said. “Everybody always does, instinctively. Any doubt you’re feeling is just noise, trying to bury the truth, because you don’t want to face it.”
He looked away, back to the fake window.
“Occupation?” she asked.
“Silly question,” he said.
“I’ll put consultant.”
He nodded. “That dignifies it, somewhat.”
Then there were footsteps in the corridor and the door opened again and Blake and Poulton hurried inside. More paper in their hands, and the glow of progress in their faces.
“We’re maybe halfway to starting to get somewhere, ” Blake said. “News in from Spokane.”
“The local UPS driver quit three weeks ago,” Poulton said. “Moved to Missoula, Montana, works in a warehouse. But they spoke to him by phone and he thinks maybe he remembers the delivery.”
“So doesn’t the UPS office have paperwork?” Harper asked.
Blake shook his head. “They archive it after eleven days. And we’re looking at two months ago. If the driver can pinpoint the day, we might get it.”
“Anybody know anything about baseball?” Poulton asked.
Reacher shrugged. “Couple of guys worked out an overall all-time top ten and only two players had the letter *u* in their names.”
“Why baseball?” Harper asked.
“Day in question, some Seattle guy hit a grand slam,” Blake said. “The driver heard it on his radio, remembers it.”
“Seattle, he would remember it,” Reacher said. “Rare occurrence.”
“Babe Ruth,” Poulton said. “Who’s the other one?”
“Honus Wagner,” Reacher said.
Poulton looked blank. “Never heard of him.”

“And Hertz came through,” Blake said. “They think they remember a real short rental, Spokane airport, the exact day Alison died, in and out inside about two hours.”
“They got a name?” Harper asked.
Blake shook his head. “Their computer’s down. They’re working on it.”
“Don’t the desk people remember?”
“Are you kidding? Lucky if those people remember their *own* names.”
“So when will we get it?”
“Tomorrow, I guess. Morning, with a bit of luck. Otherwise the afternoon.”
“Three-hour time difference. It’ll be the afternoon for us.”
“Probably.”
“So does Reacher still go?”
Blake paused and Reacher nodded.
“I still go,” he said “The name will be phony, for sure. And the UPS thing will lead nowhere. This guy’s way too smart for basic paper-trail errors.”
Everybody waited. Then Blake nodded.
“I guess I agree,” he said. “So Reacher still goes.”
THEY GOT A ride in a plain Bureau Chevrolet and were at the airport in D.C. before dark. They lined up for the United shuttle with the lawyers and the lobbyists. Reacher was the only person on the line not wearing a business suit, male or female. The cabin crew seemed to know most of the passengers and greeted them at the airplane door like regulars. Harper walked all the way down the aisle and chose seats right at the back.
“No rush to get off,” she said. “You’re not seeing Cozo until tomorrow.”
Reacher said nothing.
“And Jodie won’t be home yet,” she said. “Lawyers work hard, right? Especially the ones fixing to be partner. ”
He nodded. He’d just gotten around to figuring the same thing.
“So we’ll sit here,” she said. “It’s quieter.”
“The engines are right back here,” he said.
“But the guys in the suits aren’t.”
He smiled and took the window seat and buckled up.
“And we can talk back here,” she said. “I don’t like people listening.”
“We should sleep,” he said. “We’re going to be busy.”
“I know, but talk first. Five minutes, OK?”
“Talk about what?”
“The scratches on her face,” she said. “I need to understand what that’s about.”
He glanced across at her. “Why? You figuring to crack this all on your own?”
She nodded. “I wouldn’t turn down the opportunity to make the arrest.”

“Ambitious?”
She made a face. “Competitive, I guess.”
He smiled again. “Lisa Harper against the pointy-heads. ”
“Damn right,” she said. “Plain-vanilla agents, they treat us like shit.”
The engines wound up to a scream and the plane rolled backward from the gate. Swung its nose around and lumbered toward the runway.
“So what about the marks on her face?” Harper asked.
“I think it proves my point,” Reacher said. “I think it’s the single most valuable piece of evidence we’ve gotten so far.”
“Why?”
He shrugged. “It was so halfhearted, wasn’t it? So tentative? I think it proves the guy is hiding behind appearances. It proves he’s pretending. Like there’s me, looking at the cases, and I’m thinking where’s the violence? Where’s the anger? And simultaneously somewhere the guy is reviewing his progress, and he’s thinking *oh my God, I’m not showing any anger*, and so on the next one he tries to show some, but he’s not really feeling any, so it comes across as really nothing much at all.”
Harper nodded. “Not even enough to make her flinch, according to Stavely.”
“Bloodless,” Reacher said. “Almost literally. Like a technical exercise, which it was, because this whole thing is a technical exercise, some cast-iron down-to-earth motive hiding behind a psycho masquerade.”
“He made her do it to herself.”
“I think so.”
“But why would he?”
“Worried about fingerprints? About revealing if he’s left-handed or right-handed? Demonstrating his control? ”
“It’s a lot of control, don’t you think? But it explains why it was so halfhearted. She wouldn’t really hurt herself.”
“I guess not,” he said, sleepily.
“Why Alison, though? Why did he wait until number four?”
“Ceaseless quest for perfection, I suppose. A guy like this, he’s thinking and refining all the time.”
“Does it make her special in some way? Significant? ”
Reacher shrugged. “That’s pointy-head stuff. If they thought so, I’m sure they’d have said.”
“Maybe he knew her better than the others. Worked with her more closely.”
“Maybe. But don’t stray into their territory. Keep your feet on the ground. You’re plain-vanilla, remember? ”
Harper nodded. “And the plain-vanilla motive is money.”

“Has to be,” Reacher said. “Always love or money. And it can’t be love, because love makes you crazy, and this guy isn’t crazy.”
The plane turned and stopped hard against its brakes at the head of the runway. Paused for a second and jumped forward and accelerated. Unstuck itself and lifted heavily into the air. The lights of D.C. spun past the window.
“Why did he change the interval?” Harper asked over the noise of the climb.
Reacher shrugged. “Maybe he just wanted to.”
“Wanted to?”
“Maybe he just did it for fun. Nothing more disruptive for you guys than a pattern that changes.”
“Will it change again?”
The plane rocked and tilted and leveled, and the engine noise fell away to a cruise.
“It’s over,” Reacher said. “The women are guarded, and you’ll be making the arrest pretty soon.”
“You’re that confident?”
Reacher shrugged again. “No point going in expecting to lose.”
He yawned and jammed his head between the seatback and the plastic bulkhead. Closed his eyes.
“Wake me when we get there,” he said.
BUT THE THUMP and whine of the wheels coming down woke him, three thousand feet above and three miles east of La Guardia in New York. He looked at his watch and saw he’d slept fifty minutes. His mouth tasted tired.
“You want to get some dinner?” Harper asked him.
He blinked and checked his watch again. He had at least an hour to kill before Jodie’s earliest possible ETA. Probably two hours. Maybe three.
“You got somewhere in mind?” he asked back.
“I don’t know New York too well,” she said. “I’m an Aspen girl.”
“I know a good Italian,” he said.
“They put me in a hotel on Park and Thirty-sixth,” she said. “I assume you’re staying at Jodie’s.”
He nodded. “I assume I am, too.”
“So is the restaurant near Park and Thirty-sixth?”
He shook his head. “Cab ride. This is a big town.”
She shook her head in turn. “No cabs. They’ll send a car. Ours for the duration.”
The driver was waiting at the gate. Same guy who had driven them before. His car was parked in the tow lane outside Arrivals, with a large card with the Bureau shield printed on it propped behind the windshield. Congestion was bad, all the way into Manhattan. It was the second half of rush hour. But the guy

drove like he had nothing to fear from the traffic cops and they were outside Mostro's within forty minutes of the plane touching down.
The street was dark, and the restaurant glowed like a promise. Four tables were occupied and Puccini was playing. The owner saw Reacher on the sidewalk and hurried to the door, beaming. Showed them to a table and brought the menus himself.
"This is the place Petrosian was leaning on?" Harper asked.
Reacher nodded toward the owner. "Look at the little guy. Did he deserve that?"
"You should have left it to the cops."
"That's what Jodie said."
"She's clearly a smart woman."
It was warm inside the huge room, and Harper slipped her jacket off and twisted to hang it over the back of her chair. Her shirt twisted with her, tightening and loosening. First time since he'd met her, she was wearing a bra. She followed his gaze and blushed.
"I wasn't sure who we'd be meeting," she said.
He nodded.
"We'll be meeting somebody," he said. "That's for damn sure. Sooner or later."
The way he said it made her glance up at him.
"Now you really want this guy, right?" she said.
"Yes, now I do."
"For Amy Callan? You liked her, didn't you?"
"She was OK. I liked Alison Lamarr better, what I saw of her. But I want this guy for Rita Scimeca."
"She likes you too," she said. "I could tell."
He nodded again.
"Did you have a relationship with her?"
He shrugged. "That's a very vague word."
"An affair?"
He shook his head. "I only met her after she was raped. *Because* she was raped. She wasn't in any kind of a state to be having affairs. Still isn't, by the look of it. I was a little older than she was, maybe five or six years. We got very friendly, but it was like a paternalistic thing, you know, which I guess she needed, but she hated it at the same time. I had to work hard to make it feel at least brotherly, as I recall. We went out a few times, but like big brother and little sister, always completely platonic. She was like a wounded soldier, recuperating."
"That's how she saw it?"
"Exactly like that," he said. "Like a guy who has his leg shot off. It can't be denied, but it can be dealt with. And she was dealing with it."
"And now this guy is setting her back."

And now this guy is setting her back.
Reacher nodded. “That’s the problem. Hiding behind this harassment thing, he’s pounding on an open wound. If he was up-front about it, it would be OK. Rita could accept that as a separate problem, I think. Like a one-legged guy could deal with getting the flu. But it’s coming across like a taunt, about her past.”
“And that makes you mad.”
“I feel responsible for Rita, he’s messing with her, so he’s messing with me.”
“And people shouldn’t mess with you.”
“No, they shouldn’t.”
“Or?”
“Or they’re deep in the shit.”
She nodded, slowly.
“You’ve convinced me,” she said.
He said nothing.
“You convinced Petrosian too, I guess,” she said.
“I never went near Petrosian,” he said. “Never laid eyes on him.”
“But you *are* kind of arrogant, you know?” she said. “Prosecutor, judge, jury, executioner, all in one? What about the rules?”
He smiled.
“Those *are* the rules,” he said. “People mess with me, they find that out pretty damn quick.”
Harper shook her head. “We arrest this guy, remember? We find him and we arrest him. We’re going to do this properly. According to *my* rules, OK?”
He nodded. “I already agreed to that.”
Then the waiter came over and stood near, pen poised. They ordered two courses each and sat in silence until the food came. Then they ate in silence. There wasn’t much of it. But it was as good as always. Maybe even better. And it was on the house.
AFTER COFFEE THE FBI driver took Harper to her hotel uptown and Reacher walked down to Jodie’s place, alone and enjoying it. He let himself into her lobby and rode up in the elevator. Let himself into her apartment. The air was still and silent. The rooms were dark. Nobody home. He switched on lamps and closed blinds. Sat down on the living room sofa to wait.

22

THIS TIME THERE will be guards. You know that for sure. So this time will be difficult. You smile to yourself and correct your phraseology. Actually, this time will be very difficult. Very, very difficult. But not impossible. Not for you. It will be a challenge, is all. Putting guards into the equation will elevate the whole thing up a little nearer to interesting. A little nearer the point where your talent can really flex and stretch like it needs to. It will be a challenge to relish. A challenge to beat.

But you don't beat anything without thinking. You don't beat anything without careful observation and planning. The guards are a new factor, so they need analysis. But that's your strength, isn't it? Accurate, dispassionate analysis. Nobody does it better than you. You've proved that, over and over again, haven't you? Four whole times.

So what do the guards mean to you? Initial question, who are the guards? Out here in the sticks a million miles from nowhere, first impression is you're dealing with dumb-ass local cops. No immediate problem. No immediate threat. But the downside is, out here in the sticks a million miles from nowhere, there aren't enough dumb-ass local cops to go around. Some tiny Oregon township outside of the Portland city limits won't have enough cops to keep up a twenty-four-hour watch. So they'll be looking for help, and you know that help will come from the FBI. You know that for sure. The way you predict it, the locals will take the day, and the Bureau will take the night.

Given the choice, obviously you aren't going to tangle with the Bureau. So you're going to avoid the night. You're going to take the day, when all that stands between you and her is some local fat boy in a Crown Vic full of cheeseburger wrappers and cold coffee. And you're going to take the day because the day is a more elegant solution. Broad daylight. You love the phrase. They use it all the time, don't they?

"The crime was committed in broad daylight," you whisper to yourself. Getting past the locals in broad daylight won't be too hard. But even so, it's not something you're going to undertake lightly. You're not going to rush in. You're going to watch carefully, from a distance, until you see how it goes. You're going to invest some time in careful, patient observation. Fortunately, you've got a little time. And it won't be hard to do. The place is mountainous. Mountainous places have two characteristics. Two advantages. First of all, they're already full of idiots hanging out in sweaters with field glasses around their necks. And

second of all, mountainous terrain makes it easy to see point A from point B. You just get yourself concealed high up on some peak or knoll or whatever the hell they call them. Then you settle in, and you gaze downward, and you watch. And you wait.

REACHER WAITED A long time in the stillness of Jodie's living room. His posture on the sofa changed from sitting to sprawling. After an hour he swiveled around and lay down. Closed his eyes. Opened them again and struggled to stay awake. Closed them again. Kept them closed. Figured he'd catch ten minutes. Figured he'd hear the elevator. Or the door. But when it came to it, he heard neither. He woke up and found her bending over him, kissing his cheek.

"Hey, Reacher," she said softly.

He pulled her to him and held her in a tight silent embrace. She hugged back, one-handed because she was still carrying her briefcase, but hard.

"How was your day?" he asked.

"Later," she whispered.

She dropped the briefcase and he pulled her down on top of him. She struggled out of her coat and let it fall. The silk lining whispered and sighed. She was in a wool dress with a zipper all the way down the back to the base of her spine. He unzipped it slowly and felt the warmth of her body underneath. She pushed up with her elbows sharp points in his stomach. Her hands scrabbled at his shirt. He pushed the dress off her shoulders. She pulled his shirt out of his waistband. Tore at his belt.

She stood up and her dress fell to the floor. She held out her hand and he took it and she led him to the bedroom. They stumbled out of their clothes as they walked. Made it to the bed. It was white and cool. Neon glow from the city outside lit it in random patterns.

She pushed him down, with her hands on his shoulders. She was strong, like a gymnast. Urgent and energetic and lithe on top of him. He was lost. They finished filmed in sweat in a tangle of sheets. She was pressed against him. He could feel her heart hammering on his chest. Her hair was in his mouth. He was breathing hard. She was smiling. Her face was tucked into his shoulder and he could feel the smile against his skin. The shape of her mouth, the cool of her teeth. The impatient curve in the muscles of her cheek.

She was beautiful in a way he couldn't describe. She was tall and lean and graceful, and blond and faintly tanned and she had spectacular hair and eyes. But she was more than that. She was shot through with energy and will and passion. Crackling with restless intelligence, like electricity. He traced his hand down the smooth curve of her back. She stretched her foot all the way down his leg and tried to lace her toes into his. The secret smile was still there, against his neck.

“Now you can ask me about my day,” she said.
Her words were muffled by his shoulder.
“How was your day?” he asked.
She put her hand flat on his chest and pushed herself up onto her elbow. Made a shape with her mouth and blew her hair off her face. Then the smile came back.
“It was great,” she said.
He smiled in turn.
“Great how?” he asked.
“Secretary gossip,” she said. “Mine talked to one from upstairs over lunch.”
“And?”
“There’s a partners’ meeting in a few days.”
“And?”
“The upstairs secretary had just typed the agenda. They’re going to make a partnership offer.”
He smiled. “Who to?”
She smiled back. “To one of the associates.”
“Which one?”
“Guess.”
He pretended to think about it. “They’d go for somebody special, right? The best they got? The smartest, hardest-working, most charming and all that?”
“That’s usually what they do.”
He nodded. “Congratulations, babe. You deserve it. You really do.”
She smiled happily and threaded her arms around his neck. Pressed herself down in a full-body hug, head to toe.
“Partner,” she said. “What I always wanted.”
“You deserve it,” he said again. “You really do.”
“A partner at thirty,” she said. “Can you believe it?”
He stared up at the ceiling and smiled. “Yes, I can believe it. If you’d gone into politics, you’d be president by now.”
“I can’t believe it,” she said. “I never can, when I get what I want.”
Then she was quiet for a second.
“But it hasn’t happened yet,” she said. “Maybe I should wait until it has.”
“It’ll happen,” he said.
“It’s only an agenda. Maybe they’ll all vote no.”
“They won’t,” he said.
“There’ll be a party,” she said. “Will you come?”
“If you want me to. If I won’t ruin your image.”
“You could buy a suit. Wear your medals. You’d blow them away.”
He was quiet for a spell, thinking about buying a suit. If he did, it would be the

first suit he'd ever worn.
"Have *you* got what you want?" she asked.
He wrapped his arms around her. "Right now?"
"Overall?"
"I want to sell the house," he said.
She lay still for a moment.
"OK," she said. "Not that you need my permission."
"It burdens me down," he said. "I can't handle it."
"You don't need to explain to me."
"I could live the rest of my life on the money I get for it."
"You'd have to pay taxes."
He nodded. "Whatever. What's left would buy me plenty of motel rooms."
"You should think carefully. It's the only asset you've got."
"Not to me. Money for motels is an asset. The house is a burden."
She was silent.
"I'm going to sell my car, too," he said.
"I thought you liked it," she said.
He nodded. "It's OK. For a car. I just don't like owning things."
"Owning a car isn't exactly the end of the world."
"It is to me. Too much hassle. It needs insurance, all that kind of stuff."
"You don't have insurance?"
"I thought about it," he said. "They need all kinds of paperwork first."
She paused.
"How will you get around?"
"Same as I always did, hitch rides, take the bus."
She paused again.
"OK, sell the car if you want to," she said. "But maybe keep the house. It's useful."
He shook his head, next to hers. "It drives me crazy."
He felt her smile.
"You're the only person I know who *wants* to be homeless," she said. "Most people try real hard to avoid it."
"There's nothing I want more," he said. "Like you want to make partner, I want to be free."
"Free of me too?" she asked, quietly.
"Free of the house," he said. "It's a burden. Like an anchor. You're not."
She unwrapped her arms from his neck and propped herself on an elbow.
"I don't believe you," she said. "The house anchors you and you don't like it, but I anchor you too, don't I?"
"The house makes me feel bad," he said. "You make me feel good. I only know

"The house makes me feel bad," he said. "You make me feel good. I only know how I feel."
"So you'd sell the house but you'd stick around New York?"
He was quiet for a beat.
"I'd maybe move around a little," he said. "You travel. You're busy a lot of the time. We could make it work."
"We'd drift apart."
"I don't think so."
"You'd stay away longer and longer."
He shook his head. "It'll be the same as it's been all year. Except I won't have the house to worry about."
"You've made up your mind, right?"
He nodded. "It's driving me crazy. I don't even know the zip code. Presumably because I don't *want* to know, deep down."
"You don't need my permission," she said again.
Then she was silent.
"You upset?" he asked, uselessly.
"Worried," she said.
"It won't change anything," he said.
"So why do it?"
"Because I have to."
She didn't reply.
THEY FELL ASLEEP like that, in each other's arms, with a strand of melancholy laced through the afterglow. Morning came and there was no time for more talk. Jodie showered and left with no breakfast and without asking him what he was doing or when he'd be back. He showered and dressed and locked up the apartment and rode down to the street and found Lisa Harper waiting for him. She was dressed in her third suit and she was leaning on the fender of the Bureau car. The day was bright with cold sun and the light was on her hair. The car was stopped at the curb with angry traffic swarming around it. The Bureau driver was motionless behind the wheel, staring straight ahead. The air was full of noise.
"You OK?" she asked.
He shrugged. "I guess."
"So let's go."
The driver fought traffic twenty blocks uptown and went underground into the same crowded garage Lamarr had brought him to. They used the same elevator in the corner. Rode up to the twenty-first floor. Stepped out into the same quiet gray corridor. The driver preceded them like a host and pointed to his left.
"Third door," he said.

Third door," he said.
James Cozo was behind his desk and looked as though he might have been there for an hour. He was in shirtsleeves. His jacket was on a hanger on a bentwood hat stand. He was watching television, political cable, an earnest reporter in front of the Capitol, rapid cutaways to the Hoover Building. The budget hearings.
"The return of the vigilante," he said.
He nodded to Harper and closed a file. Muted the television sound and pushed back from his desk and rubbed his hands over his narrow face, like he was washing without water.
"So what do you want?" he asked.
"Addresses," Reacher said. "For Petrosian's boys."
"The two you put in the hospital? They won't be pleased to see you."
"They'll be pleased to see me leave."
"You going to hurt them again?"
"Probably."
Cozo nodded. "Suits me, pal."
He pulled a file from a stack and rooted through it. Copied an address onto a slip of paper.
"They live together," he said. "They're brothers."
Then he thought again and tore the paper into shreds. Reversed the open file on the desk and took a new sheet of paper. Tossed a pencil on top of it.
"You copy it," he said. "Don't want my handwriting anywhere near this, literally or metaphorically."
The address was near Fifth, on Sixty-sixth Street.
"Nice neighborhood," Reacher said. "Expensive."
Cozo nodded again. "Lucrative operation."
Then he smiled.
"Well, it was," he said. "Until you got busy down in Chinatown."
Reacher said nothing.
"Take a taxi," Cozo said to Harper. "And you stay out of the way. No overt Bureau involvement here, OK?"
She nodded, reluctantly.
"Have fun," Cozo said.
THEY WALKED OVER to Madison with Harper craning like a tourist. Caught a cab uptown and got out on the corner of Sixtieth Street.
"We'll walk the rest of the way," Reacher said.
"We?" Harper said. "Good. I want to stay involved."
"You have to stay involved," Reacher said. "Because I won't get in without you."
The address led them six blocks north to a plain, medium-height apartment

The address led them six blocks north to a plain, medium-height apartment building faced with gray brick. Metal window frames, no balconies. Air conditioners built through the walls under the windows. No awning over the sidewalk, no doorman. But it was clean and well kept.
“Expensive place?” Harper asked.
Reacher shrugged. “I don’t know. Not the most expensive, I guess. But they won’t be giving them away.”
The street door was open. The lobby was narrow, with hard stucco walls carefully streaked with paint so they looked a little like marble. There was a single elevator at the back of the lobby, with a narrow brown door.
The apartment they wanted was on the eighth floor. Reacher touched the elevator button and the door rolled back. The car was lined with bronze mirror on all four sides. Harper stepped in and Reacher crowded after her. Pressed 8. An infinite number of reflections rode up with them.
“You knock on their door,” Reacher said. “Get them to open up. They won’t if they see me in the spyhole.”
She nodded and the elevator stopped on 8. The door rolled back. They stepped out on a dull landing the same shape as the lobby. The apartment they were looking for was in the back of the building on the right.
Reacher stood flat against the wall and Harper stood in front of the door. She bent forward and then back to flip her hair off her face. Took a breath and raised her hand and knocked on the door. Nothing happened for a moment. Then Harper stiffened like she was under scrutiny. There was a rattle of chain from the inside and the door opened a crack.
“Building management,” Harper said. “I need to check the air conditioners.”
Wrong season, Reacher thought. But Harper was more than six feet tall and had blond hair more than a yard long and her hands in her pockets so the front of her shirt was pulled tight. The door pushed shut for a second and the chain rattled again and the door swung back. Harper stepped inside like she was accepting a gracious invitation.
Reacher peeled off the wall and followed her in before the door closed again. It was a small dark apartment with a view of the light well. Everything was brown, rugs, furniture, drapes. There was a small foyer opening to a small living room. The living room held a sofa and two armchairs, and Harper. And both of the guys Reacher had last seen leaving the alley behind Mostro’s.
“Hey, guys,” he said.
“We’re brothers,” the first guy said, irrelevantly.
They both had broad strips of hospital gauze taped to their foreheads, stark white, a little longer and broader than the labels Reacher had stuck there. One of them had bandages on his hands. They were dressed identically in sweaters and

golf pants. Without their bulky overcoats, they looked smaller. One guy was wearing boat shoes. The other was wearing moccasin slippers that looked like he'd made them himself from a mail-order kit. Reacher stared at them and felt his aggression drain away.
"Shit," he said.
They stared back at him.
"Sit down," he said.
They sat, side by side on the sofa. They watched him, with fearful eyes hooded under the ludicrous gauze.
"Are these the right guys?" Harper asked.
Reacher nodded.
"Things change, I guess," he said.
"Petrosian's dead," the first guy said.
"We know that already," Reacher said back.
"We don't know nothing else," the second guy said.
Reacher shook his head. "Don't say that. You know plenty of things."
"Like what?"
"Like where Bellevue is."
The first guy looked nervous. "Bellevue?"
Reacher nodded. "The hospital they took you to."
Both brothers looked at the wall.
"You liked it there?" Reacher asked.
Neither one of them replied.
"You want to go back there?"
No reply.
"Big emergency room there, right?" Reacher said. "Good for fixing all kinds of things. Broken arms, broken legs, all kinds of injuries."
The brother with the bandaged hands was older. The spokesman.
"What do you want?" he said.
"A trade."
"What for what?"
"Information," Reacher said. "In exchange for not sending you back to Bellevue."
"OK," the guy said.
Harper smiled. "That was easy."
"Easier than I thought it would be," Reacher said.
"Things change," the guy said. "Petrosian's dead."
"Those guns you had," Reacher said. "Where did you get them?"
The guy was wary.

“The guns?” he said.
“The guns,” Reacher repeated. “Where did you get them?”
“Petrosian gave them to us,” the guy said.
“Where did he get them from?”
“We don’t know.”
Reacher smiled and shook his head. “You can’t say that. You can’t just say *we* don’t know. It’s not convincing. You could say *I* don’t know, but you can’t answer for your brother. You can’t know for sure what he knows, can you?”
“We don’t know,” the guy said again.
“They came from the Army,” Reacher said.
“Petrosian bought them,” the guy said.
“He *paid* for them,” Reacher said.
“He bought them.”
“He arranged their purchase, I accept that.”
“He gave them to us,” the younger brother said.
“Did they come in the mail?”
The older brother nodded. “Yes, in the mail.”
Reacher shook his head. “No, they didn’t. He sent you to pick them up someplace. Probably a whole consignment. ”
“He picked them up himself.”
“No, he didn’t. He sent you. Petrosian wouldn’t go himself. He sent you, in that Mercedes you were using. ”
The brothers stared at the wall, thinking, like there was a decision to be made.
“Who are you?” the older one asked.
“I’m nobody,” Reacher said.
“Nobody?”
“Not a cop, not FBI, not ATF, not anybody.”
No reply.
“So there’s an upside and a downside here,” Reacher said. “You tell me stuff, it stays with me. Doesn’t have to go any farther. I’m interested in the Army, not you. The downside is, you *don’t* tell me, I’m not concerned with sending you off to court with all kinds of civil rights. I’m concerned with sending you back to Bellevue with all kinds of broken arms and legs.”
“You INS?” the guy asked.
Reacher smiled. “Mislaid your green cards?”
The brothers said nothing.
“I’m not INS,” Reacher said. “I told you, I’m not anything. I’m nobody. Just a guy who wants an answer. You tell me the answer, you can stay here as long as you want, enjoy the benefits of American civilization. But I’m getting impatient.

Those shoes aren’t going to do it forever.”
“Shoes?”
“I don’t want to hit a guy wearing slippers like that.”
There was silence.
“New Jersey,” the older brother said. “Through the Lincoln Tunnel, there’s a roadhouse set back where Route 3 meets the turnpike.”
“What’s it called?”
“I don’t know,” the guy said. “Somebody’s Bar, is all I know. Mac something, like Irish.”
“Who did you see in there?”
“Guy called Bob.”
“Bob what?”
“Bob, I don’t know. We didn’t exchange business cards or anything. Petrosian just told us Bob.”
“A soldier?”
“I guess. I mean, he wasn’t in uniform or nothing. But he had real short hair.”
“How does it go down?”
“You go in the bar, you find him, you give him the cash, he takes you in the parking lot and gives you the stuff out of the trunk of his car.”
"A Cadillac,” the other guy said. "An old DeVille, some dark color.”
“How many times?”
“Three.”
“What stuff?”
“Berettas. Twelve each trip.”
“What time of day?”
“Evening time, around eight o’clock.”
“You have to call him ahead?”
The younger brother shook his head.
“He’s always in there by eight o’clock,” he said. “That’s what Petrosian told us.”
Reacher nodded.
“So what does Bob look like?” he asked.
“Like you,” the older brother said. “Big and mean.”

23

THE LAW PROVIDES that a narcotics conviction can be accompanied by confiscation of assets, which means that the DEA in New York City ends up with more automobiles than it can possibly ever need, so it loans out the surplus to other law enforcement agencies, including the FBI. The FBI uses those vehicles when it needs some anonymous transport that doesn't look like government-issue. Or when it needs to preserve some respectable distance between itself and some unspecified activity taking place. Therefore James Cozo withdrew the Bureau's sedan and the services of its driver and tossed Harper the keys to a black one-year-old Nissan Maxima currently parked in the back row of the underground lot.

"Have fun," he said again.

Harper drove. It was the first time she had driven in New York City, and she was nervous about it. She threaded around a couple of blocks and headed south on Fifth and motored slowly, with the taxis plunging and darting and honking around her.

"OK, what now?" she said.

Now we waste some time, Reacher thought.

"Bob's not around until eight," he said. "We've got the whole afternoon to kill."

"I feel like we should be doing something."

"No rush," Reacher said. "We've got three weeks."

"So what do we do?"

"First we eat," Reacher said. "I missed breakfast."

YOU'RE HAPPY TO miss breakfast because you need to be sure. The way you predict it, it's going to be a straight twelve-hour/twelve-hour split between the local police department and the Bureau, with changeovers at eight in the evening and eight in the morning. You saw it happen at eight in the evening yesterday, so now you're back bright and early to see it happen again at eight this morning. Missing a crummy help-yourself-in-the-lobby motel breakfast is a small price to pay for that kind of certainty. So is the long, long drive into position. You're not dumb enough to rent a room anywhere close by.

And you're not dumb enough to take a direct route, either. You wind your way through the mountains and leave your car on a gravel turnout a half-mile from your spot. The car is safe enough there. The only reason they built the turnout in the first place is that assholes are always leaving their cars there while they go watching eagles or scrambling over rocks or hiking up and down. A rental car

parked neatly on the gravel is as invisible as the ski bags on the airport carousel. Just part of the scenery.

You climb away from the road up a small hill maybe a hundred feet high. There are scrawny trees all over the place, a little more than shoulder high. They have no leaves, but the terrain keeps you concealed. You're in a kind of wide trench. You step left and right to pass tumbled boulders. At the top of the hill you follow the ridge to the left. You duck low as the ground starts to fall away on the other side. You drop to your knees and shuffle forward to where two giant rocks rest on each other, giving a wonderful random view of the valley through the triangle they make between them. You lean your right shoulder on the right-hand rock and Lieutenant Rita Scimeca's house slides into the exact center of your field of view, just a little more than two hundred yards away.

The house is slightly north and west of your position, so you're getting a full-frontal of the street side. It's maybe three hundred feet down the mountain, so the whole thing is laid out like a plan. The Bureau car is right there, parked outside. A clean Buick, dark blue. One agent in it. You use your field glasses. The guy is still awake. His head is upright. He's not looking around much. Just staring forward, bored out of his skull. You can't blame him. Twelve hours through the night, in a place where the last big excitement was somebody's Christmas bake sale.

It's cold in the hills. The rock is sucking heat out of your shoulder. There's no sun. Just sullen clouds stacked up over the giant peaks. You turn away for a moment and pull on your gloves. Pull your muffler up over the lower half of your face. Partly for the warmth, partly to break up the clouds of steam your breathing is creating in the air. You turn back. Move your feet and squirm around. Get comfortable. You raise the glasses again.

The house has a wire fence all the way around the perimeter of the yard. There's an opening onto a driveway. The driveway is short. A single garage door stands at the end of it, under the end of the front porch. There's a path off the driveway that loops around through some neat rockery planting to the front door. The Bureau car is parked at the sidewalk right across the driveway opening, just slightly up the hill from dead center. Facing down the rise. That puts the driver's line of vision directly in line with the mouth of the path. Intelligent positioning. If you walk up the hill to the house, he sees you coming all the way. You come on him from behind, he maybe spots you in his mirror, and he sees you for certain as soon as you pass him by. Then he gets a clear back view all the way as you walk up the looping path. Intelligent positioning, but that's the Bureau for you. You see movement a half-mile to the west and two hundred feet farther down the mountain. A black-and-white Crown Victoria, nosing through a right-angle turn.

Prowling, slow. It snuffles through the turns and enters her road. A cloud of white vapor trails from the tailpipe. The engine is cold. The car has been parked up all night behind a quiet station house. It comes up the street and slows and stops flank to flank with the Buick. The cars are a foot apart. You don't see it for sure but you know the windows are buzzing down. Greetings are being exchanged. Information is being passed on. It's all quiet, the Bureau guy is saying. Have a nice day, he's adding. The local cop is grunting. Pretending to be bored, while secretly he's thrilled to have an important mission. Maybe the first he's ever had. See you later, the Bureau guy is saying.

The black-and-white moves up the hill and turns in the road. The Buick's engine starts and the car lurches as the agent slams it into drive. The black-and-white noses in behind it. The Buick moves away down the hill. The black-and-white rolls forward and stops. Exactly where the Buick was, inch for inch. It bounces twice on its springs and settles. The motor stops. The white vapor drifts and disappears. The cop turns his head to the right and gets exactly the same view of the path the Bureau guy had gotten. Maybe not such a dumb-ass, after all.

HARPER DROVE THE Maxima into a commercial parking garage on West Ninth Street, right after Reacher told her the grid pattern was about to finish and the street layout was about to get messy. They walked back east and south and found a bistro with a view of Washington Square Park. The waitress had a copy of a digest-sized philosophy journal to lean her order pad on. A student from NYU, making ends meet. The air was cold, but the sun was out. The sky was blue.

"I like it here," Harper said. "Great city."

"I told Jodie I'm selling the house," Reacher said.

She looked across at him. "She OK with that?"

He shrugged. "She's worried. I don't see why. It makes me a happier person, how can that worry her?"

"Because it makes you a footloose person."

"It won't change anything."

"So why do it?"

"That's what she said."

Harper nodded. "She would. People do things for a reason, right? So she's thinking, what's the reason here?"

"Reason is I don't want to own a house."

"But reasons have layers. That's only the top layer. She's asking herself, OK, *why* doesn't he want to own a house?"

"Because I don't want the hassle. She knows that. I told her."

"Bureaucratic type of hassle?"

He nodded. “It’s a big pain in the ass.”
“Yes, it is. A real big pain in the ass. But she’s thinking bureaucratic hassle is just a kind of symbol for something else.”
“Like what?”
“Like wanting to be footloose.”
“You’re just going around in a circle.”
“I’m just telling you how she’s thinking.”
The philosophy student brought coffee and Danish. Left a check written out in a neat, academic hand. Harper picked it up.
“I’ll take care of it,” she said.
“OK,” Reacher said.
“You need to convince her,” Harper said. “You know, make her believe you’re going to stick around, even though you’re selling the house.”
“I told her I’m selling my car too,” he said.
She nodded. “That might help. Sounds like a stick-around thing to do.”
He paused for a beat.
“I told her I might travel a little,” he said.
She stared at him. “Christ, Reacher, that’s not very reassuring, is it?”
“She travels. She’s been to London twice this year. I didn’t make a big fuss about it?”
“How much do you plan to travel?”
He shrugged again. “I don’t know. A little, I guess. I like getting around. I really do. I told you that.”
Harper was quiet for a second.
“You know what?” she said. “Before you convince *her* you’re going to stick around, maybe you should convince yourself.”
“I am convinced.”
“Are you? Or do you figure you’ll be in and out, as and when?”
“In and out a little, I guess.”
“You’ll drift apart.”
“That’s what she said.”
Harper nodded. “Well, I’m not surprised.”
He said nothing. Just drank his coffee and ate his Danish.
“It’s make-your-mind-up time,” Harper said. “On the road or off the road, you can’t do both together.”
HIS LUNCH BREAK will be the first big test. That’s your preliminary conclusion. At first you wondered about bathroom arrangements, but he just went inside and used hers. He got out of the car after about ninety minutes, after his morning coffee had worked its way through. He stood stretching on the

sidewalk. Then he walked up the looping path and rang the doorbell. You adjusted the focus on the field glasses and got a pretty good side view. You didn't see her. She stayed in the house. You saw his body language, a little awkward, a little embarrassed. He didn't speak. He didn't ask. Just presented himself at the door. So the arrangement had been set up ahead of time. Tough on Scimeca, you think to yourself, psychologically speaking. A raped woman, random intrusion of a large male person for some explicit penis-based activity. But it happened smoothly enough. He went in, and the door closed, a minute passed, the door opened again, and he came back out. He walked back to the car, looking around some, paying attention. He opened the car door, slid inside, and the scene went back to normal.

So, no opportunity with the bathroom breaks. His lunch break would be the next chance. No way the guy is going twelve hours without eating. Cops are always eating. That's your experience. Doughnuts, pastries, coffee, steak and eggs. Always eating.

HARPER WANTED A view of the city. She was like a tourist. Reacher walked her south through Washington Square Park and all the way down West Broadway to the World Trade Center. It was about a mile and three quarters. They sauntered slowly and spent fifty minutes doing it. The sky was bright and cold and the city was teeming. Harper was enjoying it.

"We could go up to the restaurant," Reacher said. "Bureau could buy me lunch."

"I just bought you lunch," Harper said.

"No, that was a late breakfast."

"You're always eating," she said.

"I'm a big guy," he said. "I need nutrition."

They checked their coats in the lobby and rode up to the top of the building. Waited in line at the restaurant desk, with Harper pressed up against the wall of windows, gazing out at the view. She showed her badge and they got a table for two, right at a window facing directly back up West Broadway and Fifth Avenue beyond, from a quarter-mile high.

"Awesome," she said.

It was awesome. The air was crisp and clear and the view extended a hundred miles. The city was khaki far below them in the fall light. Packed, intricate, infinitely busy. The rivers were green and gray. The outer boroughs faded into Westchester and Connecticut and Long Island. In the other direction, New Jersey crowded the bank and curved away in the far distance.

"Bob's over there," she said.

"Someplace," Reacher agreed.

"Who is Bob?"

“He’s an asshole.”
She smiled. “Not a very exact description, criminologically speaking.”
“He’s a storeman,” Reacher said. “A nine-to-five guy, if he’s in the bar every night.”
“He’s not our guy, right?”
He’s nobody’s guy, Reacher thought.
“He’s small-time,” he said. “Selling out of the trunk of his car in the parking lot? No ambition. Not enough at stake to make it worth killing people.”
“So how can he help us?”
“He can name names. He’s got suppliers, and he knows who the other players are. One of the other players will name more names, and then another and another. ”
“They all know each other?”
Reacher nodded. “They carve it up. They have specialties and territories, same as anybody else.”
“Could take us a long time.”
“I like the geography here,” Reacher said.
“The geography? Why?”
“It makes sense. You’re in the Army, you want to steal weapons, where do you steal them from? You don’t creep around the barracks at night and pull them out from every footlocker you see. That way, you get yourself about eight hours’ grace until the guys wake up and say hey, where’s my damn Beretta?”
“So where do you steal them from?”
“Someplace they won’t be missed, which means storage. Find a stockpile facility where they’re laid up ready for the next war.”
“And where are those?”
“Look at an interstate map.”
“Why interstate?”
“Why do you think the interstates were built? Not so the Harper family could drive from Aspen to Yellowstone Park on vacation. So the Army could move troops and weapons around, fast and easy.”
“They were?”
Reacher nodded. “Sure they were. Eisenhower built them in the fifties, height of the Cold War thing, and Eisenhower was a West Pointer, first and last.”
“So?”
“So you look where the interstates all meet. That’s where they put the storage, so the stuff can go any which way, moment’s notice. Mostly just behind the coasts, because old Ike wasn’t too worried about parachutists dropping into Kansas. He was thinking of ships coming in from the sea.”

"And Jersey is good for that?"
Reacher nodded again. "Great strategic location. Therefore lots of storage, therefore lots of theft."
"Therefore Bob might know something?"
"He'll point us in a new direction. That's about all we can count on from Bob."
HIS LUNCH BREAK is no good. No good at all. You keep the field glasses tight to your eyes and watch the whole thing happen. A second black-and-white prowl car noses around the corner and moves slowly up the hill. It stops flank to flank against the first one and stays there, motor running. Two of the damn things, side by side. Probably the whole of the police department's fleet, right there in front of you.
You get a partial view. The driver's window is down on both cars. There's a brown paper sack and a closed cup of coffee. The new guy lifts them across the gap, elbow high to keep them upright. You adjust the focus on the field glasses. You see the waiting cop reach out. The scene is flat and two-dimensional and grainy, like the optics are at their limit. The cop takes the coffee first. His head turns as he finds the cup holder inside. Then he takes the bag. He props it on the ledge of his door and unrolls the top. Glances down. Smiles. He has a big, meaty face. He's looking at a cheeseburger or something. Maybe two of them, and a wedge of pie.
He rolls the top of the sack again and swings it inside. Almost certainly dumps it on his passenger seat. Then his head is moving. They're chatting. The cop is animated. He's a young guy. The flesh of his face is tight with youth. He's full of himself. Enchanted with his important mission. You watch him for a long moment. Watch the happy expression on his face. Wonder what that face will look like when he walks to her door for a bathroom break and gets no reply to his knock. Because right there and then you decide two things. You're going in there, to do the job. And you're going to work it without killing the cop first, just because you want to see that expression change.
THE NISSAN MAXIMA was briefly a drug dealers' favorite ride, so Reacher felt OK about using it to get out to the Jersey bar. It would look innocent enough parked in the lot. It would look *real*. Unmarked government cars never did. A normal person spends twenty grand on a sedan, he goes ahead and orders the chrome wheels and the pearl coat along with it. But the government never did, so their cars looked obvious, artificially plain, like they had big signs painted on the side saying *this is a police unmarked*. And if Bob saw such a thing in the lot, he'd break the habit of a lifetime and spend his evening someplace else.
Reacher drove. Harper preferred not to, not in the dark and the rush hour. And rush hour was bad. Traffic was slow up the spine of Manhattan and jammed at the entrance to the tunnel. Reacher played with the radio and found a station

the entrance to the tunnel. Reacher played with the radio and found a station where a woman was telling him how long he was going to have to wait. Forty, forty-five minutes. That was about twice as slow as walking, which was exactly how it felt.

They inched forward, deep under the Hudson River. His backyard was sixty miles upstream. He sat there and traced its contours in his mind, testing his decision. It was a nice enough yard, as yards go. Certainly it was fertile. You turned your head, the grass was a foot high when you turned it back. It had a lot of trees. Maples, which had been cute in the early fall. Cedars, which Leon must have planted himself, because they were placed in artful groups. Leaves came off the maples and little purple berries came off the cedars. When the leaves were down, there was a wide view of the opposite bank of the river. West Point was right there, and West Point had been an important part of Reacher's life. But he was not a nostalgic guy. Part of being a drifter means you look forward, not backward. You concentrate on what's ahead. And he felt in his gut that a big part of looking ahead was looking for *newness*. Looking for places you hadn't been and things you hadn't seen. And the irony of his life was that although he had covered most of the earth's surface, one time or another, he felt he hadn't seen much. A lifetime in the service was like rushing down a narrow corridor, eyes fixed firmly to the front. There was all kinds of enticing stuff off to the sides, which you rushed past and ignored. Now he wanted to take the side trips. He wanted a crazy zigzag, any direction he felt like, any old time he wanted. And returning to the same place every night wouldn't do it. So his decision was the right one. He said the words to himself. *Sell the house. The house is on the market. The house is for sale. The house is sold*. He said the words and a weight came up off of him. It wasn't just the *practical* weight, although that was important. No more fretting about leaks in the pipes and bills in the mail and oil deliveries and insurance coverage. It was the *release*. Like he was back in the world, unburdened. He was free and ready to go. It was like a door opening and sunlight flooding in. He smiled to himself in the thrumming darkness of the tunnel, Harper at his side.

"You actually enjoying this?" she said.

"Best mile of my life," he answered.

YOU WAIT ANDand you watch, hour after hour. Perfectionism like that, you don't find everywhere. But you are perfect, and you have to stay perfect. You have to stay sure. And by now you're sure the cop is a permanent fixture. He eats in his car, he uses her bathroom from time to time, and that's it. So you think about hijacking the cop, maybe tomorrow morning, just before eight o'clock, and impersonating him. Replacing him on duty. You think about sitting

in his car for a spell and then walking up to Scimeca's door and knocking, like you were ready to relieve yourself. You think about that for around a second and a half, and then you reject it, of course. His uniform wouldn't fit. And you'd be expected to chat with the Bureau guy at the eight o'clock handover. He'd know you were a fake, straight off the bat. It's not like he's dealing with a big anonymous police department like he'd get in New York or L.A.

So either the cop has to be moved, or you have to go in right past him. At first you toy with the idea of a diversion. What would it take to get him out of there? A major automobile accident at the crossroads, maybe. A fire in the school, perhaps. But as far as you know the village doesn't have a school. You've seen yellow buses on the road, heading in and out toward Portland. The school is probably in another jurisdiction. And an automobile accident would be hard to stage. Certainly you're not about to involve yourself in one. And how do you induce two other drivers to get in a crash?

Maybe a bomb threat. But where? At the station house? That would be no good. The cop would be told to stay where he was, safely out of the way, until it was checked out. So where else? Some spot where people are gathered, maybe. Somewhere the whole police department would be needed to handle the evacuation. But this is a tiny place. Where do people gather? The church, maybe. You can see a spire, down near the through road. But you can't wait until next Sunday. The library? Probably nobody in there. Two old dears at most, sitting there doing their needlepoint, ignoring the books. Evacuation could be handled by the other cop on his own in about three and a half seconds.

And a bomb threat would mean a phone call. You start to think about that. Where from? Calls can be traced. You could head back to the airport in Portland and call from there. Tracing a call to an airport pay phone is the same thing as not tracing it at all. But then you're miles out of position at the critical time. A safe call, but a useless call. Catch-22. And there are no pay phones within a million miles of where you're crouched, not in the middle of the damn Rocky Mountains or whatever the hell they call them. And you can't use your mobile, because eventually the call would appear on your bill, which ultimately is the same thing as a confession in open court. And who can you call? You can't allow anybody to hear your voice. It's too distinctive. Too dangerous.

But the more you think about it, the more your strategy centers around the phone. There's one person you can safely let hear your voice. But it's a geometric problem. Four dimensional. Time and space. You have to call from right here, in the open, within sight of the house, but you can't use your mobile. Impasse.

THEY DROVE OUT of the tunnel and streamed west with the traffic. Route 3

angled slightly north toward the Turnpike. It was a shiny night in New Jersey, damp asphalt everywhere, sodium lights with evening fog haloes strung like necklaces. There were lit billboards and neon signs left and right. Establishments of every nature behind lumpy blacktop yards.

The roadhouse they were looking for was in the back of a leftover lot where three roads met. It was labeled with a beer company's neon sign which said *Mac-Stiophan's* , which as far as Reacher understood Gaelic meant *Stevenson's*. It was a low building with a flat roof. Its walls were faced with brown boards and there was a green neon shamrock in every window. Its parking lot was badly lit and three-quarters empty. Reacher put the Maxima at a casual angle across two spaces near the door. Slid out and looked around. The air was cold. He turned a full circle in the dark, scanning the lot against the lights from the street.

"No Cadillac DeVille," he said. "He's not here yet."

Harper looked at the door, cautiously.

"We're a little early," she said. "I guess we'll wait."

"You can wait out here," he said. "If you prefer."

She shook her head.

"I've been in worse places," she said.

It was hard for Reacher to imagine where and when. The outer door led to a six-by-six lobby with a cigarette machine and a sisal mat worn smooth and greasy with use. The inner door led to a low dark space full of the stink of beer fumes and smoke. There was no ventilation running. The green shamrocks in the windows shone inward as well as outward and gave the place a pale ghostly glare. The walls were dark boards, dulled and sticky with fifty years of cigarettes. The bar was a long wooden structure with halved barrels stuck to the front. There were tall barstools with red vinyl seats and lower versions of the same thing scattered around the room near tables built of lacquered barrels with plywood circles nailed to their tops. The plywood was rubbed smooth and dirty from thousands of wrists and hands.

There was a bartender behind the bar and eight customers in the body of the room. All of them had glasses of beer set on the plywood in front of them. All of them were men. All of them were staring at the new-comers. None of them was a soldier. They were all wrong for the military. Some were too old, some were too soft, some had long dirty hair. Just ordinary workingmen. Or maybe unemployed. But they were all hostile. They were silent, like they had just stopped talking in the middle of low muttered sentences. They were staring, like they were trying to intimidate.

Reacher swept his gaze over all of them, pausing on each face, long enough to let them know he wasn't impressed, and short enough to stop them thinking he

was in any way interested. Then he stepped to the bar and rolled a stool out for Harper.
“What’s on draft?” he asked the bartender.
The guy was wearing an unwashed dress shirt with no collar. Pleats all the way down the front. He had a dish towel squared over his shoulder. He was maybe fifty, gray-faced, paunchy. He didn’t answer.
“What have you got?” Reacher asked again.
No reply.
“Hey, are you deaf?” Harper called to the guy.
She was half on and half off the stool, one foot on the floor, the other on the rung. Her jacket was draped open and she was twisting around from the waist. Her hair was loose down her back.
“Let’s make a deal,” she said. “You give us beer, we give you money, take it from there. Maybe you could turn it into a business, you know, call it running a saloon.”
The guy turned to her.
“Haven’t seen you in here before,” he said.
Harper smiled. “No, we’re new customers. That’s what it’s all about, expanding your customer base, right? Do it well enough, and you’ll be the barroom king of the Garden State, no time at all.”
“What do you want?” the guy said.
“Two beers,” Reacher said.
“Apart from that?”
“Well, we’re already enjoying the ambiance and the friendly welcome.”
"People like you don’t come in a place like mine without wanting something.”
“We’re waiting for Bob,” Harper said.
“Bob who?”
“Bob with real short hair and an old Cadillac DeVille, ” Reacher said. “Bob from the Army, comes in here eight o’clock every night.”
“You’re waiting for him?”
“Yes, we’re waiting for him,” Harper said.
The guy smiled. Yellow teeth, some of them missing.
“Well, you’ve got a long wait, then,” he said.
“Why?”
“Buy a drink, and I’ll tell you.”
“We’ve been trying to buy a drink for the last five minutes,” Reacher said.
“What do you want?”
“Two beers,” Reacher said. “Whatever’s on tap.”
“Bud or Bud Light.”
“One of each, OK?”

"One of each, OK?"
The guy took two glasses down from an overhead rack and filled them. The room was still silent. Reacher could feel eight pairs of eyes on his back. The guy placed the beers on the bar. There was an inch of soapy foam on the top of each of them. The guy peeled two cocktail napkins from a stack and dealt them out like cards. Harper pulled a wallet from her pocket and dropped a ten between the glasses.
"Keep the change," she said. "So why have we got a long wait for Bob?"
The guy smiled again and slid the ten backward. Folded it into his hand and put his hand in his pocket.
"Because Bob's in jail, far as I know," he said.
"What for?"
"Some Army thing," the guy said. "I don't know the details, and I don't *want* to know the details. That's how you do business in this part of the Garden State, miss, begging your damn pardon, your fancy ideas notwithstanding. "
"What happened?" Reacher asked.
"Military policemen came in and grabbed him up right here, right in this room."
"When?" Reacher asked.
"Took six of them to get him. They smashed a table. I just got a check from the Army. All the way from Washington, D.C. The Pentagon. In the mail."
"When was this?" Reacher asked.
"When the check came? Couple days ago."
"No, when did they arrest him?"
"I'm not sure," the guy said. "They were still playing baseball, I remember that. Regular season, too. Couple months ago, I guess."

24

THEY LEFT THE beer untouched on the bar and headed back to the parking lot. Unlocked the Nissan and slid inside.
“Couple months is no good,” Harper said. “Puts him right outside the picture.”
“He was never *in* the picture,” Reacher said. “But we’ll go talk to him anyway.”
“How can we do that? He’s in the Army system somewhere.”
He looked at her. “Harper, I was a military policeman for thirteen years. If I can’t find him, who can?”
“He could be anywhere.”
“No, he couldn’t. If this dump is his local bar, it means he was posted somewhere near here. Low-grade guy like that, a regional MP office will be handling him. Two-month time span, he’s not court-martialed yet, so he’s in a holding pattern at a regional MP HQ, which for this region is Fort Armstrong outside of Trenton, which is less than two hours away.”
“You sure?”
He shrugged. "Unless things have changed a hell of a lot in three years.”
“Some way you can check?” she asked.
“I don’t need to check.”
“We don’t want to waste time here,” she said.
He said nothing back and she smiled and opened her bag. Came out with a folded cellular phone the size of a cigarette packet.
“Use my mobile,” she said.
EVERYBODY USES MOBILES. They use them all the time, just constantly. It’s a phenomenon of the modern age. Everybody’s talk, talk, talking, all the time, little black telephones pressed up to their faces. Where does all that conversation come from? What happened to all that conversation before mobiles were invented? Was it all bottled up? Burning ulcers in people’s guts? Or did it just develop spontaneously because technology made it possible?
It’s a subject you’re interested in. Human impulses. Your guess is a small percentage of calls made represents useful exchange of information. But the vast majority must fall into one of two categories, either the fun aspect, the sheer delight of doing something simply because you can, or else the ego-building self-important bullshit aspect. And your observation is that it splits pretty much along gender lines. It’s not an opinion you’d care to voice in public, but privately you’re sure women talk because they enjoy it, and men talk because it builds them up. Hi, honey, I’m just getting off the plane, they say. So what? Like,

who cares?

But you're confident that men's use of mobiles is more closely connected to their ego needs, so it's necessarily a stronger attachment, and therefore a more frequent urge. So if you steal a phone from a man, it will be discovered earlier, and reacted to with a greater degree of upset. That's your judgment. Therefore you're sitting in the airport food court watching the women.

The other major advantage of women is that they have smaller pockets. Sometimes, no pockets at all. Therefore they carry bags, into which goes all their stuff. Their wallets, their keys, their makeup. And their mobile phones. They take them out to use them, maybe rest them on the table for a spell, and then put them right back in their bags. If they get up for a coffee refill, of course, they take their bags with them. That's ingrained. Always keep your pocketbook with you. But some of them have other bags too. There are laptop cases, which these days are made with all kinds of extra compartments for the disks and the CD-ROM thing and the cables. And some of them have pockets for mobiles, little external leather rectangles the same shape as the cigarettes-and-lighter cases women carried back when people smoked. Those other cases, they don't always take them with them. If they're just stepping away to the beverage counter, they often leave them at the table, partly to keep their place claimed, partly because who can carry a pocketbook and a laptop case and a hot cup of coffee?

But you're ignoring the women with the laptop cases. Because those expensive leather articles imply some kind of serious purpose. Their owners might get home in an hour and want to check their e-mail or finalize a pie chart or something, whereupon they open their laptop case and find their phone is gone. Police notified, account canceled, calls traced, all within an hour. No good at all.

So the women you're watching are the nonbusiness travelers. The ones with the little nylon backpacks carried as cabin baggage. And you're specifically watching the ones heading out of town, not in toward home. They're going to make a last couple of calls from the airport and then stuff their phones into their backpacks and forget all about them, because they're flying out of the local coverage area and they don't want to pay roaming charges. Maybe they're vacationing overseas, in which case their phones are as useless to them as their house keys. Something they have to take along, but not something they ever think about.

The one particular target you're watching most closely is a woman of about twenty-three or -four, maybe forty feet away. She's dressed comfortably like she's got a long flight ahead, and she's leaning back in her chair with her head tilted left and her phone trapped in her shoulder. She's smiling vacantly as she

talks, and playing with her nails. Picking at them and turning her hands in the light to look at them. This is a lazy say-nothing chat with a girlfriend. No intensity in her face. She's just talking for the sake of talking.
Her carry-on bag is on the floor near her feet. It's a small designer backpack, all covered in little loops and catches and zippers. It's clearly so complicated to close that she's left it gaping open. She picks up her coffee cup and puts it down again. It's empty. She talks and checks her watch and cranes to look at the beverage counter. She wraps up the chat. Flips her phone closed and drops it in her backpack. Picks up a matching pocketbook and stands up and wheels away to get more coffee.
You're on your feet instantly. Car keys in your hand. You hustle straight across the court, ten feet, twenty, thirty. You're swinging the keys. Looking busy. She's in line. About to be served. You drop your keys and they skid across the tiles. You bend to retrieve them. Your hand skims her bag. You come back up with the keys and the phone together. You walk on. The keys go back in your pocket. The phone stays in your hand. Nothing more ordinary than somebody walking through an airport lounge holding a mobile.
You walk at normal pace. Stop and lean on a pillar. You flip the phone open and hold it at your face, pretending to make a call. Now you're invisible. You're a person leaning on a pillar making a call. There are a dozen of you within a twenty-foot radius. You look back. She's back at her table, drinking her coffee. You wait, whispering nothing into the phone. She drinks. Three minutes. Four. Five. You press random buttons and start talking again. You're on a new call. You're busy. You're one of the guys. She stands up. Yanks on the cords of her backpack to close it up. Picks it up by the cords and bounces it against its own weight to make them tight. She buckles the catches. Swings the pack onto one shoulder and picks up her pocketbook. Opens it to check her ticket is accessible. Closes it again. She looks around once and strides purposefully out of the food court. Straight toward you. She passes within five feet and disappears toward the departure gates. You flip the phone closed and slip it into the pocket of your suit and you walk out the other way. You smile to yourself as you go. Now the crucial call is going to end up on someone else's bill.
THE PHONE CALL to the Fort Armstrong duty officer revealed nothing at all on the surface, but the guy's evasions were voiced in such a way that a thirteen-year Army cop like Reacher took them to be confirmation as good as he'd get if they were written in an affidavit sworn before a notary public.
"He's there," he said.
Harper had been eavesdropping, and she didn't look convinced.
"They tell you that for sure?" she asked.

“More or less,” he said.
“So is it worth going?”
He nodded. “He’s there, I guarantee it.”
The Nissan had no maps in it, and Harper had no idea of where she was. Reacher had only anecdotal knowledge of New Jersey geography. He knew how to get from A to B, and then from B to C, and then from C to D, but whether that was the most efficient direct route all the way from A to D, he had no idea. So he came out of the lot and headed for the turnpike on-ramp. He figured driving south for an hour would be a good start. He realized within a minute he was using the same road Lamarr had driven him on, just a few days before. It was raining lightly and the Nissan rode harder and lower than her big Buick. It was right down there in the tunnel of spray. The windshield was filmed with city grease and the wipers were blurring the view out with every alternate stroke. *Smear*, *clear*, *smear*, *clear*. The needle on the gas gauge was heading below a quarter.
“We should stop,” Harper said. “Get gas, clean the window.”
“And buy a map,” Reacher said.
He pulled off into the next service area. It was pretty much identical to the place Lamarr had used for lunch. Same layout, same buildings. He rolled through the rain to the gas pumps and left the car at the full-service island. The tank was full and the guy was cleaning the windshield when he got back, wet, carrying a colored map which unfolded awkwardly into a yard-square sheet.
“We’re on the wrong road,” he said. “Route 1 would be better.”
“OK, next exit,” Harper said, craning over. “Use 95 to jump across.”
She used her finger to trace south down Route 1. Found Fort Armstrong on the edge of the yellow shape that represented Trenton.
“Close to Fort Dix,” she said. “Where we were before. ”
Reacher said nothing. The guy finished with the windshield and Harper paid him through her window. Reacher wiped rain off his face with his sleeve and started the motor. Threaded his way back to the highway and watched for the turn onto 95.
I-95 was a mess, with heavy traffic. Route 1 was better. It curved through Highland Park and then ran dead straight for nearly twenty miles, all the way into Trenton. Reacher remembered Fort Armstrong as a left-hand turn coming north out of Trenton, so coming south it was a right-hand turn, onto another dead straight approach road, which took them all the way to a vehicle barrier outside a two-story brick guardhouse. Beyond the guardhouse were more roads and buildings. The roads were flat with whitewashed curbs and the buildings were all brick with radiused corners and external stairways made of welded tubular steel

painted green. Window frames were metal. Classic Army architecture of the fifties, built with unlimited budgets and unlimited scope. Unlimited optimism.
"The U.S. military," Reacher said. "We were kings of the world, back then."
There was dimmed light in the guardhouse window next to the vehicle barrier. A sentry was visible, silhouetted against the light, bulky in a rain cape and helmet. He peered through the window and stepped to the door. Opened it up and came out to the car. Reacher buzzed his window down.
"You the guy who called the captain?" the sentry asked.
He was a heavy black guy. Low voice, slow accent from the Deep South. Far from home on a rainy night. Reacher nodded. The sentry grinned.
"He figured you might show up in person," he said. "Go ahead in."
He stepped back into the guardhouse and the barrier came up. Reacher drove carefully over the tire spikes and turned left.
"That was easy," Harper said.
"You ever met a retired FBI agent?" Reacher asked.
"Sure, once or twice. Couple of the old guys."
"How did you treat them?"
She nodded. "Like that guy treated you, I guess."
"All organizations are the same," he said. "Military police more so than the others, maybe. The rest of the Army hates you, so you stick together more."
He turned right, then right again, then left.
"You been here before?" Harper asked.
"These places are all the same," he said. "Look for the biggest flower bed, that's where the general office is."
She pointed. "That looks promising."
He nodded. "You got the idea."
The headlight beams played over a rose bed the size of an Olympic pool. The roses were just dormant stalks, sticking up out of a surface lumpy with horse manure and shredded bark. Behind them was a low symmetrical building with whitewashed steps leading up to double doors in the center. A light burned in a window in the middle of the left-hand wing.
"Duty office," Reacher said. "The sentry called the captain soon as we were through the gate, so right now he's walking down the corridor to the doors. Watch for the light."
The fanlights above the doors lit up with a yellow glow.
"Now the outside lights," Reacher said.
Two carriage lamps mounted on the door pillars lit up. Reacher stopped the car at the bottom of the steps.
"Now the doors open," he said.
The doors opened inward and a man in uniform stepped through the gap.

The doors opened inward and a man in uniform stepped through the gap.
“That was me, about a million years ago,” Reacher said.
The captain waited at the top of the steps, far enough out to be in the light from the carriage lamps, far enough in to be sheltered from the drizzle. He was a head shorter than Reacher had ever been, but he was broad and he looked fit. Dark hair neatly combed, plain steel eyeglasses. His uniform jacket was buttoned, but his face looked open enough. Reacher slid out of the Nissan and walked around the hood. Harper joined him at the foot of the whitewashed steps.
“Come in out of the rain,” the captain called.
His accent was East Coast urban. Bright and alert. He had an amiable smile. Looked like a decent guy. Reacher went up the steps first. Harper saw his shoes leaving wet stains on the whitewash. Glanced down and saw her own were doing the same thing.
“Sorry,” she said.
The captain smiled again.
“Don’t worry,” he said. “The prisoners paint them every morning.”
“This is Lisa Harper,” Reacher said. “She’s with the FBI.”
“Pleased to meet you,” the captain said. “I’m John Leighton.”
The three of them shook hands all around at the doors and Leighton led them inside. He turned off the carriage lamps with a switch inside the doors and then killed the hallway light.
“Budgets,” he said. “Can’t waste money.”
Light from his office was spilling out into the corridor, and he led them toward it. Stood at his door and ushered them inside. The office was original fifties, updated only where strictly necessary. Old desk, new computer, old file cabinet, new phone. There were crammed bookcases and every surface was overloaded with paper.
“They’re keeping you busy,” Reacher said.
Leighton nodded. “Tell me about it.”
“So we’ll try not to take up too much of your time.”
“Don’t worry. I called around, after you called me, naturally. Friend of a friend said I should push the boat out. Word is you were a solid guy, for a major.”
Reacher smiled, briefly.
“Well, I always tried to be,” he said. “For a major. Who was the friend of the friend?”
“Some guy worked for you when you worked for old Leon Garber. He said you were a stand-up guy and old Garber always swore by you, which makes you pretty much OK as long as this generation is still in harness.”
“People still remember Garber?”
"Do Yankees fans still remember Joe DiMaggio?"

Do Yankees fans still remember Joe DiMaggio?
“I’m seeing Garber’s daughter,” Reacher said.
“I know,” Leighton said. “Word gets around. You’re a lucky guy. Jodie Garber’s a nice lady, from what I recall.”
“You know her?”
Leighton nodded. "I met her on the bases, when I was coming up.”
“I’ll remember you to her.”
Then he lapsed into silence, thinking about Jodie, and Leon. He was going to sell the house Leon had left him, and Jodie was worrying about it.
“Sit down,” Leighton said. “Please.”
There were two upright chairs in front of the desk, tubular metal and canvas, like the things storefront churches threw away a generation ago.
“So how can I help you?” Leighton said, aiming the question at Reacher, looking at Harper.
“She’ll explain,” Reacher said.
She ran through it all from the beginning, summarizing. It took seven or eight minutes. Leighton listened attentively, interrupting her here and there.
“I know about the women,” he said. “We heard.”
She finished with Reacher’s smoke screen theory, the possible Army thefts, and the trail which led from Petrosian’s boys in New York to Bob in New Jersey.
“His name is Bob McGuire,” Leighton said. “Quartermaster sergeant. But he’s not your guy. We’ve had him two months, and he’s too dumb, anyway.”
“We figured that,” Harper said. “Feeling was he could name names, maybe lead us to somebody more likely.”
“A bigger fish?”
Harper nodded. “Somebody doing enough business to make it worth killing witnesses.”
Leighton nodded back.
“Theoretically, there might be such a person,” he said, cautiously.
“You got a name?”
Leighton looked at her and shook his head. Leaned back in his chair and rubbed the heels of his hands over his eyes. Suddenly looked very tired.
“Problem?” Reacher asked.
“How long have you been out?” Leighton asked back, eyes closed.
“About three years, I guess,” Reacher said.
Leighton yawned and stretched and returned to an upright position.
“Things have changed,” he said. “Time marches on, right?”
“What’s changed?”
“Everything,” Leighton said. “Well, this, mainly.” He leaned over and tapped his

computer monitor with his nail. It made a glassy ringing *thunk*, like a bottle.
"Smaller Army, easier to organize, more time on our hands. So they computerized us, completely. Makes communication a whole lot easier. Makes it so we all know each other's business. Makes inventories easier to manage. You want to know how many Willys Jeep tires we got in store, even though we don't use Willys Jeeps anymore? Give me ten minutes, I can tell you."
"So?"
"So we keep track of everything, much better than we used to. For instance, we know how many M9 Berettas have ever been delivered, we know how many have ever been legitimately issued, and we know how many we got in store. And if those numbers didn't add up, we'd be worrying about it, believe me."
"So do the numbers add up?"
Leighton grinned, briefly. "They do now. That's for damn sure. Nobody's stolen an M9 Beretta from the U.S. Army in the last year and a half."
"So what was Bob McGuire doing two months ago?" Reacher asked.
"Selling out the last of his stockpile. He'd been thieving ten years, at least. A little computer analysis made it obvious. Him, and a couple dozen others in a couple dozen different locations. We put procedures in place to dry up the stealing and we rounded up all the bad guys selling whatever they still had left."
"All of them?"
"Computer says so. We were leaking weapons like crazy, all kinds of descriptions, couple of dozen locations, so we arrest a couple dozen guys, and the leakage has stopped. McGuire was about the last, maybe second-to-last, I'm not sure."
"No more weapons theft?"
"Yesterday's news," Leighton said. "You're behind the times."
There was silence.
"Good job," Reacher said. "Congratulations."
"Smaller Army," Leighton said. "More time on our hands."
"You got them *all*?" Harper asked.
Leighton just nodded. "All of them. Big push, worldwide. There weren't that many. Computers did the trick."
Silence in the office.
"Well, shit, there goes that theory," she said.
She stared at the floor. Leighton shook his head, cautiously.
"Maybe not," he said. "We've got a theory of our own."
She looked up again. "The big fish?"
Leighton nodded. "Right."
"Who is he?"

“He’s only theoretical, as of now.”
“Theoretical?”
“He’s not active,” Leighton said. “He’s not stealing anything. Like I told you, we identified all the leaks and we plugged them all. Couple dozen guys waiting for trial, all the leak locations accounted for. But the way we picked them up was we sent undercover guys in, to buy the stuff. Entrapment. Bob McGuire, for instance, he sold a couple of Berettas to a couple of lieutenants in a bar.”
"We were just there,” Harper said. "MacStiophan’s, near the New Jersey Turnpike.”
“Right,” Leighton said. “Our guys bought two M9s out of the trunk of his car, two hundred bucks apiece, which is about a third of what the Army pays for them, by the by. So then we haul McGuire in and we start ripping him apart. We know more or less exactly how many pieces he’s stolen over the years, because of the inventory analysis on the computer, and we figure an average price, and we start looking for where the money has gone. And we find about a half of it, either in bank accounts or in the form of stuff he’s bought.”
“So?” Reacher said.
“So nothing, not right then. But we’re pooling information and the story is pretty much the same everywhere. They’ve all got about a half of their money missing. More or less the exact same proportion everywhere. And these guys are not the smartest guys you’ve ever met, right? They couldn’t hide their money from us. And even if they could, why would they all hide exactly half of it? Why wouldn’t some of them hide all of it, or two thirds, or three quarters? You know, whatever, a different proportion in each case?”
“Enter the theoretical big fish,” Reacher said.
Leighton nodded. “Exactly. How else to explain it? It was like a puzzle with a missing piece. We started to figure some kind of a godfather figure, you know, some big guy in the shadows, maybe organizing everything, maybe offering protection in exchange for half the profit.”
“Or half the guns,” Reacher said.
“Right,” Leighton said.
“Somebody running a protection racket,” Harper said. “Like a scam inside a scam.”
“Right,” Leighton said again.
There was a long pause.
“Looks good from our point of view,” Harper said. “Guy like that, he’s smart and capable, and he has to run around taking care of problems in various random locations. Could explain why he’s interested in so many different women. Not because all the women knew *him*, but because maybe each one of them knew

one of his clients."
"Timing is good for you too," Leighton said. "If our guy is your guy, he started planning two, three months ago, when he heard his clients were starting to go down."
Harper sat forward. "What was the volume of business like two, three years ago?"
"Pretty heavy," Leighton said. "You're really asking how much these women could have seen, right?"
"Right."
"They could have seen plenty," Leighton said.
"So how good is your case?" she asked. "Against Bob McGuire, for instance?"
Leighton shrugged. "Not brilliant. We've got him for the two pieces he sold to our guys, of course, but that's only two pieces. The rest of it is basically circumstantial, and the fact the money doesn't tie up properly weakens the hell out of it."
"So eliminating the witnesses before the trials makes sense."
Leighton nodded. "Makes a hell of a lot of sense, I guess."
"So who is this guy?"
Leighton rubbed his eyes again. "We have no idea. We don't even know for sure there *is* a guy. He's just a guess right now. Just our theory."
"Nobody's saying anything?"
"Not a damn word. We've been asking, two months solid. We've got two dozen guys, all of them with their mouths shut tight. We figure the big guy's really put the frighteners on."
"He's scary, that's for sure," Harper said. "From what we know about him."
There was silence in Leighton's office. Just the brittle patter of rain on the windows.
"If he exists," Leighton said.
"He exists," Harper said.
Leighton nodded. "We think so too."
"Well, we need his name, I guess," Reacher said.
No reply.
"I should go talk to McGuire for you," Reacher said.
Leighton smiled. "I figured you'd be saying that before long. I was all set to say no, it's improper. But you know what? I just changed my mind. I just decided to say yes, go ahead. Be my guest."
THE CELL BLOCK was underground, like it always is in a regional HQ, below a squat brick building with an iron door, standing alone on the other side of the rose bed. Leighton led them over there through the rain, their collars turned up

against the damp and their chins ducked down to their chests. Leighton used an old-fashioned bellpull outside the iron door and it opened after a second to reveal a bright hallway with a huge master sergeant standing in it. The sergeant stepped aside and Leighton led them in.

Inside, the walls were made of brick faced with white porcelain glaze. The floors and the ceilings were smooth troweled concrete painted shiny green. Lights were fluorescent tubes behind thick metal grilles. Doors were iron, with square barred openings at the top. There was a cubbyhole office on the right, with a wooden rack of keys on four-inch metal hoops. There was a big desk, piled high with video recorders taping milky-gray flickering images from twelve small monitor screens. The screens showed twelve cells, eleven of them empty and one of them with a humped shape under a blanket on the bed.

"Quiet night at the Hilton," Reacher said.

Leighton nodded. "Gets worse Saturday nights. But right now McGuire's our only guest."

"The video recording is a problem," Reacher said.

"Always breaking down, though," Leighton said.

He bent to examine the pictures on the monitors. Braced his hands on the desk. Bent closer. Rolled his right hand until his knuckle touched a switch. The recorders stopped humming and the *REC* legends disappeared from the corners of the screens.

"See?" he said. "Very unreliable system."

"It'll take a couple hours to fix," the sergeant said. "At least."

The sergeant was a giant, shiny skin the color of coffee. His uniform jacket was the size of a field tent. Reacher and Harper would have fitted into it together. Maybe Leighton, too. The guy was the exact ideal-issue MP noncom.

"McGuire's got a visitor, Sergeant," Leighton said. An off-the-record voice. "Doesn't need to go in the log."

Reacher took off his coat and his jacket. Folded them and left them on the sergeant's chair. The sergeant took a hoop of keys off the wooden board and moved to the inside door. Unlocked it and swung it back. Reacher stepped through and the sergeant closed the door and locked it again behind him. Pointed to the head of a staircase.

"After you," he said.

The staircase was built of bricks, rounded at the nose of each stair. The walls either side were the same white glaze. There was a metal handrail, bolted through to the wall every twelve inches. Another locked door at the bottom. Then a corridor, then another locked door. Then a lobby, with three locked doors to three blocks of cells. The sergeant unlocked the middle door. Flipped a switch

and fluorescent light stuttered and flooded a bright white area forty feet by twenty. There was an access zone the length of the block and about a third of its depth. The rest of the space was divided into four cells delineated by heavy iron bars. The bars were thickly covered in shiny white enamel paint. The cells were about ten feet wide, maybe twelve deep. Each cell had a video camera opposite, mounted high on the wall. Three of the cells were empty, with their gates folded back. The fourth was locked closed. It held McGuire. He was struggling awake, sitting up, surprised by the light.

"Visitor for you," the sergeant called.

There were two tall wooden stools in the corner of the access zone nearest the exit door. The sergeant carried the nearer one over and placed it in front of McGuire's cell. Walked back and sat on the other. Reacher ignored the stool and stood with his hands behind his back, gazing silently through the bars. McGuire was pushing his blanket aside and swinging his feet to the floor. He was wearing an olive undershirt and olive shorts. He was a big guy. More than six feet tall, more than two hundred pounds, more than thirty-five years old. Heavily muscled, a thick neck, big arms, big legs. Thinning hair cropped close, small eyes, a couple of tattoos. Reacher stood absolutely still, watching him, saying nothing.

"Hell are you?" McGuire said. His voice matched his bulk. It was deep, and the words were half swallowed by a heavy chest. Reacher made no reply. It was a technique he had perfected half a lifetime ago. Just stand absolutely still, don't blink, say nothing. Wait for them to run through the possibilities. *Not a buddy. Not a lawyer. Who, then?* Wait for them to start worrying.

"Hell are you?" McGuire said again.

Reacher walked away. He stepped over to where the master sergeant was sitting and bent to whisper in his ear. The giant's eyebrows came up. *You sure?* Reacher whispered again. The guy nodded and stood up and handed Reacher the hoop of keys. Went out through the door and closed it behind him. Reacher hung the keys on the knob and walked back to McGuire's cell. McGuire was staring through the bars at him.

"What do you want?" he said.

"I want you to look at me," Reacher replied.

"What?"

"What do you see?"

"Nothing," McGuire said.

"You blind?"

"No, I ain't blind."

"Then you're a liar," Reacher said. "You don't see nothing."

"I see some guy," McGuire said.

"I see some guy," McGuire said.
“You see some guy bigger than you who had all kinds of special training while you spent your time shuffling paper in some piece-of-shit quartermaster’s stores.”
“So?”
"So nothing. Just something to bear in mind for later, is all.”
“What’s later?”
“You’ll find out,” Reacher said.
“What do you want?”
“I want proof.”
“Of what?”
“Of exactly how dumb a piece of shit like you really is.”
McGuire paused. His eyes narrowed, pushed into deep furrows by his brow.
“Easy for you to talk like that,” he said. “Standing six feet away from these bars.”
Reacher took an exaggerated pace forward.
“Now I’m two feet from the bars,” he said. “And you’re still a dumb piece of shit.”
McGuire took a step forward, too. He was a foot inside the cell, holding a bar in each fist. A level gaze in his eyes. Reacher stepped forward again.
“Now I’m a foot from the bars, same as you,” he said. “And you’re *still* a dumb piece of shit.”
McGuire’s right hand came off the bar and closed into a fist and his whole arm rammed straight out like a piston. It was headed for Reacher’s throat. Reacher caught the wrist and swayed and whipped the fist past his head and rocked his weight back and hauled McGuire tight up against the inside of the bars. Twisted the wrist palm-out and walked left and bent the arm back against the elbow joint.
“See how dumb you are?” he said. “I keep on walking, I break your arm.”
McGuire was gasping against the pressure. Reacher smiled briefly and dropped the wrist. McGuire stared at him and hauled his arm back inside, rolling the shoulder, testing the damage.
“What do you want?” he said again.
“Want me to open the cell gate?”
“What?”
“Keys are right over there. You want the gate open, even things up a little?”
McGuire’s eyes narrowed a little more. He nodded. “Yeah, open the damn gate.”
Reacher stepped away and lifted the hoop of keys off the knob of the exit door. Shuffled through them and found the right one. He’d handled plenty of cell keys. He could pick one out blindfolded. He stepped back and unlocked the gate. Swung it open. McGuire stood still. Reacher walked away and put the hoop of

swung it open. McGuire stood still. Reacher walked away and put the hoop of keys back on the doorknob. Stood facing the door, his back to the cell.
“Sit down,” he called. “I left the stool there for you.”
He sensed McGuire coming out of the cell. Heard his bare feet on the concrete floor. Heard them stop.
“What do you want?” McGuire said again.
Reacher kept his back turned. Straining to sense McGuire’s approach. It wasn’t happening.
“It’s complicated,” he said. “You’re going to have to juggle a number of factors.”
“What factors?” McGuire asked, blankly.
“First factor is I’m unofficial, OK?” Reacher said.
“What does that mean?”
“You tell me.”
“I don’t know,” McGuire said.
Reacher turned around. “It means I’m not an Army cop, I’m not a civilian cop, in fact I’m not anything at all.”
“So?”
“So there’s no comeback on me. No disciplinary procedures, no pension to lose, no nothing.”
“So?”
“So if I leave you walking on crutches and drinking through a straw the rest of your life, there’s nothing anybody can do to me. And we got no witnesses in here.”
“What do you want?”
“Second factor is whatever the big guy says he’ll do to you, I can do worse.”
“What big guy?”
Reacher smiled. McGuire’s hands bunched into fists. Heavy biceps, big shoulders.
“Now it gets sophisticated,” Reacher said. “You need to concentrate real hard on this part. Third factor is, if you give me the guy’s name, he goes away somewhere else, forever. You give me his name, he can’t get to you. Not ever, you understand?”
“What name? What guy?”
“The guy you were paying off with half your take.”
“No such guy.”
Reacher shook his head. “We’re past that stage now, OK? We know there’s such a guy. So don’t make me smack you around before we even get to the important part.”
McGuire tensed up. Breathed hard. Then he quieted down. His body slackened

McGuire tensed up. Breathed hard. Then he quieted down. His body slackened slightly and his eyes narrowed again.
"So concentrate," Reacher said. "You think that to rat him out puts you in the shit. But you're wrong. What you need to understand is, you rat him out and actually it makes you safe, the whole rest of your life, because people are looking at him for a bunch of things a whole lot worse than ripping off the Army."
"What's he done?" McGuire asked.
Reacher smiled. He wished the video cameras had sound. *The guy exists*. Leighton would be dancing around the office.
"The FBI thinks he killed four women. You give me his name, they'll put him away forever. Nobody's even going to ask him about anything else."
McGuire was silent. Thinking about it. It wasn't the speediest process Reacher had ever seen.
"Two more factors," he said. "You tell me right now, I'll put in a good word for you. They'll listen to me, because I used to be one of them. Cops stick together, right? I can get you easy time."
McGuire said nothing.
"Last factor," Reacher said gently. "You need to understand, sooner or later you'll tell me anyway. It's just a question of timing. Your choice. You can tell me right now, or you can tell me in a half hour, right after I've broken your arms and legs and I'm about to snap your spine."
"He's a bad guy," McGuire said.
Reacher nodded. "I'm sure he's real bad. But you need to prioritize. Whatever he says he's going to do, that's theoretical, way off in the future, and like I told you, it isn't going to happen anyway. But what I'm going to do, it's going to happen right now. Right here."
"You ain't going to do nothing," McGuire said.
Reacher turned and picked up the wooden stool. Flipped it upside down and held it chest high with his hands around two of the legs. Took a firm backhand grip and bunched his shoulders and pulled steadily. Then he breathed hard and snapped his elbows back and the legs tore away from the rungs. The rungs clattered to the floor. He reversed the stool and held the seat in his left hand and splintered a leg free with his right. Dropped the wreckage and retained the leg. It was about a yard long, the size and weight of a ball bat.
"Now you do the same," he said.
McGuire tried hard. He turned over his own stool and grasped the legs. His muscles bunched and the tattoos swelled, but he got nowhere with it. He just stood there, holding the stool upside down.
"Too bad." Reacher said. "I tried to make it fair."

“He was Special Forces,” McGuire said. “He was in Desert Storm. He’s real tough.”
“Doesn’t matter,” Reacher said. “He resists, the FBI will shoot him down. End of problem.”
McGuire said nothing.
“He won’t know it came from you,” Reacher said. “They’ll make it look like he left some evidence behind. ”
McGuire said nothing. Reacher swung the leg of the stool.
“Left or right?” he asked.
“What?” McGuire said.
“Which arm you want me to break first?”
"LaSalle Kruger,” McGuire said. "Supply battalion CO. He’s a colonel.”

25

STEALING THE PHONE was candy from a baby, but the reconnaissance is a bitch. Timing it right was the first priority. You needed to wait for complete darkness, and you wanted to wait for the daytime cop's final hour. Because the cop is dumber than the Bureau guy, and because somebody's last hour is always better than somebody else's first hour. Attention will have waned. Boredom will have set in. His eyes will have glazed and he'll be thinking ahead to a beer with his buddies or a night in front of the television with his wife. Or however the hell he spends his downtime.

So your window extends to about forty minutes, say seven to seven-forty. You plan it in two halves. First the house, then the surrounding area. You drive back from the airport and you approach on the through road. You drive straight through the junction three streets from her house. You stop at a hikers' parking area two hundred yards farther north. There's a wide gravel trail leading east up the slope of Mount Hood. You get out of your car and you turn your back on the trail and you work your way west and north through lightly wooded terrain. You're about level with your first position, but on the other side of her house, behind it, not in front of it.

The terrain means the houses don't have big yards. There are slim cultivated strips behind the buildings, then fences, then steep hillside covered in wild brush. You ease through the brush and come out at her fence. Stand motionless in the dark and observe. Drapes are drawn. It's quiet. You can hear a piano playing, very faintly. The house is built into the hillside, and it's at right angles to the street. The side is really the front. The porch runs all the way along it. Facing you is a wall dotted with windows. No doors. You ease along the fence and check the other side, which is really the back of the house. No doors there either. So the only ways in are the front door on the porch, and the garage door facing the street. Not ideal, but it's what you expected. You've planned for it. You've planned for every contingency.

"OK, COLONEL KRUGER," Leighton said. "We're on your ass now."

They were back in the duty office, damp from the jog through the nighttime rain, high with elation, flushed with cold air and success. Handshakes had been exchanged, high fives had been smacked, Harper had laughed and hugged Reacher. Now Leighton was scrolling through a menu on his computer screen, and Reacher and Harper were sitting side by side in front of his desk on the old upright chairs, breathing hard. Harper was still smiling, basking in relief and triumph.

triumph.
“Loved that business with the stool,” she said. “We watched the whole thing on the video screen.”
Reacher shrugged.
“I cheated,” he said. “I chose the right stool, is all. I figured visiting time, that sergeant sits on the one by the door, wriggles around a little because he’s bored. Guy that size, the joints were sure to be cracked. The thing practically fell apart.”
“But it looked real good.”
“That was the plan. First rule is to look real good.”
“OK, he’s in the personnel listings,” Leighton said. "LaSalle Kruger, bird colonel, right there.”
He tapped the screen with his nail. It made the same glassy *thunk* they’d heard before. Like a bottle.
“Has he been in trouble?” Reacher asked.
“Can’t tell, yet,” Leighton said. “You think he’ll have an MP record?”
“Something happened,” Reacher said. “Special Forces in Desert Storm, and now he’s working supply? What’s that about?”
Leighton nodded. “It needs explaining. Could be disciplinary, I guess.”
He exited the personnel listings and clicked on another menu. Then he paused.
“This will take all night,” he said.
Reacher smiled. “You mean you don’t want us to see anything.”
Leighton smiled back. “Right first time, pal. You can smack the prisoners around as much as you want, but you can’t look at the computer stuff. You know how it is.”
“I sure do,” Reacher said.
Leighton waited.
“That inventory thing about the jeep tires?” Harper said suddenly. “Could you trace some missing camouflage paint in there?”
“Maybe,” Leighton said. “Theoretically, I guess.”
“Eleven women on his list, look for about three hundred gallons,” she said. “If you could put Kruger together with the paint, that would do it for me.”
Leighton nodded.
“And dates,” she said. “Find out if he was off duty when the women were killed. And match the locations, I guess. Confirm there were thefts where the women served. Prove they saw something.”
Leighton looked across at her. “The Army is going to just love me, right? Kruger’s our guy, and I’m busting my ass all night so we can give him away to the Bureau.”
“I’m sorry,” she said. “But the jurisdiction issue is clear, isn’t it? Homicide beats

theft."
Leighton nodded, suddenly somber.
"Like scissors beats paper," he said.
YOU'VE SEEN ENOUGH of the house. Standing there in the dark staring at it and listening to her play the damn piano isn't going to change anything. So you step away from the fence and duck into the brush and work your way east and south, back toward the car. You get there and dust yourself off and slide in and start it up and head back down through the crossroads. Part two of your task ahead, and you've got about twenty minutes to complete it in. You drive on. There's a small shopping center two miles west of the junction, left-hand side of the road. An old-fashioned one-story mall, shaped like a squared-off letter C. A supermarket in the middle like a keystone, small single-unit stores spreading either side of it. Some of them are boarded up and empty. You pull into the parking lot at the far end and you nose along the fire lane, looking. You find exactly what you want, three stores past the supermarket. It's nothing you didn't expect to find, but still you clench your fist and bang it on the rim of the steering wheel. You smile to yourself.
Then you turn the car around and idle back through the lot, checking it out, and your smile dies. You don't like it. You don't like it at all. It's completely overlooked. Every storefront has a direct view. It's badly lit now, but you're thinking about daylight. So you drive around behind the arm of the C, and your smile comes back again. There's a single row of overspill parking back there, facing plain painted delivery doors in the back walls of the stores. No windows. You stop the car and look around. A complete circle. This is your place. No doubt about it. It's perfect.
Then you drive back into the main lot and you park up alongside a small group of other vehicles. You kill the motor and wait. You watch the through road. You wait and watch ten minutes, and then you see the Bureau Buick heading by, not fast, not slow, reporting for duty.
"Have a nice night," you whisper.
Then you start your car again and wind around the parking lot and drive off in the opposite direction.
LEIGHTON RECOMMENDED A motel a mile down Route 1 toward Trenton. He said it was where the prisoners' visitors stayed, it was cheap, it was clean, it was the only place for miles around and he knew the phone number. Harper drove, and they found it easily enough. It looked fine from the outside, and it had plenty of vacancies.
"Number twelve is a nice double," the desk clerk said.
Harper nodded.

“OK, we’ll take it,” she said.
“We will?” Reacher said. “A double?”
“Talk about it later,” she said.
She paid cash and the desk guy handed over a key.
“Number twelve,” he said again. “Down the row a piece.”
Reacher walked through the rain, and Harper brought the car. She parked it in front of the cabin and found Reacher waiting at the door.
“What?” she said. “It’s not like we’re going to sleep, is it? We’re just waiting for Leighton to call. May as well do that in here as in the car.”
He just shrugged and waited for her to unlock the door. She opened up and went inside. He followed.
“I’m too excited to sleep, anyway,” she said.
It was a standard motel room, familiar and comforting. It was overheated and the rain was loud on the roof. There were two chairs and a table at the far end of the room by a window. Reacher walked through and sat in the right-hand chair. Put his elbows on the table and his head in his hands. Kept very still. Harper moved around, restlessly.
“We’ve got him, you know that?” she said.
Reacher said nothing.
“I should call Blake, give him the good news,” Harper said.
Reacher shook his head. “Not yet.”
“Why not?”
“Let Leighton finish up. Quantico gets involved at this point, they’ll pull him off. He’s only a captain. They’ll haul in some two-star asshole, and he’ll never get near the facts for the bullshit. Leave it with Leighton, let him get the glory.”
She was in the bathroom, looking at the rack of towels and the bottles of shampoo and the packets of soap. She came out and took her jacket off. Reacher looked away.
“It’s perfectly safe,” she said. “I’m wearing a bra.”
Reacher said nothing.
“What?” she asked. “Something’s on your mind.”
“It is?”
She nodded. “Sure it is. I can tell. I’m a woman. I’m intuitive.”
He looked straight at her. “Truth is I don’t especially want to be alone in a room with you and a bed.”
She smiled, happily, mischievously. “Tempted?”
“I’m only human.”
“So am I,” she said. “If I can control myself, I’m sure you can.”
He said nothing.

“I’m going to take a shower,” she said.
“Christ,” he muttered.
IT’S A STANDARD motel room, like a thousand you’ve seen coast to coast. Doorway, bathroom on the right, closet on the left, queen bed, dresser, table and two chairs. Old television, ice bucket, awful pictures on the wall. You hang your coat in the closet, but you keep your gloves on. No need to leave fingerprints all over the place. No real possibility of them ever finding the room, but you’ve built your whole life on being careful. The only time you take your gloves off is when you’re washing, and motel bathrooms are safe enough. You check out at eleven, and by twelve a maid is spraying cleaner all over every surface and wiping everything with a wet cloth. Nobody ever found a meaningful fingerprint in a motel bathroom.
You walk through the room and you sit in the left-hand chair. You lean back, you close your eyes, and you start to think. Tomorrow. It has to be tomorrow. You plan the timing by working backward. You need dark before you can get out. That’s the fundamental consideration. That drives everything else. But you want the daytime cop to find her. You accept that’s just a whim on your part, but hey, if you can’t brighten things up with a little whimsy, what kind of life is that? So you need to be out after dark, but before the cop’s last bathroom break. That specifies a pretty exact time, somewhere between six and six-thirty. Call it five-forty, for a margin. No, call it five-thirty, because you really need to be back in position to see the cop’s face.
OK, five-thirty. Twilight, not really dark, but it’s acceptable. The longest time you spent in any of the previous places was twenty-two minutes. In principle this one won’t be any longer, but you’re going to allow a full half hour. So you need to be inside and started by five. Then you think it through from her point of view, and it’s pretty clear you need to be making the phone call at about two o’clock. So, check out of this dump before eleven, you’re over there before twelve, you wait and watch, you make the call at two. It’s decided. You open your eyes and stand up. Undress and use the bathroom. Pull back the covers and slide into bed, wearing nothing but your gloves.
HARPER CAME OUT of the bathroom wearing nothing but a towel. Her face was scrubbed and her hair was wet. Under the weight of the water, it hung down past her waist. Without makeup, her face looked vulnerable. Cornflower-blue eyes, white teeth, cheekbones, skin. She looked about fourteen, except she was more than six feet tall. And that kind of height made a standard-issue motel towel seriously deficient in terms of length.
“I think I better call Blake,” she said. “I should really check in.”
“Don’t tell him anything,” Reacher said. “I mean it, things will spin out of

control."
She nodded. "I'll just tell him we're close."
He shook his head. "Vaguer than that, OK? Just say we're seeing some guy tomorrow who might have something connected."
"I'll be careful," she said. She sat down at the mirror. The towel rode up. She started looking at her hair.
"Can you get my phone out of my pocketbook for me?" she called.
He walked to the bed and slipped his hand into her bag. Things in there released faint fragrance as they moved. He found the phone and slipped it out and carried it over to her.
"Be real vague, OK?" he said again.
She nodded and opened the phone.
"Don't worry," she said.
"I guess I'll shower too."
She smiled. "Enjoy. I won't come in, I promise."
He went into the bathroom and closed the door. Harper's clothes were hanging from the hook on the back. All of them. The underwear was white and lacy. He thought about setting the shower icy cold, but decided to rely on willpower alone. So he set it hot and stripped off his clothes. Dumped them in a pile on the floor. Took the folding toothbrush from his jacket pocket and cleaned his teeth with plain water. Then he stood under the shower and washed with the same soap and shampoo Harper had used. He stood for a long time, trying to relax. Then he gave it up and turned the handle to cold. He held it there, gasping. One minute. Two. Then he shut it off and groped for a towel.
She knocked on the door.
"Are you done?" she called. "I need my clothes."
He unfolded the towel and wrapped it around his waist.
"OK, come in," he called.
"Just pass them out," she called back.
He bunched them into his hand and lifted them off the hook. Cracked the door and passed them through. She took them and walked away. He toweled himself almost dry and dressed, awkward in the narrow space. Combed his hair with his fingers. He stood still for a minute. Then he rattled the door handle and came out. She was standing by the bed, wearing some of her clothes. The rest of them were folded over the back of the dresser chair. Her hair was combed back. Her phone was closed, lying next to the ice bucket.
"What did you tell him?" he asked.
"Just what you said. We're meeting some guy in the morning, noting specific."
She was wearing the shirt, but the tie was draped over the chair. So was the bra.

And the suit trousers.
“He have anything to say?” he asked.
“Poulton’s in Spokane,” she said. “The Hertz thing came to nothing, just some woman on business. But the UPS guy is coming through with stuff. They’re talking tonight, but they’re three hours behind, so we won’t hear anything until morning, probably. But they identified the date from the baseball thing and UPS is pulling the records.”
"Won’t say LaSalle Kruger on the paperwork, that’s for sure.”
“Probably not, but that doesn’t matter anymore, does it? We found him.”
She sat down on the edge of the bed, her back to him.
“Thanks to you,” she said. “You were absolutely right, a smart guy with a good solid plain-vanilla motive. ”
She stood up again, restless. Paced the small area between the bed and the table. She was wearing the underpants. He could see that, through the shirttails. Her ass was wonderful. Her legs were lean. And long. Her feet were small and delicate, for her height.
“We should celebrate,” she said.
Reacher propped the pillows on the far side of the bed and leaned back against them. Looked up at the ceiling and concentrated on the sound of the rain battering on the roof.
“No room service in a place like this,” he said.
She turned to face him. The first two buttons on her shirt were undone. Thing like that, the effect depends on how far apart the buttons are. If they’re close together, it doesn’t mean much. But these were well spaced out, maybe three or four inches between each of them.
“It’s Jodie, isn’t it?” she said.
He nodded. “Of course it is.”
“Wasn’t for her, you’d want to, right?”
“I do want to,” he said.
Then he paused.
“But I won’t,” he said. “Because of her.”
She looked at him, and then she smiled.
“I like that in a guy, I guess,” she said.
He said nothing.
“Steadfastness,” she said.
He said nothing. There was silence. Just the sound of the rain on the roof, relentless and insistent.
“It’s an attractive characteristic,” she said.
He looked at the ceiling.
“Not that you’re short of attractive characteristics,” she said.

"Not that you're short of attractive characteristics," she said.
He listened to the rain. She sighed, just a tiny sound. She moved away, just an inch. But enough to ease the crisis.
"So you're going to stick around New York," she said.
He nodded again. "That's the plan."
"She'll be pissed about the house. Her father willed it to you."
"She might be," he said. "But she'll have to deal with it. The way I see it, he left me a choice, more than anything. The house, or the money I'd get for it. My choice. He knew what I was like. He wouldn't be surprised. Or upset either."
"But it's an emotional issue."
"I don't see why," he said. "It wasn't her childhood home or anything. They never really lived there. She didn't grow up there. It's just a wooden building."
"It's an anchor. That's how she sees it."
"That's why I'm selling it."
"Therefore naturally she'll worry."
He shrugged. "She'll learn. I'll stick around, house or no house."
The room went quiet again. The rain was easing. She sat down on the bed, opposite him. Tucked her bare knees up under her.
"I still feel like celebrating," she said.
She put her hand palm down in the space between them and leaned over.
"Celebration kiss," she whispered. "Nothing more, I promise."
He looked at her and reached around with his left arm and pulled her close. Kissed her on the lips. She put her hand behind his head and pushed her fingers into his hair. Tilted her head and opened her mouth. He felt her tongue on his teeth. In his mouth. He closed his eyes. Her tongue was urgent. Deep in his mouth. It felt good. He opened his eyes and saw hers, too close to focus on. They were shut tight. He let her go and pulled away, full of guilt.
"Something I need to tell you," he said.
She was breathless, and her hair was a mess.
"What?"
"I'm not being straight with you," he said.
"How not?"
"I don't think Kruger's our guy."
"What?"
There was silence. They were inches apart, on the bed. Her hand was still laced behind his head, in his hair.
"He's Leighton's guy," Reacher said. "I don't think he's ours. I never really did."
"*What?* You always did. This was *your* theory, Reacher. Why back away from it

now?”
“Because I didn’t really mean it, Harper. I was just thinking aloud. Bullshitting, basically. I’m very surprised there even *is* such a guy.”
She pulled her hand away, astonished.
“But this was *your* theory,” she said again.
He shrugged. “I just made it up. I didn’t mean any of it. I just wanted some kind of a plausible excuse to get me out of Quantico for a spell.”
She stared at him. “You *made it up*? You didn’t *mean* it?”
He shrugged. “It was halfway convincing, I guess. But I didn’t believe in it.”
“So why the hell say it?”
“I told you. I just wanted to get out of there. To give myself time to think. And it was an experiment. I wanted to see who would support it and who would oppose it. I wanted to see who really wants this thing solved.”
“I don’t believe this,” she said. “Why?”
“Why not?”
“We *all* want it solved,” she said.
“Poulton opposed it,” Reacher said.
She stared at him, from a foot away.
“What *is* this to you? A *game*?” she said.
He said nothing. She was silent, a minute, two, three.
“What the hell are you *doing*?” she said. “There are lives at stake here.”
Then there was pounding at the door. Loud, insistent knocking. She pulled away from him. He let her go and put his feet on the floor and stood up. Ran his hand through his hair and walked toward the door. A new barrage started up. A heavy hand, knocking hard.
“OK,” he called. “I’m coming.”
The pounding stopped. He opened the door. There was an Army Chevrolet parked at an angle outside the room. Leighton was standing on the stoop, his hand raised, his jacket open, raindrops on the shoulders.
“Kruger’s our guy,” he said.
He pushed past, inside the room. Saw Harper buttoning her shirt.
“Excuse me,” he said.
“It’s hot in here,” she said, looking away.
Leighton looked down at the bed, like he was surprised.
“He’s our guy, for sure,” he said. “Everything fits like a glove.”
Harper’s mobile started ringing. It was over by the ice bucket, on the dresser, squawking like an alarm clock. Leighton paused. Gestured *I can wait*. Harper scrambled over the bed and flipped the phone open. Reacher heard a voice, feathery and distorted and faraway. Harper listened to it and Reacher watched

the color drain out of her face. Watched her close the phone and put it down like it was fragile as crystal.
“We’re recalled to Quantico,” she said. “Effective immediately. Because they got Caroline Cooke’s full record. You were right, she was all over the place. But she was never anywhere near weapons. Not ever. Not within a million miles, not for a minute.”
“That’s what I’m here to tell you,” Leighton said. “Kruger’s our guy, but he isn’t yours.”
Reacher just nodded.

26

LEIGHTON WALKED THE length of the room and sat down at the table, in the right-hand chair. Same chair as Reacher had used. He put his elbows on the table and his head in his hands. Same gesture.
“First thing, there was no list,” he said. He looked up at Harper. “You asked me to check thefts where the women worked, so I needed a list of the women to do that, obviously, so I tried to find one, but I couldn’t, OK? So I made some calls, and what happened was when your people came to us a month ago, we had to generate a list from scratch. It was a pain in the ass, trawling through all the records. So some guy had a bright idea, took a shortcut, called one of the women herself, some bullshit pretext. We think it was actually Alison Lamarr, and *she* supplied the list. Seems they’d set up a big support group among themselves, couple of years ago.”
“Scimeca called them her sisters,” Reacher said. “Remember that? She said four of my sisters are dead.”
“It was their own list?” Harper said.
“We didn’t have one,” Leighton said again. “And then Kruger’s records started coming in, and the dates and places didn’t match. Not even close.”
“Could he have falsified them?”
Leighton shrugged. “He *could* have. He was an ace at falsifying his inventories, that’s for damn sure. But you haven’t heard the kicker yet.”
“Which is?”
“Like Reacher said, Special Forces to supply battalion needs some explaining. So I checked it out. He was a top boy in the Gulf. Big star, a major. They were out in the desert, behind the lines, looking for mobile SCUD launchers, small unit, bad radio. Nobody else had any real clear idea of where they were, hour to hour. So they start the artillery barrage and Kruger’s unit gets all chewed up under it. Friendly fire. Bad casualties. Kruger himself was seriously hurt. But the Army was his life, so he wanted to stay in, so they gave him the promotion all the way up to bird colonel and stuck him somewhere his injuries wouldn’t disqualify him, hence the desk job in supply. My guess is we’ll find he got all bitter and twisted afterward and started running the rackets as a kind of revenge or something. You know, against the Army, against life itself.”
“But what’s the kicker?” Harper asked.
Leighton paused.
“The friendly fire,” he said. “The guy lost both his legs.”
Silence

Silence.
“He’s in a wheelchair.”
“Shit,” she said.
“Yeah, shit. No way he’s running up and down any stairs to any bathrooms. Last time he did that was ten years ago.”
She stared at the wall.
“OK,” she said slowly. “Bad idea.”
“I’m afraid so, ma’am. And they’re right about Cooke. I checked her too, and she never held anything heavier than a pen, her whole short career. That was something else I was going to have to tell you.”
“OK,” she said again.
She examined the wall.
“But thanks anyway,” she said. “And now we’re out of here. Back to Quantico, face the music.”
“Wait,” Leighton said. “You need to hear about the paint.”
“More bad news?”
“Weird news,” Leighton said. “I started a search for reports about missing camo green, like you asked me to. Only definitive thing was hidden in a buried file, closed-access. A theft of a hundred and ten three-gallon cans.”
“That’s it,” Harper said. “Three hundred thirty gallons. Eleven women, thirty gallons each.”
“Evidence was clear,” Leighton said. “They fingered a supply sergeant in Utah.”
“Who was he?”
“She,” Leighton said. “She was Sergeant Lorraine Stanley.”
Total silence.
“But that’s impossible,” Harper said. “She was one of the victims.”
Leighton shook his head. “I called Utah. Got hold of the investigating officer. I got him out of bed. He says it was Stanley, no doubt about it. Means and opportunity. She’d tried to cover her tracks, but she wasn’t smart enough about it. It was clear-cut. They didn’t proceed against her because it was politically impossible right then. She’d just come off of the harassment thing, not long before. No way were they going to start in on her at that point. So they just watched her, until she quit. But it was her.”
“One victim stole the paint?” Reacher said. “And another provided the list of names?”
Leighton nodded, somber. “That’s how it was, I promise you. And you know I wouldn’t bullshit one of Garber’s boys.”
Reacher just nodded.
THERE WAS NO more conversation. No more talk. The room went silent. Leighton sat at the table, Harper dressed mechanically, Reacher put his coat on

and found the Nissan keys in Harper's jacket. Went outside and stood in the rain for a long moment. Then he unlocked the car and slid inside. Started the motor and waited. Harper and Leighton came out together. She crossed to the car and he walked back to his. He waved, just a brief motion of his hand. Reacher put the Nissan in drive and pulled slowly out of the lot.
"Check the map for me," he said.
"I-295 and then the Turnpike," she said.
He nodded. "I know it after that. Lamarr showed me."
"Why the hell would Lorraine Stanley steal the paint?"
"I don't know," he said.
"And you want to tell me *why*?" she asked. "You *knew* this Army thing was nothing, but you made us spend thirty-six hours on it. Why?"
"I already told you," he said. "It was an experiment, and I needed time to think."
"About what?"
He didn't answer. She went quiet for a spell.
"Good job we didn't go all the way celebrating," she said.
He didn't reply to that either. Didn't speak again, the whole way. He just found the right roads and drove on through the rain. He had new questions in his head, and he tried to think of some answers, but nothing would come. The only thing in his mind was the feel of her tongue in his mouth. It felt different from Jodie's. Tasted different. He guessed everybody's was different.
HE DROVE FAST and it took a fraction under three hours from the outskirts of Trenton all the way back to Quantico. He turned in at the unmarked road off 95 and drove through the Marine checkpoints in the dark and waited at the vehicle barrier. The FBI sentry shone a flashlight on their badges and their faces and raised the striped pole and waved them through. They eased over the speed bumps and wound slowly through the empty parking lots and pulled up opposite the glass doors. It had stopped raining back in Maryland. Virginia was dry.
"OK," Harper said. "Let's go get our asses chewed." Reacher nodded. Killed the motor and the lights and sat in the silence for a beat. Then they looked at each other and slid out of the car and stepped to the doors. Took a deep breath. But the atmosphere inside the building was very calm. It was quiet. Nobody was around. Nobody was waiting for them. They went down in the elevator to Blake's underground office. Found him sitting in there at his desk with one hand resting on the telephone and the other holding a curled sheet of fax paper. The television was playing silently, political cable, men in suits at an impressive table. Blake was ignoring it. He was staring at a spot on his desk equidistant from the fax paper and the phone and his face was totally blank. Harper nodded to him, and Reacher said nothing.

“Fax in from UPS,” Blake said. His voice was gentle. Amiable, even benign. He looked crestfallen, adrift, confused. He looked beaten.
“Guess who sent the paint to Alison Lamarr?” he said.
“Lorraine Stanley,” Reacher said.
Blake nodded.
“Correct,” he said. “From an address in a little town in Utah, that turned out to be a self-storage facility. And guess what else?”
“She sent all of it.”
Blake nodded again. “UPS has got eleven consecutive consignment numbers showing eleven identical cartons going to eleven separate addresses, including Stanley’s own place in San Diego. And guess what else?”
“What?”
“She didn’t even *have* her own place when she first put the paint in the storage facility. She waited the best part of a year until she was settled, then she went back up to Utah and dispatched it all. So what do you make of that?”
“I don’t know,” Reacher said.
“Neither do I,” Blake said.
Then he picked up the phone. Stared at it. Put it down again.
“And Poulton just called,” he said. “From Spokane. Guess what he had to say?”
“What?”
“He just got through interviewing the UPS driver. The guy remembers pretty well. Isolated place, big heavy box, I guess he would.”
“And?”
“Alison was there when he called. She was listening to the ball game too, radio on in the kitchen. She asked him inside, gave him coffee, they heard the grand slam together. A little hollering, a little dancing around, another coffee, he tells her he’s got a big heavy box for her.”
“And?”
“And she says oh, good. He goes back out and wheels it off the tail lift on a hand truck, she clears a space for it in the garage, he brings it in, he dumps it, and she’s all smiles about it.”
“Like she was expecting it?”
Blake nodded. “That was the guy’s impression. And then what does she do?”
“What?”
“She tears off the ‘Documents enclosed’ thing and carries it back to the kitchen with her. He follows, to finish up his mug of coffee. She pulls the delivery note out of the plastic, and she shreds it up into small pieces, and she dumps them in the trash, along with the plastic. ”
“Why?”

Blake shrugged. “Who the hell knows? But this guy worked UPS four years, and six times out of ten people were home for him, and he never saw such a thing before.”
“Is he reliable?”
“Poulton thinks so. Says he’s a solid guy, clear, articulate, ready to swear the whole damn thing on a stack of Bibles.”
“So what’s your take?”
Blake shook his head. “I had any idea, you’d be the first to know.”
Nighttime silence in the office.
“I apologize,” Reacher said. “My theory led us nowhere. ”
Blake made a face. “Don’t think twice. It was our call. It was worth a try. We wouldn’t have let you go, otherwise.”
“Is Lamarr around?”
“Why?”
“I should apologize to her, too.”
Blake shook his head. “She’s at home. She hasn’t been back. Says she’s a wreck, and she’s right. Can’t blame her.”
Reacher nodded. “A lot of stress. She should get away.”
Blake shrugged. “Where to? She won’t get on a damn plane. And I don’t want her driving anyplace, the state she’s in.”
Then his eyes hardened. He seemed to come back down to earth.
“I’m going to look for another consultant,” he said. “When I find one, you’re out of here. You’re getting nowhere. You’ll have to take your chances with the New York people.”
Reacher nodded.
“OK,” he said.
Blake looked away and Harper took her cue and led Reacher out of the office. Into the elevator, up to ground level, up to the third floor. They walked together through the corridor to the familiar door.
“Why was she expecting it?” Harper said. “Why was Alison expecting the box of paint, when all the others weren’t?”
He shrugged. “I don’t know.”
Harper opened his door.
“OK, good night,” she said.
“You mad at me?”
“You wasted thirty-six hours.”
“No, I invested thirty-six hours.”
“In what?”
“I don’t know, yet.”

She shrugged. “You’re a weird guy.”
He nodded. “So people say.”
Then he kissed her chastely on the cheek, before she could duck away. He stepped into his room. She waited until the door swung shut before she walked back to the elevator.
THE SHEETS AND the towels had been changed. There was new soap and shampoo. A new razor and a fresh can of shaving cream. He upended a glass and put his toothbrush in it. Walked to the bed and lay down, fully dressed, still in his coat. Stared up at the ceiling. Then he rolled up onto one elbow and picked up the phone. Dialed Jodie’s number. It rang four times, and he heard her voice, slow and sleepy.
“Who is it?” she said.
“Me,” he said back.
“It’s three o’clock in the morning.”
“Nearly.”
“You woke me up.”
“I’m sorry.”
“Where are you?”
“Locked up in Quantico.”
She paused, and he heard the hum of the line and the faraway night sounds of New York. Faint isolated car horns, the whoop of a distant siren.
“How’s it going?” she asked.
“It’s not,” he said. “They’re going to replace me. I’ll be home soon.”
“Home?”
“New York,” he said.
She was silent. He heard a quiet, urgent siren. Probably right there on Broadway, he thought. Under her window. A lonely sound.
“The house won’t change anything,” he said. “I told you that.”
“It’s the partnership meeting tomorrow,” she said.
“So we’ll celebrate,” he said. “When I get back. As long as I’m not in jail. I’m still not out of the woods with Deerfield and Cozo yet.”
“I thought they were going to forget about it.”
“If I delivered,” he said. “And I haven’t delivered.”
She paused again.
“You shouldn’t have gotten involved in the first place.”
“I know that.”
“But I love you,” she said.
“Me too,” he said. “Good luck for tomorrow.”
“You too.”

He hung up and lay back down and resumed his survey of the ceiling. Tried to see her up there, but all he saw instead were Lisa Harper and Rita Scimeca, who were the last two women he'd wanted to take to bed but couldn't, for force of circumstance. Scimeca, it would have been totally inappropriate. Harper, it would have been an infidelity. Perfectly sound reasons, but reasons not to do something don't kill the original impulse. He thought about Harper's body, the way she moved, the guileless smile, her frank engaging stare. He thought about Scimeca's face, the invisible bruises, the hurt in her eyes. Her rebuilt life out there in Oregon, the flowers, the piano, the shine of her furniture wax, the buttoned-up defensive domesticity. He closed his eyes and then opened them and stared hard at the white paint above him. Rolled onto his elbow again and picked up the phone. Dialed 0, hoping to get a switchboard.

"Yes?" said a voice he had never heard before.

"This is Reacher," he said. "Up on the third floor."

"I know who you are and where you are."

"Is Lisa Harper still in the building?"

"Agent Harper?" the voice said. "Hold, please."

The line went quiet. No music. No recorded advertisements. No *your call is very important to us*. Just nothing. Then the voice came back.

"Agent Harper is still here," it said.

"Tell her I want to see her," Reacher said. "Right away."

"I'll pass that message on," the voice said.

Then the line went dead. Reacher swung his feet to the floor and sat on the edge of the bed, facing the door, waiting.

THREE O'CLOCK IN the morning in Virginia was midnight on the Pacific coast, and midnight was Rita Scimeca's habitual bedtime. She followed the same routine every night, partly because she was naturally an organized person, and partly because that aspect of her nature had been rigorously reinforced by her military training, and anyway when you've always lived alone and always will, how many ways *are* there of getting yourself to bed?

She started in the garage. Turned off the power to the door opener, slid the bolts into place, checked the car was locked, turned off the light. Locked and bolted the door through to the basement, checked the furnace. Walked upstairs, turned off the basement light, locked the door out to the hallway. Checked the front door was locked, did the bolts, put the chain on.

Then she checked the windows. There were fourteen windows in the house, and all of them had locks. Late fall and cold, they were all closed and locked anyway, but still she checked each one of them. It was her routine. Then she returned to the front parlor with a rag for the piano. She had played four hours, mostly Bach, mostly half speed, but she was getting there. Now she had to wipe

mostly Bach, mostly half speed, but she was getting there. Now she had to wipe down the keyboard. It was important to remove the acid from the skin of her fingers. She knew the keys were actually some kind of sophisticated plastic and were probably impervious, but it was a devotional thing. If she treated the piano right, it would reward her.
She wiped the keyboard vigorously, rumbling down at the bass end, tinkling all the way up to the top of the eighty-eight keys. She closed the lid and turned out the light and returned the rag to the kitchen. Turned out the kitchen light and felt her way in the dark up to her bedroom. Used the bathroom, washed her hands, her teeth, her face, all in her usual strict order. She stood at an angle to the sink, so she didn't have to look at the tub. She hadn't looked at the tub since Reacher had told her about the paint.
Then she stepped through to her bedroom and slid under the covers. Pulled her knees up and hugged them. She was thinking about Reacher. She liked him. She really did. It had been good to see him. But then she rolled the other way and put him out of her mind, because she didn't expect ever to see him again.
HE WAITED TWENTY minutes before the door opened and Harper came back. She didn't knock, just used her key and walked right in. She was in shirtsleeves, rolled up to the elbows. Her forearms were slim and tanned. Her hair was loose. She wasn't wearing a bra. Maybe it was still in the motel room in Trenton.
"You wanted me?" she asked.
"You still on the case?" he asked.
She stepped into the room and glanced at herself in the mirror. Stood next to the dresser and turned to face him.
"Sure," she said. "Advantage of being a plain-vanilla agent, you don't get the blame for other people's crazy ideas."
He was silent. She looked at him.
"What did you want?" she said.
"I wanted to ask you a question," he said. "What would have happened if we'd already known about the paint delivery and we'd asked Alison Lamarr about it instead of the UPS guy? What would she have said?"
"The same as he said, presumably. Poulton told us the guy is solid."
"No," Reacher said. "He's solid, but she would have lied to us."
"She would? Why?"
"Because they're all lying to us, Harper. We've spoken to seven women, and they all lied to us. Vague stories about roommates and mistakes? All bullshit. If we'd gotten to Alison before, she'd have given us the same kind of a story."
"How do you know?"
"Because Rita Scimeca was lying to us. That's for damn sure. I just figured that out. She didn't have any roommate. Never. It just doesn't fit."

out. She didn't have any roommate. Never. It just doesn't fit.
"Why not?"
"Everything's wrong about it. You saw her place. You saw how she lives. All buttoned up and prissy? Everything was so neat and clean and polished. Obsessive. Living like that, she couldn't stand anybody else in her house. She even threw *us* out pretty damn quick, and I was her friend. And she didn't need a roommate for money. You saw her car, some big new sedan. And that piano. You know how much a grand piano costs? More than the car, probably. And did you see the tools on her pegboard? The pegs were all held in with little plastic loops."
"You're basing this on loops in her pegboard?"
"On everything. It's all indicative."
"So what are you saying?"
"I'm saying she was expecting the delivery, just like Alison was. Just like they *all* were. The cartons came, they all said *oh good*, just like Alison did, they all made space, they all stored their cartons."
"It's not possible. Why would they?"
"Because the guy has got some kind of a hold over them," Reacher said. "He's forcing them to *participate*. He forced Alison to give him their own list of names, he forced Lorraine Stanley to steal the paint, he forced her to hide it in Utah, he forced her to send it out at the right time, he forced each one of them to accept the delivery and then store it until he was ready. He forced each one of them to destroy the delivery notes immediately and he had each of them ready to lie about it afterward if anything unraveled before he got to them."
Harper stared at him. "But how? How the hell? How would he *do* all that?"
"I don't know," Reacher said.
"Blackmail?" she said. "Threats? Fear? Is he saying, play along and the others die but you live? Like he's conning them all separately?"
"I just don't know. Nothing fits. They weren't an especially fearful bunch, were they? Certainly Alison didn't look it. And I *know* Rita Scimeca isn't afraid of much."
She was still staring at him.
"But it's not just participation, is it?" she said. "It's more than that. He's forcing them to be *happy* about it too. Alison said *oh good* when her carton came."
Silence in the room.
"Was she *relieved* or something?" she said. "Did he promise her, you get your carton by UPS instead of FedEx or in the afternoon instead of the morning or on some particular day of the week it means you're definitely going to be OK?"
"I don't know," he said again.
Silence.

Silence.
“So what do you want me to do?” Harper asked.
He shrugged. “Just keep on thinking, I guess. You’re the only one can do anything about it now. The others won’t get anywhere, not if they keep on heading the direction they’ve been going.”
“You’ve got to tell Blake.”
He shook his head. “Blake won’t listen to me. I’ve exhausted my credibility with him. It’s up to you now.”
“Maybe you’ve exhausted your credibility with me, too.”
She sat down on the bed next to him, like she was suddenly unsteady on her feet. He was looking at her, something in his eyes.
“What?” she said.
“Is the camera on?”
She shook her head. “They gave up on that. Why?” “Because I want to kiss you again.”
“Why?”
“I liked it, before.”
“Why should I want to kiss *you* again?”
“Because you liked it before too.”
She blushed. “Just a kiss?”
He nodded.
“Well, OK, I guess,” she said.
She turned to him and he took her in his arms and kissed her. She moved her head like she had before. Pressed harder and put her tongue against his lips and his teeth. Into his mouth. He moved his hand down to her waist. She laced her fingers into his hair. Kissed harder. Her tongue was urgent. Then she put her hand on his chest and pushed herself away. Breathed hard.
“We should stop now,” she said.
“I guess,” he said.
She stood up, unsteady. Bent forward and back and tossed her hair behind her shoulders.
“I’m out of here,” she said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”
She opened the door. Stepped outside. He heard her wait in the corridor until the door swung shut again. Then he heard her walk away to the elevator. He lay back on the bed. Didn’t sleep. Just thought about obedience and acquiescence, and means and motives and opportunities. And truth and lies. He spent five solid hours thinking about all of those things.
SHE CAME BACK at eight in the morning. She was showered and glowing and wearing a different suit and tie. She looked full of energy. He was tired, and crumpled and sweaty and hot and cold all at the same time. But he was standing

just inside the door with his coat buttoned, waiting for her, his heart hammering with urgency.
“Let’s go,” he said. “Right now.”
Blake was in his office, at his desk, same as he had been before. Maybe he’d been there all night. The UPS fax was still at his elbow. The television was still playing silently. Same channel. Some Washington reporter was standing on Pennsylvania Avenue, the White House behind his shoulder. The weather looked good. Bright blue sky, clear cold air. It would be an OK day for travel.
“Today you work the files again,” Blake said.
“No, I need to get to Portland,” Reacher said. “Will you lend me the plane?”
“The plane?” Blake repeated. “What are you, crazy? Not in a million years.”
“OK,” Reacher said.
He moved to the door. Took a last look at the office and stepped into the corridor. Stood still and quiet in the center of the narrow space. Harper crowded past him.
“Why Portland?” she asked.
He looked at her. “Truth, and lies.”
“What does that mean?”
“Come with me and find out.”

27

"WHAT THE HELL'S going on?" she asked.
He shook his head.
"I can't say it out loud," he said. "You'd think I was completely crazy. You'd just walk away from me."
"What's crazy? Tell me."
"No, I can't. Right now, it's just a house of cards. You'd blow it down. Anybody would blow it down. So you need to see it for yourself. Hell, I need to see it for *myself*. But I want you there, for the arrest."
"What arrest? Just tell me."
He shook his head again. "Where's your car?"
"In the lot."
"So let's go."
REVEILLE HAD BEEN 0600 the whole of Rita Scimeca's service career, and she stuck to the habit in her new civilian life. She slept six hours out of twenty-four, midnight until six in the morning, a quarter of her life. Then she got up to face the other three quarters.
An endless procession of empty days. Late fall, there was nothing to be done in the yard. The winter temperatures were too savage for any young vegetation to make it through. So planting was restricted to the spring, and pruning and cleanup was finished by the end of the summer. Late fall and winter, the doors stayed locked and she stayed inside.
Today, she was scheduled to work on Bach. She was trying to perfect the three-part inventions. She loved them. She loved the way they moved forward, on and on, inescapably logical, until they ended up back where they started. Like Maurits Escher's drawings of stair-cases, which went up and up and up all the way back to the bottom. Wonderful. But they were very difficult pieces to play. She played them very slowly. Her idea was to get the notes right, then the articulation, then the meaning, and then last of all to get the speed right. Nothing worse than playing Bach fast and badly.
She showered in the bathroom and dressed in the bedroom. She did it quickly, because she kept the house cold. Fall in the Northwest was a chilly season. But today there was brightness in the sky. She looked out of her window and saw streaks of dawn spearing east to west like rods of polished steel. It would be cloudy, she guessed, but with a halo of sun visible. It would be like a lot of her days. Not good, not bad. But livable.
HARPER PAUSED FOR a second in the underground corridor and then led

HARPER PAUSED FOR a second in the underground corridor and then led Reacher to the elevator and up into the daylight. Outside into the chill air and across the landscaping to her car. It was a tiny yellow two-seater. He realized he had never seen it before. She unlocked it and he ducked his head and folded himself into the passenger seat. She glanced hard at him once and dumped her bag in his lap and climbed down into the driver's seat. Shoulder room was tight. It was a stick shift, and her elbow hit his when she put it in gear.
"So how do we get there?"
"We'll have to go commercial," he said. "Head for National, I guess. You got credit cards?"
She was shaking her head.
"They're all maxed out," she said. "They'll get refused. "
"All of them?"
She nodded. "I'm broke right now."
He said nothing.
"What about you?" she asked.
"I'm always broke," he said.
THE FIFTH OF Bach's three-part inventions was labeled BWV 791 by scholars and was one of the hardest in the canon, but it was Rita Scimeca's favorite piece in all the world. It depended entirely on tone, which came from the mind, down through the shoulders and the arms and the hands and the fingers. The tone had to be whimsical, but confident. The whole piece was a confection of nonsense, and the tone had to confess to that, but simultaneously it had to sound utterly serious for the effect to develop properly. It had to sound polished, but insane. Secretly, she was sure Bach was crazy.
Her piano helped. Its sound was big enough to be sonorous, but delicate enough to be nimble. She played the piece all the way through twice, half speed, and she was reasonably pleased with what she heard. She decided to play for three hours, then stop and have some lunch, and then get ahead with the housework. She wasn't sure about the afternoon. Maybe she would play some more.
YOU TAKE UP your position early. Early enough to be settled before the eight o'clock changeover. You watch it happen. It's the same deal as yesterday. The Bureau guy, still awake, but no longer very attentive. The arrival of the cold Crown Vic. The flank-to-flank pleasantries. The Buick starts up, the Crown Vic turns in the road, the Buick rolls away down the hill, the Crown Vic crawls forward and settles into its space. The engine dies, and the guy's head turns. He sinks low in his seat, and his last shift as a cop begins. After today, they won't trust him to direct traffic around the Arctic Circle.
"SO HOW DO we get there?" Harper asked again.
Reacher paused.

“Like this,” he said.
He opened her pocketbook and took out her phone and flipped it open. Closed his eyes and tried to recall sitting in Jodie’s kitchen, dialing the number. Tried to remember the precious sequence of digits. He entered them slowly. Hopefully. He pressed send. Heard ring tone for a long moment. Then the call was answered. A deep voice, slightly out of breath.
“Colonel John Trent,” it said.
“Trent, this is Reacher. You still love me?”
“What?”
“I need a ride, two people, Andrews to Portland, Oregon.”
“Like when?”
“Like right now, immediately.”
“You’re kidding, right?”
“No, we’re on our way there. We’re a half hour out.”
Silence for a second.
“Andrews to Portland, Oregon, right?” Trent said.
“Right.”
“How fast do you need to get there?”
“Fastest you got.”
Silence again.
“OK,” Trent said.
Then the line went dead. Reacher folded the phone.
“So is he doing it?” Harper asked.
Reacher nodded.
“He owes me,” he said. “So let’s go.”
She let in the clutch and drove out of the lot, into the approach road. The tiny car rode hard over the speed bumps. She passed by the FBI guard and accelerated into the curve and blasted through the first Marine checkpoint. Reacher saw heads turning in the corner of his eye, startled faces under green helmets.
“So what is it?” she asked again.
“Truth, and lies,” he said. “And means, motive, opportunity. The holy trinity of law enforcement. Three out of three is the real deal, right?”
“I can’t even get one out of three,” she said. “What’s the key?”
They cleared the second Marine checkpoint, traveling fast. More swiveling helmeted heads watched them go.
“Bits and pieces,” he said. “We know everything we need to know. Some of it, we’ve known for days. But we screwed up everywhere, Harper. Big mistakes and wrong assumptions.”
She made the blind left, north onto 95. Traffic was heavy. They were in the far

outer echoes of D.C.'s morning rush hour. She changed lanes and was balked by the cars ahead and braked hard.
"Shit," he said.
"Don't worry," she said. "Scimeca's guarded out there. They all are."
"Not well enough. Not until we get there. This is a cool, cool customer."
She nodded and dodged left and right, looking for the fastest lane. They were all slow. Her speed dropped from forty to thirty. Then all the way down to twenty.
YOU USE YOUR field glasses and you watch his first bathroom break. He's been in the car an hour, swilling the coffee he brought with him. Now he needs to unload it. The driver's door opens and he pivots in his seat and puts his big feet down on the ground and hauls himself out. He's stiff from sitting. He stretches, steadying himself with a hand on the roof of the car. He closes the door and walks around the hood, into the driveway. Up the path. You see him step up onto the porch. You see his hand move to the bell push. You see him step back and wait.
You don't see her at the door. The angle is wrong. But he nods and smiles at something and steps inside. You keep the field glasses focused and three or four minutes later he's back on the porch, moving away, looking over his shoulder, talking. Then he turns ahead and walks back down the path. Down the driveway. Around the hood of his car. He gets back in. The suspension eases downward on his side and his door closes. He sinks down in his seat. His head turns. He watches.
SHE FLICKED THE tiny car right and put it on the shoulder. Eased the speed up to thirty, thirty-five, and hauled past the stalled traffic on the inside. The shoulder was rough and littered with gravel and debris. On their left, the tires on the stationary eighteen-wheelers were taller than the car.
"What mistakes?" she said. "What wrong assumptions? "
"Very, very ironic ones, in the circumstances," he said. "But it's not entirely our fault. I think we swallowed a few big lies, too."
"What lies?"
"Big, beautiful, breathtaking lies," he said. "So big and so obvious, nobody even saw them for what they were."
SHE BREATHED HARD and tried to relax again after the cop went back out. He was in and out, in and out, all day long. It ruined her concentration. To play this thing properly, you needed to be in some kind of trance. And the damn silly cop kept on interrupting it.
She sat down and played it through again, a dozen times, fifteen, twenty, all the way from the first measure to the last. She was note-perfect, but that was nothing. Was the meaning there? Was there emotion in the sound? Thought? On

the whole, she reckoned there was. She played it again, once, then twice. She smiled to herself. Saw her face reflected back from the glossy black of the keyboard lid and smiled again. She was making progress. Now all she had to do was bring the speed up. But not too much. She preferred Bach played slowly. Too much speed trivialized it. Although it *was* fundamentally trivial music. But that was all part of Bach's mind game, she thought. He deliberately wrote trivial music that just begged to be played with great ceremony.

She stood up and stretched. Closed the keyboard lid and walked out to the hallway. Lunch was the next problem. She had to force herself to eat. Maybe everybody who lived alone had the same problem. Solo mealtimes weren't much fun.

There were footprints on the hallway parquet. Big muddy feet. The damn cop, ruining everything. Spoiling her musical concentration, spoiling the shine of her floors. She stared at the mess, and while she was staring, the doorbell rang. The idiot was here *again*. What the hell was the matter with him? Where was his bladder control? She stepped around the footprints and opened the door.

"No," she said.

"What?"

"No, you can't use the bathroom. I'm sick of it."

"Lady, I need to," he said. "That was the arrangement. "

"Well, the arrangement has changed," she said. "I don't want you coming in here anymore. It's ridiculous. You're driving me crazy."

"I have to be here."

"It's ridiculous," she said again. "I don't need your protection. Just go away, will you?"

She closed the door, firmly. Locked it tight and walked away to the kitchen, breathing hard.

HE DOESN'T GO in. You watch very carefully. He just stands there on the porch, at first surprised. Then a little disgruntled. You can see it right there in his body language. He says three things, leaning fractionally backward in self-defense, and then the door must be closing in his face, because he steps back suddenly. He looks wounded. He stands still and stares and then turns around and walks back down the path, twenty seconds after walking up it. So what's that about?

He walks around the hood of his car and opens the door. Doesn't get all the way in. He sits sideways with his feet still out on the road. He leaned over and picks up his radio mike. Holds it in his hand for thirty seconds, looking at it, thinking. Then he puts it back. Obviously he's not going to call it in. He's not going to tell his sergeant, Sir, she won't let me pee anymore. So what's he going to do? Is

this going to change anything?

THEY GOT TO Andrews by driving most of the way on the shoulder and pushing in and out of the inside lane when necessary. The base itself was an oasis of calm. Nothing much was happening. There was a helicopter in the air, but it was far enough away to be noiseless. Trent had left Reacher's name at the gate. That was clear, because the guard was expecting them. He raised the barrier and told them to park at the Marine transport office and inquire within. Harper put the yellow car in line with four dull olive Chevrolets and killed the motor. Joined Reacher on the blacktop and followed him to the office door. A corporal stared at her and passed them to a sergeant who stared at her and passed them to a captain. The captain stared at her and told them a new transport Boeing's flight test was being rerouted to Portland instead of San Diego. He said they could hitch a ride on it. He said they would be the only passengers. Then he said takeoff was scheduled in three hours.

"Three hours?" Reacher repeated.

"Portland's a civilian airport," the captain said. "It's a flight plan problem."

Reacher was silent. The guy just shrugged.

"Best the colonel could do," he said.

28

THE CAPTAIN SHOWED them to a preflight waiting room on the second floor. It was a utilitarian space, lit by fluorescent tubes, linoleum on the floor, plastic stacking chairs in untidy formation around low tables. Old coffee rings on the tables, a trash can in the corner full of discarded cups.
“It’s not much,” the captain said. “But then it’s all we got. All kinds of top brass wait in here.”
Reacher thought *do they wait three hours*? But he said nothing. Just thanked the guy and stood at the window and stared out at the runways. Nothing much was happening down there. Harper joined him for a second and then turned back and sat down in a chair.
“Talk to me,” she said. “What is it?”
“Start with the motive,” he said. “Who’s got a motive? ”
“I don’t know.”
“Go back to Amy Callan. Suppose she’d been the only victim? Who would you be looking at for a motive? ”
“Her husband.”
“Why her husband?”
“Dead wife, you always look at the husband,” she said. “Because motives are often personal. And the closest connection to a wife is a husband.”
“And *how* would you be looking at him?”
“How? Same as always. We’d sweat him, sweat his alibi, keep on going until something busted open.”
“And he wouldn’t hold up, right?”
“Sooner or later, he’d crack.”
Reacher nodded. “OK, so suppose it *is* Amy Callan’s husband. How does he avoid getting sweated like that?”
“He can’t avoid it.”
“Yes, he can. He can avoid it by going out and finding a bunch of women with some kind of a similarity with his wife and killing them too. Doing it in some bizarre fashion that he knows is going to get everybody rushing off on some flight of fancy. In other words he can camouflage his chosen target behind a farrago of bullshit. He can take the spotlight off of himself by burying the personal connection in a crowd. Like where’s the best place to hide a grain of sand?”
She nodded. “On the beach.”
“Right,” he said.

"Right," he said.
"So is it Callan's husband?"
"No, it isn't," he said. "But?"
"But we only need a motive against one of the women," she said. "Not all of them together. All but one are just decoys. Sand on the beach."
"Camouflage," he said. "Background noise."
"So which one? Which one is the real target?"
Reacher said nothing. Moved away from the window and sat down to wait.
YOU WAIT. IT'S *cold up there in the hills. Cold, and uncomfortable, crouched next to the rocks. The wind is blowing in from the west, and it's damp. But you just wait. Surveillance is important. Certainty is everything. You know that if you stay focused, you can do anything. Anything at all. So you wait.*
You watch the cop in his car and amuse yourself thinking about his plight. He's a few hundred feet away, but he's in a different world. You can step away from your rock and you've got a million acres of mountainside to use as a bathroom. He's down there in civilization. Streets, sidewalks, people's yards. He can't use them. He'd be arrested. He'd have to arrest himself. And he's not running the motor. So the car must be cold. Does that make it better or worse?
You watch him, and you wait.
THE CAPTAIN CAME back a little before the three hours were up. He led them downstairs and out through the same door they had used on the way in. A staff car was waiting there.
"Have a pleasant flight," he said.
The car drove them a mile around the perimeter track and then cut across toward a Boeing airliner standing alone on the apron. Fuel bowsers were disconnecting and ground crew were swarming. The plane was brand-new and stark white.
"We don't paint them until we know they work right," the driver said.
There was a wheeled ladder at the forward cabin door. Flight crew in uniform clustered at the top, with fat briefcases and clipboards thick with paper.
"Welcome aboard," the copilot said. "You should be able to find an empty seat."
There were two hundred and sixty of them. It was a regular passenger plane with the fripperies stripped out. No televisions, no in-flight magazines, no stewardess call buttons. No blankets, no pillows, no headsets. The seats were all the same color, khaki. The fabric was crisp and it smelled new. Reacher took three seats for himself and sat sideways, propped up against the window.
"We've done a lot of flying, the last few days," he said.
Harper sat down behind him. Buckled her belt.
"That's for sure," she said.
"Listen up, guys," the copilot called to them down the aisle. "This is a military flight, not FAA, so you get the military preflight announcement. OK? Which is,

don't worry, because we ain't going to crash. And if we do, you're mashed into ground beef and burned to a cinder anyway, so what's to worry about?"
Reacher smiled. Harper ignored the guy.
"So which one is the real target?" she asked again.
"You can figure it out," Reacher said.
The plane moved back and turned. Headed out for the runway. A minute later it was in the air, smooth, quiet, and powerful. Then it was over the sprawl of D.C., climbing hard. Then it was high in the clouds, settling to a westward cruise.
THE GUY'S STILL holding it in. He hasn't moved out of his car, and his car has stayed right there in front of her house. You watched his partner bring his lunch bag. There was a twenty-ounce cup of coffee with it. Poor bastard is going to be real miserable real soon. But it doesn't affect your plan. How could it? It's two o'clock, and time for the call.
You open the stolen mobile. Dial her number. Press on the little green telephone pictogram. You hear the connection go through. You hear ring tone. You crouch low in the lee of your rock, ready to speak. It's warmer down there. You're out of the wind. The ring tone continues. Is she going to answer? Maybe she won't. The type of contrary bitch who won't let her bodyguard use her bathroom might not be above ignoring her phone. You feel a momentary thrill of panic. What are you going to do? What if she doesn't pick up?
She picks up.
"Hello?" she says.
She's wary, annoyed, defensive. She thinks it's the police sergeant, about to complain. Or the Bureau coordinator, about to persuade her back into line.
"Hello, Rita," you say.
She hears your voice. You feel her relax.
"Yes?" she says.
You tell her what you want her to do.
"NOT THE FIRST one," Harper said. "The first one would be random. Leading us away from the scent. Probably not the second either. The second establishes the pattern. "
"I agree," Reacher said. "Callan and Cooke were background noise. They started the smoke screen."
Harper nodded. Went quiet. She had moved out from behind him. Now she was sprawled across the opposite row in the empty plane. It was a weird feeling. Familiar, but strange. Nothing around them but neat uniform rows of vacant seats.
"But he wouldn't leave it too late," Harper said. "He's got a target, he'd want to hit it before anything unraveled, right?"

“I agree,” Reacher said again.
“So it’s the third or the fourth.”
Reacher nodded. Said nothing.
“But which one?” Harper asked. “What’s the key?”
“Everything,” Reacher said. “Same as it always was. The clues. The geography, the paint, the lack of violence. ”
LUNCH WAS A cold wrinkled apple and a square of Swiss cheese, which was about all her refrigerator had to offer. She served it to herself on a plate, to preserve some semblance of order. Then she washed the plate and put it back in the cupboard and walked through the hallway and unlocked the front door. Stood in the cold for a second and walked down her path to the driveway. The police car was still parked right across the opening. The cop saw her coming and buzzed his passenger window down.
“I came to apologize,” she said. She kept it as sweet as she could. “I shouldn’t have said what I said. It’s just getting to me a little, is all. Of course you should come in, anytime you need to.”
The guy was staring at her, half puzzled, like he was thinking *women!* to himself. She kept her smile going and lifted her eyebrows and tilted her head like she was reinforcing her invitation.
“Well, I’ll come in right now,” the guy said. “If you’re sure it’s OK.”
She nodded and waited for him to get out. She noticed he left the passenger window down. The car would be cold when he got back. She led him back up the path. He was hurrying behind her. Poor guy must be desperate, she thought.
“You know where it is,” she said.
She waited in the hallway. He came back out of the powder room with a relieved expression on his face. She held the front door for him.
“Anytime,” she said. “Just ring the bell.”
“OK, ma’am,” he said. “If you’re sure.”
“I’m sure,” she said. “I appreciate what you’re doing for me.”
“What we’re here for,” the guy said, proud and shy.
She watched him all the way back to the car. Locked the door again and stepped into the parlor. Stood and looked at the piano and decided to give it another forty-five minutes. Maybe an hour.
THAT’S BETTER. AND the timing might be about right. You can’t be sure. You’re an expert in a lot of things, but you’re not a urologist. You watch him on the way back to the car, and you figure he’s too young to be into prostate trouble, so all that’s going to count is the fullness of his bladder balanced against his natural reluctance to bother her again. Two-thirty now, he’s bound to want to go at least twice more before eight. Probably once before and once

after she's dead.

THE CLOUD CLEARED over North Dakota. The ground was visible seven miles below them. The copilot wandered back into the cabin and pointed down to where he was born. A little town south of Bismarck. The Missouri River ran through it, a tiny silver thread. Then the guy wandered back again and left Reacher puzzling over navigation. He knew nothing about it. Virginia to Oregon, he'd have flown across Kentucky, Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Wyoming, Idaho. He wouldn't have gone up to North Dakota. But something called great circle routes made it shorter to go way out of your way. He knew that. But he didn't understand it. How could it be quicker to go way out of your way?

"Lorraine Stanley stole the paint," Harper said. "The lack of violence proves the guy is faking it. But what does the geography prove?"

"We talked about that," Reacher said.

"It demonstrates scope."

He nodded. "And speed."

She nodded in turn.

"And mobility," he added. "Don't forget mobility."

IN THE END, she played for an hour and a half. The cop stayed away and she relaxed and her touch improved, better than it had ever been. Her mind locked on to the notes and she brought the speed higher and higher, right to the point where the forward motion got a little ragged. Then she backed it off and settled at a point just a little slower than the tempo was marked. But what the hell, it sounded magnificent. Maybe even better than it would played at exactly the right speed. It was involving, logical, stately. She was pleased with it.

She pushed back on the stool and knitted her fingers and flexed them above her head. Then she closed the keyboard lid and stood up. Stepped out to the hallway and skipped up the stairs to her bathroom. Stood at the mirror and brushed her hair. Then she went back down to the coat closet and took out her jacket. It was short enough to be comfortable in the car and warm enough for the weather. She changed her shoes for her heavier pair. Unlocked the door to the basement stairs and went down. Unlocked the door to the garage and used the key-chain remote to open her car. The light came on inside. She switched the power on for the opener and slid into the car and started the engine while the garage door rumbled upward.

She backed onto the driveway and hit the button to close the door again. Twisted in her seat and saw the police cruiser parked in her way. She left the motor running and got out and walked down toward it. The cop was watching her. He buzzed the window open.

"I'm going to the store," she said.

The guy looked at her for a second, like this was outside the range of permissible scenarios.
“How long you going to be gone?” he asked.
She shrugged.
“Half hour, an hour,” she said.
“The store?” he said.
She nodded. “I need some things.”
He stared some more, and arrived at a decision.
“OK, but I wait here,” he said. “We’re watching the house, not you personally. Domicile-based crimes, that’s what we do.”
She nodded again. “That’s fine. Nobody’s going to grab me at the store.”
The cop nodded back. Said nothing. He started his engine and backed up the slope far enough that she could maneuver out past him. He watched her roll away down the hill, and then he eased back into position.
*Y*OU SEE THE *garage door open, you see the car come out, you see the door close again. You see her stop on her driveway, and you see her get out. You watch the conversation through the Crown Vic’s window. You see the cop back up, you see her reverse out onto the roadway. The cop moves back into position, she takes off down the hill. You smile to yourself and ease backward under the cover of the rocks. You stand up. You go to work.*
SHE MADE THE left at the bottom of her hill, and then the right onto the through road toward the city of Portland. It was cold. Another week of falling temperatures, and it would be snowing. Then her choice of automobile would start to look a little silly. Everybody else had big four-wheel-drives, either jeeps or pickup trucks. She had gone for a swoopy low-slung sedan, about four times longer than it was high. Gold paint, chrome wheels, butter-soft tan leather inside. It looked like a million dollars, but it was front-wheel-drive only, no traction control. Ground clearance was enough for a decent-sized snowball and not much more. The rest of the winter, she’d be walking or begging rides from her neighbors.
But it was smooth and quiet and it rode like a dream. She drove the two miles west and slowed for the left into the shopping center. Waited for an oncoming truck to labor past and swooped into the parking lot. Turned tight and drove around behind the right-hand arm of stores and parked up alone in the overspill lane. Pulled the key and dropped it in her bag. Got out and walked through the cold toward the supermarket.
It was warmer inside. She took a cart and walked every aisle, using time. There was no system in her shopping. She just looked at everything and took what she figured she was out of. Which was not very much, because the market didn’t sell

the things she was really interested in. No music books, no garden plants. She ended up with little enough in the cart to get her into the express line at the checkout.
The girl put it all into one paper sack and she paid cash for it and walked out with the sack cradled in her arms. Turned right on the narrow sidewalk and window-shopped her way along the row. Her breath hung in the air. She stopped outside the hardware store. It was an old-fashioned place. It carried a little bit of everything. She had shopped there before, for sacks of bonemeal and ericaceous fertilizer to help her azaleas.
She juggled the grocery sack into one arm and pulled the door. A bell rang. There was an old guy in a brown coat at the register. He nodded a greeting. She moved forward into the crowded aisles. Walked past the tools and the nails and found the decorating section. There were rolls of cheap wallpaper and packets of paste. Paintbrushes and paint rollers. And cans of paint. A display as tall as she was. Color charts were held in racks clipped to the shelves. She put her groceries on the floor and took a chart from a rack and opened it up. It was banded into colors like a huge rainbow. A big variety of shades.
“Help you, miss?” a voice said.
It was the old guy. He’d crept up behind her, helpful and anxious for a sale.
“Does this stuff mix with water?” she asked.
The old guy nodded.
“They call it latex,” he said. “But that just means water-based. You can thin it with water, clean the roller with water.”
“I want a dark green,” she said.
She pointed at the chart.
“Maybe like this olive,” she said.
“The avocado is attractive,” the old guy said.
“Too light,” she said.
“You going to thin it with water?” he asked.
She nodded. “I guess.”
“That’ll make it lighter still.”
“I think I’ll take the olive,” she said. “I want it to look kind of military.”
“OK,” the old guy said. “How much?”
“One can,” she said. “A gallon.”
“Won’t go far,” he said. “Although if you thin it, that’ll help.”
He carried it back to the register for her and rang up the sale. She paid cash and he put it in a bag with a free wooden stirring stick. The store’s name was printed off-center on the stick.
“Thank you,” she said.
She carried the grocery sack in one hand and the hardware bag in the other

She carried the grocery sack in one hand and the hardware bag in the other. Walked along the row of stores. It was cold. She looked up and checked the sky. It was blackening with clouds. They were scurrying in from the west. She looped around behind the last store. Hurried to her car. Dumped her bags on the backseat and climbed in and slammed her door and started the engine.

THE COP WAS cold, which kept his attention focused. Summertime, sitting and doing nothing could make him sleepy, but there was no chance of that with the temperature as low as it was now. So he saw the approaching figure when it was still about a hundred yards away down the hill. The crest of the slope meant he saw the head first, then the shoulders, then the chest. The figure was walking purposefully toward him, rising up over the foreshortened horizon, revealing more and more of itself, getting bigger. The head was gray, thick hair neatly trimmed and brushed. The shoulders were dressed in Army uniform. Eagles on the shoulder boards, eagles through the lapels, a colonel. A clerical collar where the shirt and tie should be. A padre. A military chaplain, approaching fast up the sidewalk. His face bobbed up and down with every stride. The white band of the collar moved below it. The guy was walking quickly. Practically marching.

He stopped suddenly a yard from the cop's right headlight. Just stood on the sidewalk with his neck craned, looking up at Scimeca's house. The cop buzzed the passenger window down. He didn't know what to say. Some local citizen, he'd call, *Sir*, *step this way*, with enough tone in there to cancel out the *sir*. But this was a padre and a bird colonel. Practically a gentleman.

"Excuse me?" he called.

The colonel looked around and stepped the length of the fender. Bent down. He was tall. He put one hand on the Crown Vic's roof and the other on the door. Ducked his head and looked straight in through the open window.

"Officer," he said.

"Help you?" the cop asked.

"I'm here to visit with the lady of the house," the padre said.

"She's not home, temporarily," the cop said. "And we've got a situation here."

"A situation?"

"She's under guard. Can't tell you why. But I'm going to have to ask you to step inside the car and show me some ID."

The colonel hesitated for a second, like he was confused. Then he straightened up and opened the passenger door. Folded himself into the seat and put his hand inside his jacket. Came out with a wallet. Flipped it open and pulled a worn military ID. Passed it across to the cop. The cop read it over and checked the photograph against the face next to him. Handed it back and nodded.

"OK, Colonel," he said. "You can wait in here with me, if you like. I guess it's cold out there."

cold out there.
“It sure is,” the colonel said, although the cop noticed he was sweating lightly. Probably from the fast walk up the hill, he figured.
"I’M NOT GETTING anyplace,” Harper said.
The plane was on descent. Reacher could feel it in his ears. And he could feel abrupt turns. The pilot was military, so he was using the rudder. Civilian pilots avoid using the rudder. Using the rudder makes the plane slew, like a car skids. Passengers don’t like the feeling. So civilian pilots turn by juicing the engines on one side and backing off on the others. Then the plane comes around smoothly. But military pilots don’t care about their passengers’ comfort. It’s not like they’ve bought tickets.
“Remember Poulton’s report from Spokane?” he said.
“What about it?”
“That’s the key. Something big and obvious.”
SHE MADE THE left off the main road and the right into her street. The cop was back in the way again. Somebody was in the front seat next to him. She stopped on the crown of the road, ready to turn in, hoping he’d take the hint and move, but he just opened his door and got out, like he needed to talk to her. He walked across, stiff from sitting, and placed his hand on the roof of her car and bent down. She opened her window and he peered in and glanced at the shopping bags on the backseat.
“Get what you need?” he asked.
She nodded.
“No problems?”
She shook her head.
“There’s a guy here to see you,” he said. “A padre, from the Army.”
“The guy in your car?” she said, like she had to say something, although it was pretty obvious. She could see the collar.
“Colonel somebody,” the cop said. “His ID is OK.”
“Get rid of him,” she said.
The cop was startled.
"He’s all the way from D.C.,” he said. “His ID says he’s based there.”
“I don’t care where he’s based. I don’t want to see him.”
The cop said nothing. Just glanced back over his shoulder. The colonel was getting out of the car. Easing up to his full height on the sidewalk. Walking over. Scimeca left her motor running and opened her door. Slid out and stood up and watched him coming, pulling her jacket tight around her in the cold.
“Rita Scimeca?” the padre asked, when he was close enough.
“What do you want?”
“I’m here to see if you’re OK.”

"I'm here to see if you're OK."
"OK?" she repeated.
"With your recovery," he said. "After your problems. "
"My *problems*?"
"After the assault."
"And if I'm not OK?"
"Then maybe I can help you."
His voice was warm and low and rich. Infinitely believable. A church voice.
"The Army send you?" she asked. "Is this official?"
He shook his head.
"I'm afraid not," he said. "I've argued it with them many times."
She nodded. "If they offer counseling, they're admitting liability."
"That's their view," the colonel said. "Regrettably. So this is a private mission. I'm acting against strict orders, in secret. But it's a matter of conscience, isn't it?"
Scimeca glanced away.
"Why me in particular?" she asked. "There were a lot of us."
"You're my fifth," he said. "I started with the ones who are obviously living alone. I thought that's where my help might be needed most. I've been all over the place. Some fruitful trips, some wasted trips. I try not to force myself on people. But I feel I have to try."
She was silent for a moment. Very cold.
"Well, you've wasted another trip, I'm afraid," she said. "I decline your offer. I don't want your help."
The colonel was not surprised, not unsurprised. "Are you sure?"
She nodded.
"Totally sure," she said.
"Really? Please think about it. I came a long way."
She didn't answer. Just glanced at the cop, impatiently. He shuffled his feet, calling the colonel's attention his way.
"Asked and answered," he said, like a lawyer.
There was silence in the street. Just the beat of Scimeca's motor idling, the drift of exhaust, a sharp chemical tang in the fall air.
"I'm going to have to ask you to leave now, sir," the cop said. "We've got a situation here."
The colonel was still for a long moment. Then he nodded.
"The offer is always open," he said. "I could come back, anytime."
He turned abruptly and walked back down the hill, moving fast. The slope swallowed him up, legs, back, head. Scimeca watched him below the horizon and slid back into her car. The cop nodded to himself and tapped twice on the

roof.
“Nice car,” he said, irrelevantly.
She said nothing.
“Right,” the cop said.
He walked back to his cruiser. Reversed it up the hill with his door hanging open. She turned into her driveway. Pushed the button on the remote and the garage door rumbled upward. She drove inside and pushed the button again. Saw the cop moving back into position before the door came down and left her in darkness.
She opened her door and the dome light clicked on. She pulled the little lever at her side and popped the trunk. Got out of the car and took her bags from the backseat and carried them through to the basement. Carried them up the stairs to the hallway and through to the kitchen. Placed them side by side on the countertop and sat down on a stool to wait.
IT’S A LOW-SLUNG car, so although the trunk is long enough and wide enough, it’s not very tall. So you’re lying on your side, cramped. Your legs are drawn up, like a fetal position. Getting in was no problem. She left the car unlocked, just like you told her to. You watched her walk away to the store, and then you just stepped over and opened the driver’s door and found the lever and popped the trunk. Closed the door again and walked around and lifted the lid. Nothing to it. Nobody was watching. You sort of rolled inside and pulled the lid closed on top of you. It was easy. There were reinforcing members on the underside. Easy to grasp.
It’s a long wait in there. But then you feel her get back in and you hear the engine start. You feel a growing patch of heat under your thigh where the exhaust runs under the trunk floor. It’s not a comfortable ride. You bounce around a little. You follow the turns in your mind and you know when she arrives back at her place. You hear the cop talking. There’s a problem. Then you hear some idiot padre, pleading. You tense up in there. You start to panic. What the hell is going on? What if she asks him in? But she gets rid of him. You hear the ice in her voice. You smile in the dark and open and close your hands in triumph. You hear it when she drives into the garage. The acoustics change. The engine goes louder. You hear the exhaust beating against the walls and the floor. Then she shuts it down and it goes very quiet.
She remembers to pop the trunk. You knew she would, because you told her not to forget. Then you hear her footsteps moving away and you hear the basement door open and close. You ease the trunk lid upward and you climb out. You stand and stretch in the dark. Rub your thigh where the heat has hurt it. Then

you move around to the front of the car. You pull your gloves on tighter and you sit down on the fender and you wait.

29

THE PLANE LANDED at Portland International like any other Boeing, but it stopped rolling some way short of the terminal and waited on a distant apron. A pickup with a staircase bolted to the load bed came slowly out to meet it. The pickup was followed by a minivan. Both vehicles were shiny clean and painted in Boeing's corporate colors. The flight crew stayed on board to analyze computer data. The minivan took Reacher and Harper around to the arrivals lane, where the taxis waited. Head of the line was a battered Caprice with a checkerboard stripe down the side. The driver wasn't local. He needed to check his map to find the road east toward the tiny village on the slopes of Mount Hood.

SHE WAS IN the house all of five minutes, and then the doorbell went. The cop was back. She came out of the kitchen and walked the length of the hallway and unlocked the door. Opened it up. He was standing there on the porch, not saying anything, trying to communicate his request with the rueful expression on his face.

"Hi," she said.

Then she just looked at him. Didn't smile or anything.

"Hi," he said back.

She waited. She was going to make him say it anyway. It was nothing to be embarrassed about.

"Guess what?" he said.

"What?"

"Can I use the powder room?"

Cold air was swirling in around her legs. She could feel it striking through her jeans.

"Of course," she said.

She closed the door behind him, to keep some warmth in. Waited next to it, while he disappeared and then came back again.

"Nice and warm in here," he said.

She nodded, although it wasn't really true. She kept the house as cold as she could stand it. For the piano tone. So the wood didn't dry out.

"Cold out there in the car," he said.

She nodded again.

"Run the motor," she said. "Get the heater going."

He shook his head. "Not allowed. Can't idle the engine. Some pollution thing."

"So take off for a spell," she said. "Drive around, get warm. I'll be OK here."

"So take off for a spell," she said. "Drive around, get warm. I'll be OK here."
Clearly it wasn't the invitation he was looking for, but he thought about it. Then he shook his head again.
"They'd take my badge," he said. "I've got to stay here."
She said nothing.
"Sorry to bother you with that padre," he said, making the point he'd intervened, and gotten rid of him.
She nodded.
"I'll bring you some hot coffee," she said. "Five minutes, OK?"
He looked pleased. A shy smile.
"Then I'll need the powder room again," he said. "Goes right through me."
"Whenever," she said.
She closed the door on him and went back to the kitchen and set her coffee machine going. Waited on the stool next to the shopping bags until it was done. She found the biggest mug she owned and poured the coffee. Added cream from the refrigerator and sugar from the cupboard. He looked like a cream-and-sugar guy, young, a little fat. She carried the mug outside and walked down the path. Steam swirled off the coffee and hung in a thin horizontal band all the way to the sidewalk. She tapped on his window and he turned and smiled and buzzed the glass down. He took the cup, awkwardly, two-handed.
"Thanks," he said.
He touched it to his lips like an extra gesture of politeness and she walked away, into the driveway, up the path, in through the door. She closed it behind her and locked it and turned around to find the visitor she was expecting standing quietly at the head of the stairs from the garage.
"Hello, Rita," the visitor said.
"Hello," she said back.
THE TAXI DROVE south on 205 and found the left turn east on 26. It rode like its next trip should be to the scrap heap. The colors inside the door seams didn't match the outside. It had probably already done three years in New York, and maybe three more in the suburbs of Chicago. But it moved along steadily enough, and its meter clicked a lot slower than it would have in New York or Chicago. And that was important, because Reacher had just realized he had almost no money in his pockets.
"Why is a demonstration of mobility important?" Harper asked.
"That's one of the big lies," Reacher said. "We just swallowed it whole."
SCIMECA STOOD THERE inside her front door, calmly. The visitor gazed back at her from the other end of the hallway, eyes inquiring.
"Did you buy the paint?"
She nodded.

“Yes, I did,” she said.
“So, are you ready?”
“I’m not sure.”
The visitor watched her a moment longer, just gazing, very calm, eyes steady.
“Are you ready now?”
“I don’t know,” she said.
The visitor smiled.
“I think you’re ready. I really do. What do you think? Are you ready?”
She nodded, slowly.
“Yes, I’m ready,” she said.
“Did you apologize to the cop?”
She nodded again. “Yes, I told him I was sorry.”
“He has to be allowed in, right?”
“I told him, whenever he needs it.”
“He has to find you. He has to be the one. That’s the way I want it.”
“OK,” Scimeca said.
The visitor was silent for a long moment, just standing there, saying nothing, watching carefully. Scimeca waited, awkward.
“Yes, he should be the one to find me,” she said. “If that’s the way you want it.”
“You did good with the padre,” the visitor said.
“He wanted to help me.”
“Nobody can help you.”
“I guess not,” Scimeca said.
“Let’s go into the kitchen,” the visitor said.
Scimeca moved away from the door. Squeezed past the visitor in the narrow hallway and led the way into her kitchen.
“The paint is right here,” she said.
“Show me.”
Scimeca took the can out of the bag and held it up by the wire handle.
“It’s olive green,” she said. “Closest they had.”
The visitor nodded. “Good. You did very well.”
Scimeca blushed with pleasure. A tiny pink flush under the white of her skin.
“Now you need to concentrate,” the visitor said. “Because I’m going to give you a lot of information.”
“What about?”
“About what I want you to do.”
Scimeca nodded.
“OK,” she said.
“First thing, you have to smile for me,” the visitor said. “That’s very important.

It means a lot to me."
"OK," Scimeca said.
"So can you smile for me?"
"I don't know."
"Try it, OK?"
"I don't smile much anymore."
The visitor nodded, sympathetic. "I know, but just try now, OK?"
Scimeca ducked her head and concentrated and came back up with a shy, weak smile. Just a faint new angle to her lips, but it was something. She held it, desperately.
"That's nice," the visitor said. "Now remember, I want you smiling all the time."
"OK."
"Got to be happy in our work, right?"
"Right."
"We need something to open the can."
"My tools are downstairs," Scimeca said.
"Have you got a screwdriver?"
"Of course," Scimeca said. "I've got eight or nine."
"Go get a big one for me, would you?"
"Sure."
"And don't forget the smile, OK?"
"Sorry."
THE MUG WAS too big for the Crown Vic's cup holder, so he drank all the coffee straight off because he couldn't put it down between sips. That always happened. At a party, if he was standing up holding a bottle, he drank it much faster than if he was sitting at a bar where he could sometimes rest it on the napkin. Like smoking. If there was an ashtray to rest the butt in, the cigarette lasted much longer than if he was walking around with it, whereupon he demolished it in about a minute and a half.
So he was sitting there with the empty mug resting on his thigh, thinking about carrying it back up to the house. *Here's your mug back*, he could say. *Thanks very much*. It would give him another chance to drop a hint about how cold he was. Maybe he could get her to put a chair in the hallway, and he could finish his shift inside. Nobody could complain about that. Better protection that way.
But he was nervous about ringing the bell again. She was an uptight character, that was for damn sure. Who knows how she might react, even though he was being real polite, just returning her mug? Even though he'd gotten rid of the chaplain for her? He bounced the mug up and down on his knee and tried to balance out between how cold he was and how offended she might get.

THE TAXI DROVE on, through Gresham, through Kelso, through Sandy. Route 26 picked up a name, Mount Hood Highway. The grade steepened. The old V-8 dug deep and rumbled upward.
“Who is it?” Harper asked.
“The key is in Poulton’s report from Spokane.”
“It is?”
He nodded. “Big and obvious. But it took me some time to spot it.”
“The UPS thing? We went through all of that.”
He shook his head. “No, before that. The Hertz thing. The rental car.”
SCIMECA CAME BACK up the basement stairs with a screwdriver in her hand. It was the third-largest she had, about eight inches long, with a blade fine enough to slip between the can and the lid, but broad enough to make an effective lever.
“I think this is the best one,” she said. “You know, for the purpose.”
The visitor looked at it from a distance. “I’m sure it’s fine. As long as you’re comfortable with it. You’ll be using it, not me.”
Scimeca nodded.
“I think it’s good,” she said.
“So where’s your bathroom?”
“Upstairs.”
“Want to show me?”
“Sure.”
“Bring the paint,” the visitor said. “And the screwdriver. ”
Scimeca went back to the kitchen and picked up the can.
“Do we need the stirring stick too?” she called.
The visitor hesitated. *New procedure, needs a new technique*.
“Yes, bring the stirring stick.”
The stick was about twelve inches long, and Scimeca clasped it together with the screwdriver in her left hand. Picked up the can by the handle with her right.
“This way,” she said.
She led the way out of the kitchen and up the stairs. Across the upstairs hallway and into her bedroom. Across the bedroom and into the bathroom.
“This is it,” she said.
The visitor looked it over, and felt like an expert on bathrooms. This one was the fifth, after all. It was medium-budget, probably. A little old-fashioned. But it suited the age of the house. A fancy marble confection would have looked wrong.
“Put the stuff down on the floor, OK?”
Scimeca bent and put the can down. The metal made a faint liquid *clonk* as it hit the tile. She folded the wire handle down and balanced the screwdriver and the

stick across the lid. The visitor came out with a folded garbage sack, black plastic, from a coat pocket. Shook it out and held it open.
“I need you to put your clothes in here.”
HE GOT OUT of the car, with the mug in his hand. Walked around the hood and into the driveway. Up the looping path. Up the porch steps. He juggled the mug into the other hand, ready to ring the bell. Then he paused. It was very quiet inside. No piano music. Was that good or bad? She was kind of obsessive, always playing the same thing over and over again. Probably didn’t like being interrupted in the middle of it. But the fact that she wasn’t playing might mean she was doing something else important. Maybe taking a nap. The Bureau guy said she got up at six. Maybe she took a siesta in the afternoon. Maybe she was reading a book. Whatever she was doing, she probably wasn’t just sitting there hoping he’d come to her door. She hadn’t shown any inclinations along those lines before.
He stood there, indecisive, his hand held out a foot away from her bell. Then he dropped it to his side and turned around and went back down the steps to the path. Back down the path to the driveway. Back around the hood of his car. He got in and leaned over and stood the mug upright in the passenger footwell.
SCIMECA LOOKED CONFUSED.
“What clothes?” she asked.
“The clothes you’re wearing,” the visitor said.
Scimeca nodded, vaguely.
“OK,” she said.
“I’m not happy with the smile, Rita,” the visitor said. “It’s slipping a little.”
“Sorry.”
“Check it out in the mirror, tell me if that’s a happy face.”
Scimeca turned to the mirror. Gazed for a second and started working on the muscles in her face, one by one. The visitor watched her reflection.
“Make it a big one. Real cheerful, OK?”
Scimeca turned back.
“How’s this?” she said, smiling as wide as she could.
“Very good,” the visitor said. “You want to make me happy, right?”
“Yes, I do.”
“So put your clothes in the bag.”
Scimeca took off her sweater. It was a heavy knit item with a tight neck. She hauled the hem up and stretched it over her head. Shook it right side out and leaned over and dropped it in the bag. Second layer was a flannel blouse, washed so many times it was soft and shapeless. She unbuttoned it all the way down and pulled the tails out of the waistband of her jeans. Shrugged it off and dropped it

in the bag.
“Now I’m cold,” she said.
She unbuttoned the jeans and undid the zip and pushed them down her legs. Kicked off her shoes and stepped out of the jeans. Rolled the shoes and the jeans together and put them in the bag. Peeled off her socks and shook them out and threw them in, one at a time.
“Hurry up, Rita,” the visitor said.
Scimeca nodded and put her hands behind her back and unhooked her bra. Pulled it off and tossed it in the bag. Slipped her panties down and stepped out of them. Crushed them into a ball and threw them into the bag. The visitor closed the neck of the bag and dropped it on the floor. Scimeca stood there, naked, waiting.
“Run the bath,” the visitor said. “Make it warm, since you’re cold.”
Scimeca bent down and put the stopper in the drain. It was a simple rubber item, secured by a chain. She opened the faucets, three-quarters hot and one-quarter cold.
“Open the paint,” the visitor said.
Scimeca squatted down and picked up the screwdriver. Worked the tip into the crack and levered. Rotated the can under the screwdriver, once, twice, until the lid sucked free.
“Be careful. I don’t want any mess.”
Scimeca laid the lid gently on the tile. Looked up, expectant.
“Pour the paint in the tub.”
She picked up the can, both hands. It was wide, not easy to hold. She clamped it between her palms and carried it to the tub. Twisted from the waist and tipped it over. The paint was thick. It smelled of ammonia. It ran slowly over the lip of the can and poured into the water. The swirl from the faucets caught it. It eddied into a spiral pattern and sank like a weight. The water started dissolving the edges of the spiral and thin green color drifted through the tub like clouds. She held the can upside down until the thick stream thinned, and then stopped.
“Careful,” the visitor said. “Now put the can down. And don’t make a mess.”
She turned the can the right way up and squatted again and placed it gently on the tile next to the lid. It made a hollow, empty sound, damped slightly by the residue coating the metal.
“Now get the stirring stick. Mix it up.”
She picked up the stick and knelt at the edge of the tub. Worked the stick into the thick sunken mass and stirred.
“It’s mixing,” she said.
The visitor nodded. “That’s why you bought latex.”

The color changed as the paint dissolved. It went from dark olive to the color of grass growing in a damp grove. It thinned, all the way down to the consistency of milk. The visitor watched carefully. It was OK. Not as dramatic as the real thing, but it was dramatic enough to be using paint at all, in the circumstances.
“OK, that’ll do. Put the stick in the can. No mess.”
Scimeca pulled the stick out of the green water and shook it carefully. Reached back and stood it upright in the empty can.
“And the screwdriver.”
She stood the screwdriver next to the stick.
“Put the lid back on.”
She picked the lid up by the edge and laid it across the top of the can. It canted up at a shallow angle, because the stirring stick was too tall to let it go all the way down.
“You can turn the faucets off now.”
She turned back to the tub and shut off the water. The level was up to within six inches of the rim.
“Where did you store your carton?”
“In the basement,” she said. “But they took it away.”
The visitor nodded. "I know. But can you remember exactly where it was?”
Scimeca nodded in turn.
“It was there for a long time,” she said.
“I want you to put the can down there,” the visitor said. “Right where the carton was. Can you do that?”
Scimeca nodded.
“Yes, I can do that,” she said.
She raised the metal hoop. Eased it up alongside the unsteady lid. Carried the can out in front of her, one hand on the handle, the other palm down against the lid, securing it. She went down the stairs and through the hallway and down to the garage and through to the basement. Stood for a second with her feet on the cold concrete floor, trying to get it exactly right. Then she stepped to her left and placed the can on the floor, in the center of the space the carton had occupied.
THE TAXI WAS struggling on a long hill past a small shopping center. There was a supermarket, with rows of stores flanking it. A parking lot, mostly empty.
“Why are we here?” Harper asked.
“Because Scimeca is next,” Reacher said.
The taxi labored onward. Harper shook her head.
“Tell me who.”
“Think about *how*,” Reacher said. “That’s the absolute final proof.”
SCIMECA MOVED THE empty can an inch to the right. Checked carefully. Nodded to herself and turned and ran back upstairs. She felt she ought to hurry

Nodded to herself and turned and ran back upstairs. She felt she ought to hurry.
“Out of breath?” the visitor asked.
Scimeca gulped and nodded.
“I ran,” she said. “All the way back.”
“OK, take a minute.”
She breathed deeply and pushed her hair off her face.
“I’m OK,” she said.
“So now you have to get into the tub.”
Scimeca smiled.
“I’ll get all green,” she said.
“Yes,” the visitor said. “You’ll get all green.”
Scimeca stepped to the side of the tub and raised her foot. Pointed her toe and put it in the water.
“It’s warm,” she said.
The visitor nodded. “That’s good.”
Scimeca took her weight on the foot in the water and brought the other in after it. Stood there in the tub up to her calves.
“Now sit down. Carefully.”
She put her hands on the rim and lowered herself down.
“Legs straight.”
She straightened her legs and her knees disappeared under the green.
“Arms in.”
She let go of the rim and put her hands down beside her thighs.
“Good,” the visitor said. “Now slide down, slowly and carefully.”
She shuffled forward in the water. Her knees came up. They were stained green, dark and then pale where little rivulets of paint flowed over her skin. She lay back and felt the warmth moving up her body. She felt it lap over her shoulders.
“Head back.”
She tilted her head and looked up at the ceiling. She felt her hair floating.
“Have you ever eaten oysters?” the visitor asked.
She nodded. She felt her hair swirl in the water as she moved her head.
"Once or twice,” she said.
“You remember how it feels? They’re in your mouth, and you just suddenly swallow them whole? Just gulp them down?”
She nodded again.
“I liked them,” she said.
“Pretend your tongue is an oyster,” the visitor said.
She glanced sideways, puzzled.
“I don’t understand,” she said.
“I want you to swallow your tongue. I want you to just gulp it down, real

"I want you to swallow your tongue. I want you to just gulp it down, real sudden, like it was an oyster."
"I don't know if I can do that."
"Can you try?"
"Sure, I can try."
"OK, give it a go, right now."
She concentrated hard, and tried. Gulped it back, suddenly. But nothing happened. Just a noise in her throat.
"Doesn't work," she said.
"Use your finger to help," the visitor said. "The others all had to do that."
"My finger?"
The visitor nodded. "Push it back in there with your finger. It worked for the others."
"OK."
She raised her hand. Thin paint ran off her arm, with thicker globules where the mixing wasn't perfect.
"Which finger?" she asked.
"Try the middle," the visitor said. "It's the longest."
She extended her middle finger and folded the others. Opened her mouth.
"Put it right under your tongue," the visitor said. "And push back hard."
She opened her mouth wider and pushed back hard.
"Now swallow."
She swallowed. Then her eyes jammed open in panic.

30

THE CAB PULLED up nose to nose with the police cruiser. Reacher was the first one out, partly because he was tense, and partly because he needed Harper to pay the driver. He stood on the sidewalk and glanced around. Stepped back into the street and headed for the cop's window.
"Everything OK?" he asked.
"Who are you?" the cop said.
"FBI," Reacher said. "Is everything OK here?"
"Can I see a badge?"
"Harper, show this guy your badge," Reacher called.
The taxi backed off and pulled a wide curb-to-curb turn in the road. Harper put her purse back in her pocketbook and came out with her badge, gold on gold, the eagle on top with its head cocked to the left. The cop glanced across at it and relaxed. Harper put it back in her bag and stood on the sidewalk, looking up at the house.
"It's all quiet here," the cop said, through his window.
"She in there?" Reacher asked him.
The cop pointed at the garage door.
"Just got back from the store," he said.
"She went out?"
"I can't stop her from going out," the cop said.
"You check her car?"
"Just her and two shopping bags. There was a padre came calling for her. From the Army, some counseling thing. She sent him away."
Reacher nodded. "She would. She's not religious."
"Tell me about it," the cop said.
"OK," Reacher said. "We're going inside."
"Just don't ask for the powder room," the cop said.
"Why not?"
"She's kind of touchy about being disturbed."
"I'll take the risk," Reacher said.
"Well, can you give her this for me?" the cop asked.
He ducked down in his car and came back with an empty mug from the passenger footwell. Handed it out through the window.
"She brought me coffee," he said. "Nice lady when you get to know her."
"Yes, she is," Reacher said.
He took the mug and followed Harper into the driveway. Up the looping path, up

He took the mug and followed Harper into the driveway. Up the looping path, up the porch steps, to the door. Harper pressed the bell. He listened to the sound echoing to silence off the polished wood inside. Harper waited ten seconds and pressed again. A burst of purring metallic noise, then echoes, then silence.
"Where is she?" she said.
She hit the bell for the third time. Noise, echoes, silence. She looked at him, worried. He looked at the lock on the door. It was a big heavy item. Probably new. Probably carried all kinds of lifetime warranties and insurance discounts. Probably had a thick case-hardened latch fitted snugly into a steel receptacle chiseled neatly into the doorframe. The doorframe was probably Oregon pine felled a hundred years ago. The best construction timber in history, dried like iron over a century.
"Shit," he said.
He stepped back to the edge of the porch and balanced the cop's empty mug on the rail. Danced forward and smashed the sole of his foot against the lock.
"Hell are you doing?" Harper said.
He whirled back and hit the door again, once, twice, three times. Felt the timbers yield. He grasped the porch railings like a ski jumper and bounced twice and hurled himself forward. Straightened his leg and smashed his whole two hundred and thirty pounds into an area the size of his heel directly over the lock. The frame splintered and part of it followed the door into the hallway.
"Upstairs," he gasped.
He raced up, with Harper crowding his back. He ducked into a bedroom. Wrong bedroom. Inferior linens, a cold musty smell. A guest room. He ducked into the next door. The right bedroom. A made bed, dimpled pillows, the smell of sleep, a telephone and a water glass on the nightstand. A connecting door, ajar. He stepped across the room and shoved it open. He saw a bathroom.
Mirrors, a sink, a shower stall.
A tub full of hideous green water.
Scimeca in the water.
And Julia Lamarr.
Julia Lamarr, turning and rising and twisting off her perch on the rim of the tub, whirling around to face him. She was wearing a sweater and pants and black leather gloves. Her face was white with hate and fear. Her mouth was half-open. Her crossed teeth were bared in panic. He seized her by the front of the sweater and spun her around and hit her once in the head, a savage abrupt blow from a huge fist powered by blind anger and crushing physical momentum. It caught her solidly on the side of the jaw and her head snapped back and she bounced off the opposite wall and went down like she was hit by a truck. He didn't see her make it to the floor because he was already turning back to the tub. Scimeca was

arched up out of the slime, naked, rigid, eyes bulging, head back, mouth open in agony.
Not moving.
Not breathing.
He put a hand under her neck and held her head up and straightened the fingers on his other hand and stabbed them into her mouth. Couldn't reach her tongue. He balled his hand and punched and forced his knuckles all the way inside. Her mouth made a giant ghastly O around his wrist and the skin of his hand tore against her teeth and he scrabbled in her throat and hooked a finger around her tongue and hauled it back. It was slippery, like a live thing. It was long and heavy and muscular. It curled tight against itself and eased up out of her throat and flopped back into her mouth. He pulled his hand free and tore more skin. Bent down to blow air into her lungs but as his face got near hers he felt a convulsive exhalation from her and a desperate cough and then her chest started heaving. Giant ragged breaths sucked in and out. He cradled her head. She was wheezing. Tortured cracked sounds in her throat.
"Set the shower running," he screamed.
Harper ran to the stall and turned on the water. He slid his hand under Scimeca's back and pulled the stopper out of the drain. The thick green water eddied away around her body. He lifted her under the shoulders and the knees. Stood up and stepped back and held her in the middle of the bathroom, dripping green slime everywhere.
"Got to get this stuff off of her," he said, helplessly.
"I'll take her," Harper said gently.
She caught her under the arms and backed herself into the shower, fully dressed. Jammed herself into a corner of the stall and held the limp body upright like a drunk. The shower turned the paint light green, and then reddened skin showed through as it rinsed away. Harper held her tight, two minutes, three, four. She was soaked to the skin and her clothes were smeared with green. She moved around in a bizarre halting dance, so the shower could catch every part of Scimeca's body. Then she maneuvered carefully backward until the water was rinsing the sticky green out of her hair. It kept on coming, endlessly. Harper was tiring. The paint was slick. Scimeca was sliding out of her grasp.
"Get towels," she gasped. "Find a bathrobe."
They were on a row of hooks, directly above where Lamarr was lying inert. Reacher took two towels and Harper staggered forward out of the stall. Reacher held a towel in front of him and Harper passed Scimeca to him. He caught her through the thickness of the towel and wrapped her in it. Harper turned off the hissing water and took the other towel. Stood there in the sudden silence,

breathing hard, wiping her face. Reacher lifted Scimeca off her feet and carried her out of the bathroom, into the bedroom. Laid her down gently on the bed. Leaned over her and wiped the wet hair off her face. She was still wheezing hard. Her eyes were open, but they were blank.
“Is she OK?” Harper called.
“I don’t know,” Reacher said.
He watched her breathing. Her chest rose and fell, rose and fell, urgently, like she had just run a mile.
“I think so,” he said. “She’s breathing.”
He caught her wrist and felt for the pulse. It was there, strong and fast.
“She’s OK,” he said. “Pulse is good.”
“We should get her to the hospital,” Harper called.
“She’ll be better here,” Reacher said.
“But she’ll need sedation. This will have blown her mind.”
He shook his head. “She’ll wake up, and she won’t remember a thing.”
Harper stared at him. “Are you kidding?”
He looked up at her. She was standing there, holding a bathrobe, soaked to the skin and smeared with paint. Her shirt was olive green and transparent.
“She was hypnotized,” he said.
He nodded toward the bathroom.
“That’s how she did it all,” he said. “Everything, every damn step of the way. She was the Bureau’s biggest expert.”
“Hypnosis?” Harper said.
He took the bathrobe from her and laid it over Scimeca’s passive form. Tucked it tight around her. Bent his head and listened to her breathing. It was still strong, and it was slowing down. She looked like a person in a deep sleep, except her eyes were wide open and staring at nothing.
“I don’t believe it,” Harper said.
Reacher used the corner of the towel and dried Scimeca’s face.
“That’s how she did it all,” he said again.
He used his thumbs and closed Scimeca’s eyes. It seemed like the right thing to do. She breathed lower and turned her head an inch. Her wet hair dragged on the pillow. She turned her head the other way, scrubbing her face into the pillow, restlessly, like a sleeping woman confused by her dreams. Harper stared at her, immobile. Then she turned around and stared and spoke to the bathroom door.
“When did you know?” she asked.
“For sure?” he said. “Last night.”
“But how?” she said.
Reacher used the towel again, where thin green fluid was leaking down out of

Scimeca's hair.
"I just went around and around," he said. "Right from the beginning, for days and days, thinking, thinking, thinking, driving myself crazy. It was a real *what if* thing. And then it turned into a *so what else* thing."
Harper stared at him. He pulled the bathrobe higher on Scimeca's shoulder.
"I knew they were wrong about the motive," he said. "I knew it all along. But I couldn't understand it. They're smart people, right? But they were so *wrong*. I was asking myself why? *Why?* Had they gotten dumb all of a sudden? Were they blinded by their professional specialty? That's what I thought it was, at first. Small units inside big organizations are so defensive, aren't they? Innately? I figured a bunch of psychologists paid to unravel very complex things wouldn't be too willing to give it up and say no, this is something very ordinary. I thought it might be subconscious. But eventually I passed on that. It's just too irresponsible. So I went around and around. And in the end the only answer left was they were wrong because they *wanted* to be wrong."
"And you knew Lamarr was driving the motive," Harper said. "Because it was her case, really. So you suspected her."
He nodded.
"Exactly," he said. "Soon as Alison died, I had to think about Lamarr doing it, because there was a close connection, and like you said, close family connections are always significant. So then I asked myself what if she did them all? What if she's camouflaging a personal motive behind the randomness of the first three? But I couldn't see how. Or why. There was no personal motive. They weren't best buddies, but they got along OK. There were no family issues. No unfairness about the inheritance, for instance. It was going to be equal. No jealousy there. And she couldn't fly, so how could it be her?"
"But?"
"But then the dam broke. Something Alison said. I remembered it much later. She said her father was dying but *sisters take care of each other, right?* I thought she was talking about emotional support or something. But then I thought what if she meant it another way? Like some people use the phrase? Like you did, when we had coffee in New York and the check came and you said you'd take care of it? Meaning you'd pay for me, you'd treat me? I thought what if Alison meant that she'd take care of Julia financially? Share with her? Like she knew the inheritance was all coming her way and Julia was getting nothing and was all uptight about it? But Julia had told me everything was equal, and she was already rich, anyway, because the old man was generous and fair. So I suddenly asked myself what if she's lying about that? What if the old guy *wasn't* generous and fair? What if she's *not* rich?"

“She was *lying* about that?”
Reacher nodded. “Had to be. Suddenly it made a lot of sense. I realized she doesn’t *look* rich. She dresses very cheap. She has cheap luggage.”
“You based it on her *luggage*?”
He shrugged. “I told you it was a house of cards. But in my experience if somebody’s got money outside of their salary, it shows up somewhere. It might be subtle and tasteful, but it’s there. And with Julia Lamarr, it wasn’t there. So she was poor. So she was lying. And Jodie told me her firm has this *so what else* thing. If they find a guy lying about something, they ask themselves *so what else*? What else is he lying about? So I thought what if she’s lying about the relationship with her sister too? What if she still hates her and resents her, like when she was a little kid? And what if she’s lying about the equal inheritance? What if there’s no inheritance for her at all?”
“Did you check it out?”
“How could I? But check it out yourself and you’ll see. It’s the only thing that fits. So then I thought what the hell else? What if *everything* is a lie? What if she’s lying about not flying? What if that’s a big beautiful lie too, just sitting there, so big and obvious nobody thinks twice about it? I even asked you how she gets away with it. You said everybody just works around it, like a law of nature. Well, we all did. We just worked around it. Like she intended. Because it made it absolutely impossible it was her. But it was a lie. It had to be. Fear of flying is way too irrational for her.”
“But it’s an impossible lie to tell. I mean, either a person flies, or she doesn’t.”
“She used to, years ago,” Reacher said. “She told me that. Then presumably she grew to hate it, so she stopped. So it was convincing. Nobody who knows her now ever saw her fly. So everybody believed her. But when it came to it, she could put herself on a plane. If it was worth it to her. And this was worth it to her. Biggest motive you ever saw. Alison was going to get everything, and she wanted it for herself. She was Cinderella, all burning up with jealousy and resentment and hatred.”
“Well, she fooled me,” Harper said. “That’s for sure.”
Reacher stroked Scimeca’s hair.
“She fooled everybody,” he said. “That’s why she did the far corners first. To make everybody think about the geography, the range, the reach, the distance. To move herself right outside the picture, subconsciously. ”
Harper was quiet for a beat. “But she was so upset. She *cried*, remember? In front of us all?”
Reacher shook his head. “She wasn’t upset. She was frightened. It was her time of maximum danger. Remember just before that? She refused to take her rest

period. Because she knew she needed to be around, to control any fallout from the postmortem. And then I started questioning the motive, and she got tense as hell because I might be heading in the right direction. But then I said it was weapons theft in the Army, and she cried, but not because she was upset. She cried with *relief*, because she was still safe. I hadn't smoked her out. And you remember what she did next?"
Harper nodded. "She started backing you up on the weapons theft thing."
"Exactly," Reacher said. "She started making my case for me. Putting words in my mouth. She said we should think laterally, go for it, maximum effort. She jumped on the bandwagon, because she saw the bandwagon was heading in the wrong direction. She was thinking hard, improvising like crazy, sending us all down another blind alley. But she wasn't thinking hard *enough*, because that bandwagon was always bullshit. There was a flaw in it, a mile wide."
"What flaw?"
"It was an impossible coincidence that the eleven witnesses could be the only eleven women obviously living alone afterward. I told you it was partly an experiment. I wanted to see who *wouldn't* support it. Only Poulton wouldn't. Blake was out of it, upset because Lamarr was upset. But Lamarr backed it all the way. She backed it big-time, because it made her safe. And then she went home, with everybody's sympathy. But she didn't go home. At least not for more than the time it takes to pack a bag. She came straight here and went to work."
Harper went pale.
"She actually confessed," she said. "Right then and there, before she left. Remember that? She said *I killed my sister*. Because of wasting time, she said. But it was really true. It was a sick joke."
Reacher nodded. "She's sick as hell. She killed four women for her stepfather's money. And this paint thing? It was always so bizarre. So bizarre, it was overwhelming. But it was difficult, too. Can you imagine the practicalities? Why would a person use a trick like that?"
"To confuse us."
"And?"
"Because she enjoyed it," Harper said, slowly. "Because she's really sick."
"Sick as hell," Reacher said again. "But very smart, too. Can you imagine the planning? She must have started two whole years ago. Her stepfather fell ill about the same time her sister came out of the Army. She started putting it all together right then. Very, very meticulous. She got the support group list direct from her sister, picked out the ones who obviously lived alone, like I did, then she visited all eleven of them, secretly, probably weekends, by plane. Walked in

everywhere she needed to because she was a woman with an FBI shield, just like you walked into Alison's place the other day and you walked past that cop just now. Nothing more reassuring than a woman with an FBI shield, right? Then she maybe gave them some story about how the Bureau was trying to finally nail the military, which must have gratified them. Said she was starting a big investigation. Sat them down in their own living rooms and asked if she could hypnotize them for background information on the issue."

"Including her own sister? But how could she do that without Alison knowing she flew there?"

"She made Alison come to Quantico for it. Remember that? Alison said she'd flown out to Quantico so Julia could hypnotize her for deep background. But there were no questions about deep background. No questions at all, in fact, just instructions for the future. She told her what to do, just like she told all of them what to do. Lorraine Stanley was still serving then, so she told her to steal the paint and hide it. The others, she told them to expect a carton sometime in the future and store it. She told all of them to expect another visit from her, and in the meantime to deny everything if they were ever asked about anything. She even scripted the bullshit stories for them, bogus roommates and random delivery mistakes."

Harper nodded and stared at the bathroom door.

"So then she told Stanley to activate the deliveries," she said. "And then she went back to Florida and killed Amy Callan. Then Caroline Cooke. And she knew as soon as she killed Cooke, a serial pattern would be established and the whole thing would fall into Blake's lap at Quantico, whereupon she was right there to start misdirecting the investigation. God, I should have spotted it. She insisted on working the case. And she insisted on staying with it. It was perfect, wasn't it? Who did the profile? She did. Who insisted on the military motive? She did. Who said we're looking for a soldier? She did. She even hauled you in as an *example* of what we were looking for."

Reacher said nothing. Harper stared at the door.

"But Alison was the only real target," she said. "And that's why she dropped the interval, I guess. Because she was all hyped up and excited and couldn't wait."

"She made us do her surveillance," Reacher said. "She asked us about Alison's place, remember? She was abandoning the interval, so she didn't have time for surveillance, so she got us to do it for her. Remember that? Is it isolated? Is the door locked? We did her scouting for her."

Harper closed her eyes. "She was off duty the day Alison died. It was Sunday. Quantico was quiet. I never even thought about it. She knew nobody would think about it, on a Sunday. She knows nobody's there."

"She is very smart." Reacher said.

"She's very smart," Reacher said.
Harper nodded. Opened her eyes. "And I guess it explains the lack of evidence everywhere. She knows what we look for at the scene."
"And she's a woman," Reacher said. "The investigators were looking for a man, because she told them to. Same with the rental cars. She knew if anybody checked they would come back with a woman's name, which would be ignored. Which is exactly what happened. "
"But what name?" Harper asked. "She'd need ID for the rental."
"For the airlines, too," Reacher said. "But I'm sure she's got a drawerful of ID. From women the Bureau has sent to prison. You'll be able to match them up, relevant dates and places. Innocent feminine names, meaning nothing."
Harper looked rueful. "I passed that message on, remember? From Hertz? *It was nothing*, I said, *just some woman on business*."
Reacher nodded. "She's very smart. I think she even dressed the same as the victims, while she was in their houses. She watched them, and if they wore a cotton dress, she wore a cotton dress. If they wore pants, she wore pants. Like she's in here now wearing an old sweater like Scimeca's. So any fibers she leaves behind will be discounted. She asked us what Alison was wearing, remember? No time for surveillance, so she asked us, all innocent and roundabout. Is she still all sporty and tanned and dressed like a cowboy? We said yes, she is, so no doubt she went in there wearing denim jeans and boots."
"And she scratched her face because she hated her."
Reacher shook his head.
"No, I'm afraid that was my fault," he said. "I kept questioning the lack of violence, right in front of her. So she supplied some, the very next time around. I should have kept my big mouth shut."
Harper said nothing.
"And that's how I knew she'd be here," Reacher said. "Because she was trying to imitate a guy like me, all along. And I said I would go for Scimeca next. So I knew she'd be here, sooner or later. But she was a little quicker than I thought. And we were a little slower. She didn't waste any time, did she?"
Harper glanced at the bathroom door. Shuddered. Glanced away.
"How did you figure the hypnotism thing?" she asked.
"Like everything else," Reacher said. "I thought I knew who, and why, but the *how* part looked absolutely impossible, so I just went around and around. That's why I wanted to get out of Quantico. I wanted space to think. It took me a real long time. But eventually, it was the only possibility. It explained everything. The passivity, the obedience, the acquiescence. And why the scenes looked the way they did. Looked like the guy never laid a finger on them, because she never

did lay a finger on them. She just reestablished the spell and told them what to do, step by step. They did everything themselves. Right down to filling their own tubs, swallowing their own tongues. The only thing she did herself was what I did, pull their tongues back up afterward, so the pathologists wouldn't catch on."
"But how did you know about the tongues?"
He was quiet for a beat.
"From kissing you," he said.
"Kissing me?"
He smiled. "You've got a great tongue, Harper. It set me thinking. Tongues were the only things which fitted Stavely's autopsy findings. But I figured there was no way to *make* somebody swallow their own tongue, until I realized it was Lamarr, and she was a hypnotist, and then the whole thing fell together."
Harper was silent.
"And you know what?" Reacher said.
"What?"
"The very first night I met her, she wanted to hypnotize me. For deep background, she said, but obviously she was going to tell me to look convincing and get absolutely nowhere. Blake pestered me to do it, and I said no, because she'll make me run naked down Fifth Avenue. Like a joke. But it was awful near the truth."
Harper shivered. "Where would she have stopped?"
"Maybe one more," Reacher said. "Six would be enough. Six would have done it. Sand on the beach."
She stepped over and sat down next to him on the bed. Stared down at Scimeca, inert beneath the bathrobe.
"Will she be OK?" she asked.
"Probably," Reacher said. "She's tough as hell."
Harper glanced at him. His shirt and pants were wet and smeared. His arms were green, right up to the shoulders.
"You're all wet," she said, absently.
"So are you," he said. "Wetter than me."
She nodded. Went quiet.
"We're both wet," she said. "But at least now it's over."
He said nothing.
"Here's to success," she said.
She leaned over and threaded her damp arms around his neck. Pulled him close and kissed him, hard on the mouth. He felt her tongue on his lips. Then it stopped moving. She pulled away.
"Feels weird," she said. "I won't be able to do this ever again without thinking

bad things about tongues.”
He said nothing.
“Horrible way to die,” she said.
He looked at her and smiled.
“You fall off a horse, you’ve got to get right back on,” he said.
He leaned toward her and cupped a hand behind her head and pulled her close. Kissed her on the mouth. She was completely still for a beat. Then she got back into it. She held the kiss for a long moment. Then she pulled away, smiling shyly.
“Go wake her up,” Reacher said. “Make the arrest, start the questioning. You’ve got a big case ahead of you.”
“She won’t talk to me.”
He looked down at Scimeca’s sleeping face.
“She will,” he said. “Tell her the first time she clams up, I’ll break her arm. The second time, I’ll grind the bones together.”
Harper shivered again and turned away. Stood up and stepped out to the bathroom. The bedroom went quiet. No sound anywhere, just Scimeca’s breathing, steady but noisy, like a machine. Then Harper came back in, a long moment later, white in the face.
“She won’t talk to me,” she said.
“How do you know? You didn’t ask her anything.”
“Because she’s dead.”
Silence.
“You killed her.”
Silence.
“When you hit her.”
Silence.
“You broke her neck.”
Then there were loud footsteps in the hallway below them. Then they were on the stairs. Then they were in the corridor outside the bedroom. The cop stepped into the room. He was holding his mug. He had retrieved it from the porch railing. He stared.
“Hell’s going on?” he said.

31

SEVEN HOURS LATER it was well past midnight. Reacher was locked up alone in a holding pen inside the FBI's Portland Field Office. He knew the cop had called his sergeant and the sergeant had called his Bureau contact. He knew Portland called Quantico and Quantico called the Hoover Building and the Hoover Building called New York. The cop relayed all that information, breathless with excitement. Then his sergeant arrived in person and he clammed up. Harper disappeared somewhere and an ambulance arrived to take Scimeca to the hospital. He heard the police department cede jurisdiction to the FBI without any kind of a struggle. Then two Portland agents arrived to make the arrest. They cuffed him and drove him to the city and dumped him in the holding pen and left him there.

It was hot in the cell. His clothes dried within an hour, stiff as boards and stained olive with paint. Apart from that, nothing happened. He guessed it was taking time for people to assemble. He wondered if they would come to Portland, or if they'd fly him back to Quantico. Nobody told him anything. Nobody came near him. He was left alone. He spent the time worrying about Scimeca. He imagined harassed strangers in the emergency room, probing and fussing over her.

It stayed quiet until after midnight. Then things started happening. He heard sounds in the building. Arrivals, urgent conversations. First person he saw was Nelson Blake. *They're coming here*, he thought. *They must have discussed a position and fired up the Lear. Timing was about right*. The inner door opened and Blake walked past the bars and glanced into the cell, something in his face. *You really screwed up now*, he was saying. He looked tired and strained. Red and pale, all at the same time.

It went quiet again for an hour. Past one o'clock in the morning, Alan Deerfield arrived, all the way from New York. The inner door opened and he walked in, silent and morose, red eyes behind the thick glasses. He paused. Glanced through the bars. The same contemplative look he'd used all those nights ago. *So you're the guy, huh?*

He walked back out and it went quiet again, another hour. Past two o'clock, a local agent came in with a bunch of keys. He unlocked the door.

"Time to talk," he said.

He led him out of the cell block into a corridor. Down the corridor to a conference room. Smaller than the New York facility, but just as cheap. Same lighting, same big table. Deerfield and Blake were sitting together on one side. There was a chair positioned opposite. He walked around and sat down in it.

There was a chair positioned opposite. He walked around and sat down in it.
There was silence for a long moment. Nobody spoke, nobody moved. Then Blake sat forward.
“I’ve got a dead agent,” he said. “And I don’t like that.”
Reacher looked at him.
“You’ve got four dead women,” he said. “Could have been five.”
Blake shook his head. “Never was going to be five. We had the situation under control. Julia Lamarr was right there rescuing the fifth when you killed her.”
The room went silent again. Reacher nodded, slowly.
“That’s your position?” he asked.
Deerfield looked up.
“It’s a viable proposition,” he said. “Don’t you think? She makes some kind of breakthrough in her own time, she overcomes her fear of flying, she gets herself out here right on the heels of the perpetrator, she arrives in the nick of time, she’s about to start emergency medical procedures when you burst in and hit her. She’s a hero, and you go to trial for the murder of a federal agent.”
Silence again.
“Can you make the chronology work?” Reacher asked.
Blake nodded. “Sure we can. She’s at home, say, nine o’clock in the morning East Coast, she gets herself outside Portland by five, Pacific. That’s eleven hours. Plenty of time to get a brainstorm and get herself to National and get on a plane.”
“The cop see the bad guy get in the house?”
Deerfield shrugged. “We figure the cop fell asleep. You know what these country boys are like.”
“He saw a padre come calling. He was awake then.”
Deerfield shook his head. “Army will say they never sent a padre. He must have dreamed it.”
“Did he see *her* get in the house?”
“Still asleep.”
“How did she get in?”
“Knocked on the door, interrupted the guy. He bolted out past her, she didn’t chase him because she wanted to check on Scimeca, because she’s a humanitarian. ”
“The cop see the guy running out?”
“Still asleep.”
“And she took the time to lock the door behind her, even though she was rushing upstairs because she’s such a humanitarian?”
“Evidently.”
The room went quiet.

“Scimeca come around yet?” Reacher asked.
Deerfield nodded. “We called the hospital. She remembers nothing about anything. We assume she must be blanking it out. We’ll get a boatload of shrinks to say that’s perfectly normal.”
“Is she OK?”
“She’s fine.”
Blake smiled. “But we won’t pursue her for a description of her attacker. Our shrinks will say that would be grossly insensitive, given her circumstances.”
The room went quiet again.
“Where’s Harper?” Reacher said.
“On suspension,” Blake said.
“For not following the party line?”
“She’s unduly affected by a romantic illusion,” Blake said. “She told us some fantastic bullshit story.”
“You see your problem, right?” Deerfield said. “You hated Lamarr from the start. So you killed her for personal reasons of your own and invented a story to cover yourself. But it’s not a very good story, is it? There’s no support for it. You can’t put Lamarr anywhere near any of the scenes.”
“She never left any evidence,” Reacher said.
Blake smiled. “Ironic, isn’t it? That’s exactly what you said to us, right at the outset. You said all we had was we *thought* a person like you did it. Well, now all you got is you *think* Lamarr did it.”
“Where’s her car?” Reacher asked. “She drove up to Scimeca’s place from the airport, where’s her car?”
“The perp stole it,” Blake said. “He must have snuck around the back on foot, originally, not knowing the cop was asleep. She surprised him, he took off in her car.”
“You going to find a rental in her real name?”
Blake nodded. “Probably. We can usually find what we need to.”
"What about the flight in from D.C.? You going to find her real name in the airline computer?”
Blake nodded again. “If we need to.”
“You see your problem, right?” Deerfield said again. “It’s just not acceptable to have a dead agent, without somebody being responsible.”
Reacher nodded. “And it’s not acceptable to admit an agent was a killer.”
“Don’t even think about it,” Blake said.
“Even though she *was* a killer?”
“She wasn’t a killer,” Deerfield said. “She was a loyal agent, doing a fine job.”
Reacher nodded.

“Well, I guess this means I’m not going to get paid,” he said.
Deerfield made a face, like there was a bad smell in the room.
“This is not a joke, Reacher,” he said. “Let’s be real clear about that. You’re in big trouble. You can say whatever the hell you want. You can say you had suspicions. But you’ll look like an idiot. Nobody will listen to you. And it won’t matter anyway. Because if you had suspicions, you should have let Harper arrest her, right?”
“No time.”
Deerfield shook his head. “Bullshit.”
“Was she visibly in the act of harming Scimeca?” Blake asked.
“I needed her out of my way.”
“Our counsel will say even *if* you had mistaken but sincere prior suspicions, you should have gone straight for Scimeca in the tub and let Harper deal with Lamarr behind you. It was two against one. It would have *saved* you time, right? If you were so concerned with your old buddy?”
“It might have saved me half a second.”
“Half a second could have been critical,” Deerfield said. “Life-or-death medical situation like that? Our counsel will make a big point out of it. He’ll say spending precious time hitting somebody proves something, like personal animosity.”
The room went quiet. Reacher looked down at the table.
“Law buff like you knows all about it,” Blake said. “Honest mistakes occur but even so, actions in defense of a victim need to happen right at the exact time the victim is getting assaulted. Not afterward. Afterward is revenge, pure and simple.”
Reacher said nothing.
“And you can’t claim it was mistaken *and* accidental, ” Blake said. “You once told me you know all about how to break someone’s skull, and no way would it happen by accident. That guy in the alley, remember? Petrosian’s boy? And what goes for skulls goes for necks, right? So it wasn’t an accident. It was deliberate homicide.”
There was silence.
“OK,” Reacher said. “What’s the deal?”
“You’re going to jail,” Deerfield said. “There’s no deal.”
“Bullshit, there’s no deal,” Reacher said. “There’s always a deal.”
Silence again. It lasted minutes. Then Blake shrugged.
“Well, you want to cooperate, we could compromise, ” he said. “We could call Lamarr a suicide, grieving about her father, tormented she couldn’t save her sister.”

“And you could keep your big mouth shut,” Deerfield said. “You could tell nobody nothing, except what we want them told.”
Silence again.
“Why should I?” Reacher said.
“Because you’re a smart guy,” Deerfield said. “Don’t forget, there’s absolutely nothing on Lamarr. You know that. She was way too smart. Sure, you could dig around a couple of years, if you had a million dollars for lawyer bills. You could come up with a little meaningless circumstantial stuff, but what’s a jury going to do with that? A big man hates a small woman? He’s a bum, she’s a federal agent? He breaks her neck, and then he blames her for it? Some fantastic story about hypnosis? Forget about it.”
“So face it, OK?” Blake said. “You’re *ours*, now.”
There was silence. Then Reacher shook his head.
“No,” he said. “I think I’ll pass on that.”
“Then you go to jail.”
“Just one question, first,” Reacher said.
“Which is?”
“Did I kill Lorraine Stanley?”
Blake shook his head. “No, you didn’t.”
“How do you know?”
“You know how we know. We had you tailed, all that week.”
“And you gave a copy of the surveillance report to my lawyer, right?”
“Right.”
“OK,” Reacher said.
“OK what, smart guy?”
“OK nuts to you, is what,” Reacher said.
“You want to expand on that?”
Reacher shook his head. “You figure it out.”
The room went quiet.
“What?” Blake said.
Reacher smiled at him. “Think about strategy. Maybe you can lock me up for Lamarr, but you can’t ever claim I’m also the guy who killed the women, because my lawyer has got your own report proving that I’m not. So what are you going to do then?”
“What does that matter to you?” Blake said. “You’re locked up anyway.”
“Think about the future,” Reacher said. “You’ve told the world it’s not me, and you’re swearing blind it’s not Lamarr, so you’ve got to be seen to keep on looking, right? You can’t ever stop, not without people wondering why. Think about the negative headlines. *Elite FBI unit gets nowhere, tenth year of search*.

You'd just have to swallow them. And you'd have to keep the guards in place, you'd have to work around the clock, more and more manpower, more and more effort, more and more budget, year after year, searching for the guy. Are you going to do that?"
Silence in the room.
"No, you're not going to do that," Reacher said. "And not doing that is the same thing as admitting you know the truth. Lamarr is dead, the search has stopped, it wasn't me, therefore Lamarr was the killer. So it's all or nothing now, for you guys. It's make-your-mind-up time. If you *don't* admit it was Lamarr, then you use up all your resources for the rest of history, pretending to look for a guy you know for sure doesn't exist. And if you *do* admit it was Lamarr, then you can't lock me up for killing her, because in the circumstances it was absolutely justifiable."
Silence again.
"So, nuts to you," Reacher said.
There was silence. Reacher smiled.
"So now what?" he asked.
They were quiet for a long moment. Then they recovered.
"We're the Bureau," Deerfield said. "We can make your life very difficult."
Reacher shook his head.
"My life's already very difficult," he said. "Nothing you guys can do to make it any harder. But you can stop with the threats, anyway. Because I'll keep your secret."
"You will?"
Reacher nodded. "I'll have to, won't I? Because if I don't, it'll all just come back on Rita Scimeca. She's the only living witness. She'll get pestered to death, prosecutors, police, newspapers, television. All the sordid details, how she was raped, how she was naked in the tub with the paint. It'll hurt her. And I don't want that to happen."
Silence again.
"So, your secret is safe with me," Reacher said.
Blake stared at the tabletop. Then he nodded.
"OK," he said. "I'll buy that."
"But we'll be watching you," Deerfield said. "Always. Never forget that."
Reacher smiled again.
"Well, don't let me catch you at it," he said. "Because you should remember what happened to Petrosian. You guys never forget *that*, OK?"
IT FINISHED LIKE that as a tie, as a wary stalemate. Nothing more was said. Reacher stood up and threaded his way around the table and out of the room. He

found an elevator and made it down to street level. Nobody came after him. There were double doors, scarred oak and wired glass. He pushed them open and stepped out into the chill of some dark deserted Portland street in the middle of the night. Stood on the edge of the sidewalk, looking at nothing in particular.
“Hey, Reacher,” Harper called.
She was behind him in the shadow of a pillar flanking the entrance. He turned and saw the gleam of her hair and a stripe of white where her shirt showed at the front of her jacket.
“Hey yourself,” he said. “You OK?”
She stepped across to him.
“I will be,” she said. “I’m going to ask for a transfer. Maybe over here. I like it.”
“Will they let you?”
She nodded. “Sure they will. They’re not going to rock any boats as long as the budget hearings are on. This is going to be the quietest thing that ever happened.”
“It never happened at all,” he said. “That’s how we left it, upstairs.”
“So you’re OK with them?”
“As OK as I ever was.”
“I’d have stood up for you,” she said. “Whatever it took.”
He nodded. “I know you would. There should be more like you.”
“Take this,” she said.
She held out a slip of flimsy paper. It was a travel voucher, issued by the desk back at Quantico.
“It’ll get you to New York,” she said.
“What about you?” he asked.
“I’ll say I lost it. They’ll wire me another one.”
She stepped close and kissed his cheek. Stepped away and started walking.
“Good luck,” she called.
“To you too,” he called back.
HE WALKED TO the airport, twelve miles on the shoulders of roads built for automobiles. It took him three hours. He exchanged the FBI voucher for a plane ticket and waited another hour for the first flight out. Slept through four hours in the air and three hours of time zones and touched down at La Guardia at one o’clock in the afternoon.
He used the last of his cash on a bus to the subway and the subway into Manhattan. Got out at Canal Street and walked south to Wall Street. He was in the lobby of Jodie’s office building a few minutes after two o’clock, borne along by sixty floors of workers returning from lunch. Her firm’s reception area was deserted. Nobody at the counter. He stepped through an open door and wandered

down a corridor lined with law-books on oak shelves. Left and right of him were empty offices. There were papers on desks and jackets over the backs of chairs, but no people anywhere.

He came to a set of double doors and heard the heavy buzz of conversation on the other side. The chink of glass on glass. Laughter. He pulled the right-hand door and the noise burst out at him and he saw a conference room jammed full of people. They were in dark suits and snowy white shirts and suspenders and quiet ties, and severe dark dresses and black nylon. There was a wall of blinding windows and a long table under a heavy white cloth loaded with ranks of sparkling glasses and a hundred bottles of champagne. Two bartenders were pouring the foamy golden wine as fast as they could. People were drinking it and toasting with it and looking at Jodie.

She was rippling through the crowd like a magnet. Wherever she walked, people stepped up and formed a crowd around her. There was a constantly changing sequence of small excited circles with her at every center. She turned left and right, smiling, clinking glasses, and then moved on randomly like a pinball into new acclaim. She saw him at the door at the same moment he saw himself reflected in the glass over a Renoir drawing on the wall. He was unshaven and dressed in a crumpled khaki shirt dried stiff with random green stains. She was in a thousand-dollar dress fresh from the closet. A hundred faces turned with hers and the room fell silent. She hesitated for a beat, like she was making a decision. Then she fought forward through the crowd and flung her arms around his neck, champagne glass and all.

“The partnership party,” he said. “You got it.”

“I sure did,” she said.

“Well, congratulations, babe,” he said. “And I’m sorry I’m late.”

She drew him into the crowd and people closed around them. He shook hands with a hundred lawyers the way he used to with generals from foreign armies. *Don’t mess with me and I won’t mess with you*. The top boy was an old red-and-gray-faced man of about sixty-five, the son of one of the names on the brass plaque in reception. His suit must have cost more than all the clothes Reacher had ever worn in his life. But the mood of the party meant there was no edge in the old guy’s attitude. He looked like he would have been delighted to shake hands with Jodie’s elevator man.

“She’s a big, big star,” he said. “And I’m gratified she accepted our offer.”

“Smartest lawyer I ever met,” Reacher said over the noise.

“Will you go with her?”

“Go with her where?”

“To London,” the old guy said. “Didn’t she explain? First tour of duty for a new partner is running the European operation for a couple of years.”

partner is running the European operation for a couple of years."
Then she was back at his side, smiling, drawing him away. The crowd was settling into small groups, and conversation was turning to work matters and quiet gossip. She led him to a space by the window. There was a yard-wide view of the harbor, framed by sheer buildings on either side.
"I called the FBI uptown," she said. "I was worried about you, and technically I'm still your lawyer. I spoke with Alan Deerfield's office."
"When?"
"Two hours ago. They wouldn't tell me anything."
"Nothing to tell. They're straight with me, I'm straight with them."
She nodded. "So you delivered, finally."
Then she paused.
"Will you be called as a witness?" she asked. "Is there going to be a trial?"
He shook his head. "No trial."
She nodded. "Just a funeral, right?"
He shrugged. "There are no relatives left. That was the point."
She paused again, like there was an important question coming up.
"How do you feel about it?" she asked. "One-word answer?"
"Calm," he said.
"Would you do it again? Same circumstances?"
He paused in turn.
"Same circumstances?" he said. "In a heartbeat."
"I have to go to work in London," she said. "Two years."
"I know," he said. "The old guy told me. When do you go?"
"End of the month."
"You don't want me to come with you," he said.
"It'll be very busy. It's a small staff with a big workload. "
"And it's a civilized city."
She nodded. "Yes, it is. Would you *want* to come?"
"Two straight years?" he said. "No. But maybe I could visit, time to time."
She smiled, vaguely. "That would be good."
He said nothing.
"This is awful," she said. "Fifteen years I couldn't live without you, and now I find I can't live *with* you."
"I know," he said. "Totally my fault."
"Do you feel the same way?"
He looked at her.
"I guess I do," he lied.
"We've got until the end of the month," she said.
He nodded.

He nodded.
“More than most people get,” he said. “Can you take the afternoon off?”
“Sure I can. I’m a partner now. I can do what I want.”
“So let’s go.”
They left their empty glasses on the window ledge and threaded their way through the knots of people. Everybody watched them to the door, and then turned back to their quiet speculations.

Echo Burning

1

There were three watchers, two men and a boy. They were using telescopes, not field glasses. It was a question of distance. They were almost a mile from their target area, because of the terrain. There was no closer cover. It was low, undulating country, burned khaki by the sun, grass and rock and sandy soil alike. The nearest safe concealment was the broad dip they were in, a bone-dry gulch scraped out a million years ago by a different climate, when there had been rain and ferns and rushing rivers.

The men lay prone in the dust with the early heat on their backs, their telescopes at their eyes. The boy scuttled around on his knees, fetching water from the cooler, watching for waking rattlesnakes, logging comments in a notebook. They had arrived before first light in a dusty pick-up truck, the long way around, across the empty land from the west. They had thrown a dirty tarpaulin over the truck and held it down with rocks. They had eased forward to the rim of the dip and settled in, raising their telescopes as the low morning sun dawned to the east behind the red house almost a mile away. This was Friday, their fifth consecutive morning, and they were low on conversation.

“Time?” one of the men asked. His voice was nasal, the effect of keeping one eye open and the other eye shut.

The boy checked his watch.

“Six-fifty,” he answered.

“Any moment now,” the man with the telescope said.

The boy opened his book and prepared to make the same notes he had made four times before.

“Kitchen light on,” the man said.

The boy wrote it down. *6:50, kitchen light on*. The kitchen faced them, looking west away from the morning sun, so it stayed dark even after dawn.

“On her own?” the boy asked.

“Same as always,” the second man said, squinting.

Maid prepares breakfast, the boy wrote. *Target still in bed*. The sun rose, inch by inch. It jacked itself higher into the sky and pulled the shadows shorter and shorter. The red house had a tall chimney coming out of the kitchen wing like the finger on a sundial. The shadow it made swung and shortened and the heat on the watchers’ shoulders built higher. Seven o’clock in the morning, and it was already hot. By eight, it would be burning. By nine, it would be fearsome. And they were there all day, until dark, when they could slip away unseen.

“Bedroom drapes opening,” the second man said. “She’s up and about.”

The boy wrote it down. *7:04, bedroom drapes open*.

“Now listen,” the first man said.

They heard the well pump kick in, faintly from almost a mile away. A quiet mechanical click, and then a steady low drone.

“She’s showering,” the man said.

The boy wrote it down. *7:06, target starts to shower*.

The men rested their eyes. Nothing was going to happen while she was in the shower. How could it? They lowered their telescopes and blinked against the brassy sun in their eyes. The well pump clicked off after six minutes. The silence sounded louder than the faint noise had. The boy wrote: *7:12, target out of shower*. The men raised their telescopes again.

“She’s dressing, I guess,” the first man said.

The boy giggled. “Can you see her naked?”

The second man was triangulated twenty feet to the south. He had the better

view of the back of the house, where her bedroom window was.

“You’re disgusting,” he said. “You know that?”

The boy wrote: *7:15, probably dressing*. Then: *7:20, probably downstairs, probably eating breakfast.*

“She’ll go back up, brush her teeth,” he said.

The man on the left shifted on his elbows.

“For sure,” he said. “Prissy little thing like that.”

“She’s closing her drapes again,” the man on the right said.

It was standard practice in the west of Texas, in the summer, especially if your bedroom faced south, like this one did. Unless you wanted to sleep the next night in a room hotter than a pizza oven.

“Stand by,” the man said. “A buck gets ten she goes out to the barn now.”

It was a wager that nobody took, because so far four times out of four she had done exactly that, and watchers are paid to notice patterns.

“Kitchen door’s open.”

The boy wrote: *7:27, kitchen door opens*.

“Here she comes.”

She came out, dressed in a blue gingham dress that reached to her knees and left her shoulders bare. Her hair was tied back behind her head. It was still damp from the shower.

“What do you call that sort of a dress?” the boy asked.

“Halter,” the man on the left said.

7:28, comes out, blue halter dress, goes to barn, the boy wrote.

She walked across the yard, short hesitant steps against the uneven ruts in the

baked earth, maybe seventy yards. She heaved the barn door open and disappeared in the gloom inside.

The boy wrote: *7:29, target in barn*.

“How hot is it?” the man on the left asked.

“Maybe a hundred degrees,” the boy said.

“There’ll be a storm soon. Heat like this, there has to be.”

“Here comes her ride,” the man on the right said.

Miles to the south, there was a dust cloud on the road. A vehicle, making slow and steady progress north.

“She’s coming back,” the man on the right said.

7:32, target comes out of barn, the boy wrote.

“Maid’s at the door,” the man said.

The target stopped at the kitchen door and took her lunch box from the maid. It was bright blue plastic with a cartoon picture on the side. She paused for a second. Her skin was pink and damp from the heat. She leaned down to adjust her socks and then trotted out to the gate, through the gate, to the shoulder of the road. The school bus slowed and stopped and the door opened with a sound the watchers heard clearly over the faint rattle of the idling engine. The chrome handrails flashed once in the sun. The diesel exhaust hung and drifted in the hot still air. The target heaved her lunch box onto the step and grasped the bright rails and clambered up after it. The door closed again and the watchers saw her corn-colored head bobbing along level with the base of the windows. Then the engine noise deepened and the gears caught and the bus moved away with a new cone of dust kicking up behind it.

7:36, target on bus to school, the boy wrote.

The road north was dead straight and he turned his head and watched the bus all the way until the heat on the horizon broke it up into a shimmering yellow mirage. Then he closed his notebook and secured it with a rubber band. Back at the red house, the maid stepped inside and closed the kitchen door. Nearly a mile

away, the watchers lowered their telescopes and turned their collars up for protection from the sun.

Seven thirty-seven, Friday morning.

Seven thirty-eight.

Seven thirty-nine, more than three hundred miles to the north and east, Jack Reacher climbed out of his motel room window. One minute earlier, he had been in the bathroom, brushing his teeth. One minute before that, he had opened the door of his room to check the morning temperature. He had left it open, and the closet just inside the entrance passageway was faced with mirrored glass, and there was a shaving mirror in the bathroom on a cantilevered arm, and by a freak of optical chance he caught sight of four men getting out of a car and walking toward the motel office. Pure luck, but a guy as vigilant as Jack Reacher gets lucky more times than the average.

The car was a police cruiser. It had a shield on the door, and because of the bright sunlight and the double reflection he could read it clearly. At the top it said City Police, and then there was a fancy medallion in the middle with Lubbock, Texas, written underneath. All four men who got out were in uniform. They had bulky belts with guns and radios and nightsticks and handcuffs. Three of the men he had never seen before, but the fourth guy was familiar. The fourth guy was a tall heavyweight with a gelled blond brush-cut above a meaty red face. This morning the meaty red face was partially obscured by a glinting aluminum splint carefully taped over a shattered nose. His right hand was similarly bound up with a splint and bandages protecting a broken forefinger.

The guy had neither injury the night before. And Reacher had no idea the guy was a cop. He just looked like some idiot in a bar. Reacher had gone there because he heard the music was good, but it wasn’t, so he had backed away from the band and ended up on a bar stool watching ESPN on a muted television fixed high on a wall. The place was crowded and noisy, and he was wedged in a space with a woman on his right and the heavyweight guy with the brush-cut on his left. He got bored with the sports and turned around to watch the room. As he turned, he saw how the guy was eating.

The guy was wearing a white tank-top shirt and he was eating chicken wings. The wings were greasy and the guy was a slob. He was dripping chicken fat off his chin and off his fingers onto his shirt. There was a dark teardrop shape right between his pecs. It was growing and spreading into an impressive stain. But the best barroom etiquette doesn't let you linger on such a sight, and the guy caught Reacher staring.

"Who you looking at?" he said.

It was said low and aggressively, but Reacher ignored it.

"Who you looking at?" the guy said again.

Reacher's experience was, they say it once, maybe nothing's going to happen. But they say it twice, then trouble's on the way. Fundamental problem is, they take a lack of response as evidence that you're worried. That they're winning. But then, they won't let you answer, anyway.

"You looking at me?" the guy said.

"No," Reacher answered.

"Don't you be looking at me, boy," the guy said.

The way he said *boy* made Reacher think he was maybe a foreman in a lumber mill or a cotton operation. Whatever muscle work was done around Lubbock. Some kind of a traditional trade passed down through the generations. Certainly the word *cop* never came to his mind. But then, he was relatively new to Texas.

"Don't you look at me," the guy said.

Reacher turned his head and looked at him. Not really to antagonize the guy. Just to size him up. Life is endlessly capable of surprises, so he knew one day he would come face to face with his physical equal. With somebody who might worry him. But he looked and saw this wasn't the day. So he just smiled and looked away again.

Then the guy jabbed him with his finger.

"I told you not to look at me," he said, and jabbed.

It was a meaty forefinger and it was covered in grease. It left a definite mark on Reacher's shirt.

"Don't do that," Reacher said.

The guy jabbed again.

"Or what?" he said. "You want to make something out of it?"

Reacher looked down. Now there were two marks. The guy jabbed again. Three jabs, three marks. Reacher clamped his teeth. What were three greasy marks on a shirt? He started a slow count to ten. Then the guy jabbed again, before he even reached eight.

"You deaf?" Reacher said. "I told you not to do that."

"You want to do something about it?"

"No," Reacher said. "I really don't. I just want you to stop doing it, is all."

The guy smiled. "Then you're a yellow-bellied piece of shit."

"Whatever," Reacher said. "Just keep your hands off me."

"Or what? What you going to do?"

Reacher restarted his count. *Eight*, *nine*.

"You want to take this outside?" the guy asked.

Ten.

"Touch me again and you'll find out," Reacher said. "I warned you four times."

The guy paused a second. Then, of course, he went for it again. Reacher caught the finger on the way in and snapped it at the first knuckle. Just folded it upward like he was turning a door handle. Then because he was irritated he leaned forward and headbutted the guy full in the face. It was a smooth move, well delivered, but it was backed off to maybe a half of what it might have been. No need to put a guy in a coma, over four grease marks on a shirt. He moved a pace to give the man room to fall, and backed into the woman on his right.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” he said.

The woman nodded vaguely, disoriented by the noise, concentrating on her drink, unaware of what was happening. The big guy thumped silently on the floorboards and Reacher used the sole of his shoe to roll him half onto his front. Then he nudged him under the chin with his toe to pull his head back and straighten his airway. The recovery position, paramedics call it. Stops you choking while you’re out.

Then he paid for his drinks and walked back to his motel, and didn’t give the guy another thought until he was at the bathroom mirror and saw him out and about in a cop’s uniform. Then he thought hard, and as fast as he could.

He spent the first second calculating reflected angles and figuring *if I can see him, does that mean he can see me*? The answer was *yes, of course he can*. If he was looking the right way, which he wasn’t yet. He spent the next second mad at himself. He should have picked up the signs. They had been there. Who else would be poking at a guy built like him, except somebody with some kind of protected status? Some kind of imagined invulnerability? He should have picked up on it.

So what to do? The guy was a cop on his own turf. And Reacher was an easily recognizable target. Apart from anything else he still had the four grease spots on his shirt, and a brand-new bruise on his forehead. There were probably forensics people who could match its shape to the bones in the guy’s nose.

So what to do? An angry cop bent on revenge could cause trouble. A lot of trouble. A noisy public arrest, for sure, maybe some wild gunshots, definitely some four-on-one fun and games in an empty out-of-the-way cell down at the station house, where you can’t fight back without multiplying your original legal problem. Then all kinds of difficult questions, because Reacher habitually carried no ID and nothing else at all except his toothbrush and a couple of thousand dollars cash in his pants pocket. So he would be regarded as a suspicious character. Almost certainly he’d be charged with attacking a law officer. That was probably a big deal in Texas. All kinds of witnesses would materialize to swear it was malicious and completely unprovoked. He could end up convicted and in the penitentiary, easy as anything. He could end up with seven-to-ten in some tough establishment. Which was definitely not number one on his wish list.

So discretion was going to be the better part of valor. He put his toothbrush in his pocket and walked through the room and opened the window. Unclipped the screen and dropped it to the ground. Climbed out and closed the window and rested the screen back in its frame and walked away across a vacant lot to the nearest street. Turned right and kept on walking until he was hidden by a low building. He looked for buses. There weren't any. He looked for taxis. Nothing doing. So he stuck out his thumb. He figured he had ten minutes to find a ride before they finished at the motel and started cruising the streets. Ten minutes, maybe fifteen at the outside.

Which meant it wasn't going to work. It couldn't work. Seven thirty-nine in the morning, the temperature was already over a hundred degrees. It was going to be impossible to get a ride at all. In heat like that no driver on the planet would open their door long enough for him to slide right in, never mind for any long prior discussions about destinations. So finding a getaway in time was going to be impossible. Absolutely impossible. He started planning alternatives, because he was so sure of it. But it turned out he was wrong. It turned out his whole day was a series of surprises.

There were three killers, two men and a woman. They were an out-of-state professional crew, based in Los Angeles, contactable through an intermediary in Dallas and a second cutout in Vegas. They had been in business ten years, and they were very good at what they did, which was take care of problems anywhere in the Southwest and survive to get paid and do it over again as many times as anybody asked them to. Ten years, and never once a hint of a problem. A good team. Meticulous, inventive, perfectionist. As good as it gets, in their strange little world. And perfectly suited to it. They were bland, forgettable, white, anonymous. To see them together, they looked like the branch office of a photocopier company on its way to a sales convention.

Not that they were ever seen together, except by their victims. They traveled separately. One always drove, and the other two flew, always by different routes. The driver was one of the men, because invisibility was their aim, and a woman driving a long distance alone was still slightly more memorable than a man. The car was always rented, always at LAX arrivals, which had the busiest rental counters in the world. It was always a generic family sedan, a mud-colored

nothing car. The license and the credit card used to obtain it were always real, properly issued in a distant state to a person who had never existed. The driver would wait on the sidewalk and then line up when a busy flight was spilling out into baggage claim when he would be just one face among a hundred. He was small and dark and had a rolling duffel and a carry-on and a harassed expression, same as everybody else.

He did the paperwork at the counter and rode the bus to the rental compound and found his allotted car. He dumped his bags in the trunk, waited at the exit check, and drove out into the glare. He spent forty minutes on the freeways, driving a wide aimless circle around the whole of the metropolitan area, making sure he wasn't followed. Then he ducked off into West Hollywood and stopped at a lock-up garage in an alley behind a lingerie salon. He left the motor running and opened the garage door and opened the trunk and swapped his rolling duffel and his carry-on for two big valises made of thick black nylon. One of them was very heavy. The heavy valise was the reason he was driving, not flying. It contained things best kept away from airport scanners.

He closed up the garage and rolled east on Santa Monica Boulevard and turned south on 101 and hooked east again on 10. Squirmed in his seat and settled in for the two-day drive all the way out to Texas. He wasn't a smoker, but he lit numerous cigarettes and held them between his fingers and flicked ash on the carpets, on the dash, on the wheel. He let the cigarettes burn out and crushed the butts in the ashtray. That way, the rental company would have to vacuum the car very thoroughly, and spray it with air freshener, and wipe down the vinyl with detailing fluid. That would eliminate every trace of him later, including his fingerprints.

The second man was on the move, too. He was taller and heavier and fairer, but there was nothing memorable about him. He joined the end-of-the-workday crush at LAX and bought a ticket to Atlanta. When he got there, he swapped his wallet for one of the five spares in his carry-on and a completely different man bought another ticket for Dallas–Fort Worth.

The woman traveled a day later. That was her privilege, because she was the team leader. She was closing in on middle age, medium-sized, medium-blond. Nothing at all special about her, except she killed people for a living. She left her car in the LAX long-term parking, which wasn't dangerous because her car was registered to a Pasadena infant who had died of the measles thirty years previously. She rode the shuttle bus to the terminal and used a forged

previously. She rode the shuttle bus to the terminal and used a forged MasterCard to buy her ticket, and a genuine New York driver's license for photo ID at the gate. She boarded her plane about the time the driver was starting his second day on the road.

After his second stop for gas on the first day, he had made a detour into the New Mexico hills and found a quiet dusty shoulder where he squatted in the cool thin air and changed the car's California plates for Arizona plates, which he took from the heavier valise. He wound his way back to the highway and drove another hour, then pulled off the road and found a motel. He paid cash, used a Tucson address, and let the desk clerk copy the Arizona plate number onto the registration form.

He slept six hours with the room air on low and was back on the road early. Made it to Dallas–Fort Worth at the end of the second day and parked in the airport long-term lot. Took his valises with him and used the shuttle bus to departures. Took the moving stairs straight down to arrivals and lined up at the Hertz counter. Hertz, because they rent Fords, and he needed a Crown Victoria.

He did the paperwork, with Illinois ID. Rode the bus to the Hertz lot and found his car. It was the plain-jane Crown Vic, in steel blue metallic, neither light nor dark. He was happy with it. He heaved his bags into the trunk and drove to a motel near the new ballpark on the road from Fort Worth to Dallas. Checked in with the same Illinois ID, ate, and slept a few hours. He woke early and met his two partners in the fierce morning heat outside the motel at exactly the same moment Jack Reacher first stuck out his thumb, more than four hundred miles away in Lubbock.

Second surprise after the cop showing up was he got a ride within three minutes. He wasn't even sweating yet. His shirt was still dry. Third surprise was the driver who stopped for him was a woman. Fourth and biggest surprise of all was the direction their subsequent conversation took.

He had been hitching rides for the best part of twenty-five years, in more countries than he could easily recall, and three minutes was about the shortest interval between sticking out his thumb and climbing into a car he could remember. As a mode of transportation, hitching rides was dying out. That was

remember. As a mode of transportation, hitching rides was dying out. That was his conclusion, based on a lot of experience. Commercial drivers had insurance problems with it, and private citizens were getting worried about it. Because who knew what kind of a psycho you were? And in Reacher's case, it was worse than the average, especially right then. He wasn't some dapper little guy, neat and inoffensive. He was a giant, six-five, heavily built, close to two hundred and fifty pounds. Up close, he was usually scruffy, usually unshaven, and his hair was usually a mess. People worried about him. They stayed away from him. And now he had the fresh new bruise on his forehead. Which was why he was surprised about the three minutes.

And why he was surprised about the woman driver. There's usually a pecking order, based on some kind of subconscious assessment of risk. Top of the list, a young girl will get a ride from an older man easiest of all, because where's the threat in that? Although now, with some of the young girls turning into scam artists wanting a hundred bucks in exchange for dropping fake molestation claims, even that is getting harder. And whatever, right down there at the bottom of the list is a big scruffy guy getting a ride from a neat slender woman in an expensive coupe. But it happened. Within three minutes.

He was hurrying south and west of the motel strip, stunned by the heat, hard to see in the jagged morning shadows, his left thumb jammed out urgently, when she pulled over at his side with the wet hiss of wide tires on hot pavement. It was a big white car and the sun on the hood dazzled him. He turned blindly and she buzzed her far window down. Seven forty-two, Friday morning.

"Where to?" she called, like she was a cab driver, not a private citizen.

"Anywhere," he said.

He regretted it, instantly. It was a dumb thing to say, because to have no specific destination usually makes things worse. They think you're some kind of an aimless drifter, which makes them suspicious, and makes them worried they might never get rid of you. Makes them worried you'll want to ride all the way home with them. But this woman just nodded.

"O.K.," she said. "I'm headed down past Pecos."

He paused a beat, surprised. Her head was ducked down, her face tilted up, looking out at him through the window.

“Great,” he said.

He stepped off the curb and opened the door and slid inside. The interior was freezing cold. She had the air roaring on maximum and the seat was leather and it felt like a block of ice. She buzzed the window up again with the button on her side as he swung the door shut behind him.

“Thanks,” he said. “You don’t know how much I appreciate this.”

She said nothing. Just made some kind of all-purpose dismissive gesture away from him as she craned to look over her shoulder at the traffic stream behind her. People have their reasons for giving rides, all of them different. Maybe they hitched a lot when they were younger and now they’re settled and comfortable they want to put back what they took out. Like a circular thing. Maybe they have charitable natures. Or maybe they’re just lonely and want a little conversation.

But if this woman wanted conversation she was in no kind of a hurry to get it started. She just waited for a couple of trucks to labor past and pulled out behind them without a word. Reacher glanced around inside the car. It was a Cadillac, two doors, but as long as a boat, and very fancy. Maybe a couple of years old, but as clean as a whistle. The leather was the color of old bones and the glass was tinted like an empty bottle of French wine. There was a pocketbook and a small briefcase thrown on the backseat. The pocketbook was anonymous and black, maybe plastic. The briefcase was made from weathered cowhide, the sort of thing that already looks old when you buy it. It was zipped open and there was a lot of folded paper stuffed in it, the sort of thing you see in a lawyer’s office.

“Move the seat back, if you want,” the woman said. “Give yourself room.”

“Thanks,” he said again.

He found switches on the door shaped like seat cushions. He fiddled with them and quiet motors eased him rearward and reclined his backrest. Then he lowered the seat, to make himself inconspicuous from outside. The motors whirred. It was like being in a dentist’s chair.

“That looks better,” she said. “More comfortable for you.”

Her own chair was tight up to the wheel, because she was small. He twisted in

his seat so he could look her over without staring straight at her. She was short and slim, dark-skinned, fine-boned. Altogether a small person. Maybe a hundred pounds, maybe thirty years old. Long black wavy hair, dark eyes, small white teeth visible behind a tense half-smile. Mexican, he guessed, but not the type of Mexican who swims the Rio Grande looking for a better life. This woman's ancestors had enjoyed a better life for hundreds of years. That was pretty clear. It was in her genes. She looked like some kind of Aztec royalty. She was wearing a simple cotton dress, printed with a pale pattern. Not much to it, but it looked expensive. It was sleeveless and finished above her knees. Her arms and legs were dark and smooth, like they had been polished.

"So, where are you headed?" she asked.

Then she paused and smiled wider. "No, I already asked you that. You didn't seem very clear about where you want to go."

Her accent was pure American, maybe more western than southern. She was steering two-handed, and he could see rings on her fingers. There was a slim wedding band, and a platinum thing with a big diamond.

"Anywhere," Reacher said. "Anywhere I end up, that's where I want to go."

She paused and smiled again. "Are you running away from something? Have I picked up a dangerous fugitive?"

Her smile meant it wasn't a serious question, but he found himself thinking maybe it ought to have been. It wasn't too far-fetched, in the circumstances. She was taking a risk. The sort of risk that was killing the art of hitching rides, as a mode of transportation.

"I'm exploring," he said.

"Exploring Texas? They already discovered it."

"Like a tourist," he said.

"But you don't look like a tourist. The tourists we get wear polyester leisure suits and come in a bus."

She smiled again as she said it. She looked good when she smiled. She looked assured and self-possessed, and refined to the point of elegance. An elegant

Mexican woman, wearing an expensive dress, clearly comfortable with talking. Driving a Cadillac. He was suddenly aware of his short answers, and his hair and his stubble and his stained shirt and his creased khaki pants. And the big bruise on his forehead.

"You live around here?" he asked, because she'd said *the tourists we get,* and he felt he needed something to say.

"I live south of Pecos," she said. "More than three hundred miles from here. I told you, that's where I'm headed."

"Never been there," he said.

She went quiet and waited at a light. Took off again through a wide junction and hugged the right lane. He watched her thigh move as she pressed on the gas pedal. Her bottom lip was caught between her teeth. Her eyes were narrowed. She was tense about something, but she had it under control.

"So, did you explore Lubbock?" she asked.

"I saw the Buddy Holly statue."

He saw her glance down at the radio, like she was thinking *this guy likes music, maybe I should put some on*.

"You like Buddy Holly?" she asked.

"Not really," Reacher said. "Too tame for me."

She nodded at the wheel. "I agree. I think Ritchie Valens was better. He was from Lubbock, too."

He nodded back. "I saw him in the Walk of Fame."

"How long were you in Lubbock?"

"A day."

"And now you're moving on."

"That's the plan."

“To wherever,” she said.

“That’s the plan,” he said again.

They passed the city limit. There was a small metal sign on a pole on the sidewalk. He smiled to himself. City Police, the shield on the cop car had said. He turned his head and watched danger disappear behind him.

The two men sat in the front of the Crown Victoria, with the tall fair man driving to give the small dark man a break. The woman sat in the back. They rolled out of the motel lot and picked up speed on I-20, heading west, toward Fort Worth, away from Dallas. Nobody spoke. Thinking about the vast interior of Texas was oppressing them. The woman had read a guidebook in preparation for the mission that pointed out that the state makes up fully seven percent of America’s land mass and is bigger than most European countries. That didn’t impress her. Everybody knew all that standard-issue Texas-is-real-big bullshit. Everybody always has. But the guide book also pointed out that side-to-side Texas is wider than the distance between New York and Chicago. That information had some impact. And it underlined why they were facing such a long drive, just to get from one nowhere interior location to another.

But the car was quiet and cool and comfortable, and it was as good a place to relax as any motel room would be. They had a little time to kill, after all.

The woman slowed and made a shallow right, toward New Mexico, then a mile later a left, straight south, toward old Mexico. Her dress was creased across the middle, like maybe she was wearing it a second day. Her perfume was subtle, mixed into the freezing air from the dashboard vents.

“So is Pecan worth seeing?” Reacher asked, in the silence.

“Pecos,” she said

"Pecos," she said.

"Right, Pecos."

She shrugged.

"I like it," she said. "It's mostly Mexican, so I'm comfortable there."

Her right hand tensed on the wheel. He saw tendons shifting under the skin.

"You like Mexican people?" she asked.

He shrugged back. "As much as I like any people, I guess."

"You don't like people?"

"It varies."

"You like cantaloupe?"

"As much as I like any fruit."

"Pecos grows the sweetest cantaloupe in the whole of Texas," she said. "And therefore, in their opinion, in the whole of the world. Also there's a rodeo there in July, but you've missed it for this year. And just north of Pecos is Loving County. You ever heard of Loving County?"

He shook his head. "Never been here before."

"It's the least-populated county in the whole of the United States," she said. "Well, if you leave out some of the places in Alaska, I guess. But also the richest, per capita. Population is a hundred and ten souls, but there are four hundred and twenty oil leases active."

He nodded. "So let me out in Pecos. It sounds like a fun place."

"It was the real Wild West," she said. "A long time ago, of course. The Texas and Pacific Railroad put a stop there. So there were saloons and all. Used to be a bad place. It was a word, too, as well as a town. A verb, and also a place. To pecos somebody meant to shoot them and throw them in the Pecos River."

"They still do that?"

She smiled again. A different smile. This smile traded some elegance for some mischief. It eased her tension. It made her appealing.

“No, they don’t do that so much, now,” she said.

“Your family from Pecos?”

“No, California,” she said. “I came to Texas when I got married.”

Keep talking, he thought. *She saved your ass*.

“Been married long?” he asked.

“Just under seven years.”

“Your family been in California long?”

She paused and smiled again.

“Longer than any Californian, that’s for sure,” she said.

They were in flat empty country and she eased the silent car faster down a dead-straight road. The hot sky was tinted bottle-green by the windshield. The instrumentation on her dashboard showed it was a hundred and ten degrees outside and sixty inside.

“You a lawyer?” he asked.

She was puzzled for a moment, and then she made the connection and craned to glance at her briefcase in the mirror.

“No,” she said. “I’m a lawyer’s client.”

The conversation went dead again. She seemed nervous, and he felt awkward about it.

“And what else are you?” he asked.

She paused a beat.

¨Somebody´s wife and mother,´´ she said. ¨And somebody´s daughter and sister, I guess. And I keep a few horses. That's all. What are you?"

"Nothing in particular," Reacher said.

"You have to be something," she said.

"Well, I used to be things," he said. "I was somebody's son, and somebody's brother, and somebody's boyfriend."

"Was?"

"My parents died, my brother died, my girlfriend left me."

Not a great line, he thought. She said nothing back.

"And I don't have any horses," he added.

"I'm very sorry," she said.

"That I don't have horses?"

"No, that you're all alone in the world."

"Water under the bridge," he said. "It's not as bad as it sounds."

"You're not lonely?"

He shrugged. "I like being alone."

She paused. "Why did your girlfriend leave you?"

"She went to work in Europe."

"And you couldn't go with her?"

"She didn't really want me to go with her."

"I see," she said. "Did *you* want to go with her?"

He was quiet for a beat.

“Not really, I guess,” he said. “Too much like settling down.”

“And you don’t want to settle down?”

He shook his head. “Two nights in the same motel gives me the creeps.”

“Hence one day in Lubbock,” she said.

“And the next day in Pecos,” he said.

“And after that?”

He smiled.

“After that, I have no idea,” he said. “And that’s the way I like it.”

She drove on, silent as the car.

“So you *are* running away from something,” she said. “Maybe you had a very settled life before and you want to escape from that particular feeling.”

He shook his head again. “No, the exact opposite, really. I was in the army all my life, which is very *un*settled, and I grew to like the feeling.”

“I see,” she said. “You became habituated to chaos, maybe.”

“I guess so.”

She paused. “How is a person in the army all his life?”

“My father was in, too. So I grew up on military bases all over the world, and then I stayed in afterward.”

“But now you’re out.”

He nodded. “All trained up and nowhere to go.”

He saw her thinking about his answer. He saw her tension come back. She started stepping harder on the gas, maybe without realizing it, maybe like an involuntary reflex. He had the feeling her interest in him was quickening, like the car.

Ford builds Crown Victorias at its plant up in St. Thomas, Canada, tens of thousands a year, and almost all of them without exception are sold to police departments, taxicab companies, or rental fleets. Almost none of them are sold to private citizens. Full-size turnpike cruisers no longer earn much of a market share, and for those die-hards who still want one from the Ford Motor Company, the Mercury Grand Marquis is the same car in fancier clothes for about the same money, so it mops up the private sales. Which makes private Crown Vics rarer than red Rolls-Royces, so the subliminal response when you see one that isn't taxicab yellow or black and white with *Police* all over the doors is to think it's an unmarked detective's car. Or government issue of some other kind, maybe U.S. Marshals, or FBI, or Secret Service, or a courtesy vehicle given to a medical examiner or a big-city fire chief.

That's the subliminal impression, and there are ways to enhance it a little.

In the empty country halfway to Abilene, the tall fair man pulled off the highway and headed through vast fields and past dense woodlands until he found a dusty turn-out probably ten miles from the nearest human being. He stopped there and turned off the motor and popped the trunk. The small dark man heaved the heavy valise out and laid it on the ground. The woman zipped it open and handed a pair of Virginia plates to the tall fair man. He took a screwdriver from the valise and removed the Texas plates, front and rear. Bolted the Virginia issue in their place. The small dark man pulled the plastic covers off all four wheels, leaving the cheap black steel rims showing. He stacked the wheel covers like plates and pitched them into the trunk. The woman took radio antennas from the valise, four of them, CB whips and cellular telephone items bought cheap at a Radio Shack in L.A. The cellular antennas stuck to the rear window with self-adhesive pads. She waited until the trunk was closed again and placed the CB antennas on the lid. They had magnetic bases. They weren't wired up to anything. They were just for show.

Then the small dark man took his rightful place behind the wheel and U-turned through the dust and headed back to the highway, cruising easily. A Crown Vic, plain steel wheels, a forest of antennas, Virginia plates. Maybe an FBI pool car, three agents inside, maybe on urgent business.

“What did you do in the army?” the woman asked, very casually.

“I was a cop,” Reacher said.

“They have cops in the army?”

“Sure they do,” he said. “Military police. Like cops, inside the service.”

“I didn’t know that,” she said.

She went quiet again. She was thinking hard. She seemed excited.

“Would you mind if I asked you some questions?” she said.

He shrugged. “You’re giving me a ride.”

She nodded. “I wouldn’t want to offend you.”

“That would be hard to do, in the circumstances. Hundred and ten degrees out there, sixty in here.”

“There’ll be a storm soon. There has to be, with a temperature like this.”

He glanced ahead at the sky. It was tinted bottle-green by the windshield glass, and it was blindingly clear.

“I don’t see any sign of it,” he said.

She smiled again, briefly. “May I ask where you live?”

“I don’t live anywhere,” he said. “I move around.”

“You don’t have a home somewhere?”

He shook his head. “What you see is what I’ve got.”

“You travel light,” she said.

“Light as I can.”

She paused for a fast mile.

“Are you out of work?” she asked.

He nodded. “Usually.”

“Were you a good cop? In the army?”

“Good enough, I guess. They made me a major, gave me some medals.”

She paused. “So why did you leave?”

It felt like an interview. For a loan, or for a job.

“They downsized me out of there,” he said. “End of the Cold War, they wanted a smaller army, not so many people in it, so they didn’t need so many cops to look after them.”

She nodded. “Like a town. If the population gets smaller, the police department gets smaller, too. Something to do with appropriations. Taxes, or something.”

He said nothing.

“I live in a very small town,” she said. “Echo, south of Pecos, like I told you. It’s a lonely place. That’s why they named it Echo. Not because it’s echoey, like an empty room. It’s from ancient Greek mythology. Echo was a young girl in love with Narcissus. But he loved himself, not her, so she pined away until just her voice was left. So that’s why it’s called Echo. Not many inhabitants. But it’s a county, too. A county and a township. Not as empty as Loving County, but there’s no police department at all. Just the county sheriff, on his own.”

Something in her voice.

“Is that a problem?” he asked.

“It’s a very *white* county,” she said. “Not like Pecos at all.”

“So?”

“So one feels there *might* be a problem, if push came to shove.”

“And has push come to shove?”

She smiled, awkwardly.

“I can tell you were a cop,” she said. “You ask so many questions. And it’s me who wanted to ask all the questions.”

She fell silent for a spell and just drove, slim dark hands light on the wheel, going fast but not hurrying. He used the cushion-shaped buttons again and laid his seat back another fraction. Watched her in the corner of his eye. She was pretty, but she was troubled. Ten years from now, she was going to have some excellent frown lines.

“What was life like in the army?” she asked.

“Different,” he said. “Different from life outside the army.”

“Different how?”

“Different rules, different situations. It was a world of its own. It was very regulated, but it was kind of lawless. Kind of rough and uncivilized.”

“Like the Wild West,” she said.

“I guess,” he said back. “A million people trained first and foremost to do what needed doing. The rules came afterward.”

“Like the Wild West,” she said again. “I think you liked it.”

He nodded. “Some of it.”

She paused. “May I ask you a personal question?”

“Go ahead,” he said.

“What’s your name?”

“Reacher,” he said.

“Is that your first name? Or your last?”

"Is that your first name? Or your last?"

"People just call me Reacher," he said.

She paused again. "May I ask you another personal question?"

He nodded.

"Have you killed people, Reacher? In the army?"

He nodded again. "Some."

"That's what the army is all about, fundamentally, isn't it?" she said.

"I guess so," he said. "Fundamentally."

She went quiet again. Like she was struggling with a decision.

"There's a museum in Pecos," she said. "A real Wild West museum. It's partly in an old saloon, and partly in the old hotel next door. Out back is the site of Clay Allison's grave. You ever heard of Clay Allison?"

Reacher shook his head.

"They called him the Gentleman Gunfighter," she said. "He retired, actually, but then he fell under the wheels of a grain cart and he died from his injuries. They buried him there. There's a nice headstone, with 'Robert Clay Allison, 1840–1887' on it. I've seen it. And an inscription. The inscription says, 'He never killed a man that did not need killing.' What do you think of that?"

"I think it's a fine inscription," Reacher said.

"There's an old newspaper, too," she said. "In a glass case. From Kansas City, I think, with his obituary in it. It says, 'Certain it is that many of his stern deeds were for the right as he understood that right to be.'"

The Cadillac sped on south.

"A fine obituary," Reacher said.

"You think so?"

He nodded. “As good as you can get, probably.”

“Would you like an obituary like that?”

“Well, not just yet,” Reacher said.

She smiled again, apologetically.

“No,” she said. “I guess not. But do you think you would like to *qualify* for an obituary like that? I mean, eventually?”

“I can think of worse things,” he said.

She said nothing.

“You want to tell me where this is heading?” he asked.

“This road?” she said, nervously.

“No, this conversation.”

She drove on for a spell, and then she lifted her foot off the gas pedal and coasted. The car slowed and she pulled off onto the dusty shoulder. The shoulder fell away into a dry irrigation ditch and it put the car at a crazy angle, tilted way down on his side. She put the transmission in park with a small delicate motion of her wrist, and she left the engine idling and the air roaring.

“My name is Carmen Greer,” she said. “And I need your help.”

2

“It wasn’t an accident I picked you up, you know,” Carmen Greer said.

Reacher’s back was pressed against his door. The Cadillac was listing like a sinking ship, canted hard over on the shoulder. The slippery leather seat gave him no leverage to struggle upright. The woman had one hand on the wheel and the other on his seat back, propping herself above him. Her face was a foot away. It was unreadable. She was looking past him, out at the dust of the ditch.

“You going to be able to drive off this slope?” he asked.

She glanced back and up at the blacktop. Its rough surface was shimmering with heat, about level with the base of her window.

“I think so,” she said. “I hope so.”

“I hope so, too,” he said.

She just stared at him.

“So why did you pick me up?” he asked.

“Why do you think?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I thought I just got lucky. I guess I thought you were a kind person doing a stranger a favor.”

She shook her head.

“No, I was looking for a guy like you,” she said.

“Why?”

“I must have picked up a dozen guys,” she said. “And I’ve seen hundreds. That’s about all I’ve been doing, all month long. Cruising around West Texas, looking at who needs a ride.”

“Why?”

She shrugged the question away. A dismissive little gesture.

“The miles I’ve put on this car,” she said. “It’s unbelievable. And the money I’ve spent on gas.”

“Why?” he asked again.

She went quiet. Wouldn’t answer. Just went into a long silence. The armrest on the door was digging into his kidney. He arched his back and pressed with his shoulders and adjusted his position. Found himself wishing somebody else had picked him up. Somebody content just to motor from A to B. He looked up at her.

“Can I call you Carmen?” he asked.

She nodded. “Sure. Please.”

“O.K., Carmen,” he said. “Tell me what’s going on here, will you?”

Her mouth opened, and then it closed again. Opened, and closed.

“I don’t know how to start,” she said. “Now that it’s come to it.”

“Come to what?”

She wouldn’t answer.

“You better tell me exactly what you want,” he said. “Or I’m getting out of the car right here, right now.”

“It’s a hundred and ten degrees out there.”

“I know it is.”

“A person could die in this heat.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“You can’t get your door open,” she said. “The car is tilted too much.”

“Then I’ll punch out the windshield.”

She paused a beat.

“I need your help,” she said again.

“You never saw me before.”

“Not personally,” she said. “But you fit the bill.”

“What bill?”

She went quiet again. Came up with a brief, ironic smile.

“It’s so difficult,” she said. “I’ve rehearsed this speech a million times, but now I don’t know if it’s going to come out right.”

Reacher said nothing. Just waited.

“You ever had anything to do with lawyers?” she asked. “They don’t do anything for you. They just want a lot of money and a lot of time, and then they tell you there’s nothing much to be done.”

“So get a new lawyer,” he said.

“I’ve had four,” she said. “Four, in a month. They’re all the same. And they’re all too expensive. I don’t have enough money.”

“You’re driving a Cadillac.”

“It’s my mother-in-law’s. I’m only borrowing it.”

“You’re wearing a big diamond ring.”

She went quiet again. Her eyes clouded.

“My husband gave it to me,” she said.

He looked at her. “So can’t he help you?”

“No, he can’t help me,” she said. “Have you ever gone looking for a private detective?”

detective?

“Never needed one. I *was* a detective.”

“They don’t really exist,” she said. “Not like you see in the movies. They just want to sit in their offices and work with the phone. Or on their computers, with their databases. They won’t come out and actually *do* anything for you. I went all the way to Austin. A guy there said he could help, but he wanted to use six men and charge me nearly ten thousand dollars a week.”

“For what?”

“So I got desperate. I was really panicking. Then I got this idea. I figured if I looked at people hitching rides, I might find somebody. One of them might turn out to be the right type of person, and willing to help me. I tried to choose pretty carefully. I only stopped for rough-looking men.”

“Thanks, Carmen,” Reacher said.

“I don’t mean it badly,” she said. “It’s not uncomplimentary.”

“But it could have been dangerous.”

She nodded. “It nearly was, a couple of times. But I had to take the risk. I had to find *somebody*. I figured I might get rodeo guys, or men from the oil fields. You know, tough guys, roughnecks, maybe out of work, with a little time on their hands. Maybe a little anxious to earn some money, but I can’t pay much. Is that going to be a problem?”

“So far, Carmen, everything is going to be a problem.”

She went quiet again.

“I talked to them all,” she said. “You know, chatted with them a little, discussed things, like we did. I was trying to make some kind of judgment about what they were like, inside, in terms of their characters. I was trying to assess their qualities. Maybe twelve of them. And none of them were really any good. But I think you are.”

“You think I’m what?”

“I think you’re good at the core of you,” she said. “Really. I don’t

"I think you're my best chance so far," she said. "Really, I do. A former cop, been in the army, no ties anywhere, you couldn't be better."

"I'm not looking for a job, Carmen."

She nodded happily. "I know. I figured that out already. But that's better still, I think. It keeps it pure, don't you see that? Help for help's sake. No mercenary aspect to it. And your background is perfect. It obligates you."

He stared at her. "No, it doesn't."

"You were a soldier," she said. "And a *policeman*. It's perfect. You're *supposed* to help people. That's what cops *do*."

"We spent most of our time busting heads. Not a whole lot of helping went on."

"But it must have. That's what cops are *for*. It's like their fundamental duty. And an army cop is even better. You said it yourself, you do what's necessary."

"If you need a cop, go to the county sheriff. Pecos, or wherever it is."

"Echo," she said. "I live in Echo. South of Pecos."

"Wherever," he said. "Go to the sheriff."

She was shaking her head. "No, I can't do that."

Reacher said nothing more. Just lay half on his back, pressed up against the door by the car's steep angle. The engine was idling patiently, and the air was still roaring. The woman was still braced above him. She had gone silent. She was staring out past him and blinking, like she was about to cry. Like she was ready for a big flood of tears. Like she was tragically disappointed, maybe with him, maybe with herself.

"You must think I'm crazy," she said.

He turned his head and looked hard at her, top to toe. Strong slim legs, strong slim arms, the expensive dress. It was riding up on her thighs, and he could see her bra strap at her shoulder. It was snow white against the color of her skin. She had clean combed hair and trimmed painted nails. An elegant, intelligent face, tired eyes.

“I’m not crazy,” she said.

Then she looked straight at him. Something in her face. Maybe an appeal. Or maybe hopelessness, or desperation.

“It’s just that I’ve dreamed about this for a month,” she said. “My last hope. It was a ridiculous plan, I guess, but it’s all I had. And there was always the chance it would work, and with you I think maybe it could, and now I’m screwing it up by coming across like a crazy woman.”

He paused a long time. Minutes. He thought back to a pancake house he’d seen in Lubbock, right across the strip from his motel. It had looked pretty good. He could have crossed the street, gone in there, had a big stack with bacon on the side. Lots of syrup. Maybe an egg. He would have come out a half hour after she blew town. He could be sitting next to some cheerful trucker now, listening to rock and roll on the radio. On the other hand, he could be bruised and bleeding in a police cell, with an arraignment date coming up.

“So start over,” he said. “Just say what you’ve got to say. But first, drive us out of this damn ditch. I’m very uncomfortable. And I could use a cup of coffee. Is there anyplace up ahead where we could get coffee?”

“I think so,” she said. “Yes, there is. About an hour, I think.”

“So let’s go there. Let’s get a cup of coffee.”

“You’re going to dump me and run,” she said.

It was an attractive possibility. She stared at him, maybe five long seconds, and then she nodded, like a decision was made. She put the transmission in D and hit the gas. The car had front-wheel drive, and all the weight was on the back, so the tires just clawed at nothing and spun. Gravel rattled against the underbody and a cloud of hot khaki dust rose up all around them. Then the tires caught and the car heaved itself out of the ditch and bounced up over the edge of the blacktop. She got it straight in the lane, and then she floored it and took off south.

“I don’t know where to begin,” she said.

“At the beginning,” he said. “Always works best that way. Think about it, tell me over coffee. We’ve got the time.”

She shook her head. Stared forward through the windshield, eyes locked on the empty shimmering road ahead. She was quiet for a mile, already doing seventy.

“No, we don’t,” she said. “It’s real urgent.”

Fifty miles southwest of Abilene, on a silent county road ten miles north of the main east-west highway, the Crown Victoria waited quietly on the shoulder, its engine idling, its hood unlatched and standing an inch open for better cooling. All around it was flatness so extreme the curvature of the earth was revealed, the dusty parched brush falling slowly away to the horizon in every direction. There was no traffic, and therefore no noise beyond the tick and whisper of the idling engine and the heavy buzz of the earth baking and cracking under the unbearable heat of the sun.

The driver had the electric door mirror racked all the way outward so he could see the whole of the road behind him. The Crown Vic’s own dust had settled and the view was clear for about a mile, right back to the point where the blacktop and the sky mixed together and broke and boiled into a silvery shimmering mirage. The driver had his eyes focused on that distant glare, waiting for it to be pierced by the indistinct shape of a car.

He knew what car it would be. The team was well briefed. It would be a white Mercedes Benz, driven by a man on his own toward an appointment he couldn’t miss. The man would be driving fast, because he would be running late, because he was habitually late for everything. They knew the time of his appointment, and they knew his destination was thirty miles farther on up the road, so simple arithmetic gave them a target time they could set their watches by. A target time that was fast approaching.

“So let’s do it,” the driver said.

He stepped out of the car into the heat and clicked the hood down into place. Slid back into the seat and took a ball cap from the woman. It was one of three bought from a souvenir vendor on Hollywood Boulevard, thirteen ninety-five each. It was dark blue, with *FBI* machine-embroidered in white cotton thread across the front. The driver squared it on his head and pulled the peak low over

his eyes. Moved the transmission lever into drive and kept his foot hard on the brake. Leaned forward a fraction and kept his eyes on the mirror.

“Right on time,” he said.

The silver mirage was boiling and wobbling and a white shape pulled free of it and speared out toward them like a fish leaping out of water. The shape settled and steadied on the road, moving fast, crouching low. A white Mercedes sedan, wide tires, dark windows.

The driver eased his foot off the brake and the Crown Vic crawled forward through the dust. He touched the gas when the Mercedes was still a hundred yards behind him. The Mercedes roared past and the Crown Vic pulled out into the hot blast of its slipstream. The driver straightened the wheel and accelerated. Smiled with his lips hard together. The killing crew was going to work again.

The Mercedes driver saw headlights flashing in his mirror and looked again and saw the sedan behind him. Two peaked caps silhouetted in the front seat. He dropped his eyes automatically to his speedometer, which was showing more than ninety. Felt the cold *oh-shit* stab in his chest. Eased off the gas while he calculated how late he was already and how far he still had to go and what his best approach to these guys should be. Humility? Or maybe *I’m-too-important-to-be-hassled*? Or what about a sort of *come-on-guys*, *I’m-working-too* camaraderie?

The sedan pulled alongside as he slowed and he saw three people, one of them a woman. Radio antennas all over the car. No lights, no siren. Not regular cops. The driver was waving him to the shoulder. The woman was pressing an ID wallet against her window. It had *FBI* in two-inch-high letters. Their caps said *FBI*. Serious-looking people, in some kind of duty fatigues. Serious-looking squad car. He relaxed a little. The FBI didn’t stop you for speeding. Must be something else. Maybe some kind of security check, which made sense considering what lay thirty miles up the road. He nodded to the woman and braked and eased right, onto the shoulder. He feathered the pedal and coasted to a stop in a big cloud of dust. The Bureau car eased up and stopped behind him, the brightness of its headlight beams dimmed by the cloud.

The way to do it is to keep them quiet and alive as long as possible. Postpone any kind of struggle. Struggling leads to evidence, blood and fibers and body fluids spraying and leaking all over the place. So they all three got out of the car at a medium speed, like they were harassed professionals dealing with something important, but not something right up there at the top of their agenda.

“Mr. Eugene?” the woman called. “Al Eugene, right?”

The Mercedes driver opened his door and slid out of his seat and stood up in the heat and the glare. He was around thirty, not tall, dark and sallow, soft and rounded. He faced the woman, and she saw some kind of innate southern courtesy toward women place him at an immediate disadvantage.

“What can I do for you, ma’am?” he asked.

“Your cellular phone not working, sir?” the woman asked.

Eugene patted at the pocket of his suit coat.

“Should be,” he said.

“May I see it, sir?”

Eugene took it out of his pocket and handed it over. The woman dialed a number and looked surprised.

“Seems O.K.,” she said. “Sir, can you spare us five minutes?”

“Maybe,” Eugene said. “If you tell me what for.”

“We have an FBI assistant director a mile up the road, needs to speak with you. Something urgent, I guess, or we wouldn’t be here, and something pretty important, or we’d have been told what it’s all about.”

Eugene pulled back his cuff and looked at his watch.

“I have an appointment,” he said.

The woman was nodding. “We know about that, sir. We took the liberty of calling ahead and rescheduling for you. Five minutes is all we need.”

Eugene shrugged.

“Can I see some ID?” he asked.

The woman handed over her wallet. It was made of worn black leather and had a milky plastic window on the outside. There was an FBI photo-ID behind it, laminated and embossed and printed with the kind of slightly old-fashioned typeface the federal government might use. Like most people in the United States, Eugene had never seen an FBI ID. He assumed he was looking at his first.

“Up the road a-piece?” he said. “O.K., I’ll follow you, I guess.”

“We’ll drive you,” the woman said. “There’s a checkpoint in place, and civilian cars make them real nervous. We’ll bring you right back. Five minutes, is all.”

Eugene shrugged again.

“O.K.,” he said.

They all walked as a group back toward the Crown Vic. The driver held the front passenger door for Eugene.

“You ride up here, sir,” he said. “They’re listing you as a class-A individual, and if we put a class-A individual in the backseat, then we’ll get our asses kicked but good, that’s for damn sure.”

They saw Eugene swell up a little from his assigned status. He nodded and ducked down and slid into the front seat. Either he hadn’t noticed they still had his phone, or he didn’t care. The driver closed the door on him and ducked around the hood to his own. The tall fair man and the woman climbed into the rear. The Crown Vic eased around the parked Benz and pulled left onto the blacktop. Accelerated up to about fifty-five.

“Ahead,” the woman said.

The driver nodded.

“I see it,” he said. “We’ll make it.”

There was a plume of dust on the road, three or four miles into the distance. It was rising up and dragging left in the faint breeze. The driver slowed, hunting the turn he had scouted thirty minutes before. He spotted it and pulled left and crossed the opposite shoulder and bumped down through a depression where the road was built up like a causeway. Then he slewed to the right, tight in behind a stand of brush tall enough to hide the car. The man and the woman in the rear seat came out with handguns and leaned forward and jammed them into Eugene’s neck, right behind the ears where the structure of the human skull provides two nice muzzle-shaped sockets.

“Sit real still,” the woman said.

Eugene sat real still. Two minutes later, a big dark vehicle blasted by above them. A truck, or a bus. Dust clouded the sky and the brush rustled in the moving air. The driver got out and approached Eugene’s door with a gun in his hand. He opened the door and leaned in and jammed the muzzle into Eugene’s throat, where the ends of the collarbones make another convenient socket.

“Get out,” he said. “Real careful.”

“What?” was all Eugene could say.

“We’ll tell you what,” the woman said. “Now get out.”

Eugene got out, with three guns at his head.

“Step away from the car,” the woman said. “Walk away from the road.”

This was the tricky time. Eugene was glancing around as far and as fast as he dared move his head. His eyes were jumping. His body was twitching. He stepped away from the car. One pace, two, three. Eyes everywhere. The woman nodded.

“Al,” she called loudly.

Her two partners jumped away, long sideways strides. Eugene’s head snapped around to face the woman who had called his name. She shot him through the right eye. The sound of the gun clapped and rolled across the hot landscape like thunder. The back of Eugene’s head came off in a messy cloud and he went

thunder. The back of Eugene's head came off in a messy cloud and he went straight down and sprawled in a loose tangle of arms and legs. The woman stepped around him and crouched down and took a closer look. Then she stepped away and stood up straight with her legs and arms spread, like she was ready to be searched at the airport.

"Check," she said.

The two men stepped close and examined every inch of her skin and clothing. They checked her hair and her hands.

"Clear," the small dark man said.

"Clear," the tall fair man said.

She nodded. A faint smile. No residue. No evidence. No blood or bone or brains anywhere on her person.

"O.K.," she said.

The two men stepped back to Eugene and took an arm and a leg each and dragged his body ten feet into the brush. They had found a narrow limestone cleft there, a crack in the rock maybe eight feet deep and a foot and a half across, wide enough to take a man's corpse sideways, too narrow to admit the six-foot wingspan of a vulture or a buzzard. They maneuvered the body until the trailing hand and the trailing foot fell into the hole. Then they lowered away carefully until they were sure the torso would fit. This guy was fatter than some. But he slid in without snagging on the rock. As soon as they were sure, they dropped him the rest of the way. He wedged tight, about seven feet down.

The bloodstains were already drying and blackening. They kicked desert dust over them and swept the area with a mesquite branch to confuse the mass of footprints. Then they walked over and climbed into the Crown Vic and the driver backed up and swung through the brush. Bounced through the dip and up the slope to the roadway. The big car nosed back the way it had come and accelerated gently to fifty-five miles an hour. Moments later it passed by Eugene's white Mercedes, parked right where he'd left it, on the other side of the road. It already looked abandoned and filmed with dust.

“I have a daughter,” Carmen Greer said. “I told you that, right?”

“You told me you were a mother,” Reacher said.

She nodded at the wheel. “Of a daughter. She’s six and a half years old.”

Then she went quiet for a minute.

“They called her Mary Ellen,” she said.

“They?”

“My husband’s family.”

“They named your kid?”

“It just happened, I guess. I wasn’t in a good position to stop it.”

Reacher was quiet for a beat.

“What would you have called her?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Gloria, maybe. I thought she was glorious.”

She went quiet again.

“But she’s Mary Ellen,” he said.

She nodded. “They call her Ellie, for short. Miss Ellie, sometimes.”

“And she’s six and a half?”

“But we’ve been married less than seven years. I told you that, too, right? So you can do the math. Is that a problem?”

“Doing the math?”

“Thinking about the implication.”

He shook his head at the windshield. “Not a problem to me. Why would it be?”

He shook his head at the windshield. "Not a problem to me. Why would it be?"

"Not a problem to me, either," she said. "But it explains why I wasn't in a good position."

He made no reply.

"We got off to all kinds of a bad start," she said. "Me and his family."

She said it with a dying fall in her voice, the way a person might refer back to a tragedy in the past, a car wreck, a plane crash, a fatal diagnosis. The way a person might refer back to the day her life changed forever. She gripped the wheel and the car drove itself on, a cocoon of cold and quiet in the blazing landscape.

"Who are they?" he asked.

"The Greers," she said. "An old Echo County family. Been there since Texas was first stolen. Maybe they were there to steal some of it themselves."

"What are they like?"

"They're what you might expect," she said. "Old white Texans, big money from way back, a lot of it gone now but a lot of it still left, some history with oil and cattle ranching, river-baptized Protestants, not that they ever go to church or think about what the Lord might be saying to them. They hunt animals for pleasure. The father died some time ago, the mother is still alive, there are two sons, and there are cousins all over the county. My husband is the elder boy, Sloop Greer."

"Sloop?" Reacher said.

She smiled for the first time since driving out of the ditch.

"Sloop," she said again.

"What kind of a name is that?"

"An old family name," she said. "Some ancestor, I guess. Probably he was at the Alamo, fighting against mine."

"Sounds like a boat. What's the other boy called? Yacht? Tug? Ocean liner? Oil

"Sounds like a boat. What's the other boy called? Yacht? Tug? Ocean liner? Oil tanker?"

"Robert," she said. "People call him Bobby."

"Sloop," Reacher said again. "That's a new one to me."

"New to me, too," she said. "The whole thing was new to me. But I used to like his name. It marked him out, somehow."

"I guess it would."

"I met him in California," Carmen said. "We were in school together, UCLA."

"Off of his home turf," Reacher said.

She stopped smiling. "Correct. Only way it could have happened, looking back. If I'd have met him out here, you know, with the whole package out in plain view, it would never have happened. No way. I can promise you that. Always assuming I'd even *come* out here, in the first place, which I hope I wouldn't have."

She stopped talking and squinted ahead into the glare of the sun. There was a ribbon of black road and a bright shape up ahead on the left, shiny aluminum broken into moving fragments by the haze boiling up off the blacktop.

"There's the diner," she said. "They'll have coffee, I'm sure."

"Strange kind of a diner if it didn't," he said.

"There are lots of strange things here," she said.

The diner sat alone on the side of the road, set on a slight rise in the center of an acre of beaten dirt serving as its parking lot. There was a sign on a tall pole and no shade anywhere. There were two pick-up trucks, carelessly parked, far from each other.

"O.K.," she said, hesitant, starting to slow the car. "Now you're going to run. You figure one of those guys with the pick-ups will give you a ride."

He said nothing.

“If you are, do it later, O.K.?” she said. “Please? I don’t want to be left alone in a place like this.”

She slowed some more and bounced off the road onto the dirt. Parked right next to the sign pole, as if it was a shade tree offering protection from the sun. Its slender shadow fell across the hood like a bar. She pushed the lever into Park and switched off the engine. The air conditioner’s compressor hissed and gurgled in the sudden silence. Reacher opened his door. The heat hit him like a steelyard furnace. It was so intense he could barely catch his breath. He stood dumb for a second and waited for her and then they walked together across the hot dirt. It was baked dry and hard, like concrete. Beyond it was a tangle of mesquite brush and a blinding white-hot sky as far as the eye could see. He let her walk half a pace ahead of him, so he could watch her. She had her eyes half-closed and her head bowed, like she didn’t want to see or be seen. The hem on her dress had fallen to a decorous knee-length. She moved very gracefully, like a dancer, her upper body erect and perfectly still and her bare legs scissoring elegantly below it.

The diner had a tiny foyer with a cigarette machine and a rack full of flyers about real estate and oil changes and small-town rodeos and gun shows. Inside the second door it was cold again. They stood together in the delicious chill for a moment. There was a register next to the door and a tired waitress sitting sideways on a counter stool. A cook visible in the kitchen. Two men in separate booths, eating. All four people looked up and paused, like there were things they could say but wouldn’t.

Reacher looked at each of them for a second and then turned away and led Carmen to a booth at the far end of the room. He slid across sticky vinyl and tilted his head back into a jet of cold air coming down from a vent in the ceiling. Carmen sat opposite and raised her head and he looked at her face-on for the first time.

“My daughter looks nothing at all like me,” she said. “Sometimes I think that’s the cruelest irony in this whole situation. Those big old Greer genes just about steamrollered mine, that’s for sure.”

She had spectacular dark eyes with long lashes and a slight tilt to them, and a straight nose that made an open Y-shape against her brows. High cheekbones framed by thick black hair that shone navy in the light. A rosebud of a mouth with a subtle trace of red lipstick. Her skin was smooth and clear, the color of

weak tea or dark honey, and it had a translucent glow behind it. It was actually a whole lot lighter in color than Reacher's own sunburned forearms, and he was white and she wasn't.

"So who does Ellie look like?" he asked.

"Them," she said.

The waitress brought ice water and a pad and a pencil and an upturned chin and no conversation. Carmen ordered iced coffee and Reacher ordered his hot and black.

"She doesn't look like she's mine at all," Carmen said. "Pink skin, yellow hair, a little chubby. But she's got my eyes."

"Lucky Ellie," Reacher said.

She smiled briefly. "Thank you. Plan is she should stay lucky."

She held the water glass flat against her face. Then she used a napkin to wipe the dew away. The waitress brought their drinks. The iced coffee was in a tall glass, and she spilled some of it as she put it down. Reacher's was in an insulated plastic carafe, and she shoved an empty china mug across the table next to it. She left the check facedown halfway between the two drinks, and walked away without saying anything at all.

"You need to understand I loved Sloop once," Carmen said.

Reacher made no reply, and she looked straight at him.

"Does it bother you to hear this kind of stuff?" she asked.

He shook his head, although the truth was it did bother him, a little. Loners aren't necessarily too comfortable with a stranger's intimacies.

"You told me to start at the beginning," she said.

"Yes," he said. "I did."

"So I will," she said. "I loved him once. You need to understand that. And you need to understand that wasn't hard to do. He was big, and he was handsome,

need to understand that wasn't hard to do. He was big, and he was handsome, and he smiled a lot, and he was casual, and he was relaxed. And we were in school and we were young, and L.A. is a very special place, where anything seems possible and nothing seems to matter very much."

She took a drinking straw from the canister on the table and unwrapped it.

"And you need to know where I was coming from," she said. "Truth is, I had it all completely backward. I wasn't some Mexican worrying about whether the white family would accept me. I was worrying about *my* family accepting this gringo boy. That's how it seemed to me. I come from a thousand acres in Napa, we've been there forever, we were always the richest people I knew. And the most cultured. We had the art, and the history, and the music. We gave to museums. We employed white people. So I spent my time worrying about what my folks would say about me marrying out."

He sipped his coffee. It was stewed and old, but it would do.

"And what did they say?" he asked.

"They went insane. I thought they were being foolish. Now I understand they weren't."

"So what happened?"

She sipped her drink through the straw. Took a napkin from a canister and dabbed her lips. It came away marked with her lipstick.

"Well, I was pregnant," she said. "And that made everything a million times worse, of course. My parents are very devout, and they're very traditional, and basically they cut me off, I guess. They disowned me. It was like the whole Victorian thing, expelled from the snowy doorstep with a bundle of rags, except it wasn't snowing, of course, and the bundle of rags was really a Louis Vuitton valise."

"So what did you do?"

"We got married. Nobody came, just a few friends from school. We lived a few months in L.A., we graduated, we stayed there until the baby was a month away. It was fun, actually. We were young and in love."

He could feel [illegible]

He poured himself a second cup of coffee.

“But?” he asked.

“But Sloop couldn’t find a job. I began to realize he wasn’t trying very hard. Getting a job wasn’t in his plan. College was four years of fun for him, then it was back to the fold, go take over Daddy’s business. His father was ready to retire by then. I didn’t like that idea. I thought we were starting up fresh, on our own, you know, a new generation on both sides. I felt I’d given stuff up, and I thought he should, too. So we argued a lot. I couldn’t work, because of being so pregnant, and I had no money of my own. So in the end we couldn’t make the rent, so in the end he won the argument, and we trailed back here to Texas, and we moved in to the big old house with his folks and his brother and his cousins all around, and I’m still there.”

The dying fall was back in her voice. The day her life changed forever.

“And?” he asked.

She looked straight at him. “And it was like the ground opens up and you fall straight through to hell. It was such a shock, I couldn’t even react at all. They treated me strange, and the second day I suddenly realized what was going on. All my life I’d been like a princess, you know, and then I was just a hip kid among ten thousand others in L.A., but now I was suddenly just a piece of beaner trash. They never said it straight out, but it was *so* clear. They hated me, because I was the greaseball whore who’d hooked their darling boy. They were painfully polite, because I guess their strategy was to wait for Sloop to come to his senses and dump me. It happens, you know, in Texas. The good old boys, when they’re young and foolish, they like a little dark meat. Sometimes it’s like a rite of passage. Then they wise up and straighten out. I knew that’s what they were thinking. And hoping. And it was a shock, believe me. I had never thought of myself like that. Never. I’d never had to. Never had to confront it. The whole world was turned upside down, in an instant. Like falling in freezing water. Couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, couldn’t even move.”

“But he didn’t dump you, evidently.”

She looked down at the table.

“No,” she said. “He didn’t dump me. He started hitting me instead. First time, he punched me in the face. Then Ellie was born the next day.”

punched me in the face. Then Ellie was born the next day.

The Crown Victoria turned back into a normal Hertz rental behind a stand of trees eight miles off the highway, halfway between Abilene and Big Spring. The Virginia plates came off, and the Texas plates went back on. The plastic wheel covers were kicked back into place. The cellular antennas were peeled off the rear glass and laid back in the valise. The CB whips pulled clear of the sheet metal and joined them. The souvenir ball caps were nested together and packed away with the handguns. Eugene's mobile phone was smashed against a rock and the pieces hurled deep into the thicket. A little grit from the shoulder of the road was sprinkled onto the front passenger seat, so that the rental people would have to vacuum up any of Eugene's stray hairs and fibers along with it.

Then the big sedan pulled back onto the blacktop and wound its way back to the highway. It cruised comfortably, heading west, a forgettable vehicle filled with three forgettable people. It made one more stop, at a comfort area named for the Colorado River, where sodas were consumed and a call was made from an untraceable payphone. The call was to Las Vegas, from where it was rerouted to Dallas, from where it was rerouted to an office in a small town in the west of Texas. The call reported complete success so far, and it was gratefully received.

"He split my lip and loosened my teeth," Carmen Greer said.

Reacher watched her face.

"That was the first time," she said. "He just lost it. But straight away he was full of remorse. He drove me to the emergency room himself. It's a long, long drive from the house, hours and hours, and the whole way he was begging me to forgive him. Then he was begging me not to tell the truth about what had happened. He seemed really ashamed, so I agreed. But I never had to say anything anyway, because as soon as we arrived I started into labor and they took me straight upstairs to the delivery unit. Ellie was born the next day."

“And then what?”

“And then it was O.K.,” she said. “For a week, at least. Then he started hitting me again. I was doing everything wrong. I was paying too much attention to the baby, I didn’t want sex because I was hurting from the stitches. He said I had gotten fat and ugly from the pregnancy.”

Reacher said nothing.

“He got me believing it,” she said. “For a long, long time. That happens, you know. You’ve got to be very self-confident to resist it. And I wasn’t, in that situation. He took away all my self-esteem. Two or three years, I thought it *was* my fault, and I tried to do better.”

“What did the family do?”

She pushed her glass away. Left the iced coffee half-finished.

“They didn’t know about it,” she said. “And then his father died, which made it worse. He was the only reasonable one. He was O.K. But now it’s just his mother and his brother. He’s awful, and she’s a witch. And they still don’t know. It happens in secret. It’s a big house. It’s like a compound, really. We’re not all on top of each other. And it’s all very complicated. He’s way too stubborn and proud to ever agree with them he’s made a mistake. So the more they’re down on me, the more he pretends he loves me. He misleads them. He buys me things. He bought me this ring.”

She held up her right hand, bent delicately at the wrist, showing off the platinum band with the big diamond. It looked like a hell of a thing. Reacher had never bought a diamond ring. He had no idea what they cost. A lot, he guessed.

“He bought me horses,” she said. “They knew I wanted horses, and he bought them for me, so he could look good in front of them. But really to explain away the bruises. It was his stroke of genius. A permanent excuse. He makes me say I’ve fallen off. They know I’m still just learning to ride. And that explains a lot in rodeo country, bruises and broken bones. They take it for granted.”

“He’s broken your bones?”

She nodded, and started touching parts of her body, twisting and turning in the confines of the tight booth, silently recounting her injuries, hesitating slightly

confines of the light booth, silently recounting her injuries, hesitating slightly now and then like she couldn't recall them all.

"My ribs, first of all, I guess," she said. "He kicks me when I'm on the floor. He does that a lot, when he's mad. My left arm, by twisting it. My collarbone. My jaw. I've had three teeth reimplanted."

He stared at her.

She shrugged. "The emergency room people think I'm the worst rider in the history of the West."

"They believe it?"

"Maybe they just choose to."

"And his mother and brother?"

"Likewise," she said. "Obviously I'm not going to get the benefit of the doubt."

"Why the hell did you stick around? Why didn't you just get out, the very first time?"

She sighed, and she closed her eyes, and she turned her head away. Spread her hands on the table, palms down, and then turned them over, palms up.

"I can't explain it," she whispered. "Nobody can ever explain it. You have to know what it's like. I had no confidence in myself. I had a newborn baby and no money. Not a dime. I had no friends. I was watched all the time. I couldn't even make a call in private."

He said nothing. She opened her eyes and looked straight at him.

"And worst of all, I had nowhere to go," she said.

"Home?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I never even thought about it," she said. "Taking the beatings was better than trying to crawl back to my family, with a white blond baby in my arms."

He said nothing.

“And the first time you pass up the chance, you’ve had it,” she said. “That’s how it is. It just gets worse. Whenever I thought about it, I still had no money, I still had a baby, then she was a one-year-old, then a two-year-old, then a three-year-old. The time is never right. If you stay that first time, you’re trapped forever. And I stayed that first time. I wish I hadn’t, but I did.”

He said nothing. She looked at him, appealing for something.

“You have to take it on faith,” she said. “You don’t know how it is. You’re a man, you’re big and strong, somebody hits you, you hit him back. You’re on your own, you don’t like someplace, you move on. It’s different for me. Even if you can’t understand it, you have to believe it.”

He said nothing.

“I could have gone if I’d left Ellie,” she said. “Sloop told me if I left the baby with him, he’d pay my fare anyplace I wanted to go. First class. He said he’d call a limo all the way from Dallas, right there and then, to take me straight to the airport.”

He said nothing.

“But I wouldn’t do that,” she said quietly. “I mean, how could I? So Sloop makes out this is my *choice*. Like I’m agreeing to it. Like I *want* it. So he keeps on hitting me. Punching me, kicking me, slapping me. Humiliating me, sexually. Every day, even if he isn’t mad at me. And if he *is* mad at me, he just goes crazy.”

There was silence. Just the rush of air from the cooling vents in the diner’s ceiling. Vague noise from the kitchens. Carmen Greer’s low breathing. The clink of fracturing ice in her abandoned glass. He looked across the table at her, tracing his gaze over her hands, her arms, her neck, her face. The neckline of her dress had shifted left, and he could see a thickened knot on her collarbone. A healed break, no doubt about it. But she was sitting absolutely straight, with her head up and her eyes defiant, and her posture was telling him something.

“He hits you *every* day?” he asked.

She closed her eyes. “Well, almost every day. Not literally, I guess. But three

She closed her eyes. "Well, almost every day. Not literally, I guess. But three, four times in a week, usually. Sometimes more. It feels like every day."

He was quiet for a long moment, looking straight at her.

Then he shook his head.

"You're making it up," he said.

The watchers stayed resolutely on station, even though there was nothing much to watch. The red house baked under the sun and stayed quiet. The maid came out and got in a car and drove away in a cloud of dust, presumably to the market. There was some horse activity around the barn. A couple of listless ranch hands walked the animals out and around, brushed them down, put them back inside. There was a bunkhouse way back beyond the barn, same architecture, same blood-red siding. It looked mostly empty, because the barn was mostly empty. Maybe five horses in total, one of them the pony for the kid, mostly just resting in their stalls because of the terrible heat.

The maid came back and carried packages into the kitchen. The boy made a note of it in his book. The dust from her wheels floated slowly back to earth and the men with the telescopes watched it, with their tractor caps reversed to keep the sun off their necks.

"You're lying to me," Reacher said.

Carmen turned away to the window. Red spots the size of quarters crept high into her cheeks. Anger, he thought. Or embarrassment, maybe.

"Why do you say that?" she asked, quietly.

"Physical evidence," he said. "You've got no bruising visible anywhere. Your skin is clear. Light makeup, too light to be hiding anything. It's certainly not

hiding the fact you're blushing like crazy. You look like you've just stepped out of the beauty parlor. And you're moving easily. You skipped across that parking lot like a ballerina. So you're not hurting anyplace. You're not stiff and sore. If he's hitting you almost every day, he must be doing it with a feather."

She was quiet for a beat. Then she nodded.

"There's more to tell you," she said.

He looked away.

"The crucial part," she said. "The main point."

"Why should I listen?"

She took another drinking straw and unwrapped it. Flattened the paper tube that had covered it and began rolling it into a tight spiral, between her finger and thumb.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But I had to get your attention."

Reacher turned his head and looked out of the window, too. The sun was moving the bar of shadow across the Cadillac's hood like the finger on a clock. His attention? He recalled opening his motel room door that morning. A brand-new day, ready and waiting to be filled with whatever came his way. He recalled the reflection of the cop in the mirror and the sticky whisper of the Cadillac's tires on the hot pavement as they slowed alongside him.

"O.K., you got my attention," he said, looking out at the car.

"It happened for five whole years," she said. "Exactly like I told you, I promise. Almost every day. But then it stopped, a year and a half ago. But I had to tell it to you backward, because I needed you to listen to me."

He said nothing.

"This isn't easy," she said. "Telling this stuff to a stranger."

He turned back to face her. "It isn't easy listening to it."

She took a breath. "You going to run out on me?"

He shrugged. “I almost did, a minute ago.”

She was quiet again.

“Please don’t,” she said. “At least not here. Please. Just listen a little more.”

He looked straight at her.

“O.K., I’m listening,” he said.

“But will you still help me?”

“With what?”

She said nothing.

“What did it feel like?” he asked. “Getting hit?”

“Feel like?” she repeated.

“Physically,” he said.

She looked away. Thought about it.

“Depends where,” she said.

He nodded. She knew it felt different in different places.

“The stomach,” he said.

“I threw up a lot,” she said. “I was worried, because there was blood.”

He nodded again. She knew what it felt like to be hit in the stomach.

“I swear it’s true,” she said. “Five whole years. Why would I make it up?”

“So what happened?” he said. “Why did he stop?”

She paused, like she was aware people might be looking at her. Reacher glanced up, and saw heads turn away. The cook, the waitress, the two guys at the distant tables. The cook and the waitress were faster about it than the two guys chose to be. There was hostility in their faces.

be. There was hostility in their faces.

“Can we go now?” she asked. “We need to get back. It’s a long drive.”

“I’m coming with you?”

“That’s the whole point,” she said.

He glanced away again, out of the window.

“Please, Reacher,” she said. “At least hear the rest of the story, and then decide. I can let you out in Pecos, if you won’t come all the way to Echo. You can see the museum. You can see Clay Allison’s grave.”

He watched the bar of shadow touch the Cadillac’s windshield. The interior would be like a furnace by now.

“You should see it anyway,” she said. “If you’re exploring Texas.”

“O.K.,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said.

He made no reply.

“Wait for me,” she said. “I need to go to the bathroom. It’s a long drive.”

She slid out of the booth with uninjured grace and walked the length of the room, head down, looking neither left nor right. The two guys at the tables watched her until she was almost past them and then switched their blank gazes straight back to Reacher. He ignored them and turned the check over and dumped small change from his pocket on top of it, exact amount, no tip. He figured a waitress who didn’t talk didn’t want one. He slid out of the booth and walked to the door. The two guys watched him all the way. He stood in front of the glass and looked out beyond the parking lot. Watched the flat land bake under the sun for a minute or two until he heard her footsteps behind him. Her hair was combed and she had done something with her lipstick.

“I guess I’ll use the bathroom too,” he said.

She glanced right, halfway between the two guys.

“Wait until I’m in the car,” she said. “I don’t want to be left alone in here. I shouldn’t have come in here in the first place.”

She pushed out through the doors and he watched her to the car. She got in and he saw it shudder as she started the engine to run the air. He turned and walked back to the men’s room. It was a fair-sized space, two porcelain urinals and one toilet cubicle. A chipped sink with a cold water faucet. A fat roll of paper towels sitting on top of the machine it should have been installed in. Not the cleanest facility he had ever seen.

He unzipped and used the left-hand urinal. Heard footsteps outside the door and glanced up at the chromium valve that fed the flush pipes. It was dirty, but it was rounded and it reflected what was behind him like a tiny security mirror. He saw the door open and a man step inside. He saw the door close again and the man settle back against it. He was one of the customers. Presumably one of the pick-up drivers. The chromium valve distorted the view, but the guy’s head was nearly to the top of the door. Not a small person. And he was fiddling blindly behind his back. Reacher heard the click of the door lock. Then the guy shifted again and hung his hands loose by his sides. He was wearing a black T-shirt. There was writing on it, but Reacher couldn’t read it backward. Some kind of an insignia. Maybe an oil company.

“You new around here?” the guy asked.

Reacher made no reply. Just watched the reflection.

“I asked you a question,” the guy said.

Reacher ignored him.

“I’m talking to you,” the guy said.

“Well, that’s a big mistake,” Reacher said. “All you know, I might be a polite type of person. I might feel obligated to turn around and listen, whereupon I’d be pissing all over your shoes.”

The guy shuffled slightly, caught out. Clearly he had some kind of set speech prepared, which was what Reacher had been counting on. A little improvised interruption might slow him down some. Maybe enough to get zipped up and decent. The guy was still shuffling, deciding whether to react.

“So I guess it’s down to me to tell you,” he said. “Somebody’s got to.”

He wasn’t reacting. No talent for repartee.

“Tell me what?” Reacher asked.

“How it is around here.”

Reacher paused a beat. The only problem with coffee was its diuretic effect.

“And how is it around here?” he asked.

“Around here, you don’t bring beaners into decent folks’ places.”

“What?” Reacher said.

“What part don’t you understand?”

Reacher breathed out. Maybe ten seconds to go.

“I didn’t understand any of it,” he said.

“You don’t bring beaners in a place like this.”

“What’s a beaner?” Reacher asked.

The guy took a step forward. His reflection grew disproportionately larger.

“Latinos,” he said. “Eat beans all the time.”

“Latina,” Reacher said. “With an *a*. Gender counts with inflected languages. And she had iced coffee. Haven’t seen her eat a bean all day.”

“You some kind of a smart guy?”

Reacher finished and zipped up with a sigh. Didn’t flush. A place like that, it didn’t seem like standard practice. He just turned to the sink and operated the faucet.

“Well, I’m smarter than you,” he said. “That’s for damn sure. But then, that’s not saying much. This roll of paper towels is smarter than you. A lot smarter. Each sheet on its own is practically a genius, compared to you. They could stroll

Each sheet on its own is practically a genius, compared to you. They could stroll into Harvard, one by one, full scholarships for each of them, while you're still struggling with your GED."

It was like taunting a dinosaur. Some kind of a brontosaurus, where the brain is a very long distance from anyplace else. The sound went in, and some time later it was received and understood. Four or five seconds, until it showed in the guy's face. Four or five seconds after that, he swung with his right. It was a ponderous slow swing with a big bunched fist on the end of a big heavy arm, aiming wide and high for Reacher's head. It could have caused some damage, if it had landed. But it didn't land. Reacher caught the guy's wrist in his left palm and stopped the swing dead. A loud wet *smack* echoed off the bathroom tile.

"The bacteria on this floor are smarter than you," he said.

He twisted his hips ninety degrees so his groin was protected and he squeezed the guy's wrist with his hand. There had been a time when he could break bones by squeezing with his hand. It was more about blind determination than sheer strength.

But right then, he didn't feel it.

"This is your lucky day," he said. "All I know, you could be a cop. So I'm going to let you go."

The guy was staring desperately at his wrist, watching it get crushed. The clammy flesh was swelling and going red.

"After you apologize," Reacher said.

The guy stared on, four or five seconds. Like a dinosaur.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I apologize."

"Not to me, asshole," Reacher said. "To the lady."

The guy said nothing. Reacher turned up the pressure. Felt his thumb go slick with sweat, sliding up over the tip of his index finger. Felt the bones in the guy's wrist click and move. The radius and the ulna, getting closer than nature intended.

“O.K.,” the guy gasped. “Enough.”

Reacher released the wrist. The guy snatched it back and cradled his hand, panting, looking up, looking down.

“Give me the keys to your truck,” Reacher said.

The guy twisted awkwardly to get into his right pocket with his left hand. Held out a large bunch of keys.

“Now go wait for me in the parking lot,” Reacher said.

The guy unlocked the door left-handed and shuffled out. Reacher dropped the keys in the unflushed urinal and washed his hands again. Dried them carefully with the paper towels and left the bathroom behind him. He found the guy out in the lot, halfway between the diner door and the Cadillac.

“Be real nice, now,” Reacher called to him. “Maybe offer to wash her car or something. She’ll say no, but it’s the thought that counts, right? If you’re creative enough, you get your keys back. Otherwise, you’re walking home.”

He could see through the tinted glass that she was watching them approach, not understanding. He motioned with his hand that she should let her window down. A circular motion, like winding a handle. She buzzed the glass down, maybe two inches, just wide enough to frame her eyes. They were wide and worried.

“This guy’s got something to say to you,” Reacher said.

He stepped back. The guy stepped up. Looked down at the ground, and then back at Reacher, like a whipped dog. Reacher nodded, encouragingly. The guy put his hand on his chest, like an operatic tenor or a fancy maître d’. Bent slightly from the waist, to address the two-inch gap in the glass.

“Ma’am,” he said. “Just wanted to say we’d all be real pleased if y’all would come back real soon, and would you like me to wash your car, seeing as you’re here right now?”

“What?” she said.

They both turned separately to Reacher, the guy pleading, Carmen astonished.

“Beat it,” he said. “I left your keys in the bathroom.”

Four, five seconds later, the guy was back on his way to the diner. Reacher stepped around the hood to his door. Pulled it open.

“I thought you were running out on me,” Carmen said. “I thought you’d asked that guy for a ride.”

“I’d rather ride with you,” he said.

The Crown Victoria drove south to a lonely crossroads hamlet. There was an old diner on the right and a vacant lot on the left. A melted stop line on the road. Then a decrepit gas station, and opposite it a one-room schoolhouse. Dust and heat shimmer everywhere. The big car slowed and crawled through the junction at walking pace. It rolled past the school gate and then suddenly picked up speed and drove away.

Little Ellie Greer watched it go. She was in a wooden chair at the schoolroom window, halfway through raising the lid of her big blue lunch box. She heard the brief shriek of rubber as the car accelerated. She turned her head and stared after it. She was a serious, earnest child, much given to silent observation. She kept her big dark eyes on the road until the dust settled. Then she turned back to matters at hand and inspected her lunch, and wished her mom had been home to pack it, instead of the maid, who belonged to the Greers and was mean.

3

“What happened a year and a half ago?” Reacher asked.

She didn’t answer. They were on a long straight deserted road, with the sun just about dead-center above them. Heading south and near noon, he figured. The road was made of patched blacktop, smooth enough, but the shoulders were ragged. There were lonely billboards at random intervals, advertising gas and accommodations and markets many miles ahead. Either side of the road the landscape was flat and parched and featureless, dotted here and there with still windmills in the middle distance. There were automobile engines mounted on concrete pads, closer to the road. Big V-8s, like you would see under the hood of an ancient Chevrolet or Chrysler, painted yellow and streaked with rust, with stubby black exhaust pipes standing vertically.

“Water pumps,” Carmen said. “For irrigating the fields. There was agriculture here, in the old days. Back then, gasoline was cheaper than water, so those things ran all day and all night. Now there’s no water left, and gas has gotten too expensive.”

The land fell away on every side, covered with dry brush. On the far horizon southwest of the endless road, there might have been mountains a hundred miles away. Or it might have been a trick of the heat.

“Are you hungry?” she asked. “If we don’t stop we could pick Ellie up from school, and I’d really like to do that. I haven’t seen her since yesterday.”

“Whatever you want,” Reacher said.

She accelerated until the big Cadillac was doing eighty and wallowing heavily over the undulations in the road. He straightened in his seat and tightened his belt against the reel. She glanced across at him.

“Do you believe me yet?” she asked.

He glanced back at her. He had spent thirteen years as an investigator, and his natural instinct was to believe nothing at all.

“What happened a year and a half ago?” he asked. “Why did he stop?”

She adjusted her grip on the wheel. Opened her palms, stretched her fingers, closed them tight again on the rim.

“He went to prison,” she said.

“For beating up on you?”

“In *Texas*?” she said. She laughed, just a yelp, like a short cry of pain. “Now I know you’re new here.”

He said nothing. Just watched Texas reel in through the windshield ahead of him, hot and brassy and yellow.

“It just doesn’t happen,” she said. “In Texas a gentleman would never raise his hand to a woman. Everybody knows that. Especially not a *white* gentleman whose family has been here over a hundred years. So if a greaseball whore wife dared to claim a thing like that, they’d lock *her* up, probably in a rubber room.”

The day her life changed forever.

“So what did he do?”

“He evaded federal taxes,” she said. “He made a lot of money trading oil leases and selling drilling equipment down in Mexico. He neglected to tell the IRS about it. In fact, he neglected to tell the IRS about anything. One day they caught him.”

“They put you in jail for that?”

She made a face. “Actually, they try hard not to. A first-time thing like that, they were willing to let him pay, you know, make proposals and so forth. A clean breast and a pay-back plan is what they’re looking for. But Sloop was way too stubborn for that. He made them dig everything out for themselves. He was hiding things right up to the trial. He refused to pay anything. He even disputed that he owed them anything, which was ridiculous. And all the money was hidden behind family trusts, so they couldn’t just take it. It made them mad, I think.”

“So they prosecuted?”

She nodded at the wheel.

“With a vengeance,” she said. “A federal case. You know that expression? Making a federal case out of something? Now I see why people say that. Biggest fuss you ever saw. A real contest, the local good old boys against the Treasury Department. Sloop’s lawyer is his best friend from high school, and his other

Department. Sloop's lawyer is his best friend from high school, and his other best friend from high school is the DA in Pecos County, and he was advising them on strategy and stuff like that, but the IRS just rolled right over all of them. It was a massacre. He got three-to-five years. The judge set the minimum at thirty months in jail. And cut me a break."

Reacher said nothing. She accelerated past a truck, the first vehicle they had seen in more than twenty miles.

"I was so happy," she said. "I'll never forget it. A white-collar thing like that, after the verdict came in they just told him to present himself at the federal prison the next morning. They didn't drag him away in handcuffs or anything. He came home and packed a little suitcase. We had a big family meal, stayed up kind of late. Went upstairs, and that was the last time he hit me. Next morning, his friends drove him up to the jail, someplace near Abilene. A Club Fed is what they call it. Minimum security. It's supposed to be comfortable. I heard you can play tennis there."

"Do you visit him?"

She shook her head.

"I pretend he's dead," she said.

She went quiet, and the car sped on toward the haze on the horizon. There *were* mountains visible to the southwest, unimaginably distant.

"The Trans-Pecos," she said. "Watch for the light to change color. It's very beautiful."

He looked ahead, but the light was so bright it had no color at all.

"Minimum thirty months is two and a half years," she said. "I thought it safest to bet on the minimum. He's probably behaving himself in there."

Reacher nodded. "Probably."

"So, two and a half years," she said. "I wasted the first one and a half."

"You've still got twelve months. That's plenty of time for anything."

She was quiet again.

She was quiet again.

“Talk me through it,” she said. “We have to agree on what needs to be done. That’s important. That way, you’re seeing it exactly the same way I am.”

He said nothing.

“Help me,” she said. “Please. Just theoretically for now, if you want.”

He shrugged. Then he thought about it, from her point of view. From his, it was too easy. Disappearing and living invisibly was second nature to him.

“You need to get away,” he said. “An abusive marriage, that’s all a person can do, I guess. So, a place to live, and an income. That’s what you need.”

“Doesn’t sound much, when you say it.”

“Any big city,” he said. “They have shelters. All kinds of organizations.”

“What about Ellie?”

“The shelters have baby-sitters,” he said. “They’ll look after her while you’re working. There are lots of kids in those places. She’d have friends. And after a little while you could get a place of your own.”

“What job could I get?”

“Anything,” he said. “You can read and write. You went to college.”

“How do I get there?”

“On a plane, on a train, in a bus. Two one-way tickets.”

“I don’t have any money.”

“None at all?”

She shook her head. “What little I had ran out a week ago.”

He looked away.

“What?” she said.

“You dress pretty sharp for a person with no money.”

“Mail order,” she said. “I have to get approval from Sloop’s lawyer. He signs the checks. So I’ve got clothes. But what I haven’t got is cash.”

“You could sell the diamond.”

“I tried to,” she said. “It’s a fake. He told me it was real, but it’s stainless steel and cubic zirconium. The jeweler laughed at me. It’s worth maybe thirty bucks.”

He paused a beat.

“There must be money in the house,” he said. “You could steal some.”

She went quiet again, another fast mile south.

“Then I’m a double fugitive,” she said. “You’re forgetting about Ellie’s legal status. And that’s the whole problem. Always has been. Because she’s Sloop’s child, too. If I transport her across a state line without his consent, then I’m a kidnapper. They’ll put her picture on milk cartons, and they’ll find me, and they’ll take her away from me, and I’ll go to jail. They’re very strict about it. Taking children out of a failed marriage is the number one reason for kidnapping today. The lawyers all warned me. They all say I need Sloop’s agreement. And I’m not going to get it, am I? How can I even go up there and ask him if he’d consent to me disappearing forever with his baby? Someplace he’ll never find either of us?”

“So don’t cross the state line. Stay in Texas. Go to Dallas.”

“I’m not staying in Texas,” she said.

She said it with finality. Reacher said nothing back.

“It’s not easy,” she said. “His mother watches me, on his behalf. That’s why I didn’t go ahead and sell the ring, even though I could have used the thirty bucks. She’d notice, and it would put her on her guard. She’d know what I’m planning. She’s smart. So if one day money is missing and Ellie is missing, I might get a few hours start before she calls the sheriff and the sheriff calls the FBI. But a few hours isn’t too much help, because Texas is real big, and buses are real slow. I wouldn’t make it out.”

I wouldn't make it out.

“Got to be some way,” he said.

She glanced back at her briefcase on the rear seat. The legal paperwork.

“There are lots of ways,” she said. “Procedures, provisions, wards of the court, all kinds of things. But lawyers are slow, and very expensive, and I don’t have any money. There are pro-bono people who do it for free, but they’re always very busy. It’s a mess. A big, complicated mess.”

“I guess it is,” he said.

“But it should be possible in a year,” she said. “A year’s a long time, right?”

“So?”

“So I need you to forgive me for wasting the first year and a half. I need you to understand why. It was all so daunting, I kept putting it off. I was safe. I said to myself, plenty of time to go. You just agreed, twelve months is plenty of time for anything. So even if I was starting cold, right now, I could be excused for that, right? Nobody could say I’d left it too late, could they?”

There was a polite beep from somewhere deep inside the dashboard. A little orange light started flashing in the stylized shape of a gas pump, right next to the speedometer.

“Low fuel,” she said.

“There’s Exxon up ahead,” he said. “I saw a billboard. Maybe fifteen miles.”

“I need Mobil,” she said. “There’s a card for Mobil in the glove box. I don’t have any way of paying at Exxon.”

“You don’t even have money for gas?”

She shook her head. “I ran out. Now I’m charging it all to my mother-in-law’s Mobil account. She won’t get the bill for a month.”

She steered one-handed and groped behind her for her pocketbook. Dragged it forward and dumped it on his lap.

“Check it out,” she said.

He sat there, with the bag on his knees.

“I can’t be poking through a lady’s pocketbook,” he said.

“I want you to,” she said. “I need you to understand.”

He paused a beat and snapped it open and a soft aroma came up at him. Perfume and makeup. There was a hairbrush, tangled with long black hairs. A nail clipper. And a thin wallet.

“Check it out,” she said again.

There was a worn dollar bill in the money section. That was all. A solitary buck. No credit cards. A Texas driver’s license, with a startled picture of her on it. There was a plastic window with a photograph of a little girl behind it. She was slightly chubby, with perfect pink skin. Shiny blond hair and bright lively eyes. A radiant smile filled with tiny square teeth.

“Ellie,” she said.

“She’s very cute.”

“She is, isn’t she?”

“Where did you sleep last night?”

“In the car,” she said. “Motels are forty bucks.”

“Mine was nearer twenty,” he said.

She shrugged.

“Anything over a dollar, I haven’t got it,” she said. “So it’s the car for me. It’s comfortable enough. Then I wait for the breakfast rush and wash up in some diner’s restroom, when they’re too busy to notice.”

“What about eating?”

“I don’t eat.”

She was slowing down, maybe trying to preserve the rest of her gas.

“I’ll pay for it,” Reacher said. “You’re giving me a ride.”

There was another billboard, on the right shoulder. Exxon, ten miles.

“O.K.,” she said. “I’ll let you pay. But only so I can get back to Ellie.”

She accelerated again, confident the tank would last ten miles. Less than a gallon, Reacher figured, even with a big old engine like that. Even driving fast. He sat back and watched the horizon reel in. Then he suddenly realized what he should do.

“Stop the car,” he said.

“Why?”

“Just do it, O.K.?”

She glanced at him, puzzled, but she pulled over on the ragged shoulder. Left it with two wheels on the blacktop, the engine running, the air blasting.

“Now wait,” he said.

They waited in the cold until the truck she had passed came through.

“Now sit still,” he said.

He unclipped his seat belt and squinted down and tore the pocket off his shirt. Cheap material, weak stitching, it came away with no trouble at all.

“What are you wearing?” he asked.

“What? What are you doing?”

“Tell me exactly what you’re wearing.”

She blushed. Fidgeted nervously.

“This dress,” she said. “And underwear. And shoes.”

“Show me your shoes.”

Show me your shoes.

She paused a second, and then leaned down and worked her shoes off. Passed them across to him, one at a time. He checked them carefully. Nothing in them. He passed them back. Then he leaned forward and unbuttoned his shirt. Took it off. Passed it to her.

“I’m getting out now,” he said. “I’m going to turn my back. Take all your clothes off and put the shirt on. Leave your clothes on the seat and then get out, too.”

“Why?”

“You want me to help you, just do it. All of them, O.K.?”

He got out of the car and walked away. Turned around and stared down the road, back the way they had come. It was very hot. He could feel the sun burning the skin on his shoulders. Then he heard the car door open. He turned back and saw her climbing out, barefoot, wearing his shirt. It was huge on her. She was hopping from foot to foot because the road was burning her feet.

“You can keep your shoes,” he called.

She leaned in and picked them up and put them on.

“Now walk away and wait,” he called.

She paused again, and then moved ten feet away. He stepped back to the car. Her clothes were neatly folded on her seat. He ignored them. Reached back and searched her pocketbook again, and then the briefcase. Nothing there. He turned back to the clothes and shook them out. They were warm from her body. The dress, a bra, underpants. Nothing hidden in them. He laid them on the roof of the car and searched the rest of it.

It took him twenty minutes. He covered it completely. Under the hood, the whole of the interior, under the carpets, in the seats, under the seats, in the trunk, under the fenders, everywhere. He found nothing at all, and he was absolutely prepared to bet his life no civilian could conceal anything from him in an automobile.

“O.K.,” he called. “Get dressed now. Same routine.”

He waited with his back turned until he heard her behind him. She was holding his shirt. He took it from her and put it back on.

“What was that about?” she asked.

“Now I’ll help you,” he said. “Because now I believe you.”

“Why?”

“Because you really don’t have any money,” he said. “No credit cards, either. Not in your wallet, and not hidden anyplace else. And nobody travels three hundred miles from home, not overnight, with absolutely no money. Not unless they’ve got some real big problems. And a person with real big problems deserves some kind of help.”

She said nothing. Just ducked her head slightly, like she was accepting a compliment. Or offering one. They climbed back in the car and shut the doors. Sat for a minute in the cool air, and then she maneuvered back onto the road again.

“So, you’ve got a year,” he said. “That’s plenty of time. A year from now, you could be a million miles away. New start, new life. Is that what you want me for? To help you get away?”

She said nothing for a couple of minutes. A couple of miles. The road rolled down a slight hill, and then up again. There were buildings in the far distance, on the next crest. Probably the gas station. Maybe a tow-truck operation next to it.

“Right now just agree with me,” she said. “A year is enough. So it’s O.K. to have waited.”

“Sure,” he said. “A year is enough. It’s O.K. to have waited.”

She said nothing more. Just drove straight ahead for the gas station, like her life depended on it.

The first establishment was a junkyard. There was a long low shed made out of

corrugated tin, with the front wall all covered with old hubcaps. Behind it was an acre of wrecked cars. They were piled five or six deep, with the older models at the bottom, like geological strata. Beyond the low shed was the turn for the gas station. It was old enough to have pumps with pointers instead of figures, and four public rest rooms instead of two. Old enough that a taciturn guy came out into the heat and filled your car for you.

The Cadillac took more than twenty gallons, which cost Reacher the price of a motel room. He passed the bills through his window and waved away a dollar in change. He figured the guy should have it. The outside temperature reading on the dash showed one hundred and eleven degrees. No wonder the guy didn't talk. Then he found himself wondering whether it was because the guy didn't like to see a beaner driving a white man around in a Cadillac.

"*Gracias, señor,*" Carmen said. "Thank you."

"Pleasure," he said. "*De nada, señorita*."

"You speak Spanish?"

"Not really," he said. "I served all over, so I can say a few words in a lot of languages. But that's all. Except French. I speak French pretty well. My mother was French."

"From Louisiana or Canada?"

"From Paris, France."

"So you're half-foreign," she said.

"Sometimes I feel a lot more than half."

She smiled like she didn't believe him and eased back to the road. The gas needle jumped up to F, which seemed to reassure her. She got the car straight in her lane and accelerated back to a cruise.

"But you should call me *señora,*" she said. "Not *señorita*. I'm a married woman."

"Yes," he said. "I guess you are."

She went quiet for a mile. Settled back in the seat and rested both hands lightly on the bottom curve of the wheel. Then she took a deep breath.

“O.K., here’s the problem,” she said. “I don’t have a year.”

“Why not?”

“Because a month ago his lawyer friend came out to the house. Told us there was some kind of deal on the table.”

“What deal?”

“I don’t know for sure. Nobody told me exactly. My guess is Sloop’s going to rat out some business associates in exchange for early release. I think his other friend is brokering it through the DA’s office.”

“Shit,” Reacher said.

Carmen nodded. “Yes, shit. They’ve all been working their asses off, getting it going. I’ve had to be all smiles, like oh great, Sloop’s coming home early.”

Reacher said nothing.

“But inside, I’m screaming,” she said. “I left it too late, you see. A year and a half, I did nothing at all. I thought I was safe. I was wrong. I was stupid. I was sitting around in a trap without knowing it, and now it’s sprung shut, and I’m still in it.”

Reacher nodded slowly. *Hope for the best, plan for the worst*. That was his guiding principle.

“So what’s the progress on the deal?” he asked.

The car sped on south.

“It’s done,” she said, in a small voice.

“So when does he get out?”

“Today’s Friday,” she said. “I don’t think they can do it on the weekend. So it’ll be Monday, I expect. A couple of days, is all.”

“I see,” Reacher said.

“So I’m scared,” she said. “He’s coming home.”

“I see,” Reacher said again.

“Do you?” she asked.

He said nothing.

“Monday night,” she said. “He’s going to start it all up again. It’s going to be worse than ever.”

“Maybe he’s changed,” Reacher said. “Prison can change people.”

It was a useless thing to say. He could see it in her face. And in his experience, prison didn’t change people for the better.

“No, it’s going to be worse than ever,” she said. “I know it. I know it for sure. I’m in big trouble, Reacher. I can promise you that.”

Something in her voice.

“Why?”

She moved her hands on the wheel. Closed her eyes tight, even though she was doing seventy miles an hour.

“Because it was me who told the IRS about him,” she said.

The Crown Victoria drove south, and then west, and then looped back north in a giant sweeping curve. It detoured over near the highway so it could fill up with gas at a self-service pump in a busy station. The driver used a stolen Amex card in the slot and then wiped his prints off it and dropped it in the trash next to the pump, with the empty oil bottles and the soda cans and the used paper towels covered with windshield dirt. The woman busied herself with a map and selected their next destination. Kept her finger on the spot until the driver got back in and

squirmed around to take a look at it.

“Now?” he asked.

“Just to check it out,” she replied. “For later.”

“It seemed like such a good plan,” Carmen said. “It seemed foolproof. I knew how stubborn he was, and how greedy he was, so I knew he wouldn’t cooperate with them, so I knew he would go to jail, at least for a little while. Even if by some chance he didn’t, I thought it might preoccupy him for a spell. And I thought it might shake some money loose for me, you know, when he was hiding it all. And it worked real well, apart from the money. But that seemed like such a small thing at the time.”

“How did you do it?”

“I just called them. They’re in the book. They have a whole section to take information from spouses. It’s one of their big ways to get people. Normally it happens during divorces, when you’re mad at each other. But I was already mad at him.”

“Why haven’t you gone ahead and *got* a divorce?” he asked. “Husband in jail is grounds, right? Some kind of desertion?”

She glanced in the mirror, at the briefcase on the rear seat.

“It doesn’t solve the problem with Ellie,” she said. “In fact, it makes it much worse. It alerts everybody to the possibility I’ll leave the state. Legally, Sloop could require me to register her whereabouts, and I’m sure he would.”

“You could stay in Texas,” he said again.

She nodded.

“I know, I know,” she said. “But I can’t. I just can’t. I know I’m being irrational, but I can’t stay here, Reacher. It’s a beautiful state, and there *are* nice people

here, and it's very big, so I could get a long way away, but it's a *symbol*. Things have happened to me here that I have to get away from. Not just with Sloop."

He shrugged.

"Your call," he said.

She went quiet and concentrated on driving. The road reeled in. It was dropping down off of a wide flat mesa that looked the size of Rhode Island.

"The caprock," she said. "It's limestone, or something. All the water evaporated about a million years ago and left the rock behind. Geological deposits, or something."

She sounded vague. Her tour-guide explanation was less definitive than usual.

"So what do you want me to do?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said, although he was certain that she did.

"Help you run? I could do that, probably."

She said nothing.

"You picked me out," he said. "You must have had something in mind."

She said nothing. He fell to thinking about the potential target group she had outlined to him. Out-of-work rodeo riders and roughnecks. Men of various talents, but he wasn't sure if beating a federal manhunt would be among them. So she had chosen well. Or lucked out.

"You need to move fast," he said. "Two days, you need to get started right now. We should pick Ellie up and turn the car around and get going. Vegas, maybe, for the first stop."

"And do what there?"

"Pick up some ID," he said. "Place like Vegas, we could find something, even if it's only temporary. I've got some money. I can get more, if you need it."

"I can't take your money," she said. "That wouldn't be fair."

“Fair or not, you’re going to need money. You can pay me back later. Then maybe you should go back to L.A. You could start building some new paperwork there.”

She was quiet again, another mile.

“No, I can’t run,” she said. “I can’t be a fugitive. I can’t be an *illegal*. Whatever else I am, I’ve never been an illegal. I’m not going to start being one now. And neither is Ellie. She deserves better than that.”

“You both deserve better than that,” he said. “But you’ve got to do something.”

“I’m a citizen,” she said. “Think about what that means to a person like me. I’m not going to give it up. I’m not going to pretend to be somebody else.”

“So what’s your plan?”

“You’re my plan,” she said.

Bull riders, roughnecks, a six-foot-five two-hundred-fifty-pound ex-military cop.

“You want me to be your *bodyguard* ?” he asked.

She made no reply.

“Carmen, I’m sorry about your situation,” he said. “Believe me, I really am.”

No response.

“But I can’t be your bodyguard.”

No reply.

“I can’t be,” he said again. “It’s ridiculous. What do you think is going to happen? You think I’m going to be with you twenty-four hours a day? Seven days a week? Making sure he doesn’t hit you?”

No reply. A huge highway interchange sprawled across the empty landscape, miles away in the haze.

“It’s ridiculous,” he said again. “I could warn him off, I guess. I could scare him.

I could smack him around a little, to back up the message. But what happens when I'm gone? Because sooner or later, I'm going to be gone, Carmen. I'm not going to stay around. I don't like to stay anywhere. And it's not just me. Face it, *nobody* is going to stay around. Not long enough. Not ten years. Or twenty, or thirty or however long it is until he ups and dies of old age."

No reply. No effect, either. It wasn't like what he was saying was a big disappointment to her. She just listened and drove, fast and smooth, and silent, like she was biding her time. The highway cloverleaf grew larger and nearer and she swooped onto it and around it and headed due west, following a big green sign that said: Pecos 75 miles.

"I don't want a bodyguard," she said. "I agree, that would be ridiculous."

"So what am I supposed to be for?"

She settled onto the highway, center lane, driving faster than before. He watched her face. It was completely blank.

"What am I supposed to be for?" he asked again.

She hesitated. "I can't say it."

"Say what?"

She opened her mouth. Closed it again. Swallowed hard, and said nothing. He stared at her. *Bull riders, roughnecks, an ex-MP. Clay Allison's grave, the fancy inscription, the obituary in the Kansas City newspaper*.

"You *are* crazy," he said.

"Am I?" The spots of color came back to her face, the size of quarters, burning red high above her cheekbones.

"Totally crazy," he said. "And you can forget about it."

"I *can't* forget about it."

He said nothing.

"I want him dead, Reacher," she said. "I really do. It's my only way out,

literally. And he deserves it."

"Tell me you're kidding."

"I'm not kidding," she said. "I want him killed."

He shook his head. Stared out of the window.

"Just forget all about it," he said. "It's absurd. This isn't the Wild West anymore."

"Isn't it? Isn't it still O.K. to kill a man who needs killing?"

Then she went quiet, just driving, like she was waiting him out. He stared at the speeding landscape in front of him. They were heading for the distant mountains. The blazing afternoon sun made them red and purple. It changed the color of the air. The Trans-Pecos, she had called them.

"Please, Reacher," she said. "Please. At least think about it."

He said nothing. *Please? Think about it*? He was beyond reaction. He dropped his eyes from the mountains and watched the highway. It was busy with traffic. A river of cars and trucks, crawling across the vastness. She was passing them all, one after another. Driving way too fast.

"I'm not crazy," she said. "Please. I tried to do this right. I really did. Soon as his lawyer told me about the deal, I saw a lawyer of my own, and then three more, and none of them could do anything for me as fast as a month. All they could do was tell me Ellie traps me exactly where I am. So then I looked for protection. I asked private detectives. They wouldn't do anything for me. I went to a security firm in Austin and they said yes, they could guard me around the clock, but it would be six men and nearly ten thousand dollars a week. Which is the same thing as saying no. So I tried, Reacher. I tried to do it right. But it's impossible."

He said nothing.

"So I bought a gun," she said.

"Wonderful," he said.

"And bullets." she said. "It took all the cash I had."

“You picked the wrong guy,” he said.

“But why? You’ve killed people before. In the army. You told me that.”

“This is different.”

“How?”

“This would be murder. Cold-blooded murder. It would be an assassination.”

“No, it would be just the same. Just like the army.”

He shook his head. “Carmen, it wouldn’t be the same.”

“Don’t you take an oath or something? To protect people?”

“It’s not the same,” he said again.

She passed an eighteen-wheeler bound for the coast, and the Cadillac rocked and shimmied through the superheated turbulent air.

“Slow down,” he said.

She shook her head. “I can’t slow down. I want to see Ellie.”

He touched the dashboard in front of him, steadying himself. The freezing air from the vents blasted against his chest.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I’m not going to crash. Ellie needs me. If it wasn’t for Ellie, I’d have crashed a long time ago, believe me.”

But she eased off a little, anyway. The big rig crept back alongside.

“I know this is a difficult conversation,” she said.

“You think?”

“But you have to look at it from my point of view. Please, Reacher. I’ve been through it a million times. I’ve thought it through. I’ve been from A to B to C to D, all the way to Z. Then again, and again. And again. I’ve examined all the

options. So this is all logical to me. And this is the only way. I *know* that. But it's hard to talk about, because it's new to you. You haven't thought about it before. It comes out of the blue. So I sound crazy and cold-blooded to you. I know that. I appreciate that. But I'm not crazy or cold-blooded. It's just that I've had the time to reach the conclusion, and you haven't. And this is the only conclusion, I promise you."

"Whatever, I'm not killing a guy I never saw before."

"He hits me, Reacher," she said. "He beats me, badly. Punches me, kicks me, hurts me. He enjoys it. He laughs while he does it. I live in fear, all the time."

"So go to the cops."

"The cop. There's only one. And he wouldn't believe me. And even if he did, he wouldn't do anything about it. They're all big buddies. You don't know how it is here."

Reacher said nothing.

"He's coming home," she said. "Can you *imagine* what he's going to do to me?"

He said nothing.

"I'm *trapped*, Reacher. I'm boxed in, because of Ellie. Do you see that?"

He said nothing.

"Why won't you help me? Is it the money? Is it because I can't pay you?"

He said nothing.

"I'm desperate," she said. "You're my only chance. I'm begging you. Why won't you do it? Is it because I'm Mexican?"

He said nothing.

"It's because I'm just a greaseball, right? A beaner? You'd do it for a white woman? Like your girlfriend? I bet she's a white woman. Probably a blonde, right?"

“Yes, she’s a blonde,” he said.

“Some guy was beating up on her, you’d kill him.”

Yes, I would, he thought.

“And *she* ran off to Europe without you. Didn’t want you to go with her. But you’d do it for her, and you won’t do it for me.”

“It’s not the same,” he said for the third time.

“I know,” she said. “Because I’m just beaner trash. I’m not worth it.”

He said nothing.

“What’s her name?” she asked. “Your girlfriend?”

“Jodie,” he said.

“O.K., imagine Jodie over there in Europe. She’s trapped in some bad situation, getting beat up every day by some maniac sadist. She tells you all about it. Bares her soul. Every horrible humiliating detail. What are you going to do?”

Kill him, he thought.

She nodded like she could read his mind. “But you won’t do that for me. You’d do it for the gringa, but not for me.”

He paused a beat with his mouth halfway open. It was true. He would do it for Jodie Garber, but he wouldn’t do it for Carmen Greer. *Why not*? Because it comes in a rush. You can’t force it. It’s a hot-blooded thing, like a drug in your veins, and you go with it. If it’s not there, you can’t go with it. Simple as that. He’d gone with it before in his life, many times. People mess with him, they get what they get. They mess with Jodie, that’s the same thing as messing with him. Because Jodie *was* him. Or at least she used to be. In a way that Carmen wasn’t. And never would be. So it just wasn’t *there*.

“It’s not about gringas or latinas,” he said quietly.

She said nothing.

“Please, Carmen,” he said. “You need to understand that.”

“So what *is* it about?”

“It’s about I know her and I don’t know you.”

“And that makes a difference?”

“Of course it does.”

“Then get to know me,” she said. “We’ve got two days. You’re about to meet my daughter. Get to know us.”

He said nothing. She drove on. Pecos 55 miles.

“You were a policeman,” she said. “You should want to help people. Or are you scared? Is that it? Are you a coward?”

He said nothing.

“You could do it,” she said. “You’ve done it before. So you know how. You could do it and get clean away. You could dump his body where nobody would find it. Out in the desert. Nobody would ever know. It wouldn’t come back on you, if you were careful. You’d never get caught. You’re smart enough.”

He said nothing.

“Are you smart enough? Do you know how? Do you?”

“Of course I know how,” he said. “But I won’t do it.”

“Why not?”

“I told you why not. Because I’m not an assassin.”

“But I’m desperate,” she said. “I need you to do this. I’m begging you. I’ll do anything if you’ll help me.”

He said nothing.

“What do you want, Reacher? You want sex? We could do that.”

“Stop the car,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because I’ve had enough of this.”

She jammed her foot down hard on the gas. The car leapt forward. He glanced back at the traffic and leaned over toward her and knocked the transmission into N. The engine unloaded and screamed and the car coasted and slowed. He used his left hand on the wheel and hauled it around against her desperate grip and steered the car to the shoulder. It bounced off the blacktop and the gravel bit against the tires and the speed washed away. He jammed the lever into P and opened his door, all in one movement. The car skidded to a stop with the transmission locked. He slid out and stood up unsteadily. Felt the heat on his body like a blow from a hammer and slammed the door and walked away from her.

4

He was sweating heavily twenty yards after getting out of the car. And already regretting his decision. He was in the middle of nowhere, on foot on a major highway, and the slowest vehicles were doing sixty. Nobody was going to want to stop for him. Even if they did want to, give them a little reaction time, give them a little time to check their mirrors, a little braking time, they’d be more than a mile away before they knew it, and then they’d shrug their shoulders and speed up again and keep on going. *Dumb place to hitch a ride*, they’d think.

It was worse than dumb. It was suicidal. The sun was fearsome and the temperature was easily a hundred and twelve degrees. The slipstream from the cars was like a hot gale, and the suction from the giant trucks wasn’t far from pulling him off his feet. He had no water. He could barely breathe. There was a constant stream of people five yards away, but he was as alone as if he was stumbling blind through the desert. If a state trooper didn’t come by and arrest him for jaywalking, he could die out there.

He turned and saw the Cadillac, still sitting inert on the shoulder. But he kept on

He turned and saw the Cadillac, still sitting there on the shoulder. But he kept on walking away from it. He made it about fifty yards and stopped. Turned to face east and stuck out his thumb. But it was hopeless, like he knew it would be. After five minutes, a hundred vehicles, the nearest thing he'd gotten to a response was some trucker blasting his air horn, a huge bass sound roaring past him with a whine of stressed tires and a hurricane of dust and grit. He was choking and burning up.

He turned again. Saw the Cadillac lurch backward and start up the shoulder toward him. Her steering was imprecise. The rear end was all over the place. It was close to slewing out into the traffic. He started walking back to it. It came on to meet him, fishtailing wildly. He started running. He stopped alongside the car as she braked hard. The suspension bounced. She buzzed the passenger window down.

"I'm sorry," she said.

He didn't hear it in the noise, but he caught the shape of the words.

"Get in," she said.

His shirt was sticking to his back. He had grit in his eyes. The howl of sound from the road was deafening him.

"Get in," she mouthed. "I'm sorry."

He got in. It felt exactly the same as the first time. The air roaring, the freezing leather seat. The small cowed woman at the wheel.

"I apologize," she said. "I'm sorry. I said stupid things."

He slammed the door. There was sudden silence. He put his hand in the chill stream from the vents.

"I didn't mean them," she said.

"Whatever," he said back.

"Really, I didn't mean them. I'm just so desperate I can't tell right from wrong anymore. And I'm very sorry for the thing about the sex. It was a crass thing to say."

Then her voice went small. “It’s just that some of the guys I’ve picked up, I figured that was what it was going to have to be.”

“You’d have sex with them so they’d kill your husband?”

She nodded. “I told you, I’m trapped and I’m scared and I’m desperate. And I don’t have anything else to offer.”

He said nothing.

“And I’ve seen movies where that happens,” she said.

He nodded back.

“I’ve seen those movies, too,” he said. “They never get away with it.”

She paused a long moment.

“So you’re not going to do it,” she said, like a statement of fact.

“No, I’m not,” he said.

She paused again, longer.

“O.K., I’ll let you out in Pecos,” she said. “You can’t be out there walking. You could die in heat like this.”

He paused too, much longer than she had. Then he shook his head. Because he had to be *somewhere*. When you live on the road, you learn pretty quick that any one place is about as good as any other place.

“No, I’ll come with you,” he said. “I’ll hang out a couple of days. Because I’m sorry about your situation, Carmen. I really am. Just because I won’t walk in and shoot the guy doesn’t mean I don’t want to help you some other way. If I can. And if you still want me to, that is.”

She paused another beat.

“Yes, I still want you to,” she said.

“And I want to meet Ellie. She looks like a great kid, from her picture.”

“She is a great kid.”

“But I’m not going to murder her father.”

She said nothing.

“Is that completely clear?” he asked.

She nodded.

“I understand,” she said. “I’m sorry I asked.”

“It’s not just me, Carmen,” he said. “Nobody would do it. You were fooling yourself. It wasn’t a good plan.”

She looked small and lost.

“I thought nobody could refuse,” she said. “If they knew.”

She turned and watched the traffic coming up behind her. Waited for a gap. Six cars later, she pulled back onto the highway and gunned the motor. Within a minute she was doing eighty again, passing one car after another. The trucker who had used his air horn as he left Reacher in the dust lasted seven whole minutes, before she reeled him in.

The Crown Victoria made it to the destination the woman had selected within eighty minutes. It was an inch-wide empty brown stain on the map, and it was a forty-mile-wide empty brown stain in reality. One road ran through it, meandering roughly north and east in the lee of distant mountains. Hot, lonely, valueless country. But it had all the features she had predicted. It would serve her purposes. She smiled to herself. She had an instinct for terrain.

“O.K.,” she said. “First thing tomorrow. Right here.”

The big car turned and headed back south. The dust from its tires hung in the air for long minutes and then floated down to the powdery ground.

Carmen came off the highway just short of Pecos and speared south on a small county road that led down into total emptiness. Within five miles, they could have been on the surface of the moon.

“Tell me about Echo,” he said.

She shrugged. “What’s to tell? It’s nothing. When they were first mapping Texas a hundred years ago, the Census Bureau called a place settled if it had more than six people to the square mile, and we *still* don’t qualify. We’re still the frontier.”

“But it’s very beautiful,” he said.

And it was. The road was snaking and diving through endless contours, with red rock canyons either side of it, tall and noble to the east, fractured and pierced to the west, where ancient streams had sought the banks of the Rio Grande. Tall dry mountains reared beyond, with an immense technicolor sky above, and even in the speeding car he could sense the stunning silence of thousands of square miles of absolute emptiness.

“I hate it,” she said.

“Where will I be?” he asked.

“On the property. In the bunkhouse, I guess. They’ll hire you for the horses. We’re always a man short. You show up with a pulse, they’ll be interested. You can say you’re a wrangler. It’ll be a good disguise. It’ll keep you close by.”

“I don’t know anything about horses.”

She shrugged. “Maybe they won’t notice. They don’t notice much. Like me getting beaten half to death.”

An hour later, they were tight for time. She was driving fast enough that the tire

squeal from the curves was more or less continuous. They came up a long steep grade and then turned out between two rock pillars on a peak and suddenly there was flat land below them as far as the eye could see. The road fell away like a twisted tan ribbon and was crossed twenty miles ahead by another, just visible through the haze like a faint line on a map. The distant crossroads was studded with a handful of tiny buildings, and apart from them and the two roads there was no evidence humans had ever lived on the planet.

“Echo County,” she said. “Everything you see, and a lot more besides. A thousand square miles, and a hundred and fifty people. Well, a hundred and forty-eight, because one of them is sitting right here with you, and one of them is still in jail.”

Her mood had improved, because she said it with a wry smile. But she was looking at a tiny plume of dust on the road far below them. It was puffing out like a squirrel’s tail, crawling slowly south, a quarter of the way to the crossroads.

“That must be the school bus,” she said. “We have to beat it to town, or Ellie will get on and we’ll miss her.”

“Town?” Reacher said.

She smiled again, briefly.

“You’re looking at it,” she said. “Uptown Echo.”

She accelerated down the grade and the Cadillac’s own dust swirled and hung behind it. The landscape was so vast that speed seemed slowed to absurdity. Reacher figured the bus might be a half hour from the crossroads, and the Cadillac was traveling twice as fast, so they should catch it inside fifteen minutes, even though the elevation and the clear desert air made it look close enough to reach out and touch, like a child’s toy on the floor of a room.

“It’s good of you to be coming,” she said. “Thank you. I mean it.”

“*No hay de que, señorita*,” he said.

“So you do know more than a few words.”

He shrugged. “There were a lot of Spanish-speaking people in the army. Most of

He shrugged. "There were a lot of Spanish-speaking people in the army. Most of the new generation, in fact. Some of the best of them."

"Like baseball," she said.

"Yes," he said. "Like baseball."

"But you should call me *señora. Señorita* makes me too happy."

She accelerated again when the road leveled out and about a mile before they caught up with the bus she swung out into the wrong lane, ready to pass it. Safe enough, he figured. The chances of meeting oncoming traffic in that part of the world were worse than winning the lottery. She reeled in the bus and pulled through the cone of dust and blasted past and stayed on the left for another mile. Then she eased back right and five minutes later they were slowing as they approached the crossroads.

From ground level the hamlet looked ragged and defeated, the way small places do under the heat of the sun. There were lots partially overrun with dry thorny weeds, delineated with raw block walls, commercially zoned but never developed. There was a diner on the right on the northwest corner, nothing more than a long, low shack made of wood with all the color baked right out of it. Diagonally opposite was the school, a one-room building like something out of a history book. *The beginnings of rural education*. Opposite that on the southwest corner was a gas station with two pumps and a small yard filled with stalled cars behind it. Diagonally opposite the gas station and across the road from the school the northeast corner was an empty lot, with concrete blocks spilled randomly across it, like an optimistic new venture had been planned and then abandoned, maybe while LBJ was still in office. There were four other buildings, all one story, all plain concrete, all set back with thin rough driveways leading to them from the road. Houses, Reacher guessed. Their yards were littered with junk, children's bikes and tired automobiles on blocks and old living room furniture. The yards were baked dry and hard and had low chicken-wire fences around them, maybe to keep the big snakes out.

The crossroads itself had no stop signs, just thick lines on the blacktop, melted in the heat. Carmen drove straight through and past the school and U-turned across the full width of the road, bumping down into shallow drainage ditches on both shoulders. She came back and stopped with the school gate close to Reacher's window. The school yard was ringed by a wire hurricane fence like a dog pound, and the gate was an inexact hinged rectangle made of galvanized tubing and

and the gate was an inexact hinged rectangle made of galvanized tubing and faced with the same wire.

She stared past him at the school door. The bus came laboring down from the north and stopped on its own side of the road, parallel to the Cadillac, facing the other direction. The schoolhouse door opened and a woman stepped out. She moved slow and looked tired. The teacher, Reacher guessed, ready to end her day. She saw the bus and waved to the children. They spilled out in a long stream. Seventeen of them, nine girls and eight boys, he counted. Ellie Greer was seventh in line. She was wearing a blue dress. She looked damp and hot. He recognized her from her photograph and by the way Carmen moved beside him. He heard her catch her breath and scrabble for the door handle.

She skipped around the hood and met her daughter outside the car on the beaten earth strip that passed for a sidewalk. She scooped her up in a wild hug. Spun her around and around. Her little feet windmilled outward and her blue lunch box swung and hit her mother on the back. Reacher could see the child laughing and tears in Carmen's eyes. They came back around the rear of the car clutched tight together. Carmen opened the door and Ellie scrambled straight into the driver's seat and stopped dead when she saw him. She went instantly silent and her eyes went wide.

"This is Mr. Reacher," Carmen said.

Ellie turned to look at her.

"He's my friend," Carmen said. "Say hello to him."

Ellie turned back.

"Hello," she said.

"Hey, Ellie," Reacher said. "School O.K.?"

Ellie paused. "It was O.K."

"Learn anything?"

"How to spell some words."

She paused again, and then tilted her chin upward a fraction.

“Not easy ones,” she said. “*Ball* and *fall*.”

Reacher nodded gravely.

“Four letters,” he said. “That’s pretty tough.”

“I bet you can spell them.”

“B-A-L-L,” Reacher said. “F-A-L-L. Like that, right?”

“You’re grown up,” Ellie said, like he had passed a test. “But you know what? The teacher said four letters, but there’s only three, because the L comes twice. Right there at the end.”

“You’re a smart kid,” Reacher said. “Now hop in the back and let your mom in out of the heat.”

She scrambled past his left shoulder and he caught the smell of elementary school. He had attended maybe fifteen different places, most of them in different countries and continents, and they all smelled the same. It was more than thirty years since he had last been in one, but he still remembered it clearly.

“Mom?” Ellie said.

Carmen slid in and shut the door. She looked flushed. Heat, sudden exertion, sudden brief happiness, Reacher didn’t know.

“Mom, it’s hot,” Ellie said. “We should get ice cream sodas. From the diner.”

Reacher saw Carmen about to smile and agree, and then he saw her glance back at her pocketbook and remember the lone dollar stashed inside it.

“From the diner, Mom,” Ellie said. “Ice cream sodas. They’re best when it’s hot. Before we go home.”

Carmen’s face fell, and then it fell a little farther when she caught up to the end of Ellie’s sentence. *Home*. Reacher stepped into the silence.

“Good idea,” he said. “Let’s get ice cream sodas. My treat.”

Carmen glanced across, dependent on him and unhappy about it. But she put the

car in drive anyway and pulled back through the crossroads and turned left into the diner's lot. She came around and parked in the shade tight against its north wall, right next to the only other car in the place, a steel blue Crown Victoria, new and shiny. Must be a state trooper's unmarked, or maybe a rental, Reacher thought.

The diner was cold inside, chilled by a big old-fashioned air conditioner that vented down through the roof. And it was empty, apart from a group Reacher took to be the Crown Victoria's occupants, a trio of ordinary indoor types at a window, two men and a woman. The woman was medium blond and pleasant looking. One guy was small and dark and the other was taller and fair. So the Crown Vic was a rental, not a cop car, and these guys were maybe some kind of a sales team heading between San Antonio and El Paso. Maybe they had heavy samples in the trunk that prevented them from flying. He glanced away and let Ellie lead him toward a booth at the opposite end of the room.

"This is the best table," she said. "All the others have torn seats, and they've sewed them up, and the thread is kind of thick and it can hurt the back of your leg."

"I guess you've been in here before," Reacher said.

"Of course I have." She giggled, like he was crazy. Two rows of tiny square teeth flashed at him. "I've been in here lots of times."

Then she jumped up and scooted sideways over the vinyl.

"Mommy, sit next to me," she said.

Carmen smiled. "I'm going to use the rest room first. I'll be right back. You stay here with Mr. Reacher, O.K.?"

The kid nodded gravely and Mr. Reacher sat himself down opposite her and they looked at each other quite openly. He wasn't sure what she was seeing, but he was seeing a living version of the photograph from her mother's wallet. Thick corn-colored hair tied back in a ponytail, incongruous dark eyes wide open and staring at him rather than at the camera's lens, a little snub of a nose, a serious mouth closed in a rather earnest way. Her skin was impossibly perfect, like pink damp velvet.

"Where did you go to school?" she asked. "Did you go here too?"

"Where did you go to school?" she asked. "Did you go here too?"

"No, I went to lots of different places," he said. "I moved around."

"You didn't go to the same school all the time?"

He shook his head. "Every few months, I went to a new one."

She concentrated hard. Didn't ask why. Just examined the proposition for its benefits and drawbacks.

"How could you remember where everything was? Like the bathrooms? You might forget who the teacher was. You might call her by the wrong name."

He shook his head again. "When you're young, you can remember stuff pretty well. It's when you get old that you start to forget things."

"I forget things," she said. "I forgot what my daddy looks like. He's in prison. But I think he's coming home soon."

"Yes, I think he is."

"Where did you go to school when you were six and a half like me?"

School, the center of her universe. He thought about it. When he was six and a half, the war in Vietnam was still well below its peak, but it was already big enough that his father was there or thereabouts at the time. So he figured that year would have been split between Guam and Manila. Manila, mostly, he thought, judging by his memories of the buildings and the vegetation, the places he hid out in and played around.

"The Philippines," he said.

"Is that in Texas too?" she asked.

"No, it's a bunch of islands between the Pacific and the South China Sea. Right out in the ocean, a long way from here."

"The ocean," she said, like she wasn't sure. "Is the ocean in America?"

"Is there a map on the wall in your school?"

“Yes, there is. A map of the whole world.”

“O.K., the oceans are all the blue parts.”

“There’s a lot of blue parts.”

He nodded. “That’s for sure.”

“My mom went to school in California.”

“That’ll be on the map, too. Find Texas and look to the left.”

He saw her looking down at her hands, trying to remember which was left and which was right. Then he saw her look up beyond his shoulder, and he turned to see Carmen on her way back, trapped temporarily by the sales people getting up out of their booth. She waited until they had moved to the door and cleared the aisle and then she skipped back and sat down, all in one graceful movement. She pressed close to Ellie and hugged her one-armed and tickled her and got a squeal in exchange. The waitress finished with the sales people at the register and walked over, pad and pencil at the ready.

“Three Coke floats, please,” Ellie said, loud and clear.

The waitress wrote it down.

“Coming right up, honey,” she said, and walked away.

“Is that O.K. for you?” Carmen asked.

Reacher nodded. Like the smell of elementary school, he remembered the taste of a Coke float. He’d had his first ever in a PX canteen in Berlin, in a long low Quonset hut left over from the Four Powers occupation. It had been a warm summer’s day in Europe, no air conditioning, and he remembered the heat on his skin and the bubbles in his nose.

“It’s silly,” Ellie said. “It’s not the *Coke* that floats. It’s the ice cream that floats *in* the Coke. They should call them ice cream floats.”

Reacher smiled. He recalled thinking the same sorts of things, when he was her age. Outraged puzzlement at the illogicalities of the world he was being asked to join.

“Like elementary school,” he said. “I found out that *elementary* means easy. So ‘elementary school’ means ‘easy school.’ I remember thinking, well, it seems pretty hard to me. ‘Hard school’ would be a better name.”

Ellie looked at him, seriously.

“I don’t think it’s hard,” she said. “But maybe it’s harder in the ocean.”

“Or maybe you’re smarter than me.”

She thought about it, earnestly.

“I’m smarter than some people,” she said. “Like Peggy. She’s still on the three-letter words. And she thinks you spell zoo with a Z.”

Reacher had no answer to that. He waited for Carmen to pick it up, but before she could the waitress arrived back with a tin tray with three tall glasses on it. She put them on the table with great ceremony and whispered “*Enjoy”* to Ellie and backed away. But the glasses were almost a foot tall, and the drinking straws added another six inches, and Ellie’s chin was about level with the table top, so her mouth was a long way from where it needed to be.

“You want me to hold it down?” Carmen asked her. “Or do you want to kneel up?”

Ellie thought about it. Reacher was starting to wonder if this kid ever made a quick, easy decision. He saw a little of himself in her. He had taken things too seriously. The kids in every new school had made fun of him for it. But usually only once.

“I’ll kneel up,” she said.

It was more than kneeling. She stood on the vinyl bench in a kind of crouch, with her hands planted palms-down on the table around the base of the glass, and her head ducked to the straw. As good a method as any, Reacher figured. She started sucking her drink and he turned to look at his own. The ice cream was a round greasy spoonful. He found the cola way too sweet, like it was mixed from syrup in the wrong proportions. The bubbles were huge and artificial. It tasted awful. A long way from a childhood summer’s day in Germany.

“Don’t you like it?” Ellie asked.

Her mouth was full, and she sprayed a little of the mixture onto his sleeve.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You’re making a funny face.”

“Too sweet,” he said. “It’ll rot my teeth. Yours, too.”

She came up with a huge grimace, like she was showing her teeth to a dentist.

“Doesn’t matter,” she said. “They’re all going to fall out anyway. Peggy’s got two out already.”

Then she bent back to her straw and vacuumed up the rest of the drink. She poked at the sludge in the bottom of the glass with her straw until it was liquid enough to suck.

“I’ll finish yours, too, if you want,” she said.

“No,” her mother said back. “You’ll throw up in the car.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

“No,” Carmen said again. “Now go to the bathroom, O.K.? It’s a long way home.”

“I went already,” Ellie said. “We always go at school, last thing. We line up. We have to. The bus driver hates it if we pee on the seats.”

Then she laughed delightedly.

“Ellie,” her mother said.

“Sorry, Mommy. But it’s only the boys who do that. I wouldn’t do it.”

“Go again anyway, O.K.?”

Ellie rolled her eyes theatrically and clambered over her mother’s lap and ran to the back of the diner. Reacher put a five over the check.

“Great kid,” he said.

“I think so,” Carmen said. “Well, most of the time.”

“Smart as anything.”

She nodded. “Smarter than me, that’s for sure.”

He let that one go, too. Just sat in silence and watched her eyes cloud over.

“Thanks for the sodas,” she said.

He shrugged. “My pleasure. And a new experience. I don’t think I’ve ever bought a soda for a kid before.”

“So you don’t have any of your own, obviously.”

“Never even got close.”

“No nieces or nephews? No little cousins?”

He shook his head.

“I was a kid myself,” he said. “Once upon a time, and a long time ago. Apart from what I remember about that, I don’t know too much about it.”

“Stick around a day or two and Ellie will teach you more than you ever wanted to know. As you’ve probably guessed.”

Then she looked beyond his shoulder and he heard Ellie’s footsteps behind him. The floor was old and there were obviously air pockets trapped under the buckled linoleum because her shoes made hollow slapping sounds.

“Mom, let’s *go*,” she said.

“Mr. Reacher is coming, too,” Carmen said. “He’s going to work with the horses.”

He got up out of the booth and saw her watching him.

“O.K.,” she said. “But let’s *go*.”

They pushed outside into the heat. Past the middle of the afternoon, and it was hotter than ever. The Crown Victoria was gone. They walked around to the Cadillac and Ellie climbed through to the backseat. Carmen sat for a long moment with her hand resting on the key. She closed her eyes. Then she opened them again and started the engine.

She drove back through the crossroads and past the school again and then more than sixty miles straight south. She went pretty slowly. Maybe half the speed she had used before. Ellie didn't complain. Reacher guessed she thought this was normal. He guessed Carmen never drove very fast on her way home.

They didn't pass much. There were power lines looping rhythmically between weathered poles on the left shoulder. There were windmills and oil pumps here and there in the distance, some of them working, most of them seized up and still. There were more V-8 irrigation rigs on the western side of the road, on the edges of old fields, but they were silent and rusted because the winds had scoured the earth shallow. Some places, it was cleaned right back to dry caliche ledges. Nothing much left to irrigate. The eastern side was better. There were whole square miles of mesquite, and sometimes broad patches of decent grassland running in irregular linear shapes, like there must be water underground.

Every ten or twelve miles there would be a ranch gate standing isolated by the side of the road. They were simple right-angle shapes, maybe fifteen feet wide, maybe fifteen feet high, with beaten earth tracks running through them into the distance. Some of them had names on them, made up from strips of wood nailed into the shapes of letters. Some of them had the names formed from iron, worked by hand into fancy script. Some of them had old bleached cattle skulls fixed centrally, with long horns curving outward like vulture's wings. Some of them were supplemented by old barbed wire strands running aimlessly into the middle distance, sketching the location of ancient boundaries. The wire was on wooden posts, and the posts were weathered and twisted into corkscrew shapes and looked as if they would turn to dust if you touched them.

Some of the ranch houses were visible, depending on the contours of the land. Where it was flat, Reacher could see clusters of buildings in the far distance. The

houses were two-story, mostly painted white, crouching among huddles of low barns and sheds. They had windmills out back, and satellite dishes, and they looked quiet and stunned in the heat. The sun was getting low in the west, and the outside temperature was still showing a hundred and ten.

“It’s the road, I think,” Carmen said. “It soaks up the sun all day, and gives it back later.”

Ellie had fallen asleep, sprawled across the rear seat. Her head was pillowed on the briefcase. Her cheek was touching the edges of the papers that outlined how her mother could best escape her father.

“Greer property starts here,” Carmen said. “On the left. Next track is ours, about eight miles.”

It was flat land, rising slightly on the right to a fragmented mesa about a mile away to the west. On the left, the Greers had better barbed wire than most. It looked like it might have been restrung less than fifty years ago. It ran reasonably straight into the east, enclosing patchy grassland that showed about equal parts green and brown. Miles away there was a forest of oil derricks visible against the skyline, all surrounded by tin huts and abandoned equipment.

“Greer Three,” Carmen said. “Big field. It made Sloop’s grandfather a lot of money, way back. Ran dry about forty years ago. But it’s a famous family story, about that gusher coming in. Most exciting thing that ever happened to them.”

She slowed a little more, clearly reluctant to make the final few miles. In the far distance the road rose into the boiling haze and Reacher could see the barbed wire change to an absurd picket fence. It was tight against the shoulder, like something you would see in New England, but it was painted dull red. It ran about half a mile to a ranch gate, which was also painted red, and then ran on again into the distance and out of sight. There were buildings behind the gate, much closer to the road than the ones he had seen before. There was a big old house with a two-story core and a tall chimney and sprawling one-story additions. There were low barns and sheds clustered loosely around it. There was ranch fencing enclosing arbitrary squares of territory. Everything was painted dull red, all the buildings and all the fences alike. The low orange sun blazed against them and made them glow and shimmer and split horizontally into bands of mirage.

She slowed still more where the red fence started. Coasted the last hundred yards with her foot off the gas and then turned in on a beaten dirt track running under the gate. There was a name on the gate, high above their heads, red-painted wood on red-painted wood. It said Red House. She glanced up at it as she passed through.

“Welcome to hell,” she said.

The Red House itself was the main building in a compound of four impressive structures. It had a wide planked porch with wooden columns and a swinging seat hung from chains, and beyond it eighty yards farther on was a motor barn, but she couldn’t drive down to it because a police cruiser was parked at an angle on the track, completely blocking her way. It was an old-model Chevy Caprice, painted black and white, with Echo County Sheriff on the door, where it had said something else before. Bought by the county secondhand, Reacher thought, maybe from Dallas or Houston, repainted and refurbished for easy duty out here in the sticks. It was empty and the driver’s door was standing open. The light bar on the roof was flashing red and blue, whipping colors horizontally over the porch and the whole front of the house.

“What’s this about?” Carmen said.

Then her hand went up to her mouth.

“God, he can’t be home already,” she said. “Please, no.”

“Cops wouldn’t bring him home,” Reacher said. “They don’t run a limo service.”

Ellie was waking up behind them. No more hum from the engine, no more rocking from the springs. She struggled upright and gazed out, eyes wide.

“What’s that?” she said.

“It’s the sheriff,” Carmen said.

“Why’s *he* here?” Ellie asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Why are the lights flashing?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did somebody call 911? Maybe there’s been a burglar. Maybe he wore a mask and stole something.”

She crawled through and knelt on the padded armrest between the front seats. Reacher caught the school smell again and saw delighted curiosity in her face. Then he saw it change to extreme panic.

“Maybe he stole a horse,” she said. “Maybe my pony, Mommy.”

She scrambled across Carmen’s lap and scrabbled at the door handle. Jumped out of the car and ran across the yard, as fast as her legs would carry her, her arms held stiff by her sides and her ponytail bouncing behind her.

“I don’t think anybody stole a horse,” Carmen said. “I think Sloop’s come home.”

“With the lights flashing?” Reacher said.

She unclipped her seat belt and swiveled sideways and placed her feet on the dirt of the yard. Stood up and stared toward the house, with her hands on the top of the door frame, like the door was shielding her from something. Reacher did the same, on his side. The fierce heat wrapped around him. He could hear bursts of radio chatter coming from the sheriff’s car.

“Maybe they’re looking for you,” he said. “You’ve been away overnight. Maybe they reported you missing.”

Across the Cadillac’s roof, she shook her head. “Ellie was here, and as long as they know where she is, they don’t care where I am.”

She stood still for a moment longer, and then she took a sideways step and eased the door shut behind her. Reacher did the same. Twenty feet away, the house door opened and a uniformed man stepped out onto the porch. The sheriff,

obviously. He was about sixty and overweight, with dark tanned skin and thin gray hair plastered to his head. He was walking half-backward, taking his leave of the gloom inside. He had black pants and a white uniform shirt with epaulettes and embroidered patches on the shoulders. A wide gun belt with a wooden-handled revolver secured into a holster with a leather strap. The door closed behind him and he turned toward his cruiser and stopped short when he saw Carmen. Touched his forefinger to his brow in a lazy imitation of a salute.

“Mrs. Greer,” he said, like he was suggesting something was her fault.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Folks inside will tell you,” the sheriff said. “Too damn hot for me to be repeating everything twice.”

Then his gaze skipped the roof of the Cadillac and settled on Reacher.

“And who are you?” he asked.

Reacher said nothing.

“Who are you?” the guy said again.

“I’ll tell the folks inside,” Reacher replied. “Too damn hot for me to be repeating everything twice.”

The guy gave him a long calm look, and finished with a slow nod of his head, like he’d seen it all before. He dumped himself inside his secondhand cruiser and fired it up and backed out to the road. Reacher let its dust settle on his shoes and watched Carmen drive the Cadillac down the track to the motor barn. It was a long low farm shed with no front wall, and it was painted red, like everything else. There were two pick-ups and a Jeep Cherokee in it. One of the pick-ups was recent and the other was sitting on flat tires and looked like it hadn’t been moved in a decade. Beyond the building a narrow dirt track looped off into the infinite desert distance. Carmen eased the Cadillac in next to the Jeep and walked back out into the sun. She looked small and out of place in the yard, like an orchid in a trash pile.

“So where’s the bunkhouse?” he asked.

“Stay with me,” she said. “You need to meet them guys. You need to get

"Stay with me," she said. "You need to meet them anyway. You need to get hired. You can't just show up in the bunkhouse."

"O.K.," he said.

She led him slowly to the bottom of the porch steps. She took them cautiously, one at a time. She arrived in front of the door and knocked.

"You have to knock?" Reacher asked.

She nodded.

"They never gave me a key," she said.

They waited, with Reacher a step behind her, appropriate for the hired help. He could hear footsteps inside. Then the door swung open. A guy was standing there, holding the inside handle. He looked to be in his middle twenties. He had a big square face, with the skin blotched red and white. He was bulky with frat-boy muscle turning to fat. He was wearing denim jeans and a dirty white T-shirt with the sleeves rolled tight over what was left of his biceps. He smelled of sweat and beer. He was wearing a red baseball cap backward on his head. A semicircle of forehead showed above the plastic strap. At the back, a shock of hair spilled out under the peak, exactly the same color and texture as Ellie's.

"It's you," he said, glancing at Carmen, glancing away.

"Bobby," she said.

Then his glance settled on Reacher.

"Who's your friend?"

"His name is Reacher. He's looking for work."

The guy paused.

"Well, come on in, I guess," he said. "Both of you. And close the door. It's hot."

He turned back into the gloom and Reacher saw the letter *T* on the ball cap. *Texas Rangers*, he thought. *Good ball club, but not good enough*. Carmen followed the guy three steps behind, entering her home of nearly seven years like

an invited guest. Reacher stayed close to her shoulder.

“Sloop’s brother,” she whispered to him.

He nodded. The hallway was dark inside. He could see the red paint continued everywhere, over the wooden walls, the floors, the ceilings. Most places it was worn thin or worn away completely, just leaving traces of pigment behind like a stain. There was an ancient air conditioner running somewhere in the house, forcing the temperature down maybe a couple of degrees. It ran slowly, with a patient drone and rattle. It sounded peaceful, like the slow tick of a clock. The hallway was the size of a motel suite, filled with expensive stuff, but it was all old, like they’d run out of money decades ago. Or else they’d always had so much that the thrill of spending it had worn off a generation ago. There was a huge mirror on one wall, with the ornate frame painted red. Opposite to it was a rack filled with six bolt-action hunting rifles. The mirror reflected the rack and made the hallway seem full of guns.

“What did the sheriff want?” Carmen called.

“Come inside,” Bobby called back.

We are inside, Reacher thought. But then he saw he meant “Come into the parlor.” It was a big red room at the back of the house. It had been remodeled. It must have been a kitchen once. It opened out through the original wall of the house to a replacement kitchen easily fifty years old. The parlor had the same worn paint everywhere, including all over the furniture. There was a big farmhouse table and eight wheelback chairs, all made out of pine, all painted red, all worn back to shiny wood where human contact had been made.

One of the chairs was occupied by a woman. She looked to be somewhere in her middle fifties. She was the sort of person who still dresses the same way she always did despite her advancing age. She was wearing tight jeans with a belt and a blouse with a Western fringe. She had a young woman’s hairstyle, colored a bright shade of orange and teased up off her scalp above a thin face. She looked like a twenty-year-old prematurely aged by some rare medical condition. Or by a shock. Maybe the sheriff had sat her down and given her some awkward news. She looked preoccupied and a little confused. But she showed a measure of vitality, too. A measure of authority. There was still vigor there. She looked like the part of Texas she owned, rangy and powerful, but temporarily laid low, with most of her good days behind her.

“What did the sheriff want?” Carmen asked again.

“Something happened,” the woman said, and her tone meant it wasn’t something good. Reacher saw a flicker of hope behind Carmen’s eyes. Then the room went quiet and the woman turned to look in his direction.

“His name is Reacher,” Carmen said. “He’s looking for work.”

“Where’s he from?”

Her voice was like rawhide. *I’m the boss here*, it said.

“I found him on the road,” Carmen answered.

“What can he do?”

“He’s worked with horses before. He can do blacksmithing.”

Reacher looked out of the window while she lied about his skills. He had never been closer to a horse than walking past the ceremonial stables on the older army bases that still had them. He knew in principle that a blacksmith made horseshoes, which were iron things horses had nailed to their feet. Or their hoofs. Hooves? He knew there was a charcoal brazier involved, and a bellows, and a great deal of rhythmic hammering. An anvil was required, and a trough of water. But he had never actually touched a horseshoe. He had seen them occasionally, nailed up over doors as a superstition. He knew some cultures nailed them upward, and some downward, all to achieve the same good luck. But that was all he knew about them.

“We’ll talk about him later,” the woman said. “Other things to talk about first.”

Then she remembered her manners and sketched a wave across the table.

“I’m Rusty Greer,” she said.

“Like the ballplayer?” Reacher asked.

“I was Rusty Greer before he was born,” the woman said. Then she pointed at Bobby. “You already met my boy Robert Greer. Welcome to the Red House Ranch, Mr. Reacher. Maybe we can find you work. If you’re willing and

honest."

"What did the sheriff want?" Carmen asked for the third time.

Rusty Greer turned and looked straight at her.

"Sloop's lawyer's gone missing," she said.

"What?"

"He was on his way to the federal jail to see Sloop. He never got there. State police found his car abandoned on the road, south of Abilene. Just sitting there empty, miles from anywhere, keys still in it. Situation doesn't look good."

"Al Eugene?"

"How many lawyers you think Sloop had?"

Her tone added: *you idiot*. The room went totally silent and Carmen went pale and her hand jumped to her mouth, fingers rigid and extended, covering her lips.

"Maybe the car broke down," she said.

"Cops tried it," Rusty said. "It worked just fine."

"So where is he?"

"He's gone missing. I just told you that."

"Have they looked for him?"

"Of course they have. But they can't find him."

Carmen took a deep breath. Then another.

"Does it change anything?" she asked.

"You mean, is Sloop still coming home?"

Carmen nodded weakly, like she was terribly afraid of the answer.

"Don't you worry none," Rusty said. She was smiling. "Sloop will be back here

"Don't you worry none," Rusty said. She was smiling. "Sloop will be back here Monday, just like he always was going to be. Al being missing doesn't change a thing. The sheriff made that clear. It was a done deal."

Carmen paused a long moment, with her eyes closed, and her hand on her lips. Then she forced the hand down and forced the lips into a trembling smile.

"Well, good," she said.

"Yes, good," her mother-in-law said.

Carmen nodded, vaguely. Reacher thought she was about to faint.

"What do you suppose happened to him?" she asked.

"How would I know? Some sort of trouble, I expect."

"But who would make trouble for Al?"

Rusty's smile thinned to a sneer.

"Well, take your best guess, dear," she said.

Carmen opened her eyes. "What does that mean?"

"It means, who would want to make trouble for their lawyer?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I do," Rusty said. "Somebody who buys them a big old Mercedes Benz and gets sent to jail anyhow, that's who."

"Well, who did that?"

"Anybody could have. Al Eugene takes anybody for a client. He has no *standards*. He's halfway to being plain crooked. Maybe all the way crooked, for all I know. Three-quarters of his clients are the wrong sort."

Carmen was still pale. "The wrong sort?"

"You know what I mean."

“You mean Mexican? Why don’t you just come right out and say it?”

Rusty was still smiling.

“Well, tell me different,” she said. “Some Mexican boy gets sent to jail, he doesn’t just stand up and accept his punishment like we do. No, he blames his lawyer, and he gets all his brothers and his cousins all riled up about it, and of course he’s got plenty of those come up here after him, all illegals, all *cholos*, all of them in gangs, and now you see exactly how that turns out. Just like it is down there in Mexico itself. You of all people should know what it’s like.”

“Why should I of all people? I’ve never even been to Mexico.”

Nobody replied to that. Reacher watched her, standing up shaken and proud and alone like a prisoner in the enemy camp. The room was quiet. Just the thump and click of the old air conditioner running somewhere else.

“You got an opinion here, Mr. Reacher?” Rusty Greer asked.

It felt like a left-field question in a job interview. He wished he could think of something smart to say. Some diversion. But it wouldn’t help any to start some big clumsy fight and get himself thrown off the property inside the first ten minutes.

“I’m just here to work, ma’am,” he said.

“I’d like to know your opinion, all the same.”

Just like a job interview. A character reference. Clearly she wanted exactly the right sort of person shoveling horseshit for her.

“Mr. Reacher was a cop himself,” Carmen said. “In the army.”

Rusty nodded. “So what’s your thinking, ex–army cop?”

Reacher shrugged. “Maybe there’s an innocent explanation. Maybe he had a nervous breakdown and wandered off.”

“Doesn’t sound very likely. Now I see why they made you an ex-cop.”

Silence for a long moment.

“Well, if there was trouble, maybe white folks made it,” Reacher said.

“That’s not going to be a popular view around here, son.”

“It’s not looking to be popular. It’s looking to be right or wrong. And the population of Texas is three-quarters white, therefore I figure there’s a three-in-four chance white folks were involved, assuming people are all the same as each other.”

“That’s a big assumption.”

“Not in my experience.”

Rusty bounced her gaze off the tabletop, back to Carmen.

“Well, no doubt you agree,” she said. “With your new friend here.”

Carmen took a breath.

“I never claim to be better than anyone else,” she said. “So I don’t see why I should agree I’m worse.”

The room stayed quiet.

“Well, time will tell, I guess,” Rusty said. “One or other of us is going to be eating humble pie.”

She said it *paah*. The long syllable trailed into silence.

“Now, where’s Sloop’s little girl?” she asked, with an artificial brightness in her voice, like the conversation had never happened. “You bring her back from school?”

Carmen swallowed and turned to face her. “She’s in the barn, I think. She saw the sheriff and got worried her pony had been stolen.”

“That’s ridiculous. Who would steal her damn pony?”

“She’s only a child,” Carmen said.

“[illegible]

"Well, the maid is ready to give the child its supper, so take it to the kitchen, and show Mr. Reacher to the bunkhouse on your way."

Carmen just nodded, like a servant with new instructions. Reacher followed her out of the parlor, back to the hallway. They went outside into the heat again and paused in the shadows on the porch.

"Ellie eats in the kitchen?" Reacher asked.

Carmen nodded.

"Rusty hates her," she said.

"Why? She's her granddaughter."

Carmen looked away.

"Her blood is tainted," she said. "Don't ask me to explain it. It's not rational. She hates her, is all I know."

"So why all the fuss if you took her away?"

"Because Sloop wants her here. She's his weapon against me. His instrument of torture. And his mother does what he wants."

"She make you eat in the kitchen, too?"

"No, she makes me eat with her," she said. "Because she knows I'd rather not."

He paused, at the edge of the shadow.

"You should have gotten out of here," he said. "We should be in Vegas by now."

"I was hopeful, for a second," she said. "About Al Eugene. I thought there might be a delay."

He nodded. "So was I. It would have been useful."

She nodded, tears in her eyes.

"I know," she said. "Too good to be true."

“So you should still think about running.”

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Shook her head.

“I won’t run,” she said. “I won’t be a fugitive.”

He said nothing.

“And you should have agreed with her,” she said. “About the Mexicans. I’d have understood you were bluffing. I need her to keep you around.”

“I couldn’t.”

“It was a risk.”

She led him down the steps into the sun and across the yard. Beyond the motor barn was a horse barn. That structure was red like everything else, big as an aircraft hangar, with clerestory vents in the roof. There was a big door standing a foot open. There was a strong smell coming out of it.

“I’m not much of a country guy,” he said.

“You’ll get used to it,” she said.

Behind the barn were four corrals boxed in with red fences. Two of them were covered in scrubby grass, and two of them had desert sand piled a foot thick. There were striped poles resting on oil drums to make jumping courses. Behind the corrals was another red building, long and low, with small windows high up under the eaves.

“The bunkhouse,” she said.

She stood still for a moment, lost in thought. Then she shivered in the heat and came back, all business.

“The door is around the other side,” she said. “You’ll find two guys in there, Joshua and Billy. Don’t trust either one of them. They’ve been here forever and they belong to the Greers. The maid will bring your meals down to you in about an hour, after Ellie eats, before we do.”

“O.K.,” he said.

“And Bobby will come down to check you out, sooner or later. Watch him carefully, Reacher, because he’s a snake.”

“O.K.,” he said again.

“I’ll see you later,” she said.

“You going to be all right?”

She nodded once and walked away. He watched her until she was behind the horse barn, and then he walked around and found the door into the bunkhouse.

5

The boy filled a whole new page in his notebook. The men with the telescopes called out descriptions and the exact sequence of events. The arrival of the sheriff, the return of the beaner and the kid with the new guy in tow, the kid running off to the barn, the sheriff leaving, the beaner and the new guy entering the house, a long period of nothing doing, the emergence of the beaner and the new guy onto the porch, their walk together down toward the bunkhouse, her return alone.

“Who is he?” the boy asked.

“Hell should we know?” one of the men replied.

Very tall, heavy, not neatly dressed, shirt and pants, can’t tell how old, the boy wrote. Then he added: *Not a wrangler, wrong shoes. Trouble*?

The grade fell away behind the bunkhouse and made it a two-story building. The lower floor had huge sliding doors, frozen open on broken tracks. There was another pick-up in there, and a couple of green tractors. At the far end to the right was a wooden staircase without a handrail leading upward through a rectangular hole in the ceiling. Reacher spent a minute on the ground floor looking at the vehicles. The pick-up had a gun rack in the rear window. The air

was hot and heavy and smelled of gasoline and motor oil.

Then he used the staircase and came out on the second level. All the interior carpentry was painted red, walls, floor and roof beams alike. The air was hotter still up there, and stale. No air conditioning, and not much ventilation. There was a closed-off area at the far end, which he guessed was the bathroom. Apart from that the whole of the floor was one big open space, with sixteen beds facing each other eight to a side, with simple iron frames and thin striped mattresses and bedside cabinets and footlockers.

The two beds nearest the bathroom were occupied. Each had a small, wiry man lying half-dressed on top of the sheets. Both men wore blue jeans and fancy tooled boots and no shirts. Both had their hands folded behind their heads. They both turned toward the staircase as Reacher stepped up inside the room. They both unlaced their nearer arms to get a better look at him.

Reacher had done four years at West Point, and then thirteen years in the service, so he had a total seventeen years' experience of walking into a new dormitory and being stared at by its occupants. It wasn't a sensation that bothered him. There was a technique involved in handling it. An etiquette. The way to do it was to just walk in, select an unoccupied bed, and say absolutely nothing at all. Make somebody else speak first. That way, you could judge their disposition before you were forced to reveal your own.

He walked to a bed two places away from the head of the staircase, against the north wall, which he judged would be cooler than the south. In the past, in the army, he would have had a heavy canvas kit bag to dump on the bed as a symbol of possession. The kit bag would be stenciled with his name and his rank, and the number of restencilings on it would offer a rough guide to his biography. Kit bags saved a lot of talking time. But the best he could do in this new situation was take his folding toothbrush from his pocket and prop it on the bedside cabinet. As a substitute gesture, it lacked physical impact. But it made the same point. It said *I live here now, same as you do. You got any kind of a comment to make about that*?

Both men kept on staring at him, saying nothing. Lying down, it was hard to judge their physiques with any degree of certainty, but they were both small. Maybe five-six or -seven each, maybe a hundred and fifty pounds. But they were wiry and muscular, like middleweight boxers. They had farmers' tans, deep brown on their arms and their faces and their necks, and milky white where T-

shirts had covered their bodies. They had random knobs and old swellings here and there on their ribs and arms and collarbones. Reacher had seen marks like that before. Carmen had one. He had one or two himself. They were where old fractures had set and healed.

He walked past the two men to the bathroom. It had a door, but it was a communal facility inside, four of everything with no interior partitioning. Four toilets, four sinks, four shower heads in a single elongated stall. It was reasonably clean, and it smelled of warm water and cheap soap, like the two guys had recently showered, maybe ready for Friday evening off. There was a high window with a clogged insect screen and no glass. By standing tall he could see past the corner of the horse barn all the way up to the house. He could see half of the porch and a sliver of the front door.

He came back into the dormitory room. One of the guys had hauled himself upright and was sitting with his head turned, watching the bathroom door. His back was as pale as his front, and it had more healed fractures showing through the skin. The ribs, the right scapula. Either this guy spent a lot of time getting run over by trucks, or else he was a retired rodeo rider who had passed his career a little ways from the top of his trade.

“Storm coming,” the guy said.

“What I heard,” Reacher said.

“Inevitable, with a temperature like this.”

Reacher said nothing.

“You hired on?” the guy asked.

“I guess,” Reacher said.

“So you’ll be working for us.”

Reacher said nothing.

“I’m Billy,” the guy said.

The other guy moved up on his elbows.

“Josh,” he said.

Reacher nodded to them both.

“I’m Reacher,” he said. “Pleased to meet you.”

“You’ll do the scut work for us,” the guy called Billy said. “Shoveling shit and toting bales.”

“Whatever.”

“Because you sure don’t look like much of a horse rider to me.”

“I don’t?”

Billy shook his head. “Too tall. Too heavy. Center of gravity way up there. No, my guess is you’re not much of a horse rider at all.”

“The Mexican woman bring you in?” Josh asked.

“Mrs. Greer,” Reacher said.

“Mrs. Greer is Rusty,” Billy said. “She didn’t bring you in.”

“Mrs. Carmen Greer,” Reacher said.

Billy said nothing. The guy called Josh just smiled.

“We’re heading out after supper,” Billy said. “Bar, couple hours south of here. You could join us. Call it a get-to-know-you type of thing.”

Reacher shook his head. “Maybe some other time, when I’ve earned something. I like to pay my own way, situation like that.”

Billy thought about it and nodded.

“That’s a righteous attitude,” he said. “Maybe you’ll fit right in.”

The guy called Josh just smiled.

Reacher walked back to his bed and stretched himself out, keeping still, fighting the heat. He stared up at the red-painted rafters for a minute, and then he closed

the heat. He stared up at the red-painted rafters for a minute, and then he closed his eyes.

The maid brought supper forty minutes later. She was a middle-aged white woman who could have been a relative of Billy's. She greeted him with familiarity. Maybe a cousin. Certainly she looked a little like him. Sounded like him. The same genes in there somewhere. She greeted Josh with ease and Reacher himself with coolness. Supper was a pail of pork and beans, which she served into metal bowls with a ladle taken from her apron pocket. She handed out forks and spoons, and empty metal cups.

"Water in the bathroom faucet," she said, for Reacher's benefit.

Then she went back down the stairs and Reacher turned his attention to the food. It was the first he had seen all day. He sat on his bed with the bowl on his knees and ate with the spoon. The beans were dark and soupy and mixed with a generous spoonful of molasses. The pork was tender and the fat was crisp. It must have been fried separately and mixed with the beans afterward.

"Hey, Reacher," Billy called over. "So what do you think?"

"Good enough for me," he said.

"Bullshit," Josh said. "More than a hundred degrees all day, and she brings us hot food? I showered already and now I'm sweating like a pig again."

"It's free," Billy said.

"Bullshit, it's free," Josh said back. "It's a part of our wages."

Reacher ignored them. Bitching about the food was a staple of dormitory life. And this food wasn't bad. Better than some he'd eaten. Better than what came out of most barracks cookhouses. He dumped his empty bowl on the cabinet next to his toothbrush and lay back down and felt his stomach go to work on the sugars and the fats. Across the room Billy and Josh finished up and wiped their mouths with their forearms and took clean shirts out of their footlockers. Shrugged them on and buttoned them on the run and combed through their hair

with their fingertips.

“See you later,” Billy called.

They clattered down the stairs and a moment later Reacher heard the sound of a gasoline engine starting up directly below. The pick-up, he guessed. He heard it back out through the doors and drive away. He stepped into the bathroom and saw it come around the corner and wind around the horse barn and bounce across the yard past the house.

He walked back through the dormitory and piled the three used bowls on top of each other, with the silverware in the topmost. Threaded the three cup handles onto his forefinger and walked down the stairs and outside. The sun was nearly below the horizon but the heat hadn’t backed off at all. The air was impossibly hot. Almost suffocating. And it was getting humid. A warm damp breeze was coming in from somewhere. He walked up past the corrals, past the barn, through the yard. He skirted around the porch and looked for the kitchen door. Found it and knocked. The maid opened up.

“I brought these back,” he said.

He held up the bowls and the cups.

“Well, that’s kind of you,” she said. “But I’d have come for them.”

“Long walk,” he said. “Hot night.”

She nodded.

“I appreciate it,” she said. “You had enough?”

“Plenty,” he said. “It was very good.”

She shrugged, a little bashful. “Just cowboy food.”

She took the used dishes from him and carried them inside.

“Thanks again,” she called.

It sounded like a dismissal. So he turned away and walked out to the road, with the low sun full on his face. He stopped under the wooden arch. Ahead of him to

the west was nothing at all, just the empty eroded mesa he had seen on the way in. On the right, to the north, was a road sixty miles long with a few buildings at the end of it. A neighbor fifteen miles away. On the left, to the south, he had no idea. A bar two hours away, Billy had said. Could be a hundred miles. He turned around. To the east, Greer land for a stretch, and then somebody else's, and then somebody else's again, he guessed. Dry holes and dusty caliche and nothing much more all the way back to Austin, four hundred miles away.

New guy comes to gate and stares right at us, the boy wrote. *Then looks all around. Knows we're here? Trouble*?

He closed his book again and pressed himself tighter to the ground.

"Reacher," a voice called.

Reacher squinted right and saw Bobby Greer in the shadows on the porch. He was sitting in the swing set. Same denims, same dirty T-shirt. Same backward ball cap.

"Come here," he called.

Reacher paused a beat. Then he walked back past the kitchen and stopped at the bottom of the porch steps.

"I want a horse," Bobby said. "The big mare. Saddle her up and bring her out."

Reacher paused again. "You want that now?"

"When do you think? I want an evening ride."

Reacher said nothing.

"And we need a demonstration," Bobby said.

“Of what?”

“You want to hire on, you need to show us you know what you’re doing.”

Reacher paused again, longer.

“O.K.,” he said.

“Five minutes,” Bobby said.

He stood up and headed back inside the house. Closed the door. Reacher stood for a moment with the heat on his back and then headed down to the barn. Headed for the big door. The one with the bad smell coming out of it. A demonstration? *You’re in deep shit now*, he thought. *More ways than one*.

There was a light switch inside the door, in a metal box screwed to the siding. He flicked it on and weak yellow bulbs lit the enormous space. The floor was beaten earth, and there was dirty straw everywhere. The center of the barn was divided into horse stalls, back to back, with a perimeter track lined with floor-to-ceiling hay bales inside the outer walls. He circled around the stalls. A total of five were occupied. Five horses. They were all tethered to the walls of their stalls with complicated rope constructions that fitted neatly over their heads.

He took a closer look at each of them. One of them was very small. A pony. Ellie’s, presumably. *O.K., strike that*. Four to go. Two were slightly bigger than the other two. He bent down low and peered upward at them, one at a time. In principle he knew what a mare should look like, underneath. It should be easy enough to spot one. But in practice, it wasn’t easy. The stalls were dark and the tails obscured the details. In the end he decided the first one he looked at wasn’t a mare. Wasn’t a stallion, either. Some parts were missing. *A gelding. Try the next*. He shuffled along and looked at the next. *O.K., that’s a mare. Good*. The next one was a mare, too. The last one, another gelding.

He stepped back to where he could see both of the mares at once. They were huge shiny brown animals, huffing through their noses, moving slightly, making dull *clop* sounds with their feet on the straw. *No, their hoofs. Hooves*? Their necks were turned so they could watch him with one eye each. Which one was bigger? The one on the left, he decided. A little taller, a little heavier, a little wider in the shoulders. *O.K., that’s the big mare. So far, so good*.

Now, the saddle. Each stall had a kind of a thick post coming horizontally out of the outside wall, right next to the gate, with a whole bunch of equipment piled on it. A saddle for sure, but also a lot of complicated straps and blankets and metal items. The straps are the reins, he guessed. The metal thing must be the bit. It goes in the horse's mouth. *The bit between her teeth, right*? He lifted the saddle off the post. It was very heavy. He carried it balanced on his left forearm. *Felt good*. Just like a regular cowboy. *Roy Rogers, eat your heart out*.

He stood in front of the stall gate. The big mare watched him with one eye. Her lips folded back like thick rolls of rubber, showing big square teeth underneath. They were yellow. *O.K., think. First principles*. Teeth like that, this thing is not a carnivore. It's not a biting animal. Well, it might try to nick you a little, but it's not a lion or a tiger. It eats grass. It's an herbivore. Herbivores are generally timid. Like antelope or wildebeests out there on the sweeping plains of Africa. So this thing's defense mechanism is to run away, not to attack. It gets scared, and it runs. But it's a herd animal, too. So it's looking for a leader. It will submit to a show of authority. *So be firm, but don't scare it*.

He opened the gate. The horse moved. Its ears went back and its head went up. Then down. Up and down, against the rope. It moved its back feet and swung its huge rear end toward him.

"Hey," he said, loud and clear and firm.

It kept on coming. He touched it on the side. It kept on coming. *Don't get behind it. Don't let it kick you*. That much, he knew. What was the phrase? *Like being kicked by a horse*? Had to mean something.

"Stand still," he said.

It was swinging sideways toward him. He met its flank with his right shoulder. Gave it a good solid shove, like he was aiming to bust down a door. The horse quieted. Stood still, huffing gently. He smiled. *I'm the boss, O.K.*? He put the back of his right hand up near its nose. It was something he had seen at the movies. *You rub the back of your hand on its nose, and it gets to know you. Some smell thing*. The skin on its nose felt soft and dry. Its breath was strong and hot. Its lips peeled back again and its tongue came out. It was huge and wet.

"O.K., good girl," he whispered.

He lifted the saddle two-handed and dumped it down on her back. Pushed and pulled at it until it felt solid. It wasn't easy. *Was it the right way around*? Had to be. It was shaped a little like a chair. There was a definite front and a back. There were broad straps hanging down on either side. Two long, two short. Two had buckles, two had holes. What were *they* for? To hold the saddle on, presumably. You bring the far ones around and buckle them at the side, up underneath where the rider's thigh would be. He ducked down and tried to grab the far straps, underneath the horse's belly. He could barely reach them. This was one wide animal, that was for damn sure. He stretched and caught the end of one strap in his fingertips and the saddle slipped sideways.

"Shit," he breathed.

He straightened up and leveled the saddle again. Ducked down and grabbed for the far straps. The horse moved and put them way out of his reach.

"*Shit*," he said again.

He stepped closer, crowding the horse against the wall. It didn't like that, and it leaned on him. He weighed two hundred and fifty pounds. The horse weighed half a ton. He staggered backward. The saddle slipped. The horse stopped moving. He straightened the saddle again and kept his right hand on it while he groped for the straps with his left.

"Not like *that*," a voice called from way above him.

He spun around and looked up. Ellie was lying on top of the stack of hay bales, up near the roof, her chin on her hands, looking down at him.

"You need the *blanket* first," she said.

"What blanket?"

"The saddle cloth," she said.

The horse moved again, crowding hard against him. He shoved it back. Its head came around and it looked at him. He looked back at it. It had huge dark eyes. Long eyelashes. He glared at it. *I'm not afraid of you, pal. Stand still or I'll shove you again*.

"Ellie, does anybody know you're in here?" he called

"Ellie, does anybody know you're in here?" he called.

She shook her head, solemnly.

"I'm hiding," she said. "I'm good at hiding."

"But does anybody know you hide in here?"

"I think my mommy knows I do sometimes, but the Greers don't."

"You know how to do this horse stuff?"

"Of course I do. I can do my pony all by myself."

"So help me out here, will you? Come and do this one for me."

"It's easy," she said.

"Just show me, O.K.?"

She stayed still for a second, making her usual lengthy decision, and then she scrambled down the pile of bales and jumped to the ground and joined him in the stall.

"Take the saddle off again," she said.

She took a cloth off of the equipment post and shook it out and threw it up over the mare's back. She was too short and Reacher had to straighten it one-handed.

"Now put the saddle on it," she said.

He dropped the saddle on top of it. Ellie ducked underneath the horse's belly and caught the straps. She barely needed to stoop. She threaded the ends together and pulled.

"You do it," she said. "They're stiff."

He lined the buckles up and pulled hard.

"Not too tight," Ellie said. "Not yet. Wait for her to swell up."

"She's going to *swell up*?"

Ellie nodded, gravely. “They don’t like it. They swell their stomachs up to try to stop you. But they can’t hold it, so they come down again.”

He watched the horse’s stomach. It was already the size of an oil drum. Then it blew out, bigger and bigger, fighting the straps. Then it subsided again. There was a long sigh of air through its nose. It shuffled around and gave up.

“Now do them tight,” Ellie said.

He pulled them as tight as he could. The mare shuffled in place. Ellie had the reins in her hands, shaking them into some kind of coherent shape.

“Take the rope off of her,” she said. “Just pull it down.”

He pulled the rope down. The mare’s ears folded forward and it slid down over them, over her nose, and off.

“Now hold this up.” She handed him a tangle of straps. “It’s called the bridle.”

He turned it in his hands, until the shape made sense. He held it against the horse’s head until it was in the right position. He tapped the metal part against the mare’s lips. *The bit*. She kept her mouth firmly closed. He tried again. No result.

“How, Ellie?” he asked.

“Put your thumb in.”

“My thumb? Where?”

“Where her teeth stop. At the side. There’s a hole.”

He traced the ball of his thumb sideways along the length of the mare’s lips. He could feel the teeth passing underneath, one by one, like he was counting them. Then they stopped, and there was just gum.

“Poke it in,” Ellie said.

“My *thumb*?”

She nodded. He pushed, and the lips parted, and his thumb slipped into a warm,

gluey, greasy socket. And sure enough, the mare opened her mouth.

“Quick, put the bit in,” Ellie said.

He pushed the metal into the mouth. The mare used her massive tongue to get it comfortable, like she was helping him, too.

“Now pull the bridle up and buckle it.”

He eased the leather straps up over the ears and found the buckles. There were three of them. One fastened flat against the slab of cheekbone. One went over her nose. The third was hanging down under her neck.

“Not too tight,” Ellie said. “She’s got to breathe.”

He saw a worn mark on the strap, which he guessed indicated the usual length.

“Now loop the reins up over the horn.”

There was a long strap coming off of the ends of the bit in a loop. He guessed that was the rein. And he guessed the horn was the upright thing at the front end of the saddle. Like a handle, for holding on with. Ellie was busy pulling the stirrups down into place, walking right under the mare’s belly from one side to the other.

“Now lift me up,” she said. “I need to check everything.”

He held her under the arms and lifted her into the saddle. She felt tiny and weighed nothing at all. The horse was way too wide for her, and her legs came out more or less straight on each side. She lay down forward and stretched her arms out and checked all the buckles. Redid some of them. Tucked the loose ends away. Pulled the mane hair out neatly from under the straps. Gripped the saddle between her legs and jerked herself from side to side, checking for loose movement.

“It’s O.K.,” she said. “You did very good.”

She put her arms out to him and he lifted her down. She was hot and damp.

“Now just lead her out,” she said. “Hold her at the side of her mouth. If she won’t come, give her a yank.”

“Thanks a million, kid,” he said. “Now go hide again, O.K.?”

She scrambled back up the stack of hay bales and he tugged at a strap coming off a metal ring at the side of the mouth. The mare didn’t move. He clicked his tongue and pulled again. The mare lurched forward. He jumped ahead and she got herself into some kind of a rhythm behind him. *Clop*, *clop*, *clop*. He led her out of the stall and pulled her around the corner and headed for the door. Let her come ahead to his shoulder and stepped with her into the yard. She walked easily. He adjusted to her pace. His arm was neatly bent at the elbow and her head was rocking up and down a little and her shoulder was brushing gently against his. He walked her across the yard like he’d done it every day of his life. *Roy Rogers, eat your damn heart out*.

Bobby Greer was back on the porch steps, waiting. The mare walked right up to him and stopped. Reacher held the little leather strap while Bobby checked all of the same things Ellie had. He nodded.

“Not bad,” he said.

Reacher said nothing.

“But you took longer than I expected.”

Reacher shrugged. “I’m new to them. I always find it’s better to go slow, the first time. Until they’re familiar with me.”

Bobby nodded again. “You surprise me. I would have bet the farm the nearest you’d ever gotten to a horse was watching the Preakness on cable.”

“The what?”

“The Preakness. It’s a horse race.”

“I know it is. I was kidding.”

“So maybe it’s a double surprise,” Bobby said. “Maybe my sister-in-law was actually telling the truth for once.”

Reacher glanced at him. “Why wouldn’t she be?”

“I don’t know why. But she hardly ever does. You need to bear that in mind.”

Reacher said nothing. Just waited.

“You can go now,” Bobby said. “I’ll put her away when I’m through.”

Reacher nodded and walked away. He heard a crunch of leather behind him, which he assumed was Bobby getting up into the saddle. But he didn’t look back. He just walked through the yard, down past the barn, past the corrals, and around the corner of the bunkhouse to the foot of the stairway. He intended to go straight up and take a long shower to get rid of the terrible animal smell that was clinging to him. But when he got up to the second story, he found Carmen sitting on his bed with a set of folded sheets on her knees. She was still in her cotton dress, and the sheets glowed white against the skin of her bare legs.

“I got you these,” she said. “From the linen closet in the bathroom. You’re going to need them. I didn’t know if you would realize where they were.”

He stopped at the head of the stairs, one foot inside the room, the other foot still on the last tread.

“Carmen, this is crazy,” he said. “You should get out, right now. They’re going to realize I’m a phony. I’m not going to last a day. I might not even be here on Monday.”

“I’ve been thinking,” she said. “All the way through supper.”

“About what?”

“About Al Eugene. Suppose it’s about whoever Sloop is going to rat out? Suppose they woke up and took some action? Suppose they grabbed Al to stop the deal?”

“Can’t be. Why would they wait? They’d have done it a month ago.”

“Yes, but suppose everybody *thought* it was.”

He stepped all the way into the room.

“I don’t follow,” he said, although he did.

“Suppose you made Sloop disappear,” she said. “The exact same way somebody made Al disappear. They’d think it was all connected somehow. They wouldn’t suspect you. You’d be totally in the clear.”

He shook his head. “We’ve been through this. I’m not an assassin.”

She went quiet. Looked down at the sheets in her lap and began picking at a seam. The sheets were frayed and old. Cast-offs from the big house, Reacher thought. Maybe Rusty and her dead husband had slept under those same sheets. Maybe Bobby had. Maybe Sloop had. Maybe Sloop and Carmen, together.

“You should just get out, right now,” he said again.

“I can’t.”

“You should stay somewhere inside of Texas, just temporarily. Fight it, legally. You’d get custody, in the circumstances.”

“I don’t have any money. It could cost a hundred thousand dollars.”

“Carmen, you have to do *something*.”

She nodded.

“I know what I’m going to do,” she said. “I’m going to take a beating, Monday night. Then Tuesday morning, I’m going to come find you, wherever you are. Then you’ll *see*, and maybe you’ll change your mind.”

He said nothing. She angled her face up into the fading light from the high windows. Her hair tumbled back on her shoulders.

“Take a good look,” she said. “Come close.”

He stepped nearer.

“I’ll be all bruised,” she said. “Maybe my nose will be broken. Maybe my lips will be split. Maybe I’ll have teeth missing.”

He said nothing.

“Touch my skin,” she said. “Feel it.”

He put the back of his forefinger on her cheek. Her skin was soft and smooth, like warm silk. He traced the wide arch of her cheekbone.

“Remember this,” she said. “Compare it to what you feel Tuesday morning. Maybe it’ll change your mind.”

He took his finger away. Maybe it *would* change his mind. That was what she was counting on, and that was what he was afraid of. The difference between cold blood and hot blood. It was a big difference. For him, a crucial difference.

“Hold me,” she said. “I can’t remember how it feels to be held.”

He sat down next to her and took her in his arms. She slid hers around his waist and buried her head in his chest.

“I’m scared,” she said.

They sat like that for twenty minutes. Maybe thirty. Reacher lost all track of time. She was warm and fragrant, breathing steadily. Then she pulled away and stood up, with a bleak expression on her face.

“I have to go find Ellie,” she said. “It’s her bedtime.”

“She’s in the barn. She showed me how to put all that crap on the horse.”

She nodded. “She’s a good kid.”

“That’s for sure,” he said. “Saved my bacon.”

She handed the sheets to him.

“You want to come riding tomorrow?” she asked.

“I don’t know how.”

“I’ll teach you.”

“C[illegible]”

"Could be a long process."

"It can't be. We have to get up on the mesa."

"Why?"

She looked away.

"Something you have to teach *me*," she said. "In case Tuesday doesn't change your mind. I need to know how to work my gun properly."

He said nothing.

"You can't deny me the right to defend myself," she said.

He said nothing. She went quietly down the stairs, leaving him sitting on the bed holding the folded sheets on his knees, exactly like he had found her.

He made up his bed. The old sheets were thin and worn, which he figured was O.K., in the circumstances. The temperature was still somewhere in the high nineties. Middle of the night, it might cool off to eighty-five. He wasn't going to be looking for a lot of warmth.

He went back down the stairs and stepped outside. Looking east, there was a black horizon. He stepped around the bunkhouse corner and faced the sunset in the west. It flamed against the red buildings. He stood still and watched it happen. This far south, the sun would drop away pretty quickly. Like a giant red ball. It flared briefly against the rim of the mesa and then disappeared and the sky lit up red above it.

He heard the sound of footsteps in the dust ahead of him. Squinted into the sunset glare and saw Ellie walking down toward him. Little short steps, stiff arms, the blue halter dress specked with pieces of straw. Her hair was lit from behind and glowed red and gold like an angel.

"I came to say good night," she said.

He remembered times in the past, being entertained in family quarters on a base somewhere, the melancholy notes of taps sounding faintly in the distance, polite army kids saying a formal farewell to their fathers' brother officers. He remembered it well. You shook their little hands, and off they went. He smiled at her.

"O.K., good night, Ellie," he said.

"I like you," she said.

"Well, I like you, too," he said.

"Are you hot?"

"Very."

"There'll be a storm soon."

"Everybody tells me that."

"I'm glad you're my mommy's friend."

He said nothing. Just put out his hand. She looked at it.

"You're supposed to give me a good-night kiss," she said.

"Am I?"

"Of *course* you are."

"O.K.," he said.

Her face was about level with his thigh. He started to bend down.

"No, pick me up," she said.

She held up her arms, more or less vertical. He paused a beat and then swung her in the air and settled her in the crook of his elbow. Kissed her cheek, gently.

"Good night," he said again.

"Carry me." she said. "I'm tired."

He carried her past the corrals, past the horse barn, across the yard to the house. Carmen was waiting on the porch, leaning on a column, watching them approach.

“There you are,” she said.

“Mommy, I want Mr. Reacher to come in and say good night,” Ellie said.

“Well, I don’t know if he can.”

“I only work here,” Reacher said. “I don’t live here.”

“Nobody will *know*,” Ellie said. “Come in through the kitchen. There’s only the maid in there. She works here, too. And she’s allowed in the house.”

Carmen stood there, unsure.

“Mommy, *please*,” Ellie said.

“Maybe if we all go in together,” Carmen said.

“Through the kitchen,” Ellie said. Then she changed her voice to a fierce whisper that was probably louder than talking. “We don’t want the *Greers* to see us.”

Then she giggled, and rocked in Reacher’s arms, and ducked her face down into his neck. Carmen glanced at him, a question in her face. He shrugged back. *What’s the worst thing can happen*? He lowered Ellie to the ground and she took her mother’s hand. They walked together to the kitchen door and Carmen pushed it open.

Sunset, the boy wrote, and noted the time. The two men crawled backward from the lip of the gulch and raised themselves up on their knees and stretched. *Off duty*, the boy wrote, and noted the time. Then they all three scrabbled around on their knees and pulled the rocks off the corners of the tarp hiding their pick-up.

Folded it as neatly as they could without standing up and stowed it in the load bed. Repacked the cooler and collapsed the telescopes and climbed three-in-a-row into the cab. Drove out of the far side of the gulch and headed due west across the hardpan toward the red horizon.

Inside the kitchen the maid was loading a huge dishwashing machine. It was made of green enamel and had probably been the very latest thing around the time man first walked on the moon. She looked up and said nothing. Just kept on stacking plates. Reacher saw the three bowls he had brought her. They were rinsed and ready.

“This way,” Ellie whispered.

She led them through a door that led to a back hallway. There was no window, and the air was suffocating. There were plain wooden stairs on one side, painted red, worn back to the wood in crescent shapes on each tread. She led them upward. The stairs creaked under Reacher’s weight.

They finished inside a kind of closet on the second floor. Ellie pushed the door open and crossed a hallway and made a right into a narrow corridor. Everything was wooden, the walls, the floor, the ceiling. Everything was painted red. Ellie’s room was at the end of the corridor. It was maybe twelve feet square, and red. And very hot. It faced south and must have been baking in the sun all afternoon. The drapes were closed, and had been all day, Reacher guessed, offering some meager protection from the heat.

“We’ll go get washed up,” Carmen said. “Mr. Reacher will wait here, O.K.?”

Ellie watched until she was sure he was staying. He sat down on the end of the bed to confirm it. To help her reach her conclusion. She turned slowly and followed her mother out to the bathroom.

The bed was narrow, maybe thirty inches wide. And short, appropriate for a kid. It had cotton sheets printed with small colored animals of uncertain genus. There was a night table, and a bookcase, and a small armoire. This furniture looked reasonably new. It was made of blond wood, first bleached and then hand-

painted with cheerful designs. It looked nice. Probably bought in a cute little boutique and hauled over from Austin, he thought. Or maybe all the way from Santa Fe. Some of the bookshelves held books, and the others held stuffed animals all jumbled together and crammed into the spaces.

He could hear the old air conditioner running. It thumped and rattled, patiently. It was louder here. Must be mounted in the attic, he thought. It made a soothing sound. But it didn't do much about cooling the house. Up there in the trapped air of the second floor, it felt like a hundred and twenty degrees.

Ellie and Carmen came back into the room. Ellie was suddenly quiet and bashful, maybe because she was in her pajamas. They looked like regular cotton shorts and a T-shirt, but they were printed with little things that might have been rabbits. Her hair was damp and her skin was pink. The back of one hand was wedged in her mouth. She climbed onto the bed and curled up near the pillow, using about half the available length of the mattress, close to him but careful not to touch him.

"O.K., good night, kid," he said. "Sleep well."

"Kiss me," she said.

He paused a second, and then he bent down and kissed her forehead. It was warm and damp and smelled of soap. She curled up more and snuggled down into the pillow.

"Thank you for being our friend," she said.

He stood up and stepped toward the door. Glanced at Carmen. *Did you tell her to say that? Or is it for real*?

"Can you find your way back down?" Carmen asked him.

He nodded.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said.

She stayed in Ellie's bedroom and he found the closet with the back stairs in it. He went down to the inside hallway and through the kitchen. The maid was gone. The old dishwasher was humming away to itself. He stepped out into the night and paused in the darkness and silence of the yard. It was hotter than ever.

He stepped toward the gate. Ahead of him the sunset had gone. The horizon was black. There was pressure in the air. A hundred miles away to the southwest he could see heat lightning flickering. Faint sheets and bolts of dry electricity discharging randomly, like a gigantic celestial camera taking pictures. He looked straight up. No rain. No clouds. He turned around and caught gleams of white in the darkness off to his right. A T-shirt. A face. A semicircle of forehead showing through the back of a ball cap. Bobby Greer, again.

“Bobby,” he said. “Enjoy your ride?”

Bobby ignored the inquiry. “I was waiting for you.”

“Why?”

“Just making sure you came back out again.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“You tell me. Why would you go in there at all? In the first place? All three of you, like a little family.”

“You saw us?”

Bobby nodded. “I see everything.”

“Everything?” Reacher repeated.

“Everything I need to.”

Reacher shrugged.

“I kissed the kid good night,” he said. “You got a problem with that?”

Bobby was quiet for a beat.

“Let me walk you back to the bunkhouse,” he said. “I need to talk to you.”

He didn’t talk any on the way down through the yard. He just walked. Reacher kept pace and looked ahead at the night sky in the east. It was vast and black and filled with stars. Apart from dim windows in some of the Greer buildings there

was absolute pitch darkness everywhere. It threw the stars into vivid relief, impossibly tiny and numerous points of light dusting backward through billions of cubic miles of space. Reacher liked peering out into the universe. He liked thinking about it. He used it for perspective. He was just a tiny insignificant speck briefly sparked to life in the middle of nowhere. So what really mattered? Maybe nothing at all. So maybe he should just go ahead and bust Sloop Greer's head and have done with it. *Why not*? In the context of the whole universe, how was that so very different from not busting it at all?

"My brother had a problem," Bobby said, awkwardly. "I guess you know that."

"I heard he cheated on his taxes," Reacher said.

Bobby nodded in the dark. "IRS snoops are everywhere."

"Is that how they found him? Snooping?"

"Well, how else would they?" Bobby asked.

He went quiet. Walked ahead a couple of paces.

"Anyway, Sloop went to jail," he said.

Reacher nodded. "Getting out Monday, I heard."

"That's right. So he's not going to be too happy finding you here, kissing his kid, getting friendly with his wife."

Reacher shrugged as he walked. "I'm just here to work."

"Right, as a wrangler. Not as a nursemaid."

"I get time off, right?"

"But you need to be careful how you spend it."

Reacher smiled. "You mean I need to know my place?"

"Right," Bobby said. "And your place ain't alongside my brother's wife, or getting cozy with his kid."

“A man can’t choose his friends?”

“Sloop ain’t going to be happy, he gets home and finds some outsider has chosen his wife and kid for his friends.”

Reacher stopped walking. Stood still in the dark. “Thing is, Bobby, why would I give a rat’s ass what makes your brother happy?”

Bobby stopped, too. “Because we’re a family. Things get talked about. You need to get that through your head. Or you won’t work here too long. You could get run right out of here.”

“You think?”

“Yeah, I think.”

Reacher smiled again. “Who you going to call? The sheriff with the secondhand car? Guy like that could get a heart attack, just thinking about it.”

Bobby shook his head. “West Texas, we look after things personally. It’s a tradition. Never had too big of a law enforcement thing around here, so we kind of accustomed ourselves.”

Reacher took a step closer.

“So you going to do it?” he said. “You want to do it now?”

Bobby said nothing. Reacher nodded.

“Maybe you’d prefer to set the maid on me,” he said. “Maybe she’ll come after me with a skillet.”

“Josh and Billy will do what they’re told.”

“The little guys? The maid might be better. Or you, even.”

“Josh and Billy get in the ring with bulls that weigh a ton and a half. They ain’t going to be too worried about you.”

Reacher started walking again. “Whatever, Bobby. I only said good night to the kid. No reason to start World War Three over it. She’s starved for company. So

is her mother. What can I do about it?"

"You can get smart about it, is what," Bobby said. "I told you before, she lies about everything. So whatever big story she's been telling you, chances are it's bullshit. So don't go making a fool out of yourself, falling for it. You wouldn't be the first."

They turned the corner beyond the corrals and headed for the bunkhouse door.

"What does that mean?" Reacher asked.

"How dumb do you think I am? She's gone all day every day for the best part of a month, gone all night as often as she can get away with it, leaving the kid here for us to tend to. And she's gone where? Some motel up in Pecos, is where, screwing the brains out of whatever new guy she can get to believe her bullshit stories about how her husband doesn't understand her. Which is entirely her business, but it's *my* business if she thinks she can go ahead and bring the guy back here. Two days before her husband gets home? Passing you off as some stranger looking for ranch work? What kind of crap is that?"

"What did you mean, I wouldn't be the first?"

"Exactly what I said. Talk to Josh and Billy about it. They ran him off."

Reacher said nothing. Bobby smiled at him.

"Don't believe her," he said. "There are things she doesn't tell you, and what she does tell you is mostly lies."

"Why doesn't she have a key to the door?"

"She had a key to the damn door. She lost it, is all. It's never locked, anyway. Why the hell would it be locked? We're sixty miles from the nearest crossroads."

"So why does she have to knock?"

"She doesn't have to knock. She could walk right in. But she puts on a big thing about how we exclude her. But it's all bullshit. Like, how do we exclude her? Sloop *married* her, didn't he?"

Reacher said nothing.

“So you work if you want to,” Bobby said. “But stay away from her and the kid. And I’m saying that for your sake, O.K.?”

“Can I ask you something?” Reacher said.

“What?”

“Did you know your hat is on backward?”

“My what?”

“Your cap,” Reacher said. “It’s on backward. I wondered if you knew that. Or if maybe it just kind of slipped around, accidentally.”

Bobby stared at him.

“I like it this way,” he said.

Reacher nodded again.

“Well, I guess it keeps the sun off of your neck,” he said. “Keeps it from getting any redder.”

“You watch your mouth,” Bobby said. “You stay away from my brother’s family, and watch your damn mouth.”

Then he turned in the dark and headed back up to the house. Reacher stood and watched him walk away. Beyond him the lightning still danced on the far southwest horizon. Then he disappeared behind the barn and Reacher listened to the sound his boots made in the dust, until it faded away to nothing.

6

Reacher went right to bed, even though it was still early. *Sleep when you can, so you won't need to when you can't.* That was his rule. He had never worked regular hours. To him, there was no real difference between a Tuesday and a Sunday, or a Monday and a Friday, or night and day. He was happy to sleep twelve hours, and then work the next thirty-six. And if he didn't have to work the next thirty-six, then he'd sleep twelve hours again, and again, as often as he could, until something else cropped up.

The bed was short and the mattress was lumpy. The air in the room had settled like a thick hot soup on the thin sheet covering him. He could hear insects outside, clicking and whining loudly. There might have been a billion of them, separately audible if he concentrated hard enough, merging together into a single scream if he didn't. The sound of the night, far from anywhere. There were lonely guttural cries from cougars and coyotes way off in the distance. The horses heard them too, and he sensed restless movement over in the barn, quieting after a moment, starting up again after the next ghostly, plaintive yelp. He heard rustling air and imagined he felt changes in pressure as colonies of bats took flight. He imagined he could feel the beat of their leathery wings. He fell asleep watching the stars through a small window high above him.

The road from Pecos to El Paso is more than two hundred miles long, and is dotted on both sides with occasional clumps of motels and gas stations and fast food outlets. The killing crew drove an hour west, which took them seventy miles, and then stopped at the second place they saw. That was the woman's habit. Not the first place. Always the second place. And always arrive very late. It was close to a superstition, but she rationalized it as good security.

The second place had a gas station big enough for eighteen-wheelers to use and a two-story motel and a twenty-four-hour diner. The tall fair man went into the motel office and paid cash for two rooms. They weren't adjoining. One was on the first floor far from the office and the second was upstairs, halfway down the

the first floor far from the office and the second was upstairs, halfway down the row. The woman took the upstairs room.

“Get some sleep,” she told her partners. “We’ve still got work to do.”

Reacher heard Josh and Billy come back at two in the morning. The air was still hot. The insects were still loud. He heard the pick-up engine a couple of miles south, growing nearer and louder, slowing, turning in at the gate. He heard the squeal of springs as it bounced across the yard. He heard it drive into the shed beneath him, and he heard the motor switch off. Then there was just tinkling and clicking as it cooled, and footsteps on the stairs. They were loud and clumsy. He stayed as deeply asleep as he could and tracked their sounds past him, over to the bathroom, back to their bunks. Their bedsprings creaked as they threw themselves down. Then there was nothing but the insects and the wet rhythmic breathing of men who had worked hard all day and drunk hard all night. It was a sound he was familiar with. He had spent seventeen years in dormitories, off and on.

The insect noise was completely gone when he woke. So were the stars. The high window showed luminous streaks of dawn in their place. Maybe six in the morning, he thought, summer, this far south. It was already hot. He lifted his arm and checked his watch. Ten past six, Saturday morning. He thought about Jodie, in London. It was ten past twelve in London. Six hours ahead. She would have been up for ages. Probably at a museum, looking at pictures. Maybe thinking about lunch, in some English tearoom. Then he thought about Carmen Greer, over in the main house, forty-eight hours away from waking up on the day Sloop came home. And then Ellie, maybe hot and restless on her tiny cot, innocently barreling on toward the day her little life would change again.

He threw back the crumpled sheet and walked naked to the bathroom, carrying his clothes balled in his hand. Josh and Billy were still deep asleep. They were both still dressed. Josh still had his boots on. They were snoring half-heartedly, sprawled out and inert. There was a vague smell of old beer in the air. The smell

of hangovers.

He set the shower going warm until he had soaped the sweat off his body and then turned it to cold to wake himself up. The cold water was nearly as warm as the hot. He imagined it pumping out of the baked ground, picking up heat all the way. He filled a sink with water and soaked his clothes. It was a trick he'd picked up as a kid, long ago, somewhere out in the Pacific, from sentries on the midday watch. If you dress in wet clothes, you've got a built-in air conditioner that keeps you cool until they dry out. An evaporative principle, like a swamp cooler. He dressed with the clammy cotton snagging against his skin and headed down the stairs and outside into the dawn. The sun was over the horizon ahead of him. The sky was arching purple overhead. No trace of cloud. The dust under his feet was still hot from yesterday.

The watchers assembled piecemeal, like they had five times before. It was a familiar routine by then. One of the men drove the pick-up to the boy's place and found him outside and waiting. Then they drove together to the second man's place, where they found that the routine had changed.

"He just called me," the second man explained. "Some different plan. We got to go to someplace up on the Coyanosa Draw for new instructions, face to face."

"Face to face with who?" the first man said. "Not him, right?"

"No, some new people we're going to be working with."

The boy said nothing. The first man just shrugged.

"O.K. with me," he said.

"Plus, we're going to get paid," the second man said.

"Even better," the first man said.

The second man squeezed onto the bench seat and closed his door and the pick-up turned and headed north.

Reacher walked around the corner of the bunkhouse and past the corrals to the barn. He could hear no sound at all. The whole place felt stunned by the heat. He was suddenly curious about the horses. Did they lie down to sleep? He ducked in the big door and found the answer was no, they didn't. They were sleeping standing up, heads bowed, knees locked against their weight. The big old mare he'd tussled with the night before smelled him and opened an eye. Looked at him blankly and moved a front foot listlessly and closed her eye again.

He glanced around the barn, rehearsing the work he might be expected to perform. The horses would need feeding, presumably. So there must be a food store someplace. What did they eat? Hay, he guessed. There were bales of it all over the place. Or was that straw, for the floor? He found a separate corner room stacked with sacks of some kind of food supplement. Big waxed-paper bags, from some specialist feed supplier up in San Angelo. So probably the horses got mostly hay, with some of the supplement to make up the vitamins. They'd need water, too. There was a faucet in one corner, with a long hose attached to it. A trough in each stall.

He came out of the barn and walked up the track to the house. Peered in through the kitchen window. Nobody in there. No activity. It looked the same as it had when he left the night before. He walked on toward the road. Heard the front door open behind him and turned to see Bobby Greer stepping out on the porch. He was wearing the same T-shirt and the same ball cap, but now it was the right way around. The peak was low over his eyes. He was carrying a rifle in his right hand. One of the pieces from the rack in the hallway. A fine .22 bolt-action, modern and in good condition. He put it up on his shoulder and stopped short.

"I was on my way to get you up," he said. "I need a driver."

"Why?" Reacher asked. "Where are you going?"

"Hunting," Bobby said. "In the pick-up."

"You can't drive?"

"Of course I can drive. But it takes two. You drive while I shoot."

“You shoot from a truck?”

“I’ll show you,” Bobby said.

He walked across to the motor barn. Stopped next to the newer pick-up. It had a roll bar built into the load bed.

“You drive,” he said. “Out on the range. I’m here in back, leaning on the bar. Gives me a three-hundred-sixty-degree field of fire.”

“While we’re moving?”

“That’s the skill of it. It’s fun. Sloop invented it. He was real good.”

“What are you hunting?”

“Armadillo,” Bobby said. He stepped sideways and pointed down the track into the desert. It was a narrow dirt road scuffed into the landscape, meandering left and right to avoid rock formations, taking the path of least resistance.

“Hunting country,” he said. “It’s pretty good, south of here. And they’re all out there, good fat ones. ’Dillo chili, can’t beat it for lunch.”

Reacher said nothing.

“You never ate armadillo?” Bobby asked.

Reacher shook his head.

“Good eating,” Bobby said. “Back when my granddaddy was a boy, Depression times, it was about all the eating there was. Texas turkey, they called it. Or Hoover hog. Kept people alive. Now the tree-huggers have got it protected. But if it’s on our land, it’s ours to shoot. That’s the way I see it.”

“I don’t think so,” Reacher said. “I don’t like hunting.”

“Why not? It’s a challenge.”

“For you, maybe,” Reacher said. “I already know I’m smarter than an armadillo.”

“You work here, Reacher. You’ll do what you’re told.”

“We need to discuss some formalities, before I work here.”

“Like what?”

“Like wages.”

“Two hundred a week,” Bobby said. “Bed and three squares a day thrown in.”

Reacher said nothing.

“O.K.?” Bobby asked. “You wanted work, right? Or is it just Carmen you want?”

Reacher shrugged. *Two hundred a week*? It was a long time since he’d worked for two hundred a week. But then, he wasn’t there for the money.

“O.K.,” he said.

“And you’ll do whatever Josh and Billy tell you to.”

“O.K.,” Reacher said again. “But I won’t take you hunting. Not now, not ever. Call it a matter of conscience.”

Bobby was quiet for a long moment. “I’ll find ways to keep you away from her, you know. Every day, I’ll find something.”

“I’ll be in the barn,” Reacher said, and walked away.

Ellie brought his breakfast to him there. She was wearing a miniature set of blue denim dungarees. Her hair was wet and loose. She was carrying a plate of scrambled eggs. She had silverware in her breast pocket, upright, like pens. She was concentrating on remembering a message.

“My mommy says, don’t forget the riding lesson,” she recited. “She wants you to meet her here in the barn after lunch.”

Then she ran back toward the house without another word. He sat down on a bale and ate the eggs. Took the empty plate back to the kitchen and headed down to the bunkhouse. Josh and Billy weren't there to tell him to do anything. *Suits me*, he thought. He didn't go looking for them. Just lay down and dozed in the heat.

The Coyanosa Draw was a watercourse with a bed wide enough to carry the runoff from the Davis Mountains to the Pecos River, which took it to the Rio Grande all the way down on the border with Mexico. But runoff was seasonal and unreliable, so the region was sparsely populated. There were abandoned farmsteads built close to the dry riverbed, far from each other, far from anywhere. One of them had an old swaybacked house baked gray by the sun. In front of it was an empty barn. The barn had no doors, just an open wall facing west toward the house. The way the buildings were set in the landscape, the interior of the barn was invisible except from the yard right in front of it.

The Crown Victoria was waiting inside the barn, its engine idling to keep the air going. The barn had an exterior staircase leading up to a hayloft, with a small platform outside the door at the top. The woman was out in the heat, up on the platform, where she could survey the meandering approach road. She saw the watchers' pick-up two miles away. It was traveling fast and kicking up a plume of dust. She waited until she was sure it was unaccompanied and then she turned and walked down the stairs. Signaled to the others.

They got out of the car and stood waiting in the heat. They heard the pick-up on the road, and then it pulled around the corner of the barn and slowed in the yard. They directed it with hand signals, like traffic cops. They pointed into the barn. One of them led the truck on foot, gesturing like the guy on the airport apron. He brought it tight up to the rear wall, gesturing all the time, and then he gave a thumbs-up to halt it. He stepped alongside the driver's window and his partner stepped to the passenger door.

The driver shut off the motor and relaxed. Human nature. The end of a fast drive to a secret rendezvous, the intrigue of new instructions, the prospect of a big payday. He wound down his window. On the passenger's side, the second man did the same thing. Then they both died, shot in the side of the head with nine-

millimeter bullets. The boy in the middle lived exactly one second longer, both sides of his face splattered with blood and brain tissue, his notebook clutched in his hands. Then the small dark man leaned in and shot him twice in the chest. The woman pushed him out of the way and adjusted the window winders on both doors to leave the glass cracked open about an inch. An inch would let insects in and keep scavengers out. Insects would help with decomposition, but scavengers could drag body parts away, which would risk visibility.

Reacher dozed a couple of hours before Josh and Billy got back. They didn't give him any instructions. They just got cleaned up for lunch. They told him they were invited inside the house to eat. And he wasn't, because he had refused to drive.

"Bobby told me you ran some guy off," he said.

Joshua just smiled.

"What guy?" Billy said.

"Some guy came down here with Carmen."

"The Mexican?"

"Some friend of hers."

Billy shook his head. "Don't know anything about it. We never ran any guy off. What are we, cops?"

"You're the cop," Joshua said.

"Am I?"

Joshua nodded. "Bobby said so. You were a military cop."

"You been discussing me?"

Joshua shrugged and went quiet.

“Got to go,” Billy said.

Twenty minutes later Carmen herself brought his armadillo lunch to him. It was in a covered dish and smelled strongly of chili. She left, nervous and in a hurry, without saying a word. He tried the meal. The meat was halfway between sweet and ordinary. It had been shredded and chopped and mixed with beans and two-alarm sauce from a bottle. Then slightly overdone in a warm oven. He had eaten worse, and he was hungry, which helped. He took his time, and then carried the dish back to the kitchen. Bobby was standing out on the porch steps, like a sentry.

“Horses need more feed supplement,” he called. “You’ll go with Josh and Billy to pick it up. After siesta. Get as many bags as fit in the truck.”

Reacher nodded and walked on to the kitchen. Gave the used dish to the maid, and thanked her for the meal. Then he walked down to the barn and went inside and sat on a bale of straw to wait. The horses turned around in their stalls to watch him do it. They were patient and listless in the heat. One of them was chewing slowly. There were hay stalks stuck to its lips.

Carmen came in ten minutes later. She had changed into faded blue jeans and a checked cotton shirt with no sleeves. She was carrying a straw hat and her pocketbook. She looked tiny and afraid.

“Bobby doesn’t know you called the IRS,” he said. “He thinks it was random snooping. So maybe Sloop does, too.”

She shook her head. “Sloop knows.”

“How?”

She shrugged. “Actually, he doesn’t *know*. But he convinced himself it had to be me. He was looking for somebody to blame, and who else is there? No evidence or anything, but as it happens he’s right. Ironic, isn’t it?”

“But he didn’t tell Bobby.”

“He wouldn’t. He’s too stubborn to agree with them. They hate me, he hates me, he keeps it a secret, they keep it a secret. From him, I mean. They make sure I know it.”

know it.

“You should get out. You’ve got forty-eight hours.”

She nodded. “Forty-eight hours exactly, I think. They’ll let him out at seven in the morning. They’ll drive all night to be there for him. It’s about seven hours. So he’ll be back home this time on Monday. Just after lunch.”

“So get out, right now.”

“I can’t.”

“You should,” he said. “This place is impossible. It’s like the outside world doesn’t exist.”

She smiled, bitterly. “Tell me about it. I’ve lived here nearly seven years. My whole adult life, give or take.”

She hung her hat and her pocketbook on a nail in the wall. Did all the saddling work herself, quickly and efficiently. She was lithe and deft. The slim muscles in her arms bunched and relaxed as she lifted the saddles. Her fingers were precise with the buckles. She readied two horses in a quarter of the time he had taken to do one.

“You’re pretty good at this,” he said.

“*Gracias*, *señor*,” she said. “I get a lot of practice.”

“So how can they believe you keep falling off, regular as clockwork?”

“They think I’m clumsy.”

He watched her lead his horse out of its stall. It was one of the geldings. She was tiny beside it. In the jeans, he could have spanned her waist with his hand.

“You sure don’t look clumsy,” he said.

She shrugged. “People believe what they need to.”

He took the reins from her. The horse huffed through its nose and shifted its feet. Moved its head up and down, up and down. His hand went with it.

“Walk him out,” she said.

“Shouldn’t we have leather pants? And riding gloves?”

“Are you kidding? We never wear that stuff here. It’s way too hot.”

He waited for her. Her horse was the smaller mare. She wedged her hat on her head and took her pocketbook off the nail and put it in a saddlebag. Then she followed him, leading her mare confidently out into the yard, into the heat and the sun.

“O.K., like this,” she said. She stood on the mare’s left and put her left foot in the stirrup. Gripped the horn with her left hand and bounced twice on her right leg and jacked herself smoothly into the saddle. He tried it the same way. Put his left foot in the stirrup, grasped the horn, put all his weight on the stirrup foot and straightened his leg and pulled with his hand. Leaned his weight forward and right and suddenly he was up there in the seat. The horse felt very wide, and he was very high in the air. About the same as riding on an armored personnel carrier.

“Put your right foot in,” she said.

He jammed his foot into the other stirrup and squirmed around until he was as comfortable as he was ever going to get. The horse waited patiently.

“Now bunch the reins on the horn, in your left hand.”

That part was easy. It was just a question of imitating the movies. He let his right hand swing free, like he was carrying a Winchester repeater or a coil of rope.

“O.K., now just relax. And kick gently with your heels.”

He kicked once and the horse lurched into a walk. He used his left hand on the horn to keep himself steady. After a couple of paces he began to understand the rhythm. The horse was moving him left and right and forward and back with every alternate step. He held tight to the horn and used pressure from his feet to keep his body still.

“Good,” she said. “Now I’ll go in front and he’ll follow. He’s pretty docile.”

I would be, too, he thought, *a hundred ten degrees and two hundred fifty pounds on my back*. Carmen clicked her tongue and kicked her heels and her horse moved smoothly around his and led the way through the yard and past the house. She swayed easily in the saddle, the muscles in her thighs bunching and flexing as she kept her balance. Her hat was down over her eyes. Her left hand held the reins and her right was hanging loose at her side. He caught the blue flash of the fake diamond in the sun.

She led him out under the gate to the road and straight across without looking or stopping. He glanced left and right, south and north, and saw nothing at all except heat shimmer and distant silver mirages. On the far side of the road was a step about a foot high onto the limestone ledge. He leaned forward and let the horse climb it underneath him. Then the rock rose gently into the middle distance, reaching maybe fifty feet of elevation in the best part of a mile. There were deep fissures running east-west and washed-out holes the size of shell craters. The horses picked their way between them. They seemed pretty sure on their feet. So far, he hadn't had to do any conscious steering. Which he was happy about, because he wasn't exactly sure how to.

"Watch for rattlesnakes," Carmen called.

"Great," he called back.

"Horses get scared by anything that moves. They'll spook and run. If that happens, just hang on tight and haul on the reins."

"Great," he said again.

There were scrubby plants rooting desperately in cracks in the rock. There were smaller holes, two or three feet across, some of them with undercut sides. *Just right for a snake*, he thought. He watched them carefully at first. Then he gave it up, because the shadows were too harsh to see anything. And the saddle was starting to wear on him.

"How far are we going?" he called.

She turned, like she had been waiting for the question.

"We need to get over the rise," she said. "Down into the gulches."

The limestone smoothed out into broader unbroken shelves and she slowed to let

The limestone smoothed out into broader unbroken shelves and she slowed to let his horse move up alongside hers. But it stayed just short of level, which kept him behind her. Kept him from seeing her face.

“Bobby told me you had a key,” he said.

“Did he?”

“He said you lost it.”

“No, that’s not true. They never gave me one.”

He said nothing.

“They made a big point of not giving me one,” she said. “Like it was a symbol.”

“So he was lying?”

She nodded, away from him. “I told you, don’t believe anything he says.”

“He said the door’s never locked, anyway.”

“Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn’t.”

“He told me you don’t have to knock, either.”

“That’s a lie, too,” she said. “Since Sloop’s been gone, if I don’t knock, they run and grab a rifle. Then they go, *oh sorry, but strangers prowling around the house make us nervous*. Like a big pretend show.”

He said nothing.

“Bobby’s a liar, Reacher,” she said. “I told you that.”

“I guess he is. Because he also told me you brought some other guy down here, and he got Josh and Billy to run him off. But Josh and Billy didn’t know anything about any guy.”

She was quiet for a long moment.

“No, that was true,” she said. “I met a man up in Pecos, about a year ago. We had an affair. At first just at his place up there. But he wanted more.”

“So you brought him here?”

“It was his idea. He thought he could get work, and be close to me. I thought it was crazy, but I went along with it. That’s where I got the idea to ask you to come. Because it actually worked for a spell. Two or three weeks. Then Bobby caught us.”

“And what happened?”

“That was the end of it. My friend left.”

“So why would Josh and Billy deny it to me?”

“Maybe it wasn’t Josh and Billy who ran him off. Maybe they didn’t know about it. Maybe Bobby did it himself. My friend wasn’t as big as you. He was a schoolteacher, out of work.”

“And he just disappeared?”

“I saw him again, just once, back in Pecos. He was scared. Wouldn’t talk to me.”

“Did Bobby tell Sloop?”

“He promised he wouldn’t. We had a deal.”

“What kind of a deal?”

She went quiet again. Just rode on, sitting slackly on the swaying horse.

“The usual kind,” she said. “If I’d do something for him, he’d keep quiet.”

“What kind of something?”

She paused again.

“Something I really don’t want to tell you about,” she said.

“I see.”

“Yes, you see.”

“And did he keep quiet?”

“I really have no idea. He made me do it twice. It was disgusting. *He’s* disgusting. But he promised faithfully. But he’s a liar, so I’m assuming he told Sloop anyway. On one of his brotherly visits. I always knew it was a lose-lose gamble, but what could I do? What choice did I have?”

“Bobby figures that’s why I’m here. He thinks we’re having an affair, too.”

She nodded. “That would be my guess. He doesn’t know Sloop hits me. Even if he did, he wouldn’t expect me to do anything about it.”

Reacher was quiet for a spell. Another twenty yards, thirty, at the slow patient pace of a walking horse.

“You need to get out,” he said. “How many times do you have to hear it?”

“I won’t run,” she answered.

They reached the top of the rise and she made a small sound and her horse stopped walking. His stopped, too, at her shoulder. They were about fifty feet above the plain. Ahead of them, to the west, the caliche sloped gently down again, pocked by dry gulches the size of ballparks. Behind them, to the east, the red house and the other buildings in the compound were spread out a mile away, flat on the baked land like a model. The road ran like a gray ribbon, north and south. Behind the tiny motor barn the dirt track wandered south and east through the desert, like a scar on burned and pockmarked skin. The air was dry and unnaturally clear all the way to both horizons, where it broke up into haze. The heat was a nightmare. The sun was fearsome. Reacher could feel his face burning.

“Take care as we go down,” Carmen said. “Stay balanced.”

She moved off ahead of him, letting her horse find its own way down the incline. He kicked with his heels and followed her. He lost the rhythm as his horse stepped short and he started bouncing uncomfortably.

“Follow me,” she called.

She was moving to the right, toward a dry gulch with a flat floor, all stone and sand. He started trying to figure which rein he should pull on, but his horse

said. He started trying to figure which rein he should pull on, but his horse turned anyway. Its feet crunched on gravel and slipped occasionally. Then it stepped right down into the gulch, which jerked him violently backward and forward. Ahead of him Carmen was slipping out of the saddle. Then she was standing on the ground, stretching, waiting for him. His horse stopped next to hers and he shook his right foot free of the stirrup and got off by doing the exact opposite of what had got him on a half hour before.

“So what do you think?” she asked.

“Well, I know why John Wayne walked funny.”

She smiled briefly and led both horses together to the rim of the gulch and heaved a large stone over the free ends of both sets of reins. He could hear absolute silence, nothing at all behind the buzz and shimmer of the heat. She lifted the flap of her saddlebag and took out her pocketbook. Zipped it open and slipped her hand in and came out with a small chromium handgun.

“You promised you’d teach me,” she said.

“Wait,” he said.

“What?”

He said nothing. Stepped left, stepped right, crouched down, stood tall. Stared at the floor of the gulch, moving around, using the shadows from the sun to help him.

“What?” she said again.

“Somebody’s been here,” he said. “There are tracks. Three people, a vehicle driving in from the west.”

“Tracks?” she said. “Where?”

He pointed. “Tire marks. Some kind of a truck. Stopped here. Three people, crawled up to the edge on their knees.”

He put himself where the tracks ended at the rim of the gulch. Lay down on the hot grit and hauled himself forward on his elbows. Raised his head.

“Somebody was watching the house,” he said.

"Somebody was watching the house," he said.

"How do you know?"

"Nothing else to see from here."

She knelt alongside him, the chromium pistol in her hand.

"It's too far away," she said.

"Must have used field glasses. Telescopes, even."

"Are you sure?"

"You ever see reflections? The sun on glass? In the mornings, when the sun was in the east?"

She shuddered.

"No," she said. "Never."

"Tracks are fresh," he said. "Not more than a day or two old."

She shuddered again.

"Sloop," she said. "He thinks I'm going to take Ellie. Now I know he's getting out. He's having me watched."

Reacher stood up and walked back to the center of the bowl.

"Look at the tire tracks," he said. "They were here four or five times."

He pointed down. There were several overlapping sets of tracks in a complex network. At least four, maybe five. The tire treads were clearly pressed into the powdered sand. There was a lot of detail. The outside shoulder of the front right tire was nearly bald.

"But they're not here today," Carmen said. "Why not?"

"I don't know," Reacher said.

Carmen looked away. Held out the gun to him.

“Please show me how to use this,” she said.

He moved his gaze from the tracks in the sand and looked at the gun. It was a Lorcin L-22 automatic, two-and-a-half-inch barrel, chrome frame, with plastic molded grips made to look like pink mother-of-pearl. Made in Mira Loma, California, not too long ago, and probably never used since it left the factory.

“Is it a good one?” she asked.

“How much did you pay for it?”

“Over eighty dollars.”

“Where?”

“In a gun store up in Pecos.”

“Is it legal?”

She nodded. “I did all the proper paperwork. Is it any good?”

“I guess,” he said. “As good as you’ll get for eighty bucks, anyway.”

“The man in the store said it was ideal.”

“For what?”

“For a lady. I didn’t tell him why I needed it.”

He hefted it in his hand. It was tiny, but reasonably solid. Not light, not heavy. Not heavy enough to be loaded, anyway.

“Where are the bullets?” he asked.

She stepped back toward the horses. Took a small box out of her bag. Came back and handed it to him. It was neatly packed with tiny .22 shells. Maybe fifty of them.

“Show me how to load it,” she said.

He shook his head.

“You should leave it out here,” he said. “Just dump it and forget about it.”

“But why?”

“Because this whole thing is crazy. Guns are dangerous, Carmen. You shouldn’t keep one around Ellie. There might be an accident.”

“I’ll be very careful. And the house is full of guns anyway.”

“Rifles are different. She’s too small to reach the trigger and have it pointing at herself simultaneously.”

“I keep it hidden. She hasn’t found it yet.”

“Only a matter of time.”

She shook her head.

“My decision,” she said. “She’s my daughter.”

He said nothing.

“She won’t find it,” she said. “I keep it by the bed, and she doesn’t come in there.”

“What happens to her if you decide to use it?”

She nodded. “I know. I think about that all the time. I just hope she’s too young to really understand. And when she’s old enough, maybe she’ll see it was the lesser of two evils.”

“No, what *happens* to her? There and then? When you’re in jail?”

“They don’t send you to jail for self-defense.”

“Who says it’s self-defense?”

“You *know* it would be self-defense.”

“Doesn’t matter what I know. I’m not the sheriff, I’m not the DA, I’m not the

judge and jury."

She went quiet.

"Think about it, Carmen," he said. "They'll arrest you, you'll be charged with first-degree homicide. You've got no bail money. You've got no money for a lawyer either, so you'll get a public defender. You'll be arraigned, and you'll go to trial. Could be six or nine months down the road. Could be a year. Then let's say everything goes exactly your way from that point on. The public defender makes out it's self-defense, the jury buys it, the judge apologizes that a wronged woman has been put through all of that, and you're back on the street. But that's a year from now. At least. What's Ellie been doing all that time?"

She said nothing.

"She'll have spent a year with Rusty," he said. "On her own. Because that's where the court would leave her. The grandmother? Ideal solution."

"Not when they understood what the Greers are like."

"O.K., so partway through the year Family Services will arrive and haul her off to some foster home. Is that what you want for her?"

She winced. "Rusty would send her there anyway. She'd refuse to keep her, if Sloop wasn't around anymore."

"So leave the gun out here in the desert. It's not a good idea."

He handed it back to her. She took it and cradled it in her palms, like it was a precious object. She tumbled it from one hand to another, like a child's game. The fake pearl grips flashed in the sun.

"No," she said. "I want to learn to use it. For self-confidence. And that's a decision that's mine to make. You can't decide for me."

He was quiet for a beat. Then he shrugged.

"O.K.," he said. "Your life, your kid, your decision. But guns are serious business. So pay attention."

She passed it back. He laid it flat on his left palm. It reached from the ball of his

She passed it back. He laid it flat on his left palm. It reached from the ball of his thumb to the middle knuckle of his middle finger.

“Two warnings,” he said. “This is a very, very short barrel. See that?” He traced his right index finger from the chamber to the muzzle. “Two and a half inches, is all. Did they explain that at the store?”

She nodded. “The guy said it would fit real easy in my bag.”

“It makes it a very inaccurate weapon,” he said. “The longer the barrel, the straighter it shoots. That’s why rifles are three feet long. If you’re going to use this thing, you need to get very, very close, O.K.? Inches away would be best. Right next to the target. *Touching* the target if you can. You try to use this thing across a room, you’ll miss by miles.”

“O.K.,” she said.

“Second warning.” He dug a bullet out of the box and held it up. “This thing is tiny. And slow. The pointy part is the bullet, and the rest of it is the powder in the shell case. Not a very big bullet, and not very much powder behind it. So it’s not necessarily going to do a lot of damage. Worse than a bee sting, but one shot isn’t going to be enough. So you need to get real close, and you need to keep on pulling the trigger until the gun is empty.”

“O.K.,” she said again.

“Now watch.”

He clicked out the magazine and fed nine bullets into it. Clicked the magazine back in and jacked the first shell into the breech. Took out the magazine again and refilled the empty spot at the bottom. Clicked it back in and cocked the gun and left the safety catch on.

“Cocked and locked,” he said. “You do two things. Push the safety catch, and pull the trigger ten times. It’ll fire ten times before it’s empty, because there’s one already in the mechanism and nine more in the magazine.”

He handed the gun to her.

“Don’t point it at me,” he said. “Never point a loaded gun at anything you don’t *definitely* want to kill.”

She took it and held it away from him, cautiously.

“Try it,” he told her. “The safety, and the trigger.”

She used her left hand to unlatch the safety. Then she pointed it in her right and closed her eyes and pulled the trigger. The gun twisted in her grip and pointed down. The blast of the shot sounded quiet, out there in the emptiness. A chip of rock and a spurt of dust kicked off the floor ten feet away. There was a metallic ricochet *whang* and a muted ring as the shell case ejected and the horses shuffled in place and then silence closed in again.

“Well, it works,” she said.

“Put the safety back on,” he said.

She clicked the catch and he turned to look at the horses. He didn’t want them to run. Didn’t want to spend time chasing them in the heat. But they were happy enough, standing quietly, watching warily. He turned back and undid his top button and slipped his shirt off over his head. Walked fifteen feet south and laid the shirt on the rim of the gulch, hanging it down and spreading it out to represent a man’s torso. He walked back and stood behind her.

“Now shoot my shirt,” he said. “You always aim for the body, because it’s the biggest target, and the most vulnerable.”

She raised the gun, and then lowered it again.

“I can’t do this,” she said. “You don’t want holes in your shirt.”

“I figure there isn’t much of a risk,” he said. “Try it.”

She forgot to release the safety catch. Just pulled on the unyielding trigger. Twice, puzzled why it wouldn’t work. Then she remembered and clicked it off. Pointed the gun and closed her eyes and fired. Reacher guessed she missed by twenty feet, high and wide.

“Keep your eyes open,” he said. “Pretend you’re mad at the shirt, you’re standing there pointing your finger right at it, like you’re yelling.”

She kept her eyes open. Squared her shoulders and pointed with her right arm held level. She fired and missed again, maybe six feet to the left, maybe a little

field level. She fired and missed again, maybe six feet to the left, maybe a little low.

“Let me try,” he said.

She passed him the gun. It was tiny in his hand. The trigger guard was almost too small to fit his finger. He closed one eye and sighted in.

“I’m aiming for where the pocket was,” he said.

He fired a double-tap, two shots in quick succession, with his hand rock-steady. The first hit the shirt in the armpit opposite the torn pocket. The second hit centrally but low down. He relaxed his stance and handed the gun back.

“Your turn again,” he said.

She fired three more, all of them hopeless misses. High to the right, wide to the left. The last hit the dirt, maybe seven feet short of the target. She stared at the shirt and lowered the gun, disappointed.

“So what have you learned?” he asked.

“I need to get close,” she said.

“Damn right,” he said. “And it’s not entirely your fault. A short-barrel handgun is a close-up weapon. See what I did? I missed by twelve inches, from fifteen feet. One bullet went left, and the other went down. They didn’t even miss consistently. And I can shoot. I won competitions for pistol shooting in the army. Couple of years, I was the best there was.”

“O.K.,” she said.

He took the gun from her and squatted in the dust and reloaded it. One up the spout and nine in the magazine. He cocked it and locked it and laid it on the ground.

“Leave it there,” he said. “Unless you’re very, very sure. Could you do it?”

“I think so,” she said.

“Thinking so isn’t enough. You’ve got to *know* so. You’ve got to be prepared to

get real close, jam it into his gut, and fire ten times. If you don't, or if you hesitate, he'll take it away from you, maybe turn it on you, maybe fire wildly and hit Ellie running in from her room."

She nodded, quietly. "Last resort."

"Believe it. You pull the gun, from that point on, it's all or nothing."

She nodded again.

"Your decision," he said. "But I suggest you leave it there."

She stood still for a long, long time. Then she bent down and picked up the gun. Slipped it back into her bag. He walked over and retrieved his shirt and slipped it over his head. Neither bullet hole showed. One was under his arm, and the other tucked in below the waistband of his pants. Then he tracked around the gulch and picked up all eight spent shell cases. It was an old habit, and good housekeeping. He jingled them together in his hand like small change and put them in his trouser pocket.

They talked about fear on the ride home. Carmen was quiet on the way back up the rise, and she stopped again at the peak. The Red House compound stretched below them in the distant haze, and she just sat and looked down at it, both hands clasped on the horn of her saddle, saying nothing, a faraway look in her eyes. Reacher's horse stopped as usual slightly behind hers, so he got the same view, but framed by the curve of her neck and her shoulder.

"Do you ever get afraid?" she asked.

"No," he said.

She was quiet again for a spell.

"But how is that possible?" she asked.

He looked at the sky. "It's something I learned, when I was a little boy."

“How?”

He looked at the ground. “I had a brother, older than me. So he was always ahead. But I wanted to be doing the same stuff as him. He had scary comics, and anywhere we had American television he’d be watching it. So I looked at the same comics and watched the same shows. There was one show about space adventures. I don’t remember what it was called. We watched it in black-and-white somewhere. Maybe in Europe. They had a spaceship that looked like a little submarine with spider legs. They would land it somewhere and get out and go exploring. I remember one night they got chased by this scary creature. It was hairy, like an ape. Like Bigfoot. Long hairy arms and a big snarl. It chased them back to the spaceship, and they jumped in and slammed the hatch shut just as it was climbing in after them.”

“And you were scared?”

He nodded, even though he was behind her. “I was about four, I think. I was terrified. That night I was certain the thing was under my bed. I had this high old bed, and I knew the thing was living under it. It was going to come out and get me. I could just about feel its paw reaching up for me. I couldn’t sleep. If I went to sleep, it would come out and get me for sure. So I stayed awake for hours. I would call for my dad, but when he came in, I was too ashamed to tell him. It went on like that for days and days.”

“And what happened?”

“I got mad. Not at myself for being afraid, because as far as I was concerned the thing was totally real and I *should* be afraid. I got mad at the thing for *making* me afraid. For threatening me. One night I just kind of exploded with fury. I yelled *O.K., come out and try it! Just damn well try it! I’ll beat the shit right out of you*! I faced it down. I turned the fear into aggression.”

“And that worked?”

“I’ve never been scared since. It’s a habit. Those space explorers shouldn’t have turned and run, Carmen. They should have stood there and faced the creature down. They should have stood and fought. You see something scary, you should stand up and step *toward* it, not away from it. Instinctively, reflexively, in a raging fury.”

“Is that what you do?”

“Always.”

“Is it what I should do? With Sloop?”

“I think it’s what everybody should do.”

She was quiet for a moment. Just staring down at the house, and then lifting her eyes to the horizon beyond it. She clicked her tongue, and both horses moved off together, down the long slow slope toward the road. She shifted in the saddle to keep her balance. Reacher imitated her posture and stayed safely aboard. But not comfortably. He figured horseback riding would be one of the things he tried once and didn’t repeat.

“So what did Bobby say?” she asked. “About us?”

“He said you’ve been away most days for a month, and some nights, and he figured we’ve been up in a motel in Pecos together having an affair. Now he’s all outraged that you’ve brought me down here, so close to Sloop getting back.”

“I wish we had been,” she said. “In a motel, having an affair. I wish that was all it was.”

He said nothing. She paused a beat.

“Do you wish we had been, too?” she asked.

He watched her in the saddle. Lithe, slim, hips swaying gently against the patient gait of the horse. The dark honey skin of her arms was bright in the sun. Her hair hung to the middle of her back.

“I could think of worse things,” he said.

It was very late in the afternoon when they got back. Josh and Billy were waiting. They were leaning side by side against the wall of the barn, in the harsh shadow below the eaves. Their pick-up was ready for the trip to the feed

supplier. It was parked in the yard.

“It takes all three of you?” Carmen whispered.

“It’s Bobby,” Reacher said back. “He’s trying to keep me away from you. Trying to spoil the fun we’re supposed to be having.”

She rolled her eyes.

“I’ll put the horses away,” she said. “I should brush them first.”

They dismounted together in front of the barn door. Josh and Billy peeled off the wall, impatience in their body language.

“You ready?” Billy called.

“He should have been ready a half hour ago,” Josh said.

For that, Reacher made them wait. He walked down to the bunkhouse, very slowly, because he wasn’t going to let them hurry him, and because he was stiff from the saddle. He used the bathroom and rinsed dust off his face. Splashed cold water over his shirt. Walked slowly back. The pick-up had turned to face the gate and the engine was running. Carmen was brushing his horse. Thin clouds of dust were coming off its chestnut fur. *Hair? Coat*? Josh was sitting sideways in the driver’s seat. Billy was standing next to the passenger door.

“So let’s go,” he called.

He put Reacher in the middle seat. Josh swung his feet in and slammed his door shut. Billy crowded in on the other side and Josh took off toward the gate. Paused at the road and then made a left, at which point Reacher knew the situation was a lot worse than he had guessed.

7

He had seen the feed bags in the storeroom. There were plenty of them, maybe forty, in head-high stacks. Big waxed paper bags, probably thirty pounds to a

forty, in head-high stacks. Big waxed-paper bags, probably thirty pounds to a bag. Altogether twelve hundred pounds of feed. About half a ton. How fast were four horses and a pony going to eat their way through all of that?

But he had always understood the trip was Bobby's idea of a diversion. Buying more feed before it was strictly necessary was as good a way as any of getting him out of Carmen's life for a spell. But they weren't buying more feed. Because they had turned left. The bags were all printed with a brand name and nutritional boasts and the name and the address of the feed supplier. The feed supplier was in San Angelo. He had seen it repeated forty times, once on each bag, in big clear letters. *San Angelo, San Angelo, San Angelo*. And San Angelo was north and east of Echo County. Way north and east. Not south and west. They should have turned right.

So, Bobby was planning to get him out of Carmen's life *permanently*. Josh and Billy had been told to get rid of him. *And Josh and Billy will do what they're told*, Bobby had said. He smiled at the windshield. *Forewarned is forearmed*. They didn't know he'd seen the feed bags, didn't know he'd read the writing on them, and they didn't know he'd been looking at maps of Texas for most of the last week. They didn't know a left turn instead of a right would mean anything to him.

How would they aim to do it? Carmen had implied her out-of-work teacher friend had been scared off. Scared pretty badly, if he wouldn't even talk to her later, up in the relative safety of Pecos. So were they going to try to scare *him*? If so, they really had to be kidding. He felt the aggression building inside. He used it and controlled it like he had learned to. He used the adrenaline flow to ease the stiffness in his legs. He let it pump him up. He flexed his shoulders, leaning on Josh on one side, Billy on the other.

"How far is it?" he asked innocently.

"Couple hours," Billy said.

They were doing about sixty, heading south on the dead-straight road. The landscape was unchanging. Scrubby dry grassland on the left, sullen limestone caliche on the right, broken up into ledges and layers. All of it baking under the relentless sun. There was no traffic. The road looked like it saw one or two vehicles a day. Maybe all they had to do was get far enough away, pull over, throw him out, and he'd die slowly of thirst before anybody got to him. Or of exhaustion, walking back. Or of rattlesnake bites.

exhaustion, walking back. Or of rattlesnake bites.

“No, less than a couple hours,” Josh said. “Hundred miles is all.”

So maybe they were headed to the bar they had mentioned yesterday. Maybe they had friends there. *They better had*, Reacher thought. *A pair of fifth-rate cowboys ain’t going to do it for me*. Then he breathed out again. Relaxed. Struggled with a decision. The problem with the kind of undiluted raging aggression he had described to Carmen was it came out so all-or-nothing. He recalled his first day in high school. The summer after he finished his elementary education, the family moved back stateside for a six-month tour. He was enrolled in a big high school off-base, somewhere in New Jersey, somewhere near Fort Dix. And he was ready for it. In his usual serious earnest fashion he calculated that high school would be bigger and better than elementary school, in every way, including the seriousness of the locker-room scuffling. So he made his usual new-school first-day plan to jump on the very first guy who tried anything. That had always worked well for him. Hit hard, hit early, get your retaliation in first. It made a big impression. But this time, make an even bigger impression, hit harder than ever, because clearly high school was going to be a whole new kind of a deal.

So sure enough some hard kid shoved him the first morning, and ten minutes later the hard kid was on his way to the hospital for a three-week stay. Then Reacher discovered it was really a very genteel school, in a good neighborhood, and that he’d reacted way too drastically, and everybody was looking at him like he was some sort of a barbarian. And he felt like one. He felt a little ashamed. From then on, he’d become calmer. He’d learned to be certain what he was into before he did anything. And he’d learned to offer warnings, sometimes, in certain circumstances.

“We coming straight back?” he asked.

It was a smart tactical question. They couldn’t say no, without alerting him. They couldn’t say yes, if they weren’t going there in the first place.

“We’re going for a couple beers first,” Billy said.

“Where?”

“Where we went yesterday.”

“I’m broke,” Reacher said. “I didn’t get paid yet.”

“We’re buying,” Josh said.

“The feed store open late? On a Saturday?”

“Big order, they’ll accommodate us,” Billy said.

Maybe it was a new supplier. Maybe they changed their source.

“I guess you use them a lot,” he said.

“All the years we’ve been here,” Josh said.

“Then we’re going straight back?”

“Sure we are,” Billy said. “You’ll be back in time for your beauty sleep.”

“That’s good,” Reacher said.

He paused.

“Because that’s the way I like it,” he said.

Mess with me now, you get what you get.

Billy said nothing. Josh just smiled and drove.

The scenery flattened very gradually as they headed south. From his time with the maps he knew the Rio Grande was curling around toward them from the west. They were entering the river basin, where wide prehistoric waters had scoured the land. Josh kept the speed at a steady sixty. Billy stared idly out of his window. The road remained straight and featureless. Reacher rested his head on the gun rack behind him and waited. Waiting was something he was accustomed to. Many times in his career, frantic action had been preceded by a long drive. It usually happened that way. The patient accumulation of evidence, the arrival at a conclusion, the identification of a suspect, the drive out to deal with him.

Waiting was a skill you learned fast, in the military.

The road got rougher the farther south they drove. The truck labored over it. The load bed was empty, so the rear wheels bounced and skipped. There were vultures on some of the telephone poles. The sun was low in the west. There was a sign on the shoulder. It said Echo 5 miles. It was pocked with bullet holes.

“I thought Echo was north,” Reacher said. “Where Ellie goes to school.”

“It’s split,” Billy said. “Half of it up there, half of it down here. Hundred sixty miles of nothing in between.”

“World’s biggest town, end to end,” Josh said. “Bigger than Los Angeles.”

He eased off the gas around a long slow curve and a cluster of small buildings came into view in the distance, all of them built low to the ground, all of them lit from behind by the low sun. There were tin advertisements on the shoulder, three miles out, announcing well in advance what the buildings were going to be. There was going to be another gas station, and a country store. And a bar, called the Longhorn Lounge, owned and operated by somebody named Harley. It had the last sign, but it was the first establishment they came to. It was a hundred feet east of the shoulder of the road, built out of tarred boards under an iron roof, crouched low at an angle in the middle of two acres of parched earth. There were ten or twelve pick-up trucks parked nose-in to the building like airplanes at a terminal. And nearest the door was the sheriff’s secondhand police car, just sitting there like it had been abandoned.

Josh bumped across the parking lot and put the truck in line with the others. The bar had neon beer signs in the windows, trapped between dirty glass and faded gingham drapes. Josh turned the motor off. Put the keys in his pocket. In the sudden quiet Reacher could hear bar noise, the roar of extractor fans and air conditioners, the thump of an overworked jukebox amplifier, the rumble of talking, the chink of bottles and glasses, the click of pool balls. Sounded like a reasonable crowd in there.

Josh and Billy opened their doors together and swung out. Reacher slid out through the passenger door and stood with his back to the sun. It was still hot. He could feel heat all over him, right from the back of his neck to the heels of his shoes.

“O.K.,” Billy said. “We’re buying.”

"O.K.," Billy said. "We're buying."

There was an inside lobby with an old-fashioned pay phone and scrawled numbers and old messages creeping over the boards alongside it. Then there was a second door, with a yellow glass window in it, that led into the bar itself. Billy pushed it open.

For a military cop, walking into a bar is like a batter stepping to the plate. It's his place of business. Maybe ninety percent of low-grade trouble in the service happens in bars. Put a bunch of young men trained for aggression and reaction alongside a limitless supply of alcohol, add in unit rivalries, add in the presence of civilian women and their civilian husbands and boyfriends, and it becomes inevitable. So just like a batter walks warily from the on-deck circle, watching the infield, surveying the outfield, calculating angles and distances, a military cop is all eyes on the way into a bar. First, he counts the exits. There are usually three. The front door, the back door out beyond the rest rooms, and the private door from the office behind the bar. Reacher saw that the Longhorn Lounge had all three of them. The windows were too small to be useful to anybody.

Then the MP looks at the crowd. He looks for knots of trouble. Who falls silent and stares? Where are the challenges? Nowhere, in the Longhorn. There were maybe twenty or twenty-five people in the long low room, all men, all tanned and lean and dressed in denim, none of them paying any kind of attention beyond casual glances and nods of easy familiarity toward Billy and Josh. The sheriff was nowhere to be seen. But there was an unoccupied stool at the bar with a fresh bottle sitting on a used napkin in front of it. Maybe the place of honor.

Then the MP looks for weapons. There was an antique revolver above the bar, wired onto a wooden plaque with a message branded into it with a hot poker: We don't call 911. There would be a few modern handguns here and there in the room. There were long-neck bottles all over the place, but Reacher wasn't worried about them. Bottles are no real use as weapons. Except in the movies, where they make them out of spun sugar and print the labels on tissue paper. A real bottle won't break against a table top. The glass is too thick. They just make a loud banging noise. They have some marginal use as clubs, but the pool table worried him more. It sat in the middle of the room, all covered in hard celluloid balls, four guys with four cues using it, maybe a dozen more cues vertical in a long rack on the nearest wall. Short of a shotgun, a pool cue is the best barroom weapon ever invented. Short enough to be handy, long enough to be useful,

made out of fine hardwood and nicely weighted with lead.

The air was unnaturally cold and thick with beer fumes and smoke and noise. The jukebox was near the pool table, and beyond it was an area with small round lounge tables surrounded by stools padded with red vinyl. Billy held up three fingers to the barman and got three cold bottles in exchange. He carried them laced between his fingers and led the way toward the tables. Reacher stepped ahead of him and got there first. He wanted his choice of seats. *Back to the wall* was his rule. *All three exits in view, if possible*. He threaded his way in and sat down. Josh sat to his half-right, and Billy sat half-left. Pushed a bottle across the scarred surface of the table. People had stubbed cigarettes on the wood. The sheriff came into the room from the rear, from the direction of the rest rooms, checking that his pants were zipped. He paused a second when he saw Reacher, nothing in his face, and then he moved on and sat down at the bar, on the unoccupied stool, his shoulders hunched, his back to the crowd.

Billy raised his bottle like a toast.

“Good luck,” he said.

You’re going to need it, pal, Reacher thought. He took a long pull from his own bottle. The beer was cold and gassy. It tasted strongly of hops.

“I need to make a phone call,” Billy said.

He pushed back from the table and stood up again. Josh leaned to his right, trying to fill the new vacant space in front of Reacher. Billy made it through the crowd and went outside to the lobby. Reacher took another sip of his beer and estimated the passage of time. And counted the people in the room. There were twenty-three of them, excluding himself, including the barman, who he guessed was Harley. Billy came back inside two minutes and forty seconds. He bent and spoke into the sheriff’s ear. The sheriff nodded. Billy spoke some more. The sheriff nodded again. Drained his bottle and pushed back from the bar and stood up. Turned to face the room. Glanced once in Reacher’s direction and then stepped away and pushed out through the door. Billy stood and watched him go and then threaded his way back to the table.

“Sheriff’s leaving,” he said. “He remembered he had urgent business elsewhere.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Did you make your call?” Josh asked, like it was rehearsed.

“Yes, I made my call,” Billy said.

Then he sat down on his stool and picked up his bottle.

“Don’t you want to know who I called?” he said, looking across at Reacher.

“Why would I give a rat’s ass who you called?” Reacher said.

“I called for the ambulance,” Billy said. “Best to do it ahead of time, because it comes all the way from Presidio. It can take hours to get here.”

“See, we got a confession to make,” Josh said. “We lied to you before. There was a guy we ran off. He was knocking boots with the Mexican woman. Bobby didn’t think that was appropriate behavior, in the circumstances, what with Sloop being in prison and all. So we got asked to take care of it. We brought him down here.”

“Want to know what we did?” Billy asked.

“I thought we were going to the feed store,” Reacher said.

“Feed store’s up in San Angelo.”

“So what are we doing all the way down here?”

“We’re telling you, is what. This is where we brought the other guy.”

“What’s this other guy got to do with me?”

“Bobby figures you’re in the same category, is what.”

“He thinks I’m knocking boots with her too?”

Josh nodded. “He sure does.”

“What do you think?”

“We agree with him. Why else would you come around? You’re no horseman

"We agree with him. Why else would you come around? You're no horseman, that's for damn sure."

"Suppose I told you we're just good friends?"

"Bobby says you're more than that."

"And you believe him?"

Billy nodded. "Sure we do. She comes on to *him*. He told us that himself. So why should you be any different? And hey, we don't blame you. She's a good-looking piece of ass. I'd go there myself, except she's Sloop's. You got to respect family, even with beaners. That's the rule around here."

Reacher said nothing.

"Her other guy was a schoolteacher," Billy said. "Got way out of line. So we brought him down here, and we took him out back, in the yard, and we got us a hog butchering knife, and we got us a couple of guys to hold him, and we pulled his pants down, and we told him we were going to cut it off. He was all crying and whimpering and messing himself. Begging and whining. Promising he'd get himself lost. Pleading with us not to cut. But we cut just a little anyway. For the fun of it. There was blood everywhere. Then we let him go. But we told him if we ever saw his face again, we'd take it all the way off for real. And you know what? We never saw his face again."

"So it worked," Josh said. "It worked real good. Only problem was he nearly bled out, from the wound. We should have called ahead for the ambulance. We figured we should remember that, for the next time. Live and learn, that's what we always say. So this time, we did call ahead. Especially for you. So you should be grateful."

"You cut the guy?" Reacher asked.

"We sure did."

"Sounds like you're real proud of yourselves."

"We do what it takes. We look after the family."

"And you're admitting it to me?"

Josh nodded. “Why shouldn’t we? Like, who the hell are you?”

Reacher shrugged. “Well, I’m not a schoolteacher.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you aim to cut me, it’ll be you goes in the ambulance.”

“You think?”

Reacher nodded. “That horse I was on shit more trouble than you guys are going to give me.”

He looked at each of them in turn, openly and evenly. Serene self-confidence works wonders, in a situation like that. And he felt confident. It was confidence born of experience. It was a long, long time since he’d lost a two-on-one bar fight.

“Your choice,” he said. “Quit now, or go to the hospital.”

“Well, you know what?” Josh said, smiling. “I think we’ll stay with the program. Because whatever the hell kind of a guy you think you are, we’re the ones got a lot of friends in here. And you don’t.”

“I didn’t inquire about your social situation,” Reacher said.

But it was clearly true. They had friends in there. Some kind of a subliminal vibe was quieting the room, making people restless and watchful. They were glancing over, then glancing at each other. The atmosphere was building. The pool game was slowing down. Reacher could feel tension in the air. The silences were starting. The challenges. Maybe it was going to be worse than two-on-one. Maybe a lot worse.

Billy smiled.

“We don’t scare easy,” he said. “Call it a professional thing.”

They get in the ring with bulls that weigh a ton and a half, Bobby had said. *They ain’t going to be too worried about you*. Reacher had never been to a rodeo. He knew nothing about them, except for occasional passing impressions from

television or the movies. He guessed the riders sat on some kind of a fence, near the pen, and they jumped on just as the bull was released out into the ring. Then they had to stay on. What was it, eight seconds? And if they didn't, they could get kicked around pretty badly. They could get stomped. Or gored, with the horns. So these guys had some kind of dumb courage. And strength. And resilience. And they were accustomed to pain and injury. But they were also accustomed to some kind of a *pattern*. Some kind of a structured buildup. Some kind of a measured countdown, before the action suddenly started. He didn't know for sure how it went. Maybe *three, two, one, go*. Maybe *ten, nine, eight*. Whatever, they were accustomed to waiting, counting off the seconds, tensing up, breathing deeply, getting ready for it.

"So let's do it," he said. "Right now, in the yard."

He came out from behind the table and stepped past Josh before he could react. Walked ahead, away from the jukebox, to the right of the pool table, heading for the rest room exit. Knots of people blocked him and then parted to let him through. He heard Josh and Billy following right behind him. He felt them counting down, tensing up, getting ready. Maybe twenty paces to the exit, maybe thirty seconds to the yard. *Twenty-nine, twenty-eight*. He kept his steps even, building on the rhythm. *Twenty-seven, twenty-six*. Arms loose by his side. *Twenty-five, twenty-four*.

He snatched the last pool cue from the rack and reversed it in his hands and scythed a complete hundred-eighty-degree turn and hit Billy as hard as he could in the side of the head, *one*. There was a loud crunch of bone clearly audible over the jukebox noise and a spray of blood and Billy went down like he had been machine-gunned. He swung again, chopping full-force at Josh like a slugger swinging for the fences, *two*. Josh's hand came up to block the blow and his forearm broke clean in half. He screamed and Reacher swung again for the head, *three*, connecting hard, knocking him sideways. He jabbed for the face and punched out a couple of teeth, *four*. Backhanded the cue with all his strength against the upper arm and shattered the bone, *five*. Josh went down head-to-toe with Billy and Reacher stood over them both and swung again four more times, fast and hard, *six, seven, eight, nine*, against ribs and collarbones and knees and skulls. A total of nine swings, maybe six or seven seconds of furious explosive force. *Hit hard, hit early, get your retaliation in first*. While they're still waiting for the bell.

The other men in the bar had spun away from the action and now they were

The other men in the bar had spun away from the action and now they were crowding back in again, slowly and warily. Reacher turned a menacing circle with the cue held ready. He bent and took the truck keys from Josh's pocket. Then he dropped the cue and let it clatter to the floor and barged his way through the crowd to the door, breathing hard, shoving people out of his way. Nobody seriously tried to stop him. Clearly friendship had its limits, down there in Echo County. He made it into the lot, still breathing fast. The heat broke him out in a sweat, instantly. He made it back to the truck. Slid inside and fired it up and backed away from the building and peeled away north. The bar door stayed firmly closed. Nobody came after him.

The sun set far away in the west an hour into his drive back and it was full dark when he turned in under the ranch gate. But every light in the Red House was burning. And there were two cars parked in the yard. One was the sheriff's secondhand cruiser. The other was a lime green Lincoln. The sheriff's car was flashing red and blue. The Lincoln was lit by the spill from the porch and the hot yellow light made it look the color of a dead man's skin. There were clouds of moths everywhere, big papery insects crowding the bulbs above the porch like tiny individual snowstorms, forming and re-forming as they fluttered from one to the next. Behind them the chant of the night insects was already rhythmic and insistent.

The front door of the house was standing open and there was noise in the foyer. Loud excited conversation, from a small crowd of people. Reacher stepped up and looked into the room and saw the sheriff, and Rusty Greer, and Bobby, and then Carmen standing alone near the rack of rifles. She had changed out of her jeans and shirt. She was wearing a dress. It was red and black and had no sleeves. It finished at the knee. She looked numb. Conflicting emotions in her face made it blank and expressionless. There was a man in a suit at the opposite end of the room, standing near the red-framed mirror so Reacher could see the front and back of him at the same time. The Lincoln driver, obviously. He was sleek and slightly overweight, not short, not tall, dressed in pressed seersucker. Maybe thirty years old, with light-colored hair carefully combed and receding from a domed brow. He had a pale indoor face, red with sunburn on the upward-facing planes like he played golf in the early afternoon. The face was split into a huge politician's smile. He looked like he had been receiving fulsome accolades

and pretending they were completely unnecessary.

Reacher paused on the porch and decided not to enter. But his weight put a loud creak into the boards and Bobby heard it. He glanced out into the night and did a perfect double-take. Stood completely still for a second and then came hurrying through the door. Took Reacher's elbow and pulled him into the lee of the wall, alongside the entrance, out of sight of the foyer.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I work here," Reacher said. "Remember?"

"Where are Josh and Billy?"

"They quit."

Bobby stared at him. "They what?"

"They quit," Reacher said again.

"What does that mean?"

"It means they decided they didn't want to work here anymore."

"Why would they do that?"

Reacher shrugged. "How would I know? Maybe they were just exercising their prerogative inside a free labor market."

"What?"

Reacher said nothing. Bobby's absence and the voices on the porch had pulled people to the door. Rusty Greer was first out, followed by the sheriff and the guy in the seersucker suit. Carmen stayed inside, near the rifles, still looking numb. They all fell silent, looking at Reacher, Rusty like she had a social difficulty to deal with, the sheriff puzzled, the new guy in the suit wondering who the hell this stranger was.

"What's going on?" Rusty asked.

"This guy says Josh and Billy quit on us," Bobby said.

“They wouldn’t do that,” Rusty said. “Why would they do that?”

The guy in the suit was looming forward, like he expected to be introduced.

“Did they give a reason?” Rusty asked.

The sheriff was looking straight at Reacher, nothing in his face. Reacher made no reply. Just stood there, waiting.

“Well, I’m Hack Walker,” the guy in the suit said, in a big honest voice, holding out his hand. “I’m the DA up in Pecos, and I’m a friend of the family.”

“Sloop’s oldest friend,” Rusty said, absently.

Reacher nodded and took the guy’s hand.

“Jack Reacher,” he said. “I work here.”

The guy held on to his hand in both of his own and beamed a subtle little smile that was partly genuine, partly *you-know-how-it-is* ironic. A perfect politician’s smile.

“You registered to vote here yet?” he asked. “Because if so, I just want to point out I’m running for judge in November, and I’d surely like to count on your support.”

Then he started up with a self-deprecating chuckle, a man secure among friends, amused about how the demands of democracy can intrude on good manners. *You know how it is*. Reacher took his hand back and nodded without speaking.

“Hack’s worked so hard for us,” Rusty said. “And now he’s brought us the most delightful news.”

“Al Eugene showed up?” Reacher asked.

“No, not yet,” Rusty said. “Something else entirely.”

“And nothing to do with the election,” Hack said. “You folks all understand that, don’t you? I agree, November time makes us want to do something for everybody, but you *know* I’d have done this for you anyhow.”

“And *you* know we’d all vote for you anyhow, Hack,” Rusty said.

Then everybody started beaming at everybody else. Reacher glanced beyond them at Carmen standing alone in the foyer. She wasn’t beaming.

“You’re getting Sloop out early,” he said. “Tomorrow, I guess.”

Hack Walker ducked his head, like Reacher had offered him a compliment.

“That’s for sure,” he said. “All along they claimed they couldn’t do administration on the weekend, but I managed to change their minds. They said it would be the first Sunday release in the history of the system, but I just said hey, there’s a first time for everything.”

“Hack’s going to drive us up there,” Rusty said. “We’re leaving soon. We’re going to drive all night.”

“We’re going to be waiting on the sidewalk,” Hack said. “Right outside the prison gate, seven o’clock in the morning. Old Sloop’s going to get a big welcome.”

“You all going?” Reacher asked.

“I’m not,” Carmen said.

She had come out onto the porch, quietly, like a wraith. She was standing with her feet together, both hands on the railing, leaning forward from the waist, elbows locked, staring north at the black horizon.

“I have to stay and see to Ellie,” she said.

“Plenty of room in the car,” Hack said. “Ellie can come too.”

Carmen shook her head. “I don’t want her to see her father walking out of a prison door.”

“Well, please yourself,” Rusty said. “He’s only your husband, after all.”

Carmen made no reply. Just shivered slightly, like the night air was thirty degrees instead of ninety.

“Then I guess I’ll stay too,” Bobby said. “Keep an eye on things. Sloop will understand.”

Reacher glanced at him. Carmen turned abruptly and walked back into the house. Rusty and Hack Walker drifted after her. The sheriff and Bobby stayed on the porch, each taking a half-step toward the other, to put a subliminal human barrier between Reacher and the door.

“So why did they quit?” Bobby asked.

Reacher glanced at them both and shrugged.

“Well, they didn’t exactly quit,” he said. “I was trying to sugar the pill, for the family, was all. Truth is we were in a bar, and they picked a fight with some guy. You saw us in the bar, right, Sheriff?”

The sheriff nodded, cautiously.

“It was after you left,” Reacher said. “They picked a fight and lost.”

“Who with?” Bobby asked. “What guy?”

“The wrong guy.”

“But who was he?”

“Some big guy,” Reacher said. “He smacked them around for a minute or two. I think somebody called the ambulance for them. They’re probably in the hospital now. Maybe they’re dead, for all I know. They lost, and they lost real bad.”

Bobby stared. “Who was the guy?”

“Just some guy, minding his own business.”

“Who?”

“Some stranger, I guess.”

Bobby paused. “Was it you?”

“Me?” Reacher said. “Why would they pick a fight with me?”

Bobby said nothing.

“Why would they pick a fight with me, Bobby?” Reacher asked again. “What possible kind of a reason would they have for that?”

Bobby made no reply. Just stared and then turned and stalked into the house. Slammed the door loudly behind him. The sheriff stayed where he was.

“So they got hurt bad,” he said.

Reacher nodded. “Seems that way. You should make some calls, check it out. Then start spreading the news. Tell people that’s what happens, if they start picking fights with the wrong strangers.”

The sheriff nodded again, still cautious.

“Maybe it’s something you should bear in mind, too,” Reacher said. “Bobby told me down here folks sort out their own differences. He told me they’re reluctant to involve law enforcement people. He implied cops stay out of private disputes. He said it’s some kind of a big old West Texas tradition.”

The sheriff was quiet for a moment.

“I guess it might be,” he said.

“Bobby said it definitely was. A definite tradition.”

The sheriff turned away.

“Well, you could put it that way,” he said. “And I’m a very traditional guy.”

Reacher nodded.

“I’m very glad to hear it,” he said.

The sheriff paused on the porch steps, and then moved on again without looking back. He slid into his car and killed the flashing lights and started the engine. Maneuvered carefully past the lime green Lincoln and headed out down the driveway and under the gate. His engine was running rich. Reacher could smell unburned gasoline in the air, and he could hear the muffler popping with tiny explosions. Then the car accelerated into the distance and he could hear nothing

at all except the grasshoppers clicking and chattering.

He came down off the porch and walked around to the kitchen door. It was standing open, either for ventilation or so the maid could eavesdrop on the excitement. She was standing just inside the room, close to an insect screen made of plastic strips hanging down in the doorway.

“Hey,” Reacher said. He had learned long ago to be friendly with the cookhouse detail. That way, you eat better. But she didn’t answer him. She just stood there, warily.

“Let me guess,” he said. “You only made two suppers for the bunkhouse.”

She said nothing, which was as good as a yes.

“You were misinformed,” he said. “Was it Bobby?”

She nodded. “He told me you weren’t coming back.”

“He was mistaken,” he said. “It was Josh and Billy who didn’t come back. So I guess I’ll eat their dinners. Both of them. I’m hungry.”

She paused. Then she shrugged.

“I’ll bring them down,” she said. “In a minute.”

He shook his head.

“I’ll eat them here,” he said. “Save you the walk.”

He parted the plastic strips with the backs of his hands and stepped inside the kitchen. It smelled of chili, left over from lunchtime.

“What did you make?” he asked.

“Steaks,” she said.

“Good,” he said. “I like them rare.”

"Good," he said. "I like bovines better than edentates."

"What?"

"I like beef better than I like armadillo."

"So do I," she said.

She used pot holders and took two plates out of a warming oven. Each held a medium-sized rib-eye steak, and a large mound of mashed potato and a smaller mound of fried onions. She put them side by side on the kitchen table, with a fork on the left of the left-hand plate and a knife all the way to the right. It looked like a double-barreled meal.

"Billy was my cousin," she said.

"He probably still is," Reacher said. "Josh got it worse."

"Josh was my cousin, too."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that."

"Different branch of the family," she said. "More distant. And they were both fools."

Reacher nodded. "Not the sharpest chisels in the box."

"But the Greers are sharp," she said. "Whatever it is you're doing with the Mexican woman, you should remember that."

Then she left him alone to eat.

He rinsed both plates when he finished and left them stacked in the sink. Walked down to the horse barn and sat down to wait in the foul heat inside because he wanted to stay close to the house. He sat on a hay bale and kept his back to the horses. They were restless for a spell, and then they got used to his presence. He heard them fall asleep, one by one. The shuffling hooves stopped moving and he heard lazy huffs of breath

heard lazy huffs of breath.

Then he heard feet over on the boards of the porch, and then on the steps, and then the crunch of dry dust under them as they crossed the yard. He heard the Lincoln's doors open, then shut again. He heard the engine start, and the transmission engage. He stood up and stepped to the barn door and saw the Lincoln turning around in front of the house. It was lit from behind by the porch lights, and he could see Hack Walker silhouetted at the wheel, with Rusty Greer beside him. The porch lights turned her teased-up hair to cotton candy. He could see the shape of her skull underneath it.

The big car drove straight out under the gate and swooped right without pausing and accelerated away down the road. He watched the bright cone of its headlights through the picket fence, bouncing left to right through the darkness. Then it was gone and the sounds of the night insects came back and the big moths around the lights were all that was moving.

He waited just inside the barn door, trying to guess who would come for him first. Carmen, probably, he thought, but it was Bobby who stepped out on the porch, maybe five minutes after his mother had left to bring his brother home. He came straight down the steps and headed across the yard, down toward the path to the bunkhouse. He had his ball cap on again, reversed on his head. Reacher stepped out of the barn and cut him off.

"Horses need watering," Bobby said. "And I want their stalls cleaned out."

"You do it," Reacher said.

"What?"

"You heard."

Bobby stood still.

"I'm not doing it," he said.

"Then I'll make you do it."

“What the hell is this?”

“A change, is what,” Reacher said. “Things just changed for you, Bobby, big time, believe me. Soon as you decided to set Josh and Billy on me, you crossed a line. Put yourself in a whole different situation. One where you do exactly what I tell you.”

Bobby said nothing.

Reacher looked straight at him. “I tell you *jump*, you don’t even ask how high. You just start jumping. That clear? I own you now.”

Bobby stood still. Reacher swung his right hand, aiming a big slow roundhouse slap. Bobby ducked away from it, straight into Reacher’s left, which pulled the ball cap off his head.

“So go look after the horses,” Reacher said. “Then you can sleep in there with them. I see you again before breakfast time, I’ll break your legs.”

Bobby stood still.

“Who are you going to call, little brother?” Reacher asked him. “The maid, or the sheriff?”

Bobby said nothing. The vastness of the night closed in. Echo County, a hundred and fifty souls, most of them at least sixty or a hundred miles beyond the black horizons. The absolute definition of isolation.

“O.K.,” Bobby said quietly.

He walked slowly toward the barn. Reacher dropped the ball cap in the dirt and strolled up to the house, with the porch lights shining in his eyes and the big papery moths swarming out to greet him.

Two-thirds of the killing crew saw him stroll. They were doing it better than the watchers had. The woman had checked the map and rejected the tactic of driving in from the west. For one thing, the Crown Vic wouldn’t make it over the desert

terrain. For another, to hide a mile away made no sense at all. Especially during the hours of darkness. Far better to drive straight down the road and stop a hundred yards shy of the house, long enough for two of the team to jump out, then turn the car and head back north while the two on foot ducked behind the nearest line of rocks and worked south toward the red gate and holed up in the small craters ten yards from the blacktop.

It was the two men on foot. They had night-vision devices. Nothing fancy, nothing military, just commercial equipment bought from a sporting goods catalog and carried along with everything else in the black nylon valise. They were binoculars, with some kind of electronic enhancement inside. Some kind of infrared capability. It picked up the night heat rising off the ground, and made Reacher look like he was wobbling and shimmering as he walked.

8

Reacher found Carmen in the parlor. The light was dim and the air was hot and thick. She was sitting alone at the red-painted table. Her back was perfectly straight and her forearms were resting lightly on the wooden surface and her gaze was blank and absolutely level, focused on a spot on the wall where there was nothing to see.

“Twice over,” she said. “I feel cheated, twice over. First it was a year, and then it was nothing. Then it was forty-eight hours, but really it was only twenty-four.”

“You can still get out,” he said.

“Now it’s less than twenty-four,” she said. “It’s sixteen hours, maybe. I’ll have breakfast by myself, but he’ll be back for lunch.”

“Sixteen hours is enough,” he said. “Sixteen hours, you could be anywhere.”

“Ellie’s fast asleep,” she said. “I can’t wake her up and bundle her in a car and run away and be chased by the cops forever.”

Reacher said nothing.

“I’m going to try to face it,” she said. “A fresh start. I’m planning to tell him, enough is enough. I’m planning to tell him, he lays a hand on me again, I’ll divorce him. Whatever it takes. However long.”

“Way to go,” he said.

“Do you believe I can?” she asked.

“I believe anybody can do anything,” he said. “If they want it enough.”

“I want it,” she said. “Believe me, I want it.”

She went quiet. Reacher glanced around the silent room.

“Why did they paint everything red?” he asked.

“Because it was cheap,” she said. “During the fifties, nobody down here wanted red anything, because of the Communists. So it was the cheapest color at the paint store.”

“I thought they were rich, back then. With the oil.”

“They were rich. They still are rich. Richer than you could ever imagine. But they’re also mean.”

He looked at the places where the fifty-year-old paint was worn back to the wood.

“Evidently,” he said.

She nodded again. Said nothing.

“Last chance, Carmen,” he said. “We could go, right now. There’s nobody here to call the cops. By the time they get back, we could be anywhere you want.”

“Bobby’s here.”

“He’s going to stay in the barn.”

“He’d hear the car.”

“We could rip out the phones.”

“He’d chase us. He could get to the sheriff inside two hours.”

“We could fix the other cars so they wouldn’t work.”

“He’d hear us doing it.”

“I could tie him up. I could drown him in a horse trough.”

She smiled, bitterly. “But you won’t drown Sloop.”

He nodded. “Figure of speech, I guess.”

She was quiet for a beat. Then she scraped back her chair and stood up.

“Come and see Ellie,” she said. “She’s so beautiful when she’s asleep.”

She passed close to him and took his hand in hers. Led him out through the kitchen and into the rear lobby and up the back stairs, toward the noise of the fan turning slowly. Down the long hot corridor to Ellie’s door. She eased it open with her foot and maneuvered him so he could see inside the room.

There was a night-light plugged into an outlet low on the wall and its soft orange glow showed the child sprawled on her back, with her arms thrown up around her head. She had kicked off her sheet and the rabbit T-shirt had ridden up and was showing a band of plump pink skin at her waist. Her hair was tumbled over the pillow. Long dark eyelashes rested on her cheeks like fans. Her mouth was open a fraction.

“She’s six and a half,” Carmen whispered. “She needs this. She needs a bed of her own, in a place of her own. I can’t make her live like a fugitive.”

He said nothing.

“Do you see?” she whispered.

He shrugged. He didn’t, really. At age six and a half, he had lived exactly like a fugitive. He had at every age, right from birth to yesterday. He had moved from one service base to another, all around the world, often with no notice at all. He recalled days when he got up for school and instead was driven to an airstrip and

ended up on the other side of the planet thirty hours later. He recalled stumbling tired and bewildered into dank bungalow bedrooms and sleeping on unmade beds. The next morning, his mother would tell him which country they were in. Which continent they were on. If she knew yet. Sometimes she didn't. It hadn't done him any harm.

Or, maybe it had.

"It's your call, I guess," he said.

She pulled him back into the corridor and eased Ellie's door shut behind him.

"Now I'll show you where I hid the gun," she said. "You can tell me if you approve."

She walked ahead of him down the corridor. The air conditioner was loud. He passed under a vent and a breath of air played over him. It was warm. Carmen's dress swayed with every step. She was wearing heels and they put tension in the muscles of her legs. He could see tendons in the backs of her knees. Her hair hung down her back and merged with the black pattern on the red fabric of the dress. She turned left and then right and stepped through an archway. There was another staircase, leading down.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Separate wing," she said. "It was added. By Sloop's grandfather, I think."

The staircase led to a long narrow ground-floor hallway that led out of the main building to a master suite. It was as big as a small house. There was a dressing area, and a spacious bathroom, and a sitting room with a sofa and two armchairs. Beyond the sitting room was a broad archway. Beyond the archway, there was a bedroom.

"In here," she said.

She walked straight through the sitting room and led him to the bedroom.

"You see what I mean?" she said. "We're a long way from anywhere. Nobody hears anything. And I try to be quiet, anyway. If I scream, he hits me harder."

He nodded and looked around. There was a window, facing east, with insects

He nodded and looked around. There was a window, facing east, with insects loud beyond the screen. There was a king-size bed close to it, with side tables by the head, and a chest-high piece of furniture full of drawers opposite the foot. It looked like it had been made a hundred years ago, out of some kind of oak trees.

“Texas ironwood,” she said. “It’s what you get if you let the mesquite grow tall.”

“You should have been a teacher,” he said. “You’re always explaining things.”

She smiled, vaguely. “I thought about it, in college. It was a possibility, back then. In my other life.”

She opened the drawer on the top right.

“I moved the gun,” she said. “I listened to your advice. Bedside cabinet was too low. Ellie could have found it. This is too high for her.”

He nodded again and moved closer. The drawer was a couple of feet wide, maybe eighteen inches deep. It was her underwear drawer. The pistol was lying on top of her things, which were neatly folded, and silky, and insubstantial, and fragrant. The mother-of-pearl plastic on the grips looked right at home there.

“You could have told me where it was,” he said. “You didn’t need to show me.”

She was quiet for a beat.

“He’ll want sex, won’t he?” she said.

Reacher made no reply.

“He’s been locked up a year and a half,” she said. “But I’m going to refuse.”

Reacher said nothing.

“It’s a woman’s right, isn’t it?” she asked. “To say no?”

“Of course it is,” he said.

“Even though the woman is married?”

“Most places,” he said.

She was quiet for a beat.

“And it’s also her right to say yes, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Equally,” he said.

“I’d say yes to you.”

“I’m not asking.”

She paused. “So is it O.K. for me to ask you?”

He looked straight at her. “Depends on why, I guess.”

“Because I want to,” she said. “I want to go to bed with you.”

“Why?”

“Honestly?” she said. “Just because I want to.”

“And?”

She shrugged. “And I want to hurt Sloop a little, I guess, in secret. In my heart.”

He said nothing.

“Before he gets home,” she said.

He said nothing.

“And because Bobby already thinks we’re doing it,” she said. “I figure, why get the blame without getting the fun?”

He said nothing.

“I just want a little fun,” she said. “Before it all starts up again.”

He said nothing.

“No strings attached,” she said. “I’m not looking for it to change anything. About your decision, I mean. About Sloop.”

He nodded.

“It wouldn’t change anything,” he said.

She looked away.

“So what’s your answer?” she asked.

He watched her profile. Her face was blank. It was like all other possibilities were exhausted for her, and all that was left was instinct. Early in his service career, when the threat was still plausible, people talked about what they would do when the enemy missiles were airborne and incoming. This was absolutely the number-one pick, by a huge, huge margin. A universal instinct. And he could see it in her. She had heard the four-minute warning, and the sirens were sounding loud in her mind.

“No,” he said.

She was quiet for a long moment.

“Will you at least stay with me?” she asked.

The killing crew moved fifty miles closer to Pecos in the middle of the night. They did it secretly, some hours after booking in for a second night at their first location. It was the woman’s preferred method. Six false names, two overlapping sets of motel records, the confusion built fast enough to keep them safe.

They drove east on I-10 until they passed the I-20 interchange. They headed down toward Fort Stockton until they saw signs for the first group of motels serving the Balmorhea state recreation area. Those motels were far enough from the actual tourist attraction to make them cheap and anonymous. There wasn’t going to be a lot of cutesy decor and personal service. But they would be clean and decent. And they would be full of people exactly like themselves. That was what the woman wanted. She was a chameleon. She had an instinct for the right type of place. She chose the second establishment they came to, and sent the small dark man to pay cash for two rooms.

Reacher woke up on Sloop Greer's sofa with the Sunday dawn. Beyond him, the bedroom window faced east and the night insects were gone and the sky was bright. The bed sheet looked damp and tangled. Carmen wasn't under it. He could hear the shower running in the bathroom. And he could smell coffee.

He got off the sofa and stretched. Wandered through the archway to the bedroom. He saw Carmen's dress on the floor. He went to the window and checked the weather. No change. The sky was hazed with heat. He wandered back to the sitting area. There was a credenza in one corner, set up with a small coffee machine. There were two upturned mugs beside it, with spoons, like a hotel. The bathroom door was closed. The shower sounded loud behind it. He filled a mug with coffee and wandered into the dressing area. There were two large closets there, parallel, one on each side. Not walkins, just long deep alcoves screened with sliding doors made out of mirrored glass.

He opened the left-hand closet. It was hers. It was full of dresses and pants on hangers. There were blouses. There was a rack of shoes. He closed it again and turned around and opened the other one. It was Sloop's. There were a dozen suits, and rows and rows of chinos and blue jeans. Cedar shelves stacked with T-shirts, and dress shirts folded into plastic wraps. A row of neckties. Belts, with fancy buckles. A long row of dusty shoes on the floor. The shoes looked to be about size eleven. He swapped his coffee cup into his other hand and nudged open a suit coat, looking for the label. It was a forty-four long. It would fit a guy about six feet two or three, maybe a hundred and ninety or two hundred pounds. So Sloop was not an especially big guy. Not a giant. But he was a foot taller and twice the weight of his wife. Not the world's fairest match-up.

There was a photograph frame face-down on top of a stack of shirts. He turned it over. There was a five-by-seven color print under a cream card mat glassed into a lacquered wooden surround. The print showed three guys, young, halfway between boyhood and manhood. Maybe seventeen years old, maybe eighteen. They were standing close together, leaning on the bulging fender of an old-fashioned pick-up truck. They were peering expectantly at the camera, like maybe it was perched close by on a rock and they were waiting for the self-timer to click in. They looked full of youthful energy and excitement. Their whole lives ahead of them, full of infinite possibilities. One of them was Hack Walker.

a little slimmer, a little more muscular, a lot more hair. He guessed the other two were Al Eugene and Sloop Greer himself. Teen-aged buddies. Eugene was a head shorter than Sloop, and chubby. Sloop looked like a younger version of Bobby.

He heard the shower shut off and put the photograph back and closed the slider. Moved back to the sitting area. A moment later the bathroom door opened and Carmen came out in a cloud of steam. She was wrapped in two white towels, one around her body, the other bound like a turban around her hair. He looked at her and stayed quiet, unsure of what to say.

“Good morning,” she said in the silence.

“To you, too,” he said.

She unwrapped the turban and shook out her hair. It hung wet and straight.

“It isn’t, though, is it?” she said. “A good morning? It’s a bad morning.”

“I guess,” he said.

“He could be walking out the gate, this exact minute.”

He checked his watch. It was almost seven.

“Any time now,” he said.

“Use the shower if you want,” she said. “I have to go and see to Ellie.”

“O.K.”

He stepped into the bathroom. It was huge, and made out of some kind of reconstituted marble with gold tones in it. It looked like a place he’d once stayed, in Vegas. He used the john and rinsed his mouth at the sink and stripped off his stale clothes and stepped into the shower stall. It was enclosed with bronze-tinted glass and it was enormous. There was a shower head the size of a hubcap above him, and tall pipes in each corner with additional water jets pointing directly at him. He turned the faucet and a huge roaring started up. Then a deluge of warm water hit him from all sides. It was like standing under Niagara Falls. The side jets started pulsing hot and cold and he couldn’t hear himself think. He washed as quickly as he could and soaped his hair and rinsed off and

think. He washed as quickly as he could and soaped his hair and rinsed off and shut it all down.

He took a fresh towel from a stack and dried off as well as he could in the humidity. Wrapped the towel around him and stepped back into the dressing area. Carmen was buttoning her shirt. It was white, and she had white pants on. Gold jewelry. Her skin looked dark against it and her hair was glossy and already curling in the heat.

“That was quick,” she said.

“Hell of a shower,” he said.

“Sloop chose it,” she said. “I hate it. There’s so much water, I can hardly breathe in there.”

She slid her closet shut and twisted left and right to examine her reflection in the mirrored doors.

“You look good,” he said.

“Do I look Mexican enough?” she asked. “With the white clothes?”

He said nothing.

“No jeans today,” she said. “I’m sick of trying to look like I was born a cowgirl in Amarillo.”

“You look good,” he said again.

“Seven hours,” she said. “Six and a half, if Hack drives fast.”

He nodded. “I’m going to find Bobby.”

She stretched tall and kissed him on the cheek.

“Thanks for staying,” she said. “It helped me.”

He said nothing.

“Join us for breakfast,” she said. “Twenty minutes.”

Then she walked slowly out of the room, on her way to wake her daughter.

Reacher dressed and found a different way back into the house. The whole place was a warren. He came out through a living room he hadn't seen before and into the foyer with the mirror and the rifles. He opened the front door and stepped out on the porch. It was already hot. The sun was coming from low on his right, and it was casting harsh early shadows. The shadows made the yard look pocked and lumpy.

He walked down to the barn and went in the door. The heat and the smell were as bad as ever, and the horses were awake and restless. But they were clean. They had water. Their feed troughs had been filled. He found Bobby asleep in an unoccupied stall, on a bed of clean straw.

"Rise and shine, little brother," he called.

Bobby stirred and sat up, confused as to where he was, and why. Then he remembered, and went tense with resentment. His clothes were dirty and hay stalks clung to him all over.

"Sleep well?" Reacher asked.

"They'll be back soon," Bobby said. "Then what do you think is going to happen?"

Reacher smiled. "You mean, am I going to tell them I made you clean out the barn and sleep in the straw?"

"You couldn't tell them."

"No, I guess I couldn't," Reacher said. "So are *you* going to tell them?"

Bobby said nothing. Reacher smiled again.

"No, I didn't think you would," he said. "So stay in here until noontime, then I'll let you in the house to get cleaned up for the main event."

“What about breakfast?”

“You don’t get any.”

“But I’m hungry.”

“So eat the horse food. Turns out there’s bags and bags of it, after all.”

He went back to the kitchen and found the maid brewing coffee and heating a skillet.

“Pancakes,” she said. “And that will have to do. They’ll want a big lunch, so that’s where my morning is going.”

“Pancakes are fine,” he said.

He walked on into the silent parlor and listened for sounds from above. Ellie and Carmen should be moving around somewhere. But he couldn’t hear anything. He tried to map the house in his head, but the layout was too bizarre. Clearly it had started out a substantial ranch house, and then random additions had been made whenever necessary. Overall, there was no coherence to it.

The maid came in with a stack of plates. Four of them, with four sets of silverware and four paper napkins piled on top.

“I assume you’re eating in here,” she said.

Reacher nodded. “But Bobby isn’t. He’s staying in the barn.”

“Why?”

“I think a horse is sick.”

The maid dumped the stack of plates and slid one out, leaving three of everything.

“So I’ll have to carry it down to him, I guess,” she said, irritated.

“I’ll take it,” Reacher said. “You’re very busy.”

He followed her back to the kitchen and she piled the first four pancakes off the skillet onto a plate. Added a little butter and maple syrup. Reacher wrapped a knife and a fork into a napkin and picked up the plate and walked back out into the heat. He found Bobby where he had left him. He was sitting up, doing nothing.

“What’s this?” he said.

“Breakfast,” Reacher said. “I had a change of heart. Because you’re going to do something for me.”

“Yeah, what?”

“There’s going to be some kind of a big lunch, for Sloop getting back.”

Bobby nodded. “I expect so.”

“You’re going to invite me. As your guest. Like I’m you’re big buddy.”

“I am?”

“Sure you are. If you want these pancakes, and if you want to walk without sticks the rest of your life.”

Bobby went quiet.

“Dinner, too,” Reacher said. “You understand?”

“Her *husband*’s coming home, for God’s sake,” Bobby said. “It’s *over*, right?”

“You’re jumping to conclusions, Bobby. I’ve got no particular interest in Carmen. I just want to get next to Sloop. I need to talk to him.”

“About what?”

“Just do it, O.K.?”

Bobby shrugged.

“[illegible]”

"Whatever," he said.

Reacher handed him the plate of pancakes and headed for the house again.

Carmen and Ellie were sitting side by side at the table. Ellie's hair was wet from the shower and she was in a yellow seersucker dress.

"My daddy's coming home today," she said. "He's on his way, right now."

Reacher nodded. "I heard that."

"I thought it was going to be tomorrow. But it's today."

Carmen was looking at the wall, saying nothing. The maid brought pancakes in on a platter. She served them out, two for the kid, three for Carmen, four for Reacher. Then she took the platter away and went back to the kitchen.

"I was going to stay home from school tomorrow," Ellie said. "Can I still?"

Carmen said nothing.

"Mom? Can I still?"

Carmen turned and looked at Reacher, like he had spoken. Her face was blank. It reminded him of a guy he had known who had gone to the eye doctor. He had been having trouble reading fine print. The eye doctor spotted a tumor in the retina. Made arrangements there and then for him to have the eye removed the next day. Then the guy had sat around knowing that tomorrow he was going into the hospital with two eyes and coming back out with one. The certainty had burned him up. The anticipation. The dread. Much worse than a split-second accident with the same result.

"Mommy? Can I?" Ellie asked again.

"I guess," Carmen said. "What?"

"Mommy, you're not *listening*. Are you excited too?"

“Yes,” Carmen said.

“So can I?”

“Yes,” Carmen said again.

Ellie turned to her food and ate it like she was starving. Reacher picked at his, watching Carmen. She ate nothing.

“I’m going to see my pony now,” Ellie said.

She scrambled off her chair and ran out of the room like a miniature whirlwind. Reacher heard the front door open and close and the thump of her shoes on the porch steps. He finished his breakfast while Carmen held her fork in midair, like she was uncertain what to do with it, like she had never seen one before.

“Will you talk to him?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said.

“I think he needs to know it’s not a secret anymore.”

“I agree.”

“Will you look at him? When you’re talking to him?”

“I guess so,” he said.

“Good. You should. Because you’ve got gunfighter’s eyes. Maybe like Clay Allison had. You should let him see them. Let him see what’s coming.”

“We’ve been through all of that,” he said.

“I know,” she answered.

Then she went off alone and Reacher set about killing time. It felt like waiting for an air raid. He walked out onto the porch and looked across the yard at the

road where it came in from the north. He followed it with his eyes to where the red picket fence finished, and beyond that to where it disappeared over the curve of the earth. The air was still clear with morning and there was no mirage over the blacktop. It was just a dusty ribbon framed by the limestone ledge to the west and the power lines to the east.

He turned back and sat down on the porch swing. The chains creaked under his weight. He settled sideways, facing the ranch gate, one leg up and the other on the floor. Then he did what most soldiers do when they're waiting for action. He went to sleep.

Carmen woke him maybe an hour later. She touched him on the shoulder and he opened his eyes and saw her standing over him. She had changed her clothes. Now she was in pressed blue jeans and a checked shirt. She was wearing boots made out of lizard skin. A belt to match. Her hair was tied back and she had made up her face with pale powder and blue eye shadow.

"I changed my mind," she said. "I don't want you to talk to him. Not yet."

"Why not?"

"It might set him off. If he knows somebody else knows."

"You didn't think that before."

"I thought it over again. I think it might be worse, if we start out like that. It's better coming from me. At least at first."

"You sure?"

She nodded. "Let me talk to him, the first time."

"When?"

"Tonight," she said. "I'll tell you tomorrow how it went."

He sat up, with both feet on the ground.

“You were pretty sure you’d have a busted nose tomorrow,” he said.

“I think this is best,” she said.

“Why did you change your clothes?”

“These are better,” she said. “I don’t want to provoke him.”

“You look like a cowgirl, born in Amarillo.”

“He likes me like this.”

“And dressing like who you are would provoke him?”

She made a face. A defeated face, he thought.

“Don’t chicken out, Carmen,” he said. “Stand and fight instead.”

“I will,” she said. “Tonight. I’ll tell him I’m not going to take it anymore.”

He said nothing.

“So don’t talk to him today, O.K.?” she said.

He looked away.

“It’s your call,” he said.

“It’s better this way.”

She went back into the house. Reacher stared north at the road. Sitting down, he could see a mile less of it. The heat was up, and the shimmer was starting.

She woke him again after another hour. The clothes were the same, but she had removed the makeup.

“You think I’m doing this wrong,” she said.

He sat up and rubbed both hands over his face, like he was washing.

“I think it would be better out in the open,” he said. “He should know somebody else knows. If not me, then his family, maybe.”

“I can’t tell them.”

“No, I guess you can’t.”

“So what should I do?”

“You should let me talk to him.”

“Not right away. It would be worse. Promise me you won’t.”

He nodded.

“It’s your call,” he said. “But you promise *me* something, O.K.? Talk to him yourself, tonight. For sure. And if he starts anything, get out of the room and just scream your head off until we all come running. Scream the place down. Demand the cops. Shout for help. It’ll embarrass him. It’ll change the dynamic.”

“You think?”

“He can’t pretend it isn’t happening, not if everybody hears you.”

“He’ll deny it. He’ll say I was just having a nightmare.”

“But deep inside, he’ll know we know.”

She said nothing.

“Promise me, Carmen,” he said. “Or I’ll talk to him first.”

She was quiet for a moment.

“O.K., I promise you,” she said.

He settled back on the swing and tried to doze another hour. But his internal clock was telling him the time was getting near. The way he remembered the maps of Texas, Abilene was probably less than seven hours from Echo County. Probably nearer six, for a driver who was a DA and therefore a part of the law enforcement community and therefore relatively unconcerned about speeding tickets. So assuming Sloop got out at seven without any delay, they could be home by one o'clock. And he probably would get out without any delay, because a minimum-security federal facility wouldn't have a whole lot of complicated procedures. They'd just make a check mark on a clipboard and cut him loose.

He guessed it was nearly twelve and looked at his watch to confirm it. It was one minute past. He saw Bobby come out of the horse barn and start up the track past the car barn. He was carrying his breakfast plate, blinking in the sun, walking like his limbs were stiff. He crossed the yard and stepped up on the porch. Said nothing. Just walked on into the house and closed the door behind him.

About twelve-thirty, Ellie came wandering up from the direction of the corrals. Her yellow dress was all covered in dirt and sand. Her hair was matted with it and her skin was flushed from the heat.

"I've been jumping," she said. "I pretend I'm a horse and I go around and around the jumps as fast as I can."

"Come here," Reacher said.

She stood close and he dusted her down, brushing the sand and the dirt to the floor with his palm.

"Maybe you should go shower again," he said. "Get your hair clean."

"Why?"

"So you look nice, for your daddy getting home."

She thought about it, with intense concentration.

"O.K.," she said.

"OK," she said.

"Be quick."

She looked at him for a moment, and then she turned and ran into the house.

At a quarter to one, Bobby came outside. He was clean and dressed in fresh jeans and a new T-shirt. He had alligator boots on his feet. They had silver accents at the toe. He was wearing another red ball cap. It was backward on his head, and it had a flash on the side reading *Division Series 1999*.

"They lost, right?" Reacher said.

"Who?"

"The Texas Rangers. In the 1999 Division Series. To the Yankees."

"So?"

"So nothing, Bobby."

Then the door opened again and Carmen and Ellie came out together. Carmen was still in the cowgirl outfit. She had the makeup on again. Ellie was still in the yellow seersucker. Her hair was wet and tied back into a ponytail with a ribbon. Carmen was holding her hand and staggering slightly, like her knees were weak.

Reacher stood up and gestured that she should sit down. Ellie climbed up and sat next to her. Nobody spoke. Reacher stepped to the porch rail and watched the road. He could see all the way to where the power lines disappeared in the haze. Maybe five miles north. Maybe ten. It was hard to be certain.

He was deep in the shadow of the porch, and the world was hot and white in front of him. He saw the dust cloud right at the extremity of his vision. It smudged in the haze and hung and drifted east, like a faint desert breeze was catching it and pushing it over toward Greer land. It grew until he could make out its shape. It was a long yellow teardrop of dust, rising and falling, dodging left and right with the curves of the road. It grew to a mile long, and many generations of it bloomed and dissipated before it came close enough for him to

generations of it bloomed and dissipated before it came close enough for him to see the lime green Lincoln at its head. It came up over a contour in the road and shimmered through the haze and slowed where the barbed wire gave way to the red picket fence. It looked dusty and tired and travel-stained. It braked hard close to the gate and the front end squatted as the suspension compressed. It turned in sharply. The cone of dust behind it drifted straight on south, like it had been outwitted by the abrupt change of direction.

There was a crunch of dirt and gravel and the sun flashed once in the windshield as the car came through its turn, and then three figures were clearly visible inside. Hack Walker was at the wheel. Rusty Greer was in the backseat. And there was a large pale man in the front. He had short fair hair and a plain blue shirt. He was craning his neck, looking around, smiling broadly. Sloop Greer, arriving home.

9

The Lincoln stopped next to the porch and the suspension settled and the engine died. Nobody inside the car moved for a moment. Then three doors opened up and all three people spilled out and Bobby and Ellie clattered down the porch steps toward them. Reacher moved back from the rail. Carmen stood up slowly and stepped forward and took his place there.

Sloop Greer left his door open and stretched in the sun like anyone would after a year and a half in a cell and six hours on the road. His face and hands were white with prison pallor and he was overweight from the starchy food, but he was Bobby's brother. There was no doubt about that. He had the same hair, the same face, the same bones, the same posture. Bobby stepped straight in front of him and held his arms wide and hugged him hard. Sloop hugged back and they staggered around and whooped and clapped each other on the back like they were on a lawn in front of a frat house and somebody had done something big in a game of college football.

Ellie froze and hung back, like she was suddenly confused by the noise and the commotion. Sloop let Bobby go and squatted down and held his arms out to her. Reacher turned and watched Carmen's face. It was locked up tight. Ellie stood in

the dirt, shy and motionless, knuckles in her mouth, and then she made some kind of a mental connection and launched herself into Sloop's embrace. He whirled her up into the air and hugged her. Kissed her cheek. Danced her around and around in a circle. Carmen made a small sound in her throat and looked away.

Sloop set Ellie down on the ground and looked up into the porch and smiled triumphantly. Behind him Bobby was talking to his mother and Hack Walker. They were huddled together behind the car. Sloop was holding out his hand, beckoning to his wife. She backed away from the porch rail, deep into the shadow.

"Maybe you should talk to him after all," she whispered.

"Make your mind up," Reacher whispered back.

"Let me see how it goes," she said.

She took a deep breath and forced a smile and skipped down the steps. Took Sloop's hands and folded herself into his arms. They kissed, long enough that nobody would think they were brother and sister, but not long enough that anybody would think there was real passion there. Behind the car Bobby and his mother had detached themselves from Hack and were walking around the hood and heading for the porch. Bobby had a worried look on his face and Rusty was fanning herself with her hand and looking hard in Reacher's direction, all the way up the steps.

"I hear Bobby invited you to lunch," she said quietly, at the top.

"Very gracious of him," Reacher said.

"Yes, it was. Very gracious. But it's going to be a purely family thing today."

"Is it?" Reacher said.

"Not even Hack is staying," she added, like it was final proof of something.

Reacher said nothing.

"So I'm sorry," she said. "But the maid will bring your meals down to the bunkhouse, in the usual way. You boys can get together again tomorrow."

clubhouse, in the usual way. You boys can get together again tomorrow."

Reacher was silent for a long moment. Then he nodded.

"O.K.," he said. "I wouldn't want to intrude."

Rusty smiled and Bobby avoided his eye. They walked into the house and Reacher went down the steps into the yard, out into the midday heat. It was like a furnace. Hack Walker was on his own next to the Lincoln, getting ready to leave.

"Hot enough for you?" he asked, with his politician's smile.

"I'll survive," Reacher said.

"Going to be a storm."

"So people say."

Walker nodded. "Reacher, right?"

Reacher nodded. "So everything went O.K. in Abilene, I guess."

"Like clockwork," Hack said. "But I'm tired, believe me. Texas is a big, big place. You can forget that, sometimes. You can drive forever. So I'm leaving these folks to their celebrations and hitting the rack. Gratefully, let me tell you."

Reacher nodded again. "So I'll see you around, maybe."

"Don't forget to vote in November," Hack replied. "For me, preferably."

He used the same bashful expression he had used the night before. Then he paused at the car door and waved across the roof to Sloop. Sloop made a gun with his fingers and leveled it at Hack and pursed his lips like he was supplying the sound of the shot. Hack slid into the car and fired it up and backed into a turn and headed for the gate. He paused a second and made a right and accelerated away and a moment later Reacher was watching a new cone of dust drifting north along the road.

Then he turned back and saw Sloop strolling up across the yard, holding Ellie's hand in his right and Carmen's in his left. His eyes were screwed tight against the sun. Carmen was saying nothing and Ellie was saying a lot. They all walked

the sun. Carmen was saying nothing and Ellie was saying a lot. They all walked straight past him and up the steps, three abreast. They paused at the door and Sloop turned his right shoulder to allow Ellie in ahead of him. He followed her across the threshold and then turned his shoulder the other way to pull Carmen in after him. The door closed on them hard enough to raise a puff of hot dust off the porch floorboards.

Reacher saw nobody except the maid for nearly three hours. He stayed inside the bunkhouse and she brought him lunch and then came back to collect the plate an hour later. Time to time he would watch the house from the high bathroom window, but it was closed up tight and he saw nothing at all. Then late in the afternoon he heard voices behind the horse barn and walked up there and found Sloop and Carmen and Ellie out and about, taking the air. It was still very hot. Maybe hotter than ever. Sloop looked restless. He was sweating. He was scuffing his shoes through the dirt. Carmen looked very nervous. Her face was slightly red. Maybe tension, maybe strain. Maybe the fearsome heat. But it wasn't impossible she'd been slapped a couple of times, either.

"Ellie, come with me to see your pony," she said.

"I saw him this morning, Mommy," Ellie said.

Carmen held out her hand. "But I didn't. So let's go see him again."

Ellie looked mystified for a second, and then she took Carmen's hand. They stepped behind Sloop and set off slowly for the front of the barn. Carmen turned her head and mouthed *talk to him* as she walked. Sloop turned around and watched them go. Turned back and looked at Reacher, like he was seeing him for the first time.

"Sloop Greer," he said, and held out his hand.

Up close, he was an older, wiser version of Bobby. A little older, maybe a lot wiser. There was intelligence in his eyes. Not necessarily a pleasant sort of intelligence. It wasn't hard to imagine some cruelty there. Reacher shook his hand. It was big-boned, but soft. It was a bully's hand, not a fighter's.

“Jack Reacher,” he said. “How was prison?”

There was a split-second flash of surprise in the eyes. Then it was replaced by instant calm. *Good self-control*, Reacher thought.

“It was pretty awful,” Sloop said. “You been in yourself?”

Quick, too.

“On the other side of the bars from you,” Reacher said.

Sloop nodded. “Bobby told me you were a cop. Now you’re an itinerant worker.”

“I have to be. I didn’t have a rich daddy.”

Sloop paused a beat. “You were military, right? In the army?”

“Right, the army.”

“I never cared much for the military, myself.”

“So I gathered.”

“Yeah, how?”

“Well, I hear you opted out of paying for it.”

Another flash in the eyes, quickly gone. *Not easy to rile*, Reacher thought. *But a spell in prison teaches anybody to keep things well below the surface*.

“Shame you spoiled it by crying uncle and getting out early.”

“You think?”

Reacher nodded. “If you can’t do the time, then don’t do the crime.”

“You got out of the army. So maybe you couldn’t do the time either.”

Reacher smiled. *Thanks for the opening*, he thought.

“I had no choice,” he said. “Fact is, they threw me out.”

"I had no choice," he said. "Fact is, they threw me out."

"Yeah, why?"

"I broke the law, too."

"Yeah, how?"

"Some scumbag of a colonel was beating up on his wife. Nice young woman. He was a furtive type of a guy, did it all in secret. So I couldn't prove it. But I wasn't about to let him get away with it. That wouldn't have been right. Because I don't like men who hit women. So one night, I caught him on his own. No witnesses. He's in a wheelchair now. Drinks through a straw. Wears a bib, because he drools all the time."

Sloop said nothing. He was so silent, the skin at the inside corners of his eyes turned dark purple. *Walk away now*, Reacher thought, *and you're confessing it to me*. But Sloop stayed exactly where he was, very still, staring into space, seeing nothing. Then he recovered. The eyes came back into focus. Not quickly, but not too slowly, either. A smart guy.

"Well, that makes me feel better," he said. "About withholding my taxes. They might have ended up in your pocket."

"You don't approve?"

"No, I don't," Sloop said.

"Of who?"

"Either of you," Sloop said. "You, or the other guy."

Then he turned and walked away.

Reacher went back to the bunkhouse. The maid brought him dinner and came back for the plate. Full darkness fell outside and the night insects started up with their crazy chant. He lay down on his bed and sweated. The temperature stayed rock-steady around a hundred degrees. He heard isolated coyote howls again

rock steady around a hundred degrees. He heard isolated coyote howls again, and cougar screams, and the invisible beating of bats' wings.

Then he heard a light tread on the bunkhouse stair. He sat up in time to see Carmen come up into the room. She had one hand pressed flat on her chest, like she was out of breath, or panicking, or both.

"Sloop talked to Bobby," she said. "For ages."

"Did he hit you?" Reacher asked.

Her hand went up to her cheek.

"No," she said.

"Did he?"

She looked away.

"Well, just once," she said. "Not hard."

"I should go break his arms."

"He called the sheriff."

"Who did?"

"Sloop."

"When?"

"Just now. He talked to Bobby, and then he called."

"About me?"

She nodded. "He wants you out of here."

"It's O.K.," Reacher said. "The sheriff won't do anything."

"You think?"

Reacher nodded. "I squared him away, before."

She paused a beat. “I’ve got to get back now. He thinks I’m with Ellie.”

“You want me to come with you?”

“Not yet. Let me talk to him first.”

“Don’t let him hit you again, Carmen. Come get me, soon as you need me. Or make noise, O.K.? Scream and shout.”

She started back down the stairs.

“I will,” she said. “I promise. You sure about the sheriff?”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “The sheriff won’t do a thing.”

But the sheriff did one thing. He passed the problem to the state police. Reacher found that out ninety minutes later, when a Texas Ranger cruiser turned in under the gate, looking for him. Somebody directed it all the way down past the barns and in behind the bunkhouse. He heard its motor and the sound of its tires crushing the dust on the track. He got off of his bed and went down the stairs and when he got to the bottom he was lit up by the spotlight mounted in front of its windshield. It shone in past the parked farm tractors and picked him out in a bright cone of light. The car doors opened and two Rangers got out.

They were not similar to the sheriff. Not in any way. They were in a different class altogether. They were young and fit and professional. Both of them were medium height, both of them were halfway between lean and muscled. Both had military-style buzz cuts. Both had immaculate uniforms. One was a sergeant and the other was a trooper. The trooper was Hispanic. He was holding a shotgun.

“What?” Reacher called.

“Step to the hood of the car,” the sergeant called back.

Reacher kept his hands clear of his body and walked to the car.

“Assume the position,” the sergeant said.

Reacher put his palms on the fender and leaned down. The sheet metal was hot from the engine. The trooper covered him with the shotgun and the sergeant patted him down.

“O.K., get in the car,” he said.

Reacher didn’t move.

“What’s this about?” he asked.

“A request from a property owner to remove a trespasser.”

“I’m not a trespasser. I work here.”

“Well, I guess they just terminated you. So now you’re a trespasser. And we’re going to remove you.”

“That’s a state police job?”

“Small community like this, we’re on call to help the local guys, their days off, or serious crimes.”

“Trespassing is a serious crime?”

“No, Sunday is the Echo sheriff’s day off.”

The moths had found the spotlight. They fluttered in and crowded the lens, landing and taking off again when the heat of the bulb got to them. They batted against Reacher’s right arm. They felt dry and papery and surprisingly heavy.

“O.K., I’ll leave,” he said. “I’ll walk out to the road.”

“Then you’ll be a vagrant on a county highway. That’s against the law, too, around here, especially during the hours of darkness.”

“So where are we going?”

“You have to leave the county. We’ll let you out in Pecos.”

“They owe me money. I never got paid.”

“So get in the car. We’ll stop at the house.”

Reacher glanced left at the trooper, and the shotgun. Both of them looked businesslike. He glanced right, at the sergeant. He had his hand on the butt of his gun. He saw in his mind the two Greer boys, two versions of the same face, both of them grinning, smug and triumphant. But it was Rusty he saw mouthing *checkmate* at him.

“There’s a problem here,” he said. “The daughter-in-law is getting smacked around by her husband. It’s an ongoing situation. He just got out of prison today.”

“She made a complaint?”

“She’s scared to. The sheriff’s a good old boy and she’s a Hispanic woman from California.”

“Nothing we can do without a complaint.”

Reacher glanced the other way at the trooper, who just shrugged.

“Like the man told you,” he said. “Nothing we can do without we hear about it.”

“You’re hearing about it now,” Reacher said. “I’m telling you.”

The trooper shook his head. “Needs to come from the victim.”

“Get in the car,” the sergeant said.

“You don’t have to do this.”

“Yes, we do.”

“I need to be here. For the woman’s sake.”

“Listen, pal, we were informed you’re trespassing. So all we got is a question of whether you’re wanted here, or whether you’re not. And apparently, you’re not.”

“The woman wants me here. Like her bodyguard.”

“Is she the property owner?”

“No, she isn’t.”

“Are you employed by her? Like officially?”

Reacher shrugged. “More or less.”

“She paying you? You got a contract we can see?”

Reacher said nothing.

“So get in the car.”

“She’s in danger.”

“We get a call, we’ll come running.”

“She can’t call. Or if she does, the sheriff won’t pass it on.”

“Then there’s nothing we can do. Now get in the car.”

Reacher said nothing. The sergeant opened the rear door. Then he paused.

“You could come back tomorrow,” he said, quietly. “No law says a man can’t try to get himself rehired.”

Reacher took a second look at the shotgun. It was a big handsome Ithaca with a muzzle wide enough to stick his thumb in. He took a second look at the sergeant’s handgun. It was a Glock, secured into an oiled leather holster by a strap that would take about half a second to unfasten.

“But right now, get in the car.”

Checkmate.

“O.K.,” Reacher said. “But I’m not happy.”

“Very few of our passengers are,” the sergeant said back.

He used his hand on the top of Reacher’s head and folded him into the back seat. It was cold in there. There was a heavy wire barrier in front of him. Either side, the door handles and the window winders had been removed. Small squares of

aluminum had been riveted over the holes in the trim. The seat was vinyl. There was a smell of disinfectant and a heavy stink from an air freshener shaped like a pine tree hanging from the mirror in front. There was a radar device built up on top of the dash and quiet radio chatter coming from a unit underneath it.

The sergeant and the trooper swung in together in front and drove him up to the house. All the Greers except Ellie were on the porch to see him go. They were standing in a line at the rail, first Rusty, then Bobby, then Sloop and Carmen. They were all smiling. All except Carmen. The sergeant stopped the car at the foot of the steps and buzzed his window down.

“This guy says you owe him wages,” he called.

There was silence for a second. Just the sound of the insects.

“So tell him to sue us,” Bobby called back.

Reacher leaned forward to the metal grille.

“*¡Carmen*!” he shouted. “*¡Si hay un problema, llama directamente a estos hombres*!”

The sergeant turned his head. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“So what do you want to do?” the sergeant asked. “About your money?”

“Forget about it,” Reacher said.

The sergeant buzzed his window up again and pulled out toward the gate. Reacher craned his neck and saw them all turn to watch him go, all except for Carmen, who stood absolutely still and stared rigidly ahead at the spot where the car had just been. The sergeant made a right onto the road and Reacher turned his head the other way and saw them all filing back into the house. Then the sergeant accelerated hard and they were lost to sight.

“What was that you called out to them?” he asked.

Reacher said nothing. The trooper answered for him.

“It was Spanish,” he said. “For the record. It was not ‘Carmen, if there’s trouble

"It was Spanish," he said. "For the woman. It meant 'Carmen, if there's trouble, call these guys direct.' Terrible accent."

Reacher said nothing.

They drove the same sixty miles he had covered the other way in the white Cadillac, back to the crossroads hamlet with Ellie's school and the gas station and the old diner. The sergeant stuck to a lazy fifty-five all the way, and it took an hour and five minutes. When they got there, everything was closed up tight. There were lights burning in two of the houses, and nothing else. Then they drove the stretch where Carmen had chased the school bus. Nobody talked. Reacher sprawled sideways on the vinyl bench and watched the darkness. Another twenty minutes north he saw the turn where Carmen had come down out of the hills. They didn't take it. They just kept on going, heading for the main highway, and then Pecos beyond it.

They never got there. The radio call came in a mile short of the county line. An hour and thirty-five minutes into the ride. The call was bored and laconic and loud with static. A woman dispatcher's voice.

"*Blue Five, Blue Five*," it said.

The trooper unhooked the microphone and stretched the cord and clicked the switch.

"Blue Five, copy, over," he said.

"Required at the Red House Ranch immediately, sixty miles south of north Echo crossroads, domestic disturbance reported, over."

"Copy, nature of incident, over?"

"Unclear at this time, believed violent, over."

"Well, shit," the sergeant said.

"Copy, on our way, out," the trooper said. He replaced the microphone. Turned

around. “So she understood your Spanish. I guess your accent wasn’t too far off, after all.”

Reacher said nothing. The sergeant turned his head.

“Look on the bright side, pal,” he said. “Now we can do something about it.”

“I warned you,” Reacher said. “And you should have damn well listened to me. So if she’s hurt bad, it’s on you. Pal.”

The sergeant said nothing to that. Just jammed on the brakes and pulled a wide slow turn across the whole of the road, shoulder to shoulder. Got it pointing straight south again and hustled. He got it up to a hundred on the straightaways, kept it at ninety on the curves. He didn’t use the lights or the siren. Didn’t even slow at the crossroads. He didn’t need to. The chances of meeting traffic on that road were worse than winning the lottery.

They were back again exactly two hours and thirty minutes after they left. Ninety-five minutes north, fifty-five minutes south. First thing they saw was the sheriff’s secondhand cruiser, dumped at an angle in the yard, door open, light bar flashing. The sergeant slewed through the dirt and jammed to a stop right behind it.

“Hell’s he doing here?” he said. “It’s his day off.”

There was nobody in sight. The trooper opened his door. The sergeant shut down the motor and did the same.

“Let me out,” Reacher said.

“No dice, pal,” the sergeant said back. “You stay right there.”

They got out and walked together to the porch steps. They went up. Across the boards. They pushed the door. It was open. They went inside. The door swung shut behind them. Reacher waited. Five minutes. Seven. Ten. The car grew warm. Then hot. There was silence. No sound at all beyond random static from the radio and the ticking of the insects.

The trooper came out alone after about twelve minutes. Walked slowly back to his side of the car and opened his door and leaned in for the microphone.

“Is she O.K.?” Reacher asked.

The guy nodded, sourly.

“She’s fine,” he said. “At least physically. But she’s in a shitload of trouble.”

“Why?”

“Because the call wasn’t about *him* attacking *her*. It was the other way around. She shot him. He’s dead. So we just arrested her.”

10

The trooper clicked the microphone and called in for backup and an ambulance. Then he dictated an interim report to the dispatcher. He used the words *gunshot wounds* twice and *homicide* three times.

“Hey,” Reacher called to him. “Stop calling it homicide on the radio.”

“Why?”

“Because it was self-defense. He was beating her. We all need to get that straight, from the start.”

“Not for me to say. You, either.”

Reacher shook his head. “It *is* for you to say. Because what you say now counts for something, later. You put it in people’s heads it’s a homicide, it’ll be tough for her. Better that everybody’s real clear from the start about what it is.”

“I don’t have that kind of influence.”

“Yes, you do.”

“How would *you* know what kind of influence I have?”

“Because I *was* you, once upon a time. I was a cop, in the military. I called things in. I know how it works.”

The trooper said nothing.

“She’s got a kid,” Reacher said. “You should remember that. So she needs minimum bail, and she needs it tonight. You can influence that for her.”

“She shot him,” the trooper said. “She should have thought about all that before.”

“The guy was beating up on her. It was self-defense.”

The trooper said nothing.

“Give her a break, O.K.? Don’t make her a victim twice over.”

“*She’s* the victim? Her husband is the one lying there dead.”

“You should have sympathy. You must know how it is for her.”

“Why? What’s the connection between her and me?”

Now it was Reacher who said nothing.

“You think I should cut her a break just because I’m Hispanic and she is too?”

“You wouldn’t be cutting her a break,” Reacher said. “You’d be being accurate, is all. She needs your help.”

The trooper hung up the microphone.

“Now you’re offending me,” he said.

He backed out of the car and slammed the door. Walked away, up to the house again. Reacher glanced through the window to his right, toward the rocky land west of the compound, full of regret. *I knew how it would be*, he thought. *I should have made her leave the damn gun up there on the mesa. Or I should have taken care of the whole thing myself.*

The state cops stayed inside the house and Reacher saw nothing until the backup arrived more than an hour later. It was an identical cruiser with another trooper driving and another sergeant riding alongside him. This time the trooper was white and the sergeant was Hispanic. They got out of their car and walked straight into the house. The heat and the quiet came back. There were animal howls in the far distance and the whisper of insects and the beating of invisible wings. Lights came on in some of the house windows and then snapped off again. After twenty minutes, the Echo sheriff left. He came out of the house and stumbled down the porch steps to his car. He looked tired and disoriented. His shirt was dark with sweat. He maneuvered his cruiser out from behind the tangle

of police vehicles and drove away.

Another hour later, the ambulance came. It had its emergency lights on. Reacher saw the night pulsing red far to the south and then bright headlight beams and a boxy vehicle painted red and gold and white lurching in through the gate. It was marked Presidio Fire Department. Maybe it was the same truck Billy had called the night before. It turned a slow circle in the yard and backed up to the porch steps. The crew got out lazily and stretched and yawned in the dark. They knew they weren't about to be called on for their paramedic skills.

They opened the rear doors and took out a rolling gurney and the backup sergeant met them on the steps and led them inside. Reacher was sweating inside the car. It was airless and hot. He traced in his mind the medics walking through the interior hallways to the bedroom. Attending to the corpse. Lifting it onto the gurney. Rolling the gurney out. It was going to be difficult to handle. There were narrow stairs and tight corners.

But they came back out about as fast as was feasible and lifted the gurney down the porch steps. Sloop Greer was just a large heavy shape on it, wound into a white sheet. The medics lined up the gurney with the rear of the ambulance and pushed. The wheels folded up and the gurney slid inside and the medics closed the doors on it.

Then they stood around in a group with three of the cops. The trooper who Reacher had offended wasn't there. He must have been guarding Carmen, somewhere inside the house. The three cops out in the yard were slow and relaxed. The excitement was over. The deal was done. So they were standing there a little deflated, and maybe a little disappointed, like cops often get, like something had happened they were supposed to prevent from happening. Reacher knew exactly how they felt.

They talked for a couple of minutes and then the ambulance crew climbed back into their cab and bounced their vehicle across the yard to the gate. It paused there for a second and turned right and headed slowly north. The cops watched it until it was gone and then they turned together and headed back inside the house. Five minutes later they came out again, all four of them, and this time they brought Carmen with them.

She was dressed in the same jeans and shirt. Her hair was heavy with water. Her hands were cuffed behind her back. Her head was down and her face was pale

hands were tied behind her back. Her head was down and her face was pale and filmed with sweat and her eyes were blank. The backup cops held an elbow each. They brought her down the steps slowly and clumsily, three people moving out of step. They stopped and regrouped in the dirt and walked her over to their cruiser. The trooper opened the rear door and the sergeant placed a hand on the top of her head and folded her inside. She offered no resistance. She was completely passive. Reacher saw her shuffle sideways on the seat, looking awkward and uncomfortable with her hands trapped behind her. Then she hitched her feet in after her, pointing her toes, suddenly looking elegant again. The trooper waited a beat and closed the door on her and Rusty and Bobby came out on the porch to watch her go.

Rusty's hair was a mess, like she'd been to bed and gotten up again. She was wearing a short satin robe that shone in the porch lights. It was white, and below it her legs were as pale as the fabric. Bobby was behind her. He was in jeans and a T-shirt, and he was barefoot. They pressed up against the porch rail. Both of their faces were pale and stunned. Their eyes were wide and blank and staring.

The backup cops climbed into their cruiser and started it up. The first two slid into the front of Reacher's car and did the same. They waited for the backup to ease ahead and then followed it out to the gate. Reacher turned his head and saw Rusty and Bobby craning to watch them go. The cars paused and turned right together and accelerated north. Reacher turned his head the other way and the last thing he saw was Ellie stumbling out onto the porch. She was in her rabbit pajamas and was carrying a small bear in her left hand and had the knuckles of her right pressed hard into her mouth.

The inside of the cop car cooled right down after about a mile. There was an aperture in the wire grille in front of him and if he sat in the middle of the seat and ducked his head he could line it up with the view through the windshield above the radar unit and below the mirror. It was like watching a movie unfold in front of him. The backup car swayed in the headlight beams, close and vivid and unreal in the intense dusty blackness all around it. He couldn't see Carmen. Maybe she was slumped down in the seat and her head was hidden behind the police lights stacked along the rear shelf, behind the glass.

"Where are they taking her?" he called

"Where are they taking her?" he called.

The sergeant shifted in his seat. Answered a hundred yards later.

"Pecos," he said. "County jail."

"But this is Echo," Reacher said. "Not Pecos."

"There are a hundred and fifty people in Echo County. You think they operate a separate jurisdiction just for them? With jails and all? And courthouses?"

"So how does it work?"

"Pecos picks it up, that's how it works. For all the little counties, around and about. All the administrative functions."

Reacher was quiet for a beat.

"Well, that's going to be a real big problem," he said.

"Why?"

"Because Hack Walker is the Pecos DA. And he was Sloop Greer's best buddy. So he'll be prosecuting the person who shot his friend."

"Worried about a conflict of interest?"

"Aren't you?"

"Not really," the sergeant said. "We know Hack. He's not a fool. He sees some defense counsel about to nail him for an impropriety, he'll pass on it. He'll have to. What's the word, excuse himself?"

"Recuse," Reacher said.

"Whatever. He'll give it to an assistant. And I think both the Pecos ADAs are women, actually. So the self-defense thing will get some sympathy."

"It doesn't need sympathy," Reacher said. "It's plain as day."

"And Hack's running for judge in November," the sergeant said. "Bear that in mind. Lots of Mexican votes in Pecos County. He won't let anybody do

anything that'll give her lawyer a chance to make him look bad in the newspaper. So she's lucky, really. A Mexican woman shoots a white man in Echo, gets tried for it by a woman ADA in Pecos, couldn't be better for her."

"She's from California," Reacher said. "She's not Mexican."

"But she looks Mexican," the sergeant said. "That's what's important to a guy who needs votes in Pecos County."

The two state police cruisers drove on in convoy. They caught and passed the ambulance just short of the school and the gas station and the diner at the crossroads. Left it lumbering north in their wake.

"The morgue's in Pecos, too," the sergeant said. "One of the oldest institutions in town, I guess. They needed it right from the get-go. Pecos was that kind of a place."

Reacher nodded, behind him.

"Carmen told me," he said. "It was the real Wild West."

"You going to stick around?"

"I guess so. I need to see she's O.K. She told me there's a museum in town. Things to see. Somebody's grave."

"Clay Allison's," the sergeant said. "Some old gunslinger."

"Never killed a man who didn't need killing."

The sergeant nodded in the mirror. "That could be her position, right? She could call it the Clay Allison defense."

"Why not?" Reacher said. "It was justifiable homicide, any way you cut it."

The sergeant said nothing to that.

“Should be enough to make bail, at least,” Reacher said. “She’s got a kid back there. She needs bail, like tomorrow.”

The sergeant glanced in the mirror again.

“Tomorrow could be tough,” he said. “There’s a dead guy in the picture, after all. Who’s her lawyer?”

“Hasn’t got one.”

“She got money for one?”

“No.”

“Well, shit,” the sergeant said.

“What?” Reacher asked.

“How old is the kid?”

“Six and a half.”

The sergeant went quiet.

“What?” Reacher asked again.

“Having no lawyer is a big problem, is what. Kid’s going to be seven and a half before mom even gets a bail *hearing*.”

“She’ll get a lawyer, right?”

“Sure, Constitution says so. But the question is, when? This is Texas.”

“You ask for a lawyer, you don’t get one right away?”

“Not right away. You wait a long, long time. You get one when the indictment comes back. And that’s how old Hack Walker is going to avoid his little conflict problem, isn’t it? He’ll just lock her up and forget about her. He’d be a fool not to. She’s got no lawyer, who’s to know? Could be Christmas before they get around to indicting her. By which time old Hack will be a judge, most likely, not a prosecutor. He’ll be long gone. No more conflict of interest. Unless he happens to pull the case later, whereupon he’d have to excuse himself anyway.”

to pull the case later, whereupon he'd have to excuse himself anyway.

“Recuse.”

“Whatever, not having her own lawyer changes everything.”

The trooper in the passenger seat turned and spoke for the first time in an hour.

“See?” he said. “Didn’t matter what I called it on the radio.”

“So don’t you spend your time at the museum,” the sergeant said. “You want to help her, you go find her a lawyer. You go beg, borrow or steal her one.”

Nobody spoke the rest of the way into Pecos County. They crossed under Interstate 10 and followed the backup car across more empty blackness all the way to Interstate 20, about a hundred miles west of where Reacher had forced his way out of Carmen’s Cadillac sixty hours previously. The sergeant slowed the car and let the backup disappear ahead into the darkness. He braked and pulled off onto the shoulder a hundred yards short of the cloverleaf.

“We’re back on patrol from here,” he said. “Time to let you out.”

“Can’t you drive me to the jail?”

“You’re not going to jail. You haven’t done anything. And we’re not a taxicab company.”

“So where am I?”

The sergeant pointed straight ahead.

“Downtown Pecos,” he said. “Couple miles, that way.”

“Where’s the jail?”

“Crossroads before the railroad. In the courthouse basement.”

The sergeant opened his door and slid out and stretched. Stepped back and

opened Reacher's door with a flourish. Reacher slid out feet first and stood up. It was still hot. Haze hid the stars. Lonely vehicles whined by on the highway bridge, few enough in number that absolute silence descended between each one. The shoulder was sandy, and stunted velvet mesquite and wild indigo struggled at its margin. The cruiser's headlights picked out old dented beer cans tangled among the stalks.

"You take care now," the sergeant said.

He climbed back into his seat and slammed his door. The car crunched its way back to the blacktop and curved to the right, onto the cloverleaf, up onto the highway. Reacher stood and watched its taillights disappear in the east. Then he set off walking north, under the overpass, toward the neon glow of Pecos.

He walked through one pool of light after another, along a strip of motels that got smarter and more expensive the farther he moved away from the highway. Then there was a rodeo arena set back from the street with posters still in place from a big event a month ago. *There's a rodeo there in July,* Carmen had said. *But you've missed it for this year*. He walked in the road because the sidewalks had long tables set up on them, like outdoor market stalls. They were all empty. But he could smell cantaloupe on the hot night air. *The sweetest in the whole of Texas*, she had said. *Therefore in their opinion, in the whole of the world*. He guessed an hour before dawn old trucks would roll in loaded with ripe fruit from the fields, maybe hosed down with irrigation water to make it look dewy and fresh and attractive. Maybe the old trucks would have whole families crammed in the cabs ready to unload and sell all day and find out whether their winter was going to be good or bad, lean or prosperous. But really he knew nothing at all about agriculture. All his ideas came from the movies. Maybe it was all different in reality. Maybe there were government subsidies involved, or giant corporations.

Beyond the cantaloupe market was a pair of eating places. There was a doughnut shop, and a pizza parlor. Both of them were dark and closed up tight. Sunday, the middle of the night, miles from anywhere. At the end of the strip was a crossroads, with a sign showing the museum was straight across. But before the turn, on the right, was the courthouse. It was a nice enough building, but he

turn, on the right, was the courthouse. It was a nice enough building, but he didn't spend any time looking at it. Just ducked around the side to the back. No jail he had ever seen had an entrance on the street. There was a lit doorway in the back wall at semi-basement level with two cement steps leading down from a parking area. There was a dusty four-cylinder Chevrolet in one corner. The lot was fenced with razor wire and hung with large notices warning unauthorized parkers their cars would be towed. There were yellow lightbulbs mounted on the fence posts. Clouds of silent insects crowded each of them. The blacktop was still hot under his feet. No cooling breezes back there. The jail door was scarred steel and had No Admittance stenciled across it in faded paint. Above it was a small video camera angled down, with a red diode glowing above the lens.

He went down the steps and knocked hard on the door. Stepped back a pace so the camera could pick him up. Nothing happened for a long moment. He stepped forward and knocked again. There was the click of a lock and a woman opened the door. She was dressed in a court bailiff's uniform. She was white, maybe fifty, with gray hair dyed the color of sand. She had a wide belt loaded with a gun and a nightstick and a can of pepper spray. She was heavy and slow, but she looked awake and on the ball.

"Yes?" she said.

"You got Carmen Greer in here?"

"Yes."

"Can I see her?"

"No."

"Not even for a minute?"

"Not even."

"So when can I?"

"You family?"

"I'm a friend."

"Not a lawyer, right?"

“No.”

“Then Saturday,” the woman said. “Visiting is Saturday, two to four.”

Almost a week.

“Can you write that down for me?” he said. He wanted to get inside. “Maybe give me a list of what I’m allowed to bring her?”

The bailiff shrugged and turned and stepped inside. Reacher followed her into the dry chill of an air conditioner running on high. There was a lobby. The bailiff had a high desk, like a lectern. Like a barrier. Behind it were cubbyholes covering the back wall. He saw Carmen’s lizard-skin belt rolled into one of them. There was a small Ziploc bag with the fake ring in it. Off to the right was a barred door. A tiled corridor beyond.

“How is she?” he asked.

The bailiff shrugged again. “She ain’t happy.”

“About what?”

“About the cavity search, mainly. She was screaming fit to burst. But rules are rules. And what, she thinks I enjoy it either?”

She pulled a mimeographed sheet from a stack. Slid it across the top of the desk.

“Saturday, two to four,” she said. “Like I told you. And don’t bring her anything that’s not on the list, or we won’t let you in.”

“Where’s the DA’s office?”

She pointed at the ceiling. “Second floor. Go in the front.”

“When does it open?”

“About eight-thirty.”

“You got bail bondsmen in the neighborhood?”

She smiled. “Ever see a courthouse that didn’t? Turn left at the crossroads.”

“What about lawyers?”

“Cheap lawyers or expensive lawyers?”

“Free lawyers.”

She smiled again.

“Same street,” she said. “That’s all it is, bondsmen and community lawyers.”

“Sure I can’t see her?”

“Saturday, you can see her all you want.”

“Not now? Not even for a minute?”

“Not even.”

“She’s got a daughter,” Reacher said, irrelevantly.

“Breaks my heart,” the woman said back.

“When will you see her?”

“Every fifteen minutes, whether she likes it or not. Suicide watch, although I don’t think your friend is the type. You can tell pretty easy. And she’s a tough cookie. That’s my estimation. But rules are rules, right?”

“Tell her Reacher was here.”

“Who?”

“Reacher. Tell her I’ll stick around.”

The woman nodded, like she’d seen it all, which she probably had.

“I’m sure she’ll be thrilled,” she said.

Then Reacher walked back to the motel strip, remembering all the jailhouse duty he’d pulled early in his career, wishing he could put his hand on his heart and say he’d acted a whole lot better than the woman he’d just met.

He walked almost all the way back to the highway, until the prices ducked under thirty bucks. Picked a place and woke the night clerk and bought the key to a room near the end of the row. It was worn and faded and crusted with the kind of dirt that shows the staff isn't all the way committed to excellence. The bedding was limp and the air smelled dank and hot, like they saved power by turning the air conditioning off when the room wasn't rented. But it was serviceable. One advantage of being ex-military was almost any place was serviceable. There was always somewhere worse to compare it with.

He slept restlessly until seven in the morning and showered in tepid water and went out for breakfast at the doughnut shop halfway back to the courthouse. It was open early and advertised Texas-sized doughnuts. They were larger than normal, and more expensive. He ate two with three cups of coffee. Then he went looking for clothes. Since he ended his brief flirtation with owning a house he had gone back to his preferred system of buying cheap items and junking them instead of laundering them. It worked well for him. It kept the permanence monkey off his back, literally.

He found a cheap store that had already been open an hour. It sold a little bit of everything, from bales of cheap toilet paper to work boots. He found a rack of chinos with the brand labels cut out. Maybe they were flawed. Maybe they were stolen. He found the right size and paired them with a khaki shirt. It was thin and cut loose like something from Hawaii, but it was plain, and it cost less than a Texas-sized doughnut. He found white underwear. The store had no fitting rooms. It wasn't that kind of a place. He talked the clerk into letting him use the staff bathroom. He put on the new gear and transferred his stuff from pocket to pocket. He still had the eight shell cases from Carmen's Lorcin, rattling around like loose change. He weighed them in his hand and then dropped them in his new pants pocket.

He balled up the old clothes and stuffed them in the bathroom trash. Went back out to the register and paid thirty bucks in cash. He might get three days out of it. Ten bucks a day, just for clothes, made no sense at all until you figured a washing machine cost four hundred and a dryer another three and the basement to put them in implied a house, which cost at least a hundred grand to buy and then tens of thousands a vear in taxes and maintenance and insurance and

associated bullshit. Then ten bucks a day for clothes suddenly made all the sense in the world.

He waited on the sidewalk until eight o'clock, leaning against a wall under an awning to stay out of the sun. He figured the bailiffs would change shifts at eight. That would be normal. And sure enough at five minutes past he saw the heavy woman drive herself out of the lot in the dusty four-cylinder Chevrolet. She made a left and drove right past him. He crossed the street and walked down the side of the courthouse again. *If the night shift won't help you, maybe the day shift will*. Night workers are always tougher. Less regular contact with the public, less immediate supervision, makes them think they're king of the castle.

But the day worker was just as bad. He was a man, a little younger, a little thinner, but otherwise the exact equivalent of his opposite number. The conversation was just the same. *Can I see her? No. When, then? Saturday. Is she O.K.? As well as can be expected*. It sounded like something you would hear in front of a hospital, from a cautious spokesperson. The guy confirmed that only lawyers were allowed unrestricted access to the prisoners. So Reacher came back up the steps and went out looking for a lawyer.

It was clear that the events of the previous night had left the red house stunned and quiet. And depopulated, which suited the killing crew just fine. The ranch hands weren't there, the tall stranger was gone, and Carmen Greer was gone. And her husband, obviously. That left just the old woman, the second son, and the granddaughter. Three of them, all at home. It was Monday, but the kid hadn't gone to school. The bus came and went without her. She just hung around, in and out of the barn. She looked confused and listless. They all did. Which made them easier to watch. Better targets.

The two men were behind a rock, opposite the ranch gate, well hidden and elevated about twenty feet up the slope. Their view was good enough. The woman had dropped them three hundred yards north and driven back toward Pecos.

"When do we do this?" they had asked her.

“When I say,” she had replied.

Reacher turned left at the crossroads in the center of Pecos and followed a street that ran parallel with the railroad tracks. He passed the bus depot and hit a strip that might have started out as anything but now was made up entirely of low-rent operations serving the courthouse population, bail bondsmen and storefront legal missions, like the night shift woman had said. The legal missions all had rows of desks facing the store windows with customer chairs in front of them and waiting areas inside the doors. All of them were grimy and undecorated and messy, with piles of files everywhere, and notes and memos taped and tacked to the walls next to the desks. Twenty past eight in the morning, they were all busy. They all had patient knots of people waiting inside and anxious clients perched on the customer chairs. Some of the clients were on their own, but most of them were in family groups, some of them with a bunch of children. All of them were Hispanic. So were some of the lawyers, but overall they were a mixed bunch. Men, women, young, old, bright, defeated. The only thing they had in common was they all looked harassed to the breaking point.

He chose the only establishment that had an empty chair in front of a lawyer. It was halfway down the street and the chair was way in back of the store and the lawyer was a young white woman of maybe twenty-five with thick dark hair cut short. She had a good tan and was wearing a white sports bra instead of a shirt and there was a leather jacket slung over the back of her chair. She was nearly hidden behind two tall stacks of files. She was on the phone, and she was at the point of tears.

He approached her desk and waited for a *sit down* gesture. He didn’t get one, but he sat down anyway. She glanced at him and glanced away. Kept on talking into the phone. She had dark eyes and white teeth. She was talking slow Spanish with an East Coast accent, haltingly enough that he could follow most of it. She was saying *yes, we won*. Then *but he won’t pay. He simply won’t. He just refuses*. Time to time she would stop and listen to whoever was on the other end. Then she would repeat herself. *We won, but he still won’t pay*. Then she listened again. The question must have been *so what do we do now*, because she said *we go back to court, to enforce the judgment*. Then the question was obviously *how*

long does that take because she went very quiet and said *a year. Maybe two*. Reacher heard clear silence at the other end and watched the woman's face. She was upset and embarrassed and humiliated. Blinking back tears of bitter frustration. She said, "*Llamaré de nuevo más tarde"* and hung up. *I'll call again soon*.

Then she faced front and closed her eyes and breathed deeply through her nose, in and out, in and out. She rested her hands palms-down on the desk. Breathed some more. Maybe it was a relaxation technique they taught you in law school. But it didn't seem to be working. She opened her eyes and dropped a file into a drawer and focused between the piles of paper across the desk at Reacher.

"Problem?" he asked her.

She shrugged and nodded all at the same time. An all-purpose expression of misery.

"Winning the case is only half the battle," she said. "Sometimes, a lot less than half, believe me."

"So what happened?"

She shook her head. "We don't need to go into it."

"Some guy won't pay up?" Reacher said.

She shrugged and nodded again.

"A rancher," she said. "Crashed his car into my client's truck. Injured my client and his wife and two of his children. It was early in the morning. He was on his way back from a party, drunk. They were on their way to market. It was harvest time and they couldn't work the fields and they lost their whole crop."

"Cantaloupe?"

"Bell peppers, actually. Rotted on the vine. We sued and won twenty thousand dollars. But the guy won't pay. He just refuses. He's waiting them out. He plans to starve them back to Mexico, and he will, because if we have to go back to court it'll take at least another year and they can't live another whole year on fresh air, can they?"

“They didn’t have insurance?”

“Premiums are way too expensive. These people are barely scratching a living. All we could do was proceed directly against the rancher. Solid case, well presented, and we won. But the old guy is sitting tight, with a big smirk on his damn face.”

“Tough break,” Reacher said.

“Unbelievable,” she said. “The things these people go through, you just wouldn’t believe it. This family I’m telling you about, the border patrol killed their eldest son.”

“They did?”

She nodded. “Twelve years ago. They were illegals. Paid their life savings to some guide to get them here, and he just abandoned them in the desert. No food, no water, they’re holing up in the daytime and walking north at night, and a patrol chases them in the dark with rifles and kills their eldest boy. They bury him and walk on.”

“Anything get done about it?”

“Are you kidding? They were illegals. They couldn’t do anything. It happened all the time. Everybody’s got a story like that. And now they’re settled and been through the immigration amnesty, we try to get them to trust the law, and then something like this happens. I feel like such a fool.”

“Not your fault.”

“It is my fault. I should know better. *Trust us*, I tell them.”

She went quiet and Reacher watched her try to recover.

“Anyway,” she said, and then nothing more. She looked away. She was a good-looking woman. It was very hot. There was a single air conditioner stuck in the fanlight over the door, a big old thing, a long way away. It was doing its best.

“Anyway,” she said again. Looked at him. “How can I help you?”

“Not me,” Reacher said. “A woman I know.”

“She needs a lawyer?”

“She shot her husband. He was abusing her.”

“When?”

“Last night. She’s across the street, in jail.”

“Is he dead?”

Reacher nodded. “As a doornail.”

Her shoulders sagged. She opened a drawer and took out a yellow pad.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“My name?”

“You’re the one talking to me.”

“Reacher,” he said. “What’s your name?”

She wrote “Reacher” on the pad, first line.

“Alice,” she said. “Alice Amanda Aaron.”

“You should go into private practice. You’d be first in the Yellow Pages.”

She smiled, just a little.

“One day, I will,” she said. “This is a five-year bargain with my conscience.”

“Paying your dues?”

“Atoning,” she said. “For my good fortune. For going to Harvard Law. For coming from a family where twenty thousand dollars is a month’s common charge on the Park Avenue co-op instead of life or death during the winter in Texas.”

“Good for you, Alice,” he said.

“So tell me about your woman friend.”

“She’s of Mexican heritage and her husband was white. Her name is Carmen Greer and her husband was Sloop Greer.”

“Sloop?”

“Like a boat.”

“O.K.,” Alice said, and wrote it all down.

“The abuse stopped for the last year and a half because he was in prison for tax evasion. He got out yesterday and started it up again and she shot him.”

“O.K.”

“Evidence and witnesses are going to be hard to find. The abuse was covert.”

“Injuries?”

“Fairly severe. But she always passed them off as accidental, to do with horses.”

“Horses?”

“Like she fell off of them.”

“Why?”

Reacher shrugged. “I don’t know. Family dynamic, coercion, shame, fear, embarrassment, maybe.”

“But there’s no doubt the abuse happened?”

“Not in my mind.”

Alice stopped writing. Stared down at the yellow paper.

“Well, it’s not going to be easy,” she said. “Texas law isn’t *too* far behind the times on spousal abuse, but I’d prefer lots of clear evidence. But his spell in prison helps us. Not a model citizen, is he? We could plead it down to involuntary manslaughter. Maybe settle for time served, with probation. If we

work hard, we stand a chance."

"It was justifiable homicide, not manslaughter."

"I'm sure it was, but it's a question of what will work, and what won't."

"And she needs bail," Reacher said. "Today."

Alice looked up from the paper and stared at him.

"Bail?" she repeated, like it was a foreign word. "Today? Forget about it."

"She's got a kid. A little girl, six and a half."

She wrote it down.

"Doesn't help," she said. "Everybody's got kids."

She ran her fingers up and down the tall stacks of files.

"They've all got kids," she said again. "Six and a half, one and a half, two kids, six, seven, ten."

"She's called Ellie," Reacher said. "She needs her mother."

Alice wrote "Ellie" on the pad, and connected it with an arrow to "Carmen Greer."

"Only two ways to get bail in a case like this," she said. "First way is we stage essentially the whole trial at the bail hearing. And we're not ready to do that. It'll be months before I can even *start* working on it. My calendar is totally full. And even when I *can* start, it'll take months to prepare, in these circumstances."

"What circumstances?"

"Her word against a dead man's reputation. If we've got no eyewitnesses, we'll have to subpoena her medical records and find experts who can testify her injuries weren't caused by falling off horses. And clearly she's got no money, or you wouldn't be in here on her behalf, so we're going to have to find some experts who'll appear for free. Which isn't impossible, but it can't be done in a hurry."

“So what can be done in a hurry?”

“I can run over to the jail and say ‘Hi, I’m your lawyer, I’ll see you again in a year.’ That’s about all can be done in a hurry.”

Reacher glanced around the room. It was teeming with people.

“Nobody else will be faster,” Alice said. “I’m relatively new here. I’ve got less of a backlog.”

It seemed to be true. She had just two head-high stacks of files on her desk. The others all had three or four or five.

“What’s the second way?”

“Of what?”

“Getting bail. You said there were two ways.”

She nodded. “Second way is we convince the DA not to oppose it. If we stand up and ask for bail and he stands up and says he has no objection, then all that matters is whether the judge thinks it’s appropriate. And the judge will be influenced by the DA’s position, probably.”

“Hack Walker was Sloop Greer’s oldest buddy.”

Alice’s shoulder’s sagged again.

“Great,” she said. “He’ll recuse himself, obviously. But his staff will go to bat for him. So forget bail. It isn’t going to happen.”

“But will you take the case?”

“Sure I will. That’s what we do here. We take cases. So I’ll call Hack’s office, and I’ll go see Carmen. But that’s all I can do right now. You understand? Apart from that, right now taking the case is the same thing as not taking the case.”

Reacher sat still for a second. Then he shook his head.

“Not good enough, Alice,” he said. “I want you to get to work right now. Make something happen.”

“I can’t,” she said. “Not for months. I told you that.”

She went quiet and he watched her for a second more.

“You interested in a deal?” he asked.

“A deal?”

“Like I help you, you help me.”

“How can you help me?”

“There are things I could do for you. Like, I could recover the twenty grand for your pepper growers. Today. And then you could start work for Carmen Greer. Today.”

“What are you, a debt collector?”

“No, but I’m a quick learner. It’s probably not rocket science.”

“I can’t let you do that. It’s probably illegal. Unless you’re registered somewhere.”

“Just suppose the next time you saw me I was walking back in here with a check for twenty grand in my pocket?”

“How would you do that?”

He shrugged. “I’d just go ask the guy for it.”

“And that would work?”

“It might,” he said.

She shook her head. “It would be unethical.”

“As opposed to what?”

She didn’t answer for a long time. Just stared off somewhere behind his head. But then he saw her glance down at the phone. He saw her rehearsing the good news call in her mind.

“Who’s the rancher?” he asked.

She glanced at the drawer. Shook her head again.

“I can’t tell you,” she said. “I’m worried about the ethics.”

“I’m offering,” he said. “You’re not asking.”

She sat still.

“I’m volunteering,” he said. “Like a paralegal assistant.”

She looked straight at him.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” she said.

She stood up suddenly and walked away. She was wearing denim shorts, and she was taller than he had guessed. Short shorts, long legs. A fine tan. Walking, she looked pretty good from the back. She went through a door in the rear wall of the old store. He stood up and leaned over the desk and pulled open the drawer. Lifted the top file out and reversed it so he could read it. It was full of legal paper. He shuffled through to some kind of a deposition printed on a single sheet. There was a name and address typed neatly in a box labeled “Defendant.” He folded the paper into quarters and put it in his shirt pocket. Closed the file and dropped it back in the drawer. Hooked the drawer shut and sat down again. A moment later Alice Amanda Aaron came out through the rear door and walked back to the desk. She looked pretty good from the front, too.

“Any place around here I can borrow a car?” he asked her.

“You don’t have one?”

He shook his head.

“Well, you can borrow mine, I guess,” she said. “It’s in the lot, behind the building.”

She fiddled in her jacket pocket, behind her. Came out with a set of keys.

“It’s a VW,” she said.

He took the keys from her.

“There are maps in the glove compartment,” she said. “You know, in case a person isn’t familiar with the area.”

He pushed back from the desk.

“Maybe I’ll catch you later,” he said.

She said nothing. He stood up and walked through the quiet crowd of people and out into the sun.

11

Alice’s car was the only VW in the lot behind the building. It was baking in the sun right in the center, a new-shape Beetle, bright yellow in color, New York plates, about a year and a half old, and there was more than a bunch of maps in the glove compartment. There was a handgun in there, too.

It was a beautiful nickel-finished Heckler & Koch P7M10, four-inch barrel, ten .40 caliber shells. In Reacher’s day the army had wanted the same thing in the 9mm blued-steel version, but the defense department had balked at the cost, which must have been about sixteen times the price of Carmen Greer’s eighty-dollar Lorcin. It was a fine, fine piece. One of the best available. Maybe it was a gift from the family back on Park Avenue. Maybe the car was, too. He could just imagine it. The VW was an easy choice. The perfect graduation present. But the gun might have caused some consternation. The parents would have been sitting up there on their high floor in New York, worrying about it. *She’s going to work where? With poor people? She’ll need protection, surely*. So they would have researched the whole matter thoroughly and gone out and bought her the best on the market, like they would have bought her a Rolex if she had needed a watch.

Out of habit he took it apart and checked the action and reassembled it. It was new, but it had been fired and cleaned maybe four or five times. It spoke of conscientious hours put in at the practice range. Maybe some exclusive Manhattan basement. He smiled. Slotted it back in the glove compartment under

the maps. Then he racked the seat all the way back and fiddled with the key and fired the engine up and started the air running. He took the maps out of the glove compartment and spread them on the empty seat beside him. Took the folded paper from his shirt pocket and checked the maps for the rancher's address. It seemed to be somewhere north and east of town, maybe an hour away if he hustled hard.

The VW had a manual transmission with a sharp clutch and he stalled out twice before he got the hang of driving it. He felt awkward and conspicuous. The ride was firm and there was some kind of a bud vase attached to the dash, loaded with a little pink bloom that was reviving steadily as the car got colder. There was subtle perfume in the air. He had learned to drive nearly twenty-five years before, underage and illegally, in a Marine Corps deuce-and-a-half with the driving seat six feet off the ground, and he felt about as far away from that experience as it was possible to get.

The map showed seven ways out of Pecos. He had come in on the southernmost, and it didn't have what he was looking for. So he had six to cover. His instinct led him west. The town's center of gravity seemed to be lumped to the east of the crossroads, therefore east would be definitely wrong. So he drove away from the lawyers and the bondsmen in the direction of El Paso and followed a slight right-hand curve and found exactly what he wanted, all spread out in front of him and receding into the distance. Every town of any size has a strip of auto dealers clustered together on one of the approaches, and Pecos was no different.

He cruised up the strip and turned around and cruised back, looking for the right kind of place. There were two possibilities. Both of them had gaudy signs offering Foreign Car Service. Both of them offered Free Loaners. He chose the place farther out of town. It had a used car business in front with a dozen clunkers decked with flags and low prices on their windshields. An office in a trailer. Behind the sales lot was a long low shed with hydraulic hoists. The floor of the shed was oil-stained earth. There were four mechanics visible. One of them was halfway underneath a British sports car. The other three were unoccupied. A slow start to a hot Monday morning.

He drove the yellow VW right into the shed. The three unoccupied mechanics drifted over to it. One of them looked like a foreman. Reacher asked him to adjust the VW's clutch so its action would be softer. The guy looked happy to be offered the work. He said it would cost forty bucks. Reacher agreed to the price and asked for a loaner. The guy led him behind the shed and pointed to an

and asked for a loaner. The guy led him behind the shed and pointed to an ancient Chrysler LeBaron convertible. It had been white once, but now it was khaki with age and sunlight. Reacher took Alice's gun with him, wrapped up in her maps like a store-bought package. He placed it on the Chrysler's passenger seat. Then he asked the mechanic for a tow rope.

"What you want to tow?" the guy asked.

"Nothing," Reacher said. "I just want the rope, is all."

"You want a rope, but you don't want to tow anything?"

"You got it," Reacher said.

The guy shrugged and walked away. Came back with a coil of rope. Reacher put it in the passenger footwell. Then he drove the LeBaron back into town and out again heading north and east, feeling a whole lot better about the day. Only a fool would try unlicensed debt-collecting in the wilds of Texas in a bright yellow car with New York plates and a bud vase on the dash.

He stopped once in empty country, to unscrew the Chrysler's plates with a penny from his pocket. He stored them on the floor on the passenger's side, next to the coil of rope. Put the bolts in the glove compartment. Then he drove on, looking for his destination. He was maybe three hours north of the Greer place, and the land looked pretty much the same, except it was better irrigated. Grass was growing. The mesquite had been burned back. There were cultivated acres, with green bushes all over them. Peppers, maybe. Or cantaloupe. He had no idea. There was wild indigo on the shoulders of the road. An occasional prickly pear. No people. The sun was high and the horizons were shimmering.

The rancher's name was listed on the legal paper as Lyndon J. Brewer. His address was just a route number, which Alice's map showed was a stretch of road that ran about forty miles before it disappeared into New Mexico. It was the same sort of road as the drag heading south out of Echo down to the Greer place, a dusty blacktop ribbon and a string of drooping power lines punctuated by big ranch gates about every fifteen miles. The ranches had names, which weren't necessarily going to be the names of the owners, like the Red House had

nowhere been labeled Greer. So finding Lyndon J. Brewer in person wasn't necessarily going to be easy.

But then it was, because the road was crossed by another and the resulting crossroads had a line of mailboxes laid out along a gray weathered plank and the mailboxes had people's names and ranch names on them together. Brewer was painted freehand in black on a white box, and Big Hat Ranch was painted right below it.

He found the entrance to the Big Hat Ranch fifteen miles to the north. There was a fancy iron arch, painted white, like something you might see holding up a conservatory roof in Charleston or New Orleans. He drove right past it and stopped on the shoulder of the road at the foot of the next power line pole. Got out of the car and looked straight up. There was a big transformer can at the top of the pole where the line split off in a T and ran away at a right angle toward where the ranch house must be. And, looping parallel all the way, about a foot lower down, the telephone line ran with it.

He took Alice's gun from under the maps on the passenger seat and the rope from the footwell. Tied one end of the rope into the trigger guard with a single neat knot. Passed twenty feet of rope through his hands and swung the gun like a weight. Then he clamped the rope with his left hand and threw the gun with his right, aiming to slot it between the phone line and the electricity supply above it. The first time, he missed. The gun fell about a foot short and he caught it coming down. The second time he threw a little harder and hit it just right. The gun sailed through the gap and fell and snagged the rope over the wire. He played the rope out over his left palm and lowered the gun back down to himself. Untied it and tossed it back into the car and clamped the looped rope in both hands and pulled sharply. The phone line broke at the junction box and snaked down to the ground, all the way up to the next pole a hundred yards away.

He coiled the rope again and dropped it back in the footwell. Got in the car and backed up and turned in under the white-painted gate. Drove the best part of a mile down a private driveway to a white-painted house that should have been in a historical movie. It had four massive columns at the front, holding up a second-story balcony. There were broad steps leading up to a double front door. There was a tended lawn. A parking area made from raked gravel.

He stopped the car on the gravel at the bottom of the steps and shut off the motor. Tucked his shirt tight into the waistband of his pants. Some girl who

motor. Tucked his shirt tight into the waistband of his pants. Some girl who worked as a personal trainer had told him it made his upper body look more triangular. He slipped the gun into his right hip pocket. Its shape showed through nicely. Then he rolled the sleeves of his new shirt all the way up to the shoulders. Gripped the LeBaron's wheel and squeezed until it started to give and the veins in his biceps were standing out big and obvious. When you've got arms bigger than most people's legs, sometimes you need to exploit what nature has given you.

He got out of the car and went up the steps. Used a bell he found to the right of the doors. Heard a chime somewhere deep inside the mansion. Then he waited. He was about to use the bell again when the left-hand door opened. There was a maid standing there, about half the height of the door. She was dressed in a gray uniform and looked like she came from the Philippines.

"I'm here to see Lyndon Brewer," Reacher said.

"Do you have an appointment?" the maid said. Her English was very good.

"Yes, I do."

"He didn't tell me."

"He probably forgot," Reacher said. "I understand he's a bit of an asshole."

Her face tensed. Not with shock. She was fighting a smile.

"Who shall I announce?"

"Rutherford B. Hayes," Reacher said.

The maid paused and then smiled, finally.

"He was the nineteenth President," she said. "The one after Ulysses S. Grant. Born 1822 in Ohio. Served from 1877 until 1881. One of seven presidents from Ohio. The middle one of three consecutive."

"He's my ancestor," Reacher said. "I'm from Ohio, too. But I've got no interest in politics. Tell Mr. Brewer I work for a bank in San Antonio and we just discovered stock in his grandfather's name worth about a million dollars."

"He'll be excited about that," the maid said.

"He'll be excited about that," the maid said.

She walked away and Reacher stepped through the door in time to see her climbing a wide staircase in back of the entrance foyer. She moved neatly, without apparent effort, one hand on the rail all the way. The foyer was the size of a basketball court, and it was hushed and cool, paneled in golden hardwood polished to a deep luster by generations of maids. There was a grandfather clock taller than Reacher, ticking softly to itself once a second. An antique chaise like you see society women perched on in oil-painted portraits. Reacher wondered if it would break in the middle if he put his weight on it. He pressed on the velvet with his hand. Felt horsehair padding under it. Then the maid came back down the stairs the same way she had gone up, gliding, her body perfectly still and her hand just grazing the rail.

"He'll see you now," she said. "He's on the balcony, at the back of the house."

There was an upstairs foyer with the same dimensions and the same decor. French doors let out onto the rear balcony, which ran the whole width of the house and looked out over acres of hot grassland. It was roofed and fans turned lazily near the ceiling. There was heavy wicker furniture painted white and arranged in a group. A man sat in a chair with a small table at his right hand. The table held a pitcher and a glass filled with what looked like lemonade, but it could have been anything. The man was a bull-necked guy of about sixty. He was softened and faded from a peak that might have been impressive twenty years ago. He had plenty of white hair and a red face burned into lines and crags by the sun. He was dressed all in white. White pants, white shirt, white shoes. It looked like he was ready to go lawn bowling at some fancy country club.

"Mr. Hayes?" he called.

Reacher walked over and sat down without waiting for an invitation.

"You got children?" he asked.

"I have three sons," Brewer replied.

"Any of them at home?"

"They're all away, working."

"Your wife?"

“She’s in Houston, visiting.”

“So it’s just you and the maid today?”

“Why do you ask?” He was impatient and puzzled, but polite, like people are when you’re about to give them a million dollars.

“I’m a banker,” Reacher said. “I have to ask.”

“Tell me about the stock,” Brewer said.

“There is no stock. I lied about that.”

Brewer looked surprised. Then disappointed. Then irritated.

“Then why are you here?” he asked.

“It’s a technique we use,” Reacher said. “I’m really a loan officer. A person needs to borrow money, maybe he doesn’t want his domestic staff to know.”

“But I don’t need to borrow money, Mr. Hayes.”

“You sure about that?”

“Very.”

“That’s not what we heard.”

“I’m a rich man. I lend. I don’t borrow.”

“Really? We heard you had problems meeting your obligations.”

Brewer made the connection slowly. Shock traveled through his body to his face. He stiffened and grew redder and glanced down at the shape of the gun in Reacher’s pocket, like he was seeing it for the first time. Then he put his hand down to the table and came back with a small silver bell. He shook it hard and it made a small tinkling sound.

“Maria!” he called, shaking the bell. “Maria!”

The maid came out of the same door Reacher had used. She walked soundlessly

The maid came out of the same door Reacher had used. She walked soundlessly along the boards of the balcony.

“Call the police,” Brewer ordered. “Dial 911. I want this man arrested.”

She hesitated.

“Go ahead,” Reacher said. “Make the call.”

She ducked past them and into the room directly behind Brewer’s chair. It was some kind of a private study, dark and masculine. Reacher heard the sound of a phone being picked up. Then the sound of rapid clicking, as she tried to make it work.

“The phones are out,” she called.

“Go wait downstairs,” Reacher called back.

“What do you want?” Brewer asked.

“I want you to meet your legal obligation.”

“You’re not a banker.”

“That’s a triumph of deduction.”

“So what are you?”

“A guy who wants a check,” Reacher said. “For twenty thousand dollars.”

“You represent those . . . *people*?”

He started to stand up. Reacher put his arm out straight and shoved him back in his chair, hard enough to hurt.

“Sit still,” he said.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because I’m a compassionate guy,” Reacher said. “That’s why. There’s a family in trouble here. They’re going to be upset and worried all winter long. Disaster staring them in the face. Never knowing which day is going to bring

everything crashing down around them. I don't like to see people living that way, whoever they are."

"They don't like it, they should get back to Mexico, where they belong."

Reacher glanced at him, surprised.

"I'm not talking about *them*," he said. "I'm talking about *you*. Your family."

"My family?"

Reacher nodded. "I stay mad at you, they'll all suffer. A car wreck here, a mugging there. You might fall down the stairs, break your leg. Or your wife might. The house might catch on fire. Lots of accidents, one after the other. You'll never know when the next one is coming. It'll drive you crazy."

"You couldn't get away with it."

"I'm getting away with it right now. I could start today. With you."

Brewer said nothing.

"Give me that pitcher," Reacher said.

Brewer hesitated a moment. Then he picked it up and held it out, like an automaton. Reacher took it. It was fancy crystal with a cut pattern, maybe Waterford, maybe imported all the way from Ireland. It held a quart and probably cost a thousand bucks. He balanced it on his palm and sniffed its contents. Lemonade. Then he tossed it over the edge of the balcony. Yellow liquid arced out through the air and a second later there was a loud crash from the patio below.

"Oops," he said.

"I'll have you arrested," Brewer said. "That's criminal damage."

"Maybe I'll start with one of your sons," Reacher said. "Pick one out at random and throw him off the balcony, just like that."

"I'll have you arrested," Brewer said again.

“Why? According to you, what the legal system says doesn’t matter. Or does that only apply to you? Maybe you think you’re something special.”

Brewer said nothing. Reacher stood up and picked up his chair and threw it over the rail. It crashed and splintered on the stone below.

“Give me the check,” he said. “You can afford it. You’re a rich man. You just got through telling me.”

“It’s a matter of principle,” Brewer said. “They shouldn’t be here.”

“And you should? Why? They were here first.”

“They lost. To us.”

“And now you’re losing. To me. What goes around, comes around.”

He bent down and picked up the silver bell from the table. It was probably an antique. Maybe French. The cup part was engraved with filigree patterns. Maybe two and a half inches in diameter. He held it with his thumb on one side and all four fingers on the other. Squeezed hard and crushed it out of shape. Then he transferred it into his palm and squashed the metal flat. Leaned over and shoved it in Brewer’s shirt pocket.

“I could do that to your head,” he said.

Brewer made no reply.

“Give me the check,” Reacher said, quietly. “Before I lose my damn temper.”

Brewer paused. Five seconds. Ten. Then he sighed.

“O.K.,” he said. He led the way into the study and over to the desk. Reacher stood behind him. He didn’t want any revolvers appearing suddenly out of drawers.

“Make it out to cash,” he said.

Brewer wrote the check. He got the date right, he got the amount right, and he signed it.

“It better not bounce,” Reacher said.

“It won’t,” Brewer said.

“It does, you do, too. Off the patio.”

“I hope you rot in hell.”

Reacher folded the check into his pocket and found the way out to the upstairs foyer. Went down the stairs and walked over to the grandfather clock. Tilted it forward until it overbalanced. It fell like a tree and smashed on the floor and stopped ticking.

The two men exfiltrated after nearly three hours. The heat was too brutal to stay longer. And they didn’t really need to. Nobody was going anywhere. That was clear. The old woman and her son stayed mostly in the house. The kid was hanging around in the barn, coming out now and then until the sun drove her back inside, once walking slowly back to the house when the maid called her to come and eat. So they gave it up and crawled north in the lee of the rocks and came out to wait on the dusty shoulder as soon as they were out of sight of the house. The woman in the Crown Vic turned up right on time. She had the air blasting and water in bottles. They drank the water and made their report.

“O.K.,” the woman said. “So I guess we’re ready to make our move.”

“I guess we are,” the dark man said.

“Sooner the better,” the fair man agreed. “Let’s get it done.”

Reacher put the plates back on the old LeBaron as soon as he was out of sight of the Brewer house. Then he drove straight back to Pecos and reclaimed Alice Aaron’s VW from the mechanics. He paid them their forty bucks without complaint, but afterward he wasn’t really sure they’d done anything to the car.

The clutch felt just as sharp as it had before. He stalled out twice on the way back to the legal mission.

He left it in the lot behind the building with the maps and the handgun in the glove compartment where he had found them. Entered the old store from the front and found Alice at her desk in back. She was on the phone and busy with clients. There was a whole family group in front of her. Three generations of quiet, anxious people. She had changed her clothes. Now she was wearing black high-waisted pants made out of some kind of thin cotton or linen, and a black jacket to match. The jacket made the white sports bra look like a shirt. The whole thing looked very formal. Instant attorney.

She saw him and put her hand over the phone and excused herself from her clients. She twisted away from them and he leaned down next to her.

“We’ve got big problems,” she said quietly. “Hack Walker wants to see you.”

“Me?” he said. “Why?”

“Better you hear it from him.”

“Hear what? Did you meet with him?”

She nodded. “I went right over. We talked for a half hour.”

“And? What did he say?”

“Better you hear it from him,” she said again. “We can talk about it later, O.K.?”

There was worry in her voice. He looked at her. She turned back to the phone. The family in front of her desk leaned forward to catch her words. He took the twenty-thousand-dollar check out of his pocket and unfolded it and smoothed it on the desktop. She saw it and stopped talking. Put her hand over the phone again. Took a deep breath.

“Thanks,” she said.

Now there was embarrassment in her voice. Like maybe she had reconsidered her end of the bargain. He dropped her car keys on the desk and walked back out to the sidewalk. Turned right and headed for the courthouse.

The Pecos County District Attorney's office occupied the whole of the courthouse's second floor. There was an entry door from the stairwell that led to a narrow passage that passed through a wooden gate into an open area used as a secretarial pen. Beyond that were three doors leading into three offices, one for the DA and one for each of the assistants. All the interior walls separating the offices from the pen and from each other were glass from the waist up. They had old-fashioned venetian blinds covering the glass, with wide wooden slats and cotton tapes. The whole place looked cramped and out-of-date. There were air conditioners in every external window. They were all set on high and their motors put a deep booming tone into the structure of the walls.

The secretarial pen had two cluttered desks, both of them occupied, the farther one by a middle-aged woman who looked like she belonged there, the nearer one by a young man who could have been an intern working his summer vacation from college. Clearly he doubled as the office receptionist, because he looked up with a bright *how may we help you* expression on his face.

"Hack Walker wants to see me," Reacher said.

"Mr. Reacher?" the kid asked.

Reacher nodded and the kid pointed to the corner office.

"He's expecting you," he said.

Reacher threaded his way through the cluttered space to the corner office. The door had a window with an acetate plaque below it. The plaque read Henry F. W. Walker, District Attorney. The window was covered on the inside by a closed blind. Reacher knocked once and went in without waiting for a reply.

The office had a window on each wall and a mess of filing cabinets and a big desk piled with paper and a computer and three telephones. Walker was in his chair behind it, leaning back, holding a photograph frame in both hands. It was a small wooden thing with a fiberboard tongue on the back that would prop it upright on a desk or a shelf. He was staring at the front of it. Some kind of serious distress on his face.

“What can I do for you?” Reacher asked.

Walker transferred his gaze from the photograph.

“Sit down,” he said. “Please.”

The hearty politician’s boom had gone from his voice. He sounded tired and ordinary. There was a client chair in front of the desk. Reacher picked it up and turned it sideways to give himself some legroom.

“What can I do for you?” he asked again.

“You ever had your life turned upside down overnight?”

Reacher nodded. “Now and then.”

Walker propped the photograph on the desk, sideways, so it was visible to both of them. It was the same color shot he had seen in Sloop Greer’s closet. The three young men leaning on the old pick-up’s fender, good friends, intoxicated with youth, on the cusp of infinite possibilities.

“Me and Sloop and Al Eugene,” he said. “Now Al’s a missing person and Sloop is dead.”

“No word on Eugene?”

Walker shook his head. “Not a thing.”

Reacher said nothing.

“We were such a threesome,” Walker said. “And you know how that goes. Isolated place like this, you get to be more than friends. It was us against the world.”

“Was Sloop his real name?”

Walker looked up. “Why do you ask?”

“Because I thought yours was Hack. But I see from the sign on your door it’s Henry.”

Walker nodded, and smiled a tired smile. “It’s Henry on my birth certificate. My folks call me Hank. Always did. But I couldn’t say it as a youngster, when I was learning to talk. It came out *Hack*. It kind of stuck.”

“But Sloop was for real?”

Walker nodded again. “It was Sloop Greer, plain and simple.”

“So what can I do for you?” Reacher asked for the third time.

“I don’t know, really,” Walker said. “Maybe just listen awhile, maybe clarify some things for me.”

“What kind of things?”

“I don’t know, really,” Walker said again. “Like, when you look at me, what do you see?”

“A district attorney.”

“And?”

“I’m not sure.”

Walker was quiet for a spell.

“You like what you see?” he asked.

Reacher shrugged. “Less and less, to be honest.”

“Why?”

“Because I come in here and find you getting all misty-eyed over your boyhood friendship with a crooked lawyer and a wife-beater.”

Walker looked away. “You certainly come straight to the point.”

“Life’s too short not to.”

There was silence for a second. Just the dull roar of all the air conditioner motors, rising and falling as they slipped in and out of phase with each other.

“Actually I’m three things,” Walker said. “I’m a man, I’m a DA, and I’m running for judge.”

“So?”

“Al Eugene isn’t a crooked lawyer. Far from it. He’s a good man. He’s a campaigner. And he needs to be. Fact is, structurally, the state of Texas is not big on protecting the rights of the accused. The *indigent* accused, even worse. You know that, because you had to find a lawyer for Carmen yourself, and that can only be because you were told she wouldn’t get a court appointment for months. And the lawyer you found must have told you she’s still looking at months and months of delay. It’s a bad system, and I’m aware of it, and Al is aware of it. The Constitution guarantees access to counsel, and Al takes that promise very seriously. He makes himself available to anybody who can find his door. He gives them fair representation, whoever they are. Inevitably some of them are bad guys, but don’t forget the Constitution applies to bad guys too. But most of his clients are O.K. Most of them are just poor, is all, black or white or Hispanic.”

Reacher said nothing.

“So let me take a guess,” Walker said. “I don’t know where you heard Al called crooked, but a buck gets ten it was from an older white person with money or position.”

It was Rusty Greer, Reacher thought.

“Don’t tell me who,” Walker said. “But ten gets a hundred I’m right. A person like that sees a lawyer sticking up for poor people or colored people, and they regard it as a nuisance, or as an unpleasantness, and then as some kind of treachery against their race or their class, and from there on it’s a pretty easy jump to calling it crooked.”

“O.K.,” Reacher said. “Maybe I’m wrong about Eugene.”

“I guarantee you’re wrong about him. I guarantee you could go back to the very day he passed the bar exam and not find any crooked behavior, anywhere at all.”

He placed his fingernail on the photograph, just below Al Eugene’s chin.

“He’s my friend,” he said. “And I’m happy about that. As a man, and as a DA.”

He's my friend," he said. "And I'm happy about that. As a man, and as a DA."

"What about Sloop Greer?"

Walker nodded. "We'll get to that. But first let me tell you about being a DA."

"What's to tell?"

"Same kind of stuff. I'm like Al. I believe in the Constitution, and the rule of law, and impartiality, and fairness. I can absolutely guarantee you could turn this office upside down and never find one single case where I've been less than fair and impartial. I've been tough, sure, and I've sent lots of people to prison, and some of them to death row, but I've never done anything if I wasn't absolutely convinced it was right."

"Sounds like a stump speech," Reacher said. "But I'm not registered to vote."

"I know," Walker said. "I checked, finally. That's why I'm talking like this. If this was politics, it would be too hokey for words. But this is for real. I want to be a judge, because I could do some good. You familiar with how things work in Texas?"

"Not really."

"Judges in Texas are all elected. They have a lot of power. And it's a weird state. A lot of rich people, but a lot of poor people, too. The poor people need court-appointed lawyers, obviously. But there's no public defender system in Texas. So the judges choose the poor people's lawyers for them. They just pick them out, from any old law firm they want. They're in control of the whole process. They determine the fees, too. It's patronage, pure and simple. So who is the judge going to appoint? He's going to appoint somebody who contributed to his election campaign. It's about cronyism, not fitness or talent. The judge hands out ten thousand dollars of taxpayer money to some favored law firm, the law firm assigns some incompetent lackey who puts in a hundred dollars' worth of work, the net result being nine thousand nine hundred dollars unearned profit for the law firm and some poor guy in jail for something he maybe didn't do. Most defense lawyers meet their clients for the first time at the start of the trial, right there in the courtroom. We've had drunk lawyers and lawyers who fall asleep at the defense table. They don't do any work. They don't check anything. Like, the year before I got here, some guy was on trial for the rape of a child. He was

convicted and went to prison for life. Then some pro-bono operation like you went and proved the guy had actually been in jail at the time the rape happened. In *jail*, Reacher. Fifty miles away. Awaiting trial for stealing a car. There was paperwork from here to there, proving it beyond any doubt, all of it in black and white in the public record. His first lawyer never even checked."

"Not too good," Reacher said.

"So I do two things," Walker said. "First, I aim to become a judge, so I can help to put things right in the future. Second, right now, right here in the DA's office, we act out both sides. Every single time, one of us assembles the prosecution case, and another of us does the defense's work and tries to tear it down. We work real hard at it, because we know nobody else will, and I couldn't sleep nights if we didn't."

"Carmen Greer's defense is rock solid," Reacher said.

Hack Walker looked down at the desk.

"No, the Greer situation is a nightmare," he said. "It's a total disaster, all ways around. For me personally, as a man, as a DA, and as a candidate for a judgeship."

"You have to recuse yourself."

Walker looked up. "Of course I'll recuse myself. No doubt about that. But it's still personal to me. And I'm still in overall charge. Whatever happens, it's still my *office*. And that'll have repercussions for me."

"You want to tell me what your problem is?"

"Don't you see? Sloop was my friend. And I'm an honest prosecutor. So in my heart and in my head, I want to see justice done. But I'm looking at sending a Hispanic *woman* to *death row*. I do that, I can forget about the election, can't I? This county is heavily Hispanic. But I want to be a judge. Because I could do some good. And asking for the death penalty against a minority woman *now* will stop me dead. Not just here. It will be headline news *everywhere*. Can you imagine? What's *The New York Times* going to say? They already think we're dumb redneck barbarians who marry our own cousins. It'll follow me the rest of my life."

“So don’t prosecute her. It wouldn’t be justice, anyhow. Because it was self-defense, pure and simple.”

“She got you convinced of that?”

“It’s obvious.”

“I wish it *was* obvious. I’d give my right arm. For the first time in my career, I’d twist and turn to make this go away.”

Reacher stared at him. “You don’t need to twist and turn. Do you?”

“Let’s talk it through,” Walker said. “Step by step, right from the beginning. The spousal-abuse defense can work, but it has to be white-heat, spur-of-the-moment stuff. You understand? That’s the law. There can’t be premeditation. And Carmen premeditated like crazy. That’s a fact, and it won’t go away. She bought the gun more or less immediately when she heard he was coming home. The paperwork comes through this office eventually, so I know that’s true. She was ready and waiting to ambush him.”

Reacher said nothing.

“I know her,” Walker said. “Obviously, I know her. Sloop was my friend, so I’ve known her as long as he did, near enough.”

“And?”

Walker shrugged, miserably. “There are problems.”

“What problems?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know how much I should say, legitimately. So I’m just going to take a few guesses, O.K.? And I don’t want you to respond at all. Not a word. It might put you in a difficult position.”

“Difficult how?”

“You’ll see, later. She probably told you she comes from a rich wine-growing family north of San Francisco, right?”

Reacher said nothing.

“She told you she met Sloop at UCLA, where they were students together.”

Reacher said nothing.

“She told you Sloop got her pregnant and they had to get married and as a consequence her parents cut her off.”

Reacher said nothing.

“She told you Sloop hit her from the time she was pregnant. She said there were serious injuries that Sloop made her pass off as riding accidents.”

Reacher said nothing.

“She claimed it was her who tipped off the IRS, which made her all the more frantic about Sloop coming home.”

Reacher said nothing.

“O.K.,” Walker said. “Now strictly speaking, anything she told you is merely hearsay and is inadmissible in court. Even though they were spontaneous statements that indicated how acute her anguish was. So in a situation like this, her lawyer will try hard to get the hearsay admitted, because it goes to her state of mind. And there *are* provisions that might allow it. Obviously most DAs would fight it, but this office wouldn’t. We’d tend to allow it, because we know marital abuse can be covert. My instinct would be to allow *anything* that gets us nearer to the truth. So let’s say you or a person like you were allowed to testify. You’d paint a pretty horrible picture, and in the circumstances, what with his return home looming over her and all, the jury might tend to be sympathetic. They might overlook the element of premeditation. She might get a not guilty verdict.”

“So where’s the problem?”

“Problem is, if you testified, you’d be cross-examined, too.”

“So?”

Walker looked down at the desk again. “Let me take a couple more guesses. Don’t respond. And please, if I’m guessing wrong, don’t be offended. If I’m

wrong, I apologize most sincerely in advance. O.K.?"

"O.K."

"My guess is the premeditation was extensive. My guess is she thought about it and then she tried to recruit you to do it for her."

Reacher said nothing.

"My guess is she didn't pick you up by accident. She selected you in some way and tried hard to persuade you."

Reacher said nothing. Walker swallowed.

"Another guess," he said. "She offered you sex as a bribe."

Reacher said nothing.

"Another guess," Walker said. "She didn't give up. At some stage, she tried again to get you into bed."

Reacher said nothing.

"You see?" Walker said. "If I'm right, and I think I am, because I *know* this woman, all that stuff would come out too, under cross-examination. Evidence of thorough preparation. Unless you were to lie on the stand. Or unless we didn't ask the right questions. But assuming we asked the right questions and you told us the truth, the whole premeditation issue would be damaged. Very seriously. Probably fatally."

Reacher said nothing.

"And it gets worse, I'm afraid," Walker said. "Much worse. Because if she's told you things, what matters then is her *credibility*, right? Specifically, was she telling you the truth about the abuse, or was she not? We'd test that by asking you questions we *do* know the answers to. So under cross-examination, we'd ask you innocent stuff first, like who she is and where she's from, and you'd tell us what she told you."

"And?"

“And her credibility would fall apart. Next stop, death by lethal injection.”

“Why?”

“Because I *know* this woman, and she makes things up.”

“What things?”

“Everything. I’ve heard her stories, over and over. Did she in fact tell you she’s from a rich wine-growing family?”

Reacher nodded. “More or less. She said she’s from a thousand acres in the Napa Valley. Isn’t she?”

Walker shook his head. “She’s from some barrio in South Central L.A. Nobody knows anything about her parents. She probably doesn’t, either.”

Reacher was quiet for a moment. Then he shrugged. “Disguising a humble background isn’t a crime.”

“She was never a student at UCLA. She was a stripper. She was a whore, Reacher. She serviced the UCLA frat parties, among other things. Sloop met her when she was performing. Part of her repertoire was an interesting little trick with a long-neck beer bottle. He fell for her, somehow. You know, *let me take you away from all this* sort of thing. I guess I can understand it. She’s cute now. She was stunning then. And smart. She looked at Sloop and saw a rich man’s son from Texas, with a big fat wallet. She saw a meal ticket. She went to live with him. Came off the pill and lied about it and got herself pregnant. Whereupon Sloop did the decent thing, because he was like that, in a gentlemanly way. She suckered him, and he let her.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Walker shrugged. “Doesn’t matter if you do or if you don’t, and I’ll tell you exactly why in a moment. But it’s all true, I’m afraid. She had brains. She knew what happens to whores when they get old. It goes right downhill, and it doesn’t start very high, does it? She wanted a way out, and Sloop was it. She bled him for years, diamonds, horses, everything.”

“I don’t believe you,” Reacher said again.

Walker nodded. “She’s very convincing. Can’t argue with that.”

“Even if it *is* true, does it justify him hitting her?”

Walker paused a beat.

“No, of course not,” he said. “But here’s the big problem. The thing is, he didn’t hit her. Never, Reacher. He wasn’t violent with her. Not ever. I *knew* Sloop. He was a lot of things, and to be absolutely honest about it, not all of them were good. He was lazy, he was a little casual in business. A little dishonest, to be truthful. I’m not wearing rose-colored spectacles. But all his faults came from the feeling he was a Texan gentleman. I’m very aware of that, because I was a poor boy by comparison. Practically trash. He had the big ranch and the money. It made him a little arrogant and superior, hence the laziness and the impatience with strict principle. But part of being a gentleman in Texas is you would *never, ever* hit a woman. Whoever the woman was. Not ever. So, she’s making all that up, too. I know it. He never hit her. I promise you that.”

Reacher shook his head. “What *you* promise me doesn’t prove a damn thing. I mean, what else would you say? You were his friend.”

Walker nodded again. “I take your point. But there’s nothing else to go on. There’s just nothing there. Absolutely no evidence, no witnesses, no nothing. We were close. I was with them a thousand times. I heard about the horseback riding accidents as they happened. There weren’t *that* many, and they seemed genuine. We’ll ask for the medical records, of course, but I don’t hold out much hope they’ll be ambiguous.”

“You said it yourself, abuse can be covert.”

“*That* covert? I’m a DA, Reacher. I’ve seen everything. Some lone couple in a trailer park, maybe. But Sloop and Carmen lived with family, and they saw friends every day. And before you told the story to Alice Aaron, nobody in the whole of Texas had ever heard the faintest whiff of a rumor about violence between them. Not me, not Al, nobody. So do you understand what I mean? There’s no evidence. All we’ve got is her word. And you’re the *only other person* who ever heard it. But if you take the stand to back her up, then her trial is over before it’s begun, because the *other* stuff you’ll have to say will prove she’s a pathological liar. Like, *did* she say she’d tipped off the IRS?”

“Yes, she did. She said she called them. Some special unit.”

Walker shook his head. “They caught him through bank records. It was just a purely accidental by-product of an audit on somebody else. She knew nothing about it. I know that *for sure*, for an absolute fact, because Sloop went straight to Al Eugene and Al came straight to me for advice. I saw the indictment. Black and white. Carmen is a liar, Reacher, pure and simple. Or maybe not pure and simple. Maybe there are some very complicated reasons behind it.”

Reacher paused a long moment.

“Maybe she is a liar,” he said. “But liars can still get abused, same as anybody else. And abuse can be covert. You don’t *know* it wasn’t happening.”

Walker nodded. “I agree. I don’t *know*. But I would bet my life it wasn’t.”

“She convinced me.”

“She probably convinced herself. She lives in a fantasy world. I *know* her, Reacher. She’s a liar, is all, and she’s guilty of first-degree homicide.”

“So why are we talking?”

Walker paused.

“Can I trust you?” he asked.

“Does it matter?” Reacher said.

Walker went very quiet. Just stared at his office wall, a whole minute, then another. And another. The boom of the air conditioners crowded into the silence.

“Yes, it matters,” he said. “It matters plenty. To Carmen, and to me. Because right now you’re reading me completely wrong. I’m not an angry friend trying to protect my old buddy’s reputation. Fact is, I *want* to find a defense for Carmen, don’t you see that? Even *invent* one. You know, maybe just *pretend* the abuse happened and back-pedal like crazy on the premeditation. I’m seriously tempted. Because then I don’t need to charge her at all and I can probably save my shot at the judgeship.”

The silence came back. Nothing but the air conditioner motors and telephones

ringing faintly outside the office door. The distant chatter of a fax machine.

“I want to go see her,” Reacher said.

Walker shook his head. “Can’t let you. You’re not her lawyer.”

“You could bend the rules.”

Walker sighed again and dropped his head into his hands. “Please, don’t tempt me. Right now I’m thinking about throwing the rules off the top of the building.”

Reacher said nothing. Walker stared into space, his eyes jumping with strain.

“I want to figure out her real motive,” he said finally. “Because if it was something real cold, like money, I don’t have a choice. She has to go down.”

Reacher said nothing.

“But if it wasn’t, I want you to help me,” Walker said. “If her medical records are remotely plausible, I want to try to save her with the abuse thing.”

Reacher said nothing.

“O.K., what I really mean is I want to try to save myself,” Walker said. “Try to save my chances in the election. Or both things, O.K.? Her *and* me. Ellie, too. She’s a great kid. Sloop loved her.”

“So what would you want from me?”

“If we go down that road.”

Reacher nodded. “If,” he said.

“I’d want you to lie on the stand,” Walker said. “I’d want you to repeat what she told you about the beatings, and modify what she told you about everything else, in order to preserve her credibility.”

Reacher said nothing.

“That’s why I need to trust you,” Walker said. “And that’s why I needed to lay everything out for you. So you know exactly what you’re getting into with her.”

“I’ve never done that sort of a thing before.”

“Neither have I,” Walker said. “It’s killing me just to talk about it.”

Reacher was quiet for a long moment.

“Why do you assume I’d want to?” he asked.

“I think you like her,” Walker said. “I think you feel sorry for her. I think you want to help her. Therefore indirectly you could help me.”

“How would you work it?”

Walker shrugged. “I’ll be withdrawn from the case from the start, so one of my assistants will be handling it. I’ll find out exactly what she can prove for sure, and I’ll coach you on it so you don’t get tripped up. That’s why I can’t let you go see Carmen now. They keep a record downstairs. It would look like prior collusion.”

“I don’t know,” Reacher said.

“I don’t, either. But maybe it won’t have to go all the way to trial. If the medical evidence is a little flexible, and we take a deposition from Carmen, and one from you, then maybe dropping the charges altogether would be justified.”

“Lying in a deposition would be just as bad.”

“Think about Ellie.”

“And your judgeship.”

Walker nodded. “I’m not hiding that from you. I want to get elected, no doubt about it. But it’s for an honest reason. I want to make things better, Reacher. It’s always been my ambition. Work my way up, improve things from the inside. It’s the only way. For a person like me, anyway. I’ve got no influence as a lobbyist. I’m not a politician, really. I find all that stuff embarrassing. I don’t have the skills.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Let me think it over,” Walker said. “A day or two. I’ll take it from there.”

“You sure?”

Walker sighed again. “No, of course I’m not *sure*. I hate this whole thing. But what the hell, Sloop’s dead. Nothing’s going to change that. Nothing’s going to bring him back. It’ll trash his memory, of course. But it would save Carmen. And he loved her, Reacher. In a way nobody else could ever understand. The disapproval he brought down on himself was unbelievable. From his family, from polite society. He’d be happy to exchange his reputation for her life, I think. *His* life for *her* life, effectively. He’d exchange mine, or Al’s, or anybody’s, probably. He loved her.”

There was silence again.

“She needs bail,” Reacher said.

“Please,” Walker said. “It’s out of the question.”

“Ellie needs her.”

“That’s a bigger issue than bail,” Walker said. “Ellie can stand a couple of days with her grandmother. It’s the rest of her life we need to worry about. Give me time to work this out.”

Reacher shrugged and stood up.

“This is all in strict confidence, right?” Walker said. “I guess I should have made that clear right from the start.”

Reacher nodded.

“Get back to me,” he said.

Then he stood up and walked out the room.

12

“One simple question,” Alice said. “Is it plausible that domestic abuse could be so covert that close friends are totally unaware of it?”

“I don’t know,” Reacher said. “I don’t have much experience.”

“Neither do I.”

They were on opposite sides of Alice’s desk in the back of the legal mission. It was the middle of the day, and the heat was so brutal it was enforcing a *de facto* siesta on the whole town. Nobody was out and about who didn’t desperately need to be. The mission was largely deserted. Just Alice and Reacher and one other lawyer twenty feet away. The inside temperature was easily over a hundred and ten degrees. The humidity was rising. The ancient air conditioner above the door was making no difference at all. Alice had changed into shorts again. She was leaning back in her chair, arms above her head, her back arched off the sticky vinyl. She was slick with sweat from head to foot. Over the tan it made her skin look oiled. Reacher’s shirt was soaked. He was reconsidering its projected three-day life span.

“It’s a catch-22,” Alice said. “Abuse you *know* about isn’t covert. *Really* covert abuse, you might assume it isn’t happening. Like, I assume my dad isn’t beating my mom. But maybe he is. Who would know? What about yours?”

Reacher smiled. “I doubt it. He was a U.S. Marine. Big guy, not especially genteel. But then, you should have seen my mother. Maybe she was beating *him*.”

“So yes or no about Carmen and Sloop?”

“She convinced me,” Reacher said. “No doubt about it.”

“Despite everything?”

“She convinced me,” he said again. “Maybe she’s all kinds of a liar about other things, but he was beating her. That’s my belief.”

Alice looked at him, a lawyer’s question in her eyes.

“No doubt at all?” she asked.

“No doubt at all,” he said

"No doubt at all," he said.

"O.K., but a difficult case just got a lot harder. And I hate it when that happens."

"Me too," he said. "But hard is not the same thing as impossible."

"You understand the exact legalities here?"

He nodded. "It's not rocket science. She's in deep shit, whichever way you cut it. If there *was* abuse, she's blown it anyway by being so premeditated. If there *wasn't*, then it's murder one, pure and simple. And whatever, she has zero credibility because she lies and exaggerates. Ballgame over, if Walker didn't want to be judge so bad."

"Exactly," Alice said.

"You happy about riding that kind of luck?"

"No."

"Neither am I."

"Not morally, not practically," Alice said. "Anything could happen here. Maybe Hack's got a love child somewhere, and it'll come out and he'll have to withdraw anyway. Maybe he likes to have sex with armadillos. It's a long time until November. Counting on him to stay electable no matter what would be foolish. So his tactical problem with Carmen could disappear at any time. So she needs a properly structured defense."

Reacher smiled again. "You're even smarter than I figured."

"I thought you were going to say than I *looked*."

"I think more lawyers should dress that way."

"You need to stay off the stand," she said. "Much safer for her. No deposition, either. Without you, the gun is the only thing that suggests premeditation. And we should be able to argue that *buying* the gun and actually *using* it weren't necessarily closely connected. Maybe she bought it for another reason."

Reacher said nothing.

“They’re testing it now,” she said. “Over at the lab. Ballistics and fingerprints. Two sets of prints, they say. Hers, I guess, maybe his, too. Maybe they struggled over it. Maybe the whole thing was an accident.”

Reacher shook his head. “The second set must be mine. She asked me to teach her how to shoot. We went up on the mesa and practiced.”

“When?”

“Saturday. The day before he got home.”

She stared at him.

“Christ, Reacher,” she said. “You *definitely* stay off the stand, O.K.?”

“I plan to.”

“What about if things change and they subpoena you?”

“Then I’ll lie, I guess.”

“Can you?”

“I was a cop of sorts for thirteen years. It wouldn’t be a totally radical concept.”

“What would you say about your prints on the gun?”

“I’d say I found it dumped somewhere. Innocently gave it back to her. Make it look like she had reconsidered after buying it.”

“You comfortable with saying stuff like that?”

“If the ends justify the means, I am. And I think they do here. She’s given herself a problem proving it, is all. You?”

She nodded. “A case like this, I guess so. I don’t care about the lies about her background. People do stuff like that, all the time, all kinds of reasons. So all that’s left is the premeditation thing. And most other states, premeditation wouldn’t be an issue. They recognize the reality. A battered woman can’t necessarily be effective on the spur of the moment. Sometimes she needs to wait until he’s drunk, or asleep. You know, bide her time. There are lots of cases like

that in other jurisdictions."

"So where do we start?"

"Where we're forced to," Alice said. "Which is a pretty bad place. The circumstantial evidence is overwhelming. *Res ipsa loquitur*, they call it. The thing speaks for itself. Her bedroom, her gun, her husband lying there dead on the floor. That's murder one. We leave it like that, they'll convict her on the first vote."

"So?"

"So we back-pedal on the premeditation and then we prove the abuse through the medical records. I already started the paperwork. We joined with the DA's office for a common-cause subpoena. All Texas hospitals, and all neighboring states. Domestic violence, that's standard procedure, because people sometimes drive all over to hide it. The hospitals generally react pretty fast, so we should get the records overnight. Then it's *res ipsa loquitur* again. If the injuries *were* caused by violence, then the records will at least show they *could have* been. That's just common sense. Then she takes the stand and she talks about the abuse. She'll have to take it on the chin over the bullshit stories about her past. But if we present it right, she could even look quite good. No shame in being an ex-hooker trying to reform. We could build up some sympathy there."

"You sound like a pretty good lawyer."

She smiled. "For one so young?"

"Well, what are you, two years out of school?"

"Six months," she said. "But you learn fast down here."

"Evidently."

"Whatever, with careful jury selection, we'll get at least half and half don't-knows and not-guiltys. The not-guiltys will wear down the don't-knows within a couple of days. Especially if it's this hot."

Reacher pulled the soaked fabric of his shirt off his skin. "Can't stay this hot much longer, can it?"

“Hey, I’m talking about *next* summer,” Alice said. “That’s if she’s lucky. Could be the summer after that.”

He stared at her. “You’re kidding.”

She shook her head. “The record around here is four years in jail between arrest and trial.”

“What about Ellie?”

She shrugged. “Just pray the medical records look real good. If they do, we’ve got a shot at getting Hack to drop the charges altogether. He’s got a lot of latitude.”

“He wouldn’t need much pushing,” Reacher said. “The mood he’s in.”

“So look on the bright side. This whole thing could be over in a couple of days.”

“When are you going to go see her?”

“Later this afternoon. First I’m going to the bank to cash a twenty-thousand-dollar check. Then I’m going to put the money in a grocery bag and drive out and deliver it to some very happy people.”

“O.K.,” Reacher said.

“I don’t want to know what you did to get it.”

“I just asked for it.”

“I don’t want to know,” she said again. “But you should come with me and meet them. And be my bodyguard. Not every day I carry twenty thousand dollars around the Wild West in a grocery bag. And it’ll be cool in the car.”

“O.K.,” Reacher said again.

The bank showed no particular excitement about forking over twenty grand in

mixed bills. The teller treated it like a completely routine part of her day. She just counted the money three times and stacked it carefully in a brown-paper grocery bag Alice provided for the purpose. Reacher carried it back to the parking lot for her. But she didn't need him to. There was no danger of getting mugged. The fearsome heat had just about cleared the streets, and what few people remained were moving slowly and listlessly.

The interior of the VW had heated up to the point where they couldn't get in right away. Alice started the air going and left the doors open until the blowers took thirty degrees off it. It was probably still over a hundred when they slid inside. But it felt cool. All things are relative. Alice drove, heading north and east. She was good. Better than him. She didn't stall out a single time.

"There'll be a storm," she said.

"Everybody tells me that," he said. "But I don't see it coming."

"You ever felt heat like this before?"

"Maybe," he said. "Once or twice. Saudi Arabia, the Pacific. But Saudi is drier and the Pacific is wetter. So, not exactly."

The sky ahead of them was light blue, so hot it looked white. The sun was a diffuse glare, like it was located everywhere. There was no cloud at all. He was squinting so much the muscles in his face were hurting.

"It's new to me," she said. "That's for sure. I figured it would be hot here, but this is completely unbelievable."

Then she asked him when he'd been in the Middle East and the Pacific islands, and he responded with the expanded ten-minute version of his autobiography because he found he was enjoying her company. The first thirty-six years were easy enough, as always. They made a nicely linear tale of childhood and adulthood, accomplishment and progress, punctuated and underlined in the military fashion with promotions and medals. The last few years were harder, as usual. The aimlessness, the drifting. He saw them as a triumph of disengagement, but he knew other people didn't. So as always he just told the story and answered the awkward questions and let her think whatever she wanted.

Then she responded in turn with an autobiography of her own. It was more or

Then she responded in turn with an autobiography of her own. It was more or less the same as his, in an oblique way. He was the son of a soldier, she was the daughter of a lawyer. She had never really considered straying away from the family trade, just like he hadn't. All her life she had seen people talk the talk and walk the walk and then she had set about following after them, just like he had. She spent seven years at Harvard where he spent four at West Point. Now she was twenty-five and the rough equivalent of an ambitious lieutenant in the law business. He had been an ambitious lieutenant at twenty-five, too, and he could remember exactly how it felt.

"So what's next?" he asked.

"After this?" she said. "Back to New York, I guess. Maybe Washington, D.C. I'm getting interested in policy."

"You won't miss this down-and-dirty stuff?"

"I will, probably. And I won't give it up completely. Maybe I'll volunteer a few weeks a year. Certainly I'll try to fund it. That's where all our money comes from, you know. Big firms in the big cities, with a conscience."

"I'm glad to hear it. Somebody needs to do something."

"That's for sure."

"What about Hack Walker?" he asked. "Will he make a difference?"

She shrugged at the wheel. "I don't know him very well. But his reputation is good. And he can't make things any worse, can he? It's a really screwed-up system. I mean, I'm a democrat, big D *and* little d, so theoretically to elect your judges is perfectly fine with me. Theoretically. But in practice, it's totally out of hand. I mean, what does it cost to run a campaign down here?"

"No idea."

"Well, figure it out. We're talking about Pecos County, basically, because that's where the bulk of the electorate is. A bunch of posters, some newspaper ads, half a dozen homemade commercials on the local TV channels. A market like this, you'd have to work really hard to spend more than five figures. But these guys are all picking up contributions running to hundreds and hundreds and *hundreds*

of thousands of dollars. Millions, maybe. And the law says if you don't get around to spending it, you don't have to give it back. You just keep it, for miscellaneous future expenses. So what it amounts to is they're all picking up their bribes in advance. The law firms and the oil people and the special interests are paying *now* for future help. You can get seriously rich, running for judge in Texas. And if you get elected and do the right things all your years on the bench, you retire straight into some big law partnership and you get asked onto the boards of a half-dozen big companies. So it's not really about trying to get elected a *judge*. It's about trying to get elected a *prince*. Like turning into royalty overnight."

"So will Walker make a difference?" he asked again.

"He will if he wants to. Simple as that. And right now, he'll make a difference to Carmen Greer. That's what we need to focus on."

He nodded. She slowed the car, hunting a turn. They were back up in ranch country. Somewhere near the Brewer place, he guessed, although he didn't recognize any specific features of the landscape. It was laid out in front of him, so dry and so hot it seemed the parched vegetation could burst into flames at any moment.

"Does it bother you she told all those lies?" Alice asked.

He shrugged. "Yes and no. Nobody likes to be lied to, I guess. But look at it from her point of view. She reached the conclusion he had to be gotten rid of, so she set about achieving it."

"So there *was* extensive premeditation?"

"Should I be telling you this?"

"I'm on her side."

He nodded. "She had it all planned. She said she looked at a hundred guys and sounded out a dozen before she picked on me."

Alice nodded back. "Actually that makes me feel better somehow, you know? Kind of proves how bad it was. Surely *nobody* would do that without some kind of really urgent necessity."

“Me too,” he said. “I feel the same way.”

She slowed again and turned the car onto a farm track. After ten yards the track passed under a poor imitation of the older ranch gates he had seen elsewhere. It was just a rectangle of unpainted two-by-fours nailed together, leaning slightly to the left. The crossbar had a name written on it. It was indecipherable, scorched and faded to nothing by the sun. Beyond it were a few acres of cultivated ground. There were straight rows of turned dirt and an irrigation system pieced together from improvised parts. There were piles of fieldstone here and there. Neat wooden frames to carry wires to support the bushes that no longer grew. Everything was dry and crisp and fallow. The whole picture spoke of agonizing months of back-breaking manual labor in the fearsome heat, followed by tragic disappointment.

There was a house a hundred yards beyond the last row of turned earth. It wasn’t a bad place. It was small and low, wood-framed, painted dull white with a finish that had cracked and crazed in the sun. There was a windmill behind it. There was a barn, with an irrigation pump venting through the roof and a damaged three-quarter-ton truck standing idle. The house had a closed front door. Alice parked the VW right next to it.

“They’re called García,” she said. “I’m sure they’re home.”

Twenty thousand dollars in a grocery bag had an effect like he’d never seen before. It was literally a gift of life. There were five Garcías, two generations, two in the older and three in the younger. They were all small and scrappy people. The parents were maybe in their late forties and the eldest child was a girl of maybe twenty-four. The younger offspring were both boys and could have been twenty-two and twenty. They all stood quietly together inside the doorway. Alice said a bright hello and walked straight past them and spilled the money on their kitchen table.

“He changed his mind,” she said, in Spanish. “He decided to pay up, after all.”

The Garcías formed a semicircle around the table, silent, looking at the money, like it represented such a stunning reversal of fortune that no reaction was

possible. They didn’t ask any questions. Just accepted it had finally happened and then paused a second and burst out with a long list of plans. First, they would get the telephone reconnected so they wouldn’t have to walk eight miles to their neighbor’s place. Then the electricity. Then they would pay back what they had borrowed from friends. Then they would buy diesel fuel, so the irrigation pump could run again. Then they would get their truck fixed and drive it to town for seed and fertilizer. They went quiet again when it dawned on them they could get a whole crop grown and harvested and sold before the winter came.

Reacher hung back and looked around the room. It was an eat-in, live-in kitchen, opening to a front parlor. The parlor was hot and airless and had a yard-long encyclopedia set and a bunch of religious statuettes on a low shelf. A single picture on the wall. The picture was a photograph of a boy. It was a studio portrait. The boy was maybe fourteen, with a precocious smudge of mustache above his lip. He was wearing a white confirmation robe and smiling shyly. The picture was in a black frame and had a dusty square of black fabric hung around it.

“My eldest son,” a voice said. “That picture was made just before we left our village in Mexico.”

Reacher turned and found the mother standing behind him.

“He was killed, on the journey here,” she said.

Reacher nodded. “I know. I heard. The border patrol. I’m very sorry.”

“It was twelve years ago. His name was Raoul García.”

The way she said his name was like a small act of remembrance.

“What happened?” Reacher asked.

The woman was silent for a second.

“It was awful,” she said. “They hunted us for three hours in the night. We were walking and running, they had a truck with bright lights. We got split up. Divided, in the dark. Raoul was with his sister. He was protecting her. She was twelve. He sent her one way and walked the other way, into the lights. He knew it was worse, if they captured girls. He gave himself up to save his sister. But

it was worse, if they captured girls. He gave himself up to save his sister. But they didn't try to arrest him or anything. Didn't even ask him any questions. They just shot him down and drove away. They came near where I was hiding. They were laughing. I heard them. Like it was a sport."

"I'm very sorry," Reacher said again.

The woman shrugged. "It was very common then. It was a bad time, and a bad area. We found that out, later. Either our guide didn't know, or didn't care. We found out that there were more than twenty people killed on that route in a year. For fun. Some of them in horrible ways. Raoul was lucky, just to be shot. Some of them, their screams could be heard for miles, across the desert, in the darkness. Some of the girls were carried away and never seen again."

Reacher said nothing. The woman gazed at the picture for a moment longer. Then she turned away with an immense physical effort and forced a smile and gestured that Reacher should rejoin the party in the kitchen.

"We have tequila," she said quietly. "Saved especially for this day."

There were shot glasses on the table, and the daughter was filling them from a bottle. The girl that Raoul had saved, all grown up. The younger son passed the glasses around. Reacher took his and waited. The García father motioned for quiet and raised his drink toward Alice in a toast.

"To our lawyer," he said. "For proving the great Frenchman Honoré de Balzac wrong when he wrote, 'Laws are spider webs through which the big flies pass and the little ones get caught.'"

Alice blushed a little. García smiled at her and turned to Reacher. "And to you, sir, for your generous assistance in our time of need."

"*De nada*," Reacher said. "*No hay de que*."

The tequila was rough and Raoul's memory was everywhere, so they refused a second shot and left the Garcías alone with their celebrations. They had to wait again until the air conditioner made the VW's interior bearable. Then they

headed back to Pecos.

“I enjoyed that,” Alice said. “Felt like I finally made a difference.”

“You did make a difference.”

“Even though it was you made it happen.”

“You did the skilled labor,” he said.

“Nevertheless, thanks.”

“Did the border patrol ever get investigated?” he asked.

She nodded. “Thoroughly, according to the record. There was enough noise made. Nothing specific, of course, but enough general rumors to make it inevitable.”

“And?”

“And nothing. It was a whitewash. Nobody was even indicted.”

“But did it stop?”

She nodded again. “As suddenly as it started. So obviously they got the message.”

“That’s how it works,” he said. “I’ve seen it before, different places, different situations. The investigation isn’t really an investigation, as such. It’s more like a message. Like a coded warning. Like saying, you can’t get away with this anymore, so you better stop doing it, whoever you are.”

“But justice wasn’t done, Reacher. Twenty-some people died. Some of them gruesomely. It was like a pogrom, a year long. Somebody should have paid.”

“Did you recognize that Balzac quotation?” he asked.

“Sure,” she said. “I went to Harvard, after all.”

“Remember Herbert Marcuse, too?”

“He was later, right? A philosopher, not a novelist.”

"He was later, right? A philosopher, not a novelist."

He nodded. "Born ninety-nine years after Balzac. A social and political philosopher. He said, 'Law and order are everywhere the law and order which protect the established hierarchy.'"

"That stinks."

"Of course it does," he said. "But that's the way it is."

They made it back to Pecos inside an hour. She parked on the street right outside the legal mission so they only had to walk ten feet through the heat. But ten feet was enough. It was like walking ten feet through a blast furnace with a hot towel wrapped around your head. They made it inside and found Alice's desk covered in little handwritten notes stuck randomly to its surface. She peeled them off and scooped them up and read them through, one by one. Then she dropped them all in a drawer.

"I'm going to check in with Carmen at the jail," she said. "But the prints and the ballistics are back from the lab. Hack Walker wants to see you about them. Sounds like he's got a problem."

"I'm sure he has," Reacher said.

They walked to the door and paused a second before braving the sidewalk again. Then they split up in front of the courthouse. Alice walked on toward the jailhouse entrance and Reacher went up the front steps and inside. The public areas and the staircase had no air-conditioning. Making it up just one floor soaked him in sweat. The intern at the desk pointed silently to Hack Walker's door. Reacher went straight in and found Walker studying a technical report. He had the look of a man who thinks if he reads a thing often enough, maybe it will change what it says.

"She killed him," he said. "Everything matches. The ballistics are perfect."

Reacher sat down in front of the desk.

“Your prints were on the gun, too,” Walker said.

Reacher made no reply. If he was going to lie, he was going to save it for when it would count for something.

“You’re in the national fingerprint database,” Walker said. “You know that?”

Reacher nodded. “All military personnel are.”

“So maybe you found the gun discarded,” Walker said. “Maybe you handled it because you were worried about a family with a kid having a stray firearm around. Maybe you picked it up and put it away in a place of safety.”

“Maybe,” Reacher said.

Walker turned a page in the file.

“But it’s worse than that, isn’t it?” he said.

“Is it?”

“You a praying man?”

“No,” Reacher said.

“You damn well should be. You should get on your knees and thank somebody.”

“Like who?”

“Maybe the state cops. Maybe old Sloop himself for calling the sheriff.”

“Why?”

“Because they just saved your life.”

“How?”

“Because you were on the road in a squad car when this went down. If they’d left you in the bunkhouse, you’d be our number-one suspect.”

“Why?”

Walker turned another page.

“Your prints were on the gun,” he said again. “*And* on every one of the shell cases. *And* on the magazine. *And* on the ammunition box. You loaded that gun, Reacher. Probably test-fired it too, they think, then reloaded it ready for action. She bought it, so it was technically *her* possession, but it looks from the fingerprint evidence that it was effectively *your* weapon.”

Reacher said nothing.

“So you see?” Walker asked. “You should set up a little shrine to the state police and give thanks every morning you wake up alive and free. Because the obvious thing for me to do would be come right after *you*. You could have crept up from the bunkhouse to the bedroom, easy as anything. Because you knew where the bedroom was, didn’t you? I talked to Bobby. He told me you spent the previous night in there. Did you really think he’d just sit quiet in the barn? He probably watched you two going at it, through the window.”

“I didn’t sleep with her,” Reacher said. “I was on the sofa.”

Walker smiled. “Think a jury would believe you? Or an ex-whore? I don’t. So we could easily prove some kind of a sexual jealousy motive. The next night you could have crept up there and got the gun out of the drawer and shot Sloop dead, and then crept back again. Only you couldn’t have, because you were in the back of a police car at the time. So you’re a lucky man, Reacher. Because right now a white male shooter would be worth his weight in gold to me. You could go integrate death row single-handed. A big WASP like you, in among all the blacks and the Hispanics, I’d look like the fairest prosecutor in Texas. The election would be over before it started.”

Reacher said nothing. Walker sighed.

“But you didn’t do it, unfortunately,” he said. “She did it. So *now* what have I got? The premeditation thing is going from bad to worse. It’s just about shot to hell now. Clearly she thought, and she thought, even to the extent of hooking up with some ex-army guy to give her weapons training. We got your record, after we got your prints. You were a pistol-shooting champ two straight years. You did a spell as an instructor, for Christ’s sake. You loaded her gun for her. What the hell am I going to do?”

“What you planned,” Reacher said. “Wait for the medical reports.”

Walker went quiet. Then he sighed again. Then he nodded.

“We’ll have them tomorrow,” he said. “And you know what I did? I hired a defense expert to take a look at them. You know there are experts who only appear for the defense? Normally we wouldn’t go near them. Normally we want to know how *much* we can get out of a thing, not how little. But I hired a defense guy, the exact same guy Alice Aaron would hire if she could afford him. Because I want somebody who can persuade me there’s a faint possibility Carmen’s telling the truth, so I can let her go without looking like I’m crazy.”

“So relax,” Reacher said. “It’ll be over tomorrow.”

“I hope so,” Walker said. “And it might be. Al Eugene’s office is sending over some financial stuff. Al did all that kind of work for Sloop. So if there’s no financial motive, and the medical reports are good, maybe I *can* relax.”

“She had no money at all,” Reacher said. “It was one of her big problems.”

Walker nodded. “Good,” he said. “Because *her* big problems solve *my* big problems.”

The office went quiet underneath the drone of the air conditioners. The back of Reacher’s neck felt cold and wet.

“You should be more proactive,” he said. “With the election.”

“Yeah, how?”

“Do something popular.”

“Like what?”

“Like reopen something about the border patrol. People would like that. I just met a family whose son was murdered by them.”

Walker went quiet again for a second, then just shook his head.

“Ancient history,” he said.

“Not to those families,” Reacher said. “There were twenty-some homicides in a year. Most of the survivors live around here, probably. And most of them will be voters by now.”

“The border patrol was investigated,” Walker said. “Before my time, but it was pretty damn thorough. I went through the files years ago.”

“You have the files?”

“Sure. Mostly happened down in Echo, and all that stuff comes here. It was clearly a bunch of rogue officers on a jag of their own, and the investigation most likely served to warn them off. They probably quit. Border patrol has a pretty good turnover of staff. The bad guys could be anywhere by now, literally. Probably left the state altogether. It’s not just the immigrants who flow north.”

“It would make you look good.”

Walker shrugged. “I’m sure it would. A lot of things would make me look good. But I do have *some* standards, Reacher. It would be a total waste of public money. Grandstanding, pure and simple. It wouldn’t get anywhere. Nowhere at all. They’re long gone. It’s ancient history.”

“Twelve years ago isn’t ancient history.”

“It is around here. Things change fast. Right now I’m concentrating on what happened in Echo last night, not twelve years ago.”

“O.K.,” Reacher said. “Your decision.”

“I’ll call Alice in the morning. When we get the material we need. Could be all over by lunchtime.”

“Let’s hope so.”

“Yeah, let’s,” Walker said.

Reacher went out through the hot trapped air in the stairwell and stepped outside.

It was hotter still on the sidewalk. So hot, it was difficult to breathe properly. It felt like all the oxygen molecules had been burned out of the air. He made it across the street and down to the mission with sweat running into his eyes. He pushed in through the door and found Alice sitting alone at her desk.

“You back already?” he asked, surprised.

She just nodded.

“Did you see her?”

She nodded again.

“What did she say?”

“Nothing at all,” Alice said. “Except she doesn’t want me to represent her.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I said. Literally the only words I got out of her were, and I quote, ‘I refuse to be represented by you.’”

“Why?”

“She didn’t say. She said nothing at all. I just told you that. Except she doesn’t want me on the case.”

“Why the hell not?”

Alice just shrugged and said nothing.

“Has this kind of a thing ever happened before?”

Alice shook her head. “Not to me. Not to anybody within living memory in this place. Normally they can’t make their minds up whether to bite your hand off or smother you with hugs and kisses.”

“So what the hell happened?”

“I don’t know. She was fairly calm, fairly rational.”

“Did you try to persuade her?”

Did you try to persuade her?

“Of course I did. To a point. But I wanted to get out of there before she lost it and started hollering. A witness hears her say it, I lose all standing. And then she’s really in trouble. I plan to go back and try again later.”

“Did you tell her I sent you?”

“Sure I did. I used your name. Reacher this, Reacher that. Made no difference. All she said was she refused representation. Over and over again, three or four times. Then she gave me the silent treatment.”

“Can you think of a reason?”

Alice shrugged. “Not really, in the circumstances. I mean, I’m not exactly Perry Mason. Maybe I don’t inspire much confidence. I go in there half-naked and sweating like a pig, and if this was Wall Street or somewhere I could understand somebody taking one look and thinking *wow, like, forget about it*. But this isn’t Wall Street. This is Pecos County jail, and she’s Hispanic, and I’m a lawyer with a pulse, so she should have been dancing with joy I came at all.”

“So why?”

“It’s inexplicable.”

“What happens now?”

“Now it’s a balancing act. I have to get her to accept representation before anybody hears her refuse it.”

“And if she still doesn’t?”

“Then I go about my business and she’s completely on her own. Until six months from now when the indictment’s in and some crony of the judge’s sends some useless jerk to see her.”

Reacher was quiet for a moment. “I’m sorry, Alice. I had no idea this would happen.”

“Not your fault.”

“Go back about seven, O.K.?” he said. “When the upstairs offices are empty and

"Go back about seven, O.K.?" he said. "When the upstairs offices are empty and before the night shift woman comes on. She struck me as nosier than the day guy. He probably won't pay too much attention. So you can press her some. Let her holler if she wants to."

"O.K.," she said. "Seven o'clock it is. Hell of a day. Up and down, like a roller coaster."

"Like life itself," Reacher said.

She smiled, briefly. "Where will I find you?"

"I'm in the last motel before the highway."

"You like traffic noise?"

"I like cheap. Room eleven, name of Millard Fillmore."

"Why?"

"Habit," he said. "I like aliases. I like anonymity."

"So who is Millard Fillmore?"

"President, two before Abraham Lincoln. From New York."

She was quiet for a moment. "Should I dress up like a lawyer for her? You think that might make a difference?"

Reacher shrugged. "I doubt it. Look at me. I look like a scarecrow, and she never said anything about it."

Alice smiled again. "You do a little, you know. I saw you come in this morning and I thought *you* were the client. Some kind of homeless guy in trouble."

"This is a new outfit," Reacher said. "Fresh today."

She looked him over again and said nothing. He left her with paperwork to do and walked as far as the pizza parlor south of the courthouse. It was nearly full with people and had a huge air conditioner over the door spilling a continuous stream of moisture on the sidewalk. Clearly it was the coldest place in town, and therefore right then the most popular. He went in and got the last table and drank

therefore right then the most popular. He went in and got the last table and drank ice water as fast as the busboy could refill his glass. Then he ordered an anchovy pizza, heavy on the fish. He figured his body needed to replace salt.

As he ate it a new description was being passed by phone to the killing crew. The call was carefully rerouted through Dallas and Las Vegas to a motel room a hundred miles from Pecos. The call was made by a man, speaking quietly but clearly. It contained a detailed identification of a new target, a male, starting with his full name and his age, and accompanied by an exact rundown of his physical appearance and all of his likely destinations within the next forty-eight hours.

The information was taken by the woman, because she had sent her partners out to eat. She made no notes. She was naturally cautious about leaving written evidence, and she had an excellent memory. It had been honed by constant practice. She listened carefully until the caller stopped talking and then she decided the crew's price. She wasn't reluctant to speak on the phone. She was talking through an electronic device bought in the Valley that made her sound like a robot with a head cold. So she named the price and then listened to the silence on the other end. Listened to the guy deciding whether to negotiate the cost. But he didn't. Just said O.K. and hung up. The woman smiled. *Smart guy*, she thought. Her crew didn't work for cheapskates. A parsimonious attitude about money betrayed all kinds of other negative possibilities.

Reacher had ice cream after the pizza, and more water, and then coffee. He lingered over it as long as was reasonable and then he paid his check and walked back to his motel room. The heat felt worse than ever after being cold and dry for an hour. He took a long shower in tepid water and rinsed his clothes in the sink. Shook them hard to eliminate the wrinkles and arranged them on a chair to dry. Then he turned the room air to high and lay down on the bed to wait for Alice. Checked his watch. He figured if she got there anytime after eight o'clock it would be a good sign, because if Carmen decided to get serious they would need to talk for at least an hour. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

need to talk for at least an hour. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

13

She got there at seven-twenty. He woke from a feverish overheated doze and heard a tentative knock at his door. Rolled off the bed and wrapped a damp towel around his waist and padded barefoot across the dirty carpet and opened up. Alice was standing there. He looked at her. She just shook her head. He stared out at the dusk light for a second. Her yellow car was parked in the lot. He turned and stepped back into the room. She followed him inside.

“I tried everything,” she said.

She had changed back into her lawyer outfit. The black pants and the jacket. The pants had a very high waistband, so high it almost met the bottom edge of the sports bra. There was an inch of tanned midriff showing. Apart from that, she looked exactly like the real deal. And he couldn’t see how an inch of skin would be significant to a woman in Carmen’s position.

“I asked her, was it me?” Alice said. “Did she want somebody different? Older? A man? A Hispanic person?”

“What did she say?”

“She said she didn’t want anybody at all.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Yes, it is,” Alice said. “I described her predicament. You know, in case she wasn’t seeing it clearly. It made no difference.”

“Tell me everything she said.”

“I already have.”

Reacher was uncomfortable in the towel. It was too small.

“Let me put my pants on,” he said.

He scooped them off the chair and ducked into the bathroom. The pants were wet and clammy. He pulled them on and zipped them up. Came back out. Alice had taken her jacket off and laid it on the chair, next to his wet shirt. She was sitting on the bed with her elbows on her knees.

“I tried everything,” she said again. “I said, show me your arm. She said, what for? I said, I want to see how good your veins are. Because that’s where the lethal injection will go. I told her she’d be strapped down on the gurney, I described the drugs she’d get. I told her about the people behind the glass, there to watch her die.”

“And?”

“It made no difference at all. Like talking to the wall.”

“How hard did you push?”

“I shouted a little. But she waited me out and just repeated herself. She’s refusing representation, Reacher. We better face it.”

“Is that kosher?”

“Of course it is. No law says you *have* to have counsel. Just that you have to be *offered* counsel.”

“Isn’t it evidence of insanity or something?”

She shook her head.

“Not in itself,” she said. “Otherwise every murderer would just refuse to have a lawyer and automatically get off with an incapacity defense.”

“She’s not a murderer.”

“She doesn’t seem very anxious to prove it.”

“Did anybody hear her?”

“Not yet. But I’m worried. Logically her next move is to put it in writing. Then I

can't even get in the door. Nor can anybody else."

"So what do we do?"

"We have to finesse her. That's all we *can* do. We just have to ignore her completely and keep on dealing with Walker behind her back. On her behalf. If we can get him to drop the charges, then we've set her free whether she wants us to or not."

He shrugged. "Then that's what we'll do. But it's completely bizarre, isn't it?"

"It sure is," Alice said. "I never heard of such a thing before."

A hundred miles away, the two male members of the killing crew returned to their motel after eating dinner. They had chosen pizza, too, but with pitchers of cold beer instead of water and coffee. They found their woman partner waiting for them inside their room. She was alert and pacing, which they recognized as a sign of news.

"What?" the tall man asked.

"A supplementary job," she said.

"Where?"

"Pecos."

"Is that smart?"

She nodded. "Pecos is still safe enough."

"You think?" the dark man asked.

"Wait until you hear what he's paying."

"When?"

"Depends on the prior commitment."

Depends on the prior commitment.

“O.K.,” the tall man said. “Who’s the target?”

“Just some guy,” the woman said. “I’ll give you the details when we’ve done the other thing.”

She walked to the door.

“Stay inside now,” she said. “Get to bed, get some sleep. We’ve got a very busy day coming up.”

“This is a crummy room,” Alice said.

Reacher glanced around. “You think?”

“It’s awful.”

“I’ve had worse.”

She paused a beat. “You want dinner?”

He was full of pizza and ice cream, but the inch of midriff was attractive. So was the corresponding inch of her back. There was a deep cleft there. The waistband of the pants spanned it like a tiny bridge.

“Sure,” he said. “Where?”

She paused again.

“My place?” she said. “It’s difficult for me to eat out around here. I’m a vegetarian. So usually I cook for myself.”

“A vegetarian in Texas,” he said. “You’re a long way from home.”

“Sure feels like it,” she said. “So how about it? And I’ve got better air conditioning than this.”

He smiled. “Woman-cooked food *and* better air? Sounds good to me.”

“You eat vegetarian?”

“I eat anything.”

“So let’s go.”

He shrugged his damp shirt on. She picked up her jacket. He found his shoes. Locked up the room and followed her over to the car.

She drove a couple of miles west to a low-rise residential complex built on a square of scrubby land trapped between two four-lane roads. The buildings had stucco walls painted the color of sand with dark-stained wooden beams stuck all over the place for accents. There were maybe forty rental units and they all looked halfhearted and beaten down by the heat. Hers was right in the center, like a small city town house sandwiched between two others. She parked outside her door on a fractured concrete pad. There were parched desert weeds wilting in the cracks.

But it was gloriously cool inside the house. There was central air running hard. He could feel the pressure it was creating. There was a narrow living room with a kitchen area in back. A staircase on the left. Cheap rented furniture and a lot of books. No television.

“I’m going to shower,” she said. “Make yourself at home.”

She disappeared up the stairs. He took a look around. The books were mostly law texts. The civil and criminal codes of Texas. Some constitutional commentaries. There was a phone on a side table with four speed dials programmed. Top slot was labeled *Work*. Second was *J Home*. Third was *J Work*. Fourth was *M & D*. On one of the bookshelves there was a photograph in a silver frame, showing a handsome couple who could have been in their middle fifties. It was a casual outdoors shot, in a city, probably New York. The man had gray hair and a long patrician face. The woman looked a little like an older version of Alice herself. Same hair, minus the color and the youthful bounce.

The Park Avenue parents, no doubt. Mom and Dad, M & D. They looked O.K. He figured *J* was probably a boyfriend. He checked, but there was no photograph of him. Maybe his picture was upstairs, next to her bed.

He sat in a chair and she came back down within ten minutes. Her hair was wet and combed, and she was wearing shorts again with a T-shirt that probably said *Harvard Soccer* except it had been washed so many times the writing was nearly illegible. The shorts were short and the T-shirt was thin and tight. She had dispensed with the sports bra. That was clear. She was barefoot and looked altogether sensational.

“You played soccer?” he asked.

“My partner did,” she said.

He smiled at the warning. “Does he still?”

“He’s a she. Judith. I’m gay. And yes, she still plays.”

“She any good?”

“As a partner?”

“As a soccer player.”

“She’s pretty good. Does it bother you?”

“That she’s pretty good at soccer?”

“No, that I’m gay.”

“Why would it?”

Alice shrugged. “It bothers some people.”

“Not this one.”

“I’m Jewish, too.”

Reacher smiled. “Did your folks buy you the handgun?”

She [illegible] this. “You found that?”

She glanced at him. "You found that?"

"Sure," he said. "Nice piece."

She nodded. "A gay Jewish vegetarian woman from New York, they figured I should have it."

Reacher smiled again. "I'm surprised they didn't get you a machine gun or a grenade launcher."

She smiled back. "I'm sure they thought about it."

"You obviously take your atoning seriously. You must feel like I did walking around in the Lebanon."

She laughed. "Actually, it's not so bad here. Texas is a pretty nice place, overall. Some great people, really."

"What does Judith do?"

"She's a lawyer, too. She's in Mississippi right now."

"Same reasons?"

Alice nodded. "A five-year plan."

"There's hope for the legal profession yet."

"So it doesn't bother you?" she said. "That it's just a meal with a new friend and then back to the motel on your own?"

"I never thought it would be anything else," he lied.

The meal was excellent. It had to be, because he wasn't hungry. It was some kind of a homemade dark chewy confection made out of crushed nuts bound together with cheese and onions. Probably full of protein. Maybe some vitamins, too. They drank a little wine and a lot of water with it. He helped her clear up and then they talked until eleven.

and then they talked until eleven.

“I’ll drive you back,” she said.

But she was barefoot and comfortable, so he shook his head.

“I’ll walk,” he said. “Couple of miles will do me good.”

“It’s still hot,” she said.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be O.K.”

She didn’t put up much of a protest. He arranged to meet her at the mission in the morning and said goodnight. The outside air was as thick as soup. The walk took forty minutes and his shirt was soaked again when he got back to the motel.

He woke early in the morning and rinsed his clothes and put them on wet. They were dry by the time he reached the law offices. The humidity had gone and the hot desert air sucked the moisture right out of them and left them as stiff as new canvas. The sky was blue and completely empty.

Alice was already at her usual desk in a black A-line dress with no sleeves. A Mexican guy was occupying one of her client chairs. He was talking quietly to her. She was writing on a yellow pad. The young intern from Hack Walker’s office was waiting patiently behind the Mexican guy’s shoulder. He was holding a thin orange and purple FedEx packet in his hand. Reacher took a place right behind him. Alice was suddenly aware of the gathering crowd and looked up. Sketched a surprised *just a minute* gesture in the air and turned back to her client. Eventually put her pencil down and spoke quietly in Spanish. The guy responded with stoic blank-faced patience and stood up and shuffled away. The intern moved forward and laid the FedEx packet on the desk.

“Carmen Greer’s medical reports,” he said. “These are the originals. Mr. Walker took copies. He wants a conference at nine-thirty.”

“We’ll be there,” Alice said.

She pulled the packet closer to her and the intern followed the Mexican guy

She pulled the packet slowly toward her. The intern followed the Mexican guy out. Reacher sat down in the client chair. Alice glanced at him, her fingers resting on the packet, a puzzled expression on her face. He shrugged. The packet was a lot thinner than he had expected, too.

She unfolded the flap and pressed the edges of the packet inward so it opened like a mouth. Held it up and spilled the contents on the desk. There were four separate reports packed loose in individual green covers. Each cover was marked with Carmen's name and her Social Security number and a patient reference. There were dates on all of them. The dates ranged back more than six years. The older the date, the paler the cover, like the green color had faded out with age. Reacher slid his chair around the desk and put it next to Alice's. She stacked the four reports in date order, with the oldest at the top of the pile. She opened it up and nudged it left, so it was exactly between them. Then she moved her chair a fraction, so her shoulder was touching his.

"O.K.," she said. "So let's see."

The first report was about Ellie's birth. The whole thing was timed in hours and minutes. There was a lot of gynecological stuff about dilation and contractions. Fetal monitors had been attached. An epidural anesthetic had been administered at thirteen minutes past four in the morning. It had been judged fully effective by four-twenty. There had been a delivery-room shift change at six. Labor had continued until the following lunchtime. Accelerants had been used. An episiotomy had been performed at one o'clock. Ellie had been born at twenty-five minutes past. No complications. Normal delivery of the placenta. The episiotomy had been stitched immediately. The baby was pronounced viable in every respect.

There was no mention of facial bruising, or a split lip, or loosened teeth.

The second report concerned two cracked ribs. It was dated in the spring, fifteen months after childbirth. There was an X-ray film attached. It showed the whole left side of her upper torso. The ribs were bright white. Two of them had tiny gray cracks. Her left breast was a neat dark shape. The attending physician had noted that the patient reported being thrown from a horse and landing hard against the top rail of a section of ranch fencing. As was usual with rib injuries, there was nothing much to be done except bind them tight and recommend plenty of physical rest.

"What do you think?" Alice asked.

"What do you think?" Alice asked.

"Could be something," Reacher said.

The third report was dated six months later, at the end of the summer. It concerned severe bruising to Carmen's lower right leg. The same physician noted she reported falling from a horse while jumping and landing with her shin against the pole that constituted the obstacle the horse was attempting. There was a long technical description of the contusion, with measurements vertically and laterally. The affected area was a tilted oval, four inches wide and five long. X rays had been taken. The bone was not fractured. Painkillers had been prescribed and the first day's supply provided from the emergency room pharmacy.

The fourth report was dated two and a half years later, which was maybe nine months before Sloop went to prison. It showed a broken collarbone on the right side. All the names in the file were new. It seemed like the whole ER staff had turned over. There was a new name for the attending physician, and she made no comment about Carmen's claim to have fallen off her horse onto the rocks of the mesa. There were extensive detailed notes about the injury. They were very thorough. There was an X-ray film. It showed the curve of her neck and her shoulder. The collarbone was cleanly snapped in the middle.

Alice squared all four reports together, upside down on the desk.

"Well?" she said.

Reacher made no reply. Just shook his head.

"Well?" she said again.

"Maybe she sometimes went to another hospital," he said.

"No, we'd have picked it up. I told you, we ask at all of them. Matter of routine."

"Maybe they drove out of state."

"We checked," she said. "Domestic violence, we cover all neighboring states. I told you that, too. Routine guidelines."

"Maybe she used another name."

“They’re logged by Social Security number.”

He nodded. “This isn’t enough, Alice. She told me about more than this. We’ve got the ribs and we’ve got the collarbone, but she claimed he broke her arm, too. Also her jaw. She said she’d had three teeth reimplanted.”

Alice said nothing. He closed his eyes. Tried to think about it like he would have in the old days, an experienced investigator with a suspicious mind and thirteen years of hard time behind him.

“Two possibilities,” he said. “One, the hospital records system screwed up.”

Alice shook her head. “Very unlikely.”

He nodded again. “Agreed. So two, she *was* lying.”

Alice was quiet for a long moment.

“Exaggerating, maybe,” she said. “You know, to lock you in. To make sure of your help.”

He nodded again, vaguely. Checked his watch. It was twenty past nine. He leaned sideways and slipped the stacked reports back into the FedEx packet.

“Let’s go see what Hack thinks,” he said.

Two thirds of the killing crew rolled south out of Pecos, uncharacteristically quiet. The third member waited in the motel room, pensive. They were taking risks now. Twelve years in the business, and they had never worked one area so long. It had always seemed too dangerous. In and out, quick and clean, had been their preferred method. Now they were departing from it. Radically. So there had been no conversation that morning. No jokes, no banter. No pre-mission excitement. Just a lot of nervous preoccupation with private thoughts.

But they had readied the car on schedule, and assembled the things they would need. Then they had half-eaten breakfast, and sat quiet, checking their watches.

“Nine-twenty,” the woman said eventually. “It’s time.”

There was a visitor already seated in Walker’s office. He was a man of maybe seventy, overweight and florid, and he was suffering badly in the heat. The air conditioners were going so hard that the rush of air was audible over the drone of the motors and papers were lifting off the desk. But the indoor temperature was still somewhere in the middle nineties. The visitor was mopping his brow with a large white handkerchief. Walker himself had his jacket off and was sitting absolutely still in his chair with his head in his hands. He had copies of the medical reports laid side by side on his desk and he was staring at them like they were written in a foreign language. He looked up blankly, and then he made a vague gesture toward the stranger.

“This is Cowan Black,” he said. “Eminent professor of forensic medicine, lots of other things, too. The renowned defense expert. This is probably the first time he’s ever been in a DA’s office.”

Alice stepped over and shook the guy’s hand.

“I’m very pleased to meet you, sir,” she said. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Cowan Black said nothing. Alice introduced Reacher and they all shuffled their chairs into an approximate semicircle around the desk.

“The reports came in first thing this morning,” Walker said. “Everything on file from Texas, which was one hospital only. There was nothing at all from New Mexico, Oklahoma, Arkansas, or Louisiana. I personally photocopied everything and immediately sent the originals over to you. Dr. Black arrived a half hour ago and has studied the copies. He wants to see the X rays. Those, I couldn’t copy.”

Reacher passed the FedEx packet to Black, who spilled the contents the same way Alice had and extracted the three X-ray films. The ribs, the leg, the collarbone. He held them up against the light from the window and studied them, one by one, for minutes each. Then he slipped them back in their appropriate folders, neatly, like he was a man accustomed to order and precision.

Walker sat forward. “So, Dr. Black, are you able to offer us a preliminary opinion?”

He sounded tense, and very formal, like he was already in court. Black picked up the first folder. The oldest, the palest, the one about Ellie’s birth.

“This is nothing at all,” he said. His voice was deep and dark and rotund, like a favorite uncle in an old movie. A perfect voice for the witness stand. “This is purely routine obstetrics. Interesting only in that a rural Texas hospital was operating at a level that would have been considered state-of-the-art a decade or so earlier.”

“Nothing untoward?”

“Nothing at all. One assumes the husband caused the pregnancy, but aside from that there’s no evidence he did anything to her.”

“The others?”

Black switched files, to the damaged ribs. Pulled the X-ray film out and held it ready.

“Ribs are there for a purpose,” he said. “They form a hard, bony, protective cage to protect the vulnerable internal organs from damage. But not a *rigid* cage. That would be foolish, and evolution isn’t a foolish process. No, the rib cage is a sophisticated structure. If it *were* rigid, the bones would shatter under any kind of severe blow. But there’s complex ligament suspension involved at each of the bone terminations, so the cage’s first response is to yield and distort, in order to spread the force of the impact.”

He held up the X-ray film and pointed here and there on it.

“And that’s exactly what happened here,” he said. “There is obvious stretching and tearing of the ligaments all over the place. This was a heavy diffuse blow with a broad, blunt instrument. The force was dissipated by the flexibility of the rib cage, but even so was sufficient to crack two of the bones.”

“What kind of a blunt instrument?” Walker asked.

“Something long and hard and rounded, maybe five or six inches in diameter. Something exactly like a fencing rail, I would think.”

Something exactly like a fencing rail, I would think.

“It couldn’t have been a kick?”

Black shook his head.

“Emphatically, no,” he said. “A kick transfers a lot of energy through a tiny contact area. The welt at the toe of a boot is what? Maybe an inch and a half by a quarter inch? That’s essentially a *sharp* object, not a blunt object. It would be too sudden and too concentrated for the yielding effect to operate. We would see the cracked bones, for sure, but we wouldn’t see the ligament stretching at all.”

“What about a knee?”

“A knee in the ribs? That’s similar to a punch. Blunt, but an essentially circular impact site. The ligament stretching would show a completely different pattern.”

Walker drummed his fingers on his desk. He was starting to sweat.

“Any way a person could have done it?” he asked.

Black shrugged. “If he were some kind of contortionist, maybe. If he could hold his whole leg completely rigid and somehow jump up and hit her in the side with it. Like it was a fence railing. I would say it was completely impossible.”

Walker went quiet for a second.

“What about the bruised shin?” he asked.

Black swapped the third file into his hand. Opened it and read through the description of the contusion again. Then he shook his head.

“The shape of the bruise is crucial,” he said. “Again, it’s what you’d get from the impact of a long hard rounded object. Like a fence rail again, or maybe a sewer pipe, striking against the front of the shin at an oblique angle.”

“Could he have hit her with a length of pipe?”

Black shrugged again.

“Theoretically, I suppose,” he said. “If he was standing almost behind her, and somehow could reach over her, and he swung a hard downward blow, and struck

somehow could reach over her, and he swung a hard downward blow, and struck her almost but not quite parallel with her leg. He'd have to do it two-handed, because nobody can hold a six-inch diameter pipe one-handed. Probably he'd have to stand on a chair, and position her very carefully in front of it. It's not very likely, is it?"

"But is it possible?"

"No," Black said. "It isn't possible. I say that now, and I'd certainly have to say it under oath."

Walker was quiet again.

"What about the collarbone?" he asked.

Black picked up the last report.

"These are very detailed notes," he said. "Clearly an excellent physician."

"But what do they tell you?"

"It's a classic injury," Black said. "The collarbone is like a circuit breaker. A person falls, and they try to break their fall by throwing out their hand. Their whole body weight is turned into a severe physical impact that travels upward as a shock wave through their rigid arm, through their rigid shoulder joint, and onward. Now, if it wasn't for the collarbone, that force would travel into the neck, and probably break it, causing paralysis. Or into the brain pan, causing unconsciousness, maybe a chronic comatose state. But evolution is smart, and it chooses the least of all the evils. The collarbone snaps, thereby dissipating the force. Inconvenient and painful, to be sure, but not life-threatening. A mechanical circuit breaker, and generations of bicyclists and inline skaters and horseback riders have very good reason to be grateful for it."

"Falling can't be the only way," Walker said.

"It's the *main* way," Black said. "And almost always the only way. But occasionally I've seen it happen other ways, too. A downward blow with a baseball bat aimed at the head might miss and break the collarbone. Falling beams in a burning building might impact against the top of the shoulder. I've seen that with firefighters."

“Carmen Greer wasn’t a firefighter,” Walker said. “And there’s no evidence a baseball bat was involved any other time.”

Nobody spoke. The roar of the air conditioners filled the silence.

“O.K.,” Walker said. “Let me put it this way. I need evidence that there was violent physical abuse against this woman. Is there any here?”

Black went quiet for a spell. Then he simply shook his head.

“No,” he said. “Not within the bounds of reasonable likelihood.”

“None at all? Not even a shred?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“Stretching the bounds of reasonable likelihood?”

“There’s nothing there.”

“Stretching the bounds all the way until they break?”

“Still nothing. She had a normal pregnancy and she was an unlucky horseback rider. That’s all I see here.”

“No reasonable doubt?” Walker said. “That’s all I need. Just a shred will do.”

“It’s not there.”

Walker paused a beat. “Doctor, please let me say this with the greatest possible respect, O.K.? From a DA’s point of view, you’ve been a pain in the rear end many more times than I can remember, to me and my colleagues throughout the state. There have been times when we’re not sure what you’ve been smoking. You’ve always been capable of coming up with the most bizarre explanations for almost anything. So I’m asking you. Please. Is there any way *at all* you could interpret this stuff differently?”

Black didn’t answer.

“I’m sorry,” Walker said. “I offended you.”

“Not in the way you think you did,” Black said. “The fact is, I’ve never offered a bizarre explanation of anything. If I see possible exoneration, I speak up in court, sure. But what you clearly fail to understand is if I *don’t* see possible exoneration, then I don’t speak up *at all*. What your colleagues and I have clashed over in the past is merely the tip of the iceberg. Cases that have no merit don’t get to trial, because I advise the defense to plead them out and hope for mercy. And I see many, many cases that have no merit.”

“Cases like this one?”

Black nodded. “I’m afraid so. If I had been retained by Ms. Aaron directly, I would tell her that her client’s word is not to be trusted. And you’re right, I say that very reluctantly, with a long and honorable record of preferring to take the defense’s side. Which is a record I have always maintained, despite the attendant risk of annoying our districts’ attorneys. And which is a record I always aim to continue, for as long as I am spared. Which might not be much longer, if this damn heat keeps up.”

He paused a second and looked around.

“For which reason I must take my leave of you now,” he said. “I’m very sorry I was unable to help you, Mr. Walker. Really. It would have been enormously satisfying.”

He squared the reports together and slipped them back into the FedEx packet. Handed it to Reacher, who was nearest. Then he stood up and headed for the door.

“But there has to be something,” Walker said. “I don’t believe this. The one time in my life I *want* Cowan Black to come up with something, and he can’t.”

Black shook his head. “I learned a long time ago, sometimes they’re just guilty.”

He sketched a brief gesture that was half-wave, half-salute, and walked slowly out of the office. The breeze from the air conditioners caught the door and crashed it shut behind him. Alice and Reacher said nothing. Just watched Walker at his desk. Walker dropped his head into his hands and closed his eyes.

“Go away,” he said. “Just get the hell out of here and leave me alone.”

The air in the stairwell was hot, and it was worse still out on the sidewalk. Reacher swapped the FedEx packet into his left hand and caught Alice's arm with his right. Stopped her at the curb.

"Is there a good jeweler in town?" he asked.

"I guess," she said. "Why?"

"I want you to sign out her personal property. You're still her lawyer, as far as anybody knows. We'll get her ring appraised. Then we'll find out if she's telling the truth about *anything*."

"You still got doubts?"

"I'm from the army. First we check, then we double-check."

"O.K.," she said. "If you want." They turned around and walked down the alley and she took possession of Carmen's lizard skin belt and her ring by signing a form that specified both items as material evidence. Then they went looking for a jeweler. They walked away from the cheap streets and found one ten minutes later in a row of upmarket boutiques. The window display was too crowded to be called elegant, but judging by the price tags the owner had a feel for quality. Or for blind optimism.

"So how do we do this?" Alice asked.

"Make out it's an estate sale," Reacher said. "Maybe it belonged to your grandmother."

The guy in the store was old and stooped. He might have looked pretty sharp forty years ago. But he still acted sharp. Reacher saw a flash in his eyes. *Cops*? Then he saw him answer his own question in the negative. Alice didn't look like a cop. Neither did Reacher, which was a mistaken impression he'd traded on for years. Then the guy went into an assessment of how smart these new customers might be. It was transparent, at least to Reacher. He was accustomed to watching people make furtive calculations. He saw him decide to proceed with caution.

Alice produced the ring and told him she'd inherited it from family. Told him she was thinking of selling it, if the price was right.

The guy held it under a desk lamp and put a loupe in his eye.

"Color, clarity, cut and carat," he said. "The four Cs. That's what we look for."

He turned the stone left and right. It flashed in the light. He picked up a slip of stiff card that had circular holes punched through it. They started small and got bigger. He fitted the stone in the holes until he found one that fit exactly.

"Two and a quarter carats," he said. "Cut is real handsome. Color is good, maybe *just* on the yellow side of truly excellent. Clarity isn't flawless, but it's not very far off. This stone ain't bad. Not bad at all. How much do you want for it?"

"Whatever it's worth," Alice said.

"I could give you twenty," the guy said.

"Twenty what?"

"Thousand dollars," the guy said.

"Twenty thousand dollars?"

The guy put up his hands, palms out, defensively.

"I know, I know," he said. "Someone probably told you it's worth more. And maybe it is, retail, some big fancy store, Dallas or somewhere. But this is Pecos, and you're selling, not buying. And I have to make my profit."

"I'll think about it," Alice said.

"Twenty-five?" the guy said.

"Twenty-*five* thousand dollars?"

The guy nodded. "That's about as high as I can go, being fair to myself. I got to eat, after all."

“Let me think about it,” Alice said.

“Well, don’t think too long,” the guy said. “The market might change. And I’m the only game in town. Piece like this, it’ll scare anybody else.”

They stopped together on the sidewalk right outside the store. Alice was holding the ring like it was red hot. Then she opened her pocketbook and put it in a zippered compartment. Used her fingertips to push it all the way down.

“Guy like that says twenty-five, it’s got to be worth sixty,” Reacher said. “Maybe more. Maybe a lot more. My guess is he’s not the Better Business Bureau’s poster boy.”

“A lot more than thirty dollars, anyway,” Alice said. “A fake? Cubic zirconium? She’s playing us for fools.”

He nodded, vaguely. He knew she meant *playing you for a fool*. He knew she was too polite to say it.

“Let’s go,” he said.

They walked west through the heat, back to the cheap part of town, beyond the courthouse, next to the railroad tracks. It was about a mile, and they spent thirty minutes on it. It was too hot to hurry. He didn’t speak the whole way. Just fought his usual interior battle about exactly when to give up on a lost cause.

He stopped her again at the door to the mission.

“I want to try one last thing,” he said.

“Why?” she asked.

“Because I’m from the army,” he said. “First we double-check, then we triple-check.”

She sighed. A little impatience there. “What do you want to do?”

“I want to talk to your

"You need to drive me."

"Where?"

"There's an eyewitness we can talk to."

"An *eyewitness*? Where?"

"In school, down in Echo."

"The *kid*?"

He nodded. "Ellie. She's sharp as a tack."

"She's six years old."

"If it was happening, I'll bet she knows."

Alice stood completely still for a second. Then she glanced in through the windows. The place was crowded with customers. They looked listless from the heat and beaten down by life.

"It's not fair to *them*," she said. "I need to move on."

"Just this one last thing."

"I'll lend you the car again. You can go alone."

He shook his head. "I need your opinion. You're the lawyer. And I won't get in the schoolhouse without you. You've got status. I haven't."

"I can't do it. It'll take all day."

"How long would it have taken to get the money from the rancher? How many billable hours?"

"We don't bill."

"You know what I mean."

She was quiet for a moment.

“O.K.,” she said. “A deal’s a deal, I guess.”

“This is the last thing, I promise.”

“Why, exactly?” she asked.

They were in the yellow VW, heading south on the empty road out of Pecos. He recognized none of the landmarks. It had been dark when he came the other way in the back of the police cruiser.

“Because I was an investigator,” he said.

“O.K.,” she said. “Investigators investigate. That, I can follow. But don’t they *stop* investigating? I mean, ever? When they *know* already?”

“Investigators never know,” he said. “They feel, and they guess.”

“I thought they dealt in facts.”

“Not really,” he said. “I mean, eventually they do, I suppose. But ninety-nine percent of the time it’s ninety-nine percent about what you *feel*. About people. A good investigator is a person with a feel for people.”

“Feeling doesn’t change black into white.”

He nodded. “No, it doesn’t.”

“Weren’t you ever wrong before?”

“Of course I was. Lots of times.”

“But?”

“But I don’t think I’m wrong now.”

“So why, exactly?” she asked again.

“Because I know things about people, Alice.”

Because I know things about people, Alice.

“So do I,” she said. “Like, I know Carmen Greer suckered you, too.”

He said nothing more. Just watched her drive, and looked at the view ahead. He could see mountains in the distance, where Carmen had chased the school bus. He had the FedEx packet on his knees. He fanned himself with it. Balanced it on his fingers. Turned it over and over, aimlessly. Stared down at the front and the back, at the orange and purple logo, at the label, at the meaningless little words all over it, sender, addressee, *extremely urgent*, commodity description, dimensions in inches, twelve-by-nine, weight in pounds, two-point-six, payment, recipient’s contact information, overnight, no post office box number, shipper must check: *this shipment does not contain dangerous goods*. He shook his head and pitched it behind him, onto the backseat.

“She had no money with her,” he said.

Alice said nothing back. Just drove on, piloting the tiny car fast and economically. He could feel her pitying him. It was suddenly coming off her in waves.

“What?” he said.

“We should turn around,” she said. “This is a complete waste of time.”

“Why?”

“Because exactly what is Ellie going to tell us? I mean, I can follow your thinking. If Carmen really *did* get a broken arm, then she must have been wearing a plaster cast for six weeks. And Ellie’s a smart kid, so she’ll recall it. Same for the jaw thing. Broken jaw, you’re all wired up for a spell. Certainly a kid would remember *that. If* any of this really happened, and *if* it happened recently enough that she can remember anything at all.”

“But?”

“But we *know* she was never in a cast. We *know* she never had her jaw wired. We’ve got her medical records, remember? They’re right here in the car with us. Everything she ever went to the hospital for. Or do you think setting bones is a do-it-yourself activity? You think the blacksmith did it in the barn? So the very

best Ellie can do is confirm what we already know. And most likely she won't remember anything anyway, because she's just a kid. So this trip is a *double* waste of time."

"Let's do it anyway," he said. "We're halfway there already. She might recall something useful. And I want to see her again. She's a great kid."

"I'm sure she is," Alice said. "But spare yourself, O.K.? Because what are you going to do? Adopt her? She's the one with the raw end of this deal, so you might as well accept it and forget all about her."

They didn't speak again until they arrived at the crossroads with the diner and the school and the gas station. Alice parked exactly where Carmen had and they got out together into the heat.

"I better come with you," Reacher said. "She knows me. We can bring her out and talk in the car."

They went through the wire gate into the yard. Then through the main door into the schoolhouse itself, into the school smell. They were out again a minute later. Ellie Greer wasn't there, and she hadn't been there the day before, either.

"Understandable, I guess," Alice said. "Traumatic time for her."

Reacher nodded. "So let's go. It's only another hour south."

"Great," Alice said.

They got back in the VW and drove the next sixty miles of parched emptiness without talking. It took a little less than an hour, because Alice drove faster than Carmen had wanted to. Reacher recognized the landmarks. He saw the old oil field, on the distant horizon off to the left. Greer Three.

"It's coming up," he said.

Alice slowed. The red-painted picket fence replaced the wire and the gate swam into view through the haze. Alice braked and turned in under it. The small car bounced uncomfortably across the yard. She stopped it close to the bottom of the familiar porch steps and turned off the motor. The whole place was silent. No activity. But people were home, because all the cars were lined up in the vehicle barn. The white Cadillac was there, and the Jeep Cherokee, and the new pick-up

barn. The white Cadillac was there, and the Jeep Cherokee, and the new pick-up, and the old pick-up. They were all crouched there in the shadows.

They got out of the car and stood for a second behind the open doors, like they offered protection from something. The air was very still, and hotter than ever. Easily a hundred and ten degrees, maybe more. He led her up the porch steps into the shadow of the roof and knocked on the door. It opened almost immediately. Rusty Greer was standing there. She was holding a .22 rifle, one-handed. She stayed silent for a long moment, just looking him over. Then she spoke.

“It’s you,” she said. “I thought it might be Bobby.”

“You lost him?” Reacher said.

Rusty shrugged. “He went out. He isn’t back yet.”

Reacher glanced back at the motor barn.

“All the cars are here,” he said.

“Somebody picked him up,” Rusty said. “I was upstairs. Didn’t see them. Just heard them.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Anyway,” Rusty said. “I didn’t expect to see you again, ever.”

“This is Carmen’s lawyer,” Reacher said.

Rusty turned and glanced at Alice. “This is the best she could do?”

“We need to see Ellie.”

“What for?”

“We’re interviewing witnesses.”

“A child can’t be a witness.”

“I’ll decide that,” Alice said.

Rusty just smiled at her.

“Ellie’s not here,” she said.

“Well, where is she?” Reacher said. “She’s not in school.”

Rusty said nothing.

“Mrs. Greer, we need to know where Ellie is,” Alice said.

Rusty smiled again. “I don’t know where she is, lawyer girl.”

“Why not?” Alice asked.

“Because Family Services took her, that’s why not.”

“When?”

“This morning. They came for her.”

“And you let them take her?” Reacher said.

“Why wouldn’t I? I don’t want her. Now that Sloop is gone.”

Reacher stared at her. “But she’s your granddaughter.”

Rusty made a dismissive gesture. The rifle moved in her hand.

“That’s a fact I was never thrilled about,” she said.

“Where did they take her?”

“An orphanage, I guess,” Rusty said. “And then she’ll get adopted, if anybody wants her. Which they probably won’t. I understand half-breeds are very difficult to place. Decent folk generally don’t want beaner trash.”

There was silence. Just the tiny sounds of dry earth baking in the heat.

“I hope you get a tumor,” Reacher said.

He turned around and walked back to the car without waiting for Alice. Got in and slammed the door and sat staring forward with his face burning and his

and slammed the door and sat staring forward with his face burning and his massive hands clenching and unclenching. She got in beside him and fired up the motor.

“Get me out of here,” he said. She took off in a cloud of dust. Neither of them spoke a single word, all the way north to Pecos.

It was three in the afternoon when they got back, and the legal mission was half empty because of the heat. There was the usual thicket of messages on Alice’s desk. Five of them were from Hack Walker. They made a neat little sequence, each of them more urgent than the last.

“Shall we go?” Alice asked.

“Don’t tell him about the diamond,” Reacher said.

“It’s over now, don’t you see?”

And it was. Reacher saw it right away in Walker’s face. There was relaxation there. Some kind of finality. Closure. Some kind of peace. He was sitting behind his desk. His desk was all covered with papers. They were arranged in two piles. One was taller than the other.

“What?” Reacher asked.

Walker ignored him and handed a single sheet to Alice.

“Waiver of her Miranda rights,” he said. “Read it carefully. She’s declining legal representation, and she’s declaring that it’s entirely voluntary. And she adds that she refused *your* representation from the very start.”

“I doubted her competence,” Alice said.

Walker nodded. “I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt. But there’s no doubt now. So you’re here purely as a courtesy, O.K.? Both of you.”

Then he handed over the smaller pile of papers. Alice took them and fanned

them out and Reacher leaned to his right to look at them. They were computer printouts. They were all covered in figures and dates. They were bank records. Balance statements and transaction listings. Credits and debits. There seemed to be five separate accounts. Two were regular checking accounts. Three were money-market deposits. They were titled *Greer Non-Discretionary Trust*, numbers one through five. The balances were healthy. Very healthy. There was a composite total somewhere near two million dollars.

"Al Eugene's people messengered them over," Walker said. "Now look at the bottom sheets."

Alice riffed through. The bottom sheets were paper-clipped together. Reacher read over her shoulder. There was a lot of legal text. It added up to the formal minutes of a trust agreement. There was a notarized deed attached. It stated in relatively straightforward language that for the time being a single trustee was in absolute sole control of all Sloop Greer's funds. That single trustee was identified as Sloop Greer's legal wife, Carmen.

"She had two million bucks in the bank," Walker said. "All hers, effectively."

Reacher glanced at Alice. She nodded.

"He's right," she said.

"Now look at the last clause of the minutes," Walker said.

Alice turned the page. The last clause concerned reversion. The trusts would become discretionary once again and return the funds to Sloop's own control at a future date to be specified by him. Unless he first became irreversibly mentally incapacitated. Or died. Whereupon all existing balances would become Carmen's sole property, in the first instance as a matter of prior agreement, and in the second, as a matter of inheritance.

"Is all of that clear?" Walker asked.

Reacher said nothing, but Alice nodded.

Then Walker passed her the taller pile.

"Now read this," he said.

“What is it?” she asked.

“A transcript,” Walker said. “Of her confession.”

There was silence.

“She confessed?” Alice said.

“We videotaped it,” Walker said.

“When?”

“Noon today. My assistant went to see her as soon as the financial stuff came in. We tried to find you first, but we couldn’t. Then she told us she didn’t want a lawyer anyway. So we had her sign the waiver. Then she spilled her guts. We brought her up here and videotaped the whole thing over again. It’s not pretty.”

Reacher was half-listening, half-reading. It wasn’t pretty. That was for damn sure. It started out with all the usual assurances about free will and absolute absence of coercion. She stated her name. Went all the way back to her L.A. days. She had been an illegitimate child. She had been a hooker. *Street stroller*, she called it. Some odd barrio expression, Reacher assumed. Then she came off the streets and started stripping, and changed her title to *sex worker*. She had latched onto Sloop, just like Walker had claimed. *My meal ticket*, she called him. Then it became a story of impatience. She was bored witless in Texas. She wanted out, but she wanted money in her pocket. The more money the better. Sloop’s IRS trouble was a godsend. The trusts were tempting. She tried to have him killed in prison, which she knew from her peers was possible, but she found out that a federal minimum-security facility wasn’t that sort of a place. So she waited. As soon as she heard he was getting out, she bought the gun and went recruiting. She planned to leverage her marks with invented stories about domestic violence. Reacher’s name was mentioned as the last pick. He had refused, so she did it herself. Having already fabricated the abuse claims, she intended to use them to get off with self-defense, or diminished responsibility, or whatever else she could manage. But then she realized her hospital records would come up blank, so she was confessing and throwing herself on the mercy of the prosecutor. Her signature was scrawled on the bottom of every page.

Alice was a slow reader. She came to the end a full minute after him.

“I’m sorry, Reacher,” she said.

"I´m sorry, Reacher,´´ she said.

There was silence for a moment.

“What about the election?” Reacher asked. The last hope.

Walker shrugged. “Texas code says it’s a capital crime. Murder for remuneration. We’ve got enough evidence to choke a pig. And I can’t ignore a voluntary confession, can I? So, couple hours ago I was pretty down. But then I got to thinking about it. Fact is, a voluntary confession helps me out. A confession and a guilty plea, saves the taxpayer the cost of a trial. Justifies me asking for a life sentence instead. The way I see it, with a story like that, she’s going to look very, very bad, whoever you are. So if I back off the death penalty, I’ll look magnanimous in comparison. Generous, even. The whites will fret a little, but the Mexicans will eat it up with a spoon. See what I mean? The whole thing is reversed now. She was the good guy, I was the heavy hand. But now she’s the heavy hand, and I’m the good guy. So I think I’m O.K.”

Nobody spoke for another minute. There was just the omnipresent roar of the air conditioners.

“I’ve got her property,” Alice said. “A belt and a ring.”

“Take them to storage,” Walker said. “We’ll be moving her, later.”

“Where?”

“The penitentiary. We can’t keep her here anymore.”

“No, where’s storage?”

“Same building as the morgue. Make sure you get a receipt.”

Reacher walked with her over to the morgue. He wasn’t aware of taking a single step. Wasn’t aware of the heat, or the dust, or the noise, or the traffic, or the smells of the street. He felt like he was floating an inch above the sidewalk, insulated inside some kind of sensory-deprivation suit. Alice was talking to him,

time to time, but he was hearing nothing that she said. All he could hear was a small voice inside his head that was saying *you were wrong. Completely wrong*. It was a voice he had heard before, but that didn't make it any easier to hear again, because he had built his whole career on hearing it fewer times than the next guy. It was like a box score in his mind, and his average had just taken some serious damage. Which upset him. Not because of vanity. It upset him because he was a professional who was supposed to get things right.

"Reacher?" Alice was saying. "You're not listening, are you?"

"What?" he said.

"I asked you, do you want to get a meal?"

"No," he said. "I want to get a ride."

She stopped walking. "What now? Quadruple-check?"

"No, I mean out of here. I want to go somewhere else. A long way away. I hear Antarctica is nice, this time of year."

"The bus depot is on the way back to the office."

"Good. I'll take a bus. Because I'm all done hitchhiking. You never know who's going to pick you up."

The morgue was a low industrial shed in a paved yard behind the street. It could have been a brake shop or a tire depot. It had metal siding and a roll-up vehicle door. There was a personnel entrance at the far end of the building. It had two steps up to it, framed by handrails fabricated from steel pipe. Inside, it was very cold. There were industrial-strength air conditioners running full blast. It felt like a meat store. Which it was, in a way. To the left of the foyer was a double door that gave directly onto the morgue operation. It was standing open, and Reacher could see the autopsy tables. There was plenty of stainless steel and white tile and fluorescent light in there.

Alice put the lizard skin belt on the reception counter and dug in her pocketbook for the ring. She told the attendant they were for *Texas* vs. *Carmen Greer*. He went away and came back with the evidence box.

"No, it's personal property," she said. "Not evidence. I'm sorry."

"No, it's personal property," she said. "Not evidence. I'm sorry."

The guy gave her a *why didn't you say so* look and turned around.

"Wait," Reacher called. "Let me see that."

The guy paused, and then he turned back and slid the box across the counter. It had no lid, so it was really just a cardboard tray maybe three inches deep. Somebody had written *Greer* on the front edge with a marker pen. The Lorcin was in a plastic bag with an evidence number. Two brass shell cases were in a separate bag. Two tiny .22 bullets were in a bag each. They were gray and very slightly distorted. One bag was marked *Intercranial #1* and the other was marked *Intercranial #2*. They had reference numbers, and signatures.

"Is the pathologist here?" Reacher asked.

"Sure," the counter guy said. "He's always here."

"I need to see him," Reacher said. "Right now."

He was expecting objections, but the guy just pointed to the double doors.

"In there," he said.

Alice hung back, but Reacher went through. At first he thought the room was empty, but then he saw a glass door in the far corner. Behind it was an office, with a man in green scrubs at a desk. He was doing paperwork. Reacher knocked on the glass. The man looked up. Mouthed *come in*. Reacher went in.

"Help you?" the guy said.

"Only two bullets in Sloop Greer?" Reacher said.

"Who are you?"

"I'm with the perp's lawyer," Reacher said. "She's outside."

"The perp?"

"No, the lawyer."

"O.K.." the guy said. "What about the bullets?"

“How many were there?”

“Two,” the guy said. “Hell of a time getting them out.”

“Can I see the body?”

“Why?”

“I’m worried about a miscarriage of justice.”

It’s a line that usually works with pathologists. They figure there’s going to be a trial, they figure they’ll be called on for evidence, the last thing they want is to be humiliated by the defense on cross-examination. It’s bad for their scientific image. And their egos. So they prefer to get any doubts squared away beforehand.

“O.K.,” he said. “It’s in the freezer.”

He had another door in back of his office which led to a dim corridor. At the end of the corridor was an insulated steel door, like a meat locker.

“Cold in there,” he said.

Reacher nodded. “I’m glad somewhere is.”

The guy operated the handle and they went inside. The light was bright. There were fluorescent tubes all over the ceiling. There was a bank of twenty-seven stainless steel drawers on the far wall, nine across, three high. Eight of them were occupied. They had tags slipped into little receptacles on the front, the sort of thing you see on office filing cabinets. The air in the room was frosty. Reacher’s breath clouded in front of him. The pathologist checked the tags and slid a drawer. It came out easily, on cantilevered runners.

“Had to take the back of his head off,” he said. “Practically had to scoop his brains out with a soup ladle, before I found them.”

Sloop Greer was on his back and naked. He looked small and collapsed in death. His skin was gray, like unfired clay. It was hard with cold. His eyes were open, blank and staring. He had two bullet holes in his forehead, about three inches apart. They were neat holes, blue and ridged at the edges, like they had been

apart. They were neat holes, blue and ridged at the edges, like they had been carefully drilled there by a craftsman.

“Classic .22 gunshot wounds,” the pathologist said. “The bullets go in O.K., but they don’t come out again. Too slow. Not enough power. They just rattle around in there. But they get the job done.”

Reacher closed his eyes. Then he smiled. A big, broad grin.

“That’s for sure,” he said. “They get the job done.”

There was a knock at the open door. A low sound, like soft knuckles against hard steel. Reacher opened his eyes again. Alice was standing there, shivering.

“What are you doing?” she called to him.

“What comes after quadruple-check?” he called back.

His breath hung in the air in front of him, like a shaped cloud.

“Quintuple-check,” she said. “Why?”

“And after that?”

“Sextuple,” she said. “Why?”

“Because we’re going to be doing a whole lot of checking now.”

“Why?”

“Because there’s something seriously wrong here, Alice. Come take a look.”

14

Alice walked slowly across the tile.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Tell me what you see,” Reacher said.

She dropped her eyes toward the corpse like it required a physical effort.

“Shot in the head,” she said. “Twice.”

“How far apart are the holes?”

“Maybe three inches.”

“What else do you see?”

“Nothing,” she said.

He nodded. “Exactly.”

“So?”

“Look closer. The holes are clean, right?”

She took a step nearer the drawer. Bent slightly from the waist.

“They look clean,” she said.

“That has implications,” he said. “It means they’re not contact wounds. A contact wound is where you put the muzzle of the gun directly against the forehead. You know what happens when you do that?”

She shook her head. Said nothing.

“First thing out of a gun barrel is an explosion of hot gas. If the muzzle was tight against the forehead, the gas punches in under the skin and then can’t go

anyplace, because of the bone. So it punches right back out again. It tears itself a big star-shaped hole. Looks like a starfish. Right, doc?"

The pathologist nodded.

"Star-burst splitting, we call it," he said.

"That's absent here," Reacher said. "So it wasn't a contact shot. Next thing out of the barrel is flame. If it was a real close shot, two or three inches, but not a contact shot, we'd see burning of the skin. In a small ring shape."

"Burn rim," the pathologist said.

"That's absent, too," Reacher said. "Next thing out is soot. Soft, smudgy black stuff. So if it was a shot from six or eight inches, we'd see soot smudging on his forehead. Maybe a patch a couple inches wide. That's not here, either."

"So?" Alice asked.

"Next thing out is gunpowder particles," Reacher said. "Little bits of unburned carbon. No gunpowder is perfect. Some of it doesn't burn. It just blasts out, in a spray. It hammers in under the skin. Tiny black dots. Tattooing, it's called. If it was a shot from a foot away, maybe a foot and a half, we'd see it. You see it?"

"No," Alice said.

"Right. All we see is the bullet holes. Nothing else. No evidence at all to suggest they were from close range. Depends on the exact powder in the shells, but they look to me like shots from three or four feet away, absolute minimum."

"Eight feet six inches," the pathologist said. "That's my estimation."

Reacher glanced at him. "You tested the powder?"

The guy shook his head. "Crime scene diagrams. He was on the far side of the bed. The bed was near the window, gave him an alley two feet six inches wide on his side. He was found near the bedside table, up near the head, against the window wall. We know she wasn't next to him there, or we'd have found all that close-range stuff you just mentioned. So the nearest she *could* have been was on the other side of the bed. At the foot end, probably. Firing across it, diagonally,

according to the trajectories. He was probably retreating as far as he could get. It was a king-size bed, so my best guess is eight feet six inches, to allow for the diagonal."

"Excellent," Reacher said. "You prepared to say so on the stand?"

"Sure. And that's only the theoretical minimum. Could have been more."

"But what does it mean?" Alice asked.

"Means Carmen didn't do it," Reacher said.

"Why not?"

"How big is a man's forehead? Five inches across and two high?"

"So?"

"No way she could have hit a target that small from eight feet plus."

"How do you know?"

"Because I saw her shoot, the day before. First time she pulled a trigger in her life. She was hopeless. Literally hopeless. She couldn't have hit the side of a barn from eight feet plus. I told her she'd have to jam the gun in his gut and empty the magazine."

"You're digging her grave," Alice said. "That sort of testimony shouldn't be volunteered."

"She didn't do it, Alice. She couldn't have."

"She could have gotten lucky."

"Sure, once. But not twice. Twice means they were aimed shots. And they're close together, horizontally. He'd have started falling after the first one. Which means it was a fast double-tap. *Bang bang*, like that, no hesitation. That's skillful shooting."

Alice was quiet for a second.

“She could have been faking,” she said. “You know, before. About needing to learn. She lied about everything else. Maybe she was really an expert shot, but she claimed not to be. Because she wanted you to do it for her. For other reasons.”

Reacher shook his head.

“She wasn’t faking,” he said. “All my life I’ve seen people shoot. Either you can or you can’t. And if you can, it shows. You can’t hide it. You can’t unlearn it.”

Alice said nothing.

“It wasn’t Carmen,” Reacher said. “Even *I* couldn’t have done it. Not with that piece of junk she bought. Not from that distance. A fast double-tap to the head? Whoever did this is a better shooter than me.”

Alice smiled, faintly. “And that’s rare?”

“Very,” he said, unselfconsciously.

“But she confessed to it. Why would she do that?”

“I have no idea.”

Ellie wasn’t sure she understood completely. She had hidden on the stairs above the foyer when her grandmother talked to the strangers. She had heard the words *new family*. She understood what they meant. And she already knew she *needed* a new family. The Greers had told her that her daddy had died and her mommy had gone far away and wasn’t ever coming back. And they had told her they didn’t want to keep her with them. Which was O.K. with her. She didn’t want to stay with them, either. They were mean. They had already sold her pony, and all the other horses, too. A big truck had come for them, very early that morning. She didn’t cry. She just somehow knew it all went together. No more Daddy, no more Mommy, no more pony, no more horses. Everything had changed. So she went with the strangers, because she didn’t know what else to do.

Then the strangers had let her talk to her mommy on the phone. Her mommy had cried, and at the end she said *be happy with your new family*. But the thing was, she wasn't sure if these strangers *were* her new family, or if they were just *taking* her to her new family. And she was afraid to ask. So she just kept quiet. The back of her hand was sore, where she put it in her mouth.

"It's a can of worms," Hack Walker said. "You know what I mean? Best not to open it at all. Things could get out of hand, real quick."

They were back in Walker's office. It was easily fifty degrees hotter than the interior of the morgue building. They were both sweating heavily.

"You understand?" Walker asked. "It makes things worse again."

"You think?" Alice said.

Walker nodded. "It muddies the waters. Let's say Reacher is right, which is a stretch, frankly, because all he's got is a highly subjective opinion here. He's guessing, basically. And his guess is based on what, exactly? It's based on an impression she chose to give him beforehand, that she couldn't shoot, and we already know every *other* impression she chose to give him beforehand was total bullshit from beginning to end. But let's say he's right, just for the sake of argument. What does that give us?"

"What?"

"A conspiracy, is what. We know she tried to rope Reacher in. Now you've got her roping somebody else in. She gets ahold of somebody else, she tells them to come to the house, she tells them where and when, she tells them where her gun is concealed, they show up, get the gun, do the deed. If it happened that way, she's instigated a conspiracy to commit murder for remuneration. Hired a killer, cold-blooded as hell. We go down that road, she's headed for the lethal injection again. Because *that* looks a whole lot worse than a solo shot, believe me. In comparison, a solo shot looks almost benign. It looks like a crime of the moment, you know? We leave it exactly the way we got it, along with the guilty plea, I'm happy asking for a life sentence. But we start talking conspiracy, that's

real evil, and we're back on track for death row."

Alice said nothing.

"So you see what I mean?" Walker said. "There's no net benefit. Absolutely the opposite effect. It makes things much worse for her. Plus, she already said she did it herself. Which I think is true. But if it isn't, then her confession was a calculated lie, designed to cover her ass, because she knew a conspiracy would look worse. And we'd have to react to that. We couldn't let that go. It would make us look like fools."

Alice said nothing. Reacher just shrugged.

"So leave it alone," Walker said. "That's my suggestion. If it would help her, I'd look at it. But it won't. So we should leave it alone. For her sake."

"And for your judgeship's sake," Reacher said.

Walker nodded. "I'm not hiding that from you."

"You happy to leave it alone?" Alice asked. "As a prosecutor? Somebody could be getting clean away with something."

Walker shook his head. "*If* it happened the way Reacher thinks. If, if, if. *If* is a very big word. I got to say I think it's highly unlikely. Believe me, I'm a real enthusiastic prosecutor, but I wouldn't build a case and waste a jury's time on one person's purely subjective opinion about how well another person could shoot. Especially when that other person is as accomplished a liar as Carmen is. All we know, she's been shooting every day since she was a kid. A rough kid from some barrio in L.A., certainly a rural Texas jury wouldn't see any problem in swallowing that."

Reacher said nothing. Alice nodded again.

"O.K.," she said. "I'm not her lawyer, anyway."

"What would you do if you were?"

She shrugged. "I'd leave it, probably. Like you say, blundering into a conspiracy rap wouldn't help her any."

She stood up, slowly, like it was an effort in the heat. She tapped Reacher on the shoulder. Gave him a *what can we do*? look and headed for the door. He stood up and followed her. Walker said nothing. Just watched them partway out of the room and then dropped his eyes to the old photograph of the three boys leaning on the pick-up's fender.

They crossed the street together and walked as far as the bus depot. It was fifty yards from the courthouse, fifty yards from the legal mission. It was a small, sleepy depot. No buses in it. Just an expanse of diesel-stained blacktop ringed with benches shaded from the afternoon sun by small white fiberglass roofs. There was a tiny office hut papered on the outside with schedules. It had a through-the-wall air conditioner running hard. There was a woman in it, sitting on a high stool, reading a magazine.

"Walker's right, you know," Alice said. "He's doing her a favor. It's a lost cause."

Reacher said nothing.

"So where will you head?" she asked.

"First bus out," he said. "That's my rule."

They stood together and read the schedules. Next departure was to Topeka, Kansas, via Oklahoma City. It was due in from Phoenix, Arizona, in a half hour. It was making a long slow counterclockwise loop.

"Been to Topeka before?" Alice asked.

"I've been to Leavenworth," he said. "It's not far."

He tapped on the glass and the woman sold him a one-way ticket. He put it in his pocket.

"Good luck, Alice," he said. "Four and a half years from now, I'll look for you in the Yellow Pages."

She smiled.

“Take care, Reacher,” she said.

She stood still for a second, like she was debating whether to hug him or kiss him on the cheek, or just walk away. Then she smiled again, and just walked away. He watched her go until she was lost to sight. Then he found the shadiest bench and sat down to wait.

She still wasn’t sure. They had taken her to a very nice place, like a house, with beds and everything. So maybe this *was* her new family. But they didn’t *look* like a family. They were very busy. She thought they looked a bit like doctors. They were kind to her, but busy too, with stuff she didn’t understand. Like at the doctor’s office. Maybe they were doctors. Maybe they knew she was upset, and they were going to make her better. She thought about it for a long time, and then she asked.

“Are you doctors?” she said.

“No,” they answered.

“Are you my new family?”

“No,” they said. “You’ll go to your new family soon.”

“When?”

“A few days, O.K.? But right now you stay with us.”

She thought they all looked very busy.

The bus rolled in more or less on time. It was a big Greyhound, dirty from the road, wrapped in a diesel cloud, with heat shimmering visibly from its air

conditioner grilles. It stopped twenty feet from him and the driver held the engine at a loud shuddering idle. The door opened and three people got off. Reacher stood up and walked over and got on. He was the only departing passenger. The driver took his ticket.

“Two minutes, O.K.?” the guy said. “I need a comfort stop.”

Reacher nodded and said nothing. Just shuffled down the aisle and found a double seat empty. It was on the left, which would face the evening sun all the way after they turned north at Abilene. But the windows were tinted dark blue and the air was cold, so he figured he’d be O.K. He sat down sideways. Stretched out and rested his head against the glass. The eight spent shells in his pocket were uncomfortable against the muscle of his thigh. He hitched up and moved them through the cotton. Then he took them out and held them in his palm. Rolled them together like dice. They were warm, and they made dull metallic sounds.

Abilene, he thought.

The driver climbed back in and hung off the step and looked both ways, like an old railroad guy. Then he slid into his seat and the door wheezed shut behind him.

“Wait,” Reacher called.

He stood up and shuffled forward again, all the way down the aisle.

“I changed my mind,” he said. “I’m getting off.”

“I already canceled your ticket,” the driver said. “You want a refund, you’ll have to mail a claim.”

“I don’t want a refund,” Reacher said. “Just let me out, O.K.?”

The driver looked blank, but he operated the mechanism anyway and the doors wheezed open again. Reacher stepped down into the heat and walked away. He heard the bus leave behind him. It turned right where he had turned left and he heard its noise fade and die into the distance. He walked on to the law office. Working hours elsewhere were over and it was crowded again with groups of quiet worried people, some of them talking to lawyers, some of them waiting to. Alice was at her desk in back, talking to a woman with a baby on her knee. She

Alice was at her desk in back, talking to a woman with a baby on her knee. She looked up, surprised.

“Bus didn’t come?” she asked.

“I need to ask you a legal question,” he said.

“Is it quick?”

He nodded. “Civilian law, if some guy tells an attorney about a crime, how far can the cops press the attorney for the details?”

“It would be privileged information,” Alice said. “Between lawyer and client. The cops couldn’t press at all.”

“Can I use your phone?”

She paused a moment, puzzled. Then she shrugged.

“Sure,” she said. “Squeeze in.”

He took a spare client chair and put it next to hers, behind the desk.

“Got phone books for Abilene?” he asked.

“Bottom drawer,” she said. “All of Texas.”

She turned back to the woman with the baby and restarted their discussion in Spanish. He opened the drawer and found the right book. There was an information page near the front, with all the emergency services laid out in big letters. He dialed the state police, Abilene office. A woman answered and asked how she could help him.

“I have information,” he said. “About a crime.”

The woman put him on hold. Maybe thirty seconds later the call was picked up elsewhere. Sounded like a squad room. Other phones were ringing in the background and there was faint people noise all around.

“Sergeant Rodríguez,” a voice said.

“I have information about a crime,” Reacher said again.

"I have information about a crime," Reacher said again.

"Your name, sir?"

"Chester A. Arthur," Reacher said. "I'm a lawyer in Pecos County."

"O.K., Mr. Arthur, go ahead."

"You guys found an abandoned automobile south of Abilene on Friday. A Mercedes Benz belonging to a lawyer called Al Eugene. He's currently listed as a missing person."

There was the sound of a keyboard pattering.

"O.K.," Rodríguez said. "What can you tell me?"

"I have a client here who says Eugene was abducted from his car and killed very near the scene."

"What's your client's name, sir?"

"Can't tell you that," Reacher said. "Privileged information. And the fact is I'm not sure I even believe him. I need you to check his story from your end. If he's making sense, then maybe I can persuade him to come forward."

"What is he telling you?"

"He says Eugene was flagged down and put in another car. He was driven north to a concealed location on the left-hand side of the road, and then he was shot and his body was hidden."

Alice had stopped her conversation and was staring sideways at him.

"So I want you to search the area," Reacher said.

"We already searched the area."

"What kind of a radius?"

"Immediate surroundings."

"No, my guy says a mile or two north. You need to look under vegetation, in the

cracks in the rock, pumping houses, anything there is. Some spot near where a vehicle could have pulled off the road."

"A mile or two north of the abandoned car?"

"My guy says not less than one, not more than two."

"On the left?"

"He's pretty sure," Reacher said.

"You got a phone number?"

"I'll call you back," Reacher said. "An hour from now."

He hung up. The woman with the baby was gone. Alice was still staring at him.

"What?" she said.

"We should have focused on Eugene before."

"Why?"

"Because what's the one solid fact we've got here?"

"What?"

"Carmen didn't shoot Sloop, that's what."

"That's an opinion, not a fact."

"No, it's a fact, Alice. Believe me, I *know* these things."

She shrugged. "O.K., so?"

"So somebody else shot him. Which raises the question, why? We know Eugene is missing, and we know Sloop is dead. They were connected, lawyer and client. So let's assume Eugene is dead, too, not just missing. For the sake of argument. They were working together on a deal that sprung Sloop from jail. Some kind of a big deal, because that isn't easy. They don't hand out remissions like candy. So it must have involved some heavy-duty information. Something valuable. Big

trouble for somebody. Suppose that somebody took them *both* out, for revenge, or to stop the flow of information?"

"Where did you get this idea?"

"From Carmen, actually," he said. "She suggested that's how I should do it. Off Sloop and make like stopping the deal was the pretext."

"So Carmen took her own advice."

"No, Carmen's parallel," Reacher said. "She hated him, she had a motive, she's all kinds of a liar, but she didn't kill him. Somebody else did."

"Yes, *for* her."

"No," Reacher said. "It didn't happen that way. She just got lucky. It was a parallel event. Like he was run over by a truck someplace else. Maybe she's thrilled with the result, but she didn't *cause* it."

"How sure are you?"

"Very sure. Any other way is ridiculous. Think about it, Alice. Anybody who shoots that well is a professional. Professionals plan ahead, at least a few days. And if she had hired a professional a few days ahead, why would she trawl around Texas looking for guys like me hitching rides? And why would she allow Sloop to be killed in her own bedroom, where she would be the number-one suspect? With her own gun?"

"So what do you think happened?"

"I think some hit team took Eugene out on Friday and covered their ass by hiding the body so it won't be found until the trail is completely cold. Then they took Sloop out on Sunday and covered their ass by making it look like Carmen did it. In her bedroom, with her own gun."

"But she was with him. Wouldn't she have *noticed*? Wouldn't she have *said*?"

He paused. "Maybe she was with Ellie at the time. Maybe she walked back into the bedroom and found it done. Or maybe she was in the shower. Her hair was wet when they arrested her."

“Then she’d have heard the shots.”

“Not with that shower. It’s like Niagara Falls. And a .22 pistol is quiet.”

“How do you know where they’ll find Eugene’s body? Assuming you’re right?”

“I thought about how I would do it. They obviously had a vehicle of their own, out there in the middle of nowhere. So maybe they staged a breakdown or a flat. Flagged him down, forced him into their vehicle, drove him away. But they wouldn’t want to keep him in there long. Too risky. Two or three minutes maximum, I figure, which is a mile or two from a standing start.”

“Why north? Why on the left side?”

“I’d have driven way north first. Turned back and scouted the nearside shoulder. Picked my place and measured a couple of miles backward, turned around again and set up and waited for him.”

“Conceivable,” she said. “But the Sloop thing? That’s impossible. They went down to that house? In Echo, in the middle of nowhere? Hid out and crept in? While she was in the shower?”

“I could have done it,” he said. “And I’m assuming they’re as good as me. Maybe they’re better than me. They certainly shoot better.”

“You’re crazy,” she said.

“Maybe,” he said.

“No, for sure,” she said. “Because she *confessed* to it. Why would she do that? If it was really nothing at all to do with her?”

“We’ll figure that out later. First, we wait an hour.”

He left Alice with work to do and went back out into the heat. Decided he’d finally take a look at the Wild West museum. When he got there, it was closed.

Too late in the day. But he could see an alley leading to an open area in back. There was a locked gate, low enough for him to step over. Behind the buildings was a collection of rebuilt artifacts from the old days. There was a small one-cell jailhouse, and a replica of Judge Roy Bean's courthouse, and a hanging tree. The three displays made a nice direct sequence. Arrest, trial, sentence. Then there was Clay Allison's grave. It was well tended, and the headstone was handsome. Clay was his middle name. His first name was Robert. Robert Clay Allison, born 1840, died 1887. *Never killed a man that did not need killing*. Reacher had no middle name. It was Jack Reacher, plain and simple. Born 1960, not dead yet. He wondered what his headstone would look like. Probably wouldn't have one. There was nobody to arrange it.

He strolled back up the alley and stepped over the gate again. Facing him was a long low concrete building, two stories. Retail operations on the first floor, offices above. One of them had Albert E. Eugene, Attorney at Law painted on the window in old-fashioned gold letters. There were two other law firms in the building. The building was within sight of the courthouse. These were the cheap lawyers, Reacher guessed. Separated geographically from the free lawyers in Alice's row and the expensive lawyers who must be on some other street. Although Eugene had driven a Mercedes Benz. Maybe he did a lot of volume. Or maybe he was just vain and had been struggling with a heavy lease payment.

He paused at the crossroads. The sun was dropping low in the west and there were clouds stacking up on the southern horizon. There was a warm breeze on his face. It was gusting strong enough to tug at his clothes and stir dust on the sidewalk. He stood for a second and let it flatten the fabric of his shirt against his stomach. Then it died and the dull heat came back. But the clouds were still there in the south, like ragged stains on the sky.

He walked back to Alice's office. She was still at her desk. Still facing an endless stream of problems. There were people in her client chairs. A middle-aged Mexican couple. They had patient, trusting expressions on their faces. Her stack of paperwork had grown. She pointed vaguely at his chair, which was still placed next to hers. He squeezed in and sat down. Picked up the phone and dialed the Abilene number from memory. He gave his name as Chester Arthur and asked for Sergeant Rodríguez.

He was on hold a whole minute. Then Rodríguez picked up and Reacher knew right away they had found Eugene's body. There was a lot of urgency in the guy's voice.

guy's voice.

“We need your client’s name, Mr. Arthur,” Rodriguez said.

“What did your people find?” Reacher asked.

“Exactly what you said, sir. Mile and a half north, on the left, in a deep limestone crevasse. Shot once through the right eye.”

“Was it a .22?”

“No way. Not according to what I’m hearing. Nine millimeter, at least. Some big messy cannon. Most of his head is gone.”

“You got an estimated time of death?”

“Tough question, in this heat. And they say the coyotes got to him, ate up some of the parts the pathologist likes to work with. But if somebody said Friday, I don’t think we’d argue any.”

Reacher said nothing.

“I need some names,” Rodríguez said.

“My guy’s not the doer,” Reacher said. “I’ll talk to him and maybe he’ll call you.”

Then he hung up before Rodríguez could start arguing. Alice was staring at him again. So were her clients. Clearly they spoke enough English to follow the conversation.

“Which president was Chester Arthur?” Alice asked.

“After Garfield, before Grover Cleveland,” Reacher replied. “One of two from Vermont.”

“Who was the other?”

“Calvin Coolidge.”

“So they found Eugene,” she said.

“Sure did.”

“So now what?”

“Now we go warn Hack Walker.”

“*Warn* him?”

Reacher nodded. “Think about it, Alice. Maybe what we’ve got here is two out of two, but I think it’s more likely to be two out of three. They were a threesome, Hack and Al and Sloop. Carmen said they all worked together on the deal. She said Hack brokered it with the feds. So Hack knew what they knew, for sure. So he could be next.”

Alice turned to her clients.

“Sorry, got to go,” she said, in English.

Hack Walker was packing up for the day. He was on his feet with his jacket on and he was latching his briefcase closed. It was after six o’clock and his office windows were growing dim with dusk. They told him that Eugene was dead and watched the color drain out of his face. His skin literally contracted and puckered under a mask of sweat. He clawed his way around his desk and dumped himself down in his chair. He said nothing for a long moment. Then he nodded slowly.

“I guess I always knew,” he said. “But I was, you know, hoping.”

He turned to look down at the photograph.

“I’m very sorry,” Reacher said.

“Do they know why?” Walker asked. “Or who?”

“Not yet.”

Walker paused again. “Why did they tell you about it before me?”

“Reacher figured out where they should look,” Alice said. “*He* told *them*, effectively.”

Then she went straight into his two-for-three theory. The deal, the dangerous knowledge. The warning. Walker sat still and listened to it. His color came back, slowly. He stayed quiet, thinking hard. Then he shook his head.

“Can’t be right,” he said. “Because the deal was really nothing at all. Sloop caved in and undertook to pay the taxes and the penalties. That was all. Nothing more. He got desperate, couldn’t stand the jail time. It happens a lot. Al contacted the IRS, made the offer, they didn’t bat an eye. It’s routine. It was handled at a branch office. By junior-grade personnel. That’s how routine it was. The federal prosecutor needed to sign off on it, which is where I came in. I hustled it through, is all, a little faster than it might have gone without me. You know, the old boys’ club. It was a routine IRS matter. And believe me, nobody gets killed over a routine IRS matter.”

He shook his head again. Then he opened his eyes wide and went very still.

“I want you to leave now,” he said.

Alice nodded. “We’re very sorry for your loss. We know you were friends.”

But Walker just looked confused, like that wasn’t what he was worrying about.

“What?” Reacher said.

“We shouldn’t talk anymore, is what,” Walker said.

“Why not?”

“Because we’re going around in a circle, and we’re finishing up in a place where we don’t want to be.”

“We are?”

“Think about it, guys. Nobody gets killed over a routine IRS matter. Or do they? Sloop and Al were fixing to take the trust money away from Carmen and give most of it to the government. Now Sloop and Al are dead. Two plus two makes four. Her motive is getting bigger and better all the time. We keep talking like

this, I've *got* to think conspiracy. Two deaths, not one. No choice, I've got to. And I don't want to do that."

"There was no conspiracy," Reacher said. "If she'd already hired people, why did she pick me up?"

Walker shrugged. "To confuse the issue? Distance herself?"

"Is she *that* smart?"

"I think she is."

"So prove it. Show us she hired somebody."

"I can't do that."

"Yes, you can. You've got her bank records. Show us the payment."

"The payment?"

"You think these people work for free?"

Walker made a face. Took keys from his pocket and unlocked a drawer in his desk. Lifted out the pile of financial information. *Greer Non-Discretionary Trust*, numbers 1 through 5. Reacher held his breath. Walker went through them, page by page. Then he squared them together again and reversed them on the desk. His face was blank.

Alice leaned forward and picked them up. Leafed through, scanning the fourth column from the left, which was the debit column. There were plenty of debits. But they were all small and random. Nothing bigger than two hundred and ninety-seven dollars. Several below a hundred.

"Add up the last month," Reacher said.

She scanned back.

"Nine hundred, round figures," she said.

Reacher nodded. "Even if she hoarded it, nine hundred bucks doesn't buy you much. Certainly doesn't buy you somebody who can operate the way we've

seen.”

Walker said nothing.

“We need to go talk to her,” Reacher said.

“We can’t,” Walker said. “She’s on the road, headed for the penitentiary.”

“She didn’t do it,” Reacher said. “She didn’t do anything. She’s completely innocent.”

“So why did she confess?”

Reacher closed his eyes. Sat still for a moment.

“She was forced to,” he said. “Somebody got to her.”

“Who?”

Reacher opened his eyes.

“I don’t know who,” he said. “But we can find out. Get the bailiff’s log from downstairs. See who came to visit her.”

Walker’s face was still blank and sweaty. But he picked up the phone and dialed an internal number. Asked for the visitor’s log to be brought up immediately. Then they waited in silence. Three minutes later they heard the sound of heavy footsteps in the secretarial pen and the bailiff came in through the office door. It was the day guy. He was breathing hard after running up the stairs. He was carrying a thick book in his hand.

Walker took it from him and opened it up. Scanned through it quickly and reversed it on the desk. Used his finger to point. Carmen Greer was logged in during the early hours of Monday morning. She was logged out two hours ago, into the custody of the Texas Department of Correction. In between she had received one visitor, twice. Nine o’clock on Monday morning and again on Tuesday at noon, the same assistant DA had gone down to see her.

“Preliminary interview, and then the confession,” Walker said.

There were no other entries at all.

“Is this right?” Reacher asked.

The bailiff nodded.

“Guaranteed,” he said.

Reacher looked at the log again. The first ADA interview had lasted two minutes. Clearly Carmen had refused to say a word. The second interview had lasted twelve minutes. After that she had been escorted upstairs for the videotape.

“Nobody else?” he asked.

“There were phone calls,” the bailiff said.

“When?”

“All day Monday, and Tuesday morning.”

“Who was calling her?”

“Her lawyer.”

“Her *lawyer*?” Alice said.

The guy nodded.

“It was a big pain in the ass,” he said. “I had to keep bringing her in and out to the phone.”

“Who was the lawyer?” Alice asked.

“We’re not allowed to ask, ma’am. It’s a confidentiality thing. Lawyer discussions are secret.”

“Man or woman?”

“It was a man.”

“Hispanic?”

“I don’t think so. He sounded like a regular guy. His voice was a little muffled. I

"I don't think so. He sounded like a regular guy. His voice was a little muffled. I think it was a bad phone line."

"Same guy every time?"

"I think so."

There was silence in the office. Walker nodded vaguely and the bailiff took it for a dismissal. They heard him walk out through the secretarial pen. They heard the lobby door close behind him.

"She didn't tell us she was represented," Walker said. "She told us she didn't *want* representation."

"She told me the same thing," Alice said.

"We need to know who this person was," Reacher said. "We need to get the phone company to trace the calls."

Walker shook his head. "Can't do it. Legal discussions are privileged."

Reacher stared at him. "You really think it was a *lawyer*?"

"Don't you?"

"Of course not. It was some guy, threatening her, forcing her to lie. Think about it, Walker. First time your ADA saw her, she wouldn't say a word. Twenty-seven hours later, she's confessing. Only thing that happened in between was a bunch of calls from this guy."

"But what kind of threat could make her say that?"

The killing crew was uneasy in its new role as baby-sitter. Each member felt exactly the same way, each for the exact same reasons. Holding a child hostage was not a normal part of their expertise. Taking her in the first place had been. That was a fairly standard operation, based as always on lure and deception. The woman and the tall fair man had gone to the Red House as a pair, because they figured that would match the public's perception of how social workers operate

figured that would match the public's perception of how social workers operate. They had arrived in the big official-looking sedan and used a brisk professional manner. They had mixed it with a generous helping of pious do-gooder sanctimony, like they were desperately concerned with the child's welfare above all else. They had a thick wad of bogus papers to display. The papers looked exactly like Family Services warrants and relevant authorizations from state agencies. But the grandmother hardly even looked at them. She offered no resistance at all. It struck them as unnatural. She just handed the kid over, like she was real glad about it.

The kid put up no resistance, either. She was very earnest and silent about the whole thing. Like she was trying to be on her best behavior. Like she was trying to please these new adults. So they just put her in the car and drove her away. No tears, no screaming, no tantrums. It went well, all things considered. Very well. About as effortless as the Al Eugene operation.

But then they departed from the usual. Radically. Standard practice would have been to drive straight to a scouted location and pull the triggers. Conceal the body and then get the hell out. But this task was different. They had to keep her hidden. And alive and unharmed. At least for a spell. Maybe days and days. It was something they had never done before. And professionals get uneasy with things they've never done before. They always do. That's the nature of professionalism. Professionals feel best when they stick to what they know.

"Call Family Services," Reacher said. "Right now."

Hack Walker just stared at him.

"You asked the question," Reacher said. "What kind of a threat could make her confess to something she didn't do? Don't you see? They must have gotten her kid."

Walker stared a beat longer, frozen. Then he wrestled himself into action and unlocked another drawer and rattled it open. Lifted out a heavy black binder. Opened it up and thumbed through and grabbed his phone and dialed a number. There was no answer. He dabbed the cradle and dialed another. Some kind of an evening emergency contact. It was picked up and he asked the question, using

evening emergency contact. It was picked up and he asked the question, using Ellie's full name, Mary Ellen Greer. There was a long pause. Then an answer. Walker listened. Said nothing. Just put the phone down, very slowly and carefully, like it was made out of glass.

"They never heard of her," he said.

Silence. Walker closed his eyes, and then opened them again.

"O.K.," he said. "Resources are going to be a problem. State police, of course. And the FBI, because this is a kidnap. But we've got to move immediately. Speed is absolutely paramount here. It always is, with kidnap cases. They could be taking her anywhere. So I want you two to go down to Echo right now, get the full story from Rusty. Descriptions and everything."

"Rusty won't talk to us," Reacher said. "She's too hostile. What about the Echo sheriff?"

"That guy is useless. He's probably drunk right now. You'll have to do it."

"Waste of time," Reacher said.

Walker opened another drawer and took two chromium stars from a box. Tossed them onto the desk.

"Raise your right hands," he said. "Repeat after me."

He mumbled his way through some kind of an oath. Reacher and Alice repeated it back, as far as they could catch it. Walker nodded.

"Now you're sheriff's deputies," he said. "Valid throughout Echo County. Rusty will *have* to talk to you."

Reacher just stared at him.

"What?" Walker said.

"You can still do that here? Deputize people?"

"Sure I can," Walker said. "Just like the Wild West. Now get going, O.K.? I've got a million calls to make."

Reacher took his chromium star and stood up, an accredited law enforcement official again for the first time in four and a quarter years. Alice stood up alongside him.

“Meet back here directly,” Walker called. “And good luck.”

Eight minutes later they were in the yellow VW again, heading south toward the Red House for the second time that day.

The woman took the call. She let the phone ring four times while she got the voice-altering device out of her bag and switched it on. But she didn’t need it. She didn’t need to talk at all. She just listened, because it was a one-sided message, long and complex but basically clear and concise and unambiguous, and the whole thing was repeated twice. When it was over, she hung up the phone and put the electronics back in her bag.

“It’s tonight,” she said.

“What is?” the tall man asked.

“The supplementary job,” she said. “The Pecos thing. Seems like the situation up there is unraveling slightly. They found Eugene’s body.”

“Already?”

“Shit,” the dark man said.

“Yes, shit,” the woman said. “So we move on the supplementary right away, tonight, before things get any worse.”

“Who’s the target?” the tall man asked.

“His name is Jack Reacher. Some drifter, ex-military. I’ve got a description. There’s a girl lawyer in the picture, too. She’ll need attention as well.”

“We do them simultaneous with this baby-sitting gig?”

The woman shrugged. “Like we always said, we keep the baby-sitting going as long as possible, but we reserve the right to terminate when necessary.”

The men looked at each other. Ellie watched them from the bed.

15

Reacher was not good company on the ride south. He didn’t talk at all for the first hour and a half. Evening dark had fallen fast and he kept the VW’s dome light on and studied the maps from the glove compartment. In particular he concentrated on a large-scale topographical sheet that showed the southern part of Echo County. The county boundary was a completely straight line running east to west. At its closest point, it was fifty miles from the Rio Grande. That made no sense to him.

“I don’t understand why she lied about the diamond,” he said.

Alice shrugged. She was pushing the little car as fast as it was willing to go.

“She lied about everything,” she said.

“The ring was different,” he said.

“Different how?”

“A different sort of lie. Like apples are different from oranges.”

“I don’t follow.”

“The ring is the only thing I can’t explain to myself.”

“The *only* thing?”

“Everything else is coherent, but the ring is a problem.”

She drove on, another mile. The power line poles came and went, flashing through the headlight beams for a split second each.

through the headlight beams for a split second each.

“You know what’s going on, don’t you?” she said.

“You ever done computer-aided design?” he asked.

“No,” she said.

“Me neither.”

“So?”

“Do you know what it is?”

She shrugged again. “Vaguely, I guess.”

“They can build a whole house or car or whatever, right there on the computer screen. They can paint it, decorate it, look at it. If it’s a house, they can go *in* it, walk around. They can rotate it, look at the front, look at the back. If it’s a car, they can see how it looks in daylight and in the dark. They can tilt it up and down, spin it around, examine it from every angle. They can crash it and see how it holds up. It’s like a real thing, except it isn’t. I guess it’s a *virtual* thing.”

“So?” she said again.

“I can see this whole situation in my mind, like a computer design. Inside and out, up and down. From every angle. Except for the ring. The ring screws it up.”

“You want to explain that?”

“No point,” he said. “Until I figure it out.”

“Is Ellie going to be O.K.?”

“I hope so. That’s why we’re making this trip.”

“You think the grandmother can help us?”

He shrugged. “I doubt it.”

“So how is this trip helping Ellie?”

He said nothing. Just opened the glove compartment and put the maps back. Took out the Heckler & Koch handgun. Clicked out the magazine and checked the load. *Never assume*. But it still held its full complement of ten shells. He put the magazine back in and jacked the first round into the chamber. Then he cocked the pistol and locked it. Eased up off the passenger seat and slipped it into his pocket.

“You think we’re going to need that?” she asked.

“Sooner or later,” he said. “You got more ammo in your bag?”

She shook her head. “I never thought I’d actually *use* it.”

He said nothing.

“You O.K.?” she asked.

“Feeling good,” he said. “Maybe like you did during that big trial, before the guy refused to pay.”

She nodded at the wheel. “It was a good feeling.”

“That’s your thing, right?”

“I guess it is.”

“This is my thing,” he said. “This is what I’m built for. The thrill of the chase. I’m an investigator, Alice, always was, always will be. I’m a *hunter*. And when Walker gave me that badge my head started working.”

“You know what’s going on, don’t you?” she asked again.

“Aside from the diamond ring.”

“Tell me.”

He said nothing.

“Tell me,” she said again.

“Did you ever ride a horse?”

“No,” she said. “I’m a city girl. Openest space I ever saw was the median strip in the middle of Park Avenue.”

“I just rode one with Carmen. First time ever.”

“So?”

“They’re very tall. You’re way up there in the air.”

“So?” she said again.

“You ever ride a bike?”

“In New York City?”

“Inline skating?”

“A little, back when it was cool.”

“You ever fall?”

“Once, pretty badly.”

He nodded. “Tell me about that meal you made for me.”

“What about it?”

“Homemade, right?”

“Sure.”

“You weighed out the ingredients?”

“You have to.”

“So you’ve got a scale in your kitchen?”

“Sure,” she said again.

“The scales of justice,” he said.

“Reacher, what the hell are you talking about?”

Reacher, what the hell are you talking about?

He glanced to his left. The red picket fence was racing backward through the edge of her headlight beams.

“We’re here,” he said. “I’ll tell you later.”

She slowed and turned in under the gate and bumped across the yard.

“Face it toward the motor barn,” he said. “And leave the headlights on. I want to take a look at that old pick-up truck.”

“O.K.,” she said.

She coasted a yard or two and hauled on the steering wheel until the headlight beams washed into the right-hand end of the barn. They lit up half of the new pick-up, half of the Jeep Cherokee, and all of the old pick-up between them.

“Stay close to me,” he said.

They got out of the car. The night air felt suddenly hot and damp. Different than before. It was cloudy and there were disturbed insects floating everywhere. But the yard was quiet. No sound. They walked over together for a better look at the abandoned truck. It was some kind of a Chevrolet, maybe twenty years old, but still a recognizable ancestor of the newer truck alongside it. It had bulbous fenders and dulled paint and a roll bar built into the load bed. It must have had a million miles on it. Probably hadn’t been started in a decade. The springs sagged and the tires were flat and the rubber was perished by the relentless heat.

“So?” Alice said.

“I think it’s the truck in the photograph,” Reacher said. “The one in Walker’s office? Him and Sloop and Eugene leaning on the fender?”

“Trucks all look the same to me,” she said.

“Sloop had the same photograph.”

“Is that significant?”

He shrugged. “They were good friends.”

They turned away. Alice ducked back into the VW and killed the lights. Then he led her to the foot of the porch steps. Up to the main entrance. He knocked. Waited. Bobby Greer opened the door. Stood there, surprised.

“So you came home,” Reacher said.

Bobby scowled, like he had already heard it.

“My buddies took me out,” he said. “To help with the grieving process.”

Reacher opened his palm to show off the chromium star. *The badge flip*. It felt good. Not quite as good as flashing a United States Army Criminal Investigation Division credential, but it had an effect on Bobby. It stopped him closing the door again.

“Police,” Reacher said. “We need to see your mother.”

“Police? You?”

“Hack Walker just deputized us. Valid throughout Echo County. Where’s your mother?”

Bobby paused a beat. Leaned forward and glanced up at the night sky and literally sniffed the air.

“Storm’s rolling in,” he said. “It’s coming now. From the south.”

“Where’s your mother, Bobby?”

Bobby paused again.

“Inside,” he said.

Reacher led Alice past Bobby into the red foyer with the rifles and the mirror. It was a degree or two cooler inside the house. The old air conditioner was running hard. It thumped and rattled patiently, somewhere upstairs. They walked through the foyer and into the parlor in back. Rusty Greer was sitting at the table in the same chair as the first time he had seen her. She was wearing the same style of clothes. Tight jeans and a fringed blouse. Her hair was lacquered up into a halo as hard as a helmet.

“We’re here on official business, Mrs. Greer,” Reacher said. He showed her the badge in his palm. “We need some answers.”

“Or what, big man?” Rusty said. “You going to arrest me?”

Reacher pulled out a chair and sat opposite her. Just looked at her.

“I’ve done nothing wrong,” she said.

Reacher shook his head. “As a matter of fact, you’ve done everything wrong.”

“Like what?”

“Like, my grandmother would have died before she let her grandchildren get taken away. Literally. Over her dead body, she’d have said, and she’d have damn well meant every word.”

Silence for a second. Just the endless tick of the fan.

“It was for the child’s own good,” Rusty said. “And I had no choice. They had papers.”

“You given grandchildren away before?”

“No.”

“So how do you know they were the *right* papers?”

Rusty just shrugged. Said nothing.

“Did you check?”

“How could I?” Rusty said. “And they looked right. All full of big words, aforementioned, hereinafter, the State of Texas.”

“They were fakes,” Reacher said. “It was a kidnap, Mrs. Greer. It was coercion. They took your granddaughter to threaten your daughter-in-law with.”

He watched her face, for dawning realization, for guilt or shame or fear or remorse. There was some expression there. He wasn’t exactly sure what it was.

“S[illegible]” he said. “H[illegible]?”

¨So we need descriptions,´´ he said. ¨How many were there?´´

She said nothing.

“How many people, Mrs. Greer?”

“Two people. A man and a woman.”

“White?”

“Yes.”

“What did they look like?”

Rusty shrugged again.

“Ordinary,” she said. “Normal. Like you would expect. Like social workers. From a city. They had a big car.”

“Hair? Eyes? Clothes?”

“Fair hair, I think. Both of them. Cheap suits. The woman wore a skirt. Blue eyes, I think. The man was tall.”

“What about their car?”

“I don’t know about cars. It was a big sedan. But kind of ordinary. Not a Cadillac.”

“Color?”

“Gray or blue, maybe. Not dark.”

“You got any humble pie in the kitchen?”

“Why?”

“Because I should cram it down your throat until it chokes you. Those fair-haired white people with the blue eyes are the ones who killed Al Eugene. And you gave your own granddaughter to them.”

She stared at him. “Killed? Al is dead?”

“Two minutes after they took him out of his car.”

She went pale and her mouth started working. She said *what about*, and then stopped. And again, *what about*. She couldn’t add the word *Ellie*.

“Not yet,” Reacher said. “That’s my guess. And my hope. Ought to be *your* hope, too, because if they hurt her, you know what I’m going to do?”

She didn’t answer. Just clamped her lips and shook her head from side to side.

“I’m going to come back down here and break your spine. I’m going to stand you up and snap it like a rotten twig.”

They made her take a bath, which was awful, because one of the men watched her do it. He was quite short and had black hair on his head and his arms. He stood inside the bathroom door and watched her all the time she was in the tub. Her mommy had told her, *never let anybody see you undressed*, *especially not a man*. And he was right there watching her. And she had no pajamas to put on afterward. She hadn’t brought any. She hadn’t brought *anything*.

“You don’t need pajamas,” the man said. “It’s too hot for pajamas.”

He stood there by the door, watching her. She dried herself with a small white towel. She needed to pee, but she wasn’t going to let him watch her do *that*. She had to squeeze very near him to get out of the room. Then the other two watched her all the way to the bed. The other man, and the woman. They were horrible. They were *all* horrible. She got into the bed and pulled the covers up over her head and tried hard not to cry.

“What now?” Alice asked.

“Back to Pecos.” Reacher said. “I want to keep on the move. And we’ve got a lot

of stuff to do tonight. But go slow, O.K.? I need time to think."

She drove out to the gate and turned north into the darkness. Switched the fan on high to blow the night heat away.

"Think about what?" Alice asked.

"About where Ellie is."

"Why do you think it was the same people as killed Eugene?"

"It's a deployment issue," he said. "I can't see anybody using a separate hit team and kidnap team. Not down here in the middle of nowhere. So I think it's one team. Either a hit team moonlighting on the kidnap, or a kidnap team moonlighting on the hits. Probably the former, because the way they did Eugene was pretty expert. If that was moonlighting, I'd hate to see them do what they're *really* good at."

"All they did was shoot him. Anybody could do that."

"No, they couldn't. They got him to stop the car, they talked him into theirs. They kept him quiet throughout. That's really good technique, Alice. Harder than you can imagine. Then they shot him through the eye. That means something, too."

"What?"

He shrugged. "It's a tiny target. And in a situation like that, it's a snap shot. You raise the gun, you fire. *One, two*. No rational reason to pick such a tiny target. It's a kind of exuberance. Not exactly showing off, as such. More like just celebrating your own skill and precision. Like reveling in it. It's a joy thing."

Silence in the car. Just the hum of the motor and the whine of the tires.

"And now they've got the kid," Alice said.

"And they're uneasy about it, because they're moonlighting. They're used to each other alone. They're accustomed to their normal procedures. Having a live kid around makes them worried about being static and visible."

"They'll look like a family. A man, a woman, a little girl."

"They'll look like a family. A man, a woman, a little girl."

"No, I think there's more than two of them."

"Why?"

"Because if it was me, I'd want three. In the service, we used three. Basically a driver, a shooter and a back-watcher."

"You shot people? The military police?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes. You know, things better not brought to trial."

She was quiet for a long moment. He saw her debating whether to hitch an inch farther away from him. Then he saw her decide to stay where she was.

"So why didn't you do it for Carmen?" she asked. "If you've done it before?"

"She asked me the same question. My answer is, I really don't know."

She was quiet again, another mile.

"Why are they holding Ellie?" she said. "I mean, *still* holding her? They already coerced the confession. So what's still to gain?"

"You're the lawyer," he said. "You have to figure that one out. When does it become set in stone? You know, irrevocable?"

"Never, really. A confession can be retracted anytime. But in practice, I guess if she answered *nolo contendere* to the grand jury indictment, that would be regarded as a milestone."

"And how soon could that happen?"

"Tomorrow, easily. Grand jury sits more or less permanently. It would take ten minutes, maybe a quarter of an hour."

"I thought justice ground real slow in Texas."

"Only if you plead not guilty."

Silence again, for many miles. They passed through the crossroads hamlet with

the school and the gas station and the diner. It whipped backward through the headlight beams, three short seconds end to end. The sky up ahead was still clear. The stars were still visible. But the clouds were building fast behind them, in the south.

“So maybe tomorrow they’ll let her go,” Alice said.

“And maybe tomorrow they won’t. They’ll be worried she could make the ID. She’s a smart kid. She sits quiet, watching and thinking all the time.”

“So what do we do?”

“We try to figure out where she is.”

He opened the glove compartment and took out the maps again. Found a large-scale plan of Pecos County and spread it on his knee. Reached up and clicked on the dome light.

“How?” Alice asked. “I mean, where do you start?”

“I’ve done this before,” Reacher said. “Years and years, I hunted deserters and AWOLs. You train yourself to think like them, and you usually find them.”

“That easy?”

“Sometimes,” he said.

Silence in the speeding car.

“But they could be anywhere,” Alice said. “I mean, there must be a million hide-outs. Abandoned farmsteads, ruined buildings.”

“No, I think they’re using motels,” Reacher said.

“Why?”

“Because appearances are very important to them. Part of their technique. They suckered Al Eugene somehow, and they looked plausible to Rusty Greer, not that she cared too much. So they need running water and showers and closets and working electricity for hairdryers and shavers.”

“There are hundreds of motels here,” she said. “Thousands, probably.”

He nodded. “And they’re moving around, almost certainly. A different place every day. Basic security.”

“So how do we find the right one tonight?”

He held the map where it caught the light.

“We find it in our heads. Think like them, figure out what *we’d* do. Then that should be the same thing as what *they’d* do.”

“Hell of a gamble.”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“So are we going to start now?”

“No, we’re going back to your office now.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t like frontal assaults. Not against people this good, not with a kid in the crossfire.”

“So what do we do?”

“We divide and rule. We lure two of them out. Maybe we capture a tongue.”

“A tongue? What’s that?”

“An enemy prisoner who’ll talk.”

“How do we do that?”

“We decoy them. They’re already aware we know about them. So they’ll come for us, try a little damage control.”

“They *know* we know? But how?”

“Somebody just told them.”

“Who?”

Reacher didn’t reply. Just stared down at the map. Looked at the faint red lines that represented roads meandering across thousands of empty miles. Closed his eyes and tried hard to imagine what they looked like in reality.

Alice parked in the lot behind the law offices. She had a key to the rear door. There were a lot of shadows, and Reacher was very vigilant as they walked. But they made it inside O.K. The old store was deserted and dusty and silent and hot. The air conditioner had been turned off at the end of the day. Reacher stood still and listened for the inaudible quiver of people waiting. It’s a primeval sensation, received and understood far back in the brain. It wasn’t there.

“Call Walker and give him an update,” he said. “Tell him we’re here.”

He made her sit back-to-back with him at somebody else’s desk in the center of the room, so he could watch the front entrance while she watched the rear. He rested the pistol in his lap with the safety off. Then he dialed Sergeant Rodríguez’s number in Abilene. Rodríguez was still on duty, and he sounded unhappy about it.

“We checked with the bar association,” he said. “There are no lawyers licensed in Texas called Chester A. Arthur.”

“I’m from Vermont,” Reacher said. “I’m volunteering down here, pro bono.”

“Like hell you are.”

The line went quiet.

“I’ll deal,” Reacher said. “Names, in exchange for conversation.”

“With who?”

“With you, maybe. How long have you been a Ranger?”

“Seventeen years.”

“How much do you know about the border patrol?”

“Enough, I guess.”

“You prepared to give me a straight yes-no answer? No comebacks?”

“What’s the question?”

“You recall the border patrol investigation twelve years ago?”

“Maybe.”

“Was it a whitewash?”

Rodríguez paused a long moment, and then he answered, with a single word.

“I’ll call you back,” Reacher said.

He hung up and turned and spoke over his shoulder to Alice.

“You get Walker?” he asked.

“He’s up to speed,” she said. “He wants us to wait for him here, for when he’s through with the FBI.”

Reacher shook his head. “Can’t wait here. Too obvious. We need to stay on the move. We’ll go to him, and then we’ll get back on the road.”

She paused a beat. “Are we in serious danger?”

“Nothing we can’t handle,” he said.

She said nothing.

“You worried?” he asked.

“A little,” she said. “A lot, actually.”

“You can’t be,” he said. “I’m going to need your help.”

“Why was the lie about the ring different?”

"Why was the lie about the ring different?

"Because everything else is hearsay. But I found out for myself the ring wasn't a fake. Direct personal discovery, not hearsay. Feels very different."

"I don't see how it's important."

"It's important because I've got a whole big theory going and the lie about the ring screws it up like crazy."

"Why do you want to believe her so much?"

"Because she had no money with her."

"What's the big theory?"

"Remember that Balzac quotation? And Marcuse?"

Alice nodded.

"I've got another one," Reacher said. "Something Ben Franklin once wrote."

"What are you, a walking encyclopedia?"

"I remember stuff I read, is all. And I remember something Bobby Greer said, too, about armadillos."

She just looked at him.

"You're crazy," she said.

He nodded. "It's only a theory. It needs to be tested. But we can do that."

"How?"

"We just wait and see who comes for us."

She said nothing.

"Let's go check in with Walker," he said.

They walked through the heat to the courthouse building. There was a breeze again, blowing in from the south. It felt damp and urgent. Walker was on his own in his office, looking very tired. His desk was a mess of phone books and paper.

“Well, it’s started,” he said. “Biggest thing you ever saw. FBI and state police, roadblocks everywhere, helicopters in the air, more than a hundred and fifty people on the ground. But there’s a storm coming in, which ain’t going to help.”

“Reacher thinks they’re holed up in a motel,” Alice said.

Walker nodded, grimly. “If they are, they’ll find them. Manhunt like this, it’s going to be pretty relentless.”

“You need us anymore?” Reacher asked.

Walker shook his head. “We should leave it to the professionals now. I’m going home, grab a couple hours rest.”

Reacher looked around the office. The door, the floor, the windows, the desk, the filing cabinets.

“I guess we’ll do the same thing,” he said. “We’ll go to Alice’s place. Call us if you need us. Or if you get any news, O.K.?”

Walker nodded.

“I will,” he said. “I promise.”

“We’ll go as FBI again,” the woman said. “It’s a no-brainer.”

“All of us?” the driver asked. “What about the kid?”

The woman paused. She had to go, because she was the shooter. And if she had to split the team two and one, she wanted the tall guy with her, not the driver.

“You stay with the kid,” she said.

There was a moment’s silence.

“Abort horizon?” the driver asked.

It was their standard operating procedure. Whenever the team was split, the woman set an abort horizon. Which meant that you waited until the time had passed, and then, if the team wasn’t together again, you got the hell out, every man for himself.

“Four hours, O.K.?” the woman said. “Done and dusted.”

She stared at him a second longer, eyebrows raised, to make sure he understood the implication of her point. Then she knelt and unzipped the heavy valise.

“So let’s do it,” she said.

They did the exact same things they had done for Al Eugene, except they did them a whole lot faster because the Crown Vic was parked in the motel’s lot, not hidden in a dusty turnout miles from anywhere. The lot was dimly lit and mostly empty, and there was nobody around, but it still wasn’t a secure feeling. They pulled the wheel covers off and threw them in the trunk. They attached the communications antennas to the rear window and the trunk lid. They zipped blue jackets over their shirts. They loaded up with spare ammunition clips. They squared the souvenir ballcaps on their heads. They checked the loads in their nine-millimeter pistols and racked the slides and clicked the safety catches and jammed the guns in their pockets. The tall fair man slipped into the driver’s seat. The woman paused outside the motel room door.

“Four hours,” she said again. “Done and dusted.”

The driver nodded and closed the door behind her. Glanced over at the kid in the bed. *Done and dusted* meant *leave nothing at all behind, especially live witnesses*.

Reacher took the Heckler & Koch and the maps of Texas and the FedEx packet

Reacher took the Heckler & Koch and the maps of Texas and the Pedlar packet out of the VW and carried them into Alice's house, straight through the living room and into the kitchen area. It was still and cool inside. And dry. The central air was running hard. He wondered for a second what her utility bills must be like.

"Where's the scale?" he asked.

She pushed past him and squatted down and opened a cupboard. Used two hands and lifted a kitchen scale onto the countertop. It was a big piece of equipment. It was new, but it looked old. A retro design. It had a big white upright face the size of a china plate, like the speedometer on an old-fashioned sedan. It was faced with a bulbous plastic window with a chromium bezel. There was a red pointer behind the window and large numbers around the circumference. A manufacturer's name and a printed warning: *Not Legal For Trade*.

"Is it accurate?" he asked.

Alice shrugged.

"I think so," she said. "The nut roast comes out O.K."

There was a chromium bowl resting in a cradle above the dial. He tapped on it with his finger and the pointer bounced up to a pound and then back down to zero. He took the magazine out of the Heckler & Koch and laid the empty gun in the bowl. It made a light metallic sound. The pointer spun up to two pounds and six ounces. Not an especially light weapon. About right, he figured. His memory told him the catalog weight was in the region of forty-three ounces, with an empty magazine.

He put the gun back together and opened cupboards until he found a store of food. He lifted out an unopened bag of granulated sugar. It was in a gaudy yellow packet that said *5 lbs*. on the side.

"What are you doing?" Alice asked.

"Weighing things," he said.

He stood the sugar upright in the chromium bowl. The pointer spun up to five pounds exactly. He put the sugar back in the cupboard and tried a cellophane-wrapped packet of chopped nuts. The pointer read two pounds. He looked at the

label on the packet and saw *2 lbs*.

“Good enough,” he said.

He folded the maps and laid them across the top of the bowl. They weighed one pound and three ounces. He took them off and put the nuts back on. Still two pounds. He put the nuts back in the cupboard and tried the FedEx packet. It weighed one pound and one ounce. He added the maps and the pointer inched up to two pounds and four ounces. Added the loaded gun on top and the pointer jerked around to five pounds and three ounces. If he had wanted to, he could have calculated the weight of the bullets.

“O.K., let’s go,” he said. “But we need gas. Long ride ahead. And maybe you should get out of that dress. You got something more active?”

“I guess,” she said, and headed for the stairs.

“You got a screwdriver?” he called after her.

“Under the sink,” she called back.

He bent down and found a brightly colored toolbox in the cupboard. It was made out of plastic and looked like a lunch pail. He clicked it open and selected a medium-sized screwdriver with a clear yellow handle. A minute later Alice came back down the stairs wearing baggy khaki cargo pants and a black T-shirt with the sleeves torn off at the shoulder seams.

“O.K.?” she asked.

“Me and Judith,” he said. “Got a lot in common.”

She smiled and said nothing.

“I’m assuming your car is insured,” he said. “It could get damaged tonight.”

She said nothing. Just locked up her door and followed him out to the VW. She drove out of her complex, with Reacher craning his neck, watching the shadows. She got gas at a neon-bright all-night station out on the El Paso road. Reacher paid for it.

“O.K., back to the courthouse,” he said. “Something I want from there.”

She said nothing. Just turned the car and headed east. Parked in the lot behind the building. They walked around and tried the street door. It was locked up tight.

“So what now?” she asked.

It was hot on the sidewalk. Still up there around ninety degrees, and damp. The breeze had died again. There were clouds filling the sky.

“I’m going to kick it in,” he said.

“There’s probably an alarm.”

“There’s definitely an alarm. I checked.”

“So?”

“So I’m going to set it off.”

“Then the cops will come.”

“I’m counting on it.”

“You want to get us arrested?”

“They won’t come right away. We’ve got three or four minutes, maybe.”

He took two paces back and launched forward and smashed the flat of his sole above the handle. The wood splintered and sagged open a half inch, but held. He kicked again and the door crashed back and bounced off the corridor wall. A blue strobe high up outside started flashing and an urgent electric bell started ringing. It was about as loud as he had expected.

“Go get the car,” he said. “Get it started and wait for me in the alley.”

He ran up the stairs two at a time and kicked in the outer office door without breaking stride. Jinked through the secretarial pen like a running back and steadied himself and kicked in Walker’s door. It smashed back and the venetian blind jerked sideways and the glass pane behind it shattered and the shards

rained down like ice in winter. He went straight for the bank of filing cabinets. The lights were off and the office was hot and dark and he had to peer close to read the labels. It was an odd filing system. It was arranged partly in date order and partly by the alphabet. That was going to be a minor problem. He found a cabinet marked *B* and jammed the tip of the screwdriver into the keyhole and hammered it in with the heel of his hand. Turned it sharp and hard and broke the lock. Pulled the drawer and raked through the files with his fingers.

The files all had tiny labels encased in plastic tabs arranged so they made a neat diagonal from left to right. The labels were all typed with words starting with *B*. But the contents of the files were way too recent. Nothing more than four years old. He stepped two paces sideways and skipped the next *B* drawer and went to the next-but-one. The air was hot and still and the bell was ringing loud and the glare of the flashing blue strobe pulsed in through the windows. It was just about keeping time with his heartbeat.

He broke the lock and slid the drawer. Checked the labels. No good. Everything was either six or seven years old. He had been inside the building two minutes and thirty seconds. He could hear a distant siren under the noise of the bell. He stepped sideways again and attacked the next *B* drawer. He checked the dates on the tabs and walked his fingers backward. Two minutes and fifty seconds. The bell seemed louder and the strobe seemed brighter. The siren was closer. He found what he was looking for three-quarters of the way back through the drawer. It was a two-inch-thick collection of paperwork in a heavy paper sling. He lifted the whole thing out and tucked it under his arm. Left the drawer all the way open and kicked all the others shut. Ran through the secretarial pen and down the stairs. Checked the street from the lobby and when he was certain it was clear he ducked around into the alley and straight into the VW.

“Go,” he said.

He was a little breathless, and that surprised him.

“Where?” Alice asked.

“South,” he said. “To the Red House.”

“Why? What’s there?”

“Everything,” he said.

She took off fast and fifty yards later Reacher saw red lights pulsing in the distance behind them. The Pecos Police Department, arriving at the courthouse just a minute too late. He smiled in the dark and turned his head in time to catch a split-second glimpse of a big sedan nosing left two hundred yards ahead of them into the road that led down to Alice's place. It flashed through the yellow wash of a streetlight and disappeared. It looked like a police-spec Crown Victoria, plain steel wheels and four VHF antennas on the back. He stared into the darkness that had swallowed it and turned his head as they passed.

"Fast as you can," he said to Alice.

Then he laid the captured paperwork on his knees and reached up and clicked on the dome light so he could read it.

The *B* was for "border patrol," and the file summarized the crimes committed by it twelve years ago and the measures taken in response. It made for unpleasant reading.

The border between Mexico and Texas was very long, and for an accumulated total of about half its length there were roads and towns near enough on the American side to make it worth guarding pretty closely. Theory was if illegals penetrated there, they could slip away into the interior fast and easily. Other sectors had nothing to offer except fifty or a hundred miles of empty parched desert. Those sectors weren't really guarded at all. Standard practice was to ignore the border itself and conduct random vehicle sweeps behind the line by day or night to pick the migrants up at some point during their hopeless three-or four-day trudge north across the wastelands. It was a practice that worked well. After the first thirty or so miles on foot through the heat the migrants became pretty passive. Often they surrendered willingly. Often the vehicle sweeps turned into first-aid mercy missions, because the walkers were sick and dehydrated and exhausted because they had no food or water.

They had no food or water because they had been cheated. Usually they would pay their life savings to some operator on the Mexican side who was offering them a fully accompanied one-way trip to paradise. Vans and minibuses would take them from their villages to the border, and then the guide would crouch and

point across a deserted footbridge to a distant sandhill and swear that more vans and minibuses were waiting behind it, full of supplies and ready to go. The migrants would take a deep breath and sprint across, only to find nothing behind the distant sandhill. Too hopeful and too afraid to turn back, they would just blindly walk ahead into exhaustion.

Sometimes there *would* be a vehicle waiting, but its driver would demand a separate substantial payment. The migrants had nothing left to offer, except maybe some small items of personal value. The new driver would laugh and call them worthless. Then he would take them anyway and offer to see what cash he could raise on them up ahead. He would drive off in a cloud of hot dust and never be seen again. The migrants would eventually realize they had been duped, and they would start stumbling north on foot. Then it became a simple question of endurance. The weather was key. In a hot summer, the mortality rate was very high. That was why the border patrol's random sweeps were often seen as mercy missions.

Then that suddenly changed.

For a whole year, the roving vehicles were as likely to bring sudden death as arrest or aid. At unpredictable intervals, always at night, rifles would fire and a truck would roar in and swoop and maneuver until one lone runner was winnowed out from the pack. Then the lone runner would be hunted for a mile or so and shot down. Then the truck would disappear into the dark again, engine roaring, headlights bouncing, dust trailing, and stunned silence would descend.

Sometimes it wasn't so clean.

Some victims were wounded and dragged away and tortured. The corpse of one teenage boy was found tied to a cactus stump with barbed wire. He had been partially flayed. Some were burned alive or beheaded or mutilated. Three teenage girls were captured over a period of four months. Their autopsy details were gruesome.

None of the survivor families made official complaints. They all shared the illegal's basic fear of involvement with bureaucracy. But stories began to circulate around the community of legal relatives and their support groups. Lawyers and rights advocates started compiling files. Eventually the subject was broached at the appropriate level. A low-level inquiry was started. Evidence was gathered, anonymously. A provable total of seventeen homicides was

established. Added to that was an extrapolated figure of eight more, to represent cases where bodies had never been found or where they had been buried by the survivors themselves. Young Raoul García's name was included in the second total.

There was a map in the file. Most of the ambushes had taken place inside a pear-shaped pocket of territory enclosing maybe a hundred square miles. It was marked on the map like a stain. It was centered on a long north-south axis with the southerly bulge sitting mostly inside the Echo County line. That meant the victims had already made it fifty miles or more. By then they would be weak and tired and in no shape to resist.

Border patrol brass launched a full-scale investigation one August, eleven months after the first vague rumors surfaced. There was one more attack at the end of that month, and then nothing ever again. Denied an ongoing forensic basis for examination, the investigation got nowhere at all. There were preventive measures enforced, like strict accounting of ammunition and increased frequency of radio checks. But no conclusions were reached. It was a thorough job, and to their credit the brass kept hard at it, but a retrospective investigation into a closed paramilitary world where the only witnesses denied ever having been near the border in the first place was hopeless. The matter wound down. Time passed. The homicides had stopped, the survivors were building new lives, the immigration amnesties had insulated the outrage. The tempo of investigation slowed to a halt. The files were sealed four years later.

"So?" Alice said.

Reacher butted the papers together with the heel of his hand. Closed the file. Pitched it behind him into the rear seat.

"Now I know why she lied about the ring," he said.

"Why?"

"She didn't lie. She was telling the truth."

"She said it was a fake worth thirty bucks."

"And she thought that was the truth. Because some jeweler in Pecos laughed at her and *told* her it was a fake worth thirty bucks. And she believed him. But he

was trying to rip her off, was all, trying to buy it for thirty bucks and sell it again for sixty thousand. Oldest scam in the world. Exact same thing happened to some of these immigrants in the file. Their first experience of America."

"The *jeweler* lied?"

He nodded. "I should have figured it before, because it's obvious. Probably the exact same guy we went to. I figured he didn't look like the Better Business Bureau's poster boy."

"He didn't try to rip *us* off."

"No, Alice, he didn't. Because you're a sharp-looking white lawyer and I'm a big tough-looking white guy. She was a small Mexican woman, all alone and desperate and scared. He saw an opportunity with her that he didn't see with us."

Alice was quiet for a second.

"So what does it mean?" she asked.

Reacher clicked off the dome light. Smiled in the dark and stretched. Put his palms on the dash in front of him and flexed his massive shoulders against the pressure.

"It means we're good to go," he said. "It means all our ducks are in a neat little row. And it means you should drive faster, because right now we're maybe twenty minutes ahead of the bad guys, and I want to keep it that way as long as I can."

She blew straight through the sleeping crossroads hamlet once again and made the remaining sixty miles in forty-three minutes, which Reacher figured was pretty good for a yellow four-cylinder import with a bud vase next to the steering wheel. She made the turn in under the gate and braked hard and stopped at the foot of the porch steps. The porch lights were on and the VW's dust fogged up around them in a khaki cloud. It was close to two o'clock in the morning.

"Leave it running," Reacher said.

Leave it running," Reacher said.

He led her up to the door. Hammered hard on it and got no reply. Tried the handle. It was unlocked. *Why would it be locked? We're sixty miles from the nearest crossroads*. He swung it open and they stepped straight into the red-painted foyer.

"Hold your arms out," he said.

He unloaded all six .22 hunting rifles out of the rack on the wall and laid them in her arms, alternately muzzle to stock so they would balance. She staggered slightly under the weight.

"Go put them in the car," he said.

There was the sound of footsteps overhead, then creaking from the stairs, and Bobby Greer came out of the parlor door, rubbing sleep out of his eyes. He was barefoot and wearing boxers and a T-shirt and staring at the empty gun rack.

"Hell you think you're doing?" he said.

"I want the others," Reacher said. "I'm commandeering your weapons. On behalf of the Echo County sheriff. I'm a deputy, remember?"

"There aren't any others."

"Yes, there are, Bobby. No self-respecting redneck like you is going to be satisfied with a bunch of .22 popguns. Where's the heavy metal?"

Bobby said nothing.

"Don't mess with me, Bobby," Reacher said. "It's way too late for that."

Bobby paused. Then he shrugged.

"O.K.," he said.

He padded barefoot across the foyer and pushed open a door that led into a small dark space that could have been a study. He flicked on a light and Reacher saw black-and-white pictures of oil wells on the walls. There was a desk and a chair and another gun rack filled with four 30–30 Winchesters. Seven-shot lever-

action repeaters, big handsome weapons, oiled wood, twenty-inch barrels, beautifully kept. *Wyatt Earp, eat your heart out.*

“Ammunition?” Reacher asked.

Bobby opened a drawer in the gun rack’s pedestal. Took out a cardboard box of Winchester cartridges.

“I’ve got some special loads, too,” he said. Took out another box.

“What are they?”

“I made them myself. Extra power.”

Reacher nodded. “Take them all out to the car, O.K.?”

He took the four rifles out of the rack and followed Bobby out of the house. Alice was sitting in the car. The six .22s were piled on the seat behind her. Bobby leaned in and placed the ammunition next to them. Reacher stacked the Winchesters upright behind the passenger seat. Then he turned back to Bobby.

“I’m going to borrow your Jeep,” he said.

Bobby shrugged, barefoot on the hot dirt.

“Keys are in it,” he said.

“You and your mother stay in the house now,” Reacher said. “Anybody seen out and about will be considered hostile, O.K.?”

Bobby nodded. Turned and walked to the foot of the steps. Glanced back once and went inside the house. Reacher leaned into the VW to talk to Alice.

“What are we doing?” she said.

“Getting ready.”

“For what?”

“For whatever comes our way.”

“[illegible]?”

"Why do we need ten rifles?"

"We don't. We need one. I don't want to give the bad guys the other nine, is all."

"They're coming here?"

"They're about ten minutes behind us."

"So what do we do?"

"We're all going out in the desert."

"Is there going to be shooting?"

"Probably."

"Is that smart? You said yourself, they're good shots."

"With handguns. Best way to defend against handguns is hide a long way off and shoot back with the biggest rifle you can find."

She shook her head. "I can't be a part of this, Reacher. It's not right. And I've never even held a rifle."

"You don't have to shoot," he said. "But you have to be a witness. You have to identify exactly who comes for us. I'm relying on you. It's vital."

"How will I see? It's dark out there."

"We'll fix that."

"It's going to rain."

"That'll help us."

"This is not right," she said again. "The police should handle this. Or the FBI. You can't just shoot at people."

The air was heavy with storm. The breeze was blowing again and he could smell pressure and voltage building in the sky.

"Rules of engagement, Alice," he said. "I'll wait for an overtly hostile act before

I do anything. Just like the U.S. Army. O.K.?"

"We'll be killed."

"You'll be hiding far away."

"Then *you'll* be killed. You said it yourself, they're good at this."

"They're good at walking up to somebody and shooting them in the head. What they're like out in the open in the dark against incoming rifle fire is anybody's guess."

"You're crazy."

"Seven minutes," he said.

She glanced backward at the road from the north. Then she shook her head and shoved the gearstick into first and held her foot on the clutch. He leaned in and squeezed her shoulder.

"Follow me close, O.K.?" he said.

He ran down to the motor barn and got into the Greer family's Cherokee. Racked the seat back and started the engine and switched on the headlights. Reversed into the yard and straightened up and looped around the motor barn and headed straight down the dirt track into open country. Checked the mirror and saw the VW right there behind him. Looked ahead again and saw the first raindrop hit his windshield. It was as big as a silver dollar.

16

They drove in convoy for five fast miles through the dark. There was no moonlight. No starlight. Cloud cover was low and thick but it held the rain to nothing more than occasional splattering drops, ten whole seconds between each of them, maybe six in every minute. They exploded against the windshield into wet patches the size of saucers. Reacher swatted each of them separately with

the windshield wipers. He held steady around forty miles an hour and followed the track through the brush. It turned randomly left and right, heading basically south toward the storm. The ground was very rough. The Jeep was bouncing and jarring. The VW was struggling to keep pace behind him. Its headlights were swinging and jumping in his mirrors.

Five miles from the house the rain was still holding and the mesquite and the fractured limestone began to narrow the track. The terrain was changing under their wheels. They had started out across a broad desert plain that might have been cultivated grassland a century ago. Now the ground was rising slowly and shading into mesa. Rocky outcrops rose left and right in the headlight beams, channeling them roughly south and east. Taller stands of mesquite crowded in and funneled them tighter. Soon there was nothing more than a pair of deep ruts worn through the hardpan. Ledges and sinkholes and dense patches of thorny low brush meant they had no choice but to follow them. They curved and twisted and felt like a riverbed.

Then the track bumped upward and straightened and ran like a highway across a miniature limestone mesa. The stone was a raised pan as big as a football field, maybe a hundred twenty yards long and eighty wide, roughly oval in shape. There was no vegetation growing on it. Reacher swung the Jeep in a wide circle and used the headlights on bright to check the perimeter. All around the edges the ground fell away a couple of feet into rocky soil. Stunted bushes crowded anyplace they could find to put their roots. He drove a second circle, wider, and he liked what he saw. The miniature mesa was as bare as a dinner plate laid on a dead lawn. He smiled to himself. Timed out in his head what they needed to do. Liked the answer he came up with.

He drove all the way to the far end of the rock table and stopped where the track bumped down off it and disappeared onward. Alice pulled the VW alongside him. He jumped out of the Jeep and ducked down to her window. The night air was still hot. Still damp. The urgent breeze was back. Big raindrops fell lazily and vertically. He felt like he could have dodged each one of them individually. Alice used a switch and buzzed the window down.

“You O.K.?” he asked her.

“So far,” she said.

“Turn it around and back it up to the edge,” he said. “All the way back. Block

the mouth of the track."

She maneuvered the car like she was parking on a city street and ran it backward until it was centered in the mouth of the track and the rear wheels were tight against the drop. She left the front facing exactly north, the way they had come. He nosed the Jeep next to her and opened the tailgate.

"Kill the motor and the lights," he called. "Get the rifles."

She passed him the big Winchesters, one at a time. He laid them sideways in the Jeep's load space. She passed him the .22s, and he pitched them away into the brush, as far as he could throw them. She passed him the two boxes of 30–30 ammunition. Winchester's own, and Bobby Greer's hand-loads. He laid them alongside the rifles. Ducked around to the driver's door and switched the engine off. The lumpy six-cylinder idle died. Silence fell. He listened hard and scanned the northern horizon. The mesquite sighed faintly in the wind. Unseen insects buzzed and chattered. Infrequent raindrops hit his shoulders. That was all. Nothing else. Absolute blackness and silence everywhere.

He came back to the tailgate and opened the ammunition boxes. They were both packed tight with cartridges standing on their firing pins, points upward. The factory shells were new and bright. Bobby's were a little scuffed. Recycled brass. He took one out and held it up to the Jeep's interior light and looked hard at it. *I made them myself*, Bobby had said. *Extra power*. Which was logical. Why else would a jerk like Bobby hand-load his own cartridges? Not for *less* power, that was for sure. Like, why do people tune hot-rod motors? Not to make them milder than stock. It's a boy thing. So Bobby had probably packed and tamped a whole lot of extra powder into each one, maybe thirty or forty extra grains. And maybe he had used hotter powder than normal. Which would give him a couple hundred extra foot-pounds of muzzle energy, and maybe a hundred miles an hour extra velocity. And which would give him the muzzle flash from hell, and which would ruin his breech castings and warp his barrels inside a couple of weeks. But Reacher smiled and took ten more of the shells out of the box anyway. They weren't his guns, and he had just decided muzzle flash was exactly what he was looking for.

He loaded the first Winchester with a single sample of Bobby's hand-loads. The second, he filled with seven more. The third, he loaded alternately one stock round, one of Bobby's, another stock round, until it was full with four stock and three hand-loads. The fourth rifle he filled entirelv with factorv ammo. He laid

the guns left to right in sequence across the Jeep's load space and closed the tailgate on them.

"I thought we only needed one," Alice said.

"I changed the plan," he said.

He stepped around to the driver's seat and Alice climbed in beside him.

"Where are we going now?" she asked.

He started the engine and backed away from the parked VW.

"Think of this mesa like a clock face," he said. "We came in at the six o'clock position. Right now your car is parked at the twelve, facing backward. You're going to be hiding on the rim at the eight. On foot. Your job is to fire a rifle, one shot, and then scoot down to the seven."

"You said I wouldn't have to shoot."

"I changed the plan," he said again.

"But I told you, I can't fire a rifle."

"Yes, you can. You just pull the trigger. It's easy. Don't worry about aiming or anything. All I want is the sound and the flash."

"Then what?"

"Then you scoot down to the seven and watch. I'm going to be busy shooting. I need you to ID exactly who I'm shooting at."

"This isn't right."

"It isn't wrong, either."

"You think?"

"You ever seen Clay Allison's grave?"

She rolled her eyes. "You need to read the history books, Reacher. Clay Allison

was a total psychopath. He once killed a guy bunking with him, just because he snored. He was an amoral maniac, plain and simple. Nothing too noble about that."

Reacher shrugged. "Well, we can't back out now."

"Two wrongs don't make a right, you know?"

"It's a choice, Alice. Either we ambush them, or get ambushed *by* them."

She shook her head.

"Great," she said.

He said nothing.

"It's dark," she said. "How will I see anything?"

"I'll take care of that."

"How will I know when to fire?"

"You'll know."

He pulled the Jeep close to the edge of the limestone table and stopped. Opened the tailgate and took out the first rifle. Checked his bearings and ran to the fractured rock lip and laid the gun on the ground with the butt hanging over the edge and the barrel pointing at the emptiness twenty feet in front of the distant VW. He leaned down and racked the lever. It moved precisely with a sweet metallic *slick-slick*. A fine weapon.

"It's ready to fire," he said. "And this is the eight o'clock spot. Stay down below the lip, fire the gun, and then move to the seven. Crouch low all the way. And then watch, real careful. They might fire in your direction, but I guarantee they'll miss, O.K.?"

She said nothing.

"I promise," he said. "Don't worry about it."

"Are you sure?"

“Superman couldn’t hit anything with a handgun in the dark at this distance.”

“They might get lucky.”

“No, Alice, tonight they’re not going to get lucky. Believe me.”

“But when do I fire?”

“Fire when ready,” he said.

He watched her hide below the lip of the rock, an arm’s length from her rifle.

“Good luck,” he said. “I’ll see you later.”

“Great,” she said again.

He climbed back into the Jeep and hustled it straight across the mesa to the four o’clock position. Spun the wheel and reversed the car and backed it straight off the rock. It bumped down two feet and came to a shuddering stop in the undergrowth. He killed the engine and the lights. Took the fourth rifle and propped it upright against the passenger door. Carried the second and third with him and climbed back onto the ledge and ran in the open to what he estimated was the two o’clock spot. Laid the third rifle carefully on the lip of the rock and ran the rest of the way to the parked VW. Ducked inside and unscrewed the dome light. Eased the driver’s door back to three inches from closed and left it. Measured twenty feet clockwise and laid the second rifle on the ground, on the rim of the ledge, somewhere between the twelve and the one. Twelve-thirty, maybe. *No, about twelve-seventeen, to be pedantic*, he thought. Then he crawled back and lay facedown on the ground, tight up against the VW, with his right shoulder tucked under the little running board and the right side of his face pressed against the sidewall of the front tire. He was breathing deeply. The tire smelled like rubber. His left shoulder was out in the weather. Big ponderous raindrops hit it at infrequent intervals. He hitched in closer and settled down to wait. *Eight minutes, perhaps*, he thought. *Maybe nine*.

It was eleven minutes. They were a little slower than he expected. He saw a flash

in the north and at first thought it was lightning, but then it happened again and he saw it was headlight beams bouncing across rough terrain and catching the low gray cloud overhead. A vehicle was pitching and rolling its way through the darkness. It was heading his way, which he knew it would, because the landscape gave it no other choice but to stay on the track. Its lights flared and died as the nose rose and fell. He was sweating. The air around him was hotter then ever. He could feel pressure and electricity in the sky above. The raindrops were falling harder and a little faster. It felt like a fuse was burning and the storm was set to explode. *Not yet*, he thought. *Please, give me five minutes more*.

Thirty seconds later he could hear an engine. A gasoline engine, running hard. Eight cylinders. The sound rose and fell as the driven wheels gripped the dirt and then bounced and lost traction. *Hard suspension*, he thought. *Load-carrying suspension. Bobby's pick-up, probably. The one he used to hunt the armadillo*.

He tucked himself tighter against the underside of the VW. The engine noise grew louder. It rose and fell. The lights bounced and swerved. They lit the northern horizon with a dull glow. Then they were near enough to make out as separate twin beams spearing through the mesquite. They threw harsh shadows and flicked left and right as the vehicle turned. Then the truck burst into sight. It bounced up onto the mesa traveling fast. The engine screamed like all four wheels were off the ground. The headlights flared high and then dipped low as it crashed back to earth. It landed slightly off course and the lights swept the perimeter for a second before they straightened ahead. It accelerated on the flatter terrain. The engine was loud. It came on and on, straight at him. Faster and faster. Forty miles an hour, fifty. Seventy yards away. Fifty. Forty. It came straight at him until the bouncing headlights washed over the stationary VW directly ahead of it. The yellow paint above Reacher's shoulder glowed impossibly bright. Then the truck jammed to a panic stop. All four wheels locked hard on the limestone grit and there was a howl of rubber and the truck slewed slightly left and came to rest facing eleven o'clock, maybe thirty yards in front of him. The far edge of the headlight beams washed over him. He forced himself tighter under the VW.

He could smell the raindrops in the dust.

Nothing happened for a second.

Then the pick-up driver killed his lights. They faded to weak orange filaments

and died to nothing and total darkness came back. The insects went silent. No sound at all beyond the truck engine idling against the brake. Reacher thought: *did they see me*?

Nothing happened.

Now, Alice, Reacher thought.

Nothing happened.

Shoot, Alice, he thought. *Shoot now, for God's sake*.

Nothing happened.

Shoot the damn gun, Alice. Just pull the damn trigger.

Nothing happened.

He closed his eyes and paused another whole endless second and braced himself to launch outward anyway. Opened his eyes and took a breath and started moving.

Then Alice fired.

There was a monstrous muzzle flash easily ten feet long far away to his right and the buzzing whine of a supersonic bullet high in the air and a split second later an enormous barking crash clapped across the landscape. He rolled out from under the VW and reached in through the driver's door and flicked the headlights on. Jumped backward into the mesquite and kept rolling and came up into a low crouch six feet away to see the pick-up caught perfectly in the cone of bright light. Three people in it. A driver in the cab. Two figures crouching in the load bed, holding the roll bar one-handed. All three of them with their heads turned abruptly on their shoulders, rigid and frozen and staring backward at the spot Alice had fired from.

They were immobile a split second longer, and then they reacted. The driver flicked his own lights back on. The pick-up and the VW glared at each other like it was a contest. Reacher was dazzled by the light but he saw the figures in the load bed were wearing caps and blue jackets. One figure was smaller than the other. *A woman*, he thought. He fixed her position carefully in his mind. *Shoot*

the women first. That was the standard counterterrorist doctrine. The experts figured they were more fanatical. And suddenly he knew she was the shooter. She had to be. Small hands, neat fingers. Carmen's Lorcin could have been built for her. She was crouched low alongside her partner on his left.

They both had handguns. They both stared sideways a half-second longer and then snapped forward into the glare and leaned on the pick-up's roof and started shooting at the VW's lights. *Their caps said FBI on the front*. He froze. *What the hell*? Then he relaxed. *Beautiful*. Fake apparel, fake ID, a tricked-up Crown Vic. *They just went to Alice's place in it. And that's how they stopped Al Eugene on Friday*. They were shooting continuously. He heard the flat dull thumps of powerful nine-millimeter pistols firing fast. He heard spent shells clattering out onto the pick-up's roof. He saw the VW's windshield explode and heard bullets punching through sheet metal and the tinkling of glass and then the VW's lights were gone and he could see nothing at all behind the dazzle of the pick-up's own lights. He sensed the pistols turning back to where they had Alice's firing position fixed in their memories. He saw tiny oblique muzzle flashes and heard bullets whining away from him. The left-hand gun stopped. *The woman. Reloading already. Only thirteen shots*, his subconscious mind told him. *Has to be a SIG Sauer P228 or a Browning Hi-Power*.

He crawled forward to the rim of the mesa and tracked fifteen feet left and found the rifle he had placed at twelve-seventeen. Winchester number two, full of Bobby Greer's hand-loads. He fired without aiming and the recoil almost knocked him off his knees. A tremendous flame leapt out of the muzzle. It was like the strobe on a camera. He had no idea where the bullet went. He racked the lever *slick-slick* and hustled right, toward the wrecked VW. Fired again. Two huge visible flashes, moving progressively counterclockwise. From the pick-up's vantage point it would look like a person traversing right-to-left. A smart shooter would fire ahead of the last flash and hope to hit the moving target. *Deflection shooting*. They went for it. He heard bullets whining off the rock near the car. Heard one hit it.

But by then he was on the move in the opposite direction, clockwise again. He dropped the rifle and bent low and ran for the next one. It was there at two o'clock. The third Winchester, the one with the sequenced load. The first shot was a factory bullet. Worth some care. He steadied himself on the lip of the ledge and aimed into the blackness eight feet behind the pick-up's headlights and four feet above them. Fired once. *Now they think there are three riflemen out*

here, one behind them on the left, two ahead on the right. There was ringing in his ears and he couldn't see where his bullet went but he heard the woman's voice shout a faint command and the pick-up's headlights promptly died. He fired again at the same spot with the next shell, which was a hand-load. The gout of flame spat out and lit up the mesa and he jinked five feet right. Tracked the frozen visual target in his mind and fired the next. The second factory bullet, neat and straight and true. He heard a sharp scream. Danced one pace to his right and fired the next hand-load. The muzzle flash showed him a body falling headfirst out of the pick-up bed. It was caught entirely motionless in midair. *One down. But the wrong one*. It was too big. It was the man. *Factory round next*. He concentrated hard and aimed again slightly left of the place the guy had fallen from. Racked the lever. It moved a quarter-inch and jammed solid on the worn cartridge case from the last hand-load.

Then two things happened. First the pick-up moved. It lurched forward and peeled away fast in a tight desperate circle and headed back north, the way it had come. Then a handgun started firing close to the VW. *The woman was out of the truck. She was on foot in the dark*. She was firing fast. A hail of bullets. They were missing him by three or four feet. The truck raced away. Its lights flicked on again. He tracked them in the corner of his eye. They jerked and bounced and swerved and grew smaller. Then they disappeared off the end of the mesa. The truck just thumped down off the edge of the rock table and hurtled back toward the Red House. Its noise faded to nothing and its lights dimmed to a distant glow moving on the far black horizon. The handgun stopped firing. *Reloading again*. There was sudden total silence. Total darkness. A second later the insect chant swam back into focus. It sounded softer than usual. Less frantic. He realized the rain had changed. The heavy drops had stopped and in their place was an insistent patter of drizzle. He held his hand palm-up and felt it building. It grew perceptibly harder and harder within seconds like he was standing in a shower stall and an unseen hand was opening the faucet wider and wider.

He wiped water off his forehead to keep it out of his eyes and laid the jammed rifle quietly in the dust. The dust was already wet under his fingers. It was turning to mud. He moved left, tracking back toward the hidden Jeep. It was maybe forty yards away. The rain got harder. It built and built like there was going to be no limit to its power. It hissed and roared on the mesquite bushes all around him. *Good news and bad news*. The good news was it took making noise out of the equation. He wouldn't have backed himself to move as quietly as the woman could. Not through desert vegetation at night. A frame six feet five in

height and two hundred fifty pounds in weight was good for a lot of things, but not for silent progress through unseen thorny plants. The noise of the rain would help him more than her. That was the good news. The bad news was visibility was soon going to be worse than zero. They could bump into each other back-to-back before either of them knew the other was there.

So a lever-action repeater was not going to be the weapon of choice. Too slow for a snap shot. Too cumbersome to maneuver. And a Winchester throws the spent shell out of the top, not out of the side. Which means in a heavy rainstorm it can let water in through the ejection port. And this was going to be a heavy rainstorm. He could sense it. It was going to try to compensate for ten years of drought in a single night.

He made it back to the Jeep at the four o'clock position. Found the fourth rifle propped against its door, full of factory shells. It was already soaked. He shook it off and aimed obliquely across the mesa toward the eleven. Pulled the trigger. It fired. It still worked fine. He fired four more spaced shots, at the twelve, the one, the two, the three. Fan fire. *A gamble*. The upside was he might get lucky and hit the woman. Downside was it would tell her he was on his own. One guy, more than one rifle. That was now an easy deduction. And it would tell her where he was. If she was counting it would suggest to her he was waiting there with the last two shells still in the magazine.

So he slid the gun under the Jeep and waded west through the brush until he was forty feet from the edge of the rock. Pulled Alice's Heckler & Koch out of his pocket and knocked the safety off. Knelt down and smeared mud over his hands and arms and face and waited for lightning to strike. Summer storms he had witnessed before in hot parts of the world always featured lightning. Gigantic thunderheads rubbed and jostled overhead and the voltage built to an unbearable level. Five more minutes, he guessed. Then lightning would fire in bolts or sheets and the landscape would flash with brightness. He was in khaki clothes and had smeared khaki mud on his skin. He doubted that she had.

He worked south, away from the Jeep, back toward the wrecked VW, keeping forty feet in the undergrowth. The darkness was total. The rain was building relentlessly. It built to the point where it was absolutely impossible that it could build any harder, and then it just kept on building. The limestone sinkholes were already full of water. Rain was lashing their surfaces. Small rivers were running around his feet, gurgling into bottomless crevasses all around. The noise was astonishing. The rain was roaring against the ground so hard that it was

astonishing. The rain was roaring against the ground so hard that it was impossible to imagine a louder sound. Then it fell harder and the sound got louder.

He realized the camouflage mud had rinsed straight off his skin. Impossible for it not to. Carmen's shower was like a grudging trickle in comparison. He began to worry about breathing. How could there be air to breathe, with so much water? It was running down his face in solid streams and running straight into his mouth. He put his hand over his jaw and sucked air through his fingers and spat and spluttered the rainwater away.

He was opposite the two o'clock position and thirty feet from the ledge when the lightning started. Far to the south a ragged bolt exploded from the sky and hit the earth five miles away. It was pure intense white and shaped like a bare tree hurled upside down by a hurricane. He fell to a crouch and stared straight ahead, looking for peripheral vision. Saw nothing. The thunder followed the lightning five seconds later, a ragged tearing rumble. *Where is she? Does she think she's smarter than she thinks I am? In which case she'll be behind me*. But he didn't turn around. Life is always about guessing and gambling, and he had her pegged as a slick operator, for sure. *In her world*. Put her out on the street face-to-face with Al Eugene, and she's got the smarts to charm the birds out of the trees. *But put her down all alone in open combat territory at night in a storm, and she's struggling. I'm good at this. She's not. She's in front of me, clinging to the edge of the mesa somewhere, scared like she's never been scared before. She's mine*.

The storm was moving. The second lightning strike came three minutes later and a mile north and east of the first one. It was a jagged sheet that flickered insanely for eight or ten seconds before dying into darkness. Reacher craned upward and scanned ahead and right. Saw nothing. Turned and scanned left. Saw the woman seventy feet away, crouched in the lee of the ledge. He could see the white writing on her cap. *FBI*. Big letters. She was looking straight at him and her gun was rigid in her hand and her arm was fully extended from the shoulder. He saw the muzzle flash as she fired at him. It was a tiny dull spark completely overwhelmed by the storm.

The storm drifted slowly north and east and pushed the leading edge of rain ahead of it. It reached the motel building and built steadily and quickly from a

ahead of it. It reached the motel building and built steadily and quickly from a whisper to a patter to a hard relentless drumming on the roof. It was a metal roof and within thirty seconds the noise was very loud. It woke Ellie from a restless troubled sleep. She opened her eyes wide and saw the small dark man with hair on his arms. He was sitting very still in a chair near the bed, watching her.

“Hi, kid,” he said.

Ellie said nothing.

“Can’t sleep?”

Ellie looked up at the ceiling.

“Raining,” she said. “It’s noisy.”

The man nodded, and checked his watch.

She missed him. Impossible to tell by how much. The lightning died and plunged the world back into absolute darkness. Reacher fired once at the remembered target and listened hard. Nothing. *Probably a miss. Seventy feet in heavy rain, not an easy shot.* Then the thunderclap came. It was a shuddering bass boom that rocked the ground and rolled slowly away. He crouched again. He had nine bullets left. Then he threw the double-bluff dice. *She’ll think I’ll move, so I won’t.* He stayed right where he was. Waited for the next lightning bolt. It would tell him how good she was. An amateur would move away from him. A good pro would move closer. A *really* good pro would double-bluff the double-bluff and stay exactly where she was.

By then the rain was as heavy as it was going to get. That was his guess. He had once been caught in a jungle storm in Central America and gotten wet faster than falling fully clothed into the sea. That was the hardest rain imaginable and this was easily comparable. He was completely soaked to the skin. *Beyond* soaked. Water was running in continuous torrents under his shirt. Pouring off him, not dripping. It sluiced out of his buttonholes like jets. He was cold. The temperature had plummeted twenty or thirty degrees in less than twenty minutes. As much water was bouncing upward around him as was lashing down. The noise was

unbearable. Leaves and stalks were tearing off the bushes. They were flowing and eddying away and building tiny beaver dams against every rock on the ground. The hard hot grit had washed into slushy mud six inches deep. His feet were sinking in it. His gun was soaked. *That's O.K. A Heckler & Koch will fire wet. But so will a Browning or a SIG*.

The next lightning flash was still well to the south, but it was nearer. And brighter. It was a gigantic lateral bolt that hissed and crackled across the sky. He scanned left. The woman had moved closer. She was sixty feet away from him, still tight against the mesa. *Good, but not really good*. She fired at him and missed by four feet. It was a hasty shot and her arm was still swinging in from the south. *The south? She figured I'd moved away*. He felt mildly insulted and leveled his arm and fired back. The incoming thunderclap buried the sound of the shot. *Probably a miss. Eight left*.

Then it was back to the calculations. *What will she do? What will she figure I'll do*? She had been wrong the last time. *So this time she'll gamble. She'll guess I'll move in closer. So she'll move in closer too. She'll go for the killing shot immediately*.

He stayed in a crouch, exactly where he was. *Triple-bluff*. He tracked his gun hand left-to-right along the theoretical direction she must be moving. Waited for the precious lightning. It came sooner than he expected. The storm was ripping in fast. It exploded not more than a half-mile away and was followed almost immediately by a bellow of thunder. The flash was brighter than the sun. He squinted ahead. *The woman was gone*. He jerked left and saw a smudge of vivid blue backtracking away in the opposite direction. He fired instinctively just ahead of it and the lightning died and darkness and noise and chaos collapsed around him. *Seven left*. He smiled. *But now I only need one more*.

The sound of thunder frightened her. It sounded like when Joshua and Billy had put a new roof on the motor barn. They had used big sheets of tin and they boomed and flexed when they were carrying them and made a horrible noise when they hammered the nails through. Thunder was like a hundred million billion sheets of roofing tin all flexing and booming in the sky. She ducked her head under the sheets and watched the room light up with bright wobbling

flashes of lightning outside the window.

“Are you scared?” the man asked.

She nodded, under the sheets. It scrubbed her hair, but she was sure the man could see her head moving.

“Don’t be scared,” the man said. “It’s only a storm. Big girls aren’t scared of storms.”

She said nothing. He checked his watch again.

Her tactics were transparent. She was good, but not good enough to be unreadable. She was working close in to the rim of the mesa, because it offered an illusion of safety. She was working an *in-out-in-in* move. Double-bluffing, triple-bluffing, aiming to be unpredictable. *Smart, but not smart enough*. She had moved close, and then moved away. Now she would move close again, and then the next time not away again, but closer still. She figured he would begin to read the pattern and anticipate the yo-yo outward. But she would come inward instead. To wrong-foot him. And because she wanted to be close. She *liked* close. A head-shot artiste like her, he guessed her preferred range would be something less than ten feet.

He jumped out of his crouch and ran as hard as he could, like a sprinter, backward and left, curving around in a fast wide circle. He crashed through the brush like a panicked animal, big leaping strides, hurdling mesquite, splashing through puddles, sliding through the mud. He didn’t care how much noise he was making. He would be inaudible a yard away. All that mattered was how fast he was. He needed to outflank her before the next lightning bolt.

He ran wildly in a big looping curve and then slowed and skidded and eased in close to the limestone ledge maybe twenty feet north of where he had first seen her. She had moved south, and then back, so now she would be on her way south again. She ought to be thirty feet ahead by now. Right in front of him. He walked after her, fast and easy, like he was on a sidewalk somewhere. Kept loose, trying to second-guess the rhythm of the lightning, staying ready to hit the

wet dirt.

The small dark man checked his watch again. Ellie hid under the sheet.

“Over three hours,” the man said.

Ellie said nothing.

“Can you tell the time?”

Ellie straightened up in the bed and pulled the sheet down slowly, all the way past her mouth.

“I’m six and a half,” she said.

The man nodded.

“Look,” he said.

He held out his arm and twisted his wrist.

“One more hour,” he said.

“Then what?”

The man looked away. Ellie watched him a long moment more. Then she pulled the sheet back over her head. The thunder boomed and the lightning flashed.

The flash lit up the whole landscape for miles ahead. The crash of thunder crowded in on top of it. Reacher dropped to a crouch and stared. *She wasn’t there*. She was nowhere in front of him. The lightning died and the thunder rolled on. For a second he wondered whether he would hear her gun over it. *Would he*? Or would the first he knew be the sickening impact of the bullet? He

dropped full length into the mud and lay still. Felt the rain lashing his body like a thousand tiny hammers. *O.K., rethink.* Had *she* outflanked *him*? She could have attempted an exact mirror-image of his own move. In which case they had each sprinted a wide fast circle in opposite directions and essentially exchanged positions. Or she could have found a sinkhole or a crevasse and gone to ground. She could have found the Jeep. If she'd glanced backward during a lightning strike she would have seen it. It was an easy conclusion that he'd have to get back to it eventually. How else was he going to get out of the desert? So maybe she was waiting there. Maybe she was inside it, crouching low. Maybe she was *under* it, in which case he had just presented her with a Winchester rifle with two factory rounds still in the magazine.

He stayed down in the mud, thinking hard. He ignored the next lightning flash altogether. Just pressed himself into the landscape, calculating, deciding. He rejected the possibility of the flanking maneuver. That was military instinct. He was dealing with a street shooter, not an infantry soldier. No infantryman would aim for a guy's eye. Percentages were against it. So maybe she had gone for the Jeep. He swam himself through a stationary muddy circle and raised his head and waited.

The next flash was a sheet, rippling madly and lighting the underside of the clouds like a battlefield flare. The Jeep was a long way away. Too far, surely. And if she *had* gone for it, she was no immediate threat. Not all the way back there, not at that distance. So he swiveled back around and crawled on south. *Check and clear, zone by zone*. He moved slowly, on his knees and elbows. Ten feet, twenty, twenty-five. It felt exactly like basic training. He crawled on and on, and then he smelled perfume.

It was somehow intensified by the rain. He realized the whole desert smelled different. The rain had changed things entirely. He could smell plants and earth. They made a strong, pungent, natural odor. But mixed into it was a woman's perfume. *Was* it perfume? Or was it something from nature, like a night flower suddenly blooming in the storm? No, it was perfume. A woman's perfume. No question about it. He stopped moving and lay completely still.

He could hear the mesquite moving, but it was only the wind. The rain was easing back toward torrential and a strong wet breeze was coming in from the south, teasing him with the smell of perfume. It was absolutely dark. He raised his gun and couldn't see it in his hand. Like he was a blind man.

Which way is she facing? Not east. She had to be crouched low, so to the east there would be nothing to see except the blank two-foot wall that was the edge of the mesa. If she was looking south or west, no problem. *If she's looking north, she's looking straight at me, except she can't see me. Too dark. She can't smell me either, because I'm upwind*. He raised himself on his left forearm and pointed his gun straight from his right shoulder. If she was facing south or west, it would give him an easy shot into her back. *But worst case, she's looking north and we're exactly facing each other. We could be five feet apart. So it's a gamble now. When the lightning flashes, who reacts first*?

He held his breath. Waited for the lightning. It was the longest wait of his life. The storm had changed. Thunder was rumbling long and loud, but it wasn't sharp anymore. The rain was still heavy. It kicked mud and grit up onto his face. Thrashed against the brush. Brand-new streams gurgled all around his prone body. He was half-submerged in water. He was very cold.

Then there was a split-second tearing sound in the sky and a gigantic thunderclap crashed and a bolt of lightning fired absolutely simultaneously. It was impossibly white and harsh and the desert lit up brighter than day. The woman was three feet in front of him. She was slumped facedown on the ground, already battered by rain and silted with mud. She looked small and collapsed and empty. Her legs were bent at the knees and her arms were folded under her. Her gun had fallen next to her shoulder. A Browning Hi-Power. It was half-submerged in the mud and a small thicket of twigs had already dammed against one side of it. He used the last of the lightning flash to scrabble for it and hurl it far away. Then the light died and he used the after-image retained in his eyes to find her neck.

There was no pulse. She was already very cold.

Deflection shooting. His third bullet, instinctively placed just ahead of her as she scrambled away from him. She had jumped straight into its path. He kept the fingers of his left hand on the still pulse in her neck, afraid to lose contact with her in the dark. He settled down to wait for the next lightning flash. His left arm started shaking. He told himself it was because he was holding it at an unnatural angle. Then he started laughing. It built quickly, like the rain. He had spent the last twenty minutes stalking a woman he had already shot dead. *Accidentally*. He laughed uncontrollably until the rain filled his mouth and set him coughing and spluttering wildly.

The man stood up and walked over to the credenza. Picked up his gun from where it was lying on the polished wood. Ducked down to the black nylon valise and took out a long black silencer. Fitted it carefully to the muzzle of the gun. Walked back to the chair and sat down again.

“It’s time,” he said.

He put his hand on her shoulder. She felt it through the sheet. She wriggled away from him. Swam down in the bed and curled up. She needed to pee. Very badly.

“It’s time,” the man said again.

He folded the sheet back. She scrabbled away, holding the opposite hem tight between her knees. Looked straight at him.

“You said one more hour,” she said. “It hasn’t been a hour yet. I’ll tell that lady. She’s your boss.”

The man’s eyes went blank. He turned and looked at the door, just for a moment. Then he turned back.

“O.K.,” he said. “You tell me when you think it’s been one more hour.”

He let go of the sheet and she wrapped herself up in it again. Ducked her head under it and put her hands over her ears to block the noise of the thunder. Then she closed her eyes, but she could still see the lightning flashes through the sheet and through her eyelids. They looked red.

The next flash was sheet lightning again, vague and diffuse and flickering. He rolled the body over, just to be sure. Tore open her jacket and shirt. He had hit her in the left armpit. It was through-and-through, exiting in the opposite wall of her chest. Probably got her heart, both lungs and her spine. A .40 bullet was not

a subtle thing. It took a lot to stop one. The entry wound was small and neat. The exit wound wasn't. The rain flushed it clean. Diluted blood leaked all over the place and instantly disappeared. Her chest cavity was filling with water. It looked like a medical diagram. He could have sunk his whole hand in there.

She was medium-sized. Blond hair, soaked and full of mud where it spilled out under the FBI cap. He pushed the bill of the cap upward so he could see her face. Her eyes were open and staring at the sky and filling with rain like tears. Her face was slightly familiar. He had seen her before. *Where*? The lightning died and he was left with the image of her face in his mind, harsh and white and reversed like a photograph's negative. *The diner. The Coke floats. Friday, school quitting time, a Crown Victoria, three passengers*. He had pegged them as a sales team. *Wrong again.*

"O.K.," he said out loud. "Ballgame over."

He put Alice's gun back in his pocket and walked away north, back to the Jeep. It was so dark and he had so much rain in his eyes he thumped right into the side of it before he knew he was there. He tracked around it with a hand on the hood and found the driver's door. Opened it and closed it and opened it again, just for the thrill of making the dome light come on inside, illumination he could control for himself.

It wasn't easy driving back up onto the limestone. The grit that should have been under the wheels and aiding traction was now slick mud. He put the headlights on bright and started the wipers beating fast and selected four-wheel drive and slid around for a while before the front tires caught and dragged the car up the slope. Then he hooked a wide curve ahead and left, all the way across to the seven o'clock position. He hit the horn twice and Alice walked out of the mesquite into the headlight beams. She was soaked to the skin. Water was pouring off her. Her hair was plastered flat. Her ears stuck out a little. She stepped to her left and ran around to the passenger door.

"I guess this is the storm people were expecting," he said.

Lightning flared again outside. A ragged bolt far to their left, accompanied by an explosion of thunder. The weather was moving north, and fast.

She shook her head. "This little shower? This is just a taste. Wait until tomorrow."

“I’ll be gone tomorrow.”

“You will?”

He nodded.

“You O.K.?” he asked.

“I didn’t know when to fire.”

“You did fine.”

“What happened?”

He drove off again, turning south, zigzagging the Jeep to fan the headlight beams back and forth across the mesa. Thirty feet in front of the wrecked VW, he found the first guy’s body. It was humped and inert. He dipped the lights so they would shine directly on it and jumped out into the rain. The guy was dead. He had taken the Winchester’s bullet in the stomach. He hadn’t died instantaneously. His hat was missing and he had torn open his jacket to clutch his wound. He had crawled quite a distance. He was tall and heavily built. Reacher closed his eyes and scanned back to the scene in the diner. *By the register. The woman, two men. One big and fair, one small and dark.* Then he walked back to the Jeep and slid inside. The seat was soaked.

“Two dead,” he said. “That’s what happened. But the driver escaped. Did you ID him?”

“They came to kill us, didn’t they?”

“That was the plan. Did you ID the driver?”

She said nothing.

“It’s very important, Alice,” he said. “For Ellie’s sake. We don’t have a tongue. That part didn’t work out. They’re both dead.”

She said nothing.

“Did you see him?”

She shook her head.

“No, not really,” she said. “I’m very sorry. I was running, the lights were only on a second or two.”

It had seemed longer than that to Reacher. Much longer. But in reality, she was probably right. She was maybe even overestimating. It might have been only three-quarters of a second. They had been very quick with the triggers.

“I’ve seen these people before,” he said. “On Friday, up at the crossroads. Must have been after they got Eugene. They must have been scouting the area. Three of them. A woman, a big guy, a small dark guy. I can account for the woman and the big guy. So was it the small dark guy driving tonight?”

“I didn’t really see.”

“Gut feeling?” Reacher said. “First impression? You must have gotten a glimpse. Or seen a silhouette.”

“Didn’t you?”

He nodded. “He was facing away from me, looking down to where you fired from. There was a lot of glare. Some rain on his windshield. Then I was shooting, and then he took off. But I don’t think he was small.”

She nodded, too. “Gut feeling, he wasn’t small. Or dark. It was just a blur, but I’d say he was big enough. Maybe fair-haired.”

“Makes sense,” Reacher said. “They left one of the team behind to guard Ellie.”

“So who was driving?”

“Their client. The guy who hired them. That’s my guess. Because they were short-handed, and because they needed local knowledge.”

“He got away.”

Reacher smiled. “He can run, but he can’t hide.”

They went to take a look at the wrecked VW. It was beyond help. Alice didn't seem too concerned about it. She just shrugged and turned away. Reacher took the maps from the glove compartment and turned the Jeep around and headed north. The drive back to the Red House was a nightmare. Crossing the mesa was O.K. But beyond the end of it the desert track was baked so hard that it wasn't absorbing any water at all. The rain was flooding all over the surface. The part that had felt like a riverbed *was* a riverbed. It was pouring with a fast torrent that boiled up over the tires. Mesquite bushes had been torn off their deep taproots and washed out of their shallow toeholds and whole trees were racing south on the swirl. They dammed against the front of the Jeep and rode with it until cross-currents tore them loose. Sinkholes were concealed by the tide. But the rain was easing fast. It was dying back to drizzle. The eye of the storm had blown away to the north.

They were right next to the motor barn before they saw it. It was in total darkness. Reacher braked hard and swerved around it and saw pale lights flickering behind some of the windows in the house.

"Candles," he said.

"Power must be out," Alice said. "The lightning must have hit the lines."

He braked again and slid in the mud and turned the car so the headlights washed deep into the barn.

"Recognize anything?" he asked.

Bobby's pick-up was back in its place, but it was wet and streaked with mud. Water was dripping out of the load bed and pooling on the ground.

"O.K.," Alice said. "So what now?"

Reacher stared into the mirror. Then he turned his head and watched the road from the north.

"Somebody's coming," he said.

There was a faint glow of headlights behind them, rising and falling, many miles distant, breaking into a thousand pieces in the raindrops on the Jeep's windows

distant, breaking into a thousand pieces in the raindrops on the Jeep's windows.

"Let's go say howdy to the Greers," he said.

He pulled Alice's gun out of his pocket and checked it. *Never assume*. But it was O.K. *Cocked and locked. Seven left.* He put it back in his pocket and drove across the soaking yard to the foot of the porch steps. The rain was almost gone. The ground was beginning to steam. The vapor rose gently and swirled in the headlight beams. They got out into the humidity. The temperature was coming back. So was the insect noise. There was a faint whirring chant all around. It sounded wary and very distant.

He led her up the porch steps and pushed open the door. The hallway had candles burning in holders placed here and there on all the available horizontal surfaces. They gave a soft orange glow and made the foyer warm and inviting. He ushered Alice through to the parlor. Stepped in behind her. More candles were burning in there. Dozens of them. They were glued to saucers with melted wax. There was a Coleman lantern standing on a credenza against the end wall. It was hissing softly and burning bright.

Bobby and his mother were sitting together at the red-painted table. Shadows were dancing and flickering all around them. The candlelight was kind to Rusty. It took twenty years off her. She was fully dressed, in jeans and a shirt. Bobby sat beside her, looking at nothing in particular. The tiny flames lit his face and made it mobile.

"Isn't this romantic," Reacher said.

Rusty moved, awkwardly.

"I'm scared of the dark," she said. "Can't help it. Always have been."

"You should be," Reacher said. "Bad things can happen in the dark."

She made no reply to that.

"Towel?" Reacher asked. He was dripping water all over the floor. So was Alice.

"In the kitchen," Rusty said.

There was a thin striped towel on a wooden roller. Alice blotted her face and hair

and patted her shirt. Reacher did the same, and then he stepped back into the parlor.

“Why are you both up?” he asked. “It’s three o’clock in the morning.”

Neither of them answered.

“Your truck was out tonight,” Reacher said.

“But we weren’t,” Bobby said. “We stayed inside, like you told us to.”

Rusty nodded. “Both of us, together.”

Reacher smiled.

“Each other’s alibi,” he said. “That would get them rolling in the aisles, down in the jury room.”

“We didn’t do anything,” Bobby said.

Reacher heard a car on the road. Just the faint subliminal sound of tires slowing on soaked blacktop. The faint whistle of drive belts turning under a hood. Then there was a slow wet crunch as it turned under the gate. Grit and pebbles popped under the wheels as it drove up to the porch. There was a tiny squeal from a brake rotor and then silence as the engine died. The *clunk* of a door closing. Feet on the porch steps. The house door opening, footsteps crossing the foyer. Then the parlor door opened. The candle flames swayed and flickered. Hack Walker stepped into the room.

“Good,” Reacher said. “We don’t have much time.”

“Did you rob my office?” Walker replied.

Reacher nodded. “I was curious.”

“About what?”

“About details,” Reacher said. “I’m a details guy.”

“You didn’t need to break in. I’d have shown you the files.”

“You weren’t there.”

You weren't there.

"Whatever, you shouldn't have broken in. You're in trouble for it. You can understand that, right? Big trouble."

Reacher smiled. *Bad luck and trouble, been my only friends*.

"Sit down, Hack," he said.

Walker paused a second. Then he threaded his way around all the chairs and sat down next to Rusty Greer. Candlelight lit his face. The lantern glowed to his left.

"You got something for me?" he asked.

Reacher sat opposite. Laid his hands palm-down on the wood.

"I was a cop of sorts for thirteen years," he said.

"So?"

"I learned a lot of stuff."

"Like?"

"Like, lies are messy. They get out of control. But the truth is messy, too. So any situation you're in, you expect rough edges. Anytime I see anything that's all buttoned up, I get real suspicious. And Carmen's situation was messy enough to be real."

"But?"

"I came to see there were a couple of edges that were just *too* rough."

"Like what?"

"Like, she had no money with her. I *know* that. Two million in the bank, and she travels three hundred miles with a single dollar in her purse? Sleeps in the car, doesn't eat? Leapfrogs from one Mobil station to the next, just to keep going? That didn't tie up for me."

"She was playacting. That's who she is."

“You know who Nicolaus Copernicus is?”

“Was,” Walker said. “Some old astronomer. Polish, I think. Proved the earth goes around the sun.”

Reacher nodded. “And much more than that, by implication. He asked us all to consider how likely is it that we’re at the absolute center of things? What are the odds? That what we’re seeing is somehow exceptional? The very best or the very worst? It’s an important philosophical point.”

“So?”

“So if Carmen had two million bucks in the bank but traveled with a single dollar just in case she bumped into a guy as suspicious as me, then she is undoubtedly the number-one best-prepared con artist in the history of the world. And old Copernicus asks me, how likely *is* that? That I should by chance happen to bump into the best con artist in the history of the world? His answer is, not very likely, really. He says the likelihood is, if I bump into a con artist at all, it’ll be a very average and mediocre one.”

“So what are you saying?”

“I’m saying it didn’t tie up for me. So it got me thinking about the money. And then something else didn’t tie up.”

“What?”

“Al Eugene’s people messengered Sloop’s financial stuff over, right?”

“This morning. Feels like a long time ago.”

“Thing is, I saw Al’s office. When I went to the museum. It’s literally within sight of the courthouse. It’s a one-minute walk. So how likely is it they would *messenger* something over? Wouldn’t they just *walk* it over? For a friend of Al’s? Especially if it was urgent? It would take them ten times as long just to dial the phone for the courier service.”

The candlelight danced and flickered. The red room glowed.

“People messenger things all the time,” Walker said. “It’s routine. And it was too hot for walking.”

too hot for walking.

Reacher nodded. “Maybe. It didn’t mean much at the time. But then something *else* didn’t tie up. The collarbone.”

“What about it?”

Reacher turned to face Alice. “When you fell off your inline skates, did you break your collarbone?”

“No,” Alice said.

“Any injuries at all?”

“I tore up my hand. A lot of road rash.”

“You put your hand out to break your fall?”

“Reflex,” she said. “It’s impossible not to.”

Reacher nodded. Turned back through the candlelit gloom to Walker.

“I rode with Carmen on Saturday,” he said. “My first time ever. My ass got sore, but the thing I really remember is how *high* I was. It’s scary up there. So the thing is, if Carmen fell off, from that height, onto rocky dirt, hard enough to bust her collarbone, how is it that she didn’t get road rash, too? On her hand?”

“Maybe she did.”

“The hospital didn’t write it up.”

“Maybe they forgot.”

“It was a very detailed report. New staff, working hard. I noticed that, and Cowan Black did, too. He said they were very thorough. They wouldn’t have neglected lacerations to the palm.”

“She must have worn riding gloves.”

Reacher shook his head. “She told me nobody wears gloves down here. Too hot. And she definitely wouldn’t have said that if gloves had once saved her from

serious road rash. She'd have been a big fan of gloves, in that case. She'd have certainly made *me* wear them, being new to it."

"So?"

"So I started to wonder if the collarbone thing *could* have been from Sloop hitting her. I figured it was possible. Maybe she's on her knees, a big clubbing fist from above, she moves her head. Only she also claimed he had broken her arm and her jaw and knocked her teeth loose, too, and there was no mention of all that stuff, so I stopped wondering. Especially when I found out the ring was real."

A candle on the left end of the table died. It burned out and smoke rose from it in a thin plume that ran absolutely straight for a second and then spiraled crazily.

"She's a liar," Walker said. "That's all."

"She sure is," Bobby said.

"Sloop never hit her," Rusty said. "A son of mine would never hit a woman, whoever she was."

"One at a time, O.K.?" Reacher said, quietly.

He could feel the impatience in the room. Elbows shifting on the table, feet moving on the floor. He turned to Bobby first.

"You claim she's a liar," he said. "And I know why. It's because you don't like her, because you're a racist piece of shit, and because she had an affair with the schoolteacher. So among other things you took it on yourself to try and turn me off of her. Some kind of loyalty to your brother."

Then he turned to Rusty. "We'll get to what Sloop did and didn't do real soon. But right now, you keep quiet, O.K.? Hack and I have business."

"What business?" Walker said.

"This business," Reacher said, and propped Alice's gun on the tabletop, the butt resting on the wood and the muzzle pointing straight at Walker's chest.

"What the hell are you doing?" Walker said.

Reacher clicked the safety off with his thumb. The *snick* sounded loud in the room. Candles flickered and the lantern hissed softly.

“I figured out the thing with the diamond,” he said. “Then everything else made sense. Especially with you giving us the badges and sending us down here to speak with Rusty.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It was like a conjuring trick. The whole thing. You knew Carmen pretty well. So you knew what she must have told me. Which was the absolute truth, always. The truth about herself, and about what Sloop was doing to her. So you just exactly reversed everything. It was simple. A very neat and convincing trick. Like she told me she was from Napa, and you said, *hey, I bet she told you she’s from Napa, but she isn’t, you know*. Like she told me she’d called the IRS, and you said, *hey, I bet she told you she called the IRS, but she didn’t, really*. It was like *you* knew the real truth and were reluctantly exposing commonplace lies she had told before. But it was *you* who was lying. All along. It was very, very effective. Like a conjuring trick. And you dressed it all up behind pretending you wanted to save her. You fooled me for a long time.”

“I *did* want to save her. I *am* saving her.”

“Bullshit, Hack. Your only aim all along was to coerce a confession out of her for something she didn’t do. It was a straightforward plan. Your hired guns kidnapped Ellie today so you could force Carmen to confess. I was your only problem. I stuck around, I recruited Alice. We were in your face from Monday morning onward. So you misled us for twenty-seven straight hours. You let us down slowly and regretfully, point by point. It was beautifully done. Well, almost. To really make it work, you’d have to be the best con artist in the world. And like old Copernicus says, what are the odds that the best con artist in the world would happen to be up there in Pecos?”

There was silence. Just sputtering wax, the hissing of the lantern, five people breathing. The old air conditioner wasn’t running. No power.

“You’re crazy,” Walker said.

“No, I’m not. You decoyed me by being all regretful about what a liar Carmen

was and how desperate you were to save her. You were even smart enough to reveal a cynical reason for *wanting* to save her. About wanting to be a judge, so I wouldn't think you were too good to be true. That was a great touch, Hack. But all the time you were talking to her on the phone, muffling your voice to get past the desk clerk, telling him you were her lawyer, telling *her* if she ever spoke to a *real* lawyer, you'd hurt Ellie. Which is why she refused to speak with Alice. Then you wrote out a bunch of phony financial statements on your own computer right there at your desk. One printout looks much the same as any other. And you drafted the phony trust deeds. And the phony Family Services papers. You knew what real ones looked like, I guess. Then as soon as you heard your people had picked up the kid you got back on the phone and coached Carmen through the phony confession, feeding back to *her* all the lies you'd told to *me*. Then you sent your assistant downstairs to listen to them."

"This is nonsense."

Reacher shrugged. "So let's prove it. Let's call the FBI and ask them how the hunt for Ellie is going."

"Phones are out," Bobby said. "Electrical storm."

Reacher nodded. "O.K., no problem."

He kept the gun pointed at Walker's chest and turned to face Rusty.

"Tell me what the FBI agents asked you," he said.

Rusty looked blank. "What FBI agents?"

"No FBI agents came here tonight?"

She just shook her head. Reacher nodded.

"*You* were playacting, Hack," he said. "You told us you'd called the FBI and the state police, and there were roadblocks in place, and helicopters up, and more than a hundred fifty people on the ground. But you didn't call anybody. Because if you had, the very *first* thing they would have done is come down here. They'd have talked to Rusty for hours. They'd have brought sketch artists and crime scene technicians. This is the scene of the crime, after all. And Rusty is the only witness."

“You’re wrong, Reacher,” Walker said.

“There *were* FBI people here,” Bobby said. “I saw them in the yard.”

Reacher shook his head.

“There were people wearing FBI hats,” he said. “Two of them. But they aren’t wearing those hats anymore.”

Walker said nothing.

“Big mistake, Hack,” Reacher said. “Giving us those stupid badges and sending us down here. You’re in law enforcement. You knew Rusty was the vital witness. You also knew she wouldn’t cooperate fully with me. So it was an inexplicable decision for a DA to take, to send us down here. I couldn’t believe it. Then I saw why. You wanted us out of the way. And you wanted to know where we were, at all times. So you could send your people after us.”

“What people?”

“The hired guns, Hack. The people in the FBI hats. The people you sent to kill Al Eugene. The people you sent to kill Sloop. They were pretty good. Very professional. But the thing with professionals is, they need to be able to work again in the future. Al Eugene was no problem. Could have been anybody, out there in the middle of nowhere. But Sloop was harder. He was just home from prison, wasn’t going anyplace for a spell. So it had to be done right here, which was risky. They made you agree to cover their asses by framing Carmen. Then you made *them* agree to help you do it by moonlighting as the kidnap team.”

“This is ridiculous,” Walker said.

“You knew Carmen had bought a gun,” Reacher said. “You told me, the paperwork comes through your office. And you knew *why* she bought it. You knew all about Sloop and what he did to her. You knew their bedroom was a torture chamber. So she wants to hide a gun in there, where does she put it? Three choices, really. Top shelf of her closet, in her bedside table, or in her underwear drawer. Common sense. Same for any woman in any bedroom. I know it, and your people knew it. They probably watched through the window until she went to shower, they slipped some gloves on, a minute later they’re in the room, they cover Sloop with their own guns until they find Carmen’s, and

they shoot him with it. They're outside again thirty seconds later. A quick sprint back to where they left their car on the road, and they're gone. This house is a warren. But you know it well. You're a friend of the family. You assured them they could be in and out without being seen. You probably drew them a floor plan."

Walker closed his eyes. Said nothing. He looked old and pale. The candlelight wasn't helping him.

"But you made mistakes, Hack," Reacher said. "People like you always make mistakes. The financial reports were clumsy. Lots of money, but hardly any expenditure? How likely is that? What is she, a miser, too? And the messenger thing was a bad slip. If they *had* been messengered, you'd have left them in the courier packet, like you did with the medical reports, to make them look even more official."

Walker opened his eyes, defiant.

"The medical reports," he repeated. "You saw them. They *prove* she was lying. You heard Cowan Black say it."

Reacher nodded. "Leaving them in the FedEx packet was neat. They looked real urgent, like they were hot off the truck. But you should have torn the label off the front. Because the thing is, FedEx charges by weight. And I weighed the packet on Alice's kitchen scales. One pound, one ounce. But the label said two pounds and nine ounces. So one of two things must have happened. Either FedEx ripped off the hospital by padding the charge, or you took out about sixty percent of the contents and trashed them. And you know what? I vote for you checking the contents before you sent them over to us. You've been a DA for a spell, you've tried a lot of cases, you know what convincing evidence looks like. So anything about the beatings went straight in the trash. All you left were the genuine accidents. But the road rash thing passed you by, so you left the collarbone in by mistake. Or maybe you felt you *had* to leave it in, because you know she's got a healed knot clearly visible and you figured I'd have noticed it."

Walker said nothing. The lantern hissed.

"The broken arm, the jaw, the teeth," Reacher said. "My guess is there are five or six more folders in a Dumpster somewhere. Probably not behind the courthouse. Probably not in your backyard, either. I guess you're smarter than

that. Maybe they're in a trashcan at the bus station. Some big public place."

Walker said nothing. The candle flames danced. Reacher smiled.

"But you were mostly pretty good," he said. "When I figured Carmen wasn't the shooter, you steered it straight back to a conspiracy *involving* Carmen. You didn't miss a beat. Even when I made the link to Eugene, you kept on track. You were very shocked. You went all gray and sweaty. Not because you were upset about Al. But because he'd been found so soon. You hadn't planned on that. But still, you thought for ten seconds and came up with the IRS motive. But you know what? You were so busy thinking, you forgot to be scared enough. About the two-for-three possibility. It was a plausible threat. You should have been much more worried. Anybody else would have been."

Walker said nothing.

"And you got Sloop out on a Sunday," Reacher said. "Not easy to do. But you didn't do it for him. You did it so he could be killed on a Sunday, so Carmen could be framed on a Sunday and spend the maximum time in jail before visitors could get near her the next Saturday. To give yourself five clear days to work on her."

Walker said nothing.

"Lots of mistakes, Hack," Reacher said. "Including sending people after me. Like old Copernicus says, what were the chances they'd be good enough?"

Walker said nothing. Bobby was leaning forward, staring sideways across his mother, looking straight at him. Catching on, slowly.

"*You* sent people to kill my brother?" he breathed.

"No," Walker said. "Reacher's wrong."

Bobby stared at him like he'd answered *yes* instead.

"But why *would* you?" he asked. "You were friends."

Then Walker looked up, straight at Reacher.

“Yes, why *would* I?” he said. “What possible motive could I have?”

“Something Benjamin Franklin once wrote,” Reacher said.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“You wanted to be a judge. Not because you wanted to do good. That was all sanctimonious bullshit. It was because you wanted the trappings. You were born a poor boy and you were greedy for money and power. And it was right there in front of you. But first you had to get elected. And what sort of a thing stops a person getting elected?”

Walker just shrugged.

“Old scandals,” Reacher said. “Among other things. Old secrets, coming back at you from the past. Sloop and Al and you were a threesome, way back when. Did all kinds of stuff together. You three against the world. You told me that. So there’s Sloop, in prison for cheating on his taxes. He can’t stand it in there. So he thinks, *how do I get out of here*? Not by repaying my debts. By figuring, my old pal Hack is running for judge this year. Big prize, all that money and power. What’s he prepared to do to get it? So he calls you up and says he could start some serious rumors about some old activities if you don’t broker his way out of there. You think it over carefully. You figure Sloop wouldn’t incriminate *himself* by talking about something you all did together, so at first you relax. Then you realize there’s a large gap between the sort of *facts* that would convict you and the sort of *rumors* that would wreck your chances in the election. So you cave in. You take some of your campaign donations and arrange to pay off the IRS with it. Now Sloop’s happy. But you’re not. In your mind, the cat is out of the bag. Sloop’s threatened you once. What about the next time he wants something? And Al’s involved, because he’s Sloop’s lawyer. So now it’s all fresh in Al’s mind too. Your chances of making judge are suddenly vulnerable.”

Walker said nothing.

“You know what Ben Franklin once wrote?” Reacher asked.

“What?”

“ ‘Three can keep a secret, if two of them are dead.’ ”

Silence in the room. No movement, no breathing. Just the soft hiss of the lantern

Silence in the room. No movement, no breathing. Just the soft hiss of the lantern and the flickering of the tiny candle flames.

“What was the secret?” Alice whispered.

“Three boys in rural Texas,” Reacher said. “Growing up together, playing ball, having fun. They get a little older, they turn their attention to what their dads are doing. The guns, the rifles, the hunting. Maybe they start with the armadillos. They shouldn’t, really, because they’re protected. By the tree-huggers. But the attitude is, they’re on my land, they’re mine to hunt. Bobby said that to me. An arrogant attitude. A *superior* attitude. I mean, hey, what’s an armadillo worth? But armadillos are slow and boring prey. Too easy. The three boys are growing up. They’re three young men now. High school seniors. They want a little more excitement. So they go looking for coyotes, maybe. Worthier opponents. They hunt at night. They use a truck. They range far and wide. And soon they find bigger game. Soon they find a *real* thrill.”

“What?”

“Mexicans,” Reacher said. “Poor anonymous no-account brown families stumbling north through the desert at night. And I mean, hey, what are *they* worth? Are they even human? But they make great prey. They run, and they squeal. Almost like hunting actual people, right, Hack?”

Silence in the room.

“Maybe they started with a girl,” Reacher said. “Maybe they didn’t mean to kill her. But they did anyway. Maybe they *had* to. Couple of days, they’re nervous. They hold their breath. But there’s no comeback. Nobody reacts. Nobody even cares. So hey, this is suddenly *fun*. Then they’re out often. It becomes a sport. The ultimate kill. Better than armadillos. They take that old pick-up, one of them driving, two of them riding in the load bed, they hunt for hours. Bobby said Sloop invented that technique. Said he was real good at it. I expect he was. I expect they all were. They got plenty of practice. They did it twenty-five times in a year.”

“That was the border patrol,” Bobby said.

“No, it wasn’t. The report wasn’t a whitewash. It didn’t read like one, and the inside word is it was kosher. Sergeant Rodríguez told me that. And people like

Sergeant Rodríguez *know* things like that, believe me. The investigation got nowhere because it was looking in the wrong place. It wasn't a bunch of rogue officers. It was three local boys called Sloop Greer and Al Eugene and Hack Walker. Having fun in that old pick-up truck that's still parked in your barn. Boys will be boys, right?"

Silence in the room.

"The attacks were mostly in Echo County," Reacher said. "That struck me as odd. Why would the border patrol come so far north? Truth is, they didn't. Three Echo boys went a little ways south instead."

Silence.

"The attacks stopped in late August," Reacher said. "Why was that? Not because the investigation scared them off. They didn't *know* about the investigation. It was because college opens early September. They went off to be freshmen. The next summer it was too dangerous or they'd grown out of it, and they didn't ever do it again. The whole thing faded into history, until twelve years later Sloop was sitting in a cell somewhere and dragged it all up because he was so desperate to get out."

Everybody was staring straight at Walker. His eyes were closed tight and he was deathly pale.

"It seemed so unfair, right?" Reacher said to him. "All that was way in the past. Maybe you weren't even a willing participant in the first place. Maybe the others dragged you into it. And now it was all coming back at you. It was a nightmare. It was going to ruin your life. It was going to take away the big prize. So you made some calls. Made some decisions. Three can keep a secret, if two of them are dead."

Another candle died. The wick hissed and smoke plumed.

"No," Walker said. "It wasn't like that."

The lantern flickered behind him. Shadows danced on the ceiling.

"So what was it like?" Reacher asked.

“I was just going to take Ellie. Just temporarily. I hired some local people to do it. I had plenty of campaign money. They watched her for a week. I went up to the jail and told Sloop, don’t mess with me. But he didn’t care. He said, go ahead and take Ellie. He didn’t want her. He was all conflicted. He married Carmen to punish himself for what we did, I think. That’s why he hit her all the time. She was a permanent reminder. He thought she could read it in him. See it in his eyes. Like voodoo. Ellie, too. He thought *she* could see it in him. So taking her wasn’t a threat to Sloop.”

“So then you hired some more people.”

Walker nodded. “They took over and got rid of the watchers for me.”

“And then they got rid of Al and Sloop.”

“It was a long time ago, Reacher. He shouldn’t have brought it up. We were kids at the time. We all agreed we would never even mention it again. We promised each other. Never, *ever*. It was the unmentionable thing. Like it had never happened. Like it was just a bad dream, a year long.”

There was silence.

“You were driving the truck tonight,” Reacher said.

Walker nodded again, slowly. “You two, then it would have been over. I knew you knew, you see. I mean, why else would you steal the files and lead us out into the desert? So I drove the truck. Why not? I’d driven out there at night before, many times.”

Then he went quiet. Swallowed hard, twice. Closed his eyes.

“But I got scared,” he said. “I got sick. I couldn’t go through with it. Not again. I’m not that person anymore. I changed.”

Silence in the room.

“Where’s Ellie?” Reacher asked.

Walker shrugged and shook his head. Reacher fished in his pocket and came out with the chromium star.

“Is this thing legal?” he asked.

Walker opened his eyes. Nodded.

“Technically, I guess,” he said.

“So I’m going to arrest you.”

Walker shook his head, vaguely.

“No,” he said. “Please.”

“Are you armed?” Reacher asked him.

Walker nodded. “Pistol, in my pocket.”

“Get it for me, Mrs. Greer,” Reacher said.

Rusty turned in her chair and went for Walker’s pocket. He offered no resistance. Even leaned sideways to make it easier for her. She came out with a small blued-steel revolver. A Colt Detective Special, .38 caliber, six shots, two-inch barrel. A small weapon. Rusty cradled it in her palm, and it looked right at home in a woman’s hand.

“Where’s Ellie, Hack?” Reacher asked again.

“I don’t know,” Walker said. “I really don’t. They use motels. I don’t know which one. They wouldn’t tell me. They said it’s safer that way.”

“How do you contact them?”

“A Dallas number. It must be rerouted.”

“Phones are out,” Bobby said.

“Where is she, Hack?” Reacher asked again.

“I don’t know. I’d tell you if I did.”

Reacher raised Alice’s gun. Held it straight out across the table. His arms were long, and the muzzle came to rest two feet from Walker’s face.

“Watch the trigger finger, Hack,” he said.

He tightened his finger until the skin shone white in the candlelight. The trigger moved backward, a sixteenth of an inch, then an eighth.

“You want to die, Hack?”

Walker nodded.

“Yes, please,” he whispered.

“Tell me first,” Reacher said. “Make it right. Where is she?”

“I don’t *know*,” Walker said.

He stared at the muzzle. It was so close, his eyes were crossing. The candle flames were reflected in the polished nickel. Reacher sighed and slackened his finger and lowered the gun all the way back to the tabletop. It hit the wood with a quiet sound. Nobody spoke. And nobody moved, until Rusty’s hand came up with the tiny revolver in it. She raised it in a wavering circle and it finished up pointing at nobody in particular.

“Sloop wouldn’t hit a woman,” she whispered. “Those were all riding accidents.”

Reacher shook his head. “He beat Carmen for five years, Rusty, almost every day they were married, until he went to jail. Broke her bones and split her lips and bruised her flesh. And that was after raping and torturing and murdering twenty-five human beings, at night, in the desert, twelve years ago.”

She trembled wildly.

“No,” she said. “That isn’t true.”

The gun wavered unsteadily.

“Point that thing at me and I’ll shoot you,” Reacher said. “Believe me, it would be an absolute pleasure.”

She stared at him for a second and then crooked her arm and touched the gun to the side of her own head, just above her ear. The metal penetrated her lacquered

hair like a stick thrust through a bird's nest. She kept it there for a long moment and then pulled it away and turned and twisted in her chair and moved it again and brought it level with Hack Walker's forehead, with the muzzle no more than two inches from his skin.

"You killed my boy," she whispered.

Walker made no attempt to move. He just nodded, very slightly.

"I'm sorry," he whispered back.

No revolver has a safety mechanism. And a Colt Detective Special is a double-action pistol. Which means the first half of the trigger's travel clicks the hammer back and revolves the cylinder under it, and then, if you keep on pulling, the hammer drops and the gun fires.

"No, Rusty," Reacher said.

"Mom," Bobby called.

The hammer clicked back.

"*No*," Alice shouted.

The hammer tripped. The gun fired. There was colossal noise and flame, and the crown of Walker's head blasted backward into the candlelit gloom. It just came off like a lid and splintered into mist. *Colt Super Autos with hollow points*, Reacher's subconscious mind told him. The flame died abruptly and he saw a blackened hole between Walker's eyes and his hair on fire from the muzzle flash. Then Rusty fired again. The second bullet followed the first straight through Walker's head and he went down and Rusty kept the gun rock-steady in the air above him and fired into space, three, four, five, six. The third shot splintered the wall, and the fourth hit the Coleman lantern and shattered its glass, and the fifth hit its kerosene reservoir and exploded it over a ten-foot square of wall. It blew sideways and ignited with a bright flash and the sixth shot hit the exact center of the flames. She kept on pumping the trigger even after the gun was empty. Reacher watched her finger flexing and the hammer clicking and the cylinder stepping around obediently. Then he turned and watched the wall.

The kerosene was thicker than water and had more surface tension. It flung out and dripped and ran and burned fiercely. It set the wall on fire

outward and dripped and ran and burned fiercely. It set the wall on fire immediately. The dry old wood burned with no hesitation at all. Blue flames crept upward and sideways and the faded red paint bubbled and peeled ahead of them. Tongues of flame found the vertical seams between the boards and raced up them like they were hungry. They reached the ceiling and paused momentarily and then curved horizontally and spread outward. The air in the room stirred to feed them. The candles guttered in the sudden draft. Within five seconds the wall was burning along its full height. Then the fire started creeping sideways. The flames were blue and smooth and curled and liquid, like they were sculpted out of something wet and soft. They glowed with mysterious inner light. Flakes of burning paint were drifting on hot currents and landing randomly. The fire was creeping clockwise, very fast, coming around behind everybody in the room.

“Out,” Reacher shouted.

Alice was already on her feet and Bobby was staring at the fire. Rusty was sitting absolutely motionless, still patiently working the trigger. The clicking of the firing mechanism was lost behind the crackle of the flames.

“Get her out,” Reacher shouted.

“We’ve got no water,” Bobby shouted back. “The well pump won’t work without electricity.”

“Just get your mother out,” Reacher shouted.

Bobby stood completely still. The flames had found the floorboards. The paint bubbled and peeled outward in a wide arc and the fire started a patient journey in pursuit. Reacher kicked chairs out of the way and lifted the table and overturned it on top of the flames. They died under it and then detoured neatly around it. The ceiling was well alight. Walker’s body was sprawled on the floor near the window. His hair was still on fire from the muzzle flash. It smoked and smoldered with flames of a different color. The fire had found the door frame. Reacher stepped across and pulled Rusty out of her chair. Spun her around and straight-armed her through the smoke and out of the room ahead of him. Alice was already in the foyer. She had the front door open. Reacher could feel damp air sucking in to feed the fire. It was keeping low, down by his feet. It was already a strong breeze.

Alice ran down the steps to the yard and Reacher pushed Rusty after her. She

Alice ran down the steps to the yard and Reacher pushed Rusty after her. She clattered down and staggered out onto the wet dirt and got steady on her feet and just stood there, still holding the empty gun straight out from her shoulder, still clicking the useless trigger. Walker's Lincoln was parked next to the Jeep, wet and dirty and travel-stained. Reacher ducked back inside the foyer. It was filling with smoke. It was pooling near the ceiling and crowding downward in layers. The air was hot and paint was scorching everywhere. Bobby was coughing hard near the parlor door. The parlor was already a mass of flame. An inferno. The fire was curling out of the door. The door itself was on fire. The red-framed mirror cracked in the heat and Reacher turned and saw two of himself staring back. He took a deep spluttering breath and ran toward the flames and grabbed Bobby by the wrist. Twisted his arm and grabbed the back of his belt like he was arresting him and ran him out into the darkness. Hustled him down the steps and shoved him toward the center of the yard.

"It's burning down," Bobby screamed. "All of it."

The windows were alive with yellow light. Flames were dancing behind them. Smoke was drifting through the screens and there were loud random cracking sounds from inside as timbers yielded and moved. The soaked roof was already steaming gently.

"It's burning down," Bobby screamed again. "What are we going to do?"

"Go live in the barn," Reacher said. "That's where people like you belong."

Then he grabbed Alice's hand and ran straight for the Jeep.

17

When the storm moved north the driver knew his partners weren't coming back. It was a sensation so strong it took on the weight of absolute fact. It was like the rain had left a void behind that would never be filled. He turned in his chair and stared at the motel room door. Sat like that for minutes. Then he stood up and walked over and opened it. Looked out into the parking lot, focusing left, focusing right. The blacktop was streaming with water. The air smelled sharp and clean.

He stepped outside and walked ten paces in the dark. There was a running gutter somewhere and the gurgle of street drains and loud dripping from the trees. But nothing else. Nothing else at all. Nobody was coming. Nobody was ever going to come again. He knew it. He turned around. Wet grit slid under his shoes. He walked back. Stepped inside the room and closed the door gently behind him. Looked over at the bed. Looked at the sleeping child in it.

"You drive," he called. "North, O.K.?"

He pushed her toward the driver's door and ran around the hood. She pulled her seat forward and he racked his backward. Unfolded the maps on his knees. To his left the Red House was burning fiercely. All the windows were bright with flame. Both floors now. The maid ran out of the kitchen door, wrapped in a bathrobe. The light of the fire caught her face. There was no expression on it.

"O.K., let's go," he said.

She slammed the selector into Drive and gunned the motor. The transfer case was still locked in four-wheel drive and all four tires spun and scattered wet stones and the car took off. She slewed past Walker's Lincoln. Made the right under the gate without pausing. Accelerated hard. He turned his head and saw the first flames appear at the eaves of the roof. They licked outward and paused and ran horizontally, searching for sustenance. Steam was pouring off the soaked

shingles and mixing with smoke. Rusty and Bobby and the maid were watching it drift, hypnotized. He glanced away and didn't look back again. Just stared ahead and then riffed through the maps on his knees and found the large-scale sheet showing Pecos County in its entirety. Then he reached up and clicked the dome light on.

"Faster," he said. "I've got a real bad feeling about this."

The four hours were long gone, but he waited anyway. He felt a certain reluctance. How could he not? He wasn't a monster. He would do what he had to do, for sure, but he wasn't going to *enjoy* it, exactly.

He walked over and opened the door again and hung the *Do Not Disturb* tag on the outside handle. Closed the door and locked it from the inside. He appreciated the locks motels put on their doors. A big lever to turn on the inside, a satisfying heavy *click*, smooth and oily, no corresponding catch on the outside. It helped. Absolute undisturbed security was a useful thing. He slipped the chain on and started into the room.

Alice drove as fast as she dared. The Jeep wasn't a great road vehicle. It rolled too much and rocked violently from side to side. The steering was vague. It required constant correction. It was a problem. But Reacher ignored it and just held the map high, where it caught the light from the roof console. He stared hard at it and checked the scale and held his finger and thumb apart like a little compass and traced a circle.

"You done any tourist stuff around here?" he asked.

She nodded at the wheel. "Some, I guess. I went to the McDonald Observatory. It was great."

He checked the map. The McDonald Observatory was southwest of Pecos, high up in the Davis Mountains.

up in the Davis Mountains.

“That’s eighty miles,” he said. “Too far.”

“For what?”

“For them to have been today. I think they’ll have been a half hour from Pecos by road, max. Twenty-five miles, thirty tops.”

“Why?”

“To be close to Walker. He might have planned on smuggling Carmen out, if necessary. Or maybe bringing Ellie in to see her. Whatever it took to convince her that the threat was real. So I think they’ll have holed up somewhere nearby.”

“And near a tourist attraction?”

“Definitely,” he said. “That’s key.”

“Can this work?” she asked. “Finding the right place in your head?”

“It’s worked for me before.”

“How many times? As a percentage?”

He ignored the question. Went back to the map. She gripped the wheel and drove. Dropped her eyes to the speedometer.

“Oh *God*,” she whispered.

He didn’t look up. “What?”

“We’re out of gas. It’s right on empty. The warning light is on.”

He was quiet for a second.

“Keep going,” he said. “We’ll be O.K.”

She kept her foot hard down.

“How? You think the gauge is broken?”

He looked up. Glanced ahead.

“Just keep going,” he said.

“We’re going to run out,” she said.

“Don’t worry,” he said.

She drove on. The car rocked hard. The headlights bounced ahead of them. The tires whined on the streaming blacktop. She glanced down again.

“It’s right on *empty*, Reacher,” she said. “*Below* empty.”

“Don’t worry,” he said again.

“Why not?”

“You’ll see.”

He kept his eyes on the windshield. She drove on, as fast as the Jeep would go. The engine was growling loud. A gruff old straight-six, drinking gasoline at the rate of a pint every minute.

“Use two-wheel drive,” he said. “More economical.”

She wrestled with the drivetrain lever and wrenched it forward. The front end of the car went quiet. The steering stopped fighting her. She drove on. Another half mile. Then a mile. She glanced down at the dash again.

“We’re running on fumes,” she said.

“Don’t worry,” he said for the third time.

Another mile. The engine stumbled and coughed once and ran ragged for a second and then picked up again. Air in the fuel line, he thought, or sludge dredged up from the bottom of the tank.

“Reacher, we’re *out of gas*,” Alice said.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Why not?”

"Why not?"

Another mile.

"That's why not," he said suddenly.

The right edge of the headlight beam washed over the ragged gravel shoulder and lit up a steel-blue Ford Crown Victoria. It had four VHF antennas on the back and no wheel covers. It was just sitting there, inert and abandoned, facing north.

"We'll use that," he said. "It'll have most of a tank. They were well organized."

She braked hard and pulled in behind it. "This is theirs? Why is it here?"

"Walker left it here."

"How did you know?"

"It's pretty obvious. They came down from Pecos in two cars, this and the Lincoln. They dumped the Lincoln here and used the Ford the rest of the way. Then Walker ran away from the mesa, put the pick-up back in the barn, drove the Ford back up here, retrieved his Lincoln and came back down in it for our benefit. To make us think it was his first visit, if we happened to be still alive and looking."

"What about the keys?"

"They'll be in it. Walker wasn't in the right frame of mind to worry about Hertz losing a rental car."

Alice jumped out and checked. Gave a thumbs-up. The keys were in it. Reacher followed her with the maps. They left the Greers' Jeep with the doors standing open and the motor idling through the last of its gas. They got into the Crown Vic and he racked his seat back and she pulled hers forward. She fired it up and they were on the road again within thirty seconds, already doing sixty miles an hour.

"It's three-quarters full," she said. "And it drives much better."

He nodded. It felt low and fast and smooth. Exactly like a big sedan should.

“I’m sitting where Al Eugene sat,” he said.

She glanced at him. He smiled.

“Go faster,” he said. “Nobody will stop you. We look just like a squad car.”

She accelerated to seventy-five, then eighty. He found the dome light and clicked it on and returned to the maps.

“O.K., where were we?” he said.

“The McDonald Observatory,” she said. “You didn’t like it.”

He nodded. “It was too far out.”

He tilted the map to catch the light. Stared hard at it. *Concentrate, Reacher. Make it work. If you can.*

“What’s at Balmorhea State Recreation Area?” he asked.

It was still southwest of Pecos, but only thirty miles out.

The right sort of distance.

“It’s a desert oasis,” she said. “Like a huge lake, very clear. You can swim and scuba dive there.”

But not the right sort of place.

“I don’t think so,” he said.

He checked northeast, up to thirty miles out.

“What about Monahans Sandhills?”

“Four thousand acres of sand dunes. Looks like the Sahara.”

“That’s it? And people go there?”

“It’s very impressive.”

He went quiet and checked the map all over again.

He went quiet and checked the map all over again.

“What about Fort Stockton?” he asked.

“It’s just a town,” she said. “No different than Pecos, really.”

Then she glanced across at him. “But *Old* Fort Stockton is worth seeing, I guess.”

He looked at the map. Old Fort Stockton was marked as a historic ruin, north of the town itself. Nearer Pecos. He measured the distance. Maybe forty-five miles.

Possible.

“What is it exactly?” he asked.

“Heritage site,” she said. “An old military fort. The Buffalo Soldiers were there. Confederates had torn the place down. The Buffaloes rebuilt it. Eighteen sixty-seven, I think.”

He checked again. The ruins were southeast of Pecos, accessible from Route 285, which looked like a decent road. Probably a fast road. Probably a *typical* road. He closed his eyes. Alice raced on. The Crown Vic was very quiet. It was warm and comfortable. He wanted to go to sleep. He was very tired. Wet spray from the tires hissed against the underside.

“I like the Old Fort Stockton area,” he said.

“You think they were there?”

He was quiet again, another whole mile.

“Not *there*,” he said. “But nearby. Think about it, from their point of view.”

“I can’t,” she said. “I’m not like them.”

“So pretend,” he said. “What were they?”

“I don’t know.”

“They were professionals. Quiet and unobtrusive. Like chameleons. Instinctively good at camouflage. Good at not being noticed. Put yourself in their shoes,

Alice."

"I can't," she said again.

"Think like them. Imagine. Get into it. Who are they? I saw them and thought they were a sales team. Rusty Greer thought they were social workers. Apparently Al Eugene thought they were FBI agents. So think like them. *Be* them. Your strength is you look very normal and very ordinary. You're white, and you look very middle-class, and you've got this Crown Victoria, which when it's not all tricked up with radio antennas looks like an ordinary family sedan. The FBI con helped, but basically you looked harmless enough that Al Eugene felt *safe* to stop for you, but also somehow commanding enough that he also *had* to. *Wanted* to. So you're ordinary, but you're respectable and plausible. And businesslike."

"O.K."

"But now you've got a kid with you. So what are you now?"

"What?"

"Now you're a normal, ordinary, respectable, plausible middle-class family."

"But there were three of them."

He was quiet a beat. Kept his eyes closed.

"One of the men was an uncle," he said. "You're a middle-class family, on vacation together in your sedan. But you're not a loud Disneyland type of family. You're not in shorts and brightly colored T-shirts. You look quiet, maybe a little earnest. Maybe a little nerdy. Or maybe a little *studious*. Maybe you look like a school principal's family. Or an accountant's. You're obviously from out of state, so you're traveling. Where to? Ask yourself the same question they must have asked themselves. Where will you blend in? Where's the safest place around here? Where would an earnest, studious, middle-class family go, with their six-and-a-half-year-old daughter? Where's a proper, enlightening, *educational* kind of a place to take her? Even though she's way too young and doesn't care? Even though people laugh behind your back at how politically correct and cloyingly *diligent* you are?"

"Old Fort Stockton," Alice said.

"Exactly. You show the kid the glorious history of the African-American soldiers, even though you'd have a heart attack if she grew up and wanted to date one. But you're driving a Ford, not a BMW or a Cadillac. You're *sensible*. Which means not rich, basically. Careful about your expenditure. You resent overpaying for something. Motels, just as much as cars. So you drive in from the north and you stay at a place far enough out to be reasonable. Not the dumps in the middle of nowhere. But on the first distant fringes of the Fort Stockton tourist area. Where the value is good."

He opened his eyes.

"That's where you would stay, Alice," he said.

"It is?"

He nodded. "A place where they get plenty of earnest, striving, not-rich middle-class families on vacation. The sort of place that gets recommended in boring AAA magazines. A place where you fit right in. A place with lots of people exactly like you. A place where you won't stand out in anybody's memory for a second. And a place where you're only thirty, thirty-five minutes from Pecos by a fast road."

Alice shrugged and nodded all at the same time.

"Good theory, I guess," she said. "Good logic. Question is, were they following the same logic?"

"I hope so," Reacher said. "Because we don't have time for a big search. I don't think we have much time for anything. I'm getting a bad feeling. I think she's in real danger now."

Alice said nothing.

"Maybe the others were supposed to call in regularly," he said. "Maybe this third guy is about to panic."

"So it's a hell of a gamble."

He said nothing.

“Do the math,” she said. “A forty-five-mile radius gives you a circle over six thousand square miles in area. And you want to pick one tiny pinpoint out of it?”

He was quiet again, another mile.

Roll the dice, Reacher.

“I think they were pretty smart and careful,” he said. “And their priorities were pretty obvious. They were looking at the same maps we are. So I think that’s how they’d have done it.”

“But are you *sure*?”

He shrugged.

“Can’t ever be *sure*,” he said. “But that’s how *I’d* have done it. That’s the trick, Alice. Think like them. Never fails.”

“Never?”

He shrugged. “Sometimes.”

The sleeping crossroads hamlet was dead ahead. The school, the gas station, the diner. Pecos straight on, Old Fort Stockton to the right.

“Well?” she asked.

He said nothing.

“Well?” she asked again.

He stared through the windshield.

“Decision?” she said.

He said nothing. She braked hard and skidded a yard on the soaked road and came to a complete halt right on the melted stop line.

“Well?”

Roll the damn dice, Reacher.

“Make the turn,” he said.

The driver decided to take a shower first. An excusable delay. He had time. The room was locked. The child was fast asleep. He stripped off his clothes and folded them neatly and placed them on his chair. Stepped into the bathroom. Pulled the shower curtain and set the water running.

Then he unwrapped a new bar of soap. He liked motel soaps. He liked the crisp paper packets, and the smell when you opened them. It bloomed out at you, clean and strong. He sniffed the shampoo. It was in a tiny plastic bottle. It smelled of strawberries. He read the label. *Conditioning Shampoo*, it said. He leaned in and placed the soap in the porcelain receptacle and balanced the shampoo on the rim of the tub. Pushed the curtain aside with his forearm and stepped into the torrent.

The road northeast out of Echo was narrow and winding and clung to a hilly ridge that followed the course of the Coyanosa Draw. Now the big Ford was no longer ideal. It felt oversized and soft and ungainly. The blacktop was running with water flowing right to left across its surface. Heavy rills were pushing mud and grit over it in fan-shaped patterns. Alice was struggling to maintain forty miles an hour. She wasn’t talking. Just hauling the wallowing sedan around an endless series of bends and looking pale under her tan. Like she was cold.

“You O.K.?” he asked.

“Are you?” she asked back.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You just killed two people. Then saw a third die and a house burn down.”

He glanced away. *Civilians*.

“Water under the bridge,” he said. “No use dwelling on it now.”

“That’s a hell of an answer.”

“Why?”

“Doesn’t stuff like that affect you at all?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t get to ask them any questions.”

“Is that all you’re sorry for?”

He was quiet for a second.

“Tell me about that house you’re renting,” he said.

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“My guess is it’s a short-term kind of a place, people in and out all the time, not very well maintained. My guess is it was kind of dirty when you moved in.”

“So?”

“Am I right?”

She nodded at the wheel. “I spent the first week cleaning.”

“Grease on the stove, sticky floors?”

“Yes.”

“Bugs in the closets?”

She nodded again.

“Roaches in the kitchen?”

“A colony,” she said. “Big ones.”

“And you got rid of them?”

"And you got rid of them."

"Of course I did."

"How?"

"Poison."

"So tell me how you felt about *that*."

She glanced sideways. "You comparing those people to cockroaches?"

He shook his head. "Not really. I like cockroaches better. They're just little packets of DNA scuttling around, doing what they have to do. Walker and his buddies didn't *have* to do what they did. They had a choice. They could have been upstanding human beings. But they chose not to be. Then they chose to mess with me, which was the final straw, and they got what they got. So I'm not going to lose any sleep over it. I'm not even going to give it another thought. And if you do, I think you're wrong."

She was quiet for another twisting mile.

"You're a hard man, Reacher," she said.

He was quiet in turn.

"I think I'm a realistic man," he said. "And a decent enough guy, all told."

"You may find normal people don't agree."

He nodded.

"A lot of you don't," he said.

He stood in the warm water long enough to soak all over, and then he started on his hair. He lathered the shampoo into a rich halo and worked on his scalp with his fingertips. Then he rinsed his hands and soaped his face, his neck, behind his ears. He closed his eyes and let the water sluice down over his body. Used more

shampoo on his chest where the hair was thick. Attended to his underarms and his back and his legs.

Then he washed his hands and his forearms very thoroughly and carefully, like he was a surgeon preparing for a procedure.

“How far now?” Alice asked.

Reacher calculated from the map.

“Twenty-five miles,” he said. “We cross I-10 and head north on 285 toward Pecos.”

“But the ruins are on the other road. The one up to Monahans.”

“Trust me, Alice. They stayed on 285. They wanted access.”

She said nothing.

“We need a plan,” Reacher said.

“For taking this guy?” she said. “I wouldn’t have a clue.”

“No, for later. For getting Carmen back.”

“You’re awfully confident.”

“No point going in expecting to lose.”

She braked hard for a corner and the front end washed wide. Then the road straightened for a hundred yards and she accelerated like she was grateful for it.

“Habeas corpus,” she said. “We’ll go to a federal judge and enter an emergency motion. Tell the whole story.”

“Will that work?”

“It’s exactly what habeas corpus is for. It’s been working for eight hundred

"It's exactly what habeas corpus is for. It's been working for eight hundred years. No reason it won't work this time."

"O.K.," he said.

"One thing, though."

"What?"

"We'll need testimony. So you'll have to keep this one alive. If that's not too much to ask."

He finished washing and just stood there in the warm stream of water. He let it flow over his body. He had a new thought in his head. He would need money. The others weren't coming back. The killing crew was history. He knew that. He was unemployed again. And he was unhappy about that. He wasn't a leader. He wasn't good at going out and creating things for himself. Teamwork had suited him just fine. Now he was back on his own. He had some money stashed under his mattress at home, but it wasn't a whole lot. He'd need more, and he'd need it pretty damn soon.

He turned around in the stall and tilted his head back and let the water wash his hair flat against his scalp. So maybe he should take the kid with him back to L.A. Sell her there. He knew people. People who facilitated adoptions, or facilitated other stuff he wouldn't want to inquire too closely about. She was what? Six and a half? And white? Worth a lot of money to somebody, especially with all that fair hair. Blue eyes would have added an extra couple of grand, but whatever, she was a cute little package as she was. She might fetch a decent price, from people he knew.

But how to get her there? The Crown Vic was gone, but he could rent another car. Not like he hadn't done that plenty of times before. He could call Pecos or Fort Stockton and get one brought down, first thing in the morning. He had no end of phony paperwork. But that would mean some delivery driver would see his face. *And the kid's*. No, he could hide her in the woman's empty room and bring the rental guy into his. But it was still a risk.

Or, he could steal a car. Not like he hadn't done *that* before, either, long ago, in his youth. He could steal one right out of the motel parking lot. He eased the shower curtain aside and leaned out for a second and checked his watch, which was resting on the vanity. *Four-thirty in the morning*. They could be on the road by five. Two hours minimum before some citizen came out of his room and found his car gone. They would be a hundred miles away by then. And he had spare plates. The California issue from the original LAX rental, and the Texas issue that had come off the Crown Vic.

He got back under the shower and straightened the curtain again. His decision was made. If there was a white sedan out there, he would take it. Sedans were the most common shape in the Southwest, and white was the most common color, because of the sun. And he could keep the kid in the trunk. No problem. A Corolla would be best, maybe a couple of years old. Very generic. Easily confused with a Geo Prizm or a dozen other cheap imports. Even traffic cops had a hard time recognizing Corollas. He could drive it all the way home. He could sell it too, as well as the kid, make a little *more* money. He nodded to himself. Smiled and raised his arms to rinse again.

Ten miles south and west of Fort Stockton itself, the road curved to the right and switchbacked over the top of the ridge, then fell away down the far slope and ran parallel to the Big Canyon Draw for a spell. Then it leveled out and speared straight for the I-10 interchange which was represented on the map like a spider, with eight roads all coming together in one place. The northwest leg was Route 285 to Pecos, which showed up on paper as a ninety-degree left turn. Then there were maybe twenty miles of it between the Fort Stockton city limit and a highway bridge that recrossed the Coyanosa Draw.

"That's the target area," Reacher said. "Somewhere in those twenty miles. We'll drive north to the bridge and turn around and come back south. See it like they saw it."

Alice nodded silently and accelerated down the slope. The tires pattered on the rough surface and the big soft car pitched and rolled.

She woke up because of the noise of the shower. It drummed against the tiles on the other side of the wall and sounded a little like rain coming down on the roof again. She pulled the sheet over her head and then pulled it back down. Watched the window. There was no lightning anymore. She listened hard. She couldn't hear any more thunder. Then she recognized the sound for what it was. The shower was running. In the bathroom. It was louder than hers at home, but quieter than her mom's.

The man was in the shower.

She pushed the sheet down to her waist. Struggled upright and sat there. There were no lights on in the room, but the drapes weren't drawn and a yellow glow was coming in from outside. It was wet out there. She could see raindrops on the window and reflections.

The room was empty.

Of course it is, silly, she said to herself. *The man is in the shower*.

She pushed the sheet down to her ankles. Her clothes were folded on the table by the window. She crept out of the bed and tiptoed over and stretched out her hand and took her underpants from the pile. Stepped into them. Pulled her T-shirt over her head. Threaded her arms through the sleeves. Then she took her shorts and checked they were the right way around and put them on. Pulled the waistband up over her shirt and sat down cross-legged on the floor to buckle her shoes.

The shower was still running.

She stood up and crept past the bathroom door, very quietly, because she was worried about her shoes making noise. She kept on the rug where she could. Stayed away from the linoleum. She stood still and listened.

The shower was still running.

She crept down the little hallway, past the closet, all the way to the door. It was dark back there. She stood still and looked at the door. She could see a handle, and a lever thing, and a chain thing. She thought hard. The handle was a handle, and the lever was probably a lock. She didn't know what the chain thing was for. There was a narrow slot with a rider hole at one end. She imagined the door

There was a narrow slot with a wider hole at one end. She imagined the door opening. It would get a little ways and then the chain would stop it.

The shower was still running.

She had to get the chain thing off. It might slide along. Maybe that was what the narrow slot was for. She studied it. It was very high. She stretched up and couldn't really reach it. She stretched up taller and got the flat of her fingertips on it. She could slide it that way. She slid it all the way sideways until the end fell into the hole. But she couldn't pull it out.

The shower was still running.

She put her other hand flat on the door and flipped her toes over until she was right up on the points of her shoes. Stretched until her back started to hurt and picked at the chain with her fingertips. It wouldn't come out. It was hooked in. She came down off her toes and listened.

The shower was still running.

She went back on her toes and kicked and pushed against them until her legs hurt and reached up with both hands. The end of the chain was a little circle. She waggled it. It moved up a little. She let it down again. Pushed it up and picked at it at the same time and it came out. It rattled down and swung and hit the door frame with a noise that sounded very loud. She held her breath and listened.

The shower was still running.

She came down off her toes and tried the lock lever. She put her thumb on one side and her finger on the other and turned it. It wouldn't move at all. She tried it the other way. It moved a little bit. It was very stiff. She closed her mouth in case she was breathing too loud and used both hands and tried harder. It moved some more, like metal rubbing on metal. She strained at it. It hurt her hands. It moved some more. Then it suddenly clicked back all the way.

A big click.

She stood still and listened.

The shower was still running.

She tried the handle. It moved easily. She looked at the door. It was very high and it looked very thick and heavy. It had a thing at the top that would close it automatically behind her. It was made from metal. She had seen those things before. They made a lot of noise. The diner opposite her school had one.

The shower had stopped.

She froze. Stood still, blank with panic. *The door will make a noise. He'll hear it. He'll come out. He'll chase me*. She whirled around and faced the room.

The I-10 interchange was a huge concrete construction laid down like a healing scar on the landscape. It was as big as a stadium and beyond it dull orange streetlights in Fort Stockton lit up the thinning clouds. Fort Stockton still had electricity. Better power lines. Alice kept her foot hard down and screamed three-quarters of the way around the interchange and launched northwest on 285. She passed the city limit doing ninety. There was a sign: Pecos 48 miles. Reacher leaned forward, moving his head rapidly side to side, scanning both shoulders of the road at once. Low buildings flashed past. Some of them were motels.

"This could be entirely the wrong place," Alice said.

"We'll know soon enough," he replied.

He turned the water off and rattled the curtain back and stepped out of the tub. Wrapped a towel around his waist and used another to dry his face. Looked at himself in the misty mirror and combed his hair with his fingers. Strapped his watch to his wrist. Dropped both towels on the bathroom floor and took two fresh ones off the little chrome rack. Wrapped one around his waist and draped the other over his shoulder like a toga.

He stepped out of the bathroom. Light spilled out with him. It fell across the room in a broad yellow bar. He stopped dead. Stared at the empty bed

room in a broad yellow bar. He stopped dead. Stared at the empty bed.

Inside three minutes they had passed three motels and Reacher thought all three of them were wrong. It was about guessing and feeling now, about living in a zone where he was blanking out everything except the tiny murmurs from his subconscious mind. Overt analysis would ruin it. He could make a lengthy case for or against any particular place. He could talk himself into paralysis. So he was listening to nothing at all except the quiet whispers from the back of his brain. And they were saying: *not that one. No. No*.

He took a dazed involuntary step toward the bed, like seeing it from a different angle might put her back in it. But nothing changed. There was just the rumpled sheet, half pushed down, half pushed aside. The pillow, at an angle, dented with the shape of her head. He turned and checked the window. It was closed tight and locked from the inside. Then he ran to the door. Short desperate steps, dodging furniture all the way. The chain was off. The lock was clicked back.

What?

He eased the handle down. Opened the door. The *Do Not Disturb* tag was lying on the concrete walk, a foot from the doorway.

She'd gotten out.

He fixed the door so it wouldn't lock behind him and ran out into the night, barefoot, wearing just his towels, one around his waist and the other like a toga. He ran ten paces into the parking lot and stood still. He was panting. Shock, fear, sudden exertion. It was warm again. There was a heavy vegetable stink in the air, wet earth and flowers and leaves. Trees were dripping. He spun a complete circle. *Where the hell did she go? Where*? A kid that age, she'd have just run for it. As fast as she could. Probably toward the road. He took a single step after her and then whirled around. Back toward the door. He'd need his clothes. Couldn't chase her in a couple of towels.

The low clumps of buildings petered out three or four miles before they were due to hit the bridge. They just stopped being there. There was just desert. He stared through the windshield into the empty distance and thought of every road he had ever seen and asked himself: *are there going to be more buildings up ahead? Or nothing now until we hit the outskirts of Pecos thirty miles away*?

“Turn around,” he said.

“Now?”

“We’ve seen all we’re going to see.”

She hit the brakes and pulled a violent turn, shoulder to shoulder across the road. Fishtailed a little on the wet gravel and straightened and headed back south.

“Slower now,” he said. “Now we’re them. We’re looking at this with their eyes.”

Ellie was lying completely still on the high shelf in the closet. She was good at hiding. Everybody said so. She was good at climbing, too, so she liked to hide high up. Like in the horse barn. Her favorite place was high up on top of the straw bales. The closet shelf wasn’t as comfortable. It was narrow and there were old dust bunnies up there. A wire coat hanger and a plastic bag with a word on it too long to read. But she could lie down flat and hide. It was a good place, she thought. Difficult to get up to. She had climbed on the smaller shelves at the side. They were like a ladder. Very high. But it was dusty. She might sneeze. She knew she mustn’t. *Was she high enough*? He wasn’t a very tall man. She held her breath.

Alice kept the speed steady at sixty. The first motel they came back to was on

the left side of the road. It had a low tended hedge running a hundred yards to screen the parking lot. There was a center office and two one-story wings of six rooms each. The office was dark. There was a soda machine next to it, glowing red. Five cars in the lot.

“No,” Reacher said. “We don’t stop at the first place we see. We’d more likely go for the second place.”

The second place was four hundred yards south.

And it was a possibility.

It was built at right angles to the road. The office was face-on to the highway but the cabins ran away into the distance behind it, which made the lot U-shaped. And concealed. There were planted trees all around it, wet and dripping from the rain.

Possible.

Alice slowed the car to a crawl.

“Drive through,” he said.

She swung into the lot and nosed down the row. It was eight cabins long. Three cars were parked. She swung around the far end and up the other side. Eight more cabins. Another three cars. She paused alongside the office door.

“Well?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“No,” he said.

“Why not?”

“Occupancy ratio is wrong. Sixteen cabins, six cars. I’d need to see eight cars, at least.”

“Why?”

“They didn’t want a place that’s practically empty. Too likely to be remembered.

They were looking for somewhere around two-thirds full, which would be ten or eleven cars for sixteen cabins. They've got two rooms but right now no car at all, so that would be eight or nine cars for sixteen cabins. That's the ratio we need. Two-thirds minus two. Approximately."

She glanced across at him and shrugged. Eased back to the road and continued south.

He got a couple of paces toward the door and stopped dead. There was a yellow light off to one side of the lot, casting a low glow over the soaked blacktop. It showed him his footsteps. They were a line of curious fluid imprints blotted into the dampness. He could see his heels and his toes and his arches. Mostly toes, because he'd been running. The prints were filmy and wet. They weren't about to dry up and disappear anytime soon.

But he couldn't see *her* footprints.

There was just one set of tracks, and they were his. No doubt about it. *She hadn't come out.* Not unless she could levitate herself and fly. Which was impossible. He smiled.

She was hiding in the room.

He ran the final eight steps and ducked back inside. Closed the door gently and fastened the chain and clicked the lock.

"Come on out," he called softly.

There was no response, but he hadn't really expected one.

"I'm coming to get you," he called.

He started by the window, where there was an upholstered chair across the corner of the room with a space behind it large enough for a kid to hide. But she wasn't there. He got on his knees and bent down and looked under the beds. Not there, either.

“Hey, kid,” he called. “Enough already.”

There was a shared bedside cabinet with a little door. She wasn’t in there. He straightened up and adjusted his towels. She wasn’t in the bathroom, he knew that. So where was she? He looked around the room. *The closet. Of course*. He smiled to himself and danced over.

“Here I come, honey,” he called.

He slid the doors and checked the floor. There was a folded valise rack and nothing else. There was a set of vertical shelves on the right, nothing in them. A high shelf above, running the whole width of the space. He stretched tall and checked it out. Nothing there. Just dust bunnies and an old wire coat hanger and a plastic bag from a grocery called Subrahamian’s in Cleveland.

He turned around, temporarily defeated.

The third motel had a painted sign. No neon. Just a board hung from a gallows with chains. It was carefully lettered in a script so fancy Reacher wasn’t sure what it said. Something Canyon, maybe, with old-fashioned spelling, *cañon*, like Spanish. The letters were shadowed in gold.

“I like this,” he said. “Very tasteful.”

“Go in?” Alice asked.

“You bet.”

There was a little entrance road through twenty yards of garden. The plantings were sad and scorched by the heat, but they were an *attempt* at something.

“I like this,” he said again.

It was the same shape as the last place. An office first, with a U-shaped parking lot snaking around two back-to-back rows of cabins set at ninety degrees to the road. Alice drove the complete circle. Ten cabins to a row, twenty in total, twelve cars parked neatly next to twelve random doors. Two Chevrolets, three

Hondas, two Toyotas, two Buicks, an old Saab, an old Audi, and a five-year-old Ford Explorer.

“Two-thirds minus two,” Reacher said.

“Is this the place?” Alice asked.

He said nothing. She stopped next to the office.

“Well?”

He said nothing. Just opened the door and slid out. The heat was coming back. It was full of the smell of soaked earth. He could hear drains running and gutters dripping. The office was dark and full of shadows. The door was locked. There was a neat brass button for the night bell. He leaned his thumb on it and peered in through the window.

There was no soda machine. Just a neat counter and a large rack full of flyers. He couldn’t make out what they referred to. Too dark. He kept his thumb on the bell. A light came on in a doorway in back of the office and a man stepped out. He was running his hand through his hair. Reacher took the Echo County deputy’s star out of his pocket and clicked it flat against the glass. The man turned the office light on and walked to the door and undid the lock. Reacher stepped inside and walked past him. The flyers in the rack covered all the tourist attractions within a hundred miles. Old Fort Stockton featured prominently. There was something about a meteor crater at Odessa. All worthy stuff. Nothing about rodeos or gun shows or real estate. He waved to Alice. Gestured her in after him.

“This is the place,” he said.

“Is it?”

He nodded. “Looks right to me.”

“You cops?” the office guy asked, looking out at the car.

“I need to see your register,” Reacher said. “For tonight’s guests.”

It was impossible. Totally impossible. She wasn't outside, she wasn't inside. He ran his eyes over the room again. The beds, the furniture, the closet. Nothing doing. She wasn't in the bathroom, because he had *been* in the bathroom.

Unless . . .

Unless she had been under the bed or in the closet and then had ducked into the bathroom while he was outside. He stepped over and opened the bathroom door. Smiled at himself in the mirror. The mist had cleared off it. He pulled back the shower curtain in one dramatic sweeping move.

"There you are," he said.

She was pressed up into the corner of the tub, standing straight, wearing a T-shirt and shorts and shoes. The back of her right hand was jammed in her mouth. Her eyes were wide open. They were dark and huge.

"I changed my mind," he said. "I was going to take you with me."

She said nothing. Just watched him. He reached out to her. She shrank back. Took the hand away from her mouth.

"It's not been four hours," she said.

"Yes, it has," he said. "Way more than four."

She put her knuckles back in her mouth. He reached out again. She shrank away. What had her mommy told her to do? *If you're worried about something, just scream and scream*. She took a deep breath and tried. But no sound would come out. Her throat was too dry.

"The register," Reacher said again.

The office guy hesitated like there were procedures involved. Reacher checked his watch and pulled the Heckler & Koch from his pocket, all in one simple

movement.

“Right now,” he said. “We don’t have time to mess around.”

The guy’s eyes went wide and he ducked around the counter and reversed a big leather ledger. Pushed it toward the near edge. Reacher and Alice crowded together to look at it.

“What names?” she asked.

“No idea,” he said. “Just look at the cars.”

There were five columns to a page. Date, name, home address, vehicle make, date of departure. There were twenty lines, for twenty cabins. Sixteen were occupied. Seven of them had arrows originating on the previous page, indicating guests who were staying a second or subsequent night. Nine cabins held new arrivals. Eleven cabins had a vehicle make entered directly against them. Four cabins were marked in two pairs of two, each sharing a vehicle.

“Families,” the night clerk said. “Or large parties.”

“Did you check them in?” Reacher asked.

The guy shook his head.

“I’m the night man,” he said. “I’m not here until midnight.”

Reacher stared at the page. Went very still. Looked away.

“What?” Alice said.

“This isn’t the right place. This is the wrong place. I blew it.”

“Why?”

“Look at the cars,” he said.

He ran the gun muzzle down the fourth column. Three Chevrolets, three Hondas, two Toyotas, two Buicks, one Saab, one Audi. And one Ford.

“Should be two Fords,” he said. “Their Crown Vic and the Explorer that’s

already parked out there."

"Shit," she said.

He nodded. *Shit*. He went completely blank. If this wasn't the right place, he had absolutely no idea what was. He had staked everything on it. He had no plan B. He glanced at the register. *Ford*. Pictured the old Explorer sitting out there, square and dull. Then he glanced back at the register again.

The handwriting was all the same.

"Who fills this out?" he asked.

"The owner," the clerk said. "She does everything the old-fashioned way."

He closed his eyes. Retraced in his mind Alice's slow circle around the lot. Thought back to all the old-fashioned motels he'd used in his life.

"O.K.," he said. "The guest tells her the name and the address, she writes it down. Then maybe she just glances out of the window and writes down the vehicle make for herself. Maybe if the guests are talking or busy getting their money out."

"Maybe. I'm the night man. I'm never here for that."

"She's not really into automobiles, is she?"

"I wouldn't know. Why?"

"Because there are three Chevrolets in the book and only two in the lot. I think she put the Explorer down as a Chevy. It's an old model. Kind of angular. Maybe she confused it with an old-model Blazer or something."

He touched the gun muzzle to the word *Ford*.

"That's the Crown Vic," he said. "That's them."

"You think?" Alice said.

"I know. I can feel it."

They had taken two rooms, not adjacent, but in the same wing. Rooms five and

They had taken two rooms, not adjacent, but in the same wing. Rooms five and eight.

“O.K.,” he said again. “I’m going to take a look.”

He pointed to the night guy. “You stay here and keep quiet.”

Then he pointed to Alice. “You call the state police and start doing your thing with the federal judge, O.K.?”

“You need a key?” the night clerk asked.

“No,” Reacher said. “I don’t need a key.”

Then he walked out into the damp warmth of the night.

The right-hand row of cabins started with number one. There was a concrete walkway leading past each door. He moved quickly and quietly along it and his shoes left damp prints all the way. There was nothing to see except doors. They came at regular intervals. No windows. The windows would be at the back. These were standard-issue motel rooms, like he had seen a million times before, no doubt about it. Standard layout, with a door, a short hallway, closet on one side and bathroom on the other, the hallway opening out into a room occupying the full width of the unit, two beds, two chairs, a table, a credenza, air conditioner under the window, pastel pictures on the wall.

Cabin number five had a *Do Not Disturb* tag lying on the concrete a foot from the doorway. He stepped over it. *If you’ve got a stolen kid, you keep her in the room farthest from the office. No-brainer*. He walked on and stopped outside number eight. Put his ear to the crack of the door and listened. Heard nothing. He walked silently on, past number nine, past ten, to the end of the row. Walked around the bend of the U. The two cabin blocks were parallel, facing each other across a thirty-foot-wide rectangle of garden. It was desert horticulture, with low spiky plants growing out of raked gravel and crushed stone. There were small yellow lanterns here and there. Large rocks and boulders, carefully placed, a Japanese effect.

The crushed stone was noisy under his feet. He had to walk slow. He passed by ten's window, then nine's, then crouched low and eased against the wall. Crawled forward and positioned himself directly under eight's window sill. The air conditioner was running loud. He couldn't hear anything over it. He raised his head, slowly and carefully. Looked into the room.

Nothing doing. The room was completely empty. It was completely undisturbed. It might never have been occupied. It was just sitting there, still and sterile, cleaned and readied, the way motel rooms are. He felt a flash of panic. *Maybe they made multiple bookings all over the place. Two or three similar places, to give themselves a choice. Thirty or forty bucks a night, why not*? He stood up straight. Stopped worrying about the noise from the gravel. Ran past seven and six, straight to five's window. Put himself right in front of it and looked in.

And saw a small dark man wearing two white towels dragging Ellie out of the bathroom. Bright light was spilling out behind him. He had both her wrists caught in one hand above her head. She was kicking and bucking violently in his grip. Reacher stared in for maybe a quarter of a second, long enough to sense the layout of the room and see a black 9-mm handgun with a silencer lying on the credenza. Then he took a breath and one long fluid step away and bent down and picked up a rock from the garden. It was bigger than a basketball and could have weighed a hundred pounds. He heaved it straight through the window. The screen disintegrated and glass shattered and he followed it headfirst into the room with the window frame caught around his shoulders like a wreath of victory.

The small dark man froze in shock for a split second and then let Ellie go and turned and scrabbled desperately toward the credenza. Reacher batted away the splintered frame and got there first and caught him by the throat with his right hand and jammed him back against the wall and followed up with a colossal left to the gut and let him fall and kicked him once in the head, very hard. Saw his eyes roll up into his skull. Then he breathed in and out like a train and gasped and shuffled his feet and flexed his hands and fought the temptation to kick him to death.

Then he turned to Ellie.

"You O.K.?" he asked.

She nodded. Paused in the sudden silence.

“He’s a bad man,” she said. “I think he was going to *shoot* me.”

He paused in turn. Fought to control his breathing.

“He can’t do that now,” he said.

“There was thunder and lightning.”

“I heard it too. I was outside. Got all wet.”

She nodded. “It rained a whole lot.”

“You O.K.?” he asked for the second time.

She just thought about it and nodded. She was very composed. Very serious. No tears, no screaming. The room went absolutely quiet. The action had lasted all of three seconds, beginning to end. It was like it hadn’t happened at all. But the rock from the garden was lying there in the middle of the floor, nested in shards of broken glass. He picked it up and carried it to the shattered window and tipped it through. It crunched on the gravel and rolled away.

“You O.K.?” he asked for the third time.

Ellie nodded. He picked up the phone and dialed zero. The night guy answered. Reacher told him to send Alice down to room five. Then he walked over and unlatched the chain and unlocked the door. Left it propped open. It set up a breeze, all the way through the room to the broken window. The outside air was damp. And warm. Warmer than the inside air.

“You O.K.?” he asked for the fourth time.

“Yes,” Ellie said. “I’m O.K.”

Alice stepped inside a minute later. Ellie looked at her, curiously.

“This is Alice,” Reacher said. “She’s helping your mom.”

“Where is my mom?”

“She’ll be with you soon,” Alice said.

Then she turned and looked down at the small dark guy. He was inert on the floor, pressed up against the wall, arms and legs tangled.

“Is he alive?” she whispered.

Reacher nodded. “Concussed, is all. I think. I hope.”

“State police is responding,” she whispered. “And I called my boss at home. Got him out of bed. He’s setting up a chambers meeting with a judge, first thing. But he says we’ll need a straightforward confession from this guy if we want to avoid a big delay.”

Reacher nodded. “We’ll get one.”

He bent down and twisted one of the small dark man’s towels tight around his neck like a noose and used it to drag him across the floor and into the bathroom.

Twenty minutes later he came out again and found two state cops standing in the room. A sergeant and a trooper, both Hispanic, both composed and immaculate in their tan uniforms. He could hear their car idling outside the door. He nodded to them and walked over and picked up the driver’s clothes from the chair. Tossed them back into the bathroom.

“So?” the sergeant said.

“He’s ready to talk,” Reacher said. “He’s offering a full and voluntary confession. But he wants you to understand he was just the driver.”

“He wasn’t a shooter?”

Reacher shook his head. “But he saw everything.”

“What about the kidnap?”

“He wasn’t there. He was guarding her afterward, is all. And there’s a lot of other stuff, too, going back a number of years.”

“Situation like this, he talks, he’s going away for a long time.”

“He knows that. He accepts it. He’s happy about it. He’s looking for redemption.”

The cops just glanced at each other and went into the bathroom. Reacher heard people shuffling and moving around and handcuffs clicking.

“I have to get back,” Alice said. “I have to prepare the writ. Lot of work involved, with habeas corpus.”

“Take the Crown Vic,” Reacher said. “I’ll wait here with Ellie.”

The cops brought the driver out of the bathroom. He was dressed and his hands were cuffed behind him and each cop had hold of an elbow. He was bent over and white with pain and already talking fast. The cops hustled him straight out to their cruiser and the room door swung shut behind them. There was the muffled sound of car doors slamming and the growl of an engine.

“What did you do to him?” Alice whispered.

Reacher shrugged. “I’m a hard man. Like you said.”

He asked her to send the night clerk down with a master key and she walked away toward the office. He turned to Ellie.

“You O.K.?” he said.

“You don’t need to keep asking me,” she replied.

“Tired?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Your mom will come soon,” he said. “We’ll wait for her right here. But let’s change rooms, shall we? This one’s got a broken window.”

She nodded. “You broke it. With that truck.”

She giggled. "You broke it. With that rock."

He heard the Crown Vic start up in the distance. Heard its tires on the road.

"Let's try room eight," he said. "It's nice and clean. Nobody's been in it. It can be ours."

She took his hand and they walked out together and along the concrete walkway to number eight, a dozen steps for him, three dozen for her, damp filmy tracks left in the wet behind both of them. The clerk met them with a pass key and Ellie got straight into the bed nearest the window. Reacher lay down on the other and watched her until she was sound asleep. Then he wrapped his arm under his head and tried to doze.

Less than two hours later the new day dawned bright and hot and the air stirred and the metal roof clicked and cracked and the timbers under it creaked and moved. Reacher opened his eyes after a short uneasy rest and swung his legs to the floor. Crept quietly to the door and opened it up and stepped outside. The eastern horizon was far off to his right beyond the motel office. It was flaring with pure white light. There were rags of old cloud in the sky. They were burning off as he watched. *No storm today*. People had talked about it for a week, but it wasn't going to happen. Last night's hour of rain was all it was ever going to be. A complete misfire.

He crept back into the room and lay down again. Ellie was still asleep. She had kicked the sheet down and her shirt had ridden up and he could see the plump band of pink skin at her waist. Her legs were bent, like she had been running in her dreams. But her arms were thrown up above her head, which some army psychiatrist had once told him was a sign of security. *A kid sleeps like that*, he had said, *deep down it feels safe*. Safe? She was some kid. That was for damn sure. Most adults he knew would be wrecks after an experience like hers. For weeks. Or longer. But she wasn't. Maybe she was too young to fully comprehend. Or maybe she was just a tough kid. One or the other. He didn't know. He had no experience. He closed his eyes again.

He opened them for the second time thirty minutes later because Ellie was standing right next to him, shaking his shoulder.

standing right next to him, shaking his shoulder.

“I’m hungry,” she said.

“Me too,” he said back. “What would you like?”

“Ice cream,” she said.

“For breakfast?”

She nodded.

“O.K.,” he said. “But eggs first. Maybe bacon. You’re a kid. You need good nutrition.”

He fumbled the phone book out of the bedside drawer and found a diner listed that was maybe a mile nearer Fort Stockton. He called them and bribed them with the promise of a twenty-dollar tip to drive breakfast out to the motel. He sent Ellie into the bathroom to get washed up. By the time she came out, the food had arrived. Scrambled eggs, smoked bacon, toast, jelly, cola for her, coffee for him. And a huge plastic dish of ice cream with chocolate sauce.

Breakfast changes everything. He ate the food and drank the coffee and felt some energy coming back. Saw the same effect in Ellie. They propped the room door wide open while they ate to smell the morning air. Then they dragged chairs out to the concrete walk and set them side by side and sat down to wait.

They waited more than four hours. He stretched out and idled the time away like he was accustomed to doing. She waited like it was a serious task to be approached with her usual earnest concentration. He called the diner again halfway through and they ate a second breakfast, identical menu to the first. They went in and out to the bathroom. Talked a little. Tried to identify the trees, listened to the buzz of the insects, looked for clouds in the sky. But mostly they kept their gaze ahead and half-right, where the road came in from the north. The ground was dry again, like it had never rained at all. The dust was back. It plumed off the blacktop and hung in the heat. It was a quiet road, maybe one vehicle every couple of minutes. Occasionally a small knot of traffic, stalled

behind a slow-moving farm truck.

A few minutes after eleven o'clock Reacher was standing a couple of paces into the lot and he saw the Crown Vic coming south in the distance. It crept slowly out of the haze. He saw the fake antennas wobbling and flexing behind it. Dust trailing in the air.

"Hey kid," he called. "Check this out."

She stood next to him and shaded her eyes with her hand. The big car slowed and turned in and drove up right next to them. Alice was in the driver's seat. Carmen was next to her. She looked pale and washed out but she was smiling and her eyes were wide with joy. She had the door open before the car stopped moving and she came out and skipped around the hood and Ellie ran to her and jumped into her arms. They staggered around together in the sunlight. There was shrieking and crying and laughter all at the same time. He watched for a moment and then backed away and squatted next to the car. He didn't want to intrude. He guessed times like these were best kept private. Alice saw what he was thinking and buzzed her window down and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Everything squared away?" he asked her.

"For us," she said. "Cops have got a lot of paperwork ahead. All in all they're looking at more than fifty homicides in seven separate states. Including what happened here twelve years ago and Eugene and Sloop and Walker himself. They're going to arrest Rusty for shooting Walker. But she'll get off easy, I should think, in the circumstances."

"Anything about me?"

"They were asking about last night. Lots of questions. I said I did it all."

"Why?"

She smiled. "Because I'm a lawyer. I called it self-defense and they bought it without hesitating. It was my car out there, and my gun. No-brainer. They'd have given you a much harder time."

"So we're all home free?"

"Especially Carmen."

Especially Carmen.

He looked up. Carmen had Ellie on her hip, with her face buried in her neck like the sweet fragrance of her was necessary to sustain life itself. She was walking aimless random circles with her. Then she raised her head and squinted against the sun and smiled with such abandoned joy that Reacher found himself smiling along with her.

“She got plans?” he asked.

“Moving up to Pecos,” Alice said. “We’ll sort through Sloop’s affairs. There’s probably some cash somewhere. She’s talking about moving into a place like mine. Maybe working part-time. Maybe even looking at law school.”

“You tell her about the Red House?”

“She laughed with happiness. I told her it was probably burned down to a cinder, and she just laughed and laughed. I felt good for her.”

Now Ellie was leading her by the hand around the parking lot, checking out the trees she had inspected previously, talking a mile a minute. They looked perfect together. Ellie was hopping with energy and Carmen looked serene and radiant and very beautiful. Reacher stood up and leaned against the car.

“You want lunch?”

“Here?”

“I’ve got a thing going with a diner. They’ve probably got vegetables.”

“Tuna salad will do it for me.”

He went inside and used the phone. Ordered three sandwiches and promised yet another twenty bucks for the tip. Came out and found Ellie and Carmen looking for him.

“I’m going to a new school soon,” Ellie said. “Just like you did.”

“You’ll do great,” he said. “You’re smart as a whip.”

Then Carmen let go of her daughter’s hand and stepped near him, a little shy and silent and awkward for a second. Then she smiled wide and put her arms around

silent and awkward for a second. Then she smiled wide and put her arms around his chest and hugged him hard.

“Thanks,” was all she said.

He hugged her back. “I’m sorry it took so long.”

“Did my clue help?”

“Clue?” he said.

“I left a clue for you.”

“Where?”

“In the confession.”

He said nothing. She unwound herself from his embrace and took his arm and led him to where Ellie wouldn’t hear her.

“He made me say I was a whore.”

He nodded.

“But I pretended to be nervous and I got the words wrong. I said ‘street stroller.’”

He nodded again. “I remember.”

“But it’s really streetwalker, isn’t it? To be correct? That was the clue. You were supposed to think to yourself, it’s not *stroller*, it’s *walker*. Get it? It’s *Walker*. Meaning it’s Hack Walker doing all of this.”

He went very quiet.

“I missed that,” he said.

“So how did you know?”

“I guess I took the long way around.”

She just smiled again. Laced her arm into his and walked him back to the car,

where Ellie was laughing with Alice.

“You going to be O.K.?” he asked her.

She nodded. “But I feel very guilty. People died.”

He shrugged. “Like Clay Allison said.”

“Thanks,” she said again.

“No hay de que, señora.”

“*Señorita*,” she said.

Carmen and Ellie and Alice drifted inside to get washed up for lunch. He watched the door close behind them and just walked away. It seemed like the natural thing to do. He didn’t want anybody to try to keep him there. He jogged to the road and turned south. Walked a whole hot mile before he got a ride from a farm truck driven by a toothless old man who didn’t talk much. He got out at the I-10 interchange and waited on the west ramp for ninety minutes in the sun until an eighteen-wheeler slowed and stopped next to him. He walked around the massive hood and looked up at the window. The window came down. He could hear music over the loud shudder of the diesel. It sounded like Buddy Holly. The driver leaned out. He was a guy of about fifty, fleshy, wearing a Dodgers T-shirt and about four days’ growth of beard.

“Los Angeles?” he called.

“Anywhere,” Reacher called back.

Jack Reacher series

1. Killing Floor (1997)

2. Die Trying (1998)

3. Tripwire (1999)

4. The Visitor (2000) aka Running Blind

5. Echo Burning (2001)

6. Without Fail (2002)

7. Persuader (2003)

8. The Enemy (2004)

9. One Shot (2005)

10. The Hard Way (2006)

11. Bad Luck and Trouble (2007)

Without Fail

1

They found out about him in July and stayed angry all through August. They tried to kill him in September. It was way too soon. They weren't ready. The attempt was a failure. It could have been a disaster, but it was actually a miracle. Because nobody noticed.

They used their usual method to get past security and set up a hundred feet from where he was speaking. They used a silencer and missed him by an inch. The bullet must have passed right over his head. Maybe even through his hair, because he immediately raised his hand and patted it back into place as if a gust of wind had disturbed it. They saw it over and over again, afterward, on television. He raised his hand and patted his hair. He did nothing else. He just kept on with his speech, unaware, because by definition a silenced bullet is too fast to see and too quiet to hear. So it missed him and flew on. It missed everybody standing behind him. It struck no obstacles, hit no buildings. It flew on straight and true until its energy was spent and gravity hauled it to earth in the far distance where there was nothing except empty grassland. There was no response. No reaction. Nobody noticed. It was like the bullet had never been fired at all. They didn't fire again. They were too shaken up.

So, a failure, but a miracle. And a lesson. They spent October acting like the professionals they were, starting over, calming down, thinking, learning, preparing for their second attempt. It would be a better attempt, carefully planned and properly executed, built around technique and nuance and sophistication, and enhanced by unholy fear. A worthy attempt. A creative attempt. Above all, an attempt that wouldn't fail.

Then November came, and the rules changed completely.

Reacher's cup was empty but still warm. He lifted it off the saucer and tilted it and watched the sludge in the bottom flow toward him, slow and brown, like river silt.

“When does it need to be done?” he asked.

“As soon as possible,” she said.

He nodded. Slid out of the booth and stood up.

“I’ll call you in ten days,” he said.

“With a decision?”

He shook his head. “To tell you how it went.”

“I’ll know how it went.”

“OK, to tell you where to send my money.”

She closed her eyes and smiled. He glanced down at her.

“You thought I’d refuse?” he said.

She opened her eyes. “I thought you might be a little harder to persuade.”

He shrugged. “Like Joe told you, I’m a sucker for a challenge. Joe was usually right about things like that. He was usually right about a lot of things.”

“Now I don’t know what to say, except thank you.”

He didn’t reply. Just started to move away, but she stood up right next to him and kept him where he was. There was an awkward pause. They stood for a second face-to-face, trapped by the table. She put out her hand and he shook it. She held on a fraction too long, and then she stretched up tall and kissed him on the cheek. Her lips were soft. Their touch burned him like a tiny voltage.

“A handshake isn’t enough,” she said. “You’re going to do it for us.” Then she paused. “And you were nearly my brother-in-law.”

He said nothing. Just nodded and shuffled out from behind the table and glanced

back once. Then he headed up the stairs and out to the street. Her perfume was on his hand. He walked around to the cabaret lounge and left a note for his friends in their dressing room. Then he headed out to the highway, with ten whole days to find a way to kill the fourth-best-protected person on the planet.

It had started eight hours earlier, like this: team leader M. E. Froelich came to work on that Monday morning, thirteen days after the election, an hour before the second strategy meeting, seven days after the word assassination had first been used, and made her final decision. She set off in search of her immediate superior and found him in the secretarial pen outside his office, clearly on his way to somewhere else, clearly in a hurry. He had a file under his arm and a definite stay back expression on his face. But she took a deep breath and made it clear that she needed to talk right then. Urgently. And off the record and in private, obviously. So he paused a moment and turned abruptly and went back inside his office. He let her step in after him and closed the door behind her, softly enough to make the unscheduled meeting feel a little conspiratorial, but firmly enough that she was in no doubt he was annoyed about the interruption to his routine. It was just the click of a door latch, but it was also an unmistakable message, parsed exactly in the language of office hierarchies everywhere: you better not be wasting my time with this.

He was a twenty-five-year veteran well into his final lap before retirement, well into his middle fifties, the last echo of the old days. He was still tall, still fairly lean and athletic, but graying fast and softening in some of the wrong places. His name was Stuyvesant. Like the last Director-General of New Amsterdam, he would say when the spelling was questioned. Then, acknowledging the modern world, he would say: like the cigarette. He wore Brooks Brothers every day of his life without exception, but he was considered capable of flexibility in his tactics. Best of all, he had never failed. Not ever, and he had been around a long time, with more than his fair share of difficulties. But there had been no failures, and no bad luck, either. Therefore, in the merciless calculus of organizations everywhere, he was considered a good guy to work for.

“You look a little nervous,” he said.

“I am, a little,” Froelich said back.

His office was small, and quiet, and sparsely furnished, and very clean. The walls were painted bright white and lit with halogen. There was a window, with white vertical blinds half closed against gray weather outside.

“Why are you nervous?” he asked.

“I need to ask your permission.”

“For what?”

“For something I want to try,” she said. She was twenty years younger than Stuyvesant, exactly thirty-five. Tall rather than short, but not excessively. Maybe only an inch or two over the average for American women of her generation, but the kind of intelligence and energy and vitality she radiated took the word medium right out of the equation. She was halfway between lithe and muscular, with a bright glow in her skin and her eyes that made her look like an athlete. Her hair was short and fair and casually unkempt. She gave the impression of having hurriedly stepped into her street clothes after showering quickly after winning a gold medal at the Olympics by playing a crucial role in some kind of team sport. Like it was no big deal, like she wanted to get out of the stadium before the television interviewers got through with her teammates and started in on her. She looked like a very competent person, but a very modest one.

“What kind of something?” Stuyvesant asked. He turned and placed the file he was carrying on his desk. His desk was large, topped with a slab of gray composite. High-end modern office furniture, obsessively cleaned and polished like an antique. He was famous for always keeping his desktop clear of paperwork and completely empty. The habit created an air of extreme efficiency.

“I want an outsider to do it,” Froelich said.

Stuyvesant squared the file on the desk corner and ran his fingers along the spine and the adjacent edge, like he was checking the angle was exact.

“You think that’s a good idea?” he asked.

Froelich said nothing.

“I suppose you’ve got somebody in mind?” he asked.

“An excellent prospect.”

“Who?”

Froelich shook her head.

“You should stay outside the loop,” she said. “Better that way.”

“Was he recommended?”

“Or she.”

Stuyvesant nodded again. The modern world.

“Was the person you have in mind recommended?”

“Yes, by an excellent source.”

“In-house?”

“Yes,” Froelich said again.

“So we’re already in the loop.”

“No, the source isn’t in-house anymore.”

Stuyvesant turned again and moved his file parallel to the long edge of the desk. Then back again parallel with the short edge.

“Let me play devil’s advocate,” he said. “I promoted you four months ago. Four months is a long time. Choosing to bring in an outsider now might be seen to

betray a certain lack of self-confidence, mightn't it? Wouldn't you say?"

"I can't worry about that."

"Maybe you should," Stuyvesant said. "This could hurt you. There were six guys who wanted your job. So if you do this and it leaks, then you've got real problems. You've got half a dozen vultures muttering told you so the whole rest of your career. Because you started second-guessing your own abilities."

"Thing like this, I need to second-guess myself. I think."

"You think?"

"No, I know. I don't see an alternative."

Stuyvesant said nothing.

"I'm not happy about it," Froelich said. "Believe me. But I think it's got to be done. And that's my judgment call."

The office went quiet. Stuyvesant said nothing.

"So will you authorize it?" Froelich asked.

Stuyvesant shrugged. "You shouldn't be asking. You should have just gone ahead and done it regardless."

"Not my way," Froelich said.

"So don't tell anybody else. And don't put anything on paper."

"I wouldn't anyway. It would compromise effectiveness."

Stuyvesant nodded vaguely. Then, like the good bureaucrat he had become, he arrived at the most important question of all.

“How much would this person cost?” he asked.

“Not much,” Froelich said. “Maybe nothing at all. Maybe expenses only. We’ve got some history together. Theoretically. Of a sort.”

“This could stall your career. No more promotions.”

“The alternative would finish my career.”

“You were my choice,” Stuyvesant said. “I picked you. Therefore anything that damages you damages me, too.”

“I understand that, sir.”

“So take a deep breath and count to ten. Then tell me that it’s really necessary.”

Froelich nodded, and took a breath and kept quiet, ten or eleven seconds.

“It’s really necessary,” she said.

Stuyvesant picked up his file.

“OK, do it,” he said.

She started immediately after the strategy meeting, suddenly aware that doing it was the hard part. Asking for permission had seemed like such a hurdle that she had characterized it in her mind as the most difficult stage of the whole project. But now that felt like nothing at all compared with actually hunting down her target. All she had was a last name and a sketchy biography that might or might not have been accurate and up to date eight years ago. If she even remembered the details correctly. They had been mentioned casually, playfully, late one night, by her lover, part of some drowsy pillow talk. She couldn’t even be sure she had been paying full attention. So she decided not to rely on the details. She would rely solely on the name itself.

She wrote it in large capital letters at the top of a sheet of yellow paper. It brought back a lot of memories. Some bad, most good. She stared at it for a long moment, and then she crossed it out and wrote UNSUB instead. That would help her concentration, because it made the whole thing impersonal. It put her mind in a groove, took her right back to basic training. An unknown subject was somebody to be identified and located. That was all, nothing more and nothing less.

Her main operational advantage was computer power. She had more access to more databases than the average citizen gets. UNSUB was military, she knew that for sure, so she went to the National Personnel Records Center's database. It was compiled in St. Louis, Missouri, and listed literally every man or woman who had served in a U.S. military uniform, anywhere, ever. She typed in the last name and waited and the inquiry software came back with just three short responses. One she eliminated immediately, by given name. I know for sure it's not him, don't I? Another she eliminated by date of birth. A whole generation too old. So the third had to be UNSUB. No other possibility. She stared at the full name for a second and copied the date of birth and the Social Security number onto her yellow paper. Then she hit the icon for details and entered her password. The screen redrew and came up with an abbreviated career summary.

Bad news. UNSUB wasn't military anymore. The career summary dead-ended five whole years ago with an honorable discharge after thirteen years of service. Final rank was major. There were medals listed, including a Silver Star and a Purple Heart. She read the citations and wrote down the details and drew a line across the yellow paper to signify the end of one era and the start of another. Then she plowed on.

Next logical step was to look at Social Security's Master Death Index. Basic training. No point trying to chase down somebody who was already dead. She entered the number and realized she was holding her breath. But the inquiry came back blank. UNSUB was still alive, as far as the government knew. Next step was to check in with the National Crime Information Center. Basic training again. No point trying to sign up somebody who was serving time in prison, for instance, not that she thought it was remotely likely, not in UNSUB's case. But you never knew. There was a fine line, with some personality types. The NCIC database was always slow, so she shoved drifts of accumulated paperwork into

drawers and then left her desk and refilled her coffee cup. Strolled back to find a negative arrest-or-conviction record waiting on her screen. Plus a short note to say UNSUB had an FBI file somewhere in their records. Interesting. She closed NCIC and went straight to the FBI's database. She found the file and couldn't open it. But she knew enough about the Bureau's classification system to be able to decode the header flags. It was a simple narrative file, inactive. Nothing more. UNSUB wasn't a fugitive, wasn't wanted for anything, wasn't currently in trouble.

She wrote it all down, and then clicked her way into the nationwide DMV database. Bad news again. UNSUB didn't have a driver's license. Which was very weird. And which was a very big pain in the butt. Because no driver's license meant no current photograph and no current address listing. She clicked her way into the Veterans'Administration computer in Chicago. Searched by name, rank, and number. The inquiries came up blank. UNSUB wasn't receiving federal benefits and hadn't offered a forwarding address. Why not? Where the hell are you? She went back into Social Security and asked for contributions records. There weren't any. UNSUB hadn't been employed since leaving the military, at least not legally. She tried the IRS for confirmation. Same story. UNSUB hadn't paid taxes in five years. Hadn't even filed.

OK, so let's get serious. She hitched straighter in her chair and quit the government sites and fired up some illicit software that took her straight into the banking industry's private world. Strictly speaking she shouldn't be using it for this purpose. Or for any purpose. It was an obvious breach of official protocol. But she didn't expect to get any comeback. And she did expect to get a result. If UNSUB had even a single bank account anywhere in the fifty states, it would show up. Even a humble little checking account. Even an empty or abandoned account. Plenty of people got by without bank accounts, she knew that, but she felt in her gut UNSUB wouldn't be one of them. Not somebody who had been a U.S. Army major. With medals.

She entered the Social Security number twice, once in the SSN field and once in the taxpayer ID field. She entered the name. She hit search.

One hundred and eighty miles away, Jack Reacher shivered. Atlantic City in the middle of November wasn't the warmest spot on earth. Not by any measure. The wind came in off the ocean carrying enough salt to keep everything permanently damp and clammy. It whipped and gusted and blew trash around and flattened his pants against his legs. Five days ago he had been in Los Angeles, and he was pretty sure he should have stayed there. Now he was pretty sure he should go back. Southern California was a very attractive place in November. The air was warm down there, and the ocean breezes were soft balmy caresses instead of endless lashing fusillades of stinging salt cold. He should go back there. He should go somewhere, that was for damn sure.

Or maybe he should stick around like he'd been asked to, and buy a coat.

He had come back east with an old black woman and her brother. He had been hitching rides east out of L.A. in order to take a one-day look at the Mojave Desert. The old couple had picked him up in an ancient Buick Roadmaster. He saw a microphone and a primitive PA system and a boxed Yamaha keyboard among the suitcases in the load space and the old lady told him she was a singer heading for a short residency all the way over in Atlantic City. Told him her brother accompanied her on the keyboard and drove the car, but he wasn't much of a talker anymore, and he wasn't much of a driver anymore, and the Roadmaster wasn't much of a car anymore. It was all true. The old guy was completely silent and they were all in mortal danger several times inside the first five miles. The old lady started singing to calm herself. She gave it a few bars of Dawn Penn's "You Don't Love Me" and Reacher immediately decided to go all the way east with her just to hear more. He offered to take over the driving chores. She kept on singing. She had the kind of sweet smoky voice that should have made her a blues superstar long ago, except she was probably in the wrong place too many times and it had never happened for her. The old car had failed power steering to wrestle with and all kinds of ticks and rattles and whines under the hammer-heavy V-8 beat, and at about fifty miles an hour the noises all came together and sounded like a backing track. The radio was weak and picked up an endless succession of local AM stations for about twenty minutes each. The old woman sang along with them and the old guy kept completely quiet and slept most of the way on the backseat. Reacher drove eighteen hours a day for three solid days, and arrived in New Jersey feeling like he'd been on vacation.

The residency was at a fifth-rate lounge eight blocks from the boardwalk, and the manager wasn't the kind of guy you would necessarily trust to respect a contract. So Reacher made it his business to count the customers and keep a running total of the cash that should show up in the pay envelope at the end of the week. He made it very obvious and watched the manager grow more and more resentful about it. The guy took to making short cryptic phone calls with his hand shielding the receiver and his eyes locked on Reacher's face. Reacher looked straight back at him with a wintry smile and an unblinking gaze and stayed put. He sat through all three sets two weekend nights running, but then he started to get restless. And cold. The Mamas and the Papas were in his head: I'd be safe and warm, if I was in L.A. So on the Monday morning he was about to change his mind and get back on the road when the old keyboard player walked him back from breakfast and finally broke his silence.

"I want to ask you to stick around," he said. He pronounced it wanna ax, and there was some kind of hope in the rheumy old eyes. Reacher didn't answer.

"You don't stick around, that manager's going to stiff us for sure," the old guy said, like getting stiffed for money was something that just happened to musicians, like flat tires and head colds. "But we get paid, we got gas money to head up to New York, maybe get us a gig from B. B. King in Times Square, resurrect our careers. Guy like you could make a big difference in that department, count on it."

Reacher said nothing.

"Of course, I can see you being worried," the old guy said. "Management like that, bound to be some unsavory characters lurking in the background."

Reacher smiled at the subtlety.

"What are you, anyway?" the old guy asked. "Some kind of a boxer?"

"No," Reacher said. "No kind of a boxer."

"Wrestler?" the old guy asked. He said it wrassler. "Like on cable television?"

“No.”

“You’re big enough, that’s for damn sure,” the old guy said. “Plenty big enough to help us out, if you wanted to.”

He said it he’p. No front teeth. Reacher said nothing.

“What are you, anyway?” the old guy asked again.

“I was a military cop,” Reacher said. “In the Army, thirteen years.”

“You quit?”

“As near as makes no difference.”

“No jobs for you folks afterward?”

“None that I want,” Reacher said.

“You live in L.A.?”

“I don’t live anywhere,” Reacher said. “I move around.”

“So road folk should stick together,” the old guy said. “Simple as that. Help each other. Keep it a mutual thing.”

He’p each other.

“It’s very cold here,” Reacher said.

“That’s for damn sure,” the old guy said. “But you could buy a coat.”

So he was on a windswept corner with the sea gale flattening his pants against his legs, making a final decision. The highway, or a coat store? He ran a brief fantasy through his head, La Jolla maybe, a cheap room, warm nights, bright stars, cold beer. Then: the old woman at B. B. King’s new club in New York, some retro-obsessed young A&R man stops by, gives her a contract, she makes a

CD, she gets a national tour, a sidebar in Rolling Stone, fame, money, a new house. A new car. He turned his back on the highway and hunched against the wind and walked east in search of a clothing store.

On that particular Monday there were nearly twelve thousand FDIC-insured banking organizations licensed and operating inside the United States and between them they carried over a thousand million separate accounts, but only one of them was listed against UNSUB's name and Social Security number. It was a simple checking account held at a branch of a regional bank in Arlington, Virginia. M. E. Froelich stared at the branch's business address in surprise. That's less than four miles from where I'm sitting right now. She copied the details onto her yellow paper. Picked up her phone and called a senior colleague on the other side of the organization and asked him to contact the bank in question for all the details he could get. Especially a home address. She asked him to be absolutely as fast as possible, but discreet, too. And completely off the record. Then she hung up and waited, anxious and frustrated about being temporarily hands-off. Problem was, the other side of the organization could ask banks discreet questions quite easily, whereas for Froelich to do so herself would be regarded as very odd indeed.

Reacher found a discount store three blocks nearer the ocean and ducked inside. It was narrow but ran back into the building a couple of hundred feet. There were fluorescent tubes all over the ceiling and racks of garments stretching as far as the eye could see. Seemed to be women's stuff on the left, children's in the center, and men's on the right. He started in the far back corner and worked forward.

There were all kinds of coats commercially available, that was for damn sure. The first two rails had short padded jackets. No good. He went by something an old Army buddy had told him: a good coat is like a good lawyer. It covers your ass. The third rail was more promising. It had neutral-colored thigh-length canvas coats made bulky by thick flannel linings. Maybe there was some wool in

there. Maybe some other stuff, too. They certainly felt heavy enough.

“Can I help you?”

He turned around and saw a young woman standing right behind him.

“Are these coats good for the weather up here?” he asked.

“They’re perfect,” the woman said. She was very animated. She told him all about some kind of special stuff sprayed on the canvas to repel moisture. She told him all about the insulation inside. She promised it would keep him warm right down to a subzero temperature. He ran his hand down the rail and pulled out a dark olive XXL.

“OK, I’ll take this one,” he said.

“You don’t want to try it on?”

He paused and then shrugged into it. It fit pretty well. Nearly. Maybe it was a little tight across the shoulders. The sleeves were maybe an inch too short.

“You need the 3XLT,” the woman said. “What are you, a fifty?”

“A fifty what?”

“Chest.”

“No idea. I never measured it.”

“Height about six-five?”

“I guess,” he said.

“Weight?”

“Two-forty,” he said. “Maybe two-fifty.”

“So you definitely need the big-and-tall fitting,” she said. “Try the 3XLT.”

The 3XLT she handed him was the same dull color as the XXL he had picked. It fit much better. A little roomy, which he liked. And the sleeves were right.

“You OK for pants?” the woman called. She had ducked away to another rail and was flicking through heavy canvas work pants, glancing at his waist and the length of his legs. She came out with a pair that matched one of the colors in the flannel lining inside the coat. “And try these shirts,” she said. She jumped over to another rail and showed him a rainbow of flannel shirts. “Put a T-shirt underneath it and you’re all set. Which color do you like?”

“Something dull,” he said.

She laid everything out on top of one of the rails. The coat, the pants, the shirt, a T-shirt. They looked pretty good together, muddy olives and khakis.

“OK?” she said brightly.

“OK,” he said. “You got underwear too?”

“Over here,” she said.

He rooted through a bin of reject-quality boxers and selected a pair in white. Then a pair of socks, mostly cotton, flecked with all kinds of organic colors.

“OK?” the woman said again. He nodded and she led him to the register at the front of the store and bleeped all the tags under the little red light.

“One hundred and eighty-nine dollars even,” she said.

He stared at the red figures on the register’s display.

“I thought this was a discount store,” he said.

“That’s incredibly reasonable, really,” she said. He shook his head and dug into his pocket and came out with a wad of crumpled bills. Counted out a hundred and ninety. The dollar change she gave him left him with four bucks in his hand.

The senior colleague from the other side of the organization called Froelich back within twenty-five minutes.

“You get a home address?” she asked him.

“One hundred Washington Boulevard,” the guy said. “Arlington, Virginia. Zip code is 20310-1500.”

Froelich wrote it down. “OK, thanks. I guess that’s all I need.”

“I think you might need a little more.”

“Why?”

“You know Washington Boulevard?”

Froelich paused. “Runs up to the Memorial Bridge, right?”

“It’s just a highway.”

“No buildings? Got to be buildings.”

“There is one building. Pretty big one. Couple hundred yards off the east shoulder.”

“What?”

“The Pentagon,” the guy said. “This is a phony address, Froelich. One side of Washington Boulevard is Arlington Cemetery and the other side is the Pentagon. That’s it. Nothing else. There’s no number one hundred. There are no private mailing addresses at all. I checked with the Postal Service. And that zip code is

the Department of the Army, inside the Pentagon."

"Great," Froelich said. "You tell the bank?"

"Of course not. You told me to be discreet."

"Thanks. But I'm back at square one."

"Maybe not. This is a bizarre account, Froelich. Six-figure balance, but it's all just stuck in checking, earning nothing. And the customer accesses it via Western Union only. Never comes in. It's a phone arrangement. Customer calls in with a password, the bank wires cash through Western Union, wherever."

"No ATM card?"

"No cards at all. No checkbook was ever issued, either."

"Western Union only? I never heard of that before. Are there any records?"

"Geographically, all over the place, literally. Forty states and counting in five years. Occasional deposits and plenty of nickel-and-dime withdrawals, all of them to Western Union offices in the boonies, in the cities, everywhere."

"Bizarre."

"Like I said."

"Anything you can do?"

"Already done it. They're going to call me next time the customer calls them."

"And then you're going to call me?"

"I might."

"Is there a frequency pattern?"

“It varies. Maximum interval recently has been a few weeks. Sometimes it’s every few days. Mondays are popular. Banks are closed on the weekend.”

“So I could get lucky today.”

“Sure you could,” the guy said. “Question is, am I going to get lucky too?”

“Not that lucky,” Froelich said.

The lounge manager watched Reacher step into his motel lobby. Then he ducked back into a windy side street and fired up his cell phone. Cupped his hand around it and spoke low and urgently, and convincingly, but respectfully, as was required.

“Because he’s dissing me,” he said, in answer to a question.

“Today would be good,” he said, in answer to another.

“Two at least,” he said, in answer to the final question. “This is a big guy.”

Reacher changed one of his four dollars for quarters at the motel desk and headed for the pay phone. Dialed his bank from memory and gave his password and arranged for five hundred bucks to be wired to Western Union in Atlantic City by close of business. Then he went to his room and bit off all the tags and put his new clothes on. Transferred all his pocket junk across and threw his summer gear in the trash and looked himself over in the long mirror behind the closet door. Grow a beard and get some sunglasses and I could walk all the way to the North Pole, he thought.

Froelich heard about the proposed wire transfer eleven minutes later. Closed her eyes for a second and clenched her hands in triumph and then reached behind her and pulled a map of the Eastern Seaboard off a shelf. Maybe three hours if the traffic cooperates. I might just make it. She grabbed her jacket and her purse and ran down to the garage.

Reacher wasted an hour in his room and then went out to test the insulating properties of his new coat. Field trial, they used to call it, way back when. He headed east toward the ocean, into the wind. Felt rather than saw somebody behind him. Just a characteristic little burr down in the small of his back. He slowed up and used a store window for a mirror. Caught a glimpse of movement fifty yards back. Too far away for details.

He walked on. The coat was pretty good, but he should have bought a hat to go with it. That was clear. The same buddy with the opinion on coats used to claim that half of total heat loss was through the top of the head, and that was certainly how it felt. The cold was blowing through his hair and making his eyes water. A military-issue watch cap would have been valuable, in November on the Jersey shore. He made a mental note to keep an eye out for surplus stores on his way back from the Western Union office. In his experience they often inhabited the same neighborhoods.

He reached the boardwalk and walked south, with the same itch still there in the small of his back. He turned suddenly and saw nothing. Walked back north to where he had started. The boards under his feet were in good shape. There was a notice claiming they were made from some special hardwood, the hardest timber the world's forests had to offer. The feeling was still there in the small of his back. He turned and led his invisible shadows out onto the Central Pier. It was the original structure, preserved. It looked like he guessed it must have way back when it was built. It was deserted, which was no surprise considering the weather, and which added to the feeling of unreality. It was like an architectural photograph from a history book. But some of the little antique booths were open and selling things, including one selling modern coffee in plastic cups. He bought a twenty-ounce black regular, which took all his remaining cash, but warmed him through. He walked to the end of the pier as he drank it. Dropped

the cup in the trash and stood and watched the gray ocean for a spell. Then he turned back and headed for the shore and saw two men walking toward him.

They were useful-sized guys, short but wide, dressed pretty much alike in blue peacoats and gray denim pants. They both had hats. Little knitted watch caps made from gray wool, jammed down over meaty heads. Clearly they knew how to dress for the climate. They had their hands in their pockets, so he couldn't tell whether they had gloves to match. Their pockets were high on their coats, so their elbows were forced outward. They both wore heavy boots, the sort of things a steelworker or a stevedore might choose. They were both a little bowlegged, or maybe they were just attempting an intimidating swagger. They both had a little scar tissue around their brows. They looked like fairground scufflers or dockyard bruisers from fifty years ago. Reacher glanced back and saw nobody behind him, all the way to Ireland. So he just stopped walking. Didn't worry about putting his back against the rail.

The two men walked on and stopped eight feet in front of him and faced him head-on. Reacher flexed his fingers by his side, to test how cold they were. Eight feet was an interesting choice of distance. It meant they were going to talk before they tangled. He flexed his toes and ran some muscle tension up through his calves, his thighs, his back, his shoulders. Moved his head side to side and then back a little, to loosen his neck. He breathed in through his nose. The wind was on his back. The guy on the left took his hands out of his pockets. No gloves. And either he had bad arthritis or he was holding rolls of quarters in both palms.

"We got a message for you," he said.

Reacher glanced at the pier rail and the ocean beyond. The sea was gray and roiled. Probably freezing. Throwing them in would be close to homicide.

"From that club manager?" he asked.

"From his people, yeah."

"He's got people?"

“This is Atlantic City,” the guy said. “Stands to reason he’s got people.”

Reacher nodded. “So let me guess. I’m supposed to get out of town, skedaddle, beat it, get lost, never come back, never darken your door again, forget I was ever here.”

“You’re on the ball today.”

“I can read minds,” Reacher said. “I used to work a fairground booth. Right next to the bearded lady. Weren’t you guys there too? Three booths along? The World’s Ugliest Twins?”

The guy on the right took his hands out of his pockets. He had the same neuralgic pain in his knuckles, or else a couple more rolls of quarters. Reacher smiled. He liked rolls of quarters. Good old-fashioned technology. And they implied the absence of firearms. Nobody clutches rolls of coins if they’ve got a gun in their pocket.

“We don’t want to hurt you,” the guy on the right said.

“But you got to go,” the guy on the left said. “We don’t need people interfering in this town’s economic procedures.”

“So take the easy way out,” the guy on the right said. “Let us walk you to the bus depot. Or the old folk could wind up getting hurt, too. And not just financially.”

Reacher heard an absurd voice in his head: straight from his childhood, his mother saying please don’t fight when you’re wearing new clothes. Then he heard a boot-camp unarmed-combat instructor saying hit them fast, hit them hard, and hit them a lot. He flexed his shoulders inside his coat. Suddenly felt very grateful to the woman in the store for making him take the bigger size. He gazed at the two guys, exactly nothing in his eyes except a little amusement and a lot of absolute self-confidence. He moved a little to his left, and they rotated with him. He moved a little closer to them, tightening the triangle. He raised his hand and smoothed his hair where the wind was disturbing it.

“Better just to walk away now,” he said.

They didn’t, like he knew they wouldn’t. They responded to the challenge by crowding in toward him, imperceptibly, just a fractional muscle movement that eased their body weight forward rather than backward. They need to be laid up for a week, he thought. Cheekbones, probably. A sharp blow, depressed fractures, maybe temporary loss of consciousness, bad headaches. Nothing too severe. He waited until the wind gusted again and raised his right hand and swept his hair back behind his left ear. Then he kept his hand there, with his elbow poised high, like a thought had just struck him.

“Can you guys swim?” he asked.

It would have taken superhuman self-control not to glance at the ocean. They weren’t superhuman. They turned their heads like robots. He clubbed the right-hand guy in the face with his raised elbow and cocked it again and hit the left-hand guy as his head snapped back toward the sound of his buddy’s bones breaking. They went down on the boards together and their rolls of quarters split open and coins rolled everywhere and pirouetted small silver circles and collided and fell over, heads and tails. Reacher coughed in the bitter cold and stood still and replayed it in his head: two guys, two seconds, two blows, game over. You’ve still got the good stuff. He breathed hard and wiped cold sweat from his forehead. Then he walked away. Stepped off the pier onto the boardwalk and went looking for Western Union.

He had looked at the address in the motel phone book, but he didn’t need it. You could find a Western Union office by feel. By intuition. It was a simple algorithm: stand on a street corner and ask yourself, is it more likely to be left or right now? Then you turned left or right as appropriate, and pretty soon you were in the right neighborhood, and pretty soon you found it. This one had a two-year-old Chevy Suburban parked on a fireplug right outside the door. The truck was black with smoked windows, and it was immaculately clean and shiny. It had three short UHF antennas on the roof. There was a woman alone in the driver’s seat. He glanced at her once, and then again. She was fair-haired and looked relaxed and alert all at the same time. Something about the way her arm was

resting against the window. And she was cute, no doubt about that. Some kind of magnetism about her. He glanced away and went inside the office and claimed his cash. Folded it into his pocket and came back out and found the woman on the sidewalk, standing right in front of him, looking straight at him. At his face, like she was checking off similarities and differences against a mental image. It was a process he recognized. He had been looked at like that once or twice before.

“Jack Reacher?” she said.

He double-checked his memory, because he didn’t want to be wrong, although he didn’t think he was. Short fair hair, great eyes looking right at him, some kind of a quiet confidence in the way she held herself. She had qualities he would remember. He was sure of that. But he didn’t remember them. Therefore he had never seen her before.

“You knew my brother,” he said.

She looked surprised, and a little gratified. And temporarily lost for words.

“I could tell,” he said. “People look at me like that, they’re thinking about how we look a lot alike, but also a lot different.”

She said nothing.

“Been nice meeting you,” he said, and moved away.

“Wait,” she called.

He turned back.

“Can we talk?” she said. “I’ve been looking for you.”

He nodded. “We could talk in the car. I’m freezing my ass off out here.”

She was still for a second longer, with her eyes locked on his face. Then she

moved suddenly and opened the passenger door.

“Please,” she said. He climbed in and she walked around the hood and climbed in on her side. Started the engine to run the heater, but didn’t go anywhere.

“I knew your brother very well,” she said. “We dated, Joe and I. More than dated, really. We were pretty serious for a time. Before he died.”

Reacher said nothing. The woman flushed.

“Well, obviously before he died,” she said. “Stupid thing to say.”

She went quiet.

“When?” Reacher asked.

“We were together two years. We broke up a year before it happened.”

Reacher nodded.

“I’m M. E. Froelich,” she said.

She left an unspoken question hanging in the air: did he ever mention me? Reacher nodded again, trying to make it like the name meant something. But it didn’t. Never heard of you, he thought. But maybe I wish I had.

“Emmy?” he said. “Like the television thing?”

“M. E.,” she said. “I go by my initials.”

“What are they for?”

“I won’t tell you that.”

He paused a beat. “What did Joe call you?”

“He called me Froelich,” she said.

He nodded. “Yes, he would.”

“I still miss him,” she said.

“Me too, I guess,” Reacher said. “So is this about Joe, or is it about something else?”

She was still again, for another beat. Then she shook herself, a tiny subliminal quiver, and came back all business.

“Both,” she said. “Well, mainly something else, really.”

“Want to tell me what?”

“I want to hire you for something,” she said. “On a kind of posthumous recommendation from Joe. Because of what he used to say about you. He talked about you, time to time.”

Reacher nodded. “Hire me for what?”

Froelich paused again and came up with a tentative smile.

“I’ve rehearsed this line,” she said. “Couple of times.”

“So let me hear it.”

“I want to hire you to assassinate the Vice President of the United States.”

2

“Good line,” Reacher said. “Interesting proposition.”

“What’s your answer?” Froelich asked.

“No,” he said. “Right now I think that’s probably the safest all-around response.”

She smiled the tentative smile again and picked up her purse.

“Let me show you some ID,” she said.

He shook his head.

“Don’t need it,” he said. “You’re United States Secret Service.”

She looked at him. “You’re pretty quick.”

“It’s pretty clear,” he said.

“Is it?”

He nodded. Touched his right elbow. It was bruised.

“Joe worked for them,” he said. “And knowing the way he was, he probably worked pretty hard, and he was a little shy, so anybody he dated was probably in the office, otherwise he would never have met them. Plus, who else except the government keeps two-year-old Suburbans this shiny? And parks next to hydrants? And who else but the Secret Service could track me this efficiently through my banking arrangements?”

“You’re pretty quick,” she said again.

“Thank you,” he said back. “But Joe didn’t have anything to do with Vice Presidents. He was in Financial Crimes, not the White House protection detail.”

She nodded. “We all start out in Financial Crimes. We pay our dues as anticounterfeiting grunts. And he ran anticounterfeiting. And you’re right, we met in the office. But he wouldn’t date me then. He said it wasn’t appropriate.

But I was planning on transferring across to the protection detail as soon as I could anyway, and as soon as I did, we started going out."

Then she went a little quiet again. Looked down at her purse.

"And?" Reacher said.

She looked up. "Something he said one night. I was kind of keen and ambitious back then, you know, starting a new job and all, and I was always trying to figure out if we were doing the best we could, and Joe and I were goofing around, and he said the only real way for us to test ourselves would be to hire some outsider to try to get to the target. To see if it was possible, you know. A security audit, he called it. I asked him, like who? And he said, my little brother would be the one. If anybody could do it, he could. He made you sound pretty scary."

Reacher smiled. "That sounds like Joe. A typical harebrained scheme."

"You think?"

"For a smart guy, Joe could be very dumb sometimes."

"Why is it dumb?"

"Because if you hire some outsider, all you need to do is watch for him coming. Makes it way too easy."

"No, his idea was the person would come in anonymously and unannounced. Like now, absolutely nobody knows about you except me."

Reacher nodded. "OK, maybe he wasn't so dumb."

"He felt it was the only way. You know, however hard we work, we're always thinking inside the box. He felt we should be prepared to test ourselves against some random challenge from the outside."

"And he nominated me?"

"He said you'd be ideal."

"So why wait so long to try it? Whenever this conversation was, it had to be at

least six years ago. Didn't take you six years to find me."

"It was eight years ago," Froelich said. "Right at the start of our relationship, just after I got the transfer. And it only took me one day to find you."

"So you're pretty quick, too," Reacher said. "But why wait eight years?"

"Because now I'm in charge. I was promoted head of the Vice President's detail four months ago. And I'm still keen and ambitious, and I still want to know that we're doing it right. So I decided to follow Joe's advice, now that it's my call. I decided to try a security audit. And you were recommended, so to speak. All those years ago, by somebody I trusted very much. So I'm here to ask you if you'll do it."

"You want to get a cup of coffee?"

She looked surprised, like coffee wasn't on the agenda.

"This is urgent business," she said.

"Nothing's too urgent for coffee," he said. "That's been my experience. Drive me back to my motel and I'll take you to the downstairs lounge. Coffee's OK, and it's a very dark room. Just right for a conversation like this."

The government Suburban had a DVD-based navigation system built into the dash, and Reacher watched her fire it up and pick the motel's street address off a long list of potential Atlantic City destinations.

"I could have told you where it is," he said.

"I'm used to this thing," she said. "It talks to me."

"I wasn't going to use hand signals," he said.

She smiled again and pulled out into the traffic. There wasn't much. Evening gloom was falling. The wind was still blowing. The casinos might do OK, but the boardwalk and the piers and the beaches weren't going to see much business for the next six months. He sat still next to her in the warmth from the heater and

thought about her with his dead brother for a moment. Then he just watched her drive. She was pretty good at it. She parked outside the motel door and he led her inside and down a half-flight of stairs to the lounge. It smelled stale and sticky, but it was warm and there was a flask of coffee on the machine behind the bar. He pointed at it, and then at himself and Froelich, and the barman got busy. Then he walked to a corner booth and slid in across the vinyl with his back to the wall and the whole room in sight. *Old habits*. Froelich clearly had the same habits because she did the same thing, so they ended up close together and side by side. Their shoulders were almost touching.

“You’re very similar to him,” she said.

“In some ways,” he said. “Not in others. Like, I’m still alive.”

“You weren’t at his funeral.”

“It came at an inopportune time.”

“You sound just the same.”

“Brothers often do.”

The barman brought the coffee, on a beer-stained cork tray. Two cups, black, little plastic pots of fake milk, little paper packets of sugar. Two cheap little spoons, pressed out of stainless steel.

“People liked him,” Froelich said.

“He was OK, I guess.”

“Is that all?”

“That’s a compliment, one brother to another.”

He lifted his cup and tipped the milk and the sugar and the spoon off his saucer.

“You drink it black,” Froelich said. “Just like Joe.”

Reacher nodded. “Thing I can’t get my head around is I was always the kid brother, but now I’m three years older than he ever got to be.”

Froelich looked away. “I know. He just stopped being there, but the world carried on anyway. It should have changed, just a little bit.”

She sipped her coffee. Black, no sugar. *Just like Joe*.

“Nobody ever think of doing it, apart from him?” Reacher asked. “Using an outsider for a security audit?”

“Nobody.”

“Secret Service is a relatively old organization.”

“So?”

“So I’m going to ask you an obvious question.”

She nodded. “President Lincoln signed us into existence just after lunch on April fourteenth, 1865. Then he went to the theater that same night and got assassinated.”

“Ironic.”

“From our perspective, now. But back then we were only supposed to protect the currency. Then McKinley was assassinated in 1901 and they figured they should have somebody looking out for the President full-time, and we got the job.”

“Because there was no FBI until the 1930s.”

She shook her head. “Actually there was an early incarnation called the Office of the Chief Examiner, founded in 1908. It became the FBI in 1935.”

“That sounds like the sort of pedantic stuff Joe would know.”

“I think it was him who told me.”

“He would. He loved all that historical stuff.”

He saw her make an effort not to go quiet again.

“So what was your obvious question?” she said.

“You use an outsider for the very first time in a hundred and one years, got to be

You use an outsider for the very first time in a hundred and one years, got to be because of something more than you're a perfectionist."

She started to answer, and then she stopped. She paused a beat. He saw her decide to lie. He could sense it, in the angle of her shoulder.

"I'm under big pressure," she said. "You know, professionally. There are a lot of people waiting for me to screw up. I need to be sure."

He said nothing. Waited for the embellishments. Liars always embellish.

"I wasn't an easy choice," she said. "It's still rare for a woman to head up a team. There's a gender thing going on, same as anywhere else, I guess, same as always. Some of my colleagues are a little Neanderthal."

He nodded. Said nothing.

"It's always on my mind," she said. "I've got to slam-dunk the whole thing."

"Which Vice President?" he asked. "The new one or the old one?"

"The new one," she said. "Brook Armstrong. The Vice President–elect, strictly speaking. I was assigned to lead his team back when he joined the ticket, and we want continuity, so it's a little bit like an election for us, too. If our guy wins, we stay on the job. If our guy loses, we're back to being footsoldiers."

Reacher smiled. "So did you vote for him?"

She didn't answer.

"What did Joe say about me?" he asked.

"He said you'd relish the challenge. You'd beat your brains out to find a way of getting it done. He said you had a lot of ingenuity and you'd find three or four ways of doing it and we'd learn a lot from you."

"And you said?"

"This was eight years ago, don't forget. I was kind of full of myself, I guess. I said no way would you even get close."

"And he said?"

And he said?

“He said plenty of people had made that same mistake.”

Reacher shrugged. “I was in the Army eight years ago. I was probably ten thousand miles away, up to my eyes in bullshit.”

She nodded. “Joe knew that. It was kind of theoretical.”

He looked at her. “But now it’s not theoretical, apparently. Eight years later you’re going ahead with it. And I’m still wondering why.”

“Like I said, now it’s my call. And I’m under big-time pressure to perform well.”

He said nothing.

“Would you consider doing it?” Froelich asked.

“I don’t know much about Armstrong. Never heard much about him before.”

She nodded. “Nobody has. He was a surprise choice. Junior senator from North Dakota, standard-issue family man, wife, grown-up daughter, cares long-distance for his sick old mother, never made any kind of national impact. But he’s an OK guy, for a politician. Better than most. I like him a lot, so far.”

Reacher nodded. Said nothing.

“We would pay you, obviously,” Froelich said. “That’s not a problem. You know, a professional fee, as long as it’s reasonable.”

“I’m not very interested in money,” Reacher said. “I don’t need a job.”

“You could volunteer.”

“I was a soldier. Soldiers never volunteer for anything.”

“That’s not what Joe said about you. He said you did all kinds of stuff.”

“I don’t like to be employed.”

“Well, if you want to do it for free we certainly wouldn’t object.”

He was quiet for a beat. “There would be expenses, probably, if a person did this sort of a thing properly.”

“We’d reimburse them, naturally. Whatever the person needed. All official and aboveboard, afterward.”

He looked down at the table. “Exactly what would you want the person to do?”

“I want you, not a person. Just to act the part of an assassin. To scrutinize things from an outside perspective. Find the holes. Prove to me if he’s vulnerable, with times, dates, places. I could start you off with some schedule information, if you want.”

“You offer that to all assassins? If you’re going to do this you should do it for real, don’t you think?”

“OK,” she said.

“You still think nobody could get close?”

She considered her answer carefully, maybe ten seconds. “On balance, yes, I do. We work very hard. I think we’ve got everything covered.”

“So you think Joe was wrong back then?”

She didn’t answer.

“Why did you break up?” he asked.

She glanced away for a second and shook her head. “That’s private.”

“How old are you?”

“Thirty-five.”

“So eight years ago you were twenty-seven.”

She smiled. “Joe was nearly thirty-six. An older man. I celebrated his birthday with him. And his thirty-seventh.”

Reacher moved sideways a little and looked at her again. *Joe had good taste*, he thought. Close up, she looked good. Smelled good. Perfect skin, great eyes, long lashes. Good cheekbones, a small straight nose. She looked lithe and strong. She was attractive, no doubt about it. He wondered what it would be like to hold her, kiss her. Go to bed with her. He pictured Joe wondering the same thing, the first time she walked into the office he ran. And he eventually found out. *Way to go, Joe*.

“I guess I forgot to send a birthday card,” he said. “Either time.”

“I don’t think he minded.”

“We weren’t very close,” he said. “I don’t really understand why not.”

“He liked you,” she said. “He made that clear. Talked about you, time to time. I think he was quite proud of you, in his own way.”

Reacher said nothing.

“So will you help me out?” she asked.

“What was he like? As a boss?”

“He was terrific. He was a superstar, professionally.”

“What about as a boyfriend?”

“He was pretty good at that, too.”

Reacher said nothing. There was a long silence.

“Where have you been since you left the service?” Froelich asked. “You haven’t left much of a paper trail.”

“That was the plan,” Reacher said. “I keep myself to myself.”

Questions in her eyes.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m not radioactive.”

“I know,” she said. “Because I checked. But I’m kind of curious, now that I’ve

met you. You were just a name before."

He glanced down at the table, trying to look at himself as a third party, described secondhand in occasional bits and pieces by a brother. It was an interesting perspective.

"Will you help me out?" she asked again.

She unbuttoned her coat, because of the warmth of the room. She was wearing a pure white blouse under the coat. She moved a little closer, and half-turned to face him. They were as close as lovers on a lazy afternoon.

"I don't know," he said.

"It'll be dangerous," she said. "I have to warn you that nobody will know you're out there except me. That's a big problem if you're spotted anywhere. Maybe it's a bad idea. Maybe I shouldn't be asking."

"I wouldn't be spotted anywhere," Reacher said.

She smiled. "That's exactly what Joe told me you'd say, eight years ago."

He said nothing.

"It's very important," she said. "And urgent."

"You want to tell me why it's important?"

"I've already told you why."

"Want to tell me why it's urgent?"

She said nothing.

"I don't think this is theoretical at all," he said.

She said nothing.

"I think you've got a situation," he said.

She said nothing.

“I think you know somebody is out there,” he said. “An active threat.”

She looked away. “I can’t comment on that.”

“I was in the Army,” he said. “I’ve heard answers like that before.”

“It’s just a security audit,” she said. “Will you do it for me?”

He was quiet for a long time.

“There would be two conditions,” he said.

She turned back and looked at him. “Which are?”

“One, I get to work somewhere cold.”

“Why?”

“Because I just spent a hundred and eighty-nine dollars on warm clothes.”

She smiled, briefly. “Everywhere he’s going should be cold enough for you in the middle of November.”

“OK,” he said. He dug in his pocket and slid her a matchbook and pointed to the name and address printed on it. “And there’s an old couple working a week in this particular club and they’re worried about getting ripped off for their wages. Musicians. They should be OK, but I need to be sure. I want you to talk to the cops here.”

“Friends of yours?”

“Recent.”

“When’s payday supposed to be?”

“Friday night, after the last set. Midnight, maybe. They need to pick up their money and get their stuff to their car. They’ll be heading to New York.”

“I’ll ask one of our agents to check in with them every day. Better than the cops, I think. We’ve got a field office here. Big-time money laundering in Atlantic City. It’s the casinos. So you’ll do it?”

Reacher went quiet again and thought about his brother. *He's back to haunt me*, he thought. *I knew he would be, one day*. His coffee cup was empty but still warm. He lifted it off the saucer and tilted it and watched the sludge in the bottom flow toward him, slow and brown, like river silt.

"When does it need to be done?" he asked.

At that exact moment less than a hundred and thirty miles away in a warehouse behind Baltimore's Inner Harbor cash was finally exchanged for two weapons and matching ammunition. A lot of cash. Good weapons. Special ammunition. The planning for the second attempt had started with an objective analysis of the first attempt's failure. As realistic professionals they were reluctant to blame the whole debacle on inadequate hardware, but they agreed that better firepower couldn't hurt. So they had researched their needs and located a supplier. He had what they wanted. The price was right. They negotiated a guarantee. It was their usual type of arrangement. They told the guy that if there was a problem with the merchandise they would come back and shoot him through the spinal cord, low down, put him in a wheelchair.

Getting their hands on the guns was the last preparatory step. Now they were ready to go fully operational.

Vice President–elect Brook Armstrong had six main tasks in the ten weeks between election and inauguration. Sixth and least important was the continuation of his duties as junior senator from North Dakota until his term officially ended. There were nearly six hundred and fifty thousand people in the state and any one of them might want attention at any time, but Armstrong assumed they all understood they were in limbo until his successor took over. Equally, Congress wasn't doing much of anything until January. So his senatorial duties didn't occupy much of his attention.

Fifth task was to ease his successor into place back home. He had scheduled two rallies in the state so he could hand the new guy on to his own tame media contacts. It had to be a visual thing, shoulder to shoulder, plenty of grip-and-grin for the cameras, Armstrong taking a metaphoric step backward, the new guy taking a metaphoric step forward. The first rally was planned for the twentieth of

November, the other four days later. Both would be irksome, but party loyalty demanded it.

Fourth task was to learn some things. He would be a member of the National Security Council, for instance. He would be exposed to stuff a junior senator from North Dakota couldn't be expected to know. A CIA staffer had been assigned as his personal tutor, and there were Pentagon people coming in, and Foreign Service people. It was all kept as fluid as possible, but there was a lot of work to be fitted around everything else.

And everything else was increasingly urgent. The third task was where it started to get important. There were some tens of thousands of contributors who had supported the campaign nationally. The really big donors would be taken care of in other ways, but the individual thousand-dollar-and-up supporters needed to share the success, too. So the party had scheduled a number of big receptions in D.C. where they could all mill around and feel important and at the center of things. Their local committees would invite them to fly in and dress up and rub shoulders. They would be told it wasn't officially certain yet whether it would be the new President or the new Vice President hosting them. In practice three-quarters of the duty was already scheduled to fall to Armstrong.

The second task was where it started to get *really* important. Second task was to stroke Wall Street. A change of administration was a sensitive thing, financially. No real reason why there should be anything but smooth continuity, but temporary nerves and jitters could snowball fast, and market instability could cripple a new presidency from the get-go. So a lot of effort went into investor reassurance. The President-elect handled most of it himself, with the crucial players getting extensive personal face time in D.C., but Armstrong was slated to handle the second-division people up in New York. There were five separate trips planned during the ten-week period.

But Armstrong's first and most important task of all was to run the transition team. A new administration needs a roster of nearly eight thousand people, and about eight hundred of them need confirmation by the Senate, of which about eighty are really key players. Armstrong's job was to participate in their selection, and then use his Senate connections to grease their way through the upcoming confirmation process. The transition operation was based in the official space on G Street, but it made sense for Armstrong to lead it from his old Senate office. All in all, it wasn't fun. It was grunt work, but that's the difference between being first and second on the ticket.

between being first and second on the ticket.

So the third week after the election went like this: Armstrong spent the Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday inside the Beltway, working with the transition team. His wife was taking a well-earned post-election break at home in North Dakota, so he was temporarily living alone in his Georgetown row house. Froelich packed his protection detail with her best agents and kept them all on high alert.

He had four agents camping out with him in the house and four Metro cops permanently stationed outside in cars, two in front and two in the alley behind. A Secret Service limo picked him up every morning and drove him to the Senate offices, with a second car following. *The gun car*, it was called. There was the usual efficient transfer across the sidewalks at both ends. Then three agents stayed with him throughout the day. His personal detail, three tall men, dark suits, white shirts, quiet ties, sunglasses even in November. They kept him inside a tight unobtrusive triangle of protection, always unsmiling, eyes always roving, physical placement always subtly adjusting. Sometimes he could hear faint sounds from their radio earpieces. They wore microphones on their wrists and carried automatic weapons under their jackets. He thought the whole experience was impressive, but he knew he was in no real danger inside the office building. There were D.C. cops outside, the Hill's own security inside, permanent metal detectors on all the street doors, and all the people he saw were either elected members or their staffers, who had been security-cleared many times over.

But Froelich wasn't as sanguine as Armstrong was. She watched for Reacher in Georgetown and on the Hill, and saw no sign of him. He wasn't there. Neither was anybody else worth worrying about. It should have relaxed her, but it didn't.

The first scheduled reception for mid-level donors was held on the Thursday evening, in the ballroom of a big chain hotel. The whole building was swept by dogs during the afternoon, and key interior positions were occupied by Metro cops who would stay put until Armstrong finally left many hours later. Froelich put two Secret Service agents on the door, six in the lobby, and eight in the ballroom itself. Another four secured the loading dock, which is where Armstrong would enter. Discreet video cameras covered the whole of the lobby and the whole of the ballroom and each was connected to its own recorder. The recorders were all slaved to a master timecode generator, so there would be a permanent real-time record of the whole event.

The guest list was a thousand people long. November weather meant they

couldn’t line up on the sidewalk and the tenor of the event meant security had to be pleasantly unobtrusive, so the standard winter protocol applied, which was to get the guests in off the street and into the lobby immediately through a temporary metal detector placed inside the frame of the entrance door. Then they milled around inside the lobby and eventually made their way to the ballroom door. Once there, their printed invitations were checked and they were asked for photo ID. The invitations were laid facedown on a glass sheet for a moment, and then handed back as souvenirs. Under the glass sheet was a video camera working to the same timecode as the others, so names and faces were permanently tied together in the visual record. Finally, they passed through a second metal detector and onward into the ballroom. Froelich’s crew were serious but good-humored, and made it seem more like they were protecting the guests themselves from some thrilling unspecified danger, rather than protecting Armstrong from *them*.

Froelich spent her time staring at the video monitors, looking for faces that didn’t fit. She saw none, but she kept on worrying anyway. She saw no sign of Reacher. She wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or annoyed about that. *Was he doing it or not?* She thought about cheating and issuing his description to her team. Then she thought better of it. *Win or lose, I need to know*, she thought.

Armstrong’s two-car convoy entered the loading dock a half hour later, by which time the guests had drunk a couple of glasses of cheap sparkling wine and eaten as many soggy canapés as they wanted. His personal three-man detail brought him in through a rear passageway and kept to a ten-foot radius for the duration. His appearance was timed to last two hours, which gave him an average of a little over seven seconds per guest. On a rope line seven seconds would be an eternity, but this situation was different, primarily in the handshaking method. A campaigning politician learns very quickly to fumble a handshake and grip the *back* of the recipient’s hand, not the palm. It creates a breathless *so-much-support-here-I’ve-got-to-be-quick* type of drama, and better still it means it’s strictly the pol’s choice when he lets go, not the supporter’s. But in an event of this nature, Armstrong couldn’t use that tactic. So he had to shake properly and work fast to keep to seven seconds each. Some guests were content with brevity and others hung on a little longer, gushing their congratulations like maybe he hadn’t experienced any before. There were some men who went for the two-handed forearm grip. Some put their arms around his shoulders for private photographs. Some were disappointed that his wife wasn’t there. Some weren’t. There was one woman in particular who took his hand in a firm grip and held on

for ten or twelve seconds, even pulling him nice and close and whispering something in his ear. She was surprisingly strong and nearly pulled him off balance. He didn't really hear what she whispered. Maybe her room number. But she was slim and pretty, with dark hair and a great smile, so he wasn't too upset about it. He just smiled back gratefully and moved on. His Secret Service detail didn't bat an eye.

He worked a complete circle around the room, eating nothing, drinking nothing, and made it back out of the rear door after two hours and eleven minutes. His personal detail put him back in his car and drove him home. The sidewalk crossing was completely uneventful and another eight minutes later his house was locked down for the night and secure. Back at the hotel the rest of the security detail withdrew unnoticed and the thousand guests left over the next hour or so.

Froelich drove straight back to her office and called Stuyvesant at home just before midnight. He answered right away and sounded like he had been holding his breath and waiting for the phone to ring.

"Secure," she said.

"OK," he replied. "Any problems?"

"None that I saw."

"You should review the video anyway. Look for faces."

"I plan to."

"Happy about tomorrow?"

"I'm not happy about anything."

"Your outsider working yet?"

"Waste of time. Three full days and he's nowhere to be seen."

"What did I tell you? It wasn't necessary."

There was nothing to accomplish in D.C. on the Friday morning so Armstrong stayed home and had his CIA guy come in for two hours' teaching. Then his detail rehearsed the full motorcade exfiltration. They used an armored Cadillac with two escort Suburbans flanked by two cop cars and a motorcycle escort. They drove him to Andrews Air Force Base for a midday flight to New York City. As a courtesy the defeated incumbents had allowed him the use of Air Force Two, although technically it couldn't use that call sign until it had a real inaugurated Vice President in it, so for the moment it was just a comfortable private airplane. It flew into La Guardia and three cars from the Secret Service's New York Field Office picked the party up and drove them south to Wall Street, with an NYPD motorcycle escort riding ahead of them.

Froelich was already in position inside the Stock Exchange. The New York Field Office had plenty of experience working with the NYPD and she was comfortable that the building was adequately secure. Armstrong's reassurance meetings were held in a back office and lasted two hours, so she relaxed until the photo call. The transition team's media handlers wanted news pictures on the sidewalk in front of the building's pillars, sometime after the closing bell. She had no chance whatsoever of persuading them otherwise, because they desperately needed the positive exposure. But she was profoundly unhappy about her guy standing still in the open air for any period of time. She had agents video the photographers for the record and check their press credentials twice and search every camera bag and every pocket of every vest. She checked in by radio with the local NYPD lieutenant and confirmed that the perimeter was definitively secured to a thousand feet on the ground and five hundred vertically. Then she allowed Armstrong out with the assorted brokers and bankers and they posed for five whole agonizing minutes. The photographers crouched on the sidewalk right at Armstrong's feet so they could get group head-and-shoulders shots with the *New York Stock Exchange* lintel inscription floating overhead. *Too much proximity*, Froelich thought. Armstrong and the financial guys stared optimistically and resolutely into the middle distance, endlessly. Then, mercifully, it was over. Armstrong gave his patented "I'd love to stay" wave and backed away into the building. The financiers followed him and the photographers dispersed. Froelich relaxed again. Next up was a routine road trip back to *Air Force Two* and a flight to North Dakota for the first of Armstrong's handover rallies the next day, which meant she had maybe fourteen hours without major pressure.

Her cell phone rang in the car as they got close to La Guardia. It was her senior colleague from the Treasury side of the organization, at his desk in D.C.

“That bank account we’re tracking?” he said. “The customer just called in again. He’s wiring twenty grand to Western Union in Chicago.”

“In cash?”

“No, cashier’s check.”

“A Western Union cashier’s check? For twenty grand? He’s paying somebody for something. Goods or services. Got to be.”

Her colleague made no reply, and she clicked her phone off and just held it in her hand for a second. *Chicago?* Armstrong wasn’t going anywhere near Chicago.

Air Force Two landed in Bismarck and Armstrong went home to join his wife and spend the night in his own bed in the family house in the lake country south of the city. It was a big old place with an apartment above the garage block that the Secret Service took over as its own. Froelich withdrew Mrs. Armstrong’s personal detail to give the couple some privacy. She gave all the personal agents the rest of the night off and tasked four more to stake out the house, two in front, two behind. State troopers made up the numbers, parked in cars on a three-hundred-yard radius. She walked the whole area herself as a final check, and her cell phone rang as she came back into the driveway.

“Froelich?” Reacher said.

“How did you get this number?”

“I was a military cop. I can get numbers.”

“Where are you?”

“Don’t forget those musicians, OK? In Atlantic City? Tonight’s the night.”

Then the phone went dead. She walked up to the apartment above the garage and idled some time away. She called the Atlantic City office at one in the morning and was told that the old couple had been paid the right money at the right time and escorted to their car and all the way out to I-95, where they had turned north. She clicked off her phone and sat for a spell in a window seat, just thinking. It was a quiet night, very dark. Very lonely. Cold. Distant dogs barked occasionally. No moon, no stars. She hated nights like this. The family-house situations were always the trickiest. Eventually anybody got thoroughly sick of being guarded, and even though Armstrong was still amused by the novelty she could tell he was ready for some down time. And certainly his wife was. So she had nobody at all in the interior and was relying exclusively on perimeter defense. She knew she should be doing more, but she had no real option, at least not until they explained the extent of the present danger to Armstrong himself, which they hadn't yet done, because the Secret Service never does.

Saturday dawned bright and cold in North Dakota, and preparations began immediately after breakfast. The rally was scheduled for one o'clock on the grounds of a church community center on the south side of the city. Froelich had been surprised that it was an outdoors event, but Armstrong had told her that it would be heavy overcoat weather, nothing more. He told her that North Dakotans usually didn't retreat indoors until well after Thanksgiving. At which point she was almost overcome by an irrational desire to cancel the whole event. But she knew the transition team would oppose her, and she didn't want to fight losing battles this early. So she said nothing. Then she almost proposed Armstrong wear a Kevlar vest under his heavy overcoat, but eventually she decided against it. *Poor guy's got four years of this, maybe eight,* she thought. *He's not even inaugurated yet. Too early*. Later, she wished she'd gone with her first instinct.

The church community center's grounds were about the size of a soccer field and were bordered to the north by the church itself, which was a handsome white clapboard structure traditional in every way. The other three sides were well fenced and two of them backed onto established housing subdivisions, with the third fronting onto the street. There was a wide gateway that opened into a small parking lot. Froelich banned parking for the day and put two agents and a local cop car on the gate, with twelve more cops on foot on the grass just inside the perimeter. She put two cop cars in each of the surrounding streets and had the church itself searched by the local police canine unit and then closed and locked

church itself searched by the local police canine unit and then closed and locked. She doubled the personal detail to six agents, because Armstrong's wife was accompanying him. She told the detail to stick close to the couple at all times. Armstrong didn't argue with that. Being seen in the center of a prowling pack of six tough guys looked very high-level. His successor-designate would be happy about it, too. Some of that D.C. power-elite status might rub off on him.

The Armstrongs made it a rule never to eat at public events. It was too easy to look like idiots, greasy fingers, trying to talk while chewing. So they had an early lunch at home and drove up in convoy and got right to the business at hand. It was easy enough. Even relaxing, in a way. Local politics was not Armstrong's problem anymore. Wouldn't be much of a problem for his successor either, to be truthful. He had a handsome newly minted plurality and was basking in a lot of reflected glow. So the afternoon turned out to be not much more than a pleasant stroll around a pleasant piece of real estate. His wife was beautiful, his successor stayed at his side throughout, there were no awkward questions from the press, all four network affiliates and CNN were there, all the local papers had sent photographers, and stringers from *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* showed up, too. All in all it went so well he began to wish they hadn't bothered to schedule the follow-up event. It really wasn't necessary.

Froelich watched the faces. She watched the perimeters. She watched the crowd, straining to sense any alteration in the herd behavior that might indicate tension or uneasiness or sudden panic. She saw nothing. Saw no sign of Reacher, either.

Armstrong stayed thirty minutes longer than anticipated, because the weak fall sun bathed the field in gold, and there was no breeze, and he was having a good time, and there was nothing scheduled for the evening except a quiet dinner with key members of the state legislature. So his wife was escorted home and his personal detail herded him back toward the cars and drove him north into the city of Bismarck itself. There was a hotel adjacent to the restaurant and Froelich had arranged rooms for the dead time before the meal. Armstrong napped for an hour and then showered and dressed. The meal was going well when his chief of staff fielded a call. The outgoing President and Vice President were formally summoning the President-elect and the Vice President–elect to a one-day transition conference at the Naval Support Facility in Thurmont, starting early the next morning. It was a conventional invitation, because inevitably there was business to discuss. And it was delivered in the traditional way, last-minute and pompous, because the lame ducks wanted to push the world around one last

time. But Froelich was delighted, because the unofficial name for the Naval Support Facility in Thurmont is Camp David, and there is no safer place in the world than that particular wooded clearing in the Maryland mountains. She decided they should all fly back to Andrews immediately and take Marine helicopters straight out to the compound. If they spent all night and all day there she would be able to relax completely for twenty-four hours.

But late on the Sunday morning a Navy steward found her at breakfast in the mess hall and plugged a telephone into a baseboard socket near her chair. Nobody uses cordless or cellular phones at Camp David. Too vulnerable to electronic eavesdropping.

“Call transferred from your main office, ma’am,” the steward said.

There was empty silence for a second, and then a voice.

“We should get together,” Reacher said.

“Why?”

“Can’t tell you on the phone.”

“Where have you been?”

“Here and there.”

“Where are you now?”

“In a room at the hotel you used for the reception Thursday.”

“You got something urgent for me?”

“A conclusion.”

“Already? It’s only been five days. You said ten.”

“Five was enough.”

Froelich cupped the phone. “What’s the conclusion?”

Then she found herself holding her breath.

“It’s impossible,” Reacher said.

She breathed out and smiled. “Told you so.”

“No, your job is impossible. You should get over here, right now.”

3

She drove back to D.C. in her Suburban and argued with herself the whole way. *If the news is really bad, when do I involve Stuyvesant? Now? Later?* In the end she pulled over on Dupont Circle and called him at home and asked him the question direct.

“I’ll get involved when I need to,” he said. “Who did you use?”

“Joe Reacher’s brother.”

“*Our* Joe Reacher? I didn’t know he had a brother.”

“Well, he did.”

“What’s he like?”

“Just like Joe, maybe a little rougher.”

“Older or younger?”

“Both,” Froelich said. “He started out younger, and now he’s older.”

Stuyvesant went quiet for a moment.

“Is he as smart as Joe?” he asked.

“I don’t know yet,” Froelich said.

Stuyvesant went quiet again. “So call me when you need to. But sooner rather than later, OK? And don’t say anything to anybody else.”

She ended the call and threaded back into the Sunday traffic and drove the last mile and parked outside the hotel. The desk was expecting her and sent her straight up to 1201, twelfth floor. She followed a waiter through the door. He was carrying a tray with a pot of coffee and two upside-down cups on saucers. No milk, no sugar, no spoons, and a single pink rose in a narrow china vase. The room was standard-issue city hotel. Two queen beds, flowery prints at the window, bland lithographs on the walls, a table, two chairs, a desk with a complicated phone, a credenza with a television, a connecting door to the next

complicated phone, a credenza with a television, a connecting door to the next room. Reacher was sitting on the nearer bed. He was wearing a black nylon warm-up jacket with a black T-shirt and black jeans and black shoes. He had an earpiece in his ear and a pretty good fake Secret Service pin in the collar of the jacket. He was clean shaven and his hair had been cut very short and was neatly combed.

“What have you got for me?” she asked.

“Later,” he said.

The waiter put the tray on the table and backed silently out of the room. Froelich watched the door click shut behind him and turned back to Reacher. Paused a beat.

“You look just like one of us,” she said.

“You owe me lots of money,” he said.

“Twenty grand?”

He smiled. “Most of that. They told you about it?”

She nodded. “But why a cashier’s check? That puzzled me.”

“It won’t, soon.”

He stood up and stepped across to the table. Righted the cups and picked up the pot and poured the coffee.

“You timed the room service well,” she said.

He smiled again. “I knew where you were, I knew you’d be driving back. It’s Sunday, no traffic. Easy enough to derive an ETA.”

“So what have you got to tell me?”

“That you’re good,” he said. “That you’re really, really good. That I don’t think anybody else could do this better than you.”

She went quiet. “But?”

“But you’re not good enough. You need to face that whoever it is out there could walk right in and get the job done.”

“I never said there’s anybody out there.”

He said nothing.

“Just give me the information, Reacher.”

“Three and a half,” he said.

“Three and a half what? Out of ten?”

“No, Armstrong’s dead, three and a half times over.”

She stared at him. “Already?”

“That’s how I score it,” he said.

“What do you mean, a half?”

“Three definites and one possible.”

She stopped halfway to the table and just stood there, bewildered.

“In five *days*?” she said. “How? What aren’t we doing?”

“Have some coffee,” he said.

She moved toward the table like an automaton. He handed her a cup. She took it and backed away to the bed. The cup rattled in the saucer.

“Two main approaches,” Reacher said. “Like in the movies, John Malkovich or Edward Fox. You’ve seen those movies?”

She nodded blankly. “We have a guy monitoring the movies. In the Office of Protection Research. He analyzes all the assassination movies. John Malkovich made *In the Line of Fire* with Clint Eastwood.”

“And Rene Russo,” Reacher said. “She was pretty good.”

“Edward Fox was in *The Day of the Jackal*, way back.”

Reacher nodded. “John Malkovich was looking to take out the President of the United States, and Edward Fox was looking to take out the President of France. Two competent assassins, working solo. But there was a fundamental difference between them. John Malkovich knew all along he wasn’t going to survive the mission. He knew he’d die a second after the President. But Edward Fox aimed to get away with it.”

“He didn’t, though.”

“It was a movie, Froelich. Had to end that way. He could have gotten away with it, easy as anything.”

“So?”

“It gives us two strategies to consider. A close-up suicide mission, or a clean long-distance job.”

“We know all that. I told you, we have a person working on it. We get transcripts, analyses, memos, position papers. We talk to the screenwriters sometimes, if there’s new stuff. We want to know where they get their ideas from.”

“Learn anything?”

She shrugged and sipped her coffee and he saw her trawl back through her memory, like she had all the transcripts and all the memos and all the position papers stashed away in a mental filing cabinet.

“*The Day of the Jackal* impressed us, I think,” she said. “Edward Fox played a pro shooter who had a rifle built so it could be disguised as a crutch for a handicapped veteran. He used the disguise to get into a nearby building some hours before a public appearance and planned a long-range head shot from a high-floor window. He was using a silencer, so he could get away afterward. Could have worked, in theory. But the story was set a long time ago. Before I was born. Early sixties, I think. General de Gaulle, after the Algerian crisis, wasn’t it? We enforce far wider perimeters now. The movie was a factor in that, I guess. Plus our own problems in the early sixties, of course.”

“And *In the Line of Fire*?” Reacher asked.

“John Malkovich played a renegade CIA operative,” she said. “He manufactured a plastic pistol in his basement so he could beat the metal detectors and conned his way into a campaign rally and intended to shoot the President from very close range. Whereupon, as you say, we would have taken him down immediately.”

“But old Clint jumped into the path of the bullet,” Reacher said. “Good movie, I thought.”

“Implausible, we thought,” Froelich answered. “Two main faults. First, the idea that you can build a working pistol from hobbyist material is absurd. We look at stuff like that all the time. His gun would have exploded, blown his hand off at the wrist. The bullet would have just fallen out of the wreckage onto the floor. And second, he spent about a hundred thousand dollars along the way. Lots and lots of travel, phony offices for mail drops, plus a fifty-thousand-dollar donation to the party that got him into the campaign rally in the first place. Our assessment was a maniac personality like that wouldn’t have big bucks to spend. We dismissed it.”

“It was only a movie,” Reacher said. “But it was illustrative.”

“Of what?”

“Of the idea of getting into a rally and attacking the target from close quarters, as opposed to the old idea of going for long-distance safety.”

Froelich paused. Then she smiled, a little warily at first, like a grave danger might be receding into the distance.

“Is this all you’ve got?” she said. “Ideas? You had me worried.”

“Like the rally here on Thursday night,” Reacher said. “A thousand guests. Time and place announced in advance. Advertised, even.”

“You found the transition’s website?”

Reacher nodded. “It was very useful. Lots of information.”

“We vet it all.”

We vet it all.

“But it still told me every place Armstrong’s going to be,” Reacher said. “And when. And in what kind of a context. Like the rally right here, Thursday night. With the thousand guests.”

“What about them?”

“One of them was a dark-haired woman who got hold of Armstrong’s hand and pulled him a little off-balance.”

She stared at him. “You were there?”

He shook his head. “No, but I heard about it.”

“How?”

He ignored the question. “Did you see it?”

“Only on video,” she said. “Afterward.”

“That woman could have killed Armstrong. That was the first opportunity. Up to that point you were doing real well. You were scoring A-plus during the government stuff around the Capitol.”

She smiled again, a little dismissively. “Could have? You’re wasting my time, Reacher. I wanted better than *could have*. I mean, anything *could* happen. A bolt of lightning could hit the building. A meteorite, even. The universe could stop expanding and time could reverse. That woman was an invited guest. She was a party contributor. She passed through two metal detectors and she was ID-checked at the door.”

“Like John Malkovich.”

“We’ve been through that.”

“Suppose she was a martial-arts expert. Maybe military-trained in black ops. She could have broken Armstrong’s neck like you could break a pencil.”

“Suppose, suppose.”

“Suppose she was armed.”

“She wasn’t. She passed through two metal detectors.”

Reacher put his hand in the pocket of his jacket and came out with a slim brown object.

“Ever seen one of these?” he asked.

It looked like a penknife, maybe three and a half inches long. A curved handle. He clicked a button and a speckled brown blade snapped outward.

“This is entirely ceramic,” he said. “Same basic stuff as a bathroom tile. Harder than anything except a diamond. Certainly harder than steel, and sharper than steel. And it doesn’t trigger a metal detector. That woman could have been carrying this thing. She could have slit Armstrong open from his belly button to his chin with it. Or cut his throat. Or stuck it in his eye.”

He passed the weapon over. Froelich took it and studied it.

“Made by a firm called Böker,” Reacher said. “In Solingen, Germany. They’re expensive, but they’re relatively available.”

Froelich shrugged. “OK, so you bought a knife. Doesn’t prove anything.”

“That knife was in the ballroom Thursday night. It was clutched in that woman’s left hand, in her pocket, with the blade open, all the time she was shaking Armstrong’s hand and pulling him close. She got his belly within three inches of it.”

Froelich stared at him. “Are you serious? Who was she?”

“She was a party supporter called Elizabeth Wright, from Elizabeth, New Jersey, as it happens. She gave the campaign four thousand bucks, a grand each in her name, her husband’s, and her two kids’. She stuffed envelopes for a month, put a big sign in her front yard, and operated a phone tree on Election Day.”

“So why would she carry a knife?”

“Well, actually, she didn’t.”

He stood up and walked to the connecting door. Pulled his half open and

He stood up and walked to the connecting door. Pulled his hair open and knocked hard on the inner half.

"OK, Neagley," he called.

The inner door opened and a woman walked in from the next room. She was somewhere in her late thirties, medium height and slim, dressed in blue jeans and a soft gray sweatshirt. She had dark hair. Dark eyes. A great smile. The way she moved and the tendons in her wrists spoke of serious gym time.

"You're the woman on the video," Froelich said.

Reacher smiled. "Frances Neagley, meet M. E. Froelich. M. E. Froelich, meet Frances Neagley."

"Emmy?" Frances Neagley said. "Like the television thing?"

"Initials," Reacher said.

Froelich stared at him. "Who is she?"

"The best Master Sergeant I ever worked with. Beyond expert-qualified on every kind of close-quarters combat you can think of. Scares the hell out of me, certainly. She got cut loose around the same time I did. Works as a security consultant in Chicago."

"Chicago," Froelich repeated. "That's why the check went there."

Reacher nodded. "She funded everything, because I don't have a credit card or a checkbook. As you already know, probably."

"So what happened to Elizabeth Wright from New Jersey?"

"I bought these clothes," Reacher said. "Or rather, you bought them for me. And the shoes. Sunglasses, too. My version of Secret Service fatigues. I went to the barber. Shaved every day. I wanted to look plausible. Then I wanted a lone woman from New Jersey, so I met a couple of Newark flights at the airport here on Thursday. Watched the crowd and latched onto Ms. Wright and told her I was a Secret Service agent and there was a big security snafu going on and she should come with me."

"How did you know she was headed to the rally?"

How did you know she was headed to the rally?"

"I didn't. I just looked at all the women coming out of baggage claim and tried to judge by how they looked and what they were carrying. Wasn't easy. Elizabeth Wright was the sixth woman I approached."

"And she believed you?"

"I had impressive ID. I bought this radio earpiece from Radio Shack, two bucks. Little electrical cord disappearing down the back of my neck, see? I had a rented Town Car, black. I looked the part, believe me. *She* believed me. She was quite excited about the whole thing, really. I brought her back to this room and guarded her all evening while Neagley took over. I kept listening to my earpiece and talking into my watch."

Froelich switched her gaze across to Neagley.

"We wanted New Jersey for a reason," Neagley said. "Their driver's licenses are the easiest to forge, you know that? I had a laptop and a color printer with me. I'd just gotten through making Reacher's Secret Service ID for him. No idea if it was anything like the real thing, but it sure looked good. So I made up a Jersey license with my picture and her name and address on it, printed it out, laminated it with a thing we bought from Staples for sixty bucks, sandpapered the edges clean, scuffed it around a little bit, and shoved it in my bag. Then I dressed up some and took Ms. Wright's party invitation with me and headed downstairs. I got into the ballroom OK. With the knife in my pocket."

"And?"

"I hung around, then I got hold of your guy. Held on for a spell."

Froelich looked straight at her. "How would you have done it?"

"I had hold of his right hand in my right. I pulled him close, he rotated slightly, I had a clear shot at the right side of his neck. Three-and-a-half-inch blade, I'd have stuck it through his carotid artery. Then jerked it around some. He'd have bled to death inside thirty seconds. I was one arm movement away from doing it. Your guys were ten feet away. They'd have plugged me afterward for sure, but they couldn't have stopped me from getting it done."

Froelich was pale and silent. Neagley looked away.

“Without the knife would have been harder,” she said. “But not impossible. Breaking his neck would have been tricky because he’s got some muscle up there. I’d have had to do a quick two-step to get his weight moving, and if your guys were fast enough they might have stopped me halfway. So I guess I’d have gone with a blow to his larynx, hard enough to crush it. A jab with my left elbow would have done the trick. I’d have been dead before him, probably, but he’d have suffocated right afterward, unless you’ve got people that could do an emergency tracheotomy on the ballroom floor within a minute or so, which I guess you don’t have.”

“No,” Froelich said. “We don’t have.”

Then she fell silent again.

“Sorry to ruin your day,” Neagley said. “But hey, you wanted to know this stuff, right? No point doing a security audit and not telling you the outcome.”

Froelich nodded. “What did you whisper to him?”

“I said, I’ve got a knife. Just for the hell of it. But very quietly. If anybody had challenged me I was going to claim I’d said, where’s your wife? Like I was coming on to him. I imagine that happens, time to time.”

Froelich nodded again.

“It does,” she said. “Time to time. What else?”

“Well, he’s safe in his house,” Neagley said.

“You checked?”

“Every day,” Reacher said. “We’ve been on the ground in Georgetown since Tuesday night.”

“I didn’t see you.”

“That was the plan.”

“How did you know where he lives?”

“We followed your limos.”

Froelich said nothing.

“Good limos,” Reacher said. “Slick tactics.”

“Friday morning was especially good,” Neagley said.

“But the rest of Friday was pretty bad,” Reacher said. “Lack of coordination produced a major communications error.”

“Where?”

“Your D.C. people had video of the ballroom but clearly your New York people never saw it, because as well as being the woman in the party dress Thursday night Neagley was also one of the photographers outside the Stock Exchange.”

“Some North Dakota paper has a website,” Neagley said. “Like all of them, with a graphic of their masthead. I downloaded it and modified it into a press pass. Laminated it and put brass eyelets in it and slung it around my neck with a nylon cord. Trawled the secondhand stores in lower Manhattan for battered old photo gear. Kept a camera up in front of my face the whole time so Armstrong wouldn’t recognize me.”

“You should operate an access list,” Reacher said. “Control it, somehow.”

“We can’t,” Froelich said. “It’s a constitutional thing. The First Amendment guarantees journalistic access, any old time they want it. But they were all searched.”

“I wasn’t carrying,” Neagley said. “I was just breaching your security for the hell of it. But I *could* have been carrying, that’s for damn sure. I could have gotten a bazooka past that kind of a search.”

Reacher stood up and stepped to the credenza. Pulled open a drawer and took out a stack of photographs. They were commercial one-hour six-by-four-inch color prints. He held up the first picture. It was a low-angle shot of Armstrong standing outside the Stock Exchange with the carved lintel inscription floating like a halo over his head.

“Neagley’s,” Reacher said. “Good picture, I thought. Maybe we should sell it to

a magazine, defray some of the twenty grand."

He stepped back to the bed and sat down and passed the photograph to Froelich. She took it and stared at it.

"Point is I was four feet away," Neagley said. "I could have gotten to him if I'd wanted to. A John Malkovich situation again, but what the hell."

Froelich nodded blankly. Reacher dealt the next print, like a playing card. It was a grainy telephoto picture clearly taken from a great distance, looking down from way above street level. It showed Armstrong outside the Stock Exchange, tiny in the center of the frame. There was a crude gunsight drawn around his head with a ballpoint pen.

"This is the half," Reacher said. "I was on the sixtieth floor of an office building three hundred yards away. Inside the police perimeter, but higher than they were checking."

"With a rifle?"

He shook his head. "With a piece of wood the same size and shape as a rifle. And another camera, obviously. And a big lens. But I played it out for real. I wanted to see if it was possible. I figured people wouldn't like to see a rifle-shaped package, so I got a big square box from a computer monitor and put the wood in diagonally, top corner to bottom corner. Then I just wheeled it into the elevator on a hand truck, pretended it was real heavy. I saw a few cops. I was wearing these clothes without the fake pin or the earpiece. I guess they thought I was a delivery driver or something. Friday after the closing bell, the district was getting quiet enough to be convenient. I found a window in an empty conference room. It wouldn't open, so I guess I'd have had to cut out a circle of glass. But I could have taken a shot, just like I took the picture. And I'd have been Edward Fox. I could have gotten clean away."

Froelich nodded, reluctantly.

"Why only a half?" she asked. "Looks like you had him fair and square."

"Not in Manhattan," Reacher said. "I was about nine hundred feet away and six hundred feet up. That's an eleven-hundred-foot shot, give or take. Not a problem for me ordinarily, but the wind currents and the thermals around those towers

turn it into a lottery. They're always changing, second to second. Swirling, up and down and side to side. They make it so you can't guarantee a hit. That's the good news, really. No competent rifleman would try a distance shot in Manhattan. Only an idiot would, and an idiot's going to miss anyway."

Froelich nodded again, a little relieved.

"OK," she said.

So she's not worried about an idiot, Reacher thought. *Must be a professional*.

"So," he said. "Call it a total score of three, if you want, and forget the half. Don't worry about New York at all. It was tenuous."

"But Bismarck wasn't tenuous," Neagley said. "We got there about midnight. Commercial flights, through Chicago."

"I called you from a mile away," Reacher said. "About the musicians."

He dealt the next two photographs.

"Infrared film," he said. "In the dark."

The first picture showed the back of the Armstrong family house. The colors were washed out and distorted, because of the infrared photography. But it was a fairly close shot. Every detail was clearly visible. Doors, windows. Froelich could even see one of her agents, standing in the yard.

"Where were you?" she asked.

"On the neighbor's property," Reacher said. "Maybe fifty feet away. Simple night maneuver, infiltration in the dark. Standard infantry techniques, quiet and stealthy. Couple of dogs barked some, but we got around them. The state troopers in the cars didn't see a thing."

Neagley pointed to the second picture. It showed the front of the house. Same colors, same detail, same distance.

"I was across the street, at the front," she said. "Behind somebody's garage."

Reacher sat forward on the bed. "Plan would have been to have an M16 each,

with the grenade launcher on it. Plus some other full-auto long guns. Maybe even M60 machine guns on tripods. We certainly had enough time to set them up. We'd have put phosphorous grenades into the building with the M16s, simultaneously front and back, one each, ground floor, and either Armstrong would burn up in bed or we'd shoot him down as he ran out the door or jumped out the window. We'd have timed it for maybe four in the morning. Shock would have been total. Confusion would have been tremendous. We could have taken your agents out in the melee, easy as anything. We could have chewed the whole house to splinters. We'd have probably exfiltrated OK too, and then it would have boiled down to a standard manhunt situation, which wouldn't have been ideal out there in the boonies, but we'd probably have made it, with a bit of luck. Edward Fox again."

There was silence.

"I don't believe it," Froelich said. She stared at the pictures. "This can't be Friday night. This was some other night. You weren't really there."

Reacher said nothing.

"Were you?" she asked.

"Well, check this out," Reacher said. He handed her another photograph. It was a telephoto shot. It showed her sitting in the apartment window above the garage, staring out into the darkness, holding her cell phone. Her heat signature was picked up in strange reds and oranges and purples. But it was her. No doubt about it. Like she was close enough to touch.

"I was calling New Jersey," she said, quietly. "Your musician friends got away OK."

"Good," Reacher said. "Thanks for arranging it."

She stared at the three infrared pictures, one after the other, and said nothing.

"So the ballroom and the family house were definites," Reacher said. "Two-zip for the bad guys. But the next day was the real clincher. Yesterday. That rally at the church."

He passed the last photo across. It was regular daylight film, taken from a high angle. It showed Armstrong in his heavy overcoat walking across the community

angle. It showed Armstrong in his heavy overcoat walking across the community center lawns. The late golden sun threw a long shadow out behind him. He was surrounded by a loose knot of people, but his head was clearly visible. It had another crude gunsight inked around it.

“I was in the church tower,” Reacher said.

“The church was locked.”

“At eight o’clock in the morning. I’d been in there since five.”

“It was searched.”

“I was up where the bells were. At the top of a wooden ladder, behind a trapdoor. I put pepper on the ladder. Your dogs lost interest and stayed on the first floor.”

“It was a local unit.”

“They were sloppy.”

“I thought about canceling the event.”

“You should have.”

“Then I thought about asking him to wear a vest.”

“Wouldn’t have mattered. I would have aimed at his head. It was a beautiful day, Froelich. Clear sky, sunny, no wind at all. Cool, dense air. *True* air. I was a couple hundred feet away. I could have shot his eyes out.”

She went quiet.

“John Malkovich or Edward Fox?” she asked.

“I’d have hit Armstrong and then as many other people as I could, three or four seconds. Cops mostly, I guess, but women and children too. I’d have aimed to wound them, not kill them. In the stomach, probably. More effective that way. People flopping around and bleeding all over the place, it would have created mass panic. Enough to get away, probably. I’d have busted out of the church within ten seconds and gotten away into the surrounding subdivision fast enough. Neagley was standing by in a car. She’d have been rolling soon as she

enough. Neagley was standing by in a car. She'd have been rolling soon as she heard the shots. So I'd probably have been Edward Fox."

Froelich stood up and walked to the window. Put her hands palms down on the sill and stared out at the weather.

"This is a disaster," she said.

Reacher said nothing.

"I guess I didn't anticipate your level of focus," she said. "I didn't know it was going to be all-out guerrilla warfare."

Reacher shrugged. "Assassins aren't necessarily going to be the gentlest people you'll ever meet. And they're the ones who make the rules here."

Froelich nodded. "And I didn't know you were going to get help, especially not from a woman."

"I kind of warned you," Reacher said. "I told you it couldn't work if you were watching for me coming. You can't expect assassins to call ahead with their plans."

"I know," she said. "But I was imagining a lone man, is all."

"It's always going to be a team," Reacher said. "There are no lone men."

He saw an ironic half smile reflected in the glass.

"So you don't believe the Warren Report?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Neither do you," he said. "No professional ever will."

"I don't feel like much of a professional today," she said.

Neagley stood up and stepped over and perched on the sill, next to Froelich, her back against the glass.

"Context," she said. "That's what you've got to think about. It's not so bad.

Reacher and I were United States Army Criminal Investigation Division specialists. We were trained in all kinds of ways. Trained to think, mostly. Trained to be inventive. And to be ruthless, for sure, and self-confident. And tougher than the people we were responsible for, and some of *them* were plenty tough. So we're very unusual. People as specialized as us, there's not more than maybe ten thousand in the whole country."

"Ten thousand is a lot," Froelich said.

"Out of two hundred eighty-one million? And how many of them are currently the right age and available and motivated? It's a statistically irrelevant fraction. So don't sweat it. You've got an impossible job. You're *required* to leave him vulnerable. Because he's a politician. He's got to do all this visible stuff. We would never have *dreamed* of letting anybody do what Armstrong does. Never in a million years. It would have been completely out of the question."

Froelich turned around and faced the room. Swallowed once and nodded vaguely into the middle distance.

"Thanks," she said. "For trying to make me feel better. But I've got some thinking to do, don't I?"

"Perimeters," Reacher said. "Keep the perimeters to a half-mile all around, keep the public away from him, and keep at least four agents literally within touching distance at all times. That's all you can do."

Froelich shook her head.

"Can't do it," she said. "It would be considered unreasonable. Undemocratic, even. And there are going to be hundreds of weeks like this one over the next three years. *After* three years it'll start to get worse because they'll be in their final year and they'll be trying to get reelected and everything will have to be looser still. And about seven years from now Armstrong will start looking for the nomination in his own right. Seen how they do that? Crowd scenes all over the place from New Hampshire onward? Town meetings in shirtsleeves? Fund-raisers? It's a complete nightmare."

The room went quiet. Neagley peeled off the windowsill and walked across the room to the credenza. Took two thin files out of the drawer the photographs had been in. She held up the first.

“A written report,” she said. “Salient points and recommendations, from a professional perspective.”

“OK,” Froelich said.

Neagley held up the second file.

“And our expenses,” she said. “They’re all accounted for. Receipts and all. You should make the check payable to Reacher. It was his money.”

“OK,” Froelich said again. She took the files and clasped them to her chest, like they offered her protection from something.

“And there’s Elizabeth Wright from New Jersey,” Reacher said. “Don’t forget her. She needs to be taken care of. I told her that to make up for missing the reception you’d probably invite her to the Inauguration Ball.”

“OK,” Froelich said for the third time. “The Ball, whatever. I’ll speak to somebody about it.”

Then she just stood still.

“This is a disaster,” she said again.

“You’ve got an impossible job,” Reacher said. “Don’t beat up on yourself.”

She nodded. “Joe used to tell me the same thing. He said, in the circumstances, we should consider a ninety-five percent success rate a triumph.”

“Ninety-four percent,” Reacher said. “You’ve lost one President out of eighteen since you guys took over. Six percent failure rate. That’s not too bad.”

“Ninety-four, ninety-five,” she said. “Whatever, I guess he was right.”

“Joe was right about a lot of things, the way I recall it.”

“But we’ve never lost a Vice President,” she said. “Not yet.”

She put the files under one arm and stacked the photographs on the credenza and butted them around with her fingertips until they were neatly piled. Picked them up and put them in her bag. Then she glanced at each of the four walls in turn,

like she was memorizing their exact details. A distracted little gesture. She nodded at nothing in particular and headed for the door.

“Got to go,” she said.

She walked out of the room and the door sucked shut behind her. There was silence for a spell. Then Neagley stood up straight at the end of one of the beds and clamped the cuffs of her sweatshirt in her palms and stretched her arms high above her head. She tilted her head back and yawned. Her hair cascaded over her shoulders. The hem of her shirt rode up and Reacher saw hard muscle above the waistband of her jeans. It was ridged like a turtle’s back.

“You still look good,” he said.

“So do you, in black.”

“Feels like a uniform,” he said. “Five years since I last wore one.”

Neagley finished stretching. Smoothed her hair and pulled the hem of her shirt back down into place.

“Are we done here?” she asked.

“Tired?”

“Exhausted. We worked our butts off, ruining that poor woman’s day.”

“What did you think of her?”

“I liked her. And like I told her, I think she’s got an impossible job. And all in all, I think she’s pretty good at it. I doubt if anybody else could do it better. And I think she kind of knows that too, but it’s burning her up that she’s forced to settle for ninety-five percent instead of a hundred.”

“I agree.”

“Who’s this guy Joe she was talking about?”

“An old boyfriend.”

“You knew him?”

“My brother. She dated him.”

“When?”

“They broke up six years ago.”

“What’s he like?”

Reacher glanced at the floor. Didn’t correct the *is* to a *was*.

“Like a civilized version of me,” he said.

“So maybe she’ll want to date you, too. Civilized can be an overrated virtue. And collecting the complete set is always fun for a girl.”

Reacher said nothing. The room went quiet.

“I guess I’ll head home,” Neagley said. “Back to Chicago. Back to the real world. But I got to say, it was a pleasure working with you again.”

“Liar.”

“No, really, I mean it.”

“So stick around. A buck gets ten she’ll be back inside an hour.”

Neagley smiled. “What, to ask you out?”

Reacher shook his head. “No, to tell us what her real problem is.”

4

Froelich walked across the sidewalk to her Suburban. Spilled the files onto the passenger seat. Started the engine and kept her foot hard on the brake. Pulled her phone from her bag and flipped it open. Entered Stuyvesant's home number digit by digit and then paused with her finger resting on the call button. The phone waited patiently with the number displayed on the tiny green screen. She looked ahead through the windshield, fighting with herself. She looked down at the phone. Back out at the street. Her finger rested on the button. Then she flipped the phone shut and dropped it on top of the files. Pulled the transmission lever into drive and took off from the curb with a loud chirp from all four tires. Hung a left and a right and headed for her office.

The room-service guy came back to collect the coffee tray and left with it. Reacher took his jacket off and hung it in the closet. Pulled the T-shirt out of the waistband of his jeans.

"Did you vote in the election?" Neagley asked him.

He shook his head. "I'm not registered anywhere. Did you?"

"Sure," she said. "I always vote."

"Did you vote for Armstrong?"

"Nobody votes for Vice President. Except his family, maybe."

"But did you vote for that ticket?"

She nodded. "Yes, I did. Would you have?"

"I guess so," he said. "You ever hear anything about Armstrong before?"

"Not really," she said. "I mean, I'm interested in politics, but I'm not one of those people who can name all hundred senators."

"Would you run for office?"

“Not in a million years. I like a low profile, Reacher. I was a sergeant, and I always will be, inside. Never wanted to be an officer.”

“You had the potential.”

She shrugged and smiled, all at the same time. “Maybe I did. But what I didn’t have was the desire. And you know what? Sergeants have plenty of power. More than you guys ever realized.”

“Hey, I realized,” he said. “Believe me, I realized.”

“She’s not coming back, you know. We’re sitting here talking and wasting time and I’m missing all kinds of flights home, and she’s not coming back.”

“She’s coming back.”

Froelich parked in the garage and headed upstairs. Presidential protection was a 24/7 operation, but Sundays still felt different. People dressed different, the air was quieter, phone traffic was down. Some people spent the day at home. *Like Stuyvesant, for instance*. She closed her office door and sat at her desk and opened a drawer. Took out the things she needed and slipped them into a large brown envelope. Then she opened Reacher’s expenses file and copied the figure on the bottom line onto the top sheet of her yellow pad and switched her shredder on. Fed the whole file into it, sheet by sheet, and then followed it with the file of recommendations and all the six-by-four photographs, one by one. She fed the file folders themselves in and stirred the long curling shreds around in the output bin until they were hopelessly tangled. Then she switched the machine off again and picked up the envelope and headed back down to the garage.

Reacher saw her car from the hotel room window. It came around the corner and slowed. There was no traffic on the street. Late in the afternoon, on a November Sunday in D.C. The tourists were in their hotels, showering, getting ready for dinner. The natives were home, reading their newspapers, watching the NFL on television, paying bills, doing chores. The air was fogging with evening. Streetlights were sputtering to life. The black Suburban had its headlights on. It pulled a wide U across both lanes and slid into an area reserved for waiting taxis.

“She’s back,” Reacher said.

Neagley joined him at the window. “We can’t help her.”

“Maybe she isn’t looking for help.”

“Then why would she come back?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “A second opinion? Validation? Maybe she just wants to talk. You know, a problem shared is a problem halved.”

“Why talk to us?”

“Because we didn’t hire her and we can’t fire her. And we weren’t rivals for her position. You know how these organizations work.”

“Is she *allowed* to talk to us?”

“Didn’t you ever talk to somebody you shouldn’t have?”

Neagley made a face. “Occasionally. Like, I talked to you.”

“And I talked to you, which was worse, because you weren’t an officer.”

“But I had the potential.”

“That’s for damn sure,” he said, looking down. “Now she’s just sitting there.”

“She’s on the phone. She’s calling somebody.”

The room phone rang.

“Us, evidently,” Reacher said.

He picked up the phone.

“We’re still here,” he said.

Then he listened for a moment.

“OK,” he said, and put the phone down.

“She coming up?” Neagley asked. He nodded and went back to the window in time to see Froelich climbing out of the car. She was holding an envelope. She skipped across the sidewalk and disappeared from sight. Two minutes later they heard the distant chime of the elevator arriving on their floor. Twenty seconds after that, a knock on the door. Reacher stepped over and opened up and Froelich walked in and stopped in the middle of the room. Glanced first at Neagley, and then at Reacher.

“Can we have a minute in private?” she asked him.

“Don’t need one,” he said. “The answer is yes.”

“You don’t know the question yet.”

“You trust me, because you trusted Joe and Joe trusted me, therefore that loop is closed. Now you want to know if I trust Neagley, so you can close *that* loop also, and the answer is yes, I trust her absolutely, therefore you can too.”

“OK,” Froelich said. “I guess that was the question.”

“So take your jacket off and make yourself at home. You want more coffee?”

Froelich slipped out of her jacket and dumped it on the bed. Stepped over to the table and laid the envelope down.

“More coffee would be fine,” she said.

Reacher dialed room service and asked for a large pot and three cups, three saucers, and absolutely nothing else.

“I only told you half the truth before,” Froelich said.

“I guessed,” Reacher said.

Froelich nodded apologetically and picked up the envelope. Opened the flap and pulled out a clear vinyl page protector. There was something in it.

“This is a copy of something that came in the mail,” she said.

She dropped it on the table and Reacher and Neagley inched their chairs closer

to take a look. The page protector was a standard office product. The thing inside it was an eight-by-ten color photograph of a single sheet of white paper. It was shown lying on a wooden surface and had a wooden office ruler laid alongside it to indicate scale. It looked like a normal letter-sized sheet. Centered left to right on it, an inch or so above the middle, were five words: *You are going to die*. The words were crisp and bold, obviously printed from a computer.

The room stayed quiet.

“When did it come?” Reacher asked.

“The Monday after the election,” Froelich said. “First-class mail.”

“Addressed to Armstrong?”

Froelich nodded. “At the Senate. But he hasn’t seen it yet. We open all public mail addressed to protectees. We pass on whatever is appropriate. We didn’t think this was appropriate. What do you think of it?”

“Two things, I guess. First, it’s true.”

“Not if I can help it.”

“You discovered the secret of immortality? Everybody’s going to die, Froelich. I am, you are. Maybe when we’re a hundred, but we aren’t going to live forever. So technically it’s a statement of fact. An accurate prediction, as much as a threat.”

“Which raises a question,” Neagley said. “Is the sender smart enough to have phrased it that way on purpose?”

“What would be the purpose?”

“To avoid prosecution if you find him? Or her? To be able to say, hey, it wasn’t a threat, it was a statement of fact? Anything we can infer from the forensics about the sender’s intelligence?”

Froelich looked at her in surprise. And with a measure of respect.

“We’ll get to that,” she said. “And we’re pretty sure it’s a him, not a her.”

“Why?”

“We’ll get to that,” Froelich said again.

“But why are you worrying about it?” Reacher asked. “That’s my second reaction. Surely those guys get sackloads of threats in the mail.”

Froelich nodded. “Several thousand a year, typically. But most of them are sent to the President. It’s fairly unusual to get one directed specifically at the Vice President. And most of them are on old scraps of paper, written in crayon, bad spelling, crossings out. Defective, in some way. And this one isn’t defective. This one stood out from the start. So we looked at it pretty hard.”

“Where was it mailed?”

“Las Vegas,” Froelich said. “Which doesn’t really help us. In terms of Americans traveling inside America, Vegas has the biggest transient population there is.”

“You’re sure an American sent it?”

“It’s a percentage game. We’ve never had a written threat from a foreigner.”

“And you don’t think he’s a Vegas resident?”

“Very unlikely. We think he traveled there to mail it.”

“Because?” Neagley asked.

“Because of the forensics,” Froelich said. “They’re spectacular. They indicate a very careful and cautious guy.”

“Details?”

“Were you a specialist? In the military police?”

“She was a specialist in breaking people’s necks,” Reacher said. “But I guess she took an intelligent interest in the other stuff.”

“Ignore him,” Neagley said. “I spent six months training in the FBI labs.”

Froelich nodded. “We sent this to the FBI. Their facilities are better than ours.”

There was a knock at the door. Reacher stood up and walked over and put his eye to the peephole. The room-service guy, with the coffee. Reacher opened the door and took the tray from him. A large pot, three upside-down cups, three saucers, no milk or sugar or spoons, and a single pink rose in a thin china vase. He carried the tray back to the table and Froelich moved the photograph to give him room to put it down. Neagley righted the cups and started to pour.

“What did the FBI find?” she asked.

“The envelope was clean,” Froelich said. “Standard brown letter size, gummed flap, metal butterfly closure. The address was printed on a self-adhesive label, presumably by the same computer that printed the message. The message was inserted unfolded. The flap gum was wetted with faucet water. No saliva, no DNA. No fingerprints on the metal closure. There were five sets of prints on the envelope itself. Three of them were postal workers. Their prints are on file as government workers. It’s a condition of their employment. The fourth was the Senate mail handler who passed it on to us. And the fifth was our agent who opened it.”

Neagley nodded. “So forget the envelope. Except inasmuch as the faucet water was pretty thoughtful. This guy’s a reader, keeps up with the times.”

“What about the letter itself?” Reacher asked.

Froelich picked up the photograph and tilted it toward the room light.

“Very weird,” she said. “The FBI lab says the paper was made by the Georgia-Pacific company, their high-bright, twenty-four-pound heavyweight, smooth finish, acid-free laser stock, standard eight-and-a-half-by-eleven-inch letter size. Georgia-Pacific is the third-largest supplier into the office market. They sell hundreds of tons a week. So a single sheet is completely untraceable. But it’s a buck or two more expensive per ream than basic paper, so that might mean something. Or it might not.”

“What about the printing?”

“It’s a Hewlett-Packard laser. They can tell by the toner chemistry. Can’t tell which model, because all their black-and-white lasers use the same basic toner powder. The typeface is Times New Roman, from Microsoft Works 4.5 for

powder. The typeface is Times New Roman, from Microsoft Works 4.5 for Windows 95, fourteen point, printed bold."

"They can narrow it down to a single computer program?"

Froelich nodded. "They've got a guy who specializes in that. Typefaces tend to change very subtly between different word processors. The software writers fiddle with the kerning, which is the spacing between individual letters, as opposed to the spacing between words. If you look long enough, you can kind of sense it. Then you can measure it and identify the program. But it doesn't help us much. There must be a million zillion PCs out there with Works 4.5 bundled in."

"No prints, I guess," Neagley said.

"Well, this is where it gets weird," Froelich answered. She moved the coffee tray an inch and laid the photograph flat. Pointed to the top edge. "Right here on the actual edge we've got microscopic traces of talcum dust." Then she pointed to a spot an inch below the top edge. "And here we've got two definite smudges of talcum dust, one on the back, one on the front."

"Latex gloves," Neagley said.

"Exactly," Froelich said. "Disposable latex gloves, like a doctor's or a dentist's. They come in boxes of fifty or a hundred pairs. Talcum powder inside the gloves, to help them slip on. But there's always some loose talcum in the box, so it transfers from the outside of the glove, too. The dust on the top edge is baked, but the smudges aren't."

"OK," Neagley said. "So the guy puts on his gloves, breaks open a new ream of paper, fans it out so it won't jam, which puts talcum dust on the top edge where he flips it, then he loads the printer, prints out his message, whereby he bakes the dust."

"Because a laser printer uses heat," Froelich said. "The toner powder is attracted to the paper by an electrostatic charge in the shape of the required letters, and then a heater bakes it into place permanently. Somewhere around two hundred degrees, I think, momentarily."

Neagley leaned close. "Then he lifts the paper out of the output tray by clamping it between his finger and thumb, which accounts for the smudges front and back

near the top, which aren't baked because it's after the heat treatment. And you know what? This is a home office, not a work office."

"Why?"

"The front and back finger-clamping thing means the paper is coming out of the printer vertically. Popping up, like a toaster. If it was feeding out flat the marks would be different. There would be a smear on the front where he slides it. Less of a mark on the back. And the only Hewlett-Packard lasers that feed the paper vertically are the little ones. Home-office things. I've got one myself. It's too slow to use high-volume. And the toner cartridge only lasts twenty-five hundred pages. Strictly amateur. So this guy did this in his den at home."

Froelich nodded. "Stands to reason, I guess. He's going to look a little strange using latex gloves in front of other people in an office."

Neagley smiled, like she was making progress. "OK, he's in his den, he lifts the message out of his printer and slides it straight into the envelope and seals it with faucet water while he's still got his gloves on. Hence none of his prints."

Froelich's face changed. "No, this is where it gets *very* weird." She pointed to the photograph. Laid her fingernail on a spot an inch below the printed message, and a little ways to the right of center. "What might we expect to find here, if this were a regular letter, for instance?"

"A signature," Reacher said.

"Exactly," Froelich said. She kept her fingernail on the spot. "And what we've *got* here is a thumbprint. A big, clear, definite thumbprint. Obviously deliberate. Bold as anything, exactly vertical, clear as a bell. Way too big to be a woman's. He's signed the message with his thumb."

Reacher pulled the photograph out from under Froelich's finger and studied it.

"You're tracing the print, obviously," Neagley said.

"They won't find anything," Reacher said. "The guy must be completely confident his prints aren't on file anywhere."

"We've come up blank so far," Froelich said.

“Which *is* very weird,” Reacher said. “He signs the note with his thumbprint, which he’s happy to do because his prints aren’t on file anywhere, but he goes to extraordinary lengths to make sure his prints don’t appear anywhere else on the letter or the envelope. Why?”

“Effect?” Neagley said. “Drama? Neatness?”

“But it explains the expensive paper,” Reacher said. “The smooth coating holds the print. Cheap paper would be too porous.”

“What did they use at the lab?” Neagley asked. “Iodine fuming? Ninhydrin?”

Froelich shook her head. “It came right up on the fluoroscope.”

Reacher was quiet for a spell, just looking at the photograph. Full dark had fallen outside the window. Shiny, damp, city dark.

“What else?” he said to Froelich. “Why are you so uptight?”

“Should she need something else?” Neagley asked him.

He nodded. *You know how these organizations work*, he had told her.

“There has to be something else,” he said. “I mean, OK, this is scary and challenging and intriguing, I guess, but she’s really panicking here.”

Froelich sighed and picked up her envelope and slid out a second item. It was identical to the first in almost every respect. A plastic page protector, with an eight-by-ten color photograph inside it. The photograph showed a sheet of white paper. There were eight words printed on it: *Vice-President–elect Armstrong is going to die*. The paper was lying on a different surface, and it had a different ruler next to it. The surface was gray laminate, and the ruler was clear plastic.

“It’s virtually identical,” Froelich said. “The forensics are the same, and it’s got the same thumbprint for a signature.”

“And?”

“It showed up on my boss’s desk,” Froelich said. “One morning, it was just *there*. No envelope, no nothing. And absolutely no way of telling how it got

there.”

Reacher stood up and moved to the window. Found the track cord and pulled the drapes closed. No real reason. It just felt like the appropriate thing to do.

“When did it show up?” he asked.

“Three days after the first one came in the mail,” Froelich said.

“Aimed at you,” Neagley said. “Rather than Armstrong himself. Why? To make sure you take the first one seriously?”

“We were already taking it seriously,” Froelich said.

“When does Armstrong leave Camp David?” Reacher asked.

“They’ll have dinner there tonight,” Froelich said. “Probably shoot the breeze for a spell. They’ll fly back after midnight, I guess.”

“Who’s your boss?”

“Guy called Stuyvesant,” Froelich said. “Like the cigarette.”

“You tell him about the last five days?”

Froelich shook her head. “I decided not to.”

“Wise,” Reacher said. “Exactly what do you want us to do?”

Froelich was quiet for a spell.

“I don’t really know,” she said. “I’ve asked myself that for six days, ever since I decided to find you. I asked myself, in a situation like this, what do I really want? And you know what? I really want to talk to somebody. Specifically, I really want to talk to Joe. Because there are complexities here, aren’t there? You can see that, right? And Joe would find a way through them. He was smart like that.”

“You want me to be Joe?” Reacher said.

“No, I want Joe to be still alive.”

Reacher nodded. “You and me both. But he ain’t.”

“So maybe you could be the next best thing.”

Then she was quiet again.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “That didn’t come out very well.”

“Tell me about the Neanderthals,” Reacher said. “In your office.”

She nodded. “That was my first thought, too.”

“It’s a definite possibility,” he said. “Some guy gets all jealous and resentful, lays all this stuff on you and hopes you’ll crack up and look stupid.”

“My first thought,” she said again.

“Any likely candidates in particular?”

She shrugged. “On the surface, none of them. Below the surface, any of them. There are six guys on my old pay grade who got passed over when I got the promotion. Each one of them has got friends and allies and supporters in the grades below. Like networks inside networks. Could be anybody.”

“Gut feeling?”

She shook her head. “I can’t come up with a favorite. And all their prints are on file. Condition of employment for us too. And this period between the election and the inauguration is very busy. We’re stretched. Nobody’s had time for a weekend in Vegas.”

“Didn’t have to be a weekend. Could have been in and out in a single day.”

Froelich said nothing.

“What about discipline problems?” Reacher asked. “Anybody resent the *way* you’re leading the team? You had to yell at anybody yet? Anybody underperforming?”

She shook her head. “I’ve changed a few things. Spoken to a couple of people. But I’ve been tactful. And the thumbprint doesn’t match anybody anyway, whether I’ve spoken to them or not. So I think it’s a genuine threat from out there in the world.”

“Me too,” Neagley said. “But there’s *some* insider involvement, right? Like, who else could wander around your building and leave something on your boss’s desk?”

Froelich nodded.

“I need you to come see the office,” she said.

They rode the short distance in the government Suburban. Reacher sprawled in the back and Neagley rode with Froelich in the front. The night air was damp, suspended somewhere between drizzle and evening mist. The roads were glossy with water and orange light. The tires hissed and the windshield wipers thumped back and forth. Reacher glimpsed the White House railings and the front of the Treasury Building before Froelich turned a corner and drove into a narrow alley and headed for a garage entrance straight ahead. There was a steep ramp and a guard in a glass booth and a bright wash of white light. There were low ceilings and thick concrete pillars. She parked the Suburban on the end of a row of six identical models. There were Lincoln Town Cars here and there, and Cadillacs of various vintages and sizes with awkward rebuilt frames around the windows where bulletproof glass had been installed. Every vehicle was black and shiny and the whole garage was painted glossy white, walls and ceiling and floor alike. The place looked like a monochrome photograph. There was a door with a small porthole of wired glass. Froelich led them through it and up a narrow mahogany staircase into a small first-floor lobby. There were marble pilasters and a single elevator door.

“You two shouldn’t really be here,” Froelich said. “So say nothing, stick close to me and walk fast, OK?”

Then she paused a beat. “But come look at something first.”

She led them through another inconspicuous door and around a corner into a vast dark hall that felt the size of a football field.

“The building’s main lobby,” she said. Her voice echoed in the marble emptiness. The light was dim. White stone looked gray in the gloom.

“Here,” she said.

The walls had giant raised panels carved out of marble, reeded at the edges in the classical style. The one they were standing under was engraved at the top: *The United States Department Of The Treasury*. The inscription ran laterally for eight or nine feet. Underneath it was another inscription: *Roll Of Honor*. Then starting in the top left corner of the panel was an engraved list of dates and names. Maybe three or four dozen of them. The next-to-last name on the list was *J. Reacher, 1997*. Last was *M. B. Gordon, 1997*. Then there was plenty of empty space. Maybe a column and a half.

“That’s Joe,” Froelich said. “Our tribute.”

Reacher looked up at his brother’s name. It was neatly chiseled. Each letter was maybe two inches high and was inlaid with gold leaf. The marble looked cold, and it was veined and flecked like marble everywhere. Then he caught a glimpse in his mind of Joe’s face, maybe twelve years old, maybe at the dinner table or the breakfast table, always a millisecond faster than anyone else to see a joke, always a millisecond slower to start a smile. Then a glimpse of him leaving home, which at that time was a service bungalow somewhere hot, his shirt wet with sweat, his kitbag on his shoulder, heading out to the flight line and a ten-thousand-mile journey to West Point. Then at the graveside at their mother’s funeral, which was the last time he had seen him alive. He’d met Molly Beth Gordon, too. About fifteen seconds before she died. She had been a bright, vivacious blond woman. Not so very different from Froelich herself.

“No, that’s not Joe,” he said. “Or Molly Beth. Those are just names.”

Neagley glanced at him and Froelich said nothing and led them back to the small lobby with the single elevator. They went up three floors to a different world. It was full of narrow corridors and low ceilings and businesslike adaptations. Acoustic tile overhead, halogen light, white linoleum and gray carpet on the floors, offices divided into cubicles with shoulder-high padded fabric panels on adjustable feet. Banks of phones, fax machines, piles of paper, computers everywhere. There was a literal hum of activity built from the whine of hard drives and cooling fans and the muted screech of modems and the soft ringing of

phones. Inside the main door was a reception counter with a man in a suit sitting behind it. He had a phone cradled in his shoulder and was writing something on a message log and couldn't manage more than a puzzled glance and a distracted nod of greeting.

"Duty officer," Froelich said. "They work a three-shift system around the clock. This desk is always manned."

"Is this the only way in?" Reacher asked.

"There are fire stairs way in back," Froelich said. "But don't get ahead of yourself. See the cameras?"

She pointed to the ceiling. There were miniature surveillance cameras everywhere there needed to be to cover every corridor.

"Take them into account," she said.

She led them deeper into the complex, turning left and right until they ended up at what must have been the back of the floor. There was a long narrow corridor that opened out into a windowless square space. Against the side wall of the square was a secretarial station with room for one person, with a desk and file cabinets and shelves loaded with three-ring binders and piles of loose memos. There was a portrait of the current President on the wall and a furled Stars and Stripes in a corner. A coatrack next to the flag. Nothing else. Everything was tidy. Nothing was out of place. Behind the secretary's desk was the fire exit. It was a stout door with an acetate plaque showing a green man running. Above the exit was a surveillance camera. It stared forward like an unblinking glass eye. Opposite the secretarial station was a single blank door. It was closed.

"Stuyvesant's office," Froelich said.

She opened the door and led them inside. Flicked a switch and bright halogen light filled the room. It was a reasonably small office. Smaller than the square anteroom outside it. There was a window, with white fabric blinds closed against the night.

"Does the window open?" Neagley asked.

"No," Froelich said. "And it faces Pennsylvania Avenue, anyway. Some burglar climbs up three floors on a rope, somebody's going to notice, believe me."

climbs up three floors on a rope, somebody's going to notice, believe me."

The office was dominated by a huge desk with a gray composite top. It was completely empty. There was a leather chair pushed exactly square against it.

"Doesn't he use a phone?" Reacher asked.

"Keeps it in the drawer," Froelich said. "He likes the desktop clear."

There were tall cabinets against the wall, faced with the same gray laminate as the desk. There were two visitor chairs made of leather. Apart from that, nothing. It was a serene space. It spoke of a tidy mind.

"OK," Froelich said. "The mail threat came on the Monday in the week after the election. Then, on the Wednesday evening, Stuyvesant went home about seven-thirty. Left his desk clear. His secretary left a half hour later. Popped her head in the door just before she went, like she always does. She confirms that the desk was clear. And she'd notice, right? If there was a sheet of paper on the desk, it would stand out."

Reacher nodded. The desktop looked like the foredeck of a battleship made ready for inspection by an admiral. A speck of dust would have stood out.

"Eight o'clock Thursday morning, the secretary comes in again," Froelich said. "She walks straight to her own desk and starts work. Doesn't open Stuyvesant's door at all. Ten after eight, Stuyvesant himself shows up. He's carrying a briefcase and wearing a raincoat. He takes off the raincoat and hangs it up on the coatrack. His secretary speaks to him and he sets his briefcase upright on her desk and confers with her about something. Then he opens his door and walks into his office. He's not carrying anything. He's left his briefcase on the secretary's desk. About four or five seconds later he comes back out. Calls his secretary in. They both confirm that at that point, the sheet of paper was there on the desk."

Neagley glanced around the office, at the door, at the desk, at the distance between the door and the desk.

"Is this just their testimony?" she asked. "Or do the surveillance cameras record to videotape?"

"Both," Froelich said. "All the cameras record to separate tapes. I've looked at

this one, and everything happens exactly as they describe it, coming and going."

"So unless they're in it together, neither of them put the paper there."

Froelich nodded. "That's the way I see it."

"So who did?" Reacher asked. "What else does the tape show?"

"The cleaning crew," Froelich said.

She led them back to her own office and took three video-cassettes out of her desk drawer. Stepped over to a bank of shelves, where a small Sony television with a built-in VCR nestled between a printer and a fax machine.

"These are copies," she said. "The originals are locked away. The recorders work on timers, six hours on each tape. Six in the morning until noon, noon until six, six until midnight, midnight until six, and start again."

She found the remote in a drawer and switched the television on. Put the first tape in the mechanism. It clicked and whirred and a dim picture settled on the screen.

"This is the Wednesday evening," she said. "Six P.M. onward."

The picture was gray and milky and the detail definition was soft, but the clarity was completely adequate. The camera showed the whole square area from behind the secretary's head. She was at her desk, on the phone. She looked old. She had white hair. Stuyvesant's door was on the right of the picture. It was closed. There was a date and time burned into the picture at the bottom left. Froelich hit fast wind and the motion sped up. The secretary's white head moved with comical jerkiness. Her hand batted up and down as she finished calls and fielded new ones. Some person bustled into shot and delivered a stack of internal mail and turned and bustled away. The secretary sorted the mail with the speed of a machine. She opened every envelope and piled the contents neatly and took out a stamp and ink pad and stamped every new letter at the top.

"What's she doing?" Reacher asked.

"Date of receipt," Froelich said. "This whole operation runs on accurate

"Date of receipt," Froelich said. "This whole operation runs on accurate paperwork. Always has."

The secretary was using her left hand to curl each sheet back and her right to stamp the date. The tape's fast motion made her look frantic. In the bottom corner of the picture the date held steady and the time unspooled just about fast enough to read. Reacher turned away from the screen and looked around Froelich's office. It was a typical government space, pretty much the civilian equivalent of the offices he'd spent his time in, aggressively plain and expensively shoehorned into a fine old building. Tough gray nylon carpet, laminate furniture, IT wiring routed carefully in white plastic conduit. Foot-high piles of paper everywhere, reports and memoranda tacked to the walls. There was a glass-fronted cabinet with a yard of procedure manuals inside. There was no window in the room. But she still had a plant. It was in a plastic pot on the desk, pale and dry and struggling to survive. There were no photographs. No mementos. Nothing personal at all except a faint trace of her perfume in the air and the fabric of her chair.

"OK, this is where Stuyvesant goes home," she said.

Reacher looked back at the screen and saw the time counter race through seven-thirty, and then seven-thirty-one. Stuyvesant stepped out of his office at triple speed. He was a tall man, wide across the shoulders, slightly stooped, graying at the temples. He was carrying a slim briefcase. The video made him move with absurd energy. He raced across to the coat rack and took down a black raincoat. Hurled it onto his shoulders and raced back to the secretary's desk. Bent abruptly and said something and raced away again out of sight. Froelich pressed the fast wind button harder and the speed redoubled again. The secretary jerked and swayed in her seat. The time counter blurred. As the seven turned to an eight the secretary jumped up and Froelich slowed the tape back to triple speed in time to catch her opening Stuyvesant's door for a second. She held on to the handle and leaned inside with one foot off the ground and turned immediately and closed the door. Rushed around the square space and collected her purse and an umbrella and a coat and disappeared into the gloom at the far end of the corridor. Froelich doubled the playback speed once again and the time counter unspooled faster but the picture remained entirely static. The stillness of a deserted office descended and held steady as time rushed by.

"When do the cleaners come in?" Reacher asked.

"Just before midnight," Froelich said.

"Just before midnight," Froelich said.

"That late?"

"They're night workers. This is a round-the-clock operation."

"And there's nothing else visible before then?"

"Nothing at all."

"So spool ahead. We get the picture."

Froelich operated the buttons and shuttled between fast-forward with snow on the screen and regular-speed playback with a picture to check the timecode. At eleven-fifty P.M. she let the tape run. The counter clicked ahead, a second at a time. At eleven fifty-two there was motion at the far end of the corridor. A team of three people emerged from the gloom. There were two women and a man, all of them wearing dark overalls. They looked Hispanic. They were all short and compact, dark-haired, stoic. The man was pushing a cart. It had a black garbage bag locked into a hoop at the front, and trays stacked with cloths and spray bottles on shelves at the rear. One of the women was carrying a vacuum cleaner. It rode on her back like a pack. It had a long hose with a broad nozzle. The other woman was carrying a bucket in one hand and a mop in the other. The mop had a square foam pad on the head and a complicated hinge halfway up the handle, for squeezing excess water away. All three of them were wearing rubber gloves. The gloves looked pale on their hands. Maybe clear plastic, maybe light yellow. All three of them looked tired. Like night workers. But they looked neat and clean and professional. They had tidy haircuts and their expressions said: *we know this ain't the world's most exciting job, but we're going to do it properly*. Froelich paused the tape and froze them as they approached Stuyvesant's door.

"Who are they?" Reacher asked.

"Direct government employees," Froelich said. "Most office cleaners in this city are contract people, minimum wage, no benefits, high-turnover nobodies. Same in any city. But we hire our own. The FBI, too. We need a high degree of reliability, obviously. We keep two crews at all times. They're properly interviewed, they're background-checked, and they don't get in the door unless they're good people. Then we pay them real well, and give them full health plans, and dental, and paid vacations, the whole nine yards. They're department

members, same as anybody else."

"And they respond?"

She nodded. "They're terrific, generally."

"But you think this crew smuggled the letter in."

"No other conclusion to come to."

Reacher pointed at the screen. "So where is it now?"

"Could be in the garbage bag, in a stiff envelope. Could be in a page protector, taped underneath one of the trays or the shelves. Could be taped to the guy's back, under his overalls."

She hit play and the cleaners continued onward into Stuyvesant's office. The door swung shut behind them. The camera stared forward blankly. The time counter ticked on, five minutes, seven, eight. Then the tape ran out.

"Midnight," Froelich said.

She ejected the cassette and put the second tape in. Pressed play and the date changed to Thursday and the timer restarted at midnight exactly. It crawled onward, two minutes, four, six.

"They certainly do a thorough job," Neagley said. "Our office cleaners would have done the whole building by now. A lick and a promise."

"Stuyvesant likes a clean working environment," Froelich said.

At seven minutes past midnight the door opened and the crew filed out.

"So now you figure the letter is there on the desk," Reacher said.

Froelich nodded. The video showed the cleaners starting work around the secretarial station. They missed nothing. Everything was energetically dusted and wiped and polished. Every inch of carpet was vacuumed. Garbage was emptied into the black bag. It had bellied out to twice its size. The man looked a little disheveled by his efforts. He pushed the cart backward foot by foot and the women retreated with him. Sixteen minutes past midnight, they backed away

into the gloom and left the picture still and quiet, as it had been before they came.

“That’s it,” Froelich said. “Nothing more for the next five hours and forty-four minutes. Then we change tapes again and find nothing at all from six A.M. until eight, when the secretary comes in, and then it goes down exactly as she and Stuyvesant claimed it did.”

“As one might expect,” said a voice from the door. “I think our word can be trusted. After all, I’ve been in government service for twenty-five years, and my secretary even longer than that, I believe.”

5

The guy at the door was Stuyvesant, no doubt about that. Reacher recognized him from his appearance on the tape. He was tall, broad-shouldered, over fifty, still in reasonable shape. A handsome face, tired eyes. He was wearing a suit and a tie, on a Sunday. Froelich was looking at him, worried. But he in turn was staring straight at Neagley.

“You’re the woman on the video,” he said. “In the ballroom, Thursday night.”

He was clearly thinking hard. Running conclusions through his head and then nodding imperceptibly to himself whenever they made sense. After a moment he moved his gaze from Neagley to Reacher and stepped right into the room.

“And you’re Joe Reacher’s brother,” he said. “You look just like him.”

Reacher nodded.

“Jack Reacher,” he said, and offered his hand.

Stuyvesant took it.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” he said. “Five years late, I know, but the Treasury Department still remembers your brother with affection.”

Reacher nodded again.

“This is Frances Neagley,” he said.

“Reacher brought her in to help with the audit,” Froelich said.

Stuyvesant smiled a brief smile.

“I gathered that,” he said. “Smart move. What were the results?”

The office went quiet.

“I apologize if I offended you, sir,” Froelich said. “You know, before. Talking about the tape like that. I was just explaining the situation.”

“What were the audit results?” Stuyvesant asked again.

She said nothing back.

“That bad?” Stuyvesant said to her. “Well, I certainly hope so. I knew Joe Reacher too. Not as well as you did, but we came into contact, time to time. He was impressive. I’m assuming his brother is at least half as smart. Ms. Neagley, probably smarter still. In which case they must have found ways through. Am I right?”

“Three definites,” Froelich said.

Stuyvesant nodded.

“The ballroom, obviously,” he said. “Probably the family house and that damn outdoors event in Bismarck too. Am I right?”

“Yes,” Froelich said.

“Extreme levels of performance,” Neagley said. “Unlikely to be duplicated.”

Stuyvesant held up his hand and cut her off.

“Let’s go to the conference room,” he said. “I want to talk about baseball.”

He led them through narrow winding corridors to a relatively spacious room in the heart of the complex. It had a long table in it with ten chairs, five to a side. No windows. The same gray synthetic carpet underfoot and the same white acoustic tile overhead. The same bright halogen light. There was a low cabinet against one wall. It had closed doors and three telephones on it. Two were white and one was red. Stuyvesant sat down and waved to the chairs on the other side of the table. Reacher glanced at a huge notice board full of memos labeled *confidential*.

“I’m going to be uncharacteristically frank,” Stuyvesant said. “Just temporarily, you understand, because I think we owe you an explanation, and because Froelich involved you with my initial approval, and because Joe Reacher’s brother is family, so to speak, and therefore his colleague is too.”

“We worked together in the military,” Neagley said.

Stuyvesant nodded, like that was an inference he had drawn long ago.

“Let’s talk about baseball,” he said. “You follow the game?”

They all waited.

“The Washington Senators had already gone when I hit town,” he said. “So I’ve had to make do with the Baltimore Orioles, which has been a mixed bag in terms of fun. But do you understand what’s unique about the game?”

“The length of the season,” Reacher said. “The win percentages.”

Stuyvesant smiled, like he was conferring praise.

“Maybe you’re better than half as smart,” he said. “The thing about baseball is that the regular season is one hundred sixty-two games long. Way, way longer than any other sport. Any other sport has about half as many games as baseball. Basketball, hockey, football, soccer, anything. Any other sport, the players can start out thinking they can win every single game all season long. It’s just about a realistic motivational goal. It’s even been achieved, here and there, now and then. But it’s impossible in baseball. The very best teams, the greatest champions, they all lose around a third of their games. They lose fifty or sixty times a year, at least. Imagine what that feels like, from a psychological perspective. You’re a superb athlete, you’re fanatically competitive, but you know for sure you’re going to lose repeatedly. You have to make mental adjustments, or you couldn’t cope with it. And presidential protection is exactly the same thing. That’s my point. We can’t win every day. So we get used to it.”

“You only lost once,” Neagley said. “Back in 1963.”

“No,” Stuyvesant said. “We lose repeatedly. But not every loss is significant. Just like baseball. Not every hit they get produces a run against you, not every defeat they inflict loses you the World Series. And with us, not every mistake kills our guy.”

“So what are you saying?” Neagley asked.

Stuyvesant sat forward. “I’m saying despite what your audit might have revealed

you should still have considerable faith in us. Not every error costs us a run. Now, I completely understand that kind of so-what self-confidence must seem very offhand to an outsider. But *you* must understand we're forced to think that way. Your audit showed up a few holes, and what we have to do now is judge whether it's possible to fill them. Whether it's *reasonable*. I'm going to leave that to Froelich's own judgment. It's her show. But what I'm suggesting is that you get rid of any sense of doubt you're feeling about us. As private citizens. Any sense of our failure. Because we're not failing. There are always going to be holes. Part of the job. This is a democracy. Get used to it."

Then he sat back, like he was finished.

"What about this specific threat?" Reacher asked him.

Stuyvesant paused, and then he shook his head. His face had changed. The mood in the whole room had changed.

"That's precisely where I stop being frank," he said. "I told you it was a temporary indulgence. And it was a very serious lapse on Froelich's part to reveal the existence of any threat at all. All I'm prepared to say is we intercept a lot of threats. Then we deal with them. *How* we deal with them is entirely confidential. Therefore I would ask you to understand you are now under an absolute obligation never to mention this situation to anybody after you leave here tonight. Or any aspect of our procedures. That obligation is rooted in federal statute. There are sanctions available to me."

There was silence. Reacher said nothing. Neagley sat quiet. Froelich looked upset. Stuyvesant ignored her completely and gazed hard at Reacher and Neagley, at first hostile, and then suddenly pensive. He started thinking hard again. He stood up and walked over to the low cabinet with the telephones on it. Squatted down in front of it. Opened the doors and took out two yellow legal pads and two ballpoint pens. Walked back and dropped one of each in front of Reacher and one of each in front of Neagley. Circled around the head of the table again and sat back down in his chair.

"Write your full names," he said. "All and any aliases, dates of birth, Social Security numbers, military ID numbers, and current addresses."

"What for?" Reacher asked.

“Just do it,” Stuyvesant said.

Reacher paused and picked up his pen. Froelich looked at him, anxiously. Neagley glanced at him and shrugged and started writing on her pad. Reacher waited a beat and then followed her example. He was finished well before her. He had no middle name and no current address. Stuyvesant walked around behind them and scooped the pads off the table. Said nothing and walked straight out of the room with the pads held tight under his arm. The door slammed loudly behind him.

“I’m in trouble,” Froelich said. “And I’ve made trouble for you guys, too.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Reacher said. “He’s going to make us sign some kind of confidentiality agreement, is all. He’s gone to get them typed up, I guess.”

“But what’s he going to do to me?”

“Nothing, probably.”

“Demote me? Fire me?”

“He authorized the audit. The audit was necessary because of the threats. The two things were connected. We’ll tell him we pushed you with questions.”

“He’ll demote me,” Froelich said. “He wasn’t happy about me running the audit in the first place. Told me it indicated a lack of self-confidence.”

“Bullshit,” Reacher said. “We did stuff like that all the time.”

“Audits *build* self-confidence,” Neagley said. “That was our experience. Better to know something for sure than just hope for the best.”

Froelich looked away. Didn’t reply. The room went quiet. They all waited, five minutes, then ten, then fifteen. Reacher stood up and stretched. Stepped over to the low cabinet and looked at the red phone. He picked it up and held it to his ear. There was no dial tone. He put it back and scanned the confidential memos on the notice board. The ceiling was low and he could feel heat on his head from the halogen lights. He sat down again and turned his chair and tilted it back and put his feet on the next one in line. Glanced at his watch. Stuyvesant had been gone twenty minutes.

“Hell is he doing?” he said. “Typing them himself?”

“Maybe he’s calling his agents,” Neagley said. “Maybe we’re all going to jail, to guarantee our everlasting silence forever.”

Reacher yawned and smiled. “We’ll give him ten more minutes. Then we’re leaving. We’ll all go out and get some dinner.”

Stuyvesant came back after five more. He walked into the room and closed the door. He was carrying no papers. He stepped over and sat down in his original seat and placed his hands flat on the table. Drummed a staccato little rhythm with his fingertips.

“OK,” he said. “Where were we? Reacher had a question, I think.”

Reacher took his feet off the chair and turned to face front.

“Did I?” he said.

Stuyvesant nodded. “You asked about this specific threat. Well, it’s either an inside job or it’s an outside job. It’s got to be one or the other, obviously.”

“We’re discussing this now?”

“Yes, we are,” Stuyvesant said.

“Why? What changed?”

Stuyvesant ignored the question. “If it’s an outside job, should we necessarily worry? Perhaps not, because that’s like baseball, too. If the Yankees come to town saying they’re going to beat the Orioles, does that mean it’s true? Boasting about it is not the same thing as actually doing it.”

Nobody spoke.

“I’m asking for your input here,” Stuyvesant said.

Reacher shrugged.

“OK,” he said. “You think it *is* an outside threat?”

“No, I think it’s inside intimidation intended to damage Froelich’s career. Now ask me what I’m going to do about it.”

Reacher glanced at him. Glanced at his watch. Glanced at the wall. *Twenty-five minutes, a Sunday evening, deep inside the D.C.-Maryland-Virginia triangle*.

“I know what you’re going to do about it,” he said.

“Do you?”

“You’re going to hire me and Neagley for an internal investigation.”

“Am I?”

Reacher nodded. “If you’re worried about inside intimidation then you need an internal investigation. That’s clear. And you can’t use one of your own people, because you might hit on the bad guy by chance. And you don’t want to bring the FBI in, because that’s not how Washington works. Nobody washes their dirty linen in public. So you need some other outsider. And you’ve got two of them sitting right in front of you. They’re already involved, because Froelich just involved them. So either you terminate that involvement, or you choose to expand on it. You’d prefer to expand on it, because that way you don’t have to find fault with an excellent agent you just promoted. So can you use us? Of course you can. Who better than Joe Reacher’s little brother? Inside Treasury, Joe Reacher is practically a saint. So your ass is covered. And mine is too. Because of Joe I’ll get automatic credibility from the start. And I was a good investigator in the military. So was Neagley. You know that, because you just checked. My guess is you just spent twenty-five minutes talking to the Pentagon and the National Security Agency. That’s why you wanted those details. They ran us through their computers and we came out clean. More than clean, probably, because I’m sure our security clearances are still on file, and I’m sure they’re still way higher than you actually need them to be.”

Stuyvesant nodded. He looked satisfied.

“An excellent analysis,” he said. “You get the job, just as soon as I get hard copies of those clearances. They should be here in an hour or two.”

“You can do this?” Neagley said.

“I can do what I want,” Stuyvesant said. “Presidents tend to give a lot of

"I can do what I want," Stuyvesant said. "Presidents tend to give a lot of authority to the people they hope will keep them alive."

Silence in the room.

"Will I be a suspect?" Stuyvesant asked.

"No," Reacher said.

"Maybe I should be. Maybe I should be your number-one suspect. Perhaps I felt forced to promote a woman because of contemporary pressures to do so, but I secretly resent it, so I'm working behind her back to panic her and thereby discredit her."

Reacher said nothing.

"I could have found a friend or a relative who had never been fingerprinted. I could have placed the paper on my desk at seven-thirty Wednesday evening and instructed my secretary not to notice it. She'd have followed my orders. Or I could have instructed the cleaners to smuggle it in that night. They'd have followed my orders, too. But they'd have followed Froelich's orders equally. She should be your number-two suspect, probably. Maybe she has a friend or a relative with no prints on file either, and maybe she's setting this whole thing up in order to deal with it spectacularly and earn some enhanced credibility."

"Except I'm not setting it up," Froelich said.

"Neither of you is a suspect," Reacher said.

"Why not?" Stuyvesant asked.

"Because Froelich came to me voluntarily, and she knew something about me from my brother. You hired us directly after seeing our military records. Neither of you would have done those things if you had something to hide. Too much risk."

"Maybe we think we're smarter than you are. An internal investigation that missed us would be the best cover there is."

Reacher shook his head. "Neither of you is that dumb."

"Good," Stuyvesant replied. He looked satisfied. "So let's agree it's a jealous

"Good," Stuyvesant replied. He looked satisfied. "So let's agree it's a jealous rival elsewhere in the department. Let's assume he conspired with the cleaners."

"Or she," Froelich said.

"Where are the cleaners now?" Reacher asked.

"Suspended," Stuyvesant said. "At home, on full pay. They live together. One of the women is the man's wife and the other woman is his sister-in-law. The other crew is working overtime to make up, and costing me a fortune."

"What's their story?"

"They know nothing about anything. They didn't bring in any sheet of paper, they never saw it, it wasn't there when they were there."

"But you don't believe them."

Stuyvesant was quiet for a long moment. He fiddled with his shirt cuffs and then laid his hands flat on the table again.

"They're trusted employees," he said. "They're very nervous about being under suspicion. Very upset. Frightened, even. But they're also *calm*. Like we won't be able to prove anything, because they didn't do anything. They're a little puzzled. They passed a lie-detector test. All three of them."

"So you do believe them."

Stuyvesant shook his head. "I can't believe them. How can I? You saw the tapes. Who else put the damn thing there? A ghost?"

"So what's your opinion?"

"I think somebody they knew inside the building asked them to do it, and explained it away as a routine test procedure, like a war game or a secret mission, said there was no harm in it, and coached them through what would happen afterward in terms of the video and the questioning and the lie detector. I think that might give a person enough composure to pass the polygraph. If they were convinced they weren't in the wrong and there would be no adverse consequences. If they were convinced they were really helping the department somehow."

“Have you pursued that with them yet?”

Stuyvesant shook his head.

“That’ll be your job,” he said. “I’m not good at interrogation.”

Reacher said nothing.

He left as suddenly as he had arrived. Just upped and walked out of the room. The door swung shut behind him and left Reacher and Neagley and Froelich sitting together at the table in the bright light and the silence.

“You won’t be popular,” Froelich said. “Internal investigators never are.”

“I’m not interested in being popular,” Reacher said.

“I’ve already got a job,” Neagley said.

“Take some vacation time,” Reacher said. “Stick around, be unpopular with me.”

“Will I get paid?”

“I’m sure there’ll be a fee,” Froelich said.

Neagley shrugged. “OK, I guess my partners could see this as a prestige thing. You know, government work? I could go back to the hotel, make some calls, see if they can cope without me for a spell.”

“You want to get that dinner first?” Froelich asked.

Neagley shook her head. “No, I’ll eat in my room. You two get dinner.”

They wound their way back through the corridors to Froelich’s office and she called a driver for Neagley. Then she escorted her down to the garage and came back upstairs to find Reacher sitting quiet at her desk.

“Are you two having a relationship?” she asked.

“Who?”

¨Who?´´

“You and Neagley.”

“What kind of a question is that?”

“She was weird about dinner.”

He shook his head. “No, we’re not having a relationship.”

“Did you ever? You seem awful close.”

“Do we?”

“She obviously likes you, and you obviously like her. And she’s cute.”

He nodded. “I do like her. And she is cute. But we never had a relationship.”

“Why not?”

“Why not? It just never happened. You know what I mean?”

“I guess.”

“I’m not sure what it’s got to do with you, anyway. You’re my brother’s ex, not mine. I don’t even know your name.”

“M. E.,” she said.

“Martha Enid?” he said. “Mildred Eliza?”

“Let’s go,” she said. “Dinner, my place.”

“Your place?”

“Restaurants are impossible here on Sunday night. And I can’t afford them anyway. And I’ve still got some of Joe’s things. Maybe you should have them.”

She lived in a small warm row house in an unglamorous neighborhood across

the Anacostia River near Bolling Air Force Base. It was one of those city homes where you close the drapes and concentrate on the inside. There was street parking and a wooden front door with a small foyer behind it that led directly into a living room. It was a comfortable space. Wood floors, a rug, old-fashioned furniture. A small television set with a big cable box wired to it. Some books on a shelf, a small music system with a yard of CDs propped against it. The heaters were turned up high so Reacher peeled off his black jacket and dumped it on the back of a chair.

“I don’t want it to be an insider,” Froelich said.

“Better that than a real outside threat.”

She nodded and moved toward the back of the room where an arch opened into an eat-in kitchen. She looked around, a little vague, like she was wondering what all the machines and cabinets were for.

“We could send out for Chinese food,” Reacher called.

She took off her jacket and folded it in half and laid it on a stool.

“Maybe we should,” she said.

She had a white blouse on and without the jacket it looked softer and more feminine. The kitchen was lit with regular bulbs turned low and they were kinder to her skin than the bright office halogen had been. He looked at her and saw what Joe must have seen, eight years previously. She found a take-out menu in a drawer and dialed a number and called in an order. Hot and sour soup and General Tso’s chicken, times two.

“That OK?” she asked.

“Don’t tell me,” he said. “It’s what Joe liked.”

“I’ve still got some of his things,” she said. “You should come see them.”

She walked ahead of him back to the foyer and up the stairs. There was a guest room at the front of the house. It had a deep closet with a single door. A light bulb came on automatically when she opened it. The closet was full of miscellaneous junk, but the hanging rail had a long line of suits and shirts still

wrapped in the dry cleaner's plastic. The plastic had turned a little yellow and brittle with age.

"These are his," Froelich said.

"He left them here?" Reacher asked.

She touched the shoulder of one of the suits through the plastic.

"I figured he'd come back for them," she said. "But he didn't, the whole year. I guess he didn't need them."

"He must have had a lot of suits."

"Couple dozen, I guess," she said.

"How can a person have twenty-four suits?"

"He was a dresser," she said. "You must remember that."

He stood still. The way he remembered it, Joe had lived in one pair of shorts and one T-shirt. In the winters he wore khakis. When it was very cold he added a worn-out leather pilot's jacket. That was it. At their mother's funeral he wore a very formal black suit, which Reacher had assumed was rented. But maybe it wasn't. Maybe working in Washington had changed his approach.

"You should have them," Froelich said. "They're your property, anyway. You were his next of kin, I guess."

"I guess I was," he said.

"There's a box, too," she said. "Stuff he left around and never came back for."

He followed her gaze to the closet floor and saw a cardboard box sitting underneath the hanging rail. The flaps were folded over each other.

"Tell me about Molly Beth Gordon," he said.

"What about her?"

"After they died I kind of inferred they'd had a thing going."

She shook her head. “They were close. No doubt about that. But they worked together. She was his assistant. He wouldn’t date people in the office.”

“Why did you break up?” he asked.

The doorbell rang downstairs. It sounded loud in the Sunday hush.

“The food,” Froelich said.

They went down and ate together at the kitchen table, silently. It felt curiously intimate, but also distant. Like sitting next to a stranger on a long plane ride. You feel connected, but also not connected.

“You can stay here tonight,” she said. “If you like.”

“I didn’t check out of the hotel.”

She nodded. “So check out tomorrow. Then base yourself here.”

“What about Neagley?”

Silence for a beat.

“Her, too, if she wants. There’s another bedroom on the third floor.”

“OK,” he said.

They finished the meal and he put the containers in the trash and rinsed the plates. She set the dishwasher going. Then her phone rang. She stepped through to the living room to answer it. Talked for a long moment and then hung up and came back.

“That was Stuyvesant,” she said. “He’s giving you the formal go-ahead.”

He nodded. “So call Neagley and tell her to get her ass in gear.”

“Now?”

“Get a problem, solve a problem,” he said. “That’s my way. Tell her to be out front of the hotel in thirty minutes.”

“[illegible]?”

"Where are you going to start?"

"With the video," he said. "I want to watch the tapes again. And I want to meet with the guy who runs that part of the operation."

Thirty minutes later they scooped Neagley off the sidewalk in front of the hotel. She had changed into a black suit with a short jacket. The pants were cut tight. They looked pretty good from the back, in Reacher's opinion. He saw Froelich arrive at the same conclusion. But she said nothing. Just drove, five minutes, and then they were back in the Secret Service offices. Froelich headed straight for her desk and left Reacher and Neagley with the agent who ran the video surveillance. He was a small thin nervous guy in Sunday clothes who had come in at short notice to meet with them. He looked a little dazed about it. He led them to a closet-sized equipment room full of racks of recorders. One wall was a floor-to-ceiling shelving unit with hundreds of VHS tapes stacked neatly in black plastic boxes. The recorders themselves were plain gray industrial units. The whole tiny space was full of neat wiring and procedural memos tacked to the walls and soft noise from small motors turning and the smell of warm circuit boards and the green glow of LED numbers ticking over relentlessly.

"System really looks after itself," the guy said. "There are four recorders slaved to each camera, six hours to a tape, so we change all the tapes once a day, file them away, keep them three months, and then reuse them."

"Where are the originals from the night in question?" Reacher asked.

"Right here," the guy said. He fiddled in his pocket and came out with a bunch of small brass keys on a ring. Squatted down in the limited space and opened a low cupboard. Took out three boxes.

"These are the three I copied for Froelich," he said, on his knees.

"Some place where we can look at them?"

"They're no different than the copies."

"Copying causes detail loss," Reacher said. "First rule, start with the originals."

"OK," the guy said. "You can look at them right here, I guess."

He stood up awkwardly and pushed and pulled some equipment around on a bench and angled a small monitor outward and switched on a stand-alone player. A blank gray square appeared on the screen.

“No remotes on these things,” he said. “You have to use the buttons.”

He stacked the three tape boxes in the correct time sequence.

“Got chairs?” Reacher asked.

The guy ducked out and came back dragging two typist’s chairs. They tangled in the doorway and he had trouble fitting them both in front of the narrow bench. Then he glanced around like he was unhappy about leaving strangers alone in his little domain.

“I guess I’ll wait in the foyer,” he said. “Call me when you’re through.”

“What’s your name?” Neagley asked.

“Nendick,” the guy said, shyly.

“OK, Nendick,” she said. “We’ll be sure to call you.”

He left the room and Reacher put the third tape in the machine.

“You know what?” Neagley said. “That guy didn’t sneak a peek at my ass.”

“Didn’t he?”

“Guys usually do when I’m wearing these pants.”

“Do they?”

“Usually.”

Reacher kept his gaze firmly on the blank video screen.

“Maybe he’s gay,” he said.

“He was wearing a wedding band.”

“Then maybe he tries hard to avoid inappropriate feelings. Or maybe he’s tired.”

“Or maybe I’m getting old,” she said.

He hit fast rewind. The motor whirred.

“Third tape,” he said. “Thursday morning. We’ll do this backward.”

The player spooled fast. He watched the counter and hit play and the picture came up with an empty office with the timecode burned in over it showing the relevant Thursday’s date and the time at seven fifty-five A.M. He hit forward scan and then froze the picture when the secretary entered the frame at exactly eight o’clock in the morning. He settled in his chair and hit play and the secretary walked into the square area and took off her coat and hung it on the rack. Walked within three feet of Stuyvesant’s door and bent down behind her desk.

“Stowing her purse,” Neagley said. “On the floor in the footwell.”

The secretary was a woman of maybe sixty. For a moment she was face-on to the camera. She was a matronly figure. Stern, but kindly. She sat down heavily and hitched her chair in and opened a book on the desk.

“Checking the diary,” Neagley said.

The secretary stayed firmly in her chair, busy with the diary. Then she started in on a tall stack of memos. She filed some of them in a drawer and used her rubber stamp on others and moved them right to left across her desk.

“You ever see so much paperwork?” Reacher said. “Worse than the Army.”

The secretary broke off from her memo stack twice, to answer the phone. But she didn’t move from her chair. Reacher fast-forwarded until Stuyvesant himself swept into view at ten past eight. He was wearing a dark raincoat, maybe black or charcoal. He was carrying a slim briefcase. He took off his coat and hung it on the rack. Advanced into the square area and the secretary’s head moved like she was speaking to him. He set his briefcase on her desk at an exact angle and adjusted its position. Bent to confer with her. Nodded once and straightened up and stepped to his door without his briefcase and disappeared into his office. The timer ticked off four seconds. Then he was back out in the doorway, calling to his secretary.

his secretary.

“He found it,” Reacher said.

“The briefcase thing is weird,” Neagley said. “Why would he leave it?”

“Maybe he had an early meeting,” Reacher said. “Maybe he left it out there because he knew he was leaving again right away.”

He fast-forwarded through the next hour. People ducked in and out of the office. Froelich made two trips. Then a forensic team arrived and left twenty minutes later with the letter in a plastic evidence bag. He hit reverse scan. The whole morning’s activity unfolded again, backward. The forensic team left and then arrived, Froelich came out and in twice, Stuyvesant arrived and left, and then his secretary did the same.

“Now for the boring part,” Reacher said. “Hours and hours of nothing.”

The picture settled to a steady shot of an empty area with the timer rushing backward. Absolutely nothing happened. The level of detail coming off the original tape was better than the copy, but there wasn’t much in it. It was gray and milky. OK for a surveillance situation, but it wouldn’t have won any technical awards.

“You know what?” Reacher said. “I was a cop for thirteen years, and I never found anything significant on a surveillance tape. Not even once.”

“Me neither,” Neagley said. “The hours I spent like this.”

At six A.M. the tape jammed to a stop and Reacher ejected it and fast wound the second tape to the far end and started the patient backward search again. The timer sped through five o’clock and headed fast toward four. Nothing happened. The office just sat there, still and gray and empty.

“Why are we doing this tonight?” Neagley asked.

“Because I’m an impatient guy,” Reacher said.

“You want to score one for the military, don’t you? You want to show these civilians how the real pros work.”

“Nothing left to prove,” Reacher said. “We already scored three and a half.”

He bent closer to the screen. Fought to keep his eyes focused. Four o’clock in the morning. Nothing was happening. Nobody was delivering any letters.

“Or maybe there’s another reason we’re doing this tonight,” Neagley said. “Maybe you’re trying to outpoint your brother.”

“Don’t need to. I know exactly how we compared. And it doesn’t matter to me what anybody else thinks about it.”

“What happened to him?”

“He died.”

“I gathered that, belatedly. But how?”

“He was killed. In the line of duty. Just after I left the Army. Down in Georgia, south of Atlanta. Clandestine rendezvous with an informer from a counterfeiting operation. They were ambushed. He was shot in the head, twice.”

“They get the guys who did it?”

“No.”

“That’s awful.”

“Not really. I got them instead.”

“What did you do?”

“What do you think?”

“OK, how?”

“It was a father-and-son team. I drowned the son in a swimming pool. I burned the father to death in a fire. After shooting him in the chest with a hollow-point .44.”

“That ought to do it.”

“Moral of the story, don’t mess with me or mine. I just wish they’d known that

"Moral of the story, don't mess with me or mine. I just wish they'd known that ahead of time."

"Any comeback?"

"I exfiltrated fast. Stayed out of circulation. Had to miss the funeral."

"Bad business."

"The guy he was meeting with got it, too. Bled to death under a highway ramp. There was a woman, as well. From Joe's office. His assistant, Molly Beth Gordon. They knifed her at the Atlanta airport."

"I saw her name. On the roll of honor."

Reacher was quiet a beat. The video sped backward. Three in the morning, then two-fifty-something. Then two-forty. Nothing happening.

"The whole thing was a can of worms," he said. "It was his own fault, really."

"That's harsh."

"It was a stretch for him. I mean, would you get ambushed at a rendezvous?"

"No."

"Me neither."

"I'd do all the usual stuff," Neagley said. "You know, arrive three hours early, stake it out, surveil, block the approaches."

"But Joe didn't do any of that. He was out of his depth. Thing about Joe, he looked tough. He was six-six, two-fifty, built like a brick outhouse. Hands like shovels, face like a catcher's mitt. We were clones, physically, the two of us. But we had different brains. Deep down, he was a cerebral guy. Kind of *pure*. Naive, even. He never thought dirty. Everything was a game of chess with him. He gets a call, he sets up a meet, he drives down there. Like he's moving his knight or his bishop around. He just didn't expect somebody to come along and blow the whole chessboard away."

Neagley said nothing. The tape sped on backward. Nothing was happening on it. The square office area just sat there, dim and steady.

The square office area just sat there, dim and steady.

“Afterward I was angry he was so careless,” Reacher said. “But then I figured I couldn’t blame him for that. To be careless, first of all you’ve got to know what you’re supposed to be careful about. And he just didn’t. He didn’t know. He didn’t see stuff like that. Didn’t think that way.”

“So?”

“So I guess I was angry I didn’t do it for him.”

“Could you have?”

He shook his head. “I hadn’t seen him for seven years. I had no idea where he was. He had no idea where I was. But somebody *like* me should have done it for him. He should have asked for help.”

“Too proud?”

“No, too naive. That’s the bottom line.”

“Could he have reacted? At the scene?”

Reacher made a face. “They were pretty good, I guess. Semiproficient, by our standards. There must have been some chance. But it would have been a split-second thing, purely instinctive. And Joe’s instincts were all buried under the cerebral stuff. He probably stopped to think. He always did. Just enough to make him come out timid.”

“Naive and timid,” Neagley said. “They don’t share that opinion around here.”

“Around here he must have looked like a wild man. Everything’s comparative.”

Neagley shifted in her chair and watched the screen.

“Stand by,” she said. “The witching hour approaches.”

The timer spun back through half past midnight. The office was undisturbed. Then at sixteen minutes past midnight the cleaning crew rushed backward out of the gloom of the exit corridor. Reacher watched them at high speed until they reversed into Stuyvesant’s office at seven minutes past. Then he ran the tape forward at normal speed and watched them come out again and clean the

forward at normal speed and watched them come out again and clean the secretarial station.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“They look pretty normal,” Neagley said.

“If they’d just left the letter in there, would they look so composed?”

They weren’t hurrying. They weren’t furtive or anxious or stressed or excited. They weren’t glancing backward at Stuyvesant’s door. They were just cleaning, efficiently and speedily. He reversed the tape again and sped back through seven minutes past midnight and onward until it jammed to a stop at midnight exactly. He ejected it and inserted the first tape. Wound to the far end and scanned backward until they first entered the picture just before eleven fifty-two. Ran the tape forward and watched them walk into shot and froze the tape when they were all clearly visible.

“So where would it be?” he asked.

“Like Froelich speculated,” Neagley said. “Could be anywhere.”

He nodded. She was right. Between the three of them and the cleaning cart, they could have concealed a dozen letters.

“Do they look worried?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Run the tape. See how they move.”

He let them walk onward. They headed straight for Stuyvesant’s door and disappeared from view inside, eleven fifty-two exactly.

“Show me again,” Neagley said.

He ran the segment again. Neagley leaned back and half-closed her eyes.

“Their energy level is a little different than when they came out,” she said.

“You think?”

She nodded. “A little slower? Like they’re hesitant?”

“Or like they’re dreading having to do something bad in there?”

He ran it again.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Kind of hard to interpret. And it’s no kind of evidence, that’s for sure. Just a subjective feeling.”

He ran it again. There was no real overt difference. Maybe they looked a little less wired going in than coming out. Or more tired. But then, they spent fifteen minutes in there. And it was a relatively small office. Already quite clean and neat. Maybe it was their habit to take a ten-minute rest in there, out of sight of the camera. Cleaners weren’t dumb. Maybe they put their feet on the desk, not a letter.

“I don’t know,” Neagley said again.

“Inconclusive?” Reacher said.

“Naturally. But who else have we got?”

“Nobody at all.”

He hit fast rewind and stared at nothing until he found eight o’clock in the evening. The secretary got up from her desk, put her head around Stuyvesant’s door, and went home. He wound back to seven thirty-one and watched Stuyvesant himself leave.

“OK,” he said. “The cleaners did it. On their own initiative?”

“I seriously doubt it.”

“So who told them to?”

They stopped in the foyer and found Nendick and sent him back to tidy up his equipment room. Then they went in search of Froelich and found her deep in a stack of paperwork at her desk, on the phone, coordinating Brook Armstrong’s return from Camp David.

“We need to speak with the cleaners,” Reacher said.

“Now?” Froelich said.

“No better time. Late-night interrogation always works best.”

She looked blank. “OK, I’ll drive you, I guess.”

“Better that you’re not there,” Neagley said.

“Why not?”

“We’re military. We’ll probably want to slap them around some.”

Froelich stared at her. “You can’t do that. They’re department members, no different than me.”

“She’s kidding,” Reacher said. “But they’re going to feel better talking to us if there’s nobody else from the department around.”

“OK, I’ll wait outside. But I’m going with you.”

She finished up her phone calls and tidied up her paperwork and then led them back to the elevator and down to the garage. They climbed into the Suburban and Reacher closed his eyes for twenty minutes as she drove. He was tired. He had been working hard for six days straight. Then the car came to a stop and he opened his eyes again in a mean neighborhood full of ten-year-old sedans and hurricane fencing. There was orange glow from streetlights here and there. Patched blacktop and scrawny weeds in the sidewalks. The thump of a loud car stereo blocks away.

“This is it,” Froelich said. “Number 2301.”

Number 2301 was the left-hand half of a two-family house. It was a low clapboard structure with paired front doors in the center and symmetrical windows left and right. There was a low wire fence defining a front yard. The yard had a lawn that was partly dead. No bushes or flowers or shrubs. But it was neat enough. No trash. The steps up to the door were swept clean.

“I’ll wait right here,” Froelich said.

Reacher and Neagley climbed out of the car. The night air was cold and the

distant stereo was louder. They went in through the gate. Up a cracked concrete walk to the door. Reacher pressed the bell and heard it sound inside the house. They waited. Heard the slap of footsteps on what sounded like a bare floor, and then something metal being hauled out of the way. The door opened and a man stood there, holding the handle. He was the cleaner from the video, no doubt about it. They had looked at him forward and backward for hours. He was not young, not old. Not short, not tall. Just a completely average guy. He was wearing cotton pants and a Redskins sweatshirt. His skin was dark and his cheekbones were high and flat. His hair was black and glossy, with an old-fashioned cut still crisp and neat around the edges.

“Yes?” he said.

“We need to talk about the thing at the office,” Reacher said.

The guy didn’t ask any questions. Didn’t ask for ID. Just glanced at Reacher’s face and stepped backward and over the thing he had moved to get the door open. It was a child’s seesaw made out of brightly colored curved metal tubes. It had little seats at each end, like you might see on a child’s tricycle, and plastic horses’ heads with little handlebars coming out of the sides below the ears.

“Can’t leave it outside at night,” the guy said. “It would be stolen.”

Neagley and Reacher climbed over it into a narrow hallway. There were more toys neatly packed onto shelves. Bright grade-school paintings visible on the front of the refrigerator in the kitchen. The smell of cooking. There was a living room off the hallway with two silent, scared women in it. They were wearing Sunday dresses, which were very different from their work overalls.

“We need to know your names,” Neagley said.

Her voice was halfway between warm friendliness and the cold knell of doom. Reacher smiled to himself. That was Neagley’s way. He remembered it well. Nobody ever argued with her. It was one of her strengths.

“Julio,” the man said.

“Anita,” the first woman said. Reacher assumed she was Julio’s wife, by the way she glanced at him before answering.

“Maria,” the second woman said. “I’m Anita’s sister.”

¨Maria,´´ the second woman said. ¨I´m Anita´s sister.´´

There was a small sofa and two armchairs. Anita and Maria squeezed up to let Julio sit with them on the sofa. Reacher took that as an invitation and sat down in one of the armchairs. Neagley took the other. It put the two of them at a symmetrical angle, like the sofa was a television screen and they were sitting down to watch it.

“We think you guys put the letter in the office,” Neagley said.

There was no reply. No reaction at all. No expression on the three faces. Just some kind of silent blank stoicism.

“Did you?” Neagley asked.

No reply.

“The kids in bed?” Reacher asked.

“They’re not here,” Anita said.

“Are they yours or Maria’s?”

“They’re mine.”

“Boys or girls?”

“Both girls.”

“Where are they?”

She paused a beat. “With cousins.”

“Why?”

“Because we work nights.”

“Not for much longer,” Neagley said. “You won’t be working at all, unless you tell somebody something.”

No response.

“No more health insurance, no more benefits.”

No response.

“You might even go to jail.”

Silence in the room.

“Whatever happens to us will happen,” Julio said.

“Did somebody ask you to put it there? Somebody you know in the office?”

Absolutely no response.

“Somebody you know outside the office?”

“We didn’t do anything with any letter.”

“So what *did* you do?” Reacher asked.

“We cleaned. That’s what we’re there for.”

“You were in there an awful long time.”

Julio looked at his wife, like he was puzzled.

“We saw the tape,” Reacher said.

“We know about the cameras,” Julio said.

“You follow the same routine every night?”

“We have to.”

“Spend that long in there every night?”

Julio shrugged. “I guess so.”

“You rest up in there?”

“No, we clean.”

“Same every night?”

“Everything’s the same every night. Unless somebody’s spilled some coffee or left a lot of trash around or something. That might slow us up some.”

“Was there something like that in Stuyvesant’s office that night?”

“No,” Julio said. “Stuyvesant is a clean guy.”

“You spent some big amount of time in there.”

“No more than usual.”

“You got an exact routine?”

“I guess so. We vacuum, wipe things off, empty the trash, put things neat, move on to the next office.”

Silence in the room. Just the faint thump of the far-off car stereo, much attenuated by the walls and the windows.

“OK,” Neagley said. “Listen up, guys. The tape shows you going in there. Afterward, there was a letter on the desk. We think you put it there because somebody asked you to. Maybe they told you it was a joke or a trick. Maybe they told you it was OK to do it. And it was OK. There’s no harm done. But we need to know who asked you. Because this is part of the game, too, us trying to find out. And now you’ve got to tell us, otherwise the game is over and we have to figure you put it there off of your own bat. And that’s not OK. That’s real bad. That’s making a threat against the Vice President–elect of the United States. And you can go to prison for that.”

No reaction. Another long silence.

“Are we going to get fired?” Maria asked.

“Aren’t you listening?” Neagley said. “You’re going to jail, unless you tell us who it was.”

Maria’s face went still, like a stone. And Anita’s, and Julio’s. Still faces, blank eyes, stoic miserable expressions straight from a thousand years of peasant

experience: *sooner or later, the harvest always fails*.

“Let’s go,” Reacher said.

They stood up and stepped through to the hallway. Climbed over the seesaw and let themselves out into the night. Made it back to the Suburban in time to see Froelich snapping her cell phone shut. There was panic in her eyes.

“What?” Reacher asked.

“We got another one,” she said. “Ten minutes ago. And it’s worse.”

6

It was waiting for them in the center of the long table in the conference room. A small crowd of people had gathered around it. The halogen spots in the ceiling lit it perfectly. There was a brown nine-by-twelve envelope with a metal closure and a torn flap. And a single sheet of white letter-size paper. On it were printed ten words: *The day upon which Armstrong will die is fast approaching*. The message was split into two lines, exactly centered between the margins and set slightly above the middle of the paper. There was nothing else visible. People stared at it in silence. The guy in the suit from the reception desk pushed backward through the crowd and spoke to Froelich.

“I handled the envelope,” he said. “I didn’t touch the letter. Just spilled it out.”

“How did it arrive?” she asked.

“The garage guard took a bathroom break. Came back and found it on the ledge inside his booth. He brought it straight up to me. So I guess his prints are on the envelope too.”

“When, exactly?”

“Half hour ago.”

“How does the garage guard work his breaks?” Reacher asked.

The room went quiet. People turned toward the new voice. The desk guy started in with a fierce *who-the-hell-are-you* look. But then he saw Froelich’s face and shrugged and answered obediently.

“He locks the barrier down,” he said. “That’s how. Runs to the bathroom, runs back. Maybe two or three times a shift. He’s down there eight hours at a stretch.”

Froelich nodded. “Nobody’s blaming him. Anybody call a forensic team yet?”

“We waited for you.”

“OK, leave it on the table, nobody touch it, and seal this room tight.”

“Is there a camera in the garage?” Reacher asked.

"Is there a camera in the garage?" Reacher asked.

"Yes, there is."

"So get Nendick to bring us tonight's tape, right now."

Neagley craned over the table. "Rather florid wording, don't you think? And 'fast' definitely takes the prediction defense away, I would say. Turns the whole thing into an overt threat."

Froelich nodded.

"You got that right," she said slowly. "If this is somebody's idea of a game or a joke, it just turned very serious very suddenly."

She said it loud and clear and Reacher caught her purpose fast enough to watch the faces in the room. There was absolutely no reaction on any of them. Froelich checked her watch.

"Armstrong's in the air," she said. "On his way home to Georgetown."

Then she was quiet for a beat.

"Call out an extra team," she said. "Half to Andrews, half to Armstrong's house. And put an extra vehicle in the convoy. And take an indirect route back."

There was a split second of hesitation and then people started moving with the practiced efficiency of an elite team readying itself for action. Reacher watched them carefully, and he liked what he saw. Then he and Neagley followed Froelich back to her office. She called an FBI number and asked for a forensic team, urgent. Listened to the reply and hung up.

"Not that there's much doubt about what they'll find," she said, to nobody in particular. Then Nendick knocked and came in, carrying two videotapes.

"Two cameras," he said. "One is inside the booth, high up, looking down and sideways, supposed to ID individual drivers in their cars. The other is outside, looking straight up the alley, supposed to pick up approaching vehicles."

He put both cassettes on the desk and went back out. Froelich picked up the first tape and scooted her chair over to her television set. Put the tape in and pressed play. It was the side-ways view from inside the booth. The angle was high, but it

play. It was the sideways view from inside the booth. The angle was high, but it was about right to catch a driver framed in a car window. She wound back thirty-five minutes. Pressed play again. The guard was shown sitting on his stool with the back of his left shoulder in shot. Doing nothing. She fast-wound forward until he stood up. He touched a couple of buttons and disappeared. Nothing happened for thirty seconds. Then an arm snaked into view from the extreme right edge of the picture. Just an arm, in a heavy soft sleeve. A tweed overcoat, maybe. The hand on the end of it was gloved in leather. There was an envelope in the hand. It was pushed through the half-closed sliding window and dropped onto the ledge. Then the arm disappeared.

“He knew about the camera,” Froelich said.

“Clearly,” Neagley said. “He was a yard shy of the booth, stretching out.”

“But did he know about the other camera?” Reacher asked.

Froelich ejected the first tape and inserted the second. Wound backward thirty-five minutes. Pressed play. The view was straight up the alley. The quality was poor. There were pools of light from outdoor spotlights and the contrast with areas of darkness was vivid. The shadows lacked detail. The angle was high and tight. The top of the picture cut off well before the street end of the alley. The bottom of the shot stopped maybe six feet in front of the booth. But the width was good. Very good. Both walls of the alley were clearly in view. There was no way of approaching the garage entrance without passing through the camera’s field of vision.

The tape ran. Nothing happened. They watched the timecode counter until it reached a point twenty seconds before the arm had appeared. Then they watched the screen. A figure appeared at the top. Definitely male. No doubt about it. There was no mistaking the shoulders or the walk. He was wearing a heavy tweed overcoat, maybe gray or dark brown. Dark pants, heavy shoes, a muffler around his neck. And a hat on his head. A wide-brimmed hat, dark in color, tilted way down in front. He walked with his chin tucked down. The video picked up a perfect view of the crown of his hat, all the way down the alley.

“He knew about the second camera,” Reacher said.

The tape ran on. The guy walked fast, but purposefully, not hurrying, not running, not out of control. He had the envelope in his right hand, holding it flat against his body. He disappeared out of the bottom of the shot and reappeared

against his body. He disappeared out of the bottom of the shot and reappeared three seconds later. Without the envelope. He walked at the same purposeful pace all the way back up the alley and out of shot at the top of the screen.

Froelich froze the tape. “Description?”

“Impossible,” Neagley said. “Male, a little short and squat. Right-handed, probably. No visible limp. Apart from that we don’t know diddly. We saw nothing.”

“Maybe not too squat,” Reacher said. “The angle foreshortens things a little.”

“He had inside knowledge,” Froelich said. “He knew about the cameras and the bathroom breaks. So he’s one of us.”

“Not necessarily,” Reacher said. “He could be an outsider who staked you out. The exterior camera must be visible if you’re looking for it. And he could assume the interior camera. Most places have them. And a couple of nights’ surveillance would teach him the bathroom break procedure. But you know what? Insider or outsider, we drove right past him. We must have. When we went out to see the cleaners. Because even if he’s an insider, he needed to time the bathroom break exactly right. So he needed to be watching. He must have been across the street for a couple of hours, looking down the alley. Maybe with binoculars.”

The office went quiet.

“I didn’t see anybody,” Froelich said.

“Me neither,” Neagley said.

“I had my eyes closed,” Reacher said.

“We wouldn’t have seen him,” Froelich said. “He hears a vehicle coming up the ramp, he ducks out of sight, surely.”

“I guess so,” Reacher said. “But we were real close to him, temporarily.”

“Shit,” Froelich said.

“Yeah, shit,” Neagley echoed.

“So what do we do?” Froelich asked.

“Nothing,” Reacher said. “Nothing we can do. This was more than forty minutes ago. If he’s an insider, he’s back home by now. Maybe tucked up in bed. If he’s an outsider, he’s already on I-95 or something, west or north or south, maybe thirty miles away. We can’t call the troopers in four states and ask them to look for a right-handed man in a car who doesn’t limp, no better description than that.”

“They could look for an overcoat and a hat on the backseat or in the trunk.”

“It’s November, Froelich. Everybody’s got a hat and a coat with them.”

“So what do we do?” she asked again.

“Hope for the best, plan for the worst. Concentrate on Armstrong, just in case this whole thing is for real. Keep him wrapped up tight. Like Stuyvesant said, threatening isn’t necessarily the same thing as succeeding.”

“What’s his schedule?” Neagley asked.

“Home tonight, the Hill tomorrow,” Froelich said.

“So you’ll be OK. You scored perfect around the Capitol. If Reacher and I couldn’t get to him there, no squat guy in an overcoat is going to. Assuming a squat guy in an overcoat *wants* to, instead of just shaking you up for the fun of it.”

“You think?”

“Like Stuyvesant said, take a deep breath and tough it out. Be confident.”

“Doesn’t feel good. I need to know who this guy is.”

“We’ll find out who he is, sooner or later. Until then, if you can’t attack at one end you have to defend at the other.”

“She’s right,” Reacher said. “Concentrate on Armstrong, just in case.”

Froelich nodded vaguely and took the tape out of the machine and put the first

one back in. Restarted it and stared at the screen until the garage guard came back from his bathroom break and noticed the envelope and picked it up and hurried out of shot with it.

“Doesn’t feel good,” she said again.

An FBI forensic crew came by an hour later and photographed the sheet of paper on the conference room table. They used an office ruler for a scale reference and then used a pair of sterile plastic tweezers to lift the paper and the envelope into separate evidence bags. Froelich signed a form to keep the chain of evidence intact and they took both items away for examination. Then she got on the phone for twenty minutes and tracked Armstrong all the way out of the Marine helicopter at Andrews and all the way home.

“OK, we’re secure,” she said. “For now.”

Neagley yawned and stretched. “So take a break. Be ready for a hard week.”

“I feel stupid,” Froelich said. “I don’t know if this is a game or for real.”

“You feel too much,” Neagley said.

Froelich looked at the ceiling. “What would Joe do now?”

Reacher paused and smiled. “Go to the store and buy a suit, probably.”

“No, seriously.”

“He’d close his eyes for a minute and work it all out like it was a chess puzzle. He read Karl Marx, you know that? He said Marx had this trick of explaining everything with one single question, which was, who benefits?”

“So?”

“Let’s say it is an insider doing this. Karl Marx would say, OK, the insider plans to benefit from it. Joe would ask, OK, *how* does he plan to benefit from it?”

“By making me look bad in front of Stuyvesant.”

“And getting you demoted or fired or whatever, because that rewards him in some way. That would be his aim. But that would be his *only* aim. Situation like that, there’s no serious threat against Armstrong. That’s an important point. And then Joe would say, OK, suppose it’s not an insider, suppose it’s an outsider. How does *he* plan to benefit?”

“By assassinating Armstrong.”

“Which gratifies him in some other way. So Joe would say what you’ve got to do is proceed *as if* it’s an outsider, and proceed very calmly and without panicking, and above all successfully. That’s two birds with one stone. If you’re calm, you deny the insider his benefit. If you’re successful, you deny the outsider *his* benefit.”

Froelich nodded, frustrated. “But which is it? What did the cleaners tell you?”

“Nothing,” Reacher said. “My read is somebody they know persuaded them to smuggle it in, but they aren’t admitting to anything.”

“I’ll tell Armstrong to stay home tomorrow.”

Reacher shook his head. “You can’t. You do that, you’ll be seeing shadows every day and he’ll be in hiding for the next four years. Just stay calm and tough it out.”

“Easy to say.”

“Easy to do. Just take a deep breath.”

Froelich was still and silent for a spell. Then she nodded.

“OK,” she said. “I’ll get you a driver. Be back here at nine in the morning. There’ll be another strategy meeting. Exactly a week after the last one.”

The morning was damp and very cold, like nature wanted to be done with fall and get started with winter. Exhaust fumes drifted down the streets in low white clouds and pedestrians hurried by on the sidewalks with their faces ducked deep into scarves. Neagley and Reacher met at eight-forty at the cab line outside the

hotel and found a Secret Service Town Car waiting for them. It was double-parked with the engine running and the driver standing next to it. He was maybe thirty years old, dressed in a dark overcoat and gloves, and he was up on his toes, scanning the crowd anxiously. He was breathing hard and his breath was pluming in the air.

“He looks worried,” Neagley said.

The inside of the car was hot. The driver didn’t speak once during the journey. Didn’t even say his name. Just bulled through the morning traffic and squealed into the underground garage. Led them at a fast walk into the interior lobby and into the elevator. Up three floors and across to the reception desk. It was manned by a different guy. He pointed down the corridor toward the conference room.

“Started without you,” he said. “You better hurry.”

The conference room was empty apart from Froelich and Stuyvesant sitting face-to-face across the width of the table. They were both still and silent. Both pale. On the polished wood between them lay two photographs. One was the official FBI crime scene eight-by-ten of the previous day’s ten-word message: *The day upon which Armstrong will die is fast approaching*. The other was a hasty Polaroid of another sheet of paper. Reacher stepped close and bent to look.

“Shit,” he said.

The Polaroid showed a single sheet of letter-sized paper, exactly like the first three in every detail. It followed the same format, a printed message neatly centered near the middle of the page. Nine words: *A demonstration of your vulnerability will be staged today*.

“When did it come?” he asked.

“This morning,” Froelich said. “In the mail. Addressed to Armstrong at his office. But we’re bringing all his mail through here now.”

“Where is it from?”

“Orlando, Florida, postmarked Friday.”

“Another popular tourist destination,” Stuyvesant said.

Reacher nodded. “Forensics on yesterday’s?”

“Just got a heads-up by phone,” Froelich said. “Everything’s identical, thumbprint and all. I’m sure this one will be the same. They’re working on it now.”

Reacher stared at the pictures. The thumbprints were completely invisible, but he felt he could just about see them there, like they were glowing in the dark.

“I had the cleaners arrested,” Stuyvesant said.

Nobody spoke.

“Gut call?” Stuyvesant said. “Joke or real?”

“Real,” Neagley said. “I think.”

“Doesn’t matter yet,” Reacher said. “Because nothing’s happened yet. But we act like it’s for real until we know otherwise.”

Stuyvesant nodded. “That was Froelich’s recommendation. She quoted Karl Marx at me. *The Communist Manifesto*.”

“*Das Kapital*, actually,” Reacher said. He picked up the Polaroid and looked at it again. The focus was a little soft and the paper was very white from the strobe, but there was no mistaking what the message meant.

“Two questions,” he said. “First, how secure are his movements today?”

“As good as it gets,” Froelich said. “I’ve doubled his detail. He’s scheduled to leave home at eleven. I’m using the armored stretch again instead of the Town Car. Full motorcade. We’re using awnings across the sidewalks at both ends. He won’t see open air at any point. We’ll tell him it’s another rehearsal procedure.”

“He still doesn’t know about this yet?”

“No,” Froelich said.

“Standard practice,” Stuyvesant said. “We don’t tell them.”

“Thousands of threats a year,” Neagley said.

Stuyvesant nodded. “Exactly. Most of them are background noise. We wait until we’re absolutely sure. And even then, we don’t always make a big point out of it. They’ve got better things to do. It’s our job to worry.”

“OK, second question,” Reacher said. “Where’s his wife? And he has a grown-up kid, right? We have to assume that messing with his family would be a pretty good demonstration of his vulnerability.”

Froelich nodded. “His wife is back here in D.C. She came in from North Dakota yesterday. As long as she stays in or near the house she’s OK. His daughter is doing graduate work in Antarctica. Meteorology, or something. She’s in a hut surrounded by a hundred thousand square miles of ice. Better protection than we could give her.”

Reacher put the Polaroid back down on the table.

“Are you confident?” he asked. “About today?”

“I’m nervous as hell.”

“But?”

“I’m as confident as I can be.”

“I want Neagley and me on the ground, observing.”

“Think we’re going to screw up?”

“No, but I think you’re going to have your hands full. If the guy’s in the neighborhood, you might be too busy to spot him. And he’ll have to be in the neighborhood if he’s for real and he wants to stage a demonstration of something.”

“OK,” Stuyvesant said. “You and Ms. Neagley, on the ground, observing.”

Froelich drove them to Georgetown in her Suburban. They arrived just before ten o’clock. They got out three blocks short of Armstrong’s house and Froelich drove on. It was a cold day, but a watery sun was trying its best. Neagley stood

still and glanced around, all four directions.

“Deployment?” she asked.

“Circles, on a three-block radius. You go clockwise and I’ll go counterclockwise. Then you stay south and I’ll stay north. Meet back at the house after he’s gone.”

Neagley nodded and walked away west. Reacher went east into the weak morning sun. He wasn’t especially familiar with Georgetown. Apart from short periods during the previous week spent watching Armstrong’s house he had explored it only once, briefly, just after he left the service. He was familiar with the college feel and the coffee shops and the smart houses. But he didn’t know it like a cop knows his beat. A cop depends on a sense of *inappropriateness*. What doesn’t fit? What’s out of the ordinary? What’s the wrong type of face or the wrong type of car for the neighborhood? Impossible to answer those questions without long habituation to a place. And maybe impossible to answer them at all in a place like Georgetown. Everybody who lives there comes from somewhere else. They’re there for a reason, to study at the university or to work in the government. It’s a transient place. It has a temporary, shifting population. You graduate, you leave. You get voted out, you go someplace else. You get rich, you move to Chevy Chase. You go broke, you go sleep in a park.

So just about everybody he saw was suspicious. He could have made a case against any of them. Who belonged? An old Porsche with a blown muffler rumbled past him. Oklahoma plates. An unshaven driver. Who was he? A brand new Mercury Sable was parked nose-to-tail with a rusted-out Rabbit. The Sable was red and almost certainly a rental. Who was using it? Some guy just in for the day for a special purpose? He detoured next to it and glanced in through the windows at the rear seat. No overcoat, no hat. No open ream of Georgia-Pacific office paper. No box of latex medical gloves. And who owned the Rabbit? A graduate student? Or some backwoods anarchist with a Hewlett-Packard printer at home?

There were people on the sidewalks. Maybe four or five of them visible at any one time in any one direction. Young, old, white, black, brown. Men, women, young people carrying backpacks full of books. Some of them hurrying, some of them strolling. Some of them obviously on their way to the market, some of them obviously on their way back. Some of them looking like they had no particular place to go. He watched them all in the corner of his eye, but nothing

special jumped out at him.

Time to time he checked upper-story windows as he walked. There were a lot of them. It was good rifle territory. A warren of houses, back gates, narrow alleys. But a rifle would be no good against an armored stretch limo. The guy would need an antitank missile for that. Of which there were plenty to choose from. The AT-4 would be favorite. It was a three-foot disposable fiberglass tube that fired a six-and-a-half pound projectile through eleven inches of armor. Then the *BASE* principle took over. *Behind Armor Secondary Effect.* The entrance hole stayed small and tight, so the explosive event stayed confined to the interior of the vehicle. Armstrong would be reduced to little floating carbon pieces not much bigger than charred wedding confetti. Reacher glanced up at the windows. He doubted that a limo would have much armor plate in the roof, anyway. He made a mental note to ask Froelich about it. And to ask if she often rode in the same car as her charge.

He turned a corner and came out at the top of Armstrong's street. Looked up at the high windows again. A mere demonstration wouldn't require an actual missile. A rifle would be functionally ineffective, but it would make a point. A couple of chips in the limo's bulletproof glass would serve some kind of notice. A paintball gun would do the trick. A couple of red splatters on the rear window would be a message. But the upper-floor windows were quiet as far as the eye could see. They were clean and neat and draped and closed against the cold. The houses themselves were quiet and calm, serene and prosperous.

There was a small crowd of onlookers watching the Secret Service team erect an awning between Armstrong's house and the curb. It was like a long narrow white tent. Heavy white canvas, completely opaque. The house end fitted flat against the brick around Armstrong's front door. The curb end had a radius like a jetway at an airport. It would hug the profile of the limo. The limo's door would open right inside it. Armstrong would pass from the safety of his house straight into the armored car without ever being visible to an observer.

Reacher walked a circle around the group of curious people. They looked unthreatening. Neighbors, mostly, he guessed. Dressed like they weren't going far. He moved back up the street and continued the search for open upper-story windows. That would be inappropriate, because of the weather. But there weren't any. He looked for people loitering. There were plenty of those. There was a block where every second storefront was a coffee shop, and there were people passing time in every one of them. Sipping espresso, reading papers

people passing time in every one of them. Sipping espresso, reading papers, talking on cell phones, writing in cramped notebooks, playing with electronic organizers.

He picked a coffee shop that gave him a good view south down the street and a marginal view east and west and bought a tall regular, black, and took a table. Sat down to wait and watch. At ten fifty-five a black Suburban came up the street and parked tight against the curb just north of the tent. It was followed by a black Cadillac stretch that parked tight against the tent's opening. Behind that was a black Town Car. All three vehicles looked very heavy. All three had reinforced window frames and one-way glass. Four agents spilled out of the lead Suburban and took up stations on the sidewalk, two of them north of the house and two of them south. Two Metro Police cruisers snuffled up the street and the first stopped right in the center of the road well ahead of the Secret Service convoy and the second hung back well behind it. They lit up their light bars to hold the traffic. There wasn't much. A blue Chevy Malibu and a gold Lexus SUV waited to get by. Reacher had seen neither vehicle before. Neither had been out cruising the area. He looked at the tent and tried to guess when Armstrong was passing through it. Impossible. He was still gazing at the house end when he heard the faint thump of an armored door closing and the four agents stepped back to their Suburban and the whole convoy took off. The lead cop car leapt forward and the Suburban and the Cadillac and the Town Car fell in behind it and moved fast up the street. The second police cruiser brought up the rear. All five vehicles turned east right in front of Reacher's coffee shop. Tires squealed on the pavement. The cars accelerated. He watched them disappear. Then he turned back and watched the small crowd in the street disperse. The whole neighborhood went quiet and still.

They watched the motorcade drive away from a vantage point about eighty yards from where Reacher was sitting. Their surveillance confirmed what they already knew. Professional pride prevented them from writing off his commute to work as actually *impossible*, but as a viable opportunity it was going to be way down on their list. Way, way down. Right there at the bottom. Which made it all the more fortunate that the transition website offered so many other tempting choices.

They walked a circuitous route through the streets and made it back to their rented red Sable without incident.

Reacher finished his last mouthful of coffee and walked down toward Armstrong's house. He stepped off the sidewalk where the tent blocked it. It was a white canvas tunnel leading directly to Armstrong's front door. The door was closed. He walked on and stepped back on the sidewalk and met Neagley coming up from the opposite direction.

"OK?" he asked her.

"Opportunities," she said. "Didn't see anybody about to exploit any of them."

"Me neither."

"I like the tent and the armored car."

Reacher nodded. "Takes rifles out of the equation."

"Not entirely," Neagley said. "A .50 sniper rifle would get through the armor. With the Browning AP round, or the API."

He made a face. Either bullet was a formidable proposition. The standard armor-piercing item just blasted through steel plate, and the alternative armor-piercing incendiary burned its way through. But in the end he shook his head.

"No chance to aim," he said. "First you'd have to wait until the car was rolling, to be sure he was in it. Then you're putting a bullet into a large moving vehicle with dark windows. Hundred-to-one you'd hit Armstrong himself inside."

"So you'd need an AT-4."

"What I thought."

"Either with the high-explosive against the car, or else you could use it to put a phosphorous bomb into the house."

"From where?"

"I'd use an upper-floor window in a house behind Armstrong's. Across the alley, in back. Their defense is mostly concentrated on the front."

“How would you get in?”

“Phony utility guy, water company, electric company. Anybody who could get in carrying a big toolbox.”

Reacher nodded. Said nothing.

“It’s going to be a hell of a four years,” Neagley said.

“Or eight.”

Then there was the hiss of tires and the sound of a big engine behind them and they turned to see Froelich easing up in her Suburban. She stopped alongside them, twenty yards short of Armstrong’s house. Gestured them into the vehicle. Neagley got in the front and Reacher sprawled in the back.

“See anybody?” Froelich asked.

“Lots of people,” Reacher said. “Wouldn’t buy a cheap watch from any of them.”

Froelich took her foot off the brake and let the engine’s idle speed crawl the car along the road. She kept it tight in the gutter and stopped it again when the nearside rear door was exactly level with the end of the tent. Lifted her hand from the wheel and spoke into the microphone wired to her wrist.

“One, ready,” she said.

Reacher looked to his right down the length of the canvas tunnel and saw the front door open and a man step out. It was Brook Armstrong. No doubt about it. His photograph had been all over the papers for five solid months and Reacher had spent four whole days watching his every move. He was wearing a khaki raincoat and carrying a leather briefcase. He walked through the tent, not fast, not slow. An agent in a suit watched him from the door.

“The convoy was a decoy,” Froelich said. “We do it that way, time to time.”

“Fooled me,” Reacher said.

“Don’t tell him this isn’t a rehearsal,” Froelich said. “Remember he’s not aware of anything yet.”

Reacher sat up straight and moved over to make room. Armstrong opened the door and climbed in beside him.

“Morning, M. E.,” he said.

“Morning, sir,” she replied. “These are associates of mine, Jack Reacher and Frances Neagley.”

Neagley half-turned and Armstrong threaded a long arm over the seat to shake her hand.

“I know you,” he said. “I met you at the party on Thursday evening. You’re a contributor, aren’t you?”

“She’s a security person, actually,” Froelich said. “We had a little cloak-and-dagger stuff going there. An efficiency analysis.”

“I was impressed,” Neagley said.

“Excellent,” Armstrong said to her. “Believe me, ma’am, I’m very grateful for the care everybody takes of me. Way more than I deserve. Really.”

He was magnificent, Reacher thought. His voice and his face and his eyes spoke of nothing but boundless fascination with Neagley alone. Like he would rather talk to her than do anything else in the whole world. And he had one hell of a visual memory, to place one face in a thousand from four days ago. That was clear. A born politician. He turned and shook Reacher’s hand and lit up the car with a smile of genuine pleasure.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Reacher,” he said.

“Pleasure’s all mine,” Reacher said. Then he found himself smiling back. He liked the guy, immediately. He had charm to burn. There was charisma coming off him like heat. And even if you discounted ninety-nine percent of it as political bullshit you could still like the fragment that was left. You could like it a lot.

“You in security too?” Armstrong asked him.

“Adviser,” Reacher said.

"Harvey," Reacher said.

"Well, you guys do a hell of a great job. Glad to have you aboard."

There was a tiny sound from Froelich's earpiece and she took off down the street and made her way toward Wisconsin Avenue. Merged into the traffic stream and headed south and east for the center of town. The sun had disappeared again and the city looked gray through the deep tint in the windows. Armstrong made a little sound like a happy sigh and looked out at it, like he was still thrilled with it. Under the raincoat he was immaculate in a suit and a broadcloth shirt and a silk tie. He looked larger than life. Reacher had five years and three inches and fifty pounds on him but felt small and dull and shabby in comparison. But the guy also looked *real*. Very genuine. You could forget the suit and the tie and picture him in a torn old plaid jacket, out there splitting logs in his yard. He looked like a very serious politician, but a fun guy, too. He was tall and wired with energy. Blue eyes, plain features, unruly hair flecked with gold. He looked fit. Not with the kind of polish a gym gives you, but like he was just born strong. He had good hands. A slim gold wedding ring and no others. Cracked, untidy nails.

"Ex-military, am I right?" he asked.

"Me?" Neagley said.

"Both of you, I should think. You're both a little wary. He's checking me out and you're checking the windows, especially at the lights. I recognize the signs. My dad was military."

"Career guy?"

Armstrong smiled. "You didn't read my campaign bios? He planned on a career, but he was invalided out before I was born and started a lumber business. Never lost the look, though. He always walked the walk, that's for sure."

Froelich came off M Street and headed parallel with Pennsylvania Avenue, past the Executive Office Building, past the front of the White House. Armstrong craned to look out at it. Smiled, with the laugh lines deepening around his eyes.

"Unbelievable, isn't it?" he said. "Out of everybody who's surprised I'm going to be a part of that, I'm the *most* surprised of all, believe me."

Froelich drove straight past her own office in the Treasury Building and headed

for the Capitol dome in the distance.

“Wasn’t there a Reacher at Treasury?” Armstrong asked.

Hell of a memory for names, too, Reacher thought.

“My elder brother,” he said.

“Small world,” Armstrong said.

Froelich made it onto Constitution Avenue and drove past the side of the Capitol. Made a left onto First Street and headed for a white tent leading to a side door in the Senate Offices. There were two Secret Service Town Cars flanking the tent. Four agents out on the sidewalks, looking cautious and cold. Froelich drove straight for the tent and eased to a stop tight against the curb. Checked her position and rolled forward a foot to put Armstrong’s door right inside the canvas shelter. Reacher saw a group of three agents waiting inside the tunnel. One of them stepped forward and opened the Suburban’s door. Armstrong raised his eyebrows, like he was bemused by all the attention.

“Good meeting you both,” he said. “And thanks, M.E.”

Then he stepped out into the canvas gloom and shut the door and the agents surrounded him and walked him down the length of the tent toward the building. Reacher glimpsed uniformed Capitol security people waiting inside. Armstrong stepped through the door and it closed solidly behind him. Froelich pulled away from the curb and eased around the parked cars and headed north in the direction of Union Station.

“OK,” she said, like she was very relieved. “So far so good.”

“You took a chance there,” Reacher said.

“Two in two hundred eighty-one million,” Neagley said.

“What are you talking about?”

“Could have been one of us who sent the letters.”

Froelich smiled. “My guess is it wasn’t. What did you think of him?”

“I liked him,” Reacher said. “I really did.”

“Me too,” Neagley said. “I’ve liked him since Thursday. So now what?”

“He’s in there all day for meetings. Lunch in the dining room. We’ll take him home around seven o’clock. His wife is home. So we’ll rent them a video or something. Keep them locked up tight all evening.”

“We need intelligence,” Reacher said. “We don’t know what exact form this demonstration might take. Or where it will be. Could be anything from graffiti upward. We don’t want to let it pass us by without noticing. If it happens at all.”

Froelich nodded. “We’ll check at midnight. Assuming we get to midnight.”

“And I want Neagley to interview the cleaners again. We get what we need from them, we can put our minds at rest.”

“I’d like to do that,” Froelich said.

They dropped Neagley at the Federal lockup and then drove back to Froelich’s office. Written FBI forensic reports were in on the latest two messages. They were identical to the first two in every respect. But there was a supplementary report from a Bureau chemist. He had detected something unusual about the thumbprints.

“Squalene,” Froelich said. “You ever heard of that?”

Reacher shook his head.

“It’s an acyclic hydrocarbon. A type of oil. There are traces of it present in the thumbprints. Slightly more on the third and fourth than the first and second.”

“Prints always have oils. That’s how they get made.”

“But usually it’s regular human finger oil. This stuff is different. C-thirty-H-fifty. It’s a fish oil. Shark-liver oil, basically.”

She passed the paper across her desk. It was covered in complicated stuff about organic chemistry. Squalene was a natural oil used as an old-fashioned lubricant

for delicate machinery, like clockwork watches. There was an addendum at the bottom which said that when hydrogenated, squalene with an *e* becomes squalane with an *a*.

“What’s hydrogenated?” Reacher asked.

“You add water?” Froelich said. “Like hydroelectric power?”

He shrugged and she pulled a dictionary off the shelf and flicked through to *H*.

“No,” she said. “It means you add extra hydrogen atoms to the molecule.”

“Well, that makes everything clear as mud. I scored pretty low in chemistry.”

“It means this guy could be a shark fisherman.”

“Or he guts fish for a living,” Reacher said. “Or he works in a fish store. Or he’s an antique watchmaker with his hands dirty from lubricating something.”

Froelich opened a drawer and flipped through a file and pulled a single sheet. Passed it across. It was a life-size fluoroscope photograph of a thumbprint.

“This our guy?” Reacher asked.

Froelich nodded. It was a very clear print. Maybe the clearest print Reacher had ever seen. All the ridges and whorls were exactly delineated. It was bold and astonishingly provocative. And it was big. Very big. The pad of the thumb measured nearly an inch and a half across. Reacher pressed his own thumb alongside it. His thumb was smaller, and he didn’t have the most delicate hands in the world.

“That’s not a watchmaker’s thumb,” Froelich said.

Reacher nodded slowly. The guy must have hands like bunches of bananas. And rough skin, to print with that degree of clarity.

“Manual worker,” he said.

“Shark fisherman,” Froelich said. “Where do they catch a lot of sharks?”

“Florida, maybe.”

“Orlando’s in Florida.”

Her phone rang. She picked it up and her face fell. She looked up at the ceiling and pressed the phone into her shoulder.

“Armstrong needs to go over to the Department of Labor,” she said. “And he wants to walk.”

7

It was exactly two miles from the Treasury Building to the Senate Offices and Froelich drove the whole way one-handed while she talked on her phone. The weather was gray and the traffic was heavy and the trip was slow. She parked at the mouth of the white tent on First Street and killed the motor and snapped her phone closed all at the same time.

“Can’t the Labor guys come over here?” Reacher asked.

She shook her head. “It’s a political thing. There are going to be changes over there and it’s more polite if Armstrong makes the effort himself.”

“Why does he want to walk?”

“Because he’s an outdoors type. He likes fresh air. And he’s stubborn.”

“Where does he have to go, exactly?”

She pointed due west. “Less than half a mile that way. Call it six or seven hundred yards across Capitol Plaza.”

“Did he call them or did they call him?”

“He called them. It’s going to leak so he’s trying to preempt the bad news.”

“Can you stop him going?”

“Theoretically,” she said. “But I really don’t want to. That’s not the sort of argument I want to have right now.”

Reacher turned and looked down the street behind them. Nothing there except gray weather and speeding cars on Constitution Avenue.

“So let him do it,” he said. “He called them. Nobody’s luring him out into the open. It’s not a trick.”

She glanced ahead through the windshield. Then she turned and stared past him, through his side window, down the length of the tent. Flipped her phone open and spoke to people in her office again. She used abbreviations and a torrent of

and spoke to people in her office again. She used abbreviations and a torrent of jargon he couldn't follow. Finished the call and closed her phone.

"We'll bring a Metro traffic chopper in," she said. "Keep it low enough to be obvious. He'll have to pass the Armenian Embassy, so we'll put some extra cops there. They'll blend in. I'll follow him in the car on D Street fifty yards behind. I want you out ahead of him with your eyes wide open."

"When are we doing this?"

"Within ten minutes. Go up the street and left."

"OK," he said. She restarted the car and rolled forward so he could step onto the sidewalk clear of the tent. He got out and zipped his jacket and walked away into the cold. Up First Street and left onto C Street. There was traffic on Delaware Avenue ahead of him and beyond it he could see Capitol Plaza. There were low bare trees and open brown lawns. Paths made from crushed sandstone. A fountain in the center. A pool to the right. To the left and farther on, some kind of an obelisk memorial to somebody.

He dodged cars and ran across Delaware. Walked on into the plaza. Grit crunched under his shoes. It was very cold. His soles were thin. It felt like there were ice crystals mixed in with the crushed stone underfoot. He stopped just short of the fountain. Looked around. Perimeters were good. To the north was open ground and then a semicircle of state flags and some other monument and the bulk of Union Station. To the south was nothing except for the Capitol Building itself far away across Constitution Avenue. Ahead to the west was a building he assumed was the Department of Labor. He looped around the fountain with his eyes focused on the middle distance and saw nothing that worried him. Poor cover, no close windows. There were people in the park, but no assassin hangs around all day just in case somebody's schedule changes unexpectedly.

He walked on. C Street restarted on the far side of the plaza, just about opposite the obelisk. It was more of an upright slab, really. There was a sign pointing toward it: *Taft Memorial*. C Street crossed New Jersey Avenue and then Louisiana Avenue. There were crosswalks. Fast traffic. Armstrong was going to spend some time standing still waiting for lights. The Armenian Embassy was ahead on the left. A police cruiser was pulling up in front of it. It parked on the curb and four cops got out. He heard a distant helicopter. Turned around and saw

it low in the north and west, skirting the prohibited airspace around the White House. The Department of Labor was dead ahead. There were plenty of convenient side doors.

He crossed C Street to the north sidewalk. Strolled back fifty yards to where he could see into the plaza. Waited. The helicopter was stationary in the air, low enough to be obvious, high enough not to be deafening. He saw Froelich's Suburban come around the corner, tiny in the distance. It pulled over and waited at the curb. He watched people. Most of them were hurrying. It was too cold for loitering. He saw a group of men way on the far side of the fountain. Six guys in dark overcoats surrounded a seventh in a khaki raincoat. They walked in the center of the sandstone path. The two agents on point were alert. The others crowded tight, like a moving huddle. They passed the fountain and headed for New Jersey Avenue. Waited at the light. Armstrong was bareheaded. The wind blew his hair. Cars streamed past. Nobody paid attention. Drivers and pedestrians occupied different worlds, based on relative time and space. Froelich kept her distance. Her Suburban idled along in the gutter fifty yards back. The light changed and Armstrong and his team walked on. So far, so good. The operation was working well.

Then it wasn't.

First the wind pushed the police helicopter slightly off station. Then Armstrong and his team were halfway across the narrow triangular spit of land between New Jersey Avenue and Louisiana Avenue when a lone pedestrian did a perfect double take from ten yards away. He was a middle-aged guy, lean from neglect, bearded, long-haired, unkempt. He was wearing a belted raincoat greasy with age. He stood completely still for a split second and then launched himself toward Armstrong with his legs taking long bouncing strides and his arms windmilling uselessly and his mouth wide open in a snarl. The two nearest agents jumped forward to intercept him and the other four pulled back and crowded around Armstrong himself. They jostled and maneuvered until they had all six bodies between the crazy guy and Armstrong. Which left Armstrong totally vulnerable from the opposite direction.

Reacher thought *decoy* and spun around. Nothing there. Nothing anywhere. Just the cityscape, still and cold and indifferent. He checked windows for movement. He looked for the flash of sun on glass. Nothing. Nothing at all. He looked at cars on the avenues. All of them oblivious and moving fast. None of them

slowing. He turned back and saw the crazy guy on the ground with two agents holding him down and two more with guns covering him. He saw Froelich's Suburban speeding up and taking the corner fast. She stopped hard on the curb and two agents bundled Armstrong straight across the sidewalk and into the backseat.

But the Suburban didn't go anywhere. It just sat there with traffic spilling around it. The helicopter drifted back on station and lost a little altitude and came down for a closer look. Its noise beat the air. Nothing happened. Then Armstrong got back out of the car. The two agents got out with him and walked him over to the crazy guy on the ground. Armstrong squatted down. Rested his elbows on his knees. It looked like he was talking. Froelich left her motor running and joined him on the sidewalk. Raised her hand and spoke into her wrist microphone. After a long moment a Metro cruiser came around the corner and pulled up behind the Suburban. Armstrong stood up straight and watched the two agents with the guns put the guy in the back of the cop car. The cop car drove away and Froelich went back to her Suburban and Armstrong regrouped with his escort and walked on toward the Department of Labor. The helicopter drifted above them. As they finally crossed Louisiana Avenue one way Reacher crossed it the other and jogged down to Froelich in her car. She was sitting in the driver's seat with her head turned to watch Armstrong walk away. Reacher tapped on the window and she whirled around in surprise. Saw who it was and buzzed the glass down.

"You OK?" he asked her.

She turned back again to watch Armstrong. "I must be nuts."

"Who was the guy?"

"Just some street person. We'll follow it up, but I can tell you right now it's not connected. No way. If that guy had sent the messages we'd still be smelling the bourbon on the paper. Armstrong wanted to *talk* to him. Said he felt sorry for him. And then he insisted on sticking with the walkabout. He's nuts. And I'm nuts for allowing it."

"Is he going to walk back?"

"Probably. I need it to rain, Reacher. Why doesn't it ever rain when you want it to? A real downpour an hour from now would help me out."

He glanced up at the sky. It was gray and cold, but all the clouds were high and unthreatening. It wasn't going to rain.

"You should tell him," he said.

She shook her head and turned to face front. "We just don't do that."

"Then you should get one of his staff to call him back in a hurry. Like something's real urgent. Then he'd have to ride."

She shook her head again. "He's running the transition. He sets the pace. Nothing's urgent unless he says it is."

"So tell him it's another rehearsal. A new tactic or something."

Froelich glanced across at him. "I guess I could do that. It's still the pregame period. We're entitled to rehearse with him. Maybe."

"Try it," he said. "The walk back is more dangerous than the walk there. There'll be a couple hours for somebody to find out he's going to do it."

"Get in," she said. "You look cold."

He walked around the Suburban's hood and climbed in on the passenger side. Unzipped his jacket and held it open to allow the warm air from the heater to funnel up inside it. They sat and watched until Armstrong and his minders disappeared inside the Labor building. Froelich immediately called her office. Left instructions that she was to be informed before Armstrong moved again. Then she put the car in gear and took off south and west toward the East Wing of the National Gallery. She made a left and drove past the Capitol Building's reflecting pool. Then a right onto Independence Avenue.

"Where are we going?" Reacher asked.

"Nowhere in particular," she said. "I'm just killing time. And trying to decide if I should resign today or keep on beating my brains out."

She drove past all the museums and made a left onto Fourteenth Street. The Bureau of Engraving and Printing rose up on their right, between them and the Tidal Basin. It was a big gray building. She pulled up at the curb opposite its main entrance. Kept the engine running and her foot on the brake. Gazed up at

main entrance. Kept the engine running and her foot on the brake. Gazed up at one of the high office windows.

“Joe spent time in there,” she said. “Back when they were designing the new hundred-dollar bill. He figured if he was going to have to protect it, he should have some input on it. A long time ago, now.”

Her head was tilted up. Reacher could see the curve of her throat. He could see the way it met the opening of her shirt. He said nothing.

“I used to meet him here sometimes,” she said. “Or on the steps of the Jefferson Memorial. We’d walk around the Basin, late in the evening. In spring or summer.”

Reacher looked ahead to his right. The memorial crouched low among the bare trees and was reflected perfectly in the still water.

“I loved him, you know,” Froelich said.

Reacher said nothing. Just looked at her hand resting on the wheel. And her wrist. It was slim. The skin was perfect. There was a trace of a faded summer tan.

“And you’re very like him,” she said.

“Where did he live?”

She glanced at him. “Don’t you know?”

“I don’t think he ever told me.”

Silence in the idling car.

“He had an apartment in the Watergate,” she said.

“Rented?”

She nodded. “It was very bare. Like it was only temporary.”

“It would be. Reachers don’t own property. I don’t think we ever have.”

“Your mother’s family did. They had estates in France.”

“Did they?”

“You don’t know that either?”

He shrugged. “I know they were French, obviously. Not sure I ever heard about their real-estate situation.”

Froelich eased her foot off the brake and glanced in the mirror and gunned the motor and rejoined the traffic stream.

“You guys had a weird idea of family,” she said. “That’s for damn sure.”

“Seemed normal at the time,” he said. “We thought every family was like that.”

Her cell phone rang. A low electronic trill in the quiet of the car. She flipped it open. Listened for a moment and said *OK* and closed it up.

“Neagley,” she said. “She’s finished with the cleaners.”

“She get anything?”

“Didn’t say. She’s meeting us back at the office.”

She looped around south of the Mall and drove north on Fourteenth Street. Her phone rang again. She fumbled it open one-handed and listened as she drove. Said nothing and snapped it shut. Glanced at the traffic ahead on the street.

“Armstrong’s ready to get back,” she said. “I’m going to go try and make him ride with me. I’ll drop you in the garage.”

She drove down the ramp and stopped long enough for Reacher to jump out. Then she turned around in the crowded space and headed back up to the street. Reacher found the door with the wired glass porthole and walked up the stairs to the lobby with the single elevator. Rode it to the third floor and found Neagley waiting in the reception area. She was sitting upright on a leather chair.

“Stuyvesant around?” Reacher asked her.

She shook her head. “He went next door. To the White House.”

“I want to go look at that camera.”

They walked together past the counter toward the rear of the floor and came out in the square area outside Stuyvesant’s office. His secretary was at her desk with her purse open. She had a tiny tortoiseshell mirror and a stick of lip gloss in her hands. The pose made her look human. Efficient, for sure, but like an amiable old soul, too. She saw them coming and put her cosmetic equipment away fast, like she was embarrassed to be caught with it. Reacher looked over her head at the surveillance camera. Neagley looked at Stuyvesant’s door. Then she glanced at the secretary.

“Do you remember the morning the message showed up in there?” she asked.

“Of course I do,” the secretary said.

“Why did Mr. Stuyvesant leave his briefcase out here?”

The secretary thought for a moment. “Because it was a Thursday.”

“What happens on a Thursday? Does he have an early meeting?”

“No, his wife goes to Baltimore, Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

“How is that connected?”

“She volunteers at a hospital there.”

Neagley looked straight at her. “How does that affect her husband’s briefcase?”

“She drives,” the secretary said. “She takes their car. They only have one. No department vehicle either, because Mr. Stuyvesant isn’t operational anymore. So he has to come to work on the Metro.”

Neagley looked blank. “The subway?”

The secretary nodded. “He has a special briefcase for Tuesdays and Thursdays because he’s forced to place it on the floor of the subway car. He won’t do that with his regular briefcase, because he thinks it gets dirty.”

Neagley stood still. Reacher thought back to the videotapes, Stuyvesant leaving late on Wednesday evening, returning early on Thursday morning.

“I didn’t notice a difference,” he said. “Looked like the same case to me.”

The secretary nodded in agreement.

“They’re identical items,” she said. “Same make, same vintage. He doesn’t like for people to realize. But one is for his automobile and the other is for the subway car.”

“Why?”

“He hates dirt. I think he’s afraid of it. Tuesdays and Thursdays, he won’t take his subway-car briefcase into his office at all. He leaves it out here all day and I have to bring him things from it. If it’s been raining he leaves his shoes out here, too. Like his office was a Japanese temple.”

Neagley glanced at Reacher. Made a face.

“It’s a harmless eccentricity,” the secretary said. Then she lowered her voice, as if she might be overheard all the way from the White House. “And absolutely unnecessary, in my opinion. The D.C. Metro is famous for being the cleanest subway in the world.”

“OK,” Neagley said. “But weird.”

“It’s harmless,” the secretary said again.

Reacher lost interest and stepped behind her and looked at the fire door. It had a brushed-steel push bar at waist height, like the city construction codes no doubt required it to have. He put his fingers on it and it clicked back with silky precision. He pushed a little harder and it folded up against the painted wood and the door swung back. It was a heavy fireproof item and there were three large steel hinges carrying its weight. He stepped through to a small square stairwell. There were concrete stairs, newer than the stone fabric of the building. They ran up to the higher floors and down toward street level. They had steel handrails. There were dim emergency lights behind glass in wire cages. Clearly a narrow space had been appropriated in the back of the building during the modernization and dedicated to a full-bore fire escape system.

There was a regular knob on the back of the door that operated the same latch as the push bar. It had a keyhole, but it wasn’t locked. It turned easily. *Makes sense*,

he thought. The building was secure as a whole. They didn't need for every floor to be isolated as well. He let the door close behind him and waited in the gloom on the stairwell for a second. Turned the knob again and reopened the door and stepped back into the brightness of the secretarial area, one pace. Twisted and looked up at the surveillance camera. It was right there above his head, set so it would pick him up sometime during his second step. He inched forward and let the door close behind him. Checked the camera again. It would be seeing him by now. And he still had more than eight feet to go before he reached Stuyvesant's door.

"The cleaners put the message there," the secretary said. "There's no other possible explanation."

Then her phone rang and she excused herself politely and answered it. Reacher and Neagley walked back through the maze of corridors and found Froelich's office. It was quiet and dark and empty. Neagley flicked the halogen lights on and sat down at the desk. There was no other chair, so Reacher sat on the floor with his legs straight out and his back propped against the side of a file cabinet.

"Tell me about the cleaners," he said.

Neagley drummed a rhythm on the desk with her fingers. The click of her nails alternated with little papery thumps from the pads of her fingers.

"They're all lawyered up," she said. "The department sent them attorneys, one each. They're all Mirandized, too. Their human rights are fully protected. Wonderful, isn't it? The civilian world?"

"Terrific. What did they say?"

"Nothing much. They clammed up tight. Stubborn as hell. But worried as hell, too. They're looking at a rock and a hard place. Obviously very frightened about revealing who told them to put the paper there, and equally frightened about losing their jobs and maybe going to jail. They can't win. It wasn't attractive."

"You mention Stuyvesant's name?"

"Loud and clear. They know his name, obviously, but I'm not sure they know who he *is*, specifically. They're night workers. All they see is a bunch of offices. They don't see people. They didn't react to his name at all. They didn't really

react to anything. Just sat there, scared to death, looking at their lawyers, saying nothing."

"You're slipping. People used to eat out of your hand, the way I recall it."

She nodded. "I told you, I'm getting old. I couldn't get a handle on them anywhere. The lawyers wouldn't let me, really. The civilian justice system is very off-putting. I never felt so disconnected."

Reacher said nothing. Checked his watch. "So what now?" Neagley asked.

"We wait," he said.

The wait went slowly. Froelich came back after an hour and a half and reported that Armstrong was safely back in his own office. She had persuaded him to come with her in the car. She told him she understood that he preferred to walk, but she made the point that her team needed operational fine-tuning and there was no better time to do it than right now. She pushed it to the point where a refusal would have seemed like a prima-donna pain in the ass, and Armstrong wasn't like that, so he climbed into the Suburban quite happily. The transfer through the tent at the Senate Offices had worked without incident.

"Now make some calls," Reacher said. "See if anything's happened that we need to know about."

She checked with the D.C. cops first. There was the usual list of urban crimes and misdemeanors, but it would have been a stretch to categorize any of them as a demonstration of Armstrong's vulnerability. She transferred to the precinct holding the crazy guy and took a long verbal report on his status. Hung up and shook her head.

"Not connected," she said. "They know him. IQ below eighty, alcoholic, sleeps on the street, barely literate, and his prints don't match. He's got a record a yard long for jumping on anybody he's ever seen in the newspapers he sleeps under. Some kind of a bipolar problem. I suggest we forget all about him."

"OK," Reacher said.

Then she opened up the National Crime Information Center database and looked

Then she opened up the National Crime Information Center database and looked at recent entries. They were flooding in from all over the country at a rate faster than one every second. Faster than she could read them.

“Hopeless,” she said. “We’ll have to wait until midnight.”

“Or one o’clock,” Neagley said. “It might happen on Central time, out there in Bismarck. They might shoot up his house. Or throw a rock through the window.”

So Froelich called the cops in Bismarck and asked for immediate notification of anything that could be even remotely connected to an interest in Armstrong. Then she made the same request to the North Dakota State Police and the FBI nationwide.

“Maybe it won’t happen,” she said.

Reacher looked away. *You better hope it does*, he thought.

Around seven o’clock in the evening the office complex began to quiet down. Most of the people visible in the corridors were drifting one way only, toward the front exit. They were wearing raincoats and carrying bags and briefcases.

“Did you check out of the hotel?” Froelich asked.

“Yes,” Reacher said.

“No,” Neagley said. “I make a terrible houseguest.”

Froelich paused a beat, a little taken aback. But Reacher wasn’t surprised. Neagley was a very solitary person. Always had been. She kept herself to herself. He didn’t know why.

“OK,” Froelich said. “But we should take some time out. Rest up and regroup later. I’ll drop you guys off and then go try to get Armstrong home safely.”

They rode together down to the garage and Froelich fired up her Suburban and drove Neagley to the hotel. Reacher walked with her as far as the bell captain’s stand and reclaimed his Atlantic City clothes. They were packed with his old shoes and his toothbrush and his razor, folded up inside a black garbage bag he had taken from a maid’s cart. It didn’t impress the bellboy. But he carried it out

had taken from a maid's cart. It didn't impress the bellboy. But he carried it out to the Suburban anyway and Reacher took it from him and gave him a dollar. Then he climbed back in alongside Froelich and she drove on. It was cold and dark and damp and the traffic was bad. There was congestion everywhere. Long lines of red brake lights streamed ahead of them, long lines of bright white headlights streamed toward them. They drove south across the Eleventh Street Bridge and fought through a maze of streets to Froelich's house. She double-parked with the motor running and fiddled behind the steering wheel and took her door key off its ring. Handed it to him.

"I'll be back in a couple of hours," she said. "Make yourself at home."

He took his bag and got out and watched her drive off. She made a right to loop back north over a different bridge and disappeared from sight. He crossed the sidewalk and unlocked her front door. The house was dark and warm. It had her perfume in it. He closed the door behind him and fumbled for a light switch. A low-wattage bulb came on inside a yellow shade on a lamp on a small chest of drawers. It gave a soft, muted light. He put the key down next to it and dropped his bag at the foot of the stairs and stepped into the living room. Switched on the light. Walked on into the kitchen. Looked around.

There were basement stairs behind a door. He stood still for a second with his ritual curiosity nagging at him. It was an ingrained reflex, like breathing. But was it polite to search your host's house? Just out of habit? *Of course not*. But he couldn't resist. He walked down the stairs, switching lights on as he went. The basement itself was a dark space walled with smooth old concrete. It had a furnace and a water softener in it. A washing machine and an electric dryer. Shelving units. Old suitcases. Plenty of miscellaneous junk stacked all around, but nothing of any great significance. He walked back up. Turned off the lights. Opposite the head of the stairs was an enclosed space right next to the kitchen. It was larger than a closet, smaller than a room. Maybe a pantry, originally. It had been fitted out as a tiny home office. There was a rolling chair and a desk and shelves, all of them a few years old. They looked like chain-store versions of real office furniture, with plenty of wear and tear on them. Maybe they were secondhand. There was a computer, fairly old. An inkjet printer connected to it with a fat cable. He moved back into the kitchen.

He looked at all the usual places women hide things in kitchens and found five hundred dollars in mixed bills inside an earthenware casserole on a high shelf inside a cupboard. Emergency cash. Maybe an old Y2K precaution that she

decided to stick with afterward. He found an M9 Beretta nine-millimeter sidearm in a drawer, carefully hidden under a stack of place mats. It was old and scratched and stained with dried oil in random patches. Probably Army surplus, redistributed to another government department. Last-generation Secret Service issue, without a doubt. It was unloaded. The magazine was missing. He opened the next drawer to the left and put his hand on four spares laid out in a line under an oven glove. They were all loaded with standard jacketed cartridges. Good news and bad news. The layout was smart. Pick up the gun with your right hand, access the magazines with your left. Sound ergonomics. But storing magazines full of bullets was a bad idea. Leave them long enough, the spring in the magazine learns its compressed shape and won't function right. More jams are caused by tired magazine springs than any other single reason. Better to keep the gun with a single shell locked in the chamber and all the other bullets loose. You can fire once right-handed while you thumb loose shells into an empty magazine with your left. Slower than the ideal, but a lot better than pulling the trigger and hearing nothing at all except a dull click.

He closed the kitchen drawers and moved back into the living room. Nothing there, except a hollowed-out book on the shelves, and it was empty. He turned on the TV, and it worked. He had once known a guy who hid things inside a gutted TV set. The guy's quarters had been searched eight times before anybody thought to check that everything was exactly as it seemed.

There was nothing in the hallway. Nothing taped under the drawers in the little chest. Nothing in the bathrooms. Nothing of significance in the bedrooms except a shoe box under Froelich's bed. It was full of letters addressed in Joe's handwriting. He put them back without reading them. Went back downstairs and carried his garbage bag up to the guest room. Decided to wait an hour and then eat alone if she wasn't back. He would send for the hot and sour and the General Tso's again. It had been pretty good. He put his bathroom items next to the sink. Hung his Atlantic City clothes in the closet next to Joe's abandoned suits. He looked at them and stood still for a long moment and then selected one at random and pulled it off the rail.

The plastic wrap tore as he stripped it away. It was stiff and brittle. The label inside the suit coat had a single Italian word embroidered in fancy script. Not a brand he recognized. The material was some kind of fine wool. It was very dark gray and had a faint sheen to it. The lining was acetate made to look like dark red silk. Maybe it *was* silk. There was no vent in the back. He laid it on the bed

and put the pants next to it. The pants were very plain. No pleats, no cuffs.

He went back to the closet and took out a shirt. Lifted the plastic off it. It was pure white broadcloth. No buttons on the collar. A small label inside the neckband with two names in copperplate script, too obscure to read. *Somebody & Somebody*. Either an exclusive London shirtmaker, or some sweatshop faking it. The fabric was hefty. Not thick like fatigues, but there was some weight to it.

He unlaced his shoes. Took off his jacket and jeans and folded them over a chair. Followed it with his T-shirt and his underwear. Stepped into the bathroom and set the shower running. Stepped into the stall. There was soap and shampoo in there. The soap was dried rock-hard and the shampoo bottle was stuck shut with old suds. Clearly Froelich didn't have frequent houseguests. He soaked the bottle under the stream of hot water and forced it open. Washed his hair and soaped his body. Leaned out and grabbed his razor and shaved carefully. Rinsed all over and got out and dripped on the floor and searched for a towel. He found one in a cupboard. It was thick and new. Too new to be any good at drying. It just slid the water around on his skin. He did his best with it and then wrapped it around his waist and combed his hair with his fingers.

He stepped back into the bedroom and picked up Joe's shirt. Hesitated a second, and then put it on. Flipped the collar up and buttoned it at the neck. Buttoned it down the front. Opened the closet door and checked the fit in the mirror. It was perfect, more or less. Could have been tailored for him. He buttoned the cuffs. Sleeve length was excellent. He twisted left and right. Caught sight of a shelf behind the rail. The space where the suit and the shirt had been let him see it. There were neckties neatly rolled and placed side by side. Tissue-paper packages from a laundry, sealed with sticky labels. He opened one and found a pile of clean white boxers. Opened another and found black socks folded together in pairs.

He moved back to the bed and dressed in his brother's clothes. Selected a dark maroon tie with a discreet pattern. British, like it represented a regimental association or one of those expensive high schools. He put it on and cracked the shirt collar down over it. Put on a pair of boxers and a pair of socks. Stepped into the suit pants. Shrugged into the jacket. He put his new shoes on and used the discarded tissue paper to scrub the scuffs off them. Stood up straight and walked back to the mirror. The suit fit very well. It was maybe a fraction long in the arms and legs, because he was a fraction shorter than Joe had been. And it was

maybe a fraction tight, because he was a little heavier. But overall he looked very impressive in it. Like a completely different person. Older. More authoritative. More serious. More like Joe.

He bent down and picked up the cardboard box. It was heavy. Then he heard a sound down in the hallway. Somebody out on the step, knocking on the front door. He put the box back on the closet floor and headed down the stairs. Opened up. It was Froelich. She was standing in the evening mist with her hand raised ready to knock again. Light from the street behind her put her face in shadow.

“I gave you my key,” she said.

He stepped back and she stepped in. Looked up and froze. She fumbled behind her back and pushed the door shut and leaned hard up against it. Just stared at him. Something in her eyes. Shock, fear, panic, loss, he didn’t know.

“What?” he said.

“I thought you were Joe,” she said. “Just for a second.”

Her eyes filled with tears and she laid her head back against the wood of the door. She blinked against the tears and looked at him again and started crying hard. He stood still for a second and then stepped forward and took her in his arms. She dropped her purse and burrowed into his chest.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I tried on his suit.”

She said nothing. Just cried.

“Stupid, I guess,” he said.

She moved her head, but he couldn’t tell if she was saying *yes, it was* or *no, it wasn’t*. She locked her arms around his body and just held on. He put one hand low on her back and used the other to smooth her hair. He held her like that for minutes. She fought the tears and then gulped twice and pulled away. Swiped at her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Not your fault,” she said.

He said nothing.

He said nothing.

“You looked so real. I bought him that tie.”

“I should have thought,” Reacher said.

She ducked down to her purse and came back with a tissue. Blew her nose and smoothed her hair.

“Oh, God,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” he said again.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I’ll be OK.”

He said nothing.

“You looked so good, is all,” she said. “Just standing there.”

She was staring at him quite openly. Then she reached out and straightened his tie. Touched a spot on his shirt where her tears had dampened it. Ran her fingers behind the lapels of his jacket. Stepped forward on tiptoe and locked her hands behind his neck and kissed him on the mouth.

“So good,” she said, and kissed him again, hard.

He held still for a second and then kissed her back. Hard. Her mouth was cool. Her tongue was swift. She tasted faintly of lipstick. Her teeth were small and smooth. He could smell perfume on her skin and in her hair. He put one hand low on her side and the other behind her head. He could feel her breasts against his chest. Her ribs, yielding slightly under his hand. Her hair, between his fingers. Her hand was cold and urgent on the back of his neck. Her fingers were raking upward into the stubble from his haircut. He could feel her nails on his skin. He slid his hand up her back. Then she stopped moving. Held still. Pulled away. She was breathing heavily. Her eyes were closed. She touched the back of her hand to her mouth.

“We shouldn’t do this,” she said.

He looked at her.

“Probably not,” he said.

"Probably not," he said.

She opened her eyes. Said nothing.

"So what should we do?" he asked.

She moved sideways and stepped into her living room.

"I don't know," she said. "Eat dinner, I guess. Did you wait?"

He followed her into the room.

"Yes," he said. "I waited."

"You're very like him," she said.

"I know," he said.

"Do you understand what I mean?"

He nodded. "What you saw in him you see in me, a little bit."

"But *are* you like him?"

He knew exactly what she was asking. *Did you see things the same? Did you share tastes? Were you attracted to the same women?*

"Like I told you," he said. "There are similarities. And there are differences."

"That's no answer."

"He's dead," Reacher said. "That's an answer."

"And if he wasn't?"

"Then a lot of things would be different."

"Suppose I'd never known him. Suppose I'd gotten your name some other way."

"Then I might not be here at all."

"Suppose you were anyway."

He looked at her. Took a deep breath, and held it, and let it out.

“Then I doubt if we’d be standing here talking about dinner,” he said.

“Maybe you wouldn’t be a substitute,” she said. “Maybe you’d be the real thing and Joe was the substitute.”

He said nothing.

“This is too weird,” she said. “We can’t do this.”

“No,” he said. “We can’t.”

“It was a long time ago,” she said. “Six years.”

“Is Armstrong OK?”

“Yes,” she said. “He’s OK.”

Reacher said nothing.

“We broke up, remember?” she said. “A year before he died. It’s not like I’m his tragic widow or something.”

Reacher said nothing.

“And it’s not like you’re really his grieving brother either,” she said. “You hardly knew him.”

“Mad at me about that?”

She nodded. “He was a lonely man. He needed somebody. So I’m a little mad about it.”

“Not half as much as I am.”

She said nothing in reply. Just moved her wrist and checked her watch. It was a strange gesture, so he checked his, too. The second hand hit nine-thirty exactly. Her cell phone rang inside her open purse out in the hallway. It was loud in the silence.

“[illegible]” she said. “[illegible]”

¨My people checking in,´´ she said. ¨From Armstrong´s house.´´

She stepped back to the hallway and bent down and answered the call. Hung up without comment.

“All quiet,” she said. “I told them to call every hour.”

He nodded. She looked anywhere but straight at him. The moment was gone.

“Chinese again?” she asked.

“Suits me,” he said. “Same order.”

She called it in from the kitchen phone and disappeared upstairs to take a shower. He waited in the living room and took the food from the delivery guy when he eventually showed up with it. She came down again and they ate across from each other at the kitchen table. She brewed coffee and they drank two cups each slowly, not talking. Her cell phone rang again at exactly ten-thirty. She had it next to her at the table and answered it immediately. Just a short message.

“All quiet,” she said. “So far, so good.”

“Stop worrying,” he said. “It would take an air strike to get him in his house.”

She smiled suddenly. “Remember Harry Truman?”

“My favorite president,” Reacher said. “From what I know about him.”

“Ours, too,” she said. “From what we know about him. One time around 1950 the White House residence was being renovated and he was living in Blair House across Pennsylvania Avenue. Two men came to kill him. One was taken out by the cops on the street, but the other made it to the door. Our people had to pull *Truman* off the assassin. He said he was going to take his gun away and stick it up his ass.”

“Truman was like that.”

“You bet he was. You should hear some of the old stories.”

“Would Armstrong be like that?”

“Maybe. Depends how the moment struck him, I guess. He’s pretty gentle

"Maybe. Depends how the moment struck him, I guess. He's pretty gentle physically, but he's not a coward. And I've seen him very angry."

"And he looks tough enough."

Froelich nodded. Checked her watch. "We should get back to the office now. See if anything's happened anyplace else. You call Neagley while I clear up here. Tell her to be ready to roll in twenty minutes."

They were back in the office before eleven-fifteen. The message logs were blank. Nothing of significance from the D.C. police department. Nothing from North Dakota, nothing from the FBI. Updates were still streaming into the National Crime Information Center's database. Froelich started combing through the day's reports. She found nothing of interest. Her cell phone rang at eleven-thirty. All was quiet and peaceful in Georgetown. She turned back to the computer. Nothing doing. Time ticked around to midnight. Monday finished and Tuesday started. Stuyvesant showed up again. He just appeared in the doorway like he had before. Said nothing. The only chair in the room was Froelich's own. Stuyvesant leaned against the door frame. Reacher sat on the floor. Neagley perched on a file cabinet.

Froelich waited ten minutes and called the D.C. cops. They had nothing to report. She called the Hoover Building and the FBI told her nothing significant had happened before midnight in the East. She turned back to the computer screen. Called out occasional incoming stories but neither Stuyvesant nor Reacher nor Neagley could twist them into any kind of a connection with a potential threat to Armstrong. The clock moved on to one in the morning. Midnight, Central time. She called the police department in Bismarck. They had nothing for her. She called the North Dakota State Police. Nothing at all. She tried the FBI again. Nothing reported from their field offices in the last sixty minutes. She put the phone down and scooted her chair back from her desk. Breathed out.

"Well, that's it," she said. "Nothing happened."

"Excellent," Stuyvesant said.

"No," Reacher said. "Not excellent. Not excellent at all. It's the worst possible news we could have gotten."

news we could have gotten.

8

Stuyvesant led them straight back toward the conference room. Neagley walked next to Reacher, close by his shoulder in the narrow corridors.

“Great suit,” she whispered.

“First one I ever wore,” he whispered back. “We on the same page with this?”

“On the same page and out of a job, probably,” she said. “That is, if you’re thinking what I’m thinking.”

They turned a corner. Walked on. Stuyvesant stopped and shepherded them into the conference room and came in after them and hit the lights and closed the door. Reacher and Neagley sat together on one side of the long table and Stuyvesant sat next to Froelich on the other, like he foresaw an adversarial element to the conversation.

“Explain,” he said.

Silence for a second.

“This is definitely *not* an inside job,” Neagley said.

Reacher nodded. “Although we were fooling ourselves by ever thinking it was entirely one thing or the other. It was always both. But it was useful shorthand. The real question was where the balance lay. Was it fundamentally an inside job with trivial help from the outside? Or was it basically an outside job with trivial help from the inside?”

“The trivial help being what?” Stuyvesant asked.

“A potential insider needed a thumbprint that wasn’t his. A potential outsider needed a way to get the second message inside this building.”

“And you’ve concluded that it’s the outsider?”

Reacher nodded again. “Which is absolutely the worst news we could have gotten. Because whereas an insider messing around is merely a pain in the ass, an outsider is truly dangerous.”

an outsider is truly dangerous.

Stuyvesant looked away. “Who?”

“No idea,” Reacher said. “Just some outsider with a loose one-time connection to an insider, sufficient to get the message in and nothing more.”

“The insider being one of the cleaners.”

“Or all of them,” Froelich said.

“I assume so, yes,” Reacher said.

“You sure about this?”

“Completely.”

“How?” Stuyvesant asked.

Reacher shrugged.

“Lots of reasons,” he said. “Some of them small, one of them big.”

“Explain,” Stuyvesant said again.

“I look for simplicity,” Reacher said.

Stuyvesant nodded. “So do I. I hear hoofbeats, I think horses, not zebras. But the simple explanation here is an insider trying to get under Froelich’s skin.”

“Not really,” Reacher said. “The chosen method is way too complex for that. They’d be doing all the usual stuff instead. The easy stuff. I’m sure we’ve all seen it before. Mysterious communications failures, computer crashes, bogus alarm calls to nonexistent addresses in the bad part of town, she arrives, calls in for backup, nobody shows, she gets scared, she panics on the radio, a recording gets made and starts to circulate. Any law enforcement department has got a stack of examples a yard high.”

“Including the military police?”

“Sure. Especially with women officers.”

Stuyvesant shook his head.

“No,” he said. “That’s conjecture. I’m asking how you *know*.”

“I know because nothing happened today.”

“Explain,” Stuyvesant said for the third time.

“This is a smart opponent,” Reacher said. “He’s bright and he’s confident. He’s in *command*. But he threatened something and he didn’t deliver.”

“So? He failed, is all.”

“No,” Reacher said. “He didn’t even *try*. Because he didn’t know he had to. Because he didn’t know his letter arrived today.”

Silence in the room.

“He expected it to arrive tomorrow,” Reacher said. “It was mailed on Friday. Friday to Monday is pretty fast for the U.S. mail. It was a fluke. He banked on Friday to Tuesday.”

Nobody spoke.

“He’s an outsider,” Reacher said. “He’s got no direct connection to the department and therefore he’s unaware his threat showed up a day early, or he’d have delivered today *for sure*. Because he’s an arrogant son of a bitch, and he wouldn’t have wanted to let himself down. Count on it. So he’s out there somewhere, waiting to deliver on his threat tomorrow, which is exactly when he expected he’d have to all along.”

“Great,” Froelich said. “There’ll be another contributor reception tomorrow.”

Stuyvesant was quiet for a beat.

“So what do you suggest?” he asked.

“We have to cancel,” Froelich said.

“No, I meant long-term strategy,” Stuyvesant said. “And we can’t cancel *anything*. We can’t just give up and say we can’t protect our principal.”

“You have to tough it out,” Reacher said. “It’ll only be a demonstration. Designed to torment you. My guess is it’ll specifically avoid Armstrong altogether. It’ll penetrate somewhere he has been or will be some other time.”

“Like where?” Froelich asked.

“His house, maybe,” Reacher said. “Either here or in Bismarck. His office. Somewhere. It’ll be theatrical, like these damn messages. It’ll be some spectacular thing in a place Armstrong just was or is heading for next. Because right now this whole thing is a *contest*, and the guy promised a demonstration, and I think he’ll keep his word, but I’m betting the next move will be parallel somehow. Otherwise why phrase the message the way he did? Why talk about a demonstration? Why not just go ahead and say, Armstrong, you’re going to die today?”

Froelich made no reply.

“We have to identify this guy,” Stuyvesant said. “What do we know about him?”

Silence in the room.

“Well, we know we’re fooling ourselves again,” Reacher said. “Or else still speaking in shorthand. Because it’s not a *him*. It’s *them*. It’s a team. It always is. It’s two people.”

“That’s a guess,” Stuyvesant said.

“You wish,” Reacher said back. “It’s provable.”

“How?”

“It bothered me way back that there was the thumbprint on the letter along with clear evidence of latex gloves. Why would he swing both ways? Either his prints are on file or they aren’t. But it’s two people. The thumbprint guy has never been printed. The gloves guy has been. It’s two people, working together.”

Stuyvesant looked very tired. It was nearly two o’clock in the morning.

“You don’t really need us anymore,” Neagley said. “This isn’t an internal investigation now. This is out there in the world.”

“No,” Stuyvesant said. “It’s still internal as long as there’s something to get from the cleaners. They must have met with these people. They must know who they are.”

Neagley shrugged. “You gave them lawyers. You made it very difficult.”

“They had to have counsel, for God’s sake,” Stuyvesant said. “They were arrested. That’s the law. It’s their Sixth Amendment right.”

“I guess it is,” Neagley said. “So tell me, is there a law for when the Vice President gets killed before his inauguration?”

“Yes, there is,” Froelich said quietly. “The Twentieth Amendment. Congress chooses another one.”

Neagley nodded. “Well, I sure hope they’ve got their short list ready.”

Silence in the room.

“You should bring in the FBI,” Reacher said.

“I will,” Stuyvesant replied. “When we’ve got names. Not before.”

“They’ve already seen the letters.”

“Only in the labs. Their left hand doesn’t know what their right hand is doing.”

“You need their help.”

“And I’ll ask for it. Soon as we’ve gotten names, I’m going to give them to the Bureau on a silver platter. But I’m not going to tell them where they came from. I’m not going to tell them we were internally compromised. And I’m sure as hell not bringing them in while we still *are* internally compromised.”

“Is it that big of a deal?”

“Are you kidding? CIA had a problem with that Ames guy, remember? The Bureau got hold of it and they laughed up their sleeves for years. Then they had their own problems with that Hanssen guy, and they didn’t look so smart after all. This is the big leagues, Reacher. Right now the Secret Service is number one, by a very healthy margin. We’ve only recorded one defeat in our entire

history, and that was almost forty years ago. So we're not about to take a dive down the league table just for the fun of it."

Reacher said nothing.

"And don't get all superior with me," Stuyvesant said. "Don't tell me the Army reacted any different. I don't recall you guys running to the Bureau for assistance. I don't recall your embarrassing little secrets all over the *Washington Post*."

Reacher nodded. Most of the Army's embarrassments were cremated. Or six feet under. Or sitting in a stockade somewhere, too scared even to open their mouths. Or back home, too scared to tell their own mothers why. He had arranged some of those circumstances himself.

"So we'll take it a step at a time," Stuyvesant said. "Prove these guys are outsiders. Get their names from the cleaners. Lawyers or no lawyers."

Froelich shook her head. "First priority is getting Armstrong to midnight alive."

"It's only going to be a demonstration," Reacher said.

"I heard you before," she said. "But it's my call. And you're just guessing. All we've got is nine words on a piece of paper. And your interpretation might be plain wrong. I mean, what better demonstration would there be than actually *doing* it? Really getting to him would demonstrate his vulnerability, wouldn't it? I mean, what better way *is* there of demonstrating it?"

Neagley nodded. "And it would be a way of hedging their bets, also. An attempt that fails could be passed off as a demonstration, maybe. You know, to save face."

"If you're right to begin with," Stuyvesant said.

Reacher said nothing. The meeting came to an end a couple of minutes later. Stuyvesant made Froelich run through Armstrong's schedule for the day. It was an amalgam of familiar parts. First, intelligence briefings from the CIA at home, like on Friday morning. Then afternoon transition meetings on the Hill, the same as most days. Then the evening reception at the same hotel as Thursday. Stuyvesant noted it all down and went home just before two-thirty in the morning. Left Froelich on her own at the long table in the bright light and the

morning. Left Froelich on her own at the long table in the bright light and the silence, opposite Reacher and Neagley.

“Advice?” she said.

“Go home and sleep,” Reacher said.

“Great.”

“And then do exactly what you’ve been doing,” Neagley said. “He’s OK in his house. He’s OK in his office. Keep the tents in place and the transfers are OK too.”

“What about the hotel reception?”

“Keep it short and take a lot of care.”

Froelich nodded. “All I can do, I guess.”

“Are you good at your job?” Neagley asked.

Froelich paused.

“Yes,” she said. “I’m pretty good.”

“No, you’re not,” Reacher said. “You’re the best. The absolute best there has ever been. You’re so damn good it’s unbelievable.”

“That’s how you’ve got to think,” Neagley said. “Pump yourself up. Get to the point where it’s impossible to think that these jerky guys with their silly notes are going to get within a million miles of you.”

Froelich smiled, briefly. “Is this military-style training?”

“For me it was,” Neagley said. “Reacher was born thinking that way.”

Froelich smiled again.

“OK,” she said. “Home and sleep. Big day tomorrow.”

Washington, D.C., is quiet and empty in the middle of the night and it took just two minutes to reach Neagley's hotel and only another ten to get back to Froelich's house. Her street was crowded with parked cars. They looked like they were asleep, dark and still and inert and heavily dewed with cold mist. The Suburban was more than eighteen feet long and they had to go two whole blocks before they found a space big enough for it. They locked it up and walked back together in the chill. Made it to the house and opened the door and stepped inside. The lights were still on. The heating was still running hard. Froelich paused in the hallway.

"Are we OK?" she asked. "About earlier?"

"We're fine," he said.

"I just don't want us to get our signals mixed."

"I don't think they're mixed."

"I'm sorry I disagreed with you," she said. "About the demonstration."

"It's your call," he said. "Only you can make it."

"I had other boyfriends," she said. "You know, after."

He said nothing.

"And Joe had other girlfriends," she said. "He wasn't all that shy, really."

"But he left his stuff here."

"Does that matter?"

"I don't know," he said. "Got to mean something."

"He's dead, Reacher. Nothing can affect him now."

"I know."

She was quiet for a second.

"I'm going to make tea," she said. "You want some?"

He shook his head. “I’m going to bed.”

She stepped into the living room on her way to the kitchen and he walked upstairs. Closed the guest room door quietly behind him and opened up the closet. Stripped off Joe’s suit and put it back on the wire dry-cleaner’s hanger. Hung it on the rail. Took off the tie and rolled it and put it back on the shelf. Took off the shirt and dropped it on the closet floor. He didn’t need to save it. There were four more on the rail, and he didn’t expect to be around longer than four more days. He peeled off the socks and dropped them on top of the shirt. Walked into the bathroom wearing only his boxers.

He took his time in there and when he came out Froelich was standing in the guest room doorway. Wearing a nightgown. It was white cotton. Longer than a T-shirt, but not a whole lot longer. The hallway light behind her made it transparent. Her hair was tousled. Without shoes she looked smaller. Without makeup she looked younger. She had great legs. A wonderful shape. She looked soft and firm, all at the same time.

“He broke up with me,” she said. “It was his choice, not mine.”

“Why?”

“He met somebody he preferred.”

“Who?”

“Doesn’t matter who. Nobody you ever heard of. Just somebody.”

“Why didn’t you say so?”

“Denial, I guess,” she said. “Trying to protect myself, maybe. And trying to protect his memory in front of his brother.”

“He wasn’t nice about it?”

“Not very.”

“How did it happen?”

“He just told me one day.”

“And walked out?”

“We weren’t really living together. He spent time here, I spent time there, but we always kept separate places. His stuff is still here because I wouldn’t let him come back to get it. I wouldn’t let him in the door. I was hurt and angry with him.”

“I guess you would be.”

She shrugged. The hem of her nightgown rode up an inch on her thigh.

“No, it was silly of me,” she said. “I mean, it’s not like things like that never happen, is it? It was just a relationship that started and then finished. Hardly unique in human history. Hardly unique in *my* history. And half the times it was me who did the walking away.”

“Why are you telling me?”

“You know why,” she said.

He nodded. Didn’t speak.

“So you can start with a blank slate,” she said. “How you react to me can be about you and me, not about you and me and Joe. He took himself out of the picture. It was his choice. So it’s none of his business, even if he was still around.”

He nodded again.

“But how blank is your slate?” he asked.

“He was a great guy,” she said. “I loved him once. But you’re not him. You’re a separate person. I know that. I’m not looking to get him back. I don’t want a ghost.”

She took one step into the room.

“That’s good,” he said. “Because I’m not like him. Hardly at all. You need to be real clear about that from the start.”

“I’m clear about it,” she said. “The start of what?”

She took another step into the room and then stood still.

“The start of whatever,” he said. “But the end will turn out the same, you know. You need to be real clear about that, too. I’ll leave, just like he did. I always do.”

She came closer. They were a yard apart.

“Soon?” she asked.

“Maybe,” he said. “Maybe not.”

“I’ll take my chances,” she said. “Nothing lasts forever.”

“Doesn’t feel right,” he said.

She glanced at his face. “What doesn’t?”

“I’m standing here wearing your ex-lover’s clothes.”

“Not many of them,” she said. “And it’s a situation that can be easily remedied.”

He paused.

“Is it?” he said. “Want to show me how?”

He stepped forward again and she put her hands on his waist. Slipped her fingers under the elastic waistband of his boxers and remedied the situation. Stepped back a little and raised her arms above her head. Her nightgown slipped off very easily. Fell to the floor. They barely made it to the bed.

They got three hours’ sleep and woke up at seven when her alarm started ringing in her own room. It sounded far away and faint through the guest room wall. He was on his back and she was curled under his arm. Her thigh was hooked over his. Her head was resting against his shoulder. Her hair touched his face. He felt comfortable in that position. And warm. Warm and comfortable. And tired. Warm and comfortable and tired enough that he wanted to ignore the noise and stay put. But she struggled free and sat up in the bed, dazed and sleepy.

“Good morning,” he said.

There was gray light from the window. She smiled and yawned and pulled her elbows back and stretched. The clock in the next room kept on making noise. Then it went into a new mode and got louder. He slid his hand flat against her stomach. Moved it up to her breasts. She yawned again and smiled again and twisted around and ducked her head and nuzzled into his neck.

“Good morning to you too,” she said.

The alarm blared on through the wall. It clearly had a feature that made it get more and more urgent if it was ignored. He pulled her down on top of him. Smoothed her hair away from her face and kissed her. The distant clock started chirping and howling like a cop car. He was glad he wasn’t in the same room with it.

“Got to get up,” she said.

“We will,” he said. “Soon.”

He held her. She stopped struggling. They made love breathlessly, like the alarm clock was spurring them on. It sounded like they were in a nuclear bunker with missile sirens ticking off the last moments of their lives. They finished, panting, and she heaved herself out of bed and ran through to her own room and shut the noise off. The silence was deafening. He lay back on the pillow and looked up at the ceiling. An oblique bar of gray light from the window showed some imperfections in the plaster. She came back, naked, walking slowly.

“Come back to bed,” he said.

“Can’t,” she said. “Got to go to work.”

“He’ll be OK for a spell. And if he isn’t, they can always get another one. That Twentieth Amendment thing. They’ll be lining up around the block.”

“And I’ll be lining up for a new job. Maybe flipping burgers.”

“You ever done that?”

“What, flipped burgers?”

“Been out of work.”

She shook her head. “Never.”

He smiled. “I haven’t really worked for five years.”

She smiled back. “I know. I checked the computers. But you’re working today. So get your ass out of bed.”

She gave him a fine view of her own ass as she walked away to her own bathroom. He lay still for a second longer with Dawn Penn’s old song coming back at him: *you don’t love me, yes I know now*. He shook it out of his head and threw back the covers and stood up and stretched. One arm up to the ceiling, then the other. He arched his back. Pointed his toes and stretched his legs. That was the whole of his fitness routine. He walked to the guest bathroom and went for the full twenty-two minute ablution sequence. Teeth, shave, hair, shower. He dressed in another of Joe’s old suits. This one was pure black, same brand, same tailoring details. He paired it with another fresh shirt, same *Somebody & Somebody* label, same pure white cotton. Clean boxers, clean socks. A dark blue silk tie with tiny silver parachutes all over it. There was a British manufacturer’s label on it. Maybe it was from the Royal Air Force in England. He checked himself in the mirror and then ruined the look by putting his new Atlantic City coat over the suit. It was coarse and clumsy in comparison and the colors didn’t match, but he figured to be spending some time out in the cold today, and it didn’t seem that Joe had left any overcoats behind. He must have skipped out in summer.

He met Froelich at the bottom of the stairs. She was in a feminine version of his own outfit, a black pant suit with an open-necked white blouse. But her coat was better. It was dark gray wool, very formal. She was putting her earpiece in. It had a curly wire that straightened after six inches to run down her back.

“Want to help?” she said. She pulled her elbows back in the same gesture she had used when she woke up. It pushed her jacket collar off the back of her neck. He dropped the wire down between her jacket and her blouse. The tiny plug on the end acted like a counterweight and took it all the way to her waist. She pulled her coat and her jacket aside and he found a black radio unit clipped to her belt in the small of her back. The microphone lead was already plugged in and threaded up her back and down her left sleeve. He plugged the earpiece in. She let her jacket and her coat fall back into place and he saw her gun in a

holster clipped to her belt near her left hip, butt forward for easy access by her right hand. It was a big, boxy SIG-Sauer P226, which he was happy about. Altogether a better proposition than the previous-issue Beretta in her kitchen drawer.

"OK," she said. Then she took a deep breath. Checked her watch. Reacher did the same thing. It was nearly a quarter to eight.

"Sixteen hours and sixteen minutes to go," she said. "Call Neagley and tell her we're on our way."

He used her mobile as they walked back to her Suburban. The morning was damp and cold, exactly the same as the night had been except now there was some grudging gray light in the sky. The Suburban's windows were all misted over with dew. But it started on the first turn of the key and the heater worked fast and the interior was warm and comfortable by the time Neagley climbed on board outside the hotel.

Armstrong slipped a leather jacket over his sweater and stepped out of his back door. The wind caught his hair and he zipped the coat as he walked to his gate. Two paces before he got there he was picked up in the scope. The scope was a Hensoldt 1.5-6×42 BL originally supplied with a SIG SSG 3000 sniper rifle, but it had been adapted by the Baltimore gunsmith to fit its new home, which was on top of a Vaime Mk2. *Vaime* was a word registered by Oy Vaimennin Metalli Ab, which was a Finnish weapons specialist that correctly figured it needed a simplified name if it was going to sell its excellent products in the West. And the Mk2 was an excellent product. It was a silenced sniper rifle that used a low-powered version of the standard 7.62 millimeter NATO round. Low-powered, because the bullet had to fly at subsonic speeds to preserve the silence that the built-in suppressor created. And because of the low power and the suppressor's complex exhaust gas management scheme there was very little recoil. Almost none at all. Just the gentlest little kick imaginable. It was a fine rifle. With a good scope like the Hensoldt it was a guaranteed killer at any range up to two hundred yards. And the man with his eye to the scope was only a hundred and twenty-six yards from Armstrong's back gate. He knew that for an exact fact, because he had just checked the distance with a laser range finder. He was exposed to the weather, but he was adequately prepared. He knew how to do

this. He was wearing a dark green down coat and a black hat made of synthetic fleece. He had gloves made from the same material, with the right-hand fingertips cut off for control. He was lying down out of the wind, which kept his eyes clear of tears. He anticipated absolutely no problems at all.

The way a man goes through a gate works like this: he stops walking momentarily. He stands still. He has to, whichever way the gate hinges. If it hinges toward him, he reaches out for the latch and flips it open and pulls the gate and kind of stands on tiptoe and arches his legs so the gate can swing past them. If it hinges away from him, he stands still while he finds the latch and pushes it open. That's faster, but there's still a moment where there's no real forward motion at all. And this particular gate opened toward the house. That fact was clearly visible through the Hensoldt. There was going to be a two-second window of perfect opportunity.

Armstrong reached the gate. Stopped walking. One hundred and twenty-six yards away the man with his eye to the scope nudged the rifle a fraction left until the target was exactly centered. Held his breath. Eased his finger back. Took up the slack in the trigger. Then he squeezed it all the way. The rifle coughed loudly and kicked gently. The bullet took a hair over four-tenths of a second to travel the hundred and twenty-six yards. It hit Armstrong with a wet *thump* high on the forehead. It penetrated his skull and followed a downward angle through his frontal lobe, through his central ventricles, through his cerebellum. It shattered his first vertebra and exited at the base of his neck through soft tissue near the top of his spinal cord. It flew on and struck the ground eleven feet farther back and buried itself deep in the earth.

Armstrong was clinically dead before he hit the ground. The bullet's path caused massive brain trauma and its kinetic energy pulsed outward through brain tissue and was reflected back by the inside of the skull bones like a big wave in a small swimming pool. The resulting damage was catastrophic. All brain function ceased before gravity dropped the body.

One hundred and twenty-six yards away the man with his eye to the scope lay perfectly still for a second. Then he cradled the rifle flat against his torso and rolled away until it was safe to stand. He racked the rifle's bolt and caught the hot shell case in his gloved hand and dropped it into his pocket. Moved backward into cover and then walked away, completely shielded from view.

Neagley was uncharacteristically quiet in the car. Maybe she was worried about the day ahead. Maybe she could sense the altered chemistry. Reacher didn't know, and either way he wasn't in a hurry to find out. He just sat quiet while Froelich battled the traffic. She looped northwest and used the Whitney Young bridge across the river and drove past the RFK football stadium. Then she took Massachusetts Avenue and stayed away from the congestion around the government part of town. But Mass. Ave. was slow itself, and it was nearly nine o'clock before they arrived in Armstrong's Georgetown street. She parked behind another Suburban near the mouth of the tent. An agent stepped off the sidewalk and rounded the hood to talk with her.

"The spook just got here," he said. "They'll be into Spying 101 by now."

"Should be 201 by now, surely," Froelich said. "He's been doing it long enough."

"No, CIA stuff is awful complicated," the guy said. "For plain folks, anyway."

Froelich smiled and the guy walked away. Took up station again on the sidewalk. Froelich buzzed her window up and half-turned to face Reacher and Neagley equally.

"Foot patrol?" she said.

"Why I wore my coat," Reacher said.

"Four eyes are better than two," Neagley said.

They got out together and left Froelich in the warmth of the car. The street side of the house was quiet and well covered so they walked north and turned right to get a view of the back. There were cop cars top and bottom of the alley. Nothing was happening. Everything was buttoned up tight against the cold. They walked onward to the next street. There were cop cars there, too.

"Waste of time," Neagley said. "Nobody's going to get him in his house. I assume the police would notice somebody hauling in an artillery piece."

"So let's get breakfast," Reacher said. They walked back to the cross street and found a doughnut shop. Bought coffee and crullers and perched on stools in front

found a doughnut shop. Bought coffee and crullers and perched on stools in front of a long counter built inside the store window. The window was misted with condensation. Neagley used a napkin and wiped crescent shapes to see through.

“Different tie,” she said.

He glanced down at it.

“Different suit,” she said.

“You like it?”

“I would if we still lived in the 1990s,” she said.

He said nothing. She smiled.

“So,” she said.

“What?”

“Ms. Froelich collected the set.”

“You could tell?”

“Unmistakable.”

“Free will on my part,” Reacher said.

Neagley smiled again. “I didn’t think she raped you.”

“You going to be all judgmental now?”

“Hey, your call. She’s a nice lady. But so am I. And you never come on to *me*.”

“You ever wanted me to?”

“No.”

“That’s the point. I like my interest to be welcome.”

“Which must limit your options some.”

“Some,” he said. “But not as much as you.”

"Some," he said. "But not completely."

"Apparently not," Neagley said.

"You disapprove?"

"Hell no. Be my guest. Why do you think I stayed on in the hotel? I didn't want to get in her way, is all."

"*Her* way? Was it that obvious?"

"Oh please," Neagley said.

Reacher sipped his coffee. Ate a cruller. He was hungry and it tasted great. Iced hard on the outside, light in the middle. He ate another and sucked his fingertips clean. Felt the caffeine and the sugar hit his bloodstream.

"So who are these guys?" Neagley asked. "You got any feelings?"

"Some," Reacher said. "I'd have to concentrate hard to line them up. Not worth starting with that until we know if we're staying on the job."

"We won't be," Neagley said. "Our job ends with the cleaners. And that's a waste of time in itself. No way will they have a *name* for us. Or if they do, it'll be phony. Best we'll get is a description. Which is bound to be useless."

Reacher nodded. Finished his coffee.

"Let's go," he said. "Once around the block for form's sake."

They walked as slowly as they could bear to in the cold. Nothing was happening. Everything was quiet. There were cop cars or Secret Service vehicles on every street. Their exhaust fumes clouded white and drifted in the still air. Apart from that absolutely nothing was moving. They turned corners and came up on Armstrong's street from the south. The white tent was ahead of them on the right. Froelich was out of her car, waving to them urgently. They hurried up the sidewalk to meet her.

"Change of plan," she said. "There was a problem on the Hill. He cut the CIA thing short and headed up there."

"He left already?" Reacher asked.

Froelich nodded. "He's rolling now."

Then she paused and listened to a voice in her earpiece.

"He's arriving," she said.

She lifted her wrist and spoke into her microphone.

"Situation report, over," she said, and listened again.

There was a wait. Thirty seconds. Forty.

"OK, he's inside," she said. "Secure."

"So what now?" Reacher said.

Froelich shrugged. "Now we wait. That's what this job is. It's about waiting."

They drove back to the office and waited the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon. Froelich received regular situation reports. Reacher built up a pretty good picture of how things were organized. Metro cops were stationed outside the Senate Office buildings in cars. Secret Service agents held the sidewalk. Inside the street doors were members of the Capitol's own police force, one officer manning each metal detector, plenty more patrolling the hallways. Mingled in with them were more Secret Service. The transition business itself took place in upstairs offices with pairs of agents outside every door. Armstrong's personal detail stayed with him at all times. The radio reports spoke of a fairly static day. There was a lot of sitting around and talking going on. Plenty of deals being made. That was clear. Reacher recalled the phrase *smoke-filled rooms*, except he guessed nobody was allowed to smoke anymore.

At four o'clock they drove over to Neagley's hotel, which was being used again for the contributor function. Start time was scheduled for seven in the evening, which gave them three hours to secure the building. Froelich had a preplanned protocol that involved a squeeze search starting in the kitchen loading bay and the penthouse suites simultaneously. Metro cops with dogs were accompanied

by Secret Service people and worked patiently, floor by floor. As each floor was cleared three cops took up permanent station, one at each end of the bedroom corridor and one covering the elevator bank and the fire stairs. The two search teams met on the ninth floor at six o'clock, by which time temporary metal detectors were in place inside the lobby and at the ballroom door. The cameras were set up and recording.

"Ask for two forms of ID this time," Neagley said. "Driver's license and a credit card, maybe."

"Don't worry," Froelich said. "I plan to."

Reacher stood in the ballroom doorway and glanced around the room. It was a vast space, but a thousand people were going to crowd it out to the point of discomfort.

Armstrong took the elevator down from his office and turned a tight left in the lobby. Pushed through an unmarked door that led to a rear exit. He was wearing a raincoat and carrying a briefcase. The corridor behind the unmarked door was a plain narrow space that smelled of janitorial supplies. Some kind of strong detergent cleaner. He had to squeeze past two stacks of cartons. One of the stacks was neat and new, made up from recent deliveries. The other was unsteady and ragged, made up of empty boxes waiting for the trash collector. He turned his body sideways to get past the second pile. Held his briefcase out behind him and led with his right forearm. He pushed open the exit door and stepped out into the cold.

There was a small square internal courtyard, partly open on the north side. It was an unglamorous space. Tin trunking for the building's ventilation system was clipped to the walls above head height. There were red-painted pipes and brass-collared valves at shin level, feeding the fire sprinklers. There was a line of three trash containers painted dark blue. They were large steel boxes the size of automobiles. Armstrong had to walk past them to get to the back street. He got past the first one. He got past the second one. Then a quiet voice called to him.

"Hey," it said. He turned and saw a man cramped into the small space between the second and the third containers. He registered a dark coat and a hat and some kind of brutal weapon. It was short and fat and black. It came up and coughed.

It was a Heckler & Koch MP5SD6 silenced submachine gun, set to fire three-round bursts. It used standard nine-millimeter Parabellums. No need for low-powered versions, because the SD6's barrel has thirty holes in it to bleed gas and reduce muzzle velocity to subsonic speeds. It fires at a cyclic rate of eight hundred rounds per minute, so that each three-round burst was complete in a fraction over a fifth of a second. The first burst hit Armstrong in the center of his chest. The second hit him in the center of his face.

The basic H&K MP5 has a lot of advantages, including extreme reliability and extreme accuracy. The silenced version works even better because the weight of the integral suppressor mitigates the natural tendency that any submachine gun has toward muzzle climb during operation. Its sole drawback is the vigor with which it spits out its empty cartridge cases. They come out of the side almost as fast as the bullets come out of the front. They travel a long way. Not really a problem in its intended arenas of operation, which are confined to the necessary operations of the world's elite military and paramilitary units. But it was a problem in this situation. It meant the shooter had to leave six empty shell cases behind as he stuffed the gun under his coat and stepped over Armstrong's body and walked out of the small courtyard and away to his vehicle.

By six-forty there were almost seven hundred guests in the hotel lobby. They formed a long loose line from the street door to the coat check to the ballroom entrance. There was loud excited conversation in the air, and the heady stink of mingling perfumes. There were new dresses and white tuxedos and dark suits and bright ties. There were clutch purses and small cameras in leather cases. Patent shoes and high heels and the flash of diamonds. Fresh perms and bare shoulders and a lot of animation.

Reacher watched it all, leaning on a pillar near the elevators. He could see three agents through the glass on the street. Two at the door, operating a metal detector. They had its sensitivity set high, because it was beeping at every fourth or fifth guest. The agents were searching purses and patting down pockets. They were smiling conspiratorially as they did so. Nobody minded. There were eight agents roaming the lobby, faces straight, eyes always moving. There were three agents at the ballroom door. They were checking ID and inspecting invitations. Their metal detector was just as sensitive. Some people were searched for a second time. There was already music in the ballroom, audible in waves as the

crowd noise peaked and died.

Neagley was triangulated across the lobby on the second step of the mezzanine staircase. Her gaze moved like radar, back and forth across the sea of people. Every third sweep she would lock eyes with Reacher and give a tiny shake of her head. Reacher could see Froelich moving randomly. She looked good. Her black suit was elegant enough for evening, but she wouldn't be mistaken for a guest. She was full of authority. Time to time she would talk to one of her agents face-to-face. Other times she would talk to her wrist. He got to the point where he could tell exactly when she was hearing messages in her earpiece. Her movements lost a little focus as she concentrated on what she was being told.

By seven o'clock most of the guests were safely in the ballroom. There was a small gaggle of latecomers lining up for the first metal detector and a corresponding number waiting at the ballroom door. Guests who had bought an overnight package at the hotel were drifting out of the elevators in couples or foursomes. Neagley was now isolated on the mezzanine staircase. Froelich had sent her agents into the ballroom one by one as the lobby crowd thinned out. They joined the eight already in there. She wanted all sixteen prowling around by the time the action started. Plus the three on the personal detail, and two on the ballroom door, and two on the street door. Plus cops in the kitchen, cops in the loading bay, cops on all seventeen floors, cops on the street.

"How much is all this costing?" Reacher asked her.

"You don't want to know," she said. "You really don't."

Neagley came down off the staircase and joined them by the pillar.

"Is he here yet?" she asked.

Froelich shook her head. "We're compressing his exposure time. He's arriving late and leaving early."

Then she stiffened and listened to her earpiece. Put her finger on it to cut out the background noise. She raised her other wrist and spoke into the microphone.

"Copy, out," she said. She was pale.

"What?" Reacher asked.

She ignored him. Spun around and called to the last remaining agent free in the lobby. Told him he was acting on-site team leader for the rest of the night. Spoke into her microphone and repeated that information to all the agents on the local net. Told them to double their vigilance, halve their perimeters, and further compress exposure time wherever possible.

“What?” Reacher asked again.

“Back to base,” Froelich said. “Now. That was Stuyvesant. Seems like we’ve got a real big problem.”

9

She used the red strobes behind the Suburban's grille and barged through the evening traffic like it was life and death. She lit up the siren at every light. Pushed through and accelerated hard into gaps. Didn't talk at all. Reacher sat completely still in the front passenger seat and Neagley leaned forward from the back with her eyes locked on the road ahead. The three-ton vehicle bucked and swayed. The tires fought for grip on the slick pavement. They made it back to the garage inside four minutes. They were in the elevator thirty seconds later. In Stuyvesant's office less than one minute after that. He was sitting motionless behind his immaculate desk. Slumped in his chair like he had taken a punch to the stomach. He was holding a sheaf of papers. The light shone through them and showed the kind of random coded headings you get by printing from a database. There were two blocks of dense text under the headings. His secretary was standing next to him, handing him more paper, sheet by sheet. She was white in the face. She left the room without saying a single word. Closed the door, which intensified the silence.

"What?" Reacher said.

Stuyvesant glanced up at him. "Now *I* know."

"Know what?"

"That this is an outside job. For sure. Without any possible doubt."

"How?"

"You predicted theatrical," Stuyvesant said. "Or spectacular. Those were your predictions. To which we might add dramatic, or incredible, or whatever."

"What was it?"

"Do you know what the homicide rate is, nationally?"

Reacher shrugged. "High, I guess."

"Almost twenty thousand every year."

"OK."

OK.

“That’s about fifty-four homicides every day.”

Reacher did the math in his head.

“Nearer fifty-five,” he said. “Except in leap years.”

“Want to hear about two of today’s?” Stuyvesant asked.

“Who?” Froelich asked.

“Small sugar beet farm in Minnesota,” Stuyvesant said. “The farmer walks out his back gate this morning and gets shot in the head. For no apparent reason. Then this afternoon there’s a small strip mall outside of Boulder, Colorado. A CPA’s office in one of the upstairs rooms. The guy comes down and walks out of the rear entrance and gets killed with a machine gun in the service yard. Again, no apparent reason.”

“So?”

“The farmer’s name was Bruce Armstrong. The accountant’s was Brian Armstrong. Both of them were white men about Brook Armstrong’s age, about his height, about his weight, similar appearance, same color eyes and hair.”

“Are they family? Are they related?”

“No,” Stuyvesant said. “Not in any way. Not to each other, not to the VP. So therefore I’m asking myself, what are the odds? That two random men whose last name is Armstrong and whose first names both begin with *BR* are going to get senselessly killed the same day we’re facing a serious threat against our guy? And I’m thinking, the answer is about a trillion billion to one.”

Silence in the office.

“The demonstration,” Reacher said.

“Yes,” Stuyvesant said. “That was the demonstration. Cold-blooded murder. Two innocent men. So I agree with you. These are not insiders having a joke.”

Neagley and Froelich made it to Stuyvesant's visitor chairs and just sat down without being asked. Reacher leaned on a tall file cabinet and stared out the window. The blinds were still open, but it was full dark outside. Washington's orange nighttime glow was the only thing he could see.

"How were you notified?" he asked. "Did they call in and claim responsibility?"

Stuyvesant shook his head. "FBI alerted us. They've got software that scans the NCIC reports. Armstrong is one of the names that they flag up."

"So now they're involved anyway."

Stuyvesant shook his head again. "They passed on some information, is all. They don't understand its significance."

The room stayed quiet. Just four people breathing, lost in somber thoughts.

"We got any details from the scenes?" Neagley asked.

"Some," Stuyvesant said. "The first guy was a single shot to the head. Killed him instantly. They can't find the bullet. The guy's wife didn't hear anything."

"Where was she?"

"About twenty feet away in the kitchen. Doors and windows shut because of the weather. But you'd expect her to hear something. She hears hunters all the time."

"How big was the hole in his head?" Reacher asked.

"Bigger than a .22," Stuyvesant said. "If that's what you're thinking."

Reacher nodded. The only handgun inaudible from twenty feet would be a silenced .22. Anything bigger than that, you'd probably hear something, suppressor or no suppressor, windows or no windows.

"So it was a rifle," he said.

"Trajectory looks like it," Stuyvesant said. "Medical examiner figures the bullet was traveling downward. It went through his head front to back, high to low."

"Hilly country?"

“All around.”

“So it was either a very distant rifle or a silenced rifle. And I don’t like either one. Distant rifle means somebody’s a great shooter, silenced rifle means somebody owns a bunch of exotic weapons.”

“What about the second guy?” Neagley asked.

“It was less than eight hours later,” Stuyvesant said. “But more than eight hundred miles away. So most likely the team split up for the day.”

“Details?”

“Coming through in bits and pieces. First impression from the locals is the weapon was some kind of machine gun. But again, nobody heard anything.”

“A silenced machine gun?” Reacher said. “Are they sure?”

“No question it was a machine gun,” Stuyvesant said. “The corpse was all chewed up. Two bursts, head and chest. Hell of a mess.”

“Hell of a demonstration,” Froelich said.

Reacher stared through the window. There was light fog in the air.

“But what exactly does it demonstrate?” he said.

“That these are not very nice people.”

He nodded. “But not very much more than that, does it? It doesn’t really demonstrate Armstrong’s vulnerability as such, not if they weren’t connected to him in any way. Are we *sure* they weren’t related? Like very distant cousins or something? At least the farmer? Minnesota is next to North Dakota, right?”

Stuyvesant shook his head.

“My first thought, obviously,” he said. “But I double-checked. First, the VP isn’t from North Dakota originally. He moved in from Oregon. Plus we have the complete text of his FBI background check from when he was nominated. It’s pretty exhaustive. And he doesn’t have any living relatives that anybody’s aware of except an elder sister who lives in California. His wife has got a bunch of

cousins but none of them are called Armstrong and most of them are younger. Kids, basically."

"OK," Reacher said. *Kids*. He had a flash in his mind of a seesaw, and stuffed toys and lurid paintings stuck to a refrigerator with magnets. *Cousins*.

"It's weird," he said. "Killing two random unconnected lookalikes called Armstrong is dramatic enough, I guess, but it doesn't show any great ingenuity. Doesn't prove anything. Doesn't make us worried about our security here."

"Makes us sad for them," Froelich said. "And their families."

"No doubt," Reacher said. "But two hicks in the sticks going down doesn't really make us *sweat*, does it? It's not like we were protecting them as well. Doesn't make us doubt ourselves. I really thought it would be something more personal. More intriguing. Like some equivalent of the letter showing up on your desk."

"You sound disappointed," Stuyvesant said.

"I am disappointed. I thought they might come close enough to give us a chance at them. But they stayed away. They're cowards."

Nobody spoke.

"Cowards are bullies," Reacher said. "Bullies are cowards."

Neagley glanced at him. Knew him well enough to sense when to push.

"So?" she asked.

"So we need to go back and rethink a couple of things. Information is stacking up fast and we're not processing it. Like, now we know these guys are outsiders. Now we know this is not a genteel inside game."

"So?" Neagley asked again.

"And what happened in Minnesota and Colorado shows us these guys are prepared to do just about anything at all."

"So?"

“The cleaners. What do we know about them?”

“That they’re involved. That they’re scared. That they’re not saying anything.”

“Correct,” Reacher said. “But why are they scared? Why aren’t they saying anything? Way back we thought they might be playing some cute game with an insider. But they’re not doing that. Because these guys aren’t insiders. And they’re not cute people. And this isn’t a game.”

“So?”

“So they’re being coerced in some serious way. They’re being scared and silenced. By some serious people.”

“OK, how?”

“You tell me. How do you scare somebody without leaving a mark on them?”

“You threaten something plausible. Serious harm in the future, maybe.”

Reacher nodded. “To them, or to somebody they care about. To the point where they’re paralyzed with terror.”

“OK.”

“Where have you heard the word *cousins* before?”

“All over the place. I’ve got cousins.”

“No, recently.”

Neagley glanced at the window.

“The cleaners,” she said. “Their kids are with cousins. They told us.”

“But they were a little hesitant about telling us, remember?”

“Were they?”

Reacher nodded. “They paused a second and looked at each other first.”

“So?”

“Maybe their kids *aren’t* with cousins.”

“Why would they lie?”

Reacher looked at her. “Is there a better way to coerce somebody than taking their kids away as insurance?”

They moved fast, but Stuyvesant made sure they moved properly. He called the cleaners’ lawyers and told them he needed the answer to just one question: the name and address of the children’s baby-sitters. He told them a quick answer would be much better than a delay. He got the quick answer. The lawyers called back within a quarter of an hour. The name was Gálvez and the address was a house a mile from the cleaners’ own.

Then Froelich motioned for quiet and got on the radio net and asked for a complete situation update from the hotel. She spoke to her acting on-site leader and four other key positions. There were no problems. Everything was calm. Armstrong was working the room. Perimeters were tight. She instructed that all agents should accompany Armstrong through the loading bay at the function’s conclusion. She asked for a human wall, all the way to the limo.

“And make it soon,” she said. “Compress the exposure.”

Then they squeezed into the single elevator and rode down to the garage. Climbed into Froelich’s Suburban for the drive Reacher had slept through first time around. This time he stayed awake as Froelich raced through traffic to the cheap part of town. They passed right by the cleaners’ house. Threaded another mile through dark streets made narrow by parked cars and came to a stop outside a tall thin two-family house. It was ringed by a wire fence and had trash cans chained to the gatepost. It was boxed in on one side by a package store and on the other by a long line of identical houses. There was a sagging twenty-year-old Cadillac parked at the curb. Yellow sodium lighting was cutting through the fog.

“So what do we do?” Stuyvesant said.

Reacher looked through the window. “We go talk with these people. But we don’t want a mob scene. They’re scared already. We don’t want to panic them

don't want a mob scene. They're scared already. We don't want to panic them. They might think the bad guys are back. So Neagley should go first."

Stuyvesant was about to offer an objection but Neagley slid straight out of the car and headed for the gate. Reacher watched her turn a fast circle on the sidewalk before going in, to read the surroundings. Watched her glance left and right as she walked up the path. Nobody was around. Too cold. She reached the door. Searched for a bell. Couldn't find one, so she rapped on the wood with her knuckles.

There was a one-minute wait and then the door opened and was stopped short by a chain. A bar of warm light flooded out. There was a one-minute conversation. The door eased forward to release the chain. The bar of light narrowed and widened again. Neagley turned and waved. Froelich and Stuyvesant and Reacher climbed out of the Suburban and walked up the path. There was a small dark guy standing in the doorway, waiting for them, smiling shyly.

"This is Mr. Gálvez," Neagley said. They introduced themselves and Gálvez backed into the hallway and made a follow-me gesture with the whole of his arm, like a butler. He was a small guy dressed in suit pants and a patterned sweater. He had a fresh haircut and an open expression. They followed him inside. The house was small and clearly overcrowded, but it was very clean. There was a line of seven children's coats hung neatly on a row of pegs inside the door. Some of them were small, some of them were a little bigger. There were seven school backpacks lined up on the floor underneath them. Seven pairs of shoes. There were toys neatly piled here and there. Three women visible in the kitchen. Shy children peering out from behind their skirts. More easing their heads around the living room door. They kept moving. Kept appearing and disappearing in random sequences. They all looked the same. Reacher couldn't get an accurate count. There were dark eyes everywhere, open wide.

Stuyvesant seemed a little out of his depth, like he didn't know how to broach the subject. Reacher squeezed past him and moved ahead toward the kitchen. Stopped in the doorway. There were seven school lunch boxes lined up on a counter. The lids were up, like they were ready for assembly-line loading first thing in the morning. He moved back to the hallway. Squeezed past Neagley and looked at the little coats. They were all colorful nylon items, like small versions of the things he had browsed in the Atlantic City store. He lifted one off its peg. It had a white patch inside the collar. Somebody had used a laundry marker and written *J. Gálvez* on it in careful script. He put it back and checked the other six.

Each was labeled with a surname and a single initial. Total of five *Gálvez* and two *Alvárez*.

Nobody was speaking. Stuyvesant looked awkward. Reacher caught Mr. Gálvez's eye and nodded him through to the living room. Two children scuttled out as they stepped in.

"You got five kids?" Reacher asked.

Gálvez nodded. "I'm a lucky man."

"So who do the two Alvárez coats belong to?"

"My wife's cousin Julio's children."

"Julio and Anita's?"

Gálvez nodded. Said nothing.

"I need to see them," Reacher said.

"They're not here."

Reacher glanced away.

"Where are they?" he asked quietly.

"I don't know," Gálvez said. "At work, I guess. They work nights. For the federal government."

Reacher glanced back. "No, I mean their kids. Not them. I need to see their kids."

Gálvez looked at him, puzzled. "See their kids?"

"To check they're OK."

"You just saw them. In the kitchen."

"I need to see which ones they are exactly."

"We're not taking money," Gálvez said. "Except for their food."

"We're not taking money," Gálvez said. "Except for their food."

Reacher nodded. "This isn't about licenses or anything. We don't care about that stuff. We just need to see their kids are OK."

Gálvez still looked puzzled. But he called out a long rapid sentence in Spanish and two small children separated themselves from the group in the kitchen and threaded between Stuyvesant and Froelich and trotted into the room. They stopped near the doorway and stood perfectly still, side by side. Two little girls, very beautiful, huge dark eyes, soft black hair, serious expressions. Maybe five and seven years old. Maybe four and six. Maybe three and five. Reacher had no idea.

"Hey, kids," he said. "Show me your coats."

They did exactly what they were told, like kids sometimes do. He followed them out to the hallway and watched as they stood up on tiptoe and touched the two little jackets he knew were marked *Alvárez*.

"OK," he said. "Now go get a cookie or something."

They scuttled back to the kitchen. He watched them go. Stood still and quiet for a second and then stepped back to the living room. Got close to Gálvez and lowered his voice again.

"Anybody else been inquiring about them?" he asked.

Gálvez just shook his head.

"You sure?" Reacher asked. "Nobody watching them, no strangers around?"

Gálvez shook his head again.

"We can fix it," Reacher said. "If you're worried about anything, you should go ahead and tell us right now. We'll take care of it."

Gálvez just looked blank. Reacher watched his eyes. He had spent his career watching eyes, and these two were innocent. A little disconcerted, a little puzzled, but the guy wasn't hiding anything. He had no secrets.

"OK," he said. "We're sorry to have interrupted your evening."

He kept very quiet on the drive back to the office.

They used the conference room again. It seemed to be the only facility with seating for more than three. Neagley let Froelich put herself next to Reacher. She sat with Stuyvesant on the opposite side of the table. Froelich got on the radio net and heard that Armstrong was about to leave the hotel. He was cutting the evening short. Nobody seemed to mind. It worked both ways. Spend a lot of time with them, and they're naturally thrilled about it. Rush it through, and they're equally delighted such a busy and important guy found any time at all for them. Froelich listened to her earpiece and tracked him all the way out of the ballroom, through the kitchens, into the loading bay, into the limo. Then she relaxed. All that was left was a high-speed convoy out to Georgetown and a transfer through the tent in the darkness. She fiddled behind her back and turned the earpiece volume down a little. Sat back and glanced at the others, questions in her eyes.

"Makes no sense to me," Neagley said. "It implies there's something they're *more* worried about than their children."

"Which would be what?" Froelich asked.

"Green cards? Are they legal?"

Stuyvesant nodded. "Of course they are. They're United States Secret Service employees, same as anybody else in this building. Background-checked from here to hell and back. We snoop on their financial situation and everything. They were clean, far as we knew."

Reacher let the talk drift into the background. He rubbed the back of his neck with the palm of his hand. The stubble from his haircut was growing out. It felt softer. He glanced at Neagley. Stared down at the carpet. It was gray nylon, ribbed, somewhere between fine and coarse. He could see individual hairy strands glittering in the halogen light. It was an immaculately clean carpet. He closed his eyes. Thought hard. Ran the surveillance video in his head all over again. Watched it like there was a screen inside his eyelids. It went like this: eight minutes before midnight, the cleaners enter the picture. They walk into Stuyvesant's office. Seven minutes past midnight, they come out. They spend nine minutes cleaning the secretarial station. They shuffle off the way they had

come at sixteen minutes past midnight. He ran it again, forward and then backward. Concentrated on every frame. Every movement. Then he opened his eyes. Everybody was staring at him like he had been ignoring their questions. He glanced at his watch. It was almost nine o'clock. He smiled. A wide, happy grin.

"I liked Mr. Gálvez," he said. "He seemed really happy to be a father, didn't he? All those lunch boxes lined up? I bet they get whole wheat bread. Fruit, too, probably. All kinds of good nutrition."

They all looked at him.

"I was an Army kid," he said. "I had a lunch box. Mine was an old ammunition case. We all had them. It was considered the thing back then, on the bases. I stenciled my name on it, with a real Army stencil. My mother hated it. Thought it was way too militaristic, for a kid. But she gave me good stuff to eat anyway."

Neagley stared at him. "Reacher, we've got big problems here, two people are dead, and you're talking about lunch boxes?"

He nodded. "Talking about lunch boxes, and thinking about haircuts. Mr. Gálvez had just been to the barber, you notice that?"

"So?"

"And with the greatest possible respect, Neagley, I'm thinking about your ass."

Froelich stared at him. Neagley blushed.

"Your point being?" she said.

"My point being, I don't think there is anything more important to Julio and Anita than their children."

"So why are they still clamming up?"

Froelich sat forward and pressed her finger on her earpiece. Listened for a second and raised her wrist.

"Copy," she said. "Good work, everybody, out."

Then she smiled.

“Armstrong’s home,” she said. “Secure.”

Reacher looked at his watch again. Nine o’clock exactly. He glanced across at Stuyvesant. “Can I see your office again? Right now?”

Stuyvesant looked blank, but he stood up and led the way out of the room. They followed the corridors and arrived at the rear of the floor. The secretarial station was quiet and deserted. Stuyvesant’s door was closed. He pushed it open and hit the lights.

There was a sheet of paper on the desk.

They all saw it. Stuyvesant stood completely still for a second and then walked across the floor and stared down at it. Swallowed. Breathed out. Picked it up.

“Fax from Boulder PD,” he said. “Preliminary ballistics. My secretary must have left it.”

He smiled with relief.

“Now check,” Reacher said. “Concentrate. Is this how your office usually looks?”

Stuyvesant held the fax and glanced around the room.

“Exactly,” he said.

“So this is how the cleaners see it every night?”

“Well, the desk is usually clear,” Stuyvesant said. “But otherwise, yes.”

“OK,” Reacher said. “Let’s go.”

They walked back to the conference room. Stuyvesant read the fax.

“They found six shell cases,” he said. “Nine millimeter Parabellums. Strange impact marks on the sides. They’ve sent a drawing.”

He slid the paper to Neagley. She read it through. Made a face. Slid it across to Reacher. He looked at the drawing and nodded.

“Heckler & Koch MP5,” he said. “It punches the empty brass out like nobody’s business. The guy had it set to bursts of three. Two bursts, six cases. They probably ended up twenty yards away.”

“Probably the SD6 version,” Neagley said. “If it was silenced. That’s a nice weapon. Quality submachine gun. Expensive. Rare, too.”

“Why did you want to see my office?” Stuyvesant asked.

“We’re wrong about the cleaners,” Reacher said.

The room went quiet.

“In what way?” Neagley asked.

“In every way,” Reacher said. “Every possible way we could be. What happened when we talked to them?”

“They stonewalled like crazy.”

He nodded. “That’s what I thought too. They went into some kind of a stoic silence. All of them. Almost like a trance. I interpreted that as a response to some kind of danger. Like they were really digging deep and defending against whatever hold somebody had over them. Like it was vitally important. Like they knew they couldn’t afford to say a single word. But you know what?”

“What?”

“They just didn’t have a clue what we were talking about. Not the first idea. We were two crazy white people asking them impossible questions, is all. They were too polite and too inhibited to tell us to get lost. They just sat there patiently while we rambled on.”

“So what are you saying?”

“Think about what else we know. There’s a weird sequence of facts on the tape. They look a little tired going into Stuyvesant’s office, and a little less tired coming out. They look fairly neat going in, and a little disheveled coming out. They spend fifteen minutes in there, and only nine in the secretarial area.”

“So?” Stuyvesant asked.

Reacher smiled. “Your office is probably the world’s cleanest room. You could do surgery in there. You keep it that way deliberately. We know about the thing with the briefcase and the wet shoes, by the way.”

Froelich looked blank. Stuyvesant’s turn to blush.

“It’s tidy to the point of obsession,” Reacher said. “And yet the cleaners spent fifteen minutes in there. Why?”

“They were unpacking the letter,” Stuyvesant said. “Placing it in position.”

“No, they weren’t.”

“Was it just Maria on her own? Did Julio and Anita come out first?”

“No.”

“So who put it there? My secretary?”

“No.”

The room went quiet.

“Are you saying I did?” Stuyvesant asked.

Reacher shook his head. “All I’m doing is asking why the cleaners spent fifteen minutes in an office that was already very clean.”

“They were resting?” Neagley said.

Reacher shook his head again. Froelich smiled suddenly.

“Doing something to make themselves disheveled?” she said.

Reacher smiled back. “Like what?”

“Like having sex?”

Stuyvesant went pale.

“I sincerely hope not,” he said. “And there were three of them, anyway.”

"I sincerely hope not," he said. "And there were three of them, anyway."

"Threesomes aren't unheard of," Neagley said.

"They live together," Stuyvesant said. "They want to do that, they can do it at home, can't they?"

"It can be an erotic adventure," Froelich said. "You know, making out at work."

"Forget the sex," Reacher said. "Think about the dishevelment. What exactly created that impression for us?"

Everybody shrugged. Stuyvesant was still pale. Reacher smiled.

"Something else on the tape," he said. "Going in, the garbage bag is reasonably empty. Coming out, it's much fuller. So was there a lot of trash in the office?"

"No," Stuyvesant said, like he was offended. "I never leave trash in there."

Froelich sat forward. "So what was in the bag?"

"Trash," Reacher said.

"I don't understand," Froelich said.

"Fifteen minutes is a long time, people," Reacher said. "They worked efficiently and thoroughly in the secretarial area and had it done in nine minutes. That's a slightly bigger and slightly more cluttered area. Things all over the place. So compare the two areas, compare the complexity, assume they work just as hard everywhere, and tell me how long they *should* have spent in the office."

Froelich shrugged. "Seven minutes? Eight? About that long?"

Neagley nodded. "I'd say nine minutes, tops."

"I like it clean," Stuyvesant said. "I leave instructions to that effect. I'd want them in there for ten minutes, at least."

"But not fifteen," Reacher said. "That's excessive. And we asked them about it. We asked them, why so long in there? And what did they say?"

"They didn't answer," Neagley said. "Just looked puzzled."

"They didn't answer," Neagley said. "Just looked puzzled."

"Then we asked them whether they spent the same amount of time in there every night. And they said yes, they did."

Stuyvesant looked to Neagley for confirmation. She nodded.

"OK," Reacher said. "We've boiled it down. We're looking at fifteen particular minutes. You've all seen the tapes. Now tell me how they spent that time."

Nobody spoke.

"Two possibilities," Reacher said. "Either they didn't, or they spent the time growing their hair."

"What?" Froelich said.

"That's what makes them look disheveled. Julio especially. His hair is a little longer coming out than going in."

"How is that possible?"

"It's possible because we weren't looking at one night's activities. We were looking at two separate nights spliced together. Two halves of two different nights."

Silence in the room.

"Two tapes," Reacher said. "The tape change at midnight is the key. The first tape is kosher. Has to be, because early on it shows Stuyvesant and his secretary going home. That was the real thing. The real Wednesday. The cleaners show up at eleven fifty-two. They look tired, because maybe that's the first night in their shift pattern. Maybe they've been up all day doing normal daytime things. But it's been a routine night at work so far. They're on time. No spilled coffee anywhere, no huge amount of trash anywhere. The garbage bag is reasonably empty. My guess is they had the office finished in about nine minutes. Which is probably their normal speed. Which is reasonably fast. Which is why they were puzzled when we claimed it was slow. My guess is in reality they came out at maybe one minute past midnight and spent another nine minutes on the secretarial station and left the area at ten past midnight."

"But?" Froelich asked.

"But?" Froelich asked.

"But after midnight we were looking at a different night altogether. Maybe from a couple of weeks ago, before the guy got his latest haircut. A night when they arrived in the area later, and therefore left the area later. Because of some earlier snafu in some other office. Maybe some big pile of trash that filled up their bag. They looked more energetic coming out because they were hurrying to catch up. And maybe it was a night in the middle of their work week and they'd adjusted to their pattern and slept properly. So we saw them go in on Wednesday and come out on a completely different night."

"But the date was correct," Froelich said. "It was definitely Thursday's date."

Reacher nodded. "Nendick planned it ahead of time."

"Nendick?"

"Your tape guy," Reacher said. "My guess is for a whole week he had that particular camera's midnight-to-six tape set up to show that particular Thursday's date. Maybe two whole weeks. Because he needed three options. Either the cleaners would be in *and* out before midnight, or in before midnight and out *after* midnight, or in and out after midnight. He had to wait to match his options. If they'd been in and out before midnight, he'd have given you a matching tape showing nothing at all between midnight and six. If they'd been in and out after midnight, that's what you'd have seen. But the way it happened, he had to use one that showed them leaving only."

"Nendick left the letter?" Stuyvesant asked.

Reacher nodded. "Nendick is the insider. Not the cleaners. What that particular camera *really* recorded that night was the cleaners leaving just after midnight and then sometime before six in the morning Nendick himself stepping in through the fire door with gloves on and the letter in his hand. Probably around five-thirty, I would guess, so he wouldn't have to wait long before trashing the real tape and choosing his substitute."

"But it showed me arriving in the morning. My secretary, too."

"That was the third tape. There was another change at six A.M., back to the real thing. Only the middle tape was swapped."

Silence in the room.

“He probably described the garage cameras for them too,” Reacher said. “For the Sunday night delivery.”

“How did you spot it?” Stuyvesant asked. “The hair?”

“Partly. It was Neagley’s ass, really. Nendick was so nervous around the tapes he didn’t pay attention to Neagley’s ass. She noticed. She told me that’s very unusual.”

Stuyvesant blushed again, like maybe he was able to vouch for that fact personally.

“So we should let the cleaners go,” Reacher said. “Then we should talk with Nendick. He’s the one who met with these guys.”

Stuyvesant nodded. “And been threatened by them, presumably.”

“I hope so,” Reacher said. “I hope he’s not involved of his own free will.”

Stuyvesant used his master key and entered the video recording room with the duty officer as a witness. They found that ten consecutive midnight-to-six tapes were missing prior to the Thursday in question. Nendick had entered them in a technical log as faulty recordings. Then they picked a dozen random tapes from the last three months and watched parts of them. They confirmed that the cleaners never spent more than nine minutes in his office. So Stuyvesant made a call and secured their immediate release.

Then there were three options: either call Nendick in on a pretext, or send agents out to arrest him, or drive themselves over to his house and get some questioning started before the Sixth Amendment kicked in and began to complicate things.

“We should go right now,” Reacher said. “Exploit the element of surprise.”

He was expecting resistance, but Stuyvesant just nodded blankly. He looked pale and tired. He looked like a man with problems. Like a man juggling a sense of betrayal and righteous anger against the standard Beltway instinct for

concealment. And the instinct for concealment was going to be much stronger with a guy like Nendick than with the cleaners. Cleaners would be regarded as mere ciphers. Sooner or later somebody could spin it *hey, cleaners, what can you do*? But a guy like Nendick was different. A guy like that was a main component in an organization that should know better. So Stuyvesant booted up his secretary's computer and found Nendick's home address. It was in a suburb ten miles out in Virginia. It took twenty minutes to get there. He lived on a quiet winding street in a subdivision. The subdivision was old enough that the trees and the foundation plantings were mature but new enough that the whole place still looked smart and well kept. It was a medium-priced area. There were foreign cars on most of the driveways, but they weren't this year's models. They were clean, but a little tired. Nendick's house was a long low ranch with a khaki roof and a brick chimney. It was dark except for the blue flicker of a television set in one of the windows.

Froelich swung straight onto the driveway and parked in front of the garage. They climbed out into the cold and walked to the front door. Stuyvesant put his thumb on the bell and left it there. Thirty seconds later a light came on in the hallway. It blazed orange in a fan-shaped window above the door. A yellow porch light came on over their heads. The door opened and Nendick just stood in his hallway and said nothing. He was wearing a suit, like he was just home from work. He looked slack with fear, like a new ordeal was about to be piled on top of an old one. Stuyvesant looked at him and paused and then stepped inside. Froelich followed him. Then Reacher. Then Neagley. She closed the door behind her and took up station in front of it like a sentry, feet apart, hands clasped easy in the small of her back.

Nendick still said nothing. Just stood there, slack and staring. Stuyvesant put a hand on his shoulder and turned him around. Pushed him toward the kitchen. He didn't resist. Just stumbled limply toward the back of his house. Stuyvesant followed him and hit a switch and fluorescent tubes sputtered to life above the countertops.

"Sit," he said, like he was talking to a dog.

Nendick stepped over and sat on a stool at his breakfast bar. Said nothing. Just wrapped his arms around himself like a man chilled by fever.

"Names," Stuyvesant said.

Nendick said nothing. He *worked* at saying nothing. He stared forward at the far wall. One of the fluorescent lights was faulty. It was struggling to kick in. Its capacitor put an angry buzz into the silence. Nendick's hands started shaking, so he tucked them up under his arms to keep them still and began to rock back and forth on the stool. It creaked gently under his weight. Reacher glanced away and looked around the kitchen. It was a pretty room. There were yellow check drapes at the window. The ceiling was painted to match. There were flowers in vases. They were all dead. There were dishes in the sink. A couple of weeks' worth. Some of them were crusted.

Reacher stepped back to the hallway. Into the living room. The television was a huge thing a couple of years old. It was tuned to a commercial network. The program seemed to be made up of clips from police traffic surveillance videos several years out of date. The sound was low. Just a constant murmur suggesting extreme and sustained excitement. There was a remote control balanced carefully on the arm of a chair opposite the screen. There was a low mantel above the fireplace with a row of six photographs in brass frames. Nendick and a woman featured in all six of them. She was about his age, maybe just lively enough and attractive enough not to be called plain. The photographs followed the couple from their wedding day through a couple of vacations and some other unspecified events. There were no pictures of children. And this wasn't a house where children lived. There were no toys anywhere. No mess. Everything was frilly and considered and matched and adult.

The remote on the arm of the chair was labeled *Video*, not *TV*. Reacher glanced at the screen and pressed play. The cop radio sound died instantly and the video machine clicked and whirred and a second later the picture went black and was replaced by an amateur video of a wedding. Nendick and his wife smiled into the camera from several years in the past. Their heads were close together. They looked happy. She was all in white. He was wearing a suit. They were on a lawn. A blustery day. Her hair was blowing and the sound track was dominated by wind noise. She had a nice smile. Bright eyes. She was saying something for posterity, but Reacher couldn't hear the words.

He pressed stop and a nighttime car chase resumed. He stepped back into the kitchen. Nendick was still shaking and rocking. He still had his hands trapped up under his arms. He still wasn't saying anything. Reacher glanced again at the dirty dishes and the dead flowers.

"We can get her back for you," he said

"We can get her back for you," he said.

Nendick said nothing.

"Just tell us who, and we'll go get her right now."

No reply.

"Sooner the better," Reacher said. "Thing like this, we don't want to have her wait any longer than she has to, do we?"

Nendick stared at the far wall with total concentration.

"When did they come for her?" Reacher asked. "Couple of weeks ago?"

Nendick said nothing. Made no sound at all. Neagley came in from the hallway. Drifted away into the half of the kitchen that was set up as a family room. There was a matching set of heavy furniture grouped along one wall, bookcase, credenza, bookcase.

"We can help you," Reacher said. "But we need to know where to start."

Nendick said nothing in reply. Nothing at all. Just stared and shook and rocked and hugged himself tight.

"Reacher," Neagley called. Soft voice, with some kind of strain in it. He stepped away from Nendick and joined her at the credenza. She handed him something. It was an envelope. There was a Polaroid photograph in it. The photograph showed a woman sitting on a chair. Her face was white and panicked. Her eyes were wide. Her hair was dirty. It was Nendick's wife, looking about a hundred years older than the pictures in the living room. She was holding up a copy of *USA Today*. The masthead was right under her chin. Neagley passed him another envelope. Another Polaroid in it. Same woman. Same pose. Same paper, but a different day.

"Proofs of life," Reacher said.

Neagley nodded. "But look at this. What's this proof of?"

She passed him another envelope. A padded brown mailer. Something soft and white in it. Underwear. One pair. Discolored. Slightly grimy.

“Great,” he said. Then she passed him a fourth envelope. Another padded brown mailer. Smaller. There was a box in it. It was a tiny neat cardboard thing like a jeweler might put a pair of earrings in. There was a pad of cotton wool in it. The cotton wool was browned with old blood, because lying on top of it was a fingertip. It had been clipped off at the first knuckle by something hard and sharp. Garden shears, maybe. It was probably from the little finger of the left hand, judging by the size and the curve. There was still paint on the nail. Reacher looked at it for a long moment. Nodded and handed it back to Neagley. Walked around and faced Nendick head on across the breakfast bar. Looked straight into his eyes. Gambled.

“Stuyvesant,” he called. “And Froelich. Go wait in the hallway.”

They stood still for a second, surprised. He glared hard at them. They shuffled obediently out of the room.

“Neagley,” he called. “Come over here with me.”

She walked around and stood quiet at his side. He leaned down and put his elbows on the counter. Put his face level with Nendick’s. Spoke soft.

“OK, they’re gone,” he said. “It’s just us now. And we’re not Secret Service. You know that, right? You never saw us before the other day. So you can trust us. We won’t screw up like they will. We come from a place where you’re not allowed to screw up. And we come from a place where they don’t have rules. So we can get her back. We know how to do this. We’ll get the bad guys and we’ll bring her back. Safe. Without fail, OK? That’s a promise. Me to you.”

Nendick leaned his head back and opened his mouth. His lips were dry. They were flecked with sticky foam. Then he closed his mouth. Tight. Clamped his jaw hard. So hard his lips were compressed into a bloodless thin line. He brought one shaking hand out from under his arm and put the thumb and forefinger together like he was holding something small. He drew the small imaginary thing sideways across his lips, slowly, like he was closing a zipper. He put his hand back under his arm. Shook. Stared at the wall. There was crazy fear in his eyes. Some kind of absolute, uncontrolled terror. He started rocking again. Started coughing. He was coughing and choking in his throat. He wouldn’t open his mouth. It was clamped tight. He was bucking and shaking on the stool. Clutching his sides. Gulping desperately inside his clamped mouth. His eyes

were wild and staring. They were pools of horror. Then they rolled up inside his head and the whites showed and he pitched backward off the stool.

10

They did what they could at the scene, but it was useless. Nendick just lay on the kitchen floor, not moving, not really conscious, but not really unconscious either. He was in some kind of a fugue state. Like suspended animation. He was pale and damp with perspiration. His breathing was shallow. His pulse was weak. He was responsive to touch and light but nothing else. An hour later he was in a guarded room at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center with a tentative diagnosis of psychosis-induced catatonia.

“Paralyzed with fear, in layman’s language,” the doctor said. “It’s a genuine medical condition. We see it most often in superstitious populations, like Haiti, or parts of Louisiana. Voodoo country, in other words. The victims get cold sweats, pallor, loss of blood pressure, near-unconsciousness. Not the same thing as adrenaline-induced panic. It’s a neurogenic process. The heart slows, the large blood vessels in the abdomen take blood away from the brain, most voluntary function shuts down.”

“What kind of threat could do that to a person?” Froelich asked, quietly.

“One that the person sincerely believes,” the doctor answered. “That’s the key. The victim has to be convinced. My guess is his wife’s kidnappers described to him what they would do to her if he talked. Then your arrival triggered a crisis, because he was afraid he *would* talk. Maybe he even wanted to talk, but he knew he couldn’t afford to. I wouldn’t want to speculate about the exact nature of the threat against his wife.”

“Will he be OK?” Stuyvesant asked.

“Depends on the condition of his heart. If he tends toward heart disease he could be in serious trouble. The cardiac stress is truly enormous.”

“When can we talk to him?”

“No time soon. Depends on him, basically. He needs to come around.”

“It’s very important. He’s got critical information.”

The doctor shook his head.

“Could be days,” he said. “Could be never.”

They waited a long fruitless hour during which nothing changed. Nendick just lay there inert, surrounded by beeping machines. He breathed in and out, but that was all. So they gave it up and left him there and drove back to the office in the dark and the silence. Regrouped in the windowless conference room and faced the next big decision.

“Armstrong’s got to be told,” Neagley said. “They’ve staged their demonstration. No place to go now except stage the real thing.”

Stuyvesant shook his head. “We never tell them. It’s a rigid policy. Has been for a hundred and one years. We’re not going to change it now.”

“Then we should limit his exposure,” Froelich said.

“No,” Stuyvesant said. “That’s an admission of defeat in itself, and it’s a slippery slope. We pull out once, we’ll be pulling out forever, every single threat we get. And that must not happen. What must happen is that we defend him to the best of our ability. So we start planning, now. What are we defending against? What do we know?”

“That two men are already dead,” Froelich replied.

“Two men and one woman,” Reacher said. “Look at the statistics. Kidnapped is the same thing as dead, ninety-nine times in a hundred.”

“The photographs were proof of life,” Stuyvesant said.

“Until the poor guy delivered. Which he did almost two weeks ago.”

“He’s still delivering. He’s not talking. So I’m going to keep on hoping.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Know anything about her?” Neagley asked.

Stuyvesant shook his head. “Never met her. Don’t even know her name. I hardly know Nendick, either. He’s just some technical guy I sometimes see around.”

The room went quiet.

“FBI has got to be told as well,” Neagley said. “This isn’t just about Armstrong now. There’s a kidnap victim dead or in serious danger. That’s the Bureau’s jurisdiction, no question. Plus the interstate homicide. That’s their bag too.”

The room stayed very quiet. Stuyvesant sighed and looked around at each of the others, slowly and carefully, one at a time.

“Yes,” he said. “I agree. It’s gone too far. They need to know. God knows I don’t want to, but I’ll tell them. I’ll let us take the hit. I’ll hand everything over to them.”

There was silence. Nobody spoke. There was nothing to say. It was exactly the right thing to do, in the circumstances. Approval would have seemed sarcastic, and commiseration wasn’t appropriate. For the Nendick couple and two unrelated families called Armstrong, maybe, but not for Stuyvesant.

“Meanwhile we’ll focus on Armstrong,” he said. “That’s all we can do.”

“Tomorrow is North Dakota again,” Froelich said. “More open-air fun and games. Same place as before. Not very secure. We leave at ten.”

“And Thursday?”

“Thursday is Thanksgiving Day. He’s serving turkey dinners in a homeless shelter here in D.C. He’ll be very exposed.”

There was a long moment of silence. Stuyvesant sighed again, heavily, and placed his hands palms down on the long wooden table.

“OK,” he said. “Be back in here at seven o’clock tomorrow morning. I’m sure the Bureau will be delighted to send over a liaison guy.”

Then he levered himself upright and left the room to head back to his office, where he would make the calls that would put a permanent asterisk next to his career.

“I feel helpless,” Froelich said. “I want to be more proactive.”

“Don’t like playing defense?” he asked.

They were in her bed, in her room. It was larger than the guest room. Prettier. And quieter, because it was at the back of the house. The ceiling was smoother. Although it would take angled sunlight to really test it. Which would happen at sunset instead of in the morning, because the window faced the other way. The bed was warm. The house was warm. It was like a cocoon of warmth in the cold gray city night.

“Defense is OK,” she said. “But attack is defense, isn’t it? In a situation like this? But we always let things come to us. Then we just run away from them. We’re too operational. We’re not investigative enough.”

“You have investigators,” he said. “Like the guy who watches the movies.”

She nodded against his shoulder. “The Office of Protection Research. It’s a strange role. Kind of academic, rather than specific. Strategic, rather than tactical.”

“So do it yourself. Try a few things.”

“Like what?”

“We’re back to the original evidence, with Nendick crapping out. So we have to start over. You should concentrate on the thumbprint.”

“It’s not on file.”

“Files have glitches. Files get updated. Prints get added. You should try again, every few days. And you should widen the search. Try other countries. Try Interpol.”

“I doubt if these guys are foreign.”

“But maybe they’re Americans who traveled. Maybe they got in trouble in Canada or Europe. Or Mexico or South America.”

“Maybe,” she said.

“And you should check the thumbprint thing as an MO. You know, search the databases to see if anybody ever signed threatening letters with their thumb

before. How far back do the archives go?"

"To the dawn of time."

"So put a twenty-year limit on it. I guess way back at the dawn of time plenty of people signed things with their thumbs."

She smiled, sleepily. He could feel it against his shoulder.

"Before they learned to write," he said.

She didn't reply. She was fast asleep, breathing slow, snuggled against his shoulder. He eased his position and felt a shallow dip on his side of the mattress. He wondered if Joe had made it. He lay quiet for a spell and then craned his arm up and switched out the light.

Seemed like about a minute and a half later they were up again and showered and back in the Secret Service conference room eating doughnuts and drinking coffee with an FBI liaison agent named Bannon. Reacher was in his Atlantic City coat and the third of Joe's abandoned Italian suits and the third *Somebody & Somebody* shirt and a plain blue tie. Froelich was in another black pant suit. Neagley was in the same suit she had worn on Sunday evening. It was the one that showed off her figure. The one that Nendick had ignored. She was cycling through her wardrobe as fast as the hotel laundry would let her. Stuyvesant was immaculate in his usual Brooks Brothers. Maybe it was fresh on, maybe it wasn't. There was no way to tell. All his suits were the same. He looked very tired. Actually they all looked very tired, and Reacher was a little worried about that. In his experience tiredness impaired operational efficiency as badly as a drink too many.

"We'll sleep on the plane," Froelich said. "We'll tell the pilot to fly slow."

Bannon was a guy of about forty. He was in a tweed sport coat and gray flannels and looked bluff and Irish and was tall and heavy. He had a red complexion that the winter morning hadn't helped. But he was polite and cheerful and he had supplied the doughnuts and the coffee himself. Two different stores, each chosen for its respective quality. He had been well received. Twenty bucks' worth of food and drink had broken a lot of interagency ice.

“No secrets either way,” he said. “That’s what we’re proposing. And no blame anywhere. But no bullshit, either. I think we got to face the fact that the Nendick woman is dead. We’ll look for her like she wasn’t, but we shouldn’t fool ourselves. So we’ve got three down already. Some evidence, but not a lot. We’re guessing Nendick has met with these guys, and we’re assuming they’ve certainly been to his house, if only to grab up his wife. So that’s a crime scene, and we’re going over it today, and we’ll share what we get. Nendick will help us if he ever wakes up. But assuming he won’t anytime soon, we’ll go at it from three different directions. First, the message stuff that went down here in D.C. Second, the scene in Minnesota. Third, the scene in Colorado.”

“Are your people in charge out there?” Froelich asked.

“Both places,” Bannon said. “Our ballistics people figure the Colorado weapon for a Heckler and Koch submachine gun called the MP5.”

“We already concluded that,” Neagley said. “And it was probably silenced, which makes it the MP5SD6.”

Bannon nodded. “You’re one of the ex-military, right? In which case you’ve seen MP5s before. As I have. They’re military and paramilitary weapons. Police and federal SWAT teams use them.”

Then he went quiet and looked around the assembled faces, like there was more to his point than he had actually articulated.

“What about Minnesota?” Neagley asked.

“We found the bullet,” Bannon said. “We swept the farmyard with a metal detector. It was buried about nine inches deep in the mud. Consistent with a shot from a small wooded hillside about a hundred and twenty yards away to the north. Maybe eighty feet of elevation.”

“What was the bullet?” Reacher asked.

“NATO 7.62 millimeter,” Bannon said.

Reacher nodded. “You test it?”

“For what?”

“Burn.”

Bannon nodded. “Low power, weak charge.”

“Subsonic ammunition,” Reacher said. “In that caliber it has to be a Vaime Mk2 silenced sniper rifle.”

“Which is also a police and paramilitary weapon,” Bannon said. “Often supplied to antiterrorist units.”

He looked around the room again, like he was inviting a comment. Nobody made one. So he pitched it himself.

“You know what?” he said.

“What?”

“Put a list of who buys Heckler & Koch MP5s in America side to side with a list of who buys Vaime Mk2s, and you see only one official purchaser on both lists.”

“Who?”

“The United States Secret Service.”

The room went quiet. Nobody spoke. There was a knock at the door. The duty officer. He stood there, framed in the doorway.

“Mail just arrived,” he said. “Something you need to see.”

They laid it on the conference room table. It was a familiar brown envelope, gummed flap, metal closure. A computer-printed self-adhesive address label. *Brook Armstrong, United States Senate, Washington D.C.* Clear black-on-white Times New Roman lettering. Bannon opened his briefcase and took out a pair of white cotton gloves. Pulled them on, right hand, left hand. Tightened them over his fingers.

“Got these from the lab,” he said. “Special circumstances. We don’t want to use latex. Don’t want to confuse the talcum traces.”

The gloves were clumsy. He had to slide the envelope to the edge of the table to pick it up. He held it with one hand and looked for something to open it with. Reacher took his ceramic knife out of his pocket and snapped it open. Offered it handle-first. Bannon took it and eased the tip of the blade under the corner of the flap. Moved the envelope backward and the knife forward. The blade cut the paper like it was cutting air. He handed the knife back to Reacher and pressed on the sides of the envelope so it made a mouth. Glanced inside. Turned the envelope over and tipped something out.

It was a single sheet of letter-size paper. Heavyweight white stock. It landed and skidded an inch on the polished wood and settled flat. It had a question printed over two lines, centered between the margins, a little higher than halfway up the sheet. Five words, in the familiar severe typeface: *Did you like the demonstration?* The last word was the only word on the second line. That isolation gave it some kind of extra emphasis.

Bannon turned the envelope over and checked the postmark.

“Vegas again,” he said. “Saturday. They’re real confident, aren’t they? They’re asking if he liked the demonstration three days before they staged it.”

“We have to move out now,” Froelich said. “Lift-off at ten. I want Reacher and Neagley with me. They’ve been there before. They know the ground.”

Stuyvesant raised his hand. A vague gesture. Either *OK* or *whatever* or *don’t bother me*, Reacher couldn’t tell.

“I want twice-daily meetings,” Bannon said. “In here, seven every morning and maybe ten at night?”

“If we’re in town,” Froelich said. She headed for the door. Reacher and Neagley followed her out of the room. Reacher caught her and nudged her elbow and steered her left instead of right, down the corridor toward her office.

“Do the database search,” he whispered.

She glanced at her watch. “It’s way too slow.”

“So start it now and let it compile all day.”

“Won’t Bannon do it?”

Won't Battalion do it?

“Probably. But double-checking never hurt anybody.”

She paused. Then she turned and headed for the interior of the floor. Lit up her office and turned on her computer. The NCIC database had a complex search protocol. She entered her password and clicked the cursor into the box and typed *thumbprint.*

“Be more specific,” Reacher said. “That’s going to give you ten zillion plain-vanilla fingerprint cases.”

She tabbed backward and typed *thumbprint+document+ letter+signature*.

“OK?” she said.

He shrugged. “I was born before these things were invented.”

“It’s a start,” Neagley said. “We can refine it later if we need to.”

So Froelich clicked on *search* and the hard disk chattered and the inquiry box disappeared from the screen.

“Let’s go,” she said.

Moving a threatened Vice President–elect from the District of Columbia to the great state of North Dakota was a complicated undertaking. It required eight separate Secret Service vehicles, four police cars, a total of twenty agents, and an airplane. Staging the local political rally itself required twelve agents, forty local police officers, four State Police vehicles, and two local canine units. Froelich spent a total of four hours on the radio in order to coordinate the whole operation.

She left her own Suburban in the garage and used a stretched Town Car with a driver so she could be free to concentrate on giving orders. Reacher and Neagley sat with her in the back and they drove out to Georgetown and parked near Armstrong’s house. Thirty minutes later they were joined by the gun car and two Suburbans. Fifteen minutes after that, an armored Cadillac stretch showed up and parked with its passenger door tight against the tent. Then two Metro

cruisers sealed the street, top and bottom. Their light bars were flashing. All vehicles were using full headlights. The sky was dark gray and a light rain was falling. Everybody kept their engines idling to power their heaters and exhaust fumes were drifting and pooling near the curbs.

They waited. Froelich talked to the personal detail in the house and the Air Force ground crew at Andrews. She talked to the cops in their cars. She listened to traffic reports from a radio news helicopter. The city was jammed because of the weather. The Metro traffic division was recommending a long loop right around the Beltway. Andrews reported that the mechanics had signed off on the plane and the pilots were aboard. The personal detail reported that Armstrong had finished his morning coffee.

“Move him,” she said.

The transfer inside the tent was invisible, but she heard it happen in her earpiece. The limo moved away from the curb and a Suburban jumped ahead of it and formed up behind the lead cop. The gun car came next, then Froelich’s stretch, then the second Suburban, then the trail cop. The convoy moved out and straight up Wisconsin Avenue, through Bethesda, traveling directly away from Andrews. But then it turned right and swung onto the Beltway and settled in for a fast clockwise loop. By then Froelich was patched through to Bismarck and was checking the arrival arrangements. Local ETA was one o’clock and she wanted plans in place so she could sleep on the flight.

The convoy used the north gate into Andrews and swept right onto the tarmac. Armstrong’s limo stopped with its passenger door twenty feet from the bottom of the steps up to the plane. The plane was a Gulfstream twinjet painted in the Air Force’s ceremonial blue *United States of America* livery. Its engines were whining loudly and blowing rain across the ground in thin waves. The Suburbans spilled agents and Armstrong slid out of his limo and ran the twenty feet through the drizzle. His personal detail followed, and then Froelich and Neagley and Reacher. A waiting press van contributed two reporters. A second three-man team of agents brought up the rear. Ground crew wheeled the stairs away and a steward closed the airplane door.

Inside it was nothing like the *Air Force One* Reacher had seen in the movies. It was more like the kind of bus a small-time rock band would ride in, a plain little vehicle customized with twelve better-than-stock seats. Eight of them were arranged in two groups of four with tables between each facing pair, and there

were four facing ahead in a row straight across the front. The seats were leather and the tables were wood, but they looked out of place in the utilitarian fuselage. There was clearly a pecking order about who sat where. People crowded the aisle until Armstrong chose his place. He went for a backward-facing window seat in the port-side foursome. The two reporters sat down opposite. Maybe they had arranged an interview to kill the downtime. Froelich and the personal detail took the other foursome. The backup agents and Neagley took the front row. Reacher was left with no choice. The one seat that remained put him directly across the aisle from Froelich, but it also put him right next to Armstrong.

He stuffed his coat into the overhead bin and slid into the seat. Armstrong glanced at him like he was already an old friend. The reporters checked him out. He could feel their inquiring gaze. They were looking at his suit. He could see them thinking: *too upmarket for an agent. So who is this guy? An aide? An appointee?* He buckled his seat belt like sitting next to Vice Presidents–elect was something he did every four years, regular as clockwork. Armstrong did nothing to disabuse his audience. Just sat there, poised, waiting for the first question.

The engine noise built and the plane moved out to the runway. By the time it took off and leveled out almost everybody except those at Reacher's table was fast asleep. They all just shut down like professionals do when they're faced with a window between periods of intense activity. Froelich was accustomed to sleeping on planes. That was clear. Her head was tucked down on her shoulder and her arms were folded neatly in her lap. She looked good. The three agents around her sprawled a little less decorously. They were big guys. Wide necks, broad shoulders, thick wrists. One of them had his foot shoved out in the aisle. It looked to be about size fourteen. He assumed Neagley was asleep behind him. She could sleep anywhere. He had once seen her sleep in a tree, on a long stakeout. He found the button and laid his chair back a fraction and got comfortable. But then the reporters started talking. To Armstrong, but about him.

"Can we get a name, sir, for the record?" one of them said.

Armstrong shook his head.

"I'm afraid identities need to remain confidential at this point," he said.

"But we can assume we're still in the national security arena here?"

Armstrong smiled. Almost winked.

“I can’t stop you assuming things,” he said.

The reporters wrote something down. Started a conversation about foreign relations, with heavy emphasis on military resources and spending. Reacher ignored it all and tried to drift off. Came around again when he heard a repeated question and felt eyes on him. One of the reporters was looking in his direction.

“But you *do* still support the doctrine of overwhelming force?” the other guy was asking Armstrong.

Armstrong glanced at Reacher. “Would you wish to comment on that?”

Reacher yawned. “Yes, I still support overwhelming force. That’s for sure. I support it big time. Always have, believe me.”

The reporters both wrote it down. Armstrong nodded wisely. Reacher laid his chair back a little more and went to sleep.

He woke up on the descent into Bismarck. Everybody around him was already awake. Froelich was talking quietly to her agents, giving them their standard operational instructions. Neagley was listening along with the three guys in her row. He glanced out Armstrong’s window and saw brilliant blue sky and no clouds. The earth was tan and dormant, ten thousand feet below. He could see the Missouri River winding north to south through an endless sequence of bright blue lakes. He could see the narrow ribbon of I-94 running east to west. The brown urban smudge of Bismarck where they met.

“We’re leaving the perimeter to the local cops,” Froelich was saying. “We’ve got forty of them on duty, maybe more. Plus state troopers in cars. Our job is to stick close together. We’ll be in and out quick. We’re arriving after the event has started and we’re leaving before it finishes.”

“Leave them wanting more,” Armstrong said, to nobody in particular.

“Works in show business,” one of the reporters said. The plane yawed and tilted and settled into a long shallow glide path. Seat backs came upright and belts were ratcheted tight. The reporters stowed their notebooks. They were staying on the plane. No attraction in open-air local politics for important foreign-relations journalists. Froelich glanced across at Reacher and smiled. But there was worry

journalists. Froelich glanced across at Reacher and smiled. But there was worry in her eyes.

The plane put down gently and taxied over to a corner of the tarmac where a five-car motorcade waited. There was a State Police cruiser at each end and three identical stretched Town Cars sandwiched between. A small knot of ground crew standing by with a rolling staircase. Armstrong traveled with his detail in the center limo. The backup crew took the one behind it. Froelich and Reacher and Neagley took the one in front. The air was freezing, but the sky was bright. The sun was blinding.

“You’ll be freelancing,” Froelich said. “Wherever you feel you need to be.”

There was no traffic. It felt like empty country. There was a short fast trip over smooth concrete roads and suddenly Reacher saw the familiar church tower in the distance, and the low surrounding huddle of houses. There were cars parked solid along the side of the approach road all the way up to a State Police roadblock a hundred yards from the community center entrance. The motorcade eased past it and headed for the parking lot. The fences were decorated with bunting and there was a large crowd already assembled, maybe three hundred people. The church tower loomed over all of them, tall and square and solid and blinding white in the winter sun.

“I hope this time they checked every inch of it,” Froelich said.

The five cars swept onto the gravel and crunched to a stop. The backup agents were out first. They fanned out in front of Armstrong’s car, checking the faces in the crowd, waiting until Froelich heard the all-clear from the local police commander on her radio. She got it and instantly relayed it to the backup leader. He acknowledged immediately and stepped to Armstrong’s door and opened it ceremoniously. Reacher was impressed. It was like a ballet. Five seconds, serene, dignified, unhurried, no apparent hesitation at all, but there had already been three-way radio communication and visual confirmation of security. This was a slick operation.

Armstrong stepped out of his car into the cold. He was already smiling a perfect *local-boy-embarrassed-by-all-the-fuss* smile and stretching out his hand to greet his successor at the head of the reception line. He was bareheaded. His personal detail moved in so close they were almost jostling him. The backup agents got close, too, maneuvering themselves so they kept the tallest two of the three

between Armstrong and the church. Their faces were completely expressionless. Their coats were open and their eyes were always moving.

“That damn church,” Froelich said. “It’s like a shooting gallery.”

“We should go check it again,” Reacher said. “Ourselves, just to be sure. Have him circulate counterclockwise until we do.”

“That takes him *nearer* the church.”

“He’s safer nearer the church. Makes the downward angle too steep. There are wooden louvers up there around the bells. The field of fire starts about forty feet out from the base of the tower. Closer than that, he’s in a blind spot.”

Froelich raised her wrist and spoke to her lead agent. Seconds later they saw him ease Armstrong to his right, into a wide counterclockwise loop around the field. The new senator tagged along. The crowd changed direction and moved with them.

“Now find the guy with the church keys,” Reacher said.

Froelich spoke to the local police captain. Listened to his response in her ear.

“The church warden will meet us there,” she said. “Five minutes.”

They got out of the car and walked across the gravel to the church gate. The air was very cold. Armstrong’s head was visible among a sea of people. The sun was catching his hair. He was well out in the field, thirty feet from the tower. The new senator was at his side. Six agents close by. The crowd was moving with them, slowly changing its shape like an evolving creature. There were dark overcoats everywhere. Women’s hats, mufflers, sunglasses. The grass was brown and dead from night frosts.

Froelich stiffened. Cupped her hand over her ear. Raised the other hand and spoke into her wrist microphone.

“Keep him close to the church,” she said.

Then she dropped her hands and opened her coat. Loosened her gun in its holster.

“State cops on the far perimeter just called in,” she said. “They’re worried about some guy on foot.”

“Where?” Reacher asked.

“In the subdivision.”

“Description?”

“Didn’t get one.”

“How many cops on the field?”

“Forty plus, all around the edge.”

“Get them facing outward. Backs to the crowd. All eyes on the near perimeter.”

Froelich spoke to the police captain on the radio and issued the order. Her own eyes were everywhere.

“I got to go,” she said.

Reacher turned to Neagley.

“Check the streets,” he said. “All the access points we found before.”

Neagley nodded and moved out toward the entrance drive. Long fast strides, halfway between walking and running.

“You found access points?” Froelich asked.

“Like a sieve.”

Froelich raised her wrist. “Move now, move now. Bring him tight against the tower wall. Cover on all three sides. Stand by with the cars. Now, people.”

She listened to the response. Nodded. Armstrong was coming close to the tower on the other side, maybe a hundred feet away from them, out of their line of sight.

“You go,” Reacher said. “I’ll check the church.”

She raised her wrist.

“Now keep him there,” she said. “I’m coming by.”

She headed straight back toward the field without another word. Reacher was left alone at the church gate. He stepped through and headed onward toward the building itself. Waited at the door. It was a huge thing, carved oak, maybe four inches thick. It had iron bands and hinges. Big black nail heads. Above it the tower rose seventy feet vertically into the sky. There was a flag and a lightning rod and a weather vane on the top. The weather vane was not moving. The flag was limp. The air was completely still. Cold, dense air, no breeze at all. The sort of air that takes a bullet and wraps around it and holds it lovingly, straight and true.

A minute later there was the noise of shoes on the gravel and he looked back at the gate and saw the church warden approaching. He was a small man in a black surplice that reached his feet. He had a cashmere coat over it. A fur hat with earflaps tied under his chin. Thick eyeglasses in gold frames. A huge wire hoop in his hand with a huge iron key hanging off it. It was so big it looked like a prop for a comic movie about medieval jails. He held it out and Reacher took it from him.

“That’s the original key,” the warden said. “From 1870.”

“I’ll bring it back to you,” Reacher said. “Go wait for me on the field.”

“I can wait right here,” the guy said.

“On the field,” Reacher said again. “Better that way.”

The guy’s eyes were wide and magnified behind his glasses. He turned around and walked back the way he had come. Reacher hefted the big old key in his hand. Stepped to the door and lined it up with the hole. Put it in the lock. Turned it hard. Nothing happened. He tried again. Nothing. He paused. Tried the handle.

The door was not locked.

It swung open six inches with a squeal from the old iron hinges. He remembered the noise. It had sounded much louder when he opened the door at five in the morning. Now it was lost in the low-level hubbub coming from three hundred people on the field.

people on the field.

He pushed the door all the way open. Paused again and then stepped quietly through into the gloom inside. The building was a simple wooden structure with a vaulted roof. The walls were painted a faded parchment white. The pews were worn and polished to a shine. There was stained glass in the windows. At one end there was an altar and a high lectern with steps leading up to it. Some doors to small rooms beyond. Vestries, maybe. He wasn't sure of the terminology.

He closed the door and locked it from the inside. Hid the key inside a wooden chest full of hymnals. Crept the length of the center aisle and stood still and listened. He could hear nothing. The air smelled of old wood and dusty fabrics and candle wax and cold. He crept on and checked the small rooms behind the altar. There were three of them, all small, all with bare wooden floors. All of them empty except for piles of old books and church garments.

He crept back. Through the door into the base of the tower. There was a square area with three bell ropes hanging down in the center. The ropes had yard-long faded embroidered sleeves sewn over the raw ends. The sides of the square area were defined by a steep narrow staircase that wound upward into the gloom. He stood at the bottom and listened hard. Heard nothing. Eased himself up. After three consecutive right-angle turns the stairs ended on a ledge. Then there was a wooden ladder bolted to the inside of the tower wall. It ran upward twenty feet to a trapdoor in the ceiling. The ceiling was boarded solid except for three precise nine-inch holes for the bell ropes. If anybody was up there, he could see and hear through the holes. Reacher knew that. He had heard the dogs pattering around below him, five days ago.

He paused at the foot of the ladder. Stood as quiet as possible. Took the ceramic knife out of his coat pocket and shrugged the coat and suit jacket off and left them piled on the ledge. Stepped onto the ladder. It creaked loudly under his weight. He eased upward to the next rung. The ladder creaked again.

He stopped. Took one hand away from the rung it was gripping and stared at the palm. *Pepper. The pepper he had used five days ago was still on the ladder*. It was smeared and smudged on the rungs, maybe by his previous descent five days ago, maybe by some new ascent undertaken today by the cops. *Or by somebody else*. He paused. Eased up another rung. The ladder creaked again.

He paused again. *Assess and evaluate*. He was on a noisy ladder eighteen feet

below a trapdoor. Above the trapdoor was an uncertain situation. He was unarmed, except for a knife with a blade three and a half inches long. He took a breath. Opened the knife and held it between his teeth. Reached up and grasped the side rails of the ladder as far above his head as he could stretch. Catapulted himself upward. He made the remaining eighteen feet in three or four seconds. At the top he kept one foot and one hand on the ladder and swung his body out into open space. Stabilized himself with his fingertips spread on the ceiling above. Felt for movement.

There was none. He reached out and poked the trapdoor upward an inch and let it fall closed. Put his fingertips back on the ceiling. No movement up there. No tremor, no vibration. He waited thirty seconds. Still nothing. He swung back onto the ladder and pushed the trapdoor all the way open and swarmed up into the bell chamber.

He saw the bells, hanging mute in their cradles. Three of them, with iron wheels above, driven by the ropes. The bells were small and black and cast from iron. Nothing like the giant bronze masterpieces that grace the ancient cathedrals of Europe. They were just plain rural artifacts from plain rural history. Sunlight came through the louvers and threw bars of cold light across them. The rest of the chamber was empty. There was nothing up there. It looked exactly as he had left it.

Except it didn't.

The dust was disturbed. There were scuffs and unexplained marks on the floor. Heels and toes, knees and elbows. They weren't his from five days ago. He was sure of that. And there was a faint smell in the air, right at the edge of his consciousness. It was the smell of sweat and tension and gun oil and machined steel and new brass cartridge cases. He turned a slow circle and the smell was gone like it had never been there at all. He stood still and put his fingertips against the iron bells, willing them to give up their secret stored vibrations.

Sound came through the louvers, as well as sunlight. He could hear people clustered near the base of the tower seventy feet below. He stepped over and squinted down. The louvers were weathered wooden slats spaced apart and set into a frame at angles of maybe thirty degrees. The fringe of the crowd was visible. The bulk of it was not. He could see cops on the perimeter of the field, thirty yards apart, standing easy and facing the fences. He could see the community center building. He could see the motorcade waiting patiently in the

lot, with the engines running and exhaust vapor clouding white in the cold. He could see the surrounding houses. He could see a lot of things. It was a good firing position. Limited field, but it only takes one shot.

He glanced upward. Saw another trapdoor in the bell chamber ceiling, and another ladder leading up to it. Next to the ladder there were heavy copper grounding straps coming down from the lightning rod. They were green with age. He had ignored the ceiling on his previous visit. He had experienced no desire to climb through and wait eight hours out in the cold. But for somebody looking for an unlimited field of fire on a sunny afternoon the trapdoor would be attractive. It was there for changing the flag, he guessed. The lightning rod and the weather vane might have been there since 1870, but the flag hadn't. It had added a lot of stars since 1870.

He put the knife back between his teeth and started up the new ladder. It was a twelve-foot climb. The wood creaked and gave under his weight. He made it halfway and stopped. His hands were on the side rails. His face was near the upper rungs. They were ancient and dusty. Except for random patches, where they were rubbed perfectly clean. There were two ways to climb a ladder. Either you hold the side rails, or you touch each rung with an overhand grip. He rehearsed in his mind how the grip pattern would go. There would be contact, left and right on alternate rungs. He arched his body outward and looked down. Craned his neck and looked up. He could see clean patches in that exact pattern, to the left and right on alternate rungs. Somebody had climbed the ladder. Recently. Maybe within a day or two. Maybe within an hour or two. Maybe the church warden, hanging a laundered flag. Maybe not.

He hung motionless. Chatter from the crowd drifted up to him through the louvers. He was up above the bells. The maker had soldered his initials on top of each of them where the iron narrowed at the neck. *AHB* was written there three times over in shaky lines of melted tin.

He eased upward. Placed his fingertips as before on the wood above his head. But these were thick balks of timber, probably faced with lead on the outside surface. They were as solid as stone. A guy could be dancing a jig up above and he would never feel it. He eased up two more rungs. Hunched his shoulders and stepped up another rung until he was crouched at the top of the ladder with the trapdoor pressing down on his back. He knew it would be heavy. It was probably as thick as the roof itself and weatherproofed with lead. Some kind of a lip arrangement on it to stop rain leaking through. He twisted around to look at the

arrangement on it to stop rain leaking through. He twisted around to look at the hinges. They were iron. A little rusted. Maybe a little stiff.

He took a long wet breath around the knife handle and snapped his legs straight and exploded up through the trap. It crashed back and he scrambled up and out onto the roof into the blinding daylight. Grabbed the knife from his mouth and rolled away. His face grazed the roof. It was lead, pitted and dulled and grayed by more than a hundred and thirty winters. He snapped upright and spun a full circle on his knees.

There was nobody up there.

It was like a shallow lead-lined box, open to the sky at the top. The walls were about three feet high. The floor was raised in the center to anchor the flagpole and the weather vane post and the lightning rod. Up close, they were huge. The lead was applied in sheets, carefully beaten and soldered at the joints. There were shaped funnels in the corners to drain rainwater and snowmelt away.

He crawled on his hands and knees to the edge. He didn't want to stand. He guessed the agents below were trained to watch for random movement taking place in high vantage points above them. He eased his head over the parapet. Shivered in the frigid air. He saw Armstrong directly below. The new senator was standing next to him. The six agents were surrounding them in a perfect circle. Then he saw movement in the corner of his eye. A hundred yards away across the field cops were running. They were gathering at a point near the back corner of the enclosure. They were glancing down at something and spinning away and hunching into their radio microphones. He looked directly down again and saw Froelich forcing her way out through the crowd. She had her index finger pressed onto her earpiece. She was moving fast. Heading toward the cops.

He crawled back again and clambered down through the trapdoor. Slammed it shut above his head and climbed down the ladder. Through the next trapdoor and down the next ladder. He picked up his coat and jacket and ran down the narrow winding stairs. Past the embroidered ends of the bell ropes and through to the main body of the church.

The oak door was standing wide open.

The lid of the hymnal box was up and the key was in the door lock from the inside. He stepped over and stood a yard inside the building. Waited. Listened.

Sprinted out into the cold and stopped again six feet down the path. Spun around. There was nobody waiting to ambush him. Nobody there at all. The area was quiet and deserted. He could hear noise far away on the field. He shrugged into his coat and headed toward it. Saw a man running toward him across the gravel, fast and urgent. He was wearing a long brown coat, some kind of heavy twill, halfway between a raincoat and an overcoat. It was flapping open behind him. Tweed jacket and flannel pants under it. Stout shoes. He had his hand raised like a greeting. A gold badge palmed in the hand. Some kind of a Bismarck detective. Maybe the police captain himself.

“Is the tower secure?” he shouted from twenty feet away.

“It’s empty,” Reacher shouted back. “What’s going on?”

The cop stopped where he was and bent over, panting, his hands on his knees.

“Don’t know yet,” he called. “Some big commotion.”

Then he stared beyond Reacher’s shoulder at the church.

“Damn it, you should have locked the door,” he called. “Can’t leave the damn thing open.”

He raced on toward the church. Reacher ran the other way, to the field. Met Neagley running in from the entrance road.

“What?” she shouted.

“It’s going down,” he shouted back.

They ran on together. Through the gate and into the field. Froelich was moving fast toward the cars. They changed direction and cut her off.

“Rifle hidden at the base of the fence,” she said.

“Someone’s been in the church,” Reacher said. He was out of breath. “In the tower. Probably right on the roof. Probably still around someplace.”

Froelich looked straight at him and stood completely still for a second. Then she raised her hand and spoke into the microphone on her wrist.

“Stand by to abort,” she said. “Emergency extraction on my count of three.”

Her voice was very calm.

“Stand by all vehicles. Main car and gun car to target on my count of three.”

She paused a single beat.

“One, two, three, abort now, abort now.”

Two things happened simultaneously. First there was a roar of engines from the motorcade and it split apart like a starburst. The lead cop car jumped forward and the rear cop car slewed backward and the first two stretch limos hauled through a tight turn and accelerated across the gravel and straight out onto the field. At the same time the personal detail jumped all over Armstrong and literally buried him from view. One agent took the lead and the other two took an elbow each and the backup three piled on and threw their arms up over Armstrong’s head from behind and drove him bodily forward through the crowd. It was like a football maneuver, full of speed and power. The crowd scattered in panic as the cars bumped across the grass one way and the agents rushed the other way to meet them. The cars skidded to a stop and the personal detail pushed Armstrong straight into the first and the backup crew piled into the second.

The lead cop had his lights and siren started already and was crawling forward down the exit road. The two loaded limos fishtailed on the grass and turned around on the field and headed back to the pavement. They rolled up straight behind the cop car and then all three vehicles accelerated hard and headed out while the third stretch headed straight for Froelich.

“We can get these guys,” Reacher said to her. “They’re right here, right now.”

She didn’t reply. Just grabbed him and Neagley by the arms and pulled them into the limo with her. It roared after the lead vehicles. The second cop fell in directly behind it and just twenty short seconds after the initial abort command the whole motorcade had formed up in a tight line and was screaming away from the scene at seventy miles an hour with every light flashing and every siren blaring.

Froelich slumped back in her seat.

“See?” she said. “We’re not proactive. Something happens, we run away.”

See?" she said. "We're not proactive. Something happens, we run away.

11

Froelich stood in the chill and spoke to Armstrong at the foot of the plane's steps. It was a short conversation. She told him about the discovery of the concealed rifle and told him it was more than enough to justify the extraction. He didn't argue. Didn't ask any awkward leading questions. He seemed completely unaware of any larger picture. And he seemed completely unconcerned about his own safety. He was more anxious to calculate the public-relations consequences for his successor. He looked away and ran through the pluses and minuses in his head like politicians do and came back with a tentative smile. *No damage done*. Then he ran up the steps to the warmth inside the plane, ready to resume his agenda with the waiting journalists.

Reacher was faster with the seat selection second time around. He took a place in the forward-facing front row, next to Froelich and across the aisle from Neagley. Froelich used the taxi time doing the rounds of her team, quietly congratulating them on their performance. She spoke to each of them in turn, leaning close, talking, listening, finishing with discreet fist-to-fist contact like ballplayers after a vital hit. Reacher watched her. *Good leader*, he thought. She came back to her seat and buckled her belt. Smoothed her hair and pressed her fingertips hard into her temples like she was clearing her mind of past events and preparing to concentrate on the future.

"We should have stayed around," Reacher said.

"The place is swarming with cops," Froelich said. "FBI will join them. That's their job. We focus on Armstrong. And I don't like it any better than you do."

"What was the rifle? Did you see it?"

She shook her head. "We'll get a report. They said it was in a bag. Some kind of vinyl carrying case."

"Hidden in the grass?"

She nodded. "Where it's long at the base of the fence."

"When was the church locked?"

“Last thing Sunday. More than sixty hours ago.”

“So I guess our guys picked the lock. It’s a crude old mechanism. The keyhole’s so big you can practically get your whole hand in there.”

“You sure you didn’t see them?”

Reacher shook his head. “But they saw me. They were in there with me. They saw where I hid the key. They let themselves out.”

“You probably saved Armstrong’s life. And my ass. Although I don’t understand their plan. They were in the church and their rifle was a hundred yards away?”

“Wait until we know what the rifle was. Then maybe we’ll understand.”

The plane turned at the end of the runway and accelerated immediately. Took off and climbed hard. The engine noise throttled back after five minutes and Reacher heard the journalists starting their foreign-relations conversation again. They didn’t ask any questions about the early return.

They touched down at Andrews at six-thirty local time. The city was quiet. The long Thanksgiving weekend had already started, halfway through the afternoon. The motorcade headed straight in on Branch Avenue and drove through the heart of the capital and out again to Georgetown. Armstrong was shepherded into his house through the white tent. Then the cars turned listlessly and headed back to base. Stuyvesant wasn’t around. Reacher and Neagley followed Froelich to her desk and she accessed her NCIC search results. They were hopeless. There was a small proud rubric at the top of the screen that claimed the software had compiled for five hours and twenty-three minutes and come up with no less than 243,791 matches. Anything that ever mentioned any two of a thumbprint or a document or a letter or a signature was neatly listed. The sequence began exactly twenty years ago and averaged more than thirty entries for each of the 7,305 days since. Froelich sampled the first dozen reports and then skipped ahead to random interim dates. There was nothing even remotely useful.

“We need to refine the parameters,” Neagley said. She squatted next to Froelich and moved the keyboard closer. Cleared the screen and called up the inquiry box and typed *thumbprint-as-signature*. Reached for the mouse and clicked on

search. The hard drive chattered and the inquiry box disappeared. The phone rang and Froelich picked it up. Listened for a moment and put it down.

“Stuyvesant’s back,” she said. “He’s got the preliminary FBI report on the rifle. He wants us in the conference room.”

“We came close to losing today,” Stuyvesant said.

He was at the head of the table with sheets of faxed paper spread out in front of him. They were covered in dense type, a little blurred from transmission. Reacher could see the cover sheet’s heading, upside down. There was a small seal on the left, and *U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation* on the right.

“First factor is the unlocked door,” Stuyvesant said. “The FBI’s guess is the lock was picked early this morning. They say a child could have done it with a bent knitting needle. We should have secured it with a temporary lock of our own.”

“Couldn’t do it,” Froelich said. “It’s a landmark building. Can’t be touched.”

“Then we should have changed the venue.”

“I looked for alternatives first time around. Every other place was worse.”

“You should have had an agent on the roof,” Neagley said.

“No budget,” Stuyvesant said. “Until after the inauguration.”

“If you get that far,” Neagley said.

“What was the rifle?” Reacher asked, in the silence.

Stuyvesant squared the paper in front of him. “Your guess?”

“Something disposable,” Reacher said. “Something they weren’t actually planning on using. In my experience something that gets found that easily is supposed to get found that easily.”

Stuyvesant nodded. “It was barely a rifle at all. It was an ancient .22 varmint

gun. Badly maintained, rusty, probably hadn't been used in a generation. It was not loaded and there was no ammunition with it."

"Identifying marks?"

"None."

"Fingerprints?"

"Of course not."

Reacher nodded.

"Decoy," he said.

"The unlocked door is persuasive," Stuyvesant said. "What did you do when you went in, for instance?"

"I locked it again behind me."

"Why?"

"I like it that way, for surveillance."

"But if you were going to be shooting?"

"Then I would have left it open, especially if I didn't have the key."

"Why?"

"So I could get out fast, afterward."

Stuyvesant nodded. "The unlocked door means they were in there to shoot. My take is they were waiting in there with the MP5 or the Vaime Mk2. Maybe both weapons. They imagined the junk gun would be spotted far away at the fence, the bulk of the police presence would move somewhat toward it, we would move Armstrong toward the motorcade, whereupon they would have a clear shot at him."

"Sounds right to me," Reacher said. "But I didn't actually see anybody in there."

¨Plenty of places to hide in a country church,´ Stuyvesant said. ¨Did you check the crypt?"

"No."

"The loft?"

"No."

"Plenty of places," Stuyvesant said again.

"I sensed somebody."

"Yes," Stuyvesant said. "They were in there. That's for sure."

There was silence for a beat.

"Any unexplained attendees?" Froelich asked.

Stuyvesant shook his head. "It was pure chaos. Cops running everywhere, the crowd scattering. By the time order was restored at least twenty people had left. It's understandable. You're in a crowd on an open field, somebody finds a gun, you run like hell. Why wouldn't you?"

"What about the man on foot in the subdivision?"

"Just a guy in a coat," Stuyvesant said. "State cop couldn't really come up with anything more than that. Probably just a civilian out walking. Probably nobody. My guess is our guys were already in the church by that time."

"Something must have aroused the trooper's suspicions," Neagley said.

Stuyvesant shrugged. "You know how it is. How does a North Dakota State Trooper react around the Secret Service? He's damned if he does and damned if he doesn't. Somebody looks suspicious, he's got to call it in even if he can't articulate exactly why afterward. And we can't moan at him for it. I'd rather he erred on the side of caution. Don't want to make him afraid to be vigilant."

"So we've still got nothing," Froelich said.

"We've still got Armstrong," Stuyvesant said. "And Armstrong's still got a pulse. So go eat dinner and be back here at ten for the FBI meeting."

pulse. So go eat dinner and be back here at ten for the FBI meeting.

First they went back to Froelich's office to check on Neagley's NCIC search. It was done. In fact it had been done before they even stepped away from the desk. The rubric at the top of the screen said the search had lasted nine-hundredths of a second and come up with zero matches. Froelich called up the inquiry box again and typed *thumbprint on letter*. Clicked on *search* and watched the screen. It redrew immediately and came up with no matches in eight-hundredths of a second.

"Getting nowhere even faster now," she said.

She tried *thumbprint on message*. Same result, no matches in eight-hundredths of a second. She tried *thumbprint on threat*. Identical result, identical eight-hundredths of a second. She sighed with frustration.

"Let me have a go," Reacher said. She got up and he sat down in her chair and typed *a short letter signed with a big thumbprint*.

"Idiot," Neagley said.

He clicked the mouse. The screen redrew instantly and reported that within the seven-hundredths of a second it had spent looking the software had detected no matches.

"But it was a new speed record," Reacher said, and smiled.

Neagley laughed, and the mood of frustration eased a little. He typed *thumbprint and squalene* and hit *search* again. A tenth of a second later the search came back blank.

"Slowing down," he said.

He tried *squalene* on its own. No match, eight-hundredths of a second.

He typed *squalane* with an *a*. No match, eight-hundredths of a second.

"Forget it," he said. "Let's go eat."

"Wait," Neagley said. "Let me try again. This is like an Olympic event."

"Wait," Neagley said. "Let me try again. This is like an Olympic event."

She nudged him out of the chair. Typed *single unexplained thumbprint*. Hit *search*. No match, six-hundredths of a second. She smiled.

"Six hundredths," she said. "Folks, we have a new world record."

"Way to go," Reacher said.

She typed *solo unexplained thumbprint*. Hit *search*.

"This is kind of fun," she said.

No match, six-hundredths of a second.

"Tied for first place," Froelich said. "My turn again."

She took Neagley's place at the keyboard and thought for a long moment.

"OK, here we go," she said. "This one either wins me the gold medal, or it'll keep us here all night long."

She typed a single word: *thumb*. Hit *search*. The inquiry box disappeared and the screen paused for a whole second and came back with a single entry. A single short paragraph. It was a police report from Sacramento in California. An emergency room doctor from a city hospital had notified the local police department five weeks ago that he had treated a man who had severed his thumb in a carpentry accident. But the doctor was convinced by the nature of the wound that it had been deliberate albeit amateur surgery. The cops had followed up and the victim had assured them it had indeed been an accident with a power saw. Case closed, report filed.

"Weird stuff in this system," Froelich said.

"Let's go eat," Reacher said again.

"Maybe we should try vegetarian," Neagley said.

They drove out to Dupont Circle and ate at an Armenian restaurant. Reacher had

lamb and Froelich and Neagley stuck to various chickpea concoctions. They had baklava for dessert and three small cups each of strong muddy coffee. They talked a lot, but about nothing. Nobody wanted to talk about Armstrong, or Nendick, or his wife, or men capable of frightening a person to the point of death and then shooting down two innocent civilians who happened to share a name. Froelich didn't want to talk about Joe in front of Reacher, Neagley didn't want to talk about Reacher in front of Froelich. So they talked about politics, like everybody else in the restaurant and probably everybody else in the city. But talking about politics in late November was pretty much impossible without mentioning the new administration, which led back toward Armstrong, so they generalized it away again toward personal views and beliefs. That needed background information, and before long Froelich was asking Neagley about her life and career.

Reacher tuned it out. He knew she wouldn't answer questions about her life. She never did. Never had. He had known her many years, and had discovered absolutely nothing about her background. He assumed there was some unhappiness there. It was pretty common among Army people. Some join because they need a job or want to learn a trade, some join because they want to shoot heavy weapons and blow things up. Some like Reacher himself join because it's preordained. But most join because they're looking for cohesion and trust and loyalty and camaraderie. They're looking for the brothers and the sisters and the parents they haven't got anyplace else.

So Neagley skipped her early life and ran through her service career for Froelich and Reacher ignored it and looked around the restaurant. It was busy. Lots of couples and families. He guessed people who were cooking big Thanksgiving meals tomorrow didn't want to cook tonight. There were a couple of faces he almost recognized. Maybe they were politicians or television reporters. He tuned the conversation back in again when Neagley started talking about her new career in Chicago. It sounded pretty good. She was partnered with a bunch of people from law enforcement and the military. It was a big firm. They offered a whole range of services from computer security to kidnap protection for traveling executives overseas. If you had to live in one place and go to work every day, that was probably the way to do it. She sounded satisfied with her life.

They were about to order a fourth cup of coffee when Froelich's cell phone rang. It was just after nine o'clock. The restaurant had gotten noisy and they missed it at first. Then they became aware of the low insistent trilling inside her purse.

at first. Then they became aware of the low insistent trilling inside her purse. Froelich got the phone out and answered the call. Reacher watched her face. Saw puzzlement, and then a little concern.

"OK," she said, and closed the phone. Looked across at Reacher. "Stuyvesant wants you back in the office, right now, immediately."

"Me?" Reacher said. "Why?"

"He didn't say."

Stuyvesant was waiting for them behind one end of the reception counter just inside the main door. The duty officer was busy at the other end. Everything looked completely normal except for a telephone directly in front of Stuyvesant. It had been dragged up out of position and was sitting on the front part of the counter, facing outward, trailing its wire behind it. Stuyvesant was staring at it.

"We got a call," he said.

"Who from?" Froelich asked.

"Didn't get a name. Or a number. Caller ID was blocked. Male voice, no particular accent. He called the switchboard and asked to speak with the big guy. Something in the voice made the duty officer take it seriously, so he patched it through, thinking perhaps the big guy was me, you know, the boss. But it wasn't. The caller didn't want to speak with me. He wanted the big guy he's been seeing around recently."

"Me?" Reacher said.

"You're the only big guy new on the scene."

"Why would he want to speak with me?"

"We're about to find out. He's calling back at nine-thirty."

Reacher glanced at his watch. Twenty-two minutes past.

"It's them," Froelich said. "They saw you in the church."

“That’s my guess,” Stuyvesant said. “This is our first real contact. We’ve got a recorder set up. We’ll get a voice print. And we’ve got a trace on the line. You need to talk for as long as you can.”

Reacher glanced at Neagley. She looked at her watch. Shook her head.

“Not enough time now,” she said.

Reacher nodded. “Can we get a weather report for Chicago?”

“I could call Andrews,” Froelich said. “But why?”

“Just do it, OK?”

She stepped away to use another line. The Air Force meteorological people took four minutes to tell her Chicago was cold but clear and expected to stay that way. Reacher glanced at his watch again. Nine twenty-seven.

“OK,” he said.

“Remember, talk as long as you can,” Stuyvesant said. “They can’t explain you. They don’t know who you are. They’re worried about that.”

“Is the Thanksgiving thing on the website?” Reacher asked.

“Yes,” Froelich said.

“Specific location?”

“Yes,” she said again.

Nine twenty-eight.

“What else is upcoming?” Reacher asked.

“Wall Street again in ten days,” Froelich said. “That’s all.”

“What about this weekend?”

“Back to North Dakota with his wife. Late tomorrow afternoon.”

“Is that on the website?”

Is that on the website?

Froelich shook her head.

“No, that’s completely private,” she said. “We haven’t announced it anywhere.”

Nine twenty-nine.

“OK,” Reacher said again.

Then the phone rang, very loud in the silence.

“A little early,” Reacher said. “Somebody’s anxious.”

“Talk as long as you can,” Stuyvesant said. “Use their curiosity against them. Keep it going.”

Reacher picked up the phone.

“Hello,” he said.

“You won’t get that lucky again,” a voice said.

Reacher ignored it and listened hard to the background sounds.

“Hey,” the voice said. “I want to talk to you.”

“But I don’t want to talk to you, asshole,” Reacher said, and put the phone down.

Stuyvesant and Froelich just stared at him.

“Hell are you doing?” Stuyvesant asked.

“I wasn’t feeling very talkative,” Reacher said.

“I told you to talk as long as you could.”

Reacher shrugged. “You wanted it done different, you should have done it yourself. You could have pretended to be me. Talked to your heart’s content.”

“That was deliberate sabotage.”

“No, it wasn’t. It was a move in a game.”

“This isn’t a damn *game*.”

“That’s exactly what it is.”

“We needed information.”

“Get real,” Reacher said. “You were never going to get information.”

Stuyvesant was silent.

“I want a cup of coffee,” Reacher said. “You dragged us out of the restaurant before we were finished.”

“We’re staying here,” Stuyvesant said. “They might call back.”

“They won’t,” Reacher said.

They waited five minutes at the reception counter and then gave it up and took plastic cups of coffee with them to the conference room. Neagley was keeping herself to herself. Froelich was very quiet. Stuyvesant was very angry.

“Explain,” he said.

Reacher sat down alone at one end of the table. Neagley occupied neutral territory halfway down one side. Froelich and Stuyvesant sat together at the far end.

“These guys use faucet water to seal their envelopes,” Reacher said.

“So?” Stuyvesant said.

“So there’s not one chance in a million they’re going to make a traceable call to the main office of the United States Secret Service, for God’s sake. *They* would have cut the call short. I didn’t want to let them have the satisfaction. They need to know if they’re tangling with me, then I take the upper hand, not them.”

“You blew it because you think you’re in a pissing contest?”

“I didn’t blow anything,” Reacher said. “We got all the information we were ever going to get.”

“We got absolutely nothing.”

“No, you got a voice print. The guy said thirteen words. All the vowel sounds, most of the consonants. You got the sibilant characteristics, and some of the fricatives.”

“We needed to know where they were, you idiot.”

“They were at a pay phone with caller ID blocked. Somewhere in the Midwest. Think about it, Stuyvesant. They were in Bismarck today with heavy weapons. Therefore they’re driving. They’re on a four-hundred-mile radius by now. They’re somewhere in one of about six huge states, in a bar or a country store, using the pay phone. And anybody smart enough to use faucet water to seal an envelope knows exactly how short to keep a phone call to make it untraceable.”

“You don’t know they’re driving.”

“No,” Reacher said. “You’re quite right. I don’t know for sure. There is a slight possibility that they were frustrated about today’s outcome. Annoyed, even. And they know from the website that there’s another chance tomorrow, right here. And then nothing much for a spell. So it’s possible they ditched their weapons and aimed to fly in tonight. In which case they might be at O’Hare right now, waiting for a connection. It might have been worthwhile putting some cops in place to see who’s using the pay phones. But I only had eight minutes. If you had thought about it earlier it might have been practical. You had a whole half hour. They gave you notice, for God’s sake. You could have arranged something easily. In which case I would have talked their damn ears off, to let the cops get a good look around. But you didn’t think about it. You didn’t arrange it. You didn’t arrange anything. So don’t talk to *me* about sabotage. Don’t be telling me *I’m* the one who blew something here.”

Stuyvesant looked down. Said nothing.

“Now ask him why he wanted the weather report,” Neagley said.

Stuyvesant said nothing.

“Why did you want the weather report?” Froelich asked.

"Why did you want the weather report?" Froelich asked.

"Because there might still have been time to get something together. If the weather was bad the night before Thanksgiving in Chicago the airport would be so backed up they'd be sitting around there for hours. In which case I would have provoked some kind of a call-back later, for after we got some cops in place. But the weather was OK. Therefore no delays, therefore no time."

Stuyvesant said nothing.

"Accent?" Froelich asked, quietly. "Did the thirteen words you granted them give you a chance to pick anything out?"

"You made a recording," Reacher said. "But nothing jumped out at me. Not foreign. Not Southern, not East Coast. Probably one of those other places where they don't have much of an accent."

The room was quiet for a long moment.

"I apologize," Stuyvesant said. "You probably did the right thing."

Reacher shook his head. Breathed out.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "We're clutching at straws here. Million to one we were ever going to get a location. It was a snap decision, really. Just a gut thing. If they're puzzled about me, I want to keep them puzzled. Keep them guessing. And I wanted to make them mad at me. I wanted to take some focus off Armstrong. Better that they focus on me for a spell."

"You want these people coming after you personally?"

"Better than have them coming after Armstrong personally."

"Are you nuts? He's got the Secret Service around him. You haven't."

Reacher smiled. "I'm not too worried about them."

Froelich moved in her chair.

"So this *is* a pissing contest," she said. "God, you're just like Joe, you know that?"

“Except I’m still alive,” Reacher said.

There was a knock at the door. The duty officer put his head into the room.

“Special Agent Bannon is here,” he said. “Ready for the evening meeting.”

Stuyvesant briefed Bannon privately in his office about the telephone communications. They came back into the conference room together at ten past ten. Bannon still looked more like a city cop than a federal agent. Donegal tweed, gray flannel, stout shoes, red face. Like a wise old high-mileage detective from Chicago or Boston or New York. He was carrying a thin file folder, and he was acting somber.

“Nendick is still unresponsive,” he said.

Nobody spoke.

“He’s no better and no worse,” Bannon said. “They’re still worried about him.”

He sat heavily in the chair opposite Neagley’s. Opened his file folder and took out a thin stack of color photographs. Dealt them like cards around the table. Two each.

“Bruce Armstrong and Brian Armstrong,” he said. “Late of Minnesota and Colorado, respectively.”

The photographs were large inkjet prints done on glossy paper. Not faxes. The originals must have been borrowed from the families and then scanned and e-mailed. They were snapshots, basically, each blown up and then cropped down to a useful head-and-shoulders format in the local FBI lab, presumably. The results looked artificial. Two bluff open faces, two innocent smiles, two fond gazes directed toward something that should have been there in the shot with them. Their names were neatly written in ballpoint pen in the bottom border. By Bannon himself, maybe. *Bruce Armstrong*, *Brian Armstrong*.

They weren’t really similar to each other. And neither of them looked much like Brook Armstrong. Nobody would have had even a moment’s hesitation differentiating between the three of them. Not in the dark, not in a hurry. They

were just three American men with fair hair and blue eyes, somewhere in their middle forties, that was all. But therefore, they *were* alike in another way. If you sliced and diced the human population of the world, you'd use up quite a few distinct divisions before you got around to separating the three of them out. Male or female, black or white, Asian or Caucasian or Mongoloid, tall or short, thin or fat or medium, young or old or middle-aged, dark or fair, blue eyes or brown eyes. You would have to make all those separate distinctions before you could say the three Armstrongs looked different from one another.

"What do you think?" Bannon asked.

"Close enough to make the point," Reacher said.

"We agree," Bannon said. "Two widows and five fatherless children between them. This is fun, isn't it?"

Nobody replied to that.

"You got anything else for us?" Stuyvesant asked.

"We're working hard," Bannon said. "We're running the thumbprint again. We're trying every database in the known world. But we're not optimistic. We canvassed Nendick's neighbors. They didn't get many visitors to the house. Seems like they socialized as a couple, mostly in a bar about ten miles from their place, out toward Dulles. It's a cop bar. Seems like Nendick trades on his employment status. We're trying to trace anybody he was seen talking to more than the average."

"What about two weeks ago?" Stuyvesant said. "When the wife got taken away? Must have been some kind of commotion."

Bannon shook his head. "There's a fairly high daytime population in his street. Soccer moms all around. But it's a dry hole. Nobody remembers anything. It could have happened at night, of course."

"No, I think Nendick delivered her somewhere," Reacher said. "I think they made him do it. Like a refinement of the torture. To underline his responsibility. To put an edge on the fear."

"Possible," Bannon said. "He's afraid, that's for damn sure."

Reacher nodded. “I think these guys are real good at the cruel psychological nuances. I think that’s why some of the messages came here direct. Nothing worse for Armstrong than to hear from the people paid to protect him that he’s in big trouble.”

“Except he’s not hearing from them,” Neagley said.

Bannon made no comment on that. Stuyvesant paused a beat.

“Anything else?” he said.

“We’ve concluded you won’t get any more messages,” Bannon said. “They’ll strike at a time and place of their own choosing, and obviously they won’t tip you off as to where and when. Conversely if they try and fail, they won’t want you to have known about it ahead of time, otherwise they’d look ineffective.”

“Any feeling about where and when?”

“We’ll talk about that tomorrow morning. We’re working on a theory right now. I assume you’ll all be here tomorrow morning?”

“Why wouldn’t we be?”

“It’s Thanksgiving Day.”

“Armstrong’s working, so we’re working.”

“What’s he doing?”

“Being a nice guy at a homeless shelter.”

“Is that wise?”

Stuyvesant just shrugged.

“No choice,” Froelich said. “It’s in the Constitution that politicians have to serve turkey dinners on Thanksgiving Day in the worst part of town they can find.”

“Well, wait until we talk tomorrow morning,” Bannon said. “Maybe you’ll want to change his mind. Or amend the Constitution.”

Then he stood up and walked around the table and collected the photographs again, like they were precious to him.

Froelich dropped Neagley at the hotel and then she and Reacher drove home. She was quiet all the way. Conspicuously and aggressively silent. He stood it until they reached the bridge over the river and then he gave in.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said.

“Got to be something,” he said.

She didn’t answer. Just drove on and parked as near her place as she could get, which was two streets away. The neighborhood was quiet. It was late at night before a holiday. People were inside, cozy and relaxed. She shut off the engine, but didn’t get out of the car. Just sat there, looking straight ahead through the windshield, saying nothing.

“What?” he asked again.

“I don’t think I can stand it,” she said.

“Stand what?”

“You’re going to get yourself killed,” she said. “Just like you got Joe killed.”

“Excuse me?” he said.

“You heard.”

“I didn’t get Joe killed.”

“He wasn’t cut out for that kind of stuff. But he went ahead and did it anyway. Because he was always comparing himself. He was driven to do it.”

“By me?”

“Who else? He was your brother. He followed your career.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Why do you people have to *be* like this?” she said.

“Us people?” he said back. “Like what?”

“You men,” she said. “You military people. Always charging headlong into stupidity.”

“Is that what I’m doing?”

“You know it is.”

“I’m not the one sworn to take a bullet for some worthless politician.”

“Neither am I. That’s just a figure of speech. And not all politicians are worthless.”

“So would you take a bullet for him? Or not?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“And I’m not charging headlong into anything.”

“Yes, you are. You’ve been *challenged*. And God forbid you should stay cool and just walk away.”

“You *want* me to walk away?” he said. “Or do you want to get this thing done?”

“You can’t do it by butting heads, like you were all rutting deer or something.”

“Why not? Sooner or later it’s us or them. That’s how it is. That’s how it always is. Why pretend any different?”

“Why look for trouble?”

“I’m not looking for trouble. I don’t see it as *trouble*.”

“Well, what the hell else is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t *know*?”

He paused a beat.

“You know any lawyers?” he asked.

“Any what?”

“You heard,” he said.

“Lawyers? Are you kidding? In this town? It’s wall-to-wall lawyers.”

“OK, so picture a lawyer. Twenty years out of law school, lots of hands-on experience. Somebody asks him, can you write this slightly complex will for me? What does he say? What does he do? Does he start trembling with nerves? Does he think he’s been challenged? Is it a testosterone thing? No, he just says, sure, I can do that. And then he goes ahead and does it. Because it’s his *job*. Pure and simple.”

“This isn’t your job, Reacher.”

“Yes, it is, near as makes no difference. Uncle Sam paid me your tax dollars to do exactly this kind of stuff, thirteen straight years. And Uncle Sam sure as hell didn’t expect me to run away and get all psychological and conflicted about it.”

She stared forward through the windshield. It was misting fast, from their breath.

“There are hundreds of people on the other side of the Secret Service,” she said. “In Financial Crimes. Hundreds of them. I don’t know how many, exactly. Lots of them. Good people. We’re not really investigative, but they are. That’s *all* they are. That’s what they’re *for*. Joe could have picked any ten of them and sent them down to Georgia. He could have picked fifty of them. But he didn’t. He had to go himself. He had to go alone. Because he was challenged. He couldn’t back off. Because he was always comparing himself.”

“I agree he shouldn’t have done it,” Reacher said. “Like a doctor shouldn’t write a will. Like a lawyer shouldn’t do surgery.”

“But you made him.”

He shook his head.

“No, I didn’t make him,” he said.

She was silent.

“Two points, Froelich,” he said. “First, people shouldn’t have to choose their careers with one eye on what their brother might think. And second, the last time Joe and I had any significant contact I was sixteen years old. He was eighteen. He was leaving for West Point. I was a kid. The *last* thing on his mind was copying me. Are you nuts? And I never really saw him again after that. Funerals only, basically. Because whatever you think about me as a brother, he was no better. He paid no attention to me. Years would go by, I wouldn’t hear from him.”

“He followed your career. Your mother sent him stuff. He was comparing himself.”

“Our mother died seven years before he did. I barely had a career back then.”

“You won the Silver Star in Beirut right at the beginning.”

“I was in an explosion,” he said. “They gave me a medal because they couldn’t think what else to do. That’s what the Army is like. Joe knew that.”

“He was comparing himself,” she said.

Reacher moved in his seat. Watched small swirls of condensation form on the windshield glass.

“Maybe,” he said. “But not to me.”

“Who then?”

“Our dad, possibly.”

She shrugged. “He never talked about *him*.”

“Well, there you go,” Reacher said. “Avoidance. Denial.”

“You think? What was special about your dad?”

Reacher looked away. Closed his eyes.

“He was a Marine,” he said. “Korea and Vietnam. Very compartmentalized guy. Gentle, shy, sweet, loving man, but a stone-cold killer, too. Harder than a nail. Next to him I look like Liberace.”

“Do *you* compare yourself with him?”

Reacher shook his head. Opened his eyes.

“No point,” he said. “Next to him I look like Liberace. Always will, no matter what. Which isn’t necessarily such a bad thing for the world.”

“Didn’t you like him?”

“He was OK. But he was a freak. No room for people like him anymore.”

“Joe shouldn’t have gone to Georgia,” she said.

Reacher nodded.

“No argument about that,” he said. “No argument at all. But it was nobody’s fault except his own. He should have had more sense.”

“So should you.”

“I’ve got plenty of sense. Like for instance I joined the Military Police, not the Marine Corps. Like for instance I don’t feel compelled to rush around trying to design a new hundred dollar bill. I stick to what I know.”

“And you think you know how to take out these guys?”

“Like the garbage man knows how to take out the trash. It ain’t rocket science.”

“That sounds pretty arrogant.”

He shook his head. “Listen, I’m sick of justifying myself. It’s ridiculous. You know your neighbors? You know the people who live around here?”

“Not really,” she said.

He rubbed mist off the glass and pointed out his window with his thumb. "Maybe one of them is an old lady who knits sweaters. Are you going to walk up to her and say, oh my God, what's with *you?* I can't believe you actually have the *temerity* to know how to knit *sweaters*."

"You're equating armed combat with knitting sweaters?"

"I'm saying we're all good at something. And that's what I'm good at. Maybe it's the only thing I'm good at. I'm not proud of it, and I'm not ashamed of it, either. It's just *there*. I can't help it. I'm genetically programmed to win, is all. Several consecutive generations."

"Joe had the same genes."

"No, he had the same parents. There's a difference."

"I hope your faith in yourself is justified."

"It is. Especially now, with Neagley here. *She* makes me look like Liberace."

Froelich looked away. Went quiet.

"What?" he said.

"She's in love with you."

"Bullshit."

Froelich looked straight at him. "How would you know?"

"She's never been interested."

Froelich just shook her head.

"I just talked to her about it," he said. "The other day. She said she's never been interested. She told me that, words of one syllable."

"And you believed her?"

"Wasn't I supposed to?"

Froelich said nothing. Reached a pencil behind

Froelich said nothing. Reacher smiled, slowly.

“What, you think she *is* interested?” he asked.

“You smile just like Joe,” she answered. “A little shy, a little lopsided. It’s the most incredibly beautiful smile I ever saw.”

“You’re not exactly over him, are you?” he said. “At the risk of being the last to know. At the risk of stating the bloody obvious.”

She didn’t answer. Just got out of the car and started walking. He followed after her. It was cold and damp on the street. The night air was heavy. He could smell the river, and jet fuel from somewhere. They reached her house. She unlocked the door. They stepped inside.

There was a sheet of paper lying on the hallway floor.

12

It was the familiar high-white letter-size sheet. It was lying precisely aligned with the oak flooring strips. It was in the geometric center of the hallway, near the bottom of the stairs, exactly where Reacher had dumped his garbage bag of clothes two nights previously. It had a simple statement printed neatly on it, in the familiar Times New Roman computer script, fourteen point, bold. The statement was five words long, split between two lines in the center of the page: *It's going to happen soon*. The three words *It's going to* made up the first line on their own. The *happen soon* part was alone on the second line. It looked like a poem or a song lyric. Like it was divided up that way for a dramatic purpose, like there should be a pause between the lines, or a breath, or a drum roll, or a rim shot. *It's going to* . . . bam! . . . *happen soon*. Reacher stared at it. The effect was hypnotic. *Happen soon. Happen soon*.

"Don't touch it," Froelich said.

"Wasn't going to," Reacher replied.

He ducked his head back out the door and checked the street. All the nearby cars were empty. All the nearby windows were closed and draped. No pedestrians. No loiterers in the dark. All was quiet. He came back inside and closed the door slowly and carefully, so as not to disturb the paper with a draft.

"How did they get it in here?" Froelich said.

"Through the door," Reacher said. "Probably at the back."

Froelich pulled the SIG Sauer from her holster and they walked through the living room together and into the kitchen. The door to the backyard was closed, but it was unlocked. Reacher opened it a foot. Scanned the outside surroundings and saw nothing at all. Eased the door back wide so the inside light fell onto the exterior surface. Leaned close and looked at the scratch plate around the keyhole.

"Marks," he said. "Very small. They were pretty good."

"They're here in D.C.," she said. "Right now. They're not in some Midwest bar."

She stared through the kitchen into the living room.

“The phone,” she said.

It was pulled out of position on the table next to the fireside chair.

“They used my phone,” she said.

“To call me, probably,” Reacher said.

“Prints?”

He shook his head. “Gloves.”

“They’ve been in my house,” she said.

She moved away from the rear door and stopped at the kitchen counter. Glanced down at something and snatched open a drawer.

“They took my gun,” she said. “I had a backup gun in here.”

“I know,” Reacher said. “An old Beretta.”

She opened the drawer next to it.

“The magazines are gone too,” she said. “I had ammo in here.”

“I know,” Reacher said again. “Under an oven glove.”

“How do you know?”

“I checked, Monday night.”

“Why would you?”

“Habit,” he said. “Don’t take it personally.”

She stared at him and then opened the wall cupboard with the money stash in it. He saw her check the earthenware pot. She said nothing, so he assumed the cash was still there. He filed the observation away in the professional corner of his mind, as confirmation of a long-held belief: *people don’t like searching above*

head height.

Then she stiffened. A new thought.

“They might still be in the house,” she said, quietly.

But she didn’t move. It was the first sign of fear he had ever seen from her.

“I’ll check,” he said. “Unless that’s an unhealthy response to a challenge.”

She just handed him her pistol. He turned out the kitchen light so he wouldn’t be silhouetted on the basement stairs and walked slowly down. Listened hard past the creaks and sighs of the house, and the hum and trickle of the heating system. Stood still in the dark and let his eyes adjust. There was nobody there. Nobody upstairs, either. Nobody hiding and waiting. People hiding and waiting give off human vibrations. Tiny hums and quivers. And he wasn’t feeling anything. The house was empty and undisturbed, apart from the displaced telephone and the missing Beretta and the message on the hallway floor. He came back to the kitchen and held out the SIG, butt-first.

“Secure,” he said.

“I better make some calls,” she said.

Special Agent Bannon showed up forty minutes later in a Bureau sedan with three members of his task force. Stuyvesant arrived five minutes after them in a department Suburban. They left both vehicles double-parked in the street with their strobes going. The neighboring houses were spattered with random bursts of light, blue and red and white. Stuyvesant stood still in the open doorway.

“We weren’t supposed to get any more messages,” he said.

Bannon was on his knees, looking at the sheet of paper.

“This is generic,” he said. “We predicted we wouldn’t get specificity. And we haven’t. The word *soon* is meaningless as to time and place. It’s just a taunt. We’re supposed to be impressed with how smart they are.”

“I was already impressed with how smart they are,” Stuyvesant said.

Bannon looked up at Froelich. “How long have you been out?”

“All day,” Froelich said. “We left at six-thirty this morning to meet with you.”

“We?”

“Reacher’s staying here,” she said.

“Not anymore, he’s not,” Bannon said. “Neither of you is staying here. It’s too dangerous. We’re putting you in a secure location.”

Froelich said nothing.

“They’re in D.C. right now,” Bannon said. “Probably regrouping somewhere. Probably got in from North Dakota a couple hours after you did. They know where you live. And we need to work here. This is a crime scene.”

“This is my house,” Froelich said.

“It’s a crime scene,” Bannon said again. “They’ve been here. We’ll have to rip it up some. Better that you stay away until we put it back together.”

Froelich said nothing.

“Don’t argue,” Stuyvesant said. “I want you protected. We’ll put you in a motel. Couple of U.S. marshals outside the door, until this is over.”

“Neagley, too,” Reacher said.

Froelich glanced at him. Stuyvesant nodded.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I already sent somebody to pick her up.”

“Neighbors?” Bannon asked.

“Don’t really know them,” Froelich answered.

“They might have seen something,” Bannon said. He checked his watch. “They might still be up. At least I hope so. Dragging witnesses out of bed generally makes them very cranky.”

“So get what you need, people,” Stuyvesant called. “We’re leaving, right now.”

Reacher stood in Froelich’s guest room and had a strong feeling he would never come back to it. So he took his things from the bathroom and his garbage bag of Atlantic City clothes and all of Joe’s suits and shirts that were still clean. He stuffed clean socks and underwear into the pockets. Carried all the clothes in one hand and Joe’s cardboard box under the other arm. He came down the stairs and stepped out into the night air and it hit him that for the first time in more than five years he was leaving a place carrying baggage. He loaded it into the Suburban’s trunk and then walked around and climbed into the backseat. Sat still and waited for Froelich. She came out of her house carrying a small valise. Stuyvesant took it from her and stowed it and they climbed into the front together. Took off down the street. Froelich didn’t look back.

They drove due north and then turned west all the way through the tourist sites and out again on the other side. They stopped at a Georgetown motel about ten blocks shy of Armstrong’s street. There was an old-model Crown Vic parked outside, with a new Town Car next to it. The Town Car had a driver in it. The Crown Vic was empty. The motel itself was a small neat place with dark wood all over it. A discreet sign. It was hemmed in by three embassies with fenced grounds. The embassies belonged to new countries Reacher had never heard of, but their fences were OK. It was a very protected location. Only one way in, and a marshal in the lobby would take care of that. An extra marshal in the corridor would be icing on the cake.

Stuyvesant had booked three rooms. Neagley had already arrived. They found her in the lobby. She was buying soda from a machine and talking to a big guy in a cheap black suit and patrolman’s shoes. A U.S. marshal, without a doubt. The Crown Vic driver. *Their vehicle budget must be smaller than the Secret Service’s*, Reacher thought. *As well as their clothing allowance*.

Stuyvesant did the paperwork at the desk and came back with three key cards. Handed them around in an embarrassed little ceremony. Mentioned three room numbers. They were sequential. Then he scrabbled in his pocket and came out with the Suburban’s keys. Gave them to Froelich.

“I’ll ride back with the guy who brought Neagley over,” he said. “I’ll see you tomorrow, seven o’clock in the office, with Bannon, all of you.”

Then he turned and left. Neagley juggled her key card and her soda and a garment bag and went looking for her room. Froelich and Reacher followed behind her, with a key card each. There was another marshal at the head of the bedroom corridor. He was sitting awkwardly on a plain dining chair. He had it tilted back against the wall for comfort. Reacher squeezed his untidy luggage past him and stopped at his door. Froelich was already two rooms down, not looking in his direction.

He went inside and found a compact version of what he had seen a thousand times before. Just one bed, one chair, a table, a normal telephone, a smaller TV screen. But the rest was generic. Floral drapes, already closed. A floral bedspread, Scotchgarded until it was practically rigid. No-color bamboo-weave stuff on the walls. A cheap print over the bed, pretending to be a hand-colored architectural drawing of some part of some ancient Greek temple. He stowed his baggage and arranged his bathroom articles on the shelf above the sink. Checked his watch. Past midnight. Thanksgiving Day, already. He took off Joe's jacket and dropped it on the table. Loosened his tie and yawned. There was a knock at the door. He opened up and found Froelich standing there.

"Come in," he said.

"Just for a minute," she said. He walked back and sat on the end of the bed, to let her take the chair. Her hair was a mess, like she had just run her fingers through it. She looked good like that. Younger, and vulnerable, somehow.

"I *am* over him," she said.

"OK," he said.

"But I can see how you might think I'm not."

"OK," he said again.

"So I think we should be apart tonight. I wouldn't want you to be worried about why I was here. If I *was* here."

"Whatever you want," he said.

"It's just that you're so like him. It's impossible not to be reminded. You can see that, can't you? But you were never a substitute. I need you to know that."

that, can't you? But you were never a substitute. I need you to know that.

"Still think I got him killed?"

She looked away.

"Something got him killed," she said. "Something on his mind, in his background. Something made him think he could beat somebody he couldn't beat. Something made him think he was going to be OK when he wasn't going to be OK. And the same thing could happen to you. You're stupid if you don't see that."

He nodded. Said nothing. She stood up and walked past him. He caught her perfume as she went by.

"Call me if you need me," he said.

She didn't reply. He didn't get up.

A half hour later there was another knock at the door and he opened it up expecting to find Froelich again. But it was Neagley. Still fully dressed, a little tired, but calm.

"You on your own?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Where is she?" Neagley asked.

"She left."

"Business or lack of pleasure?"

"Confusion," he said. "Half the time she wants me to be Joe, the other half she wants to blame me for getting him killed."

"She's still in love with him."

"Evidently."

“Six years after their relationship ended.”

“Is that normal?”

She shrugged. “You’re asking me? I guess some people carry a torch for a long time. He must have been quite a guy.”

“I didn’t really know him all that well.”

“Did you get him killed?”

“Of course not. I was a million miles away. Hadn’t spoken to him for seven years. I told you that.”

“So what’s her angle?”

“She says he was driven to be reckless because he was comparing himself to me.”

“And was he?”

“I doubt it.”

“You said you felt guilty afterward. You told me that too, when we were watching those surveillance tapes.”

“I think I said I felt angry, not guilty.”

“Angry, guilty, it’s all the same thing. Why feel guilty if it wasn’t your fault?”

“Now *you’re* saying it was my fault?”

“I’m just asking, what’s the guilt about?”

“He grew up under a false impression.”

He went quiet and moved deeper into the room. Neagley followed him. He lay down on the bed, arms outstretched, hands hanging off the edges. She sat down in the armchair, where Froelich had been.

“Tell me about the false impression,” she said.

“He was big, but he was studious,” Reacher said. “The schools we went to, being studious was like having ‘Kick my ass’ tattooed across your forehead. And he wasn’t all that tough, really, although he was big. So he got his ass kicked, regular as clockwork.”

“And?”

“I was two years younger, but I was big *and* tough, and not very studious. So I started to look after him. Loyalty, I guess, and I liked fighting anyway. I was about six. I’d wade in anywhere. I learned a lot of stuff. Learned that style was the big thing. Look like you mean it, and people back off a lot. Sometimes they didn’t. I had eight-year-olds all over me the first year. Then I got better at it. I hurt people bad. I was a madman. It got to be a thing. We’d arrive in some new place and pretty quick people would know to lay off Joe, or the psycho would be coming after them.”

“Sounds like you were a lovely little boy.”

“It was the Army. Anyplace else they’d have sent me to reform school.”

“You’re saying Joe grew to rely on it.”

Reacher nodded. “It was like that for ten years, basically. It came and went, and it happened less as we got older. But more serious when it actually did. I think he internalized it. Ten years is a significant chunk of time when you’re growing up, internalizing things. I think it became part of his mind-set to ignore danger because the psycho always had his back. So I think Froelich’s right, in a way. He *was* reckless. Not because he was trying to compete, but because deep down he felt he could afford to be. Because I had always looked after him, like his mother had always fed him, like the Army had always housed him.”

“How old was he when he died?”

“Thirty-eight.”

“That’s twenty years, Reacher. He had twenty years to adjust. We all adjust.”

“Do we? Sometimes I still feel like that same six-year-old. Everybody looking out of the corner of their eye at the psycho.”

“Like who?”

Like who?

“Like Froelich.”

“She been saying things?”

“I disconcert her, clearly.”

“Secret Service is a civilian organization. Paramilitary at best. Nearly as bad as regular citizens.”

He smiled. Said nothing.

“So, what’s the verdict?” Neagley asked. “You going to be walking around from now on thinking you killed your brother?”

“A little bit, maybe,” he said. “But I’ll get over it.”

She nodded. “You will. And you should. It wasn’t your fault. He was thirty-eight. He wasn’t waiting for his little brother to show up.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“About what?”

“Something else Froelich said.”

“She wonders why we aren’t doing it?”

“You’re quick,” he said.

“I could sense it,” Neagley said. “She came across as a little concerned. A little jealous. Cold, even. But then, I’d just kicked her ass with the audit thing.”

“You sure had.”

“We’ve never even touched, you know that, you and me? We’ve never had any physical contact of any kind at all. You’ve never patted me on the back, never even shaken my hand.”

He looked at her, and thought back through fifteen years.

“Haven’t I?” he said. “Is that good or bad?”

“It’s good,” she said. “But don’t ask why.”

“OK,” he said.

“Reasons of my own. Don’t ask what they are. But I don’t like to be touched. And you never touched me. I always figured you could sense it. And I always appreciated that. It’s one of the reasons I always liked you so much.”

He said nothing.

“Even if you should have been in reform school,” she said.

“You probably should have been in there with me.”

“We’d have made a good team,” she said. “We *are* a good team. You should come back to Chicago with me.”

“I’m a wanderer,” he said.

“OK, I won’t push,” she said. “And look on the bright side with Froelich. Cut her some slack. She’s probably worth it. She’s a nice woman. Have some fun. You’re good together.”

“OK,” he said. “I guess.”

Neagley stood up and yawned.

“You OK?” he asked.

She nodded. “I’m fine.”

Then she put a kiss on the tips of her fingers and blew it to him from six feet away. Walked out of the room without saying another word.

He was tired, but he was agitated and the room was cold and the bed was lumpy and he couldn’t sleep. So he put his pants and shirt back on and walked to the closet and pulled out Joe’s box. He didn’t expect to find anything of interest in

it. It would be abandoned stuff, that was all. Nobody leaves important things in a girlfriend's house when he knows he's going to skip out someday soon.

He put the box on the bed and pulled the flaps open. First thing he saw was a pair of shoes. They were packed heel-to-toe sideways across one end of the box. They were formal black shoes, good leather, reasonably heavy. They had proper stitched welts and toe caps. Thin laces in five holes. Imported, probably. But not Italian. They were too substantial. British, maybe. Like the Air Force tie.

He placed them on the bedcover. Put the heels six inches apart and the toes a little farther. The right heel was worn more than the left. The shoes were fairly old, fairly battered. He could see the whole shape of Joe's feet in them. The whole shape of his body, towering above them, like he was standing right there wearing them, invisible. They were like a death mask.

There were three books in the box, packed edge-up. One was *Du côté de chez Swann*, which was the first volume of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. It was a French paperback with a characteristic severe plain cover. He leafed through it. He could manage the language, but the content passed over his head. The second book was a college text about statistical analysis. It was heavy and dense. He leafed through it and gave up on both the language and the content. Piled it on top of Proust on the bed.

He picked up the third book. Stared at it. He recognized it. He had bought it for Joe himself, a long time ago, for his thirtieth birthday. It was Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. It was in English, but he had bought it in Paris at a used bookstore. He could even remember exactly what it had cost, which wasn't very much. The Paris bookseller had relegated it to the foreign-language section, and it wasn't a first edition or anything. It was just a nice-looking volume, and a great story.

He opened it to the flyleaf. He had written: *Joe. Avoid both, OK? Happy Birthday. Jack*. He had used the bookseller's pen, and the ink had smudged. Now it had faded a little. Then he had written out an address label, because the bookseller had offered to mail it for him. The address was the Pentagon back then, because Joe was still in Military Intelligence when he was thirty. The bookseller had been very impressed. *The Pentagon, Arlington, Virginia, USA.*

He leafed past the title page to the first line: *At the beginning of July, during a*

spell of exceptionally hot weather, towards evening, a certain young man came down to the street from the room he was renting. Then he leafed ahead, looking for the ax murder itself, and a folded paper fell out of the book. It was there as a bookmark, he guessed, about halfway through, where Raskolnikov is arguing with Svidrigaïlov.

He unfolded the paper. It was Army issue. He could tell by the color and the texture. Dull cream, smooth surface. It was the start of a letter, in Joe's familiar neat handwriting. The date was six weeks after his birthday. The text said: *Dear Jack, thanks for the book. It got here eventually. I will treasure it always. I might even read it. But probably not soon, because things are getting pretty busy here. I'm thinking of jumping ship and going to Treasury. Somebody (you'd recognize the name) offered me a job, and* That was it. It ended abruptly, halfway down the page. He laid it unfolded next to the shoes. Put all three books back in the box. He looked at the shoes and the letter and listened hard inside his head like a whale listens for another whale across a thousand miles of freezing ocean. But he heard nothing. There was nothing there. Nothing at all. So he crammed the shoes back into the box and folded the letter and tossed it in on top. Closed the flaps again and carried the box across the room and balanced it on top of the trash can. Turned back to the bed and heard another knock at the door.

It was Froelich. She was wearing her suit pants and jacket. No shirt under the jacket. Probably nothing at all under the jacket. He guessed she had dressed quickly because she knew she had to walk near the marshal in the corridor.

"You're still up," she said.

"Come in," he said.

She stepped into the room and waited until he closed the door.

"I'm not angry at you," she said. "You didn't get Joe killed. I don't really think that. And I'm not angry at Joe for getting killed. That just happened."

"You're angry at something," he said.

"I'm angry at him for leaving me," she said.

He moved back into the room and sat on the end of the bed. This time, she sat right next to him.

“I’m over him,” she said. “Completely. I promise you. I have been for a long time. But I’m not over how he just walked out on me.”

Reacher said nothing.

“And therefore I’m angry at *myself*,” she said, quietly. “Because I wished him harm. Inside of me. I so wanted him to crash and burn afterward. And then he *did*. So I feel terribly guilty. And now I’m worried that you’re judging me.”

Reacher paused a beat.

“Nothing to judge,” he said. “Nothing to feel guilty about, either. Whatever you wished was understandable, and it had no influence on what happened. How could it?”

She was silent.

“He got in over his head,” Reacher said. “That’s all. He took a chance and got unlucky. You didn’t cause it. I didn’t cause it. It just happened.”

“Things happen for a reason.”

He shook his head.

“No, they don’t,” he said. “They really don’t. They just happen. It wasn’t your fault. You’re not responsible.”

“You think?”

“You’re not responsible,” he said again. “Nobody’s responsible. Except the guy who pulled the trigger.”

“I wished him harm,” she said. “I need you to forgive me.”

“Nothing to forgive.”

“I need you to say the words.”

“I can’t,” Reacher said. “And I won’t. You don’t need forgiving. It wasn’t your fault. Or mine. Or Joe’s, even. It just happened. Like things do.”

She was quiet for a long moment. Then she nodded, just slightly, and moved a little closer to him.

“OK,” she said.

“Are you wearing anything under that suit?” he asked.

“You knew I had a gun in the kitchen.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Why did you search my house?”

“Because I’ve got the gene that Joe didn’t have. Things don’t happen to me. I don’t get unlucky. You carrying a gun now?”

“No, I’m not,” she said.

There was silence for a beat.

“And there’s nothing under the suit,” she said.

“I need to confirm those things for myself,” he said. “It’s a caution thing. Purely genetic, you understand.”

He undid the first button on her jacket. Then the second. Slipped his hand inside. Her skin was warm and smooth.

They got a wake-up call from the motel desk at six o’clock in the morning. *Stuyvesant must have arranged it last night*, Reacher thought. *I wish he’d forgotten*. Froelich stirred at his side. Then her eyes snapped open and she sat up, wide awake.

“Happy Thanksgiving,” he said.

“I hope it will be,” she said. “I’ve got a feeling about today. I think it’s the day we win or lose.”

“I like that kind of a day.”

“You do?”

“Sure,” he said. “Losing is not an option, which means it’s the day we win.”

She pushed back the covers. The room had gone from too cold to too hot.

“Dress casual,” she said. “Suits don’t look right on a holiday at a soup kitchen. Will you tell Neagley?”

“You tell her. You’ll be passing her door. She won’t bite.”

“She won’t?”

“No,” he said.

She put her suit back on and left. He padded over to the closet and pulled out the bag full of his Atlantic City clothes. He spilled them on the bed and did his best to flatten out the wrinkles. Then he showered without shaving. *She wanted me to look casual*, he thought. He found Neagley in the lobby. She was wearing her jeans and her sweatshirt with a battered leather jacket over it. There was a buffet table with coffee and muffins. The U.S. marshals had already eaten most of them.

“You two kiss and make up?” Neagley asked.

“A little of each, I guess,” he said.

He took a cup and filled it with coffee. Selected a raisin bran muffin. Then Froelich showed up, newly showered and wearing black denim jeans with a black polo shirt and a black nylon jacket. They ate and drank whatever the marshals had left and then they walked out together to Stuyvesant’s Suburban. It was before seven in the morning on Thanksgiving Day and the city looked like it had been evacuated the night before. There was silence everywhere. It was cold, but the air was still and soft. The sun was up and the sky was pale blue. The stone buildings looked golden. The roads were completely empty. It took no time at all to reach the office. Stuyvesant was waiting for them in the conference room. His interpretation of casual was a pair of pressed gray pants and a pink sweater under a bright blue golf jacket. Reacher guessed all the labels said Brooks Brothers, and he guessed Mrs. Stuyvesant had gone to the Baltimore hospital as was usual on a Thursday, Thanksgiving Day or not. Bannon was

sitting opposite Stuyvesant. He was in the same tweed and flannel. He would look like a cop whatever day it was. He looked like a guy without too many options in his closet.

“Let’s get to it,” Stuyvesant said. “We’ve got a big agenda.”

“First item,” Bannon said. “The FBI formally advises cancellation today. We know the bad guys are in the city and therefore it’s reasonable to assume there may be some kind of imminent hostile attempt.”

“Cancellation is out of the question,” Stuyvesant said. “Free turkey at a homeless shelter might sound trivial, but this is a town that runs on symbols. If Armstrong pulled out the political damage would be catastrophic.”

“OK, then we’re going to be there on the ground with you,” Bannon said. “Not to duplicate your role. We’ll stay strictly out of your way on all matters that concern Armstrong’s personal security. But if something does go down, the closer we are the luckier we’ll get.”

“Any specific information?” Froelich asked.

Bannon shook his head.

“None,” he said. “Just a feeling. But I would urge you to take it very seriously.”

“I’m taking everything very seriously,” Froelich said. “In fact, I’m changing the whole plan. I’m moving the event outdoors.”

“*Out*doors?” Bannon said. “Isn’t that worse?”

“No,” Froelich said. “On balance, it’s better. It’s a long low room, basically. Kitchen at the back. It’s going to get very crowded. We’ve got no realistic chance of using metal detectors on the doors. It’s the end of November, and most of these people are going to be wearing five layers and carrying God knows what kind of metal stuff. We can’t search them. It would take forever and God knows how many diseases my people would catch. We can’t wear gloves to do it because that would be seen as insulting. So we have to concede there’s a fair chance that the bad guys could mingle in and get close, and we have to concede we’ve got no real way of stopping them.”

“So how does it help to be outdoors?”

So how does it help to be outdoors?

“There’s a side yard. We’ll put the serving tables in a long line at right angles to the wall of the building. Pass stuff out through the kitchen window. Behind the serving table is the wall of the yard. We’ll put Armstrong and his wife and four agents in a line behind the serving table, backs to the wall. We’ll have the guests approach from the left, single file through a screen of more agents. They’ll get their food and walk on inside to sit down and eat it. The television people will like it better, too. Outside is always better for them. And there’ll be orderly movement. Left to right along the table. Turkey from Armstrong, stuffing from Mrs. Armstrong. Move along, sit down to eat. Easier to portray, visually.”

“Upside?” Stuyvesant asked.

“Extensive,” Froelich said. “Much better crowd security. Nobody can pull a weapon before they get near Armstrong, because they’re filtering through an agent screen the whole time until they’re right across the table from him. Whereupon if they wait to do it at that point, he’s got four agents right alongside him.”

“Downside?”

“Limited. We’ll be screened on three sides by walls. But the yard is open at the front. There’s a block of five-story buildings directly across the street. Old warehousing. The windows are boarded, which is a huge bonus. But we’ll need to put an agent on every roof. So we’ll have to forget the budget.”

Stuyvesant nodded. “We can do that. Good plan.”

“The weather helped us for once,” Froelich said.

“Is this basically a conventional plan?” Bannon asked. “Like normal Secret Service thinking?”

“I don’t really want to comment on that,” Froelich said. “Secret Service doesn’t discuss procedure.”

“Work with me, ma’am,” Bannon said. “We’re all on the same side here.”

“You can tell him,” Stuyvesant said. “We’re already in hip-deep.”

Froelich shrugged.

“OK,” she said. “I guess it’s a conventional plan. Place like that, we’re pretty limited for options. Why are you asking?”

“Because we’ve done a lot of work on this,” Bannon said. “A lot of thinking.”

“And?” Stuyvesant said.

“We’re looking at four specific factors here. First, this all started seventeen days ago, correct?”

Stuyvesant nodded.

“And who’s hurting?” Bannon asked. “That’s the first question. Second, think about the demonstration homicides out in Minnesota and Colorado. How were you alerted? That’s the second question. Third, what were the weapons used out there? And fourth, how did the last message end up on Ms. Froelich’s hallway floor?”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying all four factors point in one single direction.”

“What direction?”

“What’s the purpose behind the messages?”

“They’re threats,” Froelich said.

“Who are they threatening?”

“Armstrong, of course.”

“Are they? Some were addressed to you, and some were addressed to him. But has he seen *any* of them? Even the ones addressed directly to him? Does he even know anything about them?”

“We never tell our protectees. That’s policy, always has been.”

“So Armstrong’s not sweating, is he? Who’s sweating?”

“We are.”

“So are the messages *really* aimed at Armstrong, or are they really aimed at the United States Secret Service? In a real-world sense?”

Froelich said nothing.

“OK,” Bannon said. “Now think about Minnesota and Colorado. Hell of a demonstration. Not easy to stage. Whoever you are, shooting people down takes nerve and skill and care and thought and preparation. Not easy. Not something you undertake lightly. But they undertook it, because they had some kind of point to make. Then what did they do? How did they tip you off? How did they tell you where to look?”

“They didn’t.”

“Exactly,” Bannon said. “They went to all that trouble, took all that risk, and then they sat back and did nothing at all. They just waited. And sure enough, the NCIC reports were filed by the local police departments, and the FBI computers scanned through NCIC like they’re programmed to do, and they spotted the word *Armstrong* like they’re programmed to do, and we called you with the good news.”

“So?”

“So tell me, how many Joe Publics would know all that would happen? How many Joe Publics would sit back and take the risk that their little drama would go unconnected for a day or two until you read about it in the newspapers?”

“So what are you saying? Who are they?”

“What weapons did they use?”

“An H&K MP5SD6 and a Vaime Mk2,” Reacher said.

“Fairly esoteric weapons,” Bannon said. “And not legally available for sale to the public, because they’re silenced. Only government agencies can buy them. And only one government agency buys both of them.”

“Us,” Stuyvesant said, quietly.

“Yes, you,” Bannon said. “And finally, I looked for Ms. Froelich’s name in the phone book. And you know what? She’s not there. She’s unlisted. Certainly there was no boxed ad saying, ‘I’m a Secret Service crew chief and this is where I live.’ So how did these guys know where to deliver the last message?”

There was a long silence.

“They know me,” Froelich said, quietly.

Bannon nodded. “I’m sorry, folks, but as of now the FBI is looking for Secret Service people. Not current employees, because current employees would have been aware of the early arrival of the demonstration threat and would have acted a day sooner. So we’re focusing on recent ex-employees who still know the ropes. People who knew you wouldn’t tell Armstrong himself. People who knew Ms. Froelich. People who knew Nendick, too, and where to find him. Maybe people who left under a cloud and are carrying some kind of grudge. Against the Secret Service, not against Brook Armstrong. Because our theory is that Armstrong is a means, not an end. They’ll waste a Vice President–elect just to get at you, exactly like they wasted the other two Armstrongs.”

The room was silent.

“What would be the motive?” Froelich asked.

Bannon made a face. “Embittered ex-employees are walking, talking, living, breathing motives. We all know that. We’ve all suffered from it.”

“What about the thumbprint?” Stuyvesant said. “All our people are printed. Always have been.”

“Our assumption is that we’re talking about two guys. Our assessment is that the thumbprint guy is an unknown associate of somebody who used to work here, who is the latex gloves guy. So we’re saying *they* and *them* purely as a convenience. We’re not saying they both worked here. We’re not suggesting you’ve got two renegades.”

“Just one renegade.”

“That’s our theory,” Bannon said. “But saying *they* and *them* is useful and instructive, too, because they’re a team. We *need* to look at them as a single unit.

Because they share information. Therefore what I'm saying is, only one of them worked here, but they both know your secrets."

"This is a very big department," Stuyvesant said. "Big turnover of people. Some quit. Some are fired. Some retire. Some get asked to."

"We're checking now," Bannon said. "We're getting personnel lists direct from Treasury. We're going back five years."

"You'll get a long list."

"We've got the manpower."

Nobody spoke.

"I'm real sorry, people," Bannon said. "Nobody likes to hear their problem is close to home. But it's the only conclusion there is. And it's not good news for days like today. These people are here in town right now and they know exactly what you're thinking and exactly what you're doing. So my advice is to cancel. And if you're not going to cancel, then my advice is to take a great deal of care."

Stuyvesant nodded in the silence.

"We will," he said. "You can count on that."

"My people will be in place two hours in advance," Bannon said.

"Ours will be in place an hour before that," Froelich replied.

Bannon smiled a tight little smile and pushed back his chair and stood up.

"See you there," he said.

He left the room and closed the door behind him, firmly, but quietly.

Stuyvesant checked his watch. "Well?"

They had sat quiet for a moment, and then strolled out to the reception area and got coffee. Then they regrouped in the conference room, in the same seats, each

of them looking at the place Bannon had vacated like he was still there.

“Well?” Stuyvesant said again.

Nobody spoke.

“Inevitable, I guess,” Stuyvesant said. “They can’t pin the thumbprint guy on us, but the other one is *definitely* one of ours. It’ll be all smiles over at the Hoover Building. They’ll be grinning from ear to ear. Laughing up their sleeves at us.”

“But does that make them wrong?” Neagley asked.

“No,” Froelich said. “These guys know where I live. So I think Bannon’s right.”

Stuyvesant flinched, like the umpire had called *strike one*.

“And you?” he said to Neagley.

“Worrying about DNA on envelopes sounds like insiders,” Neagley said. “But one thing bothers me. If they’re familiar with your procedures, then they didn’t interpret the Bismarck situation very well. They expected the cops would move toward the decoy rifle and Armstrong would move toward the cars, thereby traversing their field of fire. But that didn’t happen. Armstrong waited in the blind spot and the cars came to him.”

Froelich shook her head.

“No, I’m afraid their interpretation was correct,” she said. “Normally Armstrong would have been well out in the middle of the field, letting people get a good look at him. Right there in the center of things. We don’t usually make them skulk around the edges. It was a last-minute change to keep him near the church. Based on Reacher’s input. And normally there’s absolutely no way I would allow a rear-wheel-drive limo on the grass. Too easy to bog down and get stuck. That’s an article of faith. But I knew the ground was dry and hard. It was practically frozen. So I improvised. That maneuver would have struck an insider as completely off the wall. It would have been the very last thing they were expecting. They would have been totally surprised by it.”

Silence for a beat.

“Then Bannon’s theory is perfectly plausible,” Neagley said. “I’m very sorry.”

Stuyvesant nodded, slowly. *Strike two*.

“Reacher?” he said.

“Can’t argue with a word of it.”

Strike three. Stuyvesant’s head dropped, like his last hope was gone.

“But I don’t believe it,” Reacher said.

Stuyvesant’s head came up again.

“I’m glad they’re pursuing it,” Reacher said. “Because it needs to be pursued, I guess. We need to eliminate all possibilities. And they’ll go at it like crazy. If they’re right, they’ll take care of it for us, that’s for sure. So it’s one less thing for us to worry about. But I’m pretty sure they’re wasting their time.”

“Why?” Froelich asked.

“Because I’m pretty sure neither of these guys ever worked here.”

“So who are they?”

“I think they’re both outsiders. I think they’re between two and ten years older than Armstrong himself, both of them brought up and educated in remote rural areas where the schools were decent but the taxes were low.”

“What?”

“Think of everything we know. Think of everything we’ve seen. Then think of the very smallest part of it. The very tiniest component.”

“Tell us,” Froelich said.

Stuyvesant checked his watch again. Shook his head.

“Not now,” he said. “We need to move. You can tell us later. But you’re sure?”

“They’re both outsiders,” Reacher said. “Guaranteed. It’s in the Constitution.”

13

Every city has a cusp, where the good part of town turns bad. Washington D.C. was no different. The border between desirable and undesirable ran in a ragged irregular loop, bulging outward here and there to accommodate reclaimed blocks, swooping inward in other areas to claim inroads of its own. It was pierced in some places by gentrified corridors. Elsewhere it worked gradually, shading imperceptibly over hundreds of yards down streets where you could buy thirty different blends of tea at one end and cash checks at the other for thirty percent of the proceeds.

The shelter selected for Armstrong's appearance was halfway into the no-man's-land north of Union Station. To the east were train tracks and switching yards. To the west was a highway running underground in a tunnel. All around were decayed buildings. Some of them were warehouses and some of them were apartments. Some of them were abandoned, some of them were not. The shelter itself was exactly what Froelich had described. It was a long low one-story building made of brick. It had large metal-framed windows evenly spaced in the walls. It had a yard next to it twice its own size. The yard was closed in on three sides by high brick walls. It was impossible to decipher the building's original purpose. Maybe it had been a stable, back when Union Station's freight had been hauled away by horses. Maybe later it was updated with new windows and used as a trucking depot after the horses faded away. Maybe it had served time as an office. It was impossible to tell.

It housed fifty homeless people every night. They were woken early every morning and given breakfast and turned out on the streets. Then the fifty cots were stacked and stored and the floor was washed and the air was misted with disinfectant. Metal tables and chairs were carried in and placed where the beds had been. Lunch was available every day, and dinner, and then the reverse conversion to a dormitory took place at nine every evening.

But this day was different. Thanksgiving Day was always different, and this year it was more different than usual. Wake-up call happened a little earlier and breakfast was served a little faster. The overnighters were shown the door a full half hour before normal, which was a double blow to them because cities are notoriously quiet on Thanksgiving Day and panhandling receipts are dismal. The floor was washed more thoroughly than usual and more disinfectant was sprayed into the air. The tables were positioned more exactly, the chairs were lined up

into the air. The tables were positioned more exactly, the chairs were lined up more precisely, more volunteers were on hand, and all of them were wearing fresh white sweatshirts with the benefactor's name brightly printed in red.

The first Secret Service agents to arrive were the line-of-sight team. They had a large-scale city surveyor's map and a telescopic sight removed from a sniper rifle. One agent walked through every step that Armstrong was scheduled to take. Every separate pace he would stop and turn around and squint through the scope and call out every window and every rooftop he could see. Because if he could see a rooftop or a window, a potential marksman on that rooftop or in that window could see him. The agent with the map would identify the building concerned and check the scale and calculate the range. Anything under seven hundred feet he marked in black.

But it was a good location. The only available sniper nests were on the roofs of the abandoned five-story warehouses opposite. The guy with the map finished up with a straight line of just five black crosses, nothing more. He wrote *checked with scope, clear daylight, 0845 hrs, all suspect locations recorded* across the bottom of the map and signed his name and added the date. The agent with the scope countersigned and the map was rolled and stored in the back of a department Suburban, awaiting Froelich's arrival.

Next on scene was a convoy of police vans with five separate canine units in them. One unit cleared the shelter. Two more entered the warehouses. The last two were explosives hunters who checked the surrounding streets in all directions on a four-hundred-yard radius. Beyond four hundred yards, the maze of streets meant there were too many potential access routes to check, and therefore too many to bomb with any realistic chance of success. As soon as a building or a street was pronounced safe a D.C. patrolman took up station on foot. The sky was still clear and the sun was still out. It gave an illusion of warmth. It kept grousing to a minimum.

By nine thirty the shelter was the epicenter of a quarter of a square mile of secure territory. D.C. cops held the perimeter on foot and in cars and there were better than fifty more loose in the interior. They made up the majority of the local population. The city was still quiet. Some of the shelter inhabitants were hanging around. There was nowhere productive to go, and they knew from experience that to be early in the lunch line was better than late. Politicians didn't understand portion control, and pickings could be getting slim after the first thirty minutes.

Froelich arrived at ten o'clock exactly, driving her Suburban, Reacher and Neagley riding with her. Stuyvesant was right behind in a second Suburban. Behind him were four more trucks carrying five department sharpshooters and fifteen general-duty agents. Froelich parked on the sidewalk tight against the base of the warehouse wall. Normally she might have just blocked the street beyond the shelter entrance, but she didn't want to reveal the direction of Armstrong's intended approach to onlookers. He was actually scheduled to come in from the south, but that information and ten minutes with a map could predict his route all the way from Georgetown.

She assembled her people in the shelter's yard and sent the sharpshooters to secure the warehouse roofs. They would be up there three hours before the event started, but that was normal. Generally they were the first to arrive and the last to leave. Stuyvesant pulled Reacher aside and asked him to go up there with them.

"Then come find me," he said. "I want a firsthand report about how bad it is."

So Reacher walked across the street with an agent called Crosetti and they ducked past a cop into a damp hallway full of trash and rat droppings. There were stairs winding up through a central shaft. Crosetti was in a Kevlar vest and was carrying a rifle in a hard case. But he was a fit guy. He was half a flight ahead of Reacher at the top.

The stairs came out inside a rooftop hutch. There was a wooden door that opened outward into the sunlight. The roof was flat. It was made of asphalt. There were pigeon corpses here and there. There were dirty skylights made of wired glass and small metal turrets on top of ventilation pipes. The roof was lipped with a low wall, set on top with eroded coping stones. Crosetti walked to the left edge, and then the right. Made visual contact with his colleagues on either side. Then he walked to the front to check the view. Reacher was already there.

The view was good and bad. Good in the conventional sense because the sun was shining and they were five floors up in a low-built part of town. Bad because the shelter's yard was right there underneath them. It was like looking down into a shoe box from a distance of three feet up and three feet away. The back wall where Armstrong would be standing was dead ahead. It was made out of old brick and looked like the execution wall in some foreign prison. Hitting him would be easier than shooting a fish in a barrel.

“What’s the range?” Reacher asked.

“Your guess?” Crosetti said.

Reacher put his knees against the lip of the roof and glanced out and down.

“Ninety yards?” he said.

Crosetti unsnapped a pocket in his vest and took out a range finder.

“Laser,” he said. He switched it on and lined it up.

“Ninety-two to the wall,” he said. “Ninety-one to his head. That was a pretty good guess.”

“Windage?”

“Slight thermal coming up off the concrete down there,” Crosetti said. “Nothing else, probably. No big deal.”

“Practically like standing right next to him,” Reacher said.

“Don’t worry,” Crosetti said. “As long as I’m up here nobody else can be. That’s the job today. We’re sentries, not shooters.”

“Where are you going to be?” Reacher asked.

Crosetti glanced all around his little piece of real estate and pointed.

“Over there, I guess,” he said. “Tight in the far corner. I’ll face parallel with the front wall. Slight turn to my left and I’m covering the yard. Slight turn to my right, I’m covering the head of the stairwell.”

“Good plan,” Reacher said. “You need anything?”

Crosetti shook his head.

“OK,” Reacher said. “I’ll leave you to it. Try to stay awake.”

Crosetti smiled. “I usually do.”

“Good,” Reacher said. “I like that in a sentry.”

Good," Reacher said. "I like that in a sentry."

He went back down five flights through the darkness and stepped out into the sun. Walked across the street and glanced up. Saw Crosetti nestled comfortably in the angle of the corner. His head and his knees were visible. So was his rifle barrel. It was jutting upward against the bright sky at a relaxed forty-five degrees. He waved. Crosetti waved back. He walked on and found Stuyvesant in the yard. He was hard to miss, given the color of his sweater and the brightness of the daylight.

"It's OK up there," Reacher said. "Hell of a firing platform, but as long as your guys hold it we're safe enough."

Stuyvesant nodded and turned around and scanned upward. All five warehouse roofs were visible from the yard. All five were occupied by sharpshooters. Five silhouetted heads, five silhouetted rifle barrels.

"Froelich is looking for you," Stuyvesant said.

Nearer the building, staff and agents were hauling long trestle tables into place. The idea was to form a barrier with them. The right-hand end would be hard against the shelter's wall. The left-hand end would be three feet from the yard wall opposite. There would be a pen six feet deep behind the line of tables. Armstrong and his wife would be in the pen with four agents. Directly behind them would be the execution wall. Up close it didn't look so bad. The old bricks looked warmed by the sun. Rustic, even friendly. He turned his back on them and looked up at the warehouse roofs. Crosetti waved again. *I'm still awake*, the wave said.

"Reacher," Froelich called.

He turned around and found her walking out of the shelter toward him. She was carrying a clipboard thick with paper. She was up on her toes, busy, in charge, in command. She looked magnificent. The black clothes emphasized her litheness and made her eyes blaze with blue. Dozens of agents and scores of cops swirled all around her, every one of them under her personal control.

"We're doing fine here," she said. "So I want you to take a stroll. Just check around. Neagley's already out there. You know what to look for."

"Feels good, doesn't it?" he asked.

“What?”

“Doing something really well,” he said. “Taking charge.”

“Think I’m doing well?”

“You’re the best,” he said. “This is tremendous. Armstrong’s a lucky man.”

“I hope,” she said.

“Believe it,” he said.

She smiled, quickly and shyly, and moved on, leafing through her paperwork. He turned the other way and walked back out to the street. Turned right and planned a route in his head that would keep him on a block-and-a-half radius.

There were cops on the corner and the beginnings of a ragged crowd of people waiting for the free lunch. There were two television trucks setting up fifty yards down the street from the shelter. Hydraulic masts were unfolding themselves and satellite dishes were rotating. Technicians were unrolling cable and shouldering cameras. He saw Bannon with six men and a woman he guessed were the FBI task force. They had just arrived. Bannon had a map unrolled on the hood of his car and his agents were clustered around looking at it. Reacher waved to Bannon and turned left and passed the end of an alley that led down behind the warehouses. He could hear a train on the tracks ahead of him. The mouth of the alley was manned by a D.C. cop, facing outward, standing easy. There was a police cruiser parked nearby. Another cop in it. Cops everywhere. The overtime bill was going to be something to see.

There were broken-down stores here and there, but they were all closed for the holiday. Some of the storefronts were churches, also closed. There were auto body shops nearer the railroad tracks, all shuttered and still. There was a pawnshop with a very old guy outside washing the windows. He was the only thing moving on the street. His store was tall and narrow and had concertina barriers inside the glass. The display space was crammed with junk of every description. There were clocks, coats, musical instruments, alarm radios, hats, record players, car stereos, binoculars, strings of Christmas lights. There was writing on the windows, offering to buy just about any article ever manufactured. If it didn’t grow in the ground or move by itself, this guy would

give you money for it. He also offered services. He would cash checks, appraise jewelry, repair watches. There was a tray of watches on view. They were mostly old-fashioned wind-up items, with bulging crystals and big square luminescent figures and sculpted hands. Reacher glanced again at the sign: *Watches Repaired*. Then he glanced again at the old guy. He was up to his elbows in soap suds.

“You fix watches?” he asked.

“What have you got?” the old guy said. He had an accent. Russian, probably.

“A question,” Reacher said.

“I thought you had a watch to fix. That was my business, originally. Before quartz.”

“My watch is fine,” Reacher said. “Sorry.”

He pulled back his cuff to check the time. Quarter past eleven.

“Let me see that,” the old guy said.

Reacher extended his wrist.

“Bulova,” the old guy said. “American military issue before the Gulf War. A good watch. You buy it from a soldier?”

“No, I was a soldier.”

The old guy nodded. “So was I. In the Red Army. What’s the question?”

“You ever heard of squalene?”

“It’s a lubricant.”

“You use it?”

“Time to time. I don’t fix so many watches now. Not since quartz.”

“Where do you get it?”

“A

"Are you kidding?"

"No," Reacher said. "I'm asking a question."

"You want to know where I get my squalene?"

"That's what questions are for. They seek to elicit information."

The old guy smiled. "I carry it around with me."

"Where?"

"You're looking at it."

"Am I?"

The old guy nodded. "And I'm looking at yours."

"My what?"

"Your supply of squalene."

"I haven't got any squalene," Reacher said. "It comes from sharks' livers. Long time since I was next to a shark."

The old man shook his head. "You see, the Soviet system was very frequently criticized, and believe me I've always been happy to tell the truth about it. But at least we had education. Especially in the natural sciences."

"C-thirty H-fifty," Reacher said. "It's an acyclic hydrocarbon. Which when hydrogenated becomes squalane with an *a*."

"You understand any of that?"

"No," Reacher said. "Not really."

"Squalene is an oil," the old guy said. "It occurs naturally in only two places in the known biosphere. One is inside a shark's liver. The other is as a sebaceous product on the skin around the human nose."

Reacher touched his nose. "Same stuff? Sharks' livers and people's noses?"

The old guy nodded. “Identical molecular structure. So if I need squalene to lubricate a watch, I just dab some off on my fingertip. Like this.”

He wiped his wet hand on his pant leg and extended a finger and rubbed it down where his nose joined his face. Then he held up the fingertip for inspection.

“Put that on the gear wheel and you’re OK,” he said.

“I see,” Reacher said.

“You want to sell the Bulova?”

Reacher shook his head.

“Sentimental value,” he said.

“From the Army?” the old guy said. “You’re *nekulturniy*.”

He turned back to his task and Reacher walked on.

“Happy Thanksgiving,” Reacher called. There was no reply. He met Neagley a block from the shelter. She was walking in from the opposite direction. She turned around and walked back with him, keeping her customary distance from his shoulder.

“Beautiful day,” she said. “Isn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“How would you do it?”

“I wouldn’t,” he said. “Not here. Not in Washington D.C. This is their backyard. I’d wait for a better chance someplace else.”

“Me too,” she said. “But they missed in Bismarck. Wall Street in ten days is no good to them. Then they’re deep into December, and the next thing is more holidays and then the inauguration. So they’re running out of opportunities. And we know they’re right here in town.”

Reacher said nothing. They walked past Bannon. He was sitting in his car.

They arrived back at the shelter at noon exactly. Stuyvesant was standing near the entrance. He nodded a cautious greeting. Inside the yard everything was ready. The serving tables were lined up. They were draped with pure white cloths that hung down to the floor. They were loaded with food warmers laid out in a line. There were ladles and long-handled spoons neatly arrayed. The kitchen window opened directly into the pen behind the tables. The shelter hall itself was set up for dining. There were police sawhorses arranged so that the crowd would be funneled down the left edge of the yard. Then there was a right turn across the face of the serving area. Then another right along the wall of the shelter and in through the door. Froelich was detailing positions for each of the general-duty agents. Four would be at the entrance to the yard. Six would line the approach to the serving area. One would secure each end of the pen, from the outside. Three would patrol the exit line.

“OK, listen up,” Froelich called. “Remember, it’s very easy to look a little like a homeless person, but very hard to look *exactly* like a homeless person. Watch their feet. Are their shoes right? Look at their hands. We want to see gloves, or ingrained dirt. Look at their faces. They need to be lean. Hollow cheeks. We want to see dirty hair. Hair that hasn’t been washed for a month or a year. We want to see clothes that are *molded* to the body. Any questions?”

Nobody spoke.

“Any doubt at all, act first and think later,” Froelich called. “I’m going to be serving behind the tables with the Armstrongs and the personal detail. We’re depending on you not to send us anybody you don’t like, OK?”

She checked her watch.

“Five past twelve,” she said. “Fifty-five minutes to go.”

Reacher squeezed through at the left-hand end of the serving tables and stood in the pen. Behind him was a wall. To his right was a wall. To his left were the shelter windows. Ahead to his right was the approach line. Any individual would pass four agents at the yard entrance and six more as he shuffled along. Ten suspicious pairs of eyes before anybody got face-to-face with Armstrong himself. Ahead to the left was the exit line. Three agents funneling people into the hall. He raised his eyes. Dead ahead were the warehouses. Five sentries on

five roofs. Crosetti waved. He waved back.

“OK?” Froelich asked.

She was standing across the serving table from him. He smiled.

“Dark or light?” he asked.

“We’ll eat later,” she said. “I want you and Neagley freelance in the yard. Stay near the exit line, so you get a wide view.”

“OK,” he said.

“Still think I’m doing well?”

He pointed left.

“I don’t like those windows,” he said. “Suppose somebody bides his time all the way through the line, keeps his head down, behaves himself, picks up his food, makes it inside, sits down, and then pulls a gun and fires back through the window?”

She nodded.

“Already thought about it,” she said. “I’m bringing three cops in from the perimeter. Putting one in each window, standing up, facing the room.”

“That should do it,” he said. “Great job.”

“And we’re going to be wearing vests,” she said. “Everybody in the pen. The Armstrongs, too.”

She checked her watch again.

“Forty-five minutes,” she said. “Walk with me.”

They walked out of the yard and across the street to where she had parked her Suburban. It was in a deep shadow made by the warehouse wall. She unlocked the tailgate and swung it open. The shadow and the tinted glass made it dark inside. The load bay was neatly packed with equipment. But the backseat was empty.

“We could get in,” Reacher said. “You know, fool around a little.”

“We could not.”

“You said it was fun, fooling around at work.”

“I meant the office.”

“Is that an invitation?”

She paused. Straightened up. Smiled.

“OK,” she said. “Why not? I might like that.”

Then she smiled wider.

“OK,” she said again. “Soon as Armstrong is secure, we’ll go do it on Stuyvesant’s desk. As a celebration.”

She leaned in and grabbed her vest and stretched up and kissed him on the cheek. Then she ducked away and headed back. He slammed the tailgate and she locked it from forty feet away with the remote.

With thirty minutes to go she put her vest on under her jacket and ran a radio check. She told the police commander he could start marshaling the crowd near the entrance. Told the media they could come into the yard and start the tapes rolling. With fifteen minutes to go she announced that the Armstrongs were on their way.

“Get the food out,” she called.

The kitchen crew swarmed into the pen and the cooks passed pans of food out through the kitchen window. Reacher leaned on the shelter wall at the end of the line of serving tables, on the public side. He put his back flat on the bricks between the kitchen window and the first hall window. He would be looking straight down the food line. A half-turn to his left, he would be looking at the approach line. A half-turn to his right, he would be looking into the pen. People would have to skirt around him with their loaded plates. He wanted a close-up view. Neagley stood six feet away, in the body of the yard, in the angle the

sawhorses made. Froelich paced near her, nervous, thinking through the last-minute checks for the hundredth time.

“Arrival imminent,” she said into her wrist microphone. “Driver says they’re two blocks away. You guys on the roof see them yet?”

She listened to her earpiece and then spoke again.

“Two blocks away,” she repeated.

The kitchen crew finished loading the food warmers and disappeared. Reacher couldn’t see because of the brick walls but he heard the motorcade. Several powerful engines, wide tires on the pavement, approaching fast, slowing hard. A Metro cruiser pulled past the entrance, then a Suburban, then a Cadillac limo that stopped square in the gateway. An agent stepped forward and opened the door. Armstrong stepped out and turned back and offered his hand to his wife. Cameramen pressed forward. The Armstrongs stood up straight together and paused a beat by the limo’s door and smiled for the lenses. Mrs. Armstrong was a tall blond woman whose genes had come all the way from Scandinavia a couple of hundred years ago. That was clear. She was wearing pressed jeans and a puffed-up goose-down jacket a size too large to accommodate her vest. Her hair was lacquered back into a frame around her face. She looked a little uncomfortable in the jeans, like she wasn’t accustomed to wearing them.

Armstrong was in jeans too, but his were worn like he lived in them. He had a red plaid jacket buttoned tight. It was a little too small to conceal the shape of the vest from an expert eye. He was bareheaded, but his hair was brushed. His personal detail surrounded them and eased them into the yard. Cameras panned as they walked past. The personal agents were dressed like Froelich. Black denim, black nylon jackets zipped over vests. Two of them were wearing sunglasses. One of them was wearing a black ball cap. All of them had earpieces and bulges at their waists where their handguns were.

Froelich led them into the pen behind the serving tables. One agent took each end and stood with arms folded for nothing but crowd surveillance. The third agent and Froelich and the Armstrongs themselves took the middle to do the serving. They milled around for a second and then arranged themselves with the third agent on the left, then Armstrong, then Froelich, then Armstrong’s wife on the right. Armstrong picked up a ladle in one hand and a spoon in the other. Checked the cameras were on him and raised the utensils high, like weapons.

Checked the cameras were on him and raised the utensils high, like weapons.

“Happy Thanksgiving, everybody,” he called.

The crowd swarmed slowly through the gateway. They were a subdued bunch. They moved lethargically and didn’t talk much. No excited chatter, no buzz of sound. Nothing like the hotel lobby at the donor reception. Most of them were swaddled in several heavy layers. Some of them had rope belts. They had hats and fingerless gloves and downcast faces. Each had to pass left and right and left and right through the six screening agents. The first recipient looped past the last agent and took a plastic plate from the first server and was subjected to the full brilliance of Armstrong’s smile. Armstrong spooned a turkey leg onto the plate. The guy shuffled along and Froelich gave him vegetables. Armstrong’s wife added the stuffing. Then the guy shuffled past Reacher and headed inside for the tables. The food smelled good and the guy smelled bad.

It continued like that for five minutes. Every time a pan of food was emptied it was replaced by a new one passed out through the kitchen window. Armstrong was smiling like he was enjoying himself. The line of homeless people shuffled forward. The cameras rolled. The only sound was the clatter of metal utensils in the serving dishes and the repeated banalities from the servers. *Enjoy! Happy Thanksgiving! Thanks for coming by!*

Reacher glanced at Neagley. She raised her eyebrows. He glanced up at the warehouse roofs. Glanced at Froelich, busy with her long-handled spoon. Looked at the television people. They were clearly bored. They were taping a whole hour and they knew it would be edited to eight seconds maximum with boilerplate commentary laid over it. *Vice President–elect Armstrong served the traditional Thanksgiving turkey today at a homeless shelter here in Washington D.C.* Cut to first-quarter football highlights.

The line was still thirty people long when it happened.

Reacher sensed a dull chalky impact nearby and something stung him on the right cheek. In the corner of his eye he saw a puff of dust around a small cratered chip on the surface of the back wall. No sound. No sound at all. A split second later his brain told him: *Bullet. Silencer*. He looked at the line. Nobody moving. He snapped his head to the left and up. *The roof. Crosetti wasn’t there. Crosetti was there. He was twenty feet out of position. He was shooting. It wasn’t Crosetti.*

Then he tried to defeat time and move faster than the awful slow motion of panic would allow him. He pushed off the wall and filled his lungs with air and turned toward Froelich as slowly as a man running through a swimming pool. His mouth opened and desperate words formed in his throat and he tried to shout them out. But she was already well ahead of him.

She was screaming, *"G-u-u-n!"*

She was spinning in slow motion. Her spoon was loose in the air, arcing up over the table, glittering in the sun, spraying food. She was on Armstrong's left. She was jumping sideways at him. Her left arm was scything up to shield him. She was jumping like a basketball player going for a hook shot. Twisting in midair. She got her right hand on his shoulder for a pivot and used the momentum of her left to turn herself around face-on to him. She drew her knees up and landed square on his upper chest. Breath punched out of him and his legs buckled and he was going down backward when the second silenced bullet hit her in the neck. There was no sound. No sound at all. Just a bright vivid backward spray of blood in the sunlight, as fine as autumn mist.

It hung there in a long conical cloud, like vapor, pink and iridescent. It stretched to a point as she fell. Her spoon came down through it, tumbling end over end, disturbing its shape. It lengthened in a long graceful curve. She went down and left her blood in the air behind her like a question mark. Reacher turned his head like it was clamped with an enormous weight and saw the slope of a shoulder far away on the roof, moving backward out of sight. He turned infinitely slowly back to the yard and saw the wet pink arrow of Froelich's blood pointing down to a place now out of sight behind the tables.

Then time restarted and a hundred things happened all at once, all at high speed, all with shattering noise. Agents smothered Armstrong's wife and hauled her to the ground. She was screaming loud. Shrieking desperately. Agents pulled their guns and started firing up at the warehouse roof. There was shouting and wailing from the crowd. People were stampeding. Running everywhere under the heavy repeated thumping of powerful handguns. Reacher clawed at the serving tables and hurled them behind him and fought his way through the wreckage to Froelich. Agents were dragging Armstrong out from underneath her. Auto engines were revving. Tires were squealing. Guns were firing. There was smoke in the air. Sirens were yelping. Armstrong disappeared off the floor and Reacher fell to his knees in a lake of blood next to Froelich and cradled her head in his arms. All her litheness was gone. She was completely limp and still, like her

arms. All her fitfulness was gone. She was completely limp and still, like her clothes were empty. But her eyes were wide open. They were moving slowly from side to side, searching, like she was curious about something.

“Is he OK?” she whispered.

Her voice was very quiet, but alert.

“Secure,” Reacher said.

He slid a hand under her neck. He could feel her earpiece wire. He could feel blood. She was soaked with it. It was pulsing out. More than pulsing. It was like a warm hard jet, driven by the whole of her blood pressure. It forced and bubbled its way out between his clamped fingers like a strong bathtub faucet being turned high and low, high and low. He raised her head and let it fall back a fraction and saw a ragged exit wound in the right front side of her throat. It was leaking blood. Like a river. Like a flood. It was arterial blood, draining out of her.

“Medics,” he called.

Nobody heard him. His voice didn’t carry. There was too much noise. The agents around him were firing up at the warehouse roof. There was a continuous crashing and booming of guns. Spent shell cases were ejecting and hitting him on the back and bouncing off and hitting the ground with small brassy sounds he could hear quite well.

“Tell me it wasn’t one of us,” Froelich whispered.

“It wasn’t one of you,” he said.

She dropped her chin to her chest. Welling blood flooded out between the folds of her skin. Poured down and soaked her shirt. Pooled on the ground and ran away between the ridges in the concrete. He flattened his hand hard against the back of her neck. It was slippery. He pressed harder. The flow of blood loosened his grip, like it was hosing his hand away. His hand was slipping and floating on the tide.

“Medics,” he called again, louder.

But he knew it was useless. She probably weighed about one-twenty, which

meant she had eight or nine pints of blood in her. Most of them were already gone. He was kneeling in them. Her heart was doing its job, thumping away valiantly, pumping her precious blood straight out onto the concrete around his legs.

“Medics,” he screamed.

Nobody came.

She looked straight up at his face.

“Remember?” she whispered.

He bent closer.

“How we met?” she whispered.

“I remember,” he said.

She smiled weakly, like his answer satisfied her completely. She was very pale now. There was blood everywhere on the ground. It was a vast spreading pool. It was warm and slick. Now it was frothing and foaming at her neck. Her arteries were empty and filling with air. Her eyes moved in her head and then settled on his face. Her lips were stark white. Turning blue. They fluttered soundlessly, rehearsing her last words.

“I love you, Joe,” she whispered.

Then she smiled, peacefully.

“I love you too,” he said.

He held her for long moments more until she bled out and died in his arms about the same time Stuyvesant gave the cease-firing order. There was sudden total silence. The strong coppery smell of hot blood and the cold acid stink of gun smoke hung in the air. Reacher looked up and back and saw a cameraman shouldering his way toward him with his lens tilting down like a cannon. Saw Neagley stepping into his path. Saw the cameraman pushing her. She didn’t seem to move a muscle but suddenly the cameraman was falling. He saw Neagley catch the camera and heave it straight over the execution wall. He heard it crash to the ground. He heard an ambulance siren starting up far in the

distance. Then another. He heard cop cars. Feet running. He saw Stuyvesant's pressed gray pants next to his face. He was standing in Froelich's blood.

Stuyvesant did nothing at all. Just stood there for what felt like a very long time, until they all heard the ambulance in the yard. Then he bent down and tried to pull Reacher away. Reacher waited until the paramedics got very close. Then he laid Froelich's head gently on the concrete. Stood up, sick and cramped and unsteady. Stuyvesant caught his elbow and walked him away.

"I didn't even know her name," Reacher said.

"It was Mary Ellen," Stuyvesant told him.

The paramedics fussed around for a moment. Then they went quiet and gave it up and covered her with a sheet. Left her there for the medical examiners and the crime-scene investigators. Reacher stumbled and sat down again, with his back to the wall, his hands on his knees, his head in his hands. His clothes were soaked with blood. Neagley sat down next to him, an inch away. Stuyvesant squatted in front of them both.

"What's happening?" Reacher asked.

"They're locking the city down," Stuyvesant said. "Roads, bridges, the airports. Bannon's in charge of it. He's got all his people out, and Metro cops, U.S. marshals, cops from Virginia, state troopers. Plus some of our people. We'll get them."

"They'll use the railroad," Reacher said. "We're right next to Union Station."

Stuyvesant nodded.

"They're searching every train," he said. "We'll get them."

"Was Armstrong OK?"

"Completely unharmed. Froelich did her duty."

There was a long silence. Reacher looked up.

"What happened on the roof?" he asked. "Where was Crosetti?"

Stuyvesant looked away.

“Crosetti was decoyed somehow,” he said. “He’s in the stairwell. He’s dead too. Shot in the head. With the same silenced rifle, probably.”

Another long silence.

“Where was Crosetti from?” Reacher asked.

“New York, I think,” Stuyvesant said. “Maybe Jersey. Somewhere up there.”

“That’s no good. Where was Froelich from?”

“She was a Wyoming girl.”

Reacher nodded.

“That’ll do,” he said. “Where’s Armstrong now?”

“Can’t tell you that,” Stuyvesant said. “Procedure.”

Reacher raised his hand and looked at his palm. It was rimed with blood. All the lines and scars were outlined in red.

“Tell me,” he said. “Or I’ll break your neck.”

Stuyvesant said nothing.

“Where is he?” Reacher repeated.

“The White House,” Stuyvesant said. “In a secure room. It’s procedure.”

“I need to go talk to him.”

“Now?”

“Right now.”

“You can’t.”

Reacher looked away, beyond the fallen tables. “I can.”

“I can’t let you do that.”

“So try to stop me.”

Stuyvesant was quiet for a long moment.

“Let me call him first,” he said.

He stood up awkwardly and walked away.

“You OK?” Neagley asked.

“It’s like Joe all over again,” Reacher said. “Like Molly Beth Gordon.”

“Nothing you could have done.”

“Did you see it?”

Neagley nodded.

“She took a bullet for him,” Reacher said. “She told me that was just a figure of speech.”

“Instinct,” Neagley said. “And she was unlucky. Must have missed her vest by half an inch. Subsonic bullet, it would have bounced right off.”

“Did you see the shooter?”

Neagley shook her head. “I was facing front. Did you?”

“A glimpse,” Reacher said. “One man.”

“Hell of a thing,” Neagley said.

Reacher nodded and wiped his palms on his pants, front and back. Then he ran his hands through his hair. “If I wrote insurance I wouldn’t touch any of Joe’s old friends. I’d tell them to commit suicide and save the bad guys the trouble.”

“So what now?”

He shrugged. “You should go home to Chicago.”

“You?”

“I’m going to stick around.”

“Why?”

“You know why.”

“The FBI will get them.”

“Not if I get them first,” Reacher said.

“You made up your mind?”

“I held her while she bled to death. I’m not going to just walk away.”

“Then I’ll stick around, too.”

“I’ll be OK on my own.”

“I know you will,” Neagley said. “But you’ll be better with me.”

Reacher nodded.

“What did she say to you?” Neagley asked.

“She said nothing to me. She thought I was Joe.”

He saw Stuyvesant picking his way back through the yard. Hauled himself upright with both hands against the wall.

“Armstrong will see us,” Stuyvesant said. “You want to change first?”

Reacher looked down at his clothes. They were soaked with Froelich’s blood in big irregular patches. It was cooling and drying and blackening.

“No,” he said. “I don’t want to change first.”

They used the Suburban that Stuyvesant had arrived in. It was still Thanksgiving

Day and D.C. was still quiet. They saw almost no civilian activity. Almost everything out and moving was law enforcement. There was a double ring of hasty police roadblocks on every thoroughfare around the White House. Stuyvesant kept his strobes going and was waved through all of them. He showed his ID at the White House vehicle gate and parked outside the West Wing. A Marine sentry passed them to a Secret Service escort who led them inside. They went down two flights of stairs to a vaulted basement built from brick. There were plant rooms down there. Other rooms with steel doors. The escort stopped in front of one of them and knocked hard.

The door was opened from the inside by one of Armstrong's personal detail. He was still wearing his Kevlar vest. Still wearing his sunglasses, although the room had no windows. Just bright fluorescent tubes on the ceiling. Armstrong and his wife were sitting together on chairs at a table in the center of the room. The other two agents were leaning against the walls. The room was silent. Armstrong's wife had been crying. That was clear. Armstrong himself had a smudge of Froelich's blood on the side of his face. He looked deflated. Like this whole White House thing was no longer fun.

"What's the situation?" he asked.

"Two casualties," Stuyvesant said quietly. "The sentry on the warehouse roof, and M.E. herself. They both died at the scene."

Armstrong's wife turned away like she had been slapped.

"Did you get the people who did it?" Armstrong asked.

"The FBI is leading the hunt," Stuyvesant said. "Just a matter of time."

"I want to help," Armstrong said.

"You're going to help," Reacher said.

Armstrong nodded. "What can I do?"

"You can issue a formal statement," Reacher said. "Immediately. In time for the networks to get it on the evening news."

"Saying what?"

“Saying you’re canceling your holiday weekend in North Dakota out of respect for the two dead agents. Saying you’re holing up in your Georgetown house and going absolutely nowhere at all before you attend a memorial service for your lead agent in her hometown in Wyoming on Sunday morning. Find out the name of the town and mention it loud and clear.”

Armstrong nodded again.

“OK,” he said. “I could do that, I guess. But why?”

“Because they won’t try again here in D.C. Not against the security you’re going to have at your house. So they’ll go home and wait. Which gives me until Sunday to find out where they live.”

“You? Won’t the FBI find them today?”

“If they do, that’s great. I can move on.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Then I’ll find them myself.”

“And if *you* fail?”

“I don’t plan to fail. But if I do, then they’ll show up in Wyoming to try again. At Froelich’s service. Whereupon I’ll be waiting for them.”

“No,” Stuyvesant said. “I can’t allow it. Are you crazy? We can’t secure a situation out West on seventy-two hours’ notice. And I can’t use a protectee as *bait*.”

“He doesn’t have to actually go,” Reacher said. “There probably won’t even be a service. He just has to say it.”

Armstrong shook his head. “I can’t say it if there isn’t going to be a service. And if there is a service, I can’t say it and not show up.”

“If you want to help, that’s what you’ve got to do.”

Armstrong said nothing.

They left the Armstrongs in the West Wing basement and were escorted back to the Suburban. The sun was still shining and the sky was still blue. The buildings were still white and golden. It was still a glorious day.

“Take us back to the motel,” Reacher said. “I want to get a shower. Then I want to meet with Bannon.”

“Why?” Stuyvesant asked.

“Because I’m a witness,” Reacher said. “I saw the shooter. On the roof. Just a glimpse of his back as he moved away from the edge.”

“You got a description?”

“Not really,” Reacher said. “It was only a glimpse. I couldn’t describe him. But there was something about how he moved. I’ve seen him before.”

14

He peeled off his clothes. They were stiff and cold and clammy with blood. He dropped them on the closet floor and stepped into the bathroom. Set the shower going. The tray under his feet ran red and then pink and then clear. He washed his hair twice and shaved carefully. Dressed in another of Joe's shirts and another of his suits and chose the regimental tie that Froelich had bought, as a tribute. Then he went back out to the lobby.

Neagley was waiting for him there. She had changed, too. She was wearing a black suit. It was the old Army way. *If in doubt, go formal*. She had a cup of coffee ready for him. She was talking to the U.S. marshals. They were a new crew. The day shift, he guessed.

"Stuyvesant's coming back," she told him. "Then we go meet with Bannon."

He nodded. The marshals were quiet around him. Almost respectful. Toward him or because of Froelich, he didn't know.

"Tough break," one of them said.

Reacher looked away.

"I guess it was," he replied.

Then he looked back.

"But hey, shit happens," he said.

Neagley smiled, briefly. It was the old Army way. *If in doubt, be flippant*.

Stuyvesant showed up an hour later and drove them to the Hoover Building. The balance of power had changed. Killing federal agents was a federal crime, so now the FBI was firmly in charge. Now it was a straightforward manhunt. Bannon met them in the main lobby and took them up in an elevator to their conference room. It was better than Treasury's. It was paneled in wood and had windows. There was a long table with clusters of glasses and bottles of mineral

water. Bannon was conspicuously democratic and avoided the head of the table. He just dumped himself down in one of the side chairs. Neagley put herself on the same side, two places away. Reacher sat down opposite her. Stuyvesant chose a place three away from Reacher and poured himself a glass of water.

“Quite a day,” Bannon said in the silence. “My agency extends its deepest sympathies to your agency.”

“You haven’t found them,” Stuyvesant said.

“We got a heads up from the medical examiner,” Bannon said. “Crosetti was shot through the head with a NATO 7.62 round. Died instantly. Froelich was shot through the throat from behind, same gun, probably. The bullet clipped her carotid artery. But I guess you already know that.”

“You haven’t found them,” Stuyvesant said again.

Bannon shook his head.

“Thanksgiving Day,” he said. “Pluses and minuses. Main minus was that we were short of personnel because of the holiday, and so were you, and so were the Metro cops, and so was everybody else. Main plus was that the city itself was very quiet. On balance it was quieter than we were shorthanded. The way it turned out we were the majority population all over town five minutes after it happened.”

“But you didn’t find them.”

Bannon shook his head again.

“No,” he said. “We didn’t find them. We’re still looking, of course, but being realistic we would have to say they’re out of the District by now.”

“Outstanding,” Stuyvesant said.

Bannon made a face. “We’re not turning cartwheels. But there’s nothing to be gained by yelling at us. Because we could yell right back. Somebody got through the screen *you* deployed. Somebody decoyed *your* guy off the roof.”

He looked directly at Stuyvesant as he said it.

“We paid for it,” Stuyvesant said. “Big time.”

“How did it happen?” Neagley asked. “How did they get up there at all?”

“Not through the front,” Bannon said. “There was a shit-load of cops watching the front. They saw nothing, and they can’t all have fallen asleep at the critical time. Not down the back alley either. There was a cop on foot and a cop in a car watching, both ends. Those four all say they saw nobody either, and we believe all four of them. So we think the bad guys got into a building a block over. Walked through the building and out a rear door into the alley halfway down. Then they skipped ten feet across the alley and got in the back of the warehouse and walked up the stairs. No doubt they exited the same way. But they were probably running, on the way out.”

“How did they decoy Crosetti?” Stuyvesant said. “He was a good agent.”

“Yes, he was,” Reacher said. “I liked him.”

Bannon shrugged again. “There’s always a way, isn’t there?”

Then he looked around the room, the way he did when he wanted people to understand more than he was saying. Nobody responded.

“Did you check the trains?” Reacher asked.

Bannon nodded. “Very carefully. It was fairly busy. People heading out for family dinners. But we were thorough.”

“Did you find the rifle?”

Bannon just shook his head. Reacher stared at him.

“They got away *carrying a rifle*?” he said.

Nobody spoke. Bannon looked back at Reacher.

“You saw the shooter,” he said.

Reacher nodded. “Just a glimpse, for a quarter-second, maybe. In silhouette, as he moved away.”

“And you figure you’ve seen him before.”

“But I don’t know where.”

“Outstanding,” Bannon said.

“There was something about the way he moved, that’s all. The shape of his body. His clothing, maybe. It’s just out of reach. Like the next line of an old song.”

“Was he the guy from the garage video?”

“No,” Reacher said.

Bannon nodded. “Whatever, it doesn’t mean much. Stands to reason you’ve seen him before. You’ve been in the same place at the same time, in Bismarck for sure, and maybe elsewhere. We already know they’ve seen *you*. Because of the phone call. But it would be nice to have a name and face, I guess.”

“I’ll let you know,” Reacher said.

“Your theory still standing?” Stuyvesant asked.

“Yes,” Bannon said. “We’re still looking at your ex-employees. Now more than ever. Because we think that’s why Crosetti left his post. We think he saw somebody he knew and trusted.”

They drove the half mile west on Pennsylvania Avenue and parked in the garage and rode up to the Secret Service’s own conference room. Every inch of the short journey was bitter without Froelich.

“Hell of a thing,” Stuyvesant said. “I never lost an agent before. Twenty-five years. And now I’ve lost two in a day. I *want* these guys, so bad.”

“They’re dead men walking,” Reacher said.

“All the evidence is against us,” Stuyvesant said.

“So what are you saying? You don’t want them if they’re yours?”

“I don’t want them to *be* ours.”

“I don’t think they *are* yours,” Reacher said. “But either way, they’re going down. Let’s be real straight about that. They’ve crossed so many lines I’ve given up counting.”

“I don’t want them to be ours,” Stuyvesant said again. “But I’m afraid Bannon might be right.”

“It’s either-or,” Reacher said. “That’s all. Either he’s right or he’s wrong. If he’s right, we’ll know soon enough because he’ll bust his balls to show us. Thing is, he’ll never look at the possibility that he’s wrong. He wants to be right too much.”

“Tell me he’s wrong.”

“I think he *is* wrong. And the upside is, if I’m wrong that he’s wrong, it doesn’t matter worth a damn. Because he’s going to leave no stone unturned. We can absolutely rely on him. He doesn’t need our input. Our responsibility is to look at what he’s *not* looking at. Which I think is the right place to look anyway.”

“Just tell me he’s wrong.”

“His thing is like a big pyramid balancing on its point. Very impressive, until it falls over. He’s betting everything on the fact that Armstrong hasn’t been told. But there’s no logic in that. Maybe these guys *are* targeting Armstrong personally. Maybe they just didn’t know you wouldn’t tell him.”

Stuyvesant nodded.

“I might buy that,” he said. “God knows I want to. But there’s the NCIC thing. Bannon was right about that. If they were outside our community, they’d have pointed us toward Minnesota and Colorado personally. We have to face that.”

“The weapons are persuasive too,” Neagley said. “And Froelich’s address.”

Reacher nodded. “So is the thumbprint, actually. If we really want to depress ourselves we should consider if maybe they *knew* the print wouldn’t come back. Maybe they ran a test from this end.”

“Great,” Stuyvesant said.

"Great," Stuyvesant said.

"But I still don't believe it," Reacher said.

"Why not?"

"Get the messages and take a real close look."

Stuyvesant waited a beat and then stood up slowly and left the room. Came back three minutes later with a file folder. He opened it up and laid the six official FBI photographs in a neat line down the center of the table. He was still wearing his pink sweater. The bright color was reflected in the glossy surfaces of the eight-by-tens as he leaned over them. Neagley moved around the table and all three of them sat side by side so they could read the messages the right way up.

"OK," Reacher said. "Examine them. Everything about them. And remember why you're doing it. You're doing it for Froelich."

The line of photographs was four feet long, and they had to stand up and shuffle left to right along the table to inspect them all.

You are going to die.

Vice-President–elect Armstrong is going to die.

The day upon which Armstrong will die is fast approaching.

A demonstration of your vulnerability will be staged today.

Did you like the demonstration?

It's going to happen soon.

"So?" Stuyvesant asked.

"Look at the fourth message," Reacher said. "*Vulnerability* is correctly spelled."

"So?"

"That's a big word. And look at the last message. The apostrophe in *it's* is correct. Lots of people get that wrong, you know, *it's* and *its*. There are periods

at the ends, except for the question mark."

"So?"

"The messages are reasonably literate."

"OK."

"Now look at the third message."

"What about it?"

"Neagley?" Reacher asked.

"It's a little fancy," she said. "A little awkward and old-fashioned. The *upon which* thing. And the *fast approaching* thing."

"Exactly," Reacher said. "A little archaic."

"But what does all this prove?" Stuyvesant asked.

"Nothing, really," Reacher said. "But it suggests something. Have you ever read the Constitution?"

"Of what? The United States?"

"Sure."

"I guess I've read it," Stuyvesant said. "A long time ago, probably."

"Me too," Reacher said. "Some school I was at gave us a copy each. It was a thin little book, thick cardboard covers. Very narrow when it was shut. The edges were hard. We used to karate-chop each other with it. Hurt like hell."

"So?"

"It's a legal document, basically. Historical, too, of course, but it's fundamentally legal. So when somebody prints it up as a book, they can't mess with it. They have to reproduce it exactly word for word, otherwise it wouldn't be valid. They can't modernize the language, they can't clean it up."

"Obviously not."

"Obviously not."

"The early parts are from 1787. The last amendment in my copy was the twenty-sixth, from 1971, lowering the voting age to eighteen. A span of a hundred and eighty-four years. With everything reproduced exactly like it was written down at the particular time."

"So?"

"One thing I remember is that in the first part, *Vice President* is written without a hyphen between the two words. Same in the latest part. No hyphen. But in the stuff that was written in the middle period, there is a hyphen. It's *Vice-President* with a hyphen between the words. So clearly from about the 1860s up to maybe the 1930s it was considered correct usage to use a hyphen there."

"These guys use a hyphen," Stuyvesant said.

"They sure do," Reacher said. "Right there in the second message."

"So what does that mean?"

"Two things," Reacher said. "We know they paid attention in class, because they're reasonably literate. So the first thing it means is that they went to school someplace where they used old textbooks and old style manuals that were way out of date. Which explains the third message's archaic feel, maybe. And which is why I figured they might be from a poor rural area with low school taxes. Second thing it means is they never worked for the Secret Service. Because you guys are buried in paperwork. I've never seen anything like it, even in the Army. Anybody who worked here would have written *Vice President* a million times over in their career. All with the modern usage without the hyphen. They would have gotten totally used to it that way."

There was quiet for a moment.

"Maybe the other guy wrote it," Stuyvesant said. "The one who didn't work here. The one with the thumbprint."

"Makes no difference," Reacher said. "Like Bannon figured, they're a unit. They're collaborators. And perfectionists. If one guy had written it wrong, the other guy would have corrected it. But it wasn't corrected, therefore neither of them knew it was wrong. Therefore neither of them worked here."

Stuyvesant was silent for a long moment.

“I want to believe it,” he said. “But you’re basing everything on a hyphen.”

“Don’t dismiss it,” Reacher said.

“I’m not dismissing it,” Stuyvesant said. “I’m thinking.”

“About whether I’m crazy?”

“About whether I can afford to back this kind of hunch.”

“That’s the beauty of it,” Reacher said. “It doesn’t matter if I’m completely wrong. Because the FBI is taking care of the alternative scenario.”

“It could be deliberate,” Neagley said. “They might be misleading us. Trying to disguise their background or their education level. Throwing us off.”

Reacher shook his head.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “This is too subtle. They’d do all the usual things. Gross misspellings, bad punctuation. A hyphen between *Vice* and *President* is something you don’t know from right or wrong. It’s something you just do.”

“What are the exact implications?” Stuyvesant asked.

“Age is critical,” Reacher said. “They can’t be older than early fifties, to be running around doing all this stuff. Up ladders, down stairs. They can’t be younger than mid-forties, because you read the Constitution in junior high, and surely by 1970 every school in America had new books. I think they were in junior high at or toward the end of the period when isolated rural schools were still way behind the times. You know, maybe one-room schoolhouses, fifty-year-old textbooks, out-of-date maps on the wall, you’re sitting there with all your cousins listening to some gray-haired old lady.”

“It’s very speculative,” Stuyvesant said. “It’s a pyramid too, balancing on its point. Looks good until it falls over.”

Silence in the room.

“Well, I’m going to pursue it,” Reacher said. “With Armstrong, or without him. With you, or without you. By myself, if necessary. For Froelich’s sake. She deserves it.”

Stuyvesant nodded. “If neither of them worked for us, how would they know to rely on an FBI scan of the NCIC reports?”

“I don’t know,” Reacher said.

“How did they decoy Crosetti?”

“I don’t know.”

“How would they get our weapons?”

“I don’t know.”

“How did they know where M. E. lived?”

“Nendick told them.”

Stuyvesant nodded. “OK. But what would be their motive?”

“Animosity against Armstrong personally, I guess. A politician must make plenty of enemies.”

Silence again.

“Maybe it’s half and half,” Neagley said. “Maybe they’re outsiders with animosity against the Secret Service. Maybe guys who got rejected for a job. Guys who really wanted to work here. Maybe they’re some kind of nerdy law-enforcement buffs. They might know about NCIC. They might know what weapons you buy.”

“That’s possible,” Stuyvesant said. “We turn down a lot of people. Some of them get very upset about it. You could be right.”

“No,” Reacher said. “She’s wrong. Why would they wait? I’m sticking by my age estimate. And nobody applies for a Secret Service job at the age of fifty. If they ever got turned down, it was twenty-five years ago. Why wait until now to retaliate?”

“That’s a good point too,” Stuyvesant said.

“This is about Armstrong personally,” Reacher said. “It has to be. Think about the time line here. Think about cause and effect. Armstrong became the running mate during the summer. Before that nobody had ever heard of him. Froelich told me that herself. Now we’re getting threats against him. Why now? Because of something he did during the campaign, that’s why.”

Stuyvesant stared down at the table. Placed his hands flat on it. Moved them in small neat circles like there was a wrinkled tablecloth under them that needed flattening. Then he leaned over and butted the first message under the second. Then both of them under the third. He kept at it until he had all six stacked neatly. He scooped his file folder under the pile and closed it.

“OK, this is what we’re going to do,” he said. “We’re going to give Neagley’s theory to Bannon. Somebody we refused to hire is more or less in the same category as somebody we eventually fired. The bitterness component would be about the same. The FBI can deal with all of that as a whole. We’ve got the paperwork. They’ve got the manpower. And the balance of probability is that they’re correct. But we’d be derelict if we didn’t also consider the alternative. That they might not be correct. So we’re going to spend our time looking at Reacher’s theory. Because we’ve got to do *something*, for Froelich’s sake, apart from anything else. So where do we start?”

“With Armstrong,” Reacher said. “We figure out who hates him and why.”

Stuyvesant called a guy from the Office of Protection Research and ordered him into the office immediately. The guy pleaded he was eating Thanksgiving dinner with his family. Stuyvesant relented and gave him two hours to finish up. Then he headed back to the Hoover Building to meet with Bannon again. Reacher and Neagley waited in reception. There was a television in there and Reacher wanted to see if Armstrong delivered on the early news. It was a half hour away.

“You OK?” Neagley asked.

“I feel weird,” Reacher said. “Like I’m two people. She thought I was Joe with her at the end.”

“What would Joe have done about it?”

“Same as I’m going to do about it, probably.”

“So go ahead and do it,” Neagley said. “You always were Joe as far as she was concerned. You may as well square the circle for her.”

He said nothing.

“Close your eyes,” Neagley said. “Clear your mind. You need to concentrate on the shooter.”

Reacher shook his head. “I won’t get it if I concentrate.”

“So think about something else. Use peripheral vision. Pretend you’re looking somewhere else. The next roof along, maybe.”

He closed his eyes. Saw the edge of the roof, harsh against the sun. Saw the sky, bright and pale all at the same time. A winter sky. Just a trace of uniform misty haze all over it. He gazed at the sky. Recalled the sounds he had been hearing. Nothing much from the crowd. Just the clatter of serving spoons, and Froelich saying *thanks for stopping by*. Mrs. Armstrong saying *enjoy*, nervously, like she wasn’t quite sure what she had gotten herself into. Then he heard the soft *chunk* of the first silenced bullet hitting the wall. It had been a poor shot. It had missed Armstrong by four feet. Probably a rushed shot. The guy comes up the stairs, stands in the rooftop doorway, calls softly to Crosetti. *And Crosetti responds*. The guy waits for Crosetti to come to him. Maybe backs away into the stairwell. Crosetti comes on. Crosetti gets shot. The rooftop hutch muffles the sound from the silencer. The guy steps over the body and runs crouched straight to the lip of the roof. Kneels and fires hastily, too soon, before he’s really settled, and he misses by four feet. The miss craters the brick and a small chip flies off and hits Reacher in the cheek. The guy racks the bolt and aims more carefully for the second shot.

He opened his eyes.

“I want you to work on *how*,” he said.

“How what, exactly?” Neagley said.

“How they lured Crosetti away from his post. I want to know how they did that.”

How they lured Crosetti away from his post. I want to know how they did that.

Neagley was quiet for a moment.

“I’m afraid Bannon’s theory fits best,” she said. “Crosetti looked up and saw somebody he recognized.”

“Assume he didn’t,” Reacher said. “How else?”

“I’ll work on it. You work on the shooter.”

He closed his eyes again and looked at the next roof along. Back down at the serving tables. Froelich, in the last minute of her life. He recalled the spray of blood and his immediate instinctive reaction. *Incoming lethal fire. Point of origin?* He had glanced up and seen . . . what? The curve of a back or a shoulder. It was moving. The shape and the movement were somehow one and the same thing.

“His coat,” he said. “The shape of his coat over his body, and the way it draped when he moved.”

“Seen the coat before?”

“Yes.”

“Color?”

“I don’t know. Not sure it really *had* a color.”

“Texture?”

“Texture is important. Not thick, not thin.”

“Herringbone?”

Reacher shook his head. “Not the coat we saw on the garage video. Not the guy, either. This guy was taller and leaner. Some length in his upper body. It gave the coat its drape. I think it was a long coat.”

“You only saw his shoulder.”

“It *flowed* like a long coat.”

“How did it flow?”

“Energetically. Like the guy was moving fast.”

“He would be. Far as he knew he’d just shot Armstrong.”

“No, like he was always energetic. A rangy guy, decisive in his movements.”

“Age?”

“Older than us.”

“Build?”

“Moderate.”

“Hair?”

“Don’t remember.”

He kept his eyes closed and searched his memory for coats. *A long coat, not thick, not thin*. He let his mind drift, but it always came back to the Atlantic City coat store. Standing there in front of a rainbow of choices, five whole minutes after making a stupid random decision that had led him away from the peace and quiet of a lonely motel room in La Jolla, California.

He gave up on it twenty minutes later and gestured for the duty officer to turn the television sound up for the news. The story led the bulletin, obviously. The coverage opened with a studio portrait of Armstrong in a box behind the anchorman’s shoulder. Then it cut to video of Armstrong handing his wife out of the limo. They stood up together and smiled. Started to walk past the camera. Then the tape cut to Armstrong holding up his ladle and his spoon. A smile on his face. The voice-over paused long enough for the live sound to come up: *Happy Thanksgiving, everybody!* Then there were seven or eight seconds taken from a little later on when the food line was really moving.

Then it happened.

Because of the silencer there was no gunshot, and because there was no gunshot the cameraman didn't duck or startle in the usual way. The picture held steady. And because there was no gunshot it seemed completely inexplicable why Froelich was suddenly jumping at Armstrong. It looked a little different, seen from the front. She just took off from her left foot and twisted up and sideways. She looked desperate, but graceful. They ran it once at normal speed, and then again in slow motion. She got her right hand on his left shoulder and pushed him down and herself up. Her momentum carried her all the way around and she drew her knees up and simply knocked him over with them. He fell and she followed him down. She was a foot below her maximum height when the second bullet came in and hit her.

"Shit," Reacher said.

Neagley nodded, slowly. "She was too quick. A quarter second slower she'd still have been high enough in the air to take it in the vest."

"She was too good."

They ran it again, normal speed. It was all over in a second. Then they let the tape run on. The cameraman seemed rooted to the spot. Reacher saw himself barging through the tables. Saw the other agents firing. Froelich was out of sight, on the floor. The camera ducked because of the firing, but then came up level again and started moving in. The picture wobbled as the guy stumbled over something. There were long moments of total confusion. Then the cameraman started forward again, hungry for a shot of the downed agent. Neagley's face appeared, and the picture went black. Coverage switched back to the anchorman. The anchorman looked straight at the camera and announced that Armstrong's reaction had been immediate and emphatic.

The picture cut to tape of an outdoors location Reacher recognized as the West Wing's parking lot. Armstrong was standing there with his wife. They were both still in their casual clothes, but they had taken their Kevlar vests off. Somebody had cleaned Froelich's blood from Armstrong's face. His hair was combed. He looked resolute. He spoke in low, controlled tones, like a plain man wrestling with strong emotions. He talked about his extreme sadness that two agents had died. He extolled their qualities as individuals. He offered sincere sympathy to their families. He went on to say he hoped it would be seen that they had died protecting democracy itself, not just himself in person. He hoped their families

might take some small measure of comfort from that, as well as a great deal of justified pride. He promised swift and certain retribution against the perpetrators of the outrage. He assured America that no amount of violence or intimidation could deter the workings of government, and that the transition would continue unaffected. But he finished by saying that as a mark of his absolute respect, he was remaining in Washington and canceling all engagements until he had attended a memorial service for his personal friend and protection team leader. He said the service would be held on Sunday morning, in a small country church in a small Wyoming town called Grace, where no finer metaphor for America's enduring greatness could be found.

"Guy's full of shit," the duty officer said.

"No, he's OK," Reacher said.

The bulletin cut to first-quarter football highlights. The duty officer muted the sound and turned away. Reacher closed his eyes. Thought of Joe, and then of Froelich. Thought of them together. Then he rehearsed his upward glance once again. The curved spray of Froelich's blood, the curve of the shooter's shoulder, retreating, swinging away, *swooping* away. The coat flowing with him. *The coat*. He ran it all again, like the TV station had rerun its tape. He froze on the coat. *He knew*. He opened his eyes wide.

"Figured how yet?" he asked.

"Can't get past Bannon's take," Neagley answered.

"Say it."

"Crosetti saw somebody he knew and trusted."

"Man or woman?"

"Man, according to you."

"OK, say it again."

Neagley shrugged. "Crosetti saw some man he knew and trusted."

Reacher shook his head. "Two words short. Crosetti saw some *type of* man he

knew and trusted."

"Who?" she asked.

"Who can get in and out of anywhere without suspicion?"

Neagley looked at him. "Law enforcement?"

Reacher nodded. "The coat was long, kind of reddish-brown, faint pattern to it. Too thin for an overcoat, too thick for a raincoat, flapping open. It swung as he ran."

"As who ran?"

"That Bismarck cop. The lieutenant or whatever he was. He ran over to me after I came out of the church. It was him on the warehouse roof."

"It was a *cop*?"

"That's a very serious allegation," Bannon said. "Based on a quarter-second of observation from ninety yards during extreme mayhem."

They were back in the FBI's conference room. Stuyvesant had never left it. He was still in his pink sweater. The room was still impressive.

"It was him," Reacher said. "No doubt about it."

"Cops are all fingerprinted," Bannon said. "Condition of employment."

"So his partner isn't a cop," Reacher said. "The guy on the garage video."

Nobody spoke.

"It was him," Reacher said again.

"How long did you see him for in Bismarck?" Bannon asked.

"Ten seconds, maybe," Reacher said. "He was heading for the church. Maybe he'd seen me inside, ducked out, saw me leave, turned around, got ready to go

back in.”

“Ten and a quarter seconds total,” Bannon said. “Both times in panic situations. Defense counsel would eat you up.”

“It makes sense,” Stuyvesant said. “Bismarck is Armstrong’s hometown. Hometowns are the places to look for feuds.”

Bannon made a face. “Description?”

“Tall,” Reacher said. “Sandy hair going gray. Lean face, lean body. Long coat, some kind of a heavy twill, reddish-brown, open. Tweed jacket, white shirt, tie, gray flannel pants. Big old shoes.”

“Age?”

“Middle or late forties.”

“Rank?”

“He showed me a gold badge, but he stayed twenty feet away. I couldn’t read it. He struck me as a senior guy. Maybe a detective lieutenant, maybe even a captain.”

“Did he speak?”

“He shouted from twenty feet away. Couple dozen words, maybe.”

“Was he the guy on the phone?”

“No.”

“So now we know both of them,” Stuyvesant said. “A shorter squat guy in a herringbone overcoat from the garage video and a tall lean cop from Bismarck. The squat guy spoke on the phone, and it’s his thumbprint. And he was in Colorado with the machine gun because the cop is the marksman with the rifle. That’s why he was heading for the church tower. He was going to shoot.”

Bannon opened a file. Pulled a sheet of paper. Studied it carefully.

“Our Bismarck field office listed all attending personnel,” he said. “There were

forty-two local cops on the field. Nobody above the rank of sergeant except for two, firstly the senior officer present, who was a captain, and his second-in-command, who was a lieutenant."

"Might have been either one of them," Reacher said.

Bannon sighed. "This puts us in a difficult spot."

Stuyvesant stared at him. "Now you're worried about upsetting the Bismarck PD? You didn't worry too much about upsetting us."

"I'm not worried about upsetting anybody," Bannon said. "I'm thinking tactically, is all. If it had been a patrolman out there I could call the captain or the lieutenant and ask him to investigate. Can't do that the other way around. And alibis are going to be all over the place. Senior ranks will be off-duty today for the holiday."

"Call now," Neagley said. "Find out who's not in town. They can't be home yet. You're watching the airports."

Bannon shook his head. "People aren't home today for lots of reasons. They're visiting family, stuff like that. And this guy *could* be home already. He could have gotten through the airports easy as anything. That's the whole point, isn't it? Mayhem like we had today, multiple agencies out and looking, nobody knows each other, all he's got to do is hustle along holding his badge up and he walks straight through anywhere. That's obviously how they got into the immediate area. And out again. What's more natural in the circumstances than a cop running full speed with his badge held up?"

The room went quiet.

"Personnel files," Stuyvesant said. "We should get Bismarck PD to send us their files and let Reacher look at the photographs."

"That would take days," Bannon said. "And who would I ask? I might be speaking directly to the bad guy."

"So speak to your Bismarck field office," Neagley said. "Wouldn't surprise me if the local FBI had illicit summaries on the whole police department, with photographs."

Bannon smiled. “You’re not supposed to know about things like that.”

Then he stood up slowly and went out to his office to make the necessary call.

“So Armstrong made the statement,” Stuyvesant said. “Did you see it? But it’s going to cost him politically, because I can’t let him go.”

“I need a decoy, is all,” Reacher said. “Better for me if he doesn’t really show up. And the last thing I care about right now is politics.”

Stuyvesant didn’t answer. Nobody spoke again. Bannon came back into the room after fifteen minutes. He had a completely neutral look on his face.

“Good news and bad news,” he said. “Good news is that Bismarck isn’t the largest city on earth. Police department employs a hundred thirty-eight people, of which thirty-two are civilian workers, leaving a hundred and six badged officers. Twelve of those are women, so we’re down to ninety-four already. And thanks to the miracles of illicit intelligence and modern technology we’ll have scanned and e-mailed mug shots of all ninety-four of them within ten minutes.”

“What’s the bad news?” Stuyvesant asked.

“Later,” Bannon said. “After Reacher has wasted a little more of our time.”

He looked around the room. Wouldn’t say anything more. In the end the wait was a little less than ten minutes. An agent in a suit hurried in with a sheaf of paper. He stacked it in front of Bannon. Bannon pushed the pile across to Reacher. Reacher picked it up and flicked through. Sixteen sheets, some of them still a little wet from the printer. Fifteen sheets had six photographs each and the sixteenth had just four. Ninety-four faces in total. He started with the last sheet. None of the four faces was even close.

He picked up the fifteenth sheet. Glanced across the next six faces and put the paper down again. Picked up the fourteenth sheet. Scanned all six pictures. He worked fast. He didn’t need to study carefully. He had the guy’s features fixed firmly in his mind. But the guy wasn’t on the fourteenth sheet. Or the thirteenth.

“How sure are you?” Stuyvesant asked.

Nothing on the twelfth sheet.

“I’m sure,” Reacher said. “That was the guy, and the guy was a cop. He had a badge and he looked like a cop. He looked as much like a cop as Bannon.”

Nothing on the eleventh sheet. Or the tenth.

“I don’t look like a cop,” Bannon said.

Nothing on the ninth sheet.

“You look exactly like a cop,” Reacher said. “You’ve got a cop coat, cop pants, cop shoes. You’ve got a cop face.”

Nothing on the eighth sheet.

“He acted like a cop,” Reacher said.

Nothing on the seventh sheet.

“He smelled like a cop,” Reacher said.

Nothing on the sixth sheet. Nothing on the fifth sheet.

“What did he say to you?” Stuyvesant asked.

Nothing on the fourth sheet.

“He asked me if the church was secure,” Reacher said. “I asked him what was going on. He said some kind of big commotion. Then he yelled at me for leaving the church door open. Just like a cop would talk.”

Nothing on the third sheet. Or the second. He picked up the first sheet and knew instantly that the guy wasn’t on it. He dropped the paper and shook his head.

“OK, now for the bad news,” Bannon said. “Bismarck PD had nobody there in plain clothes. Nobody at all. It was considered a ceremonial occasion. They were all in full uniform. All forty-two of them. Especially the brass. The captain and the lieutenant were in full *dress* uniform. White gloves and all.”

“The guy was a Bismarck cop,” Reacher said.

“No,” Bannon said. “The guy was not a Bismarck cop. At best he was a guy impersonating a Bismarck cop.”

Reacher said nothing.

“But he was obviously making a pretty good stab at it,” Bannon said. “He convinced you, for instance. Clearly he had the look, and the mannerisms.”

Nobody spoke.

“So nothing’s changed, I’m afraid,” Bannon said. “We’re still looking at recent Secret Service ex-employees. Because who better to impersonate a provincial cop than some other law-enforcement veteran who just worked his whole career alongside provincial cops at events exactly like that one?”

15

A staffer from the Office of Protection Research was waiting when Reacher and Neagley and Stuyvesant got back to the Treasury Building. He was standing in the reception area wearing a knitted sweater and blue pants, like he had run straight in from the family dinner table. He was about Reacher's age and looked like a university professor except for his eyes. They were wise and wary, like he had seen a few things, and heard about plenty more. His name was Swain. Stuyvesant introduced him all around and disappeared. Swain led Reacher and Neagley through corridors they hadn't used before to an area that clearly doubled as a library and a lecture room. It had a dozen chairs set facing a podium and was lined on three walls with bookshelves. The fourth wall had a row of hutches with computers on desks. A printer next to each computer.

"I heard what the FBI is saying," Swain said.

"You believe it?" Reacher asked.

Swain just shrugged.

"Yes or no?" Reacher asked.

"I guess it's not impossible," Swain said. "But there's no reason to believe it's likely. Just as likely that it's ex-FBI agents. Or *current* FBI agents. As an agency we're better than they are. Maybe they're trying to bring us down."

"Think we should look in that direction?"

"You're Joe Reacher's brother, aren't you?"

Reacher nodded.

"I worked with him," Swain said. "Way back."

"And?"

"He used to encourage random observations."

"So do I," Reacher said. "You got any?"

“My job is strictly academic,” Swain said. “You understand? I’m purely a researcher. A scholar, really. I’m here to analyze.”

“And?”

“This situation feels different from anything else I’ve seen. The hatred is very visible. Assassinations fall into two groups, ideological or functional. A functional assassination is where you need to get rid of a guy for some specific political or economic reason. An ideological assassination is where you murder a guy because you hate him, basically. There have been plenty of attempts along those lines, over the years. I can’t tell you about any of them except to say that most don’t get very far. And that there’s certainly always plenty of hatred involved. But usually it’s well hidden, down at the conspirator level. They whisper among themselves. All we ever see is the result. But this time the hatred is right there in our face. They’ve gone to a lot of trouble and taken a lot of risks to make sure we know all about it.”

“So what’s your conclusion?”

“I just think the early phase was extraordinary. The messages? Think about the risks. Think about the energy required to minimize those risks. They put unbelievable resources into the early phase. So I have to assume they felt it was worthwhile.”

“But it wasn’t,” Neagley said. “Armstrong has never even seen any of the messages. They were wasting their time.”

“Simple ignorance,” Swain said. “Were *you* aware we absolutely won’t discuss threats with a protectee?”

“No,” Neagley said. “I was surprised.”

“Nobody’s aware,” Swain said. “Everybody’s surprised. These guys thought they were getting right to him. So I’m convinced it’s personal. Aimed at him, not us.”

“So are we,” Reacher said. “You got a specific reason?”

“You’ll think I’m naive,” Swain said. “But I don’t believe anybody who works or has worked for us would have killed the other two Armstrongs. Not just like that.”

that.

Reacher shrugged. “Maybe you’re naive. Maybe you aren’t. But it doesn’t matter. We’re convinced anyway.”

“What’s your reason?”

“The hyphen in the second message.”

“The hyphen?” Swain said. Then he paused. “Yes, I see. Plausible, but a little circumstantial, wouldn’t you say?”

“Whatever, we’re working with the assumption it was personal.”

“OK, but why? Only possible answer is they absolutely hate him. They wanted to taunt him, scare him, make him suffer first. Just shooting him isn’t enough for them.”

“So who are they? Who hates him that bad?”

Swain made a gesture with his hand, like he was pushing that question aside.

“Something else,” he said. “This is a little off the wall, but I think we’re miscounting. How many messages have there been?”

“Six,” Reacher said.

“No,” Swain said. “I think there have been seven.”

“Where’s the seventh?”

“Nendick,” Swain said. “I think Nendick delivered the second message, and was the third message. You see, you got here and forty-eight hours later you got to Nendick, which was pretty quick. But with respect, we’d have gotten there anyway, sooner or later. It was inevitable. If it wasn’t the cleaners, it had to be the tapes. So we’d have gotten there. And what was waiting for us? Nendick wasn’t just a delivery system. He was a message *in himself*. He showed what these people are capable of. Assuming Armstrong was in the loop, he’d have been getting pretty shaky by that point.”

“Then there are nine messages,” Neagley said. “On that basis, we should add in the Minnesota and the Colorado situations.”

the Minnesota and the Colorado situations."

"Absolutely," Swain said. "You see what I mean? Everything has fear as its purpose. Every single thing. Suppose Armstrong *was* in the loop all along. He gets the first message, he's worried. *We* get the second message, he's more worried. We trace its source, and he starts to feel better, but no, it gets even worse, because we find Nendick paralyzed with fear. Then we get the demonstration threat, he's worried some more. Then the demonstration happens, and he's devastated by how ruthless it was."

Reacher said nothing. Just stared at the floor.

"You think I'm overanalytical," Swain said.

Reacher shook his head, still looking at the floor. "No, I think I'm underanalytical. Maybe. Possibly. Because what are the thumbprints about?"

"They're a taunt of a different sort," Swain said. "They're a boast. A puzzle. A tease. *Can't catch me* sort of thing."

"How long did you work with my brother?"

"Five years. I worked *for* him, really. I say *with him* as a vain attempt at status."

"Was he a good boss?"

"He was a great boss," Swain said. "Great guy all around."

"And he ran random-observation sessions?"

Swain nodded. "They were fun. Anybody could say anything."

"Did he join in?"

"He was very lateral."

Reacher looked up. "You just said everything has fear as its purpose, every single thing. Then you said the thumbprints are a taunt of a different sort. So not everything is the same, right? Something's different."

Swain shrugged. "I could stretch it. The thumbprints induce the fear that these

guys are too clever to be caught. Different sort of fear, but it's still *fear*."

Reacher looked away. Went quiet. Thirty seconds, a whole minute.

"I'm going to cave in," he said. "Finally. I'm going to be like Joe. I'm wearing his suit. I was sleeping with his girlfriend. I keep meeting his old colleagues. So now I'm going to make a lateral random off-the-wall observation, just like he did, apparently."

"What is it?" Neagley said.

"I think we missed something," Reacher said. "Just skated right on by it."

"What?"

"I've got all these weird images going around in my head. Like for instance, Stuyvesant's secretary doing things at her desk."

"What things?"

"I think we've got the thumbprint exactly ass-backward. All along we've assumed they knew it was untraceable. But I think we're completely wrong. I think it's just the opposite. I think they expected it *would* be traceable."

"Why?"

"Because I think the thumbprint thing is exactly the same as the Nendick thing. I met a watchmaker today. He told me where squalene comes from."

"Sharks' livers," Neagley said.

"And people's noses," Reacher said. "Same stuff. That gunk you wake up with in the morning is squalene. Same chemical exactly."

"So?"

"So I think our guys gambled and got unlucky. Suppose you picked a random male person aged about sixty or seventy. What are the chances he'd have been fingerprinted at least once in his lifetime?"

"Pretty good, I guess," Neagley said. "All immigrants are printed. American

born, he'd have been drafted for Korea or Vietnam and printed even if he didn't go. He'd have been printed if he'd ever been arrested or worked for the government."

"Or for some private corporations," Swain said. "Plenty of them require prints. Banks, retailers, people like that."

"OK," Reacher said. "So here's the thing. I don't think the thumbprint comes from one of the guys themselves. I think it comes from somebody else entirely. From some innocent bystander. From somebody they picked out at random. And it was supposed to lead us directly *to* that somebody."

The room went quiet. Neagley stared at Reacher.

"What for?" she said.

"So we could find another Nendick," he said. "The thumbprint was *on* every message, and the guy it came from *was* a message, just like Swain says Nendick was. We were supposed to trace the print and find the guy and find an exact replica of the Nendick situation. Some terrified victim, too scared to open his mouth and tell us anything. A message in himself. But by pure accident our guys hit on somebody who had never been printed, so we couldn't find him."

"But there were six paper messages," Swain said. "Probably twenty days between the first one going in the mail and the last one being delivered to Froelich's house. So what does that mean? All the messages were prepared in advance? That's way too much planning ahead, surely."

"It's possible," Neagley said. "They could have printed dozens of variations, one for every eventuality."

"No," Reacher said. "I think they printed them up as they went along. I think they kept the thumbprint available to them at all times."

"How?" Swain asked. "They abducted some guy and took him hostage? They've stashed him somewhere? They're taking him everywhere with them?"

"Couldn't work," Neagley said. "Can't expect us to find him if he's not home."

"He's home," Reacher said. "But his thumb isn't."

Nobody spoke.

“Fire up a computer,” Reacher said. “Search NCIC for the word *thumb*.”

“We’ve got a big field office in Sacramento,” Bannon said. “Three agents are already mobile. A doctor, too. We’ll know in an hour.”

This time Bannon had come to them. They were in the Secret Service conference room, Stuyvesant at the head of the table, Reacher and Neagley and Swain together on one side, Bannon alone on the other.

“It’s a bizarre idea,” Bannon said. “What would they do? Keep it in the freezer?”

“Probably,” Reacher said. “Thaw it a bit, rub it down their nose, print it on the paper. Just like Stuyvesant’s secretary with her rubber stamp. It’s probably drying out a bit with age, which is why the squalene percentage keeps getting higher.”

“What are the implications?” Stuyvesant said. “Assuming you’re right?”

Reacher made a face. “We can change one major assumption. Now I would guess they’ve both got prints on file, and they’ve both been wearing the latex gloves.”

“Two renegades,” Bannon said.

“Not necessarily ours,” Stuyvesant said.

“So explain the other factors,” Bannon said.

Nobody spoke. Bannon shrugged.

“Come on,” he said. “We’ve got an hour. And I don’t want to be looking in the wrong place. So convince me. Show me these are private citizens gunning for Armstrong personally.”

Stuyvesant glanced at Swain, but Swain said nothing.

“Time is ticking by,” Bannon said.

“This isn’t an ideal context,” Swain said.

Bannon smiled. “What, you only preach to the choir?”

Nobody spoke.

“You’ve got no case,” Bannon said. “I mean, who cares about a Vice President? They’re nobodies. What was it, a bucket of warm spit?”

“It was a pitcher,” Swain said. “John Nance Garner said the Vice Presidency isn’t worth a pitcher of warm spit. He also called it a spare tire on the automobile of government. He was FDR’s first running mate. John Adams called it the most insignificant office man had ever invented, and he was the first Vice President of all.”

“So who cares enough to shoot a spare tire or an insignificant pitcher of spit?”

“Let me start from the beginning,” Swain said. “What does a Vice President do?”

“He sits around,” Bannon says. “Hopes the big guy dies.”

Swain nodded. “Somebody else said the Vice President’s job is merely about waiting. In case the President dies, sure, but more often for the nomination in his own right eight years down the track. But in the short term, what is the Vice President *for*?”

“Beats the hell out of me,” Bannon said.

“He’s there to be a candidate,” Swain said. “That’s the bottom line. His design life lasts from when he’s tapped in the summer until election day. He’s useful for four or five months, tops. He starts out as a pick-me-up for the campaign. Everybody’s bored to death with the presidential nominees by midsummer, so the VP picks put a jolt into the campaigns. Suddenly we’ve all got something else to talk about. Somebody else to analyze. We look at their qualities and their records. We figure out how well they balance the tickets. That’s their initial function. Balance and contrast. Whatever the presidential nominee isn’t, the VP nominee *is*, and vice versa. Young, old, racy, dull, northern, southern, dumb, smart, hard, soft, rich, poor.”

“We get the picture,” Bannon said.

We get the picture," Bannon said.

"So he's there for what he *is*," Swain said. "Initially he's just a photograph and a biography. He's a *concept*. Then his duties start. He's got to have campaigning skills, obviously. Because he's there to be the attack dog. He's got to be able to say the stuff the presidential candidate isn't allowed to say himself. If the campaign scripts an attack or a put-down, it's the VP candidate they get to deliver it. Meanwhile the presidential candidate stands around somewhere else looking all statesmanlike. Then the election happens and the presidential candidate goes to the White House and the VP gets put away in a closet. His usefulness is over, first Tuesday in November."

"Was Armstrong good at that kind of stuff?"

"He was excellent. The truth is he was a very negative campaigner, but the polls didn't really show it because he kept that nice smile on his face the whole time. Truth is he was deadly."

"And you think he trod on enough toes to get himself assassinated for it?"

Swain nodded. "That's what I'm working on now. I'm analyzing every speech and comment, matching up his attacks against the profile of the people he was attacking."

"The timing is persuasive," Stuyvesant said. "Nobody can argue with that. He was in the House for six years and the Senate for another six and barely got a nasty letter. This whole thing was triggered by something recent."

"And his recent history is the campaign," Swain said.

"Nothing way in his background?" Bannon asked.

Swain shook his head.

"We're covered four ways," he said. "First and most recent was your own FBI check when he was nominated. We've got a copy and it shows nothing. Then we've got opposition research from the other campaign from this time around and from both of his congressional races. Those guys dig up way more stuff than you do. And he's clean."

"North Dakota sources?"

“Nothing,” Swain said. “We talked to all the papers up there, matter of course. Local journalists know everything, and there’s nothing wrong with the guy.”

“So it was the campaign,” Stuyvesant said. “He pissed somebody off.”

“Somebody who owns Secret Service weapons,” Bannon said. “Somebody who knows about the interface between the Secret Service and the FBI. Somebody who knows you can’t mail something to the Vice President without it going through the Secret Service office first. Somebody who knew where Froelich lived. You ever heard of the duck test? If it looks like a duck, sounds like a duck, walks like a duck?”

Stuyvesant said nothing. Bannon checked his watch. Took his cell phone out of his pocket and laid it on the table in front of him. It sat there, silent.

“I’m sticking with the theory,” he said. “Except now I’m listing both of the bad guys as yours. If this phone rings and Reacher turns out to be right, that is.”

The phone rang right then. He had the ringer set to a squeaky little rendition of some famous classical overture. It sounded ludicrous in the somber stillness of the room. He picked it up and clicked it on. The fatuous tune died. Somebody must have said *chief?* because he said *yeah* and then just listened, not more than eight or nine seconds. Then he clicked the phone off and dropped it back in his jacket pocket.

“Sacramento?” Stuyvesant asked.

“No,” Bannon said. “Local. They found the rifle.”

They left Swain behind and headed over to the FBI labs inside the Hoover Building. An expert staff was assembling. They all looked a lot like Swain himself, academic and scientific types dragged in from home. They were dressed like family men who had expected to remain inert in front of the football game for the rest of the day. A couple of them had already enjoyed a couple of beers. That was clear. Neagley knew one of them, vaguely, from her training stint in the labs many years before.

“Was it a Vaime Mk2?” Bannon asked.

“Without a doubt,” one of the techs said.

“Serial number on it?”

The guy shook his head. “Removed with acid.”

“Anything you can do?”

The guy shook his head again.

“No,” he said. “If it was a stamped number, we could go down under it and find enough distressed crystals in the metal to recover the number, but Vaime uses engraving instead of stamping. Nothing we can do.”

“So where is it now?”

“We’re fuming it for prints,” the guy said. “But it’s hopeless. We got nothing on the fluoroscope. Nothing on the laser. It’s been wiped.”

“Where was it found?”

“In the warehouse. Behind the door of one of the third-floor rooms.”

“I guess they waited in there,” Bannon said. “Maybe five minutes, slipped out at the height of the mayhem. Cool heads.”

“Shell cases?” Neagley asked.

“None,” the tech said. “They must have collected their brass. But we’ve got all four bullets. The three from today are wrecked from impact on hard surfaces. But the Minnesota sample is intact. The mud preserved it.”

He walked to a lab bench where the bullets were laid out on a sheet of clean white butcher paper. Three of them were crushed to distorted blobs by impact. One of the three was clean. That was the one that had missed Armstrong and hit the wall. The other two were smeared with black residue from Crosetti’s brains and Froelich’s blood, respectively. The remains of the human tissue had printed on the copper jackets and burned on the hot surface in characteristic lacy patterns. Then the patterns had collapsed after the bullets had flown on and impacted whatever came next. The back wall, in Froelich’s case. The interior hallway wall, presumably, in Crosetti’s. The Minnesota bullet looked new. Its

passage through the farmyard mud had scoured it clean.

“Get the rifle,” Bannon said.

It came out of the laboratory still smelling of the hot super-glue fumes that had been blown all over it in the hope of finding latent fingerprints. It was a dull, boxy, undramatic weapon. It was painted all over in factory-finish black epoxy paint. It had a short stubby bolt and a relatively short barrel made much longer by the fat suppressor. It had a powerful scope fixed to the sight mounts.

“That’s the wrong scope,” Reacher said. “That’s a Hensoldt. Vaime uses Bushnell scopes.”

“Yeah, it’s been modified,” one of the techs said. “We already logged that.”

“By the factory?”

The guy shook his head.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “High standard, but it’s not factory workmanship.”

“So what does that mean?” Bannon asked.

“I’m not sure,” Reacher said.

“Is a Hensoldt better than a Bushnell?”

“Not really. They’re both fine scopes. Like BMW and Mercedes. Like Canon and Nikon.”

“So a person might have a preference?”

“Not a government person,” Reacher said. “Like, what would you say if one of your crime scene photographers came to you and said, I want a Canon instead of this Nikon you gave me?”

“I’d probably tell him to get lost.”

“Exactly. He works with what he’s got. So I don’t see somebody going to their department armorer and asking him to junk a thousand-dollar Bushnell just because he prefers the feel of a thousand-dollar Hensoldt.”

“So why the switch?”

“I’m not sure,” Reacher said again. “Damage, maybe. If you drop a rifle you can damage a sniper scope pretty easily. But a government repairer would use another Bushnell. They don’t just buy the rifles. They buy crateloads of spare parts along with them.”

“Suppose they were short? Suppose the scopes got damaged a lot?”

“Then they might use a Hensoldt, I guess. Hensoldts usually come with SIG rifles. You need to look at your lists again. Find out if there’s anybody who buys Vaimes *and* SIGs for their snipers.”

“Is the SIG silenced too?”

“No,” Reacher said.

“So there you go,” Bannon said. “Some agency needs two types of sniper rifles, it buys Vaimes as the silenced option and SIGs as the unsilenced option. Two types of scope in the spare-parts bins. They run out of Bushnells, they start in on the Hensoldts.”

“Possible,” Reacher said. “You should make the inquiries. You should ask specifically if anybody has fitted a Hensoldt scope to a Vaime rifle. And if they haven’t, you should start asking commercial gunsmiths. Start with the expensive ones. These are rare pieces. This could be important.”

Stuyvesant was staring into the distance. Worry in the slope of his shoulders.

“What?” Reacher asked.

Stuyvesant focused, and shook his head. A defeated little gesture.

“I’m afraid we bought SIGs,” he said, quietly. “We had a batch of SG550s about five years ago. Unsilenced semiautomatics, as an alternative option. But we don’t use them much because the automatic mechanism makes them a little inaccurate for close crowd situations. They’re mostly stored. We use the Vaimes everywhere now. So I’m sure the SIG parts bins are still full.”

The room was quiet for a moment. Then Bannon’s phone rang again. The insane

The room was quiet for a moment. Then Bannon's phone rang again. The inane little overture trilled into the silence. He clicked it on and put it to his ear and said yeah and listened.

"I see," he said. Listened some more.

"The doctor agree?" he asked. Listened some more.

"I see," he said, and listened.

"I guess," he said, and listened.

"Two?" he asked, and listened.

"OK," he said, and clicked the phone off.

"Upstairs," he said. He was pale.

Stuyvesant and Reacher and Neagley followed him out to the elevator and rode with him up to the conference room. He sat at the head of the table and the others stayed together toward the other end, like they didn't want to get too close to the news. The sky was full dark outside the windows. Thanksgiving Day was grinding to a close.

"His name is Andretti," Bannon said. "Age seventy-three, retired carpenter, retired volunteer firefighter. He's got granddaughters. That's where the pressure came from."

"Is he talking?" Neagley asked.

"Some," Bannon said. "Sounds like he's made of slightly sterner stuff than Nendick."

"So how did it go down?"

"He frequents a cop bar outside of Sacramento, from his firefighting days. He met two guys in there."

"Were they cops?" Reacher asked.

"Cop-like," Bannon said. "That was his description. They got to talking, they got to showing each other pictures of the family. They got to talking about what a

rotten world it is, and what they would do to protect their families from it. It was gradual, he said."

"And?"

"He clammed up on us for a spell, but then our doctor took a look at his hand. The left thumb has been surgically removed. Well, not really *surgically*. Somewhere between severed and hacked off, our guy said. But there was an attempt at neatness. Andretti stuck to his carpentry story. Our doctor said, no way was that a saw. Like, no *way*. Andretti seemed pleased to be contradicted, and he talked some more."

"And?"

"He lives alone. Widower. The two cop-like guys had wormed an invitation home with him. They were asking him, what would you do to protect your family? Like, what would you *do*? How far would you go? It was all rhetorical at first, and then it got practical fast. They told him he would have to give up his thumb or his granddaughters. His choice. They held him down and did it. They took his photographs and his address book. Told him now they knew what his granddaughters looked like and where they lived. Told him they'd take out their ovaries the same way they'd taken off his thumb. And he was ready to believe them, obviously. He would be, right? They'd just done it to *him*. They stole a cooler from the kitchen and some ice from the refrigerator to transport the thumb. They left and he made it to the hospital."

Silence in the room.

"Descriptions?" Stuyvesant asked.

Bannon shook his head.

"Too scared," he said. "My guys talked about Witness Protection for the whole family, but he's not going to bite. My guess is we've got all we're going to get."

"Forensics in the house?"

"Andretti cleaned it thoroughly. They made him. They watched him do it."

"What about the bar? Anybody see them talking?"

“We’ll ask. But this was nearly six weeks ago. Don’t hold your breath.”

Nobody spoke for a long time.

“Reacher?” Neagley said.

“What?”

“What are you thinking?”

He shrugged.

“I’m thinking about Dostoyevsky,” he said. “I just found a copy of *Crime and Punishment* that I sent Joe for a birthday present. I remember I almost sent him *The Brothers Karamazov* instead, but I decided against it. You ever read that book?”

Neagley shook her head.

“Part of it is about what the Turks did in Bulgaria,” he said. “There was all kinds of rape and pillage going on. They hanged prisoners in the mornings after making them spend their last night nailed to a fence by their ears. They threw babies in the air and caught them on bayonets. They said the best part was doing it in front of the mothers. Ivan Karamazov was seriously disillusioned by it all. He said *no animal could ever be so cruel as a man, so artfully, so artistically cruel*. Then I was thinking about these guys making Andretti clean his house while they watched. I guess he had to do it one-handed. He probably struggled with it. Dostoyevsky put his feelings in a book. I don’t have his talent. So now I’m thinking I’m going to find these guys and impress on them the error of their ways in whatever manner my own talent allows.”

“You didn’t strike me as a reader,” Bannon said.

“I get by,” Reacher said.

“And I would caution you against vigilantism.”

“That’s a big word for a Special Agent.”

“Whatever, I don’t want independent action.”

Reacher nodded.

“Noted,” he said.

Bannon smiled. “You done the math puzzle yet?”

“What math puzzle?”

“We’re assuming that Vaime rifle was in Minnesota on Tuesday and North Dakota yesterday. Now it’s here in D.C. today. They didn’t fly it in, that’s for damn sure, because putting long guns on a commercial flight leaves a paper trail a mile long. And it’s too far to drive in the time they had. So either one guy was on his own with the Heckler & Koch in Bismarck while the other guy was driving all the way from Minnesota to here with the Vaime. Or if both guys were in Bismarck then they must own two Vaimes, one there, one stashed here. And if both guys were in Bismarck but they own only one Vaime, then somebody else drove it in from Minnesota for them, in which case we’re dealing with three guys, not two.”

Nobody spoke.

“I’m going back to see Swain,” Reacher said. “I’ll walk. It’ll do me good.”

“I’ll come with you,” Neagley said.

It was a fast half mile west on Pennsylvania Avenue. The sky was still cloudless, which made the night air cold. There were some stars visible through the faint city smog and the orange glow of street lighting. There was a small moon, far away. No traffic. They walked past the Federal Triangle and the bulk of the Treasury Building came closer. The White House roadblocks had gone. The city was back to normal. It was like nothing had ever happened.

“You OK?” Neagley asked.

“Facing reality,” Reacher said. “I’m getting old. Slowing up, mentally. I was pretty pleased about getting to Nendick as fast as I did, but I was supposed to get there right away. So in fact I was terrible. Same with the thumbprint. We spent hours boxing around that damn print. Days and days. We twisted and turned to

accommodate it. Never saw the actual intention."

"But we got there in the end."

"And I'm feeling guilty, as usual."

"Why?"

"I told Froelich she was doing well," Reacher said. "But I should have told her to double the sentries on the roof. One guy on the edge, one in the stairwell. Might have saved her."

Neagley was silent. Six strides, seven.

"It was her job, not yours," she said. "Don't feel guilty. You're not responsible for everybody in the world."

Reacher said nothing. Just walked.

"And they were masquerading as cops," Neagley said. "They'd have walked through two sentries just the same as one. They'd have walked through a *dozen* sentries. Fact is, they *did* walk through a dozen sentries. More than that. They must have. The whole area was crawling with agents. There's nothing anybody could have done different. Shit happens."

Reacher said nothing.

"Two sentries, they'd *both* have gotten killed," Neagley said. "Another casualty wouldn't have helped anybody."

"You think Bannon looks like a cop?" Reacher asked.

"You think there are three guys?" Neagley asked back.

"No. Not a chance. This is a two-guy thing. Bannon's missing something very obvious. Occupational hazard with a mind like his."

"What's he missing?"

"You think he looks like a cop?"

Neagley smiled, briefly.

“Exactly like a cop,” she said. “He probably was a cop before he joined the Bureau.”

“What makes him look like a cop?”

“Everything. Every single thing. It’s in his pores.”

Reacher went quiet. Walked on.

“Something in Froelich’s pep talk,” he said. “Just before Armstrong showed up. She was warning her people. She said it’s very easy to look a little like a homeless person, but very difficult to look exactly like a homeless person. I think it’s the same with cops. If I put a tweed sport coat on and gray pants and plain shoes and held up a gold badge, would I look like a cop?”

“A little. But not exactly.”

“But these guys *do* look exactly like cops. I saw one of them and never thought twice. And they’re in and out of everywhere without a single question.”

“It would explain a lot of things,” Neagley said. “They were right at home in the cop bar with Nendick. And with Andretti.”

“Like Bannon’s duck test,” Reacher said. “They look like cops, they walk like cops, they talk like cops.”

“And it would explain how they knew about DNA on envelopes, and the NCIC computer thing. Cops would know that the FBI networks all that information.”

“And the weapons. They might filter through to second-tier SWAT teams or State Police specialists. Especially refurbished items with nonstandard scopes.”

“But we know they aren’t cops. You went through ninety-four mug shots.”

“We know they aren’t Bismarck cops,” Reacher said. “Maybe they’re cops from someplace else.”

Swain was still waiting for them. He looked unhappy. Not necessarily with the waiting. He looked like a man with bad news to hear, and bad news to give. He looked a question at Reacher, and Reacher nodded, once.

“His name was Andretti,” he said. “Same situation as Nendick, basically. He’s holding up better, but he’s not going to talk, either.”

Swain said nothing.

“Your score,” Reacher said. “You made the connection. And the rifle was a Vaime with a Hensoldt scope where a Bushnell should be.”

“I don’t specialize in firearms,” Swain said.

“You need to tell us what you know about the campaign. Who got mad at Armstrong?”

There was a short silence. Then Swain looked away.

“Nobody,” he said. “What I said in there wasn’t true. Thing is, I finished the analysis days ago. He upset people, for sure. But nobody very significant. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“So why say it?”

“I wanted to get the FBI off their track, was all. I don’t think it was one of us. I don’t like to see our agency getting abused that way.”

Reacher said nothing.

“It was for Froelich and Crosetti,” Swain said. “They deserve better than that.”

“So you’ve got a feeling and we’ve got a hyphen,” Reacher said. “Most cases I ever dealt with had stronger foundations than that.”

“What do we do now?”

“We look somewhere else,” Neagley said. “If it’s not political it must be personal.”

“I’m not sure if I can show you that stuff,” Swain said. “It’s supposed to be

confidential.”

“Is there anything bad in it?”

“No, or you’d have heard about it during the campaign.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“Is he faithful to his wife?” Reacher asked.

“Yes,” Swain said.

“Is she faithful to him?”

“Yes.”

“Is he kosher financially?”

“Yes.”

“So everything else is deep background. How can it hurt to let us take a look?”

“I guess it can’t.”

“So let’s go.”

They headed through the back corridors toward the library, but when they got there the phone was ringing. Swain picked it up and then handed it to Reacher.

“Stuyvesant, for you,” he said.

Reacher listened for a minute and then put the phone down.

“Armstrong’s coming in,” he said. “He’s upset and restless and wants to talk to everybody he can find who was there today.”

They left Swain in the library and walked back to the conference room. Stuyvesant came in a minute later. He was still in his golf clothes. He still had Froelich’s blood on his shoes. It was splashed up on the welts, black and dry. He

looked close to exhaustion. And mentally shattered. Reacher had seen it before. A guy goes twenty-five years, and it all falls apart in one terrible day. A suicide bombing will do it, or a helicopter crash or a secrets leak or a furlough rampage. Then the retributive machinery clanks into action and a flawless career spent garnering nothing but praise is trashed at the stroke of a pen, because it all has to be somebody's *fault*. Shit happens, but never in an official inquiry commission's final report.

"We're going to be thin on the ground," Stuyvesant said. "I gave most people twenty-four hours and I'm not dragging them back in just because the protectee can't sleep."

Two more guys came in five minutes later. Reacher recognized one of them as a rooftop sharpshooter and the other as one of the agent screen around the food line. They nodded tired greetings and turned around and went and got coffee. Came back in with a plastic cup for everybody.

Armstrong's security preceded him like the edge of an invisible bubble. There was radio communication with the building while he was still a mile away. There was a second call when he reached the garage. His progress into the elevator was reported. One of his personal detail entered the reception area and announced an all-clear. The other two brought Armstrong inside. The procedure was repeated at the conference room door. The first agent came in, glanced around, spoke into his cuff, and Armstrong leapfrogged past him into the room.

He had changed into casual clothes that didn't suit him. He was in corduroy pants and a patterned sweater and a suede jacket. All the colors matched and all the fabrics were stiff and new. It was the first false note Reacher had seen from him. It was like he had asked himself *what would a Vice President wear?* instead of just grabbing whatever was at the front of his closet. He nodded somber greetings all around and moved toward the table. Didn't speak to anybody. He seemed awkward. The silence grew. It reached the point where it was embarrassing.

"How's your wife, sir?" the sharpshooter asked.

It was the perfect political question, Reacher thought. It was an invitation to talk about somebody else's feelings, which was always easier than talking about your own. It was collegial, in that it said *we all are on the inside here, so let's talk*

about somebody who isn't. And it said: *here's your chance to thank us for saving her ass, and yours*.

"She's very shaken," Armstrong said. "It was a terrible thing. She wants you to know how sorry she is. She's been giving me a hard time, actually. She says it's wrong of me to be putting you people at risk."

It was the perfect political answer, Reacher thought. It invited only one reply: *Just doing our job, sir*.

"It's our job, sir," Stuyvesant said. "If it wasn't you, it would be somebody else."

"Thank you," Armstrong said. "For being so gracious. And thank you for performing so superbly well today. From both of us. From the bottom of our hearts. I'm not a superstitious guy, but I kind of feel I owe you now. Like I won't be free of an obligation until I've done something for you. So don't hesitate to ask me. Anything at all, formal or informal, collective or individual. I'm your friend for life."

Nobody spoke.

"Tell me about Crosetti," Armstrong said. "Did he have family?"

The sharpshooter nodded.

"A wife and a son," he said. "The boy is eight, I think."

Armstrong looked away.

"I'm so sorry," he said.

Silence in the room.

"Is there anything I can do for them?" Armstrong asked.

"They'll be looked after," Stuyvesant said.

"Froelich had parents in Wyoming," Armstrong said. "That's all. She wasn't married. No brothers or sisters. I spoke with her folks earlier today. After I saw

you at the White House. I felt I ought to offer my condolences personally. And I felt I should clear my statement with them, you know, before I spoke to the television people. I felt I couldn't misrepresent the situation without their permission, just for the sake of a decoy scheme. But they liked the idea of a memorial service on Sunday. So much so that they're going to go ahead with it, in fact. So there will be a service, after all."

Nobody spoke. Armstrong picked a spot on the wall, and looked hard at it.

"I want to attend it," he said. "In fact, I'm *going* to attend it."

"I can't permit that," Stuyvesant said.

Armstrong said nothing.

"I mean, I advise against it," Stuyvesant said.

"She was killed because of me. I want to attend her service. It's the least I can do. I want to speak there, actually. I guess I should talk to her folks again."

"I'm sure they'd be honored, but there are security issues."

"I respect your judgment, of course," Armstrong said. "But it isn't negotiable. I'll go on my own, if I have to. I might prefer to go on my own."

"That isn't possible," Stuyvesant said.

Armstrong nodded. "So find three agents who want to be there with me. And only three. We can't turn it into a circus. We'll get in and out fast, unannounced."

"You announced it on national television."

"It isn't negotiable," Armstrong said again. "They won't want to turn the whole thing into a circus. That wouldn't be fair. So, no media and no television. Just us."

Stuyvesant said nothing.

"I'm going to her service," Armstrong said. "She was killed because of me."

“She knew the risks,” Stuyvesant said. “We all know the risks. We’re here because we want to be.”

Armstrong nodded. “I spoke with the director of the FBI. He told me the suspects got away.”

“It’s just a matter of time,” Stuyvesant said.

“My daughter is in the Antarctic,” Armstrong said. “It’s coming up to midsummer down there. The temperature is up to twenty below zero. It’ll peak at maybe eighteen below in a week or two. We just spoke on the satellite phone. She’s says it feels unbelievably warm. We’ve had the same conversation for the last two years straight. I used to take it as a kind of metaphor. You know, everything’s relative, nothing’s *that* bad, you can get used to anything. But now I don’t know anymore. I don’t think I’ll ever get over today. I’m alive only because another person is dead.”

Silence in the room.

“She knew what she was doing,” Stuyvesant said. “We’re all volunteers.”

“She was terrific, wasn’t she?”

“Let me know when you want to meet with her replacement.”

“Not yet,” Armstrong said. “Tomorrow, maybe. And ask around about Sunday. Three volunteers. Friends of hers who would want to be there anyway.”

Stuyvesant was silent. Then he shrugged.

“OK,” he said.

Armstrong nodded. “Thank you for that. And thank you for today. Thank you all. From both of us. That’s really all I came here to say.”

His personal detail picked up the cue and moved him to the door. The invisible security bubble rolled out with him, probing forward, checking sideways, checking backward. Three minutes later a radio call came in from his car. He was secure and mobile north and west toward Georgetown.

“Shit,” Stuyvesant said. “Now Sunday is going to be a damn nightmare on top of

everything else."

Nobody looked at Reacher, except Neagley. They walked out alone and found Swain in the reception area. He had his coat on.

"I'm going home," he said.

"In an hour," Reacher said. "First you're going to show us your files."

The files were biographical. There were twelve in total. Eleven were bundles of raw data like newspaper cuttings and interviews and depositions and other first-generation paperwork. The twelfth was a comprehensive summary of the first eleven. It was as thick as a medieval Bible and it read like a book. It narrated the whole story of Brook Armstrong's life, and every substantive fact had a number following it in parentheses. The number indicated on a scale of one to ten how solidly the fact had been authenticated. Most of the numbers were tens.

The story started on page one with his parents. His mother had grown up in Oregon, moved to Washington State for college, returned to Oregon to start work as a pharmacist. Her own parents and siblings were sketched in, and the whole of her education was listed from kindergarten to postgraduate school. Her early employers were listed in sequence, and the start-up of her own pharmacy business had three pages all to itself. She still owned it and still took income from it, but she was now retired and sick with something that was feared to be terminal.

His father's education was listed. His military service had a start date and a medical discharge date, but there were no details beyond that. He was an Oregon native who married the pharmacist on his return to civilian life. They moved to an isolated village in the southwest corner of the state and he used family money to buy himself a lumber business. The newlyweds had a daughter soon afterward and Brook Armstrong himself was born two years later. The family business prospered and grew to a decent size. Its progress and development had several pages all to itself. It provided a pleasant provincial lifestyle.

The sister's biography was a half inch thick itself so Reacher skipped over it and started in on Brook's education. It began like everybody else's in kindergarten. There were endless details. Too many to pay close attention to, so he leafed ahead and skimmed. Armstrong went all the way through the local school system. He was good at sports. He got excellent grades. The father had a stroke and died just after Armstrong left home for college. The lumber business was sold. The pharmacy continued to prosper. Armstrong himself spent seven years in two different universities, first Cornell in upstate New York and then Stanford in California. He had long hair but no proven drug use. He met a Bismarck girl at Stanford. They were both political science postgraduates. They got married. They made their home in North Dakota and he started his political career with a

They made their home in North Dakota and he started his political career with a campaign for a seat in the State legislature.

“I need to get home,” Swain said. “It’s Thanksgiving and I’ve got kids and my wife is going to kill me.”

Reacher looked ahead at the rest of the file. Armstrong was just starting in on his first minor election and there were six more inches of paperwork to go. He fanned through it with his thumb.

“Nothing here to worry us?” he asked.

“Nothing anywhere,” Swain said.

“Does this level of detail continue throughout?”

“It gets worse.”

“Am I going to find anything if I read all night?”

“No.”

“Was all of it used in this summer’s campaign?”

Swain nodded. “Sure. It’s a great bio. That’s why he was picked in the first place. Actually we got a lot of the detail *from* the campaign.”

“And you’re sure nobody in particular was upset *by* the campaign?”

“I’m sure.”

“So where exactly does your feeling come from? Who hates Armstrong that bad and why?”

“I don’t know exactly,” Swain said. “It’s just a feeling.”

Reacher nodded.

“OK,” he said. “Go home.”

Swain picked up his coat and left in a hurry and Reacher sampled his way through the remaining years. Neagley leafed through the endless source material.

They both gave it up after an hour.

“Conclusions?” Neagley asked.

“Swain has got a very boring job,” Reacher said.

She smiled.

“Agreed,” she said.

“But something kind of jumps out at me. Something that’s not here, rather than something that *is* here. Campaigns are cynical, right? These people will use any old thing that puts them in a good light. So for instance, we’ve got his mother. We’ve got endless detail about her college degrees and her pharmacy thing. Why?”

“To appeal to independent women and small-business people.”

“OK, and then we’ve got stuff about her getting sick. Why?”

“So Armstrong looks like a caring son. Very dutiful and full of family values. It humanizes him. And it authenticates his issues about health care.”

“And we’ve got plenty of stuff about his dad’s lumber company.”

“For the business lobby again. And it touches on environmental concerns. You know, trees and logging and all that kind of thing. Armstrong can say he’s got practical knowledge. He’s walked the walk, at one remove.”

“Exactly,” Reacher said. “Whatever the issue, whatever the constituency, they find a bone to throw.”

“So?”

“They took a pass on military service. And usually they love all that stuff, in a campaign. Normally if your dad was in the Army, you’d shout it from the rooftops to wrap up another whole bunch of issues. But there’s no detail at all. He joined, he got discharged. That’s all we know. See what I mean? We’re drowning in detail everywhere else, but not there. It stands out.”

“The father died ages ago.”

The father died ages ago.

“Doesn’t matter. They’d have been all over it if there was something to be gained. And what was the medical discharge for? If it had been a wound they’d have made something out of it, for sure. Even a training accident. The guy would have been a big hero. And you know what? I don’t like to see unexplained medical discharges. You know how it was. It makes you wonder, doesn’t it?”

“I guess it does. But it can’t be connected. It happened before Armstrong was even born. Then the guy died nearly thirty years ago. And you said it yourself, this all was triggered by something Armstrong did in the campaign.”

Reacher nodded. “But I’d still like to know more about it. We could ask Armstrong direct, I guess.”

“Don’t need to,” Neagley said. “I can find out, if you really need me to. I can make some calls. We’ve got plenty of contacts. People who figure on getting a job with us when they quit are generally interested in making a good impression beforehand.”

Reacher yawned. “OK, do it. First thing tomorrow.”

“I’ll do it tonight. The military is still twenty-four/seven. Hasn’t changed any since we quit.”

“You should sleep. It can wait.”

“I never sleep anymore.”

Reacher yawned again. “Well, I’m going to.”

“Bad day,” Neagley said.

Reacher nodded. “As bad as they get. So make the calls if you want to, but don’t wake me up to tell me about them. Tell me about them tomorrow.”

The night duty officer fixed them a ride back to the Georgetown motel and Reacher went straight to his room. It was quiet and still and empty. It had been cleaned and tidied. The bed was made. Joe’s box had gone. He sat in the chair

for a moment and wondered if Stuyvesant had thought to cancel Froelich's booking. Then the nighttime silence pressed in on him and he was overcome by a sense of something *not there*. A sense of absence. Things that should be there and weren't. *What exactly?* Froelich, of course. He had an ache for her. She should be there, and she wasn't. She had been there the last time he was in the room. Early that morning. *Today's the day we win or lose*, she had said. *Losing is not an option*, he had replied.

Something *not there*. Maybe Joe himself. Maybe lots of things. There were lots of things missing from his life. Things not done, things not said. *What exactly?* Maybe it was just Armstrong's father's service career on his mind. *But maybe it was more than that. Was something else missing?* He closed his eyes and chased it hard but all he saw was the pink spray of Froelich's blood arcing backward into the sunlight. So he opened his eyes again and stripped off his clothes and showered for the third time that day. He found himself staring down at the tray like he was still expecting to see it run red. But it stayed clear and white.

The bed was cold and hard and the new sheets were stiff with starch. He slipped in alone and stared at the ceiling for an hour and thought hard. Then he switched off abruptly and made himself sleep. He dreamed of his brother strolling hand in hand with Froelich all the way around the Tidal Basin in summer. The light was soft and golden and the blood streaming from her neck hung in the still warm air like a shimmering red ribbon five feet above the ground. It hung there undisturbed by the passing crowds and it made a full mile-wide circle when she and Joe arrived back where they had started. Then she changed into Swain and Joe changed into the Bismarck cop. The cop's coat flapped open as he walked and Swain said *I think we miscounted* to everybody he met. Then Swain changed into Armstrong. Armstrong smiled his brilliant politician's smile and said *I'm so sorry* and the cop turned and threaded a long gun out from under his flapping coat and slowly racked the bolt and shot Armstrong in the head. There was no sound, because the gun was silenced. No sound, even as Armstrong hit the water and floated away.

There was an alarm call from the desk at six o'clock and a minute later there was a knock at the door. Reacher rolled out of bed and wrapped a towel around his waist and checked the spy hole. It was Neagley, with coffee for him. She was all dressed and ready to go. He let her in and sat on the bed and started the coffee

and she paced the narrow alley that led to the window. She was wired. Looked like she'd been drinking coffee all night.

"OK, Armstrong's father?" she said, like she was asking the question for him. "He was drafted right at the end of Korea. Never saw active service. But he went through officer training and came out a second lieutenant and was assigned to an infantry company. They were stationed in Alabama, some place that's long gone. They were ordered to achieve battle readiness for a fight everybody knew was already over. And you know how that stuff went, right?"

Reacher nodded sleepily. Sipped his coffee.

"Some idiot captain running endless competitions," he said. "Points for this, points for that, deductions all over the place, at the end of the month Company B gets to keep a flag in its barracks for kicking Company A's ass."

"And Armstrong senior usually won," Neagley said. "He ran a tight unit. But he had a temper problem. It was unpredictable. If somebody screwed up and lost points he could fly into a rage. Happened a couple of times. Not just the usual officer bullshit. It's described in the records as serious uncontrolled temper tantrums. He went way too far, like he couldn't stop himself."

"And?"

"They let him get away with it twice. It wasn't constant. It was purely episodic. But the third time, there was some real serious physical abuse and they kicked him out for it. And they covered it up, basically. They gave him a psychological discharge, wrote it up as generic battle stress, even though he'd never been a combat officer."

Reacher made a face. "He must have had friends. And so must you, to get that deep into the records."

"I've been on the phone all night. Stuyvesant's going to have a coronary when he sees the motel bill."

"How many individual victims?"

"My first thought, but we can forget them. There were three, one for each incident. One was KIA in Vietnam, one died ten years ago in Palm Springs, and the third is more than seventy years old, lives in Florida."

the third is more than seventy years old, lives in Florida.

“Dry hole,” Reacher said.

“But it explains why they left it out of the campaign.”

Reacher nodded. Sipped his coffee. “Any chance Armstrong himself inherited the temper? Froelich said she’d seen him angry.”

“That was my second thought,” Neagley said. “It’s conceivable. There was something there below the surface when he was insisting on going to her service, wasn’t there? But I assume the broader picture would have come out already, long ago. The guy’s been running for office at one level or another his whole life. And this all started with the campaign this summer. We already agreed on that.”

Reacher nodded, vaguely.

“The campaign,” he repeated. He sat still with the coffee cup in his hand. Stared straight ahead at the wall, one full minute, then two.

“What?” Neagley asked.

He didn’t reply. Just got up and walked to the window. Pulled back the shades and looked out at slices and slivers of D.C. under the gray dawn sky.

“What did Armstrong *do* in the campaign?” he asked.

“Lots of things.”

“How many Representatives does New Mexico have?”

“I don’t know,” Neagley said.

“I think it’s three. Can you name them?”

“No.”

“Would you recognize any of them on the street?”

“No.”

“Oklahoma?”

“Don’t know. Five?”

“Six, I think. Can you name them?”

“One of them is an asshole, I know that. Can’t remember his name.”

“Senators from Tennessee?”

“What’s your point?”

Reacher stared out of the window.

“We’ve got Beltway disease,” he said. “We’re all caught up in it. We’re not looking at this thing like real people. To almost everybody else out there in the country all these politicians are absolute nobodies. You said it yourself. You said you’re interested in politics but you couldn’t name all hundred senators. And most people are a thousand times less interested than you. Most people wouldn’t recognize another state’s junior senator if he ran up and bit them in the ass. Or she, as Froelich would have said. She actually admitted nobody had ever heard of Armstrong before.”

“So?”

“So Armstrong did one absolutely basic, fundamental, elemental thing in the campaign. He put himself in the public eye, nationally. For the very first time in his life ordinary people outside of his home state and outside of his circle of friends saw his face. Heard his name. For the first time ever. I think this all could be as basic as that.”

“In what way?”

“Suppose his face came back at somebody from way in the past. Completely out of the blue. Like a sudden shock.”

“Like who?”

“Like you’re some guy somewhere and long ago some young man lost his temper and smacked you around. Some situation like that. Maybe in a bar, maybe over a girl. Maybe he humiliated you by doing so. You never see the guy

again, but the incident festers in your mind. Years pass, and suddenly there's the guy all over the papers and the TV. He's a politician, running for Vice President. You never heard of him in the years before, because you don't watch C-SPAN or CNN. But now, there he is, everywhere, in your face. So what do you do? If you're politically aware you might call the opposing campaign and dish the dirt. But you're not politically aware, because this is the first time you've ever seen him since the fight in the bar a lifetime ago. So what do you do? The sight of him brings it all back. It's been festering."

"You think about some kind of revenge."

Reacher nodded. "Which would explain Swain's thing about wanting him to suffer. But maybe Swain's been looking in the wrong place. Maybe we all have. Because maybe this isn't personal to Armstrong the politician. Maybe it's personal to Armstrong the man. Maybe it's *really* personal."

Neagley stopped pacing and sat down in the chair.

"It's very tenuous," she said. "People get over things, don't they?"

"Do they?"

"Mostly."

Reacher glanced down at her. "You haven't gotten over whatever makes it that you don't like people to touch you."

The room went quiet.

"OK," she said. "*Normal* people get over things."

"Normal people don't kidnap women and cut thumbs off and kill innocent bystanders."

She nodded.

"OK," she said again. "It's a theory. But where can we go with it?"

"Armstrong himself, maybe," Reacher said. "But that would be a difficult conversation to have with a Vice President–elect. And would he even remember? If he inherited the kind of temper that gets a guy thrown out of the

remember? If he inherited the kind of temper that gets a guy thrown out of the Army he could have had dozens of fights long ago. He's a big guy. Could have spread mayhem far and wide before he got a handle on it."

"His wife? They've been together a long time."

Reacher said nothing.

"Time to get going," Neagley said. "We meet with Bannon at seven. Are we going to tell him?"

"No," Reacher said. "He wouldn't listen."

"Go shower," Neagley said.

Reacher nodded. "Something else first. It kept me awake last night for an hour. It nagged at me. Something that's not here, or something that hasn't been done."

Neagley shrugged.

"OK," she said. "I'll think about it. Now get your ass in gear."

He dressed in the last of Joe's suits. It was charcoal gray and as fine as silk. He used the last of the clean shirts. It was stiff with starch and as white as new snow. The last tie was dark blue with a tiny repeated pattern. When you looked very closely you saw that each element of the pattern was a diagram of a pitcher's hand, gripping a baseball, preparing to throw a knuckleball.

He met Neagley out in the lobby and ate a muffin from the buffet and took a cup of coffee with him in the Secret Service Town Car. They were late into the conference room. Bannon and Stuyvesant were already there. Bannon was still dressed like a city cop. Stuyvesant was back in a Brooks Brothers suit. Reacher and Neagley left one seat unoccupied between themselves and Stuyvesant. Bannon stared at the empty place, like maybe it was supposed to symbolize Froelich's absence.

"The FBI is not going to have agents in Grace, Wyoming," he said. "Special request from Armstrong, via the director. He doesn't want a circus out there."

"Suits me," Reacher said.

Suits me," Reacher said.

"You're wasting your time," Bannon said. "We're complying only because we're happy to. The bad guys know how this stuff works. They were in the business. They'll have understood his statement was a trap. So they won't show up."

Reacher nodded. "Won't be the first trip I ever wasted."

"I'm warning you against independent action."

"There won't *be* any action, according to you."

Bannon nodded.

"Ballistics tests are in," he said. "The rifle we found in the warehouse is definitely the same gun that fired the Minnesota bullet."

"So how did it get here?" Stuyvesant asked.

"We burned more than a hundred man-hours last night," Bannon said. "All I can tell you for sure is how it *didn't* get here. It didn't fly in. We checked all commercial arrivals into eight airports and there were no firearms manifests at all. Then we traced all private planes into the same eight airports. Nothing even remotely suspicious."

"So they drove it in?" Reacher said.

Bannon nodded. "But Bismarck to D.C. is more than thirteen hundred miles. That's more than twenty hours absolute minimum, even driving like a lunatic. Impossible, in the time frame. So the rifle was never in Bismarck. It came in direct from Minnesota, which was a little more than eleven hundred miles in forty-eight hours. Your grandmother could do that."

"My grandmother couldn't drive," Reacher said. "Still figuring on three guys?"

Bannon shook his head. "No, on reflection we're sticking at two. The whole thing profiles better that way. We figure the team was split one and one between Minnesota and Colorado on Tuesday and it stayed split afterward. The guy pretending to be the Bismarck cop was acting solo at the church. We figure he had the submachine gun only. Which makes sense, because he knew Armstrong

was going to be buried in agents as soon as the decoy rifle was discovered. And a submachine gun is better than a rifle against a cluster of people. Especially an H&K MP5. Our people say it's as accurate as a rifle at a hundred yards and a lot more powerful. Thirty-round magazines, he would have chewed through six agents and gotten to Armstrong easy enough."

"So why was the other guy bothering to drive here at the time?" Stuyvesant asked.

"Because these are your people," Bannon said. "They're realistic professionals. They knew the odds. They knew they couldn't guarantee a hit in any one particular place. So they went through Armstrong's schedule and planned to leapfrog ahead of each other to cover all the bases."

Stuyvesant said nothing.

"But they were together yesterday," Reacher said. "You're saying the first guy drove the Vaime here and I saw the guy from Bismarck on the warehouse roof."

Bannon nodded. "No more leapfrogging, because yesterday was the last good opportunity for a spell. The Bismarck guy must have flown in, commercial, not long after the Air Force brought you back."

"So where's the H&K? He must have abandoned it in Bismarck somewhere between the church and the airport. You find it?"

"No," Bannon said. "But we're still looking."

"And who was the guy the state trooper saw in the subdivision?"

"We're discounting him. Almost certainly just a civilian."

Reacher shook his head. "So this solo guy hid the decoy rifle and legged it back to the church with the H&K all by himself?"

"I don't see why not."

"Have you ever hidden out and lined up to shoot a man?"

"No," Bannon said.

“I have,” Reacher said. “And it’s not a lot of fun. You need to be comfortable, and relaxed, and alert. It’s a muscle thing. You get there well ahead of time, you settle in, you adjust your position, you figure out your range, you check the wind, you assess the angle of elevation or depression, you calculate the bullet drop. Then you lie there, staring through the sight. You get your breathing slow, you let your heart rate drop. And you know what you want at that point, more than anything else in the whole world?”

“What?”

“You want somebody you trust watching your back. All of your concentration is out there in front of you, and you start to feel an itch in your spine. If these guys are realistic professionals like you say they are, then no way would one of them work that church tower alone.”

Bannon was silent.

“He’s right,” Neagley said. “Best guess is the guy in the subdivision was the back-watcher, on his way from hiding the decoy. He was looping around, well away from the fence. The shooter was hiding out in the church, waiting for him to get back.”

“Which begs a question,” Reacher said. “Like, who was it on the road from Minnesota at the time?”

Bannon shrugged.

“OK,” he said. “So there *are* three of them.”

“All ours?” Stuyvesant asked, neutrally.

“I don’t see why not,” Bannon said.

Reacher shook his head. “You’re obsessed. Why don’t you just arrest everybody who ever worked for the Secret Service? There are probably some hundred-year-olds left over from FDR’s first term.”

“We’re sticking with our theory,” Bannon said.

“Fine,” Reacher said. “Keeps you out of my hair.”

“I warned you against vigilantism, twice.”

“And I heard you twice.”

The room went silent. Then Bannon’s face softened. He glanced across at Froelich’s empty chair.

“Even though I would completely understand your motive,” he said.

Reacher stared down at the table.

“It’s two guys, not three,” he said. “I agree with you, it profiles better. A thing like this, the best choice would be one guy on his own, but that’s never practical, so it’s got to be two. But not three. A third guy multiplies the risk by a hundred.”

“So what happened with the rifle?”

“They messengered it, obviously,” Reacher said. “FedEx or UPS or somebody. Maybe the USPS itself. They probably packaged it up with a bunch of saws and hammers and called it a delivery of tool samples. Some bullshit story like that. Addressed to a motel here, awaiting their arrival. That’s what I would have done, anyway.”

Bannon looked embarrassed. Said nothing. Just stood up and left. The door clicked shut behind him. The room went quiet. Stuyvesant stayed in his seat, a little awkward.

“We need to talk,” he said.

“You’re firing us,” Neagley said.

He nodded. Put his hand in his inside jacket pocket and came out with two slim white envelopes.

“This isn’t internal anymore,” he said. “You know that. It’s gotten way too big.”

“But you know Bannon is looking in the wrong place.”

“I hope he’ll come to realize that,” Stuyvesant said. “Then maybe he’ll start looking in the right place. Meanwhile we’ll defend Armstrong. Starting with this

craziness in Wyoming. That's what we do. That's all we *can* do. We're reactive. We're defensive. We've got no legal basis to employ outsiders in a proactive role."

He slid the first envelope along the shiny tabletop. Gave it enough force that it carried exactly six feet and spun to a stop in front of Reacher. Then the second, with a gentler motion, so it stopped in front of Neagley.

"Later," Reacher said. "Fire us later. Give us the rest of the day."

"Why?"

"We need to talk to Armstrong. Just me and Neagley."

"About what?"

"About something important," Reacher said. Then he went quiet again.

"The thing we talked about this morning?" Neagley asked him.

"No, the thing that was on my mind last night."

"Something not there, something not done?"

He shook his head. "It was something not *said*."

"What wasn't said?"

He didn't answer. Just gathered up both envelopes and slid them back along the tabletop. Stuyvesant stopped them dead with the flat of his hand. Picked them up and held them, uncertain.

"I can't let you talk to Armstrong without me," he said.

"You'll have to," Reacher said. "It's the only way he'll talk at all."

Stuyvesant said nothing. Reacher glanced at him. "Tell me about the mail system. How long have you been checking Armstrong's mail?"

"From the start," Stuyvesant said. "Since he was picked as the candidate. That's absolutely standard procedure."

“How does it work?”

Stuyvesant shrugged. “It’s easy enough. At first the agents at his house opened everything delivered there and we had a guy at the Senate Offices opening the stuff that went there and a guy in Bismarck looking after the local items. But after the first couple of messages we centralized everything right here for convenience.”

“But everything always got passed on to him except for the threats?”

“Obviously.”

“You know Swain?”

“The researcher? I know him a little.”

“You should promote him. Or give him a bonus. Or a big kiss on the forehead. Because he’s the only person around here with an original idea in his head. Us included.”

“What’s his idea?”

“We need to see Armstrong. As soon as possible. Me and Neagley, alone. Then we’ll consider ourselves fired and you’ll never see us again. And you’ll never see Bannon again, either. Because your problem will be over a couple of days later.”

Stuyvesant put both envelopes back in his jacket.

It was the day after Thanksgiving and Armstrong was in self-imposed exile from public affairs, but arranging a meeting with him was intensely problematic. Straight after the morning meeting Stuyvesant promoted one of Froelich’s original six male rivals to replace her, and the guy was full of all kinds of macho “Now we can do this properly” bullshit. He kept it firmly under control in front of Stuyvesant because of sensitivity issues, but he threw up every kind of obstacle he could find. The main stumbling block was a decades-old rule that no protectee can be alone with visitors without at least one protection agent present. Reacher saw the logic in that. Even if they were strip-searched for weapons, he

and Neagley could have completely dismembered Armstrong in about a second and a half. But they had to meet alone. That was vital. Stuyvesant was reluctant to overrule the new team leader on his first day, but eventually he quoted the Pentagon security clearances and decreed that the presence of two agents immediately outside the door would be sufficient. Then he called Armstrong at home to clear it with him personally. He got off the phone and said that Armstrong sounded a little concerned about something and would call right back.

They waited and Armstrong called back after twenty minutes and told Stuyvesant three things: first, his mother's health had taken a sudden turn for the worse, therefore second, he wanted to be flown out to Oregon that afternoon, therefore third, the meeting with Reacher and Neagley would have to be short and it would have to be delayed two hours while he packed.

So Reacher and Neagley went to Froelich's office to wait some more, but it had already been taken over by the new guy. The little plant was gone. Furniture had been moved. Things had been changed around. All that remained of Froelich was a faint trace of her perfume in the air. So they went back to the reception area and sprawled in the leather chairs. Watched the muted television. It was tuned to a news channel, and they saw Froelich die all over again, silently and in slow motion. They saw part of Armstrong's subsequent statement. They saw Bannon interviewed outside the Hoover Building. They didn't ask for the sound to be turned up. They knew what he would be saying. They watched football highlights from the Thanksgiving Day games. Then Stuyvesant called them back to his office.

His secretary wasn't there. She was clearly enjoying a long weekend at home. They walked through the empty area and sat down in front of Stuyvesant's immaculate desk while he ran through the rules of engagement.

"No physical contact," he said.

Reacher smiled. "Not even a handshake?"

"I guess a handshake is OK," Stuyvesant said. "But nothing else. And you are not to reveal anything about the current situation. He doesn't know, and I don't want him to find out from you. Is that understood?"

Reacher nodded.

“Understood,” Neagley said.

“Don’t upset him and don’t harass him. Remember who he is. And remember he’s preoccupied with his mother.”

“OK,” Reacher said.

Stuyvesant looked away. “I’ve decided I don’t want to know why you want to see him. And I don’t want to know what happens afterward, if anything. But I do want to say thanks for everything you’ve already done. Your audit will help us, and I think you probably saved us in Bismarck, and your hearts have been in the right place throughout, and I’m very grateful for all of that.”

Nobody spoke.

“I’m going to retire,” Stuyvesant said. “I’d have to fight to save my career now, and the truth is I don’t like my career enough to fight for it.”

“These guys were never your agents,” Reacher said.

“I know that,” Stuyvesant said. “But I lost two people. Therefore my career is over. But that’s my decision and my problem. All I mean to say to you is I’m glad I got the chance to meet Joe’s brother, and it was a real pleasure working with you both.”

Nobody spoke.

“And I’m glad you were there at the end for M.E.”

Reacher looked away. Stuyvesant took the envelopes out of his pocket again.

“I don’t know whether to hope you’re right or wrong,” he said. “About Wyoming, I mean. We’ll have three agents and some local cops. That’s not a lot of cover, if things turn out bad.”

He passed the envelopes across the desk.

“There’s a car waiting downstairs,” he said. “You get a one-way ride to Georgetown, and then you’re on your own.”

They went down in the elevator and Reacher detoured into the main hall. It was

vast and dark and gray and deserted, and the cold marble echoed with his footsteps. He stopped underneath the carved panel and glanced up at his brother's name. Glanced at the empty space where Froelich's would soon be added. Then he glanced away and walked back and joined Neagley. They pushed through the small door with the wired glass porthole and found their car.

The white tent was still in place across the sidewalk in front of Armstrong's house. The driver pulled up with the rear door tight against the contour and spoke into his wrist microphone. A second later Armstrong's front door opened and three agents stepped out. One walked forward through the canvas tunnel and opened the car door. Reacher got out and Neagley slid out beside him. The agent closed the door again and stood impassive on the curb and the car drove away. The second agent held his arms out in a brief mime that they should stand still and be searched. They waited in the whitened canvas gloom. Neagley tensed while strange hands patted her down. But it was superficial. They barely touched her. And they missed Reacher's ceramic knife. It was hidden in his sock.

The agents led them inside to Armstrong's hallway and closed the door. The house was larger than it appeared from the outside. It was a big substantial place that looked like it had been standing for a hundred years and was good for maybe a hundred more. The hallway had dark antiques and striped paper on the walls and a clutter of framed pictures everywhere. There were rugs on the floors laid over thick wall-to-wall carpeting. There was a battered garment bag resting in a corner, presumably ready for the emergency trip to Oregon.

"This way," one of the agents said.

He led them deep into the house and through a dogleg in the hallway to a huge eat-in kitchen that would have looked at home in a log cabin. It was all pine, with a big table at one end and all the cooking equipment at the other. There was a strong smell of coffee. Armstrong and his wife were sitting at the table with heavy china mugs and four different newspapers. Mrs. Armstrong was wearing a jogging suit and a sheen of sweat, like there might be a home gym in the basement. It looked like she wasn't going to Oregon with her husband. She had no makeup on. She looked a little tired and dispirited, like the events of Thanksgiving Day had altered her feelings in a fundamental way. Armstrong himself looked composed. He was wearing a clean shirt under a jacket with the

sleeves pulled up over his forearms. No tie. He was reading the editorials from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* side by side.

“Coffee?” Mrs. Armstrong asked.

Reacher nodded and she stood up and walked into the kitchen area and pulled two more mugs off hooks and filled them. Walked back with one in each hand. Reacher couldn’t decide if she was short or tall. She was one of those women who look short in flat shoes and tall in heels. She handed the mugs over without much expression. Armstrong looked up from his papers.

“I’m sorry to hear about your mother,” Neagley said.

Armstrong nodded.

“Mr. Stuyvesant told me you want a private conversation,” he said.

“Private would be good,” Reacher said.

“Should my wife join us?”

“That depends on your definition of privacy.”

Mrs. Armstrong glanced at her husband.

“You can tell me afterward,” she said. “Before you leave. If you need to.”

Armstrong nodded again and made a show of folding his newspapers. Then he stood up and detoured to the coffee machine and refilled his mug.

“Let’s go,” he said.

He led them back to the doglegged hallway and into a side room. Two agents followed and stood on each side of the door on the outside. Armstrong glanced out at them as if in apology and shut the door on them. Walked around and stood behind a desk. The room was set up like a study, but it was more recreational than for real. There was no computer. The desk was a big old item made from dark wood. There were leather chairs and books chosen for the look of their spines. There was paneling and an old Persian rug. There was an air freshener somewhere putting fragrance into the hush. There was a framed photograph on the wall. It showed a person of indeterminate gender standing on an ice floe. He

or she was wearing an enormous padded down coat with a hood and thick mittens that reached the elbow. The hood had a big fur ruff that framed the face tight. The face itself was entirely hidden by a ski mask and smoked yellow snow goggles. One of the elbow-high mittens was raised in greeting.

“Our daughter,” Armstrong said. “We asked her for a photo, because we miss her. That’s what she sent. She has a sense of humor.”

He sat down behind the desk. Reacher and Neagley took a chair each.

“This all feels very confidential,” Armstrong said.

Reacher nodded. “And in the end I think we’ll all agree it should be kept confidential.”

“What’s on your mind?”

“Mr. Stuyvesant gave us some ground rules,” Reacher said. “I’m going to start breaking them right now. The Secret Service intercepted six threatening messages against you. The first came in the mail eighteen days ago. Two more came in the mail subsequently and three were hand-delivered.”

Armstrong said nothing.

“You don’t seem surprised,” Reacher said.

Armstrong shrugged.

“Politics is a surprising business,” he said.

“I guess it is,” Reacher said. “All six messages were signed with a thumbprint. We traced the print to an old guy in California. His thumb had been amputated and stolen and used like a rubber stamp.”

Armstrong said nothing.

“The second message showed up in Stuyvesant’s own office. Eventually it was proved that a surveillance technician named Nendick had placed it there. Nendick’s wife had been kidnapped in order to coerce his actions. He was so frightened of the danger to her posed by his inevitable interrogation that he went into some kind of a coma. But we’re guessing she was already dead by then.

into some kind of a coma. But we're guessing she was already dead by then anyway."

Armstrong was silent.

"There's a researcher in the office called Swain who made an important mental connection. He felt we were miscounting. He realized that Nendick was supposed to be a message in himself, thereby making seven messages, not six. Then we added the guy in California who'd had his thumb removed and made it eight messages. Plus there were two homicides on Tuesday which made the ninth and tenth messages. One in Minnesota, and one in Colorado. Two unrelated strangers named Armstrong were killed as a kind of demonstration against you."

"Oh no," Armstrong said.

"So, ten messages," Reacher said. "All of them designed to torment you, except you hadn't been told about any of them. But then I started wondering whether we're *still* miscounting. And you know what? I'm pretty sure we are. I think there were at least eleven messages."

Silence in the small room.

"What would be the eleventh?" Armstrong asked.

"Something that slipped through," Reacher said. "Something that came in the mail, addressed to you, something that the Secret Service didn't see as a threat. Something that meant nothing at all to them, but something that meant a lot to *you*."

Armstrong said nothing.

"I think it came first," Reacher said. "Right at the very beginning, maybe, before the Secret Service even caught on. I think it was like an *announcement*, that only you would understand. So I think you've known about all this all along. I think you know who's doing it, and I think you know *why*."

"People have died," Armstrong said. "That's a hell of an accusation."

"Do you deny it?"

Armstrong said nothing.

Armstrong said nothing.

Reacher leaned forward.

“Some crucial words were never spoken,” he said. “Thing is, if I was standing there serving turkey and then somebody started shooting and somebody else was suddenly bleeding to death on top of me, sooner or later I’d be asking, who the hell *were* they? What the hell did they *want?* Why the hell were they *doing* that? Those are fairly basic questions. I’d be asking them loud and clear, believe me. But you didn’t ask them. We saw you twice, afterward. In the White House basement, and then later at the office. You said all kinds of things. You asked, had they been captured yet? That was your big concern. You never asked who they might be or what their possible motive was. And why didn’t you ask? Only one possible explanation. You already *knew*.”

Armstrong said nothing.

“I think your wife knows, too,” Reacher said. “You conveyed her anger at you for putting people at risk. I don’t think she was generalizing. I think she knows you know, and she thinks you should have told somebody.”

Armstrong was silent.

“So I think you’re feeling a little guilty now,” Reacher said. “I think that’s why you agreed to make the television statement for me and that’s why you suddenly want to go to the service itself. Some kind of a conscience thing. Because you *knew*, and you didn’t tell anybody.”

“I’m a politician,” Armstrong said. “We have hundreds of enemies. There was no point in speculating.”

“Bullshit,” Reacher said. “This isn’t political. This is personal. Your kind of political enemy is some North Dakota soybean grower you made ten cents a week poorer by altering a subsidy. Or some pompous old senator you declined to vote with. The soybean grower might make a halfhearted effort against you at election time and the senator might bide his time and screw you on some big floor issue but neither one of them is going to do what these guys are doing.”

Armstrong said nothing.

“I’m not a fool,” Reacher said. “I’m an angry man who watched a woman I was

fond of bleed to death."

"I'm not a fool either," Armstrong said.

"I think you are. Something's coming back at you from the past and you think you can just ignore it and hope for the best? Didn't you realize it would happen? You people have no perspective. You thought you were world famous already just because you were in the House and the Senate? Well, you weren't. Real people never heard of you until the campaign this summer. You thought all your little secrets were already out? Well, they weren't, either."

Armstrong said nothing.

"Who are they?" Reacher asked.

Armstrong shrugged. "Your guess?"

Reacher paused a beat.

"I think you've got a temper problem," he said. "Same as your dad. I think way back before you learned to control it you made people suffer, and some of them forgot about it, but some of them didn't. I think it's a part of some particular person's life that somebody once did something bad to them. Maybe hurt them, or hurt their self-esteem, or screwed them up in some other kind of a big way. I think that particular person repressed it deep down inside until they turned on the TV one day and saw your face for the first time in thirty years."

Armstrong sat still for a long moment.

"How far along is the FBI with this?" he asked.

"They're nowhere. They're out beating the bushes for people that don't exist. We're way ahead of them."

"And what are your intentions?"

"I'm going to help you," Reacher said. "Not that you deserve it in any way at all. It'll be a purely accidental by-product of me standing up for Nendick and his wife, and an old guy called Andretti, and two people called Armstrong, and Crosetti, and especially for Froelich, who was my brother's friend."

There was silence.

“Will this stay confidential?” Armstrong asked.

Reacher nodded. “It’ll have to. Purely for my sake.”

“Sounds like you’re contemplating a very serious course of action.”

“People play with fire, they get burned.”

“That’s the law of the jungle.”

“Where the hell else do you think you live?”

Armstrong was quiet, another long moment.

“So then you’ll know my secret and I’ll know yours,” he said.

Reacher nodded. “And we’ll all live happily ever after.”

There was another long silence. It lasted a whole minute. Reacher saw Armstrong the politician fade away, and Armstrong the man replace him.

“You’re wrong in most ways,” he said. “But not all of them.”

He leaned down and opened a drawer. Took out a padded mailer and tossed it on the desk. It skidded on the shiny wood and came to rest an inch from the edge.

“I guess this counts as the first message,” he said. “It arrived on Election Day. I suppose the Secret Service must have been a little puzzled, but they didn’t see anything really wrong with it. So they passed it right along.”

The mailer was a standard commercial stationery product. It was addressed to *Brook Armstrong, United States Senate, Washington D.C.* The address was printed on a familiar self-adhesive label in the familiar computer font, Times New Roman, fourteen point, bold. It had been mailed somewhere in the state of Utah on October 28. The flap had been opened a couple of times and resealed. Reacher eased it back and looked inside. Held it so Neagley could see.

There was nothing in the envelope except a miniature baseball bat. It was the kind of thing sold as a souvenir or given away as a token. It was plain lacquered

softwood the color of honey. It was about an inch wide around the barrel and would have been about fifteen inches long except that it was broken near the end of the handle. It had been broken deliberately. It had been partially sawn through and then snapped where it was weak. The raw end had been scratched and scraped to make it look accidental.

“I don’t have a temper problem,” Armstrong said. “But you’re right, my father did. We lived in a small town in Oregon, kind of lonely and isolated. It was a lumber town, basically. It was a mixed sort of place. The mill owners had big houses, the crew chiefs had smaller houses, the crews lived in shanties or rooming houses. There was a school. My mother owned the pharmacy. Down the road was the rest of the state, up the road was virgin forest. It felt like the frontier. It was a little lawless, but it wasn’t too bad. There were occasional whores and a lot of drinking, but overall it was just trying to be an American town.”

He went quiet for a moment. Placed his hands palms down on the desk and stared at them.

“I was eighteen,” he said. “Finished with high school, ready for college, spending my last few weeks at home. My sister was away traveling somewhere. We had a mailbox at the gate. My father had made it himself, in the shape of a miniature lumber mill. It was a nice thing, made out of tiny strips of cedar. At Halloween in the previous year it had been smashed up, you know, the traditional Halloween thing where the tough kids go out cruising with a baseball bat, bashing mailboxes. My father heard it happening and he chased them, but he didn’t really see them. We were a little upset, because it was a nice mailbox and destroying it seemed kind of senseless. But he rebuilt it stronger and became kind of obsessed about protecting it. Some nights he hid out and guarded it.”

“And the kids came back,” Neagley said.

Armstrong nodded.

“Late that summer,” he said. “Two kids, in a truck, with a bat. They were big guys. I didn’t really know them, but I’d seen them around before, here and there. They were brothers, I think. Real hard kids, you know, delinquents, bullies from out of town, the sort of kids you always stayed well away from. They took a swing at the box and my dad jumped out at them and there was an argument. They were sneering at him, threatening him, saying bad things about my mother.

They said, bring her on out and we'll show her a good time with this bat, better than you can show her. You can imagine the gestures that went with it. So then there was a fight, and my dad got lucky. It was just one of those things, two lucky punches and he won. Or maybe it was his military training. The bat had bust in half, maybe against the box. I thought that would be the end of it, but he dragged the kids into the yard and got some logging chain and some padlocks and got them chained up to a tree. They were kneeling down, facing each other around the trunk. My dad's mind was gone. His temper had kicked in. He was hitting them with the broken bat. I was trying to stop him, but it was impossible. Then he said he was going to show *them* a good time with the bat, with the broken end, unless they begged him not to. So they begged. They begged long and loud."

He went quiet again.

"I was there all the time," he said. "I was trying to calm my father down, that's all. But these guys were looking at me like I was *participating*. There was this *thing* in their eyes, like I was a witness to their worst moment. Like I was seeing them being totally humiliated, which I guess is the worst thing you can do to a bully. There was absolute hatred in their eyes. Against *me*. Like they were saying, you've seen this, so now you have to die. It was literally as bad as that."

"What happened?" Neagley asked.

"My father kept them there. He said he was going to leave them there all night and start up again in the morning. We went inside and he went to bed and I snuck out again an hour later. I was going to let them go. But they were already gone. They'd gotten out of the chains somehow. Escaped. They never came back. I never saw them again. I went off to college, never really came home again except for visits."

"And your father died."

Armstrong nodded. "He had blood pressure problems, which was understandable, I guess, given his personality. I kind of forgot about the two kids. It was just an episode that had happened in the past. But I didn't *really* forget about them. I always remembered the look in their eyes. I can see it right now. It was stone-cold hatred. It was like two cocky thugs who couldn't stand to be seen any other way than how they chose to be seen. Like I was committing a

mortal sin just for happening to see them losing. Like I was *doing* something to them. Like I was their enemy. They stared at me. I gave up trying to understand it. I'm no kind of a psychologist. But I never forgot that look. When that package came I wasn't puzzled for a second who had sent it, even though it's been nearly thirty years."

"Did you know their names?" Reacher asked.

Armstrong shook his head. "I didn't know much about them, except I guess they lived in some nearby town. What are you going to do?"

"I know what I'd *like* to do."

"What's that?"

"I'd like to break both your arms and never see you again as long as I live. Because if you'd spoken up on Election Day, Froelich would still be alive."

"Why the hell didn't you?" Neagley asked.

Armstrong shook his head. There were tears in his eyes.

"Because I had no idea it was serious," he said. "I really didn't, I promise you, on my daughter's life. Don't you see? I just thought it was supposed to remind me or unsettle me. I wondered whether maybe in their minds they still thought I was in the wrong back then, and it was supposed to be a threat of political embarrassment or exposure or something. Obviously I wasn't worried about that because I wasn't in the wrong back then. Everybody would understand that. And I couldn't see any other logical reason for sending it. I was thirty years older, so were they. I'm a rational adult, I assumed they were. So I thought it was maybe just an unpleasant joke. I didn't conceive of any *danger* in it. I absolutely promise you that. I mean, why would I? So it unsettled me for an hour, and then I dropped it. Maybe I half-expected some kind of lame follow-up, but I figured I'd deal with that when it happened. But there *was* no follow-up. It didn't happen. Not as far as I knew. *Because nobody told me*. Until now. Until *you* told me. And according to Stuyvesant you shouldn't be telling me even now. And people have suffered and *died*. Christ, why did he keep me out of the loop? I could have given him the whole story if he'd just *asked*."

Nobody spoke.

“So you’re right and you’re wrong,” he said. “I knew who and why, but I didn’t know all along. I didn’t know the middle. I knew the beginning, and I knew the end. I knew as soon as the shooting started, believe me. I mean, I just *knew*. It was an unbelievable shock, out of the blue. Like, *this* is the follow-up? It was an insane development. It was like half-expecting a rotten tomato to be thrown at me one day and getting a nuclear missile instead. I thought the world had gone mad. You want to blame me for not speaking out, OK, go ahead and blame me, but how could I have known? How could I have predicted this kind of insanity?”

Silence for a beat.

“So that’s my guilty secret,” Armstrong said. “Not that I did anything wrong thirty years ago. But that I didn’t have the right kind of imagination to see the implications of the package three weeks ago.”

Nobody spoke.

“Should I tell Stuyvesant now?” Armstrong asked.

“Your choice,” Reacher said.

There was a long pause. Armstrong the man faded away again, and Armstrong the politician came back to replace him.

“I don’t want to tell him,” he said. “Bad for him, bad for me. People have suffered and died. It’ll be seen as a serious misjudgment on both our parts. He should have asked, I should have told.”

Reacher nodded. “So leave it to us. You’ll know our secret and we’ll know yours.”

“And we’ll all live happily ever after.”

“Well, we’ll all live,” Reacher said.

“Descriptions?” Neagley asked.

“Just kids,” Armstrong said. “Maybe my age. I only remember their eyes.”

“What’s the name of the town?”

“Underwood, Oregon,” Armstrong said. “Where my mother still lives. Where I’m going in an hour.”

“And these kids were from the area?”

Armstrong glanced at Reacher. “And you predicted they’ll go home to wait.”

“Yes,” Reacher said. “I did.”

“And I’m heading right there.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Reacher said. “That theory is way out of date now. I assume they expected you’d remember them, and I assume they didn’t anticipate the communication breakdown between yourself and the Secret Service. And they wouldn’t want you to be able to lead *them* right to their door. Therefore their door has changed. They don’t live in Oregon anymore. That’s one thing we can be absolutely sure of.”

“So how are you going to find them?”

Reacher shook his head. “We can’t find them. Not now. Not in time. They’ll have to find us. In Wyoming. At the memorial service.”

“I’m going there too. With minimal cover.”

“So just hope it’s all over before you arrive.”

“Should I tell Stuyvesant?” Armstrong asked again.

“Your choice,” Reacher said again.

“I can’t cancel the appearance. That wouldn’t be right.”

“No,” Reacher said. “I guess it wouldn’t.”

“I can’t tell Stuyvesant now.”

“No,” Reacher said. “I guess you can’t.”

Armstrong said nothing. Reacher stood up to leave, and Neagley did the same.

“Or about this,” Reacher said. “We think the [illegible]”

¨One last thing,´ Reacher said. ¨We think these guys grew up to be cops.´

Armstrong sat still. He started to shake his head, but then he stopped and looked down at the desk. His face clouded, like he was hearing a faint thirty-year-old echo.

“Something during the beating,” he said. “I only half-heard it, and I’m sure I discounted it at the time. But I think at one point they claimed their dad was a cop. They said he could get us in big trouble.”

Reacher said nothing.

The protection agents showed them out. They walked the length of the canvas tent and stepped off the curb into the street. Turned east and got back on the sidewalk and settled in for the trek to the subway. It was late morning and the air was clear and cold. The neighborhood was deserted. Nobody was out walking. Neagley opened the envelope Stuyvesant had given her. It contained a check for five thousand dollars. The memo line was written up as *professional consultation*. Reacher’s envelope contained two checks. One was for the same five-grand fee and the other was for his audit expenses, repaid to the exact penny.

“We should go shopping,” Neagley said. “We can’t go hunting in Wyoming dressed like this.”

“I don’t want you to come with me,” Reacher said.

17

They had the argument right there on the street as they walked through Georgetown.

“Worried about my safety?” Neagley asked. “Because you shouldn’t be. Nothing’s going to happen to me. I can look after myself. And I can make my own decisions.”

“I’m not worried about your safety,” Reacher said.

“What then? My performance? I’m way better than you.”

“I know you are.”

“So what’s your problem?”

“Your license. You’ve got something to lose.”

Neagley said nothing.

“You’ve got a license, right?” Reacher said. “To be in the business you’re in? And you’ve got an office and a job and a home and a fixed location. I’m going to disappear after this. You can’t do that.”

“Think we’re going to get caught?”

“I can afford to take the risk. You can’t.”

“There’s no risk if we don’t get caught.”

Now Reacher said nothing.

“It’s like you told Bannon,” she said. “I’m lying there lined up on these guys, I’m going to get an itch in my spine. I need you to watch my back.”

“This isn’t your fight.”

“Why is it yours? Because some woman your brother once dumped got herself killed doing her job? That’s tenuous.”

Reacher said nothing.

“OK, it’s your fight,” Neagley said. “I know that. But whatever thing you’ve got in your head that *makes* it your fight makes it *my* fight too. Because I’ve got the same thing in *my* head. And even if we didn’t think the same, if I had a problem, wouldn’t you help me out?”

“I would if you asked.”

“So we’re even.”

“Except I’m not asking.”

“Not right now. But you will be. You’re two thousand miles from Wyoming and you don’t have a credit card to buy a plane ticket with, and I do. You’re armed with a folding knife with a three-inch blade and I know a guy in Denver who will give us any weapons we want, no questions asked, and you don’t. I can rent a car in Denver to get us the rest of the way, and you can’t.”

They walked on, twenty yards, thirty.

“OK,” Reacher said. “I’m asking.”

“We’ll get the clothes in Denver,” she said. “I know some good places.”

They made it to Denver before three in the afternoon Mountain Time. The high plains lay all around them, tan and dormant. The air was thin and bitter cold. There was no snow yet, but it was coming. The runway plows were lined up and ready. The snowdrift fences were prepared. The car rental companies had shipped their sedans south and brought in plenty of new four-wheel-drives. Neagley signed for a GMC Yukon at the Avis counter. They shuttled to the lot and picked it up. It was black and shiny and looked a lot like Froelich’s Suburban except it was two feet shorter.

They drove it into the city. It was a long, long way. Space seemed infinitely available even after D.C., which wasn’t the most crowded place in the East. They parked in a downtown garage and walked three blocks and Neagley found

the store she was looking for. It was an all-purpose outdoor equipment place. It had everything from boots and compasses to zinc stuff designed to stop you getting sunburn on your nose. They bought a bird-watcher's spotting scope and a hiker's large-scale map of central Wyoming and then they moved to the clothing racks. They were full of the kind of stuff you could use halfway up the Rockies and then wear around town without looking like a complete idiot. Neagley went for a walker's heavy-duty outfit in greens and browns. Reacher duplicated his Atlantic City purchases at twice the price and twice the quality. This time he added a hat, and a pair of gloves. He dressed in the changing cubicle. Left Joe's last surviving suit stuffed in the garbage can.

Neagley found a pay phone on the street and stopped in the cold long enough to make a short call. Then they went back to the truck and she drove it out of the garage and through the city center toward the dubious part of town. There was a strong smell of dog food in the air.

"There's a factory here," she said.

Reacher nodded. "No kidding."

She came off a narrow street into some kind of an industrial park and nosed through a tangle of low-built metal structures. There were linoleum dealers and brake shops and places where you could get four snow tires for ninety-nine bucks and other places where you could get your steering realigned for twenty. On one corner there was a long low workshop standing on its own in the center of a quarter-acre of cracked blacktop. The building had a closed roll-up door and a hand-painted sign that read: *Eddie Brown Engineering*.

"This is your guy?" Reacher asked.

Neagley nodded. "What do we want?"

Reacher shrugged. "No point planning it to death. Something short and something long, one of each, plus some ammunition, I guess. That should do it."

She stopped in front of the roll-up door and hit the horn. A guy came out of a personnel entrance and got halfway to the car before he saw who it was. He was tall and heavy through the neck and shoulders. He had short fair hair and an open amiable face, but he had big hands and thick wrists and wasn't the sort of guy you'd mess with on a whim. He sketched a wave and ducked back inside and a

moment later the big door started rolling up. Neagley drove in under it and it came back down behind them.

On the inside the building was about half the size it should have been, but apart from that it looked convincing. The floor was grease-stained concrete and there were metalworkers' lathes here and there, and drilling machines and stacks of raw sheet metal and bundles of steel rods. But the back wall was ten feet closer on the inside than the exterior proportions dictated. Clearly there was a handsome-sized room concealed behind it.

"This is Eddie Brown," Neagley said.

"Not my real name," the big guy said.

He accessed the concealed room by pulling on a big pile of scrap metal. It was all welded together and welded in turn to a steel panel hidden behind it. The whole thing swung open on silent oiled hinges like a giant three-dimensional door. The guy calling himself Eddie Brown led them through it into a whole different situation.

The concealed room was as clean as a hospital. It was painted white and lined on all four sides by shelves and racks. On three walls the shelves held handguns, some of them boxed, some of them loose. The racks were full of long guns, rifles and carbines and shotguns and machine guns, yards of them, all of them neat and parallel. The air was full of the stink of gun oil. The fourth wall was lined like a library with boxes of ammunition. Reacher could smell the new brass and the crisp cardboard and faint traces of powder.

"I'm impressed," he said.

"Take what you need," Eddie said.

"Where do the serial numbers lead to?"

"The Austrian Army," Eddie said. "They kind of fizzle out after that."

Ten minutes later they were back on the road, with Reacher's new jacket carefully spread out in the Yukon's load space over two nine-millimeter Steyr GBs, a Heckler & Koch MP5 unsilenced machine gun, an M16 rifle, and boxes full of two hundred rounds for each weapon.

They entered Wyoming after dark, driving north on I-25. They turned left at Cheyenne and picked up I-80. They rolled west to Laramie and then headed north. The town called Grace was still five hours away, well beyond Casper. The map showed it nestled in the middle of nowhere between towering mountains on one side and infinite grasslands on the other.

“We’ll stop in Medicine Bow,” Reacher said. “Sounds like a cool place. We’ll aim to get to Grace at dawn tomorrow.”

Medicine Bow didn’t look like much of a cool place in the dark, but it had a motel about two miles out with rooms available. Neagley paid for them. Then they found a steakhouse a mile in the other direction and ate twelve-ounce sirloins that cost less than a drink in D.C. The place closed up around them so they took the hint and headed back to their rooms. Reacher left his coat in the truck, to hide the firepower from curious eyes. They said goodnight in the lot. Reacher went straight to bed. He heard Neagley in the shower. She was singing to herself. He could hear it, through the wall.

He woke up at four in the morning, Saturday. Neagley was showering again, and still singing. He thought: *When the hell does she sleep?* He rolled out of bed and headed for the bathroom. Turned his shower on hot, which must have made hers run cold, because he heard a muffled scream through the wall. So he turned it off again and waited until he heard her finish. Then he showered and dressed and met her out by the car. It was still pitch dark. Still very cold. There were flakes of snow blowing in from the west. They were drifting slowly through the parking lot lights.

“Can’t find any coffee,” Neagley said.

They found some an hour north. A roadside diner was opening for breakfast. They saw its lights a mile away. It was next to the mouth of a dirt road leading down through the darkness to the Medicine Bow National Forest. The diner looked like a barn, long and low, made out of red boards. Cold outside, warm inside. They sat at a table by a curtained window and ate eggs and bacon and

toast and drank strong bitter coffee.

“OK, we’ll call them one and two,” Neagley said. “One is the Bismarck guy. You’ll recognize him. Two is the guy from the garage video. We might recognize him from his build. But we don’t really know what he looks like.”

Reacher nodded. “So we’ll look for the Bismarck guy hanging out with some other guy. No point planning it to death.”

“You don’t sound very enthusiastic.”

“You should go home.”

“Now that I’ve gotten you here?”

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“You’re uptight that Froelich was killed. That’s all. Doesn’t mean anything’s going to happen to me.”

He said nothing.

“We’re two against two,” Neagley said. “You and me against two bozos, and you’re worried about it?”

“Not very,” he said.

“Maybe they won’t even show. Bannon figured they’d know it was a trap.”

“They’ll show,” Reacher said. “They’ve been challenged. It’s a testosterone thing. And they’ve got more than enough screws loose to jump right on it.”

“Nothing’s going to happen to me, if they do.”

“I’d feel bad if it did.”

“It’s not going to,” she said.

“Tell me I’m not making you do this.”

“My own free will,” she said.

He nodded. “So let’s go.”

They got back on the road. Snowflakes hung in the headlight beams. They drifted in weightlessly from the west and shone bright in the light and then whipped backward as they drove. They were big flakes, dry and powdery, not many of them. The road was narrow. It wandered left and right. The surface was lumpy. All around it in the darkness was a vastness so large it sucked the noise of the car away into nothing. They were driving in a bright tunnel of silence, leaping ahead from one lonely snowflake to the next.

“I guess Casper will have a police department,” Reacher said.

Neagley nodded at the wheel. “Could be a hundred strong. Casper is nearly as big as Cheyenne. Nearly as big as Bismarck, actually.”

“And they’ll be responsible for Grace,” Reacher said.

“Alongside the state troopers, I guess.”

“So any other cops we find there are our guys.”

“You’re still certain they’re cops?”

He nodded. “It’s the only way everything makes sense. The initial contact with Nendick and Andretti in the cop bars, the familiarity with the NCIC, the access to the government weapons. Plus the way they slip in and out everywhere. Crowds, confusion, a gold shield gets you anywhere. And if Armstrong’s right and their dad was a cop, that’s a pretty good predictor. It’s a family trade, like the military.”

“My dad wasn’t in the military.”

“But mine was, so there’s fifty percent right away. Better than most other professions. And you know what the clincher is?”

“What?”

“Something we should have figured long ago. But we just skated right on by. We missed it, totally. *The two dead Armstrongs*. How the hell do you just *find* two white guys with fair hair and blue eyes and the right dates of birth and the right

faces and above all the right first and last names? That's a very tall order. But these guys did it. And there's only one practical way of doing it, which is the national DMV database. Driver's license information, names, addresses, dates of birth, photographs. It's all right there, everything you need. And nobody can get into it, except cops, who can dial it right up."

Neagley was silent for a moment.

"OK, they *are* cops," she said.

"They sure are. And we're brain dead for not spotting it on Tuesday."

"But cops would have heard of Armstrong long ago, wouldn't they?"

"Why would they? Cops know about their own little world, that's all, same as anybody else. If you worked in some rural police department in Maine or Florida or outside San Diego you might know the New York Giants quarterback or the Chicago White Sox center fielder but there's no reason why you would have heard of North Dakota's junior senator. Unless you were a politics junkie, and most people aren't."

Neagley drove on. Way to the right, far to the east, a narrow band of sky was a fraction lighter than it had been. It had turned the color of dark charcoal against the blackness beyond it. The snow was no heavier, no lighter. The big lazy flakes drifted in from the mountains, floating level, sometimes rising.

"So which is it?" she asked. "Maine or Florida or San Diego? We need to know, because if they're flying in they won't be armed with anything they can't pick up here."

"California is a possibility," Reacher said. "Oregon isn't. They wouldn't have revealed their specific identity to Armstrong if they still lived in Oregon. Nevada is a possibility. Or Utah or Idaho. Anywhere else is too far."

"For what?"

"To be on a reasonable radius from Sacramento. How long does a stolen cooler of ice last?"

Neagley said nothing.

“Nevada or Utah or Idaho,” Reacher said. “That’s my guess. Not California. I think they wanted a state line between them and the place they went for the thumb. Feels better, psychologically. I think they’re a long day’s drive from Sacramento. Which means they’re probably a long day’s drive from here, too, in the other direction. So I think they’ll be coming in by road, armed to the teeth.”

“When?”

“Today, if they’ve got any sense.”

“The bat was mailed in Utah,” Neagley said.

Reacher nodded. “OK, so scratch Utah. I don’t think they wanted to mail anything in their home state.”

“So Idaho or Nevada,” Neagley said. “We better watch for license plates.”

“This is a tourist destination. There are going to be plenty of out-of-state plates. Like we’ve got Colorado plates.”

“How will they aim to do it?”

“Edward Fox,” Reacher said. “They want to survive, and they’re reasonable with a rifle. Hundred and twenty yards in Minnesota, ninety in D.C. They’ll aim to get him in the church doorway, somewhere like that. Maybe out in the graveyard. Drop him right next to somebody else’s headstone.”

Neagley slowed and turned right onto Route 220. It was a better road, wider, newer blacktop. It ran with a river wandering next to it. The sky was lighter in the east. Up ahead was a faint glow from the city of Casper, twenty miles north. The snow was still blowing in from the west, slow and lazy.

“So what’s our plan?” Neagley asked.

“We need to see the terrain,” Reacher said.

He looked sideways out the window. He had seen nothing but darkness since leaving Denver.

They stopped on the outer edge of Casper for gas and more coffee and a bathroom. Then Reacher took a turn at the wheel. He picked up Route 87 north out of town and drove fast for thirty miles because Route 87 was also I-25 again and was wide and straight. And he drove fast because they were late. Dawn was in full swing to the east and they were still well short of Grace. The sky was pink and beautiful and the light came in brilliant horizontal shafts and lit the mountainsides in the west. They were meandering through the foothills. On their right, to the east, the world was basically flat all the way to Chicago and beyond. On their left, distant in the west, the Rocky Mountains reared two miles high. The lower slopes were dotted with stands of pine and the peaks were white with snow and streaked with gray crags. For miles either side of the ribbon of road was high desert, with sagebrush and tan grasses blazing purple in the early sun.

“Been here before?” Neagley asked.

“No,” he said.

“We need to turn,” she said. “Soon, east toward Thunder Basin.”

He repeated the name in his head, because he liked the sound of the words. *Thunder Basin. Thunder Basin*.

He made a shallow right off the highway onto a narrow county road. There were signposts to Midwest and Edgerton. The land fell away to the east. Pines a hundred feet tall threw morning shadows a hundred yards long. There was endless ragged grassland interrupted here and there by the remains of old industrial enterprises. There were square stone foundations a foot high and tangles of old iron.

“Oil,” Neagley said. “And coal mining. All closed down eighty years ago.”

“The land looks awful flat,” Reacher said.

But he knew the flatness was deceptive. The low sun showed him creases and crevices and small escarpments that were nothing compared to the mountains on his left but were a long way from being *flat*. They were in a transition area, where the mountains shaded randomly into the high plains. The geological tumult of a million years ago rippled outward all the way to Nebraska, frozen in

time, leaving enough cover to hide a walking man in a million different places.

“We need it to be totally flat,” Neagley said.

Reacher nodded at the wheel. “Except for maybe one little hill a hundred yards from where Armstrong is going to be. And another little hill a hundred yards back from it, where we can watch from.”

“It isn’t going to be that easy.”

“It never is,” Reacher said.

They drove on, another whole hour. They were heading north and east into emptiness. The sun rose well clear of the horizon. The sky was banded pink and purple. Behind them the Rockies blazed with reflected light. Ahead and to the right the grasslands ran into the distance like a stormy ocean.

There was no more snow in the air. The big lazy flakes had disappeared.

“Turn here,” Neagley said.

“Here?” He slowed to a stop and looked at the turn. It was just a dirt road, leading south to the middle of nowhere.

“There’s a town down there?” he asked.

“According to the map,” Neagley said.

He backed up and made the turn. The dirt road ran a mile through pines and then broke out with a view of absolutely nothing.

“Keep going,” Neagley said.

They drove on, twenty miles, thirty. The road rose and fell. Then it peaked and the land fell away in front of them into a fifty-mile-wide bowl of grass and sage. The road ran ahead through it straight south like a faint pencil line and crossed a river in the base of the bowl. Two more roads ran into the bridge from nowhere. There were tiny buildings scattered randomly. The whole thing looked like a capital letter K, lightly peppered with habitation where the three lines of the letter met.

“That’s Grace, Wyoming,” Neagley said. “Where this road crosses the south fork of the Cheyenne River.”

Reacher eased the Yukon to a stop. Put it in park and crossed his arms on the top of the wheel. Leaned forward with his chin on his hands and stared ahead through the windshield.

“We should be on horses,” he said.

“Wearing white hats,” Neagley said. “With Colt .45s.”

“I’ll stick with the Steyrs,” Reacher said. “How many ways in?”

Neagley traced her finger over the map.

“North or south,” she said. “On this road. The other two roads don’t go anywhere. They peter out in the brush. Maybe they head out to old cattle ranches.”

“Which way will the bad guys come?”

“Nevada, they’ll come in from the south. Idaho, from the north.”

“So we can’t stay right here and block the road.”

“They might be down there already.”

One of the buildings was a tiny pinprick of white in a square of green. *Froelich’s church,* he thought. He opened his door and got out of the car. Walked around to the tailgate and came back with the bird-watcher’s spotting scope. It was like half of a huge pair of binoculars. He steadied it against the open door and put it to his eye.

The optics compressed the view into a flat grainy picture that danced and quivered with his heartbeat. He focused until it was like looking down at the town from a half-mile away. The river was a narrow cut. The bridge was a stone structure. The roads were all dirt. There were more buildings than he had first thought. The church stood alone in a tended acre inside the south angle of the K. It had a stone foundation and the rest of it was clapboard painted white. It would have looked right at home in Massachusetts. Its grounds widened out to the

south and were mowed grass studded with headstones.

South of the graveyard was a fence, and behind the fence was a cluster of two-story buildings made of weathered cedar. They were set at random angles to one another. North of the church were more of the same. Houses, stores, barns. Along the short legs of the K were more buildings. Some of them were painted white. They were close together near the center of town, farther apart as the distance increased. The river ran blue and clear, east and north into the sea of grass. There were cars and pickups parked here and there. Some pedestrian activity. It looked like the population might reach a couple of hundred.

“It was a cattle town, I guess,” Neagley said. “They brought the railroad in as far as Casper, through Douglas. They must have driven the herds sixty, seventy miles south and picked it up there.”

“So what do they do now?” Reacher asked.

The town wobbled in the scope as he spoke.

“No idea,” she said. “Maybe they all invest on-line.”

He passed her the scope and she refocused and stared down through it. He watched the lens move fractionally up and down and side to side as she covered the whole area.

“They’ll set up to the south,” she said. “All the preservice activity will happen south of the church. They’ve got a couple of old barns a hundred yards out, and some natural cover.”

“How will they aim to get away?”

The scope moved an eighth of an inch, to the right.

“They’ll expect roadblocks north and south,” she said. “Local cops. That’s a no-brainer. Their badges might get them through, but I wouldn’t be counting on it. This is a whole different situation. There might be confusion, but there won’t be crowds.”

“So how?”

“I know how I’d do it,” she said. “I’d ignore the roads altogether. I’d take off across the grass, due west. Forty miles of open country in some big four-wheel-drive, and you hit the highway. I doubt the Casper PD has got a helicopter. Or the Highway Patrol. There are only two highways in the whole state.”

“Armstrong will come in a helicopter,” Reacher said. “Probably from some Air Force base in Nebraska.”

“But they won’t use his helicopter to chase the bad guys. They’ll be exfiltrating him or taking him to a hospital. I’m sure that’s some kind of standard protocol.”

“Highway Patrol would set up north and south on the highway. They’ll have nearly an hour’s warning.”

Neagley lowered the scope and nodded. “I’d anticipate that. So I’d drive straight *across* the highway and get back off-road. West of the highway is ten thousand square miles of nothing between Casper and the Wind River Reservation, with only one major road through it. They’d be long gone before somebody whistled up a helicopter and started the search.”

“That’s a bold plan.”

“I’d go for it,” Neagley said.

Reacher smiled. “I know *you* would. Question is, will these guys? I’m wondering if they’ll take one look and turn around and forget about it.”

“Doesn’t matter. We’ll take them down while they’re looking. We don’t need to catch them in the act.”

Reacher climbed back into the driver’s seat.

“Let’s go to work,” he said.

The bowl was very shallow. They lost maybe a hundred feet of elevation in the twenty miles they drove before they reached the town. The road was hard-packed dirt, smooth as glass, beautifully scraped and contoured. An annual art, Reacher guessed, performed anew every year when the winter snows melted and the spring rains finished. It was the kind of road Model T Fords rolled down in documentary films. It curved as it approached the town so that the bridge could cross the river at an exact right angle.

cross the river at an exact right angle.

The bridge seemed to represent the geographic center of town. There was a general store that offered postal service and a breakfast counter. There was a forge set back behind it that had probably fixed ranch machinery way back in history. There was a feed supplier's office and a hardware store. There was a one-pump gas station with a sign that read: *Springs Repaired*. There were sidewalks made of wood fronting the buildings. They ran like boat docks, floating on the earth. There was a quiet leathery man loading groceries into a pickup bed.

"They won't come here," Reacher said. "This is the most exposed place I've ever seen."

Neagley shook her head. "They won't know that until they've seen it for themselves. They might be in and out in ten minutes, but ten minutes is all we need."

"Where are we going to stay?"

She pointed. "Over there."

There was a plain-fronted red cedar building with numerous small windows and a sign that read: *Clean Rooms*.

"Terrific," Reacher said.

"Drive around," Neagley said. "Let's get a feel for the place."

A letter K has only four options for exploration, and they had already covered the northern leg on the way in. Reacher backed up to the bridge and struck out north and east, following the river. That road led past eight houses, four on each side, and then narrowed after another half-mile to a poor stony track. There was a barbed-wire fence lost in the grass on the left, and another on the right.

"Ranch land," Neagley said.

The ranches themselves were clearly miles away. Fragments of the road were visible as it rose and fell over gentle contours into the distance. Reacher turned the truck around and headed back and turned down the short southeast leg. It had more houses and they were closer together, but it was otherwise similar. It

narrowed after the same distance and ran on toward nothing visible. There was more barbed wire and an inexplicable wooden shed with no door. Inside the shed was a rusting pickup truck with pale weedy grass growing up all around it. It looked like it had been parked there back when Richard Nixon was Vice President.

“OK, go south,” Neagley said. “Let’s see the church.”

The south leg led seventy miles to Douglas, and they drove the first three miles of it. The town’s power and telephone lines came in from that direction, strung on tarred poles, looping on into the distance, following the road. The road passed the church and the graveyard, then the cluster of cedar buildings, then a couple of abandoned cattle barns, then maybe twenty or thirty small houses, and then the town finished and there was just infinite grassland ahead. But it wasn’t flat. There were crevices and crevasses worn smooth by ten thousand years of winds and weather. They undulated calmly, up and down to maximum depths of ten or twelve feet, like slow ocean swells. They were all connected in a network. The grass itself was a yard high, brown and dead and brittle. It swayed in waves under the perpetual breeze.

“You could hide an infantry company in there,” Neagley said.

Reacher turned the car and headed back toward the church. Pulled over and parked level with the graveyard. The church itself was very similar to the one outside Bismarck. It had the same steep roof over the nave and the same blocky square tower. It had a clock on the tower and a weather vane and a flag, and a lightning rod. It was white, but not as bright. Reacher glanced west to the horizon and saw gray clouds massing over the distant mountains.

“It’s going to snow,” he said.

“We can’t see anything from here,” Neagley said.

She was right. The church was built right in the river valley bottom. Its foundation was probably the lowest structure in town. The road to the north was visible for maybe a hundred yards. Same in the south. It ran in both directions and rose over gentle humps and disappeared from sight.

“They could be right on top of us before we know it,” Neagley said. “We need to be able to see them coming.”

Reacher nodded. Opened his door and climbed out of the car. Neagley joined him and they walked toward the church. The air was cold and dry. The graveyard lawn was dead under their feet. It felt like the beginning of winter. There was a new grave site marked out with cotton tape. It lay to the west of the church, in virgin grass on the end of a row of weathered headstones. Reacher detoured to take a look. There were four Froelich graves in a line. Soon to be a fifth, on some sad day in the near future. He looked at the rectangle of tape and imagined the hole dug deep and crisp and square.

Then he stepped away and looked around. There was flat empty land opposite the church on the east side of the road. It was a big enough space to land a helicopter. He stood and imagined it coming in, rotors thumping, turning in the air to face the passenger door toward the church, setting down. He imagined Armstrong climbing out. Crossing the road. Approaching the church. The vicar would probably greet him near the door. He stepped sideways and stood where Armstrong might stand and raised his eyes. Scanned the land to the south and west. *Bad news*. There was some elevation there, and about a hundred and fifty yards out there were waves and shadows in the moving grass that must mean dips and crevices in the earth beneath it. There were more beyond that distance, all the way out to infinity.

“How good do you think they are?” he asked.

Neagley shrugged. “They’re always either better or worse than you expect. They’ve shown some proficiency so far. Shooting downhill, thin air, through grass, I’d be worried out to about five hundred yards.”

“And if they miss Armstrong they’ll hit somebody else by mistake.”

“Stuyvesant needs to bring a surveillance helicopter too. This angle is hopeless, but you could see everything from the air.”

“Armstrong won’t let him,” Reacher said. “But we’ve got the air. We’ve got the church tower.”

He turned and walked back toward it.

“Forget the rooming house,” he said. “This is where we’re going to stay. We’ll see them coming, north or south, night or day. It’ll all be over before Stuyvesant or Armstrong even get here.”

They were ten feet from the church door when it opened and a clergyman stepped out, closely followed by an old couple. The clergyman was middle-aged and looked very earnest. The old couple were both maybe sixty years old. The man was tall and stooped, and a little underweight. The woman was still good-looking, a little above average height, trim and nicely dressed. She had short fair hair turning gray the way fair hair does. Reacher knew exactly who she was, immediately. And she knew who he was, or thought she did. She stopped talking and stopped walking and just stared at him the same way her daughter had. She looked at his face, confused, like she was comparing similarities and differences against a mental image.

“You?” she said. “Or is it?”

Her face was strained and tired. She was wearing no makeup. Her eyes were dry, but they hadn’t been for the last two days. That was clear. They were rimmed with red and lined and swollen.

“I’m his brother,” Reacher said. “I’m very sorry for your loss.”

“You should be,” she said. “Because this is entirely Joe’s fault.”

“Is it?”

“He made her change jobs, didn’t he? He wouldn’t date a coworker, so *she* had to change. *He* wouldn’t change. She went over to the dangerous side, while he stayed exactly where he was, safe and sound. And now look what’s come of it.”

Reacher paused a beat.

“I think she was happy where she was,” he said. “She could have changed back, you know, afterward, if she wasn’t. But she didn’t. So I think that means she wanted to stay there. She was a fine agent, doing important work.”

“How could she change back? Was she supposed to see him every day like nothing had happened?”

“I meant she could have waited the year, and then changed back.”

“What difference does a year make? He broke her heart. How could she *ever* work for him again?”

Reacher said nothing.

“Is he coming here?” she asked.

“No,” Reacher said. “He’s not.”

“Good,” she said. “Because he wouldn’t be welcome.”

“No, I guess he wouldn’t,” Reacher said.

“I suppose he’s too *busy*,” she said.

She walked off, toward the dirt road. The clergyman followed her, and so did Froelich’s father. But then he hesitated and turned back.

“She knows it’s not really Joe’s fault,” he said. “We both know Mary Ellen was doing what she wanted.”

Reacher nodded. “She was terrific at it.”

“Was she?”

“Best they ever had.”

The old man nodded, like he was satisfied.

“How is Joe?” he asked. “I met him a couple of times.”

“He died,” Reacher said. “Five years ago. In the line of duty.”

There was quiet for a moment.

“I’m very sorry,” the old man said.

“But don’t tell Mrs. Froelich,” Reacher said. “If it helps her not to know.”

The old man nodded again and turned away and set off after his wife with a strange loping stride.

“See?” Neagley said quietly. “Not everything is your fault.”

There was a notice board planted in the ground near the church door. It was like

There was a notice board planted in the ground near the church door. It was like a very slim cabinet mounted on sturdy wooden legs. It had glass doors. Behind the doors was a square yard of green felt with slim cotton tapes thumbtacked diagonally all over it. Notices typed on a manual typewriter were slipped behind the tapes. At the top was a permanent list of regular Sunday services. The first was held every week at eight o'clock in the morning. This was clearly a denomination that demanded a high degree of commitment from its parishioners. Next to the permanent list was a hastily typed announcement that this Sunday's eight o'clock service would be dedicated to the memory of Mary Ellen Froelich. Reacher checked his watch and shivered in the cold.

"Twenty-two hours," he said. "Time to lock and load."

They brought the Yukon nearer to the church and opened the tailgate. Bent over together and loaded all four weapons. They took a Steyr each. Neagley took the H&K and Reacher took the M16. They distributed the spare rounds between them, as appropriate. Then they locked the car and left it.

"Is it OK to bring guns into a church?" Neagley asked.

"It's OK in Texas," Reacher said. "Probably compulsory here."

They hauled the oak door open and stepped inside. It was very similar to the Bismarck building. Reacher wondered briefly whether rural communities had bought their churches by mail order, the same as everything else. It had the same parchment-white paint, the same shiny pews, the same pulpit. The same three bell ropes hanging down inside the tower. The same staircase. They went all the way up to the high ledge and found a ladder bolted to the wall, with a trapdoor above it.

"Home sweet home," Reacher said.

He led the way up the ladder and through the trapdoor and into the bell chamber. The bell chamber was not the same as the one in Bismarck. It had a clock added into it. There was a four-foot cube of brass machinery mounted centrally on iron girders just above the bells themselves. The clock had two faces, both driven simultaneously by the same gears inside the cube. Long iron shafts ran straight out from the cube, through the walls, through the backs of the faces, all the way to the external hands. The faces were mounted in the openings where the louvers had been, to the east and the west. The machinery was ticking loudly. Gear wheels and ratchets were clicking. They were setting up tiny sympathetic

wheels and ratchets were clicking. They were setting up tiny sympathetic resonances in the bells themselves.

“We’ve got no view east or west,” Reacher said.

Neagley shrugged.

“North and south is all we need,” she said. “That’s where the road runs.”

“I guess,” he said. “You take the south.”

He ducked under the girders and the iron shafts and crawled over to the louver facing north. Knelt up and looked out. Got a perfect view. He could see the bridge and the river. He could see the whole town. He could see the dirt road leading north. Maybe ten straight miles of it. It was completely empty.

“You OK?” he called.

“Excellent,” Neagley called back. “I can almost see Colorado.”

“Shout when you spot something.”

“You too.”

The clock ticked *thunk*, *thunk*, *thunk*, once a second. The sound was loud and precise and tireless. He glanced back at the mechanism and wondered whether it would drive him crazy before it sent him to sleep. He heard expensive alloy touching wood ten feet behind him as Neagley put her submachine gun down. He laid his M16 on the boards next to his knees. Squirmed around until he was as comfortable as he was going to get. Then he settled in to watch and wait.

18

The air was cold and seventy feet above ground the breeze was a wind. It came in through the louvers and scoured his eyes and made them water. They had been there two hours, and nothing had happened. They had seen nothing and heard nothing except the clock. They had learned its sound. Each *thunk* was made up of a bundle of separate metallic frequencies, starting low down with the muted bass ring of the bigger gears, ranging upward to the tiny treble click of the escapement lever, and finishing with a faint time-delayed *ding* resonating off the smallest bell. It was the sound of madness.

“I got something,” Neagley called. “SUV, I think, coming in from the south.”

He took a quick look north and got up off his knees. He was stiff and cold and very uncomfortable. He picked up the bird-watcher’s scope.

“Catch,” he called.

He tossed it in an upward loop over the clock shaft. Neagley twisted and caught it one-handed and turned back to the louver panel. Put the scope to her eye.

“Might be a new model Chevy Tahoe,” she called. “Light gold metallic. Sun is on the windshield. No ID on the occupants.”

Reacher looked north again. The road was still empty. He could see ten miles. It would take ten minutes to cover ten miles even at a fast cruise. He stood up straight and stretched. Ducked under the clock shafts and crawled over next to Neagley. She moved to her right and he wiped his eyes and stared out south. There was a tiny gold speck on the road, all alone, maybe five miles away.

“Not exactly busy,” she said. “Is it?”

She passed him the scope. He refocused it and propped its weight on a louver and squinted through it. The telephoto compression held the truck motionless. It looked like it was bouncing and swaying on the road but making absolutely no forward progress at all. It looked dirty and travel-stained. It had a big chrome front fender all smeared with mud and salt. The windshield was streaked. The sun’s reflection made it impossible to see who was riding in it.

“Why is it still sunny?” he said. “I thought it was going to snow.”

“Look to the west,” Neagley said.

He put the scope down and turned and put the left side of his face tight against the louvers. Closed his right eye and looked out sideways with his left. The sky was split in two. In the west it was almost black with clouds. In the east it was pale blue and hazy. Giant multiple shafts of sunlight blazed down through mist where the two weather systems met.

“Unbelievable,” he said.

“Some kind of inversion,” Neagley said. “I hope it stays where it is or we’ll freeze our asses off up here.”

“It’s about fifty miles away.”

“And the wind generally blows in from the west.”

“Great.”

He picked up the scope again and checked on the golden truck. It was maybe a mile closer, bucking and swaying on the dirt. It must have been doing about sixty.

“What do you think?” Neagley said.

“Nice vehicle,” he said. “Awful color.”

He watched it come on another mile and then handed back the scope.

“I should check north,” he said.

He crawled under the clock shaft and made it back to his own louver. There was nothing happening in the north. The road was still empty. He reversed his previous maneuver and put his right cheek against the wood and closed his left eye with his hand and checked west again. The snow clouds were clamped down on the mountains. It was like night and day, with an abrupt transition where the foothills started.

“It’s a Chevy Tahoe for sure,” Neagley called. “It’s slowing down.”

“See the plate?”

“Not yet. It’s about a mile out now, slowing.”

“See who’s in it?”

“I’ve got sun and tinted glass. No ID. Half a mile out now.”

Reacher glanced north. No traffic.

“Nevada plates, I think,” Neagley called. “Can’t read them. They’re all covered in mud. It’s right on the edge of town. It’s going real slow now. Looks like a reconnaissance cruise. It’s not stopping. Still no ID on the occupants. It’s getting real close now. I’m looking right down at the roof. Dark tint on the rear side glass. I’m going to lose them any second. It’s right underneath us now.”

Reacher stood up tight against the wall and peered down at the best angle he could get. The way the louvers were set in the frame gave him a blind spot maybe forty feet deep.

“Where is it now?” he called.

“Don’t know.”

He heard the sound of an engine over the moan of the wind. A big V-8, turning slowly. He stared down and a metallic gold hood slid into view. Then a roof. Then a rear window. The truck passed all the way underneath him and rolled through the town and crossed the bridge at maybe twenty miles an hour. It stayed slow for a hundred more yards. Then it accelerated. It picked up speed fast.

“Scope,” he called.

Neagley tossed it back to him and he rested it on a louver and watched the truck drive away to the north. The rear window was tinted black and there was an arc where the wiper had cleared the salt spray. The rear bumper was chrome. He could see raised lettering that read *Chevrolet Tahoe*. The rear plate was indecipherable. It was caked with road salt. He could see hand marks where the tailgate had been raised and lowered. It looked like a truck that had done some serious mileage in the last day or two.

“It’s heading out,” he called.

He watched it in the scope all the way. It bounced and swayed and grew smaller and smaller. It took ten whole minutes to drive all the way out of his field of vision. It rose up over the last hump in the road and then disappeared with a last flash of sun on gold paint.

“Anything more?” he called.

“Clear to the south,” Neagley called back.

“I’m going down for the map. You can watch both directions while I’m gone. Do some limbo dancing under this damn clock thing.”

He crawled to the trapdoor and got his feet on the ladder. Went down, stiff and sore and cold. He made it to the ledge and down the winding staircase. Out of the tower and out of the church into the weak midday sun. He limped across the graveyard toward the car. Saw Froelich’s father standing right next to it, looking at it like it might answer a question. The old guy saw his approach reflected in the window glass and spun around to face him.

“Mr. Stuyvesant is on the phone for you,” he said. “From the Secret Service office in Washington D.C.”

“Now?”

“He’s been holding twenty minutes. I’ve been trying to find you.”

“Where’s the phone?”

“At the house.”

The Froelich house was one of the white buildings on the short southeastern leg of the K. The old guy led the way with his long loping stride. Reacher had to hurry to keep up with him. The house had a front garden with a white picket fence. It was full of herbs and cottage plants that had died back from the cold. Inside it was dim and fragrant. There were wide dark boards on the floors. Rag rugs here and there. The old guy led the way into a front parlor. There was an antique table under the window with a telephone and a photograph on it. The telephone was an old model with a heavy receiver and a plaited cord insulated

with brown fabric. The photograph was of Froelich herself, aged about eighteen. Her hair was a little longer than she had kept it, and a little lighter. Her face was open and innocent, and her smile was sweet. Her eyes were dark blue, alive with hopes for the future.

There was no chair next to the table. Clearly the Froelichs came from a generation that preferred to stand up while talking on the telephone. Reacher unraveled the cord and held the phone to his ear.

“Stuyvesant?” he said.

“Reacher? You got any good news for me?”

“Not yet.”

“What’s the situation?”

“The service is scheduled for eight o’clock,” Reacher said. “But I guess you know that already.”

“What else do I need to know?”

“You coming in by chopper?”

“That’s the plan. He’s still in Oregon right now. We’re going to fly him to an air base in South Dakota and then take a short hop in an Air Force helicopter. We’ll have eight people altogether, including me.”

“He only wanted three.”

“He can’t object. We’re all her friends.”

“Can’t you have a mechanical problem? Just stay in South Dakota?”

“He’d know. And the Air Force wouldn’t play anyway. They wouldn’t want to go down in history as the reason why he couldn’t make it.”

Reacher stood and looked out the window. “OK, so you’ll see the church easy enough. You’ll land across the street to the east. There’s a good place right there. Then he’s got about fifty yards to the church door. I can absolutely guarantee the immediate surroundings. We’re going to be in the church all night. But you’re

going to hate what you see farther out. There's about a hundred-fifty-degree field of fire to the south and west. It's completely open. And there's plenty of concealment."

Silence in D.C.

"I can't do it," Stuyvesant said. "I can't bring him into that. Or any of my people. I'm not going to lose anybody else."

"So just hope for the best," Reacher said.

"Not my way. You're going to have to deliver."

"We will if we can."

"How will I know? You don't have radios. Cell phones won't work out there. And it's too cumbersome to keep on using this land line."

Reacher paused for a second.

"We've got a black Yukon," he said. "Right now it's parked on the road, right next to the church, to the east. If it's still there when you show up, then pull out and go home. Armstrong will just have to swallow it. But if it's gone, then we're gone, and we won't be gone unless we've delivered, you follow?"

"OK, understood," Stuyvesant said. "A black Yukon east of the church, we abort. No Yukon, we land. Have you searched the town?"

"We can't do a house-to-house. But it's a very small place. Strangers are going to stand out, believe me."

"Nendick came around. He's talking a little. He says the same as Andretti. He was approached by the two of them and took them to be cops."

"They are cops. We're definite about that. Did you get descriptions?"

"No. He's still thinking about his wife. Didn't seem right to tell him he probably didn't need to."

"Poor guy."

“I’d like to get some closure for him. At least find her body, maybe.”

“I’m not planning an arrest here.”

Silence in D.C.

“OK,” Stuyvesant said. “I guess we won’t be seeing you either way. So, good luck.”

“You too,” Reacher said.

He put the receiver back in the cradle and tidied the cord into a neat curl on the table. Looked out at the view. The window faced north and east across an empty ocean of waist-high grass. Then he turned away from it and saw Mr. Froelich watching him from the parlor doorway.

“They’re coming here, aren’t they?” the old man said. “The people who killed my daughter? Because Armstrong is coming here.”

“They might be here already,” Reacher said.

Mr. Froelich shook his head. “Everybody would be talking about it.”

“Did you see that gold truck come through?”

The old man nodded. “It passed me, going real slow.”

“Who was in it?”

“I didn’t see. The windows were dark. I didn’t like to stare.”

“OK,” Reacher said. “If you hear about anybody new in town, come and tell me.”

The old man nodded again. “You’ll know as soon as I do. And I’ll know as soon as anybody new arrives. Word travels fast here.”

“We’ll be in the church tower,” Reacher said.

“Are you here on behalf of Armstrong?”

Reacher said nothing.

Reacher said nothing.

“No,” Mr. Froelich said. “You’re here to take an eye for an eye, aren’t you?”

Reacher nodded. “And a tooth for a tooth.”

“A life for a life.”

“Two for five, to be accurate,” Reacher said. “They get the fat end of the deal.”

“Are you comfortable with that?”

“Are you?”

The old guy’s watery eyes flicked all around the sunless room and came to rest on his daughter’s eighteen-year-old face.

“Do you have a child?” he asked.

“No,” Reacher said. “I don’t.”

“Neither do I,” the old man said. “Not anymore. So I’m comfortable with it.”

Reacher walked back to the Yukon and took the hiker’s map off the backseat. Then he climbed the church tower and found Neagley shuttling back and forth between the north and south side.

“All clear,” she said, over the tick of the clock.

“Stuyvesant called,” he said. “To the Froelichs’ house. He’s panicking. And Nendick woke up. Same approach as Andretti.”

He unfolded the map and spread it out flat on the bell chamber floor. Put his finger on Grace. It was in the center of a rough square made by four roads. The square was maybe eighty miles high and eighty wide. The right-hand perimeter was made by Route 59, which ran up from Douglas in the south through a town called Bill to a town called Wright in the north. The top edge of the square was Route 387, which ran west from Wright to Edgerton. Both roads were shown on the map as secondaries. They had driven part of 387 already and knew it to be a pretty decent strip of blacktop. The left-hand edge of the square was I-25, which

pretty decent strip of blacktop. The left-hand edge of the square was I-25, which came down from Montana in the north and ran straight past Edgerton and all the way down to Casper. The bottom of the square was also I-25, where it came out of Casper and doglegged east to Douglas before turning south again and heading for Cheyenne. The whole eighty-mile square was split into two more or less equal vertical rectangles by the dirt road that ran north to south through Grace. That road showed up on the map as a thin dotted gray line. The key in the margin called it an unpaved minor track.

"What do you think?" Neagley asked.

Reacher traced the square with his finger. Widened his radius and traced a hundred miles east, and north, and west, and south. "I think that in the whole history of the western United States no person has ever just *passed through* Grace, Wyoming. It's inconceivable. Why would anybody? Any coherent journey south to north or east to west would miss it altogether. Casper to Wright, say. Bottom left to top right. You'd use I-25 east to Douglas and Route 59 north out of Douglas to Wright. Coming through Grace makes no sense at all. It saves no miles. It just slows you down, because it's a dirt track. And would you even notice the track? Remember what it looked like at the north end? I thought it was going nowhere."

"And we've got a hiker's map," Neagley said. "Maybe it's not even on a regular road map."

"So that truck passed through for a reason," Reacher said. "Not by accident, not for the fun of it."

"Those were the guys," Neagley said.

Reacher nodded. "They were on their reconnaissance run."

"I agree," Neagley said. "But did they like what they saw?"

Reacher closed his eyes. *What did they see?* They saw a tiny town with no safe hiding places. A helicopter landing site just fifty yards from the church. And a black SUV that looked a little like an official Secret Service vehicle already parked on the road, big and obvious. With Colorado plates, and Denver was probably the nearest Secret Service Field Office.

"I don't think they were turning cartwheels," he said.

“So will they abort? Or will they come back?”

“Only one way to find out,” Reacher said. “We wait and see.”

They waited. The sun fell away into afternoon and the temperature dropped like a stone. The clock ticked 3,600 times every hour. Neagley went out for a walk and came back with a bag from the grocery store. They ate an improvised lunch. Then they developed a new lookout pattern based on the fact that no vehicle could get all the way through either field of view in less than about eight minutes. So they sat comfortably and every five minutes by Neagley’s watch they knelt up and shuffled over to their louvers and scanned the length of the road. Each time there was a small thrill of anticipation, and each time it was disappointed. But the regular physical movement helped against the cold. They started stretching in place, to keep loose. They did push-ups, to keep warm. The spare rounds in their pockets jingled loudly. *Battle rattle*, Neagley called it. From time to time Reacher pressed his face against the louvers and stared out at the snowfall in the west. The clouds were still low and black, held back by an invisible wall about fifty miles away.

“They won’t come back,” Neagley said. “They’d have to be insane to try anything here.”

“I think they are insane,” Reacher said.

He watched and waited, and listened to the clock. He had had enough just before four o’clock. He used the blade of his knife to cut through the accumulation of old white paint and lifted one of the louvers out of the frame. It was a simple length of wood, maybe three feet long, maybe four inches wide, maybe an inch thick. He held it out in front of him like a spear and crawled over and pushed it into the clock mechanism. The gear wheels jammed on it and the clock stopped. He pulled the wood out again and crawled away and slotted it back in the frame. The silence was suddenly deafening.

They watched and waited. It got colder, to the point where they both started shivering. But the silence helped. Suddenly, it helped a lot. Reacher crawled over and checked his partial view to the west again and then crawled back and

picked up the map. Stared at it hard, lost in thought. He used his finger and thumb like a compass and measured distances. *Forty, eighty, a hundred and twenty, a hundred and sixty miles. Slow, faster, fast, slow. Overall average speed maybe forty. That's four hours*.

"Sun sets in the west," he said. "Rises in the east."

"On this planet," Neagley said.

Then they heard the staircase creak below them. They heard feet on the ladder. The trapdoor lifted an inch and fell back and then crashed all the way open and the vicar put his head up into the bell chamber and stared at the submachine gun pointing at him from one side and the M16 rifle from the other.

"I need to talk to you about those things," he said. "You can't expect me to be happy about having weapons in my church."

He stood there on the ladder, looking like a severed head. Reacher laid the M16 back on the floor. The vicar stepped up another rung.

"I understand the need for security," he said. "And we're honored to host the Vice President–elect, but I really can't permit engines of destruction in a hallowed building. I would have expected somebody to discuss it with me."

"Engines of destruction?" Neagley repeated.

"What time does the sun set?" Reacher asked.

The vicar looked a little surprised by the change of subject. But he answered very politely.

"Soon," he said. "It falls behind the mountains quite early here. But you won't see it happen today. There are clouds. There's a snowstorm coming in from the west."

"And when does it rise?"

"This time of year? A little before seven o'clock, I suppose."

"You heard a weather report for tomorrow?"

“They say much the same as today.”

“OK,” Reacher said. “Thanks.”

“Did you stop the clock?”

“It was driving me nuts.”

“That’s why I came up. Do you mind if I set it going again?”

Reacher shrugged. “It’s your clock.”

“I know the noise must be bothersome.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Reacher said. “We’ll be out of here as soon as the sun sets. Weapons and all.”

The vicar hauled himself all the way up into the chamber and leaned over the iron girders and fiddled with the mechanism. There was a setting device linked to a separate miniature clock that Reacher hadn’t noticed before. It was buried within the gear wheels. It had an adjustment lever attached to it. The vicar checked his wristwatch and used the lever to force the exterior hands around to the correct time. The miniature clock hands moved with them. Then he simply turned a gear wheel with his hand until the mechanism picked up the momentum for itself and started again on its own. The heavy *thunk, thunk, thunk* came back. The smallest bell rang in sympathy, one tiny resonance for every second that passed.

“Thank you,” the vicar said.

“An hour at most,” Reacher said. “Then we’ll be gone.”

The vicar nodded like his point was made and threaded himself down through the trapdoor. Pulled it closed after him.

“We can’t leave here,” Neagley said. “Are you crazy? They could come in at night easy as anything. Maybe that’s exactly what they’re waiting for. They could drive back in without headlights.”

Reacher glanced at his watch.

“They’re already here,” he said. “Or almost here.”

“Where?”

“I’ll show you.”

He pulled the louver out of the frame again and handed it to her. Crawled under the clock shaft to the bottom of the next ladder that led up through the roof to the outside. Climbed up it and eased the roof trapdoor open.

“Stay low,” he called.

He swam out, keeping his stomach flat on the roof. The construction was just about identical to the Bismarck roof. There was soldered lead sheathing built up into a shallow box. Drains in the corners. A substantial anchor for the flagpole and the weather vane and the lightning rod. And a three-foot wall all around the edge. He turned a circle on his stomach and leaned down and took the louver from Neagley. Then he got out of her way and let her crawl up next to him. The wind was strong and the air was bitterly cold.

“Now we kind of kneel low,” he said. “Close together, facing west.”

They knelt together, shoulder to shoulder, hunched down. He was on the left, she was on the right. He could still hear the clock. He could feel it, through the lead and the heavy wooden boards.

“OK, like this,” he said. He held the louver in front of his face, with his left hand holding the left end. She took the right end in her right hand. They shuffled forward on their knees until they were tight against the low wall. He eased his end of the louver level with the top of the wall. She did the same.

“More,” he said. “Until we’ve got a slit to see through.”

They raised it higher in concert until it was horizontal with an inch of space between its lower edge and the top of the wall. They gazed out through the gap. They would be visible if somebody was watching the tower very carefully, but overall it was a pretty unobtrusive tactic. As good as he could improvise, anyway.

“Look west,” he said. “Maybe a little bit south of west.”

They squinted into the setting sun. They could see forty miles of waving grass. It was like an ocean, bright and golden in the evening backlight. Beyond it was the darkening snowstorm. The area between was misty and sheets of late sunlight speared backward through it right at them. There were shifting curtains of sun and shadow and color and rainbows that started nowhere and ended nowhere.

“Watch the grassland,” he said.

“What am I looking for?”

“You’ll see it.”

They knelt there for minutes. The sun inched lower. The last rays tilted flatter into their eyes. Then they saw it. They saw it together. About a mile out into the sea of grass the dying sun flashed gold once on the roof of the Tahoe. It was crawling east through the grassland, very slowly, coming directly toward them, bouncing gently over the rough terrain, lurching up and down through the dips and the hollows at walking speed.

“They were smart,” Reacher said. “They read the map and had the same idea you did, to exit across open country to the west. But then they looked at the town and knew they had to come in that way, too.”

The sun slid into the low clouds fifty miles west and the resulting shadow raced east across the grassland and the golden light died. Twilight came down like a circuit breaker had popped open and then there was nothing more to be seen. They lowered the louver screen and ducked away flat to the roof. Crawled across the lead and back down into the bell chamber. Neagley threaded her way under the clock shaft and picked up the Heckler & Koch.

“Not yet,” Reacher said.

“So when?”

“What will *they* do now?”

“I guess they’ll get as close as they dare. Then they’ll set up and wait.”

Reacher nodded. “They’ll turn the truck around and park it facing west in the best hollow they can find about a hundred, two hundred yards out. They’ll check their sightlines to the east and make sure they can see but can’t be seen. Then

their sightlines to the east and make sure they can see but can't be seen. Then they'll sit tight and wait for Armstrong to show."

"That's fourteen hours."

"Exactly," Reacher said. "We're going to leave them out there all night. We'll let them get cold and stiff and tired. Then the sun will rise right in their eyes. We'll be coming at them out of the sun. They won't even see us."

They hid the long guns under the pew nearest the church door and left the Yukon parked where it was. Walked up toward the bridge and took two rooms in the boardinghouse. Then they headed for the grocery store to get dinner ingredients. The sun was gone and the temperature was below freezing. There was snow in the air again. Big feathery flakes were drifting around, reluctant to settle. They swirled and hung in the air and rose back up like tiny birds.

The breakfast counter was all closed down, but the woman in the store offered to microwave something from the freezer cabinet. She seemed to assume Reacher and Neagley were a Secret Service advance detail. Everybody seemed to know Armstrong was expected at the service. She heated up some meat pies and some slushy vegetables. They ate them at the darkened counter. They tasted as good as field rations. The woman wouldn't take money for them.

The rooms in the boardinghouse were clean, as advertised. They had walls paneled with pine boards. Rag rugs on the floors. One single bed in each, with flowery counterpanes washed so many times they were nearly transparent. There was a bathroom at the far end of the corridor. Reacher let Neagley take the room nearer to it. Then she joined him in his room for a spell, because she was restless and wanted to talk. They sat side by side on the bed, because there was no other furniture.

"We'll be going up against a prepared position," she said.

"The two of us against two bozos," Reacher replied. "You worried now?"

"It's gotten harder."

"Tell me again," he said. "I'm not making you do this, am I?"

“You can’t do it alone.”

He shook his head. “I could do it alone one-handed with my head in a bag.”

“We know nothing about them.”

“But we can make some kind of an assessment. The tall guy in Bismarck is the shooter, and the other guy watches his back and drives. Big brother, little brother. There’ll be a lot of loyalty. It’s a brother thing. This whole deal is a brother thing. Explaining the motivation to somebody who wasn’t close would be hard. You can’t just walk up to a stranger and say hey, I want to shoot a guy because his dad threatened to put a stick up my ass and I had to beg him not to.”

Neagley said nothing.

“I’m not asking you to participate,” Reacher said.

Neagley smiled. “You’re an idiot. I’m worried about you, not me.”

“Nothing’s going to happen to me,” Reacher said. “I’m going to die an old man in some lonely motel bed.”

“This all is a brother thing for you too, isn’t it?”

He nodded. “Has to be. I don’t really give a damn about Armstrong. I liked Froelich, but I would never have known her except for Joe.”

“*Are* you lonely?”

“Sometimes. Not usually.”

She moved her hand, very slowly. It started an inch from his hand. She made the inch last like a million miles. Her fingers moved imperceptibly over the washed-out counterpane until they were a fraction from his. Then they lifted and moved more, until they were directly over his and just a fraction above. It was like there was a layer of air between their hands, compressed so hard it was warm and liquid. She floated her hand on the air and kept it motionless. Then she pressed harder and brought it down and her fingers touched the backs of his fingers, very lightly. She turned her elbow so her hand lay precisely aligned. Then she pushed down harder. Her palm felt warm. Her fingers were long and cool. Their tips lay on his knuckles. They moved and traced the lines and scars and tendons. They

raked down between his. He turned his hand over. She pressed her palm into his. Laced her fingers through his fingers and squeezed. He squeezed back.

He held her hand for five long minutes. Then she slowly pulled it away. Stood up and stepped to the door. Smiled.

“See you in the morning,” she said.

He slept badly and woke up at five, worried about the endgame. Complications crowded in on him. He threw back the covers and slipped out of bed. Dressed in the dark and walked down the stairs and out into the night. It was bitter cold and the snowflakes were blowing in faster. They looked wet and heavy. The weather was moving east. Which was good, he guessed.

There was no light. All the town’s windows were dark, there were no streetlights, there was no moon, there were no stars. The church tower loomed up in the middle distance, faint and gray and ghostly. He walked in the middle of the dirt road and crossed the graveyard. Found the church door and went inside. Crept up the tower stairs by feel. Found the ladder in the dark and climbed up into the bell chamber. The clock ticked loudly. Louder than in the daytime. It sounded like a mad blacksmith beating his iron hammer against his anvil once a second.

He ducked under the clock shaft and found the next ladder. Climbed up out of the darkness onto the roof. Crawled over to the west wall and raised his head. The landscape was infinitely dark and silent. The distant looming mountains were invisible. He could see nothing. He could hear nothing. The air was freezing. He waited.

He waited thirty minutes in the cold. It set his eyes watering and his nose running. He started shivering violently. *If I’m cold, they’re nearly dead*, he thought. And sure enough after thirty long minutes he heard the sound he had been listening for. The Tahoe’s engine started. It was far away, but it sounded deafening in the night silence. It was somewhere out there to the west, maybe a couple hundred yards distant. It idled for ten whole minutes, running the heater. He couldn’t fix an exact location by sound alone. But then they made a fatal mistake. They flicked the dome light on and off for a second. He saw a brief

yellow glow deep down in the grass. The truck was down in a dip. Absolutely concealed, its roof well below the average grade level. A little south of west, but not by much. Maybe a hundred and fifty yards out. It was a fine location. They would probably use the truck itself as the shooting platform. Lie prone on the roof, aim, fire, jump down, jump in, drive away.

He put both arms flat along the wall and faced due west and fixed the memory of the brief yellow flash in his mind against the location of the tower. A hundred and fifty yards out, maybe thirty yards south of perpendicular. He crawled back into the bell tower, past the hammering clock, down to the nave. He retrieved the long guns from under the pew and left them on the cold ground underneath the Yukon. He didn't want to put them inside. Didn't want to answer their flash of light with one of his own.

Then he walked back to the boardinghouse and found Neagley coming out of her room. It was nearly six o'clock. She was showered and dressed. They went into his room to talk.

"Couldn't sleep?" he asked.

"I never sleep," she said. "They still there?"

He nodded. "But there's a problem. We can't take them down where they are. We need to move them first."

"Why?"

"Too close to home. We can't start World War Three out there an hour before Armstrong gets here. And we can't leave two corpses lying around a hundred and fifty yards from the town. People here have seen us. There'll be early cops up from Casper. Maybe state troopers. You've got your license to think about. We need to drive them off and take them down somewhere deserted. West, where it's snowing, maybe. This snow will be around until April. That's what I want. I want to do it far away and I want it to be April before anybody knows that anything happened here."

"OK, how?"

"They're Edward Fox. They're not John Malkovich. They want to live to fight another day. We can make them run if we do it right."

They were back at the Yukon before six-thirty. The snowflakes were still drifting in the air. But the sky was beginning to lighten in the east. There was a band of dark purple on the horizon, and then a band of charcoal, and then the blackness of night. They checked their weapons. Laced their shoes, zipped their coats, swung their shoulders to check freedom of action. Reacher put his hat on, and his left glove. Neagley put her Steyr in her inside pocket and slung the Heckler & Koch over her back.

“See you later,” she whispered.

She walked west into the graveyard. He saw her step over the low fence and turn a little south and then she disappeared in the darkness. He walked to the base of the tower and stood flat against the middle of the west wall and recalculated the Tahoe’s position. Pointed his arm out straight toward it and walked back, moving his arm to compensate for his changes of position, keeping the target locked in. He laid the M16 on the ground with the muzzle pointing a little south of west. He stepped behind the Yukon and leaned on the tailgate and waited for the dawn.

It came slowly and gradually and magnificently. The purple color grew lighter and reddened at its base and spread upward and outward until half the sky was streaked with light. Then an orange halo appeared two hundred miles away in South Dakota and the earth tumbled toward it and the first slim arc of the sun burst up over the horizon. The sky blazed pink. Long high clouds burned red. Reacher watched the sun and waited until it climbed high enough to hurt his eyes and then he unlocked the Yukon and started the engine. He blipped it loud and turned the radio on full blast. He ran the tuning arrows up and down until he found some rock and roll and left the driver’s door open so the music beat against the dawn silence. Then he picked up the M16 and knocked the safety off and put it to his shoulder and fired a single burst of three, aiming a little south of west directly over the hidden Tahoe. He heard Neagley answer immediately with a triple of her own. The MP5 had a faster cyclic rate and a distinctive chattering sound. She was triangulated in the grass a hundred yards due south of the Tahoe, firing directly north over it. He fired again, three more from the east. She fired again, three more from the south. The four bursts of fire crashed and rolled and echoed over the landscape. They said: *We. . .know. . .you’re. . . there*.

He waited thirty seconds, as planned. There was no response from the Tahoe's position. No lights, no movement, no return fire. He raised the rifle again. Aimed high. Squeezed the trigger. *We*. The Heckler & Koch chattered far away to his left. *Know*. He fired again. *You're*. She fired again. *There*.

No response. He wondered for a second whether they'd already slipped away in the last hour. Or gotten really smart and moved through the town to the east. They were dumb to attack into the sun. He spun around and saw nothing behind him except lights snapping on in windows. Heard nothing anywhere except the ringing in his ears and the deafening rock and roll music from the car. He turned back ready to fire again and saw the Tahoe burst up out of the grass a hundred and fifty yards in front of him. The dawn sun flashed gold and chrome against its tailgate. It bucked over a rise with all four wheels off the ground and crashed back to earth and accelerated away from him into the west.

He threw the rifle into the Yukon's backseat and slammed the door and killed the radio and accelerated straight across the graveyard. Smashed through the wooden fence and plunged into the grassland. Hung a fast curve south. The terrain was murderous. The car was crashing and bouncing over ruts and pitching wildly over long swells. He steered one-handed and clipped his belt with the other. Pulled it tight against the locking mechanism to keep him clamped to the seat. He saw Neagley racing toward him through the grass on his left. He jammed on the brakes and she wrenched the nearside rear door open and threw herself inside behind him. He took off again and she slammed the door and fought her way over into the front passenger seat. She belted herself in and jammed the Heckler & Koch down between her knees and braced herself with both hands on the dash like she was fighting a roller coaster ride.

"Perfect," she said. She was panting hard. He raced on. Curved back to the north until he found the swath the Tahoe had blasted through the grass. He got himself centered in it and hit the gas. The ride was worse than any roller coaster. It was a continuous violent battering. The car was leaping and shuddering and going alternately weightless and then crashing back to earth and taking off again. The engine was screaming. The wheel was writhing in his hands and kicking back hard enough to break his thumbs. He kept his fingers sticking straight out and steered with his palms only. He was afraid they were going to shatter an axle.

"See them yet?" he shouted.

"Not yet," she shouted back. "They could be three hundred yards ahead."

“I’m afraid the car will break.”

He hit the gas harder. He was doing nearly fifty miles an hour. Then sixty. The faster he went, the better it rode. It spent less actual time on the ground.

“I see them,” Neagley called.

They were two hundred yards ahead, intermittently visible as they bucked up and down through the sea of grass like a manic gold dolphin riding the waves. Reacher pressed on and pulled a little closer. He had the advantage. They were clearing a path for him. He crept up to about a hundred yards back and held steady. The engine roared and the suspension bucked and crashed and banged.

“They can run,” he screamed.

“But they can’t hide,” Neagley screamed back.

Ten minutes later they were ten miles west of Grace and felt like they had been badly beaten in a fistfight. Reacher’s head was hitting the roof over every bump and his arms were aching. His shoulders were wrenched. The engine was still screaming. The only way he could keep his foot on the gas pedal was to mash it all the way down to the carpet. Neagley was bouncing around at his side and flailing back and forth. She had given up bracing herself with her arms in case she broke her elbows.

Over the next ten murderous miles the terrain shaded into something new. They were literally in the middle of nowhere. The town of Grace was twenty miles behind them and the highway was twenty miles ahead. The grade was rising. The land was breaking up into sharper ravines. There was more rock. There was still grass growing, and it was still tall, but it was thinner because the roots were shallower. And there was snow on the ground. The grass stalks were rigid with ice and they came up out of a six-inch white blanket. Both cars slowed, a hundred yards apart. Within another mile the chase had slowed to a ludicrous twenty-mile-an-hour procession. They were inching down forty-five-degree faces, plunging hood-deep through accumulated snow in the bottoms, clawing up the rises with their transmissions locked in four-wheel-drive. The crevasses ran maybe ten or fifteen feet deep. The endless wind from the west had packed the snow into them with the lee faces bare and the windward faces smooth and sheer. There were flakes in the air, whipping horizontally toward them.

“We’re going to get stuck,” Neagley said.

“They got in this way,” Reacher said. “Got to be able to get out.”

They lost sight of the Tahoe ahead of them every time it dropped away into a ravine. They glimpsed it only when they labored up a peak and caught sight of it up on a peak of its own three or four dips in front. There was no rhythm. No coordination. Both trucks were diving and then clawing upward randomly. They had slowed to walking pace. Reacher had the transmission locked in low range and the truck was slipping and sliding. Far to the west the snowstorm was wild. The weather was blowing in fast.

“It’s time,” Reacher said. “Any one of these ravines, the snow will hide them all winter.”

“OK, let’s go for it,” Neagley said.

She buzzed her window down and a flurry of snow blew in on a gale of freezing air. She picked up the Heckler & Koch and clicked it to full auto. Reacher accelerated hard and plunged through the next two dips as fast as the truck could take it. Then he jammed on the brakes at the top of the third peak and flicked the wheel left. The truck slewed sideways and slid to a stop with the passenger window facing forward and Neagley leaned all the way out and waited. The gold Tahoe reared up a hundred yards ahead and she loosed a long raking burst of fire aimed low at the rear tires and the fuel tank. The Tahoe paused fractionally and then rocked over the peak of its rise and disappeared again.

Reacher spun the wheel and hit the gas and crawled after it. The stop had cost them maybe another hundred yards. He plowed through three consecutive ravines and stopped again on the fourth peak. They waited. Ten seconds, fifteen. The Tahoe did not reappear. They waited twenty seconds. Thirty.

“Hell is it?” Reacher muttered.

He slid the truck down the windward face, through the snow, up the other side. Straight over the top into the next dip. Up the rise, over the top, down into the snow. No sign of the Tahoe. He powered on. The tires spun and the engine screamed. He made it up the next rise. Stopped dead at the top. The land fell away twenty feet into a broad gulch. It was thick with snow and the icy stalks of

grass showed less than a foot above it. The Tahoe's incoming tracks from the day before were visible straight ahead, almost obscured by wind and fresh snowfall. But its outgoing tracks were deep and new. They turned sharply right and ran away to the north, through a tight curve in the ravine, and then out of sight behind a snow-covered outcrop. There was silence all around. Snow was driving straight at them. It was coming *upward* at them, off the bottom of the dip.

Time and space, Reacher thought. Four dimensions. A classic tactical problem. The Tahoe might have U-turned and might be aiming to arrive back at the crucial place at the crucial time. It could retrace its path and be back near the church just before Armstrong touched down. But to chase it blind would be suicide. Because it might not be doubling back at all. It might be waiting in ambush around the next corner. But to spend too long thinking about it would be suicide, too. Because it might not be doubling back or waiting in ambush. It might be circling right around and aiming to come up behind them. A classic problem. Reacher glanced at his watch. *Almost the point of no return*. They had been gone nearly thirty minutes. Therefore it would take nearly thirty to get back. And Armstrong had been due in an hour and five.

"Feel like getting cold?" he said.

"No alternative," Neagley said back. She opened her door and slid out into the snow. Ran clumsily to her right, fighting through the drifts, over the rocks, aiming to connect the legs of the U. He took his foot off the brake and nudged the wheel and eased down the slope. Turned hard right in the ravine bottom and followed the Tahoe's tracks. It was the best solution he could improvise. If the Tahoe *was* doubling back, he couldn't wait forever. No point in driving cautiously back to the church and arriving there after Armstrong was already dead. And if he *was* driving straight into an ambush, he was happy enough to do it with Neagley standing behind his opponents with a submachine gun in her hands. He figured that would pretty much guarantee his survival.

But there was no ambush. He came around the rocks and turned back east and saw nothing at all except empty wheel tracks in the snow and Neagley standing fifty yards farther on with the sun on her back and her gun raised over her head. The *all clear* signal. He hit the gas and raced up toward her. The truck slipped and slid and skidded in the Tahoe's impacted ruts. He bounced over hidden rocks. He touched the brake. The truck lurched and drifted sideways and stopped

with the front wheels down in a snow-filled trench. Neagley fought her way through the drifts and pulled the door. Icy air followed her inside.

“Hit it,” she said. She was panting again. “They must be at least five minutes ahead of us by now.”

He touched the gas. All four wheels spun uselessly. The truck stayed motionless and all four tires whined in the snow and the front end dug in deeper.

“Shit,” he said.

He tried again. Same result. The truck shuddered and rocked and didn’t go anywhere. He switched the transmission out of locked low range and tried again. Same result. He let the engine idle and put the transmission in reverse, then drive, then reverse, then drive. The truck rocked urgently back and forth, back and forth, six inches, a foot. But it didn’t climb out of the trench.

Neagley glanced at her watch. “They’re out there ahead of us. They could get back there in time.”

Reacher nodded and touched the gas and kept on banging the transmission lever into reverse, into drive, into reverse. The truck bucked and bounced. But it didn’t climb out of the trench. The tire treads howled on the glassy snow. The front end dodged left and right with the engine torque and the rear end squirmed with it.

“Armstrong’s in the air now,” Neagley said. “And our car isn’t parked next to the church anymore. So he’s going to go ahead and land.”

Reacher looked at his own watch. Fought his rising panic.

“You do it,” he said. “Keep it rocking back and forward.”

He twisted around and grabbed his gloves. Unclipped his belt and opened his door and slid out into the snow.

“And if it goes, don’t stop for anything,” he said.

He floundered around to the rear of the truck. Stamped and kicked at the snow until he got his feet braced against rock. Neagley slid across into the driver’s seat. She built up a rhythm, drive and reverse, drive and reverse, little taps on the

gas as the gears slid home. The truck rocked on its springs and began to roll back and forth along a foot and a half of impacted ice. Reacher put his back against the tailgate and hooked his hands under the rear bumper. Moved with the truck as it pushed back at him. Straightened his legs and heaved as it moved away. The tire treads were full of snow. They flung little white hieroglyphs into the air as they spun. The exhaust fumes burbled out near his knees and hung in the air. He stumbled forward and pushed backward, again, and again. Now the truck was moving two feet at a time. He clamped his hands harder. Snow was blowing straight out of the west into his face. He started counting. *One, two . . . three. One, two . . . three*. He started walking the truck backward and heaving it forward. Now it was moving three feet with each change of direction. He stamped a chain of footholds. *One, two . . . three*. On the last *three* he shoved with all his strength. He felt the truck climb up out of the trench. Felt it fall back in again. The tailgate butted him hard in the back. He stumbled forward and floundered for grip. Rebuilt his rhythm. He was sweating in the cold. He was out of breath. *One, two . . . three*. He heaved again and the truck disappeared out from behind him and he fell backward into the snow.

He rolled up through the stink of gasoline exhaust. The truck was twenty yards ahead. Neagley was driving it as slow as she dared. He slipped and slid and chased after it. He swerved right to get in its wheel track. The ground rose. Neagley gunned it to maintain her momentum. He was running hard but she was driving away from him. He sprinted. He smashed the toes of his boots into the snow to keep from slipping. She slowed at the top of the rise. The truck went up and over. He saw the whole underside. The fuel tank, the differential. She braked gently and he caught the door handle and flung the door open and floundered downhill alongside the truck until he had built enough speed to fling himself inside. He hauled himself into the seat and slammed the door and she stamped hard on the gas and the violent battering roller coaster ride came back.

“Time?” she screamed.

He fought to keep his wrist still and stared at his watch. He was breathing too hard to speak. He just shook his head. They were at least ten minutes behind. And it was a crucial ten minutes. The Tahoe would arrive back at its starting point about two minutes into it and Armstrong would touch down after another five. Neagley drove on. She hurtled up the rises and took off and plunged hood-deep into the drifts and battered her way through and did it all over again. Without the wheel to hold on to Reacher was thrown all over the place. He fought the alternate weightlessness and physical pounding and caught blurred

fought the alternate weightlessness and physical pounding and caught blurred glimpses of the time on his watch. He stared through the windshield at the sky in the east. The sun was in his eyes. He dropped his gaze to the terrain. Nothing there. No Tahoe. It was long gone. All that remained were its tracks through the snow, deep twinned ruts that narrowed in the far distance ahead. They pointed resolutely toward the town of Grace like arrows. They were full of ice crystals that burned red and yellow against the early dawn light.

Then they changed. They swooped a tight ninety-degree left and disappeared into a north-south ravine.

“What?” Neagley shouted.

“Follow,” Reacher gasped.

The ravine was narrow, like a trench. It ran steeply downhill. The Tahoe’s tracks were clearly visible for fifty yards and then they swerved out of sight again, a sharp right behind a rock outcrop the size of a house. Neagley braked hard as the grade fell away. She stopped. She paused a beat and Reacher’s mind screamed, *An ambush now?* a split second after her foot hit the gas again and her hands turned the wheel. The Yukon locked into the Tahoe’s ruts and its two-ton weight slid it helplessly down the icy slope. The Tahoe burst out of hiding, backward, directly in front of them. It jammed to a skidding stop right across their path. Neagley was out of her door before the Yukon stopped moving. She rolled in the snow and floundered away to the north. The Yukon slewed violently and stalled in a snowdrift. Reacher’s door was jammed shut by the depth of the snow. He used all his strength and forced it half-open and scraped out through the gap. Saw the driver spilling from the Tahoe, slipping and falling in the snow. Reacher rolled away and pulled his Steyr from his pocket. Thrashed around to the back of the Yukon and crawled forward through the snow along its other side. The Tahoe driver was holding a rifle, rowing himself through the snow with its muzzle, slipping and sliding. He was heading for cover in the rock. He was the guy from Bismarck. No doubt about that. Lean face, long body. He even had the same coat on. He was bulling through the snowdrift with the coat flapping open and small snowstorms kicking outward from his knees at every step. Reacher raised the Steyr and steadied it against the Yukon’s fender and tracked the guy’s head. Tightened his finger on the trigger. Then he heard a voice, loud and urgent, right behind him.

“Hold your fire,” the voice called.

He turned and saw a second guy ten yards north and west. Neagley was stumbling through the snow directly ahead of him. He had her Heckler & Koch held low in his left hand. A handgun in his right, jammed in her back. He was the guy from the garage video. No doubt about that, either. Tweed overcoat, short, wide in the shoulders, a little squat. No hat this time. He had the same face as the Bismarck guy, a little fatter. The same graying sandy hair, a little thicker. *Brothers*.

“Throw the weapon down, sir,” he called.

It was a perfect cop line and he had a perfect cop voice. Neagley mouthed *I’m sorry*. Reacher reversed the Steyr in his hand. Held it by the barrel.

“Throw down the weapon, sir,” the squat guy called again.

His brother from Bismarck changed direction and plowed forward through the snow and moved in closer. He raised the rifle. It was a Steyr too, a long handsome gun. It was all covered with snow. It was pointing straight at Reacher’s head. The low morning sun made the shadow of the barrel ten feet long. Reacher thought: *What happened to that lonely motel bed?* Snowflakes swirled and the air was bitter cold. He pulled his arm back and tossed his pistol high in the air. It arced lazily thirty feet through the falling snow and landed and buried itself in a drift. The guy from Bismarck fumbled in his pocket with his left hand and pulled out his badge. Held it high in his palm. The badge was gold. It was backed by a worn leather slip. The leather was brown. The rifle wavered. The guy fumbled the badge away again and brought the rifle to his shoulder and held it level and steady.

“We’re police officers,” he said.

“I know you are,” Reacher said back. He glanced around. The snow was falling hard. It was whipping and swirling. The crevasse they were in was like a cave with no roof. It was probably the loneliest place on the planet. The guy from the garage video pushed Neagley nearer. She stumbled and he caught up with her and pushed her off to one side and kept his handgun hard in her back.

“But who are you?” the Bismarck guy asked.

Reacher didn’t answer. Just checked the geometry. It wasn’t attractive. He was triangulated twelve feet from either guy, and the snow underfoot was slick and

slow.

The Bismarck guy smiled. “You here to make the world safe for democracy?”

“I’m here because you’re a lousy shot,” Reacher said. “You got the wrong person on Thursday.” Then he moved very cautiously and pulled his cuff and checked his watch. And smiled. “And you lose again. It’s too late now. You’re going to miss him.”

The Bismarck guy just shook his head. “Police scanner. In our truck. We’re listening to Casper PD. Armstrong is delayed twenty minutes. There was a weather problem in South Dakota. So we decided to hang out and let you catch up with us.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Because we don’t like you,” the Bismarck guy said. He spoke along the rifle stock. His lips moved against it. “You’re poking around where you’re not welcome. In a purely private matter. In something that doesn’t concern you at all. So consider yourselves under arrest. You want to plead guilty?”

Reacher said nothing.

“Or you just want to plead?”

“Like you did?” Reacher said. “When that ball bat was getting close?”

The guy went quiet for a second.

“Your attitude isn’t helping your cause,” he said.

He paused again, five long seconds.

“The jury is back,” he said.

“What jury?”

“Me and my brother. That’s all the jury you’ve got. We’re your whole world right now.”

“Whatever happened, it was thirty years ago.”

“A guy does something like that, he should pay.”

“The guy died.”

The Bismarck cop shrugged. The rifle barrel moved. “You should read your Bible, my friend. The sins of the fathers, you ever heard of that?”

“What sins? You lost a fight, is all.”

“We never lose. Sooner or later, we always win. And Armstrong *watched*. Snot-nosed rich kid, all smiling and grinning. A man doesn’t forget a thing like that.”

Reacher said nothing. The silence was total. Each snowflake felt separately audible as it hissed and whirled through the air. *Keep him talking*, Reacher thought. *Keep him moving*. But he looked into the crazed eyes and couldn’t think of a thing to say.

“The woman goes in the truck,” the guy said. “We’ll have a little fun with her, after we deal with Armstrong. But I’m going to shoot you right now.”

“Not with that rifle,” Reacher said. *Keep him talking. Keep him moving*. “The muzzle is full of slush. It’ll blow up in your hands.”

There was a long silence. The guy calculated the distance between himself and Reacher, just a glance. Then he lowered the rifle. Reversed it in his hands, in and out fast, long enough to check. The muzzle was packed with icy snow. *The M16 is on the Yukon’s backseat*, Reacher thought. *But the door is blocked shut by the drift*.

“You want to bet your life on a little slush?” the Bismarck guy asked.

“Do you?” Reacher said. “The breech will blow, take your ugly face off. Then I’ll take the barrel and shove it up your ass. I’ll pretend it was a baseball bat.”

The guy’s face darkened. But he didn’t pull the trigger.

“Step away from the car,” he said, like the cop he was. Reacher took a long pace away from the Yukon, up and down in the snow, like wading.

“And another.”

Reacher moved again. He was six feet from the car. Six feet from his M16. Thirty feet from his nine-millimeter, far away in the snow. He glanced around. The Bismarck brother held the rifle in his left hand and put his right under his coat and came out with a handgun. It was a Glock. Black and square and ugly. *Probably police department issue*. He released the safety and leveled it one-handed at Reacher's face.

"Not that one either," Reacher said.

Keep him talking. Keep him moving.

"Why not?"

"That's your work gun. Chances are you've used it before. So there are records. They find my body, the ballistics will come right back at you."

The guy stood still for a long moment. Didn't speak. Nothing in his face. But he put the Glock away again. Raised the rifle. Shuffled backward through the snow toward the Tahoe. The rifle traversed and stayed level with Reacher's chest. Reacher thought: *Just pull the damn trigger. Let's all have a laugh*. The guy fumbled behind him and opened the Tahoe's rear door, driver's side. Dropped the rifle in the snow and came out with a handgun, all in one move. It was an old M9 Beretta, scratched and stained with dried oil. The guy tracked forward again through the drift. Stopped six feet away from Reacher. Raised his arm. Unlatched the safety with his thumb and leveled the weapon straight at the center of Reacher's face.

"Throw-down gun," he said. "No records on this one."

Reacher said nothing.

"Say goodnight now," the guy whispered.

Nobody moved.

"On the click," Reacher said.

He stared straight ahead at the gun. Saw Neagley's face in the corner of his eye. Saw that she didn't understand what he meant, but saw her nod anyway. It was just a fractional movement of her eyelids. Like half a blink. The Bismarck guy smiled. Tightened his finger. His knuckle shone white. He squeezed the trigger

sniffed. Tightened his finger. His knuckle shone white. He squeezed the trigger.

There was a dull click.

Reacher came out with his ceramic knife already open and brushed it sideways across the guy's forehead. Then he caught the Beretta's barrel in his left hand and jerked it up and jerked it down full force across his knee and shattered the guy's forearm. Pushed him away and spun around. Neagley had hardly moved. But the guy from the garage video was inert in the snow by her feet. He was bleeding from both ears. She was holding her Heckler & Koch in one hand and the guy's handgun in the other.

"Yes?" she said.

He nodded. She stepped a pace away so her clothes wouldn't get splashed and pointed the handgun at the ground and shot the garage guy three times. *Bang bang . . . bang*. A double-tap to the head, and then an insurance round in the chest. The sound of the shots clapped and rolled like thunder. They both turned away. The Bismarck guy was stumbling around in the snow, completely blind. His forehead was sliced to the bone and blood was pouring out of the wound in sheets and running down into his eyes. It was in his nose and in his mouth. His panting breath was bubbling out through it. He was cradling his broken arm. Staggering about, left and right, turning circles, raising his left forearm to his face, trying to wipe the blood out of his eyes so he could see.

Reacher watched him for a moment, nothing in his face. Then he took the Heckler & Koch from Neagley and set it to fire a single round and waited until the guy had pirouetted around backward and shot him through the throat from the rear. He tried to put the bullet exactly where Froelich had taken hers. The spent brass expelled and hit the Tahoe twenty feet away with a loud *clang* and the guy pitched forward on his face and lay still and the snow turned bright red all around him. The crash of the shot rolled away and absolute silence rolled back to replace it. Reacher and Neagley stood still and held their breath and listened hard. Heard nothing except the sound of the snow falling.

"How did you know?" Neagley asked, quietly.

"It was Froelich's gun," he said. "They stole it from her kitchen. I recognized the scratches and the oil marks. She'd kept the clips loaded in a drawer for about five years."

“It still might have fired,” Neagley said.

“The whole of life is a gamble,” Reacher said. “From the very beginning to the very end. Wouldn’t you say?”

The silence closed in tighter. And the cold. They were alone in a thousand square miles of freezing emptiness, breathing hard, shivering, a little sick with adrenaline.

“How long will the church thing last?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Neagley said. “Forty minutes? An hour?”

“So we don’t need to rush.”

He waded over and retrieved his Steyr from where it had fallen. The snow was already starting to cover the two bodies. He took wallets and badges from the pockets. Wiped his knife clean on the Bismarck guy’s twill coat. Opened all four of the Tahoe’s doors so the snow would drift inside and bury it quicker. Neagley wiped the garage guy’s pistol on her coat and dropped it. Then they floundered back to the Yukon and climbed inside. Took a last look back. The scene was already rimed with new snow, whitening fast. It would be gone within forty-eight hours. The icy wind would freeze the whole tableau inside a long smooth east-west drift until the spring sunshine released it again.

Neagley drove, slowly. Reacher piled the wallets on his knees and started with the badges. The truck was lurching gently and it took effort just to hold them still in front of his eyes long enough to look at them.

“County cops from Idaho,” he said. “Some rural place south of Boise, I think.”

He put both badges into his pocket. Opened the Bismarck guy’s wallet. It was a brown leather trifold, dry and cracked and molded around the contents. There was a milky plastic window on the inside with a police ID behind it. The guy’s lean face stared out from the photograph.

“His name was Richard Wilson,” he said. “Basic grade detective.”

There were two credit cards and an Idaho driver’s license in the wallet. And scraps of paper, and almost three hundred dollars in cash. He spilled the paper on his knees and put the cash in his pocket. Opened the garage guy’s wallet. It was

his knees and put the cash in his pocket. Opened the garage guy's wallet. It was phony alligator, black, and it had an ID from the same police department.

"Peter Wilson," he said. He checked the driver's license. "A year younger."

Peter had three credit cards and nearly two hundred dollars. Reacher put the cash in his pocket and glanced ahead. The snow clouds were behind them and the sky was clear in the east. The sun was out and in their eyes. There was a small black dot in the air. The church tower was barely visible, almost twenty miles away. The Yukon bounced its way toward it, relentlessly. The black dot grew larger. There was a gray blur of rotors above it. It looked motionless in the air. Reacher steadied himself against the dash and looked up through the windshield. There was a tinted band across the top of the glass. The helicopter eased down through it. He could make out its shape. It was fat and bulbous at the front. Probably a Night Hawk. It picked up a visual on the church and turned toward it. It drifted in like a fat insect. The Yukon bounced gently over washboard depressions. The wallets slid off Reacher's knees and the paper scraps scattered. The helicopter was hovering. Then it was swinging in the air, turning its main door toward the church.

"Golf clubs," Reacher said. "Not tool samples."

"What?"

He held up a scrap of paper. "A UPS receipt. Next-day air. From Minneapolis. Addressed to Richard Wilson, arriving guest, at a D.C. motel. A carton, a foot square, forty-eight inches long. Contents, one bag of golf clubs."

Then he went quiet. Stared at another scrap of paper.

"Something else," he said. "For Stuyvesant, maybe."

They watched the distant helicopter land and they stopped right there in the middle of the empty grassland. Got out into the freezing cold sunshine and walked aimless circles and stretched and yawned. The Yukon ticked loudly as it cooled. Reacher piled the badges with the police IDs and the drivers' licenses on the passenger seat and then hurled the empty wallets far into the landscape.

"We need to sanitize," he said. They wiped their prints off all four weapons and

threw them into the grass, north and south and east and west. Emptied the spare rounds from their pockets and hurled them away in looping brassy swirls through the sunlight. Followed them with the bird watcher's scope. Reacher kept his hat and gloves. And the ceramic knife. He had grown fond of it.

Then they drove the rest of the way to Grace slow and easy and bumped up out of the grassland and through the wrecked fence and across the graveyard. Parked near the waiting helicopter and got out. They could hear the groan of the organ and the sound of people singing inside the church. No crowds. No media. It was a dignified scene. There was a Casper PD cruiser parked at a discreet distance. There was an Air Force crewman in a flight suit standing next to the helicopter. He was alert and vigilant. Probably not an Air Force crewman at all. Probably one of Stuyvesant's guys in a borrowed outfit. Probably had a rifle hidden just inside the cabin door. Probably a Vaime Mk2.

"You OK?" Neagley asked.

"I'm always OK," Reacher said. "You?"

"I'm fine."

They stood there for fifteen minutes, not really sure if they were hot or cold. There was a loud mournful piece from the distant organ, and then quiet, and then the muffled sound of feet moving on dusty boards. The big oak door opened and a small crowd filtered out into the sunshine. The vicar stood outside the door with Froelich's parents and spoke to everybody as they left.

Armstrong came out after a couple of minutes with Stuyvesant at his side. They were both in dark overcoats. They were surrounded by seven agents. Armstrong spoke to the vicar and shook hands with the Froelichs and spoke some more. Then his detail brought him away toward the helicopter. He saw Reacher and Neagley and detoured near them, a question in his face.

"We all live happily ever after," Reacher said.

Armstrong nodded once.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome," Reacher said.

Armstrong hesitated a second longer and then turned away without shaking hands and walked on toward the chopper. Stuyvesant came next, on his own.

“Happily?” he repeated.

Reacher gathered the badges and the IDs and the licenses from his pockets. Stuyvesant cupped his hands to take them all.

“Maybe more happily than we thought,” Reacher said. “They weren’t yours, that’s for sure. They were cops, from Idaho, near Boise. You’ve got the addresses there. I’m sure you’ll find what you need. The computer, the paper and the printer, Andretti’s thumb in the freezer. Something else, maybe.”

He took a scrap of paper from his pocket.

“I found this too,” he said. “It was in one of the wallets. It’s a register receipt. They went to the grocery store late on Friday and bought six TV dinners and six big bottles of water.”

“So?” Stuyvesant said.

Reacher smiled. “My guess is they weren’t doing their regular weekly marketing, not in the middle of everything else they were doing. I think maybe they were making sure Mrs. Nendick could eat while they came out here. I think she’s still alive.”

Stuyvesant snatched the receipt and ran for the helicopter.

Reacher and Neagley said their good-byes at the Denver airport late the next morning, Monday. Reacher signed over his fee check to her and she bought him a first-class ticket on United to New York La Guardia. He walked her to the gate for her Chicago flight. People were already boarding. She didn’t say anything. Just placed her bag on the floor and stood still directly in front of him. Then she stretched up and hugged him, fast, like she didn’t really know how to do it. She let go after a second and picked up her bag and walked down the jetway. Didn’t look back.

He made it into La Guardia late in the evening. Took a bus and a subway to Times Square and walked Forty-second Street until he found B. B. King’s new

Times Square and walked Forty-second Street until he found B. B. King's new club. A four-piece guitar band was just finishing its first set. They were pretty good. He listened until the set ended and then walked back to the ticket taker.

"Was there an old woman here last week?" he asked. "Sounded a little like Dawn Penn? With an old guy on keyboards?"

The ticket taker shook his head.

"Nobody like that," the guy said. "Not here."

Reacher nodded once and stepped out into the shiny darkness. It was cold on the street. He headed west for the Port Authority and a bus out of town.

Persuader

CHAPTER 1

The cop climbed out of his car exactly four minutes before he got shot. He moved like he knew his fate in advance. He pushed the door against the resistance of a stiff hinge and swiveled slowly on the worn vinyl seat and planted both feet flat on the road. Then he grasped the door frame with both hands and heaved himself up and out. He stood in the cold clear air for a second and then turned and pushed the door shut again behind him. Held still for a second longer. Then he stepped forward and leaned against the side of the hood up near the headlight.

The car was a seven-year-old Chevy Caprice. It was black and had no police markings. But it had three radio antennas and plain chrome hubs. Most cops you talk to swear the Caprice is the best police vehicle ever built. This guy looked like he agreed with them. He looked like a veteran plain-clothes detective with the whole of the motor pool at his disposal. Like he drove the ancient Chevy because he wanted to. Like he wasn’t interested in the new Fords. I could see that kind of stubborn old-timer personality in the way he held himself. He was wide and bulky in a plain dark suit made from some kind of heavy wool. He was tall but stooped. An old man. He turned his head and looked north and south along the road and then craned his thick neck to glance back over his shoulder at the college gate. He was thirty yards away from me.

The college gate itself was purely a ceremonial thing. Two tall brick pillars just rose up from a long expanse of tended lawn behind the sidewalk. Connecting the pillars was a high double gate made from iron bars bent and folded and twisted into fancy shapes. It was shiny black. It looked like it had just been repainted. It was probably repainted after every winter. It had no security function. Anybody who wanted to avoid it could drive straight across the lawn. It was wide open, anyway. There was a driveway behind it with little knee-high iron posts set eight feet back on either side. They had latches. Each half of the gate was latched into one of them. Wide open. The driveway led on down to a huddle of mellow brick buildings about a hundred yards away. The buildings had steep mossy roofs and

were overhung by trees. The driveway was lined with trees. The sidewalk was lined with trees. There were trees everywhere. Their leaves were just about coming in. They were tiny and curled and bright green. Six months from now they would be big and red and golden and photographers would be swarming all over the place taking pictures of them for the college brochure.

Twenty yards beyond the cop and his car and the gate was a pickup truck parked on the other side of the road. It was tight against the curb. It was facing toward me, fifty yards away. It looked a little out of place. It was faded red and had a big bull bar on the front. The bar was dull black and looked like it had been bent and straightened a couple of times. There were two men in the cab. They were young, tall, clean-cut, fair-haired. They were just sitting there, completely still, gazing forward, looking at nothing in particular. They weren't looking at the cop. They weren't looking at me.

I was set up to the south. I had an anonymous brown panel van parked outside a music store. The store was the kind of place you find near a college gate. It had used CDs in racks out on the sidewalk and posters in the windows behind them advertising bands people have never heard of. I had the van's rear doors open. There were boxes stacked inside. I had a sheaf of paperwork in my hands. I was wearing a coat, because it was a cold April morning. I was wearing gloves, because the boxes in the van had loose staples where they had been torn open. I was wearing a gun, because I often do. It was wedged in my pants, at the back, under the coat. It was a Colt Anaconda, which is a huge stainless steel revolver chambered for the .44 Magnum cartridge. It was thirteen and a half inches long and weighed almost four pounds. Not my first choice of weapon. It was hard and heavy and cold and I was aware of it all the time.

I paused in the middle of the sidewalk and looked up from my papers and heard the distant pickup's engine start. It stayed where it was, just idling. White exhaust pooled around its rear wheels. The air was cold. It was early and the street was deserted. I stepped behind my van and glanced down the side of the music store toward the college buildings. Saw a black Lincoln Town Car waiting outside one of them. There were two guys standing next to it. I was a hundred yards away but neither one of them looked like a limo driver. Limo drivers don't come in pairs and they don't look young and heavy and they don't act tense and wary. These guys looked exactly like bodyguards.

The building the Lincoln was waiting outside of looked like some kind of a small dormitory. It had Greek letters over a big wooden door. I watched and the

small dormitory. It had Greek letters over a big wooden door. I watched and the big wooden door opened up and a young thin guy stepped out. He looked like a student. He had long messy hair and was dressed like a homeless person but carried a bag that looked like shiny expensive leather. One of the bodyguards stood point while the other held the car door and the young thin guy tossed his bag onto the back seat and slid right in after it. He pulled the door shut behind himself. I heard it slam, faint and muffled from a hundred yards away. The bodyguards glanced around for a second and then got in the front together and a short moment later the car moved away. Thirty yards behind it a college security vehicle snuffled slowly in the same direction, not like it was intending to make up a convoy but like it just happened to be there anyway. There were two rent-a-cops in it. They were slumped down low in their seats and they looked aimless and bored.

I took my gloves off and tossed them into the back of my van. Stepped out into the road where my view was better. I saw the Lincoln come up the driveway at a moderate speed. It was black and shiny and immaculate. It had plenty of chrome on it. Plenty of wax. The college cops were way behind it. It paused at the ceremonial gate and turned left and came south toward the black police Caprice. Toward me.

What happened next occupied eight seconds, but it felt like the blink of an eye.

The faded red pickup moved off the curb twenty yards back. It accelerated hard. It caught up with the Lincoln and pulled out and passed it exactly level with the cop's Caprice. It came within a foot of the cop's knees. Then it accelerated again and pulled a little ways ahead and its driver swung the wheel hard and the corner of the bull bar smashed square into the Lincoln's front fender. The pickup driver kept the wheel turned and his foot hard down and forced the Lincoln off the road onto the shoulder. The grass tore up and the Lincoln slowed radically and then hit a tree head-on. There was the *boom* of metal caving and tearing and headlight glass shattering and there was a big cloud of steam and the tree's tiny green leaves shook and quivered noisily in the still morning air.

Then the two guys in the pickup came out shooting. They had black machine pistols and were firing them at the Lincoln. The sound was deafening and I could see arcs of spent brass raining down on the blacktop. Then the guys were pulling at the Lincoln's doors. Hauling them open. One of them leaned into the back and started dragging the thin kid out. The other was still firing his gun into the front. Then he reached into his pocket left-handed and came out with some kind of a

grenade. Tossed it inside the Lincoln and slammed the doors and grabbed his buddy and the kid by the shoulders and turned them away and hauled them down into a crouch. There was a loud bright explosion inside the Lincoln. All six windows shattered. I was more than twenty yards away and felt every bit of the concussion. Pebbles of glass blew everywhere. They made rainbows in the sun. Then the guy who had tossed the grenade scrambled up and sprinted for the passenger side of the pickup and the other straight-armed the kid inside the cab and crowded right in after him. The doors slammed shut and I saw the kid trapped in there on the center seat. I saw terror in his face. It was white with shock and right through the dirty windshield I saw his mouth opening in a silent scream. I saw the driver working the gears and heard the engine roaring and the tires squealing and then the truck was coming directly at me.

It was a Toyota. I could see TOYOTA on the grille behind the bull bar. It rode high on its suspension and I could see a big black differential at the front. It was the size of a soccer ball. Four-wheel drive. Big fat tires. Dents and faded paint that hadn't been washed since it left the factory. It was coming straight at me.

I had less than a second to decide.

I flipped the tail of my coat and pulled out the Colt. Aimed very carefully and fired once at the Toyota's grille. The big gun flashed and roared and kicked in my hand. The huge .44 slug shattered the radiator. I fired again at the left front tire. Blew it out in a spectacular explosion of black rubber debris. Yards of blown tread whipped through the air. The truck slewed and stopped with the driver's side facing me. Ten yards away. I ducked behind the back of my van and slammed the rear doors and came out on the sidewalk and fired again at the left rear tire. Same result. Rubber everywhere. The truck crashed down on its left-side rims at a steep angle. The driver opened his door and spilled out on the blacktop and scrambled up on one knee. He had his gun in the wrong hand. He juggled it across and I waited until I was fairly sure he was going to point it at me. Then I used my left hand to cradle my right forearm against the Colt's four-pound weight and aimed carefully at center mass like I had been taught a long time ago and pulled the trigger. The guy's chest seemed to explode in a huge cloud of blood. The skinny kid was rigid inside the cab. Just staring in shock and horror. But the second guy was out of the cab and scrambling around the front of the hood toward me. His gun was coming around at me. I swiveled left and paused a beat and cradled my forearm. Aimed at his chest. Fired. Same result. He went down on his back behind the fender in a cloud of red vapor.

Now the skinny kid was moving in the cab. I ran for him and pulled him out right over the first guy's body. Ran him back to my van. He was limp with shock and confusion. I shoved him into the passenger seat and slammed the door on him and spun around and headed for the driver's side. In the corner of my eye I saw a third guy coming right at me. Reaching into his jacket. Some tall heavy guy. Dark clothes. I braced my arm and fired and saw the big red explosion in his chest at exactly the same split second I realized it was the old cop from the Caprice and he had been reaching into his pocket for his badge. The badge was a gold shield in a worn leather holder and it flew up out of his hand and tumbled end over end and landed hard against the curb right in front of my van.

Time stood still.

I stared at the cop. He was on his back in the gutter. His whole chest was a mess of red. It was all over him. There was no welling or pumping. No sign of a heartbeat. There was a big ragged hole in his shirt. He was completely still. His head was turned and his cheek was hard against the blacktop. His arms were flung out and I could see pale veins in his hands. I was aware of the blackness of the road and the vivid green of the grass and the bright blue of the sky. I could hear the thrill of the breeze in the new leaves over the gunshots still roaring in my ears. I saw the skinny kid staring out through my van's windshield at the downed cop and then staring at me. I saw the college security cruiser coming left out of the gate. It was moving slower than it should have been. Dozens of shots had been fired. Maybe they were worried about where their jurisdiction began and where it ended. Maybe they were just scared. I saw their pale pink faces behind their windshield. They were turned in my direction. Their car was doing maybe fifteen miles an hour. It was crawling straight at me. I glanced at the gold shield in the gutter. The metal was worn smooth by a lifetime of use. I glanced at my van. Stood completely still. One thing I learned a long time ago is that it's easy enough to shoot a man. But there's absolutely no way to unshoot one.

I heard the college car rolling slowly toward me. Heard its tires crushing grit on the blacktop. Everything else was silence. Then time restarted and a voice in my head screamed *go go go* and I ran for it. I scrambled into the van and threw the gun down on the middle seat and fired up the engine and pulled a U-turn so hard we came up on two wheels. The skinny kid was thrown all over the place. I got the wheel straight and stamped on the gas and took off south. I had a limited view in the mirror but I saw the college cops light up their roof bar and come right after me. The kid next to me was totally silent. His mouth was hanging

open. He was concentrating on staying in his seat. I was concentrating on accelerating as hard as I could. Traffic was mercifully light. It was a sleepy New England town, early in the morning. I got the van wound up to about seventy miles an hour and tightened my hands on the wheel until my knuckles showed white and just stared at the road ahead, like I didn't want to see what was behind me.

"How far back are they?" I asked the kid.

He didn't respond. He was slack with shock and crunched up in the corner of his seat, as far away from me as he could get. He was staring at the roof. He had his right hand braced against the door. Pale skin, long fingers.

"How far back?" I asked again. The engine was roaring loud.

"You killed a cop," he said. "That old guy was a cop, you know."

"I know."

"You shot him."

"Accident," I said. "How far back are the others?"

"He was showing you his badge."

"How far back are the others?"

He stirred himself and turned around and ducked his head so he could line up the view out of the small rear windows.

"Hundred feet," he said. He sounded vague and scared. "Real close. One of them is hanging out the window with a gun."

Right on cue I heard the distant pop of a handgun over the roar of the engine and the whine of the tires. I picked up the Colt from the seat beside me. Dropped it again. It was empty. I had fired six times already. A radiator, two tires, two guys. And one cop.

"Glove compartment," I said.

"You should stop," the kid said. "Explain to them. You were helping me. It was

a mistake." He wasn't looking at me. He was staring out of the back windows.

"I shot a cop," I said. I kept my voice completely neutral. "That's all they know. That's all they want to know. They aren't going to care about how or why."

The kid said nothing.

"Glove compartment," I said again.

He turned again and fumbled the lid open. There was another Anaconda in there. Identical. Shiny stainless steel, fully loaded. I took it from the kid. Wound my window all the way down. Cold air rushed in like a gale. It carried the sound of a handgun firing right behind us, fast and steady.

"Shit," I said.

The kid said nothing. The shots kept coming, loud and dull and percussive. *How were they missing?*

"Get down on the floor," I said.

I slid sideways until my left shoulder was jammed hard against the door frame and craned my right arm all the way around until the new gun was out of the window and pointing backward. I fired once and the kid stared at me in horror and then slid forward and crouched down in the space between the front edge of his seat and the dash with his arms wrapped around his head. A second later the rear window ten feet behind where his head had been exploded.

"Shit," I said again. Steered for the side of the road to improve my angle. Fired behind us again.

"I need you to watch," I said. "Stay down as far as you can."

The kid didn't move.

"Get up," I said. "*Now.* I need you to watch."

He raised himself and twisted around until his head was just high enough to see out the back. I saw him register the shattered rear window. Saw him realize that his head had been right in line with it.

“I’m going to slow down a little,” I said. “Going to pull in so they’ll pull out to pass me.”

“Don’t do it,” the kid said. “You can still put this right.”

I ignored him. Dropped the speed to maybe fifty and pulled right and the college car instinctively drifted left to come up on my flank. I fired my last three chambers at it and its windshield shattered and it slewed all the way across the road like maybe the driver was hit or a tire had gone. It plowed nose-first into the opposite shoulder and smashed through a line of planted shrubs and then it was lost to sight. I dropped the empty gun on the seat beside me and wound the window up and accelerated hard. The kid said nothing. Just stared into the rear of the van. The broken window back there was making a weird moaning sound as the air sucked out through it.

“OK,” I said. I was out of breath. “Now we’re good to go.”

The kid turned to face me.

“Are you crazy?” he said.

“You know what happens to people who shoot cops?” I said back.

He had no reply to that. We drove on in silence for maybe thirty whole seconds, more than half a mile, blinking and panting and staring straight ahead through the windshield like we were mesmerized. The inside of the van stank of gunpowder.

“It was an accident,” I said. “I can’t bring him back. So get over it.”

“Who *are* you?” he asked.

“No, who are *you*?” I asked back.

He went quiet. He was breathing hard. I checked the mirror. The road was completely empty behind us. Completely empty ahead of us. We were way out in open country. Maybe ten minutes from a highway cloverleaf.

“I’m a target,” he said. “For abduction.”

It was an odd word to use.

“They were trying to kidnap me,” he said.

“You think?”

He nodded. “It’s happened before.”

“Why?”

“Money,” the kid said. “Why else?”

“You rich?”

“My father is.”

“Who is he?”

“Just a guy.”

“But a rich guy,” I said.

“He’s a rug importer.”

“Rugs?” I said. “What, like carpets?”

“Oriental rugs.”

“You can get rich importing Oriental rugs?”

“Very,” the kid said.

“You got a name?”

“Richard,” he said. “Richard Beck.”

I checked the mirror again. The road was still empty behind. Still empty ahead. I slowed a little and steadied the van in the center of my lane and tried to drive on like a normal person.

“So who were those guys?” I asked.

Richard Beck shook his head. “I have no idea.”

Richard Beck shook his head. "I have no idea."

"They knew where you were going to be. And when."

"I was going home for my mother's birthday. It's tomorrow."

"Who would know that?"

"I'm not sure. Anybody who knows my family. Anybody in the rug community, I guess. We're well known."

"There's a community?" I said. "Rugs?"

"We all compete," he said. "Same sources, same market. We all know each other."

I said nothing. Just drove on, sixty miles an hour.

"*You* got a name?" he asked me.

"No," I said.

He nodded, like he understood. *Smart boy.*

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I'm going to let you out near the highway," I said. "You can hitch a ride or call a cab and then you can forget all about me."

He went very quiet.

"I can't take you to the cops," I said. "That's just not possible. You understand that, right? I killed one. Maybe three. You saw me do it."

He stayed quiet. *Decision time.* The highway was six minutes ahead.

"They'll throw away the key," I said. "I screwed up, it was an accident, but they aren't going to listen. They never do. So don't ask me to go anywhere near *anybody.* Not as a witness, not as nothing. I'm out of here like I don't exist. We absolutely clear on that?"

He didn't speak.

“And don’t give them a description,” I said. “Tell them you don’t remember me. Tell them you were in shock. Or I’ll find you and I’ll kill you.”

He didn’t answer.

“I’ll let you out somewhere,” I said. “Like you never saw me.”

He moved. Turned sideways on his seat and looked straight at me.

“Take me home,” he said. “All the way. We’ll give you money. Help you out. We’ll hide you, if you want. My folks will be grateful. I mean, *I’m* grateful. Believe me. You saved my ass. The cop thing, it was an accident, right? Just an accident. You got unlucky. It was a pressure situation. I can understand that. We’ll keep it quiet.”

“I don’t need your help,” I said. “I just need to get rid of you.”

“But I need to get home,” he said. “We’d be helping each other.”

The highway was four minutes ahead.

“Where’s home?” I asked.

“Abbot,” he said.

“Abbot what?”

“Abbot, Maine. On the coast. Between Kennebunkport and Portland.”

“We’re heading in the wrong direction.”

“You can turn north on the highway.”

“It’s got to be two hundred miles, minimum.”

“We’ll give you money. We’ll make it worth your while.”

“I could let you out near Boston,” I said. “Got to be a bus to Portland.”

He shook his head, violently, like a seizure.

“No way,” he said. “I can’t take the bus. I can’t be alone. Not now. I need protection. Those guys might still be out there.”

“Those guys are dead,” I said. “Like the damn cop.”

“They might have associates.”

It was another odd word to use. He looked small and thin and scared. There was a pulse jumping in his neck. He used both hands to pull his hair away from his head and turned toward the windshield to let me see his left ear. It wasn’t there. There was just a hard knob of scar tissue. It looked like a small piece of uncooked pasta. Like a raw tortellini floret.

“They cut it off and mailed it,” he said. “The first time.”

“When?”

“I was fifteen.”

“Your dad didn’t pay up?”

“Not quickly enough.”

I said nothing. Richard Beck just sat there, showing me his scar, shocked and scared and breathing like a machine.

“You OK?” I asked.

“Take me home,” he said. Like he was pleading. “I can’t be alone now.”

The highway was two minutes ahead.

“Please,” he said. “Help me.”

“Shit,” I said, for the third time.

“Please. We can help each other. You need to hide out.”

“We can’t keep this van,” I said. “We have to assume the description is on the air all over the state.”

He stared at me, full of hope. The highway was one minute ahead.

“We’ll have to find a car,” I said.

“Where?”

“Anywhere. There are cars all over the place.”

There was a big sprawling out-of-town shopping mall nestled south and west of the highway interchange. I could already see it in the distance. There were giant tan buildings with no windows and bright neon signs. There were giant parking lots about half-filled with cars. I pulled in and drove once around the whole place. It was as big as a town. There were people everywhere. They made me nervous. I came around again and headed in past a line of trash containers to the rear of a big department store.

“Where are we going?” Richard asked.

“Staff parking,” I said. “Customers are in and out all day long. Unpredictable. But store people are in there for the duration. Safer.”

He looked at me like he didn’t understand. I headed for a line of eight cars parked head-on against a blank wall. There was an empty slot next to a dull-colored Nissan Maxima about three years old. It would do. It was a pretty anonymous vehicle. The lot was a backwater, quiet and private. I pulled beyond the empty slot and backed up into it. Put the van’s rear doors tight against the wall.

“Got to hide the busted window,” I said.

The kid said nothing. I put both empty Colts into my coat pockets and slid out. Tried the Maxima’s doors.

“Find me some wire,” I said. “Like heavy electrical cable or a coat hanger.”

“You’re going to steal this car?”

I nodded. Said nothing.

“Is that smart?”

“

"You'd think so if it was you who'd accidentally shot a cop."

The kid looked blank for a second and then came to and scouted around. I emptied the Anacondas and tossed the twelve spent shell cases into a garbage container. The kid came back with a three-foot length of electrical wire from a trash pile. I stripped the insulation with my teeth and made a little hook in the end and shoved it past the rubber sealing strip around the Maxima's window.

"You're the lookout," I said.

He stepped away and scanned the lot and I fed the wire down inside the car and jiggled it around and jiggled the door handle until it popped open. I tossed the wire back in the trash and bent down under the steering column and pulled off the plastic shroud. Sorted through the wires in there until I found the two I needed and touched them together. The starter motor whined and the engine turned over and caught and ran steadily. The kid looked suitably impressed.

"Misspent youth," I said.

"Is this smart?" he asked again.

I nodded. "Smart as we can get. It won't be missed until six tonight, maybe eight. Whenever the store closes. You'll be home long before then."

He paused with his hand on the passenger door and then kind of shook himself and ducked inside. I racked the driver's seat back and adjusted the mirror and backed out of the slot. Took it easy through the mall lot. There was a cop car crawling around about a hundred yards away. I parked again in the first place I saw and sat there with the engine running until the cop moved away. Then I hustled for the exit and around the cloverleaf and two minutes later we were heading north on a wide smooth highway at a respectable sixty miles an hour. The car smelled strongly of perfume and there were two boxes of tissues in it. There was some kind of furry bear stuck on the rear window with clear plastic suckers where its paws should have been. There was a Little League glove on the back seat and I could hear an aluminum bat rattling around in the trunk.

"Mom's taxi," I said.

The kid didn't answer.

"Don't worry," I said. "She's probably insured. Probably a solid citizen."

“Don’t worry,” I said. “She’s probably insured. Probably a solid citizen.”

“Don’t you feel bad?” he said. “About the cop?”

I glanced at him. He was thin and pale and crunched up again as far from me as he could get. His hand was resting against the door. His long fingers made him look a little like a musician. I think he wanted to like me, but I didn’t need him to.

“Shit happens,” I said. “No need to get all worked up about it.”

“What the hell kind of answer is that?”

“The only kind. It was minor collateral damage. Means nothing unless it comes back to bite us. Bottom line, we can’t change it, so we move on.”

He said nothing.

“Anyway, it was your dad’s fault,” I said.

“For being rich and having a son?”

“For hiring lousy bodyguards.”

He looked away. Said nothing.

“They *were* bodyguards, right?”

He nodded. Said nothing.

“So don’t *you* feel bad?” I asked. “About them?”

“A little,” he said. “I guess. I didn’t know them well.”

“They were useless,” I said.

“It happened so fast.”

“The bad guys were waiting right there,” I said. “A ratty old pickup like that just hanging around in a prissy little college town? What kind of bodyguards don’t notice a thing like that? They never heard of threat assessment?”

“You saying you noticed?”

“I noticed.”

“Not bad for a van driver.”

“I was in the army. I was a military cop. I understand bodyguarding. And I understand collateral damage.”

The kid nodded, uncertainly.

“You got a name yet?” he asked.

“Depends,” I said. “I need to understand your point of view. I could be in all kinds of trouble. At least one cop is dead and now I just stole a car.”

He went quiet again. I matched him, mile for mile. Gave him time to think. We were almost out of Massachusetts.

“My family appreciates loyalty,” he said. “You did their son a service. And you did *them* a service. Saved them some money, at least. They’ll show their gratitude. I’m sure the last thing they’ll do is rat you out.”

“You need to call them?”

He shook his head. “They’re expecting me. As long as I show up there’s no need to call them.”

“The cops will call them. They think you’re in big trouble.”

“They don’t have the number. Nobody does.”

“The college must have your address. They can find your number.”

He shook his head again. “The college doesn’t have the address. Nobody does. We’re very careful about stuff like that.”

I shrugged and kept quiet and drove another mile.

“So what about you?” I said. “You going to rat me out?”

I saw him touch his right ear. The one that was still there. It was clearly a

I saw him touch his right ear. The one that was still there. It was clearly a completely subconscious gesture.

“You saved my ass,” he said. “I’m not going to rat you out.”

“OK,” I said. “My name is Reacher.”

We spent a few minutes cutting across a tiny corner of Vermont and then struck out north and east across New Hampshire. Settled in for the long, long drive. The adrenaline drained away and the kid got over his state of shock and we both ended up a little down and sleepy. I cracked the window to get some air in and some perfume out. It made the car noisy but it kept me awake. We talked a little. Richard Beck told me he was twenty years old. He was in his junior year. He was majoring in some kind of contemporary art expression thing that sounded a lot like finger painting to me. He wasn’t good at relationships. He was an only child. There was a lot of ambivalence about his family. They were clearly some kind of tight close-knit clan and half of him wanted out and the other half needed to be in. He was clearly very traumatized by the previous kidnap. It made me wonder whether something had been done to him, apart from the ear thing. Maybe something much worse.

I told him about the army. I laid it on pretty thick about my bodyguarding qualifications. I wanted him to feel he was in good hands, at least temporarily. I drove fast and steady. The Maxima had just been filled. We didn’t need to stop for gas. He didn’t want lunch. I stopped once to use a men’s room. Left the engine running so I wouldn’t have to fiddle with the ignition wires again. Came back to the car and found him inert inside it. We got back on the road and passed by Concord in New Hampshire and headed toward Portland in Maine. Time passed. He got more relaxed, the closer we got to home. But he got quieter, too. Ambivalence.

We crossed the state line and then about twenty miles short of Portland he squirmed around and checked the view out of the back very carefully and told me to take the next exit. We turned onto a narrow road heading due east toward the Atlantic. It passed under I-95 and then ran more than fifteen miles across granite headlands to the sea. It was the kind of landscape that would have looked great in summer. But it was still cold and raw. There were trees stunted by salt winds and exposed rock outcrops where gales and storm tides had scoured the

winds and exposed rock outcrops where gales and storm tides had scoured the dirt away. The road twisted and turned like it was trying to fight its way as far east as it could get. I glimpsed the ocean ahead. It was as gray as iron. The road pushed on past inlets to the left and right. I saw small beaches made of gritty sand. Then the road curved left and immediately right and rose up onto a headland shaped like the palm of a hand. The palm narrowed abruptly into a single finger jutting directly out to sea. It was a rock peninsula maybe a hundred yards wide and half a mile long. I could feel the wind buffeting the car. I drove out onto the peninsula and saw a line of bent and stunted evergreen trees that were trying to hide a high granite wall but weren't quite tall enough or thick enough to succeed. The wall was maybe eight feet tall. It was topped with big coils of razor wire. It had security lights mounted at intervals. It ran laterally all the way across the hundred-yard width of the finger. It canted down suddenly at the ends and ran all the way into the sea, where its massive foundations were built on huge stone blocks. The blocks were mossy with seaweed. There was an iron gate set in the wall, dead-center. It was closed.

"This is it," Richard Beck said. "This is where I live."

The road led straight to the gate. Behind the gate it changed to a long straight driveway. At the end of the driveway was a gray stone house. I could see it there at the end of the finger, right out in the ocean. Right beside the gate was a one-story lodge. Same design and same stone as the house, but much smaller and lower. It shared its foundations with the wall. I slowed and stopped the car in front of the gate.

"Honk the horn," Richard Beck said.

The Maxima had a little bugle shape on the airbag lid. I pressed on it with one finger and the horn beeped politely. I saw a surveillance camera on the gatepost tilt and pan. It was like a little glass eye looking at me. There was a long pause and the lodge door opened. A guy in a dark suit stepped out. Clearly the suit came from a big-and-tall store and was probably the largest size it had ever offered but even so it was very tight in the shoulders and short in the arms for its owner. He was way bigger than me, which put him firmly in the freak category. He was a giant. He walked up close to his side of the gate and stared out. He spent a long time looking at me and a short time looking at the kid. Then he unlocked the gate and pulled it open.

"Drive straight up to the house," Richard told me. "Don't stop here. I don't like that guy very much."

that guy very much.

I drove through the gate. Didn't stop. But I drove slow and looked around. The first thing you do going into a place is to look for your way out. The wall ran all the way into rough water on both sides. It was too high to jump and the razor wire along the top made it impossible to climb. There was a cleared area maybe thirty yards deep behind it. Like no-man's-land. Or a minefield. The security lights were set to cover all of it. There was no way out except through the gate. The giant was closing it behind us. I could see him in the mirror.

It was a long drive up to the house. Gray ocean on three sides. The house was a big old pile. Maybe some sea captain's place from way back when killing whales made people respectable fortunes. It was all stone, with intricate beadings and cornices and folds. All the north-facing surfaces were covered in gray lichen. The rest was spotted with green. It was three stories high. It had a dozen chimneys. The roofline was complex. There were gables all over the place with short gutters and dozens of fat iron pipes to drain the rainwater away. The front door was oak and was banded and studded with iron. The driveway widened into a carriage circle. I followed it around counterclockwise and stopped right in front of the door. The door opened and another guy in a dark suit stepped out. He was about my size, which made him a lot smaller than the guy in the lodge. But I didn't like him any better. He had a stone face and blank eyes. He opened the Maxima's passenger door like he had been expecting to see it, which I guessed he was, because the big guy in the lodge would have called ahead.

"Will you wait here?" Richard asked me.

He slipped out of the car and walked away into the gloom inside the house and the guy in the suit closed the oak door from the outside and took up station right in front of it. He wasn't looking at me but I knew I was somewhere in his peripheral vision. I broke the wire connection under the steering column and turned the motor off and waited.

It was a reasonably long wait, probably close to forty minutes. Without the engine running the car grew cold. It rocked gently in the sea breeze eddying around the house. I stared straight ahead through the windshield. I was facing northeast and the air was whipped and clear. I could see the coastline curving in from the left. I could see a faint brown smudge in the air about twenty miles away. Probably pollution coming up out of Portland. The city itself was hidden behind a headland.

Then the oak door opened again and the guard stepped smartly aside and a woman came out. She was Richard Beck's mother. No doubt about that. No doubt at all. She had the same slight build and the same pale face. The same long fingers. She was wearing jeans and a heavy fisherman's sweater. She had windblown hair and was maybe fifty years old. She looked tired and strained. She stopped about six feet from the car, like she was giving me the opportunity to realize it would be more polite if I got out and met her halfway. So I opened the door and slid out. I was stiff and cramped. I stepped forward and she put out her hand. I took it. It was ice cold and full of bones and tendons.

"My son told me what happened," she said. Her voice was low and sounded a little husky, like maybe she smoked a lot or had been crying hard. "I can't begin to express how grateful I am that you helped him."

"Is he OK?" I asked.

She made a face, like she wasn't sure. "He's lying down now."

I nodded. Let go of her hand. It fell back to her side. There was a short awkward silence.

"I'm Elizabeth Beck," she said.

"Jack Reacher," I said.

"My son explained your predicament," she said.

It was a nice neutral word. I said nothing in reply.

"My husband will be home tonight," she said. "He'll know what to do."

I nodded. There was another awkward pause. I waited.

"Would you like to come in?" she asked.

She turned and walked back into the hallway. I followed her. I passed through the door and it beeped. I looked again and saw that a metal detector had been installed tight against the inside jamb.

"Would you mind?" Elizabeth Beck asked. She made a sort of sheepish apologetic gesture toward me and then toward the big ugly guy in the suit. He

stepped up and made ready to pat me down.

“Two guns,” I said. “Empty. In my coat pockets.”

He pulled them out with the kind of easy practiced moves that suggested he had patted plenty of people down before. He laid them on a side table and squatted and ran his hands up my legs, and then stood and went over my arms, my waist, my chest, my back. He was very thorough, and not very gentle.

“I’m sorry,” Elizabeth Beck said.

The guy in the suit stood back and there was another awkward silence.

“Do you need anything?” Elizabeth Beck asked.

I could think of a lot of things I needed. But I just shook my head.

“I’m kind of tired,” I said. “Long day. I really need a nap.”

She smiled briefly, like she was pleased, like having her own personal cop-killer asleep somewhere would relieve her of a social pressure.

“Of course,” she said. “Duke will show you to a room.”

She looked at me for a second longer. Underneath the strain and the pallor she was a handsome woman. She had fine bones and good skin. Thirty years ago she must have been fighting them off with a stick. She turned away and disappeared into the depths of the house. I turned to the guy in the suit. I assumed he was Duke.

“When do I get the guns back?” I asked.

He didn’t answer. Just pointed me to the staircase and followed me up. Pointed to the next staircase and we came out on the third floor. He led me to a door and pushed it open. I went in and found a plain square room paneled with oak. There was heavy old furniture in it. A bed, an armoire, a table, a chair. There was an Oriental carpet on the floor. It looked thin and threadbare. Maybe it was a priceless old item. Duke pushed past me and walked across it and showed me where the bathroom was. He was acting like a bellboy in a hotel. He pushed past me again and headed back to the door.

“Dinner’s at eight,” he said. Nothing more.

He stepped out and closed the door. I didn’t hear a sound but when I checked I found it was locked from the outside. There was no keyhole on the inside. I stepped to the window and looked out at the view. I was at the back of the house and all I could see was ocean. I was facing due east and there was nothing between me and Europe. I looked down. Fifty feet below were rocks with waves foaming all around them. The tide looked like it was coming in.

I stepped back to the door and put my ear against it and listened hard. Heard nothing. I scanned the ceiling and the cornices and the furniture, very carefully, inch by inch. Nothing there. No cameras. I didn’t care about microphones. I wasn’t going to make any noise. I sat on the bed and took my right shoe off. Flipped it over and used my fingernails to pull a pin out of the heel. Swiveled the heel rubber like a little door and turned the shoe the right way up and shook it. A small black plastic rectangle fell out on the bed and bounced once. It was a wireless e-mail device. Nothing fancy. It was just a commercial product, but it had been reprogrammed to send only to one address. It was about the size of a large pager. It had a small cramped keyboard with tiny keys. I switched the power on and typed a short message. Then I pressed *send now.*

The message said: *I’m in.*

CHAPTER 2

Truth is by that point I had been *in* for eleven whole days, since a damp shiny Saturday night in the city of Boston when I saw a dead man walk across a sidewalk and get into a car. It wasn't a delusion. It wasn't an uncanny resemblance. It wasn't a double or a twin or a brother or a cousin. It was a man who had died a decade ago. There was no doubt about it. No trick of the light. He looked older by the appropriate number of years and was carrying the scars of the wounds that had killed him.

I was walking on Huntington Avenue with a mile to go to a bar I had heard about. It was late. Symphony Hall was just letting out. I was too stubborn to cross the street and avoid the crowd. I just threaded my way through it. There was a mass of well-dressed fragrant people, most of them old. There were double-parked cars and taxis at the curb. Their engines were running and their windshield wipers were thumping back and forth at irregular intervals. I saw the guy step out of the foyer doors on my left. He was wearing a heavy cashmere overcoat and carrying gloves and a scarf. He was bareheaded. He was about fifty. We almost collided. I stopped. He stopped. He looked right at me. We got into one of those crowded-sidewalk things where we both hesitated and then both started moving and then both stopped again. At first I thought he didn't recognize me. Then there was a shadow in his face. Nothing definitive. I held back and he walked across in front of me and climbed into the rear seat of a black Cadillac DeVille waiting at the curb. I stood there and watched as the driver eased out into the traffic and pulled away. I heard the hiss of the tires on the wet pavement.

I got the plate number. I wasn't panicking. I wasn't questioning anything. I was ready to believe the evidence of my own eyes. Ten years of history was overturned in a second. *The guy was alive.* Which gave me a huge problem.

That was day one. I forgot all about the bar. I went straight back to my hotel and started calling half-forgotten numbers from my Military Police days. I needed somebody I knew and trusted, but I had been out for six years by then and it was late on a Saturday night so the odds were against me. In the end I settled for somebody who claimed he had heard of me, which might or might not have

made a difference to the eventual outcome. He was a warrant officer named Powell.

“I need you to trace a civilian plate,” I told him. “Purely as a favor.”

He knew who I was, so he didn’t give me any grief about not being able to do it for me. I gave him the details. Told him I was pretty sure it was a private registration, not a livery car. He took my number and promised to call me back in the morning, which would be day two.

He didn’t call me back. He sold me out instead. I think in the circumstances anybody would have. Day two was a Sunday and I was up early. I had room service for breakfast and sat waiting for the call. I got a knock on the door instead. Just after ten o’clock. I put my eye to the peephole and saw two people standing close together so they would show up well in the lens. One man, one woman. Dark jackets. No overcoats. The man was carrying a briefcase. They both had some kind of official IDs held up high and tilted so they would catch the hallway light.

“Federal agents,” the man called, just loud enough for me to hear him through the door.

In a situation like that it doesn’t work to pretend you’re not in. I’d been the guys in the hallway often enough. One of them stays right there and the other goes down to get a manager with a passkey. So I just opened up and stood back to let them in.

They were wary for a moment. They relaxed as soon as they saw I wasn’t armed and didn’t look like a maniac. They handed over their IDs and shuffled around politely while I deciphered them. At the top they said: *United States Department of Justice.* At the bottom they said: *Drug Enforcement Administration.* In the middle were all kinds of seals and signatures and watermarks. There were photographs and typed names. The man was listed as Steven Eliot, one *l* like the old poet. *April is the cruelest month.* That was for damn sure. The photograph was a pretty good likeness. Steven Eliot looked somewhere between thirty and forty and was thickset and dark and a little bald and had a smile that looked friendly in the picture and even better in person. The woman was listed as Susan

Duffy. Susan Duffy was a little younger than Steven Eliot. She was a little taller than him, too. She was pale and slender and attractive and had changed her hair since her photograph was taken.

“Go ahead,” I said. “Search the room. It’s a long time since I had anything worth hiding from you guys.”

I handed back their IDs and they put them away in their inside pockets and made sure they moved their jackets enough to let me see their weapons. They had them in neat shoulder rigs. I recognized the ribbed grip of a Glock 17 under Eliot’s armpit. Duffy had a 19, which is the same thing only a little smaller. It was snug against her right breast. She must have been left-handed.

“We don’t want to search the room,” she said.

“We want to talk about a license plate,” Eliot said.

“I don’t own a car,” I said.

We were all still standing in a neat little triangle just inside the door. Eliot still had the briefcase in his hand. I was trying to figure out who was the boss. Maybe neither one of them. Maybe they were equals. And fairly senior. They were well dressed but looked tired. Maybe they had worked most of the night and flown in from somewhere. From Washington D.C., maybe.

“Can we sit down?” Duffy asked.

“Sure,” I said. But a cheap hotel room made that awkward. There was only one chair. It was shoved under a small desk crammed between a wall and the cabinet that held the television set. Duffy pulled it out and turned it around so it faced the bed. I sat on the bed, up near the pillows. Eliot perched on the foot of the bed and laid his briefcase down on it. He was still giving me the friendly smile and I couldn’t find anything phony about it. Duffy looked great on the chair. The seat height was exactly right for her. Her skirt was short and she was wearing dark nylons that went light where her knees bent.

“You’re Reacher, right?” Eliot asked.

I took my eyes off Duffy’s legs and nodded. I felt I could count on them to know that much.

“This room is registered to somebody called Calhoun,” Eliot said. “Paid for with cash, one night only.”

“Habit,” I said.

“You leaving today?”

“I take it one day at a time.”

“Who’s Calhoun?”

“John Quincy Adams’s vice president,” I said. “It seemed appropriate for this location. I used up the presidents long ago. Now I’m doing vice presidents. Calhoun was unusual. He resigned to run for the Senate.”

“Did he get in?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why the phony name?”

“Habit,” I said again.

Susan Duffy was looking straight at me. Not like I was nuts. Like she was interested in me. She probably found it to be a valuable interrogation technique. Back when I interrogated people I did the same thing. Ninety percent of asking questions is about listening to answers.

“We spoke to a military cop called Powell,” she said. “You asked him to trace a plate.”

Her voice was low and warm and a little husky. I said nothing.

“We have traps and flags in the computers against that plate,” she said. “Soon as Powell’s inquiry hit the wires we knew all about it. We called him and asked him what his interest was. He told us the interest came from you.”

“Reluctantly, I hope,” I said.

She smiled. “He recovered fast enough to give us a phony phone number for you. So you needn’t worry about old unit loyalties.”

“But in the end he gave you the right number.”

“We threatened him,” she said.

“Then MPs have changed since my day,” I said.

“It’s important to us,” Eliot said. “He saw that.”

“So now you’re important to us,” Duffy said.

I looked away. I’ve been around the block more times than I care to count but the sound of her voice saying that still gave me a little thrill. I began to think maybe she was the boss. And a hell of an interrogator.

“A member of the public calls in a plate,” Eliot said. “Why would he do that? Maybe he got in a fender bender with the car the plate was on. Maybe it was a hit-and-run. But wouldn’t he go to the cops for that? And you just told us you don’t have a car anyway.”

“So maybe you saw somebody *in* the car,” Duffy said.

She let the rest of it hang. It was a neat Catch-22. If the person in the car was my friend, then I was probably her enemy. If the person in the car was my enemy, then she was ready to be my friend.

“You guys had breakfast?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“So have I,” I said.

“We know,” she said. “Room service, a short stack of pancakes with an egg on top, over easy. Plus a large pot of coffee, black. It was ordered for seven forty-five and delivered at seven forty-four and you paid cash and tipped the waiter three bucks.”

“Did I enjoy it?”

“You ate it.”

Eliot snapped the locks on his briefcase and lifted the lid. Pulled out a stack of

paper secured with a rubber band. The paper looked new but the writing on it was blurred. Photocopies of faxes, probably made during the night.

“Your service record,” he said.

I could see photographs in his briefcase. Glossy black-and-white eight-by-tens. Some kind of a surveillance situation.

“You were a military cop for thirteen years,” Eliot said. “Fast-track promotion all the way from second lieutenant to major. Citations and medals. They liked you. You were good. Very good.”

“Thank you.”

“More than very good, actually. You were their special go-to guy on numerous occasions.”

“I guess I was.”

“But they let you go.”

“I was riffed,” I said.

“Riffed?” Duffy repeated.

“RIF, reduction in force. They love to make acronyms out of things. The Cold War ended, military spending got cut, the army got smaller. So they didn’t need so many special go-to guys.”

“The army still exists,” Eliot said. “They didn’t chop everybody.”

“No.”

“So why you in particular?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

He didn’t challenge me.

“You can help us,” Duffy said. “Who did you see in the car?”

I didn’t answer.

I didn't answer.

"Were there drugs in the army?" Eliot asked.

I smiled.

"Armies love drugs," I said. "They always have. Morphine, Benzedrine. The German Army invented Ecstasy. It was an appetite suppressant. CIA invented LSD, tested it on the U.S. Army. Armies march on their veins."

"Recreational?"

"Average age of a recruit is eighteen. What do you think?"

"Was it a problem?"

"We didn't make it much of a problem. Some grunt goes on furlough, smokes a couple of joints in his girlfriend's bedroom, we didn't care. We figured we'd rather see them with a couple of blunts than a couple of six-packs. Outside of our care we liked them docile rather than aggressive."

Duffy glanced at Eliot and Eliot used his fingernails to scrape the photographs up out of his case. He handed them to me. There were four of them. All four were grainy and a little blurred. All four showed the same Cadillac DeVille I had seen the night before. I recognized it by the plate number. It was in some kind of a parking garage. There were two guys standing next to the trunk. In two of the pictures the trunk lid was down. In two of them it was up. The two guys were looking down at something inside the trunk. No way of telling what it was. One of the guys was a Hispanic gangbanger. The other was an older man in a suit. I didn't know him.

Duffy must have been watching my face.

"Not the man you saw?" she said.

"I didn't say I saw anybody."

"The Hispanic guy is a major dealer," Eliot said. "Actually he's *the* major dealer for most of Los Angeles County. Not provable, of course, but we know all about him. His profits must run to millions of dollars a week. He lives like an emperor. But he came all the way to Portland, Maine, to meet with this other guy."

I touched one of the photographs. “This is Portland, Maine?”

Duffy nodded. “A parking garage, downtown. About nine weeks ago. I took the pictures myself.”

“So who’s this other guy?”

“We’re not exactly sure. We traced the Cadillac’s plate, obviously. It’s registered to a corporation called Bizarre Bazaar. Main office is in Portland, Maine. Far as we can tell it started out way back as some kind of hippy-dippy import-export trader with the Middle East. Now it specializes in importing Oriental rugs. Far as we can tell the owner is a guy called Zachary Beck. We’re assuming that’s him in the photographs.”

“Which makes him huge,” Eliot said. “If this guy from LA is prepared to fly all the way back east to meet with him, he’s got to be a couple of rungs up the ladder. And anybody a couple of rungs above this LA guy is in the stratosphere, believe me. So Zachary Beck’s a top boy, and he’s fooling with us. Rug importer, drug importer. He’s making jokes.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I never saw him before.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Duffy said. She hitched forward on the chair. “It’s better for us if he isn’t the guy you saw. We already know about him. It’s better for us if you saw one of his associates. We can try to get to him that way.”

“You can’t get to him head-on?”

There was a short silence. Seemed to me there was some embarrassment in it.

“We’ve got problems,” Eliot said.

“Sounds like you’ve got probable cause against the LA player. And you’ve got photographs that put him side by side with this Beck guy.”

“The photographs are tainted,” Duffy said. “I made a mistake.”

More silence.

“The garage was private property,” she said. “It’s under an office building. I didn’t have a warrant. Fourth Amendment makes the pictures inadmissible.”

“Can’t you lie? Say you were outside the garage?”

“Physical layout makes that impossible. Defense counsel would figure it in a minute and the case would collapse.”

“We need to know who you saw,” Eliot said.

I didn’t answer.

“We really need to know,” Duffy said. She said it in the kind of soft voice that makes men want to jump tall buildings. But there was no artifice there. No pretense. She wasn’t aware of how good she was sounding. *She really needed to know.*

“Why?” I asked.

“Because I need to put this right.”

“Everybody makes mistakes.”

“We sent an agent after Beck,” she said. “Undercover. A woman. She disappeared.”

Silence.

“When?” I asked.

“Seven weeks ago.”

“You looked for her?”

“We don’t know where to look. We don’t know where Beck goes. We don’t even know where he lives. He has no registered property. His house must be owned by some phantom corporation. It’s a needle in a haystack.”

“Haven’t you tailed him?”

“We’ve tried. He has bodyguards and drivers. They’re too good.”

“For the DEA?”

“For us. We’re on our own. The Justice Department disowned the operation when I screwed up.”

“Even though there’s an agent missing?”

“They don’t know there’s an agent missing. We put her in after they closed us down. She’s off the books.”

I stared at her.

“This whole thing is off the books,” she said.

“So how are you working it?”

“I’m a team leader. Nobody’s looking over my shoulder day to day. I’m pretending I’m working on something else. But I’m not. I’m working on this.”

“So nobody knows this woman is missing?”

“Just my team,” she said. “Seven of us. And now you.”

I said nothing.

“We came straight here,” she said. “We need a break. Why else would we fly up here on a Sunday?”

The room went quiet. I looked from her to Eliot and back to her. They needed me. I needed them. And I liked them. I liked them a lot. They were honest, likable people. They were like the best of the people I used to work with.

“I’ll trade,” I said. “Information for information. We’ll see how we get along. And then we’ll take it from there.”

“What do you need?”

I told her I needed ten-year-old hospital records from a place called Eureka in California. I told her what kind of a thing to look for. I told her I would stay in Boston until she got back to me. I told her not to put anything on paper. Then

they left and that was it for day two. Nothing happened on day three. Or day four. I hung around. I find Boston acceptable for a couple of days. It's what I call a forty-eight town. Anything more than forty-eight hours, and it starts to get tiresome. Of course, most places are like that for me. I'm a restless person. So by the start of day five I was going crazy. I was ready to assume they had forgotten all about me. I was ready to call it quits and get back on the road. I was thinking about Miami. It would be a lot warmer down there. But late in the morning the phone rang. It was her voice. It was nice to hear.

"We're on our way up," she said. "Meet you by that big statue of whoever it is on a horse, halfway around the Freedom Trail, three o'clock."

It wasn't a very precise rendezvous, but I knew what she meant. It was a place in the North End, near a church. It was springtime and too cold to want to go there without a purpose but I got there early anyway. I sat on a bench next to an old woman feeding house sparrows and rock doves with torn-up crusts of bread. She looked at me and moved to another bench. The birds swarmed around her feet, pecking at the grit. A watery sun was fighting rainclouds in the sky. It was Paul Revere on the horse.

Duffy and Eliot showed up right on time. They were wearing black raincoats all covered in little loops and buckles and belts. They might as well have worn signs around their necks saying *Federal Agents from Washington D.C.* They sat down, Duffy on my left and Eliot on my right. I leaned back and they leaned forward with their elbows on their knees.

"Paramedics fished a guy out of the Pacific surf," Duffy said. "Ten years ago, just south of Eureka, California. White male, about forty. He had been shot twice in the head and once in the chest. Small-caliber, probably .22s. Then they figure he was thrown off a cliff into the ocean."

"He was alive when they fished him out?" I asked, although I already knew the answer.

"Barely," she said. "He had a bullet lodged near his heart and his skull was broken. Plus one arm and both legs and his pelvis, from the fall. And he was half-drowned. They operated on him for fifteen straight hours. He was in intensive care for a month and in the hospital recuperating for another six."

"ID?"

“Nothing on him. He’s in the records as a John Doe.”

“Did they try to ID him?”

“No fingerprint match,” she said. “Nothing on any missing-persons lists. Nobody came to claim him.”

I nodded. *Fingerprint computers tell you what they’re told to tell you.*

“What then?” I asked.

“He recovered,” she said. “Six months had passed. They were trying to work out what to do with him when he suddenly discharged himself. They never saw him again.”

“Did he tell them anything about who he was?”

“They diagnosed amnesia, certainly about the trauma, because that’s almost inevitable. They figured he might be genuinely blank about the incident and the previous day or two. But they figured he must be able to remember things from before that, and they got the strong impression he was pretending not to. There’s a fairly extensive case file. Psychiatrists, everything. They interviewed him regularly. He was extremely resolute. Never said a word about himself.”

“What was his physical condition when he left?”

“Pretty fair. He had visible scars from the GSWs, that’s about all.”

“OK,” I said. I leaned my head back and looked up at the sky.

“Who was he?”

“Your guess?” I said.

“.22s to the head and chest?” Eliot said. “Dumped in the ocean? It was organized crime. An assassination. Some kind of hit man got to him.”

I said nothing. Looked up at the sky.

“Who was he?” Duffy said again.

I kept on looking up at the sky and dragged myself ten years backward through time, to a whole different world.

“You know anything about tanks?” I asked.

“Military tanks? Tracks and guns? Not really.”

“There’s nothing to them,” I said. “I mean, you like them to be able to move fast, you want some reliability, you don’t object to some fuel economy. But if I’ve got a tank and you’ve got a tank, what’s the only thing I really want to know?”

“What?”

“Can I shoot you before you can shoot me? That’s what I want to know. If we’re a mile apart, can my gun reach you? Or can your gun reach me?”

“So?”

“Of course, physics being physics, the likely answer is if I can hit you at a mile, then you can hit me at a mile. So it comes down to ammunition. If I stand off another two hundred yards so your shell bounces off me without hurting me, can I develop a shell that doesn’t bounce off you? That’s what tanks are all about. The guy in the ocean was an army intelligence officer who had been blackmailing an army weapons specialist.”

“Why was he in the ocean?”

“Did you watch the Gulf War on TV?” I asked.

“I did,” Eliot said.

“Forget about the smart bombs,” I said. “The real star of the show was the M1A1 Abrams main battle tank. It scored about four hundred to zip against the Iraqis, who were using the best anybody ever had to give them. But having the war on TV meant that we’d shown our hand to the whole world, so we better get on with dreaming up some new stuff for the next time around. So we got on with it.”

“And?” Duffy asked.

“If you want a shell to fly farther and hit harder, you can stuff more propellant

into it. Or make it lighter. Or both. Of course, if you're stuffing more propellant into it, you've got to do something pretty radical elsewhere to make it lighter. Which is what they did. They took the explosive charge out of it. Which sounds weird, right? Like, what's it going to do? Go *clang* and bounce off? But they changed the shape. They dreamed up this thing that looks like a giant lawn dart. Built-in fins and all. It's cast from tungsten and depleted uranium. The densest metals you can find. It goes real fast and real far. They called it the long-rod penetrator."

Duffy glanced at me with her eyelids low and smiled and blushed all at the same time. I smiled back.

"They changed the name," I said. "Now it's called the *APFSDS.* I told you they like initials. Armor Piercing Fin Stabilized Discarding Sabot. It's powered by its own little rocket motor, basically. It hits the enemy tank with tremendous kinetic energy. The kinetic energy changes to heat energy, just like they teach you in high school physics. It melts its way through in a split second and sprays the inside of the enemy tank with a jet of molten metal, which kills the tankers and blows up anything explosive or flammable. It's a very neat trick. And either way, you shoot, you score, because if the enemy armor is too thick or you've fired from too far away, the thing just sticks partway in like a dart and spalls, which means it fragments the inner layer of the armor and throws scabs of scalding metal around inside like a hand grenade. The enemy crew come apart like frogs in a blender. It was a brilliant new weapon."

"What about the guy in the ocean?"

"He got the blueprints from the guy he was blackmailing," I said. "Piece by piece, over a long period of time. We were watching him. We knew exactly what he was doing. He was aiming to sell them to Iraqi Intelligence. The Iraqis wanted to level the playing field for the next time around. The U.S. Army didn't want that to happen."

Eliot stared at me. "So they had the guy killed?"

I shook my head. "We sent a couple of MPs down to arrest him. Standard operating procedure, all legal and aboveboard, believe me. But it went wrong. He got away. He was going to disappear. The U.S. Army *really* didn't want that to happen."

“So *then* they had him killed?”

I looked up at the sky again. Didn’t answer.

“That wasn’t standard procedure,” Eliot said. “Was it?”

I said nothing.

“It was off the books,” he said. “Wasn’t it?”

I didn’t answer.

“But he didn’t die,” Duffy said. “What was his name?”

“Quinn,” I said. “Turned out to be the single worst guy I ever met.”

“And you saw him in Beck’s car on Saturday?”

I nodded. “He was being chauffeured away from Symphony Hall.”

I gave them all the details I had. But as I talked we all knew the information was useless. It was inconceivable that Quinn would be using his previous identity. So all I had to offer was a physical description of a plain-looking white man about fifty years old with two .22 GSW scars on his forehead. Better than nothing, but it didn’t really get them anywhere.

“Why didn’t his prints match?” Eliot asked.

“He was erased,” I said. “Like he never existed.”

“Why didn’t he die?”

“Silenced .22,” I said. “Our standard issue weapon for covert close work. But not a very powerful weapon.”

“Is he still dangerous?”

“Not to the army,” I said. “He’s ancient history. This all was ten years ago. The APFSDS will be in the museum soon. So will the Abrams tank.”

AH-1SDS will be in the museum soon. So will the Abrams tank.

“So why try to trace him?”

“Because depending on exactly what he remembers he could be dangerous to the guy who went to take him out.”

Eliot nodded. Said nothing.

“Did he look important?” Duffy asked. “On Saturday? In Beck’s car?”

“He looked wealthy,” I said. “Expensive cashmere overcoat, leather gloves, silk scarf. He looked like a guy who was accustomed to being chauffeured around. He just jumped right in, like he did it all the time.”

“Did he greet the driver?”

“I don’t know.”

“We need to place him,” she said. “We need context. How did he act? He was using Beck’s car, but did he look entitled? Or like somebody was doing him a favor?”

“He looked entitled,” I said. “Like he uses it every day of the week.”

“So is he Beck’s equal?”

I shrugged. “He could be Beck’s boss.”

“Partner at best,” Eliot said. “Our LA guy wouldn’t travel to meet with an underling.”

“I don’t see Quinn as somebody’s partner,” I said.

“What was he like?”

“Normal,” I said. “For an intelligence officer. In most ways.”

“Except for the espionage,” Eliot said.

“Yes,” I said. “Except for that.”

“And whatever got him killed off the books.”

“That too.”

Duffy had gone quiet. She was thinking hard. I was pretty sure she was thinking of ways she could use me. And I didn’t mind at all.

“Will you stay in Boston?” she asked. “Where we can find you?”

I said I would, and they left, and that was the end of day five.

I found a scalper in a sports bar and spent most of days six and seven at Fenway Park watching the Red Sox struggling through an early-season homestand. The Friday game went seventeen innings and ended very late. So I slept most of day eight and then went back to Symphony Hall at night to watch the crowd. Maybe Quinn had season tickets to a concert series. But he didn’t show. I replayed in my mind the way he had glanced at me. It might have been just that rueful crowded-sidewalk thing. But it might have been more.

Susan Duffy called me again on the morning of day nine, Sunday. She sounded different. She sounded like a person who had done a lot more thinking. She sounded like a person with a plan.

“Hotel lobby at noon,” she said.

She showed up in a car. Alone. The car was a Taurus built down to a very plain specification. It was grimy inside. A government vehicle. She was wearing faded denim jeans with good shoes and a battered leather jacket. Her hair was newly washed and combed back from her forehead. I got in on the passenger side and she crossed six lanes of traffic and drove straight into the mouth of a tunnel that led to the Mass Pike.

“Zachary Beck has a son,” she said.

She took an underground curve fast and the tunnel ended and we came out into the weak midday April light, right behind Fenway.

“He’s a college junior,” she said. “Some small no-account liberal-arts place, not

too far from here, as it happens. We talked to a classmate in exchange for burying a cannabis problem. The son is called Richard Beck. Not a popular person, a little strange. Seems very traumatized by something that happened about five years ago."

"What kind of something?"

"He was kidnapped."

I said nothing.

"You see?" Duffy said. "You know how often regular people get kidnapped these days?"

"No," I said.

"Doesn't happen," she said. "It's an extinct crime. So it must have been a turf war thing. It's practically proof his dad's a racketeer."

"That's a stretch."

"OK, but it's very persuasive. And it was never reported. FBI has no record of it. Whatever happened was handled privately. And not very well. The classmate says Richard Beck is missing an ear."

"So?"

She didn't answer. She just drove west. I stretched out on the passenger seat and watched her out of the corner of my eye. She looked good. She was long and lean and pretty, and she had life in her eyes. She was wearing no makeup. She was one of those women who absolutely didn't need to. I was very happy to let her drive me around. But she wasn't just driving me around. She was taking me somewhere. That was clear. She had come with a plan.

"I studied your whole service record," she said. "In great detail. You're an impressive guy."

"Not really," I said.

"And you've got big feet," she said. "That's good, too."

“Why?”

“You’ll see,” she said.

“Tell me,” I said.

“We’re very alike,” she said. “You and me. We have something in common. I want to get close to Zachary Beck to get my agent back. You want to get close to him to find Quinn.”

“Your agent is dead. Eight weeks now, it would be a miracle. You should face it.”

She said nothing.

“And I don’t care about Quinn.”

She glanced right and shook her head.

“You do,” she said. “You really do. I can see that from here. It’s eating you up. He’s unfinished business. And my guess is you’re the sort of guy who hates unfinished business.” Then she paused for a second. “And I’m proceeding on the assumption that my agent is still alive, unless and until you supply definitive proof to the contrary.”

“Me?” I said.

“I can’t use one of my people,” she said. “You understand that, right? This whole thing is illegal as far as the Justice Department is concerned. So whatever I do next has to stay off the books. And my guess is you’re the sort of guy who understands off-the-books operations. And is comfortable with them. Even prefers them, maybe.”

“So?”

“I need to get somebody inside Beck’s place. And I’ve decided it’s going to be you. You’re going to be my very own long-rod penetrator.”

“How?”

“Richard Beck is going to take you there.”

She came off the pike about forty miles west of Boston and turned north into the Massachusetts countryside. We passed through picture-perfect New England villages. Fire departments were out on the curbs polishing their trucks. Birds were singing. People were putting stuff on their lawns and pruning their bushes. There was the smell of woodsmoke in the air.

We stopped at a motel in the middle of nowhere. It was an immaculate place with quiet brick facings and blinding white trim. There were five cars in the lot. They were blocking access to the five end rooms. They were all government vehicles. Steven Eliot was waiting in the middle room with five men. They had hauled their desk chairs in from their own rooms. They were sitting in a neat semicircle. Duffy led me inside and nodded to Eliot. I figured it was a nod that meant: *I told him, and he hasn't said no. Yet.* She moved to the window and turned so that she faced the room. The daylight was bright behind her. It made her hard to see. She cleared her throat. The room went quiet.

"OK, listen up, people," she said. "One more time, this is off the books, this is not officially sanctioned, and this will be done on our own time and at our own risk. Anybody wants out, just leave now."

Nobody moved. Nobody left. It was a smart tactic. It showed me she and Eliot had at least five guys who would follow them to hell and back.

"We have less than forty-eight hours," she said. "Day after tomorrow Richard Beck heads home for his mother's birthday. Our source says he does it every year. Cuts classes and all. His father sends a car with two pro bodyguards because the kid is terrified of a repeat abduction. We're going to exploit that fear. We're going to take down the bodyguards and kidnap him."

She paused. Nobody spoke.

"Our aim is to get into Zachary Beck's house," she said. "We can assume the supposed kidnappers themselves wouldn't exactly be welcome there. So what will happen is that Reacher will immediately rescue the kid *from* the supposed kidnappers. It will be a tight sequence, kidnap, rescue, like that. The kid comes over all grateful and Reacher is greeted like a hero around the family hearth."

People sat quiet at first. Then they stirred. The plan was so full of holes it made a Swiss cheese look solid. I stared straight at Duffy. Then I found myself staring out the window. *There were ways of plugging the holes.* I felt my brain start to move. I wondered how many of the holes Duffy had already spotted. I wondered how many of the answers she had already gotten. I wondered how she knew I loved stuff like this.

“We have an audience of one,” she said. “All that matters is what Richard Beck thinks. The whole thing will be phony from beginning to end, but he’s got to be absolutely convinced it’s real.”

Eliot looked at me. “Weaknesses?”

“Two,” I said. “First, how do you take the bodyguards down without really hurting them? I assume you’re not *that* far off the books.”

“Speed, shock, surprise,” he said. “The kidnap team will have machine pistols with plenty of blank ammunition. Plus a stun grenade. Soon as the kid is out of the car, we toss a flashbang in. Lots of sound and fury. They’ll be dazed, nothing more. But the kid will assume they’re hamburger meat.”

“OK,” I said. “But second, this whole thing is like method acting, right? I’m some kind of a passerby, and coincidentally I’m the type of guy who can rescue him. Which makes me smart and capable. So why wouldn’t I just haul his ass around to the nearest cops? Or wait for the cops to come to us? Why wouldn’t I stick around and give evidence and make all kinds of witness statements? Why would I want to immediately drive him all the way home?”

Eliot turned to Duffy.

“He’ll be terrified,” she said. “He’ll want you to.”

“But why would I agree? It doesn’t matter what he wants. What matters is what is logical for me to do. Because we don’t have an audience of one. We have an audience of *two.* Richard Beck and Zachary Beck. Richard Beck there and then, and Zachary Beck later. He’ll be looking at it in retrospect. We’ve got to convince him just as much.”

“The kid might ask you not to go to the cops. Like last time.”

“But why would I listen to him? If I was Mr. Normal the cops would be the first

"But why would I listen to him? If I was Mr. Normal the cops would be the first thing on my mind. I'd want to do everything strictly by the book."

"He would argue with you."

"And I would ignore him. Why would a smart and capable adult listen to a crazy kid? It's a hole. It's too cooperative, too purposeful, too phony. Too *direct.* Zachary Beck would rumble it in a minute."

"Maybe you get him in a car and you're being chased."

"I'd drive straight to a police station."

"Shit," Duffy said.

"It's a plan," I said. "But we need to get real."

I looked out of the window again. It was bright out there. I saw a lot of green stuff. Trees, bushes, distant wooded hillsides dusted with new leaves. In the corner of my eye I saw Eliot and Duffy looking down at the floor of the room. Saw the five guys sitting still. They looked like a capable bunch. Two of them were a little younger than me, tall and fair. Two were about my age, plain and ordinary. One was a lot older, stooped and gray. I thought long and hard. Kidnap, rescue, Beck's house. *I need to be in Beck's house. I really do. Because I need to find Quinn. Think about the long game.* I looked at the whole thing from the kid's point of view. Then I looked at it again, from his father's point of view.

"It's a plan," I said again. "But it needs perfecting. So I need to be the sort of person who wouldn't go to the cops." Then I paused. "No, better still, right in front of Richard Beck's eyes, I need to *become* the sort of person who *can't* go to the cops."

"How?" Duffy said.

I looked straight at her. "I'll have to hurt somebody. By accident, in the confusion. Another passerby. Some innocent party. Some kind of ambiguous circumstance. Maybe I run somebody over. Some old lady walking her dog. Maybe I even kill her. I panic and I run."

"Too difficult to stage," she said. "And not really enough to make you run,

anyway. I mean, accidents happen, in circumstances like these."

I nodded. The room stayed quiet. I closed my eyes and thought some more and saw the beginnings of a sketchy scene take shape right there in my mind.

"OK," I said. "How about this? I'll kill a cop. By accident."

Nobody spoke. I opened my eyes.

"It's a grand slam," I said. "You see that? It's totally perfect. It puts Zachary Beck's mind at rest about why I didn't act normally and *go* to the cops. You don't go to the cops if you've just killed one of their own, even if it's an accident. He'll understand that. And it'll give me a reason to stay on at his house afterward. Which I'll need to do. He'll think I'm in hiding. He'll be grateful about the rescue and he's a criminal anyway so his conscience won't get in his way."

There were no objections. Just silence, and then a slow indefinable murmur of assessment, agreement, consent. I scoped it out, beginning to end. *Think about the long game.* I smiled.

"And it gets better," I said. "He might even hire me. In fact I think he'll be very *tempted* to hire me. Because we're creating the illusion that his family's suddenly under attack and he'll be down by two bodyguards and he'll know I'm better than they were anyway because they lost and I didn't. And he'll be happy to hire me because as long as he thinks I'm a cop-killer and he's sheltering me he'll think he *owns* me."

Duffy smiled, too.

"So let's go to work," she said. "We've got less than forty-eight hours."

The two younger guys were tagged as the kidnap team. We decided they would be driving a Toyota pickup from the DEA's stock of impounded vehicles. They would be using confiscated Uzis filled with nine-millimeter blanks. They would have a stun grenade filched from the DEA SWAT stores. Then we started to rehearse my role as the rescuer. Like all good scam artists we decided I should stick as close to the truth as possible, so I would be an ex-military drifter, in the

stick as close to the truth as possible, so I would be an ex-military driver, in the right place at the right time. I would be armed, which in the circumstances would be technically illegal in Massachusetts, but which would be in character and plausible.

“I need a big old-fashioned revolver,” I said. “I have to be carrying something appropriate for a citizen. And the whole thing has to be a big drama, beginning to end. The Toyota comes at me, I need to disable it. I need to shoot it up. So I need three real bullets and three blanks, in strict sequence. The three real bullets for the truck, the three blanks for the people.”

“We could load any gun like that,” Eliot said.

“But I’ll need to see the chambers,” I said. “Right before I fire. I won’t fire a mixed load without a visual check. I need to know I’m starting in the right place. So I need a revolver. A big one, not some small thing, so I can see clearly.”

He saw my point. Made a note. Then we nominated the old guy as the local cop. Duffy proposed he should just blunder into my field of fire.

“No,” I said. “It has to be the right kind of mistake. Not just a careless shot. Beck senior needs to be impressed with me in the right kind of way. I need to do it deliberately, but recklessly. Like I’m a madman, but a madman who can shoot.”

Duffy agreed and Eliot thought through a mental list of available vehicles and offered me an old panel van. Said I could be a delivery guy. Said it would give me a legitimate reason to be hanging out on the street. We made lists, on paper and in our heads. The two guys my age were sitting there without an assigned task, and they were unhappy about it.

“You’re backup cops,” I said. “Suppose the kid doesn’t even see me shoot the first one? He might have fainted or something. You need to chase us in a car, and I’ll take you out when I’m certain he’s watching.”

“Can’t have backup cops,” the old guy said. “I mean, what’s going on here? Suddenly the whole place is swarming with cops for no good reason?”

“College cops,” Duffy said. “You know, those rent-a-cop guys colleges have? They just happen to be there. I mean, where else would you find them?”

“Excellent,” I said. “They can start from right inside the campus. They can control the whole thing by radio from the rear.”

“How will you take them out?” Eliot asked me, like it was an issue.

I nodded. I saw the problem. I would have fired six shots by then.

“I can’t reload,” I said. “Not while I’m driving. Not with blanks. The kid might notice.”

“Can you ram them? Force them off the road?”

“Not in a crummy old van. I’ll have to have a second revolver. Preloaded, waiting inside the van. In the glove compartment, maybe.”

“You’re running around with two six-shooters?” the old guy said. “That’s a little odd, in Massachusetts.”

I nodded. “It’s a weak point. We’re going to have to risk a few.”

“So I should be in plain clothes,” the old guy said. “Like a detective. Shooting at a uniformed cop is beyond reckless. That would be a weak point, too.”

“OK,” I said. “Agreed. Excellent. You’re a detective, and you pull out your badge, and I think it’s a gun. That happens.”

“But how do we die?” the old guy asked. “We just clutch our stomachs and fall over, like an old Wild West show?”

“That’s not convincing,” Eliot said. “This whole thing has got to look exactly right. For Richard Beck’s sake.”

“We need Hollywood stuff,” Duffy said. “Kevlar vests and condoms filled with fake blood that explode off of a radio signal.”

“Can we get it?”

“From New York or Boston, maybe.”

“We’re tight for time.”

“Tell me about it,” Duffy said.

¨Tell me about it,´ Duffy said.

That was the end of day nine. Duffy wanted me to move into the motel and offered to have somebody drive me back to my Boston hotel for my luggage. I told her I didn't have any luggage and she looked at me sideways but didn't say anything. I took a room next to the old guy. Somebody drove out and got pizza. Everybody was running around and making phone calls. They left me alone. I lay on my bed and thought the whole thing through again, beginning to end, from my point of view. I made a list in my head of all the things we hadn't considered. It was a long list. But there was one item bothering me above all. Not exactly *on* the list. Kind of parallel to it. I got off my bed and went to find Duffy. She was out in the lot, hurrying back to her room from her car.

"Zachary Beck isn't the story here," I told her. "He can't be. If Quinn's involved, then Quinn's the boss. He wouldn't play second fiddle. Unless Beck is a worse guy than Quinn, and I don't even want to think about that."

"Maybe Quinn changed," she said. "He was shot twice in the head. Maybe that kind of rewired his brains. Diminished him, somehow."

I said nothing. She hurried away. I went back to my room.

Day ten started with the arrival of the vehicles. The old guy got a seven-year-old Chevy Caprice to act as his police unmarked. It was the one with the Corvette motor in it, from the final model year before General Motors stopped making them. It looked just right. The pickup was a big thing painted faded red. It had a bull bar on the front. I saw the younger guys talking about how they would use it. My ride was a plain brown panel van. It was the most anonymous truck I had ever seen. It had no side windows and two small rear windows. I checked inside for a glove compartment. It had one.

"OK?" Eliot asked me.

I slapped its side like van people do and it boomed faintly in response.

"Perfect." I said. "I want the [illegible]

"Perfect," I said. "I want the revolvers to be big .44 Magnums. I want three heavy soft-nosed bullets and nine blanks. Make the blanks as loud as you can get."

"OK," he said. "Why soft-nose?"

"I'm worried about ricochets," I said. "I don't want to hurt anybody by accident. Soft-nose slugs will deform and stick to what they hit. I'm going to fire one into the radiator and two at the tires. I want you to pump the tires way high so they'll explode when I hit them. We've got to make it spectacular."

Eliot hurried away and Duffy came up to me.

"You'll need these," she said. She had a coat and a pair of gloves for me. "You'll look more realistic if you're wearing them. It'll be cold. And the coat will hide the gun."

I took them from her and tried on the coat. It fit pretty well. She was clearly a good judge of sizes.

"The psychology will be tricky," she said. "You're going to have to be flexible. The kid might be catatonic. You might need to coax some reaction out of him. But ideally he'll be awake and talking. In which case I think you need to show a little reluctance about getting yourself more and more involved. Ideally you need to let *him* talk *you* into driving him all the way home. But at the same time you need to be dominant. You need to keep events moving along so he doesn't have time to dwell on exactly what he's seeing."

"OK," I said. "In which case I'm going to change my ammunition requisition. I'm going to make the second bullet in the second gun a real one. I'll tell him to get down on the floor and then I'll blow out the window behind him. He'll think it was the college cops shooting at us. Then I'll tell him to get up again. It'll increase his sense of danger and it'll get him used to doing what I tell him and it'll make him a little happier to watch the college cops get it in the neck. Because I don't want him fighting me, trying to stop me. I might wreck the van and kill both of us."

"In fact you need to bond with him," she said. "He needs to speak well of you, later. Because I agree, getting hired on up there would hit the jackpot. It would give you access. So try to impress the kid. But keep it very subtle. You don't need him to like you. You just need to make him think you're a tough guy who

need him to like you. You just need to make him think you're a tough guy who knows what he's doing."

I went to find Eliot and then the two guys playing the college cops came to find me. We arranged that they would fire blanks at me first, then I would fire one blank at them, then I would shoot out the van's rear window, and then I would fire another blank, and finally I would fire my last three blanks in a spaced group. On the final shot they would blow out their own windshield with a real bullet from one of their own guns and then they would go sliding off the road like they had lost a tire or been hit.

"Don't get confused which load is which," one of them said.

"You either," I said back.

We had more pizza for lunch and then went out to cruise the target area. We parked a mile short and went over a couple of maps. Then we risked three separate passes in two cars right past the college gate. I would have preferred more time to study but we were worried about being conspicuous. We drove back to the motel in silence and regrouped in Eliot's room.

"Looks OK," I said. "Which way will they turn?"

"Maine is north of here," Duffy said. "We can assume he lives somewhere near Portland."

I nodded. "But I think they'll go south. Look at the maps. You get to the highway faster that way. And standard security doctrine is to get on wide busy roads as soon as possible."

"It's a gamble."

"They'll go south," I said.

"Anything else?" Eliot asked.

"I'd be nuts to stick with the van," I said. "Old man Beck will figure if I was doing this for real I'd ditch it and steal a car."

“Where?” Duffy asked.

“The map shows a mall next to the highway.”

“OK, we’ll stash one there.”

“Spare keys under the bumper?” Eliot asked.

Duffy shook her head. “Too phony. We need this whole thing to be absolutely convincing. He’ll have to steal it for real.”

“I don’t know how,” I said. “I’ve never stolen a car.”

The room went quiet.

“All I know is what I learned in the army,” I said. “Military vehicles are never locked. And they don’t have ignition keys. They start off a button.”

“OK,” Eliot said. “No problem is insuperable. We’ll leave it unlocked. But you’ll act like it *is* locked. You’ll pretend to jimmy the door. We’ll leave a load of wire and a bunch of coat hangers nearby. Maybe you could ask the kid to find something for you. Make him feel involved. It’ll help the illusion. Then you screw around with it and, hey, the door pops open. We’ll loosen the shroud on the steering column. We’ll strip the right wires and *only* the right wires. You find them and touch them together and you’re an instant bad guy.”

“Brilliant,” Duffy said.

Eliot smiled. “I do my best.”

“Let’s take a break,” Duffy said. “Start again after dinner.”

The final pieces fell into place after dinner. Two of the guys got back with the last of the equipment. They had a matched pair of Colt Anacondas for me. They were big brutal weapons. They looked expensive. I didn’t ask where they got them from. They came with a box of real .44 Magnums and a box of .44 blanks. The blanks came from a hardware store. They were designed for a heavy-duty nail gun. The sort of thing that punches nails straight into concrete. I opened

each Anaconda cylinder and scratched an *X* against one of the chambers with the tip of a nail scissor. A Colt revolver's cylinder steps around clockwise, which is different from a Smith & Wesson, which rotates counterclockwise. The *X* would represent the first chamber to be fired. I would line it up at the ten o'clock position where I could see it and it would step around and fall under the hammer with the first pull of the trigger.

Duffy brought me a pair of shoes. They were my size. The right one had a cavity carved into the heel. She gave me a wireless e-mail device that fit snugly into the space.

"That's why I'm glad you've got big feet," she said. "Made it easier to fit."

"Is it reliable?"

"It better be. It's new government issue. All departments are doing their concealed communications with it now."

"Great," I said. In my career more foul-ups had been caused by faulty technology than any other single cause.

"It's the best we can do," she said. "They'd find anything else. They're bound to search you. And the theory is if they're scanning for radio transmissions all they'll hear is a brief burst of modem screech. They'll probably think it's static."

They had three blood effects from a New York theatrical costumier. They were big and bulky. Each was a foot-wide square of Kevlar that was to be taped to the victim's chest. They had rubber gore reservoirs and radio receivers and firing charges and batteries.

"Wear loose shirts, guys," Eliot said.

The radio triggers were separate buttons I would have to tape to my right forearm. They were wired to batteries I would have to carry in my inside pocket. The buttons were big enough to feel through my coat and my jacket and my shirt, and I figured I would look OK supporting the Colt's weight with my left hand. We rehearsed the sequence. First, the pickup driver. That button would be nearest my wrist. I would trigger it with my index finger. Second, the pickup passenger. That button would be in the middle. Middle finger. Third, the old guy playing the cop. That button would be nearest my elbow, ring finger.

“You’ll have to lose them afterward,” Eliot said. “They’ll search you for sure at Beck’s house. You’ll have to stop at a men’s room or something and get rid of them.”

We rehearsed endlessly in the motel lot. We laid out the road in miniature. By midnight we were as solid as we were ever going to get. We figured we would need all of eight seconds, beginning to end.

“You have the critical decision,” Duffy said to me. “It’s your call. If there’s anything wrong when the Toyota is coming at you, anything at all, then you abort and you watch it go on by. We’ll clean it up somehow. But you’ll be firing three live rounds in a public place and I don’t want any stray pedestrians getting hit, or cyclists, or joggers. You’ll have less than a second to decide.”

“Understood,” I said, although I really didn’t see any easy way of cleaning it up if it had already gotten that far. Then Eliot took a last couple of phone calls and confirmed they had a college security cruiser on loan and were putting a plausible old Nissan Maxima behind the mall’s flagship department store. The Maxima had been impounded from a small-time marijuana grower in New York State. They still had tough drug laws down there. They were putting phony Massachusetts plates on it and filling it with the kind of junk a department store sales lady might be expected to haul around with her.

“Bed now,” Duffy called. “Big day tomorrow.”

That was the end of day ten.

Duffy brought doughnuts and coffee to my room for breakfast on day eleven, early. Her and me, alone. We went through the whole thing, one last time. She showed me photographs of the agent she had inserted fifty-nine days ago. She was a blonde thirty-year-old who had gotten a clerk’s job with Bizarre Bazaar using the name Teresa Daniel. Teresa Daniel was petite and looked resourceful. I looked hard at the pictures and memorized her features, but it was another woman’s face I was seeing in my mind.

“I’m assuming she’s still alive,” Duffy said. “I have to.”

I said nothing.

I said nothing.

“Try hard to get hired,” she said. “We checked your recent history, the same way Beck might. You come out pretty vague. Plenty missing that would worry me, but I don’t think it would worry him.”

I gave the photographs back to her.

“I’m a shoo-in,” I said. “The illusion reinforces itself. He’s left shorthanded and he’s under attack, all at the same time. But I’m not going to try too hard. In fact I’m going to come across a little reluctant. I think anything else would seem phony.”

“OK,” she said. “You’ve got seven objectives, of which numbers one, two, and three are, take a lot of care. We can assume these are extremely dangerous people.”

I nodded. “We can do more than assume it. If Quinn’s involved, we can absolutely guarantee it.”

“So act accordingly,” she said. “Gloves off, from the start.”

“Yes,” I said. I put my arm across my chest and started massaging my left shoulder with my right hand. Then I stopped myself, surprised. An army psychiatrist once told me that type of unconscious gesture represents feelings of vulnerability. It’s defensive. It’s about covering up and hiding. It’s the first step toward curling yourself into a ball on the floor. Duffy must have read the same books, because she picked up on it and looked straight at me.

“You’re scared of Quinn, aren’t you?” she said.

“I’m not scared of anybody,” I said. “But certainly I preferred it when he was dead.”

“We can cancel,” she said.

I shook my head. “I’d like the chance to find him, believe me.”

“What went wrong with the arrest?”

I shook my head again.

“I won’t talk about that,” I said.

She was quiet for a beat. But she didn’t push it. Just looked away and paused and looked back and started up with the briefing again. Quiet voice, efficient diction.

“Objective number four is find my agent,” she said. “And bring her back to me.”

I nodded.

“Five, bring me solid evidence I can use to nail Beck.”

“OK,” I said.

She paused again. Just a beat. “Six, find Quinn and do whatever you need to do with him. And then seven, get the hell out of there.”

I nodded. Said nothing.

“We won’t tail you,” she said. “The kid might spot us. He’ll be pretty paranoid by then. And we won’t put a homing device on the Nissan, because they’d probably find it later. You’ll have to e-mail us your location, soon as you know it.”

“OK,” I said.

“Weaknesses?” she asked.

I forced my mind away from Quinn.

“Three weaknesses that I can see,” I said. “Two minor and one major. First minor one is that I’m going to blow the back window out of the van but the kid will have about ten minutes to realize the broken glass is in the wrong place and there isn’t a corresponding hole in the windshield.”

“So don’t do it.”

“I think I really need to. I think we need to keep the panic level high.”

“OK, we’ll put a bunch of boxes back there. You should have boxes anyway, if you’re a delivery man. They might obscure his view. If they don’t, just hope he doesn’t put two and two together inside ten minutes.”

I nodded. “And second, old man Beck is going to call the cops down here, sometime, somehow. Maybe the newspapers, too. He’s going to be looking for corroborating information.”

“We’ll give the cops a script to follow. And they’ll give the press something. They’ll play ball for as long as they need to. What’s the major weakness?”

“The bodyguards,” I said. “How long can you hold them? You can’t let them get near a phone, or they’ll call Beck. So you can’t formally arrest them. You can’t put them in the system. You’ll have to hold them incommunicado, completely illegally. How long can you keep that going?”

She shrugged. “Four or five days, tops. We can’t protect you any longer than that. So be real fast.”

“I plan to be,” I said. “How long will the battery last on my e-mail thing?”

“About five days,” she said. “You’ll be out by then. We can’t give you a charger. It would be too suspicious. But you can use a cell phone charger, if you can find one.”

“OK,” I said.

She just looked at me. There was nothing more to say. Then she moved close and kissed me on the cheek. It was sudden. Her lips were soft. They left a dusting of doughnut sugar on my skin.

“Good luck,” she said. “I don’t think we’ve missed anything.”

But we had missed a lot of things. They were glaring errors in our thinking and they all came back to haunt me.

CHAPTER 3

Duke the bodyguard came back to my room five minutes before seven in the evening, which was way too early for dinner. I heard his footsteps outside and a quiet click as the lock turned. I was sitting on the bed. The e-mail device was back in my shoe and my shoe was back on my foot.

“Get a nap, asshole?” he asked.

“Why am I locked up?” I asked back.

“Because you’re a cop-killer,” he said.

I looked away. Maybe he had been a cop himself, before he went private. Lots of ex-cops wind up in the security business, as consultants or private eyes or bodyguards. Certainly he had some kind of an agenda, which could be a problem for me. But it meant he was buying Richard Beck’s story without question, which was the upside. He looked at me for a second with nothing much in his face. Then he led me out of the room and down the two flights of stairs to the ground floor and through dark passageways toward the side of the house that faced north. I could smell salt air and damp carpet. There were rugs everywhere. Some places they were laid two-deep on the floor. They glowed with muted colors. He stopped in front of a door and pushed it open and stepped back so I was channeled into a room. It was large and square and paneled with dark oak. Rugs all over the floor. There were small windows in deep recesses. Darkness and rock and gray ocean outside. There was an oak table. My two Colt Anacondas were lying on it, unloaded. Their cylinders were open. There was a man at the head of the table. He was sitting in an oak chair with arms and a tall back. He was the guy from Susan Duffy’s surveillance photographs.

In the flesh he was mostly unremarkable. Not big, not small. Maybe six feet, maybe two hundred pounds. Gray hair, not thin, not thick, not short, not long. He was about fifty. He was wearing a gray suit made out of expensive cloth cut without any attempt at style. His shirt was white and his tie was no color at all, like gasoline. His hands and face were pale, like his natural habitat was underground parking garages at night, hawking samples of something from his Cadillac’s trunk.

Cadillac's trunk.

“Sit down,” he said. His voice was quiet and strained, like it was all high up in his throat. I sat opposite him at the far end of the table.

“I’m Zachary Beck,” he said.

“Jack Reacher,” I said.

Duke closed the door gently and leaned his bulk against it from the inside. The room went quiet. I could hear the ocean. It wasn’t a rhythmic wave sound like you hear at the beach. It was a continuous random crashing and sucking of surf on the rocks. I could hear pools draining and gravel rattling and breakers coming in like explosions. I tried to count them. People say every seventh wave is a big one.

“So,” Beck said. He had a drink on the table in front of him. Some kind of amber liquid in a short heavy glass. Oily, like scotch or bourbon. He nodded to Duke. Duke picked up a second glass. It had been waiting there for me on a side table. It had the same oily amber liquid in it. He carried it awkwardly with his finger and thumb right down at the base. He walked across the room and bent a little to place it carefully in front of me. I smiled. I knew what it was for.

“So,” Beck said again.

I waited.

“My son explained your predicament,” he said. It was the same phrase his wife had used.

“The law of unintended consequences,” I said.

“It presents me with difficulties,” he said. “I’m just an ordinary businessman, trying to work out where my responsibilities lie.”

I waited.

“We’re grateful, naturally,” he said. “Please don’t misunderstand that.”

“But?”

“There are legal issues, aren’t there?” He said it with a little annoyance in his

"There are legal issues, aren't there?" He said it with a little annoyance in his voice, like he was being victimized by complexities beyond his control.

"It's not rocket science," I said. "I need you to turn a blind eye. At least temporarily. Like one good turn deserves another. If your conscience can accommodate that kind of a thing."

The room went quiet again. I listened to the ocean. I could hear a full spectrum of sounds out there. I could hear brittle seaweed dragging on granite and a drawn-out undertow sucking backward toward the east. Zachary Beck's gaze was moving all over the place. He was looking at the table, then at the floor, then into space. His face was narrow. Not much of a jaw. His eyes were set fairly close together. His brow was lined with concentration. His lips were thin and his mouth was pursed. His head was moving a little. The whole thing was a reasonable facsimile of an ordinary businessman struggling with weighty issues.

"Was it a mistake?" he asked.

"The cop?" I said. "In retrospect, obviously. At the time, I was just trying to get the job done."

He spent a little more time thinking, and then he nodded.

"OK," he said. "In the circumstances, we might be willing to help you out. If we can. You did a great service for the family."

"I need money," I said.

"Why?"

"I'm going to need to travel."

"When?"

"Right now."

"Is that wise?"

"Not really. I'd prefer to wait here a couple of days until the initial panic is over. But I don't want to push my luck with you."

"How much money?"

"How much money?"

"Five thousand dollars might do it."

He said nothing to that. Just started up with the gazing thing again. This time, there was a little more focus in his eyes.

"I've got some questions for you," he said. "Before you leave us. *If* you leave us. Two issues are paramount. First, who were they?"

"Don't you know?"

"I have many rivals and enemies."

"That would go this far?"

"I'm a rug importer," he said. "I didn't intend to be, but that's the way things worked out. Possibly you think I just deal with department stores and interior decorators, but the reality is I deal with all kinds of unsavory characters in various foreign hellholes where enslaved children are forced to work eighteen-hour days until their fingers bleed. Their owners are all convinced I'm ripping them off and raping their cultures, and the truth is I probably am, although no more than they are. They aren't fun companions. I need a certain toughness to prosper. And the point is, so do my competitors. This is a tough business all around. So between my suppliers and my competitors I can think of half a dozen separate people who would kidnap my son to get at me. After all, one of them *did,* five years ago, as I'm sure my son told you."

I said nothing.

"I need to know who they were," he said, like he really meant it. So I paused a beat and recounted the whole event for him, second by second, yard by yard, mile by mile. I described the two tall fair-haired DEA guys in the Toyota accurately and in great detail.

"They mean nothing to me," he said.

I didn't answer.

"Did you get the Toyota's license plate?" he asked.

I thought back and told him the truth.

“I only saw the front,” I said. “There was no plate.”

“OK,” he said. “So they were from a state that doesn’t require a front license plate. That narrows it down a little, I guess.”

I said nothing. A long moment later he shook his head.

“Information is in very short supply,” he said. “An associate of mine contacted the police department down there, in a roundabout way. One town cop is dead, one college cop is dead, two unexplained strangers in a Lincoln Town Car are dead, and two unexplained strangers in a Toyota pickup truck are dead. The only surviving eyewitness is a second college cop, and he’s still unconscious after a car wreck nearly five miles away. So right now nobody knows what happened. Nobody knows why it happened. Nobody has made a connection to an attempted kidnap. All anybody knows is there was a bloodbath down there for no apparent reason. They’re speculating about gang warfare.”

“What happens when they run the Lincoln’s plate?” I asked.

He hesitated.

“It’s a corporate registration,” he said. “It doesn’t lead directly here.”

I nodded. “OK, but I want to be on the West Coast before that other college cop wakes up. He got a good look at me.”

“And I want to know who stepped out of line here.”

I glanced at the Anacondas on the table. They had been cleaned and lightly oiled. I was suddenly very glad I had ditched the spent shells. I picked up my glass. Wrapped my thumb and all four fingers around it and sniffed the contents. I had no idea what they were. I would have preferred a cup of coffee. I put the glass back on the table.

“Is Richard OK?” I asked.

“He’ll live,” Beck said. “I’d like to know who exactly is attacking me.”

“I told you what I saw,” I said. “They didn’t show me ID. They weren’t known

to me personally. I just happened to be there. What's your second paramount issue?"

There was another pause. The surf crashed and boomed outside the windows.

"I'm a cautious man," Beck said. "And I don't want to offend you."

"But?"

"But I'm wondering who you are, exactly."

"I'm the guy who saved your boy's other ear," I said.

Beck glanced at Duke, who stepped forward smartly and took my glass away. He used the same awkward pincer movement with his thumb and his index finger, right down at the base.

"And now you've got my fingerprints," I said. "Nice and clear."

Beck nodded again, like a guy making a judicious decision. He pointed at the guns, where they lay on the table.

"Nice weapons," he said.

I said nothing back. He moved his hand and nudged one of them with his knuckles. Then he sent it sliding across the wood toward me. The heavy steel made a hollow reverberant sound on the oak.

"You want to tell me why there's a mark scratched against one of the chambers?"

I listened to the ocean.

"I don't know why," I said. "They came to me like that."

"You bought them used?"

"In Arizona," I said.

"From a gun store?"

"F[illegible]" I said.

"From a gun show," I said.

"Why?"

"I don't like background checks," I said.

"Didn't you ask about the scratches?"

"I assumed they were reference marks," I said. "I assumed some gun nut had tested them and marked the most accurate chamber. Or the least accurate."

"Chambers differ?"

"Everything differs," I said. "That's the nature of manufacturing."

"Even with eight-hundred-dollar revolvers?"

"Depends on how discriminating you want to be. You feel the need to measure down to the hundred-thousandths of an inch, then everything in the world is different."

"Does it matter?"

"Not to me," I said. "I point a gun at somebody, I don't care which individual blood cell I'm targeting."

He sat quiet for a moment. Then he went into his pocket and came out with a bullet. Shiny brass case, dull lead point. He stood it upright in front of him like a miniature artillery shell. Then he knocked it over and rolled it under his fingers on the table. Then he placed it carefully and flicked it with his fingertip so that it rolled all the way along to me. It came in a wide graceful curve. It made a slow droning sound on the wood. I let it roll off the end of the table and caught it in my hand. It was an unjacketed Remington .44 Magnum. Heavy, probably more than three hundred grains. It was a brutal thing. Probably cost the best part of a dollar. It was warm from his pocket.

"You ever played Russian roulette?" he asked.

"I need to get rid of the car I stole," I said.

"We've already gotten rid of it," he said.

“Where?”

“Where it won’t be found.”

He went quiet. I said nothing. Just looked at him, like I was thinking *Is that the sort of thing an ordinary businessman does*? As well as registering his limousines through shell corporations? And instantly recalling the retail on a Colt Anaconda? And trapping a guest’s prints on a whiskey tumbler?

“You ever played Russian roulette?” he asked again.

“No,” I said. “I never did.”

“I’m under attack,” he said. “And I just lost two guys. Time like this I need to be adding guys, not losing them.”

I waited, five seconds, ten. I made out like I was struggling with the concept.

“You asking to hire me?” I said. “I’m not sure I can stick around.”

“I’m not asking anything,” he said. “I’m deciding. You look like a useful guy. You could have that five thousand dollars to stay, not to go. Maybe.”

I said nothing.

“Hey, if I want you, I’ve got you,” he said. “There’s a dead cop down in Massachusetts and I’ve got your name and I’ve got your prints.”

“But?”

“But I don’t know who you are.”

“Get used to it,” I said. “How do you know who anybody is?”

“I find out. I test people. Suppose I asked you to kill another cop? As a gesture of good faith?”

“I’d say no. I’d repeat that the first one was an unfortunate accident I regret very much. And I’d start wondering about what kind of an ordinary businessman you really are.”

“My business is my business. It needn’t concern you.”

I said nothing.

“Play Russian roulette with me,” he said.

“What would that prove?”

“A federal agent wouldn’t do it.”

“Why are you worried about federal agents?”

“That needn’t concern you, either.”

“I’m not a federal agent,” I said.

“So prove it. Play Russian roulette with me. I mean, I’m already playing Russian roulette with you, in a manner of speaking, just letting you into my house without knowing exactly who you are.”

“I saved your son.”

“And I’m very grateful for that. Grateful enough that I’m still talking to you in a civilized manner. Grateful enough that I might yet offer you sanctuary and employment. Because I like a man who gets the job done.”

“I’m not looking for work,” I said. “I’m looking to hide out for maybe forty-eight hours and then move on.”

“We’d look after you. Nobody would ever find you. You’d be completely safe here. If you pass the test.”

“Russian roulette is the test?”

“The infallible test,” he said. “In my experience.”

I said nothing. The room was silent. He leaned forward in his chair.

“You’re either with me or against me,” he said. “Either way, you’re about to prove it. I sincerely hope you choose wisely.”

Duke moved against the door. The floor creaked under his feet. I listened to the

Duke moved against the door. The floor creaked under his feet. I listened to the ocean. Spray smashed upward and the wind whipped it and heavy foam drops arced lazily through the air and tapped against the window glass. The seventh wave came booming in, heavier than the others. I picked up the Anaconda in front of me. Duke pulled a gun out from under his jacket and pointed it at me in case I had something other than roulette on my mind. He had a Steyr SPP, which is most of a Steyr TMP submachine gun cut down into pistol form. It's a rare piece from Austria and it was big and ugly in his hand. I looked away from it and concentrated on the Colt. I thumbed the bullet into a random chamber and closed the cylinder and spun it free. The ratchet purred in the silence.

"Play," Beck said.

I spun the cylinder again and raised the revolver and touched the muzzle to my temple. The steel was cold. I looked Beck straight in the eye and held my breath and eased the trigger back. The cylinder turned and the hammer cocked. The action was smooth, like silk rubbing on silk. I pulled the trigger all the way. The hammer fell. There was a loud click. I felt the smack of the hammer pulse all the way through the steel to the side of my head. But I felt nothing else. I breathed out and lowered the gun and held it with the back of my hand resting on the table. Then I turned my hand over and pulled my finger out of the trigger guard.

"Your turn," I said.

"I just wanted to see you do it," he said.

I smiled.

"You want to see me do it again?" I said.

Beck said nothing. I picked up the gun again and spun the cylinder and let it slow and stop. Raised the muzzle to my head. The barrel was so long my elbow was forced up and out. I pulled the trigger, fast and decisive. There was a loud click in the silence. It was the sound of an eight-hundred-dollar piece of precision machinery working exactly the way it should. I lowered the gun and spun the cylinder a third time. Raised the gun. Pulled the trigger. Nothing. I did it a fourth time, fast. Nothing. I did it a fifth time, faster. Nothing.

"OK," Beck said.

"Tell me about Oriental rugs," I said.

“Nothing much to tell,” he said. “They go on the floor. People buy them. Sometimes for a lot of money.”

I smiled. Raised the gun again.

“Odds are six to one,” I said. I spun the cylinder a sixth time. The room went completely silent. I put the gun to my head. Pulled the trigger. I felt the smack of the hammer falling on an empty chamber. Nothing else.

“Enough,” Beck said.

I lowered the Colt and cracked the cylinder and dumped the bullet out on the table. Lined it up carefully and rolled it all the way back to him. It droned on the wood. He stopped it with the heel of his hand and sat there and said nothing for two or three minutes. He was looking at me like I was an animal in a zoo. Like maybe he wished there were some bars between him and me.

“Richard tells me you were a military cop,” he said.

“Thirteen years,” I said.

“Were you good?”

“Better than those bozos you sent to pick him up.”

“He speaks well of you.”

“So he should,” I said. “I saved his ass. At considerable cost to myself.”

“You going to be missed anywhere?”

“No.”

“Family?”

“Haven’t got any.”

“Job?”

“I can’t go back to it now,” I said. “Can I?”

He played with the bullet for a moment, rolling it under the pad of his index finger. Then he scooped it up into his palm.

“Who can I call?” he said.

“For what?”

He jiggled the bullet in his palm, like shaking dice.

“An employment recommendation,” he said. “You had a boss, right?”

Mistakes, coming back to haunt me.

“Self-employed,” I said.

He put the bullet back on the table.

“Licensed and insured?” he said.

I paused a beat.

“Not exactly,” I said.

“Why not?”

“Reasons,” I said.

“Got a registration for your truck?”

“I might have mislaid it.”

He rolled the bullet under his fingers. Gazed at me. I could see him thinking. He was running things through his head. Processing information. Trying to make it fit with his own preconceptions. I willed him onward. *An armed tough guy with an old panel van that doesn’t belong to him. A car thief. A cop-killer.* He smiled.

“Used records,” he said. “I’ve seen that store.”

I said nothing. Just looked him in the eye.

“Let me take a guess,” he said. “You were fencing stolen CDs.”

His type of guy. I shook my head.

“Bootlegs,” I said. “I’m not a thief. I’m ex-military, trying to scrape a living. And I believe in free expression.”

“Like hell,” he said. “You believe in making a buck.”

His type of guy.

“That too,” I said.

“Were you doing well?”

“Well enough.”

He scooped the bullet into his palm again and tossed it to Duke. Duke caught it one-handed and dropped it into his jacket pocket.

“Duke is my head of security,” Beck said. “You’ll work for him, effective immediately.”

I glanced at Duke, than back at Beck.

“Suppose I don’t want to work for him?” I said.

“You have no choice. There’s a dead cop down in Massachusetts, and we have your name and your prints. You’ll be on probation, until we get a feel for exactly what kind of a person you are. But look on the bright side. Think about five thousand dollars. That’s a lot of bootleg CDs.”

The difference between being an honored guest and a probationary employee was that I ate dinner in the kitchen with the other help. The giant from the gatehouse lodge didn’t show, but there was Duke and one other guy I took to be some kind of an all-purpose mechanic or handyman. There was a maid and a cook. The five of us sat around a plain deal table and had a meal just as good as the family was getting in the dining room. Maybe better, because maybe the cook had spat in theirs, and I doubted if she would spit in ours. I had spent enough time around grunts and NCOs to know how they do things.

There wasn’t much conversation. The cook was a sour woman of maybe sixty. The maid was timid. I got the impression she was fairly new. She was unsure about how to conduct herself. She was young and plain. She was wearing a cotton shift and a wool cardigan. She had clunky flat shoes on. The mechanic was a middle-aged guy, thin, gray, quiet. Duke was quiet too, because he was thinking. Beck had handed him a problem and he wasn’t sure how he should deal with it. Could he use me? Could he trust me? He wasn’t stupid. That was clear. He saw all the angles and he was prepared to spend a little time examining them. He was around my age. Maybe a little younger, maybe a little older. He had one of those hard ugly corn-fed faces that hides age well. He was about my size. I probably had heavier bones, he was probably a little bulkier. We probably weighed within a pound or two of each other. I sat next to him and ate my food and tried to time it right with the kind of questions a normal person would be expected to ask.

“So tell me about the rug business,” I said, with enough tone in my voice that he knew I was saying I assumed Beck was into something else entirely.

“Not now,” he said, like he meant *not in front of the help.* And then he looked at me in a way that had to mean *anyway I’m not sure I want to be talking to a guy crazy enough to chance shooting himself in the head six straight times.*

“The bullet was a fake, right?” I said.

“What?”

“No powder in it,” I said. “Probably just cotton wadding.”

“Why would it be a fake?”

“I could have shot him with it.”

“Why would you want to do that?”

“I wouldn’t, but he’s a cautious guy. He wouldn’t take the risk.”

“I was covering you.”

“I could have gotten you first. Used your gun on him.”

He stiffened a little, but he didn't say anything. *Competitive*. I didn't like him very much. Which was OK with me, because I guessed he was going to wind up as a casualty before too long.

"Hold this," he said.

He took the bullet out of his pocket and handed it to me.

"Wait there," he said.

He got up off his chair and walked out of the kitchen. I stood the bullet upright in front of me, just like Beck had. I finished up my meal. There was no dessert. No coffee. Duke came back with one of my Anacondas swinging from his trigger finger. He walked past me to the back door and nodded me over to join him. I picked the bullet up and clamped it in my palm. Followed him. The back door beeped as we passed through it. Another metal detector. It was neatly integrated into the frame. But there was no burglar alarm. Their security depended on the sea and the wall and the razor wire.

Beyond the back door was a cold damp porch, and then a rickety storm door into the yard, which was nothing more than the tip of the rocky finger. It was a hundred yards wide and semicircular in front of us. It was dark and the lights from the house picked up the grayness of the granite. The wind was blowing and I could see luminescence from the whitecaps out in the ocean. The surf crashed and eddied. There was a moon and low torn clouds moving fast. The horizon was immense and black. The air was cold. I twisted up and back and picked out my room's window way above me.

"Bullet," Duke said.

I turned back and passed it to him.

"Watch," he said.

He loaded it into the Colt. Jerked his hand to snap the cylinder shut. Squinted in the moonlit grayness and clicked the cylinder around until the loaded chamber was at the ten o'clock position.

"Watch," he said again.

He pointed the gun with his arm straight, aiming just below horizontal at the flat granite tables where they met the sea. He pulled the trigger. The cylinder turned and the hammer dropped and the gun kicked and flashed and roared. There was a simultaneous spark on the rocks and an unmistakable metallic *whang* of a ricochet. It feathered away to silence. The bullet probably skipped a hundred yards out into the Atlantic. Maybe it killed a fish.

“It wasn’t a fake,” he said. “I’m fast enough.”

“OK,” I said.

He opened the cylinder and shook the empty shell case out. It clinked on the rocks by his feet.

“You’re an asshole,” he said. “An asshole cop-killer.”

“Were you a cop?”

He nodded. “Once upon a time.”

“Is Duke your first name or your last?”

“Last.”

“Why does a rug importer need armed security?”

“Like he told you, it’s a rough business. There’s a lot of money in it.”

“You really want me here?”

He shrugged. “I might. If somebody’s sniffing around, we might need some cannon fodder. Better you than me.”

“I saved the kid.”

“So what? Get in line. We’ve all saved the kid, one time or another. Or Mrs. Beck, or Mr. Beck himself.”

“How many guys have you got?”

“Not enough,” he said. “Not if we’re under attack.”

“What is this, a war?”

He didn’t answer. Just walked past me toward the house. I turned my back on the restless ocean and followed him.

There was nothing doing in the kitchen. The mechanic had disappeared and the cook and the maid were stacking dishes into a machine large enough to do duty in a restaurant. The maid was all fingers and thumbs. She didn’t know what went where. I looked around for coffee. There still wasn’t any. Duke sat down again at the empty deal table. There was no activity. No urgency. I was aware of time slipping away. I didn’t trust Susan Duffy’s estimate of five days’ grace. Five days is a long time when you’re guarding two healthy individuals off the books. I would have been happier if she had said three days. I would have been more impressed by her sense of realism.

“Go to bed,” Duke said. “You’ll be on duty as of six-thirty in the morning.”

“Doing what?”

“Doing whatever I tell you.”

“Is my door going to be locked?”

“Count on it,” he said. “I’ll unlock it at six-fifteen. Be down here by six-thirty.”

I waited on my bed until I heard him come up after me and lock the door. Then I waited some more until I was sure he wasn’t coming back. Then I took my shoe off and checked for messages. The little device powered up and the tiny green screen was filled with a cheerful italic announcement: *You’ve Got Mail!* There was one item only. It was from Susan Duffy. It was a one-word question: *Location?* I hit *reply* and typed *Abbot, Maine, coast, 20m S of Portland, lone house on long rock finger.* That would have to do. I didn’t have a mailing address or exact GPS coordinates. But she should be able to pin it down if she spent some time with a large-scale map of the area. I hit *send now.*

Then I stared at the screen. I wasn't entirely sure how e-mail worked. Was it instantaneous communication, like a phone call? Or would my reply wait somewhere in limbo before it got to her? I assumed she would be watching for it. I assumed she and Eliot would be spelling each other around the clock.

Ninety seconds later the screen announced *You've Got Mail!* again. I smiled. This might work. This time her message was longer. Only twenty-one words, but I had to scroll down the tiny screen to read it all. It said: *We'll work the maps, thanks. Prints show 2 bodyguards in our custody are ex-army. All under control here. You? Progress?*

I hit *reply* and typed *hired, probably.* Then I thought for a second and pictured Quinn and Teresa Daniel in my mind and added *otherwise no progress yet.* Then I thought some more and typed *re 2 bodyguards ask MP Powell quote 10-29, 10-30, 10-24, 10-36 unquote from me specifically.* Then I hit *send now.* I watched the machine announce *Your message has been sent* and looked away at the darkness outside the window and hoped Powell's generation still spoke the same language mine did. 10-29, 10-30, 10-24, and 10-36 were four standard Military Police radio codes that meant nothing much in themselves. 10-29 stood for *weak signal.* It was a procedural complaint about failing equipment. 10-30 meant *I am requesting nonemergency assistance.* 10-24 meant *suspicious person.* 10-36 meant *please forward my messages.* The 10-30 nonemergency call meant the whole string would attract no attention from anybody. It would be recorded and filed somewhere and ignored for the rest of history. But taken together the string was a kind of underground jargon. At least it used to be, way back when I was in uniform. The *weak signal* part meant *keep this quiet and under the radar.* The request for nonemergency assistance backed it up: *keep this away from the hot files. Suspicious person* was self-explanatory. *Please forward my messages* meant *put me in the loop.* So if Powell was on the ball he would understand the whole thing to mean *check these guys out on the quiet and give me the skinny.* And I hoped he was on the ball, because he owed me. He owed me big time. He had sold me out. My guess was he would be looking for ways to make it up to me.

I looked back at the tiny screen: *You've Got Mail!* It was Duffy, saying *OK, be fast.* I replied *trying* and switched off and nailed the device back into the heel of my shoe. Then I checked the window.

It was a standard two-part sliding thing. The bottom casement would slide upward in front of the top casement. There was no insect screen. The paint on

upward in front of the top casement. There was no insect screen. The paint on the inside was thin and neat. The paint on the outside was thick and sloppy from where it had been continually redone to beat the climate. There was a brass catch. It was an ancient thing. There was no modern security. I slipped the catch and pushed the window up. It caught on the thick paint. But it moved. I got it open about five inches and cold sea air blew in on me. I bent down and looked for alarm pads. There weren't any. I heaved it all the way up and examined the whole of the frame. There was no sign of any security system at all. It was understandable. The window was fifty feet up above the rocks and the ocean. And the house itself was unreachable because of the high wall and the water.

I leaned out the window and looked down. I could see where I had been standing when Duke fired the bullet. I stayed half-in and half-out of the window for about five minutes, leaning on my elbows, staring at the black ocean, smelling the salt air, and thinking about the bullet. I had pulled the trigger six times. It would have made a hell of a mess. My head would have exploded. The rugs would have been ruined and the oak paneling would have splintered. I yawned. The thinking and the sea air were making me sleepy. I ducked back inside and slammed the casement down and went to bed.

I was already up and showered and dressed when I heard Duke unlock the door at six-fifteen the next morning, day twelve, Wednesday, Elizabeth Beck's birthday. I had already checked my e-mail. There were no messages. None at all. I wasn't worried. I spent ten quiet minutes at the window. The dawn was right there in front of me and the sea was gray and oily and subdued. The tide was out. Rocks were exposed. Pools had formed here and there. I could see birds on the shore. They were black guillemots. Their spring feathers were coming in. Gray was changing to black. They had bright red feet. I could see cormorants and black-backed gulls wheeling in the distance. Herring gulls swooping low, searching for breakfast.

I waited until Duke's footsteps had receded and went downstairs and walked into the kitchen and met the giant from the gatehouse face-to-face. He was standing at the sink, drinking water from a glass. He had probably just swallowed his steroid pills. He was a very big guy. I stand six feet five inches tall and I have to center myself quite carefully to walk through a standard thirty-inch doorway. This guy was at least six inches taller than me and probably ten inches wider across the shoulders. He probably outweighed me by two hundred pounds

across the shoulders. He probably outweighed me by two hundred pounds. Maybe by more. I got that core shudder I get when I'm next to a guy big enough to make me feel small. The world seems to tilt a little.

"Duke is in the gym," the guy said.

"There's a gym?" I said.

"Downstairs," he said. His voice was light and high-pitched. He must have been gobbling steroids like candy for years. His eyes were dull and his skin was bad. He was somewhere in his middle thirties, greasy blond, dressed in a muscle shirt and sweatpants. His arms were bigger than my legs. He looked like a cartoon.

"We work out before breakfast," he said.

"Fine," I said. "Go right ahead."

"You too."

"I never work out," I said.

"Duke's expecting you. You work here, you work out."

I glanced at my watch. Six twenty-five in the morning. Time ticking away.

"What's your name?" I asked.

He didn't answer. Just looked at me like I was setting some kind of a trap for him. That's another problem with steroids. Too many of them can rewire your head. And this guy's head didn't look like it had started from a very positive place to begin with. He looked mean and stupid. No better way to put it. And not a good combination. There was something in his face. I didn't like him. I was oh-for-two, as far as liking my new colleagues went.

"It's not a difficult question," I said.

"Paulie," he said.

I nodded. "Pleased to meet you, Paulie. I'm Reacher."

"I know," he said. "You were in the army."

“You got a problem with that?”

“I don’t like officers.”

I nodded. *They had checked.* They knew what rank I had held. They had some kind of access.

“Why not?” I asked. “Did you fail the OCS exam?”

He didn’t answer.

“Let’s go find Duke,” I said.

He put his glass of water down and led me out to a back hallway and through a door to a set of wooden cellar stairs. There was a whole basement under the house. It must have been blasted out of solid rock. The walls were raw stone patched and smoothed with concrete. The air was a little damp and musty. There were naked lightbulbs hanging in wire cages close to the ceiling. There were numerous rooms. One was a good-sized space with white paint all over it. The floor was covered with white linoleum. There was a smell of old sweat. There was an exercise bicycle and a treadmill and a weights machine. There was a heavy bag hanging from a ceiling joist. There was a speed bag near it. Boxing gloves on a shelf. There were dumbbells stored in wall racks. There were free weights stacked loose on the floor next to a bench. Duke was standing right next to it. He was wearing his dark suit. He looked tired, like he had been up all night. He hadn’t showered. His hair was a mess and his suit was creased and wrinkled, especially low down on the back of the coat.

Paulie went straight into some kind of a complicated stretching routine. He was so muscle-bound that his legs and arms had limited articulation. He couldn’t touch his shoulders with his fingers. His biceps were too big. I looked at the weights machine. It had all kinds of handles and bars and grips. It had strong black cables that led through pulleys to a tall stack of lead plates. You would have to be able to lift about five hundred pounds to move them all.

“You working out?” I said to Duke.

“None of your business,” he replied.

“Me either,” I said.

Paulie turned his giant neck and glanced at me. Then he lay down on his back on the bench and shuffled around until his shoulders were positioned underneath a bar resting on a stand. The bar had a bunch of weights on either end. He grunted a bit and wrapped his hands around the bar and flicked his tongue in and out like he was preparing for a major effort. Then he pressed upward and lifted the bar off the stand. The bar bent and wobbled. There was so much weight on it that it curved way down at the ends, like old film of Russian weight-lifters at the Olympics. He grunted again and heaved it up until his arms were locked straight. He held it like that for a second and then crashed it back into the stand. He turned his head and looked straight at me, like I was supposed to be impressed. I was, and I wasn't. It was a lot of weight, and he had a lot of muscle. But steroid muscle is dumb muscle. It looks real good, and if you want to pit it against dead weight it works just fine. But it's slow and heavy and tires you out just carrying it around.

"Can you bench-press four hundred pounds?" he called. He was a little out of breath.

"Never tried," I said.

"Want to try now?"

"No," I said.

"Wimpy little guy like you, it could build you up."

"I'm officer class," I said. "I don't need building up. I want some four-hundred-pound weight bench-pressed, I just find some big stupid ape and tell him to do it for me."

He glowered at me. I ignored him and looked at the heavy bag. It was a standard piece of gym equipment. Not new. I pushed it with my palm and set it swinging gently on its chain. Duke was watching me. Then he was glancing at Paulie. He had picked up on some vibe I hadn't. I pushed the bag again. We had used heavy bags extensively in hand-to-hand combat training. We would be wearing dress uniforms to simulate street clothes and we used the bags to learn how to kick. I once split a heavy bag with the edge of my heel, years ago. The sand dumped right out on the floor. I figured that would impress Paulie. But I wasn't going to try it again. The e-mail thing was hidden in my heel and I didn't want to damage it. I made an absurd mental note to tell Duffy she should have put it in the left

shoe instead. But then, she was left-handed. Maybe she had thought she was doing the right thing all along.

“I don’t like you,” Paulie called. He was looking straight at me, so I assumed he was talking to me. His eyes were small. His skin glittered. He was a walking chemical imbalance. Exotic compounds were leaking from his pores.

“We should arm wrestle,” he said.

“What?”

“We should arm wrestle,” he said again. He came up right next to me, light and quiet on his feet. He towered over me. He practically blotted out the light. He smelled of sharp acrid sweat.

“I don’t want to arm wrestle,” I said. I saw Duke watching me. Then I glanced at Paulie’s hands. They were clenched into fists, but they weren’t huge. And steroids don’t do anything for a person’s hands, unless they exercise them, and most people don’t think to do that.

“Pussy,” he said.

I said nothing.

“Pussy,” he said again.

“What’s in it for the winner?” I asked.

“Satisfaction,” he said.

“OK.”

“OK what?”

“OK, let’s do it,” I said.

He seemed surprised, but he moved back to the weights bench fast enough. I took my jacket off and folded it over the exercise bicycle. Unbuttoned my right cuff and rolled my sleeve up to my shoulder. My arm looked very thin next to his. But my hand was a shade bigger. My fingers were longer. And what little muscle I had in comparison to him came from pure genetics, not out of some

pharmacist's bottle.

We knelt down facing each other across the bench and planted our elbows. His forearm was a little longer than mine, which was going to put a kink in his wrist, which was going to help me. We slapped our palms together and gripped. His hand felt cold and damp to me. Duke took up station at the head of the bench, like a referee.

"Go," he said.

I cheated from the first moment. The aim of arm wrestling is to use the strength in your arm and shoulder to rotate your hand downward, taking your opponent's hand with it, to the mat. I had no chance of doing that. Not against this guy. No chance at all. It was going to be all I could do to keep my own hand in place. So I didn't even try to win. I just squeezed. A million years of evolution have given us an opposable thumb, which means it can work against the other four fingers like a pincer. I got his knuckles lined up and squeezed them mercilessly. And I have very strong hands. I concentrated on keeping my arm upright. Stared into his eyes and squeezed his hand until I felt his knuckles start to crush. Then I squeezed harder. And harder. He didn't give up. He was immensely strong. He kept the pressure on. I was sweating and breathing hard, just trying not to lose. We held it like that for a whole minute, straining and quivering in the silence. I squeezed harder. I let the pain build up in his hand. Watched it register in his face. Then I squeezed harder still. That's what gets them. They think it's already gotten as bad as it's going to get, and then it gets worse. And then worse still, like a ratchet. Worse and worse, like there's an infinite universe of agony ahead of them, stepping *up* and *up* and *up*, remorselessly, like a machine. They start concentrating on their own distress. And then the decision starts flickering in their eyes. They know I'm cheating, but they realize they can't do anything about it. They can't look up helplessly and say *he's hurting me*! *It's not fair!* That makes them the pussy, not me. And they can't face that. So they swallow it. They swallow it and they start worrying about whether it's going to get any worse. And it is. For sure. There's plenty more to come. There's always more to come. I stared into Paulie's eyes and squeezed harder. Sweat was making his skin slick, so my hand was moving easily over his, tighter and tighter. There were no friction burns to distract him. The pain was all right there in his knuckles.

"Enough," Duke called. "It's a tie."

I didn’t loosen my grip. Paulie didn’t back off with the pressure. His arm was as solid as a tree.

“I said enough,” Duke called. “You assholes have got work to do.”

I raised my elbow up high so he couldn’t surprise me with a last-second effort. He looked away and dragged his arm off the bench. We let go of each other. His hand was marked vivid red and white. The ball of my thumb felt like it was on fire. He pushed himself off his knees and stood up and walked straight out of the room. I heard his heavy tread on the wooden staircase.

“That was real stupid,” Duke said. “You just made another enemy.”

I was out of breath. “What, I was supposed to lose?”

“It would have been better.”

“Not my way.”

“Then you’re stupid,” he said.

“You’re head of security,” I said. “You should tell him to act his age.”

“Not that easy.”

“So get rid of him.”

“That’s not easy either.”

I stood up slowly. Rolled my sleeve down and buttoned my cuff. Glanced at my watch. Nearly seven in the morning. Time ticking away.

“What am I doing today?” I asked.

“Driving a truck,” Duke said. “You can drive a truck, right?”

I nodded, because I couldn’t say no. I had been driving a truck when I rescued Richard Beck.

“I need to shower again,” I said. “And I need some clean clothes.”

“Tell the maid,” he said. He was joking. “What am I, your housekeeper?”

¨Tell the maid,´´ he said. He was tired. ¨What am I, your damn valet?´´

He watched me for a second and headed for the stairs and left me all alone in the basement. I stood and stretched and panted and shook my hand loose from the wrist to ease the strain. Then I retrieved my jacket and went looking for Teresa Daniel. Theoretically she could be locked up somewhere down there. But I didn't find her. The basement was a warren of spaces carved and blasted out of the rock. Most of them were self-explanatory. There was a furnace room filled with a roaring boiler and a bunch of pipes. There was a laundry room, with a big washing machine sitting high on a wooden table, so it would drain by gravity into a pipe that ran out through the wall at knee height. There were storage areas. There were two locked rooms. Their doors were solid. I listened hard but heard nothing from inside them. I knocked gently and got no response.

I headed back upstairs and met Richard Beck and his mother in the ground-floor hallway. Richard had washed his hair and parted it low on the right and swept it sideways so it hung down thickly on the left, to hide his missing ear. It looked like the thing old guys do to hide the fact they're going bald on top. The ambivalence was still there in his face. He looked comfortable in the dark safety of his house, but I could see he also felt a little trapped. He looked pleased enough to see me. Not just because I had saved his ass, but maybe because I was a random representation of the outside world, too.

"Happy birthday, Mrs. Beck," I said.

She smiled at me, like she was flattered that I'd remembered. She looked better than she had the day before. She was easily ten years older than me, but I might have paid her some attention if we'd met somewhere by chance, like a bar or a club or on a long train ride.

"You'll be with us for a while," she said. Then it seemed to dawn on her why I would be with them for a while. I was hiding out there because I had killed a cop. She looked confused and glanced away and moved on through the hallway. Richard went with her and looked back at me, once, over his shoulder. I found the kitchen again. Paulie wasn't there. Zachary Beck was waiting for me instead.

"What weapons did they have?" he asked. "The guys in the Toyota?"

"They had Uzis," I said. *Stick to the truth, like all good scam artists.* "And a grenade."

“Which Uzis?”

“The Micros,” I said. “The little ones.”

“Magazines?”

“The short ones. Twenty rounds.”

“Are you absolutely sure?”

I nodded.

“You an expert?”

“They were designed by an Israeli Army lieutenant,” I said. “His name was Uziel Gal. He was a tinkerer. He made all kinds of improvements to the old Czech models 23 and 25 until he had a whole new thing going. This was back in 1949. The original Uzi went into production in 1953. It’s franchised to Belgium and Germany. I’ve seen a few, here and there.”

“And you’re absolutely sure these were Micro versions with the short mags?”

“I’m sure.”

“OK,” he said, like it meant something to him. Then he walked out of the kitchen and disappeared. I stood there and thought about the urgency of his questions and the wrinkles in Duke’s suit. The combination worried me.

I found the maid and told her I needed clothes. She showed me a long shopping list and said she was on her way out to the grocery store. I told her I wasn’t asking her to go buy me clothes. I told her just to borrow them from somebody. She went red and bobbed her head and said nothing. Then the cook came back from somewhere and took pity on me and fried me some eggs and bacon. And made me some coffee, which put the whole day in a better light. I ate and drank and then I went up the two flights of stairs to my room. The maid had left some clothes in the corridor, neatly folded on the floor. There was a pair of black denim jeans and a black denim shirt. Black socks and white underwear. Every

item was laundered and neatly pressed. I guessed they were Duke's. Beck's or Richard's would have been too small and Paulie's would look like I was wearing a tent. I scooped them up and carried them inside. Locked myself in my bathroom and took my shoe off and checked for e-mail. There was one message. It was from Susan Duffy. It said: *Your location pinpointed by map. We will move up 25m S and W of you to motel near I-95. Response from Powell quote your eyes only, both DD after 5, 10-2, 10-28 unquote. Progress?*

I smiled. Powell still talked the language. *Both DD after 5* meant both guys had served five years and then been dishonorably discharged. Five years is way too long for the discharges to have been related to inherent ineptitude or training screw-ups. Those things would have been evident very early. The only way to get fired after five years is to be a bad person. And *10-2, 10-28* left no doubt about it. 10-28 was a standard radio-check response meaning *loud and clear.* 10-2 was a standard radio call for *ambulance urgently needed.* But read together as MPs' covert slang *ambulance urgently needed, loud and clear* meant *these guys need to be dead, make no mistake about it.* Powell had been in the files, and he hadn't liked what he had seen.

I found the icon for *reply* and typed *no progress yet, stay tuned.* Then I hit *send now* and put the unit back in my shoe. I didn't spend long in the shower. Just rinsed the gymnasium sweat off and dressed in the borrowed clothes. I used my own shoes and jacket and the overcoat Susan Duffy had given me. I walked downstairs and found Zachary Beck and Duke standing together in the hallway. They both had coats on. Duke had car keys in his hand. He still hadn't showered. He still looked tired, and he was scowling. Maybe he didn't like me wearing his clothes. The front door was standing open and I saw the maid driving past in a dusty old Saab, off to do the household's marketing. Maybe she was going to buy a birthday cake.

"Let's go," Beck said, like there was work to be done and not much time to do it in. They led me out through the front door. The metal detector beeped twice, once for each of them but not for me. Outside the air was cold and fresh. The sky was bright. Beck's black Cadillac was waiting on the carriage circle. Duke held the rear door and Beck settled himself in the back. Duke got into the driver's seat. I took the front passenger seat. It seemed appropriate. There was no conversation.

Duke started the engine and put the car in gear and accelerated down the driveway. I could see Paulie far ahead in the distance, opening the gate for the

driveway. I could see Paulie far ahead in the distance, opening the gate for the maid in the Saab. He was back in his suit. He stood and waited for us and we swept past him and headed west, away from the sea. I turned around and saw him closing the gate again.

We drove the fifteen miles inland and turned north on the highway toward Portland. I stared ahead through the windshield and wondered exactly where they were taking me. And what they were going to do with me when they got me there.

They took me right to the edge of the port facilities outside the city itself. I could see the tops of ships' superstructures out on the water, and cranes all over the place. There were abandoned containers stacked in weedy lots. There were long low office buildings. There were trucks moving in and moving out. There were seagulls in the air everywhere. Duke drove through a gate into a small lot made of cracked concrete and patched blacktop. There was nothing in it except for a panel van standing all alone in the center. It was a medium-sized thing, made from a pickup frame with a big boxy body built onto it. The body was wider than the cab and wrapped up over it. It was the kind of thing you find in a rental line. Not the smallest they have to offer, not the largest. There was no writing on it. It was entirely plain, painted blue, with rust streaks here and there. It was old, and it had lived its life in the salt air.

"Keys are in the door pocket," Duke said.

Beck leaned forward from the back seat and handed me a slip of paper. It had directions on it, to some place in New London, Connecticut.

"Drive the truck to this exact address," he said. "It's a parking lot pretty much the same as this one. There'll be an identical truck already there. Keys in the door pocket. You leave this one, you bring the other one back here."

"And don't look inside either one," Duke said.

"And drive slow," Beck said. "Stay legal. Don't attract attention."

"Why?" I said. "What's in them?"

"Beer," Beck said from behind me. "I'm thinking of opening all Yuen's

¨Rugs,´´ Beck said, from behind me. ¨I´m thinking of you, is all. You´re a wanted man. Better to keep a low profile. So take your time. Stop for coffee. Act normally.”

They said nothing more. I got out of the Cadillac. The air smelled of sea and oil and diesel exhaust and fish. The wind was blowing. There was indistinct industrial noise all around, and the shriek and caw of gulls. I walked over to the blue truck. Passed directly behind it and saw the roller door handle was secured by a little lead seal. I walked on and opened the driver’s door. Found the keys in the pocket. Climbed inside and started the engine. Belted myself in and got comfortable and put the thing in gear and drove out of the lot. I saw Beck and Duke in the Cadillac, watching me go, nothing in their faces. I paused at the first turn and made the left and struck out south.

CHAPTER 4

Time ticking away. That's what I was conscious of. This was some kind of a trial or a test, and it was going to take me at least ten precious hours to complete it. Ten hours that I didn't have to spare. And the truck was a pig to drive. It was old and balky and there was a constant roaring from the engine and a screaming whine from the transmission. The suspension was soft and worn out and the whole vehicle floated and wallowed. But the rearview mirrors were big solid rectangular things bolted to the doors and they gave me a pretty good view of anything more than ten yards behind me. I was on I-95, heading south, and it was quiet. I was pretty sure nobody was tailing me. Pretty sure, but not completely certain.

I slowed as much as I dared and squirmed around and put my left foot on the gas pedal and ducked down and pulled off my right shoe. Juggled it up into my lap and extracted the e-mail device one-handed. I held it tight against the rim of the steering wheel and drove and typed all at the same time: *urgent meet me 1st I-95 rest area southbound S of Kennebunk exit now immediately bring soldering iron and lead solder Radio Shack or hardware store.* Then I hit *send now* and dropped the thing on the seat beside me. Kicked my foot back into the shoe and got it back on the pedal and straightened up in the seat. Checked the mirrors again. Nothing there. So I did some math. Kennebunk to New London was a distance of maybe two hundred miles, maybe a little more. Four hours at fifty miles an hour. Two hours fifty minutes at seventy, and seventy was probably the best I was going to get out of that particular truck. So I would have a maximum margin of an hour and ten minutes to do whatever I decided I needed to.

I drove on. I kept it at a steady fifty in the right lane. Everybody passed me. Nobody stayed behind me. I had no tail. I wasn't sure if that was good or bad. The alternative might be worse. I passed the Kennebunk exit after twenty-nine minutes. Saw a rest area sign a mile later. It promised food and gas and restrooms seven miles ahead. The seven miles took me eight and a half minutes. Then there was a shallow ramp that swooped right and rose up a slope through a thicket of trees. The view wasn't good. The leaves were small and new but there were so many of them that I couldn't see much. The rest area itself was invisible to me. I let the truck coast and crested the rise and drove down into a perfectly

standard interstate facility. It was just a wide road with diagonal parking slots on both sides and a small huddle of low brick buildings on the right. Beyond the buildings was a gas station. There were maybe a dozen cars parked close to the bathrooms. One of them was Susan Duffy's Taurus. It was last in line on the left. She was standing next to it with Eliot at her side.

I drove slowly past her and made a *wait* gesture with my hand and parked four slots beyond her. I switched off the engine and sat gratefully in the sudden silence for a moment. I put the e-mail device back in my heel and laced my shoe. Then I tried to look like a normal person. I stretched my arms and opened the door and slid out and stumped around for a moment like a guy easing his cramped legs and relishing the fresh forest air. I turned a couple of complete circles and scanned the whole area and then stood still and kept my eyes on the ramp. Nobody came up it. I could hear light traffic out on the highway. It was close by and fairly loud, but the way it was all behind the trees made me feel private and isolated. I counted off seventy-two seconds, which represents a mile at fifty miles an hour. Nobody came up the ramp. And nobody follows at a distance of more than a mile. So I ran straight over to where Duffy and Eliot were waiting for me. He was in casual clothes and looked a little uneasy in them. She was in worn jeans and the same battered leather jacket I had seen before. She looked spectacular in them. Neither of them wasted any time on greetings, which I guess I was happy about.

"Where are you headed?" Eliot asked.

"New London, Connecticut," I said.

"What's in the truck?"

"I don't know."

"No tail," Duffy said, like a statement, not a question.

"Might be electronic," I said.

"Where would it be?"

"In the back, if they've got any sense. Did you get the soldering iron?"

"Not yet," she said. "It's on its way. Why do we need it?"

“There’s a lead seal,” I said. “We need to be able to remake it.”

She glanced at the ramp, anxious. “Hard thing to get ahold of at short notice.”

“Let’s check the parts we can get to,” Eliot said. “While we’re waiting.”

We jogged back to the blue truck. I got down on the ground and took a look at the underside. It was all caked in ancient gray mud and streaked with leaking oil and fluid.

“It won’t be here,” I said. “They’d need a chisel to get close to the metal.”

Eliot found it inside the cab about fifteen seconds after he started looking. It was stuck to the foam on the bottom of the passenger’s seat with a little dot of hook-and-loop fastener. It was a tiny bare metal can a little bigger than a quarter and about half an inch thick. It trailed a thin eight-inch wire that was presumably the transmitting antenna. Eliot closed the whole thing into his fist and backed out of the cab fast and stared at the mouth of the ramp.

“What?” Duffy asked.

“This is weird,” he said. “Thing like this has a hearing-aid battery, nothing more. Low power, short range. Can’t be picked up beyond about two miles. So where’s the guy tracking it?”

The mouth of the ramp was empty. I had been the last guy up it. We stood there with our eyes watering in the cold wind, staring at nothing. Traffic hissed by behind the trees, but nothing came up the ramp.

“How long have you been here now?” Eliot asked.

“About four minutes,” I said. “Maybe five.”

“Makes no sense,” he said. “That puts the guy maybe four or five miles behind you. And he can’t hear this thing from four or five miles.”

“Maybe there’s no guy,” I said. “Maybe they trust me.”

“So why put this thing in there?”

“Maybe they didn’t. Maybe it’s been in there for years. Maybe they forgot all

about it."

"Too many maybes," he said.

Duffy spun right and stared at the trees.

"They could have stopped on the highway shoulder," she said. "You know, exactly level with where we are now."

Eliot and I spun to our right and stared, too. It made good sense. It was no kind of clever surveillance technique to pull into a rest stop and park right next to your target.

"Let's take a look," I said.

There was a narrow strip of neat grass and then an equally narrow area where the highway people had tamed the edge of the woods with planted shrubs and bark chips. Then there were just trees. The highway had mown them down to the east and the rest area had leveled them to the west but in between was a forty-foot thicket that could have been growing there since the dawn of time. It was hard work getting through it. There were vines and scratchy brambles and low branches. But it was April. Getting through in July or August might have been impossible.

We stopped just before the trees petered out into lower growth. Beyond that was the flat grassy highway shoulder. We eased forward as far as we dared and craned left and right. There was nobody parked there. The shoulder was clear as far as we could see in both directions. Traffic was very light. Whole five-second intervals went by with no vehicles in view at all. Eliot shrugged like he didn't understand it and we turned around and forced our way back.

"Makes no sense," he said again.

"They're short of manpower," I said.

"No, they're on Route One," Duffy said. "They must be. It runs parallel with I-95 the whole way down the coast. From Portland, way down south. It's probably less than two miles away most of the time."

We turned east again, like we could see through the trees and spot a car idling on the shoulder of a distant parallel road.

the shoulder of a distant parallel road.

“It’s how I’d do it,” Duffy said.

I nodded. It was a very plausible scenario. There would be technical disadvantages. With up to two miles of lateral displacement any slight fore-aft discrepancy due to traffic would make the signal drift in and out of range. But then, all they wanted to know was my general direction.

“It’s possible,” I said.

“No, it’s likely,” Eliot said. “Duffy’s right. It’s pure common sense. They want to stay out of your mirrors as long as they can.”

“Either way, we have to assume they’re there. How far does Route One stay close to I-95?”

“Forever,” Duffy said. “Way farther than New London, Connecticut. They split around Boston, but they come back together.”

“OK,” I said. Checked my watch. “I’ve been here about nine minutes now. Long enough for the bathroom and a cup of coffee. Time to put the electronics back on the road.”

I told Eliot to put the transmitter in his pocket and drive Duffy’s Taurus south at a steady fifty miles an hour. I told him I would catch him in the truck somewhere before New London. I figured I would worry about how to get the transmitter back in the right place later. Eliot took off and I was left alone with Duffy. We watched her car disappear south and then swiveled around north and watched the incoming ramp. I had an hour and one minute and I needed the soldering iron. *Time ticking away.*

“How is it up there?” Duffy asked.

“A nightmare,” I said. I told her about the eight-foot granite wall and the razor wire and the gate and the metal detectors on the doors and the room with no inside keyhole. I told her about Paulie.

“Any sign of my agent?” she asked.

“I only just got there,” I said.

“She’s in that house,” she said. “I have to believe that.”

I said nothing.

“You need to make some progress,” she said. “Every hour you spend there puts you deeper in trouble. And her.”

“I know that,” I said.

“What’s Beck like?” she asked.

“Bent,” I said. I told her about the fingerprints on the glass and the way the Maxima had disappeared. Then I told her about the Russian roulette.

“You played?”

“Six times,” I said, and stared at the ramp.

She stared at me. “You’re crazy. Six to one, you should be dead.”

I smiled. “You ever played?”

“I wouldn’t. I don’t like those odds.”

“You’re like most people. Beck was the same. He thought the odds were six to one. But they’re nearer six hundred to one. Or six thousand. You put a single heavy bullet in a well-made well-maintained gun like that Anaconda and it would be a miracle if the cylinder came to rest with the bullet near the top. The momentum of the spin always carries it to the bottom. Precision mechanism, a little oil, gravity helps you out. I’m not an idiot. Russian roulette is a lot safer than people think. And it was worth the risk to get hired.”

She was quiet for a spell.

“You got a feeling?” she asked.

“He looks like a rug importer,” I said. “There are rugs all over the damn place.”

“But?”

“But he isn’t,” I said. “I’d bet my pension on it. I asked him about the rugs and

he didn’t say much. Like he wasn’t very interested in them. Most people like to talk about their businesses. Most people, you can’t shut them up.”

“You get a pension?”

“No,” I said.

Right then a gray Taurus identical to Duffy’s except for the color burst up over the rise of the ramp. It slowed momentarily while the driver scanned around and then accelerated hard straight toward us. It was the old guy at the wheel, the one I had left in the gutter near the college gate. He slammed to a stop next to my blue truck and opened his door and heaved himself up and out in exactly the same way he had gotten out of the borrowed police Caprice. He had a big black-and-red Radio Shack bag in his hand. It was bulky with boxes. He held it up and smiled and stepped forward to shake my hand. He had a fresh shirt on, but his suit was the same. I could see blotches where he had tried to sponge the fake blood out. I could picture him, standing at his motel room sink, getting busy with the hand towel. He hadn’t been very successful. It looked like he had been careless with the ketchup at dinner.

“They got you running errands already?” he asked.

“I don’t know what they got me doing,” I said. “We got a lead seal problem.”

He nodded. “I figured. Shopping list like that, what else could it be?”

“You done one before?”

“I’m old-school,” he said. “We did ten a day, once upon a time, way back. Truck stops all over the place, we’d be in and out before the guy had even ordered his soup.”

He squatted down and emptied the Radio Shack bag on the blacktop. He had a soldering iron and a spool of dull solder. And an inverter that would power the iron from his car’s cigar lighter. That meant he had to keep his engine running, so he started it up and reversed a little way so that the cord would reach.

The seal was basically a drawn lead wire with large tags molded on each end. The tags had been crushed together with some kind of a heated device so they had fused together in a large embossed blob. The old guy left the fused ends strictly alone. It was clear he had done this before. He plugged the iron in and let

strictly alone. It was clear he had done this before. He plugged the iron in and let it heat. He tested it by spitting on the end. When he was satisfied he dabbed the tip on the sleeve of his suit coat and then touched it to the wire where it was thin. The wire melted and parted. He eased the gap wider like opening a tiny handcuff and slipped the seal out of its channel. He ducked into his car and laid it on the dash. I grabbed the door lever and turned it.

“OK,” Duffy said. “So what have we got?”

We had rugs. The door rattled upward and daylight flooded the load area and we saw maybe two hundred rugs, all neatly rolled and tied with string and standing upright on their ends. They were all different sizes, with the taller rolls at the cab end and the shorter ones at the door end. They stepped down toward us like some kind of ancient basalt rock formation. They were rolled face-in, so all we saw were the back surfaces, coarse and dull. The string around them was rough sisal, old and yellowed. There was a strong smell of raw wool and a fainter smell of vegetable dye.

“We should check them,” Duffy said. There was disappointment in her voice.

“How long have we got?” the old guy asked.

I checked my watch.

“Forty minutes,” I said.

“Better just sample them,” he said.

We hauled a couple out from the front rank. They were rolled tight. No cardboard tubes. They were just rolled in on themselves and tied tight with the string. One of them had a fringe. It smelled old and musty. The knots in the string were old and flattened. We picked at them with our nails but we couldn’t get them undone.

“They must cut the string,” Duffy said. “We can’t do that.”

“No,” the old guy said. “We can’t.”

The string was coarse and looked foreign. I hadn’t seen string like that for a long time. It was made from some kind of a natural fiber. Jute, maybe, or hemp.

“Somebody’s ready?” the old guy said.

"So what do we do?" the old guy asked.

I pulled another rug out. Hefted it in my hands. It weighed about what a rug should weigh. I squeezed it. It gave slightly. I rested it end-down on the road and punched it in the middle. It yielded a little, exactly how a tightly-rolled rug would feel.

"They're just rugs," I said.

"Anything under them?" Duffy asked. "Maybe those tall ones in back aren't tall at all. Maybe they're resting on something else."

We pulled rugs out one by one and laid them on the road in the order we would have to put them back in. We built ourselves a random zigzag channel through the load space. The tall ones were exactly what they appeared to be, tall rugs, rolled tight, tied with string, standing upright on their ends. There was nothing hidden. We climbed out of the truck and stood there in the cold surrounded by a crazy mess of rugs and looked at each other.

"It's a dummy load," Duffy said. "Beck figured you would find a way in."

"Maybe," I said.

"Or else he just wanted you out of the way."

"While he's doing what?"

"Checking you out," she said. "Making sure."

I looked at my watch. "Time to reload. I'm already going to have to drive like a madman."

"I'll come with you," she said. "Until we catch up with Eliot, I mean."

I nodded. "I want you to. We need to talk."

We put the rugs back inside, kicking and shoving them until they were neatly arranged in their original positions. Then I pulled the roller door down and the old guy got to work with the solder. He slipped the broken seal back through its channel and eased the parted ends close together. He heated the iron and bridged the gap with its tip and touched the free end of the solder roll to it. The gap filled

with a large silvery blob. It was the wrong color and it was way too big. It made the wire look like a cartoon drawing of a snake that has just swallowed a rabbit.

“Don’t worry,” he said.

He used the tip of the iron like a tiny paintbrush and smoothed the blob thinner and thinner. He flicked the tip occasionally to get rid of the excess. He was very delicate. It took him three long minutes but at the end of them he had the whole thing looking pretty much like it had before he arrived. He let it cool a little and then blew hard on it. The new silvery color instantly turned to gray. It was as close to an invisible repair as I had ever seen. Certainly it was better than I could have done myself.

“OK,” I said. “Very good. But you’re going to have to do another one. I’m supposed to bring another truck back. We better take a look at that one, too. We’ll meet up in the first northbound rest area after Portsmouth, New Hampshire.”

“When?”

“Be there five hours from now.”

Duffy and I left him standing there and headed south as fast as I could get the old truck to move. It wouldn’t do much better than seventy. It was shaped like a brick and the wind resistance defeated any attempt to go faster. But seventy was OK. I had a few minutes in hand.

“Did you see his office?” she asked.

“Not yet,” I said. “We need to check it out. In fact we need to check out his whole harbor operation.”

“We’re working on it,” she said. She had to talk loud. The engine noise and gearbox whine were twice as bad at seventy as they had been at fifty. “Fortunately Portland is not too much of a madhouse. It’s only the forty-fourth busiest port in the U.S. About fourteen million tons of imports a year. That’s about a quarter-million tons a week. Beck seems to get about ten of them, two or three containers.”

“Does Customs search his stuff?”

“As much as they search anybody’s. Their current hit rate is about two percent. If he gets a hundred and fifty containers a year maybe three of them will be looked at.”

“So how is he doing it?”

“He could be playing the odds by limiting the bad stuff to, say, one container in ten. That would bring the effective search rate down to zero-point-two percent. He could last years like that.”

“He’s already lasted years. He must be paying somebody off.”

She nodded beside me. Said nothing.

“Can you arrange extra scrutiny?” I asked.

“Not without probable cause,” she said. “Don’t forget, we’re way off the books here. We need some hard evidence. And the possibility of a payoff makes the whole thing a minefield, anyway. We might approach the wrong official.”

We drove on. The engine roared and the suspension swayed. We were passing everything we saw. Now I was watching the mirrors for cops, not tails. I was guessing that Duffy’s DEA papers would take care of any specific legal problems, but I didn’t want to lose the time it would take for her to have the conversation.

“How did Beck react?” she asked. “First impression?”

“He was puzzled,” I said. “And a little resentful. That was my first impression. You notice that Richard Beck wasn’t guarded at school?”

“Safe environment.”

“Not really. You could take a kid out of a college, easy as anything. No guards means no danger. I think the bodyguard thing for the trip home was just some kind of a sop to the fact that the kid is paranoid. I think it was purely an indulgence. I don’t think old man Beck can have thought it was really necessary, or he would have provided security at school as well. Or kept him out of school

or he would have provided security at school as well. Or kept him out of school altogether."

"So?"

"So I think there was some kind of a done deal somewhere in the past. As a result of the original kidnap, maybe. Something that guaranteed some kind of stability. Hence no bodyguards in the dorm. Hence Beck's resentment, like somebody had suddenly broken an agreement."

"You think?"

I nodded at the wheel. "He was surprised, and puzzled, and annoyed. His big question was who?"

"Obvious question."

"But this was a how-dare-they kind of a question. There was attitude in it. Like somebody was out of line. It wasn't just an inquiry. It was an expression of annoyance at somebody."

"What did you tell him?"

"I described the truck. I described your guys."

She smiled. "Safe enough."

I shook my head. "He's got a guy called Duke. First name unknown. Ex-cop. His head of security. I saw him this morning. He'd been up all night. He looked tired and he hadn't showered. His suit coat was all creased, low down at the back."

"So?"

"Means he was driving all night. I think he went down there to get a look at the Toyota. To check the rear license plate. Where did you stash it?"

"We let the state cops take it. To keep the plausibility going. We couldn't take it back to the DEA garage. It'll be in a compound somewhere."

"Where will the plate lead?"

"Hartford, Connecticut," she said. "We busted a small-time Ecstasy ring."

“When?”

“Last week.”

I drove on. The highway was getting busier.

“Our first mistake,” I said. “Beck’s going to check it out. And then he’s going to be wondering why some small-time Ecstasy dealers from Connecticut are trying to snatch his son. And then he’s going to be wondering *how* some small-time Ecstasy dealers from Connecticut *can* be trying to snatch his son a week after they all got hauled off to jail.”

“Shit,” Duffy said.

“It gets worse,” I said. “I think Duke got a look at the Lincoln, too. It’s got a caved-in front and no window glass left, but it hasn’t got any bullet holes in it. And it doesn’t look like a real grenade went off inside. That Lincoln is living proof this whole thing was phony baloney.”

“No,” she said. “The Lincoln is hidden. It didn’t go with the Toyota.”

“Are you sure? Because the first thing Beck asked me this morning was chapter and verse about the Uzis. It was like he was asking me to damn myself right out of my own mouth. Two Uzi Micros, twenty-round mags, forty shots fired, and not a single mark on the car?”

“No,” she said again. “No way. The Lincoln is hidden.”

“Where?”

“It’s in Boston. It’s in our garage, but as far as any paperwork goes it’s in the county morgue building. It’s supposed to be a crime scene. The bodyguards are supposed to be plastered all over the inside. We aimed for plausibility. We thought this thing through.”

“Except for the Toyota’s plate.”

She looked deflated. “But the Lincoln is OK. It’s a hundred miles away from the Toyota. This guy Duke would have to drive all night.”

“I think he did drive all night. And why was Beck so uptight about the Uzis?”

She went still.

“We have to abort,” she said. “Because of the Toyota. Not because of the Lincoln. The Lincoln’s OK.”

I checked my watch. Checked the road ahead. The van roared on. We would be coming up on Eliot sometime soon. I calculated time and distance.

“We have to abort,” she said again.

“What about your agent?”

“Getting you killed won’t help her.”

I thought about Quinn.

“We’ll discuss it later,” I said. “Right now we stay in business.”

We passed Eliot after eight more minutes. His Taurus was sitting rock-steady in the inside lane, holding a modest fifty. I pulled ahead of him and matched his speed and he fell in behind. We skirted all the way around Boston and pulled into the first rest area we saw south of the city. The world was a lot busier down there. I sat still with Duffy at my side and watched the ramp for seventy-two seconds and saw four cars follow me in. None of their drivers paid me any attention. A couple of them had passengers. They all did normal rest-stop things like standing and yawning by their open doors and looking around and then heading over to the bathrooms and the fast food.

“Where’s the next truck?” Duffy asked.

“In a lot in New London,” I said.

“Keys?”

“In it.”

“So then we will have to go by the motor Nobody has ever stolen a truck with the keys in

"So there will be people there, too. Nobody leaves a truck alone with the keys in it. They'll be waiting for you. We don't know what they've been told to do. We should consider termination."

"I won't walk into a trap," I said. "Not my style. And the next truck might have something better in it."

"OK," she said. "We'll check it in New Hampshire. If you get that far."

"You could lend me your Glock."

I saw her reach up and touch it under her arm. "How long for?"

"As long as I need it."

"What happened to the Colts?"

"They took them."

"I can't," she said. "I can't give up my service weapon."

"You're already way off the books."

She paused.

"Shit," she said. She took the Glock out of her holster and passed it to me. It was warm from the heat of her body. I held it in my palm and savored the feeling. She dug in her purse and came out with two spare magazines. I put them in one pocket and the gun in the other.

"Thanks," I said.

"See you in New Hampshire," she said. "We'll check the truck. And then we'll decide."

"OK," I said, although I had already decided. Eliot walked over and took the transmitter out of his pocket. Duffy got out of his way and he stuck it back under her seat. Then they went off together, back to the government Taurus. I waited a plausible amount of time and got back on the road.

I found New London without any problem. It was a messy old place. I had never been there before. Never had a reason to go. It's a Navy town. I think they build submarines there. Or somewhere nearby. Groton, maybe. The directions Beck had given me brought me off the highway early and threaded me through failing industrial areas. There was plenty of old brick, damp and smoke-stained and rotten. I pulled into the side of the road about a mile short of where I guessed the lot would be. Then I made a right and a left and tried to circle around it. I parked at a busted meter and checked Duffy's gun. It was a Glock 19. It was maybe a year old. It was fully loaded. The spare magazines were full, too. I got out of the truck. I heard booming foghorns way out in the Sound. A ferry was heading in. The wind was scraping trash along the street. A hooker stepped out of a doorway and smiled at me. It's a Navy town. She couldn't smell an army MP the way her sisters could elsewhere.

I turned a corner and got a pretty good partial view of the lot I was headed for. The land sloped down toward the sea and I had some elevation. I could see the truck waiting for me. It was the twin of the one I was in. Same age, same type. Same color. It was sitting there all alone. It was in the exact center of the lot, which was just an empty square made of crushed brick and weeds. Some old building had been bulldozed two decades ago and nothing had been built to replace it.

I couldn't see anybody waiting for me, although there were a thousand dirty windows within range and theoretically all of them could have been full of watchers. But I didn't feel anything. Feeling is a lot worse than knowing, but sometimes it's all you've got. I stood still until I got cold and then I walked back to the truck. Drove it around the block and into the lot. Parked it nose to nose with its twin. Pulled the key and dropped it in the door pocket. Glanced around one last time and got out. I put my hand in my pocket and closed it around Duffy's gun. Listened hard. Nothing but grit blowing and the far-off sounds of a run-down city struggling through the day. I was OK, unless somebody was planning to drop me with a long-range rifle shot. And clutching a Glock 19 in my pocket wasn't going to defend against that.

The new truck was cold and still. The door was unlocked and the key was right there in the pocket. I racked the seat and fixed the mirrors. Dropped the key on the floor like I was clumsy and checked under the seats. No transmitter. Just a few gum wrappers and dust bunnies. I started the engine. Backed away from the

truck I had just gotten out of and swooped the new one around the lot and aimed it back toward the highway. I didn't see anybody. Nobody came after me.

The new truck drove a little better than the old one had. It was a little quieter and a little faster. Maybe it had been around the clock only twice. It reeled in the miles, taking me back north. I stared ahead through the windshield and felt like I could see the lonely house on the rock finger getting bigger and bigger with every minute. It was drawing me in and repelling me simultaneously with equal force. So I just sat there immobile with one hand on the wheel and my eyelids locked open. Rhode Island was quiet. Nobody followed me through it. Massachusetts was mostly a long loop around Boston and then a sprint through the northeastern bump with the dumps like Lowell on my left and the cute places like Newburyport and Cape Ann and Gloucester far away on my right. No tail. Then came New Hampshire. I-95 sees about twenty miles of it with Portsmouth as the last stop. I passed it by and watched for rest area signs. I found one just inside the Maine state line. It told me that Duffy and Eliot and the old guy with the stained suit would be waiting for me eight miles ahead.

It wasn't just Duffy and Eliot and the old guy. They had a DEA canine unit with them. I guess if you give government types enough time to think they'll come up with something you don't expect. I pulled into an area pretty much identical to the Kennebunk one and saw their two Tauruses parked on the end of the row next to a plain van with a spinning ventilator on the roof. I parked four slots away from them and went through the cautious routine of waiting and watching, but nobody pulled in after me. I didn't worry about the highway shoulder. The trees made me invisible from the highway. There were trees everywhere. Maine has got a whole lot of trees, that was for damn sure.

I got out of the truck and the old guy pulled his car close and went straight into his thing with the soldering iron. Duffy pulled me out of his way by the elbow.

"I made some calls," she said. She held up her Nokia like she was proving it to me. "Good news and bad news."

¨Good news first,´ I said. ¨Cheer me up.´

“I think the Toyota thing might be OK.”

“Might be?”

“It’s complicated. We got Beck’s shipping schedule from U.S. Customs. All his stuff comes out of Odessa. It’s in the Ukraine, on the Black Sea.”

“I know where it is.”

“Plausible point of origin for rugs. They come north through Turkey from all over. But Odessa is a heroin port, from our point of view. Everything that doesn’t come here direct from Colombia feeds through Afghanistan and Turkmenistan and across the Caspian and the Caucasus. So if Beck’s using Odessa it means he’s a heroin guy, and if he’s a heroin guy it means he doesn’t know any Ecstasy dealers from Adam. Not in Connecticut, not anywhere. There can’t be a relationship. No way. How could there be? It’s a completely different part of the business. So he’s starting from scratch as far as finding anything out goes. I mean, the Toyota plate will give him a name and an address, sure, but that information won’t mean anything to him. It’s going to be a few days before he can find out who they are and pick up their trail.”

“That’s the good news?”

“It’s good enough. Trust me, they’re in separate worlds. And a few days is all you’ve got anyway. We can’t hold those bodyguards forever.”

“What’s the bad news?”

She paused a beat. “It’s actually not impossible that someone could have gotten a peek at the Lincoln.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing specific. Just that security at the garage maybe wasn’t as good as it might have been.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means we can’t say for sure that something bad didn’t happen.”

We heard the truck's roller door rattle upward. It banged against its stop and a second later we heard Eliot calling us urgently. We stepped over there expecting to find something good. We found another transmitter instead. It was the same tiny metal can with the same eight-inch filament antenna. It was glued to the inside of the sheetmetal, near the loading door, about head height.

"Great," Duffy said.

The load space was packed with rugs, exactly the same as we had seen before. It could have been the same van. They were rolled tight and tied with rough string and stacked on their ends in descending order of height.

"Do we check them?" the old guy asked.

"No time," I said. "If somebody's on the other end of that transmitter they'll figure I'm entitled to maybe ten minutes here, nothing more."

"Put the dog in," Duffy said.

A guy I hadn't met opened up the rear of the DEA van and came out with a beagle on a leash. It was a little fat low-slung thing wearing a working-dog harness. It had long ears and an eager expression. I like dogs. Sometimes I think about getting one. It could keep me company. This one ignored me completely. It just let its handler lead it over to the blue truck and then it waited to be told what to do. The guy lifted it up into the load space and put it down on the staircase of rugs. He clicked his fingers and spoke some kind of a command and took the leash off. The dog scampered up and down and side to side. Its legs were short and it had a problem making it up and down between the different levels. But it covered every inch and then came back to where it had started and stood there with its eyes bright and its tail wagging and its mouth open in an absurd wet smile like it was saying *so where's the action*?

"Nothing," its handler said.

"Legit load," Eliot said.

Duffy nodded. "But why is it coming back north? Nobody exports rugs back to Odessa. Why would they?"

"It was a test," I said. "For me. They figured maybe I'd look, maybe I wouldn't."

“Fix the seal,” Duffy said.

The new guy hauled his beagle out and Eliot stretched up tall and pulled the door down. The old guy picked up his soldering iron and Duffy pulled me away again.

“Decision?” she said.

“What would you do?”

“Abort,” she said. “The Lincoln is the wild card. It could kill you.”

I looked over her shoulder and watched the old guy at work. He was already thinning the solder join.

“They bought the story,” I said. “Impossible not to. It was a great story.”

“They might have looked at the Lincoln.”

“I can’t see why they would have wanted to.”

The old guy was finishing up. He was bending down, ready to blow on the join, ready to turn the wire dull gray. Duffy put her hand on my arm.

“Why was Beck talking about the Uzis?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“All done,” the old guy called.

“Decision?” Duffy said.

I thought about Quinn. Thought about the way his gaze had traveled across my face, not fast, not slow. Thought about the .22 scars, like two extra eyes up there on the left of his forehead.

“I’m going back,” I said. “I think it’s safe enough. They’d have gone for me this morning if they had any doubts.”

Duffy said nothing. She didn’t argue. She just took her hand off my arm and let me go.

CHAPTER 5

She let me go, but she didn't ask for her gun back. Maybe it was subconscious. Maybe she wanted me to have it. I put it in the back of my waistband. It felt better there than the big Colt had. I hid the spare magazines in my socks. Then I hit the road and was back in the lot near the Portland docks exactly ten hours after I left it. There was nobody waiting there to meet me. No black Cadillac. I drove right in and parked. Dropped the key in the door pocket and slid out. I was tired and slightly deaf after five hundred highway miles.

It was six o'clock in the evening and the sun was way down behind the city on my left. The air was cold and dampness was blowing in from the sea. I buttoned my coat and stood still for a minute in case I was being watched. Then I wandered off. I tried to look aimless. But I headed generally north and took a good look at the buildings ahead of me. The lot was bordered by low offices. They looked like trailers without the wheels. They had been cheaply built and badly maintained. They had small untidy parking lots. The lots were full of mid-range cars. The whole place looked busy and down-to-earth. Real-world commerce happened there. That was clear. No fancy headquarters, no marble, no sculpture, just a bunch of ordinary people working hard for their money behind unwashed windows lined with broken venetian blinds.

Some of the offices were bumped-out additions built onto the sides of small warehouses. The warehouses were modern prefabricated metal structures. They had concrete loading platforms built up to waist height. They had narrow lots defined by thick concrete posts. The posts had every shade of automotive paint known to man scraped on them.

I found Beck's black Cadillac after about five minutes. It was parked on a rectangle of cracked blacktop at an angle against the side of a warehouse, near an office door. The door looked like it belonged on a house in the suburbs. It was a colonial design made from hardwood. It had never been painted and it was gray and grainy from the salt air. It had a faded sign screwed to it: *Bizarre Bazaar.* The script was handpainted and looked like something from Haight-Ashbury in the sixties. Like it should have been promoting a concert at the Fillmore West, like Bizarre Bazaar was a one-hit wonder opening for Jefferson

Airplane or the Grateful Dead.

I heard a car approaching and backed off behind the adjacent building and waited. It was a big car, coming slowly. I could hear fat soft tires dropping into wet potholes. It was a Lincoln Town Car, shiny black, identical to the one we had trashed outside the college gate. The two of them had probably come off the line together, nose to tail. It drove slowly past Beck's Cadillac and rounded the corner and parked in back of the warehouse. A guy I hadn't seen before got out of the driver's seat. He stretched and yawned like maybe he had just driven five hundred highway miles, too. He was medium height and heavy with close-cropped black hair. Lean face, bad skin. He was scowling, like he was frustrated. He looked dangerous. But junior, somehow. Like he was low down on the totem pole. And like he might be all the more dangerous because of it. He leaned back into the car and came out again carrying a portable radio scanner. It had a long chrome antenna and a mesh-covered speaker that would whine and squawk whenever an appropriate transmitter was within a mile or two of it.

He walked around the corner and pushed in through the unpainted door. I stayed where I was. Reviewed the whole of the last ten hours in my head. As far as radio surveillance went I had stopped three times. Each stop had been short enough to be plausible. Visual surveillance would be a different matter entirely. But I was pretty sure there had been no black Lincoln in my line of sight at any point. I tended to agree with Duffy. The guy and his scanner had been on Route One.

I stood still for a minute. Then I came out into plain sight and walked to the door. Pushed it open. There was an immediate right-angle turn to the left. It led to a small open area filled with desks and file cabinets. There were no people in it. None of the desks was occupied. But they had been until very recently. That was clear. They were part of a working office. There were three of them and they were covered with the kind of stuff people leave behind at the end of the day. Half-finished paperwork, rinsed coffee cups, notes to themselves, souvenir mugs filled with pencils, packs of tissues. There were electric heaters on the walls and the air was very warm and it smelled faintly of perfume.

At the back of the open area was a closed door with low voices behind it. I recognized Beck's, and Duke's. They were talking with a third man, who I guessed was the guy with the tracking equipment. I couldn't make out what they were saying. Couldn't make out the tone. There was some urgency there. Some debate. No raised voices, but they weren't discussing the company picnic.

debate. No raised voices, but they weren't discussing the company picnic.

I looked at the stuff on the desks and the walls. There were two maps pinned up on boards. One showed the whole world. The Black Sea was more or less in the exact center. Odessa was nestling there to the left of the Crimean Peninsula. There was nothing marked on the paper but I could trace the route a little tramp steamer would take, through the Bosphorus, through the Aegean Sea, through the Mediterranean, out past Gibraltar, and then full steam across the Atlantic to Portland, Maine. A two-week voyage, probably. Maybe three. Most ships are pretty slow.

The other map showed the United States. Portland itself was obliterated by a worn and greasy stain. I guessed people had put their fingertips on it to span their hands and calculate time and distance. A small person's hand fully extended might represent a day's driving. In which case Portland wasn't the best location for a distribution center. It was a long way from everywhere else.

The papers on the desks were incomprehensible to me. At best I could just about interpret details about dates and loads. I saw some prices listed. Some were high, some were low. Opposite the prices were codes for something. They could have been for rugs. They could have been for something else. But on the surface the whole place looked exactly like an innocent shipping office. I wondered if Teresa Daniel had worked in it.

I listened to the voices some more. Now I was hearing anger and worry. I backed out to the corridor. Took the Glock out of my waistband and put it in my pocket with my finger inside the trigger guard. A Glock doesn't have a safety catch. It has a sort of trigger on the trigger. It's a tiny bar that latches back as you squeeze. I put a little pressure on it. Felt it give. I wanted to be ready. I figured I would shoot Duke first. Then the guy with the radio. Then Beck. Beck was probably the slowest and you always leave the slowest for last.

I put my other hand in my pocket, too. A guy with one hand in his pocket looks armed and dangerous. A guy with both hands in his pockets looks relaxed and lazy. No threat. I took a breath and walked back into the room, noisily.

"Hello?" I called.

The back office door opened up fast. The three of them crowded together to look out. Beck, Duke, the new guy. No guns.

“How did you get in here?” Duke asked. He looked tired.

“Door was open,” I said.

“How did you know which door?” Beck asked.

I kept my hands in my pockets. I couldn’t say I had seen the painted sign, because it was Duffy who had told me the name of his operation, not him.

“Your car’s parked outside,” I said.

He nodded.

“OK,” he said.

He didn’t ask about my day. The new guy with the scanner must have described it already. Now he was just standing there, looking straight at me. He was younger than Beck. Younger than Duke. Younger than me. He was maybe thirty-five. He still looked dangerous. He had flat cheekbones and dull eyes. He was like a hundred bad guys I had busted in the army.

“Enjoy the drive?” I asked him.

He didn’t answer.

“I saw you bring the scanner in,” I said. “I found the first bug. Under the seat.”

“Why did you look?” he asked.

“Habit,” I said. “Where was the second?”

“In the back,” he said. “You didn’t stop for lunch.”

“No money,” I said. “Nobody gave me any yet.”

The guy didn’t smile.

“Welcome to Maine,” he said. “Nobody gives you money here. You earn it.”

“OK,” I said.

“I’m Angel Doll,” he said, like he was expecting his name to impress me. But it

"I'm Angel Doll," he said, like he was expecting his name to impress me. But it didn't.

"I'm Jack Reacher," I said.

"The cop-killer," he said, with something in his voice.

He looked at me for a long moment and then looked away. I couldn't figure out where he fit in. Beck was the boss and Duke was his head of security but this junior guy seemed very relaxed about talking right over their heads.

"We're in a meeting," Beck said. "You can wait out by the car."

He ushered the other two back inside the room and shut the door on me. That in itself told me there was nothing worth hunting for in the secretarial area. So I wandered outside and took a good look at the security system on my way. It was fairly rudimentary, but effective. There were contact pads on the door and all the windows. They were small rectangular things. They had wires the size and color of spaghetti tacked all along the baseboards. The wires came together in a metal box mounted on the wall next to a crowded notice board. The notice board was full of yellowed paper. There was all kinds of stuff about employee insurance and fire extinguishers and evacuation points. The alarm box had a keypad and two small lights. There was a red one labeled *armed* and a green one labeled *unarmed*. There were no separate zones. No motion sensors. It was crude perimeter defense only.

I didn't wait by the car. I walked around a little, until I had gotten a feel for the place. The whole area was a warren of similar operations. There was a convoluted access road for trucks. I guessed it would operate as a one-way system. Containers would be hauled down from the piers to the north and unloaded into the warehouses. Then delivery trucks would be loaded in turn and take off south. Beck's warehouse itself wasn't very private. It was right in the middle of a row of five. But it didn't have an outside loading dock. No waist-high platform. It had a roller door instead. It was temporarily blocked by Angel Doll's Lincoln, but it was big enough to drive a truck through. Secrecy could be achieved.

There was no overall external security. It wasn't like a naval dockyard. There was no wire fencing. No gate, no barriers, no guards in booths. It was just a big messy hundred-acre area full of random buildings and puddles and dark corners. I guessed there would be some kind of activity all around the clock. How much

I guessed there would be some kind of activity all around the clock. How much, I didn't know. But probably enough to mask some clandestine comings and goings.

I was back at the Cadillac and leaning on the fender when the three of them came out. Beck and Duke came first and Doll hung back in the doorway. I still had my hands in my pockets. I was still ready to go for Duke first. But there was no overt aggression in the way anybody was moving. No wariness. Beck and Duke just walked over toward the car. They looked tired and preoccupied. Doll stayed where he was in the doorway, like he owned the place.

"Let's go," Beck said.

"No, wait," Doll called. "I need to talk to Reacher first."

Beck stopped walking. Didn't turn around.

"Five minutes," Doll said. "That's all. Then I'll lock up for you."

Beck didn't say anything. Neither did Duke. They looked irritated, but they weren't going to object. I kept my hands in my pockets and walked back. Doll turned and led me through the secretarial pen and into the back office. Through another door and into a glass-walled cubicle inside the warehouse itself. I could see a forklift on the warehouse floor and steel racks loaded with rugs. The racks were easily twenty feet high and the rugs were all tightly rolled and tied with string. The cubicle had a personnel door to the outside and a metal desk with a computer on it. The desk chair was worn out. Dirty yellow foam showed through at every seam. Doll sat down on it and looked up at me and moved his mouth into the approximate shape of a smile. I stood sideways at the end of the desk and looked down on him.

"What?" I said.

"See this computer?" he said. "It's got taps into every Department of Motor Vehicles in the country."

"So?"

"So I can look [illegible]."

"So I can check license plates."

I said nothing. He took a handgun out of his pocket. A neat move, fast and fluid. But then, it was a good pocket gun. It was a Soviet-era PSM, which is a small automatic pistol built as smooth and slim as possible, so it won't snag on clothing. It uses weird Russian ammunition, which is hard to get. It has a safety catch at the rear of the slide. Doll's was in the forward position. I couldn't remember whether that represented *safe* or *fire*.

"What do you want?" I asked him.

"I want to confirm something with you," he said. "Before I go public with it and move myself up a rung or two."

There was silence.

"How would you do that?" I asked.

"By telling them an extra little thing they don't know about yet," he said. "Maybe I'll even earn myself a nice big bonus. Like, maybe I'll get the five grand they earmarked for you."

I pressed the Glock's trigger lock in my pocket. Glanced to my left. I could see all the way through to the back office window. Beck and Duke were standing by the Cadillac. They had their backs to me. They were forty feet away. *Too close.*

"I dumped the Maxima for you," Doll said.

"Where?"

"Doesn't matter," he said. Then he smiled again.

"What?" I said again.

"You stole it, right? At random, from a shopping mall."

"So?"

"It had Massachusetts plates," he said. "They were phony. No such number has ever been issued."

Mistakes, coming back to haunt me. I said nothing.

“So I checked the VIN,” he said. “The vehicle identification number. All cars have them. On a little metal plate, top of the dash.”

“I know,” I said.

“It came back as a Maxima,” he said. “So far, so good. But it was registered in New York. To a bad boy who was arrested five weeks ago. By the government.”

I said nothing.

“You want to explain all that?” he said.

I didn’t answer.

“Maybe they’ll let me waste you myself,” he said. “I might enjoy that.”

“You think?”

“I’ve wasted people before,” he said, like he had something to prove.

“How many?” I said.

“Enough.”

I glanced through the back office window. Let go of the Glock and took my hands out of my pockets, empty.

“The New York DMV list must be out-of-date,” I said. “It was an old car. Could have been sold out of state a year ago. You check the authentication code?”

“Where?”

“Top of the screen, on the right. It needs to have the right numbers in it to be up-to-date. I was a military cop. I’ve been in the New York DMV system more times than you have.”

“I hate MPs,” he said.

I watched his gun.

“I don’t care who you hate,” I said. “I’m just telling you I know how those systems work. And that I’ve made the same mistake. More than once.”

He was quiet for a beat.

“That’s bullshit,” he said.

Now I smiled.

“So go ahead,” I said. “Embarrass yourself. No skin off my nose.”

He sat still for a long moment. Then he swapped the gun from his right hand to his left and got busy with the mouse. He tried to keep one eye on me while he clicked and scrolled. I moved a little, like I was interested in the screen. The New York DMV search page came up. I moved a little more, around behind his shoulder. He entered what must have been the Maxima’s original plate number, apparently from memory. He hit *search now*. The screen redrew. I moved again, like I was all set to prove him wrong.

“Where?” he asked.

“Right there,” I said, and started to point at the monitor. But I was pointing with both hands and all ten fingers and they didn’t make it to the screen. My right hand stopped at his neck. My left took the gun out of his left. It dropped on the floor and sounded exactly like a pound of steel hitting a plywood board covered with linoleum. I kept my eyes on the office window. Beck and Duke still had their backs to me. I got both hands around Doll’s neck and squeezed. He thrashed around wildly. Fought back. I shifted my grip. The chair fell over under him. I squeezed harder. Watched the window. Beck and Duke were just standing there. Their backs to me. Their breath was misting in front of them. Doll started clawing at my wrists. I squeezed harder still. His tongue came out of his mouth. Then he did the smart thing and gave up on my wrists and reached up behind him and went for my eyes. I pulled my head back and hooked one hand under his jaw and put the other flat against the side of his head. Wrenched his jaw hard to the right and smashed his head downward to the left and broke his neck.

I stood the chair upright again and pushed it in neatly behind the desk. Picked up

his gun and ejected the magazine. It was full. Eight bottle-necked 5.45 millimeter Soviet Pistol shells. They're roughly the same size as a .22, and they're slow, but they're supposed to hit pretty hard. Soviet security forces were supposed to be happy enough with them. I checked the chamber. There was a round in it. I checked the action. It had been set to *fire.* I reassembled the whole thing and left it cocked and locked. Put it in my left-hand pocket.

Then I went through his clothes. He had all the usual stuff. A wallet, a cell phone, a money clip without much money in it, a big bunch of keys. I left it all there. Opened the rear personnel door to the outside and checked the view. Beck and Duke were now hidden from me by the corner of the building. I couldn't see them, they couldn't see me. There was nobody else around. I walked over to Doll's Lincoln and opened the driver's door. Found the trunk release. The latch popped quietly and the lid rose an inch. I went back inside and dragged the body out by the collar. Opened the trunk all the way and heaved it inside. Latched the lid down gently and closed the driver's door. Glanced at my watch. The five minutes were up. I would have to finish the garbage disposal later. I walked back through the glass cubicle, through the back office, through the secretarial pen, through the front door, and outside. Beck and Duke heard me and turned around. Beck looked cold and annoyed by the delay. I thought: *so why stand still for it?* Duke was shivering a little and his eyes were watering and he was yawning. He looked exactly like a guy who hadn't slept for thirty-six hours. I thought: *I see a triple benefit in that.*

"I'll drive," I said. "If you want."

He hesitated. Said nothing.

"You know I can drive," I said. "You just had me driving all day. I did what you wanted. Doll told you all about it."

He said nothing.

"Was it another test?" I asked.

"You found the bug," he said.

"Did you think I wouldn't?"

"You might have acted different if you hadn't found the bug."

“Why would I? I just wanted to get back here, fast and safe. I was exposed, ten straight hours. It was no fun for me. I’ve got more to lose than you, whatever you’re into.”

He said nothing to that.

“Your call,” I said, like I didn’t care.

He hesitated a fraction more and then exhaled and handed me the keys. That was the first benefit. There’s something symbolic about handing over a set of keys. It’s about trust and inclusion. It moved me closer to the center of their circle. Made me less of an outsider. And it was a big bunch of keys. There were house keys and office keys as well as the car keys. Maybe a dozen keys in total. A lot of metal. A big symbol. Beck watched the whole transaction and made no comment about it. Just turned away and settled himself in the back of the car. Duke dumped himself in the passenger seat. I got in the driver’s seat and started the engine. Arranged my coat around me so that both of the guns in my pockets were resting in my lap. I was ready to pull them out and use them if a cell phone rang. It was a fifty-fifty chance that the next call these guys got would be because someone had found Doll’s body. Therefore the next call these guys got would also be their last. I was happy with odds of six hundred or six thousand to one, but fifty-fifty was a little too rich for me.

But no phones rang the whole way home. I drove smoothly and gently and found all the right roads. I turned east toward the Atlantic. It was already full dark out there. I came up on the palm-shaped promontory and drove out onto the rock finger and aimed straight for the house. The lights were blazing all along the top of the wall. The razor wire glittered. Paulie was waiting to open the gate. He glared at me as I drove past. I ignored him and hustled up the driveway and stopped on the carriage circle right next to the door. Beck got straight out. Duke shook himself awake and followed him.

“Where do I put the car?” I asked.

“In the garage, asshole,” he said. “Around the side.”

That was the second benefit. I was going to get five minutes alone.

I looped all the way around the carriage circle again and headed down the south side of the house. The garage block stood on its own inside a small walled

courtyard. It had probably been a stable back when the house was built. It had granite cobblestones in front of it and a vented cupola on the roof to let the smell out. The horse stalls had been knocked together to make four garages. The hayloft had been converted into an apartment. I guessed the quiet mechanic lived up there.

The garage on the left-hand end had its door open and was standing empty. I drove the Cadillac inside and killed the motor. It was gloomy in there. There were shelves filled with the kind of junk that piles up in a garage. There were oil cans and buckets and old bottles of wax polish. There was an electric tire compressor and a pile of used rags. I put the keys in my pocket and slid out of the seat. Listened for the sound of a phone in the house. Nothing. I strolled over and checked the rags. Picked up a thing the size of a hand towel. It was dark with grime and dirt and oil. I used it to wipe an imaginary spot off the Cadillac's front fender. Glanced around. Nobody there. I wrapped Doll's PSM and Duffy's Glock and her two spare magazines in the rag. Put the whole bundle under my coat. It might have been possible to get the guns into the house. Maybe. I could have gone in the back door and let the metal detector beep and looked puzzled for a second and then pulled out the big bunch of keys. I could have held them up like they explained everything. A classic piece of misdirection. It might have worked. Maybe. It would depend on their level of suspicion. But whatever, getting the guns out of the house again would have been very difficult. Assuming there were no panic phone calls anytime soon the chances were I would be leaving with Beck or Duke or both in the normal way and there was no guarantee I would have the keys again. So I had a choice. Take a chance, or play it safe? My decision was to play it safe and keep the firepower outside.

I walked out of the garage courtyard and wandered around toward the back of the house. Stopped at the corner of the courtyard wall. Stood still for a second and then turned ninety degrees and followed the wall out toward the rocks like I wanted to take a look at the ocean. It was still calm. There was a long oily swell coming in from the southeast. The water looked black and infinitely deep. I gazed at it for a moment and then ducked down and put the wrapped guns in a little dip tight against the wall. There were scrawny weeds growing there. Somebody would have to trip over them to find them.

I strolled back, hunched into my coat, trying to look like a reflective guy getting a couple of minutes' peace. It was quiet. The shore birds were gone. It was too dark for them. They would be safe in their roosts. I turned around and headed for the back door. Went in through the porch and into the kitchen. The metal

the back door. Went in through the porch and into the kitchen. The metal detector beeped. Duke and the mechanic guy and the cook all turned to look at me. I paused a beat and pulled out the keys. Held them up. They looked away. I walked in and dropped the keys on the table in front of Duke. He left them there.

The third benefit of Duke's exhaustion unfolded steadily all the way through dinner. He could barely stay awake. He didn't say a word. The kitchen was warm and steamy and we ate the kind of food that would put anybody to sleep. We had thick soup and steak and potatoes. There was a lot of it. The plates were piled high. The cook was working like a production line. There was a spare plate with a whole portion of everything just sitting untouched on a counter. Maybe somebody was in the habit of eating twice.

I ate fast and kept my ears open for the phone. I figured I could grab the car keys and be outside before the first ring finished. Inside the Cadillac before the second. Halfway down the drive before the third. I could smash through the gate. I could run Paulie over. But the phone didn't ring. There was no sound in the house at all, except people chewing. There was no coffee. I was on the point of taking that personally. I like coffee. I drank water instead. It came from the faucet over the sink and tasted like chlorine. The maid came in from the family dining room before I finished my second glass. She walked over to where I was sitting, awkward in her unfashionable shoes. She was shy. She looked Irish, like she had just come all the way from Connemara to Boston and couldn't find a job down there.

"Mr. Beck wants to see you," she said.

It was only the second time I had heard her speak. She sounded a little Irish, too. Her cardigan was wrapped tight around her.

"Now?" I asked.

"I think so," she said.

He was waiting for me in the square room with the oak dining table where I had played Russian roulette for him.

"The Toyota was from Hartford, Connecticut," he said. "Angel Doll traced the

plate this morning.”

“No front plates in Connecticut,” I said, because I had to say something.

“We know the owners,” he said.

There was silence. I stared straight at him. It took me a fraction of a second just to understand him.

“How do you know them?” I asked.

“We have a business relationship.”

“In the rug trade?”

“The nature of the relationship needn’t concern you.”

“Who are they?”

“That needn’t concern you either,” he said.

I said nothing.

“But there’s a problem,” he said. “The people you described aren’t the people who own the truck.”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded. “You described them as tall and fair. The guys who own the truck are Spanish. Small and dark.”

“So who were the guys I saw?” I asked, because I had to ask something.

“Two possibilities,” he said. “One, maybe somebody stole their truck.”

“Or?”

“Two, maybe they expanded their personnel.”

“Either one is possible,” I said.

He shook his head. “Not the first. I called them. There was no answer. So I asked

around. They've disappeared. No reason why they should disappear just because someone stole their truck."

"So they expanded their roster."

He nodded. "And decided to bite the hand that feeds them."

I said nothing.

"Are you certain they used Uzis?" he asked.

"That's what I saw," I said.

"Not MP5Ks?"

"No," I said. I looked away. No comparison. Not even close. The MP5K is a short Heckler & Koch submachine gun designed early in the 1970s. It has two big fat handles molded from expensive plastic. It looks very futuristic. Like a movie prop. Next to it an Uzi looks like something hammered together by a blind man in his basement.

"No question," I said.

"No possibility the kidnap was random?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Million to one."

He nodded again.

"So they've declared war," he said. "And they've gone to ground. They're hiding out somewhere."

"Why would they do that?"

"I have no idea."

There was silence. No sound from the sea. The swells came and went inaudibly.

"Are you going to try to find them?" I asked.

"You bet your ass," Beck said.

Duke was waiting for me in the kitchen. He was angry and impatient. He wanted to take me upstairs and get me locked down for the night. I didn't protest. A locked door with no inside keyhole is a very good alibi.

"Tomorrow, six-thirty," he said. "Back on duty."

I listened hard and heard the lock click and waited for his footsteps to recede. Then I got busy with my shoe. There was a message waiting. It was from Duffy: *back OK?* I hit *reply* and typed: *Bring a car one mile short of the house. Leave it there with key on seat. Quiet approach, no lights.*

I hit *send.* There was a short delay. I guessed she was using a laptop. She would be waiting in her motel room with it plugged in and switched on. It would go: *Bing! You've Got Mail!*

She came back with: *Why? When?*

I sent: *Don't ask. Midnight.*

There was a long delay. Then she sent: *OK.*

I sent: *Retrieve it six am, stealthy.*

She replied: *OK.*

I sent: *Beck knows the Toyota owners.*

Ninety painful seconds later she came back with: *How?*

I sent: *quote business relationship unquote.*

She asked: *Specifics?*

I sent: *Not given.*

She replied with one simple word: *Shit.*

I waited. She sent nothing more. She was probably conferring with Eliot. I could

picture them, talking fast, not looking at each other, trying to decide. I sent a question: *How many did you arrest in Hartford?* She came back with: *All of them, i.e. three.* I asked: *Are they talking?* She replied: *Not talking at all.* I asked: *Lawyers?* She came back with: *No lawyers.*

It was a very ponderous way to have a conversation. But it gave me plenty of time to think. Lawyers would have been fatal. Beck could have gotten to their lawyers, easily. Sooner or later it would have occurred to him to check if his buddies had been arrested.

I sent: *Can you keep them incommunicado?*

She sent: *Yes, two or three days.*

I sent: *Do it.*

There was a long pause. Then she came back with: *What is Beck thinking?*

I sent: *That they've declared war and gone to ground.*

She asked: *What are you going to do?*

I sent: *Not sure.*

She sent: *Will leave car, advise use it to pull out.*

I replied: *Maybe.*

There was another long pause. Then she sent: *Turn unit off, save battery.* I smiled to myself. Duffy was a very practical woman.

I lay fully dressed on the bed for three hours, listening for a phone. I didn't hear one. I got up just before midnight and rolled the Oriental rug back and lay down on the floor with my head against the oak boards and listened. It's the best way to pick up the small sounds inside a building. I could hear the heating system running. I could hear the wind around the house. It was moaning softly. The ocean itself was quiet. The house was still. It was a solid stone structure. No creaking, no cracking. No human activity. No talking, no movement. I guessed

Duke was sleeping the sleep of the dead. That was the third benefit of his exhaustion. He was the only one I was worried about. He was the only professional.

I laced my shoes tight and took off my jacket. I was still dressed in the black denim the maid had supplied. I slid the window all the way up and sat on the sill, facing the room. I stared at the door. Twisted around and looked outside. There was a slim sliver of moon. Some starlight. A little wind. Ragged silver clouds. The air was cold and salty. The ocean was moving slow and steady.

I swung my legs out into the night and shuffled sideways. Then I rolled over onto my stomach and scrabbled with my toes until I found a fold in the stone carving where an accent line had been set into the facade. I got my feet set and held the sill with both hands and craned my body outward. Used one hand to pull the window down to within two inches of closed. Eased sideways and felt for a drainpipe running down from the roof gutter. I found one about a yard away. It was a fat cast-iron pipe maybe six inches in diameter. I got my right palm flat on it. It felt solid. But it felt distant. I'm not an agile person. Put me in the Olympics and I'd be a wrestler or a boxer or a weight-lifter. Not a gymnast.

I brought my right hand back and shuffled sideways with my toes until I was as far to the right as I could get. I jumped my left hand along the sill until it was tight in the corner of the window frame. Stretched out with my right. Got it hooked around the far side of the pipe. The iron was painted and it felt cold and a little slick with night dew. I put my thumb in front and my fingers behind. Tested my grip. Craned out a little more. I was spread-eagled on the wall. I equalized the pressure between my hands and pulled inward. Kicked my feet off the ledge and jumped them sideways, one each side of the pipe. Pulled inward again and let go of the sill and brought my left hand over to join my right. Now I had the pipe in both hands. My grip held. My feet were flat on the wall. My ass was sticking right out, fifty feet above the rocks. The wind caught my hair. It was cold.

A boxer, not a gymnast. I could hold on there all night. No problem with that. But I wasn't certain how to move myself down. I tensed my arms and pulled myself in toward the wall. Slid my hands downward as I did so, six inches. Slid my feet down a matching distance. Let my weight fall backward. That seemed to work. I did it again. I bounced down, six inches at a time. Wiped each palm in turn to fight the dew. I was sweating, even though it was cold. My right hand

hurt from my bout with Paulie. I was still forty-five feet above the ground. I inched downward. Got myself level with the second floor. It was slow progress, but it was safe. Except that I was putting two hundred and fifty pounds of shock into an old iron pipe every few seconds. The pipe was probably a hundred years old. And iron rusts and rots.

It moved a little. I felt it shudder and shake and shiver. And it was slippery. I had to lock my fingers behind it to make sure my grip would hold. My knuckles were scraping on the stone. I bounced down, six inches at a time. I developed a rhythm. I would pull close, then fall back and slide my hands down and try to cushion the shock by easing my arms out straight. I let my shoulders take the impact. Then I would be bent at the waist at a tighter angle than before so I would move my feet down six inches and start again. I made it down to the first-floor windows. The pipe felt stronger there. Maybe it was anchored in a concrete base. I bounced down, faster. Made it all the way to the ground. Felt the solid rock under my feet and breathed out in relief and stepped away from the wall. Wiped my hands on my pants and stood still and listened. It felt good to be out of the house. The air was like velvet. I heard nothing. There were no lights in the windows. I felt the sting of cold on my teeth and realized I was smiling. I glanced up at the hunter's moon. Shook myself and walked quietly away to reclaim the guns.

They were still there in the rag in the dip behind the weed stalks. I left Doll's PSM where it was. I preferred the Glock. I unwrapped it and checked it carefully, out of habit. Seventeen bullets in the gun, seventeen in each of the spare magazines. Fifty-one nine-millimeter Parabellums. If I fired one, I'd probably have to fire them all. By which time somebody would have won and somebody would have lost. I put the magazines in my pockets and the gun itself in my waistband and tracked all the way around the far side of the garage block for a preliminary distant look at the wall. It was still all lit up. The lights blazed harsh and blue and angry, like a stadium. The lodge was bathed in the glow. The razor wire glittered. The light was a solid bar, thirty yards deep, bright as day, with absolute darkness beyond. The gate stood closed and chained. The whole thing looked like the outer perimeter of a nineteenth-century prison. Or an asylum.

I gazed at it until I had figured out how to get past it and then I headed around inside the cobbled courtyard. The apartment above the garages was dark and quiet. The garage doors were all closed, but none of them had locks. They were big old-fashioned timber things. They had been installed way back before

big old-fashioned timber things. They had been installed way back before anybody had thought of stealing cars. Four sets of doors, four garages. The left-hand one held the Cadillac. I had already been in there. So I checked the others, slow and quiet. The second had yet another Lincoln Town Car in it, black, the same as Angel Doll's, the same as the one the bodyguards had used. It was waxed and shiny and its doors were locked.

The third garage was completely empty. Nothing in it at all. It was clean and swept. I could see broom tracks in the dusty oil patches on the floor. There were a few carpet fibers here and there. Whoever had swept up had missed them. They were short and stiff. I couldn't make out the color in the darkness. They looked gray. They looked like they had been pulled out of a rug's burlap backing. They meant nothing to me. So I moved on.

I found what I wanted in the fourth garage. I opened the doors wide and let in just about enough moonlight to see by. The dusty old Saab the maid had used for her marketing was in there, parked head-in close to a workbench. There was a grimy window behind the bench. Gray moonlight on the ocean outside. The bench had a vise screwed to it and was covered in tools. The tools were old. Their handles were wood that had darkened with age and oil. I found a bradawl. It was just a blunt steel spike set into a handle. The handle was bulbous, turned from oak. The spike was maybe two inches long. I put it into the vise, maybe a quarter-inch deep. Tightened the vise hard. Pulled on the handle and bent the spike into a neat right angle. Loosened the vise and checked my work and put it away in my shirt pocket.

Then I found a chisel. It was a woodworking item. It had a half-inch blade and a nice ash handle. It was probably seventy years old. I hunted around and found a carborundum whetstone and a rusty can of sharpening fluid. Dabbed some fluid on the stone and spread it with the tip of the chisel. Worked the steel back and forth until it showed bright. One of the many high schools I went to was an old-fashioned place in Guam where shop was graded by how well you did with the scut work, like sharpening tools. We all scored high. It was the kind of accomplishment we were interested in. That class had the best knives I ever saw. I turned the chisel over and did the other face. I got the edge square and true. It looked like high-grade Pittsburgh steel. I wiped it on my pants. Didn't test the edge on my thumb. I didn't particularly want to bleed. I knew it was razor sharp just by looking at it.

I came out into the courtyard and squatted down in the angle of the walls and

loaded my pockets. I had the chisel if things needed to stay quiet, and I had the Glock if it was OK to go noisy. Then I scoped out my priorities. *The house first,* I decided. There was a strong possibility that I would never get another look at it.

The outer door to the kitchen porch was locked, but the mechanism was crude. It was a token three-lever affair. I put the bent spike of the bradawl in like a key and felt for the tumblers. They were big and obvious. It took me less than a minute to get inside. I stopped again and listened carefully. I didn't want to walk in on the cook. Maybe she was up late, baking a special pie. Or maybe the Irish girl was in there doing something. But there was only silence. I crossed the porch and knelt down in front of the inner door. Same crude lock. Same short time. I backed off a foot and swung the door open. Smelled the kitchen smells. Listened again. The room was cold and deserted. I put the bradawl on the floor in front of me. Put the chisel next to it. Added the Glock and the spare magazines. I didn't want to set the metal detector off. In the still of the night it would have sounded like a siren. I slid the bradawl along the floor, tight against the boards. Pushed it right through the doorway and into the kitchen. Did the same with the chisel. Kept it tight against the floor and rolled it all the way inside. Almost all commercial metal detectors have a dead zone right at the bottom. That's because men's dress shoes are made with a steel shank in the sole. It gives the shoe flexibility and strength. Metal detectors are designed to ignore shoes. It makes sense, because otherwise they would beep every time a guy with decent footwear passed through.

I slid the Glock through the dead zone and followed it with one magazine at a time. Pushed everything as far inside as I could reach. Then I stood up and walked through the door. Closed it quietly behind me. Picked up all my gear and reloaded my pockets. Debated taking my shoes off. It's easier to creep around quietly in socks. But if it comes to it, shoes are great weapons. Kick somebody with your shoes on, and you disable them. With your shoes off, you break a toe. And they take time to put back on. If I had to get out fast, I didn't want to be running around on the rocks barefoot. Or climbing the wall. I decided to keep them on and walk carefully. It was a solidly-built house. Worth the risk. I went to work.

First I searched the kitchen for a flashlight. Didn't find one. Most houses on the

end of a long power line spur have outages from time to time, so most people who live in them keep something handy. But the Becks didn't seem to. The best I could find was a box of kitchen matches. I put three in my pocket and struck one on the box. Used the flickering light to look for the big bunch of keys I had left on the table. Those keys would have helped me a lot, but they weren't there. Not on the table, not on some hook near the door, not anywhere. I wasn't very surprised. It would have been too good to be true to find them.

I blew out the match and found my way in the dark to the head of the basement stairs. Crept all the way down and struck another match with my thumbnail at the bottom. Followed the tangle of wires on the ceiling back to the breaker box. There was a flashlight on a shelf right next to it. Classic dumb place to keep a flashlight. If a breaker pops the box is your destination, not your starting point.

The flashlight was a big black Maglite the length of a nightstick. Six D cells inside. We used to use them in the army. They were guaranteed unbreakable, but we found that depended on what you hit with them, and how hard. I lit it up and blew out the match. Spat on the burned stub and put it in my pocket. Used the flashlight to check the breaker box. It had a gray metal door with twenty circuit breakers inside. None of them was labeled *gatehouse*. It must have been separately supplied, which made sense. No point in running power all the way to the main house and then running some of it all the way back to the lodge. Better to give the lodge its own tap on the incoming power line. I wasn't surprised, but I was vaguely disappointed. It would have been sweet to be able to turn the wall lights off. I shrugged and closed the box and turned around and went to look at the two locked doors I had found that morning.

They weren't locked anymore. First thing you always do before attacking a lock is to check it's not already open. Nothing makes you feel stupider than picking a lock that isn't locked. These weren't. Both doors opened easily with a turn of the handle.

The first room was completely empty. It was more or less a perfect cube, maybe eight feet on a side. I played the flashlight beam all over it. It had rock walls and a cement floor. No windows. It looked like a storeroom. It was immaculately clean and there was nothing in it. Nothing at all. No carpet fibers. Not even trash or dirt. It had been swept and vacuumed, probably earlier that day. It was a little dank and damp. Exactly how you would expect a stone cellar to feel. I could smell the distinctive dusty smell of a vacuum cleaner bag. And there was a trace of something else in the air. A faint, tantalizing odor right at the edge of

of something else in the air. A faint, tantalizing odor right at the edge of imperceptibility. It was vaguely familiar. Rich, and papery. Something I should know. I stepped right inside the room and shut off the flashlight. Closed my eyes and stood in the absolute blackness and concentrated. The smell disappeared. It was like my movements had disturbed the air molecules and the one part in a billion I was interested in had diffused itself into the clammy background of underground granite. I tried hard, but I couldn't get it. So I gave it up. It was like memory. To chase it meant to lose it. And I didn't have time to waste.

I switched the flashlight back on and came out into the basement corridor and closed the door quietly behind me. Stood still and listened. I could hear the furnace. Nothing else. I tried the next room. It was empty, too. But only in the sense that it was currently unoccupied. It had stuff in it. It was a bedroom.

It was a little larger than the storeroom. It was maybe twelve-by-ten. The flashlight beam showed me rock walls, a cement floor, no windows. There was a thin mattress on the floor. It had wrinkled sheets and an old blanket strewn across it. No pillows. It was cold in the room. I could smell stale food, stale perfume, sleep, and sweat, and fear.

I searched the whole room carefully. It was dirty. But I found nothing of significance until I pulled the mattress aside. Under it, scratched into the cement of the floor, was a single word: *justice*. It was written all in spidery capital letters. They were uneven and chalky. But they were clear. And emphatic. And underneath the letters were numbers. Six of them, in three groups of two. Month, day, year. Yesterday's date. The letters and the numbers were scratched deeper and wider than marks made with a pin or a nail or the tip of a scissor. I guessed they had been made with the tine of a fork. I put the mattress back in position and took a look at the door. It was solid oak. It was thick and heavy. It had no inside keyhole. Not a bedroom. A prison cell.

I stepped outside and closed the door and stood still again and listened hard. Nothing. I spent fifteen minutes on the rest of the basement and found nothing at all, not that I expected to. I wouldn't have been left to run around there that morning if there was anything for a person to find. So I killed the flashlight and crept back up the stairs in the dark. Went back to the kitchen and searched it until I found a big black trash can liner. Then I wanted a towel. Best thing I could find was a worn linen square designed to dry dishes with. I folded both items neatly and jammed them in my pockets. Then I came back out into the hallway and went to look at the parts of the house I hadn't seen before.

There were a lot to choose from. The whole place was a warren. I started at the front, where I had first come in the day before. The big oak door was closed tight. I gave it a wide berth, because I didn't know how sensitive the metal detector was. Some of them beep when you're a foot away. The floors were solid oak planks, covered in rugs. I stepped carefully, but I wasn't too worried about noise. The rugs and the drapes and the paneling would soak up sound.

I scouted the whole of the ground floor. Only one place caught my attention. On the north side next to the room where I had spent the time with Beck was another locked door. It was opposite the family dining room, across a wide interior hallway. It was the only locked door on the ground floor. Therefore it was the only room that interested me. Its lock was a big brass item from back when things were manufactured with pride and aplomb. It had all kinds of fancy filigree edges where it was screwed into the wood. The screw heads themselves were rubbed smooth by a hundred and fifty years of polishing. It was probably original to the house. Some old artisan up in nineteenth-century Portland had probably fashioned it by hand, in between making boat chandlery. It took me about a second and a half to open.

The room was a den. Not an office, not a study, not a family room. I covered every inch with the flashlight beam. There was no television in there. No desk, no computer. It was just a room, simply furnished in an old-fashioned style. There were heavy velvet drapes pulled across the window. There was a big armchair padded with buttoned red leather. There was a glass-fronted collector's cabinet. And rugs. They were three-deep on the floor. I checked my watch. It was nearly one o'clock. I had been on the loose for nearly an hour. I stepped into the room and closed the door quietly.

The collector's cabinet was nearly six feet tall. It had two full-width drawers at the bottom and locked glass doors above them. Behind the glass were five Thompson submachine guns. They were the classic drum-magazine gangster weapons from the 1920s, the pieces you see in old grainy black-and-white photographs of Al Capone's soldiers. They were displayed alternately facing left and right, resting on custom hardwood pegs that held them exactly level. They were all identical. And they all looked brand new. They looked like they had never been fired. Like they had never even been touched. The armchair was set to face the cabinet. There was nothing else of significance in the room. I sat down in the chair and got to wondering why anybody would want to spend time gazing at five old grease guns.

Then I heard footsteps. A light tread, upstairs, directly over my head. Three paces, four, five. Fast quiet steps. Not just deference to the time of night. A real attempt at concealment. I got up out of the chair. Stood still. Turned the flashlight off and put it in my left hand. Put the chisel in my right. I heard a door close softly. Then there was silence. I listened hard. Focused on every tiny sound. The background rush of the heating system built to a roar in my ears. My breathing was deafening. Nothing from above. Then the footsteps started again.

They were heading for the stairs. I locked myself inside the room. I knelt behind the door and tripped the tumblers, *one, two,* and listened to the creak of the staircase. It wasn't Richard coming down. It wasn't a twenty-year-old. There was a measured caution in the tread. Some kind of stiffness. Somebody getting slower and quieter as they approached the bottom. The sound disappeared altogether in the hallway. I pictured someone standing on the thick rugs, surrounded by the drapes and the paneling, looking around, listening hard. Maybe heading my way. I picked up the flashlight and the chisel again. The Glock was in my waistband. I had no doubt I could fight my way out of the house. No doubt at all. But approaching an alert Paulie over hundreds of yards of open ground and through the stadium lights would be difficult. And a firefight now would bury the mission forever. Quinn would disappear again.

There was no sound from the hallway. No sound at all. Just a crushing silence. Then I heard the front door open. I heard the rattle of a chain and a lock springing back and the click of a latch and the sucking sound of a copper insulating strip releasing its grip on the edge of the door. A second later the door closed again. I felt a tiny shudder in the structure of the house as the heavy oak hit the frame. *No beep from the metal detector.* Whoever had passed through it wasn't carrying a weapon. Or even a set of car keys.

I waited. Duke was surely fast asleep. And he wasn't the trusting type. I guessed he wouldn't walk around at night without a gun. Neither would Beck. But either one of them might be smart enough just to stand there in the hallway and open and close the door to make me think they had gone out through it. When in fact they hadn't. When in fact they were still standing right there, gun drawn, staring back into the gloom, waiting for me to show myself.

I sat down sideways in the red leather chair. Took the Glock out of my pants and aimed it left-handed at the door. Soon as they opened it wider than nine millimeters I would fire. Until then, I would wait. I was good at waiting. If they thought they were going to wait me out, they had picked the wrong guy.

thought they were going to wait me out, they had picked the wrong guy.

But a whole hour later there was still absolute silence out in the hallway. No sound of any kind. No vibrations. There was nobody there. Certainly not Duke. He would have fallen asleep by then and hit the deck. Not Beck, either. He was an amateur. It takes tremendous skill to keep absolutely still and silent for a whole hour. So the door thing hadn't been a trick. Somebody had gone out unarmed into the night.

I knelt down and used the bradawl on the tumblers again. Lay full-length on the floor and reached up and pulled the door open. A precaution. Anybody waiting for the door to open would have their eyes locked at head height. I would see them before they saw me. But there was nobody waiting. The hallway was empty. I stood upright and locked the door behind me. Walked silently down the basement stairs and put the flashlight back in its place. Felt my way back upstairs. Crept to the kitchen and slid all my hardware along the floor and out the door into the porch. Locked it behind me and crouched down and picked up all my stuff and checked the view out back. Saw nothing except an empty gray world of moonlit rocks and ocean.

I locked the porch door behind me and kept very close to the side of the house. Ducked through deep black shadows and made it back to the courtyard wall. Found the dip in the rock and wrapped the chisel and the bradawl in the rag and left them there. I couldn't take them with me. They would tear the trash bag. I followed the courtyard wall onward toward the ocean. I aimed to get down on the rocks right behind the garage block, to the south, completely out of sight of the house.

I made it halfway there. Then I froze.

Elizabeth Beck was sitting on the rocks. She was wearing a white bathrobe over a white nightgown. She looked like a ghost, or an angel. She had her elbows on her knees and she was staring into the darkness in the east like a statue.

I kept completely still. I was thirty feet away from her. I was dressed all in black but if she glanced to her left I would show up against the horizon. And sudden movement would give me away. So I just stood there. The ocean swell lapped in and out, quiet and lazy. It was a peaceful sound. Hypnotic motion. She was

staring at the water. She must have been cold. There was a slight breeze and I could see it in her hair.

I inched downward like I was trying to melt into the rock. Bent my knees and spread my fingers and eased myself down into a crouch. She moved. Just a quizzical turn of her head, like something had suddenly occurred to her. She looked right at me. Gave no sign of surprise. She stared directly at me for minute after minute. Her long fingers were laced together. Her pale face was lit by moonlight reflected off the lapping water. Her eyes were open, but clearly she wasn't seeing anything. Or else I was low enough down against the sky that she thought I was a rock or a shadow.

She sat like that for maybe ten more minutes, staring in my direction. She started shivering in the cold. Then she moved her head again, decisively, and looked away from me at the sea to her right. She unlaced her fingers and moved her hands and smoothed her hair back. Turned her face up to the sky. She stood up slowly. She was barefoot. She shuddered, like she was cold, or sad. She held her arms out sideways like a tightrope walker and stepped toward me. The ground was hurting her feet. That was clear. She balanced herself with her arms and tested every step. She came within a yard of me. Went right on by and headed back to the house. I watched her go. The wind caught her robe. Her nightdress flattened against her body. She disappeared behind the courtyard wall. A long moment later I heard the front door open. There was a tiny pause and then a soft *clump* as it closed. I dropped flat to the ground and rolled onto my back. Stared up at the stars.

I lay like that as long as I dared and then got up and scrambled the final fifty feet to the edge of the sea. Shook out the trash bag and stripped off my clothes and packed them neatly into it. I wrapped the Glock inside my shirt with the spare magazines. Stuffed my socks into my shoes and packed them on top and followed them with the small linen towel. Then I tied the bag tight and held it by the neck. Slipped into the water, dragging it behind me.

The ocean was cold. I had figured it would be. I was on the coast of Maine in April. But this was *cold.* It was icy. It was jarring and numbing. It took my breath away. Inside a second I was chilled to the bone. Five yards offshore my teeth were chattering and I was going nowhere and the salt stung my eyes.

I kicked onward until I was ten yards out and I could see the wall. It glared with light. I couldn't get through it. Couldn't get over it. So I had to go around it. No choice. I reasoned with myself. I had to swim a quarter-mile. I was strong but not fast and I was towing a bag, so it would take me maybe ten minutes. Fifteen, at the absolute maximum. That was all. And nobody dies of exposure in fifteen minutes. Nobody. Not me, anyway. Not tonight.

I fought the cold and the swell and built a kind of sidestroke rhythm. I towed the bag with my left hand for ten leg-kicks. Then I changed to my right and kicked on. There was a slight current. The tide was coming in. It was helping me. But it was freezing me, too. It was coming in all the way from the Grand Banks. It was arctic. My skin was dead and slick. My breath was rasping. My heart was thumping. I started to worry about thermal shock. I thought back to books I had read about the *Titanic*. The people who didn't make it into the lifeboats all died within an hour.

But I wasn't going to be in the water for an hour. And there were no actual icebergs around. And my rhythm was working. I was about level with the wall. The light spill stopped well short of me. I was naked and pale from the winter but I felt invisible. I passed the wall. Halfway there. I kicked onward. Pounded away. Raised my wrist clear of the water and checked the time. I had been swimming for six minutes.

I swam for six more. Trod water and gasped for air and floated the bag ahead of me and looked back. I was well clear of the wall. I changed direction and headed for the shore. Came up through slick mossy rocks onto a gritty beach. Threw the bag up ahead of me and crawled out of the water on my knees. I stayed on all fours for a whole minute, panting and shivering. My teeth were chattering wildly. I untied the bag. Found the towel. Rubbed myself furiously. My arms were blue. My clothes snagged on my skin. I got my shoes on and stowed the Glock. Folded the bag and the towel and put them wet in my pocket. Then I ran, because I needed to get warm.

I ran for nearly ten minutes before I found the car. It was the old guy's Taurus, gray in the moonlight. It was parked facing away from the house, all set to go, no delay. Duffy was a practical woman, that was for sure. I smiled again. The key was on the seat. I started the motor and eased away slowly. Kept the lights off and didn't touch the brake until I was off the palm-shaped promontory and around the first curve on the road inland. Then I lit up the headlights and turned

up the heater and hit the gas hard.

I was outside the Portland docks fifteen minutes later. I left the Taurus parked on a quiet street a mile short of Beck's warehouse. Walked the rest of the way. This was the moment of truth. If Doll's body had been found the place would be in an uproar and I would melt away and never be seen again. If it hadn't, I would live to fight another day.

The walk took the best part of twenty minutes. I saw nobody. No cops, no ambulances, no police tape, no medical examiners. No unexplained men in Lincoln Town Cars. I circled Beck's warehouse itself on a wide radius. I glimpsed it through gaps and alleys. The lights were all on in the office windows. But that was the way I had left it. Doll's car was still there by the roller door. Exactly where I had left it.

I walked away from the building and came back toward it from a new angle, from the blind side where there was no window. I took the Glock out. Held it hidden low down by my leg. Doll's car faced me. Beyond it on the left was the personnel door into the warehouse cubicle. Beyond that was the back office. I passed the car and the door and dropped to the floor and crawled under the window. Raised my head and looked inside. Nobody there. The secretarial area was empty, too. All quiet. I breathed out and put the gun away. Retraced my steps to Doll's car. Opened the driver's door and popped the trunk. He was still in there. He hadn't gone anywhere. I took his keys out of his pocket. Closed the lid on him again and carried the keys in through the personnel door. Found the right key and locked it behind me.

I was willing to risk fifteen minutes. I spent five in the warehouse cubicle, five in the back office, and five in the secretarial area. I wiped everything I touched with the linen towel, so I wouldn't leave any prints behind. I found no specific trace of Teresa Daniel. Or of Quinn. But then, there were no names named anywhere. Everything was coded, people and merchandise alike. I came away with only one solid fact. Bizarre Bazaar sold several tens of thousands of individual items every year, to several hundred individual customers, in transactions totaling several tens of millions of dollars. Nothing made clear what the items were or who the customers were. Prices were clustered around three levels: some around fifty bucks, some around a thousand bucks, and some much

more than that. There were no shipping records at all. No FedEx, no UPS, no postal service. Clearly distribution was handled privately. But an insurance file I found told me that the corporation owned only two delivery trucks.

I walked back to the warehouse cubicle and shut the computer down. Retraced my steps to the entrance hallway and turned all the lights off as I went and left everything neat and tidy. I tested Doll's keys in the front door and found the one that fit and clamped it in my palm. Turned back to the alarm box.

Doll was clearly trusted to lock up, which meant he knew how to set the alarm. I was sure Duke would do it himself, from time to time. And Beck, obviously. Probably one or two of the clerks as well. A whole bunch of people. One of them would have a lousy memory. I looked at the notice board next to the box. Flipped through the memos where they were pinned three-deep. Found a four-figure code written on the bottom of a two-year-old note from the city about new parking regulations. I entered it on the keypad. The red light started flashing and the box started beeping. I smiled. It never fails. Computer passwords, unlisted numbers, alarm codes, someone always writes them down.

I went out the front door and closed it behind me. The beeping stopped. I locked it and walked around the corner and slid into Doll's Lincoln. Started it up and drove it away. I left it in a downtown parking garage. It could have been the same one that Susan Duffy had photographed. I wiped everything I had touched and locked it up and put the keys in my pocket. I thought about setting it on fire. It had gas in the tank and I still had two dry kitchen matches. Burning cars is fun. And it would increase the pressure on Beck. But in the end I just walked away. It was probably the right decision. It would take most of a day for anybody to grow aware of it parked there. Most of another day for them to decide to do something about it. Then another day for the cops to respond. They would trace the plate and come up against one of Beck's shell corporations. So they would tow it away, pending further inquiry. They would bust open the trunk for sure, worried about terrorist bombs or because of the smell, but by then a whole bunch of other deadlines would have been reached and I would be long gone.

I walked back to the Taurus and drove it to within a mile of the house. Returned Duffy's compliment by U-turning and leaving it facing the right way for her.

Then I went through my previous routine in reverse. I stripped on the gritty beach and packed the garbage bag. Waded into the sea. I wasn't keen to do it. It was just as cold. But the tide had turned. It was going my way. Even the ocean was cooperating. I swam the same twelve minutes. Looped right around the end of the wall and came ashore behind the garage block. I was shaking with cold and my teeth were chattering again. But I felt good. I dried myself as well as I could on the damp linen rag and dressed fast before I froze. Left the Glock and the spare magazines and Doll's set of keys hidden with the PSM and the chisel and the bradawl. Folded the bag and the towel and wedged them under a rock a yard away. Then I headed for my drainpipe. I was still shivering.

The climb was easier going up than coming down. I walked my hands up the pipe and my feet up the wall. Got level with my window and grabbed the sill with my left hand. Jumped my feet across to the stone ledge. Brought my right hand over and pushed the window up. Hauled myself inside as quietly as I could.

The room was icy. The window had been open for hours. I closed it tight and stripped again. My clothes were damp. I laid them out on the radiator and headed for the bathroom. Took a long hot shower. Then I locked myself in there with my shoes. It was exactly six in the morning. They would be picking up the Taurus. Probably Eliot and the old guy would be doing it. Probably Duffy would have stayed back at base. I took the e-mail device out and sent: *Duffy?* Ninety seconds later she came back with: *Here. You OK?* I sent: *Fine. Check these names anywhere you can, inc. with MP Powell—Angel Doll, poss. associate Paulie, both poss. ex-military.*

She sent: *Will do.*

Then I sent the question that had been on my mind for five and a half hours: *What is Teresa Daniel's real name?*

There was the usual ninety-second delay, and then she came back with: *Teresa Justice.*

CHAPTER 6

No point in going to bed, so I just stood at the window and watched the dawn. It was soon in full flow. The sun came up over the sea. The air was fresh and clear. I could see fifty miles. I watched an arctic tern coming in low from the north. It skimmed the rocks as it passed them. I guessed it was looking for a place to build a nest. The low sun behind it threw shadows as big as vultures. Then it gave up on the search for shelter and looped and wheeled and swooped away over the water and tumbled into the ocean. It came out a long moment later and silver droplets of freezing water trailed it back into the sky. It had nothing in its beak. But it flew on like it was happy enough. It was better adapted than me.

There wasn't much to see after that. There were a few herring gulls far in the distance. I squinted against the glare and looked for signs of whales or dolphins and saw nothing. I watched mats of seaweed drift around on circular currents. At six-fifteen I heard Duke's footsteps in the corridor and the click of my lock. He didn't come in. He just tramped away again. I turned and faced the door and took a deep breath. Day thirteen, Thursday. Maybe that was better than day thirteen falling on a Friday. I wasn't sure. *Whatever, bring it on.* I took another breath and walked out through the door and headed down the stairs.

Nothing was the same as the morning before. Duke was fresh and I was tired. Paulie wasn't around. I went down to the basement gym and found nobody there. Duke didn't stay for breakfast. He disappeared somewhere. Richard Beck came in to eat in the kitchen. There was just him and me at the table. The mechanic wasn't there. The cook stayed busy at the stove. The Irish girl came in and out from the dining room. She was moving fast. There was a buzz in the air. Something was happening.

"Big shipment coming in," Richard Beck said. "It's always like this. Everybody gets excited about the money they're going to make."

"You heading back to school?" I asked him.

"Sunday," he said. He didn't seem worried about it. But I was. Sunday was three days away. My fifth full day there. The final deadline. Whatever was going to happen would have happened by then. The kid was going to be in the crossfire

happen would have happened by then. The kid was going to be in the crossfire throughout.

“You OK with that?” I asked.

“With going back?”

I nodded. “After what happened.”

“We know who did it now,” he said. “Some assholes from Connecticut. It won’t happen again.”

“You can be that sure?”

He looked at me like I was nuts. “My dad handles stuff like this all the time. And if it’s not done by Sunday, then I’ll just stay here until it is.”

“Does your dad run this whole thing by himself? Or does he have a partner?”

“He runs it all by himself,” he said. His ambivalence was gone. He looked happy to be home, secure and comfortable, proud of his dad. His world had contracted to a barren half-acre of lonely granite, hemmed in by the restless sea and a high stone wall topped by razor wire.

“I don’t think you really killed that cop,” he said.

The kitchen went quiet. I stared at him.

“I think you just wounded him,” he said. “I’m hoping so, anyway. You know, maybe he’s recovering right now. In a hospital somewhere. That’s what I’m thinking. You should try to do the same. Think positive. It’s better that way. Then you can have the silver lining without the cloud.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“So just pretend,” he said. “Use the power of positive thinking. Say to yourself, I did a good thing and there was no downside.”

“Your dad called the local police,” I said. “I don’t think there was any room for doubt.”

“So just pretend,” he said again. “That’s what I do. Bad things didn’t happen

"So just pretend," he said again. "That's what I do. Bad things didn't happen unless you choose to recall them."

He had stopped eating and his left hand was up at the left side of his head. He was smiling brightly, but his subconscious was recalling some bad things, right there and then. That was clear. It was recalling them big time.

"OK," I said. "It was just a flesh wound."

"In and out," he said. "Clean as a whistle."

I said nothing.

"Missed everything by a fraction," he said. "It was a miracle."

I nodded. It would have been some kind of a miracle. That was for damn sure. Shoot somebody in the chest with a soft-nose .44 Magnum and you blow a hole in them the size of Rhode Island. Death is generally instantaneous. The heart stops immediately, mostly because it isn't there anymore. I figured the kid hadn't seen anybody shot before. Then I thought, but maybe he has. And maybe he didn't like it very much.

"Positive thinking," he said. "That's the key. Just assume he's warm and comfortable somewhere, making a full recovery."

"What's in the shipment?" I asked.

"Fakes, probably," he said. "From Pakistan. We get two-hundred-year-old Persians made there. People are such suckers."

"Are they?"

He looked at me and nodded. "They see what they want to see."

"Do they?"

"All the time."

I looked away. There was no coffee. After a while you realize that caffeine is addictive. I was irritated. And tired.

"What are you doing today?" he asked me.

"What are you doing today?" he asked me.

"I don't know," I said.

"I'm just going to read," he said. "Maybe stroll a little. Walk the shoreline, see what washed up in the night."

"Things wash up?"

"Sometimes. You know, things fall off boats."

I looked at him. *Was he telling me something?* I had heard of smugglers floating bales of marijuana ashore in isolated places. I guessed the same system would work for heroin. *Was he telling me something?* Or was he warning me? Did he know about my hidden bundle of hardware? And what was all that stuff about the shot cop? Psychobabble? Or was he playing games with me?

"But that's mostly in the summer," he said. "It's too cold for boats right now. So I guess I'll stay inside. Maybe I'll paint."

"You paint?"

"I'm an art student," he said. "I told you that."

I nodded. Stared at the back of the cook's head, like I could induce her to make coffee by telepathy. Then Duke came in. He walked over to where I was sitting. Placed one hand on the back of my chair and the other flat on the table. Bent low, like he needed to have a confidential conversation.

"Your lucky day, asshole," he said.

I said nothing.

"You're driving Mrs. Beck," he said. "She wants to go shopping."

"Where?"

"Wherever," he said.

"All day?"

"It better be."

I nodded. *Don't trust the stranger on shipment day.*

"Take the Cadillac," he said. He dropped the keys on the table. "Make sure she doesn't rush back."

Or, don't trust Mrs. Beck on shipment day.

"OK," I said.

"You'll find it very interesting," he said. "Especially the first part. Gives me a hell of a kick, anyway, every single time."

I had no idea what he meant, and I didn't waste time speculating about it. I just stared at the empty coffee pot and Duke left and a moment later I heard the front door open and close. The metal detector beeped twice. Duke and Beck, guns and keys. Richard got up from the table and wandered out and I was left alone with the cook.

"Got any coffee?" I asked her.

"No," she said.

I sat there until I finally figured that a dutiful chauffeur should be ready and waiting, so I headed out through the back door. The metal detector beeped politely at the keys. The tide was all the way in and the air was cold and fresh. I could smell salt and seaweed. The swell was gone and I could hear waves breaking. I walked around to the garage block and started the Cadillac and backed it out. Drove it around to the carriage circle and waited there with the motor running to get the heater going. I could see tiny ships on the horizon heading in and out of Portland. They crawled along just beyond the line where the sky met the water, half-hidden, infinitely slow. I wondered if one of them was Beck's, or whether it was in already, all tied up and set for unloading. I wondered whether a Customs officer was already walking right past it, eyes front, heading for the next ship in line, a wad of crisp new bills in his pocket.

Elizabeth Beck came out of the house ten minutes later. She was wearing a knee-length plaid skirt and a thin white sweater with a wool coat over it. Her legs were bare. No panty hose. Her hair was pulled back with a rubber band. She looked cold. And defiant, and resigned, and apprehensive. Like a noblewoman

walking to the guillotine. I guessed she was used to having Duke drive her. I guessed she was a little conflicted about riding with the cop-killer. I got out and made ready to open the rear door. She walked right past it.

“I’ll sit in front,” she said.

She settled herself in the passenger seat and I slid back in next to her.

“Where to?” I asked politely.

She stared out her window.

“We’ll talk about that when we’re through the gate,” she said.

The gate was closed and Paulie was standing dead-center in front of it. His shoulders and arms looked like he had basketballs stuffed inside his suit. The skin on his face was red with cold. He had been waiting there for us. I stopped the car six feet in front of him. He made no move toward the gate. I looked straight at him. He ignored me and tracked around to Elizabeth Beck’s window. Smiled at her and tapped on the glass with his knuckles and made a winding motion with his hand. She stared straight ahead through the windshield. Tried to ignore him. He tapped again. She turned to look at him. He raised his eyebrows. Made the winding motion again. She shuddered. It was enough of a definite physical spasm to rock the car on its springs. She stared hard at one of her fingernails and then placed it on the window button and pressed. The glass buzzed down. Paulie squatted with his right forearm on the door frame.

“Good morning,” he said.

He leaned in and touched her cheek with the back of his forefinger. Elizabeth Beck didn’t move. Just stared straight ahead. He tucked a stray wisp of hair behind her ear.

“I enjoyed our visit last night,” he said.

She shuddered again. Like she was deathly cold. He moved his hand. Dropped it to her breast. Cupped it. Squeezed it. She sat still for it. I used the button on my side. Her glass buzzed up. Then it stalled against Paulie’s giant arm and the safety feature kicked in and it came back down again. I opened my door and slid out. Rounded the hood. Paulie was still squatting down. He still had his hand inside the car. It had moved a little lower.

inside the car. It had moved a little lower.

“Back off,” he said, looking at her, talking to me.

I felt like a lumberjack confronting a redwood tree without an ax or a chainsaw. *Where do I start?* I kicked him in the kidney. It was the kind of kick that would have sent a football out of the stadium and into the parking lot. It would have cracked a utility pole. It would have put most guys in the hospital all by itself. It would have killed some of them. It had about as much effect on Paulie as a polite tap on the shoulder. He didn’t even make a noise. He just put both hands on the door frame and slowly pushed himself upright. Turned around to face me.

“Relax, Major,” he said. “Just my way of saying good morning to the lady.”

Then he moved away from the car and looped right around me and unlocked the gate. I watched him. He was very calm. No sign of a reaction. It was like I hadn’t touched him at all. I stood still and let the adrenaline drain away. Then I looked at the car. At the trunk, and at the hood. To walk around the trunk would say *I’m scared of you.* So I walked around the hood instead. But I made sure to stay well out of his reach. I had no desire to give some surgeon six months’ work rebuilding the bones in my face. The closest I got to him was about five feet. He made no move on me. Just cranked the gate all the way open and stood there patiently waiting to close it again.

“We’ll talk about that kick later, OK?” he called.

I didn’t reply.

“And don’t get the wrong impression, Major,” he said. “She likes it.”

I got back in the car. Elizabeth Beck had closed her window. She was staring straight ahead, pale and silent and humiliated. I drove through the gate. Headed west. Watched Paulie in the mirror. He closed the gate and headed back inside the lodge. Disappeared from sight.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” Elizabeth said quietly.

I said nothing.

“And thank you for your intervention,” she said. “But it will prove futile. And I’m afraid it will bring you a lot of trouble. He already hates you, you know.

And he's not very rational."

I said nothing.

"It's a control thing, of course," she said. It was like she was explaining it to herself. It wasn't like she was talking to me. "It's a demonstration of power. That's all it is. There's no actual sex. He can't do it. Too many steroids, I suppose. He just paws me."

I said nothing.

"He makes me undress," she said. "Makes me parade around for him. Paws me. There's no sex. He's impotent."

I said nothing. Just drove slow, keeping the car steady and level through the coastal curves.

"It usually lasts about an hour," she said.

"Have you told your husband?" I asked.

"What could *he* do?"

"Fire the guy."

"Not possible," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because Paulie doesn't work for my husband."

I glanced at her. Recalled telling Duke: *You should get rid of him.* Duke had answered: *That's not easy.*

"So who does he work for?" I said.

"Somebody else."

"Who?"

She shook her head. It was like she couldn't speak the name.

“It’s a control thing,” she said again. “I can’t object to what they do to me, just like my husband can’t object to what they do to him. Nobody can object. To *anything*, you see. That’s the point. You won’t be allowed to object to anything, either. Duke wouldn’t think to object, of course. He’s an animal.”

I said nothing.

“I just thank God I have a son,” she said. “Not a daughter.”

I said nothing.

“Last night was very bad,” she said. “I was hoping he would start leaving me alone. Now that I’m getting old.”

I glanced at her again. Couldn’t think of anything to say.

“It was my birthday yesterday,” she said. “That was Paulie’s present to me.”

I said nothing.

“I turned fifty,” she said. “I suppose you don’t want to think about a naked fifty-year-old, parading around.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“But I keep in shape,” she said. “I use the gym when the others aren’t around.”

I said nothing.

“He pages me,” she said. “I have to carry a pager at all times. It buzzed in the middle of the night. Last night. I had to go, right away. It’s much worse if I keep him waiting.”

I said nothing.

“I was on my way back when you saw me,” she said. “Out there on the rocks.”

I pulled onto the side of the road. Braked gently and stopped the car. Eased the gearshift into Park.

gearshift into Park.

“I think you work for the government,” she said.

I shook my head.

“You’re wrong,” I said. “I’m just a guy.”

“Then I’m disappointed.”

“I’m just a guy,” I said again.

She said nothing.

“You shouldn’t say stuff like that,” I said. “I’m in enough trouble already.”

“Yes,” she said. “They’d kill you.”

“Well, they’d try,” I said. Then I paused. “Have you told them what you think?”

“No,” she said.

“Well don’t. And you’re wrong anyway.”

She said nothing.

“There’d be a battle,” I said. “They’d come for me and I wouldn’t go quietly. People would get hurt. Richard, maybe.”

She stared at me. “Are you *bargaining* with me?”

I shook my head again.

“I’m warning you,” I said. “I’m a survivor.”

She smiled a bitter smile.

“You have absolutely no idea,” she said. “Whoever you are, you’re in way over your head. You should leave now.”

“I’m just a guy,” I said. “I’ve got nothing to hide from them.”

The wind rocked the car. I could see nothing but granite and trees. We were miles from the nearest human being.

“My husband is a criminal,” she said.

“I figured that,” I said.

“He’s a hard man,” she said. “He can be violent, and he’s always ruthless.”

“But he’s not his own boss,” I said.

“No,” she said. “He isn’t. He’s a hard man who literally quakes in front of the person who *is* his boss.”

I said nothing.

“There’s an expression,” she said. “People ask, why do bad things happen to good people? But in my husband’s case, bad things are happening to a bad person. Ironic, isn’t it? But they *are* bad things.”

“Who does Duke belong to?”

“My husband. But Duke’s as bad as Paulie, in his way. I wouldn’t care to choose between them. He was a corrupt cop, and a corrupt federal agent, and a killer. He’s been in prison.”

“Is he the only one?”

“On my husband’s payroll? Well, he had the two bodyguards. They were his. Or they were provided for him, anyway. But they were killed, of course. Outside Richard’s college. By the men from Connecticut. So yes, Duke’s the only one now. Apart from the mechanic, of course. But he’s just a technician.”

“How many has the other guy got?”

“I’m not sure. They seem to come and go.”

“What exactly are they importing?”

She looked away. “If you’re not a government man, then I guess you wouldn’t be interested.”

I followed her gaze toward the distant trees. *Think, Reacher.* This could be an elaborate con game designed to flush me out. They could all be in it together. His gate man's hand on his wife's breast would be a small price for Beck to pay for some crucial information. And I believed in elaborate con games. I had to. I was riding one myself.

"I'm not a government man," I said.

"Then I'm disappointed," she said again.

I put the car in Drive. Held my foot on the brake.

"Where to?" I asked.

"Do you think I care where the hell we go?"

"You want to get some coffee?"

"Coffee?" she said. "Sure. Go south. Let's stay well away from Portland today."

I made the turn south onto Route One, about a mile short of I-95. It was a pleasant old road, like roads used to be. We passed through a place called Old Orchard Beach. It had neat brick sidewalks and Victorian streetlights. There were signs pointing left to a beach. There were faded French flags. I guessed Quebec Canadians had vacationed there before cheap airfares to Florida and the Caribbean had changed their preferences.

"Why were you out last night?" Elizabeth Beck asked me.

I said nothing.

"You can't deny it," she said. "Did you think I hadn't seen you?"

"You didn't react," I said.

"I was in Paulie mode," she said. "I've trained myself not to react."

I said nothing.

“Your room was locked,” she said.

“I climbed out the window,” I said. “I don’t like to be locked in.”

“What did you do then?”

“I took a stroll. Like I thought you were doing.”

“Then you climbed back in?”

I nodded. Said nothing.

“The wall is your big problem,” she said. “There are the lights and the razor wire, obviously, but there are sensors too, in the ground. Paulie would hear you from thirty yards away.”

“I was just getting some air,” I said.

“No sensors under the driveway,” she said. “They couldn’t make them work under the blacktop. But there’s a camera on the lodge. And there’s a motion alarm on the gate itself. Do you know what an NSV is?”

“Soviet tank-turret machine gun,” I said.

“Paulie’s got one,” she said. “He keeps it by the side door. He’s been told to use it if he hears the motion alarm.”

I breathed in, and then I breathed out. An NSV is more than five feet long and weighs more than fifty-five pounds. It uses cartridges four and a half inches long and a half-inch wide. It can fire twelve of them in a second. It has no safety mechanism. The combination of Paulie and an NSV would be nobody’s idea of fun.

“But I think you swam,” she said. “I can smell the sea on your shirt. Very faintly. You didn’t dry yourself properly when you got back.”

We passed a sign for a town called Saco. I coasted to the shoulder and stopped again. Cars and trucks whined past us.

“You were incredibly lucky,” she said. “There are some bad riptides off the point. Strong undertow. But I expect you went in behind the garages. In which

case you missed them by about ten feet."

"I don't work for the government," I said.

"Don't you?"

"Don't you think you're taking a hell of a chance?" I said. "Let's say I wasn't exactly what I appeared to be. Just for the sake of argument. Let's say I was from a rival organization, for instance. Don't you see the risk? You think you would make it back to the house alive? Saying what you're saying?"

She looked away.

"Then I guess that will be the test," she said. "If you're a government man, you won't kill me. If you're not, you will."

"I'm just a guy," I said. "You could get me in trouble."

"Let's find coffee," she said. "Saco is a nice town. All the big mill owners lived there, way back."

We ended up on an island in the middle of the Saco River. There was an enormous brick building on it that had been a gigantic mill, way back in history. Now it was being gentrified into hundreds of offices and stores. We found a glass-and-chrome coffee shop called *Café Café.* A pun in French, I guessed. But the smell alone was worth the trip. I ignored the lattes and the flavored foamy stuff and ordered regular coffee, hot, black, large. Then I turned to Elizabeth Beck. She shook her head.

"You stay," she said. "I've decided to go shopping. Alone. I'll meet you back here in four hours."

I said nothing.

"I don't need your permission," she said. "You're just my driver."

"I don't have any money," I said.

She gave me twenty bucks from her purse. I paid for the coffee and carried it to a table. She came with me and watched me sit down.

“Four hours,” she said. “Maybe a little more, but no less. In case there’s something you need to do.”

“I’ve got nothing to do,” I said. “I’m just your driver.”

She looked at me. Zipped her purse. The space around my table was tight. She twisted a little to get the strap of her purse square on her shoulder. Jackknifed slightly to avoid touching the table and spilling my coffee. There was a *clunk*, like plastic hitting the floor. I looked down. Something had fallen out from under her skirt. She stared at it and her face slowly turned a deep shade of red. She bent and picked the thing up and clutched it in her hand. Fumbled her way onto the chair opposite me like all the strength had gone out of her. Like she was utterly humiliated. She was holding a pager. It was a black plastic rectangle a little smaller than my own e-mail device. She stared at it. Her neck was bright red all the way down under her sweater. She spoke in a low rueful whisper.

“He makes me carry it there,” she said. “Inside my underpants. He likes it to have what he calls the appropriate effect when it buzzes. He checks that it’s there every time I go through the gate. Normally I take it out and put it in my bag afterward. But I didn’t want to do that, you know, this time, with you watching.”

I said nothing. She stood up. Blinked twice and took a breath and swallowed.

“Four hours,” she said. “In case there’s something you need to do.”

Then she walked away. I watched her go. She turned left outside the door and disappeared. *An elaborate con game?* It was possible that they could try to set me up with her story. Possible that she could carry a pager in her pants to back it up. Possible that she could contrive to shake it loose at exactly the right moment. All possible. But what wasn’t even remotely possible was that she could manufacture a deep red blush, right on cue. Nobody can do that. Not even the world’s finest actress at the peak of her powers could do that. So Elizabeth Beck was for real.

I didn't abandon sensible precautions entirely. They were too deeply ingrained for that. I finished my coffee like an innocent person with all the time in the world. Then I strolled out to the mall's internal sidewalks and turned random lefts and rights until I was sure I was alone. Then I went back to the coffee shop and bought another cup. Borrowed their restroom key and locked myself in. Sat on the lid of the john and took off my shoe. There was a message waiting from Duffy: *Why interest in Teresa Daniel's real name?* I ignored it and sent: *Where is your motel?* Ninety seconds later she answered: *What did you have for breakfast first day in Boston?* I smiled. Duffy was a practical woman. She was worried my e-mail device had been compromised. She was asking a security question. I sent: *Short stack with egg, coffee, three-dollar tip, I ate it.* Any other answer than that and she would be running for her car. Ninety seconds later she came back with: *West side of Route One 100 yards south of Kennebunk River.* I figured that was about ten miles away. I sent: *See you in 10 minutes.*

It took me more like fifteen minutes by the time I had gotten back to the car and fought the traffic where Route One bottlenecked through Saco. I kept one eye on the mirror the whole way and saw nothing to worry about. I crossed the river and found a motel on my right. It was a cheerful bright gray place pretending to be a string of classic New England saltboxes. It was April and not very busy. I saw the Taurus I had been a passenger in out of Boston parked next to the end room. It was the only plain sedan I could see. I put the Cadillac thirty yards away behind a wooden shed hiding a big propane tank. No sense in leaving it visible to everybody passing by on Route One.

I walked back and knocked once and Susan Duffy opened the door fast and we hugged. We just went straight into it. It took me completely by surprise. I think it took her by surprise, too. We probably wouldn't have done it if we had thought about it first. But I guess she was anxious and I was stressed and it just happened. And it felt real good. She was tall, but she was slight. My hand spanned almost the whole width of her back and I felt her ribs give a little. She smelled fresh and clean. No perfume. Just skin, not long out of the shower.

"What do you know about Teresa?" she asked.

"You alone?" I asked.

She nodded. “The others are in Portland. Customs says Beck’s got a boat coming in today.”

We let go of each other. Moved on into the room.

“What are they going to do?” I asked.

“Observation only,” she said. “Don’t worry. They’re good at it. Nobody will see them.”

It was a very generic motel room. One queen bed, a chair, a desk, a TV, a window, a through-the-wall air conditioner. The only things that distinguished it from a hundred thousand other motel rooms were a blue-and-gray color scheme and nautical prints on the wall. They gave it a definite New England coastal flavor.

“What do you know about Teresa?” she asked again.

I told her about the name carved into the basement room floor. And the date. Duffy stared at me. Then she closed her eyes.

“She’s alive,” she said. “Thank you.”

“Well, she was alive yesterday,” I said.

She opened her eyes. “You think she’s alive today?”

I nodded. “I think the odds are pretty good. They want her for something. Why keep her alive nine weeks and kill her now?”

Duffy said nothing.

“I think they just moved her,” I said. “That’s all. That’s my best guess. The door was locked in the morning, she was gone by the evening.”

“You think she’s been treated OK?”

I didn’t tell her what Paulie liked to do with Elizabeth Beck. She already had enough to worry about.

“I think she scratched her name with a fork,” I said. “And there was a spare plate

of steak and potatoes lying around last night, like they took her out in such a hurry they forgot to tell the cook. So I think they were probably feeding her. I think she's a prisoner, plain and simple."

"Where would they have taken her?"

"I think Quinn's got her," I said.

"Why?"

"Because it seems to me what we're looking at here is one organization superimposed over another. Beck's a bad guy for sure, but he's been taken over by a worse guy."

"Like a corporate thing?"

"Exactly," I said. "Like a hostile takeover. Quinn's put his staff into Beck's operation. He's riding it like a parasite."

"But why would they move Teresa?"

"A precaution," I said.

"Because of you? How worried are they?"

"A little," I said. "I think they're moving things and hiding things."

"But they haven't confronted you yet."

I nodded. "They're not really sure about me."

"So why are they taking a risk with you?"

"Because I saved the boy."

She nodded. Went quiet. She looked a little tired. I guessed maybe she hadn't slept at all since I asked her for the car at midnight. She was wearing jeans and a man's Oxford shirt. The shirt was pure white and neatly tucked in. The top two buttons were undone. She was wearing boat shoes over bare feet. The room heat was set on high. There was a laptop computer on the desk, next to the room phone. The phone was a console thing all covered in fast-dial buttons. I checked

the number and memorized it. The laptop was plugged through a complex adapter into a data port built into the base of the phone. There was a screensaver playing on it. It showed the Justice Department shield drifting around. Every time it reached the edge of the screen it would bounce off in a new random direction like that ancient video tennis game. There was no sound with it.

“Have you seen Quinn yet?” she asked.

I shook my head.

“Know where he operates out of?”

I shook my head again. “I haven’t really seen anything. Except their books are coded and they don’t have enough of a distribution fleet to be moving what they seem to move. Maybe their customers collect.”

“That would be insane,” she said. “They wouldn’t show their customers their base of operations. In fact we already know they don’t. Beck met with the LA dealer in a parking garage, remember.”

“So maybe they rendezvous somewhere neutral. For the actual sales. Somewhere close by, in the northeast.”

She nodded. “How did you see their books?”

“I was in their office last night. That’s why I wanted the car.”

She moved to the desk and sat down and tapped the laptop’s touch pad. The screensaver disappeared. My last e-mail was displayed under it: *See you in 10 minutes.* She went into the deleted items directory and clicked on a message from Powell, the MP who had sold me out.

“We traced those names for you,” she said. “Angel Doll did eight years in Leavenworth for sexual assault. Should have been life for rape and murder, but the prosecution screwed up. He was a communications technician. Raped a female lieutenant colonel, left her to bleed to death from the inside. He’s not a very nice guy.”

“He’s a very dead guy,” I said.

She just looked at me.

“He checked the Maxima’s plates,” I said. “Confronted me. Big error. He was the first casualty.”

“You killed him?”

I nodded. “Broke his neck.”

She said nothing.

“His choice,” I said. “He was about to compromise the mission.”

She was pale.

“You OK?” I said.

She looked away. “I wasn’t really expecting casualties.”

“There might be more. Get used to it.”

She looked back at me. Took a breath. Nodded.

“OK,” she said. Then she paused. “Sorry about the plates. That was a mistake.”

“Anything about Paulie?”

She scrolled down the screen. “Doll had a buddy in Leavenworth called Paul Masserella, a bodybuilder, serving eight for assault on an officer. His defense counsel pleaded it down on account of steroid rage. Tried to blame the army for not monitoring Masserella’s intake.”

“His intake is all over the place now.”

“You think he’s the same Paulie?”

“Must be. He told me he doesn’t like officers. I kicked him in the kidney. It would have killed you or Eliot. He didn’t even notice.”

“What’s he going to do about it?”

“I hate to think.”

“You OK with going back?”

You OK with going back?

“Beck’s wife knows I’m phony.”

She stared at me. “How?”

I shrugged. “Maybe she doesn’t *know*. Maybe she just wants me to be. Maybe she’s trying to convince herself.”

“Is she broadcasting it?”

“Not yet. She saw me out of the house last night.”

“You can’t go back.”

“I’m not a quitter.”

“You’re not an idiot, either. It’s out of control now.”

I nodded. “But it’s my decision.”

She shook her head. “It’s our decision, jointly. You’re depending on our backup.”

“We need to get Teresa out of there. We really do, Duffy. It’s a hell of a situation for her to be in.”

“I could send SWAT teams for her. Now you’ve confirmed she’s alive.”

“We don’t know where she is right now.”

“She’s my responsibility.”

“And Quinn is mine.”

She said nothing.

“You can’t send SWAT teams,” I said. “You’re off the books. Asking for SWAT teams is the same thing as asking to be fired.”

“I’m prepared to get fired, if it comes to it.”

“It’s not just you,” I said. “Six other guys would get fired with you.”

She said nothing.

“And I’m going back anyway,” I said. “Because I want Quinn. With you or without you. So you might as well use me.”

“What did Quinn *do* to you?”

I said nothing. She was quiet for a long moment.

“Would Mrs. Beck talk to us?” she said.

“I don’t want to ask her,” I said. “Asking her is the same thing as confirming her suspicions. I can’t be sure exactly where that would lead.”

“What would you do if you went back?”

“Get promoted,” I said. “That’s the key. I need to move up into Duke’s job. Then I’ll be top boy on Beck’s side. Then I’ll get some kind of official liaison with Quinn’s side. That’s what I need. I’m working in the dark without it.”

“We need progress,” she said. “We need evidence.”

“I know,” I said.

“How will you get promoted?”

“Same way anybody gets promoted,” I said.

She didn’t reply to that. Just switched her e-mail program back to *inbox* and stood up and stepped away to the window to look at the view. I looked at her. The light behind her was coming right through her shirt. Her hair was swept back and a couple of inches of it was on her collar. It looked like a five-hundred-dollar style to me, but I guessed on a DEA salary she probably did it herself. Or got a girlfriend to do it for her. I could picture her in someone’s kitchen, on a chair set out in the middle of the floor, an old towel around her neck, interested in how she looked but not interested enough to spend big bucks in a city salon.

Her butt looked spectacular in the jeans. I could see the label on the back: *Waist 24. Leg 32.* That made her inseam five inches short of mine, which I was

prepared to accept. But a waist a whole foot smaller than mine was ridiculous. I carry almost no body fat. All I've got in there are the necessary organs, tight and dense. She must have had miniature versions. I see a waist like that and all I want to do is span it with my hands and marvel at it. Maybe bury my head somewhere a little higher up. I couldn't tell what that might feel like with her unless she turned around. But I suspected it might feel very nice indeed.

"How dangerous is it now?" she asked. "Realistic assessment?"

"Can't tell," I said. "Too many variables. Mrs. Beck is running on intuition, that's all. Maybe a little wish-fulfillment with it. She's got no hard evidence. In terms of hard evidence I think I'm holding up OK. So even if Mrs. Beck talks to somebody it all depends on whether they choose to take a woman's intuition seriously or not."

"She saw you out of the house. That's hard evidence."

"But of what? That I'm restless?"

"This guy Doll was killed while you weren't locked up."

"They'll assume I didn't get past the wall. And they won't find Doll. No way. Not in time."

"Why did they move Teresa?"

"Precaution."

"It's out of control now," she said again.

I shrugged, even though she couldn't see the gesture. "This kind of thing is always out of control. It's to be expected. Nothing ever works like you predict it. All plans fall apart as soon as the first shot is fired."

She went quiet. Turned around.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked.

I paused a beat. The light was still behind her. *Very nice indeed.*

"I'm going to take a nap," I said.

“How long have you got?”

I checked my watch. “About three hours.”

“You tired?”

I nodded. “I was up all night, swimming, mostly.”

“You swam past the wall?” she said. “Maybe you *are* an idiot.”

“Are you tired too?” I asked.

“Very. I’ve been working hard for weeks.”

“So take a nap with me,” I said.

“Doesn’t feel right. Teresa’s in danger somewhere.”

“I can’t go yet anyway,” I said. “Not until Mrs. Beck is ready.”

She paused a beat. “There’s only one bed.”

“Not a huge problem. You’re thin. You won’t take up much room.”

“Wouldn’t be right,” she said.

“We don’t have to get *in*,” I said. “We could just lie on top.”

“Right next to each other?”

“Fully dressed,” I said. “I’ll even keep my shoes on.”

She said nothing.

“It’s not against the law,” I said.

“Maybe it is,” she said. “Some states have weird old statutes. Maine might be one of them.”

“I’ve got other Maine statutes to worry about.”

“Not right this minute.”

I smiled. Then I yawned. I sat on the bed and lay down on my back. Rolled over on my side and turned away from the middle and jammed my arms up under my head. Closed my eyes. I sensed her standing there, minute after minute. Then I felt her lie down next to me. She shuffled around a little. Then she went still. But she was tense. I could feel it. It was coming through the mattress springs, tiny high-frequency thrills of concern.

“Don’t panic,” I said. “I’m way too tired.”

But I wasn’t, really. The problem started when she moved slightly and touched my butt with hers. It was a very faint contact, but she might as well have plugged me into a power outlet. I opened my eyes and stared at the wall and tried to figure out whether she was asleep and had moved involuntarily or whether she had done it on purpose. I spent a couple of minutes thinking it through. But I guess mortal danger is an aphrodisiac because I found myself erring on the side of optimism. Then I wasn’t certain about the required response. What was the correct etiquette? I settled for moving an inch myself and firming up the connection. I figured that would put the ball back in her court. Now she could struggle with the interpretation.

Nothing happened for a whole minute. I was on the point of getting disappointed when she moved again. Now the connection was pretty damn solid. If I didn’t weigh two hundred and fifty pounds she might have slid me right across the shiny bedcover. I was fairly certain I could feel the rivets on her back pockets. *My turn.* I disguised it with a sort of sleepy sound and rolled over so we were stacked like spoons and my arm was accidentally touching her shoulder. Her hair was in my face. It was soft and smelled like summer. The cotton of her shirt was crisp. It plunged down to her waist and then the denim of her jeans swooped back up over her hips. I squinted down. She had taken her shoes off. I could see the soles of her feet. Ten little toes, all in a line.

She made a sleepy sound of her own. I was pretty sure it was fake. She nestled backward until she was jammed tight against me from top to bottom. I put my hand on her upper arm. Then I moved it down until it fell off her elbow and came to rest on her waist. The tip of my little finger was under the waistband of

her jeans. She made another sound. Almost certainly a fake. I held my breath. Her butt was tight against my groin. My heart was thumping. My head was spinning. No way could I resist. No way at all. It was one of those insane hormone-driven moments when I would have risked eight years in Leavenworth for it. I slid my hand up and forward and cupped her breast. After that, things got completely out of control.

She was one of those women who is far more attractive naked than clothed. Not all women are, but she was. She had a body to die for. She had no tan, but her skin was not pale. It was as soft as silk, but it was not translucent. She was very slim, but I couldn't see her bones. She was long, and she was lean. She was made for one of those bathing suits that swoop way up at the sides. She had small firm breasts, perfectly shaped. Her neck was long and slender. She had great ears and ankles and knees and shoulders. She had a little hollow at the base of her throat. It was very slightly damp.

She was strong, too. I must have outweighed her by a hundred and thirty pounds, but she had worn me out. She was young, I guess. She had maybe ten years on me. She had left me exhausted, which made her smile. She had a great smile.

"Remember my hotel room in Boston?" I said. "The way you sat on the chair? I wanted you right then."

"I was just sitting on a chair. There wasn't a *way* to it."

"Don't kid yourself."

"Remember the Freedom Trail?" she said. "You told me about the long-rod penetrator? I wanted *you* right then."

I smiled.

"It was part of a billion-dollar defense contract," I said. "So I'm glad this particular citizen got something out of it."

"If Eliot hadn't been with me I'd have done it right there in the park."

"There was a woman feeding the birds."

“We could have gone behind a bush.”

“Paul Revere would have seen us,” I said.

“He rode all night,” she said.

“I’m not Paul Revere,” I said.

She smiled again. I felt it against my shoulder.

“All done, old guy?” she asked.

“I didn’t say that, exactly.”

“Danger is an aphrodisiac, isn’t it?” she said.

“I guess it is.”

“So you admit you’re in danger?”

“I’m in danger of having a heart attack.”

“You really shouldn’t go back,” she said.

“I’m in danger of not being able to.”

She sat up on the bed. Gravity had no effect on her perfection.

“I’m serious, Reacher,” she said.

I smiled up at her. “I’ll be OK. Two or three more days. I’ll find Teresa and I’ll find Quinn and then I’ll get out.”

“Only if I let you.”

I nodded.

“The two bodyguards,” I said.

She nodded in turn. “That’s why you need my end of the operation. You can forget all about the heroic stuff. With you or without you, my ass. We turn those

forget all about the heroic stuff. With you or without you, my ass. We turn those guys loose and you're a dead man, one phone call later."

"Where are they now?"

"In the first motel, back in Massachusetts. Where we made the plans. The guys from the Toyota and the college car are sitting on them."

"Hard, I hope."

"Very."

"That's hours away," I said.

"By road," she said. "Not by telephone."

"You want Teresa back."

"Yes," she said. "But I'm in charge."

"You're a control freak," I said.

"I don't want anything bad to happen to you, is all."

"Nothing bad ever happens to me."

She leaned down and traced her fingertips over the scars on my body. Chest, stomach, arms, shoulders, forehead. "You've taken a lot of damage for a guy nothing bad ever happens to."

"I'm clumsy," I said. "I fall over a lot."

She stood up and walked to the bathroom, naked, graceful, completely unself-conscious.

"Hurry back," I called.

But she didn't hurry back. She was in the bathroom a long time and when she came out again she was wearing a robe. Her face had changed. She looked a

little awkward. A little rueful.

“We shouldn’t have done that,” she said.

“Why not?”

“It was unprofessional.”

She looked straight at me. I nodded. I guessed it was a little unprofessional.

“But it was fun,” I said.

“We shouldn’t have.”

“We’re grown-ups. We live in a free country.”

“It was just taking comfort. Because we’re both stressed and uptight.”

“Nothing really wrong with that.”

“It’s going to complicate things,” she said.

I shook my head.

“Not if we don’t let it,” I said. “Doesn’t mean we have to get married or anything. We don’t owe each other anything because of it.”

“I wish we hadn’t.”

“I’m glad we did. I think if a thing feels right, you should do it.”

“That’s your philosophy?”

I looked away.

“It’s the voice of experience,” I said. “I once said no when I wanted to say yes and I lived to regret it.”

She hugged the robe tight around her.

“It did feel good,” she said.

“For me too,” I said.

“But we should forget it now. It meant what it meant, nothing more, OK?”

“OK,” I said.

“And you should think hard about going back.”

“OK,” I said again.

I lay on the bed and thought about how it felt to say no when you really wanted to say yes. On balance saying yes had been better, and I had no regrets. Duffy was quiet. It was like we were just waiting for something to happen. I took a long hot shower and dressed in the bathroom. We were done talking by then. There was nothing left to say. We both knew I was going back. I liked the fact that she didn’t really try to stop me. I liked the fact that we were both focused, practical people. I was lacing my shoes when her laptop went *ping*, like a muffled high-pitched bell. Like a microwave when your food is ready. No artificial voice saying *You’ve got mail.* I came out of the bathroom and she sat down in front of the computer and clicked a button.

“Message from my office,” she said. “Records show eleven dubious ex-cops called Duke. I put the request in yesterday. How old is he?”

“Forty, maybe,” I said.

She scrolled through her list.

“Southern guy?” she asked. “Northern?”

“Not Southern,” I said.

“Choice of three,” she said.

“Mrs. Beck said he’d been a federal agent, too.”

She scrolled some more.

“John Chapman Duke,” she said. “He’s the only one who went federal afterward. Started in Minneapolis as a patrolman and then a detective. Subject of three investigations by Internal Affairs. Inconclusive. Then he joined us.”

“DEA?” I said. “Really?”

“No, I meant the federal government,” she said. “He went to the Treasury Department.”

“To do what?”

“Doesn’t say. But he was indicted within three years. Some kind of corruption. Plus suspicion of multiple homicides, no real hard evidence. But he went to prison for four years anyway.”

“Description?”

“White, about your size. The photo makes him look uglier, though.”

“That’s him,” I said.

She scrolled some more. Read the rest of the report.

“Take care,” she said. “He sounds like a piece of work.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. I thought about kissing her good-bye at the door. But I didn’t. I figured she wouldn’t want me to. I just ran over to the Cadillac.

I was back in the coffee shop and almost at the end of my second cup when Elizabeth Beck appeared. She had nothing to show for her shopping. No purchases, no gaudy bags. I guessed she hadn’t actually been inside any stores. She had hung around for four long hours to let the government guy do whatever he needed to. I raised my hand. She ignored me and headed straight for the counter. Bought herself a tall white coffee and carried it over to my table. I had decided what I was going to tell her.

“I don’t work for the government,” I said.

“Then I’m disappointed,” she said, for the third time.

“How could I?” I said. “I killed a cop, remember.”

“You” she said

"Yes," she said.

"Government people don't do stuff like that."

"They might," she said. "By accident."

"But they wouldn't run away afterward," I said. "They would stick around and face the music."

She went quiet and stayed quiet for a long time. Sipped her coffee slowly.

"I've been there maybe eight or ten times," she said. "Where the college is, I mean. They run events for the students' families, now and then. And I try to be there at the start and finish of every semester. One summer I even rented a little U-Haul and helped him move his stuff home."

"So?"

"It's a small school," she said. "But even so, on the first day of the semester it gets very busy. Lots of parents, lots of students, SUVs, cars, vans, traffic everywhere. The family days are even worse. And you know what?"

"What?"

"I've never seen a town policeman there. Not once. Certainly not a detective in plain clothes."

I looked out the window to the internal mall sidewalk.

"Just a coincidence, I suppose," she said. "A random Tuesday morning in April, early in the day, nothing much going on, and there's a detective waiting right by the gate, for no very obvious reason."

"What's your point?" I asked.

"That you were terribly unlucky," she said. "I mean, what were the odds?"

"I don't work for the government," I said.

"You took a shower," she said. "Washed your hair."

"Did I?"

Did I?

“I can see it and smell it. Cheap soap, cheap shampoo.”

“I went to a sauna.”

“You didn’t have any money. I gave you twenty dollars. You bought at least two cups of coffee. That would leave maybe fourteen dollars.”

“It was a cheap sauna.”

“It must have been,” she said.

“I’m just a guy,” I said.

“And I’m disappointed about it.”

“You sound like you want your husband to get busted.”

“I do.”

“He’d go to prison.”

“He already lives in a prison. And he deserves to. But he’d be freer in a real prison than where he is now. And he wouldn’t be there forever.”

“You could call somebody,” I said. “You don’t need to wait for them to come to you.”

She shook her head. “That would be suicide. For me and Richard.”

“Just like it would be if you talked about me like this in front of anybody else. Remember, I wouldn’t go quietly. People would get hurt. You and Richard, maybe.”

She smiled. “Bargaining with me again?”

“Warning you again,” I said. “Full disclosure.”

She nodded.

“I know how to keep my mouth shut,” she said, and then she proved it by not

saying another word. We finished our coffee in silence and walked back to the car. We didn't talk. I drove her home, north and east, completely unsure whether I was carrying a ticking time bomb with me or turning my back on the only inside help I would ever get.

Paulie was waiting behind the gate. He must have been watching from his window and then taken up position as soon as he saw the car in the distance. I slowed and stopped and he stared out at me. Then he stared at Elizabeth Beck.

"Give me the pager," I said.

"I can't," she said.

"Just do it," I said.

Paulie unlatched the chain and pushed the gate. Elizabeth unzipped her bag and handed me the pager. I let the car roll forward and buzzed my window down. Stopped level with where Paulie was waiting to shut the gate again.

"Check this out," I called.

I tossed the pager overarm out in front of the car. It was a left-handed throw. It was weak and lacked finesse. But it got the job done. The little black plastic rectangle looped up in the air and landed dead-center on the driveway maybe twenty feet in front of the car. Paulie watched its trajectory and then froze when he realized what it was.

"Hey," he said.

He went after it. I went after him. I stamped on the gas and the tires howled and the car jumped forward. I aimed the right-hand corner of the front bumper at the side of his left knee. I got very close. But he was incredibly quick. He scooped the pager off the blacktop and skipped back and I missed him by a foot. The car shot straight past him. I didn't slow down. Just accelerated away and watched him in the mirror, standing in my wake, staring after me, blue tire smoke drifting all around him. I was severely disappointed. If I had to fight a guy who outweighed me by two hundred pounds I'd have been much happier if he was

crippled first. Or at least if he wasn't so damn *fast.*

I stopped on the carriage circle and let Elizabeth Beck out at the front door. Then I put the car away and was heading for the kitchen when Zachary Beck and John Chapman Duke came out looking for me. They were agitated and walking quickly. They were tense and upset. I thought they were going to give me a hard time about Paulie. But they weren't.

"Angel Doll is missing," Beck said.

I stood still. The wind was blowing in off the ocean. The lazy swell was gone and the waves were as big and noisy as they had been on the first evening. There was spray in the air.

"He spoke with you last thing," Beck said. "Then he locked up and left and he hasn't been seen since."

"What did he want with you?" Duke asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"You don't know? You were in there five minutes."

I nodded. "He took me back to the warehouse office."

"And?"

"And nothing. He was all set to say something but his cell phone rang."

"Who was it?"

I shrugged. "How would I know? Some kind of an urgent thing. He talked on the phone the whole five minutes. He was wasting my time and yours so I just gave it up and walked back out."

"What was he saying on the phone?"

"I didn't listen," I said. "Didn't seem polite."

“Hear any names?” Beck asked.

I turned to him. Shook my head.

“No names,” I said. “But they knew each other. That was clear. Doll did a lot of listening, I guess. I think he was taking instructions about something.”

“About what?”

“No idea,” I said.

“Something urgent?”

“I guess so. He seemed to forget all about me. Certainly he didn’t try to stop me when I walked away.”

“That’s all you know?”

“I assumed it was some kind of a plan,” I said. “Instructions for the following day, maybe.”

“Today?”

I shrugged again. “I’m just guessing. It was a very one-sided conversation.”

“Terrific,” Duke said. “You’re a real big help, you know that?”

Beck looked out at the ocean. “So he took an urgent call on his cell and then he locked up and left. That’s all you can tell us?”

“I didn’t see him lock up,” I said. “And I didn’t see him leave. He was still on the phone when I came out.”

“Obviously he locked up,” Beck said. “And obviously he left. Everything was perfectly normal this morning.”

I said nothing. Beck turned through ninety degrees and faced east. The wind came off the sea and flattened his clothes against him. His trouser legs flapped like flags. He moved his feet, scuffing the soles of his shoes against the grit, like he was trying to get warm.

“We don’t need this now,” he said. “We really don’t *need* this. We’ve got a big weekend coming up.”

I said nothing. They turned around together and headed back to the house and left me there, alone.

I was tired, but I wasn’t going to get any rest. That was clear. There was bustle in the air and the routine I had seen on the previous two nights was all shot to hell. There was no food in the kitchen. No dinner. The cook wasn’t there. I heard people moving in the hallway. Duke came into the kitchen and walked straight past me and went out the back door. He was carrying a blue Nike sports bag. I followed him out and stood and watched from the corner of the house and saw him go into the second garage. Five minutes later he backed the black Lincoln out and drove off in it. He had changed the plates. When I had seen it in the middle of the night it had six-digit Maine plates on it. Now it was showing a seven-digit New York number. I went back inside and looked for coffee. I found the machine, but I couldn’t find any filter papers. I settled for a glass of water instead. I was halfway through drinking it when Beck came in. He was carrying a sports bag, too. The way it hung from its handles and the noise it made when it bumped against his leg told me it was full of heavy metal. Guns, probably, maybe two of them.

“Get the Cadillac,” he said. “Right now. Pick me up at the front.”

He took the keys out of his pocket and dropped them on the table in front of me. Then he crouched down and unzipped his bag and came out with two New York license plates and a screwdriver. Handed them to me.

“Put these on it first,” he said.

I saw guns in the bag. Two Heckler & Koch MP5Ks, short and fat and black with big bulbous molded handles. Futuristic, like movie props.

“Where are we going?” I said.

“We’re following Duke down to Hartford, Connecticut,” he said. “We’ve got some business there, remember?”

He zipped the bag and stood up and carried it back out into the hallway. I sat still for a second. Then I raised my glass of water and toasted the blank wall in front of me.

“Here’s to bloody wars and dread diseases,” I said to myself.

CHAPTER 7

I left the rest of the water in the kitchen and headed out toward the garage block. Dusk was gathering on the ocean horizon, a hundred miles away in the east. The wind was blowing hard and the waves were pounding. I stopped walking and turned a casual circle. Saw nobody else out and about. So I ducked out of sight down the side of the courtyard wall. Found my hidden bundle and laid the phony plates and the screwdriver on the rocks and unwrapped both guns. Duffy's Glock went into my right-hand coat pocket. Doll's PSM went into my left. I put the spare Glock mags in my socks. Stowed the rag and picked up the plates and the screwdriver and backtracked to the courtyard entrance.

The mechanic was busy in the third garage. The empty one. He had the doors wide open and was oiling the hinges. The space behind him was even cleaner than when I had seen it in the night. It was immaculate. The floor had been hosed. I could see it drying in patches. I nodded to the guy and he nodded back. I opened up the left-hand garage. Squatted down and unscrewed the Maine plate off the Cadillac's trunk lid and replaced it with the New York number. Did the same at the front. Left the old plates and the screwdriver on the floor and got in and fired it up. Backed it out and headed around to the carriage circle. The mechanic watched me go.

Beck was waiting there for me. He opened the rear door himself and dropped his sports bag on the back seat. I heard the guns shifting inside. Then he closed the rear door again and slid in the front beside me.

"Go," he said. "Use I-95 south as far as Boston."

"We need gas," I said.

"OK, first place you see," he said.

Paulie was waiting at the gate. His face was all twisted up with anger. He was a problem that wouldn't keep much longer. He glared in at me. Turned his head left and right and kept his eyes on me the whole time he was opening the gate. I ignored him and drove on through. I didn't look back at him. *Out of sight, out of*

mind was the way I wanted to play it, as far as he was concerned.

The coast road west was empty. We were on the highway twelve minutes after we left the house. I was getting used to the way the Cadillac drove. It was a nice car. Smooth, and quiet. But it was heavy on gas. That was for sure. The needle was getting seriously low. I could almost see it moving. The way I recalled it the first gas stop was the one south of Kennebunk. The place where I had met with Duffy and Eliot on the way down to New London. We reached it within fifteen minutes. It felt very familiar to me. I drove past the parking lot where we had broken into the van and headed down to the pumps. Beck said nothing. I got out and filled the tank. It took a long time. Eighteen gallons. I screwed the cap back on and Beck buzzed his window down and gave me a wad of cash.

“Always buy gas with cash,” he said. “Safer that way.”

I kept the change, which was a little over fifteen bucks. I figured I was entitled. I hadn’t been paid yet. I got back on the road and settled in for the trip. I was tired. Nothing worse than mile after mile of lonely highway when you’re tired. Beck was quiet beside me. At first I thought he was just morose. Or shy, or inhibited. Then I realized he was nervous. I guessed he wasn’t entirely comfortable heading into battle. I was. Especially because I knew for sure we weren’t going to find anybody to fight.

“How’s Richard?” I asked him.

“He’s fine,” he said. “He’s got inner strength. He’s a good son.”

“Is he?” I said, because I needed to say something. I needed him to talk to keep me awake.

“He’s very loyal. A father can’t ask for more.”

Then he went quiet again, and I fought to stay awake. Five miles, ten.

“Have you ever dealt with small-time dope dealers?” he asked me.

“No,” I said.

“There’s something unique about them,” he said.

He didn’t say anything more for twenty miles. Then he picked it up again like he

He didn't say anything more for twenty miles. Then he picked it up again like he had spent the entire time chasing an elusive thought.

"They're completely dominated by fashion," he said.

"Are they?" I said, like I was interested. I wasn't, but I still needed him to talk.

"Of course lab drugs are fashion items anyway," he said. "Really their customers are just as bad as they are. I can't even keep track of the stuff they sell. Some different weird name every week."

"What's a lab drug?" I asked.

"A drug made in a lab," he said. "You know, something manufactured, something chemical. Not the same as something that grows naturally in the ground."

"Like marijuana."

"Or heroin. Or cocaine. Those are natural products. Organic. They're refined, obviously, but they aren't created in a beaker."

I said nothing. Just fought to keep my eyes open. The car was way too warm. You need cold air when you're tired. I bit my bottom lip to stay awake.

"The fashion thing infects everything they do," he said. "Every single thing. Shoes, for instance. These guys we're looking for tonight, every time I've seen them they've had different shoes."

"What, like sneakers?"

"Sure, like they play basketball for a living. One time they've got two-hundred-dollar Reeboks, brand new out of the box. Next time I see them, Reeboks are completely unacceptable and it's got to be Nikes or something. Air-this, air-that. Or it's suddenly Caterpillar boots, or Timberlands. Leather, then Gore-Tex, then leather again. Black, then that yellow color like a work boot. Always with the laces undone. Then it's back to the running shoes again, only this time it's Adidas, with the little stripes. Two, three hundred dollars a pop. For no reason. It's insane."

I said nothing. Just drove, with my eyelids locked open and my eyeballs stinging.

stinging.

“You know why it is?” he said. “Because of the money. They’ve got so much money they don’t know what to do with it. Like jackets. Have you seen the jackets they wear? One week it’s got to be North Face, all shiny and puffy, full of goose feathers, doesn’t matter whether it’s winter or summer because these guys are only out at night. The next week, shiny is yesterday’s news. Maybe North Face is still OK, but now it’s got to be microfiber. Then it’s letter jackets, wool with leather sleeves. Two, three hundred dollars a pop. Each style lasts about a week.”

“Crazy,” I said, because I had to say something.

“It’s the money,” he said again. “They don’t know what to do with it, so they get into change for change’s sake. It infects everything. Guns, too, of course. Like these particular guys, they liked Heckler and Koch MP5Ks. Now they have Uzis, according to you. You see what I mean? With these guys, even their weapons are fashion items, the same as their sneakers, or their jackets. Or their actual product, which brings everything full circle. Their demands change all the time, in every arena. Cars, even. They like Japanese mostly, which is about fashions coming in from the West Coast, I guess. But one week it’s Toyotas, next week it’s Hondas. Then it’s Nissans. The Nissan Maxima was a big favorite, two, three years ago. Like the one you stole. Then it’s Lexuses. It’s a mania. Watches, too. They’re wearing Swatches, then they’re wearing Rolexes. They don’t see a difference. Complete madness. Of course, being in the market, speaking as a supplier, I’m not complaining. Market obsolescence is what we aim for, but it gets a little rapid at times. Gets hard to keep up.”

“So you’re in the market?”

“What’s your guess?” he said. “You thought I was an accountant?”

“I thought you were a rug importer.”

“I am,” he said. “I import a lot of rugs.”

“OK.”

“But that’s fundamentally a cover,” he said. Then he laughed. “You think you don’t have to take precautions these days, selling athletic shoes to people like that?”

that.

He kept on laughing. There was a lot of nervous tension in there. I drove on. He calmed down. Looked through the side window, looked through the windshield. Started talking again, like it served his own purpose as much as it served mine.

“Do you ever wear sneakers?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

“Because I’m looking for somebody to explain it to me. There’s no rational difference between a Reebok and a Nike, is there?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“I mean, they’re probably made in the same factory. Out in Vietnam somewhere. They’re probably the same shoe until they put the logo on.”

“Maybe,” I said. “I really wouldn’t know. I was never an athlete. Never wore that type of footwear.”

“Is there a difference between a Toyota and a Honda?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Why not?”

“Because I never had a POV.”

“What’s a POV?”

“A privately owned vehicle,” I said. “What the army would call a Toyota or a Honda. Or a Nissan or a Lexus.”

“So what *do* you know?”

“I know the difference between a Swatch and a Rolex.”

“OK, what’s the difference?”

“There isn’t one,” I said. “They both tell the time.”

“That’s no answer.”

“I know the difference between an Uzi and a Heckler and Koch.”

He turned on his seat. “Good. Great. Explain it to me. Why would these guys junk their Heckler and Kochs in favor of Uzis?”

The Cadillac hummed onward. I shrugged at the wheel. Fought a yawn. It was a nonsense question, of course. The Hartford guys hadn’t junked their MP5Ks in favor of Uzis. Not in reality. Eliot and Duffy hadn’t been aware of Hartford’s weapon *du jour* and they hadn’t been aware that Beck knew anything about Hartford, that’s all, so they had given their guys Uzis, probably because they were lying around closest to hand.

But theoretically it was a very good question. An Uzi is a fine, fine weapon. A little heavy, maybe. Not the world’s fastest cyclic rate, which might matter to some people. Not much rifling inside the barrel, which compromises accuracy a little bit. On the other hand, it’s very reliable, very simple, totally proven, and you can get a forty-round magazine for it. A fine weapon. But any Heckler & Koch MP5 derivative is a better weapon. They fire the same ammunition faster and harder. They’re very, very accurate. As accurate as a good rifle, in some hands. Very reliable. Flat-out better. A great 1970s design up against a great 1950s design. Doesn’t hold true in all fields, but with military ordnance, modern is better, every time.

“There’s no reason,” I said. “Makes no sense to me.”

“Exactly,” Beck said. “It’s about fashion. It’s an arbitrary whim. It’s a compulsion. Keeps everybody in business, but drives everybody nuts, too.”

His cell phone rang. He juggled it up out of his pocket and answered it by saying his name, short and sharp. And a little nervously. *Beck.* It sounded like a cough. He listened for a long time. Made his caller repeat an address and directions and then clicked off and put the phone back in his pocket.

“That was Duke,” he said. “He made some calls. Our boys aren’t anywhere in Hartford. But they’re supposed to have some country place a little ways south and east. Duke figures that’s where they’re holed up. So that’s where we’re going.”

“What are we going to do when we get there?”

What are we going to do when we get there?

“Nothing spectacular,” Beck said. “We don’t need to make a big deal out of it. Nothing neat, nothing fancy. Situation like this, I favor just mowing them down. An impression of inevitability, you know? But casual. Like you mess with me, then punishment is definitely swift and certain, but not like I’m in a sweat about it.”

“You lose customers that way.”

“I can replace them. I’ve got people lining up around the block. That’s the truly great thing about this business. Supply and demand is tilted way in favor of demand.”

“You going to do this yourself?”

He shook his head. “That’s what you and Duke are for.”

“Me? I thought I was just driving.”

“You already wasted two of them. Couple more shouldn’t bother you.”

I turned the heater down a click and worked on keeping my eyes open. *Bloody wars,* I said to myself.

We looped halfway around Boston and then he told me to strike out south and west on the Mass Pike and then I-84. We did sixty more miles, which took about an hour. He didn’t want me to drive too fast. He didn’t want to be conspicuous. Phony plates, a bag full of automatic weapons on the back seat, he didn’t want the Highway Patrol to get involved. I could see the sense in that. I drove like an automaton. I hadn’t slept in forty hours. But I wasn’t regretting passing up the chance of a nap in Duffy’s motel. I was very happy with the way I had spent my time there, even if she wasn’t.

“Next exit,” he said.

Right then I-84 was spearing straight through the city of Hartford. There was low cloud and the city lights made it orange. The exit led to a wide road that narrowed after a mile and headed south and east into open country. There was

narrowed after a mile and headed south and east into open country. There was blackness ahead. There were a few closed country stores, bait and tackle, beer on ice, motorcycle parts, and then nothing at all except the dark shape of trees.

“Make the next right,” he said, eight minutes later.

I turned onto a smaller road. The surface was bad and there were random curves. Darkness everywhere. I had to concentrate. I wasn’t looking forward to driving back.

“Keep going,” he said.

We did eight or nine more miles. I had no idea where we were.

“OK,” he said. “Pretty soon we should see Duke waiting up ahead.”

A mile and a half later my headlight beams picked out Duke’s rear plate. He was parked on the shoulder. His car was canted over where the grade fell away into a ditch.

“Stop behind him.”

I pulled up nose-to-tail with the Lincoln and jammed the selector into Park. I wanted to go to sleep. Five minutes would have made a lot of difference to me. But Duke swung out of his seat as soon as he identified us and hurried around to Beck’s window. Beck buzzed the glass down and Duke squatted and leaned his face inside.

“Their place is about two miles ahead,” he said. “Long curved driveway on the left. Not much more than a dirt path. We can make it about halfway up in the cars, if we do it quiet and slow, no lights. We’ll have to walk the rest of the way.”

Beck said nothing. Just buzzed his window up again. Duke went back to his car. It bounced off the shoulder and straightened up. I followed him through the two miles. We killed our lights a hundred yards short of the driveway and made the turn. Took it slow. There was some moonlight. The Lincoln ahead of me lurched and rolled as it crawled over ruts. The Cadillac did the same thing, out of phase, up where the Lincoln was down, corkscrewing right where the Lincoln was twisting left. We slowed to a crawl. Used idle speed to inch us closer. Then Duke’s brake lights flared bright and he stopped dead. I stopped behind him.

Beck twisted around in his seat and hauled the sports bag through the gap between us and unzipped it on his knee. Handed me one of the MP5Ks from it, with two spare thirty-round magazines.

“Get the job done,” he said.

“You waiting here?”

He nodded. I broke the gun down and checked it. Put it back together and jacked a round into the chamber and clicked the safety on. Then I put the spare mags in my pockets very carefully so they wouldn’t rattle against the Glock and the PSM. Eased myself out of the car. Stood and breathed the cold night air. It was a relief. It woke me up. I could smell a lake nearby, and trees, and leaf mold on the ground. I could hear a small waterfall in the distance, and the mufflers on the cars ticking gently as they cooled. There was a gentle breeze in the trees. Other than that there was nothing to hear. Just absolute silence.

Duke was waiting for me. I could see tension and impatience in the way he was holding himself. He had done this stuff before. That was clear. He looked exactly like a veteran cop before a major bust. Some degree of routine familiarity, mixed in with an acute awareness that no two situations are ever quite alike. He had his Steyr in his hand, with the long thirty-round magazine in it. It protruded way down out of the grip. Made the gun look bigger and uglier than ever.

“Let’s go, asshole,” he whispered.

I stayed five feet behind him and walked on the opposite side of the driveway, like an infantryman would. I had to be convincing, like I was worried about presenting a grouped target. I knew the place was going to be empty, but he didn’t.

We walked on around a bend and saw the house in front of us. There was a light burning in a window. On a security timer, probably. Duke slowed and stopped.

“See a door?” he whispered.

I peered into the gloom. Saw a small porch. Pointed at it.

“You wait at the entrance,” I whispered back. “I’ll check the lighted window.”

He was happy enough to agree to that. We made it to the porch. He stopped there and waited and I peeled off and looped around toward the window. Dropped to the ground and crawled the last ten feet in the dirt. Raised my head at the sill and peered inside. There was a low-wattage bulb burning in a table lamp with a yellow plastic shade. There were battered sofas and armchairs. Cold ash from an old fire in the hearth. Pine paneling on the walls. No people.

I crawled backward until the light spill let Duke see me and held two forked fingers below my eyes. Standard sniper-spotter visual code for *I see.* Then I held my hand palm out, all my fingers extended. *I see five people.* Then I went into a complicated series of gestures that might have indicated their disposition and their weaponry. I knew Duke wouldn't understand them. I didn't understand them either. As far as I knew they were entirely meaningless. I had never been a sniper-spotter. But the whole thing looked real good. It looked professional and clandestine and urgent.

I crawled back ten more feet and then stood up and walked quietly back to join him at the door.

"They're out of it," I whispered. "Drunk or stoned. We get a good jump, we'll be home and dry."

"Weapons?"

"Plenty, but nothing within reach." I pointed at the porch. "Looks like there's going to be a short hallway on the other side. Outer door, inner door, then the hallway. You take left, I'll take right. We'll wait there in the hallway. Take them down when they come out of the room to see what the noise is all about."

"You giving the orders now?"

"I did the recon."

"Just don't screw up, asshole."

"You either."

"I never do," he said.

"OK," I said.

“I mean it,” he said. “You get in my way, I’ll be more than happy to put you down with the rest of them, no hesitation.”

“We’re on the same side here.”

“Are we?” he said. “I think we’re about to find out.”

“Relax,” I said.

He paused. Tensed. Nodded in the dark. “I’ll hit the outer door, you hit the inner. Like leapfrog.”

“OK,” I said again. I turned away and smiled. Just like a veteran cop. If I hit the inner door, he would leapfrog through it first and I would go second, and the second guy is the guy who usually gets shot, given normal reaction times from the enemy.

“Safeties off,” I whispered.

I clicked the H&K to single-round fire and he clicked the catch on his Steyr to the right. I nodded and he nodded and kicked in the outer door. I was right there on his shoulder and slid past him and kicked in the inner door without breaking stride. He slid past me and jumped left and I followed him and went right. He was good enough. We made a pretty good team. We were crouched in perfect position even before the shattered doors had stopped swinging on their hinges. He was staring ahead at the entry to the room in front of us. He had the Steyr in a fixed two-handed grip, arms straight out, eyes wide open. He was breathing hard. Almost panting. Getting himself through a long moment of danger, the best way he could. I pulled Angel Doll’s PSM out of my pocket. Held it left-handed and snicked the safety off and scrambled across the floor and jammed it in his ear.

“Keep very quiet,” I said to him. “And make a choice. I’m going to ask you one question. Just one. If you lie, or if you refuse to answer, I’m going to shoot you in the head. You understand?”

He held perfectly still, five seconds, six, eight, ten. Stared desperately at the door in front of him.

“Don’t worry, *asshole*,” I said. “There’s nobody here. They were all arrested last

week. By the government."

He was motionless.

"You understand what I said before? About the question?"

He nodded, hesitantly, awkwardly, with the gun still jammed hard in his ear.

"You answer it, or I shoot you in the head. Got it?"

He nodded again.

"OK, here it comes," I said. "You ready?"

He nodded, just once.

"Where is Teresa Daniel?" I asked.

There was a long pause. He turned half toward me. I tracked my hand around to keep the PSM's muzzle in place. Realization dawned slowly in his eyes.

"In your dreams," he said.

I shot him in the head. Just jerked the muzzle out of his ear and fired once left-handed into his right temple. The sound was shattering in the dark. Blood and brain and bone chips hit the far wall. The muzzle flash burned his hair. Then I fired a double-tap from the H&K right-handed into the ceiling and fired another from the PSM left-handed into the floor. Switched the H&K to automatic fire and stood up and emptied it point-blank into his body. Picked up his Steyr from where it had fallen and blasted the ceiling with it, again and again, fifteen fast shots, *bam bam bam bam*, half the magazine. The hallway was instantly full of bitter smoke and chips of wood and plaster were flying everywhere. I switched magazines on the H&K and sprayed the walls, all around. The noise was deafening. Spent shell cases were spitting out and bouncing around and raining down everywhere. The H&K clicked empty and I fired the rest of the PSM's ammo into the hallway wall and kicked open the door to the lighted room and blew up the table lamp with the Steyr. I found a side table and tossed it through the window and used up the second spare magazine for the H&K by spraying the trees in the distance while I fired the Steyr left-handed into the floor until it clicked empty. Then I piled the Steyr and the H&K and the PSM together in my

arms and ran for it with my head ringing like a bell. I had fired a hundred and twenty-eight rounds in about fifteen seconds. They had deafened me. They must have sounded like World War Three to Beck.

I ran straight down the driveway. I was coughing and trailing gunsmoke like a cloud. I headed for the cars. Beck had already scrambled across into the Cadillac's driver's seat. He saw me coming and opened his door an inch. Faster than using the window.

"Ambush," I said. I was out of breath and I could hear my own voice loud inside my head. "There were at least eight of them."

"Where's Duke?"

"Dead. We got to go. *Right now*, Beck."

He froze for a second. Then he moved.

"Take his car," he said.

He already had the Cadillac rolling. He jammed his foot down and slammed his door and reversed down the driveway and out of sight. I jumped into the Lincoln. Fired it up. Stuck the selector in Reverse and got one elbow up on the back of the seat and stared through the rear window and hit the gas. We shot out backward onto the road one after the other and slewed around and took off again north, side by side like a stoplight drag race. We howled around the curves and fought the camber and stayed up around seventy miles an hour. Didn't slow until we reached the turn that would take us back toward Hartford. Beck edged ahead of me and I fell in behind him and followed. He drove five fast miles and turned in at a closed package store and parked at the back of the lot. I parked ten feet from him and just lay back in the seat and let him come to me. I was too tired to get out. He ran around the Cadillac's hood and pulled my door open.

"It was an ambush?" he said.

I nodded. "They were waiting for us. Eight of them. Maybe more. It was a massacre."

He said nothing. There was nothing for him to say. I picked up Duke's Steyr from the seat beside me and handed it over.

“I recovered it,” I said.

“Why?”

“I thought you might want me to. I thought it might be traceable.”

He nodded. “It isn’t. But that was good thinking.”

I gave him the H&K, too. He stepped back to the Cadillac and I watched him zip both pieces into his bag. Then he turned around. Clenched both hands and looked up at the black sky. Then at me.

“See any faces?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Too dark. But we hit one of them. He dropped this.”

I handed him the PSM. It was like punching him in the gut. He turned pale and put out a hand and steadied himself against the Lincoln’s roof.

“What?” I said.

He looked away. “I don’t believe it.”

“What?”

“You hit somebody and he dropped this?”

“I think Duke hit him.”

“You saw it happen?”

“Just shapes,” I said. “It was dark. Lots of muzzle flashes. Duke was firing and he hit a shape and this was on the floor when I came out.”

“This is Angel Doll’s gun.”

“Are you sure?”

“Million to one it isn’t. You know what it is?”

“Never saw one like it.”

“It’s a special KGB pistol,” he said. “From the old Soviet Union. Very rare in this country.”

Then he stepped away into the darkness of the lot. I closed my eyes. I wanted to sleep. Even five seconds would have made a difference.

“Reacher,” he called. “What evidence did you leave?”

I opened my eyes.

“Duke’s body,” I said.

“That won’t lead anybody anywhere. Ballistics?”

I smiled in the dark. Imagined Hartford PD forensic scientists trying to make sense of the trajectories. Walls, floors, ceilings. They would conclude the hallway had been full of heavily-armed disco dancers.

“A lot of bullets and shell cases,” I said.

“Untraceable,” he said.

He moved deeper into the dark. I closed my eyes again. I had left no fingerprints. No part of me had touched any part of the house except for the soles of my shoes. And I hadn’t fired Duffy’s Glock. I had heard something about a central registry somewhere that stored data on rifling marks. Maybe her Glock was a part of it. But I hadn’t used it.

“Reacher,” Beck called. “Drive me home.”

I opened my eyes.

“What about this car?” I called back.

“Abandon it here.”

I yawned and forced myself to move and used the tail of my coat to wipe the wheel and all the controls I had touched. The unused Glock nearly fell out of my pocket. Beck didn’t notice. He was so preoccupied I could have taken it out and twirled it around my finger like the Sundance Kid and he wouldn’t have noticed. I wiped the door handle and then leaned in and pulled the keys and wiped them

and tossed them into the scrub at the edge of the lot.

“Let’s go,” Beck said.

He was silent until we were thirty miles north and east of Hartford. Then he started talking. He had spent the time getting it all worked out in his mind.

“The phone call yesterday,” he said. “They were laying their plans. Doll was working with them all along.”

“From when?”

“From the start.”

“Doesn’t make sense,” I said. “Duke went south and got the Toyota’s plate number for you. Then you gave it to Doll and told him to trace it. But why would Doll tell you the truth about the trace? If they were his buddies, he’d have dead-ended it, surely. Led you away from them. Left you in the dark.”

Beck smiled a superior smile.

“No,” he said. “They were setting up the ambush. That was the point of the phone call. It was good improvisation on their part. The kidnap gambit failed, so they switched tactics. They let Doll point us in the right direction. So that what happened tonight could happen.”

I nodded slowly, like I was deferring to his point of view. The best way to clinch a pending promotion is to let them think you’re just a little dumber than they are. It had worked for me before, three straight times, in the military.

“Did Doll actually know what you were planning for tonight?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “We were all discussing it, yesterday. In detail. When you saw us talking, in the office.”

“So he set you up.”

“Yes,” he said again. “He locked up last night and then left Portland and drove

all the way down to wait with them. Told them all who was coming, and when, and why."

I said nothing. Just thought about Doll's car. It was about a mile away from Beck's office. I began to wish I had hidden it better.

"But there's one big question," Beck said. "Was it *just* Doll?"

"Or?"

He went quiet. Then he shrugged.

"Or any of the others that work with him," he said.

The ones you don't control, I thought. *Quinn's people.*

"Or all of them together," he said.

He started thinking again, another thirty, forty miles. He didn't speak another word until we were back on I-95, heading north around Boston.

"Duke is dead," he said.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Here it comes, I thought.

"I knew him a long time," he said.

I said nothing.

"You're going to have to take over," he said. "I need somebody right now. Somebody I can trust. And you've done well for me so far."

"Promotion?" I said.

"You're qualified."

"Head of security?"

"At least temporarily," he said. "Permanently, if you'd like."

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Just remember what *I* know,” he said. “I own you.”

I was quiet for a mile. “You going to pay me anytime soon?”

“You’ll get your five grand plus what Duke got on top.”

“I’ll need some background,” I said. “I can’t help you without it.”

He nodded.

“Tomorrow,” he said. “We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Then he went quiet again. Next time I looked, he was fast asleep beside me. Some kind of a shock reaction. He thought his world was falling apart. I fought to stay awake and keep the car on the road. And I thought back to texts I had read from the British Army in India, during the Raj, at the height of their empire. Young subalterns trapped in junior ranks had their own mess. They would dine together in splendid dress uniforms and talk about their chances of promotion. But they had none, unless a superior officer died. Dead men’s shoes was the rule. So they would raise their crystal glasses of fine French wine and toast *bloody wars and dread diseases*, because a casualty further up the chain of command was their only way to get ahead. Brutal, but that’s how it’s always been, in the military.

I made it back to the Maine coast purely on autopilot. I couldn’t recall a single mile of the drive. I was numb with exhaustion. Every part of me ached. Paulie was slow about opening the gate. I guess we got him out of bed. He made a big point about staring in at me. I dropped Beck at the front door and put the car in the garage. Stashed the Glock and the spare magazines just for safety’s sake and went in through the back door. The metal detector beeped at the car keys. I dropped them on the kitchen table. I was hungry, but I was too tired to eat. I climbed all the stairs and fell down on my bed and went to sleep, fully dressed, overcoat and shoes and all.

The weather woke me six hours later. Horizontal rain was battering my window. It sounded like gravel on the glass. I rolled off the bed and checked the view. The sky was iron gray and thick with cloud and the sea was raging. It was laced with angry foam a half-mile out. The waves were swamping the rocks. No birds. It was nine in the morning. Day fourteen, a Friday. I lay down on the bed again and stared at the ceiling and tracked back seventy-two hours to the morning of day eleven, when Duffy gave me her seven-point plan. One, two, and three, take a lot of care. I was doing OK under that heading. I was still alive, anyway. Four, find Teresa Daniel. No real progress there. Five, nail down some evidence against Beck. I didn't have any. Not a thing. I hadn't even seen him do anything wrong, except maybe operate a vehicle with phony license plates and carry a bag full of submachine guns that were probably illegal in all four states he'd been in. Six, find Quinn. No progress there, either. Seven, get the hell out. That item was going to have to wait. Then Duffy had kissed me on the cheek. Left doughnut sugar on my face.

I got up again and locked myself in my bathroom to check for e-mail. My bedroom door wasn't locked anymore. I guessed Richard Beck wouldn't presume to walk in on me. Or his mother. But his father might. He owned me. I was promoted, but I was still walking a tightrope. I sat on the floor and took my shoe off. Opened the heel and switched the machine on. *You've Got Mail!* It was a message from Duffy: *Beck's containers unloaded and trucked to warehouse. Not inspected by Customs. Total of five. Largest shipment for some time.*

I hit *reply* and typed: *Are you maintaining surveillance?*

Ninety seconds later she answered: *Yes.*

I sent: *I got promoted.*

She sent: *Exploit it.*

I sent: *I enjoyed yesterday.*

She sent: *Save your battery.*

I smiled and switched the unit off and put it back in my heel. I needed a shower, but first I needed breakfast, and then I needed to find clean clothes. I unlocked the bathroom and walked through my room and down stairs to the kitchen. The

the bathroom and walked through my room and downstairs to the kitchen. The cook was back in business. She was serving toast and tea to the Irish girl and dictating a long shopping list. The Saab keys were on the table. The Cadillac keys weren't. I scratched around and ate everything I could find and then went looking for Beck. He wasn't around. Neither was Elizabeth or Richard. I went back to the kitchen.

"Where's the family?" I asked.

The maid looked up and said nothing. She had put a raincoat on, ready to go out shopping.

"Where's Mr. Duke?" the cook asked.

"Indisposed," I said. "I'm replacing him. Where are the Becks?"

"They went out."

"Where to?"

"I don't know."

I looked out at the weather. "Who drove?"

The cook looked down at the floor.

"Paulie," she said.

"When?"

"An hour ago."

"OK," I said. I was still wearing my coat. I had put it on when I left Duffy's motel and I hadn't taken it off since. I went straight out the back door and into the gale. The rain was lashing and it tasted of salt. It was mixed with sea spray. The waves were hitting the rocks like bombs. White foam was bursting thirty feet in the air. I ducked my face into my collar and ran around to the garage block. Into the walled courtyard. It was sheltered in there. The first garage was empty. The doors were standing open. The Cadillac was gone. The mechanic was inside the third garage, doing something by himself. The maid ran into the courtyard. I watched her haul open the fourth garage's doors. She was getting

soaked. She went in and a moment later backed the old Saab out. It rocked in the wind. The rain turned the dust on it to a thin film of gray mud that ran down the sides like rivers. She drove away, off to market. I listened to the waves. Started worrying about how high they might be getting. So I hugged the courtyard wall and looped all the way around it to the seaward side. Found my little dip in the rocks. The weed stalks around it were wet and bedraggled. The dip was full of water. It was rainwater. Not seawater. It was safely above the tide. The waves hadn't reached it. But rainwater was all it was full of. Apart from the water, it was completely empty. No bundle. No rag, no Glock. The spare magazines were gone, Doll's keys were gone, the bradawl was gone, and the chisel was gone.

CHAPTER 8

I came around to the front of the house and faced west and stood in the lashing rain and stared at the high stone wall. Right at that moment I came as close as I ever got to bailing out. It would have been easy. The gate was wide open. I guessed the maid had left it that way. She had gotten out in the rain to open it and she hadn't wanted to get out again to close it. Paulie wasn't there to do it for her. He was out, driving the Cadillac. So the gate was open. And unguarded. The first time I had ever seen it that way. I could have slipped straight through it. But I didn't. I stayed.

Time was part of the reason. Beyond the gate was at least twelve miles of empty road before the first significant turning. Twelve miles. And there were no cars to use. The Becks were out in the Cadillac and the maid was out in the Saab. We had abandoned the Lincoln in Connecticut. So I would be on foot. Three hours' fast walk. I didn't have three hours. Almost certainly the Cadillac would return within three hours. And there was nowhere to hide on the road. The shoulders were bare and rocky. It was an exposed situation. Beck would pass me head-on. I would be walking. He would be in a car. And he had a gun. And Paulie. I had nothing.

Therefore strategy was part of the reason, too. To be caught in the act of walking away would confirm whatever Beck might think he knew, assuming it was Beck who had discovered the stash. But if I stayed I had some kind of a chance. Staying would imply innocence. I could deflect suspicion onto Duke. I could say it must have been Duke's stash. Beck might find that plausible. Maybe. Duke had enjoyed the freedom to go wherever he wanted, any time of night or day. I had been locked up and supervised the whole time. And Duke wasn't around anymore to deny anything. But I would be right there in Beck's face, talking loud and fast and persuasive. He might buy it.

Hope was part of the reason, too. Maybe it wasn't Beck who had found the stash. Maybe it was Richard, walking the shoreline. His reaction would be unpredictable. I figured it at fifty-fifty whether he would approach me or his father first. Or maybe it was Elizabeth who had found it. She was familiar with the rocks out there. She knew them well. Knew their secrets. I guessed she had

spent plenty of time on them, for one reason or another. And her reaction would favor me. Probably.

The rain was part of the reason for staying, too. It was cold and hard and relentless. I was too tired to road march three hours in the rain. I knew it was just weakness. But I couldn't move my feet. I wanted to go back inside the house. I wanted to get warm and eat again and rest.

Fear of failure was part of the reason, too. If I walked away now I would never come back. I knew that. And I had invested two weeks. I had made good progress. People were depending on me. I had been beaten many times. But I had never just quit. Not once. Not ever. If I quit now, it would eat me up the rest of my days. *Jack Reacher, quitter. Walked away when the going got tough.*

I stood there with the rain driving against my back. Time, strategy, hope, the weather, fear of failure. All parts of the reason for staying. All right there on the list.

But top of the list was a woman.

Not Susan Duffy, not Teresa Daniel. A woman from long ago, from another life. She was called Dominique Kohl. I was a captain in the army when I met her. I was one year away from my final promotion to major. I got to my office early one morning and found the usual stack of paperwork on my desk. Most of it was junk. But among it was a copy of an order assigning an E-7 Sergeant First Class Kohl, D.E. to my unit. Back then we were in a phase where all written references to personnel had to be gender-neutral. The name *Kohl* sounded German to me and I pictured some big ugly guy from Texas or Minnesota. Big red hands, big red face, older than me, maybe thirty-five, with a whitewall haircut. Later in the morning the clerk buzzed through to say the guy was reporting for duty. I made him wait ten minutes just for the fun of it and then called him in. But the him was a her and she wasn't big and ugly. She was wearing a skirt. She was about twenty-nine years old. She wasn't tall, but she was too athletic to be called petite. And she was too pretty to be called athletic. It was like she had been exquisitely molded from the stuff they make the inside of tennis balls out of. There was an elasticity about her. A firmness and a softness, all at the same time. She looked sculpted, but she had no hard edges. She stood rigidly at attention in front of my desk and snapped a smart salute. I didn't return it, which was rude of me. I just stared at her for five whole seconds.

“At ease, Sergeant,” I said.

She handed me her copy of her orders and her personnel file. We called them *service jackets.* They contained everything anybody needed to know. I left her standing easy in front of me while I read hers through, which was rude of me too, but there was no other option. I didn’t have a visitor’s chair. Back then the army didn’t provide them below the rank of full colonel. She stood completely still, hands clasped behind her back, staring at a point in the air exactly a foot above my head.

Her jacket was impressive. She had done a little of everything and succeeded at it all in spectacular fashion. Expert marksman, specialist in a number of skills, tremendous arrest record, excellent clear-up percentage. She was a good leader and had been promoted fast. She had killed two people, one with a firearm, one unarmed, both incidents rated righteous by the subsequent investigating panels. She was a rising star. That was clear. I realized that her transfer represented a substantial compliment to me, in some superior’s mind.

“Glad to have you aboard,” I said.

“Sir, thank you, sir,” she said, with her eyes fixed in space.

“I don’t do all that shit,” I said. “I’m not afraid I’m going to vaporize if you look at me and I don’t really like one *sir* in a sentence, let alone two, OK?”

“OK,” she said. She caught on fast. She never called me *sir* again, the whole rest of her life.

“Want to jump right in at the deep end?” I said.

She nodded. “Sure.”

I rattled open a drawer and slid a slim file out and passed it across to her. She didn’t look at it. Just held it one-handed down by her side and looked at me.

“Aberdeen, Maryland,” I said. “At the proving grounds. There’s a weapons designer acting weird. Confidential tip from a buddy who’s worried about espionage. But I think it’s more likely blackmail. Could be a long and sensitive investigation.”

“No problem,” she said.

"No problem," she said.

She was the reason I didn't walk out through the open and unguarded gate.

I went inside instead and took a long hot shower. Nobody likes to risk confrontation when they're wet and naked, but I was way past caring. I guess I was feeling fatalistic. *Whatever, bring it on.* Then I wrapped up in a towel and went down a flight and found Duke's room. Stole another set of his clothes. I dressed in them and put my own shoes and jacket and coat on. Went back to the kitchen to wait. It was warm in there. The way the sea was pounding and the rain was beating on the windows made it feel warmer still. It was like a sanctuary. The cook was in there, doing something with a chicken.

"Got coffee?" I asked her.

She shook her head.

"Why not?"

"Caffeine," she said.

I looked at the back of her head.

"Caffeine is the whole point of coffee," I said. "Anyway, tea's got caffeine, and I've seen you make that."

"Tea has tannin," she said.

"And caffeine," I said.

"So drink tea instead," she said.

I looked around the room. There was a wooden block standing vertically on a counter with black knife handles protruding at angles. There were bottles and glasses. I guessed under the sink there might be ammonia sprays. Maybe some chlorine bleach. Enough improvised weapons for a close-quarters fight. If Beck was even a little inhibited about shooting in a crowded room, I might be OK. I might be able to take him before he took me. All I would need was half a second.

second.

“You want coffee?” the cook asked. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yes,” I said. “It is.”

“All you have to do is ask.”

“I did ask.”

“No, you asked if there was any,” she said. “Not the same thing.”

“So will you make me some? Please?”

“What happened to Mr. Duke?”

I paused. Maybe she was planning on marrying him, like in old movies where the cook marries the butler and they retire and live happily ever after.

“He was killed,” I said.

“Last night?”

I nodded. “In an ambush.”

“Where?”

“In Connecticut.”

“OK,” she said. “I’ll make you some coffee.”

She set the machine going. I watched where she got everything from. The filter papers were stored in a cupboard next to the paper napkins. The coffee itself was in the freezer. The machine was old and slow. It made a loud ponderous gulping sound. Combined with the rain lashing on the windows and the waves pounding on the rocks it meant I didn’t hear the Cadillac come back. First I knew, the back door was thrown open and Elizabeth Beck burst in with Richard crowding after her and Beck himself bringing up the rear. They were moving with the kind of exhilarated breathless urgency people show after a short fast dash through heavy rain.

“Hello,” Elizabeth said to me.

I nodded. Said nothing.

“Coffee,” Richard said. “Great.”

“We went out for breakfast,” Elizabeth said. “Old Orchard Beach. There’s a little diner there we like.”

“Paulie figured we shouldn’t wake you,” Beck said. “He figured you looked pretty tired last night. So he offered to drive us instead.”

“OK,” I said. Thought: *Did* Paulie *find my stash? Did he tell them yet?*

“You want coffee?” Richard asked me. He was over by the machine, rattling cups in his hand.

“Black,” I said. “Thanks.”

He brought me a cup. Beck was peeling off his coat and shaking water off it onto the floor.

“Bring it through,” he called. “We need to talk.”

He headed out to the hallway and looked back like he expected me to follow him. I took my coffee with me. It was hot and steaming. I could toss it in his face if I had to. He led me toward the square paneled room we had used before. I was carrying my cup, which slowed me down a little. He got there well ahead of me. When I entered he was already all the way over by one of the windows with his back to me, looking out at the rain. When he turned around he had a gun in his hand. I just stood still. I was too far away to use the coffee. Maybe fourteen feet. It would have looped up and curled and dispersed in the air and probably missed him altogether.

The gun was a Beretta M9 Special Edition, which was a civilian Beretta 92FS all dressed up to look exactly like a standard military-issue M9. It used nine-millimeter Parabellum ammunition. It had a fifteen-round magazine and military dot-and-post sights. I remembered with bizarre clarity that the retail price had been $861. I had carried an M9 for thirteen years. I had fired many thousands of practice rounds with it and more than a few for real. Most of them had hit their targets, because it’s an accurate weapon. Most of the targets had been destroyed,

because it's a powerful weapon. It had served me well. I even remembered the original sales pitch from the ordnance people: *It's got manageable recoil and it's easy to strip in the field.* They had repeated it like a mantra. Over and over again. I guess there were contracts at stake. There was some controversy. Navy SEALs hated it. They claimed they'd had dozens blow up in their faces. They even made up a cadence song about it: *No way are you a Navy Seal, until you eat some Italian steel.* But the M9 always served me well. It was a fine weapon, in my opinion. Beck's example looked like a brand-new gun. The finish was immaculate. Dewy with oil. There was luminescent paint on the sights. It glowed softly in the gloom.

I waited.

Beck just stood there, holding the gun. Then he moved. He slapped the barrel into his left palm and took his right hand away. Leaned over the oak table and held the thing out to me, butt-first, left-handed, politely, like he was a clerk in a store.

"Hope you like it," he said. "I thought you might feel at home with it. Duke was into the exotics, like that Steyr he had. But I figured you'd be more comfortable with the Beretta, you know, given your background."

I stepped forward. Put my coffee on the table. Took the gun from him. Ejected the magazine, checked the chamber, worked the action, looked down the barrel. It wasn't spiked. It wasn't a trick. It was a working piece. The Parabellums were real. It was brand new. It had never been fired. I slapped it back together and just held it for a moment. It was like shaking hands with an old friend. Then I cocked it and locked it and put it in my pocket.

"Thanks," I said.

He put his hand in his own pocket and came out with two spare magazines.

"Take these," he said.

He passed them across. I took them.

"I'll get you more later," he said.

"OK," I said.

“You ever tried laser sights?”

I shook my head.

“There’s a company called Laser Devices,” he said. “They do a universal handgun sight that mounts under the barrel. Plus a little flashlight that clips under the sight. Very cool device.”

“Gives a little red spot?”

He nodded. Smiled. “Nobody likes to get lit up with that little red spot, that’s for sure.”

“Expensive?”

“Not really,” he said. “Couple hundred bucks.”

“How much weight does it add?”

“Four and a half ounces,” he said.

“All at the front?”

“It helps, actually,” he said. “Stops the muzzle kicking upward when you fire. It adds about thirteen percent of the weight of the gun. More with the flashlight, of course. Maybe forty, forty-five ounces total. Still way less than those Anacondas you were using. What were they, fifty-nine ounces?”

“Unloaded,” I said. “More with six shells in them. Am I ever going to get them back?”

“I put them away somewhere,” he said. “I’ll get them for you later.”

“Thanks,” I said again.

“You want to try the laser?”

“I’m happy without it,” I said.

He nodded again. “Your choice. But I want the best protection I can get.”

“D[illegible]” I said.

"Don't worry," I said.

"I've got to go out now," he said. "Alone. I've got an appointment."

"You don't want me to drive you?"

"This sort of appointment, I have to do them alone. You stay here. We'll talk later. Move into Duke's room, OK? I like my security closer to where I sleep."

I put the spare magazines in my other pocket.

"OK," I said.

He walked past me into the hallway, back toward the kitchen.

It was the kind of mental somersault that can slow you down. Extreme tension, and then extreme puzzlement. I walked to the front of the house and watched from a hallway window. Saw the Cadillac sweep around the carriage circle in the rain and head for the gate. It paused in front of it and Paulie came out of the gatehouse. They must have dropped him there on their way back from breakfast. Beck must have driven the final length of the driveway himself. Or Richard, or Elizabeth. Paulie opened the gate. The Cadillac drove through it and away into the rain and the mist. Paulie closed the gate. He was wearing a slicker the size of a circus tent.

I shook myself and turned back and went to find Richard. He had the kind of guileless eyes that hide nothing. He was still in the kitchen, drinking his coffee.

"You walk the shoreline this morning?" I asked him.

I asked it innocently and amiably, like I was just making conversation. If he had anything to hide, I would know. He would go red, look away, stammer, shuffle his feet. But he did none of those things. He was completely relaxed. He looked straight at me.

"Are you kidding?" he said. "Seen the weather?"

I nodded.

“Pretty bad,” I said.

“I’m quitting college,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because of last night,” he said. “The ambush. Those Connecticut guys are still on the loose. Not safe to go back. I’m staying right here for a spell.”

“You OK with that?”

He nodded. “It was mostly a waste of time.”

I looked away. *The law of unintended consequences.* I had just short-circuited a kid’s education. Maybe ruined his life. But then, I was about to send his father to jail. Or waste him altogether. So I guessed a BA didn’t matter very much, compared to that.

I went to find Elizabeth Beck. She would be harder to read. I debated my approach and couldn’t come up with anything guaranteed to work. I found her in a parlor tucked into the northwest corner of the house. She was in an armchair. She had a book open on her lap. It was *Doctor Zhivago*, by Boris Pasternak. Paperback. I had seen the movie. I remembered Julie Christie, and the music. “Lara’s Theme.” Train journeys. And a lot of snow. Some girl had made me go.

“It’s not you,” she said.

“What’s not me?”

“You’re not the government spy.”

I breathed out. She wouldn’t say that if she’d found my stash.

“Exactly,” I said. “Your husband just gave me a gun.”

“You’re not smart enough to be a government spy.”

“Aren’t I?”

She shook her head. “Richard was desperate for a cup of coffee just now. When we came in.”

“So?”

“Do you think he would have been if we’d really been out for breakfast? He could have had all the coffee he wanted.”

“So where did you go?”

“We were called to a meeting.”

“With who?”

She just shook her head, like she couldn’t speak the name.

“Paulie didn’t *offer* to drive us,” she said. “He summoned us. Richard had to wait in the car.”

“But you went in?”

She nodded. “They’ve got a guy called Troy.”

“Silly name,” I said.

“But a very smart guy,” she said. “He’s young, and he’s very good with computers. I guess he’s what they call a hacker.”

“And?”

“He just got partial access to one of the government systems in Washington. He found out they put a federal agent in here. Undercover. At first they assumed it was you. Then they checked a little further and found out it was a woman and she’s actually been here for weeks.”

I stared at her, not understanding. *Teresa Daniel was off the books. The government computers knew nothing about her.* Then I remembered Duffy’s laptop, with the Justice Department logo as the screensaver. I remembered the modem wire, trailing across the desk, going through the complex adapter, going into the wall, hooking up with all the other computers in the world. Had Duffy

been compiling private reports? For her own use? For postaction justification?

“I hate to think what they’re going to do,” Elizabeth said. “To a woman.”

She shuddered visibly and looked away. I made it as far as the hallway. Then I stopped dead. There were no cars. And twelve miles of road before I would even begin to get anywhere. Three hours’ fast walk. Two hours, running.

“Forget it,” Elizabeth called. “Nothing to do with you.”

I turned around and stared in at her.

“Forget it,” she said again. “They’ll be doing it right now. It’ll be all over soon.”

The second time I ever saw Sergeant First Class Dominique Kohl was the third day she worked for me. She was wearing green battledress pants and a khaki T-shirt. It was very hot. I remember that. We were having some kind of a major heat wave. Her arms were tanned. She had the kind of skin that looks dusty in the heat. She wasn’t sweating. The T-shirt was great. She had her tapes on it, *Kohl* on the right and *US Army* on the left, both of them kicked up just a little by the curve of her breasts. She was carrying the file I had given her. It had gotten a little thicker, padded out with her notes.

“I’m going to need a partner,” she said to me. I felt a little guilty. Her third day, and I hadn’t even partnered her up. I wondered whether I’d given her a desk. Or a locker, or a room to sleep in.

“You met a guy called Frasconi yet?” I said.

“Tony? I met him yesterday. But he’s a lieutenant.”

I shrugged. “I don’t mind commissioned and noncommissioned working together. There’s no regulation against it. If there was, I’d ignore it anyway. You got a problem with it?”

She shook her head. “But maybe he does.”

“Frasconi? He won’t have a problem.”

“So will you tell him?”

“Sure,” I said. I made a note for myself, on a slip of blank paper, *Frasconi, Kohl, partners.* I underlined it twice, so I would remember. Then I pointed at the file she was carrying. “What have you got?”

“Good news and bad news,” she said. “Bad news is their system for signing out eyes-only paper is all shot to hell. Could be routine inefficiency, but more likely it’s been deliberately compromised to conceal stuff that shouldn’t be happening.”

“Who’s the guy in question?”

“A pointy-head called Gorowski. Uncle Sam recruited him right out of MIT. A nice guy, by all accounts. Supposed to be very smart.”

“Is he Russian?”

She shook her head. “Polish, from a million years ago. No hint of any ideology.”

“Was he a Red Sox fan up at MIT?”

“Why?”

“They’re all weird,” I said. “Check it.”

“It’s probably blackmail,” she said.

“So what’s the good news?”

She opened her file. “This thing they’re working on is a kind of small missile, basically.”

“Who are they working with?”

“Honeywell and the General Defense Corporation.”

“And?”

“This missile needs to be slim. So it’s going to be subcaliber. The tanks use hundred and twenty millimeter cannons, but the thing is going to be smaller than

that.”

“By how much?”

“Nobody knows yet. But they’re working on the sabot design right now. The sabot is a kind of sleeve that surrounds the thing to make it up to the right diameter.”

“I know what a sabot is,” I said.

She ignored me. “It’s going to be a discarding sabot, which means it comes apart and falls away immediately after the thing leaves the gun muzzle. They’re trying to figure whether it has to be a metal sabot, or whether it could be plastic. *Sabot* means boot. From the French. It’s like the missile starts out wearing a little boot.”

“I know that,” I said. “I speak French. My mother was French.”

“Like sabotage,” she said. “From old French labor disputes. Originally it meant to smash new industrial equipment by kicking it.”

“With your boots,” I said.

She nodded. “Right.”

“So what’s the good news again?”

“The sabot design isn’t going to tell anybody anything,” she said. “Nothing important, anyway. It’s just a sabot. So we’ve got plenty of time.”

“OK,” I said. “But make it a priority. With Frasconi. You’ll like him.”

“You want to get a beer later?”

“Me?”

She looked right at me. “If all ranks can work together, they should be able to have a beer together, right?”

“OK,” I said.

Dominique Kohl looked nothing at all like the photographs I had seen of Teresa Daniel, but it was a blend of both their faces I saw in my head. I left Elizabeth Beck with her book and headed up to my original room. I felt more isolated up there. Safer. I locked myself in the bathroom and took my shoe off. Opened the heel and fired up the e-mail device. There was a message from Duffy waiting: *No activity at warehouse. What are they doing?*

I ignored it and hit *new message* and typed: *We lost Teresa Daniel.*

Four words, eighteen letters, three spaces. I stared at them for a long time. Put my finger on the *send* button. But I didn't press it. I went to *backspace* instead and erased the message. It disappeared from right to left. The little cursor ate it up. I figured I would send it only when I had to. When I knew for sure.

I sent: *Possibility your computer is penetrated.*

There was a long delay. Much longer than the usual ninety seconds. I thought she wasn't going to answer. I thought she must be ripping her wires out of the wall. But maybe she was just getting out of the shower or something because about four minutes later she came back with a simple: *Why?*

I sent: *Talk of a hacker with partial access to government systems.*

She sent: *Mainframes or LANs?*

I had no idea what she meant. I sent: *Don't know.*

She asked: *Details?*

I sent: *Just talk. Are you keeping a log on your laptop?*

She sent: *Hell no!*

I sent: *Anywhere?*

She sent: *Hell no!!*

I sent: *Eliot?*

There was another four-minute delay. Then she came back with: *Don't think so*.

I asked: *Think or know?*

She sent: *Think.*

I stared at the tiled wall in front of me. Breathed out. *Eliot had killed Teresa Daniel*. It was the only explanation. Then I breathed in. Maybe it wasn't. Maybe he hadn't. I sent: *Are these e-mails vulnerable?*

We had been e-mailing back and forth furiously for more than sixty hours. She had asked for news of her agent. I had asked for her agent's real name. And I had asked in a way that definitely wasn't gender-neutral. Maybe I had killed Teresa Daniel.

I held my breath until Duffy came back with: *Our e-mail is encrypted. Technically might be visible as code but no way is it readable.*

I breathed out and sent: *Sure?*

She sent: *Totally.*

I sent: *Coded how?*

She sent: *NSA billion-dollar project.*

That cheered me up, but only a little. Some of NSA's billion-dollar projects are in the *Washington Post* before they're even finished. And communications snafus screw more things up than any other reason in the world.

I sent: *Check with Eliot immediately about computer logs.*

She sent: *Will do. Progress?*

I typed: *None.*

Then I deleted it and sent: *Soon.* I thought it might make her feel better.

I went all the way down to the ground-floor hallway. The door to Elizabeth's parlor was standing open. She was still in the armchair. *Doctor Zhivago* was facedown in her lap and she was staring out the window at the rain. I opened the front door and stepped outside. The metal detector squawked at the Beretta in my pocket. I closed the door behind me and headed straight across the carriage circle and down the driveway. The rain was hard on my back. It ran down my neck. But the wind helped me. It blew me west, straight toward the gatehouse. I felt light on my feet. Coming back again was going to be harder. I would be walking directly into the wind. Assuming I was still walking at all.

Paulie saw me coming. He must have spent his whole time crouched inside the tiny building, prowling from the front windows to the back windows, watching, like a restless animal in its lair. He came out, in his slicker. He had to duck his head and turn sideways to get through the door. He stood with his back against the wall of his house, where the eaves were low. But the eaves didn't help him. The rain drove horizontally under them. I could hear it lashing against the slicker, hard and loud and brittle. It drove against his face and ran down it like torrents of sweat. He had no hat. His hair was plastered against his forehead. It was dark with water.

I had both hands in my pockets with my shoulders hunched forward and my face ducked into my collar. My right hand was tight around the Beretta. The safety was off. But I didn't want to use it. Using it would require complicated explanations. And he would only be replaced. I didn't want to have him replaced until I was ready to have him replaced. So I didn't want to use the Beretta. But I was prepared to.

I stopped six feet from him. Out of his reach.

"We need to talk," I said.

"I don't want to talk," he said.

"You want to arm wrestle instead?"

His eyes were pale blue and his pupils were tiny. I guessed his breakfast had been taken entirely in the form of capsules and powder.

"Talk about what?" he said.

"[illegible]" I said.

"New situation," I said.

He said nothing.

"What's your MOS?" I asked.

MOS is an army acronym. The army loves acronyms. It stands for *Military Occupational Specialty.* And I used the present tense. *What is,* not *what was.* I wanted to put him right back there. Being ex-military is like being a lapsed Catholic. Even though they're way in the back of your mind, the old rituals still exert a powerful pull. Old rituals like obeying an officer.

"Eleven bang bang," he said, and smiled.

Not a great answer. *Eleven bang bang* was grunt slang for *11B,* which meant *11-Bravo, Infantry,* which meant *Combat Arms.* Next time I face a four-hundred-pound giant with veins full of meth and steroids I would prefer it if his MOS had been mechanical maintenance, or typewriting. Not combat arms. Especially a four-hundred-pound giant who doesn't like officers and who had served eight years in Fort Leavenworth for beating up on one.

"Let's go inside," I said. "It's wet out here."

I said it with the kind of tone you develop when you get promoted past captain. It's a reasonable tone, almost conversational. It's not the sort of tone you use as a lieutenant. It's a suggestion, but it's an order, too. It's heavy with inclusion. It says: *Hey, we're just a couple of guys here. We don't need to let formalities like rank get in our way, do we?*

He looked at me for a long moment. Then he turned and slid sideways through his door. Ducked his chin to his chest so he could get through. Inside, the ceiling was about seven feet high. It felt low to me. His head was almost touching it. I kept my hands in my pockets. Water from his slicker was pooling on the floor.

The house stank with a sharp acrid animal smell. Like a mink. And it was filthy. There was a small living room that opened to a kitchen area. Beyond the kitchen was a short hallway with a bathroom off it and a bedroom at the end. That was all. It was smaller than a city apartment, but it was all dressed up to look like a miniature stand-alone house. There was mess everywhere. Unwashed dishes in the sink. Used plates and cups and articles of athletic clothing all over the living room. There was an old sofa opposite a new television set. The sofa had been

room. There was an old sofa opposite a new television set. The sofa had been crushed by his bulk. There were pill bottles on shelves, on tables, everywhere. Some of them were vitamins. But not many of them.

There was a machine gun in the room. The old Soviet NSV. It belonged on a tank turret. Paulie had it suspended from a chain in the middle of the room. It hung there like a macabre sculpture. Like the Alexander Calder thing they put in every new airport terminal. He could stand behind it and swing it through a complete circle. He could fire it through the front window or the back window, like they were gunports. Limited field of fire, but he could cover forty yards of the road to the west, and forty yards of the driveway to the east. It was fed by a belt that came up out of an open ammunition case placed on the floor. There were maybe twenty more cases stacked against the wall. The cases were dull olive, all covered with Cyrillic letters and red stars.

The gun was so big I had to back up against the wall to get around it. I saw two telephones. One was probably an outside line. The other was probably an internal phone that reached the house. There were alarm boxes on the wall. One would be for the sensors out in no-man's-land. The other would be for the motion detector on the gate itself. There was a video monitor, showing a milky monochrome picture from the gatepost camera.

"You kicked me," he said.

I said nothing.

"Then you tried to run me over," he said.

"Warning shots," I said.

"About what?"

"Duke's gone," I said.

He nodded. "I heard."

"So it's me now," I said. "You've got the gate, I've got the house."

He nodded again. Said nothing.

"I look after the Becks now," I said. "I'm responsible for their security. Mr.

Beck trusts me. He trusts me so much he gave me a weapon.´´

I was giving him a stare the whole time I was talking. The kind of stare that feels like pressure between the eyes. This would be the moment when the meth and the steroids should kick in and make him grin like an idiot and say, *Well he ain't going to trust you anymore when I tell him what I found out there on the rocks, is he? When I tell him you already had a weapon.* He would shuffle and grin and use a singsong voice. But he said nothing. Did nothing. Didn't react at all, beyond a slight defocus in his eyes, like he was having trouble computing the implications.

"Understand?" I said.

"It used to be Duke and now it's you," he said neutrally.

It wasn't him who had found my stash.

"I'm looking out for their welfare," I said. "Including Mrs. Beck's. That game is over now, OK?"

He said nothing. I was getting a sore neck from looking up into his eyes. My vertebrae are much more accustomed to looking downward at people.

"OK?" I said again.

"Or?"

"Or you and I will have to go around and around."

"I'd like that."

I shook my head.

"You wouldn't like it," I said. "Not one little bit. I'd take you apart, piece by piece."

"You think?"

"You ever hit an MP?" I asked. "Back in the service?"

He didn't answer. Just looked away and stayed quiet. He was probably remembering his arrest. He probably resisted a little, and needed to be subdued

remembering his arrest. He probably resisted a little, and needed to be subdued. So consequently he probably tripped down some stairs somewhere and suffered a fair amount of damage. Somewhere between the scene of the crime and the holding cell, probably. Purely by accident. That kind of thing happens, in certain circumstances. But then, the arresting officer probably sent six guys to pick him up. I would have sent eight.

“And then I’d fire you,” I said.

His eyes came back, slow and lazy.

“You can’t fire me,” he said. “I don’t work for you. Or Beck.”

“So who do you work for?”

“Somebody.”

“This somebody got a name?”

He shook his head.

“No dice,” he said.

I kept my hands in my pockets and eased my way around the machine gun. Headed for the door.

“We straight now?” I said.

He looked at me. Said nothing. But he was calm. His morning dosages must have been well balanced.

“Mrs. Beck is off-limits, right?” I said.

“While you’re here,” he said. “You won’t be here forever.”

I hope not, I thought. His telephone rang. The outside line, I guessed. I doubted if Elizabeth or Richard would be calling him from the house. The ring was loud in the silence. He picked it up and said his name. Then he just listened. I heard a trace of a voice in the earpiece, distant and indistinct with plastic peaks and resonances that obscured what was being said. The voice spoke for less than a minute. Then the call was over. He put the phone down and moved his hand

quite delicately and used the flat of his palm to set the machine gun swinging gently on its chain. I realized it was a conscious imitation of the thing I had done with the heavy bag down in the gym on our first morning together. He grinned at me.

“I’m watching you,” he said. “I’ll always be watching you.”

I ignored him and opened the door and stepped outside. The rain hit me like a fire hose. I leaned forward and walked straight into it. Held my breath and had a very bad feeling in the small of my back until I was all the way through the forty-yard arc the back window could cover. Then I breathed out.

Not Beck, not Elizabeth, not Richard. Not Paulie.

No dice.

Dominique Kohl said *no DICE* to me the night we had our beer. Something unexpected had come up and I had to rain-check the first evening and then she rain-checked my makeup date, so it was about a week before we got together. Maybe eight days. Sergeants drinking with captains was difficult on-post back then because the clubs were rigorously separate, so we went out to a bar in town. It was the usual kind of place, long and low, eight pool tables, plenty of people, plenty of neon, plenty of jukebox noise, plenty of smoke. It was still very hot. The air conditioners were running flat out and getting nowhere. I was wearing fatigue pants and an old T-shirt, because I didn’t own any personal clothes. Kohl arrived wearing a dress. It was a simple A-line, no sleeves, knee-length, black, with little white dots on it. Very small dots. Not like big polka dots or anything. A very subtle pattern.

“How’s Frasconi working out?” I asked her.

“Tony?” she said. “He’s a nice guy.”

She didn’t say anything more about him. We ordered Rolling Rocks, which suited me because it was my favorite drink that summer. She had to lean very close to talk, because of the noise. I enjoyed the proximity. But I wasn’t fooling myself. It was the decibel level making her do it, nothing else. And I wasn’t going to try anything with her. No formal reason not to. There were rules back

going to try anything with her. No formal reason not to. There were rules back then, I guess, but there were no regulations yet. The notion of sexual harassment was slow coming to the army. But I was already aware of the potential unfairness. Not that there was any way I could help or hurt her career. Her jacket made it plain she was going to make master sergeant and then first sergeant like night follows day. It was only a matter of time. Then came the leap up to E-9 status, sergeant major. That was hers for the taking, too. After that, she would have a problem. After sergeant major came command sergeant major, and there's only one of those in each regiment. After that came sergeant major of the army, and there's only one of those, period. So she would rise and then stop, whatever I said about it.

"We have a tactical problem," she said. "Or strategic, maybe."

"Why?"

"The pointy-head, Gorowski? We don't think it's blackmail in the sense that he's got some terrible secret or anything. Looks to us more like straightforward threats against his family. Coercion, rather than blackmail."

"How can you tell?"

"His file is clean as a whistle. He's been background-checked to hell and back. That's why they do it. They're trying to avoid the possibility of blackmail."

"Was he a Red Sox fan?"

She shook her head. "Yankees. He's from the Bronx. Went to the High School of Science there."

"OK," I said. "I like him already."

"But the book says we should bust him right now."

"What's he doing?"

"We've seen him taking papers out of the lab."

"Are they still doing the sabot?"

She nodded. "But they could publish the sabot design in *Stars and Stripes* and it

wouldn’t tell anybody anything. So the situation isn’t critical yet.”

“What does he do with the papers?”

“He dead-drops them in Baltimore.”

“Have you seen who picks them up?”

She shook her head.

“No dice,” she said.

“What are you thinking about the pointy-head?”

“I don’t want to bust him. I think we should get whoever it is off his back and leave him be. He’s got two baby girls.”

“What does Frasconi think?”

“He agrees.”

“Does he?”

She smiled.

“Well, he will,” she said. “But the book says different.”

“Forget the book,” I said.

“Really?”

“Direct order from me,” I said. “I’ll put it in writing, if you want. Go with your instinct. Trace the chain the whole way to the other end. If we can, we’ll keep this Gorowski guy out of trouble. That’s my usual approach, with Yankees fans. But don’t let it get away from you.”

“I won’t,” she said.

“Wrap it up before they get done with the sabot,” I said. “Or we’ll have to think of another approach.”

“OK,” she said.

OK," she said.

Then we talked about other things, and drank a couple more beers. After an hour there was something good on the jukebox and I asked her to dance. For the second time that night she told me *No dice.* I thought about that phrase later. Clearly it came from crapshooters' jargon. It must have originally meant *foul,* like a call, like the dice hadn't been properly rolled. *No dice!* Like a baseball umpire calling a grounder over the bag. *Foul ball!* Then much later it became just another negative, like *no way, no how, no chance.* But how far back in its etymology was she mining? Had she meant a plain *no,* or was she calling a foul? I wasn't sure.

I was completely soaked when I got back to the house so I went upstairs and took possession of Duke's room and toweled off and dressed in a fresh set of his clothes. The room was at the front of the house, more or less central. The window gave me a view west all the way along the driveway. The elevation meant I could see over the wall. I saw a Lincoln Town Car in the far distance. It was heading straight for us. It was black. It had its headlights on, because of the weather. Paulie came out in his slicker and opened the gate well ahead of time so it didn't have to slow down. It came straight through, moving fast. The windshield was wet and smeared and the wipers were beating back and forth. Paulie had been expecting it. He had been alerted by the phone call. I watched it approach until it was lost to sight below me. Then I turned away.

Duke's room was square and plain, like most of the rooms in the house. It had dark paneling and a big Oriental carpet. There was a television set and two telephones. External and internal, I guessed. The sheets were clean and there were no personal items anywhere, except for clothes in the closet. I guessed maybe early in the morning Beck had told the maid about the personnel change. I guessed he had told her to leave the clothes for me.

I went back to the window and about five minutes later I saw Beck coming back in the Cadillac. Paulie was ready for him, too. The big car barely had to slow. Paulie swung the gate shut after it. Then he chained it and locked it. The gate was a hundred yards from me, but I could make out what he was doing. The Cadillac disappeared from view beneath me and headed around to the garage block. I headed downstairs. I figured since Beck was back it might be time for lunch. I figured maybe Paulie had chained the gate because he was heading on

lunch. I figured maybe Paulie had chained the gate because he was heading on down to join us.

But I was wrong.

I made it to the hallway and met Beck coming out of the kitchen. His coat was spotted with rain. He was looking for me. He had a sports bag in his hand. It was the same bag he had carried the guns to Connecticut in.

“Job to do,” he said. “Right now. You need to catch the tide.”

“Where?”

He moved away. Turned his head and called over his shoulder.

“The guy in the Lincoln will tell you,” he said.

I went through the kitchen and outside. The metal detector beeped at me. I walked back into the rain and headed for the garage block. But the Lincoln was parked right there at the corner of the house. It had been turned and backed up so its trunk faced the sea. There was a guy in the driver’s seat. He was sheltering from the rain, and he was impatient. He was tapping on the wheel with his thumbs. He saw me in the mirror and the trunk popped and he opened his door and slid out fast.

He looked like somebody had dragged him out of a trailer park and shoved him in a suit. He had a long graying goatee hiding a weak chin. He had a greasy pony tail held together by a pink rubber band. The band was speckled with glitter. It was the kind of thing you see on drugstore carousels, placed low down so little girls will choose them. He had old acne scars. He had prison tattoos on his neck. He was tall and very thin, like a regular person split lengthwise into two.

“You the new Duke?” he said to me.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m the new Duke.”

“I’m Harley,” he said.

I didn’t tell him my name.

“So let’s do it,” he said.

“Do what?”

He came around and raised the trunk lid all the way.

“Garbage disposal,” he said.

There was a military-issue body bag in the trunk. Heavy black rubber, zipped all along its length. I could see by the way it was folded into the space that it held a small person. A woman, probably.

“Who is it?” I asked, although I already knew the answer.

“The government bitch,” he said. “Took us long enough, but we got her in the end.”

He leaned in and grabbed his end of the bag. Clamped both corners in his hands. Waited for me. I just stood there, feeling the rain against my neck, listening to it snapping and popping against the rubber.

“Got to catch the tide,” he said. “It’s going to turn.”

I leaned down and took hold of the corners at my end. We glanced at each other to coordinate our efforts and heaved the bag up and out. It wasn’t heavy, but it was awkward, and Harley was not strong. We carried it a few steps toward the shore.

“Put it down,” I said.

“Why?”

“I want to see,” I said.

Harley just stood there.

“I don’t think you do,” he said.

“Put it down,” I said again.

He hesitated a second longer and then we squatted together and laid the bag on the rocks. The body settled inside with its back arched upward. I stayed squatted down and duck-walked around to the head. Found the zipper tag and pulled.

“Just look at the face,” Harley said. “That part’s not too bad.”

I looked. It was very bad. She had died in extreme agony. That was clear. Her face was blasted with pain. It was still twisted into the shape of her final ghastly scream.

But it wasn’t Teresa Daniel.

It was Beck’s maid.

CHAPTER 9

I inched the zipper down a little more until I saw the same mutilation I had seen ten years previously. Then I stopped. Turned my head into the rain and closed my eyes. The water on my face felt like tears.

“Let’s get on with it,” Harley said.

I opened my eyes. Stared at the waves. Pulled the zipper back up without looking anymore. Stood slowly and stepped around to the foot of the bag. Harley waited. Then we each grasped our corners and lifted. Carried the burden over the rocks. He led me south and east, way out to a place on the shore where two granite shelves met. There was a steep V-shaped cleft between them. It was half-full of moving water.

“Wait until after the next big wave,” Harley said.

It came booming in and we both ducked our heads away from the spray. The cleft filled to the top and the tide ran up over the rocks and almost reached our shoes. Then it pulled away again and the cleft emptied out. Gravel rattled and drained. The surface of the sea was laced with dull gray foam and pitted by the rain.

“OK, put it down,” Harley said. He was out of breath. “Hold your end.”

We laid the bag down so the head end was hanging out over the granite shelf and into the cleft. The zipper faced upward. The body was on its back. I held both corners at the foot. The rain plastered my hair to my head and ran into my eyes. It stung. Harley squatted and straddled the bag and humped the head end farther out into space. I went with him, inch by inch, small steps on the slippery rocks. The next wave came in and eddied under the bag. It floated it up a little. Harley used the temporary buoyancy to slide it a little farther into the sea. I moved with it. The wave receded. The cleft drained again. The bag drooped down. The rain thrashed against the stiff rubber. It battered our backs. It was deathly cold.

Harley used the next five waves to ease the bag out more and more until it was hanging right down into the cleft. I was left holding empty rubber. Gravity had

hanging right down into the cleft. I was left holding empty rubber. Gravity had jammed the body tight up against the top of the bag. Harley waited and looked out to sea and then ducked low and pulled the zipper all the way down. Scrambled back fast and took a corner from me. Held tight. The seventh wave came booming in. We were soaked with its spray. The cleft filled and the bag filled and then the big wave receded and sucked the body right out of the bag. It floated motionless for a split second and then the undertow caught it and took it away. It went straight down, into the depths. I saw long fair hair streaming in the water and pale skin flashing green and gray and then it was gone. The cleft foamed red as it drained.

“Hell of a riptide here,” Harley said.

I said nothing.

“The undertow takes them right out,” he said. “We never had one come back, anyways. It pulls them a mile or two, going down all the way. Then there’s sharks out there, I guess. They cruise the coast here. Plus all kinds of other creatures. You know, crabs, suckerfish, things like that.”

I said nothing.

“Never had one come back,” he said again.

I glanced at him and he smiled at me. His mouth was like a caved-in hole above the goatee. He had rotten yellow stumps for teeth. I glanced away again. The next wave came in. It was only a small one, but when it receded the cleft was washed clean. It was like nothing had happened. Like nothing had ever been there. Harley stood up awkwardly and zipped the empty bag. Pink water sluiced out of it and ran over the rocks. He started rolling it up. I glanced back at the house. Beck was standing in the kitchen doorway, alone, watching us.

We went back toward the house, soaked with rain and salt water. Beck ducked back into the kitchen. We followed him in. Harley hung around on the edge of the room, like he felt he shouldn’t be there.

“She was a federal agent?” I said.

“No question,” Beck said.

"No question," Beck said.

His sports bag was on the table, in the center, prominent, like a prosecution exhibit in a courtroom. He zipped it open and rummaged inside.

"Check this out," he said.

He lifted a bundle onto the table. Something wrapped in a damp dirty oil-stained rag the size of a hand towel. He unfolded it and took out Duffy's Glock 19.

"This all was hidden in the car we let her use," he said.

"The Saab?" I said, because I had to say something.

He nodded. "In the well where the spare tire is. Under the trunk floor." He laid the Glock on the table. Took the two spare magazines out of the rag and laid them next to the gun. Then he put the bent bradawl next to them, and the sharpened chisel. And Angel Doll's keyring.

I couldn't breathe.

"The bradawl is a lock pick, I guess," Beck said.

"How does this prove she was federal?" I asked.

He picked up the Glock again and turned it around and pointed to the right-hand side of the slide.

"Serial number," he said. "We checked with Glock in Austria. By computer. We have access to that kind of thing. This particular gun was sold to the United States government about a year ago. Part of a big order for the law enforcement agencies, 17s for the male agents and 19s for the women. So that's how we know she was federal."

I stared at the serial number. "Did she deny it?"

He nodded. "Of course she did. She said she just found it. Gave us a big song and dance. She blamed you, actually. Said it was your stuff. But then, they always deny it, don't they? They're trained to, I guess."

I looked away. Stared through the window at the sea. *Why had she picked it all*

up? Why hadn't she just left it there? Was it some kind of a housekeeping instinct? She didn't want it to get wet? Or what?

"You look upset," Beck said.

And how did she even find it? Why would she even be looking?

"You look upset," he said again.

I was beyond upset. She had died in agony. And I had done it to her. She probably thought she was doing me a favor. By keeping my stuff dry. By keeping it from rusting. She was just a dumb naive kid from Ireland, trying to help me out. And I had killed her, as surely as if I had stood there and butchered her myself.

"I'm responsible for security," I said. "I should have suspected her."

"You're responsible only since last night," Beck said. "So don't beat yourself up over it. You haven't even got your feet under the table yet. It was Duke who should have made her."

"But I never would have suspected her," I said. "I thought she was just the maid."

"Hey, me too," he said. "Duke, also."

I looked away again. Stared at the sea. It was gray and heaving. I didn't really understand. *She found it. But why would she hide it so well?*

"This is the clincher," Beck said.

I looked back in time to see him lifting a pair of shoes out of the bag. They were big square clunky items, black, the shoes she had been wearing every single time I had seen her.

"Look at this," he said.

He turned the right shoe over and pulled a pin out of the heel with his fingernails. Then he swiveled the heel rubber like a little door and turned the shoe the right way up. He shook it. A small black plastic rectangle clattered out on the table. It landed facedown. He turned it over.

It was a wireless e-mail device, exactly identical to my own.

He passed me the shoe. I took it. Stared at it, blankly. It was a woman's size six. Made for a small foot. But it had a wide bulbous toe, and therefore a wide thick heel to balance it visually. Some kind of a clumsy fashion statement. The heel had a rectangular cavity carved out of it. Identical to mine. It had been done neatly. It had been done with patience. But not by a machine. It showed the same faint tool marks that mine did. I pictured some guy in a lab somewhere, a line of shoes on a bench in front of him, the smell of new leather, a small arc of woodcarving tools laid out in front of him, curls and slivers of rubber accumulating on the floor around him as he labored. Most government work is surprisingly low-tech. It's not all exploding ballpoint pens and cameras built into watches. A trip to the mall to buy a commercial e-mail device and a pair of plain shoes is about as cutting-edge as most of it gets.

"What are you thinking?" Beck asked.

I was thinking about how I was feeling. I was on a roller-coaster. She was still dead, but I hadn't killed her anymore. The government computers had killed her again. So I was relieved, personally. But I was more than a little angry, too. *Like, what the hell was Duffy doing?* What the hell was she playing at? It was an absolute rule of procedure that you never put two or more people undercover in the same location unless they're aware of each other. That was absolutely *basic.* She had told me about Teresa Daniel. *So why the hell hadn't she told me about this other woman?*

"Unbelievable," I said.

"The battery is dead," he said. He was holding the device in both hands. Using both thumbs on it, like a video game. "It doesn't work, anyway."

He passed it to me. I put the shoe down and took it from him. Pressed the familiar *power* button. But the screen stayed dead.

"How long was she here?" I asked.

"Eight weeks," Beck said. "It's hard for us to keep domestic staff. It's lonely

"Eight weeks," Beck said. "It's hard for us to keep domestic staff. It's lonely here. And there's Paulie, you know. And Duke wasn't a very hospitable guy, either."

"I guess eight weeks would be a long time for a battery to last."

"What would be their procedure now?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I was never federal."

"In general," he said. "You must have seen stuff like this."

I shrugged.

"I guess they'd have expected it," I said. "Communications are always the first things to get screwed up. She drops off the radar, they wouldn't worry right away. They'd have no choice but to leave her in the field. I mean, they can't contact her to order her home, can they? So I guess they would trust her to get the battery charged up again, as soon as she could." I turned the unit on its edge and pointed to the little socket on the bottom. "Looks like it needs a cell phone charger, something like that."

"Would they send people after her?"

"Eventually," I said. "I guess."

"When?"

"I don't know. Not yet, anyway."

"We plan to deny she was ever here. Deny we ever saw her. There's no evidence she was ever here."

"You better clean her room real good," I said. "There'll be fingerprints and hair and DNA all over the place."

"She was recommended to us," he said. "We don't advertise in the paper or anything. Some guys we know in Boston put her in touch."

He glanced at me. I thought: *Some guys in Boston begging for a plea bargain, helping the government any which way they could.* I nodded.

“Tricky,” I said. “Because what does that say about them?”

He nodded back sourly. He agreed with me. He knew what I was saying. He picked up the big bunch of keys from where they were lying next to the chisel.

“I think these are Angel Doll’s,” he said.

I said nothing.

“So it’s a three-way nightmare,” he said. “We can tie Doll to the Hartford crew, and we can tie our Boston friends to the feds. Now we can tie Doll to the feds, too. Because he gave his keys to the undercover bitch. Which means the Hartford crew must be in bed with the feds as well. Doll’s dead, thanks to Duke, but I’ve still got Hartford, Boston, *and* the government on my back. I’m going to need you, Reacher.”

I glanced at Harley. He was looking out the window at the rain.

“Was it just Doll?” I asked.

Beck nodded. “I’ve been through all of that. I’m satisfied. It was just Doll. The rest are solid. They’re still with me. They were very apologetic about Doll.”

“OK,” I said.

There was silence for a long moment. Then Beck rewrapped my stash in its rag and dumped it back in his bag. He threw the dead e-mail device in after it and piled the maid’s shoes on top. They looked sad and empty and forlorn.

“I’ve learned one thing,” he said. “I’m going to start searching people’s shoes, that’s for damn sure. You can bet your life on that.”

I bet my life on it right there and then. I kept my own shoes on. I got back up to Duke’s room and checked his closet. There were four pairs in there. Nothing I would have picked out for myself in a store, but they looked reasonable and they were close to the right size. But I left them there. To show up so soon in different shoes would raise a red flag. And if I was going to ditch mine, I was

going to ditch them properly. No point leaving them in my room for casual inspection. I would have to get them out of the house. And there was no easy way of doing that right then. Not after the scene in the kitchen. I couldn't just walk downstairs with them in my hands. What was I supposed to say? *What, these? Oh, they're the shoes I was wearing when I arrived. I'm just going out to throw them in the ocean.* Like I was suddenly bored with them? So I kept them on.

And I still needed them, anyway. I was tempted, but I wasn't ready to cut Duffy out. Not just yet. I locked myself in Duke's bathroom and took the e-mail device out. It was an eerie feeling. I hit *power* and the screen came up with a message: *We need to meet.* I hit *reply* and sent: *You bet your ass we do.* Then I turned the unit off and nailed it back into my heel and went down to the kitchen again.

"Go with Harley," Beck told me. "You need to bring the Saab back."

The cook wasn't there. The counters were neat and clean. They had been scrubbed. The stove was cold. It felt like there should be a *Closed* sign hanging on the door.

"What about lunch?" I said.

"You hungry?"

I thought back to the way the sea had swelled the bag and claimed the body. Saw the hair under the water, fluid and infinitely fine. Saw the blood rinsing away, pink and diluted. I wasn't hungry.

"Starving," I said.

Beck smiled sheepishly. "You're one cold son of a bitch, Reacher."

"I've seen dead people before. I expect to see them again."

He nodded. "The cook is off duty. Eat out, OK?"

"I don't have any money."

He put his hand in his pants pocket and came out with a wad of bills. Started to count them out and then just shrugged and gave it up and handed the whole lot to me. It must have been close to a thousand dollars.

life. It must have been close to a thousand dollars.

“Walking-around money,” he said. “We’ll do the salary thing later.”

I put the cash in my pocket.

“Harley is waiting in the car,” he said.

I went outside and pulled my coat collar up. The wind was easing. The rain was reverting to vertical. The Lincoln was still there at the corner of the house. The trunk lid was closed. Harley was drumming his thumbs on the wheel. I slid into the passenger seat and buzzed it backward to get some legroom. He fired up the engine and set the wipers going and took off. We had to wait while Paulie unchained the gate. Harley fiddled with the heater and set it on high. Our clothes were wet and the windows were steaming up. Paulie was slow. Harley started drumming again.

“You two work for the same guy?” I asked him.

“Me and Paulie?” he said. “Sure.”

“Who is he?”

“Beck didn’t tell you?”

“No,” I said.

“Then I won’t either, I guess.”

“Hard for me to do my job without information,” I said.

“That’s your problem,” he said. “Not mine.”

He gave me his yellow gappy smile again. I figured if I hit him hard enough my fist would take out all the little stumps and end up somewhere in the back of his scrawny throat. But I didn’t hit him. Paulie got the chain loose and swung the gate back. Harley took off immediately and squeezed through with about an inch of clearance on each side. I settled back in my seat. Harley clicked the headlights on and accelerated hard and rooster tails of spray kicked up behind us. We drove west, because there was no choice for the first twelve miles. Then we turned north on Route One, away from where Elizabeth Beck had taken me, away from Old Orchard Beach and Saco, toward Portland. I had no view of anything

Old Orchard Beach and Saco, toward Portland. I had no view of anything because the weather was so dismal. I could barely see the tail lights on the traffic ahead of us. Harley didn't speak. Just rocked back and forth in the driver's seat and drummed his thumbs on the wheel and drove. He wasn't a smooth driver. He was always either on the gas or the brake. We sped up, slowed down, sped up, slowed down. It was a long twenty miles.

Then the road swerved hard to the west and I saw I-295 close by on our left. There was a narrow tongue of gray seawater beyond it and beyond that was the Portland airport. There was a plane taking off in a huge cloud of spray. It roared low over our heads and swung south over the Atlantic. Then there was a strip mall on our left with a long narrow parking lot out front. The mall had the sort of stores you expect to find in a low-rent place trapped between two roads near an airport. The parking lot held maybe twenty cars in a line, all of them head-in and square-on to the curb. The old Saab was fifth from the left. Harley pulled the Lincoln in and stopped directly behind it. Drummed his thumbs on the wheel.

"All yours," he said. "Key is in the door pocket."

I got out in the rain and he drove off as soon as I shut my door. But he didn't get back on Route One. At the end of the lot he made a left. Then an immediate right. I saw him ease the big car through an improvised exit made of lumpy poured concrete that led into the adjoining lot. I pulled my collar up again and watched as he drove slowly through it and then disappeared behind a set of brand-new buildings. They were long low sheds made of bright corrugated metal. Some kind of a business park. There was a network of narrow blacktop roads. They were wet and shiny with rain. They had high concrete curbs, smooth and new. I saw the Lincoln again, through a gap between buildings. It was moving slow and lazy, like it was looking to park somewhere. Then it slid behind another building and I didn't see it again.

I turned around. The Saab was nose-in to a discount liquor store. Next to the liquor store on one side was a place that sold car stereos and on the other side was a place with a window full of fake crystal chandeliers. I doubted if the maid had been sent out to buy a new ceiling fixture. Or to get a CD player installed in the Saab. So she must have been sent to the liquor store. And then she must have found a whole bunch of people waiting there for her. Four of them, maybe five. At least. After the first moment of surprise she would have changed from a bewildered maid to a trained agent fighting for her life. They would have anticipated that. They would have come mob-handed. I looked up and down the

sidewalk. Then I looked at the liquor store. It had a window full of boxes. There was no real view out. But I went in anyway.

The store was full of boxes but empty of people. It felt like it spent most of its time that way. It was cold and dusty. The clerk behind the counter was a gray guy of about fifty. Gray hair, gray shirt, gray skin. He looked like he hadn't been outside in a decade. He had nothing I wanted to buy as an ice-breaker. So I just went right ahead and asked him my question.

"See that Saab out there?" I said.

He made a big show of lining up his view out front.

"I see it," he said.

"You see what happened to the driver?"

"No," he said.

People who say *no* right away are usually lying. A truthful person is perfectly capable of saying *no,* but generally they stop and think about it first. And they add *sorry* or something like that. Maybe they come out with some questions of their own. It's human nature. They say *Sorry, no, why, what happened?* I put my hand in my pocket and peeled off a bill from Beck's wad purely by feel. Took it out. It was a hundred. I folded it in half and held it up between my finger and my thumb.

"Now did you see?" I said.

He glanced to his left. My right. Toward the business park beyond his walls. Just a fast glance, furtive, out and back.

"No," he said again.

"Black Town Car?" I said. "Drove off that way?"

"I didn't see," he said. "I was busy."

I nodded. "You're practically rushed off your feet in here. I can see that. It's a miracle one man can handle the pressure."

“I was in the back. On the phone, I guess.”

I kept the hundred up there in my hand for another long moment. I guessed a hundred tax-free dollars would represent a healthy slice of his week’s net take. But he looked away from it. That told me plenty, too.

“OK,” I said. I put the money back in my pocket and walked out.

I drove the Saab two hundred yards south on Route One and stopped at the first gas station I saw. Went in and bought a bottle of spring water and two candy bars. I paid four times more for the water than I would have for gasoline, if you calculated it by the gallon. Then I came out and sheltered near the door and peeled a candy bar and started eating it. Used the time to look around. No surveillance. So I stepped over to the pay phones and used my change to call Duffy. I had memorized her motel number. I crouched under the plastic bubble and tried to stay dry. She answered on the second ring.

“Drive north to Saco,” I said. “Right now. Meet me in the big brick mall on the river island in a coffee shop called *Café Café.* Last one there buys.”

I finished my candy bar as I drove south. The Saab rode hard and it was noisy compared to Beck’s Cadillac or Harley’s Lincoln. It was old and worn. The carpets were thin and loose. It had six figures on the clock. But it got the job done. It had decent tires and the wipers worked. It made it through the rain OK. And it had nice big mirrors. I watched them all the way. Nobody came after me. I got to the coffee shop first. Ordered a tall espresso to wash the taste of chocolate out of my mouth.

Duffy showed up six minutes later. She paused in the doorway and looked around and then headed over toward me and smiled. She was in fresh jeans and another cotton shirt, but it was blue, not white. Over that was her leather jacket and over that was a battered old raincoat that was way too big for her. Maybe it was the old guy’s. Maybe she had borrowed it from him. It wasn’t Eliot’s. That was clear. He was smaller than she was. She must have come north not expecting bad weather.

“Is this place safe?” she said.

I didn’t answer.

“What?” she said.

“You’re buying,” I said. “You got here second. I’ll have another espresso. And you owe me for the first one.”

She looked at me blankly and then went to the counter and came back with an espresso for me and a cappuccino for herself. Her hair was a little wet. She had combed it with her fingers. She must have parked her car on the street and walked in through the rain and checked her reflection in a store window. She counted her change in silence and dealt me bills and coins equal to the price of my first cup. Coffee was another thing way more expensive than gasoline, up here in Maine. But I guessed it was the same everywhere.

“What’s up?” she said.

I didn’t answer.

“Reacher, what’s the matter?”

“You put another agent in eight weeks ago,” I said. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“What?”

“What I said.”

“What agent?”

“She died this morning. She underwent a radical double mastectomy without the benefit of anesthetic.”

She stared at me. “Teresa?”

I shook my head.

“Not Teresa,” I said. “The other one.”

“What other one?”

“Don’t bullshit me,” I said.

“What other one?”

I stared at her. Hard. Then softer. There was something about the light in that coffee shop. Maybe it was the way it came off all the blond wood and the brushed metal and the glass and the chrome. It was like X-ray light. Like a truth serum. It had shown me Elizabeth Beck’s genuine uncontrollable blush. Now I was expecting it to show me the exact same thing from Duffy. I was expecting it to show me a deep red blush of shame and embarrassment, because I had found her out. But it showed me total surprise instead. It was right there in her face. She had gone very pale. She had gone stark white with shock. It was like the blood had drained right out of her. And nobody can do that on command, any more than they can blush.

“What *other* one?” she said again. “There was only Teresa. What? Are you telling me she’s dead?”

“Not Teresa,” I said again. “There was another one. Another woman. She got hired on as a kitchen maid.”

“No,” she said. “There’s only Teresa.”

I shook my head again. “I saw the body. It wasn’t Teresa.”

“A kitchen maid?”

“She had an e-mail thing in her shoe,” I said. “Exactly the same as mine. The heel was scooped out by the same guy. I recognized the handiwork.”

“That’s not possible,” she said.

I looked straight at her.

“I would have told you,” she said. “Of course I would have told you. And I wouldn’t have *needed* you if I had another agent in there. Don’t you see that?”

I looked away. Looked back. Now I was embarrassed.

“So who the hell was she?” I asked.

She didn’t answer. Just started nudging her cup around and around on her saucer, prodding at the handle with her forefinger, turning it ten degrees at a

time. The heavy foam and the chocolate dust stayed still while the cup rotated. She was thinking like crazy.

“Eight weeks ago?” she said.

I nodded.

“What alerted them?” she asked.

“They got into your computer,” I said. “This morning, or maybe last night.”

She looked up from her cup. “That’s what you were asking me about?”

I nodded. Said nothing.

“Teresa isn’t in the computer,” she said. “She’s off the books.”

“Did you check with Eliot?”

“I did better than check,” she said. “I searched the whole of his hard drive. And all of his files on the main server back in D.C. I’ve got total access everywhere. I looked for *Teresa, Daniel, Justice, Beck, Maine,* and *undercover.* And he didn’t write any of those words anywhere.”

I said nothing.

“How did it go down?” she asked.

“I’m not really sure,” I said. “I guess at first the computer told them you had somebody in there, and then it told them it was a woman. No name, no details. So they looked for her. And I think it was partly my fault they found her.”

“How?”

“I had a stash,” I said. “Your Glock, and the ammo, and a few other things. She found them. She hid them in the car she was using.”

Duffy was quiet for a second.

“OK,” she said. “And you’re thinking they searched the car and your stuff made her look bad, right?”

“I guess so.”

“But maybe they searched *her* first and found the shoe.”

I looked away. “I sincerely hope so.”

“Don’t beat up on yourself. It’s not your fault. As soon as they got into the computer it was only a matter of time for the first one they looked at. They both fit the bill. I mean, how many women were there to choose from? Presumably just her and Teresa. They couldn’t miss.”

I nodded. There was Elizabeth, too. And there was the cook. But neither one of them would figure very high on a list of suspicious persons. Elizabeth was the guy’s wife. And the cook had probably been there twenty years.

“But who was she?” I said.

She played with her cup until it was back in its starting position. The unglazed rim on the bottom made a tiny grinding sound.

“It’s obvious, I’m afraid,” she said. “Think of the time line here. Count backward from today. Eleven weeks ago I screwed up with the surveillance photographs. Ten weeks ago they pulled me off the case. But because Beck is a big fish I couldn’t give it up and so nine weeks ago I put Teresa in without their knowledge. But also because Beck is a big fish, and without *my* knowledge, they must have reassigned the case to someone else and eight weeks ago that someone else put this maid person in, right on top of Teresa. Teresa didn’t know the maid was coming and the maid didn’t know Teresa was already there.”

“Why would she have nosed into my stuff?”

“I guess she wanted to control the situation. Standard procedure. As far as she was concerned, you weren’t anybody kosher. You were just a loose cannon. Some kind of troublemaker. You were a cop-killer, and you were hiding weapons. Maybe she thought you were from a rival operation. She was probably thinking of selling you out to Beck. It would have enhanced her credibility with him. And she needed you out of the way, because she didn’t need extra complications. If she didn’t sell you out to Beck, she would have turned you in to us, as a cop-killer. I’m surprised she didn’t already.”

“Her battery was dead.”

Her battery was dead.

She nodded. “Eight weeks. I guess kitchen maids don’t have good access to cell phone chargers.”

“Beck said she was out of Boston.”

“Makes sense,” she said. “They probably farmed it out to the Boston field office. That would work, geographically. And it would explain why we didn’t pick up any kind of water-cooler whispers in D.C.”

“He said she was recommended by some friends of his.”

“Plea-bargainers, for sure. We use them all the time. They set each other up quite happily. No code of silence with these people.”

Then I remembered something else Beck had said.

“How was Teresa communicating?” I asked.

“She had an e-mail thing, like yours.”

“In her shoe?”

Duffy nodded. Said nothing. I heard Beck’s voice, loud in my head: *I’m going to start searching people’s shoes, that’s for damn sure. You can bet your life on that.*

“When did you last hear from her?”

“She fell off the air the second day.”

She went quiet.

“Where was she living?” I asked.

“In Portland. We put her in an apartment. She was an office clerk, not a kitchen maid.”

“You been to the apartment?”

She nodded. “Nobodv’s seen her there since the second dav.”

“You check her closet?”

“Why?”

“We need to know what shoes she was wearing when she was captured.”

Duffy went pale again.

“Shit,” she said.

“Right,” I said. “What shoes were left in her closet?”

“The wrong ones.”

“Would she think to ditch the e-mail thing?”

“Wouldn’t help her. She’d have to ditch the shoes, too. The hole in the heel would tell the story, wouldn’t it?”

“We need to find her,” I said.

“We sure do,” she said. Then she paused a beat. “She was very lucky today. They went looking for a woman, and they happened to look at the maid first. We can’t count on her staying that lucky much longer.”

I said nothing. *Very lucky for Teresa, very unlucky for the maid.* Every silver lining has a cloud. Duffy sipped her coffee. Grimaced slightly like the taste was off and put the cup back down again.

“But what gave her away?” she said. “In the first place? That’s what I want to know. I mean, she only lasted two days. And that was nine whole weeks before they broke into the computer.”

“What background story did you give her?”

“The usual, for this kind of work. Unmarried, unattached, no family, no roots. Like you, except you didn’t have to fake it.”

I nodded slowly. *A good-looking thirty-year-old woman who would never be missed.* A huge temptation for guys like Paulie or Angel Doll. Maybe

irresistible. *A fun thing to have around.* And the rest of their crew might be even worse. Like Harley, for instance. He didn't strike me as much of an advertisement for the benefits of civilization.

"Maybe nothing gave her away," I said. "Maybe she just went missing, you know, like women do. Lots of women go missing. Young women especially. Single, unattached women. Happens all the time. Thousands a year."

"But you found the room they were keeping her in."

"All those missing women have to be somewhere. They're only missing as far as the rest of us are concerned. They know where they are, and the men who took them know where they are."

She looked at me. "You think it's like that?"

"Could be."

"Will she be OK?"

"I don't know," I said. "I hope so."

"Will they keep her alive?"

"I think they want to keep her alive. Because they don't know she's a federal agent. They think she's just a woman."

A fun thing to have around.

"Can you find her before they check her shoes?"

"They might never check them," I said. "You know, if they're seeing her in one particular light, as it were, it would be a leap to start seeing her as something else."

She looked away. Went quiet.

"One particular light," she repeated. "Why don't we just say what we mean?"

"Because we don't want to," I said.

She stayed quiet. One minute. Two. Then she looked straight back at me. A brand-new thought.

“What about your shoes?” she said.

I shook my head.

“Same thing,” I said. “They’re getting used to me. It would be a leap to start seeing me as something else.”

“It’s still a big risk.”

I shrugged.

“Beck gave me a Beretta M9,” I said. “So I’ll wait and see. If he bends down to take a look I’ll shoot him through the middle of the forehead.”

“But he’s just a businessman, right? Basically? Would he really do bad stuff to Teresa without knowing she was a threat to his business?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Did he kill the maid?”

I shook my head. “Quinn did.”

“Were you a witness?”

“No.”

“So how do you know?”

I looked away.

“I recognized the handiwork,” I said.

The fourth time I ever saw Sergeant First Class Dominique Kohl was a week after the night we spent in the bar. The weather was still hot. There was talk of a tropical storm blowing in from the direction of Bermuda. I had a million files on

my desk. We had rapes, homicides, suicides, weapons thefts, assaults, and there had been a riot the night before because the refrigeration had broken down in the enlisted mess kitchens and the ice cream had turned to water. I had just gotten off the phone with a buddy at Fort Irwin in California who told me it was the same over there whenever the desert winds were blowing.

Kohl came in wearing shorts and a tank top shirt. She still wasn't sweating. Her skin was still dusty. She was carrying her file, which was then about eight times as thick as when I had first given it to her.

"The sabot has got to be metal," she said. "That's their final conclusion."

"Is it?" I said.

"They'd have preferred plastic, but I think that's just showboating."

"OK," I said.

"I'm trying to tell you they've finished with the sabot design. They're ready to move on with the important stuff now."

"You still feel all warm and fuzzy about this Gorowski guy?"

She nodded. "It would be a tragedy to bust him. He's a nice guy and an innocent victim. And the bottom line is he's good at his job and useful to the army."

"So what do you want to do?"

"It's tricky," she said. "I guess what I want to do is bring him on board and get him to feed phony stuff to whoever it is who's got the hook in. That way we keep the investigation going without risking putting anything real out there."

"But?"

"The real thing looks phony in itself. It's a very weird device. It's like a big lawn dart. It has no explosive in it."

"So how does it work?"

"Kinetic energy, dense metals, depleted uranium, heat, all that kind of stuff. Were you a physics postgrad?"

“No.”

“Then you won’t understand it. But my feeling is if we screw with the designs the bad guy is going to know. It’ll put Gorowski at risk. Or his baby girls, or whatever.”

“So you want to let the real blueprints out there?”

“I think we have to.”

“Big risk,” I said.

“Your call,” she said. “That’s why you get the big bucks.”

“I’m a captain,” I said. “I’d be on food stamps if I ever got time to eat.”

“Decision?”

“Got a line on the bad guy yet?”

“No.”

“Feel confident you won’t let it get away?”

“Totally,” she said.

I smiled. Right then she looked like the most self-possessed human being I had ever seen. Shining eyes, serious expression, hair hooked behind her ears, short khaki shorts, tiny khaki shirt, socks and parachute boots, dark dusty skin everywhere.

“So go for it,” I said.

“I never dance,” she said.

“What?”

“It wasn’t just you,” she said. “In fact, I’d have liked to. I appreciated the invitation. But I never dance with anybody.”

"Why not?"

"Just a thing," she said. "I feel self-conscious. I'm not very coordinated."

"Neither am I."

"Maybe we should practice in private," she said.

"Separately?"

"One-on-one mentoring helps," she said. "Like with alcoholism."

Then she winked and walked out and left a very faint trace of her perfume behind her in the hot heavy air.

Duffy and I finished our coffee in silence. Mine tasted thin and cold and bitter. I had no stomach for it. My right shoe pinched. It wasn't a perfect fit. And it was starting to feel like a ball and chain. It had felt ingenious at first. Smart, and cool, and clever. I remembered the first time I opened the heel, three days ago, soon after I first arrived at the house, soon after Duke locked the door to my room. *I'm in.* I had felt like a guy in a movie. Then I remembered the last time I opened it. Up in Duke's bathroom, an hour and a half ago. I had fired up the unit and Duffy's message had been waiting there for me: *We need to meet.*

"Why did you want to meet?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "Doesn't matter now. I'm revising the mission. I'm scrapping all our objectives except getting Teresa back. Just find her and get her out of there, OK?"

"What about Beck?"

"We're not going to get Beck. I screwed up again. This maid person was a legitimate agent and Teresa wasn't. Nor were you. And the maid died, so they're going to fire me for going off the books with Teresa and you, and they're going to abandon the case against Beck because I compromised procedure so badly they could never make it stand up in court anymore. So just get Teresa the hell out and we'll all go home."

“OK,” I said.

“You’ll have to forget about Quinn,” she said. “Just let it go.”

I said nothing.

“We failed anyway,” she said. “You haven’t found anything useful. Not a thing. No evidence at all. It’s been a complete waste of time, beginning to end.”

I said nothing.

“Like my career,” she said.

“When are you going to tell the Justice Department?”

“About the maid?”

I nodded.

“Right away,” she said. “Immediately. I’ll have to. No choice. But I’ll search the files first and find out who put her in there. Because I’d prefer to break the news face-to-face, I guess, at my own level. It’ll give me a chance to apologize. Any other way all hell will break loose before I get the opportunity. All my access codes will be canceled and I’ll be handed a cardboard box and told to clear my desk within thirty minutes.”

“How long have you been there?”

“A long time. I thought I was going to be the first woman director.”

I said nothing.

“I would have told you,” she said. “I promise, if I’d had another agent in there I would have told you.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m sorry for jumping to conclusions.”

“It’s the stress,” she said. “Undercover is tough.”

I nodded. “It’s like a hall of mirrors up there. One damn thing after another. Everything feels unreal.”

We left our half-finished cups on the table and headed out, into the mall's interior sidewalks, and then outside into the rain. We had parked near each other. She kissed me on the cheek. Then she got into her Taurus and headed south and I got into the Saab and headed north.

Paulie took his own sweet time about opening the gate for me. He made me wait a couple of minutes before he even came lumbering out of his house. He still had his slicker on. Then he stood and stared for a minute before he went near the latch. But I didn't care. I was busy thinking. I was hearing Duffy's voice in my head: *I'm revising the mission.* Most of my military career a guy named Leon Garber was either directly or indirectly my boss. He explained everything to himself by making up little phrases or sayings. He had one for every occasion. He used to say: *Revising objectives is smart because it stops you throwing good money after bad.* He didn't mean money in any literal sense. He meant manpower, resources, time, will, effort, energy. He used to contradict himself, too. Just as often he would say: *Never ever get distracted from the exact job in hand.* Of course, proverbs are like that generally. *Too many cooks spoil the broth, many hands make light work, great minds think alike, fools never differ.* But overall, after you canceled out a few layers of contradiction, Leon approved of revision. He approved of it big time. Mainly because revision was about thinking, and he figured thinking never hurt anybody. So I was thinking, and thinking hard, because I was aware that something was slowly and imperceptibly creeping up on me, just outside of my conscious grasp. Something connected to something Duffy had said to me: *You haven't found anything useful. Not a thing. No evidence at all.*

I heard the gate swing back. Looked up to see Paulie waiting for me to drive through. The rain was beating on his slicker. He still had no hat. I exacted some petty revenge by waiting a minute myself. Duffy's revision suited me well enough. I didn't care much about Beck. I really didn't, either way. But I wanted Teresa. And I would get her. I wanted Quinn, too. And I would get him too, whatever Duffy said. The revision was only going to go so far.

I checked on Paulie again. He was still waiting. He was an idiot. He was out in the rain, I was in a car. I took my foot off the brake and rolled slowly through the gate. Then I accelerated hard and headed down to the house.

I put the Saab away in the slot I had once seen it in and walked out into the courtyard. The mechanic was still in the third garage. The empty one. I couldn't see what he was doing. Maybe he was just sheltering from the rain. I ran back to the house. Beck heard the metal detector announce my arrival and came into the kitchen to meet me. He pointed at his sports bag. It was still there on the table, right in the center.

"Get rid of this shit," he said. "Throw it in the ocean, OK?"

"OK," I said. He went back out to the hallway and I picked up the bag and turned around. Headed outside again and slipped down the ocean side of the garage block wall. I put my bundle right back in its hidden dip. *Waste not, want not.* And I wanted to be able to return Duffy's Glock to her. She was already in enough trouble without having to add the loss of her service piece to the list. Most agencies take that kind of a thing very seriously.

Then I walked on to the edge of the granite tables and swung the bag and hurled it far out to sea. It pinwheeled end over end in the air and the shoes and the e-mail unit were thrown clear. I saw the e-mail thing hit the water. It sank immediately. The left shoe hit toe-first and followed it. The bag parachuted a little and landed gently facedown and filled with water and turned over and slipped under. The right shoe floated for a moment, like a tiny black boat. It pitched and yawed and bobbed urgently like it was trying to escape to the east. It rode up over a peak and rode down on the far side of the crest. Then it started to list sideways. It floated maybe ten more seconds and then it filled with water and sank without a trace.

There was no activity in the house. The cook wasn't around. Richard was in the family dining room eating a sandwich he must have made for himself and staring out at the rain. Elizabeth was still in her parlor, still working on *Doctor Zhivago.* By a process of elimination I figured Beck must be in his den, maybe sitting in his red leather chair and looking at his machine gun collection. There was quiet everywhere. I didn't understand it. Duffy had said they had five containers in and Beck had said he had a big weekend coming up, but nobody was doing anything.

I went up to Duke's room. I didn't think of it as my room. I hoped I never

would. I lay down on the bed and started thinking again. Tried to chase whatever it was hovering way in the back of my mind. *It's easy,* Leon Garber would have said. *Work the clues. Go through everything you've seen, everything you've heard.* So I went through it. But I kept coming back to Dominique Kohl. The fifth time I ever saw her, she drove me to Aberdeen, Maryland, in an olive-green Chevrolet. I was having second thoughts about letting genuine blueprints out into the world. It was a big risk. Not usually something I would worry about, but I needed more progress than we were making. Kohl had identified the dead-drop site, and the drop technique, and where and when and how Gorowski was letting his contact know that the delivery had been made. But she still hadn't seen the contact make the pickup. Still didn't know who he was.

Aberdeen was a small place twenty-some miles north and east of Baltimore. Gorowski's method was to drive down to the big city on a Sunday and make the drop in the Inner Harbor area. Back then the renovations were in full swing and it was a nice bright place to be but the public hadn't caught on all the way yet and it stayed pretty empty most of the time. Gorowski had a POV. It was a two-year-old Mazda Miata, bright red. It was a plausible car, all things considered. Not new, but not cheap either, because it was a popular model back then and nobody could get a discount off sticker, so used values held up well. And it was a two-seater, which was no good for his baby girls. So he had to have another car, too. We knew his wife wasn't rich. It might have worried me in someone else, but the guy was an engineer. It was a characteristic choice. He didn't smoke, didn't drink. Entirely plausible that he would hoard his spare dollars and spring for something with a sweet manual change and rear-wheel drive.

The Sunday we followed him he parked in a lot near one of the Baltimore marinas and went to sit on a bench. He was a squat hairy guy. Wide, but not tall. He had the Sunday newspaper with him. He spent some time gazing out at the sailboats. Then he closed his eyes and turned his face up to the sky. The weather was still wonderful. He spent maybe five minutes just soaking up the sun like a lizard. Then he opened his eyes and opened his paper and started to read it.

"This is his fifth time," Kohl whispered to me. "Third trip since they finished with the sabot stuff."

"Standard procedure so far?" I asked.

"Identical," she said.

He kept busy with the paper for about twenty minutes. I could tell he was actually reading it. He paid attention to all the sections, except for sports, which I thought was a little odd for a Yankees fan. But then, I guessed a Yankees fan wouldn't like the Orioles stuffed down his throat all the time.

"Here we go," Kohl whispered.

He glanced up and slipped a buff army envelope out of the newspaper. Snapped his left hand up and out to take a kink out of the section he was reading. And to distract, because at the exact same time his right hand dropped the envelope into the garbage can beside him at the end of the bench.

"Neat," I said.

"You bet," she said. "This boy is no dummy."

I nodded. He was pretty good. He didn't get up right away. He sat there for maybe ten more minutes, reading. Then he folded the paper slowly and carefully and stood up and walked to the edge of the water and looked out at the boats some more. Then he turned around and walked back toward his car, with the newspaper tucked up under his left arm.

"Now watch," Kohl said.

I saw him take a nub of chalk out of his pants pocket with his right hand. He scuffed against an iron lamp post and left a tick of chalk on it. It was the fifth mark on the post. Five weeks, five marks. The first four were fading away with age, in sequence. I stared at them through my field glasses while he walked on into the parking lot and got into his roadster and drove slowly away. I turned back and focused on the garbage can.

"Now what happens?" I said.

"Absolutely nothing," Kohl said. "I've done this twice before. Two whole Sundays. Nobody's going to come. Not today, not tonight."

"When is the trash emptied?"

"Tomorrow morning, first thing."

"Maybe the garbage man is a go-between."

"Maybe the garbage man is a go-between."

She shook her head. "I checked. The truck compacts everything into a solid mass as it's loaded and then it goes straight into the incinerator."

"So our secret blueprints are getting burned up in a municipal incinerator?"

"That's safe enough."

"Maybe one of these sailboat guys is sneaking out in the middle of the night."

"Not unless the Invisible Man bought a sailboat."

"So maybe there's no guy," I said. "Maybe the whole thing was set up way in advance and then the guy got arrested for something else. Or he got cold feet and left town. Or he got sick and died. Maybe it's a defunct scheme."

"You think?"

"Not really," I said.

"Are you going to pull the plug?" she said.

"I have to. I might be an idiot, but I'm not completely stupid. This is way out of hand now."

"Can I go to plan B?"

"Haul Gorowski in and threaten him with a firing squad. Then tell him if he plays ball and delivers phony plans we'll be nice to him."

"Tough to make them convincing."

"Tell him to draw them himself," I said. "It's his ass on the line."

"Or his children's."

"All part of being a parent," I said. "It'll concentrate his mind."

She was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "You want to go dancing?"

"Here?"

“We’re a long way from home. Nobody knows us.”

“OK,” I said.

Then we figured it was too early for dancing, so we had a couple of beers and waited for evening. The bar we were in was small and dark. There was wood and brick. It was a nice place. It had a jukebox. We spent a long time leaning on it, side by side, trying to choose our debut number. We debated it with intensity. It began to assume enormous significance. I tried to interpret her suggestions by analyzing the tempos. Were we going to be holding on to each other? That sort of dancing? Or was it going to be the usual sort of separate-but-equal leaping about? In the end we would have needed a United Nations resolution, so we just put our quarter in the machine and closed our eyes and hit buttons at random. We got “Brown Sugar” by the Rolling Stones. It was a great number. It always has been. She was actually a pretty good dancer. But I was terrible.

Afterward we were out of breath, so we sat down and ordered more beers. And I suddenly figured out what Gorowski had been up to.

“It’s not the envelope,” I said. “The envelope is empty. It’s the newspaper. The blueprints are in the newspaper. In the sports section. He should have checked the box scores. The envelope is a diversion, in case of surveillance. He’s been well rehearsed. He dumps the newspaper in another garbage can, later. *After* making his chalk mark. Probably on his way out of the lot.”

“Shit,” Kohl said. “I wasted five weeks.”

“And somebody got three real blueprints.”

“One of us,” she said. “Military, or CIA, or FBI. A professional, to be that cute.”

The newspaper, not the envelope. Ten years later I was lying on a bed in Maine thinking about Dominique Kohl dancing and a guy called Gorowski folding his newspaper, slowly and carefully, and staring out at a hundred sailboat masts on the water. *The newspaper, not the envelope.* It seemed to be still relevant, somehow. *This, not that.* Then I thought about the maid hiding my stash under the floor of the Saab’s trunk. She couldn’t have hidden anything else there, or

Beck would have found it and added it to the prosecution exhibits on his kitchen table. But the Saab's carpets were old and loose. If I was the sort of person who hid a gun under a spare tire I might hide papers under a car's carpets. And I might be the sort of person who made notes and kept records.

I rolled off the bed and stepped to the window. The afternoon had already happened. Full dark was on its way. Day fourteen, a Friday, nearly over. I went downstairs, thinking about the Saab. Beck was walking through the hallway. He was in a hurry. Preoccupied. He went into the kitchen and picked up the phone. Listened to it for a second and then held it out to me.

"The phones are all dead," he said.

I put the receiver to my ear and listened. There was nothing there. No dial tone, no scratchy hiss from open circuits. Just dull inert silence, and the sound of blood rushing in my head. Like a seashell.

"Go try yours," he said.

I went back upstairs to Duke's room. The internal phone worked OK. Paulie answered on the third ring. I hung up on him. But the outside line was stone dead. I held the receiver like it would make a difference and Beck appeared in the doorway.

"I can speak to the gate," I said.

He nodded.

"That's a completely separate circuit," he said. "We put it in ourselves. What about the outside line?"

"Dead," I said.

"Weird," he said.

I put the receiver down. Glanced at the window.

"Could be the weather," I said.

"No," he said. He held up his cell phone. It was a tiny silver Nokia. "This is out too."

He handed it to me. There was a tiny screen on the front. A bar chart on the right showed that the battery was fully charged. But the signal meter was all the way down. *No service* was displayed, big and black and obvious. I handed it back.

“I need to use the bathroom,” I said. “I’ll be right down.”

I locked myself in. Pulled off my shoe. Opened the heel. Pressed *power*. The screen came up: *No service.* I turned it off and nailed it back in. Flushed the toilet for form’s sake and sat there on the lid. I was no kind of a telecommunications expert. I knew phone lines came down, now and then. I knew cell phone technology was sometimes unreliable. But what were the chances that one location’s land lines would fail at the exact same time its nearest cell tower went down? Pretty small, I guessed. Pretty damn small. So it had to be a deliberate outage. But who had requested it? Not the phone company. They wouldn’t do disruptive maintenance at commuting time on a Friday. Early on a Sunday morning, maybe. And they wouldn’t have the land lines down at the same time as the cell towers, anyway. They would stagger the two jobs, surely.

So who had organized it? A heavy-duty government agency, maybe. Like the DEA, perhaps. Maybe the DEA was coming for the maid. Maybe its SWAT team was rolling up the harbor operation first and it didn’t want Beck to know before it was ready to come on out to the house.

But that was unlikely. The DEA would have more than one SWAT team available. It would go for simultaneous operations. And even if it didn’t, it would be the easiest thing in the world to close the road between the house and the first turning. They could seal it forever. There was a twelve-mile stretch of unlimited opportunity. Beck was a sitting duck, phones or no phones.

So who?

Maybe Duffy, off the books. Duffy’s status might just get her a major once-in-a-lifetime favor, one-on-one with a phone company manager. Especially a favor that was limited geographically. One minor land line spur. And one cell tower, probably somewhere out near I-95. It would give a thirty-mile dead spot for people to drive through, but she might have been able to swing it. Maybe. Especially if the favor was strictly limited in duration. Not open-ended. Four or five hours, say.

And why would Duffy suddenly be afraid of phones for four or five hours? Only one possible answer. She was afraid for me.

The bodyguards were loose.

CHAPTER 10

Time. Distance divided by speed adjusted for direction equals time. Either I had enough, or I had none at all. I didn't know which it would be. The bodyguards had been held in the Massachusetts motel where we planned the original eight-second sting. Which was less than two hundred miles south. That much, I knew for sure. Those were facts. The rest was pure speculation. But I could put together some kind of a likely scenario. They had broken out of the motel and stolen a government Taurus. Then they had driven like hell for maybe an hour, breathless with panic. They had wanted to get well clear before they did another thing. They might have even gotten a little lost, way out there in the wilds. Then they had gotten their bearings and hit the highway. Accelerated north. Then they had calmed down, checked the view behind, slowed up, stayed legal, and started looking for a phone. But by then Duffy had already killed the lines. She had acted fast. So their first stop represented a waste of time. Ten minutes, maybe, to allow for slowing down, parking, calling the house, calling the cell, starting up again, rejoining the highway traffic. Then they would have done it all again a second time at the next rest area. They would have blamed the first failure on a random technical hitch. Another ten minutes. After that, either they would have seen the pattern, or they would have figured they were getting close enough just to press on regardless. Or both.

Beginning to end, a total of four hours, maybe. But when did those four hours start? I had no idea. That was clear. Obviously somewhere between four hours ago and, say, thirty minutes ago. So either I had enough time or no time at all.

I came out of the bathroom fast and checked the window. The rain had stopped. It was night outside. The lights along the wall were on. They were haloed with mist. Beyond them was absolute darkness. No headlights in the distance. I headed downstairs. Found Beck in the hallway. He was still prodding at his Nokia, trying to get it to work.

"I'm going out," I said. "Up the road a little."

"Why?"

"I don't like this thing with the phones. Could be nothing, could be something."

I don't like this thing with the phones. Could be nothing, could be something.

"Something like what?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe somebody's coming. You just got through telling me how many people you got on your back."

"We've got a wall and a gate."

"You got a boat?"

"No," he said. "Why?"

"If they get as far as the gate, you're going to need a boat. They could sit there and starve you out."

He said nothing.

"I'll take the Saab," I said.

"Why?"

Because it's lighter than the Cadillac.

"Because I want to leave the Cadillac for you," I said. "It's bigger."

"What are you going to do?"

"Whatever I need to," I said. "I'm your head of security now. Maybe nothing's happening, but if it is, then I'm going to try to take care of it for you."

"What do I do?"

"You keep a window open and listen," I said. "At night with all this water around, you'll hear me from a couple miles away if I'm shooting. If you do, put everybody in the Cadillac and get the hell out. Drive fast. Don't stop. I'll hold them off long enough for you to get past. Have you got someplace else to go?"

He nodded. Didn't tell me where.

"So go there," I said. "If I make it, I'll get to the office. I'll wait there, in the car. You can check there later."

“OK,” he said.

“Now call Paulie on the internal phone and tell him to stand by to let me through the gate.”

“OK,” he said again.

I left him there in the hallway. Walked out into the night. I detoured around the courtyard wall and retrieved my bundle from its hole. Carried it back to the Saab and put it on the rear seat. Then I slid into the front and fired up the engine and backed out. Drove slow around the carriage circle and accelerated down the drive. The lights on the wall were bright in the distance. I could see Paulie at the gate. I slowed a little and timed it so I didn’t have to stop. I went straight through. Drove west, staring through the windshield, looking for headlight beams coming toward me.

I drove four miles, and then I saw a government Taurus. It was parked on the shoulder. Facing toward me. No lights. The old guy was sitting behind the wheel. I killed my lights and slowed and stopped window to window with him. Wound down my glass. He did the same. Aimed a flashlight and a gun at my face until he saw who I was. Then he put them both away.

“The bodyguards are out,” he said.

I nodded. “I figured. When?”

“Close to four hours ago.”

I glanced ahead, involuntarily. *No time.*

“We got two men down,” he said.

“Killed?”

He nodded. Said nothing.

“Did Duffy report it?”

“She can’t,” he said. “Not yet. We’re off the books. This whole situation isn’t even happening.”

“She’ll have to report it,” I said. “It’s two guys.”

“She will,” he said. “Later. After you deliver. Because the objectives are right back in place again. She needs Beck for justification, now more than ever.”

“How did it go down?”

He shrugged. “They bided their time. Two of them, four of us. Should have been easy. But our boys got sloppy, I guess. It’s tough, locking people down in a motel.”

“Which two got it?”

“The kids who were in the Toyota.”

I said nothing. It had lasted roughly eighty-four hours. Three and a half days. Actually a little better than I had expected, at the start.

“Where is Duffy now?” I asked.

“We’re all fanned out,” he said. “She’s up in Portland with Eliot.”

“She did good with the phones.”

He nodded. “Real good. She cares about you.”

“How long are they off?”

“Four hours. That’s all she could get. So they’ll be back on soon.”

“I think they’ll come straight here.”

“Me too,” he said. “That’s why I came straight here.”

“Close to four hours, they’ll be off the highway by now. So I guess the phones don’t matter anymore.”

“That’s how I figure it.”

That's how I figure it.

"Got a plan?" I said.

"I was waiting for you. We figured you'd make the connection."

"Did they get guns?"

"Two Glocks," he said. "Full mags."

Then he paused a beat. Looked away.

"Less four shots fired at the scene," he said. "That's how it was described to us. Four shots, two guys. They were all head shots."

"Won't be easy."

"It never is," he said.

"We need to find a place."

I told him to leave his car where it was and get in with me. He came around and slid into the passenger seat. He was wearing the same raincoat Duffy had been wearing in the coffee shop. He had reclaimed it. We drove another mile, and then I started looking for a place. I found one where the road narrowed sharply and went into a long gentle curve. The blacktop was built up a little, like a shallow causeway. The shoulders were less than a foot wide and fell away fast into rocky ground. I stopped the car and then turned it sharply and backed it up and pulled forward again until it was square across the road. We got out and checked. It was a good roadblock. There was no room to get around it. But it was a very obvious roadblock, like I knew it would be. The two guys would come tearing around the curve and jam on the brakes and then start backing up and shooting.

"We need to roll it over," I said. "Like a bad accident."

I took my bundle out of the back seat. Put it down on the shoulder, just in case. Then I made the old guy put his coat down on the road. I emptied my pockets and put mine beyond his. I wanted to roll the Saab onto the coats. I needed to bring it back relatively undamaged. Then we stood shoulder to shoulder with our backs to the car and started rocking it. It's easy enough to turn a car over. I've

seen it done all over the world. You let the tires and the suspension help you. You rock it, and then you bounce it, and then you keep it going until it's coming right up in the air, and then you time it just right and flip it all the way over. The old guy was strong. He did his part. We got it bouncing through about forty-five degrees and then we spun around together and hooked our hands under the sill and heaved it all the way onto its side. Then we kept the momentum going and tipped it right onto its roof.

The coats meant it slid around easily enough without scratching, so we positioned it just right. Then I opened the upside-down driver's door and told the old guy to get in and play dead for the second time in three days. He threaded his way inside and lay down on his front, half-in and half-out, with his arms thrown up above his head. In the dark, he looked pretty convincing. In the harsh shadows of bright headlights he would look no worse. The coats weren't visible, unless you really looked for them. I moved away and retrieved my bundle and climbed down the rocks beyond the shoulder and crouched low.

Then we waited.

It seemed like a long wait. Five minutes, six, seven. I collected rocks, three of them, each a little larger than my palm. I watched the horizon to the west. The sky was still full of low clouds and I figured headlight beams would reflect off them as they bounced and dipped. But the horizon stayed black. And quiet. I could hear nothing at all except the distant surf and the old guy breathing.

"They got to be coming," he called.

"They'll come," I said.

We waited. The night stayed dark and quiet.

"What's your name?" I called.

"Why?" he called back.

"I just want to know," I said. "Doesn't seem right that I've killed you twice and I don't even know your name."

"Terry Villanueva," he called.

"Is that Spanish?"

Is that Spanish?

“Sure is.”

“You don’t look Spanish.”

“I know,” he said. “My mom was Irish, my dad was Spanish. But my brother and I took after our mom. My brother changed his name to Newton. Like the old scientist, or the suburb. Because that’s what *Villanueva* means, new town. But I stuck with the Spanish. Out of respect for the old guy.”

“Where was this?”

“South Boston,” he said. “Wasn’t easy, years ago, a mixed marriage and all.”

We went quiet again. I watched and listened. Nothing. Villanueva shifted his position. He didn’t look comfortable.

“You’re a trooper, Terry,” I called.

“Old school,” he called back.

Then I heard a car.

And Villanueva’s cell phone rang.

The car was maybe a mile away. I could hear the faint feathery sound of a faraway V-6 motor revving fast. I could see the distant glow of headlights trapped between the road and the clouds. Villanueva’s phone was set to ring with an insane speeded-up version of Bach’s *Toccata and Fugue in D.* He stopped playing dead and scrambled halfway up to knees and dragged it out of his pocket. Thumbed a button and killed the music and answered it. It was a tiny thing, lost in his hand. He held it to his ear. He listened for a second. I heard him say, “OK.” Then, “We’re doing it right now.” Then, “OK.” Then he said “OK” again and clicked the phone off and lay back down. His cheek was on the blacktop. The phone was half-in and half-out of his hand.

“Service was just restored,” he called to me.

And a new clock started ticking. I glanced to my right into the east. Beck would keep trying the lines. I guessed as soon as he got a dial tone he would come out

to find me and tell me the panic was over. I glanced to my left into the west. I could hear the car, loud and clear. The headlight beams bounced and swung, bright in the darkness.

“Thirty seconds,” I called.

The sound got louder. I could hear the tires and the automatic gearbox and the engine all as separate noises. I ducked lower. Ten seconds, eight, five. The car raced around the corner and its lights whipped across my hunched back. Then I heard the thump of hydraulics and the squeal of brake rotors and the howl of locked rubber grinding on the blacktop and the car came to a complete stop, slightly off line, twenty feet from the Saab.

I looked up. It was a Taurus, plain blue paint, gray in the cloudy moonlight. A cone of white light ahead of it. Brake lights flaring red behind. Two guys in it. Their faces were lit by their lights bouncing back off the Saab. They held still for a second. Stared forward. They recognized the Saab. They must have seen it a hundred times. I saw the driver move. Heard him shove the gearshift forward into Park. The brake lights died. The engine idled. I could smell exhaust fumes and the heat from under the hood.

The two guys opened their doors in unison. Got out and stood up, behind the doors. They had the Glocks in their hands. They waited. They came out from behind the doors. Walked forward, slowly, with the guns held low. The headlight beams lit them brightly from the waist down. Their upper bodies were harder to see. But I could make out their features. Their shapes. They were the bodyguards. No doubt about it. They were young and heavy, tense and wary. They were dressed in dark suits, creased and crumpled and stained. They had no ties. Their shirts had turned from white to gray.

They squatted next to Villanueva. He was in their shadow. They moved a little and turned his face into the light. I knew they had seen him before. Just a brief glimpse as they passed him, outside the college gate, eighty-four hours ago. I didn’t expect them to remember him. And I don’t think they did. But they had been fooled once, and they didn’t want to get fooled again. They were very cautious. They didn’t start in with immediate first aid. They just squatted there and did nothing. Then the one nearest me stood up.

By then I was five feet from him. I had my right hand cupped around a rock. It was a little bigger than a softball. I swung my arm, wide and flat and fast, like I

was going to slap him in the face. The momentum would have taken my arm off at the shoulder if I had missed. But I didn't miss. The rock hit him square on the temple and he went straight down like a weight had fallen on him from above. The other guy was faster. He scrambled away and twisted to his feet. Villanueva flailed at his legs and missed them. The guy danced away and whipped around. His Glock came up toward me. All I wanted to do was stop him firing it so I hurled the rock straight at his head. He spun away again and took it square in the back of his neck, right where his cranium curved in to meet his spine. It was like a ferocious punch. It pitched him straight forward. He dropped the Glock and went down on his face like a tree and lay still.

I stood there and watched the darkness in the east. Saw nothing. No lights. Heard nothing, except the distant sea. Villanueva crawled out of the upside-down car on his hands and knees and crouched over the first guy.

"This one's dead," he said.

I checked, and he was. Hard to survive a ten-pound rock sideways into the temple. His skull was neatly caved in and his eyes were wide open and there was nothing much happening behind them. I checked the pulses in his neck and his wrist and went to look at the second guy. Crouched down over him. He was dead, too. His neck was broken, but good. I wasn't very surprised. The rock weighed ten pounds and I had pitched it like Nolan Ryan.

"Two birds, one stone," Villanueva said.

I said nothing.

"What?" he said. "You wanted to take them back into custody? After what they did to us? This was suicide by cop, plain and simple."

I said nothing.

"You got a problem?" Villanueva said.

I wasn't *us.* I wasn't DEA, and I wasn't a cop. But I thought about Powell's private signal to me: *My eyes only, 10-2, 10-28. These guys need to be dead, make no mistake about it.* And I was prepared to take Powell's word for it. That's what unit loyalties are for. Villanueva had his, and I had mine.

"No problem," I said.

"No problem," I said.

I found the rock where it had come to rest and rolled it back to the shoulder. Then I got to my feet and walked away and leaned in and killed the Taurus's lights. Waved Villanueva over toward me.

"We need to be real quick now," I said. "Use your phone and get Duffy to bring Eliot down here. We need him to take this car back."

Villanueva used a speed dial and started talking and I found the two Glocks on the road and stuffed them back into the dead guys' pockets, one each. Then I stepped over to the Saab. Getting it the right way up again was going to be a whole lot harder than turning it over. For a second I worried that it was going to be impossible. The coats killed any friction against the road. If we shoved it, it was just going to slide on its roof. I closed the upside-down driver's door and waited.

"They're coming," Villanueva called.

"Help me with this," I called back.

We manhandled the Saab on the coats back toward the house as far as we could get it. It slid off Villanueva's coat onto mine. Slid to the far edge of mine and then stopped dead when the metal caught against the road.

"It's going to get scratched," Villanueva said.

I nodded.

"It's a risk," I said. "Now get in their Taurus and bump it."

He drove their Taurus forward until its front bumper touched the Saab. It connected just above the waistline, against the B-pillar between the doors. I signaled him for more gas and the Saab jerked sideways and the roof ground against the blacktop. I climbed up on the Taurus's hood and pushed hard against the Saab's sill. Villanueva kept the Taurus coming, slow and steady. The Saab jacked up on its side, forty degrees, fifty, sixty. I braced my feet against the base of the Taurus's windshield and walked my hands down the Saab's flank and then put them flat on its roof. Villanueva hit the gas and my spine compressed about an inch and the Saab rolled all the way over and landed on its wheels with a thump. It bounced once and Villanueva braked hard and I fell forward off the

hood and banged my head on the Saab's door. Ended up flat on the road under the Taurus's front fender. Villanueva backed it away and stopped and hauled himself out.

"You OK?" he said.

I just lay there. My head hurt. I had hit it hard.

"How's the car?" I said.

"Good news or bad news?"

"Good first," I said.

"The side mirrors are OK," he said. "They'll spring back."

"But?"

"Big gouges in the paint," he said. "Small dent in the door. I think you did it with your head. The roof is a little caved-in, too."

"I'll say I hit a deer."

"I'm not sure they have deer out here."

"A bear, then," I said. "Or whatever. A beached whale. A sea monster. A giant squid. A huge woolly mammoth recently released from a melting glacier."

"You OK?" he said again.

"I'll live," I said.

I rolled over and got up on all fours. Pushed myself upright, slow and easy.

"Can you take the bodies?" he said. "Because we can't."

"Then I guess I'll have to," I said.

We opened the Saab's rear hatch with difficulty. It was a little misaligned because the roof was a little distorted. We carried the dead guys one at a time and folded them into the load space. They almost filled it. I went back to the

shoulder and retrieved my bundle and carried it over and put it in on top of them. There was a parcel shelf that would hide everything from view. It took both of us to close the hatch. We had to take a side each and lean down hard. Then we picked up our coats off the road and shook them out and put them on. They were damp and crushed and a little torn up in places.

“You OK?” he asked again.

“Get in the car,” I said.

We sprung the door mirrors back into place and climbed in together. I turned the key. It wouldn’t start. I tried again. No luck. In between the two tries I heard the fuel pump whining.

“Leave the ignition on for a moment,” Villanueva said. “The gasoline drained out of the engine. When it was upside down. Wait a moment, let it pump back in.”

I waited and it started on the third attempt. So I put it in gear and got it straight on the road and drove the mile back to where we had left the other Taurus. The one that Villanueva had arrived in. It was waiting right there for us on the shoulder, gray and ghostly in the moonlight.

“Now go back and wait for Duffy and Eliot,” I said. “Then I suggest you get the hell out of here. I’ll see you all later.”

He shook my hand.

“Old school,” he said.

“Ten-eighteen,” I said. 10-18 was MP radio code for *assignment completed*. But I guess he didn’t know that, because he just looked at me.

“Stay safe,” I said.

He shook his head.

“Voice mail,” he said.

“What about it?”

“When a cell phone is out of service you usually get routed to voice mail.”

“The whole tower was down.”

“But the cell network didn’t know that. Far as the machinery knew, Beck just had his individual phone switched off. So they’ll have gotten his voice mail. In a central server somewhere. They might have left him a message.”

“What would have been the point?”

Villanueva shrugged. “They might have told him they were on their way back. You know, maybe they expected him to check his messages right away. They might have left him the whole story. Or maybe they weren’t really thinking straight, and they figured it was like a regular answering machine, and they were saying, *Hey, Mr. Beck, pick up, will you?*”

I said nothing.

“They might have left their voices on there,” he said. “Today. That’s the bottom line.”

“OK,” I said.

“What are you going to do?”

“Start shooting,” I said. “Shoes, voice mail, he’s one step away now.”

Villanueva shook his head.

“You can’t,” he said. “Duffy needs to bring him in. It’s the only way she can save her own ass now.”

I looked away. “Tell her I’ll do my best. But if it’s him or me, he goes down.”

Villanueva said nothing.

“What?” I said. “Now I’m a human sacrifice?”

“Just do your best,” he said. “Duffy’s a good kid.”

“I know she is,” I said.

He hauled himself out of the Saab, one hand on the door frame, the other on the seat back. He stepped across and got into his own car and drove away, slow and quiet, no lights. I saw him wave. I watched until he was lost to sight and then I backed up and turned and got the Saab straddling the middle of the road, facing west. I figured when Beck came out to find me he would think I was doing a good defensive job.

But either Beck wasn't trying the phones very often or he wasn't thinking very much about me because I sat there for ten minutes with no sign of him. I spent part of the time testing my earlier hypothesis that a person who hides a gun under the spare wheel might also hide notes under the carpets. The carpets were already loose and they hadn't been helped by being turned upside down. But there was nothing at all under them, except for rust stains and a damp layer of acoustical padding that looked like it had been made out of old red and gray sweaters. No notes. Bad hypothesis. I put the carpets back in place as well as I could and kicked them around until they were reasonably flat.

Then I got out and checked the exterior damage. Nothing I could do about the scratches in the paint. They were bad, but not disastrous. Nothing I could do about the dent in the door either, unless I wanted to take it apart and press the panel out. The roof was a little caved in. I remembered it as having a definite dome shape. Now it was fairly flat. But I figured I could maybe do something about that from the inside. I climbed into the back seat and put both palms up flat on the headliner and pushed hard. I was rewarded by two sounds. One of them was the pop of sheet metal springing back into shape. The other was the crackle of paper.

It wasn't a new car, so the headliner wasn't the one-piece molded mouse-fur thing that everybody uses now. It was the old-fashioned cream vinyl thing with the side-to-side wire ribs that pleated it into three accordion sections. The edges were trapped under a black rubber gasket that ran all around the roof. The vinyl was a little puckered in the front corner, over the driver's seat. The gasket looked a little loose there. I guessed a person could stress the vinyl by pushing up on it and then peel it out from under the gasket. Then tug on it until it pulled away all along its length. That would give sideways access into any one of the three pleated sections the person chose to use. Then it would take time and fingernails to get the vinyl back under the gasket. A little care would make the intrusion

hard to see, in a car as worn as that one.

I leaned forward and checked the section that ran above the front seats. I stabbed the vinyl upward until I felt the underside of the roof, all the way across the width of the car. Nothing there. Nothing in the next section, either. But the section above the rear seats had paper hidden in it. I could even judge the size and weight. Legal-size paper, maybe eight or ten stacked sheets.

I got out of the back and slid into the driver's seat and looked at the gasket. Put some tension into the vinyl and picked at the edge. I got a fingernail under the rubber and eased it down into a little mouth a half-inch long. Scraped my other hand sideways across the roof and the vinyl obediently pulled out from under the gasket and gave me enough of a hole to get my thumb into.

I worked my thumb backward and I had gotten about nine inches unzipped when I was suddenly lit up from behind. Bright light, harsh shadows. The road came in over my right shoulder so I glanced across at the passenger-door mirror. The glass was cracked. It was filled with multiple sets of bright headlights. I saw the etched warning: *OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR.* I twisted around in the seat and saw a single set of high beams sweeping urgently left and right through the curves. A quarter-mile back. Coming on fast. I dropped my window an inch and heard the distant hiss of fat tires and the growl of a quiet V-8 kicked down into second gear. The Cadillac, in a hurry. I stabbed the vinyl back into place. No time to secure it under the gasket. I just shoved it upward and hoped it would stay there.

The Cadillac came right up behind me and stopped hard. The headlights stayed on. I watched in the mirror and saw the door open and Beck step out. I put my hand in my pocket and clicked the Beretta to *fire*. Duffy or no Duffy, I wasn't interested in a long discussion about voice mail. But Beck had nothing in his hands. No gun, no Nokia. He stepped forward and I slid out and met him level with the Saab's rear bumper. I wanted to keep him away from the dents and the scratches. It put him about eighteen inches from the guys he had sent down to pick up his son.

"Phones are back on," he said.

"The cell too?" I said.

He nodded.

“But look at this,” he said.

He took the little silver phone out of his pocket. I kept my hand around the Beretta, out of sight. It would blow a hole in my coat, but it would blow a bigger hole in his coat. He passed me the phone. I took it, left-handed. Held it low, in the spread of the Cadillac’s headlights. Looked at the screen. I didn’t know what I was looking for. Some cell phones I had seen signaled a voice mail message with a little pictogram of an envelope. Some used a little symbol made up of two small circles joined together by a bar at the bottom, like a reel-to-reel tape, which I thought was weird, because I guessed most cell phone users had never seen a reel-to-reel tape in their lives. And I was pretty sure that the cell phone companies didn’t record the messages themselves on reel-to-reel tape. I guessed they did it digitally, inert inside some kind of a solid-state circuit. But then, the signs at railroad crossings still show the sort of locomotive that Casey Jones would have been proud of.

“See that?” Beck said.

I saw nothing. No envelopes, no reel-to-reel tapes. Just the signal strength bar, and the battery bar, and the *menu* thing, and the *names* thing.

“What?” I said.

“The signal strength,” he said. “It’s only showing three out of five. Normally I get four.”

“Maybe the tower was down,” I said. “Maybe it powers up again slowly. Some kind of electrical reason.”

“You think?”

“There are microwaves involved,” I said. “It’s probably complicated. You should look again later. Maybe it’ll come back up.”

I handed the phone back to him, left-handed. He took it and put it away in his pocket, still fretting about it.

“All quiet here?” he said.

“As the grave,” I said.

As the grave," I said.

"So it was nothing," he said. "Not something."

"I guess," I said. "I'm sorry."

"No, I appreciate your caution. Really."

"Just doing my job," I said.

"Let's go get dinner," he said.

He went back to the Cadillac and got in. I clicked the Beretta back to *safe* and slid into the Saab. He backed up and turned in the road and waited for me. I guessed he wanted to go in through the gate together, so Paulie would only have to open and close it once. We drove back in convoy, four short miles. The Saab rode badly and the headlights pointed way up at an angle and the steering felt light. There were four hundred pounds of weight in the trunk. And the corner of the headliner fell down when I hit the first bump in the road and flapped in my face the whole way back.

We put the cars in the garages and Beck waited for me in the courtyard. The tide was coming in. I could hear the waves behind the walls. They were dumping huge volumes of water on the rocks. I could feel its impact through the ground. It was a definite physical sensation. Not just sound. I joined Beck and we walked back together and used the front door. The metal detector beeped twice, once for him, once for me. He handed me a set of house keys. I accepted them, like a badge of office. Then he told me dinner would be served in thirty minutes and he invited me to eat it with the family.

I went up to Duke's room and stood at the high window. Five miles to the west, I thought I saw red taillights moving away into the distance. Three pairs of lights. Villanueva and Eliot and Duffy, I hoped, in the government Tauruses. *10-18, assignment completed.* But it was hard to be sure if they were real because of the glare from the lights on the wall. They might have been spots in my vision, from fatigue, or from the bang on the head.

I took a fast shower and stole another set of Duke's clothes. Kept my own shoes

and jacket on, left my ruined coat in the closet. I didn't check for e-mail. Duffy had been too busy for messages. And at that point we were on the same page, anyway. There was nothing more she could tell me. Pretty soon I would be telling her something, just as soon as I got a chance to rip the headliner out of the Saab.

I wasted the balance of the thirty-minute lull and then walked downstairs. Found the family dining room. It was huge. There was a long rectangular table in it. It was oak, heavy, solid, not stylish. It would have seated twenty people. Beck was at the head. Elizabeth was all the way at the other end. Richard was alone on the far side. The place set for me put me directly opposite him, with my back to the door. I thought about asking him to swap with me. I don't like sitting with my back to a door. But I decided against it and just sat down.

Paulie wasn't there. Clearly he hadn't been invited. The maid wasn't there either, of course. The cook was having to do all the scut work, and she didn't look very pleased about it. But she had done a good job with the food. We started with French onion soup. It was pretty authentic. My mother wouldn't have approved, but there are always twenty million individual Frenchwomen who think they alone possess the perfect recipe.

"Tell us about your service career," Beck said to me, like he wanted to make conversation. He wasn't going to talk about business. That was clear. Not in front of the family. I guessed maybe Elizabeth knew more than was good for her, but Richard seemed fairly oblivious. Or maybe he was just blocking it out. What had he said? Bad things don't happen unless you choose to recall them?

"Nothing much to tell," I said. I didn't want to talk about it. Bad things had happened, and I didn't choose to recall them.

"There must be something," Elizabeth said.

They were all three looking at me, so I shrugged and gave them a story about checking a Pentagon budget and seeing eight-thousand-dollar charges for maintenance tools called RTAFAs. I told them I was bored enough to be curious and had made a couple of calls and been told the acronym stood for *rotational torque-adjustable fastener applicators.* I told them I had tracked one down and found a three-dollar screwdriver. That had led to three-thousand-dollar hammers, thousand-dollar toilet seats, the whole nine yards. It's a good story. It's the sort of thing that suits any audience. Most people respond to the audacity and anti-

government types get to seethe. But it isn't true. It happened, I guess, but not to me. It was a different department entirely.

"Have you killed people?" Richard asked.

Four in the last three days, I thought.

"Don't ask questions like that," Elizabeth said.

"The soup is good," Beck said. "Maybe not enough cheese."

"Dad," Richard said.

"What?"

"You need to think about your arteries. They're going to get all clogged up."

"They're my arteries."

"And you're my dad."

They glanced at each other. They both smiled shy smiles. Father and son, best buddies. *Ambivalence.* It was all set to be a long meal. Elizabeth changed the subject away from cholesterol. She started talking about the Portland Museum of Art instead. She said it had an I. M. Pei building and a collection of American and Impressionist masters. I couldn't tell if she was trying to educate me or to tempt Richard to get out of the house and do something. I tuned her out. I wanted to get to the Saab. But I couldn't, right then. So I tried to predict exactly what I would find there. Like a game. I heard Leon Garber in my head: *Think about everything you've seen and everything you've heard. Work the clues.* I hadn't heard much. But I had seen a lot of things. I guessed they were all clues, of a sort. The dining table, for instance. The whole house, and everything in it. The cars. The Saab was a piece of junk. The Cadillac and the Lincolns were nice automobiles, but they weren't Rolls-Royces and Bentleys. The furniture was all old and dull and solid. Not cheap, but then, it didn't represent current expenditure anyway. It was all paid for long ago. What had Eliot said in Boston? About the LA gangbanger? *His profits must run to millions of dollars a week. He lives like an emperor.* Beck was supposed to be a couple of rungs up the ladder. But Beck didn't live like an emperor. Why not? Because he was a cautious Yankee, unimpressed by consumer baubles?

“Look,” he said.

I surfaced and saw him holding his cell phone out to me. I took it from him and looked at the screen. The signal strength was back up to four bars.

“Microwaves,” I said. “Maybe they ramp up slowly.”

Then I looked again. No envelopes, no reel-to-reel tapes. No voice-mail messages. But it was a tiny phone and I have big thumbs and I accidentally touched the up-down arrow key underneath the screen. The display instantly changed to a list of names. His virtual phone book, I guessed. The screen was so small it could show only three contacts at a time. At the top was *house*. Then came *gate*. Third on the list was *Xavier*. I stared at it so hard the room went silent around me and blood roared in my ears.

“The soup was very good,” Richard said.

I handed the phone back to Beck. The cook reached across in front of me and took my bowl away.

The first time I ever heard the name *Xavier* was the sixth time I ever saw Dominique Kohl. It was seventeen days after we danced in the Baltimore bar. The weather had broken. The temperature had plummeted and the skies were gray and miserable. She was in full dress uniform. For a moment I thought I must have scheduled a performance review and forgotten all about it. But then, I had a company clerk to remind me about stuff like that, and he hadn’t mentioned anything.

“You’re going to hate this,” Kohl said.

“Why? You got promoted and you’re shipping out?”

She smiled at that. I realized it had come out as more of a personal compliment than I should have risked.

“I found the bad guy,” she said.

“How?”

“Exemplary application of relevant skills,” she said.

I looked at her. “Did we schedule a performance review?”

“No, but I think we should.”

“Why?”

“Because I found the bad guy. And I think performance reviews always go better just after a big break in a case.”

“You’re still working with Frasconi, right?”

“We’re partners,” she said, which wasn’t strictly an answer to the question.

“Is he helping?”

She made a face. “Permission to speak freely?”

I nodded.

“He’s a waste of good food,” she said.

I nodded again. That was my impression, too. Lieutenant Anthony Frasconi was solid, but he wasn’t the crispest shirt in the closet.

“He’s a nice man,” she said. “I mean, don’t get me wrong.”

“But you’re doing all the work,” I said.

She nodded. She was holding the original file, the one that I had given her just after I found out she wasn’t a big ugly guy from Texas or Minnesota. It was bulging with her notes.

“*You* helped, though,” she said. “You were right. The document in question is in the newspaper. Gorowski dumps the whole newspaper in a trash can at the parking lot exit. Same can, two Sundays in a row.”

“And?”

“And two Sundays in a row, the same guy fishes it out again.”

And two Sundays in a row the same guy fishes it out again.

I paused. It was a smart plan, except that the idea of fishing around in a garbage can gave it a certain vulnerability. A certain lack of plausibility. The garbage can thing is hard to do, unless you're willing to go the whole way and dress up like a homeless person. And that's hard to do in itself, if you want to be really convincing. Homeless people walk miles, spend all day, check every can along their route. To imitate their behavior plausibly takes infinite time and care.

"What kind of a guy?" I said.

"I know what you're thinking," she said. "Who roots around in trash cans except street people, right?"

"So who does?"

"Imagine a typical Sunday," she said. "A lazy day, you're strolling, maybe the person you're meeting is a little late, maybe the impulse to go out for a walk has turned out to be a little boring. But the sun is shining, and there's a bench to sit on, and you know the Sunday papers are always fat and interesting. But you don't happen to have one with you."

"OK," I said. "I'm imagining."

"Have you noticed how a used newspaper kind of becomes community property? Seen what they do on a train, for instance? Or a subway? A guy reads his paper, leaves it on the seat when he gets out, another guy picks it up right away? He'd rather die than pick up half a candy bar, but he'll pick up a used newspaper with no problem at all?"

"OK," I said.

"Our guy is about forty," she said. "Tall, maybe six-one, trim, maybe one-ninety, short black hair going gray, fairly upmarket. He wears good clothes, chinos, golf shirts, and he kind of saunters through the lot to the can."

"Saunters?"

"It's a word," she said. "Like he's strolling, lost in thought, not a care in the world. Like maybe he's coming back from Sunday brunch. Then he notices the newspaper sitting in the top of the can, and he picks it up and checks the

headlines for a moment, and he kind of tilts his head a little and he puts the paper under his arm like he'll read some more of it later and he strolls on."

"Saunters on," I said.

"It's incredibly natural," she said. "I was right there watching it happen and I almost discounted it. It's almost subliminal."

I thought about it. She was right. She was a good student of human behavior. Which made her a good cop. If I ever did actually get around to a performance review, she was going to score off the charts.

"Something else you speculated about," she said. "He saunters on out to the marina and gets on a boat."

"He lives on it?"

"I don't think so," she said. "I mean, it's got bunks and all, but I think it's a hobby boat."

"How do you know it's got bunks?"

"I've been aboard," she said.

"When?"

"The second Sunday," she said. "Don't forget, all I'd seen up to that point was the business with the newspaper. I still hadn't positively identified the document. But he went out on another boat with some other guys, so I checked it out."

"How?"

"Exemplary application of relevant skills," she said. "I wore a bikini."

"Wearing a bikini is a skill?" I said. Then I looked away. In her case, it would be more like world-class performance art.

"It was still hot then," she said. "I blended in with the other yacht bunnies. I strolled out, walked up his little gangplank. Nobody noticed. I picked the lock on the hatch and searched for an hour."

I had to ask.

“How did you conceal lock picks in a bikini?” I said.

“I was wearing shoes,” she said.

“Did you find the blueprint?”

“I found all of them.”

“Did the boat have a name?”

She nodded. “I traced it. There’s a yacht registry for all that stuff.”

“So who’s the guy?”

“This is the part you’re going to hate,” she said. “He’s a senior Military Intelligence officer. A lieutenant colonel, a Middle East specialist. They just gave him a medal for something he did in the Gulf.”

“Shit,” I said. “But there might be an innocent explanation.”

“There might,” she said. “But I doubt it. I just met with Gorowski an hour ago.”

“OK,” I said. That explained the dress greens. Much more intimidating than wearing a bikini, I guessed. “And?”

“And I made him explain his end of the deal. His little girls are twelve months and two. The two-year-old disappeared for a day, two months ago. She won’t talk about what happened to her while she was gone. She just cries a lot. A week later our friend from Military Intelligence showed up. Suggested that the kid’s absence could last a lot longer than a day, if daddy didn’t play ball. I don’t see any innocent explanation for that kind of stuff.”

“No,” I said. “Nor do I. Who is the guy?”

“His name is Francis Xavier Quinn,” she said.

The cook brought the next course, which was some kind of a rib roast, but I didn't really notice it because I was still thinking about Francis Xavier Quinn. Clearly he had come out of the California hospital and left the *Quinn* part of his name behind him in the trash with his used gowns and his surgical dressings and his *John Doe* wrist bands. He had just walked away and stepped straight into a new identity, ready made. An identity that he felt comfortable with, one that he would always remember deep down at the primeval level he knew hidden people had to operate on. No longer United States Army Lieutenant Colonel Quinn, F.X., Military Intelligence. From that point on, he was just plain Frank Xavier, anonymous citizen.

"Rare or well?" Beck asked me.

He was carving the roast with one of the black-handled knives from the kitchen. They had been stored in a knife block and I had thought about using one of them to kill him with. The one he was using right then would have been a good choice. It was about ten inches long, and it was razor sharp, judging by how well the meat was slicing. Unless the meat happened to be unbelievably tender.

"Rare," I said. "Thank you."

He carved me two slices and I regretted it instantly. My mind flashed back seven hours to the body bag. I had pulled the zipper down and seen another knife's work. The image was so vivid I could still feel the cold metal tag between my fingers. Then I flashed back ten whole years, right back to the beginning with Quinn, and the loop was complete.

"Horseradish?" Elizabeth said.

I paused. Then I took a spoonful. The old army rule was *Eat every time you can, sleep every time you can,* because you didn't know when you were going to get another chance to do either. So I shut Quinn out of my mind and helped myself to vegetables and started eating. Restarted thinking. *Everything I'd heard, everything I'd seen.* I kept coming back to the Baltimore marina in the bright sunlight, and to the envelope and the newspaper. *Not this, but that.* And to the thing Duffy had said to me: *You haven't found anything useful. Not a thing. No evidence at all.*

"Have you read Pasternak?" Elizabeth asked me.

“What do you think of Edward Hopper?” Richard asked.

“You think the M16 should be replaced?” Beck said.

I surfaced again. They were all looking at me. It was like they were starved for conversation. Like they were all lonely. I listened to the waves crashing around three sides of the house and understood how they could feel that way. They were very isolated. But that was their choice. I like isolation. I can go three weeks without saying a word.

“I saw *Doctor Zhivago* at the movies,” I said. “I like the Hopper painting with the people in the diner at night.”

“Nighthawks,” Richard said.

I nodded. “I like the guy on the left, all alone.”

“Remember the name of the diner?”

“Phillies,” I said. “And I think the M16 is a fine assault rifle.”

“Really?” Beck said.

“It does what an assault rifle is supposed to do,” I said. “You can’t ask for much more than that.”

“Hopper was a genius,” Richard said.

“Pasternak was a genius,” Elizabeth said. “Unfortunately the movie trivialized him. And he hasn’t been well translated. Solzhenitsyn is overrated by comparison.”

“I guess the M16 is an *improved* rifle,” Beck said.

“Edward Hopper is like Raymond Chandler,” Richard said. “He captured a particular time and place. Of course, Chandler was a genius, too. Way better than Hammett.”

“Like Pasternak is better than Solzhenitsyn?” his mother said.

They went on like that for a good long time. Day fourteen, a Friday, nearly over,

eating a beef dinner with three doomed people, talking about books and pictures and rifles. *Not this, but that.* I tuned them out again and trawled back ten years and listened to Sergeant First Class Dominique Kohl instead.

“He’s a real Pentagon insider,” she said to me, the seventh time we met. “Lives close by in Virginia. That’s why he keeps his boat up in Baltimore, I guess.”

“How old is he?” I asked.

“Forty,” she said.

“Have you seen his full record?”

She shook her head. “Most of it is classified.”

I nodded. Tried to put the chronology together. A forty-year-old would have been eligible for the last two years of the Vietnam draft, at the age of eighteen or nineteen. But a guy who wound up as an intel light colonel before the age of forty had almost certainly been a college graduate, maybe even a Ph.D., which would have gotten him a deferment. So he probably didn’t go to Indochina, which in the normal way of things would have slowed his promotion. No bloody wars, no dread diseases. But his promotion hadn’t been slow, because he was a light colonel before the age of forty.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Kohl said. “How come he’s already two whole pay grades above you?”

“Actually I was thinking about you in a bikini.”

She shook her head. “No you weren’t.”

“He’s older than me.”

“He went up like a bottle rocket.”

“Maybe he’s smarter than me,” I said.

“Almost certainly,” she said. “But even so, he’s gone real far, real fast.”

I nodded.

“Great,” I said. “So now we’re messing with a big star from the intel community.”

“He’s got lots of contact with foreigners,” she said. “I’ve seen him with all kinds of people. Israelis, Lebanese, Iraqis, Syrians.”

“He’s supposed to,” I said. “He’s a Middle East specialist.”

“He comes from California,” she said. “His dad was a railroad worker. His mom stayed at home. They lived in a small house in the north of the state. He inherited it, and it’s his only asset. And we can assume he’s been on military pay since college.”

“OK,” I said.

“He’s a poor boy, Reacher,” she said. “So how come he rents a big house in MacLean, Virginia? How come he owns a yacht?”

“Is it a yacht?”

“It’s a big sailboat with bedrooms. That’s a yacht, right?”

“POV?”

“A brand-new Lexus.”

I said nothing.

“Why don’t his own people ask these kind of questions?” she said.

“They never do,” I said. “Haven’t you noticed that? Something can be plain as day and it passes them by.”

“I really don’t understand how that happens,” she said.

I shrugged.

“They’re human,” I said. “We should cut them some slack. Preconceptions get in the way. They ask themselves how good he is, not how bad he is.”

She nodded. “Like I spent two days watching the envelope, not the newspaper. Preconceptions.”

“But they should know better.”

“I guess.”

“Military Intelligence,” I said.

“The world’s biggest oxymoron,” she replied, in the familiar old ritual. “Like safe danger.”

“Like dry water,” I said.

“Did you enjoy it?” Elizabeth Beck asked me, ten years later.

I didn’t answer. *Preconceptions get in the way.*

“Did you enjoy it?” she asked again.

I looked straight at her. *Preconceptions.*

“Sorry?” I said. *Everything I had heard.*

“Dinner,” she said. “Did you enjoy it?”

I looked down. My plate was completely empty.

“It was fabulous,” I said. *Everything I had seen.*

“Really?”

“No question,” I said. *You haven’t found anything useful.*

“I’m glad,” she said.

“Forget Hopper and Pasternak,” I said. “And Raymond Chandler. Your cook is a genius.”

“You feeling OK?” Beck said. He had left half his meat on his plate.

“Terrific,” I said. *Not a thing.*

“You sure?”

I paused. *No evidence at all.*

“Yes, I really mean it,” I said.

And I really did mean it. *Because I knew what was in the Saab.* I knew for sure. No doubt about it. So I felt terrific. But I felt a little ashamed, too. Because I had been very, very slow. Painfully slow. Disgracefully slow. It had taken me eighty-six hours. More than three and a half days. I had been every bit as dumb as Quinn’s old unit. *Something can be plain as day and it passes them by.* I turned my head and looked straight at Beck like I was seeing him for the very first time.

CHAPTER 11

I knew, but I calmed down fast during dessert and coffee. And I gave up on feeling terrific. Gave up on feeling ashamed, too. Those emotions were crowded out. I started to feel a little concerned instead. Because I started to see the exact dimensions of the tactical problem. And they were huge. They were going to force a whole new definition of working alone and undercover.

Dinner ended and everybody scraped their chairs back and stood up. I stayed in the dining room. I left the Saab's headliner undisturbed. I was in no hurry. I could get to it later. There was no point risking trouble to confirm something I already knew. I helped the cook clean up instead. It seemed polite. Maybe it was even expected. The Becks went off somewhere and I carried dishes through to the kitchen. The mechanic was in there, eating a bigger portion of beef than I had gotten. I looked at him and started to feel a little ashamed again. I hadn't paid him any attention at all. Hadn't thought much about him. I had never even asked myself what he was for. But now I knew.

I loaded the dishes into the machine. The cook did economical things with the leftovers and wiped off the counters and within about twenty minutes we had everything squared away. Then she told me she was headed for bed so I said good night to her and went out the back door and walked across the rocks. I wanted to look at the sea. Wanted to gauge the tide. I had no experience with the ocean. I knew the tides came in and out maybe twice a day. I didn't know when or why. Something to do with the moon's gravity, maybe. Possibly it turned the Atlantic into a giant bathtub sloshing east and west between Europe and America. Maybe when it was low tide in Portugal it was high tide in Maine, and vice versa. I had no idea. Right then the tide looked to be changing from high to low. From in to out. I watched the waves for five more minutes and then headed back to the kitchen. The mechanic had left. I used the bunch of keys Beck had given me to lock the inner door. I left the outer door open. Then I walked through the hallway and checked the front. I guessed I was supposed to do stuff like that now. It was locked and chained. The house was quiet. So I went upstairs to Duke's room and started planning the endgame.

There was a message from Duffy waiting for me in my shoe. It said: *You OK?* I replied: *Sincere thanks for the phones. You saved my ass.*

She came back with: *Mine too. Equal element of self-interest.*

I didn't reply to that. I couldn't think of anything to say. I just sat there in the silence. She had won a minor postponement, but that was all. Her ass was toast, whatever happened next. Nothing I could do about that.

Then she sent: *Have searched all files and cannot repeat cannot find authorization for 2nd agent.*

I sent: *I know.*

She came back with just two characters: *??*

I sent: *We need to meet. I will either call or just show up. Stand by.*

Then I shut down the power and nailed the device back into my heel and wondered briefly whether I would ever take it out again. I checked my watch. It was nearly midnight. Day fourteen, a Friday, was nearly over. Day fifteen, a Saturday, was about to begin. Two weeks to the day since I had barged through the crowd outside Symphony Hall in Boston, on my way to a bar I never reached.

I lay down on the bed, fully dressed. I figured the next twenty-four or forty-eight hours were going to be crucial, and I wanted to spend five of the first six of them fast asleep. In my experience tiredness causes more foul-ups than carelessness or stupidity put together. Probably because tiredness itself creates carelessness and stupidity. So I got comfortable and closed my eyes. Set the alarm in my head for two o'clock in the morning. It worked, like it always does. I woke up after a two-hour nap, feeling OK.

I rolled off the bed and crept downstairs. Went through the hallway and the kitchen and unlocked the back door. I left all my metal stuff on the table. I didn't want the detector to make a noise. I stepped outside. It was very dark. There was

no moon. No stars. The sea was loud. The air was cold. There was a breeze. It smelled of dampness. I walked around to the fourth garage and opened the doors. The Saab was still there, undisturbed. I eased the hatch open and pulled out my bundle. Carried it around and stowed it in its dip. Then I went back for the first bodyguard. He had been dead for several hours and the low temperature was bringing rigor on early. He was pretty stiff. I hauled him out and jacked him up on my shoulder. It was like carrying a two-hundred-pound tree trunk. His arms stuck out like branches.

I carried him to the V-shaped cleft that Harley had shown me. Laid him down next to it and started counting waves. Waited for the seventh. It rolled in and just before it got to me I nudged the body into the cleft. The water came in under it and pushed it right back up at me. It was like the guy was trying to grab me with his rigid arms and take me with him. Or like he wanted to kiss me good-bye. He floated there for a second quite lazily and then the wave receded and the cleft drained and he was gone.

It worked the same way for the second guy. The ocean took him away to join his buddy, and the maid. I squatted there for a moment, feeling the breeze on my face, listening to the tireless tide. Then I went back and closed up the Saab's hatch and slid into the driver's seat. Finished the job on the headliner and reached back and pulled out the maid's notes. There were eight legal-size pages of them. I read them all in the dim glow from the dome light. They were full of specifics. They had plenty of fine detail. But in general they didn't tell me anything I didn't already know. I checked them twice and when I was finished I butted them into a neat stack and carried them back to the tip of the point. Sat down on a rock and folded each page into a paper boat. Somebody had showed me how, when I was a kid. Maybe it had been my dad. I couldn't remember. Maybe it had been my brother. I launched the eight little boats on the receding tide one after the other and watched them sail and bob away into the pitch darkness in the east.

Then I went back and spent some time fixing the headliner. I got it looking pretty good. I closed up the garage. I figured I would be gone before anybody opened it up again and noticed the damage on the car. I headed back to the house. Reloaded my pockets and relocked the door and crept back upstairs. Stripped to my shorts and slid into bed. I wanted to get three more hours. So I reset the alarm in my head and hauled the sheet and the blanket up around me and pressed a dip into the pillow and closed my eyes again. Tried to sleep. But I couldn't. It wouldn't come. Dominique Kohl came instead. She came straight at

couldn't. It wouldn't come. Dominique Kohl came instead. She came straight at me out of the darkness, like I knew she would.

The eighth time we met we had tactical problems to discuss. Taking down an intel officer was a can of worms. Obviously MPs deal exclusively with military people gone bad, so acting against one of our own was not a novelty. But the intel community was a case apart. Those guys were separate and secretive and they tried very hard to be accountable to nobody. They were tough to get at. Generally they closed ranks faster than the best drill squad you ever saw. So Kohl and I had a lot to talk about. I didn't want to have the meeting in my office. There was no visitor's chair. I didn't want her standing up the whole time. So we went back to the bar in town. It seemed like an appropriate location. The whole thing was getting so heavy we were ready to feel a little paranoid about it. Going off-base seemed like a smart thing to do. And I liked the idea of discussing intel matters like a couple of regular spies, in a dark little booth at the back of a tavern. I think Kohl did, too. She showed up in civilian clothes. Not a dress, but jeans and a white T-shirt with a leather jacket over it. I was in fatigues. I didn't have any civilian clothes. The weather was cold by then. I ordered coffee. She got tea. We wanted to keep our heads clear.

"I'm glad we used the real blueprints now," she said.

I nodded.

"Good instinct," I said. As far as evidence went we needed to slam-dunk the whole thing. For Quinn to be in possession of the real blueprints would go a long way. Anything less than that, he could start spinning stories about test procedures, war games, exercises, entrapment schemes of his own.

"It's the Syrians," she said. "And they're paying in advance. On an installment plan."

"How?"

"Briefcase exchange," she said. "He meets with an attaché from the Syrian Embassy. They go to a café in Georgetown. They both carry those fancy aluminum briefcases, identical."

"Halliburton," I said.

She nodded. "They put them side by side under the table and he picks up the

Syrian guy's when he leaves."

"He's going to say the Syrian is a legit contact. He's going to say the guy is passing *him* stuff."

"So we say, OK, show us the stuff."

"He'll say he can't, because it's classified."

Kohl said nothing. I smiled.

"He'll give us a big song and dance," I said. "He'll put his hand on our shoulders and look into our eyes and say, *Hey, trust me on this, folks, national security is involved.*"

"Have you dealt with these guys before?"

"Once," I said.

"Did you win?"

I nodded. "They're generally full of shit. My brother was MI for a time. Now he works for Treasury. But he told me all about them. They think they're smart, whereas they're really the same as anybody else."

"So what do we do?"

"We'll have to recruit the Syrian."

"Then we can't bust him."

"You wanted two-for-one?" I said. "Can't have it. The Syrian is only doing his job. Can't fault him for that. Quinn is the bad guy here."

She was quiet for a moment, a little disappointed. Then she shrugged.

"OK," she said. "But how do we do it? The Syrian will just walk away from us. He's an embassy attaché. He's got diplomatic immunity."

I smiled again. "Diplomatic immunity is just a sheet of paper from the State Department. The way I did it before was I got hold of the guy and told him to

hold a sheet of paper up in front of his gut. Then I pulled my pistol out and asked him if he figured the paper was going to stop a bullet. He said I would get into trouble. I told him however much trouble I got into wasn't going to affect how slowly he bled to death."

"And he saw it your way?"

I nodded. "Played ball like Mickey Mantle."

She went quiet again. Then she asked me the first of two questions that much later I wished I had answered differently.

"Can we see each other socially?" she said.

It was a private booth in a dark bar. She was cute as hell, and she was sitting there right next to me. I was a young man back then, and I thought I had all the time in the world.

"You asking me on a date?" I said.

"Yes," she said.

I said nothing.

"We've come a long way, baby," she said. Then she added, "Women, I mean," just in case I wasn't up-to-date with current cigarette advertising.

I said nothing.

"I know what I want," she said.

I nodded. I believed her. And I believed in equality. I believed in it big time. Not long before that I had met a woman Air Force colonel who captained a B52 bomber and cruised the night skies with more explosive power aboard her single plane than all the bombs ever dropped in the whole of human history put together. I figured if she could be trusted with enough power to explode the planet, then Sergeant First Class Dominique Kohl could be trusted to figure out who she wanted to date.

"So?" she said.

Questions I wished I had answered differently.

“No,” I said.

“Why not?”

“Unprofessional,” I said. “You shouldn’t do it.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’ll put an asterisk next to your career,” I said. “Because you’re a talented person who can’t get any higher than sergeant major without going to officer candidate school, so you’ll go there, and you’ll ace it, and you’ll be a lieutenant colonel within ten years, because you deserve it, but everybody will be saying that you got it because you dated your captain way back when.”

She said nothing. Just called the waitress over and ordered us two beers. The room was getting hotter as it got more crowded. I took my jacket off, she took her jacket off. I was wearing an olive-drab T-shirt that had gotten small and thin and faded from being washed a thousand times. Her T-shirt was a boutique item. It was scooped a little lower at the neck than most T-shirts, and the sleeves were cut away at an angle so they rode up on the small deltoid muscles at the top of her arms. The fabric was snow white against her skin. And it was slightly translucent. I could see that she was wearing nothing underneath it.

“Military life is full of sacrifices,” I said, more to myself than to her.

“I’ll get over it,” she said.

Then she asked me the second question I wish I had answered differently.

“Will you let me make the arrest?” she said.

Ten years later I woke up alone in Duke’s bed at six o’clock in the morning. His room was at the front of the house, so I had no view of the sea. I was looking west, at America. There was no morning sun. No long dawn shadows. Just dull gray light on the driveway, and the wall, and the granite landscape beyond. The wind was blowing in off the sea. I could see trees moving. I imagined black

storm clouds behind me, way out over the Atlantic, moving fast toward the shore. I imagined sea birds fighting the turbulent air with their feathers whipped and ruffled by the gale. Day fifteen, starting out gray and cold and inhospitable, and likely to get worse.

I showered, but I didn't shave. I dressed in more of Duke's black denim and laced my shoes and carried my jacket and my coat over my arm. Walked quietly down to the kitchen. The cook had already made coffee. She gave me a cup and I took it and sat at the table. She lifted a loaf of bread out of the freezer and put it in the microwave. I figured I would need to evacuate her, at some point before things turned unpleasant. And Elizabeth, and Richard. The mechanic and Beck himself could stay to face the music.

I could hear the sea from the kitchen, loud and clear. The waves crashed in and the relentless undertow sucked back out. Pools filled and drained, the gravel rattled across the rocks. The wind moaned softly through the cracks in the outer porch door. I heard frantic cries from the gulls. I listened to them and sipped my coffee and waited.

Richard came down ten minutes after me. His hair was all over the place and I could see his missing ear. He took coffee and sat down across from me. His ambivalence was back. I could see him facing up to no more college and the rest of his life hidden away with his folks. I figured if his mother got away without an indictment they could start over somewhere else. Depending on how resilient he was, he could get back to school without missing much more than a week of the semester. If he wanted to. Unless it was an expensive school, which I guessed it was. They were going to have money problems. They were going to walk away with nothing more than they stood up in. If they walked away at all.

The cook went out to set the dining room up for breakfast. Richard watched her go and I watched him and saw his ear again and a piece of the puzzle clicked into place.

"Five years ago," I said. "The kidnap."

He kept his composure. Just looked down at the table and then looked up at me and combed his hair over his scar with his fingers.

"Do you know what your dad is really into?" I asked.

He nodded. Said nothing.

“Not just rugs, right?” I said.

“No,” he said. “Not just rugs.”

“How do you feel about that?”

“There are worse things,” he said.

“Want to tell me what happened five years ago?” I said.

He shook his head. Looked away.

“No,” he said. “I don’t.”

“I knew a guy called Gorowski,” I said. “His two-year-old daughter was abducted. Just for a day. How long were you gone for?”

“Eight days,” he said.

“Gorowski fell right into line,” I said. “One day was enough for him.”

Richard said nothing.

“Your dad isn’t the boss here,” I said, like a statement.

Richard said nothing.

“He fell into line five years ago,” I said. “After you had been gone eight days. That’s the way I figure it.”

Richard was silent. I thought about Gorowski’s daughter. She was twelve years old now. She probably had the Internet and a CD player and a phone in her room. Posters on her walls. And a tiny dim ache in her mind about something that had happened way in the past. Like the itch you get from a long-healed bone.

“I don’t need details,” I said. “I just want you to say his name.”

“Whose name?”

“The guy who took you away for eight days.”

Richard just shook his head.

“I heard the name *Xavier*,” I said. “Someone mentioned it.”

Richard looked away and his left hand went straight to the side of his head, which was all the confirmation I needed.

“I was raped,” he said.

I listened to the sea, pounding on the rocks.

“By Xavier?”

He shook his head again.

“By Paulie,” he said. “He was just out of prison. He still had a taste for that kind of thing.”

I was quiet for a long moment.

“Does your father know?”

“No,” he said.

“Your mother?”

“No.”

I didn’t know what to say. Richard said nothing more. We sat there in silence. Then the cook came back and fired up the stove. She put fat in a skillet and started heating it. The smell made me sick to my stomach.

“Let’s go for a walk,” I said.

Richard followed me outside to the rocks. The air was salty and fresh and bitter cold. The light was gray. The wind was strong. It was blowing straight in our faces. Richard’s hair strung way out behind him, almost horizontal. The spray was smashing twenty feet in the air and foamy drops of water were whipping toward us like bullets.

“Every silver lining has a cloud,” I said. I had to talk loud, just to be heard over the wind and the surf. “Maybe one day Xavier and Paulie will get what’s coming to them, but your dad will go to prison in the process.”

Richard nodded. There were tears in his eyes. Maybe they were from the cold wind. Maybe they weren’t.

“He deserves to,” he said.

Very loyal, his father had said. *Best buddies.*

“I was gone eight days,” Richard said. “One should have been enough. Like with the other guy you mentioned.”

“Gorowski?”

“Whoever. With the two-year-old girl. You think she was raped?”

“I sincerely hope not.”

“Me too.”

“Can you drive?” I said.

“Yes,” he said.

“You might need to get out of here,” I said. “Soon. You and your mother and the cook. So you need to be ready. For if and when I tell you to go.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m a guy paid to protect your father. From his so-called friends, as much as his enemies.”

“Paulie won’t let us through the gate.”

“He’ll be gone soon.”

He shook his head.

“Paulie will kill you,” he said. “You have no idea. You can’t deal with Paulie,

whoever you are. Nobody can."

"I dealt with those guys outside the college."

He shook his head again. His hair streamed in the wind. It reminded me of the maid's hair, under the water.

"That was phony," he said. "My mom and I discussed it. It was a setup."

I was quiet for a second. *Did I trust him yet?*

"No, it was for real," I said. *No, I didn't trust him yet.*

"It's a small community," he said. "They have about five cops. I never saw that guy before in my life."

I said nothing.

"I never saw those college cops either," he said. "And I was there nearly three full years."

I said nothing. *Mistakes, coming back to haunt me.*

"So why did you quit school?" I said. "If it was a setup?"

He didn't answer.

"And how come Duke and I were ambushed?"

He didn't answer.

"So what was it?" I said. "A setup or for real?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

"You saw me shoot them all," I said.

He said nothing. I looked away. The seventh wave came rolling in. It crested forty yards out and hit the rocks faster than a man can run. The ground shuddered and spray burst upward like a star shell.

"Did either of you discuss this with your father?" I said.

“I didn’t,” he said. “And I’m not going to. I don’t know about my mom.”

And I don’t know about you, I thought. Ambivalence works both ways. You blow hot, then you blow cold. The thought of his father in a prison cell might look pretty good to him right now. Later, it might look different. When push came to shove, this guy was capable of swinging either way.

“I saved your ass,” I said. “I don’t like it that you’re pretending I didn’t.”

“Whatever,” he said. “There’s nothing you can do anyway. This is going to be a busy weekend. You’ve got the shipment to deal with. And after that you’ll be one of them anyway.”

“So help me out,” I said.

“I won’t double-cross my dad,” he said.

Very loyal. Best buddies.

“You don’t have to,” I said.

“So how can I help you?”

“Just tell him you want me here. Tell him you shouldn’t be alone right now. He listens to you, about stuff like that.”

He didn’t reply. Just walked away from me and headed back to the kitchen. He went straight through to the hallway. I guessed he was going to eat breakfast in the dining room. I stayed in the kitchen. The cook had set my place at the deal table. I wasn’t hungry, but I forced myself to eat. Tiredness and hunger are bad enemies. I had slept, and now I was going to eat. I didn’t want to wind up weak and light-headed at the wrong moment. I had toast, and another cup of coffee. Then I got more into it and had eggs and bacon. I was on my third cup of coffee when Beck came in to find me. He was wearing Saturday clothes. Blue jeans and a red flannel shirt.

“We’re going to Portland,” he said. “To the warehouse. Right now.”

He went back out to the hallway. I guessed he would wait at the front. And I guessed Richard hadn’t talked to him. Either he hadn’t gotten a chance, or he

guessed Richard hadn't talked to him. Either he hadn't gotten a chance, or he hadn't wanted to. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. Checked my pockets to make sure the Beretta was safely stowed and the keys were there. Then I walked out and fetched the car. Drove it around to the front. Beck was waiting there for me. He had put a canvas jacket over his shirt. He looked like a regular Maine guy heading out to split logs or tap his maple trees for syrup. But he wasn't.

Paulie was about ready with the gate so I had to slow but I didn't have to stop. I glanced at him as I passed. I figured he would die today. Or tomorrow. Or I would. I left him behind and gunned the big car along the familiar road. After a mile I passed the spot where Villanueva had parked. Four miles after that I rounded the narrow curve where I had trapped the bodyguards. Beck didn't speak. He had his knees apart with his hands held down between them. He was leaning forward in his seat. His head was down, but his eyes were up. He was staring straight ahead through the windshield. He was nervous.

"We never had our talk," I said. "About the background information."

"Later," he said.

I passed Route One and used I-95 instead. Headed north for the city. The sky stayed gray. The wind was strong enough to push the car a little off line. I turned onto I-295 and passed by the airport. It was on my left, beyond the tongue of water. On my right was the back of the strip mall where the maid had been captured, and the back of the new business park where I figured she had died. I kept on going straight and threaded my way into the harbor area. I passed the lot where Beck parked his trucks. One minute later we arrived at his warehouse.

It was surrounded by vehicles. There were five of them parked head-in against the walls, like airplanes at a terminal. Like animals at a trough. Like suckerfish on a corpse. There were two black Lincoln Town Cars and two blue Chevy Suburbans and a gray Mercury Grand Marquis. One of the Lincolns was the car I had been in when Harley drove me out to pick up the Saab. After we put the maid into the sea. I looked for enough space to park the Cadillac.

"Just let me out here," Beck said.

I eased to a stop. "And?"

"Head back to the house," he said. "Take care of my family."

I nodded. So maybe Richard had talked to him, after all. Maybe his ambivalence was swinging my way, just temporarily.

“OK,” I said. “Whatever you need. You want me to pick you up again later?”

He shook his head.

“I’m sure I’ll get a ride back,” he said.

He slid out and headed for the weathered gray door. I took my foot off the brake and looped around the warehouse and rolled back south.

I used Route One instead of I-295 and drove straight to the new business park. Pulled in and cruised through the network of brand-new roads. There were maybe three dozen identical metal buildings. They were very plain. It wasn’t the kind of place that depends on attracting casual passersby. Foot-traffic wasn’t important. There were no retail places. No gaudy come-ons. No big billboards. Just discreet unit numbers with business names printed small next to them. There were lock-and-key people, ceramic tile merchants, a couple of print shops. There was a beauty products wholesaler. Unit 26 was an electric wheelchair distributor. And next to it was Unit 27: *Xavier eXport Company*. The *X*s were much larger than the other letters. There was a main office address on the sign that didn’t match the business park’s location. I figured it referred to someplace in downtown Portland. So I rolled north again and recrossed the river and did some city driving.

I came in on Route One with a park on my left. Made a right onto a street full of office buildings. They were the wrong buildings. It was the wrong street. So I quartered the business district for five long minutes until I spotted a street sign with the right name on it. Then I watched the numbers and pulled up on a fireplug outside a tower that had stainless steel letters stretched across the whole of the frontage, spelling out a name: *Missionary House.* There was a parking garage under it. I looked at the vehicle entrance and was pretty sure Susan Duffy had walked through it eleven weeks earlier, with a camera in her hand. Then I recalled a high school history lesson, somewhere hot, somewhere Spanish, a quarter-century in the past, some old guy telling us about a Spanish Jesuit called

Francisco Javier. I could even remember his dates: 1506 to 1552. Francisco Javier, Spanish missionary. Francis Xavier, Missionary House. Back in Boston at the start Eliot had accused Beck of making jokes. He had been wrong. It was Quinn with the twisted sense of humor.

I moved off the fireplug and found Route One again and headed south on it. I drove fast but it took me thirty whole minutes to reach the Kennebunk River. There were three Ford Tauruses parked outside the motel, all plain and identical apart from color, and even then there wasn't much variation between them. They were gray, gray blue, and blue. I put the Cadillac where I had put it before, behind the propane store. Walked back through the cold and knocked on Duffy's door. I saw the peephole black out for a second and then she opened up. We didn't hug. I saw Eliot and Villanueva in the room behind her.

"Why can't I find the second agent?" she said.

"Where did you look?"

"Everywhere," she said.

She was wearing jeans and a white Oxford shirt. Different jeans, different shirt. She must have had a large supply. She was wearing boat shoes over bare feet. She looked good, but there was worry in her eyes.

"Can I come in?" I said.

She paused a second, preoccupied. Then she moved out of the way and I followed her inside. Villanueva was in the desk chair. He had it tilted backward. I hoped the legs were strong. He wasn't a small guy. Eliot was on the end of the bed, like he had been in my room in Boston. Duffy had been sitting at the head of the bed. That was clear. The pillows were stacked vertically and the shape of her back was pressed into them.

"Where did you look?" I asked her again.

"The whole system," she said. "The whole Justice Department, front to back, which means FBI as well as DEA. And she's not there."

“Conclusion?”

“She was off the books too.”

“Which begs a question,” Eliot said. “Like, what the hell is going on?”

Duffy sat down at the head of the bed again and I sat down next to her. There was no other place for me to go. She wrestled a pillow out from behind her and shoved it in behind me. It was warm from her body.

“Nothing much is going on,” I said. “Except all three of us started out two weeks ago just like the Keystone Cops.”

“How?” Eliot said.

I made a face. “I was obsessed with Quinn, you guys were obsessed with Teresa Daniel. We were all so obsessed we went right ahead and built a house of cards.”

“How?” he said again.

“My fault more than yours,” I said. “Think about it from the very beginning, eleven weeks ago.”

“Eleven weeks ago was nothing to do with you. You weren’t involved yet.”

“Tell me exactly what happened.”

He shrugged. Rehearsed it in his mind. “We got word from LA that a top boy just bought himself a first-class ticket to Portland, Maine.”

I nodded. “So you tracked him to his rendezvous with Beck. And took pictures of him doing what?”

“Checking samples,” Duffy said. “Doing a deal.”

“In a private parking garage,” I said. “And as an aside, if it was private enough to get you in trouble with the Fourth Amendment, maybe you should have wondered how Beck got himself in there.”

She said nothing.

“Then what?” I said.

“We looked at Beck,” Eliot said. “Concluded he was a major importer and a major distributor.”

“Which he most definitely is,” I said. “And you put Teresa in to nail him.”

“Off the books,” Eliot said.

“That’s a minor detail,” I said.

“So what went wrong?”

“It was a house of cards,” I said. “You made one tiny error of judgment at the outset. It invalidated everything that came after it.”

“What was it?”

“Something that I should have seen a hell of a lot earlier than I did.”

“What?”

“Just ask yourself why you can’t find a computer trail for the maid.”

“She was off the books. That’s the only explanation.”

I shook my head. “She was as legal as can be. She was all over the damn books. I found some notes she made. There’s no doubt about it.”

Duffy looked straight at me. “Reacher, what exactly is going on?”

“Beck has a mechanic,” I said. “Some kind of a technician. For what?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

“I never even asked myself,” I said. “I should have. I shouldn’t have needed to, actually, because I should have known before I even met the damn mechanic. But I was locked in a groove, just like you were.”

“What groove?”

“Beck knew the retail on a Colt Anaconda,” I said. “He knew how much it

"Beck knew the recoil on a Colt Anaconda," I said. "He knew how much it weighed. Duke had a Steyr SPP, which is a weird Austrian gun. Angel Doll had a PSM, which is a weird Russian gun. Paulie's got an NSV, probably the only one inside the United States. Beck was obsessed with the fact that we attacked with Uzis, not H and Ks. He knew enough to spec out a Beretta 92FS so it looked just like a regular military M9."

"So?"

"He's not what we thought he was."

"So what is he? You just agreed he's definitely a major importer and distributor."

"He is."

"So?"

"You looked in the wrong computer," I said. "The maid didn't work for the Justice Department. She worked for Treasury."

"Secret Service?"

I shook my head.

"ATF," I said. "The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms."

The room went quiet.

"Beck isn't a drug dealer," I said. "He's a gunrunner."

The room stayed quiet for a very long time. Duffy looked at Eliot. Eliot looked back at her. Then they both looked at Villanueva. Villanueva looked at me. Then he looked out the window. I waited for the tactical problem to dawn on them. But it didn't. Not right away.

"So what was the LA guy doing?" Duffy said.

"Looking at samples," I said. "In the Cadillac's trunk. Exactly like you thought.

But they were samples of the weapons Beck was dealing. He as good as told me. He said dope dealers were driven by fashion. They like new and fancy things. They change weapons all the time, always looking for the latest thing."

"He told you?"

"I wasn't really listening," I said. "I was tired. And it was all mixed in with stuff about sneakers and cars and coats and watches."

"Duke went to Treasury," she said. "After he was a cop."

I nodded. "Beck probably met him on the job. Probably bought him off."

"Where does Quinn fit in?"

"I figure he was running a rival operation," I said. "He probably always was, ever since he got out of the hospital in California. He had six months to make his plans. And guns are a much better fit with a guy like Quinn than narcotics. I figure at some point he identified Beck's operation as a takeover target. Maybe he liked the way Beck was mining the dope dealer market. Or maybe he just liked the rug side of the business. It's great cover. So he moved in. He kidnapped Richard five years ago, to get Beck's signature on the dotted line."

"Beck told you the Hartford guys were his customers," Eliot said.

"They were," I said. "But for their guns, not for their dope. That's why he was puzzled about the Uzis. He'd probably just gotten through selling them a whole bunch of H and Ks, and now they're using Uzis? He couldn't understand it. He must have thought they had switched suppliers."

"We were pretty dumb," Villanueva said.

"I was dumber than you," I said. "I was amazingly dumb. There was evidence all over the place. Beck isn't rich enough to be a dope dealer. He makes good money, for sure, but he doesn't make millions a week. He noticed the marks I scratched on the Colt cylinders. He knew the price and the weight of a laser sight to use on the Beretta he gave me. He put a couple of mint H&Ks in a bag when he needed to take care of some business down in Connecticut. Probably pulled them right out of stock. He's got a private collection of Thompson grease guns."

"What's the mechanic for?"

What's the mechanic for?

"He gets the guns ready for sale," I said. "That's my guess. He tweaks them, adjusts them, checks them out. Some of Beck's customers wouldn't react well to substandard merchandise."

"Not the ones we know," Duffy said.

"Beck talked about the M16 at dinner," I said. "He was conversing about an assault rifle, for God's sake. And he wanted to hear my opinion about Uzis versus H&Ks, like he was really fascinated. I thought he was just a gun nerd, you know, but it was actually professional interest. He has computer access to the Glock factory in Deutsch-Wagram in Austria."

Nobody spoke. I closed my eyes, then I opened them again.

"There was a smell in a basement room," I said. "I should have recognized it. It was the smell of gun oil on cardboard. It's what you get when you stack boxes of new weapons and leave them there for a week or so."

Nobody spoke.

"And the prices in the Bizarre Bazaar books," I said. "Low, medium, high. Low for ammunition, medium for handguns, high for long guns and exotics."

Duffy was looking at the wall. She was thinking hard.

"OK," Villanueva said. "I guess we were all a little dumb."

Duffy looked at him. Then she stared at me. The tactical problem was finally dawning on her.

"We have no jurisdiction," she said.

Nobody spoke.

"This is ATF business," she said. "Not DEA."

"It was an honest mistake," Eliot said.

She shook her head. "I don't mean *then.* I mean *now.* We can't be in there. We

have to butt out, right now, immediately."

"I'm not butting out," I said.

"You have to. Because *we* have to. We have to fold our tents and leave. And you can't be in there on your own and unsupported."

A whole new definition of alone and undercover.

"I'm staying," I said.

I searched my soul for a whole year after it happened and concluded I wouldn't have answered any differently even if she hadn't been fragrant and naked under a thin T-shirt and sitting next to me in a bar when she asked the fateful question. *Will you let me make the arrest?* I would have said yes, whatever the circumstances. For sure. Even if she had been a big ugly guy from Texas or Minnesota standing at attention in my office, I would have said yes. She had done the work. She deserved the credit. I was vaguely interested in getting ahead back then, maybe a little less so than most people, but any structure that has a ranking system tempts you to try to climb it. So I was vaguely interested. But I wasn't a guy who hijacked subordinates' achievements in order to make myself look good. I never did that. If somebody performed well, did a good job, I was always happy to stand back and let them reap the rewards. It was a principle I adhered to throughout my career. I could always console myself by basking in their reflected glow. It was my company, after all. There was a certain amount of collective recognition. Sometimes.

But anyway, I really liked the idea of an MP noncom busting an intel light colonel. Because I knew a guy like Quinn would absolutely hate it. He would see it as the ultimate indignity. A guy who bought Lexuses and sailboats and wore golf shirts didn't want to be taken down by a damn *sergeant.*

"Will you let me make the arrest?" she asked again.

"I want you to," I said.

“It’s a purely legal issue,” Duffy said.

“Not to me,” I said.

“We have no authority.”

“I don’t work for you.”

“It’s suicide,” Eliot said.

“I survived so far.”

“Only because she cut the phones.”

“The phones are history,” I said. “The bodyguard problem resolved itself. So I don’t need backup anymore.”

“Everybody needs backup. You can’t go undercover without it.”

“ATF backup did the maid a whole lot of good,” I said.

“We lent you a car. We helped you every step of the way.”

“I don’t need cars anymore. Beck gave me my own set of keys. And a gun. And bullets. I’m his new right-hand man. He trusts me to protect his family.”

They said nothing.

“I’m an inch away from nailing Quinn,” I said. “I’m not butting out now.”

They said nothing.

“And I can get Teresa Daniel back,” I said.

“ATF can get Teresa Daniel back,” Eliot said. “We go to ATF now, we’re off the hook with our own people. The maid was theirs, not ours. No harm, no foul.”

“ATF isn’t up to speed,” I said. “Teresa will be caught in the crossfire.”

There was a long silence.

There was a long silence.

“Monday,” Villanueva said. “We’ll sit on it until Monday. We’ll have to tell ATF by Monday at the latest.”

“We should tell them right now,” Eliot said.

Villanueva nodded. “But we won’t. And if necessary I’ll make sure that we don’t. I say we give Reacher until Monday.”

Eliot said nothing more. He just looked away. Duffy laid her head back on the pillow and stared up at the ceiling.

“Shit,” she said.

“It’ll be over by Monday,” I said. “I’ll bring Teresa back to you here and then you can head home and make all the calls you want.”

She was quiet for a whole minute. Then she spoke.

“OK,” she said. “You can go back. And you should probably go back right now. You’ve been gone a long time. That’s suspicious in itself.”

“OK,” I said.

“But think first,” she said. “Are you absolutely sure?”

“I’m not your responsibility,” I said.

“I don’t care,” she said. “Just answer the question. Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Now think again. Still sure?”

“Yes,” I said again.

“We’ll be here,” she said. “Call us if you need us.”

“OK,” I said.

“Still sure?”

“Yes,” I said.

“So go.”

She didn’t get up. None of them did. I just eased myself off the bed and walked out through the silent room. I was halfway back to the Cadillac when Terry Villanueva came out after me. He waved me to wait and walked across to me. He moved stiff and slow, like the old guy he was.

“Bring me in,” he said. “Any chance you get, I want to be there.”

I said nothing.

“I could help you out,” he said.

“You already did.”

“I need to do more. For the kid.”

“Duffy?”

He shook his head. “No, Teresa.”

“You got a connection?”

“I got a responsibility,” he said.

“How?”

“I was her mentor,” he said. “It worked out that way. You know how that is?”

I nodded. I knew exactly, totally, and completely how that was.

“Teresa worked for me for a spell,” he said. “I trained her. I broke her in, basically. Then she moved up. But ten weeks ago she came back to me and asked if I thought she should accept this mission. She had doubts.”

“But you said yes.”

He nodded. “Like a damn fool.”

“Could you really have stopped her?”

Could you really have stopped her?

“Probably. She would have listened to me if I had made a case why she shouldn’t do it. She’d have made up her own mind, but she’d have listened.”

“I understand,” I said.

And I did, no question about it. I left him standing there in the motel lot and slid into the car and watched him watch me drive away.

I stayed on Route One all the way through Biddeford and Saco and Old Orchard Beach and then struck out east on the long lonely road out to the house. I checked my watch as I got close and figured I had been away two whole hours, of which only forty minutes were legitimate. Twenty minutes to the warehouse, twenty back. But I didn’t expect to have to explain myself to anybody. Beck would never know I hadn’t come straight home and the others would never know I had been supposed to. I figured I was right there in the endgame, freewheeling toward victory.

But I was wrong.

I knew it before Paulie got halfway through opening the gate. He came out of his house and stepped across to the latch. He was wearing his suit. No coat. He lifted the latch by butting it upward with his clenched fist. Everything was still normal. I had seen him open the gate a dozen times and he was doing nothing he hadn’t done before. He wrapped his fists around the bars. Pulled the gate. But before he got halfway through opening it he stopped it dead. He just made enough space to squeeze his giant frame through. Then he stepped out to meet me. He walked around toward my window and when he got six feet from the car he stopped and smiled and took two guns out of his pockets. It happened in less than a second. Two pockets, two hands, two guns. They were my Colt Anacondas. The steel looked dull in the gray light. I could see they were both loaded. There were bright snub-nose copper jackets winking at me from every chamber I could see. Remington .44 Magnums, without a doubt. Full metal jacket. Eighteen bucks for a box of twenty. Plus tax. Ninety-five cents each. Twelve of them. Eleven dollars and forty cents’ worth of precision ammunition, ready to go, five dollars and seventy cents in each hand. And he was holding those hands very steady. Thev were like rocks. The left was aimed a little ahead of the Cadillac’s front

tire. The right was aimed directly at my head. His fingers were tight on the triggers. The muzzles weren't moving at all. Not even a fraction. He was like a statue.

I did all the usual things. I ran all the numbers. The Cadillac was a big car with long doors but he had put himself just far enough away that I couldn't jerk my door open and hit him with it. And the car was stationary. If I hit the gas he would fire both guns instantly. The bullet from the one in his right hand might well pass behind my head but the car's front tire would roll straight into the path of the one from his left. Then I would hit the gates hard and lose momentum and with a blown front tire and maybe with damaged steering I would be a sitting duck. He would fire ten more times and even if I wasn't killed outright I would be badly wounded and the car would be crippled. He could just step over and watch me bleed while he reloaded.

I could sneak it into reverse and howl away backward but reverse gear is pretty low on most cars and therefore I would be moving slowly. And I would be moving directly away from him in a perfectly straight line. No lateral displacement. None of the usual benefits of a moving target. And a Remington .44 Magnum leaves a gun barrel at more than eight hundred miles an hour. No easy way to outrun one.

I could try my Beretta. It would have to be a very fast snap shot through the window glass. But the window glass on a Cadillac is pretty thick. They make it that way to keep the interior quiet. Even if I got the gun out and fired before he did, it would be pure chance if I hit him. The glass would shatter for sure, but unless I took all the time I needed to make absolutely certain the trajectory was exactly perpendicular to the window the bullet would deflect. Perhaps radically. It could miss him altogether. And even if it hit him it would be pure chance if it hurt him. I remembered kicking him in the kidney. Unless I happened to hit him in the eye or straight through the heart he would think he had been stung by a bee.

I could buzz the window down. But it was very slow. And I could predict exactly what would happen. He would straighten his arm while the glass was moving and bring the right-hand Colt within three feet of my head. Even if I got the Beretta out real fast he would still have a hell of a jump on me. The odds were not good. Not good at all. *Stay alive,* Leon Garber used to say. *Stay alive and see what the next minute brings.*

Paulie dictated the next minute.

“Put it in Park,” he yelled.

I heard him clearly, even through the thick glass. I moved the gearshift into Park.

“Right hand where I can see it,” he yelled.

I put my right palm up against the window, fingers extended, just like when I signaled *I see five people* to Duke.

“Open the door with your left,” he yelled.

I scrabbled blindly with my left hand and pulled the door release. Pushed on the glass with my right. The door swung open. Cold air came in. I felt it around my knees.

“Both hands where I can see them,” he said. He spoke quieter, now the glass wasn’t between us. He brought the left-hand Colt around on me, now the car was out of gear. I looked at the twin muzzles. It was like sitting on the foredeck of a battleship looking up at a pair of naval guns. I put both hands where he could see them.

“Feet out of the car,” he said.

I swiveled on my butt, slowly on the leather. Got my feet out onto the blacktop. I felt like Terry Villanueva outside the college gate, early in the morning of day eleven.

“Stand up,” he said. “Step away from the car.”

I levered myself upright. Stepped away from the car. He pointed both guns directly at my chest. He was four feet away from me.

“Stand very still,” he said.

I stood very still.

“Richard,” he called.

Richard Beck came out of the gatehouse door. He was pale. I saw Elizabeth

Beck behind him in the shadows. Her blouse was open at the front. She was clutching it tight around herself. Paulie grinned at me. A sudden, lunatic grin. But the guns didn't waver. Not even a fraction. They stayed rock steady.

"You came back a little too soon," he said. "I was about to make him have sex with his mother."

"Are you out of your mind?" I said. "What the hell is going on?"

"I got a call," he said. "That's what's going on."

I should have been back an hour and twenty minutes ago.

"Beck called you?"

"Not Beck," he said. "My boss."

"Xavier?" I said.

"*Mr.* Xavier," he said.

He stared at me, like a challenge. The guns didn't move.

"I went shopping," I said. *Stay alive. See what the next minute brings.*

"I don't care what you did."

"I couldn't find what I wanted. That's why I'm late."

"We expected you to be late."

"Why?"

"We got new information."

I said nothing to that.

"Walk backward," he said. "Through the gate."

He kept both guns four feet from my chest and walked forward while I walked backward through the gate. He matched me pace for pace. I stopped twenty feet inside, in the middle of the driveway. He stepped to one side and half-turned so

inside, in the middle of the driveway. He stepped to one side and half-turned so he could cover me on his left and Richard and Elizabeth on his right.

“Richard,” he called. “Close the gate.”

He kept the left-hand Colt aimed at me and swung the right-hand Colt toward Richard. Richard saw it coming around at him and stepped up and grabbed the gate and pushed it shut. It clanged into place, loud and metallic.

“Chain it.”

Richard fumbled with the chain. I heard it ringing and rattling against the iron. I heard the Cadillac, idling quietly and obediently forty feet away on the wrong side of the gate. I heard the waves pounding on the shore behind me, slow and regular and distant. I saw Elizabeth Beck in the gatehouse doorway. She was ten feet away from the big machine gun hanging on its chain. It had no safety catch. But Paulie was in the blind spot. The back window couldn’t see him.

“Lock it,” Paulie called.

Richard snapped the padlock shut.

“Now you and your mom go stand behind Reacher.”

They met near the gatehouse door. Walked toward me. Passed right by me. They were both white and trembling. Richard’s hair was blowing. I saw his scar. Elizabeth had her arms crossed tight against her chest. I heard them both stop behind me. Heard their shoes on the blacktop as they shuffled around to face my back. Paulie stepped over to the center of the driveway. He was ten feet away. Both barrels were aimed at my chest, one to the left side, one to the right. Jacketed .44 Magnums would go straight through me and probably straight through Richard and Elizabeth, too. They might make it all the way to the house. Might break a couple of first-floor windows.

“Now Reacher holds his arms out by his sides,” Paulie called.

I held them out, away from my body, stiff and straight, angled down.

“Now Richard takes Reacher’s coat off,” Paulie called. “He pulls it down, from the collar.”

I felt Richard's hands on my neck. They were cold. They grasped my collar and peeled the coat down. It slid off my shoulders and came down my arms. It pulled past one wrist, then past the other.

"Ball it up," Paulie called.

I heard Richard balling it up.

"Bring it here," Paulie called.

Richard came out from behind me carrying the balled coat. He got within five feet of Paulie and stopped.

"Throw it over the gate," Paulie said. "Real far."

Richard threw it over the gate. Real far. The arms flapped in the air and it sailed up and then down and I heard the dull padded thump of the Beretta in the pocket landing hard on the Cadillac's hood.

"Same thing with the jacket," Paulie said.

My jacket landed next to the coat on the Cadillac's hood and slid down the shiny paint and ended up on the road in a crumpled heap. I was cold. The wind was blowing and my shirt was thin. I could hear Elizabeth breathing behind me, fast and shallow. Richard was just standing there, five feet from Paulie, waiting for his next instruction.

"Now you and your mom walk fifty paces," Paulie said to him. "Back toward the house."

Richard turned and walked back and passed by me again. I heard his mother get in step with him. Heard them walk away together. I turned my head and saw them stop about forty yards back and turn around and face front again. Paulie tracked backward toward the gate, one pace, two, three. He stopped five feet from it. His back was to it. He had me fifteen feet in front of him and I guessed he could see Richard and Elizabeth over my shoulder, maybe a hundred feet farther on in the distance. We were all in a perfect straight line on the driveway, Paulie near the gate and facing the house, Richard and Elizabeth halfway to the house and facing back at him, me in the middle, trying to stay alive to see what the next minute would bring, facing Paulie, looking him square in the eye.

He smiled.

“OK,” he said. “Now watch carefully.”

He stayed facing me the whole time. He maintained eye contact. He crouched down and placed both guns on the blacktop by his feet and then flipped them backward toward the base of the gate. I heard their steel frames scraping on the rough surface. Saw them come to rest a yard behind him. Saw his hands come back, empty. He stood up again and showed me his palms.

“No guns,” he said. “I’m going to beat you to death.”

CHAPTER 12

I could still hear the Cadillac. I could hear its lumpy V-8 whisper and the faint liquid burble from its tailpipes. I could hear drive belts turning slowly under the hood. I could hear the muffler ticking as it adjusted to a new temperature.

“Rules,” Paulie called. “You get past me, you get the guns.”

I said nothing.

“You get to them, you can use them,” he called.

I said nothing. He kept smiling.

“You understand?” he called.

I nodded. Watched his eyes.

“OK,” he said. “I won’t touch the guns unless you run away. You do that, I’ll pick them up and shoot you in the back. That’s fair, right? You got to stand and fight now.”

I said nothing.

“Like a man,” he called.

Still I said nothing. I was cold. No coat, no jacket.

“Like an officer and a gentleman,” he said.

I watched his eyes.

“We clear on the rules?” he said.

I said nothing. The wind was on my back.

“We clear on the rules?” he said again.

“Crystal,” I said.

“You going to run?” he said.

I said nothing.

“I think you will,” he said. “Because you’re a pussy.”

I didn’t react.

“Officer pussy,” he said. “Rear-echelon whore. Coward.”

I just stood there. *Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.* And I doubted he knew any words I hadn’t heard a hundred thousand times before. Military cops are never very popular. I tuned his voice out. Watched his eyes and his hands and his feet instead. Thought hard. I knew a lot about him. None of it was good. He was big and he was crazy and he was fast.

“Damn ATF spy,” he called.

Not exactly, I thought.

“Here I come,” he called.

He didn’t move. I didn’t, either. I just stood my ground. He was full of meth and steroids. His eyes were blazing.

“Coming to get you,” he sang.

He didn’t move. He was heavy. Heavy, and strong. Very strong. If he hit me, I would go down. And if I went down, I would never get up again. I watched him. He came up on the balls of his feet. Moved, fast. Feinted left, and stopped. I stood still. Held my ground. Watched him. Thought hard. He was heavier than nature intended, maybe by a hundred or a hundred and fifty pounds. Maybe by more. So he was fast, but he wouldn’t be fast forever.

I took a breath.

“Elizabeth tells me you can’t get it up,” I said.

He stared in at me. I could still hear the Cadillac. I could still hear the waves.

They were crashing in, way behind the house.

“Big guy,” I said. “But not big everywhere.”

No reaction.

“I bet my left-hand pinkie is bigger,” I said.

I held it out, halfway curled into my palm.

“And stiffer,” I said.

His face darkened. He seemed to swell up. He exploded at me. Just launched himself forward with his right arm scything around in a giant roundhouse strike. I sidestepped his body and ducked under his arm and bounced up again and spun around. He stopped short on stiff legs and whipped back toward me. We had changed places. Now I was nearer the guns than he was. He panicked and came at me again. Same move. His right arm swung. I sidestepped and ducked and we were back where we started. But he was breathing a little heavier than I was.

“You’re a big girl’s blouse,” I said.

It was a term of abuse I had picked up somewhere. England, maybe. I had no idea what it meant. But it worked real well, with a certain type of guy. It worked real well with Paulie. He came at me again, no hesitation. Same exact move. This time I crashed an elbow into his side as I spun under his arm. He bounced straight off of locked knees and came right back at me. I dodged away again and felt the breeze as his giant fist passed an inch above my head.

He stood there, panting. I was warming up nicely. I was beginning to feel I had some kind of a chance. He was a very poor fighter. Lots of very big guys are. Either their sheer size is so intimidating it stops fights from ever starting in the first place, or else it lets them win every one directly after their first punch lands. Either way, they don’t get much practice. They don’t develop much finesse. And they get out of shape. Weights machines and treadmills are no substitute for the kind of urgent, anxious, breathless tight-throat high-speed high-adrenaline fitness you need to fight on the street. I figured Paulie was a prime example. I figured he had weight-lifted himself right out of the frame.

I blew him a kiss.

He swarmed through the air at me. Came on like a pile driver. I dodged left and put an elbow in his face and he connected with his left hand and knocked me sideways like I weighed nothing at all. I went down on one knee and got back up just in time to arch around his next crazy lunge. His fist missed my gut by a quarter-inch and its wild momentum pulled him past me and downward a little which put the side of his head right in line for a left hook. I let it go with everything I had from my toes on up. My fist crashed into his ear and he staggered back and I followed up with a colossal right to his jaw. Then I danced back and took a breather and tried to see what damage I'd done.

No damage.

I had hit him four times and it was like I hadn't hit him at all. The two elbows had been solid smashes and the two punches had been as hard as anything I had ever thrown in my life. There was blood on his upper lip from the second elbow, but there was absolutely nothing else wrong with him. Theoretically he should have been unconscious. Or in a coma. It was probably thirty years since I ever had to hit a guy more than four times. But he showed no pain. No concern. He wasn't unconscious. He wasn't in a coma. He was dancing around and smiling again. He was relaxed. Moving easy. Huge. Impregnable. *There was no way to hurt him.* I looked at him and knew for sure I had no chance at all. And he looked at me and knew exactly what I was thinking. He smiled wider. Got balanced on the balls of both feet and hunched his shoulders down low and held his hands out in front of him like claws. He stamped his feet, left, right, left, right. It was like he was pawing the ground. Like he was going to come and get me and tear me apart. The smile distorted into a terrible wide grin of pleasure.

He came straight at me and I dodged left. But he was ready for that maneuver and he landed a right hook in the center of my chest. It felt exactly like being hit by a four-hundred-pound weight-lifter moving at six miles an hour. My sternum seemed to crack and I thought my heart would stop from the shock. I came up off my feet and went down on my back. Then it was about choosing to live or choosing to die. I chose to live. Rolled over twice and pushed with my hands and levered myself upright. Jumped back and sideways and dodged a straight drive that would have killed me.

After that it was about staying alive and seeing what the next half-second would bring. My chest hurt badly and my mobility was below a hundred percent but I dodged whatever he threw for about a minute. He was fast, but he wasn't

talented. I got an elbow in his face. It cracked his nose. It should have punched it out the back of his head. But at least it started bleeding. He opened his mouth to breathe. I dodged and danced and waited. Caught a huge roundhouse punch on the left shoulder that nearly paralyzed my arm. Then he near-missed with a right and for a fraction of a split second his stance was wide open. His mouth was open because of the blood in his nose. I wound up and let go with a cigarette punch. It's a bar fight trick I learned long ago. You offer your guy a cigarette and he takes it and lifts it to his lips and opens his mouth maybe three-quarters of an inch. Whereupon you time it just right and land a huge uppercut under his chin. It slams his mouth shut and breaks his jaw and busts his teeth and maybe he bites his tongue off. *Thank you and good night.* I didn't need to offer Paulie a cigarette because his mouth was already hanging open. So I just let go with the uppercut. Gave it everything I had. It was a perfect blow. I was still thinking and still steady on my feet and although I was small compared with him I'm really a very big guy with a lot of training and experience. I landed the punch right where his jaw narrowed under his chin. Solid bone-to-bone contact. I came up on my toes and followed through a whole yard. It should have broken his neck as well as his jaw. His head should have come right off and rolled away in the dirt. But the blow did nothing at all. Absolutely nothing. Just rocked him back an inch. He shook his head once and hit me in the face. I saw it coming and did all the right things. I whipped my head back and opened my mouth wide so I wouldn't lose teeth from both parts of my jaw. Because my head was moving backward I took some momentum out of the blow but it was still a tremendous impact. Like being hit by a train. Like a car wreck. My lights went out and I went down hard and lost track of where I was so the blacktop came up at me like a second huge punch in the back. Air thumped out of my lungs and I saw a spray of blood from my mouth. The back of my skull hit the driveway. The sky dimmed above me.

I tried to move but it was like a car that doesn't start with the first turn of the key. *Click . . . nothing.* I lost half a second. My left arm was weak so I used my right. Got halfway off the floor. Folded my feet under me and heaved myself upright. I was dizzy. I was all over the place. But Paulie was just standing still and watching me. And smiling.

I realized he was going to take his time with me. I realized he was going to really enjoy himself.

I looked for the guns. They were still behind him. I couldn't get to them. I had

hit him six times and he was laughing at me. He had hit me three times and I was a mess. I was badly shaken up. I was going to die. I knew it with sudden clarity. I was going to die in Abbot, Maine, on a dull Saturday morning in late April. And half of me was saying *Hey, we've all got to die. What does it matter exactly where or when?* But the other half was blazing with the kind of fury and arrogance that has powered so much of my life: *You going to let this particular guy take you down?* I followed the silent argument intently and made my choice and spat blood and breathed hard and shaped up one last time. My mouth hurt. My head hurt. My shoulder hurt. My chest hurt. I was sick and dizzy. I spat again. Traced my teeth with my tongue. It made me feel like I was smiling. *So look on the bright side.* I had no fatal injuries. Yet. I hadn't been shot. So I smiled for real and spat for the third time and said to myself *OK, let's die fighting.*

Paulie was still smiling, too. He had blood on his face but other than that he looked completely normal. His tie was still neat. He still had his suit coat on. He still looked like he had basketballs stuffed up into the shoulders. He watched me shape up and he smiled wider and got down into the crouch again and did the claw-hands thing again and started pawing the ground again. I figured I could dodge one more time, maybe twice, maybe three times if I was really lucky, and then it would be all over. Dead, in Maine. On an April Saturday. I pictured Dominique Kohl in my mind and I said *I tried, Dom, I really did.* I faced front. I saw Paulie take a breath. Then I saw him move. He turned away. Walked ten feet. Turned back. Then he came straight at me, fast. I dodged away. His coat slapped at me as he went past. In the corner of my eye I saw Richard and Elizabeth, far in the distance, watching. Their mouths were open, like they were saying *Those who are about to die, we salute you.* Paulie switched direction fast and came toward me at a dead run.

But then he got fancy, and I saw I was going to win, after all.

He tried to kick me martial-arts style, which is about the stupidest thing you can do in a face-to-face street fight. As soon as you have one foot off the floor you're off balance and you're vulnerable. You're just begging to lose. He came at me fast with his body turned sideways like some kung-fu idiot on the television. His foot was way up in the air and he led with it, heel first, with his giant shoe held parallel with the ground. If he had connected, he would have killed me, no question. But he didn't connect. I rocked backward and caught his foot in both hands and just heaved it upward. *Can I bench-press four hundred*

pounds? Well, let's find out, asshole. I put every ounce of my strength into it and jerked him right off the ground and got his foot way up in the air and then I dropped him on his head. He sprawled in a stunned heap with his face turned toward me. The first rule of street fighting is when you get your guy on the ground you finish him, no hesitation, no pause, no inhibition, no gentlemanly conduct. You *finish* him. Paulie had ignored that rule. I didn't. I kicked him as hard as I could in the face. Blood spurted and he rolled away from me and I stamped on his right hand with my heel and shattered all the carpals and metacarpals and phalanges that he had in there. Then I did it again, two hundred fifty pounds of dead weight stamping down on broken bones. Then I stamped again and bust his wrist. Then his forearm.

He was superhuman. He rolled away and pushed himself upright with his left hand. He got on his feet and stepped away. I danced in and he swung a huge left hook and I knocked it aside and landed a short left on his broken nose. He rocked back and I kneed him in the groin. His head snapped forward and I hit him with the cigarette punch again, right-handed. His head snapped back and I put my left elbow in his throat. Stamped on his instep, once, twice, and then stabbed my thumbs in his eyes. He wheeled away and I kicked his right knee from behind and his leg folded up and he went down again. I got my left foot on his left wrist. His right arm was completely useless. It was just flopping around. He was pinned, unless he could backhand two hundred fifty pounds vertically with his left arm alone. And he couldn't. I guessed steroids only got you so far. So I stamped on his left hand with my right foot until I could see the shattered bones coming out through the skin. Then I spun and jumped and landed square on his solar plexus. Stepped off him and kicked him hard in the top of his head, once, twice, three times. Then again a fourth time, so hard my shoe fell apart and the e-mail device came out and skittered away across the blacktop. It landed exactly where Elizabeth Beck's pager had landed when I had thrown it from the Cadillac. Paulie followed it with his eyes and stared at it. I kicked him in the head again.

He sat up. Just levered himself upright with the strength in his massive abs. Both arms hung uselessly by his sides. I grabbed his left wrist and turned his elbow inside out until the joint dislocated and then broke. He flapped his broken right wrist at me and slapped me with his bloody hand. I grabbed it in my left and squeezed the broken knuckles. Just stared into his eyes and crushed the shattered bones. He didn't make a sound. I kept hold of his slimy hand and turned his right elbow inside out and fell on it with my knees and heard it break. Then I wiped my palms on his hair and walked away. Made it to the gate and picked up the

my palms on his hair and walked away. Made it to the gate and picked up the Colts.

He stood up. It was a clumsy move. His arms were useless. He slid his feet in toward his butt and jerked his weight forward onto them and levered himself upright. His nose was crushed and pouring with blood. His eyes were red and angry.

“Walk,” I said. I was out of breath. “To the rocks.”

He stood there like a stunned ox. There was blood in my mouth. Loose teeth. I felt no satisfaction. None at all. I hadn’t beaten him. He had beaten himself. With the kung-fu nonsense. If he had come at me swinging, I would have been dead inside a minute, and we both knew it.

“Walk,” I said. “Or I’ll shoot you.”

His chin came up, like a question.

“You’re going in the water,” I said.

He just stood there. I didn’t want to shoot him. I didn’t want to have to move a four-hundred-pound carcass a hundred yards to the sea. He stood still and my mind started working on the problem. Maybe I could wrap the gate chain around his ankles. Did Cadillacs have tow hooks? I wasn’t sure.

“Walk,” I said again.

I saw Richard and Elizabeth coming toward me. They were looping around in a wide circle. They wanted to get behind me without coming too close to Paulie. It was like he was a mythic figure. Like he was capable of anything. I knew how they felt. He had two broken arms, but I was watching him like my life depended on it. Which it did. If he ran at me and knocked me over he could crush me to death with his knees. I began to doubt that the Colts would do anything to him. I imagined him swarming at me, and emptying twelve bullets into him and watching them hit without slowing him down at all.

“Walk,” I said.

He walked. He turned away and started up the driveway. I followed, ten paces behind. Richard and Elizabeth moved farther onto the grass. We passed them

and they fell in behind me. At first I thought of telling them to stay where they were. But then I figured they had earned the right to watch, each in their own separate ways.

He followed the carriage circle around. He seemed to know where I wanted him. And he didn't seem to care. He passed by the garage block and headed behind the house and out onto the rocks. I followed, ten paces back. I was limping, because the heel had come off my right shoe. The wind was in my face. The sea was loud around us. It was rough and raging. He walked all the way to the head of Harley's cleft. He stopped there and stood still and then turned back to face me.

"I can't swim," he said. He slurred his words. I had broken some of his teeth, and hit him hard in the throat. The wind howled around him. It lifted his hair and added another inch to his height. Spray blew past him, right at me.

"No swimming involved," I replied.

I shot him twelve times in the chest. All twelve bullets passed straight through him. Big chunks of flesh and muscle followed them out over the ocean. One guy, two guns, twelve loud explosions, eleven dollars and forty cents in ammunition. He went down backward into the water. Made a hell of a splash. The sea was rough, but the tide was wrong. It wasn't pulling. He just settled in the roiling water and floated. The ocean turned pink around him. He floated, static. Then he started drifting. He drifted out, very slowly, bucking up and down violently on the swell. He floated for a whole minute. Then two. He drifted ten feet. Then twenty. He rolled over on his front with a loud sucking sound and pinwheeled slowly in the current. Then faster. He was trapped just underneath the surface of the water. His jacket was soaked and air was ballooned under it and leaking out of twelve separate bullet holes. The ocean was tossing him up and down like he weighed nothing at all. I put both empty guns on the rocks and squatted down and threw up into the ocean. Stayed down, breathing hard, watching him float. Watching him spin. Watching him drift away. Richard and Elizabeth kept themselves twenty feet from me. I cupped my hand and rinsed my face with cold salt water. Closed my eyes. Kept them closed for a long, long time. When I opened them again I looked out over the rough surface of the sea and saw that he wasn't there anymore. He had finally gone under.

I stayed down. Breathed out. Checked my watch. It was only eleven o'clock. I watched the ocean for a spell. It rose and fell. Waves broke and spray showered

watched the ocean for a spell. It rose and fell. Waves broke and spray showered me. I saw the Arctic tern again. It was back, looking for a place to nest. My mind was blank. Then I started thinking. Started scoping things out. Started assessing the changed circumstances. I thought for five whole minutes and eventually got around to feeling pretty optimistic. With Paulie gone so early I figured the endgame had just gotten a whole lot faster and easier.

I was wrong about that, too.

The first thing that went wrong was that Elizabeth Beck wouldn't leave. I told her to take Richard and the Cadillac and get the hell out. But she wouldn't go. She just stood there on the rocks with her hair streaming and her clothes flapping in the wind.

"This is my home," she said.

"Pretty soon it's going to be a war zone," I said.

"I'm staying."

"I can't let you stay."

"I'm not leaving," she said. "Not without my husband."

I didn't know what to tell her. I just stood there, getting colder. Richard came up behind me and circled around and looked out at the sea, and then back at me.

"That was cool," he said. "You beat him."

"No, he beat himself," I said.

There were noisy seagulls in the air. They were fighting the wind, circling a spot in the ocean maybe forty yards away. They were dipping down and pecking at the crests of the waves. They were eating floating fragments of Paulie. Richard was watching them with blank eyes.

"Talk to your mother," I said to him. "You need to convince her to get away."

"I'm not leaving," Elizabeth said again.

“Me either,” Richard said. “This is where we live. We’re a family.”

They were in some kind of shock. I couldn’t argue with them. So I tried to put them to work instead. We walked up the driveway, slow and quiet. The wind tore at our clothes. I was limping, because of my shoe. I stopped where the bloodstains started and retrieved the e-mail device. It was broken. The plastic screen was cracked and it wouldn’t turn on. I dropped it in my pocket. Then I found the heel rubber and sat cross-legged on the ground and put it back in place. Walking was easier after that. We reached the gate and unchained it and opened it and I got my jacket and my coat back and put them on. I buttoned the coat and turned the collar up. Then I drove the Cadillac in through the gate and parked it near the gatehouse door. Richard chained the gate again. I went inside and opened the big Russian machine gun’s breech and freed the ammunition belt. Then I lifted the gun off its chain. Carried it outside into the wind and put it sideways across the Cadillac’s rear seat. I went back in and rolled the belt back into its box and took the chain off its ceiling hook and unscrewed the hook from the joist. Carried the box and the chain and the hook outside and put them in the Cadillac’s trunk.

“Can I help with anything?” Elizabeth asked.

“There are twenty more ammunition boxes,” I said. “I want them all.”

“I’m not going in there,” she said. “Never again.”

“Then I guess you can’t help with anything.”

I carried two boxes at a time, so it took me ten trips. I was still cold and I was aching all over. I could still taste blood in my mouth. I stacked the boxes in the trunk and all over the floor in back and in the front passenger footwell. Then I slid into the driver’s seat and tilted the mirror. My lips were split and my gums were rimed with blood. My front teeth at the top were loose. I was upset about that. They had always been misaligned and they had been a little chipped for years, but I got them when I was eight and I was used to them and they were the only ones I had.

“Are you OK?” Elizabeth asked.

I felt the back of my head. There was a tender spot where I had hit the driveway.

There was a serious bruise on the side of my left shoulder. My chest hurt and breathing wasn't entirely painless. But overall I was OK. I was in better shape than Paulie, which was all that mattered. I thumbed my teeth up into my gums and held them there.

"Never felt better," I said.

"Your lip is all swollen."

"I'll live."

"We should celebrate."

I slid out of the car.

"We should talk about getting you out of here," I said.

She said nothing to that. The phone inside the gatehouse started ringing. It had an old-fashioned bell in it, low and slow and relaxing. It sounded faint and far away, muffled by the noise of the wind and the sea. It rang once, then twice. I walked around the Cadillac's hood and went inside and picked it up. Said Paulie's name and waited a beat and heard a voice I hadn't heard in ten years.

"Did he show up yet?" it said.

I paused.

"Ten minutes ago," I said. I kept my hand halfway over the mouthpiece and made my voice high and light.

"Is he dead yet?"

"Five minutes ago," I said.

"OK, stay ready. This is going to be a long day."

You got that right, I thought. Then the phone clicked off and I put it down and stepped back outside.

"Who was it?" Elizabeth asked.

"Quinn," I said.

Quinn," I said.

The first time I heard Quinn's voice was ten years previously on a cassette tape. Kohl had a telephone tap going. It was unauthorized, but back then military law was a lot more generous than civilian procedure. The cassette was a clear plastic thing that showed the little spools of tape inside. Kohl had a player the size of a shoe box with her and she clicked the cassette into it and pressed a button. My office filled with Quinn's voice. He was talking to an offshore bank, making financial arrangements. He sounded relaxed. He spoke clearly and slowly with the neutral homogenized accent you get from a lifetime in the army. He read out account numbers and gave passwords and issued instructions concerning a total of half a million dollars. He wanted most of it moved to the Bahamas.

"He mails the cash," Kohl said. "To Grand Cayman, first."

"Is that safe?" I said.

She nodded. "Safe enough. The only risk would be postal workers stealing it. But the destination address is a PO box and he sends it book rate, and nobody steals books out of the mail. So he gets away with it."

"Half a million dollars is a lot of money."

"It's a valuable weapon."

"Is it? *That* valuable?"

"Don't you think so?"

I shrugged. "Seems like a lot to me. For a lawn dart?"

She pointed at the tape player. Pointed at Quinn's voice filling the air. "Well, that's what they're paying, obviously. I mean, how else did he get half a million dollars? He didn't save it out of his salary, that's for sure."

"When will you make your move?"

"Tomorrow," she said. "We'll have to. He's got the final blueprint. Gorowski says it's the key to the whole thing."

says it's the key to the whole thing.

"How will it go down?"

"Frasconi is dealing with the Syrian. He's going to mark the cash, with a judge advocate watching. Then we'll all observe the exchange. We'll open the briefcase that Quinn gives to the Syrian, immediately, in front of the same judge. We'll document the contents, which will be the key blueprint. Then we'll go pick Quinn up. We'll arrest him and impound the briefcase that the Syrian gave to *him*. The judge can watch us open it later. We'll find the marked cash inside, and therefore we'll have a witnessed and documented transaction, and therefore Quinn will go down, and he'll stay down."

"Watertight," I said. "Good work."

"Thank you," she said.

"Will Frasconi be OK?"

"He'll have to be. I can't deal with the Syrian myself. Those guys are weird with women. They can't touch us, can't look at us, sometimes they can't even talk to us. So Frasconi will have to do it."

"Want me to hold his hand?"

"His part is all offstage," she said. "There's nothing much he can screw up."

"I think I'll hold his hand anyway."

"Thank you," she said again.

"And he'll go with you to make the arrest."

She said nothing.

"I can't send you one-on-one," I said. "You know that."

She nodded.

"But I'll tell him you're the lead investigator," I said. "I'll make sure he understands it's your case."

“OK,” she said.

She pressed the *stop* button on her tape player. Quinn’s voice died, halfway through a word. The word was going to be *dollars,* as in *two hundred thousand.* But it came out as *doll.* He sounded bright and happy and alert, like a guy at the top of his game, fully aware he was busy playing and winning. Kohl ejected the cassette. Slipped it into her pocket. Then she winked at me and walked out of my office.

“Who’s Quinn?” Elizabeth Beck asked me, ten years later.

“Frank Xavier,” I said. “He used to be called Quinn. His full name is Francis Xavier Quinn.”

“You *know* him?”

“Why else would I be here?”

“Who are you?”

“I’m a guy who knew Frank Xavier back when he was called Francis Xavier Quinn.”

“You work for the government.”

I shook my head. “This is strictly personal.”

“What will happen to my husband?”

“No idea,” I said. “And I don’t really care either way.”

I went back inside Paulie’s little house and locked the front door. Came out again and locked the back door behind me. Then I checked the chain on the gate. It was tight. I figured we could keep intruders out for a minute, maybe a minute and a half, which might be good enough. I put the padlock key in my pants pocket.

“Back to the big house now,” I said. “You’ll have to walk, I’m afraid.”

I drove the Cadillac down the driveway, with the ammunition boxes stacked behind and beside me. I saw Elizabeth and Richard in the mirror, hurrying side by side. They didn't want to get out of town, but they weren't too keen on being left alone. I stopped the car by the front door and backed it up ready to unload. I opened the trunk and took the ceiling hook and the chain and ran upstairs to Duke's room. His window looked out along the whole length of the driveway. It would make an ideal gunport. I took the Beretta out of my coat pocket and snicked the safety off and fired it once into the ceiling. I saw Elizabeth and Richard fifty yards away stop dead and then start running toward the house. Maybe they thought I had shot the cook. Or myself. I stood on a chair and punched through the bullet hole and raked the plaster back until I found a wooden joist. Then I aimed carefully and fired again and drilled a neat nine-millimeter hole in the wood. I screwed the hook into it and slipped the chain onto it and tested it with my weight. It held.

I went back down and opened the Cadillac's rear doors. Elizabeth and Richard arrived and I told them to carry the ammunition boxes. I carried the big machine gun. The metal detector on the front door squealed at it, loud and urgent. I carried it upstairs. Hung it on the chain and fed the end of the first belt into it. Swung the muzzle to the wall and opened the lower sash of the window. Swung the muzzle back and traversed it side to side and ranged it up and down. It covered the whole width of the distant wall and the whole length of the driveway down to the carriage circle. Richard stood and watched me.

"Keep stacking the boxes," I said.

Then I stepped over to the nightstand and picked up the outside phone. Called Duffy at the motel.

"You still want to help?" I asked her.

"Yes," she said.

"Then I need all three of you at the house," I said. "Quick as you can."

After that there was nothing more to be done until they arrived. I waited by the window and pressed my teeth into my gums with my thumb and watched the road. Watched Richard and Elizabeth struggling with the heavy boxes. Watched the sky. It was noon, but it was darkening. The weather was getting even worse. The wind was freshening. The North Atlantic coast, in late April. Unpredictable.

Elizabeth Beck came in and stacked a box. Breathed hard. Stood still.

“What’s going to happen?” she asked.

“No way of telling,” I said.

“What’s this gun for?”

“It’s a precaution.”

“Against what?”

“Quinn’s people,” I said. “We’ve got our backs to the sea. We might need to stop them on the driveway.”

“You’re going to shoot at them?”

“If necessary.”

“What about my husband?” she asked.

“Do you care?”

She nodded. “Yes, I do.”

“I’m going to shoot at him, too.”

She said nothing.

“He’s a criminal,” I said. “He can take his chances.”

“The laws that make him a criminal are unconstitutional.”

“You think?”

She nodded again. “The Second Amendment is clear.”

“Take it to the Supreme Court,” I said. “Don’t bother me with it.”

“People have the right to bear arms.”

“Drug dealers don’t.” I said. “I never saw an amendment that says it’s OK to fire

automatic weapons in the middle of a crowded neighborhood. Using bullets that go through brick walls, one after the other. And through innocent bystanders, one after the other. Babies and children."

She said nothing.

"You ever seen a bullet hit a baby?" I said. "It doesn't slide right in, like a hypodermic needle. It *crushes* its way through, like a bludgeon. Crushing and tearing."

She said nothing.

"Never tell a soldier that guns are fun," I said.

"The law is clear," she said.

"So join the NRA," I said. "I'm happy right here in the real world."

"He's my husband."

"You said he deserved to go to prison."

"Yes," she said. "But he doesn't deserve to die."

"You think?"

"He's my husband," she said again.

"How does he make the sales?" I asked.

"He uses I-95," she said. "He cuts the centers out of the cheap rugs and rolls the guns in them. Like tubes, or cylinders. Drives them to Boston or New Haven. People meet him there."

I nodded. Remembered the stray carpet fibers I had seen around.

"He's my husband," Elizabeth said.

I nodded again. "If he's got the sense not to stand right next to Quinn he might be OK."

“Promise me he’ll be OK. Then I’ll leave. With Richard.”

“I can’t promise,” I said.

“Then we’re staying.”

I said nothing.

“It was never a voluntary association, you know,” she said. “With Xavier, I mean. You really need to understand that.”

She moved to the window and gazed down at Richard. He was heaving the last ammunition case out of the Cadillac.

“There was coercion,” she said.

“Yes, I figured that out,” I said.

“He kidnapped my son.”

“I know,” I said.

Then she moved again and looked straight at me.

“What did he do to you?” she asked.

I saw Kohl twice more that day as she prepared her end of the mission. She was doing everything right. She was like a chess player. She never did anything without looking two moves ahead. She knew the judge advocate she asked to monitor the transaction would have to recuse himself from the subsequent court-martial, so she picked one she knew the prosecutors hated. It would be one less obstacle later. She had a photographer standing by to make a visual record. She had timed the drive out to Quinn’s Virginia house. The file I had given her at the start now filled two cardboard boxes. The second time I saw her she was carrying them. They were stacked one on top of the other and her biceps were straining against their weight.

“How is Gorowski holding up?” I asked her.

“Not good,” she said. “But he’ll be out of the woods tomorrow.”

“You’re going to be famous.”

“I hope not,” she said. “This should stay classified forever.”

“Famous in the classified world,” I said. “Plenty of people see that stuff.”

“So I guess I should ask for my performance review,” she said. “Day after tomorrow, maybe.”

“We should have dinner tonight,” I said. “We should go out. Like a celebration. Best place we can find. I’ll buy.”

“I thought you were on food stamps.”

“I’ve been saving up.”

“You’ve had plenty of opportunity. It’s been a long case.”

“Slow as molasses,” I said. “That’s your only problem, Kohl. You’re thorough, but you’re slow.”

She smiled again and hitched the boxes higher.

“You should have agreed to date me,” she said. “Then I could have shown you how slow can be better than fast.”

She carried the boxes away and I met her two hours later at a restaurant in town. It was an upmarket place so I had showered and put a clean uniform on. She showed up wearing a black dress. Not the same one as before. No dots on it. Just sheer black. It was very flattering, not that she needed the help. She looked about eighteen.

“Great,” I said. “They’re going to think you’re dining with your dad.”

“My uncle, maybe,” she said. “My dad’s younger brother.”

It was one of those meals where the food wasn’t important. I can remember everything else about the evening, but I can’t remember what I ordered. Steak, maybe. Or ravioli. Something. I know we ate. We talked a lot, about the kind of

stuff we probably wouldn't share with just anybody. I came very close to breaking down and asking her if she wanted to find a motel. But I didn't. We had a glass of wine each and then switched to water. There was an unspoken agreement we needed to stay sharp for the next day. I paid the check and we left at midnight, separately. She was bright, even though it was late. She was full of life and energy and focus. She was bubbling with anticipation. Her eyes were shining. I stood on the street and watched her drive away.

"Someone's coming," Elizabeth Beck said, ten years later.

I glanced out the window and saw a gray Taurus far in the distance. The color blended with the rock and the weather and made it hard to see. It was maybe two miles away, coming around a curve in the road, moving fast. Villanueva's car. I told Elizabeth to stay put and keep an eye on Richard and I went downstairs and out the back door. I retrieved Angel Doll's keys from my hidden bundle. Put them in my jacket pocket. I took Duffy's Glock and her spare magazines, too. I wanted her to get them back intact. It was important to me. She was already in enough trouble. I stashed them in my coat pocket with my Beretta and walked around to the front of the house and got in the Cadillac. Drove it up to the gate and slid out and waited out of sight. The Taurus stopped outside the gate and I saw Villanueva at the wheel with Duffy next to him and Eliot in the back. I stepped out of hiding and took the chain off the gate and swung it open. Villanueva eased through and stopped nose to nose with the Cadillac. Then three doors opened and they all climbed out into the cold and stared at me.

"What the hell happened to you?" Villanueva said.

I touched my mouth. It felt swollen and tender.

"Walked into a door," I said.

Villanueva glanced at the gatehouse.

"Or a door*man*," he said. "Am I right?"

"You OK?" Duffy asked.

"I'm in better shape than the doorman," I said.

“Why are we here?”

“Plan B,” I said. “We’re going to Portland, but if we don’t find what we need up there we’re going to have to come back here and wait. So two of you are coming out with me right now and the other one is staying here to hold the fort.” I turned around and pointed at the house. “The center second-floor window has got a big machine gun mounted in it to cover the approach. I need one of you in there manning it.”

Nobody volunteered. I looked straight at Villanueva. He was old enough to have been drafted, way back. He might have spent time around big machine guns.

“You do it, Terry,” I said.

“Not me,” he said. “I’m coming out with you to find Teresa.”

He said it like there was going to be no way to argue with him.

“OK, I’ll do it,” Eliot said.

“Thanks,” I said. “You ever seen a Vietnam movie? Seen the door gunner on a Huey? That’s you. If they come, they won’t try to get through the gate. They’ll go in the front window of the gatehouse and out the back door or the back window. So you be ready to hose them down as they come out.”

“What if it’s dark?”

“We’ll be back before dark.”

“OK. Who’s in the house?”

“Beck’s family. And the cook. They’re noncombatants, but they won’t leave.”

“What about Beck himself?”

“He’ll come back with the others. If he got away again in the confusion it wouldn’t break my heart. But if he got hit in the confusion it wouldn’t break my heart either.”

“OK.”

“They probably won’t show up,” I said. “They’re busy. This all is just a precaution.”

“OK,” he said again.

“You keep the Cadillac,” I said. “We’ll take the Taurus.”

Villanueva got back in the Ford and reversed it out through the gate again. I walked out with Duffy and closed the gate from the outside and chained it and locked it and tossed the padlock key over to Eliot.

“See you later,” I said.

He turned the Cadillac around and I watched him drive it down toward the house. Then I got in the Taurus with Duffy and Villanueva. She took the front seat. I took the back. I got her Glock and her spare magazines out of my pocket and passed them forward to her, like a little ceremony.

“Thanks for the loan,” I said.

She put the Glock in her shoulder holster and the magazines in her purse.

“You’re very welcome,” she said.

“Teresa first,” Villanueva said. “Quinn second. OK?”

“Agreed,” I said.

He K-turned on the road and took off west.

“So where do we look?” he said.

“Choice of three locations,” I said. “There’s the warehouse, there’s a city-center office, and there’s a business park near the airport. Can’t keep a prisoner in a city-center office building over the weekend. And the warehouse is too busy. They just had a big shipment. So my vote goes with the business park.”

“I-95 or Route One?”

“Route One,” I said.

We drove in silence, fifteen miles inland, and turned north on Route One toward Portland.

CHAPTER 13

It was early afternoon on a Saturday, so the business park was quiet. It was rinsed clean by rain and it looked fresh and new. The metal buildings glowed like dull pewter under the gray of the sky. We cruised through the network of streets at maybe twenty miles an hour. Saw nobody. Quinn's building looked locked up tight. I turned my head as we drove by and studied the sign again: *Xavier eXport Company.* The words were professionally etched on thick stainless steel, but the oversized *X*s looked like an amateur's idea of graphic design.

"Why does it say *export*?" Duffy asked. "He's importing stuff, surely."

"How do we get in?" Villanueva asked.

"We break in," I said. "Through the rear, I guess."

The buildings were laid out back-to-back, with neat parking lots in front of each of them. Everything else in the park was either a road or new lawn bounded by neat poured-concrete curbs. There were no fences anywhere. The building directly behind Quinn's was labeled *Paul Keast & Chris Maden Professional Catering Services.* It was closed up and deserted. I could see past it all the way to Quinn's back door, which was a plain metal rectangle painted dull red.

"Nobody around," Duffy said.

There was a window on Quinn's back wall near the red door. It was made from pebbled glass. Probably a bathroom window. It had iron bars over it.

"Security system?" Villanueva said.

"On a new place like this?" I said. "Almost certainly."

"Wired direct to the cops?"

"I doubt it," I said. "That wouldn't be smart, for a guy like Quinn. He doesn't want the cops snooping around every time some kid busts his windows."

“Private company?”

“That’s my guess. Or his own people.”

“So how do we do it?”

“We do it real fast. Get in and out before anybody reacts. We can risk five or ten minutes, probably.”

“One at the front and two at the back?”

“You got it,” I said. “You take the front.”

I told him to pop the trunk and then Duffy and I slid out of the car. The air was cold and damp and the wind was blowing. I took the tire iron out from under the spare wheel and closed the trunk lid and watched the car drive away. Duffy and I walked down the side of the catering place and across the dividing lawn to Quinn’s bathroom window. I put my ear against the cold metal siding and listened. Heard nothing. Then I looked at the window bars. They were made up from a shallow one-piece rectangular iron basket that was secured by eight machine screws, two on each of the four sides of the rectangle. The screws went through welded flanges the size of quarters. The screw heads themselves were the size of nickels. Duffy pulled the Glock out of her shoulder holster. I heard it scrape on the leather. I checked the Beretta in my coat pocket. Held the tire iron two-handed. Put my ear back on the siding. Heard Villanueva’s car pull up at the front of the building. I could hear the beat of the engine coming through the metal. I heard his door open and close. He left the engine running. I heard his feet on the front walkway.

“Stand by,” I said.

I felt Duffy move behind me. Heard Villanueva knocking loudly on the front door. I stabbed the tire iron end-on into the siding next to one of the screws. Made a shallow dent in the metal. Shoved the iron sideways into it and under the bars and hauled on it. The screw held. Clearly it went through the siding all the way into the steel framing. So I reseated the iron and jerked harder, once, twice. The screw head broke off and the bars moved a little.

I had to break six screw heads in total. Took me nearly thirty seconds. Villanueva was still knocking. Nobody was answering. When the sixth screw

broke I grabbed the bars themselves and hauled them open ninety degrees like a door. The two remaining screws screeched in protest. I picked up the tire iron again and smashed the pebbled glass. Reached in with my hand and found the catch and pulled the window open. Took out the Beretta and went headfirst into the bathroom.

It was a small cubicle, maybe six-by-four. There was a toilet and a sink with a small frameless mirror. A trash can and a shelf with spare toilet rolls and paper towels on it. A bucket and a mop propped in a corner. Clean linoleum on the floor. A strong smell of disinfectant. I turned around and checked the window. There was a small alarm pad screwed to the sill. But the building was still quiet. No siren. A silent alarm. Now a phone would be ringing somewhere. Or an alert would be flashing on a computer screen.

I stepped out of the bathroom into a back hallway. Nobody there. It was dark. I faced front and backed away to the rear door. Fumbled behind me without looking and unlocked it. Pulled it open. Heard Duffy step inside.

She had probably done six weeks at Quantico during her basic training and she still remembered the moves. She held the Glock two-handed and slid past me and took up station by a door that was going to lead out of the hallway into the rest of the building. She leaned her shoulder on the jamb and crooked her elbows to pull the gun up out of my way. I stepped forward and kicked the door and went through it and dodged left and she spun after me and went to the right. We were in another hallway. It was narrow. It ran the whole length of the building, all the way to the front. There were rooms off it, left and right. Six rooms, three on either side. Six doors, all of them closed.

“Front,” I whispered. “Villanueva.”

We crabbed our way along, back-to-back, covering each door in turn. They stayed closed. We made it to the front door and I unlocked it and opened it up. Villanueva stepped through and closed it again behind him. He had a Glock 17 in his gnarled old hand. It looked right at home there.

“Alarm?” he whispered.

“Silent,” I whispered back.

“So let’s be quick.”

“Room by room,” I whispered.

It wasn’t a good feeling. We had made so much noise that nobody in the building could have any doubt we were there. And the fact that they hadn’t blundered out to confront us meant they were smart enough to sit tight with their hammers back and their sights trained chest-high at the inside of their doors. And the center hallway was only about three feet wide. It didn’t give us much room to maneuver. Not a good feeling. The doors were all hinged on the left, so I put Duffy on my left facing out to cover the doors opposite. I didn’t want us all facing the same way. I didn’t want to get shot in the back. Then I put Villanueva on my right. His job was to kick in the doors, one by one. I took the center. My job was to go in first, room by room.

We started with the front room on the left. Villanueva kicked the door, hard. The lock broke and the frame splintered and the door crashed open. I went straight in. The room was empty. It was a ten-by-ten square with a window and a desk and a wall of file cabinets. I came straight out and we all spun around and hit the room opposite, immediately. Duffy covered our backs and Villanueva kicked the door and I went in. It was empty, too. But it was a bonus. The partition wall between it and the next room had been removed. It was ten-by-twenty. It had two doors to the hallway. There were three desks in the room. There were computers and phones. There was a coat rack in the corner with a woman’s raincoat hanging on it.

We crossed the hallway to the fourth door. The third room. Villanueva kicked the door and I rolled around the jamb. Empty. Another ten-by-ten square. No window. A desk, with a big cork notice board behind it. Lists pinned to the cork. An Oriental carpet covering most of the linoleum.

Four down. Two to go. We chose the back room on the right. Villanueva hit the door. I went in. It was empty. Ten-by-ten, white paint, gray linoleum. Completely bare. Nothing in it at all. Except bloodstains. They had been cleaned up, but not well. There were brown swirls on the floor, where an overloaded mop had pushed them around. There was splatter on the walls. Some of it had been wiped. Some of it had been missed altogether. There were lacy trails up to waist height. The angles between the baseboards and the linoleum were rimed with brown and black.

“The maid,” I said.

Nobody replied. We stood still for a long silent moment. Then we backed out and turned around and hit the last door, hard. I went in, gun-first. And stopped dead.

It was a prison. And it was empty.

It was ten-by-ten. It had white walls and a low ceiling. No windows. Gray linoleum on the floor. A mattress on the linoleum. Wrinkled sheets on the mattress. Dozens of Chinese food cartons all over the place. Empty plastic bottles that had held spring water.

“She was here,” Duffy said.

I nodded. “Just like in the basement up at the house.”

I stepped all the way inside and lifted up the mattress. The word *justice* was smeared on the floor, big and obvious, painted with a finger. Underneath it was today’s date, six numbers, month, day, year, fading and then strengthening as she had reloaded her fingertip with something black and brown.

“She’s hoping we’ll track her,” Villanueva said. “Day by day, place by place. Smart kid.”

“Is that written in blood?” Duffy said.

I could smell stale food and stale breath, all through the room. I could smell fear and desperation. She had heard the maid die. Two thin doors wouldn’t have blocked much sound.

“Hoisin sauce,” I said. “I hope.”

“How long since they moved her?”

I looked inside the closest cartons. “Two hours, maybe.”

“Shit.”

“So let’s go,” Villanueva said. “Let’s go find her.”

“Five minutes,” Duffy said. “I need to get something I can give to ATF. To make this whole thing right.”

“We haven’t got five minutes,” Villanueva said.

“Two minutes,” I said. “Grab what you can and look at it later.”

We backed out of the cell. Nobody looked at the charnel house opposite. Duffy led us back to the room with the Oriental carpet. *Smart choice*, I thought. It was probably Quinn’s office. He was the kind of guy who would give himself a rug. She took a thick file marked *Pending* from a desk drawer and pulled all the lists off the cork board.

“Let’s go,” Villanueva said again.

We came out through the front door exactly four minutes after I had gone in through the bathroom window. It felt more like four hours. We piled into the gray Taurus and were back on Route One a minute after that.

“Stay north,” I said. “Head for the city center.”

We were quiet at first. Nobody looked at anybody. Nobody spoke. We were thinking about the maid. I was in the back and Duffy was in the front with Quinn’s paperwork spread over her knees. Traffic across the bridge was slow. There were shoppers heading into the city. The roadway was slick with rain and salt spray. Duffy shuffled papers, glancing at one after another. Then she broke the silence. It was a relief.

“This all is pretty cryptic,” she said. “We’ve got an *XX* and a *BB.*”

“Xavier Export Company and Bizarre Bazaar,” I said.

“BB is importing,” she said. “XX is exporting. But they’re obviously linked. They’re like two halves of the same operation.”

“I don’t care,” I said. “I just want Quinn.”

“And Teresa,” Villanueva said.

“First-quarter spreadsheet,” Duffy said. “They’re on track to turn over twenty-

two million dollars this year. That's a lot of guns, I guess."

"Quarter-million Saturday Night Specials," I said. "Or four Abrams tanks."

"Mossberg," Duffy said. "You heard that name?"

"Why?" I said.

"XX just received a shipment from them."

"O.F. Mossberg and Sons," I said. "From New Haven, Connecticut. Shotgun manufacturer."

"What's a Persuader?"

"A shotgun," I said. "The Mossberg M500 Persuader. It's a paramilitary weapon."

"XX is sending Persuaders someplace. Two hundred of them. Total invoice value sixty thousand dollars. Basically in exchange for something BB is receiving."

"Import-export," I said. "That's how it works."

"But the prices don't add up," she said. "BB's incoming shipment is invoiced at seventy thousand. So XX is coming out ten thousand dollars ahead."

"The magic of capitalism," I said.

"No, wait, there's another item. Now it balances. Two hundred Mossberg Persuaders plus a ten-thousand-dollar bonus item to make the values match."

"What's the bonus item?" I said.

"It doesn't say. What would be worth ten grand?"

"I don't care," I said again.

She shuffled more paper.

"Keast and Maden," she said. "Where did we see those names?"

“The building behind Quinn’s,” I said. “The caterers.”

“He hired them,” she said. “They’re delivering something today.”

“Where?”

“Doesn’t say.”

“What kind of something?”

“Doesn’t say. Eighteen items at fifty-five dollars each. Almost a thousand dollars’ worth of something.”

“Where to now?” Villanueva said.

We were off the bridge and looping north and west, with the park on our left.

“Make the second right,” I said.

We pulled straight into Missionary House’s underground garage. There was a rent-a-cop in a fancy uniform in a booth. He logged us in without paying a whole lot of attention. Then Villanueva showed him his DEA badge and told him to sit tight and keep quiet. Told him not to call anybody. Behind him the garage was quiet. There were maybe eighty spaces and fewer than a dozen cars in them. But one of them was the gray Grand Marquis I had seen outside Beck’s warehouse that morning.

“This is where I took the photographs,” Duffy said.

We drove to the back of the garage and parked in a corner. Got out and took the elevator up one floor to the lobby. There was some tired marble decor and a building directory. The Xavier Export Company shared the fourth floor with a law firm called *Lewis, Strange & Greville.* We were happy about that. It meant there would be an interior hallway up there. We wouldn’t be stepping straight out of the elevator into Quinn’s offices.

We got back in the elevator and pressed *4*. Faced front. The doors closed and the motor whined. We stopped on four. We heard voices. The elevator bell pinged.

The doors opened. The hallway was full of lawyers. There was a mahogany door on the left with a brass plate marked *Lewis, Strange & Greville, Attorneys at Law.* It was open and three people had come out through it and were standing around waiting for one of them to close it. Two men, one woman. They were in casual clothes. They were all carrying briefcases. They all looked happy. They all turned and looked at us. We stepped out of the elevator. They smiled and nodded at us, like you do with strangers in a small hallway. Or maybe they thought we had come to consult with them on a legal matter. Villanueva smiled back and nodded toward Xavier Export's door. *It's not you we're looking for. It's them.* The woman lawyer looked away and squeezed past us into the elevator. Her partners locked up their office and joined her. The elevator doors closed on them and we heard the car whining down.

"Witnesses," Duffy whispered. "Shit."

Villanueva pointed at Xavier Export's door. "And there's someone in there. Those lawyers didn't seem surprised that we should be up here at this time on a Saturday. So they must *know* there's someone in there. Maybe they thought we've got an appointment or something."

I nodded. "One of the cars in the garage was at Beck's warehouse this morning."

"Quinn?" Duffy said.

"I sincerely hope so."

"We agreed, Teresa first," Villanueva said. "Then Quinn."

"I'm changing the plan," I said. "I'm not walking away. Not if he's in there. Not if he's a target of opportunity."

"But we can't go in anyway," Duffy said. "We've been seen."

"*You* can't go in," I said. "I can."

"What, alone?"

"That's the way I want it. Him and me."

"We left a trail."

“So roll it up. Go back to the garage and drive away. The guard will log you out. Then call this office five minutes later. Between the garage log and the phone log it’ll be on record that nothing happened while you were here.”

“But what about you? It’ll be on record that we left you in here.”

“I doubt it,” I said. “I don’t think the garage guy paid that much attention. I don’t think he counted heads or anything. He just wrote down the plate number.”

She said nothing.

“I don’t care anyway,” I said. “I’m a hard person to find. And I plan to get harder.”

She looked at the law firm’s door. Then at Xavier Export’s. Then at the elevator. Then at me.

“OK,” she said. “We’ll leave you to it. I really don’t want to, but I really have to, you understand?”

“Completely,” I said.

“Teresa might be in there with him,” Villanueva whispered.

I nodded. “If she is, I’ll bring her to you. Meet me at the end of the street. Ten minutes after you make the phone call.”

They both hesitated and then Duffy put her finger on the elevator call button. We heard noises in the shaft as the machinery started.

“Take care,” she said.

The bell pinged and the doors opened. They stepped in. Villanueva glanced out at me and hit the button for the lobby and the doors closed on them like theater curtains and they were gone. I stepped away and leaned on the wall on the far side of Quinn’s door. It felt good to be alone. I put my hand around the Beretta’s grip in my pocket and waited. I imagined Duffy and Villanueva stepping out of the elevator and walking to their car. Driving it out of the garage. Getting noticed by the guard. Parking around the corner and calling information. Getting Quinn’s number. I turned and stared at the door. Imagined Quinn on the other side of it, at his desk, with a phone in front of him. I stared at the door like I

side of it, at his desk, with a phone in front of him. I stared at the door like I could see him right through it.

The first time I ever saw him was on the actual day of the bust. Frasconi had done well with the Syrian. The guy was all squared away. Frasconi was very adequate in a situation like that. Give him time and a clear objective and he could deliver. The Syrian brought cash money with him from inside his embassy and we all sat down together in front of the judge advocate and counted it. There was fifty thousand dollars. We figured it was the final installment of many. We marked each bill separately. We even marked the briefcase. We put the judge advocate's initials on it with clear nail varnish, near one of the hinges. The judge advocate wrote up an affidavit for the file and Frasconi held on to the Syrian, and Kohl and I moved into position ready for the surveillance itself. Her photographer was already standing by in a second-floor window in a building across the street from the café and twenty yards south. The judge advocate joined us ten minutes later. We were using a utility truck parked at the curb. It had portholes with one-way glass. Kohl had borrowed it from the FBI. She had drafted three grunts to complete the illusion. They were wearing power company overalls and actually digging up the street.

We waited. There was no conversation. There wasn't much air in the truck. The weather was warm again. Frasconi released the Syrian after forty minutes. He came strolling into view from the north. He had been warned what would happen if he gave us away. Kohl had written the script and Frasconi had delivered it. They were threats we probably wouldn't have carried out. But he didn't know that. I guess they were plausible, based on what happened to people in Syria.

He sat down at a sidewalk table. He was ten feet from us. He put his briefcase on the floor, level with the side of the table. It was like a second guest. The waiter came and took his order. Came back after a minute with an espresso. The Syrian lit a cigarette. Smoked it halfway down and crushed it out in the ashtray.

"The Syrian is waiting," Kohl said, quietly. She had a tape recorder running. Her idea was to have a real-time audio record as a backup. She was wearing her dress greens, ready for the arrest. She looked real good in them.

"Check," the judge said. "The Syrian is waiting."

The Syrian finished his coffee and waved to the waiter for another. He lit another cigarette.

“Does he always smoke so much?” I asked.

“Why?” Kohl said.

“Is he warning Quinn off?”

“No, he always smokes,” Kohl said.

“OK,” I said. “But they’re bound to have an abort sign.”

“He won’t use it. Frasconi really put a fright in him.”

We waited. The Syrian finished his second cigarette. He put his hands flat on the table. He drummed his fingers. He looked OK. He looked like a guy waiting for another guy who was maybe a little overdue. He lit another cigarette.

“I don’t like all this smoking,” I said.

“Relax, he’s always like this,” Kohl said.

“Makes him look nervous. Quinn could pick up on it.”

“It’s normal. He’s from the Middle East.”

We waited. I watched the crowd build up. It was close to lunch time.

“Now Quinn is approaching,” Kohl said.

“Check,” the judge replied. “Quinn is approaching now.”

I looked to the south. Saw a tidy-looking guy, neat and trim, maybe six feet one and a little under two hundred pounds. He looked a little younger than forty. He had black hair with a little gray in it in front of his ears. He was wearing a blue suit with a white shirt and a dull red tie. He looked just like everybody else in D.C. He moved fast, but he made it look slow. He was neat in his movements. Clearly fit and athletic. Almost certainly a jogger. He was carrying a Halliburton briefcase. It was the exact twin of the Syrian’s. It flashed slightly gold in the sunlight.

The Syrian laid his cigarette in the ashtray and sketched a wave. He looked a little uneasy, but I guessed that was appropriate. Big-time espionage in the heart of your enemy's capital is not a game. Quinn saw him and moved toward him. The Syrian stood up and they shook hands across the table. I smiled. They had a smart system going. It was a tableau so familiar in Georgetown that it was almost invisible. An American in a suit shaking hands with a foreigner across a table loaded with coffee cups and ashtrays. They both sat down. Quinn shuffled on his chair and got comfortable and placed his briefcase tight alongside the one that was already there. At a casual glance the two cases looked like one in a larger size.

"Briefcases are adjacent," Kohl said, into the microphone.

"Check," the judge said. "The briefcases are adjacent."

The waiter came back with the Syrian's second espresso. Quinn said something to the waiter and he left again. The Syrian said something to Quinn. Quinn smiled. It was a smile of pure control. Pure satisfaction. The Syrian said something else. He was playing his part. He thought he was saving his life. Quinn craned his neck and looked for the waiter. The Syrian picked up his cigarette again and turned his head the other way and blew smoke directly at us. Then he put the cigarette out in the ashtray. The waiter came back with Quinn's drink. A large cup. Probably white coffee. The Syrian sipped his espresso. Quinn drank his coffee. They didn't talk.

"They're nervous," Kohl said.

"Excited," I said. "They're nearly through. This is the last meeting. The end is in sight. For both of them. They just want to get it done."

"Watch the briefcases," Kohl said.

"Watching them," the judge replied.

Quinn put his cup down on the saucer. Scraped his chair back. Reached forward with his right hand. Picked up the Syrian's case.

"Quinn has the Syrian's case," the judge said.

Quinn stood up. Said one last thing and turned around and walked away. There was a spring in his step. We watched him until he was out of sight. The Syrian

was a spring in his step. We watched him until he was out of sight. The Syrian was left with the check. He paid it and walked away north, until Frasconi stepped out of a doorway and took his arm and led him right back toward us. Kohl opened up the truck's rear door and Frasconi pushed the guy inside. We didn't have much space, with five people in the truck.

"Open the case," the judge said.

Up close the Syrian looked a lot more nervous than he had through the glass. He was sweating and he didn't smell too good. He laid the case flat on the floor and squatted in front of it. Glanced at each of us in turn and clicked the catches and lifted the lid.

The case was empty.

I heard the phone ring inside the Xavier Export Company's office. The door was thick and heavy and the sound was muffled and far away. But it was a phone, and it was ringing exactly five minutes after Duffy and Villanueva must have left the garage. It rang twice and was answered. I didn't hear any conversation. I guessed Duffy would make up some kind of a wrong-number story. I guessed she would keep it going just long enough to look significant in a phone log. I gave it a minute. Nobody keeps a bogus call going longer than sixty seconds.

I took the Beretta out of my pocket and pulled open the door. Stepped inside into a wide-open reception area. There was dark wood and carpet. An office to the left, closed up. An office to the right, closed up. A reception desk in front of me. A person at the desk, in the act of hanging up a phone. Not Quinn. It was a woman. She was maybe thirty years old. She had fair hair. Blue eyes. In front of her was an acetate plaque in a wooden holder. It said: *Emily Smith.* Behind her was a coat rack. There was a raincoat on it. And a black cocktail dress sheathed in dry-cleaner's plastic hanging on a wire hanger. I fumbled behind my back left-handed and locked the hallway door. Watched Emily Smith's eyes. They were staring straight at me. They didn't move. They didn't turn left or right toward either office door. So she was probably alone. And they didn't drop toward a purse or a desk drawer. So she was probably unarmed.

"You're supposed to be dead," she said.

“Am I?”

She nodded, vaguely, like she couldn’t process what she was seeing.

“You’re Reacher,” she said. “Paulie told us he took you out.”

I nodded. “OK, I’m a ghost. Don’t touch the phone.”

I stepped forward and looked at her desk. No weapons on it. The phone was a complicated multi-line console. It was all covered in buttons. I leaned down left-handed and ripped its cord out of its socket.

“Stand up,” I said.

She stood up. Just pushed her chair back and levered herself upright.

“Let’s check the other rooms,” I said.

“There’s nobody here,” she said. There was fear in her voice, so she was probably telling me the truth.

“Let’s check anyway,” I said.

She came out from behind her desk. She was a foot shorter than me. She was wearing a dark skirt and a dark shirt. Smart shoes, which I figured would go equally well later with her cocktail dress. I put the Beretta’s muzzle against her spine and bunched the back of her shirt collar in my left hand and moved her forward. She felt small and fragile. Her hair fell over my hand. It smelled clean. We checked the left-hand office first. She opened the door for me and I pushed her all the way inside and stepped sideways and moved out of the doorway. I didn’t want to get shot in the back from across the reception area.

It was just an office. A decent-sized space. Nobody in it. There was an Oriental carpet, and a desk. There was a bathroom. Just a small cubicle with a toilet and a sink. Nobody in it. So I spun her around and moved her all the way across the reception area and into the right-hand office. Same decor. Same type of carpet, same type of desk. It was unoccupied. Nobody in it. No bathroom. I kept tight hold of her collar and pushed her back to the center of the reception area. Stopped her right next to her desk.

“Nobody here,” I said.

"Nobody here," I said.

"I told you," she said.

"So where is everybody?"

She didn't answer. And I felt her stiffen, like she was going to make a big point out of not answering.

"Specifically, where is Teresa Daniel?" I said.

No reply.

"Where's Xavier?" I said.

No reply.

"How do you know my name?"

"Beck told Xavier. He asked his permission to employ you."

"Xavier checked me out?"

"As far as he could."

"And he gave Beck his OK?"

"Obviously."

"So why did he set Paulie on me this morning?"

She stiffened again. "The situation changed."

"This morning? Why?"

"He got new information."

"What information?"

"I don't know exactly," she said. "Something about a car."

The Saab? The maid's missing notes?

“He made certain deductions,” Emily Smith said. “Now he knows all about you.”

“Figure of speech,” I said. “Nobody knows all about me.”

“He knows you were talking to ATF.”

“Like I said, nobody really knows anything.”

“He knows what you’ve been doing here.”

“Does he? Do you?”

“He didn’t tell me.”

“Where do you fit in?”

“I’m his operations manager.”

I wrapped her shirt collar tighter in my left fist and moved the Beretta’s muzzle and used it to itch my cheek where the bruising was tightening the skin. I thought about Angel Doll, and John Chapman Duke, and two bodyguards whose names I didn’t even know, and Paulie. I figured adding Emily Smith to the casualty list wasn’t going to cost me much, in a cosmic sense. I put the gun to her head. I heard a plane in the distance, leaving from the airport. It roared through the sky, less than a mile away. I figured I could just wait for the next one and pull the trigger. Nobody would hear a thing. And she probably deserved it.

Or, maybe she didn’t.

“Where is he?” I said.

“I don’t know.”

“You know what he did ten years ago?”

Live or die, Emily. If she knew, she would say so. For sure. Out of pride, or inclusion, or self-importance. She wouldn’t be able to keep it in. And if she knew, she deserved to die. Because to know and to still work with the guy made

it that way.

“No, he never told me,” she said. “I didn’t know him ten years ago.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

I believed her.

“You know what happened to Beck’s maid?” I said.

A truthful person is perfectly capable of saying no, but generally they stop and think about it first. Maybe they come out with some questions of their own. It’s human nature.

“Who?” she said. “No, what?”

I breathed out.

“OK,” I said.

I put the Beretta back in my pocket and let go of her collar and turned her around and trapped both her wrists together in my left hand. Picked up the electrical cord from the phone with my right. Then I straight-armed her into the left-hand office and all the way through to the bathroom. Shoved her inside.

“The lawyers next door have gone home,” I said. “There won’t be anybody in the building until Monday morning. So go ahead and shout and scream all you want, but nobody will hear you.”

She said nothing. I closed the door on her. Tied the phone cord tight around the knob. Opened the office door as wide as it would go and tied the other end of the cord to its handle. She could haul on the inside of the bathroom door all weekend long without getting anywhere. Nobody can break electrical wire by pulling on it lengthwise. I figured she’d give up after an hour and sit tight and drink water from the sink faucet and use the toilet and try to pass the time.

I sat down at her desk. I figured an operations manager should have some interesting paperwork. But she didn’t. The best thing I found was a copy of the

Keast and Maden order. The caterers. *18 @ $55.* Somebody had penciled a note on the bottom. A woman's handwriting. Probably Emily Smith's own. The note said: *lamb, not pork!* I swiveled her chair around and looked at the wrapped dress on the coat rack. Then I swiveled it back and checked my watch. My ten minutes were up.

I rode the elevator to the garage and left by a fire exit in the rear. The rent-a-cop didn't see me. I walked around the block and came up on Duffy and Villanueva from behind. Their car was parked on the corner and they were together in the front, staring forward through the windshield. I guessed they were hoping to see two people walking down the street toward them. I opened the door and slid into the back seat and they spun around and looked disappointed. I shook my head.

"Neither of them," I said.

"Somebody answered the phone," Duffy said.

"A woman called Emily Smith," I said. "His operations manager. She wouldn't tell me anything."

"What did you do with her?"

"Locked her in the bathroom. She's out of the picture until Monday."

"You should have sweated her," Villanueva said. "You should have pulled her fingernails out."

"Not my style," I said. "But you can go right ahead, if you want. Feel free. She's still up there. She's not going anywhere."

He just shook his head and sat still.

"So what now?" Duffy asked.

"So what now?" Kohl asked.

We were still inside the utility truck. Kohl, the judge advocate, and me. Frasconi had taken the Syrian away. Kohl and I were thinking hard and the judge was in the process of washing his hands of the whole thing.

“I was only here to observe,” he said. “I can’t give you legal advice. It wouldn’t be appropriate. And frankly I wouldn’t know what to tell you anyway.”

He glared at us and let himself out the rear door and just walked away. He didn’t look back. I guess that was the downside of picking out a royal pain in the ass for an observer. *Unintended consequences.*

“I mean, what happened?” Kohl said. “What exactly did we see?”

“Only two possibilities,” I said. “One, he was ripping the guy off, plain and simple. Classic confidence trick. You drip, drip, drip the unimportant stuff, and then you hold back on the final installment. Or two, he was working as a legitimate intelligence officer. On an official operation. Proving that Gorowski was leaky, proving that the Syrians were willing to pay big bucks for stuff.”

“He kidnapped Gorowski’s daughter,” she said. “No way was that officially sanctioned.”

“Worse things have happened,” I said.

“He was ripping them off.”

I nodded. “I agree with you. He was ripping them off.”

“So what can we do about it?”

“Nothing,” I said “Because if we go ahead and accuse him of scamming them for personal profit, he’ll just automatically say no, I wasn’t doing that, actually I was running a sting, and I invite you to try to prove otherwise. And then he’ll not very politely remind us to keep our big noses out of intelligence business.”

She said nothing.

“And you know what?” I said. “Even if he *was* ripping them off, I wouldn’t know what to charge him with. Does the Uniform Code stop you taking money from foreign idiots in exchange for briefcases full of fresh air?”

“I don’t know.”

“Neither do I.”

“But whatever, the Syrians will go ape,” she said. “I mean, won’t they? They paid him half a million bucks. They’ll have to react. Their pride is at stake. Even if he *was* legit, he took a hell of a big risk. Half a million big risks. They’ll be coming after him. And he can’t just disappear. He’ll have to stay on-post. He’ll be a sitting target.”

I paused a beat. Looked at her. “If he’s not going to disappear, why was he moving all his money?”

She said nothing. I looked at my watch. Thought: *This, not that*. Or, just perhaps, just for once, this *and* that.

“Half a million is too much money,” I said.

“For what?”

“For the Syrians to pay. It’s just not worth it. There’ll be a prototype soon. Then there’ll be a preproduction batch. There’ll be a hundred finished weapons down at the quartermaster level within a matter of months. They could buy one of those for ten thousand dollars, probably. Some bent corporal would sell them one. They could even steal one for free. Then they could just reverse-engineer it.”

“OK, so they’re dumb businessmen,” Kohl said. “But we heard Quinn on the tape. He put half a million in the bank.”

I looked at my watch again. “I know. That’s a definite fact.”

“So?”

“It’s still too much. The Syrians are no dumber than anybody else. Nobody would value a fancy lawn dart at half a million bucks.”

“But we know that’s what they paid. You just agreed it’s a definite fact.”

“No,” I said. “We know Quinn’s got half a million in the bank. That’s the fact. It doesn’t prove the Syrians paid him half a million. That part is speculation.”

“What?”

“Quinn’s a Middle East specialist. He’s a smart guy, and he’s a bad guy. I think you stopped looking too soon.”

“Looking at what?”

“At him. Where he goes, who he meets. How many dubious regimes are there in the Middle East? Four or five, minimum. Suppose he’s in bed with two or three of them at once? Or all of them? With each one thinking it’s the only one? Suppose he’s leveraging the same scam three or four times over? That would explain why he’s got half a million in the bank for something that isn’t worth half a million to any one individual.”

“And he’s ripping them *all* off?”

I checked my watch again.

“Maybe,” I said. “Or maybe he’s playing for real with one of them. Maybe that’s how it got started. Maybe he intended it to be for real all along, with one favored client. But he couldn’t get the kind of big money he wanted from them. So he decided to multiply the yield.”

“I should have watched more cafés,” she said. “I shouldn’t have stopped with the Syrian guy.”

“He’s probably got a fixed route,” I said. “Lots of separate meetings, one after another. Like a damn mail carrier.”

She checked her watch.

“OK,” she said. “So right now he’s taking the Syrian’s cash home.”

I nodded. “And then he’s heading out again right away to meet with the next guy. So you need to get Frasconi and get some more surveillance going. Find Quinn on his way back into town. Haul in anybody he swaps a briefcase with. Maybe you’ll just end up with a bunch of empty briefcases, but maybe one of them won’t be empty, in which case we’re back in business.”

She glanced around the inside of the truck. Glanced down at her tape recorder

She glanced around the inside of the truck. Glanced down at her tape recorder.

“Forget it,” I said. “No time for the clever stuff. It’ll have to be just you and Frasconi, out there on the street.”

“The warehouse,” I said. “We’re going to have to check it out.”

“We’ll need support,” Duffy said. “They’ll all be there.”

“I hope they are.”

“Too dangerous. There are only three of us.”

“Actually I think they’re all on their way to someplace else. It’s possible they’ve left already.”

“Where are they going?”

“Later,” I said. “Let’s take it one step at a time.”

Villanueva moved the Taurus off the curb.

“Wait,” I said. “Make the next right. Something else I want to check first.”

I directed him two blocks over and one up and we came to the parking garage where I had left Angel Doll in the trunk of his car. Villanueva waited on a hydrant and I slipped out. I walked down the vehicle entrance and let my eyes adjust to the gloom. Walked on until I came to the space I had used. There was a car in it. But it wasn’t Angel Doll’s black Lincoln. It was a metallic green Subaru Legacy. It was the Outback version, with the roof rails and the big tires. It had a Stars and Stripes sticker in the back window. A patriotic driver. But not quite patriotic enough to buy an American automobile.

I walked the two adjacent aisles, just to make sure, although I already was. Not the Saab, but the Lincoln. Not the maid’s missing notes, but Angel Doll’s missing heartbeat. *Now he knows all about you.* I nodded to myself in the dark. Nobody knows all about anybody. But I guessed now he knew more about me than I was totally comfortable with. I walked back the way I had come. Up the

entrance ramp and out into the daylight. It was cloudy and gray and dim and shadowed by tall buildings but it felt like a searchlight beam had hit me. I slid back into the Taurus and closed the door quietly.

“OK?” Duffy asked.

I didn’t answer. She turned around in her seat and faced me.

“OK?” she said again.

“We need to get Eliot out of there,” I said.

“Why?”

“They found Angel Doll.”

“Who did?”

“Quinn’s people.”

“How?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you sure?” she said. “It could have been the Portland PD. A suspicious vehicle, parked too long?”

I shook my head. “They’d have opened the trunk. So now they’d be treating the whole garage as a crime scene. They’d have it taped off. There’d be cops all over the place.”

She said nothing.

“It’s completely out of control now,” I said. “So call Eliot. On his cell. Order him out of there. Tell him to take the Becks and the cook with him. In the Cadillac. Tell him to arrest them all at gunpoint if necessary. Tell him to find a different motel and hide out.”

She dug in her purse for her Nokia. Hit a speed dial button. Waited. I timed it out in my head. One ring. Two rings. Three rings. Four rings. Duffy glanced at me, anxious. Then Eliot answered. Duffy breathed out and gave him the instructions,

loud and clear and urgent. Then she clicked off.

“OK?” I said.

She nodded. “He sounded very relieved.”

I nodded back. He would be. No fun in crouching over the butt end of a machine gun, your back to the sea, staring out at the gray landscape, not knowing what’s coming at you, or when.

“So let’s go,” I said. “To the warehouse.”

Villanueva moved off the curb again. He knew the way. He had watched the warehouse twice, with Eliot. Two long days. He threaded southeast through the city and approached the port from the northwest. We all sat quiet. There was no conversation. I tried to assess the damage. It was total. A disaster. But it was also a liberation. It clarified everything. No more pretending. The scam had dissolved away to nothing. Now I was their enemy, plain and simple. And they were mine. It was a release.

Villanueva was a smart operator. He did everything right. He worked his way around the warehouse on a three-block radius. Covered all four sides. We were limited to brief glimpses down alleys and through gaps between buildings. Four passes, four glimpses. There were no cars there. The roller door was closed tight. No lights in the windows.

“Where are they all?” Duffy said. “This was supposed to be a big weekend.”

“It is,” I said. “I think it’s very big. And I think what they’re doing makes perfect sense.”

“What *are* they doing?”

“Later,” I said. “Let’s go take a look at the Persuaders. And let’s see what they’re getting in exchange.”

Villanueva parked two buildings north and east, outside a door marked *Brian’s Fine Imported Taxidermy*. He locked the Taurus and we walked south and west and then looped around to come up on Beck’s place from the blind side where there were no windows. The personnel door into the warehouse office was

locked. I looked in through the back office window and saw nobody. Rounded the corner and looked in at the secretarial area. Nobody there. We arrived at the unpainted gray door and stopped. It was locked.

“How do we get in?” Villanueva asked.

“With these,” I said.

I pulled out Angel Doll’s keys and unlocked the door. Opened it. The burglar alarm started beeping. I stepped in and flipped through the papers on the notice board and found the code and entered it. The red light changed to green and the beeping stopped and the building went silent.

“They’re not here,” Duffy said. “We don’t have time to explore. We need to go find Teresa.”

I could already smell gun oil. It was floating right there on top of the smell of the raw wool from the rugs.

“Five minutes,” I said. “And then ATF will give you a medal.”

“They should give you a medal,” Kohl said.

She was calling me from a pay phone on the Georgetown University campus.

“Should they?”

“We’ve got him. We can stick a fork in him. The guy is totally done.”

“So who was it?”

“The Iraqis,” she said. “Can you believe that?”

“Makes sense, I guess,” I said. “They just got their asses kicked and they want to be ready for the next time.”

“Talk about audacious.”

“How did it go down?”

How did it go down?

“The same as we saw before. But with Samsonites, not Halliburtons. We got empty cases from a Lebanese guy and an Iranian. Then we hit the motherlode with the Iraqi guy. The actual blueprint.”

“You sure?”

“Totally certain,” she said. “I called Gorowski and he authenticated it by the drafting number in the bottom corner.”

“Who witnessed the transfer?”

“Both of us. Me and Frasconi. Plus some students and faculty. They did it in a university coffee shop.”

“What faculty?”

“We got a law professor.”

“What did he see?”

“The whole thing. But he can’t swear to the actual transfer. They were real slick, like a shell game. The briefcases were identical. Is it enough?”

Questions I wish I had answered differently. It was possible Quinn could claim the Iraqi already had the blueprint, from sources unknown. Possible he could suggest the guy just liked to carry it around with him. Possible he could deny there was any exchange at all. But then I thought about the Syrian, and the Lebanese guy, and the Iranian. And all the money in Quinn’s bank. The rip-off victims would be smarting. They might be willing to testify in closed session. The State Department might be able to offer them some kind of a quid pro quo. And Quinn’s fingerprints would be on the briefcase in the Iraqi’s possession. He wouldn’t have worn gloves to the rendezvous. Too suspicious. Altogether I thought we had enough. We had a clear pattern, we had inexplicable dollars in Quinn’s bank account, we had a top-secret U.S. Army blueprint in an Iraqi agent’s possession, and we had two MPs and a law professor to say how it got there, and we had fingerprints on a briefcase handle.

“It’s plenty,” I said. “Go make the arrest.”

“Where do I go?” Duffy said.

“I’ll show you,” I said.

I moved past her through the open area. Into the back office. Through the door into the warehouse cubicle. Angel Doll’s computer was still there on the desk. His chair was still leaking its stuffing all over the place. I found the right switch and lit up the warehouse floor. I could see everything through the glass partition. The racks of carpets were still there. The forklift was still there. But in the middle of the floor were five head-high stacks of crates. They were piled into two groups. Farthest from the roller door were three piles of battered wooden boxes all stenciled with markings in unfamiliar foreign alphabets, mostly Cyrillic, overlaid with right-to-left scrawls in some kind of Arabic language. I guessed those were Bizarre Bazaar’s imports. Nearer the door were two piles of new crates printed in English: *Mossberg Connecticut.* Those would be the Xavier Export Company’s outgoing shipment. Import-export, barter at its purest. *Fair exchange is no robbery,* as Leon Garber might have said.

“It’s not huge, is it?” Duffy said. “I mean, five stacks of boxes? A hundred and forty thousand dollars? I thought it was supposed to be a big deal.”

“I think it is big,” I said. “In importance, maybe, rather than quantity.”

“Let’s take a look,” Villanueva said.

We moved out onto the warehouse floor. He and I lifted the top Mossberg crate down. It was heavy. My left arm was still a little weak. And the center of my chest still hurt. It made my smashed mouth feel like nothing at all.

Villanueva found a claw hammer on a table. Used it to pull the nails out of the crate’s lid. Then he lifted the lid off and laid it on the floor. The crate was full of foam peanuts. I plunged my hands in and came out with a long gun wrapped in waxed paper. I tore the paper off. It was an M500 Persuader. It was the Cruiser model. No shoulder stock. Just a pistol grip. 12-gauge, eighteen-and-a-half-inch barrel, three-inch chamber, six shot capacity, blued metal, black synthetic front grip, no sights. It was a nasty, brutal, close-up street weapon. I pumped the action, *crunch crunch.* It moved like silk on skin. I pulled the trigger. It clicked

like a Nikon.

“See any ammunition?” I said.

“Here,” Villanueva called. He had a box of Brenneke Magnum slugs in his hand. Behind him was an open carton full of dozens of identical packages. I broke open two boxes and loaded six shells and jacked one into the chamber and loaded a seventh. Then I clicked the safety, because the Brennekes were not birdshot. They were one-ounce solid copper slugs that would leave the Persuader at nearly eleven hundred miles an hour. They would punch a hole in a cinder block wall big enough to crawl through. I put the weapon on the table and unwrapped another one. Loaded it and clicked the safety and laid it next to the first one. Caught Duffy looking right at me.

“It’s what they’re for,” I said. “An empty gun is no good to anybody.”

I put the empty Brenneke boxes back in the carton and closed the lid. Villanueva was looking at Bizarre Bazaar’s crates. He had paperwork in his hands.

“These look like carpets to you?” he said.

“Not a whole lot,” I said.

“U.S. Customs thinks they do. Guy called Taylor signed off on them as handwoven rugs from Libya.”

“That’ll help,” I said. “You can give this Taylor guy to ATF. They can check his bank accounts. Might make you more popular.”

“So what’s really in them?” Duffy said. “What do they make in Libya?”

“Nothing,” I said. “They grow dates.”

“This all is Russian stuff,” Villanueva said. “It’s been through Odessa twice. Imported to Libya, turned right around, and exported here. In exchange for two hundred Persuaders. Just because somebody wants to look tough on the streets of Tripoli.”

“And they make a lot of stuff in Russia,” Duffy said.

I nodded. “Let’s see what, exactly.”

There were nine crates in three stacks. I lifted the top crate off the nearest stack and Villanueva got busy with his claw hammer. He pulled the lid off and I saw a bunch of AK-74s nested in wood shavings. Standard Kalashnikov assault rifles, well used. Boring as hell, street value maybe two hundred bucks each, depending on where you were selling them. They weren't fashion items. I couldn't see any guys in North Face jackets trading in their beautiful matte-black H&Ks for them.

The second crate was smaller. It was full of wood shavings and AKSU-74 submachine guns. They're AK-74 derivatives. Efficient, but clunky. They were used too, but well maintained. Not exciting. No better than a half-dozen Western equivalents. NATO hadn't lain awake at night worrying about them.

The third crate was full of nine-millimeter Makarov pistols. Most of them were scratched and old. It's a crude and lazy design, ripped off from the ancient Walther PP. The Soviet military was never much of a handgun culture. They thought using sidearms was right down there with throwing stones.

"This is all crap," I said. "Best thing to do with this stuff would be melt it down and use it for boat anchors."

We started on the second stack, and found something much more interesting in the very first crate. It was full of VAL Silent Sniper rifles. They were secret until 1994, when the Pentagon captured one. They're all black, all metal, with a skeleton stock. They fire special heavy nine-millimeter subsonic rounds. Tests showed they penetrated any body armor you chose to wear at a range of five hundred yards. I remember a fair amount of consternation at the time. There were twelve of them. The next crate held another twelve. They were quality weapons. And they looked good. They would go really well with the North Face jackets. Especially the black ones with the silver linings.

"Are they expensive?" Villanueva asked.

I shrugged. "Hard to say. Depends on what a person is willing to pay, I guess. But an equivalent Vaime or SIG bought new in the U.S. could cost over five grand."

"Then that's the whole invoice value right there."

I nodded. “They’re serious weapons. But not a lot of use in south-central LA. So their street value might be much less.”

“We should go,” Duffy said.

I stepped back to line up the view through the glass and out the back office window. It was mid-afternoon. Gloomy, but still light.

“Soon,” I said.

Villanueva opened the last crate in the second stack.

“What the hell is this?” he said.

I stepped over. Saw a nest of wood shavings. And a slim black tube with a short wooden section to act as a shoulder rest. A bulbous missile loaded ready in the muzzle. I had to look twice before I was sure.

“It’s an RPG-7,” I said. “It’s an anti-tank rocket launcher. An infantry weapon, shoulder-fired.”

“RPG means rocket propelled grenade,” he said.

“In English,” I said. “In Russian it means Reaktivniy Protivotankovyi Granatomet, rocket anti-tank grenade launcher. But it uses a missile, not a grenade.”

“Like the long-rod penetrator?” Duffy said.

“Sort of,” I said. “But it’s explosive.”

“It blows up tanks?”

“That’s the plan.”

“So who’s going to buy it from Beck?”

“I don’t know.”

“Drug dealers?”

“Conceivably. It would be very effective against a house. Or an armored

"Conceivably. It would be very effective against a house. Or an armored limousine. If your rival bought a bulletproof BMW, you'd need one of these."

"Or terrorists," she said.

I nodded. "Or militia whackos."

"This is very serious."

"They're hard to aim," I said. "The missile is big and slow. Nine times out of ten even a slight crosswind will make you miss. But that's no consolation to whoever else gets hit by mistake."

Villanueva wrenched the next lid off.

"Another one," he said. "The same."

"We need to call ATF," Duffy said. "FBI too, probably. Right now."

"Soon," I said.

Villanueva opened the last two crates. Nails squealed and wood split.

"More weird stuff," he said.

I looked. Saw thick metal tubes painted bright yellow. Electronic modules bolted underneath. I looked away.

"Grails," I said. "SA-7 Grails. Russian surface-to-air missiles."

"Heat seekers?"

"You got it."

"For shooting down planes?" Duffy said.

I nodded. "And really good against helicopters."

"What kind of range?" Villanueva asked.

"Good up to nearly ten thousand feet," I said.

“That could take down an airliner.”

I nodded.

“Near an airport,” I said. “Soon after takeoff. You could use it from a boat in the East River. Imagine hitting a plane coming out of La Guardia. Imagine it crashing in Manhattan. It would be September 11 all over again.”

Duffy stared at the yellow tubes.

“Unbelievable,” she said.

“This is not about drug dealers anymore,” I said. “They’ve expanded their market. This is about terrorism. It has to be. This one shipment alone would equip a whole terrorist cell. They could do practically anything with it.”

“We need to know who’s lining up to buy it. And why they want it.”

Then I heard the sound of feet on the floor in the doorway. And the *snick* of a round seating itself in an automatic pistol’s chamber. And a voice.

“We don’t ask why they want it,” it said. “We never do. We just take their damn money.”

CHAPTER 14

It was Harley. His mouth was a ragged hole above his goatee. I could see his yellow teeth. He was holding a Para Ordnance P14 in his right hand. The P14 is a solid Canadian-made copy of the Colt 1911 and it was way too heavy for him. His wrists were thin and weak. He would have been better off with a Glock 19, like Duffy's.

"Saw the lights were on," he said. "Thought I'd come in and check."

Then he looked straight at me.

"I guess Paulie screwed up," he said. "And I guess you faked his voice when Mr. Xavier called you on the phone."

I looked at his trigger finger. It was in position. I spent half a second mad at myself for letting him walk in unannounced. Then I moved on to working out how to take him down. Thought: *Villanueva is going to yell at me if I take him down before we ask about Teresa.*

"You going to introduce me around?" he said.

"This is Harley," I said.

Nobody spoke.

"Who are these other people?" Harley asked me.

I said nothing.

"We're federal agents," Duffy said.

"So what are you all doing in here?" Harley asked.

He asked the question like he was genuinely interested. He was wearing a different suit. It was shiny black. He had a silver tie under it. He had showered and washed his hair. His pony tail was secured by a regular brown rubber band.

“We’re working in here,” Duffy said.

He nodded. “Reacher has seen what we do to government women. He’s seen it with his own eyes.”

“You should jump ship, Harley,” I said. “It’s all coming apart now.”

“You think?”

“I know.”

“See, we don’t get that feeling from the computers. Your friend and mine in the body bag, she didn’t tell them nothing yet. They’re still waiting on her first report. Matter of fact, most days it seems like they’ve forgotten about her altogether.”

“We’ve nothing to do with computers.”

“Even better,” he said. “You’re freelance operators, nobody knows you’re here, and I got you all covered.”

“Paulie had me covered,” I said.

“With a gun?”

“With two.”

His eyes flicked down for a second. Then back up.

“I’m smarter than Paulie,” he said. “Put your hands on your heads.”

We put our hands on our heads.

“Reacher’s got a Beretta,” he said. “I know that for sure. I’m guessing there are two Glocks in the room as well. Most likely a 17 and a 19. I want to see them all on the floor, nice and slow, one at a time.”

Nobody moved. Harley shaded the P14 toward Duffy.

“The woman first,” he said. “Finger and thumb.”

Duffy slid his left hand under his jacket and [illegible]

Duffy slid her left hand under her jacket and dragged her Glock out, pinched between her finger and thumb. She dropped it on the floor. I moved my arm and started my hand toward my pocket.

“Wait,” Harley said. “You’re not a trustworthy character.”

He stepped forward and reached up and pressed the P14’s muzzle into my lower lip, right where Paulie had hit me. Then he reached down with his left hand and burrowed in my pocket. Came out with the Beretta. Dropped it next to Duffy’s Glock.

“You next,” he said to Villanueva. He kept the P14 where it was. It was cold and hard. I could feel the muzzle’s pressure on my loose teeth. Villanueva dropped his Glock on the floor. Harley raked all three guns behind him with his foot. Then he stepped backward.

“OK,” he said. “Now get over here by the wall.”

He wheeled us around until he was next to the crates and we were lined up against the back wall.

“There’s one more of us,” Villanueva said. “He isn’t here.”

Mistake, I thought. Harley just smiled.

“So call him,” he said. “Tell him to come on down.”

Villanueva said nothing. It felt like a dead end. Then it turned into a trap.

“Call him,” Harley said again. “Right now, or I’ll start shooting.”

Nobody moved.

“Call him, or the woman gets a bullet in the thigh.”

“She’s got the phone,” Villanueva said.

“In my purse,” Duffy said.

“And where’s your purse?”

“In the car.”

in the car.

Good answer, I thought.

“Where’s the car?” Harley asked.

“Close by,” Duffy said.

“The Taurus next to the stuffed animal place?”

Duffy nodded. Harley hesitated.

“You can use the phone in the office,” he said. “Call the guy.”

“I don’t know his number,” Duffy said.

Harley just looked at her.

“It’s on my speed dial,” she said. “I don’t have it memorized.”

“Where’s Teresa Daniel?” I asked.

Harley just smiled. *Asked and answered,* I thought.

“Is she OK?” Villanueva said. “Because she better be.”

“She’s fine,” Harley said. “Mint condition.”

“You want me to go get the phone?” Duffy asked.

“We’ll all go,” Harley said. “After you put these crates back in order. You messed them up. You shouldn’t have done that.”

He stepped up next to Duffy and put the muzzle of his gun to her temple.

“I’ll wait right here,” he said. “And the woman can wait here with me. Like my own personal life insurance policy.”

Villanueva glanced at me. I shrugged. I figured we were nominated to do the quartermaster work. I stepped forward and picked up the hammer from the floor. Villanueva picked up the lid from the first Grail crate. Glanced at me again. I shook my head just enough for him to see. I would have loved to bury the

hammer in Harley's head. Or his mouth. I could have solved his dental problems permanently. But a hammer was no good against a guy with a gun to a hostage's head. And anyway, I had a better idea. And it would depend on a show of compliance. So I just held the hammer and waited politely until Villanueva had the lid in place over the fat yellow missile tube. I butted it with the heel of my hand until the nails found their original holes. Then I hammered them in and stood back and waited again.

We did the second Grail crate the same way. Lifted it up and piled it back on top of the first one. Then we did the RPG-7s. Nailed down the lids and stacked them exactly like we had found them. Then we did the VAL Silent Snipers. Harley watched us carefully. But he was relaxing a little. We were compliant. Villanueva seemed to understand what we were aiming for. He had caught on fast. He found the lid for the Makarov crate. Paused with it halfway into position.

"People buy these things?" he said.

Perfect, I thought. His tone was conversational, and a little puzzled. And professionally interested, just like a real ATF guy might be.

"Why wouldn't they buy them?" Harley said.

"Because they're junk," I said. "You ever tried one?"

Harley shook his head.

"Let me show you something," I said. "OK?"

Harley kept the gun pressed hard against Duffy's temple. "Show me what?"

I put my hand in the crate and came out with one of the pistols. Blew wood shavings off it and held it up. It was old and scratched. Well used.

"Very crude mechanism," I said. "They simplified the original Walther design. Ruined it, really. Double-action, like the original, but the pull is a nightmare."

I pointed the gun at the ceiling and put my finger on the trigger and used just my thumb on the back of the butt to exaggerate the effect. Pincered my hand and pulled the trigger. The mechanism grated like a balky stick shift in an old car and the gun twisted awkwardly in my grip.

the gun twisted awkwardly in my grip.

“Piece of junk,” I said.

I did it again, listening to the bad sound and letting the gun twist and rock between my finger and thumb.

“Hopeless,” I said. “No chance of hitting anything unless it’s right next to you.”

I tossed the gun back into the crate. Villanueva slid the lid into position.

“You should be worried, Harley,” he said. “Your reputation won’t be worth shit if you put junk like this on the street.”

“Not my problem,” Harley said. “Not my reputation. I just work here.”

I hammered the nails back in, slowly, like I was tired. Then we started on the AKSU-74 crate. The old submachine guns. Then we did the AK-74s.

“You could sell these to the movies,” Villanueva said. “For historical dramas. That’s about all they’re good for.”

I hammered the nails into position and we stacked the crate with the others until we had all of Bizarre Bazaar’s imports back into a neat separate pile, just like we had found them. Harley was still watching us. He still had his gun at Duffy’s head. But his wrist was tired and his finger wasn’t hard on the trigger anymore. He had let it slide upward to the underside of the frame, where it was helping take the weight. Villanueva shoved the Mossberg crate across the floor toward me. Found the lid. We had only opened one.

“Nearly done,” I said.

Villanueva slid the lid into position.

“Wait up,” I said. “We left two of them on the table.”

I stepped across and picked up the first Persuader. Stared at it.

“See this?” I said to Harley. I pointed at the safety catch. “They shipped it with the safety on. Shouldn’t do that. It could damage the firing pin.”

I snicked the safety to *fire* and wrapped the gun in its waxed paper and burrowed it deep down into the foam peanuts. Stepped back for the second one.

“This one’s exactly the same,” I said.

“You guys are going out of business for sure,” Villanueva said. “Your quality control is all over the place.”

I set the safety to *fire* and stepped back toward the crate. Pivoted off my right foot like a second baseman lining up a double play and pulled the trigger and shot Harley through the gut. The Brenneke round sounded like a bomb going off and the giant slug cut Harley in half, literally. He was there, and then suddenly he wasn’t. He was in two large pieces on the floor and the warehouse was full of acrid smoke and the air was full of the hot stink of Harley’s blood and his digestive system and Duffy was screaming because the man she had been standing next to had just exploded. My ears were ringing. Duffy kept on screaming and danced away from the spreading pool at her feet. Villanueva caught her and held on tight and I racked the Persuader’s slide and watched the door in case there were any more surprises coming at us. But there weren’t. The warehouse structure stopped resonating and my hearing came back and then there was nothing except silence and Duffy’s fast loud breathing.

“I was standing right next to him,” she said.

“You aren’t standing right next to him now,” I said. “That’s the bottom line.”

Villanueva let go of her and stepped over and bent down and picked up our handguns from where Harley had kicked them. I took the second loaded Persuader out of the crate and unwrapped it again and clicked the safety on.

“I really like these,” I said.

“They seem to work,” Villanueva said.

I held both shotguns in one hand and put my Beretta in my pocket.

“Get the car, Terry,” I said. “Somebody’s probably calling the cops right now.”

He left by the front door and I looked at the sky through the window. There was plenty of cloud, but there was still plenty of daylight, too.

“What now?” Duffy said.

“Now we go somewhere and wait,” I said.

I waited more than an hour, sitting at my desk, looking at my telephone, expecting Kohl to call me. She had timed the drive out to MacLean at thirty-five minutes. Starting from the Georgetown University campus might have added five or ten, depending on traffic. Assessing the situation at Quinn’s house could have added another ten. Taking him down should have taken less than one. Cuffing him and putting him in the car should have taken another three. Fifty-nine minutes, beginning to end. But a whole hour passed and she didn’t call.

I started to worry after seventy minutes. Started to worry badly after eighty. Dead on ninety minutes I scared up a pool car and hit the road myself.

Terry Villanueva parked the Taurus on the patch of broken blacktop outside the office door and left the engine running.

“Let’s call Eliot,” I said. “Find out where he went. We’ll go wait with him.”

“What are we waiting for?” Duffy said.

“Dark,” I said.

She went out to the idling car and got her bag. Brought it back. Dug out her phone and hit the number. I timed it out in my head. One ring. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six.

“No answer,” Duffy said.

Then her face brightened. Then it fell again.

“Gone to voice mail,” she said. “Something’s wrong.”

“Let’s go,” I said.

“Where to?”

I looked at my watch. Looked out the window at the sky. *Too early*.

“The coast road,” I said.

We left the warehouse with the lights off and the doors locked. There was too much good stuff in it to leave it open and accessible. Villanueva drove. Duffy sat next to him in the front. I sat in the back with the Persuaders on the seat beside me. We threaded our way out of the harbor area. Past the lot where Beck parked his blue trucks. Onto the highway, past the airport, and south, away from the city.

We came off the highway and struck out east on the familiar coast road. There was no other traffic. The sky was low and gray and the wind off the sea was strong enough to set up a howling around the Taurus’s windshield pillars. There were drops of water in the air. Maybe they were raindrops. Maybe it was sea spray, lashed miles inland by the gale. It was still way too light. *Too early.*

“Try Eliot again,” I said.

Duffy took her phone out. Speed-dialed the number. Put the phone to her ear. I heard six faint rings and the whisper of the voice mail announcement. She shook her head. Clicked the phone off again.

“OK,” I said.

She twisted around in her seat.

“You sure they’re all out at the house?” she said.

“Did you notice Harley’s suit?” I said.

“Black,” she said. “Cheap.”

“It was as close as he could get to a tux. It was his idea of evening wear. And Emily Smith had a black cocktail dress ready in her office. She was going to change. She already had her smart shoes on. I think there’s going to be a

banquet."

"Keast and Maden," Villanueva said. "The caterers."

"Exactly," I said. "Banquet food. Eighteen people at fifty-five dollars a head. Tonight. And Emily Smith made a note on the order. Lamb, not pork. Who eats lamb and not pork?"

"People who keep kosher."

"And Arabs," I said. "Libyans, maybe."

"Their suppliers."

"Exactly," I said again. "I think they're about to cement their commercial relationship. I think all the Russian stuff in the crates was some kind of a token shipment. It was a gesture. Same with the Persuaders. They've demonstrated to each other that both sides can deliver. Now they're going to break bread together and go into business for real."

"At the house?"

I nodded. "It's an impressive location. Isolated, very dramatic. And it's got a big dining table."

He turned the windshield wipers on. The glass streaked and smeared. It was sea spray, whipping horizontally off the Atlantic. Full of salt.

"Something else," I said.

"What?"

"I think Teresa Daniel is part of the deal," I said.

"What?"

"I think they're selling her along with the shotguns. A cute blond American girl. I think she's the ten-thousand-dollar bonus item."

Nobody spoke.

"Did you actually see Hasbrouck's body?"

"Did you notice what Harley said about her? Mint condition."

Nobody spoke.

"I think they've kept her fed and alive and untouched." I thought: *Paulie wouldn't have bothered with Elizabeth Beck if Teresa had been available to him. With all due respect to Elizabeth.*

Nobody spoke.

"They're probably cleaning her up right now," I said.

Nobody spoke.

"I think she's headed for Tripoli," I said. "Part of the deal. Like a sweetener."

Villanueva accelerated hard. The wind howled louder around the windshield pillars and the door mirrors. Two minutes later we reached the spot where we had ambushed the bodyguards and he slowed again. We were five miles from the house. Theoretically we were already visible from the upper floor windows. We came to a stop in the center of the road and we all craned forward and stared into the east.

I used an olive-green Chevrolet and made it out to MacLean in twenty-nine minutes. Stopped in the center of the road two hundred yards shy of Quinn's residence. It was in an established subdivision. The whole place was quiet and green and watered and was baking lazily in the sun. The houses were on acre lots and were half-hidden behind thick evergreen foundation plantings. Their driveways were jet black. I could hear birds singing and a far-off sprinkler turning slowly and hissing against a soaked sidewalk through sixty degrees of its rotation. I could see fat dragonflies in the air.

I took my foot off the brake and crawled forward a hundred yards. Quinn's house was sided with dark cedar boards. It had a stone walk and knee-high stone walls boxing in earth beds full of low spruces and rhododendrons. It had small windows and the way the eaves of the roof met the tops of the walls made it feel like the house was crouched down with its back to me.

Frasconi's car was parked in the driveway. It was an olive-green Chevrolet identical to my own. It was empty. Its front bumper was tight against Quinn's garage door. The garage was a long low triple. It was closed up. There was no sound anywhere, except the birds and the sprinkler and the hum of insects.

I parked behind Frasconi's car. My tires sounded wet on the hot blacktop. I slid out and eased my Beretta out of its holster. Clicked the safety to *fire* and started up the stone walk. The front door was locked. The house was silent. I peered in through a hallway window. Saw nothing, except the kind of solid neutral furniture that goes into an expensive rental.

I walked around to the rear. There was a flagstone patio with a barbecue grill on it. A square teak table going gray in the weather and four chairs. An off-white canvas sun umbrella on a pole. A lawn, and plenty of low-maintenance evergreen bushes. A cedar fence stained the same dark color as the house siding closed off the neighbors' view.

I tried the kitchen door. It was locked. I looked in the window. Saw nothing. I moved around the rear perimeter. Came to the next window and saw nothing. Moved to the next window and saw Frasconi lying on his back.

He was in the middle of the living room floor. There was a sofa and two armchairs all covered in durable mud-colored fabric. The floor was done in wall-to-wall carpet and it matched the olive of his uniform. He had been shot once through the forehead. Nine millimeter. Fatal. Even through the window I could see the single crusted hole and the dull ivory color of his skull under his skin. There was a lake of blood under his head. It had soaked into the carpet and was already drying and turning dark.

I didn't want to go in on the first floor. If Quinn was still in there he would be waiting upstairs where he had the tactical advantage. So I dragged the patio table over to the back of the garage and used it to climb onto the roof. Used the roof to get me next to an upstairs window. Used my elbow to get me through the glass. Then I went feetfirst into a guest bedroom. It smelled musty and unused. I walked through it and came out in an upstairs hallway. Stood still and listened. Heard nothing. The house sounded completely empty. There was a deadness. A total absence of sound. No human vibrations.

But I could smell blood.

I crossed the upstairs hallway and found Dominique Kohl in the master bedroom. She was on her back on the bed. She was completely naked. Her clothes had been torn off. She had been hit in the face enough times to make her groggy and then she had been butchered. Her breasts had been removed with a large knife. I could see the knife. It had been thrust upward through the soft flesh under her chin and through the roof of her mouth and into her brain.

By that point in my life I had seen a lot of things. I had once woken up after a terrorist attack with part of another man's jawbone buried in my gut. I had had to wipe his flesh out of my eyes before I could see well enough to crawl away. I had crawled twenty yards through severed legs and arms and butted my knees against severed heads with my hands pressed hard into my abdomen to stop my own intestines falling out. I had seen homicides and accidents and men machine-gunned in feuds and people reduced to pink paste in explosions and blackened twisted lumps in fires. But I had never seen anything as bad as Dominique Kohl's butchered body. I threw up on the floor and then for the first time in more than twenty years I cried.

"So what now?" Villanueva said, ten years later.

"I'm going in alone," I said.

"I'm coming with you."

"Don't argue," I said. "Just get me a little closer. And drive real slow."

It was a gray car on a gray day and slow-moving objects are less perceptible than fast-moving objects. He took his foot off the brake and touched the gas and got it rolling at about ten miles an hour. I checked the Beretta and its spare magazines. Forty-five rounds, less two fired into Duke's ceiling. I checked the Persuaders. Fourteen rounds, less one fired through Harley's gut. Total of fifty-six rounds, against less than eighteen people. I didn't know who was on the guest list, but Emily Smith and Harley himself were going to be no-shows for sure.

"Stupid to do it alone," Villanueva said.

"Stupid to do it together," I said back. "The approach is going to be suicidal."

He didn’t answer.

“Better that you guys stand by out here,” I said.

He made no reply to that. He wanted my back and he wanted Teresa but he was smart enough to see that walking toward a fortified and isolated house in the last of the daylight was going to be no kind of fun. He just kept the car rolling slowly. Then he took his foot off the gas and put the transmission in neutral and let it coast to a stop. He didn’t want to risk the flare of brake lights in the mist. We were maybe a quarter-mile short of the house.

“You guys wait here,” I said. “For the duration.”

Villanueva looked away.

“Give me one hour,” I said.

I waited until they both nodded.

“Then call ATF,” I said. “After an hour, if I’m not back.”

“Maybe we should do that now,” Duffy said.

“No,” I said. “I want the hour first.”

“ATF will get Quinn,” she said. “It’s not like they’re going to let him walk.”

I thought back to what I had seen and just shook my head.

I broke every regulation and ignored every procedure in the book. I walked away from a crime scene and failed to report it. I obstructed justice left and right. I left Kohl in the bedroom and Frasconi in the living room. Left their car on the driveway. Just drove myself back to the office and took a silenced Ruger Standard .22 from the company armory and went to find Kohl’s boxed-up files. My gut told me Quinn would make one stop before he headed for the Bahamas. He would have an emergency stash somewhere. Maybe phony ID, maybe a wad of cash, maybe a packed bag, maybe all three. He wouldn’t hide the stash on-post. Nor in his rented house. He was too professional for that. Too cautious. He

would want it safe and far away. I was gambling it would be in the place he had inherited in northern California. From his parents, the railroad worker and the stay-at-home mom. So I needed that address.

Kohl's handwriting was neat. The two cartons were filled with her notes. They were comprehensive. They were meticulous. They broke my heart. I found the California address in an eight-page bio she had prepared. It was a five-digit house number on a road that came under the Eureka post office. Probably a lonely place, far out of town. I went to my company clerk's desk and signed a stack of travel warrants for myself. Put my service Beretta and the silenced Ruger in a canvas bag and drove to the airport. They gave me papers to sign before they let me carry loaded firearms inside the cabin. I wasn't about to check them. I figured there was a good chance Quinn might take the same flight. I figured if I saw him at the gate or on the plane I would waste him right there and then.

But I didn't see him. I got on a plane for Sacramento and walked the aisle after takeoff and scanned every face and he wasn't there. So I sat tight for the duration of the flight. Just stared into space. The stewardesses stayed well away from me.

I rented a car at the Sacramento airport. Drove it north on I-5 and then northwest on Route 299. It was a designated scenic road. It wound through the mountains. I looked at nothing except the yellow line ahead of me. I had picked up three hours because of flying across three time zones but even so it was gathering dark when I hit the Eureka limit. I found Quinn's road. It was a meandering strip that ran north-south high in the hills above U.S. 101. The highway was laid out far below me. I could see headlights streaming north. Taillights heading south. I guessed there was a rail line down there somewhere. Maybe a station or a depot nearby, convenient for Quinn's old man back when he was working.

I found the house. Drove past it without slowing. It was a rough one-story cabin. It used an old milk churn instead of a mailbox post. The front yard had gone to seed a decade ago. I K-turned five hundred yards south of it and drove two hundred yards back toward it with my lights off. Parked behind an abandoned diner with a caved-in roof. Got out and climbed a hundred feet into the hills. Walked north three hundred yards and came on his place from the rear.

In the dusk I could see a narrow back porch and a scuffed area next to it where cars could be parked. Clearly it was the sort of place where you use the back door, not the front. There were no lights on inside. I could see dusty sun-faded

drapes half-closed in the windows. The whole place looked empty and unused. I could see a couple of miles north and south and there were no cars on the road.

I came down the hill slowly on foot. Circled the house. Listened at every window. There was nobody inside. I figured Quinn would park in back and come in through the rear, so I broke in through the front. The door was thin and old and I just pushed hard on it until the inner jamb started to give and then I smacked it once above the lock with the heel of my hand. Wood splintered and the door swung open and I stepped inside and closed it again and wedged it shut with a chair. It would look OK from the outside.

It was musty inside and easily ten degrees colder than outside. It was dark and dim. I could hear a refrigerator running in the kitchen, so I knew there was electricity. The walls were covered in ancient wallpaper. It was faded and yellow. There were only four rooms. There was an eat-in kitchen, and a living room. There were two bedrooms. One was small and the other was smaller. I figured the smaller one had been Quinn's, as a kid. There was a lone bathroom between the bedrooms. White fixtures, stained with rust.

Four rooms plus a bath is an easier search than most. I found what I was looking for almost immediately. I lifted a rag rug off of the living room floor and found a square hatch let into the boards. If it had been in the hallway I would have figured it for an inspection cover above the crawl space. But it was in the living room. I took a fork from the kitchen and levered it open. Under it was a shallow wooden tray built between the floor joists. On the tray was a shoe box wrapped in milky plastic sheeting. Inside the shoe box were three thousand dollars and two keys. I figured the keys were for safety-deposit boxes or left-luggage lockers. I took the cash and left the keys where they were. Then I put the hatch lid back and replaced the rug and chose a chair and sat down to wait with my Beretta in my pocket and the Ruger laid across my lap.

"Take care," Duffy said.

I nodded. "Sure."

Villanueva said nothing. I slid out of the Taurus with the Beretta in my pocket and the Persuaders held one in each hand. Crossed straight to the shoulder of the

road and got as far down on the rocks as I could and started picking my way east. There was still daylight behind the clouds but I was dressed in black and I was carrying black guns and I wasn't exactly on the road itself and I thought I might have a chance. The wind was blowing hard toward me and there was water in the air. I could see the ocean ahead. It was raging. The tide was on the way out. I could hear the distant waves pounding and the long suck of the undertow ripping through sand and gravel.

I came around a shallow curve and saw that the wall lights were on. They blazed blue-white against the dim sky. The contrast between the electric light and the late-afternoon darkness beyond it would mean they would see me less and less well the closer I got. So I climbed back onto the roadway and started to jog. I got as close as I dared and then slipped back down the rocks and hugged the shore. The ocean was right at my feet. I could smell salt and seaweed. The rocks were slippery. Waves pounded and spray burst up at me and the water swirled angrily.

I stood still. Took a breath. Realized I couldn't swim around the wall. Not this time. It would be madness. The sea was way too rough. I would have no chance. No chance at all. I would be tossed around like a cork and smashed against the rocks and battered to death. Unless the undertow got me first and pulled me out and swallowed me into the depths and drowned me.

Can't go around it, can't go over it. Got to go through it.

I climbed up the rocks again and stepped into the bar of light as far from the gate as I could get. I was all the way over where the foundations canted down toward the water. Then I kept very close to the wall and walked along its length. I was bathed in light. But nobody east of the wall could see me because it was between me and the house and it was taller than me. And anybody west of me was a friend. All I had to worry about was tripping the sensors buried in the ground. I stepped as lightly as I could and hoped they hadn't buried any this close in.

And I guess they hadn't, because I made it to the gatehouse OK. I risked a glance inside through the gap in the drapes in the front window and saw the brightly-lit living room and Paulie's replacement busy relaxing on the collapsed sofa. He was a guy I hadn't seen before. He was about Duke's age and size. Maybe approaching forty, maybe a little slighter than me. I spent some time figuring his exact height. That was going to be important. He was possibly two inches shorter than me. He was dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt and a denim jacket. Clearly he wasn't going to the ball. He was Cinderella, tasked to watch

the gate while the others partied. I hoped he was the only one. I hoped they were working a skeleton crew. But I wasn't about to bet on it. Any kind of minimal caution would put a second guy on the front door of the house, and maybe a third up there in Duke's window. Because they knew Paulie hadn't gotten the job done. They knew I was still out there somewhere.

I couldn't afford the noise involved in shooting the new guy. The waves were loud and the wind was howling but neither sound would mask the Beretta. And nothing on earth would mask a Persuader firing a Brenneke Magnum. So I retreated a couple of yards and put the Persuaders down on the ground and took my coat and my jacket off. Then I took my shirt off and wrapped it tight around my left fist. Put my bare back against the wall and sidestepped my way to the edge of the window. Used the nails on my right hand to tap softly on the bottom corner of the glass, where it was draped, on and off, faint little paradiddles like a mouse makes when he runs across above a ceiling. I did it four times and was about to try a fifth when I saw in the corner of my eye the light in the window suddenly go dim. That meant the new guy had gotten off his sofa and pressed his face up against the glass to try to see what kind of little creature was out there bothering him. So I concentrated on getting the height exactly right and spun one-eighty and threw a huge roundhouse left with my padded fist and bust the window first and the new guy's nose a millisecond later. He went down in a heap below the inside sill and I reached in through the hole I had made and unlatched the casement and swung it open and climbed inside. The guy was sitting on his butt on the floor. He was bleeding from his nose and the glass cuts in his face. He was groggy. There was a handgun on the sofa. He was eight feet away from it. He was twelve feet from the phones. He shook his head to clear it and looked up at me.

"You're Reacher," he said. There was blood in his mouth.

"Correct," I said back.

"You've got no chance," he said.

"You think?"

He nodded. "We've got shoot-to-kill orders."

"On me?"

He nodded again.

“Who has?”

“Everybody.”

“Xavier’s orders?”

He nodded again. Put the back of his hand up under his nose.

“People going to obey those orders?” I asked.

“For sure.”

“Are you?”

“I guess not.”

“Promise?”

“I guess so.”

“OK,” I said.

I paused for a moment and thought about asking him some more questions. He might be reluctant. But I figured I could slap him around some and get all the answers he had to give. But in the end I figured those answers didn’t matter very much. Made no practical difference to me if there were ten or twelve or fifteen hostiles in the house, or what they were armed with. *Shoot to kill. Them or me.* So I just stepped away and was trying to decide what to do with the guy when he made my mind up for me by reneging on his promise. He came up off the floor and made a dive for the handgun on the sofa. I caught him with a wild left in the throat. It was a solid punch, and a lucky one. But not for him. It crushed his larynx. He went down on the floor again and suffocated. It was reasonably quick. About a minute and a half. There was nothing I could do for him. I’m not a doctor.

I stood completely still for a minute. Then I put my shirt back on and climbed back out of the window and retrieved the shotguns and my jacket and my coat and climbed back in and crossed the room and looked out of the back window at the house.

“Shit,” I said, and looked away.

The Cadillac was parked on the carriage circle. Eliot hadn’t gotten away. Nor had Elizabeth, or Richard, or the cook. That put three noncombatants into the mix. And the presence of noncombatants makes any assault a hundred times harder. And this one was hard enough to begin with.

I looked again. Next to the Cadillac was a black Lincoln Town Car. Next to the Town Car were two dark blue Suburbans. There was no catering truck. Maybe it was around the side, next to the kitchen door. Maybe it was coming later. Or maybe it wasn’t coming at all. Maybe there was no banquet. Maybe I had screwed up completely and misinterpreted the whole situation.

I stared through the harsh lights on the wall into the gloom around the house. I couldn’t see a guard on the front door. But then, it was cold and wet and anybody with any sense would be inside the hallway looking out through the glass. I couldn’t see anybody in Duke’s window, either. But it was standing open, exactly the way I had left it. Presumably the NSV was still hanging there on its chain.

I looked at the vehicles again. The Town Car could have brought four people in. The Suburbans could have brought seven each. Eighteen people, maximum. Maybe fifteen or sixteen principals and two or three guards. Alternatively, maybe only three drivers came. Maybe I was completely wrong.

Only one way to find out.

And this was the hardest part. I had to get through the lights. I debated finding the switch and turning them off. But that would be an instant early warning to the people in the house. Five seconds after they went off they would be on the phone asking the gate guard what had happened. And the gate guard couldn’t answer, because the gate guard was dead. Whereupon I would have fifteen or more people swarming straight at me in the gloom. Easy enough to avoid most of them. But the trick would be to know who to avoid, and who to grab. Because I was pretty sure if I let Quinn get behind me tonight I would never see him again.

So I had to do it with the lights blazing. Two possibilities. One was to run straight toward the house. That would minimize the time I spent actually

illuminated. But it would involve rapid motion, and rapid motion catches the eye. The other possibility would be to traverse the wall all the way to the ocean. Sixty yards, slowly. It would be agony. But it was probably the better option.

Because the lights were mounted on the wall, trained away from it. There would be a dark tunnel between the wall itself and the rear edge of the beams. It would be a slim triangle. I could crawl along it, right down at the base of the structure. Slowly. Through the NSV's field of fire.

I eased the rear door open. There were no lights on the gatehouse itself. They started twenty feet to my right, where the gatehouse wall became the perimeter wall. I stepped halfway out and crouched down. Turned ninety degrees right and looked for my tunnel. It was there. It was less than three feet deep at ground level. It narrowed to nothing at head height. And it wasn't very dark. There was scatter coming back off the ground and there were occasional misaligned beams and there was glow coming out of the rear of the lamps themselves. My tunnel was maybe halfway between pitch dark and brilliantly lit.

I shuffled forward on my knees and reached back and closed the door behind me. Put a Persuader in each hand and dropped to my stomach and pressed my right shoulder hard against the base of the wall. Then I waited. Just long enough for anybody who thought they'd seen the door move to lose interest. Then I started crawling. Slowly.

I got maybe ten feet. Then I stopped again. Fast. I heard a vehicle out on the road. Not a sedan. Something bigger than that. Maybe another Suburban. I reversed direction. Dug my toes in and crawled backward to the doorway. Knelt up and opened the door and slid inside the gatehouse and stood up. Put the Persuaders on a chair and took the Beretta out of my pocket. I could hear a big-inch V-8 idling on the other side of the gate.

Decisions. Whoever was out there was expecting the gate guard's services. And a buck got ten whoever was out there would know I wasn't the real gate guard. So I figured I would have to give up on the crawling. I figured I would have to go noisy. Shoot them, take their vehicle, make it down to the house real fast before the NSV gunner could draw a bead. Then take my chances in the ensuing chaos.

I stepped to the back door again. Clicked the Beretta's safety off and took a breath. I had the initial advantage. I already knew exactly what I was going to

do. Everybody else would have to react first. And that would take them a second too long.

Then I remembered the camera on the gatepost. The video monitor. I could see exactly what I was faced with. I could count heads. *Forewarned is forearmed.* I stepped across to check. The picture was gray and milky. It showed a white panel van. Writing on the side. *Keast & Maden Catering.* I breathed out. No reason why they should know the gate man. I put the Beretta back in my pocket. Stripped off my coat and jacket. Pulled the denim thing off the gate man's body and slipped it on. It was tight, and there was blood on it. But it was reasonably convincing. I stepped out the door. Kept my back to the house and tried to make myself look two inches shorter. Walked to the gate. Butted the latch upward with my fist, the same way Paulie used to. Hauled it open. The white truck drove up level with me. The passenger buzzed his window down. He was wearing a tux. The guy at the wheel was in a tux. *More noncombatant*s.

"Where to?" the passenger asked.

"Around the house to the right," I said. "Kitchen door's all the way at the back."

The window went back up. The truck drove past me. I waved. Closed the gate again. Stepped back into the lodge and watched the truck from the window. It headed straight for the house and then swung right at the carriage circle. Its headlight beams washed over the Cadillac and the Town Car and the two Suburbans and I caught a flare from its brake lights and then it disappeared from view.

I waited two minutes. Willed it to get darker. Then I changed back into my own coat and jacket and retrieved the Persuaders from the chair. Eased the door open and crawled out and closed it behind me and dropped to my stomach. Pressed my shoulder to the base of the wall and started the slow crawl all over again. I kept my face turned away from the house. There was grit underneath me and I could feel small stones sharp against my elbows and my knees. But mostly I could feel a tingle in my back. It was facing a weapon that could fire twelve half-inch bullets every second. There was probably some tough guy right behind it with his hands resting lightly on the handles. I was hoping he would miss with the first burst. I figured he probably would. I figured he would fire the first burst way low or way high. Whereupon I would be up and running zigzags into the darkness before he lined up for a better try.

I inched forward. Ten yards. Fifteen. Twenty. I kept it really slow. Kept my face turned to the wall. Hoped I looked like a vague indistinct shadow in the penumbra. It was completely counterintuitive. I was fighting a powerful desire to jump up and run. My heart was pounding. I was sweating, even though it was cold. The wind was battering me. It was coming off the sea and hitting the wall and streaming down it like a tide and trying to roll me out to where the lights were brightest.

I kept going. Made it about halfway. About thirty yards covered, about thirty yards to go. My elbows were sore. I was keeping the Persuaders up off the ground and my arms were taking the toll. I stopped to rest. Just pressed myself into the dirt. Tried to look like a rock. I turned my head and risked a glance toward the house. It was quiet. I glanced ahead. Glanced behind. *The point of no return.* I crawled on. Had to force myself to keep the speed slow. The farther I got, the worse my back tingled. I was breathing hard. Getting close to panic. Adrenaline was boiling through me, screaming *run, run.* I gasped and panted and forced my arms and legs to stay coordinated. To stay *slow.* Then I got within ten yards of the end and started to believe I could make it. I stopped. Took a breath. And another. Started again. Then the ground tilted down and I followed it headfirst. I reached the water. Felt wet slime underneath me. Small rough waves came at me and spray hit me. I turned a ninety-degree left and paused. I was way on the edge of anybody's field of view, but I had to get through thirty feet of bright light. I gave up on keeping it slow. I ducked my head and half-stood and just ran for it.

I spent maybe four seconds lit up brighter than I had ever been before. It felt like four lifetimes. I was blinded. Then I crashed back into darkness and crouched down and listened. Heard nothing except the wild sea. Saw nothing except purple spots in my eyes. I stumbled on another ten paces over the rocks and then stood still. Looked back. *I was in.* I smiled in the dark. *Quinn, I'm coming to get you now.*

CHAPTER 15

Ten years ago I waited eighteen hours for him. I never doubted he was coming. I just sat in his armchair with the Ruger on my lap and waited. I didn't sleep. I barely even blinked. Just sat. All through the night. Through the dawn. All through the next morning. Midday came and went. I just sat and waited for him.

He came at two o'clock in the afternoon. I heard a car slowing on the road and stood up and kept well back from the window and watched as he turned in. He was in a rental, similar to mine. It was a red Pontiac. I saw him clearly through the windshield. He was neat and clean. His hair was combed. He was wearing a blue shirt with the collar open. He was smiling. The car swept past the side of the house and I heard it crunch to a stop on the dirt outside the kitchen. I stepped through to the hallway. Pressed myself against the wall next to the kitchen door.

I heard his key in the lock. Heard the door swing open. The hinges squealed in protest. He left it open. I heard his car idling outside. He hadn't switched it off. He wasn't planning on staying long. I heard his feet on the kitchen linoleum. A fast, light, confident tread. A man who thought he was playing and winning. He came through the door. I hit him in the side of the head with my elbow.

He went down on the floor on his back and I spanned my hand and pinned him by the throat. Laid the Ruger aside and patted him down. He was unarmed. I let go of his neck and his head came up and I smashed it back down with the heel of my hand under his chin. The back of his head hit the floor and his eyes rolled up in his head. I walked through the kitchen and closed the door. Stepped back and dragged him into the living room by the wrists. Dropped him on the floor and slapped him twice. Aimed the Ruger at the center of his face and waited for his eyes to open.

They opened and focused first on the gun and then on me. I was in uniform and all covered in badges of rank and unit designations so it didn't take him long to work out who I was and why I was there.

"Wait," he said.

"For what?"

For what?

“You’re making a mistake.”

“Am I?”

“You’ve got it wrong.”

“Have I?”

He nodded. “They were on the take.”

“Who were?”

“Frasconi and Kohl.”

“Were they?”

He nodded again. “And then he tried to cheat her.”

“How?”

“Can I sit up?”

I shook my head. Kept the gun where it was.

“No,” I said.

“I was running a sting,” he said. “I was working with the State Department. Against hostile embassies. I was trawling.”

“What about Gorowski’s kid?”

He shook his head, impatiently. “Nothing happened with the damn kid, you idiot. Gorowski had a script to follow, that’s all. It was a setup. In case the hostiles checked on him. We play these things deep. There has to be a chain to follow, in case anyone is suspicious. We were doing proper dead drops and everything. In case we were being watched.”

“What about Frasconi and Kohl?”

“They were good. They picked up on me real early. Assumed I wasn’t legit.

Which pleased me. Meant I was playing my part just right. Then they went bad. They came to me and said they'd slow the investigation if I paid them. They said they'd give me time to leave the country. They thought I wanted to do that. So I figured, hey, why not play along? Because who knows in advance what bad guys a trawl will find? And the more the merrier, right? So I played them out."

I said nothing.

"The investigation was slow, wasn't it?" he said. "You must have noticed that. Weeks and weeks. It was real slow."

Slow as molasses.

"Then yesterday happened," he said. "I got the Syrians and the Lebanese and the Iranians in the bag. Then the Iraqis, who were the big fish. So I figured it was time to put your guys in the bag too. They came over for their final payoff. It was a lot of money. But Frasconi wanted it all. He hit me over the head. I came around and found he had sliced Kohl up. He was a crazy man, believe me. I got to a gun in a drawer and shot him."

"So why did you run?"

"Because I was freaked. I'm a Pentagon guy. I never saw blood before. And I didn't know who else might be in it with your guys. There could have been more."

Frasconi and Kohl.

"You're very good," he said to me. "You came right here."

I nodded. Thought back to his eight-page bio, in Kohl's tidy handwriting. *Parents' occupations, childhood home.*

"Whose idea was it?" I said.

"Originally?" he said. "Frasconi's, of course. He outranked her."

"What was her name?"

I saw a flicker in his eyes.

“Kohl,” he said.

I nodded again. She had gone out to make the arrest in dress greens. A black acetate nameplate above her right breast. *Kohl.* Gender-neutral. *Uniform, female enlisted, the nameplate is adjusted to individual figure differences and centered horizontally on the right side between one and two inches above the top button of the coat.* He would have seen it as soon as she walked in the door.

“First name?”

He paused.

“Don’t recall,” he said.

“Frasconi’s first name?”

Uniform, male officer, the nameplate is centered on the right-side breast pocket flap equidistant between the seam and the button.

“I don’t recall.”

“Try,” I said.

“I can’t recall it,” he said. “It’s only a detail.”

“Three out of ten,” I said. “Call it an E.”

“What?”

“Your performance,” I said. “A failing grade.”

“What?”

“Your dad was a railroad worker,” I said. “Your mom was a homemaker. Your full name is Francis Xavier Quinn.”

“So?”

“Investigations are like that,” I said. “You plan to put somebody in the bag, you find out all about them first. You were playing those two for weeks and weeks and never found out their first names? Never looked at their service records?

Never made any notes? Never filed any reports?"

He said nothing.

"And Frasconi never had an idea in his life," I said. "Never even took a dump unless somebody told him to. Nobody connected to those two would ever say *Frasconi and Kohl.* They'd say *Kohl and Frasconi.* You were dirty all the way and you never saw my guys in your life before the exact minute they showed up at your house to arrest you. And you killed them both."

He proved I was right by trying to fight me. I was ready for him. He started to scramble up. I knocked him back down, a lot harder than I really needed to. He was still unconscious when I put him in the trunk of his car. Still unconscious when I transferred him to the trunk of mine, behind the abandoned diner. I drove a little way south on U.S. 101 and took a right that led toward the Pacific. I stopped on a gravel turnout. There was a fabulous view. It was three o'clock in the afternoon and the sun was shining and the ocean was blue. The turnout had a knee-high metal barrier and then there was another half-yard of gravel and then there was a long vertical drop into the surf. Traffic was very light. Maybe a car every couple of minutes. The road was just an arbitrary loop off the highway.

I opened the trunk and then slammed it again just in case he was awake and planning to jump out at me. But he wasn't. He was starved of air and barely conscious. I dragged him out and propped him up on rubbery legs and made him walk. Let him look at the ocean for a minute while I checked for potential witnesses. There were none. So I turned him around. Stepped away five paces.

"Her name was Dominique," I said.

Then I shot him. Twice in the head, once in the chest. I expected him to go straight down on the gravel, whereupon I was planning to step in close and put a fourth up through his eye socket before throwing him into the ocean. But he didn't go straight down on the gravel. He staggered backward and tripped on the rail and went over it and hit the last half-yard of America with his shoulder and rolled straight over the cliff. I grabbed the barrier with one hand and leaned over and looked down. Saw him hit the rocks. The surf closed over him. I didn't see him again. I stayed there for a full minute. Thought: *Two in the head, one in the heart, a hundred-twenty-foot fall into the ocean, no way to survive that.*

I picked up my shell cases. "Ten-eighteen, Dom," I said to myself, and walked

back to my car.

Ten years later it was going dark very fast and I was picking my way over the rocks behind the garage block. The sea was heaving and thrashing on my right. The wind was in my face. I didn't expect to see anybody out and about. Especially not at the sides or the back of the house. So I was moving fast, head up, alert, a Persuader in each hand. *I'm coming to get you, Quinn.*

When I cleared the rear of the garage block I could see the catering company's truck parked at the back corner of the building. It was exactly where Harley had put the Lincoln to unload Beck's maid from the trunk. The truck's rear doors were open and the driver and the passenger were shuttling back and forth unpacking it. The metal detector on the kitchen door was beeping at every foil dish they carried. I was hungry. I could smell hot food on the wind. Both guys were in tuxedos. Their heads were ducked down because of the weather. They weren't paying attention to anything except their jobs. But I gave them a wide berth anyway. I stayed all the way on the edge of the rocks and skirted around in a loop. Jumped over Harley's cleft and kept on going.

When I was as far from the caterers as I could get I cut in and headed for the opposite back corner of the house. I felt real good. I felt silent and invisible. Like some kind of a primeval force, howling in from the sea. I stood still and worked out which would be the dining room windows. I found them. The lights were on in the room. I stepped in close and risked a look through the glass.

First person I saw was Quinn. He was standing up straight in a dark suit. He had a drink in his hand. His hair was pure gray. The scars on his forehead were small and pink and shiny. He was a little stooped. A little heavier than he had been. He was ten years older.

Next to him was Beck. He was in a dark suit, too. He had a drink. He was shoulder to shoulder with his boss. Together they were facing three Arab guys. The Arabs were short, with black oiled hair. They were in American clothes. Sharkskin suits, light grays and blues. They had drinks, too.

Behind them Richard and Elizabeth Beck were standing close together, talking. The whole thing was like a free-form cocktail party crammed around the edges of the giant dining table. The table was set with eighteen places. It was very

of the giant dining table. The table was set with eighteen places. It was very formal. Each setting had three glasses and enough flatware to last a week. The cook was bustling about the room with a tray of drinks. I could see champagne flutes and whiskey tumblers. She was in a dark skirt and a white blouse. She was relegated to cocktail waitress. Maybe her expertise didn't stretch to Middle Eastern cuisine.

I couldn't see Teresa Daniel. Maybe they planned to make her jump out of a cake, later. The other occupants of the room were all men. Three of them. Quinn's best boys, presumably. They were a random trio. A mixture. Hard faces, but probably no more dangerous than Angel Doll or Harley had been.

So, eighteen settings, but only ten diners. Eight absentees. Duke, Angel Doll, Harley, and Emily Smith made four of them. The guy they had sent to the gatehouse to replace Paulie was presumably the fifth. That left three unaccounted for. One on the front door, one in Duke's window, and one with Teresa Daniel, probably.

I stayed on the outside, looking in. I had been to cocktail parties and formal dinners plenty of times. Depending on where you served they played a big part in base life. I figured these people would be in there four hours, minimum. They wouldn't come out except for bathroom breaks. Quinn was talking. He was sharing eye contact scrupulously among the three Arabs. He was holding forth. Smiling, gesturing, laughing. He looked like a guy who was playing and winning. But he wasn't. His plans had been disrupted. A banquet for eighteen had become dinner for ten, because I was still around.

I ducked under the window and crawled toward the kitchen. Stayed on my knees and slipped out of my coat and left the Persuaders wrapped in it where I could find them again. Then I stood up and walked straight into the kitchen. The metal detector beeped at the Beretta in my pocket. The catering guys were in there. They were doing something with aluminum foil. I nodded at them like I lived there and walked straight into the hallway. My feet were quiet on the thick rugs. I could hear the loud buzz of cocktail conversation from the dining room. I could see a guy at the front door. He had his back to me and he was staring out the window. He had his shoulder leaning on the edge of the window recess. His hair was haloed blue by the wall lights in the distance. I walked straight up behind him. *Shoot to kill. Them or me.* I paused for one second. Reached around and cupped my right hand under his chin. Put my left knuckles against the base of his neck. Jerked up and back with my right and down and forward with my left and

snapped his neck at the fourth vertebra. He sagged back against me and I caught him under the arms and walked him into Elizabeth Beck's parlor and dumped him on the sofa. *Doctor Zhivago* was still there on a side table.

One down.

I closed the parlor door on him and headed for the stairs. Went up, quick and quiet. Stopped outside Duke's room. Eliot was sprawled just inside the doorway. Dead. He was on his back. His jacket was thrown open and his shirt was stiff with blood and full of holes. The rugs under him were crusty. I stepped over him and kept behind the door and glanced into the room. Saw why he had died. The NSV had jammed. He must have taken Duffy's call and been on his way out of the room when he looked up and saw a convoy coming toward him on the road. He must have darted toward the big gun. Squeezed the trigger and felt it jam. It was a piece of junk. The mechanic had it field-stripped on the floor and was crouched over it trying to repair the belt feed mechanism. He was intent on his task. Didn't see me coming. Didn't hear me.

Shoot to kill. Them or me.

Two down.

I left him lying on top of the machine gun. The barrel stuck out from under him and looked like a third arm. I checked the view from the window. The wall lights were still blazing. I checked my watch. I was exactly thirty minutes into my hour.

I went back downstairs. Through the hallway. Like a ghost. To the basement door. The lights were on down there. I went down the stairs. Through the gymnasium. Past the washing machine. I pulled the Beretta out of my pocket. Clicked the safety. Held it out in front of me and turned the corner and walked straight toward the two rooms. One of them was empty and had its door standing open. The other was closed up and had a young thin guy sitting on a chair in front of it. He had the chair tilted back against it. He looked straight at me. His eyes went wide. His mouth came open. No sound came out. He didn't seem like much of a threat. He was wearing a T-shirt with *Dell* on it. Maybe this was Troy, the computer geek.

"Keep quiet if you want to live," I said.

He kept quiet.

“Are you Troy?”

He stayed quiet and nodded *yes.*

“OK, Troy,” I said.

I figured we were right underneath the dining room. I couldn’t risk firing a gun in a stone cellar right under everybody’s feet. So I put the Beretta back in my pocket and caught him around the neck and banged his head on the wall, twice, and put him to sleep. Maybe I cracked his skull, maybe I didn’t. I didn’t really care either way. His keyboard work had killed the maid.

Three down.

I found the key in his pocket. Used it in the lock and swung open the door and found Teresa Daniel sitting on her mattress. She turned and looked straight at me. She looked exactly like the photographs Duffy had shown me in my motel room early in the morning on day eleven. She looked in perfect health. Her hair was washed and brushed. She was wearing a virginal white dress. White panty hose and white shoes. Her skin was pale and her eyes were blue. She looked like a human sacrifice.

I paused a moment, unsure. I couldn’t predict her reaction. She must have figured out what they wanted from her. And she didn’t know me. As far as she knew, I was one of them, ready to lead her right to the altar. And she was a trained federal agent. If I asked her to come with me, she might start fighting. She might be storing it up, waiting for her chance. And I didn’t want things to get noisy. Not yet.

But then I looked again at her eyes. One pupil was enormous. The other was tiny. She was very still. Very quiet. Slack and dazed. She was all doped up. Maybe with some kind of a fancy substance. What was it? The date rape drug? Rohypnol? Rophynol? I couldn’t remember its name. Not my area of expertise. Eliot would have known. Duffy or Villanueva would still know. It made people passive and obedient and acquiescent. Made them lie back and take anything they were told to take.

“Teresa?” I whispered.

She didn’t answer.

“You OK?” I whispered.

She nodded.

“I’m fine,” she said.

“Can you walk?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Walk with me.”

She stood up. She was unsteady on her feet. Muscle weakness, I guessed. She had been caged for nine weeks.

“This way,” I said.

She didn’t move. She just stood there. I put out my hand. She reached out and took it. Her skin was warm and dry.

“Let’s go,” I said. “Don’t look at the man on the floor.”

I stopped her again just outside the door. Let her hand go and dragged Troy into the room and closed the door on him and locked it. Took Teresa’s hand again and walked away. She was very suggestible. Very obedient. She just fixed her gaze out in front of her and walked with me. We turned the corner and passed by the washing machine. We walked through the gymnasium. Her dress was silky and lacy. She was holding my hand like a date. I felt like I was going to the prom. We walked up the stairs, side by side. Reached the top.

“Wait here,” I said. “Don’t go anywhere without me, OK?”

“OK,” she whispered.

“Don’t make any noise at all, OK?”

“I won’t.”

I closed the door on her and left her on the top step, with her hand resting lightly

on the rail and a bare lightbulb burning behind her. I checked the hallway carefully and headed back to the kitchen. The food guys were still busy in there.

“You guys called Keast and Maden?” I said.

The one nearer me nodded.

“Paul Keast,” he said.

“Chris Maden,” his partner said.

“I need to move your truck, Paul,” I said.

“Why?”

“Because it’s in the way.”

The guy just looked at me. “You told me to put it there.”

“I didn’t tell you to leave it there.”

He shrugged and rooted around on a counter and came up with his keys.

“Whatever,” he said.

I took the keys and went outside and checked the back of the truck. It was fitted out with metal racks on either side. For trays of food. There was a narrow aisle running down the center. No windows. It would do. I left the rear doors open and slid into the driver’s seat and fired it up. Backed it out to the carriage circle and turned it around and reversed it back to the kitchen door. Now it was facing the right way. I killed the motor but left the keys in it. Went back inside the kitchen. The metal detector beeped.

“What are they eating?” I asked.

“Lamb kebabs,” Maden said. “With rice and couscous and humus. Stuffed grape leaves to start. Baklava for dessert. With coffee.”

“That’s Libyan?”

“It’s generic,” he said. “They eat it everywhere.”

“I used to get that for a dollar,” I said. “You’re charging fifty-five.”

“Where? In *Portland*?”

“In Beirut,” I said.

I stepped out and checked the hallway. All quiet. I opened the basement door. Teresa Daniel was waiting right there, like an automaton. I held out my hand.

“Let’s go,” I said.

She stepped out. I closed the door behind her. Walked her into the kitchen. Keast and Maden stared at her. I ignored them and walked her through. Out through the door. Over to the truck. She shivered in the cold. I helped her climb into the back.

“Wait there for me now,” I said. “Very quiet, OK?”

She nodded and said nothing.

“I’m going to close the doors on you,” I said.

She nodded again.

“I’ll get you out of there soon,” I said.

“Thank you,” she said.

I closed the doors on her and went back to the kitchen. Stood still and listened. I could hear talking from the dining room. It all sounded reasonably social.

“When do they eat?” I said.

“Twenty minutes,” Maden said. “When they’re through with the drinks. There was champagne included in the fifty-five dollars, you know.”

“OK,” I said. “Don’t take offense.”

I checked my watch. Forty-five minutes gone. Fifteen minutes to go.

Show time.

I went back outside into the cold. Slipped into the food truck and fired it up. Eased it forward, slowly around the corner of the house, slowly around the carriage circle, slowly down the driveway. Away from the house. Through the gate. Onto the road. I hit the gas. Took the curves fast. Jammed to a stop level with Villanueva's Taurus. Jumped out. Villanueva and Duffy were instantly out to meet me.

"Teresa's in the back," I said. "She's OK but she's all doped up."

Duffy pumped her fists and jumped on me and hugged me hard and Villanueva wrenched open the doors. Teresa fell into his arms. He lifted her down like a child. Then Duffy grabbed her away from him and he took a turn hugging me.

"You should take her to the hospital," I said.

"We'll take her to the motel," Duffy said. "We're still off the books."

"You sure?"

"She'll be OK," Villanueva said. "Looks like they gave her roofies. Probably from their dope-dealer pals. But they don't last long. They flush out fast."

Duffy was hugging Teresa like a sister. Villanueva was still hugging me.

"Eliot's dead," I said.

That put a real damper on the mood.

"Call ATF from the motel," I said. "If I don't call you first."

They just looked at me.

"I'm going back now," I said.

I turned the truck around and headed back. I could see the house ahead of me. The windows were lit up yellow. The wall lights flared blue in the mist. The truck fought the wind. *Plan B,* I decided. Quinn was mine, but the others could be ATF's headache.

I stopped on the far side of the carriage circle and reversed down the side of the house. Stopped outside the kitchen. Got out and walked around the back of the house and found my coat. Unwrapped the Persuaders. Put my coat on. I needed it. It was a cold night and I would be on the road again in about five minutes.

I stepped across to the dining room windows to check inside. They had closed the drapes. *Makes sense*, I thought. It was a wild blustery night. The dining room would look better with closed drapes. Cozier. Oriental rugs on the floor, wood paneling, silver on the linen tablecloth.

I picked up the Persuaders and walked back to the kitchen. The metal detector squealed. The food guys had ten plates with stuffed grape leaves all lined up on a counter. The leaves looked dark and oily and tough. I was hungry but I couldn't have eaten one. The way my teeth were right then would have made it impossible. I figured I would be eating ice cream for a week, thanks to Paulie.

"Hold off with the food for five minutes, OK?" I said.

Keast and Maden stared at the shotguns.

"Your keys," I said.

I dropped them next to the grape leaves. I didn't need them anymore. I had the keys Beck had given me. I figured I would leave by the front door and use the Cadillac. Faster. More comfortable. I took a knife from the wooden block. Used it to put a slit in the inside of my right-hand coat pocket, just wide enough to allow a Persuader's barrel down into the lining. I picked the gun I had killed Harley with and holstered it there. I held the other one two-handed. Took a breath. Stepped into the hallway. Keast and Maden watched me go. First thing I did was check the powder room. No point in getting all dramatic if Quinn wasn't even in the dining room. But the powder room was empty. Nobody on bathroom break.

The dining room door was closed. I took another breath. Then another. Then I kicked it in and stepped inside and fired two Brennekes into the ceiling. They were like stun grenades. The twin explosions were colossal. Plaster and wood rained down. Dust and smoke filled the air. Everybody froze like statues. I leveled the gun at Quinn's chest. Echoes died away.

"Remember me?" I said.

Elizabeth Beck screamed in the sudden silence.

I moved another step into the room and kept the muzzle on Quinn.

“Remember me?” I said again.

One second. Two. His mouth started moving.

“I saw you in Boston,” he said. “On the street. A Saturday night. Maybe two weeks ago.”

“Try again,” I said.

His face was completely blank. He didn’t remember me. *They diagnosed amnesia,* Duffy had said. *Certainly about the trauma, because that’s almost inevitable. They figured he might be genuinely blank about the incident and the previous day or two.*

“I’m Reacher,” I said. “I need you to remember me.”

He glanced helplessly at Beck.

“Her name was Dominique,” I said.

He turned back to me. Stared at me. Eyes wide. Now he knew who I was. His face changed. Blood drained out and fury swarmed in. And fear. The .22 scars went pure white. I thought about aiming right between them. It would be a difficult shot.

“You really thought I wouldn’t find you?” I said.

“Can we talk?” he said. Sounded like his mouth was dry.

“No,” I said. “You’ve already been talking ten extra years.”

“We’re all armed here,” Beck said. He sounded afraid. The three Arabs were staring at me. They had plaster dust stuck to the oil in their hair.

“So tell everybody to hold their fire,” I said. “No reason for more than one casualty here.”

People eased away from me. Dust settled on the table. A slab of falling ceiling had broken a glass. I moved with the crowd and turned and adjusted the geometry to herd the bad guys together at one end of the room. At the same time I tried to force Elizabeth and Richard and the cook together at the other. Where they would be safe, by the window. Pure body language. I turned my shoulder and inched forward and even though the table was between me and most of them they went where I wanted them. The little gathering parted obediently into two groups, eight and three.

“Everybody should step away from Mr. Xavier now,” I said.

Everybody did, except Beck. Beck stayed right at his shoulder. I stared at him. Then I realized Quinn had a grip on his arm. He was holding it tight just above the elbow. Pulling on it. Pulling on it hard. Looking for a human shield.

“These slugs are an inch wide,” I said to him. “As long as I can see an inch of you, that won’t work very well.”

He said nothing back. Just kept on pulling. Beck was resisting. There was fear in his eyes, too. It was a static little slow-motion contest. But I guessed Quinn was winning it. Inside ten seconds Beck’s left shoulder was overlapping Quinn’s right. Both of them were quivering with effort. Even though the Persuader had a pistol grip instead of a stock I raised it high to my shoulder and sighted carefully down the barrel.

“I can still see you,” I said.

“Don’t shoot,” Richard Beck said, behind me.

Something in his voice.

I glanced back at him. Just a brief turn of my head. Just a flash. There and back. He had a Beretta in his hand. It was identical to the one in my pocket. It was pointed at my head. The electric light was harsh on it. It was highlighted. Even though I had only looked for a fraction of a second I had seen the elegant engraving on the slide. *Pietro Beretta.* I had seen the dew of new oil. I had seen the little red dot that is revealed when the safety is pushed to *fire.*

“Put it away, Richard,” I said.

“Not while my father is there,” he said.

"Not while my father is there," he said.

"Let go of him, Quinn," I said.

"Don't shoot, Reacher," Richard said. "I'll shoot you first."

By then Quinn had Beck almost all the way in front of him.

"Don't shoot," Richard said again.

"Put it down, Richard," I said.

"No."

"Put it down."

"No."

I listened carefully to his voice. He wasn't moving. He was standing still. I knew exactly where he was. I knew the angle I would have to turn through. I rehearsed it in my head. *Turn. Fire. Pump. Turn. Fire.* I could get them both within a second and a quarter. Too fast for Quinn to react. I took a breath.

Then I pictured Richard in my mind. The silly hair, the missing ear. The long fingers. I pictured the big Brenneke slug blasting through him, crushing, bludgeoning, the immense kinetic energy blowing him apart. I couldn't do it.

"Put it away," I said.

"No."

"Please."

"No."

"You're helping them."

"I'm helping my dad."

"I won't hit your dad."

"I can't take that risk. He's my dad."

“Elizabeth, tell him.”

“No,” she said. “He’s my husband.”

Stalemate.

Worse than stalemate. Because there was absolutely nothing I could do. I couldn’t fire on Richard. Because I wouldn’t let myself. Therefore I couldn’t fire on Quinn. And I couldn’t *say* I wasn’t going to fire on Quinn because then eight guys would immediately pull guns on me. I might get a few of them, but sooner or later one of them would get me. And I couldn’t separate Quinn from Beck. No way was Quinn going to let go of Beck and walk out of the room alone with me. *Stalemate.*

Plan C.

“Put it away, Richard,” I said.

Listen.

“No.”

He hadn’t moved. I rehearsed it again. *Turn. Fire.* I took a breath. Spun and fired. A foot to Richard’s right, at the window. The slug smashed through the drapes and caught the casement frame and blew it away. I ran three paces and went headfirst through the hole. Rolled twice wrapped in a torn velvet curtain and scrambled up on my feet and ran. Straight out on the rocks.

I turned back after twenty yards and stood still. The remaining curtain was billowing in the wind. It was flapping in and out of the hole. I could hear the fabric snapping and beating. Yellow light shone behind it. I could see backlit figures crowding together behind the shattered glass. Everything was moving. The curtain, the people. The light was fading and blazing as the curtain flapped in and out. Then shots started coming at me. Handguns were firing. First two, then four, then five. Then more. Rounds were buzzing through the air all around me. Hitting the rocks and sparking and ricocheting. Chips of stone flew everywhere. The shots sounded quiet. They sounded like dull insignificant pops. Their sound was lost in the howl of the wind and the crash of the waves. I dropped to my knees. Raised the Persuader. Then the shooting stopped. I held my fire. The curtain disappeared. Somebody had torn it down. Light flooded out

at me. I saw Richard and Elizabeth forced to the front of the crowd at the window. Their arms were twisted up behind them. I saw Quinn's face behind Richard's shoulder. He was aiming a gun straight at me.

"Shoot me now," he screamed.

His voice was nearly lost in the wind. I heard the seventh wave crash in behind me. Spray burst upward and the wind caught it and it hit me hard in the back of the head. I saw one of Quinn's guys behind Elizabeth. Her face was twisted in pain. His right wrist was resting on her shoulder. His head was behind her head. He had a gun in his hand. I saw another gun butt come forward and knock shards of glass out of the frame. It raked it clean. Then Richard was jerked forward. His knee came up on the sill. Quinn pushed him all the way outside. Came out after him, still holding him close.

"Shoot me now," he screamed again.

Behind him Elizabeth was lifted out through the window. There was a thick arm around her waist. Her legs kicked desperately. She was planted on the ground and pulled backward to cover the guy holding her. I could see her face, pale in the darkness. Twisted in pain. I shuffled backward. More people climbed out. They swarmed. They formed up together. They made a wedge. Richard and Elizabeth were held shoulder to shoulder at the front like a blunt point. The wedge started lurching toward me. It was uncoordinated. I could see five guns. I shuffled backward. The wedge kept coming. The guns started firing again.

They were aiming to miss. They were aiming to corral me. I moved backward. Counted rounds. Five guns, full mags, they had at least seventy-five shells between them. Maybe more. And they had fired maybe twenty. They were a long way from empty. And their fire was controlled. They weren't just blasting away. They were aiming left and right of me, into the rocks, regular spaced shots every couple of seconds. Coming on like a machine. Like a tank armored with humans. I stood up. Moved backward. The wedge kept coming at me.

Richard was on the right and Elizabeth was on the left. I picked a guy behind Richard and to his right and aimed. The guy saw me do it and crowded in tight. The wedge jammed together. Now it was a narrow column. It kept on coming. I had no shot. I walked backward, step by step.

My left heel found the edge of Harley's cleft.

Water boiled in and covered my shoe. I heard the waves. Gravel rattled and sucked. I moved my right foot level with my left. Balanced on the edge. I saw Quinn smiling at me. Just the gleam of his teeth in the dark.

“Say good night now,” he screamed.

Stay alive. See what the next minute brings.

The column grew arms. Six or seven of them, reaching out, turning forward with their guns. Aiming. They were waiting for a command. I heard the seventh wave crash in at my feet. It came up over my ankles and flooded ten feet in front of me. It paused there for a second and then it drained back, indifferent, like a metronome. I looked at Elizabeth and Richard. Looked at their faces. Took a deep breath. Thought: *Them or me.* I dropped the Persuader and threw myself backward into the water.

First was the shock of the cold, and then it was like falling off a building. Except it wasn’t a free fall. It was like landing in a freezing lubricated tube and being sucked down it at a steep and controlled angle. With acceleration. I was upside down. I was traveling headfirst. I had landed on my back and for a split second I had felt nothing. Just the freezing water in my ears and my eyes and my nose. It stung my lip. I was about a foot under the surface. I wasn’t going anywhere. I was worried about floating back up. I would bob to the surface right in front of them. They would be crowding around the lip of the cleft with their guns aimed down at the water.

But then I felt my hair stand up. It was a gentle sensation. Like somebody was combing it upright and pulling on it. Then I felt a grip on my head. Like a strong man with big hands was clamping my face between his palms and pulling, very gently at first, and then a little harder. And harder. I felt it in my neck. It was like I was getting taller. Then I felt it in my chest and my shoulders. My arms were floating free and suddenly they were wrenched up above my head. Then I fell off the building. It was like a perfect swallow dive, on my back. I just arched downward. But I accelerated. Much faster than a free fall through the air. It was like I was being reeled in by a gigantic elastic cord.

I couldn’t see anything. I didn’t know if my eyes were open or shut. The cold

was so stunning and the pressure on my body was so uniform that I didn´t really feel anything, either. No physical force. It was completely fluid. It was like some kind of science fiction transportation. Like I was being beamed down. Like I was liquid. Like I had been elongated. Like I was suddenly thirty feet tall and an inch wide. There was blackness and coldness everywhere. I held my breath. All the tension went out of me and I leaned my head back to feel the water on my scalp. Pointed my toes. Arched my spine. Stretched my arms far up ahead of me. Opened my fingers to feel the water flow between them. It felt very peaceful. I was a bullet. I liked it.

Then I felt a panicked thump all through my chest and knew I was drowning. So I started to fight. I tumbled myself over and my coat came up around my head. I tore it off, spinning and somersaulting in the freezing tube. The coat whipped across my face and hurtled away. I slid out of my jacket. It disappeared. I suddenly felt the bitter cold. I was still going down fast. My ears were hissing. I was tumbling in slow motion. Whipping down and down faster than I had ever traveled and rolling and tumbling like I was mired in treacle.

How wide was the tube? I didn't know. I kicked desperately and clawed at the water around me. It felt like quicksand. *Don't swim down.* I kicked and fought and tried to find the edge. Bargained with myself. *Concentrate. Find the edge. Make progress. Stay calm. Let it take you down fifty feet for every foot you move sideways.* I stopped for a second and regrouped and started swimming properly. And hard. Like the tube was the flat surface of a pool and I was in a race. Like there was a girl and a drink and a chair on the patio for the winner.

How long had I been down? I didn't know. Maybe fifteen seconds. I could hold my breath for maybe a minute. *So relax. Swim hard. Find the edge.* There had to be an edge. The whole ocean wasn't moving like this. It couldn't be, otherwise Portugal was going to be under water. And half of Spain. Pressure roared in my ears.

Which way was I facing? Didn't matter. I just had to get out of the current. I swam onward. Felt the tide fighting me. It was incredibly powerful. It had been gentle before. Now it tore at me. Like it resented my decision to fight back. I clamped my teeth and kicked on. It was like crawling across a floor with a thousand tons of bricks on my back. My lungs swelled and burned. I trickled air out between my lips. Kicked on and on. Clawed the water ahead of me.

Thirty seconds. I was drowning. I knew it. I was weakening. My lungs were

empty. My chest was crushed. I had a billion tons of water on top of me. I could feel my face twisting in pain. My ears were roaring. My stomach was knotted. My left shoulder was burning where Paulie had hit it. I heard Harley's voice in my head: *We never had one come back.* I kicked on.

Forty seconds. I was making no progress. I was being hurled down into the depths. I was going to hit the seabed. I kicked on. Clawed at the tide. *Fifty seconds.* My ears were hissing. My head was bursting. My lips were clamped against my teeth. I was very angry. Quinn had made it out of the ocean. *Why couldn't I?*

I kicked on desperately. *A whole minute.* My fingers were frozen and cramped. My eyes were scoured. *More than a minute.* I flailed and lashed. I battered my way through the water. Kicked and fought. Then I felt a change in the tide. *I found the edge.* It was like grabbing a telegraph pole from a speeding train. I punched through the skin of the tube and a new tide seized my hands and hit me in the head and turbulence battered me and I was suddenly cartwheeling head over feet and floating free in water that felt still and clear and freezing.

Now think. Which way is up? I used every ounce of self-control I had and stopped fighting. Just floated. Tried to gauge my direction. I went nowhere. *My lungs were empty.* My lips were clamped tight. *I couldn't breathe.* I had neutral buoyancy. I wasn't moving. I was dead in the water. In a cubic mile of black ocean. I opened my eyes. Stared all around me. Above me, below me, to the sides. I twisted and turned. Saw nothing. It was like outer space. Everything was pitch dark. No light at all. *We never had one come back.*

I felt slight pressure on my chest. Less on my back. I was hanging facedown in the water. Suspended. I was floating upward, very slowly, back-first. I concentrated hard. Fixed the sensation clearly in my mind. Fixed my position. Arched my spine. Scrabbled with my hands. Kicked my legs down. Stretched my arms toward the surface. *Now go. Don't breathe.*

I kicked furiously. Scooped huge strokes with my arms. Clamped my lips. *I had no air.* I held my face up at an angle so that the first thing to break the surface would be my mouth. *How far?* It was black above me. There was nothing there. I was a mile down. *I had no air.* I was going to die. I opened my lips. Water flooded my mouth. I spat and swallowed. Kicked onward. I could see purple colors in my eyes. My head hummed. I felt feverish. Like I was burning. Then

like I was freezing. Then like I was wrapped in thick feather quilts. They were soft. I could feel nothing at all.

I stopped kicking then, because I was pretty sure I had died. So I opened my mouth to breathe. Sucked in seawater. My chest spasmed and coughed it out. In and out, twice more. I was breathing pure water. I kicked once more. It was all I could manage. One last kick. I made it a big one. Then I just closed my eyes and floated and breathed the cold water.

I hit the surface half a second later. I felt the air on my face like a lover's caress. I opened my mouth and my chest heaved and a high spout of water shot up and I gulped air even before it came back down on me. Then I fought like a madman to keep my face up in the cold sweet oxygen. Just kicked and panted and breathed, sucking and blowing and coughing and retching.

I spread my arms wide and let my legs float up and tilted my head back with my mouth wide open. Watched my chest rise and fall, rise and fall, fill and empty. It moved incredibly fast. I felt tired. And peaceful. And vague. I had no oxygen in my brain. I tossed around in the water for a full minute, just breathing. My vision cleared. I saw dull clouds above me. My head cleared. I breathed some more. *In, out, in, out,* with my lips pursed, blowing like a locomotive. My head starting aching. I trod water and looked for the horizon. Couldn't find it. I was pitching and falling on fast urgent waves, up and down, up and down, maybe ten or fifteen feet at a time. I kicked a little and timed it so the next wave carried me up to its peak. Stared ahead. Saw nothing at all before I fell back into its trough.

I had no idea where I was. I turned ninety degrees and rode the next peak and looked again. To my right. Maybe there would be a boat out there somewhere. There wasn't. There was nothing. I was alone in the middle of the Atlantic. Drifting. *We never had one come back.*

I turned one-eighty and rode a peak and looked to my left. Nothing there. I fell back into the trough and rode the next peak and looked behind me.

I was a hundred yards from shore.

I could see the big house. I could see lit windows. I could see the wall. I could see the blue haze of its lights. I hauled my shirt up on my shoulders. It was soaked and heavy. I took a breath. Rolled onto my front and started swimming.

One hundred yards. Any kind of a halfway decent Olympic competitor could swim a hundred yards in about forty-five seconds. And any kind of a halfway decent high school swimmer could do it in less than a minute. It took me nearly fifteen. The tide was going out. I felt like I was going backward. I felt like I was still drowning. But eventually I touched the shore and got my arms around a smooth rock that was coated with freezing slime and held on tight. The sea was still rough. Big waves thumped in on me and smashed my cheek against the granite, regular as clockwork. I didn't care. I savored the impacts. Each and every one of them. I loved that rock.

I rested on it for a minute more and then crawled my way around behind the garage block, sloshing along half in and half out of the water, crouched low. Then I crawled out on my hands and knees. Rolled over on my back. Stared up at the sky. *Now you had one come back, Harley.*

The waves came in and reached my waist. I shuffled on my back until they reached only my knees. Rolled onto my front again. Lay with my face pressed down on the rock. I was cold. Chilled to the bone. My coat was gone. My jacket was gone. The Persuaders were gone. The Beretta was gone.

I stood up. Water sluiced off me. I staggered a couple of steps. Heard Leon Garber in my head: *What doesn't kill you only makes you stronger.* He thought JFK had said it. I thought it was actually Friedrich Nietzsche, and he said *destroy*, not *kill. What doesn't destroy us makes us stronger.* I staggered two more steps and leaned up against the back of the courtyard wall and threw up about a gallon of salt water. That made me feel a little better. I jerked my arms around and kicked each leg in turn to try to get some circulation going and some water out of my clothes. Then I plastered my soaking hair back on my head and tried a couple of long slow breaths. I was worried about coughing. My throat was raw and aching from the cold and the salt.

Then I walked along the back wall and turned at the corner. Found my little dip and visited my hidden bundle one last time. *I'm coming to get you, Quinn.*

My watch was still working and it showed me my hour was long gone. Duffy

My watch was still working and it showed me my hour was long gone. Duffy would have called ATF twenty minutes ago. But their response would be slow. I doubted if they had a field office in Portland. Boston was probably the closest. Where the maid had been sent out from. So I still had enough time.

The food truck was gone. Evidently dinner had been canceled. But the other vehicles were still there. The Cadillac, the Town Car, the two Suburbans. Eight hostiles still in the house. Plus Elizabeth and the cook. I didn't know which category to put Richard in.

I kept tight against the house wall and looked in every window. The cook was in the kitchen. She was cleaning up. Keast and Maden had left all their stuff there. I ducked under the sill and moved on. The dining room was a ruin. The wind blowing in through the shattered window had caught the linen tablecloth and thrown plates and glasses everywhere. There were dunes of plaster dust in the corners where the wind had piled them. There were two big holes in the ceiling. Probably in the ceiling of the room above, and the room above that, too. The Brennekes had probably made it all the way out through the roof, like moon shots.

The square room where I had played Russian roulette had the three Libyans and Quinn's three guys in it. They were all sitting around the oak table, doing nothing. They looked blank and shocked. But they looked settled. They weren't going anywhere. I ducked under the sill and moved on. Came all the way around to Elizabeth Beck's parlor. She was in there. With Richard. Somebody had taken the dead guy out. She was on her sofa, talking fast. I couldn't hear what she was saying, but Richard was listening hard. I ducked under the sill and moved on.

Beck and Quinn were in Beck's little room. Quinn was in the red armchair and Beck was standing in front of the cabinet with the machine gun display. Beck looked pale and grim and hostile and Quinn looked full of himself. He had a fat unlit cigar in his hand. He was rolling it between his fingers and thumb and lining up a silver cutter at the business end.

I made it back to the kitchen after completing a whole circle. Stepped inside. I didn't make a sound. The metal detector stayed quiet. The cook didn't hear me coming. I caught her from behind. Clamped a hand over her mouth and dragged her over to a counter. I wasn't taking any chances after what Richard had done to me. I found a linen towel in a drawer and used it as a gag. Found another to tie her wrists. Found another to tie her ankles. I left her sitting uncomfortably on the

floor next to the sink. I found a fourth towel and put it in my pocket. Then I stepped out into the hallway.

It was quiet. I could hear Elizabeth Beck's voice, faintly. Her parlor door was standing open. I couldn't hear anything else. I went straight to the door of Beck's den. Opened it. Stepped inside. Closed it again.

I was met by a haze of cigar smoke. Quinn had just lit up. I got the feeling he had been laughing about something. Now he was frozen with shock. Beck was the same. Pale, and frozen. They were just staring at me.

"I'm back," I said.

Beck had his mouth open. I hit him with a cigarette punch. His mouth slammed shut and his head snapped back and his eyes rolled up and he went straight down on the three-deep rugs on the floor. It was a decent blow, but not my best. His son had saved his life after all. If I hadn't been so tired from swimming, a better punch would have killed him.

Quinn came straight at me. Straight out of the chair. He dropped his cigar. Went for his pocket. I hit him in the stomach. Air punched out of him and he folded forward and dropped to his knees. I hit him in the head and pushed him down on his stomach. Knelt on his back, with my knees high up between his shoulder blades.

"No," he said. He had no air. "Please."

I put the flat of one hand on the back of his head. Took my chisel out of my shoe and slid it in behind his ear and up into his brain, slowly, inch by inch. He was dead before it was halfway in, but I kept it going until it was buried all the way to the hilt. I left it there. I wiped the handle with the towel from my pocket and then I spread the towel over his head and stood up, wearily.

"Ten-eighteen, Dom," I said to myself.

I stepped on Quinn's burning cigar. Took Beck's car keys out of his pocket and slipped back into the hallway. Walked through the kitchen. The cook followed me with her eyes. I stumbled around to the front of the house. Slid into the Cadillac. Fired it up and took off west.

It took me thirty minutes to get to Duffy's motel. She and Villanueva were together in his room with Teresa Justice. She wasn't Teresa Daniel anymore. She wasn't dressed like a doll anymore, either. They had her in a motel robe. She had showered. She was coming around fast. She looked weak and wan, but she looked like a person. Like a federal agent. She stared at me in horror. At first I thought she was confused about who I was. She had seen me in the cellar. Maybe she thought I was one of them.

But then I saw myself in the mirror on the closet door and I saw her problem. I was wet from head to toe. I was shaking and shivering. My skin was dead white. The cut on my lip had opened and turned blue on the edges. I had fresh bruises where the waves had butted me against the rock. I had seaweed in my hair and slime on my shirt.

"I fell in the sea," I said.

Nobody spoke.

"I'll take a shower," I said. "In a minute. Did you call ATF?"

Duffy nodded. "They're on their way. Portland PD has already secured the warehouse. They're going to seal the coast road, too. You got out just in time."

"Was I ever there?"

Villanueva shook his head. "You don't exist. Certainly we never met you."

"Thank you," I said.

"Old school," he said.

I felt better after the shower. Looked better, too. But I had no clothes. Villanueva lent me a set of his. They were a little short and wide. I used his old raincoat to hide them. I wrapped it tight around me, because I was still cold. We had pizza delivered. We were all starving. I was very thirsty, from the salt water. We ate and we drank. I couldn't bite on the pizza crust. I just sucked the topping off. After an hour, Teresa Justice went to bed. She shook my hand. Said good night, very politely. She had no idea who I was.

“Roofies wipe out their short-term memory,” Villanueva told me.

Then we talked business. Duffy was very down. She was living a nightmare. She had lost three agents in an illegal operation. And getting Teresa out was no kind of upside. Because Teresa shouldn’t have been in there in the first place.

“So quit,” I said. “Join ATF instead. You just handed them a big result on a plate. You’ll be flavor of the month.”

“I’m going to retire,” Villanueva said. “I’m old enough and I’ve had enough.”

“I can’t retire,” Duffy said.

In the restaurant the night before the arrest, Dominique Kohl had asked me, “Why are you doing this?”

I wasn’t sure what she meant. “Having dinner with you?”

“No, working as an MP. You could be anything. You could be Special Forces, Intelligence, Air Cavalry, Armored, anything you wanted.”

“So could you.”

“I know. And I know why *I’m* doing this. I want to know why you’re doing it.”

It was the first time anybody had ever asked me.

“Because I always wanted to be a cop,” I said. “But I was predestined for the military. Family background, no choice at all. So I became a military cop.”

“That’s not really an answer. Why did you want to be a cop in the first place?”

I shrugged. “It’s just the way I am. Cops put things right.”

“What things?”

“They look after people. They make sure the little guy is OK.”

“That’s it? The little guy?”

I shook my head.

“No,” I said. “Not really. I don’t really care about the little guy. I just hate the big guy. I hate big smug people who think they can get away with things.”

“You produce the right results for the wrong reasons, then.”

I nodded. “But I try to do the right thing. I think the reasons don’t really matter. Whatever, I like to see the right thing done.”

“Me too,” she said. “I try to do the right thing. Even though everybody hates us and nobody helps us and nobody thanks us afterward. I think doing the right thing is an end in itself. It has to be, really, doesn’t it?”

“Did you do the right thing?” I asked, ten years later.

Duffy nodded.

“Yes,” she said.

“No doubt at all?”

“No,” she said.

“You sure?”

“Totally.”

“So relax,” I said. “That’s the best you can ever hope for. Nobody helps and nobody says thanks afterward.”

She was quiet for a spell.

“Did *you* do the right thing?” she said.

“No question,” I said.

We left it at that. Duffy had put Teresa Justice in Eliot's old room. That left Villanueva in his, and me in Duffy's. She seemed a little awkward about what she had said before. About our lack of professionalism. I wasn't sure if she was trying to reinforce it or trying to withdraw it.

"Don't panic," I said. "I'm way too tired."

And this time, I proved I was. Not for lack of trying. We started. She made it clear she wanted to withdraw her earlier objection. Made it clear she agreed that saying *yes* was better than saying *no.* I was very happy about that, because I liked her a lot. So we started. We got naked and got in bed together and I remember kissing her so hard it made my mouth hurt. But that's all I remember. I fell asleep. I slept the sleep of the dead. Eleven hours straight. They were all gone when I woke up. Gone to face whatever their futures held for them. I was alone in the room, with a bunch of memories. It was late morning. Sunlight was coming in through the shades. Motes of dust were dancing in the air. Villanueva's spare outfit was gone from the back of the chair. There was a shopping bag there instead. It was full of cheap clothes. They looked like they would fit me very well. Susan Duffy was a good judge of sizes. There were two complete sets. One was for cold weather. One was for hot. She didn't know where I was headed. So she had catered for both possibilities. She was a very practical woman. I figured I would miss her. For a time.

I dressed in the hot weather stuff. Left the cold weather stuff right there in the room. I figured I could drive Beck's Cadillac out to I-95. To the Kennebunk rest area. I figured I could abandon it there. Figured I could catch a ride south without any problem. And I-95 goes to all kinds of places, all the way down to Miami.

The Enemy

one

As serious as a heart attack. Maybe those were Ken Kramer's last words, like a final explosion of panic in his mind as he stopped breathing and dropped into the abyss. He was out of line, in every way there was, and he knew it. He was where he shouldn't have been, with someone he shouldn't have been with, carrying something he should have kept in a safer place. But he was getting away with it. He was playing and winning. He was on top of his game. He was probably smiling. Until the sudden thump deep inside his chest betrayed him. Then everything turned around. Success became instant catastrophe. He had no time to put anything right.

Nobody knows what a fatal heart attack feels like. There are no survivors to tell us. Medics talk about necrosis, and clots, and oxygen starvation, and occluded blood vessels. They predict rapid useless cardiac fluttering, or else nothing at all. They use words like *infarction* and *fibrillation*, but those terms mean nothing to us. *You just drop dead* is what they should say. Ken Kramer certainly did. He just dropped dead, and he took his secrets with him, and the trouble he left behind nearly killed me too.

I was alone in a borrowed office. There was a clock on the wall. It had no second hand. Just an hour hand, and a minute hand. It was electric. It didn't tick. It was completely silent, like the room. I was watching the minute hand, intently. It wasn't moving.

I waited.

It moved. It jumped ahead six degrees. Its motion was mechanical and damped and precise. It bounced once and quivered a little and came to rest.

A minute.

One down, one to go.

Sixty more seconds.

I kept on watching. The clock stayed still for a long, long time. Then the hand jumped again. Another six degrees, another minute, straight-up midnight, and 1989 was 1990.

I pushed my chair back and stood up behind the desk. The phone rang. I figured it was someone calling to wish me a happy new year. But it wasn't. It was a civilian cop calling because he had a dead soldier in a motel thirty miles off-post.

"I need the Military Police duty officer," he said.

I sat down again, behind the desk.

"You got him," I said.

"We've got one of yours, dead."

"One of mine?"

"A soldier," he said.

"Where?"

"Motel, in town."

"Dead how?" I asked.

"Heart attack, most likely," the guy said.

I paused. Turned the page on the army-issue calendar on the desk, from December 31st to January 1st.

"Nothing suspicious?" I said.

"Don't see anything."

"You seen heart attacks before?"

"Lots of them."

“OK,” I said. “Call post headquarters.”

I gave him the number.

“Happy New Year,” I said.

“You don’t need to come out?” he said.

“No,” I said. I put the phone down. I didn’t need to go out. The army is a big institution, a little bigger than Detroit, a little smaller than Dallas, and just as unsentimental as either place. Current active strength is 930,000 men and women, and they are as representative of the general American population as you can get. Death rate in America is around 865 people per 100,000 population per year, and in the absence of sustained combat soldiers don’t die any faster or slower than regular people. On the whole they are younger and fitter than the population at large, but they smoke more and drink more and eat worse and stress harder and do all kinds of dangerous things in training. So their life expectancy comes out about average. Soldiers die at the same speed as everyone else. Do the math with the death rate versus current strength, and you have twenty-two dead soldiers every single day of every single year, accidents, suicides, heart disease, cancer, stroke, lung disease, liver failure, kidney failure. Like dead citizens in Detroit, or Dallas. So I didn’t need to go out. I’m a cop, not a mortician.

The clock moved. The hand jumped and bounced and settled. Three minutes past midnight. The phone rang again. It was someone calling to wish me a happy new year. It was the sergeant in the office outside of mine.

“Happy New Year,” she said to me.

“You too,” I said. “You couldn’t stand up and put your head in the door?”

“You couldn’t put yours *out* the door?”

“I was on the phone.”

“Who was it?”

“Nobody,” I said. “Just some grunt didn’t make it to the new decade.”

“You want coffee?”

You want coffee?

“Sure,” I said. “Why not?”

I put the phone down again. At that point I had been in more than six years, and army coffee was one of the things that made me happy to stay in. It was the best in the world, no question. So were the sergeants. This one was a mountain woman from north Georgia. I had known her two days. She lived off-post in a trailer park somewhere in the North Carolina Badlands. She had a baby son. She had told me all about him. I had heard nothing about a husband. She was all bone and sinew and she was as hard as woodpecker lips, but she liked me. I could tell, because she brought me coffee. They don’t like you, they don’t bring you coffee. They knife you in the back instead. My door opened and she came in, carrying two mugs, one for her and one for me.

“Happy New Year,” I said to her.

She put the coffee down on my desk, both mugs.

“Will it be?” she said.

“Don’t see why not,” I said.

“The Berlin Wall is halfway down. They showed it on the television. They were having a big party over there.”

“I’m glad someone was, somewhere.”

“Lots of people. Big crowds. All singing and dancing.”

“I didn’t see the news.”

“This all was six hours ago. The time difference.”

“They’re probably still at it.”

“They had sledgehammers.”

“They’re allowed. Their half is a free city. We spent forty-five years keeping it that way.”

“Pretty soon we won’t have an enemy anymore.”

I tried the coffee. Hot, black, the best in the world.

“We won,” I said. “Isn’t that supposed to be a good thing?”

“Not if you depend on Uncle Sam’s paycheck.”

She was dressed like me in standard woodland camouflage battledress uniform. Her sleeves were neatly rolled. Her MP brassard was exactly horizontal. I figured she had it safety-pinned in back where nobody could see. Her boots were gleaming.

“You got any desert camos?” I asked her.

“Never been to the desert,” she said.

“They changed the pattern. They put big brown splotches on it. Five years’ research. Infantry guys are calling it chocolate chip. It’s not a good pattern. They’ll have to change it back. But it’ll take them another five years to figure that out.”

“So?”

“If it takes them five years to revise a camo pattern, your kid will be through college before they figure out force reduction. So don’t worry about it.”

“OK,” she said, not believing me. “You think he’s good for college?”

“I never met him.”

She said nothing.

“The army hates change,” I said. “And we’ll always have enemies.”

She said nothing. My phone rang again. She leaned forward and answered it for me. Listened for about eleven seconds and handed me the receiver.

“Colonel Garber, sir,” she said. “He’s in D.C.”

She took her mug and left the room. Colonel Garber was ultimately my boss, and although he was a pleasant human being it was unlikely he was calling eight

minutes into New Year's Day simply to be social. That wasn't his style. Some brass does that stuff. They come over all cheery on the big holidays, like they're really just one of the boys. But Leon Garber wouldn't have dreamed of trying that, with anyone, and least of all with me. Even if he had known I was going to be there.

"Reacher here," I said.

There was a long pause.

"I thought you were in Panama," Leon Garber said.

"I got orders," I said.

"From Panama to Fort Bird? Why?"

"Not my place to ask."

"When was this?"

"Two days ago."

"That's a kick in the teeth," he said. "Isn't it?"

"Is it?"

"Panama was probably more exciting."

"It was OK," I said.

"And they got you working duty officer on New Year's Eve already?"

"I volunteered," I said. "I'm trying to make people like me."

"That's a hopeless task," he said.

"A sergeant just brought me coffee."

There was another pause. "Someone just call you about a dead soldier in a motel?" he asked.

"Eight minutes ago," I said. "I shuffled it off to headquarters."

Eight minutes ago," I said. "I shuffled it off to headquarters."

"And they shuffled it off to someone else and I just got pulled out of a party to hear all about it."

"Why?"

"Because the dead soldier in question is a two-star general."

The phone went quiet.

"I didn't think to ask," I said.

The phone stayed quiet.

"Generals are mortal," I said. "Same as anyone else."

No reply.

"There was nothing suspicious," I said. "He croaked, is all. Heart attack. Probably had gout. I didn't see a reason to get excited."

"It's a question of dignity," Garber said. "We can't leave a two-star lying around belly-up in public without reacting. We need a presence."

"And that would be me?"

"I'd prefer someone else. But you're probably the highest-ranking sober MP in the world tonight. So yes, it would be you."

"It'll take me an hour to get there."

"He's not going anywhere. He's dead. And they haven't found a sober medical examiner yet."

"OK," I said.

"Be respectful," Garber said.

"OK," I said again.

"And be polite. Off-post, we're in their hands. It's a civilian jurisdiction."

“I’m familiar with civilians. I met one, once.”

“But control the situation,” he said. “You know, if it needs controlling.”

“He probably died in bed,” I said. “Like people do.”

“Call me,” he said. “If you need to.”

“Was it a good party?”

“Excellent. My daughter is visiting.”

He clicked off and I called the civilian dispatcher back and got the name and the address of the motel. Then I left my coffee on my desk and told my sergeant what was up and headed back to my quarters to change. I figured a *presence* required Class A greens, not woodland-pattern BDUs.

I took a Humvee from the MP motor pool and was logged out through the main gate. I found the motel inside fifty minutes. It was thirty miles due north of Fort Bird through dark undistinguished North Carolina countryside that was equal parts strip malls and scrubby forest and what I figured were dormant sweet potato fields. It was all new to me. I had never served there before. The roads were very quiet. Everyone was still inside, partying. I hoped I would be back at Bird before they all came out and started driving home. Although I really liked the Humvee’s chances, head-on against a civilian ride.

The motel was part of a knot of low commercial structures clustered in the darkness near a big highway interchange. There was a truck stop as a centerpiece. It had a greasy spoon that was open on the holidays and a gas station big enough to take eighteen-wheelers. There was a no-name cinder-block lounge bar with lots of neon and no windows. It had an *Exotic Dancers* sign lit up in pink and a parking lot the size of a football field. There were diesel spills and rainbow puddles all over it. I could hear loud music coming out of the bar. There were cars parked three-deep all around it. The whole area was glowing sulfurous yellow from the streetlights. The night air was cold and full of fog. The motel itself was directly across the street from the gas station. It was a run-down swaybacked affair about twenty rooms long. It had a lot of peeling paint. It

looked empty. There was an office at the left-hand end with a token vehicle porch and a buzzing Coke machine.

First question: Why would a two-star general use a place like this? I was pretty sure there wouldn't have been a DoD inquiry if he had checked into a Holiday Inn.

There were two town police cruisers parked at careless angles outside the motel's last-but-one room. There was a small plain sedan sandwiched between them. It was cold and misted over. It was a base-model Ford, red, four cylinder. It had skinny tires and plastic hubcaps. A rental, for sure. I put the Humvee next to the right-hand police cruiser and slid out into the chill. I heard the music from across the street, louder. The last-but-one room's lights were off and its door was open. I figured the cops were trying to keep the interior temperature low. Trying to stop the old guy from getting too ripe. I was anxious to take a look at him. I was pretty sure I had never seen a dead general before.

Three cops stayed in their cars and one got out to meet me. He was wearing tan uniform pants and a short leather jacket zipped to his chin. No hat. The jacket had badges pinned to it that told me his name was Stockton and his rank was deputy chief. He was gray, about fifty. He was medium height and a little soft and heavy but the way he was reading the badges on my coat told me he was probably a veteran, like a lot of cops are.

"Major," he said, as a greeting.

I nodded. A veteran, for sure. A major gets a little gold-colored oak leaf on the epaulette, one inch across, one on each side. This guy was looking upward and sideways at mine, which wasn't the clearest angle of view. But he knew what they were. So he was familiar with rank designations. And I recognized his voice. He was the guy who had called me, at five seconds past midnight.

"I'm Rick Stockton," he said. "Deputy Chief."

He was calm. He had seen heart attacks before.

"I'm Jack Reacher. MP duty officer tonight."

He recognized my voice in turn. Smiled.

"You decided to come out," he said. "After all."

You decided to come out," he said. "After all.

"You didn't tell me the DOA was a two-star."

"Well, he is."

"I've never seen a dead general," I said.

"Not many people have," he said, and the way he said it made me think he had been an enlisted man.

"Army?" I asked.

"Marine Corps," he said. "First sergeant."

"My old man was a Marine," I said. I always make that point, talking to Marines. It gives me some kind of genetic legitimacy. Stops them from thinking of me as a pure army dogface. But I keep it vague. I don't tell them my old man had made captain. Enlisted men and officers don't automatically see eye to eye.

"Humvee," Stockton said.

He was looking at my ride.

"You like it?" he asked.

I nodded. *Humvee* was everyone's best attempt at saying HMMWV, which stands for *High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle*, which about says it all. Like the army generally, what you're told is what you get.

"It works as advertised," I said.

"Kind of wide," he said. "I wouldn't like to drive it in a city."

"You'd have tanks in front of you," I said. "They'd be clearing the way. I think that would be the basic plan."

The music from the bar thudded on. Stockton said nothing.

"Let's look at the dead guy," I said to him.

He led the way inside. Flicked a switch that lit up the interior hallway. Then

another that lit up the whole room. I saw a standard motel layout. A yard-wide lobby with a closet on the left and a bathroom on the right. Then a twelve-by-twenty rectangle with a built-in counter the same depth as the closet, and a queen bed the same depth as the bathroom. Low ceiling. A wide window at the far end, draped, with an integrated heater-cooler unit built through the wall underneath it. Most of the things in the room were tired and shabby and colored brown. The whole place looked dim and damp and miserable.

There was a dead man on the bed.

He was naked, facedown. He was white, maybe pushing sixty, quite tall. He was built like a fading pro athlete. Like a coach. He still had decent muscle, but he was growing love handles the way old guys do, however fit they are. He had pale hairless legs. He had old scars. He had wiry gray hair buzzed close to his scalp and cracked weathered skin on the back of his neck. He was a type. Any hundred people could have looked at him and all hundred would have said *army officer*, for sure.

“He was found like this?” I asked.

“Yes,” Stockton said.

Second question: How? A guy takes a room for the night, he expects privacy until the maid comes in the next morning, at the very least.

“How?” I said.

“How what?”

“How was he found? Did he call 911?”

“No.”

“So how?”

“You’ll see.”

I paused. I didn’t see anything yet.

“Did you roll him over?” I said.

“Yes. Then we rolled him back.”

“Mind if I take a look?”

“Be my guest.”

I stepped to the bed and slipped my left hand under the dead guy’s armpit and rolled him over. He was cold and a little stiff. Rigor was just setting in. I got him settled flat on his back and saw four things. First, his skin had a distinctive gray pallor. Second, shock and pain were frozen on his face. Third, he had grabbed his left arm with his right hand, up near the bicep. And fourth, he was wearing a condom. His blood pressure had collapsed long ago and his erection had disappeared and the condom was hanging off, mostly empty, like a translucent flap of pale skin. He had died before reaching orgasm. That was clear.

“Heart attack,” Stockton said, behind me.

I nodded. The gray skin was a good indicator. So was the evidence of shock and surprise and sudden pain in his upper left arm.

“Massive,” I said.

“But before or after penetration?” Stockton said, with a smile in his voice.

I looked at the pillow area. The bed was still completely made. The dead guy was on top of the counterpane and the counterpane was still tight over the pillows. But there was a head-shaped dent, and there were rucks where elbows and heels had scrabbled and pushed lower down.

“She was underneath him when it happened,” I said. “That’s for sure. She had to wrestle her way out.”

“Hell of a way for a man to go.”

“I can think of worse ways.”

Stockton just smiled at me.

“What?” I said.

He didn’t answer.

“No sign of the woman?” I said.

“Hide nor hair,” he said. “She ran for it.”

“The desk guy see her?”

Stockton just smiled again.

I looked at him. Then I understood. *A low-rent dive near a highway interchange with a truck stop and a strip bar, thirty miles north of a military base.*

“She was a hooker,” I said. “That’s how he was found. The desk guy knew her. Saw her running out way too soon. Got curious as to why and came in here to check.”

Stockton nodded. “He called us right away. The lady in question was long gone by then, of course. And he’s denying she was ever here in the first place. He’s pretending this isn’t that kind of an establishment.”

“Your department had business here before?”

“Time to time,” he said. “It *is* that kind of an establishment, believe me.”

Control the situation, Garber had said.

“Heart attack, right?” I said. “Nothing more.”

“Probably,” Stockton said. “But we’ll need an autopsy to know for sure.”

The room was quiet. I could hear nothing except radio traffic from the cop cars outside, and music from the bar across the street. I turned back to the bed. Looked at the dead guy’s face. I didn’t know him. I looked at his hands. He had a West Point ring on his right and a wedding band on his left, wide, old, probably nine carat. His dog tags were hidden under his right arm, where he had reached across to grab his left bicep. I lifted the arm with difficulty and pulled the tags out. He had rubber silencers on them. I raised them until the chain went tight against his neck. His name was Kramer and he was a Catholic and his blood group was O.

“We could do the autopsy for you,” I said. “Up at the Walter Reed Army

Medical Center."

"Out of state?"

"He's a general."

"You want to hush it up."

I nodded. "Sure I do. Wouldn't you?"

"Probably," he said.

I let go of the dog tags and moved away from the bed and checked the nightstands and the built-in counter. Nothing there. There was no phone in the room. A place like this, I figured there would be a pay phone in the office. I moved past Stockton and checked the bathroom. There was a privately purchased black leather Dopp kit next to the sink, zipped closed. It had the initials *KRK* embossed on it. I opened it up and found a toothbrush and a razor and travel-sized tubes of toothpaste and shaving soap. Nothing else. No medications. No heart prescription. No pack of condoms.

I checked the closet. There was a Class A uniform in there, neatly squared away on three separate hangers, with the pants folded on the bar of the first and the coat next to it on the second and the shirt on a third. The tie was still inside the shirt collar. Centered above the hangers on the shelf was a field grade officer's service cap. Gold braid all over it. On one side of the cap was a folded white undershirt and on the other side was a pair of folded white boxers.

There were two shoes side by side on the closet floor next to a faded green canvas suit carrier which was propped neatly against the back wall. The shoes were gleaming black and had socks rolled tight inside them. The suit carrier was a privately purchased item and had battered leather reinforcements at the stress points. It wasn't very full.

"You'd get the results," I said. "Our pathologist would give you a copy of the report with nothing added and nothing deleted. You see anything you're not happy about, we could put the ball right back in your court, no questions asked."

Stockton said nothing, but I wasn't feeling any hostility coming off him. Some town cops are OK. A big base like Bird puts a lot of ripples into the surrounding

civilian world. Therefore MPs spend a lot of time with their civilian counterparts, and sometimes it's a pain in the ass, and sometimes it isn't. I had a feeling Stockton wasn't going to be a huge problem. He was relaxed. Bottom line, he seemed a little lazy to me, and lazy people are always happy to pass their burdens on to someone else.

"How much?" I said.

"How much what?"

"How much would a whore cost here?"

"Twenty bucks would do it," he said. "There's nothing very exotic available in this neck of the woods."

"And the room?"

"Fifteen, probably."

I rolled the corpse back onto its front. Wasn't easy. It weighed two hundred pounds, at least.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"About what?"

"About Walter Reed doing the autopsy."

There was silence for a moment. Stockton looked at the wall.

"That might be acceptable," he said.

There was a knock at the open door. One of the cops from the cars.

"Medical examiner just called in," he said. "He can't get here for another two hours at least. It's New Year's Eve."

I smiled. *Acceptable* was about to change to *highly desirable.* Two hours from now Stockton would need to be somewhere else. A whole bunch of parties would be breaking up and the roads would be mayhem. Two hours from now he would be begging me to haul the old guy away. I said nothing and the cop went

back to wait in his car and Stockton moved all the way into the room and stood facing the draped window with his back to the corpse. I took the hanger with the uniform coat on it and lifted it out of the closet and hung it on the bathroom door frame where the hallway light fell on it.

Looking at a Class A coat is like reading a book or sitting next to a guy in a bar and hearing his whole life story. This one was the right size for the body on the bed and it had *Kramer* on the nameplate, which matched the dog tags. It had a Purple Heart ribbon with two bronze oak leaf clusters to denote a second and third award of the medal, which matched the scars. It had two silver stars on the epaulettes, which confirmed he was a major general. The branch insignia on the lapels denoted Armor and the shoulder patch was from XII Corps. Apart from that there were a bunch of unit awards and a whole salad bowl of medal ribbons dating way back through Vietnam and Korea, some of which he had probably earned the hard way, and some of which he probably hadn't. Some of them were foreign awards, whose display was authorized but not compulsory. It was a very full coat, relatively old, well cared for, standard-issue, not privately tailored. Taken as a whole it told me he was professionally vain, but not personally vain.

I went through the pockets. They were all empty, except for a key to the rental car. It was attached to a keyring in the shape of a figure 1, which was made out of clear plastic and contained a slip of paper with *Hertz* printed in yellow at the top and a license-plate number written by hand in black ballpoint underneath.

There was no wallet. No loose change.

I put the coat back in the closet and checked the pants. Nothing in the pockets. I checked the shoes. Nothing in them except the socks. I checked the hat. Nothing hidden underneath it. I lifted the suit carrier out and opened it on the floor. It contained a battledress uniform and an M43 field cap. A change of socks and underwear and a pair of shined combat boots, plain black leather. There was an empty compartment that I figured was for the Dopp kit. Nothing else. Nothing at all. I closed it up and put it back. Squatted down and looked under the bed. Saw nothing.

"Anything we should worry about?" Stockton asked.

I stood up. Shook my head.

"No," I lied.

“Then you can have him,” he said. “But I get a copy of the report.”

“Agreed,” I said.

“Happy New Year,” he said.

He walked out to his car and I headed for my Humvee. I called in a 10-5 *ambulance requested* and told my sergeant to have it accompanied by a squad of two who could list and pack all Kramer’s personal property and bring it back to my office. Then I sat there in the driver’s seat and waited until Stockton’s guys were all gone. I watched them accelerate away into the fog and then I went back inside the room and took the rental key from Kramer’s jacket. Came back out and used it to unlock the Ford.

There was nothing in it except the stink of upholstery cleaner and carbonless copies of the rental agreement. Kramer had picked the car up at one thirty-two that afternoon at Dulles Airport near Washington D.C. He had used a private American Express card and received a discount rate. The start-of-rental mileage was 13,215. Now the odometer was showing 13,513, which according to my arithmetic meant he had driven 298 miles, which was about right for a straight-line trip between there and here.

I put the paper in my pocket and relocked the car. Checked the trunk. It was completely empty.

I put the key in my pocket with the rental paper and headed across the street to the bar. The music got louder with every step I took. Ten yards away I could smell beer fumes and cigarette smoke from the ventilators. I threaded through parked vehicles and found the door. It was a stout wooden item and it was closed against the cold. I pulled it open and was hit in the face by a wall of sound and a blast of hot thick air. The place was heaving. I could see five hundred people and black-painted walls and purple spotlights and mirrorballs. I could see a pole dancer on a stage in back. She was on all fours and naked except for a white cowboy hat. She was crawling around, picking up dollar bills.

There was a big guy in a black T-shirt behind a register inside the door. His face was in deep shadow. The edge of a dim spotlight beam showed me he had a chest the size of an oil drum. The music was deafening and the crowd was packed shoulder to shoulder and wall to wall. I backed out and let the door swing shut. Stood still for a moment in the cold air and then walked away and crossed

the street and headed for the motel office.

It was a dismal place. It was lit with fluorescent tubes that gave the air a greenish cast and it was noisy from the Coke machine parked at its door. It had a pay phone on the wall and worn linoleum on the floor and a waist-high counter boxed in with the sort of fake wood paneling people use in their basements. The clerk sat on a high stool behind it. He was a white guy of about twenty with long unwashed hair and a weak chin.

“Happy New Year,” I said.

He didn’t reply.

“You take anything out of the dead guy’s room?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No.”

“Tell me again.”

“I didn’t take anything.”

I nodded. I believed him.

“OK,” I said. “When did he check in?”

“I don’t know. I came on at ten. He was already here.”

I nodded again. Kramer was in the rental lot at Dulles at one thirty-two and he hadn’t driven enough miles to do much of anything except come straight here, in which case he was checking in around seven-thirty. Maybe eight-thirty, if he stopped for dinner somewhere. Maybe nine, if he was an exceptionally cautious driver.

“Did he use the pay phone at all?”

“It’s busted.”

“So how did he get hold of the hooker?”

“What hooker?”

"The hooker he was poking when he died."

"No hookers here."

"Did he go over and get her from the lounge bar?"

"He was way the hell down the row. I didn't see what he did."

"You got a driver's license?"

The guy paused. "Why?"

"Simple question," I said. "Either you do or you don't."

"I got a license," he said.

"Show me," I said.

I was bigger than his Coke machine and all covered in badges and ribbons and he did what he was told, like most skinny twenty-year-olds do when I use that tone. He eased his butt up off the stool and reached back and came out with a wallet from his hip pocket. Flipped it open. His DL was behind a milky plastic window. It had his photograph on it, and his name, and his address.

"OK," I said. "Now I know where you live. I'll be back later with some questions. If I don't find you here I'll come and find you at home."

He said nothing to me. I turned away and pushed out through the door and went back to my Humvee to wait.

Forty minutes later a military meat wagon and another Humvee showed up. I told my guys to grab everything including the rental car but didn't wait around to watch them do it. I headed back to base instead. I logged in and got back to my borrowed office and told my sergeant to get me Garber on the phone. I waited at my desk for the call to come through. It took less than two minutes.

"What's the story?" he asked.

"His name was Kramer," I said.

“I know that,” Garber said. “I spoke to the police dispatcher after I spoke to you. What happened to him?”

“Heart attack,” I said. “During consensual sex with a prostitute. In the kind of motel a fastidious cockroach would take pains to avoid.”

There was a long silence.

“Shit,” Garber said. “He was married.”

“Yes, I saw his wedding band. And his West Point ring.”

“Class of Fifty-two,” Garber said. “I checked.”

The phone went quiet.

“Shit,” he said again. “Why do smart people pull stupid stunts like this?”

I didn’t answer, because I didn’t know.

“We’ll need to be discreet,” Garber said.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “The cover-up is already started. The locals let me send him to Walter Reed.”

“Good,” he said. “That’s good.” Then he paused. “From the beginning, OK?”

“He was wearing XII Corps patches,” I said. “Means he was based in Germany. He flew into Dulles yesterday. From Frankfurt, probably. Civilian flight, for sure, because he was wearing Class As, hoping for an upgrade. He would have worn BDUs on a military flight. He rented a cheap car and drove two hundred ninety-eight miles and checked into a fifteen-dollar motel room and picked up a twenty-dollar hooker.”

“I know about the flight,” Garber said. “I called XII Corps and spoke with his staff. I told them he was dead.”

“When?”

“After I got off the phone with the dispatcher.”

“You tell them how or where he was dead?”

“I said a probable heart attack, nothing more, no details, no location, which is starting to look like a very good decision now.”

“What about the flight?” I said.

“American Airlines, yesterday, Frankfurt to Dulles, arrived thirteen hundred hours, with an onward connection nine hundred hours today, Washington National to LAX. He was going to an Armored Branch conference at Fort Irwin. He was an Armored commander in Europe. An important one. Outside chance of making Vice-Chief of Staff in a couple of years. It’s Armored’s turn next, for Vice-Chief. Current guy is infantry, and they like to rotate. So he stood a chance. But it ain’t going to happen for him now, is it?”

“Probably not,” I said. “Being dead and all.”

Garber didn’t answer that.

“How long was he over here for?” I said.

“He was due back in Germany inside a week.”

“What’s his full name?”

“Kenneth Robert Kramer.”

“I bet you know his date of birth,” I said. “And where he was born.”

“So?”

“And his flight numbers and his seat assignments. And what the government paid for the tickets. And whether or not he requested a vegetarian meal. And what exact room Irwin VOQ was planning on putting him in.”

“What’s your point?”

“My point is, why don’t I know all that stuff too?”

“Why would you?” Garber said. “I’ve been working the phones and you’ve been poking around in a motel.”

“You know what?” I said. “Every time I go anywhere I’ve got a wad of airplane tickets and travel warrants and reservations and if I’m flying in from overseas I’ve got a passport. And if I’m going to a conference I’ve got a briefcase full of all kinds of other crap to carry them in.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying there were things missing from the motel room. Tickets, reservations, passport, itinerary. Collectively, the kind of things a person would carry in a briefcase.”

Garber didn’t respond.

“He had a suit carrier,” I said. “Green canvas, brown leather bindings. A buck gets ten he had a briefcase to match. His wife probably chose them both. Probably got them mail-order from L.L.Bean. Maybe for Christmas, ten years ago.”

“And the briefcase wasn’t there?”

“He probably kept his wallet in it too, when he was wearing Class As. As many medal ribbons as this guy had, it makes the inside pocket tight.”

“So?”

“I think the hooker saw where he put his wallet after he paid her. Then they got down to business, and he croaked, and she saw a little extra profit for herself. I think she stole his briefcase.”

Garber was quiet for a moment.

“Is this going to be a problem?” he asked.

“Depends what else was in the briefcase,” I said.

two

I put the phone down and saw a note my sergeant had left me: *Your brother called. No message.* I folded the note once and dropped it in the trash. Then I headed back to my quarters and got three hours' sleep. Got up again fifty minutes before first light. I was back at the motel just as dawn was breaking. Morning didn't make the neighborhood look any better. It was depressed and abandoned for miles around. And quiet. Nothing was stirring. Dawn on New Year's Day is as close as any inhabited place gets to absolute stillness. The highway was deserted. There was no traffic. None at all.

The diner at the truck stop was open but empty. The motel office was empty. I walked down the row to the last-but-one room. Kramer's room. The door was locked. I stood with my back to it and pretended I was a hooker whose client had just died. I had pushed his weight off me and dressed fast and grabbed his briefcase and I was running away with it. What would I do? I wasn't interested in the briefcase itself. I wanted the cash in the wallet, and maybe the American Express card. So I would rifle through and grab the cash and the card and ditch the bag itself. But where would I do that?

Inside the room would have been best. But I hadn't done it there, for some reason. Maybe I was panicking. Maybe I was shocked and spooked and just wanted to get the hell out, fast. So where else? I looked straight ahead at the lounge bar. That was probably where I was going. That was probably where I was based. But I wouldn't carry the briefcase in there. My co-workers would notice, because I was already carrying a big purse. Hookers always carry big purses. They've got a lot of stuff to haul around. Condoms, massage oils, maybe a gun or a knife, maybe a credit card machine. That's the easiest way to spot a hooker. Look for someone dressed like she's going to a ball, carrying a bag like she's going on vacation.

I looked to my left. Maybe I walked around behind the motel. It would be quiet back there. All the windows faced that way, but it was night and I could count on the drapes being closed. I turned left and left again and came out behind the bedrooms on a rectangle of scrubby weeds that ran the length of the building and was about twenty feet deep. I imagined walking fast and then stopping in deep shadow and going through the bag by feel. I imagined finding what I wanted and heaving the bag away into the darkness. I might have thrown it thirty feet.

I stood where she might have stood and scoped out a quarter circle. It gave me about a hundred and fifty square feet to check. The ground was stony and nearly frozen by overnight frost. I found plenty of stuff. I found trash and used needles and foil crack pipes and a Buick hubcap and a skateboard wheel. But I didn't find a briefcase.

There was a wooden fence at the rear of the lot. It was about six feet tall. I jacked myself up on it and looked over. Saw another rectangle of weeds and stones. No briefcase. I got down off the fence and walked onward and came up on the motel office from the back. There was a window made of dirty pebbled glass that I guessed let into the staff bathroom. Underneath it were a dozen trashed air conditioners all stacked in a low pile. They were rusty. They hadn't been moved in years. I walked on and came around the corner and turned left into a weedy gravel patch with a Dumpster on it. I opened the lid. It was three-quarters full of garbage. No briefcase.

I crossed the street and walked through the empty lot and looked at the lounge bar. It was silent and closed up tight. Its neon signs were all switched off and the little bent tubes looked cold and dead. It had its own Dumpster, close by in the lot, just sitting there like a parked vehicle. There was no briefcase in it.

I ducked inside the greasy spoon. It was still empty. I checked the floor around the tables and the banquettes in the booths. I looked on the floor behind the register. There was a cardboard box back there with a couple of forlorn umbrellas in it. But no briefcase. I checked the women's bathroom. No women in it. No briefcase in it either.

I looked at my watch and walked back to the bar. I would need to ask some face-to-face questions there. But it wouldn't be open for business for another eight hours at least. I turned around and looked across the street at the motel. There was still nobody in the office. So I headed back to my Humvee and got there in time to hear a 10-17 come in on the radio. *Return to base.* So I acknowledged and fired up the big diesel and drove all the way back to Bird. There was no traffic and I made it inside forty minutes. I saw Kramer's rental parked in the motor pool lot. There was a new person at the desk outside my borrowed office. A corporal. The day shift. He was a small dark guy who looked like he was from Louisiana. French blood in there, certainly. I know French blood when I see it.

"Your brother called again," the corporal said.

“Why?”

“No message.”

“What was the ten-seventeen for?”

“Colonel Garber requests a ten-nineteen.”

I smiled. You could live your whole life saying nothing but *10-this* and *10-that.* Sometimes I felt like I already had. A 10-19 was a contact by phone or radio. Less serious than a 10-16, which was a contact by secure landline. *Colonel Garber requests a 10-19* meant *Garber wants you to call him,* was all. Some MP units get in the habit of speaking English, but clearly this one hadn’t yet.

I stepped into my office and saw Kramer’s suit carrier propped against the wall and a carton containing his shoes and underwear and hat sitting next to it. His uniform was still on three hangers. They were hung one in front of the other on my coatrack. I walked past them to my borrowed desk and dialed Garber’s number. Listened to the purr of the ring tone and wondered what my brother wanted. Wondered how he had tracked me down. I had been in Panama sixty hours ago. Before that I had been all over the place. So he had made a big effort to find me. So maybe it was important. I picked up a pencil and wrote *Joe* on a slip of paper. Then I underlined it, twice.

“Yes?” Leon Garber said in my ear.

“Reacher here,” I said. The clock on the wall showed a little after nine in the morning. Kramer’s onward connection to LAX was already in the air.

“It was a heart attack,” Garber said. “No question.”

“Walter Reed worked fast.”

“He was a general.”

“But a general with a bad heart.”

“Bad arteries, actually. Severe arteriosclerosis leading to fatal ventricular fibrillation. That’s what they’re telling us. And I believe them too. Probably kicked in around the time the whore took her bra off.”

“He wasn’t carrying any pills.”

“It was probably undiagnosed. It’s one of those things. You feel fine, then you feel dead. No way it could be faked, anyway. You could simulate fibrillation with an electric shock, I guess, but you can’t simulate forty years’ worth of crap in the arteries.”

“Were we worried about it being faked?”

“There could have been KGB interest,” Garber said. “Kramer and his tanks are the biggest single tactical problem the Red Army is facing.”

“Right now the Red Army is facing the other way.”

“Kind of early to say whether that’s permanent or not.”

I didn’t reply. The phone went quiet.

“I can’t let anyone else touch this with a stick,” Garber said. “Not just yet. Because of the circumstances. You understand that, right?”

“So?”

“So you’re going to have to do the widow thing,” Garber said.

“Me? Isn’t she in Germany?”

“She’s in Virginia. She’s home for the holidays. They have a house there.”

He gave me the address and I wrote it on the slip of paper, directly underneath where I had underlined *Joe.*

“Anyone with her?” I asked.

“They don’t have kids. So she’s probably alone.”

“OK,” I said.

“She doesn’t know yet,” Garber said. “Took me a while to track her down.”

“Want me to take a priest?”

“It isn’t a combat death. You could take a female partner, I guess. Mrs. Kramer might be a hugger.”

“OK.”

“Spare her the details, obviously. He was en route to Irwin, is all. Croaked in a layover hotel. We need to make that the official line. Nobody except you and me knows any different yet, and that’s the way we’re going to keep it. Except you can tell whoever you partner with, I guess. Mrs. Kramer might ask questions, and you’ll need to be on the same page. What about the local cops? Are they going to leak?”

“The guy I saw was an ex-Marine. He knows the score.”

“Semper Fi,” Garber said.

“I didn’t find the briefcase yet,” I said.

The phone went quiet again.

“Do the widow thing first,” Garber said. “Then keep on looking for it.”

I told the day-shift corporal to move Kramer’s effects to my quarters. I wanted to keep them safe and sound. The widow would ask for them, eventually. And things can disappear, on a big base like Bird, which can be embarrassing. Then I walked over to the O Club and looked for MPs eating late breakfasts or early lunches. They usually cluster well away from everybody else, because everybody else hates them. I found a group of four, two men and two women. They were all in woodland-pattern BDUs, standard on-post dress. One of the women was a captain. She had her right arm in a sling. She was having trouble eating. She would have trouble driving too. The other woman had a lieutenant’s bar on each lapel and *Summer* on her nametape. She looked to be about twenty-five years old and she was short and slender. She had skin the same color as the mahogany table she was eating off.

“Lieutenant Summer,” I said.

“Sir?”

“Happy New Year,” I said.

“Sir, you too.”

“You busy today?”

“Sir, general duties.”

“OK, out front in thirty minutes, Class As. I need you to hug a widow.”

I put my own Class As on again and called the motor pool for a sedan. I didn’t want to ride all the way to Virginia in a Humvee. Too noisy, too uncomfortable. A private brought me a new olive-green Chevrolet. I signed for it and drove it around to post headquarters and waited.

Lieutenant Summer came out halfway through the twenty-eighth minute of her allotted thirty. She paused a second and then walked toward the car. She looked good. She was very short, but she moved easily, like a willowy person. She looked like a six-foot catwalk model reduced in size to a tiny miniature. I got out of the car and left the driver’s door open. Met her on the sidewalk. She was wearing an expert sharpshooter badge with bars for rifle, small bore rifle, auto rifle, pistol, small bore pistol, machine gun, and submachine gun hanging on it. They made a little ladder about two inches long. Longer than mine. I only have rifle and pistol. She stopped dead in front of me and came to attention and fired off a perfect salute.

“Sir, Lieutenant Summer reports,” she said.

“Take it easy,” I said. “Informal mode of address, OK? Call me Reacher, or nothing. And no saluting. I don’t like it.”

She paused. Relaxed.

“OK,” she said.

I opened the passenger door and started to get in.

“I’m driving?” she asked.

“I was up most of the night.”

“Who died?”

“General Kramer,” I said. “Big tank guy in Europe.”

She paused again. “So why was he here? We’re all infantry.”

“Passing through,” I said.

She got in on the other side and racked the driver’s seat all the way forward. Adjusted the mirror. I pushed the passenger seat back and got as comfortable as I could.

“Where to?” she said.

“Green Valley, Virginia,” I said. “It’ll be about four hours, I guess.”

“That’s where the widow is?”

“Home for the holidays,” I said.

“And we’re breaking the news? Like, Happy New Year, ma’am, and by the way, your husband’s dead?”

I nodded. “Lucky us.” But I wasn’t really worried. Generals’ wives are as tough as they come. Either they’ve spent thirty years pushing their husbands up the greasy pole, or they’ve endured thirty years of fallout as their husbands have climbed it for themselves. Either way, there’s not much left that can get to them. They’re tougher than the generals, most of the time.

Summer took her cap off and tossed it onto the backseat. Her hair was very short. Almost shaved. She had a delicate skull and nice cheekbones. Smooth skin. I liked the way she looked. And she was a fast driver. That was for damn sure. She clipped her belt and took off north like she was training for NASCAR.

“Was it an accident?” she asked.

“Heart attack,” I said. “His arteries were bad.”

“Where? Our VOQ?”

I shook my head. “A crappy little motel in town. He died with a twenty-dollar hooker wedged somewhere underneath him.”

“We’re not telling the widow that part, right?”

“No, we’re not. We’re not telling anyone that part.”

“Why was he passing through?”

“He didn’t come to Bird itself. He was transiting D.C. Frankfurt to Dulles, then National to LAX twenty hours later. He was going out to Irwin for a conference.”

“OK,” she said, and then she went very quiet. We drove on. We got about level with the motel, but well to the west, heading straight for the highway.

“Permission to speak freely?” she said.

“Please,” I said.

“Is this a test?”

“Why would it be a test?”

“You’re from the 110th Special Unit, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I said. “I am.”

“I have an application pending.”

“To the 110th?”

“Yes,” she said. “So, is this a covert assessment?”

“Of what?”

“Of me,” she said. “As a candidate.”

“I needed a woman partner. In case the widow is a hugger. I picked you out at random. The captain with the busted arm couldn’t have driven the car. And it would be kind of inefficient for us to wait until we had a dead general to conduct

personnel assessments.´´

“I guess,” she said. “But I’m wondering if you’re sitting there waiting for me to ask the obvious questions.”

“I’d expect any MP with a pulse to ask the obvious questions, whether or not they had a special unit transfer pending.”

“OK, I’m asking. General Kramer had a twenty-hour layover in the D.C. area and he wanted to get his rocks off and he didn’t mind paying for the privilege. So why did he drive all the way down here to do it? It’s what, three hundred miles?”

“Two hundred and ninety-eight,” I said.

“And then he’d have to drive all the way back.”

“Clearly.”

“So why?”

“You tell me,” I said. “Come up with something I haven’t thought of myself and I’ll recommend you for the transfer.”

“You can’t. You’re not my CO.”

“Maybe I am,” I said. “This week, anyway.”

“Why are you even here? Is something happening I should know about?”

“I don’t know why I’m here,” I said. “I got orders. That’s all I know.”

“Are you really a major?”

“Last time I checked,” I said.

“I thought 110th investigators were usually warrant officers. Working plain clothes or undercover.”

“They usually are.”

“So why bring you here when they could send a warrant officer and have him

"So why bring you here when they could send a warrant officer and have him dress up as a major?"

"Good question," I said. "Maybe one day I'll find out."

"May I ask what your orders were?"

"Temporary detached duty as Fort Bird's Provost Marshal's executive officer."

"The Provost Marshal isn't on-post," she said.

"I know," I said. "I found that out. He transferred out the same day I transferred in. Some temporary thing."

"So you're acting CO."

"Like I said."

"MP XO isn't a special unit job," she said.

"I can fake it," I said. "I started out a regular MP, just like you."

Summer said nothing. Just drove.

"Kramer," I said. "Why did he contemplate a six-hundred-mile round-trip? That's twelve hours' driving time out of his twenty. Just to spend fifteen bucks on a room and twenty on a whore?"

"Why does it matter? A heart attack is a heart attack, right? I mean, was there any question about it?"

I shook my head. "Walter Reed already did the autopsy."

"So it doesn't really matter where or when it happened."

"His briefcase is missing."

"I see," Summer said.

I saw her thinking. Her lower eyelids flicked upward a fraction.

"How do you know he had a briefcase?" she said.

“I don’t. But did you ever see a general go to a conference without one?”

“No,” she said. “You think the hooker ran off with it?”

I nodded. “That’s my working hypothesis right now.”

“So, find the hooker.”

“Who was she?”

Her eyelids moved again.

“Doesn’t make sense,” she said.

I nodded again. “Exactly.”

“Four possible reasons Kramer didn’t stay in the D.C. area. One, he might have been traveling with fellow officers and didn’t want to embarrass himself in front of them by having a hooker come to his room. They might have seen her in the corridor or heard her through the walls. So he invented an excuse and stayed in a different place. Two, even if he was traveling alone he might have been on a DoD travel voucher and he was paranoid about a desk clerk seeing the girl and calling *The Washington Post.* That happens. So he preferred to pay cash in some anonymous dive. Three, even if he wasn’t on a government ticket he might have been a well-known guest or a familiar face in a big-city hotel. So likewise he was looking for anonymity somewhere out of town. Or four, his sexual tastes ran beyond what you can get from the D.C. Yellow Pages, so he had to go where he knew for sure he could get what he wanted.”

“But?”

“Problems one, two, and three could be answered by going ten or fifteen miles, maybe less. Two hundred and ninety-eight is completely excessive. And whereas I’m prepared to believe there are tastes that can’t be satisfied in D.C., I don’t see how they’re more likely to be satisfied way out here in the North Carolina boonies, and anyway I would guess such a thing would cost a lot more than twenty bucks wherever you eventually found it.”

“So why did he take the six-hundred-mile detour?”

She didn’t answer. Just drove, and thought. I closed my eyes. Kept them closed

She didn't answer. Just drove, and thought. I closed my eyes. Kept them closed for about thirty-five miles.

"He knew the girl," Summer said.

I opened my eyes. "How?"

"Some men have favorites. Maybe he met her a long time ago. Fell for her, in a way. It can happen like that. It can almost be a love thing."

"Where would he have met her?"

"Right there."

"Bird is all infantry. He was Armored Branch."

"Maybe they had joint exercises. You should check back."

I said nothing. Armored and the infantry run joint exercises all the time. But they run them where the tanks are, not where the grunts are. Much easier to transport men across a continent than tanks.

"Or maybe he met her at Irwin," Summer said. "In California. Maybe she worked Irwin, but had to leave California for some reason, but she liked working military bases, so she moved to Bird."

"What kind of a hooker would *like* working military bases?"

"The kind that's interested in money. Which is all of them, presumably. Military bases support their local economies in all kinds of ways."

I said nothing.

"Or maybe she always worked Bird, but followed the infantry to Irwin when they did a joint exercise out there one time. Those things can last a month or two. No point in hanging around at home with no customers."

"Best guess?" I said.

"They met in California," she said. "Kramer will have spent years at Irwin, on and off. Then she moved to North Carolina, but he still liked her enough to make the detour whenever he was in D.C."

“She doesn’t do anything special, not for twenty bucks.”

“Maybe he didn’t need anything special.”

“We could ask the widow.”

Summer smiled. “Maybe he just liked her. Maybe she made damn sure he did. Hookers are good at that. They like repeat customers best of all. It’s much safer for them if they already know the guy.”

I closed my eyes again.

“So?” Summer said. “Did I come up with something you didn’t think of?”

“No,” I said.

I fell asleep before we were out of the state and woke up again nearly four hours later when Summer took the Green Valley ramp too fast. My head rolled to the right and hit the window.

“Sorry,” she said. “You should check Kramer’s phone records. He must have called ahead, to make sure she was around. He wouldn’t have driven all that way on the off chance.”

“Where would he have called from?”

“Germany,” she said. “Before he left.”

“More likely he used a pay phone at Dulles. But we’ll check.”

“We?”

“You can partner with me.”

She said nothing.

“Like a test,” I said.

"Is this important?"

"Probably not. But it might be. Depends what the conference is about. Depends what paperwork he was taking to it. He might have had the whole ETO order of battle in his case. Or new tactics, assessment of shortcomings, all kinds of classified stuff."

"The Red Army is going to fold."

I nodded. "I'm more worried about red faces. Newspapers, or television. Some reporter finds classified stuff on a trash pile near a strip club, there'll be major embarrassment all around."

"Maybe the widow will know. He might have discussed it with her."

"We can't ask her," I said. "As far as she's concerned he died in his sleep with the blanket pulled up to his chin, and everything else was kosher. Any worries we've got at this point stay strictly between me, you, and Garber."

"Garber?" she said.

"Me, you, and him," I said.

I saw her smile. It was a trivial case, but working it with Garber was a definite stroke of luck, for a person with a 110th Special Unit transfer pending.

Green Valley was a picture-perfect colonial town and the Kramer house was a neat old place in an expensive part of it. It was a Victorian confection with fish-scale tiles on the roof and a bunch of turrets and porches all painted white, sitting on a couple of acres of emerald lawn. There were stately evergreen trees dotted about. They looked like someone had positioned them with care, which they probably had, a hundred years ago. We pulled up at the curb and waited, just looking. I don't know what Summer was thinking about, but I was scanning the scene and filing it away under *A* for *America*. I have a Social Security number and the same blue and silver passport as everyone else but between my old man's Stateside tours and my own I can only put together about five years' worth of actual residence in the continental U.S. So I know a bunch of basic elementary-school facts like state capitals and how many grand slams Lou

Gehrig hit and some basic high-school stuff like the constitutional amendments and the importance of Antietam, but I don't know much about the price of milk or how to work a pay phone or how different places look and smell. So I soak it up when I can. And the Kramer house was worth soaking up. That was for sure. A watery sun was shining on it. There was a faint breeze and the smell of woodsmoke in the air and a kind of intense cold-afternoon quiet all around us. It was the kind of place you would have wanted your grandparents to live. You could have visited in the fall and raked leaves and drunk apple cider and then come back in the summer and loaded a ten-year-old station wagon with a canoe and headed for a lake somewhere. It reminded me of the places in the picture books they gave me in Manila and Guam and Seoul.

Until we got inside.

"Ready?" Summer said.

"Sure," I said. "Let's do it. Let's do the widow thing."

She was quiet. I was sure she had done it before. I had too, more than once. It was never fun. She pulled off the curb and headed for the driveway entrance. Drove slowly toward the front door and eased to a stop ten feet from it. We opened our doors together and slid out into the chill and straightened our jackets. We left our hats in the car. That would be Mrs. Kramer's first clue, if she happened to be watching. A pair of MPs at your door is never good news, and if they're bareheaded, it's worse news.

This particular door was painted a dull antique red and it had a glass storm screen in front of it. I rang the bell and we waited. And waited. I started to think nobody was home. I rang the bell again. The breeze was cold. It was stronger than it had looked.

"We should have called ahead," Summer said.

"Can't," I said. "Can't say, please be there four hours from now so we can deliver some very important news face-to-face. Too much of a preview, wouldn't you say?"

"I came all this way and I've got nobody to hug."

"Sounds like a country song. Then your truck breaks down and your dog dies."

I tried the bell again. No response.

“We should look for a vehicle,” Summer said.

We found one in a closed two-car garage standing separate from the house. We could see it through the window. It was a Mercury Grand Marquis, metallic green, as long as an ocean liner. It was the perfect car for a general’s wife. Not new, not old, premium but not overpriced, suitable color, American as hell.

“Think this is hers?” Summer asked.

“Probably,” I said. “Chances are they had a Ford until he made lieutenant colonel. Then they moved up to a Mercury. They were probably waiting for the third star before they thought about a Lincoln.”

“Sad.”

“You think? Don’t forget where he was last night.”

“So where is she? You think she went out walking?”

We turned around and felt the breeze on our backs and heard a door bang at the rear of the house.

“She was out in the yard,” Summer said. “Gardening, maybe.”

“Nobody gardens on New Year’s Day,” I said. “Not in this hemisphere. There’s nothing growing.”

But we walked around to the front anyway and tried the bell again. Better to let her meet us formally, on her own terms. But she didn’t show. Then we heard the door again, at the back, banging aimlessly. Like the breeze had gotten hold of it.

“We should check that out,” Summer said.

I nodded. A banging door has a sound all its own. It suggests all kinds of things.

“Yes,” I said. “We probably should.”

We walked around to the rear of the house, side by side, into the wind. There was a flagstone path. It led us to a kitchen door. It opened inward, and it must

have had a spring on the back to keep it closed. The spring must have been a little weak, because the gusting breeze was overpowering it from time to time and kicking the door open eight or nine inches. Then the gust would die away and the spring would reassert itself and the door would bang back into the frame. It did it three times as we watched. It was able to do it because the lock was smashed.

It had been a good lock, made of steel. But the steel had been stronger than the surrounding wood. Someone had used a wrecking bar. It had been jerked hard, maybe twice, and the lock had held but the wood had splintered. The door had opened up and the lock had just fallen out of the wreckage. It was right there on the flagstone path. The door had a crescent-shaped bite out of it. Splinters of wood had been blown here and there and piled by the wind.

“What now?” Summer said.

There was no security system. No intruder alarm. No pads, no wires. No automatic call to the nearest police precinct. No way of telling if the bad guys were long gone, or if they were still inside.

“What now?” Summer said again.

We were unarmed. No weapons, on a formal visit in Class A uniform.

“Go cover the front,” I said. “In case anyone comes out.”

She moved away without a word and I gave her a minute to get in position. Then I pushed the door with my elbow and stepped inside the kitchen. Closed the door behind me and leaned on it to keep it shut. Then I stood still and listened.

There was no sound. No sound at all.

The kitchen smelled faintly of cooked vegetables and stewed coffee. It was big. It was halfway between tidy and untidy. A well-used space. There was a door on the other side of the room. On my right. It was open. I could see a small triangle of polished oak floor. A hallway. I moved very slowly. Crept forward and to the right to line up my view. The door banged again behind me. I saw more of the hallway. I figured it ran straight to the front entrance. Off of it to the left was a closed door. Probably a dining room. Off of it to the right was a den or a study. Its door was open. I could see a desk and a chair and dark wood bookcases. I took a cautious step. Moved a little more.

took a cautious step. Moved a little more.

I saw a dead woman on the hallway floor.

three

The dead woman had long gray hair. She was wearing an elaborate white flannel nightgown. She was on her side. Her feet were near the study door. Her arms and legs had sprawled in a way that made it look like she was running. There was a shotgun half underneath her. One side of her head was caved in. I could see blood and brains matted in her hair. More blood had pooled on the oak. It looked dark and sticky.

I stepped into the hallway and stopped an arm's length from her. I squatted down and reached for her wrist. Her skin was very cold. There was no pulse.

I stayed down. Listened. Heard nothing. I leaned over and looked at her head. She had been hit with something hard and heavy. Just a single blow, but a serious one. The wound was in the shape of a trench. Nearly an inch wide, maybe four inches long. It had come from the left side, and above. She had been facing the back of the house. Facing the kitchen. I glanced around and dropped her wrist and stood up and stepped into the den. A Persian carpet covered most of the floor. I stood on it and imagined I was hearing quiet tense footsteps coming down the hallway, toward me. Imagined I was still holding the wrecking bar I had used to force the lock. Imagined swinging it when my target stepped into view, on her way past the open doorway.

I looked down. There was a stripe of blood and hair on the carpet. The wrecking bar had been wiped on it.

Nothing else in the room was disturbed. It was an impersonal space. It looked like it was there because they had heard a family house should have a study. Not because they actually needed one. The desk was not set up for working. There were photographs in silver frames all over it. But fewer than I would have expected, from a long marriage. There was one that showed the dead man from the motel and the dead woman from the hallway standing together with the Mount Rushmore faces blurry in the background. General and Mrs. Kramer, on vacation. He was much taller than she was. He looked strong and vigorous. She looked petite in comparison.

There was another framed photograph showing Kramer himself in uniform. The picture was a few years old. He was standing at the top of the steps, about to climb into a C-130 transport plane. It was a color photograph. His uniform was

green, the airplane was brown. He was smiling and waving. Off to assume his one-star command, I guessed. There was a second picture, almost identical, a little newer. Kramer, at the top of a set of airplane steps, turning back, smiling and waving. Off to assume his two-star command, probably. In both pictures he was waving with his right hand. In both pictures his left held the same canvas suit carrier I had seen in the motel room closet. And above it, in both pictures, tucked up under his arm, was a matching canvas briefcase.

I stepped out to the hallway again. Listened hard. Heard nothing. I could have searched the house, but I didn't need to. I was pretty sure there was nobody in it and I knew there was nothing I needed to find. So I took a last look at the Kramer widow. I could see the soles of her feet. She hadn't been a widow for long. Maybe an hour, maybe three. I figured the blood on the floor was about twelve hours old. But it was impossible to be precise. That would have to wait until the doctors arrived.

I retreated through the kitchen and went back outside and walked around to find Summer. Sent her inside to take a look. It was quicker than a verbal explanation. She came out again four minutes later, looking calm and composed. *Score one for Summer,* I thought.

"You like coincidences?" she said.

I said nothing.

"We have to go to D.C.," she said. "To Walter Reed. We have to make them double-check Kramer's autopsy."

I said nothing.

"This makes his death automatically suspicious. I mean, what are the chances? It's one in forty or fifty thousand that an individual soldier will die on any given day, but to have his wife die on the *same* day? For her to be a homicide victim on the same day?"

"Wasn't the same day," I said. "Wasn't even the same year."

She nodded. "OK, New Year's Eve, New Year's Day. But that just makes my point. It's inconceivable that Walter Reed had a pathologist scheduled to work

point. It's inconceivable that Walter Reed had a pathologist scheduled to work last night. So they had to drag one in, specially. And from where? From a party, probably."

I smiled, briefly. "So you want us to go up there and say, hey, are you sure your doc could see straight last night? Sure he wasn't too juiced up to spot the difference between a heart attack and a homicide?"

"We have to check," she said. "I don't like coincidences."

"What do you think happened in there?"

"Intruder," she said. "Mrs. Kramer was woken up by the noise at the door, got out of bed, grabbed a shotgun she kept near at hand, came downstairs, headed for the kitchen. She was a brave lady."

I nodded. Generals' wives, tough as they come.

"But she was slow," Summer said. "The intruder was already all the way into the study and was able to get her from the side. With the crowbar he had used on the door. As she walked past. He was taller than she was, maybe by a foot, probably right-handed."

I said nothing.

"So are we going to Walter Reed?"

"I think we have to," I said. "We'll go as soon as we've finished here."

We called the Green Valley cops from a wall phone we found in the kitchen. Then we called Garber and gave him the news. He said he would meet us at the hospital. Then we waited. Summer watched the front of the house, and I watched the back. Nothing happened. The cops came within seven minutes. They made a tight little convoy, two marked cruisers, a detective's car, an ambulance. They had lights and sirens going. We heard them a mile away. They howled into the driveway and then shut down. Summer and I stepped back in the sudden silence and they all swarmed past us. We had no role. A general's wife is a civilian, and the house was inside a civilian jurisdiction. Normally I wouldn't let such fine distinctions get in my way, but the place had already told me what I needed to know. So I was prepared to stand back and earn some Brownie points by doing it by the book. Brownie points might come in useful later.

A patrolman watched us for twenty long minutes while the other cops poked around inside. Then a detective in a suit came out to take our statements. We told him about Kramer's heart attack, the widow trip, the banging door. His name was Clark and he had no problem with anything we had to say. His problem was the same as Summer's. Both Kramers had died miles apart on the same night, which was a coincidence, and he didn't like coincidences any better than Summer did. I started to feel sorry for Rick Stockton, the deputy chief down in North Carolina. His decision to let me haul Kramer's body away was going to look bad, in this new light. It put half the puzzle in the military's hands. It was going to set up a conflict.

We gave Clark a phone number where he could reach us at Bird, and then we got back in the car. I figured D.C. was another seventy miles. Another hour and ten. Maybe less, the way Summer drove. She took off and found the highway again and put her foot down until the Chevy was vibrating fit to bust.

"I saw the briefcase in the photographs," she said. "Did you?"

"Yes," I said.

"Does it upset you to see dead people?"

"No," I said.

"Why not?"

"I don't know. You?"

"It upsets me a little."

I said nothing.

"You think it was a coincidence?" she said.

"No," I said. "I don't believe in coincidences."

"So you think the postmortem missed something?"

"No," I said again. "I think the postmortem was probably accurate."

“So why are we driving all the way to D.C.?”

“Because I need to apologize to the pathologist. I dropped him in it by sending him Kramer’s body. Now he’s going to have wall-to-wall civilians bugging him for a month. That will piss him off big time.”

But the pathologist was a her, not a him, and she had such a sunny disposition that I doubted anything could piss her off for long. We met with her in the Walter Reed Army Medical Center’s reception area, four o’clock in the afternoon, New Year’s Day. It looked like any other hospital lobby. There were holiday decorations hanging from the ceilings. They already looked a little tired. Garber was already there. He was sitting on a plastic chair. He was a small man and didn’t seem uncomfortable. But he was quiet. He didn’t introduce himself to Summer. She stood next to him. I leaned on the wall. The doctor faced us with a sheaf of notes in her hand, like she was lecturing a small group of keen students. Her name badge read *Sam McGowan*, and she was young and dark, and brisk, and open.

“General Kramer died of natural causes,” she said. “Heart attack, last night, after eleven, before midnight. There’s no possibility of doubt. I’m happy to be audited if you want, but it would be a complete waste of time. His toxicology was absolutely clear. The evidence of ventricular fibrillation is indisputable and his arterial plaque was monumental. So forensically, your only tentative question might be whether by coincidence someone electrically stimulated fibrillation in a man almost certain to suffer it anyway within minutes or hours or days or weeks.”

“How would it be done?” Summer asked.

McGowan shrugged. “The skin would have to be wet over a large area. The guy would have to be in a bathtub, basically. Then, if you applied wall current to the water, you’d probably get fibrillation without burn marks. But the guy wasn’t in a bathtub, and there’s no evidence he ever had been.”

“What if his skin wasn’t wet?”

“Then I’d have seen burn injuries. And I didn’t, and I went over every inch of him with a magnifying glass. No burns, no hypodermic marks, no nothing.”

“What about shock, or surprise, or fear?”

The doctor shrugged again. “Possible, but we know what he was doing, don’t we? That kind of sudden sexual excitement is a classic trigger.”

Nobody spoke.

“Natural causes, folks,” McGowan said. “Just a big old heart attack. Every pathologist in the world could take a look at him and there would be one hundred percent agreement. I absolutely guarantee it.”

“OK,” Garber said. “Thanks, Doc.”

“I apologize,” I said. “You’re going to have to repeat all that to about two dozen civilian cops, every day for a couple of weeks.”

She smiled. “I’ll print up an official statement.”

Then she looked at each of us in turn in case we had more questions. We didn’t, so she smiled once more and swept away through a door. It sucked shut behind her and the ceiling decorations rustled and stilled and the reception area went quiet.

We didn’t speak for a moment.

“OK,” Garber said. “That’s it. No controversy with Kramer himself, and his wife is a civilian crime. It’s out of our hands.”

“Did you know Kramer?” I asked him.

Garber shook his head. “Only by reputation.”

“Which was?”

“Arrogant. He was Armored Branch. The Abrams tank is the best toy in the army. Those guys rule the world, and they know it.”

“Know anything about the wife?”

He made a face. “She spent way too much time at home in Virginia, is what I hear. She was rich, from an old Virginia family. I mean, she did her duty. She

spent time on-post in Germany, only when you add it up, it really wasn't a hell of a lot of time. Like now, XII Corps told me she was home for the holidays, which sounds OK, but actually she came home for Thanksgiving and wasn't expected back until the spring. So the Kramers weren't real close, by all accounts. No kids, no shared interests."

"Which might explain the hooker," I said. "If they lived separate lives."

"I guess," Garber said. "I get the feeling it was a marriage, you know, but it was more window dressing than anything real."

"What was her name?" Summer asked.

Garber turned to look at her.

"Mrs. Kramer," he said. "That's all the name we need to know."

Summer looked away.

"Who was Kramer traveling to Irwin with?" I asked.

"Two of his guys," Garber said. "A one-star general and a colonel, Vassell and Coomer. They were a real triumvirate. Kramer, Vassell, and Coomer. The corporate face of Armor."

He stood up and stretched.

"Start at midnight," I said to him. "Tell me everything you did."

"Why?"

"Because I don't like coincidences. And neither do you."

"I didn't do anything."

"Everybody did something," I said. "Except Kramer."

Garber looked straight at me.

"I watched the ball drop," he said. "Then I had another drink. I kissed my daughter. I kissed a whole bunch of people, as I recall. Then I sang 'Auld Lang

Syne.´´

“And then?”

“My office got me on the phone. Told me they’d found out by circuitous means that we had a dead two-star down in North Carolina. Told me the Fort Bird MP duty officer had palmed it off. So I called there, and I got you.”

“And then?”

“You set out to do your thing and I called the town cops and got Kramer’s name. Looked him up and found he was a XII Corps guy. So I called Germany and reported the death, but I kept the details to myself. I told you this already.”

“And then?”

“Then nothing. I waited for your report.”

“OK,” I said.

“OK what?”

“OK, sir?”

“Bullshit,” he said. “What are you thinking?”

“The briefcase,” I said. “I still want to find it.”

“So keep looking for it,” he said. “Until I find Vassell and Coomer. They can tell us whether there was anything in it worth worrying about.”

“You can’t find them?”

He shook his head.

“No,” he said. “They checked out of their hotel, but they didn’t fly to California. Nobody seems to know where the hell they are.”

Garber left to drive himself back to town and Summer and I climbed into the

car and headed south again. It was cold, and it was getting dark. I offered to take the wheel, but Summer wouldn't let me. Driving seemed to be her main hobby.

"Colonel Garber seemed tense," she said. She sounded disappointed, like an actress who had failed an audition.

"He was feeling guilty," I said.

"Why?"

"Because he killed Mrs. Kramer."

She just stared at me. She was doing about ninety, looking at me, sideways.

"In a manner of speaking," I said.

"How?"

"This was no coincidence."

"That's not what the doctor told us."

"Kramer died of natural causes. That's what the doctor told us. But something about that event led directly to Mrs. Kramer becoming a homicide victim. And Garber set all that in motion. By notifying XII Corps. He put the word out, and within about two hours the widow was dead too."

"So what's going on?"

"I have absolutely no idea," I said.

"And what about Vassell and Coomer?" she said. "They were a threesome. Kramer's dead, his wife is dead, and the other two are missing."

"You heard the man. It's out of our hands."

"You're not going to do anything?"

"I'm going to look for a hooker."

We set off on the most direct route we could find, straight back to the motel and the lounge bar. There was no real choice. First the Beltway, and then I-95. Traffic was light. It was still New Year's Day. The world outside our windows looked dark and quiet, cold and sleepy. Lights were coming on everywhere. Summer drove as fast as she dared, which was plenty fast. What might have taken Kramer six hours was going to take us less than five. We stopped for gas early, and we bought stale sandwiches that had been made in the previous calendar year. We forced them down as we hustled south. Then I spent twenty minutes watching Summer. She had small neat hands. She had them resting lightly on the wheel. She didn't blink much. Her lips were slightly parted and every minute or so she would run her tongue across her teeth.

"Talk to me," I said.

"About what?"

"About anything," I said. "Tell me the story of your life."

"Why?"

"Because I'm tired," I said. "To keep me awake."

"Not very interesting."

"Try me," I said.

So she shrugged and started at the beginning, which was outside of Birmingham, Alabama, in the middle of the sixties. She had nothing bad to say about it, but she gave me the impression that she knew even then there were better ways to grow up than poor and black in Alabama at that time. She had brothers and sisters. She had always been small, but she was nimble, and she parlayed a talent for gymnastics and dancing and jumping rope into a way of getting noticed at school. She was good at the book work too, and had assembled a patchwork of minor scholarships and moved out of state to a college in Georgia. She had joined the ROTC and in her junior year the scholarships ran out and the military picked up the tab in exchange for five years' future service. She was now halfway through it. She had aced MP school. She sounded comfortable. The military had been integrated for forty years and she said she found it to be the most color-blind place in America. But she was also a little frustrated about her own individual progress. I got the impression her application to the 110th was

make-or-break for her. If she got it, she was in for life, like me. If she didn't, she was out after five.

"Now tell me about your life," she said.

"Mine?" I said. Mine was different in every way imaginable. Color, gender, geography, family circumstances. "I was born in Berlin. Back then, you stayed in the hospital seven days, so I was one week old when I went into the military. I grew up on every base we've got. I went to West Point. I'm still in the military. I always will be. That's it, really."

"You got family?"

I recalled the note from my sergeant: *Your brother called. No message.*

"A mother and a brother," I said.

"Ever been married?"

"No. You?"

"No," she said. "Seeing anyone?"

"Not right now."

"Me either."

We drove on, a mile, and another.

"Can you imagine a life outside the service?" she asked.

"Is there one?"

"I grew up out there. I might be going back."

"You civilians are a mystery to me," I said.

Summer parked outside Kramer's room, I guessed for authenticity's sake, a little less than five hours after we left Walter Reed. She seemed satisfied with

her average speed. She shut the motor down and smiled.

“I’ll take the lounge bar,” I said. “You speak to the kid in the motel office. Do the good cop thing. Tell him the bad cop is right behind you.”

We slid out into the cold and the dark. The fog was back. The streetlights burned through it. I stretched and yawned and then straightened my coat and watched Summer head past the Coke machine. Her skin flared red as she stepped through its glow. I crossed the road and headed for the bar.

The lot was as full as it had been the night before. Cars and trucks were parked all around the building. The ventilators were working hard again. I could see smoke and smell beer in the air. I could hear music thumping away. The neon was bright.

I pulled the door and stepped into the noise. The crowd was wall-to-wall again. The same spotlights were burning. There was a different girl naked on the stage. There was the same barrel-chested guy half in shadow behind the register. I couldn’t see his face, but I knew he was looking at my lapels. Where Kramer had worn Armored’s crossed cavalry sabers with a charging tank over them, I had the Military Police’s crossed flintlock pistols, gold and shiny. Not the most popular sight, in a place like that.

“Cover charge,” the guy at the register said.

It was hard to hear him. The music was very loud.

“How much?” I said.

“Hundred dollars,” he said.

“I don’t think so.”

“OK, two hundred dollars.”

“Hilarious,” I said.

“I don’t like cops in here.”

“Can’t think why,” I said.

“Look at me.”

I looked at him. There was nothing much to see. The edge of a downlighter beam lit up a big stomach and a big chest and thick, short, tattooed forearms. And hands the size and shape of frozen chickens with heavy silver rings on most of the fingers. But the guy’s shoulders and his face were in deep shadow above them. Like he was half-hidden by a curtain. I was talking to a guy I couldn’t see.

“You’re not welcome here,” he said.

“I’ll get over it. I’m not an unduly sensitive person.”

“You’re not listening,” he said. “This is my place and I don’t want you in it.”

“I’ll be quick.”

“Leave now.”

“No.”

“Look at me.”

He leaned forward into the light. Slowly. The downlighter beam rode up his chest. Up his neck. Onto his face. It was an incredible face. It had started out ugly and it had gotten much worse. He had straight razor scars all over it. They crisscrossed it like a lattice. They were deep and white and old. His nose had been busted and badly reset and busted again and badly reset again, many times over. He had brows thick with scar tissue. Two small eyes were staring out at me from under them. He was maybe forty. Maybe five-ten, maybe three hundred pounds. He looked like a gladiator who had survived twenty years, deep inside the catacombs.

I smiled. “This thing with the face is supposed to impress me? With the dramatic lighting and all?”

“It should tell you something.”

“It tells me you lost a lot of fights. You want to lose another, that’s fine with me.”

He said nothing.

“Or I could put this place off-limits to every enlisted man at Bird. I could see what that does to your bar profits.”

He said nothing.

“But I don’t want to do that,” I said. “No reason to penalize my guys, just because you’re an asshole.”

He said nothing.

“So I guess I’ll ignore you.”

He sat back. The shadow slid back into place, like a curtain.

“I’ll see you later,” he said, from out of the darkness. “Somewhere, sometime. That’s for sure. That’s a promise. You can count on that.”

“*Now* I’m scared,” I said. I moved on and pressed into the crowd. I made it through a packed bottleneck and into the main part of the building. It was much bigger inside than it had looked. It was a big low square, full of noise and people. There were dozens of separate areas. Speakers everywhere. Loud music. Flashing lights. There were plenty of civilians in there. Plenty of military too. I could spot them by their haircuts, and their clothes. Off-duty soldiers always dress distinctively. They try to look like everybody else, and they fail. They’re always a little clean and out-of-date. They were all looking at me as I passed them by. They weren’t pleased to see me. I looked for a sergeant. Looked for a few lines around the eyes. I saw four likely candidates, six feet back from the edge of the main stage. Three of them saw me and turned away. The fourth saw me and paused for a second and then turned toward me. Like he knew he had been selected. He was a compact guy maybe five years older than me. Special Forces, probably. There were plenty of them at Bird, and he had the look. He was having a good time. That was clear. He had a smile on his face and a bottle in his hand. Cold beer, dewy with moisture. He raised it, like a toast, like an invitation to approach. So I went up close to him and spoke in his ear.

“Spread the word for me,” I said. “This is nothing official. Nothing to do with our guys. Something else entirely.”

“Like what?” he said.

“Lost property,” I said. “Nothing important. Everything’s cool.”

He said nothing.

“Special Forces?” I said.

He nodded. “Lost property?”

“No big deal,” I said. “Just something that went missing across the street.”

He thought about it and then he raised his bottle again and clinked it against where mine would have been if I had bought one. It was a clear display of acceptance. Like a mime, in all the noise. But even so a thin stream of men started up, shuffling toward the exit. Maybe twenty grunts left during my first two minutes in the room. MPs have that effect. No wonder the guy with the face didn’t want me in there.

A waitress came up to me. She was wearing a black T-shirt cut off about four inches below the neck and black shorts cut off about four inches below the waist and black shoes with very high heels. Nothing else. She stood there and looked at me until I ordered something. I asked for a Bud, and I paid about eight times its value. Took a couple of sips, and then went looking for whores.

They found me first. I guess they wanted me out of sight before I emptied the place completely. Before I reduced their customer base to zero. Two of them came straight at me. One was a platinum blonde. The other was a brunette. Both were wearing tiny tight sheath dresses that sparkled with all kinds of synthetic fibers. The blonde got in front of the brunette and headed her off. Came clattering straight toward me, awkward in absurd clear plastic heels. The brunette wheeled away and headed for the Special Forces sergeant I had spoken to. He waved her off with what looked like an expression of genuine distaste. The blonde kept on track and came right up next to me and leaned on my arm. Stretched up tall until I could feel her breath in my ear.

“Happy New Year,” she said.

“You too,” I said.

“I haven’t seen you in here before,” she said, like I was the only thing missing from her life. Her accent wasn’t local. She wasn’t from the Carolinas. She wasn’t from California either. Georgia or Alabama, probably.

wasn't from California either. Georgia or Alabama, probably.

"You new in town?" she asked, loud, because of the music.

I smiled. I had been in more whorehouses than I cared to count. All MPs have. Every single one is the same, and every single one is different. They all have different protocols. But the *Are you new in town?* question was a standard opening gambit. It invited me to start the negotiations. It insulated her from a solicitation charge.

"What's the deal here?" I asked her.

She smiled shyly, like she had never been asked such a thing before. Then she told me I could watch her onstage in exchange for dollar tips, or I could spend ten to get a private show in a back room. She explained the private show could involve touching, and to make sure I was paying attention she ran her hand up the inside of my thigh.

I could see how a guy could be tempted. She was cute. She looked to be about twenty. Except for her eyes. Her eyes looked like a fifty-year-old's.

"What about something more?" I said. "Someplace else we could go?"

"We can talk about that during the private show."

She took me by the hand and led me past their dressing room door and through a velvet curtain into a dim room behind the stage. It wasn't small. It was maybe thirty feet by twenty. It had an upholstered bench running around the whole perimeter. It wasn't especially private either. There were about six guys in there, each of them with a naked woman on his lap. The blonde girl led me to a space on the bench and sat me down. She waited until I came out with my wallet and paid her ten bucks. Then she draped herself over me and snuggled in tight. The way she sat made it impossible for me not to put my hand on her thigh. Her skin was warm and smooth.

"So where can we go?" I asked.

"You're in a hurry," she said. She moved around and eased the hem of her dress up over her hips. She wasn't wearing anything under it.

"Where are you from?" I asked her.

“Atlanta,” she said.

“What’s your name?”

“Sin,” she said. “Spelled *S, i, n.*”

I was fairly certain that was a professional alias.

“What’s yours?” she said.

“Reacher,” I said. There was no point adopting an alias of my own. I was fresh from the widow visit, still in Class As, with my nameplate big and obvious on my right jacket pocket.

“That’s a nice name,” she said, automatically. I was fairly certain she said it to everybody. *Quasimodo, Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, that’s a nice name.* She moved her hand. Started with the top button of my jacket and undid it all the way down. Smoothed her fingers inside across my chest, under my tie, on top of my shirt.

“There’s a motel across the street,” I said.

She nodded against my shoulder.

“I know there is,” she said.

“I’m looking for whoever went over there last night with a soldier.”

“Are you kidding?”

“No.”

She pushed against my chest. “Are you here to have fun, or ask questions?”

“Questions,” I said.

She stopped moving. Said nothing.

“I’m looking for whoever went over to the motel last night with a soldier.”

“Get real,” she said. “We all go over to the motel with soldiers. There’s practically a groove worn in the pavement. Look carefully, and you can see it.”

practically a groove worn in the pavement. Look carefully, and you can see it.

“I’m looking for someone who came back a little sooner than normal, maybe.”

She said nothing.

“Maybe she was a little spooked.”

She said nothing.

“Maybe she met the guy there,” I said. “Maybe she got a call earlier in the day.”

She eased her butt up off my knee and pulled her dress down as far as it would go, which wasn’t very far. Then she traced her fingertips across my lapel badge.

“We don’t answer questions,” she said.

“Why not?”

I saw her glance at the velvet curtain. Like she was looking through it and all the way across the big square room to the register by the door.

“Him?” I said. “I’ll make sure he isn’t a problem.”

“He doesn’t like us to talk to cops.”

“It’s important,” I said. “The guy was an important soldier.”

“You all think you’re important.”

“Any of the girls here from California?”

“Five or six, maybe.”

“Any of them used to work Fort Irwin?”

“I don’t know.”

“So here’s the deal,” I said. “I’m going to the bar. I’m going to get another beer. I’m going to spend ten minutes drinking it. You bring me the girl who had the problem last night. Or you show me where I can find her. Tell her there’s no real problem. Tell her nobody will get in trouble. I think you’ll find she understands

that."

"Or?"

"Or I'll roust everybody out of here and I'll burn the place to the ground. Then you can all find jobs somewhere else."

She glanced at the velvet curtain again.

"Don't worry about the fat guy," I said. "Any pissing and moaning out of him, I'll bust his nose again."

She just sat still. Didn't move at all.

"It's important," I said again. "We fix this now, nobody gets in trouble. We don't, then someone winds up with a big problem."

"I don't know," she said.

"Spread the word," I said. "Ten minutes."

I bumped her off my lap and watched her disappear through the curtain. Followed her a minute later and fought my way to the bar. I left my jacket hanging open. I thought it made me look off duty. I didn't want to ruin everybody's evening.

I spent twelve minutes drinking another overpriced domestic beer. I watched the waitresses and the hookers work the room. I saw the big guy with the face moving through the press of people, looking here, looking there, checking on things. I waited. My new blonde friend didn't show. And I couldn't see her anywhere. The place was very crowded. And it was dark. The music was thumping away. There were strobes and black lights and the whole scene was confusion. The ventilation fans were roaring but the air was hot and foul. I was tired and I was getting a headache. I slid off my stool and tried a circuit of the whole place. Couldn't find the blonde anywhere. I went around again. Didn't find her. The Special Forces sergeant I had spoken to before stopped me halfway through my third circuit.

"Looking for your girlfriend?" he said

"Looking for your girlfriend?" he said.

I nodded. He pointed at the dressing room door.

"I think you just caused her some trouble," he said.

"What kind of trouble?"

He said nothing. Just held up his left palm and smacked his right fist into it.

"And you didn't do anything?" I said.

He shrugged.

"You're the cop," he said. "Not me."

The dressing room door was a plain plywood rectangle painted black. I didn't knock. I figured the women who used the room weren't shy. I just pulled it open and stepped inside. There were regular lightbulbs burning in there, and piles of clothes, and the stink of perfume. There were vanity tables with theater mirrors. There was an old sofa, red velvet. Sin was sitting on it, crying. She had a vivid red outline of a hand on her left cheek. Her right eye was swollen shut. I figured it for a double slap, first forehand, then backhand. Two heavy blows. She was pretty shaken. Her left shoe was off. I could see needle marks between her toes. Addicts in the skin trades often inject there. It rarely shows. Models, hookers, actresses.

I didn't ask if she was OK. That would have been a stupid question. She was going to live, but she wasn't going to work for a week. Not until the eye went black and then turned yellow enough to hide with makeup. I just stood there until she saw me, through the eye that was still open.

"Get out," she said.

She looked away.

"Bastard," she said.

"You find the girl yet?" I said.

She looked straight at me.

“There was no girl,” she said. “I asked all around. I asked everybody. And that’s what I heard back. Nobody had a problem last night. Nobody at all.”

I paused a beat. “Anyone not here who should be?”

“We’re all here. We’ve all got Christmas to pay for.”

I didn’t speak.

“You got me slapped for nothing,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m sorry for your trouble.”

“Get out,” she said again, not looking at me.

“OK,” I said.

“Bastard,” she said.

I left her sitting there and forced my way back through the crowd around the stage. Through the crowd around the bar. Through the bottleneck entrance, to the doorway. The guy with the face was right there in the shadows again, behind the register. I guessed where his head was in the darkness and swung my open right hand and slapped him on the ear, hard enough to rock him sideways.

“You,” I said. “Outside.”

I didn’t wait for him. Just pushed my way out into the night. There was a bunched-up crowd of people in the lot. All military. The ones who had trickled out when I came in. They were standing around in the cold, leaning on cars, drinking beer from the long-neck bottles they had carried out with them. They weren’t going to be a problem. They would have to be very drunk indeed to mix it up with an MP. But they weren’t going to be any help either. I wasn’t one of them. I was on my own.

The door burst open behind me. The big guy came out. He had a couple of locals with him. Both looked like farmers. We all stepped into a pool of yellow light from a fixture on a pole. We all faced each other. Our breath turned to vapor in the air. Nobody spoke. No preamble was required. I guessed that parking lot had seen plenty of fights. I guessed this one would be no different from all the others. It would finish up just the same, with a winner and a loser.

outers. It would finish up just the same, with a winner and a loser.

I slipped out of my jacket and hung it on the nearest car's door mirror. It was a ten-year-old Plymouth, good paint, good chrome. An enthusiast's ride. I saw the Special Forces sergeant I had spoken to come out into the lot. He looked at me for a second and then stepped away into the shadows and stood with his men by the cars. I took my watch off and turned away and dropped it in my jacket pocket. Then I turned back. Studied my opponent. I wanted to mess him up bad. I wanted Sin to know I had stood up for her. But there was no percentage in going for his face. That was already messed up bad. I couldn't make it much worse. And I wanted to put him out of action for a spell. I didn't want him coming around and taking his frustration out on the girls, just because he couldn't get back at me.

He was barrel-chested and overweight, so I figured I might not have to use my hands at all. Except on the farmers, maybe, if they piled in. Which I hoped wouldn't happen. No need to start a big conflict. On the other hand, it was their call. Everybody has a choice in life. They could hang back, or they could choose up sides.

I was maybe seven inches taller than the guy with the face, but maybe seventy pounds lighter. And ten years younger. I watched him run the numbers. Watched him conclude that on balance he would be OK. I guessed he figured himself for a real junkyard dog. Figured me for an upstanding representative of Uncle Sam. Maybe the Class As made him think I was going to act like an officer and a gentleman. Somewhat proper, somewhat inhibited.

His mistake.

He came at me, swinging. Big chest, short arms, not much reach at all. I arched around the punch and let him skitter away. He came back at me. I swatted his hand away and tapped him in the face with my elbow. Not hard. I just wanted to stop his momentum and get him standing still right in front of me, just for a moment.

He put all his weight on his back foot and lined up a straight drive aimed for my face. It was going to be a big blow. It would have hurt me if it had landed. But before he let it go I stepped in and smashed my right heel into his right kneecap. The knee is a fragile joint. Ask any athlete. This guy had three hundred pounds bearing down on it and he got two hundred thirty driving straight through it. His

patella shattered and his leg folded backward. Exactly like a regular knee joint, but in reverse. He went down forward and the top of his boot came up to meet the front of his thigh. He screamed, real loud. I stepped back and smiled. *He shoots, he scores.*

I stepped back in and looked at the guy's knee, carefully. It was messed up, but good. Broken bone, ripped ligaments, torn cartilage. I thought about kicking it again, but I really didn't need to. He was in line for a visit to the cane store, as soon as they let him out of the orthopedic ward. He was going to be choosing a lifetime supply. Wood, aluminum, short, long, his pick.

"I'll come back and do the other one," I said. "If anything happens that I don't want to happen."

I don't think he heard me. He was writhing around in an oily puddle, panting and whimpering, trying to get his knee in a position where it would stop killing him. He was shit out of luck there. He was going to have to wait for surgery.

The farmers were busy choosing up sides. Both of them were pretty dumb. But one of them was dumber than the other. Slower. He was flexing his big red hands. I stepped in and headbutted him full in the face, to help with the decision-making process. He went down, head-to-toe with the big guy, and his pal beat a fast retreat behind the nearest pickup truck. I lifted my jacket off the Plymouth's door mirror and shrugged back into it. Took my watch out of my pocket. Strapped it back on my wrist. The soldiers drank their beer and looked at me, nothing in their faces. They were neither pleased nor disappointed. They had invested nothing in the outcome. Whether it was me or the other guys on the ground was all the same to them.

I saw Lieutenant Summer on the fringe of the crowd. Threaded my way through cars and people toward her. She looked tense. She was breathing hard. I guessed she had been watching. I guessed she had been ready to jump in and help me out.

"What happened?" she said.

"The fat guy hit a woman who was asking questions for me. His pal didn't run away fast enough."

She glanced at them and then back at me. "What did the woman say?"

"She said she had a problem and I was the right

"She said nobody had a problem last night."

"The kid in the motel still denies there was a hooker with Kramer. He's pretty definite about it."

I heard Sin say: *You got me slapped for nothing. Bastard.*

"So what made him go looking in the room?"

Summer made a face. "That was my big question, obviously."

"Did he have an answer?"

"Not at first. Then he said it was because he heard a vehicle leaving in a hurry."

"What vehicle?"

"He said it was a big engine, revving hard, taking off fast, like a panic situation."

"Did he see it?"

Summer just shook her head.

"Makes no sense," I said. "A vehicle implies a call girl, and I doubt if they have many call girls here. And why would Kramer need a call girl anyway, with all those other hookers right here in the bar?"

Summer was still shaking her head. "The kid says the vehicle had a very distinctive sound. Very loud. And diesel, not gasoline. He says he heard the exact same sound again a little later on."

"When?"

"When you left in your Humvee."

"What?"

Summer looked right at me. "He says he checked Kramer's room because he heard a military vehicle peeling out of the lot in a panic."

four

We went back across the road to the motel and made the kid tell the story all over again. He was surly and he wasn't talkative, but he made a good witness. Unhelpful people often do. They're not trying to please you. They're not trying to impress you. They're not making all kinds of stuff up, trying to tell you what you want to hear.

He said he was sitting in the office, alone, doing nothing, and at about eleven twenty-five in the evening he heard a vehicle door slam and then a big turbodiesel start up. He described sounds that must have been a gearbox slamming into reverse and a four-wheel-drive transfer case locking up. Then there was tire noise and engine noise and gravel noise and something very large and heavy sped away in a big hurry. He said he got off his stool and went outside to look. Didn't see the vehicle.

"Why did you check the room?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "I thought maybe it was on fire."

"On fire?"

"People do stuff like that, in a place like this. They set the room on fire. And then hightail out. For kicks. Or something. I don't know. It was unusual."

"How did you know which room to check?"

He went very quiet at that point. Summer pressed him for an answer. Then I did. We did the good cop, bad cop thing. Eventually he admitted it was the only room rented for the whole night. All the others were renting by the hour, and were being serviced by foot traffic from across the street, not by vehicles. He said that was how he had been so sure there was never a hooker in Kramer's room. It was his responsibility to check them in and out. He took the money and issued the keys. Kept track of the comings and the goings. So he always knew for sure who was where. It was a part of his function. A part he was supposed to keep very quiet about.

"I'll lose my job now," he said.

He got worried to the point of tears and Summer had to calm him down. Then he

He got worried to the point of tears and Summer had to calm him down. Then he told us he had found Kramer's body and called the cops and cleared all the hourly renters out for safety's sake. Then Deputy Chief Stockton had shown up within about fifteen minutes. Then I had shown up, and when I left sometime later the kid recognized the same vehicle sounds he had heard before. Same engine noise, same drivetrain noises, same tire whine. He was convincing. He had already admitted that hookers used the place all the time, so he had no more reason to lie. And Humvees were still relatively new. Still relatively rare. And they made a distinctive noise. So I believed him. We left him there on his stool and stepped outside into the cold red glow of the Coke machine.

"No hooker," Summer said. "A woman from the base instead."

"A woman officer," I said. "Maybe fairly senior. Someone with permanent access to her own Humvee. Nobody signs out a pool vehicle for an assignation like that. And she's got his briefcase. She must have."

"She'll be easy to find. She'll be in the gate log, time out, time in."

"I might have even passed her on the road. If she left here at eleven twenty-five she wasn't back at Bird before twelve-fifteen. I was leaving around then."

"If she went straight back to the post."

"Yes," I said. "If."

"Did you see another Humvee?"

"Don't think so," I said.

"Who do you think she is?"

I shrugged. "Like we figured about the phantom hooker. Someone he met somewhere. Irwin, probably, but it could have been anywhere."

I stared across at the gas station. Watched cars go by on the road.

"Vassell and Coomer might know her," Summer said. "You know, if it was a long-term thing between her and Kramer."

"Yes, they might."

“Where do you think they are?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “But I’m sure I’ll find them if I need them.”

I didn’t find them. They found me. They were waiting for me in my borrowed office when we got back. Summer dropped me at my door and went to park the car. I walked past the outer desk. The night-shift sergeant was back. The mountain woman, with the baby son and the paycheck worries. She gestured at the inner door in a way that told me someone was in there. Someone that ranked a lot higher than either of us.

“Got coffee?” I said.

“The machine is on,” she said.

I took some with me. My coat was still unbuttoned. My hair was a mess. I looked exactly like a guy who had been brawling in a parking lot. I walked straight to the desk. Put my coffee down. There were two guys in upright visitor chairs against the wall, facing me. They were both in woodland BDUs. One had a Brigadier General’s star on his collar and the other had a colonel’s eagle. The general had *Vassell* on his nametape and the colonel had *Coomer.* Vassell was bald and Coomer wore eyeglasses and they were both pompous enough and old enough and short and soft and pink enough to look vaguely ridiculous in BDUs. They looked like Rotary Club members on their way to a fancy dress ball. First impression, I didn’t like them very much.

I sat down in my chair and saw two slips of paper stacked square in the center of the blotter. The first was a note that said: *Your brother called again. Urgent.* This time there was a phone number with it. It had a 202 area code. Washington D.C.

“Don’t you salute senior officers?” Vassell said, from his chair.

The second note said: *Col. Garber called. Green Valley PD calculates Mrs. K died approx. 0200.* I folded both notes separately and tucked them side by side under the base of my telephone. Adjusted them so I could see exactly half of each one. Looked up in time to see Vassell glaring at me. His naked scalp was going red.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “What was the question?”

“Don’t you salute senior officers when you enter a room?”

“If they’re in my chain of command,” I said. “You’re not.”

“I don’t consider that an answer,” he said.

“Look it up,” I said. “I’m with the 110th Special Unit. We’re separate. Structurally we’re parallel to the rest of the army. We have to be, if you think about it. We can’t police you if we’re in your chain of command ourselves.”

“I’m not here to be policed, son,” Vassell said.

“So why are you here? It’s kind of late for a social visit.”

“I’m here to ask some questions.”

“Ask away,” I said. “Then I’ll ask some of my own. And you know what the difference will be?”

He said nothing.

“I’ll be answering out of courtesy,” I said. “You’ll be answering because the Uniform Code of Military Justice requires you to.”

Vassell said nothing. Just glared at me. Then he glanced at Coomer. Coomer looked back at him, and then at me.

“We’re here about General Kramer,” he said. “We’re his senior staff.”

“I know who you are,” I said.

“Tell us about the general.”

“He’s dead,” I said.

“We’re aware of that. We’d like to know the circumstances.”

“He had a heart attack.”

“Where?”

Where?

“Inside his chest cavity.”

Vassell glowered.

“Where did he die?” Coomer said.

“I can’t tell you that,” I said. “It’s germane to an ongoing inquiry.”

“In what way?” Vassell said.

“In a confidential way.”

“It was around here somewhere,” he said. “That much is already common knowledge.”

“Well, there you go,” I said. “What’s the conference at Irwin about?”

“What?”

“The conference at Irwin,” I said again. “Where you were all headed.”

“What about it?”

“I need to know the agenda.”

Vassell looked at Coomer and Coomer opened his mouth to start telling me something when my phone rang. It was my desk sergeant. She had Summer out there with her. She was unsure whether to send her in. I told her to go right ahead. So there was a tap on the door and Summer came in. I introduced her all around and she pulled a spare chair over to my desk and sat down, alongside me, facing them. Two against two. I pulled the second note out from under the telephone and passed it to her: *Col. Garber called. Green Valley PD calculates Mrs. K died approx. 0200.* She unfolded it and read it and refolded it and passed it back to me. I put it back under the phone. Then I asked Vassell and Coomer about the Irwin agenda again, and watched their attitudes change. They didn’t get any more helpful. It was more of a sideways move than an improvement. But because there was now a woman in the room they dialed down the overt hostility and replaced it with smug patronizing civility. They came from that kind of a background and that kind of a generation. They hated MPs and I was sure they

hated women officers, but all of a sudden they felt they had to be polite.

“It was going to be purely routine,” Coomer said. “Just a regular powwow. Nothing of any great importance.”

“Which explains why you didn’t actually go,” I said.

“Naturally. It seemed much more appropriate to remain here. You know, under the circumstances.”

“How did you find out about Kramer?”

“XII Corps called us.”

“From Germany?”

“That’s where XII Corps is, son,” Vassell said.

“Where did you stay last night?”

“In a hotel,” Coomer said.

“Which one?”

“The Jefferson. In D.C.”

“Private or on a DoD ticket?”

“That hotel is authorized for senior officers.”

“Why didn’t General Kramer stay there?”

“Because he made alternative arrangements.”

“When?”

“When what?” Coomer said.

“When did he make these alternative arrangements?”

“Some days ago.”

“So it wasn’t a spur of the moment thing?”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“Do you know what those arrangements were?”

“Obviously not,” Vassell said. “Or we wouldn’t be asking you where he died.”

“You didn’t think he was maybe visiting with his wife?”

“Was he?”

“No,” I said. “Why do you need to know where he died?”

There was a long pause. Their attitudes changed again. The smugness fell away and they replaced it with a kind of winsome frankness.

“We don’t really *need* to know,” Vassell said. He leaned forward and glanced at Summer like he wished she weren’t there. Like he wanted this new intimacy to be purely man-to-man with me. “And we have no specific information or direct knowledge at all, but we’re worried that General Kramer’s private arrangements could lead to the potential for embarrassment, in light of the circumstances.”

“How well did you know him?”

“On a professional level, very well indeed. On a personal level, about as well as anyone knows his brother officer. Which is to say, perhaps not well enough.”

“But you suspect in general terms what his arrangements might have been.”

“Yes,” he said. “We have our suspicions.”

“So it wasn’t a surprise to you that he didn’t bunk at the hotel.”

“No,” he said. “It wasn’t.”

“And it wasn’t a surprise when I told you he wasn’t visiting with his wife.”

“Not entirely, no.”

“So you suspected roughly what he might be doing, but you didn’t know where.”

Vassell nodded his head. “Roughly.”

“Did you know with whom he might have been doing it?”

Vassell shook his head.

“We have no specific information,” he said.

“OK,” I said. “Doesn’t really matter. I’m sure you know the army well enough to realize that if we discover a potential for embarrassment, we’ll cover it up.”

There was a long pause.

“Have all traces been removed?” Coomer asked. “From wherever it was?”

I nodded. “We took his stuff.”

“Good.”

“I need the Irwin conference agenda,” I said.

There was another pause.

“There wasn’t one,” Vassell said.

“I’m sure there was,” I said. “This is the army. It’s not the Actors Studio. We don’t do free improvisation sessions.”

There was a pause.

“There was nothing on paper,” Coomer said. “I told you, Major, it was no big deal.”

“How did you spend your day today?”

“Chasing rumors about the general.”

“How did you get down here from D.C.?”

“We have a car and a driver on loan from the Pentagon.”

“You checked out of the Jefferson?”

You checked out of the Jefferson?

“Yes, we did.”

“So your bags are in the Pentagon car?”

“Yes, they are.”

“Where is the car?”

“Waiting outside your post headquarters.”

“It’s not my post headquarters,” I said. “I’m here on temporary detachment.”

I turned to Summer and told her to go fetch their briefcases from the car. They got all outraged, but they knew they couldn’t stop me doing it. Civilian notions about unreasonable search and seizure and warrants and probable cause stop at an army post main gate. I watched their eyes while Summer was gone. They were annoyed, but they weren’t worried. So either they were telling the truth about the Irwin conference or they had already ditched the relevant paperwork. But I went through the motions anyway. Summer got back carrying two identical briefcases. They were exactly like the one Kramer had in his silver-framed photographs. Staffers kiss up in all kinds of ways.

I searched through them on my desk. I found passports, plane tickets, travel vouchers, and itineraries in both of them. But no agendas for Fort Irwin.

“Sorry for the inconvenience,” I said.

“Happy now, son?” Vassell said.

“Kramer’s wife is dead too,” I said. “Did you know that?”

I watched them carefully, and I saw that they didn’t know. They stared at me and stared at each other and started to get pale and upset.

“How?” Vassell said.

“When?” Coomer said.

“Last night,” I said. “She was a homicide victim.”

“Where?”

“In her house. There was an intruder.”

“Do we know who it was?”

“No, we don’t. It’s not our case. It’s a civilian jurisdiction.”

“What was it? A burglary?”

“It maybe started out that way.”

They said nothing more. Summer and I walked them out to the sidewalk in front of post headquarters and watched them climb into their Pentagon car. It was a Mercury Grand Marquis, a couple of model years newer than Mrs. Kramer’s big old boat, and black rather than green. Their driver was a tall guy in BDUs. He had subdued-order badges on and I couldn’t make out his name or his rank in the dark. But he didn’t look like an enlisted man. He U-turned smoothly across the empty road and drove Vassell and Coomer away. We watched his taillights disappear north, through the main gate, and away into the darkness beyond.

“What do you think?” Summer said.

“I think they’re full of shit,” I said.

“Important shit or regular flag-rank shit?”

“They’re lying,” I said. “They’re uptight, they’re lying, and they’re stupid. Why am I worried about Kramer’s briefcase?”

“Sensitive paperwork,” she said. “Whatever he was carrying to California.”

I nodded. “They just defined it for me. It’s the conference agenda itself.”

“You’re sure there was one?”

“There’s always an agenda. And it’s always on paper. There’s a paper agenda for everything. You want to change the dog food in the K-9 kennels, you need forty-seven separate meetings with forty-seven separate paper agendas. So there was one for Irwin, that’s for damn sure. It was completely stupid to say there wasn’t. If they’ve got something to hide, they should have just said it’s too secret

for me to see."

"Maybe the conference really wasn't important."

"That's bullshit too. It was very important."

"Why?"

"Because a two-star general was going. And a one-star. And because it was New Year's Eve, Summer. Who flies on New Year's Eve and spends the night in a lousy stopover hotel? And this year in Germany was a big deal. The Wall is coming down. We won, after forty-five years. The parties must have been incredible. Who would miss them for something unimportant? To have gotten those three guys on a plane on New Year's Eve, this Irwin thing had to be some kind of a very big deal."

"They were upset about Mrs. Kramer. More than about Kramer himself."

I nodded. "Maybe they liked her."

"They must have liked Kramer too."

"No, he's just a tactical problem for them. It's an unsentimental business, up there at their level. They hitched themselves to him, and now he's dead, and they're worrying about where that leaves them."

"Ready for promotion, maybe."

"Maybe," I said. "But if Kramer turns out to be an embarrassment, they could go down with him."

"Then they should be reassured. You promised them a cover-up."

There was something prim in her voice. Like she was suggesting I shouldn't have promised them any such thing.

"We protect the army, Summer," I said. "Like family. That's what we're for." Then I paused. "But did you notice they didn't shut up after that? They should have taken the hint. Cover-up requested, cover-up promised. Asked and answered, mission accomplished."

“They wanted to know where his stuff was.”

“Yes,” I said. “They did. And you know what that means? It means they’re looking for Kramer’s briefcase too. Because of the agenda. Kramer’s copy is the only one still outside of their direct control. They came down here to check if I had it.”

Summer looked in the direction their car had gone. I could still smell its exhaust in the air. An acid tang from the catalyst.

“How do civilian medics work?” I asked her. “Suppose you’re my wife, and I go down with a heart attack? What do you do?”

“I call 911.”

“And then what happens?”

“The ambulance shows up. Takes you to the emergency room.”

“And let’s say I’m DOA when I get there. Where would you be?”

“I would have ridden to the hospital with you.”

“And where would my briefcase be?”

“At home,” she said. “Wherever you left it.” Then she paused. “What? You think someone went to Mrs. Kramer’s house last night looking for the briefcase?”

“It’s a plausible sequence,” I said. “Someone hears that he’s dead from a heart attack, assumes he was pronounced in the ambulance or the emergency room, assumes whoever he was with would have accompanied him, goes down there expecting to find an empty house with a briefcase in it.”

“But Kramer was never there.”

“It was a reasonable first try.”

“You think it was Vassell and Coomer?”

I said nothing.

“That’s crazy,” Summer said. “They don’t look the type.”

“Don’t let looks fool you. They’re Armored Branch. They’ve trained all their lives to roll right over anything that gets in their way. But I don’t think the timing works for them. Let’s say Garber called XII Corps in Germany at twelve-fifteen, earliest. Then let’s say XII Corps called the hotel back here in the States at twelve-thirty, earliest. Green Valley is seventy minutes from D.C. and Mrs. Kramer died at two o’clock. That would have given them a twenty-minute margin to react, maximum. They were just in from the airport, so they didn’t have a car with them, and it would have taken time to get hold of one. And they certainly didn’t have a crowbar with them. Nobody travels with a crowbar in their luggage, just in case. And I doubt if the Home Depot was open, after midnight on New Year’s Eve.”

“So someone *else* is out there looking?”

“We need to find that agenda,” I said. “We need to nail this thing down.”

I sent Summer away to do three things: first, list all female personnel at Fort Bird with access to their own Humvees, and second, list any of them who might have met Kramer at Fort Irwin in California, and third, contact the Jefferson Hotel in D.C. and get Vassell and Coomer’s exact check-in and checkout times, plus details on all their incoming and outgoing phone calls. I went back to my office and filed the note from Garber and spread the note from my brother on the blotter and dialed the number. He picked up on the first ring.

“Hey, Joe,” I said.

“Jack?”

“What?”

“I got a call.”

“Who from?”

“Mom’s doctor,” he said.

“About what?”

About what?

“She’s dying.”

five

I hung up and called Garber's office. He wasn't in. So I left a message detailing my travel plans and saying I would be out for seventy-two hours. I didn't give a reason. Then I hung up and sat at my desk, numb. Five minutes later Summer came in. She had a sheaf of motor-pool paper with her. I guess she planned on compiling her Humvee list there and then, right in front of me.

"I have to go to Paris," I said.

"Paris, Texas?" she said. "Or Paris, Kentucky, or Paris, Tennessee?"

"Paris, France," I said.

"Why?"

"My mother is sick."

"Your mother lives in France?"

"Paris," I said.

"Why?"

"Because she's French."

"Is it serious?"

"Being French?"

"No, whatever she's sick with."

I shrugged. "I don't really know. But I think so."

"I'm very sorry."

"I need a car," I said. "I need to get to Dulles, right now."

"I'll drive you," she said. "I like driving."

She left the paperwork on my desk and went to retrieve the Chevrolet we had

She left the paperwork on my desk and went to retrieve the Chevrolet we had used before. I went to my quarters and packed an army duffel with one of everything from my closet. Then I put on my long coat. It was cold, and I didn't expect Europe was going to be any warmer. Not in early January. Summer brought the car to my door. She kept it at thirty until we were off-post. Then she lit it up like a rocket and headed north. She was quiet for a spell. She was thinking. Her eyelids were moving.

"We should tell the Green Valley cops," she said. "If we think Mrs. Kramer was killed because of the briefcase."

I shook my head. "Telling them won't bring her back. And if she was killed because of the briefcase we'll find whoever did it from our end."

"What do you want me to do while you're gone?"

"Work the lists," I said. "Check the gate log. Find the woman, find the briefcase, put the agenda in a very safe place. Then check on who Vassell and Coomer called from the hotel. Maybe they sent an errand boy out into the night."

"You think that's possible?"

"Anything's possible."

"But they didn't know where Kramer was."

"That's why they tried the wrong place."

"Who would they have sent?"

"Bound to be someone who has their interests close to his heart."

"OK," she said.

"And find out who was driving them just now."

"OK," she said.

We didn't speak again, all the way to Dulles.

I met my brother Joe in the line at the Air France ticket desk. He had booked seats for both of us on the first morning flight. Now he was lining up to pay for them. I hadn't seen him for almost three years. The last time we had been together was at our father's funeral. Since then we had gone our separate ways.

"Good morning, little brother," he said.

He was wearing an overcoat and a suit and a tie, and he looked pretty good in them. He was two years older than me, and he always had been, and he always would be. As a kid I used to study him and think, That's how I'll look when I grow up. Now I found myself doing it again. From a distance we could have been mistaken for each other. Standing side by side it was obvious that he was an inch taller and a little slighter than me. But mostly it was obvious that he was a little older than me. It looked like we had started out together, but he had seen the future first, and it had aged him, and worn him down.

"How are you, Joe?" I said.

"Can't complain."

"Busy?"

"Like you wouldn't believe."

I nodded and said nothing. Truth is, I didn't know exactly what he did for a living. He had probably told me. It wasn't a national secret or anything. It was something to do with the Treasury Department. He had probably told me all the details and I probably hadn't listened. Now it seemed too late to ask.

"You were in Panama," he said. "Operation Just Cause, right?"

"Operation Just Because," I said. "That's what we called it."

"Just because what?"

"Just because we could. Just because we all had to have something to do. Just because we've got a new Commander-in-Chief who wants to look tough."

"Is it going well?"

"It's like Notre Dame against the Tumble Tots. How else is it going to go?"

“You got Noriega yet?”

“Not yet.”

“So why did they post you back here?”

“We took twenty-seven thousand guys,” I said. “It wasn’t down to me personally.”

He smiled briefly and then got that narrow-eyed look I remembered from childhood. It meant he was figuring out some pedantic and convoluted line of reasoning. But we got to the head of the line before he had time to tell me about it. He took out his credit card and paid for the flights. Maybe he expected me to pay him back for mine, maybe he didn’t. He didn’t make it clear either way.

“Let’s get coffee now,” he said.

Joe was probably the only other human on the planet who liked coffee as much as I did. He started drinking it when he was six. I copied him immediately. I was four. Neither of us has stopped since. The Reacher brothers’ need for caffeine makes heroin addiction look like an amusing little take-it-or-leave-it sideline.

We found a place with a W-shaped counter snaking through it. It was three-quarters empty. It was harshly lit with fluorescent tubes and the vinyl on the stools was sticky. We sat side by side and rested our forearms on the counter in the universal pose of early-morning travelers everywhere. A guy in an apron put mugs in front of us without asking. Then he filled them with coffee from a flask. The coffee smelled fresh. The place was changing over from the all-night service to the breakfast menu. I could hear eggs frying.

“What happened in Panama?” Joe asked.

“To me?” I said. “Nothing.”

“What were your orders there?”

“Supervision.”

“Of what?”

“Of the process,” I said. “The Noriega thing is supposed to look judicial. He’s supposed to stand trial here in the States. So we’re supposed to grab him up with some kind of formality. Some way that will look acceptable when we get him in a courtroom.”

“You were going to read him his Miranda rights?”

“Not exactly. But it had to be better than some cowboy thing.”

“Did you screw up?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Who replaced you?”

“Some other guy.”

“Rank?”

“Same,” I said.

“A rising star?”

I sipped my coffee. Shook my head. “I never met him before. But he seemed like a bit of an asshole to me.”

Joe nodded and picked up his mug. Said nothing.

“What?” I said.

“Bird’s not a small post,” he said. “But it’s not real big either, right? What are you working on?”

“Right now? Some two-star died and I can’t find his briefcase.”

“Homicide?”

I shook my head. “Heart attack.”

“When?”

“Last night.”

Last night.

"*After* you got there?"

I said nothing.

"You sure you didn't screw up?" Joe said.

"I don't think so," I said again.

"So why did they pull you out of Panama? One day you're supervising the Noriega process, and the next day you're in North Carolina with nothing to do? And you'd *still* have nothing to do if the general hadn't died."

"I got orders," I said. "You know how it is. You have to assume they know what they're doing."

"Who signed the orders?"

"I don't know."

"You should find out. Find out who wanted you at Bird badly enough to pull you out of Panama and replace you with an asshole. And you should find out why."

The guy in the apron refilled our mugs. Shoved plastic menus in front of us.

"Eggs," Joe said. "Over well, bacon, toast."

"Pancakes," I said. "Egg on the top, bacon on the side, plenty of syrup."

The guy took the menus back and went away and Joe turned around on his stool and sat back-to with his legs stretched way out into the aisle.

"What exactly did her doctor say?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "Not very much. No details, no diagnosis. No real information. European doctors aren't very good with bad news. They hedge around it all the time. Plus, there's a privacy issue, obviously."

"But we're headed over there for a reason?"

He nodded. "He suggested we might want to come. And then he hinted that

sooner might be better than later."

"What is *she* saying?"

"That it's all a lot of fuss about nothing. But that we're always welcome to visit."

We finished our breakfast and I paid for it. Then Joe gave me my ticket, like a transaction. I was sure he earned more than me, but probably not enough to make an airline ticket proportional to a plate of eggs and bacon with toast on the side. But I took the deal. We got off our stools and got our bearings and headed for the check-in counter.

"Take your coat off," he said.

"Why?"

"I want the clerk to see your medal ribbons," he said. "Military action going on overseas, we might get an upgrade."

"It's Air France," I said. "France isn't even a military member of NATO."

"The check-in clerk will be American," Joe said. "Try it."

I shrugged out of my coat. Folded it over my arm and walked sideways so the left of my chest stuck out forward.

"OK now?" I said.

"Perfect," he said, and smiled.

I smiled back. Left-to-right on the top row I wear the Silver Star, the Defense Superior Service Medal, and the Legion of Merit. Second row has the Soldier's Medal, the Bronze Star, and my Purple Heart. The bottom two rows are the junk awards. I won all of the good stuff purely by accident and none of it means very much to me. Using it to get an upgrade out of an airline clerk is about what it's good for. But Joe liked the top two rows. He served five years in Military Intelligence and didn't get past the junk.

We made it to the head of the line and he put his passport and ticket on the counter along with a Treasury Department ID. Then he stepped behind my shoulder. I put my own passport and ticket down. He nudged me in the back. I turned a little sideways and looked at the clerk.

“Can you find us something with legroom?” I asked him.

He was a small man, middle-aged, tired. He looked up at us. Together we measured almost thirteen feet tall and weighed about four hundred fifty pounds. He studied the Treasury ID and looked at my uniform and pattered on his keyboard and came up with a forced smile.

“We’ll seat you gentlemen up front,” he said.

Joe nudged me in the back again and I knew he was smiling.

We were in the last row of the first-class cabin. We were talking, but we were avoiding the obvious subject. We talked about music, and then politics. We had another breakfast. We drank coffee. Air France makes pretty good coffee in first class.

“Who was the general?” Joe asked.

“Guy called Kramer,” I said. “An Armored commander in Europe.”

“Armored? So why was he at Bird?”

“He wasn’t on the post. He was at a motel thirty miles away. Rendezvous with a woman. We think she ran away with his briefcase.”

“Civilian?”

I shook my head. “We think she was an officer from Bird. He was supposed to be overnighting in D.C. on his way to California for a conference.”

“That’s a three-hundred-mile detour.”

“Two hundred and ninety-eight.”

“But you don’t know who she is.”

“She’s fairly senior. She drove her own Humvee out to the motel.”

“She has to be fairly senior. Kramer’s known her for a good spell, to make it worth driving a five-hundred-ninety-six-mile round-trip detour.”

I smiled. Anyone else would have said *a six-hundred-mile detour.* But not my brother. Like me he has no middle name. But it should be *Pedantic.* Joe Pedantic Reacher.

“Bird is still all infantry, right?” he said. “Some Rangers, some Delta, but mostly grunts, as I recall. So have you got many senior women?”

“There’s a Psy-Ops school now,” I said. “Half the instructors are women.”

“Rank?”

“Some captains, some majors, a couple of light colonels.”

“What was in the briefcase?”

“The agenda for the California conference,” I said. “Kramer’s staffers are pretending there isn’t one.”

“There’s always an agenda,” Joe said.

“I know.”

“Check the majors and the light colonels,” he said. “That would be my advice.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“And find out who wanted you at Bird,” he said. “And why. This Kramer thing wasn’t the reason. We know that for sure. Kramer was alive and well when your orders were cut.”

We read day-old copies of *Le Matin* and *Le Monde.* About halfway through the flight we started talking in French. We were pretty rusty, but we got by. Once

learned, never forgotten. He asked me about girlfriends. I guess he figured it was an appropriate subject for discussion in the French language. I told him I had been seeing a girl in Korea but since then I had been moved to the Philippines and then Panama and now to North Carolina so I didn't expect to see her again. I told him about Lieutenant Summer. He seemed interested in her. He told me he wasn't seeing anyone.

Then he switched back to English and asked when I had last been in Germany.

"Six months ago," I said.

"It's the end of an era," he said. "Germany will reunify. France will renew its nuclear testing because a reunified Germany will bring back bad memories. Then it will propose a common currency for the EC as a way of keeping the new Germany inside the tent. Ten years from now Poland will be in NATO and the USSR won't exist anymore. There'll be some rump nation. Maybe it will be in NATO too."

"Maybe," I said.

"So Kramer chose a good time to check out. Everything will be different in the future."

"Probably."

"What are you going to do?"

"When?"

He turned in his seat and looked at me. "There's going to be force reduction, Jack. You should face it. They're not going to keep a million-man army going, not when the other guy has fallen apart."

"He hasn't fallen apart yet."

"But he will. It'll be over within a year. Gorbachev won't last. There'll be a coup. The old communists will make one last play, but it won't stick. Then the reformers will be back forever. Yeltsin, probably. He's OK. So in D.C. the temptation to save money will be irresistible. It'll be like a hundred Christmases coming all at once. Never forget your Commander-in-Chief is primarily a politician."

politician.

I thought back to the sergeant with the baby son.

“It’ll happen slowly,” I said.

Joe shook his head. “It’ll happen faster than you think.”

“We’ll always have enemies,” I said.

“No question,” he said. “But they’ll be different kinds of enemies. They won’t have ten thousand tanks lined up across the plains of Germany.”

I said nothing.

“You should find out why you’re at Bird,” Joe said. “Either nothing much is happening there, and therefore you’re on the way down, or something *is* happening there, and they want you around to deal with it, in which case you’re on the way up.”

I said nothing.

“You need to know either way,” he said. “Force reduction is coming, and you need to know if you’re up or down right now.”

“They’ll always need cops,” I said. “They bring it down to a two-man army, one of them better be an MP.”

“You should make a plan,” he said.

“I never make plans.”

“You need to.”

I traced my fingertips across the ribbons on my chest.

“They got me a seat in the front of the plane,” I said. “Maybe they’ll keep me in a job.”

“Maybe they will,” Joe said. “But even if they do, will it be a job you want? Everything’s going to get horribly second-rate.”

I noticed his shirt cuffs. They were clean and crisp and secured by discreet cuff links made from silver and black onyx. His tie was a plain somber item made from silk. He had shaved carefully. The bottom of his sideburn was cut exactly square. My brother was a man horrified by anything less than the best.

“A job’s a job,” I said. “I’m not choosy.”

We slept the rest of the way. We were woken by the pilot on the PA telling us we were about to start our descent into Roissy–Charles de Gaulle. Local time was eight o’clock in the evening. Nearly the whole of the second day of the new decade had disappeared like a mirage as we slid through one Atlantic time zone after another.

We changed some money and hiked over to the taxi line. It was a mile long, full of people and luggage. It was hardly moving. So we found a *navette* instead, which is what the French call an airport shuttle bus. We had to stand all the way through the dreary northern suburbs and into the center of Paris. We got out at the Place de l’Opéra at nine in the evening. Paris was dark and damp and cold and quiet. Cafés and restaurants had warm lights burning behind closed doors and fogged windows. The streets were wet and lined with small parked cars. The cars were all misted over with nighttime dew. We walked together south and west and crossed the Seine at the Pont de la Concorde. Turned west again along the Quai d’Orsay. The river was dark and sluggish. Nothing was moving on it. The streets were empty. Nobody was out and about.

“Should we get flowers?” I asked.

“Too late,” Joe said. “Everything’s closed.”

We turned left at the Place de la Résistance and walked into the Avenue Rapp, side by side. We saw the Eiffel Tower on our right as we passed the mouth of the Rue de l’Université. It was lit up in gold. Our heels sounded like rifle shots on the silent sidewalk. We arrived at my mother’s building. It was a modest six-story stone apartment house trapped between two gaudier Belle Époque facades. Joe took his hand out of his pocket and unlocked the street door.

“You have a key?” I said.

He nodded. “I’ve had one for a long time.”

He nodded. ¨I´ve always had a key.´´

Inside the street door was a cobbled alley that led through to the center courtyard. The concierge’s room was on the left. Beyond it was a small alcove with a small, slow elevator. We rode it up to the fifth floor. Stepped out into a high, wide hallway. It was dimly lit. It had dark decorative tiles on the floor. The right-hand apartment had tall oak double doors with a discreet brass plaque engraved: *M. & Mme. Girard.* The left-hand doors were painted off-white and labeled: *Mme. Reacher.*

We knocked and waited.

six

We heard slow shuffling steps inside the apartment and a long moment later my mother opened the door.

"Bonsoir, Maman," Joe said.

I just stared at her.

She was very thin and very gray and very stooped and she looked about a hundred years older than the last time I had seen her. She had a long heavy plaster cast on her left leg and she was leaning on an aluminum walker. Her hands were gripping it hard and I could see bones and veins and tendons standing out. She was trembling. Her skin looked translucent. Only her eyes were the same as I remembered them. They were blue and merry and filled with amusement.

"Joe," she said. "And Reacher."

She always called me by my last name. Nobody remembered why. Maybe I had started it, as a kid. Maybe she had continued it, the way families do.

"My boys," she said. "Just look at the two of you."

She spoke slowly and breathlessly but she was smiling a happy smile. We stepped up and hugged her. She felt cold and frail and insubstantial. She felt like she weighed less than her aluminum walker.

"What happened?" I said.

"Come inside," she said. "Make yourselves at home."

She turned the walker around with short clumsy movements and shuffled back through the hallway. She was panting and wheezing. I stepped in after her. Joe closed the door and followed me. The hallway was narrow and tall and was followed by a living room with wood floors and white sofas and white walls and framed mirrors. My mother made her way to a sofa and backed up to it slowly and dropped herself into it. She seemed to disappear in its depth.

"What happened?" I asked again.

She wouldn’t answer. She just waved the inquiry away with an impatient movement of her hand. Joe and I sat down, side by side.

“You’re going to have to tell us,” I said.

“We came all this way,” Joe said.

“I thought you were just visiting,” she said.

“No you didn’t,” I said.

She stared at a spot on the wall.

“It’s nothing,” she said.

“Doesn’t look like nothing.”

“Well, it was just bad timing.”

“In what way?”

“I got unlucky,” she said.

“How?”

“I was hit by a car,” she said. “It broke my leg.”

“Where? When?”

“Two weeks ago,” she said. “Right outside my door, here on the Avenue. It was raining, I had an umbrella, it was shading my eyes, I stepped out, and the driver saw me and braked, but the *pavé* was wet and the car slid right into me, very slowly, like slow motion, but I was transfixed and I couldn’t move. I felt it hit my knee, very gently, like a kiss, but it snapped a bone. It hurt like hell.”

I saw in my mind the guy in the parking lot outside the nude bar near Bird, writhing around in an oily puddle.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Joe asked.

She didn't answer.

"But it'll mend, right?" he asked.

"Of course," she said. "It's trivial."

Joe just looked at me.

"What else?" I said.

She kept on looking at the wall. Did the dismissive thing with her hand again.

"What else?" Joe asked.

She looked at me, and then she looked at him.

"They gave me an X ray," she said. "I'm an old woman, according to them. According to them, old women who break bones are at risk from pneumonia. Because we're laid up and immobile and our lungs can fill and get infected."

"And?"

She said nothing.

"Have you got pneumonia?" I said.

"No."

"So what happened?"

"They found out. With the X ray."

"Found what out?"

"That I have cancer."

Nobody spoke for a long time.

"But you already knew," I said.

She smiled at me, like she always did.

“Yes, darling,” she said. “I already knew.”

“For how long?”

“For a year,” she said.

Nobody spoke.

“What sort of cancer?” Joe said.

“Every sort there is, now.”

“Is it treatable?”

She shook her head.

“*Was* it treatable?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I didn’t ask.”

“What were the symptoms?”

“I had stomachaches. I had no appetite.”

“Then it spread?”

“Now I hurt all over. It’s in my bones. And this stupid leg doesn’t help.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

She shrugged. Gallic, feminine, obstinate.

“What was to tell?” she said.

“Why didn’t you go to the doctor?”

She didn’t answer for a time.

“I’m tired,” she said.

“Of what?” Joe said. “Life?”

She smiled. “No, Joe, I mean I’m *tired.* It’s late and I need to go to bed, is what I mean. We’ll talk some more tomorrow. I promise. Don’t let’s have a lot of fuss now.”

We let her go to bed. We had to. We had no choice. She was the most stubborn woman imaginable. We found stuff to eat in her kitchen. She had laid in provisions for us. That was clear. Her refrigerator was stocked with the kinds of things that wouldn’t interest a woman with no appetite. We ate pâté and cheese and made coffee and sat at her table to drink it. The Avenue Rapp was still and silent and deserted, five floors below her window.

“What do you think?” Joe asked me.

“I think she’s dying,” I said. “That’s why we came, after all.”

“Can we make her get treatment?”

“It’s too late. It would be a waste of time. And we can’t make her do anything. When could anyone make her do what she didn’t want to?”

“Why doesn’t she want to?”

“I don’t know.”

He just looked at me.

“She’s a fatalist,” I said.

“She’s only sixty years old.”

I nodded. She had been thirty when I was born, and forty-eight when I stopped living wherever we called home. I hadn’t noticed her age at all. At forty-eight she had looked younger than I did when I was twenty-eight. I had last seen her a year and a half ago. I had stopped by Paris for two days, en route from Germany to the Middle East. She had been fine. She had looked great. She was about two years into widowhood then, and like with a lot of people the two-year threshold had been like turning a corner. She had looked like a person with a lot of life left.

“Why didn’t she tell us?” Joe said.

“I don’t know.”

“I wish she had.”

“Shit happens,” I said.

Joe just nodded.

She had made up her guest room with clean fresh sheets and towels and she had put flowers in bone china vases on the nightstands. It was a small fragrant room full of two twin beds. I pictured her struggling around with her walker, fighting with duvets, folding corners, smoothing things out.

Joe and I didn’t talk. I hung my uniform in the closet and washed up in the bathroom. Set the clock in my head for seven the next morning and got into bed and lay there looking at the ceiling for an hour. Then I went to sleep.

I woke at exactly seven. Joe was already up. Maybe he hadn’t slept at all. Maybe he was accustomed to a more regular lifestyle than I was. Maybe the jet lag bothered him more. I showered and took fatigue pants and a T-shirt from my duffel and put them on. Found Joe in the kitchen. He had coffee going.

“Mom’s still asleep,” he said. “Medication, probably.”

“I’ll go get breakfast,” I said.

I put my coat on and walked a block to a pâtisserie I knew on the Rue St.-Dominique. I bought croissants and *pain au chocolat* and carried the waxed bag home. My mother was still in her room when I got back.

“She’s committing suicide,” Joe said. “We can’t let her.”

I said nothing.

“What?” he said. “If she picked up a gun and held it to her head, wouldn’t you stop her?”

I shrugged. “She already put the gun to her head. She pulled the trigger a year ago. We’re too late. She made sure we would be.”

“Why?”

“We have to wait for her to tell us.”

She told us during a conversation that lasted most of the day. It proceeded in bits and pieces. We started over breakfast. She came out of her room, all showered and dressed and looking about as good as a terminal cancer patient with a broken leg and an aluminum walker can. She made fresh coffee and put the croissants I had bought on good china and served us quite formally at the table. The way she took charge spooled us all backward in time. Joe and I shrank back to skinny kids and she bloomed into the matriarch she had once been. A military wife and mother has a pretty hard time, and some handle it, and some don’t. She always had. Wherever we had lived had been home. She had seen to that.

“I was born three hundred meters from here,” she said. “On the Avenue Bosquet. I could see Les Invalides and the École Militaire from my window. I was ten when the Germans came to Paris. I thought that was the end of the world. I was fifteen when they left. I thought that was the beginning of a new one.”

Joe and I said nothing.

“Every day since then has been a bonus,” she said. “I met your father, I had you boys, I traveled the world. I don’t think there’s a country I haven’t been to.”

We said nothing.

“I’m French,” she said. “You’re American. There’s a world of difference. An American gets sick, she’s outraged. How dare that happen to her? She must have the fault corrected immediately, at once. But French people understand that first you live, and then you die. It’s not an outrage. It’s something that’s been happening since the dawn of time. It has to happen, don’t you see? If people didn’t die, the world would be an awfully crowded place by now.”

“It’s about *when* you die,” Joe said.

My mother nodded

My mother nodded.

“Yes, it is,” she said. “You die when it’s your time.”

“That’s too passive.”

“No, it’s realistic, Joe. It’s about picking your battles. Sure, of course you cure the little things. If you’re in an accident, you get yourself patched up. But some battles can’t be won. Don’t think I didn’t consider this whole thing very carefully. I read books. I spoke to friends. The success rates after the symptoms have already shown themselves are very poor. Five-year survival, ten percent, twenty percent, who needs it? And that’s after truly horrible treatments.”

It’s about when *you die.* We spent the morning going back and forth on Joe’s central question. We talked it through, from one direction, then from another. But the conclusion was always the same. *Some battles can’t be won.* And it was a moot point, anyway. It was a discussion that should have happened twelve months ago. It was no longer appropriate.

Joe and I ate lunch. My mother didn’t. I waited for Joe to ask the next obvious question. It was just hanging there. Eventually, he got to it. Joe Reacher, thirty-two years of age, six feet six inches tall, two hundred and twenty pounds, a West Point graduate, some kind of a Treasury Department big shot, placed his palms flat on the table and looked into his mother’s eyes.

“Won’t you miss us, Mom?” he asked.

“Wrong question,” she said. “I’ll be dead. I won’t be missing anything. It’s you that will be missing me. Like you miss your father. Like I miss him. Like I miss my father, and my mother, and my grandparents. It’s a part of life, missing the dead.”

We said nothing.

“You’re really asking me a different question,” she said. “You’re asking, how can I abandon you? You’re asking, aren’t I concerned with your affairs anymore? Don’t I want to see what happens with your lives? Have I lost interest in you?”

We said nothing.

“I understand,” she said. “Truly, I do. I asked myself the same questions. It’s like walking out of a movie. Being *made* to walk out of a movie that you’re really enjoying. That’s what worried me about it. I would never know how it turned out. I would never know what happened to you boys in the end, with your lives. I hated that part. But then I realized, obviously I’ll walk out of the movie sooner or later. I mean, nobody lives forever. I’ll *never* know how it turns out for you. I’ll never know what happens with your lives. Not in the end. Not even under the best of circumstances. I realized that. Then it didn’t seem to matter so much. It will always be an arbitrary date. It will always leave me wanting more.”

We sat quiet for a spell.

“How long?” Joe asked.

“Not long,” she said.

We said nothing.

“You don’t need me anymore,” she told us. “You’re all grown up. My job is done. That’s natural, and that’s good. That’s life. So let me go.”

By six in the evening we were all talked out. Nobody had spoken for an hour. Then my mother sat up straight in her chair.

“Let’s go out to dinner,” she said. “Let’s go to Polidor, on Rue Monsieur Le Prince.”

We called a cab and rode it to the Odéon. Then we walked. My mother wanted to. She was bundled up in a coat and she was hanging on our arms and moving slow and awkward, but I think she enjoyed the air. Rue Monsieur Le Prince cuts the corner between the Boulevard St.- Germain and the Boulevard St.-Michel, in the Sixième. It may be the most Parisian street in the whole of the city. Narrow, diverse, slightly seedy, flanked by tall plaster facades, bustling. Polidor is a famous old restaurant. It makes you feel all kinds of people have eaten there. Gourmets, spies, painters, fugitives, cops, robbers.

We all ordered the same three courses. *Chèvre chaud, porc aux pruneaux, dames blanches.* We ordered a fine red wine. But my mother ate nothing and drank

nothing. She just watched us. There was pain showing in her face. Joe and I ate, self-consciously. She talked, exclusively about the past. But there was no sadness. She relived good times. She laughed. She rubbed her thumb across the scar on Joe's forehead and scolded me for putting it there all those years ago, like she always did. I rolled up my sleeve like I always did and showed her where he had stuck me with a chisel in revenge, and she scolded him equally. She talked about things we had made her in school. She talked about birthday parties we had thrown, on grim faraway bases in the heat, or the cold. She talked about our father, about meeting him in Korea, about marrying him in Holland, about his awkward manner, about the two bunches of flowers he had bought her in all their thirty-three years together, one when Joe was born, and one when I was.

"Why didn't you tell us a year ago?" Joe asked.

"You know why," she said.

"Because we would have argued," I said.

She nodded.

"It was a decision that belonged to me," she said.

We had coffee and Joe and I smoked cigarettes. Then the waiter brought the bill and we asked him to call a cab for us. We rode back to the Avenue Rapp in silence. We all went to bed without saying much.

I woke early on the fourth day of the new decade. Heard Joe in the kitchen, talking French. I went in there and found him with a woman. She was young and brisk. She had short neat hair and luminous eyes. She told me she was my mother's private nurse, provided under the terms of an old insurance policy. She told me she normally came in seven days a week, but had missed the day before at my mother's request. She told me my mother had wanted a day alone with her sons. I asked the girl how long each visit lasted. She said she stayed as long as she was needed. She told me the old insurance policy would cover up to twenty-four hours a day, as and when it became necessary, which she thought might be

very soon.

The girl with the luminous eyes left and I went back to the bedroom and showered and packed my bag. Joe came in and watched me do it.

“You leaving?” he said.

“We both are. You know that.”

“We should stay.”

“We came. That’s what she wanted. Now she wants us to go.”

“You think?”

I nodded. “Last night, at Polidor. It was about saying good-bye. She wants to be left in peace now.”

“You can do that?”

“It’s what she wants. We owe it to her.”

I got breakfast items again in the Rue St.-Dominique and we ate them with bowls of coffee, the French way, all three of us together. My mother had dressed in her best and was acting like a fit young woman temporarily inconvenienced by a broken leg. It must have taken a lot of will, but I guessed that was how she wanted to be remembered. We poured coffee and passed things to each other, politely. It was a civilized meal. Like we used to have, long ago. Like an old family ritual.

Then she revisited another old family ritual. She did something she had done ten thousand times before, all through our lives, since we were first old enough to have individuality of our own. She struggled up out of her chair and stepped over and put her hands on Joe’s shoulders, from behind. Then she bent and kissed his cheek.

“What don’t you need to do?” she asked him.

He didn’t answer. He never did. Our silence was part of the ritual.

“You don’t need to solve *all* the world’s problems, Joe. Only some of them. There are enough to go around.”

She kissed his cheek again. Then she kept one hand on the back of his chair and reached out with the other and moved herself over behind me. I could hear her ragged breathing. She kissed my cheek. Then like she used to all those years before she put her hands on my shoulders. Measured them, side to side. She was a small woman, fascinated by the way her baby had grown into a giant.

“You’ve got the strength of two normal boys,” she said.

Then came my own personal question.

“What are you going to do with this strength?” she asked me.

I didn’t answer. I never did.

“You’re going to do the right thing,” she said.

Then she bent down and kissed me on the cheek again.

I thought: *Was that the last time?*

We left thirty minutes later. We hugged long and hard at the door and we told her we loved her, and she told us she loved us too and she always had. She stood there and we went down in the tiny elevator and set out on the long walk back to the Opéra to get the airport bus. Our eyes were full of tears and we didn’t talk at all. My medals meant nothing to the check-in girl at Roissy–Charles de Gaulle. She sat us in the back of the plane. About halfway through the flight I picked up *Le Monde* and saw that Noriega had been found in Panama City. A week ago I had lived and breathed that mission. Now I barely remembered it. I put the paper down and tried to look ahead. Tried to remember where I was supposed to be going, and what I was supposed to be doing when I got there. I had no real recollection. No sense of what was going to happen. If I had, I would have stayed in Paris.

seven

Going west the time changes lengthened the day instead of shortening it. They paid us back the hours we had lost two days before. We landed at Dulles at two in the afternoon. I said good-bye to Joe and he found the cab line and headed into the city. I went looking for buses and was arrested before I found any.

Who guards the guards? Who arrests an MP? In my case it was a trio of warrant officers working directly for the Provost Marshal General's office. There were two W3s and a W4. The W4 showed me his credentials and his orders and then the W3s showed me their Berettas and their handcuffs and the W4 gave me a choice: either behave myself or get knocked on my ass. I smiled, briefly. I approved of his performance. He carried himself well. I doubted if I would have done it any different, or any better.

"Are you armed, Major?" he said.

"No," I said.

I would have been worried for the army if he had believed me. Some W4s would have. They would have been intimidated by the sensitivities involved. Arresting a superior officer from your own corps is tough duty. But this particular W4 did everything right. He heard me say No and nodded to his W3s and they moved in to pat me down about as fast as if I had said *Yes, with a nuclear warhead.* One of them did the body search and the other went through my duffel. They were both very thorough. Took them a good few minutes before they were satisfied.

"Do I need to put the cuffs on you?" the W4 asked.

I shook my head. "Where's the car?"

He didn't answer. The W3s formed up one on either side and slightly behind me. The W4 walked in front. We crossed the sidewalk and passed by the bay where the buses were waiting and headed for an official-vehicle-only lane. There was an olive green sedan parked there. This was their time of maximum danger. A determined man would be tensing up at that point, ready to make his break. They knew it, and they formed up a little tighter. They were a good team. Three against one, they reduced the odds to maybe fifty-fifty. But I let them put me in the car. Afterward, I wondered what would have happened if I had run for it.

Sometimes, I found myself wishing that I had.

The car was a Chevrolet Caprice. It had been white before the army sprayed it green. I saw the original color inside the door frame. It had vinyl seats and manual windows. Civilian police specification. I slid across the rear bench and settled in the corner behind the front passenger seat. One of the W3s crammed in next to me and the other got behind the wheel. The W4 sat next to him up front. Nobody spoke.

We headed east toward the city on the main highway. I was probably five minutes behind Joe in his taxi. We turned south and east and drove through Tysons Corner. At that point I knew for sure where we were going. A couple of miles later we picked up signs to Rock Creek. Rock Creek was a small town twenty-some miles due north of Fort Belvoir and forty-some north and east of the Marine place at Quantico. It was as close as I got to a permanent duty station. It housed the 110th Special Unit headquarters. So I knew where we were headed. But I had no idea why.

One Hundred and Tenth headquarters was basically an office and supply facility. There were no cells. No secure holding facilities. They locked me up in an interview room. Just dumped my bag on the table and locked the door and left me there. It was a room I had locked guys in before. So I knew how it was done. One of the W3s would be on station in the corridor outside. Maybe both of them would be. So I just tilted the plain wooden chair back and put my feet on the table and waited.

I waited an hour. I was uncomfortable and hungry and dehydrated from the plane. I figured if they knew all of that they'd have kept me waiting two hours. Or more. As it was they came back after sixty minutes. The W4 led the way and gestured with his chin that I should stand up and follow him out the door. The W3s fell in behind me. They walked me up two flights of stairs. Led me left and right through plain gray passageways. At that point I knew for sure where we were going. We were going to Leon Garber's office. But I didn't know why.

They stopped me outside his door. It had reeded glass with *CO* painted on it in gold. I had been through it many times. But never while in custody. The W4 knocked and waited and opened the door and stepped back to let me walk inside. He closed the door behind me and stayed on the other side of it, out in the corridor with his guys.

Behind Garber's desk was a man I had never seen before. He was a colonel. He was in BDUs. His tape said: *Willard, U.S. Army.* He had iron-gray hair parted in a schoolboy style. It needed a trim. He had steel-rimmed eyeglasses and the kind of gray pouchy face that must have looked old when he was twenty. He was short and relatively squat and the way his shoulders failed to fill his BDUs told me he spent no time at all in the gym. He had a problem sitting still. He was rocking to his left and plucking at his pants where they went tight over his right knee. Before I had been in the room ten seconds he had adjusted his position three times. Maybe he had hemorrhoids. Maybe he was nervous. He had soft hands. Ragged nails. No wedding band. Divorced, for sure. He looked the type. No wife would let him walk about with hair like that. And no wife could have stood all that rocking and twitching. Not for very long.

I should have come smartly to attention and saluted and announced: *Sir, Major Reacher reports.* That would have been the standard army etiquette. But I was damned if I was going to do that. I just took a long lazy look around and came to rest standing easy in front of the desk.

"I need explanations," the guy called Willard said.

He moved in his chair again.

"Who are you?" I said.

"You can see who I am."

"I can see you're a colonel in the U.S. Army named Willard. But I can't explain anything to you before I know whether or not you're in my chain of command."

"I *am* your chain of command, son. What does it say on my door?"

"Commanding officer," I said.

"And where are we?"

"Rock Creek, Virginia," I said.

"OK, asked and answered," he said.

"You're new," I said. "We haven't met."

“I assumed this command forty-eight hours ago. And now we’ve met. And now I need explanations.”

“Of what?”

“You were UA, for a start,” he said.

“Unauthorized absence?” I said. “When?”

“The last seventy-two hours.”

“Incorrect,” I said.

“How so?”

“My absence was authorized by Colonel Garber.”

“It was not.”

“I called this office,” I said.

“When?”

“Before I left.”

“Did you receive his authorization?”

I paused. “I left a message. Are you saying he denied authorization?”

“He wasn’t here. He got orders for Korea some hours earlier.”

“Korea?”

“He got the MP command there.”

“That’s a Brigadier General’s job.”

“He’s acting. The promotion will no doubt be confirmed in the fall.”

I said nothing.

“Garber’s gone,” Willard said. “I’m here. The military merry-go-round

"Career's gone," Willard said. "I'm here. The military likely go round continues. Get used to it."

The room went quiet. Willard smiled at me. Not a pleasant smile. It was close to a sneer. The rug was out from under my feet, and he was watching me hit the ground.

"It was good of you to leave your travel plans," he said. "It made today easier."

"You think the arrest was appropriate for UA?"

"You don't?"

"It was a simple miscommunication."

"You left your assigned post without authorization, Major. Those are the facts. Just because you had a vague expectation that authorization might be granted doesn't alter them. This is the army. We don't act in advance of orders or permissions. We wait until they are properly received and confirmed. The alternative would be anarchy and chaos."

I said nothing.

"Where did you go?"

I pictured my mother, leaning on her aluminum walker. I pictured my brother's face as he watched me pack.

"I took a short vacation," I said. "I went to the beach."

"The arrest wasn't for the UA," Willard said. "It was because you wore Class As on the evening of New Year's Day."

"That's an offense now?"

"You wore your nameplate."

I said nothing.

"You put two civilians in the hospital. While wearing your nameplate."

I stared at him. Thought hard. I didn't believe the fat guy and the farmer had

dropped a dime on me. Not possible. They were stupid, but they weren't that stupid. They knew I knew where I could find them.

"Who says so?" I asked.

"You had a big audience in that parking lot."

"One of ours?"

Willard nodded.

"Who?" I said.

"No need for you to know."

I kept quiet.

"You got anything to say?" Willard asked me.

I thought: *He won't testify at the court-martial. That's for damn sure. That's what I've got to say.*

"Nothing to say," I said.

"What do you think I should do with you?"

I said nothing.

"What do you think I should do?"

You should figure out the difference between a hard-ass and a dumb-ass, pal. You should figure it out real quick.

"Your choice," I said. "Your decision."

He nodded. "I also have reports from General Vassell and Colonel Coomer."

"Saying what?"

"Saying you acted in a disrespectful manner toward them."

"Then those reports are incorrect."

Then those reports are incorrect.

“Like the UA was incorrect?”

I said nothing.

“Stand at attention,” Willard said.

I looked at him. Counted *One thousand. Two thousand. Three thousand.* Then I came to attention.

“That was slow,” he said.

“I’m not looking to win a drill competition,” I said.

“What was your interest in Vassell and Coomer?”

“An agenda for an Armored Branch conference is missing. I need to know if it contained classified information.”

“There was no agenda,” Willard said. “Vassell and Coomer have made that perfectly clear. To me, and to you. To ask is permissible. You have that right, technically. But to willfully disbelieve a senior officer’s direct answer is disrespectful. It’s close to harassment.”

“Sir, I do this stuff for a living. I believe there was an agenda.”

Now Willard said nothing.

“May I ask what was your previous command?” I said.

He shifted in his chair.

“Intelligence,” he said.

“Field agent?” I asked. “Or desk jockey?”

He didn’t answer. *Desk jockey.*

“Did you have conferences without agendas?” I asked.

He looked straight at me.

“Direct orders, Major,” he said. “One, terminate your interest in Vassell and Coomer. Forthwith, and immediately. Two, terminate your interest in General Kramer. We don’t want flags raised on that matter, not under the circumstances. Three, terminate Lieutenant Summer’s involvement in special unit affairs. Forthwith, and immediately. She’s a junior-grade MP and after reading her file as far as I’m concerned she always will be. Four, do not attempt to make further contact with the local civilians you injured. And five, do not attempt to identify the eyewitness against you in that matter.”

I said nothing.

“Do you understand your orders?” he said.

“I’d like them in writing,” I said.

“Verbal will do,” he said. “Do you understand your orders?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Dismissed.”

I counted *One thousand. Two thousand. Three thousand.* Then I saluted and turned around. I made it all the way to the door before he fired his parting shot.

“They tell me you’re a big star, Reacher,” he said. “So right now you need to decide whether you keep on being a big star, or whether you let yourself become an arrogant smart-ass son of a bitch. And you need to remember that nobody likes arrogant smart-ass sons of bitches. And you need to remember we’re coming to a point where it’s going to matter whether people like you or not. It’s going to matter a lot.”

I said nothing.

“Do I make myself clear, Major?”

“Crystal,” I said.

I got my hand on the door handle.

“One last thing,” he said. “I’m going to sit on the brutality complaint. For as long as I possibly can. Out of respect for your record. You’re very lucky that it

came up internally. But I want you to remember that it's here, and it stays active."

I left Rock Creek just before five in the afternoon. Caught a bus into Washington D.C., and another one south down I-95. Then I removed my lapel insignia and hitched the final thirty miles to Bird. It works a little faster that way. Most of the local traffic is enlisted men, or retired enlisted men, or their families, and most of them are suspicious of MPs. So experience had taught me things went better if you kept your badges in your pocket.

I got a ride and got out two hundred yards short of Bird's main gate, a few minutes past eleven in the evening, January fourth, after a little more than six hours on the road. North Carolina was pitch dark and cold. Very cold, so I jogged the two hundred yards to heat myself up. I was out of breath when I got to the gate. I was logged in and I ran down to my office. It was warm inside. The night-watch sergeant with the baby son was on duty. She had coffee going. She gave me a cup and I walked into my office and found a note from Summer waiting for me on my desk. The note was clipped to a slim green file. The file had three lists in it. The women-with-Humvees list, the women-from-Irwin list, and the main gate log for New Year's Eve. The first two lists were relatively short. The gate log was a riot. People had been in and out all night long, partying. But only one name was common to all three compilations: *Lt/Col Andrea Norton.* Summer had circled the name in all three locations. Her note said: *Call me about Norton. Hope your mom was OK.*

I found the old message slip with Joe's telephone number on it and called him first.

"You holding up?" I asked him.

"We should have stayed," he said.

"She gave the nurse one day off," I said. "One day was what she wanted."

"We should have stayed anyway."

"She doesn't want spectators," I said.

Joe didn't answer. The phone was hot and silent against my ear.

"I've got a question," I said. "When you were at the Pentagon, did you know an asshole called Willard?"

He stayed quiet for a long moment, changing gears, searching his memory. He had been out of Intelligence for some time.

"Squat little man?" he said. "Couldn't sit still? Always shuffling around on his chair, fussing with his pants? He was a desk guy. A major, I think."

"He's a full colonel now," I said. "He just got assigned to the 110th. He's my CO at Rock Creek."

"MI to the 110th? That makes sense."

"Makes no sense to me."

"It's the new theory," Joe said. "They're copying private-sector doctrine. They think know-nothings are good because they're not invested in the status quo. They think they bring fresh perspectives."

"Anything I should know about this guy?"

"You called him an asshole, so it sounds like you already know about him. He was smart, but he *was* an asshole, for sure. Vicious, petty, very corporate, good at office politics, exclusively interested in number one, excellent ass-kisser, always knew which way the wind was blowing."

I said nothing.

"Hopeless with women," Joe said. "I remember that."

I said nothing.

"He's a perfect example," Joe said. "Like we discussed. He was on the Soviet desk. He monitored their tank production and fuel consumption, as I recall. I think he worked out some kind of an algorithm that told us what kind of training Soviet armor was doing based on how much fuel they were eating. He was hot for a year or so. But now I guess he's seen the future. He got himself out while the getting was good. You should do the same. At least you should think about

it. Like we discussed."

I said nothing.

"Meanwhile, watch your step," Joe said. "I wouldn't want Willard for a boss."

"I'll be OK," I said.

"We should have stayed in Paris," he said, and hung up.

I found Summer in the O Club bar. She had a beer on the go and was leaning on the wall with a couple of W2s. She moved away from them when she saw me.

"Garber's gone to Korea," I said. "We got a new guy."

"Who?"

"A colonel called Willard. From Intelligence."

"So how is he qualified?"

"He isn't qualified. He's an asshole."

"Doesn't that piss you off?"

I shrugged. "He's telling us to stay away from the Kramer thing."

"Are we going to?"

"He's telling me to stop talking to you. He says he's going to turn down your application."

She went very quiet. Looked away.

"Shit," she said.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I know you wanted it."

She looked back at me.

“Is he serious about the Kramer thing?” she asked.

I nodded. “He’s serious about everything. He had me arrested at the airport, to make all his various points.”

“Arrested?”

I nodded again. “Someone ratted me out for those guys in the parking lot.”

“Who?”

“One of the grunts in the audience.”

“One of ours? Who?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s cold.”

I nodded. “Never happened to me before.”

She went quiet again.

“How was your mom?” she said.

“She broke her leg,” I said. “No big deal.”

“They can get pneumonia.”

I nodded again. “She had the X ray. No pneumonia.”

Her lower eyelids moved upward.

“Can I ask the obvious question?” she said.

“Is there one?”

“Aggravated battery against civilians is a big deal. And apparently there’s a report and an eyewitness, good enough to get you arrested.”

“So?”

“So why are you still walking around?”

“Willard’s sitting on it.”

“But why would he, if he’s an asshole?”

“Out of respect for my record. That’s what he said.”

“Did you believe him?”

I shook my head.

“There must be something wrong with the complaint,” I said. “An asshole like Willard would use it if he could, that’s for sure. He doesn’t care about my record.”

“Can’t be something wrong with the complaint. A military witness is the best kind they can get. He’ll testify to whatever they tell him to. It’s like Willard would be writing the complaint himself.”

I said nothing.

“And why are you here at all?” she asked.

I heard Joe say: *You should find out who wanted you at Bird badly enough to pull you out of Panama and replace you with an asshole.*

“I don’t know why I’m here,” I said. “I don’t know anything. Tell me about Lieutenant Colonel Norton.”

“We’re off the case.”

“So just tell me for interest’s sake.”

“It isn’t her. She’s got an alibi. She was at a party in a bar off-post. All night long. About a hundred people were there with her.”

“Who is she?”

“Psy-Ops instructor. She’s a psychosexual Ph.D. who specializes in attacking an enemy’s internal emotional security concerning his feelings of masculinity.”

“She sounds like a fun lady.”

“She was invited to a party in a bar. Someone thinks she’s a fun lady.”

“Did you check who drove Vassell and Coomer down here?”

Summer nodded. “Our gate guys list him as a Major Marshall. I looked him up, and he’s a XII Corps staffer on temporary detached duty at the Pentagon. Some kind of a blue-eyed boy. He’s been over here since November.”

“Did you check phone calls out of the D.C. hotel?”

She nodded again.

“There weren’t any,” she said. “Vassell’s room took one incoming call at twelve twenty-eight in the morning. I’m assuming that was XII Corps calling from Germany. Neither of them made any outgoing calls.”

“None at all?”

“Not a one.”

“Are you sure?”

“Totally. It’s an electronic switchboard. Dial nine for an outside line, and the computer records it automatically. It has to, for the bill.”

Dead end.

“OK,” I said. “Forget the whole thing.”

“Really?”

“Orders are orders,” I said. “The alternative is anarchy and chaos.”

I went back to my office and called Rock Creek. I figured Willard would be long gone. He was the type of guy who keeps bankers’ hours his whole life. I got hold of a company clerk and asked him to find a copy of the original order moving me from Panama to Bird. It was five minutes before he came back on

the line. I spent them reading Summer's lists. They were full of names that meant nothing to me.

"I've got the order here now, sir," the guy on the phone said.

"Who signed it?" I asked him.

"Colonel Garber, sir."

"Thank you," I said, and put the phone down. Then I sat for ten minutes wondering why people were lying to me. Then I forgot all about that question, because my phone rang again and a young MP private on routine base patrol told me we had a homicide victim in the woods. It sounded like a real bad one. My guy had to pause twice to throw up before he got to the end of his report.

eight

Most rural army posts are pretty big. Even if the built infrastructure is compact, there is often a huge acreage of spare land reserved around it. This was my first tour at Fort Bird, but I guessed it would be no exception. It would be like a small neat town surrounded by a county-sized horseshoe-shaped government-owned tract of poor sandy earth with low hills and shallow valleys and a thin covering of trees and scrub. Over the post's long life the trees would have imitated the gray ashes of the Ardennes and the mighty firs of Central Europe and the swaying palms of the Middle East. Whole generations of infantry training theory would have come and gone there. There would be old trenches and foxholes and firing pits. There would be bermed rifle ranges and barbed-wire obstacles and isolated huts where psychiatrists would challenge masculine emotional security. There would be concrete bunkers and exact replicas of government offices where Special Forces would train to rescue hostages. There would be cross-country running routes where out-of-shape boot camp inductees would tire and stagger and where some of them would collapse and die. The whole thing would be ringed by miles of ancient rusty wire and claimed for the DoD forever by warning notices fixed to every third fence post.

I called a bunch of specialists and went out to the motor pool and found a Humvee that had a working flashlight in the clip on the dash. Then I fired it up and followed the private's directions south and west of the inhabited areas until I was on a rough sandy track leading straight out into the hinterland. The darkness was absolute. I drove more than a mile and then I saw another Humvee's headlights in the distance. The private's vehicle was parked at a sharp angle about twenty feet off the road and its high beams were shining into the trees and casting long evil shadows deep into the woods. The private himself was leaning up against its hood. His head was bowed and he was looking down at the ground.

First question: How does a guy on motor patrol in the dark spot a corpse hidden way the hell out here, deep in the trees?

I parked next to him and took the flashlight out of the clip and slid out into the cold and immediately understood how. There was a trail of clothing starting in the center of the track. Right on the crown of the camber was a single boot. It was a standard-issue black leather combat boot, old, worn, not very well shined. West of it was a sock. a vard awav. Then another boot. another sock. a BDU

jacket, an olive drab undershirt. The clothes were all spaced out in a line, like a grotesque parody of the domestic fantasy where you get home and find abandoned lingerie items leading you up the stairs to the bedroom. Except that the jacket and the undershirt were stained dark with blood.

I checked the condition of the ground at the edge of the track. It was rock hard and frosted over. I wasn't going to compromise the scene. I wasn't going to blur any footprints, because there weren't going to be any footprints. So I took a deep breath and followed the trail of clothes to its conclusion. When I got there I understood why my guy had thrown up twice. At his age I might have thrown up three times.

The corpse was facedown in the frozen leaf litter at the base of a tree. Naked. Medium height, compact. It was a white guy, but he was mostly covered in blood. There were bone-deep knife cuts all over his arms and shoulders. From behind I could see that his face looked beaten and swollen. His cheeks were protruding. His dog tags were missing. There was a slim leather belt cinched tight around his neck. It had a brass buckle and the long tail looped away from his head. There was some kind of thick pink-white liquid pooled on his back. He had a broken tree limb rammed up his ass. Below it the ground was black with blood. I guessed when we rolled him over we would find that his genitals had been removed.

I backtracked along the trail of clothes and made it to the road. Stepped over next to the MP private. He was still staring down at the ground.

"Where are we exactly?" I asked him.

"Sir?"

"No question we're still on the base?"

He nodded. "We're a mile inside the fence line. In every direction."

"OK," I said. Jurisdiction was clear. Army guy, army property. "We'll wait here. Nobody gets access in there until I say so. Clear?"

"Sir," he said.

"You're doing a good job," I said.

“You think?”

“You’re still on your feet,” I said.

I went back to my Humvee and radioed my sergeant. Told her what was up and where and asked her to find Lieutenant Summer and have her call me on the emergency channel. Then I waited. An ambulance arrived two minutes later. Then two Humvees showed up with the crime scene specialists I had called before leaving my office. Guys spilled out. I told them to stand by. There was no burning urgency.

Summer got on the radio within five minutes.

“Dead guy in the woods,” I told her. “I want you to find that Psy-Ops woman you were telling me about.”

“Lieutenant Colonel Norton?”

“I want you to bring her out here.”

“Willard said you can’t work with me.”

“He said I can’t involve you in special unit stuff. This is regular police business.”

“Why do you want Norton there?”

“I want to meet her.”

She clicked off and I got out of my truck. Joined the medics and the forensics people. We all stood around in the cold. We kept our engines running to keep the batteries charged and the heaters working. Clouds of diesel smoke drifted and pooled and formed horizontal strata, like smog. I told the crime scene people to start listing the clothing on the road. I told them not to touch it and not to leave the track.

We waited. There was no moon. No stars. No light and no sound beyond our headlights and our idling diesels. I thought about Leon Garber. Korea was one of the biggest branch offices the U.S. Army has to offer. Not the most glamorous, but probably the most active and certainly the most difficult. MP command out there was a feather in anyone’s cap. It meant he would probably retire with two

there was a feather in anyone's cap. It meant he would probably retire with two stars, which was way more than he could have ever hoped for. If my brother was right and axes were getting ready to fall, then Leon had already come out on the right side of the cut. I was happy for him. For about ten minutes. Then I started looking at his situation from a different perspective. I worried at it for another ten minutes and got nowhere with it.

Summer showed up before I was finished thinking. She was driving a Humvee and she had a bareheaded blonde woman in BDUs about four feet away from her in the front passenger seat. She stopped the truck in the center of the track with her headlights full on us. She stayed in the vehicle and the blonde got out and scanned the crowd and stepped into the matrix of headlight beams and made straight for me. I saluted her out of courtesy and checked her nametape. It said: *Norton.* She had a light colonel's oak leaves sewn on her lapels. She was a little older than me, but not much. She was tall and thin and had the kind of face that should have made her an actress or a model.

"How can I help you, Major?" she said. She sounded like she was from Boston and not very pleased about being dragged outside in the middle of the night.

"Something I need you to see," I said.

"Why?"

"Maybe you'll have a professional opinion."

"Why me?"

"Because you're here in North Carolina. It would take me hours to get someone from somewhere else."

"What kind of someone do you need?"

"Someone in your line of work."

"I'm aware that I work in a classroom," she said. "I don't need constant reminders."

"What?"

"It seems to be a popular sport here, reminding Andrea Norton that she's just a bookish academic, while everybody else is out there busy with the real thing."

bookish academic, while everybody else is out there busy with the real thing."

"I wouldn't know about that. I'm new here. I just want first impressions from someone in your line of work, is all."

"You're not trying to make a point?"

"I'm trying to get some help."

She made a face. "OK."

I offered her my flashlight. "Follow the trail of clothes to the end. Please don't touch anything. Just fix your first impressions in your mind. Then I'd like to talk to you about them."

She said nothing. Just took my flashlight from me and set off. She was brightly backlit for the first twenty feet by the MP private's headlights. His Humvee was still facing the woods. Her shadow danced ahead of her. Then she stepped beyond the range of the headlights' illumination and I saw her flashlight beam move onward, bobbing and spearing through the darkness. Then I lost sight of it. All that was visible was a faint reflection from the underside of leafless branches, far in the distance, high in the air.

She was gone about ten minutes. Then I saw the flashlight beam sweeping back toward us. She came out of the woods, retracing her steps. She walked right up to me. She looked pale. She clicked the flashlight off and handed it back.

"My office," she said. "In one hour."

She got back in Summer's Humvee and Summer backed up and turned and accelerated away into the dark.

"OK, guys, go to work," I said. I sat in my truck and watched drifting smoke and flashlight beams quartering the ground and bright blue camera flashes freezing the motion all around me. I radioed my sergeant again and told her to get the base mortuary opened up. Told her to have a pathologist standing by, first thing in the morning. After thirty minutes the ambulance backed up onto the shoulder and my guys loaded a sheet-draped shape into it. They closed the doors and slapped on them and the truck took off. Clear plastic evidence bags were filled and labeled. Crime scene tape was wound between tree trunks. It was tied off in a rough rectangle maybe forty yards by fifty.

I left them to finish up by themselves and drove back through the dark to the main post buildings. Checked with a sentry and got directions to the Psy-Ops facility. It was a low brick structure with green doors and windows that might have housed the quartermaster offices way back when it was built. It was set at a distance from post headquarters, maybe halfway to where Special Forces bunked. There was darkness and silence all around it but there was a light burning in the central hallway and in one of the office windows. I parked my truck and went inside. Made it through gloomy tiled corridors and came to a door with a pebble-glass window set in its upper half. The glass had light behind it and *Lt/Col. A. Norton* stenciled on it. I knocked and went in. I saw a small neat office. It was clean and it smelled feminine. I didn't salute again. I figured we were past that point.

Norton was behind a big oak army-issue desk and she had it covered with open textbooks. She had so many on the go that she had taken her telephone off the desk and put it down on the floor. She had a yellow legal pad in front of her with handwritten notes on it. The pad was in a pool of light from her desk lamp and its color was reflected upward into her hair.

"Hello," she said.

I sat down in her visitor's chair.

"Who was he?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't think we'll get a visual ID. He was too badly beaten. We'll have to use fingerprints. Or teeth. If he's got any left in there."

"Why did you want me to look at him?"

"I told you why. I wanted your opinion."

"Why did you think I would have an opinion?"

"Seemed to me there were elements in there that you would understand."

"I'm not a criminal profiler."

"I don't want you to be. I just want some input, fast. I want to know if I'm starting out in the right direction."

starting out in the right direction.

She nodded. Swept her hair back off her face.

“The obvious conclusion is that he was a homosexual,” she said. “Possibly killed because of it. Or if not, then with full awareness of it on the part of his attackers.”

I nodded.

“There was genital amputation,” she said.

“You checked?”

“I moved him a little,” she said. “I’m sorry. I know you asked me not to.”

I looked at her. She hadn’t been wearing gloves. She was a tough lady. Maybe her classroom-bound reputation was undeserved.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said.

“My guess is you’ll find his testicles and his penis in his mouth. I doubt if his cheeks would have swelled that much simply from a beating. It’s an obvious symbolic statement, from the point of view of a homophobic attacker. Removing the deviant organs, simulating oral sex.”

I nodded.

“Likewise the nudity and the missing dog tags,” she said. “Removing the army from the deviant is the same thing as removing the deviant from the army.”

I nodded.

“The foreign object insertion speaks for itself,” she said. “In the anus.”

I nodded.

“And then there’s the fluid on his back,” she said.

“Yogurt,” I said.

“Probably strawberry,” she said. “Or maybe raspberry. It’s the old joke. How

does a gay man fake an orgasm?"

"He groans a bit," I said. "And then he throws yogurt on his lover's back."

"Yes," she said. She didn't smile. And she watched me, to see if I would.

"What about the cuts and the beating?" I said.

"Hate," she said.

"And the belt around the neck?"

She shrugged. "It's suggestive of an autoerotic technique. Partial asphyxiation creates heightened pleasure during orgasm."

I nodded.

"OK," I said.

"OK what?"

"Those were your first impressions. Do you have an opinion based on them?"

"Do you?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"You first."

"I think it's bogus."

"Why?"

"Too much going on," I said. "There were six things there. The nudity, the missing tags, the genitals, the tree branch, the yogurt, and the belt. Any two would have done it. Maybe three. It's like they were *trying* to make a point, instead of just going ahead and making one. Maybe trying too hard."

Norton said nothing.

"Too much," I said again. "Like shooting someone, then strangling him, then

stabbing him, then drowning him, then suffocating him, then beating him to death. It's like they were decorating a damn Christmas tree with clues."

She stayed quiet. She was watching me, deep inside her pool of light. Maybe assessing me.

"I have my doubts about the belt," she said. "Autoeroticism isn't exclusively homosexual. All men have the same orgasms physiologically, gay or not."

"The whole thing was faked," I said.

She nodded, finally.

"I agree with you," she said. "You're a smart guy."

"For a cop?"

She didn't smile. "But we know as officers that to permit homosexuals to serve is illegal. So we better be sure we're not letting a defense of the army cloud our judgment."

"It's my job to protect the army," I said.

"Exactly," Norton said.

I shrugged. "But I'm not taking a position. I'm not saying this guy definitely wasn't gay. Maybe he was. I really don't care. And maybe his attackers knew, maybe they didn't. I'm saying either way, that's not why they killed him. They wanted it to look like the reason. But they weren't really *feeling* it. They were feeling something else. So they larded on the clues, in a rather self-conscious way."

Then I paused.

"In a rather academic way," I said.

She stiffened.

"An academic way?" she said.

"Do you guys teach anything about this kind of stuff in class?"

“We don’t teach people how to kill,” she said.

“That’s not what I asked.”

She nodded. “We talk about it. We have to. Cutting off your enemy’s dick is as basic as it gets. It’s happened all through history. Happened all through Vietnam. Afghan women have been doing it to captured Soviet soldiers for the last ten years. We talk about what it symbolizes, what it communicates, and the fear it creates. There are whole books about the fear of grotesque wounds. It’s always a message to the target population. We talk about violation with foreign objects. We talk about the deliberate display of violated bodies. The trail of abandoned clothing is a classic touch.”

“Do you talk about yogurt?”

She shook her head. “But that’s a very old joke.”

“And the asphyxiation thing?”

“Not on the Psy-Ops courses. But most of the people here can read magazines. Or they can watch porn on videotape.”

“Do you talk about questioning an enemy’s sexuality?”

“Of course we do. Impugning an enemy’s sexuality is the whole point of our course. His sexual orientation, his virility, his capability, his capacity. It’s a core tactic. It always has been, everywhere, throughout history. It’s designed to work both ways. It diminishes him, and it builds us up by comparison.”

I said nothing.

She looked right at me. “Are you asking me if I recognized the fruits of our lessons, out there in the woods?”

“I guess I am,” I said.

“You didn’t really want my opinion, did you?” she asked. “That was all preamble. You already knew what you were seeing.”

I nodded. “I’m a smart guy, for a cop.”

“The answer is no,” she said. “I did not recognize the fruits of our lessons, out there in the woods. Not specifically.”

“But possibly?”

“Anything’s possible.”

“Did you meet General Kramer when you were at Fort Irwin?” I asked.

“Once or twice,” she said. “Why?”

“When did you last see him?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Not recently?”

“No. Not recently. Why?”

“How did you meet him?”

“Professionally,” she said.

“You teach your stuff to Armored Branch?”

“Irwin isn’t exclusively Armored Branch. It’s the National Training Center too, don’t forget. People used to come to us there. Now we go to them.”

I said nothing.

“Does it surprise you we taught Armored people?”

I shrugged again. “A little, I guess. If I was riding around in a seventy-ton tank, I don’t suppose I’d feel a need for any more of a psychological edge.”

She still didn’t smile. “We taught them. As I recall General Kramer didn’t like it if the infantry was getting things his people weren’t. It was an intense rivalry.”

“Who do you teach now?”

“Delta Force,” she said. “Exclusively.”

“Thank you for your help,” I said.

“I didn’t recognize anything tonight that we would take responsibility for.”

“Not specifically.”

“It was psychologically generic,” she said.

“OK,” I said.

“And I resent being asked.”

“OK,” I said again. “Good night, ma’am.”

I got up out of the chair and headed for the door.

“What was the real reason?” she asked. “If the display we saw was bogus?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m not that smart.”

I stopped in my outer office and the sergeant with the baby son gave me coffee. Then I went into my inner office and found Summer waiting for me there. She had come to collect her lists, because the Kramer case was closed.

“Did you check the other women?” I asked her. “Apart from Norton?”

She nodded. “They all have alibis. It’s the best night of the year for alibis. Nobody spends New Year’s Eve alone.”

“I did,” I said.

She said nothing back. I butted the papers into a neat stack and put them back inside their folder and unclipped the note off the front. *Hope your mom was OK.* I dropped the note in my drawer and handed the file to her.

“What did Norton tell you?” she asked.

“She agreed with me that it was homicide dressed up to look like gay-bashing. I asked her if any of the symbols came from Psy-Ops classes and she didn’t really

say yes or no. She said they were psychologically generic. She resented being asked."

"So what now?"

I yawned. I was tired. "We'll work it like we work any of them. We don't even know who the victim is yet. I guess we'll find out tomorrow. On deck at seven, OK?"

"OK," she said, and headed for my door, carrying her file.

"I called Rock Creek," I said. "Asked a clerk to find their copy of the order bringing me here from Panama."

"And?"

"He said it's got Garber's signature on it."

"But?"

"That's not possible. Garber got me on the phone on New Year's Eve and was surprised I was here."

"Why would a clerk lie?"

"I don't think a clerk would. I think the signature is a forgery."

"Is that conceivable?"

"It's the only explanation. Garber couldn't have forgotten he'd transferred me here forty-eight hours previously."

"So what's this all about?"

"I have no idea. Someone somewhere is playing chess. My brother told me I should find out who wants me here bad enough to pull me out of Panama and replace me with an asshole. So I tried to find out. And now I'm thinking maybe we should be asking the same question about Garber. Who wants him out of Rock Creek bad enough to replace *him* with an asshole?"

"But Korea has to be a genuine merit promotion, doesn't it?"

“Garber deserves it, no question,” I said. “Except it’s too early. It’s a one-star job. DoD has to bring it to the Senate. That process happens in the fall, not in January. This was a panic move, spur of the moment.”

“But that would be pointless chess,” Summer said. “Why bring you in and pull him out? The two moves neutralize each other.”

“So maybe there are two people playing. Like a tug-of-war. Good guy, bad guy. Win one, lose one.”

“But the bad guy could have won both, easily. He could have discharged you. Or sent you to prison. He’s got the civilian complaint to work with.”

I said nothing.

“It doesn’t add up,” Summer said. “Whoever’s playing on your side is willing to let Garber go but is powerful enough to keep you here, even with the civilian complaint on the table. Powerful enough that Willard knew he couldn’t proceed against you, even though he probably wanted to. You know what that means?”

“Yes,” I said. “I do.”

She looked straight at me.

“It means you’re seen as more important than Garber,” she said. “Garber’s gone, and you’re still here.”

Then she looked away and went quiet.

“Permission to speak freely, Lieutenant,” I said.

She looked back at me.

“You’re not more important than Garber,” she said. “You can’t be.”

I yawned again.

“No argument from me,” I said. “Not on that particular subject. This is not about a choice between me and Garber.”

She paused. Then she nodded.

“No,” she said. “It isn’t. This is about a choice between Fort Bird and Rock Creek. Fort Bird is seen as more important. What’s happening here on the post is seen as more sensitive than what’s happening at special unit headquarters.”

“Agreed,” I said. “But what the hell is happening here?”

nine

I took the first tentative step toward finding out at one minute past seven the next morning, in Fort Bird's mortuary. I had slept for three hours and I hadn't eaten breakfast. There aren't many hard-and-fast rules involved in military crime investigation. Mostly we depend on instinct and improvisation. But one of the few rules that exist is: You don't eat before you walk into an army postmortem.

So I spent the breakfast hour with the crime scene report. It was a fairly thick file, but it had no useful information in it. It listed all the recovered uniform items and described them in minute detail. It described the corpse. It listed times and temperatures. All the thousands of words were backed by dozens of Polaroid photographs. But neither the words nor the pictures told me what I needed to know.

I put the file in my desk drawer and called the Provost Marshal's office for any AWOL or UA reports. The dead guy might have been missed already, and we might have been able to pick up on his identity that way. But there were no reports. Nothing out of the ordinary. The post was humming along with all its ducks in a row.

I walked out into the morning cold.

The mortuary had been custom-built during the Eisenhower administration and it was still fit for its purpose. We weren't looking for a high degree of sophistication. This wasn't the civilian world. We knew last night's victim hadn't slipped on a banana skin. I didn't much care which particular injury had been the fatal one. All I wanted to know was an approximate time of death, and who he was.

There was a tiled lobby inside the main doors with exits to the left, the center, and the right. If you went left, you found the offices. If you went right, you found cold storage. I went straight ahead, where knives cut and saws whined and water sluiced.

There were two dished metal tables set in the center of the room. They had bright lights above them and noisy drains below. They were surrounded by greengrocer scales hanging on chains ready to weigh excised organs, and by rolling steel carts with empty glass jars ready to receive them, and other carts

with rows of knives and saws and shears and pliers lying ready for use on green canvas sheets. The whole place was glazed with white subway tiles and the air was cold and sweet with the smell of formaldehyde.

The right-hand table was clean and empty. The left-hand table was surrounded by people. There was a pathologist and an assistant and a clerk taking notes. Summer was there, standing back, observing. They were maybe halfway through the process. The tools were all in use. Some of the glass jars were filled. The drain was sucking loudly. I could see the corpse's legs through the crowd. They had been washed. They looked blue-white under the lamps above them. All the smeared dirt and blood was gone.

I stood next to Summer and took a look. The dead guy was on his back. They had taken the top of his skull off. They had cut around the center of his forehead and peeled the skin of his face down. It was lying there inside out, like a blanket pulled down on a bed. It reached to his chin. His cheekbones and his eyeballs were exposed. The pathologist was dissecting his brain, looking for something. He had used the saw on his skull and popped the top off like a lid.

"What's the story?" I asked him.

"We got fingerprints," he said.

"I faxed them in," Summer said. "We'll know today."

"Cause of death?"

"Blunt trauma," the doctor said. "To the back of the head. Three heavy blows, with something like a tire iron, I should think. All this dramatic stuff is postmortem. Pure window dressing."

"Any defensive injuries?"

"Not a thing," the doctor said. "This was a surprise attack. Out of the blue. There was no fight, no struggle."

"How many assailants?"

"I'm not a magician. The fatal blows were probably all delivered by the same individual. I can't tell if there were others standing around and watching."

“Best guess?”

“I’m a scientist, not a guesser.”

“One assailant only,” Summer said. “Just a feeling.”

I nodded.

“Time of death?” I asked.

“Hard to be sure,” the doctor said. “Nine or ten last night, probably. But don’t take that to the bank.”

I nodded again. Nine or ten would make sense. Well after dark, several hours before any reasonable expectation of discovery. Plenty of time for the bad guy to lure him out there, and then to be somewhere else when the alarms sounded.

“Was he killed at the scene?” I asked.

The pathologist nodded.

“Or very close to it,” he said. “No medical signs to suggest otherwise.”

“OK,” I said. I glanced around. The broken tree limb was lying on a cart. Next to it was a jar with a penis and two testicles in it.

“In his mouth?” I said.

The pathologist nodded again. Said nothing.

“What kind of a knife?”

“Probably a K-bar,” he said.

“Great,” I said. K-bars had been manufactured by the tens of millions for the last fifty years. They were as common as medals.

“The knife was used by a right-handed person,” the doctor said.

“And the tire iron?”

“Same.”

Same.

“OK,” I said.

“The fluid was yogurt,” the doctor said.

“Strawberry or raspberry?”

“I didn’t do a taste test.”

Next to the jars of organs was a short stack of four Polaroid photographs. They were all of the fatal wound site. The first one was as-discovered. The guy’s hair was relatively long and dirty and matted with blood and I couldn’t make out much detail. The second was with the blood and dirt rinsed away. The third was with the hair cut back with scissors. The fourth was with the hair completely shaved away, with a razor.

“How about a crowbar?” I asked.

“Possible,” the doctor said. “Maybe better than a tire iron. I took a plaster cast, anyway. You bring me the weapon, I’ll tell you yes or no.”

I stepped in a little and took a closer look. The corpse was very clean. It was gray and white and pink. It smelled faintly of soap, as well as blood and other rich organic odors. The groin was a mess. Like a butcher’s shop. The knife cuts on the arms and the shoulders were deep and obvious. I could see muscle and bone. The edges of the wounds were blue and cold. The blade had gone right through a tattoo on his left upper arm. An eagle was holding a scroll with *Mother* written on it. Overall, the guy was not a pleasant sight. But he was in better shape than I had feared he would be.

“I thought there would be more swelling and bruising,” I said.

The pathologist glanced at me.

“I told you,” he said. “All the drama was after he was dead. No heartbeat, no blood pressure, no circulation, therefore no swelling and no contusions. Not much bleeding either. It was just leaking out by gravity. If he’d been alive when they cut him, it would have been running like a river.”

He turned back to the table and finished up inside the guy’s brain pan and put the

lid of bone back where it belonged. He tapped it twice to get a good seal and wiped the leaky join with a sponge. Then he pulled the guy's face back into place. Poked and prodded and smoothed with his fingers and when he took his hands away I saw the Special Forces sergeant I had spoken to in the strip club, staring blindly upward into the bright lights above him.

I took a Humvee and drove past Andrea Norton's Psy-Ops school to the Delta Force station. It was pretty much self-contained in what had been a prison back before the army collected all its miscreants together at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas. The old wire and the walls suited its current purpose. There was a giant WW2-era airplane hangar next to it. It looked like it had been dragged in from some closed base and bolted back together to house their racks of stores and their trucks and their up-armored Humvees and maybe even a couple of fast-response helicopters.

The sentry on the inner gate let me in and I went straight to the adjutant's office. Seven-thirty in the morning, and it was already lit up and busy, which told me something. The adjutant was at his desk. He was a captain. In the upside-down world of Delta Force the sergeants are the stars, and the officers stay home and do the housework.

"You got anyone missing?" I asked him.

He looked away, which told me something more.

"I assume you know I do," he said. "Otherwise why would you be here?"

"You got a name for me?"

"A name? I assumed you had arrested him for something."

"This is not about an arrest," I said.

"So what's it about?"

"Does this guy get arrested a lot?"

"No. He's a fine soldier."

“What’s his name?”

The captain didn’t answer. Just leaned down and opened a drawer and pulled a file. Handed it to me. Like all the Delta files I had ever seen, it was heavily sanitized for public consumption. There were just two pages in it. The first was a name-rank-and-number ID sheet and a bare-bones career summary for a guy called Christopher Carbone. He was an unmarried sixteen-year veteran. He had served four years in an infantry division, four in an airborne division, four in a Ranger company, and four in Special Forces Detachment D. He was five years older than me. He was a sergeant first class. There were no theater details and no mention of awards or decorations.

The second sheet contained ten inky fingerprints and a color photograph of the man I had spoken to in the bar and just left on the mortuary slab.

“Where is he?” the captain asked. “What happened?”

“Someone killed him,” I said.

“What?”

“Homicide,” I said.

“When?”

“Last night. Nine or ten o’clock.”

“Where?”

“Edge of the woods.”

“What woods?”

“Our woods. On-post.”

“Jesus Christ. Why?”

I put the file back together and slipped it under my arm.

“I don’t know why,” I said. “Yet.”

“Jesus Christ,” he said again. “Who did it?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Yet.”

“Jesus Christ,” the guy said, for the third time.

“Next of kin?” I asked.

The captain paused. Breathed out.

“I think he has a mother somewhere,” he said. “I’ll let you know.”

“Don’t,” I said. “You’ll be making the call.”

He said nothing.

“Did Carbone have enemies here?” I asked.

“None that I knew about.”

“Any points of friction?”

“Like what?”

“Any lifestyle issues?”

He stared at me. “What are you saying?”

“Was he gay?”

“What? Of course not.”

I said nothing.

“You’re saying Carbone was a fag?” the captain whispered.

I pictured Carbone in my mind, lounging six feet from the strip club runway, six feet from whoever was crawling around at the time on her elbows and knees with her ass up in the air and her nipples brushing the stage, a long-neck bottle in his hand and a big smile on his face. It seemed like a weird way for a gay man to spend his leisure time. But then I pictured the detachment in his eyes and his embarrassed gesture as he waved the brunette hooker away.

embarrassed gesture as he waved the brunette hooker away.

“I don’t know what Carbone was,” I said.

“Then keep your damn mouth shut,” his captain said. “Sir.”

I took Carbone’s file with me back to the mortuary and collected Summer and took her to the O Club for breakfast. We sat on our own in a corner, far from everyone else. I ate eggs and bacon and toast. Summer ate oatmeal and fruit and glanced through the file. I drank coffee. Summer drank tea.

“The pathologist is calling it gay-bashing,” she said. “He thinks it’s obvious.”

“He’s wrong.”

“Carbone’s not married.”

“Neither am I,” I said. “Neither are you. Are you gay?”

“No.”

“There you go.”

“But misdirection has to be based on something real, right? I mean, if they knew he was a gambler, for instance, they might have crammed IOU slips in his mouth or thrown playing cards all around the place. Then we might have thought it was about gambling debts. You see what I mean? It just doesn’t work if it’s not based on anything. Something that can be disproved in five minutes looks stupid, not clever.”

“Your best guess?”

“Carbone was gay, and someone knew it, but it wasn’t the reason.”

I nodded.

“It wasn’t the reason,” I said. “Let’s say he *was* gay. He was in sixteen years. He survived most of the seventies and all of the eighties. So why would it happen now? Times are changing, getting better, he’s getting better at hiding it, going

out to strip joints with his buddies. No reason for it to happen now, all of a sudden. It would have happened before. Four years ago, or eight, or twelve, or sixteen. Whenever he joined a new unit and new people got to know him."

"So what was the reason?"

"No idea."

"Whatever, it could be embarrassing. Just like Kramer and his motel."

I nodded again. "Bird seems to be a very embarrassing place."

"You think this is why you're here? Carbone?"

"It's possible. Depends on what he represents."

I asked Summer to file and forward all the appropriate notifications and reports and I headed back to my office. Rumor was spreading fast. I found three Delta sergeants waiting for me, looking for information. They were typical Special Forces guys. Small, lean, whippy, slightly unkempt, hard as nails. Two of them were older than the third. The young one was wearing a beard. He was tan, like he was just back from somewhere hot. They were all pacing in my outer office. My sergeant with the baby son was there with them. I guessed she was pulling a swing shift. She was looking at them like they might have been alternating spells of pacing with spells of hitting on her. She looked very civilized, in comparison to them. Almost genteel. I ushered them all into my inner office and closed the door and sat down at my desk and left them standing in front of it.

"Is it true about Carbone?" one of them asked.

"He was killed," I said. "Don't know who, don't know why."

"When?"

"Last night, nine or ten o'clock."

"Where?"

"Here."

“This is a closed post.”

I nodded. “The perp wasn’t a member of the general public.”

“We heard he was messed up good.”

“Pretty good.”

“When are you going to know who it was?”

“Soon, I hope.”

“You got leads?”

“Nothing specific.”

“When you know, are we going to know too?”

“You want to?”

“You bet your ass.”

“Why?”

“You know why,” the guy said.

I nodded. Gay or straight, Carbone was a member of the world’s most fearsome gang. His buddies were going to stand up for him. I felt a little envious for a second. If I got offed in the woods late one night, I doubted if three tough guys would go straight to someone’s office, eight in the morning, champing at the bit, ready for revenge. Then I looked at the three of them again and thought, *This particular perp could be in a shitload of trouble. All I’d have to do is drop a name.*

“I need to ask you some cop questions,” I said. I asked them all the usual stuff. Did Carbone have any enemies? Had there been any disputes? Threats? Fights? The three guys all shook their heads and answered every question in the negative.

“Anything else?” I asked. “Anything that put him at risk?”

“Like what?”

“Like anything,” I said. It was as far as I wanted to go.

“No,” they all said.

“Got any theories?” I asked.

“Look at the Rangers,” the young one said. “Find someone who failed Delta training, and thinks he still has a point to prove.”

Then they left, and I sat there chewing on their final comment. A Ranger with a point to prove? I doubted it. Not plausible. Delta sergeants don’t go out in the woods with people they don’t know and get hit on the back of the head. They train long and hard to make such eventualities very unlikely, even impossible. If a Ranger had picked a fight with Carbone, it would have been the Ranger we found at the base of the tree. If two Rangers had gone out there with him, we’d have found two Rangers dead. Or at the very least we would have found defensive injuries on Carbone himself. He wouldn’t have gone down easily.

So he went out there with someone he knew and trusted. I pictured him at ease, maybe chatting, maybe smiling like he had done in the bar in town. Maybe leading the way somewhere, his back to his attacker, suspecting nothing. Then I pictured a tire iron or a crowbar being fumbled out from under a coat, swinging, hitting with a crunching impact. Then again. And again. It had taken three hard blows to put him down. Three surprise blows. And a guy like Carbone doesn’t get surprised very often.

My phone rang. I picked it up. It was Colonel Willard, the asshole in Garber’s office, up in Rock Creek.

“Where are you?” he asked.

“In my office,” I said. “How else would I be answering my phone?”

“Stay there,” he said. “Don’t go anywhere, don’t do anything, don’t call anyone. Those are my direct orders. Just sit there quietly and wait.”

“For what?”

“I’m on my way down.”

I'm on my way down.

He clicked off. I put the phone back in its cradle.

I stayed there. I didn't go anywhere, I didn't do anything, I didn't call anyone. My sergeant brought me a cup of coffee. I accepted it. Willard hadn't told me to die of thirst.

After an hour I heard a voice in the outer office and then the young Delta sergeant came back in, alone. The one with the beard and the tan. I told him to take a seat and pondered my orders. *Don't go anywhere, don't do anything, don't call anyone.* I guessed talking with the guy would amount to doing something, which would contravene the *don't do anything* part of the command. But then, breathing was doing something, technically. So was metabolizing. My hair was growing, my beard was growing, all twenty of my nails were growing, I was losing weight. It was impossible not to do *anything.* So I decided that component of the order was purely rhetorical.

"Help you, Sergeant?" I said.

"I think Carbone was gay," the sergeant said.

"You *think* he was?"

"OK, he was."

"Who else knew?"

"All of us."

"And?"

"And nothing. I thought you should know, is all."

"You think it has a bearing?"

He shook his head. "We were comfortable with it. And whoever killed him wasn't one of us. It wasn't anyone in the unit. That's not possible. We don't do stuff like that. Outside the unit, nobody knew. Therefore it wasn't a factor."

“So why tell me?”

“Because you’re bound to find out. I wanted you to be ready for it. I didn’t want it to be a surprise.”

“Because?”

“Then maybe you can keep it quiet. Since it’s not a factor.”

I said nothing.

“It would trash his memory,” the sergeant said. “And that’s wrong. He was a nice guy and a good soldier. Being gay shouldn’t be a crime.”

“I agree,” I said.

“The army needs to change.”

“The army hates change.”

“They say it damages unit cohesion,” he said. “They should have come and seen our squadron working. With Carbone right there in it.”

“I can’t keep it quiet,” I said. “Maybe I would if I could. But the way the crime scene looked, everyone’s going to get the message.”

“What? It was like a sex crime? You didn’t say that before.”

“I was trying to keep it quiet,” I said.

“But nobody knew. Not outside the unit.”

“Someone must have. Or else the perp is in your unit.”

“That’s not possible. No way, no how.”

“One thing or the other has got to be possible,” I said. “Was he seeing anyone on the outside?”

“No, never.”

“So he was celibate for sixteen years?”

So he was celibate for sixteen years?

The guy paused a beat.

“I guess I don’t really know,” he said.

“Someone knew,” I said. “But I don’t think it was a factor. I think someone just tried to make it look like it was. Maybe we can make that clear, at least.”

The sergeant shook his head. “It’ll be the only thing anyone remembers about him.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“I’m not gay,” he said.

“I don’t really care either way.”

“I’ve got a wife and a kid.”

He left me with that information and I went back to obeying Willard’s orders.

I spent the time thinking. There had been no weapon recovered at the scene. No significant forensics. No threads of clothing snagged on a bush, no footprints in the earth, none of his attacker’s skin under Carbone’s fingernails. All of that was easily explicable. The weapon had been taken away by the attacker, who had probably been wearing BDUs, which the Department of the Army specifies very carefully just so that they won’t fall apart and leave threads all over the place. Textile mills across the nation have stringent quality targets to meet, in terms of wear-and-tear standards for military twill and poplin. The earth was frozen hard, so footprints were impossible. North Carolina probably had a reliable frost window of about a month, and we were smack in the middle of it. And it had been a surprise attack. Carbone had been given no time to turn around and claw and kick at his assailant.

So there was no material information. But we had some advantages. We had a fixed pool of possible suspects. It was a closed base, and the army is pretty good at recording who was where, at all times. We could start with yards of printout paper and go through each name, on a simple binary basis, possible or not

possible. Then we could collate all the possibles and go to work with the holy trinity of detectives everywhere: means, motive, opportunity. Means and opportunity wouldn't signify much. By definition nobody would be on the possibles list unless they had been proved to have opportunity. And everybody in the army was physically capable of swinging a tire iron or a crowbar against the back of an unsuspecting victim's head. It was probably a rough equivalent of the most basic entry requirement.

So it would end up with motive, which is where it had started for me. What was the reason?

I sat for another hour. Didn't go anywhere, didn't do anything, didn't call anyone. My sergeant brought me more coffee. I mentioned that she might call Lieutenant Summer for me and suggest she stop by.

Summer showed up within five minutes. I had a whole raft of things to tell her, but she had anticipated every one of them. She had ordered a list of all base personnel, plus a copy of the gate log so we could add and subtract names as appropriate. She had arranged for Carbone's quarters to be sealed, pending a search. She had arranged an interview with his CO to develop a better picture of his personal and professional life.

"Excellent," I said.

"What's this thing with Willard?" she asked.

"A pissing contest, probably," I said. "Important case like this, he wants to come down and direct things personally. To remind me I'm under a cloud."

But I was wrong.

Willard finally showed after a total of exactly four hours. I heard his voice in the outer office. I was pretty sure my sergeant wasn't offering him coffee. She had better instincts than that. My door opened and he came in. He didn't look at me. Just closed the door behind him and turned around and sat down in my visitor's chair. Immediately started up with the shuffling thing. He was going at

it hard and plucking at the knees of his pants like they were burning his skin.

“Yesterday,” he said. “I want a complete record of your movements. I want to hear it from your own lips.”

“You’re down here to ask *me* questions?”

“Yes,” he said.

I shrugged.

“I was on a plane until two,” I said. “I was with you until five.”

“And then?”

“I got back here at eleven.”

“Six hours? I did it in four.”

“You drove, presumably. I took two buses and hitched a ride.”

“After that?”

“I spoke to my brother on the phone,” I said.

“I remember your brother,” Willard said. “I worked with him.”

I nodded. “He mentioned that.”

“And then what?”

“I spoke to Lieutenant Summer,” I said. “Socially.”

“And then?”

“Carbone’s body was discovered about midnight.”

He nodded and twitched and shuffled and looked uncomfortable.

“Did you keep your bus tickets?” he said.

“I doubt it,” I said.

"I doubt it," I said.

He smiled. "Remember who gave you a ride to the post?"

"I doubt it. Why?"

"Because I might need to know. To prove I didn't make a mistake."

I said nothing.

"*You* made mistakes," Willard said.

"Did I?"

He nodded. "I can't decide whether you're an idiot or whether you're doing this on purpose."

"Doing what?"

"Are you *trying* to embarrass the army?"

"What?"

"What's the big picture here, Major?" he said.

"You tell me, Colonel."

"The Cold War is ending. Therefore there are big changes coming. The status quo will not be an option. Therefore we've got every part of the military trying to stand tall and make the cut. And you know what?"

"What?"

"The army is always at the bottom of the pile. The Air Force has got all those glamorous airplanes. The Navy has got submarines and carriers. The Marines are always untouchable. And we're stuck down there in the mud, literally. The bottom of the pile. The army is *boring*, Reacher. That's the view in Washington."

"So?"

"This Carbone guy was a shirtlifter. He was a damn *fudgepacker*, for Christ's

sake. An elite unit has got *perverts* in it? You think the army needs for people to know that? At a time like this? You should have written him up as a training accident."

"That wouldn't have been true."

"Who cares?"

"He wasn't killed because of his orientation."

"Of course he was."

"I do this stuff for a living," I said. "And I say he wasn't."

He glared at me. Went quiet for a moment.

"OK," he said. "We'll come back to that. Who else but you saw the body?"

"My guys," I said. "Plus a Psy-Ops light colonel I wanted an opinion from. Plus the pathologist."

He nodded. "You deal with your guys. I'll tell Psy-Ops and the doctor."

"Tell them what?"

"That we're writing it up as a training accident. They'll understand. No harm, no foul. No investigation."

"You're kidding."

"You think the army wants this to get around? Now? That Delta had an illegal soldier for four years? Are you nuts?"

"The sergeants want an investigation."

"I'm pretty sure their CO won't. Believe me. You can take that as gospel."

"You'll have to give me a direct order," I said. "Words of one syllable."

"Watch my lips," Willard said. "Do not investigate the fag. Write a situation report indicating that he died in a training accident. A night maneuver, a run, an

exercise, anything. He tripped and fell and hit his head. Case closed. That is a direct order."

"I'll need it in writing," I said.

"Grow up," he said.

We sat quiet for a moment or two, just glaring at each other across the desk. I sat still, and Willard rocked and plucked. I clenched my fist, out of his sight. I imagined smashing a straight right to the center of his chest. I figured I could stop his lousy heart with a single blow. I could write it up as a training accident. I could say he had been practicing getting in and out of his chair, and he had slipped and caught his sternum on the corner of the desk.

"What was the time of death?" he asked.

"Nine or ten last night," I said.

"And you were off-post until eleven?"

"Asked and answered," I said.

"Can you prove that?"

I thought of the gate guards in their booth. They had logged me in.

"Do I have to?" I said.

He went quiet again. Leaned to his left in the chair.

"Next item," he said. "You claim the butt-bandit wasn't killed because he was a butt-bandit. What's your evidence?"

"The crime scene was overdone," I said.

"To obscure the real motive?"

I nodded. "That's my judgment."

"What was the real motive?"

What was the real motive?

“I don’t know. That would have required an investigation.”

“Let’s speculate,” Willard said. “Let’s assume the hypothetical perpetrator would have benefited from the homicide. Tell me how.”

“The usual way,” I said. “By preventing some future action on Sergeant Carbone’s part. Or to cover up a crime that Sergeant Carbone was a party to or had knowledge of.”

“To silence him, in other words.”

“To dead-end something,” I said. “That would be my guess.”

“And you do this stuff for a living.”

“Yes,” I said. “I do.”

“How would you have located this person?”

“By conducting an investigation.”

Willard nodded. “And when you found this person, hypothetically, assuming you were able to, what would you have done?”

“I would have taken him into custody,” I said. *Protective custody*, I thought. I pictured Carbone’s squadron buddies in my mind, pacing anxiously, ready to lock and load.

“And your suspect pool would have been whoever was on-post at the time?”

I nodded. Lieutenant Summer was probably struggling with reams of printout paper even as we spoke.

“Verified via strength lists and gate logs,” I said.

“Facts,” Willard said. “I would have thought that facts would be extremely important to someone who does this stuff for a living. This post covers nearly a hundred thousand acres. It was last strung with perimeter wire in 1943. Those are facts. I discovered them with very little trouble, and you should have too.

Doesn’t it occur to you that not everyone on the post has to come through the main gate? Doesn’t it occur to you that someone recorded as *not* being here could have slipped in through the wire?”

“Unlikely,” I said. “It would have given him a walk of well over two miles, in pitch dark, and we run random motor patrols all night.”

“The patrols might have missed a trained man.”

“Unlikely,” I said again. “And how would he have rendezvoused with Sergeant Carbone?”

“Prearranged location.”

“It wasn’t a location,” I said. “It was just a spot near the track.”

“Map reference, then.”

“Unlikely,” I said, for the third time.

“But possible?”

“Anything’s possible.”

“So a man could have met with the shirtlifter, then killed him, then gotten back out through the wire, and then walked around to the main gate, and then signed in?”

“Anything’s possible,” I said again.

“What kind of timescale are we looking at? Between killing him and signing in?”

“I don’t know. I would have to work out the distance he walked.”

“Maybe he ran.”

“Maybe he did.”

“In which case he would have been out of breath when he passed the gate.”

I said nothing.

“Best guess,” Willard said. “How much time?”

“An hour or two.”

He nodded. “So if the fairy was offed at nine or ten, the killer could have been logging in at eleven?”

“Possible,” I said.

“And the motive would have been to dead-end something.”

I nodded. Said nothing.

“And you took six hours to complete a four-hour journey, thereby leaving a potential two-hour gap, which you explain with the vague claim that you took a slow route.”

I said nothing.

“And you just agreed that a two-hour window is generous in terms of getting the deed done. In particular the two hours between nine and eleven, which by chance are the same two hours that you can’t account for.”

I said nothing. Willard smiled.

“And you arrived at the gate out of breath,” he said. “I checked.”

I didn’t reply.

“But what would have been your motive?” he said. “I assume you didn’t know Carbone well. I assume you don’t move in the same social circles that he did. At least I sincerely hope you don’t.”

“You’re wasting your time,” I said. “And you’re making a big mistake. Because you really don’t want to make an enemy out of me.”

“Don’t I?”

“No,” I said. “You really don’t.”

“What do you need dead-ended?” he asked me.

I said nothing.

“Here’s an interesting fact,” Willard said. “Sergeant First Class Christopher Carbone was the soldier who lodged the complaint against you.”

He proved it to me by unfolding a copy of the complaint from his pocket. He smoothed it out and passed it across my desk. There was a reference number at the top and then a date and a place and a time. The date was January second, the place was Fort Bird’s Provost Marshal’s office, and the time was 0845. Then came two paragraphs of sworn affidavit. I glanced through some of the stiff, formal sentences. *I personally observed a serving Military Police Major named Reacher strike the first civilian with a kicking action against the right knee. Immediately subsequent to that Major Reacher struck the second civilian in the face with his forehead. To the best of my knowledge both attacks were unprovoked. I saw no element of self-defense.* Then came a signature with Carbone’s name and number typed below it. I recognized the number from Carbone’s file. I looked up at the slow silent clock on the wall and pictured Carbone in my mind, slipping out of the bar door into the parking lot, looking at me for a second, and then merging with the knot of men leaning on cars and drinking beer from bottles. Then I looked down again and opened a drawer and slipped the sheet of paper inside.

“Delta Force looks after its own,” Willard said. “We all know that. I guess it’s part of their mystique. So what are they going to do now? One of their own is beaten to death after lodging a complaint against a smart-ass MP major, and the smart-ass MP major in question needs to save his career, and he can’t exactly account for his time on the night it went down?”

I said nothing.

“The Delta CO’s office gets its own copy,” Willard said. “Standard procedure with disciplinary complaints. Multiple copies all over the place. So the news will leak very soon. Then they’ll be asking questions. So what shall I tell them? I could tell them you’re definitely not a suspect. Or I could suggest you definitely *are* a suspect, but there’s some type of technicality in the way that means I can’t touch you. I could see how their sense of right and wrong deals with that kind of

injustice."

I said nothing.

"It's the only complaint Carbone ever made," he said. "In a sixteen-year career. I checked that too. And it stands to reason. A guy like that has to keep his head down. But Delta as a whole will see some significance in it. Carbone comes up over the parapet for the first time in his life, they're going to think you boys had some previous history. They'll think it was a grudge match. Won't make them like you any better."

I said nothing.

"So what should I do?" Willard said. "Should I go over there and drop some hints about awkward legal technicalities? Or shall we trade? I keep Delta off your back, and you start toeing the line?"

I said nothing.

"I don't really think you killed him," he said. "Not even you would go that far. But I wouldn't have minded if you had. Fags in the army deserve to be killed. They're here under false pretenses. You would have chosen the wrong reason, is all."

"It's an empty threat," I said. "You never told me he lodged the complaint. You didn't show it to me yesterday. You never gave me a name."

"Their sergeants' mess won't buy that for a second. You're a special unit investigator. You do this stuff for a living. Easy enough for you to weasel a name out of all the paperwork they think we do."

I said nothing.

"Wake up, Major," Willard said. "Get with the program. Garber's gone. We're going to do things my way now."

"You're making a mistake," I said. "Making an enemy out of me."

He shook his head. "I don't agree. I'm not making a mistake. And I'm not making an enemy out of you. I'm bringing this unit into line, is all. You'll thank me later. All of you. The world is changing. I can see the big picture."

life later. All of you. The world is changing. I can see the big picture.

I said nothing.

“Help the army,” he said. “And help yourself at the same time.”

I said nothing.

“Do we have a deal?” he said.

I didn’t reply. He winked at me.

“I think we have a deal,” he said. “You’re not that dumb.”

He got up and walked out of the office and closed the door behind him. I sat there and watched the stiff vinyl cushion on my visitor’s chair regain its shape. It happened slowly, with quiet hissing sounds as air leaked back into it.

ten

The world is changing. I had always been a loner, but at that point I started to feel lonely. And I had always been a cynic, but at that point I began to feel hopelessly naive. Both of my families were disappearing out from under me, one because of simple relentless chronology, and the other because its reliable old values seemed suddenly to be evaporating. I felt like a man who wakes alone on a deserted island to find that the rest of the world has stolen away in boats in the night. I felt like I was standing on a shore, watching small receding shapes on the horizon. I felt like I had been speaking English, and now I realized everyone else had been speaking a different language entirely. The world was changing. And I didn't want it to.

Summer came back three minutes later. I guessed she had been hiding around a corner, waiting for Willard to leave. She had folds of printer paper under her arm, and big news in her eyes.

"Vassell and Coomer were here again last night," she said. "They're listed on the gate log."

"Sit down," I said.

She paused, surprised, and then she sat where Willard had.

"I'm toxic," I said. "You should walk away from me right now."

"What do you mean?"

"We were right," I said. "Fort Bird is a very embarrassing place. First Kramer, then Carbone. Willard is closing both cases down, to spare the army's blushes."

"He can't close *Carbone* down."

"Training accident," I said. "Carbone tripped and fell and hit his head."

"What?"

"Willard's using it as a test for me. Am I with the program or not?"

“Are you?”

I didn’t answer.

“They’re illegal orders,” Summer said. “They have to be.”

“Are you prepared to challenge them?”

She didn’t reply. The only practical way to challenge illegal orders was to disobey them and then take your chances with the resulting general court-martial, which would inevitably become a mano a mano struggle with a guy way higher on the food chain, in front of a presiding judge who was well aware of the army’s preference that orders should never be questioned.

“So nothing ever happened,” I said. “Bring all your paperwork here and forget you ever heard of me or Kramer or Carbone.”

She said nothing.

“And speak to the guys who were there last night. Tell them to forget what they saw.”

She looked down at the floor.

“Then go back to the O Club and wait for your next assignment.”

She looked up at me.

“Are you serious?” she said.

“Totally,” I said. “I’m giving you a direct order.”

She stared at me. “You’re not the man I thought you were.”

I nodded.

“I agree,” I said. “I’m not.”

She walked out and I gave her a minute to get clear and then I picked up the folded paper she had left behind. There was a lot of it. I found the page I wanted, and I stared at it.

Because I don't like coincidences.

Vassell and Coomer had entered Bird by the main gate at six forty-five in the evening of the night Carbone had died. They had left again at ten o'clock. Three and a quarter hours, right across Carbone's time of death.

Or right across dinnertime.

I picked up the phone and called the O Club dining room. A mess sergeant told me the NCO in charge would call me back. Then I called my own sergeant and asked her to find out who was my opposite number at Fort Irwin, and to get him on the line. She came in four minutes later with a mug of coffee for me.

"He's all tied up," she said. "Could be half an hour. His name is Franz."

"Can't be," I said. "Franz is in Panama. I talked to him there face-to-face."

"Major Calvin Franz," she said. "That's what they told me."

"Call them back," I said. "Double-check."

She left my coffee on my desk and went back out to her phone. Came in again after another four minutes and confirmed that her information had been correct.

"Major Calvin Franz," she said again. "He's been there since December twenty-ninth."

I looked down at my calendar. *January 5th.*

"And you've been *here* since December twenty-ninth," she said.

I looked straight at her.

"Call some more posts," I said. "The big ones only. Start with Fort Benning, and work through the alphabet. Get me the names of their MP XOs, and find out how long they've been there."

She nodded and went back out. The NCO from the dining room called me back. I asked him about Vassell and Coomer. He confirmed they had eaten dinner in the O Club. Vassell had gone with the halibut, and Coomer had opted for the steak.

“Did they eat on their own?” I asked.

“No, sir, they were with an assortment of senior officers,” the guy said.

“Was it a date?”

“No, sir, we had the impression it was impromptu. It was an odd collection of people. I think they all hooked up in the bar, over aperitifs. Certainly we had no reservation for the group.”

“How long were they there?”

“They were seated before seven-thirty, and they got up just before ten o’clock.”

“Nobody left and came back?”

“No, sir, they were under our eye throughout.”

“All the time?”

“We paid close attention to them, sir. It was a question of the general’s rank, really.”

I hung up. Then I called the main gate. Asked who had actually eyeballed Vassell and Coomer in and out. They gave me a sergeant’s name. I told them to find the guy and have him call me back.

I waited.

The guy from the gate was the first to get back to me. He confirmed he had been on duty all through the previous evening, and he confirmed he had personally witnessed Vassell and Coomer arrive at six forty-five and leave again at ten.

“Car?” I asked.

“Big black sedan, sir,” he said. “A Pentagon staff car.”

“Grand Marquis?” I asked.

“I’m pretty sure, sir.”

“Was there a driver?”

“The colonel was driving,” the guy said. “Colonel Coomer, that is. General Vassell was in the front passenger seat.”

“Just the two of them in the car?”

“Affirmative, sir.”

“Are you sure?”

“That’s definite, sir. No question about it. At night we use flashlights. Black sedan, DoD plates, two officers in the front, proper IDs displayed, rear seat vacant.”

“OK, thanks,” I said, and hung up. The phone rang again immediately. It was Calvin Franz, in California.

“Reacher?” he said. “What the hell are you doing there?”

“I could ask you the exact same question.”

The phone went quiet for a beat.

“No idea what the hell I’m doing here,” he said. “Irwin’s all quiet. It usually is, they tell me. Weather’s nice, though.”

“Did you check your orders?”

“Sure,” he said. “Didn’t you? Panama’s the most fun I’ve had since Grenada, and now I’m staring at the sands of the Mojave? Seems to have been Garber’s personal brainwave. I thought I must have upset him. Now I’m not so sure what’s going on. Unlikely that we both upset him.”

“What exactly were your orders?” I said.

“Temporary XO for the Provost Marshal.”

“Is he there right now?”

“No, actually. He got a temporary detachment the same day I got in.”

“So you’re acting CO?”

“Looks that way,” he said.

“Me too.”

“What’s going on?”

“No idea,” I said. “If I ever find out, I’ll tell you. But first I need to ask you a question. I came across a bird colonel and a one-star over here, supposed to be heading out to you for an Armored conference on New Year’s Day. Vassell and Coomer. Did they ever show?”

“That conference was canceled,” Franz said. “We heard their two-star bought the farm somewhere. Guy called Kramer. They seemed to think there was no point going ahead without him. Either that, or they can’t think at all without him. Or they’re all too busy fighting over who’s going to get his command.”

“So Vassell and Coomer never came to California?”

“They never came to Irwin,” Franz said. “That’s for sure. Can’t speak for California. It’s a big state.”

“Who else was supposed to attend?”

“Armored’s inner circle. Some are based here. Some showed and went away again. Some never showed at all.”

“Did you hear anything about the agenda?”

“I wouldn’t expect to. Was it important?”

“I don’t know. Vassell and Coomer said there wasn’t one.”

“There’s always an agenda.”

“That’s what I figured.”

“I’ll keep my ears open.”

“Happy New Year,” I said. Then I put the phone down and sat quiet. Thought hard. Calvin Franz was one of the good guys. Actually, he was one of the *best* guys. Tough, fair, as competent as the day was long. Nothing ever knocked him off his stride. I had been happy enough to leave Panama, knowing that he was still there. But he wasn’t still there. I wasn’t there, and he wasn’t there. So who the hell was?

I finished my coffee and carried my mug outside and put it back next to the machine. My sergeant was on the phone. She had a page of scribbled notes in front of her. She held up a finger like she had big news. Then she went back to writing. I went back to my desk. She came in five minutes later with her scribbled page. Thirteen lines, three columns. The third column was made up of numbers. Dates, probably.

“I got as far as Fort Rucker,” she said. “Then I stopped. Because there’s a very obvious pattern developing.”

“Tell me,” I said.

She reeled off thirteen posts, alphabetically. Then she reeled off the names of their MP executive officers. I knew all thirteen names, including Franz’s and my own. Then she reeled off the dates they had been transferred in. Every date was exactly the same. Every date was December 29th. Eight days ago.

“Say the names again,” I told her.

She read them again. I nodded. Inside the arcane little world of military law enforcement, if you wanted to pick an all-star squad, and if you thought long and hard about it all through the night, those thirteen names were what you would have come up with. No doubt about it. They made up a major-league, heavy-duty baker’s dozen. There would have been about ten other obvious guys in the mix, but I had no doubt at all that a couple of them would be right there on posts farther along in the alphabet, and the other eight or so in significant places around the globe. And I had no doubt at all that all of them had been there just eight days. Our heavy hitters. I wouldn’t have wanted to say how high or how low I ranked among them individually, but collectively, down there at the field level, we were the army’s top cops, no question about it.

“Weird,” I said. And it was weird. To shuffle that many specific individuals around on the same day took some kind of will and planning, and to do it during Just Cause took some kind of an urgent motive. The room seemed to go quiet, like I was straining to hear the other shoe fall.

“I’m going over to the Delta station,” I said.

I drove myself in a Humvee because I didn’t want to walk. I didn’t know if the asshole Willard was off the post yet, and I didn’t want to cross his path again. The sentry let me into the old prison and I went straight to the adjutant’s office. He was still at his desk, looking a little more tired than when I had seen him in the early morning.

“It was a training accident,” I said.

He nodded. “So I heard.”

“What kind of training was he doing?” I asked.

“Night maneuvers,” the guy said.

“Alone?”

“Escape and evasion, then.”

“On-post?”

“OK, he was jogging. Burning off the holiday calories. Whatever.”

“I need this to sound kosher,” I said. “My name’s going to be on the report.”

The captain nodded. “Then forget the jogging. I don’t think Carbone was a runner. He was more of a gym rat. A lot of them are.”

“A lot of who are?”

He looked straight at me.

“Delta guys,” he said.

“Did he have a specialization?”

“They’re all generalists. They’re all good at everything.”

“Not radio, not medic?”

“They all do radio. And they’re all medics. It’s a safeguard. If they’re captured individually, they can claim to be the company medic. Might save them from a bullet. And they can demonstrate the expertise, if they’re tested.”

“Any medical training take place at night?”

The captain shook his head. “Not specifically.”

“Could he have been out testing comms gear?”

“He could have been out road testing a vehicle,” the captain said. “He was good with mechanical things. I guess as much as anyone he looked after the unit’s trucks. That was probably as close as he got to a specialization.”

“OK,” I said. “Maybe he blew a tire, and his truck fell off the jack and crushed his head?”

“Works for me,” the captain said.

“Uneven terrain, maybe a soft spot under the jack, the whole thing would be unstable.”

“Works for me,” the captain said again.

“I’ll say my guys towed the truck back.”

“OK.”

“What kind of truck was it?”

“Any kind you like.”

“Your CO around?” I said.

“He’s away. For the holidays.”

“Who is he?”

“You won’t know him.”

“Try me.”

“Colonel Brubaker,” the captain said.

“David Brubaker?” I said. “I know him.” Which was partially true. I knew him by reputation. He was a real hairy-assed Special Forces evangelist. According to him the rest of us could fold our tents and go home and the whole world could hide behind his handpicked units. Maybe some helicopter battalions could stay in harness, to ferry his people around. Maybe a single Pentagon office could stay open, to procure the weapons he wanted.

“When will he be back?” I said.

“Sometime tomorrow.”

“Did you call him?”

The captain shook his head. “He won’t want to be involved. And he won’t want to talk to you. But I’ll get him to reissue some operational safety procedures, as soon as we find out what kind of an accident it was.”

“Crushed by a truck,” I said. “That’s what it was. That should make him happy. Vehicular safety is a shorter section than weapons safety.”

“In what?”

“In the field manual.”

The captain smiled.

“Brubaker doesn’t use the field manual,” he said.

“I want to see Carbone’s billet,” I said.

“Why?”

“Because I need to sanitize it. If I’m going to sign off on a truck accident, I don’t

want any loose ends around."

Carbone had bunked the same way as his unit as a whole, on his own in one of the old cells. It was a six-by-eight space made of painted concrete and it had its own sink and toilet. It had a standard army cot and a footlocker and a shelf on the wall as long as the bed. All in all, it was pretty good accommodations for a sergeant. There were plenty around the world who would have traded in the blink of an eye.

Summer had had police tape stuck across the doorway. I pulled it down and balled it up and put it in my pocket. Stepped inside the room.

Special Forces Detachment D is very different from the rest of the army in its approach to discipline and uniformity. Relationships between the ranks are very casual. Nobody even remembers how to salute. Tidiness is not prized. Uniform is not compulsory. If a guy feels comfortable in a previous-issue fatigue jacket that he's had for years, he wears it. If he likes New Balance running shoes better than GI combat boots, he wears them. If the army buys four hundred thousand Beretta sidearms, but the Delta guy likes SIGs better, he uses a SIG.

So Carbone had no closet full of clean and pressed uniforms. There were no serried ranks of undershirts, crisp and laundered, folded ready for use. There were no gleaming boots under his bed. His clothing was all piled on the first three-quarters of the long shelf above his cot. There wasn't much of it. It was all basically olive green, but apart from that it wasn't stuff that a current quartermaster would recognize. There were some old pieces of the army's original extended cold-weather clothing system. There were some faded pieces of standard BDUs. Nothing was marked with unit or regimental insignia. There was a green bandanna. There were some old green T-shirts, washed so many times they were nearly transparent. There was a neatly rolled ALICE harness next to the T-shirts. *ALICE* stands for *All-Purpose Lightweight Carrying Equipment,* which is what the army calls a nylon belt that you hang things from.

The final quarter of the shelf's length held a collection of books, and a small color photograph in a brass frame. The photograph was of an older woman who looked a little like Carbone himself. His mother, without a doubt. I remembered his tattoo, sliced across by the K-bar. An eagle, holding a scroll with *Mother* on it. I remembered my mother, shooing us away into the tiny elevator after we had

hugged her goodbye.

I moved on to Carbone's books.

There were five paperbacks and one tall thin hardcover. I ran my finger along the paperbacks. I didn't recognize any of the titles or any of the authors. They all had cracked spines and yellow-edged pages. They all seemed to be adventure stories involving prototype airplanes or lost submarines. The lone hardcover was a souvenir publication from a Rolling Stones concert tour. Judging by the style of the print on the spine it was about ten years old.

I lifted his mattress up off the cot springs and checked under it. Nothing there. I checked the toilet tank and under the sink. Nothing doing. I moved on to the footlocker. First thing I saw after opening it was a brown leather jacket folded across the top. Underneath the jacket were two white button-down shirts and two pairs of blue jeans. The cotton items were worn and soft and the jacket was neither cheap nor expensive. Together they made up a soldier's typical Saturday-night outfit. Shit, shave, and shower, throw on the civilian duds, pile into someone's car, hit a couple of bars, have some fun.

Underneath the jeans was a wallet. It was small, and made out of brown leather that almost matched the jacket. Like the clothes above it, it was set up for a typical Saturday night's requirements. There were forty-three dollars in cash in it, sufficient for enough rounds of beers to get the fun started. There was a military ID card and a North Carolina driver's license in it, in case the fun concluded inside an MP jeep or a civilian black-and-white. There was an unopened condom, in case the fun got serious.

There was a photograph of a girl, behind a plastic window. Maybe a sister, maybe a cousin, maybe a friend. Maybe nobody. Camouflage, for sure.

Underneath the wallet was a shoe box half-full of six-by-four prints. They were all amateur snapshots of groups of soldiers. Carbone himself was in some of them. Small groups of men were standing and posing, like chorus lines, arms around each other's shoulders. Some shots were under a blazing sun and the men were shirtless, wearing beanie hats, squinting and smiling. Some were in jungles. Some were in wrecked and snowy streets. All showed the same tight camaraderie. Comrades in arms, off duty, still alive, and happy about it.

There was nothing else in Carbone's six-by-eight cell. Nothing significant,

nothing out of the ordinary, nothing explanatory. Nothing that revealed his history, his nature, his passions, or his interests. He had lived his life in secret, buttoned down, like his Saturday-night shirts.

I walked back to my Humvee. Turned a corner and came face-to-face with the young sergeant with the beard and the tan. He was in my way, and he wasn't about to move.

"You made a fool out of me," he said.

"Did I?"

"About Carbone. Letting me talk the way I did. Company clerk just showed us some interesting paperwork."

"So?"

"So we're thinking now."

"Don't tire yourself out," I said.

"Think this is funny? You won't think it's funny if we find out it was you."

"It wasn't."

"Says you."

I nodded. "Says me. Now get out of my way."

"Or?"

"Or I'll kick your ass."

He stepped up close. "Think you could kick my ass?"

I didn't move. "You're wondering whether I kicked Carbone's ass. And he was probably twice the soldier you are."

"You won't even see it coming," he said.

I said nothing.

“Believe me,” he said.

I looked away. I believed him. If Delta put a hit on me, I wouldn’t see it coming. That was for sure. Weeks from now or months from now or years from now I would walk into a dark alley somewhere and a shadow would step out and a K-bar would slip between my ribs or my neck would snap with a loud *crack* that would echo off the bricks around me, and that would be the end of it.

“You’ve got a week,” the guy said.

“To do what?”

“To show us it wasn’t you.”

I said nothing.

“Your choice,” the guy said. “Show us, or make those seven days count. Make sure you cover all your lifetime ambitions. Don’t start a long book.”

eleven

I drove the Humvee back to my office. Left it parked right outside my door. The sergeant with the baby son had gone. The small dark corporal who I thought was from Louisiana was there in her place. The coffeepot was cold and empty. There were two message slips on my desk. The first was: *Major Franz called. Please call him back.* The second said: *Detective Clark returned your call.* I dialed Franz in California first.

“Reacher?” he said. “I asked about the Armored agenda.”

“And?”

“There wasn’t one. That’s their story, and they’re sticking to it.”

“But?”

“We both know that’s bullshit. There’s always an agenda.”

“So did you get anywhere?”

“Not really,” he said. “But I can prove an incoming secure fax from Germany late on December thirtieth, and I can prove significant Xeroxing activity on the thirty-first, in the afternoon. And then there was some shredding and burning on New Year’s Day, after the Kramer news broke. I spoke to the incinerator guy. One burn bag, full of paper shreds, maybe enough for about sixty sheets.”

“How secure is their secure fax line?”

“How secure do you want it to be?”

“Extremely secure. Because the only way I can make sense out of this is if the agenda was really secret. I mean, *really* secret. And if it was really secret, would they have put it on paper in the first place?”

“They’re XII Corps, Reacher. They’ve been living on the front line for forty years. All they’ve got is secrets.”

“How many people were scheduled to attend the conference?”

“I spoke to the mess. There were fifteen bag lunches booked.”

“Sixty pages, fifteen people, that’s a four-page agenda, then.”

“Looks that way. But they went up in smoke.”

“Not the original that was faxed from Germany,” I said.

“They’ll have burned that one over there.”

“No, my guess is Kramer was hand-carrying it when he died.”

“So where is it now?”

“Nobody knows. It got away.”

“Is it worth chasing?”

“Nobody knows,” I said again. “Except the guy who wrote it, and he’s dead. And Vassell and Coomer. They must have seen it. They probably helped with it.”

“Vassell and Coomer went back to Germany. This morning. First flight out of Dulles. The staffers here were talking about it.”

“You ever met this new guy Willard?” I asked him.

“No.”

“Try not to. He’s an asshole.”

“Thanks for the warning. What did we do to deserve him?”

“I have no idea,” I said. We hung up and I dialed the Virginia number and asked for Detective Clark. I got put on hold. Then I heard a click and a second’s worth of squad room sounds and a voice came on the line.

“Clark,” it said.

“Reacher,” I said. “U.S. Army, down at Fort Bird. Did you want me?”

“You wanted me, as I recall,” Clark said. “You wanted a progress report on Mrs

"You wanted me, as I recall," Clark said. "You wanted a progress report on Mrs. Kramer. But there isn't any progress. We're looking at a brick wall here. We're looking for help, actually."

"Nothing I can do. It's your case."

"I wish it wasn't," he said.

"What have you got?"

"Lots of nothing. The perp was in and out without maybe touching a thing. Gloves, obviously. There was a light frost on the ground. We've got some residual grit from the driveway and the path, but we're not even close to a footprint."

"Neighbors see anything?"

"Most of them were out, or drunk. It was New Year's Eve. I've had people up and down the street canvassing, but nothing's jumping out at me. There were some cars around, but there would be anyway, on New Year's Eve, with folks heading back and forth to parties."

"Any tire tracks on the driveway?"

"None that mean anything."

I said nothing.

"The victim was killed with a crowbar," Clark said. "Probably the same tool as was used on the door."

"I figured that," I said.

"After the attack the perp wiped it on the rug and then washed it clean in the kitchen sink. We found stuff in the pipe. No prints on the faucet. Gloves, again."

I said nothing.

"Something else we haven't got," Clark said. "There's nothing much to say your general ever really lived there."

"Why?"

Why?

“We gave it the full-court press, forensically. We printed the whole place, we took hair and fiber from everywhere including the sink and shower traps, like I said. Everything belonged to the victim except a couple of stray prints. Bingo, we thought, but the database brought them back as the husband’s. And the ratio of hers to his suggests he was hardly there over the last five years or so. Is that usual?”

“He’ll have stayed on-post a lot,” I said. “But he should have been home for the holidays every year. The story here is that the marriage wasn’t so great.”

“People like that should just go ahead and get divorced,” Clark said. “I mean, that’s not a deal-breaker even for a general, right?”

“Not that I’ve heard,” I said. “Not anymore.”

Then he went quiet for a minute. He was thinking.

“How bad was the marriage?” he asked. “Bad enough that we should be looking at the husband for the doer?”

“The timing doesn’t work,” I said. “He was dead when it happened.”

“Was there money involved?”

“Nice house,” I said. “Probably hers.”

“So what about a paid hit, maybe set up way ahead of time?”

Now he was really clutching at straws.

“He’d have arranged it for when he was away in Germany.”

Clark said nothing to that.

“Who called you for this progress report?” I asked him.

“You did,” he said. “An hour ago.”

“I don’t recall doing that.”

“Not you personally,” he said. “Your people. It was the little black chick I met at the scene. Your lieutenant. I was too busy to talk. She gave me a number, but I left it somewhere. So I called back on the number you gave me originally. Did I do wrong?”

“No,” I said. “You did fine. Sorry we can’t help you.”

We hung up. I sat quiet for a moment and then I buzzed my corporal.

“Ask Lieutenant Summer to come see me,” I said.

Summer showed up inside ten minutes. She was in BDUs and between her face and her body language I could see she was feeling a little nervous of me and a little contemptuous of me all at the same time. I let her sit down and then I launched right into it.

“Detective Clark called back,” I said.

She said nothing.

“You disobeyed my direct order,” I said.

She said nothing.

“Why?” I asked.

“Why did you give me the order?”

“Why do you think?”

“Because you’re toeing Willard’s line.”

“He’s the CO,” I said. “It’s a good line to toe.”

“I don’t agree.”

“You’re in the army now, Summer. You don’t obey orders just because you agree with them.”

“[illegible]”

¨We don´t cover things up just because we´re told to either.´´

“We do,” I said. “We do that all the time. We always have.”

“Well, we shouldn’t.”

“Who made you Chief of Staff?”

“It’s unfair to Carbone and Mrs. Kramer,” she said. “They’re innocent victims.”

I paused. “Why did you start with Mrs. Kramer? You see her as more important than Carbone?”

Summer shook her head. “I didn’t start with Mrs. Kramer. I got to her second. I had already started on Carbone. I went through the personnel lists and the gate log and marked who was here at the time and who wasn’t.”

“You gave me that paperwork.”

“I copied it first.”

“You’re an idiot,” I said.

“Why? Because I’m not chicken?”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-five.”

“OK,” I said. “So next year you’ll be twenty-six. You’ll be a twenty-six-year-old black woman with a dishonorable discharge from the only career you’ve ever had. Meanwhile the civilian job market will be flooded because of force reduction and you’ll be competing with people with chests full of medals and pockets full of testimonials. So what are you going to do? Starve? Go work up at the strip club with Sin?”

She said nothing.

“You should have left it to me,” I said.

“You weren’t doing anything.”

“I’m glad you thought so,” I said. “That was the plan.”

“What?”

“I’m going to take Willard on,” I said. “It’s going to be him or me.”

She said nothing.

“I work for the army,” I said. “Not for Willard. I believe in the army. I don’t believe in Willard. I’m not going to let him trash everything.”

She said nothing.

“I told him not to make an enemy out of me. But he didn’t listen.”

“Big step,” she said.

“One that you already took,” I said.

“Why did you cut me out?”

“Because if I blow it I don’t want to take anyone down with me.”

“You were protecting me.”

I nodded.

“Well, don’t,” she said. “I can think for myself.”

I said nothing.

“How old are *you*?” she asked.

“Twenty-nine,” I said.

“So next year you’ll be thirty. You’ll be a thirty-year-old white man with a dishonorable discharge from the only job you’ve ever had. And whereas I’m young enough to start over, you’re not. You’re institutionalized, you’ve got no social skills, you’ve never been in the civilian world, and you’re good for nothing. So maybe it should be *you* laying in the weeds, not me.”

I said nothing.

I said nothing.

“You should have talked it over,” she said.

“It’s a personal choice,” I said.

“I already made my personal choice,” she said. “Seems like you know that now. Seems like Detective Clark accidentally ratted me out.”

“That’s exactly what I mean,” I said. “One stray phone call and you could be out on the street. This is a high-stakes game.”

“And I’m right here in it with you, Reacher. So bring me up to speed.”

Five minutes later she knew what I knew. All questions, no answers.

“Garber’s signature was a forgery,” she said.

I nodded.

“So what about Carbone’s, on the complaint? Is that forged too?”

“Maybe,” I said. I took the copy that Willard had given me out of my desk drawer. Smoothed it out on the blotter and passed it across to her. She folded it neatly and put it in her inside pocket.

“I’ll get the writing checked,” she said. “Easier for me than you, now.”

“Nothing’s easy for either of us now,” I said. “You need to be very clear about that. So you need to be very clear about what you’re doing.”

“I’m clear,” she said. “Bring it on.”

I sat quiet for a minute. Just looked at her. She had a small smile on her face. She was plenty tough. But then, she had grown up poor in an Alabama shack with churches burning and exploding all around her. I guessed watching her back against Willard and a bunch of Delta vigilantes might represent progress, of a sort, in her life.

“Thank you,” I said. “For being on my side.”

"Thank you," I said. "For being on my side."

"I'm not on your side," she said. "You're on mine."

My phone rang. I picked it up. It was the Louisiana corporal, calling from his desk outside my door.

"North Carolina State Police on the line," he said. "They want a duty officer. You want to take it?"

"Not really," I said. "But I guess I better."

There was a click and some dead air and another click. Then a dispatcher came on the line and told me a trooper in an I-95 patrol car had found an abandoned green canvas briefcase on the highway shoulder. He told me it had a wallet inside that identified the owner as a General Kenneth R. Kramer, U.S. Army. He told me he was calling Fort Bird because he figured it was the closest military installation to where the briefcase had been found. And he was calling to tell me where the briefcase was currently being held, in case I was interested in having someone sent out to pick it up.

twelve

Summer drove. We took the Humvee I had left at the curb. We didn't want to take time to sign out a sedan. It cramped her style a little. Humvees are big slow trucks that are good for a lot of things, but covering paved roads fast isn't one of them. She looked tiny behind the wheel. The vehicle was full of noise. The engine was thrashing and the tires were whining loud. It was four o'clock on a dull day and it was starting to go dark.

We drove north to Kramer's motel and turned east through the cloverleaf and then north on I-95 itself. We covered fifteen miles and passed a rest area and started looking for the right State Police building. We found it twelve miles farther on. It was a long low one-story brick structure with a forest of tall radio masts bolted to its roof. It was maybe forty years old. The brick was dull tan. It was impossible to say whether it had started out yellow and then faded in the sun or whether it had started out white and gotten dirty from the traffic fumes. There were stainless-steel letters in an art deco style spelling out *North Carolina State Police* all along its length.

We pulled in and parked in front of a pair of glass doors. Summer shut the Humvee down and we sat for a second and then slid out. Crossed a narrow sidewalk and pulled the doors and stepped inside the facility. It was a typical police place, built for function and floored with linoleum, which was shined every night whether it needed it or not. The walls had many layers of slick paint directly over concrete blocks. The air was hot and smelled faintly of sweat and stewed coffee.

There was a desk guy behind a reception counter. We were in battledress uniform and our Humvee was visible behind us through the doors, so he made the connection fast enough. He didn't ask for ID or inquire why we were there. He didn't speculate as to why General Kramer hadn't shown up himself. He just glanced at me and spent a little longer looking at Summer and then leaned down under his counter and came back up with the briefcase. It was in a clear plastic bag. Not an evidence bag. Just some kind of a shopping bag. It had a store's name printed across it in red.

The briefcase itself matched Kramer's suit carrier in every way. Same color, same design, same age, same level of wear and tear, no monogram. I opened it and looked inside. There was a wallet. There were plane tickets. There was a

passport. There was a paper-clipped itinerary three sheets thick. There was a hardcover book.

There was no conference agenda.

I closed the case up again and laid it down on the counter. Butted it square with the edge. I was disappointed, but not surprised.

“Was it in the plastic bag when the trooper found it?” I asked.

The desk guy shook his head. He was looking at Summer, not me.

“I put it in the bag myself,” he said. “I wanted to keep it clean. I wasn’t sure how soon someone would get here.”

“Where exactly was it found?” I asked him.

He paused a beat and looked away from Summer and ran a thick fingertip down a desk ledger and across a line to a mile marker code. Then he turned around and used the same fingertip on a map. The map was a large-scale plan of North Carolina’s portion of I-95 and was long and narrow, like a ribbon five inches wide. It showed every mile of the highway from where it entered from South Carolina and exited again into Virginia. The guy’s finger hovered for a second and then came down, decisively.

“Here,” he said. “Northbound shoulder, a mile past the rest area, about eleven miles south of where we are right now.”

“Any way of knowing how long it had been there?”

“Not really,” he said. “We’re not out there specifically looking for trash on the shoulders. Stuff can be there a month.”

“So how was it found?”

“Routine traffic stop. The trooper just saw it there, walking from his car to the car he had stopped.”

“When was this exactly?”

“Today,” the guy said. “Start of the second watch. Not long after noon.”

“It wasn’t there a month,” I said.

“When did he lose it?”

“New Year’s Eve,” I said.

“Where?”

“It was stolen from where he was staying.”

“Where was he staying?”

“A motel about thirty miles south of here.”

“So the bad guys were coming back north.”

“I guess,” I said.

The guy looked at me like he was asking permission and then picked the case up with both hands and looked at it like he was a connoisseur and it was a rare piece. He turned it in the light and stared at it from every angle.

“January,” he said. “We’ve got a little night dew right now. And it’s cold enough that we’re worried about ice. So we’ve got salt down. Things age fast, this time of year on the highway shoulder. And this looks old and worn, but not very deteriorated. It’s got some grit on it, in the weave of the canvas. But not very much. It hasn’t been out there since New Year’s Eve, that much is for damn sure. Less than twenty-four hours, I’d say. One night, not more.”

“Can you be certain?” Summer asked.

He shook his head. Put the case back on the counter.

“Just a guess,” he said.

“OK,” I said. “Thanks.”

“You’ll have to sign for it.”

I nodded. He reversed the desk ledger and pushed it toward me. I had *Reacher* in

a subdued-pattern stencil above my right breast pocket, but I figured he hadn't paid much attention to it. He had spent most of his time looking at Summer's pockets. So I scrawled *K. Kramer* on the appropriate line in the book and picked up the briefcase and turned away.

"Funny sort of burglary," the desk guy said. "There's an Amex card and money still in the wallet. We inventoried the contents."

I didn't reply. Just went out through the doors, back to the Humvee.

Summer waited for a gap in the traffic and then drove across all three lanes and bounced straight onto the soft grass median. She went down a slope and through a drainage ditch and straight up the other side. Paused and waited and turned left back onto the blacktop and headed south. That was the kind of thing a Humvee was good for.

"Try this," she said. "Last night Vassell and Coomer leave Bird at ten o'clock with the briefcase. They head north for Dulles or D.C. They extract the agenda and throw the case out the car window."

"They were in the bar and the dining room their whole time at Bird."

"So one of their dinner companions passed it on. We should check who they ate with. Maybe one of the women on the Humvee list was there."

"They were all alibied."

"Only superficially. New Year's Eve parties are pretty chaotic."

I looked out the window. Afternoon was fading fast. Evening was coming on. The world looked dark and cold.

"Sixty miles," I said. "The case was found sixty miles north of Bird. That's an hour. They would have grabbed the agenda and ditched the case faster than that."

Summer said nothing.

"And they would have stopped at the rest area to do it. They would have put the

case in a garbage can. That would have been safer. Throwing a briefcase out of a car window is pretty conspicuous."

"Maybe there really wasn't an agenda."

"It would be the first time in military history."

"Then maybe it really wasn't important."

"They ordered bag lunches at Irwin. Two-stars, one-stars, and colonels were planning to work through their lunch hour. That might be the first time in military history too. That was an important conference, Summer, believe me."

She said nothing.

"Do that U-turn thing again," I said. "Across the median. Then go back north a little. I want to look at the rest area."

The rest area was the same as on most American interstates I had seen. The northbound highway and the southbound highway eased apart to put a long fat bulge into the median. The buildings were shared by both sets of travelers. Therefore they had two fronts and no backs. They were built of brick and had dormant flower beds and leafless trees all around them. There were gas pumps. There were angled parking slots. Right then the place seemed to be halfway between quiet and busy. It was the end of the holidays. Families were struggling home, ready for school, ready for work. The parking slots were maybe one-third filled with cars. Their distribution was interesting. People had grabbed the first parking spot they saw rather than chancing something farther on, even though that might have put them ultimately a little closer to the food and the bathrooms. Maybe it was human nature. Some kind of insecurity.

There was a small semicircular plaza at the facility's main entrance. I could see bright neon signs inside at the food stations. Outside, there were six trash cans all fairly close to the doors. There were plenty of people around, looking in, looking out.

"Too public," Summer said. "This is going nowhere."

I nodded again. "I'd forget it in a heartbeat if it wasn't for Mrs. Kramer."

I nodded again. "I'd forget it in a heartbeat if it wasn't for Mrs. Kramer."

"Carbone is more important. We should prioritize."

"That feels like we're giving up."

We went north out of the rest area and Summer did her off-roading thing across the median again and turned south. I got as comfortable as it was possible to get in a military vehicle and settled in for the ride back. Darkness unspooled on my left. There was a vague sunset in the West, to my right. The road looked damp. Summer didn't seem very worried about the possibility of ice.

I did nothing for the first twenty minutes. Then I switched the dome light on and searched Kramer's briefcase, thoroughly. I didn't expect to find anything, and I wasn't proved wrong. His passport was a standard item, seven years old. He looked a little better in the picture than he had dead in the motel, but not much. He had plenty of stamps in and out of Germany and Belgium. The future battlefield and NATO HQ, respectively. He hadn't been anywhere else. He was a true specialist. For at least seven years he had concentrated exclusively on the world's last great tank arena and its command structure.

The plane tickets were exactly what Garber had said they should be. Frankfurt to Dulles, and Washington National to Los Angeles, both round-trip. They were all coach class and government rate, booked three days before the first departure date.

The itinerary matched the details on the plane tickets exactly. There were seat assignments. It seemed like Kramer preferred the aisle. Maybe his age was affecting his bladder. There was a reservation for a single room in Fort Irwin's Visiting Officers' Quarters, which he had never reached.

His wallet contained thirty-seven American dollars and sixty-seven German marks, all in mixed small bills. The Amex card was the basic green item, due to expire in a year and a half. He had carried one since 1964, according to the *Member Since* rubric. I figured that was pretty early for an army officer. Back then most got by with cash and military scrip. Kramer must have been a sophisticated guy, financially.

There was a Virginia driver's license. He had been using Green Valley as his

There was a Virginia driver's license. He had been using Green Valley as his permanent address, even though he avoided spending time there. There was a standard military ID card. There was a photograph of Mrs. Kramer, behind a plastic window. It showed a much younger version of the woman I had seen dead on her hallway floor. It was at least twenty years old. She had been pretty back then. She had long auburn hair that showed up a little orange from the way the photograph had faded with age.

There was nothing else in the wallet. No receipts, no restaurant checks, no Amex carbons, no phone numbers, no scraps of paper. I wasn't surprised. Generals are often neat, organized people. They need fighting talent, but they need bureaucratic talent too. I guessed Kramer's office and desk and quarters would be the same as his wallet. They would contain everything he needed and nothing he didn't.

The hardcover book was an academic monograph from a Midwestern university about the Battle of Kursk. Kursk happened in July of 1943. It was Nazi Germany's last grand offensive of World War Two and its first major defeat on an open battlefield. It turned into the greatest tank battle the world has ever seen, and ever will see, unless people like Kramer himself are eventually turned loose. I wasn't surprised by his choice of reading material. Some small part of him must have feared the closest he would ever get to truly cataclysmic action was reading about the hundreds of Tigers and Panthers and T-34s whirling and roaring through the choking summer dust all those years ago.

There was nothing else in the briefcase. Just a few furred paper shreds trapped in the seams. It looked like Kramer was the sort of guy who emptied his case and turned it upside down and shook it every time he packed for a trip. I put everything back inside and buckled the little straps and laid the case on the floor by my feet.

"Speak to the dining room guy," I said. "When we get back. Find out who was at the table with Vassell and Coomer."

"OK," Summer said. She drove on.

We got back to Bird in time for dinner. We ate in the O Club bar with a bunch of fellow MPs. If Willard had spies among them, they would have seen nothing

except a couple of tired people doing not very much of anything. But Summer slipped away between courses and came back with news in her eyes. I ate my dessert and drank my coffee slowly enough that nobody could think I had urgent business anywhere. Then I stood up and wandered out. Waited in the cold on the sidewalk. Summer came out five minutes later. I smiled. It felt like we were conducting a clandestine affair.

“Only one woman ate with Vassell and Coomer,” she said.

“Who?” I asked.

“Lieutenant Colonel Andrea Norton.”

“The Psy-Ops person?”

“The very same.”

“She was at a party on New Year’s Eve?”

Summer made a face. “You know what those parties are like. A bar in town, hundreds of people, in and out all the time, noise, confusion, drinks, people disappearing two by two. She could have slipped away.”

“Where was the bar?”

“Thirty minutes from the motel.”

“Then she would have been gone an hour, absolute minimum.”

“That’s possible.”

“Was she in the bar at midnight? Holding hands and singing ‘Auld Lang Syne’? Whoever was standing next to her should be able to say for sure.”

“People say she was there. But she could have made it back by then anyway. The kid said the Humvee left at eleven twenty-five. She’d have been back with five minutes to spare. It could have looked natural. You know, everybody comes out of the woodwork, ready for the ball to drop. The party kind of starts over.”

I said nothing.

“She would have taken the case to sanitize it. Maybe her phone number was in there, or her name or her picture. Or a diary. She didn’t want the scandal. But once she was through with it, she didn’t need the rest of the stuff anymore. She’d have been happy to hand it back when asked.”

“How would Vassell and Coomer know who to ask?”

“Hard to hide a long-standing affair in this fishbowl.”

“Not logical,” I said. “If people knew about Kramer and Norton, why would someone go to the house in Virginia?”

“OK, maybe they didn’t *know*. Maybe it was just there on the list of possibilities. Maybe way down the list. Maybe it was something that people thought was over.”

I nodded. “What can we get from her?”

“We can get confirmation that Vassell and Coomer arranged to take possession of the briefcase last night. That would prove they were looking for it, which puts them in the frame for Mrs. Kramer.”

“They made no calls from the hotel, and they didn’t have time to get down there themselves. So I don’t see how we can put them in the frame. What else can we get?”

“We can be certain about what happened to the agenda. We can know that Vassell and Coomer got it back. Then at least the army can relax because we’ll know for sure it isn’t going to wind up on some public trash pile for a journalist to find.”

I nodded. Said nothing.

“And maybe Norton saw it,” Summer said. “Maybe she read it. Maybe she could tell us what all this fuss is about.”

“That’s tempting.”

“It sure is.”

“Can we just walk in and ask her?”

“You’re from the 110th. You can ask anyone anything.”

“I have to stay under Willard’s radar.”

“She doesn’t know he warned you off.”

“She does. He spoke to her after the Carbone thing.”

“I think we have to talk to her.”

“Difficult kind of a talk to have,” I said. “She’s likely to get offended.”

“Only if we do it wrong.”

“What are the chances of doing it right?”

“We might be able to manipulate the situation. There’ll be an embarrassment factor. She won’t want it broadcast.”

“We can’t push her to the point where she calls Willard.”

“You scared of him?”

“I’m scared of what he can do to us bureaucratically. Doesn’t help anyone if we both get transferred to Alaska.”

“Your call.”

I was quiet for a long moment. Thought back to Kramer’s hardcover book. This was like July thirteenth, 1943, the pivotal day of the Battle of Kursk. We were like Alexander Vasilevsky, the Soviet general. If we attacked now, this minute, we had to keep on and on attacking until the enemy was run off his feet and the war was won. If we bogged down or paused for breath even for a second, we would be overrun again.

“OK,” I said. “Let’s do it.”

We found Andrea Norton in the O Club lounge and I asked her if she would

spare us a minute in her office. I could see she was puzzled as to why. I told her it was a confidential matter. She stayed puzzled. Willard had told her that Carbone was a closed case, and she couldn't see what else we would have to talk to her about. But she agreed. She told us she would meet us there in thirty minutes.

Summer and I spent the thirty minutes in my office with her list of who was on-post and who wasn't at Carbone's time of death. She had yards of computer paper neatly folded into a large concertina about an inch thick. There was a name, rank, and number printed on each line with pale dot-matrix ink. Almost every name had a check mark next to it.

"What are the marks?" I asked her. "Here or not here?"

"Here," she said.

I nodded. I was afraid of that. I riffed through the concertina with my thumb.

"How many?" I asked.

"Nearly twelve hundred."

I nodded again. There was nothing intrinsically difficult about boiling down twelve hundred names and finding one sole perpetrator. Police files everywhere are full of larger suspect pools. There had been cases in Korea where the entire U.S. military strength had been the suspect pool. But cases like that require unlimited manpower, big staffs, and endless resources. And they require everybody's total cooperation. They can't be handled behind a CO's back, in secret, by two people acting alone.

"Impossible," I said.

"Nothing's impossible," Summer said.

"We have to go at it a different way."

"How?"

"What did he take to the scene?"

“Nothing.”

“Wrong,” I said. “He took himself.”

Summer shrugged. Dragged her fingers up the folded edges of her paper. The stack thickened and then thinned back down as the air sighed out from between the pages.

“Pick a name,” she said.

“He took a K-bar,” I said.

“Twelve hundred names, twelve hundred K-bars.”

“He took a tire iron or a crowbar.”

She nodded.

“And he took yogurt,” I said.

She said nothing.

“Four things,” I said. “Himself, a K-bar, a blunt instrument, and yogurt. Where did the yogurt come from?”

“His refrigerator in his quarters,” Summer said. “Or one of the mess kitchens, or one of the mess buffets, or the commissary, or a supermarket or a deli or a grocery store somewhere off-post.”

I pictured a man breathing hard, walking fast, maybe sweating, a bloodstained knife and a crowbar clutched together in his right hand, an empty yogurt pot in his left, stumbling in the dark, nearing a destination, looking down, seeing the pot, hurling it into the undergrowth, putting the knife in his pocket, slipping the crowbar under his coat.

“We should look for the container,” I said.

Summer said nothing.

“He’ll have ditched it,” I said. “Not close to the scene, but not far from it either.”

“Will it help us?”

“It’ll have some kind of a product code on it. Maybe a *best before* date. Stuff like that. It might lead us to where it was bought.”

Then I paused.

“And it might have prints on it,” I said.

“He’ll have worn gloves.”

I shook my head. “I’ve seen people opening yogurt containers. But I’ve never seen anyone do it with gloves on. There’s a foil closure. With a tiny little tab to pull.”

“We’re on a hundred thousand acres here.”

I nodded. *Square one.* Normally a couple of phone calls would get me all the grunts on the post lined up a yard apart on their knees, crawling slowly across the terrain like a giant human comb, staring down at the ground and parting every blade of grass by hand. And then doing it again the next day, and the next, until one of them found what we were looking for. With manpower like the army has, you can find a needle in a haystack. You can find both halves of a broken needle. You can find the tiny chip of chrome that flaked off the break.

Summer looked at the clock on the wall.

“Our thirty minutes are up,” she said.

We used the Humvee to get over to Psy-Ops and parked in a slot that was probably reserved for someone else. It was nine o’clock. Summer killed the motor and we opened the doors and slipped out into the cold.

I took Kramer’s briefcase with me.

We walked through the old tiled corridors and came to Norton’s door. Her light was on. I knocked and we went in. Norton was behind her desk. All her textbooks were back on her shelves. There were no legal pads on view. No pens or pencils. Her desktop was clear. The pool of light from her lamp was a perfect

circle on the empty wood.

She had three visitor's chairs. She waved us toward them. Summer sat on the right. I sat on the left. I propped Kramer's briefcase on the center chair, facing Norton, like a ghost at the feast. She didn't look at it.

"How can I help you?" she said.

I made a point of adjusting the briefcase's position so that it was completely upright on the chair.

"Tell us about the dinner party last night," I said.

"What dinner party?"

"You ate with some Armored staffers who were visiting."

She nodded.

"Vassell and Coomer," she said. "So?"

"They worked for General Kramer."

She nodded again. "So I believe."

"Tell us about the meal."

"The food?"

"The atmosphere," I said. "The conversation. The mood."

"It was just dinner in the O Club," she said.

"Someone gave Vassell and Coomer a briefcase."

"Did they? What, like a present?"

I said nothing.

"I don't remember that," Norton said. "When?"

"During dinner," I said. "Or as they were leaving."

During dinner," I said. "Or as they were leaving.

Nobody spoke.

"A briefcase?" Norton said.

"Was it you?" Summer asked.

Norton looked at her, blankly. She was either genuinely puzzled, or she was a superb actress. "Was it me what?"

"Who gave them the briefcase."

"Why would I give them a briefcase? I hardly knew them."

"How well did you know them?"

"I met them once or twice, years ago."

"At Irwin?"

"I believe so."

"Why did you eat with them?"

"I was in the bar. They asked me. It would have been rude to decline."

"Did you know they were coming?" I asked.

"No," she said. "I had no idea. I was surprised they weren't in Germany."

"So you knew them well enough to know where they're based."

"Kramer was an Armored Branch commander in Europe. They were his staffers. I wouldn't expect to find them based in Hawaii."

Nobody spoke. I watched Norton's eyes. She hadn't looked at Kramer's briefcase longer than about half a second. Just long enough to figure I was some guy who carried a briefcase, and then to forget all about it.

"What's going on here?" she said.

I didn’t answer.

“Tell me.”

I pointed to the briefcase. “This is General Kramer’s. He lost it on New Year’s Eve and it showed up again today. We’re trying to figure out where it’s been.”

“Where did he lose it?”

Summer moved in her chair.

“In a motel,” she said. “During a sexual assignation with a woman from this post. The woman was driving a Humvee. Therefore we’re looking for women who knew Kramer, and who have permanent access to Humvees, and who were off-post on New Year’s Eve, and who were at dinner last night.”

“I was the only woman at dinner last night.”

Silence.

Summer nodded. “We know that. And we promise we can keep the whole thing quiet, but first we need you to confirm who you gave the briefcase to.”

The room stayed quiet. Norton looked at Summer like she had told a joke with a punch line she didn’t quite understand.

“You think I was sleeping with General Kramer?” she said.

Summer said nothing.

“Well, I wasn’t,” Norton said. “God forbid.”

Nobody spoke.

“I don’t know whether to laugh or cry,” she said. “I’m seriously conflicted. That’s a completely absurd accusation. I’m astonished you made it.”

Nobody spoke for a long time. Norton smiled, like the main component of her reaction was amusement. Not anger. She closed her eyes and opened them a moment later, like she was erasing the conversation from her memory.

“Is there something missing from the briefcase?” she asked me.

I didn’t answer.

“Help me out here,” she said. “Please. I’m trying to see the point of this extraordinary visit. Is there something missing from Kramer’s briefcase?”

“Vassell and Coomer say not.”

“But?”

“I don’t believe them.”

“You probably should. They’re senior officers.”

I said nothing.

“What does your new CO say?”

“He doesn’t want it pursued. He’s worried about embarrassment.”

“You should be guided by him.”

“I’m an investigator. I have to ask questions.”

“The army is a family,” she said. “We’re all on the same side.”

“Did Vassell or Coomer leave with this briefcase last night?” I said.

Norton closed her eyes again. At first I thought she was just exasperated, but then I realized she was picturing last night’s scene, at the O Club coat check.

“No,” she said. “Neither one of them left with that briefcase.”

“Are you absolutely sure?”

“I’m totally certain.”

“What was their mood during dinner?”

She opened her eyes.

“They were relaxed,” she said. “Like they were passing an empty evening.”

“Did they say why they were at Bird again?”

“General Kramer’s funeral was yesterday, at noon.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“I believe Walter Reed released the body and the Pentagon handled the details.”

“Where was the funeral?”

“Arlington Cemetery,” she said. “Where else?”

“That’s three hundred miles away.”

“Approximately. As the crow flies.”

“So why did they come down here for dinner?”

“They didn’t tell me,” she said.

I said nothing.

“Anything else?” she asked.

I shook my head.

“A motel?” she said. “Do I look like the kind of woman who would agree to meet a man in a motel?”

I didn’t answer.

“Dismissed,” she said.

I stood up. Summer did the same. I took Kramer’s briefcase from the center chair and walked out of the room. Summer followed behind me.

“Did you believe her?” Summer asked me.

We were sitting in the Humvee outside the Psy-Ops building. The engine was idling and the heater was blowing hot stale air that smelled of diesel.

“Totally,” I said. “As soon as she didn’t look at the briefcase. She’d have gotten very flustered if she’d ever seen it before. And I certainly believed her about the motel. It would cost you a suite at the Ritz to get in her pants.”

“So what did we learn?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Nothing at all.”

“No, we learned that Bird is a very attractive place, apparently. Vassell and Coomer keep coming all the way down here, for no very obvious reason.”

“Tell me about it,” I said.

“And that Norton thinks we’re a family.”

“Officers,” I said. “What do you expect?”

“You’re an officer. I’m an officer.”

I nodded.

“I was at West Point for four years,” I said. “I should know better. I should have changed my name and come back in as a private. Three promotions, I’d be an E-4 specialist by now. Maybe even an E-5 sergeant. I wish I was.”

“What now?”

I checked my watch. It was close to ten o’clock.

“Sleep,” I said. “First light, we go out looking for a yogurt container.”

thirteen

I had never eaten yogurt myself but I had seen some and my impression was that individual portions came in small pots about two inches wide, which meant you could fit about three hundred of them in a square yard. Which meant you could fit nearly a million and a half of them in an acre. Which meant you could hide a hundred-fifty billion of them inside Fort Bird's perimeter wire. Which meant that looking for one would be like looking for a single anthrax spore in Yankee Stadium. I did the calculation while I showered and dressed in the predawn darkness.

Then I sat on my bed and waited for some light in the sky. No point in going out there and missing the 1-in-150-billion chance because it was too dark to see properly. But as I sat I started to figure we could narrow the odds by being intelligent about where exactly we looked. The guy with the yogurt obviously made it back from *A* to *B.* We knew where *A* was. *A* was where Carbone had been killed. And there was a limited choice of places for *B. B* was either a random hole in the perimeter wire or somewhere among the main post buildings. So if we were smart, we could cut the billions to millions, and find the thing in a hundred years instead of a thousand.

Unless it was already licked clean inside some starving raccoon's den.

I met Summer in the MP motor pool. She was bright and full of energy but we didn't talk. There was nothing to say, except that the task we had set for ourselves was impossible. And I guessed neither of us wanted to confirm that out loud. So we didn't speak. We just picked a Humvee at random and headed out. I drove, for a change, the same three-minute journey I had driven thirty-some hours before.

According to the Humvee's trip meter we traveled exactly a mile and a half and according to its compass we traveled south and west, and then we arrived at the crime scene. There were still tatters of MP tape on some of the trees. We parked ten yards off the track and got out. I climbed up on the hood and sat on the roof above the windshield. Gazed west and north, and then turned around and gazed east and south. The air was cold. There was a breeze. The landscape was brown and dead and immense. The dawn sun was weak and pale.

"Which way did he go?" I called.

“North and east,” Summer called back.

She sounded pretty sure about it.

“Why?” I called.

She climbed up on the hood and sat next to me.

“He had a vehicle,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because we didn’t find one left out here, and I doubt if they walked.”

“Why?”

“Because if they’d walked, it would have happened closer to where they started. This is at least a thirty-minute walk from anywhere. I don’t see the bad guy concealing a tire iron or a crowbar for thirty solid minutes, not walking side by side. Under a coat, it would make him move like a robot. Carbone would have twigged. So they drove. In the bad guy’s vehicle. He had the weapon under a jacket or something on the backseat. Maybe the knife and the yogurt too.”

“Where did they start?”

“Doesn’t matter. Only thing that matters to us now is where the bad guy went afterward. And if he was in a vehicle, he didn’t drive outward toward the wire. We can assume there are no vehicle-sized holes in it. Man-sized maybe, or deer-sized, but nothing big enough to drive a truck or a car through.”

“OK,” I said.

“So he headed back to the post. He can’t have gone anywhere else. Can’t just drive a vehicle into the middle of nowhere. He drove back along the track and parked his vehicle and went about his business.”

I nodded. Looked at the western horizon ahead of me. Turned and looked north and east, back along the track. Back toward the post. *A mile and a half of track.* I pictured the aerodynamics of an empty yogurt container. Lightweight plastic, cup-shaped, a torn foil closure flapping like an air brake. I pictured throwing

one, hard. It would sail and stall in the air. It would travel ten feet, tops. A mile and a half of track, ten feet of shoulder, on the left, on the driver's side. I felt millions shrink to thousands. Then I felt them expand all the way back up to billions.

"Good news and bad news," I said. "I think you're right, so you've cut the search area down by about ninety-nine percent. Maybe more. Which is good."

"But?"

"If he was in a vehicle, did he throw it out at all?"

Summer was silent.

"He could have just dropped it on the floor," I said. "Or chucked it in the back."

"Not if it was a pool vehicle."

"So maybe he put it in a sidewalk trash can later, after he parked. Or maybe he took it home with him."

"Maybe. It's a fifty-fifty situation."

"Seventy-thirty at best," I said.

"We should look anyway."

I nodded. Braced the palms of my hands on the windshield's header rail and vaulted down to the ground.

It was January, and the conditions were pretty good. February would have been better. In a temperate northern hemisphere climate, vegetation dies right back in February. It gets as thin and sparse as it ever will. But January was OK. The undergrowth was low and the ground was flat and brown. It was the color of dead bracken and leaf litter. There was no snow. The landscape was even and neutral and organic. It was a good background. I figured a container for a dairy product would be bright white. Or cream. Or maybe pink, for a strawberry or a raspberry flavor. Whatever, it would be a helpful color. It wouldn't be black, for

instance. Nobody puts a dairy product in a black container. So if it was there and we came close to it, we would find it.

We checked a ten-foot belt all around the perimeter of the crime scene. Found nothing. So we went back to the track and set off north and east along it. Summer walked five feet from the track's left-hand edge. I walked five feet to her left. If we both scanned both ways we would cover a fifteen-foot strip, with two pairs of eyes on the crucial five-foot lane between us, which is exactly where the container should have landed, according to my aerodynamic theory.

We walked slow, maybe half-speed. I used short paces and settled into a rhythm of moving my head from one side to the other with every step. I felt pretty stupid doing it. I must have looked like a penguin. But it was an efficient method. I lapsed into a kind of autopilot mode and the ground blurred beneath me. I wasn't seeing individual leaves and twigs and blades of grass. I was tuning out what should be there. I felt like something that shouldn't be there would leap right out at me.

We walked for ten minutes and found nothing.

"Swap?" Summer said.

We changed places and moved on. We saw a million tons of forest debris, and nothing else. Army posts are kept scrupulously clean. The weekly litter patrol is a religion. Outside the wire we would have been tripping over all kinds of stuff. Inside, there was nothing. Nothing at all. We did another ten minutes, another three hundred yards, and then we paused and swapped positions again. Moving slow in the cold air was chilling me. I stared at the earth like a maniac. I felt we were close to our best chance. A mile and a half is 2,640 yards. I figured the first few hundred and the last few hundred were poor hunting grounds. At first the guy would have been feeling the pure urge to escape. Then close to the post buildings he knew he had to be ready and done and composed. So the middle stretch was where he would have sanitized. Anyone with any sense would have coasted to a stop, breathed in, breathed out, and thought things through. He would have buzzed his window down and felt the night air on his face. I slowed down and looked harder, left and right, left and right. Saw nothing.

"Did he have blood on him?" I said.

"A little, maybe," Summer said, on my right.

I didn’t look at her. I kept my eyes on the ground.

“On his gloves,” she said. “Maybe on his shoes.”

“Less than he might have expected,” I said. “Unless he was a doctor he would have expected some pretty bad bleeding.”

“So?”

“So he didn’t use a pool car. He expected blood and didn’t want to risk leaving it all over a vehicle that someone else was going to drive the next day.”

“So like you said, with his own car, he’ll have thrown it in the back. So we aren’t going to find anything out here.”

I nodded. Said nothing. Walked on.

We covered the whole of the middle section and found nothing. Two thousand yards of dormant organic material and not one single man-made item. Not a cigarette butt, not a scrap of paper, no rusted cans, no empty bottles. It was a real tribute to the post commander’s enthusiasm. But it was disappointing. We stopped with the main post buildings clearly visible, three hundred yards in front of us.

“I want to backtrack,” I said. “I want to do the middle part again.”

“OK,” she said. “About-face.”

She turned and we switched positions. We decided we would cover each three-hundred-yard section the opposite way around from the first pass. Where I had walked inboard, I would walk outboard, and vice versa. No real reason, except our perspectives were different and we felt we should alternate. I was more than a foot taller than she was, and therefore simple trigonometry meant I could see more than a foot farther in either direction. She was closer to the ground and she claimed her eyes were good for detail.

We walked back, slow and steady.

Nothing in the first section. We swapped positions. I took up station ten feet

from the track. Scanned left and right. The wind was in our faces, and my eyes started watering from the cold. I put my hands in my pockets.

Nothing in the second section. We changed positions again. I walked five feet from the track, parallel to its edge. Nothing in the third section. We changed yet again. I did math in my head as we walked. So far we had swept a fifteen-foot swath along a 2,340-yard length. That made 11,700 square yards, which was a hair better than two-point-four acres. Nearly two and a half acres, out of a hundred thousand. Odds of forty thousand to one, approximately. Better than driving to town and spending a dollar on a lottery ticket. But not much better.

We walked on. The wind got stronger and we got colder. We saw nothing.

Then I saw something.

It was far to my right. Maybe twenty feet from me. Not a yogurt container. Something else. I almost ignored it because it was well outside the zone of possibility. No lightweight plastic unaerodynamic item could have gone that far after being thrown from a car on the track. So my eyes spotted it and my brain processed it and rejected it instantly, on a purely preprogrammed basis.

And then it hung up on it. Out of pure animal instinct.

Because it looked like a snake. The lizard part of my brain whispered *snake* and I got that little primeval jolt of fright that had kept my ancestors alive and well way back in evolution. It was all over in a split second. It was smothered immediately. The modern educated part of my mind stepped in and said, *No snakes here in January, bud. Way too cold.* I breathed out and moved on a step and then paused to look back, purely out of curiosity.

There was a curved black shape in the dead grass. Belt? Garden hose? But it was settled deeper down among the stiff brown stalks than something made of leather or fabric or rubber could have fallen. It was right down there among the roots. Therefore it was heavy. And it had to be heavy to have traveled so far from the track. Therefore it was metal. Solid, not tubular. Therefore it was unfamiliar. Very little military equipment is curved.

I walked over. Got close. Knelt down.

It was a crowbar.

A black-painted crowbar, all matted on one end with blood and hair.

I stayed with it and sent Summer to get the truck. She must have jogged all the way back for it because she returned sooner than I expected and out of breath.

“Do we have an evidence bag?” I asked.

“It’s not evidence,” she said. “Training accidents don’t need evidence.”

“I’m not planning on taking it to court,” I said. “I just don’t want to touch it, is all. Don’t want my prints on it. That might give Willard ideas.”

She checked the back of the truck.

“No evidence bags,” she said.

I paused. Normally you take exquisite care not to contaminate evidence with foreign prints and hairs and fibers, so as not to confuse the investigation. If you screw up, you can get your ass chewed by the prosecutors. But this time the motivation had to be different, with Willard in the mix. If I screwed up, I could get my ass sent to jail. Means, motive, opportunity, my prints on the weapon. Too good to be true. If the training accident story came back to bite him, he would jump all over anything he could get.

“We could bring a specialist out here,” Summer said. She was standing right behind me. I could sense her there.

“Can’t involve anyone else,” I said. “I didn’t even want to involve you.”

She came around beside me and crouched low. Smoothed stalks of grass out of the way with her hands, for a closer look.

“Don’t touch it,” I said.

“Wasn’t planning to,” she said.

We looked at it together, close up. It was a handheld wrecking bar forged from octagonal-section steel. It looked like a high-quality tool. It looked brand new. It

was painted gloss black with the kind of paint people use on boats or cars. It was shaped a little like an alto saxophone. The main shaft was about three feet long, slightly *S*-shaped, and it had a shallow curve on one end and a full curve on the other, the shape of a capital letter *J*. Both tips were flattened and notched into claws, ready for levering nails out of planks of wood. Its design was streamlined and evolved, and simple, and brutal.

“Hardly used,” Summer said.

“Never used,” I said. “Not for construction, anyway.”

I stood up.

“We don’t need to print it,” I said. “We can assume the guy was wearing gloves when he swung it.”

Summer stood up next to me.

“We don’t need to type the blood either,” she said. “We can assume it’s Carbone’s.”

I said nothing.

“We could just leave it here,” Summer said.

“No,” I said. “We can’t do that.”

I bent down and untied my right boot. Pulled the lace all the way out and used a reef knot to tie the ends together. That gave me a closed loop about fifteen inches in diameter. I draped it over my right palm and dragged the free end across the dead stubble until I snagged it under the crowbar’s tip. Then I closed my fist and lifted the heavy steel weight carefully out of the grass. I held it up, like a proud angler with a fish.

“Let’s go,” I said.

I limped around to the front passenger seat with the crowbar swinging gently in midair and my boot half off. I sat close to the transmission tunnel and steadied the crowbar against the floor just enough to stop it touching my legs as the vehicle moved.

“Where to?” Summer asked.

“The mortuary,” I said.

I was hoping the pathologist and his staff would be out eating breakfast, but they weren’t. They were all in the building, working. The pathologist himself caught us in the lobby. He was on his way somewhere with a file in his hand. He looked at us and then he looked at the trophy dangling from my boot lace. Took him half of a second to understand what it was, and the other half to realize it put us all in a very awkward situation.

“We could come back later,” I said. *When you’re not here.*

“No,” he said. “We’ll go to my office.”

He led the way. I watched him walk. He was a small dark man with short legs, brisk, competent, a little older than me. He seemed nice enough. And I guessed he wasn’t stupid. Very few medics are. They have all kinds of complicated stuff to learn, before they get to be where they want to be. And I guessed he wasn’t unethical. Very few medics were that either, in my experience. They’re scientists at heart, and scientists generally retain a good-faith interest in facts and the truth. Or at least they retain some kind of innate curiosity. All of which was good, because this guy’s attitude was going to be crucial. He could stay out of our way, or he could sell us out with a single phone call.

His office was a plain square room full of original-issue gray steel desks and file cabinets. It was crowded. There were framed diplomas on the walls. There were shelves full of books and manuals. No specimen jars. No weird stuff pickled in formaldehyde. It could have been an army lawyer’s office, except the diplomas were from medical schools, not law schools.

He sat down in his rolling chair. Placed his file on his desk. Summer closed his door and leant on it. I stood in the middle of the floor, with the crowbar hanging in space. We all looked at each other. Waited to see who would make the opening bid.

“Carbone was a training accident,” the doctor said, like he was moving his first pawn two squares forward.

I nodded.

“No question,” I said, like I was moving my own pawn.

“I’m glad we’ve got *that* straight,” he said.

But he said it in a voice that meant: *Can you believe this shit?*

I heard Summer breathe out, because we had an ally. But we had an ally who wanted distance. We had an ally who wanted to hide behind an elaborate charade. And I didn’t altogether blame him. He owed years of service in exchange for his medical school tuition. Therefore he was cautious. Therefore he was an ally whose wishes we had to respect.

“Carbone fell and hit his head,” I said. “It’s a closed case. Pure accident, very unfortunate for all concerned.”

“But?”

I held the crowbar a little higher.

“I think this is what he hit his head on,” I said.

“Three times?”

“Maybe he bounced. Maybe there were dead twigs under the leaves, made the ground a little springy, like a trampoline.”

The doctor nodded. “Terrain can be like that, this time of year.”

“Lethal,” I said.

I lowered the crowbar again. Waited.

“Why did you bring it here?” the doctor asked.

“There might be an issue of contributory negligence,” I said. “Whoever left it lying around for Carbone to fall on might need a reprimand.”

The doctor nodded again. “Littering is a grave offense.”

“I [illegible]” I said.

"In this man's army," I said.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing," I said. "We're here to help you out, is all. With it being a closed case, we figured you wouldn't want to clutter your place up with those plaster casts you made. Of the wound site. We figured we could haul them to the trash for you."

The doctor nodded for a third time.

"You could do that," he said. "It would save me a trip."

He paused for a long moment. Then he cleared the file away from in front of him and opened some drawers and laid sheets of clean white paper on the desktop and arranged half-a-dozen glass microscope slides on the paper.

"That thing looks heavy," he said to me.

"It is," I said.

"Maybe you should put it down. Take the weight off your shoulder."

"Is that medical advice?"

"You don't want ligament damage."

"Where should I put it down?"

"Any flat surface you can find."

I stepped forward and laid the crowbar gently on his desk, on top of the paper and the glass slides. Unhooked my boot lace and picked the knot out of it. Squatted down and threaded it back through all the eyelets. Tightened it up and tied it off. I looked up in time to see the doctor move a microscope slide. He picked it up and scraped it against the end of the crowbar where it was matted with blood and hair.

"Damn," he said. "I got this slide all dirty. Very careless of me."

He made the exact same error with five more slides.

“Are we interested in fingerprints?” he said.

I shook my head. “We’re assuming gloves.”

“We should check, I think. Contributory negligence is a serious matter.”

He opened another drawer and peeled a latex glove out of a box and snapped it on his hand. It made a tiny cloud of talcum dust. Then he picked the crowbar up and carried it out of the room.

He came back less than ten minutes later. He still had his glove on. The crowbar was washed clean. The black paint gleamed. It looked indistinguishable from new.

“No prints,” he said.

He put the crowbar down on his chair and pulled a file drawer and came out with a plain brown cardboard box. Opened it up and took out two chalk-white plaster casts. Both were about six inches long and both had *Carbone* handwritten in black ink on the underside. One was a positive, formed by pressing wet plaster into the wound. The other was a negative, formed by molding more plaster over the positive. The negative showed the shape of the wound the weapon had made, and therefore the positive showed the shape of the weapon itself.

The doctor put the positive on the chair next to the crowbar. Lined them up, parallel. The cast was about six inches long. It was white and a little pitted from the molding process but was otherwise identical to the smooth black iron. Absolutely identical. Same section, same thickness, same contours.

Then the doctor put the negative on the desk. It was a little bigger than the positive, and a little messier. It was an exact replica of the back of Carbone’s shattered skull. The doctor picked up the crowbar. Hefted it in his hand. Lined it up, speculatively. Brought it down, very slowly, *one,* for the first blow, then *two* for the second. Then *three* for the last. He touched it to the plaster. The third and final wound was the best defined. It was a clear three-quarter-inch trench in the plaster, and the crowbar fitted it perfectly.

“I’ll check the blood and the hair,” the doctor said. “Not that we don’t already know what the results will be.”

know what the results will be.

He lifted the crowbar out of the plaster and tried it again. It went in again, precisely, and deep. He lifted it out and balanced it across his open palms, like he was weighing it. Then he grasped it by the straighter end and swung it, like a batter going after a high fastball. He swung it again, harder, a compact, violent stroke. It looked big in his hands. Big, and a little heavy for him. A little out of control.

“Very strong man,” he said. “Vicious swing. Big tall guy, right-handed, physically very fit. But that describes a lot of people on this post, I guess.”

“There was no guy,” I said. “Carbone fell and hit his head.”

The doctor smiled briefly and balanced the bar across his palms again.

“It’s handsome, in its way,” he said. “Does that sound strange?”

I knew what he meant. It was a nice piece of steel, and it was everything it needed to be and nothing it didn’t. Like a Colt Detective Special, or a K-bar, or a cockroach. He slid it inside a long steel drawer. The metals scraped one on the other and then boomed faintly when he let it go and dropped it the final inch.

“I’ll keep it here,” he said. “If you like. Safer that way.”

“OK,” I said.

He closed the drawer.

“Are you right-handed?” he asked me.

“Yes,” I said. “I am.”

“Colonel Willard told me you did it,” he said. “But I didn’t believe him.”

“Why not?”

“You were very surprised when you saw who it was. When I put his face back on. You had a definite physical reaction. People can’t fake that sort of thing.”

“Did you tell Willard that?”

The doctor nodded. “He found it inconvenient. But it didn’t really deflect him. And I’m sure he’s already developed a theory to explain it away.”

“I’ll watch my back,” I said.

“Some Delta sergeants came to see me too. There are rumors starting. I think you should watch your back very carefully.”

“I plan to,” I said.

“*Very* carefully,” the doctor said.

Summer and I got back in the Humvee. She fired it up and put it in gear and sat with her foot on the brake.

“Quartermaster,” I said.

“It wasn’t military issue,” she said.

“It looked expensive,” I said. “Expensive enough for the Pentagon, maybe.”

“It would have been green.”

I nodded. “Probably. But we should still check. Sooner or later we’re going to need all our ducks in a row.”

She took her foot off the brake and headed for the quartermaster building. She had been at Bird much longer than me and she knew where everything was. She parked again in front of the usual type of warehouse. I knew there would be a long counter inside with massive off-limits storage areas behind it. There would be huge bales of clothing, tires, blankets, mess kits, entrenching tools, equipment of every kind.

We went in and found a young guy in new BDUs behind the counter. He was a cheerful corn-fed country boy. He looked like he was working in his dad’s hardware store, and he looked like it was his life’s ambition. He was enthusiastic. I told him we were interested in construction equipment. He opened a manual the size of eight phone books. Found the correct section. I asked him to

find listings for crowbars. He licked his forefinger and turned pages and found two entries. *Prybar, general issue, long, claw on one end* and then *crowbar, general issue, short, claw on both ends.* I asked him to show us an example of the latter.

The kid went away and disappeared among the tall stacks. We waited. Breathed in the unique quartermaster smell of old dust and new rubber and damp cotton twill. He came back after five long minutes with a GI crowbar. Laid it down on the counter in front of us. It landed with a heavy thump. Summer had been right. It was painted olive green. And it was a completely different item than the one we had just left in the pathologist's office. Different section, six inches shorter, slightly thinner, slightly different curves. It looked carefully designed. It was probably a perfect example of the way the army does things. Years ago it had probably been the ninety-ninth item on someone's reequipment agenda. A subcommittee would have been formed, with expert input from survivors of the old construction battalions. A specification would have been drawn up concerning length and weight and durability. Metal fatigue would have been investigated. Arenas of likely use would have been considered. Brittleness in the frozen winters of northern Europe would have been evaluated. Malleability in the severe heat of the equator would have been taken into account. Detailed drawings would have been made. Then tenders would have gone out. Mills all over Pennsylvania and Alabama would have priced the job. Prototypes would have been forged. They would have been tested, exhaustively. One and only one winner would have been approved. Paint would have been supplied, and the thickness and uniformity of its application would have been specified and carefully monitored. Then the whole business would have been completely forgotten. But the product of all those long months of deliberation was still coming through, thousands of units a year, needed or not.

"Thanks, soldier," I said.

"You need to take it?" the kid asked.

"Just needed to see it," I said.

We went back to my office. It was midmorning, a dull day, and I felt aimless. So far, the new decade wasn't doing much for me. I wasn't a huge fan of the 1990s

yet, at that point, six days in.

“Are you going to write the accident report?” Summer asked.

“For Willard? Not yet.”

“He’ll expect it today.”

“I know. But I’m going to make him ask, one more time.”

“Why?”

“I guess because it’s a fascinating experience. Like watching maggots writhing around in something that died.”

“What died?”

“My enthusiasm for getting out of bed in the morning.”

“One bad apple,” she said. “Doesn’t mean much.”

“Maybe,” I said. “If it is just one.”

She said nothing.

“Crowbars,” I said. “We’ve got two separate cases with crowbars, and I don’t like coincidences. But I can’t see how they can be connected. There’s no way to join them up. Carbone was a million miles from Mrs. Kramer, in every way imaginable. They were in completely different worlds.”

“Vassell and Coomer join them up,” she said. “They had an interest in something that could have been in Mrs. Kramer’s house, and they were here at Bird the night Carbone was murdered.”

I nodded. “That’s what’s driving me crazy. It’s a perfect connection, except it isn’t. They took one call in D.C., they were too far from Green Valley to do anything to Mrs. Kramer themselves, and they didn’t call anyone from the hotel. Then they were here the night Carbone died, but they were in the O Club with a dozen witnesses the whole time, eating steak and fish.”

“First time they were here, they had a driver. Major Marshall, remember? But

the second time, they were on their own. That feels a little clandestine to me. Like they were here for a secret reason."

"Nothing very secret about hanging around in the O Club bar and then eating in the O Club dining room. They weren't out of sight for a minute, all night long."

"But why didn't they have their driver? Why come on their own? I assume Marshall was at the funeral with them. But then they chose to drive more than three hundred miles by themselves? And more than three hundred back?"

"Maybe Marshall was unavailable," I said.

"Marshall's their blue-eyed boy," she said. "He's available when they say so."

"Why did they come here at all? It's a very long way for a very average dinner."

"They came for the briefcase, Reacher. Norton's wrong. She must be. Someone gave it to them. They left with it."

"I don't think Norton's wrong. She convinced me."

"Then maybe they picked it up in the parking lot. Norton wouldn't have seen that. I assume she didn't go out there in the cold and wave them off. But they left with it, for sure. Why else would they be happy to fly back to Germany?"

"Maybe they just gave up on it. They were due back in Germany anyway. They couldn't stay here forever. They've got Kramer's command to fight over."

Summer said nothing.

"Whatever," I said. "There's no possible connection."

"It's a random universe."

I nodded. "So they stay on the back burner. Carbone stays on the front."

"Are we going back out to look for the yogurt pot?"

I shook my head. "It's in the guy's car, or in his trash."

"Could have been useful."

“We’ll work with the crowbar instead. It’s brand new. It was probably bought just as recently as the yogurt was.”

“We have no resources.”

“Detective Clark up in Green Valley will do it for us. He’s already looking for *his* crowbar, presumably. He’ll be canvassing hardware stores. We’ll ask him to widen his radius and stretch his time frame.”

“That’s a lot of extra work for him.”

I nodded. “We’ll have to offer him something. We’ll have to string him along. We’ll tell him we’re working on something that might help him.”

“Like what?”

I smiled. “We could fake it. We could give him Andrea Norton’s name. We could show her exactly what kind of a family we are.”

I called Detective Clark. I didn’t give him Andrea Norton’s name. I told him a few lies instead. I told him I recalled the damage to Mrs. Kramer’s door, and the damage to her head, and that I figured a crowbar was involved, and I told him that as it happened we had a rash of break-ins at military installations all up and down the Eastern seaboard that also seemed to involve crowbars, and I asked him if we could piggyback on the legwork he was undoubtedly already doing in terms of tracing the Green Valley weapon. He paused at that point, and I filled the silence by telling him that military quartermasters currently had no crowbars on general issue and therefore I was convinced our bad guys had used a civilian source of supply. I gave him some guff about not wanting to duplicate his efforts because we had a more promising line of inquiry to spend our time on. He paused again at that point, like cops everywhere, waiting to hear the proffered quid pro quo. I told him that as soon as we had a name or a profile or a description he would have it too, just as fast as stuff can travel down a fax line. He perked up then. Clark was a desperate man, staring at a brick wall. He asked what exactly I wanted. I told him it would be helpful to us if he could expand his canvass to a three-hundred-mile radius around Green Valley, and check hardware store purchases during a window that started late on New Year’s Eve and extended through, say, January fourth.

“What’s your promising line of inquiry?” he asked.

“There might be a military connection with Mrs. Kramer. We might be able to give you the guy on a plate all tied up with a bow.”

“I’d really like that.”

“Cooperation,” I said. “Makes the world go around.”

“Sure does,” he said.

He sounded happy. He bought the whole bill of goods. He promised to expand his search and copy me in. I hung up the phone and it rang again immediately. I picked it up and heard a woman’s voice. It sounded warm and intimate and Southern. It asked me to 10-33 a 10-16 from the MP XO at Fort Jackson, which meant *Please stand by to take a secure landline call from your opposite number in South Carolina.* I waited with the phone by my ear and heard an empty electronic hiss for a moment. Then there was a loud click and my oppo in South Carolina came on and told me I should know that Colonel David C. Brubaker, Fort Bird’s Special Forces CO, had been found that morning with two bullets in his head in an alley in a crummy district of Columbia, which was South Carolina’s capital city, and which was all of two hundred miles from the North Carolina golf course hotel where he had been spending his holiday furlough with his wife. And according to the local paramedics he had been dead for a day or two.

fourteen

My oppo at Jackson was a guy called Sanchez. I knew him fairly well, and I liked him better. He was smart, and he was good. I put the call on the speaker to include Summer and we talked briefly about jurisdiction, but without much enthusiasm. Jurisdiction was always a gray area, and we all knew we were beaten from the get-go. Brubaker had been on vacation, he had been in civilian clothes, he had been in a city alley, and therefore the Columbia PD was claiming him. There was nothing we could do about it. And the Columbia PD had notified the FBI, because Brubaker's last known whereabouts were the North Carolina golf hotel, which added a possible interstate dimension to the situation, and interstate homicide was the Bureau's bag. And also because an army officer is technically a federal employee, and killing federal employees is a separate offense, which would give them another charge to throw at the perp if by any miracle they ever found him. Neither Sanchez nor I nor Summer cared a whole hell of a lot about the difference between state courts and federal courts, but we all knew if the FBI was involved the case was well beyond our grasp. We agreed the very best we could hope for was that we might eventually see some of the relevant documentation, strictly for informational purposes only, and strictly as a courtesy. Summer made a face and turned away. I took the phone off the speaker and picked it up and spoke to Sanchez one-on-one again.

"Got a feeling?" I asked him.

"Someone he knew," Sanchez said. "Not easy to surprise a Delta soldier as good as Brubaker was, in an alley."

"Weapon?"

"Paramedics figured it for a nine-millimeter handgun. And they should know. They see plenty of GSWs. Apparently they do a lot of cleaning up every Friday and Saturday night, in that part of town."

"Why was he there?"

"No idea. Rendezvous, presumably. With someone he knew."

"Got a feeling about when?"

“The body’s stone cold, the skin is a little green, and rigor is all gone. They’re saying twenty-four or forty-eight hours. Safe bet would be to split the difference. Let’s call it the middle of the night before last. Maybe three, four A.M. City garbage truck found him at ten this morning. Weekly trash collection.”

“Where were you on December twenty-eighth?”

“Korea. You?”

“Panama.”

“Why did they move us?”

“I keep thinking we’re about to find out,” I said.

“Something weird is going on,” Sanchez said. “I checked, because I was curious, and there are more than twenty of us in the same boat, worldwide. And Garber’s signature is on all the orders, but I don’t think it’s legit.”

“I’m certain it isn’t legit,” I said. “Anything happening down there before this Brubaker situation?”

“Not a thing. Quietest week I ever spent.”

We hung up. I sat still for a long moment. Seemed to me that Columbia in South Carolina was about two hundred miles from Fort Bird. Drive southwest on the highway, cross the state line, find I-20 heading west, drive some more, and you were there. About two hundred miles. The night before last was the night we found Carbone’s body. I had left Andrea Norton’s office just before two o’clock in the morning. She could alibi me up until that point. Then I had been in the mortuary at seven o’clock, for the postmortem. The pathologist could confirm that. So I had two unconnected alibi bookends. But 0200 until 0700 still gave me a possible five-hour window, with Brubaker’s likely time of death right there in the middle of it. Could I have driven two hundred miles there and two hundred miles back in five hours?

“What?” Summer said.

“The Delta guys have already got me in the frame for Carbone. Now I’m wondering whether they’re going to be coming at me for Brubaker too. How does four hundred miles in five hours sound to you?”

does four hundred miles in five hours sound to you?

“I could probably do it,” she said. “Average of eighty miles an hour all the way. Depends on what car I was using, of course, and road construction, and traffic, and weather, and cops. It’s definitely possible.”

“Terrific.”

“But it’s marginal.”

“It better be marginal. Killing Brubaker will be like killing God, to them.”

“You going over there to break the news?”

I nodded. “I think I have to. It’s a question of respect. But you inform the post commander for me, OK?”

The Special Forces adjutant was an asshole, but he was human too. He went very pale when I told him about Brubaker, and there was clearly more to it than an anticipation of mere bureaucratic hassle. From what I had heard Brubaker was stern and distant and authoritarian, but he was a real father figure, to his men individually and to his unit as a whole. And to his unit as a concept. Special Forces generally and Delta in particular hadn’t always been popular inside the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill. The army hates change and it takes a long time to get used to things. The idea of a ragtag bunch of hunter-killers had been a hard sell at the outset, and Brubaker had been one of the guys doing the selling, and he had never let up since. His death was going to hit Special Forces the way the death of a president would hit the nation.

“Carbone was bad enough,” the adjutant said. “But this is unbelievable. Is there a connection?”

I looked at him.

“Why would there be a connection?” I said. “Carbone was a training accident.”

He said nothing.

“Why was Brubaker at a hotel?”

“Because he likes to play golf. He’s got a house near Bragg from way back, but he doesn’t like the golf there.”

“Where was the hotel?”

“Outside of Raleigh.”

“Did he go there a lot?”

“Every chance he got.”

“Does his wife play golf?”

The adjutant nodded. “They play together.”

Then he paused.

“Played,” he said, and then he went quiet and looked away from me. I pictured Brubaker in my mind. I had never met him, but I knew guys just like him. One day they’re talking about how to angle a claymore mine so the little ball bearings explode outward at exactly the right angle to rip the enemy’s spines out of their backs with maximum efficiency. Next day they’re wearing pastel shirts with small crocodiles on the breast, playing golf with their wives, maybe holding hands and smiling as they ride together along the fairways in their little electric carts. I knew plenty of guys like that. My own father had been one. Not that he had ever played golf. He watched birds. He had been in most countries in the world, and he had seen a lot of birds.

I stood up.

“Call me if you need me,” I said. “You know, if there’s anything I can do.”

The adjutant nodded.

“Thanks for the visit,” he said. “Better than a phone call.”

I went back to my office. Summer wasn’t there. I wasted more than an hour with her personnel lists. I made a shortcut decision and took the pathologist out of the

mix. I took Summer out. I took Andrea Norton out. Then I took all the women out. The medical evidence was pretty clear about the attacker's height and strength. I took the O Club dining room staff out. Their NCO had said they were all hard at work, fussing over their guests. I took the cooks out, and the bar staff, and the MP gate guards. I took out anyone listed as hospitalized and nonambulatory. I took myself out. I took Carbone out, because it wasn't suicide.

Then I counted the remaining check marks, and wrote the number *973* on a slip of paper. That was our suspect pool. I stared into space. My phone rang. I picked it up. It was Sanchez again, down at Fort Jackson.

"Columbia PD just called me," he said. "They're sharing their initial findings."

"And?"

"Their medical examiner doesn't entirely agree with me. Time of death wasn't three or four in the morning. It was one twenty-three A.M., the night before last."

"That's very precise."

"Bullet caught his wristwatch."

"A broken watch? Can't necessarily rely on that."

"No, it's firm enough. They did a lot of other tests. Wrong season for measurable insect activity, which would have helped, but the stomach contents were exactly right for five or six hours after he ate a heavy dinner."

"What does his wife say?"

"He disappeared at eight that night, after a heavy dinner. Got up from the table and never came back."

"What did she do about it?"

"Nothing," Sanchez said. "He was Special Forces. Their whole marriage, he'll have been disappearing with no warning, the middle of dinner, the middle of the night, days or weeks at a time, never able to say where or why afterward. She was used to it."

"Did he get a phone call or something?"

“She assumes he did, at some point. She’s not really sure. She was in the spa before dinner. They’d just played twenty-seven holes.”

“Can you call her yourself? She’ll talk to you faster than civilian cops.”

“I could try, I suppose.”

“Anything else?” I said.

“The GSWs were nine-millimeter,” he said. “Two rounds fired, both of them through and through, neat entry wounds, bad exit wounds.”

“Full metal jackets,” I said.

“Contact shots. There were powder burns. And soot.”

I paused. I couldn’t picture it. *Two rounds fired? Contact shots?* So one of the bullets goes in, comes out, loops all the way around, comes back, and drops down and smashes his wristwatch?

“Did he have his hands on his head?”

“He was shot from behind, Reacher. A double tap, to the back of the skull. *Bang bang*, thank you and good night. The second round must have gone through his head and caught his watch. Downward trajectory. Tall shooter.”

I said nothing.

“Right,” Sanchez said. “How likely *is* all that? Did you know him?”

“Never met him,” I said.

“He was way above average. He was a real pro. And he was a thinker. Any angle, any advantage, any wrinkle, he knew it and he was ready to use it.”

“But he got himself shot in the back of the head?”

“He knew the shooter, definitely. Had to. Why else would he turn his back, in the middle of the night, in an alley?”

“You looking at people from Jackson?”

“That’s a lot of people.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Did he have enemies at Bird?”

“Not that I’ve heard,” I said. “He had enemies up the chain of command.”

“Those pussies don’t meet people in alleys in the middle of the night.”

“Where was the alley?”

“Not in a quiet part of town.”

“So did anyone hear anything?”

“Nobody,” Sanchez said. “Columbia PD ran a canvass and came up empty.”

“That’s weird.”

“They’re civilians. What else would they be?”

He went quiet.

“You met Willard yet?” I asked him.

“He’s on his way here right now. Seems to be a real hands-on type of asshole.”

“What was the alley like?”

“Whores and crack dealers. Nothing that the Columbia city fathers are likely to put in their tourism brochures.”

“Willard hates embarrassment,” I said. “He’s going to be nervous about image.”

“Columbia’s image? What does he care?”

“The army’s image,” I said. “Willard won’t want Brubaker put next to whores and crack dealers. Not an elite colonel. He figures this Soviet stuff is going to shake things up. He figures we need good PR right now. He figures he can see

the big picture."

"The big picture is I can't get near this case anyway. So what kind of pull does he have with the Columbia PD and the FBI? Because that's what it's going to take."

"Just be ready for trouble," I said.

"Are we in for seven lean years?"

"Not that long."

"Why not?"

"Just a feeling," I said.

"You happy with me handling liaison down here? Or should I get them to call you direct? Brubaker is your dead guy, technically."

"You do it," I said. "I've got other things to do."

We hung up and I went back to Summer's lists. *Nine hundred seventy-three.* Nine hundred seventy-two innocent, one guilty. But which one?

Summer came back inside another hour. She walked in and gave me a sheet of paper. It was a photocopy of a weapons requisition that Sergeant First Class Christopher Carbone had made four months ago. It was for a Heckler & Koch P7 handgun. Maybe he had liked the H&K submachine guns Delta was using, and therefore he wanted the P7 for his personal sidearm. He had asked for it to be chambered for the standard nine-millimeter Parabellum cartridge. He had asked for the thirteen-round magazine, and three spares. It was a perfectly standard requisition form, and a perfectly reasonable request. I was sure it had been granted. There would have been no political sensitivities. H&K was a German outfit and Germany was a NATO country, last time I checked. There would have been no compatibility issues either. Nine-millimeter Parabellums were standard NATO loads. The U.S. Army had no shortage of them. We had warehouses crammed full of them. We could have filled thirteen-round magazines with them a million times over, every day for the rest of history.

“So?” I said.

“Look at the signature on it,” Summer said. She took my copy of Carbone’s complaint out of her inside pocket and handed it over. I spread it out on my desk, side by side with the requisition form. Looked from one to the other.

The two signatures were identical.

“We’re not handwriting experts,” I said.

“We don’t need to be. They’re the same, Reacher. Believe it.”

I nodded. Both signatures read *C. Carbone*, and the four capital letter *C*s were very distinctive. They were fast, elongated, curling flourishes. The lower-case *e* on the end of each sample was distinctive too. It made a small round shape, and then the tail of the letter whipped way out to the right of the page, well beyond the name itself, horizontally, and exuberantly. The *a-r-b-o-n* in the middle was fast and fluid and linear. As a whole it was a bold, proud, legible, self-confident signature, developed no doubt by long years of signing checks and bar bills and leases and car papers. No signature was impossible to forge, of course, but I figured this one would have been a real challenge. A challenge that I guessed would have been impossible to meet between midnight and 0845 on a North Carolina army post.

“OK,” I said. “The complaint is genuine.”

I left it on the desk. Summer reversed it and read it through, although she must have read it plenty of times already.

“It’s cold,” she said. “It’s like a knife in the back.”

“It’s weird,” I said. “That’s what it is. I never met this guy before. I’m absolutely sure of that. And he was Delta. Not too many gentle pacifist souls over there. Why would he be offended? It wasn’t *his* leg I broke.”

“Maybe it was personal. Maybe the fat guy was his friend.”

I shook my head. “He’d have stepped in. He’d have stopped the fight.”

“It’s the only complaint he ever made in a sixteen-year career.”

“You been talking to people?”

“All kinds of people. Right here, and by phone far and wide.”

“Were you careful?”

“Very. And it’s the only complaint you ever had made against you.”

“You checked that too?”

She nodded. “All the way back to when God’s dog was a puppy.”

“You wanted to know what kind of a guy you’re dealing with here?”

“No, I wanted to be able to show the Delta guys you don’t have a history. With Carbone or with anyone else.”

“You’re protecting *me* now?”

“Someone’s going to have to. I was just over there, and they’re plenty mad.”

I nodded. *Brubaker.*

“I’m sure they are,” I said. I pictured Delta’s lonely prison barracks, first designed to keep people in, then used to keep strangers out, now serving to keep their unity boiling like a pressure cooker. I pictured Brubaker’s office, wherever it was, quiet and deserted. I pictured Carbone’s cell, standing empty.

“So where was Carbone’s new P7?” I said. “I didn’t find it in his quarters.”

“In their armory,” Summer said. “Cleaned, oiled, and loaded. They check their personal weapons in and out. They’ve got a cage inside their hangar. You should see that place. It’s like Santa’s grotto. Special armored Humvees wall to wall, trucks, explosives, grenade launchers, claymores, night vision stuff. They could equip a Central African dictatorship all by themselves.”

“That’s very reassuring,” I said.

“Sorry,” she said.

“Why did he file the complaint?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

I pictured Carbone in the strip club, New Year’s night. I had walked in and I had seen a group of four men I took to be sergeants. The swirl of the crowd had turned three of them away from me and one of them toward me in a completely random dynamic. I hadn’t known who was going to be there, they hadn’t known I was going to show up. I had never met any of them before. The encounter was as close to pure chance as it was possible to get. Yet Carbone had tagged me for the kind of tame mayhem he must have seen a thousand times before. The kind of tame mayhem he must have *joined in with* a hundred times before. Show me an enlisted man who claims never to have fought a civilian in a bar, and I’ll show you a liar.

“Are you Catholic?” I asked.

“No, why?” Summer said.

“I wondered if you knew any Latin.”

“It’s not just Catholics who know Latin. I went to school.”

“OK, *cui bono*?” I said.

“Who benefits? What, from the complaint?”

“It’s always a good guide to motive,” I said. “You can explain most things with it. History, politics, everything.”

“Like, follow the money?”

“Approximately,” I said. “Except I don’t think there’s money involved here. But there must have been some benefit for Carbone. Otherwise why would he do it?”

“Could have been a moral thing. Maybe he was driven to do it.”

“Not if it was his first complaint in sixteen years. He must have seen far worse. I only broke one leg and one nose. It was no kind of a big deal. This is the army, Summer. I assume he hadn’t been confusing it with a gardening club all these years.”

“I don’t know,” she said again.

I slid her the slip of paper with *973* written on it.

“That’s our suspect pool,” I said.

“He was in the bar until eight o’clock,” she said. “I checked that too. He left alone. Nobody saw him again after that.”

“Anyone say anything about his mood?”

“Delta guys don’t have moods. Too much danger of appearing human.”

“Had he been drinking?”

“One beer.”

“So he just walked out of the mess at eight, no nerves, no worries?”

“Apparently so.”

“He knew the guy he was meeting,” I said.

Summer said nothing.

“Sanchez called again while you were out,” I said. “Colonel Brubaker was shot in the back of the head. A double tap, close in, from behind.”

“So he knew the guy he was meeting too.”

“Very likely,” I said. “One twenty-three in the morning. Bullet caught his watch. Between three and a half and four and a half hours after Carbone.”

“That puts you in the clear with Delta. You were still here at one twenty-three.”

“Yes,” I said. “I was. With Norton.”

“I’ll spread the word.”

“They won’t believe you.”

“Do you think there’s a connection between Carbone and Brubaker?”

“Common sense says there has to be. But I don’t see how. And I don’t see why. I mean, sure, they were both Delta soldiers. But Carbone was here and Brubaker was there, and Brubaker was a high-profile mover and shaker, and Carbone was a nobody who kept himself to himself. Maybe because he thought he had to.”

“You think we’ll ever have gays in the military?”

“We’ve already got gays in the military. We always have had. World War Two, the Western Allies had fourteen million men in uniform. Any kind of reasonable probability says at least a million of them were gay. And we won that war, as I recall, last time I checked with the history books. We won it big time.”

“It’s a hell of a step,” she said.

“They took the same step when they let black soldiers in. And women. Everyone pissed and moaned about that too. Bad for morale, bad for unit cohesion. It was crap then and it’s crap now. Right? You’re here and you’re doing OK.”

“Are you a Catholic?”

I shook my head. “My mother taught us the Latin. She cared about our education. She taught us things, me and my brother, Joe.”

“You should call her.”

“Why?”

“To see how her leg is.”

“Maybe later,” I said.

I went back to the personnel lists and Summer went out and came back in with a map of the Eastern United States. She taped it flat to the wall below the clock and marked our location at Fort Bird with a red pushpin. Then she marked Columbia, South Carolina, where Brubaker had been found. Then she marked Raleigh, North Carolina, where he had been playing golf with his wife. I gave her a clear plastic ruler from my desk drawer and she checked the map’s scale and started calculating times and distances.

“Bear in mind most of us don’t drive as fast as you do,” I said.

“None of you drive as fast as I do,” she said.

She measured four and a half inches between Raleigh and Columbia and called it five to allow for the way U.S. 1 snaked slightly. She held the ruler against the scale in the legend box.

“Two hundred miles,” she said. “So if Brubaker left Raleigh after dinner, he could have been in Columbia by midnight, easily. An hour or so before he died.”

Then she checked the distance between Fort Bird and Columbia. She came up with a hundred and fifty miles, less than I had originally guessed.

“Three hours,” she said. “To be comfortable.”

Then she looked at me.

“It could have been the same guy,” she said. “If Carbone was killed at nine or ten, the same guy could have been in Columbia at midnight or one, ready for Brubaker.”

She put her little finger on the Fort Bird pin.

“Carbone,” she said.

Then she spanned her hand and put her index finger on the Columbia pin.

“Brubaker,” she said. “It’s a definite sequence.”

“It’s a definite guess,” I said.

She didn’t reply.

“Do we know that Brubaker drove down from Raleigh?” I said.

“We can assume he did.”

“We should check with Sanchez,” I said. “See if they found his car anywhere. See if his wife says he took it with him in the first place.”

“OK.” she said. She got out [illegible]

"OK," she said. She went out to my sergeant's desk to make the call. Left me with the interminable personnel lists. She came back in ten minutes later.

"He took his car," she said. "His wife told Sanchez they had two cars up at the hotel. His and hers. They always did it that way because he was always rushing off somewhere and she was always concerned about getting stuck."

"What kind of car?" I said. I figured she would have asked.

"Chevy Impala SS."

"Nice car."

"He left after dinner and his wife's assumption was that he was driving back here to Bird. That would have been normal. But the car hasn't turned up anyplace yet. At least, not according to the Columbia PD and the FBI."

"OK," I said.

"Sanchez thinks they're holding out on him, like they know something we don't."

"That would be normal too."

"He's pressing them. But it's difficult."

"It always is."

"He'll call us," she said. "As soon as he gets anywhere."

We got a call thirty minutes later. But not from Sanchez. Not about Brubaker or Carbone. The call was from Detective Clark, in Green Valley, Virginia. It was about Mrs. Kramer's case.

"Got something," he said.

He sounded very pleased with himself. He launched into a blow-by-blow account of the moves he had made. They sounded reasonably intelligent. He had used a map to figure out all the likely approaches to Green Valley from as much as three hundred miles away. Then he had used phone books to compile a list of

as three hundred miles away. Then he had used phone books to compile a list of hardware sources that lay along those approaches. He had started his guys calling them all, one by one, beginning right in the center of the spiderweb. He had figured that crowbar sales would be slow in winter. Major remodeling happens from springtime onward. Nobody wants their walls torn down for kitchen extensions when the weather is cold. So he had expected to get very few positive reports. After three hours he had gotten none at all. People had spent the post-Christmas period buying power drills and electric screwdrivers. Some had bought chainsaws, to keep their wood-burning stoves going. Those with pioneer fantasies had bought axes. But nobody had been interested in inert and prosaic things like crowbars.

So he made a lateral jump and fired up his crime databases. Originally he planned to look for reports of other crimes that involved doors and crowbars. He thought that might narrow down a location. He didn't find anything that matched his parameters. But instead, right there on his NCIC computer, he found a burglary at a small hardware store in Sperryville, Virginia. The store was a lonely place on a dead-end street. According to the owner the front window had been kicked in sometime in the early hours of New Year's Day. Because it was a holiday, there had been no money left in the register. As far as the store owner could tell, the only thing that had been stolen was a single crowbar.

Summer stepped back to the map on the wall and put a pushpin through the center of Sperryville, Virginia. Sperryville was a small place and the plastic barrel of the pin obscured it completely. Then she put another pin through Green Valley. The two pins finished up about a quarter-inch apart. They were almost touching. They represented about ten miles of separation.

"Look at this," Summer said.

I got up and stepped over. Looked at the map. Sperryville was on the elbow of a crooked road that ran southwest to Green Valley and beyond. In the other direction it didn't really go anywhere at all except Washington D.C. So Summer put a pin in Washington D.C. She put the tip of her little finger on it. Put her middle finger on Sperryville and her index finger on Green Valley.

"Vassell and Coomer," she said. "They left D.C., they stole the crowbar in Sperryville, they broke into Mrs. Kramer's house in Green Valley."

“Except they didn’t,” I said. “They were just in from the airport. They didn’t have a car. And they didn’t call for one. You checked the phone records yourself.”

She said nothing.

“Plus they’re lard-ass staff officers,” I said. “They wouldn’t know how to burgle a hardware store if their lives depended on it.”

She took her hand off the map. I stepped back to my desk and sat down again and butted the personnel lists into a neat pile.

“We need to concentrate on Carbone,” I said.

“Then we need a new plan,” she said. “Detective Clark is going to stop looking for crowbars now. He’s found the one he’s interested in.”

I nodded. “Back to traditional time-honored methods of investigation.”

“Which are?”

“I don’t really know. I went to West Point. I didn’t go to MP school.”

My phone rang. I picked it up. The same warm Southern voice I had heard before went through the same *10-33, 10-16 from Jackson* routine I had heard before. I acknowledged and hit the speaker button and leaned all the way back in my chair and waited. The room filled with electronic hum. Then there was a click.

“Reacher?” Sanchez said.

“And Lieutenant Summer,” I said. “We’re on the speaker.”

“Anyone else in the room?”

“No,” I said.

“Door closed?”

“Yes. What’s up?”

“Columbia PD came through again, is what. They’re feeding me stuff bit by bit. And they’re having themselves a real good time doing it. They’re gloating like crazy.”

“Why?”

“Because Brubaker had heroin in his pocket, that’s why. Three dime bags of brown. And a big wad of cash money. They’re saying it was a drug deal that went bad.”

fifteen

I was born in 1960, which made me seven during the Summer of Love, and thirteen at the end of our effective involvement in Vietnam, and fifteen at the end of our official involvement there. Which meant I missed most of the American military's collision with narcotics. The heavy-duty Purple Haze years passed me by. I had caught the later, stable phase. Like many soldiers I had smoked a little weed from time to time, maybe just enough to develop a preference among different strains and sources, but nowhere near enough to put me high on the list of U.S. users in terms of lifetime volume consumed. I was a part-timer. I was one of those guys who bought, not sold.

But as an MP, I had seen plenty sold. I had seen drug deals. I had seen them succeed, and I had seen them fail. I knew the drill. And one thing I knew for sure was that if a bad deal ends up with a dead guy on the floor, there's nothing in the dead guy's pocket. No cash, no product. No way. Why would there be? If the dead guy was the buyer, the seller runs away with his dope intact *and* the buyer's cash. If the dead guy was the seller, then the buyer gets the whole stash for free. The deal money walks right back home with him. Either way someone takes a nice big profit in exchange for a couple of bullets and a little rummaging around.

"It's bullshit, Sanchez," I said. "It's faked."

"Of course it is. I know that."

"Did you make that point?"

"Did I need to? They're civilians, but they ain't stupid."

"So why are they gloating?"

"Because it gives them a free pass. If they can't close the case, they can just write it off. Brubaker ends up looking bad, not them."

"They found any witnesses yet?"

"Not a one."

"Shots were fired," I said. "Someone must have heard something."

“Not according to the cops.”

“Willard is going to freak,” I said.

“That’s the least of our problems.”

“Are you alibied?”

“Me? Do I need to be?”

“Willard’s going to be looking for leverage. He’s going to use anything he can invent to get you to toe the line.”

Sanchez didn’t answer right away. Some kind of electronic circuitry in the phone line brought the background hiss up loud to cover the silence. Then he spoke over it.

“I think I’m fireproof here,” he said. “It’s the Columbia PD making the accusations, not me.”

“Just take care,” I said.

“Bet on it,” he said.

I clicked the phone off. Summer was thinking. Her face was tense and her lower lids were moving.

“What?” I said.

“You sure it was faked?” she said.

“Had to be,” I said.

“OK,” she said. “Good.” She was still standing next to the map. She put her hand back on it. Little finger on the Fort Bird pin, index finger on the Columbia pin. “We agree that it was faked. We’re sure of it. So there’s a pattern now. The drugs and the money in Brubaker’s pocket are the exact same thing as the branch up Carbone’s ass and the yogurt on his back. Elaborate misdirection. Concealment of the true motive. It’s a definite MO. It’s not just a guess anymore. The same guy did both. He killed Carbone here and then jumped in his car and drove down to Columbia and killed Brubaker there. It’s a clear sequence.

Everything fits. Times, distances, the way the guy thinks."

I looked at her standing there. Her small brown hand was stretched like a starfish. She had clear polish on her nails. Her eyes were bright.

"Why would he ditch the crowbar?" I said. "After Carbone but before Brubaker?"

"Because he preferred a handgun," she said. "Like anyone normal would. But he knew he couldn't use one here. Too noisy. A mile from the main post, late in the evening, we'd have all come running. But in a bad part of a big city, nobody was going to think twice. Which is how it turned out, apparently."

"Could he have been sure of that?"

"No," she said. "Not entirely sure. He set up the rendezvous, so he knew where he was going. But he couldn't be exactly certain about what he would find when he got there. So I guess he would have liked to keep a backup weapon. But the crowbar was all covered with Carbone's blood and hair by then. There was no opportunity to clean it. He was in a hurry. The ground was frozen. No patch of soft grass to wipe it on. So he couldn't see having it in the car with him. Maybe he was worried about a traffic stop on the way south. So he ditched it."

I nodded. Ultimately, the crowbar was disposable. A handgun was a more reliable weapon against a fit and wary opponent. Especially in the tight confines of a city alley, as opposed to the kind of dark and wide-open spaces where he had taken Carbone down. I yawned. Closed my eyes. *From the wide-open spaces where he had taken Carbone down.* I opened my eyes again.

"He killed Carbone here," I repeated. "And then he jumped in his car and drove to Columbia and killed Brubaker there."

"Yes," Summer said.

"But you figured he was *already* in a car," I said.

"Yes," she said again. "I did."

"You figured he drove out on the track with Carbone, hit him in the head, arranged the scene, and then drove back here to the post. Your reasoning was pretty good. And where we found the crowbar kind of confirmed it."

pretty good. And where we found the crowbar kind of confirmed it.

“Thank you,” she said.

“And then we figured he parked his car and went about his business.”

“Correct,” she said.

“But he can’t have parked his car and gone about his business. Because now we’re saying he drove straight to Columbia, South Carolina, instead. To meet with Brubaker. Three-hour drive. He was in a hurry. Not much time to waste.”

“Correct,” she said again.

“So he didn’t park his car,” I said. “He didn’t even touch the brake. He drove straight out the main gate instead. There’s no other way off the post. He drove straight out the main gate, Summer, immediately after he killed Carbone, somewhere around nine or ten o’clock.”

“Check the gate log,” she said. “There’s a copy right there on the desk.”

We checked the gate log together. Operation Just Cause in Panama had moved all domestic installations up one level on the DefCon scale and therefore all closed posts were recording entrances and exits in detail in bound ledgers that had preprinted page numbers in the top right-hand corner. We had a good clear Xerox of the page for January fourth. I was confident it was genuine. I was confident it was complete. And I was confident it was accurate. The Military Police have numerous failings, but snafus with basic paperwork aren’t any of them.

Summer took the page from me and taped it to the wall next to the map. We stood side by side and looked at it. It was ruled into six columns. There were spaces for date, time in, time out, plate number, occupants, and reason.

“Traffic was light,” Summer said.

I said nothing. I was in no position to know whether nineteen entries represented light traffic or not. I wasn’t used to Bird and it had been a long time since I had pulled gate duty anywhere else. But certainly it seemed quiet compared to the

multiple pages I had seen for New Year's Eve.

"Mostly people reporting back for duty," Summer said.

I nodded. Fourteen lines had entries in the *Time In* column but no corresponding entries in the *Time Out* column. That meant fourteen people had come in and stayed in. Back to work, after time away from the post for the holidays. Or after time away from the post for other reasons. I was right there among them: 1-4-90. 2302, Reacher, J., Mjr, RTB. *January fourth, 1990, two minutes past eleven in the evening, Major J. Reacher, returning to base.* From Paris, via Garber's old office in Rock Creek. My vehicle plate number was listed as: *Pedestrian.* My sergeant was there, coming in from her off-post address to work the night shift. She had arrived at nine-thirty, driving something with North Carolina plates.

Fourteen in, to stay in.

Only five exits.

Three of them were routine food deliveries. Big trucks, probably. An army post gets through a lot of food. Lots of hungry mouths to feed. Three trucks in a day seemed about right to me. Each of them was timed inward at some point during the early afternoon and then timed outward again a plausible hour or so later. The last time out was just before three o'clock.

Then there was a seven-hour gap.

The last-but-one recorded exit was Vassell and Coomer themselves, on their way out after their O Club dinner. They had passed through the gate at 2201. They had previously been timed in at 1845. At that point their Department of Defense plate number had been written down and their names and ranks had been entered. Their reason had been stated as: *Courtesy visit.*

Five exits. Four down.

One to go.

The only other person to have left Fort Bird on the fourth of January was logged as: 1-4-90, 2211, Trifonov, S., Sgt. There was a North Carolina passenger vehicle plate number written in the relevant space. There was no time in recorded. There was nothing in the reason column. Therefore a sergeant called

Trifonov had been on-post all day or all week and then he had left at eleven minutes past ten in the evening. No reason had been recorded because there was no directive to inquire as to why a soldier was leaving. The assumption was that he was going out for a drink or a meal or for some other form of entertainment. *Reason* was a question the gate guards asked of people trying to get in, not trying to get out.

We checked again, just to be absolutely sure. We came up with the same result. Apart from General Vassell and Colonel Coomer in their self-driven Mercury Grand Marquis, and then a sergeant called Trifonov in some other kind of car, nobody had passed through the gate in an outward direction in a vehicle or on foot at any time on the fourth of January, apart from three food trucks in the early part of the afternoon.

“OK,” Summer said. “Sergeant Trifonov. Whoever he is. He’s the one.”

“Has to be,” I said.

I called the main gate. Got the same guy I had spoken to before, when I was checking on Vassell and Coomer earlier. I recognized his voice. I asked him to search forward through his log, starting from the page number immediately following the one we were looking at. Asked him to check exactly when a sergeant named Trifonov had returned to Bird. Told him it could be anytime after about four-thirty in the morning on January fifth. There was a moment’s delay. I could hear the guy turning the stiff parchment pages in the ledger. He was doing it slowly, paying close attention.

“Sir, five o’clock in the morning precisely,” the guy said. “January fifth, 0500, Sergeant Trifonov, returning to base.” I heard another page turn. “He left at 2211 the previous evening.”

“Remember anything about him?”

“He left about ten minutes after those Armored staffers you were asking me about before. He was in a hurry, as I recall. Didn’t wait for the barrier to go all the way up. He squeezed right underneath it.”

“What kind of car?”

“Corvette, I think. Not a new one. But it looked pretty good.”

“Were you still on duty when he got back?”

“Yes, sir, I was.”

“Remember anything about that?”

“Nothing that stands out. I spoke to him, obviously. He has a foreign accent.”

“What was he wearing?”

“Civilian stuff. A leather jacket, I think. I assumed he had been off duty.”

“Is he on the post now?”

I heard pages turning again. I imagined a finger, tracing slowly down all the lines written after 0500 on the morning of the fifth.

“We haven’t logged him out again, sir,” the guy said. “Not as of right now. So he must be on-post somewhere.”

“OK,” I said. “Thanks, soldier.”

I hung up. Summer looked at me.

“He got back at 0500,” I said. “Three and a half hours after Brubaker’s watch stopped.”

“Three-hour drive,” she said.

“And he’s here now.”

“Who is he?”

I called post headquarters. Asked the question. They told me who he was. I put the phone down and looked straight at Summer.

“He’s Delta,” I said. “He was a defector from Bulgaria. They brought him in as an instructor. He knows stuff our guys don’t.”

I got up from my desk and stepped over to the map on the wall. Put my own fingers on the pushpins. Little finger on Fort Bird, index finger on Columbia. It was like I was validating a theory by touch alone. A hundred and fifty miles. Three hours and twelve minutes to get there, three hours and thirty-seven minutes to get back. I did the math in my head. An average speed of forty-seven miles an hour going, and forty-one coming back. At night, on empty roads, in a Chevrolet Corvette. He could have done it with the parking brake on.

“Should we have him picked up?” Summer said.

“No,” I said. “I’ll do it myself. I’ll go over there.”

“Is that smart?”

“Probably not. But I don’t want those guys to think they got to me.”

“I’ll come with you,” she said.

“OK,” I said.

It was five o’clock in the afternoon, exactly thirty-six hours to the minute since Trifonov arrived back on-post. The weather was dull and cold. We took sidearms and handcuffs and evidence bags. We walked to the MP motor pool and found a Humvee that had a cage partition bolted behind the front seats and no inside handles on the back doors. Summer drove. She parked at Delta’s prison gate. The sentry let us through on foot. We walked around the outside of the main block until I found the entrance to their NCO Club. I stopped, and Summer stopped beside me.

“You going in there?” she said.

“Just for a minute.”

“Alone?”

I nodded. “Then we’re going to their armory.”

“Not smart,” she said. “I should come in with you.”

“Why?”

She hesitated. “As a witness, I guess.”

“To what?”

“To whatever they do to you.”

I smiled, briefly.

“Terrific,” I said.

I pushed in through the door. The place was pretty crowded. The light was dim and the air was full of smoke. There was a lot of noise. Then people saw me and went quiet. I moved onward. People stood where they were. Stock-still. Then they turned to face me. I pushed past them, one by one. Through the crowd. Nobody moved out of my way. They bumped me with their shoulders, left and right. I bumped back, in the silence. I stand six feet five inches tall and I weigh two hundred thirty pounds. I can hold my own in a shoving competition.

I made it through the lobby and moved into the bar. Same thing happened. The noise died fast. People turned toward me. Stared at me. I pushed and shoved and bumped my way through the room. There was nothing to hear except tense breathing and the scrape of feet on the floor and the soft thump of shoulder on shoulder. I kept my eyes on the far wall. The young guy with the beard and the tan stepped out into my path. He had a glass of beer in his hand. I kept going straight and he leaned to his right and we collided and his glass slopped half its contents on the linoleum tile.

“You spilled my drink,” he said.

I stopped. Looked down at the floor. Then I looked into his eyes.

“Lick it up,” I said.

We stood face-to-face for a second. Then I moved on past him. I felt an itch in my back. I knew he was staring at me. But I wasn’t about to turn around. No way. Not unless I heard a bottle shatter against a table behind me.

I didn’t hear a bottle. I made it all the way to the far wall. Touched it like a swimmer at the end of a lap. Turned around and started back. The return journey

swimmer at the end of a lap. Turned around and started back. The return journey was no different. The room was silent. I picked up the pace a little. Drove faster through the crowd. Bumped harder. Momentum has its advantages. By the time I was ten paces from the lobby people were starting to move out of my way. They were backing off a little.

I figured we had communicated effectively. So in the lobby I started to deviate slightly from a purely straight path. Other people returned the compliment. I made it back to the entrance like any other civilized person in a crowded situation. I stopped at the door. Turned around. Scanned the faces in the room, slowly, one group at a time, *one thousand, two thousand, three thousand, four thousand.* Then I turned my back on them all and stepped out into the cold fresh air.

Summer wasn't there.

I looked around and a second later saw her slip out of a service entrance ten feet away. It had gotten her in behind the bar. I figured she had been watching my back.

She looked at me.

"Now you know," she said.

"Know what?"

"How the first black soldier felt. And the first woman."

She showed me the way to the old airplane hangar where their armory was. We walked across twenty feet of swept concrete and went in through a personnel door set in the side. She hadn't been kidding about equipping an African dictatorship. There were arc lights blazing high in the roof of the hangar and they showed a small fleet of specialist vehicles and vast stacks of every kind of man-portable weapon you could imagine. I guessed David Brubaker had done a very effective lobbying job, up at the Pentagon.

"Over here," Summer said.

She led me to a wire pen. It was about fifteen feet square. It had three walls and

a roof made out of some kind of hurricane fencing. Like a dog run. There was a wire door standing open with an open padlock hung on the chain-link by its tongue. Behind the door was a stand-up writing table. Behind the writing table was a man in BDUs. He didn't salute. Didn't come to attention. But he didn't turn away either. He just stood there and looked at me neutrally, which was as close to proper etiquette as Delta ever got.

"Help you?" he said, like he was a clerk in a store and I was a customer. Behind him on racks were well-used sidearms of every description. I saw five different submachine-gun models. There were some M16s, A1s, and A2s. There were handguns. Some were new and fresh, some were old and worn. They were stored neatly and precisely, but without ceremony. They were tools of a trade, nothing less, nothing more.

In front of the guy on the desk was a logbook.

"You check them in and check them out?" I asked.

"Like valet parking," the guy said. "Post regulations won't allow personal weapons in the accommodations areas." He was looking at Summer. I guessed he had been through the same question-and-answer with her, when she was looking for Carbone's new P7.

"What does Sergeant Trifonov use for a handgun?" I asked.

"Trifonov? He favors the Steyr GB."

"Show me."

He turned away to the pistol rack and came back with a black Steyr GB. He was holding it by the barrel. It looked oiled and well maintained. I had an evidence bag out and ready and he dropped it straight in. I zipped the bag shut and looked at the gun through the plastic.

"Nine-millimeter," Summer said.

I nodded. It was a fine gun, but an unlucky one. Steyr-Daimler-Puch built it with the prospect of big orders from the Austrian Army dancing in its eyes, but a rival outfit named Glock came along and stole the prize. Which left the GB an unhappy orphan, like Cinderella. And like Cinderella it had many excellent qualities. It packed eighteen rounds, which was a lot, but it weighed less than

qualities. It packed eighteen rounds, which was a lot, but it weighed less than two and a half pounds unloaded, which wasn't. You could take it apart and put it back together in twelve seconds, which was fast. Best of all, it had a very smart gas management system. All automatic weapons work by using the explosion of gas in the chamber to cycle the action, to get the spent case out and the next cartridge in. But in the real world some cartridges are old or weak or badly assembled. They don't all explode with the same force. Put an out-of-spec weak load in some guns, and the action just wheezes and won't cycle at all. Put a too-heavy load in, and the gun can blow up in your hand. But the Steyr was designed to deal with anything that came its way. If I were a Special Forces soldier taking dubious-quality ammunition from whatever ragtag bunch of partisans I was hanging with, I'd use a Steyr. I would want to be sure that whatever I was depending on would fire, ten times out of ten.

Through the plastic I pressed the magazine catch behind the trigger and shook the bag until the magazine fell out of the butt. It was an eighteen-round magazine, and there were sixteen cartridges in it. I gripped the slide and ejected one round from the chamber. So he had gone out with nineteen shells. Eighteen in the magazine, and one in the chamber. He had come back with seventeen shells. Sixteen in the magazine, and one in the chamber. Therefore he had fired two.

"Got a phone?" I said.

The clerk nodded at a booth in the corner of the hangar, twenty feet from his station. I walked over there and called my sergeant's desk. The Louisiana guy answered. The corporal. The night-shift woman was probably still at home in her trailer, putting her baby to bed, showering, getting ready for the trek to work.

"Get me Sanchez at Jackson," I said.

I held the phone by my ear and waited. One minute. Two.

"What?" Sanchez said.

"Did they find the shell cases?" I said.

"No," he said. "The guy must have cleaned up at the scene."

"Pity. We could have matched them for a slam dunk."

“You *found* the guy?”

“I’m holding his gun right now. Steyr GB, fully loaded, less two fired.”

“Who is he?”

“I’ll tell you later. Let the civilians sweat for a spell.”

“One of ours?”

“Sad, but true.”

Sanchez said nothing.

“Did they find the bullets?” I said.

“No,” he said.

“Why not? It was an alley, right? How far could they go? They’ll be buried in the brick somewhere.”

“Then they won’t do us any good. They’ll be flattened beyond recognition.”

“They were jacketed,” I said. “They won’t have broken up. We could weigh them, at least.”

“They haven’t found them.”

“Are they looking?”

“I don’t know.”

“They dug up any witnesses yet?”

“No.”

“Did they find Brubaker’s car?”

“No.”

“It’s got to be right there, Sanchez. He drove down and arrived at midnight or one o’clock. In a distinctive car. Aren’t they looking for it?”

one o'clock. In a distinctive car. Aren't they looking for it?

"There's something they're not sharing. I can feel it."

"Did Willard get there yet?"

"I expect him any minute."

"Tell him Brubaker is all wrapped up," I said. "And tell him you heard the other thing wasn't a training accident after all. That should make his day."

Then I hung up. Walked back to the wire cage. Summer had stepped inside and she was shoulder to shoulder with the armory clerk behind the stand-up desk. They were leafing through his logbook together.

"Look at this," she said.

She used both forefingers to show me two separate entries. Trifonov had signed out his personal Steyr GB nine-millimeter pistol at seven-thirty on the evening of January fourth. He had signed it back in at a quarter past five on the morning of the fifth. His signature was big and awkward. He was Bulgarian. I guessed he had grown up with the Cyrillic alphabet and was new to writing with Roman letters.

"Why did he take it?" I said.

"We don't ask for a reason," the clerk said. "We just do the paperwork."

We came out of the hangar and walked toward the accommodations block. Passed the end of an open parking lot. There were forty or fifty cars in it. Typical soldiers' rides. Not many imports. There were some battered plain-vanilla sedans, but mostly there were pickup trucks and big Detroit coupes, some of them painted with flames and stripes, some of them with hiked back ends and chrome wheels and fat raised-letter tires. There was only one Corvette. It was red, parked all by itself on the end of a row, three spaces from anything else.

We detoured to take a look at it.

It was about ten years old. It looked immaculately clean, inside and out. It had been washed and waxed thoroughly within the last day or two. The wheel

been washed and waxed, thoroughly, within the last day or two. The wheel arches were clean. The tires were black and shiny. There was a coiled hose on the hangar wall, thirty feet away. We bent down and peered in through the windows. The interior looked like it had been soaked with detailing fluid and wiped and vacuumed. It was a two-seat car, but there was a parcel shelf. It was small, but probably big enough for a crowbar hidden under a coat. Summer knelt down and ran her fingers under the sills. Came up with clean hands.

“No grit from the track,” she said. “No blood on the seats.”

“No yogurt pot on the floor,” I said.

“He cleaned up after himself.”

We walked away. We went out through their main gate and locked Trifonov’s gun in the front of our Humvee. Then we turned around and headed back inside.

I didn’t want to involve the adjutant. I just wanted to get Trifonov out of there before anyone knew what was going down. So we went in through the mess kitchen door and I found a steward and told him to find Trifonov and bring him out through the kitchen on some kind of a pretext. Then we stepped back into the cold and waited. The steward came out alone five minutes later and told us Trifonov wasn’t anywhere in the mess.

So we headed for the cells. Found a soldier coming out of the showers and he told us where to look. We walked past Carbone’s empty room. It was quiet and undisturbed. Trifonov bunked three doors farther down. We got there. His door was standing open. The guy was right there in his room, sitting on the narrow cot, reading a book.

I had no idea what to expect. As far as I knew Bulgaria had no Special Forces. Truly elite units were not common inside the Warsaw Pact. Czechoslovakia had a pretty good airborne brigade, and Poland had airborne and amphibious divisions. The Soviet Union itself had a few *Vysotniki* tough guys. Apart from that, sheer weight of numbers was the name of the game, in the eastern part of Europe. Throw enough bodies into the fray, and eventually you win, as long as you regard two-thirds of them as expendable. And they did.

So who was this guy?

So who was this guy?

NATO Special Forces put a lot of emphasis on endurance in selection and training. They have guys running fifty miles carrying everything including the kitchen sink. They keep them awake and hiking over appalling terrain for a week at a time. Therefore NATO elite troops tended to be small whippy guys, built like marathon runners. But this Bulgarian was huge. He was at least as big as me. Maybe even bigger. Maybe six-six, maybe two-fifty. He had a shaved head. He had a big square face that would be somewhere between brutally plain and reasonably good-looking depending on the light. At that point the fluorescent tube on the ceiling of his cell wasn't doing him any favors. He looked tired. He had piercing eyes set deep and close together in hooded sockets. He was a few years older than me, somewhere in his early thirties. He had huge hands. He was wearing brand-new woodland BDUs, no name, no rank, no unit.

"On your feet, soldier," I said.

He put his book down on the bed next to him, carefully, facedown and open, like he was saving his place.

We put handcuffs on him and got him into the Humvee without any trouble. He was big, but he was quiet. He seemed resigned to his fate. Like he knew it had been only a matter of time before all the various logbooks in his life betrayed him.

We drove him back and got him to my office without incident. We sat him down and unlocked the handcuffs and redid them so that his right wrist was cuffed to the chair leg. Then we took a second pair of cuffs and did the same thing with his left. He had big wrists. They were as thick as most men's ankles.

Summer stood next to the map, staring at the pushpins, like she was leading his gaze toward them and saying: *We know.*

I sat at my desk.

"What's your name?" I said. "For the record."

"Trifonov," he said. His accent was heavy and abrupt, all in his throat.

"First name?"

"First name?"

"Slavi."

"Slavi Trifonov," I said. "Rank?"

"I was a colonel at home. Now I'm a sergeant."

"Where's home?"

"Sofia," he said. "In Bulgaria."

"You're very young to have been a colonel."

"I was very good at what I did."

"And what did you do?"

He didn't answer.

"You have a nice car," I said.

"Thank you," he said. "A car like that was always a dream to me."

"Where did you take it on the night of the fourth?"

He didn't answer.

"There are no Special Forces in Bulgaria," I said.

"No," he said. "There are not."

"So what did you do there?"

"I was in the regular army."

"Doing what?"

"Three-way liaison between the Bulgarian Army, the Bulgarian Secret Police, and our friends in the Soviet *Vysotniki*."

"Qualifications?"

“I had five years’ training with the GRU.”

“Which is what?”

He smiled. “I think you know what it is.”

I nodded. The Soviet GRU was a kind of a cross between a military police corps and Delta Force. They were plenty tough, and they were just as ready to turn their fury inward as outward.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“In America?” he said. “I’m waiting.”

“For what?”

“For the end of the communist occupation of my country. It will happen soon, I think. Then I’m going back. I’m proud of my country. It’s a beautiful place full of beautiful people. I’m a nationalist.”

“What are you teaching Delta?”

“Things that are out-of-date now. How to fight against the things I was trained to do. But that battle is already over, I think. You won.”

“You need to tell us where you were on the night of the fourth.”

He said nothing.

“Why did you defect?”

“Because I was a patriot,” he said.

“Recent conversion?”

“I was always a patriot. But I came close to being discovered.”

“How did you get out?”

“Through Turkey. I went to the American base there.”

“Tell me about the night of the fourth.”

Tell me about the flight of the fourth.

He said nothing.

“We’ve got your gun,” I said. “You signed it out. You left the post at eleven minutes past ten and got back at five in the morning.”

He said nothing.

“You fired two rounds.”

He said nothing.

“Why did you wash your car?”

“Because it’s a beautiful car. I wash it twice a week. Always. A car like that was a dream to me.”

“You ever been to Kansas?”

“No.”

“Well, that’s where you’re headed. You’re not going home to Sofia. You’re going to Fort Leavenworth instead.”

“Why?”

“You know why,” I said.

Trifonov didn’t move. He sat absolutely still. He was hunched way forward, with his wrists fastened to the chair down near his knees. I sat still too. I wasn’t sure what to do. Our own Delta guys were trained to resist interrogation. I knew that. They were trained to counter drugs and beatings and sensory deprivation and anything else anyone could think of. Their instructors were encouraged to employ hands-on training methods. So I couldn’t even imagine what Trifonov had been through, in five years with the GRU. There was nothing much I could do to him. I wasn’t above smacking people around. But I figured this guy wouldn’t say a word even if I disassembled him limb by limb.

So I moved on to traditional policing techniques. Lies, and bribery.

“Some people figure Carbone was an embarrassment,” I said. “You know, to the

"Some people figure Carbone was an embarrassment," I said. "You know, to the army. So we wouldn't necessarily want to pursue it too far. You spill the beans now, we could send you back to Turkey. You could wait there until it was time to go home and be a patriot."

"It was you who killed Carbone," he said. "People are talking about it."

"People are wrong," I said. "I wasn't here. And I didn't kill Brubaker. Because I wasn't there either."

"Neither was I," he said. "Either."

He was very still. Then something dawned on him. His eyes started moving. He looked left, and then right. He looked up at Summer's map. Looked at the pins. Looked at her. Looked at me. His lips moved. I saw him say *Carbone* to himself. Then *Brubaker*. He made no sound, but I could lip-read his awkward accent.

"Wait," he said.

"For what?"

"No," he said.

"No what?"

"No, sir," he said.

"Tell me, Trifonov," I said.

"You think I had something to do with Carbone and *Brubaker*?"

"You think you didn't?"

He went quiet again. Looked down.

"Tell me, Trifonov," I said.

He looked up.

"It wasn't me," he said.

I just sat there. Watched his face. I had been handling investigations of various kinds for six long years, and Trifonov was at least the thousandth guy to look me in the eye and say *It wasn't me.* Problem was, a percentage of those thousand guys had been telling the truth. And I was starting to think maybe Trifonov was too. There was something about him. I was starting to get a very bad feeling.

"You're going to have to prove it," I said.

"I can't."

"You're going to have to. Or they'll throw away the key. They might let Carbone slide, but they sure as hell aren't going to let Brubaker slide."

He said nothing.

"Start over," I said. "The night of January fourth, where were you?"

He just shook his head.

"You were somewhere," I said. "That's for damn sure. Because you weren't here. You logged in and out. You and your gun."

He said nothing. Just looked at me. I stared back at him and didn't speak. He went into the kind of desperate conflicted silence I had seen many times before. He was moving in the chair. Imperceptibly. Tiny violent movements, from side to side. Like he was fighting two alternating opponents, one on his left, one on his right. Like he knew he had to tell me where he had been, but like he knew he couldn't. He was jumping around like the absolute flesh-and-blood definition of a rock and a hard place.

"The night of January fourth," I said. "Did you commit a crime?"

His deep-set eyes came up to meet mine. Locked on.

"OK," I said. "Time to choose up sides. Was it a worse crime than shooting Brubaker in the head?"

He said nothing.

"Did you go up to Washington D.C. and rape the president's ten-year-old granddaughters, one after the other?"

“No,” he said.

“I’ll give you a clue,” I said. “Where you’re sitting, that would be about the only worse crime than shooting Brubaker in the head.”

He said nothing.

“Tell me.”

“It was a private thing,” he said.

“What kind of a private thing?”

He didn’t answer. Summer sighed and moved away from her map. She was starting to figure that wherever Trifonov had been, chances were it wasn’t Columbia, South Carolina. She looked at me, eyebrows raised. Trifonov moved in his chair. His handcuffs clinked against the metal of the legs.

“What’s going to happen to me?” he asked.

“That depends on what you did,” I said.

“I got a letter,” he said.

“Getting mail isn’t a crime.”

“From a friend of a friend.”

“Tell me about the letter.”

“There’s a man in Sofia,” he said.

He sat there, hunched forward, his wrists cuffed to the chair legs, and he told us the story of the letter. The way he framed it, he made it sound like he thought there was something uniquely Bulgarian about it. But there wasn’t, really. It was a story that could have been told by any of us.

There was a man in Sofia. He had a sister. The sister had been a minor gymnast

and had defected on a college tour of Canada and had eventually settled in the United States. She had gotten married to an American. She had become a citizen. Her husband had turned out bad. The sister wrote about it to the brother back home. Long, unhappy letters. There were beatings, and abuse, and cruelty, and isolation. The sister's life was hell. The communist censors had passed the letters, because anything that made America look bad was OK with them. The brother in Sofia had a friend in town who knew his way around the city's dissident network. The friend had an address for Trifonov, at Fort Bird in North Carolina. Trifonov had been in touch with the dissident network before he skipped to Turkey. The friend had packaged up a letter from the man in Sofia and given it to a guy who bought machine parts in Austria. The machine-parts guy had gone to Austria and mailed the letter. The letter made its way to Fort Bird. Trifonov received it on January second, early in the morning, at mail call. It had his name on it in big Cyrillic letters and it was all covered in foreign stamps and *Luftpost* stickers.

He had read the letter alone in his room. He knew what was expected of him. Time and distance and relationships compressed under the pressure of nationalist loyalty, so that it was like his own sister who was getting smacked around. The woman lived near a place called Cape Fear, which Trifonov thought was an appropriate name, given her situation. He had gone to the company office and checked a map, to find out where it was.

His next available free time was the evening of January fourth. He made a plan and rehearsed a speech, which centered around the inadvisability of abusing Bulgarian women who had friends within driving distance.

"Still got the letter?" I asked.

He nodded. "But you won't be able to read it, because it's written in Bulgarian."

"What were you wearing that night?"

"Plain clothes. I'm not stupid."

"What kind of plain clothes?"

"Leather jacket. Blue jeans. Shirt. American. They're all the plain clothes I've got."

"[illegible]?"

"What did you do to the guy?"

He shook his head. Wouldn't answer.

"OK," I said. "Let's all go to Cape Fear."

We kept Trifonov cuffed and put him in the back of the MP Humvee. Summer drove. Cape Fear was on the Atlantic coast, south and east, maybe a hundred miles. It was a tedious ride, in a Humvee. It would have been different in a Corvette. Although I couldn't remember ever being in a Corvette. I had never known anyone who owned one.

And I had never been to Cape Fear. It was one of the many places in America I had never visited. I had seen the movie, though. Couldn't remember where, exactly. In a tent, somewhere hot, maybe. Black and white, with Gregory Peck having some kind of a major problem with Robert Mitchum. It was good enough entertainment, as I recalled, but fundamentally annoying. There was a lot of jeering from the audience. Robert Mitchum should have gone down early in the first reel. Watching civilians dither around just to spin out a story for ninety minutes had no real appeal for soldiers.

It was full dark before we got anywhere near where we were going. We passed a sign near the outer part of Wilmington that billed the town as a historic and picturesque old port city but we ignored it because Trifonov called through from the rear and told us to make a left through some kind of a swamp. We drove out through the darkness into the middle of nowhere and made another left toward a place called Southport.

"Cape Fear is off of Southport," Summer said. "It's an island in the ocean. I think there's a bridge."

But we stopped well short of the coast. We didn't even get to Southport itself. Trifonov called through again as we passed a trailer park on our right. It was a large flat rectangular area of reclaimed land. It looked like someone had dredged part of the swamp to make a lake and then spread the fill over an area the size of a couple of football fields. The land was bordered by drainage ditches. There were power lines coming in on poles and maybe a hundred trailers studded all over the rectangle. Our headlights showed that some of them were fancy double-wide affairs with add-ons and planted gardens and picket fences. Some of them

wide affairs with add-ons and planted gardens and picket fences. Some of them were plain and battered. A couple had fallen off their blocks and were abandoned. We were maybe ten miles inland, but the ocean storms had a long reach.

“Here,” Trifonov said. “Make a right.”

There was a wide center track with narrower tracks branching left and right. Trifonov directed us through the maze and we stopped outside a sagging lime-green trailer that had seen better days. Its paint was peeling and the tar-paper roof was curling. It had a smoking chimney and the blue light of a television behind its windows.

“Her name is Elena,” Trifonov said.

We left him locked in the Humvee. Knocked on Elena’s door. The woman who opened it could have stepped straight into the encyclopedia under *B* for *Battered Woman.* She was a mess. She had old yellow bruises all around her eyes and along her jaw and her nose was broken. She was holding herself in a way that suggested old aches and pains and maybe even newly broken ribs. She was wearing a thin housedress and men’s shoes. But she was clean and bathed and her hair was tied back neatly. There was a spark of something in her eyes. Some kind of pride, maybe, or satisfaction at having survived. She peered out at us nervously, from behind the triple oppressions of poverty and suffering and foreign status.

“Yes?” she said. “Can I help you?” Her accent was like Trifonov’s, but much higher-pitched. It was quite appealing.

“We need to talk to you,” Summer said, gently.

“What about?”

“About what Slavi Trifonov did for you,” I said.

“He didn’t do anything,” she said.

“But you know the name.”

She paused.

“Please come in,” she said.

I guessed I was expecting some kind of mayhem inside. Maybe empty bottles strewn about, full ashtrays, dirt and confusion. But the trailer was neat and clean. There was nothing out of place. It was cold, but it was OK. And there was nobody else in it.

“Your husband not here?” I said.

She shook her head.

“Where is he?”

She didn’t answer.

“My guess is he’s in the hospital,” Summer said. “Am I right?”

Elena just looked at her.

“Mr. Trifonov helped you,” I said. “Now you need to help him.”

She said nothing.

“If he wasn’t here doing something good, he was somewhere else doing something bad. That’s the situation. So I need to know which it was.”

She said nothing.

“This is very, very important,” I said.

“What if both things were bad?” she asked.

“The two things don’t compare,” I said. “Believe me. Not even close. So just tell me exactly what happened, OK?”

She didn’t answer right away. I moved a little deeper into the trailer. The television was tuned to PBS. The volume was low. I could smell cleaning products. Her husband had gone, and she had started a new phase in her life with a mop and a pail, and education on the tube.

“I don’t know exactly what happened,” she said. “Mr. Trifonov just came here and took my husband away.”

and took my husband away."

"When?"

"The night before last, at midnight. He said he had gotten a letter from my brother in Sofia."

I nodded. *At midnight. He left Bird at 2211, he was here an hour and forty-nine minutes later. One hundred miles, an average of dead-on fifty-five miles an hour, in a Corvette.* I glanced at Summer. She nodded. *Easy.*

"How long was he here?"

"Just a few minutes. He was quite formal. He introduced himself, and he told me what he was doing, and why."

"And that was it?"

She nodded.

"What was he wearing?"

"A leather jacket. Jeans."

"What kind of car was he in?"

"I don't know what it's called. Red, and low. A sports car. It made a loud noise with its exhaust pipes."

"OK," I said. I nodded to Summer and we moved toward the door.

"Will my husband come back?" Elena said.

I pictured Trifonov as I had first seen him. Six-six, two-fifty, shaved head. The thick wrists, the big hands, the blazing eyes, and the five years with GRU.

"I seriously doubt it," I said.

We climbed back into the Humvee. Summer started the engine. I turned around

and spoke to Trifonov through the wire cage.

“Where did you leave the guy?” I asked him.

“On the road to Wilmington,” he said.

“When?”

“Three o’clock in the morning. I stopped at a pay phone and called 911. I didn’t give my name.”

“You spent three hours on him?”

He nodded, slowly. “I wanted to be sure he understood the message.”

Summer threaded her way out of the trailer park and turned west and then north toward Wilmington. We passed the tourist sign on the outskirts and went looking for the hospital. We found it a quarter-mile in. It looked like a reasonable place. It was mostly two-story and had an ambulance entrance with a broad canopy. Summer parked in a slot reserved for a doctor with an Indian name and we got out. I unlocked the rear door and let Trifonov out to join us. I took the cuffs off him. Put them in my pocket.

“What was the guy’s name?” I asked him.

“Pickles,” he said.

The three of us walked in together and I showed my special unit badge to the orderly behind the triage desk. Truth is, it confers no rights or privileges on me out in the civilian world, but the guy reacted like it gave me unlimited powers, which is what most civilians do when they see it.

“Early morning of January fifth,” I said. “Sometime after three o’clock, there was an admission here.”

The guy riffed through a stack of aluminum clipboards in a stand to his right. Pulled two of them partway out.

“Male or female?” he said.

“Male.”

He dropped one of the clipboards back in its slot. Pulled the other all the way out.

“John Doe,” he said. “Indigent male, no ID, no insurance, claims his name is Pickles. Cops found him on the road.”

“That’s our guy,” I said.

“Your guy?” he said, looking at my uniform.

“We might be able to take care of his bill,” I said.

He paid attention to that. Glanced at his stack of clipboards, like he was thinking, *One down, two hundred to go.*

“He’s in post-op,” he said. He pointed toward the elevator. “Second floor.”

He stayed behind his counter. We rode up, the three of us together. Got out and followed the signs to the post-op ward. A nurse at a station outside the door stopped us. I showed her my badge.

“Pickles,” I said.

She pointed us to a private room with a closed door, across the hallway.

“Five minutes only,” she said. “He’s very sick.”

Trifonov smiled. We walked across the corridor and opened the private room’s door. The light was dim. There was a guy in the bed. He was asleep. Impossible to tell whether he was big or small. I couldn’t see much of him. He was mostly covered in plaster casts. His legs were in traction and he had big GSW bandage packs around both knees. Opposite his bed was a long lightbox at eye level that was pretty much covered with X-ray exposures. I clicked the light and took a look. Every film had a date and the name *Pickles* scrawled in the margin. There were films of his arms and his ribs and his chest and his legs. The human body has more than two hundred ten bones in it, and it seemed like this guy Pickles had most of them broken. He had put a big dent in the hospital’s radiography budget all by himself.

I clicked the light off and kicked the leg of the bed, twice. The guy in it stirred.

Woke up. Focused in the dim light and the look on his face when he saw Trifonov was all the alibi Trifonov was ever going to need. It was a look of stark, abject terror.

“You two wait outside,” I said.

Summer led Trifonov out the door and I moved up to the head of the bed.

“How are you, asshole?” I said.

The guy called Pickles was all white in the face. Sweating, and trembling inside his casts.

“That was the man,” he said. “Right there. He did this to me.”

“Did what to you?”

“He shot me in the legs.”

I nodded. Looked at the GSW packs. Pickles had been kneecapped. Two knees, two bullets. Two rounds fired.

“Front or side?” I said.

“Side,” he said.

“Front is worse,” I said. “You were lucky. Not that you deserved to be lucky.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Didn’t you? I just met your wife.”

“Foreign bitch.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s her own fault. She won’t do what I tell her. A man needs to be obeyed. Like it says in the Bible.”

“Shut up,” I said.

“Aren’t you going to do something?”

“Yes,” I said. “I am. Watch.”

I swung my hand like I was brushing a fly off his sheets. Caught him with a soft backhander on the side of his right knee. He screamed and I walked away and stepped out the door. Found the nurse looking over in my direction.

“He is very sick,” I said.

We rode down in the elevator and avoided the guy at the triage desk by using the main entrance. We walked around to the Humvee in silence. I opened the rear door for Trifonov but stopped him on the way in. I shook his hand.

“I apologize,” I said.

“Am I in trouble?” he said.

“Not with me,” I said. “You’re my kind of guy. But you’re very lucky. You could have hit a femoral artery. You could have killed him. Then it might have been different.”

He smiled, briefly. He was calm.

“I trained five years with GRU,” he said. “I know how to kill people. And I know how not to.”

sixteen

We gave Trifonov his Steyr back and let him out at the Delta gate. He probably signed the gun back in and then legged it to his room and picked up his book. Probably carried on reading right where he left off. We parked the Humvee and walked back to my office. Summer went straight to the copy of the gate log. It was still taped to the wall, next to the map.

“Vassell and Coomer,” she said. “They were the only other people who left the post that night.”

“They went north,” I said. “If you want to say they threw the briefcase out of the car, then you have to agree they went north. They didn’t go south to Columbia.”

“OK,” she said. “So the same guy didn’t do Carbone and Brubaker. There’s no connection. We just wasted a lot of time.”

“Welcome to the real world,” I said.

The real world got a whole lot worse when my phone rang twenty minutes later. It was my sergeant. The woman with the baby son. She had Sanchez on the line, calling from Fort Jackson. She put him through.

“Willard has been and gone,” he said. “Unbelievable.”

“Told you so.”

“He pitched all kinds of hissy fits.”

“But you’re fireproof.”

“Thank God.”

I paused. “Did you tell him about my guy?”

He paused. “You told me to. Shouldn’t I have?”

“It was a dry hole. Looked good at first, but it wasn’t in the end.”

“Well, he’s on his way up to see you about it. He left here two hours ago. He’s going to be very disappointed.”

“Terrific,” I said.

“What are you going to do?” Summer asked.

“What is Willard?” I said. “Fundamentally?”

“A careerist,” she said.

“Correct,” I said.

Technically the army has a total of twenty-six separate ranks. A grunt comes in as an E-1 private, and as long as he doesn’t do anything stupid he is automatically promoted to an E-2 private after a year, and to an E-3 private first class after another year, or even a little earlier if he’s any good. Then the ladder stretches all the way up to a five-star General of the Army, although I wasn’t aware of anyone except George Washington and Dwight David Eisenhower who ever made it that far. If you count the E-9 sergeant major grade as three separate steps to acknowledge the Command Sergeant Majors and the Sergeant Major of the Army, and if you count all four warrant officer grades, then a major like me has seven steps above him and eighteen steps below him. Which gives a major like me considerable experience of insubordination, going both ways, up and down, giving and taking. With a million people on twenty-six separate rungs on the ladder, insubordination was a true art form. And the canvas was one-on-one privacy.

So I sent Summer away and waited for Willard on my own. She argued about it. In the end I got her to agree that one of us should stay under the radar. She went to get a late dinner. My sergeant brought me a sandwich. Roast beef and Swiss cheese, white bread, a little mayo, a little mustard. The beef was pink. It was a good sandwich. Then she brought me coffee. I was halfway through my second cup when Willard arrived.

He came straight in. He left the door open. I didn’t get up. Didn’t salute. Didn’t stop sipping my coffee. He tolerated it, like I knew he would. He was being very

stop sipping my coffee. He tolerated it, like I knew he would. He was being very tactical. As far as he knew I had a suspect that could take Brubaker's case away from the Columbia PD and break the link between an elite colonel and drug dealers in a crack alley. So he was prepared to start out warm and friendly. Or maybe he was looking for a bonding experience with one of his staff. He sat down and started plucking at his trouser legs. He put a man-to-man expression on his face, like we had just been through some kind of a shared experience together.

"Wonderful drive from Jackson," he said. "Great roads."

I said nothing.

"Just bought a vintage Pontiac GTO," he said. "Fine car. I put polished headers on it, big bore pipes. Goes like shit off a shiny shovel."

I said nothing.

"You like muscle cars?"

"No," I said. "I like to take the bus."

"That's not much fun."

"OK, let me put it another way. I'm happy with the size of my penis. I don't need compensation."

He went white. Then he went red. The same shade as Trifonov's Corvette. He glared at me like he was a real tough guy.

"Tell me about the progress on Brubaker," he said.

"Brubaker's not my case."

"Sanchez told me you found the guy."

"False alarm," I said.

"Are you sure?"

"Totally."

“Who were you looking at?”

“Your ex-wife.”

“What?”

“Someone told me she slept with half the colonels in the army. Always had, like a hobby. So I figured that might include Brubaker. I mean, it was a fifty-fifty chance.”

He stared at me.

“Only kidding,” I said. “It was nobody. Just a dry hole.”

He looked away, furious. I got up and closed my office door. Stepped back to my desk. Sat down again. Faced him.

“Your insolence is incredible,” he said.

“So make a complaint, Willard. Go up the chain of command and tell someone I hurt your feelings. See if anyone believes you. Or see if anyone believes you can’t fix a thing like that all by yourself. Watch *that* note go in your file. See what kind of an impression it makes at your one-star promotion board.”

He squirmed in his chair. Hitched his body from side to side and stared around the room. Fixed his gaze on Summer’s map.

“What’s that?” he said.

“It’s a map,” I said.

“Of what?”

“Of the eastern United States.”

“What are the pins for?”

I didn’t answer. He got up and stepped over to the wall. Touched the pins with his fingertips, one at a time. D.C., Sperryville, and Green Valley. Then Raleigh, Fort Bird, Cape Fear, and Columbia.

“What is all this?” he said.

“They’re just pins,” I said.

He pulled the pin out of Green Valley, Virginia.

“Mrs. Kramer,” he said. “I told you to leave that alone.”

He pulled all the other pins out. Threw them down on the floor. Then he saw the gate log. Scanned down it and stopped when he got to Vassell and Coomer.

“I told you to leave them alone as well,” he said.

He tore the list off the wall. The tape took scabs of paint with it. Then he tore the map down. More paint came with it. The pins had left tiny holes in the Sheetrock. They looked like a map all by themselves. Or a constellation.

“You made holes in the wall,” he said. “I won’t have army property abused in this way. It’s unprofessional. What would visitors to this room think?”

“They’d have thought there was a map on the wall,” I said. “It was you that pulled it down and made the mess.”

He dropped the crumpled paper on the floor.

“You want me to walk over to the Delta station?” he said.

“Want me to break your back?”

He went very quiet.

“You should think about *your* next promotion board, Major. You think you’re going to make lieutenant colonel while I’m still here?”

“No,” I said. “I really don’t. But then, I don’t expect you’ll be here very long.”

“Think again. This is a nice niche. The army will always need cops.”

“But it won’t always need clueless assholes like you.”

“You’re speaking to a senior officer.”

I looked around the room. “But what am I saying? I don’t see any witnesses.”

He said nothing.

“You’ve got an authority problem,” I said. “It’s going to be fun watching you try to solve it. Maybe we could solve it man-to-man, in the gym. You want to try that?”

“Have you got a secure fax machine?” he said.

“Obviously,” I said. “It’s in the outer office. You passed it on your way in. What are you? Blind as well as stupid?”

“Be standing next to it at exactly nine hundred hours tomorrow. I’ll be sending you a set of written orders.”

He glared at me one last time. Then he stepped outside and slammed the door so hard that the whole wall shook and the air current lifted the map and the gate log an inch off the floor.

I stayed at my desk. Dialed my brother in Washington, but he didn’t answer. I thought about calling my mother. But then I figured there was nothing to say. Whatever I talked about, she would know I had called to ask: *Are you still alive?* She would know that was what was on my mind.

So I got out of my chair and picked up the map and smoothed it out. Taped it back on the wall. I picked up all seven pins and put them back in place. Taped the gate log alongside the map. Then I pulled it down again. It was useless. I balled it up and threw it in the trash. Left the map there all on its own. My sergeant came in with more coffee. I wondered briefly about her baby’s father. Where was he? Had he been an abusive husband? If so, he was probably buried in a swamp somewhere. Or several swamps, in several pieces. My phone rang and she answered it for me. Passed me the receiver.

“Detective Clark,” she said. “Up in Virginia.”

I trailed the phone cord around the desk and sat down again.

“We’re making progress now,” he said. “The Sperryville crowbar is our weapon

"We're making progress now," he said. "The Sperryville crowbar is our weapon, for sure. We got an identical sample from the hardware store and our medical examiner matched it up."

"Good work," I said.

"So I'm calling to tell you I can't keep on looking. We found ours, so we can't be looking for yours anymore. I can't justify the overtime budget."

"Sure," I said. "We anticipated that."

"So you're on your own with it now, bud. And I'm real sorry about that."

I said nothing.

"Anything at your end? You got a name for me yet?"

I smiled. *You can forget about a name*, I thought. *Bud.* No *quo,* no *quid.* Not that there ever was a name in the first place.

"I'll let you know," I said.

Summer came back and I told her to take the rest of the night off. Told her to meet me for breakfast in the O Club. At nine o'clock exactly, when Willard's orders were due. I figured we could have a long leisurely meal, plenty of eggs, plenty of coffee, and we could stroll back over about ten-fifteen.

"You moved the map," she said.

"Willard tore it down. I put it back up."

"He's dangerous."

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe not. Time will tell."

She went back to her quarters and I went back to mine. I was in a room in the Bachelor Officers' row. It was pretty much like a motel. There was a street named after some long-dead Medal of Honor winner and a path branching off from the sidewalk that led to my door. There were posts every twenty yards with streetlights on them. The one nearest my door was out. It was out because it had

been busted with a stone. I could see glass on the path. And three guys in the shadows. I walked past the first one. He was the Delta sergeant with the beard and the tan. He tapped the face of his watch with his forefinger. The second guy did the same thing. The third guy just smiled. I got inside and closed my door. Didn't hear them walk away. I didn't sleep well.

They were gone by morning. I made it to the O Club OK. At nine o'clock the dining room was pretty much empty, which was an advantage. The disadvantage was that whatever food remained had been stewing on the buffet for a while. But on balance I thought it was a good situation. I was more of a loner than a gourmet. Summer and I sat across from each other at a small table in the center of the room. Between us we ate almost everything that was left. Summer consumed about a pound of grits and two pounds of biscuits. She was small, but she could eat. That was for damn sure. We took our time with our coffee and walked over to my office at ten-twenty. There was mayhem inside. Every phone was ringing. The Louisiana corporal looked harassed.

"Don't answer your phone," he said. "It's Colonel Willard. He wanted immediate confirmation that you'd gotten your orders. He's mad as hell."

"What are the orders?"

He ducked back to his desk and offered me a sheet of fax paper. The phones kept on ringing. I didn't take the sheet of paper. I just stood there and read it over my corporal's shoulder. There were two closely spaced paragraphs. Willard was ordering me to examine the quartermaster's inward delivery note file and his outward distribution log. I was to use them to work out on paper exactly what ought to be there in the on-post warehouse. Then I was to verify my conclusion by means of a practical search. Then I was to compile a list of all missing items and propose a course of action in writing to track down their current whereabouts. I was to execute the order in a prompt and timely fashion. I was to call him to confirm receipt of the order immediately it was in my hand.

It was a classic make-work punishment. In the bad old days they ordered you to paint coal white or fill sandbags with teaspoons or scrub floors with toothbrushes. This was the modern-day MP equivalent. It was a mindless task that would take two weeks to complete. I smiled.

The phones were still ringing.

“The order was never in my hand,” I said. “I’m not here.”

“Where are you?”

“Tell him someone dropped a gum wrapper in the flower bed outside the post commander’s office. Tell him I won’t have army real estate abused in that way. Tell him I’ve been on the trail since well before dawn.”

I led Summer back out onto the sidewalk, away from the ringing phones.

“Asshole,” I said.

“You should lay low,” she said. “He’ll be calling all over.”

I stood still. Looked around. Cold weather. Gray buildings, gray sky.

“Let’s take the day off,” I said. “Let’s go somewhere.”

“We’ve got things to do.”

I nodded. *Carbone. Kramer. Brubaker.*

“Can’t stay here,” I said. “So we can’t do much about Carbone.”

“Want to go down to Columbia?”

“Not our case. Nothing we can do that Sanchez isn’t doing.”

“Too cold for the beach,” Summer said.

I nodded again. Suddenly wished it wasn’t too cold for the beach. I would have liked to see Summer on the beach. In a bikini. A very small one, for preference.

“We have to work,” she said.

I looked south and west, beyond the post buildings. I could see the trees, cold and dead against the horizon. I could see a tall pine, dull and dormant, a little nearer. I figured it was close to where we had found Carbone.

Carbone.

“Let’s go to Green Valley,” I said. “Let’s visit with Detective Clark. We could ask him for his crowbar notes. He made a start for us. So maybe we could finish up. A four-hour drive might be a good investment at this point.”

“And four hours back.”

“We could have lunch. Maybe dinner. We could go AWOL.”

“They’d find us.”

I shook my head.

“Nobody would find me,” I said. “Not ever.”

I stayed there on the sidewalk and Summer went away and came back five minutes later in the green Chevy we had used before. She pulled in tight to the curb and buzzed her window down before I could move.

“Is this smart?” she said.

“It’s all we’ve got,” I said.

“No, I mean you’re going to be on the gate log. Time out, ten-thirty. Willard could check it.”

I said nothing. She smiled.

“You could hide in the trunk,” she said. “You could get out again when we’re through the gate.”

I shook my head. “I’m not going to hide. Not because of an asshole like Willard. If he checks the log I’ll tell him the hunt for the gum-wrapper guy suddenly went interstate. Or global, even. We could go to Tahiti.”

I got in beside her and racked the seat all the way back and started thinking about bikinis again. She took her foot off the brake and accelerated down the main drag. Slowed and stopped at the gate. An MP private came out with a

clipboard. He noted our plate number and we showed him ID. He wrote our names down. Glanced into the car, checked the empty rear seat. Then he nodded to his partner in the guard shack and the barrier went up in front of us, very slowly. It was a thick pole with a counterweight, red and white stripes. Summer waited until it was exactly vertical and then she dropped the hammer and we took off in a cloud of blue government-funded smoke from the Chevy's rear tires.

The weather got better as we drove north. We slid out from under a shelf of low gray cloud into bright winter sunshine. It was an army car so there was no radio in it. Just a blank panel where the civilian model would have had AM and FM and a cassette slot. So we talked from time to time and whiled the rest away riding in aimless silence. It was a curious feeling, to be free. I had spent just about my whole life being where the military told me to be, every minute of every day. Now I felt like a truant. There was a world out there. It was going about its business, chaotic and untidy and undisciplined, and I was a part of it, just briefly. I lay back in the seat and watched it spool by, bright and stroboscopic, random images flashing past like sunlight on a running river.

"Do you wear a bikini or a one-piece?" I asked.

"Why?"

"Just checking," I said. "I was thinking about the beach."

"Too cold."

"Won't be in August."

"Think you'll be here in August?"

"No," I said.

"Pity," she said. "You'll never know what I wear."

"You could mail me a picture."

"Where to?"

“Fort Leavenworth, probably,” I said. “The maximum security wing.”

“No, where will you be? Seriously.”

“I have no idea,” I said. “August is eight months away.”

“Where’s the best place you ever served?”

I smiled. Gave her the same answer I give anyone who asks that question.

“Right here,” I said. “Right now.”

“Even with Willard on your back?”

“Willard’s nothing. He’ll be gone before I am.”

“Why is he here at all?”

“My brother figures they’re copying what corporations do. Know-nothings aren’t invested in the status quo.”

“So a guy trained to write fuel consumption algorithms winds up with two dead soldiers in his first week. And he doesn’t want to investigate either one of them.”

“Because that would be old-fashioned thinking. We have to move on. We have to see the big picture.”

She smiled and drove on. Took the Green Valley ramp, going way too fast.

The Green Valley Police Department had a building north of town. It was a bigger place than I had expected, because Green Valley itself was bigger than I had expected. It encompassed the pretty town center we had already seen, but then it bulged north through some country that was mostly strip malls and light industrial units, almost all the way up to Sperryville. The police station looked big enough for twenty or thirty cops. It was built the way most places are where land is cheap. It was long and low and sprawling, with a one-story center core and two wings. The wings were built at right angles, so the place was U-shaped. The facades were concrete, molded to look like stone. There was a brown lawn

in front and parking lots at both sides. There was a flagpole dead center on the lawn. Old Glory was up there, weather-beaten and limp in the windless air. The whole place looked a little grand, and a little bleached in the pale sunlight.

We parked in the right-hand lot in an empty slot between two white police cruisers. We got out into the brightness. Went in and asked the desk guy for Detective Clark. The desk guy made an internal call and then pointed us toward the left-hand wing. We walked through an untidy corridor and ended up in a room the size of a basketball court. Pretty much the whole thing was a detectives' bullpen. There was a wooden fence that enclosed a line of four visitor's chairs and then there was a gate with a receptionist's desk next to it. Beyond the gate was a lieutenant's office way off in one corner and then nothing else except three pairs of back-to-back desks covered with phones and paper. There were file cabinets against the walls. The windows were grimy and most of them had skewed and broken blinds.

There was no receptionist at the desk. There were two detectives in the room, both of them wearing tweed sport coats, both of them sitting with their backs to us. Clark was one of them. He was talking on the phone. I rattled the gate latch. Both guys turned around. Clark paused for a second, surprised, and then he waved us in. We pulled chairs around and sat at the ends of his desk, one on each side. He kept on talking into the phone. We waited. I spent the time looking around the room. The lieutenant's office had glass walls from waist height upward. There was a big desk in there. Nobody behind it. But on it I could see two plaster casts, just like the ones our own pathologist had made. I didn't get up and go look at them. Didn't seem polite.

Clark hung up the phone and made a note on a yellow pad. Then he breathed out and pushed his chair way back so he could see both of us at the same time. He didn't say anything. He knew we weren't making a social call. But equally he didn't want to come right out and ask if we had a name for him. Because he didn't want to look foolish if we didn't.

"Just passing through," I said.

"OK," he said.

"Looking for a little help," I said.

"What kind of help?"

“Thought you might give us your crowbar notes. Now that you don’t need them anymore. Now that you’ve found yours.”

“Notes?”

“You listed all kinds of hardware stores. I figured it could save us some time if we picked up where you left off.”

“I could have faxed them,” he said.

“There’s probably a lot of them. We didn’t want to cause you the trouble.”

“I might not have been here.”

“We were passing by anyway.”

“OK,” he said again. “Crowbar notes.” He swiveled his chair and got up out of it and walked over to a file cabinet. Came back with a green folder about a half-inch thick. He dropped it on his desk. It made a decent thump.

“Good luck,” he said.

He sat down again and I nodded to Summer and she picked up the folder. Opened it. It was full of paper. She leafed through. Made a face. Passed it across to me. It was a long, long list of places that stretched from New Jersey to North Carolina. There were names and addresses and phone numbers. The first ninety or so had check marks against them. Then there were about four hundred that didn’t.

“You have to be careful,” Clark said. “Some places call them crowbars and some call them wrecking bars. You have to be sure they know what you’re talking about.”

“Do they have different sizes?”

“Lots of different sizes. Ours is pretty big.”

“Can I see it? Or is it in your evidence room?”

“It’s not evidence,” Clark said. “It’s not the actual weapon. It’s just an identical sample on loan from the Sperryville store. We can’t take it to court.”

“But it fits your plaster casts.”

“Like a glove,” he said. He got up again and walked into his lieutenant’s office and took the casts off the desk. Carried them back one in each hand and put them down on his own desk. They were very similar to ours. There was a positive and a negative, just like we had. Mrs. Kramer’s head had been a lot smaller than Carbone’s, in terms of diameter. Therefore the crowbar had caught less of its circumference. Therefore the impression of the fatal wound was a little shorter in length than ours. But it was just as deep and ugly. Clark picked it up and ran his fingertip through the trench.

“Very violent blow,” he said. “We’re looking for a tall guy, strong, right-handed. You seen anyone like that?”

“Every time I look in the mirror,” I said.

The cast of the weapon itself was a little shorter than ours too. But other than that, it looked very much the same. Same chalky section, pitted here and there with microscopic imperfections in the plaster, but basically straight and smooth and brutal.

“Can I see the actual crowbar?” I said.

“Sure,” Clark said. He leaned down and opened a drawer in his desk. Left it open like a display and moved his chair to get out of my way. I leaned forward and looked down and saw the same curved black thing I had seen the previous morning. Same shape, same contours, same color, same size, same claws, same octagonal section. Same gloss, same precision. It was exactly identical in every way to the one we had left behind in Fort Bird’s mortuary office.

We drove ten miles to Sperryville. I looked through Clark’s list to find the hardware store’s address. It was right there on the fifth line, because it was close to Green Valley. But there was no check mark against its phone number. There was a penciled note instead: *No answer.* I guessed the owner had been busy with a glazier and an insurance company. I guessed Clark’s guys would have gotten around to making a second call eventually, but they had been overtaken by the NCIC search.

Sperryville wasn't a big place, so we just cruised around looking for the address. We found a bunch of stores on a short strip and after driving it three times we found the right street name on a green sign. It pointed us down what was basically a narrow dead-end alley. We passed between the sides of two clapboard structures and then the alley widened into a small yard and we saw the hardware store facing us at the far end. It was like a small one-story barn, painted up to look more urban than rural. It was a real mom-and-pop place. It had a family name painted on an old sign. No indication that it was part of a franchise. It was just an American small business, standing alone, weathering the booms and busts from one generation to the next.

But it was an excellent place for a dead-of-night burglary. Quiet, isolated, invisible from passersby on the main street, no living accommodation on the second floor. In the front wall it had a display window on the left set next to an entrance door on the right, separated only by the width of the door frame. There was a moon-shaped hole in the window glass, temporarily backed by a sheet of unfinished plywood. The plywood had been neatly trimmed to the right size. I figured the hole had been punched through by the sole of a shoe. It was close to the door. I figured a tall guy could put his left arm through the hole up to the shoulder and get his hand around to the door latch easily enough. But he would have had to reach all the way in first and then bend his elbow slowly and deliberately, to avoid snagging his clothes. I pictured him with his left cheek against the cold glass, in the dark, breathing hard, groping blindly.

We parked right in front of the store. Got out and spent a minute looking in the window. It was full of items on display. But whoever had put them there wasn't about to move on to Saks Fifth Avenue anytime soon. Not for their famous holiday windows. Because there was no art involved. No design. No temptation. Everything was just lined up neatly on hand-built shelves. Everything had a price tag. The window was saying: *This is what we've got. If you want it, come in and get it.* But it all looked like quality stuff. There were some strange items. I had no idea what some of them were for. I didn't know much about tools. I had never really used any, except knives. But it was clear to me that this store chose what it carried pretty carefully.

We went in. There was a mechanical bell on the door that rang as we entered. The plain neatness and organization we had seen in the window was maintained inside. There were tidy racks and shelves and bins. A wide-plank wooden floor. There was a faint smell of machine oil. The place was quiet. No customers. There was a guy behind the counter, maybe sixty years old, maybe seventy. He

There was a guy behind the counter, maybe sixty years old, maybe seventy. He was looking at us, alerted by the bell. He was medium height and slender and a little stooped. He wore round eyeglasses and a gray cardigan sweater. They made him look intelligent, but they also made him look like he wasn't accustomed to handling anything bigger than a small screwdriver. They made him look like selling tools was a definite second best to being at a university, teaching a course about their design and their history and their development.

"May I help you?" he asked.

"We're here about the stolen wrecking bar," I said. "Or the stolen crowbar, if that's what you prefer to call it."

He nodded.

"Crowbar," he said. "Wrecking bar is a little uncouth, in my opinion."

"OK, we're here about the stolen crowbar," I said.

He smiled, briefly. "You're the army. Has martial law been declared?"

"We have a parallel inquiry," Summer said.

"Are you Military Police?"

"Yes," Summer said. She told him our names and ranks. He reciprocated with his own name, which matched the sign above his door.

"We need some background," I said. "About the crowbar market."

He made a face like he was interested, but not very excited. It was like asking a forensics guy about fingerprinting instead of DNA. I got the impression that crowbar development had slowed to a halt a long time ago.

"Where can I start?" he said.

"How many different sorts are there?"

"Dozens," he said. "There are at least six manufacturers that I would consider dealing with myself. And plenty of others I wouldn't."

I looked around the store. "Because you only carry quality stuff."

I looked around the store. "Because you only carry quality stuff."

"Exactly," he said. "I can't compete with the big chains on price alone. So I have to offer absolutely top quality and service."

"Niche marketing," I said.

He nodded again.

"Low-end crowbars would come from China," he said. "Mass produced, cast iron, wrought iron, low-grade forged steel. I wouldn't be interested."

"So what do you carry?"

"I import a few titanium crowbars from Europe," he said. "Very expensive, but very strong. More importantly, very light. They were designed for police and firefighters. Or for underwater work, where corrosion would otherwise be an issue. Or for anyone else that needs something small and durable and easily portable."

"But it wasn't one of those that was stolen."

The old guy shook his head. "No, the titanium bars are specialist items. The others I offer are slightly more mainstream."

"And what are those?"

"This is a small store," he said. "I have to choose what I carry very carefully. Which in some ways is a burden, but which is also a delight, because choice is very liberating. These decisions are mine, and mine alone. So obviously, for a crowbar, I would choose high-carbon chromium steel. Then the question is, should it be single-tempered or double-tempered? My honest preference would always be double-tempered, for strength. And I would want the claws to be very slim, for utility, and therefore case-hardened, for safety. That could be a lifesaver, in some situations. Imagine a man on a high roof beam, whose claw shattered. He'd fall off."

"I guess he would," I said. "So, the right steel, double-tempered, with the hard claws. What did you pick?"

"Well, actually I compromised with one of the items I carry. My preferred

manufacturer won't make anything shorter than eighteen inches. But I needed a twelve-inch, obviously."

I must have looked blank.

"For studs and joists," the old guy said. "If you're working inside sixteen-inch centers, you can't use an eighteen-inch bar, can you?"

"I guess not," I said.

"So I take a twelve-inch with a half-inch section from one source, even though it's only single-tempered. I think it's satisfactory, though. In terms of strength. With only twelve inches of leverage, the force a person generates isn't going to overwhelm it."

"OK," I said.

"Apart from that particular item and the titanium specialties, I order exclusively from a very old Pittsburgh company called Fortis. They make two models for me. An eighteen-inch, and a three-footer. Both of them are three-quarter-inch section. High-carbon double-tempered chromium steel, case-hardened claws, very fine quality paint."

"And it was the three-footer that was stolen," I said.

He looked at me like I was clairvoyant.

"Detective Clark showed us the sample you lent him," I said.

"I see," he said.

"So, is the thirty-six-inch three-quarter-section Fortis a rare item?"

He made a face, like he was a little disappointed.

"I sell one a year," he said. "Two, if I'm very lucky. They're expensive. And appreciation for quality is declining shamefully. Pearls before swine, I say."

"Is that the same everywhere?"

"Everywhere?" he repeated.

“In other stores. Regionally. With the Fortis crowbars.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Perhaps I didn’t make myself quite clear. They’re made for me. To my own design. To my own exact specification. They’re custom items.”

I stared at him. “They’re exclusive to this store?”

He nodded. “The privilege of independence.”

“Literally exclusive?”

He nodded again. “Unique in all the world.”

“When did you last sell one?”

“About nine months ago.”

“Does the paint wear off?”

“I know what you’re asking,” he said. “And the answer is yes, of course. If you find one that looks new, it’s the one that was stolen on New Year’s Eve.”

We borrowed an identical sample from him for comparative purposes, the same way Detective Clark had. It was dewed with machine oil and had tissue paper wrapped around the center shaft. We laid it like a trophy across the Chevy’s backseat. Then we ate in the car. Burgers, from a drive-through a hundred yards north of the tool store.

“Tell me three new facts,” I said.

“One, Mrs. Kramer and Carbone were killed by the same individual weapon. Two, we’re going to drive ourselves nuts trying to find a connection between them.”

“And three?”

“I don’t know.”

“Three, the bad guy knew Sperryville pretty well. Could you have found that store in the dark, in a hurry, unless you knew the town?”

We looked ahead through the windshield. The mouth of the alley was just about visible. But then, we knew it was there. And it was full daylight.

Summer closed her eyes.

“Focus on the weapon,” she said. “Forget everything else. Visualize it. The custom crowbar. Unique in all the world. It was carried out of that alley, right there. Then it was in Green Valley at two A.M. on January first. And then it was inside Fort Bird at nine P.M. on the fourth. It went on a journey. We know where it started, and we know where it finished. We don’t know for sure where it went in between, but we do know for certain it passed one particular point along the way. It passed Fort Bird’s main gate. We don’t know when, but we know for sure that it *did.*”

She opened her eyes.

“We have to get back there,” she said. “We have to look at the logs again. The earliest it could have passed the gate is six A.M. on January first, because Bird is four hours from Green Valley. The latest it could have passed the gate is, say, eight P.M. on January fourth. That’s an eighty-six-hour window. We need to check the gate logs for everybody who entered during that time. Because we know for sure that the crowbar came in, and we know for sure that it didn’t walk in by itself.”

I said nothing.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “There’ll be a lot of names.”

The truant feeling was completely gone. We got back on the road and headed east, looking for I-95. We found it and we turned south, toward Bird. Toward Willard on the phone. Toward the angry Delta station. We slid back under the shelf of gray cloud just before the North Carolina state line. The sky went dark. Summer put the headlights on. We passed the State Police building on the opposite shoulder. Passed the spot where Kramer’s briefcase had been found. Passed the rest area a mile later. We merged with the east–west highway spur

and came off at the cloverleaf next to Kramer's motel. We left it behind us and drove the thirty miles down to Fort Bird's gate. The guard shack MPs signed us in at 1930 hours exactly. I told them to copy their logs starting at 0600 hours January first and ending at 2000 hours January fourth. I told them to have a Xerox record of that eighty-six-hour slice of life delivered to my office immediately.

My office was very quiet. The morning mayhem was long gone. The sergeant with the baby son was back on duty. She looked tired. I realized she didn't sleep much. She worked all night and probably played with her kid all day. Tough life. She had coffee going. I figured she was just as interested in it as I was. Maybe more.

"Delta guys are restless," she said. "They know you arrested the Bulgarian guy."

"I didn't arrest him. I just asked him some questions."

"That's a distinction they don't seem willing to make. People have been in and out of here looking for you."

"Were they armed?"

"They don't need to be armed. Not those guys. You should have them confined to quarters. You could do that. You're acting MP CO here."

I shook my head. "Anything else?"

"You need to call Colonel Willard before midnight, or he's going to write you up as AWOL. He said that's a promise."

I nodded. It was Willard's obvious next move. An AWOL charge wouldn't reflect badly on a CO. Wouldn't make him look like he had lost his grip. An AWOL charge was always on the man who ran, fair and square.

"Anything else?" I said again.

"Sanchez wants a ten-sixteen," she said. "Down at Fort Jackson. And your brother called again."

“Any message?” I said.

“No message.”

“OK,” I said.

I went inside to my desk. Picked up my phone. Summer stepped over to the map. Traced her fingers across the pins, D.C. to Sperryville, Sperryville to Green Valley, Green Valley to Fort Bird. I dialed Joe’s number. He answered, second ring.

“I called Mom,” he said. “She’s still hanging in there.”

“She said soon, Joe. Doesn’t mean we have to mount a daily vigil.”

“Bound to be sooner than we think. And than we want.”

“How was she?”

“She sounded shaky.”

“You OK?”

“Not bad,” he said. “You?”

“Not a great year so far.”

“You should call her next,” he said.

“I will,” I said. “In a few days.”

“Do it tomorrow,” he said.

He hung up and I sat for a minute. Then I dabbed the cradle to clear the line and asked my sergeant to get Sanchez for me. Down at Jackson. I held the phone by my ear and waited. Summer was looking right at me.

“A daily vigil?” she said.

“She’s waiting for the plaster to come off,” I said. “She doesn’t like it.”

Summer looked at me a little more and then turned back to the map. I put the

Summer looked at me a little more and then turned back to the map. I put the phone on speaker and laid the handset down on the desk. There was a click on the line and we heard Sanchez's voice.

"I've been hassling the Columbia PD about Brubaker's car," he said.

"Didn't they find it yet?" I said.

"No," he said. "And they weren't putting any effort into finding it. Which was inconceivable to me. So I kept on hassling them."

"And?"

"They dropped the other shoe."

"Which is?"

"Brubaker wasn't killed in Columbia," he said. "He was dumped there, is all."

seventeen

Sanchez told us the Columbia medical examiners had found confused lividity patterns on Brubaker's body that in their opinion meant he had been dead about three hours before being tossed in the alley. Lividity is what happens to a person's blood after death. The heart stops, blood pressure collapses, liquid blood drains and sinks and settles into the lowest parts of the body under the simple force of gravity. It rests there and over a period of time it stains the skin liverish purple. Somewhere between three and six hours later the color fixes permanently, like a developed photograph. A guy who falls down dead on his back will have a pale chest and a purple back. Vice versa for a guy who falls down dead on his front. But Brubaker's lividity was all over the place. The Columbia medical examiners figured he had been killed, then kept on his back for about three hours, then dumped in the alley on his front. They were pretty confident about their estimate of the three-hour duration, because three hours was the point where the stains would first start to fix. They said he had signs of early fixed lividity on his back and major fixed lividity on his front. They also said he had a broad stripe across the middle of his back where the dead flesh had been partially cooked.

"He was in the trunk of a car," I said.

"Right over the muffler," Sanchez said. "Three-hour journey, plenty of temperature."

"This changes a lot of things."

"It explains why they never found his Chevy in Columbia."

"Or any witnesses," I said. "Or the shell cases or the bullets."

"So what are we looking at?"

"Three hours in a car?" I said. "At night, with empty roads? Anything up to a two-hundred-mile radius."

"That's a pretty big circle," Sanchez said.

"A hundred and twenty-five thousand square miles," I said. "Approximately. *Pi*

times the radius squared. What's the Columbia PD doing about it?"

"Dropping it like a hot potato. It's an FBI case now."

"What does the Bureau think about the dope thing?"

"They're a little skeptical. They figure heroin isn't our bag. They figure we're more into marijuana and amphetamines."

"I wish," I said. "I could use a little of both right now."

"On the other hand they know Delta guys go all over. Pakistan, South America. Which is where heroin comes from. So they'll keep it in their back pocket, in case they don't get anywhere, just like the Columbia PD was going to."

"They're wasting their time. Heroin? A guy like Brubaker would die first."

"They're thinking maybe he did."

His end of the line clicked off. I killed the speaker and put the handset back.

"It happened to the north, probably," Summer said. "Brubaker started out in Raleigh. We should be looking for his car somewhere up there."

"Not our case," I said.

"OK, the FBI should be looking."

"I'm sure they already are."

There was a knock at the door. It opened up and an MP corporal came in with sheets of paper under his arm. He saluted smartly and stepped a pace forward and placed the sheets of paper on my desk. Stepped the same pace back and saluted again.

"Copies of the gate log, sir," he said. "First through fourth of this month, times as requested."

He turned around and walked back out of the room. Closed the door. I looked at the pile of paper. There were about seven sheets in it. *Not too bad.*

“Let’s go to work,” I said.

Operation Just Cause helped us again. The raised DefCon level meant a lot of leave had been canceled. No real reason, because the Panama thing was no kind of a big deal, but that was how the military worked. No point in having DefCon levels if they couldn’t be raised up and dropped down, no point in moving them at all if there weren’t any associated consequences. No point in staging little foreign dramas unless the whole establishment felt a remote and vicarious thrill.

No point in canceling leave without giving people something to fill their time either. So there were extra training sessions and daily readiness exercises. Most of them were arduous and started early. Therefore the big bonus for us was that almost everyone who had gone out to celebrate New Year’s Eve was back on-post and in the rack relatively early. They must have straggled back around three or four or five in the morning, because there was very little gate activity recorded after six.

Incoming personnel during the eighteen hours we were looking at on New Year’s Day totaled nineteen. Summer and I were two of them, returning from Green Valley and D.C. after the widow trip and the visit to Walter Reed. We crossed ourselves off the list.

Incoming personnel other than ourselves on January second totaled sixteen. Twelve, on January third. Seventeen, before 2000 hours on January fourth. Sixty-two names in total, during the eighty-six-hour window. Nine of them were civilian delivery drivers. We crossed them off. Eleven of them were repeats. They had come in, gone out, come in again. Like commuters. My night-duty sergeant was one of them. We crossed her off, because she was a woman. And short. Elsewhere we deleted the second and any subsequent entries in each case.

We ended up with forty-one individuals, listed by name, rank, and initial. No way of telling which were men and which were women. No way of telling which of the men were tall and strong and right-handed.

“I’ll work on the genders,” Summer said. “I’ve still got the basic strength lists. They have full names on them.”

I nodded. Left her to it. Got on the phone and scared up the pathologist and asked him to meet me in the mortuary, right away.

asked him to meet me in the mortuary, right away.

I drove our Chevy between my office and his because I didn't want to be seen walking around with a crowbar. I parked outside the mortuary entrance and waited. The guy showed up inside five minutes, walking, from the direction of the O Club. I probably interrupted his dessert. Or maybe even his main course. I slid out to meet him and leaned back in and took the crowbar out of the backseat. He glanced at it. Led me inside. He seemed to understand what I wanted to do. He unlocked his office and hit the lights and unlocked his drawer. Opened it and lifted out the crowbar that had killed Carbone. Laid it on his desk. I laid the borrowed specimen next to it. Pulled the tissue paper off it. Lined it up at the same angle. It was exactly identical.

"Are there wide variations?" the pathologist asked. "With crowbars?"

"More than you would think," I said. "I just had a big crowbar lesson."

"These two look the same."

"They are the same. They're peas in a pod. Count on it. They're custom-made. They're unique in all the world."

"Did you ever meet Carbone?"

"Very briefly," I said.

"What was his posture like?"

"In what way?"

"Did he stoop?"

I thought back to the dim interior of the lounge bar. To the hard light in the parking lot. Shook my head.

"He wasn't tall enough to stoop," I said. "He was a wiry guy, solid, stood up pretty straight. Kind of on the balls of his feet. He looked athletic."

"OK."

“Why?”

“It was a downward blow. Not a downward chop, but a horizontal swing that dipped as it hit. Maybe it was just below horizontal. Carbone was seventy inches tall. The wound was sixty-five inches off the ground, assuming he wasn’t stooping. But it was delivered from above. So his attacker was tall.”

“You told us that already,” I said.

“No, I mean *tall*,” he said. “I’ve been working on it. Mapping it out. The guy had to be six-four or six-five.”

“Like me,” I said.

“And as heavy as you too. Not easy to break a skull as badly as that.”

I thought back to the crime scene. It had been pocked with small hummocks of dead grass and there were wrist-thick branches here and there on the ground, but it was basically a flat area. No way one guy could have been standing higher than the other. No way of assuming a relative height difference when there really wasn’t one.

“Six-four or six-five,” I said. “Are you prepared to go to bat on that?”

“In court?”

“It was a training accident,” I said. “We’re not going to court. This is just between you and me. Am I wasting my time looking at people less than six feet four inches tall?”

The doctor breathed in, breathed out.

“Six-three,” he said. “To be on the safe side. To allow a margin for experimental error. I’d go to bat on six-three. Count on it.”

“OK,” I said.

He shooed me out the door and hit the lights and locked up again.

Summer was sitting behind my desk when I got back, doing nothing. She was through with the gender analysis. It hadn't taken her long. The strength lists were comprehensive and accurate and alphabetical, like most army paperwork.

"Thirty-three men," she told me. "Twenty-three enlisted, ten officers."

"Who are they?"

"A little bit of everything. Delta and Ranger leave was completely canceled, but they had evening passes. Carbone himself was in and out on the first, obviously."

"We can cross him off."

"OK, thirty-two men," she said. "The pathologist is one of them."

"We can take him out too."

"Thirty-one, then," she said. "And Vassell and Coomer are still in there. In and out on the first and in again on the fourth at seven o'clock."

"Take them out," I said. "They were eating dinner. Fish, and steak."

"Twenty-nine," she said. "Twenty-two enlisted, seven officers."

"OK," I said. "Now go to Post HQ and pull their medical records."

"Why?"

"To find out how tall they are."

"Can't do that for the driver Vassell and Coomer had on New Year's Day. Major Marshall. He was a visitor. His records won't be here."

"He wasn't here the night Carbone died," I said. "So you can take him out, too."

"Twenty-eight."

"So go pull twenty-eight sets of records," I said.

She slid me a slip of white paper. I picked it up. It was the one I had written *973*

on. Our original suspect pool.

“We’re making progress,” she said.

I nodded. She smiled and stood up. Walked out the door. I took her place behind the desk. The chair was warm from her body. I savored the feeling, until it went away. Then I picked up the phone. Asked my sergeant to get the post quartermaster on the line. It took her a few minutes to find him. I figured she had to drag him out of the mess hall. I figured I had just ruined his dinner too, as well as the pathologist’s. But then, I hadn’t eaten anything yet myself.

“Yes, sir?” the guy said. He sounded a little annoyed.

“I’ve got a question, Chief,” I said. “Something only you will know.”

“Like what?”

“Average height and weight for a male U.S. Army soldier.”

The guy said nothing, but I felt his annoyance fade away. The Quartermaster Corps buys millions of uniforms a year, and twice as many boots, all on a budget, so you can bet it knows the tale of the tape to the nearest half-inch and the nearest half-ounce. It can’t afford not to, literally. And it loves to show off its specialized knowledge.

“No problem,” the guy said. “Male adult population aged twenty to fifty as a whole in America goes five-nine and a half, and one seventy-eight. We’re overrepresented with Hispanics by comparison with the nation as a whole, which brings our median height down one whole inch to five-eight and a half. We train pretty hard, which brings our median weight up three pounds to one eighty-one, muscle being generally heavier than fat.”

“Those are this year’s figures?”

“Last year’s,” he said. “This year is only a few days old.”

“What’s the spread in height?”

“What are you looking for?”

“How many guys have we got six-three or better?”

“One in ten,” he said. “In the army as a whole, maybe ninety thousand. Call it a Super Bowl crowd. On a post this size, maybe a hundred and twenty. Call it a half-empty airplane.”

“OK, Chief,” I said. “Thanks.”

I hung up. *One in ten.* Summer was going to come back with twenty-eight medical charts. Nine out of ten of them were going to be for guys too small to worry about. So out of twenty-eight, if we were lucky, only two of them would need looking at. Three, if we were unlucky. Two or three, down from nine hundred seventy-three. *Making progress.* I looked at the clock. Eight-thirty. I smiled to myself. *Shit happens, Willard,* I thought.

Shit happened, for sure, but it happened to us, not Willard. Averages and medians played their little arithmetic tricks and Summer came back with twenty-eight charts and all twenty-eight of them were for short guys. Tallest among them was a marginal six-foot-one, and he was a reed-thin one hundred sixty pounds, and he was a padre.

Once when I was a kid we lived for a month in an off-post bungalow somewhere. It had no dining table. My mother called people and had one delivered. It came packed flat in a carton. I tried to help her put it together. All the parts were there. There was a laminated tabletop, and four chrome legs, and four big steel bolts. We laid them out on the floor in the dining nook. The top, four legs, four bolts. But there was no way to fit them together. No way at all. It was some kind of an inexplicable design. Nothing would join up. We knelt side by side and worked on it. We sat cross-legged on the floor, with the dust bunnies and the cockroaches. The smooth chrome was cold in my hands. The edges were rough, where the laminate was shaped on the corners. We couldn’t put it together. Joe came in, and tried, and failed. My dad tried, and failed. We ate in the kitchen for a month. We were still trying to put that table together when we moved out. Now I felt like I was wrestling with it all over again. Nothing went together. Everything looked good at first, and then everything stalled and died.

“The crowbar didn’t walk in by itself,” Summer said. “One of those twenty-eight names brought it in. Obviously. It can’t have gotten here any other way.”

I said nothing.

“Want dinner?” she said.

“I think better when I’m hungry,” I said.

“We’ve run out of things to think about.”

I nodded. Gathered the twenty-eight medical charts together and piled them neatly. Put Summer’s original list of thirty-three names on top. Thirty-three, minus Carbone, because he didn’t bring the crowbar in himself and commit suicide with it. Minus the pathologist, because he wasn’t a convincing suspect, and because he was short, and because his practice swings with the crowbar had been weak. Minus Vassell and Coomer and their driver, Marshall, because their alibis were too good. Vassell and Coomer had been stuffing their faces, and Marshall hadn’t even come at all.

“Why wasn’t Marshall here?” I said.

Summer nodded. “That’s always bothered me. It’s like Vassell and Coomer had something to hide from him.”

“All they did was eat dinner.”

“But Marshall must have been right there at Kramer’s funeral with them. So they must have specifically told him *not* to drive them here. Like a positive order to get out of the car and stay home.”

I nodded. Pictured the long line of black government sedans at Arlington National Cemetery, under a leaden January sky. Pictured the ceremony, the folding of the flag, the salute from the riflemen. The shuffling procession back to the cars, bareheaded men with their chins ducked into their collars against the cold, maybe snow in the air. I pictured Marshall holding the Mercury’s rear doors, for Vassell first, then for Coomer. He must have driven them back to the Pentagon lot and then gotten out and watched Coomer move up into the driver’s seat.

“We should talk to him,” I said. “Find out exactly what they told him. What kind of reason they gave him. It must have been a slightly awkward moment. A blue-eyed boy like that must have felt a little excluded.”

I picked up the phone and spoke to my sergeant. Asked her to get a number for Major Marshall. Told her he was a XII Corps staffer based at the Pentagon. She said she would get back to me. Summer and I sat quiet and waited. I gazed at the map on the wall. I figured we should take the pin out of Columbia. It distorted the picture. Brubaker hadn't been killed there. He had been killed somewhere else. North, south, east, or west.

"Are you going to call Willard?" Summer asked me.

"Probably," I said. "Tomorrow, maybe."

"Not before midnight?"

"I don't want to give him the satisfaction."

"That's a risk."

"I'm protected," I said.

"Might not last forever."

"Doesn't matter. I'll have Delta Force coming after me soon. That'll make everything else seem kind of academic."

"Call Willard tonight," she said. "That would be my advice."

I looked at her.

"As a friend," she said. "AWOL is a big deal. No point making things worse."

"OK," I said.

"Do it now," she said. "Why not?"

"OK," I said again. I reached out for the phone but before I could get my hand on it my sergeant put her head in the door. She told us Major Marshall was no longer based in the United States. His temporary detached duty had been prematurely terminated. He had been recalled to Germany. He had been flown out of Andrews Air Force Base late in the morning of the fifth of January.

"Whose orders?" I asked her.

“General Vassell’s,” she said.

“OK,” I said.

She closed the door.

“The fifth of January,” Summer said.

“The morning after Carbone and Brubaker died,” I said.

“He knows something.”

“He wasn’t even here.”

“Why else would they hide him away afterward?”

“It’s a coincidence.”

“You don’t like coincidences.”

I nodded.

“OK,” I said. “Let’s go to Germany.”

eighteen

No way was Willard about to authorize any foreign expeditions so I walked over to the Provost Marshal's office and took a stack of travel vouchers out of the company clerk's desk. I carried them back to my own office and signed them all with my name on the *CO* lines and respectable forgeries of Leon Garber's signature on the *Authorized by* lines.

"We're breaking the law," Summer said.

"This is the Battle of Kursk," I said. "We can't stop now."

She hesitated.

"Your choice," I said. "In or out, no pressure from me."

She said nothing.

"These vouchers won't come back for a month or two," I said. "By then either Willard will be gone, or we will. We've got nothing to lose."

"OK," she said.

"Go pack," I said. "Three days."

She left and I asked my sergeant to figure out who was next in line for acting CO. She came back with a name I recognized as the female captain I had seen in the O Club dining room. The one with the busted arm. I wrote her a note explaining I would be out for three days. I told her she was in charge. Then I picked up the phone and called Joe.

"I'm going to Germany," I said.

"OK," he said. "Enjoy. Have a safe trip."

"I can't go to Germany without stopping by Paris on the way back. You know, under the circumstances."

He paused.

“No,” he said. “I guess you can’t.”

“Wouldn’t be right not to,” I said. “But she shouldn’t think I care more than you do. That wouldn’t be right either. So you should come over too.”

“When?”

“Take the overnight flight two days from now. I’ll meet you at Roissy–Charles de Gaulle. Then we’ll go see her together.”

Summer met me on the sidewalk outside my quarters and we carried our bags to the Chevy. We were both in BDUs because we figured our best shot was a night transport out of Andrews Air Force Base. We were too late for a civilian red-eye and we didn’t want to wait all night for the breakfast flights. We got in the car and logged out at the gate. Summer was driving, of course. She accelerated hard and then dropped into a smooth rhythm that was about ten miles an hour faster than the other cars heading our way.

I sat back and watched the road. Watched the shoulders, and the strip malls, and the traffic. We drove north thirty miles and passed by Kramer’s motel. Hit the cloverleaf and jogged east to I-95. Headed north. We passed the rest area. Passed the spot a mile later where the briefcase had been found. I closed my eyes.

I slept all the way to Andrews. We got there well after midnight. We parked in a restricted lot and swapped two of our travel vouchers for two places on a Transportation Corps C-130 that was leaving for Frankfurt at three in the morning. We waited in a lounge that had fluorescent lighting and vinyl benches and was filled with the usual ragtag bunch of transients. The military is always on the move. There are always people going somewhere, any time of the night or day. Nobody talked. Nobody ever did. We all just sat there, stiff and tired and uncomfortable.

The loadmaster came to get us thirty minutes before takeoff. We filed out onto the tarmac and walked up the ramp into the belly of the plane. There was a long line of cargo pallets in the center bay. We sat on webbing jump seats with our backs to the fuselage wall. On the whole I figured I preferred the first-class section on Air France. The Transportation Corps doesn’t have stewardesses and

section on Air France. The Transportation Corps doesn't have stewardesses and it doesn't brew in-flight coffee.

We took off a little late, heading west into the wind. Then we turned a slow one-eighty over D.C. and struck out east. I felt the movement. There were no windows, but I knew we were above the city. Joe was down there somewhere, sleeping.

The fuselage wall was very cold at altitude so we all leaned forward with our elbows on our knees. It was too noisy to talk. I stared at a pallet of tank ammunition until my vision blurred and I fell back to sleep. It wasn't comfortable, but one thing you learn in the army is how to sleep anywhere. I woke up maybe ten times and spent most of the trip in a state of suspended animation. The roar of the engines and the rush of the slipstream helped induce it. It was relatively restful. It was about sixty percent as good as being in bed.

We were in the air nearly eight hours before we started our initial descent. There was no intercom. No cheery message from the pilot. Just a change in the engine note and a downward lurching movement and a sharp sensation in the ears. All around me people were standing up and stretching. Summer had her back flat against an ammunition crate, rubbing like a cat. She looked pretty good. Her hair was too short to get messy and her eyes were bright. She looked determined, like she knew she was heading for doom or glory and was resigned to not knowing which.

We all sat down again and held tight to the webbing for the landing. The wheels touched down and the reverse thrust howled and the brakes jammed on tight. The pallets jerked forward against their straps. Then the engines cut back and we taxied a long way and stopped. The ramp came down and a dim dusk sky showed through the hole. It was five o'clock in the afternoon in Germany, six hours ahead of the East Coast, one hour ahead of Zulu time. I was starving. I had eaten nothing since the burger in Sperryville the previous day. Summer and I stood up and grabbed our bags and got in line. Shuffled down the ramp with the others and out onto the tarmac. The weather was cold. It felt pretty much the same as North Carolina.

We were way out in the restricted military corner of the Frankfurt airport. We took a personnel bus to the public terminal. After that we were on our own. Some of the other guys had transport waiting, but we didn't. We joined a bunch

Some of the other guys had transport waiting, but we didn't. We joined a bunch of civilians in the taxi line. Shuffled up, one by one. When our turn came we gave the driver a travel voucher and told him to drive us east to XII Corps. He was happy enough to comply. He could swap the voucher for hard currency at any U.S. post and I was certain he would pick up a couple of XII Corps guys going out into Frankfurt for a night on the town. No deadheading. No empty running. He was making a living off of the U.S. Army, just like plenty of Germans had for four and a half decades. He was driving a Mercedes-Benz.

The trip took thirty minutes. We drove east through suburbs. They looked like a lot of West German places. There were vast tracts of pale honey buildings built back in the fifties. The new neighborhoods ran west to east in random curving shapes, following the routes the bombers had followed. No nation ever lost a war the way Germany lost. Like everyone, I had seen the pictures taken in 1945. *Defeat* was not a big enough word. *Armageddon* would be better. The whole country had been smashed to powdered rubble by a juggernaut. The evidence would be there for all time, written in the architecture. And under the architecture. Every time the phone company dug a trench for a cable, they found skulls and bones and teacups and shells and rusted-out *Panzerfausts.* Every time ground was broken for a new foundation, a priest was standing by before the steam shovels took their first bite. I was born in Berlin, surrounded by Americans, surrounded by whole square miles of patched-up devastation. *They started it,* we used to say.

The suburban streets were neat and clean. There were discreet stores with apartments above them. The store windows were full of shiny items. Street signs were black-on-white, written in an archaic script that made them hard to read. There were small U.S. Army road signs here and there too. You couldn't go very far without seeing one. We followed the XII Corps arrows, getting closer all the time. We left the built-up area and drove through a couple of kilometers of farmland. It felt like a moat. Like insulation. The eastern sky ahead of us was dark.

XII Corps was based in a typical glory-days installation. Some Nazi industrialist had built a thousand-acre factory site out in the fields, back in the 1930s. It had featured an impressive home office building and ranks of low metal sheds stretching hundreds of meters behind it. The sheds had been bombed to twisted shards, over and over again. The home office building had been only partially damaged. Some weary U.S. Army armored division had set up camp in it in 1945. Thin Frankfurt women in headscarves and faded print dresses had been

brought in to pile the rubble, in exchange for food. They worked with wheelbarrows and shovels. Then the Army Corps of Engineers had fixed up the office building and bulldozed the piles of rubble away. Successive huge waves of Pentagon spending had rolled in. By 1953 the place was a flagship installation. There was cleaned brick and shining white paint and a strong perimeter fence. There were flagpoles and sentry boxes and guard shacks. There were mess halls and a medical clinic and a PX. There were barracks and workshops and warehouses. Above all there were a thousand acres of flat land and by 1953 it was covered with American tanks. They were all lined up, facing east, ready to roll out and fight for the Fulda Gap.

When we got there thirty-seven years later it was too dark to see much. But I knew that nothing fundamental would have changed. The tanks would be different, but that would be all. The M4 Shermans that had won World War Two were long gone, except for two fine examples standing preserved outside the main gate, one on each side, like symbols. They were placed halfway up landscaped concrete ramps, noses high, tails low, like they were still in motion, breasting a rise. They were lit up theatrically. They were beautifully painted, glossy green, with bright white stars on their sides. They looked much better than they had originally. Behind them was a long driveway with white-painted curbs and the floodlit front of the office building, which was now the post headquarters. Behind that would be the tank lagers, with M1A1 Abrams main battle tanks lined up shoulder to shoulder, hundreds of them, at nearly four million bucks apiece.

We got out of the taxi and crossed the sidewalk and headed for the main gate guard shack. My special unit badge got us past it. It would get us past any U.S. Army checkpoint anywhere except the inner ring of the Pentagon. We carried our bags down the driveway.

“Been here before?” Summer asked me.

I shook my head as I walked.

“I’ve been in Heidelberg with the infantry,” I said. “Many times.”

“Is that near?”

“Not far,” I said.

There were broad stone steps leading up to the doors. The whole place looked like a capitol building in some small state back home. It was immaculately maintained. We went up the steps and inside. There was a soldier at a desk just behind the doors. Not an MP. Just a XII Corps office grunt. We showed him our IDs.

“Your VOQ got space for us?” I asked.

“Sir, no problem,” he said.

“Two rooms,” I said. “One night.”

“I’ll call ahead,” he said. “Just follow the signs.”

He pointed to the back of the hallway. There were more doors there that would lead out into the complex. I checked my watch. It said noon exactly. It was still set to East Coast time. Six in the evening, in West Germany. Already dark.

“I need to see your MP XO,” I said. “Is he still in his office?”

The guy used his phone and got an answer. Pointed us up a broad staircase to the second floor.

“On your right,” he said.

We went up the stairs and turned right. There was a long corridor with offices on both sides. They had hardwood doors with reeded glass windows. We found the one we wanted and went in. It was an outer chamber with a sergeant in it. It was pretty much identical to the one back at Bird. Same paint, same floor, same furniture, same temperature, same smell. Same coffee, in the same standard-issue machine. The sergeant was like plenty I had seen before too. Calm, efficient, stoic, ready to believe he ran the place all by himself, which he probably did. He was behind his desk and he looked up at us as we came in. Spent half a second deciding who we were and what we wanted.

“I guess you need the major,” he said.

I nodded. He picked up his phone and buzzed through to the inner office.

“Go straight through,” he said.

We went in through the inner door and I saw a desk with a guy called Swan behind it. I knew Swan pretty well. Last time I had seen him was in the Philippines, three months earlier, when he was starting a tour of duty that was scheduled to last a year.

“Don’t tell me,” I said. “You got here December twenty-ninth.”

“Froze my ass off,” he said. “All I had was Pacific gear. Took XII Corps three days to find me a winter uniform.”

I wasn’t surprised. Swan was short, and wide. Almost cubic. He probably owned a percentile all his own, on the quartermasters’ charts.

“Your Provost Marshal here?” I said.

He shook his head. “Temporarily reassigned.”

“Garber signed your orders?”

“Allegedly.”

“Figured it out yet?”

“Not even close.”

“Me either,” I said.

He shrugged, like he was saying, *Hey, the army, what can you do?*

“This is Lieutenant Summer,” I said.

“Special unit?” Swan said.

Summer shook her head.

“But she’s cool,” I said.

Swan stretched a short arm over his desk and they shook hands.

“I need to see a guy called Marshall,” I said. “A major. Some kind of a XII Corps staffer.”

“Is he in trouble?”

“Someone is. I’m hoping Marshall will help me figure out who. You know him?”

“Never heard of him,” Swan said. “I only just got here.”

“I know,” I said. “December twenty-ninth.”

He smiled and gave me the *What can you do?* shrug again and picked up his phone. I heard him ask his sergeant to find Marshall and tell him I wanted to see him at his convenience. I looked around while we waited for the response. Swan’s office looked borrowed and temporary, just like mine did back in North Carolina. It had the same kind of clock on the wall. Electric, no second hand. No tick. It said ten minutes past six.

“Anything happening here?” I said.

“Not much,” Swan said. “Some helicopter guy went shopping in Heidelberg and got run over. And Kramer died, of course. That’s shaken things up some.”

“Who’s next in line?”

“Vassell, I guess.”

“I met him,” I said. “Wasn’t impressed.”

“It’s a poisoned chalice. Things are changing. You should hear these guys talk. They’re real gloomy.”

“The status quo is not an option,” I said. “That’s what I’m hearing.”

His phone rang. He listened for a minute and put it down.

“Marshall’s not on-post,” he said. “He’s out on a night exercise in the countryside. Back in the morning.”

Summer glanced at me. I shrugged.

“Have dinner with me,” Swan said. “I’m lonely here with all these cavalry types. The O Club in an hour?”

We carried our bags over to the Visiting Officers' Quarters and found our rooms. Mine looked pretty much the same as the one Kramer had died in, except it was cleaner. It was a standard American motel layout. Presumably some hotel chain had bid for the government contract, way back when. Then they had airfreighted all the fixtures and fittings, right down to the sinks and the towel rails and the toilet bowls.

I shaved and took a shower and dressed in clean BDUs. Knocked on Summer's door fifty-five minutes into Swan's hour. She opened up. She looked clean and fresh. Behind her the room looked the same as mine, except it already smelled like a woman's. There was some kind of nice eau de toilette in the air.

The O Club occupied half of one of the ground floor wings of the main building. It was a grand space, with high ceilings and intricate plaster moldings. There was a lounge, and a bar, and a dining room. We found Swan in the bar. He was with a lieutenant colonel who was wearing Class As with a combat infantryman's badge on the coat. It was an odd thing to see, on an Armored post. His nameplate said: *Simon.* He introduced himself to us. I got the feeling he was going to join us for dinner. He told us he was a liaison officer, working on behalf of the infantry. He told us there was an Armored guy down in Heidelberg, doing the same job in reverse.

"Been here long?" I asked him.

"Two years," he said, which I was glad about. I needed some background, and Swan didn't have it, any more than I knew anything about Fort Bird. Then I realized it was no accident that Simon was joining the party. Swan must have figured out what I wanted and set about providing it without being asked. Swan was that kind of guy.

"Pleased to meet you, Colonel," I said, and then I nodded to Swan, like I was saying thanks. We drank cold American beers from tall frosted glasses and then we went through to the dining room. Swan had made a reservation. The steward put us at a table in the corner. I sat where I could watch the whole room at once. I didn't see anyone I knew. Vassell wasn't around. Nor was Coomer.

The menu was absolutely standard. We could have been in any O Club in the world. O Clubs aren't there to introduce you to local cuisine. They're there to

make you feel at home, somewhere deep inside the army's own interpretation of America. There was a choice of fish or steak. The fish was probably European, but the steak would have been flown in across the Atlantic. Some politician in one of the ranch states would have leveraged a sweet deal with the Pentagon.

We small-talked for a spell. We bitched about pay and benefits. Talked about people we knew. We mentioned Just Cause in Panama. Lieutenant Colonel Simon told us he had been to Berlin two days previously and had gotten himself a chip of concrete from the Wall. Told us he planned to have it encased in a plastic cube. Planned to hand it on down the generations, like an heirloom.

"Do you know Major Marshall?" I asked him.

"Fairly well," he said.

"Who is he exactly?" I asked.

"Is this official?"

"Not really," I said.

"He's a planner. A strategist, basically. Long-term kind of guy. General Kramer seemed to like him. Always kept him close by, made him his intelligence officer."

"Does he have an intelligence background?"

"Not formally. But he'll have done rotations, I'm sure."

"So is he a part of the inner team? I heard Kramer and Vassell and Coomer mentioned all in the same breath, but not Marshall."

"He's on the team," Simon said. "That's for sure. But you know what flag officers are like. They need a guy, but they aren't about to admit it. So they abuse him a little. He fetches and carries and drives them around, but when push comes to shove they ask his opinion."

"Is he going to move up now Kramer's gone? Maybe into Coomer's slot?"

Simon made a face. "He should. He's an Armor fanatic to the core, like the rest of them. But nobody really knows what the hell is going to happen. Kramer

dying couldn't have come at a worse time for them."

"The world is changing," I said.

"And what a world it was," Simon said. "Kramer's world, basically, beginning to end. He graduated the Point in Fifty-two, and places like this one were all buttoned up by Fifty-three, and they've been the center of the universe for almost forty years. These places are so dug in, you wouldn't believe it. You know who has done the most in this country?"

"Who?"

"Not Armored. Not the infantry. This theater is all about the Army Corps of Engineers. Sherman tanks way back weighed thirty-eight tons and were nine feet wide. Now we're all the way up to the M1A1 Abrams, which weighs seventy tons and is eleven feet wide. Every step of the way for forty years the Corps of Engineers has had work to do. They've widened roads, hundreds of miles of them, all over West Germany. They've strengthened bridges. Hell, they've *built* roads and bridges. Dozens of them. You want a stream of seventy-ton tanks rolling east to battle, you better make damn sure the roads and bridges can take it."

"OK," I said.

"Billions of dollars," Simon said. "And of course, they knew which roads and bridges to look at. They knew where we were starting, and they knew where we were going. They talked to the war-gamers, they looked at the maps, and they got busy with the concrete and the rebar. Then they built way stations everywhere we needed them. Permanent hardened fuel stores, ammunition dumps, repair shops, hundreds of them, all along strictly predetermined routes. So we're embedded here, literally. We're dug in, literally. The Cold War battlefields are literally set in stone, Reacher."

"People are going to say we invested and we won."

Simon nodded. "And they'd be correct. But what comes next?"

"More investment," I said.

"Exactly," he said. "Like in the Navy, when the big battleships were superseded

by aircraft carriers. The end of one era, the beginning of the next. The Abrams tanks are like battleships. They're magnificent, but they're out-of-date. About the only way we can use them is down custom-built roads in directions we've already planned to go."

"They're mobile," Summer said. "Like any tank."

"Not very mobile," Simon said. "Where is the next fight going to be?"

I shrugged. I wished Joe was there. He was good at all the geopolitical stuff.

"The Middle East?" I said. "Iran or Iraq, maybe. They've both gotten their breath back, they'll be looking for the next thing to do."

"Or the Balkans," Swan said. "When the Soviets finally collapse, there's a forty-five-year-old pressure cooker waiting for the lid to come off."

"OK," Simon said. "Look at the Balkans, for instance. Yugoslavia, maybe. That'll be the first place anything happens, for sure. Right now they're just waiting for the starting gun. What do we do?"

"Send in the Airborne," Swan said.

"OK," Simon said again. "We send in the 82nd and the 101st. Lightly armed, we might get three battalions there inside a week. But what do we do after we get there? We're speed bumps, that's all, nothing more. We have to wait for the heavy units. And that's the first problem. An Abrams tank weighs seventy tons. Can't airlift it. Got to put it on a train, and then put it on a ship. And that's the good news. Because you don't just ship the tank. For every ton of tank, you have to ship four tons of fuel and other equipment. These suckers get a half-mile to the gallon. And you need spare engines, ammunition, huge maintenance crews. The logistics tail is a mile long. Like moving an iron mountain. To ship enough tank brigades to make a worthwhile difference, you're looking at a six-month buildup, minimum, and that's working right around the clock."

"During which time the Airborne troops are deep in the shit," I said.

"Tell me about it," Simon said. "And those are my boys, and I worry about them. Lightly armed paratroops against any kind of foreign armor, we'd get slaughtered. It would be a very, very anxious six months. And it gets worse. Because what happens when the heavy brigades eventually get there? What

Because what happens when the heavy brigades eventually get there? What happens is, they roll off the ships and they get bogged down two blocks later. Roads aren't wide enough, bridges aren't strong enough, they never make it out of the port area. They sit there stuck in the mud and watch the infantry getting killed far away in the distance."

Nobody spoke.

"Or take the Middle East," Simon said. "We all know Iraq wants Kuwait back. Suppose they go there? Long term, it's an easy win for us, because the open desert is pretty much the same for tanks as the steppes in Europe, except it's a little hotter and dustier. But the war plans we've got will work out just fine. But do we even get that far? We've got the infantry sitting there like tiny little speed bumps for six whole months. Who says the Iraqis won't roll right over them in the first two weeks?"

"Air power," Summer said. "Attack helicopters."

"I wish," Simon said. "Planes and whirlybirds are sexy as hell, but they don't win anything on their own. Never have, never will. Boots on the ground is what wins things."

I smiled. Part of that was a combat infantryman's standard-issue pride. But part of it was true too.

"So what's going to happen?" I asked.

"Same thing as happened with the Navy in 1941," Simon said. "Overnight, battleships were history and carriers were the new thing. So for us, now, we need to integrate. We need to understand that our light units are too vulnerable and our heavy units are too slow. We need to ditch the whole light-heavy split. We need integrated rapid-response brigades with armored vehicles lighter than twenty tons and small enough to fit in the belly of a C-130. We need to get places faster and fight smarter. No more planning for set-piece battles between herds of dinosaurs."

Then he smiled.

"Basically we'll have to put the infantry in charge," he said.

"You ever talk to people like Marshall about this kind of stuff?"

“*Their* planners? No way.”

“What do they think about the future?”

“I have no idea. And I don’t care. The future belongs to the infantry.”

Dessert was apple pie, and then we had coffee. It was the usual excellent brew. We slid back from the future into present-day small talk. The stewards moved around, silently. Just another evening, in an Officers’ Club four thousand miles from the last one.

“Marshall will be back at dawn,” Swan told me. “Look for a scout car at the rear of the first incoming column.”

I nodded. Figured dawn in January in Frankfurt would be about 0700 hours. I set my mental alarm for six. Lieutenant Colonel Simon said good night and wandered off. Summer pushed her chair back and sprawled in it, as much as a tiny person can sprawl. Swan sat forward with his elbows on the table.

“You think they get much dope on this post?” I asked him.

“You want some?” he said.

“Brown heroin,” I said. “Not for my personal use.”

Swan nodded. “Guys here say there are Turkish guest workers in Germany who could get you some. One of the speed dealers could supply it, I’m sure.”

“You ever met a guy called Willard?” I asked him.

“The new boss?” he said. “I got the memo. Never met him. But some of the guys here know him. He was an intelligence wonk, something to do with Armor.”

“He wrote algorithms,” I said.

“For what?”

“Soviet T-80 fuel consumption, I think. Told us what kind of training they were doing.”

“And now he’s running the 110th?”

I nodded.

“I know,” I said. “Bizarre.”

“How did he do that?”

“Obviously someone liked him.”

“We should find out who. Start sending hate mail.”

I nodded again. Nearly a million men in the army, hundreds of billions of dollars, and it all came down to who liked who. *Hey, what can you do?*

“I’m going to bed,” I said.

My VOQ room was so generic I lost track of where I was within a minute of closing my door. I hung my uniform in the closet and washed up and crawled between the sheets. They smelled of the same detergent the army uses everywhere. I thought of my mother in Paris and Joe in D.C. My mother was already in bed, probably. Joe would still be working, at whatever it was he did. I said *six A.M.* to myself and closed my eyes.

Dawn broke at 0650, by which time I was standing next to Summer at XII Corps’ east road gate. We had mugs of coffee in our hands. The ground was frozen and there was mist in the air. The sky was gray and the landscape was a shade of pastel green. It was low and undulating and unexciting, like a lot of Europe. There were stands of small neat trees here and there. Dormant winter earth, giving off cold organic smells. It was very quiet.

The road ran through the gate and then turned and headed east and a little north, into the fog, toward Russia. It was wide and straight, made from reinforced concrete. The curbstones were nicked here and there by tank tracks. Big wedge-shaped chunks had been knocked out of them. A tank is a difficult thing to steer.

We waited. Still quiet.

Then we heard them.

What is the twentieth century's signature sound? You could have a debate about it. Some might say the slow drone of an aero engine. Maybe from a lone fighter crawling across an azure 1940s sky. Or the scream of a fast jet passing low overhead, shaking the ground. Or the *whup whup whup* of a helicopter. Or the roar of a laden 747 lifting off. Or the crump of bombs falling on a city. All of those would qualify. They're all uniquely twentieth-century noises. They were never heard before. Never, in all of history. Some crazy optimists might lobby for a Beatles song. A *yeah, yeah, yeah* chorus fading under the screams of their audience. I would have sympathy for that choice. But a song and screaming could never qualify. Music and desire have been around since the dawn of time. They weren't invented after 1900.

No, the twentieth century's signature sound is the squeal and clatter of tank tracks on a paved street. That sound was heard in Warsaw, and Rotterdam, and Stalingrad, and Berlin. Then it was heard again in Budapest and Prague, and Seoul and Saigon. It's a brutal sound. It's the sound of fear. It speaks of a massive overwhelming advantage in power. And it speaks of remote, impersonal indifference. Tank treads squeal and clatter and the very noise they make tells you they can't be stopped. It tells you you're weak and powerless against the machine. Then one track stops and the other keeps on going and the tank wheels around and lurches straight toward you, roaring and squealing. That's the real twentieth-century sound.

We heard the XII Corps' Abrams column a long time before we saw it. The noise came at us through the fog. We heard the tracks, and the whine of the turbines. We heard the grind of the drive gear and felt fastpattering bass shudders through the soles of our feet as each new tread plate came off the cogs and thumped down into position. We heard grit and stone crushed under their weight.

Then we saw them. The lead tank loomed at us through the mist. It was moving fast, pitching a little, staying flat, its engine roaring. Behind it was another, and another. They were all in line, single file, like an armada from hell. It was a magnificent sight. The M1A1 Abrams is like a shark, evolved to a point of absolute perfection. It is the undisputed king of the jungle. No other tank on earth can even begin to damage it. It is wrapped in armor made out of a depleted uranium core sandwiched between rolled steel plate. The armor is dense and

uranium core sandwiched between rolled steel plate. The armor is dense and impregnable. Battlefield shells and rockets and kinetic devices bounce right off it. But its main trick is to stand off so far that no battlefield shell or rocket or kinetic device can even reach it. It sits there and watches enemy rounds fall short in the dirt. Then it traverses its mighty gun and fires and a second later and a mile and a half in the distance its assailant blows up and burns. It is the ultimate unfair advantage.

The lead tank rolled past us. Eleven feet wide, twenty-six feet long, nine and a half feet tall. Seventy tons. Its engine bellowed and its weight shook the ground. Its tracks squealed and clattered and slid on the concrete. Then the second tank rolled by. And the third, and the fourth, and the fifth. The noise was deafening. The huge bulk of exotic metal buffeted the air. The gun barrels dipped and swayed and bounced. Exhaust fumes swirled all around.

There were altogether twenty tanks in the formation. They drove in through the gate and their noise and vibration faded behind us and then there was a short gap and a scout car came out of the mist straight toward us. It was a shoot-and-scoot Humvee armed with a TOW-2 antitank missile launcher. Two guys in it. I stepped into its path and raised my hand. Paused. I didn't know Marshall and I had only ever seen him once, in the dark interior of the Grand Marquis outside Fort Bird's post headquarters. But even so, I was pretty sure that neither of the guys in the Humvee was him. I remembered Marshall as large and dark and these guys were small, which is much more usual for Armored people. One thing there isn't a lot of inside an Abrams is room.

The Humvee came to a stop right in front of me and I tracked around to the driver's window. Summer took up station on the passenger side, standing easy. The driver rolled his glass down. Stared out at me.

"I'm looking for Major Marshall," I said.

The driver was a captain and his passenger was a captain too. They were both dressed in Nomex tank suits, with balaclavas and Kevlar helmets with built-in headphones. The passenger had sleeve pockets full of pens. He had clipboards strapped to both thighs. They were all covered with notes. Some kind of score sheets.

"Marshall's not here," the driver said.

"So where is he?"

"So where is he?"

"Who's asking?"

"You can read," I said. I was wearing last night's BDUs. They had oak leaves on the collar and *Reacher* on the stencil.

"Unit?" the guy said.

"You don't want to know."

"Marshall went to California," he said. "Emergency deployment to Fort Irwin."

"When?"

"I'm not sure."

"Try to be."

"Last night sometime."

"That's not very specific."

"I'm honestly not sure."

"What kind of an emergency have they got at Irwin?"

"I'm not sure about that either."

I nodded. Stepped back.

"Drive on," I said.

Their Humvee moved out from the space between us, and Summer joined me in the middle of the road. The air smelled of diesel and gas turbine exhaust and the concrete was scored fresh white by the passage of the tank tracks.

"Wasted trip," Summer said.

"Maybe not," I said. "Depends exactly when Marshall left. If it was after Swan's phone call, that tells us something."

We were shunted between three different offices, trying to find out exactly what time Marshall left XII Corps. We ended up in a second-story suite that housed General Vassell's operation. Vassell himself wasn't there. We spoke to yet another captain. He seemed to be in charge of an administrative company.

"Major Marshall took a civilian flight at 2300," he said. "Frankfurt to Dulles. Seven-hour layover and on to LAX from National. I issued the vouchers myself."

"When?"

"As he was leaving."

"Which was when?"

"He left here three hours before his flight."

"Eight o'clock?"

The captain nodded. "On the dot."

"I was told he was scheduled for night maneuvers."

"He was. That plan changed."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure."

I'm not sure seemed to be XII Corps' standard-issue answer for everything.

"What's the panic at Irwin?" I said.

"I'm not sure."

I smiled, briefly. "When were Marshall's orders issued?"

"At seven o'clock."

"Written?"

written?

“Verbal.”

“By?”

“General Vassell.”

“Did Vassell countersign the travel vouchers himself?”

The captain nodded.

“Yes,” he said. “He did.”

“I need to speak to him,” I said.

“He went to London.”

“London?” I said.

“For a short-notice meeting with the British Ministry of Defense.”

“When did he leave?”

“He traveled to the airport with Major Marshall.”

“Where’s Colonel Coomer?”

“Berlin,” the guy said. “Souvenir hunting.”

“Don’t tell me,” I said. “He went to the airport with Vassell and Marshall.”

“No,” the captain said. “He took the train.”

“Terrific,” I said.

Summer and I went to the O Club for breakfast. We got the same corner table we had used the night before. We sat side by side, backs to the wall, watching the room.

“OK,” I said. “Swan’s office called for Marshall’s whereabouts at 1810 and fifty minutes later he had orders for Irwin. An hour after that he was off the post.”

“And Vassell lit out for London,” Summer said. “And Coomer jumped on a train for Berlin.”

“A night train,” I said. “Who goes on a night train just for the fun of it?”

“Everybody’s got something to hide,” she said.

“Except me and my monkey.”

“What?”

“The Beatles,” I said. “One of the sounds of the century.”

She just looked at me.

“What are they hiding?” she said.

“You tell me.”

She put her hands on the table, palms down. Took a breath.

“I can see part of it,” she said.

“Me too.”

“The agenda,” she said. “It was the other side of the coin from what Colonel Simon was talking about last night. Simon was salivating about the infantry taking Armored down a peg or two. Kramer must have seen all of that coming. Two-star generals aren’t stupid. So the Irwin conference on New Year’s Day was about fighting the opposite corner. It was about resistance, I guess. They don’t want to give up what they’ve got.”

“Hell of a thing to give up,” I said.

“Believe it,” she said. “Like battleship captains, way back.”

“So what was in the agenda?”

“Part defense, part offense,” she said. “That’s the obvious way to do it.

"Part defense, part offense," she said. "That's the obvious way to do it. Arguments against integrated units, ridicule of lightweight armored vehicles, advocacy for their own specialized expertise."

"I agree," I said. "But it's not enough. The Pentagon is going to be neck-deep in position papers full of shit like that, starting any day now. For, against, if, but and however, we're going to be bored to death with it. But there was something else in that agenda that made them totally desperate to get Kramer's copy back. What was it?"

"I don't know."

"Me either," I said.

"And why did they run last night?" Summer asked. "By now they must have destroyed Kramer's copy and every other copy. So they could have lied through their teeth about what was in it, to put your mind at rest. They could even have given you a phony document. They could have said, Here you go, this was it, check it out."

"They ran because of Mrs. Kramer," I said.

She nodded. "I still think Vassell and Coomer killed her. Kramer croaks, the ball is in their court, in the circumstances they know it's their responsibility to go out and round up all the loose paperwork. Mrs. Kramer goes down as collateral damage."

"That would make perfect sense," I said. "Except that neither one of them looked particularly tall and strong to me."

"They're both a lot taller and stronger than Mrs. Kramer was. Plus, you know, heat of the moment, pumped up with panic, we could be seeing ambiguous forensic results. And we don't know how good the Green Valley people are anyway. Could be some family doctor doing a two-year term as coroner, and what the hell would he know?"

"Maybe," I said. "But I still don't see how it could have happened. Take out the drive time from D.C., take out ten minutes to find that store and steal the crowbar, they had ten minutes to react. And they didn't have a car, and they didn't call for one."

“They could have taken a taxi. Or a town car. Direct from the hotel lobby. And we’d never trace it. New Year’s Eve, it was the busiest night of the year.”

“It would have been a long ride,” I said. “Big fare. It might stand out in some driver’s memory.”

“New Year’s Eve,” she said again. “D.C. taxis and town cars are all over three states. All kinds of weird destinations. It’s a possibility.”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “You don’t take a taxi on a trip where you break into a hardware store and a house.”

“No reason for the driver to have seen anything. Vassell or Coomer or both could have walked into that alley in Sperryville on foot. Come back five minutes later with the crowbar under their coat. Same thing with Mrs. Kramer’s house. The cab could have stopped on the driveway. All the action was around the back.”

“Too big of a risk. A D.C. cabdriver reads the papers same as anyone else. Maybe more than anyone else, with all that traffic. He sees the story from Green Valley, he remembers his two passengers.”

“They didn’t see it as a risk. They weren’t anticipating a story. Because they thought Mrs. Kramer wasn’t going to be home. They thought she would be at the hospital. And they figured no way would a couple of trivial burglaries in Sperryville and Green Valley make it into the D.C. papers.”

I nodded. Thought back to something Detective Clark had said, days ago. *I had people up and down the street, canvassing. There were some cars around.*

“Maybe,” I said. “Maybe we should check taxis.”

“Worst night of the year,” Summer said. “Like for alibis.”

“It would be a hell of a thing,” I said. “Wouldn’t it? Taking a cab to do a thing like that?”

“Nerves of steel.”

“If they’ve got nerves of steel, why did they run away last night?”

She was quiet for a moment.

“That really doesn’t make any sense,” she said. “Because they can’t run forever. They must know that. They must know that sooner or later they’re going to have to turn around and bite back.”

“I agree. And they should have done it right here. Right now. This is their turf. I don’t understand why they didn’t.”

“It will be a hell of a bite. Their whole professional lives are on the line. You should be very careful.”

“You too,” I said. “Not just me.”

“Offense is the best defense.”

“Agreed,” I said.

“So are we going after them?”

“You bet your ass.”

“Which one first?”

“Marshall,” I said. “He’s the one I want.”

“Why?”

“Rule of thumb,” I said. “Chase the one they sent farthest away, because they see him as the weakest link.”

“Now?” she said.

I shook my head.

“We’re going to Paris next,” I said. “I have to see my mom.”

nineteen

We repacked our bags and moved out of our VOQ rooms and paid a final courtesy visit to Swan in his office. He had some news for us.

“I’m supposed to arrest you both,” he said.

“Why?” I said.

“You’re AWOL. Willard put a hit out on you.”

“What, worldwide?”

Swan shook his head. “This post only. They found your car at Andrews and Willard talked to Transportation Corps. So he knew you were headed here.”

“When did you get the telex?”

“An hour ago.”

“When did we leave here?”

“An hour before that.”

“Where did we go?”

“No idea. You didn’t say. I assumed you were returning to base.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Better not tell me where you’re really going.”

“Paris,” I said. “Personal time.”

“What’s going on?”

“I wish I knew.”

“You want me to call you a cab?”

“That would be great.”

That would be great.

Ten minutes later we were in another Mercedes-Benz, heading back the way we had come fifteen hours before.

We had a choice of Lufthansa or Air France from Frankfurt-am-Main to Paris. I chose Air France. I figured their coffee would be better, and I figured if Willard got around to checking civilian carriers he would hit on Lufthansa first. I figured he was that kind of a simpleton.

We swapped two more of the forged travel vouchers for two seats in coach on the ten o'clock flight. Waited in the gate lounge. We were in BDUs, but we didn't really stand out. There were American military uniforms all over the airport. I saw some XII Corps MPs, prowling in pairs. But I wasn't worried. I figured they were on routine cooperation with the civilian cops. They weren't looking for us. I had the feeling that Willard's telex was going to stay on Swan's desk for an hour or two.

We boarded on time and stuffed our bags in the overhead. Buckled up and settled in. There were a dozen military on the plane with us. Paris always was a popular R&R destination for people stationed in Germany. The weather was still misty. But it wasn't bad enough to delay us any. We took off on time and climbed over the gray city and struck out south and west across pastel fields and huge tracts of forest. Then we climbed through the cloud into the sun and we couldn't see the ground anymore.

It was a short flight. We started our descent during my second cup of coffee. Summer was drinking juice. She looked nervous. Part excited, and part worried. I figured she had never been to Paris before. And I figured she had never been AWOL before either. I could see it was weighing on her. Truth is, it was weighing on me a little too. It was a complicating factor. I could have done without it. But I wasn't surprised to be hit with it. It had always been the obvious next step for Willard to take. Now I figured we were going to be chased around the world by BOLO messages. *Be on the lookout for.* Or else we were going to have a generalized all-points bulletin dumped on us.

We landed at Roissy–Charles de Gaulle and were off the plane and in the jetway by eleven-thirty in the morning. The airport was crowded. The taxi line was a zoo, just like it had been when Joe and I arrived the last time. So we gave up on it and walked to the *navette* station. Waited in line and climbed into the little bus. It was packed and uncomfortable. But Paris was warmer than Frankfurt had been. There was a watery sun out and I knew the city was going to look spectacular.

“Been here before?” I said.

“Never,” Summer said.

“Don’t look at the first twenty klicks,” I said. “Wait until we’re inside the Périphérique.”

“What’s that?”

“Like a ring road. Like the Beltway. That’s where the good part starts.”

“Your mom live inside it?”

I nodded. “On one of the nicest avenues in town. Where all the embassies are. Near the Eiffel Tower.”

“Are we going straight there?”

“Tomorrow,” I said. “We’re going to be tourists first.”

“Why?”

“I have to wait until my brother gets in. I can’t go on my own. We have to go together.”

She said nothing to that. Just glanced at me. The bus started up and pulled away from the curb. She watched out the window the whole way. I could see by the reflection of her face in the glass that she agreed with me. Inside the Périphérique was better.

We got out at the Place de l'Opéra and stood on the sidewalk and let the rest of the passengers swarm ahead of us. I figured we should choose a hotel and dump our bags before we did anything else.

We walked south on the Rue de la Paix, through the Place Vendôme, down to the Tuileries. Then we turned right and walked straight up the Champs-Élysées. There might have been better places to walk with a pretty woman on a lazy day under a watery winter sun, but right then I couldn't readily recall any. We made a left onto the Rue Marbeuf and came out on the Avenue George V just about opposite the George V Hotel.

"OK for you?" I said.

"Will they let us in?" Summer asked.

"Only one way to find out."

We crossed the street and a guy in a top hat opened the door for us. The girl at the desk had a bunch of little flags on her lapel, one for each language she spoke. I used French, which pleased her. I gave her two vouchers and asked for two rooms. She didn't hesitate. She went right ahead and gave us keys just like I had paid with gold bullion, or a credit card. The George V was one of those places. There was nothing they hadn't seen before. Or if there was, they weren't about to admit it to anyone.

The rooms the multilingual girl gave us both faced south and both had a partial view of the Eiffel Tower. One was decorated in shades of pale blue and had a sitting area and a bathroom the size of a tennis court. The other was three doors down the hall. It was done in parchment yellow and it had an iron Juliet balcony.

"Your choice," I said.

"I'll take the one with the balcony," she said.

We dumped our bags and washed up and met in the lobby fifteen minutes later. I was ready for lunch, but Summer had other ideas.

"I want to buy clothes," she said. "Tourists don't wear BDUs."

"This one does," I said.

“So break out,” she said. “Live a little. Where should we go?”

I shrugged. You couldn’t walk twenty yards in Paris without falling over at least three clothing stores. But most of them wanted a month’s pay for a single garment.

“We could try Bon Marché,” I said.

“What’s that?”

“Department store,” I said. “It means cheap, literally.”

“A department store called *Cheap*?”

“My kind of place,” I said.

“Anywhere else?”

“Samaritaine,” I said. “On the river, at the Pont Neuf. There’s a terrace at the top with a view.”

“Let’s go there.”

It was a long walk along the river, all the way to the tip of the Île de la Cité. It took us an hour, because we kept stopping to look at things. We passed the Louvre. We browsed the little green stalls set up on the river wall.

“What does *Pont Neuf* mean?” Summer asked me.

“New Bridge,” I said.

She looked ahead at the ancient stone structure.

“It’s the oldest bridge in Paris,” I said.

“So why do they call it new?”

“Because it was new once.”

We stepped into the warmth of the store. Like all such places the cosmetics came first and filled the air with scent. Summer led me up one floor to the women’s

clothes. I sat in a comfortable chair and let her look around. She was gone for a good half hour. She came back wearing a complete new outfit. Black shoes, a black pencil skirt, a gray-and-white Breton sweater, a gray wool jacket. And a beret. She looked like a million dollars. Her BDUs and her boots were in a Samaritaine bag in her hand.

“You next,” she said. She took me up to the men’s department. The only pants they had with ninety-five-centimeter inseams were Algerian knockoffs of American blue jeans, so that set the tone. I bought a light blue sweatshirt and a black cotton bomber jacket. I kept my army boots on. They looked OK with the jeans and they matched the jacket.

“Buy a beret,” Summer said, so I bought a beret. It was black with a leather binding. I paid for the whole lot with American dollars at a pretty good rate of exchange. I dressed in the changing cubicle. Put my camouflage gear in the carrier bag. Checked the mirror and adjusted the beret to a rakish angle and stepped out.

Summer said nothing.

“Lunch now,” I said.

We went up to the ninth-floor café. It was too cold to sit out on the terrace, but we sat at a window and got pretty much the same view. We could see the Notre-Dame cathedral to the east and the Montparnasse Tower all the way to the south. The sun was still out. It was a great city.

“How did Willard find our car?” Summer said. “How would he even know where to look? The United States is a big country.”

“He didn’t find it,” I said. “Not until someone told him where it was.”

“Who?”

“Vassell,” I said. “Or Coomer. Swan’s sergeant used my name on the phone, back at XII Corps. So at the same time as they were getting Marshall off the post they were calling Willard back in Rock Creek, telling him I was over there in Germany and hassling them again. They were asking him why the hell he had let me travel. And they were telling him to recall me.”

“They can’t dictate where a special unit investigator goes.”

“They can now, because of Willard. They’re old buddies. I just figured it out. Swan as good as told us, but it didn’t click right away. Willard has ties to Armored from his time in Intelligence. Who did he talk to all those years? About that Soviet fuel crap? Armored, that’s who. There’s a relationship there. That’s why he was so hot about Kramer. He wasn’t worried about embarrassment for the army in general. He was worried about embarrassment for Armored Branch in particular.”

“Because they’re his people.”

“Correct. And that’s why Vassel and Coomer ran last night. They didn’t *run,* as such. They’re just giving Willard time and space to deal with us.”

“Willard knows he didn’t sign our travel vouchers.”

I nodded. “That’s for sure.”

“So we’re in serious trouble now. We’re AWOL and we’re traveling on stolen vouchers.”

“We’ll be OK.”

“How exactly?”

“When we get a result.”

“Are we going to?”

I didn’t answer.

After lunch we crossed the river and walked a long roundabout route back to the hotel. We looked just like tourists, in our casual clothes, carrying our Samaritaine bags. All we needed was a camera. We window-shopped in the Boulevard St.-Germain and looked at the Luxembourg Gardens. We saw Les Invalides and the École Militaire. Then we walked up the Avenue Bosquet, which took me within fifty yards of the back of my mother’s apartment house. I didn’t tell Summer that. She would have made me go in and see her. We crossed

the Seine again at the Pont de l'Alma and got coffee in a bistro on the Avenue New-York. Then we strolled up the hill to the hotel.

"Siesta time," Summer said. "Then dinner."

I was happy enough to go for a nap. I was pretty tired. I lay down on the bed in the pale blue room and fell asleep within minutes.

Summer woke me up two hours later by calling me on the phone from her room. She wanted to know if I knew any restaurants. Paris is full of restaurants, but I was dressed like an idiot and I had less than thirty bucks in my pocket. So I picked a place I knew on the Rue Vernet. I figured I could go there in jeans and a sweatshirt without getting stared at and without paying a fortune. And it was close enough to walk. No cab fare.

We met in the lobby. Summer still looked great. Her skirt and jacket looked as good for the evening as they had for the afternoon. She had abandoned her beret. I had kept mine on. We walked up the hill toward the Champs-Élysées. Halfway there, Summer did a strange thing. She took my hand in hers. It was going dark and we were surrounded by strolling couples and I guessed it felt natural to her. It felt natural to me too. It took me a minute to realize she had done it. Or, it took me a minute to realize there was anything wrong with it. It took her the same minute. At the end of it she got flustered and looked up at me and let go again.

"Sorry," she said.

"Don't be," I said. "It felt good."

"It just happened," she said.

We walked on and turned into the Rue Vernet. Found the restaurant. It was early in the evening in January and the owner found us a table right away. It was in a corner. There were flowers and a lit candle on it. We ordered water and a *pichet* of red wine to drink while we thought about the food.

"You're at home here," Summer said to me.

"Not really," I said. "I'm not at home anywhere."

“You speak pretty good French.”

“I speak pretty good English too. Doesn’t mean I feel at home in North Carolina, for instance.”

“But you like some places better than others.”

I nodded. “This one is OK.”

“Done any long-term thinking?”

“You sound like my brother. He wants me to make a plan.”

“Everything is going to change.”

“They’ll always need cops,” I said.

“Cops who go AWOL?”

“All we need is a result,” I said. “Mrs. Kramer, or Carbone. Or Brubaker, maybe. We’ve got three bites of the cherry. Three chances.”

She said nothing.

“Relax,” I said. “We’re out of the world for forty-eight hours. Let’s enjoy ourselves. Worrying isn’t going to get us anywhere. We’re in Paris.”

She nodded. I watched her face. Watched her try to get past it. Her eyes were expressive in the candlelight. It was like she had troubles in front of her, maybe piled high into stacks, like cartons. I saw her shoulder her way around them, to the quiet place in the back of the closet.

“Drink your wine,” I said. “Have fun.”

My hand was resting on the table. She reached out and squeezed it and picked up her glass.

“We’ll always have North Carolina,” she said.

We ordered three courses each off the fixed-price page of the menu. Then we took three hours to eat them. We kept the conversation away from work. We talked about personal things instead. She asked me about my family. I told her a little about Joe, and not much about my mother. She told me about her folks, and her brothers and sisters, and enough cousins that I lost track about who was who. Mostly I watched her face in the candlelight. Her skin had a copper tone mixed behind pure ebony black. Her eyes were like coal. Her jaw was delicate, like fine china. She looked impossibly small and gentle, for a soldier. But then I remembered her sharpshooter badges. More than I had.

“Am I going to meet your mom?” she said.

“If you want to,” I said. “But she’s very sick.”

“Not just a broken leg?”

I shook my head.

“She has cancer,” I said.

“Is it bad?”

“As bad as it gets.”

Summer nodded. “I figured it had to be something like that. You’ve been upset ever since you came over here the first time.”

“Have I?”

“It’s bound to bother you.”

I nodded in turn. “More than I thought it would.”

“Don’t you like her?”

“I like her fine. But, you know, nobody lives forever. Conceptually these things don’t come as a surprise.”

“I should probably stay away. It wouldn’t be appropriate if I came. You should go with Joe. Just the two of you.”

“She likes meeting new people.”

“She might not be feeling good.”

“We should wait and see. Maybe she’ll want to go out for lunch.”

“How does she look?”

“Terrible,” I said.

“Then she won’t want to meet new people.”

We sat in silence for a spell. Our waiter brought the check. We counted our cash and paid half each and left a decent tip. We held hands all the way back to the hotel. It felt like the obvious thing to do. We were alone together in a sea of troubles, some of them shared, some of them private. The guy with the top hat opened the door for us and wished us *bonne nuit. Good night.* We rode up in the elevator, side by side, not touching. When we got out on our floor Summer had to go left and I had to go right. It was an awkward moment. We didn’t speak. I could see she wanted to come with me and I sure as hell wanted to go with her. I could see her room in my mind. The yellow walls, the smell of perfume. The bed. I imagined lifting her new sweater over her head. Unzipping her new skirt and hearing it fall to the floor. I figured it would have a silk lining. I figured it would make a rustling sound.

I knew it wouldn’t be right. But we were already AWOL. We were already in all kinds of deep shit. It would be comfort and consolation, apart from whatever else it would be.

“What time in the morning?” she said.

“Early for me,” I said. “I have to be at the airport at six.”

“I’ll come with you. Keep you company.”

“Thanks.”

“My pleasure,” she said.

We stood there.

“We’ll have to get up about four,” she said.

“I guess,” I said. “About four.”

We stood there.

“Good night then, I guess,” she said.

“Sleep well,” I said.

I turned right. Didn’t look back. I heard her door open and close a second after mine.

It was eleven o’clock. I went to bed but I didn’t sleep. I just lay there and stared at the ceiling for an hour. There was city light coming in the window. It was cold and yellow and hazy. I could see the pulses from the Eiffel Tower’s party lights. They flashed gold, on and off, somewhere between fast and slow and relentless. They changed the pattern on the plaster above my head, once a second. I heard the sound of brakes on a distant street, and the yap of a small dog, and lonely footsteps far below my window, and the beep of a faraway horn. Then the city went quiet and silence crowded in on me. It howled all around me, like a siren. I raised my wrist. Checked my watch. It was midnight. I dropped my wrist back down on the bed and was hit by a wave of loneliness so bad it left me breathless.

I put the light on and rolled over to the phone. There were instructions printed on a little plate below the dial buttons. *To call another guest’s room, press three and enter the room number*. I pressed three and entered the room number. She answered, first ring.

“You awake?” I said.

“Yes,” she said.

“Want company?”

“Yes,” she said.

I pulled my jeans and sweatshirt on and walked barefoot down the corridor. Knocked at her door. She opened it and reached out her hand and pulled me

inside. She was still fully dressed. Still in her skirt and sweater. She kissed me hard at the door and I kissed her back, harder. The door swung shut behind us. I heard the hiss of its closer and the click of its latch. We headed for the bed.

She wore dark red underwear. It was made of silk, or satin. I could smell her perfume everywhere. It was in the room and on her body. She was tiny and delicate and quick and strong. The same city light was coming in the window. Now it bathed me in warmth. Gave me energy. I could see the Eiffel Tower's lights on her ceiling. We matched our rhythm to their rhythm, slow, fast, relentless. Afterward we turned away from them and lay like spoons, burned out and breathing hard, close but not speaking, like we weren't sure exactly what we had done.

I slept an hour and woke up in the same position. I had a strong sensation of something lost and something gained, but I couldn't explain either feeling. Summer stayed asleep. She was nestled solidly into the curve of my body. She smelled good. She felt warm. She felt lithe and strong and peaceful. She was breathing slow. My left arm was under her shoulders and my right arm was draped across her waist. Her hand was cupped in mine, half-open, half-curled.

I turned my head and watched the play of light on the ceiling. I heard the faint noise of a motorbike maybe a mile away, on the other side of the Arc de Triomphe. I heard a dog bark in the distance. Other than that the city was silent. Two million people were asleep. Joe was in the air, somewhere on the Great Circle route, maybe closing in on Iceland. I couldn't picture my mother. I closed my eyes. Tried to sleep again.

The alarm clock in my head went off at four. Summer was still asleep. I eased my arm out from under her and worked some kind of circulation back into my shoulder and slid out of bed and padded across the carpet to the bathroom. Then I put my pants on and shrugged into my sweatshirt and woke Summer with a kiss.

"Rise and shine, Lieutenant," I said.

She stretched her arms up high and arched her back. The sheet fell away to her

waist.

“Good morning,” she said.

I kissed her again.

“I like Paris,” she said. “I had fun here.”

“Me too.”

“Lots of fun.”

“Lobby in half an hour,” I said.

I went back to my own room and called room service for coffee. I was through shaving and showering before it arrived. I took the tray at the door wearing just a towel. Then I dressed in fresh BDUs and poured my first cup and checked my watch. It was four-twenty in the morning in Paris, which made it ten-twenty in the evening on the East Coast, which made it well after the end of bankers’ hours. And which made it seven-twenty in the evening on the West Coast, which was early enough that a hardworking guy might still be at his desk. I checked the plate on the phone again and hit nine for a line. Dialed the only number I had ever permanently memorized, which was the Rock Creek switchboard back in Virginia. An operator answered on the first ring.

“This is Reacher,” I said. “I need a number for Fort Irwin’s MP XO.”

“Sir, there’s a standing order from Colonel Willard that you should return to base immediately.”

“I’ll be right there, soon as I can. But I need that number first.”

“Sir, where are you now?”

“In a whorehouse in Sydney, Australia,” I said. “Give me that Irwin number.”

He gave me the number. I repeated it to myself and hit nine again and dialed it. Calvin Franz’s sergeant answered, second ring.

“I need Franz,” I said.

There was a click and then silence and I was settling in for a long wait when Franz came through.

“I need you to do something for me,” I said.

“Like what?”

“You’ve got a XII Corps guy called Marshall there. You know him?”

“No.”

“I need him to stay there until I can get there myself. It’s very important.”

“I can’t stop people leaving the post unless I arrest them.”

“Just tell him I called from Berlin. That should do it. As long as he thinks I’m in Germany, he’ll stay in California.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s what he’s been told to do.”

“Does he know you?”

“Not personally.”

“Then that’s an awkward conversation for me to have. Like, I can’t just walk up to a guy I never met and say, Hey, hot news, another guy *you* never met called Reacher wants you to know he’s stuck in Berlin.”

“So be subtle,” I said. “Tell him I asked you to ask him a question for me, because there’s no way I can get there myself.”

“What question?”

“Ask him about the day of Kramer’s funeral. Was he at Arlington? What did he do the rest of the day? Why didn’t he drive his guys to North Carolina? What reason did they give him for wanting to drive themselves?”

“That’s four questions.”

“Whatever, just make it sound like you’re asking on my behalf because

"Whatever, just make it sound like you're asking on my behalf because California isn't in my travel plans."

"Where can I get back to you?"

I looked down at the phone and read out the George V's number.

"That's France," he said. "Not Germany."

"Marshall doesn't need to know that," I said. "I'll be back here later."

"When are you coming to California?"

"Within forty-eight hours, I hope."

"OK," he said. "Anything else?"

"Yes," I said. "Call Fort Bird for me and ask my sergeant to get histories on General Vassell and Colonel Coomer. Specifically I want to know if either one of them has a connection with a town called Sperryville in Virginia. Born there, grew up there, family there, any kind of connection that would indicate they might know what kind of retail outlet was where. Tell her to sit on the answers until I get in touch."

"OK," he said again. "Is that it?"

"No," I said. "Also tell her to call Detective Clark in Green Valley and have him fax his street canvasses relating to the night of New Year's Eve. She'll know what I'm talking about."

"I'm glad someone will," Franz said.

He paused. He was writing stuff down.

"So is *that* it?" he said.

"For now," I said.

I hung up and made it down to the lobby about five minutes after Summer. She was waiting there. She had been much faster than me. But then, she didn't have to shave and I don't think she had made any calls or taken time for coffee. Like me, she was back in BDUs. Somehow she had cleaned her boots, or had gotten

me, she was back in BDUs. Somehow she had cleaned her boots, or had gotten them cleaned. They were gleaming.

We didn't have money for a cab to the airport. So we walked back through the predawn darkness to the Place de l'Opéra and caught the bus. It was less crowded than the last time but just as uncomfortable. We got brief glimpses of the sleeping city and then we crossed the Périphérique and ground slowly through the dismal outer suburbs.

We got to Roissy–Charles de Gaulle just before six. It was busy there. I guessed airports worked on floating time zones all their own. It was busier at six in the morning than it would be in the middle of the afternoon. There were crowds of people everywhere. Cars and buses were loading and unloading, red-eyed travelers were coming out and going in and struggling with bags. It looked like the whole world was on the move.

The arrivals screen showed that Joe's flight was already on the ground. We hiked around to the customs area's exit doors. Took our places among a big crowd of meeters and greeters. I figured Joe would be one of the first passengers through. He would have walked fast from the plane and he wouldn't have checked any luggage. No delays.

We saw a few stragglers coming out from the previous flight. They were mostly families slowed by young children or individuals who had waited for odd-sized luggage. People in the crowd turned toward them expectantly and then turned away again when they realized they weren't who they were looking for. I watched them do it for a spell. It was an interesting physical dynamic. Just subtle adjustments of posture were enough to display interest, and then lack of interest. Welcome, and then dismissal. A half-turn inward, and then a half-turn away. Sometimes it was nothing more than a transfer of body weight from one foot to the other.

The last stragglers were mixed in with the first people off of Joe's flight. There were businessmen moving fast, humping briefcases and suit carriers. There were young women in high heels and dark glasses, expensively dressed. Models? Actresses? Call girls? There were government people, French and American. I could pick them out by the way they looked. Smart and serious, plenty of eyeglasses, but their shoes and suits and coats weren't the best quality. Low-level diplomats, probably. The flight was from D.C., after all.

level diplomats, probably. The flight was from D.C., after all.

Joe came out about twelfth in line. He was in the same overcoat I had seen before, but a different suit and a different tie. He looked good. He was walking fast and carrying a black leather overnight bag. He was a head taller than anyone else. He came out of the door and stopped dead and scanned around.

“He looks just like you,” Summer said.

“But I’m a nicer person,” I said.

He saw me right away, because I was also a head taller than anyone else. I pointed to a spot outside of the main traffic stream. He shuffled through the crowd and made his way toward it. We looped around and joined him there.

“Lieutenant Summer,” he said. “I’m very pleased to meet you.”

I hadn’t seen him look at the tapes on her jacket, where it said *Summer, U.S. Army.* Or at the lieutenant’s bars on her collar. He must have remembered her name and her rank from when we had talked before.

“You OK?” I asked him.

“I’m tired,” he said.

“Want breakfast?”

“Let’s get it in town.”

The taxi line was a mile long and moving slow. We ignored it. Headed straight for the *navette* again. We missed one and were first in line for the next. It came inside ten minutes. Joe spent the waiting time asking Summer about her visit to Paris. She gave him chapter and verse, but not about the events after midnight. I stood on the curb with my back to the roadway, watching the eastern sky above the terminal roof. Dawn was breaking fast. It was going to be another sunny day. It was the tenth of January, and the weather was the best I had seen in the new decade so far.

We got in the bus and sat in three seats together that faced sideways opposite the luggage rack. Summer sat in the middle seat. Joe sat forward of her and I sat to the rear. They were small, uncomfortable seats. Hard plastic. No legroom. Joe’s

knees were up around his ears and his head was swaying from side to side with the motion. He looked pale. I guessed putting him on a bus was not much of a welcome, after an overnight flight across the Atlantic. I felt a little bad about it. But then, I was the same size. I had the same accommodation problem. And I hadn't gotten a whole lot of sleep either. And I was broke. And I guessed being on the move was better for him than standing in the taxi line for an hour.

He brightened up some after we crossed the Périphérique and entered Haussmann's urban splendor. The sun was well up by then and the city was bathed in gold and honey. The cafés were already busy and the sidewalks were already crowded with people moving at a measured pace and carrying baguettes and newspapers. Legislation limited Parisians to a thirty-five-hour workweek, and they spent a lot of the remaining hundred thirty-three taking great pleasure in not doing very much of anything. It was relaxing just to watch them.

We got out at the familiar spot in the Place de l'Opéra. Walked south the same way we had walked the week before, crossing the river at the Pont de la Concorde, turning west on the Quai d'Orsay, turning south into the Avenue Rapp. We got as far as the Rue de l'Université, where the Eiffel Tower was visible, and then Summer stopped.

"I'll go look at the tower," she said. "You guys go on ahead and see your mom."

Joe looked at me. *Does she know?* I nodded. *She knows.*

"Thanks, Lieutenant," he said. "We'll go see how she is. If she's up for it, maybe you could join us at lunch."

"Call me at the hotel," she said.

"You know where it is?" I said.

She turned and pointed north along the avenue. "Across the bridge right there and up the hill, on the left side. Straight line."

I smiled. She had a decent sense of geography. Joe looked a little puzzled. He had seen the direction she had pointed, and he knew what was up there.

"The George V?" he said.

"Why not?" I said.

"Why not?" I said.

"Is that on the army's dime?"

"More or less," I said.

"Outstanding."

Summer stretched up tall and kissed me on the cheek and shook Joe's hand. We stayed there with the weak sun on our shoulders and watched her walk away toward the base of the tower. There was already a thin stream of tourists heading the same way. We could see the souvenir sellers unpacking. We stood and watched them in the distance. Watched Summer get smaller and smaller as she got farther away.

"She's very nice," Joe said. "Where did you find her?"

"She was at Fort Bird."

"You figured out what's going on there yet?"

"I'm a little closer."

"I would hope you are. You've been there nearly two weeks."

"Remember that guy I asked you about? Willard? He would have spent time with Armored, right?"

Joe nodded. "I'm sure he reported to them direct. Fed his stuff straight into their intelligence operation."

"Do you remember any names?"

"In Armored Branch? Not really. I never paid much attention to Willard. His thing wasn't very mainstream. It was a side issue."

"Ever heard of a guy called Marshall?"

"Don't remember him," Joe said.

I said nothing. Joe turned and looked south down the avenue. Wrapped his coat tighter around him and turned his face up to the sun.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“When did you call her last?”

“The day before yesterday. It was your turn next.”

We moved off and walked down the avenue, side by side, matching our pace to the leisurely stroll of the people around us.

“Want breakfast first?” I said. “We don’t want to wake her.”

“The nurse will let us in.”

There was a car abandoned halfway up on the sidewalk. It had been in some kind of an accident. It had a smashed fender and a flat tire. We stepped out into the street to pass it by. Saw a large black vehicle double-parked on the road forty yards ahead.

We stared at it.

“Un corbillard,” Joe said.

A hearse.

We stared at it. Tried to figure which building it was waiting at. Tried to gauge the distance. The head-on perspective made it difficult. I glanced upward at the rooflines. First came a limestone Belle Époque facade, seven stories high. Then a drop to my mother’s plainer six-story building. I traced my gaze vertically all the way down the frontage. To the street. To the hearse. It was parked right in front of my mother’s door.

We ran.

There was a man in a black silk hat standing on the sidewalk. The street door to my mother’s building was open. We glanced at the man in the hat and went in through the door to the courtyard. The concierge was standing in her doorway. She had a handkerchief in her hand and tears in her eyes. She paid us no attention. We headed for the elevator. Rode up to five. The elevator was agonizingly slow.

The door to the apartment was standing open. I could see men in black coats inside. Three of them. We went in. The men in the coats stood back. They said nothing. The girl with the luminous eyes came out of the kitchen. She looked pale. She stopped when she saw us. Then she turned and walked slowly across the room to meet us.

“What?” Joe said.

She didn’t answer.

“When?” I said.

“Last night,” she said. “It was very peaceful.”

The men in the coats realized who we must be and shuffled out into the hallway. They were very quiet. They made no noise at all. Joe took an unsteady step and sat down on the sofa. I stayed where I was. I stood still in the middle of the floor.

“When?” I said again.

“At midnight,” the girl said. “In her sleep.”

I closed my eyes. Opened them again a minute later. The girl was still there. Her eyes were on mine.

“Were you with her?” I said.

She nodded.

“All the time,” she said.

“Was there a doctor here?”

“She sent him away.”

“What happened?”

“She said she felt well. She went to bed at eleven. She slept an hour, and then she just stopped breathing.”

I looked up at the ceiling. “Was she in pain?”

“Not at the end.”

“But she said she felt well.”

“Her time had come. I’ve seen it before.”

I looked at her, and then I looked away.

“Would you like to see her?” the girl said.

“Joe?” I said. He shook his head. Stayed on the sofa. I stepped toward the bedroom. There was a mahogany coffin set up on velvet-padded trestles next to the bed. It was lined with white silk and it was empty. My mother’s body was still in the bed. The sheets were made up around her. Her head was resting gently on the pillow and her arms were crossed over her chest outside the covers. Her eyes were closed. She was barely recognizable.

Summer had asked me: *Does it upset you to see dead people?*

No, I had said.

Why not? she had asked me.

I don’t know, I had said.

I had never seen my father’s body. I was away somewhere when he died. It had been a heart thing. Some VA hospital had done its best, but it was hopeless from the start. I had flown in on the morning of the funeral and had left again the same night.

Funeral, I thought.

Joe will handle it.

I stayed by my mother’s bed for five long minutes, eyes open, eyes dry. Then I turned and stepped back into the living room. It was crowded again. The *croques-morts* were back. The pallbearers. And there was an old man on the sofa, next to Joe. He was sitting stiffly. There were two walking sticks propped next to him. He had thin gray hair and a heavy dark suit with a tiny ribbon in the buttonhole. Red, white, and blue, maybe a Croix de Guerre ribbon, or the

Medaille de la Résistance. He had a small cardboard box balanced on his bony knees. It was tied with a piece of faded red string.

“This is Monsieur Lamonnier,” Joe said. “Family friend.”

The old guy grabbed his sticks and started to struggle up to shake my hand but I waved him back down and stepped over close. He was maybe seventy-five or eighty. He was lean and dried-out and relatively tall for a Frenchman.

“You’re the one she called Reacher,” he said.

I nodded.

“That’s me,” I said. “I don’t remember you.”

“We never met. But I knew your mother a long time.”

“Thanks for stopping by.”

“You too,” he said.

Touché, I thought.

“What’s in the box?” I said.

“Things she refused to keep here,” the old guy said. “But things I felt should be found here, at a time like this, by her sons.”

He handed me the box, like it was a sacred burden. I took it and put it under my arm. It felt about halfway between light and heavy. I guessed there was a book in there. Maybe an old leather-bound diary. Some other stuff too.

“Joe,” I said. “Let’s go get breakfast.”

We walked fast and aimlessly. We turned into the Rue St.-Dominique and passed by two cafés at the top of the Rue de l’Exposition without stopping. We crossed the Avenue Bosquet against the light and then we made an arbitrary left into the Rue Jean Nicot. Joe stopped at a *tabac* and bought cigarettes. I would have smiled if I had been able to. The street was named after the guy who

discovered nicotine.

We lit up together on the sidewalk and then ducked into the first café we saw. We were all done walking. We were ready for the talking.

“You shouldn’t have waited for me,” Joe said. “You could have seen her one last time.”

“I felt it happen,” I said. “Midnight last night, something hit me.”

“You could have been with her.”

“Too late now.”

“It would have been OK with me.”

“It wouldn’t have been OK with her.”

“We should have stayed a week ago.”

“She didn’t want us to stay, Joe. That wasn’t in her plan. She was her own person, entitled to her privacy. She was a mother, but that wasn’t all she was.”

He went quiet. The waiter brought us coffee and a small straw basket full of croissants. He seemed to sense the mood. He put them down gently and backed away.

“Will you see to the funeral?” I said.

Joe nodded. “I’ll make it four days from now. Can you stay?”

“No,” I said. “But I’ll get back.”

“OK,” he said. “I’ll stay a week or so. I guess I’ll need to find her will. We’ll probably have to sell her place. Unless you want it?”

I shook my head. “I don’t want it. You?”

“I don’t see how I could use it.”

“It wouldn’t have been right for me to go on my own,” I said.

Joe said nothing.

“We saw her last week,” I said. “We were all together. It was a good time.”

“You think?”

“We had fun. That’s the way she wanted it. That’s why she made the effort. That’s why she asked to go to Polidor. It wasn’t like she ate anything.”

He just shrugged. We drank our coffee in silence. I tried a croissant. It was OK, but I had no appetite. I put it back in the basket.

“Life,” Joe said. “What a completely weird thing it is. A person lives sixty years, does all kinds of things, knows all kinds of things, *feels* all kinds of things, and then it’s over. Like it never happened at all.”

“We’ll always remember her.”

“No, we’ll remember parts of her. The parts she chose to share. The tip of the iceberg. The rest, only she knew about. Therefore the rest already doesn’t exist. As of now.”

We smoked another cigarette each and sat quiet. Then we walked back, slowly, side by side, a little burned out, at some kind of peace.

The coffin was in the *corbillard* when we got back to her building. They must have stood it upright in the elevator. The concierge was out on the sidewalk, standing next to the old man with the medal ribbon. He was leaning on his walking sticks. The nurse was there too, standing on her own. The pallbearers had their hands clasped in front of them. They were looking down at the ground.

“They’re taking her to the *dépôt mortuaire,*” the nurse said.

The funeral parlor.

“OK,” Joe said.

I didn’t stay. I said good-bye to the nurse and the concierge and shook hands with the old guy. Then I nodded to Joe and set off walking up the avenue. I

didn’t look back. I crossed the Seine at the Pont de l’Alma and walked up the Avenue George V to the hotel. I went up in the elevator and back to my room. I still had the old guy’s box under my arm. I dropped it on the bed and stood still, completely unsure about what to do next.

I was still standing there twenty minutes later when the phone rang. It was Calvin Franz, calling from Fort Irwin in California. He had to say his name twice. The first time, I couldn’t recall who he was.

“I spoke to Marshall,” he said.

“Who?”

“Your XII Corps guy.”

I said nothing.

“You OK?”

“Sorry,” I said. “I’m fine. You spoke to Marshall.”

“He went to Kramer’s funeral. He drove Vassell and Coomer there and back. Then he claims he didn’t drive them the rest of the day because he had important Pentagon meetings all afternoon.”

“But?”

“I didn’t believe him. He’s a gofer. If Vassell and Coomer had wanted him to drive, he’d have been driving, meetings or no meetings.”

“And?”

“And knowing what kind of a hard time you would give me if I didn’t check, I checked.”

“And?”

“Those meetings must have been with himself in the toilet stall, because nobody else saw him around.”

“So what was he doing instead?”

“No idea. But he was doing something, that’s for sure. The way he answered me was just way too smooth. I mean, this all was six days ago. Who the hell remembers what meetings they had six days ago? But this guy claims to.”

“You tell him I was in Germany?”

“He seemed to know already.”

“You tell him I was staying there?”

“He seemed to take it for granted you weren’t heading for California anytime soon.”

“These guys are old buddies with Willard,” I said. “He’s promised them he’ll keep me away from them. He’s running the 110th like it’s Armored’s private army.”

“I checked those histories myself, by the way. For Vassell and Coomer, because you got me curious. There’s nothing there to suggest either one of them ever heard of any place called Sperryville, Virginia.”

“Are you sure?”

“Completely. Vassell is from Mississippi and Coomer is from Illinois. Neither of them has ever lived or served anywhere near Sperryville.”

I was quiet for a second.

“Are they married?” I said.

“Married?” Franz said. “Yes, there were wives and kids in there. But they were local girls. No in-laws in Sperryville.”

“OK,” I said.

“So what are you going to do?”

“I’m coming to California.”

I put the phone down and walked along the corridor to Summer's door. I knocked and waited. She opened up. She was back from sightseeing.

"She died last night," I said.

"I know," Summer said. "Your brother just called me from the apartment. He wanted me to make sure you were OK."

"I'm OK," I said.

"I'm very sorry."

I shrugged. "Conceptually these things don't come as a surprise."

"When was it?"

"Midnight. She just gave up."

"I feel bad. You should have gone to see her yesterday. You shouldn't have spent the day with me. We shouldn't have done all that ridiculous shopping."

"I saw her last week. We had fun. Better that last week was the last time."

"I would have wanted whatever extra time I could have gotten."

"It was always going to be an arbitrary date," I said. "I could have gone yesterday, in the afternoon, maybe. Now I'd be wishing I had stayed for the evening. If I had stayed for the evening, I'd be wishing I had stayed until midnight."

"You were in here with me at midnight. I feel bad about that too."

"Don't," I said. "I don't feel bad about it. My mother wouldn't either. She was French, after all. If she'd known those were my options, she'd have insisted."

"You're just saying that."

"Well, I guess she wasn't very broad-minded. But she always wanted whatever made us happy."

“Did she give up because she was left alone?”

I shook my head. “She wanted to be left alone so she could give up.”

Summer said nothing.

“We’re leaving,” I said. “We’ll get a night flight back.”

“California?”

“East Coast first,” I said. “There are things I need to check.”

“What things?” she said.

I didn’t tell her. She would have laughed, and right then I couldn’t have handled laughter.

Summer packed her bag and came back to my room with me. I sat on the bed and played with the string on Monsieur Lamonnier’s box.

“What’s that?” she said.

“Something some old guy brought around. He said it’s something that should be found with my mother’s stuff.”

“What’s in it?”

“I don’t know.”

“So open it.”

I shoved it across the counterpane. “You open it.”

I watched her small neat fingers work on the tight old knot. Her clear nail polish flashed in the light. She got the string off and lifted the lid. It was a shallow box made out of the kind of thick sturdy cardboard you don’t see much anymore. Inside were three things. There was a smaller box, like a jewel case. It was made of cardboard faced with dark blue watermarked paper. There was a book. And there was a cheese cutter. It was a simple length of wire with a handle on each

end. The handles were turned from dark old wood. You could see a similar thing in any *épicerie* in France. Except this one had been restrung. The wire was too thick for cheese. It looked like piano wire. It was curled and corroded, like it had been stored for a very long time.

“What is it?” Summer said.

“Looks like a garrote,” I said.

“The book is in French,” she said. “I can’t read it.”

She passed it to me. It was a printed book with a thin paper dust jacket. Not a novel. Some kind of a nonfiction memoir. The corners of the pages were foxed and stained with age. The whole thing smelled musty. The title was something to do with railroads. I opened it up and took a look. After the title page was a map of the French railroad system in the 1930s. The opening chapter seemed to be about how all the lines in the north squeezed down through Paris and then fanned out again to points south. You couldn’t travel anywhere without transiting the capital. It made sense to me. France was a relatively small country with a very big city in it. Most nations did it the same way. The capital city was always the center of the spiderweb.

I flipped to the end of the book. There was a photograph of the author on the back flap of the dust jacket. The photograph was of a forty-years-younger Monsieur Lamonnier. I recognized him with no difficulty. The blurb underneath the picture said he had lost both legs in the battles of May 1940. I recalled the stiff way he had sat on my mother’s sofa. And his walking sticks. He must have been using prosthetics. Wooden legs. What I had assumed were bony knees must have been complicated mechanical joints. The blurb went on to say he had built *Le Chemin de Fer Humain.* The Human Railroad. He had been awarded the Resistance Medal by President Charles de Gaulle, and the George Cross by the British, and the Distinguished Service Medal by the Americans.

“What is it?” Summer said.

“Seems like I just met an old Resistance hero,” I said.

“What’s it got to do with your mom?”

“Maybe she and this Lamonnier guy were sweethearts way back.”

“And he wants to tell you and Joe about it? About what a great guy he was? At a time like this? That’s a little self-centered, isn’t it?”

I read on a little more. Like most French books it used a weird construction called the past historic tense, which was reserved for written stuff only. It made it hard for a nonnative to read. And the first part of the story was not very gripping. It made the point very laboriously that trains incoming from the north disgorged their passengers at the Gare du Nord terminal, and if those passengers wanted to carry on south they had to cross Paris on foot or by car or subway or taxi to another terminal like the Gare d’Austerlitz or the Gare du Lyon before joining a southbound train.

“It’s about something called the Human Railroad,” I said. “Except there aren’t many humans in it so far.”

I passed the book to Summer and she flipped through it again.

“It’s signed,” she said.

She showed me the first blank page. There was an old faded inscription on it. Blue ink, neat penmanship. Someone had written: *À Béatrice de Pierre.* To Beatrice from Pierre.

“Was your mother called Beatrice?” Summer asked.

“No,” I said. “Her name was Josephine. Josephine Moutier, and then Josephine Reacher.”

She passed the book back to me.

“I think I’ve heard of the Human Railroad,” she said. “It was a World War Two thing. It was about rescuing bomber crews that were shot down over Belgium and Holland. Local Resistance cells scooped them up and passed them along a chain all the way down to the Spanish border. Then they could get back home and get back in action. It was important because trained crews were valuable. Plus it saved people from years in a POW camp.”

“That would explain Lamonnier’s medals,” I said. “One from each Allied government.”

I put the book down on the bed and thought about packing. I figured I would throw the Samaritaine jeans and sweatshirt and jacket away. I didn't need them. Didn't want them. Then I looked at the book again and saw that some of the pages had different edges than some of the others. I picked it up and opened it and found some halftone photographs. Most of them were posed studio portraits, reproduced head-and-shoulders six to a page. The others were clandestine action shots. They showed Allied airmen hiding in cellars lit by candles placed on barrels, and small groups of furtive men dressed in borrowed peasant clothing on country tracks, and Pyrenean guides amid snowy mountainous terrain. One of the action shots showed two men with a young girl between them. The girl was not much more than a child. She was holding both men's hands, smiling gaily, leading them down a street in a city. Paris, almost certainly. The caption underneath the picture said: *Béatrice de service à ses travaux.* Beatrice on duty, doing her work. Beatrice looked to be about thirteen years old.

I was pretty sure Beatrice was my mother.

I flipped back to the pages of studio portraits and found her. It was some kind of a school photograph. She looked to be about sixteen in it. The caption was *Béatrice en 1947.* Beatrice in 1947. I flipped back and forth through the text and pieced together Lamonnier's narrative thesis. There were two main tactical problems with the Human Railroad. Finding the downed airmen was not one of them. They fell out of the sky, literally, all over the Low Countries, dozens of them every moonless night. If the Resistance got to them first, they stood a chance. If the Wehrmacht got to them first, they didn't. It was a matter of pure luck. If they got lucky and the Resistance got to them ahead of the Germans, they would be hidden, their uniforms would be exchanged for some kind of plausible disguises, forged papers would be issued, rail tickets would be bought, a courier would escort them on a train to Paris, and they would be on their way home.

Maybe.

The first tactical problem was the possibility of a spot check on the train itself, sometime during the initial journey. These were blond corn-fed farm boys from America, or redheaded British boys from Scotland, or anything else that didn't look dark and pinched and wartime French. They stood out. They didn't speak the language. Lots of subterfuges were developed. They would pretend to be asleep, or sick, or mute, or deaf. The couriers would do all the talking.

The second tactical problem was transiting Paris itself. Paris was crawling with Germans. There were random checkpoints everywhere. Clumsy lost foreigners stuck out like sore thumbs. Private automobiles had disappeared completely. Taxis were hard to find. There was no gasoline. Men walking in the company of other men became targets. So women were used as couriers. And then one of the dodges Lamonnier dreamed up was to use a kid he knew. She would meet airmen at the Gare du Nord and lead them through the streets to the Gare du Lyon. She would laugh and skip and hold their hands and pass them off as older brothers or visiting uncles. Her manner was unexpected and disarming. She got people through checkpoints like ghosts. She was thirteen years old.

Everyone in the chain had code names. Hers was Béatrice. Lamonnier's was Pierre.

I took the blue cardboard jewel case out of the box. Opened it up. Inside was a medal. It was *La Medaille de la Résistance.* The Resistance Medal. It had a fancy red, white, and blue ribbon and the medal itself was gold. I turned it over. On the back it was neatly engraved: *Josephine Moutier.* My mother.

"She never told you?" Summer said.

I shook my head. "Not a word. Not one, ever."

Then I looked back in the box. *What the hell was the garrote about?*

"Call Joe," I said. "Tell him we're coming over. Tell him to get Lamonnier back there."

We were at the apartment fifteen minutes later. Lamonnier was already there. Maybe he had never left. I gave the box to Joe and told him to check it out. He was faster than I had been, because he started with the medal. The name on the back gave him a clue. He glanced through the book and looked up at Lamonnier when he recognized him in the author photograph. Then he scanned through the text. Looked at the pictures. Looked at me.

"She ever mention any of this to you?" he said.

"Never. You?"

“Never,” he said.

I looked at Lamonnier. “What was the garrote for?”

Lamonnier said nothing.

“Tell us,” I said.

“She was found out,” he said. “By a boy at her school. A boy of her own age. An unpleasant boy, the son of collaborators. He teased and tormented her about what he was going to do.”

“What did he do?”

“At first, nothing. That was extremely unsettling for your mother. Then he demanded certain indignities as the price of his continued silence. Naturally, your mother refused. He told her he would inform on her. So she pretended to relent. She arranged to meet him under the Pont des Invalides late one night. She had to slip out of her house. But first she took her mother’s cheese cutter from the kitchen. She replaced the wire with a string from her father’s piano. It was the G below middle C, I think. It was still missing, years later. She met the boy and she strangled him.”

“She *what*?” Joe said.

“She strangled him.”

“She was thirteen years old.”

Lamonnier nodded. “At that age the physical differences between girls and boys are not a significant handicap.”

“She was thirteen years old and she *killed a guy*?”

“They were desperate times.”

“What exactly happened?” I said.

“She used the garrote. As she had planned. It’s not a difficult instrument to use. Nerve and determination were all she needed. Then she used the original cheese wire to attach a weight to his belt. She slipped him into the Seine. He was gone

and she was safe. The Human Railroad was safe."

Joe stared at him. "You let her do that?"

Lamonnier shrugged. An expressive, Gallic shrug, just like my mother's.

"I didn't know about it," he said. "She didn't tell me until afterward. I suppose at first my instinct would have been to forbid it. But I couldn't have taken care of it myself. I had no legs. I couldn't have climbed down under the bridge and I wouldn't have been steady enough for fighting. I had a man loosely employed as an assassin, but he was busy elsewhere. In Belgium, I think. I couldn't have afforded the risk of waiting for him to get back. So on balance I think I would have told her to go ahead. They were desperate times, and we were doing vital work."

"Did this really happen?" Joe said.

"I know it did," Lamonnier said. "Fish ate through the boy's belt. He floated up some days later, a short distance downstream. We passed a nervous week. But nothing came of it."

"How long did she work for you?" I asked.

"All through 1943," he said. "She was extremely good. But her face became well known. At first her face was her guardian. It was so young and so innocent. How could anyone suspect a face like that? Then it became a liability. She became familiar to *les boches.* And how many brothers and cousins and uncles could one girl have? So I had to stand her down."

"Did you recruit her?"

"She volunteered. She pestered me until I let her help."

"How many people did she save?"

"Eighty men," Lamonnier said. "She was my best Paris courier. She was a phenomenon. The consequences of discovery didn't bear thinking about. She lived with the worst kind of fear in her gut for a whole year, but never once did she let me down."

We all sat quiet

We all sat quiet.

“How did *you* start?” I asked.

“I was a war cripple,” he said. “One of many. We were too medically burdensome for them to want us as hostage prisoners. We were useless as forced laborers. So they left us in Paris. But I wanted to do something. I wasn’t physically capable of fighting. But I could organize. Those are not physical skills. I knew that trained bomber crews were worth their weight in gold. So I decided to get them home.”

“Why would my mother go her whole life without mentioning this stuff?”

Lamonnier shrugged again. Weary, unsure, still mystified all those years later.

“Many reasons, I think,” he said. “France was a conflicted country in 1945. Many had resisted, many had collaborated, many had done neither. Most preferred a clean slate. And she was ashamed of killing the boy, I think. It weighed on her conscience. I told her it hadn’t been a choice. It wasn’t a voluntary action. I told her it had been the right thing to do. But she preferred to forget the whole thing. I had to beg her to accept her medal.”

Joe and I and Summer said nothing. We all sat quiet.

“I wanted her sons to know,” Lamonnier said.

Summer and I walked back to the hotel. We didn’t talk. I felt like a guy who suddenly finds out he was adopted. *You’re not the man I thought you were.* All my life I had assumed I was what I was because of my father, the career Marine. Now I felt different genes stirring. My father hadn’t killed the enemy at the age of thirteen. But my mother had. She had lived through desperate times and she had stepped up and done what was necessary. At that moment I started to miss her more than I would have thought possible. At that moment I knew I would miss her forever. I felt empty. I had lost something I never knew I had.

We carried our bags down to the lobby and checked out at the desk. We gave back our keys and the multilingual girl prepared a long and detailed account. I

had to countersign it. I knew I was in trouble as soon as I saw it. It was outrageously expensive. I had figured the army might overlook the forged vouchers in exchange for a result. But now I wasn't so sure. I figured the George V tariff might change their view. It was like adding insult to injury. We had been there one night, but we were being charged for two because we were late checking out. My room service coffee cost as much as a meal in a bistro. My phone call to Rock Creek cost as much as a three-course lunch at the best restaurant in town. My phone call to Franz in California cost as much as a five-course dinner. Summer's call to Joe less than a mile away in my mother's apartment asking him to get hold of Lamonnier was billed at less than two minutes and cost as much as the room service coffee. And we had been charged fees for taking incoming calls. One was from Franz to me and the other was from Joe to Summer, when he asked her to check if I was OK. That little piece of sibling consideration was going to cost the government five bucks. Altogether it was the worst hotel bill I had ever seen.

The multilingual girl printed two copies. I signed one for her and she folded the other into an embossed George V envelope and gave it to me. For my records, she said. *For my court-martial,* I thought. I put it in my inside jacket pocket. Took it out again about six hours later, when I finally realized who had done what, and to who, and why, and how.

twenty

We made the familiar trek to the Place de l'Opéra and caught the airport bus. It was my sixth time on that bus in about a week. The sixth time was no more comfortable than the previous five. It was the discomfort that started me thinking.

We got out at international departures and found the Air France ticket desk. Swapped two vouchers for two seats to Dulles on the eleven o'clock red-eye. That gave us a long wait. We humped our bags across the concourse and started out in a bar. Summer wasn't conversational. I guess she couldn't think of anything to say. But the truth was, I was doing OK at that point. Life was unfolding the same way it always had for everyone. Sooner or later you ended up an orphan. There was no escaping it. It had happened that way for a thousand generations. No point in getting all upset about it.

We drank bottles of beer and looked for somewhere to eat. I had missed breakfast and lunch and I guessed Summer hadn't eaten either. We walked past all the little tax-exempt boutiques and found a place that was made up to look like a sidewalk bistro. We pooled our few remaining dollars and checked the menu and worked out that we could afford one course each, plus juice for her and coffee for me, and a tip for the waiter. We ordered *steak frites*, which turned out to be a decent slab of meat with shoestring fries and mayonnaise. You could get good food anywhere in France. Even an airport.

After an hour we moved down to the gate. We were still early and it was almost deserted. Just a few transit passengers, all shopped out, or broke like us. We sat far away from them and stared into space.

"Feels bad, going back," Summer said. "You can forget how much trouble you're in when you're away."

"All we need is a result," I said.

"We're not going to get one. It's been ten days and we're nowhere."

I nodded. Ten days since Mrs. Kramer died, six days since Carbone died. Five days since Delta had given me a week to clear my name.

"We've got nothing," Summer said. "Not even the easy stuff. We didn't even

"We've got nothing," Summer said. "Not even the easy stuff. We didn't even find the woman from Kramer's motel. That shouldn't have been difficult."

I nodded again. She was right. That shouldn't have been difficult.

We boarded forty minutes before takeoff. Summer and I had seats behind an old couple in an exit row. I wished we could change places with them. I would have been glad of the extra room. We took off on time and I spent the first hour getting more and more cramped and uncomfortable. The stewardess served a meal that I couldn't have eaten even if I had wanted to, because I didn't have enough room to move my elbows and operate the silverware.

One thought led to another.

I thought about Joe flying in the night before. He would have flown coach. That was clear. A civil servant on a personal trip doesn't fly any other way. He would have been cramped and uncomfortable all night long, a little more than me because he was an inch taller. So I felt bad all over again about putting him in the bus to town. I recalled the hard plastic seats and his cramped position and the way his head was jerked around by the motion. I should have sprung for a cab from the city and kept it waiting at the curb. I should have found a way to scare up some cash.

One thought led to another.

I pictured Kramer and Vassell and Coomer flying in from Frankfurt on New Year's Eve. American Airlines. A Boeing jet. No more spacious than any other jet. An early start from XII Corps. A long flight to Dulles. I pictured them walking down the jetway, stiff, airless, dehydrated, uncomfortable.

One thought led to another.

I pulled the George V bill out of my pocket. Opened the envelope. Read it through. Read it through again. Examined every line and every item.

The hotel bill, the airplane, the bus to town.

The bus to town, the airplane, the hotel bill.

I closed my eyes.

I thought about things that Sanchez and the Delta adjutant and Detective Clark and Andrea Norton and Summer herself had said to me. I thought about the crowd of meeters and greeters we had seen in the Roissy–Charles de Gaulle arrivals hall. I thought about Sperryville, Virginia. I thought about Mrs. Kramer's house in Green Valley.

In the end dominoes fell all over the place and landed in ways that made nobody look very good. Least of all me, because I had made many mistakes, including one big one that I knew for sure was going to come right back and bite me in the ass.

I kept myself so busy pondering my prior mistakes that I let my preoccupation lead me into making another one. I spent all my time thinking about the past and no time at all thinking about the future. About countermeasures. About what would be waiting for us at Dulles. We touched down at two in the morning and came out through the customs hall and walked straight into a trap set by Willard.

Standing in the same place they had stood six days earlier were the same three warrant officers from the Provost Marshal General's office. Two W3s and a W4. I saw them. They saw us. I spent a second wondering how the hell Willard had done it. Did he have guys standing by at every airport in the country all day and all night? Did he have a Europe-wide trace out on our travel vouchers? Could he do that himself? Or was the FBI involved? The Department of the Army? The State Department? Interpol? NATO? I had no idea. I made an absurd mental note that one day I should try to find out.

Then I spent another second deciding what to do about the situation.

Delay was not an option. Not now. Not in Willard's hands. I needed freedom of movement and freedom of action for twenty-four or forty-eight more hours. Then I would go see Willard. I would go see him happily. Because at that point I would be ready to slap him around and arrest him.

The W4 walked up to us with his W3s at his back.

"I have orders to place you both in handcuffs," he said.

“Ignore your orders,” I said.

“I can’t,” he said.

“Try.”

“I can’t,” he said again.

I nodded.

“OK, we’ll trade,” I said. “You try it with the handcuffs, I’ll break your arms. You walk us to the car, we’ll go quietly.”

He thought about it. He was armed. So were his guys. We weren’t. But nobody wants to shoot people in the middle of an airport. Not unarmed people from your own unit. That would lead to a bad conscience. And paperwork. And he didn’t want a fistfight. Not three against two. I was too big and Summer was too small to make it fair.

“Deal?” he said.

“Deal,” I lied.

“So let’s go.”

Last time he had walked ahead of me and his hot-dog W3s had stayed on my shoulders. I sincerely hoped he would repeat that pattern. I guessed the W3s figured themselves for real badass sons of bitches and I guessed they were close to being correct, but it was the W4 I was most worried about. He looked like the genuine article. But he didn’t have eyes in the back of his head. So I hoped he would walk in front.

He did. Summer and I stayed side by side with our bags in our hands and the W3s formed up wide and behind us in an arrowhead pattern. The W4 led the way. We went out through the doors into the cold. Turned toward the restricted lane where they had parked last time. It was past two in the morning and the airport approach roads were completely deserted. There were lonely pools of yellow light from fixtures up on posts. It had been raining. The ground was wet.

We crossed the public pickup lane and crossed the median where the bus shelters were. We headed onward into the dark. I could see the bulk of a parking garage

were. We headed onward into the dark. I could see the bulk of a parking garage half-left and the green Chevy Caprice far away to the right. We turned toward it. Walked in the roadway. Most other times of the day we would have been mown down by traffic. But right then the whole place was still and silent. Past two o'clock in the morning.

I dropped my bag and used both hands and shoved Summer out of the way. Stopped dead and jerked my right elbow backward and smashed the right-hand W3 hard in the face. Kept my feet planted and twisted the other way like a violent calisthenic exercise and smacked the left-hand W3 with my left elbow. Then I stepped forward and met the W4 as he spun toward the noise and came in for me. I hit him with a straight left to the chest. His weight was moving and my weight was moving and the blow messed him up pretty good. I followed it with a right hook to his chin and put him on the ground. Turned back to the W3s to check how they were doing. They were both down on their backs. There was some blood on their faces. Broken noses, loosened teeth. A lot of shock and surprise. An excellent stun factor. I was pleased. They were good, and I was better. I checked the W4. He wasn't doing much. I squatted down next to the W3s and took their Berettas out of their holsters. Then I twisted away and took the W4's out of his. Threaded all three guns on my forefinger. Then I used my other hand to find the car keys. The right-hand W3 had them in his pocket. I took them out and tossed them to Summer. She was back on her feet. She was looking a little dismayed.

I gave her the three Berettas and I dragged the W4 by his collar to the nearest bus shelter. Then I went back for the W3s and dragged them over, one in each hand. I got them all lined up facedown on the floor. They were conscious, but they were groggy. Heavy blows to the head are a lot more consequential in real life than they are in the movies. And I was breathing hard myself. Almost panting. The adrenaline was kicking in. Some kind of a delayed reaction. Fighting has an effect on both parties to the deal.

I crouched down next to the W4.

"I apologize, Chief," I said. "But you got in the way."

He said nothing. Just stared up at me. Anger, shock, wounded pride, confusion.

"Now listen," I said. "Listen carefully. You never saw us. We weren't here. We never came. You waited for hours, but we didn't show. You came back out and some thief had boosted your car in the night. That's what happened. OK?"

some thief had boosted your car in the night. That's what happened, OK?

He tried to say something, but the words wouldn't come out right.

"Yes, I know," I said. "It's pretty weak and it makes you look real stupid. But how good does it make you look that you let us escape? That you didn't handcuff us like you were ordered to?"

He said nothing.

"That's your story," I said. "We didn't show, and your car was stolen. Stick to it or I'll put it about that it was the lieutenant who took you down. A ninety-pound girl. One against three. People will love that. They'll go nuts for it. And you know how rumors can follow you around forever."

He said nothing.

"Your choice," I said.

He shrugged. Said nothing.

"I apologize," I said. "Sincerely."

We left them there and grabbed our bags and ran to their car. Summer unlocked it and we slid in and she fired it up. Put it in gear and moved away from the curb.

"Go slow," I said.

I waited until we were alongside the bus shelter and then wound the window down and tossed the Berettas out on the sidewalk. Their cover story wouldn't hold up if they lost their weapons as well as their car. The three guns landed near the three guys and they all got up on their hands and knees and started to crawl toward them.

"Now go," I said.

Summer hit the gas hard and the tires lit up and about a second later we were well outside handgun range. She kept her foot down and we left the airport doing about ninety miles an hour.

"You OK?" I said.

“So far,” she said.

“I’m sorry I had to shove you.”

“We should have just run,” she said. “We could have lost them in the terminal.”

“We needed a car,” I said. “I’m sick of taking the bus.”

“But now we’re *way* out of line.”

“That’s for sure,” I said.

I checked my watch. It was close to three in the morning. We were heading south from Dulles. Going nowhere, fast. In the dark. We needed a destination.

“You know my phone number at Bird?” I said.

“Sure,” Summer said.

“OK, pull over at the next place with a phone.”

She spotted an all-night gas station about five miles later. It was all lit up on the horizon. We pulled in and checked it out. There was a miniature grocery store behind the pumps but it was closed. At night you had to pay for your gas through a bulletproof window. There was a pay phone outside next to the air hose. It was in an aluminum box mounted on the wall. The box had phone shapes drilled into the sides. Summer dialed my Fort Bird office number and handed me the receiver. I heard one cycle of ring tone and then my sergeant answered. The night-duty woman. The one with the baby son.

“This is Reacher,” I said.

“You’re in deep shit,” she said.

“And that’s the good news,” I said.

“What’s the bad news?”

“You’re going to join me right there in it. What kind of babysitting arrangements

have you got?”

“My neighbor’s girl stays. From the trailer next door.”

“Can she stay an hour longer?”

“Why?”

“I want you to meet me. I want you to bring me some stuff.”

“It’ll cost you.”

“How much?”

“Two dollars an hour. For the babysitter.”

“I haven’t got two dollars. That’s something I want you to bring. Money.”

“You want me to give you money?”

“A loan,” I said. “Couple of days.”

“How much?”

“Whatever you’ve got.”

“When and where?”

“When you get off. At six. At the diner near the strip club.”

“What do you need me to bring?”

“Phone records,” I said. “All calls made out of Fort Bird starting from midnight on New Year’s Eve until maybe the third of January. And an army phone book. I need to speak to Sanchez and Franz and all kinds of other people. And I need Major Marshall’s personal file. The XII Corps guy. I need you to get a copy faxed in from somewhere.”

“Anything else?”

“I want to know where Vassell and Coomer parked their car when they came down for dinner on the fourth. I want you to see if anyone noticed.”

down for dinner on the fourth. I want you to see if anyone noticed."

"OK," she said. "Is that it?"

"No," I said. "I want to know where Major Marshall was on the second and the third. Scare up some travel clerk somewhere and see if any vouchers were issued. And I want a phone number for the Jefferson Hotel in D.C."

"That's an awful lot to do in three hours."

"That's why I'm asking you instead of the day guy. You're better than he is."

"Stick it," she said. "Flattery doesn't work on me."

"Hope springs eternal," I said.

We got back into the car and got back on the road. Headed east for I-95. I told Summer to go slow. If I didn't, then the way she was likely to drive on empty roads at night would get us to the diner well before my sergeant, and I didn't want that to happen. My sergeant would get there around six-thirty. I wanted to get there after her, maybe six-forty. I wanted to check she hadn't done her duty and dropped a dime on me and set up an ambush. It was unlikely, but not impossible. I wanted to be able to drive by and check. I didn't want to be already in a booth drinking coffee when Willard showed up.

"Why do you want all that stuff?" Summer asked.

"I know what happened to Mrs. Kramer," I said.

"How?"

"I figured it out," I said. "Like I should have at the beginning. But I didn't think. I didn't have enough imagination."

"It's not enough to *imagine* things."

"It is," I said. "Sometimes that's what it's all about. Sometimes that's all an investigator has got. You have to imagine what people must have done. The way they must have thought and acted. You have to think yourself into *being* them."

“Being who?”

“Vassell and Coomer,” I said. “We know who they are. We know what they’re like. Therefore we can predict what they did.”

“What did they do?”

“They got an early start and flew all day from Frankfurt. On New Year’s Eve. They wore Class As, trying to get an upgrade. Maybe they succeeded, with American Airlines out of Germany. Maybe they didn’t. Either way, they couldn’t have counted on it. They must have been prepared to spend eight hours in coach.”

“So?”

“Would guys like Vassell and Coomer be happy to wait in the Dulles taxi line? Or take a shuttle bus to the city? All cramped and uncomfortable?”

“No,” Summer said. “They wouldn’t do either thing.”

“Exactly,” I said. “They wouldn’t do either thing. They’re way too important for that. They wouldn’t dream of it. Not in a million years. Guys like that, they need to be met by a car and a driver.”

“Who?”

“Marshall,” I said. “That’s who. He’s their blue-eyed gofer. He was already over here, at their service. He must have picked them up at the airport. Maybe Kramer too. Did Kramer take the Hertz bus to the rental lot? I don’t think so. I think Marshall drove him there. Then he drove Vassell and Coomer to the Jefferson Hotel.”

“And?”

“And *he stayed there with them,* Summer. I think he had a room booked. Maybe they wanted him on the spot to drive them to National the next morning. He was going with them, after all. He was going to Irwin too. Or maybe they just wanted to talk to him, urgently. Just the three of them, Vassell, Coomer, and Marshall. Maybe it was easier to talk without Kramer there. And Marshall had a lot of stuff to talk about. They started his temporary detached duty in November. You told

me that yourself. November was when the Wall started coming down. November was when the danger signals started coming in. So they sent him over here in November to get his ear close to the ground in the Pentagon. That's my guess. But whatever, Marshall stayed the night with Vassell and Coomer at the Jefferson Hotel. I'm sure of it."

"OK, so?"

"Marshall was at the hotel, and his car was in valet parking. And you know what? I checked our bill from Paris. They charged an arm and a leg for everything. Especially the phone calls. But not *all* the phone calls. The room-to-room calls we made didn't show up at all. You called me at six, about dinner. Then I called you at midnight, because I was lonely. Those calls didn't show up anywhere on the bill. Hit three for another room, and it's free. Dial nine for a line, and it triggers the computer. There were no calls on Vassell and Coomer's bill and therefore we thought they had *made* no calls. But they *had* made calls. It's obvious. They made internal calls. Room to room. Vassell took the message from XII Corps in Germany, and then he called Coomer's room to discuss what the hell to do about the situation. And then one or the other of them picked up the phone and called Marshall's room. They called their blue-eyed gofer and told him to run downstairs and jump in his car."

"*Marshall* did it?"

I nodded. "They sent him out into the night to clean up their mess."

"Can we prove it?"

"We can make a start," I said. "I'll bet you three things. First, we'll call the Jefferson Hotel and we'll find a booking in Marshall's name for New Year's Eve. Second, Marshall's file will tell us he once lived in Sperryville, Virginia. And third, his file will tell us he's tall and heavy and right-handed."

She went quiet. Her eyelids started moving.

"Is it enough?" she said. "Is Mrs. Kramer enough of a result to get us off the hook?"

"There's more to come," I said.

It was like being in a parallel universe, watching Summer driving slow. We drifted down the highway with the world going half-speed outside our windows. The big Chevy engine was loafing along a little above idle. The tires were quiet. We passed all our familiar landmarks. The State Police facility, the spot where Kramer's briefcase had been found, the rest area, the spur to the small highway. We crawled off at the cloverleaf and I scanned the gas station and the greasy spoon and the lounge parking and the motel. The whole place was full of yellow light and fog and black shadow but I could see well enough. There was no sign of a setup. Summer turned into the lot and drove a long slow circuit. There were three eighteen-wheelers parked like beached whales and a couple of old sedans that were probably abandoned. They had the look. They had dull paint and soft tires and they were low on their springs. There was an old Ford pickup truck with a baby seat strapped to the bench. I guessed that was my sergeant's. There was nothing else. Six-forty in the morning, and the world was dark and still and quiet.

We put the car out of sight behind the lounge bar and walked across the lot to the diner. Its windows were misted by the cooking steam. There was hot white light inside. It looked like a Hopper painting. My sergeant was alone at a booth in back. We walked in and sat down beside her. She hauled a grocery bag up off the floor. It was full of stuff.

"First things first," she said.

She put her hand in the bag and came out with a bullet. She stood it upright on the table in front of me. It was a standard nine-millimeter Parabellum. Standard NATO load. Full metal jacket. For a sidearm or a submachine gun. The shiny brass casing had something scratched on it. I picked it up. Looked at it. There was a word engraved there. It was rough and uneven. It had been done fast and by hand. It said: *Reacher.*

"A bullet with my name on it," I said.

"From Delta," my sergeant said. "Hand-delivered, yesterday."

"Who by?"

"The young one with the beard."

“Charming,” I said. “Remind me to kick his ass.”

“Don’t joke about it. They’re awful stirred up.”

“They’re looking at the wrong guy.”

“Can you prove that?”

I paused. Knowing and proving were two different things. I dropped the bullet into my pocket and put my hands on the table.

“Maybe I can,” I said.

“You know who killed Carbone too?” Summer said.

“One thing at a time,” I said.

“Here’s your money,” my sergeant said. “It’s all I could get.”

She went into her bag again and put forty-seven dollars on the table.

“Thanks,” I said. “Call it I owe you fifty. Three bucks interest.”

“Fifty-two,” she said. “Don’t forget the babysitter.”

“What else have you got?”

She came out with a concertina of printer paper. It was the kind with faint blue rulings and holes in the sides. There were lines and lines of numbers on it.

“The phone records,” she said.

Then she gave me a sheet of army memo paper with a 202 number on it.

“The Jefferson Hotel,” she said.

Then she gave me a roll of curled fax paper.

“Major Marshall’s personal file,” she said.

She followed that with an army phone book. It was thick and green and had numbers in it for all our posts and installations worldwide. Then she gave me

numbers in it for all our posts and installations worldwide. Then she gave me more curled fax paper. It was Detective Clark's street canvass results, from New Year's Eve, up in Green Valley.

"Franz in California told me you wanted it," she said.

"Great," I said. "Thanks. Thanks for everything."

She nodded. "You better believe I'm better than the day guy. And someone better be prepared to say so when they start with the force reduction."

"I'll tell them," I said.

"Don't," she said. "Won't help a bit, coming from you. You'll either be dead or in prison."

"You brought all this stuff," I said. "You haven't given up on me yet."

She said nothing.

"Where did Vassell and Coomer park their car?" I asked.

"On the fourth?" she said. "Nobody knows for sure. The first night patrol saw a staff car backed in all by itself at the far end of the lot. But you can't take that to the bank. Patrol didn't get a plate number, so it's not a positive ID. And the second patrol can't remember it at all. Therefore it's one guy's report against another's."

"What exactly did the first guy see?"

"He called it a staff car."

"Was it a black Grand Marquis?"

"It was a black something," she said. "But all staff cars are black or green. Nothing unique about a black car."

"But it was out of the way?"

She nodded. "On its own, far end of the lot. But the second guy can't confirm it."

“Where was Major Marshall on the second and the third?”

“That was easier,” she said. “Two travel warrants. To Frankfurt on the second, back here on the third.”

“An overnight in Germany?”

She nodded again. “There and back.”

We sat quiet. The counterman came over with a pad and a pencil. I looked at the menu and the forty-seven dollars on the table and ordered less than two bucks’ worth of coffee and eggs. Summer took the hint and ordered juice and biscuits. That was about as cheap as we could get, consistent with staying vertical.

“Am I done here?” my sergeant asked.

I nodded. “Thanks. I mean it.”

Summer slid out to let her get up.

“Kiss your baby for me,” I said.

My sergeant just stood there, all bone and sinew. Hard as woodpecker lips. Staring straight at me.

“My mom just died,” I said. “One day your son will remember mornings like these.”

She nodded once and walked to the door. A minute later we saw her in her pickup truck, a small figure all alone at the wheel. She drove off into the dawn mist. A rope of exhaust followed behind her and then drifted away.

I shuffled all the paper into a logical pile and started with Marshall’s personal file. The quality of the fax transmission wasn’t great, but it was legible. There was the usual mass of information. On the first page I found out that Marshall had been born in September of 1958. Therefore he was thirty-one years old. He had no wife and no children. No ex-wives either. He was wedded to the military, I guessed. He was listed at six-four and two hundred twenty pounds. The army

needed to know that to keep their quartermaster percentiles up to speed. He was listed as right-handed. The army needed to know *that* because bolt-action sniper rifles are made for right-handers. Left-handed soldiers don't usually get assigned as snipers. Pigeonholing starts on day one in the military.

I turned the page.

Marshall had been born in Sperryville, Virginia, and had gone all the way through kindergarten and grade school and high school there.

I smiled. Summer looked at me, questions in her eyes. I separated the pages and slid them across to her and stretched over and used my finger to point out the relevant lines. Then I slid her the memo paper with the Jefferson Hotel number on it.

"Go find a phone," I said.

She found one just inside the door, on the wall, near the register. I saw her put two quarters in, and dial, and talk, and wait. I saw her give her name and rank and unit. I saw her listen. I saw her talk some more. I saw her wait some more. And listen some more. She put more quarters in. It was a long call. I guessed she was getting transferred all over the place. Then I saw her say thank you. I saw her hang up. I saw her come back to me, looking grim and satisfied.

"He had a room," she said. "In fact he made the booking himself, the day before. Three rooms, for him, and Vassell, and Coomer. And there was a valet parking charge."

"Did you speak to the valet station?"

She nodded. "It was a black Mercury. In just after lunch, out again at twenty to one in the morning, back in again at twenty past three in the morning, out again finally after breakfast on New Year's Day."

I riffed through the pile of paper and found the fax from Detective Clark in Green Valley. The results of his house-to-house canvass. There was a fair amount of vehicle activity listed. It had been New Year's Eve and lots of people were heading to and from parties. There had been what someone thought was a taxi on Mrs. Kramer's road, just before two o'clock in the morning.

"A staff car could be mistaken for a taxi," I said. "You know, a plain black

"A staff car could be mistaken for a taxi," I said. "You know, a plain black sedan, clean condition but a little tired, a lot of miles on it, the same shape as a Crown Victoria."

"Plausible," Summer said.

"Likely," I said.

We paid the check and left a dollar tip and counted what was left of my sergeant's loan. Decided we were going to have to keep on eating cheap, because we were going to need gas money. And phone money. And some other expenses.

"Where to now?" Summer asked me.

"Across the street," I said. "To the motel. We're going to hole up all day. A little more work, and then we sleep."

We left the Chevy hidden behind the lounge bar and crossed the street on foot. Woke the skinny guy in the motel office and asked him for a room.

"One room?" he said.

I nodded. Summer didn't object. She knew we couldn't afford two rooms. And we weren't new to sharing. Paris had worked out OK for us, as far as nighttime arrangements were concerned.

"Fifteen bucks," the skinny guy said.

I gave him the money and he smiled and gave me the key to the room Kramer had died in. I figured it was an attempt at humor. I didn't say anything. I didn't mind. I figured a room a guy had died in was better than the rooms that rented by the hour.

We walked together down the row and unlocked the door and stepped inside. The room was still dank and brown and miserable. The corpse had been hauled away, but other than that it was exactly the same as when I had first seen it.

"It ain't the George V," Summer said.

“That’s for damn sure,” I said.

We put our bags on the floor and I put my sergeant’s paperwork on the bed. The counterpane felt slightly damp. I fiddled with the heater under the window until I got some warmth out of it.

“What next?” Summer asked.

“The phone records,” I said. “I’m looking for a call to a 919 area code.”

“That’ll be a local call. Fort Bird is 919 too.”

“Great,” I said. “There’ll be a million local calls.”

I spread the printout on the bed and started looking. There weren’t a million local calls. But there were certainly hundreds. I started at midnight on New Year’s Eve and worked forward from there. I ignored the numbers that had been called more than once from more than one phone. I figured those would be cab companies or clubs or bars. I ignored the numbers that had the same exchange code as Fort Bird. Those would be off-post housing, mainly. Soldiers on duty would have been calling home in the hour after midnight, wishing their spouses and children a happy new year. I concentrated on numbers that stood out. Numbers in other North Carolina cities. In particular I was looking for a number in another city that had been called once only maybe thirty or forty minutes after midnight. That was my target. I went through the printout, patiently, line by line, page by page, looking for it. I was in no hurry. I had all day.

I found it after the third concertina fold. It was listed at twelve thirty-two. Thirty-two minutes after 1989 became 1990. That was right about when I would have expected it. It was a call that lasted nearly fifteen minutes. That was about right too, in terms of duration. It was a solid prospect. I scanned ahead. Checked the next twenty or thirty minutes. There was nothing else there that looked half as good. I went back and put my finger under the number I liked. It was my best bet. Or my only hope.

“Got a pen?” I said.

Summer gave me one from her pocket.

“Got quarters?” I said.

She showed me fifty cents. I wrote the best-bet number on the army memo paper right underneath the D.C. number for the Jefferson Hotel. Passed it to her.

“Call it,” I said. “Find out who answers. You’ll have to go back across the street to the diner. The motel phone is busted.”

She was gone about eight minutes. I spent the time cleaning my teeth. I had a theory: If you can’t get time to sleep, a shower is a good substitute. If you can’t get time to shower, cleaning your teeth is the next best thing.

I left my toothbrush in a glass in the bathroom and Summer came through the door. She brought cold and misty air in with her.

“It was a golf resort outside of Raleigh,” she said.

“Good enough for me,” I said.

“Brubaker,” she said. “That’s where Brubaker was. On vacation.”

“Probably dancing,” I said. “Don’t you think? At half past midnight on New Year’s Eve? The desk clerk probably had to drag him out of the ballroom to the phone. That’s why the call lasted a quarter of an hour. Most of it was waiting time.”

“Who called him?”

There were codes on the printout indicating the location of the originating phone. They meant nothing to me. They were just numbers and letters. But my sergeant had supplied a key for me. On the sheet after the last concertina fold was a list of the codes and the locations they stood for. She had been right. She was better than the day guy. But then, she was an E-5 sergeant and he was an E-4 corporal, and sergeants made the U.S. Army worth serving in.

I checked the code against the key.

“Someone on a pay phone in the Delta barracks,” I said.

“So a Delta guy called his CO,” Summer said. “How does that help us?”

“The timing is suggestive,” I said. “Must have been an urgent matter, right?”

“Who was it?”

“One step at a time,” I said.

“Don’t shut me out.”

“I’m not.”

“You are. You’re walling up.”

I said nothing.

“Your mom died, and you’re hurting, and you’re closing in on yourself. But you shouldn’t. You can’t do this alone, Reacher. You can’t live your whole life alone.”

I shook my head.

“It’s not that,” I said. “It’s that I’m only guessing here. I’m holding my breath all the time. One long shot after another. And I don’t want to fall flat on my face. Not right in front of you. You wouldn’t respect me anymore.”

She said nothing.

“I know,” I said. “You already don’t respect me because you saw me naked.”

She paused. Then she smiled.

“But you need to get used to that,” I said. “Because it’s going to happen again. Right now, in fact. We’re taking the rest of the day off.”

The bed was awful. The mattress dipped in the middle and the sheets were damp. Maybe worse than damp. A place like that, if the room hadn’t been rented since Kramer died, I was pretty sure the bed wouldn’t have been changed either. Kramer had never actually gotten into it, but he had died right on top of it. He had probably leaked all kinds of bodily fluids. Summer didn’t seem to mind. But she hadn’t seen him there, all gray and white and inert.

But then I figured, *What do you want for fifteen bucks?* And Summer took my

mind off the sheets. She distracted me big-time. We were plenty tired, but not too tired. We did well, second time around. The second time is often the best. That's been my experience. You're looking forward to it, and you're not bored with it yet.

Afterward, we slept like babies. The heater finally put some temperature into the room. The sheets warmed up. The traffic sounds on the highway were soothing. Like white noise. We were safe. Nobody would think of looking for us there. Kramer had chosen well. It was a hideaway. We rolled down into the mattress dip together and held each other tight. I ended up thinking it was the best bed I had ever been in.

We woke up much later, very hungry. It was after six o'clock in the evening. Already dark outside the window. The January days were spooling by one after the other, and we weren't paying much attention to them. We showered and dressed and headed across the street to eat. I took the army phone directory with me.

We went for the most calories for the fewest dollars but still ended up blowing more than eight bucks between us. I got my own back with the coffee. The diner had a bottomless cup policy and I exploited it ruthlessly. Then I camped out near the register and used the phone on the wall. Checked the number in the army book and called Sanchez down at Jackson.

"I hear you're in the shit," he said.

"Temporarily," I said. "You heard anything more about Brubaker?"

"Like what?"

"Like, did they find his car yet?"

"Yes, they did. And it was a long way from Columbia."

"Let me guess," I said. "Somewhere more than an hour due north of Fort Bird, and maybe east and a little south of Raleigh. How about Smithfield, North Carolina?"

"How the hell did you know that?"

How the hell did you know that?

“Just a feeling,” I said. “Had to be close to where I-95 meets U.S. 70. Right on a main drag. Do they think that’s where he was killed?”

“No question about it. Killed right there in his car. Someone shot him from the backseat. The windshield was blown out in front of the driver’s position and what was left of the glass was all covered in blood and brains. And there were spatters on the steering wheel that hadn’t been smudged. Therefore nobody drove the car after he died. Therefore that’s where he was killed. Right there in his car. Smithfield, North Carolina.”

“Did they find shell cases?”

“No shell cases. No significant trace evidence either, apart from the kind of normal shit they would expect to find.”

“Have they got a narrative theory?”

“It was an industrial unit parking lot. Big place, like a local landmark, with a big lot, busy in the daytime but deserted at night. They think it was a two-car rendezvous. Brubaker gets there first, the second car pulls up alongside, at least two guys get out of it, they get into Brubaker’s car, one in the front and one in the back, they sit a spell, maybe they talk a little, then the guy in the back pulls a gun and shoots. Which by the way is how they figure Brubaker’s watch got busted. They figure he had his left wrist up on the top of the wheel, the way guys do when they’re sitting in their cars. But whatever, he goes down and they drag him out and they put him in the trunk of the other car and they drive him down to Columbia and they leave him there.”

“With dope and money in his pocket.”

“They don’t know where that came from yet.”

“Why didn’t the bad guys move his car?” I said. “Seems kind of dumb to take the body to South Carolina and leave the car where it was.”

“Nobody knows why. Maybe because it’s conspicuous to drive a car full of blood with a blown windshield. Or maybe because bad guys *are* dumb sometimes.”

“You got notes about what Mrs. Brubaker said about the phone calls he took?”

“After dinner on the fourth?”

“No, earlier,” I said. “On New Year’s Eve. About half an hour after they all held hands and sang ‘Auld Lang Syne.’”

“Maybe. I took some pretty good notes. I could go look.”

“Be quick,” I said. “I’m on a pay phone here.”

I heard the receiver go down on his desk. Heard faint scratchy movement far away in his office. I waited. Put another pair of quarters in the slot. We were already down two bucks on toll calls. Plus twelve for eating and fifteen for the room. We had eighteen dollars left. Out of which I knew for sure I was going to be spending another ten, hopefully pretty soon. I began to wish the army didn’t buy Caprices with big V-8s in them. A little four-cylinder thing like Kramer had rented would have gotten us farther, on eight bucks’ worth of gas.

I heard Sanchez pick up the phone again.

“OK, New Year’s Eve,” he said. “She told me he was dragged out of a dinner dance around twelve-thirty in the morning. She told me she was a little bit aggrieved about it.”

“Did he tell her anything about the call?”

“No. But she said he danced better after it. Like he was all fired up. Like he was on the trail of something. He was all excited.”

“She could tell that from the way he danced?”

“They were married a long time, Reacher. You get to know a person.”

“OK,” I said. “Thanks, Sanchez. I got to go.”

“Be careful.”

“Always am.”

I hung up and walked back to our table.

“Where now?” Summer said.

“Now we’re going to go see girls take their clothes off,” I said.

It was a short walk across the lot from the greasy spoon to the lounge bar. There were a few cars around, but not many. It was still early. It would be another couple of hours before the crowds really built up. The locals were still home, eating dinner, watching the sports news. Guys from Fort Bird were finishing chow time in the mess, showering, getting changed, hooking up in twos and threes, finding car keys, picking out designated drivers. But I still kept my eye out. I didn’t want to bump into a crowd of Delta people. Not outside in the dark. Time was too precious to waste.

We pulled the door and stepped inside. There was a new face behind the register. Maybe a friend or a relative of the fat guy. I didn’t know him. He didn’t know me. And we were in BDUs. No unit designations. No indication that we were MPs. So the new face was happy enough to see us. He figured us for a nice little upward tick in his first-hour cash flow. We walked right past him.

The place was less than one-tenth full. It felt very different that way. It felt cold and vast and empty. Like some kind of a factory. Without a press of bodies the music was louder and tinnier than ever. There were whole expanses of vacant floor. Whole acres. Hundreds of unoccupied chairs. There was only one girl performing. She was on the main stage. She was bathed in warm red light, but she looked cold and listless. I saw Summer watching her. Saw her shudder. I had said: *So what are you going to do? Go work up at the strip club with Sin?* Face-to-face, it wasn’t a very appealing option.

“Why are we here?” she asked.

“For the key to everything,” I said. “My biggest mistake.”

“Which was?”

“Watch,” I said.

I walked around to the dressing room door. Knocked twice. A girl I didn’t know opened up. She kept the door close to her body and stuck her head around. Maybe she was naked.

Maybe she was naked.

“I need to see Sin,” I said.

“She’s not here.”

“She is,” I said. “She’s got Christmas to pay for.”

“She’s busy.”

“Ten dollars,” I said. “Ten dollars to talk. No touching.”

The girl disappeared and the door swung shut behind her. I stood out of the way, so the first person Sin would see would be Summer. We waited. And waited. Then the door opened up again and Sin stepped out. She was in a tight sheath dress. It was pink. It sparkled. She was tall on clear plastic heels. I stepped behind her. Got between her and the dressing room door. She turned and saw me. *Trapped.*

“Couple of questions,” I said. “That’s all.”

She looked better than the last time I had seen her. The bruises on her face were ten days old and were more or less healed up. Her makeup was maybe a little thicker than before. But that was the only sign of her troubles. Her eyes looked vacant. I guessed she had just shot up. Right between her toes. *Whatever gets you through the night.*

“Ten dollars,” she said.

“Let’s sit,” I said.

We found a table far from a speaker. It was relatively quiet there. I took a ten-spot out of my pocket and held it out. Didn’t let go of it.

“You remember me?” I said.

She nodded.

“Remember that night?” I said.

She nodded again.

“OK, here’s the thing. Who hit you?”

“That soldier,” she said. “The one you were talking to just before.”

twenty-one

I kept tight hold on the ten-dollar bill and took her through it, step by step. She told us that after I slid her off my knee she had gone around looking for girls to check with. She had managed whispered conversations with most of them. But none of them knew anything. None of them had any information at all, either firsthand or secondhand. There were no rumors going around. No stories about a co-worker having a problem in the motel. She had checked back in the private room and heard nothing there either. Then she had gone to the dressing room. There was nobody in there. Business was good. Everybody else was either up on the stage or across the street. She knew she should have kept on asking. But there was no gossip. She felt sure someone would have heard something, if anything bad had actually happened. So she figured she would just give up on it and blow me off. Then the soldier I had been talking to stepped into the dressing room. She gave us a pretty good description of Carbone. Like most hookers she had trained herself to remember faces. Repeat customers like to be recognized. It makes them feel special. Makes them tip better. She told us Carbone had warned her not to tell any MP anything. She put emphasis in her voice, echoing his own from ten days before. *Any* MP *anything.* Then to make sure she took him seriously he had slapped her twice, hard, fast, forehand, backhand. She had been stunned by the blows. She hadn't seen them coming. She sounded impressed by them. It was like she was ranking them against other blows she had received. Like a connoisseur. And looking at her I figured she was reasonably familiar with getting hit.

"Tell me again," I said. "It was the soldier, not the owner."

She looked at me like I was crazy.

"The *owner* never hits us," she said. "We're his meal ticket."

I gave her the ten bucks and we left her there at the quiet table.

"What does it mean?" Summer said.

"Everything," I said.

"How did you know?"

How did you know?

I shrugged. We were back in Kramer's motel room, folding stuff, packing our bags, getting ready to hit the road one last time.

"I saw it wrong," I said. "I guess I started to realize in Paris. When we were waiting for Joe at the airport. That crowd. They were watching people coming out and they were kind of half-prepared to greet them and half-prepared to ignore them, depending. That's how it was in the bar that night. I walked in, I'm a big guy, so people saw me coming. They were curious for a split second. But they didn't know me and they didn't like what I was, so they turned away again and shut me out. Very subtle, all in the body language. Except for Carbone. He didn't shut me out. He turned toward me. I thought it was just random, but it wasn't. I thought I was selecting him, but he was selecting me just as much."

"It had to be random. He didn't know you."

"He didn't know *me*, but he knew MP badges when he saw them. He'd been in the army sixteen years. He knew what he was looking at."

"So why turn toward you?"

"It was like a double-take. Like a stutter step. He was turning away, then he changed his mind and turned back. He *wanted* me to come to him."

"Why?"

"Because he wanted to know why I was there."

"Did you tell him?"

I nodded. "Looking back, yes, I did. Not in detail. I just wanted him to stop people from getting worried, so I told him it was nothing to do with anyone, just some lost property across the street, maybe one of the hookers had it. He was a very smart guy. Very subtle. He reeled me in like a fish and got it out of me."

"Why would he care?"

"Something I once said to Willard. I said things happen in order to dead-end other things. Carbone wanted my inquiries dead-ended. That was his aim. So he thought fast. And smart. Delta doesn't hire dumb guys, that's for sure. He went

in and smacked the girl, to shut her up in case she knew anything. And then he came out and let me think the owner had done it. He didn't even lie about it. He just let me assume. He wound me up like a clockwork toy and pointed me in the direction he wanted. And off I went. I smacked the owner on the ear and we fought it out in the lot. And there was Carbone, watching. He saw me work the guy over like he knew I would and then he put in the complaint. So he got it coming and going. He got both ends bottled up. The girl was silenced and he thought I would be taken out of the picture because of the disciplinary procedure. He was a very smart guy, Summer. I wish I had met him before."

"Why did he want you dead-ended? What was his motive?"

"He didn't want me to find out who took the briefcase."

"Why not?"

I sat down on the bed.

"Why did we never find the woman Kramer met in here?"

"I don't know."

"Because there never was a woman," I said. "Kramer met Carbone in here."

She just stared at me.

"Kramer was gay too," I said. "He and Carbone were getting it on."

"Carbone took the briefcase," I said. "Right out of this room. Because he had to keep the relationship secret. Just like we thought about the phantom woman, maybe he was worried there was something personal to him in it. Or maybe Kramer had been bragging about the Irwin conference. Talking about how Armored was going to fight its corner. So maybe Carbone was curious. Or even concerned. He'd been an infantryman for sixteen years. And the type of guy who gets into Delta, he's got a lot of unit loyalty. Maybe more loyalty to his unit than to his lover."

"I don't believe it," Summer said.

“You should,” I said. “It all fits. Andrea Norton more or less told us. I think she knew about Kramer. Either consciously or subconsciously, I’m not sure which. We accused her, and she wasn’t annoyed, remember? She was amused instead. Or bewildered, maybe. She was a sexual psychologist, she’d met the guy, maybe she’d picked up a vibe, professionally. Or the absence of a vibe, personally. So in our minds we had her in bed with Kramer, and she just couldn’t make it compute. So she didn’t get mad. It just didn’t connect. And we know Kramer’s marriage was a sham. No kids. He hadn’t lived at home for five years. Detective Clark wondered why he wasn’t divorced. He once asked me, *Divorce isn’t a deal-breaker for a general, is it?* I said, *No, it isn’t.* But being gay is. That’s for damn sure. Being gay is a big-time deal-breaker for a general. That’s why he kept the marriage going. It was cover, for the army. Just like the girlfriend photo in Carbone’s wallet.”

“We have no proof.”

“But we can get close. Carbone had a condom in his wallet, as well as the girlfriend photo. A buck gets ten it’s from the same pack as the one Walter Reed took off Kramer’s body. And another buck gets ten we can comb old assignment orders and find out where and when they met. Some joint exercise somewhere, like we thought all along. Plus Carbone was a vehicle guy for Delta. Their adjutant told me that. He had access to their whole stable of Humvees, any old time he wanted it. So another buck gets ten we’ll find Carbone was out in one, alone, on New Year’s Eve.”

“Was he killed for the briefcase? In the end? Like Mrs. Kramer?”

I shook my head. “Neither one of them was killed just for the briefcase.”

She just looked at me.

“Later,” I said. “One step at a time.”

“But Carbone had the briefcase. You said so. He ran off with it.”

I nodded. “And he searched it as soon as he got back to Bird. He found the agenda. He read it. And something in it made him call his CO immediately.”

“*He* called Brubaker? How could he do that? He couldn’t say, Hey, I was just sleeping with a general and guess what I found?”

“He could have said he found it somewhere else. On the sidewalk, maybe. But actually I’m wondering if Brubaker knew about Carbone and Kramer all along. It’s possible. Delta is a family and Brubaker was a very hands-on type of CO. It’s possible he knew. And maybe he exploited the situation. For intelligence purposes. These guys are incredibly competitive. And Sanchez told me Brubaker never missed any angle or any advantage or any wrinkle. So maybe the price of Brubaker’s tolerance was that Carbone had to pass stuff on, from the pillow talk.”

“That’s awful.”

I nodded. “Like being a whore. I told you there would be no winners here. Everyone’s going to come out looking bad.”

“Except us. If we get the results.”

“You’re going to be OK. I’m not.”

“Why?”

“Wait and see,” I said.

We carried our bags to the Chevy, which was still hidden behind the lounge bar. We put them in the trunk. The lot was fuller than it had been before. The night was heating up. I checked my watch. Almost eight o’clock on the East Coast, almost five on the West Coast. I stood still, trying to decide. *If we pause for breath even for a second, we’ll be overrun again.*

“I need to make two more calls,” I said.

I took the army phone book with me and we walked back to the greasy spoon. I checked every pocket for loose change and came up with a small pile. Summer contributed a quarter and a nickel. The counterman changed the pennies for silver. I fed the phone and dialed Franz at Fort Irwin. Five o’clock in the afternoon, it was the middle of his workday.

“Am I going to get past your main gate?” I asked him.

“Why wouldn’t you?”

"Why wouldn't you?"

"Willard's chasing me. He's liable to warn any place he thinks I'm going."

"I haven't heard from him yet."

"Maybe you could switch your telex off for a day or two."

"What's your ETA?"

"Tomorrow sometime."

"Your buddies are already here. They just got in."

"I haven't got any buddies."

"Vassell and Coomer. They're fresh in from Europe."

"Why?"

"Exercises."

"Is Marshall still there?"

"Sure. He drove out to LAX to pick them up. They all came back together. One big happy family."

"I need you to do two things for me," I said.

"Two more things, you mean."

"I need a ride from LAX myself. Tomorrow, first morning arrival from D.C. I need you to send someone."

"And?"

"And I need you to get someone to locate the staff car Vassell and Coomer used back here. It's a black Mercury Grand Marquis. Marshall signed it out on New Year's Eve. By now it's either back in the Pentagon garage or parked at Andrews. I need someone to find it and to do a full-court press on it, forensically. And fast."

“What would they be looking for?”

“Anything at all.”

“OK,” Franz said.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said.

I hung up and turned the pages in the army directory all the way from *F* for *Fort Irwin* to *P* for *Pentagon.* Slid my finger down the subsection to *C* for *Chief of Staff’s Office.* I left it there, briefly.

“Vassell and Coomer are at Irwin,” I said.

“Why?” Summer said.

“Hiding out,” I said. “They think we’re still in Europe. They know Willard is watching the airports. They’re sitting ducks.”

“Do we want them?” Summer said. “They didn’t know about Mrs. Kramer. That was clear. They were shocked when you told them, that night in your office. So I guess they authorized the burglary, but not the collateral damage.”

I nodded. She was right. They had been surprised, that night in my office. Coomer had gone pale and asked: *Was it a burglary?* It was a question that came straight from a guilty conscience. That meant Marshall hadn’t told them yet. He had kept the really bad news to himself. He had come back to the D.C. hotel at twenty past three in the morning, and he had told them the briefcase hadn’t been there, but he hadn’t told them what else had gone down. Vassell and Coomer must have been piecing it together on the fly, that night in my office, in the dark and after the event. It must have been an interesting ride home. Harsh words must have been exchanged.

“It’s down to Marshall alone,” Summer said. “He panicked, is all.”

“Technically it was a conspiracy,” I said. “Legally they all share the blame.”

“Hard to prosecute.”

“That’s JAG Corps’ problem.”

“It’s a weak case. Hard to prove.”

“They did other stuff,” I said. “Believe me, Mrs. Kramer is the least of their worries.”

I fed the phone again and dialed the Chief of Staff’s office, deep inside the Pentagon. A woman’s voice answered. It was a perfect Washington voice. Not high, not low, cultured, elegant, nearly accentless. I guessed she was a senior administrator, working late. I guessed she was about fifty, blonde going gray, powder on her face.

“Write this down,” I said to her. “I am a military police major called Reacher. I was recently transferred out of Panama and into Fort Bird, North Carolina. I will be standing at the E-ring checkpoint inside your building at midnight tonight. It is entirely up to the Chief of Staff whether he meets me there.”

I paused.

“Is that it?” the woman said.

“Yes,” I said, and hung up. I scooped fifteen remaining cents back into my pocket. Closed the phone book and wedged it under my arm.

“Let’s go,” I said. We drove through the gas station and topped off the tank with eight bucks’ worth of gas. Then we headed north.

“It’s entirely up to the Chief of Staff whether he meets you there?” Summer said. “What the hell is *that* about?”

We were on I-95, still three hours south of D.C. Maybe two and a half hours, with Summer at the wheel. It was full dark and the traffic was heavy. The holiday hangover was gone. The whole world was back at work.

“There’s something heavy-duty going on,” I said. “Why else would Carbone call Brubaker during a party? Anything less than truly amazing could have waited, surely. So it’s heavy-duty, with heavy-duty people involved. Has to be. Who else could have moved twenty special unit MPs around the world all on the same day?”

“You’re a major,” she said. “So are Franz and Sanchez and all the others. Any colonel could have moved you.”

“But all the Provost Marshals were moved too. They were taken out of the way. To give us room to move. And most Provost Marshals are colonels themselves.”

“OK then, any Brigadier General could have done it.”

“With forged signatures on the orders?”

“Anyone can forge a signature.”

“And hope to get away with it afterward? No, this whole thing was put together by someone who knew he could act with impunity. Someone untouchable.”

“The Chief of Staff?”

I shook my head. “No, the Vice-Chief, actually, I think. Right now the Vice-Chief is a guy who came up through the infantry. And we can assume he’s a reasonably smart guy. They don’t put dummies in that job. I think he saw the signs. He saw the Berlin Wall coming down, and he thought about it, and he realized that pretty soon everything else would be coming down too. The whole established order.”

“And?”

“And he started to worry about some kind of a move by Armored Branch. Something dramatic. Like we said, those guys have got everything to lose. I think the Vice-Chief predicted trouble, and so he moved us all around to get the right people in the right places so we could stop it before it started. And I think he was right to be worried. I think Armored saw the danger coming and they planned to get a jump on it. They don’t want integrated units bossed by infantry officers. They want things the way they were. So I think that Irwin conference was about starting something dramatic. Something bad. That’s why they were so worried about the agenda getting out.”

“But change happens. Ultimately it can’t be resisted.”

“Nobody ever accepts that fact,” I said. “Nobody ever has, and nobody ever will. Go down to the Navy Yards, and I guarantee you’ll find a million tons of fifty-year-old paper all stored away somewhere saying that battleships can never be

year-old paper all stored away somewhere saying that battleships can never be replaced and that aircraft carriers are useless pieces of newfangled junk. There'll have been admirals writing hundred-page treatises, putting their whole heart and soul into it, swearing blind that their way is the only way."

Summer said nothing.

I smiled. "Go back in *our* records and you'll probably find Kramer's granddad saying that tanks can never replace horses."

"What exactly were they planning?"

I shrugged. "We didn't see the agenda. But we can make some pretty good guesses. Discrediting of key opponents, obviously. Maximum use of dirty laundry. Almost certainly collusion with defense industries. If they could get key manufacturers to say that lightweight armored vehicles can't be made safe, that would help. They could use public propaganda. They could tell people their sons and daughters were going to be sent to war in tin cans that a peashooter could penetrate. They could try to scare Congress. They could tell them that a C-130 airlift fleet big enough to make a difference would cost hundreds of billions of dollars."

"That's just standard-issue bitching."

"So maybe there's more. We don't know yet. Kramer's heart attack made the whole thing misfire. For now."

"You think they'll start it up again?"

"Wouldn't you? If you had everything to lose?"

She took one hand off the wheel. Rested it in her lap. Turned slightly and looked at me.

"So why do you want to see the Chief of Staff?" she asked. "If you're right, then it's the Vice-Chief who's on your side. He brought you here. He's the one who's been protecting you."

"Game of chess," I said. "Tug-of-war. Good guy, bad guy. The good guy brought me here, the bad guy sent Garber away. Harder to move Garber than me, therefore the bad guy outranks the good guy. And the only person who outranks

the Vice-Chief is the Chief himself. They always rotate, we know the Vice-Chief is infantry, therefore we know the Chief is Armored. Therefore we know he has a stake."

"The Chief of Staff is the bad guy?"

I nodded.

"So why demand to see him?"

"Because we're in the army, Summer," I said. "We're supposed to confront our enemies, not our friends."

We got quieter and quieter the closer we got to D.C. I knew my strengths and my weaknesses and I was young enough and bold enough and dumb enough to consider myself any man's equal. But getting in the Chief of Staff's face was a whole other ball game. It was a superhuman rank. There was nothing above it. There had been three of them during my years of service and I had never met any of them. Never even seen any of them, as far as I could remember. Nor had I ever seen a Vice-Chief, or an Assistant Secretary, or any other of the smooth breed who moved in those exalted circles. They were a species apart. Something made them different from the rest of us.

But they started out the same. I could have been one of them, theoretically. I had been to West Point, just like they had. But for decades the Point had been little more than a spit-shined engineering school. To get on the Staff track, you had to get sent on somewhere else afterward. Somewhere better. You had to go to George Washington University, or Stanford or Harvard or Yale or MIT or Princeton, or even somewhere overseas like Oxford or Cambridge in England. You had to get a Rhodes scholarship. You had to get a master's or a Ph.D. in economics or politics or international relations. You had to be a White House Fellow. That's where my career path diverged. Right after West Point. I looked at myself in the mirror and saw a guy who was better at cracking heads than cracking books. Other people looked and saw the same thing. Pigeonholing starts on day one in the military. So they went their way and I went mine. They went to the E-ring and the West Wing, and I went to dark dim-lit alleys in Seoul and Manila. If they came to my turf, they'd be crawling on their bellies. How I was going to do on their turf remained to be seen.

“I’m going in by myself,” I said.

“You are not,” Summer said.

“I am,” I said. “You can call it what you like. Advice from a friend, or a direct order from a superior officer. But you’re staying in the car. That’s for sure. I’ll handcuff you to the steering wheel if I have to.”

“We’re in this together.”

“But we’re allowed to be intelligent. This isn’t like going to see Andrea Norton. This is as risky as it gets. No reason for both of us to go down in flames.”

“Would you stay in the car? If you were me?”

“I’d hide underneath it,” I said.

She said nothing. Just drove, as fast as ever. We hit the Beltway. Started the long clockwise quarter-circle up toward Arlington.

Pentagon security was a little tighter than usual. Maybe someone was worried about Noriega’s leftover forces staging a two-thousand-mile northward penetration. But we got into the parking lot with no trouble at all. It was almost deserted. Summer drove a long slow circuit and came to rest near the main entrance. She killed the motor and jammed the parking brake on. She did it a little harder than she really needed to. I guessed she was making a point. I checked my watch. It was five minutes before midnight.

“Are we going to argue?” I said.

She shrugged.

“Good luck,” she said. “And give him hell.”

I slid out into the cold. Closed the door behind me and stood still for a second. The bulk of the building loomed up over me in the dark. People said it was the world’s largest office complex and right then I believed them. I started walking. There was a long ramp up to the doors. Then there was a guarded lobby the size of a basketball court. My special unit badge got me through that. Then I headed

for the heart of the complex. There were five concentric pentagon-shaped corridors, called rings. Each one of them was protected by a separate checkpoint. My badge was good enough to get me through B, C, and D. Nothing on earth was going to get me into the E-ring. I stopped outside the final checkpoint and nodded to the guard. He nodded back. He was used to people waiting there.

I leaned against the wall. It was smooth-painted concrete and it felt cold and slick. The building was silent. I could hear nothing except water in pipes and the faint rush of forced-air heating and the guard's steady breathing. The floors were shined linoleum tile and they reflected the ceiling fluorescents in a long double image that ran away to a distant vanishing point.

I waited. I could see a clock in the guard's booth. It rolled past midnight. Past five after midnight. Then ten after. I waited. I started to figure my challenge had been ignored. These guys were political. Maybe they played a smarter game than I could conceive. Maybe they had more gloss and sophistication and patience. Maybe I was more than a little bit out of my league.

Or maybe the woman with the voice had thrown my message in the trash.

I waited.

Then at fifteen minutes past midnight I heard faraway heels echoing on the linoleum. Dress shoes, a staccato little rhythm that was part urgent and part relaxed. Like a man who was busy but not panicked. I couldn't see him. The rap of his heels on the floor was billowing out at me around an angled corner. It ran ahead of him down the deserted corridor like an early warning signal.

I listened to the sound and watched the spot where it told me he would appear, which was right where the fluorescent tubes on the ceiling met their reflections in the floor. The sound kept on coming. Then a man stepped around the corner and walked through the flare of light. He kept on walking straight toward me, the rhythm of his heels unbroken, not slowing, not speeding up, still busy, not panicked. He came closer. He was the Chief of Staff of the Army. He was in formal evening mess dress. He was wearing a short blue jacket nipped in at the waist. Blue pants with two gold stripes. A bow tie. Gold studs and cuff links. Elaborate knots and swirls of gold braid all over his sleeves and his shoulders. He was covered with gold insignia and badges and sashes and miniature versions of his medals. He had a full head of gray hair. He was about five-nine and one-eighty. Exactly average size for the modern army.

eighty. Exactly average size for the modern army.

He got within ten feet of me and I snapped to attention and saluted. It was a pure reflex action. Like a Catholic meeting the Pope. He didn't salute back. He just looked at me. Maybe there was a protocol that forbade saluting while wearing the evening mess uniform. Or while bareheaded in the Pentagon. Or maybe he was just rude.

He put his hand out to shake.

"Very sorry I'm late," he said. "Good of you to wait. I was at the White House. For a state dinner with some foreign friends."

I shook his hand.

"Let's go to my office," he said.

He led me past the E-ring guard and we turned left into the corridor and walked a little way. Then we stepped into a suite and I met the woman with the voice. She looked more or less like I had predicted. She was wearing civilian clothes. A dark suit so severe it was more formal than a uniform. But she sounded even better in person than she had on the phone.

"Coffee, Major?" she said.

She had a fresh pot brewed. I guessed she had clicked the switch at about eleven fifty-three, so it had finished perking at midnight exactly. I guessed the Chief of Staff's suite was that sort of place. She gave me a saucer and a cup made of transparent bone china. I was afraid of crushing it like an eggshell.

"This way," the Chief of Staff said.

He led me into his office. My cup rattled on its saucer. His office was surprisingly plain. It had the same painted concrete walls as the rest of the building. The same type of steel desk I had seen in the Fort Bird pathologist's office.

"Take a seat," he said. "If you don't mind, we'll make this quick. It's late."

I said nothing. He watched me.

"I got your message," he said. "Received and understood."

"I got your message," he said. "Received and understood."

I said nothing. He tried an icebreaker.

"Noriega's top guys are still out there," he said. "Why do you suppose that is?"

"Thirty thousand square miles," I said. "A lot of space for people to hide in."

"Will we get them all?"

"No question," I said. "Someone will sell them out."

"You're a cynic."

"A realist," I said.

"What have you got to tell me, Major?"

I sipped my coffee. The lights were low. I was suddenly aware that I was deep inside one of the world's most secure buildings, late at night, face-to-face with the nation's most powerful soldier. And I was about to make a serious accusation. And only one other person knew I was there, and maybe she was already in a cell somewhere.

"I was in Panama two weeks ago," I said. "Then I was transferred out."

"Why do you think that was?"

I took a breath. "I think the Vice-Chief wanted particular individuals on the ground in particular locations because he was worried about trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"An internal coup by your old buddies in Armored Branch."

He was silent for a long moment, and then he said, "Would that have been a realistic worry?"

I nodded. "There was a conference at Irwin scheduled for New Year's Day. I believe the agenda was certainly controversial, probably illegal, maybe treasonous."

The Chief of Staff said nothing.

“But it misfired,” I said. “Because General Kramer died. But there were potential problems from the fallout. So you personally intervened by moving Colonel Garber out of the 110th and replacing him with an incompetent.”

“Why would I do that?”

“So that nature would take its course and the investigation would misfire too.”

He sat still for another long moment. Then he smiled.

“Good analysis,” he said. “The collapse of Soviet communism was bound to lead to stresses inside the U.S. military. Those stresses were bound to manifest themselves with all kinds of internal plotting and planning. The internal plotting and planning was bound to be anticipated and steps were bound to be taken to nip potential trouble in the bud. And as you say, there were bound to be tensions at the very top that led to moves and countermoves.”

I said nothing.

“Like a game of chess,” he said. “The Vice-Chief moves, and I countermove. An inevitable conclusion, I suppose, because you were looking for a pair of senior individuals in which one outranks the other.”

I looked straight at him.

“Am I wrong?” I said.

“Only in two particulars,” he said. “Obviously you’re right in that there are huge changes coming. CIA was a little slow to spot Ivan’s imminent demise, so we’ve had less than a year to think things through. But believe me, we’ve thought them through. We’re in a unique situation now. We’re like a heavyweight boxer who’s trained for years for a shot at the world title, and then we wake up one morning and find our intended opponent has dropped dead. It’s a very bewildering sensation. But we’ve done our homework.”

He leaned down and opened a drawer and struggled out with an enormous loose-leaf file. It was at least three inches thick. It thumped down on his desktop. It had a green jacket with a long word stenciled on it in black. He reversed it so I

could read it. It said: *Transformation.*

“Your first mistake is that your focus was too close,” he said. “You need to stand back and look at it from our perspective. From above. It’s not just Armored Branch that is going to change. Everyone is going to change. Obviously we’re going to move toward highly mobile integrated units. But it’s a bad mistake to see them as infantry units with a few bells and whistles tacked on. They’re going to be a completely new concept. They’ll be something that has never existed before. Maybe we’ll integrate attack helicopters too, and give the command to the guys in the sky. Maybe we’ll move into electronic warfare and give the command to the guys with the computers.”

I said nothing.

He laid his hand on the file, palm down. “My point is that nobody is going to come out of this unscathed. Yes, Armored is going to be professionally devastated. No question about that. But so is the infantry and so is the artillery, and so is transport, and so is logistics support, and so is everyone else, equally, just as much. Maybe more, for some people. Including the military police, probably. Everything is going to change, Major. There will be no stone unturned.”

I said nothing.

“This is not about Armored versus the infantry,” he said. “You need to understand that. That’s a vast oversimplification. It’s actually about everyone versus everyone else. There will be no winners, I’m afraid. But equally therefore, there will be no losers. You could choose to think about it that way. Everyone is in the same boat.”

He took his hand off the file.

“What’s my second mistake?” I said.

“I moved you out of Panama,” he said. “Not the Vice-Chief. He knew nothing about it. I selected twenty men personally and put them where I thought I needed them. I spread them around, because in my judgment it was fifty-fifty as to who was going to blink first. The light units, or the heavy units? It was impossible to predict. Once their commanders started thinking, they would all realize they have everything to lose. I sent you to Fort Bird, for instance, because I was a

little worried about David Brubaker. He was a very proactive type."

"But it was Armored who blinked first," I said.

He nodded.

"Apparently," he said. "If you say so. It was always going to be a fifty-fifty chance. And I guess I'm a little disappointed. Those were my boys. But I'm not defensive about them. I moved onward and upward. I left them behind. I'm perfectly happy to let the chips fall where they may."

"So why did you move Garber?"

"I didn't."

"So who did?"

"Who outranks me?"

"Nobody," I said.

"I wish," he said.

I said nothing.

"What does an M16 rifle cost?" he said.

"I don't know," I said. "Not a lot, I guess."

"We get them for about four hundred dollars," he said. "What does an Abrams M1A1 main battle tank cost?"

"About four million."

"So think about the big defense contractors," he said. "Whose side are *they* on? The light units, or the heavy units?"

I didn't answer. I figured the question was rhetorical.

"Who outranks me?" he asked again.

"The Secretary of Defense," I said.

"The Secretary of Defense," I said.

He nodded. "A nasty little man. A politician. Political parties take campaign contributions. And defense contractors can see the future the same as anyone else."

I said nothing.

"A lot for you to think about," the Chief of Staff said. He hefted the big Transformation file back into his drawer. Replaced it on his desktop with a slimmer jacket. It was marked: *Argon.*

"You know what argon is?" he asked.

"It's an inert gas," I said. "They use it in fire extinguishers. It spreads a layer low down over a fire and prevents it from taking hold."

"That's why I chose the name. Operation Argon was the plan that moved you people at the end of December."

"Why did you use Garber's signature?"

"Like you suggested in another context, I wanted to let nature take its course. MP orders signed by the Chief of Staff would have raised a lot of eyebrows. Everyone would have switched to best behavior. Or smelled a rat and gone deeper underground. It would have made your job harder. It would have defeated my purpose."

"Your purpose?"

"I wanted prevention, of course. That was the main priority. But I was also curious, Major. I wanted to see who would blink first."

He handed me the file.

"You're a special unit investigator," he said. "By statute the 110th has extraordinary powers. You are authorized to arrest any soldier anywhere, including me, here in my office, if you so choose. So read the Argon file. I think you'll find it clears me. If you agree, go about your business elsewhere."

He got up from behind his desk. We shook hands again. Then he walked out of the room. Left me all alone in his office, in the heart of the Pentagon, in the

the room. Left me all alone in his office, in the heart of the Pentagon, in the middle of the night.

Thirty minutes later I got back in the car with Summer. She had kept the motor off to save gas and it was cold inside.

“Well?” she said.

“One crucial error,” I said. “The tug-of-war wasn’t the Vice-Chief and the Chief. It was the Chief himself and the Secretary of Defense.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. “I saw the file. There were memos and orders going back nine months. Different papers, different typewriters, different pens, no way to fake all that in four hours. It was the Chief of Staff’s initiative all along, and he was always kosher.”

“So how did he take it?”

“Pretty well,” I said. “Considering. But I don’t think he’ll feel like helping me.”

“With what?”

“With the trouble I’m in.”

“Which is?”

“Wait and see.”

She just looked at me.

“Where now?” she said.

“California,” I said.

twenty-two

The Chevy was running on fumes by the time we got to National Airport. We put it in the long-term lot and hiked back to the terminal. It was about a mile. There were no shuttle buses running. It was the middle of the night and the place was practically deserted. Inside the terminal we had to roust a clerk out of a back office. I gave him the last of our stolen vouchers and he booked us on the first morning flight to LAX. We were looking at a long wait.

“What’s the mission?” Summer said.

“Three arrests,” I said. “Vassell, Coomer, and Marshall.”

“Charge?”

“Serial homicide,” I said. “Mrs. Kramer, Carbone, and Brubaker.”

She stared at me. “Can you prove it?”

I shook my head. “I know exactly what happened. I know when, and how, and where, and why. But I can’t prove a damn thing. We’re going to have to rely on confessions.”

“We won’t get them.”

“I’ve gotten them before,” I said. “There are ways.”

She flinched.

“This is the army, Summer,” I said. “It ain’t a quilting bee.”

“Tell me about Carbone and Brubaker.”

“I need to eat,” I said. “I’m hungry.”

“We don’t have any money,” Summer said.

Most places had metal grilles down over their doors anyway. Maybe they would feed us on the plane. We carried our bags over to a seating area next to a twenty-foot window that had nothing but black night outside. The seats were long vinyl

benches with fixed armrests every two feet to stop people from lying down and sleeping.

“Tell me,” she said.

“It’s still a series of crazy long shots, one after the other.”

“Try me.”

“OK, start over with Mrs. Kramer. Why did Marshall go to Green Valley?”

“Because it was the obvious first place to try.”

“But it wasn’t. It was almost the obvious last place to try. Kramer had hardly been there in five years. His staff must have known that. They’d traveled with him many times before. Yet they made a fast decision and Marshall went straight there. Why?”

“Because Kramer had told them that’s where he was going?”

“Correct,” I said. “He told them he was with his wife to conceal the fact he was actually with Carbone. But then, why would he have to tell them anything?”

“I don’t know.”

“Because there’s a category of person you *have* to tell something.”

“Who?”

“Suppose you’re a rich guy traveling with your mistress. You spend one night apart, you *have* to tell her something. And if you tell her you’re dropping in on your wife purely to keep up appearances, she has to buy it. Maybe she doesn’t like it, but she has to buy it. Because it’s expected occasionally. It’s all part of the deal.”

“Kramer didn’t have a mistress. He was gay.”

“He had Marshall.”

“No,” she said. “No way.”

I nodded. “Kramer was two-timing Marshall. Marshall was his main squeeze. They were in a relationship. Marshall wasn’t an intelligence officer but Kramer appointed him one anyway to keep him close. They were an item. But Kramer had a wandering eye. He met Carbone somewhere and started seeing him on the side. So on New Year’s Eve Kramer told Marshall he was going to see his wife and Marshall believed him. Like the rich guy’s mistress would. That’s why Marshall went to Green Valley. In his heart he knew for sure Kramer had gone there. He was the one person in the world who felt he *would* know for sure. It was Marshall who told Vassell and Coomer where Kramer was. But Kramer was lying to him. Like people do in relationships.”

Summer was quiet for a long moment. She just stared out at the night.

“Does this affect what happened there?” she said.

“I think it does, slightly,” I said. “I think Mrs. Kramer talked to Marshall. She must have recognized him from her time on-post in Germany. She probably knew all about him and her husband. Generals’ wives are usually pretty smart. Maybe she even knew there was a second guy in the picture. Maybe she was pissed off and taunted Marshall about it. Like, You can’t keep your man either, right? Maybe Marshall got mad and lashed out. Maybe that’s why he didn’t tell Vassell and Coomer right away. Because the collateral damage wasn’t just about the burglary itself. It was also about an argument. That’s why I said Mrs. Kramer wasn’t killed just for the briefcase. I think partly she was killed because she taunted a jealous guy who lost his temper.”

“This is all just guesswork.”

“Mrs. Kramer is dead. That isn’t a guess.”

“The rest of it is.”

“Marshall is thirty-one, never been married.”

“That doesn’t prove a thing.”

“I know,” I said. “I know. There’s no proof anywhere. Proof is a scarce commodity right now.”

Summer was quiet for a beat. “Then what happened?”

“Then Vassell and Coomer and Marshall started the hunt for the briefcase in earnest. They had an advantage over us because they knew they were looking for a man, not a woman. Marshall flew back to Germany on the second and searched Kramer’s office and his quarters. He found something that led to Carbone. Maybe a diary, or a letter, or a photograph. Or a name or a number in an address book. Whatever. He flew back on the third and they made a plan and they called Carbone. They blackmailed him. They set up a swap for the next night. The briefcase for the letter or the photograph or whatever it was. Carbone accepted the deal. He was happy to because he didn’t want exposure and anyway he had already called Brubaker with the details of the agenda. He had nothing to lose and everything to gain. Maybe he’d been through the process before. Maybe more than once. Poor guy had been gay in the army for sixteen years. But this time it didn’t work out for him. Because Marshall killed him during the exchange.”

“Marshall? Marshall wasn’t even there.”

“He was,” I said. “You figured it out yourself. You told me about it when we were leaving the post to go see Detective Clark about the crowbar. Remember? When Willard was chasing me on the phone? You made a suggestion.”

“What suggestion?”

“Marshall was in the trunk of the car, Summer. Coomer was driving, Vassell was in the passenger seat, and Marshall was in the trunk. That’s how they got past the gate. Then they backed in at the far end of the O Club lot. Backed in, because Coomer popped the trunk before he got out. Marshall held the lid down low, but they still needed concealment. Then Vassell and Coomer went inside and started to build their cast-iron alibis. Meanwhile Marshall waits almost two hours in the trunk, holding the lid, until it’s all quiet. Then he climbs out and he drives off. That’s why the first night patrol remembers the car and the second patrol doesn’t. The car was there, and then it wasn’t. So Marshall picks Carbone up at some prearranged spot and they drive out to the woods together. Carbone is holding the briefcase. Marshall opens the trunk and gives Carbone an envelope or something. Carbone turns away into the moonlight to check it’s what he’s been promised. Even a guy as cautious as a Delta soldier would do that. His whole career is on the line. Behind him Marshall comes out with the crowbar and hits him. Not just because of the briefcase. He’s going to get the briefcase anyway. The exchange is working. And Carbone can’t afford to talk afterward. Marshall hits him partly because he’s furious at him. He’s jealous of his time

Marshall hits him partly because he's furious at him. He's jealous of his time with Kramer. That's part of why he kills him. Then he retrieves the envelope and grabs the briefcase. Throws them both in the trunk. We know the rest. He's known all along what he was going to do and he's come equipped for the misdirection. Then he drives back to the post buildings and ditches the crowbar on the way. He parks the car in the original slot and gets back in the trunk. Vassell and Coomer come out of the O Club and they drive away."

"And then what?"

"They drive, and they drive. They're excited and uptight. But they know by then what their blue-eyed boy did to Mrs. Kramer. So they're also nervous and worried. They can't find anyplace they can stop where they can let a man who may or may not be bloodstained out of the trunk. First really safe place they find is the rest area an hour north. They park far away from other cars again and let Marshall out. Marshall hands over the briefcase. They resume their journey. They spend sixty seconds searching the briefcase and then they sling it out the window a mile farther on."

Summer sat quiet. She was thinking. Her lower lids were jacking upward a fraction at a time.

"It's just a theory," she said.

"Can you explain what we know any other way?"

She thought about it. Then she shook her head.

"What about Brubaker?" she said.

A voice came out of speakers in the ceiling and told us our flight was ready to board. We picked up our bags and shuffled into line. It was still full dark outside. I counted the other passengers. Hoped there would be some spare seats, so there would be some spare breakfasts. I was very hungry. But it didn't look good. It was going to be a pretty full flight. I guessed LA's pull was pretty strong, in January, when you lived in D.C. I guessed people didn't need much of an excuse to schedule meetings out there.

"What about Brubaker?" Summer said again.

We shuffled down the aisle and found our seats. We had a window and a middle.

The aisle was already occupied by a nun. She was old. I hoped her hearing was shot. I didn't want her eavesdropping. She moved and let us in. I made Summer sit next to her. I sat by the window. Buckled my belt. Kept quiet for a moment. Watched the airport scene outside. Busy guys were doing things under floodlights. Then we pushed back from the gate and started taxiing. There was no takeoff queue. We were in the air within two minutes.

"I'm not sure about Brubaker," I said. "How did he get in the picture? Did they call him or did he call them? He knew about the agenda thirty minutes into New Year's Day. A proactive guy like that, maybe he tried a little pressure of his own. Or maybe Vassell and Coomer were just assuming a worst-case scenario. They might have figured a senior NCO like Carbone would have called his boss. So I'm not sure who called who first. Maybe they all called each other at the same time. Maybe there were mutual threats or maybe Vassell and Coomer suggested they could all work together to find a way where everybody benefits."

"Would that be likely?"

"Who knows?" I said. "These integrated units are going to be weird. Brubaker was certainly going to be popular, because he's already into weird warfare. So maybe Vassell and Coomer conned him into thinking they were looking for a strategic alliance. Whatever, they all set up a rendezvous for late on the fourth. Brubaker must have specified the location. He must have driven past that spot plenty of times, back and forth from Bird to his golf place. And he must have been feeling confident. He wouldn't have let Marshall sit behind him if he was worried."

"How do you know it was Marshall behind him?"

"Protocol," I said. "He's a colonel talking to a general and another colonel. He'll have put Vassell in the front seat and Coomer in the backseat on the passenger's side so he could turn and see them both. Marshall could be out of sight and out of mind. He was only a major. Who needs him?"

"Did they intend to kill him? Or did it just happen?"

"They intended to, for sure. They had a plan ready. A remote place to dump the body, heroin that Marshall picked up on his overnight in Germany, a loaded gun. So we were right, after all, but purely by accident. The same people that killed Carbone drove straight out the main gate and killed Brubaker. Hardly touched

the brakes."

"Double misdirection," Summer said. "The heroin thing, and dumping him to the south, not the north."

"Amateur hour," I said. "The Columbia medics must have spotted the lividity thing and the muffler burns immediately. Pure dumb luck for Vassell and Coomer that the medics didn't *tell* us immediately. Plus, they left Brubaker's car up north. That was serious brain fade."

"They must have been tired. Stress, tension, all that driving. They came down from Arlington Cemetery, went back up to Smithfield, came back down to Columbia, went back up to Dulles. Maybe eighteen hours straight. No wonder they made an occasional mistake. But they'd have gotten away with it if you hadn't ignored Willard."

I nodded. Said nothing.

"It's a very weak case," Summer said. "In fact it's incredibly weak. It isn't even circumstantial. It's just pure speculation."

"Tell me about it. That's why we need confessions."

"You need to think very carefully before you confront anyone. A case as weak as this, it could be you that goes to jail. For harassment."

I heard activity behind me and the stewardess came into view with the breakfasts. She handed one to the nun, and one to Summer, and one to me. It was a pitiful meal. There was cold juice and a hot ham and cheese sandwich. That was all. Coffee later, I assumed. I hoped. I finished everything in about thirty seconds. Summer took about thirty-one. But the nun didn't touch her tray. She just left it right there in front of her. I nudged Summer in the ribs.

"Ask her if she's going to eat that," I said.

"I can't," she said.

"She's got a charitable obligation," I said. "It's what being a nun is all about."

"I can't," she said again.

“You can.”

She sighed. “OK, in a minute.”

But she blew it. She waited too long. The nun opened the foil and started to eat the sandwich.

“Damn,” I said.

“Sorry,” Summer said.

I looked at her. “What did you say?”

“I said I’m sorry.”

“No, before that. The last thing you said.”

“I said I can’t just ask her.”

I shook my head. “No, before the breakfasts came.”

“I said it’s a very weak case.”

“Before that.”

I saw her rewind the tape in her head. “I said Vassell and Coomer would have gotten away with it if you hadn’t ignored Willard.”

I nodded. Thought about that fact for a minute. Then I closed my eyes.

I opened them again in Los Angeles. The plane touched down and the thump and screech of tires on tarmac woke me up. Then the reverse thrust screamed and the brakes jerked me forward against my belt. It was first light outside. The dawn looked brown, like it often did there. A voice on the PA told us it was seven o’clock in the morning in California. We had been heading west for two solid days and each twenty-four-hour period was averaging more like twenty-eight. I had slept for a while and I didn’t feel tired. But I still felt hungry.

We shuffled off the plane and walked down to the baggage claim. That was

where drivers met people. I scanned around. Saw that Calvin Franz hadn't sent anyone. He had come himself instead. I was happy about that. He was a welcome sight. I felt like we were going to be in good hands.

"I've got news for you," he said.

I introduced him to Summer. He shook her hand and took her bag and carried it. I guessed it was partly a courtly gesture and partly his way of hustling us out to his Humvee a little bit faster. It was parked there in the no-waiting zone. But the cops were staying well away from it. Camouflaged black-and-green Humvees tend to have that effect. We all piled in. I let Summer ride in front. Partly a courtly gesture of my own, and partly because I wanted to sprawl in the back. I was cramped from the plane.

"They found the Grand Marquis," Franz said.

He gunned the big turbodiesel and moved off the curb. Irwin was just north of Barstow, which was about thirty miles away across the breadth of the city. I figured it would take him about an hour to get us there through the morning traffic. I saw Summer watching how he drove. Professional appraisal in her eyes. It would probably have taken her about thirty-five minutes.

"It was at Andrews," Franz said. "Dumped there on the fifth."

"When Marshall was recalled to Germany," I said.

Franz nodded at the wheel. "That's what their gate log says. Parked by Marshall with a Transportation Corps reference on the docket. Our guys trailered it to the FBI. Faster that way. They had to call in a few favors. The Bureau worked on it all night. Reluctantly at first, but then they got interested in a big hurry. It seems to be tied in with a case they're working."

"Brubaker," I said.

He nodded again. "The trunk mat had parts of Brubaker on it. Blood and brain matter, to be specific. It had been scrubbed with a paper towel, but not well enough."

"Anything else?" I said.

"Lots of things. There was blood from a different source, just trace evidence of a

transfer smear, maybe from a jacket sleeve or a knife blade."

"Carbone's," I said. "From when Marshall was riding in the trunk afterward. Did they find a knife?"

"No," Franz said. "But Marshall's prints are all over the inside of the trunk."

"They would be," I said. "He spent several hours in there."

"There was a single dog tag under the mat," Franz said. "Like the chain had been broken and one of them had slipped off and gotten away."

"Carbone's?" I said.

"None other."

"Amateur hour," I said. "Anything else?"

"Mostly normal stuff. It was an untidy car. Lots of hair and fiber, fast-food wrappers, soda cans, stuff like that."

"Any yogurt pots?"

"One," Franz said. "In the trunk."

"Strawberry or raspberry?"

"Strawberry. Marshall's prints on the foil tab. Seems like he had a snack."

"He opened it," I said. "But he didn't eat it."

"There was an empty envelope," Franz said. "Addressed to Kramer at XII Corps in Germany. Airmail, postmarked a year ago. No return address. Like a photo mailer, but it didn't have anything in it."

I said nothing. He was looking at me in the mirror.

"Is any of this good news?" he said.

I smiled. "It just moved us up from speculative to circumstantial."

"A giant leap for mankind," he said.

Then I stopped smiling and looked away. I started thinking about Carbone, and Brubaker, and Mrs. Kramer. And Mrs. Reacher. All over the world people were dying, in the early part of January 1990.

In the end it took us more than an hour to get to Irwin. I guessed it was true what people said about LA highways. The post looked the same as it usually did. As busy as always. It occupied a huge acreage of the Mojave Desert. One or the other of the armored cavalry regiments lived there on a rotating basis and acted as the home team when other units came in to exercise. There was a real spring-training atmosphere. The weather was always good, people always had fun in the sunshine playing with the big expensive toys.

"You want to take care of business right away?" Franz asked.

"Are you keeping an eye on them?"

He nodded. "Discreetly."

"So let's have breakfast first."

A U.S. Army O Club was the perfect destination for people half-starved on airline food. The buffet was a mile long. Same menu as in Germany, but the orange juice and the fruit platters looked more authentic in California. I ate as much as an average rifle company and Summer ate more. Franz had already eaten. I fueled up on as much coffee as I could take. Then I pushed back from the table. Took a deep breath.

"OK," I said. "Let's go do it."

We went back to Franz's office and he made a call to his guys. They told him Marshall was already out on the range, but Vassell and Coomer were sitting tight in a VOQ rec room. Franz drove us there in his Humvee. We got out on the sidewalk. The sun was bright. The air was warm and dusty. I could smell all the prickly little desert plants that were growing as far as the eye could see.

Irwin's VOQ looked like it had been built by the same motel contractor that had gotten the XII Corps contract in Germany. There were rows of identical rooms

around a sandy courtyard. On one side was a shared facility. TV rooms, table tennis, lounges. Franz led us in through a door and stepped to one side and we found Vassell and Coomer sitting knee to knee in a pair of leather armchairs. I realized I had seen them only once before, when they came to my office at Bird. That seemed disproportionate, considering how much time I had spent thinking about them.

They were both wearing crisp new BDUs in the revised desert camouflage, the pattern people were calling chocolate chip. They both looked just as fake as they had in their woodland greens. They still looked like Rotary Club members. Vassell was still bald and Coomer was still wearing eyeglasses.

They both looked up at me.

I took a breath.

Senior officers.

Harassment.

It could be you that goes to jail.

“General Vassell,” I said. “And Colonel Coomer. You are under arrest on a charge of violating the Uniform Code of Military Justice in that you conspired together and with other persons to commit homicide.”

I held my breath.

But neither one of them had a reaction. Neither one of them spoke. They just gave it up. They just looked resigned. Like the other shoe had finally dropped and the inevitable had finally happened. Like they had been expecting this moment from the start. Like they had known for sure it was coming all along. I breathed out. There were supposed to be all kinds of stages in a person’s reaction to bad news. Grief, anger, denial. But these guys were already through all of that. That was clear. They were right there at the end of the process, butted hard up against acceptance.

I cued Summer to complete the formalities. There were all kinds of things from the Uniform Code that you had to spell out. All kinds of advisements and warnings. Summer ran through them better than I would have. Her voice was

clear and her manner was professional. Neither Vassell nor Coomer responded at all. No bluster, no pleading, no angry protestations of innocence. They just nodded obediently in all the right places. Got up out of their chairs at the end without even being told.

“Handcuffs?” Summer asked me.

I nodded.

“For sure,” I said. “And walk them to the brig. All the way. Don’t put them in the truck. Let everybody see them. They’re a disgrace.”

I got directions from a cavalry guy and took Franz’s Humvee to go get Marshall. He was supposed to be camped out in a hut near a disused range target, observing. The disused target was described to me as an obsolete Sheridan tank. It was supposed to be fairly beat-up. The hut was supposed to be in better shape and close to the old tank. I was told to stick to the established tracks to avoid unexploded ordnance and desert tortoises. If I ran over the ordnance, I would be killed. If I ran over the tortoises, I would be reprimanded by the Department of the Interior.

I left the main post alone, at nine-thirty in the morning exactly. I didn’t want to wait for Summer. She was all tied up with processing Vassell and Coomer. I felt like we were at the end of a long journey, and I just wanted to get it over. I took a borrowed sidearm, but it was still a bad decision.

twenty-three

Irwin owned enough of the Mojave that it could be a plausible standin for the vast deserts of the Middle East or, if you ignored the heat and the sand, a plausible standin for the endless steppes of Eastern Europe. Which meant I was long out of sight of the main post buildings before I was even a tenth of the way to the promised Sheridan tank. The terrain was completely empty all around me. The Humvee felt tiny out there. It was January so there was no heat shimmer but the temperature was still pretty high. I applied what the unofficial Humvee manual called 2-40 air-conditioning, which meant you opened two windows and drove at forty miles an hour. That set up a decent breeze. Normally forty miles an hour in a Humvee feels pretty fast because of its bulk. But out there in the vastness it felt like no speed at all.

A whole hour later I was still doing forty and I still hadn't found the hut. The range went on forever. Irwin was one of the world's great military reservations. That was for sure. Maybe the Soviets had a bigger place somewhere, but I would have been surprised. Maybe Willard could have told me. I smiled to myself and kept on going. Drove over a ridge and saw an empty plain below me. A dot on the next horizon that might have been the hut. A dust cloud maybe five miles to the west that might have been tanks on the move.

I kept to the track. Kept going at forty. Dust was trailing behind me like a tail. The air coming in the windows was hot. The plain was maybe three miles across. The dot on the horizon became a speck and then grew larger the closer I got to it. After a mile I could make out two separate shapes. The old tank on the left, and the observation hut on the right. After another mile I could make out three separate shapes. The old tank on the left, the observation hut on the right, and Marshall's own Humvee in the middle. It was parked to the west of the building, in the morning shade. It looked like the same shoot-and-scoot adaptation I had seen at XII Corps in Germany. The building was a simple raw cinder-block square. Big holes for windows. No glass. The tank was an old M551, which was a lightweight armored-aluminum piece that had started its design life as a reconnaissance vehicle. It was about a quarter of the weight of an Abrams and it was exactly the type of thing that people like Lieutenant Colonel Simon were betting the future on. It had seen service with some of our Airborne divisions. It wasn't a bad machine. But this example looked pretty much decomposed. It had old plywood skirts on it designed to make it resemble some kind of previous-generation Soviet armor. There had been no point in training our guys to shoot at

generation Soviet armor. There had been no point in training our guys to shoot at something our other guys were still using.

I stayed on the track and coasted to a stop about thirty yards south of the hut. Opened the door and slid out into the heat. I guessed it was less than seventy degrees but after North Carolina and Frankfurt and Paris it felt like Saudi Arabia.

I saw Marshall watching me from a hole in the cinder block.

I had only seen him once and never face-to-face. He had been in the Grand Marquis on New Year's Day, outside Bird's post headquarters, in the dark, behind green-tinted glass. I had pegged him then as a tall dark guy and his file had confirmed it. He looked just the same now. Tall, heavy, olive skin. Thick black hair cut short. He was in desert camouflage and he was stooping a little to see out the cinder-block hole.

I stood next to my Humvee. He watched me, silently.

"Marshall?" I called.

He didn't respond.

"You alone in there?"

No reply.

"Military police," I called, louder. "All personnel, exit that structure immediately."

Nobody responded. Nobody came out. I could still see Marshall through the hole. He could still see me. I guessed he was alone. If he had had a partner in there, the partner would have come out. Nobody else had a reason to be afraid of me.

"Marshall?" I called again.

He ducked out of sight. Just melted backward into the shadows inside. I took the borrowed gun out of my pocket. It was a new-issue Beretta M9. I heard an old training mantra in my head: *Never trust a weapon that you haven't personally test-fired.* I chambered a round. The sound was loud in the desert stillness. I saw the dust cloud in the west. It was maybe a little larger and a little closer than

before. I clicked the Beretta's safety to *Fire.*

"Marshall?" I called.

He didn't reply. But I heard a low voice very faintly and then a brief scratchy burst of radio static. There was no antenna on the roof of the hut. He must have had a portable field radio in there with him.

"Who are you going to call, Marshall?" I said to myself. "The cavalry?"

Then I thought: *The cavalry. An armored cavalry regiment.* I turned and looked west at the dust cloud. Suddenly realized how things stood. I was all alone in the middle of nowhere with a proven killer. He was in a hut, I was out in the open. My partner was a ninety-pound woman about fifty miles away. His buddies were riding around in seventy-ton tanks just below the visible horizon.

I got off the track fast. Worked around to the east of the hut. I saw Marshall again. He moved from one hole to another and watched me. Just gazed out at me.

"Step out of the hut, Major," I called.

There was silence for a long moment. Then he called back to me.

"I'm not going to do that," he said.

"Step out, Major," I called. "You know why I'm here."

He ducked back into the darkness.

"As of right now you're resisting arrest," I called.

No reply. No sound at all. I moved on. Circled the hut. Worked around to the north. There were no holes in the north wall. Just an iron door. It was closed. I figured it wouldn't have a lock. What was there to steal? I could walk right up to it and pull it open. *Was he armed?* I guessed standard procedure would make him unarmed. What kind of deadly enemy could a gunnery observer expect to face? But I guessed a smart guy in Marshall's situation would be taking all kinds of precautions.

There was beaten earth outside the iron door where people had made informal tracks to places they had parked. What an architect would call *pathways of desire.* None of them led north toward me. They all led roughly west or east. Shade in the morning, shade in the afternoon. So I stayed on open ground and got within ten yards of the door. Then I stopped. A good position, on the face of it. Maybe better than going all the way in and risking a surprise. I could wait there all day. No problem. It was January. The noon sun wasn't going to hurt me. I could wait until Marshall gave up. Or starved to death. I had eaten more recently than he had. That was for sure. And if he decided to come out shooting, I could shoot him first. No problem with that either.

The problem was with the holes in the cinder block. In the other three walls. They had looked the size of regular windows. Big enough for a man to climb through. Even a big man like Marshall. He could climb through the west wall and get to his Humvee. Or he could climb through the south wall and get to mine. Military vehicles don't have ignition keys. They have big red starter buttons precisely so that guys can throw themselves inside in a panic and get themselves the hell out of Dodge. And I couldn't watch the west wall and the south wall simultaneously. Not from any kind of a position that offered concealment.

Did I need concealment?

Was he armed?

I had an idea about how to find out.

Never trust a weapon that you haven't personally test-fired.

I aimed at the center of the iron door and pulled the trigger. The Beretta worked. It worked just fine. It flashed and boomed and kicked and there was an enormous *clang* and the round left a small bright pit in the metal ten yards away.

I let the echoes die.

"Marshall?" I called. "You're resisting arrest. So I'm going to come around and I'm going to start firing through the window apertures. Either the rounds will kill you or the ricochets will wound you. You want me to stop at any time, you just come on out with your hands on your head."

I [illegible]

I heard a burst of radio static again. Inside the hut.

I moved to the west. Kept low and fast. If he was armed he was going to shoot, but he was going to miss. Give me a choice of who to get shot at by and I'll pick a pointy-headed strategic planner any day of the week. On the other hand, he hadn't been completely inept with Carbone or Brubaker. So I widened my radius a little to give myself a chance of getting behind his Humvee. Or behind the old Sheridan tank.

Halfway there I paused and fired. It was no kind of a good system to make a promise and then not keep it. But I aimed high on the inside face of the window reveal so that if the round hit him it would have had to come off two walls and the ceiling first. Most of the energy would be expended and it wouldn't hurt him much. The nine-millimeter Parabellum was a decent round, but it didn't have magical properties.

I got behind the hood of his Humvee. Rested my gun hand on the warm metal. The camouflage paint was rough. It felt like it had sand mixed in with it. I aimed up at the hut. I was down in a slight dip now and it was above me. I fired again, high on the other side of the window reveal.

"Marshall?" I called. "You want suicide by cop, that's OK with me."

No reply. I was three rounds down. Twelve rounds to go. A smart guy might just lie on the floor and let me blast away. All my trajectories would be upward in relation to him because I was down in a dip. And because of the windowsills. I could try banking rounds off the ceiling and the far wall but ricochets didn't necessarily work like billiards. They weren't predictable and they weren't reliable.

I saw movement at the window.

He was armed.

And not with a handgun either. I saw a big wide shotgun barrel come out at me. Black. It looked about the size of a rainwater pipe. I figured it for an Ithaca Mag-10. A handsome piece. If you wanted a shotgun, the Mag-10 was about as good as it got. It was nicknamed the *Roadblocker* because it was effective against soft-skinned vehicles. I ducked backward and put the Humvee's engine block between myself and the hut. Made myself as small as I could get.

Then I heard the radio again. Inside the hut. It was a very short transmission and faint and full of static and I couldn't make out any actual words but the rhythm and the inflection of the burst came across like a three-syllable question. Maybe *Say again?* It was what you heard after you issued a confusing order.

I heard a repeat transmission. *Say again?* Then I heard Marshall's voice. Barely audible. Four syllables. Fluffy consonants at the beginning. *Affirmative*, maybe.

Who was he talking to and what was he ordering?

"Give it up, Marshall," I called. "How much shit do you want to be in?"

It was what a hostage negotiator would have called a pressure question. It was supposed to have a negative psychological effect. But it made no legal sense. If he shot me, he would go to Leavenworth for four hundred years. If he didn't, he would go for three hundred years. No practical difference. A rational man would ignore it.

He ignored it. He was plenty rational. He ignored it and he fired the big Ithaca instead, which is exactly what I would have done.

In theory it was the moment I was waiting for. Firing a long gun that requires a physical input before it can be fired again leaves the shooter vulnerable after pulling the trigger. I should have come out from cover immediately and returned lethal aimed fire. But the sheer stunning impact of the ten-gauge cartridge slowed me down by half a second. I wasn't hit. The spray pattern was low and tight and it caught the Humvee's front wheel. I felt the tire blow and the truck dropped its front corner ten inches into the sand. There was smoke and dust everywhere. When I looked half a second later the shotgun barrel was gone. I fired up at the top of the window reveal. I wanted a tight ricochet that came down vertically and drilled through his head.

I didn't get one. He called out to me.

"I'm reloading," he said.

I paused. He probably wasn't. A Mag-10 holds three rounds. He had only fired one. He probably wanted me to come out of cover and charge his position. Whereupon he would rear up and smile and blow me away. I stayed where I was. I didn't have the luxury of reloading. I was four down, eleven to go.

I heard the radio again. Brief static, four syllables, a descending scale. *Acknowledged, out.* Fast and casual, like a piano trill.

Marshall fired again. I saw the black barrel move in the window and there was another loud explosion and the far back corner of the Humvee dropped ten inches. Just dumped itself straight down. I flattened in the dirt for a second and squinted underneath. *He was shooting the tires out.* A Humvee can run on flat tires. That was part of the design demand. But it can't run on no tires. And a ten-gauge shotgun doesn't just flatten a tire. It *removes* a tire. It tears the rubber right off the rim and leaves little tiny shreds of it all over a twenty-foot radius.

He was disabling his own Humvee and he was going to make a break for mine.

I got up on my knees again and crouched behind the hood. Now I was actually safer than I had been before. The big vehicle was canted right down on the passenger side so that there was a solid angled wedge of metal between me and him all the way to the desert floor. I pressed up against the front fender. Lined myself up with the engine block. Put six hundred pounds of cast iron between me and the gun. I could smell diesel. A fuel line had been hit. It was leaking fast. No tires, nothing in the tank. And no percentage in soaking my shirt with diesel and lighting it and tossing it in the hut. I had no matches. And diesel isn't flammable the way gasoline is. It's just a greasy liquid. It needs to be vaporized and put under intense pressure before it explodes. That was why the Humvee was designed with a diesel engine. Safety.

"*Now* I'm reloading," Marshall called.

I waited. *Was he or wasn't he?* He probably was. But I didn't care. I wasn't going to rush him. I had a better idea. I crawled along the Humvee's tilted flank and stopped at the rear bumper. Looked past it and scoped out my view. To the south I could see my own Humvee. To the north I could see almost all the way to the hut. There was an open space twenty-five yards wide in between. No-man's-land. Marshall would have to traverse twenty-five continuous yards of open ground to get from the hut to my Humvee. Right through my field of fire. He would probably run backward, shooting as he went. But his weapon packed only three rounds fully loaded. If he spaced them out, he would be firing once every eight yards. If he loosed them all off at the start full blast and unaimed, he would be naked all the rest of the way to the truck. Either option, he was going down. That was for damn sure. I had eleven Parabellums and an accurate pistol and a

steel bumper to rest my wrist on.

I smiled.

I waited.

Then the Sheridan came apart behind me.

I heard a hum in the air like a shell the size of a Volkswagen was incoming and I turned in time to see the old tank smashed to pieces like it had been hit by a train. It jumped a whole foot off the ground and the fake plywood skirts splintered and spun away and the turret came off its ring and turned over slowly in the air and thumped down in the sand ten feet from me.

There was no explosion. Just a huge bass metal-to-metal thump. And then nothing but eerie silence.

I turned back. Watched the open ground. Marshall was still in the hut. Then a shadow passed over my head and I saw a shell in the air with that weird slow-motion optical illusion you get with long-range artillery. It flew right over me in a perfect arc and hit the desert floor fifty yards farther on. It kicked up a huge plume of dust and sand and buried itself deep.

No explosion.

They were firing practice rounds at me.

I heard the whine of turbines in the far distance. The faint clatter of drive sprockets and idlers and track-return rollers. The muffled roar of engines as tanks raced toward me. I heard a faint *boom* as a big gun fired. Then nothing. Then a hum in the air. Then more smashing and tearing of metal as the Sheridan was hit again. No explosion. A practice round is the same as a regular shell, the same size, the same weight, with a full load of propellant, but no explosive in the nose cone. It’s just a lump of dumb metal. Like a handgun bullet, except it’s five inches wide and more than a foot long.

Marshall had switched their training target.

That was what all the radio chatter had been about. Marshall had ordered them away from whatever they were doing five miles to the west. He had ordered

them to move in toward him and put rounds down on his own position. They had been incredulous. *Say again? Say again?* Marshall had replied: *Affirmative.*

He had switched their training target to cover his escape.

How many tanks were out there? How long did I have? If twenty tank guns quartered the area they would hit a man-sized target before very long. Within minutes. That was clear. The law of averages absolutely guaranteed it. And to be hit by a bullet five inches wide and more than a foot long would be no fun at all. A near-miss would be just as bad. A fifty-pound chunk of metal hitting the Humvee I was hiding behind would shred it to supersonic pieces as small and sharp as K-bar blades. Even without an explosive charge the sheer kinetic energy alone would make that happen. It would be like a grenade going off right next to me.

I heard a ragged *boom, boom* north and west of me. Low, dull sounds. Two guns firing in a tight sequence. Closer than they had been before. The air hissed. One shell went long but the other came in low on a flat trajectory and hit the Sheridan square in the side. It went in and it came out, straight through the aluminum hull like a .38 through a tin can. If Lieutenant Colonel Simon had been there to see it, he might have changed his mind about the future.

More guns fired. One after the other. A ragged salvo. There were no explosions. But the brutal calamitous physical noise was maybe worse. It was some kind of primeval clamor. The air hissed. There was deep brainless thudding as dead shells hit the earth. There were shuddering bass peals of metal against metal, like ancient giants clashing with swords. Huge chunks of wreckage from the Sheridan cartwheeled away and clanged and shivered and skidded on the sand. There was dust and dirt everywhere in the air. I was choking on it. Marshall was still in the hut. I stayed down in a low crouch and kept my Beretta aimed at the open ground. Waited. Forced my hand to keep still. Stared at the empty space. Just stared at it, desperately. I didn't understand. Marshall had to know he couldn't wait much longer. He had called down a hailstorm of metal. *We were being attacked by Abrams tanks.* My Humvee was going to get hit any second. His only avenue of escape was going to vanish right before his eyes. It was going to flip up in the air and come down on its roof. The law of averages guaranteed it. Or else the hut would get hit and collapse all around him first. He would be buried in the rubble. One thing or the other would happen. For sure. It had to. *So why the hell was he waiting?*

Then I got up on my knees and stared at the hut.

Because I knew why.

Suicide.

I had offered him suicide by cop but he had already chosen suicide by tank. He had seen me coming and he had guessed who I was. Like Vassell and Coomer he had been sitting numb day after day just waiting for the other shoe to drop. And finally there it was, at last, the other shoe, coming straight at him through the desert dust in a Humvee. He had thought and he had decided and he had gotten on the radio.

He was going down, and he was taking me with him.

I could hear the tanks pretty close now. Not more than eight or nine hundred yards. I could hear the squeal and clatter of their tracks. They were still moving fast. They would be fanning out, like it said in the field manual. They would be pitching and rolling. They would be kicking up rooster tails of dust. They would be forming a loose mobile semicircle with their big guns pointing inward like the spokes of a wheel.

I crawled back and looked at my Humvee. But if I went for it Marshall would shoot me down from the safety of the hut. No question about that. The twenty-five yards of open ground must have looked as good to him as they looked to me.

I waited.

I heard the *boom* of a gun and the *whump* of a shell and I stood up and ran the other way. I heard another *boom* and another *whump* and the first shell slammed into the Sheridan and bowled it all the way over and then the second hit Marshall's Humvee and demolished it completely. I threw myself behind the north corner of the hut and rolled tight against the base of the wall and listened to shards of metal rattling against the cinder blocks and the screeching as the old Sheridan's armor finally came apart.

The tanks were very close now. I could hear their engine notes rising and falling as they breasted rises and crashed through dips. I could hear their tracks slapping against their skirts. I could hear their hydraulics whining as they traversed their

guns.

I got to my feet. Stood up straight. Wiped dust out of my eyes. Stepped over to the iron door. Saw the bright crater my gun had made. I knew Marshall had to be either standing in the south window looking for me running or standing in the west window looking for me dead behind the wreckage. I knew he was tall and I knew he was right-handed. I fixed an abstract target in my mind. Moved my left hand and put it on the doorknob. Waited.

The next shells were fired so close that I heard *boom whump boom whump* with no pause in between. I pulled the door and stepped inside. Marshall was right there in front of me. He was facing away, looking south, framed by the brightness of the window. I aimed at his right shoulder blade and pulled the trigger and a shell took the roof off the hut. The room was instantly full of dust and I was hit by falling beams and corrugated sheets and stung by fragments of flying concrete. I went down on my knees. Then I collapsed on my front. I was pinned. I couldn't see Marshall. I heaved myself back up on my knees and flailed my arms to fight off the debris. The dust was sucking upward in a ragged spiral and I could see bright blue sky above me. I could hear tank tracks all around me. Then I heard another *boom whump* and the front corner of the hut blew away. It was there, and then it wasn't. It was solid, and then it was a spray of gray dust coming toward me at the speed of sound. A gale of dusty air whipped after it and knocked me off my feet again.

I struggled back up and crawled forward. Just butted my way through fallen beams and lumps of broken concrete. I threw twisted sheets of roofing iron aside. I was like a plow. Like a bulldozer, grinding forward, piling debris to the left and right of me. There was too much dust to see anything except the sunlight. It was right there in front of me. Brightness ahead, darkness behind. I kept on going.

I found the Mag-10. Its barrel was crushed. I threw it aside and plowed on. Found Marshall on the floor. He wasn't moving. I pulled stuff off him and grabbed his collar and hauled him up into a sitting position. Dragged him forward until I came to the front wall. I put my back against it and slid upright until I felt the window aperture. I was choking and spitting dust. It was in my eyes. I dragged him upward and hauled him over the windowsill and dumped him out. Then I fell out after him. Got up on my hands and knees and grabbed his collar again and dragged him away. Outside the hut the dust was clearing. I

could see tanks, maybe three hundred yards to the left and right of us. Lots of tanks. Hot metal in the harsh sunlight. They had outflanked us. They were holding in a perfect circle, engines idling, guns flat, aiming over open sights. I heard *boom whump* again and saw a bright muzzle flash from one of them and saw it pitch backward from the recoil. I saw its shell pass right over us. I saw it in the air. Heard it break the sound barrier with a crack like a neck snapping. Heard it smash into the remains of the hut. Felt more dust and concrete shower down on my back. I went down on my face and lay still, trapped in no-man's-land.

Then another tank fired. I saw it jerk backward from the recoil. Seventy tons, smashed back so hard its front end came right up in the air. Its shell screamed overhead. I started moving again. I dragged Marshall behind me and crawled through the dirt like I was swimming. I had no idea what he had said on the radio. No idea what his orders had been. He had to have told them he was moving out. Maybe he had told them to disregard the Humvees. Maybe that explained their *Say again?* Maybe he had told them the Humvees were fair game. Maybe that was what they had found hard to believe.

But I knew they wouldn't stop firing now. Because they couldn't see us. Dust was drifting like smoke and the view out of a buttoned-up Abrams wasn't great to begin with. It was like looking lengthwise through a grocery bag with a small square hole cut out of the bottom. I paused and batted dust out of the way and coughed and peered forward. We were close to my Humvee.

It looked straight and level.

It looked intact.

So far.

I stood up and raced the last ten feet and hauled Marshall around to the passenger side and opened the door and crammed him into the front. Then I climbed right in over him and dumped myself into the driver's seat. Hit that big red button and fired it up. Shoved it into gear and stamped on the gas so hard the acceleration slammed the door shut. Then I turned the lights full on and put my foot to the floor and charged. Summer would have been proud of me. I drove straight for the line of tanks. Two hundred yards. One hundred yards. I picked my spot and aimed carefully and burst through the gap between two main battle tanks doing more than eighty miles an hour.

I slowed down after a mile. After another mile, I stopped. Marshall was alive. But he was unconscious and he was bleeding all over the place. My aim had been good. His shoulder had a big messy nine-millimeter broken-bone through-and-through gunshot wound in it and he had plenty of other cuts from the hut's collapse. His blood was all mixed with cement dust like a maroon paste. I got him arranged on the seat and strapped him in tight with the harness. Then I broke out the first-aid kit and put pressure bandages on both sides of his shoulder and jabbed him with morphine. I wrote *M* on his forehead with a grease pencil like you were supposed to in the field. That way the medics wouldn't overdose him when he got to the hospital.

Then I walked around in the fresh air for a spell. Just walked up and down the track, aimlessly. I coughed and spat and dusted myself down as well as I could. I was bruised and sore from being pelted with concrete fragments. Two miles behind me I could still hear tanks firing. I guessed they were waiting for a cease-fire order. I guessed they were likely to run out of rounds before they got one.

I kept the 2-40 A/C going all the way back. Halfway there, Marshall woke up. I saw his chin come up off his chest. Saw him glance ahead, and then at me to his left. He was full of morphine and his right arm was useless, but I was still cautious. If he grabbed the wheel with his left he might force us off the track. He might run us over some unexploded debris. Or a tortoise. So I took my right hand off the wheel and reverse-punched him square between the eyes. It was a good solid smack. It put him right back to sleep. *Manual anesthetic.* He stayed out all the way back to the post.

I drove him straight to the base hospital. Called Franz from the nurses' station and ordered up a guard squad. I waited for them to arrive and promised rank and medals for anyone who helped ensure Marshall saw the inside of a courtroom. I told them to read him his rights as soon as he woke up. And I told them to mount a suicide watch. Then I left them to it and drove back to Franz's office. My BDUs were torn up and stiff with dust and I guessed my face and hands and hair

didn’t look any better because Franz laughed as soon as he saw me.

“I guess it’s tough taking desk jockeys down,” he said.

“Where’s Summer?” I said.

“Telexing JAG Corps,” he said. “Talking to people on the phone.”

“I lost your Beretta,” I said.

“Where?”

“Somewhere it’s going to take a bunch of archaeologists a hundred years to find.”

“Is my Humvee OK?”

“Better than Marshall’s,” I said.

I found my bag and an empty VOQ room and took a long hot shower. Then I transferred all my pocket stuff to a new set of BDUs and trashed the damaged ones. I figured any quartermaster would agree they were deteriorated beyond reasonable future use. I sat on the bed for a while. Just breathed in, breathed out. Then I walked back to Franz’s place. I found Summer there. She was looking radiant. She was holding a new file folder that already had a lot of pages in it.

“We’re on track,” she said. “JAG Corps says the arrests were righteous.”

“Did you lay out the case?”

“They say they’ll need confessions.”

I said nothing.

“We have to meet with the prosecutors tomorrow,” she said. “In D.C.”

“You’ll have to do it,” I said. “I won’t be around.”

“Why not?”

I didn’t answer.

“You OK?”

“Are Vassell and Coomer talking?”

She shook her head. “They haven’t said a word. JAG Corps is flying them to Washington tonight. They’ve been assigned lawyers.”

“There’s something wrong,” I said.

“What?”

“It’s been way too easy.”

I thought for a moment.

“We need to get back to Bird,” I said. “Right now.”

Franz lent me fifty bucks and gave me two blank travel vouchers. I signed them and Leon Garber countersigned them even though he was thousands of miles away in Korea. Then Franz drove us back to LAX. He used a staff car because his Humvee was full of Marshall’s blood. Traffic was light and it was a fast trip. We went in and I swapped the vouchers for seats on the first flight to D.C. I checked my bag. I didn’t want to carry it this time. We took off at three o’clock in the afternoon. We had been in California eight hours exactly.

twenty-four

Flying east the time zones stole back the hours we had gained going west. It was eleven o'clock at night at Washington National when we landed. I reclaimed my duffel from the carousel and we took the shuttle to the long-term lot. The Chevy was waiting there right where we left it. I used some of Franz's fifty bucks and we filled the tank. Then Summer drove us back to Bird. She went as fast as always and took the same old route, down I-95. Past the State Police barracks, the place where the briefcase was found, the rest area, the cloverleaf, the motel, the lounge bar. We were timed in through Fort Bird's main gate at three in the morning. The post was quiet. There was a night mist clamped down all over it. Nothing was stirring.

"Where to?" Summer said.

"The Delta station," I said.

She drove us around to the old prison gates and the sentry let us in. We parked in their main lot. I could see Trifonov's red Corvette in the darkness. It was all on its own, near the wall with the water hose. It looked very clean.

"Why are we here?" Summer said.

"We had a very weak case," I said. "You made that point yourself. And you were right. It was very weak. The forensics with the staff car helped, but we never really got beyond purely circumstantial stuff. We can't actually put Vassell and Coomer and Marshall at any of the scenes. Not definitively. We can't prove Marshall ever actually touched the crowbar. We can't prove he didn't actually eat the yogurt for a snack. And we certainly can't prove that Vassell and Coomer ever actually ordered him to do anything. If push came to shove, they could claim Marshall was an out-of-control lone wolf."

"So?"

"We walked in and confronted two senior officers who were doubly insulated from a very weak and circumstantial case. What should have happened?"

"They should have fought it."

I nodded. "They should have scoffed at it. They should have laughed it off. They

I nodded. "They should have scoffed at it. They should have laughed it off. They should have gotten offended. They should have threatened and blustered. They should have thrown us out on our asses. But they didn't do any of that. They just sat still for it. And their silence kind of pled themselves guilty. That was my impression. That's how I took it."

"Me too," Summer said. "Certainly."

"So why didn't they fight?"

She was quiet for a spell.

"Guilty consciences?" she said.

I shook my head. "Spare me."

She was quiet a moment longer.

"Shit," she said. "Maybe they're just waiting. Maybe they're going to collapse the case in full view of everybody. In D.C., tomorrow, when they've got their lawyers there. To ruin our careers. To put us in our place. Maybe it's a vindictive thing."

I shook my head again. "What did I charge them with?"

"Conspiracy to commit homicide."

I nodded. "I think they misunderstood me."

"It was plain English."

"They understood the words. But not the context. I was talking about one thing, and they thought I was talking about a different thing. They thought I was talking about something else entirely. They pled guilty to the wrong conspiracy, Summer. They pled guilty to something they *know* can be proved beyond a reasonable doubt."

She said nothing.

"The agenda," I said. "It's still out there. They never got it back. Carbone double-crossed them. They opened the briefcase up there on I-95, and the agenda wasn't in it. It was already gone."

wasn't in it. It was already gone.

"So where is it?"

"I'll show you where," I said. "That's why we came back. So you can use it tomorrow. Up in D.C. Use it to leverage all the other stuff. The things we're weak on."

We slid out of the car into the cold. Walked across the lot to the cell block door. Stepped inside. I could hear the sounds of sleeping men. I could taste the sour dormitory air. We walked through corridors and turned corners in the dark until we came to Carbone's billet. It was empty and undisturbed. We stepped in and I snapped the light on. Stepped over to the bed. Reached up to the shelf. Ran my fingers along the spines of the books. Pulled out the tall thin Rolling Stones souvenir. Held it. Shook it.

A four-page conference agenda fell out on the bed.

We stared at it.

"Brubaker told him to hide it," I said.

I picked it up and handed it to Summer. Turned the light back off and stepped out into the corridor. Came face-to-face with the young Delta sergeant with the beard and the tan. He was in skivvies and a T-shirt. He was barefoot. He had been drinking beer about four hours ago, according to the way he smelled.

"Well, well," he said. "Look who we have here."

I said nothing.

"You woke me up talking," he said. "And flashing lights on and off."

I said nothing.

He glanced into Carbone's cell. "Revisiting the scene of the crime?"

"This isn't where he died."

"You know what I mean."

Then he smiled and I saw his hands bunch into fists. I slammed him back against

Then he smiled and I saw his hands bunch into fists. I slammed him back against the wall with my left forearm. His skull hit the concrete and his eyes glazed for a second. I kept my arm hard and level across his chest. Got the point of my elbow on his right bicep and spread my open fingers across his left bicep. Pinned him to the wall. Leaned on him with all my weight. Kept on leaning until he was having trouble breathing.

“Do me a favor,” I said. “Read the newspaper every day this week.”

Then I fumbled in my jacket pocket with my free hand and found the bullet. The one he had delivered. The one with my name on it. I held it with my finger and thumb right down at the base. It shone gold in the faint night light.

“Watch this,” I said.

I showed him the bullet. Then I shoved it up his nose.

My sergeant was at her desk. The one with the baby son. She had coffee going. I poured two mugs and carried them into my office. Summer carried the agenda, like a trophy. She took the staple out of the paper and laid the four sheets side by side on my desk.

They were original typewritten pages. Not carbons, not faxes, not photocopies. That was clear. There were handwritten notes and penciled amendments between the lines and in the margins. There were three different scripts. Mostly Kramer’s, I guessed, but Vassell’s and Coomer’s as well, almost certainly. It had been a round-robin first draft. That was clear too. It had been the subject of a lot of thought and scrutiny.

The first sheet was an analysis of the problems that Armored was facing. The integrated units, the loss of prestige. The possibility of ceding command to others. It was gloomy, but it was conventional. And it was accurate, according to the Chief of Staff.

The second page and the third page contained more or less what I had predicted to Summer. Proposed attempts to smear key opponents, with maximum use of dirty laundry. Some of the margin notes hinted at some of the dirt, and a lot of it sounded pretty interesting. I wondered how they had gathered information like that. And I wondered if anyone in JAG Corps would follow up on it. Someone

probably would. Investigations were like that. They led off in all kinds of random directions.

There were ideas for public relations campaigns. Most of them were pretty limp. These guys hadn't mixed with the public since they took the bus up the Hudson to start their plebe year at the Point. Then there were references to the big defense contractors. There were ideas for political initiatives inside the Department of the Army and in Congress. Some of the political ideas looped right back and tied in with the defense contractor references. There were hints of some pretty sophisticated relationships there. Clearly money flowed one way and favors flowed the other way. The Secretary of Defense was mentioned by name. His help was taken pretty much for granted. On one line his name was actually underlined and a note in the margin read: *bought and paid for.* Altogether the first three pages were full of the kind of stuff you would expect from arrogant professionals heavily invested in the status quo. It was murky and sordid and desperate, for sure. But it wasn't anything that would send you to jail.

That stuff came on the fourth page.

The fourth page had a curious heading: *T.E.P., The Extra Mile.* Underneath that was a typed quotation from *The Art of War* by Sun-tzu: *To fail to take the battle to the enemy when your back is to the wall is to perish.* Alongside that in the margin was a penciled addendum in what I guessed was Vassell's handwriting: *While coolness in disaster is the supreme proof of a commander's courage, energy in pursuit is the surest test of his strength of will. Wavell.*

"Who's Wavell?" Summer said.

"An old British field marshal," I said. "World War Two. Then he was viceroy of India. He was blind in one eye from World War One."

Underneath the Wavell quote was another penciled note, in a different hand. Coomer's, probably. It said: *Volunteers? Me? Marshall?* Those three words were ringed and connected with a long looping pencil line back to the heading: *T.E.P., The Extra Mile.*

"What's that about?" Summer said.

"Read on," I said.

Below the Sun-tzu quote was a typed list of eighteen names. I knew most of them. There were key battalion commanders from prestige infantry divisions like the 82nd and the 101st, and significant staffers from the Pentagon, and some other people. There was an interesting mix of ages and ranks. There were no really junior officers, but the list wasn't confined to senior people. Not by any means. There were some rising stars in there. Some obvious choices, some offbeat mavericks. A few of the names meant nothing to me. They belonged to people I had never heard of. There was a guy listed called Abelson, for instance. I didn't know who Abelson was. He had a penciled check mark against his name. Nobody else did.

"What's the check mark for?" Summer said.

I dialed my sergeant outside at her desk.

"Ever heard of a guy called Abelson?" I asked her.

"No," she said.

"Find out about him," I said. "He's probably a light colonel or better."

I went back to the list. It was short, but it was easy enough to interpret. It was a list of eighteen key bones in a massive evolving skeleton. Or eighteen key nerves in a complex neurological system. Remove them, and a certain part of the army would be somewhat handicapped. Today, for sure. But more importantly it would be handicapped tomorrow too. Because of the rising stars. Because of the stunted evolution. And from what I knew about the people whose names I recognized, the part of the army that would get hurt was exclusively the part with the light units in it. More specifically, those light units that looked ahead toward the twenty-first century rather than those that looked backward at the nineteenth. Eighteen people was not a large number, in a million-man army. But it was a superbly chosen sample. There had been some acute analysis going on. Some precision targeting. The movers and the shakers, the thinkers and the planners. The bright stars. If you wanted a list of eighteen people whose presence or absence would make a difference to the future, this was it, all typed and tabulated.

My phone rang. I hit *Speaker* and we heard my sergeant's voice.

"Abelson was the Apache helicopter guy," she said. "You know, the attack helicopters? The gunships? Always beating that particular drum?"

helicopters? The gunships? Always beating that particular drum?"

"Was?" I said.

"He died the day before New Year's Eve. Car versus pedestrian in Heidelberg, Germany. Hit-and-run."

I clicked the phone off.

"Swan mentioned that," I said. "In passing. Now that I think about it."

"The check mark," Summer said.

I nodded. "One down, seventeen to go."

"What does *T.E.P.* mean?"

"It's old CIA jargon," I said. "It means *terminate with extreme prejudice*."

She said nothing.

"In other words, assassinate," I said.

We sat quiet for a long, long time. I looked at the ridiculous quotations again. *The enemy. When your back is to the wall. The supreme proof of a commander's courage. The surest test of his strength of will.* I tried to imagine what kind of crazy isolated ego-driven fever could drive people to add grandiose quotations like those to a list of men they wanted to murder so they could keep their jobs and their prestige. I couldn't even begin to figure it out. So I just gave it up and butted the four typewritten sheets back together and threaded the staple back through the original holes. I took an envelope from my drawer and slipped them inside it.

"It's been out in the world since the first of the year," I said. "And they knew it was gone for good on the fourth. It wasn't in the briefcase, and it wasn't on Brubaker's body. That's why they were resigned. They gave up on it a week ago. They killed three people looking for it, but they never found it. So they were just sitting there, knowing for sure sooner or later it was going to come back and bite them in the ass."

I slid the envelope across the desk.

“Use it,” I told Summer. “Use it in D.C. Use it to nail their damn hides to the wall.”

By then it was already four o’clock in the morning and Summer left for the Pentagon immediately. I went to bed and got four hours’ sleep. Woke myself up at eight. I had one thing left to do, and I knew for sure there was one thing left to be done to me.

twenty-five

I got to my office at nine o'clock in the morning. The woman with the baby son was gone by then. The Louisiana corporal had taken her place.

"JAG Corps is here for you," he said. He jerked his thumb at my inner door. "I let them go straight in."

I nodded. Looked around for coffee. There wasn't any. *Bad start.* I opened my door and stepped inside. Found two guys in there. One of them was in a visitor's chair. One of them was at my desk. Both of them were in Class As. Both had JAG Corps badges on their lapels. A small gold wreath, crossed with a saber and an arrow. The guy in the visitor's chair was a captain. The guy at my desk was a lieutenant colonel.

"Where do I sit?" I said.

"Anywhere you like," the colonel said.

I said nothing.

"I saw the telexes from Irwin," he said. "You have my sincere congratulations, Major. You did an outstanding job."

I said nothing.

"And I heard about Kramer's agenda," he said. "I just got a call from the Chief of Staff's office. That's an even better result. It justifies Operation Argon all by itself."

"You're not here to discuss the case," I said.

"No," he said. "We're not. That discussion is happening at the Pentagon, with your lieutenant."

I took a spare visitor's chair and put it against the wall, under the map. I sat down on it. Leaned back. Put my hand up over my head and played with the pushpins. The colonel leaned forward and looked at me. He waited, like he wanted me to speak first.

“You planning on enjoying this?” I asked him.

“It’s my job,” he said.

“You like your job?”

“Not all the time,” he said.

I said nothing.

“This case was like a wave on the beach,” he said. “Like a big old roller that washes in and races up the sand, and pauses, and then washes back out and recedes, leaving nothing behind.”

I said nothing.

“Except it did leave something behind,” he said. “It left a big ugly piece of flotsam stuck right there on the waterline, and we have to address it.”

He waited for me to speak. I thought about clamming up. Thought about making him do all the work himself. But in the end I just shrugged and gave it up.

“The brutality complaint,” I said.

He nodded. “Colonel Willard brought it to our attention. And it’s awkward. Whereas the unauthorized use of the travel warrants can be dismissed as germane to the investigation, the brutality complaint can’t. Because apparently the two civilians were completely unrelated to the business at hand.”

“I was misinformed,” I said.

“That doesn’t alter the fact, I’m afraid.”

“Your witness is dead.”

“He left a signed affidavit. That stands forever. That’s the same as if he were right there in the courtroom, testifying.”

I said nothing.

“It comes down to a simple question of fact,” the colonel said. “A simple yes or

no answer, really. Did you do what Carbone alleged?”

I said nothing.

The colonel stood up. “You can talk it over with your counsel.”

I glanced at the captain. Apparently he was my lawyer. The colonel shuffled out and closed the door on us. The captain leaned forward from his chair and shook my hand and told me his name.

“You should cut the colonel some slack,” he said. “He’s giving you a loophole a mile wide. This whole thing is a charade.”

“I rocked the boat,” I said. “The army is getting its licks in.”

“You’re wrong, Reacher. Nobody wants to screw you over this. Willard forced the issue, is all. So we have to go through the motions.”

“Which are?”

“All you’ve got to do is deny it. That throws Carbone’s evidence into dispute, and since he’s not around to be cross-examined, your Sixth Amendment right to be confronted by the witness against you kicks in and it guarantees you an automatic dismissal.”

I sat still.

“How would it be done?” I said.

“You sign an affidavit just like Carbone did. His says black, yours says white, the problem goes away.”

“Official paper?”

“It’ll take five minutes. We can do it right here. Your corporal can type it and witness it. Dead easy.”

I nodded.

“What’s the alternative?” I said.

“You’d be nuts to even think about an alternative.”

You'd be nuts to even think about an alternative.

“What would happen?”

“It would be like pleading guilty.”

“What would happen?” I said again.

“With an effective guilty plea? Loss of rank, loss of pay, backdated to the incident. Civilian Affairs wouldn’t let us get away with anything less.”

I said nothing.

“You’d be busted back to captain. In the regular MPs, because the 110th wouldn’t want you anymore. That’s the short answer. But you’d be nuts to even think about it. All you have to do is deny it.”

I sat there and thought about Carbone. Thirty-five years old, sixteen of them in the service. Infantry, Airborne, the Rangers, Delta. Sixteen years of hard time. He had done nothing except try to keep a secret he should never have had to keep. And try to alert his unit to a threat. Nothing much wrong with either of those things. But he was dead. Dead in the woods, dead on a slab. Then I thought about the fat guy at the strip club. I didn’t really care about the farmer. A busted nose was no big deal. But the fat guy was messed up bad. On the other hand, he wasn’t one of North Carolina’s finest citizens. I doubted if the governor was lining him up for a civic award.

I thought about both of those guys for a long time. Carbone, and the fat man in the parking lot. Then I thought about myself. A major, a star, a hotshot special unit investigator, a go-to guy headed for the top.

“OK,” I said. “Bring the colonel back in.”

The captain got up out of his chair and opened the door. Held it for the colonel. Closed it behind him. Sat down again next to me. The colonel shuffled past us and sat down at the desk.

“Right,” he said. “Let’s wrap this thing up. The complaint is baseless, yes?”

I looked at him. Said nothing.

“Well?”

"Well?"

You're going to do the right thing.

"The complaint is true," I said.

He stared at me.

"The complaint is accurate," I said. "In every detail. It went down exactly like Carbone described."

"Christ," the colonel said.

"Are you crazy?" the captain said.

"Probably," I said. "But Carbone wasn't a liar. That shouldn't be the last thing that goes in his record. He deserves better than that. He was in sixteen years."

The room went quiet. We all just sat there. They were looking at a lot of paperwork. I was looking at being an MP captain again. No more special unit. But it wasn't a big surprise. I had seen it coming. I had seen it coming ever since I closed my eyes on the plane and the dominoes started falling, end over end, one after the other.

"One request," I said. "I want a two-day suspension included. Starting now."

"Why?"

"I have to go to a funeral. I don't want to beg my CO for leave."

The colonel looked away.

"Granted," he said.

I went back to my quarters and packed my duffel with everything I owned. I cashed a check at the commissary and left fifty-two dollars in an envelope for my sergeant. I mailed fifty back to Franz. I collected the crowbar that Marshall had used from the pathologist and I put it with the one we had on loan from the store. Then I went to the MP motor pool and looked for a vehicle to borrow. I

was surprised to see Kramer's rental still parked there.

"Nobody told us what to do with it," the clerk said.

"Why not?"

"Sir, you tell me. It was your case."

I wanted something inconspicuous, and the little red Ford stood out among all the olive drab and black. But then I realized the situation would be reversed out in the world. Out there, the little red Ford wouldn't attract a second glance.

"I'll take it back now," I said. "I'm headed to Dulles anyway."

There was no paperwork, because it wasn't an army vehicle.

I left Fort Bird at twenty past ten in the morning and drove north toward Green Valley. I went much slower than before, because the Ford was a slow car and I was a slow driver, at least compared to Summer. I didn't stop for lunch. I just kept on going. I arrived at the police station at a quarter past three in the afternoon. I found Detective Clark at his desk in the bullpen. I told him his case was closed. Told him Summer would give him the details. I collected the crowbar he had on loan and drove the ten miles to Sperryville. I squeezed through the narrow alley and parked outside the hardware store. The window had been fixed. The square of plywood was gone. I looped all three crowbars over my forearm and went inside and returned them to the old guy behind the counter. Then I got back in the car and followed the only road out of town, all the way to Washington D.C.

I took a short counterclockwise loop on the Beltway and went looking for the worst part of town I could find. There was plenty of choice. I picked a four-block square that was mostly crumbling warehouses with narrow alleys between. I found what I wanted in the third alley I checked. I saw an emaciated whore come out a brick doorway. I went in past her and found a guy in a hat. He had what I wanted. It took a minute to get some mutual trust going. But eventually cash money settled our differences, like it always does everywhere. I bought a

little reefer, a little speed, and two dime rocks of crack cocaine. I could see the guy in the hat wasn't impressed by the quantities. I could see he wrote me off as an amateur.

Then I drove to Rock Creek, Virginia. I got there just before five o'clock. Parked three hundred yards from 110th Special Unit headquarters, up on a rise, where I could look down over the fence into the parking lot. I picked out Willard's car with no trouble at all. He had told me all about it. A classic Pontiac GTO. It was right there, near the rear exit. I slumped way down in my seat and kept my eyes wide-open and watched.

He came out at five-fifteen. Bankers' hours. He fired up the Pontiac and backed it away from the building. I had my window cracked open for air and even from three hundred yards I could hear the rumble of the pipes. They made a pretty good V-8 sound. I figured it was a sound Summer would have enjoyed. I made a mental note that if I ever won the lottery I should buy her a GTO of her own.

I fired up the Ford. Willard came out of the lot and turned toward me. I hunkered down and let him go past. Then I waited *one thousand, two thousand* and U-turned and followed after him. He was an easy tail. With the window down I could have done it by sound alone. He drove fairly slow, big and obvious up ahead, near the crown of the road. I stayed well back and let the drive-time traffic fill his mirrors. He headed east toward the D.C. suburbs. I figured he would have a rental in Arlington or Maclean from his Pentagon days. I hoped it wasn't an apartment. But I figured it would more likely be a house. With a garage, for the muscle car. Which was good, because a house was easier.

It was a house. It was on a rural street in the no-man's-land north of Arlington. Plenty of trees, most of them bare, some of them evergreen. The lots were irregular. The driveways were long and curved. The plantings were messy. The street should have had a sign: *Divorced or single male middle-income government workers only.* It was that kind of a place. Not totally ideal, but a lot better than a straight suburban tract with side-by-side front yards full of frolicking kids and anxious mothers.

I drove on by and parked a mile away. Sat and waited for the darkness.

I waited until seven o'clock and I walked. There was low cloud and mist. No starlight. No moon. I was in woodland-pattern BDUs. I was as invisible as the Pentagon could make me. I figured at seven the place would still be mostly empty. I figured a lot of middle-income government workers would have ambitions to become high-income government workers, so they would stay at their desks, trying to impress whoever needed impressing. I used the street that ran parallel to the back of Willard's street and found two messy yards next to each other. Neither house was lit. I walked down the first driveway and kept on going around the dark bulk of the house and straight through the backyard. I stood still. No dogs barked. I turned and tracked along the boundary fences until I was looking at Willard's own backyard. It was full of dead hummocked grass. There was a rusted-out barbecue grill abandoned in the middle of the lawn. In army terms the place was not standing tall and squared away. It was a mess.

I bent a fence post until I had room to slip past it. Walked straight through Willard's yard and around his garage to his front door. There was no porch light. The view from the street was half-open, half-obscured. Not perfect. But not bad. I put my elbow on the bell. Heard it sound inside. There was a short pause and then I heard footsteps. I stood back. Willard opened the door. No delay at all. Maybe he was expecting Chinese food. Or a pizza.

I punched him in the chest to move him backward. Stepped in after him and closed the door behind me with my foot. It was a dismal house. The air was stale. Willard was clutching the stair post, gasping for breath. I hit him in the face and knocked him down. He came up on his hands and knees and I kicked him hard in the ass and kept on kicking until he took the hint and started crawling toward the kitchen as fast as he could. He got himself in there and kind of rolled over and sat on the floor with his back hard up against a cabinet. There was fear in his face, for sure, but confusion too. Like he couldn't believe I was doing this. Like he was thinking: *This is about a disciplinary complaint?* His bureaucratic calculus couldn't compute it.

"Did you hear about Vassell and Coomer?" I asked him.

He nodded, fast and scared.

“Remember Lieutenant Summer?” I asked him.

He nodded again.

“She pointed something out to me,” I said. “Kind of obvious, but she said they would have gotten away with it if I hadn’t ignored you.”

He just stared at me.

“It made me think,” I said. “What exactly was I ignoring?”

He said nothing.

“I misjudged you,” I said. “I apologize. Because I thought I was ignoring a busybody careerist asshole. I thought I was ignoring some kind of a prissy nervous idiot corporate manager who thought he knew better. But I wasn’t. I was ignoring something else entirely.”

He stared up at me.

“You didn’t feel embarrassed about Kramer,” I said. “You didn’t feel sensitive about me harassing Vassell and Coomer. You weren’t speaking for the army when you wanted Carbone written up as a training accident. You were doing the job you were put there to do. Someone wanted three homicides covered up, and you were put there to do it for them. You were participating in a deliberate cover-up, Willard. That’s what you were doing. That’s what I was ignoring. I mean, what the hell else were you doing, *ordering* me not to investigate a homicide? It was a cover-up, and it was planned, and it was structured, and it was decided well in advance. It was decided on the second day of January, when Garber was moved out and you were moved in. You were put in there so that what they were planning to do on the fourth could be controlled. No other reason.”

He said nothing.

“I thought they wanted an incompetent in there, so that nature would take its course. But they went one better than that. They put a friend in there.”

He said nothing.

“You should have refused,” I said. “If you had refused, they wouldn’t have gone

"You should have refused," I said. "If you had refused, they wouldn't have gone ahead with it and Carbone and Brubaker would still be alive."

He said nothing.

"You killed them, Willard. Just as much as they did."

I crouched down next to him. He scrabbled on the floor and pressed backward against the cupboard behind him. He had defeat in his eyes. But he gave it one last shot.

"You can't prove anything," he said.

Now I said nothing.

"Maybe it *was* just incompetence," he said. "You thought about that? How are you going to prove the intention?"

I said nothing. His eyes went hard.

"You're not dealing with idiots," he said. "There's no proof anywhere."

I took Franz's Beretta out of my pocket. The one I had brought out of the Mojave. I hadn't lost it. It had ridden all the way with me from California. That was why I had checked my luggage, just that one time. They won't let you carry guns inside the cabin. Not without paperwork.

"This piece is listed as destroyed," I said. "It doesn't officially exist anymore."

He stared at it.

"Don't be stupid," he said. "You can't prove anything."

"You're not dealing with an idiot either," I said.

"You don't understand," he said. "It was an order. From the top. We're in the army. We obey orders."

I shook my head. "That excuse never worked for any soldier anywhere."

"It was an order," he said again.

“From who?”

He just closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said. “I know exactly who it was. And I know I can’t get to him. Not where he is. But I can get to you. You can be my messenger.”

He opened his eyes.

“You won’t do it,” he said.

“Why didn’t you refuse?”

“I couldn’t refuse. It was time to choose up sides. Don’t you see? We’re all going to have to do that.”

I nodded. “I guess we are.”

“Be smart now,” he said. “Please.”

“I thought you were one bad apple,” I said. “But the whole barrel is bad. The good apples are the rare ones.”

He stared at me.

“You ruined it for me,” I said. “You and your rotten friends.”

“Ruined what?”

“Everything.”

I stood up. Stepped back. Clicked the Beretta’s safety to *Fire.*

He stared at me.

“Good-bye, Colonel Willard,” I said.

I put the gun to my temple. He stared at me.

“Just kidding,” I said.

Then I shot him through the center of the forehead.

Then I shot him through the center of the forehead.

It was a typical nine-millimeter full metal jacket through and through. It put the back of his skull into the cupboard behind him and left it there with a lot of smashed china. I stuffed the reefer and the speed and the crack cocaine in his pockets, along with a symbolic roll of dollar bills. Then I walked out the back door and away through his yard. I slipped through the fence and through the lot behind his and walked back to my car. I sat in the driver's seat and opened my duffel and changed my boots. Took off the pair that had been ruined in the Mojave and put on a better pair. Then I drove west, toward Dulles. Into the Hertz return bays. Car rental bosses aren't dumb. They know people get cars messy. They know they accumulate all kinds of crap inside. So they position big garbage cans near the return bays in the hope that renters will do the decent thing and clear some of the crap out themselves. That way they save on wages. Cut out even a minute a car, and staff costs drop a lot over a whole year. I put my old boots in one can, and the Beretta in another. As many cars as Hertz rented at Dulles in a day, those cans were headed for the crusher on a regular basis.

I walked all the way to the terminal. I didn't feel like taking the bus. I showed my military ID and used my checkbook and bought a one-way ticket to Paris, on the same Air France red-eye Joe had taken back when the world was different.

I got to the Avenue Rapp at eight in the morning. Joe told me the cars were coming at ten. So I shaved and showered in the guest bathroom and found my mother's ironing board and pressed my Class A uniform very carefully. I found polish in a cupboard and shined my shoes. Then I dressed. I put my full array of medals on, all four rows. I followed the *Correct Order of Wear* regulations and the *Wear of Full Size Medals* regulations. Each one hung down neatly over the ribbon in the row below. I used a cloth and cleaned them. I cleaned my other badges too, including my major's oak leaves, one last time. Then I went into the white-painted living room to wait.

Joe was in a black suit. I was no expert on clothing but I figured it was new. It was some kind of a fine material. Silk, maybe. Or cashmere. I didn't know. It was beautifully cut. He had a white shirt and a black tie. Black shoes. He looked good. I had never seen him look better. He was holding up. He was a little strained around the eyes, maybe. We didn't talk. Just waited.

strained around the eyes, maybe. We didn't talk. Just waited.

At five to ten we went down to the street. The *corbillard* showed up right on time, from the *dépôt mortuaire*. Behind it was a black Citroën limousine. We got in the limousine and closed the doors and it moved off after the hearse, slow and quiet.

"Just us?" I said.

"The others are meeting us there."

"Who's coming?"

"Lamonnier," he said. "Some of her friends."

"Where are we doing it?"

"Père-Lachaise," he said.

I nodded. Père-Lachaise was a famous old cemetery. Some kind of a special place. I figured maybe my mother's Resistance history entitled her to be buried there. Maybe Lamonnier had fixed it.

"There's an offer in on the apartment," Joe said.

"How much?"

"In dollars your share would be about sixty thousand."

"I don't want it," I said. "Give my share to Lamonnier. Tell him to find whatever old guys are still alive and spread it around. He'll know some organizations."

"Old soldiers?"

"Old anybody. Whoever did the right thing at the right time."

"You sure? You might need it."

"I'd rather not have it."

"OK," he said. "Your choice."

I watched out the windows. It was a gray day. The honey tones of Paris were beaten down by the weather. The river was sluggish, like molten iron. We drove through the Place de la Bastille. Père-Lachaise was up in the northeast. Not far, but not so near you thought of it as close. We got out of the car near a little booth that sold maps to the famous graves. All kinds of people were buried at Père-Lachaise: Chopin, Molière, Edith Piaf, Jim Morrison.

There were people waiting for us at the cemetery gate. There was the concierge from my mother's building, and two other women I didn't know. The *croques-morts* lifted the coffin up on their shoulders. They held it steady for a second and then set off at a slow march. Joe and I fell in behind, side by side. The three women followed us. The air was cold. We walked along gritty paths between strange European mausoleums and headstones. Eventually we came to an open grave. Excavated earth was piled neatly on one side of it and covered with a green carpet that I guessed was supposed to look like grass. Lamonnier was waiting there for us. I guessed he had gotten there well ahead of time. He probably walked slower than a funeral. Probably hadn't wanted to hold us up, or embarrass himself.

The pallbearers set the coffin down on rope slings that were already laid out in position. Then they picked it up again and maneuvered it over the hole and used the ropes to lower it down gently. Into the hole. There was a man who read some stuff from a book. I heard the words in French and their English translations drifted through my mind. *Dust to dust, certain it is, vale of tears.* I didn't really pay attention. I just looked at the coffin, down in the hole.

The man finished speaking and one of the pallbearers pulled back the green carpet and Joe scooped up a handful of dirt. He weighed it in his palm and then threw it down on the coffin lid. It thumped on the wood. The man with the book did the same thing. Then the concierge. Then both of the other women. Then Lamonnier. He lurched over on his awkward canes and bent down and filled his hand with earth. Paused with his eyes full of tears and just turned his wrist so that the dirt trailed out of his fist like water.

I stepped up and put my hand to my heart and slipped my Silver Star off its pin. Held it in my palm. The Silver Star is a beautiful medal. It has a tiny silver star in the center of a much larger gold one. It has a bright silk ribbon in red, white, and blue, all shot through with a watermark. Mine was engraved on the back: *J. Reacher.* I thought: *J for Josephine.* I tossed it down in the hole. It hit the coffin

and bounced once and landed right side up, a little gleam of light in the grayness.

I called long-distance from the Avenue Rapp and got orders back to Panama. Joe and I ate a late lunch together and promised to stay in better touch. Then I headed back to the airport and flew through London and Miami and picked up a transport south. As a newly minted captain I was given a company to command. We were tasked to maintain order in Panama City during the Just Cause endgame. It was fun. I had a decent bunch of guys. Being out in the field again was refreshing. And the coffee was as good as ever. They ship it wherever we go, in cans as big as oil drums.

I never went back to Fort Bird. Never saw that sergeant again, the one with the baby son. I thought of her sometimes, when force reduction began to bite. I never saw Summer again either. I heard she talked up Kramer's agenda so much that JAG Corps wanted the death penalty for treason, and then she finessed confessions out of Vassell and Coomer and Marshall on all the other stuff in exchange for life in prison. I heard she got promoted to captain the day after they went to Leavenworth. So she and I ended up on the same pay grade. We met in the middle. But our paths never crossed again.

I never went back to Paris either. I meant to. I thought I might go climb down under the Pont des Invalides, late at night, and just sniff the air. But it never happened. I was in the army, and I was always where someone else told me to be.

One Shot

CHAPTER 1

Friday. Five o’clock in the afternoon. Maybe the hardest time to move unobserved through a city. Or maybe the easiest. Because at five o’clock on a Friday nobody pays attention to anything. Except the road ahead.

The man with the rifle drove north. Not fast, not slow. Not drawing attention. Not standing out. He was in a light-colored minivan that had seen better days. He was alone behind the wheel. He was wearing a light-colored raincoat and the kind of shapeless light-colored beanie hat that old guys wear on the golf course when the sun is out or the rain is falling. The hat had a two-tone red band all around it. It was pulled down low. The coat was buttoned up high. The man was wearing sunglasses, even though the van had dark windows and the sky was cloudy. And he was wearing gloves, even though winter was three months away and the weather wasn’t cold.

Traffic slowed to a crawl where First Street started up a hill. Then it stopped completely where two lanes became one because the blacktop was torn up for construction. There was construction all over town. Driving had been a nightmare for a year. Holes in the road, gravel trucks, concrete trucks, blacktop spreaders. The man with the rifle lifted his hand off the wheel. Pulled back his cuff. Checked his watch.

Eleven minutes.

Be patient.

He took his foot off the brake and crawled ahead. Then he stopped again where the roadway narrowed and the sidewalks widened where the downtown shopping district started. There were big stores to the left and the right, each one set a little higher than the last, because of the hill. The wide sidewalks gave plenty of space for shoppers to stroll. There were cast-iron flagpoles and cast-iron lamp posts all lined up like sentries between the people and the cars. The people had more

lined up like soldiers between the people and the cars. The people had more space than the cars. Traffic was very slow. He checked his watch again.

Eight minutes.

Be patient.

A hundred yards later the prosperity faded a little. The congestion eased. First Street opened out and became slightly shabby again. There were bars and dollar stores. Then a parking garage on the left. Then yet more construction where the parking garage was being extended. Then, farther ahead, the street was blocked by a low wall. Behind it was a windy pedestrian plaza with an ornamental pool and a fountain. On the plaza's left, the old city library. On its right, a new office building. Behind it, a black glass tower. First Street turned an abrupt right angle in front of the plaza's boundary wall and ran away west, past untidy rear entrances and loading docks and then on under the raised state highway.

But the man in the minivan slowed before he hit the turn in front of the plaza and made a left and entered the parking garage. He drove straight up the ramp. There was no barrier, because each slot had its own parking meter. Therefore there was no cashier, no witness, no ticket, no paper trail. The man in the minivan knew all that. He wound around the ramps to the second level and headed for the far back corner of the structure. Left the van idling in the aisle for a moment and slipped out of the seat and moved an orange traffic cone from the slot he wanted. It was the last one in the old part of the building, right next to where the new part was being added on.

He drove the van into the slot and shut it down. Sat still for a moment. The garage was quiet. It was completely full with silent cars. The slot he had protected with the traffic cone had been the last one available. The garage was always packed. He knew that. That was why they were extending it. They were doubling its size. It was used by shoppers. That was why it was quiet. Nobody in their right mind would try to leave at five o'clock. Not into the rush hour traffic. Not with the construction delays. Either they would get out by four or wait until six.

The man in the minivan checked his watch.

Four minutes.

Easy.

He opened the driver's door and slid out. Took a quarter from his pocket and put it in the meter. Twisted the handle hard and heard the coin fall and saw the clockwork give him an hour in exchange. There was no other sound. Nothing in the air except the smell of parked automobiles. Gasoline, rubber, cold exhaust.

He stood still next to the van. On his feet he had a pair of old desert boots. Khaki suede, single eyelets, white crepe soles, made by Clarks of England, much favored by Special Forces soldiers. An iconic design, unchanged in maybe sixty years.

He glanced back at the parking meter. Fifty-nine minutes. He wouldn't need fifty-nine minutes. He opened the minivan's sliding rear door and leaned inside and unfolded a blanket and revealed the rifle. It was a Springfield M1A Super Match autoloader, American walnut stock, heavy premium barrel, ten-shot box magazine, chambered for the .308. It was the exact commercial equivalent of the M-14 self-loading sniper rifle that the American military had used during his long-ago years in the service. It was a fine weapon. Maybe not quite as accurate with the first cold shot as a top-of-the-line bolt gun, but it would do. It would do just fine. He wasn't going to be looking at extraordinary distances. It was loaded with Lake City M852s. His favorite custom cartridges. Special Lake City Match brass, Federal powder, Sierra Matchking 168-grain hollow point boat tail bullets. The load was better than the gun, probably. A slight mismatch.

He listened to the silence and lifted the rifle off the rear bench. Carried it away with him to where the old part of the garage finished and the new part began. There was a half-inch trench between the old concrete and the new. Like a demarcation line. He guessed it was an expansion joint. For the summer heat. He guessed they were going to fill it with soft tar. Directly above it there was yellow-and-black *Caution Do Not Enter* tape strung between two pillars. He dropped to one knee and slid under it. Stood up again and walked on into the raw new construction.

Parts of the new concrete floor were troweled smooth and parts were rough, still waiting for a final surface. There were wooden planks laid here and there as walkways. There were haphazard piles of paper cement sacks, some full, some empty. There were more open expansion joints. There were strings of bare lightbulbs, turned off. Empty wheelbarrows, crushed soda cans, spools of cable, unexplained lengths of lumber, piles of crushed stone, silent concrete mixers,

There was gray cement dust everywhere, as fine as talc, and the smell of damp lime.

The man with the rifle walked on in the darkness until he came close to the new northeast corner. Then he stopped and put his back tight against a raw concrete pillar and stood still. Inched to his right with his head turned until he could see where he was. He was about eight feet from the garage's new perimeter wall. Looking due north. The wall was about waist-high. It was unfinished. It had bolts cast into it to take lengths of metal barrier to stop cars hitting the concrete. There were receptacles cast into the floor to take the new parking meter posts.

The man with the rifle inched forward and turned a little until he felt the corner of the pillar between his shoulder blades. He turned his head again. Now he was looking north and east. Directly into the public plaza. The ornamental pool was a long narrow rectangle running away from him. It was maybe eighty feet by twenty. It was like a large tank of water, just sitting there. Like a big aboveground lap pool. It was bounded by four waist-high brick walls. The water lapped against their inner faces. His line of sight ran on an exact diagonal from its near front corner to its far back corner. The water looked to be about three feet deep. The fountain splashed right in the center of the pool. He could hear it, and he could hear slow traffic on the street, and the shuffle of feet below him. The front wall of the pool was about three feet behind the wall that separated the plaza from First Street. The two low walls ran close together and parallel for twenty feet, east to west, with just the width of a narrow walkway between them.

He was on the garage's second floor, but the way First Street ran uphill meant the plaza was much less than one story below him. There was a definite downward angle, but it was shallow. On the right of the plaza he could see the new office building's door. It was a shabby place. It had been built and it hadn't been rented. He knew that. So to preserve some kind of credibility for the new downtown, the state had filled it with government offices. The Department of Motor Vehicles was in there, and a joint Army–Navy–Air Force–Marine Corps recruiting office. Maybe Social Security was in there. Maybe the Internal Revenue Service. The man with the rifle wasn't really sure. And he didn't really care.

He dropped to his knees and then to his stomach. The low crawl was a sniper's principal mode of movement. In his years in the service he had low-crawled a million miles. Knees and elbows and belly. Standard tactical doctrine was for the sniper and his spotter to detach from the company a thousand yards out and

sniper and his spotter to detach from the company a thousand yards out and crawl into position. In training he had sometimes taken many hours to do it, to avoid the observer's binoculars. But this time he had only eight feet to cover. And as far as he knew there were no binoculars on him.

He reached the base of the wall and lay flat on the ground, pressed up tight against the raw concrete. Then he squirmed up into a sitting position. Then he knelt. He folded his right leg tight underneath him. He planted his left foot flat and his left shin vertical. He propped his left elbow on his left knee. Raised the rifle. Rested the end of the forestock on the top of the low concrete wall. Sawed it gently back and forth until it felt good and solid. *Supported kneeling,* the training manual called it. It was a good position. Second only to lying prone with a bipod, in his experience. He breathed in, breathed out. *One shot, one kill.* That was the sniper's credo. To succeed required control and stillness and calm. He breathed in, breathed out. Felt himself relax. Felt himself come home.

Ready.

Infiltration successful.

Now wait until the time is right.

He waited about seven minutes, keeping still, breathing low, clearing his mind. He looked at the library on his left. Above it and behind it the raised highway curled in on stilts, like it was embracing the big old limestone building, cradling it, protecting it from harm. Then the highway straightened a little and passed behind the black glass tower. It was about level with the fourth story back there. The tower itself had the NBC peacock on a monolith near its main entrance, but the man with the rifle was sure that a small network affiliate didn't occupy the whole building. Probably not more than a single floor. The rest of the space was probably one-man law firms or CPAs or real estate offices or insurance brokers or investment managers. Or empty.

People were coming out of the new building on the right. People who had been getting new licenses or turning in old plates or joining the army or hassling with federal bureaucracy. There were a lot of people. The government offices were closing. Five o'clock on a Friday. The people came out the doors and walked right-to-left directly in front of him, funneling into single file as they entered the

narrow space and passed the short end of the ornamental pool between the two low walls. Like ducks in a shooting gallery. One after the other. *A target-rich environment.* The range was about a hundred feet. Approximately. Certainly less than thirty-five yards. *Very close.*

He waited.

Some of the people trailed their fingers in the water as they walked. The walls were just the right height for that. The man with the rifle could see bright copper pennies on the black tile under the water. They swam and rippled where the fountain disturbed the surface.

He watched. He waited.

The stream of people thickened up. Now there were so many of them coming all at once that they had to pause and group and shuffle and wait to get into single file to pass between the two low walls. Just like the traffic had snarled at the bottom of First Street. A bottleneck. *After you. No, after you.* It made the people slow. Now they were *slow* ducks in a shooting gallery.

The man with the rifle breathed in, and breathed out, and waited.

Then he stopped waiting.

He pulled the trigger, and kept on pulling.

His first shot hit a man in the head and killed him instantly. The gunshot was loud and there was a supersonic *crack* from the bullet and a puff of pink mist from the head and the guy went straight down like a puppet with the strings cut.

A kill with the first cold shot.

Excellent.

He worked fast, left to right. The second shot hit the next man in the head. Same result as the first, exactly. The third shot hit a woman in the head. Same result. Three shots in maybe two seconds. Three targets down. Absolute surprise. No reaction for a split second. Then chaos broke out. Pandemonium. Panic. There were twelve people caught in the narrow space between the plaza wall and the pool wall. Three were already down. The remaining nine ran. Four ran forward and five spun away from the corpses and ran back. Those five collided with the

and five spun away from the corpses and ran back. Those five collided with the press of people still moving their way. There were sudden loud screams. There was a solid stalled mass of panicked humanity, right in front of the man with the rifle. Range, less than thirty-five yards. Very close.

His fourth head shot killed a man in a suit. His fifth missed completely. The Sierra Matchking passed close to a woman's shoulder and hissed straight into the ornamental pool and disappeared. He ignored it and moved the Springfield's muzzle a fraction, and his sixth shot caught a guy on the bridge of his nose and blew his head apart.

The man with the rifle stopped firing.

He ducked low behind the garage wall and crawled backward three feet. He could smell burnt powder and over the ringing in his ears he could hear women screaming and feet pounding and the crunch of panicked fender benders on the street below. *Don't worry, little people,* he thought. *It's over now. I'm out of here.* He lay on his stomach and swept his spent shell cases into a pile. The bright Lake City brass shone right there in front of him. He scooped five of them into his gloved hands but the sixth rolled away and fell into an unfinished expansion joint. Just dropped right down into the tiny nine-inch-deep, half-inch-wide trench. He heard a quiet metallic sound as it hit bottom.

Decision?

Leave it, surely.

No time.

He jammed the five cases he had in his raincoat pocket and crawled backward on his toes and his forearms and his belly. He lay still for a moment and listened to the screaming. Then he came to his knees and stood up. Turned around and walked back the same way he had come, fast but in control, over the rough concrete, along the walkway planks, through the dark and the dust, under the yellow-and-black tape. Back to his minivan.

The rear door was still open. He rewrapped the warm rifle in its blanket and slid the door shut on it. Got in the front and started the engine. Glanced through the windshield at the parking meter. He had forty-four minutes left on it. He backed out and headed for the exit ramp. Drove down it and out the unmanned exit and made a right and a left into the tangle of streets behind the department stores. He

made a right and a left into the tangle of streets behind the department stores. He had passed under the raised highway before he heard the first sirens. He breathed out. The sirens were heading east, and he was heading west.

Good work, he thought. *Covert infiltration, six shots fired, five targets down, successful exfiltration, as cool as the other side of the pillow.*

Then he smiled suddenly. Long-term military records show that a modern army scores one enemy fatality for every fifteen thousand combat rounds expended by its infantry. But for its specialist snipers, the result is better. Way better. Twelve and a half *thousand* times better, as a matter of fact. A modern army scores one enemy fatality for every one-point-two combat rounds expended by a sniper. And one for one-point-two happened to be the same batting average as five for six. Exactly the same average. Simple arithmetic. So even after all those years a trained military sniper had scored exactly what his old instructors would have expected. They would have been very pleased about that.

But his old instructors had trained snipers for the battlefield, not for urban crime. With urban crime, factors unknown on the battlefield kick in fast. Those factors tend to modify the definition of *successful exfiltration.* In this particular case, the media reacted quickest. Not surprisingly, since the shootings took place right in front of the local NBC affiliate's window. Two things happened even before a dozen panicked bystanders all hit 911 on their cell phones simultaneously. First, every minicam in the NBC office starting rolling. The cameras were grabbed up and switched on and pointed at the windows. Second, a local news anchor called Ann Yanni started rehearsing what she knew would be her very first network breaking-news report. She was sick and scared and badly shaken, but she knew an opportunity when she saw it. So she started drafting in her head. She knew that words set agendas, and the words that came to her first were *sniper* and *senseless* and *slaying.* The alliteration was purely instinctive. So was the banality. But *slaying* was how Ann Yanni saw it. And *slaying* was a great word. It communicated the randomness, the wantonness, the savagery, the ferocity. It was a motiveless and impersonal word. It was exactly the right word for the story. At the same time she knew it wouldn't work for the caption below the pictures. *Massacre* would be better there. *Friday Night Massacre? Rush Hour Massacre?* She ran for the door and hoped her graphics guy would come up with something along those lines unbidden.

Also not present on the battlefield is urban law enforcement. The dozen simultaneous 911 cell phone calls lit up the emergency switchboard like a Christmas tree, and the local police and fire departments were rolling within forty seconds. Everything was dispatched, all of them with lights popping and sirens blaring. Every black-and-white, every available detective, every crime-scene technician, every fire engine, every paramedic, every ambulance. Initially there was complete mayhem. The 911 calls had been panicked and incoherent. But crimes were plainly involved, and they were clearly serious, so the Serious Crimes Squad's lead detective was given temporary command. He was a high-quality twenty-year PD veteran who had come all the way up from patrolman. His name was Emerson. He was blasting through slow traffic, dodging construction, hopelessly, desperately, with no way of knowing what had happened. Robbery, drugs, gang fight, terrorism, he had no hard information. None at all. But he was calm. Comparatively. His heart rate was holding below a hundred and fifty. He had an open channel with the 911 dispatcher, desperate to hear more as he drove.

"New guy on a cell phone now," the dispatcher screamed.

"Who?" Emerson screamed back.

"Marine Corps, from the recruiting office."

"Was he a witness?"

"No, he was inside. But he's outside now."

Emerson clamped his teeth. He knew he wasn't going to be first-on-scene. Not even close. He knew he was leading from the rear. So he needed eyes. Now. *A Marine? He'll do.*

"OK," he said. "Patch the Marine through."

There were loud clicks and electronic sounds and then Emerson heard a new acoustic. Outdoors, distant screaming, the splash of water. *The fountain,* he thought.

“Who is this?” he asked.

A voice came back, calm but rushed, loud and breathy, pressed close to a cell phone mouthpiece.

“This is Kelly,” it said. “First Sergeant, United States Marine Corps. Who am I speaking with?”

“Emerson, PD. I’m in traffic, about ten minutes out. What have we got?”

“Five KIA,” the Marine said.

“Five dead?”

“Affirmative.”

Shit.

“Injured?”

“None that I can see.”

“Five dead and no injured?”

“Affirmative,” the Marine said again.

Emerson said nothing. He had seen shootings in public places. He had seen dead people. But he had never seen *only* dead people. Public-place shootings always produced injured along with the dead. Usually in a one-to-one ratio, at least.

“You sure about no injured?” he said.

“That’s definitive, sir,” the Marine said.

“Who are the DOAs?”

“Civilians. Four males, one female.”

“Shit.”

“Roger that, sir,” the Marine said.

“Where were you?”

“In the recruiting office.”

“What did you see?”

“Nothing.”

“What did you hear?”

“Incoming gunfire, six rounds.”

“Handguns?”

“Long gun, I think. Just one of them.”

“A *rifle*?”

“An autoloader, I think. It fired fast, but it wasn’t on full automatic. The KIAs are all hit in the head.”

A sniper, Emerson thought. *Shit. A crazy man with an assault weapon.*

“Has he gone now?” he said.

“No further firing, sir.”

“He might still be there.”

“It’s a possibility, sir. People have taken cover. Most of them are in the library now.”

“Where are you?”

“Head-down behind the plaza wall, sir. I’ve got a few people with me.”

“Where was *he*?”

“Can’t say for sure. Maybe in the parking garage. The new part. People were pointing at it. There may have been some muzzle flash. And that’s the only major structure directly facing the KIAs.”

A warren, Emerson thought. *A damn rat's nest.*

"The TV people are here," the Marine said.

Shit, Emerson thought.

"Are you in uniform?" he asked.

"Full dress, sir. For the recruiting office."

"OK, do your best to keep order until my guys get there."

"Roger that, sir."

Then the line went dead and Emerson heard his dispatcher's breathing again. *TV people and a crazy man with a rifle,* he thought. *Shit, shit, shit. Pressure and scrutiny and second-guessing, like every other place that ever had TV people and a crazy man with a rifle.* He hit the switch that gave him the all-cars radio net.

"All units, listen up," he said. "This was a lone nutcase with a long gun. Probably an automatic weapon. Indiscriminate firing in a public place. Possibly from the new part of the parking garage. So either he's still in there, or he's already in the wind. If he left, it was either on foot or in a vehicle. So all units that are more than ten blocks out, stop now and lock down a perimeter. Nobody enters or exits, OK? No vehicles, no pedestrians, nobody under any circumstances. All units that are closer than ten blocks, proceed inward with extreme caution. But do not let him get away. *Do not* miss him. This is a must-win, people. We need this guy *today*, before CNN climbs all over us."

———

The man in the minivan thumbed the button on the remote on the visor and the garage door rumbled upward. He drove inside and thumbed the button again and the door came down after him. He shut the engine off and sat still for a moment. Then he got out of the van and walked through the mud room and on into the kitchen. He patted the dog and turned on the television.

Paramedics in full body armor went in through the back of the library. Two of them stayed inside to check for injuries among the sheltering crowd. Four of them came out the front and ran crouched through the plaza and ducked behind the wall. They crawled toward the bodies and confirmed they were all DOA. Then they stayed right there. Flat on the ground and immobile next to the corpses. *No unnecessary exposure until the garage has been searched,* Emerson had ordered.

Emerson double-parked two blocks from the plaza and told a uniformed sergeant to direct the search of the parking garage, from the top down, from the southwest corner. The uniforms cleared the fourth level, and then the third. Then the second. Then the first. The old part was problematic. It was badly lit and full of parked cars, and every car represented a potential hiding place. A guy could be inside one, or under one, or behind one. But they didn't find anybody. They had no real problem with the new construction. It wasn't lit at all, but there were no parked cars in that part. The patrolmen simply came down the stairwell and swept each level in turn with flashlight beams.

Nobody there.

The sergeant relaxed and called it in.

"Good work," Emerson said.

And it was good work. The fact that they searched from the southwest corner outward left the northeast corner entirely untouched. Nothing was disturbed. So by good luck or good judgment the PD had turned in an immaculate performance in the first phase of what would eventually be seen as an immaculate investigation from beginning to end.

By seven o'clock in the evening it was going dark and Ann Yanni had been on the air eleven times. Three of them network, eight of them local. Personally she was a little disappointed with that ratio. She was sensitive to a little skepticism coming her way from the network editorial offices. *If it bleeds, it leads* was any

news organization's credo, but this bleeding was way out there, far from New York or LA. It wasn't happening in some manicured suburb outside of Washington D.C. It had a tinge of weirdo-from-the-heartland about it. There was no real possibility that anyone *important* would walk through this guy's crosshairs. So it was not really prime-time stuff. And in truth Ann didn't have much to offer. None of the victims was identified yet. None of the *slain.* The local PD was holding its cards close to its chest until families had been notified individually. So she had no heartwarming background stories to share. She wasn't sure which of the male victims had been family men. Or churchgoers. She didn't know if the woman had been a mother or a wife. She didn't have much to offer in the way of visuals, either. Just a gathering crowd held five blocks back by police barricades, and a static long shot down the grayness of First Street, and occasional close-ups of the parking garage, which was where everyone seemed to assume the sniper had been.

By eight o'clock Emerson had made a lot of progress. His guys had taken hundreds of statements. Marine Corps First Sergeant Kelly was still sure he had heard six shots. Emerson was inclined to believe him. Marines could be trusted on stuff like that, presumably. Then some other guy mentioned his cell phone must have been open the whole time, connected to another guy's voice mail. The cellular company retrieved the recording and six gunshots were faintly audible on it. But the medical examiners had counted only five entry wounds in the five DOAs. Therefore, there was a bullet missing. Three other witnesses were vague, but they all reported seeing a small plume of water kick out of the ornamental pool.

Emerson ordered the pool to be drained.

The fire department handled it. They set up floodlights and switched off the fountain and used a pumping engine to dump the water into the city storm drains. They figured there were maybe eighty thousand gallons of water to move, and that the job would be complete in an hour.

Meanwhile crime-scene technicians had used drinking straws and laser pointers to estimate the fatal trajectories. They figured the most reliable evidence would come from the first victim. Presumably he was walking purposefully right-to-left

across the plaza when the first shot came in. After that, it was possible the subsequent victims were twisting or turning or moving in other unpredictable ways. So they based their conclusions solely on the first guy. His head was a mess, but it seemed pretty clear the bullet had traveled slightly high-to-low and left-to-right as it passed through. One tech stood upright on the spot and another held a drinking straw against the side of his head at the correct angle and held it steady. Then the first guy ducked out of the way and a third fired a laser pointer through the straw. It put a tiny red spot on the northeast corner of the parking garage extension, second level. Witnesses had claimed they had seen muzzle flashes up there. Now science had confirmed their statements.

Emerson sent his crime-scene people into the garage and told them they had all the time they needed. But he told them not to come back with nothing.

Ann Yanni left the black glass tower at eight-thirty and took a camera crew down to the barricades five blocks away. She figured she might be able to identify some of the victims by process of elimination. People whose relatives hadn't come home for dinner might be gathering there, desperate for information. She shot twenty minutes of tape. She got no specific information at all. Instead she got twenty minutes of crying and wailing and sheer stunned incredulity. The whole city was in pain and in shock. She started out secretly proud that she was in the middle of everything, and she ended up with tears in her eyes and sick to her stomach.

The parking garage was where the case was broken. It was a bonanza. A treasure trove. A patrolman three blocks away had taken a witness statement from a regular user of the garage saying that the last slot on the second level had been blocked off with an orange traffic cone. Because of it, the witness had been forced to leave the garage and park elsewhere. He had been pissed about it. A guy from the city said the cone hadn't been there officially. No way. Couldn't have been. No reason for it. So the cone was bagged for evidence and taken away. Then the city guy said there were discreet security cameras at the entrance and the exit, wired to a video recorder in a maintenance closet. The tape was extracted and taken away. Then the city guy said the new extension was stalled for funding and hadn't been worked on for two weeks. So anything in there less than two weeks old wasn't anything to do with him.

than two weeks old wasn't anything to do with him.

The crime-scene technicians started at the yellow-and-black *Caution Do Not Enter* tape. The first thing they found was a scuff of blue cotton material on the rough concrete directly underneath it. Just a peach-fuzz of barely-visible fiber. Like a guy had dropped to one knee to squirm underneath and had left a little of his blue jeans behind. They photographed the scuff and then picked it up whole with an adhesive sheet of clear plastic. Then they brought in klieg lights and angled them low across the floor. Across the two-week-old cement dust. They saw perfect footprints. *Really* perfect footprints. The lead tech called Emerson on his Motorola.

“He was wearing weird shoes,” he said.

“What kind of weird shoes?”

“You ever heard of crepe? It’s a kind of crude rubber. Almost raw. Very grippy. It picks everything up. If we find this guy, we’re going to find crepe-soled shoes with cement dust all over the soles. Also, we’re going to find a dog in his house.”

“A dog?”

“We’ve got dog hair here, picked up by the crepe rubber earlier. And then scraped off again where the concrete’s rough. And carpet fibers. Probably from his rugs at home and in his car.”

“Keep going,” Emerson said.

At ten to nine Emerson briefed his Chief of Police for a press conference. He held nothing back. It was the Chief’s decision what to talk about and what to conceal.

“Six shots fired and five people dead,” Emerson said. “All head shots. I’m betting on a trained shooter. Probably ex-military.”

“Or a hunter?” the Chief said.

“Big difference between shooting deer and shooting people. The technique might be the same, but the emotion isn’t.”

might be the same, but the emotion isn't."

"Were we right to keep this away from the FBI?"

"It wasn't terrorism. It was a lone nut. We've seen them before."

"I want to be able to sound confident about bringing this one in."

"I know," Emerson said.

"So how confident can I sound?"

"So far we've got good stuff, but not great stuff."

The Chief nodded and said nothing.

At nine o'clock exactly, Emerson took a call from the pathologist. His staff had X-rayed all five heads. Massive tissue damage, entry and exit wounds, no lodged bullets.

"Hollow points," the pathologist said. "All of them through and through."

Emerson turned and looked at the ornamental pool. *Six bullets in there,* he thought. Five through-and-throughs, and one miss. The pool was finally empty by nine-fifteen. The fire department hoses started sucking air. All that was left was a quarter-inch of scummy grit, and a lot of trash. Emerson had the lights reangled and sent twelve recruits from the Academy over the walls, six from one end and six from the other.

The crime-scene techs in the parking garage extension logged forty-eight footprints going and forty-four coming back. The perp had been confident but wary on the way in, and striding longer on the way out. In a hurry. The footprints were size eleven. They found fibers on the last pillar before the northeast corner. Mercerized cotton, at a guess, from a pale-colored raincoat, at shoulder-blade height, like the guy had pressed his back against the raw concrete and then slid around it for a look out into the plaza. They found major dust disturbance on the floor between the pillar and the perimeter wall. Plus more blue fibers and more raincoat fibers, and tiny crumbs of crepe rubber, pale in color and old.

“He low-crawled,” the lead tech said. “Knees and elbows on the way there, and knees, *toes*, and elbows coming backward. We ever find his shoes, they’re going to be all scraped up at the front.”

They found where he must have sat up and then knelt. Directly in front of that position, they saw varnish scrapings on the lip of the wall.

“He rested his gun there,” the lead tech said. “Sawed it back and forth, to get it steady.”

He lined himself up and aimed his gaze over the varnish scrapings, like he was aiming a rifle. What he saw in front of him was Emerson, pacing in front of the empty ornamental pool, less than thirty-five yards away.

The Academy recruits spent thirty minutes in the empty pool and came out with a lot of miscellaneous junk, nearly eight dollars in pennies, and six bullets. Five of them were just misshapen blobs of lead, but one of them looked absolutely brand new. It was a boat tail hollow point, beautifully cast, almost certainly a .308. Emerson called his lead crime-scene tech up in the garage.

“I need you down here,” he said.

“No, I need you up here,” the tech replied.

Emerson got up to the second level and found all the techs crouched in a low huddle with their flashlight beams pointing down into a narrow crack in the concrete.

“Expansion joint,” the lead tech said. “And look what fell in it.”

Emerson shouldered his way in and looked down and saw the gleam of brass.

“A cartridge case,” he said.

“The guy took the others with him. But this one got away.”

“Fingerprints?” Emerson asked.

“We can hope,” the tech said. “Not too many people wear gloves when they load their magazines.”

“How do we get it out of there?”

The tech stood up and used his flashlight beam to locate an electrical box on the ceiling. There was one close by, new, with unconnected cables spooling out like fronds. He looked on the floor directly underneath and found a rat’s nest of discarded trimmings. He chose an eighteen-inch length of ground wire. He cleaned it and bent it into an L-shape. It was stiff and heavy. Probably overspecified for the kind of fluorescent ceiling fixtures he guessed the garage was going to use. Maybe that was why the project was stalled for funding. Maybe the city was spending money in all the wrong places.

He jiggled the wire down into the open joint and slid it along until the end went neatly into the empty cartridge case. Then he lifted it out very carefully, so as not to scratch it. He dropped it straight into a plastic evidence bag.

“Meet at the station,” Emerson said. “In one hour. I’ll scare up a DA.”

He walked away, on a route exactly parallel to the trail of footprints. Then he stopped next to the empty parking bay.

“Empty the meter,” he called. “Print all the quarters.”

“Why?” the tech called back. “You think the guy paid?”

“I want to cover all the bases.”

“You’d have to be crazy to pay for parking just before you blow five people away.”

“You don’t blow five people away *unless* you’re crazy.”

The tech shrugged. Empty the meter? But he guessed it was the kind of insight detectives were paid for, so he just dialed his cell phone and asked the city liaison guy to come on back again.

Someone from the District Attorney's office always got involved at this point because the responsibility for prosecution rested squarely on the DA's shoulders. It wasn't the PD that won or lost in court. It was the DA. So the DA's office made its own evaluation of the evidence. Did they have a case? Was the case weak or strong? It was like an audition. Like a trial before a trial. This time, because of the magnitude, Emerson was performing in front of the DA himself. The big cheese, the actual guy who had to run for election. And reelection.

They made it a three-man conference in Emerson's office. Emerson, and the lead crime-scene tech, and the DA. The DA was called Rodin, which was a contraction of a Russian name that had been a whole lot longer before his great-grandparents came to America. He was fifty years old, lean and fit, and very cautious. His office had an outstanding victory percentage, but that was mostly due to the fact that he wouldn't prosecute anything less than a total certainty. Anything less than a total certainty, and Rodin gave up early and blamed the cops. At least that was how it seemed to Emerson.

"I need seriously good news," Rodin said. "The whole city is freaking out."

"We know exactly how it went down," Emerson told him. "We can trace it every step of the way."

"You know who it was?" Rodin asked.

"Not yet. Right now he's still John Doe."

"So walk me through it."

"We've got monochrome security videotape of a light-colored minivan entering the garage eleven minutes before the event. Can't see the plates for mud and dirt, and the camera angle isn't great. But it's probably a Dodge Caravan, not new, with aftermarket tinted windows. And we're also looking through old tapes right now because it's clear he entered the garage at some previous time and illegally blocked off a particular space with a traffic cone stolen earlier from a city construction site."

"Can we prove stolen?"

"OK, obtained," Emerson said.

"Maybe he works for the city construction department."

Maybe he works for the city construction department.

“Maybe.”

“You think the cone came from the work on First Street?”

“There’s construction all over town.”

“First Street would be closest.”

“I don’t really care where the cone came from.”

Rodin nodded. “So, he reserved himself a parking space?”

Emerson nodded in turn. “Right where the new construction starts. Therefore the cone would have looked plausible. We have a witness who saw it in place at least an hour before. And the cone has fingerprints on it. Lots of them. The right thumb and index finger match prints on a quarter we took out of the parking meter.”

“He paid to park?”

“Evidently.”

Rodin paused.

“Won’t stand up,” he said. “Defense will claim he could have placed the cone for an innocent reason. You know, selfish but innocent. And the quarter could have been in the meter for days.”

Emerson smiled. *Cops think like cops, and lawyers think like lawyers.*

“There’s more,” he said. “He parked, and then he walked through the new construction. At various points he left trace evidence behind, from his shoes and his clothing. And he’ll have picked trace evidence up, in the form of cement dust, mostly. Probably a lot of it.”

Rodin shook his head. “Ties him to the scene sometime during the last two weeks. That’s all. Not specific enough.”

“We’ve got a three-way lock on his weapon,” Emerson said.

That got Rodin's attention.

"He missed with one shot," Emerson said. "It went into the pool. And you know what? That's exactly how ballistics labs test-fire a gun. They fire into a long tank of water. The water slows and stops the bullet with absolutely no damage at all. So we've got a pristine bullet with all the lands and grooves we need to tie it to an individual rifle."

"Can you find the individual rifle?"

"We've got varnish scrapings from where he steadied it on the wall."

"That's good."

"You bet it is. We find the rifle and we'll match the varnish and the scratches. It's as good as DNA."

"Are you going to find the rifle?"

"We found a shell case. It's got tool marks on it from the ejector mechanism. So we've got a bullet *and* a case. Together they tie the weapon to the crime. The scratches tie the weapon to the garage location. The garage location ties the crime to the guy who left the trace evidence behind."

Rodin said nothing. Emerson knew he was thinking about the trial. Technical evidence was sometimes a hard sell. It lacked a human dimension.

"The shell case has got fingerprints on it," Emerson said. "From when he loaded the magazine. Same thumb and index finger as on the quarter in the parking meter and on the traffic cone. So we can tie the crime to the gun, and the gun to the ammo, and the ammo to the guy who used it. See? It all connects. The guy, the gun, the crime. It's a total slam dunk."

"The videotape shows the minivan leaving?"

"Ninety seconds after the first 911 call came in."

"Who is he?"

"We'll know just as soon as the fingerprint databases get back to us."

“If he’s in the databases.”

“I think he was a military shooter,” Emerson said. “All military personnel are in the databases. So it’s just a matter of time.”

———

It was a matter of forty-nine minutes. A desk guy knocked and entered. He was carrying a sheaf of paper. The paper listed a name, an address, and a history. Plus supplementary information from all over the system. Including a driver’s license photo. Emerson took the paper and glanced through it once. Then again. Then he smiled. Exactly six hours after the first shot was fired, the situation was nailed down tight. *A must-win.*

“His name is James Barr,” Emerson said.

Silence in the office.

“He’s forty-one years old. He lives twenty minutes from here. He served in the U.S. Army. Honorable discharge fourteen years ago. Infantry specialist, which I’m betting means a sniper. DMV says he drives a six-year-old Dodge Caravan, beige.”

He slid the papers across his desk to Rodin. Rodin picked them up and scanned them through, once, twice, carefully. Emerson watched his eyes. Saw him thinking *the guy, the gun, the crime.* It was like watching a Vegas slot machine line up three cherries. *Bing bing bing! A total certainty.*

“James Barr,” Rodin said, like he was savoring the sound of the words. He separated out the DL picture and gazed at it. “James Barr, welcome to a shitload of trouble, sir.”

“Amen to that,” Emerson said, waiting for a compliment.

“I’ll get the warrants,” Rodin said. “Arrest, and searches on his house and car. Judges will be lining up to sign them.”

He left and Emerson called the Chief of Police with the good news. The Chief said he would schedule an eight o’clock press conference for the next morning.

He said he wanted Emerson there, front and center. Emerson took that as all the compliment he was going to get, even though he didn't much like the press.

The warrants were ready within an hour, but the arrest took three hours to set up. First, unmarked surveillance confirmed Barr was home. His place was an unremarkable one-story ranch. Not immaculate, not falling down. Old paint on the siding, fresh blacktop on the driveway. Lights were on and a television set was playing in what was probably the living room. Barr himself was spotted briefly, in a lighted window. He seemed to be alone. Then he seemed to go to bed. Lights went off and the house went quiet. So then there was a pause. It was standard operating procedure to plan carefully for the takedown of an armed man inside a building. The PD SWAT team took charge. They used zoning maps from the city offices and came up with the usual kind of thing. Covert encirclement, overwhelming force on standby front and rear, sudden violent assault on the front and rear doors simultaneously. Emerson was detailed to make the actual arrest, wearing full body armor and a borrowed helmet. An assistant DA would be alongside him, to monitor the legality of the process. Nobody wanted to give a defense attorney anything to chew on later. A paramedic team would be instantly available. Two K9 officers would go along because of the crime-scene investigator's theory about the dog in the house. Altogether thirty-eight men were involved, and they were all tired. Most of them had been working nineteen hours straight. Their regular watches, plus overtime. So there was a lot of nervous tension in the air. People figured that nobody owned just one automatic weapon. If a guy had one, he had more. Maybe full-auto machine guns. Maybe grenades or bombs.

But the arrest was a walk in the park. James Barr barely even woke up. They broke down his doors at three in the morning and found him asleep, alone in bed. He stayed asleep with fifteen armed men in his bedroom aiming fifteen submachine guns and fifteen flashlight beams at him. He stirred a little when the SWAT commander threw his blankets and pillows to the floor, searching for concealed weapons. He had none. He opened his eyes. Mumbled something that sounded like *What?* and then went back to sleep, curling up on the flat mattress, hugging himself against the sudden cold. He was a large man, with white skin and black hair that was going gray all over his body. His pajamas were too small

for him. He looked slack, and a little older than his forty-one years.

His dog was an old mutt that woke up reluctantly and staggered in from the kitchen. The K9 team captured it immediately and took it straight out to their truck. Emerson took his helmet off and pushed his way through the crowd in the tiny bedroom. Saw a three-quarters-full pint of Jack Daniel's on the night table, next to an orange prescription bottle that was also three-quarters full. He bent to look at it. Sleeping pills. Legal. Recently prescribed to someone called Rosemary Barr. The label said: *Rosemary Barr. Take one for sleeplessness.*

"Who's Rosemary Barr?" the assistant DA asked. "Is he married?"

Emerson glanced around the room. "Doesn't look like it."

"Suicide attempt?" the SWAT commander asked.

Emerson shook his head. "He'd have swallowed them all. Plus the whole pint of JD. So I guess Mr. Barr had trouble getting off to sleep tonight, that's all. After a very busy and productive day."

The air in the room was stale. It smelled of dirty sheets and an unwashed body.

"We need to be careful here," the assistant DA said. "He's impaired right now. His lawyer is going to say he's not fully capable of understanding Miranda. So we can't let him say anything. And if he does say something, we can't listen."

Emerson called for the paramedics. Told them to check Barr out, to make sure he wasn't faking, and to make sure he wasn't about to die on them. They fussed around for a few minutes, listened to his heart, checked his pulse, read the prescription label. Then they pronounced him reasonably fit and healthy, but fast asleep.

"Psychopath," the SWAT commander said. "No conscience at all."

"Are we even sure this is the right guy?" the assistant DA asked.

Emerson found a pair of dress pants folded over a chair and checked the pockets. Came out with a small wallet. Found the driver's license. The name was right, and the address was right. And the photograph was right.

"This is the right guy," he said

"This is the right guy," he said.

"We can't let him say anything," the ADA said again. "We need to keep this kosher."

"I'm going to Mirandize him anyway," Emerson said. "Make a mental note, people."

He shook Barr by the shoulder and got half-opened eyes in response. Then he recited the Miranda warning. The right to remain silent, the right to a lawyer. Barr tried to focus, but didn't succeed. Then he went back to sleep.

"OK, take him in," Emerson said.

They wrapped him in a blanket and two cops dragged him out of the house and into a car. A paramedic and the ADA rode with him. Emerson stayed in the house and started the search. He found the scuffed blue jeans in the bedroom closet. The crepe-soled shoes were placed neatly on the floor below them. They were dusty. The raincoat was in the hall closet. The beige Dodge Caravan was in the garage. The scratched rifle was in the basement. It was one of several resting on a rack bolted to the wall. On a bench underneath it were five nine-millimeter handguns. And boxes of ammunition, including a half-empty box of Lake City M852 168-grain boat tail hollow point .308s. Next to the boxes were glass jars with empty cartridge cases in them. Ready for recycling, Emerson thought. Ready for handloading. The jar nearest the front of the bench held just five of them. Lake City brass. The jar's lid was still off, like the five latest cases had been dumped in there recently and in a hurry. Emerson bent down and sniffed. The air in the jar smelled of gunpowder. Cold and old, but not very.

Emerson left James Barr's house at four in the morning, replaced by forensic specialists who would go through the whole place with a fine-tooth comb. He checked with his desk sergeant and confirmed that Barr was sleeping peacefully in a cell on his own with round-the-clock medical supervision. Then he went home and caught a two-hour nap before showering and dressing for the press conference.

The press conference killed the story stone dead. A story needs the guy to be *still out there.* A story needs the guy roaming, sullen, hidden, shadowy, dangerous. It needs fear. It needs to make everyday chores exposed and hazardous, like pumping gas or visiting the mall or walking to church. So to hear that the guy was found and arrested even before the start of the second news cycle was a disaster for Ann Yanni. Immediately she knew what the network offices were going to think. *No legs, over and done with, history. Yesterday's news,* literally. *Probably wasn't much of anything anyway. Just some inbred heartland weirdo too dumb to stay free through the night. Probably sleeps with his cousin and drinks Colt 45.* Nothing sinister there. She would get one more network breaking news spot to recap the crime and report the arrest, and that would be it. Back to obscurity.

So Ann Yanni was disappointed, but she hid it well. She asked questions and made her tone admiring. About halfway through she started putting together a new theme. A new narrative. People would have to admit the police work had been pretty impressive. And this perp *wasn't* a weirdo. Not necessarily. So a serious bad guy had been caught by an even-more-serious police department. Right out there in the heartland. Something that had taken considerable time on the coasts in previous famous cases. Could she sell it? She started drafting titles in the back of her mind. *America's Fastest?* Like a play on *Finest*?

The Chief yielded the floor to Detective Emerson after about ten minutes. Emerson filled in full details on the perp's identity and his history. He kept it dry. *Just the facts, ma'am.* He outlined the investigation. He answered questions. He didn't boast. Ann Yanni thought that he felt the cops had been lucky. That they had been given much more to go on than they usually got.

Then Rodin stepped up. The DA made it sound like the PD had been involved in some early minor skirmishing and that the real work was about to begin. His office would review everything and make the necessary determinations. And yes, Ms. Yanni, because he thought the circumstances warranted it, certainly he would seek the death penalty for James Barr.

———

James Barr woke up in his cell with a chemical hangover at nine o'clock Saturday morning. He was immediately fingerprinted and re-Mirandized once,

and then twice. The right to remain silent, the right to a lawyer. He chose to remain silent. Not many people do. Not many people can. The urge to talk is usually overwhelming. But James Barr beat it. He just clamped his mouth shut and kept it that way. Plenty of people tried to talk to him, but he didn't answer. Not once. Not a word. Emerson was relaxed about it. Truth was, Emerson didn't really want Barr to say anything. He preferred to line up all the evidence, scrutinize it, test it, polish it, and get to a point where he could anticipate a conviction *without* a confession. Confessions were so vulnerable to defense accusations of coercion or confusion that he had learned to run away from them. They were icing on the cake. Literally the *last* thing he wanted to hear, not the first. Not like on the TV cop shows, where relentless interrogation was a kind of performance art. So he just stayed out of the loop and let his forensics people complete their slow, patient work.

James Barr's sister was younger than him and unmarried and living in a rented downtown condo. Her name was Rosemary. Like the rest of the city's population, she was sick and shocked and stunned. She had seen the news Friday night. And she caught it again Saturday morning. She heard a police detective say her brother's name. At first she thought it was a mistake. That she had misheard. But the guy kept on saying it. *James Barr, James Barr, James Barr.* Rosemary burst into tears. First tears of confusion, then tears of horror, then tears of fury.

Then she forced herself to calm down, and got busy.

She worked as a secretary in an eight-man law firm. Like most firms in small heartland cities, hers did a little bit of everything. And it treated its employees fairly well. The salary wasn't spectacular, but there were intangibles to compensate. One was a full package of benefits. Another was being called a paralegal instead of a secretary. Another was a promise that the firm would handle legal matters for its employees and their families free, gratis, and for nothing. Mostly that was about wills and probate and divorce, and insurance company hassles after fender benders. It wasn't about defending adult siblings who were wrongly accused in notorious urban sniper slayings. She knew that. But she felt she had to give it a try. Because she knew her brother, and she knew he couldn't be guilty.

She called the partner she worked for, at home. He was mostly a tax guy, so he called the firm's criminal litigator. The litigator called the managing partner, who called a meeting of all the partners. They held it over lunch at the country club. From the start, the agenda was about how to turn down Rosemary Barr's request in the most tactful way possible. A defense to a crime of this nature wasn't the sort of thing they were equipped to handle. Or *inclined* to handle. There were public relations implications. There was immediate agreement on that point. But they were a loyal bunch, and Rosemary Barr was a good employee who had worked many years for them. They knew she had no money, because they did her taxes. They assumed her brother had no money, either. But the Constitution guaranteed competent counsel, and they didn't have a very high opinion of public defenders. So they were caught in a genuine ethical dilemma.

The litigator resolved it. His name was David Chapman. He was a hardscrabble veteran who knew Rodin over at the DA's office. He knew him pretty well. It would have been impossible for him not to, really. They were two of a kind, raised in the same neighborhood and working in the same business, albeit on opposite sides. So Chapman went to the smoking room and used his cell phone to call the DA at home. The two lawyers had a full and frank discussion. Then Chapman came back to the lunch table.

"It's a slam dunk," he said. "Ms. Barr's brother is guilty all to hell and gone. Rodin's case is going to read like a textbook. Hell, it's probably going to *be* a textbook one day. He's got every kind of evidence there is. There's not a chink of daylight anywhere."

"Was he leveling with you?" the managing partner asked.

"There's no bullshitting between old buddies," Chapman said.

"So?"

"All we would have to do is plead in mitigation. If we can get the lethal injection reduced to life without parole, there's a big win right there. That's all Ms. Barr has a right to expect. Or her damn brother, with all due respect."

"How much involvement?" the managing partner asked.

"Sentencing phase only. Because he'll have to plead guilty."

"[illegible]?"

"You happy to handle it?"

"Under the circumstances."

"How many hours will it cost us?"

"Not many. There's practically nothing we can do."

"What grounds for mitigation?"

"He's a Gulf War vet, I believe. So there's probably chemical stuff going on. Or some kind of delayed post-traumatic thing. Maybe we could get Rodin to agree beforehand. We could get it done over lunch."

The managing partner nodded. Turned to the tax guy. "Tell your secretary we'll do everything in our power to help her brother in his hour of need."

Barr was moved from the police station lockup to the county jail before either his sister or Chapman got a chance to see him. His blanket and pajamas were taken away and he was issued paper underwear, an orange jumpsuit, and a pair of rubber shower sandals. The county jail wasn't a pleasant place to be. It smelled bad and it was noisy. It was radically overcrowded and the social and ethnic tensions that were kept in control on the street were left to rage unchecked inside. Men were stacked three to a cell and the guards were shorthanded. New guys were called fish, and fish were left to fend for themselves.

But Barr had been in the army, so the culture shock for him was a little less than it might have been. He survived as a fish for two hours, and then he was escorted to an interview room. He was told there was a lawyer waiting there for him. He found a table and two chairs bolted to the floor in a windowless cubicle. In one of the chairs was a guy he vaguely recognized from somewhere. On the table was a pocket tape recorder. Like a Walkman.

"My name is David Chapman," the guy in the chair said. "I'm a criminal defense attorney. A lawyer. Your sister works at my firm. She asked us to help you out."

Barr said nothing.

"So here I am," Chapman said.

Barr said nothing.

“I’m recording this conversation,” Chapman said. “Putting it on tape. I take it that’s OK with you?”

Barr said nothing.

“I think we met once,” Chapman said. “Our Christmas party one year?”

Barr said nothing.

Chapman waited.

“Have the charges been explained to you?” he asked.

Barr said nothing.

“The charges are very serious,” Chapman said.

Barr stayed quiet.

“I can’t help you if you won’t help yourself,” Chapman said.

Barr just stared at him. Just sat still and quiet for several long minutes. Then he leaned forward toward the tape machine and spoke for the first time since the previous afternoon.

He said, “They got the wrong guy.”

“They got the wrong guy,” Barr said again.

“So tell me about the right guy,” Chapman said immediately. He was a good courtroom tactician. He knew how to get a rhythm going. Question, answer, question, answer. That was how to get a person to open up. They fell into the rhythm, and it all came out.

But Barr just retreated back into silence.

“Let’s be clear about this,” Chapman said

"Let's be clear about this," Chapman said.

Barr didn't answer.

"Are you *denying* it?" Chapman asked him.

Barr said nothing.

"Are you?"

No response.

"The evidence is all there," Chapman said. "It's just about overwhelming, I'm afraid. You can't play dumb now. We need to talk about *why* you did it. That's what's going to help us here."

Barr said nothing.

"You want me to help you?" Chapman said. "Or not?"

Barr said nothing.

"Maybe it was your old wartime experience," Chapman said. "Or post-traumatic stress. Or some kind of mental impairment. We need to focus on the reason."

Barr said nothing.

"Denying it is not smart," Chapman said. "The evidence is right there."

Barr said nothing.

"Denying it is not an option," Chapman said.

"Get Jack Reacher for me," Barr said.

"Who?"

"Jack Reacher."

"Who's he? A friend?"

Barr said nothing.

“Someone you know?” Chapman said.

Barr said nothing.

“Someone you used to know?”

“Just get him for me.”

“Where is he? *Who* is he?”

Barr said nothing.

“Is Jack Reacher a doctor?” Chapman asked.

“A doctor?” Barr repeated.

“Is he a doctor?” Chapman asked.

But Barr didn’t speak again. He just got up from the table and walked to the cubicle’s door and pounded on it until the jailer opened it up and led him back to his overcrowded cell.

Chapman arranged to meet Rosemary Barr and the firm’s investigator at his law offices. The investigator was a retired cop shared by most of the city’s law firms. They all had him on retainer. He was a private detective, with a license. His name was Franklin. He was nothing like a private eye in a TV show. He did all his work at a desk, with phone books and computer databases. He didn’t go out, didn’t wear a gun, didn’t own a hat. But he had no equal as a fact-checker or a skip tracer and he still had plenty of friends in the PD.

“The evidence is rock solid,” he said. “That’s what I’m hearing. Emerson was in charge and he’s pretty reliable. So is Rodin, really, but for a different reason. Emerson’s a stiff and Rodin is a coward. Neither one of them would be saying what they’re saying unless the evidence was there.”

“I just can’t believe he did it,” Rosemary Barr said.

“Well, certainly he seems to be denying it,” Chapman said. “As far as I can understand him. And he’s asking for someone called Jack Reacher. Someone he knows or used to know. You ever heard that name? You know who he is?”

Rosemary Barr just shook her head. Chapman wrote the name *Jack Reacher* on a sheet of paper and slid it across to Franklin. “My guess is he may be a psychiatrist. Mr. Barr brought the name up right after I told him how strong the evidence is. So maybe this Reacher guy is someone who can help us out with the mitigation. Maybe he treated Mr. Barr in the past.”

“My brother never saw a psychiatrist,” Rosemary Barr said.

“To your certain knowledge?”

“Never.”

“How long has he been in town?”

“Fourteen years. Since the army.”

“Were you close?”

“We lived in the same house.”

“His house?”

Rosemary Barr nodded.

“But you don’t live there anymore.”

Rosemary Barr looked away.

“No,” she said. “I moved out.”

“Might your brother have seen a shrink after you moved out?”

“He would have told me.”

“OK, what about before? In the service?”

Rosemary Barr said nothing. Chapman turned back to Franklin.

“So maybe Reacher was his army doctor,” he said. “Maybe he has information about an old trauma. He could be very helpful.”

Franklin accepted the sheet of paper.

“In which case I’ll find him,” he said.

“We shouldn’t be talking about mitigation anyway,” Rosemary Barr said. “We should be talking about reasonable doubt. About *innocence*.”

“The evidence is very strong,” Chapman said. “He used his own gun.”

Franklin spent three hours failing to find Jack Reacher. First he trawled through psychiatric associations. No hits. Then he searched the Internet for Gulf War support groups. No trace. He tried Lexis-Nexis and all the news organizations. Nothing. Then he started back at the beginning and accessed the National Personnel Record Center’s database. It listed all current and former military. He found Jack Reacher’s name in there easily enough. Reacher had entered the service in 1984 and received an honorable discharge in 1997. James Barr himself had signed up in 1985 and mustered out in 1991. So there was a six-year overlap. But Reacher had been no kind of a doctor. No kind of a psychiatrist. He had been a military cop. An officer. A major. Maybe a high-level investigator. Barr had finished as a lowly Specialist E-4. Infantry, not military police. So what was the point of contact between a military police major and an infantry E-4? Something helpful, obviously, or Barr wouldn’t have mentioned the name. But what?

At the end of three hours Franklin figured he would never find out, because Reacher fell off the radar after 1997. Completely and totally. There was no trace of him anywhere. He was still alive, according to the Social Security Administration. He wasn’t in prison, according to the NCIC. But he had disappeared. He had no credit rating. He wasn’t listed as title holder to any real estate, or automobiles, or boats. He had no debts. No liens. No address. No phone number. No warrants outstanding, no judgments entered. He wasn’t a husband. Wasn’t a father. He was a ghost.

James Barr spent the same three hours in serious trouble. It started when he stepped out of his cell. He turned right to walk down to the pay phones. The corridor was narrow. He bumped into another guy, shoulder to shoulder. Then he made a bad mistake. He took his eyes off the floor and glanced at the other guy and apologized.

A bad mistake, because a fish can't make eye contact with another prisoner. Not without implying disrespect. It was a prison thing. He didn't understand.

The guy he made eye contact with was a Mexican. He had gang tattoos, but Barr didn't recognize them. Another bad mistake. He should have put his gaze back on the floor and moved on and hoped for the best. But he didn't.

Instead, he said, "Excuse me."

Then he raised his eyebrows and half-smiled in a self-deprecating way, like he was saying, *This is some place, right?*

Bad mistake. Familiarity, and a presumption of intimacy.

"What are you looking at?" the Mexican said.

At that point, James Barr understood completely. *What are you looking at?* That was pretty much a standard opener. Barrack rooms, barrooms, street corners, dark alleys, it was not a phrase you wanted to hear.

"Nothing," he said, and realized he had made the situation much worse.

"You calling me nothing?"

Barr put his eyes back on the floor and moved on, but it was way too late. He felt the Mexican's stare on his back and gave up on the pay phone idea. The phones were in a dead-end lobby and he didn't want to feel trapped. So he walked a long counterclockwise circuit and headed back to his cell. He got there OK. Didn't look at anyone, didn't speak. He lay down on his bunk. About two hours later, he felt OK. He guessed he could handle a little macho bluster. And he was bigger than the Mexican. He was bigger than two Mexicans.

He wanted to call his sister. He wanted to know she was OK.

He set off for the pay phones again.

He got there unmolested. It was a small space. There were four phones on the wall, four men talking, four lines of other men waiting behind them. Noise, shuffling feet, crazed laughter, impatience, frustration, sour air, the smell of sweat and dirty hair and stale urine. Just a normal prison scene, according to James Barr's preconceptions.

Then it wasn't a normal scene.

The men in front of him vanished. Just disappeared. They just melted out of sight. Those on the phone hung up mid-sentence and ducked back past him. Those waiting in line peeled away. In half a second the lobby went from being full and noisy to being deserted and silent.

James Barr turned around.

He saw the Mexican with the tattoos. The Mexican had a knife in his hand and twelve friends behind him. The knife was a plastic toothbrush handle wrapped with tape and sharpened to a point, like a stiletto. The friends were all stocky little guys, all with the same tattoos. They all had cropped hair with intricate patterns shaved across their skulls.

"Wait," Barr said.

But the Mexicans didn't wait, and eight minutes later Barr was in a coma. He was found sometime after that, on the floor, beaten pulpy, with multiple stab wounds and a cracked skull and severe subdural bleeding. Afterward, jail talk said he had had it coming. He had disrespected the Latinos. But jail talk said he hadn't gone quietly. There was a hint of admiration. The Mexicans had suffered a little. But not nearly as much as James Barr. He was medevaced to the city hospital and sewn up and operated on to relieve pressure from a swollen brain. Then he was dumped in a secure intensive care unit, comatose. The doctors weren't sure when he would wake up again. Maybe in a day. Maybe in a week. Maybe in a month. Maybe never. The doctors didn't really know, and they didn't really care. They were all local people.

The warden at the jail called late at night and told Emerson. Then Emerson called and told Rodin. Then Rodin called and told Chapman. Then Chapman

called and told Franklin.

“So what happens now?” Franklin asked him.

“Nothing,” Chapman said. “It’s on ice. You can’t try a guy in a coma.”

“What about when he wakes up?”

“If he’s OK, then they’ll go ahead, I guess.”

“What if he isn’t?”

“Then they won’t. Can’t try a vegetable.”

“So what do we do now?”

“Nothing,” Chapman said. “We weren’t taking it very seriously anyhow. Barr’s guilty all to hell and gone, and there’s nothing much anyone can do for him.”

Franklin called and told Rosemary Barr, because he wasn’t sure if anyone else would have taken the trouble. He found out that nobody else had. So he broke the news himself. Rosemary Barr didn’t have much of an outward reaction. She just went very quiet. It was like she was on emotional overload.

“I guess I should go to the hospital,” she said.

“If you want,” Franklin said.

“He’s innocent, you know. This is so unfair.”

“Did you see him yesterday?”

“You mean, can I alibi him?”

“Can you?”

“No,” Rosemary Barr said. “I can’t. I don’t know where he was yesterday. Or what he was doing.”

“Are there places he goes regularly? Movies, bars, anything like that?”

“Not really.”

“Friends he hangs with?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Girlfriends?”

“Not for a long time.”

“Other family he visits?”

“There’s just the two of us. Him and me.”

Franklin said nothing. There was a long, distracted pause.

“What happens now?” Rosemary Barr asked.

“I don’t know exactly.”

“Did you find that person he mentioned?”

“Jack Reacher? No, I’m afraid not. No trace.”

“Will you keep on looking?”

“There’s really nothing more I can do.”

“OK,” Rosemary Barr said. “Then we’ll have to manage without him.”

But even as they spoke, on the phone late at night on Saturday, Jack Reacher was on his way to them.

CHAPTER 2

Reacher was on his way to them because of a woman. He had spent Friday night in South Beach, Miami, in a salsa club, with a dancer from a cruise ship. The boat was Norwegian, and so was the girl. Reacher guessed she was too tall for ballet, but she was the right size for everything else. They met on the beach in the afternoon. Reacher was working on his tan. He felt better brown. He didn't know what she was working on. But he felt her shadow fall across his face and opened his eyes to find her staring at him. Or maybe at his scars. The browner he got, the more they stood out, white and wicked and obvious. She was pale, in a black bikini. A *small* black bikini. He pegged her for a dancer long before she told him. It was in the way she held herself.

They ended up having a late dinner together and then going out to the club. South Beach salsa wouldn't have been Reacher's first choice, but her company made it worthwhile. She was fun to be with. And she was a great dancer, obviously. Full of energy. She wore him out. At four in the morning she took him back to her hotel, eager to wear him out some more. Her hotel was a small Art Deco place near the ocean. Clearly the cruise line treated its people well. Certainly it was a much more romantic destination than Reacher's own motel. And much closer.

And it had cable television, which Reacher's place didn't. He woke at eight on Saturday morning when he heard the dancer in the shower. He turned on the TV and went looking for ESPN. He wanted Friday night's American League highlights. He never found them. He clicked his way through successive channels and then stopped dead on CNN because he heard the chief of an Indiana police department say a name he knew: *James Barr.* The picture was of a press conference. Small room, harsh light. Top of the screen was a caption that said: *Courtesy NBC.* There was a banner across the bottom that said: *Friday Night Massacre.* The police chief said the name again, *James Barr*, and then he introduced a homicide detective called Emerson. Emerson looked tired. Emerson said the name for a third time: *James Barr.* Then, like he anticipated the exact question in Reacher's mind, he ran through a brief biography: *Forty-one years old, local Indiana resident, U.S. Army infantry specialist from 1985 to 1991, Gulf War veteran, never married, currently unemployed.*

Reacher watched the screen. Emerson seemed like a concise type of a guy. He

was brief. No bullshit. He finished his statement and in response to a reporter's question declined to specify what if anything James Barr had said during interrogation. Then he introduced a District Attorney. This guy's name was Rodin, and he wasn't concise. Wasn't brief. He used plenty of bullshit. He spent ten minutes claiming Emerson's credit for himself. Reacher knew how *that* worked. He had been a cop of sorts for thirteen years. Cops bust their tails, and prosecutors bask in the glory. Rodin said *James Barr* a few more times and then said the state was maybe looking to fry him.

For what?

Reacher waited.

A local anchor called Ann Yanni came on. She recapped the events of the night before. Sniper slaying. Senseless slaughter. An automatic weapon. A parking garage. A public plaza. Commuters on their way home after a long workweek. Five dead. A suspect in custody, but a city still grieving.

Reacher thought it was Yanni who was grieving. Emerson's success had cut her story short. She signed off and CNN went to political news. Reacher turned the TV off. The dancer came out of the bathroom. She was pink and fragrant. And naked. She had left her towels inside.

"What shall we do today?" she said, with a wide Norwegian smile.

"I'm going to Indiana," Reacher said.

He walked north in the heat to the Miami bus depot. Then he leafed through a greasy timetable and planned a route. It wasn't going to be an easy trip. Miami to Jacksonville would be the first leg. Then Jacksonville to New Orleans. Then New Orleans to St. Louis. Then St. Louis to Indianapolis. Then a local bus, presumably, south into the heartland. Five separate destinations. Arrival and departure times were not well integrated. Beginning to end, it was going to take more than forty-eight hours. He was tempted to fly or rent a car, but he was short of money and he liked buses better and he figured nothing much was going to happen on the weekend anyway.

What happened on the weekend was that Rosemary Barr called her firm's investigator back. She figured Franklin would have a semi-independent point of view. She got him at home, ten o'clock in the morning on the Sunday.

"I think I should hire different lawyers," she said.

Franklin said nothing.

"David Chapman thinks he's guilty," Rosemary said. "Doesn't he? So he's already given up."

"I can't comment," Franklin said. "He's one of my employers."

Now Rosemary Barr said nothing.

"How was the hospital?" Franklin asked.

"Awful. He's in intensive care with a bunch of prison deadbeats. They've got him handcuffed to the bed. He's in a *coma,* for God's sake. How do they think he's going to escape?"

"What's the legal position?"

"He was arrested but not arraigned. He's in a kind of limbo. They're assuming he wouldn't have gotten bail."

"They're probably right."

"So they claim under the circumstances it's like he actually *didn't* get bail. So he's *theirs.* He's in the system. Like a twilight zone."

"What would you like to happen?"

"He shouldn't be in handcuffs. And he should be in a VA hospital at least. But that won't happen until I find a lawyer who's prepared to help him."

Franklin paused. "How do you explain all the evidence?"

"I know my brother."

"You moved out, right?"

“For other reasons. Not because he’s a homicidal maniac.”

“He blocked off a parking space,” Franklin said. “He premeditated this thing.”

“You think he’s guilty, too.”

“I work with what I’ve got. And what I’ve got doesn’t look good.”

Rosemary Barr said nothing.

“I’m sorry,” Franklin said.

“Can you recommend another lawyer?”

“Can you make that decision? Do you have a power of attorney?”

“I think it’s implied. He’s in a coma. I’m his next of kin.”

“How much money have you got?”

“Not much.”

“How much has *he* got?”

“There’s some equity in his house.”

“It won’t look good. It’ll be like a kick in the teeth for the firm you work for.”

“I can’t worry about that.”

“You could lose everything, including your job.”

“I’ll lose it anyway, unless I help James. If he’s convicted, they’ll let me go. I’ll be notorious. By association. An embarrassment.”

“He had your sleeping pills,” Franklin said.

“I gave them to him. He doesn’t have insurance.”

“Why did he need them?”

“He has trouble sleeping.”

He has trouble sleeping.

Franklin said nothing.

“You think he’s guilty,” Rosemary said.

“The evidence is overwhelming,” Franklin said.

“David Chapman isn’t really trying, is he?”

“You have to consider the possibility that David Chapman is right.”

“Who should I call?”

Franklin paused.

“Try Helen Rodin,” he said.

“Rodin?”

“She’s the DA’s daughter.”

“I don’t know her.”

“She’s downtown. She just hung out her shingle. She’s new and she’s keen.”

“Is it ethical?”

“No law against it.”

“It would be father against daughter.”

“It was going to be Chapman, and Chapman knows Rodin a lot better than his daughter does, probably. She’s been away for a long time.”

“Where?”

“College, law school, clerking for a judge in D.C.”

“Is she any good?”

“I think she’s going to be.”

Rosemary Barr called Helen Rodin on her office number. It was like a test. Someone new and keen should be at the office on a Sunday.

Helen Rodin was at the office on a Sunday. She answered the call sitting at her desk. Her desk was secondhand and it sat proudly in a mostly empty two-room suite in the same black glass tower that had NBC as the second-floor tenant. The suite was rented cheap through one of the business subsidies that the city was throwing around like confetti. The idea was to kick-start the rejuvenated downtown area and clean up later with healthy tax revenues.

Rosemary Barr didn't have to tell Helen Rodin about the case because the whole thing had happened right outside Helen Rodin's new office window. Helen had seen some of it for herself, and she had followed the rest on the news afterward. She had caught all of Ann Yanni's TV appearances. She recognized her from the building's lobby, and the elevator.

"Will you help my brother?" Rosemary Barr asked.

Helen Rodin paused. The smart answer would be *No way.* She knew that. Like *No way, forget about it, are you out of your mind?* Two reasons. One, she knew a major clash with her father was inevitable at some point, but did she need it *now*? And two, she knew that a new lawyer's early cases defined her. Paths were taken that led down fixed routes. To end up as a when-all-else-fails criminal-defense attorney would be OK, she guessed, all things considered. But to start out by taking a case that had offended the whole city would be a marketing disaster. The shootings weren't being seen as a *crime.* They were being seen as an *atrocity.* Against humanity, against the whole community, against the rejuvenation efforts downtown, against the whole idea of being from Indiana. It was like LA or New York or Baltimore had come to the heartland, and to be the person who tried to excuse it or explain it away would be a fatal mistake. Like a mark of Cain. It would follow her the rest of her life.

"Can we sue the jail?" Rosemary Barr asked. "For letting him get hurt?"

Helen Rodin paused again. Another good reason to say no. *An unrealistic client.*

"Maybe later," she said. "Right now he wouldn't generate much sympathy as a plaintiff. And it's hard to prove damages, if he's heading for death row anyway."

“Then I can’t pay you much,” Rosemary Barr said. “I don’t have money.”

Helen Rodin paused for a third time. *Another* good reason to say no. It was a little early in her career to be contemplating pro bono work.

But. But. But.

The accused deserved representation. The Bill of Rights said so. And he was innocent until proven guilty. And if the evidence was as bad as her father said it was, then the whole thing would be little more than a supervisory process. She would verify the case against him independently. Then she would advise him to plead guilty. Then she would watch his back as her father fed him through the machine. That was all. It could be seen as honest dues-paying. A constitutional chore. She hoped.

“OK,” she said.

“He’s innocent,” Rosemary Barr said. “I’m sure of it.”

They always are, Helen Rodin thought.

“OK,” she said again. Then she told her new client to meet her in her office at seven the next morning. It was like a test. A sister who really believed in her brother’s innocence would show up for an early appointment.

Rosemary Barr showed up right on time, at seven o’clock on Monday morning. Franklin was there, too. He believed in Helen Rodin and was prepared to defer his bills until he saw which way the wind was blowing. Helen Rodin herself had already been at her desk for an hour. She had informed David Chapman of the change in representation on Sunday afternoon and had obtained the audiotape of his initial interview with James Barr. Chapman had been happy to hand it over and wash his hands. She had played the tape to herself a dozen times Sunday night and a dozen more that morning. It was all anyone had of James Barr. Maybe all anyone was ever going to get. So she had listened to it carefully, and she had drawn some early conclusions from it.

“Listen,” she said.

She had the tape cued up and ready in an old-fashioned machine the size of a shoe box. She pressed *Play* and they all heard a hiss and breathing and room sounds and then David Chapman's voice: *I can't help you if you won't help yourself.* There was a long pause, full of more hiss, and then James Barr spoke: *They got the wrong guy. . . . They got the wrong guy,* he said again. Then Helen watched the tape counter numbers and spooled forward to Chapman saying: *Denying it is not an option.* Then Barr's voice came through: *Get Jack Reacher for me.* Helen spooled onward to Chapman's question: *Is he a doctor?* Then there was nothing on the tape except the sound of Barr beating on the interview room door.

"OK," Helen said. "I think he really believes he didn't do it. He claims as much, and then he gets frustrated and terminates the interview when Chapman doesn't take him seriously. That's clear, isn't it?"

"He *didn't* do it," Rosemary Barr said.

"I spoke with my father yesterday," Helen Rodin said. "The evidence is all there, Ms. Barr. He did it, I'm afraid. You need to accept that a sister maybe can't know her brother as well as she'd like. Or if she once did, that he changed for some reason."

There was a long silence.

"Is your father telling you the truth about the evidence?" Rosemary asked.

"He has to," Helen said. "We're going to see it all anyway. There's the discovery process. We're going to take depositions. There would be no sense in him bluffing at this point."

Nobody spoke.

"But we can still help your brother," Helen said in the silence. "He believes he didn't do it. I'm sure of that, after listening to the tape. Therefore he's delusional now. Or at least he was on Saturday. Therefore perhaps he was delusional on Friday, too."

"How does that help him?" Rosemary Barr asked. "It's still admitting he did it."

"The consequences will be different. If he recovers. Time and treatment in an

institution will be a lot better than time and *no* treatment in a maximum security prison."

"You want to have James declared insane?"

Helen nodded. "A medical defense is our best shot. And if we establish it right now, it might improve the way they handle him before the trial."

"He might die. That's what the doctors said. I don't want him to die a criminal. I want to clear his name."

"He hasn't been tried yet. He hasn't been convicted. He's still an innocent man in the eyes of the law."

"That's not the same."

"No," Helen said. "I guess it isn't."

There was another long silence.

"Let's meet back here at ten-thirty," Helen said. "We'll thrash out a strategy. If we're aiming for a change of hospitals, we should try for it sooner rather than later."

"We need to find this Jack Reacher person," Rosemary Barr said.

Helen nodded. "I gave his name to Emerson and my father."

"Why?"

"Because Emerson's people cleared your brother's house out. They might have found an address or a phone number. And my father needed to know because we want this guy on our witness list, not the prosecution's. Because he might be able to help us."

"He might be an alibi."

"Maybe an old army buddy, at best."

"I don't see how," Franklin said. "They were different ranks and different branches."

“We need to find him,” Rosemary Barr said. “James asked for him, didn’t he? That has to mean something.”

Helen nodded again. “I’d certainly like to find him. He might have something for us. Some exculpatory information, possibly. Or at least he might be a link to something we can use.”

“He’s out of circulation,” Franklin said.

———

He was two hours away, in the back of a bus out of Indianapolis. The trip had been slow, but pleasant enough. He had spent Saturday night in New Orleans, in a motel near the bus depot. He had spent Sunday night in Indianapolis. So he had slept and fed himself and showered. But mostly he had rocked and swayed and dozed on buses, watching the passing scenes, observing the chaos of America, and surfing along on the memory of the Norwegian. His life was like that. It was a mosaic of fragments. Details and contexts would fade and be inaccurately recalled, but the feelings and the experiences would weave over time into a tapestry equally full of good times and bad. He didn’t know yet exactly where the Norwegian would fall. At that point he thought of her as a missed opportunity. But she would have sailed away soon anyway. Or he would have. CNN’s intervention had shortened things, but maybe only by a fraction.

The bus was doing 55 on Route 37, heading south. It stopped in Bloomington. Six people got out. One of them left the Indianapolis paper behind. Reacher picked it up and checked the sports. The Yankees were still ahead in the East. Then he flipped to the front and checked the news. He saw the headline: *Sniper Suspect Hurt in Jail Attack.* He read the first three paragraphs: *Brain injury. Coma. Uncertain prognosis.* The journalist seemed torn between condemning the Indiana Board of Corrections for its lawless prisons and applauding Barr’s attackers for doing their civic duty.

This might complicate things, Reacher thought.

The later paragraphs carried a reprise of the original crime story, plus updated background, plus new facts. Reacher read them all. Barr’s sister had moved out of his house some months before the incident. The journalist seemed to think

that was either a cause or an effect of Barr's evident instability. Or both.

The bus moved out of Bloomington. Reacher folded the paper and propped his head against the window and watched the road. It was a black ribbon, wet with recent rain, and it unspooled beside him with the center line flashing by like an urgent Morse code message. Reacher wasn't sure what it was saying to him. He couldn't read it.

The bus pulled into a covered depot and Reacher came out into the daylight and found himself five blocks west of where a raised highway curled around behind an old stone building. Indiana limestone, he guessed. The real thing. It would be a bank, he thought, or a courthouse, or maybe a library. There was a black glass tower beyond it. The air was OK. It was colder than Miami but he was still far enough south that winter felt safely distant. He wasn't going to have to refresh his wardrobe because of weather. He was in white chino pants and a bright yellow canvas shirt. Both were three days old. He figured he would get another day out of them. Then he would buy replacements, cheap. He had brown boat shoes on his feet. No socks. He felt he was dressed for the boardwalk and thought he must look a little out of place in the city.

He checked his watch. Nine-twenty in the morning. He stood on the sidewalk in the diesel fumes and stretched and looked around. The city was one of those heartland places that are neither large nor small, neither new nor old. It wasn't booming and it wasn't decrepit. There was probably some history. Probably some corn and soybean trading. Maybe tobacco. Maybe livestock. There was probably a river, or a railhead. Maybe some manufacturing. There was a small downtown area. He could see it ahead of him, east of where he stood. Taller structures, some stone, some brick, some billboards. He figured the black glass tower would be the flagship building. No reason to build it anyplace else than the heart of downtown.

He walked toward it. There was a lot of construction under way. Repairs, renewals, holes in the road, gravel piles, fresh concrete, heavy trucks moving slow. He crossed in front of one and hit a side street and came out along the north side of a half-finished parking garage extension. He recalled Ann Yanni's fevered breaking-news recap and glanced up at it and then away from it to a

public square. There was an empty ornamental pool with a fountain spout sticking up forlornly in the center. There was a narrow walkway between the pool itself and a low wall. The walkway was decorated with makeshift funeral tributes. There were flowers, with their stems wrapped in aluminum foil. Photographs under plastic, and small stuffed animals, and candles. There was a dusting of leftover sand. The sand had soaked up the blood, he guessed. Fire engines carry boxes of sand for accidents and crime scenes. And stainless steel shovels for removal of body parts. He glanced back at the parking garage. Less than thirty-five yards, he thought. Very close.

He stood still. The plaza was silent. The whole city was quiet. It felt stunned, like a limb briefly paralyzed after a massive bruising blow. The plaza was the epicenter. It was where the blow had landed. It was like a black hole, with emotion compressed into it too tight to escape.

He walked on. The old limestone building was a library. *That's OK*, he thought. *Librarians are nice people. They tell you things, if you ask them.* He asked for the DA's office. A sad and subdued woman at the checkout desk gave him directions. It wasn't a long walk. It wasn't a big city. He walked east past a new office building that had signs for the DMV and a military recruitment center. Behind it was a block of off-brand stores and then a new courthouse building. It was a plain flat-roof off-the-shelf design dressed up with mahogany doors and etched glass. It could have been a church from some weird denomination with a generous but strapped congregation.

He avoided the main public entrance. He circled the block until he came to the office wing. He found a door labeled *District Attorney.* Below it on a separate brass plate he found Rodin's name. *An elected official,* he thought. *They use a separate plate to make it cheaper when the guy changes every few Novembers.* Rodin's initials were *A. A.* He had a law degree.

Reacher went in through the door and spoke to a receptionist at a counter. Asked to see A. A. Rodin himself. "About what?" the receptionist asked, quietly but politely. She was middle-aged, well cared for, well turned out, wearing a clean white blouse. She looked like she had worked behind a desk all her life. A practiced bureaucrat. But stressed. She looked like she was carrying all the town's recent troubles on her shoulders.

"About James Barr," Reacher said.

“Are you a reporter?” the receptionist asked.

“No,” Reacher said.

“May I tell Mr. Rodin’s office your connection to the case?”

“I knew James Barr in the army.”

“That must have been some time ago.”

“A long time ago,” Reacher said.

“May I have your name?”

“Jack Reacher.”

The receptionist dialed a phone and spoke. Reacher guessed she was speaking to a secretary, because both he and Rodin were referred to in the third person, like abstractions. *Can he see a Mr. Reacher about the case?* Not the Barr case. Just *the* case. The conversation continued. Then the receptionist covered the phone by clamping it to her chest, below her collarbone, above her left breast.

“Do you have information?” she asked.

The secretary upstairs can hear your heart beating, Reacher thought.

“Yes,” he said. “Information.”

“From the army?” she asked.

Reacher nodded. The receptionist put the phone back to her face and continued the conversation. It was a long one. Mr. A. A. Rodin had an efficient pair of gatekeepers. That was clear. No way of getting past them without some kind of an urgent and legitimate reason. That was clear, too. Reacher checked his watch. Nine-forty in the morning. But there was no rush, under the circumstances. Barr was in a coma. Tomorrow would do it. Or the next day. Or maybe he could get to Rodin through the cop, if need be. What was his name? Emerson?

The receptionist hung up the phone.

“Please go straight up,” she said. “Mr. Rodin is on the third floor.”

I'm honored, Reacher thought. The receptionist wrote his name on a visitor pass and slipped it into a plastic sleeve. He clipped it on his shirt and headed for the elevator. Rode it to the third floor. The third floor had low ceilings and internal corridors lit by fluorescent tubes. There were three doors made of painted fiberboard that were closed and one set of double doors made of polished wood that were open. Behind those was a secretary at a desk. The second gatekeeper. She was younger than the downstairs lady but presumably more senior.

"Mr. Reacher?" she asked.

He nodded and she came out from behind her desk and led him to where the windowed offices started. The third door they came to was labeled *A. A. Rodin.*

"What's the *A. A.* for?" Reacher asked.

"I'm sure Mr. Rodin will tell you if he wants to," the secretary said.

She knocked on the door and Reacher heard a baritone reply from inside. Then she opened the door and stood aside for Reacher to go in past her.

"Thanks," he said.

"You're most welcome," she said.

Reacher went in. Rodin was already on his feet behind his desk, ready to welcome his visitor, full of reflexive courtesy. Reacher recognized him from the TV. He was a guy of about fifty, fairly lean, fairly fit, gray hair cut short. In person he looked smaller. He was maybe an inch under six feet and a pound under two hundred. He was dressed in a summer-weight suit, dark blue. He had a blue shirt on, and a blue tie. His eyes were blue. Blue was his color, no doubt about it. He was immaculately shaved and wearing cologne. He was a very squared-away guy, no question. *As opposed to me,* Reacher thought. It was like a study in contrasts. Next to Rodin, Reacher was an unkempt giant. He was six inches taller and fifty pounds heavier. His hair was two inches longer and his clothes were a thousand dollars cheaper.

"Mr. Reacher?" Rodin said.

Reacher nodded. The office was government-basic, but neat. It was cool and quiet. No real view from the window. Just the flat roofs of the off-brand stores and the DMV office, with all the dusty junk showing. The black glass top was

and the DMV office, with all the ductwork showing. The black glass tower was visible in the distance. There was a weak sun in the sky. At a right angle to the window there was a trophy wall behind the desk, with college degree certificates and photographs of Rodin with politicians. There were framed newspaper headlines reporting guilty verdicts in seven different cases. On another wall was a photograph of a blonde girl wearing a mortarboard and a gown and holding a degree scroll. She was pretty. Reacher looked at her for a moment longer than he needed to.

“That’s my daughter,” Rodin said. “She’s a lawyer, too.”

“Is she?” Reacher said.

“She just opened her own office here in town.”

There was nothing in his tone. Reacher wasn’t sure whether he was proud, or disapproving.

“You’re due to meet with her, I think,” Rodin said.

“Am I?” Reacher said. “Why?”

“She’s defending James Barr.”

“Your daughter? Is that ethical?”

“There’s no law against it. It might not be sensible, but it’s not unethical.”

He said *sensible* with emphasis, hinting at a number of meanings. Not smart to defend a notorious case, not smart for a daughter to take on her father, not smart for *anyone* to take on A. A. Rodin. He sounded like a very competitive guy.

“She put your name on her provisional witness list,” he said.

“Why?”

“She thinks you have information.”

“Where did she get my name?”

“I don’t know.”

“From the Pentagon?”

Rodin shrugged. “I’m not sure. But she got it from somewhere. Therefore people have been looking for you.”

“Is that why I got in here?”

Rodin nodded.

“Yes, it is,” he said. “That’s exactly why. Generally I don’t encourage walk-ins.”

“Your staff seems to be on board with that policy.”

“I certainly hope so,” Rodin said. “Sit down, please.”

Reacher sat in the visitor chair and Rodin sat behind his desk. The window was on Reacher’s left and Rodin’s right. Neither man had the light in his eyes. It was an equitable furniture arrangement. Different from some prosecutors’ offices Reacher had known.

“Coffee?” Rodin asked.

“Please,” Reacher said.

Rodin made a call and asked for coffee.

“Naturally I’m interested in why you came to see me first,” he said. “The prosecution, I mean, rather than the defense.”

“I wanted your personal opinion,” Reacher said.

“On what?”

“On how strong a case you’ve got against James Barr.”

Rodin didn’t answer immediately. There was a short silence and then there was a knock at the door and the secretary came in with coffee. She had a silver tray with the works on it. A French press, two cups, two saucers, a sugar bowl, a tiny pitcher of cream, two silver spoons. The cups were fine china. *Not government issue,* Reacher thought. *Rodin likes his coffee done right.* The secretary put the tray on the edge of the desk, so that it was exactly halfway between the desk

chair and the visitor chair.

“Thanks,” Reacher said.

“You’re most welcome,” she said, and left the room.

“Help yourself,” Rodin said. “Please.”

Reacher pushed the plunger down and poured himself a cup, no cream, no sugar. It smelled dark and strong. Coffee, done right.

“The case against James Barr is exceptionally good,” Rodin said.

“Eyewitnesses?” Reacher asked.

“No,” Rodin said. “But eyewitness testimony can be of random value. I’m almost glad we don’t have eyewitnesses. Because what we’ve got instead is exceptional physical evidence. And science doesn’t lie. It doesn’t get confused.”

“Exceptional?” Reacher said.

“A complete rock-solid evidence trail that ties the man to the crime.”

“How solid?”

“As good as it gets. The best I’ve ever seen. I’m completely confident.”

“I’ve heard prosecutors say that before.”

“Not this one, Mr. Reacher. I’m a very cautious man. I don’t prosecute capital cases unless I’m certain of the outcome.”

“Keeping score?”

Rodin gestured above and behind him at his trophy wall.

“Seven for seven,” he said. “One hundred percent.”

“In how long?”

“In three years. James Barr will make it eight for eight. If he ever wakes up.”

“Suppose he wakes up damaged?”

“If he wakes up with any brain function at all, he’s going to trial. What he did here can’t be forgiven.”

“OK,” Reacher said.

“OK what?”

“You’ve told me what I wanted to know.”

“You said you had information. From the army.”

“I’ll keep it to myself for now.”

“You were a military policeman, am I right?”

“Thirteen years,” Reacher said.

“And you knew James Barr?”

“Briefly.”

“Tell me about him.”

“Not yet.”

“Mr. Reacher, if you have exculpatory information, or anything to add at all, you really need to tell me now.”

“Do I?”

“I’ll get it anyway. My daughter will submit it. She’ll be looking for a plea bargain.”

“What does the *A. A.* stand for?”

“Excuse me?”

“Your initials.”

“Aleksei Alekseivitch. My family came from Russia. But a long time ago

“Alekseï Alekseïvitch. My family came from Russia. But a long time ago. Before the October Revolution.”

“But they keep up traditions.”

“As you can see.”

“What do people call you?”

“Alex, of course.”

Reacher stood up. “Well, thanks for your time, Alex. And the coffee.”

“Are you going to see my daughter now?”

“Is there any point? You seem pretty sure of yourself.”

Rodin smiled an indulgent smile.

“It’s a matter of procedure,” he said. “I’m an officer of the court, and you’re on a witness list. I’m obliged to point out that you’re obliged to go. Anything less would be unethical.”

“Where is she?”

“In the glass tower you can see from the window.”

“OK,” Reacher said. “I guess I could drop by.”

“I still need whatever information you have,” Rodin said.

Reacher shook his head.

“No,” he said. “You really don’t.”

He returned his visitor pass to the woman at the reception desk and headed back to the public plaza. Stood in the cold sun and turned a complete circle, getting a sense of the place. All cities are the same, and all cities are different. They all have colors. Some are gray. This one was brown. Reacher guessed the brick was made from local clay and had carried the color of old farmland into the facades.

Even the stone was flecked with tan, like it carried deposits of iron. There were accents of dark red here and there, like old barns. It was a warm place, not busy, but it was surviving. It would rebound after the tragedy. There was progress and optimism and dynamism. All the new construction proved it. There were work zones and raw concrete curbs everywhere. Lots of planning, lots of rebuilding. Lots of hope.

The new parking garage extension anchored the north end of the downtown strip. It suggested commercial expansion. It was south and slightly west of the kill zone. Very close. Directly west and maybe twice as distant was a length of the raised highway. It ran free and clear through a curve for maybe thirty yards before curling in behind the library. Then it curled some more and passed behind the black glass tower. The tower was due north of the plaza. It had an NBC sign near the door, on a black granite slab. Ann Yanni's workplace, Reacher guessed, as well as Rodin's daughter's. East of the plaza was the office building with the DMV and the recruiting office. That was where the victims had come from. They had spilled out the door. What had Ann Yanni said? At the end of a long workweek? They had hustled west across the plaza toward their parked cars or the bus depot and had stumbled into a nightmare. The narrow walkway would have slowed them down and lined them up. Like shooting fish in a barrel.

Reacher walked the length of the empty ornamental pool to the revolving door at the base of the tower. He went in and checked the lobby for a directory. There was a glassed-in board made of ridged black felt with press-in white letters. NBC was on the second floor. Some of the other suites were empty, and Reacher guessed the rest changed hands fast enough to make it worth holding on to the press-in letter system. *Law Offices of Helen Rodin* was listed on four. The letters were a little misaligned and the spacing was off. *Rockefeller Center it ain't,* Reacher thought.

He waited for the elevator in a queue of two, him and a pretty blonde woman. He looked at her and she looked at him. She got out on two and he realized it was Ann Yanni. He recognized her from the broadcast. Then he figured all he needed to do was meet Emerson from the local PD and he would have brought the whole breaking-news tableau to life.

He found Helen Rodin's suite. It was at the front of the building. Her windows were going to overlook the plaza. He knocked. Heard a muffled reply and went in. There was an empty reception room with a secretary's desk. The desk was

unoccupied. It was secondhand, but not recently used. *No secretary yet,* Reacher thought. *Early days*.

He knocked on the inner office door. Heard the same voice make a second reply. He went in and found Helen Rodin at another secondhand desk. He recognized her from her father's photograph. But face-to-face she looked even better. She was probably no more than thirty, quite tall, lightly built. Slim, in an athletic sort of a way. Not anorexic. Either she ran or played soccer or had been very lucky with her metabolism. She had long blonde hair and her father's blue eyes. There was intelligence behind them. She was dressed all in black, in a pantsuit with a tight stretch top under the coat. *Lycra,* Reacher thought. *Can't beat it.*

"Hello," she said.

"I'm Jack Reacher," he said.

She stared at him. "You're kidding. Are you really?"

He nodded. "Always have been, always will be."

"Unbelievable."

"Not really. Everybody's somebody."

"I mean, how did you know to come? We couldn't find you."

"I saw it on the TV. Ann Yanni, Saturday morning."

"Well, thank God for TV," she said. "And thank God you're here."

"I was in Miami," he said. "With a dancer."

"A dancer?"

"She was Norwegian," he said.

He walked to the window and looked out. He was four stories up and the main shopping street ran away directly south, down a hill, emphasizing his elevation. The ornamental pool was placed with its long axis exactly lined up with the street. The pool was *on* the street, really, except they had blocked the street off to

make the plaza. Someone returning from a long spell away would be surprised to find a big tank of water where once there had been roadway. The pool was much longer and narrower than it had looked from ground level. It looked sad and empty, with just a thin layer of mud and scum on the black tile. Beyond it and slightly to the right was the new parking structure. It was slightly downhill from the plaza. Maybe half a story's difference.

"Were you here?" Reacher asked. "When it happened?"

"Yes, I was," Helen Rodin said quietly.

"Did you see it?"

"Not at first. I heard the first three gunshots. They came very fast. The first, and then a tiny pause, and then the next two. Then another pause, a little longer, but just a split second, really. I stood up in time for the last three. Horrible."

Reacher nodded. *Brave girl,* he thought. *She hears gunshots, and she stands up. She doesn't dive under the desk.* Then he thought: *The first, and then a tiny pause.* That was the sound of a skilled rifleman watching where his first cold shot went. So many variables. The cold barrel, the range, the wind, the zeroing, the sighting-in.

"Did you see people die?" he asked.

"Two of them," she said behind him. "It was awful."

"Three shots and two people?"

"He missed once. Either the fourth or the fifth shot, they're not sure. They found the bullet in the pool. That's why it's empty. They drained it."

Reacher said nothing.

"The bullet is part of the evidence," Helen said. "It ties the rifle to the crime."

"Did you know any of the dead people?"

"No. They were just people, I guess. In the wrong place at the wrong time."

Reacher said nothing.

“I saw flames from the gun,” Helen said. “Way over there, in the shadows, in the dark. Little spits of flame.”

“Muzzle flashes,” Reacher said.

He turned back from the window. She held out her hand.

“I’m Helen Rodin,” she said. “I’m sorry, I should have introduced myself properly.”

Reacher took her hand. It was warm and firm.

“Just Helen?” he said. “Not Helena Alekseyovna or something?”

She stared at him again. “How the hell did you know that?”

“I met your dad,” he said, and let go of her hand.

“Did you?” she said. “Where?”

“In his office, just now.”

“You went to *his* office? Today?”

“I just left there.”

“Why did you go to *his* office? You’re *my* witness. He shouldn’t have seen you.”

“He was very keen to talk.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Nothing. I asked questions instead.”

“What questions?”

“I wanted to know how strong his case was. Against James Barr.”

“I’m representing James Barr. And you’re a defense witness. You should have been talking to me, not him.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Unfortunately the case against James Barr is very strong,” she said.

“How did you get my name?” Reacher asked.

“From James Barr, of course,” she said. “How else?”

“From *Barr*? I don’t believe it.”

“Well, listen,” she said.

She turned away to the desk and pressed a key on an old-fashioned cassette player. Reacher heard a voice he didn’t recognize say: *Denying it is not an option.* Helen touched the *Pause* key and kept her finger on it.

“His first lawyer,” she said. “We changed representation yesterday.”

“How? He was in a coma yesterday.”

“Technically my client is James Barr’s sister. His next of kin.”

Then she let go of the *Pause* key and Reacher heard room sounds and hiss and then a voice he hadn’t heard for fourteen years. It was exactly how he remembered it. It was low, and tense, and raspy. It was the voice of a man who rarely spoke. It said: *Get Jack Reacher for me.*

He stood there, stunned.

Helen Rodin pressed the *Stop* key.

“See?” she said.

Then she checked her watch.

“Ten-thirty,” she said. “Stick around and join in the client conference.”

She unveiled him like a conjurer on a stage. Like a rabbit out of a hat. First in was a guy Reacher immediately took for an ex-cop. He was introduced as

Franklin, a freelance investigator who worked for lawyers. They shook hands.

“You’re a hard man to find,” Franklin said.

“Wrong,” Reacher said. “I’m an impossible man to find.”

“Want to tell me why?” There were instant questions in Franklin’s eyes. A cop’s questions. Like, *How much use is this guy going to be as a witness? What is he? A felon? A fugitive? Will he have credibility on the stand?*

“Just a hobby,” Reacher said. “Just a personal choice.”

“So you’re cool?”

“You could skate on me.”

Then a woman came in. She was in her mid-to late thirties, probably, dressed for an office, and stressed and sleepless. But behind the agitation she wasn’t unappealing. She looked like a kind and decent person. Even pretty. But she was clearly James Barr’s sister. Reacher knew that even before they were introduced. She had the same coloring and a softer, feminized, older version of the same face.

“I’m Rosemary Barr,” she said. “I’m so glad you found us. It feels providential. Now I really feel we’re getting somewhere.”

Reacher said nothing at all.

The law offices of Helen Rodin didn’t run to a conference room. Reacher figured that would come later. Maybe. If she prospered. So all four people crowded into the inner office. Helen sat at her desk. Franklin perched on a corner of it. Reacher leaned on the windowsill. Rosemary Barr paced, nervously. If there had been a rug, she would have worn holes in it.

“OK,” Helen said. “Defense strategy. At the minimum we want to pursue a medical plea. But we’ll aim higher than that. How high we eventually get will depend on a number of factors. In which connection, first, I’m sure we all want to hear what Mr. Reacher has to say.”

“I don’t think you do,” Reacher said.

“Do what?”

“Want to hear what I’ve got to say.”

“Why wouldn’t we?”

“Because you jumped to the wrong conclusion.”

“Which is?”

“Why do you think I went to see your father first?”

“I don’t know.”

“Because I didn’t come here to help James Barr.”

Nobody spoke.

“I came here to bury him,” Reacher said.

They all stared.

“But why?” Rosemary Barr asked.

“Because he’s done this before. And once was enough.”

CHAPTER 3

Reacher moved and propped his back against the window reveal and turned sideways so that he could see the plaza. And so that he couldn't see his audience.

"Is this a privileged conversation?" he asked.

"Yes," Helen Rodin said. "It is. It's a client conference. It's automatically protected. Nothing we say here can be repeated."

"Is it ethical for you to hear bad news, legally?"

There was a long silence.

"Are you going to give evidence for the prosecution?" Helen Rodin asked.

"I don't think I'll have to, under the circumstances. But I will if necessary."

"Then we would hear the bad news anyway. We would take a deposition from you before the trial. To guarantee no more surprises."

More silence.

"James Barr was a sniper," Reacher said. "Not the best the army ever had, and not the worst. Just a good, competent rifleman. Average in almost every way."

Then he paused and turned his head and looked down to his left. At the cheap new building with the recruitment office in it. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps.

"Four types of people join the military," he said. "First, for people like me, it's a family trade. Second, there are patriots, eager to serve their country. Third, there are people who just need a job. And fourth, there are people who want to kill other people. The military is the only place where it's legal to do that. James Barr was the fourth type. Deep down he thought it would be fun to kill."

Rosemary Barr looked away. Nobody spoke.

"But he never got the chance," Reacher said. "I was a very thorough investigator

when I was an MP, and I learned all about him. I studied him. He trained for five years. I went through his logbooks. Some weeks he fired two thousand rounds. All of them at paper targets or silhouettes. I counted a career total of nearly a quarter-million rounds fired, and not one of them at the enemy. He didn't go to Panama in 1989. We had a very big army back then, and we required only a very small force, so most guys missed out. It burned him up. Then Desert Shield happened in 1990. He went to Saudi. But he wasn't in Desert Storm in 1991. They made it a mostly armored campaign. James Barr sat it out in Saudi, cleaning sand out of his rifle, firing two thousand training rounds a week. Then after Desert Storm was over, they sent him to Kuwait City for the cleanup."

"What happened there?" Rosemary Barr asked.

"He snapped," Reacher said. "That's what happened there. The Soviets had collapsed. Iraq was back in its box. He looked ahead and saw that war was over. He had trained nearly six years and had never fired his gun in anger and was never going to. A lot of his training had been about visualization. About seeing himself putting the reticle on the medulla oblongata, where the spinal cord broadens at the base of the brain. About breathing slow and squeezing the trigger. About the split-second pause while the bullet flies. About seeing the puff of pink mist from the back of the head. He had visualized all of that. Many times. But he had never seen it. Not once. He had never seen the pink mist. And he really wanted to."

Silence in the room.

"So he went out one day, alone," Reacher said. "In Kuwait City. He set up and waited. Then he shot and killed four people coming out of an apartment building."

Helen Rodin was staring at him.

"He fired from a parking garage," Reacher said. "Second level. It was directly opposite the apartment building's door. The victims were American noncoms, as it happened. They had weekend passes, and they were in street clothes."

Rosemary Barr was shaking her head.

"This can't be true," she said. "It just *can't* be. He wouldn't do it. And if he did, he'd have gone to prison. But he got an honorable discharge instead. Right after

the Gulf. And a campaign medal. So it can't have happened. It can't possibly be true."

"That's exactly why I'm here," Reacher said. "There was a serious problem. Remember the sequence of events. We had four dead guys, and we worked from there. In the end I followed the trail all the way to your brother. But it was a very tough trail. We took all kinds of wrong turns. And along one of them we found stuff out about the four dead guys. Stuff we really didn't want to know. Because they had been doing things they shouldn't have been doing."

"What things?" Helen Rodin asked.

"Kuwait City was a hell of a place. Full of rich Arabs. Even the poor ones had Rolexes and Rolls-Royces and marble bathrooms with solid gold faucets. A lot of them had fled temporarily, for the duration. But they had left all their stuff behind. And some of them had left their families behind. Their wives and daughters."

"And?"

"Our four dead noncoms had been doing the conquering army thing, just like the Iraqis before them. That's how they saw it, I guess. We saw it as rape and armed robbery. As it happened they had left quite a trail that day, inside that building. And other buildings, on other days. We found enough loot in their footlockers to start another branch of Tiffany's. Watches, diamonds, all kinds of portable stuff. And underwear. We figured they used the underwear to keep count of the wives and daughters."

"So what happened?"

"It got political, inevitably. It went up the chain of command. The Gulf was supposed to be a big shiny success for us. It was supposed to be a hundred percent wonderful and a hundred percent squeaky clean. And the Kuwaitis were our allies, and so on and so forth. So ultimately we were told to cover for the four guys. We were told to bury the story. Which we did. Which also meant letting James Barr walk. Because whispers had gotten out and we knew his lawyer would have used them. We were afraid of blackmail. If we took Barr to trial, his lawyer would have countered with a justifiable homicide claim. He would have said Barr had been standing up for the honor of the army, in a rough-and-ready sort of a way. All the beans would have spilled in the process. We

were told not to risk that. So our hands were tied. It was a stalemate."

"Maybe it *was* justifiable homicide," Rosemary Barr said. "Maybe James really did know all along."

"Ma'am, he didn't know. I'm very sorry, but he didn't. He was never near any of those guys before. Didn't know them from Adam. Didn't say anything to me about them when I caught up to him. He hadn't been in KC long. Not long enough to know anything. He was just killing people. For fun. He confessed to that, to me personally, before any of the other stuff ever came to light."

Silence in the room.

"So we hushed it up and mustered him out," Reacher said. "We said his four guys had been killed by Palestinians, which was plausible in Kuwait City in 1991. I was mildly pissed about the whole thing. It wasn't the worst situation I had ever seen, but it wasn't the nicest, either. James Barr got away with murder, by sheer luck. So I went to see him before he left and I told him to justify his great good fortune by never stepping out of line again, not ever, the whole rest of his life. I told him if he ever did, I would come find him and make him sorry."

Silence in the room. It lasted minutes.

"So here I am," Reacher said.

"This must be classified information," Helen Rodin said. "I mean, surely it can't ever be *used.* There would be a huge scandal."

Reacher nodded. "It's highly classified. It's sealed inside the Pentagon. That's why I asked if this conversation was privileged."

"You'd get in big trouble if you talked about it."

"I've been in big trouble before. I came here to find out if I needed to get in big trouble again. As it happens, I don't think I do. I think your father can put James Barr away without my help. But my help is always available if he needs it."

Then Helen understood.

"You're here to pressure me," she said. "Aren't you? You're telling me if I try too hard, you'll cut me off at the knees."

too hard, you'll cut me off at the knees.

"I'm here to keep my promise," Reacher said. "To James Barr."

He closed the door and left them there, three silent and disappointed people in a room. Then he rode down in the elevator. Ann Yanni got in again on two. He wondered for a moment if she spent all day riding the elevators, hoping to be recognized. Hoping to be asked for an autograph. He ignored her. Got out with her in the lobby and just headed for the door.

He stood for a moment in the plaza. Deciding. James Barr's medical condition was the complicating factor. He didn't want to stick around until the guy woke up. If that happened at all, it might take weeks. And Reacher was not a guy who liked to stick around. He liked to be on the move. Two days in one place was about his limit. But he was stuck for alternatives. He couldn't hint at anything to Alex Rodin. Couldn't give him a call-me-if-you-need-me number. For one thing, he didn't have a phone. For another, a guy as squared away and cautious as Alex Rodin was would worry away at the hint until something began to unravel. He would make the link to the Pentagon easily enough. Reacher had even asked *did she get my name from the Pentagon?* That had been a careless mistake. So Alex Rodin would put two and two together, eventually. He would figure, *There's something extra here, and I can find out what it is from the Pentagon.* The Pentagon would stonewall him, of course. But Rodin wouldn't like being stonewalled. He would go to the media. Ann Yanni, probably. She would be ready for another network story. And at bottom Rodin would be insecure enough about losing the case that he would simply *have* to know. He wouldn't give up on it.

And Reacher didn't want the story out there. Not unless it was absolutely necessary. Gulf War vets had it hard enough, with the chemical stuff and the uranium poisoning. All they had going for them was the conflict's spotless just-war reputation. They didn't need defaming by association with people like Barr and his victims. People would say, *Hey, they were all doing it.* And they weren't all doing it, in Reacher's experience. That had been a good army. So he didn't want the story out there unless it was absolutely necessary, and he wanted to judge that for himself.

So, no hints to Alex Rodin. No call-me contingencies.

So . . . what, exactly?

He decided to stick around for twenty-four hours. Maybe there would be a clearer prognosis on Barr's condition after that. Maybe somehow he could check with Emerson and get a better feel for the evidence. Then maybe he could feel OK about leaving things with Alex Rodin's office, on a kind of forensic autopilot. If there were problems down the road maybe he would read about them in a newspaper somewhere, far in the future, on a beach or in a bar, and then he could come all the way back again.

So, twenty-four hours in a small heartland city.

He decided to go see if there was a river.

There was a river. It was a broad, slow body of water that moved west to east through an area south of downtown. Some tributary that fed the mighty Ohio, he guessed. Its north bank was straightened and strengthened with massive stone blocks along a three-hundred-yard stretch. The blocks might have weighed fifty tons each. They were immaculately chiseled and expertly fitted. They made a quayside. A wharf. They had tall fat iron mushrooms set into them, to tie off ropes. Stone paving slabs made the wharf thirty feet deep. All along its length were tall wooden sheds, open on the river side, open on the street side. The street was made of cobbles. A hundred years ago there would have been huge river barges tied up and unloading. There would have been swarms of men at work. There would have been horses and carts clattering on the cobbles. But now there was nothing. Just absolute stillness, and the slow drift of the water. Scabs of rust on the iron mushrooms, clumps of weeds between the stones.

Some of the sheds still had faded names on them. *McGinty Dry Goods. Allentown Seed Company. Parker Supply.* Reacher strolled the three hundred yards and looked at all of them. They were still standing, strong and square. Ripe for renovation, he guessed. A city that put an ornamental pool with a fountain in a public plaza would spruce up the waterfront. It was inevitable. There was construction all over town. It would move south. They would give someone tax breaks to open a riverside café. Maybe a bar. Maybe with live music, Thursday through Saturday. Maybe with a little museum laying out the history of the river trade.

He turned to walk back and came face-to-face with Helen Rodin.

“You’re not such a hard man to find,” she said.

“Evidently,” he said.

“Tourists always come to the docks.”

She was carrying a lawyer-size briefcase.

“Can I buy you lunch?” she said.

She walked him back north to the edge of the new gentrification. In the space of a single dug-up block the city changed from old and worn to new and repainted. Stores changed from dusty mom-and-pop places with displays of vacuum cleaner bags and washing machine hoses to new establishments showing off spotlit hundred-dollar dresses. And shoes, and four-dollar lattes, and things made of titanium. They walked past a few such places and then Helen Rodin led him into an eatery. It was the kind of place he had seen before. It was the kind of place he usually avoided. White walls, some exposed brick, engine-turned aluminum tables and chairs, weird salad combinations. Random ingredients thrown together and called inventive.

She led him to a table in the far back corner. An energetic kid came by with menus. Helen Rodin ordered something with oranges and walnuts and Gorgonzola cheese. With a cup of herbal tea. Reacher gave up on reading his menu and ordered the same thing, but with coffee, regular, black.

“This is my favorite place in town,” Helen said.

He nodded. He believed her. She looked right at home. The long straight hair, the black clothes. The youthful glow. He was older and came from a different time and a different place.

“I need you to explain something,” she said.

She bent down and opened her briefcase. Came out with the old tape player. Placed it carefully on the table. Pressed *Play*. Reacher heard James Barr’s first

lawyer say: *Denying it is not an option.* Then he heard Barr say: *Get Jack Reacher for me.*

“You already played that for me,” he said.

“But why would he say it?” Helen asked.

“That’s what you want me to explain?”

She nodded.

“I can’t,” he said.

“Logically you’re the last person he should have asked for.”

“I agree.”

“Could he have been in any doubt about how you felt? Fourteen years ago?”

“I don’t think so. I made myself pretty clear.”

“Then why would he ask for you now?”

Reacher didn’t answer. The food came, and they started eating. Oranges, walnuts, Gorgonzola cheese, all kinds of leaves and lettuces, and a raspberry vinaigrette. It wasn’t too bad. And the coffee was OK.

“Play me the whole tape,” he said.

She put her fork down and pressed the *Rewind* key. Kept her hand there, one fingertip on each key, like a pianist. She had long fingers. No rings. Polished nails, neatly trimmed. She pressed *Play* and picked up her fork again. Reacher heard no sound for a moment until the blank leader cleared the tape head. Then he heard a prison acoustic. Echoes, distant metallic clattering. A man breathing. Then he heard a door open and the thump of another man sitting down. No scraping of chair legs on concrete. A prison chair, bolted to the floor. The lawyer started talking. He was old and bored. He didn’t want to be there. He knew Barr was guilty. He made banal small talk for a while. Grew frustrated with Barr’s silence. Then he said, full of exasperation: *I can’t help you if you won’t help yourself.* There was a long, long pause, and then Barr’s voice came through,

agitated, close to the microphone: *They got the wrong guy*. He said it again. Then the lawyer started up again, not believing him, saying the evidence was all there, looking for a reason behind an indisputable fact. Then Barr asked for Reacher, twice, and the lawyer asked if Reacher was a doctor, twice. Then Barr got up and walked away. There was the sound of hammering on a locked door, and then nothing more.

Helen Rodin pressed the *Stop* key.

“So why?” she asked. “Why say he didn’t do it and then call for a guy who knows for sure he did it before?”

Reacher just shrugged his shoulders and said nothing. But he saw in Helen’s eyes that she had an answer.

“You know something,” she said. “Maybe you don’t know you know it. But there’s got to be something there. Something he thinks can help him.”

“Does it matter? He’s in a coma. He might never wake up.”

“It matters a lot. He could get better treatment.”

“I don’t know anything.”

“Are you sure? Was there a psychiatric evaluation made back then?”

“It never got that far.”

“Did he claim insanity?”

“No, he claimed a perfect score. Four for four.”

“Did you think he was nuts?”

“That’s a big word. Was it nuts to shoot four people for fun? Of course it was. Was *he* nuts, legally? I’m sure he wasn’t.”

“You must know something, Reacher,” Helen said. “It must be way down in there. You’ve got to dredge it up.”

He kept quiet for a moment.

“Have you actually seen the evidence?” he asked.

“I’ve seen a summary.”

“How bad is it?”

“It’s terrible. There’s no question he did it. This is about mitigation, nothing more. And his state of mind. I can’t let them execute an insane person.”

“So wait until he wakes up. Run some tests.”

“They won’t count. He could wake up like a fruitcake and the prosecution will say that was caused by the blows to the head in the jailhouse fight. They’ll say he was perfectly sane at the time of the crime.”

“Is your dad a fair man?”

“He lives to win.”

“Like father, like daughter?”

She paused.

“Somewhat,” she said.

Reacher finished up his salad. Chased the last walnut around with his fork and then gave up and used his fingers instead.

“What’s on your mind?” Helen asked.

“Just a minor detail,” he said. “Fourteen years ago it was a very tough case with barely adequate forensics. And he confessed. This time the forensics seem to be a total slam dunk. But he’s denying it.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“So think about what you *do* know,” Helen said. “Please. You must know something. You have to ask yourself, why did he come up with your name? There has to be a reason.”

Reacher said nothing. The kid who had served them came back and took their plates away. Reacher pointed at his coffee cup and the kid made another trip and refilled it. Reacher cradled it in his hands and smelled the steam.

“May I ask you a personal question?” Helen Rodin said to him.

“Depends how personal,” Reacher said.

“Why were you so untraceable? Normally guys like Franklin can find anybody.”

“Maybe he’s not as good as you think.”

“He’s probably better than I think.”

“Not everyone is traceable.”

“I agree. But you don’t look like you belong in that category.”

“I was in the machine,” Reacher said. “My whole life. Then the machine coughed and spat me out. So I thought, OK, if I’m out, I’m out. All the way out. I was a little angry and it was probably an immature reaction. But I got used to it.”

“Like a game?”

“Like an addiction,” Reacher said. “I’m addicted to being out.”

The kid brought the check. Helen Rodin paid. Then she put her tape player back in her briefcase and she and Reacher left together. They walked north, past the construction at the bottom of First Street. She was heading to her office and he was going to look for a hotel.

A man called Grigor Linsky watched them walk. He was slumped low in a car parked at the curb. He knew where to wait. He knew where she ate when she had company.

CHAPTER 4

Reacher checked into a downtown hotel called the Metropole Palace, two blocks east of First Street, about level with the main shopping strip. He paid cash up front for one night only and used the name Jimmy Reese. He had cycled through all the presidents and vice presidents long ago and was now using second basemen from the Yankees' nonchampionship years. Jimmy Reese had played pretty well during part of 1930 and pretty badly during part of 1931. He had come from nowhere and moved on to St. Louis for part of 1932. Then he had quit. He had died in California, age ninety-two. But now he was back, with a single room and a bath in the Metropole Palace, for one night only, due to check out the next morning before eleven o'clock.

The Metropole was a sad, half-empty, faded old place. But it had once been grand. Reacher could see that. He could picture the corn traders a hundred years ago walking up the hill from the river wharf and staying the night. He guessed the lobby had once looked like a Western saloon, but now it was thinly made over with modernist touches. There was a refurbished elevator. The rooms had swipe cards instead of keys. But he guessed the building hadn't really changed very much. His room was certainly old-fashioned and gloomy. The mattress felt like a part of the original inventory.

He lay down on it and put his hands behind his head. Thought back more than fourteen years to Kuwait City. All cities have colors, and KC was white. White stucco, white-painted concrete, white marble. Skies burned white by the sun. Men in white robes. The parking garage James Barr had used was white, and the apartment building opposite was white. Because of the glare the four dead guys had all been wearing aviator shades. All four men had been hit in the head, but none of the shades had broken. They had just fallen off. All four bullets had been recovered, and they broke the case. They were match-grade 168-grain jacketed boat tails. Not hollow points, because of the Geneva Convention. They were an American sniper's bullets, either Army or Marines. If Barr had used a battle rifle or a submachine gun or a sidearm, Reacher would have gotten nowhere. Because every firearm in theater except the sniper rifles used standard NATO rounds, which would have cast the net way too wide, because just about all of NATO was in-country. But Barr's whole purpose had been to use his own specialist weapon, just for once, this time for real. And in so doing, his four thirteen-cent bullets had nailed him.

But it had been a tough, tough case. Maybe Reacher's finest ever. He had used logic, deduction, paperwork, footwork, intuition, and ultimately elimination. At the end of the trail was James Barr, a man who had finally seen the pink mist and was strangely at peace with his capture.

He had confessed.

The confession was voluntary, fast, and complete. Reacher never laid a hand on him. Barr talked quite freely about the experience. Then he asked questions about the investigation, like he was fascinated by the process. Clearly he had not expected to be caught. Not in a million years. He was simultaneously aggrieved and admiring. He had even acted a little sympathetic when the political snafu eventually broke him loose. Like he was sorry that Reacher's fine efforts had come to nothing.

Fourteen years later he had not confessed.

There was another difference between this time and the last time, too. But Reacher couldn't pin it down. Something to do with how hot Kuwait City had been.

Grigor Linsky used his cell phone and called the Zec. The Zec was the man he worked for. It wasn't just Zec. It was *the* Zec. It was a question of respect. The Zec was eighty years old, but he still broke arms if he smelled disrespect. He was like an old bull. He still had his strength and his attitude. He was eighty years old *because of* his strength and his attitude. Without them he would have died at age twenty. Or later, at thirty, which was about when he went insane and his real name finally slipped his mind.

"The lawyer went back to her office," Linsky said. "Reacher turned east off First Street. I laid back and didn't follow him. But he turned away from the bus depot. Therefore we can assume he's staying in town. My guess is he checked into the Metropole Palace. There's nothing else in that direction."

The Zec made no reply.

"Should we do anything?" Linsky asked.

“How long is he here for?”

“That depends. Clearly he’s on a mission of mercy.”

The Zec said nothing.

“Should we do anything?” Linsky asked again.

There was a pause. Cellular static, and an old man breathing.

“We should maybe distract him,” the Zec said. “Or discourage him. I’m told he was a soldier. Therefore he will probably maintain a predictable pattern of behavior. If he’s at the Metropole, he won’t stay in tonight. Not there. No fun for a soldier. He’ll go out somewhere. Probably alone. So there could be an incident. Use your imagination. Make it a big scenario. Don’t use our own people. And make it look natural.”

“Damage?”

“Broken bones, at least. Maybe he gets a head injury. Maybe he winds up in the coma ward along with his buddy James Barr.”

“What about the lawyer?”

“Leave her alone. For now. We’ll open that can of worms later. If we need to.”

Helen Rodin spent an hour at her desk. She took three calls. The first was from Franklin. He was bailing out.

“I’m sorry, but you’re going to lose,” the investigator said. “And I’ve got a business to run. I can’t put in unbilled hours on this anymore.”

“Nobody likes hopeless cases,” Helen said diplomatically. She was going to need him again in the future. No point in holding his feet to the fire.

“Not pro bono hopeless cases,” Franklin said.

“If I get a budget, will you come back on board?”

“Sure,” Franklin said. “Just call me.”

Then they hung up, all proprieties observed, their relationship preserved. The next call came ten minutes later. It was from her father, who sounded full of concern.

“You shouldn’t have taken this case, you know,” he said.

“It wasn’t like I was spoiled for choice,” Helen said.

“Losing might be winning, if you know what I mean.”

“Winning might be winning, too.”

“No, winning will be losing. You need to understand that.”

“Did you ever set out to lose a case?” she asked.

Her father said nothing. Then he went fishing.

“Did Jack Reacher find you?” he asked, meaning: *Should I be worried?*

“He found me,” she said, keeping her voice light.

“Was he interesting?” Meaning: *Should I be very worried?*

“He’s certainly given me something to think about.”

“Well, should we discuss it?” Meaning: *Please tell me*.

“I’m sure we will soon. When the time is right.”

They small-talked for a minute more and arranged to meet for dinner. He tried again: *Please tell me.* She didn’t. Then they hung up. Helen smiled. She hadn’t lied. Hadn’t even really bluffed. But she felt she had participated. The law was a game, and like any game it had a psychological component.

The third call was from Rosemary Barr at the hospital.

“James is waking up,” she said. “He coughed up his breathing tube. He’s coming out of the coma.”

“Is he talking?”

“The doctors say he might be tomorrow.”

“Will he remember anything?”

“The doctors say it’s possible.”

An hour later Reacher left the Metropole. He stayed east of First Street and headed north toward the off-brand stores he had seen near the courthouse. He wanted clothes. Something local. Maybe not a set of bib overalls, but certainly something more generic than his Miami gear. Because he figured he might head to Seattle next. For the coffee. And he couldn’t walk around Seattle in a bright yellow shirt.

He found a store and bought a pair of pants that the label called taupe and he called olive drab. He found a flannel shirt almost the same color. Plus underwear. And he invested in a pair of socks. He changed in the cubicle and threw his old stuff away in the store’s own trash bin. Forty bucks, for what he hoped would be four days’ wear. Extravagant, but it was worth ten bucks a day to him not to carry a bag.

He came out and walked west toward the afternoon sun. The shirt was too thick for the weather, but he could regulate it by rolling up the sleeves and opening a second button. It was OK. It would be fine for Seattle.

He came out into the plaza and saw that the fountain had been restarted. It was refilling the pool, very slowly. The mud on the bottom was an inch deep and moving in slow swirls. Some people were standing and watching it. Others were walking. But nobody was using the short route past the memorial tributes, where Barr’s victims had died. Maybe nobody would ever again. Instead everyone was looping the long way around, past the NBC sign. Instinctively, respectfully, fearfully; Reacher wasn’t sure.

He picked his way among the flowers and sat on the low wall, with the sound of the fountain behind him and the parking garage in front of him. One shoulder was warmed by the sun and the other was cool in the shade. He could feel the leftover sand under his feet. He looked to his left and watched the DMV

building's door. Looked to his right and watched the cars on the raised highway. They tracked through the curve, high up in the air, one after the other, single file, in a single lane. There weren't many of them. Traffic up there was light, even though First Street itself was already building up to the afternoon rush hour. Then he looked to his left again and saw Helen Rodin sitting down beside him. She was out of breath.

"I was wrong," she said. "You *are* a hard man to find."

"But you triumphed nonetheless," he said.

"Only because I saw you from my window. I ran all the way down, hoping you wouldn't wander off. That was a half hour after calling all the hotels in town and being told you aren't registered anywhere."

"What hotels don't know won't hurt them."

"James Barr is waking up. He might be talking tomorrow."

"Or he might not."

"You know much about head injuries?"

"Only the ones I cause."

"I want you to do something for me."

"Like what?" he asked.

"You can help me," she said. "With something important."

"Can I?"

"And you can help yourself."

He said nothing.

"I want you to be my evidence analyst," she said.

"You've got Franklin for that."

She shook her head. "Franklin's too close to his old PD buddies. He won't be

She shook her head. "Franklin's too close to his old PD buddies. He won't be critical enough. He won't want to tear into them."

"And I will? I want Barr to go down, remember."

"Exactly. That's exactly why you should do it. You want to confirm that they've got an unbreakable case. Then you can leave town and be happy."

"Would I tell you if I found a hole?"

"I'd see it in your eyes. And I'd know from what you did next. If you go, it's a strong case. If you stay around, it's weak."

"Franklin quit, didn't he?"

She paused, and then she nodded. "This case is a loser, all ways around. I'm doing it pro bono. Because nobody else will. But Franklin's got a business to run."

"So he won't do it for free, but I will?"

"You *need* to do it. I think you're already planning to do it. That's why you went to see my father first. He's confident, for sure. You saw that. But you still want a peek at the data. You were a thorough investigator. You said so yourself. You're a perfectionist. You want to be able to leave town knowing everything is buttoned down tight, according to your own standards."

Reacher said nothing.

"This gets you a real good look," she said. "It's their constitutional obligation. They have to show us everything. The defense gets a full discovery process."

Reacher said nothing.

"You've got no choice," she said. "They're not going to show you anything otherwise. They don't show stuff to strangers off the street."

A real good look. Leave town and be happy. No choice.

"OK," Reacher said.

She pointed. "Walk four blocks west and one block south. The PD is right there.

She pointed. "Walk four blocks west and one block south. The PD is right there. I'll go upstairs and call Emerson."

"We're doing this now?"

"James Barr is waking up. I need this stuff out of the way early. I'm going to be spending most of tomorrow trying to find a psychiatrist who will work for free. A medical plea is still our best bet."

Reacher walked four blocks west and one block south. It took him under the raised highway and brought him to a corner. The PD had the whole block. Their building occupied most of it and there was an L-shaped parking lot on the rest of it for their vehicles. There were black-and-whites slotted in at angles, and unmarked detective cars, and a crime-scene van, and a SWAT truck. The building itself was made of glazed tan brick. It had a flat roof with big HVAC ducts all over it. There were bars on all the windows. Razor wire here and there around the perimeter.

He went inside and got directions and found Emerson waiting for him behind his desk. Reacher recognized him from his TV spot on Saturday morning. Same guy, pale, quiet, competent, not big, not small. In person he looked like he had been a cop since birth. Since the moment of conception, maybe. It was in his pores. In his DNA. He was wearing gray flannel pants and a white short-sleeve shirt. Open neck. No tie. There was a tweed jacket on the back of his chair. His face and his body were a little shapeless, like he had been molded by constant pressures.

"Welcome to Indiana," he said.

Reacher said nothing.

"I mean it," Emerson said. "Really. We love it when old friends of the accused show up to tear our work to shreds."

"I'm here for his lawyer," Reacher said. "Not as a friend."

Emerson nodded.

“I’ll give you the background myself,” he said. “Then my crime-scene guy will walk you through the particulars. You can see absolutely anything you want and you can ask absolutely anything you want.”

Reacher smiled. He had been a cop of sorts himself for thirteen long years, on a tough beat, and he knew the language and all its dialects. He knew the tone and he understood the nuances. And the way Emerson spoke told him things. It told him that despite the initial hostility, this was a guy secretly happy to meet with a critic. Because he knew for sure he had a solid-gold slam-dunk case.

“You knew James Barr pretty well, am I right?” Emerson asked.

“Did you?” Reacher asked back.

Emerson shook his head. “Never met him. There were no warning signs.”

“Was his rifle legal?”

Emerson nodded. “It was registered and unmodified. As were all his other guns.”

“Did he hunt?”

Emerson shook his head again. “He wasn’t an NRA member and he didn’t belong to a gun club. We never saw him out in the hills. He was never in trouble. He was just a low-profile citizen. A *no*-profile citizen, really. No warning signs at all.”

“You seen this kind of thing before?”

“Too many times. If you include the District of Columbia, then Indiana is tied for sixteenth place out of fifty-one in terms of homicide deaths per capita. Worse than New York, worse than California. This town isn’t the worst in the state, but it’s not the best, either. So we’ve seen it all before, and sometimes there are signs, and sometimes there aren’t, but either way around we know what we’re doing.”

“I spoke with Alex Rodin,” Reacher said. “He’s impressed.”

“He should be. We performed well. Your old buddy was toast six hours after the first shot. It was a textbook case, beginning to end.”

“No doubts at all?”

“Put it this way. I wrote it up Saturday morning and I haven’t given it a whole lot of thought since then. It’s a done deal. About the best done deal I ever saw, and I’ve seen a lot.”

“So is there any point in me walking through it?”

“Sure there is. I’ve got a crime-scene guy desperate to show off. He’s a good man, and he deserves his moment in the sun.”

Emerson walked Reacher to the lab and introduced him as a lawyer’s scout, not as James Barr’s friend. Which helped a little with the atmosphere. Then he left him there. The crime-scene guy was a serious forty-year-old called Bellantonio. His name was more exuberant than he was. He was tall, dark, thin, and stooped. He could have been a mortician. And he suspected James Barr was going to plead guilty. He thought he wasn’t going to get his day in court. That was clear. He had laid out the evidence chain in a logical sequence on long tables in a sealed police garage bay, just so that he could give visitors the performance he would never give a jury.

The tables were white canteen-style trestles and they ran all the way around the perimeter of the bay. Above them was a horizontal line of cork boards with hundreds of printed sheets of paper pinned to them. The sheets were encased in plastic page protectors and they related to the specific items found directly below. Trapped tight in the square made by the tables was James Barr’s beige Dodge Caravan. The bay was clean and brightly lit with harsh fluorescent tubes and the minivan looked huge and alien in there. It was old and dirty and smelled of gasoline and oil and rubber. The sliding rear door was open and Bellantonio had rigged a light to shine in on the carpet.

“This all looks good,” Reacher said.

“Best crime scene I ever worked,” Bellantonio said.

“So walk me through it.”

Bellantonio started with the traffic cone. It was sitting there on a square of butcher paper, looking large and odd and out of place. Reacher saw the print

butcher paper, looking large and odd and out of place. Reacher saw the print powder on it, read the notes above it. Barr had handled it, that was for sure. He had clamped his right hand around it, near the top, where it was narrow. More than once. There were fingerprints and palm prints. The match was a laugher. There were way more comparison points than any court would demand.

Same for the quarter from the parking meter, same for the shell case. Bellantonio showed Reacher laser-printed stills from the parking garage video, showing the minivan coming in just before the event and going out again just after it. He showed him the interior of the Dodge, showed him the automotive carpet fibers recovered from the raw new concrete, showed him the dog hairs, showed him the denim fibers and the raincoat threads. Showed him a square of rug taken from Barr's house, showed him the matching fibers found at the scene. Showed him the desert boots, showed him how crepe rubber was the best transfer mechanism going. Showed him how the tiny crumbs of rubber found at the scene matched new scuffs on the shoes' toes. Showed him the cement dust tracked back into Barr's house and recovered from the garage and the basement and the kitchen and the living room and the bedroom. Showed him a comparison sample taken from the parking garage and a lab report that proved it was the same.

Reacher scanned the transcripts from the 911 calls and the radio chatter between the squad cars. Then he glanced through the crime-scene protocol. The initial sweep by the uniformed officers, the forensic examination by Bellantonio's own people, Emerson's inspiration with the parking meter. Then he read the arrest report. It was printed out and pinned up along with everything else. The SWAT tactics, the sleeping suspect, the ID from the driver's license from the wallet in the pants pocket. The paramedics' tests. The capture of the dog by the K9 officers. The clothes in the closet. The shoes. The guns in the basement. He read the witness reports. A Marine recruiter had heard six shots. A cell phone company had provided a recording. There was a graph attached. A gray smear of sound, with six sharp spikes. Left to right, they were arrayed in a pattern that matched what Helen Rodin had said she had heard. *One, two-three, pause, four-five-six.* The graph's vertical axis represented volume. The shots had been faint but clear on the recording. The horizontal axis represented the time base. Six shots in less than four seconds. Four seconds that had changed a city. For a spell, at least.

Reacher looked at the rifle. It was heat-sealed into a clear plastic sleeve. He read the report pinned above it. A Springfield M1A Super Match, ten-shot box magazine, four cartridges still in it. Barr's prints all over it. Scratches on the

forestock matching varnish scrapings found at the scene. The intact bullet recovered from the pool. A ballistics lab report matching the bullet to the barrel. Another report matching the shell case to the ejector. Slam dunk. Case closed.

“OK, enough,” Reacher said.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” Bellantonio said.

“Best I ever saw,” Reacher said.

“Better than a hundred eyewitnesses.”

Reacher smiled. Crime-scene techs loved to say that.

“Anything you’re not happy with?” he asked.

“I love it all,” Bellantonio said.

Reacher glanced at his reflection in the Dodge’s tinted window. The black glass made his new shirt look gray.

“Why did he leave the traffic cone behind?” he said. “He could have pitched it into the back of the van, easy as anything.”

Bellantonio said nothing.

“And why did he pay to park?” Reacher asked.

“I’m forensics,” Bellantonio said. “Not psychology.”

Then Emerson came back in and stood there, waiting to accept Reacher’s surrender. Reacher gave it up, no hesitation. He shook their hands and congratulated them on a well-worked case.

He walked back, one block north and four blocks east, under the raised highway, heading for the black glass tower. It was after five o’clock and the sun was on his back. He arrived at the plaza and saw that the fountain was still going and the pool had filled another inch. He went in past the NBC sign and rode up in the elevator. Ann Yanni didn’t show. Maybe she was preparing for the six o’clock

news.

He found Helen Rodin at her secondhand desk.

“Watch my eyes,” he said.

She watched them.

“Pick your own cliché,” he said. “It’s a cast-iron, solid-gold slam dunk. It’s Willie Mays under a fly ball.”

She said nothing.

“See any doubt in my eyes?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “I don’t.”

“So start calling psychiatrists. If that’s what you really want to do.”

“He deserves representation, Reacher.”

“He stepped out of line.”

“We can’t just lynch him.”

Reacher paused. Then he nodded. “The shrink should think about the parking meter. I mean, who pays for ten minutes even if they’re *not* shooting people? It strikes me as weird. It’s so law-abiding, isn’t it? It kind of puts the whole event into a law-abiding envelope. Maybe he really was nuts this time. You know, confused about what he was doing.”

Helen Rodin made a note. “I’ll be sure to mention it.”

“You want to get some dinner?”

“We’re on opposite sides.”

“We had lunch.”

“Only because I wanted something from you.”

“We can still be civilized.”

We can still be civilized.

She shook her head. “I’m having dinner with my father.”

“He’s on the opposite side.”

“He’s my father.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Were the cops OK?” she asked.

Reacher nodded. “They were courteous enough.”

“They can’t have been very pleased to see you. They don’t understand why you’re really here.”

“They don’t need to worry. They’ve got a great case.”

“It’s not over until the fat lady sings.”

“She’s been singing since Friday at five. Pretty loud.”

“Maybe we could have a drink after dinner,” she said. “If I can get away in time. There’s a sports bar six blocks north of here. Monday night, it’s about the only place in town. I’ll drop by and see if you’re there. But I can’t promise anything.”

“Neither can I,” Reacher said. “Maybe I’ll be at the hospital, unplugging James Barr’s life support.”

He rode down in the elevator and found Rosemary Barr waiting for him in the lobby. He guessed she had just gotten back from the hospital and had called upstairs and Helen Rodin had told her he was on his way down. So she had waited. She was pacing nervously, side to side, crossing and recrossing the route between the elevator bank and the street door.

“Can we talk?” she asked.

“Outside,” he said.

He led her through the door and across the plaza to the south wall of the pool. It was still filling slowly. The fountain splashed and tinkled. He sat where he had sat before, with the funeral tributes at his feet. Rosemary Barr stood in front of him, facing him, very close, her eyes on his, not looking down at the flowers and the candles and the photographs.

“You need to keep an open mind,” she said.

“Do I?” he said.

“James wanted you here, therefore he can’t be guilty.”

“That’s a leap.”

“It’s logical,” she said.

“I just saw the evidence,” he said. “More than enough for anyone.”

“I’m not going to argue about fourteen years ago.”

“You can’t.”

“But he’s innocent now.”

Reacher said nothing.

“I understand how you feel,” Rosemary said. “You think he let you down.”

“He did.”

“But suppose he didn’t? Suppose he met your conditions and this is all a mistake? How would you feel then? What would you do for him? If you’re ready to stand up against him, don’t you think you should be equally ready to stand up *for* him?”

“That’s too hypothetical for me.”

“It’s not hypothetical. I’m just asking, if you’re proved wrong, if he didn’t do it, will you put the same energy into helping him?”

“If I’m proved wrong, he won’t need my help.”

“Will you?”

“Yes,” Reacher said, because it was an easy promise to make.

“So you need to keep an open mind.”

“Why did you move out?”

She paused. “He was angry all the time. It was no fun living with him.”

“Angry at what?”

“At everything.”

“So maybe it’s you who should keep an open mind.”

“I could have made up a reason. But I didn’t. I told you the truth. I don’t want to hide anything. I need you to trust me. I need to make you believe. My brother’s an unhappy man, maybe even disturbed. But he didn’t do *this.*”

Reacher said nothing.

“Will you keep an open mind?” she asked.

Reacher didn’t answer. Just shrugged and walked away.

He didn’t go to the hospital. Didn’t unplug James Barr’s machines. He went to the sports bar instead, after a shower back at the Metropole Palace. The six blocks north of the black glass tower took him under the highway again and out into a hinterland. Gentrification had a boundary to the south, as he had seen, and now he saw it had a boundary to the north, too. The bar was a little ways beyond it. It was in a plain square building that could have started out as anything. Maybe a feed store, maybe an automobile showroom, maybe a pool hall. It had a flat roof and bricked-up windows and moss growing where blocked rainwater gutters had spilled.

Inside it was better, but generic. It was like every other sports bar he had ever been in. It was one tall room with black-painted air-conditioning ducts pinned to the ceiling. It had three dozen TV screens hanging from the walls and the

ceiling. It had all the usual sports-bar stuff all over the place. Signed uniform jerseys framed under glass, football helmets displayed on shelves, hockey sticks, basketballs, baseballs, old game-day programs. The waitstaff was all female, all of them in cheerleader-style uniforms. The bar staff was male and dressed in striped umpire uniforms.

The TVs were all tuned to football. Inevitable, Reacher guessed, on a Monday night. Some of the screens were regular TVs, and some were plasmas, and some were projectors. The same event was displayed dozens of times, all with slightly different color and focus, some big, some small, some bright, some dim. There were plenty of people in there, but Reacher got a table to himself. In a corner, which he liked. A hard-worked waitress ran over to him and he ordered beer and a cheeseburger. He didn't look at the menu. Sports bars always had beer and cheeseburgers.

He ate his meal and drank his beer and watched the game. Time passed and the place filled up and got more and more crowded and noisy, but nobody came to share his table. Reacher had that kind of an effect on people. He sat there alone, in a bubble of quiet, with a message plainly displayed: *Stay away from me.*

Then someone ignored the message and came to join him. It was partly his own fault. He looked away from the screen and saw a girl hovering nearby. She was juggling a bottle of beer and a full plate of tacos. She was quite a sight. She had waved red hair and a red gingham shirt open at the neck and tied off at the navel. She had tight pants on that looked like denim but had to be spandex. She had the whole hourglass thing going, big-time. And she was in shiny lizard-skin boots. Open the encyclopedia to *C* for *Country Girl* and her picture was going to be right there staring back at you. She looked too young for the beer. But she was past puberty. That was for damn sure. Her shirt buttons were straining. And there was no visible panty line under the spandex. Reacher looked at her for a second too long, and she took it as an invitation.

"Can I share your table?" she asked from a yard away.

"Help yourself," he said.

She sat down. Not opposite him, but in the chair next to him.

"Thanks," she said.

She drank from her bottle and kept her eyes on him. Green eyes, bright, wide open. She half-turned toward him and arched the small of her back. Her shirt was open three buttons. Maybe a 34D, Reacher figured, in a push-up bra. He could see the edge of it. White lace.

She leaned close because of the noise.

“Do you like it?” she asked.

“Like what?” he said.

“Football,” she said.

“A bit,” he said.

“Did you play?”

Did you, not *do you*. She made him feel old.

“You’re certainly big enough,” she said.

“I tried out for Army,” he said. “When I was at West Point.”

“Did you make the team?”

“Only once.”

“Were you injured?”

“I was too violent.”

She half-smiled, not sure if he was joking.

“Want a taco?” she said.

“I just ate.”

“I’m Sandy,” she said.

So was I, he thought. *Friday, on the beach.*

“What’s your name?” she asked.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Jimmy Reese," he said.

He saw a flash of surprise in her eyes. He didn't know why. Maybe she had had a boyfriend called Jimmy Reese. Or maybe she was a serious fan of the New York Yankees.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Jimmy Reese," she said.

"Likewise," he said, and turned back to the game.

"You're new in town, aren't you?" she said.

"Usually," he said.

"I was wondering," she said. "If you only like football a bit, maybe you would like to take me somewhere else."

"Like where?"

"Like somewhere quieter. Maybe somewhere a little lonelier."

He said nothing.

"I've got a car," she said.

"You old enough to drive?"

"I'm old enough to do lots of things. And I'm pretty good at some of them."

Reacher said nothing. She moved on her chair. Pushed it out from the table a little way. Turned toward him and looked down.

"Do you like these pants?" she asked.

"I think they suit you very well."

"I do, too. Only problem is, they're too tight to wear anything underneath."

"We all have our cross to bear."

"Do you think that's [illegible]?"

"Do you think they're too revealing?"

"They're opaque. That usually does it for me."

"Imagine peeling them off."

"I can't. I doubt if I would have gotten them on."

The green eyes narrowed. "Are you a queer?"

"Are you a hooker?"

"No *way*. I work at the auto parts store."

Then she paused and seemed to think again. She reconsidered. She came up with a better answer. Which was to jump up from her chair and scream and slap his face. It was a loud scream and a loud slap and everyone turned to look.

"He called me a *whore*," she screamed. "He called me a damn *whore*!"

Chairs scraped and guys stood up fast. Big guys, in jeans and work boots and plaid shirts. Country boys. Five of them, all the same.

The girl smiled in triumph.

"Those are my brothers," she said.

Reacher said nothing.

"You just called me a whore in front of my *brothers*."

Five boys, all staring.

"He called me a *whore*," the girl wailed.

Rule one: Be on your feet and ready.

Rule two: Show them what they're messing with.

Reacher stood up, slow and easy. Six-five, two-fifty, calm eyes, hands held loose by his sides.

“He called me a *whore*,” the girl wailed again.

Rule three: Identify the ringleader.

There were five guys. Any five guys will have one ringleader, two enthusiastic followers, and two reluctant followers. Put the ringleader down, and both of the keen sidekicks, and it’s over. The reluctant pair just run for it. So there’s no such thing as five-on-one. It never gets worse than three-on-one.

Rule four: The ringleader is the one who moves first.

A big corn-fed twentysomething with a shock of yellow hair and a round red face moved first. He stepped forward a pace and the others fell in behind him in a neat arrowhead formation. Reacher stepped forward a pace of his own to meet them. The downside of a corner table is there’s no other way to go except forward.

But that was fine.

Because, rule five: Never back off.

But, rule six: Don’t break the furniture.

Break furniture in a bar, and the owner starts thinking about his insurance policy, and insurance companies require police reports, and a patrolman’s first instinct is to throw everyone in jail and sort it out later. Which generally means: *Blame it on the stranger.*

“He called me a whore,” the girl said plaintively. Like her heart was broken. She was standing off to the side, looking at Reacher, looking at the five guys, looking at Reacher. Her head was turning like a spectator at a tennis game.

“Outside,” the big guy said.

“Pay your check first,” Reacher said.

“I’ll pay later.”

“You won’t be able to.”

“You think?”

“That’s the difference between us.”

“What is?”

“I think.”

“You’ve got a smart mouth, pal.”

“That’s the least of your worries.”

“You called my sister a whore.”

“You prefer sleeping with virgins?”

“Get outside, pal, or I’ll put you down right here.”

Rule seven: Act, don’t react.

“OK,” Reacher said. “Let’s go outside.”

The big guy smiled.

“After you,” Reacher said.

“Stay here, Sandy,” the big guy said.

“I don’t mind the sight of blood,” she said.

“I’m sure you love it,” Reacher said. “One week in four, it makes you feel mighty relieved.”

“Outside,” the big guy said. *“Now.”*

He turned around and shooed the others toward the door. They formed up in single file and threaded between the tables. Their boots clattered on the wood. The girl called Sandy tagged after them. Other customers shrank away from them. Reacher put twenty dollars on his table and glanced up at the football game. Someone was winning, someone was losing.

He followed the girl called Sandy. Followed the blue spandex pants.

They were all waiting for him on the sidewalk. They were all tensed up in a shallow semicircle. There were yellow lamps on poles twenty yards away north and south and another across the street. The lamps gave each guy three shadows. There was neon outside the bar that filled the shadows with pink and blue. The street was empty. And quiet. No traffic. No noise, except sports bar sounds muffled by the door.

The air was soft. Not hot, not cold.

Rule eight: Assess and evaluate.

The big guy was round and smooth and heavy, like a bull seal. Maybe ten years out of high school. An unbroken nose, no scar tissue on his brows, no misshapen knuckles. Therefore, not a boxer. Probably just a linebacker. So he would fight like a wrestler. He would be a guy who wants you on the ground.

So he would start by charging. Head low.

That was Reacher's best guess.

And Reacher was right.

The guy exploded out of the blocks and charged, head low. Driving for Reacher's chest. Looking to drive him backward and have him stumble and fall. Whereupon the other four could all pile in together and stomp him and kick him to their hearts' content.

Mistake.

Because, rule nine: Don't run head-on into Jack Reacher.

Not when he's expecting it. It's like running into an oak tree.

The big guy charged and Reacher turned slightly sideways and bent his knees a little and timed it just right and drove all his weight up and forward off his back foot and through his shoulder straight into the big guy's face.

Kinetic energy is a wonderful thing.

Reacher had hardly moved at all but the big guy bounced off crazily, stunned,

staggering backward on stiff legs, desperately trying to stay upright, one foot tracing a lazy half-circle in the air, then the other. He came to rest six feet away with his feet firmly planted and his legs wide apart, just like a big dumb capital letter *A.*

Blood on his face.

Now he had a broken nose.

Put the ringleader down.

Reacher stepped in and kicked him in the groin, but left-footed. Right-footed, he would have popped bits of the guy's pelvis out through his nose. *Your big soft heart,* an old army instructor had said. *One day it'll get you killed.*

But not today, Reacher thought. Not here. The big guy went down. He fell on his knees and pitched forward on his face.

Then it got *real* easy.

The next two guys came in together shoulder-to-shoulder, and Reacher dropped the first with a head butt and the second with an elbow to the jaw. They both went straight down and lay still. Then it was over, because the last two guys ran. The last two guys always do. The girl called Sandy ran after them. Not fast. The tight spandex and the high-heeled boots impeded her. But Reacher let her go. He turned back and kicked her three downed brothers onto their sides. Checked they were still breathing. Checked their hip pockets. Found their wallets. Checked their licenses. Then he dropped them and straightened up and turned around because he heard a car pull up behind him at the curb.

It was a taxi. It was a taxi with Helen Rodin getting out of it.

She threw a bill at the driver and he took off fast, gazing straight ahead, deliberately not looking left or right. Helen Rodin stood still on the sidewalk and stared. Reacher was ten feet away from her, with three neon shadows and three inert forms on the ground behind him.

"What the hell is going on?" she asked.

"You tell me," he said. "You live here. You know these damn people."

“What does that mean? What the hell happened?”

“Let’s walk,” he said.

They walked south, fast, and turned a corner and went east. Then south again. Then they slowed a little.

“You’ve got blood on your shirt,” Helen Rodin said.

“But not mine,” Reacher said.

“What happened back there?”

“I was in the bar watching the game. Minding my own business. Then some underage red-haired bimbo started coming on to me. I wasn’t playing and she got it to where she found a reason to slap me. Then five guys jumped up. She said they were her brothers. We took it outside.”

“Five guys?”

“Two ran away.”

“After you beat up the first three?”

“I defended myself. That’s all. Minimum force.”

“She slapped you?”

“Right in the face.”

“What had you said to her?”

“Doesn’t matter what I said to her. It was a setup. So I’m asking you, is that how people get their kicks around here? Picking on strangers in bars?”

“I need a drink,” Helen Rodin said. “I came to meet you for a drink.”

Reacher stopped walking. “So let’s go back there.”

“We can’t go back there. They probably called the cops. You left three men on the sidewalk.”

He looked back over his shoulder.

“So let’s try my hotel,” he said. “There’s a lobby. There might be a bar.”

They walked together in silence, through dark quiet streets, four blocks south. They stayed east of the plaza and passed by the courthouse. Reacher glanced at it.

“How was dinner?” he asked.

“My father was fishing. He still thinks you’re my witness.”

“Did you tell him?”

“I can’t tell him. Your information is classified. Thank God.”

“So you let him stew.”

“He’s not stewing. He’s totally confident.”

“He should be.”

“So are you leaving tomorrow?”

“You bet I am. This place is weird.”

“Some girl comes on to you, why does that have to be a big conspiracy?”

Reacher said nothing.

“It’s not unheard-of,” she said. “Well, is it? A bar, the new guy in town all alone, why shouldn’t some girl be interested? You’re not exactly repulsive, you know.”

Reacher just walked.

“What did you say to her to get slapped?”

“I wasn’t showing any interest, she kept on coming on, I asked her if she was a hooker. Something like that.”

“A hooker? That’ll get you slapped in Indiana. And her brothers would hate it.”

“It was a setup, Helen. Let’s be realistic. It’s nice of you to say it, but I’m not the sort of guy that women chase after. I know that, OK? So it was a setup.”

“No woman ever chased you before?”

“She smiled in triumph. Like she had found an opening and *delivered* me. Like she had succeeded at something.”

Helen Rodin said nothing.

“And those guys weren’t her brothers,” Reacher said. “They were all more or less the same age, and when I checked their licenses they all had different last names.”

“Oh.”

“So it was all staged. Which is weird. There are only two reasons for doing something like that. Fun, or money. A guy in a bar might have a few bucks, but that’s not enough. So they staged it for fun. Which is weird. Doubly weird, because why pick on me? They must have known they were going to get their butts kicked.”

“There were five of them. Five guys never think one guy could kick their butts. Especially not in Indiana.”

“Or maybe I was the only stranger in the bar.”

She looked ahead, down the street. “You’re at the Metropole Palace?”

He nodded. “Me and not too many other people.”

“But I called and they said you weren’t registered. I called all the hotels, looking for you this afternoon.”

“I use aliases in hotels.”

“Why on earth?”

“Just a bad habit. Like I told you. It’s automatic now.”

They went up the front steps together and in through the heavy brass door. It

wasn’t late, but the place was quiet. The lobby was deserted. There was a bar in a side room. It was empty, except for a lone barman leaning back against the register.

“Beer,” Helen Rodin said.

“Two,” Reacher said.

They took a table near a curtained window and the guy brought two beers in bottles, two napkins, two chilled glasses, and a bowl of mixed nuts. Reacher signed the check and added his room number.

Helen Rodin smiled. “So who does the Metropole think you are?”

“Jimmy Reese,” Reacher said.

“Who’s he?”

“Wait,” Reacher said.

A flash of surprise in her eyes. He didn’t know why.

I’m pleased to meet you, Jimmy Reese.

“The girl was looking for me personally,” he said. “She wasn’t looking for some random lone stranger. She was looking for Jack Reacher specifically.”

“She was?”

He nodded. “She asked my name. I said Jimmy Reese. It knocked her off balance for a second. She was definitely surprised. Like, *You’re not Jimmy Reese, you’re Jack Reacher, someone just told me.* She paused, and then she recovered.”

“The first letters are the same. Jimmy Reese, Jack Reacher. People sometimes do that.”

“She was fast,” he said. “She wasn’t as dumb as she looked. Someone pointed her at me, and she wasn’t going to be deflected. Jack Reacher was supposed to get worked over tonight, and she was going to make sure it happened.”

“So who were they?”

“Who knows my name?”

“The police department. You were just there.”

Reacher said nothing.

“What?” Helen said. “Were they *cops*? Protecting their case?”

“I’m not here to attack their case.”

“But they don’t know that. They think that’s exactly why you’re here.”

“Their case doesn’t need protecting. It’s solid gold. And they didn’t look like cops.”

“Who else has an interest?”

“Rosemary Barr. She has an interest. She knows my name. And she knows why I’m here.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Helen said.

Reacher said nothing.

“That’s ridiculous,” Helen said again. “Rosemary Barr is a mousy little legal secretary. She wouldn’t try a thing like that. She wouldn’t know *how.* Not in a million years.”

“It was a very amateur attempt.”

“Compared to what? It was five guys. Enough for most people.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Rosemary Barr was at the hospital,” Helen said. “She went over there after the client conference, and she stayed there most of the afternoon, and I bet she’s back there now. Because her brother is waking up. She wants to be with him.”

“A buck gets ten she’s got a cell phone.”

“Can’t use cell phones near the ICU. They cause interference.”

“A pay phone, then.”

“She’s too preoccupied.”

“With saving her brother.”

Helen Rodin said nothing.

“She’s your client,” Reacher said. “Are you sure you’re impartial?”

“You’re not thinking straight. James Barr *asked* for you. He *wanted* you here. Therefore his sister wants you here, too. She wants you to stick around long enough to figure out how you can help. And she knows you can help, or why would her brother have asked for you in the first place?”

Reacher said nothing.

“Accept it,” Helen said. “It wasn’t Rosemary Barr. It’s in her best interests to have you here, alive and well and thinking.”

Reacher took a long pull on his beer. Then he nodded. “I was followed to the bar tonight, obviously. From here. Therefore I was followed here, after lunch. If Rosemary went straight to the hospital this morning she didn’t have time to set that up.”

“So we’re back to someone who thinks you can damage the case. Why not the cops? Cops could follow you anywhere. There’s a lot of them and they all have radios.”

“Cops start trouble face-to-face. They don’t get a girl to do it for them.”

“The girl might be a cop, too.”

Reacher shook his head. “Too young. Too vacant. Too much hair.”

Helen took a pen from her purse and wrote something on her cocktail napkin. Slid it across the table.

“My cell phone number,” she said. “You might need it.”

“I don’t think anyone will sue me.”

“I’m not worried about you getting sued. I’m worried about you getting arrested. Even if it wasn’t cops actually doing it, they might have gone to the bar anyway. The owner might have called them. Or the hospital might have called them. Those three boys went to the hospital, that’s for sure. And the girl definitely knows your alias now. So you might be in trouble. If you are, listen to the Miranda and then call me.”

Reacher smiled. “Ambulance chasing?”

“Looking out for you.”

Reacher picked up the napkin. Put it in his back pocket.

“OK,” he said. “Thanks.”

“Are you still going to leave tomorrow?”

“Maybe. Or maybe not. Maybe I’ll stick around and think about why someone would use violence to protect a case that’s already a hundred percent watertight.”

Grigor Linsky called the Zec on his cell phone from his car.

“They failed,” he said. “I’m very sorry.”

The Zec said nothing, which was worse than a tirade.

“They won’t be traced to us,” Linsky said.

“Will you make sure of that?”

“Certainly.”

The Zec said nothing.

“No harm, no foul,” Linsky said.

“Unless it was deliberate, to make the public aware of the problem,” the Zec said. “Then the

¨Unless it served merely to provoke the soldier,´ the Zec said. ¨Then there would be harm. Possibly considerable harm. He is James Barr's friend, after all. That fact will have implications."

Now Linsky said nothing.

"Let him see you one more time," the Zec said. "A little additional pressure might help. But after that, don't let him see you again."

"And then?"

"Then monitor the situation," the Zec said. "Make absolutely certain it doesn't turn from bad to worse."

Reacher saw Helen Rodin into a cab and then went upstairs to his room. He took off his shirt and put it in the bathroom sink and left it to soak in cold water. He didn't want bloodstains on a one-day-old shirt. Three days old, maybe. But not a brand-new garment.

Questions. There were a lot of questions, but as always the key would be finding the basic question. The fundamental question. Why would someone use violence to protect a case that was already watertight? First question: *Was* the case already watertight? He trawled through the day in his head and heard Alex Rodin say: *It's as good as it gets. The best I've ever seen.* Emerson had said: *It's the best done deal I ever saw.* The morticianlike Bellantonio had said: *It's the best crime scene I ever worked. I love it all.* Those guys all had professional self-interest in play, of course. And pride, and expediency. But Reacher himself had seen Bellantonio's work. And had said: *It's a cast-iron solid-gold slam dunk. It's Willie Mays under a fly ball.*

Was it?

Yes, it was. It was Lou Gehrig with the bases loaded. It was as close to a certainty as human life offers.

But that wasn't the fundamental question.

He rinsed his shirt and wrung it out hard and spread it on the room heater.

Turned the heater on high and opened the window. There was no noise outside. Just silence. New York City it wasn't. It sounded like they rolled up the sidewalks at nine o'clock. *I went to Indiana, but it was closed.* He lay down on the bed. Stretched out. Damp heat came off his shirt and filled the room with the smell of wet cotton.

What was the fundamental question?

Helen Rodin's cassette tape was the fundamental question. James Barr's voice, low, hoarse, frustrated. His demand: *Get Jack Reacher for me.*

Why would he say that?

Who was Jack Reacher, in James Barr's eyes?

Fundamentally?

That was the basic question.

The best crime scene I ever worked.

The best I've ever seen.

Why did he pay to park?

Will you keep an open mind?

Get Jack Reacher for me.

Jack Reacher stared at his hotel room ceiling. Five minutes. Ten. Twenty. Then he rolled over one way and pulled the cocktail napkin out of his back pocket. Rolled the other way and dialed the phone. Helen Rodin answered after eight rings. She sounded sleepy. He had woken her up.

"It's Reacher," he said.

"Are you in trouble?"

"No, but I've got some questions. Is Barr awake yet?"

"No, but he's close. Rosemary went back to the hospital. She left me a

message.”

“What was the weather like last Friday at five?”

“The weather? Friday? It was kind of dull. Cloudy.”

“Is that normal?”

“No, not really. It’s usually sunny. Or else raining. This time of year it’s usually one or the other. More likely sunny.”

“Was it warm or cold?”

“Not cold. But not *hot.* It was comfortable, I guess.”

“What did you wear to work?”

“What is this, a dirty phone call?”

“Just tell me.”

“Same as I wore today. Pantsuit.”

“No coat?”

“Didn’t need one.”

“Have you got a car?”

“A car? Yes, I’ve got a car. But I use the bus for work.”

“Use your car tomorrow. I’ll meet you at eight o’clock in your office.”

“What’s this about?”

“Tomorrow,” he said. “Eight o’clock. Go back to sleep now.”

He hung up. Rolled off the bed and checked his shirt. It was warm and wet. But it would be dry by morning. He hoped it wouldn’t shrink.

CHAPTER 5

Reacher woke at six. Took a long cold shower, because the room was hot. But his shirt was dry. It was as stiff as a board, and still the right size. There was no room service. He went out for breakfast. The roads were full of trucks, hauling gravel, hauling fill, mixing concrete, feeding the work zones' appetites. He dodged them and walked south toward the waterfront. Through the gentrification frontier. He found a workingman's diner with a basic menu. He drank coffee and ate eggs. He sat at a window and watched the street for aimless doorway lurkers or men in parked cars. Because if he had been followed the night before it was logical to assume he would be followed again. So he kept his eyes open. But he saw nobody.

Then he walked the length of First Street, north. The sun was up on his right. He used store windows as mirrors and watched his back. Plenty of people were going his way, but none of them was following him. He guessed whoever it was would be waiting for him in the plaza, ready to confirm what he expected to see: *The witness went to the lawyer's office.*

The fountain was still going. The pool was nearly half full. The tributes were still there, neatly lined up, another day older, a little more faded, a little more wilted. He figured they would be there for a week or so. Until after the last of the funerals. Then they would be removed, discreetly, maybe in the middle of the night, and the city would move on to the next thing.

He sat for a moment on the NBC monolith, with his back to the tower, like a guy wasting time because he was early. Which he was. It was only seven forty-five. There were other people in the same situation. They stood around, singly or in groups of two or three, smoking last cigarettes, reading the morning news, chilling before the daily grind. Reacher looked first at men on their own with newspapers. That was a pretty traditional surveillance cover. Although in his opinion it was due for replacement with a new exiled-smoker cover. Guys standing near doorways and smoking were the new invisibles. Or guys on cell phones. You could stand there with a Nokia up to your ear forever and nobody thought twice.

In the end he settled on a guy who was smoking *and* talking on a cell phone. He was a short man of about sixty. Maybe more. A damaged man. There was a

permanent lopsided tension in the way he held himself. An old spinal injury, maybe. Or busted ribs that had been badly set, years ago. Whatever it was, it made him look uncomfortable and querulous. He wasn't the type of guy who would happily converse at length. But there he was, on his phone, just talking, aimlessly. He had thin gray hair, recently barbered but not stylishly. He was in a double-breasted suit that had been expensively tailored, but not in the United States. It was square and boxy, too heavy for the weather. Polish, maybe. Or Hungarian. Eastern European, certainly. His face was pale and his eyes were dark. They didn't glance Reacher's way, even once.

Reacher checked his watch. Seven fifty-five. He slid off the shiny granite and walked into the tower's lobby.

Grigor Linsky stopped pretending and dialed an actual number on his phone.

"He's here," he said. "He just went up."

"Did he see you?" the Zec asked.

"Yes, I'm sure he did."

"So make that the last time. Now you stay in the shadows."

Reacher found Helen Rodin already at her desk. She looked settled in, like she had been there a long time already. She was in the same black suit, but her shirt was different. It was a simple scoop neck, not tight. It was china blue and matched her eyes exactly. Her hair was tied back in a long pony tail. Her desk was covered with legal books. Some were facedown, some were faceup. They were all open. She had about eight pages of notes going, on a yellow legal pad. References, case notes, decisions, precedents.

"James Barr is conscious," she said. "Rosemary called me at five this morning."

"Is he talking?"

“Only to the doctors. They won’t let anyone else near him yet. Not even Rosemary herself.”

“What about the cops?”

“They’re waiting. But I’ll need to be there first. I can’t let him talk to the cops without representation.”

“What is he saying to the doctors?”

“That he doesn’t know why he’s there. That he doesn’t remember anything about Friday. The doctors say that’s to be expected. Amnesia is predictable with head injuries, possibly covering several days before the trauma. Several weeks, sometimes.”

“Where does that leave you?”

“With two big problems. First, he might be faking the amnesia. And that’s actually very hard to test, either way. So now I’m going to have to find a specialist opinion on *that,* too. And if he isn’t faking, we’re in a real gray area. If he’s sane now, and he was sane before, but he’s missing a week, then how can he get a fair trial? He won’t be able to participate in his own defense. Not if he hasn’t got the slightest idea what anyone is talking about. And the state put him in that position. They let him get hurt. It was their jail. They can’t do that and then go ahead and try him.”

“What’s your father going to think?”

“He’s going to fight it tooth and nail. Obviously. No prosecutor can afford to admit the possibility that amnesia might screw up a trial. Otherwise everyone would jump right on it. Everyone would be looking to get beat up in pretrial detention. Suddenly nobody would be able to remember anything.”

“It must have happened before.”

Helen nodded. “It has.”

“So what do the law books say?”

“I’m reading them now. As you can see. *Dusky versus the United States, Wilson*

versus the United States."

"And?"

"There are lots of ifs and buts."

Reacher said nothing. Helen looked straight at him.

"It's spinning out of control," she said. "Now there'll be a trial about a trial. It's something that might need to go all the way to the Supreme Court. I'm not equipped for that. And I don't *want* that. I don't want to be the lawyer who gets people off on weird technicalities. That's not who I am and it's a label I can't afford right now."

"So plead him guilty and the hell with it."

"When you called me last night I thought you were going to walk in here this morning and tell me he's innocent."

"Dream on," Reacher said.

She looked away.

"But," he said.

She looked back. "There's a but?"

He nodded. "Unfortunately."

"What's the but?"

"He's not quite as guilty as I thought he was."

"How?"

"Get your car and I'll show you."

They rode down together to a tenants-only underground parking garage. There were NBC broadcast trucks in there and cars and pickups and SUVs of various

makes and vintages. There was a new blue Mustang convertible with an NBC sticker in the windshield. Ann Yanni's, probably, Reacher thought. It was right for her. She would drive top-down on her days off and top-up during the workweek, to keep her hair OK for the cameras. Or maybe she used a lot of spray.

Helen Rodin's ride was a small dark-green sedan so anonymous Reacher didn't know what it was. A Saturn, maybe. It was unwashed and not new. It was a graduate student's car, the sort of thing a person uses until a first salary kicks in and lease payments become affordable. Reacher knew all about lease payments. Baseball on the TV carried a lot of commercials. Every half-inning, and every call to the bullpen.

"Where are we going?" Helen asked.

"South," Reacher said.

He racked his seat back and crunched a whole lot of stuff in the footwell behind him. She had her seat close to the wheel, even though she wasn't a short woman. He ended up looking at her more or less from behind.

"What do you know?" she asked.

"It's not what I know," he said. "It's what James Barr knows."

"About what?"

"About me."

She came up out of the garage and started south down a street parallel with First. Eight o'clock in the morning, the rush hour traffic was still heavy. Going the opposite way from the afternoon rush, he guessed.

"What does James Barr know about you?" she asked.

"Something that made him want me here," he said.

"He ought to hate you."

"I'm sure he does. But he still wanted me here."

She crawled south, toward the river.

“He never met me before,” Reacher said. “Never saw me again afterward. We knew each other for three weeks, more than fourteen years ago.”

“He knew you as an investigator. Someone who broke a tough case.”

“A case he thought couldn’t be broken. He watched me do it every step of the way. He had a front row seat. He thought I was an investigative genius.”

“That’s why he wanted you here?”

Reacher nodded. “I spent last night trying to live up to his opinion.”

They crossed the river on a long iron trestle. The sun was on their left. The wharf was on their right. The slow gray water moved listlessly past it.

“Go west now,” Reacher said.

She made a right and took a two-lane county road. There were bait stores on the riverbank and shacks selling barbecue and beer and crushed ice.

“But this case was already broken,” she said. “He knew that.”

“This case was only halfway broken,” Reacher said. “That’s what he knew.”

“Halfway?”

Reacher nodded, even though he was behind her.

“There’s more to this case than Emerson saw,” he said. “Barr wanted someone else to understand that. But his first lawyer was lazy. He wasn’t very interested. That’s why Barr got so frustrated.”

“What more is there?”

“I’ll show you.”

“A lot?”

“I think so.”

“So why didn’t he just lay out the facts, whatever they are?”

“Because he couldn’t. And because nobody would have believed him anyway.”

“Why? What the hell happened here?”

There was a highway cloverleaf ahead, just like he had hoped.

“I’ll show you,” he said again. “Take the highway north.”

She powered the little car through the ramp and merged with the traffic. There was a mixed stream flowing north. Eighteen-wheelers, panel trucks, pickups, cars. The road recrossed the river on a concrete bridge. The wharf was visible to the east, in the distance. The city center was ahead, on the right. The highway rose gently on its stilts. Helen drove onward, with the roofs of low edge-of-town buildings flashing past on the left and the right.

“Be ready to take the spur that runs behind the library,” Reacher said.

It was going to be a right exit. It was announced well in advance with a sign. The broken line separating the right lane from the center lane became a solid line. Then the solid line became a narrow wedge. The through traffic was forced away to the left. The exit lane angled slightly right. They stayed in it. The wedge grew wider and was filled in with bold cross-hatched lines. Up ahead were yellow drums. They passed them by, onto the spur that would lead behind the library. Reacher twisted in his seat and checked the rear window. Nobody behind them.

“Go slow,” he said.

Two hundred yards ahead the spur started to curve, behind the library, behind the black glass tower. The roadbed was wide enough for two lanes. But the radius was too tight to make it safe for two lanes to run side by side at high speed into the corner. Traffic engineers had thought better of it. They had advised a gentler trajectory. They had marked out a single lane through the curve. It was a little wider than a normal lane, to allow for misjudgments. It started way on the left and then swung sharply to the right and cut across the apex of the curve at a more shallow angle.

“Go real slow now,” Reacher said.

The car slowed. Way up ahead of them on the left was a crescent-moon shape of

The car slowed. Way up ahead of them on the left was a crescent-moon shape of white cross-hatching. Beginning right next to them on the right was a long thin triangle of white cross-hatching. Just lines of paint on the blacktop, but they shepherded people along and kept them safe.

“Pull over,” Reacher said. “Here, on the right.”

“Can’t stop here,” Helen said.

“Like you had a flat. Just pull over. Right here.”

She braked hard and turned the wheel and steered onto the cross-hatched no-man’s-land on their right. They felt the thick painted lines thumping under the tires. A juddery little rhythm. It slowed as she slowed.

She stopped.

“Back up a little,” Reacher said.

She backed up, like she was parallel parking against the concrete parapet.

“Now forward a yard,” Reacher said.

She drove forward a yard.

“OK,” he said.

He wound his window down. The traffic lane on their left was clear and smooth, but the cross-hatched no-man’s-land they were stopped on was covered with grit and trash and debris blown across it by years of passing vehicles. There were cans and bottles and detached mud flaps and tiny cubes of broken headlight glass and plastic splinters from old fender benders. Far away to the left the through traffic rumbled north on a separate bridge. There was a constant stream over there. But they sat for a whole minute before anyone else came the way they had taken. A lone pickup passed close on their left and rocked them with its slipstream. Then the spur went quiet again.

“Not busy,” Reacher said.

“It never is,” Helen said. “This doesn’t really go anywhere people need to get. It was a total waste of money. But I guess they’ve always got to be building something.”

something."

"Look down," Reacher said.

The highway was raised up on tall stilts. The roadbed was maybe forty feet above ground level. The parapet wall was three feet high. Beyond it, ahead and to their right, was the upper story of the library building. It had an intricate cornice, carved from limestone, and a slate roof. It felt close enough to touch.

"What?" Helen asked.

Reacher pointed with his thumb and then leaned way back so she could see across him. Directly to their right was an unobstructed view down into the plaza, with a perfectly straight line of sight along the narrow bottleneck between the end of the ornamental pool and the plaza wall. And beyond it, dead ahead, perfectly aligned, was the door of the DMV office.

"James Barr was a sniper," Reacher said. "Not the best, not the worst, but he was one of ours and he trained for more than five years. And training has a purpose. It takes people who aren't necessarily very smart and it makes them *seem* smart by beating some basic tactical awareness into them. Until it becomes instinctive."

"I don't understand."

"*This* is where a trained sniper would have fired from. Up here on the highway. Because from here he's got his targets walking directly toward him in a straight line. Single file, into a bottleneck. He sets up with one aiming point and never has to vary it. His targets just walk into it, one after the other. Shooting from the side is much harder. The targets are passing right to left in front of him, relatively quickly, he's got to figure in deflection compensation, he's got to move the rifle after each shot."

"But he didn't fire from here."

"That's my point. He should have, but he didn't."

"So?"

"He had a minivan. He should have parked it right where we are now. On this exact spot. He should have climbed through into the back seat and opened the

sliding door. He should have fired from inside the minivan, Helen. It had tinted windows. The few cars that passed him wouldn't have seen a thing. He should have fired his six shots, with the much easier aim, and the six cartridge cases would have ejected inside the van, and then he should have shut the door and climbed back into the driver's seat and driven away. It would have been a much better firing position and he would have left nothing at all behind. No physical evidence of any kind, because nothing would have touched anything except his tires would have touched the road."

"It's farther away. It's a longer distance to shoot."

"It's about seventy yards. Barr was reliable at five times that distance. Any military sniper is. With an M1A Super Match, seventy yards is the same thing as point-blank range."

"Someone would have gotten his plate number. There's always *some* traffic. They would have remembered him being here, afterward."

"His plates were covered with mud. Probably on purpose. It would have been a great getaway. In five minutes he would have been five miles away. Much better than threading through the traffic on the surface streets."

Helen Rodin said nothing.

"And he was expecting it to be sunny," Reacher said. "You told me it usually is. Five o'clock in the afternoon, the sun would have been in the west, behind him. He would have been firing out of the sun. That's an absolutely basic preference for a sniper."

"Sometimes it rains."

"That would have been OK, too. It would have washed his tire tracks out of this grit. Either way around, he should have been up here in his van. Every reason in the world says he should have been up here in his van."

"But he wasn't."

"Evidently."

"Why not?"

“We should get back to your office. That’s where you need to be now. You’ve got a lot of strategizing to do.”

Helen Rodin sat down at her desk. Reacher walked to her window and looked out into the plaza. Looked for the damaged man in the boxy suit. Didn’t see him.

“What strategizing?” Helen asked. “Barr made a choice about where to shoot from, that’s all, and it wasn’t a great choice, according to you, according to some fourteen-year-old military theory that he probably forgot all about the day he quit the service.”

“They don’t forget,” Reacher said.

“I’m not convinced.”

“That’s why he walked out on Chapman. Chapman wasn’t going to be convinced, either. That’s why he asked for me.”

“And you *are* convinced?”

“I’m looking at a situation where a trained sniper passed up an excellent location in favor of a much worse one.”

“He used a parking garage in Kuwait City. You said so yourself.”

“Because that *was* a good location. It was directly in line with the apartment building’s door. The four guys were walking directly toward him. They went down like dominoes.”

“This is fourteen years later. He’s not as good as he was. That’s all.”

“They don’t forget,” Reacher said again.

“Whatever; how does it make him less guilty?”

“Because if a person chooses a terrible *B* instead of a great *A*, there has to be a reason for it. And reasons have implications.”

“What was his reason?”

“It had to be a real good one, didn’t it? Because he trapped himself inside a building, down at street level, in a congested area, with a much harder shot, in a place whose very nature made it the best crime scene a twenty-year veteran like Emerson has ever seen.”

“OK, tell me why he would do that.”

“Because he was literally going out of his way to leave every last piece of evidence he could.”

She stared at him. “That’s crazy.”

“It was a great crime scene. Everyone was so happy with how great it was, they never stopped to realize it was way *too* great. Me included. It was like Crime Scene 101, Helen. It was what they must have given Bellantonio on his first day in college. It was too good to be true, therefore it *wasn’t* true. Everything was wrong with it. Like, why would he wear a raincoat? It was warm and it wasn’t raining and he was in a car and he was never outside. He wore it so he could scrape unique fibers off it onto the pillar. Why would he wear those stupid shoes? You look at a pair of shoes like that and you just *know* they track every last piece of crap around. Why did he shoot out of the dark? So that people would see his muzzle flash and pinpoint the location so they could go up there afterward and find all the other clues. Why would he scrape his rifle on the wall? That’s a twenty-five-hundred-dollar purchase. Why didn’t he take the traffic cone away with him? It would have been easier just to throw it in the back of his van than leave it there.”

“This is crazy,” Helen said.

“Two clinchers,” Reacher said. “Why did he pay to park? That bothered me from the start. I mean, who *does* that? But he did. And he did it just so he could leave one little extra clue. Nothing else makes any sense. He wanted to leave a quarter in the meter with his prints on it. Just to tie it all in a nice little bow. To connect it with the shell case, which he probably also left there on purpose.”

“It fell in a trench.”

“He could have gotten it out. There was plenty of wire lying around, according to Bellantonio’s report. It would have taken a second and a half.”

Helen Rodin paused. “What’s the other clincher?”

Helen Rodin paused. "What's the other clincher?"

"That's easy, once you start looking through the right end of the telescope. He wanted to be looking at the pool from the south, not the west. That was crucial. He wanted to be looking at it lengthwise, not sideways."

"Why?"

"Because he didn't miss, Helen. He fired into the pool deliberately. He wanted to put a bullet in the water, down the long diagonal axis, from a low angle, just like a ballistics tank, just so it could be found later, undamaged. Just so it could tie his barrel to the crime. Sideways wouldn't have worked for him. Not enough travel distance through the water. The bullet would have hit the wall too hard. It would have gotten damaged."

"But why the hell would he do all that?"

Reacher didn't answer.

"Remorse? For fourteen years ago? So he could be found and punished?"

Reacher shook his head. "He would have confessed as soon as they found him. A remorseful person would have been *wanting* to confess."

"So why did he do all that?"

"Because he was made to, Helen. Simple as that."

She stared at him.

"Someone forced him to do it," Reacher said. "He was forced to do it and he was forced to take the blame for it. He was told to go home afterward and wait for the arrest. That's why he took the sleeping pill. He was probably going crazy, sitting there waiting for the shoe to fall."

Helen Rodin said nothing.

"He was coerced," Reacher said. "Believe it. It's the only logical explanation. He wasn't a lone nutcase. That's why he said, *They've got the wrong guy*. It was a message. He was hoping someone would pick up on it. He meant they should be looking for the other guy. The guy who made him do it. The guy he feels is

more responsible."

Helen Rodin said nothing.

"The puppet master," Reacher said.

Reacher checked the plaza again, from the window. The ornamental pool was about two-thirds full. The fountain was splashing merrily. The sun was out. There were no loiterers visible.

Helen Rodin got up from her desk. Just stood there behind it.

"I should be turning cartwheels," she said.

"He still killed five people."

"But if the coercion was substantial, it's going to help him."

Reacher said nothing.

"What do you think it was? A double-dare? Some kind of thrill-seeking?"

"Maybe," Reacher said. "But I doubt it. On the face of it, James Barr is twenty years too old for double-dares. That's a kid thing. And they'd have done it from the highway anyway. They would have wanted to survive to do it again."

"So what was it?"

"Something else entirely. Something real."

"Should we take it to Emerson?"

"No," Reacher said.

"I think we should."

"There are reasons not to."

"Like?"

“For one, Emerson’s got the best done deal he ever saw. He’s not going to pick at the seams now. No cop would.”

“So what should we do?”

“We should ask ourselves three basic questions,” Reacher said. “Like who, and how, and why. It was a transaction. We need to figure out who benefits. Because James Barr certainly didn’t.”

“The who was whoever set those guys on you last night. Because he liked the way the transaction was going and he didn’t want the boat rocked by some new guy showing up.”

“Correct,” Reacher said.

“So I need to look for that person.”

“You might not want to do that.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“It might get your client killed,” Reacher said.

“He’s in the hospital, guarded night and day.”

“Your client isn’t James Barr. It’s Rosemary Barr. You need to think about what kind of a threat can have made James Barr do what he did. He was looking at life without parole at best. Getting strapped to the gurney at worst. He knew that well in advance. He must have. So why would he go along? Why would he walk meekly into all that? It had to have been one hell of an effective threat, Helen. And what’s the only thing Barr’s got to lose? No wife, no kids, no family at all. Except a sister.”

Helen Rodin said nothing.

“He was told to keep quiet, to the end. Obviously. That’s why he asked for me. It was like a coded communication. Because the puppet can’t talk about the puppet master, not now, not ever, because the threat is still out there. I think he might be trading his life for his sister’s. Which gives you a big problem. If the puppet master sees you poking around, he’ll think the puppet talked. That’s why you can’t go to Emerson.”

can't go to Emerson.

“But the puppet didn’t talk. You figured it out.”

“We could put an announcement in the paper. Think anyone would believe it?”

“So what should I do?”

“Nothing,” Reacher said. “There’s nothing you can do. Because the more you try to help James Barr, the more likely you are to get Rosemary Barr killed for it.”

Helen Rodin was quiet for a long moment.

“Can we protect her?” she asked.

“No,” Reacher said. “We can’t. There’s only two of us. We’d need four guys minimum, and a safe house. That would cost a lot of money.”

Helen Rodin came out from behind her desk. Walked around and stood next to Reacher and gazed out of the window. She put her hands on the sill, lightly, like a pianist’s on a keyboard. Then she turned around and leaned against the glass. She was fragrant. Some clean scent a little like soap.

“You could look for him,” she said.

“Could I?” he answered, nothing in his voice.

She nodded. “He made a mistake. He gave you a reason that’s not connected to James Barr. Not directly. He set those boys on you. Therefore you’ve got a legitimate interest in finding their employer. An independent interest. You could go after him and he wouldn’t necessarily conclude that James Barr had talked.”

“I’m not here to help the defense.”

“Then look at it as helping the prosecution. If two people were involved, then two people deserve to go down. Why let the patsy take the fall on his own?”

Reacher said nothing.

“Just look at it as helping me,” Helen said.

Grigor Linsky dialed his cell phone.

“They’re back in her office,” he said. “I can see both of them in the window.”

CHAPTER 6

Reacher rode the elevator to the top of the black glass tower and found a maintenance stairwell that led to the roof. He came out through a triangular metal hutch next to the water tank and the elevator winding gear. The roof was gray tar paper covered with gravel. It was fifteen stories up, which wasn't much in comparison with some cities. But it felt like the highest point in Indiana. He could see the river to the south. South and west, he could see where the raised highway separated. He walked to the northwest corner, and wind whipped at him and flattened his shirt against his body and his pants against his legs. Directly below him the highway spur curled around behind the library and the tower and ran away due east. Far beyond it in the distance the northward spur carried on straight and met a cloverleaf about two miles away in the haze. A long straight road came off the cloverleaf and ran back toward him. He fixed its position in his mind, because that was the road he wanted.

He rode down to the lobby and set out walking. At street level the air was warm and still. He went north and west, which meant he missed the sports bar by a block. The road he wanted came in at a shallow angle south of it and diverted him away. It was straight and wide. Four lanes. Closest to downtown it had small run-down establishments. There was a gun store with heavy mesh on the windows. There was a barbershop with a sign: *Any Style $7.* There was an old-fashioned motor court on a lot that once must have stood on the edge of town. Then there was a raw cross street and beyond it the lots got bigger and the buildings got newer. Fresh commercial territory. No existing leases, nothing to tear down. Once-virgin land, now paved over.

He kept on walking and after a mile he passed a fast-food drive-through. Then a tire store. *Four New Radials $99!* Then a lube franchise and a dealership for small cars from Korea. *America's Best Warranty!* He looked ahead, because he figured he was getting close.

Are you a hooker?

No way. I work at the auto parts store.

Not *an* auto parts store. *The* auto parts store. Maybe the only one, or at least the main one. The biggest one. Which in any city is always right there on the same

strip as the tire stores and the auto dealers and the lube shops. Which in any city is always a wide new strip near a highway cloverleaf. Cities are all different, but they're also all the same.

He spent ten minutes hiking past a Ford dealership with about a thousand new pickup trucks lined up shoulder to shoulder with their front wheels up on ramps. Behind them was a giant inflatable gorilla tied down with guy wires. The wires had tinsel bunting attached to them. Beyond the new trucks were old trucks. Trade-ins, Reacher guessed, looking for new homes. Beyond the used lot was a fire road.

And then an auto parts store.

It was a franchise operation, long and low, neat and clean. New blacktop in the lot, urgent messages in the windows. Cheap oil filters, cheap antifreeze, guaranteed brake parts, superduty truck batteries. The parking lot was about a quarter full. There were slammed Hondas with wide pipes and blue headlight bulbs and rubber-band tires on chrome wheels. There were listing pickup trucks with broken springs. There were tired sedans halfway through their third hundred thousand miles. There were two cars alone together in the end bays. The store staff's cars, Reacher figured. They weren't allowed to park in the prime front-and-center slots, but they wanted their rides where they could see them through the windows. One was a four-cylinder Chevy, and the other was a small Toyota SUV. The Chevy had chromed silhouettes of reclining women on the mud flaps, which made the Toyota the redhead's car. That was Reacher's conclusion.

He went inside. The air was set very cold and smelled of sharp chemical flavors. There were maybe a half-dozen customers walking around, looking. At the front of the store were racks full of glass and chrome things. Dress-up accessories, Reacher guessed. In back were racks of things in red cardboard boxes. Clutch plates, brake pads, radiator hoses, stuff like that, he guessed. Parts. He had never put parts on a car. In the army there had been guys to do it for him, and since the army he had never had a vehicle of his own.

Between the glamour stuff and the boring stuff was a service corral made of four counters boxed together. There were registers and computers and thick paper manuals. Behind one of the computers was a tall boy somewhere in his early twenties. Not someone Reacher had seen before. Not one of the five from the

sports bar. Just a guy. He looked to be in charge. He was wearing red coveralls. A uniform, Reacher guessed, partly practical and partly suggestive of the kind of thing an Indy 500 pit mechanic might wear. Like a symbol. Like an implied promise of fast hands-on help with all kinds of matters automotive. The guy was a manager, Reacher guessed. Not the franchise owner. Not if he drove a four-cylinder Chevy to work. His name was embroidered on the left of his chest: *Gary*. Up close he looked sullen and unhelpful.

“I need to speak with Sandy,” Reacher said to him. “The redhead.”

“She’s in back right now,” the guy called Gary said.

“Shall I go through or do you want to go get her for me?”

“What’s this about?”

“Personal.”

“She’s here to work.”

“It’s a legal matter.”

“You’re not a cop.”

“I’m working with a lawyer.”

“I need to see some ID.”

“No, Gary, you don’t. You need to go get Sandy.”

“I can’t. I’m short-staffed today.”

“You could call her on the phone. Or page her.”

The guy called Gary just stood still. Did nothing. Reacher shrugged and bypassed the corral of counters and headed for a door in back marked *No Admittance*. It would be an office or a lunchroom, he guessed. Not a stockroom. A place like that, stock was unloaded directly onto the shelves. No hidden inventory. Reacher knew how modern retail worked. He read the papers people left behind on buses and in diner booths.

It was an office, small, maybe ten-by-ten, dominated by a large white laminate desk with oily handprints on it. Sandy was sitting behind it, wearing red coveralls. Hers looked a whole lot better than Gary's. They were cinched in tight around her waist with a belt. The zipper was open about eight inches. Her name was embroidered on the left, displayed a lot more prominently than Gary's was. Reacher figured that if he owned the franchise he would have Sandy working the counter and Gary in the office, no question.

"We meet again," he said.

Sandy said nothing. Just looked up at him. She was working with invoices. There was a stack of them on her left, and a stack of them on her right. One of them was in her hand, frozen in midair on its journey from one stack to the other. She looked smaller than Reacher remembered, quieter, less energetic, duller. Deflated.

"We need to talk," he said. "Don't we?"

"I'm very sorry for what happened," she said.

"Don't apologize. I wasn't offended. I just want to know how it went down."

"I don't know how."

"You do, Sandy. You were there."

She said nothing. Just placed the invoice on top of the stack to her right and used her fingers to line it up exactly.

"Who set it up?" Reacher asked.

"I don't know."

"You must know who told *you* about it."

"Jeb," she said.

"Jeb?"

"Jeb Oliver," she said. "He works here. We hang out sometimes."

“Is he here today?”

“No, he didn’t show.”

Reacher nodded. The guy called Gary had said: *I’m short-staffed today.*

“Did you see him again last night? Afterward?”

“No, I just ran for it.”

“Where does he live?”

“I don’t know. With his mother somewhere. I don’t know him that well.”

“What did he tell you?”

“That I could help with something he had to do.”

“Did it sound like fun?”

“Anything sounds like fun on a Monday night in this town. Watching a barn plank warp sounds like fun.”

“How much did he pay you?”

Sandy didn’t answer.

“A thing like that, nobody does it for free,” Reacher said.

“Hundred dollars,” she said.

“What about the other four guys?”

“Same for them.”

“Who were they?”

“His buddies.”

“Who came up with the plan? The brothers thing?”

“It was Jeb’s idea. You were supposed to start pawing me. Only you didn’t.”

“You improvised very well.”

She smiled a little, like it had been a small unscripted success in a life that held very few of them.

“How did you know where to find me?” Reacher asked.

“We were cruising in Jeb’s truck. Around and around. Kind of standing by. Then he got word on his cell.”

“Who called him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Would his buddies know?”

“I don’t think so. Jeb likes to know things that nobody else knows.”

“You want to lend me your car?”

“My car?”

“I need to go find Jeb.”

“I don’t know where he lives.”

“You can leave that part to me. But I need wheels.”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m old enough to drive,” Reacher said. “I’m old enough to do lots of things. And I’m pretty good at some of them.”

She half-smiled again, because he was using her own line from the night before. She looked away, and then she looked back at him, shy, but curious.

“Was I any good?” she asked. “You know, last night, with the act?”

“You were great,” he said. “I was preoccupied, or I would have given up on the football in a heartbeat.”

“How long would you need my car for?”

“How big is this town?”

“Not very.”

“Not very long, then.”

“Is this a big deal?”

“You got a hundred bucks. So did four other guys. That’s five hundred right there. My guess is Jeb kept another five for himself. So someone paid a thousand bucks to put me in the hospital. That’s a moderately big deal. For me, anyway.”

“I wish I hadn’t gotten involved now.”

“It turned out OK.”

“Am I in trouble?”

“Maybe,” Reacher said. “But maybe not. We could deal. You could lend me your car and I could forget all about you.”

“Promise?”

“No harm, no foul,” Reacher said.

She ducked down and lifted her purse off the floor. Rooted through and came out with a set of keys.

“It’s a Toyota,” she said.

“I know,” Reacher said. “End of the row, next to Gary’s Chevy.”

“How did you know that?”

“Intuition,” he said.

He took the keys and closed the door on her and headed back to the corral of counters. Gary was ringing some guy up for some unidentifiable purchase. Reacher waited in line behind him. Got to the register inside about two minutes.

“I need Jeb Oliver’s address,” he said.

“Why?” Gary said.

“A legal matter.”

“I want to see some ID.”

“You had a criminal conspiracy running out of your store. If I were you, the less I knew about it, the better.”

“I want to see something.”

“What about the inside of an ambulance? That’s the next thing you’re going to see, Gary, unless you give me Jeb Oliver’s address.”

The guy paused a moment. Glanced beyond Reacher’s shoulder at the line forming behind him. Apparently decided that he didn’t want to start a fight he knew he couldn’t win, with a whole bunch of people watching. So he opened a drawer and took out a file and copied an address onto a slip of paper torn off the top of a memo pad provided by an oil filter manufacturer.

“North of here,” he said. “About five miles.”

“Thank you,” Reacher said, and took the slip of paper.

The redhead’s Toyota started on the first turn of the key. Reacher let the engine idle and racked the seat back and adjusted the mirror. Clipped his belt and propped the slip of paper against the instrument panel. It meant he couldn’t see the tachometer, but he wasn’t very interested in whatever information that dial might supply. All he cared about was how much gas was in the tank, and there looked to be more than enough for five miles out and five miles back.

Jeb Oliver’s address was nothing more than a house number on a rural route. Easier to find than a road with a name, like Elm Street, or Maple Avenue. In Reacher’s experience some towns had more roads named after trees than trees themselves.

He moved out of the parking lot and drove north to the highway cloverleaf.

There was the usual forest of signs. He saw the route number he wanted. It was going to be a dogleg, right and then left. East, and then north. The little SUV hummed along OK. It was tall for its width, which made it feel tippy on the turns. But it didn't fall over. It had a small engine that kept itself working hard. The interior smelled of perfume.

The west-east part of the dogleg was some kind of a major county road. But after the turn north the blacktop narrowed and the shoulders grew ragged. There was agriculture going on to the left and the right. Some kind of a winter crop was planted in giant circles. Radial irrigation booms turned slowly. The corners where the booms didn't reach were unplanted and stony. Superimposing circles on squares wasted more than twenty-one percent of every acre, but Reacher figured that might be an efficient trade-off in places where land was plentiful and irrigation hardware wasn't.

He drove four more miles through the fields and passed a half-dozen tracks with mailboxes at the end of them. The mailboxes were painted with numbers and the tracks led away west and east to small swaybacked farm dwellings maybe two hundred yards off the road. He watched the numbers and slowed before he got to the Oliver place. It had a mailbox like all the others, up on a post made out of two figure-eight concrete blocks stacked end on end. The number was daubed in white on a weathered plywood rectangle wired to the concrete. The track was narrow with two muddy ruts flanking a weedy center hump. There were sharp tire tracks in the mud. New treads, wide, aggressive, from a big truck. Not the kind of tires you bought at the $99-for-four place.

Reacher turned the Toyota in and bumped down the track. At the end of it he could see a clapboard farmhouse with a barn behind it and a clean red pickup truck next to it. The truck was turned nose-out and it had a massive chrome radiator grille. A Dodge Ram, Reacher figured. He parked in front of it and got out. The house and the barn were about a hundred years old and the truck was about a month old. It had the big Hemi motor, and the crew cab, and four-wheel drive, and huge tires. It was probably worth more than the house, which was badly maintained and one winter away from serious trouble. The barn was no better. But it had new iron clasps on the doors, with a bicycle U-lock through them.

There was no sound except for a distant rainfall hiss as the irrigation booms turned slowly in the fields. No activity anywhere. No traffic on the road. No dogs barking. The air was still and full of the sharp smell of fertilizer and earth

dogs barking. The air was still and full of the sharp smell of fertilizer and earth. Reacher walked to the front door and knocked twice with the flat of his hand. No response. He tried again. No response. He walked around to the back of the house and found a woman sitting on a porch glider. She was a lean and leathery person, wearing a faded print dress and holding a pint bottle of something golden in color. She was probably fifty, but she could have passed for seventy, or forty if she took a bath and got a good night's sleep. She had one foot tucked up underneath her and was using the other to scoot the glider slowly back and forth. She wasn't wearing shoes.

"What do you want?" she said.

"Jeb," Reacher said.

"Not here."

"He's not at work, either."

"I know that."

"So where is he?"

"How would I know?"

"Are you his mother?"

"Yes, I am. You think I'm hiding him here? Go ahead and check."

Reacher said nothing. The woman stared at him and rocked the glider, back and forth, back and forth. The bottle rested easy in her lap.

"I insist," she said. "I mean it. Search the damn house."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Why should you?"

"Because if you invite me to search the house it means he's not in it."

"Like I said. Jeb's not here."

"What about the barn?"

"What about the barn?"

"It's locked from the outside. There's only one key and he's got it."

Reacher said nothing.

"He went away," the woman said. "Disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"Only temporarily, I hope."

"Is that his truck?"

The woman nodded. Took a small, delicate sip from her bottle.

"So he walked?" Reacher said.

"He was picked up. By a friend."

"When?"

"Late last night."

"To go where?"

"I have no idea."

"Take a guess."

The woman shrugged, rocked, sipped.

"Far away, probably," she said. "He has friends all over. California, maybe. Or Arizona. Or Texas. Or Mexico."

"Was this trip planned?" Reacher asked.

The woman wiped the neck of the bottle on the hem of her dress and held it out toward him. He shook his head. Sat down on the porch step. The old wood creaked once under his weight. The glider kept on rocking, back and forth. It was almost silent. Almost, but not quite. There was a small sound from the mechanism that came once at the end of each swing, and a little creak from a

porch board as it started its return. Reacher could smell mildew from the cushions, and bourbon from the bottle.

“Cards on the table, whoever the hell you are,” the woman said. “Jeb got home last night limping. With his nose busted. And I’m figuring you for the guy who bust it.”

“Why?”

“Who else would come looking for him? I’m guessing he started something he couldn’t finish.”

Reacher said nothing.

“So he ran,” the woman said. “The pussy.”

“Did he call someone last night? Or did someone call him?”

“How would I know? He makes a thousand calls a day, he takes a thousand calls a day. His cell phone is the biggest thing in his life. Next to his truck.”

“Did you see who picked him up?”

“Some guy in a car. He waited on the road. Wouldn’t come down the track. I didn’t see much. It was dark. White lights on the front, red lights on the back, but all cars have those.”

Reacher nodded. He had seen only a single set of tire marks in the mud, from the big pickup. The car that had waited on the road was probably a sedan, too low-slung to make it down the farm track.

“Did he say how long he would be gone?”

The woman just shook her head.

“Was he scared of something?”

“He was kind of beaten down. Deflated.”

Deflated. Like the redhead in the auto parts store.

“OK,” Reacher said. “Thanks.”

"OK," Reacher said. "Thanks."

"You going now?"

"Yes," Reacher said. He walked back the way he had come, listening to the glider moving, listening to the hiss of irrigation water. He backed the Toyota all the way to the road and swung the wheel and headed south.

He put the Toyota next to the Chevy and headed inside the store. Gary was still behind the register. Reacher ignored him and headed straight for the *No Admittance* door. The redhead was still behind the desk. She was almost through with the invoices. The stack on her right was tall, and the stack on her left had just one sheet of paper in it. She wasn't doing anything with it. She was leaning back in the chair, unwilling to finish, unwilling to get back out to the public. Or to Gary.

Reacher put the car keys on the desk.

"Thanks for the loan," he said.

"Did you find him?" she asked.

"He's gone."

She said nothing.

"You look tired," Reacher said.

She said nothing.

"Like you've got no energy. No sparkle. No enthusiasm."

"So?"

"Last night you were full of beans."

"I'm at work now."

"You were at work last night, too. You were getting paid."

“You said you were going to forget all about that.”

“I am. Have a nice life, Sandy.”

She watched him for a minute.

“You too, Jimmy Reese,” she said.

He turned around and closed the door on her again and headed out to the daylight. Started walking south, back to town.

There were four people in Helen Rodin’s office when he got there. Helen herself, and three strangers. One of them was a guy in an expensive suit. He was sitting in Helen’s chair, behind her desk. She was standing next to him, head bent, talking. Some kind of an urgent conference. The other two strangers were standing near the window, like they were waiting, like they were next in line. One was a man, one was a woman. The woman had long dark hair and glasses. The man had no hair and glasses. Both were dressed casually. Both had lapel badges with their names printed large. The woman had *Mary Mason* followed by a bunch of letters that had to be medical. The man had *Warren Niebuhr* with the same bunch of letters. Doctors, Reacher figured, probably psychiatrists. The name badges made them look like they had been dragged out of a convention hall. But they didn’t seem unhappy about it.

Helen looked up from her discussion.

“Folks, this is Jack Reacher,” she said. “My investigator dropped out and Mr. Reacher agreed to take over his role.”

News to me, Reacher thought. But he said nothing. Then Helen gestured at the guy in her chair, proudly.

“This is Alan Danuta,” she said. “He’s a lawyer specializing in veterans’ issues. From D.C. Probably the best there is.”

“You got here fast,” Reacher said to him.

“I had to,” the guy said back. “Today is the critical day for Mr. Barr.”

“We’re all headed for the hospital,” Helen said. “The doctors say he’s ready for us. I was hoping that Alan would consult by phone or e-mail, but he flew right in.”

“Easier for me that way,” Danuta said.

“No, I got lucky,” Helen said. “And then even luckier, because there’s a psychiatric conference in Bloomington all week. Dr. Mason and Dr. Niebuhr drove straight down.”

“I specialize in memory loss,” Dr. Mason said.

“And I specialize in coercion,” Dr. Niebuhr said. “Dependency issues in the criminal mind, and so on.”

“So this is the team,” Helen said.

“What about his sister?” Reacher asked.

“She’s already with him.”

“We need to talk.”

“Privately?”

“Just for a moment.”

She made an excuse-me face to the others and led Reacher into the outer office.

“You get anywhere?” she asked him.

“The bimbo and the four other guys were recruited by a friend of theirs called Jeb Oliver. He paid them a hundred bucks each. I figure he kept another five for his trouble. I went to his house, but he’s gone.”

“Where?”

“Nobody knows. He was picked up by a guy in a car.”

“Who is he?”

“He

¨He works at the store with the bimbo. But he´s also a small-time dope dealer.´´

“Really?”

Reacher nodded. “There’s a barn behind his house with a fancy lock on it. Maybe a meth lab, maybe a storeroom. He spends a lot of time on his cell phone. He owns a truck that had to cost twice what a store clerk makes in a year. And he lives with his mother.”

“What does that prove?”

“Drug dealers are more likely than anyone else to live with their mothers. I read it in the paper.”

“Why?”

“They’ve usually got small-time priors. They can’t pass the kind of background checks that landlords like to run.”

Helen said nothing.

“They were all hopped up last night,” Reacher said. “All six of them. Speed, probably, judging by the way the bimbo looked today. She was different. Really down, like an amphetamine hangover.”

“They were doped up? Then you were lucky.”

Reacher shook his head. “You want to fight with me, your best choice would be aspirin.”

“Where does this get us?”

“Look at it from Jeb Oliver’s point of view. He was doing something for somebody. Part work, part favor. Worth a thousand bucks. Had to be for someone higher up on one of his various food chains. And it probably wasn’t for the auto parts manager.”

“So you think James Barr was involved with a dope dealer?”

“Not necessarily involved. But maybe coerced by one for some unknown reason.”

“This raises the stakes,” Helen said.

“A little,” Reacher said.

“What should we do?”

“We should go to the hospital. Let Dr. Mason find out if Barr is bullshitting about the amnesia. If he is, then the fastest way through all of this is to slap him around until he tells us the truth.”

“What if he isn’t bullshitting?”

“Then there are other approaches.”

“Like what?”

“Later,” Reacher said. “Let’s hear what the shrinks have to say first.”

Helen Rodin drove out to the hospital in her Saturn with the lawyer Alan Danuta sitting beside her in the front and Reacher sprawling in the back. Mason and Niebuhr followed her in the Taurus they had rented that morning in Bloomington. They parked side by side in a large visitors’ lot, and all five people got out and stood for a moment and then headed together toward the building’s main entrance.

Grigor Linsky watched them walk. He was fifty feet across the lot, in the Cadillac that Jeb Oliver’s mother had seen in the dark the night before. He kept the motor running and dialed his cell phone. The Zec answered on the first ring.

“Yes?” he said.

“The soldier is very good,” Linsky said. “He’s already been out to the boy’s house.”

“And?”

“Nothing. The boy is no longer there.”

“Where is the boy?”

“Distributed.”

“Specifically?”

“His head and his hands are in the river. The rest of him is under eight yards of crushed stone in the new First Street roadbed.”

“What’s happening now?”

“The soldier and the lawyer are at the hospital. With three others. Another lawyer and two doctors, I think. Specialist counsel and expert witnesses, I imagine.”

“Are we relaxed?”

“We should be. They have to try. That’s the system here, as you know. But they won’t succeed.”

“Make sure they don’t,” the Zec said.

The hospital was on the outer edge of the city and therefore relatively spacious. Clearly there had been no real estate restraints. Just county budget restrictions, Reacher figured, that had limited the building to plain concrete and six stories. The concrete was painted white inside and out, and the stories were short of headroom. But other than those factors the place looked like any hospital anywhere. And it smelled like any hospital anywhere. Decay, disinfectant, disease. Reacher didn’t like hospitals very much. He was following the other four down a long bright corridor that led to an elevator. The two shrinks were leading the way. They seemed pretty much at home. Helen Rodin and Alan Danuta were right behind them. They were side by side, talking. The shrinks reached the elevator bank and Niebuhr hit the button. The little column of people closed up behind him. Then Helen Rodin turned back and stopped Reacher before he caught up with the others. Stepped close and spoke quietly.

“Does the name Eileen Hutton mean anything to you?”

“Why?”

“Why?”

“My father faxed a new witness list. He added her name.”

Reacher said nothing.

“She seems to be from the army,” Helen said. “Do you know her?”

“Should I?”

Helen came closer and turned away from the others.

“I need to know what she knows,” she said quietly.

This could complicate things, Reacher thought.

“She was the prosecutor,” he said.

“When? Fourteen years ago?”

“Yes.”

“So how much does she know?”

“I think she’s at the Pentagon now.”

“How much does she know, Reacher?”

He looked away.

“She knows it all,” he said.

“How? You never got anywhere near a courtroom.”

“Even so.”

“How?”

“Because I was sleeping with her.”

She stared at him. “Tell me you’re kidding.”

“I’m not kidding.”

I'm not kidding.

"You told her *everything*?"

"We were in a relationship. Naturally I told her everything. We were on the same side."

"Just two lonely people in the desert."

"We had a good thing going. Three great months. She was a nice person. Still is, probably. We were close."

"That's more information than I need, Reacher."

He said nothing.

"This is *way* out of control now," Helen said.

"She can't use what she's got. Even less than I can. It's still classified and she's still in the army."

Helen Rodin said nothing.

"Believe it," Reacher said.

"Then why is she on the damn list?"

"My fault," Reacher said. "I mentioned the Pentagon to your father. When I couldn't understand how my name had come up. He must have poked around. I thought he might."

"It's over before it starts if she talks."

"She can't."

"Maybe she can. Maybe she's going to. Who knows what the hell the military is going to do?"

The elevator bell rang and the small crowd shuffled closer to the doors.

"You're going to have to talk to her," Helen said. "She'll be coming here for a deposition. You're going to have to find out what she's going to say."

“She’s probably a one-star general by now. I can’t make her tell me anything.”

“Find a way,” Helen said. “Exploit old memories.”

“Maybe I don’t want to. She and I are still on the same side, remember. As far as Specialist E-4 James Barr is concerned.”

Helen Rodin turned away and stepped into the elevator car.

The elevator opened into a sixth-floor lobby that was all blank, painted concrete except for a steel-and-wired-glass door that led into a security airlock. Beyond that, Reacher could see signs to an ICU and two isolation wards, one male, one female, and two general wards, and a neonatal facility. Reacher guessed the whole sixth floor had been funded by the state. It wasn’t a pleasant place. It was a perfect blend of prison and hospital, and neither thing was a fun ingredient.

A guy in a Board of Corrections uniform met the party at a reception desk. Everyone was searched and everyone signed a liability waiver. Then a doctor showed up and led them to a small waiting area. The doctor was a tired man of about thirty, and the waiting area had chairs made of tubular steel and green vinyl. They looked like they had been ripped out of 1950s Chevrolets.

“Barr is awake and reasonably lucid,” the doctor said. “We’re listing him as stable, but that doesn’t mean he’s a well man. So today we’re restricting his visitors to a maximum of two at any one time, and we want them to keep things as brief as possible.”

Reacher saw Helen Rodin smile, and he knew why. The cops would want to come in pairs, and therefore Helen’s presence as defense counsel would make three at a time. Which meant that the medical restrictions were handing her a defense-only day.

“His sister is with him right now,” the doctor said. “She’d prefer it if you would wait until they’ve finished their visit before going in.”

The doctor left them there and Helen said, “I’ll go first, on my own. I need to introduce myself and get his consent for the representation. Then Dr. Mason should see him, I think. Then we’ll decide what to do next based on her

should see him, I think. Then we'll decide what to do next based on her conclusions."

She spoke fast. Reacher realized she was a little nervous. A little tense. All of them were, apart from him. None of them apart from him had ever met James Barr before. Barr had become an unknown destination for each of them, all in separate ways. He was Helen's client, albeit one that she didn't really want. He was an object of study for Mason and Niebuhr. Maybe the subject of future academic papers, even fame and reputation. Maybe he was a condition waiting to be named. *Barr's syndrome.* Same for Alan Danuta. Maybe to him the whole thing was a Supreme Court precedent waiting to be argued. A textbook chapter. A law school class. *Indiana versus Barr. Barr versus the United States.* They were all investing in a man they didn't know.

They took a green vinyl chair each and settled in. The little lobby smelled of chlorine disinfectant, and it was silent. There was no sound at all except for a faint rush of water in pipes and a distant electronic pulse from a machine in another room. Nobody said anything but everyone seemed to know they were in for a long slow process. No point in starting out impatient. Reacher sat opposite Mary Mason and watched her. She was relatively young, for an expert. She seemed warm and open. She had chosen eyeglasses with large frames so that her eyes could be clearly seen. Her eyes looked kind and welcoming, and reassuring. How much of that was bedside manner and how much was for real, Reacher didn't know.

"How do you do this?" he asked her.

"The assessment?" she said. "I start out assuming it's more likely to be real than fake. A brain injury bad enough for a two-day coma almost always produces amnesia. Those data were settled long ago. Then I just watch the patient. True amnesiacs are very unsettled by their condition. They're disoriented and frightened. You can see them really trying to remember. They want to remember. Fakers show up different. You can see them avoiding the days in question. They look away from them mentally. Sometimes even physically. There's often some distinctive body language."

"Kind of subjective," Reacher said.

Mason nodded. "It is basically subjective. It's very hard to prove a negative. You can use brain scans to show differing brain activity, but what the scans actually

mean is still subjective. Hypnotism is sometimes useful, but courts are scared of hypnotism, generally. So yes, I'm in the opinion business, nothing more."

"Who does the prosecution hire?"

"Someone exactly like me. I've worked both sides of the fence."

"So it's he said, she said?"

Mason nodded again. "It's usually about which of us has more letters after her name. That's what juries respond to."

"You've got a lot of letters."

"More than most people," Mason said.

"How much will he have forgotten?"

"Several days, minimum. If the trauma happened Saturday, I'd be very surprised if he remembers anything after Wednesday. Before that there'll be a shadowy period just about as long where he remembers some things and not others. But that's the minimum. I've seen cases where months are missing, sometimes after concussions, not even comas."

"Will anything come back?"

"From the initial shadowy period, possibly. He might be able to work backward from the last thing he remembers, through the preceding few days. He might be able to pick out a few previous incidents. Working forward, he'll be much more limited. If he remembers his last lunch, he might eventually get as far as dinner. If he remembers being out at a movie, he might eventually recall driving home. But there'll be a hard boundary somewhere. Typically it would be when he went to sleep on the last day he's aware of."

"Will he remember fourteen years ago?"

Mason nodded. "His long-term memory should be unimpaired. Different people seem to have different internal definitions of long-term, because there seems to be a literal chemical migration from one part of the brain to another, and no two brains are identical. The physical biology isn't well understood. People like to use computer metaphors now, but that's all wrong. It's not about hard drives and

use computer metaphors now, but that's all wrong. It's not about hard drives and random access memory. The brain is entirely organic. It's like throwing a bag of apples down the stairs. Some bruise, some don't. But I would say fourteen years counts as long-term for just about anybody."

The waiting area went quiet. Reacher listened to the distant electronic pulse. It was a sinus rhythm, he guessed, from a machine that was either monitoring a heartbeat or causing one. It was running at about seventy beats a minute. It was a restful sound. He liked it. Then a door opened halfway down a corridor and Rosemary Barr stepped out of a room. She was showered and her hair was brushed but she looked thin and exhausted and sleepless and ten years older than the day before. She stood still for a moment and then looked right, looked left, and walked slowly toward the waiting area. Helen Rodin got up and went to meet her halfway. They stood together, talking low. Reacher couldn't hear what they were saying. A two-way progress report, he guessed, first medical, then legal. Then Helen took Rosemary's arm and led her onward to the group. Rosemary looked at the two psychiatrists, at Alan Danuta, at Reacher. She said nothing. Then she walked on alone toward the security desk. Didn't look back.

"Avoidance," Niebuhr said. "We're all here to poke and prod at her brother, physically, mentally, legally, metaphorically. That's invasive and unattractive. And to acknowledge us means to acknowledge her brother's jeopardy."

"Maybe she's just tired," Reacher said.

"I'm going in to see him now," Helen said.

She walked back up the corridor and went into the room Rosemary had come out of. Reacher watched her until he heard the door close. Then he turned back to Niebuhr.

"Seen this kind of thing before?" he asked him.

"Coercion? Have *you* seen it before?"

Reacher smiled. Every psychiatrist he had ever met liked to answer questions with questions. Maybe they were taught to, day one at psychiatry school.

"I've seen it a lot," he said.

"But?"

“Usually there was more evidence of a dire threat.”

“A threat against the sister isn’t dire? You came up with that hypothesis yourself, I believe.”

“His sister hasn’t been kidnapped. She’s not a prisoner somewhere. He could have arranged to have her safeguarded. Or told her to get out of town.”

“Exactly,” Niebuhr said. “We can only conclude that he was instructed not to do any such thing. Evidently he was told to leave her open, and ignorant, and vulnerable. That demonstrates to us how powerful the coercion must have been. And it demonstrated to *him* how powerful it was. And it demonstrated to him how powerless he was in comparison. Every day. He must have been living with deep dread, and helplessness, and guilt for his obedience.”

“Ever seen a rational man afraid enough to do what he did?”

“Yes,” Niebuhr said.

“Me too,” Reacher said. “Once or twice.”

“The threatener must be a real monster. Although I’d expect to see other factors present, as enhancers, or multipliers. Very likely a recent relationship, some kind of dependency, an infatuation, a desire to please, to impress, to be valued, to be loved.”

“A woman?”

“No, you don’t kill people to impress women. That usually has the opposite effect. This will be a man. Seductive, but not in a sexual way. Compelling, somehow.”

“An alpha male and a beta male.”

“Exactly,” Niebuhr said again. “With any final reluctance resolved by the threat to the sister. Possibly Mr. Barr was never entirely sure whether the threat was a joke or for real. But he chose not to test it. Human motivation is very complex. Most people don’t really know why they do things.”

“That’s for sure.”

“Do you know why you do things?”

“Sometimes,” Reacher said. “Other times I don’t have the faintest idea. Maybe you could tell me.”

“I’m normally very expensive. That’s why I can afford to do things like this for nothing.”

“Maybe I could pay you five bucks a week, like rent.”

Niebuhr smiled uncertainly.

“Uh, no,” he said. “I don’t think so.”

Then the waiting area went quiet again and stayed quiet for ten long minutes. Danuta stretched his legs way out and worked on papers inside an open briefcase that he kept balanced on his knees. Mason had her eyes closed and might have been asleep. Niebuhr stared into space. The three of them were clearly accustomed to waiting. As was Reacher himself. He had been a military cop for thirteen years, and *Hurry Up and Wait* was the real MP motto. Not *Assist, Protect, Defend*. He focused on the distant electronic heartbeat, and passed the time.

Grigor Linsky turned his car around and watched the hospital doors in his mirror. Made a bet with himself that nothing would happen for at least sixty minutes. At least sixty, but not more than ninety. Then he rehearsed an order of priority in case they didn’t all come out together. Who should he ignore and who should he tail? In the end he decided to stick with whoever acted alone. He figured that was most likely to be the soldier. His guess was the lawyers and the doctors would head back to the office. They were predictable. The soldier wasn’t.

Helen Rodin came out of James Barr’s room fifteen minutes after she went in. She walked straight back to the waiting area. Everyone looked at her. She looked at Mary Mason.

“Your turn,” she said. Mason stood up and walked away down the corridor. She

"Your turn," she said. Mason stood up and walked away down the corridor. She took nothing with her. No briefcase, no paper, no pen. Reacher watched her until Barr's door closed behind her. Then he leaned back in his chair, in the silence.

"I liked him," Helen said, to nobody in particular.

"How is he?" Niebuhr asked.

"Weak," Helen said. "Smashed up. Like he got hit by a truck."

"Is he making sense?"

"He's coherent. But he doesn't remember anything. And I don't think he's faking."

"How far back is he blanking?"

"I can't tell. He remembers listening to a baseball game on the radio. Could have been last week or last month."

"Or last year," Reacher said.

"Did he accept your representation?" Danuta asked.

"Verbally," Helen said. "He can't sign anything. He's handcuffed to the bed."

"Did you walk him through the charges and the evidence?"

"I had to," Helen said. "He wanted to know why I thought he needed a lawyer."

"And?"

"He assumes he's guilty."

There was silence for a moment. Then Alan Danuta closed his briefcase and took it off his knees and put it on the floor. Sat up straight, fast, all in one fluid movement.

"Welcome to the gray areas," he said. "This is where good law comes from."

"Nothing good about it," Helen said. "Not so far."

“We absolutely cannot let him go to trial. The government injured him through its own negligence and now it wants to put him on trial for his life? I don’t think so. Not if he can’t even remember the day in question. What kind of a defense could he conduct?”

“My father will have kittens.”

“Obviously. We’ll have to cut him out. We’ll have to go straight to federal court. It’s a Bill of Rights issue anyway. Federal, then Appeals, then the Supremes. That’s the process.”

“That’s a *long* process.”

Danuta nodded.

“Three years,” he said. “If we’re lucky. The most applicable precedent is *Wilson*, and that case took three and a half years. Almost four.”

“And we’ve got no guarantee of winning. We might lose.”

“In which case we’ll go to trial down the road and we’ll do the best we can.”

“I’m not qualified for this,” Helen said.

“Intellectually? That’s not what I heard.”

“Tactically and strategically. And financially.”

“There are veterans’ associations that can help with the money. Mr. Barr served his country, after all. With honor.”

Helen didn’t reply to that. Just glanced Reacher’s way. Reacher said nothing. He turned away and stared at the wall. He was thinking: *This guy is going to get away with murder again? Twice?*

Alan Danuta moved in his chair.

“There is an alternative,” he said. “Not very exciting legally, but it’s out there.”

“What is it?” Helen asked.

“Give your father the puppet master. Under these circumstances, half a loaf is better than none. And the puppet master is the better half anyway.”

“Would he go for it?”

“You know him better than I do, presumably. But he’d be a fool not to go for it. He’s looking at a minimum three-year appeals process before he even gets Mr. Barr inside a courtroom. And any prosecutor worth his salt wants the bigger fish.”

Helen glanced at Reacher again.

“The puppet master is only a theory,” she said. “We don’t have anything that even remotely resembles evidence.”

“Your choice,” Danuta said. “But one way or the other, you can’t let Barr go to trial.”

“One step at a time,” Helen said. “Let’s see what Dr. Mason thinks.”

Dr. Mason came back twenty minutes later. Reacher watched her walk. The length of her stride and the look in her eyes and the set of her jaw told him she had arrived at a firm conclusion. There was no uncertainty there. No diffidence, no doubt. None at all. She sat back down and smoothed her skirt across her knees.

“Permanent retrograde amnesia,” she said. “Completely genuine. As clear a case as I ever saw.”

“Duration?” Niebuhr asked.

“Major League Baseball will tell us that,” she said. “The last thing he remembers is a particular Cardinals game. But my bet would be a week or more, counting backward from today.”

“Which includes Friday,” Helen said.

“I’m afraid so.”

“OK,” Danuta said. “There it is.”

“Great,” Helen said. She stood up and the others joined her and they all moved around and ended up facing the exit, either consciously or unconsciously; Reacher wasn’t sure. But it was clear that Barr was behind them, literally and figuratively. He had changed from being a man to being a medical specimen and a legal argument.

“You guys go on ahead,” he said.

“You’re staying here?” Helen asked.

Reacher nodded.

“I’m going to look in on my old buddy,” he said.

“Why?”

“I haven’t seen him for fourteen years.”

Helen stepped away from the others and came close.

“No, why?” she asked quietly.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m not going to switch his machines off.”

“I hope you’re not.”

“I can’t,” he said. “I don’t have much of an alibi, do I?”

She stood still for a moment. Said nothing. Then she stepped back and joined the others. They all left together. Reacher watched them process out at the security desk, and as soon as they were through the steel door and in the elevator lobby he turned around and walked down the corridor to James Barr’s door. He didn’t knock. Just paused a beat and turned the handle and went inside.

CHAPTER 7

The room was overheated. You could have roasted chickens in it. There was a wide window with white venetian blinds closed against the sun. They glowed and filled the room with soft white light. There was medical equipment piled everywhere. A silent respirator, disconnected. IV stands and heart monitors. Tubes and bags and wires.

Barr was flat on his back in a bed in the middle of the room. No pillow. His head was clamped in a brace. His hair was shaved and he had bandages over the holes they had drilled in his skull. His left shoulder was wrapped in bandages that reached to his elbow. His right shoulder was bare and unmarked. The skin there was pale and thin and marbled. His chest and his sides were bandaged. The bedsheet was folded down at his waist. His arms were straight at his sides and his wrists were handcuffed to the cot rails. He had IV needles taped to the back of his left hand. There was a peg on his right middle finger that was connected by a gray wire to a box. There were red wires leading out from under the bandages on his chest. They led to a machine with a screen. The screen was showing a rolling pattern that reminded Reacher of the cellular company's recording of the gunshots. Sharp peaks, and long troughs. The machine made a muted beep every time a peak hit the screen.

"Who's there?" Barr asked.

His voice was weak and rusty, and slow. And scared.

"Who's there?" he asked again. The way his head was clamped limited his field of vision. His eyes were moving, left and right, up and down.

Reacher stepped closer. Leaned over the bed. Said nothing.

"You," Barr said.

"Me," Reacher said.

"Why?"

"You know why."

Barr's right hand trembled. The motion put a ripple in the wire from the peg. The handcuff moved against the bed rail and made a quiet metallic sound.

"I guess I let you down," he said.

"I guess you did."

Reacher watched Barr's eyes, because they were the only part of him that could move. He was incapable of body language. His head was immobile and most of the rest of him was trussed up like a mummy.

"I don't remember anything," Barr said.

"You sure?"

"It's all blank."

"You clear on what I'll do to you if you're bullshitting me?"

"I can guess."

"Triple it," Reacher said.

"I'm not bullshitting," Barr said. "I just can't remember anything." His voice was quiet, helpless, confused. Not a defense, not a complaint. Not an excuse. Just a statement of fact, like a lament, or a plea, or a cry.

"Tell me about the ballgame," Reacher said.

"It was on the radio."

"Not the TV?"

"I prefer the radio," Barr said. "For old times' sake. That's how it always was. When I was a kid. The radio, all the way from St. Louis. All those miles. Summer evenings, warm weather, the sound of baseball on the radio."

He went quiet.

"You OK?" Reacher said.

"M[illegible]"

¨My head hurts real bad. I think I had an operation.´´

Reacher said nothing.

“I don’t like baseball on the TV,” Barr said.

“I’m not here to discuss your media preferences.”

“Do you watch baseball on TV?”

“I don’t have a TV,” Reacher said.

“Really? You should get one. You can get them for a hundred bucks. Maybe less, for a small one. Look in the Yellow Pages.”

“I don’t have a phone. Or a house.”

“Why not? You’re not still in the army.”

“How would you know?”

“Nobody’s still in the army. Not from back then.”

“Some people are,” Reacher said, thinking about Eileen Hutton.

“Officers,” Barr said. “Nobody else.”

“I *was* an officer,” Reacher said. “You’re supposed to be able to remember stuff like that.”

“But you weren’t like the others. That’s what I meant.”

“How was I different?”

“You worked for a living.”

“Tell me about the ballgame.”

“Why don’t you have a house? Are you doing OK?”

“You worried about me now?”

“Don’t like it when folks aren’t doing so well.”

“I’m doing fine,” Reacher said. “Believe me. You’re the one with the problem.”

“Are you a cop now? Here? I never saw you around.”

Reacher shook his head. “I’m just a citizen.”

“From where?”

“From nowhere. Out in the world.”

“Why are you here?”

Reacher didn’t answer.

“Oh,” Barr said. “To nail me.”

“Tell me about the ballgame.”

“It was the Cubs at the Cardinals,” Barr said. “Close game. Cards won, bottom ninth, walk-off.”

“Home run?”

“No, an error. A walk, a steal, then a groundout to second put the runner on third, one out. Soft grounder to short, check the runner, throw to first, but the throw went in the dugout and the run scored on the error. The winning run, without a hit in the inning.”

“You remember it pretty well.”

“I follow the Cards. I always have.”

“When was this?”

“I don’t even know what day it is today.”

Reacher said nothing.

“I can’t believe that I did what they say,” Barr said. “Just can’t believe it.”

“Plenty of evidence,” Reacher said.

“For real?”

“No question.”

Barr closed his eyes.

“How many people?” he asked.

“Five.”

Barr’s chest started moving. Tears welled out of his closed eyes. His mouth opened in a ragged oval. He was crying, with his head in a vise.

“Why did I do it?” he said.

“Why did you do it the first time?” Reacher said.

“I was crazy then,” Barr said.

Reacher said nothing.

“No excuses,” Barr said. “I was a different person then. I thought I’d changed. I was sure I *had.* I was good afterward. I tried real hard. Fourteen years, reformed.”

Reacher said nothing.

“I would have killed myself,” Barr said. “You know, back then. Afterward. I came close, a couple of times. I was so ashamed. Except those four guys from KC turned out to be bad. That was my only consolation. I clung on to it, like redemption.”

“Why do you own all those guns?”

“Couldn’t give them up. They were reminders. And they keep me straight. Too hard to stay straight without them.”

“Do you ever use them?”

“Occasionally. Not often. Never enough.”

"Occasionally. Not often. Now and then."

"How?"

"At a range."

"Where? The cops checked."

"Not here. I go across the line to Kentucky. There's a range there, cheap."

"You know the plaza downtown?"

"Sure. I live here."

"Tell me how you did it."

"I don't remember doing it."

"So tell me how you *would* do it. Theoretically. Like a recon briefing."

"What would the targets be?"

"Pedestrians. Coming out of the DMV building."

Barr closed his eyes again. "That's who I shot?"

"Five of them," Reacher said.

Barr started crying again. Reacher moved away and pulled a chair from against a wall. He turned it around and sat down on it, backward.

"When?" Barr said.

"Friday afternoon."

Barr stayed quiet for a long time.

"How did they catch me?" he asked.

"You tell the story."

"Was it a traffic stop?"

“Why would it be?”

“I would have waited until late. Maybe just after five. Plenty of people then. I would have stopped on the highway behind the library. Where it’s raised. Sun in the west, behind me, no reflection off the scope. I would have opened the passenger window and lined it all up and emptied the mag and hit the gas again. Only way to get caught would be if a state trooper pulled me over for speeding and saw the rifle. But I think I would have been aware of that. Wouldn’t I? I think I would have hidden the rifle and driven slow. Not fast. Why would I have risked standing out?”

Reacher said nothing.

“What?” Barr said. “Maybe a trooper stopped to help me right there. Was that it? While I was parked? Maybe he thought I had a flat. Or I was out of gas.”

“Do you own a traffic cone?” Reacher asked.

“A what?”

“A traffic cone.”

Barr started to say no, but then he stopped.

“I guess I’ve *got* one,” he said. “Not sure if I own it, exactly. I had my driveway blacktopped. They left a cone on the sidewalk to stop people driving on it. I had to leave it there three days. They never came back for it.”

“So what did you do with it?”

“I put it in the garage.”

“Is it still there?”

“I think so. I’m pretty sure.”

“When was this driveway work done?”

“Start of spring, I think. Months ago.”

“You got receipts?”

Barr tried to shake his head. Winced at the pressure from the clamp.

“It was a gypsy crew,” he said. “I think they stole the blacktop from the city. Probably from where they were starting to fix First Street. I paid cash, quick and dirty.”

“You got any friends?”

“A few.”

“Who are they?”

“Just guys. One or two.”

“Any new friends?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Women?”

“They don’t like me.”

“Tell me about the ballgame.”

“I already did.”

“Where were you? In the car? At home?”

“Home,” Barr said. “I was eating.”

“You remember that?”

Barr blinked. “The shrink lady said I should try to remember the circumstances. It might bring more stuff back. I was in the kitchen, eating chicken, cold. With potato chips. I remember that. But that’s as far as I can get.”

“Drink? Beer, juice, coffee?”

“I don’t remember. I just remember listening to the game. I’ve got a Bose radio. It’s in the kitchen. There’s a TV in there too, but I always listen to the game, never watch. Like when I was a kid.”

“How did you feel?”

“Feel?”

“Happy? Sad? Normal?”

Barr went quiet again for a moment.

“The shrink lady asked the same question,” he said. “I told her normal, but actually I think I was feeling happy. Like something good was on the horizon.”

Reacher said nothing.

“I really blew that call, didn’t I?” Barr said.

“Tell me about your sister,” Reacher said.

“She was just here. Before the lawyer came in.”

“How do you feel about her?”

“She’s all I’ve got.”

“How far would you go to protect her?”

“I would do anything,” Barr said.

“What kind of anything?”

“I’ll plead guilty if they let me. She’ll still have to move, maybe change her name. But I’ll spare her what I can. She bought me the radio. For the baseball. Birthday gift.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Why are you here?” Barr asked him.

“To bury you.”

“I deserve it.”

“You didn’t fire from the highway. You were in the new parking garage.”

"You didn't fire from the highway. You were in the new parking garage."

"On First Street?"

"North end."

"That's nuts. Why would I fire from there?"

"You asked your first lawyer to find me. On Saturday."

"Why would I do that? You ought to be the last person I wanted to see. You know about Kuwait City. Why would I want that brought up?"

"What was the Cards' next game?"

"I don't know."

"Try to remember. I need to understand the circumstances here."

"I can't remember," Barr said. "There's nothing there. I remember that winning run, and that's all. The announcers were going crazy. You know how they are. They were kind of incredulous. I mean, what a stupid way to lose a ballgame. But it's the Cubs, right? They were saying they always find some way to lose."

"What about before the game? Earlier that day?"

"I don't remember."

"What would you normally be doing?"

"Not much. I don't do much."

"What happened in the Cardinals' previous game?"

"I don't recall."

"What's the next to last thing you remember?"

"I'm not sure. The driveway?"

"That was months ago."

“I remember going out somewhere,” Barr said.

“When?”

“Not sure. Recently.”

“Alone?”

“Maybe with people. I’m not sure. Not sure where, either.”

Reacher said nothing. Just leaned back in his chair and listened to the quiet beep from the heart machine. It was running pretty fast. Both handcuffs were rattling.

“What’s in the IVs?” Barr asked.

Reacher squinted against the daylight and read the writing on the bags.

“Antibiotics,” he said.

“Not painkillers?”

“No.”

“I guess they think I don’t deserve any.”

Reacher said nothing.

“We go way back, right?” Barr said. “You and me?”

“Not really,” Reacher said.

“Not like we were friends.”

“You got that right.”

“But we were connected.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Weren’t we?” Barr asked.

“In a way,” Reacher said.

“So would you do something for me?” Barr asked. “As a favor?”

“Like what?” Reacher said.

“Pull the IV needles out of my hand.”

“Why?”

“So I can get an infection and die.”

“No,” Reacher said.

“Why not?”

“Not time yet,” Reacher said.

He stood up and put his chair back against the wall and walked out of the room. He processed out at the security desk and passed through the airlock and rode the elevator down to the street. Helen Rodin’s car wasn’t in the lot. She was already gone. She hadn’t waited for him. So he set out walking, all the way from the edge of town.

He picked his way past ten blocks of construction and went to the library first. It was getting late in the afternoon, but the library was still open. The sad woman at the desk told him where the old newspapers were kept. He started with the previous week’s stack of the same Indianapolis paper he had read on the bus. He ignored Sunday, Saturday, and Friday. He started with Thursday, Wednesday, and Tuesday, and he got a hit with the second paper he looked at. The Chicago Cubs had played a three-game series in St. Louis starting Tuesday. It was the series opener that had ended the way Barr had described. Tie game in the bottom of the ninth, a walk, a steal, a groundout, an error. The details were right there in Wednesday morning’s paper. A walk-off winning run without a hit in the inning. About ten in the evening, Tuesday. Barr had heard the announcers’ frenzied screams just sixty-seven hours before he opened fire.

Then Reacher backtracked all the way to the police station. Four blocks west.

one block south. He wasn't worried about its opening hours. It had looked like a 24/7 kind of a place to him. He went straight to the reception desk and claimed defense counsel's right to another look at the evidence. The desk guy made a call to Emerson and then pointed Reacher straight to Bellantonio's garage bay.

Bellantonio met him there and unlocked the door. Not much had changed, but Reacher noticed a couple of new additions. New sheets of paper, behind plastic, pinned above and below the original pages on the cork boards, like footnotes or addenda or appendices.

"Updates?" he asked.

"Always," Bellantonio said. "We never sleep."

"So what's new?"

"Animal DNA," Bellantonio said. "Exact match of Barr's dog's hair to the scene."

"Where is the dog now?"

"Put to sleep."

"That's cold."

"*That's* cold?"

"The damn dog didn't do anything wrong."

Bellantonio said nothing.

"What else?" Reacher asked.

"More tests on the fibers, and more ballistics. We're beyond definite on everything. The Lake City ammo is relatively rare, and we've confirmed a purchase by Barr less than a year ago. In Kentucky."

"He used a range down there."

Bellantonio nodded. "We found that out, too."

“Anything else?”

“The traffic cone came from the city’s construction department. We don’t know how or when.”

“Anything else?”

“I think that’s about it.”

“What about the negatives?”

“The negatives?”

“You’re giving me all the good news. What about the questions that didn’t get answered?”

“I don’t think there were any.”

“You sure about that?”

“I’m sure.”

Reacher glanced around the square of cork boards, one more time, and carefully.

“You play poker?” he asked.

“No.”

“Good decision. You’re a terrible liar.”

Bellantonio said nothing.

“You should start worrying,” Reacher said. “He slides, he’s going to sue your ass for the dog.”

“He won’t slide,” Bellantonio said.

“No,” Reacher said. “I don’t suppose he will.”

Emerson was waiting outside Bellantonio’s door. Jacket on, tie off. Frustration

Emerson was waiting outside Bellantonio's door. Jacket on, tie off. Frustration in his eyes, the way cops get when they're snagged up in lawyer stuff.

"Did you see him?" he asked. "At the hospital?"

"He's blank from Tuesday night onward," Reacher said. "You've got a battle on your hands."

"Terrific."

"You should run safer jails."

"Rodin will bring experts in."

"His daughter already did."

"There are legal precedents."

"They go both ways, apparently."

"You *want* to see that piece of shit back on the street?"

"Your screwup," Reacher said. "Not mine."

"As long as you're happy."

"Nobody's happy," Reacher said. "Not yet."

He left the police station and walked all the way back to the black glass tower. Helen Rodin was at her desk, studying a sheet of paper. Danuta and Mason and Niebuhr had left. She was alone.

"Rosemary asked her brother about Kuwait City," she said. "She told me so, when she came out of his room at the hospital."

"And?" Reacher said.

"He told her it was all true."

"Not a fun conversation, probably."

Helen Rodin shook her head. “Rosemary is pretty devastated. She says James is, too. He can’t believe he did it again. Can’t believe he threw fourteen years away.”

Reacher said nothing. Silence in the office. Then Helen showed Reacher the sheet of paper she was reading.

“Eileen Hutton is a Brigadier General,” she said.

“Then she’s done well,” Reacher said. “She was a major when I knew her.”

“What were you?”

“A captain.”

“Wasn’t that illegal?”

“Technically. For her.”

“She was in the JAG Corps.”

“Lawyers can break the law, same as anyone else.”

“She’s still in the JAG Corps.”

“Obviously. They don’t retrain them.”

“Based in the Pentagon.”

“That’s where they keep the smart people.”

“She’ll be here tomorrow.”

Reacher said nothing.

“For her deposition,” Helen said.

Reacher said nothing.

“It’s scheduled for four o’clock in the afternoon. Chances are she’ll fly down in the morning and check in somewhere. Because she’ll have to stay the night in town. Too late for a flight back.”

town. Too late for a flight back.

“You going to ask me to take her out for dinner?”

“No,” Helen said. “I’m not. I’m going to ask you to take her out for lunch. Before she meets with my father. I need to know in advance what she’s here for.”

“They put Barr’s dog to sleep,” Reacher said.

“It was old.”

“That doesn’t bother you?”

“Should it?”

“The dog didn’t do anything to anyone.”

Helen said nothing.

“Which hotel will Hutton use?” Reacher asked.

“I have no idea. You’ll have to catch her at the airport.”

“What flight?”

“I don’t know that, either. But there’s nothing direct from D.C. So I expect she’ll change planes in Indianapolis. She won’t get here before eleven in the morning.”

Reacher said nothing.

“I apologize,” Helen said. “For telling Danuta we didn’t have any evidence for the puppet master. I didn’t mean it to sound dismissive.”

“You were right,” Reacher said. “We didn’t have any evidence. At the time.”

She looked at him. “But?”

“We do now.”

“What?”

“They’ve been gilding the lily over at the police station. They’ve got fibers, ballistics, dog DNA, a receipt for the ammunition all the way from someplace in Kentucky. The traced the traffic cone to the city. They’ve got all kinds of stuff.”

“But?” Helen said again.

“But they haven’t got James Barr on tape driving in to place the cone in the garage beforehand.”

“Are you sure?”

Reacher nodded. “They must have looked at the tapes a dozen times by now. If they had found him, they’d have printed the stills and pinned them up for the world to see. But they’re not there, which means they didn’t find them. Which means James Barr didn’t drive in and leave the cone beforehand.”

“Which means someone else did.”

“The puppet master,” Reacher said. “Or another of his puppets. Sometime after Tuesday night. Barr thinks the cone was still in his garage Tuesday.”

Helen looked at him again. “Whoever it was must be on the tapes.”

“Correct,” Reacher said.

“But there’ll be hundreds of cars.”

“You can narrow it down some. You’re looking for a sedan. Something too low-slung to get itself down a farm track.”

“The puppet master really exists, doesn’t he?”

“No other explanation for how it went down.”

“Alan Danuta is probably right, you know,” Helen said. “My father will trade Barr for the puppet master. He’d be a fool not to.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Which means Barr is going to walk,” Helen said. “You understand that, right? There’s no alternative. The prosecution’s legal problems are overwhelming.”

Reacher said nothing.

“I’m not happy about it, either,” Helen said. “But for me it’s just a PR problem. I can spin my way out of it. At least I hope I can. I can blame it all on the way the jail was run. I can claim that it wasn’t *me* who got him off.”

“But?” Reacher said.

“What are you going to do? You came here to bury him and he’s going to walk.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” Reacher said. “What choices do I have?”

“Only two that I’m scared of. One, you could give up on helping me find the guy who’s pulling the strings. I can’t do it alone and Emerson won’t even be willing to try.”

“And two?”

“You could settle things with Barr yourself.”

“That’s for sure.”

“But you can’t do that. You’d go to prison for life if you were lucky.”

“If I got caught.”

“You would get caught. I would know you did it.”

Reacher smiled. “You’d rat me out?”

“I would have to,” Helen said.

“Not if you were my lawyer. You couldn’t say a word.”

“I’m not your lawyer.”

“I could hire you.”

“Rosemary Barr would know too, and she’d rat you out in a heartbeat. And Franklin. He heard you tell the story.”

Reacher nodded

Reacher nodded.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” he said again.

“How do we find this guy?”

“Like you said, why would I want to?”

“Because I don’t think you’re the type who settles for half a loaf.”

Reacher said nothing.

“I think you want the truth,” Helen said. “I don’t think you like it when the wool gets pulled over your eyes. You don’t like being played for a sucker.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Plus, this whole situation stinks,” Helen said. “There were six victims here. The five who died and Barr himself.”

“That expands the definition of *victimhood* a little too far for me.”

“Dr. Niebuhr expects we’ll find a preexisting relationship. Probably recent. Some new friend. We could go at it that way.”

“Barr told me he doesn’t have any new friends,” Reacher said. “Only has one or two old friends.”

“Was he telling the truth?”

“I think he was.”

“So is Niebuhr wrong?”

“Niebuhr’s guessing. He’s a shrink. All they do is guess.”

“I could ask Rosemary.”

“Would she know his friends?”

“Probably. They’re pretty close.”

“So get a list,” Reacher said.

“Is Dr. Mason guessing, too?”

“No question. But in her case I think she’s guessing right.”

“If Niebuhr’s wrong about the friend, what do we do?”

“We go proactive.”

“How?”

“There had to have been a guy following me last night and I know for sure there was one following me this morning. I saw him out there in the plaza. So the next time I see him I’ll have a word with him. He’ll tell me who he’s working for.”

“Just like that?”

“People usually tell me what I want to know.”

“Why?”

“Because I ask them nicely.”

“Don’t forget to ask Eileen Hutton nicely.”

“I’ll see you around,” Reacher said.

He walked south, beyond his hotel, and found a cheap place to eat dinner. Then he walked north, slowly, through the plaza, past the black glass tower, under the highway, all the way back to the sports bar. Altogether he was on the street the best part of an hour, and he saw nobody behind him. No damaged men in odd suits. Nobody at all.

The sports bar was half-empty and there was baseball on every screen. He found a corner table and watched the Cardinals play the Astros in Houston. It was a listless late-season game between two teams well out of contention. During the commercial breaks he watched the door. Saw nobody. Tuesday was even quieter than Monday, out there in the heartland.

Grigor Linsky dialed his cell.

“He’s back in the sports bar,” he said.

“Did he see you?” the Zec asked.

“No.”

“Why is he in the sports bar again?”

“No reason. He needed a destination, that’s all. He paraded around for nearly an hour, trying to make me show myself.”

Silence for a beat.

“Leave him there,” the Zec said. “Come in and we’ll talk.”

Alex Rodin called Emerson at home. Emerson was eating a late dinner with his wife and his two daughters, and he wasn’t thrilled about taking the call. But he did. He went out to the hallway and sat on the second-to-bottom stair, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, the phone trapped between his shoulder and his ear.

“We need to do something about this Jack Reacher guy,” Rodin said to him.

“I don’t see how he’s a huge problem,” Emerson said. “Maybe he wants to, but he can’t make the facts go away. We’ve got more than we need on Barr.”

“This is not about facts now,” Rodin said. “It’s about the amnesia. It’s about how hard the defense is going to push it.”

“That’s up to your daughter.”

“He’s a bad influence on her. I’ve been reading the case law. It’s a real gray area. The test isn’t really about whether Barr remembers the day in question. It’s about whether he understands the process, right now, today, and whether we’ve got enough other stuff on him to convict without his direct testimony.”

“I would say we do.”

“Me too. But Helen needs to swallow that. She needs to agree. But she’s got that guy standing over her all the time, turning her head. I know her. She’s not going to suck it up until he’s out of the picture.”

“I don’t see what I can do.”

“I want you to bring him in.”

“I can’t,” Emerson said. “Not without a complaint.”

Rodin went quiet.

“Well, keep an eye on him,” he said. “He spits on the sidewalk, I want you to bring him in and do something to him.”

“This isn’t the Wild West,” Emerson said. “I can’t run him out of town.”

“An arrest might be enough. We need something that breaks the spell. He’s pushing Helen where she doesn’t want to go. I know her. On her own she’ll give Barr up, no question.”

Linsky was in pain on the way back to his car. An hour on his feet was about all he could take. A long time ago the bones in his spine had been methodically cracked with an engineer’s ball-peen hammer, one after the other, starting with the coccyx and moving upward through all the lower vertebrae, and not in rapid sequence. Generally one bone had been allowed to heal before the next was broken. When the last had healed, they had started over again. Playing the xylophone, they had called it. Playing scales. Ultimately he had lost count of how many scales they had played on him.

But he never spoke of it. Worse had happened to the Zec.

The Cadillac had a soft seat and it was a relief to get in. It had a quiet motor and a gentle ride and a nice radio. Cadillacs were the kind of things that made America such a wonderful place, along with the trusting population and the hamstrung police departments. Linsky had spent time in several different countries and there was no question in his mind about which was the most

countries and there was no question in his mind about which was the most satisfactory. Elsewhere he had walked or run or crawled through dirt or hauled carts and sleds by hand. Now he drove a Cadillac.

He drove it to the Zec's house, which stood eight miles north and west of town, next to his stone-crushing plant. The plant was a forty-year-old industrial facility built on a rich limestone seam that had been discovered under farmland. The house was a big fancy palace built a hundred years ago, when the landscape was still unspoiled, for a rich dry-goods merchant. It was bourgeois and affected in every way, but it was a comfortable house in the same way that the Cadillac was a comfortable car. Best of all it stood alone in the center of many acres of flat land. Once there had been beautiful gardens, but the Zec had razed the trees and leveled the shrubberies to create a completely flat and open vista all around. There were no fences, because how could the Zec bear to live another day behind wire? For the same reason there were no extra locks, no bolts, no bars. The openness was the Zec's gift to himself. But it was also excellent security in its own right. There were surveillance cameras. Nobody could approach the house undetected. By day visitors were clearly visible at least two hundred yards away, and after dark night-vision enhancement picked them up only a little closer.

Linsky parked and eased himself out of the car. The night was quiet. The stone-crushing plant shut down at seven every evening and sat brooding and silent until dawn. Linsky glanced in its direction and walked toward the house. The front door opened before he got near it. Warm light spilled out and he saw that Vladimir himself had come down to welcome him, which meant that Chenko had to be there too, upstairs, which meant that the Zec had assembled all his top boys, which meant that the Zec was worried.

Linsky took a breath, but he walked inside without a moment's hesitation. After all, what could be done to him that hadn't been done to him before? It was different for Vladimir and Chenko, but for men with Linsky's age and experience nothing was entirely unimaginable anymore.

Vladimir said nothing. Just closed the door again and followed Linsky upstairs. It was a three-story house. The first floor was used for nothing at all, except surveillance. All the rooms were completely empty, except one that had four TV screens on a long table, showing wide-angle views north, east, south, and west. Sokolov would be in there, watching them. Or Raskin. They alternated twelve-hour shifts. The second floor of the house had a kitchen, a dining room, a living

room, and an office. The third floor had bedrooms and bathrooms. The second floor was where all the business was done.

Linsky could hear the Zec's voice from the living room, calling him. He went straight in without knocking. The Zec was in an armchair with a glass of tea clamped between his palms. Chenko was sprawled on a sofa. Vladimir pushed in behind Linsky and sat down next to Chenko. Linsky stood still and waited.

"Sit, Grigor," the Zec said. "Nobody's upset at you. It was the boy's failure."

Linsky nodded and sat down in an armchair, a little closer to the Zec than Chenko was. That maintained the hierarchy in the proper order. The Zec was eighty, and Linsky himself was more than sixty. Chenko and Vladimir were both in their forties, important men for sure, but comparative youngsters. They didn't have the history that the Zec and Linsky shared. Not even close.

"Tea?" the Zec asked in Russian.

"Please," Linsky said.

"Chenko," the Zec said. "Bring Grigor a glass of tea."

Linsky smiled inside. Chenko being made to serve him tea was a statement of the greatest importance. And he noted that Chenko did it with no unwillingness. He just got up out of his slouch and went out to the kitchen and came back in with a glass of tea on a small silver tray. Chenko was a very small man, short, wiry, no bulk at all. He had coarse black hair that stuck up in all directions even though he kept it cropped short. Vladimir was different. Vladimir was very tall and heavy and blond. Unbelievably strong. It was entirely possible that Vladimir had German genes somewhere in his background. Perhaps his grandmother had picked them up back in 1941, like germs.

"We've been talking," the Zec said.

"And?" Linsky said.

"We have to confront the fact that we made a mistake. Just one, but it could prove irksome."

"The cone," Linsky said.

“Obviously Barr isn’t on tape placing it,” the Zec said.

“Obviously.”

“But will it be a problem?”

“Your opinion?” Linsky asked politely.

“Significance is in the eye of the beholder,” the Zec said. “The detective Emerson and the DA Rodin won’t care about it. It’s a minor detail, one they won’t feel inclined to pursue. Why would they? They’re not looking to trip themselves up. And no case is ever a hundred percent perfect. They know that. So they’ll write it off as an inexplicable loose end. They might even convince themselves that Barr used a different vehicle.”

“But?”

“But it’s still a loose end. If the soldier tugs on it, something might unravel.”

“The evidence against Barr is indisputable.”

The Zec nodded. “That’s true.”

“So won’t that be enough for them?”

“Certainly it would have been. But it’s possible that Barr no longer exists. Not in the sense that he’s a legal entity accessible to their jurisprudence. He has permanent retrograde amnesia. It’s possible that Rodin won’t be able to put him on trial. If so, Rodin will be extremely frustrated about that. He’ll be expected to seek a consolation prize. And if the consolation prize were eventually to assume a higher profile than Barr himself, how could Rodin turn it down?”

Linsky sipped his tea. It was hot and sweet.

“All this from a videotape?” he said.

“It depends entirely on the soldier,” the Zec said. “It depends on his tenacity and his imagination.”

“He was a military cop,” Chenko said in English. “Did you know that?”

Linsky glanced at Chenko. Chenko rarely spoke English in the house. He had a perfect American accent, and sometimes Linsky thought he was ashamed of it.

“That doesn’t necessarily impress me,” Linsky said in Russian.

“Or me,” the Zec said. “But it’s a factor we must weigh in the balance.”

“Silencing him now would draw attention,” Linsky said. “Wouldn’t it?”

“It would depend on how it was done.”

“How many ways are there?”

“We could use the redheaded girl again,” the Zec said.

“She would be no use against the soldier. He’s a giant, and almost certainly extensively trained in self-defense.”

“But he already has an established issue with her. Several people know she tried to set him up for a beating. Perhaps she could be found severely injured. If she was, the soldier would be the obvious prime suspect. We could let the police department silence him for us.”

“She would know who attacked her,” Vladimir said. “She would know it wasn’t the soldier.”

The Zec nodded appreciatively. Linsky watched him. He was accustomed to the Zec’s methods. The Zec liked to tease solutions out of people, like Socrates of old.

“Then perhaps she should be left unable to tell anyone anything,” the Zec said.

“Dead?”

“We’ve always found that the safest way, haven’t we?”

“But it’s possible she has many enemies,” Vladimir said. “Not just him. Maybe she’s a big-time prick-teaser.”

“Then we should firm up the link. Possibly she should be found somewhere suggestive. Maybe he invited her out to renew their acquaintance.”

“In his hotel?”

“No, outside his hotel, I think. But close by. Where she can be discovered by someone other than the soldier himself. Someone who can call the police while the soldier is still asleep. That way he’s a sitting duck.”

“Why would her body be outside his hotel?”

“Evidently he hit her and she staggered away and collapsed before she got very far.”

“The Metropole Palace,” Linsky said. “That’s where he is.”

“When?” Chenko asked.

“Whenever you like,” the Zec said.

The Astros beat the Cardinals 10–7 after a limp defensive performance by both franchises. Plenty of cheap hits, plenty of errors. A bad way to win, and a worse way to lose. Reacher had stopped paying attention halfway through. He had started thinking about Eileen Hutton instead. She was part of his mosaic. He had seen her once in the States before the Gulf War, just briefly across a crowded courtroom, just long enough to register her head-turning quality, and he had assumed he would never see her again, which he figured was a pity. But then she had showed up in Saudi as part of the long, ponderous Desert Shield buildup. Reacher had been there pretty much from the start, as a recently demoted captain. The first stage of any clean-sheet foreign deployment always resembled gang warfare between the MPs and the troops they were sent out with, but after six weeks or so the situation usually settled down some, and Desert Shield wasn’t any different. After six weeks there was a structure in place, and in terms of military law enforcement, a structure demanded in-country personnel all the way up from jailers to judges, and Hutton had shown up as one of the prosecutors they shipped in. Reacher had assumed it was volunteer duty for her, which he was happy about, because that made it likely she was unmarried.

She was unmarried. First time their paths crossed, he checked her left hand and saw no ring. Then he checked her collar and saw a major’s oak leaves. That would make it a challenge, he figured, for a recently demoted captain. Then he

checked her eyes and saw that the challenge would be worth it. Her eyes were blue and full of intelligence and mischief. And promise, he figured. And adventure. He had just turned thirty-one years old, and he was up for anything.

The desert heat helped. Most of the time the temperature was above a hundred and twenty degrees, and apart from regular gas-attack practices, standard on-post dress devolved down to shorts and sleeveless undershirts. And in Reacher's experience the close proximity of hot and nearly naked men and women always led somewhere good. Better than serving out November in Minnesota, that was for damn sure.

The initial approach had promised to be tricky, given the disparity in rank. And when it came to it he fumbled it slightly, and was saved only because she was just as up for it as he was, and wasn't afraid to let it show. After that it had been as smooth as silk, three long months. Good times. Then new orders had come through, like they always did eventually. He hadn't even said goodbye to her. Didn't get the chance. Never saw her again, either.

I'll see her again tomorrow, he thought.

He stayed in the bar until ESPN started recycling the highlights it had already shown once. Then he settled up his tab and stepped out to the sidewalk, into the yellow glare of the streetlights. He decided he wouldn't go back to the Metropole Palace. He decided it was time for a change. No real reason. Just his normal restless instinct. *Keep moving. Never stay in one place too long.* And the Metropole was a gloomy old pile. Unpleasant, even by his undemanding standards. He decided to try the motor court instead. The one he had seen on his way to the auto parts store. The one next to the barbershop. *Any Style $7.* Maybe he could get a haircut before Hutton blew into town.

Chenko left the Zec's house at midnight. He took Vladimir with him. If the redhead was to be beaten to death, then Vladimir would have to do it. It had to look right, forensically. Chenko was too small to inflict the kind of battering that an enraged six-foot-five, two-hundred-fifty-pound ex-soldier might be provoked to. But Vladimir was a different matter. Vladimir might well be able to do the

to. But Vladimir was a different matter. Vladimir might well be able to do the job with a single blow, which might be convincing on the postmortem slab. A refusal, an objection, a sexual taunt, a big man might lash out once in frustration, a little harder than he intended.

They were both familiar with the girl. They had met her before, because of her connection to Jeb Oliver. They had even all worked together once. They knew where she lived, which was in a rented garden apartment that nestled on a barren patch of land in the shadow of the state highway, where it first rose on its stilts, south and west of downtown. And they knew that she lived there alone.

Reacher walked a long aimless three-block circle before approaching the motor court. He kept his own footsteps light and listened hard for the gritty crunch of a shadow behind him. He heard nothing. Saw nothing. He was alone.

The motor court was practically an antique. At one time it must have been the latest thing and consequently fairly upmarket. But since then the relentless march of time and fashion had left it behind. It was well maintained but not updated. It was exactly the kind of place he liked.

He roused the clerk and paid cash for one night only. He used the name Don Heffner, who had played second base and hit .261 during the Yankees' lean year of 1934. The clerk gave him a big brass key and pointed him down the row to room number eight. The room was faded and a little damp. The counterpane on the bed and the drapes at the window looked original. So did the bathroom. But everything worked and the door locked tight.

He took a short shower and folded his pants and his shirt very carefully and put them flat under the mattress. That was as close as he ever got to ironing. They would look OK in the morning. He would shave and shower very carefully and go to the barbershop after breakfast. He didn't want to devalue whatever memories Hutton might have retained. Assuming she had retained any at all.

Chenko parked east of the highway and he and Vladimir walked under it and approached the girl's apartment building from the back, unseen. They kept close to the wall and walked around to her door. Chenko told Vladimir to keep out of sight. Then he knocked gently. There was no response, which wasn't entirely

unexpected. It was late, and she was probably already in bed. So Chenko knocked again, a little louder. And again, as loud as he dared. He saw a light come on in a window. Heard the quiet shuffle of feet inside. Heard her voice through the crack where the door met the jamb.

“Who’s there?” she asked.

“It’s me,” he said.

“What do you want?”

“We need to talk.”

“I was asleep.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s awful late.”

“I know,” Chenko said. “But it’s very urgent.”

There was a pause.

“Wait a minute,” she said.

Chenko heard her shuffle back toward her bedroom. Then silence. Then she came back. The door opened. She was standing there, clutching a blue robe around her.

“What?” she said.

“You need to come with us,” Chenko said.

Vladimir stepped out of the shadow.

“Why is *he* here?” Sandy asked.

“He’s helping me tonight,” Chenko said.

“What do you want?”

“You need to go out.”

“Like this? I can’t.”

“I agree,” Chenko said. “You need to get dressed. Like for a date.”

“A date?”

“You need to look really good.”

“But I’ll have to shower. Do my hair.”

“We have time.”

“A date with who?”

“You just have to be seen. Like you were ready for a date.”

“At this time of night? The whole town is asleep.”

“Not the whole town. We’re awake, for instance.”

“How much do I get?”

“Two hundred,” Chenko said. “Because it’s so late.”

“How long will it take?”

“Just a minute. You just have to be seen walking somewhere.”

“I don’t know.”

“Two hundred for a minute’s work isn’t bad.”

“It isn’t a minute’s work. It’ll take me an hour to get ready.”

“Two-fifty, then,” Chenko said.

“OK,” Sandy said.

Chenko and Vladimir waited in her living room, listening through the thin walls, hearing the shower running, hearing the hair dryer, the held breaths as she put on her makeup, the elastic snap of undergarments, the whisper of fabric on skin. Chenko saw that Vladimir was restless and sweating. Not because of the task ahead. But because there was a woman in a state of undress in a nearby room. Vladimir was unreliable, in certain situations. Chenko was glad he was there to supervise. If he hadn't been, the plan would have derailed for sure.

Sandy walked into the living room after an hour, looking, as the Americans would say, like a million dollars. She was wearing a filmy black blouse that was nearly transparent. Underneath it was a black bra that molded her breasts into twin mounds of implausible roundness. She had on tight black pants that ended just below the knee. Pedal pushers? Capri pants? Chenko wasn't sure of the name. She was wearing black high-heeled shoes. With her pale skin and her red hair and her green eyes she looked like a picture in a magazine.

Pity, Chenko thought.

"My money?" Sandy asked.

"Afterward," Chenko said. "When we bring you back."

"Let me see it."

"It's in the car."

"So let's go look at it," Sandy said.

They walked in single file. Chenko led the way. Sandy came next. Vladimir brought up the rear. They walked under the highway. The car was right there ahead of them. It was cold and misted-over. There was no money in it. None at all. Chenko knew that. So he stopped six feet short and turned around. Nodded to Vladimir.

"Now," he said.

Vladimir reached forward with his right hand and put it on Sandy's right shoulder from behind. He used it to turn her upper body sideways and then he crashed his left fist into her right temple, a little above and in front of her ear. It was a colossal blow. Explosive. Her head snapped violently sideways and around, and her legs gave way and she fell to the ground vertically like an empty

around, and her legs gave way and she fell to the ground vertically like an empty suit of clothes slipping off a hanger.

Chenko squatted down next to her. Waited a moment for the body to settle and then felt the neck for a pulse. There wasn't one.

"You broke her neck," he said.

Vladimir nodded.

"It's about placement," he said. "The main vector is mostly sideways, obviously, but you try for a little rotation, too. So it's not so much a break. It's more like a wrenching action. Like a hangman's noose."

"Is your hand OK?"

"It will be tender tomorrow."

"Good work."

"I try my best."

They unlocked the car and raised the rear armrest and laid the body across the back seat. There was just enough space, side to side. She had been a small girl. Not tall. Then they got in the front together and drove off. They looped well to the east and came up on the Metropole Palace from behind. They avoided the bay where the garbage was piled and found a side alley. They stopped outside a fire exit. Vladimir slid out and opened the rear door. Pulled the body out by the shoulders and left it where it fell. Then he got back in. Chenko drove on and paused after five yards and turned in his seat. The body was lying in a heap against the alley's far wall. Directly opposite the fire door. It looked like a plausible scenario. She had fled the soldier's room in shame and panic, chosen not to wait for the elevator, and run down the fire stairs and out into the night. Maybe she had stumbled at that point and aggravated an injury already done to her. Maybe she had tripped and fallen against the wall, and the shock had dislodged an already-wrenched vertebra.

Chenko turned back and faced front and drove on, not fast, not slow, not drawing attention, not standing out, eight miles north and west, all the way back to the Zec's house.

CHAPTER 8

Reacher woke himself up at seven in the morning and went out to check for a tail and to look for a drugstore. He walked a zigzag half-mile and saw nobody behind him. He found a drugstore two blocks east of the motor court and bought black coffee in a cardboard cup, a pack of throwaway razors, a can of shaving foam, and a new tube of toothpaste. He carried his purchases back by a roundabout route and put his clothes back under the mattress and sat on the bed and drank the coffee. Then he showered and shaved, using his full twenty-two-minute routine. He washed his hair twice. Then he dressed again and went out for breakfast to the only place he could find, which was the drive-through he had seen the day before. It had a small counter inside. He had more coffee and an English muffin filled with a round piece of ham and something that might have once been egg, first dried and powdered and then reconstituted. His threshold of culinary acceptability was very low, but right then he felt he might be pushing at the bottom edge of his personal envelope.

He followed the muffin with a piece of lemon pie, for a sugar hit. It was better than the muffin, so he had a second piece, with a second cup of coffee. Then he walked south to the barbershop. He pulled the door and sat down in the chair at eight-thirty exactly.

By which time the homicide investigation outside the Metropole Palace was already three hours old. The body in the alley had been discovered at half-past five in the morning by a cleaner coming in to work. The cleaner was a middle-aged man from Honduras. He didn’t touch the body. Didn’t check for vital signs. The way it was lying there told him all he needed to know. The slack emptiness of death is recognizable anywhere. The guy just rushed inside and told the night porter. Then he went home again, because he had no green card and didn’t want to be around a police investigation. The night porter dialed 911 from the desk phone and then went out through the fire door to take a look. Came back inside thirty seconds later, not having enjoyed it.

Two patrol cars and an ambulance showed up within eight minutes. Paramedics confirmed the DOA and the ambulance went away. The patrolmen blocked off the alley and the fire exit and then took a statement from the night porter. He

said he had stepped out for some air and discovered the body himself, to protect the illegal from Honduras. It was close to true. Certainly the patrolmen had no reason to doubt his word. They just stood back and waited for Emerson.

Emerson got there by six twenty-five. He brought his number two, a woman called Donna Bianca, and the city ME, and Bellantonio himself to run the crime scene. Technical work occupied the first thirty minutes. Measurement, photography, the accumulation of trace evidence. Then Emerson got the OK and stepped close to the body and ran into his first major problem. The girl had no purse and no ID. Nobody had the slightest idea who she was.

Ann Yanni showed up behind the Metropole at seven-fifteen. She had an NBC crew with her, consisting of a cameraman and a sound guy with a microphone on a long boom. The microphone had a gray fur wind sock on it and the boom was ten feet long. The guy put his hips against the police tape and extended his arms as far as he could and heard Emerson's voice in his headphones. Emerson was talking to Bianca about prostitution.

The ME had checked the girl's arms and thighs and between her toes and found no needle tracks. So she hadn't been there to score. So maybe she was hooking. Who else would come out the side door of a downtown hotel in the middle of the night, dressed like that? She was young and she still had her looks. Therefore she wouldn't have been cheap. Therefore she would have been carrying a big purse full of twenties that had just come out of some businessman's ATM. She had run into somebody waiting for her. Either somebody waiting for her specifically, or somebody waiting on the off chance for someone like her. Whoever, he had snatched her purse and hit her in the head, a little harder than necessary.

A nineteen-or twenty-year-old who wasn't an addict wouldn't necessarily have been fingerprinted, unless she had a vice conviction somewhere. Emerson wasn't willing to count on that, therefore he didn't expect to discover her identity through the databases. He expected to discover it inside the hotel, either from the night porter who had pimped her in and out, or through the john who had called her.

"Nobody leaves," he said to Bianca. "We'll talk to all the guests and all the staff one by one. So find a room somewhere. And tell all units to be on the lookout for a guy with more new twenties than he should have."

“A big guy,” Bianca said.

Emerson nodded. “A real big guy. That was some punch.”

The ME took the body away to the morgue and Donna Bianca commandeered the hotel bar and the interviews were two-thirds through by eight-thirty in the morning.

The barber was a competent old guy who had probably been cutting the same style for close to fifty years. He went for what the military would have called a whitewall. He left an inch and a half on the top and used his clippers to shave the bottom and the sides up toward it. Then he flipped the clippers over and squared off the sideburns and cleaned the fuzz off the neck. It was a style Reacher was familiar with. He had worn it most of his life, except for periods when he had been too lazy to care, and a couple of six-month stretches when he had favored an all-over number-one buzz cut.

The barber did the thing with the hand mirror, to show Reacher the back.

“Happy?” he asked.

Reacher nodded. It looked OK, except that there was a half-inch margin all around where his skin was dead white. He had had longer hair in Miami and the tan hadn’t penetrated. The barber brushed the clippings off his collar and removed the towel. Reacher gave him his seven bucks and tipped him a dollar. Then he walked around the block. Nobody followed him. He unlocked his room and washed his face and shaved under his sideburns again. There was a new half-inch of stubble there. The barber’s clippers had been a little blunt.

The Metropole interviews were finished by nine-twenty and they gave Emerson absolutely nothing at all. The night porter swore blind that he knew nothing about the girl. There were only eleven guests and none of them was promising. Emerson was an experienced and talented detective and he knew that people sometimes tell the truth. And he knew that accepting the truth was as important a part of a detective’s professional arsenal as rejecting lies. So he conferred with Donna Bianca and together they concluded they had just wasted the best part of

three hours on a faulty hunch.

Then a guy named Gary called, from the auto parts store.

Gary had gotten to work at eight and had found himself *really* short-staffed. There was still no sign of Jeb Oliver and Sandy hadn't shown, either. At first he had been annoyed. He had called her apartment and gotten no reply. *On her way,* he had assumed. *Late.* But she never showed. Thereafter he called every thirty minutes. By nine-thirty the annoyance had given way to worry and he started thinking about auto wrecks. So he called the cops for information. The desk guy told him there had been no traffic accidents that morning. Then there was a pregnant pause and the desk guy seemed to consider another possibility and asked for a name and a description. Gary said Alexandra Dupree, known as Sandy, nineteen years old, white, petite, green and red. Ten seconds after that Gary was speaking to a detective called Emerson on a cell phone.

Gary agreed to close the store for the day and Emerson sent a patrol car to pick him up. First stop was the morgue. Gary identified the body and was white and badly shaken when he arrived in Emerson's office. Donna Bianca calmed him down and Emerson watched him carefully. Statistics show that women get killed by husbands, boyfriends, brothers, employers, and workmates—in descending order of likelihood—well before passing strangers show up on the list of possible suspects. And sometimes a boyfriend and a workmate can be the same guy. But Emerson knew that Gary was in the clear. He was too shaken. No way could a person fake that kind of sudden shock and surprise over something he had already known about for eight or ten hours.

So Emerson started in, gently, with all the usual cop questions. Last time you saw her? Know anything about her private life? Family? Boyfriends? Ex-boyfriends? Weird phone calls? Did she have any enemies? Problems? Money troubles?

And then, inevitably: Anything unusual over the last couple of days?

And so by ten-fifteen Emerson knew all about the stranger that had come to the store the day before. Very tall, heavily built, tan, aggressive, demanding, wearing olive-green pants and an olive-green flannel shirt. He had spent two

wearing olive-green pants and an olive-green flannel shirt. He had spent two mysterious sessions with Sandy in the back office, and had borrowed her car, and had demanded Jeb Oliver's address with menace, and Jeb Oliver was missing, too.

Emerson left Gary with Donna Bianca and went out to the corridor and used his cell to call Alex Rodin in his office.

"Your lucky day," he said. "We've got a nineteen-year-old female homicide victim. Someone broke her neck."

"How does that make me lucky?"

"Her last unexplained contact was yesterday, at her place of work, with a guy that sounds a whole lot like our pal Jack Reacher."

"Really?"

"We got a pretty good description from her boss. And her neck was busted by a single blow to the side of the head, which ain't easy unless you're built like Reacher is."

"Who was the girl?"

"A redhead from the auto parts store out toward the highway. There's also a boy missing from the same store."

"Where did this thing happen?"

"Outside the Metropole Palace Hotel."

"Is that where Reacher is staying?"

"Not according to the register."

"So is he a suspect or not?"

"Right now he looks pretty damn good for it."

“So when are you going to bring him in?”

“As soon as I find him.”

“I’ll call Helen,” Alex Rodin said. “She’ll know where he is.”

Rodin lied to his daughter. He told her that Bellantonio needed to see Reacher to correct a possible misunderstanding about part of the prosecution’s evidence.

“What part?” Helen asked.

“Just something they discussed. Probably nothing important, but I’m playing this very cautiously. Don’t want to hand you grounds for an appeal.”

The traffic cone, Helen thought.

“He’s on his way to the airport,” she said.

“Why?”

“To say hello to Eileen Hutton.”

“They know each other?”

“Apparently.”

“That’s unethical.”

“To know each other?”

“To influence her testimony.”

“I’m sure he won’t do that.”

“When will he be back?”

“After lunch, I think.”

“OK,” Rodin said. “It’ll keep.”

OK," Rodin said. "It'll keep."

But it didn't keep, of course. Emerson left for the airport immediately. He had met Reacher twice face-to-face and could pick him out of a crowd. Donna Bianca went with him. They went in together through a restricted area and found a security office that looked out over the whole arrivals hall through one-way glass. They scanned the waiting faces carefully. No sign of Reacher. *Not here yet.* So they settled down to wait.

CHAPTER 9

Reacher didn't go to the airport. He knew better. Senior military personnel spend a lot of time flying small aircraft, either fixed wing or rotary, and they don't like it. Outside of combat, more military personnel die in plane crashes than from any other single cause. Therefore, given a choice, a smart Brigadier General like Eileen Hutton wouldn't ride a puddle jumper down from Indianapolis. She would be happy enough with a big jet out of Washington National, but she wouldn't contemplate a twin-prop for the final leg of her journey. No way. She would rent a car instead.

So Reacher walked south and east to the library. Asked the subdued woman at the desk where the Yellow Pages were stored. He went where she pointed and hauled the book out onto a table. Opened it to *H* for Hotels. Started looking. Almost certainly some JAG Corps office grunt had done the equivalent thing the previous day, but remotely, probably online. Hutton would have told him to book her a room. He would have been anxious to please, so he would have turned first to the street map and found the courthouse and the road in from the north. Then he would have chosen a decent place convenient for both. Somewhere with parking, for the rental car. Probably a chain, with an established government rate accessible by a code number.

The Marriott Suites, Reacher thought. *That's where she'll be headed.* Off the highway, south toward town, an obvious left turn east, and there it was, three blocks north of the courthouse, an easy walk, breakfast included. The office grunt had probably printed out driving directions from the internet and clipped them to her itinerary. Anxious to please. Hutton had that effect on people.

He memorized the Marriott's number and put the book away. Then he walked out to the lobby and dialed the pay phone.

"I want to confirm a reservation," he said.

"Name?"

"Hutton."

"Yes, we've got that. Tonight only, a suite."

“Thank you,” Reacher said, and put the phone down.

She would take an early flight out of D.C. After two decades in uniform she would be up at five, in a cab at six, boarding at seven. She would be in Indianapolis by nine, latest. Out of the Hertz lot by nine-thirty. It was a two-and-a-half-hour drive. She would arrive at noon. In about an hour.

He stepped out of the lobby and looped through the plaza and headed north and east through a thin crowd of people, past the far side of the recruiting office, past the back of the courthouse. He found the Marriott easily enough and took a corner table in its coffee shop and settled down to wait.

Helen Rodin called Rosemary Barr at work. She wasn’t there. The receptionist sounded a little embarrassed about it. So Helen tried Rosemary’s home number, and got her after the second ring.

“Did they let you go?” she asked.

“Unpaid leave,” Rosemary said. “I volunteered for it. Everyone was acting awkward around me.”

“That’s awful.”

“It’s human nature. I need to make a plan. I might have to move.”

“I need a list of your brother’s friends,” Helen said.

“He doesn’t have any. The true test of friendship is adversity, isn’t it? And nobody’s visited him. Nobody’s even tried. Nobody’s called me to ask how he is.”

“I meant before,” Helen said. “I need to know who he saw, who he hung out with, who knew him well. Especially anyone new.”

“There wasn’t anyone new,” Rosemary said. “Not that I’m aware of.”

“Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure.”

“What about old?”

“Have you got a big piece of paper?”

“I’ve got a whole yellow pad.”

“Well, you aren’t going to need it. A matchbook cover would do it. James is a very self-sufficient person.”

“He must have buddies.”

“A couple, I guess,” Rosemary said. “There’s a guy called Mike from the neighborhood. They talk about lawns and baseball, you know, guy stuff.”

Mike, Helen wrote. *Guy stuff.* “Anyone else?”

There was a long pause.

“Someone called Charlie,” Rosemary said.

“Tell me about Charlie,” Helen said.

“I don’t know much about him. I never really met him.”

“How long has James known him?”

“Years.”

“Including the time you lived there?”

“He never came around when I was in. I only ever saw him once. He was leaving as I was coming in. I said, Who was that? James said, That was Charlie, like he was an old pal.”

“What does he look like?”

“He’s small. He’s got weird hair. Like a black toilet brush.”

“Is he local?”

“I guess so.”

I guess so.

“What was their point of contact?”

Another long pause.

“Guns,” Rosemary said. “They shared an interest.”

Charlie, Helen wrote. *Guns.*

Donna Bianca spent some time on her cell phone and mapped out the flight schedules between D.C. and Indianapolis. She knew the onward connecting flights left on the hour and took thirty-five minutes. She figured a person with a courthouse appointment at four o’clock wouldn’t aim to arrive on anything later than the two thirty-five. Which meant leaving Indianapolis at two, which meant getting in there at about one-thirty, latest, to allow for the walk between gates. Which meant leaving Washington National at eleven-thirty or twelve, latest. Which wasn’t possible. The last direct flight from National to Indianapolis was at nine-thirty. There was a morning cluster and an evening cluster. Nothing in between.

“She’ll come in on the twelve thirty-five,” she said.

Emerson checked his watch. *Quarter to twelve.*

“Which means Reacher will be here soon,” he said.

At ten to twelve a courier arrived at Helen Rodin’s building with six large cardboard cartons containing the defense’s copies of the prosecution’s evidence. The discovery process, mandated by the rules of due process. By the Bill of Rights, as interpreted. The courier called from the lobby and Helen told him to come on up. He had to make two trips with his handcart. He stacked the boxes in the empty secretarial pen. Helen signed for them and he left. Then she opened them. There was a mass of paperwork and dozens of photographs. And eleven new VHS cassettes. They had labels with numbers neatly printed on them that referred to a notarized sheet that described them as faithful and complete copies of the parking garage’s security tapes, made by an independent third-party

contractor. Helen took them all out and stacked them separately. She would have to take them home and use her own VCR to look at them. She didn't have a VCR in the office. Or a television set.

There was a television set in the Marriott's coffee shop. It was mounted high in the corner, on a black articulated bracket bolted to the wall. The sound was off. Reacher watched an advertisement that featured a young woman in a filmy summer dress romping through a field of wildflowers. He wasn't sure what product was being advertised. The dress, maybe, or makeup, or shampoo, or allergy medicine. Then a news banner popped up. *Noon Report.* Reacher checked his watch. Twelve exactly. He glanced toward the reception desk in the lobby. He had a clear view. No sign of Hutton. Not yet. So he glanced back at the television. Ann Yanni was on. She seemed to be live on location, downtown, out on the street. *In front of the Metropole Palace Hotel.* She talked silently but earnestly for a moment and then the picture cut to tape of dawn twilight. An alley. Police barriers. A shapeless form under a white sheet. Then the picture cut again. To a driver's license photograph. Pale skin. Green eyes. Red hair. Just under the chin a caption was superimposed: *Alexandra Dupree.*

Alexandra. Sandy.

Now they've gone too far, Reacher thought.

He shivered.

Way too far.

He stared at the screen. Sandy's face was still there. Then the picture cut again, back to tape of the early hours, to a head-and-shoulders shot of Emerson. A recorded interview. Yanni had her microphone shoved up under Emerson's nose. He was talking. Yanni pulled the microphone back and asked a question. Emerson talked some more. His eyes were flat and empty and tired and hooded against the bright light on the camera. Even without the sound Reacher knew what he was saying. He was promising a full and complete investigation. *We'll get this guy,* he was saying.

"I saw you from the desk," a voice said.

Then it said, "And I thought to myself, don't I know that guy?"

Then it said, "And I thought to myself, don't I know that guy?

Reacher looked away from the TV.

Eileen Hutton was standing right there in front of him.

Her hair was shorter. She had no tan. There were fine lines around her eyes. But otherwise she looked just the same as she had fourteen years ago. And just as good. Medium height, slim, poised. Groomed. Fragrant. Feminine as hell. She hadn't put on a pound. She was wearing civvies. Khaki chino pants, a white T, a blue oxford shirt open over it. Penny loafers, no socks, no makeup, no jewelry.

No wedding band.

"Remember me?" she said.

Reacher nodded.

"Hello, Hutton," he said. "I remember you. Of course I do. And it's good to see you again."

She had a purse and a key card in her hand. A rolling carry-on with a long handle at her feet.

"It's good to see you again, too," she said. "But please tell me it's a coincidence that you're here. Please tell me that."

Feminine as hell, except she was still a woman in a man's world, and you could still see the steel if you knew where to look. Which was into her eyes. They ran like a stock ticker, warm, warm, welcome, welcome, with a periodic bright flash: *Mess with me and I'll rip your lungs out.*

"Sit down," Reacher said. "Let's have lunch."

"Lunch?"

"It's what people do at lunch time."

"You were expecting me. You've been waiting for me."

Reacher nodded. Glanced back up at the TV set. Sandy's driver's license picture was on the screen again. Hutton followed his gaze.

was on the screen again. Hutton followed his gaze.

“Is that the dead girl?” she asked. “I heard it on the radio, driving down. Sounds like a person should get combat pay, coming here.”

“What did the radio say? There’s no sound in here.”

“Homicide. Late last night. Local girl got her neck broken. A single blow to the right temple. In an alley outside a hotel. Not this one, I hope.”

“No,” Reacher said. “It wasn’t this one.”

“Brutal.”

“I guess it was.”

Eileen Hutton sat down at the table. Not across from him. In the chair next to him. Just like Sandy, at the sports bar.

“You look great,” he said. “You really do.”

She said nothing.

“It’s good to see you,” he said again.

“Likewise,” she said.

“No, I mean it.”

“I mean it, too. Believe me, if we were at some Beltway cocktail party I would be getting all misty and nostalgic with the best of them. I might still, as soon as I find out you’re not here for the reason I think you’re here.”

“What reason would that be?”

“To keep your promise.”

“You remember that?”

“Of course I do. You talked about it all one night.”

“And you’re here because the Department of the Army got a subpoena.”

Hutton nodded. “From some idiot prosecutor.”

“Rodin,” Reacher said.

“That’s the guy.”

“My fault,” Reacher said.

“Christ,” Hutton said. “What did you tell him?”

“Nothing,” Reacher said. “I didn’t tell him anything. But he told me something. He told me my name was on the defense’s witness list.”

“The *defense* list?”

Reacher nodded. “That surprised me, obviously. So I was confused. So I asked him if my name had come from some old Pentagon file.”

“Not in this lifetime,” Hutton said.

“As I found out,” Reacher said. “But still, I had said the magic words. I had mentioned the Pentagon. The type of guy he is, I knew he would go fishing. He’s very insecure. He likes his cases armor-plated. So I’m sorry.”

“You should be. I get to spend two days in the back of beyond and I get to perjure myself from here to breakfast time.”

“You don’t need to do that. You can claim national security.”

Hutton shook her head. “We talked about it, long and hard. We decided to stay away from anything that draws attention. That Palestinian thing was very thin. If that unravels, everything unravels. So I’m here to swear blind that James Barr was GI Joe.”

“You OK with that?”

“You know the army. None of us is a virgin anymore. It’s about the mission, and the mission is to keep a lid on the KC thing.”

“Why did they delegate you?”

“Two birds with one stone. No good to them to send someone else and still have me out there knowing the truth. This way, I can’t talk about it ever again, anywhere. Not without effectively confessing to perjury one time in Indiana. They’re not dumb.”

“I’m surprised they still care. It’s practically ancient history.”

“How long have you been out?”

“Seven years.”

“And clearly you don’t have a subscription to the *Army Times.*”

“What?”

“Or maybe you never knew.”

“Never knew what?”

“Where it went back then, up the chain of command.”

“Division, I supposed. But maybe not all the way to the top.”

“It stopped on a certain colonel’s desk. He was the one who nixed it.”

“And?”

“His name was Petersen.”

“And?”

“Colonel Petersen is now Lieutenant General Petersen. Three stars. Congressional liaison. About to get his fourth star. About to be named Vice Chief of Staff of the Army.”

That could complicate things, Reacher thought.

“Embarrassing,” he said.

“You bet your ass embarrassing,” Hutton said. “So believe me, this is one lid that is going to stay on. You need to bear that in mind. Whatever you want to do

about your promise, you can't talk about what happened. Any more than I can. They would find a way to get to you."

"Neither of us needs to talk about it. It's a done deal."

"I'm very glad to hear it."

"I think."

"You think?"

"Ask me how they really got my name."

"How did they really get your name?"

"From James Barr himself."

"I don't believe it."

"I didn't believe it, either. But I do now."

"Why?"

"We should have lunch. We really need to talk. Because I think there's someone else out there who knows."

Emerson and Bianca called it quits at twelve-fifty. Reacher never showed. The feeder flight came in on time. Nobody that could have been a female Brigadier General from the Pentagon got off. The two cops waited until the arrivals hall emptied out and went quiet. Then they got in their car and drove back to town.

Reacher and Hutton had lunch. A waitress came over, happy to get some business out of her corner table at last. The menu was coffee-shop-basic. Reacher ordered a grilled cheese sandwich and coffee. Hutton went with chicken Caesar and tea. They ate and talked. Reacher ran through the details of the case. Then he ran through his theory. The perverse choice of location, the presumed coercion. He told Hutton about Niebuhr's theory of the new and persuasive friend. Told her that Barr claimed he had no new friends, and very few old ones

friend. Told her that Barr claimed he had no new friends, and very few old ones.

“Can’t be a new friend anyway,” Hutton said. “Because this is a multilayered setup. There’s the contemporaneous evidence, and the historical parallels. Second story of a parking garage fourteen years ago in KC, second story of a parking garage here and now. Virtually the same rifle. Boat tail sniper ammunition. And the desert boots. I never saw them before Desert Shield. They’re suggestive. Whoever scripted this for him knew all about his past. Which means it isn’t a new friend. It can’t be. It would take years and years before Barr would feel like sharing anything about KC.”

Reacher nodded. “But obviously he did, eventually. Which is why I said there’s someone else out there who knows.”

“We need to find that person,” Hutton said. “The mission is to keep the lid on this thing.”

“Not my mission. I don’t care if this Petersen guy gets his fourth star.”

“But you do care that a quarter million veterans don’t get their reputations trashed. The scandal would taint all of them. And they were good people.”

Reacher said nothing.

“It’s easy enough,” Hutton said. “If James Barr doesn’t have many friends, you don’t have a very big pool to search through. One of them has to be the guy.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Two birds with one stone,” Hutton said. “You get to the puppet master and the army gets to relax.”

“So why doesn’t the army do it for me?”

“We can’t afford to draw attention.”

“I’ve got operational problems,” Reacher said.

“No jurisdiction?”

“Worse than that. I’m about to get arrested.”

“For what?”

“For killing that girl behind the hotel.”

“What?”

“The puppet master doesn’t like me being here. He already tried something on Monday night, with that same girl as bait. So I went to see her yesterday, twice. And now they killed her and I’m sure I’m her last unexplained contact.”

“Have you got an alibi?”

“Depends on the exact timing, but probably not. I’m sure the cops are already looking for me.”

“Problem,” Hutton said.

“Only temporary,” Reacher said. “Science is on my side. If her neck was broken by a single blow to her right temple, then her head rotated a little, counterclockwise, which means the punch was thrown by a left-hander. And I’m right-handed. If I had hit her in the right temple I would have knocked her out for sure, but I wouldn’t have broken her neck. I would have had to do that separately, afterward.”

“You sure?”

Reacher nodded. “I used to do this stuff for a living, remember.”

“But will they believe you? Or will they figure you’re big enough to have done it with your weak hand?”

“I’m not going to risk finding out.”

“You’re going to run?”

“No, I’m going to stick around. But I’m going to have to stay out of their way. Which will slow me down some. A lot, in fact. Which is why I said I’ve got operational problems.”

“Can I help?”

Reacher smiled.

“It’s good to see you, Hutton,” he said. “It really is.”

“How can I help?”

“My guess is there’ll be a cop called Emerson waiting for you after you’re done with your deposition. He’ll ask you about me. Just play dumb. Just say I never showed up, you didn’t see me, you don’t know where I am, all that kind of stuff.”

She was quiet for a spell.

“You’re upset,” she said. “I can tell.”

He nodded. Rubbed his face, like he was washing without water.

“I don’t care much about James Barr,” he said. “If someone wanted to set him up so he took the punishment he should have taken fourteen years ago, that was OK with me. But this thing with the girl is different. It’s way out of line. She was just a sweet dumb kid. She meant no harm.”

Hutton was quiet for a moment longer.

“Are you sure about the threat to Barr’s sister?” she asked.

“I don’t see any other leverage.”

“But there’s no sign of a threat. As a prosecutor I couldn’t see entering it as a separate charge.”

“Why else would Barr have done what he did?”

Hutton didn’t answer.

“Will I see you later?” she asked.

“I’ve got a room not far away,” he said. “I’ll be around.”

“OK,” she said.

“Unless I’m already in jail.”

Unless I'm already in jail.

The waitress came back and they ordered dessert. Reacher asked for more coffee and Hutton got more tea. They kept on talking. Random subjects, random questions. They had fourteen years to catch up on.

Helen Rodin searched through the six cartons of evidence and found a crisp photocopy of a sheet of paper that had been found next to James Barr's telephone. It was as close as he had gotten to a personal phone book. It had three numbers on it, written in neat and careful handwriting. Two were for his sister Rosemary, one at her condo and the other at work. The third number was for Mike. The neighborhood guy. Nothing for anyone called Charlie.

Helen dialed Mike's number. It rang six times and cut to an answering machine. She left her office number and asked for a return call on a matter of great importance.

Emerson spent an hour with a sketch artist and came up with a pretty good likeness of Jack Reacher's face. The drawing was then scanned into a computer and colorized. Dirty-blond hair, ice-blue eyes, medium-to-dark tan. Emerson then typed the name, and estimated the height at six-five, the weight at two-fifty, the age between thirty-five and forty-five. He put the police department's phone number on the bottom line. Then he e-mailed it all over the place and set the printer to churn out two hundred color copies. He told every prowl car driver to take a sheaf and give one to every hotel clerk and barman in town. Then he added: every restaurant, diner, lunch counter, and sandwich shop, too.

James Barr's friend Mike called Helen Rodin back at three o'clock in the afternoon. She asked for his address and got him to agree to a face-to-face interview. He said he was home for the rest of the day. So she called a cab and headed out. Mike lived on James Barr's street, twenty minutes from downtown. Barr's house was visible from Mike's front yard. Both houses were similar. All the houses on the street were similar. They were 1950s ranches, long and low. Helen guessed they had all started out identical. But a half-century's worth of adding on and reroofing and re-siding and ongoing landscaping had made them

adding on and reroofing and re-siding and ongoing landscaping had made them diverge in appearance. Some looked upmarket and some still looked basic. Barr's place looked worn. Mike's place looked manicured.

Mike himself was a tired fifty-something who worked the morning shift at a paint wholesaler. His wife arrived home while Helen was still introducing herself. She was also a tired fifty-something. Her name was Tammy, which didn't suit her. She was a part-time dental nurse. She worked two mornings a week for a downtown dentist. She ushered Helen and Mike into the living room and then went away to make coffee. Helen and Mike sat down and started out with an awkward initial silence that lasted minutes.

"So, what can I tell you?" Mike asked eventually.

"You were Mr. Barr's friend," Helen said.

Mike glanced at the living room door. It was open.

"Just a neighbor," he said.

"His sister called you a friend."

"We were neighborly. Some folks might call that friendly."

"Did you spend time together?"

"We would chat a little if he walked by with his dog."

"About what kind of thing?"

"Our yards," Mike said. "If he was decorating he would ask me about paint. I asked him who fixed his driveway. Things like that."

"Baseball?"

Mike nodded. "We would talk about that."

Tammy came in with three cups of coffee on a tray. There was cream and sugar and a small plate of cookies with them, and three paper napkins. She put the tray on a low table and sat down next to her husband.

"Help yourself," she said.

"Help yourself," she said.

"Thank you," Helen said. "Thank you very much."

They all served themselves and there was silence in the room.

"Were you ever in Mr. Barr's house?" Helen asked.

Mike glanced at his wife.

"Once or twice," he said.

"They weren't friends," Tammy said.

"Was it a surprise?" Helen asked. "That he did what he did?"

"Yes," Tammy said. "It was."

"So you don't need to feel bad about mixing with him before. It wasn't something that anyone could have predicted. These things are always a surprise. Neighbors never know."

"You're trying to get him off."

"Actually I'm not," Helen said. "But there's a new theory that he didn't act alone. I'm just trying to make sure that the other man gets punished, too."

"It wasn't Mike," Tammy said.

"I don't think it was," Helen said. "Really. Not for a moment. Not now that I've met him. But whoever the other man is, you or Mike might know him or have heard about him or even seen him coming and going."

"Barr didn't really have friends," Mike said.

"Nobody?"

"Not that he spoke about to me. He lived with his sister until she moved out. I guess that was enough for him."

"Does the name Charlie mean anything to you?"

Mike just shook his head.

“What did Mr. Barr do when he had a job?”

“I don’t know,” Mike said. “He hasn’t worked for years.”

“I’ve seen a man over there,” Tammy said.

“When?”

“Now and then. Occasionally. He comes and goes. All times of the day and night, like a friend would.”

“For how long?”

“Ever since we moved here. I spend more time at home than Mike does. So I notice more.”

“When was the last time you saw this man?”

“Last week, I think. A couple of times.”

“Friday?”

“No, earlier. Tuesday and Wednesday, maybe.”

“What does he look like?”

“He’s small. He’s got funny hair. Black, like hog bristles.”

Charlie, Helen thought.

Eileen Hutton walked three fast blocks south from the Marriott and arrived at the courthouse at one minute to four exactly. Alex Rodin’s secretary came down to escort her up to the third floor. Depositions were taken in a large conference room because most witnesses brought their own lawyers and court reporters with them. But Hutton was on her own. She sat down alone on one long side of a large table and smiled as a microphone was placed in front of her and a video camera was focused on her face. Then Rodin came in and introduced himself. He brought a small team with him. An assistant, his secretary, a court reporter

He brought a small team with him. An assistant, his secretary, a court reporter with her machine.

“Would you state your full name and title for the record?” he asked.

Hutton looked at the camera.

“Eileen Ann Hutton,” she said. “Brigadier General, Judge Advocate General’s Corps, United States Army.”

“I hope this won’t take long,” Rodin said.

“It won’t,” Hutton said.

And it didn’t. Rodin was trawling in a sea he hadn’t charted. He was like a man in a darkened room. All he could do was dart around randomly and hope he bumped into something. After six questions he realized he was never going to.

He asked, “How would you characterize James Barr’s military service?”

“Exemplary without being exceptional,” Hutton said.

He asked, “Was he ever in trouble?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Hutton said.

He asked, “Did he ever commit a crime?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Hutton said.

He asked, “Are you aware of recent events in this city?”

“Yes, I am,” Hutton said.

He asked, “Is there anything in James Barr’s past that might shed light on the likelihood or otherwise of his having been involved in those events?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Hutton said.

Finally he asked, “Is there any reason why the Pentagon might be more aware of James Barr than any other veteran?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Hutton said.

So at that point Alex Rodin gave up.

“OK,” he said. “Thank you, General Hutton.”

Helen Rodin walked thirty yards and stood on the street for a moment outside James Barr’s house. It had police tape across the entryway and a plywood sheet nailed over the broken front door. It looked forlorn and empty. There was nothing to see. So she used her cell phone to call a cab and had it take her to the county hospital. It was after four o’clock in the afternoon when she arrived and the sun was in the west. It lit up the white concrete building with pale shades of orange and pink.

She rode up to the sixth floor and signed in with the Board of Corrections and found the tired thirty-year-old doctor and asked him about James Barr’s condition. The doctor didn’t really answer. He wasn’t very interested in James Barr’s condition. That was clear. So Helen just walked past him and opened Barr’s door.

Barr was awake. He was still handcuffed to the cot. His head was still clamped. His eyes were open and he was staring at the ceiling. His breathing was low and slow and the heart monitor was beeping less than once a second. His arms were trembling slightly and his handcuffs were rattling against the bed frame. Quiet, dull, metallic sounds.

“Who’s there?” he said.

Helen stepped close and leaned into his field of view.

“Are they looking after you?” she asked.

“I have no complaints,” he said.

“Tell me about your friend Charlie.”

“Is he here?”

“No, he’s not here.”

“Did Mike come?”

“I don’t think they allow visitors. Just lawyers and family.”

Barr said nothing.

“Are those your only friends?” Helen said. “Mike and Charlie?”

“I guess,” Barr said. “And Mike’s more of a neighbor.”

“What about Jeb Oliver?”

“Who?”

“He works at the auto parts store.”

“I don’t know him.”

“Are you sure?”

Barr’s eyes moved and his lips pursed, like a man searching his memory, trying to be helpful, desperate for approval.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I never heard of him.”

“Do you use drugs?”

“No,” Barr said. “Never. I wouldn’t do that.” He was quiet for a beat. “Truth is I don’t really do much of anything. I just live. That’s why this whole thing makes no sense to me. I spent fourteen years in the world. Why would I throw it all away now?”

“Tell me about Charlie,” Helen said.

“We hang out,” Barr said. “We do stuff.”

“With guns?”

“A little bit.”

“Where does Charlie live?”

Where does Charlie live?

“I don’t know.”

“How long have you been friends?”

“Five years. Maybe six.”

“And you don’t know where he lives?”

“He never told me.”

“He’s been to your place.”

“So?”

“You never went to his place?”

“He came to mine instead.”

“Do you have his phone number?”

“He just shows up, here and there, now and then.”

“Are you close?”

“Close enough.”

“How close exactly?”

“We get along.”

“Well enough to tell him what happened fourteen years ago?”

Barr didn’t answer. Just closed his eyes.

“Did you tell him?”

Barr said nothing.

“I think you told him,” Helen said.

Barr didn't confirm or deny it.

"I'm surprised that a man doesn't know where his friend lives. Especially a friend as close as I think Charlie is."

"I didn't push it," Barr said. "I was lucky to have a friend at all. I didn't want to ruin it with questions."

Eileen Hutton got up from Alex Rodin's deposition table and shook hands all around. Then she stepped out to the corridor and came face-to-face with a guy she assumed was the cop called Emerson. The one Reacher had warned her about. He confirmed it by handing her a card with his name on it.

"Can we talk?" he asked.

"About what?" she asked back.

"About Jack Reacher," Emerson said.

"What about him?"

"You know him, am I right?"

"I knew him fourteen years ago."

"When did you last see him?"

"Fourteen years ago," she said. "We were in Kuwait together. Then he shipped out somewhere. Or I did. I can't remember."

"You didn't see him today?"

"He's in Indiana?"

"He's in town. Right here, right now."

"Small world."

“How did you get here?”

“I flew into Indianapolis and rented a car.”

“Staying overnight?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Where?”

“The Marriott.”

“Reacher killed a girl last night.”

“Are you sure?”

“He’s our only suspect.”

“That would be very unlike him.”

“Call me if you see him. The station house number is on my card. And my direct extension. And my cell phone.”

“Why would I see him?”

“Like you said, it’s a small world.”

A police black-and-white crawled north through the building rush hour traffic. Past the gun store. Past the barbershop. *Any Style $7.* Then it eased right and turned into the motor court. The cop in the passenger seat got out and walked to the office. Gave the clerk a flyer. Laid it flat on the counter and swiveled it around and slid it across.

“Call us if this guy shows up, OK?” the cop said.

“He’s already here,” the clerk said. “But his name’s Heffner, not Reacher. I put him in room eight, last night.”

The cop stood still. “Is he in there now?”

“I don’t know. He’s come and gone a few times.”

“How long did he book for?”

“He paid one night. But he didn’t give the key back yet.”

“So he’s planning to be here again tonight.”

“I guess.”

“Unless he’s already here.”

“Unless,” the clerk said.

The cop stepped back to the office door. Signaled his partner. His partner shut the motor down and locked the car and walked over.

“Room eight, false name,” the first cop said.

“In there now?” his partner asked.

“We don’t know.”

“So let’s find out.”

They took the clerk with them. They made him stand well back. They drew their weapons and knocked on room eight’s door.

No response.

They knocked again.

No response.

“Got a master key?” the first cop asked.

The clerk handed him a key. The cop put it in the lock gently, one-handed. Turned it slowly. Opened the door a half inch and paused and then smashed it all the way open and stepped inside. His partner stepped in right behind him. Their guns traced left and right and up and down, fast and random and tense.

guns traced left and right and up and down, fast and random and tense.

The room was empty.

Nothing in there at all, except a forlorn little sequence of bathroom items lined up on a shelf above the sink. A new pack of throwaway razors, open, one used. A new can of shaving foam, with dried bubbles around the nozzle. A new tube of toothpaste, twice squeezed.

“This guy travels light,” the first cop said.

“But he hasn’t checked out,” his partner said. “That’s for sure. Which means he’s coming back.”

CHAPTER 10

Reacher was falling asleep on the bed in room 310 at the Marriott Suites. He was on his back, like a dead man. He and Hutton had talked so long in the coffee shop that she had almost been late for her appointment. She had checked her watch at five to four and had thrust her key card at him and asked him to dump her bag in her room. Then she had run straight out to the street. He guessed he was supposed to leave her card at the desk afterward. But he didn't. He didn't have anywhere he needed to be. Not right then. So he just parked the bag and stayed inside.

He wasn't crazy about room 310, all things considered. It was on the third floor, which made the window a difficult escape route. Room eight at the motor court had been better. Much better. Ground floor, a tangled old neighborhood, it gave a guy a sporting chance. Open the window, step out, look for an alley, or a door, or another window. That was good. This was bad. He was three floors up. A long climb. And he wasn't even sure if the Marriott's windows opened at all. Maybe they didn't. Maybe the main office lawyers had been worried about liability. Maybe they had foreseen a steady deluge of infants raining down on the parking lot blacktop. Or maybe it was a question of economies of scale. Maybe the cost of hinges and handles outweighed a little extra on the air-conditioning bill. Whatever, it wasn't a great room to be in. Not by any measure. Not for the long term.

But it was OK for the short term. So he closed his eyes and drifted away. *Sleep when you can, because you never know when you're going to sleep again.* That was the old army rule.

Emerson's plan was pretty straightforward. He put Donna Bianca in room seven. Told the two patrolmen to stash their car three streets away and walk back and wait in room nine. He put a car two streets behind the motor court, and another four blocks north, where the auto dealers were, and another two blocks south. He told the clerk to stay awake and watch through the window and call Bianca in room seven as soon as he saw the guy he knew as Heffner walk in.

Eileen Hutton got back to the Marriott at four-thirty. There was no key card waiting for her at the desk. No message. So she went up in the elevator and followed the arrows to room 310 and knocked on the door. There was a short pause and then the door opened and Reacher let her in.

“How’s my room?” she asked.

“The bed’s comfortable,” he said.

“I’m supposed to call Emerson if I see you,” she said.

“Are you going to?”

“No.”

“Perjury *and* harboring a fugitive,” he said. “All in one day.”

She dug in her purse and came out with Emerson’s card. “You’re their only suspect. He gave me three separate phone numbers. They sound pretty serious.”

He took the card from her. Put it in his back pocket, with the cocktail napkin that had Helen Rodin’s cell number on it. He was turning into a walking phone book.

“How was the thing with Rodin?” he asked.

“Straightforward,” she said.

He said nothing. She moved around, checking the suite. Bathroom, bedroom, living room, kitchenette. She took her bag and stood it neatly against a wall.

“Want to stay?” she said.

He shook his head.

“I can’t,” he said.

“OK,” she said.

“But I could come back later, if you like.”

She paused a beat.

“OK,” she said. “Come back later.”

Alex Rodin stepped back into his office and closed the door and called Emerson.

“Have you got him yet?” he asked.

“Just a matter of time,” Emerson said. “We’re looking for him all over. And we’re watching his room. He’s at the old motor court. Under a false name.”

“That’s interesting,” Rodin said. “It means he might have used a false name at the Metropole, too.”

“I’ll check,” Emerson said. “I’ll show the clerk the picture.”

“We might really be able to nail him,” Rodin said. He clicked off, thinking about two new framed headlines for his office wall. First Barr, and then Reacher.

Reacher let himself out of Hutton’s suite and used the stairs instead of the elevator. On the ground floor he turned away from the lobby and found a back corridor with a fire door at the end of it. He pushed the fire door open and held it ajar with his foot. Took Emerson’s card out of his pocket and tore it in half lengthwise and folded the half with the name on it four times. He pressed the tongue into the fire door’s lock with the ball of his thumb and wedged it there with the folded cardboard. He closed the door gently and pushed it flush with the frame with the flat of his hand. Then he walked away, past a Dumpster, through the staff lot, out to the street, heading north. The sidewalks were busy and the traffic lanes were starting to clog. He walked at a normal pace and used his height to scan the middle distance for patrol cars or cops on corners. The day was still warm. There was a weather system somewhere out there. Somewhere near. There was high pressure in the sky, clamping down, trapping the smell of damp earth and nitrogen fertilizer in the air.

He reached the raised highway and turned west in its shadow. The roadbed strode along on pillars forty feet high. Underneath it were untidy lots, some vacant and full of trash, some with old brick buildings with dark skylights in their roofs, some with new metal sheds housing body shops and spray paint operations. He passed the back of the black glass tower and stayed in the

operations. He passed the back of the black glass tower and stayed in the highway's shadow and turned south, ready to pass behind the library. He stopped suddenly and crouched and fiddled with his shoe. Like he had a stone. Glanced back under his arm and saw nobody behind him. No tail.

He moved on. After the library he was exposed for forty yards. The plaza was east of him. He stopped momentarily on a spot he judged was directly below where Helen Rodin had parked the day before and where James Barr should have parked on Friday. Forty feet lower down the view was different but the geometry was the same. He could see the wilted tributes propped against the pool's southern wall. They were small splashes of faded color in the distance. Beyond them was the DMV's door. People were coming out in ones and twos. He checked his watch. Ten to five.

He moved on, in the open, and made it across to First Street's northernmost block. He looped one block south and three blocks east and came up on the parking garage's entrance from the west. He walked up the ramp and found the security camera's lens. It was a small circle of dirty glass mounted on a plain black box that was bolted high up in the angle of two concrete beams. He waved at it. It was too high, ideally. It should have been lower, at license plate level. But all the pillars below waist height were scuffed and scraped. A rainbow of different colors. Drivers were careless. Mounted lower, the camera would have lasted a day and a half. Maybe less.

He walked up the ramps to the second level. Headed north and east, to the far back corner. The garage was still and quiet, but full. The space that James Barr had used was occupied. No room for sentiment in the scramble for downtown parking. No room for reverence.

The border between the old garage and the new construction was marked by a triple barrier of tape strung between pillars. There was standard yellow-and-black contractor's *Caution Do Not Enter* tape and above it and below it were new lengths of blue-and-white *Police Line Do Not Cross* tape. He used his forearm and stretched all three lines higher and just ducked underneath. No need to drop to one knee. No need to scuff a pair of jeans. No need to leave a mess of fibers. Not even for a guy six inches taller than Barr, and not even with a new line of tape six inches lower than the one Barr had encountered. *He was literally going out of his way to leave every last piece of evidence he could.*

Reacher walked on into the gloom. The new construction was rectangular in

shape. Maybe forty yards south to north, maybe two hundred east to west. Which meant Reacher arrived at the new northeast corner after thirty-five paces. He stood six feet back from the perimeter wall and looked down and right. He had a perfectly good view. No need to press up against a pillar. No need to squirm around like a horse on its back in a summer meadow.

He stood there and watched. People were coming out of the government office in increasing numbers. There was quite a flow. Some paused and lit cigarettes as soon as they were out in the air. Others moved on directly west, some fast, some slow. All of them turned and tracked around the north end of the pool. None of them walked where Barr's victims had walked. The funeral tributes were a disincentive. A reminder. Therefore it was hard to judge what Friday's scene had looked like. Hard, but not impossible. Reacher watched the walking people and in his mind made them forgo their respectful right turns. He made them continue straight on. They would be slow entering the bottleneck. But not too slow. And they would be close. The combination of moderate speed and proximity would exaggerate the deflection angles. It would make the job harder. It was a basic principle of long-gun use. A bird traversing the sky a hundred yards away was an easy target. The same bird at the same speed flying six feet in front of your face was an impossible target.

He pictured the people streaming right-to-left. He closed one eye and extended his arm and pointed his finger. *Click, click-click, click-click-click.* Six aimed shots. Four seconds. Fast. Tough geometry. Tension, exposure, vulnerability.

Six hits, including the deliberate miss.

Exceptional shooting.

They don't forget.

He dropped his arm to his side. It was cold in the gloom. He shivered. The air was clammy and damp and full of the smell of lime. It had been hot in Kuwait City. The air had been shimmering and full of the smell of baked dust and desert sand. Reacher had stood in the parking garage and sweated. The street below him had been blinding. Murderous. Like a blast furnace.

Hot in Kuwait City.

Four shots there.

Six shots here.

He stood and watched the people coming out the DMV door. There were plenty of them. Ten, twelve, fifteen, twenty. They turned and looped north and then turned again and walked west between the pool and the NBC peacock. They gave each other space. But if they had been in the bottleneck they would have bunched up tight.

Plenty of them.

Six shots, in four seconds.

He looked for anyone not moving. Didn't see anybody. No cops, no old men in boxy suits. He turned around and retraced his steps. Lifted the tape again and ducked under it and walked back down the ramps. Slipped out to the street and turned west, heading for the shadows under the highway. Heading for the library.

He crossed the forty yards of open ground and hugged the library's side wall and went in through a handicapped entrance. He had to walk close to the desk, but he wasn't worried about that. If Emerson started circulating *Wanted* notices he would hit the post offices and bars and hotels first. It would be a long time before he started canvassing librarians.

He made it to the lobby OK and stepped over to the pay phones. Took the cocktail napkin out of his pocket and dialed Helen Rodin's cell. She picked up on the fifth ring. He pictured her rooting through her purse, squinting at the screen, fumbling with the buttons.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

"Reacher?"

"Yes," he said. "Are you alone?"

"Yes," she said. "But you're in trouble."

"Who called you?"

"My father."

“You believe him?”

“No.”

“I’m coming to see you.”

“There’s a cop in the lobby.”

“I figured. I’ll come in through the garage.”

He hung up and walked back past the desk and out the side entrance. Back under the highway. He stayed in its shelter until he was opposite the back of the black glass tower. Opposite the vehicle ramp. He checked left, checked right, and walked straight down. Past the NBC trucks, past the Mustang he figured for Ann Yanni’s, to the elevator. He pressed the call button and waited. Checked his watch. Five-thirty. Most people would be leaving the building. A down elevator was certain to stop at the lobby level. An up elevator, maybe not. He hoped.

The elevator car arrived in the garage and let three people out. They walked away. Reacher stepped in. Pressed *4*. Stood back. The car rose one floor and stopped. In the lobby. The doors slid back like a theater curtain. The cop was right there, four feet from the elevator, facing away. He had his feet apart and his hands on his hips. He was almost close enough to touch. A man stepped into the elevator. He didn’t speak. Just nodded a two-guys-in-an-elevator greeting. Reacher nodded back. The guy pressed *7*. The doors stayed open. The cop watched the street. The new guy jiggled the button. The cop moved. He swiped his cap off his head and ran his fingers through his hair. The doors closed. The elevator moved up.

Reacher got out on four and walked through a small knot of people on their way home. Helen Rodin had her door open and ready. He stepped inside her suite and she closed up after him. She was wearing a short black skirt and a white blouse. She looked young. Like a schoolgirl. And she looked worried. Like a conflicted person.

“I should turn you in,” she said.

“But you won’t,” Reacher said.

“No,” she said. “I should, but I won’t.”

“Truth is I liked that girl,” Reacher said. “She was a sweet kid.”

“She set you up.”

“I wasn’t offended.”

“Someone didn’t like her.”

“We can’t tell. Affection didn’t come into it. She was disposable, that’s all. A means to an end.”

“The puppet master really doesn’t want you around.”

Reacher nodded. “That’s for damn sure. But he’s shit out of luck there, because I’m not leaving now. He just guaranteed that for himself.”

“Is it safe to stay?”

“It’s safe enough. But this thing with the girl is going to slow me down. So you’re going to have to do most of the work.”

She led him into the inner office. She sat down at her desk. He stayed well away from the window. He sat on the floor and propped his back against the wall.

“I already started the work,” Helen said. “I spoke to Rosemary and talked to Barr’s neighbors. Then I went back to the hospital. I think we’re looking for a guy called Charlie. Small guy, bristly black hair. Interested in guns. I got the impression he’s kind of furtive. I think he’s going to be hard to find.”

“How long has he been on the scene?”

“Five or six years, apparently. He’s the only long-term friend anyone could name. And he’s the only one Barr owns up to.”

Reacher nodded again. “That works for me.”

“And Barr doesn’t know Jeb Oliver and doesn’t use drugs.”

“You believe him?”

“Yes, I do,” Helen said. “Really. Right now I believe everything he says. It’s

like he spent fourteen years turning his life around and now he can't believe he went back. I think he's as upset about all this as anyone."

"Except the victims."

"Give him a break, Reacher. Something weird was going on."

"Does this guy Charlie know about Kuwait City?"

"Barr wouldn't say. But I think he does."

"Where does he live?"

"Barr doesn't know."

"He doesn't *know*?"

"He just sees him around. He just shows up now and then. Like I said, I think he's going to be hard to find."

Reacher said nothing.

"Did you speak to Eileen Hutton?" Helen asked.

"She's no threat. The army is keeping the lid on."

"Did you find the guy that was following you?"

"No," Reacher said. "I didn't see him again. They must have pulled him off."

"So we're nowhere."

"We're closer than we were. We can start to see a shape. We can see four guys, at least. One, the old guy in the suit. Two, this guy called Charlie. Three, someone big and very strong and left-handed."

"Why him?"

"He killed the girl last night. The old guy is too old and it sounds like Charlie might be too small. And the physical evidence suggests a left-handed blow."

"And number four is the puppet master."

"And number four is the puppet master."

Reacher nodded again. "In the shadows somewhere, making plans, pulling strings. We can assume he doesn't run around doing this kind of stuff himself."

"But how can we get to him? If he's pulled the guy off your tail, we can assume he's pulled Charlie back, too. They're hunkering down."

"There's another way. A big wide highway."

"Where?"

"We missed something very obvious," Reacher said. "We spent all this time looking down the wrong end of the gun. All we've done is look at who fired it."

"What should we have done?"

"We should have thought harder."

"About what?"

"James Barr fired four times in Kuwait City. And he fired six times here."

"OK," Helen said. "He fired two more shots here. So?"

"But he didn't," Reacher said. "Not really. Not if you think about it laterally. Truth is he fired four *fewer* shots here."

"That's ridiculous. Six is two more than four. Not four *fewer*."

"Kuwait City was very hot. Unbearable in the middle of the day. You had to be nuts to be out and about. The streets were empty most of the time."

"So?"

"So in Kuwait City James Barr killed every live human he saw. One, two, three, four, game over. The street was deserted apart from our four guys. They were the only people dumb enough to be out in the heat. And Barr took them all. He ran the table. At the time it seemed logical to me. He wanted to see the pink mist. It struck me that maybe he might have been satisfied with seeing it once, but apparently he wasn't. So it made some kind of sense that if he didn't stop at one, he would go all the way until he ran out of targets. And he did. In Kuwait

City, he ran out of targets."

Helen Rodin said nothing.

"But he didn't run out of targets here," Reacher said. "There had to have been a dozen people in that bottleneck. Or fifteen. More than ten, anyway. And he had a ten-round magazine. But he stopped shooting after six. Just stopped. He left four rounds in the gun. They're listed right there in Bellantonio's dog and pony show. And that's what I meant. He fired the most he could fire in Kuwait City, and four *less* than the most he could fire here. Which makes the psychology different here. He chose not to run the table here. Why?"

"Because he was hurrying?"

"He had an autoloader. The voice-mail recording shows six shots in four seconds. Which means he could have fired ten in less than seven seconds. Three seconds wouldn't have made any kind of a difference to him."

Helen said nothing.

"I asked him," Reacher said. "When I saw him in the hospital. I asked him how he would have done it, theoretically. Like a recon briefing. So he thought about it. He knows the area. He said he would have parked on the highway. Behind the library. He said he would have buzzed the window down and *emptied the mag.*"

Helen said nothing.

"But he didn't empty the mag," Reacher said. "He stopped shooting after six. Just stopped. Coldly and calmly. Which makes the whole dynamic different. This wasn't a crazy man sent out to terrorize the city on a dare. He wasn't pushed into it just for the fun of the carnage. This wasn't random, Helen. It wasn't psychotic. There was a specific, limited, coherent purpose behind it. Which reverses the focus. We should have seen it. We should have seen that this whole thing is about the victims, not the shooter. They weren't just unlucky people in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"They were targets?" Helen said.

"Carefully chosen," Reacher said. "And as soon as they were safely down, Barr packed up and left. With four bullets remaining. A random psycho episode

wouldn’t have panned out like that. He’d have kept on pulling the trigger until he clicked on empty. So this wasn’t a spree. It was an assassination.”

Silence in the office.

“We need to look at who the victims were,” Reacher said. “And we need to look at who wanted them dead. That’s what’s going to lead us to where we need to be.”

Helen Rodin didn’t move.

“And we need to do it real fast,” Reacher said. “Because I don’t have much time and we already wasted the best part of three days looking at everything ass-backward.”

The tired thirty-year-old doctor on the sixth floor of the county hospital was finishing up his afternoon rounds. He had left James Barr for last. Partly because he wasn’t expecting any dramatic change in his condition, and partly because he didn’t care anyway. Looking after sick thieves and swindlers was bad enough, but looking after a mass murderer was absurd. Doubly absurd, because straight after Barr was on his feet he was going to be laid back down on a gurney and some other doctor was going to come in and kill him.

But ethical obligations are hard to ignore. As is habit. As is duty, and routine, and structure. So the doctor went into Barr’s room and picked up his chart. Took out his pen. Glanced at the machines. Glanced at the patient. He was awake. His eyes were moving.

Alert, the doctor wrote.

“Happy?” he asked.

“Not really,” Barr said.

Responsive, the doctor wrote.

“Tough shit,” he said, and put his pen away.

Barr’s right handcuff was rattling gently against the cot rail. His right hand itself

was trembling and slightly cupped and the thumb and index finger were in constant motion, like he was trying to roll an imaginary ball of wax into a perfect sphere.

“Stop that,” the doctor said.

“Stop what?”

“Your hand.”

“I can’t.”

“Is that new?”

“A year or two.”

“Not just since you woke up?”

“No.”

The doctor looked at the chart. *Age: Forty-one.*

“Do you drink?” he asked.

“Not really,” Barr said. “A sip sometimes, to help me sleep.”

The doctor disbelieved him automatically and flipped through the chart to the tox screen and the liver function test. But the tox screen was clear and the liver function was healthy. *Not a drinker. Not an alcoholic. Not even close.*

“Have you seen your own physician recently?” he asked.

“I don’t have insurance,” Barr said.

“Stiffness in your arms and legs?”

“A little.”

“Does your other hand do that, too?”

“Sometimes.”

The doctor took out his pen again and scribbled on the bottom of the chart: *Observed tremor in right hand, not post-traumatic, primary diagnosis alcoholism unlikely, stiffness in limbs present, possible early-onset PA?*

“What’s wrong with me?” Barr asked.

“Shut up,” the doctor said. Then, duty done, he clipped the chart back on the foot of the bed and walked out of the room.

Helen Rodin searched through the evidence cartons and came out with the formal specification of charges against James Barr. Among many other technical violations of the law, the State of Indiana had listed five counts of homicide in the first degree with aggravating circumstances, and as due process required had gone on to list the five alleged victims by name, sex, age, address, and occupation. Helen scanned the page, ran her fingers down the columns for address and occupation.

“I don’t see any obvious connections,” she said.

“I didn’t mean they were all targets,” Reacher said. “Probably only one of them was. Two, at most. The others were window dressing. An assassination disguised as a spree. That’s my guess.”

“I’ll get to work,” she said.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said.

He used the fire stairs instead of the elevator and got back to the garage unseen. He hustled up the ramp and across the street and under the highway again. *The invisible man. Life in the shadows.* He smiled. He stopped.

He decided to go look for a pay phone.

He found one on the side wall of a small grocery called Martha’s, two blocks north of the cheap clothing store he had used. The booth faced a wide alley that was used as a narrow parking lot. There were six slanted spaces full of six cars. Beyond them, a high brick wall topped with broken glass. The alley turned ninety degrees behind the grocery. He guessed it turned again somewhere and let out on the next block south.

out on the next block south.

Safe enough, he thought.

He took Emerson's torn card out of his pocket. Chose the cell number. Dialed the phone. Leaned his shoulder against the wall and watched both ends of the alley at once and listened to the purr of the ring tone in his ear.

"Yes?" Emerson said.

"Guess who?" Reacher said.

"Reacher?"

"You named that tune in one."

"Where are you?"

"I'm still in town."

"Where?"

"Not far away."

"You know we're looking for you, right?"

"I heard."

"So you need to turn yourself in."

"I don't think so."

"Then we'll come find you," Emerson said.

"Think you can?"

"It'll be easy."

"You know a guy called Franklin?"

"Sure I do."

"And he knows you'll be"

"Ask him how easy it'll be."

"That was different. You could have been anywhere."

"You got the motor court staked out?"

There was a pause. Emerson said nothing.

"Keep your people there," Reacher said. "Maybe I'll be back. Or on the other hand, maybe I won't."

"We'll find you."

"Not a chance. You're not good enough."

"Maybe we're tracing this call."

"I'll save you the trouble. I'm outside a grocery called Martha's."

"You should come in from the cold."

"I'll trade," Reacher said. "Find out who placed the cone in the parking garage and then I'll think about coming in."

"Barr placed the cone."

"You know he didn't. His van isn't on the tapes."

"So he used another vehicle."

"He doesn't have another vehicle."

"So he borrowed one."

"From a friend?" Reacher said. "Maybe. Or maybe the friend placed the cone for him. Either way, you find that friend, and I'll think about coming in to talk to you."

"There are hundreds of cars on those tapes."

"You've got the resources," Reacher said.

“I don’t trade,” Emerson said.

“I think his name is Charlie,” Reacher said. “Small guy, wiry black hair.”

“I don’t trade,” Emerson said again.

“I didn’t kill the girl,” Reacher said.

“Says you.”

“I liked her.”

“You’re breaking my heart.”

“And you know I didn’t stay at the Metropole last night.”

“Which is why you dumped her there.”

“And I’m not left-handed.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Tell Bellantonio to talk to your ME.”

“We’ll find you,” Emerson said.

“You won’t,” Reacher said. “Nobody ever has before.”

Then he hung up and walked back to the street. Crossed the road and hiked half a block north and took cover behind a stack of unused concrete lane dividers in a vacant lot. He waited. Six minutes later two cruisers pulled up in front of Martha’s grocery. Lights, but no sirens. Four cops spilled out. Two went in the store and two went to find the phone. Reacher watched them regroup on the sidewalk. Watched them search the alley and check around its corner. Watched them come back. Watched them admit defeat. He saw one of the four get on his radio for a short conversation full of defensive body language. Raised palms, shrugged shoulders. Then the conversation ended and Reacher slipped away east, heading back toward the Marriott.

The Zec had only a thumb and a single finger remaining on each hand. On the right was a stump of an index finger, blackened and gnarled by frostbite. He had once spent a week outdoors in the winter, wearing an old Red Army tunic, and the way its previous owner's water canteen had ridden on his belt had worn the fabric of the right pocket thinner than the left. On such trivial differences survival had hung. His left hand had been saved, and his right hand lost. He had felt his fingers die from the pinkie inward. He had taken his hand out of his pocket and let it freeze hard enough to go completely numb. Then he had chewed off the dead fingers before the gangrene could spread. He remembered dropping them to the ground, one by one, like small brown twigs.

His left hand retained the pinkie. The middle three fingers were missing. Two had been amputated by a sadist with garden shears. The Zec had removed the other himself, with a sharpened spoon, so as to be disqualified for labor in some machine shop or other. He couldn't recall the specifics, but he remembered a persuasive rumor that it was better to lose another finger than work on that particular detail. Something to do with the overseer.

Ruined hands. Just two of many souvenirs of another time, another place. He wasn't very aware of them anymore, but they made modern life difficult. Cell phones had gotten so damn *small.* Linsky's number was ten digits long, and it was a pig to dial. The Zec never retained a phone long enough to make it worth storing a number. That would be madness.

Eventually he got the number entered and he concentrated hard and pressed the call button with his left-hand pinkie. Then he juggled the phone into his other palm and cupped it near his ear. He didn't need to hold it close. His hearing was still excellent, which was a miracle all by itself.

"Yes?" Linsky said.

"They can't find him," the Zec said. "I shouldn't have told you to break off our own surveillance. My mistake."

"Where have they looked?"

"Here and there. He stayed last night at the motor court. They've got it staked out, but I'm sure he won't go back. They've got a man at the lawyer's office. Other than that, they're stumbling around in the dark."

"What do you want me to do?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to find him. Use Chenko and Vladimir. And I'll send Raskin to you. Work together. Find him tonight and then call me."

Reacher stopped two blocks short of the Marriott. He knew what Emerson would be doing. He had *been* Emerson for thirteen years. Emerson would be running down a mental list. Likely haunts, known associates. Likely haunts at this time of day would include eating places. So Emerson would be sending cars to diners and restaurants and cafés, including the salad place that Helen Rodin liked and the sports bar. Then he would move on to known associates, which pretty much limited him to Helen Rodin herself. He would have the lobby cop ride up to the fourth floor and knock on the office door.

Then he would take a chance on Eileen Hutton.

So Reacher stopped two blocks short of the Marriott and looked around for a place to wait. He found one behind a shoe store. There was a three-sided corral made of head-high brick walls shielding a shoulder-high plastic garbage receptacle from public view. Reacher stepped in and found that if he leaned his shoulder on the trash can he could see a yard-wide sliver of the Marriott's main door. He wasn't uncomfortable. And it was the best-smelling garbage dump he had ever been in. The can smelled of fresh cardboard and new shoes. Better than the kind of place you find behind a fish store.

He figured if Emerson was efficient he would have to wait less than thirty minutes. *Very* efficient, less than twenty. Average, somewhere up around an hour. He leaned on the trash can and passed the time. It wasn't late but the streets were already quiet. There were very few people out and about. He watched, and waited. Then the smell of new leather from the discarded shoe boxes distracted him. It started him thinking about footwear. Maybe he should drop by the store sometime and pick out a brand-new pair. He stuck his foot out and looked down. The boat shoes he had on were soft and light and the soles were thin. They had been fine for Miami. Not so good for his current situation. He could foresee a time when he would appreciate something heavier.

Then he looked down again. Rocked back and brought his feet together and took the same pace forward. And stopped. He tried it again with his other foot, and stopped again, like a freeze-frame of a man walking. He stared down with

stopped again, like a freeze-frame of a man walking. He stared down, with something in the back of his mind. Something from Bellantonio's evidence. Something among all those hundreds of printed pages.

Then he looked up again, because he sensed movement in the corner of his eye at the Marriott's door two blocks away. He saw a squad car's hood. It moved into his field of view and dipped once as it braked and stopped. Then two cops appeared, in uniform, walking forward. He glanced at his watch. Twenty-three minutes. He smiled. Emerson was good, but not unbelievable. The cops went in through the door. They would spend five minutes with the desk clerk. The clerk would give up Hutton's room number without a fight. Generally speaking, hotel clerks from small heartland cities weren't ACLU activists. And guests were gone tomorrow, but the local PD was always there.

So the cops would go to Hutton's room. They would knock on her door. Hutton would let them in. She had nothing to hide. The cops would poke around and be on their way. Ten minutes, tops, beginning to end.

Reacher checked his watch again, and waited.

The cops were back out after eight minutes. They paused outside the doors, tiny figures far in the distance. One of them ducked his head to his collar and used his radio, calling in a negative progress report, listening for the next destination. The next likely haunt. The next known associate. Pure routine. *Have a fun evening, boys,* Reacher thought. *Because I'm going to. That's for damn sure.* He watched them drive off and waited another minute in case they were driving his way. Then he stepped out of the brick corral and headed for Eileen Hutton.

Grigor Linsky waited in his car in a fire lane in a supermarket parking lot, framed against a window that was entirely pasted over with a gigantic orange advertisement for ground beef at a very low price. *Old and spoiled,* Linsky thought. *Or full of* Listeria. *The kind of thing the Zec and I would once have killed to eat.* And *killed* was the truth. Linsky had no illusions. None at all. The Zec and he were bad people made worse by experience. Their shared suffering had conferred no grace or nobility. Quite the reverse. Men in their situation inclined toward grace and nobility had died within hours. But the Zec and he had survived, like sewer rats, by abandoning inhibition, by fighting and clawing, by betraying those stronger than themselves, by dominating those weaker.

And they had learned. What works once works always.

Linsky watched in his mirror and saw Raskin's car coming toward him. It was a Lincoln Town Car, the old square style, black and dusty, listing like a holed battleship. It stopped nose-to-tail with him and Raskin got out. He looked exactly like what he was, which was a second-rate Moscow hoodlum. Square build, flat face, cheap leather jacket, dull eyes. Forty-some years old. A stupid man, in Linsky's opinion, but he had survived the Red Army's last hurrah in Afghanistan, which had to count for something. Plenty of people smarter than Raskin hadn't come back whole, or come back at all. Which made Raskin a survivor, which was the quality that meant more than any other to the Zec.

Raskin opened the rear door and slid into the back seat behind Linsky. He didn't speak. Just handed over four copies of Emerson's *Wanted* poster. A delivery from the Zec. How the Zec had gotten the posters, Linsky wasn't sure. But he could make a guess. The posters themselves were pretty good. The likeness was pretty accurate. It would serve its purpose.

"Thank you," Linsky said politely.

Raskin didn't respond.

Chenko and Vladimir showed up two minutes later, in Chenko's Cadillac. Chenko was driving. Chenko always drove. He parked behind Raskin's Lincoln. Three large black cars, all in a line. Jack Reacher's funeral procession. Linsky smiled to himself. Chenko and Vladimir got out of their car and walked forward, one small and dark, the other big and fair. They got into Linsky's own Cadillac, Chenko in the front, Vladimir in the back next to Raskin, so that counting clockwise there was Linsky in the driver's seat, then Chenko, then Vladimir, then Raskin. The proper pecking order, instinctively obeyed. Linsky smiled again and handed out three copies of the poster. He kept one for himself, even though he didn't need it. He had seen Jack Reacher many times already.

"We're going to start over," he said. "Right from the beginning. We can assume the police will have missed something."

———

Reacher pulled the fire door open and removed the cardboard plug from the lock and put it in his pocket. He stepped inside and let the door latch behind him. He followed the back corridor to the elevator and rode up to three. Knocked on Hutton's door. He had a line in his head, from Jack Nicholson playing a hard-ass Marine colonel in some movie about Navy lawyers: *Nothing beats a woman you have to salute in the morning.*

Hutton took her time opening the door. He guessed she had settled down somewhere after getting rid of the cops. She hadn't expected to be disturbed again so soon. But eventually the door opened and she was standing there. She was wearing a robe, coming fresh out of the shower. The light behind her haloed her hair. The corridor was dim and the room looked warm and inviting.

"You came back," she said.

"Did you think I wouldn't?"

He stepped into the suite and she closed the door behind him.

"The cops were just here," she said.

"I know," he said. "I watched them all the way."

"Where were you?"

"In a garbage dump two blocks away."

"You want to wash up?"

"It was a very clean garbage dump. Behind a shoe store."

"You want to go out to dinner?"

"I'd prefer room service," he said. "I don't want to be walking around more than I have to."

"OK," she said. "That makes sense. Room service it is."

"But not just yet."

"Should I get dressed?"

“Not just yet.”

She paused a beat.

“Why not?” she said.

“Unfinished business,” he said.

She said nothing.

“It’s good to see you again,” he said.

“It’s been less than three hours,” she said.

“I mean today,” he said. “As a whole. After all this time.”

Then he stepped close and cupped her face in his hands. Pushed his fingertips into her hair like he used to and traced the contours of her cheekbones with his thumbs.

“Should we do this?” she said.

“Don’t you want to?”

“It’s been fourteen years,” she said.

“Like riding a bicycle,” he said.

“Think it will be the same?”

“It’ll be better.”

“How much better?” she asked.

“We were always good,” he said. “Weren’t we? How much better could it get?”

She held still for a long moment. Then she put her hands behind his head. She pulled and he bent down and they kissed. Then again, harder. Then again, longer. Fourteen years melted away. Same taste, same feel. Same excitement. She pulled his shirt out of his pants and unbuttoned it from the bottom upward, urgently. When the last button was open she smoothed the flat of her hands over

his chest, his shoulders, his back, down to his waistband, around to the front. His boat shoes came off easily. And his socks. He kicked his pants across the room and untied her belt. Her robe fell open.

“Damn, Hutton,” he said. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

“You either,” she said.

Then they headed for the bed, stumbling, fast and urgent, locked together like an awkward four-legged animal.

Grigor Linsky took the south side of town. He checked the salad place and then cruised down to the docks. Turned around and quartered the narrow streets, covering three sides of every block, pausing at the turns to scan the sidewalks on the fourth. The Cadillac idled along. The power steering hissed at every corner. It was slow, patient work. But it wasn’t a large city. There was no bustle. No crowds. And nobody could hide forever. That had been Grigor Linsky’s experience.

———

Afterward Hutton lay in Reacher’s arms and used her fingertips to trace a long slow inventory of the body she had known so well. It had changed in fourteen years. He had said *You haven’t changed a bit* and she had said *You either,* but she knew both of them had been generous. Nobody stays the same. The Reacher she had known in the desert had been younger and baked lean by the heat, as fluid and graceful as a greyhound. Now he was heavier, with knotted muscles as hard as old mahogany. The scars she remembered had smoothed out and faded and were replaced by newer marks. There were lines in his forehead. Lines around his eyes. But his nose was still straight and unbroken. His front teeth were still there, like trophies. She slid her hand down to his and felt his knuckles. They were large and hard, like walnut shells matted with scar tissue. *Still a fighter,* she thought. *Still trading his hands for his nose and his teeth.* She moved up to his chest. He had a hole there, left of center. Ruptured muscle, a crater big enough for the tip of her finger. A gunshot wound. Old, but new to her. Probably a .38.

“New York,” Reacher said. “Years ago. Everyone asks.”

“Everyone?”

“Who sees it.”

Hutton snuggled in closer. “How many people see it?”

He smiled. “You know, on beaches, stuff like that.”

“And in bed?”

“Locker rooms,” he said.

“And in bed,” she said again.

“I’m not a monk,” he said.

“Did it hurt?”

“I don’t remember. I was out for three weeks.”

“It’s right over your heart.”

“It was a little revolver. Probably a weak load. He should have tried a head shot. That would have been better.”

“For him. Not for you.”

“I’m a lucky man. Always have been, always will be.”

“Maybe. But you should take better care.”

“I try my best.”

Chenko and Vladimir stayed together and took the north side of town. They kept well away from the motor court. The cops had that situation buttoned up, presumably. So their first stop was the sports bar. They went in and walked

presumably. So their first stop was the sports bar. They went in and walked around. It was dark inside and not very busy. Maybe thirty guys. None of them matched the sketch. None of them was Reacher. Vladimir stayed near the door and Chenko checked the men's room. One stall had a closed door. Chenko waited until the toilet flushed and the guy came out. It wasn't Reacher. It was just a guy. So Chenko rejoined Vladimir and they got back in the car. Started quartering the streets, slowly, patiently, covering three sides of every block and pausing at the turns to scan the sidewalks on the fourth.

Hutton propped herself on an elbow and looked down at Reacher's face. His eyes were still the same. Set a little deeper, maybe, and a little more hooded. But they still shone blue like ice chips under an Arctic sun. Like a color map of twin snowmelt lakes in a high mountain landscape. But their expression had changed. Fourteen years ago they had been rimmed red by the desert sandstorms and clouded with some kind of bitter cynicism. They had been army eyes. Cop eyes. She remembered the way they would swing slow and lazy across a room like deadly tracers curling in toward a target. Now they were clearer. Younger. More innocent. He was fourteen years older, but his gaze was like a child's again.

"You just had your hair cut," she said.

"This morning," he said. "For you."

"For me?"

"Yesterday I looked like a wild man. They told me you were coming. I didn't want you to think I was some kind of a bum."

"Aren't you?"

"Some kind, I guess."

"What kind?"

"The voluntary kind."

"We should eat," she said.

"Sounds like a plan," he said.

“What do you want?”

“Whatever you get. We’ll share. Order big portions.”

“You can choose your own if you want.”

He shook his head. “A month from now some DoD clerk is going to go through your expenses. Better for you if he sees one meal rather than two.”

“Worried about my reputation?”

“I’m worried about your next promotion.”

“I won’t get one. I’m terminal at Brigadier General.”

“Not now that this Petersen guy owes you a big one.”

“Can’t deny two stars would be cool.”

“For me too,” Reacher said. “I got screwed by plenty of two-stars. To think I screwed one myself would be fun.”

She made a face.

“Food,” Reacher said.

“I like salads,” she said.

“Someone’s got to, I guess.”

“Don’t you?”

“Get a chicken Caesar to start and a steak to follow. You eat the rabbit food, I’ll eat the steak. Then get some kind of a big dessert. And a big pot of coffee.”

“I like tea.”

“Can’t do it,” Reacher said. “There are some compromises I just can’t make. Not even for the DoD.”

“But I’m thirsty.”

“They’ll send ice water. They always do.”

“I outrank you.”

“You always did. You ever see me drink tea because of it?”

She shook her head and got out of bed. Padded naked across to the desk. Checked the menu and dialed the phone. Ordered chicken Caesar, a sixteen-ounce sirloin, and a big pie with ice cream. And a six-cup pot of coffee. Reacher smiled at her.

“Twenty minutes,” she said. “Let’s take a shower.”

———

Raskin took the heart of downtown. He was on foot with the sketch in his hand and a list in his head: restaurants, bars, diners, sandwich shops, groceries, hotels. He started at the Metropole Palace. The lobby, the bar. No luck. He moved on to a Chinese restaurant two blocks away. In and out, fast and discreet. He figured he was pretty good for this kind of work. He wasn’t a very noticeable guy. Not memorable. Average height, average weight, unremarkable face. Just a hole in the air, which in some ways was a frustration, but in others was a major advantage. People looked at him, but they didn’t really *see* him. Their eyes slid right on by.

Reacher wasn’t in the Chinese place. Or the sub shop, or the Irish bar. So Raskin stopped on the sidewalk and decided to dodge north. He could check the lawyer’s office and then head toward the Marriott. Because according to Linsky those places were where the women were. And in Raskin’s experience guys who weren’t just holes in the air got to hang out with women more than the average.

Reacher got out of the shower and borrowed Hutton’s toothbrush and toothpaste and comb. Then he toweled off and walked around and collected his clothes. Put them on and tucked his shirt in. He was dressed and sitting on the bed when he heard the knock at the door.

“Room service,” a foreign voice called

"Room service," a foreign voice called.

Hutton put her head out the bathroom door. She was dressed but halfway through drying her hair.

"You go," Reacher said.

"Me?"

"You have to sign for it."

"You can write my name."

"Two hours from now the cops won't have found me and they'll come back here. Better that we don't have a guy downstairs who knows you're not alone."

"You never relax, do you?"

"The less I relax, the luckier I get."

Hutton patted her hair into shape and headed for the door. Reacher heard the rattle of a cart and the clink of plates and the scratch of a pen. Then he heard the door close and he stepped through to the living room and found a wheeled table set up in the middle of the floor. The waiter had placed one chair behind it.

"One knife," Hutton said. "One fork. One spoon. We didn't think of that."

"We'll take turns," Reacher said. "Kind of romantic."

"I'll cut your steak up and you can use your fingers."

"You could feed it to me. We should have ordered grapes."

She smiled.

"Do you remember James Barr?" he asked.

"Too much water over the dam," she said. "But I reread his file yesterday."

"How good a shooter was he?"

"Not the best we ever had, not the worst."

“That’s what I remember. I was just in the garage, taking a look. It was impressive shooting. Very impressive. I don’t remember him being *that* good.”

“There’s a lot of evidence there.”

He nodded. Said nothing.

“Maybe he’s been practicing hard,” she said. “He was in six years but he’s been out nearly three times as long. Maybe he was a late developer.”

“Maybe,” he said.

She looked at him. “You’re not staying, are you? You’re planning on leaving right after dinner. Because of this thing with the cops. You think they’ll come back to the room.”

“They will,” Reacher said. “Count on it.”

“I don’t have to let them in.”

“A place like this, the cops will do pretty much what they want. And if they find me here, you’re in trouble.”

“Not if you’re innocent.”

“You’ve got no legitimate way of telling what I am. That’s what they’ll say.”

“I’m the lawyer here,” Hutton said.

“And I was a cop,” Reacher said. “I know what they’re like. They hate fugitives. Fugitives drive them nuts. They’ll arrest you along with me and sort it all out next month. By which time your second star will be in the toilet.”

“So where are you going?”

“No idea. But I’ll think of something.”

The street door at the bottom of the black glass tower was locked for the night. Raskin knocked on it, twice. The security guard at the lobby desk looked up.

Raskin waved the sketch at him.

“Delivery,” he mouthed.

The guard got up and walked over and used a key from a bunch on a chain to unlock the door. Raskin stepped inside.

“Rodin,” he said. “Fourth floor.”

The guard nodded. The law offices of Helen Rodin had received plenty of deliveries that day. Boxes, cartons, guys with hand trucks. One more was to be expected. No big surprise. He walked back to his desk without comment and Raskin walked over to the elevator. Got in and pressed *4*.

First thing he saw on the fourth floor was a city cop standing outside the lawyer’s door. Raskin knew what that meant, immediately. It meant the lawyer’s office was still a live possibility. Which meant Reacher wasn’t in there at the present time and hadn’t tried to get in there anytime recently. So Raskin wheeled around like he was confused by the corridor layout and headed around a corner. Waited a moment and then headed back to the elevator. He folded the sketch and put it in his pocket. In the lobby he gave the guard a job-done type of wave and headed back out into the night. Turned left and headed north and east toward the Marriott Suites.

The six-cup pot of coffee was more than even Reacher could manage. He quit after five. Hutton didn’t seem to mind. He guessed she thought five out of six justified his insistence.

“Come see me in Washington,” she said.

“I will,” he said. “For sure. Next time I’m there.”

“Don’t get caught.”

“I won’t,” he said. “Not by these guys.”

Then he just looked at her for a minute. Storing away the memory. Adding another fragment to his mosaic. He kissed her once on the lips and walked to the door. Let himself out into the corridor and headed for the stairs. On the ground

floor he turned away from the lobby and used the fire door again. It swung shut and locked behind him and he took a deep breath and stepped out of the shadows and headed for the sidewalk.

Raskin saw him immediately. He was thirty yards away, walking fast, coming up on the Marriott from the rear. He saw a flash of glass in the streetlight. A fire door, opening. He saw a tall man stepping out. Standing still. Then the door jerked shut on a hydraulic closer and the tall man turned to watch it latch behind him and a stray beam of light was reflected off the moving glass and played briefly across his face. Just for a split second, like a handheld flashlight swinging through a fast arc. Like a camera strobe. Not much. But enough for Raskin to be certain. The man who had come through the fire door was the man in the sketch. Jack Reacher, for sure, no question. Right height, right weight, right face. Raskin had studied the details long and hard.

So he stopped dead and stepped backward into the shadows. Watched, and waited. Saw Reacher glance right, glance left, and set out walking straight ahead, due west, fast and easy. Raskin stayed where he was and counted *one, two, three* in his head. Then he came out of the shadows and crossed the parking lot and stopped again and peered around the corner to the west. Reacher was twenty yards ahead. Still walking, still relaxed. Still unaware. Center of the sidewalk, long strides, his arms swinging loose at his sides. He was a big guy. That was for sure. As big as Vladimir, easily.

Raskin counted to three again and let Reacher get forty yards ahead. Then he set out following. He kept his eyes fixed on the target and fumbled his cell phone out of his pocket. Dialed Grigor Linsky's number. Reacher walked on, forty yards in the distance. Raskin put the phone to his ear.

"Yes?" Linsky said.

"I found him," Raskin whispered.

"Where?"

"He's walking. West from the Marriott. He's about level with the courthouse now, two blocks to the north."

“Where’s he going?”

“Wait,” Raskin whispered. “Hold on.”

Reacher stopped on a corner. Glanced left and turned right, toward the shadows under the raised highway. Still relaxed. Raskin watched him across waist-high trash in an empty lot.

“He’s turned north,” he whispered.

“Toward?”

“I don’t know. The sports bar, maybe.”

“OK,” Linsky said. “We’ll come north. We’ll wait fifty yards up the street from the sports bar. Call me back in three minutes exactly. Meanwhile, don’t let him out of your sight.”

“OK,” Raskin said. He clicked his phone off but kept it up at his ear and took a shortcut across the empty lot. Paused against a blank brick wall and peered around its corner. Reacher was still forty yards ahead, still in the center of the sidewalk, arms swinging, still moving fast. A confident man, Raskin thought. Perhaps overconfident.

Linsky clicked off with Raskin and immediately dialed Chenko and Vladimir. Told them to rendezvous fifty yards north of the sports bar as fast as possible. Then he dialed the Zec.

“We found him,” he said.

“Where?”

“North part of downtown.”

“Who’s on him?”

“Raskin. They’re on the street, walking.”

The Zec was quiet for a moment.

“Wait until he settles somewhere,” he said. “And then get Chenko to call the cops. He’s got the accent. He can say he’s a bartender or a desk clerk or whatever.”

Raskin stayed forty yards back. He called Linsky again and kept the connection open. Reacher kept on walking, same stride, same pace. His clothes were dull and hard to see in the darkness. His neck and his hands were tan, but a little more visible. And he had a narrow stripe of pale skin around a fresh haircut, ghostly in the gloom. Raskin fixed his eyes on it. It was a white U-shaped glow, six feet off the ground, alternately rising and falling an inch with every step Reacher took. *Idiot,* Raskin thought. *He should have used boot polish. That’s what we’d have done in Afghanistan.* Then he thought: *Not that we ever had boot polish. Or haircuts.*

Then he stopped because Reacher stopped forty yards ahead. Raskin stepped back into a shadow and Reacher glanced right and turned left, into the mouth of a cross-street, out of sight behind a building.

“He’s gone west again,” Raskin whispered into the phone.

“Still good for the sports bar?” Linsky asked.

“Or the motor court.”

“Either one works for us. Move up a little. Don’t lose him now.”

Raskin sprinted ten paces and slowed at the turn. Pressed himself up against the corner of the building and peered around. And stared. *Problem.* Not with the view. The cross-street was long and wide and straight and lit at the far end by bright lights on the four-lane that ran north to the highway. So he had an excellent view. The problem was that Reacher was no longer part of it. He had disappeared. Completely.

CHAPTER 11

Reacher had once read that boat shoes had been invented by a yachtsman looking for better grip on slippery decks. The guy had taken a regular smooth-soled athletic shoe and cut tiny stripes into the rubber with a straight razor. He had experimented and ended up with the cuts lateral and wavy and close together. They had done the trick, like a miniature tire tread. A whole new industry had grown up. The style had migrated by association from yachts to slips to marinas to boardwalks to summer sidewalks. Now boat shoes were everywhere. Reacher didn't like them much. They were thin and light and insubstantial.

But they were quiet.

He had seen the guy in the leather coat as soon as he stepped out of the Marriott's fire door. It would have been hard not to. Thirty yards distant, shallow angle, decent illumination from vapor lights on poles all over the place. His glance had flicked left and he had seen him quite clearly. Seen him react. Seen him stop. Seen him thereby identify himself as an opponent. Reacher had set out walking straight ahead and had scrutinized the afterimage his night vision had retained. What kind of an opponent was this guy? Reacher had closed his eyes and concentrated, two or three paces.

Generic Caucasian, medium height, medium weight, red face and fair hair tinted orange and yellow by the streetlights.

Cop or not?

Not. Because of the jacket. It was a boxy square-shouldered double-breasted style made of chestnut-colored leather. By day it would be a definite shade of red-brown. And it had a glossy patina. It was definitely shiny. Not American. Not even from the kind of fire-sale store that sells leather garments for forty-nine bucks. It was a foreign style. Eastern European, just like the suit the twisted old guy had worn in the plaza. Not cheap. Just different. Russian, Bulgarian, Estonian, somewhere in there.

So, not a cop.

Reacher walked on. He kept his own footsteps quiet and focused on the sounds

Reacher walked on. He kept his own footsteps quiet and focused on the sounds behind him, forty yards back. Shorter strides, thicker soles, the slap of leather, the faint crunch of grit, the thump of a rubber three-quarter heel. This wasn't Charlie. No way would anybody call this guy small. Not large, but definitely not small, either. And he didn't have black hair. And this wasn't the guy who had killed the girl. Not big enough. So, add one to the tally. Not four of them. Five of them. At least. Maybe more.

Plan?

Was this guy armed? Possibly, but only with a handgun. He hadn't been carrying anything longer. And Reacher was sanguine about his chances as a moving target a hundred and twenty feet in front of a guy with a handgun. Handguns were across-the-room weapons, not down-the-street propositions. Average range for a successful engagement with a handgun was about twelve feet. He was ten times more distant. And he would hear the sound of the slide in the stillness. He would have time to react.

So, what was the plan? It was tempting to think about doubling back and taking the guy down. Just for fun. For retaliation. Reacher liked retaliation. *Get your retaliation in first* was his credo. *Show them what they're dealing with.*

Maybe.

Or maybe not. Or maybe later.

He took a random turn and walked on. He kept his steps silent. He kept his pace steady. He let the guy behind him fall into the rhythm. Like hypnosis. Left, right, left, right. He forced everything out of his mind except the distant footsteps behind him. He zoomed in on them. Concentrated on them. They were there, faint but perceptible. *Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch.* Left, right, left, right. Like hypnosis. He heard the sound of a cell phone being dialed. Just ten little electronic squawks, very quiet, almost inaudible, coming at him on the breeze in a random little sequence.

He walked on. Left, right, left, right. The streets were deserted. Downtown was dead after working hours were over. The city still had some way to go before it grew a vibrant urban community. That was for sure. He walked on. Heard faint sibilant whispering, forty yards behind him. The cell phone. *Who are you talking to, pal?* He walked on. Then he stopped on the next corner. Glanced right and

turned left into a wide straight cross-street, behind the cover of a four-story building.

Then he ran. Five paces, ten, fifteen, twenty, fast and silent, across the street to the right-hand sidewalk, past the first alley he saw, into the second. He crouched back in the shadows, in a blank gray double doorway. A fire exit, maybe from a theater or a movie house. He lay down flat on his front. The guy had been used to a vertical target. Instinctively he would be looking six feet off the ground. A low shape on the floor would mean less to him.

Reacher waited. He heard footsteps on the opposite sidewalk. The guy had seen his quarry turn a tight radius from the left-hand sidewalk of one street onto the left-hand sidewalk of the next street. Therefore subconsciously he would concentrate on the left, not the right. His first thought would be to look for still-vertical shapes in the alleys and the doorways on the left.

Reacher waited. The footsteps kept on coming. Close now. Then Reacher saw the guy. He was on the left-hand sidewalk. He was moving slow. He was looking indecisive. He was glancing ahead, glancing left, glancing ahead. He had a cell phone up at his ear. He stopped. Stood still. Looked back over his right shoulder, at the doorways and the alleys on the other side of the street. *Worth checking?*

Yes.

The guy moved sideways and backwards like a crab, diagonally, facing the street ahead of him and searching the right-hand sidewalk all at the same time. He moved out of Reacher's field of view like a film running in reverse. Reacher stood up silently and moved deeper into the alley into total darkness at its far end. He found a fat vertical kitchen vent and slid around behind it. Crouched on his haunches and waited.

It was a long wait. Then the footsteps came back. On the sidewalk. Into the alley. Slow, soft, careful. The guy was on his toes. No sound from the heels. Just the scrape of leather soles on grit. They rustled gently and low-level echoes of the sound came back off the alley's walls. The guy came closer. And closer.

He came close enough to smell.

Cologne, sweat, leather. He stopped four feet from where Reacher was hidden

and peered hopelessly into the darkness. Reacher thought: *Another step and you're history, pal. Just one more and it's Game Over for you.*

The guy turned around. Walked back to the street.

Reacher stood up and followed him, swift and silent. *Tables turned. Now* I'm *behind* you. *Time to hunt the hunters.*

Reacher was bigger than most human beings and in some ways quite clumsy, but he could be light on his feet when he needed to be and had always been good at covert pursuit. It was a skill born of long practice. Mostly it employed caution and anticipation. You had to know when your quarry was going to slow, stop, turn, check. And if you didn't know, you had to err on the side of caution. Better to hide and fall ten extra yards behind than give yourself away.

The guy in the leather coat searched every alley and every doorway on both sides of the street. Not well, but adequately. He searched and he moved forward, prey to the mistake that all adequate people make: *I didn't screw up yet. He's still somewhere up ahead.* He spoke twice on his cell phone. Quietly, but with agitation obvious in the tenor of his whisper. Reacher slipped from shadow to shadow behind him, hanging well back because the bright lights at the end of the street were getting close. The guy's searches became faster and more cursory. Hopeless and panicked, all at the same time. He made it to within twenty feet of the next turn and stopped dead and stood still.

And gave up. Just quit. He stood in the middle of the sidewalk and listened to his phone and said something in reply and then dropped his arms to his sides and all the covert rigidity went out of his body. He slumped a little and walked straight ahead, fast and big and loud and obvious like a guy with no purpose in the world except getting directly from *A* to *B.* Reacher waited long enough to be certain it wasn't a trick. Then he followed, moving silently from shadow to shadow.

Raskin walked past the sports bar's door and headed up the street. He could see Linsky's car in the distance. And Chenko's. The two Cadillacs were parked nose-to-tail at the curb, waiting for him. Waiting for the failure. Waiting for the hole in the air. *Well, here I am,* he thought.

But Linsky was civil about it. Mainly because to criticize one of the Zec's appointees was to criticize the Zec himself, and nobody would dare to do that.

"He probably took a wrong turn," Linsky said. "Maybe he didn't intend to be on that particular street at all. He probably doubled back through the alleys. Or else went into one of them to take a leak. Delayed himself and came out behind you."

"Did you check behind you?" Vladimir asked.

"Of course I did," Raskin lied.

"So what now?" Chenko asked.

"I'll call the Zec," Linsky said.

"He'll be royally pissed," Vladimir said. "We nearly had the guy."

Linsky dialed his phone. Relayed the bad news and listened to the response. Raskin watched his face. But Linsky's face was always unreadable. A skill born of long practice, and vital necessity. And it was a short call. A short response. Indecipherable. Just faint plastic sounds in the earpiece.

Linsky clicked off.

"We keep on looking," he said. "On a half-mile radius of where Raskin last saw him. The Zec is sending us Sokolov. He says we're sure of success with five of us."

"We're sure of nothing," Chenko said. "Except a big pain in the ass and no sleep tonight."

Linsky held out his phone. "So call the Zec and tell him that."

Chenko said nothing.

"Take the north, Chenko," Linsky said to him. "Vladimir, the south. Raskin, head back east. I'll take the west. Sokolov can fill in where we need him when he gets here."

Raskin headed back east, the way he had come, as fast as he could. He saw the sense in the Zec's plan. He had last seen Reacher about fifteen minutes ago, and a furtive man moving cautiously couldn't cover more than half a mile in fifteen minutes. So elementary logic dictated where Reacher must be. He was somewhere inside a circle a mile across. They had found him once. They could find him again.

He made it all the way down the wide straight cross-street and turned south toward the raised highway. Retracing his steps. He passed through the shadows under the highway and headed for the vacant lot on the next corner. Kept close to the wall. Made the turn.

Then the wall fell on him.

At least that was what it felt like. He was hit a staggering blow from behind and he fell to his knees and his vision went dark. Then he was hit again and his lights went out and he pitched forward on his face. Last thing he felt before he lost consciousness was a hand in his pocket, stealing his cell phone.

Reacher headed back under the highway with the cell phone warm in his hand. He leaned his shoulder against a concrete pillar as wide as a motel room and slid around it until his body was in the shadow and his hands were in the light from a lamp on a pole far above him. He took out the torn card with Emerson's numbers on it and dialed his cell.

"Yes?" Emerson said.

"Guess who?" Reacher said.

"This isn't a game, Reacher."

"Only because you're losing."

Emerson said nothing.

"How easy am I to find?" Reacher asked.

No reply.

“Got a pen and paper?”

“Of course I do.”

“So listen up,” Reacher said. “And take notes.” He recited the plate numbers from the two Cadillacs. “My guess is one of those cars was in the garage before Friday, leaving the cone. You should trace the plates, check the tapes, ask some questions. You’ll find some kind of an organization with at least six men. I heard some names. Raskin and Sokolov, who seem to be low-level guys. Then Chenko and Vladimir. Vladimir looks good for the guy who killed the girl. He’s as big as a house. Then there’s some kind of a lieutenant whose name I didn’t get. He’s about sixty and has an old spinal injury. He talked to his boss and referred to him as the Zec.”

“Those are Russian names.”

“You think?”

“Except Zec. What kind of a name is Zec?”

“It’s not Zec. It’s *the* Zec. It’s a word. A word, being used as a name.”

“What does it mean?”

“Look it up. Read some history books.”

There was a pause. The sound of writing.

“You should come in,” Emerson said. “Talk to me face-to-face.”

“Not yet,” Reacher said. “Do your job and I’ll think about it.”

“I am doing my job. I’m hunting a fugitive. You killed that girl. Not some guy whose name you claim you heard, as big as a house.”

“One more thing,” Reacher said. “I think the guy called Chenko also goes by the name of Charlie and is James Barr’s friend.”

“Why?”

“The description. Small guy, dark, with black hair that sticks up like a brush.”

“James Barr has got a Russian friend? Not according to our inquiries.”

“Like I said, do your job.”

“We’re doing it. Nobody mentioned a Russian friend.”

“He sounds American. I think he was involved with what happened on Friday, which means maybe this whole crew was involved.”

“Involved how?”

“I don’t know. But I plan to find out. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“You’ll be in jail tomorrow.”

“Like I’m in jail now? Dream on, Emerson.”

“Where are you?”

“Close by,” Reacher said. “Sleep well, Detective.”

He clicked the phone off and put Emerson’s number back in his pocket and took out Helen Rodin’s. Dialed it and moved around the concrete pillar into deep shadow.

“Yes?” Helen Rodin said.

“This is Reacher.”

“Are you OK? The cop is right outside my door now.”

“Suits me,” Reacher said. “Suits him too, I expect. He’s probably getting forty bucks an hour for the overtime.”

“They put your face on the six o’clock news. It’s a big story.”

“Don’t worry about me.”

“Where are you?”

“Free and clear. Making progress. I saw Charlie. I gave Emerson his plate number. Are you making progress?”

number. Are you making progress?

“Not really. All I’ve got is five random names. No reason I can see why anybody told James Barr to shoot any one of them.”

“You need Franklin. You need research.”

“I can’t afford Franklin.”

“I want you to find that address in Kentucky for me.”

“Kentucky?”

“Where James Barr went to shoot.”

Reacher heard her juggle the phone and flip through paper. Then she came back and read out an address. It meant nothing to Reacher. A road, a town, a state, a zip.

“What’s Kentucky got to do with anything?” Helen asked.

Reacher heard a car on the street. Close by, to his left, fat tires rolling slow. He slid around the pillar and looked. A PD prowl car, crawling, lights off. Two cops in the front, craning their necks, looking right, looking left.

“Got to go,” he said. He clicked the phone off and put it on the ground at the base of the pillar. Emerson’s caller ID would have trapped the number and any cell phone’s physical location could be tracked by the recognition pulse that it sends to the network, once every fifteen seconds, regular as clockwork. So Reacher left the phone in the dirt and headed west, forty feet below the raised roadbed.

Ten minutes later he was opposite the back of the black glass tower, in the shadows under the highway, facing the vehicle ramp. There was an empty cop car parked on the curb. It looked still and cold. Settled. Like it had been there for a spell. *The guy outside Helen’s door,* Reacher thought. He crossed the street and walked down the ramp. Into the underground garage. The concrete was all painted dirty white and there were fluorescent tubes blazing every fifteen feet. There were pools of light and pools of darkness. Reacher felt like he was

walking out of the wings across a succession of brightly-lit stages. The ceiling was low. There were fat square pillars holding up the building. The service core was in the center. The whole space was cold and silent and about forty yards deep and maybe three times as wide.

Forty yards deep.

Just like the new extension on First Street. Reacher stepped over and put his back against the front wall. Walked all the way across to the back wall. *Thirty-five paces.* He turned like a swimmer at the end of a lap and walked back. *Thirty-five paces.* He crossed diagonally to the far corner. The garage was dark back there. He threaded between two NBC vans and found the blue Ford Mustang he guessed belonged to Ann Yanni. It was clean and shiny. Recently waxed. It had small windows, because of the convertible top. A raked windshield. Tinted glass.

He tried the passenger door. Locked. He moved around the hood and tried the driver's door. The handle moved. Unlocked. He glanced around and opened the door.

No alarm.

He reached inside and touched the unlock button. There was a triple *thunk* as both door locks and the trunk lock unlatched. He closed the driver's door and stepped back to the trunk. The spare tire was under the floor. Nested inside the wheel were the jack and a length of metal pipe that both worked the jack and undid the wheel nuts. He took the pipe out and closed the trunk. Stepped around to the passenger side and opened the door and got inside the car.

The interior smelled of perfume and coffee. He opened the glove box and found a stack of road maps and a small leather folder the size of a purse diary. Inside the folder were an insurance slip and an auto registration, both made out to *Ms. Janine Lorna Ann Yanni* at a local Indiana address. He put the folder away again and closed the glove box. Found the right levers and lowered his seat as far as it would go. He reclined the back all the way, which wasn't far. Then he moved the whole seat backward to give himself as much legroom as he could get. He untucked his shirt and rested the pipe in his lap and lay back in the seat. Stretched. He had about three hours to wait. He tried to sleep. *Sleep when you can* was the old army rule.

First thing Emerson did was contact the phone company. He confirmed that the number his caller ID had caught was a cell phone. The service contract was written out to a business operating under the name *Specialized Services of Indiana.* Emerson tasked a first-year detective to track the business and told the phone company to track the phone. Initial progress was mixed. Specialized Services of Indiana dead-ended because it was owned by an offshore trust in Bermuda and had no local address. But the phone company reported that the cell phone was stationary and was showing up on three cells at once, which meant it had to be in the downtown area and would be easy to triangulate.

Rosemary Barr sweet-talked her way past the Board of Corrections desk on the sixth floor of the hospital and was granted an out-of-hours visit with her brother. But when she got to his room she found he was deeply asleep. Her sweet talk was wasted. She sat for thirty minutes but James didn't wake up. She watched the monitors. His heartbeat was strong and regular. His breathing was fine. He was still handcuffed and his head was still clamped but his body was perfectly still. She checked his chart, to make sure he was being properly cared for. She saw the doctor's scribbled note: *possible early-onset PA?* She had no idea what that meant, and late in the evening she couldn't find anyone willing to explain it to her.

The phone company marked the cell phone's location on a large-scale city map and faxed it to Emerson. Emerson tore it out of the machine and spent five minutes trying to make sense of it. He was expecting to find the three arrows meeting at a hotel, or a bar, or a restaurant. Instead they met on a vacant lot under the raised highway. He had a brief image in his mind of Reacher sleeping rough in a cardboard box. Then he concluded that the phone was abandoned, which was confirmed ten minutes later by the patrol car he sent out to check.

And then just for formality's sake he fired up his computer and entered the plate numbers Reacher had given him. They came back as late-model Cadillac DeVilles, both black, both registered to Specialized Services of Indiana. He wrote *dead end* on the sheet of paper and dropped it in a file.

Reacher woke up every time he heard the elevator motors start. The sound whined down the shaft through the cables and the moving cars rumbled. The first three times were false alarms. Just anonymous office people heading home after a long day at work. Every forty minutes or so they came down alone and walked wearily to their cars and drove away. Three times the tang of cold exhaust fumes drifted and three times the garage went quiet again and three times Reacher went back to sleep.

The fourth time, he stayed awake. He heard the elevator start and checked his watch. Eleven forty-five. *Showtime.* He waited and heard the elevator doors open. This time, it wasn't just another lone guy in a suit. It was a big crowd. Eight or ten people. Noisy. It was the whole cast and crew from the NBC affiliate's eleven o'clock news.

Reacher pressed himself down in the Mustang's passenger seat and hid the tire iron underneath the tails of his shirt. It was cold against the skin of his stomach. He stared up at the fabric roof and waited.

A heavy guy in baggy jeans passed through the darkness within five feet of the Mustang's front fender. He had a ragged gray beard and was wearing a Grateful Dead T-shirt under a torn cotton cardigan. Not on-screen talent. Maybe a cameraman. He walked on toward a silver pickup and climbed inside. Then came a man in a sharkskin suit and orange makeup. He had big hair and white teeth. Definitely on-screen talent, maybe weather, maybe sports. He passed by on the Mustang's other side and got into a white Ford Taurus. Then came three women together, young, casual dress, maybe the studio director and the floor manager and the vision mixer. They squeezed between the Mustang's trunk and a broadcast van. The car rocked three times as they nudged it. Then they split up and headed for their own separate rides.

Then came three more people.

Then came Ann Yanni.

Reacher didn't notice her individually until she put her hand on her car's door handle. She paused and called something out to one of the others. She got an answer, said something else, and then opened the door. She came in butt-first, swiveling and ducking her head. She was wearing old jeans and a new silk blouse. It looked expensive. Reacher guessed she had been on camera, but at an anchor's desk, visible from the waist up only. Her hair was stiff with spray. She

dumped herself in the seat and shut her door. Then she glanced to her right.

“Keep very quiet,” Reacher said to her. “Or I’ll shoot you.”

He jabbed the tire iron at her, under his shirt. Half-inch wide, long and straight, it looked plausible. She stared at it in shock. Face-to-face two feet away she looked thinner and older than she looked on the television screen. There were fine lines all around her eyes, full of makeup. But she was very beautiful. She had impossibly perfect features, bold and vivid and larger than life, like most TV people. Her blouse had a formal collar but was open three buttons. Prim and sexy, at the same time.

“Hands where I can see them,” Reacher said. “In your lap.” He didn’t want her to go for the horn. “Keys on the console.” He didn’t want her to hit the panic button. The new Fords he had driven had a little red button on the remote fob. He assumed it set off an alarm.

“Just sit tight,” he said. “Nice and quiet. We’ll be OK.”

He clicked the button on his side and locked the car.

“I know who you are,” she said.

“So do I,” he said.

He kept the tire iron in place and waited. Yanni sat still, hands in her lap, breathing hard, looking more and more scared as all around them her colleagues’ cars started up. Blue haze drifted. People drove away, one by one. No backward glances. The end of a long day.

“Keep very quiet,” Reacher said again, as a reminder. “Then we’ll be OK.”

Yanni glanced left, glanced right. Tension in her body.

“Don’t do it,” Reacher said. “Don’t do anything. Or I’ll pull the trigger. Gut shot. Or thigh. You’ll take twenty minutes to bleed out. Lots of pain.”

“What do you want?” Yanni asked.

“I want you to be quiet and sit still. Just for a few more minutes.”

She clamped her teeth and went quiet and sat still. The last car drove away. The white Taurus. The guy with the hair. The weatherman, or the sportscaster. There was tire squeal as he turned and engine noise as he gunned up the ramp. Then those sounds faded out and the garage went completely silent.

“What do you want?” Yanni asked again. Her voice wobbled. Her eyes were huge. She was trembling. She was thinking rape, murder, torture, dismemberment.

Reacher turned on the dome light.

“I want you to win the Pulitzer Prize,” he said.

“What?”

“Or the Emmy or whatever it is you guys get.”

“What?”

“I want you to listen to a story,” he said.

“What story?”

“Watch,” Reacher said.

He lifted his shirt. Showed her the tire iron resting against his stomach. She stared at it. Or at his shrapnel scar. Or both. He wasn’t sure. He balanced the tire iron in his palm. Held it up in the light.

“From your trunk,” he said. “Not a gun.”

He clicked the button on the door and unlocked the car.

“You’re free to go,” he said. “Whenever you want.”

She put her hand on the handle.

“But if you go, I go,” Reacher said. “You won’t see me again. You’ll miss the story. Someone else will get it.”

“We’ve been running your picture all night,” she said. “And the cops have got

Wanted posters all over town. You killed Alexandra Dupree."

Reacher shook his head. "Actually I didn't, and that's part of the story."

"What story?" she said again.

"Last Friday," Reacher said. "It wasn't what it seemed."

"I'm going to get out of the car now," Yanni said.

"No," Reacher said. "I'll get out. I apologize if I upset you. But I need your help and you need mine. So I'll get out. You lock the doors, start the car, keep your foot on the brake, and open your window an inch. We'll talk through the window. You can drive off anytime you want."

She said nothing. Just stared straight ahead as if she could make him vanish by not looking at him. He opened his door. Slid out and turned and laid the tire iron gently on the seat. Then he closed the door and just stood there. He tucked his shirt in. He heard the *thunk* of her door locks. She started her engine. Her brake lights flared red. He saw her reach up and switch off the dome light. Her face disappeared into shadow. He heard the transmission move out of Park. Her back-up lights flashed white as she moved the selector through Reverse into Drive. Then her brake lights went out and the engine roared and she drove off in a fast wide circle through the empty garage. Her tires squealed. Grippy rubber on smooth concrete. The squeals echoed. She lined up for the exit ramp and accelerated hard.

Then she jammed on the brakes.

The Mustang came to rest with its front wheels on the base of the ramp. Reacher walked toward it, crouching a little so he could see through the small rear window. No cell phone. She was just sitting there, staring straight ahead, hands on the wheel. The brake lights blazed red, so bright they hurt. The exhaust pipes burbled. White fumes kicked backward. Drops of water dripped out and made tiny twin pools on the floor.

Reacher walked around to her window and stayed three feet away. She buzzed the glass down an inch and a half. He dropped into a crouch so he could see her face.

"Why do I need your help?" she asked.

"Why do I need your help?" she asked.

"Because Friday was over too soon for you," he said. "But you can get it back. There's another layer. It's a big story. You'll win prizes. You'll get a better job. CNN will beat a path to your door."

"You think I'm that ambitious?"

"I think you're a journalist."

"What does *that* mean?"

"That in the end, journalists like stories. They like the truth."

She paused, almost a whole minute. Stared straight ahead. The car ticked and clicked as it warmed up. Reacher could sense the idle speed straining against the brakes. Then he saw her glance down and move her arm and shove the selector into Park. The Mustang rolled back six inches and stopped. Reacher shuffled sideways to stay level with the window. Yanni turned her head and looked straight at him.

"So tell me the story," she said. "Tell me the truth."

He told her the story, and the truth. He sat cross-legged on the concrete floor, so as to appear immobile and unthreatening. He left nothing out. He ran through all the events, all the inferences, all the theories, all the guesses. At the end he just stopped talking and waited for her reaction.

"Where were you when Sandy was killed?" she asked.

"Asleep in the motor court."

"Alone?"

"All night. Room eight. I slept very well."

"No alibi."

"You never have an alibi when you need one. That's a universal law of nature."

She looked at him for a long moment.

“What do you want me to do?” she said.

“I want you to research the victims.”

She paused.

“We could do that,” she said. “We have researchers.”

“Not good enough,” Reacher said. “I want you to hire a guy called Franklin. Helen Rodin can tell you about him. She’s in this building, two floors above you.”

“Why hasn’t she hired this Franklin guy herself?”

“Because she can’t afford him. You can. I assume you’ve got a budget. A week of Franklin’s time probably costs less than one of your weather guy’s haircuts.”

“And then what?”

“Then we put it all together.”

“How big is this?”

“Pulitzer-sized. Emmy-sized. New-job-sized.”

“How would you know? You’re not in the business.”

“I was in the army. I would guess this is worth a Bronze Star. That’s probably a rough equivalent. Better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I should turn you in.”

“You can’t,” he said. “You pull out a phone and I’ll take off up the ramp. They won’t find me. They’ve been trying all day.”

“I don’t really care about prizes,” she said.

“So do it for fun,” he said. “Do it for professional satisfaction.”

He rocked sideways and took out the napkin with Helen Rodin’s number on it. Held it edge-on at the crack of the window. Yanni took it from him, delicately,

trying to avoid touching his fingers with hers.

“Call Helen,” Reacher said. “Right now. She’ll vouch for me.”

Yanni took a cell phone out of her purse and turned it on. Watched the screen and waited until it was ready and then dialed the number. She passed the napkin back. Listened to the phone.

“Helen Rodin?” she said. Then she buzzed the window all the way up and Reacher didn’t hear any of the conversation. He gambled that it was really Helen she was speaking to. It was possible that she had looked at the napkin and dialed another number entirely. Not 911, because she had dialed ten digits. But she might have called the cops’ main desk. A reporter might know that number by heart.

But it was Helen on the line. Yanni buzzed the window down again and passed him her phone through the gap.

“Is this for real?” Helen asked him.

“I don’t think she’s decided yet,” Reacher said. “But it might work out.”

“Is it a good idea?”

“She’s got resources. And having the media watching our backs might help us.”

“Put her back on.”

Reacher passed the phone through the window. This time Yanni kept the glass down so that Reacher heard her end of the rest of the conversation. Initially she sounded skeptical, and then neutral, and then somewhat convinced. She arranged to meet on the fourth floor first thing in the morning. Then she clicked the phone off.

“There’s a cop outside her door,” Reacher said.

“She told me that,” Yanni said. “But they’re looking for you, not me.”

“What exactly are you going to do?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

Reacher said nothing.

“I guess I need to understand where you’re coming from first,” Yanni said. “Obviously you don’t care anything about James Barr himself. So is this all for the sister? Rosemary?”

Reacher watched her watching him. A woman, a journalist.

“Partly for Rosemary,” he said.

“But?”

“Mostly for the puppet master. He’s sitting there thinking he’s as smart as a whip. I don’t like that. Never have. Makes me want to show him what smart really is.”

“Like a challenge?”

“He had a girl killed, Yanni. She was just a dumb sweet kid looking for a little fun. He pushed open the wrong door there. So he deserves to have something come out at him. That’s the challenge.”

“You hardly knew her.”

“That doesn’t make her any less innocent.”

“OK.”

“OK what?”

“NBC will spring for Franklin. Then we’ll see where that takes us.”

“Thanks,” Reacher said. “I appreciate it.”

“You should.”

“I apologize again. For scaring you.”

“I nearly died of fright.”

“I’m very sorry.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes,” Reacher said. “I need to borrow your car.”

“My *car*?”

“Your car.”

“What for?”

“To sleep in and then to go to Kentucky in.”

“What’s in Kentucky?”

“Part of the puzzle.”

Yanni shook her head. “This is nuts.”

“I’m a careful driver.”

“I’d be aiding and abetting a fugitive criminal.”

“I’m not a criminal,” Reacher said. “A criminal is someone who has been convicted of a crime after a trial. Therefore I’m not a fugitive, either. I haven’t been arrested or charged. I’m a suspect, that’s all.”

“I can’t lend you my car after running your picture all night.”

“You could say you didn’t recognize me. It’s a sketch, not a photograph. Maybe it isn’t totally accurate.”

“Your hair is different.”

“There you go. I had it cut this morning.”

“But I would recognize your name. I wouldn’t lend my car to a stranger without at least knowing his name, would I?”

“Maybe I gave you a false name. You met a guy with a different name who didn’t look much like the sketch, that’s all.”

“What name?”

What name?

“Joe Gordon,” Reacher said.

“Who’s he?”

“Yankees’ second baseman in 1940. They finished third. Not Joe’s fault. He had a decent career. He played exactly one thousand games and got exactly one thousand hits.”

“You know a lot.”

“I’ll know more tomorrow if you lend me your car.”

“How would I get home tonight?”

“I’ll drive you.”

“Then you’ll know where I live.”

“I already know where you live. I checked your registration. To make sure it was your car.”

Yanni said nothing.

“Don’t worry,” Reacher said. “If I wanted to hurt you, you’d already be hurt, don’t you think?”

She said nothing.

“I’m a careful driver,” he said again. “I’ll get you home safe.”

“I’ll call a cab,” she said. “Better for you that way. The roads are quiet now and this is a distinctive car. The cops know it’s mine. They stop me all the time. They claim I’m speeding but really they want an autograph or they want to look down my shirt.”

She used her phone again and told a driver to meet her inside the garage. Then she climbed out of the car and left the motor running.

“Go park in a dark corner,” she said. “Safer for you if you don’t leave before the morning rush.”

morning rush.

“Thanks,” Reacher said.

“And do it now,” she said. “Your face has been all over the news and the cab driver will have been watching. At least I hope he was watching. I need the ratings.”

“Thanks,” Reacher said again.

Ann Yanni walked away and stood at the bottom of the ramp like she was waiting for a bus. Reacher slid into her seat and racked it back and reversed the car deep into the garage. Then he swung it around and parked nose-in in a distant corner. He shut it down and watched in the mirror. Five minutes later a green-and-white Crown Vic rolled down the ramp and Ann Yanni climbed into the back. The cab turned and drove out to the street and the garage went quiet.

Reacher stayed in Ann Yanni’s Mustang but he didn’t stay in the garage under the black glass tower. Too risky. If Yanni had a change of heart he would be a sitting duck. He could picture her getting hit by cold feet or a crisis of conscience and picking up the phone and calling Emerson. *He’s fast asleep in my car in the corner of the garage at work. Right now.* So three minutes after her cab left he started up again and drove out and around to the garage on First Street. It was empty. He went up to the second level and parked in the slot that James Barr had supposedly used. He didn’t put money in the meter. Just pulled out Yanni’s stack of road maps and planned his route and then pushed back on the wheel and reclined the seat and went back to sleep.

———

He woke himself up five hours later, before dawn, and set out on the drive south to Kentucky. He saw three cop cars before he passed the city limits. But they didn’t pay him any attention. They were too busy hunting Jack Reacher to waste time harassing a cute news anchor.

CHAPTER 12

Dawn happened somewhere way over in the east about an hour into the drive. The sky changed from black to gray to purple and then low orange sunlight came up over the horizon. Reacher switched his headlights off. He didn't like to run with lights after daybreak. Just a subliminal thing, for the State Troopers camped out on the shoulders. Lights after dawn suggested all kinds of things, like fast through-the-night escapes from trouble hundreds of miles behind. The Mustang was already provocative enough. It was loud and aggressive and it was the kind of car that gets stolen a lot.

But the troopers that Reacher saw stayed put on the shoulder. He kept the car at a nothing-to-hide seventy miles an hour and touched the CD button on the dash. Got a blast of mid-period Sheryl Crow in return, which he didn't mind at all. He stayed with it. *Every day is a winding road,* Sheryl told him. *I know,* he thought. *Tell me about it.*

He crossed the Ohio River on a long iron trestle with the sun low on his left. For a moment it turned the slow water into molten gold. Light reflected up at him from below the horizontal and made the inside of the car unnaturally bright. The trestle spars flashed past like a stroboscope. The effect was disconcerting. He closed his left eye and entered Kentucky squinting.

He kept south on a county road and waited for the Blackford River. According to Ann Yanni's maps it was a tributary that flowed on a southeast-to-northwest diagonal into the Ohio. Near its source it formed a perfect equilateral triangle about three miles on a side with two rural routes. And according to Helen Rodin's information James Barr's favored firing range was somewhere inside that triangle.

But it turned out that the firing range *was* the triangle. Three miles out Reacher saw a wire fence on the left shoulder of the road that started directly after he crossed the Blackford on a bridge. The fence ran all the way to the next intersection and had *Keep Out Live Gunfire* signs on every fourth post. Then it

turned a sixty-degree angle and ran three more miles north and east. Reacher followed it and where it met the Blackford again he found a gate and a gravel clearing and a complex of low huts. The gate was chained. It was hung with a hand-painted sign that read: *Open 8 A.M. Until Dark.*

He checked his watch. He was a half hour too early. On the other side of the road was an aluminum coach diner fronted by a gravel lot. He pulled in and stopped the Mustang right by the diner's door. He was hungry. The Marriott's room-service steak seemed like a long time ago.

He ate a long slow breakfast at a window table and watched the scene across the street. By eight o'clock there were three pickup trucks waiting to get into the range. At five after eight a guy showed up in a black diesel Humvee and mimed an apology for being late and unchained the gate. He stood aside and let his customers in ahead of him. Then he climbed back in his Humvee and followed them. He went through the same apologetic routine at the main hut door and then all four guys went inside and disappeared from view. Reacher called for another cup of coffee. He figured he would let the guy deal with the early rush and then stroll over when he had a moment to talk. And the coffee was good. Too good to pass up. It was fresh, hot, and very strong.

By eight-twenty he started to hear rifles firing. Dull percussive sounds, robbed of their power and impact by distance and wind and berms of earth. He figured the guns were about two hundred yards away, firing west. The shots came slow and steady, the sound of serious shooters aiming for the inner rings. Then he heard a string of lighter pops from a handgun. He listened to the familiar sounds for a spell and then left two bucks on the table and paid a twelve-dollar check at the register. Went outside and got back in the Mustang and drove through the lot and bumped up over the camber of the road and straight in through the range's open gate.

He found the Humvee guy behind a waist-high counter in the main hut. Up close he was older than he had looked from a distance. More than fifty, less than sixty, sparse gray hair, lined skin, but ramrod straight. He had a weathered neck wider than his head and the sort of eyes that pegged him as an ex-Marine noncom even without the tattoos on his forearms and the souvenirs on the wall behind him. The tattoos were old and faded and the souvenirs were mostly pennants and unit patches. But the centerpiece of the display was a yellowing paper target framed

under glass. It had a tight group of five .300 holes inside the inner ring and a sixth just clipping it.

“Help you?” the guy said. He was looking past Reacher’s shoulder, out the window, at the Mustang.

“I’m here to solve all your problems,” Reacher said.

“Really?”

“No, not really. I just want to ask you some questions.”

The guy paused. “About James Barr?”

“Good guess.”

“No.”

“No?”

“I don’t speak to reporters.”

“I’m not a reporter.”

“That’s a five-liter Mustang out there with a couple of options on it. So it ain’t a cop car or a rental. And it’s got Indiana plates. And it’s got an NBC sticker in the windshield. Therefore my guess is you’re a reporter fixing to gin up a television story about how James Barr used my place to train and prepare.”

“Did he?”

“I told you, I’m not talking.”

“But Barr came here, right?”

“I’m not talking,” the guy said again. No malice in his voice. Just determination. No hostility. Just self-assurance. He wasn’t talking. End of story. The hut went quiet. Nothing to hear except the distant gunfire and a low rattling hum from another room. A refrigerator, maybe.

“I’m not a reporter,” Reacher said again. “I borrowed a reporter’s car, that’s all.

To get down here."

"So what are you?"

"Just a guy who knew James Barr way back. I want to know about his friend Charlie. I think his friend Charlie led him astray."

The guy didn't say: *What friend?* He didn't ask: *Who's Charlie?* He just shook his head and said, "Can't help you."

Reacher switched his gaze to the framed target.

"Is that yours?" he asked.

"Everything you see here is mine."

"What range was it?" he asked.

"Why?"

"Because I'm thinking that if it was six hundred yards, you're pretty good. If it was eight hundred, you're very good. If it was a thousand, you're unbelievable."

"You shoot?" the guy asked.

"I used to," Reacher said.

"Military?"

"Once upon a time."

The guy turned around and lifted the frame off its hook. Laid it gently on the counter and turned it around for inspection. There was a handwritten inscription in faded ink across the bottom of the paper: *1978 U.S. Marine Corps 1000 Yard Invitational. Gunny Samuel Cash, third place.* Then there were three signatures from three adjudicators.

"You're Sergeant Cash?" Reacher said.

"Retired and scuffling," the guy said.

"M[illegible]"

¨Me too.´

“But not from the Corps.”

“You can tell that just by looking?”

“Easily.”

“Army,” Reacher said. “But my dad was a Marine.”

Cash nodded. “Makes you half-human.”

Reacher traced his fingertip over the glass, above the bullet holes. A fine group of five, and a sixth that had drifted just a hair.

“Good shooting,” he said.

“I’d be lucky to do that at half the range today.”

“Me too,” Reacher said. “Time marches on.”

“You saying you could have done it back in the day?”

Reacher didn’t answer. Truth was he had actually won the Marine Corps 1000 Yard Invitational, exactly ten years after Cash had scraped third place. He had placed all his rounds through the precise center of the target, in a ragged hole a man could put his thumb through. He had displayed the shiny cup on one office shelf after another through twelve busy months. It had been an exceptional year. He had been at some kind of a peak, physically, mentally, every way there was. That year, he couldn’t miss, literally or metaphorically. But he hadn’t defended his title the following year, even though the MP hierarchy had wanted him to. Later, looking back, he understood how that decision marked two things: the beginning of his long slow divorce from the army, and the beginning of restlessness. The beginning of always moving on and never looking back. The beginning of never wanting to do the same thing twice.

“Thousand yards is a long way,” Gunny Cash said. “Truth is, since I left the Corps I haven’t met a man who could even put a mark on the paper.”

“I might have been able to clip the edge,” Reacher said.

Cash took the [illegible]

Cash took the frame off the counter and turned and hung it back on its hook. He used the ball of his right thumb to level it.

“I don’t have a thousand-yard range here,” he said. “It would be a waste of ammunition and it would make the customers feel bad about themselves. But I’ve got a nice three-hundred that’s not being used this morning. You could try it. A guy who could clip the paper at a thousand should be able to do pretty well at three hundred.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Don’t you think?” Cash said.

“I guess,” Reacher said.

Cash opened a drawer and took out a new paper target. “What’s your name?”

“Bobby Richardson,” Reacher said. *Robert Clinton Richardson, hit .301 in 1959, 141 hits in 134 games, but the Yanks still only finished third.*

Cash took a roller ball pen from his shirt pocket and wrote *R. Richardson, 300 yards*, and the date and time on the paper.

“Record keeper,” Reacher said.

“Habit,” Cash said. Then he drew an *X* inside the inner ring. It was about half an inch tall and because of the slant of his handwriting a little less than half an inch wide. He left the paper on the counter and walked away into the room with the refrigerator noise. Came back out a minute later carrying a rifle. It was a Remington M24, with a Leupold Ultra scope and a front bipod. A standard-issue Marine sniper’s weapon. It looked to be well used but in excellent condition. Cash placed it sideways on the counter. Detached the magazine and showed Reacher that it was empty. Operated the bolt and showed Reacher that the chamber was empty, too. Reflex, routine, caution, professional courtesy.

“Mine,” he said. “Zeroed for three hundred yards exactly. By me myself, personally.”

“Good enough,” Reacher said. Which it was. An ex-Marine who in 1978 had been the third-best shooter in the world could be trusted on such matters.

“One shot,” Cash said. He took a single cartridge from his pocket. Held it up. It was a .300 Winchester round. Match grade. He stood it upright on the *X* on the paper target. It hid it entirely. Then he smiled. Reacher smiled back. He understood the challenge. He understood it perfectly. *Hit the X and I’ll talk to you about James Barr.*

At least it’s not hand-to-hand combat, Reacher thought.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Outside the air was still, and it was neither hot nor cold. Perfect shooting weather. No shivering, no risk of thermals or currents or shimmer. No wind. Cash carried the rifle and the target, and Reacher carried the cartridge in the palm of his hand. They climbed into Cash’s Humvee together and Cash fired it up with a loud diesel clatter.

“You like this thing?” Reacher asked, over the noise.

“Not really,” Cash said. “I’d be happier with a sedan. But it’s a question of image. Customers like it.”

The landscape was all low hills, covered in grass and stunted trees. Someone had used a bulldozer to carve wide straight paths through it. The paths were hundreds of yards apart and hundreds of yards long, and all of them were parallel. Each path was a separate rifle range. Each range was isolated from the others by natural hills and backed by high berms made from the earth scraped up by the bulldozer. The whole place looked like a half-built golf course. It was part green, part raw, all covered with red earth gashes. White-painted rocks and boulders delineated tracks through it, some for vehicles, some for foot traffic.

“My family has owned this land forever,” Cash said. “The range was my idea. I thought I could be like a golf pro, or tennis. You know those guys, they’ve been on the tour, they retire, they set up teaching afterward.”

“Did it work?” Reacher asked.

“Not really,” Cash said. “People come here to shoot, but to get a guy to admit he doesn’t really know how is like pulling teeth.”

Reacher saw three pickup trucks parked at separate shooting stations. The guys who had been waiting at eight o'clock were well into their morning sessions. They were all prone on coconut mats, firing, pausing, sighting, firing again.

"It's a living," Cash said, in answer to a question Reacher hadn't asked. Then he pulled the Humvee off the main track and drove three hundred yards down the length of an empty range. He got out and clipped the paper target to a frame and got back in and K-turned the truck and headed back. He parked it neatly and shut it down.

"Good luck," he said.

Reacher sat still for a moment. He was more nervous than he should have been. He breathed in and held it and felt the thrill of caffeine in his veins. Just a tiny microscopic tremble. Four fast cups of strong coffee were not an ideal preparation for accurate long-distance shooting.

But it was only three hundred yards. Three hundred yards, with a good rifle, no heat, no cold, still air. More or less the same thing as pressing the muzzle into the center of the target and pulling the trigger. He could do it with his eyes closed. There was no fundamental problem with the marksmanship. The problem was with the stakes. He wanted the puppet master more than he had wanted the Marines' cup all those years before. A lot more. He didn't know why. But that was the problem.

He breathed out. It was only three hundred yards. Not six. Not eight. Not a thousand. No big deal.

He slid out of the Humvee and took the rifle off the back seat. Carried it across rough earth to the coconut mat. Placed it gently with its bipod feet a yard back from the edge. Bent down and loaded it. Stepped back behind it and lined himself up and crouched, knelt, lay full length. He snuggled the stock into his shoulder. Eased his neck left and right and looked around. It felt like he was alone in the middle of nowhere. He ducked his head. Closed his left eye and moved his right eye to the scope. Draped his left hand over the barrel and pressed down and back. Now he had a tripod mount. The bipod, and his shoulder. Solid. He spread his legs and turned his feet out so they were flat on the mat. Drew his left leg up a little and dug the sole of his shoe into the mat's fibers so the deadweight of the limb anchored his position. He relaxed and let himself sprawl. He knew he must look like a guy who had been shot, instead of a

guy preparing to shoot.

He gazed through the scope. Saw the hypervivid image of great optics. He acquired the target. It looked close enough to touch. He laid the reticle where the two strokes of the *X* met. Squeezed the slack out of the trigger. Relaxed. Breathed out. He could feel his heart. It felt like it was loose in his chest. The caffeine was buzzing in his veins. The reticle was dancing over the *X*. It was hopping and jerking, left and right, up and down, in a tiny random circle.

He closed his right eye. Willed his heart to stop. Breathed out and kept his lungs empty, one second, two. Then again, in, out, hold. He pulled all his energy downward, into his gut. Let his shoulders slacken. Let his muscles relax. Let himself settle. He opened his eye again and saw that the reticle was still. He stared at the target. Feeling it. *Wanting* it. He pulled the trigger. The gun kicked and roared and the muzzle blast blew a cloud of dust out of the coconut mat and obscured his view. He lifted his head and coughed once and ducked back to the scope.

Bull's-eye.

The *X* was gone. There was a neat hole drilled through the center of it, leaving only four tiny ballpoint ticks visible, one at the top and one at the bottom of each stroke. He coughed again and pushed back and stood up. Cash dropped down in his place and used the scope to check the result.

"Good shooting," he said.

"Good rifle," Reacher said.

Cash operated the bolt and the spent case fell out on the mat. He got to his knees and picked it up and put it in his pocket. Then he stood up and carried the rifle back toward the Humvee.

"So do I qualify?" Reacher called after him.

"For what?"

"For talking to."

Cash turned around. "You think this was a test?"

“I sincerely hope it was.”

“You might not want to hear what I’ve got to say.”

“Try me,” Reacher said.

Cash nodded. “We’ll talk in the office.”

They detoured up the length of the range for Cash to retrieve the target. Then they turned and drove back to the huts. They passed the pickup guys. They were still blasting away. Cash parked and they went inside and Cash filed Reacher’s target in a drawer, under *R* for Richardson. Then he danced his fingers forward to *B* for Barr and pulled out a thick sheaf of paper.

“You looking to show your old buddy didn’t do it?” he asked.

“He wasn’t my buddy,” Reacher said. “I knew him once, is all.”

“And?”

“I don’t remember him being that great a shooter.”

“TV news said it was pretty short range.”

“With moving targets and deflection angles.”

“TV said the evidence is pretty clear.”

“It is,” Reacher said. “I’ve seen it.”

“Check these out,” Cash said.

He dealt the filed targets like a deck of cards, all along the length of the counter. Then he butted them edge-to-edge and squared them off to make room for more. Then he started a second row, directly underneath the first. In the end he had thirty-two sheets of paper displayed, two long rows of repetitive concentric circles, all of them marked *J. Barr, 300 yards*, with times and dates stretching back three years.

“Read them and weep,” Cash said.

Every single target showed an expert score.

Reacher stared at them, one after the other. Each inner ring was tightly packed with clean, crisp holes. Tight clusters, big and obvious. Thirty-two targets, ten rounds each, three hundred twenty rounds, all of them dead-on maximum scores.

“This is everything he did?” Reacher asked.

Cash nodded. “Like you said, I’m a record keeper.”

“What gun?”

“His own Super Match. Great rifle.”

“Did the cops call you?”

“Guy called Emerson. He was pretty decent about it. Because I’ve got to think about my own ass, because Barr trained here. I don’t want to damage my professional reputation. I’ve put in a lot of work here, and this place could get a bad name.”

Reacher scanned the targets, one more time. Remembered telling Helen Rodin: *They don’t forget.*

“What about his buddy Charlie?” he asked.

“Charlie was hopeless by comparison.”

Cash butted James Barr’s targets into a pile and put them back in the *B* slot. Then he opened another drawer and ran his fingers back to *S* and took out another sheaf of paper.

“Charlie Smith,” he said. “He was military too, by the look of him. But Uncle Sam’s money didn’t buy anything long-term there.”

He went through the same routine, laying out Charlie’s targets in two long rows. Thirty-two of them.

“They always showed up together?” Reacher asked.

“Like peanut butter and jelly,” Cash said.

“Separate ranges?”

“Separate planets,” Cash said.

Reacher nodded. In terms of numerical score Charlie’s targets were much worse than James Barr’s. *Way* worse. They were the product of a very poor shooter. One had just four hits, all of them outside the outer ring, one each in the quadrants in the corners. Across all thirty-two targets he had just eight hits inside the inner ring. One was a dead-on bull’s-eye. Dumb luck, maybe, or wind or drift or a random thermal. Seven were very close to clipping the black. Apart from that, Charlie was all over the place. Most of his rounds must have missed altogether. Percentage-wise most of his hits happened in the white between the two outer rings. Low, low scores. But his hits weren’t precisely random. There was a weird kind of consistency there. He was aiming, but he was missing. Maybe some kind of bad astigmatism in his eyes.

“What type of a guy was he?” Reacher asked.

“Charlie?” Cash said. “Charlie was a blank slate. Couldn’t read him at all. If he had been a better shot, he’d have come close to frightening me.”

“Small guy, right?”

“Tiny. Weird hair.”

“Did they talk to you much?”

“Not really. They were just two guys down from Indiana, getting off on shooting guns. I get a lot of that here.”

“Did you watch them shoot?”

Cash shook his head. “I learned never to watch anybody. People take it as a criticism. I let them come to me, but nobody ever does.”

“Barr bought his ammo here, right?”

“Lake City. Expensive.”

“His gun wasn’t cheap, either.”

“He was worth it.”

“What gun did Charlie use?”

“The same thing. Like a matched pair. In his case it was a comedy. Like a fat guy who buys a carbon fiber racing bike.”

“You got separate handgun ranges here?”

“One indoor. People use it if it rains. Otherwise I let them blast away outside, anywhere they want. I don’t care much for handguns. No art to them.”

Reacher nodded and Cash swept Charlie’s targets into a pile, careful to keep them in correct date order. Then he stacked them together and put them back in the *S* drawer.

“Smith is a common name,” Reacher said. “Actually I think it’s the most common name in America.”

“It was genuine,” Cash said. “I see a driver’s license before anyone gets membership.”

“Where was he from originally?”

“Accent? Somewhere way north.”

“Can I take one of James Barr’s targets?”

“What the hell for?”

“For a souvenir,” Reacher said.

Cash said nothing.

“It won’t go anywhere,” Reacher said. “I’m not going to sell it on the internet.”

Cash said nothing.

“Barr’s not coming back,” Reacher said. “That’s for damn sure. And if you really want to cover your ass you should dump them all anyway.”

Cash [illegible]

Cash shrugged and turned back to the file drawer.

“The most recent one,” Reacher said. “That would be best.”

Cash thumbed through the stack and pulled a sheet. Handed it across the counter. Reacher took it and folded it carefully and put it in his shirt pocket.

“Good luck with your buddy,” Cash said.

“He’s not my buddy,” Reacher said. “But thanks for your help.”

“You’re welcome,” Cash said. “Because I know who you are. I recognized you when you got behind the gun. I never forget the shape of a prone position. You won the Invitational ten years after I was in it. I was watching, from the crowd. Your real name is Reacher.”

Reacher nodded.

“Polite of you,” Cash said. “Not to mention it after I told you how I only came in third.”

“You had tougher competition,” Reacher said. “Ten years later it was all a bunch of deadbeats.”

He stopped at the last gas station in Kentucky and filled Yanni’s tank. Then he called Helen Rodin from a pay phone.

“Is the cop still there?” he asked.

“Two of them,” she said. “One in the lobby, one at my door.”

“Did Franklin start yet?”

“First thing this morning.”

“Any progress?”

“Nothing. They were five very ordinary people.”

“Where is Franklin’s office?”

Where is Pullman's office?

She gave him an address. Reacher checked his watch. “I’ll meet you there at four o’clock.”

“How was Kentucky?”

“Confusing,” he said.

He recrossed the Ohio on the same trestle bridge with Sheryl Crow telling him all over again about how every day was a winding road. He cranked up the volume and turned left and headed west. Ann Yanni’s maps showed a highway cloverleaf forty miles ahead. He could turn north there and a couple hours later he could scoot past the whole city, forty feet in the air. It seemed like a better idea than trying the surface streets. He figured Emerson would be getting seriously frustrated. And then seriously enraged, at some point during the day. Reacher would have been. Reacher had been Emerson for thirteen years, and in this kind of a situation he would have been kicking ass big time, blanketing the streets with uniforms, trying everything.

He found the cloverleaf and joined the highway going north. He killed the CD when it started over again and settled in for the cruise. The Mustang felt pretty good at seventy miles an hour. It rumbled along, lots of power, no finesse at all. Reacher figured if he could put that drivetrain in some battered old sedan body, then that would be his kind of car.

Bellantonio had been at work in his crime lab since seven o’clock in the morning. He had fingerprinted the cell phone found abandoned under the highway and come up with nothing worth a damn. Then he had copied the call log. The last number dialed was Helen Rodin’s cell. Last-but-one was Emerson’s cell. Clearly Reacher had made both of those calls. Then came a long string of calls to several different cell phones registered to Specialized Services of Indiana. Maybe Reacher had made those too, or maybe he hadn’t. No way of knowing. Bellantonio wrote it all up, but he knew Emerson wouldn’t do anything with it. The only viable pressure point was the call to Helen Rodin, and no way could Emerson start hassling a defense lawyer about a conversation with a witness, suspect or not. That would be a waste of breath.

So he moved on to the garage tapes. He had four days' worth, ninety-six hours, nearly three thousand separate vehicle movements. His staff had logged them all. Only three of them were Cadillacs. Indiana was the same as most heartland states. People bought pickup trucks as a first preference, then SUVs, then coupes, then convertibles. Regular sedans claimed a tiny market share, and most of them were Toyotas or Hondas or mid-sized domestics. Full-sized turnpike cruisers were very rare, and premium brands rarest of all.

The first Cadillac on tape was a bone-white Eldorado. A two-door coupe, several years old. It had parked before ten in the morning on the Wednesday and stayed parked for five hours. The second Cadillac on tape was a new STS, maybe red or gray, possibly light blue. Hard to be sure, with the murky monochrome picture. Whatever, it had parked soon after lunch on the Thursday and stayed there for two hours.

The third Cadillac was a black DeVille. It was caught on tape entering the garage just after six o'clock in the morning on the Friday. *Black Friday,* as Bellantonio was calling it. At six o'clock in the morning the garage would have been more or less completely empty. The tape showed the DeVille sweeping up the ramp, fast and confident. It showed it leaving again after just four minutes.

Long enough to place the cone.

The driver wasn't really visible in either sequence. There was just a gray blur behind the windshield. Maybe it was Barr, maybe it wasn't. Bellantonio wrote it all up for Emerson. He made a mental note to check through again to determine if four minutes was the shortest stay on the tapes. He suspected it was, easily.

Then he scanned the forensic sweep through Alexandra Dupree's garden apartment. He had assigned a junior guy to do it, because it wasn't the crime scene. There was nothing of interest there. Nothing at all. Except the fingerprint evidence. The apartment was a mess of prints, like all apartments are. Most of them were the girl's, but there were four other sets. Three of them were unidentifiable.

The fourth set of prints belonged to James Barr.

James Barr had been in Alexandra Dupree's apartment. In the living room, in the kitchen, in the bathroom. No doubt about it. Clear prints, perfect matches.

Unmistakable.

Bellantonio wrote it up for Emerson.

Then he read a report just in from the medical examiner. Alexandra Dupree had been killed by a single massive blow to the right temple, delivered by a left-handed assailant. She had fallen onto a gravel surface that contained organic matter including grass and dirt. But she had been found in an alley paved with limestone. Therefore her body had been moved at least a short distance between death and discovery. Other physiological evidence confirmed it.

Bellantonio took a new sheet of memo paper and addressed two questions to Emerson: *Is Reacher left-handed? Did he have access to a vehicle?*

The Zec spent the morning hours deciding what to do with Raskin. Raskin had failed three separate times. First with the initial tail, then by getting attacked from behind, and finally by letting his cell phone get stolen. The Zec didn't like failure. He didn't like it at all. At first he considered just pulling Raskin off the street and restricting him to duty in the video room on the ground floor of the house. But why would he want to depend on a failure to monitor his security?

Then Linsky called. They had been searching fourteen straight hours and had found no sign of the soldier.

"We should go after the lawyer now," Linsky said. "After all, nothing can happen without her. She's the focal point. She's the one making the moves here."

"That raises the stakes," the Zec said.

"They're already pretty high."

"Maybe the soldier's gone for good."

"Maybe he is," Linsky said. "But what matters is what he left behind. In the lawyer's head."

"I'll think about it," the Zec said. "I'll get back to you."

“Should we keep on looking?”

“Tired?”

Linsky was exhausted and his spine was killing him.

“No,” he lied. “I’m not tired.”

“So keep on looking,” the Zec said. “But send Raskin back to me.”

Reacher slowed to fifty where the highway first rose on its stilts. He stayed in the center lane and let the spur that ran behind the library pass by on his right. He kept on north for two more miles and came off at the cloverleaf that met the four-lane with the auto dealers and the parts store. He went east on the county road and then turned north again, on Jeb Oliver’s rural route. After a minute he was deep in the silent countryside. The irrigation booms were turning slowly and the sun was making rainbows in the droplets.

The heartland. Where the secrets are.

He coasted to a stop next to the Olivers’ mailbox. No way was the Mustang going to make it down the driveway. The center hump would have ripped all the parts off the bottom. The suspension, the exhaust system, the axle, the diff, whatever else was down there. Ann Yanni wouldn’t have been pleased at all. So he slid out and left the car where it was, low and crouched and winking blue in the sun. He picked his way down the track, feeling every rock and stone through his thin soles. Jeb Oliver’s red Dodge hadn’t been moved. It was sitting right there, lightly dusted with brown dirt and streaked with dried dew. The old farmhouse was quiet. The barn was closed and locked.

Reacher ignored the front door. He walked around the side of the house to the back porch. Jeb’s mother was right there on her glider. She was dressed the same but this time she had no bottle. Just a manic stare out of eyes as big as saucers. She had one foot hooked up under her and was using the other to scoot the chair about twice as fast as she had before.

“Hello,” she said.

“Jeb not back yet?” Reacher said

"Jeb not back yet?" Reacher said.

She just shook her head. Reacher heard all the sounds he had heard before. The irrigation hiss, the squeak of the glider, the creak of the porch board.

"Got a gun?" he asked.

"I don't hold with them," she said.

"Got a phone?" he asked.

"Disconnected," she said. "I owe them money. But I don't need them. Jeb lets me use his cell if I need it."

"Good," Reacher said.

"How the hell is that good? Jeb's not here."

"That's exactly what's good about it. I'm going to break into your barn and I don't want you calling the cops while I'm doing it. Or shooting me."

"That's Jeb's barn. You can't go in there."

"I don't see how you can stop me."

He turned his back on her and continued down the track. It curved a little and led directly to the barn's double doors. The doors, like the barn itself, were built of old planks alternately baked and rotted by a hundred summers and a hundred winters. Reacher touched them with his knuckles and felt a dry hollowness. The lock was brand new. It was a U-shaped bicycle lock like the ones city messengers used. One leg of the U ran through two black steel hasps that were bolted through the planks of the doors. Reacher touched the lock. Shook it. Heavy steel, warm from the sun. It was a pretty solid arrangement. No way of cutting it, no way of breaking it.

But a lock was only as strong as what it was fixed to.

Reacher grabbed the straight end of the lock at the bottom of the U. Pulled on it gently, and then harder. The doors sagged toward him and stopped. He put the flat of his palm against the wood and pushed them back. Held them closed with a straight left arm and yanked on the lock with his right. The bolts gave a little, but not much. Reacher figured that Jeb must have used anchors on the back, under

not much. Reacher figured that Jeb must have used washers on the back, under the nuts. Maybe big wide ones. They were spreading the load.

He thought: *OK, more load.*

He held the straight part of the lock with both hands and leaned back like a water-skier. Pulled hard and smashed his heel into the wood under the hasps. His legs were longer than his arms, so he was cramped and the kick didn't carry much power. But it carried enough. The old wood splintered a little and something gave half an inch. He regrouped and tried it again. Something gave a little more. Then a plank in the left-hand door split completely and two bolts pulled out. Reacher put his left hand flat on the door and got his right-hand fingers hooked in the gap with a backhand grip. He took a breath and counted to three and jerked hard. The last bolt fell out and the whole lock assembly hit the ground and the doors sagged all the way open. Reacher stepped away and folded the doors back flush with the walls and let the sunlight in.

He guessed he was expecting to see a meth lab, maybe with workbenches and beakers and scales and propane burners and piles of new Baggies ready to receive the product. Or else a big stash, ready for onward distribution.

He saw none of that.

Bright light leaked in through long vertical gaps between warped planks. The barn was maybe forty feet by twenty inside. It had a bare earth floor, swept and compacted. It was completely empty except for a well-used pickup truck parked in the exact center of the space.

The truck was a Chevy Silverado, several years old. It was light brown, like fired clay. It was a working vehicle. It had been built down to a plain specification. A base model. Vinyl seats, steel wheels, undramatic tires. The load bed was clean but scratched and dented. It had no license plates. The doors were locked and there was no sign of a key anywhere.

"What's that?"

Reacher turned and saw Jeb Oliver's mother behind him. She had her hand tight on the doorjamb, like she was unwilling to cross the threshold.

"It's a truck," Reacher said.

“I can see that.”

“Is it Jeb’s?”

“I never saw it before.”

“What did he drive before that big red thing?”

“Not this.”

Reacher stepped closer to the truck and peered in through the driver’s-side window. Manual shift. Dirt and grime. High mileage. But no trash. The truck had been someone’s faithful servant, used but not abused.

“I never saw it before,” the woman said again.

It looked like it had been there for a long time. It was settled on soft tires. It didn’t smell of oil or gasoline. It was cold, inert, filmed with dust. Reacher got on his knees and checked underneath. Nothing to see. Just a frame, caked with old dirt, clipped by rocks and gravel.

“How long has this thing been in here?” he asked from the floor.

“I don’t know.”

“When did he put the lock on the door?”

“Maybe two months ago.”

Reacher stood up again.

“What did you expect to find?” the woman asked him.

Reacher turned to face her and looked at her eyes. The pupils were huge.

“More of what you had for breakfast,” he said.

She smiled. “You thought Jeb was cooking in here?”

“Wasn’t he?”

“His stepfather brings it by.”

His stepfather brings it by."

"You married?"

"Not anymore. But he still brings it by."

"Jeb was using on Monday night," Reacher said.

The woman smiled again. "A mother can share with her kid. Can't she? What else is a mother for?"

Reacher turned away and looked at the truck one more time. "Why would he keep an old truck locked in here and a new truck out in the weather?"

"Beats me," the woman said. "Jeb always does things his own way."

Reacher backed out of the barn and walked each door closed. Then he used the balls of his thumbs to press the bolts back into their splintered holes. The weight of the lock dragged them all halfway out again. He got it looking as neat as he could, and then he left it alone and walked away.

"Is Jeb ever coming back?" the woman called after him.

Reacher didn't answer.

The Mustang was facing north, so Reacher drove north. He put the CD player on loud and kept going ten miles down an arrow-straight road, aiming for a horizon that never arrived.

Raskin dug his own grave with a Caterpillar backhoe. It was the same machine that had been used to level the Zec's land. It had a twenty-inch entrenching shovel with four steel teeth on it. The shovel took long slow bites of the soft earth and laid them aside. The engine roared and slowed, roared and slowed, and pulsed clouds of diesel exhaust filled the Indiana sky.

Raskin had been born during the Soviet Union, and he had seen a lot. Afghanistan, Chechnya, unthinkable upheaval in Moscow. A guy in his position could have been dead many times over, and that fact combined with his natural

could have been dead many times over, and that fact combined with his natural Russian fatalism made him utterly indifferent to his fate.

"Ukase," the Zec had said. *An order from an absolute authority.*

"Nichevo," Raskin had said in reply. *Think nothing of it.*

So he worked the backhoe. He chose a spot concealed from the stone-crushers' view by the bulk of the house. He dug a neat trench twenty inches wide, six feet long, six feet deep. He piled the excavated earth to his right, to the east, like a high barrier between himself and home. When he was finished he backed the machine away from the hole and shut it down. Climbed down from the cab and waited. There was no escape. No point in running. If he ran, they would find him anyway, and then he wouldn't need a grave. They would use garbage bags, five or six of them. They would use wire ties to seal the several parts of him into cold black plastic. They would put bricks in with his flesh and throw the bags in the river.

He had seen it happen before.

In the distance the Zec came out of his house. A short wide man, ancient, stooped, walking at a moderate speed, exuding power and energy. He picked his way across the uneven ground, glancing down, glancing forward. Fifty yards, a hundred. He came close to Raskin and stopped. He put his ruined hand in his pocket and came out with a small revolver, his thumb and the stump of his index finger pincered through the trigger guard. He held it out, and Raskin took it from him.

"Ukase," the Zec said.

"Nichevo," Raskin replied. A short, amiable, self-deprecating sound, like *de rien* in French, like *de nada* in Spanish, like *prego* in Italian. *Please. I'm yours to command.*

"Thank you," the Zec said.

Raskin stepped away to the narrow end of the trench. Opened the revolver's cylinder and saw a single cartridge. Closed the cylinder again and turned it until it was lined up right. Then he pulled the hammer back and put the barrel in his mouth. He turned around, so that he was facing the Zec and his back was to the trench. He shuffled backward until his heels were on the edge of the hole. He

trench. He shifted backward until his heels were on the edge of the hole. He stood still and straight and balanced and composed, like an Olympic diver preparing for a difficult backward pike off the high board.

He closed his eyes.

He pulled the trigger.

For a mile around black crows rose noisily into the air. Blood and brain and bone arced through the sunlight in a perfect parabola. Raskin's body fell backward and landed stretched out and flat in the bottom of the trench. The crows settled back to earth and the faint noise of the distant stone-crushing machines rolled back in and sounded like silence. Then the Zec clambered up into the Caterpillar's cab and started the engine. The levers all had knobs as big as pool balls, which made them easy to manipulate with his palms.

Reacher stopped fifteen miles north of the city and parked the Mustang on a big V-shaped gravel turnout made where the corners of two huge circular fields met. There were fields everywhere, north, south, east, and west, one after the other in endless ranks and files. Each one had its own irrigation boom. Each boom was turning at the same slow, patient pace.

He shut the engine down and slid out of the seat. He stood and stretched and yawned. The air was full of mist from the booms. Up close, the booms were like massive industrial machines. Like alien spaceships recently landed. There was a central vertical standpipe in the middle of each field, like a tall metal chimney. The boom arm came off it horizontally and bled water out of a hundred spaced nozzles all along its length. At the outer end the arm had a vertical leg supporting its weight. At the bottom of the leg was a wheel with a rubber tire. The wheel was as big as an airplane's landing gear. It rolled around a worn track, endlessly.

Reacher watched and waited until the wheel in the nearest field came close. He walked over and stepped alongside it. Kept pace with it. The tire came almost to his waist. The boom itself was way over his head. He kept the wheel on his right and tracked it through its long clockwise circle. He was walking through fine mist. It was cold. The boom hissed loudly. The wheel climbed gentle rises and rolled into low depressions. It was a long, long circle. The boom was maybe a

hundred and fifty feet long, which made the perimeter track more than three hundred yards. *Pi* times diameter. Area was *pi* times the radius squared, which would therefore be more than seventy-eight hundred square yards. More than one and a half acres. Which meant that the wasted corners added up to a little less than twenty-two hundred square yards. More than twenty-one percent. More than five hundred square yards in each corner. Like the shapes in the corners of a target. The Mustang was parked on one of the corners, proportionally the same size as a bullet hole.

Like one of Charlie's bullet holes, in the corners of the paper.

Reacher arrived back where he had started, a little wet, his boat shoes muddy. He stepped away from the circle and stood still on the gravel, facing west. On the far horizon a cloud of crows rose suddenly and then settled. Reacher got back in the car and turned the ignition on. Found the clamps on the header rail and the switch on the dash and lowered the roof. He checked his watch. He had two hours until his rendezvous at Franklin's office. So he lay back in the seat and let the sun dry his clothes. He took the folded target out of his pocket and looked at it for a long time. He sniffed it. Held it up to the sun and let the light shine through the crisp round holes. Then he put it away again in his pocket. He stared upward and saw nothing but sky. He closed his eyes against the glare and started to think about ego and motive, and illusion and reality, and guilt and innocence, and the true nature of randomness.

CHAPTER 13

Emerson read through Bellantonio's reports. Saw that Reacher had called Helen Rodin. He wasn't surprised. It was probably just one of many calls. Lawyers and busybodies working hard to rewrite history. No big shock there. Then he read Bellantonio's twin questions: *Is Reacher left-handed? Did he have access to a vehicle?*

Answers: *probably*, and *probably*. Southpaws weren't rare. Line up twenty people, and four or five of them would be left-handed. And Reacher had access to a vehicle *now*, that was for damn sure. He wasn't in town, and he hadn't left on a bus. Therefore he had a vehicle, and probably had had one all along.

Then Emerson read the final sheet: James Barr had been in Alexandra Dupree's apartment. What the hell was *that* about?

According to Ann Yanni's road maps Franklin's office was dead-center in a tangle of streets right in the heart of the city. Not an ideal destination. Not by any means. Construction, the start of rush hour, slow traffic on surface streets. Reacher was going to be putting a lot of trust in the tint in the Ford Motor Company's glass. That was for sure.

He started the motor and put the roof back up. Then he eased off the turnout and headed south. He repassed the Oliver place after twelve minutes, turned west on the county road, and then south again on the four-lane into town.

Emerson went back to Bellantonio's cell phone report. *Reacher had called Helen Rodin.* They had business. They had matters to discuss. He would go back to her, sooner or later. *Or she would go to him.* He picked up the phone. Spoke to his dispatcher.

"Put an unmarked car on Helen Rodin's office," he said. "If she leaves the building, have her followed."

Reacher drove past the motor court. He stayed low in the seat and glanced sideways. No sign of any activity. No obvious surveillance. He passed the barbershop, and the gun store. Traffic slowed him as he approached the raised highway. Then it slowed him more, to walking speed. His face was feet away from the pedestrians on his right. Feet away from the stalled drivers on his left. Four lanes of traffic, the two inbound lanes moving slow, the two outbound lanes static.

He wanted to get away from the sidewalk. He put his turn signal on and forced his way into the next lane. The driver behind his shoulder wasn't happy. *Don't sweat it,* Reacher thought. *I learned to drive in a deuce-and-a-half. Time was when I would have rolled right over you.*

The left-hand lane was moving a little faster. Reacher crept past cars on his right. Glanced ahead. There was a police cruiser three cars in front. In the right-hand lane. There was a green light in the distance. Traffic in the left-hand lane was approaching it slowly. Traffic in the right-hand lane was approaching it slower still. Each successive car reached the painted line and paused a moment and then jumped the gap. Nobody wanted to block the box. Now Reacher was two cars behind the cop. He hung back. The irritated guy behind him honked. Reacher inched forward. Now he was one car behind the cop.

The light went yellow.

The car in front of Reacher sprinted.

The light went red.

The cop stopped on the line and Reacher stopped directly alongside him.

He put his elbow on the console and cupped his head in his hand. Spread his fingers wide and covered as much of his face as he could. Stared straight head, up under the header rail, looking at the light, willing it to change.

Helen Rodin rode down two floors in the elevator and met Ann Yanni in the NBC reception area. NBC was paying for Franklin's time, so it was only fair that Yanni should be at the conference. They rode down to the garage together and

Yamm should be at the conference. They rode down to the garage together and got into Helen's Saturn. Came up the ramp and out into the sunshine. Helen glanced right and made a left. Didn't register the gray Impala that moved off the curb twenty yards behind her.

The light stayed red an awful long time. Then it went green and the guy behind Reacher honked and the cop turned to look. Reacher took off through his field of vision and didn't look back. He filtered into a left-turn lane and the cop car swept past on his right. Reacher watched it jam up again ahead. He didn't want to go through the side-by-side thing again so he stuck with the left turn. Found himself back in the street with Martha's grocery on it. It was clogged with slow traffic. He shifted on the seat and checked his pants pocket. Sifted through the coins by feel. Found a quarter. Debated with himself, twenty yards, thirty, forty.

Yes.

He pulled into Martha's tiny lot. Left the engine running and slid out of the seat and danced around the hood to the pay phone on the wall. He put his quarter in the slot and took out Emerson's torn card. Chose the station house number and dialed.

"Help you?" the desk guy said.

"Police?" Reacher asked.

"Go ahead, sir."

Reacher kept his voice fast and light, rushed and low. "That guy on the *Wanted* poster? The thing you guys were passing around?"

"Yes, sir?"

"He's right here, right now."

"Where?"

"In my drive-through, the one on the four-lane north of town next to the tire store. He's inside right now, at the counter, eating."

"You are in the car?"

"You sure it's the guy?"

"Looks just like the picture."

"Does he have a car?"

"Big red Dodge pickup."

"Sir, what's your name?"

"Tony Lazzeri," Reacher said. *Anthony Michael Lazzeri, batted .273 in 118 appearances at second base in 1935. Second-place finish.* Reacher figured he would need to move around the diamond soon. The Yankees hadn't had enough second basemen, or enough nonchampionship years.

"We're on our way, sir," the desk cop said.

Reacher hung up and slid back into the Mustang. Sat still until he heard the first sirens battling north.

Helen Rodin was halfway down Second Street when she caught a commotion in her mirror. A gray Impala sedan lurched out of the lane three cars behind her and pulled a crazy U-turn through the traffic and took off back the way it had come.

"Asshole," she said.

Ann Yanni twisted in her seat.

"Cop car," she said. "You can tell by the antennas."

Reacher made it to Franklin's place about ten minutes late. It was a two-story brick building. The lower floor looked like some kind of a light industrial unit, abandoned. It had steel shutters over its doors and windows. But the upstairs windows had venetian blinds with lights behind them. There was an outside staircase leading to an upper door. The door had a white plastic plate on it: *Franklin Investigations.* There was a parking apron at street level, just a patch of blacktop one-car deep and about six wide. Helen Rodin's green Saturn was

there, and a blue Honda Civic, and a black Chevy Suburban so long that it was overhanging the sidewalk by a foot. The Suburban was Franklin's, Reacher guessed. The Honda was Rosemary Barr's, maybe.

He drove past the place without slowing and circled the block. Saw nothing he didn't want to see. So he slotted the Mustang next to the Saturn and got out and locked it. Ran up the staircase and went in the door without knocking. He found himself in a short hallway with a kitchenette to his right and what he guessed was a bathroom to his left. Up ahead he could hear voices in a large room. He went in and found Franklin at a desk, Helen Rodin and Rosemary Barr in two chairs huddled in conversation, and Ann Yanni looking out the window at her car. All four turned as he came in.

"Do you know any medical terminology?" Helen asked him.

"Like what?"

"PA," she said. "A doctor wrote it. Some kind of an abbreviation."

Reacher glanced at her. Then at Rosemary Barr.

"Let me guess," he said. "The hospital diagnosed James Barr. Probably a mild case."

"Early onset," Rosemary said. "Whatever it is."

"How did you know?" Helen asked.

"Intuition," Reacher said.

"What is it?"

"Later," Reacher said. "Let's do this in order." He turned to Franklin. "Tell me what you know about the victims."

"Five random people," Franklin said. "No connection between any of them. No real connection with anything at all. Certainly no connection to James Barr. I think you were absolutely right. He didn't shoot them for any reason of his own."

"No, I was absolutely wrong," Reacher said. "Thing is, James Barr didn't shoot

them at all."

Grigor Linsky stepped back into a shadowed doorway and dialed his phone.

"I followed a hunch," he said.

"Which was?" the Zec asked.

"With the cops at the lawyer's office, I figured the soldier wouldn't be able to go see her. But obviously they still have business. So I thought maybe she would go to him. And she did. I followed her. They're together in the private detective's office right now. With the sister. And that woman from the television news."

"Are the others with you?"

"We've got the whole block covered. East, west, north, and south."

"Sit tight," the Zec said. "I'll get back to you."

Helen Rodin said, "You want to explain that statement?"

"The evidence is rock solid," Franklin said.

Ann Yanni smiled. *A story.*

Rosemary Barr just stared.

"You bought your brother a radio," Reacher said to her. "A Bose. For the ballgames. He told me that. Did you ever buy him anything else?"

"Like what?"

"Like clothes."

"Sometimes," she said.

"Pants?"

“Sometimes,” she said.

“What size?”

“Size?” she repeated blankly.

“What size pants does your brother wear?”

“Thirty-four waist, thirty-four leg.”

“Exactly,” Reacher said. “He’s relatively tall.”

“How does this help us?” Helen asked.

“You know anything about numbers games?” Reacher asked her. “Old-fashioned illegal numbers, state lotteries, the Powerball, things like that?”

“What about them?”

“What’s the hardest part of them?”

“Winning,” Ann Yanni said.

Reacher smiled. “From the players’ point of view, sure. But the hardest part for the organizers is picking truly random numbers. True randomness is very hard for humans to achieve. In the old days numbers runners used the business pages in the newspapers. They would agree in advance, maybe the second page of the stock prices, maybe the second column, the last two figures in the first six prices quoted. Or the last six, or the middle six, or whatever. That came close to true randomness. Now the big lotteries use complicated machines. But you can find mathematicians who can prove the results aren’t truly random. Because humans built the machines.”

“How does *this* help us?” Helen said.

“Just a train of thought,” Reacher said. “I sat all afternoon in Ms. Yanni’s car, enjoying the sun, thinking about how hard it is to achieve true randomness.”

“Your train is on the wrong track,” Franklin said. “James Barr shot five people. The evidence is crushing.”

“You were a cop,” Reacher said. “You put yourself in danger. Stakeouts, takedowns, high-pressure situations, moments of extreme stress. What’s the first thing you did afterward?”

Franklin glanced at the women.

“Went to the bathroom,” he said.

“Correct,” Reacher said. “Me too. But James Barr didn’t. Bellantonio’s report from Barr’s house shows cement dust in the garage, the kitchen, the living room, the bedroom, and the basement. But not in the bathroom. So he got home, but he didn’t take a leak until after he changed and showered? And how could he shower anyway without going into the bathroom?”

“Maybe he stopped on the way.”

“He was never there.”

“He was *there,* Reacher. What about the evidence?”

“There’s no evidence that says he was there.”

“Are you nuts?”

“There’s evidence that says his van was there, and his shoes, and his pants, and his coat, and his gun, and his ammo, and his quarter, but there’s nothing that says *he* was there.”

“Someone *impersonated* him?” Ann Yanni asked.

“Down to the last detail,” Reacher said. “Drove his car, wore his shoes and his clothes, used his gun.”

“This is fantasy,” Franklin said.

“It explains the raincoat,” Reacher said. “A big roomy garment that covered everything except the denim jeans? Why else wear a raincoat on a warm dry day?”

“Who?” Rosemary asked.

“Watch,” Reacher said.

He stood still, and then he took a single pace forward.

“My pants are thirty-seven-inch legs,” he said. “I crossed the new part of the garage in thirty-five strides. James Barr has a thirty-four-inch leg, which means he should have done it in about thirty-eight strides. But Bellantonio’s footprint count shows *forty*-eight strides.”

“A very short person,” Helen said.

“Charlie,” Rosemary said.

“I thought so, too,” Reacher said. “But then I went to Kentucky. Initially because I wanted to confirm something else. I got around to thinking that maybe James Barr just wasn’t good enough. I looked at the scene. It was tough shooting. And fourteen years ago he was good, but he wasn’t great. And when I saw him in the hospital the skin on his right shoulder was unmarked. And to shoot as well as he apparently did, a guy’s got to practice. And a guy who practices builds up bruising on his shoulder. Like a callus. He didn’t have it. So I figured a guy who started out average could only have gotten worse with time. Especially if he wasn’t practicing much. That’s logical, right? Maybe he’d gotten to the point where he *couldn’t* have done the thing on Friday. Through a simple lack of ability. That’s what I was thinking. So I went down to Kentucky to find out for sure how much worse he’d gotten.”

“And?” Helen asked.

“He’d gotten *better*,” Reacher said. “*Way* better. Not worse. Look at this.” He took the target out of his shirt pocket and unfolded it. “This is the latest of thirty-two sessions over the last three years. And this is much better than he was shooting when he was in the army fourteen years ago. Which is weird, right? He’s fired only three hundred twenty rounds in the last three years, and he’s great? Whereas he was firing two thousand a week back when he was only average?”

“So what does this mean?”

“He went down there with Charlie, every time. And the guy who runs the range is a Marine champion. And a real anal pack rat. He files all the used targets. Which means that Barr had at least two witnesses to what he was scoring, every

Which means that Barr had at least two witnesses to what he was scoring, every time."

"I'd *want* witnesses," Franklin said. "If I was shooting like that."

"It's not possible to get better by not practicing," Reacher said. "I think the truth is he had actually gotten really bad. And I think his ego couldn't take it. Any shooter is competitive. He knew he was lousy now, and he couldn't face it, and he wanted to cover it up. He wanted to show off."

Franklin pointed at the target. "Doesn't look lousy to me."

"This is faked," Reacher said. "You're going to give this to Bellantonio and Bellantonio is going to prove it to you."

"Faked how?"

"I'll bet this was done with a handgun. Nine-millimeter, from point-blank range. If Bellantonio measures the holes, my guess is he'll find they're forty-six thousandths of an inch bigger than .308 holes. And if he tests the paper, he'll find gunpowder residue on it. Because my guess is James Barr took a stroll down the range and made these holes from an inch away, not three hundred yards. Every time."

"That's a stretch."

"It's simple metaphysics. Barr was *never* this good. And it's fair to assume he must have gotten worse. If he'd gotten a little worse, he'd have owned up to it. But he didn't own up to it, so we can assume he'd gotten a *lot* worse. Bad enough to be seriously embarrassed about it. Maybe bad enough that he couldn't hit the paper at all."

Nobody spoke.

"It's a theory that proves itself," Reacher said. "To fake the score because of embarrassment proves he couldn't shoot well anymore. If he couldn't shoot well anymore, he didn't do the thing on Friday."

"You're just guessing," Franklin said.

Reacher nodded. "I was. But I'm not now. Now I know for sure. I fired a round

down in Kentucky. The guy made me, like a rite of passage. I was full of caffeine. I was twitching like crazy. Now I know James Barr will have been way worse."

"Why?" Rosemary asked.

"Because he has Parkinson's disease," Reacher said to her. "*PA* means paralysis agitans, and paralysis agitans is what doctors call Parkinson's disease. Your brother is getting sick, I'm afraid. Shaking and twitching. And no way on earth can you fire a rifle accurately with Parkinson's disease. My opinion, not only didn't he do the thing on Friday, he *couldn't possibly* have done it."

Rosemary went quiet. *Good news and bad news.* She glanced at the window. Looked at the floor. She was dressed like a widow. Black silk blouse, black pencil skirt, black nylons, black patent leather shoes with a low heel.

"Maybe that's why he was so angry all the time," she said. "Maybe he felt it coming on. Felt helpless and out of control. His body started to let him down. He would have hated that. Anyone would."

Then she looked straight at Reacher.

"I told you he was innocent," she said.

"Ma'am, I apologize unreservedly," Reacher said. "You were right. He reformed. He kept to his bargain. He deserves credit. And I'm sorry he's sick."

"Now you've got to help him. You promised."

"I am helping him. Since Monday night I haven't done anything else."

"This is crazy," Franklin said.

"No, it's exactly the same as it always was," Reacher said. "It's someone setting James Barr up for the fall. But instead of actually making him do it, they just made it look like he did it. That's the only practical difference here."

"But is it possible?" Ann Yanni asked.

"Why not? Think it through. *Walk* it through."

Ann Yanni walked it through. She rehearsed little movements, slowly, thoughtfully, like an actress. “He dresses in Barr’s clothes, and shoes, and maybe finds a quarter in a jar. Or in a pocket somewhere. He wears gloves, so as not to mess up Barr’s fingerprints. He’s already taken the traffic cone from Barr’s garage, maybe the day before. He gets the rifle from the basement. It’s already been loaded, by Barr himself, previously. He drives to town in Barr’s minivan. He leaves all the clues. Covers himself in cement dust. Comes back to the house and puts everything away and leaves. Fast, not even taking the time to use the bathroom. Then James Barr comes home sometime later and walks into a trap he doesn’t even know is there.”

“That’s exactly how I see it,” Reacher said.

“But where was Barr at the time?” Helen said.

“Out,” Reacher said.

“That’s a nice coincidence,” Franklin said.

“I don’t think it was,” Reacher said. “I think they arranged something to get him out of the way. He remembers going out somewhere, previously. Then being optimistic, like something good was about to happen. I think they set him up with someone. I think they engineered a chance meeting that led somewhere. I think he had a date on Friday.”

“With who?”

“Sandy, maybe. They turned her loose on me. Maybe they turned her loose on him, too. He dressed well on Friday. The report shows his wallet was in a decent pair of pants.”

“So who really did it?” Helen asked.

“Someone cold as ice,” Reacher said. “Someone who didn’t even need to use the bathroom afterward.”

“Charlie,” Rosemary said. “Got to be. Has to be. He’s small. He’s weird. He knew the house. He knew where everything was. The dog knew him.”

“He was a terrible shooter too,” Reacher said. “That’s the other reason why I went to Kentucky. I wanted to test that theory.”

went to Kentucky. I wanted to test that theory."

"So who was it?"

"Charlie," Reacher said. "His evidence was faked, too. But in a different way. The holes in his targets were all over the place. Except they weren't *really* all over the place. The distribution wasn't entirely random. He was trying to disguise how good he actually was. He was aiming at arbitrary points on the paper, and he was hitting those points, every time, dead-on, believe me. Once in a while he would get bored, and he'd put one through the inner ring. Or he'd pick on a quadrant outside the outer ring and put a round straight through it. One time he drilled all four corners. The point is, it doesn't really matter what you aim at, as long as you hit it. It's only convention that makes us aim at the ten-ring. It's just as good practice to aim at some other spot. Even a spot off the paper, like a tree. That's what Charlie was doing. He was a tremendous shot, training hard, but trying to look like he was missing all the time. But like I said, true randomness is impossible for a human to achieve. There are always patterns."

"Why would he do that?" Helen asked.

"For an alibi."

"Making people think he couldn't shoot?"

Reacher nodded. "He noticed that the range master was saving the used targets. He's an ice-cold pro who thinks about every wrinkle ahead of time."

"Who is he?" Franklin asked.

"His real name is Chenko and he hangs with a bunch of Russians. He's probably a Red Army veteran. Probably one of their snipers. And they're real good. They always have been."

"How do we get to him?"

"Through the victim."

"Square one. The victims are all dead ends. You'll have to come up with something better than that."

"His boss calls himself the Zoo."

"His boss calls himself the Zec."

"What kind of a name is that?"

"It's a word, not a name. Old-time Soviet slang. A *zec* was a labor camp inmate. In the Gulag in Siberia."

"Those camps are ancient history."

"Which makes the Zec a very old man. But a very tough old man. Probably way tougher than we can imagine."

The Zec was tired after his stint with the backhoe. But he was used to being tired. He had been tired for sixty-three years. He had been tired since the day the recruiter came to his village, in the early fall of 1942. His village was four thousand miles from anywhere, and the recruiter was a type of Moscow Russian nobody had ever seen before. He was brisk, and self-assured, and confident. He permitted no argument. No discussion. All males between the ages of sixteen and fifty were to come with him.

The Zec was seventeen at that point. Initially he was overlooked, because he was in prison. He had slept with an older man's wife, and then beaten the guy badly when he complained about it. The beaten guy claimed exemption from the draft because of his physical condition, and then he told the recruiter about his assailant in prison. The recruiter was anxious to make his numbers, so the Zec was hauled out of his cell and told to line up with the others in the village square. He did so quite happily. He assumed he was being given a ride to freedom. He assumed there would be a hundred opportunities just to walk away.

He was wrong.

The recruits were locked into a truck, and then a train, for a journey that lasted five weeks. Formal induction into the Red Army happened along the way. Uniforms were issued, thick woolen garments, and a coat, and a pair of felt-lined boots, and a pay book. But no actual pay. No weapons. And no training either, beyond a brief stop in a snow-covered rail yard, where a commissar brayed over and over again at the locked train through a huge metal megaphone. The guy repeated a simple twenty-word speech, which the Zec remembered ever

afterward: *The fate of the world is being decided at Stalingrad, where you will fight to the last for the Motherland.*

The five-week journey ended on the eastern bank of the Volga, where the recruits were unloaded like cattle and forced to run straight for a small assemblage of old river ferries and pleasure cruisers. Half a mile away on the opposite bank was a vision from hell. A city, larger than anything the Zec had ever seen before, was in ruins, belching smoke and fire. The river was burning and exploding with mortar shells. The sky was full of airplanes, which lined up and fell into dives, dropping bombs, firing guns. There were corpses everywhere, and body parts, and screaming wounded.

The Zec was forced onto a small boat that had a gaily-colored striped sunshade. It was crammed tight with soldiers. Nobody had room to move. Nobody had a weapon. The boat lurched out into the freezing current and airplanes fell on it like flies on shit. The crossing lasted fifteen minutes and at the end of it the Zec was slimy with his neighbors' blood.

He was forced off onto a narrow wooden pier and made to line up single file and then made to run toward the city, past a staging post where the second phase of his military training took place: two quartermasters were doling out loaded rifles and spare ammunition clips in an endless alternate sequence and chanting what later struck the Zec as a poem, or a song, or a hymn to complete and utter insanity, over and over again without pausing:

The one with the rifle shoots

The one without follows him

When the one with the rifle is killed

The one who is following picks up the rifle and shoots.

The Zec was handed an ammunition clip. No rifle. He was shoved forward, and blindly followed the back of the man ahead. He turned a corner. Passed in front of a Red Army machine-gun nest. At first he thought the front line must therefore be very close. But then a commissar with a flag and another huge megaphone roared at him: *No retreat! If you turn back even one step we will*

shoot you down! So the Zec ran helplessly onward and turned another corner and stepped into a hail of German bullets. He stopped, half-turned, and was hit three times in the arms and legs. He was bowled over and came to rest lying on the shattered remains of a brick wall and within minutes was buried under a mounting pile of corpses.

He came to forty-eight hours later in an improvised hospital and made his first acquaintance with Soviet military justice: harsh, ponderous, ideological, but running strictly in accordance with its own arcane rules. The matter at issue was caused by his having half-turned: Were his wounds inflicted by the Motherland's enemy, or had he been retreating toward his own side's guns? Because of the physical ambiguity he was spared execution and sentenced to a penal battalion instead. Thus began a process of survival that had so far lasted sixty-three years.

A process he intended to continue.

He dialed Grigor Linsky's number.

"We can assume the soldier is talking," he said. "Whatever he knows, they all know now. Therefore it's time to get ourselves an insurance policy."

Franklin said, "We're really no further ahead. Are we? No way is Emerson going to accept a damn thing unless we give him more than we've got right now."

"So work the victim list," Reacher said.

"That could take forever. Five lives, five life histories."

"So let's focus."

"Great. Terrific. Just tell me which one you want me to focus on."

Reacher nodded. Recalled Helen Rodin's description of what she had heard. *The first shot, and then a tiny pause, and then the next two. Then another pause, a little longer, but really only a split second, and then the last three.* He closed his eyes. In his mind he pictured Bellantonio's audio graph from the cell phone voice mail. Pictured his own mute simulation, in the gloom of the new parking

garage, his right arm extended like a rifle: *click, click-click, click-click-click.*

“Not the first one,” he said. “Not the first cold shot. No guarantee of hitting anything with that. Therefore the first victim was meaningless. Part of the window dressing. Not the last three, either. That was bang-bang-bang. The deliberate miss, and more window dressing. The job was already done by then.”

“So, the second or the third. Or both of them.”

Click, click-click.

Reacher opened his eyes.

“The third,” he said. “There’s a rhythm there. The first cold shot, then a lead-in, and then the money shot. The target. Then a break. His eye is lagging in the scope. He’s making sure the target is down. It is. So then the last three.”

“Who was the third?” Helen asked.

“The woman,” Franklin said.

Linsky called Chenko, and then Vladimir, and then Sokolov. He explained the mission and pulled them all in tighter. Franklin’s office had no back entrance. There was just the exposed staircase. The target’s car was right there on the apron. Easy.

Reacher said, “Tell me about the woman.”

Franklin shuffled his notes. Put them in a new order of priority.

“Her name was Oline Archer,” he said. “Caucasian female, married, no children, thirty-seven years old, lived west of here in the outer suburbs.”

“Employed in the DMV building,” Reacher said. “If she was the specific target, Charlie had to know where she was and when she would be coming out.”

Franklin nodded. “Employed by the DMV itself. Been there a year and a half.”

“Doing what exactly?”

“Clerical supervisor. Doing whatever they do in there.”

“So was it work-related?” Ann Yanni asked.

“Too long of a counter delay?” Franklin said. “A bad photo on a driver’s license? I doubt it. I checked the national databases. DMV clerks don’t get killed by customers. That just doesn’t happen.”

“So what about her personal life?” Helen Rodin asked.

“Nothing jumped out at me,” Franklin said. “She was just an ordinary woman. But I’ll keep digging. I’ll go down a few levels. Got to be something there.”

“Do it fast,” Rosemary Barr said. “For my brother’s sake. We have to get him out.”

“We need medical opinions for that,” Ann Yanni said. “Regular doctors now, not psychiatrists.”

“Will NBC pay?” Helen Rodin asked.

“If it’s likely to work.”

“It should,” Rosemary said. “I mean, shouldn’t it? Parkinson’s is a real thing, isn’t it? Either he’s got it or he hasn’t.”

“It might work at trial,” Reacher said. “A plausible reason why James Barr couldn’t have done it, plus a plausible narrative about someone else doing it? That’s usually how you create reasonable doubt.”

“*Plausible* is a big word,” Franklin said. “And reasonable doubt is a risky concept. Better to get Alex Rodin to drop the charges altogether. Which means convincing Emerson first.”

“I can’t talk to either one of them,” Reacher said.

“I can,” Helen said.

“I can,” Franklin said.

“And I sure as hell can,” Ann Yanni said. “We all can, apart from you.”

“But you might not want to,” Reacher said.

“Why not?” Helen asked.

“You’re not going to like this part very much.”

“Why not?” Helen asked again.

“Think,” Reacher said. “Work backward. The thing with Sandy being killed, and the thing in the sports bar Monday night, why did those two things happen?”

“To tie you up. To prevent you hurting the case.”

“Correct. Two attempts, same aim, same goal, same perpetrator.”

“Obviously.”

“And the thing Monday night started with me being followed from my hotel. Sandy and Jeb Oliver and his other pals were cruising around, standing by, waiting until someone called them and told them where I ended up. So really it started with me being followed *to* my hotel. Much earlier in the day.”

“We’ve been through all of this.”

“But how did the puppet master get my name? How did he even know I was in town? How did he know there was a guy here who was a potential problem?”

“Someone told him.”

“Who knew, early in the day on Monday?”

Helen paused a beat.

“My father,” she said. “Since early on Monday morning. And then Emerson, presumably. Shortly afterward. They’d have talked about the case. They’d have communicated immediately if there was a danger that the wheels were coming off.”

“Correct,” Reacher said. “Then one of those two guys called the puppet master.

Well before lunch on Monday."

Helen said nothing.

"Unless one of those two guys *is* the puppet master," Reacher said.

"The Zec is the puppet master. You said so yourself."

"I said he's Charlie's boss. That's all. We've got no way of knowing whether he's actually at the top of the tree."

"You're right," Helen said. "I don't like this line of thinking at all."

"Someone communicated," Reacher said. "That's for damn sure. Either your father or Emerson. My name was on the street two hours after I got off the bus. So one of them is bent and the other one won't help us either because he already likes the case exactly the way it is."

The room went quiet.

"I need to get back to work," Ann Yanni said.

Nobody spoke.

"Call me if there's news," Yanni said.

The room stayed quiet. Reacher said nothing. Ann Yanni crossed the room. Stopped next to him.

"Keys," she said.

He dug in his pocket and handed them over.

"Thanks for the loan," he said. "Nice car."

Linsky watched the Mustang leave. It went north. Loud engine, loud exhaust. It was audible for a whole block. Then the street went quiet again and Linsky dialed his phone.

"The television woman is out of there," he said.

"The television woman is out of there," he said.

"The private detective will stay at work," the Zec said.

"So what if the others leave together?"

"I hope they don't."

"What if they do?"

"Take them all."

Rosemary Barr asked, "Is there a cure? For Parkinson's disease?"

"No," Reacher said. "No cure, no prevention. But it can be slowed down. There are drugs for it. Physiotherapy helps. And sleep. The symptoms disappear when a person is asleep."

"Maybe that's why he wanted the pills. To escape."

"He shouldn't try to escape too much. Social contact is good."

"I should go to the hospital," Rosemary said.

"Explain to him," Reacher said. "Tell him what really happened on Friday."

Rosemary nodded. Crossed the room and went out the door. A minute later Reacher heard her car start up and drive away.

Franklin went out to the kitchenette to make coffee. Reacher and Helen Rodin were left alone in the office together. Reacher sat down in the chair that Rosemary Barr had used. Helen stepped to the window and looked down at the street below. She kept her back to the room. She was dressed the same as Rosemary Barr. Black shirt, black skirt, black patent-leather shoes. But she didn't look like a widow. She looked like something from New York or Paris. Her heels were higher and her legs were long and bare and tan.

"These guys we're talking about are Russians," she said.

Reacher said nothing.

“My father is an American,” she said.

“An American called Aleksei Alekseivitch,” Reacher said.

“Our family came here before World War One. There’s no possible connection. How could there be? These people we’re talking about are low-life Soviets.”

“What did your father do before he was the DA?”

“He was an assistant DA.”

“Before that?”

“He always worked there.”

“Tell me about his coffee service.”

“What about it?”

“He uses china cups and a silver tray. The county didn’t buy them for him.”

“So?”

“Tell me about his suits.”

“His suits?”

“On Monday he was wearing a thousand-dollar suit. You don’t see many public servants wearing thousand-dollar suits.”

“He’s got expensive tastes.”

“How does he afford them?”

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

“One more question.”

Helen said nothing.

Helen said nothing.

“Did he pressure you not to take the case?”

Helen said nothing. Looked left. Looked right. Then she turned around. “He said losing might be winning.”

“Concern for your career?”

“I thought so. I still think so. He’s an honest man.”

Reacher nodded. “There’s a fifty percent chance you’re right.”

Franklin came back in with the coffee, which was a thin own-brand brew in three nonmatching pottery mugs, two of them chipped, on a cork bar tray, with an open carton of half-and-half and a yellow box of sugar and a single pressed-steel spoon. He put the tray on the desk and Helen Rodin stared at it, like it was making Reacher’s point for him: *This is how coffee is served in an office.*

“David Chapman knew your name on Monday,” she said. “James Barr’s first lawyer. He’s known about you since Saturday.”

“But Chapman didn’t know I ever showed up,” Reacher said. “I assume nobody told him.”

“I knew your name,” Franklin said. “Maybe I should be in the mix, too.”

“But you knew the real reason I was here,” Reacher said. “You wouldn’t have had me attacked. You’d have had me subpoenaed.”

Nobody spoke.

“I was wrong about Jeb Oliver,” Reacher said. “He isn’t a dope dealer. There was nothing in his barn except an old pickup truck.”

“I’m glad you can be wrong about something,” Helen said.

“Jeb Oliver isn’t Russian,” Franklin said.

“Apple pie,” Reacher said.

“Therefore these guys can work with Americans. That’s what I’m saying. It

could be Emerson. Doesn't have to be the DA."

"Fifty percent chance," Reacher said. "I'm not accusing anybody yet."

"If you're right in the first place."

"The bad guys were all over me very fast."

"Doesn't sound like either Emerson or the DA to me, and I know them both."

"You can say his name," Helen said. "His name is Alex Rodin."

"I don't think it's either one of them," Franklin said.

"I'm going back to work," Helen said.

"Give me a ride?" Reacher asked. "Let me out under the highway?"

"No," Helen said. "I really don't feel like doing that."

She picked up her purse and her briefcase and walked out of the office alone.

Reacher sat still and listened to the sounds out on the street. He heard a car door opening and closing. An engine starting. A car driving away. He sipped his coffee and said, "I guess I upset her."

Franklin nodded. "I guess you did."

"These guys have got someone on the inside. That's clear, right? That's a fact. So we should be able to discuss it."

"A cop makes more sense than a DA."

"I don't agree. A cop controls only his own cases. Ultimately a prosecutor controls everything."

"I'd prefer it that way. I *was* a cop."

"So was I," Reacher said.

“And I have to say, Alex Rodin kills a lot of cases. People say it’s caution, but it could be something else.”

“You should analyze what kind of cases he kills.”

“Like I don’t have enough to do already.”

Reacher nodded. Put his mug down. Stood up.

“Start with Oline Archer,” he said. “The victim. She’s what’s important now.”

Then he stepped to the window and checked the street. Saw nothing. So he nodded to Franklin and walked down the hallway and out the door to the top of the outside staircase.

He paused on the top step and stretched in the warmth. Rolled his shoulders, flexed his hands, took a deep breath of air. He was cramped from driving and sitting all day. And oppressed by hiding out. It felt good just to stand still and do nothing, high up and exposed. Out in the open, in the daylight. Below him to his left the cars were gone except for the black Suburban. The street was quiet. He glanced to his right. There was traffic building up on the north-south drag. To his left, there was less. He figured he would dodge west first. But a long way west, because the police station must be near. He would need to loop around it. Then he would head north. North of downtown was a warren. North of downtown was where he felt best.

He started down the stairs. As he stepped off onto the sidewalk at the bottom he heard a footfall fifteen feet behind him. A side step. Thin soles on limestone grit. Quiet. Then the unmistakable *crunch-crunch* of a pump-action shotgun racking a round.

Then a voice.

It said: “Stop right there.”

An American accent. Quiet, but distinct. *From somewhere way north.* Reacher stopped. Stood still and stared straight ahead at a blank brick wall across the street.

The voice said: “Step to your right.”

Reacher stepped to his right. A long sideways shuffle.

The voice said: “Now turn around real slow.”

Reacher turned around, real slow. He kept his hands away from his body, palms out. Saw a small figure fifteen feet away. The same guy he had seen the night before, from the shadows. Not more than five-four, not more than a hundred and thirty pounds, slight, pale, with cropped black hair that stuck up crazily. Chenko. Or Charlie. In his right hand, rock-steady, was a sawn-off with a pistol grip. In his left hand was some kind of a black thing.

“Catch,” Charlie said.

He tossed the black thing underhand. Reacher watched it tumble and sparkle through the air straight at him and his subconscious said: *Not a grenade.* So he caught it. Two-handed. It was a shoe. A woman’s patent-leather dress shoe, black, with a heel. It was still slightly warm.

“Now toss it back,” Charlie said. “Just like I did.”

Reacher paused. *Whose shoe was it?* He stared down at it.

Low heel.

Rosemary Barr’s?

“Toss it back,” Charlie called. “Nice and slow.”

Assess and evaluate. Reacher was unarmed. He was holding a shoe. Not a stone, not a rock. The shoe was lightweight and unaerodynamic. It wouldn’t do anyone any harm. It would stall and flutter in the air and Charlie would just swat it away.

“Toss it back,” Charlie said again.

Reacher did nothing. He could tear the heel off and throw it like a dart. Like a missile. But Charlie would shoot him while he was drawing his arm back and winding up. Charlie was fifteen feet away, poised, balanced, unblinking, with the gun rock-steady in his hand. Too close to miss, too far to get to.

“Last chance,” Charlie said.

Reacher soft-tossed the shoe back. A long, looping underhand throw. Charlie caught it one-handed and it was like the scene had rewound right back to the beginning.

“She’s in summer school,” Charlie said. “Think about it like that. She’s going to get acquainted with the facts of life. She’s going to work on her testimony. About how her brother planned in advance. About how he let slip what he was going to do. She’s going to be a great witness. She’s going to make the case. You understand that, right?”

Reacher said nothing.

“So the game is over now,” Charlie said.

Reacher said nothing.

“Take two steps backward,” Charlie said.

Reacher took two steps backward. They put him right on the curb. Now Charlie was twenty feet away. He was still holding the shoe. He was smiling.

“Turn around,” he said.

“You going to shoot me?” Reacher asked.

“Maybe.”

“You should.”

“Why?”

“Because if you don’t, I’m going to find you and I’m going to make you sorry.”

“Big talk.”

“Not just talk.”

“So maybe I’ll shoot you.”

“You should.”

“Turn around,” Charlie said.

Reacher turned around.

“Now stand still,” Charlie said.

Reacher stood still. Faced the street. He kept his eyes open. Stared down at the blacktop. It was laid over ancient cobblestones. It was full of small humps in a regular pattern. He started counting them, to fill what might be the last seconds of his life. He strained to hear sounds behind him. Listened for the whisper of clothing as Charlie’s arm extended. Listened for the quiet metallic click as the trigger moved through its first tenth of an inch. Would Charlie shoot? Common sense said no. Homicides were always investigated.

But these people were crazy. And there was a fifty percent chance they owned a local cop. Or that *he* owned *them.*

Silence. Reacher strained to hear sounds behind him.

But he heard nothing. Nothing happened. Nothing at all. One minute. Two. Then a hundred yards away to the east he heard a siren. Just two brief electronic blips from a cop car forcing a path through traffic.

“Stand still,” Charlie said again.

Reacher stood still. Ten seconds. Twenty. Thirty. Then two police cruisers turned into the street simultaneously. One from the east and one from the west. They were both moving fast. Their engines roared. Their tires howled. Their sounds beat against the brick. They jammed to a stop. Doors opened. Cops spilled out. Reacher turned his head. Charlie wasn’t there anymore.

CHAPTER 14

The arrest was fast and efficient. It went down the usual way. Guns, shouting, handcuffs, Miranda. Reacher stayed silent throughout. He knew better than to speak. He had been a cop and he knew the kind of trouble that talking can get a guy into. And the kind of delay it can cause. Say something, and the cops have to stop to write it down. And Reacher couldn't afford for anyone to stop. Not right then.

The trip to the station house was mercifully short. Not more than four blocks. Reacher guessed it made sense that an ex-cop like Franklin would pick an office location in the neighborhood he was accustomed to. He used the drive time to work on a strategy. He figured he would be taken straight to Emerson, which gave him a fifty percent chance of being put in a room with a bad guy.

Or with a good guy.

But he ended up a hundred percent sure he was in a room with a bad guy because Emerson and Alex Rodin were both there together. Reacher was hauled out of the squad car and hustled straight to Emerson's office. Emerson was behind the desk. Rodin was in front of it.

Can't say a word, Reacher thought. *But this has got to be real fast.*

Then he thought: *Which one? Rodin? Or Emerson?* Rodin was wearing a suit. Blue, summer weight, expensive, maybe the same one as on Monday. Emerson was in shirtsleeves. Playing with a pen. Bouncing it off his blotter, one end, then the other.

Get on with it, Reacher thought.

"You weren't so hard to find," Emerson said.

Reacher said nothing. He was still handcuffed.

"Tell us about the night Alexandra Dupree was killed," Rodin said.

Reacher said nothing.

“Tell us how it felt,” Emerson said. “When her neck snapped.”

Reacher said nothing.

“The jury’s going to hate you,” Rodin said.

Reacher said, “Phone call.”

“You want to lawyer up?” Emerson said.

Reacher said nothing.

“Who’s your lawyer?” Rodin asked.

“Your daughter,” Reacher said.

“Want us to call her?” Emerson asked.

“Maybe. Or maybe Rosemary Barr instead.”

He watched their eyes.

“The sister?” Rodin said.

“You want us to call the *sister*?” Emerson said.

One of you knows she ain’t going to answer, Reacher thought.

Which one?

Nothing in their eyes.

“Call Ann Yanni,” he said.

“From the TV?” Rodin said. “Why her?”

“I get a phone call,” Reacher said. “I don’t have to explain anything. I say who, you dial the number.”

“She’ll be getting ready to go on the air. The local news is at six o’clock.”

“So we’ll wait,” Reacher said. “I’ve got all the time in the world.”

Which one of you knows that isn't true?

They waited, but it turned out the wait wasn't long. Emerson placed the call to NBC and told Ann Yanni's assistant that the police department had arrested Jack Reacher and that Reacher was requesting Yanni's presence, reason unknown. It was a bizarre message. But Yanni was in Emerson's office less than thirty minutes later. She was a journalist on the scent of a story. She knew that network tomorrow was better than local today.

"How can I help?" she asked.

She had presence. She was a star in her market. And she was media. Both Emerson and Rodin looked a little intimidated. Not by her as an individual. But by what she represented.

"I'm sorry," Reacher said to her. "I know you won't want to, and I know I said I would never tell, but under the circumstances you're going to have to confirm an alibi for me. No choice, I'm afraid."

He glanced at her. Saw her following his words. Saw confusion cross her face. She had no reaction. He kept his eyes on hers. No reaction.

Help me out here, girl.

One second.

Two seconds.

No reaction.

Reacher held his breath. *Get with the damn program, Yanni. One more second and it's all going to fall apart.*

No reaction.

Then she nodded. She had caught on. Reacher breathed out. *Good call.* Professional skill. She was a person accustomed to hearing breaking news in her

earpiece and repeating it live on air half a second later like she had known about it all her life.

“What alibi?” Emerson said.

Yanni glanced at him. Then at Rodin.

“I thought this was about Jack Reacher,” she said.

“It is,” Emerson said.

“But this is Joe Gordon,” she said. “At least, that’s what he told me.”

“He told you his name was Gordon?”

“When I met him.”

“Which was when?”

“Two days ago.”

“You’ve been running his picture on your show.”

“That was *his* picture? It looked nothing like him. The hair was totally different. No similarity at all.”

“What alibi?” Emerson said again.

“For when?” Yanni asked.

“The night the girl was killed. That’s what we’re talking about here.”

Yanni said nothing.

Rodin said, “Ma’am, if you know something, you need to tell us now.”

“I’d rather not,” Yanni said.

Reacher smiled to himself. The way she said it absolutely guaranteed that Emerson and Rodin were a minute away from begging to hear the story. She was standing there, blushing on command all the way up to her temples, her back straight, her blouse open three buttons. She was a hell of an actress. Reacher

straight, her blouse open three buttons. She was a hell of an actress. Reacher figured maybe all news anchors were.

“It’s a question of evidence,” Emerson said.

“Obviously,” Yanni said. “But can’t you just take my word?”

“For what?”

“That he didn’t do it.”

“We need details,” Rodin said.

“I have to think of my reputation,” Yanni said.

“Your statement won’t be made public if we drop the charges.”

“Can you guarantee dropping the charges?”

“Not before we hear your statement,” Emerson said.

“So it’s a Catch-22,” Yanni said.

“I’m afraid it is.”

Don’t push too far, Reacher thought. *We don’t have time.*

Yanni sighed. Looked down at the floor. Looked up, straight into Emerson’s eyes, furious, embarrassed, magnificent.

“We spent that night together,” she said.

“You and Reacher?”

“Me and Joe Gordon.”

Emerson pointed. “This man?”

Yanni nodded. “That man.”

“All night?”

“Yes.”

“From when to when?”

“From about eleven-forty. When the news was over. Until I got paged the next morning when you guys found the body.”

“Where were you?”

Reacher closed his eyes. Recalled the conversation the night before in the parking garage. The car window, open an inch and a half. *Had he told her?*

“The motor court,” Yanni said. “His room.”

“The clerk didn’t say he saw you.”

“Of course the clerk didn’t see me. I have to think about things like that.”

“Which room?”

Had he told her?

“Room eight,” Yanni said.

“He didn’t leave the room during the night?”

“No, he didn’t.”

“Not at all?”

“No.”

“How can you be sure?”

Yanni looked away. “Because we didn’t actually sleep a wink.”

The office went quiet.

“Can you offer any corroboration?” Emerson asked.

“Like what?” Yanni asked back.

“Distinguishing marks? That I can’t see right now but that someone who had been in your position would have seen?”

“Oh, please.”

“It’s the last question,” Emerson said.

Yanni said nothing. Reacher recalled switching on the Mustang’s dome light and lifting his shirt to reveal the tire iron. He moved his cuffed hands and laid them across his waistband.

“Anything?” Emerson said.

“It’s important,” Rodin said.

“He has a scar,” Yanni said. “Low down on his stomach. A horrible big thing.”

Emerson and Rodin both turned and looked at Reacher. Reacher got to his feet. Grabbed a fold of fabric in both hands and pulled his shirt out of his pants. Lifted it.

“OK,” Emerson said.

“What *was* that?” Rodin asked.

“Part of a Marine sergeant’s jawbone,” Reacher said. “The medics figured it must have weighed about four ounces. It was traveling at five thousand feet per second away from the epicenter of a trinitrotoluene explosion. Just surfing along on the pressure wave, until it hit me.”

He dropped his shirt back down. Didn’t try to tuck it in. The handcuffs would have made that difficult.

“Satisfied now?” he asked. “Have you embarrassed the lady enough?”

Emerson and Rodin looked at each other. *One of you knows for sure I’m innocent,* Reacher thought. *And I don’t care what the other one thinks.*

“Ms. Yanni will have to put it in writing,” Emerson said.

“You type it, I’ll sign it,” Yanni said.

Rodin looked straight at Reacher. “Can *you* offer corroboration?”

“Like what?”

“Something along the lines of your scar. But relating to Ms. Yanni.”

Reacher nodded. “Yes, I could. But I won’t. And if you ask again I’ll knock your teeth down your throat.”

Silence in the office. Emerson dug in his pocket and found a handcuff key. Turned suddenly and tossed it underarm through the air. Reacher’s hands were cuffed but he was careful to lead with his right. He caught the key in his right palm, and smiled.

“Bellantonio been talking to you?” he said.

“Why did you give Ms. Yanni a false name?” Emerson asked.

“Maybe I didn’t,” Reacher said. “Maybe Gordon is my real name.”

He tossed the key back and stepped over and held his wrists out and waited for Emerson to unlock the cuffs.

The Zec took the phone call two minutes later. A familiar voice, low and hurried.

“It didn’t work,” it said. “He had an alibi.”

“For real?”

“Probably not. But we’re not going to go there.”

“So what next?”

“Just sit tight. He can’t be more than one step away now. In which case he’ll be coming for you soon. So be locked and loaded and ready for him.”

“[illegible]” Ann Yanni said. “Did they?” She started the

"They didn't fight very hard," Ann Yanni said. "Did they?" She started the Mustang's engine before Reacher even got his door closed.

"I didn't expect them to," he said. "The innocent one knows the case was weak. And the guilty one knows putting me back on the street takes me off the board about as fast as putting me in a cell right now."

"Why?"

"Because they've got Rosemary Barr and they know I'll go find her. So they'll be waiting for me, ready to rock and roll. I'll be dead before morning. That's the new plan. Cheaper than jail."

They drove straight back to Franklin's office and ran up the outside staircase and found Franklin sitting at his desk. The lights were off and his face was bathed in the glow from his computer screen. He was staring at it blankly, like it was telling him nothing. Reacher broke the news about Rosemary Barr. Franklin went very still and glanced at the door. Then the window.

"We were right here," he said.

Reacher nodded. "Three of us. You, me, and Helen."

"I didn't hear anything."

"Me either," Reacher said. "They're really good."

"What are they going to do to her?"

"They're going to make her give evidence against her brother. Some kind of a made-up story."

"Will they hurt her?"

"That depends on how fast she caves."

"She's not going to cave," Yanni said. "Not in a million years. Don't you see that? She's totally dedicated to clearing her brother's name."

"Then they're going to hurt her."

Then they're going to hurt her.

“Where is she?” Franklin asked Reacher. “Best guess?”

“Wherever they are,” Reacher said. “But I don’t know where that is.”

She was in the upstairs living room, taped to a chair. The Zec was staring at her. He was fascinated by women. Once he had gone twenty-seven years without seeing one. The penal battalion he had joined in 1943 had had a few, but they were a small minority and they died fast. And then after the Great Patriotic War had been won, his nightmare progress through the Gulag had begun. In 1949 he had seen a woman peasant near the White Sea Canal. She was a stooped and bulky old crone two hundred yards away in a beet field. Then nothing, until in 1976 he saw a nurse riding a troika sled through the frozen wastes of Siberia. He was a quarryman then. He had come up out of the hole with a hundred other *zec*s and was walking home in a long ragged column down a long straight road. The nurse’s sled was approaching on another road that ran at right angles. The land was flat and featureless and covered with snow. The *zec*s could see forever. They stood and watched the nurse drive a whole mile. Then they turned their heads as one as she passed through the crossroads and watched her through another mile. The guards denied them food that night as punishment for the unauthorized halt. Four men died, but the Zec didn’t.

“Are you comfortable?” he asked.

Rosemary Barr said nothing. The one called Chenko had returned her shoe. He had crouched in front of her and fitted it to her foot like a store clerk. Then he had backed away and sat down next to the one called Vladimir, on the sofa. The one called Sokolov had stayed downstairs in a room full of surveillance equipment. The one called Linsky was pacing the room, white with pain. He had something wrong with his back.

“When the Zec speaks, you should answer,” the one called Vladimir said.

Rosemary looked away. She was afraid of Vladimir. More so than the others. Vladimir was huge, and he gave off an air of depravity, like a smell.

“Does she understand her position?” Linsky asked. The Zec smiled at him, and

Linsky smiled back. It was a private joke between them. Any claim to rights or humane treatment in the camps was always met with a question: *Do you understand your position?* The question was always followed by a statement: *You don't* have *a position. You are* nothing *to the Motherland.* The first time Linsky had heard the question he had been about to reply, but the Zec had hauled him away. By that point the Zec had eighteen years under his belt, and the intervention was uncharacteristic. But clearly he had felt something for the raw youngster. He had taken the kid under his wing. They had been together ever since, through a long succession of locations neither of them could name. Many books had been written about the Gulag, and documents had been discovered, and maps had been made, but the irony was that those who had participated had no idea where they had been. Nobody had told them. A camp was a camp, with wire, huts, endless forest, endless tundra, endless work. What difference did a name make?

Linsky had been a soldier and a thief. In the west of Europe or in America he would have served time, two years here, three years there, but during the Soviet Union, stealing was an ideological transgression. It showed an uneducated and antisocial preference for private property. Such a preference was answered with a swift and permanent removal from civilized society. In Linsky's case the removal had lasted from 1963 until civilized society had collapsed and Gorbachev had emptied the Gulag.

"She understands her position," the Zec said. "And next comes acceptance."

Franklin called Helen Rodin. Ten minutes later she was back in his office. She was still mad at Reacher. That was clear. But she was too worried about Rosemary Barr to make a big deal out of it. Franklin stayed at his desk, one eye on his computer screen. Helen and Ann Yanni sat together at a table. Reacher stared out the window. The sky was darkening.

"We should call someone," Helen said.

"Like who?" Reacher asked.

"My father. He's the good guy."

Reacher turned around. "Suppose he is. What do we tell him? That we've got a

missing person? He'll just call the cops, because what else can he do? And if Emerson's the bad guy, the cops will sit on it. Even if Emerson's the good guy, the cops will sit on it just the same. Missing adults don't get anyone very excited. Too many of them."

"But she's integral to our case."

"Their case is about her brother. So the cops will figure it's only natural she ran away. Her brother is a notorious criminal and she couldn't stand the shame."

"But you saw her get kidnapped. You could tell them."

"I saw a shoe. That's all I can tell anybody. And I've got no credibility here. I've been playing silly games for two days."

"So what do we do?"

Reacher turned back to the window.

"We take care of it ourselves," he said.

"How?"

"All we need is a location. We work through the woman who was shot, we get names, we get some kind of a context, we get a place. Then we go there."

"When?" Yanni asked.

"Twelve hours," Reacher said. "Before dawn. They'll be working on some kind of a timetable. They want to take care of me first, and then they want to start in on Rosemary Barr. We need to get to her before they run out of patience."

"But that means you'll be showing up exactly when they're expecting you."

Reacher said nothing.

"It's like walking into a trap," Yanni said.

Reacher didn't answer that. Yanni turned to Franklin and said, "Tell us more about the woman who was shot."

"There's nothing more to tell," Franklin said. "I've been through everything

"There's nothing more to tell," Franklin said. "I've been through everything forward and backward. She was very ordinary."

"Family?"

"All of them are back East. Where she came from."

"Friends?"

"Two, basically. A co-worker and a neighbor. Neither of them is interesting. Neither of them is a Russian, for instance."

Yanni turned back to Reacher. "So maybe you're wrong. Maybe the third shot wasn't the money shot."

"It must have been," Reacher said. "Or why would he pause after it? He was double-checking he had a hit."

"He paused after the sixth, too. For good."

"He wouldn't wait that long. It could have gone completely out of control by then. People could have been jumping all over each other."

"But they weren't."

"He couldn't have predicted that."

"I agree," Franklin said. "A thing like that, you don't do it with your first or your last shot."

Then his eyes lost focus. He stared at the wall, like he wasn't seeing it.

"Wait," he said.

He glanced at his screen.

"Something I forgot," he said.

"What?" Reacher asked.

"What you said about Rosemary Barr. Missing persons."

He turned back to his mouse and his keyboard and started clicking and typing. Then he hit his enter key and sat forward intently, like proximity would speed the process.

“Last chance,” he said.

Reacher knew from television commercials that computers operated at all kinds of gigahertz, which he assumed was pretty fast. But even so, Franklin’s screen stayed blank for a long, long time. There was a little graphic in the corner. It was rotating slowly. It implied a thorough and patient search through an infinite amount of data. It spun for minutes. Then it stopped. There was an electrostatic crackle from the monitor and the screen wiped down and redrew into a densely-printed document. Plain computer font. Reacher couldn’t read it from where he was.

The office went quiet.

Franklin looked up.

“OK,” he said. “There you go. At last. Finally something that isn’t ordinary. Finally we catch a break.”

“What?” Yanni said.

“Oline Archer reported her husband missing two months ago.”

CHAPTER 15

Franklin pushed his chair back to make space and the others all crowded around the screen together. Reacher and Helen Rodin ended up shoulder to shoulder. No more animosity. Just the thrill of pursuit.

Most of the document was taken up with coded headers and source information. Letters, numbers, times, origins. The substantive message was short. Two months previously, Mrs. Oline Anne Archer had made a missing persons report concerning her husband. His name was Edward Stratton Archer. He had left the marital home for work early on a routine Monday and had not returned by end-of-business on Wednesday, which was when the report was made.

“Is he still missing?” Helen asked.

“Yes,” Franklin said. He pointed to a letter *A* buried in the code at the top of the screen. “It’s still active.”

“So let’s go talk to Oline’s friends,” Reacher said. “We need some background here.”

“Now?” Franklin said.

“We’ve only got twelve hours,” Reacher said. “No time to waste.”

———

Franklin wrote down names and addresses for Oline Archer’s co-worker and neighbor. He handed the paper to Ann Yanni, because she was paying his bill.

“I’ll stay here,” he said. “I’ll see if the husband shows up in the databases. This could be a coincidence. Maybe he’s got a wife in every state. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences,” Reacher said. “So don’t waste your time. Find a phone number for me instead. A guy called Cash. Former Marine. He owns the range where James Barr went to shoot. Down in Kentucky. Call him for me.”

“Message?”

“Give him my name. Tell him to get his ass in his Humvee. Tell him to drive up here tonight. Tell him there’s a whole new Invitational going on.”

“Invitational?”

“He’ll understand. Tell him to bring his M24. With a night scope. And whatever else he’s got lying around.”

Reacher followed Ann Yanni and Helen Rodin down the stairs. They got into Helen’s Saturn, the women in the front and Reacher in the back. Reacher figured they would all have preferred the Mustang, but it only had two seats.

“Where first?” Helen asked.

“Which is closer?” Reacher asked back.

“The co-worker.”

“OK, her first.”

Traffic was slow. Roads were torn up and construction traffic was lumbering in and out of work zones. Reacher glanced between his watch and the windows. Daylight was fading. Evening was coming. *Time ticking away.*

The co-worker lived in a plain heartland suburb east of town. It was filled with a grid of straight residential streets. The streets were lined on both sides by modest ranch houses. The houses had small lots, flags on poles, hoops over the garage doors, satellite dishes on brick chimneys. Some of the sidewalk trees had faded yellow ribbons tied around them. Reacher guessed they symbolized solidarity with troops serving overseas. Which conflict, he wasn’t sure. What the point was, he had no idea. He had served overseas for most of thirteen years and had never met anyone who cared what was tied to trees back home. As long as someone sent paychecks and food and water and bullets, and wives stayed faithful, most guys were happy enough.

The sun was going down behind them and Helen was driving slowly with her

head ducked forward so she could see the house numbers early. She spotted the one she wanted and pulled into a driveway and parked behind a small sedan. It was new. Reacher recognized the brand name from his walk up the four-lane: *America's Best Warranty!*

The co-worker herself was a tired and harassed woman of about thirty-five. She opened her door and stepped out to the stoop and pulled the door shut behind her to block out the noise from what sounded like a dozen kids running riot inside. She recognized Ann Yanni immediately. Even glanced beyond her, looking for a camera crew.

"Yes?" she said.

"We need to talk about Oline Archer," Helen Rodin said.

The woman said nothing. She looked conflicted, like she knew she was supposed to think it was tasteless to talk about victims of tragedy to journalists. But apparently Ann Yanni's celebrity status overcame her reluctance.

"OK," she said. "What do you want to know? Oline was a lovely person and all of us at the office miss her terribly."

The nature of randomness, Reacher thought. Random slayings always involved people described as lovely afterward. Nobody ever said *She was a rat-faced fink and I'm glad she's dead. Whoever it was did us all a favor.* That never happened.

"We need to know something about her husband," Helen said.

"I never met her husband," the woman said.

"Did Oline talk about him?"

"A little, I guess. Now and then. His name is Ted, I think."

"What does he do?"

"He's in business. I'm not sure what kind of business."

"Did Oline say anything about him being missing?"

“Missing?”

“Oline reported him missing two months ago.”

“I know she seemed terribly worried. I think he was having problems with his business. In fact I think he’d been having problems for a year or two. That’s why Oline went back to work.”

“She didn’t always work?”

“Oh, no, ma’am. I think she did way back, and then she gave it up. But she had to come back. Because of circumstances. Whatever the opposite of rags to riches is.”

“Riches to rags,” Reacher said.

“Yes, like that,” the woman said. “She needed her job, financially. I think she was embarrassed about it.”

“But she didn’t give you details?” Ann Yanni asked.

“She was a very private person,” the woman said.

“It’s important.”

“She would get kind of distracted. That wasn’t like her. About a week before she was killed she was gone most of one afternoon. That wasn’t like her, either.”

“Do you know what she was doing?”

“No, I really don’t.”

“Anything you remember about her husband would help us.”

The woman shook her head. “His name is Ted. That’s all I can say for sure.”

“OK, thanks,” Helen said.

She turned and headed back to her car. Yanni and Reacher followed her. The woman on the stoop stared after them, disappointed, like she had failed an audition.

Ann Yanni said, “Strike one. But don’t worry. It always happens that way. Sometimes I think we should just skip the first person on the list. They never know anything.”

Reacher was uncomfortable in the back of the car. His pants pocket had gotten underneath him and a coin was digging edge-on into his thigh. He squirmed around and pulled it out. It was a quarter, new and shiny. He looked at it for a minute and then he put it in the other pocket.

“I agree,” he said. “We should have skipped her. My fault. Stands to reason a co-worker wouldn’t know much. People are cagy around co-workers. Especially rich people fallen on hard times.”

“The neighbor will know more,” Yanni said.

“We hope,” Helen said.

They were caught in crosstown traffic. They were headed from the eastern suburbs to the western, and it was a slow, slow ride. Reacher was glancing between his watch and the windows again. The sun was low on the horizon ahead of them. Behind them it was already twilight.

Time ticking away.

Rosemary Barr moved in her chair and struggled against the tape binding her wrists.

“We know it was Charlie who did it,” she said.

“Charlie?” the Zec repeated.

“My brother’s so-called *friend.*”

“Chenko,” the Zec said. “His name is Chenko. And yes, he did it. Tactically it was his plan. He did well. Of course, his physique helped. He was able to wear his own shoes inside your brother’s. He had to roll the pants and the raincoat sleeves.”

“But we *know*,” Rosemary said.

“But *who* knows? And what exactly do they bring to the party?”

“Helen Rodin knows.”

“You’ll dismiss her as your lawyer. You’ll terminate the representation. Ms. Rodin will be unable to repeat anything she learned while your relationship was privileged. Linsky, am I right?”

Linsky nodded. He was six feet away, on the sofa, propped at an odd angle to rest his back.

“That’s the law,” he said. “Here in America.”

“Franklin knows,” Rosemary said. “And Ann Yanni.”

“Hearsay,” the Zec said. “Theories, speculation, and innuendo. Those two have no persuasive evidence. And no credibility, either. Private detectives and television journalists are exactly the kind of people who peddle ridiculous and alternative explanations for events like these. It’s to be expected. Its absence would be unusual. Apparently a president was killed in this country more than forty years ago and people like them still claim that the real truth has not yet been uncovered.”

Rosemary said nothing.

“Your deposition will be definitive,” the Zec said. “You’ll go to Rodin and you’ll give sworn testimony about how your brother plotted and planned. About how he *told* you what he was intending. In detail. The time, the place, everything. You’ll say that to your sincere and everlasting regret you didn’t take him seriously. Then some poor excuse for a public defender will take one look at your evidence and plead your brother guilty and the whole thing will be over.”

“I won’t do it,” Rosemary said.

The Zec looked straight at her.

“You will do it,” he said. “I promise you that. Twenty-four hours from now

you'll be *begging* to do it. You'll be insane with fear that we might change our minds and not *let* you do it."

The room went quiet. Rosemary glanced at the Zec as if she had something to say. Then she glanced away. But the Zec answered her anyway. He had heard her message loud and clear.

"No, we won't be there with you at the deposition," he said. "But we *will* know what you tell them. Within minutes. And don't think about a little detour to the bus depot. For one thing, we'll have your brother killed. For another, there's no country in the world we can't find you in."

Rosemary said nothing.

"Anyway," the Zec said. "Let's not argue. It's unproductive. And pointless. You'll tell them what we tell you to tell them. You will, you know. You'll see. You'll be desperate to. You'll be wishing we had arranged an earlier appointment for you. At the courthouse. You'll spend the waiting time on your knees pleading for a chance to show us how word-perfect you are. That's how it usually happens. We're very good at what we do. We learned at the feet of masters."

"My brother has Parkinson's disease," Rosemary said.

"Diagnosed when?" the Zec asked, because he knew the answer.

"It's been developing."

The Zec shook his head. "Too subjective to be helpful. Who's to say it's not a similar condition brought on suddenly by his recent injury? If not, then who's to say such a condition is a true handicap anyway? When shooting from such a close range? If the public defender brings in an expert, then Rodin will bring in three. He'll find doctors who will swear that Little Annie Oakley was racked with Parkinson's disease from the very day she was born."

"Reacher knows," Rosemary said.

"The soldier? The soldier will be dead by morning. Dead, or a runaway."

"He won't run away."

“Therefore he’ll be dead. He’ll come for you tonight. We’ll be ready for him.”

Rosemary said nothing.

“Men have come for us before in the night,” the Zec said. “Many times, in many places. And yet we’re still here. *Da*, Linsky?”

Linsky nodded again.

“We’re still here,” he said.

“When will he come?” the Zec asked.

“I don’t know,” Rosemary said.

“Four o’clock in the morning,” Linsky said. “He’s an American. They’re trained that four o’clock in the morning is the best time for a surprise attack.”

“Direction?”

“From the north would make the most sense. The stone-crushing plant would conceal his staging area and leave him only two hundred yards of open ground to cover. But I think he’ll double-bluff us there. He’ll avoid the north, because he knows it’s best.”

“Not from the west,” the Zec said.

Linsky shook his head. “I agree. Not down the driveway. Too straight and open. He’ll come from the south or the east.”

“Put Vladimir in with Sokolov,” the Zec said to him. “Tell them to watch the south and the east very carefully. But tell them to keep an eye out north and west, too. All four directions must be monitored continuously, just in case. Then put Chenko in the upstairs hallway with his rifle. He can be ready to deploy to whichever window is appropriate. With Chenko, one shot will be enough.”

Then he turned to Rosemary Barr.

“Meanwhile we’ll put you somewhere safe,” he told her. “Your tutorials will start as soon as the soldier is buried.”

The outer western suburbs were bedroom communities for people who worked in the city, so the traffic stayed bad all the way out. The houses were much grander than in the east. They were all two-story, all varied, all well maintained. They all had big lots and pools and ambitious evergreen landscaping. With the last of the sunset behind them they looked like pictures in a brochure.

“Tight-ass middle class,” Reacher said.

“What we all aspire to,” Yanni said.

“They won’t want to talk,” Reacher said. “Not their style.”

“They’ll talk,” Yanni said. “Everyone talks to me.”

They drove past the Archer place slowly. There was a cast-metal sign on thin chains under the mailbox: *Ted and Oline Archer*. Beyond it, across a broad open lawn, the house looked closed-up and dark and silent. It was a big Tudor place. Dull brown beams, cream stucco. Three-car garage. *Nobody home,* Reacher thought.

The neighbor they were looking for lived across the street and one lot to the north. Hers was a place about the same size as the Archers’ but done in an Italianate style. Stone accents, little crenellated towers, dark green sun awnings on the south-facing ground-floor windows. The evening light was fading away to darkness and lamps were coming on behind draped windows. The whole street looked warm and rested and quiet and very satisfied with itself. Reacher said, “They sleep safely in their beds because rough men stand ready in the night to visit violence on those who would do them harm.”

“You know George Orwell?” Yanni asked.

“I went to college,” Reacher said. “West Point is technically a college.”

Yanni said, “The existing social order is a swindle and its cherished beliefs mostly delusions.”

“It is not possible for any thinking person to live in such a society as our own without wanting to change it,” Reacher said.

“I’m sure these are perfectly nice people,” Helen said.

“But will they talk to us?”

“They’ll talk,” Yanni said. “Everyone talks.”

Helen pulled into a long limestone driveway and parked about twenty feet behind an imported SUV that had big chrome wheels. The front door of the house was made of ancient gray weathered oak with iron banding that had nail heads as big as golf balls. It felt like you could step through it straight into the Renaissance.

“Property is theft,” Reacher said.

“Proudhon,” Yanni said. “Property is desirable, is a positive good in the world.”

“Abraham Lincoln,” Reacher said. “In his first State of the Union.”

There was an iron knocker shaped like a quoit in a lion’s mouth. Helen lifted it and used it to thump on the door. Then she found a discreet electric bell push and pressed that, too. They heard no answering sound inside the house. Heavy door, thick walls. Helen tried again with the bell, and before she got her finger off the button, the door sucked back off copper weatherproofing strips and opened like a vault. A guy was standing there with his hand on the inside handle.

“Yes?” he said. He was somewhere in his forties, solid, prosperous, probably a golf club member, maybe an Elk, maybe a Rotarian. He was wearing corduroy pants and a patterned sweater. He was the kind of guy who gets home and immediately changes clothes as a matter of routine.

“Is your wife at home?” Helen asked. “We’d like to speak with her about Oline Archer.”

“About Oline?” the guy said. He was looking at Ann Yanni.

“I’m a lawyer,” Helen said.

“What is there to be said about Oline?”

“Maybe more than you think,” Yanni said.

“You’re not a lawyer.”

“I’m here as a journalist,” Yanni said. “But not on a human interest story. Nothing tacky. There might have been a miscarriage of justice. That’s the issue here.”

“A miscarriage in what way?”

“They might have arrested the wrong man for the shootings. That’s why I’m here. That’s why we’re all here.”

Reacher watched the guy. He was standing there, holding the door, trying to decide. In the end he just sighed and stepped back.

“You better come in,” he said.

Everyone talks.

He led the way through a muted yellow hallway to a living room. It was spacious and immaculate. Velvet furniture, little mahogany tables, a stone fireplace. No television. There was probably a separate room for that. A den, or a home theater. Or perhaps they didn’t watch television. Reacher saw Ann Yanni calculating the odds.

“I’ll get my wife,” the guy said.

He came back a minute later with a handsome woman a little younger than himself. She was wearing pressed jeans and a sweatshirt the same yellow as the hallway walls. Penny loafers on her feet. No socks. She had hair that had been expensively styled to look casual and windswept. She was medium height and lean in a way that spoke of diet books and serious time in aerobics classes.

“What’s this about?” she asked.

“Ted Archer,” Helen said.

“Ted? I thought you told my husband it was about Oline.”

“We think there may be a connection. Between his situation and hers.”

“How could there be a connection? Surely what happened to Oline was

completely out of the blue."

"Maybe it wasn't."

"I don't understand."

"We suspect that Oline might have been a specific target, kind of hidden behind the confusion of the other four victims."

"Wouldn't that be a matter for the police?"

Helen paused. "At the moment the police seem satisfied with what they've got."

The woman glanced at her husband.

"Then I'm not sure we should talk about it," he said.

"At all?" Yanni asked. "Or just to me?"

"I'm not sure if we would want to be on television."

Reacher smiled to himself. *The other side of the tracks*.

"This is deep background only," Yanni said. "It's entirely up to you whether your names are used."

The woman sat down on a sofa and her husband sat next to her, very close. Reacher smiled to himself again. They had subconsciously adopted the standard couple-on-a-sofa pose that television interviews used all the time. Two faces close together, ideally framed for a tight camera shot. Yanni took her cue and sat in an armchair facing them, perched right on the edge, leaning forward, her elbows on her knees, a frank and open expression on her face. Helen took another chair. Reacher stepped away to the window. Used a finger to move the drapes aside. It was fully dark outside.

Time ticking away.

"Tell us about Ted Archer," Yanni said. "Please." A simple request, only six words, but her tone said: *I think you two are the most interesting people in the world and I would love to be your friend.* For a moment Reacher thought Yanni

had missed her way. She would have been a great cop.

“Ted had business problems,” the woman said.

“Is that why he disappeared?” Yanni asked.

The woman shrugged. “That was Oline’s initial assumption.”

“But?”

“Ultimately she rejected that explanation. And I think she was right to. Ted wasn’t that kind of a man. And his problems weren’t those kind of problems. The fact is, he was getting screwed rotten and he was mad as hell about it and he was fighting. And people who fight don’t just walk away. I mean, do they?”

“How was he getting screwed?”

The woman glanced at her husband. He leaned forward. *Boy stuff.* “His principal customer stopped buying from him. Which happens. Power in the marketplace ebbs and flows. So Ted offered to renegotiate. Offered to drop his price. No dice. So he offered to drop it more. He told me he got to the point where he was giving it away. Still no dice. They just wouldn’t buy.”

“What do you think was happening?” Yanni asked. *Keep talking, sir.*

“Corruption,” the guy said. “Under-the-table inducements. It was completely obvious. One of Ted’s competitors was offering kickbacks. No way for an honest man to compete with that.”

“When did this start?”

“About two years ago. It was a major problem for them. Financially they went downhill very fast. No cash flow. Ted sold his car. Oline had to go out to work. The DMV thing was all she could find. They made her supervisor after about a month.” He smiled a thin smile, proud of his class. “Another year, she’d have been running the place. She’d have been Commissioner.”

“What was Ted doing about it? How was he fighting?”

“He was trying to find out which competitor it was.”

“Did he find out?”

“We don’t know. He was trying for a long time, and then he went missing.”

“Didn’t Oline include this in her report?”

The guy sat back and his wife leaned forward again. Shook her head. “Oline didn’t want to. Not back then. It was all unproven. All speculation. She didn’t want to throw accusations around. And it wasn’t definitely connected. I guess the way we’re telling it now it sounds more obvious than it was at the time. I mean, Ted wasn’t Sherlock Holmes or anything. He wasn’t on the case twenty-four/ seven. He was still doing normal stuff. He was just talking to people when he could, you know, asking questions, comparing notes, comparing prices, trying to put it all together. It was a two-year period. Occasional conversations, phone calls, inquiries, things like that. It didn’t seem dangerous, certainly.”

“Did Oline *ever* go to anyone with this? Later, maybe?”

The woman nodded. “She stewed for two months after he disappeared. We talked. She was up and down with it. Eventually she decided there had to be a connection. I agreed with her. She didn’t know what to do. I told her she should call the police.”

“And did she?”

“She didn’t call. She went personally. She felt they would take her more seriously face-to-face. Not that they did, apparently. Nothing happened. It was like dropping a stone down a well and never hearing the splash.”

“When did she go?”

“A week before the thing in the plaza last Friday.”

Nobody spoke. Then, kindly, gently, Ann Yanni asked the obvious question: “You didn’t suspect a connection?”

The woman shook her head. “Why would we? It seemed to be a total coincidence. The shootings were random, weren’t they? You said so yourself. On the television news. We heard you say it. Five random victims, in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Nobody spoke.

Reacher turned away from the window.

“What business was Ted Archer in?” he asked.

“I’m sorry, I assumed you knew,” the husband said. “He owns a quarry. Huge place about forty miles north of here. Cement, concrete, crushed stone. Vertically integrated, very efficient.”

“And who was the customer who backed off?”

“The city,” the guy said.

“Big customer.”

“As big as they come. All this construction going on right now is manna from heaven for people in that business. The city sold ninety million in tax-free municipals just to cover the first year. Add in the inevitable overruns and it’s a nine-figure bonanza for somebody.”

“What car did Ted sell?”

“A Mercedes-Benz.”

“Then what did he drive?”

“He used a truck from work.”

“Did you see it?”

“Every day for two years.”

“What was it?”

“A pickup. A Chevy, I think.”

“An old brown Silverado? Plain steel wheels?”

The guy stared. “How did you know that?”

“One more question,” Reacher said. “For your wife.”

"One more question," Reacher said. "For your wife."

She looked at him.

"After Oline went to the cops, did she tell you who it was she talked to? Was it a detective called Emerson?"

The woman was already shaking her head. "I told Oline if she didn't want to call she should go to the station house, but she said it was too far, because she never got that long of a lunch hour. She said she'd go to the DA instead. His office is much closer to the DMV. And Oline was like that anyway. She preferred to go straight to the top. So she took it to Alex Rodin himself."

Helen Rodin was completely silent on the drive back to town. So silent she quivered and vibrated and shook with it. Her lips were clamped and her cheeks were sucked in and her eyes were wide-open. Her silence made it impossible for Reacher or Yanni to speak. She drove like a robot, competently, not fast, not slow, displaying a mechanical compliance with lane markers and stoplights and yield signs. She parked on the apron below Franklin's office and left the motor running and said, "You two go on ahead. I just can't do this."

Ann Yanni got out and walked over to the staircase. Reacher stayed in the car and leaned forward over the seat.

"It'll be OK," he said.

"It won't."

"Helen, pull the keys and get your ass upstairs. You're an officer of the court and you've got a client in trouble." Then he opened his door and climbed out of the car and by the time he had walked around the trunk she was waiting for him at the foot of the stairs.

Franklin was in front of his computer, as always. He told Reacher that Cash was on his way up from Kentucky, no questions asked. Told him that Ted Archer hadn't shown up anywhere else in the databases. Then he noticed the silence and the tension.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“We’re one step away,” Reacher said. “Ted Archer was in the concrete business and he was frozen out of all these new city construction contracts by a competitor who was offering bribes. He tried to prove it and must have been getting very close to succeeding, because the competitor offed him.”

“Can you prove that?”

“Only by inference. We’ll never find his body without digging up First Street again. But I know where his truck is. It’s in Jeb Oliver’s barn.”

“Why there?”

“They used Oliver for things they can’t do themselves. For when they don’t want to show their faces, or for when they can’t. Presumably Archer knew them and wouldn’t have gone near them. But Oliver was just a local kid. Maybe he staged a flat tire or hitched a ride. Archer would have walked right into it. Then the bad guys hid the body and Oliver hid the truck.”

“Oline Archer didn’t suspect anything?”

“She did eventually,” Reacher said. “She sat on it two months and then presumably she pieced together enough to make some kind of sense out of it. Then she started to go public with it and all kinds of private alarm bells must have gone off, because a week later she was dead. Staged the way it was because to have a missing husband and then a murdered wife two months later would have raised too many flags. But as long as it looked random it was going to be seen as coincidental.”

“Who had Oline taken it to? Emerson?”

Reacher said nothing.

“She took it to my father,” Helen Rodin said.

There was silence for a long moment.

“So what now?” Franklin said.

“You need to hit that keyboard again,” Reacher said. “Whoever got the city

contracts has pretty much defined himself as the bad guy here. So we need to know who he is. And where he's based."

"Public record," Franklin said.

"So check it."

Franklin turned away in the silence and started his fingers pattering over the keys. He pointed and clicked for a minute. Then he came up with the answer.

"Specialized Services of Indiana," he said. "They own all the current city contracts for cement, concrete, and crushed stone. Many, many millions of dollars."

"Where are they?"

"That was the good news."

"What's the bad?"

"There's no paperwork. They're a trust registered in Bermuda. They don't have to file anything."

"What kind of a system is that?"

Franklin didn't answer.

"A Bermuda trust needs a local lawyer." Helen's voice was low, quiet, resigned. Reacher recalled the plate outside A. A. Rodin's office: the name, followed by the letters that denoted the law degree.

Franklin clicked his way through two more screens.

"There's a phone number," he said. "That's all we've got."

"What is it?" Helen asked.

Franklin read it out.

"That's not my father's number," Helen said.

Franklin clicked his way into a reverse directory. Typed in the number and the screen changed and gave him a name and a business address.

“John Mistrov,” he said.

“Russian name,” Reacher said.

“I guess so.”

“Do you know him?”

“Vaguely. He’s a wills and trusts guy. One-man band. I’ve never worked for him.”

Reacher checked his watch. “Can you find a home address?”

Franklin went into a regular directory. Typed in the name and came up with a domestic listing.

“Should I call him?” he said.

Reacher shook his head. “We’ll pay him a visit. Face-to-face works better when time is short.”

Vladimir made his way down to the ground-floor surveillance room. Sokolov was in a rolling chair in front of the long table that carried the four television monitors. From left to right they were labeled *North*, *East, South*, and *West,* which made sense if a person viewed the world from a clockwise perspective. Sokolov was scooting his chair slowly down the line, examining each picture, moving on, returning from West to North with a powerful push off the wall. All four screens were misty and green, because it was dark outside and the thermal imaging had kicked in. Occasionally a bright dot could be seen moving fast in the distance. An animal. Nocturnal. Fox, skunk, raccoon, or a pet cat or a lost dog far from home. The North monitor showed a glow from the crushing plant. It would fade as the idle machines cooled. Apart from that all the backgrounds were a deep olive color, because there was nothing out there except for miles of fields constantly misted with cold water from the always-turning irrigation booms.

Vladimir pulled up a second wheeled chair and sat down on Sokolov's left. He would watch North and East. Sokolov would concentrate on the South and West. That way they each had responsibility for one likely direction and one unlikely. It was a fair distribution of labor.

Upstairs in the third-floor hallway Chenko loaded his own Super Match. Ten rounds, Lake City .308s. One thing Americans did right was ammunition. He opened all the bedroom doors to speed his access north, south, east, or west, as required. He walked to a window and turned his night scope on. Set it for seventy-five yards. He figured he would get the call when the soldier was about a hundred and fifty yards out. That was about the practical limit for the cameras. He would step to the right window and acquire the target when it was still more than a hundred yards distant. He would track its progress. He would let it come to him. When it was seventy-five yards out, he would kill it.

He raised the rifle. Checked the image. It was bright and clear. He watched a fox cross the open ground east to west. *Good hunting, my little friend.* He walked back to the hallway and propped the gun against the wall and sat down in a straight-backed chair to wait.

Helen Rodin insisted on staying behind in Franklin's office. So Reacher and Yanni went out alone, in the Mustang. The streets were dark and quiet. Yanni drove. She knew her way around. The address they were looking for was a loft building carved out of an old warehouse halfway between the river wharf and the railhead. Yanni said it was a part of the new urban strategy. *SoHo comes to the heartland.* She said she had thought about buying in the same building.

Then she said, "We should put Helen on suicide watch."

"She'll be OK," Reacher said.

"You think?"

"I'm pretty sure."

"What if it was your old man?"

Reacher didn't answer that. Yanni slowed as the bulk of a large brick building loomed through the darkness.

loomed through the darkness.

“You can ask first,” Reacher said. “If he doesn’t answer, I’ll ask second.”

“He’ll answer,” Yanni said. “They all answer.”

But John Mistrov didn’t. He was a thin guy of about forty-five. He was dressed like a post-divorce midlife-crisis victim. Acid-rinsed too-tight jeans, black T-shirt, no shoes. They found him all alone in a big white loft apartment eating Chinese food from paper cartons. Initially he was very pleased to see Ann Yanni. Maybe hanging out with celebrities was a part of the lifestyle glamour that the new development had promised. But his early enthusiasm faded fast. It disappeared completely when Yanni ran through her suspicions and then insisted on knowing the names behind the trust.

“I can’t tell you,” he said. “Surely you understand there are confidentiality issues here. Surely you understand that.”

“I *understand* that serious crimes have been committed,” Yanni said. “That’s what I *understand.* And you need to understand that, too. You need to choose up sides, right now, *fast,* before this thing goes public.”

“No comment,” the guy said.

“There’s no downside here,” Yanni said gently. “These names we want, they’ll all be in jail tomorrow. No comebacks.”

“No comment,” the guy said again.

“You want to go down with them?” Yanni asked. Sharply. “Like an accessory? Or do you want to get out from under? It’s your choice. But one way or the other you’re going to be on the news tomorrow night. Either doing the perp walk or standing there looking good, like, Oh my *God,* I had no *idea,* I was only too happy to help.”

“No comment,” the guy said for the third time.

Loud, clear, and smug.

Yanni gave up. Shrugged, and glanced at Reacher. Reacher checked his watch. *Time ticking away.* He stepped up close.

“You got medical insurance?” he asked.

The guy nodded.

“Dental plan?”

The guy nodded again.

Reacher hit him in the mouth. Right-handed, short swing, hard blow.

“Get *that* fixed,” he said.

The guy rocked back a step and doubled over and then came up coughing with blood all over his chin. Cut lips, loose teeth all rimed with red.

“Names,” Reacher said. “Now. Or I’ll take you apart a piece at a time.”

The guy hesitated. *Mistake.* Reacher hit him again. Then the guy came up with names, six of them, and descriptions, and an address, all from a position flat on the floor and all in a voice thick and bubbly with mouthfuls of blood.

Reacher glanced at Yanni.

“They all answer,” he said.

In the dark in the Mustang on the way back, Ann Yanni said, “He’ll call and warn them.”

“He won’t,” Reacher said. “He just betrayed them. So my guess is he’ll be going on a long vacation tomorrow.”

“You hope.”

“Doesn’t matter anyway. They already know I’m coming for them. Another warning wouldn’t make a difference.”

“You have a very direct style. One they don’t mention in Journalism 101.”

“I could teach you. It’s about surprise, really. If you can surprise them you don’t

have to hit them very hard.´´

Yanni dictated to Franklin the names that John Mistrov had given up. Four of them corresponded with names Reacher had already heard: Charlie Smith, Konstantin Raskin, Vladimir Shumilov, and Pavel Sokolov. The fifth was Grigor Linsky, which Reacher figured had to be the damaged man in the boxy suit, because the sixth name had been given simply as Zec Chelovek.

“I thought you said *zec* was a word,” Franklin said.

“It is,” Reacher said. “And so is Chelovek. It’s a transliteration of their word for human being. Zec Chelovek means prisoner–human being. Like Prisoner Man.”

“The others aren’t using code names.”

“Neither is the Zec, probably. Maybe that’s all he’s got left. Maybe he forgot his real name. Maybe we all would, in the Gulag.”

“You sound sorry for him,” Yanni said.

“I’m not sorry for him,” Reacher said. “I’m just trying to understand him.”

“No mention of my father,” Helen said.

Reacher nodded. “The Zec is the puppet master. He’s at the top of the tree.”

“Which means my father is just an employee.”

“Don’t worry about that now. Focus on Rosemary.”

Franklin used an online map and figured out that the address John Mistrov had spilled related to a stone-crushing plant built next to a quarry eight miles north and west of the city. Then he searched the tax rolls and confirmed that Specialized Services of Indiana was its registered owner. Then he searched the rolls all over again and found that the only other real estate registered to the trust was a house on the lot adjacent to the stone-crushing plant. Yanni said she knew the area.

“Anything else out there?” Reacher asked her.

She shook her head. “Nothing but farmland for miles.”

“OK,” Reacher said. “There you go. That’s where Rosemary is.”

He checked his watch. Ten o’clock in the evening.

“So what now?” Yanni said.

“Now we wait,” Reacher said.

“For what?”

“For Cash to get here from Kentucky. And then we wait some more.”

“For what?”

Reacher smiled.

“For the dead of night,” he said.

Franklin made coffee. Yanni told TV stories, about people she had known, about things she had seen, about governors’ girlfriends, politicians’ wives’ lovers, rigged ballots, crooked unions, about acres of marijuana growing behind circular screens of tall corn on the edges of Indiana fields. Then Franklin talked about his years as a cop. Then Reacher talked about his years since the army, the wandering, the exploring, his rootless invisible life.

Helen Rodin said nothing at all.

At eleven o’clock exactly they heard the rattle of a big diesel engine beating off the brick outside. Reacher stepped to the window and saw Cash’s Humvee nosing onto the parking apron. *Too noisy*, he thought. *We can’t use it.*

Or maybe we can.

“The Marines are here,” he said.

They heard Cash’s feet on the outside stairs. Heard his knock on the door.

They heard Cash's feet on the outside stairs. Heard his knock on the door. Reacher went out to the hallway to open up. Cash came in, brisk, solid, reassuring. He was dressed all in black. Black canvas pants, black canvas windbreaker. Reacher introduced him all around. Yanni, Franklin, Helen Rodin. Everyone shook hands and Cash took a seat. Inside twenty minutes he was up to speed and totally on board.

"Do we have a plan?" he asked.

"We're about to make one," Reacher said. Yanni went out to her car for the maps. Franklin cleared away the coffee cups and made space on the table. Yanni chose the right map. Spread it out flat.

"It's like a giant chessboard out there," she said. "Every square is a field a hundred yards across. There are roads laid out in a grid, north to south, west to east, about twenty fields apart." Then she pointed. Slim finger, painted nail. "But right *here* we've got two roads that meet, and southeast of the corner they make we've got an empty space three fields wide and five fields high. No agriculture there. The northern part is the stone-crushing plant and the house is south of it. I've seen it and it stands about two hundred yards off the road, all alone in the middle of absolutely nothing. No landscaping, no vegetation. But no fence, either."

"Flat?" Reacher asked.

"As a pool table," Yanni said.

"Dark out there," Cash said.

"As the Earl of Hell's waistcoat," Reacher said. "And I guess if there's no fence it means they're using cameras. With some kind of thermal imaging at night. Some kind of infrared."

"How fast can you run two hundred yards?" Cash asked.

"Me?" Reacher said. "Slow enough they could mail-order a rifle to shoot me with."

"What's the best approach?"

"Walk in from the north," Reacher said. "Without a doubt. We could get into the

stone place straight off the road and just hike through it. Then we could lie up as long as we wanted. Good concealment until the last minute."

"Can't walk in from anywhere if they've got thermal cameras."

"We'll worry about that later."

"OK, but they'll anticipate the north."

Reacher nodded. "We'll pass on the north. Too obvious."

"South or east would be next best. Because presumably the driveway comes in from the west. Probably too straight and too open."

"They'll be thinking the same thing."

"Makes us both right."

"I kind of like the driveway," Reacher said. "What will it be? Paved?"

"Crushed limestone," Yanni said. "They've got plenty to spare."

"Noisy," Cash said.

"It'll have retained a little daytime heat," Reacher said. "It'll be warmer than the dirt. It'll put a stripe of color down their thermal picture. If the contrast isn't great it'll give a shadow zone either side."

"Are you kidding?" Cash said. "You're going to be forty or fifty degrees hotter than ambient temperature. You're going to show up like a road flare."

"They're going to be paying attention south and east."

"Not exclusively."

"You got a better idea?"

"What about a full frontal assault? With vehicles?"

Reacher smiled. "If it abso*lutely* posi*tively* has to be destroyed by morning, call the United States Marine Corps."

“Roger that,” Cash said.

“Too dangerous,” Reacher said. “We can’t give them a second’s warning and we can’t turn the place into a free-fire zone. We’ve got Rosemary to think about.”

Nobody spoke.

“I like the driveway,” Reacher said again.

Cash glanced at Helen Rodin.

“We could just call in the cops,” he said. “You know, if it’s the DA who’s the bad guy here. A couple of SWAT teams could do it.”

“Same problem,” Reacher said. “Rosemary would be dead before they got near the door.”

“Cut the power lines? Kill the cameras?”

“Same problem. It’s an announcement ahead of time.”

“Your call.”

“The driveway,” Reacher said. “I like the driveway.”

“But what about the cameras?”

“I’ll think of something,” Reacher said. He stepped over to the table. Stared down at the map. Then he turned back to Cash. “Does your truck have a CD player?”

Cash nodded. “Part of the comfort package.”

“Do you mind if Franklin drives it?”

“Franklin can *have* it. I’d prefer a sedan.”

“OK, your Humvee is our approach vehicle. Franklin can drive us there, let us out, and then get straight back here.”

“Us?” Yanni said. “Are we all going?”

“You bet your ass,” Reacher said. “Four of us there, with Franklin back here as the comms center.”

“Good,” Yanni said.

“We need cell phones,” Reacher said.

“I’ve got one,” Yanni said.

“Me too,” Cash said.

“Me too,” Helen said.

“I don’t,” Reacher said.

Franklin took a small Nokia out of his pocket.

“Take mine,” he said.

Reacher took it. “Can you set up a conference call? Four cell phones and your desk phone? As soon as you get back here?”

Franklin nodded. “Give me your numbers.”

“And turn the ringers off,” Reacher said.

“When are we doing this?” Cash asked.

“Four o’clock in the morning is my favorite time,” Reacher said. “But they’ll be expecting that. We learned it from them. Four in the morning is when the KGB went knocking on doors. Least resistance. It’s a biorhythm thing. So we’ll surprise them. We’ll do it at two-thirty.”

“If you surprise them you don’t have to hit them very hard?” Yanni said.

Reacher shook his head. “In this situation if we surprise them they won’t hit *me* very hard.”

“Where am I going to be?” Cash asked.

“Southwest corner of the gravel plant,” Reacher said. “Looking south and east at

the house. You can cover the west and the north sides simultaneously. With your rifle."

"OK."

"What did you bring for me?"

Cash dug in the pocket of his windbreaker and came out with a knife in a sheath. He tossed it across the room. Reacher caught it. It was a standard-issue Navy SEAL SRK. Their survival-rescue knife. Carbon steel, black epoxy, seven-inch blade. Not new.

"This is it?" Reacher said.

"All I've got," Cash said. "The only weapons I own are my rifle and that knife."

"You're kidding."

"I'm a businessman, not a psycho."

"Christ's sake, Gunny, I'll be taking a knife to a gunfight? Isn't it supposed to be the other way around?"

"All I've got," Cash said again.

"Great."

"You can take a gun from the first one you cut. Face it, if you don't get close enough to cut one of them you aren't going to win anyway."

Reacher said nothing.

They waited. Midnight. Twelve-thirty. Yanni fiddled with her cell phone and made a call. Reacher ran through the plan one more time. First in his head, then out loud, until everyone was clear. Details, dispositions, refinements, adjustments.

"But we might still change everything," he said. "When we get there. No substitute for seeing the actual terrain."

They waited. One o'clock. One-thirty. Reacher started to allow himself to think about the endgame. About what would come after the victory. He turned to Franklin.

"Who is Emerson's number two?" he asked.

"A woman called Donna Bianca," Franklin said.

"Is she any good?"

"She's his number two."

"She'll need to be there. Afterward. It's going to be a real three-ring circus. Too much for one pair of hands. I want you to bring Emerson and Donna Bianca out there. And Alex Rodin, of course. After we win."

"They'll be in bed."

"So wake them up."

"*If* we win," Franklin said.

At one forty-five people started to get restless. Helen Rodin stepped over and squatted down next to Reacher. She picked up the knife. Looked at it. Put it back down.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked.

"Because I can. And because of the girl."

"You'll get yourself killed."

"Unlikely," Reacher said. "These are old men and idiots. I've survived worse."

"You're just saying that."

"If I get in OK, I'll be safe enough. Room-to-room isn't hard. People get very

scared with a prowler loose in the house. They hate it.´´

“But you won’t get in OK. They’ll see you coming.”

Reacher dug in his left-hand pocket and came out with the shiny new quarter that had bothered him in the car. Handed it to her.

“For you,” he said.

She looked at it. “Something to remember you by?”

“Something to remember tonight by.”

Then he checked his watch. Stood up.

“Let’s do it,” he said.

CHAPTER 16

They stood for a moment in the shadows and the silence on the parking apron below Franklin's lighted windows. Then Yanni went to get the Sheryl Crow CD from her Mustang. She gave it to Cash. Cash unlocked the Humvee and leaned inside and put it in the player. Then he gave the keys to Franklin. Franklin climbed into the driver's seat. Cash got in next to him with his M24 across his knees. Reacher and Helen Rodin and Ann Yanni squeezed together in the back.

"Turn the heater up," Reacher said.

Cash leaned to his left and dialed in maximum temperature. Franklin started the engine. Backed out into the street. Swung the wheel and took off west. Then he turned north. The engine was loud and the ride was rough. The heater kicked in and the fan blew hard. The interior grew warm, and then hot. They turned west, turned north, turned west, turned north, lining up with the grid that would run through the fields. The drive was a series of long droning cruises punctuated by sharp right-angle corners. Then they made the final turn. Franklin sat up straight behind the wheel and accelerated hard.

"This is it," Yanni said. "Dead ahead, about three miles to go."

"Start the music," Reacher said. "Track eight."

Cash hit the button.

Every day is a winding road.

"Louder," Reacher said.

Cash turned it up. Franklin drove on, sixty miles an hour.

"Two miles," Yanni called. Then: "One mile."

Franklin drove on. Reacher stared out the window to his right. Watched the fields flash past in the darkness. Random scatter from the headlights lit them up. The irrigation booms were turning so slowly they looked stationary. Mist filled the air.

“High beams,” Reacher called.

Franklin flicked them on.

“Music all the way up,” Reacher called.

Cash twisted the knob to maximum.

EVERY DAY IS A WINDING ROAD.

“Half a mile,” Yanni yelled.

“Windows,” Reacher shouted.

Four thumbs hit four buttons and all four windows dropped an inch. Hot air and loud music sucked out into the night. Reacher stared right and saw the dark outline of the house flash past, isolated, distant, square, solid, substantial, dimly lit from inside. Flat land all around it. The limestone driveway, pale, very long, as straight as an arrow.

Franklin kept his foot hard down.

“Stop sign in four hundred yards,” Yanni yelled.

“Stand by,” Reacher shouted. “Showtime.”

“One hundred yards,” Yanni yelled.

“Doors,” Reacher shouted.

Three doors opened an inch. Franklin braked hard. Stopped dead on the line. Reacher and Yanni and Helen and Cash spilled out. Franklin didn’t hesitate. He took off again like it was just a normal dead-of-night stop sign. Reacher and Yanni and Cash and Helen dusted themselves down and stood close together on the crown of the road and stared north until the glow of the lights and the sound of the engine and the thump of the music were lost in the distance and the darkness.

Sokolov had picked up the Humvee’s heat signature on both the south and west

monitors when it was still about half a mile shy of the house. Hard not to. A big powerful vehicle, traveling fast, trailing long plumes of hot air from open windows, what was to miss? On the screen it looked like a bottle rocket flying sideways. Then he heard it too, physically, through the walls. Big engine, loud music. Vladimir glanced his way.

“Passerby?” he asked.

“Let’s see,” Sokolov said.

It didn’t slow down. It hurtled straight past the house and kept on going north. On the screen it trailed heat like a reentry capsule. Through the walls they heard the music Doppler-shift like an ambulance’s siren as it went by.

“Passerby,” Sokolov said.

“Some asshole,” Vladimir said.

Upstairs on the third floor Chenko heard it, too. He stepped through an empty bedroom to a west-facing window and looked out. Saw a big black shape doing about sixty miles an hour, high-beam headlights, bright tail lights, music thumping and thudding so loud he could hear the door panels flexing from two hundred yards away. It roared past. Didn’t slow down. He opened the window and leaned out and craned his neck and watched the bubble of light track north into the distance. It went behind the skeletal tangle of machinery in the stone-crushing plant. But it was still visible as a moving glow in the air. After a quarter-mile the glow changed color. Red now, not white. Brake lights, flaring for the stop sign. The glow paused for a second. Then the red color died and the glow turned back to white and took off again, fast.

The Zec called up from the floor below: “Was that him?”

“No,” Chenko called back. “Just some rich kid out for a drive.”

Reacher led the way through the dark, four people single file on the edge of the blacktop with the gravel plant’s high wire fence on their left and huge circular fields across the road on their right. After the roar of the diesel and the thump of

the music the silence felt absolute. There was nothing to hear except the hiss of irrigation water. Reacher raised his hand and stopped them where the fence turned a right angle and ran away east. The corner post was double-thickness and braced with angled spars. Grass and weeds from the shoulder were clumped up high. He stepped forward and checked the view. He was on a perfect diagonal from the northwest corner of the house. He had an equal forty-five-degree line of sight to the north facade and the west. Because of the diagonal the distance was about three hundred yards. Visibility was very poor. There was a glimmer of cloudy moonlight, but beyond that there was nothing at all.

He stepped back. Pointed at Cash, pointed at the base of the corner post.

“This is your position,” he whispered. “Check it out.”

Cash moved forward and knelt down in the weeds. Six feet away he was invisible. He switched on his night scope and raised his rifle. Tracked it slowly left and right, up and down.

“Three stories plus a basement,” he whispered. “High-pitched shingle roof, plank siding, many windows, one door visible to the west. No cover *at all* in any direction. They bulldozed everything flat, all around. Nothing’s growing. You’re going to look like a beetle on a bed-sheet out there.”

“Cameras?”

The rifle tracked a steady line from left to right. “Under the eaves. One on the north side, one on the west. We can assume the same on the sides we can’t see.”

“How big are they?”

“How big do you want them to be?”

“Big enough for you to hit.”

“Funny man. If they were spy cameras built into cigarette lighters I could hit them from here.”

“OK, so listen up,” Reacher whispered. “This is how we’re going to do it. I’m going to get to my starting position. Then we’re all going to wait for Franklin to get back and put the comms net on the air. Then I’m going to make a move. If I

don’t feel good I’m going to call in fire on those cameras. I say the word, I want you to take them out. Two shots, *bang, bang.* That’ll slow them down, maybe ten or twenty seconds.”

“Negative,” Cash said. “I won’t direct live rounds into a wooden structure we know contains a noncombatant hostage.”

“She’ll be in the basement,” Reacher said.

“Or the attic.”

“You’d be firing at the eaves.”

“Exactly. She’s in the attic, she hears gunfire, she hits the deck, that’s exactly where I’m aiming. One man’s ceiling is another man’s floor.”

“Spare me,” Reacher said. “Take the risk.”

“Negative. Won’t do it.”

“Christ, Gunny, you are one uptight Marine, you know that?”

Cash didn’t speak. Reacher stepped forward again and peered around the corner of the fence. Took a long hard look and pulled back.

“OK,” he said. “New plan. Just watch the west windows. You see muzzle flash, you put suppressing fire into the room it’s coming out of. We can assume the hostage won’t be in the same room as the sniper.”

Cash said nothing.

“Will you do that at least?” Reacher asked.

“You might be in the house already.”

“I’ll take my chances. Voluntary assumption of risk, OK? Helen can witness my consent. She’s a lawyer.”

Cash said nothing.

“No wonder you came in third,” Reacher said. “You need to lighten up.”

“OK,” Cash said. “I see hostile gunfire, I’ll return it.”

“Hostile is about the only kind you’re going to see, don’t you think? Since you only gave me a damn knife?”

“Army,” Cash said. “Always bitching about something.”

“What do I do?” Helen asked.

“New plan,” Reacher said. He touched the fence with his palm. “Keep low, follow the fence around the corner, stop opposite the house. Stay down. They won’t pick you up there. It’s too far. Listen to your phone. If I need a distraction I’ll ask you to run a little ways toward the house and then back again. A zigzag, or a circle. Out and back. Real fast. Just enough to put a blip on their screen. No danger. By the time they move a rifle around, you’ll be back at the fence.”

She nodded. Didn’t speak.

“And me?” Ann Yanni asked.

“You stay with Cash. You’re the ethics police. He gets cold feet about helping me out, you kick his ass, OK?”

Nobody spoke.

“All set?” Reacher asked.

“Set,” they said, one after the other.

Reacher walked away into the darkness on the other side of the road.

He kept on walking, off the blacktop, across the shoulder, across the stony margin of the field, onward, right into the field, all the way into the middle of the soaking crop. He waited until the irrigation boom rolled slowly around and caught up with him. Then he turned ninety degrees and walked south with it, directly underneath it, keeping pace, letting the ceaseless water rain down and soak his hair and his skin and his clothes. The boom pulled away as it followed its circular path and Reacher kept straight on at a tangent and walked into the next field. Waited once again for the boom to find him and then walked on under

it, matching its speed, raising his arms high and wide to catch as much drenching as he could. Then that boom swung away and left him and he walked on to find the next one. And the next, and the next. When at last he was opposite the driveway entrance he simply walked in a circle, under the last boom, waiting for his cell phone to vibrate, like a man caught in a monsoon.

———

Cash's cell phone vibrated against his hip and he pulled it out and clicked it on. Heard Franklin's voice, quiet and cautious in his ear.

"Check in, please," it said.

Cash heard Helen say: "Here."

Yanni said, "Here," from three feet behind him.

Cash said, "Here."

Then he heard Reacher say: "Here."

Franklin said, "OK, you're all loud and clear, and the ball is in your court."

Cash heard Reacher say: "Gunny, check the house."

Cash lifted the rifle and swept left to right. "No change."

Reacher said: "I'm on my way."

Then there was nothing but silence. Ten seconds. Twenty. Thirty. A whole minute. Two minutes.

Cash heard Reacher ask: "Gunny, do you see me?"

Cash lifted the rifle again and swept the length of the driveway from its mouth all the way to the house. "Negative. I don't see you. Where are you?"

"About thirty yards in."

Cash moved the rifle. Estimated thirty yards from the road and stared through the scope. Saw nothing. Nothing at all. “Good work, soldier. Keep going.”

Yanni crawled forward. Whispered in Cash’s ear. “Why don’t you see him?”

“Because he’s nuts.”

“No, explain it to me. You’ve got a night scope, right?”

“The best money can buy,” Cash said. “And it works off heat, just like their cameras.” Then he pointed away to his right. “But my guess is Reacher walked through the fields. Soaked himself in water. It’s coming straight up from the aquifer, stone cold. So right now he’s close to ambient temperature. I can’t see him; they can’t see him.”

“Smart,” Yanni said.

“Brave,” Cash said. “But ultimately dumb. Because he’s drying out every step of the way. And getting warmer.”

Reacher walked through the dark in the dirt ten feet south of the driveway. Not fast, not slow. His shoes were soaked and they were sticking to the mud. Almost coming off. He was so cold he was shivering violently. Which was bad. Shivering is a physiological reaction designed to warm a cold body fast. And he didn’t want to be warm. Not yet.

Vladimir had gotten a rhythm going. He stared at the East monitor for four seconds, then the North for three. *East, two, three, four, North, two, three. East, two, three, four, North, two, three.* He didn’t move his chair. Just leaned a little one way, then the other. Beside him Sokolov had a similar thing going south and west. Slightly different intervals. Not perfectly synchronized. But just as good, Vladimir guessed. Maybe even better. Sokolov had spent a lot of time on surveillance.

Reacher walked on. Not fast, not slow. On the map the driveway had looked to be about two hundred yards long. On the ground it felt like an airport runway. Straight as a die. Wide. And long, long, long. He had been walking forever. And he was less than halfway to the house. He walked on. Just kept on going. Looking ahead every step of the way, watching the darkened windows far away in front of him.

He realized his hair wasn't dripping anymore.

He touched one hand with the other. Dry. Not warm, but no longer cold.

He walked on. He was tempted to run. Running would get him there faster. But running would heat him up. He was approaching the point of no return. He was right out there in no-man's-land. And he wasn't shivering. He raised his phone.

"Helen," he whispered. "I need that diversion."

Helen took off her heels and left them neatly side by side at the base of the fence. For an absurd moment she felt like a person who piles all her clothes on the beach before she walks into the sea to drown. Then she put her palms down on the dirt like a sprinter in the blocks and took off forward. Just ran crazily, twenty feet, thirty, forty, and then she stopped dead and stood still, facing the house with her arms out wide like a target. *Shoot me,* she thought. *Please shoot me.* Then she got scared that maybe she really meant it and she turned and ran back in a wide zigzag loop. Threw herself down and crawled along the fence again until she found her shoes.

Vladimir saw her on the North monitor. Nothing recognizable. Just a brief flare that because of the phosphor technology was smeared and a little time-lagged. But he bent his head closer anyway and stared at the afterimage. One second, two. Sokolov sensed the interruption to his rhythm and glanced over. Three seconds, four.

"Fox?" Vladimir said.

“I didn’t see it,” Sokolov said. “But probably.”

“It ran away again.”

“OK, then.” Sokolov turned back to his own pair of monitors. Glanced at the West view, checked the South, and settled into his regular cadence again.

Cash had a cadence of his own. He was inching his night scope along at what he guessed was the speed of a walking man. But every five seconds he would sweep it suddenly forward and back in case his estimate was off. During one of those rapid traverses he picked up on what looked like a pale green shadow.

“Reacher, I can see you,” he whispered. “You’re visible, soldier.”

Reacher’s voice came back: “What scope have you got on that thing?”

“Litton,” Cash said.

“Expensive, right?”

“Thirty-seven hundred dollars.”

“Got to be better than a lousy thermal camera.”

Cash didn’t reply.

Reacher said: “Well, I’m hoping so, anyway.”

He walked on. Probably the most unnatural thing a human can force himself to do, to walk slowly and surely toward a building that likely has a rifle in it pointing directly at his center mass. If Chenko had any sense at all he would wait, and wait, and wait, until his target was pretty close. And Chenko seemed to have plenty of sense. Fifty yards would be good. Or thirty-five, like Chenko’s range out of the parking garage. Chenko was pretty good at thirty-five yards. That had been made very clear.

He walked on. Transferred the phone to his left and held it near his ear. Took the

knife out of his pocket and unsheathed it and held it right-handed, low and easy. Heard Cash say: “You’re totally visible now, soldier. You’re shining like the north star. It’s like you’re on fire.”

Forty yards to go.

Thirty-nine.

Thirty-eight.

“Helen?” he said. “Do it again.”

He heard her voice: “OK.”

He walked on. Held his breath.

Thirty-five yards.

Thirty-four.

Thirty-three.

He breathed out. He walked on doggedly. Twenty-nine yards to go. He heard panting in his ear. Helen, running. He heard Yanni ask, off-mike: “How close is he?” Heard Cash answer: “Not close enough.”

Vladimir leaned forward and said, “There it is again.” He put his fingertip on the screen, as if touch might tell him something. Sokolov glanced across. Sokolov had spent many more hours with the screens than Vladimir. Primarily surveillance had been his job. His, and Raskin’s.

“That’s no fox,” he said. “It’s way too big.”

He watched for five more seconds. The image was weaving left and right at the very limit of the camera’s range. Recognizable size, recognizable shape, inexplicable motion. He stood up and walked to the door. Braced his hands on the frame and leaned out into the hallway.

“Chenko!” he called. “North!”

Behind his back on the West screen a shape as big as his thumb grew larger. It looked like a painting-by-numbers figure done in fluorescent colors. Lime green on the outside, then a band of chrome yellow, with a core of hot red.

Chenko walked through an empty bedroom and opened the window as high as it would go. Then he backed away into the darkness. That way he was invisible from below and invulnerable except to a shot taken from the third story of an adjacent building, and there were no adjacent buildings. He switched on his night scope and raised his rifle. Quartered the open ground two hundred yards out, up and down, left and right.

He saw a woman.

She was running crazily, barefoot, darting left and right, out and back, like she was dancing or playing a phantom game of soccer. Chenko thought: *What?* He squeezed the slack out of his trigger and tried to anticipate her next pirouette. Tried to guess where her chest would be a third of a second after he fired. He waited. Then she stopped moving. She stood completely still, facing the house, arms out wide like a target.

Chenko pulled the trigger.

Then he understood. He stepped back to the hallway.

"Decoy!" he screamed. *"Decoy!"*

Cash saw the muzzle flash and called, "Shot fired," and jumped his scope to the north window. The lower pane was raised, the upper pane was fixed. No point in putting a round through the opening. The upward trajectory would guarantee a miss. So he fired at the glass. He figured if he could get a hail of jagged shards going, then that might ruin somebody's night.

Sokolov was watching the crazy heat image on Vladimir's screen when he heard

Chenko's shot and his shouted warning. He glanced back at the door and turned to the South monitor. Nothing there. Then he heard return fire and shattering glass upstairs. He pushed back from the table and stepped to the door.

"Are you OK?" he called.

"Decoy," Chenko called back. "Has to be."

Sokolov turned and checked all four screens, very carefully.

"No," he called. "Negative. Definitely nothing incoming."

Reacher touched the front wall of the house. Old plank siding, painted many times. He was ten feet south of the driveway, ten feet south of the front door, near a window that looked into a dark empty room. The window was a tall rectangle with a lower pane that slid upward behind the upper pane. Maybe the upper pane slid down over the lower pane, too. Reacher didn't know the name for the style. He had rarely lived in houses and had never owned one. *Sash? Double-hung?* He wasn't sure. The house was much older than it had looked from a distance. Maybe a hundred years. Hundred-year-old house, hundred-year-old window. But did the window still have a hundred-year-old catch? He pressed his cheek against the lower pane and squinted upward.

He couldn't see. Too dark.

Then he heard the shooting. Two rounds, one close, one not, shattering glass.

Then he heard Cash in his ear: "Helen? You OK?"

He heard no reply.

Cash asked again: "Helen? Helen?"

No reply.

Reacher put the phone in his pocket. Worked the blade of his knife up into the gap where the bottom of the upper casement overlapped the top of the lower casement. He moved the blade right to left, slowly, carefully, feeling for a catch. He found one, dead-center. Tapped it gently. It felt like a heavy brass tongue. It

He found one, dead center. Tapped it gently. It felt like a heavy brass tongue. It would pivot through ninety degrees, in and out of a socket.

But which way?

He pushed it right to left. *Solid.* He pulled the knife out and worked it back in an inch left of center. Slid it back until he found the tongue again. Pushed it left to right.

It moved.

He pushed it hard, and knocked it right out of its socket.

Easy.

He lifted the lower pane high and rolled over the sill into the room.

Cash eased forward and swung his rifle through ninety degrees until it was sighted due east along the fence. He stared through the scope. Saw nothing. He moved back into cover. Raised his phone.

“Helen?” he whispered.

No response.

Reacher moved through the empty room to the door. It was closed. He put his ear against it. Listened hard. Heard nothing. He turned the handle slowly, carefully. Opened the door very slowly. Leaned out. Checked the hallway.

Empty.

There was light from an open doorway fifteen feet ahead on his left. He paused. Lifted one foot at a time and wiped the soles of his shoes on his pants. Wiped his palms. He took a single step. Tested the floor. No sound. He moved ahead slowly, silently. *Boat shoes. Good for something.* He kept close to the wall, where the floor would be strongest. He stopped a yard shy of the lighted doorway. Took a breath. Moved on.

Stopped in the doorway.

He was looking at two guys from behind. They were seated side by side with their backs to him at a long table. Staring at TV monitors. At ghostly green images of darkness. On the left, Vladimir. On the right, a guy he hadn't seen before. *Sokolov? Must be.* To Sokolov's right, a yard away from him, a handgun rested on the very end of the table. A Smith & Wesson Model 60. The first stainless steel revolver produced anywhere in the world. Two-and-a-half-inch barrel. A five-shooter.

Reacher took a long silent step into the room. Paused. Held his breath. Reversed the knife in his hand. Held the blade an inch from its end between the ball of his thumb and the knuckle of his first finger. Raised his arm. Cocked it behind his head. Snapped it forward.

Threw the knife.

It buried itself two inches deep in the back of Sokolov's neck.

Vladimir glanced right, toward the sound. Reacher was already moving. Vladimir glanced back. Saw him. Pushed himself away from the table and half-rose. Reacher watched him calculate the distance between himself and the gun. Saw him decide to go for it. Reacher stepped into his charge and ducked under his swinging left hook and buried his shoulder in his chest and wrapped both arms around his back and jacked him bodily off his feet. Just lifted him up and turned him away from the table.

And then squeezed.

Best route to a silent kill against a guy as big as Vladimir was simply to crush him to death. No hitting, no shooting, no banging around. As long as his arms and his legs couldn't connect with anything solid there would be no noise. No shouting, no screaming. Just a long labored barely-audible tubercular sound as the last breath he had taken came back out, never to be replaced.

Reacher held Vladimir a foot off the ground and squeezed with all his strength. He crushed Vladimir's chest in a bear hug so vicious and sustained and powerful that no human could have survived it. Vladimir wasn't expecting it. He thought this was some kind of a preamble. Not the main event. When he figured it out, he went crazy with panic. He rained desperate blows down on Reacher's back

and flailed with his feet at his shins. *Stupid,* Reacher thought. *You're just burning oxygen. And you ain't getting more, pal. Better believe it.* He tightened his grip. Crushed harder. And harder. And then harder, in a remorseless subliminal rhythm that said: *More,* and *More,* and *More.* His teeth ground together. His heart pounded. His muscles swelled as big and hard as river rocks and started burning. He could feel Vladimir's rib cage moving, clicking, separating, cracking, crushing. And his last living breath leaking out of his starving lungs.

Sokolov moved.

Reacher staggered under Vladimir's weight. Turned clumsily on one leg. Kicked out and caught the hilt of the knife with his heel. Sokolov stopped moving. Vladimir stopped moving. Reacher kept the pressure full on for another whole minute. Then he eased off slowly and bent down and laid the body gently on the floor. Squatted down. Breathed hard. Checked for a pulse.

No pulse.

He stood up and pulled Cash's knife out of Sokolov's neck and used it to cut Vladimir's throat, ear to ear. *For Sandy,* he thought. Then he turned back and cut Sokolov's throat, too. *Just in case.* Blood soaked the tabletop and dripped to the floor. It didn't spurt. It just leaked. Sokolov's heart had already stopped pumping. He squatted down again and cleaned the blade on Vladimir's shirt, one side, then the other. He pulled the phone out of his pocket. Heard Cash say: *"Helen?"*

He whispered: "What's up?"

Cash answered, "We took an incoming round. I can't raise Helen."

"Yanni, move left," Reacher said. "Find her. Franklin, you there?"

Franklin said, "Here."

"Stand by to call the medics," Reacher said.

Cash asked, "Where are you?"

"In the house," Reacher said.

“Opposition?”

“Unsuccessful,” Reacher said. “Where did the shot come from?”

“Third-floor window, north. Which makes sense, tactically. They’ve got the sniper up there. They can direct him based on what they see from the cameras.”

“Not anymore,” Reacher said. He dropped the phone back in his pocket. Picked up the gun. Checked the cylinder. It was fully loaded. Five Smith & Wesson .38 Specials. He moved out to the hallway with the knife in his right hand and the gun in his left. Went looking for the basement door.

Cash heard Yanni talking to herself as she moved away to his left. Low voice, but clear, like a running commentary. She was saying: “I’m moving east now, keeping low, staying tight against the fence in the darkness. I’m looking for Helen Rodin. We know they fired at her. Now she’s not answering her phone. We’re hoping she’s OK, but we’re worried that she isn’t.”

Cash listened until he couldn’t hear her anymore. He shook his head in bemusement. Then he ducked his eye to the scope and watched the house.

Rosemary Barr wasn’t in the basement. It took Reacher less than a minute to be completely certain of that. It was a wide-open space, musty, dimly lit, uninterrupted and totally empty except for the foundations of three brick chimneys.

Reacher paused at the circuit breaker box. He was tempted to throw the switch. But Chenko had a night sight, and he didn’t. So he just crept back up the stairs.

Yanni found Helen Rodin’s shoes literally by stumbling over them. They were placed neatly side by side at the base of the fence. High heels, black patent, gleaming slightly in the ragged moonlight. Yanni kicked them accidentally and heard the sound of empty footwear. She bent and picked them up. Hung them on the fence by their heels.

“Helen?” she whispered. “*Helen?* Where are you?”

Then she heard a voice: “Here.”

“Where?”

“*Here.* Keep going.”

Yanni walked on. Found a black shape rolled tight against the base of the fence.

“I dropped my phone,” Helen said. “Can’t find it.”

“Are you OK?”

“He missed me. I was leaping around like a madwoman. But the bullet came real close. It scared me. I just dropped my phone and ran.”

Helen sat up. Yanni squatted next to her.

“Look,” Helen said. She was holding something in the palm of her hand. Something bright. A coin. A quarter, new and shiny.

“What is it?” Yanni said.

“A quarter,” Helen said.

“So what?”

“Reacher gave it to me.”

Helen was smiling. Yanni could see the white of her teeth in the moonlight.

Reacher crept down the first-floor hallway. Opened doors and searched rooms to the left and right as he went. They were all empty. All unused. He paused at the bottom of the stairs. Backed away into an empty twelve-by-twenty space that might once have been a parlor. Crouched and laid the knife on the floor and pulled out his phone.

“Gunny?” he whispered.

Cash answered: “You back with us?”

“Phone was in my pocket.”

“Yanni found Helen. She’s OK.”

“Good. The basement and the first floor are clear. I think you were right after all. Rosemary must be in the attic.”

“You going upstairs now?”

“I guess I’ll have to.”

“Body count?”

“Two down so far.”

“Lots more upstairs, then.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“Roger that.”

Reacher put the phone back in his pocket and retrieved the knife from the floor. Stood up and crept out to the hallway. The staircase was in the back of the house. It was wide, doglegged, and shallow-pitched. Quite grand. There was a wide landing halfway up where the dogleg reversed direction. He went up the first half-flight backward. It made more sense that way. He wanted to know right away if there was someone in the second-floor hallway looking down over the banister. He kept close to the wall. If stairs creaked at all, they creaked most in the middle of a tread. He went slowly, feeling with his heels, putting them down gently and deliberately. And quietly. *Boat shoes. Good for something.* After five up-and-back steps, his head was about level with the second-story floor. He raised the gun. Took another step. Now he could see the whole of the hallway. It was empty. It was a quiet carpeted space lit by a single low-wattage bulb. Nothing to see, except six closed doors, three on a side. He breathed out and made it to the half-landing. Shuffled left and crept up the second part of the dogleg going forward. Stepped off the staircase. Into the hallway.

Now what?

Six closed doors. *Who was where?* He moved slowly toward the front of the house. Listened at the first door. Heard nothing. He moved on. Heard nothing at the second door. Moved on again but before he reached the third door he heard sounds from the floor above. Sounds that were coming down *through* the floor. Sounds that he didn't understand. Sliding, scraping, crunching noises, repeated rhythmically, with a single light footfall at the end of every sequence. *Slide, scrape, crunch, tap. Slide, scrape, crunch, tap.* He stared up at the ceiling. Then the third door opened and Grigor Linsky stepped out into the hallway right in front of him. And froze.

He was wearing his familiar double-breasted suit. Gray color, boxy shoulders, cuffed pants. Reacher stabbed him in the throat. Instantly, right-handed, instinctively. He buried the blade and jerked it left. *Sever the windpipe. Keep him quiet.* He stepped aside to avoid the fountain of blood. Caught him under the arms from behind and dragged him back into the room he had come out of. It was a kitchen. Linsky had been making tea. Reacher turned out the light under the kettle. Put the gun and the knife on the counter. Bent down and clamped Linsky's head between his hands and twisted it left and jerked it right. Broke his neck. The *snap* was loud enough to worry about. It was a very quiet house. Reacher retrieved the gun and the knife and listened at the door. Heard nothing except: *Slide, scrape, crunch, tap. Slide, scrape, crunch, tap.* He stepped back into the hallway. Then he knew.

Glass.

Cash had returned fire through Chenko's favored northern vantage point and like all good snipers had sought maximum damage from his one shot. And in turn, like all good snipers, Chenko was keeping his physical environment operational. *He was cleaning up the broken glass.* He had a twenty-five percent chance of being directed back to that particular window and he wanted his passage through the room clear.

Slide, scrape, crunch, tap. He was using the side of his foot to sweep the glass aside. Into a pile. Then he was stepping forward to sweep the next arc. He would want a clear two-foot walkway through the room. No danger of slipping or sliding.

How far had he got?

Reacher crept to the next staircase. It was identical to the last one. Wide, shallow, doglegged. He walked up backward, listening hard. *Slide, scrape, crunch, tap.* He crossed the half-landing. Kept on going forward. The third-floor hallway had the same layout as the one below, but it wasn't carpeted. Just bare boards. There was an upright chair in the center of the corridor. All the doors were open. North was to the right. Reacher could feel night air coming in. He stayed close to the wall. Crept onward. The noises got louder. He flattened against the wall. Took a breath. Pivoted slowly and stepped to his left. Into a doorway.

Chenko was twelve feet from him. Facing away. Facing the window. The lower pane had been pushed up behind the upper pane. Both panes had been blown out. The room was cold. The floor was covered in glass. Chenko was clearing a path from the door toward the window. He had about three feet left to go. His rifle was upright against the wall, six feet from him. He was stooped, looking down, concentrating hard on his task. It was an important task. Skidding on a pebble of glass could cost him precious time in a firefight. Chenko had discipline.

And ten seconds to live.

Reacher put the knife in his pocket. Freed his right hand. Flexed it. Stepped forward. Just walked slow and silent down the path that Chenko had cleared. Four quiet paces. Chenko sensed it. He straightened. Reacher caught him around the neck from behind. One-handed. He gripped hard. Took one more long fast stride and stiff-armed Chenko forward with it and threw him out the open window, headfirst.

"I warned you," he whispered into the darkness below. "You should have put me down when you had the chance." Then he took out his phone.

"Gunny?" he whispered.

"Here."

"Third-floor window, where you returned fire. You see it?"

"I see it."

"A guy just fell out. If he gets up again, shoot him."

Then he put the phone away and went looking for the attic door.

Then he put the phone away and went looking for the attic door.

He found Rosemary Barr completely unharmed, sitting upright on the attic floor. Her feet were taped, her wrists were taped, her mouth was taped. Reacher put his finger to his lips. She nodded. He cut her free with the bloodstained knife and helped her stand. She was unsteady for a moment. Then she shook herself and gave a kind of nod. Then a smile. Reacher guessed that whatever fear she had felt and whatever reaction she was feeling right now had both been neutralized by some kind of a steely determination to help her brother. If she survived, he would survive. That belief had kept her going.

“Have they gone?” she whispered.

“All except Raskin and the Zec,” Reacher whispered back.

“No, Raskin killed himself. I heard them talking. The Zec made him do it. Because he let you steal his cell phone.”

“Where’s the Zec likely to be?”

“He’s in the living room most of the time. Second floor.”

“Which door?”

“Last on the left.”

“OK, stay here,” Reacher whispered. “I’ll round him up and I’ll be right back.”

“I can’t stay here. You have to get me out.”

He paused. “OK, but you’ve got to be real quiet. And don’t look left or right.”

“Why not?”

“Dead people.”

“I’m glad,” Rosemary said.

Reacher held her arm down the stairs to the third-floor hallway. Then he went ahead alone to the second. All quiet. The last door on the left was still closed. He

ahead alone to the second. All quiet. The last door on the left was still closed. He waved her down. They made the turn together and headed to the first floor. To the front of the house. To the room he had entered through. He helped her over the sill and out the window, to the dirt below. He pointed.

“Follow the driveway to the road,” he said. “Turn right. I’ll tell the others you’re coming. There’s a guy in black with a rifle. He’s one of ours.”

She stood still for a second. Then she bent down and took off her low-heeled shoes and held them in her hands and started running like hell, due west, through the dirt, toward the road. Reacher took out his phone.

“Gunny?” he whispered.

“Here.”

“Rosemary Barr is heading your way.”

“Outstanding.”

“Round up the others and meet her halfway. There’s no more operational night vision. Then stand by. I’ll get back to you.”

“Roger that.”

Reacher put the phone away. Backtracked through the silent house, on his way to find the Zec.

CHAPTER 17

In the end, it came down to waiting. Wait, and good things come to you. And bad things. Reacher crept back to the second floor. The last door on the left was still closed. He ducked into the kitchen. Linsky was on the floor, on his back in a pool of blood. Reacher relit the flame under the kettle. Then he stepped out to the hallway. Walked quietly to the front of the house and leaned on the wall beyond the last door on the left.

And waited.

The kettle boiled after five minutes. The whistle started low and quiet, and then the note and the volume rose to full blast. Within ten seconds the second floor of the house was full of an insane shrieking. Ten seconds after that, the door on Reacher's right opened. A small man stepped out. Reacher let him take a pace forward and then spun him around and jammed the Smith 60 hard in the base of his throat.

And stared.

The Zec. He was a wide, ancient, twisted, stooped, battered old man. A wraith. Barely human. He was covered in livid scars and patches of discolored skin. His face was lined and drooping and seething with rage and hatred and cruelty. He was unarmed. His ruined hands didn't seem capable of holding a weapon. Reacher forced him down the hallway. Into the kitchen, backward. To the stove. The noise from the kettle was unbearable. Reacher used his left hand and killed the flame. Then he hauled the Zec back toward the living room. The kettle's whistle died away, like an air raid siren winding down. The house went quiet again.

"It's over," Reacher said. "You lost."

"It's never over," the Zec replied. Hoarse voice, low, guttural.

"Guess again," Reacher said. He kept the Smith hard against the Zec's throat. Too low and too close for him to see it. He eased the hammer back. Slowly, carefully. Deliberately. Loudly. *Click-click-click-crunch.* An unmistakable sound.

“I’m eighty years old,” the Zec said.

“I don’t care if you’re a hundred,” Reacher said. “You’re still going down.”

“Idiot,” the Zec said back. “I meant I’ve survived things worse than you. Since long before you were born.”

“Nobody’s worse than me.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. You’re nothing.”

“You think?” Reacher said. “You were alive this morning and you won’t be tomorrow. After eighty years. That makes me something, don’t you think?”

No answer.

“It’s over,” Reacher said. “Believe me. Long and winding road, OK, I understand all of that, but this is the end of it. Had to happen sometime.”

No response.

“You know when my birthday is?” Reacher asked.

“Obviously not.”

“It’s in October. You know what day?”

“Of course not.”

“You’re going to find out the hard way. I’m counting in my head. When I reach my birthday, I’m going to pull the trigger.”

He started counting in his head. *First, second.* He watched the Zec’s eyes. *Fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth.* No response. *Tenth, eleventh, twelfth.*

“What do you want?” the Zec said.

Negotiation time.

“I want to talk,” Reacher said.

“Talk?”

Talk!

“The twelfth,” Reacher said. “That’s how long you lasted. Then you gave it up. You know why? Because you want to survive. It’s the deepest instinct you’ve got. Obviously. Otherwise how would you have gotten as old as you are? It’s probably a deeper instinct than I could ever understand. A reflex, a habit, roll the dice, stay alive, make the next move, take the next chance. It’s in your DNA. It’s *what you are*.”

“So?”

“So now we’ve got ourselves a competition. What you are, against what I am.”

“And what are you?”

“I’m the guy who just threw Chenko out a third-floor window. After crushing Vladimir to death with my bare hands. Because I didn’t like what they did to innocent people. So now you’ve got to pit *your* strong desire to survive against *my* strong desire to shoot you in the head and piss in the bullet hole.”

No response.

“One shot,” Reacher said. “In the head. Lights out. That’s your choice. Another day, another roll of the dice. Or not. As the case may be.”

He saw calculation in the Zec’s eyes. Assessment, evaluation, speculation.

“I could throw you down the stairs,” he said. “You could crawl over and take a look at Vladimir. I cut his throat afterward. Just for fun. That’s who *I* am. So don’t think I don’t mean what I say. I’ll do it and I’ll sleep like a baby the rest of my life.”

“What do you want?” the Zec asked again.

“Help with a problem.”

“What problem?”

“There’s an innocent man I need to get out of the prison ward. So I need you to tell the truth to a detective called Emerson. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I need you to finger Chenko for the shooting, and Vladimir

for the girl, and whoever it was for Ted Archer. And whatever else you've done. The whole nine yards. Including how you and Linsky set it all up."

A flicker in the Zec's eyes. "Pointless. I'd get the death penalty."

"Yes, you would," Reacher said. "That's for damn sure. But you'd still be alive tomorrow. And the next day, and the next. The appeals process lasts forever here. Ten years, sometimes. You might get lucky. There might be a mistrial, there might be a jailbreak, you might get a pardon, there might be a revolution, or an earthquake."

"Unlikely."

"Very," Reacher said. "But isn't that who you are? A guy who will take the tiniest slim fragment of a chance to live another minute, as opposed to no chance at all?"

No response.

"You already answered me once," Reacher said. "When you quit the birthday game on the twelfth of October. That was pretty fast. There are thirty-one days in October. Law of averages said you'd be OK until the fifteenth or the sixteenth. A gambler would have waited for the twentieth. But you didn't get past the twelfth. Not because you're a coward. Nobody could accuse you of that. But because you're a survivor. That's who you are. Now what I want is some practical confirmation."

No response.

"Thirteenth," Reacher said. "Fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth."

"OK," the Zec said. "You win. I'll talk to the detective."

Reacher pinned him against the hallway wall with the Smith. Took out his phone. "Gunny?"

"Here."

"Come on in, all of you. I'll open the door. And, Franklin? Wake those guys up, like we talked about before."

The phone went dead. Franklin had killed the comms net to make his calls.

_____

Reacher tied the Zec's wrists and ankles with wire torn from table lamps and left him on the living room floor. Then he went downstairs. Glanced into the surveillance room. Vladimir was on his back in a lake of blood. His eyes were open. So was his throat. Reacher could see bone. Sokolov was slumped facedown on the table. His blood was all over the place. Some of it must have seeped into the wiring, because the South monitor had shorted out. The other three pictures were still there, green and ghostly. On the West monitor four figures were visible on the driveway. Yellow haloes, red cores. Close together, moving fast. Reacher turned the lights off and closed up the room. Walked on down the hallway and opened the front door.

Yanni came in first. Then Cash. Then Rosemary. Then Helen. She was barefoot and carrying her shoes in her hand. She was covered in mud. She stopped in the doorway and hugged Reacher hard. Held him for a long moment and then moved on.

"What's that smell?" Yanni asked.

"Blood," Cash said. "And other organic fluids of various kinds."

"Are they all dead?"

"All but one," Reacher said.

He led the way upstairs. Stopped Rosemary outside the living room.

"The Zec is in there," he said. "You OK about seeing him?"

She nodded.

"I want to see him," she said. "I want to ask him a question."

She stepped into the living room. The Zec was on the floor, where Reacher had left him. Rosemary stood over him, quiet, dignified, not gloating. Just curious.

“Why?” she said. “I mean, to an extent I understand what you thought you had to do. From your warped perspective. But why didn’t you just use Chenko from the highway? Why did you have to bring my brother down?”

The Zec didn’t answer. He just stared into space, seeing something, but probably not Rosemary Barr.

“Psychology,” Reacher said.

“His?”

“Ours. The public’s.”

“How?”

“There had to be a story,” Reacher said. “No, there *was* a story, and he had to control what the story was about. If he gave up a shooter, then the story would be about the shooter. No shooter, the story would have been about the victims. And if the story had been about the victims, too many questions would have been asked.”

“So he sacrificed James.”

“That’s what he does. There’s a long list.”

“Why?”

“One death is a tragedy, a million is a statistic.”

“Joseph Stalin,” Yanni said.

Reacher kicked the Zec aside and pulled the sofa away from the window about four feet. Grabbed the Zec’s collar and hauled him up and dumped him on one end. Got him sitting up straight against the arm.

“Our star witness,” he said.

He told Cash to perch on the windowsill behind the sofa. Told Yanni to go find three dining chairs. Pushed armchairs against the side walls. Yanni came back three separate times dragging chairs behind her. Reacher put them in a line facing the sofa. He ended up with a square arrangement, sofa, dining chairs,

armchairs off to the sides.

His clothes were nearly dry. Just a little dampness where the seams were thick. He ran his fingers through his hair. Patted it down. Checked his watch. Nearly four in the morning. *Least resistance. A biorhythm thing.*

“Now we wait,” he said.

They waited less than thirty minutes. Then they heard cars on the road far away in the distance. Tires on the blacktop, engine noise, exhaust pipes. The sounds grew louder. The cars slowed. They crunched onto the limestone driveway. There were four of them. Reacher went downstairs and opened the door. Saw Franklin’s black Suburban. Saw Emerson sliding out of a gray Crown Vic. Saw a compact woman with short dark hair getting out of a blue Ford Taurus. Donna Bianca, he assumed. He saw Alex Rodin climbing out of a silver BMW. Rodin locked it with his remote. He was the only one who did.

Reacher stood aside and let them gather in the hallway. Then he led them upstairs. He put Alex Rodin and Donna Bianca and Emerson in the dining chairs, left to right. He put Franklin in an armchair next to Yanni. Rosemary Barr and Helen Rodin were in armchairs on the other side of the room. Helen was looking at her father. He was looking at her. Cash was on the windowsill. Reacher stepped away and leaned up in the doorway.

“Start talking,” Reacher said.

The Zec stayed silent.

“I can send these guys away again,” Reacher said. “Just as easily as I brought them here. Then I’ll start counting again. At the seventeenth.”

The Zec sighed. Started talking. Slowly at first, and then faster. He told a long story. So much length and so much complexity that it got confusing. He spilled details of earlier unconnected crimes. Then he got to the bidding process for the city contracts. He named the official he had suborned. It wasn’t just about money. There had been girls too, supplied in small groups in a Caribbean villa. Some of them very young. He talked about Ted Archer’s fury, his two-year search, his close approach to the truth. He described the ambush, one Monday

morning. Jeb Oliver had been used. The red Dodge Ram had been his payoff. Then the Zec paused, decided, moved on. He described the fast decision to get rid of Oline Archer two months later, when she became dangerous. He described Chenko's subterfuge, the hasty but thorough planning, how they lured James Barr out of the way with a promise of a date with Sandy Dupree. He described the end of Jeb Oliver's usefulness. He told them where to find his body. He told them about Vladimir killing Sandy in an effort to stop Reacher in his tracks. Altogether he talked for thirty-two minutes, hands tied behind him, then he stopped suddenly and Reacher saw calculation in his eyes. He was already thinking about the next move. The next roll of the dice. *A mistrial. A jailbreak. A ten-year appeals process.*

The room went quiet.

Donna Bianca said, "Unbelievable."

Reacher said, "Keep talking."

The Zec just looked at him.

"Something you left out," Reacher said. "You need to tell us about your inside man. That's what we're all waiting for."

The Zec switched his gaze. He looked at Emerson. Then at Donna Bianca. Then at Alex Rodin. Right to left, along the line. Then he glanced back at Reacher.

"You're a survivor," Reacher said. "But you're not an idiot. There won't be a mistrial. There won't be a jailbreak. You're eighty years old and you won't survive a ten-year appeals process. You know all that. But still you agreed to talk. Why?"

The Zec said nothing.

"Because you knew sooner or later you'd be talking to a friend. Someone you own. Someone you bought and paid for. Am I right?"

The Zec didn't move.

"Someone right here, right now, in fact," Reacher said.

The Zec said nothing.

The Zec said nothing.

“One thing always bothered me,” Reacher said. “From the start. At first I didn’t know if I was right or if I was letting my ego get in the way. I went back and forth with it. Finally I decided I was right. The thing is, when I was in the service I was a hell of a good investigator. I was maybe the best they ever had. I would have put myself up against anyone. And you know what?”

“What?” Helen Rodin asked.

“I would never have thought of emptying that parking meter. Not in a million years. It would never have occurred to me to do that. So I was facing a question. Was Emerson a better investigator than me? Or did he *know* that quarter was there?”

Nobody spoke.

“Emerson is not better than I was,” Reacher said. “That’s just not possible. That’s what I decided.” Then he turned to the Zec. “The coin was one clue too many. You see that now? It was unnatural. Was it Chenko’s idea?”

The Zec nodded.

“You should have overruled him,” Reacher said. He turned to Emerson. “Or *you* should have left it there. It wasn’t like you needed it to make the case.”

“This is bullshit,” Emerson said.

Reacher shook his head. “A lot of things clicked into place after that. I read the 911 transcripts and the squad car call log. Right at the start you were awful quick to make up your mind. You had a bunch of incoherent panic calls but within twenty seconds you were on the radio telling your guys that this was a lone nutcase with an automatic rifle. There was no basis for that conclusion. Six shots fired, ragged sequence, it could have been six kids with a handgun each, firing once. But you knew it wasn’t.”

“Bullshit,” Emerson said again.

Reacher shook his head again. “Final proof was when I was negotiating with your boss here. I said he’d have to tell the truth to a detective called Emerson. I could have said the cops generically, or Alex Rodin the DA. But I didn’t. I said

your name specifically, and a little light came on in his eyes. He sparred around for a minute more, for form's sake, but basically he agreed real fast because he figured he'd be OK as long as you were in charge."

Silence. Then Cash said, "But Oline Archer went to Alex Rodin here. *He* buried it. That's what you found out."

Reacher shook his head again. "We found out that Oline went to the DA's *office*. I went there myself, first thing after I got to town. And you know what? Alex here has got himself a couple of real dragon ladies working the door. They know he doesn't like walk-ins. Dollars to doughnuts they sent Oline on her way. That's a matter for the police, they'll have told her. Her co-worker said she was gone most of the afternoon. My guess is the dragon ladies sent her trekking all across town to the station house, where she sat down with Emerson here."

Silence in the room.

The Zec struggled on the sofa. "Emerson, *do* something, for Christ's sake."

"Nothing he can do," Reacher said. "I'm not dumb. I think ahead. I'm sure he's got a Glock under his arm, but he's got me behind him with a .38 and a knife, and he's got Cash facing him with a sniper rifle hidden behind the sofa, and what can he do anyway? I guess he could try to kill us all and say there was some kind of a big massacre here, but how would that help him with NBC?"

Emerson stared at him.

"NBC?" Cash repeated.

"I saw Yanni fiddling with her phone earlier. I'm assuming she's transmitting all of this back to the studios."

Yanni pulled out her Nokia.

"Open channel," she said. "Digital audio recording on three separate hard discs, plus two analog tapes as backup. They've all been running since well before we got in the Humvee."

Cash stared at her. "That's why you asked me that dumb question about the night scope. That's why you were talking to yourself like a sports announcer."

“She’s a journalist,” Reacher said. “She’s going to win an Emmy.”

He stepped forward and leaned over the back of Emerson’s chair and slid his hand under his coat. Came back out with a Glock nine. Handed it to Bianca.

“You’ve got arrests to make,” he said.

Then the Zec smiled, and Chenko walked into the room.

Chenko was covered in mud and his right arm was broken, or his shoulder, or his collarbone, or maybe all three. His wrist was jammed into his shirt like a sling. But there was nothing wrong with his left arm. Nothing at all. Reacher turned around to face him and saw the sawn-off rock-steady in his left hand. He thought, irrelevantly: *Where did he get that from? His car? Were the cars parked to the east?*

Chenko glanced at Bianca.

“Put the gun down, lady,” he said.

Bianca laid Emerson’s Glock on the floor. No sound as it touched the carpet.

“Thank you,” Chenko said.

Nobody spoke.

“I guess I was out for a little while,” Chenko said. “But I got to tell you, I feel a whole hell of a lot better now.”

“We survive,” the Zec said from across the room. “That’s what we do.”

Reacher didn’t look back at the old man. He looked at Chenko’s gun instead. It had been a Benelli Nova Pump. The stock had been cut off behind the pistol grip. The barrel had been hacked off ahead of the slide. Twelve-gauge. Four-shot magazine. A handsome weapon, butchered.

“Emerson,” the Zec called. “Come over here and untie me.”

Reacher heard Emerson stand up. He didn’t look back at him. Just took a tiny

pace forward and sideways, closer to Chenko. He was a foot taller and twice as wide.

“I need a knife here,” Emerson said.

“The soldier’s got a knife,” Chenko said. “I’m damn sure of that, based on what I saw happened to my buddies downstairs.”

Reacher moved a little closer to him. A big guy and a little guy directly face-to-face, separated by about three feet, most of which was occupied by the Benelli. Reacher’s waist was level with Chenko’s chest.

“Knife,” Emerson said.

“Come and get it,” Reacher said.

“Slide it across the floor.”

“No.”

“I’ll shoot,” Chenko said. “Twelve-gauge, in the gut.”

Reacher thought: *And then what? A pump-action shotgun ain’t much use to a one-armed man.*

“So shoot,” he said.

He felt eyes on him. He knew everyone was looking at him. Staring at him. Silence buzzed in his ears. He was suddenly aware of the smells in the room. Dust in the carpet, worn furniture, fear, tension, damp night air blowing in from the open door downstairs and the busted window upstairs and carrying with it the odor of rich earth and fertilizer and budding new growth.

“Go ahead,” he said. “Shoot.”

Chenko did nothing. Just stood there. Reacher stood there directly in front of him. He knew exactly how the room was laid out. He had arranged it. He pictured it in his mind. Chenko was in the doorway facing the window. Everyone else was facing the other way. Reacher himself right in front of Chenko, face-to-face, close enough to touch. Cash directly behind him all the way in back, behind the sofa, on the windowsill, staring forward. Then the Zec

on the sofa, looking the same way. Then Emerson in the middle of the floor, near the Zec, standing up, indecisive, watching. Then Yanni and Franklin and Helen and Rosemary Barr in the armchairs against the side walls, heads turned. Then Donna Bianca and Alex Rodin on their dining chairs, twisted around at the waist, eyes wide.

Reacher knew where everyone was, and he knew what they were looking at.

“Shoot,” he said. “Aim at my belt. That’ll work. Go ahead.”

Chenko did nothing. Just stared up at him. Reacher was so close and so big he was all Chenko could see. It was just the two of them, like they were alone in the room.

“I’ll help you out,” Reacher said. “I’ll count to three. Then you pull the trigger.”

Chenko just stood there.

“You understand?” Reacher said.

No reply.

“One,” Reacher said.

No reaction.

“Two,” Reacher said.

Then he stepped out of the way. Just took a long fast sideways shuffle to his right. Cash fired from behind the sofa at the spot where Reacher’s belt had been a split second before, and Chenko’s chest blew apart.

Then Cash put his rifle back on the floor just as silently as he had picked it up.

Two night-shift squad cars came and took the Zec and Emerson away. Then four ambulances arrived for the casualties. Bianca asked Reacher what exactly had happened to the first three. Reacher told her he had absolutely no idea. None at

all. He speculated that it might have been some kind of an internal dispute. A falling-out among thieves, maybe? Bianca didn't push it. Rosemary Barr borrowed Franklin's cell phone and used it to call area hospitals, looking for a safe berth for her brother. Helen and Alex Rodin sat close together, talking. Gunny Cash sat in a chair and dozed. An old soldier's habit. *Sleep when you can.* Yanni stepped up close to Reacher and said, "Rough men stand ready in the night." Reacher found himself very aware of the live phone. He just smiled and said, "I'm usually in bed by twelve o'clock."

"Me too," Yanni said. "Alone. You remember my address?"

Reacher smiled again, and nodded. Then he went downstairs and stepped out to the front porch and walked a little ways south across the dirt until he could see past the bulk of the house to the eastern sky. Dawn was coming. Black shaded to purple right on the horizon. He turned and watched the last ambulance loading up. Vladimir's final ride, judging by the size of the shape under the sheet on the gurney. Reacher emptied his pockets and left Emerson's torn business card, and Helen Rodin's cocktail napkin, and the motor court's big brass key, and the Smith 60, and Gunny Cash's Navy SEAL SRK, all in a neat little pile beside the front door. Then he asked the paramedics if he could ride with them to town. He figured he could walk east from the hospital and be at the bus depot before the sun was fully up. He could be in Indianapolis before lunch. Then he could buy a pair of shoes and be just about anywhere before the sun went down again.

The Hard Way

CHAPTER **1**

JACK REACHER ORDERED espresso, double, no peel, no cube, foam cup, no china, and before it arrived at his table he saw a man's life change forever. Not that the waiter was slow. Just that the move was slick. So slick, Reacher had no idea what he was watching. It was just an urban scene, repeated everywhere in the world a billion times a day: A guy unlocked a car and got in and drove away. That was all.

But that was enough.

The espresso had been close to perfect, so Reacher went back to the same café exactly twenty-four hours later. Two nights in the same place was unusual for Reacher, but he figured great coffee was worth a change in his routine. The café was on the west side of Sixth Avenue in New York City, in the middle of the block between Bleecker and Houston. It occupied the ground floor of an undistinguished four-story building. The upper stories looked like anonymous rental apartments. The café itself looked like a transplant from a back street in Rome. Inside it had low light and scarred wooden walls and a dented chrome machine as hot and long as a locomotive, and a counter. Outside there was a single line of metal tables on the sidewalk behind a low canvas screen. Reacher took the same end table he had used the night before and chose the same seat. He stretched out and got comfortable and tipped his chair up on two legs. That put his back against the café's outside wall and left him looking east, across the sidewalk and the width of the avenue. He liked to sit outside in the summer, in New York City. Especially at night. He liked the electric darkness and the hot dirty air and the blasts of noise and traffic and the manic barking sirens and the crush of people. It helped a lonely man feel connected and isolated both at the same time.

He was served by the same waiter as the night before and ordered the same drink, double espresso in a foam cup, no sugar, no spoon. He paid for it as soon as it arrived and left his change on the table. That way he could leave exactly when he wanted to without insulting the waiter or bilking the owner or stealing the china. Reacher always arranged the smallest details in his life so he could move on at a split second's notice. It was an obsessive habit. He owned nothing and carried nothing. Physically he was a big man, but he cast a small shadow and left very little in his wake.

He drank his coffee slowly and felt the night heat come up off the sidewalk. He watched cars and people. Watched taxis flow north and garbage trucks pause at the curbs. Saw knots of strange young people heading for clubs. Watched girls who had once been boys totter south. Saw a blue German sedan park on the block. Watched a compact man in a gray suit get out and walk north. Watched him thread between two sidewalk tables and head inside to where the café staff was clustered in back. Watched him ask them questions.

The guy was medium height, not young, not old, too solid to be called wiry, too slight to be called heavy. His hair was gray at the temples and cut short and neat. He kept himself balanced on the balls of his feet. His mouth didn't move much as he talked. But his eyes did. They flicked left and right tirelessly. The guy was about forty, Reacher guessed, and furthermore Reacher guessed he had gotten to be about forty by staying relentlessly aware of everything that was happening around him. Reacher had seen the same look in elite infantry veterans who had survived long jungle tours.

Then Reacher's waiter turned suddenly and pointed straight at him. The compact man in the gray suit stared over. Reacher stared back, over his shoulder, through the window. Eye contact was made. Without breaking it the man in the suit mouthed *thank you* to the waiter and started back out the way he had entered. He stepped through the door and made a right inside the low canvas screen and threaded his way down to Reacher's table. Reacher let him stand there mute for a moment while he made up his mind. Then he said "Yes" to him, like an answer, not a question.

"Yes what?" the guy said back.

"Yes whatever," Reacher said. "Yes I'm having a pleasant evening, yes you can join me, yes you can ask me whatever it is you want to ask me."

The guy scraped a chair out and sat down, his back to the river of traffic, blocking Reacher's view.

"Actually I do have a question," he said.

"I know," Reacher said. "About last night."

"How did you know that?" The guy's voice was low and quiet and his accent was flat and clipped and British.

"The waiter pointed me out," Reacher said. "And the only thing that distinguishes me from his other customers is that I was here last night and they weren't."

"You're certain about that?"

"Turn your head away," Reacher said. "Watch the traffic."

The guy turned his head away. Watched the traffic.

"Now tell me what I'm wearing," Reacher said.

"Green shirt," the British guy said. "Cotton, baggy, cheap, doesn't look new, sleeves rolled to the elbow, over a green T-shirt, also cheap and not new, a little tight, untucked over flat-front khaki chinos, no socks, English shoes, pebbled leather, brown, not new, but not very old either, probably expensive. Frayed laces, like you pull on them too hard when you tie them. Maybe indicative of a self-discipline obsession."

"OK," Reacher said.

"OK what?"

"You notice things," Reacher said. "And I notice things. We're two of a kind. We're peas in a pod. I'm the only customer here now who was also here last night. I'm certain of that. And that's what you asked the staff. Had to be. That's the only reason the waiter would have pointed me out."

The guy turned back.

"Did you see a car last night?" he asked.

“I saw plenty of cars last night,” Reacher said. “This is Sixth Avenue.”

“A Mercedes Benz. Parked over there.” The guy twisted again and pointed on a slight diagonal at a length of empty curb by a fire hydrant on the other side of the street.

Reacher said, “Silver, four-door sedan, an S-420, New York vanity plates starting OSC, a lot of city miles on it. Dirty paint, scuffed tires, dinged rims, dents and scrapes on both bumpers.”

The guy turned back again.

“You saw it,” he said.

“It was right there,” Reacher said. “Obviously I saw it.”

“Did you see it leave?”

Reacher nodded. “Just before eleven forty-five a guy got in and drove it away.”

“You’re not wearing a watch.”

“I always know what time it is.”

“It must have been closer to midnight.”

“Maybe,” Reacher said. “Whatever.”

“Did you get a look at the driver?”

“I told you, I saw him get in and drive away.”

The guy stood up.

“I need you to come with me,” he said. Then he put his hand in his pocket. “I’ll buy your coffee.”

“I already paid for it.”

“So let’s go.”

“Where?”

“To see my boss.”

“Who’s your boss?”

“A man called Lane.”

“You’re not a cop,” Reacher said. “That’s my guess. Based on observation.”

“Of what?”

“Your accent. You’re not American. You’re British. The NYPD isn’t that desperate.”

“Most of us are Americans,” the British guy said. “But you’re right, we’re not cops. We’re private citizens.”

“What kind?”

“The kind that will make it worth your while if you give them a description of the individual who drove that car away.”

“Worth my while how?”

“Financially,” the guy said. “Is there any other way?”

“Lots of other ways,” Reacher said. “I think I’ll stay right here.”

“This is very serious.”

“How?”

The guy in the suit sat down again.

“I can’t tell you that,” he said.

“Goodbye,” Reacher said.

“Not my choice,” the guy said. “Mr. Lane made it mission-critical that nobody knows. For very good reasons.”

Reacher tilted his cup and checked the contents. Nearly gone.

“You got a name?” he asked.

“Do you?”

“You first.”

In response the guy stuck a thumb into the breast pocket of his suit coat and slid out a black leather business card holder. He opened it up and used the same thumb to slide out a single card. He passed it across the table. It was a handsome item. Heavy linen stock, raised lettering, ink that still looked wet. At the top it said: *Operational Security Consultants.*

“OSC,” Reacher said. “Like the license plate.”

The British guy said nothing.

Reacher smiled. “You’re security consultants and you got your car stolen? I can see how that could be embarrassing.”

The guy said, “It’s not the car we’re worried about.”

Lower down on the business card was a name: *John Gregory.* Under the name was a subscript: *British Army, Retired.* Then a job title: *Executive Vice President.*

“How long have you been out?” Reacher asked.

“Of the British Army?” the guy called Gregory said. “Seven years.”

“Unit?”

“SAS.”

“You’ve still got the look.”

“You too,” Gregory said. “How long have you been out?”

“Seven years,” Reacher said.

“Unit?”

"Unit?"

"U.S. Army CID, mostly."

Gregory looked up. Interested. "Investigator?"

"Mostly."

"Rank?"

"I don't remember," Reacher said. "I've been a civilian seven years."

"Don't be shy," Gregory said. "You were probably a lieutenant colonel at least."

"Major," Reacher said. "That's as far as I got."

"Career problems?"

"I had my share."

"You got a name?"

"Most people do."

"What is it?"

"Reacher."

"What are you doing now?"

"I'm trying to get a quiet cup of coffee."

"You need work?"

"No," Reacher said. "I don't."

"I was a sergeant," Gregory said.

Reacher nodded. "I figured. SAS guys usually are. And you've got the look."

"So will you come with me and talk to Mr. Lane?"

“I told you what I saw. You can pass it on.”

“Mr. Lane will want to hear it direct.”

Reacher checked his cup again. “Where is he?”

“Not far. Ten minutes.”

“I don’t know,” Reacher said. “I’m enjoying my espresso.”

“Bring it with you. It’s in a foam cup.”

“I prefer peace and quiet.”

“All I want is ten minutes.”

“Seems like a lot of fuss over a stolen car, even if it was a Mercedes Benz.”

“This is not about the car.”

“So what is it about?”

“Life and death,” Gregory said. “Right now more likely death than life.”

Reacher checked his cup again. There was less than a lukewarm eighth-inch left, thick and scummy with espresso mud. That was all. He put the cup down.

“OK,” he said. “So let’s go.”

CHAPTER **2**

THE BLUE GERMAN sedan turned out to be a new BMW 7-series with OSC vanity plates on it. Gregory unlocked it from ten feet away with a key fob remote and Reacher got in the front passenger seat sideways and found the switch and moved the seat back for legroom. Gregory pulled out a small silver cell phone and dialed a number.

“Incoming with a witness,” he said, clipped and British. Then he closed the phone and fired up the engine and moved out into the midnight traffic.

The ten minutes turned out to be twenty. Gregory drove north on Sixth Avenue all the way through Midtown to 57th Street and then two blocks west. He turned north on Eighth, through Columbus Circle, onto Central Park West, and into 72nd Street. He stopped outside the Dakota.

“Nice digs,” Reacher said.

“Only the best for Mr. Lane,” Gregory said, nothing in his voice.

They got out together and stood on the sidewalk and another compact man in a gray suit stepped out of the shadows and into the car and drove it away. Gregory led Reacher into the building and up in the elevator. The lobbies and the hallways were as dark and baronial as the exterior.

“You ever seen Yoko?” Reacher asked.

“No,” Gregory said.

They got out on five and Gregory led the way around a corner and an apartment door opened for them. The lobby staff must have called ahead. The door that opened was heavy oak the color of honey and the warm light that spilled out into the corridor was the color of honey, too. The apartment was a tall solid space. There was a small square foyer open to a big square living room. The living room had cool air and yellow walls and low table lights and comfortable chairs and sofas all covered in printed fabric. It was full of six men. None of them was sitting down. They were all standing up, silent. Three wore gray suits similar to Gregory’s and three were in black jeans and black nylon warm-up jackets

Gregory's and three were in black jeans and black nylon warm-up jackets. Reacher knew immediately they were all ex-military. Just like Gregory. They all had the look. The apartment itself had the desperate quiet feel of a command bunker far from some distant point where a battle was right then turning to shit.

All six men turned and glanced at Reacher as he stepped inside. None of them spoke. But five men then glanced at the sixth, which Reacher guessed identified the sixth man as Mr. Lane. The boss. He was half a generation older than his men. He was in a gray suit. He had gray hair, buzzed close to his scalp. He was maybe an inch above average height, and slender. His face was pale and full of worry. He was standing absolutely straight, racked with tension, with his fingertips spread and touching the top of a table that held an old-fashioned telephone and a framed photograph of a pretty woman.

“This is the witness,” Gregory said.

No reply.

“He saw the driver,” Gregory said.

The man at the table glanced down at the phone and then moved away from it, toward Reacher, looking him up and down, assessing, evaluating. He stopped a yard away and offered his hand.

“Edward Lane,” he said. “I’m very pleased to meet you, sir.” His accent was American, originally from some hardscrabble place far from the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Arkansas, maybe, or rural Tennessee, but in either case overlaid by long exposure to the neutral tones of the military. Reacher said his own name and shook Lane’s hand. It was dry, not warm, not cold.

“Tell me what you saw,” Lane said.

“I saw a guy get in a car,” Reacher said. “He drove it away.”

“I need detail,” Lane said.

“Reacher is ex–U.S. Army CID,” Gregory said. “He described the Benz to perfection.”

“So describe the driver,” Lane said.

“I saw more of the car than the driver,” Reacher said.

“Where were you?”

“In a café. The car was a little north and east of me, across the width of Sixth Avenue. Maybe a twenty-degree angle, maybe ninety feet away.”

“Why were you looking at it?”

“It was badly parked. It looked out of place. I guessed it was on a fireplug.”

“It was,” Lane said. “Then what?”

“Then a guy crossed the street toward it. Not at a crosswalk. Through gaps in the traffic, at an angle. The angle was more or less the same as my line of sight, maybe twenty degrees. So most of what I saw was his back, all the way.”

“Then what?”

“He stuck the key in the door and got inside. Took off.”

“Going north, obviously, this being Sixth Avenue. Did he turn?”

“Not that I saw.”

“Can you describe him?”

“Blue jeans, blue shirt, blue baseball cap, white sneakers. The clothing was old and comfortable. The guy was average height, average weight.”

“Age?”

“I didn’t see his face. Most of what I saw was his back. But he didn’t move like a kid. He was at least in his thirties. Maybe forty.”

“How exactly did he move?”

“He was focused. He headed straight for the car. Not fast, but there was no doubt where he was going. The way he held his head, I think he was looking directly at the car the whole way. Like a definite destination. Like a target. And the way he held his shoulder, I think he might have had the key out in front of him, horizontally. Like a tiny lance. Focused, and intent. And urgent. That’s how he

horizontally. Like a tiny lance. Focused, and intent. And urgent. That's how he moved."

"Where did he come from?"

"From behind my shoulder, more or less. He could have been walking north, and then stepped off the sidewalk at the café, north and east through the traffic."

"Would you recognize him again?"

"Maybe," Reacher said. "But only by his clothes and his walk and his posture. Nothing that would convince anyone."

"If he crossed through the traffic he must have glanced south to see what was coming at him. At least once. So you should have seen the right side of his face. Then when he was behind the wheel, you should have seen the left side."

"Narrow angles," Reacher said. "And the light wasn't great."

"There must have been headlight beams on him."

"He was white," Reacher said. "No facial hair. That's all I saw."

"White male," Lane said. "Thirty-five to forty-five. I guess that eliminates about eighty percent of the population, maybe more, but it's not good enough."

"Didn't you have insurance?" Reacher asked.

"This is not about the car," Lane said.

"It was empty," Reacher said.

"It wasn't empty," Lane said.

"So what was in it?"

"Thank you, Mr. Reacher," Lane said. "You've been very helpful."

He turned and walked back to where he had started, next to the table with the phone and the photograph. He stood erect beside it and spread his fingers again and laid the tips lightly on the polished wood, right next to the telephone, like his touch might detect an incoming call before the electronic pulse started the bell

touch might detect an incoming call before the electronic pulse started the bell.

“You need help,” Reacher said. “Don’t you?”

“Why would you care?” Lane asked.

“Habit,” Reacher said. “Reflex. Professional curiosity.”

“I’ve got help,” Lane said. He gestured with his free hand around the room. “Navy SEALs, Delta Force, Recon Marines, Green Berets, SAS from Britain. The best in the world.”

“You need a different kind of help. The guy who took your car, these folks can start a war against him, that’s for sure. But first you need to find him.”

No reply.

“What was in the car?” Reacher asked.

“Tell me about your career,” Lane said.

“It’s been over a long time. That’s its main feature.”

“Final rank?”

“Major.”

“Army CID?”

“Thirteen years.”

“Investigator?”

“Basically.”

“A good one?”

“Good enough.”

“110th Special Unit?”

“Some of the time. You?”

“Rangers and Delta. Started in Vietnam, ended in the Gulf the first time around. Started a second lieutenant, finished a full colonel.”

“What was in the car?”

Lane looked away. Held still and quiet for a long, long time. Then he looked back, like a decision had been made.

“You need to give me your word about something,” he said.

“Like what?”

“No cops. That’s going to be your first piece of advice, go to the cops. But I’ll refuse to do it, and I need your word that you won’t go behind my back.”

Reacher shrugged.

“OK,” he said.

“Say it.”

“No cops.”

“Say it again.”

“No cops,” Reacher said again.

“You got an ethical problem with that?”

“No,” Reacher said.

“No FBI, no nobody,” Lane said. “We handle this ourselves. Understand? You break your word, I’ll put your eyes out. I’ll have you blinded.”

“You’ve got a funny way of making friends.”

“I’m looking for help here, not friends.”

“My word is good,” Reacher said.

“Say you understand what I’ll do if you break it.”

Reacher looked around the room. Took it all in. A quiet desperate atmosphere and six Special Forces veterans, all full of subdued menace, all as hard as nails, all looking right back at him, all full of unit loyalty and hostile suspicion of the outsider.

“You’ll have me blinded,” Reacher said.

“You better believe it,” Lane said.

“What was in the car?”

Lane moved his hand away from the phone. He picked up the framed photograph. He held it two-handed, flat against his chest, high up, so that Reacher felt he had two people staring back at him. Above, Lane’s pale and worried features. Below, under glass, a woman of breathtaking classical beauty. Dark hair, green eyes, high cheekbones, a bud of a mouth, photographed with passion and expertise and printed by a master.

“This is my wife,” Lane said.

Reacher nodded. Said nothing.

“Her name is Kate,” Lane said.

Nobody spoke.

“Kate disappeared late yesterday morning,” Lane said. “I got a call in the afternoon. From her kidnappers. They wanted money. That’s what was in the car. You watched one of my wife’s kidnappers collect their ransom.”

Nobody spoke.

“They promised to release her,” Lane said. “And it’s been twenty-four hours. And they haven’t called back.”

CHAPTER **3**

EDWARD LANE HELD the framed photograph like an offering and Reacher stepped forward to take it. He tilted it to catch the light. Kate Lane was beautiful, no question about it. She was hypnotic. She was younger than her husband by maybe twenty years, which put her in her early thirties. Old enough to be all woman, young enough to be flawless. In the picture she was gazing at something just beyond the edge of the print. Her eyes blazed with love. Her mouth seemed ready to burst into a wide smile. The photographer had frozen the first tiny hint of it so that the pose seemed dynamic. It was a still picture, but it looked like it was about to move. The focus and the grain and the detail were immaculate. Reacher didn't know much about photography, but he knew he was holding a high-end product. The frame alone might have cost what he used to make in a month, back in the army.

"My Mona Lisa," Lane said. "That's how I think of that picture."

Reacher passed it back. "Is it recent?"

Lane propped it upright again, next to the telephone.

"Less than a year old," he said.

"Why no cops?"

"There are reasons."

"This kind of a thing, they usually do a good job."

"No cops," Lane said.

Nobody spoke.

"You were a cop," Lane said. "You can do what they do."

"I can't," Reacher said.

"You were a military cop. Therefore all things being equal you can do better

than them.”

“All things aren’t equal. I don’t have their resources.”

“You can make a start.”

The room went very quiet. Reacher glanced at the phone, and the photograph.

“How much money did they want?” he asked.

“One million dollars in cash,” Lane answered.

“And that was in the car? A million bucks?”

“In the trunk. In a leather bag.”

“OK,” Reacher said. “Let’s all sit down.”

“I don’t feel like sitting down.”

“Relax,” Reacher said. “They’re going to call back. Probably very soon. I can pretty much guarantee that.”

“How?”

“Sit down. Start at the beginning. Tell me about yesterday.”

So Lane sat down, in the armchair next to the telephone table, and started to talk about the previous day. Reacher sat at one end of a sofa. Gregory sat next to him. The other five guys distributed themselves around the room, two sitting, two squatting on chair arms, one leaning against the wall.

“Kate went out at ten o’clock in the morning,” Lane said. “She was heading for Bloomingdale’s, I think.”

“You think?”

“I allow her some freedom of action. She doesn’t necessarily supply me with a detailed itinerary. Not every day.”

“Was she alone?”

“Her daughter was with her.”

“*Her* daughter?”

“She has an eight-year-old by her first marriage. Her name is Jade.”

“She lives with you here?”

Lane nodded.

“So where is Jade now?”

“Missing, obviously,” Lane said.

“So this is a *double* kidnapping?” Reacher said.

Lane nodded again. “Triple, in a way. Their driver didn’t come back, either.”

“You didn’t think to mention this before?”

“Does it make a difference? One person or three?”

“Who was the driver?”

“A guy called Taylor. British, ex-SAS. A good man. One of us.”

“What happened to the car?”

“It’s missing.”

“Does Kate go to Bloomingdale’s often?”

Lane shook his head. “Only occasionally. And never on a predictable pattern. We do nothing regular or predictable. I vary her drivers, vary her routes, sometimes we stay out of the city altogether.”

“Because? You got a lot of enemies?”

“My fair share. My line of work attracts enemies.”

“You’re going to have to explain your line of work to me. You’re going to have to tell me who your enemies are.”

to tell me who your enemies are."

"Why are you sure they're going to call?"

"I'll get to that," Reacher said. "Tell me about the first conversation. Word for word."

"They called at four o'clock in the afternoon. It went pretty much how you would expect. You know, we have your wife, we have your daughter."

"Voice?"

"Altered. One of those electronic squawk boxes. Very metallic, like a robot in a movie. Loud and deep, but that doesn't mean anything. They can alter the pitch and the volume."

"What did you say to them?"

"I asked them what they wanted. They said a million bucks. I asked them to put Kate on the line. They did, after a short pause." Lane closed his eyes. "She said, you know, help me, help me." He opened his eyes. "Then the guy with the squawk box came back on and I agreed to the money. No hesitation. The guy said he would call back in an hour with instructions."

"And did he?"

Lane nodded. "At five o'clock. I was told to wait six hours and put the money in the trunk of the Mercedes you saw and have it driven down to the Village and parked in that spot at eleven-forty exactly. The driver was to lock it up and walk away and put the keys through a mail slot in the front door of a certain building on the southwest corner of Spring Street and West Broadway. Then he was to walk away and keep on walking away, south on West Broadway. Someone would move in behind him and enter the building and collect the keys. If my driver stopped or turned around or even looked back, Kate would die. Likewise if there was a tracking device on the car."

"That was it, word for word?"

Lane nodded.

"Nothing else?"

Lane shook his head.

“Who drove the car down?” Reacher asked.

“Gregory,” Lane said.

“I followed the instructions,” Gregory said. “To the letter. I couldn’t risk anything else.”

“How far of a walk was it?” Reacher asked him.

“Six blocks.”

“What was the building with the mail slot?”

“Abandoned,” Gregory said. “Or awaiting renovations. One or the other. It was empty, anyway. I went back there tonight, before I came to the café. No sign of habitation.”

“How good was this guy Taylor? Did you know him in Britain?”

Gregory nodded. “SAS is a big family. And Taylor was very good indeed.”

“OK,” Reacher said.

“OK what?” Lane said.

“There are some obvious early conclusions,” Reacher said.

CHAPTER **4**

REACHER SAID, “The first conclusion is that Taylor is already dead. These guys clearly know you to some extent, and therefore we should assume they knew who and what Taylor was. Therefore they wouldn’t keep him alive. No reason for it. Too dangerous.”

Lane asked, “Why do you think they know me?”

“They asked for a specific car,” Reacher said. “And they suspected you might have a million dollars in cash lying around. They asked for it after the banks were closed and told you to deliver it before the banks reopened. Not everyone could comply with those conditions. Usually even very rich people take a little time to get a million bucks in cash together. They get temporary loans, wire transfers, they use stock as collateral, stuff like that. But these guys seemed to know that you could just cough it up instantly.”

“How do they know me?”

“You tell me.”

Nobody spoke.

“And there are three of them,” Reacher said. “One to guard Kate and Jade wherever they took them. One to watch Gregory’s back while he walked south on West Broadway, on a cell phone to a third who was waiting to move in and pick up the keys as soon as it was safe.”

Nobody spoke.

“And they’re based a minimum two hundred miles upstate,” Reacher said. “Let’s assume the initial action went down before about eleven o’clock yesterday morning. But they didn’t call for more than five hours. Because they were driving. Then they issued instructions at five o’clock for a ransom drop more than six hours later. Because they needed the six hours because two of them had to drive all the way back. Five, six hours, that’s two hundred miles, maybe two fifty, maybe more.”

“Why upstate?” Lane said. “They could be anywhere.”

“Not south or west,” Reacher said. “Or they would have asked for the ransom car south of Canal, so they could head straight for the Holland Tunnel. Not east on Long Island, or they would have wanted to be near the Midtown Tunnel. No, north on Sixth was what they wanted. That implies they were happy to head up toward the George Washington Bridge, or the Henry Hudson and the Saw Mill, or the Triboro and the Major Deegan. Eventually they hit the Thruway, probably. They could be in the Catskills or anywhere. A farm, probably. Certainly somewhere with a big garage block or a barn.”

“Why?”

“They just inherited your Mercedes Benz. Right after hijacking whatever Taylor drove to Bloomingdale’s yesterday. They need a place to hide them.”

“Taylor was driving a Jaguar.”

“There you go. Their place must look like a luxury car lot by now.”

“Why are you so sure they’re going to call back?”

“Because of human nature. Right now they’re mad as hell. They’re kicking themselves. They know you, but maybe not all that well. They took a chance and asked for a million dollars in cash, and you bagged it up without a moment’s hesitation. You shouldn’t have done that. You should have gambled and stalled. Because now they’re saying, damn it, we should have asked for more. They’re saying, we should have tested the limits. So they’re going to get back on the phone and hit you up for another chunk. They’re going to feel out exactly how much cash you’ve got lying around. They’re going to bleed you dry.”

“Why wait so long?”

“Because it’s a significant change in strategy,” Reacher said. “Therefore they’re arguing about it. They’ve been arguing about it all day. That’s human nature, too. Three guys always argue, pro and con, stick to the plan or improvise, play it safe or take the risk.”

Nobody spoke.

“How much *have* you got in cash?” Reacher asked.

“I’m not going to tell you,” Lane said.

“Five million,” Reacher said. “That’s what they’ll ask for next. The phone is going to ring and they’re going to ask for another five million dollars.”

Seven pairs of eyes turned toward the phone. It didn’t ring.

“In another car,” Reacher said. “They must have a big barn.”

“Is Kate safe?” Lane asked.

“Right now, she’s as safe as houses,” Reacher said. “She’s their meal ticket. And you did the right thing, asking to hear her voice the first time. That set up a good pattern. They’ll have to repeat it. The problem will come after they’ve had the last payment. That’s the toughest part of any kidnap. Giving the money away is easy. Getting the person back is hard.”

The phone stayed silent.

“So should I stall?” Lane asked.

“I would,” Reacher said. “Parcel it out. Keep it going. Buy some time.”

The phone didn’t ring. No sound in the room except the hiss of cooled air and men breathing low. Reacher glanced around. Everyone was waiting patiently. Special Forces soldiers were good at waiting. For all the occasional spectacular action they saw, they spent a lot more time waiting, standing by, passing the time in readiness. And then nine times out of ten they were stood down, action canceled.

The phone didn’t ring.

“Good conclusions,” Lane said, to nobody in particular, through the silence. “Three guys, far away. Upstate. On a farm.”

But Reacher was completely wrong. Just four miles away through the electric city darkness, right there on the island of Manhattan, a lone man pushed open a door to a small, hot room. Then he stepped back. Kate Lane and her daughter Jade passed in front of him without meeting his eyes. They stepped inside the room and saw two beds. The beds looked hard and narrow. The room felt damp and unused. The window was draped with black cloth. The cloth was duct-taped to the walls, across the top, across the bottom, down both sides.

The lone man closed the door and walked away.

CHAPTER **5**

THE PHONE RANG at exactly one o'clock in the morning. Lane snatched it out of the cradle and said, "Yes?" Reacher heard a faint voice from the earpiece, distorted twice, first by a machine and then again by a bad connection. Lane said, "What?" and there was a reply. Lane said, "Put Kate on the phone. You've got to do that first." Then there was a pause, and then there was a different voice. A woman's voice, distorted, panicked, breathy. It said just one word, possibly Lane's name, and then it exploded in a scream. The scream died into silence and Lane screwed his eyes shut and the electronic robot voice came back and barked six short syllables. Lane said, "OK, OK, OK," and Reacher heard the line go dead.

Lane sat in silence, his eyes clamped shut, his breathing fast and ragged. Then his eyes opened and moved from face to face and stopped on Reacher's.

"Five million dollars," he said. "You were right. How did you know?"

"It was the obvious next step," Reacher said. "One, five, ten, twenty. That's how people think."

"You've got a crystal ball. You can see the future. I'm putting you on the payroll. Twenty-five grand a month, like all these guys."

"This isn't going to last a month," Reacher said. "It can't. It's going to be all over in a couple of days."

"I agreed to the money," Lane said. "I couldn't stall. They were hurting her."

Reacher nodded. Said nothing.

Gregory asked, "Instructions later?"

"In an hour," Lane said.

The room went quiet again. More waiting. All around the room men checked their watches and settled back imperceptibly. Lane put the silent handset back in the cradle and stared off into space. But Reacher leaned forward and tapped him

on the knee.

“We need to talk,” he said, quietly.

“About what?”

“Background. We should try to figure out who these guys are.”

“OK,” Lane said, vaguely. “We’ll go to the office.”

He stood up slowly and led Reacher out of the living room and through a kitchen to a maid’s room in back. It was small and plain and square and had been fixed up as an office. Desk, computer, fax machine, phones, file cabinets, shelves.

“Tell me about Operational Security Consultants,” Reacher said.

Lane sat down in the desk chair and turned it to face the room.

“Not much to tell,” he said. “We’re just a bunch of ex-military trying to keep busy.”

“Doing what?”

“Whatever people need. Bodyguarding, mostly. Corporate security. Like that.”

There were two framed photographs on the desk. One was a smaller reprint of Kate’s stunning picture from the living room. A seven-by-five instead of a fourteen-by-eleven, in a similar expensive gold frame. The other was of another woman, about the same age, blonde where Kate was dark, blue eyes instead of green. But just as beautiful, and photographed just as masterfully.

“Bodyguarding?” Reacher said.

“Mostly.”

“You’re not convincing me, Mr. Lane. Bodyguards don’t make twenty-five grand a month. Bodyguards are big dumb lumps lucky to make a tenth of that. And if you had guys trained for close personal protection you’d have sent one of them out with Kate and Jade yesterday morning. Taylor driving, maybe Gregory riding shotgun. But you didn’t, which suggests that bodyguarding isn’t exactly the business vou’re in.”

“My business is confidential,” Lane said.

“Not anymore. Not if you want your wife and daughter back.”

No reply.

“A Jaguar, a Mercedes, and a BMW,” Reacher said. “Plus more where they came from, I’m sure. Plus a co-op in the Dakota. Plus lots of cash lying around. Plus half a dozen guys on twenty-five grand a month. Altogether big bucks.”

“All legal.”

“Except you don’t want the cops involved.”

Involuntarily Lane glanced at the photograph of the blonde woman.

“No connection,” he said. “That’s not the reason.”

Reacher followed Lane’s gaze.

“Who is she?” he asked.

“Was,” Lane said.

“Was what?”

“Anne,” Lane said. “She was my first wife.”

“And?”

Silence for a long moment.

“You see, I’ve been through this before,” Lane said. “Five years ago. Anne was taken from me. In just the same way. But back then I followed procedure. I called the cops, even though the men on the phone had been very clear that I shouldn’t. The cops called the FBI.”

“And what happened?”

“The FBI screwed up somehow,” Lane said. “They must have been spotted at

the ransom drop. Anne died. They found her body a month later in New Jersey."

Reacher said nothing.

"That's why there's no cops this time," Lane said.

CHAPTER **6**

REACHER AND LANE sat in silence for a long time. Then Reacher said, “Fifty-five minutes. You should be ready for the next call.”

“You’re not wearing a watch,” Lane said.

“I always know what time it is.”

Reacher followed him back to the living room. Lane stood by the table again, with his fingers spread on the surface. Reacher guessed he wanted to take the call with his men all around him. Maybe he needed the comfort. Or the support.

The phone rang right on time, at two o’clock in the morning exactly. Lane picked it up and listened. Reacher heard faint robot squawks from the earpiece. Lane said, “Put Kate on,” but his request must have been refused, because then he said, “Please don’t hurt her.” He listened for another minute and said, “OK.” Then he hung up.

“Five hours from now,” he said. “Seven o’clock in the morning. Same place, same routine. The blue BMW. One person only.”

“I’ll do it,” Gregory said.

The other men in the room stirred with frustration. “We should all be there,” one of them said. He was a small dark American who looked like an accountant, except for his eyes, which were as flat and dead as a hammerhead shark’s. “Ten minutes later we would know where she is. I can promise you that.”

“One man,” Lane said. “That was the instruction.”

“This is New York City,” the guy with the shark’s eyes said. “There are always people around. They can’t be expecting deserted streets.”

“Apparently they know us,” Lane said. “They would recognize you.”

“I could go,” Reacher said. “They wouldn’t recognize me.”

“You came in with Gregory. They might be watching the building.”

“Conceivable,” Reacher said. “But unlikely.”

Lane said nothing.

“Your call,” Reacher said.

“I’ll think about it,” Lane said.

“Think fast. Better if I leave here well in advance.”

“Decision in one hour,” Lane said. He moved away from the phone and headed back toward the office. *Gone to count out the money,* Reacher thought. He wondered briefly what five million dollars looked like. *The same as one million,* he guessed. *But with hundreds instead of twenties.*

“How much money has he got?” Reacher asked.

“A lot,” Gregory said.

“He’s down six million in two days.”

The guy with the shark’s eyes smiled.

“We’ll get it back,” he said. “You can count on that. As soon as Kate’s home safe we’ll make our move. Then we’ll see who’s down and who’s up. Someone poked a stick in the wrong hornets’ nest this time, that’s for damn sure. And they wasted Taylor. He was one of us. They’ll be sorry they were ever born.”

Reacher glanced into the guy’s empty eyes and believed every word he said. Then the guy stuck out his hand, abruptly. And a little warily. “I’m Carter Groom,” he said. “I’m pleased to meet you. I think. I mean, as much as I can be, given the circumstances.”

The four other men introduced themselves with a quiet cascade of names and handshakes. Each man was polite, nothing more. Each was full of reserve in front of a stranger. Reacher tried to tie the names to faces. Gregory he already knew. A guy with a big scar over his eye was called Addison. The shortest guy among them was a Latino called Perez. The tallest was called Kowalski. There was a black guy called Burke.

“Lane told me you do bodyguarding and corporate security,” Reacher said.

Sudden silence. No reply.

“Don’t worry,” Reacher said. “I wasn’t convinced anyway. My guess is you guys were all operational noncoms. Fighting men. So I think your Mr. Lane is into something else entirely.”

“Like what?” Gregory asked.

“I think he’s pimping mercenaries,” Reacher said.

The guy called Groom shook his head. “Wrong choice of words, pal.”

“What would be the right choice?”

“We’re a private military corporation,” Groom said. “You got a problem with that?”

“I don’t really have an opinion.”

“Well, you better get one, and it better be a good one. We’re legal. We work for the Pentagon, just like we always did, and just like you did, back in the day.”

“Privatization,” Burke said. “The Pentagon loves it. It’s more efficient. The era of big government is over.”

“How many guys have you got?” Reacher asked. “Just what’s here?”

Groom shook his head again. “We’re the A-team. Like senior NCOs. Then there’s a Rolodex full of B-team squad members. We took a hundred guys to Iraq.”

“Is that where you’ve been? Iraq?”

“And Colombia and Panama and Afghanistan. We go anywhere Uncle Sam needs us.”

“What about where Uncle Sam doesn’t need you?”

Nobody spoke.

“My guess is the Pentagon pays by check,” Reacher said. “But there seems to be an awful lot of cash around here, too.”

No response.

“Africa?” Reacher said.

No response.

“Whatever,” Reacher said. “Not my business where you’ve been. All I need to know is where Mrs. Lane has been. For the last couple of weeks.”

“What difference does that make?” Kowalski asked.

“There was some surveillance,” Reacher said. “Don’t you think? I don’t suppose the bad guys were just hanging out at Bloomingdale’s every day on the off chance.”

“Mrs. Lane was in the Hamptons,” Gregory said. “With Jade, most of the summer. They only came back three days ago.”

“Who drove them back?”

“Taylor.”

“And then they were based here?”

“Correct.”

“Anything happen out in the Hamptons?”

“Like what?” Groom asked.

“Like anything unusual,” Reacher said. “Anything out of the ordinary.”

“Not really,” Groom said.

“A woman showed up at the door one day,” Gregory said.

“What kind of a woman?”

“What kind of a woman?”

“Just a woman. She was fat.”

“Fat?”

“Kind of heavyset. About forty. Long hair, center part. Mrs. Lane took her walking on the beach. Then the woman left. I figured it was a friend on a visit.”

“Ever saw her before?”

Gregory shook his head. “Maybe an old friend. From the past.”

“What did Mrs. Lane and Jade do after they got back here to the city?”

“I don’t think they did anything yet.”

“No, she went out once,” Groom said. “Mrs. Lane, I mean. Not Jade. On her own, shopping. I drove her.”

“Where?” Reacher asked.

“Staples.”

“The office supply store?” Reacher had seen them all over. A big chain, red and white décor, huge places full of stuff he had no need of. “What did she buy?”

“Nothing,” Groom said. “I waited twenty minutes on the curb, and she didn’t bring anything out.”

“Maybe she arranged a delivery,” Gregory said.

“She could have done that on-line. No need to drag me out in the car.”

“So maybe she was just browsing,” Gregory said.

“Weird place to browse,” Reacher said. “Who does that?”

“School is back soon,” Groom said. “Maybe Jade needed stuff.”

“In which case she’d have gone along,” Reacher said. “Don’t you think? And she’d have bought something.”

“Did she take something in?” Gregory asked. “Maybe she was returning something.”

“She had her tote,” Groom said. “It’s possible.” Then he looked up, beyond Reacher’s shoulder. Edward Lane was back in the room. He was carrying a large leather duffel, and struggling with its bulk. *Five million dollars,* Reacher thought. *So that’s what it looks like.* Lane dropped the bag on the floor at the entrance to the foyer. It thumped down on the hardwood and settled like the carcass of a small fat animal.

“I need to see a picture of Jade,” Reacher said.

“Why?” Lane asked.

“Because you want me to pretend I’m a cop. And pictures are the first things cops want to see.”

“Bedroom,” Lane said.

So Reacher fell in behind him and followed him to a bedroom. It was another tall square space, painted a chalky off-white, as serene as a monastery and as quiet as a tomb. There was a cherrywood king-sized bed with pencil posts at the corners. Matching tables at each side. A matching armoire that might have held a television set. A matching desk, with a chair standing in front of it and a framed photograph sitting on it. The photograph was a ten-by-eight, rectangular, set horizontal, not vertical, on the axis that photographers call landscape, not portrait. But it was a portrait. That was for sure. It was a portrait of two people. On the right was Kate Lane. It was the same shot as in the living room print. The same pose, the same eyes, the same developing smile. But the living room print had been cropped to exclude the object of her affection, which was her daughter Jade. Jade was on the left of the bedroom picture. Her pose was a mirror-image of her mother’s. They were about to look at each other, love in their eyes, smiles about to break out on their faces like they were sharing a private joke. In the picture Jade was maybe seven years old. She had long dark hair, slightly wavy, as fine as silk. She had green eyes and porcelain skin. She was a beautiful kid. It was a beautiful photograph.

“May I?” Reacher asked.

Lane nodded. Said nothing. Reacher picked the picture up and looked closer.

The photographer had caught the bond between mother and child perfectly and completely. Quite apart from the similarity in appearance there was no doubt about their relationship. No doubt at all. They were mother and daughter. But they were also friends. They looked like they shared a lot. It was a great picture.

“Who took this?” Reacher asked.

“I found a guy downtown,” Lane said. “Quite famous. Very expensive.”

Reacher nodded. Whoever the guy was, he was worth his fee. Although the print quality wasn’t quite as good as the living room copy. The colors were a little less subtle and the contours of the faces were a little plastic. Maybe it was a machine print. Maybe Lane’s budget hadn’t run to a custom hand-print where his stepdaughter was concerned.

“Very nice,” Reacher said. He put the photograph back on the desk, quietly. The room was totally silent. Reacher had once read that the Dakota was the most soundproof building in New York City. It had been built at the same time that Central Park was landscaped. The builder had packed three feet of excavated Central Park clay and mud between the floors and the ceilings. The walls were thick, too. All that mass made the building feel like it was carved from solid rock. *Which must have been a good thing*, Reacher figured, *back when John Lennon lived here.*

“OK?” Lane said. “Seen enough?”

“You mind if I check the desk?”

“Why?”

“It’s Kate’s, right?”

“Yes, it is.”

“So it’s what the cops would do.”

Lane shrugged and Reacher started with the bottom drawers. The left-hand drawer held boxes of stationery and notepaper and cards engraved simply with the name *Kate Lane.* The right-hand drawer was fitted with file hangers and the contents related exclusively to Jade’s education. She was enrolled at a private

school nine blocks north of the apartment. It was an expensive school, judging by the bills and the canceled checks. The checks were all drawn on Kate Lane's personal account. The upper drawers held pens and pencils, envelopes, stamps, self-stick return address labels, a checkbook. And credit card receipts. But nothing very significant. Nothing recent. Nothing from Staples, for instance.

The center drawer at the top held nothing but two American passports, one for Kate and one for Jade.

"Who is Jade's father?" Reacher asked.

"Does it matter?"

"It might. If this was a straightforward abduction, we'd definitely have to look at him. Estranged parents are who usually snatch kids."

"But this is a kidnap for ransom. And it's Kate they're talking about. Jade was just there by chance."

"Abductions can be disguised. And her father would need to clothe and feed her. And send her to school. He might want money."

"He's dead," Lane said. "He died of stomach cancer when Jade was three."

"Who was he?"

"He owned a jewelry store. Kate ran it for a year, afterward. Not very well. She had been a model. But that's where I met her. In the store. I was buying a watch."

"Any other relatives? Possessive grandparents, aunts, uncles?"

"Nobody that I ever met. Therefore nobody that saw Jade in the last several years. Therefore nobody you could really describe as possessive."

Reacher closed the center drawer. Straightened the photograph and turned around.

"Closet?" he said.

Lane pointed at one of a pair of narrow white doors. Behind it was a closet, large

for a New York City apartment, small for anyplace else. It had a pull chain for a light. Inside were racks of women's clothes and shoes. Fragrance in the air. There was a jacket neatly folded on the floor. Ready for the dry cleaner, Reacher thought. He picked it up. There was a Bloomingdale's label in it. He checked the pockets. Nothing in them.

"What was she wearing when she went out?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," Lane said.

"Who would know?"

"We all left before her," Lane said. "I don't think anyone was still here. Except Taylor."

Reacher closed the closet door and stepped away to the armoire. It had double doors at the top and drawers below. One of the drawers held jewelry. One was full of miscellaneous junk like paper packets of spare buttons from new garments and discarded pocket change. One was full of lacy underwear. Bras, panties, all of them either white or black.

"May I see Jade's room?" Reacher asked.

Lane led him through a short interior hallway. Jade's room was all pale pastels and kid stuff. Furry bears, china dolls, toys, games. A low bed. Pajamas folded on the pillow. A nightlight still burning. A low desk covered in drawings done with wax crayons on butcher paper. A small chair, neatly tucked in.

Nothing that meant anything to a military cop.

"I'm done," Reacher said. "I'm very sorry to intrude."

He followed Lane back to the living room. The leather bag was still there on the floor, near the foyer. Gregory and the five other soldiers were still in their places, still quiet and pensive.

"Decision time," Lane said. "Do we assume Reacher was observed entering the building tonight? Or not?"

"I didn't see anyone," Gregory said. "And I think it's very unlikely. Round-the-clock surveillance would eat manpower. So I would say not."

clock surveillance would eat manpower. So I would say not.

“I agree,” Lane said. “I think Reacher is still Joe Public to them. So he should be on the street at seven o’clock. We should try a little surveillance of our own.”

There was no objection. Reacher nodded.

“I’ll watch the front of the Spring Street building,” he said. “That way I’ll see one of them at least. Maybe two of them.”

“Don’t show yourself,” Lane said. “You understand my concern, right?”

“Completely,” Reacher said. “They won’t make me.”

“Surveillance only. Absolutely no intervention.”

“Don’t worry.”

“They’ll be there early,” Lane said. “So you be in position earlier.”

“Don’t worry,” Reacher said again. “I’ll leave right now.”

“Don’t you want to know which building you’re supposed to be watching?”

“I don’t need to know,” Reacher said. “I’ll see Gregory leave the keys.”

Then he let himself out of the apartment and rode down in the elevator. Nodded to the doorman and walked out to the street. Headed for the subway at 72nd and Broadway.

The woman who was watching the building saw him go. She had seen him arrive with Gregory, and now he was leaving alone. She checked her watch and made a note of the time. She craned her neck and tracked his progress west. Then she lost sight of him and moved back deep in the shadows.

CHAPTER **7**

FIRST IN WAS a 9 train. Reacher used the Metrocard he had bought the day before and rode eleven stops south to Houston Street. Then he came up from under the ground and walked south on Varick. It was past three o'clock in the morning, and very quiet. In Reacher's experience the city that doesn't sleep sometimes did, at least for an hour or two, on some nights of the week. There was sometimes a short intermission after the late folk had rolled home and before the early people had gotten up. Then the city went silent and took a breath and shiny darkness owned the streets. That was Reacher's time. He liked to picture the sleeping people stacked twelve, thirty, fifty stories high, often head to head with perfect strangers on opposite sides of thin apartment walls, deep in slumber, unaware of the tall quiet man striding beneath them in the shadows.

He made a left on Charlton Street, and crossed Sixth Avenue, and Charlton became Prince. Three blocks later he was on West Broadway, in the heart of SoHo, a block north of Spring Street, three hours and forty minutes ahead of schedule. He walked south, with the leisurely gait of a man with a place to go but in no hurry to get there. West Broadway was wider than the cross streets, so as he ambled past Spring he had a good view of the southwest corner. There was a narrow iron-fronted building with a dull red door set high. Three steps up to it. The building's façade was covered with graffiti low down and laced with a complex fire escape high up. The upper-story windows were filthy and backed with some kind of a dark fabric. On the ground floor there was a single window, pasted over with faded building permits. There was a mail slot in the door, a narrow rectangle with a flap. Maybe once it had been shiny brass, but now it was dull with tarnish and pitted by corrosion.

That's the one, Reacher thought. *Got to be.*

He turned east a block later on Broome and then backtracked north on Greene Street, past shuttered boutiques that sold sweaters that cost more than first-class airplane tickets and household furniture that cost more than domestic automobiles. He turned west on Prince and completed his circuit around the block. Walked south on West Broadway again and found a doorway on the east sidewalk. It had a stoop a foot and a half high. He kicked garbage out of his way and lay down on his back, his head cradled on his folded arms, his head canted

sideways like a somnolent drunk, but with his eyes half-open and focused on the dull red door seventy feet away.

Kate Lane had been told not to move and to make absolutely no noise at all, but she decided to take a risk. She couldn't sleep, obviously. Neither could Jade. How could anyone sleep, under circumstances like theirs? So Kate crept out of her bed and grasped the rail at the end and inched the whole bed sideways.

"Mom, don't," Jade whispered. "You're making a noise."

Kate didn't answer. Just crept to the head of the bed and inched it sideways. After three more cautious back-and-forth movements she had her mattress butted up hard against Jade's. Then she got back under the sheet and took her daughter in her arms. Held her tight. If they had to be awake, at least they could be awake together.

The clock in Reacher's head crept around to six in the morning. Down in the brick and iron canyons of SoHo it was still dark, but the sky above was already brightening. The night had been warm. Reacher hadn't been uncomfortable. He had been in worse spots. Many times. Often for much longer. So far he had seen no activity at the dull red door. But the early people were already out and about all around him. Cars and trucks were moving on the streets. People were passing by on both sidewalks. But nobody was looking at him. He was just a guy in a doorway.

He rolled onto his back and looked around. The door he was blocking was a plain gray metal thing. No exterior handle. Maybe a fire exit, maybe a loading dock. With a little luck he wouldn't be disturbed before seven. He rolled on his side and gazed south and west again. Arched his back like he was relieving a cramp, then glanced north. He figured whoever was coming would be in position soon. They clearly weren't fools. They would aim for a careful stakeout. They would check rooftops and windows and parked cars for watching cops. Maybe they would check doorways, too. But Reacher had never been mistaken for a

they would check doorways, too. But Reacher had never been mistaken for a cop. There was always something phony about a cop who dresses down. Reacher was the real thing.

Cops, he thought.

The word snagged in his mind the way a twig on a current catches on a riverbank. It hung up just briefly before spinning clear and floating away. Then he saw a real-life cop, in a car, coming north, going slow. Reacher squirmed upright and propped his back against the gray door. Rested his head against the cold hard metal. Sleeping horizontally in public seemed to be against the city's vagrancy laws. But there seemed to be some kind of a constitutional right to sit down. New York cops see a guy lying down in a doorway or on a bench, they blip their siren and yell through their loudhailer. They see a guy sleeping upright, they give him a hard stare and move on.

The prowl car moved on.

Reacher laid down again. Folded his arms behind his head and kept his eyes half-open.

Four miles north, Edward Lane and John Gregory rode down in the Dakota's elevator. Lane was carrying the bulging leather duffel. Outside in the gray dawn light the blue BMW waited at the curb. The man who had ferried it back from the garage got out and handed the keys to Gregory. Gregory used the remote to open the trunk and Lane dumped the bag inside. He looked at it for a second and then he slammed the lid on it.

"No heroics," he said. "Just leave the car, leave the keys, and walk away."

"Understood," Gregory said. He walked around the hood and slid into the driver's seat. Started the motor and took off west. Then he turned south on Ninth Avenue. This early in the morning, he figured the traffic would be OK.

At that same moment four miles south a man turned off Houston Street and started down West Broadway. He was on foot. He was forty-two years old, white, five feet eleven inches tall, one hundred and ninety pounds. He was wearing a jeans jacket over a hooded sweatshirt. He crossed to the west sidewalk and headed for Prince. He kept his eyes moving. Left, right, near, far. *Reconnaissance.* He was justifiably proud of his technique. He didn't miss much. He never had missed much. He imagined his gaze to be twin moving searchlights, penetrating the gloom, revealing everything.

Revealing: Forty-five degrees ahead and to the left, a man sprawled in a doorway. A big man, but inert. His limbs were relaxed in sleep. His head was cradled on his arms and canted sideways at a characteristic angle.

Drunk? Passed out?

Who was he?

The man in the hooded sweatshirt paused at the Prince Street crosswalk. Waited for the light, even though there was no traffic. Used the time to complete his inspection. The big guy's clothes were garbage, but his shoes were good. Leather, heavy, solid, proper stitched welts. Probably English. Probably three hundred dollars a pair. Maybe three-fifty. Each shoe on its own was worth twice the price of everything else the guy was wearing.

So who was he?

A bum who had stolen a pair of fancy shoes? Or not?

Not, thought the man in the hooded sweatshirt.

He turned ninety degrees and crossed West Broadway against the light. Headed straight for the doorway.

Gregory blew past a small traffic snarl at 42nd Street and caught green lights all the way to the back of the Post Office at 31st. Then the lights and his luck changed. He had to stop the BMW behind a garbage truck. He waited. Checked his watch. He had plenty of time.

his watch. He had plenty of time.

The man in the hooded sweatshirt stopped one quiet pace north of the doorway. Held his breath. The guy at his feet slept on. He didn't smell. His skin was good. His hair was clean. He wasn't malnourished.

Not a bum with a pair of stolen shoes.

The man in the hooded sweatshirt smiled to himself. This was some asshole from some million-dollar SoHo loft, been out for some fun, had a little too much, couldn't make it home.

A prime target.

He shuffled half a pace forward. Breathed out, breathed in. Leveled the twin searchlights on the chino pockets. Scoped them out.

There it was.

The left-hand front pocket. The familiar delicious bulge. Exactly two and five-eighths inches wide, half an inch thick, three and a quarter inches long.

Folding money.

The man in the hooded sweatshirt had plenty of experience. He could call it sight unseen. There would be a bunch of crisp new twenties from an ATM, a couple of leathery old fives and tens from taxi change, a wrapping of crumpled ones. Total: *a hundred and seventy-three dollars.* That was his prediction. And his predictions were usually pretty good. He doubted that he would be disappointed. But he was prepared to be pleasantly surprised.

He bent at the waist and extended his arm.

He used his fingertips to lift the top seam of the pocket. To make a little tunnel. Then he flattened his hand, palm down, and slid his index and middle fingers inside, light, like feathers. He crossed them, like scissors, or a promise. His index finger went under the cash, all the way to the first knuckle. His middle finger went over the cash. Over the fold. Like a pincer. He used light pressure. Used the pad of his middle finger to press down through the wad to the nail of his index finger. Used a brief subtle tug to break the fiber-on-fiber bond between money and pocket. Started the slow, smooth extraction.

Then his wrist broke.

Two giant hands seized it and snapped it like a rotten twig. One shattering sudden explosion of motion. A blur. At first there was no pain. Then it kicked in like a tidal wave. But by then it was too late to scream. One of the giant hands was clamped over his mouth. It was like being hit hard in the face with a first baseman's mitt.

"I've got three questions," the big guy said, quietly. "Tell me the truth and I'll let you go. Tell me a lie and I'll break your other wrist. We clear on that?"

The big guy had hardly moved. Just his hands, once, twice, three times, fast, efficient, and lethal. He wasn't even breathing hard. The man in the hooded sweatshirt couldn't breathe at all. He nodded desperately.

"OK, first question: What exactly are you doing?" The big guy took his hand away, to enable the answer.

"Your money," the man in the hooded sweatshirt said. His voice wouldn't work properly. It was all strangled up with pain and panic.

"Not your first time," the big guy said. His eyes were half-open, clear blue, expressionless. Hypnotic. The man in the sweatshirt couldn't lie.

"I call it the dawn patrol," he said. "There's sometimes two or three guys like you."

"Not exactly like me," the big guy said.

"No."

"Bad choice."

"I'm sorry."

"Second question: Are you alone?"

"Yes, I am."

"Third question: Do you want to walk away now?"

“Yes, I do.”

“So do it. Slow and natural. Go north. Turn right on Prince. Don’t run. Don’t look back. Just disappear. Right now.”

Gregory turned left off Hudson Street onto Houston and waited at the light at the bottom of Seventh Avenue. He was a block and a half from the fireplug and about eight minutes early. He figured he would pull in at the curb before he got to Sixth. He figured he should try to time it exactly.

Reacher’s heart rate was back to normal within about fifteen seconds. He jammed his cash deeper in his pocket and put his arms back behind his head. Let his head fall sideways and let his eyes half-close. He saw nobody near the red door. Saw nobody even glance at it.

The man in the hooded sweatshirt cradled his broken wrist and made it as far as Prince. Then he abandoned the slow and natural walk and just ran east as fast as he could. Stopped two blocks away and threw up in the gutter. Stayed there for a spell, bent at the waist, panting, his good hand on his knee, his bad hand tucked in the sweatshirt pocket like a sling.

Reacher had no watch but he figured when he saw Gregory it must have been between eight and nine minutes after seven o’clock. Below Houston the north-south blocks are long. Eight or nine minutes was about right for the walk down from the fireplug on Sixth. So Gregory was right on time. He came in on Spring

from the west. He was walking briskly. His hand was in the pocket of his suit coat. He stopped on the sidewalk outside the dull red door and turned with military precision and walked up the three short steps, light and easy, balanced on the balls of his feet. Then his hand came out of his pocket and Reacher saw the flash of metal and black plastic. Saw Gregory lift the mail slot's flap with his left hand and shovel the keys through with his right. Saw him drop the flap back into place and turn and walk away. Saw him make the left onto West Broadway. He didn't look back. He just kept on walking, playing his part, trying to keep Kate Lane alive.

Reacher kept his eyes on the red door. Waited. Three minutes, he figured. Five million bucks was a lot of money. There would be a certain degree of impatience. As soon as the one guy confirmed that Gregory was safely distant, the other guy would be in through the door. And they would figure one long block plus a crosswalk was safely distant. So as soon as Gregory was south of Broome, the call would come.

One minute.

Two minutes.

Three minutes.

Nothing happened.

Reacher laid back, stayed relaxed, stayed casual. No outward sign of his interest. Or his concern.

Four minutes. Nothing happened.

Reacher kept his eyes half-closed but stared at the door so hard that its details etched themselves in his mind. Scars, nicks, streaks of dirt and rust, graffiti overspray. He felt that fifty years in the future he would be able to draw a picture as accurate as a Polaroid.

Six minutes. Eight. Nine.

Nothing happened.

There were all kinds of people on the sidewalks now but none of them went anywhere near the red door. There was traffic and there were trucks unloading

and there were bodegas and bakeries open for business. There were people with newspapers and closed cups of coffee heading for the subway.

Nobody stepped up to the red door.

Twelve minutes. Fifteen.

Reacher asked himself: *Did they see me?* He answered himself: *Of course they did. Close to a certainty. The mugger saw me. That was for damn sure. And these other guys are smarter than any mugger. They're the type who see everything.* Guys good enough to take down an SAS veteran outside a department store were going to check the street pretty carefully. Then he asked himself: *But were they worried?* Answered himself: *No, they weren't.* The mugger saw a professional opportunity. That was all. To these other guys, people in doorways were like trash cans or mail boxes or fire hydrants or cruising taxis. Street furniture. You see them, you see the city. And he was alone. Cops or FBI would have come in a group. Mob-handed. There would have been a whole bunch of unexplained people hanging around looking shifty and awkward with walkie-talkies in brown paper bags made up to look like pints of liquor.

So they saw me, but they didn't scare.

So what the hell was happening?

Eighteen minutes.

Fire hydrants, Reacher thought.

The BMW was parked on a fire hydrant. Rush hour was building. NYPD tow trucks were firing up and leaving their garages and starting their day. They all had quotas to make. How long could a sane person leave five million bucks inside an illegally parked car in New York City?

Nineteen minutes.

Reacher gave it up after twenty. Just rolled out of the doorway and stood up. Stretched once and hustled north, and then west on Prince all the way to Sixth Avenue, and then north again across Houston to the curb with the fireplug.

It was empty. No BMW.

It was empty. No BMW.

CHAPTER **8**

REACHER HEADED SOUTH again, all the way back to Spring Street. Six blocks, moving fast, seven minutes. He found Gregory on the sidewalk outside the dull red door.

“Well?” Gregory said.

Reacher shook his head.

“Nothing,” he said. “Not a damn thing. Nobody showed up. It all turned to rat shit. Isn’t that what you SAS guys call it?”

“When we’re feeling polite,” Gregory said.

“The car is gone.”

“How is that possible?”

“There’s a back door,” Reacher said. “That’s my best guess right now.”

“Shit.”

Reacher nodded. “Like I said, rat shit.”

“We should check it out. Mr. Lane is going to want the whole story.”

They found an alley entrance two buildings west. It was gated and the gates were chained. The chains were secured with a padlock the size of a frying pan. Unbreakable. But reasonably new. Oiled, and frequently used. Above the gates was a single iron screen covering the whole width of the alley and extending twenty feet in the air.

No way in.

Reacher stepped back and looked left and right. The target building’s right-hand neighbor was a chocolate shop. A security screen was down over the window but Reacher could see confections the size of babies’ fists displayed behind it.

Fakes, he guessed. Otherwise they would melt or go white. There was a light on in back of the store. He cupped his hands against the glass and peered inside. Saw a small shadowy figure moving about. He banged on the door, loud, with the flat of his hand. The small figure stopped moving and turned around. Pointed at something waist-high to Reacher's right. There was a neatly engraved card taped to the door glass: *Opening hours, 10 am–10 pm.* Reacher shook his head and beckoned the small figure closer. It gave a little universal shrug of exasperation and headed his way. It was a woman. Short, dark, young, tired. She turned numerous complicated locks and opened the door against a thick steel chain.

"We're closed," she said, through the narrow gap.

"Department of Health," Reacher said.

"You don't look like it," the woman said. And she was right. Reacher had looked convincing as a bum in a doorway. He didn't look convincing as a city bureaucrat. So he nodded at Gregory, in his neat gray suit.

"He's with the city," he said. "I'm with him."

"I was just inspected," the woman said.

"This is about the building next door," Reacher said.

"What about it?"

Reacher glanced behind her. *A confectionery store full of luxury items that nobody really needs. Therefore, a fragile client base. Therefore, an insecure proprietor.*

"Rats," he said. "I'm the exterminator. We've had reports."

The woman went quiet.

"You got a key for the alley gate?" Gregory asked her.

The woman nodded. "But you can use my back door if you want. That would be quicker."

She took the door off the chain. Led them inside through air intense with the

smell of cocoa. The front of the store was dressed up for retail, and there was a working kitchen in back. Ovens, just now warming up. Dozens of shiny trays. Milk, butter, sugar. Vats of melting chocolate. Steel work-surfaces. A rear door, at the end of a short tiled hallway. The woman let them out through it and Reacher and Gregory found themselves in a brick alley about wide enough for the kind of carts and trucks they had in 1900. The alley ran east to west across the block with a single gated exit on Thompson Street at one end and a right-angle dogleg to the gate they had already seen on Spring at the other. The target building looked just as bad from the back as it had from the front. Or maybe even worse. Less graffiti, more decay. Ice damage on the brickwork, moss from spilling gutters.

One ground floor window. And a back door.

It was the same dull red color as the front door, but it looked even more decrepit. It looked like a wooden core sheeted over with steel and last painted by some GI looking for work after Korea. Or after World War Two. Or World War One. But it had a modern lock, just one, a good solid deadbolt. The handle was an old-fashioned brass ball, black and pitted with age. Impossible to tell whether it had been touched within the last hour. Reacher grabbed it and pushed. The door gave an eighth-inch and then stopped dead against the lock's steel tongue.

No way in.

Reacher turned back and headed for the chocolatier's kitchen. She was squeezing molten chocolate out of a heavy linen bag through a silver nozzle, dotting a baking sheet with one squeeze every two inches.

"Want to lick the spoon?" she asked, watching him watching her.

"You ever seen anyone next door?" he asked back.

"Nobody," she said.

"Not even coming and going?"

"Never," she said. "It's a vacant building."

"Are you here every day?"

"Every seven thirty in the morning. I fire up the ovens first thing, and I turn them

"From seven-thirty in the morning. I fire up the ovens first thing, and I turn them off at ten in the evening. Then I clean up and I'm out of here by eleven-thirty. Sixteen-hour days. I'm regular as clockwork."

"Seven days a week?"

"Small business. We never rest."

"Hard life."

"For you, too."

"Me?"

"With the rats in this town."

Reacher nodded. "Who's the owner next door?"

"Don't you know?" the woman asked. "You're with the city."

"You could save me some time," Reacher said. "The records are a mess."

"I've got no idea," the woman said.

"OK," Reacher said. "Have a great day."

"Check the building permits on the front window. They have a bunch of phone numbers on them. The owner's probably listed. You should have seen the shit I had to list to get this place done."

"Thanks," Reacher said.

"Want a chocolate?"

"Not on duty," he said.

He followed Gregory out of the front of the store and they turned right and checked the target building's front window. It was backed with dark curtains. There were a dozen permits pasted to the glass. The glass was filthy with soot and the permits were dry and curled. All of them were long expired. But they still had phone numbers handwritten with a black marker pen, one number for each of the participants in the abandoned project. Architect, contractor, owner

each of the participants in the abandoned project. Architect, contractor, owner. Gregory didn't write them down. Just took out his small silver cell phone and took a picture with it. Then he used it again, this time to make a call to the Dakota.

"Incoming," he said.

He and Reacher walked west to Sixth Avenue and rode the C train eight stops north to 72nd Street. They came up into the daylight right next to Strawberry Fields. Walked into the Dakota's lobby at eight-thirty exactly.

The woman who was watching the building saw them enter and made a note of the time.

CHAPTER **9**

THE BAD NEWS put Edward Lane on a knife edge. Reacher watched him carefully and saw him struggling for control. He paced back and forth across the living room floor and curled his hands compulsively and scratched at his palms with his nails.

“Conclusions?” he asked. Like a demand. Like an entitlement.

“I’m revising my conclusions,” Reacher said. “Maybe there aren’t three guys. Maybe there are only two. One stays with Kate and Jade, the other comes down to the city alone. He doesn’t really need to watch Gregory walk away down West Broadway because he’s planning on using the back door anyway. He’s already in the alley, out of sight.”

“Risky. Safer to be loose on the street.”

Reacher shook his head. “They did their homework. The neighbor is in her building from seven-thirty in the morning until eleven-thirty at night. Which explains the times they chose. Seven o’clock this morning, before she arrived. Eleven-forty the first night, after she left. Eleven-forty is a weirdly precise choice of time, don’t you think? There had to be some reason for it.”

Edward Lane said nothing.

Reacher said, “Or maybe there’s only one guy. On his own. It’s possible. If Kate and Jade are secured upstate, he could have come down alone.”

“Secured?”

“Locked up somewhere. Maybe bound and gagged.”

“For twelve hours at a time? There and back?”

“This is a kidnap. They’re not at a health spa.”

“Just one guy?”

“It’s possible,” Reacher said again. “And maybe he wasn’t in the alley at all. Maybe he was actually inside the building, waiting and ready. Maybe right behind the front door. Maybe Gregory dropped the keys right in his hand.”

“Will they call again?” Lane asked. “Will he?”

“Four hours from now that same argument will start all over again.”

“And?”

“What would you do?”

Lane didn’t answer directly. “If there’s only one guy, how can he argue?”

“With himself,” Reacher said. “And that’s the toughest kind of argument to have.”

Lane paced. But his hands stopped moving. It was like he had been hit with a new consideration. Reacher had been expecting it. *Here it comes*, he thought.

“Maybe you’re right,” Lane said. “Maybe it isn’t three guys.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Maybe it’s *four* guys,” Lane said. “And maybe you’re the fourth guy. Maybe that’s why you were in that coffee shop the first night. You were watching your buddy’s back. Making sure he got away OK.”

Reacher said nothing.

“It was you who elected to watch the front door this morning,” Lane said. “Because you knew nothing would happen there. You should have watched the car. You should have been on Sixth Avenue, not Spring Street. And you knew they were going to ask for five million more. You’re one of them, aren’t you?”

Silence in the room.

“Two questions,” Reacher said. “Why would I have gone back to the coffee shop the second night? Nothing was happening the second night. And if I was a bad guy, why would I have told Gregory I had seen anything at all?”

“Because you wanted to worm your way inside where you could steer us wrong. You knew I would send someone out to look for witnesses. That was obvious. And you were right there, like a spider waiting for a fly.”

Lane glanced around the room. Reacher followed his gaze. A quiet desperate atmosphere, subdued menace, six Special Forces veterans, all looking back at him, all as hard as nails, all full of hostility toward the stranger and all full of any fighting soldier’s suspicion of an MP. He checked their faces, one through six. Then he looked down at Kate Lane’s photograph.

“Pity,” he said. “Your wife is a beautiful woman, Mr. Lane. And your daughter is a lovely kid. And if you want to get them back, then I’m all you’ve got. Because like I said, these guys here can start a war, but they’re not investigators. They can’t find what you’re looking for. I know guys like these. Guys like these, they couldn’t find their own assholes if I gave them a mirror on a stick.”

Nobody spoke.

“You know where I live?” Reacher asked.

“I could find out,” Lane said.

“You couldn’t,” Reacher said. “Because I don’t really live anywhere. I move around. Here, there, and everywhere. So if I choose to walk out of here today, you’ll never see me again, the whole rest of your life. You can count on that.”

Lane didn’t answer.

“And therefore Kate,” Reacher said. “You’ll never see her again, either. You can count on that, too.”

“You wouldn’t get out of here alive,” Lane said. “Not unless I chose to let you.”

Reacher shook his head. “You won’t use firearms in here. Not inside the Dakota. I’m sure that would break the terms of your co-op lease. And I’m not worried about hand-to-hand combat. Not against little guys like these. You remember how it was back in the service, don’t you? Your guys stepped out of line, who did you call? The 110th Special Unit, that’s who. Hard men need harder cops. I was one of those cops. And I’m willing to be one again. Against all of you at once, if you like.”

Nobody spoke.

“I’m not here to steer you wrong,” Reacher said. “If I wanted to steer you wrong, I’d have given you descriptions of two fantasy guys this morning. Short, tall, fat, thin, whatever. Eskimos in fur hats. Africans in full tribal dress. I’d have had you chasing shadows all over the place. But I didn’t. I came back here and told you I’m sorry that actually I’m not steering you anyplace yet. Because I am sorry about that. Really. I’m sorry about the whole damn thing.”

Nobody spoke.

“But you need to hang with it,” Reacher said. “We all do. Things like this are never easy.”

The room stayed quiet. Then Lane exhaled. He nodded.

“I apologize,” he said. “Most sincerely. Please forgive me. It’s the stress.”

Reacher said, “No offense taken.”

Lane said, “One million dollars to find my wife.”

“For me?” Reacher said.

“As a fee.”

“That’s some raise. It was twenty-five grand a few hours ago.”

“The situation is more serious now than it was a few hours ago.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Will you accept?” Lane asked.

“We’ll talk about a fee afterward,” Reacher said. “If I succeed.”

“If?”

“I’m way behind the curve here. Success depends on how much longer we can keep this thing going.”

“Will the

"Will they call back again?"

"Yes, I think they will."

"Why did you mention Africans?"

"When?"

"Just now. You said Africans in full tribal dress. As an example of a fantasy description."

"It was an example. Like you said."

"What do you know about Africa?"

"It's a large continent south of Europe. I've never been there."

"What do we do next?"

"We think," Reacher said.

Lane went to his office and five men went out for breakfast. Reacher stayed in the living room. Gregory stayed in there with him. They sat across from each other on a pair of low sofas. Between the sofas was a coffee table. The coffee table was topped with French polished mahogany. The sofas were covered with flowery chintz. There were velvet throw pillows. The whole room seemed ludicrously overdecorated and overstyled and overcivilized, given the issues at hand. And it was totally dominated by the portrait of Kate Lane. Her eyes were everywhere.

"Can you get her back?" Gregory asked.

"I don't know," Reacher said. "Usually this kind of a thing doesn't end happily. Kidnapping is a brutal business. Usually it's the exact same thing as homicide, just delayed a little."

"That's pretty defeatist."

“No, it’s realistic.”

“Any chance at all?”

“Maybe some, if we’re only halfway through. Probably none, if we’re near the end. I don’t have any traction yet. And any kidnap, the endgame is always the hardest part.”

“You think they were really in the building when I dropped the keys?”

“It’s possible. And it would make sense. Why wait outside when they could wait inside?”

“OK,” Gregory said. “So how about this: That’s their base. That’s where they *are.* Not upstate.”

“Where are the cars?”

“In parking garages all around the city.”

“Why the five-hour delays?”

“To create a false impression.”

“It would be one hell of a double-bluff,” Reacher said. “They led us right there. Gave us the exact address.”

“But it’s conceivable.”

Reacher shrugged. “Not very. But stranger things have happened, I guess. So go call those numbers. Find out what you can. If possible, aim to have someone meet us with a key. But not right there. On the corner of Thompson. Out of sight. Just in case.”

“When?”

“Now. We need to be back here before the next ransom demand.”

Reacher left Gregory working with his cell phone on the sofa and wandered back through the kitchen to Lane's office. Lane was at his desk, but he wasn't doing anything productive. Just swinging his chair back and forth through a tiny arc and staring at the twin photographs in front of him. His two wives. One lost. Maybe both lost.

"Did the FBI find the guys?" Reacher asked. "The first time, with Anne?"

Lane shook his head.

"But you knew who they were."

"Not at the time," Lane said.

"But you found out later."

"Did I?"

"Tell me how."

"It became a threshold question," Lane said. "Who would do such a thing? At first I couldn't imagine anyone doing it. But clearly someone had, so I revised the threshold of possibilities downward. But then everyone in the world seemed to be a possibility. It was beyond my understanding."

"You surprise me. You move in a world where hostage-taking and abduction aren't exactly unknown."

"Do I?"

"Foreign conflicts," Reacher said. "Irregular forces."

"But this was domestic," Lane said. "This was right here in New York City. And it was my wife, not me or one of my men."

"But you did find the guys."

"Did I?"

Reacher nodded. "You're not asking me if I think it could be the same people all over again. You're not speculating. It's like you know for sure it isn't."

Lane said nothing.

“How did you find them?” Reacher asked.

“Someone who knew someone heard some talk. Arms dealers, up and down their network.”

“And?”

“There was a story about four guys who had heard about a deal I had done and concluded that I had money.”

“What happened to the four guys?”

“What would you have done?”

“I would have made sure they couldn’t do it again.”

Lane nodded. “Let’s just say I’m completely confident that this isn’t the same people doing it again.”

“Have you heard any new talk?” Reacher asked.

“Not a word.”

“A rival in this business?”

“I don’t have rivals in this business. I have inferiors and junior partners. And even if I did have rivals, they wouldn’t do something like this. It would be suicide. They would know that sooner or later our paths would cross. Would you risk antagonizing a bunch of armed men you’re likely to stumble across under the radar somewhere in the back of beyond?”

Reacher said nothing.

“Will they call again?” Lane asked.

“I think they will.”

“What will they ask for?”

“Two.” Reacher said. “That’s the way it goes. One fine, two fine, one...”

¨Ten,´´ Reacher said. ¨That´s the next step. One, five, ten, twenty.´´

Lane sighed, distracted.

“That’s two bags,” he said. “Can’t get ten million dollars in one bag.”

He showed no other outward reaction. Reacher thought: *One plus five already gone, plus one promised to me, plus ten more. That’s seventeen million dollars. This guy is right now looking at a running total of seventeen million dollars, and he hasn’t even blinked yet.*

“When will they call?” Lane asked.

“Drive time plus argument time,” Reacher said. “Late afternoon, early evening. Not before.”

Lane kept on swinging his chair through its tiny arc. He lapsed into silence. Then there was a quiet knock at the door and Gregory stuck his head in the room.

“I got what we need,” he said, to Reacher, not to Lane. “The building on Spring Street? The owner is a bankrupt developer. One of his lawyer’s people is meeting us there in an hour. I said we were interested in buying the place.”

“Good work,” Reacher said.

“So maybe you should revise what you said about a mirror on a stick.”

“Maybe I should. Maybe I will one day.”

“So let’s go.”

They were met at the 72nd Street curb by another new BMW 7-series sedan. This one was black. This time the driver stayed behind the wheel and Gregory and Reacher climbed in the back. The woman who was watching the building saw them go, and she noted the time.

CHAPTER **10**

THE GUY FROM the bankrupt developer's lawyer's office was a reedy paralegal of about thirty. His suit pockets were bagged out from all the keys he carried. Clearly his firm specialized in distressed real estate. Gregory gave him an OSC business card and introduced Reacher as a contractor whose opinion he valued.

"Is the building habitable?" Gregory asked. "I mean, as of right now?"

"You worried about squatters being in there?" the reedy guy asked back.

"Or tenants," Gregory said. "Or anybody."

"There's nobody in there," the guy said. "I can assure you of that fact. No water, no power, no gas, capped sewer. Also, if I'm thinking of the right building, there's another feature that makes it highly unlikely."

He juggled his keys and unlocked the Thompson Street alley gate. The three men walked east together, behind the chocolate shop, to the target building's red rear door.

"Wait," Gregory said. Then he turned to Reacher and whispered, "If they're in there, we need to think about how we do this. We could get them both killed right here."

"It's unlikely they're in there," Reacher said.

"Plan for the worst," Gregory said.

Reacher nodded. Stepped back and looked up and checked the windows. They were black with filth and dusty black drapes were drawn tight behind them. Street noise was loud, even in the alley. Therefore, their approach thus far was still undetected.

"Decision?" Gregory asked.

Reacher looked around, pensive. Stepped up next to the lawyer's guy.

“What makes you so sure there’s nobody in there?” he asked.

“I’ll show you,” the guy said. He shoved the key in the lock and pushed open the door. Then he raised his arm to stop Gregory and Reacher from crowding in too closely behind him. Because the feature that made current habitation of the building unlikely was that it had no floors.

The back door was hanging open over a yawning ten-foot pit. At the bottom of the pit was the original basement floor. It was knee-deep in trash. Above it was nothing at all. Just fifty feet of dark void, all the way up to the underside of the roof slab. The building was like a giant empty shoe box set on its end. Stumps of floor joists were faintly visible in the gloom. They had been cut off flush with the walls. The remains of individual rooms were still clearly delineated by patches of different wallpapers and vertical scars where interior partitions had been ripped out. Bizarrely, all the windows still had their drapes.

“See?” the lawyer’s guy said. “Not exactly habitable, is it?”

There was a ladder set next to the rear door. It was a tall old wooden thing. A nimble person could grasp the door frame and swing sideways and get on it and climb down into the basement trash. Then that person could pick his way forward to the front of the building and root through the garbage with a flashlight and collect anything that had fallen the thirteen feet from the letter slot above.

Or, a nimble person could be already waiting down there and could catch whatever came through the slot like a pop-up in the infield.

“Was that ladder always there?” Reacher asked.

“I don’t recall,” the guy said.

“Who else has keys to this place?” Reacher asked.

“Everyone and his uncle, probably,” the guy said. “This place has been vacant nearly twenty years. The last owner alone tried half a dozen different separate schemes. That’s half a dozen architects and contractors and God knows who else. Before that, who knows what went on? The first thing you’ll need to do is change the locks.”

“We don’t want it,” Gregory said. “We were looking for something ready to move into. You know, maybe a little paint. But this is off the charts.”

“We could be flexible on price,” the guy said.

“A dollar,” Gregory said. “That’s all I’d pay for a dump like this.”

“You’re wasting my time,” the guy said.

He leaned in over the yawning void and pulled the door closed. Then he relocked it and walked back up the alley without another word. Reacher and Gregory followed him out to Thompson Street. The guy relocked the gate and walked away south. Reacher and Gregory stayed where they were, on the sidewalk.

“Not their base, then,” Gregory said, clipped and British.

“Mirror on a stick,” Reacher said.

“Just a dead drop for the car keys. They must be up and down that ladder like trained monkeys.”

“I guess they must.”

“So next time we should watch the alley.”

“I guess we should.”

“If there is a next time.”

“There will be,” Reacher said.

“But they’ve already had six million dollars. Surely there’s going to come a point where they decide they’ve got enough.”

Reacher recalled the feel of the mugger’s hand in his pocket.

“Look south,” he said. “That’s Wall Street down there. Or take a stroll on Greene Street and look in the store windows. There’s no such thing as enough.”

“There would be for me.”

“For me, too,” Reacher said.

“That’s my point. They could be just like us.”

“Not exactly like us. I never abducted anyone. Did you?”

Gregory didn’t answer that. Thirty-six minutes later the two men were back in the Dakota, and the woman who was watching the building had made another entry in her log.

CHAPTER **11**

REACHER HAD A late breakfast delivered from a gourmet deli on Edward Lane's tab and he ate it alone in the kitchen. Then he lay down on a sofa and thought until he was too tired to think anymore. Then he closed his eyes and dozed, and waited for the phone to ring.

Kate and Jade were sleeping, too. It was nature's way. They had been unable to sleep at night, so exhaustion had overtaken them midway through the day. They were on their narrow beds, close together, deep in slumber. The lone man opened their door quietly and saw them. Paused a moment, just looking. Then he backed out of the room and left them alone. *No hurry,* he thought. In a way he was enjoying this particular phase of the operation. He was addicted to risk. He always had been. No point in denying it. It made him who he was.

Reacher woke up and found himself all alone in the living room except for Carter Groom. The guy with the shark's eyes. He was sitting in an armchair, doing nothing.

"You pulled guard duty?" Reacher asked.

"You're not exactly a prisoner," Groom said. "You're in line to get a million bucks."

"Does that bother you?"

"Not really. You find her, you'll have earned it. The workman is worthy of his hire. Says so in the Bible."

"Did you drive her often?"

“My fair share.”

“When Jade was with her, how did they ride?”

“Mrs. Lane always rode in the front. She was basically embarrassed about the whole chauffeur thing. The kid in the back, obviously.”

“What were you, back in the day?”

“Recon Marine,” Groom said. “First Sergeant.”

“How would you have handled the takedown at Bloomingdale’s?”

“Good guy or bad guy?”

“Bad guy,” Reacher said.

“How many with me?”

“Does it matter?”

Groom thought for less than a second and shook his head. “Lead guy is the important guy. Lead guy could be the only guy.”

“So how would it have gone down?”

“Only one way to do it clean,” Groom said. “You’d have to keep all the action inside the car, before they even got out. Bloomie’s is on the east side of Lexington Avenue. Lex runs downtown. So Taylor would pull over on the left and stop opposite the main entrance. Double parked, just temporarily. Whereupon our guy would grab the rear door and slide in right next to the kid. She’s belted in behind her mother. Our guy puts a gun straight to the kid’s head and grabs her hair with his free hand and holds on tight. That’s game over right there. Nobody on the street is worried. For them, it’s a pickup, not a drop-off. And Taylor would do what he’s told from that point on. What choice does he have? He’s got Mrs. Lane screaming in the seat next to him. And what can he do anyway? He can’t flip the lever and shove the seat off its runners back on the guy, because the Jaguar’s got electric seats. He can’t turn around and fight, because the gun is to the kid’s head. He can’t use violent evasive driving maneuvers because he’s in slow traffic and the guy has hold of the kid’s hair and won’t get thrown loose anyway. Game over, right there.”

won't get thrown loose anyway. Game over, right there."

"And then what?"

"Then our guy makes Taylor drive somewhere quiet. Maybe in town, more likely out of town. Then he shoots him, spine shot through the seat, so he doesn't bust the windshield. He makes Mrs. Lane dump him out. Then he makes her drive the rest of the way. He wants to stay in the back with the kid."

Reacher nodded. "That's how I see it."

"Tough on Taylor," Groom said. "You know, that final moment, the guy tells him to pull over, put the transmission in Park, sit tight. Taylor will have known what was coming."

Reacher said nothing.

"They haven't found his body yet," Groom said.

"You optimistic?"

Groom shook his head. "It's not somewhere populated, that's all it means. It's a balance. You want rid of the guy early, but you keep him alive until the location is safe. He's most likely in the countryside somewhere with the coyotes gnawing on him. Race against time whether someone finds him before he's all eaten up."

"How long was he with you?"

"Three years."

"Did you like him?"

"He was OK."

"Was he good?"

"You already asked Gregory."

"Gregory might be biased. They were from the same unit. They were Brits together overseas. What did you think?"

"He was good," Groom said. "SAS is a good outfit. Better than Delta, maybe.

Brits are usually more ruthless. It's in their genes. They ruled the world for a long time, and they didn't do it by being nice. An SAS veteran would be second only to a Recon Marine veteran, that would be my opinion. So yes, Gregory was right. Taylor was good."

"What was he like as a person?"

"Off duty he was gentle. He was good with the kid. Mrs. Lane seemed to like him. There's two types of people here. Like an inner circle and an outer circle. Taylor was inner circle. I'm outer circle. I'm all business. I'm kind of stunted, in a social situation. I can admit it. I'm nothing, away from the action. Some of the others can be both."

"Were you here five years ago?"

"For Anne? No, I came just after. But there can't be a connection."

"So I heard," Reacher said.

The clock in Reacher's head ticked around to four-thirty in the afternoon. For Kate and Jade, the third day. Probably fifty-four hours since the snatch. Fifty-four hours was an incredibly long time for a kidnap to sustain itself. Most were over in less than twenty-four, one way or the other, good result or bad. Most law enforcement people gave up after thirty-six. Each passing minute made the likely outcome more and more dire.

Around a quarter to five in the afternoon Lane came back into the room and people started drifting in after him. Gregory, Addison, Burke, Kowalski. Perez came in. The vigil around the telephone started up again unannounced. Lane stood next to the table. The others grouped themselves around the room, all facing the same way, inward. There was no doubt about the center of their attention.

But the phone didn't ring.

"Has that thing got a speaker?" Reacher asked.

“No,” Lane said.

“What about in the office?”

“I can’t do it,” Lane said. “It would be a change. It would unsettle them.”

The phone didn’t ring.

“Hang in there,” Reacher said.

In her apartment across the street the woman who had been watching the building picked up her phone and dialed.

CHAPTER **12**

THE WOMAN ACROSS the street was called Patricia Joseph, Patti to her few remaining friends, and she was dialing an NYPD detective named Brewer. She had his home number. He answered on the second ring.

“I’ve got some activity to report,” Patti said.

Brewer didn’t ask who his caller was. He didn’t need to. He knew Patti Joseph’s voice about as well as he knew anybody’s.

“Go ahead,” he said.

“There’s a new character on the scene.”

“Who?”

“I don’t have a name for him yet.”

“Description?”

“Very tall, heavily built, like a real brawler. He’s in his late thirties or early forties. Short fair hair, blue eyes. He showed up late last night.”

“One of them?” Brewer asked.

“He doesn’t dress like them. And he’s much bigger than the rest. But he acts like them.”

“Acts? What have you seen him do?”

“The way he walks. The way he moves. The way he holds himself.”

“So you think he’s ex-military, too?”

“Almost certainly.”

“OK,” Brewer said. “Good work. Anything else?”

“One thing,” Patti Joseph said. “I haven’t seen the wife or the daughter in a couple of days.”

Inside the Dakota living room the phone rang at what Reacher figured was five o’clock exactly. Lane snatched the receiver out of the cradle and clamped it to his ear. Reacher heard the drone and squawk of the electronic machine, faint and muffled. Lane said, “Put Kate on,” and there was a long, long pause. Then a woman’s voice, loud and clear. But not calm. Lane closed his eyes. Then the electronic squawk came back and Lane opened his eyes again. The squawk droned on for a whole minute. Lane listened, his face working, his eyes moving. Then the call ended. Just cut off before Lane had a chance to say anything more.

He put the receiver back in the cradle. His face was half-filled with hope, half-filled with despair.

“They want more money,” he said. “Instructions in an hour.”

“Maybe I should get down there right now,” Reacher said. “Maybe they’ll throw us a curveball by changing the time interval.”

But Lane was already shaking his head. “They threw us a different kind of curveball. They said they’re changing the whole procedure. It’s not going to be the same as before.”

Silence in the room.

“Is Mrs. Lane OK?” Gregory asked.

Lane said, “There was a lot of fear in her voice.”

“What about the guy’s voice?” Reacher asked. “Anything?”

“It was disguised. Same as always.”

“But beyond the sound. Think about this call and all the other calls. Word choice, word order, cadence, rhythm, flow. Is it an American or a foreigner?”

“Why would it be a foreigner?”

“Your line of work, if you’ve got enemies, some of them might be foreign.”

“It’s an American,” Lane said. “I think.” He closed his eyes again and concentrated. His lips moved like he was replaying conversations in his head. “Yes, American. Certainly a native speaker. No stumbles. Never any weird or unusual words. Just normal, like you would hear all the time.”

“Same guy every time?”

“I think so.”

“What about this time? Anything different? Mood? Tension? Is he still in control or is he losing it?”

“He sounded OK,” Lane said. “Relieved, even.” Then he paused. “Like this whole thing was nearly over. Like this might be the final installment.”

“It’s too soon,” Reacher said. “We’re not even close yet.”

“They’re calling the shots,” Lane said.

Nobody spoke.

“So what do we do now?” Gregory asked.

“We wait,” Reacher said. “Fifty-six minutes.”

“I’m sick of waiting,” Groom said.

“It’s all we can do,” Lane said. “We wait for instructions and we obey them.”

“How much money?” Reacher asked. “Ten?”

Lane looked right at him. “Guess again.”

“More?”

“Four and a half,” Lane said. “That’s what they want. Four million five hundred thousand U.S. dollars. In a bag.”

CHAPTER **13**

REACHER SPENT THE remaining fifty-five minutes puzzling over the choice of amount. It was a bizarre figure. A bizarre progression. One, five, four and a half. Altogether ten and a half million dollars. It felt like a destination figure. Like the end of a road. But it was a bizarre total. Why stop there? It made no kind of sense at all. Or did it?

“They know you,” he said to Lane. “But maybe not all that well. As it happens you could afford more, but maybe they don’t fully appreciate that. So was there a time when ten and a half million was all the cash you had?”

But Lane just said, “No.”

“Could someone out there have that impression?”

“No,” Lane said again. “I’ve had less and I’ve had more.”

“But you’ve never had exactly ten and a half?”

“No,” Lane said for the third time. “There’s absolutely no reason for anyone to believe that they’re cleaning me out at ten and a half.”

So Reacher gave it up and just waited for the phone to ring.

It rang right on time, at six in the evening. Lane picked it up and listened. He didn’t speak. He didn’t ask for Kate. Reacher figured he had learned that the privilege of hearing his wife’s voice was reserved for the first call in any given sequence. The demand call. Not the instruction call.

This instruction call lasted less than two minutes. Then the electronic squawk cut off abruptly and Lane put the receiver back in the cradle and gave a bitter little half-smile, like he was reluctantly admiring a hated opponent’s skill.

“This is the final installment,” he said. “After this, it’s over. They promise I get her back.”

Too soon, Reacher thought. *Ain’t going to happen.*

Gregory asked, “What do we do?”

“One hour from now,” Lane said. “One man leaves here alone with the money in the black BMW and cruises anywhere he wants. He’ll be carrying my cell phone and he’ll get a call anywhere between one and twenty minutes into the ride. He’ll be given a destination. He’s to keep the line open from that point on so they know he’s not conversing with anyone else in the car or on any other phones or on any kind of a radio net. He’ll drive to the destination he’s been given. He’ll find the Jaguar parked on the street there. The car that Taylor drove Kate in, the first morning. It’ll be unlocked. He’s to put the money on the back seat and drive away and not look back. Any chase cars, any coordination with anyone else, any tricks at all, and Kate dies.”

“They’ve got your cell phone number?” Reacher asked.

“Kate will have given it to them.”

“I’ll be the driver,” Gregory said. “If you want.”

“No,” Lane said. “I want you here.”

“I’ll do it,” Burke said. The black guy.

Lane nodded. “Thank you.”

“Then what?” Reacher asked. “How do we get her back?”

Lane said, “After they’ve counted the money, there’ll be another call.”

“On the cell or here?”

“Here,” Lane said. “It will take some time. Counting large sums is an arduous process. Not for me at this end. The money is already bricked and banded and labeled. But they won’t trust that. They’ll break the bands and examine the bills and count them by hand.”

Reacher nodded. It was a problem he had never really considered before. If the money was in hundreds, that would give them forty-five thousand bills. If they could count to a hundred every sixty seconds, that would take them four hundred and fifty minutes, which was seven and a half hours. Maybe six hours drive time, and seven and a half counting time. *A long night ahead,* he thought. *For them and for us.*

Lane said, “Why are they using the Jaguar?”

“It’s a taunt,” Reacher said. “It’s to remind you.”

Lane nodded.

“Office,” he said. “Burke, and Reacher.”

In the office Lane took a small silver Samsung phone out of a charging cradle and handed it to Burke. Then he disappeared, to his bedroom, maybe.

“Gone to get the money,” Burke said.

Reacher nodded. Gazed at the twin portraits on the desk. Two beautiful women, both equally stunning, roughly the same age, but with no real similarities. Anne Lane had been blonde and blue, somehow a child of the sixties even though she must have been born well after that decade was over. She had long straight hair parted in the middle, like a singer or a model or an actress. She had clear guileless eyes and an innocent smile. A flower child, even though house or hip hop or acid jazz would have been the thing when she got her first record player. Kate Lane was more a child of the eighties or nineties. More subtle, more worldly, more accomplished.

“No kids with Anne, right?” Reacher asked.

“No,” Burke said. “Thank God.”

So maybe motherhood accounted for the difference. There was a weight to Kate, a gravity, a heft, not physical, but somewhere deep inside her. Choose one to spend the night with, you might well pick Anne. To spend the week with, you might want Kate.

Lane came back awkwardly with a bulging leather bag. He dropped the bag on the floor and sat down at his desk.

the floor and sat down at his desk.

“How long?” he asked.

“Forty minutes,” Reacher said.

Burke checked his watch.

“Yes,” he said. “Forty minutes.”

“Go wait in the other room,” Lane said. “Leave me alone.”

Burke went for the bag but Reacher picked it up for him. It was heavy and wide, and easier for a big guy to manage. He carried it to the foyer and dropped it near the door where its predecessor had waited twelve hours before. It flopped and settled like the same dead animal. Reacher took a seat and started counting off the minutes. Burke paced. Carter Groom drummed his fingers on the arm of a chair, frustrated. The Recon Marine, beached. *I’m all business,* he had said. *I’m nothing, away from the action.* Next to him Gregory sat quiet, all British reserve. Next to him was Perez, the Latino, tiny. Next to him was Addison, with the scarred face. *A knife, probably,* Reacher thought. Then Kowalski, taller than the others but still small next to Reacher himself. Special Forces guys were usually small. They were usually lean, fast, and whippy. Built for endurance and stamina and full of smarts and cunning. Like foxes, not like bears.

Nobody talked. There was nothing to talk about, except the fact that the end of a kidnap was always the period of greatest risk. What was there that compelled kidnappers to keep their word? Honor? A sense of business ethics? Why risk a complex transfer when a shallow grave and a bullet in the victim’s head were a whole lot safer and simpler? Humanity? Decency? Reacher glanced at Kate Lane’s picture next to the phone and went a little cold. She was closer to dead now than at any point in the last three days, and he knew it. He guessed they all knew it.

“Time,” Burke said. “I’m going.”

“I’ll carry the bag for you,” Reacher said. “You know, down to the car.”

They rode down in the elevator. In the ground floor lobby a small dark woman in a long black coat swept past surrounded by tall men in suits, like staff or assistants or bodyguards.

“Was that Yoko?” Reacher said.

But Burke didn’t answer. He just walked past the doorman and out to the curb. The black BMW was waiting there. Burke opened the rear door.

“Stick the bag on the back seat,” he said. “Easier for me that way, for a seat-to-seat transfer.”

“I’m coming with you,” Reacher said.

“That’s stupid, man.”

“I’ll be on the floor in back. It’ll be safe enough.”

“What’s the point?”

“We have to do something. You know as well as I do there’s not going to be any cute little Checkpoint Charlie scene in this story. She’s not going to come tottering toward us through the mist and the fog, smiling bravely, with Jade holding her hand. That’s not going to happen. So we’re going to have to get proactive at some point.”

“What are you planning to do?”

“After you’ve switched the bag I’ll get out around the next corner. I’ll double back and see what I can see.”

“Who says you’ll see anything?”

“They’ll have four and a half million bucks sitting in an unlocked car. My guess is they won’t leave it there very long. So I’ll see something.”

“Will it help us?”

“A lot more than sitting upstairs doing nothing will help us.”

“Lane will kill me.”

“He doesn’t have to know anything about it. I’ll be back well after you. You’ll say you have no idea what happened to me. I’ll say I went for a walk.”

“Lane will kill you if you screw it up.”

“I’ll kill myself if I screw it up.”

“I’m serious. He’ll kill you.”

“My risk.”

“Kate’s risk.”

“You still banking on the Checkpoint Charlie scenario?”

Burke paused. Ten seconds. Fifteen.

“Get in,” he said.

CHAPTER **14**

BURKE STUCK LANE'S cell phone in a hands-free cradle mounted on the BMW's dash and Reacher crawled into the rear footwell on his hands and knees. There was grit on the carpet. It was a rear-drive car and the transmission hump made it an uncomfortable location. Burke started up and waited for a hole in the traffic and then U-turned and headed south on Central Park West. Reacher squirmed around until the transmission tunnel was wedged above his hips and below his ribs.

"Don't hit any big bumps," he said.

"We're not supposed to talk," Burke said.

"Only after they call."

"Believe it," Burke said. "You see this?"

Reacher struggled a little more upright and saw Burke pointing at a small black bud on the driver's-side A-pillar up near the sun visor.

"Microphone," Burke said. "For the cell. Real sensitive. You sneeze back there, they'll hear you."

"Will I hear them? On a speaker?"

"On ten speakers," Burke said. "The phone is wired through the audio system. It cuts in automatically."

Reacher lay down and Burke drove on, slowly. Then he made a tight right turn.

"Where are we now?" Reacher asked.

"Fifty-seventh Street," Burke said. "Traffic is murder. I'm going to get on the West Side Highway and head south. My guess is they'll want us downtown somewhere. That's where they've got to be. Street parking for the Jaguar would be impossible anyplace else right now. I can come back north on the East River Drive if they don't call before we get to the Battery."

Reacher felt the car stop and start, stop and start. Above him the money bag rolled one way and then the other.

“You serious that this could be just one guy?” Burke asked.

“Minimum of one,” Reacher said.

“Everything’s a minimum of one.”

“Therefore it’s possible.”

“Therefore we should take him down. Make him talk. Solve the whole problem right there.”

“But suppose it’s not just one guy.”

“Maybe we should gamble.”

“What were you?” Reacher asked. “Back in the day?”

“Delta,” Burke said.

“Did you know Lane in the service?”

“I’ve known him forever.”

“How would you have done the thing outside Bloomingdale’s?”

“Quick and dirty inside the car. As soon as Taylor stopped.”

“That’s what Groom said.”

“Groom’s a smart guy, for a jarhead. You disagree with him?”

“No.”

“It would be the only way. This isn’t Mexico City or Bogotá or Rio de Janeiro. This is New York. You couldn’t survive a fuss on the sidewalk. You’ve got eight beat cops right there, two on each corner, armed and dangerous, worried about terrorists. No, quick and dirty inside the car would be the only way at Bloomingdale’s.”

Bloomingdale's.

“But why would you have been at Bloomingdale’s at all?”

“It’s the obvious place. It’s Mrs. Lane’s favorite store. She gets all her stuff there. She loves that big brown bag.”

“But who would have known that?”

Burke was quiet for a spell.

“That’s a very good question,” he said.

Then the phone rang.

CHAPTER **15**

THE RING TONE sounded weird, coming in over ten high-quality automobile speakers. It filled the whole car. It sounded very loud and rich and full and precise. The cellular network's harsh electronic edge was taken right off it. It purred.

"Shut up now," Burke said.

He leaned to his right and hit a button on the Samsung.

"Hello?" he said.

"Good evening," a voice said back, so slowly and carefully and mechanically that it made four separate words out of two. Like: *Good-Eve-Ven-Ing*.

It was a hell of a voice. It was completely amazing. It was so heavily processed that there would be no chance of recognizing it again without the electronic machine. The machines were commercial items sold in spy stores. Reacher had seen them. They clamped over the telephone mouthpiece. On one side was a microphone, which was backed by circuit boards, and then came a small crude loudspeaker. Battery powered. There were rotary dials that shaped the sound. Zero to ten, for various different parameters. The dials on this machine must have been cranked all the way to eleven. The high frequencies were entirely missing. The low tones had been scooped out and turned around and reconstituted. They boomed and thumped like an irregular heartbeat. There was a phase effect that hissed and roared on every drawn breath and made the voice sound like it was hurtling through outer space. There was a metallic pulse that came and went. It sounded like a sheet of heavy steel being hit with a hammer. The volume was set very high. Over the BMW's ten speakers the voice sounded huge and alien. Gigantic. Like a direct connection to a nightmare.

"Who am I speaking with?" it asked, slowly.

"The driver," Burke said. "The guy with the money."

"I want your name," the voice said.

Burke said, “My name is Burke.”

The nightmare voice asked, “Who’s that in the car with you?”

“There’s nobody in the car with me,” Burke said. “I’m all alone.”

“Are you lying?”

“No, I’m not lying,” Burke said.

Reacher figured there might be a lie detector hooked up to the other end of the phone. Probably a simple device sold in the same kind of spy stores as the distortion machines. Plastic boxes, green lights and red lights. They were supposed to be able to detect the kind of voice stress that comes with lying. Reacher replayed Burke’s answers in his head and figured they would pass muster. It would be a crude machine and Delta soldiers were taught to beat better tests than a person could buy retail on Madison Avenue. And after a second it was clear that the box had indeed lit up green because the nightmare voice just went ahead calmly and asked, “Where are you now, Mr. Burke?”

“Fifty-seventh Street,” Burke said. “I’m heading west. I’m about to get on the West Side Highway.”

“You’re a long way from where I want you.”

“Who are you?”

“You know who I am.”

“Where do you want me?”

“Take the highway, if that’s what you prefer. Go south.”

“Give me time,” Burke said. “Traffic is real bad.”

“Worried?”

“How would you feel?”

“Stay on the line,” the voice said.

The sound of distorted breathing filled the car. It was slow and deep. *Unworried,* Reacher thought. *A patient person, in control, in command, safe somewhere.* He felt the car sprint and hook left. *Onto the highway through a yellow light,* he thought. *Take care, Burke. A traffic stop could be real awkward tonight.*

"I'm on the highway now," Burke said. "Heading south."

"Keep going," the voice said. Then it lapsed back to breathing. There was an audio compressor somewhere in the chain. Either in the voice machine itself or in the BMW's stereo. The breathing started out quiet and then ramped up slowly until it was roaring in Reacher's ears. The whole car was filled with it. It felt like being inside a lung.

Then the breathing stopped and the voice asked, "How's the traffic?"

"Lots of red lights," Burke said.

"Keep going."

Reacher tried to follow the route in his head. He knew there were plenty of lights between 57th Street and 34th Street. The Passenger Ship Terminal, the *Intrepid*, the Lincoln Tunnel approaches.

"I'm at Forty-second Street now," Burke said.

Reacher thought: *Are you talking to me? Or the voice?*

"Keep going," the voice said.

"Is Mrs. Lane OK?" Burke asked.

"She's fine."

"Can I talk to her?"

"No."

"Is Jade OK, too?"

"Don't worry about either one of them. Just keep on driving."

American, Reacher thought. *For sure.* Behind the wall of distortion he could hear the inflections of a native speaker. Reacher had heard more than his share of foreign accents, but this wasn't one of them.

"I'm at the Javits now," Burke said.

"Just keep going," the voice said back.

Young, Reacher thought. *Or at least not old.* All the dirt and grit in the voice came from the electronic circuitry, not from the effects of age. *Not a big guy,* Reacher thought. The booming bass was artificial. There was a speed and a lightness there. No big chest cavity. *Or, maybe a fat guy.* Maybe one of those fat guys who have high-pitched voices.

"How much farther?" Burke asked.

"You low on gas?" the voice asked.

"No."

"So what do you care?"

The breathing came back, slow and steady. *Not close yet,* Reacher thought.

"Coming up on Twenty-fourth Street," Burke said.

"Keep going."

The Village, Reacher thought. *We're going back to Greenwich Village.* The car was moving faster now. Most of the left turns into the West Village were blocked off, so there were fewer lights. And most of the traffic would be going north, not south. A clear run, relatively speaking. Reacher craned his neck and got an angle through the rear side window. He could see buildings with the evening sun reflected in their windows. They flashed past in a dizzy kaleidoscope.

The voice asked, "Where are you now?"

"Perry," Burke said.

"Keep going. But stand by now."

Getting close, Reacher thought. *Houston? Are we going to take Houston Street?* Then he thought: *Stand by now? That's a military term. But is it exclusively military? Is this guy ex-military, too? Or not? Is he a civilian? A wannabe?*

"Morton Street," Burke said.

"Left turn in three blocks," the voice said. "On Houston."

He knows New York City, Reacher thought. *He knows that Houston is three blocks south of Morton and he knows you say it House-ton, not like the place in Texas.*

"OK," Burke said.

Reacher felt the car slow. It stopped. It waited and inched forward. Then it sprinted to catch the light. Reacher rolled heavily against the rear seat.

"East on Houston now," Burke said.

"Keep going," the voice said.

The traffic on Houston was slow. Cobblestones, stop signs, potholes, lights. Reacher paced it out in his head. Washington Street, Greenwich Street, Hudson Street. Then Varick, where he had come up out of the subway for his fruitless morning vigil. The car bounced over patches of frost heave and thumped into dips.

"Sixth Avenue next," Burke said.

The voice said, "Take it."

Burke turned left. Reacher craned his neck again and saw the apartments above his new favorite café.

The voice said, "Get in the right-hand lane. Now."

Burke dabbed the brake hard and Reacher jolted forward and hit the front seat. He heard the turn signal click. Then the car jumped right. And slowed.

The voice said, "You'll see your target on the right. The green Jaguar. From the

first morning. Exactly halfway up the block. On the right."

"I already see it," Burke said.

Reacher thought: *The same place? It's right there on the same damn fireplug?*

The voice said, "Stop and make the transfer."

Reacher felt the transmission slam into Park and he heard the click of the hazard lights start up. Then Burke's door opened and noise blew in. The suspension rocked as Burke climbed out. There was honking on the street behind. An instant traffic jam. Ten seconds later the door next to Reacher's head opened wide. Burke didn't look down. Just leaned in and grabbed the bag. Reacher craned his neck the other way and looked at the Jaguar upside down. Saw a flash of dark green paint. Then the door shut in his face. He heard the Jaguar's door open. Then he heard it shut again. He heard a faint hydraulic *thunk* from somewhere outside. Ten seconds after that Burke was back in his seat. He was a little out of breath.

"The transfer is done," he said. "The money is in the Jaguar."

The nightmare voice said, "Goodbye."

The phone clicked off. The car filled with silence. Profound and absolute.

"Go now," Reacher said. "Turn right on Bleecker."

Burke took off with the hazard warning still clicking. He caught the light and barged through the crosswalk. Accelerated for twenty yards and then jammed on the brakes hard. Reacher fumbled horizontally above his head and found the door handle. Pulled it and butted the door open and scrambled out. He stood up and slammed the door and paused for a second and tugged his shirt down. Then he hustled back to the corner.

CHAPTER **16**

REACHER STOPPED WHILE he was still on Bleecker and jammed his hands in his pockets and then restarted at a more appropriate pace. He turned left onto Sixth like a man walking home. Maybe after a busy day at work, maybe planning a stop in a bar, maybe with grocery shopping on his mind. Just blending in, which he was surprisingly good at, given that he was always a head taller than anyone else around him. The height advantage was a mixed blessing for surveillance. It made him theoretically conspicuous. But it meant he could see farther than the average guy. Simple trigonometry. He stayed in the middle of the sidewalk and looked straight ahead and put the green Jaguar firmly in his peripheral vision. Checked left. Nothing. Checked right, over the Jaguar's roof.

And saw a guy six feet from the driver's door.

It was the same guy he had seen the very first night. He was absolutely sure of that. Same stature, same posture, same movements, same clothes. White, a little sunburned, lean, chiseled, clean-shaven, jaw clamped, not smiling, maybe forty years old. Calm, focused, intent. Neat and quick, dodging traffic, just into his final two strides before reaching the car. Fluid, economical movements. The guy pulled the door and slid into the seat and started the engine and clipped his belt and took a long glance back over his shoulder at the traffic. Then he pulled out neatly into a gap and took off north. Reacher kept on walking south but turned his head to watch him go. The guy flashed past, out of sight.

Six seconds, beginning to end. Maybe less.

And for what?

Just a white guy, average height, average weight, dressed like every other off-duty white guy in the city. Jeans, shirt, sneakers, ball cap. Maybe forty. Unremarkable in every way. Description? Nothing to say, except: Just a guy.

Reacher glanced south at the river of traffic. There were no free cabs coming. None at all. So he turned again and jogged back to the corner of Bleecker to see if Burke had waited for him. But Burke hadn't. So Reacher set out walking. He was too frustrated to take the subway. He needed to walk it off. He charged

north on Sixth, fast and furious, and people moved out of his way like he was radioactive.

Twenty minutes and twenty blocks later he saw a Staples store on the opposite sidewalk. Red and white signs. Windows full of office supply bargains. He dodged cars and crossed over to check it out. It was a big place. He didn't know which branch Carter Groom had taken Kate Lane to, but he figured chains carried the same stuff everywhere. He went inside and passed a corral made from inch-thick chrome bars where shopping trolleys were racked together. Beyond that on the left were the checkout registers. Beyond the trolleys on the right was a print shop full of industrial-strength photocopiers. In front of him were about twenty narrow aisles with shelves that reached the ceiling. They were piled high with an intimidating array of stuff. He started at the left front corner and zigzagged all the way through the store to the rear of the last aisle on the right. The biggest thing he saw was a desk. The smallest, either a thumbtack or a paperclip, depending on whether he judged by size or weight. He saw paper, computers, printers, toner cartridges, pens, pencils, envelopes, file boxes, plastic crates, parcel tape. He saw things he had never seen before. Software for designing houses and filing taxes. Label printers. Cell phones that took video pictures and sent e-mail.

He walked back to the front of the store with absolutely no idea at all of what Kate Lane might have been looking for.

He stood in a daze and watched a photocopier at work. It was a machine as big as a launderette dryer and it was spitting copies out so hard and so fast that it was rocking back and forth on its feet. And costing some customer a fortune. That was clear. A sign overhead said that photocopying cost between four cents and two dollars a sheet, depending on the quality of the paper and the choice between black and white and color. A lot of money, potentially. Opposite the print shop corral was a display of inkjet cartridges. They were expensive, too. Reacher had no idea what they were for. Or what they did. Or why they cost so much. He pushed past a line of people at a checkout desk and headed for the street.

Another twenty minutes and twenty blocks later he was at Bryant Park, eating a hot dog from a street vendor. Twenty minutes and twenty blocks after that he was in Central Park, drinking a bottle of still water from another street vendor. Twelve more blocks north he was still in Central Park, directly opposite the Dakota, under a tree, stopped dead, face-to-face with Anne Lane, Edward Lane's first wife.

CHAPTER **17**

THE FIRST THING Anne Lane did was tell Reacher he was wrong.

“You saw Lane’s photograph of her,” she said.

He nodded.

“We were very alike,” she said.

He nodded again.

“Anne was my sister,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry for staring. And I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you,” the woman said.

“Were you twins?”

“I’m six years younger,” the woman said. “Which means right now I’m the same age as Anne was in that photograph. Like a virtual twin, maybe.”

“You look exactly like her.”

“I try to,” the woman said.

“It’s uncanny.”

“I try very hard.”

“Why?”

“Because it feels like I’m keeping her alive. Because I couldn’t, back when it mattered.”

“How could you have kept her alive?”

“We should talk,” the woman said. “My name is Patti Joseph.”

"We should talk," the woman said. "My name is Patti Joseph."

"Jack Reacher."

"Come with me," the woman said. "We have to double back. We can't go too near the Dakota."

She led him south through the park, to the exit at 66th Street. Across to the far sidewalk. Then north again, and into the lobby of a building at 115 Central Park West.

"Welcome to the Majestic," Patti Joseph said. "Best place I ever lived. And just wait until you see where my apartment is."

Reacher saw where it was five minutes later, after a walk down a corridor, and an elevator ride, and another walk down another corridor. Patti Joseph's apartment was on the Majestic's seventh floor, north side. Its living room window looked out over 72nd Street, directly at the Dakota's entrance. There was a dining chair placed in front of the sill, as if the sill was a desk. On the sill was a notebook. And a pen. And a Nikon camera with a long lens, and a pair of Leica 10x42 binoculars.

"What do you do here?" Reacher asked.

"First tell me what you do there," Patti said.

"I'm not sure I can."

"Do you work for Lane?"

"No, I don't."

Patti Joseph smiled.

"I didn't think you did," she said. "I told Brewer, you're not one of them. You're not like them. You weren't Special Forces, were you?"

"How did you know?"

"You're too big. You wouldn't have made it through the endurance hazing. Big men never do."

“I was an MP.”

“Did you know Lane in the service?”

“No, I didn’t.”

Patti Joseph smiled again.

“I thought not,” she said. “Otherwise you wouldn’t be there.”

“Who is Brewer?”

“NYPD.” She pointed at the notebook and the pen and the camera and the binoculars. A big, sweeping gesture. “I do all this for him.”

“You’re watching Lane and his guys? For the cops?”

“For myself, mostly. But I check in.”

“Why?”

“Because hope springs eternal.”

“Hope of what?”

“That he’ll slip up, and I’ll get something on him.”

Reacher stepped closer to the window and glanced at the notebook. The handwriting was neat. The last entry read: *2014 hrs. Burke returns alone, no bag, in black BMW OSC-23, enters TDA.*

“TDA?” Reacher asked.

“The Dakota Apartments,” Patti said. “It’s the building’s official name.”

“You ever see Yoko?”

“All the time.”

“You know Burke by name?”

“Burke was around when Anne was there.”

Burke was around when Anne was there.

The last-but-one entry read: *1859 hrs. Burke and Venti leave TDA in black BMW OSC-23, with bag, Venti concealed in rear.*

“Venti?” Reacher asked.

“That’s what I’ve been calling you. Like a code name.”

“Why?”

“Venti is the largest cup that Starbucks sells. Bigger than the others.”

“I like coffee,” Reacher said.

“I could make some.”

Reacher turned away from the window. The apartment was a small one-bedroom. Plain, neat, painted. Probably worth the best part of a million bucks.

“Why are you showing me all this?” he asked.

“A recent decision,” she said. “I decided to watch for new guys, and waylay them, and warn them.”

“About what?”

“About what Lane is really like. About what he did.”

“What did he do?”

“I’ll make coffee,” Patti said.

There was no stopping her. She ducked into a small pass-through kitchen and started fiddling with a machine. Pretty soon Reacher could smell coffee. He wasn’t thirsty. He had just drunk a whole bottle of water. But he liked coffee. He figured he could stay for a cup.

Patti called out, “No cream, no sugar, right?”

“How did you know that?”

“I trust my instincts,” she said.

And I trust mine, Reacher thought, although he wasn’t entirely sure what they were telling him right then.

“I need you to get to the point,” he said.

“OK,” Patti Joseph said. “I will.” And then she said: “Anne wasn’t kidnapped five years ago. That was just a cover story. Lane murdered her.”

CHAPTER **18**

PATTI JOSEPH BROUGHT Jack Reacher black coffee in a huge white Wedgwood mug. Twenty ounce. Venti. She set it on an oversized coaster and turned her back on him and sat on the dining chair at the window. Picked up the pen in her right hand and the binoculars in her left. They looked heavy. She held them the way a shot putter holds the big iron ball, balanced on her open palm, close to her neck.

"Edward Lane is a cold man," she said. "He demands loyalty and respect and obedience. He *needs* those things, like a junkie needs a fix. That's what this whole mercenary venture is about, really. He couldn't bear losing his command position, when he left the military. So he decided to re-create it all over again. He needs to give orders and have them obeyed. Like you or I need to breathe. He's borderline mentally ill, I think. Psychotic."

"And?" Reacher said.

"He ignores his stepdaughter. Have you noticed that?"

Reacher said nothing. *He didn't mention Jade had been taken until later,* he thought. *He had her cropped out of the picture in the living room.*

"My sister Anne wasn't very obedient," Patti said. "Nothing outrageous. Nothing unreasonable. But Edward Lane ran the marriage like a military operation. Anne couldn't handle it. And the more she chafed, the more Lane demanded discipline. It became his fetish."

"What did she see in him in the first place?"

"He can be charismatic. He's strong and silent. And intelligent, in a narrow way."

"What was she before?"

"A model."

Reacher said nothing.

“Yes,” Patti said. “Just like the next one.”

“What happened?”

“Between them they drove the marriage on the rocks. It was inevitable, I guess. One day she told me she wanted a divorce. I was all in favor of that, of course. It was the best thing for her. But she tried to do the whole drag-out knock-down thing. Alimony, division of assets, the whole nine yards. Which was the worst possible thing she could have done. I knew it was a mistake. I told her just to get the hell out while she still could. But she had brought money to the relationship. Lane had used it for part of his initial stake. Anne wanted her share back. But Lane couldn’t even handle the insubordination of his wife wanting out of the marriage. To be made to give her money as well was out of the question for him. And it would have been a public humiliation, because he would have had to go out and find another investor. So he went completely postal. He faked a kidnapping and had her killed.”

Silence for a moment.

“The police were involved,” Reacher said. “The FBI, too. There must have been a certain level of scrutiny.”

Patti turned around to face the room. Smiled, sadly.

“Here we go,” she said. “We’ve reached the point where the little sister is sounding a little crazy and obsessed. But obviously Lane planned it well. He made it seem very real.”

“How?”

“His men. He employs a bunch of killers. They’re all used to obeying orders. And they’re all smart. They all know how to do stuff like this. And they aren’t virgins. Every single one of them has been out on covert operations. And probably every single one of them has killed before, up close and personal.”

Reacher nodded. *No question about it. Every one of them has. Many times.*

“You got any particular suspects in mind?” he asked.

“None of the guys you’ve seen,” Patti said. “Nobody who’s still in the A-team. I

"None of the guys you've seen," Patti said. "Nobody who's still in the A-team. I don't think the dynamic would permit that. Not as time went by. I don't think it would be sustainable, psychologically. But I don't think he would have used B-teamers. He would have needed people he could have trusted completely."

"So who?"

"A-team guys who aren't around anymore."

"Who would be in that category?"

"There were two," Patti said. "A guy called Hobart and a guy called Knight."

"Why aren't they around anymore? Why would two trusted A-teamers just up and leave?"

"Shortly after Anne died there was an operation overseas somewhere. Apparently it went bad. Two men didn't come back. Those two."

"That would be a coincidence," Reacher said. "Wouldn't it? The two guilty men were the two who didn't come back?"

"I think Lane made sure they didn't come back. He needed to tidy things up."

Reacher said nothing.

"I know," Patti said. "The little sister is crazy, right?"

Reacher gazed at her. She didn't look crazy. A little spacey, maybe. In a sixties way, like her sister. She had a curtain of long blonde hair, straight, parted in the middle, just the same as Anne in the photograph. Big blue eyes, a button nose, a dusting of freckles, pale skin. She was wearing a white peasant blouse and faded blue jeans. She was barefoot and braless. You could have taken her picture and put it straight on the cover of a compilation CD. *The Summer of Love.* The Mamas and the Papas, Jefferson Airplane, Big Brother and the Holding Company. Reacher liked music like that. He had been seven during the Summer of Love, and he wished he had been seventeen.

"How do you think it went down?" he asked.

"Knight drove Anne that day," Patti said. "That's an established fact. He took

her shopping. Waited at the curb. But she never came out of the store. Next thing anyone knew was a phone call four hours later. The usual thing. No cops, a ransom demand."

"Voice?"

"Disguised."

"How?"

"Like the guy was talking through a handkerchief or something."

"How much was the ransom?"

"A hundred grand."

"But Lane did call the cops."

Patti nodded. "But only to cover his ass. It was like he wanted independent witnesses. Very important to retain his credibility with the other guys that weren't in on the scheme."

"Then what?"

"Like you see in the movies. The FBI tapped the phones and moved in on the ransom drop. Lane's story is that they were seen. But the whole thing was phony. They waited, nobody showed up, because nobody was ever going to show up. So they brought the money home again. It was all a performance. A charade. Lane acted it all out and came home and gave the word that he was in the clear, that the cops had bought the story, that the FBI was convinced, and then Anne was killed. I'm sure of that."

"Where was the other guy during all of this? Hobart?"

"Nobody knows for sure. He was off duty. He said he was in Philadelphia. But obviously he had been in the store, just waiting for Anne to show. He was the other half of the equation."

"Did you go to the cops at the time?"

"They ignored me," Patti said. "Remember, this all was five years ago, not long

after the Twin Towers. Everyone was preoccupied. And the military was suddenly back in fashion. You know, everyone was looking for their daddy, so people like Lane were the flavor of the month. Ex–Special Forces soldiers were pretty cool back then. I was fighting an uphill battle."

"What about this cop Brewer? Now?"

"He tolerates me. What else can he do? I'm a taxpayer. But I don't suppose he's doing anything about it. I'm realistic."

"You got any evidence against Lane at all?"

"No," Patti said. "None at all. All I've got is context and feeling and intuition. That's all I can share."

"Context?"

"Do you know what a private military corporation is really for? Fundamentally?"

"Fundamentally its purpose is to allow the Pentagon to escape Congressional oversight."

"Exactly," Patti said. "They're not necessarily better fighters than people currently enlisted. Often they're worse, and they're certainly more expensive. They're there to break the rules. Simple as that. If the Geneva Conventions get in the way, it doesn't matter to them, because nobody can call them on it. The government is insulated."

"You've studied hard," Reacher said.

"So what kind of a man is Lane to participate?"

"You tell me."

"He's a sordid egomaniac weasel."

"What do you wish you had done? To keep Anne alive?"

"I should have convinced her. I should have just gotten her out of there, penniless but alive."

“Not easy,” Reacher said. “You were the kid sister.”

“But I knew.”

“When did you move here?”

“About a year after Anne died. I couldn’t let it rest.”

“Does Lane know you’re here?”

She shook her head. “I’m very careful. And this city is incredibly anonymous. You can go years without ever laying eyes on your neighbor.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Do?”

“You brought me here for a purpose. And you took a hell of a risk doing it.”

“I think it’s time for me to take risks.”

“What do you want me to do?” Reacher repeated.

“I want you to just walk away from him. For your own sake. Don’t dirty your hands with his business. No possible good can come of it.”

Silence for a moment.

“And he’s dangerous,” Patti said. “More dangerous than you can know. It’s not smart to be anywhere near him.”

“I’ll be careful,” Reacher said.

“They’re all dangerous.”

“I’ll be careful,” Reacher said again. “I always am. But I’m going back there now. I’ll walk away on my own schedule.”

Patti Joseph said nothing.

“But I’d like to meet with this guy Brewer,” Reacher said.

“Why? Because you want to trade guy jokes about the nutty little sister?”

“No,” Reacher said. “Because if he’s any kind of a cop at all he’ll have checked with the original detectives and the FBI agents. He might have a clearer picture.”

“Clearer which way?”

“Whichever way,” Reacher said. “I’d like to know.”

“He might be here later.”

“Here?”

“He usually comes over after I phone in a report.”

“You said he wasn’t doing anything.”

“I think he just comes for the company. I think he’s lonely. He drops by, at the end of his shift, on his way home.”

“Where does he live?”

“Staten Island.”

“Where does he work?”

“Midtown.”

“So this isn’t exactly on his way home.”

Patti Joseph said nothing.

“When does his shift end?” Reacher asked.

“Midnight.”

“He visits you at midnight? Way out of his way?”

“I’m not involved with him or anything,” Patti said. “He’s lonely. I’m lonely. That’s all.”

Reacher said nothing.

Reacher said nothing.

“Make an excuse to get out,” Patti said. “Check my window. If Brewer’s here, the light will be on. If he isn’t, it won’t be.”

CHAPTER **19**

PATTI JOSEPH WENT back to her lonely vigil at the window and Reacher let himself out and left her there. He walked clockwise around her block for caution's sake and came up on the Dakota from the west. It was a quarter to ten in the evening. It was warm. There was music somewhere in the Park. Music and people, far away. It was a perfect late-summer night. Probably baseball up in the Bronx or out at Shea, a thousand bars and clubs just warming up, eight million people looking back on the day or looking forward to the next.

Reacher stepped inside the building.

The lobby staff called up to the apartment and let him go ahead to the elevator. He got out and turned the corner and found Gregory in the corridor, waiting for him.

"We thought you'd quit on us," Gregory said.

"Went for a walk," Reacher said. "Any news?"

"Too early."

Reacher followed him into the apartment. It smelled sour. Chinese food, sweat, worry. Edward Lane was in the armchair next to the phone. He was staring up at the ceiling. His face was composed. Next to him at the end of a sofa was an empty place. A dented cushion. Recently occupied by Gregory, Reacher guessed. Then came Burke, sitting still. And Addison, and Perez, and Kowalski. Carter Groom was leaning on the wall, facing the door, vigilant. Like a sentry. *I'm all business,* he had said.

"When will they call?" Lane asked.

Good question, Reacher thought. *Will they call at all? Or will you call them? And give them the OK to pull the triggers?*

But he said: "They won't call before eight in the morning. Drive time and counting time, it won't be any faster than that."

Lane glanced at his watch.

“Ten hours from now,” he said.

“Yes,” Reacher said.

Somebody will call somebody ten hours from now.

The first of the ten hours passed in silence. The phone didn’t ring. Nobody said a word. Reacher sat still and felt the chance of a happy outcome receding fast. He pictured the bedroom photograph in his mind and felt Kate and Jade moving away from him. Like a comet that had come close enough to Earth to be faintly visible but had then flung itself into a new orbit and was hurtling away into the frozen wastes of space and dwindling to a faint speck of light that would surely soon vanish forever.

“I did everything they asked,” Lane said, to nobody except himself.

Nobody replied.

The lone man surprised his temporary guests by moving toward the window, not the door. Then he surprised them more by using his fingernails to pick at the duct tape seam that held the cloth over the glass. He peeled the tape away from the wall until he was able to fold back a narrow rectangle of fabric and reveal a tall slim sliver of New York City at night. The famous view. A hundred thousand lit windows glittering against the darkness like tiny diamonds on a field of black velvet. Like nowhere else in the world.

He said, “I know you love it.”

Then he said, “But say goodbye to it.”

Then he said, “Because you’re never going to see it again.”

Halfway through the second hour Lane looked at Reacher and said, “There’s food in the kitchen, if you want some.” Then he smiled a thin humorless smile and said, “Or to be technically accurate there’s food in the kitchen whether you want some or not.”

Reacher didn’t want food. He wasn’t hungry. He had eaten a hot dog not long before. But he wanted to get the hell out of the living room. That was for sure. The atmosphere was like eight men sitting around a deathbed. He stood up.

“Thanks,” he said.

He walked quietly into the kitchen. Nobody followed him. There were dirty plates and a dozen open containers of Chinese food on the countertop. Half-eaten and cold and pungent and congealed. He left them alone and sat on a stool. Glanced to his right at the open office door. He could see the photographs on the desk. Anne Lane, identical to her sister Patti. Kate Lane, gazing fondly at the child that had been cut out of the picture.

He listened hard. No sound from the living room. Nobody coming. He got off the stool and stepped inside the office. Stood still for a moment. *Desk, computer, fax machine, phones, file cabinets, shelves.*

He started with the shelves.

There were maybe eighteen linear feet of them. There were phone books on them, and manuals for firearms, and a one-volume history of Argentina, and a book called *Glock: The New Wave in Combat Handguns,* and an alarm clock, and mugs full of pens and pencils, and an atlas of the world. The atlas was old. The Soviet Union was still in it. And Yugoslavia. Some of the African countries still had their former colonial identities. Next to the atlas there was a fat Rolodex full of five hundred index cards with names and phone numbers and MOS codes on them. *Military Occupational Specialties.* Most of them were 11-Bravo. Infantry. Combat arms. At random Reacher flipped to *G* and looked for Carter Groom. Not there. Then *B* for Burke. Not there, either. So clearly this was the B-team candidate pool. Some names had black lines through them with KIA or MIA notations written on the corners of the cards. *Killed in Action, Missing in*

Action. But the rest of the names were still in the game. Nearly five hundred guys, and maybe some women, ready and available and looking for work.

Reacher put the Rolodex back and touched the computer mouse. The hard drive started up and a dialog box on the screen asked for a password. Reacher glanced at the open door and tried *Kate.* Access was denied. He tried *O5LaneE* for Colonel Edward Lane. Same result. Access denied. He shrugged and gave it up. The password was probably the guy's birthday or his old service number or the name of his high school football team. No way of knowing, without further research.

He moved on to the file cabinets.

There were four of them, standard store-bought items made of painted steel. Maybe thirty inches high. Two drawers in each of them. Eight drawers total. Unlabeled. Unlocked. He stood still and listened again and then slid the first drawer open. It moved quietly on ball bearing runners. It had twin hanging rails with six file dividers made of thin yellow cardboard slung between them. All six were full of paperwork. Reacher used his thumb and riffed through. Glanced down, obliquely. Financial records. Money moving in and out. No amount bigger than six figures and none smaller than four. Otherwise, incomprehensible. He closed the drawer.

He opened the bottom drawer on the left. Same hanging rails. Same yellow dividers. But they were bulky with the kind of big plastic wallets that come in the glove boxes of new cars. Instruction books, warranty certificates, service records. Titles. Insurance invoices. BMW, Mercedes Benz, BMW, Jaguar, Mercedes Benz, Land Rover. Some had valet keys in see-through plastic envelopes. Some had spare keys and remote fobs on the kind of promotional keyrings that dealers give away. There were EZ-Pass toll records. Receipts from gas stations. Business cards from salesmen and service managers.

Reacher closed the drawer. Glanced back at the door. Saw Burke standing there, silent, just watching him.

CHAPTER **20**

BURKE DIDN'T SPEAK for a long moment. Then he said, "I'm going for a walk."

"OK," Reacher said.

Burke said nothing back.

"You want company?" Reacher asked.

Burke glanced at the computer screen. Then down at the file drawers.

"I'll keep you company," Reacher said.

Burke just shrugged. Reacher followed him out through the kitchen. Through the foyer. Lane glanced at them from the living room, briefly, preoccupied with his thoughts. He didn't say anything. Reacher followed Burke out to the corridor. They rode down in the elevator in silence. Stepped out to the street and turned east toward Central Park. Reacher looked up at Patti Joseph's window. It was dark. The room behind it was unlit. Therefore she was alone. He pictured her in the chair behind the sill, in the gloom. Pictured her pen scratching on her pad of paper. *2327 hrs., Burke and Venti leave TDA on foot, head east toward Central Park.* Or *CP*. A person who wrote *TDA* for the Dakota would write *CP* for Central Park, surely. And maybe she had dropped *Venti* and was using his real name now. He had told her what it was. Maybe she had written *Burke and Reacher leave TDA.*

Or maybe she was asleep. She had to sleep sometime.

"That question you asked," Burke said.

"What question?" Reacher said.

"Who knew Mrs. Lane loved Bloomingdale's?"

"What about it?"

“It was a good question,” Burke said.

“What’s the answer?”

“There’s another question,” Burke said.

“Which is?”

“Who knew she was heading there that particular morning?”

“I’m assuming you all knew,” Reacher said.

“Yes, I guess we all did, more or less.”

“Therefore it’s not much of a question.”

“I think there’s inside involvement,” Burke said. “Somebody tipped somebody off.”

“Was it you?”

“No.”

Reacher stopped at the crosswalk on Central Park West. Burke stopped beside him. He was as black as coal, a small man, about the size and shape of an old-fashioned Major League second baseman. A Hall of Famer. Like Joe Morgan. He had the same physical self-confidence in the way he held himself.

The light changed. The upright red hand blinked out and the forward-leaning white man came on. Reacher had always regretted the switch from the words *WALK* and *DONT WALK*. Given the choice, he preferred words to pictograms. And as a kid he had been scandalized by the bad punctuation. Ten thousand missing apostrophes in every city in America. It had been a secret thrill, to know better.

He stepped off the curb.

“What happened after Anne?” he asked.

“With the four guys who took her?” Burke said. “That’s strictly need-to-know.”

“I’m assuming you already know.”

"I'm guessing you helped out."

"No comment."

"Did they admit it?"

"No," Burke said. "They claimed it was nothing to do with them."

"But you didn't believe them."

"What else were they going to say?"

They reached the far sidewalk. The park loomed ahead of them, dark and empty. The music had ended.

"Where are we going?" Reacher asked.

"Doesn't matter," Burke said. "I just wanted to talk."

"About the insider involvement?"

"Yes."

They turned south together and headed for Columbus Circle. There were lights and traffic down there. Crowds on the sidewalks.

"Who do you think it was?" Reacher asked.

"I have no idea," Burke said.

"Then that's a pretty short conversation," Reacher said. "Isn't it? You wanted to talk, but you don't have much to talk about."

Burke said nothing.

"But who got tipped off?" Reacher asked. "Not who did the tipping. I think that would be the more important answer. And I think that's what you want to tell me."

Burke said nothing. Just walked on in silence.

"You as good as dragged me out here," Reacher said. "Not because you're

worried if I'm getting enough fresh air and exercise."

Burke stayed quiet.

"You going to make me play Twenty Questions?" Reacher said.

"That might be the best way to do it," Burke said.

"You think this is about the money?"

"No," Burke said.

"So the money is a smokescreen?"

"Half the equation at best. Maybe a parallel aim."

"The other half of the equation being punishment?"

"You got it."

"You think there's someone out there with a grudge against Lane?"

"Yes."

"One person?"

"No."

"How many?"

"Theoretically there might be hundreds," Burke said. "Or thousands. Whole nations, maybe. We've messed with a lot of people, here and there."

"Realistically?"

"More than one person," Burke said.

"Two?"

"Yes."

"What kind of a grudge?"

What kind of a grudge?

“What’s the worst thing one man can do to another?”

“Depends who you are,” Reacher said.

“Exactly,” Burke said. “So who are we?”

Reacher thought: *Navy SEALs, Delta Force, Recon Marines, Green Berets, SAS from Britain. The best in the world.*

“Special Forces soldiers,” he said.

“Exactly,” Burke said again. “So what don’t we do?”

“You don’t leave bodies behind on the battlefield.”

Burke said nothing.

“But Lane did,” Reacher said. “He left two bodies behind.”

Burke stopped on the north curve of Columbus Circle. Traffic roared all around. Headlight beams swept wild tangents. To the right, the tall silvery bulk of a brand-new building. A wide base blocking 59th Street and twin towers rising above.

“So what are you saying?” Reacher asked. “They had brothers or sons? Someone’s come out of the woodwork looking for revenge? Finally? On their behalf?”

“Doesn’t necessarily take brothers or sons,” Burke said.

“Buddies?”

“Doesn’t necessarily take buddies, either.”

“So who?”

Burke didn’t answer. Reacher stared at him.

“Christ,” he said. “You left two guys behind *alive*?”

“Not me,” Burke said. “Not us. It was Lane.”

“And you think they finally made it home?”

“I’m sure they would have tried hard.”

“Hobart and Knight,” Reacher said.

“You know their names.”

“Evidently.”

“How? Who have you been talking to? There’s nothing about them in those file cabinets you were looking through. Or in the computer. They’ve been erased. Like they never existed. Like they’re dirty little secrets. Which they are.”

“What happened with them?”

“They were wounded. According to Lane. We never saw them. They were in forward observation posts and we heard small arms fire. Lane went up the line and came back and said they were hit bad and couldn’t possibly make it. He said we couldn’t bring them in. He said we’d lose too many guys trying. He flat ordered us to pull out. We left them there.”

“And what do you suppose happened to them?”

“We assumed they’d be taken prisoner. In which case we assumed their life expectancy would be about a minute and a half.”

I think Lane made sure they didn’t come back.

“Where was this?” Reacher asked.

“I can’t tell you,” Burke said. “I’d go to jail.”

“Why did you stick around afterward? All this time?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Sounds like you’re unhappy with how things went down.”

“I

"I obey orders. And I let officers decide things. That's how it always was and that's how it always will be."

"Does he know they're back? Lane?"

"You're not listening," Burke said. "Nobody *knows* they're back. Nobody even knows if they're alive. I'm just guessing, is all. Based on how big of a deal this all is."

"Would they do it? Hobart and Knight? Hurt a woman and a child to put a scare into Lane?"

"You mean, is it justified? Of course it isn't. But would they do it? Hell yes, they would do it. Pragmatic people do what works. Especially after what Lane did to them."

Reacher nodded. "Who would be talking to them? From the inside?"

"I don't know."

"What were they?"

"Jarheads."

"Like Carter Groom."

"Yes," Burke said. "Like Carter Groom."

Reacher said nothing.

"Marines hate that," Burke said. "Especially Recon Marines. They hate leaving guys behind. More than anyone. It's their code."

"So why does *he* stick around?"

"Same reason I do. Ours is not to reason why. That's also a code."

"Maybe in the service," Reacher said. "Not necessarily in some half-assed private company."

"I don't see a difference."

“Well, you ought to, soldier.”

“Watch your mouth, pal. I’m helping you out here. I’m earning you a million bucks. You find Hobart and Knight, you find Kate and Jade, too.”

“You think?”

“Dollars to doughnuts. A *million* dollars to doughnuts. So watch your mouth.”

“I don’t need to watch my mouth,” Reacher said. “If you’ve still got a code, then I’m still an officer. I can say what I like and you can stand there and take it and salute.”

Burke turned away from the swirling river of traffic in front of him and headed back north. Reacher let him get five yards away and then caught up and fell in beside him. Nothing more was said. Ten minutes later they turned onto 72nd Street. Reacher glanced up and to his left. Patti’s Joseph’s window was blazing with light.

CHAPTER **21**

REACHER SAID, "YOU go on ahead. I'm going to walk some more."

"Why?" Burke asked.

"You gave me things to think about."

"You can't think unless you're walking?"

"No point looking for Hobart and Knight inside the apartment."

"That's for sure. They were erased."

"One more thing," Reacher said. "When did Lane and Kate get together?"

"Soon after Anne died. Lane doesn't like to be alone."

"Do they get along OK?"

"They're still married," Burke said.

"What does that mean?"

"It means they get along OK."

"How well?"

"Well enough."

"As well as he got along with Anne? The first time around?"

Burke nodded. "About the same."

"I'll see you later," Reacher said.

Reacher watched Burke disappear inside the Dakota and then moved on west, away from Patti Joseph's place. Routine caution, which paid off big time when he glanced back and saw Burke coming after him. Clearly Burke had turned around inside the Dakota's lobby and was trying a pretty poor imitation of a clandestine tail. He was sneaking along in the shadows, his black skin and his black clothes mostly invisible but lit up like a superstar every time he passed under a streetlight.

He doesn't trust me, Reacher thought.

A Delta noncom doesn't trust an MP.

Well, there's a big surprise.

Reacher walked to the end of the block and took the stairs down to the subway. To the northbound platform. Used his Metrocard at the turnstile. He figured Burke wouldn't have a Metrocard. Lane's people drove everywhere. In which case Burke would be hung up at the machine, swiping his credit card or feeding creased bills into the slot. In which case the tail would fail at the first hurdle. If a train came soon.

Which it didn't.

It was midnight, and the trains were well into their off-peak schedules. Average wait time was probably fifteen or twenty minutes. Reacher was ready to get lucky, but he didn't. He turned and saw Burke collect a brand-new card from the machine and hang back, just waiting.

Reacher thought: *He doesn't want to be on the platform with me. He's going to come through the turnstile at the last possible minute.*

Reacher waited. There were twelve people waiting with him. A knot of three, a knot of two, seven people on their own. Mostly they were well dressed. They were folks going home after movies or restaurant meals, heading back to cheaper rents in the hundreds or all the way up in Hudson Heights.

The tunnel stayed quiet. The air was warm. Reacher leaned on a pillar and waited. Then he heard the rails start their strange metallic keening. A train, half a mile away. He saw a faint light in the darkness and felt the push of hot air. Then

mile away. He saw a faint light in the darkness and felt the push of hot air. Then the noise built and twelve people on the platform shuffled forward.

Reacher shuffled backward.

He pressed himself into a maintenance recess the size of a phone booth. Stood still. A train rolled in, fast, long, loud, hissing and squealing. A 1 train, local. Shiny aluminum, bright windows. It stopped. People got off, people got on. Then Burke came through the turnstile and made it through the doors just before they closed. The train moved away, left to right, and Reacher saw Burke through the windows. He was walking forward, eyes front, hunting his quarry, car by car.

He would be all the way up in the Bronx, 242nd Street, Van Cortlandt Park, before he realized his quarry wasn't on the train at all.

Reacher came out of the recess and brushed dirt off the shoulders of his shirt. Headed for the exit and up to the street. He was down two bucks, but he was alone, which was what he wanted to be.

The doorman at the Majestic called upstairs and pointed Reacher toward the elevator. Three minutes later he was shaking hands with Brewer, the cop. Patti Joseph was in the kitchen, making coffee. She had changed her clothes. Now she was wearing a dark pant suit, prim and proper. She had shoes on. She came out of the kitchen with two mugs, the same huge Wedgwood items she had used before. She gave one to Brewer and one to Reacher and said, "I'll leave you guys to talk. May be easier if I'm not here. I'll go for a walk. Nighttime is about the only time it's safe for me to be out."

Reacher said, "Burke will be coming out of the subway in about an hour."

Patti said, "He won't see me."

Then she left, with a nervous glance back, as if her future was at stake. Reacher watched the door close behind her and turned and took a better look at Brewer. He was everything anyone would expect a New York City detective to be, except magnified a little. A little taller, a little heavier, longer hair, more unkempt, more energetic. He was about fifty. Or forty-something and

prematurely gray.

“What’s your interest here?” he asked.

“I crossed paths with Edward Lane,” Reacher said. “And I heard Patti’s story. So I want to know what I’m getting into. That’s all.”

“Crossed paths how?”

“Lane wants to hire me for something.”

“What’s your line of work?”

“I was in the army,” Reacher said.

“It’s a free country,” Brewer said. “You can work for whoever you want.”

Then he sat down on Patti Joseph’s sofa like he owned it. Reacher stayed away from the window. The light was on and he would be visible from the street. He leaned on the wall near the lobby and sipped his coffee.

“I was a cop once myself,” he said. “Military police.”

“Is that supposed to impress me?”

“Plenty of your guys came from the same place as me. Do they impress you?”

Brewer shrugged.

“I guess I can give you five minutes,” he said.

“Bottom line,” Reacher said. “What happened five years ago?”

“I can’t tell you that,” Brewer said. “Nobody in the NYPD can tell you that. If it was a kidnap, that’s FBI business, because kidnapping is a federal crime. If it was a straightforward homicide, then that’s New Jersey business, because the body was found on the other side of the George Washington Bridge, and it hadn’t been moved postmortem. Therefore it was never really our case. Therefore we never really developed an opinion.”

“So why are you here?”

“Community relations. The kid is hurting, and she needs an ear. Plus she’s cute and she makes good coffee. Why wouldn’t I be here?”

“Your people must have gotten copied in on the paperwork.”

Brewer nodded.

“There’s a file,” he said.

“What’s in it?”

“Cobwebs and dust, mostly. The only thing anyone knows for sure is that Anne Lane died five years ago in New Jersey. She was a month decomposed when they found her. Not a pretty sight, apparently. But there was a definitive dental identification. It was her.”

“Where was this?”

“A vacant lot near the Turnpike.”

“Cause of death?”

“Fatal GSW to the back of her head. Large-caliber handgun, probably a nine, but impossible to be precise. She was out in the open. Rodents had been in and out the bullet hole. And rodents aren’t dumb. They figure they’re going to get fat on the good stuff inside, so they widen the hole before they go in. The bone was gnawed. But it was probably a nine, probably jacketed.”

“I hope you didn’t tell Patti all of that.”

“What are you? Her big brother? Of course I didn’t tell her all of that.”

“Anything else at the scene?”

“There was a playing card. The three of clubs. Shoved down the neck of her shirt, from the back. No forensics worth a damn, nobody knew what it meant.”

“Was it like a signature?”

“Or a tease. You know, some random crap to make everyone go blind trying to figure it out.”

“So what do you think?” Reacher said. “Kidnap or murder?”

Brewer yawned. “No reason to look for complications. You hear hoof beats, you look for horses, not zebras. A guy calls in that his wife has been kidnapped, you assume it’s true. You don’t start assuming it’s a complex plot to do away with her. And it was all plausible. There were real phone calls, there was real cash money in a bag.”

“But?”

Brewer went quiet for a moment. Took a long pull on his mug of coffee, swallowed, exhaled, rested his head back on the sofa.

“Patti kinds of sucks you in,” he said. “You know? Sooner or later you have to admit it’s just as plausible the other way around.”

“Gut feeling?”

“I just don’t know,” Brewer said. “Which is a weird feeling in itself, for me. I mean, sometimes I’m wrong, but I always *know*.”

“So what are you doing about it?”

“Nothing,” Brewer said. “It’s an ice-cold case outside of our jurisdiction. Hell will freeze over before the NYPD voluntarily books another unsolved homicide.”

“But you keep on showing up here.”

“Like I said, the kid needs an ear. Grief is a long and complicated process.”

“You do this for all the relatives?”

“Only the ones that look like they belong in *Playboy* magazine.”

Reacher said nothing.

“What’s your interest here?” Brewer asked again.

“Like I said.”

“Bullshit. Lane was a combat soldier. Now he’s a mercenary. You’re not worried about whether he offed someone he shouldn’t have five years ago. Find me a guy like Lane who didn’t.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Something’s on your mind,” Brewer said.

Silence for a moment.

“One thing Patti told me,” Brewer said. “She hasn’t seen the new Mrs. Lane for a couple of days. Or the kid.”

Reacher said nothing.

Brewer said, “Maybe she’s missing and you’re looking for parallels in the past.”

Reacher stayed quiet.

Brewer said, “You were a cop, not a combat soldier. So now I’m wondering what kind of thing Edward Lane would want to hire you for.”

Reacher said nothing.

Brewer said, “Anything you want to tell me?”

“I’m asking,” Reacher said. “Not telling.”

More silence. A long hard look, cop to cop.

“As you wish,” Brewer said. “It’s a free country.”

Reacher finished his coffee and stepped into the kitchen. Rinsed his mug under the tap and left it in the sink. Then he leaned his elbows on the counter and stared straight ahead. The living room in front of him was framed by the pass-through. The high-backed chair was at the window. On the sill was the neat surveillance array. The notebook, the pen, the camera, the binoculars.

“So what do you do with the stuff she calls in? Just bury it?”

Brewer shook his head.

“I pass it on,” he said. “Outside the department. To someone with an interest.”

“Who?”

“A private detective, downtown. A woman. She’s cute, too. Older, but hey.”

“NYPD is working with private detectives now?”

“This one is in an unusual position. She’s retired FBI.”

“They’re all retired something.”

“This one was the lead agent on the Anne Lane case.”

Reacher said nothing.

Brewer smiled. “So like I said, this one has an interest.”

Reacher said, “Does Patti know?”

Brewer shook his head. “Better that Patti doesn’t. Better that Patti never finds out. It would make for a bad combination.”

“What’s this woman’s name?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” Brewer said.

CHAPTER **22**

REACHER LEFT PATTI Joseph's apartment with two business cards. One was Brewer's official NYPD issue and the other was an elegant item with *Lauren Pauling* engraved at the top and *Private Investigator* under the name. Then: *Ex–Special Agent, Federal Bureau of Investigation.* At the bottom was a downtown address, with 212 and 917 phone numbers for landline and cell, and e-mail, and a website URL. It was a busy card. But the whole thing looked crisp and expensive, professional and efficient. Better than Brewer's NYPD card, and better even than Gregory's OSC card.

Reacher tossed Brewer's card in a Central Park West trash can and put Lauren Pauling's in his shoe. Then he took a circuitous route back toward the Dakota. It was close to one o'clock in the morning. He circled the block and saw a cop car on Columbus Avenue. *Cops,* he thought. The word hung up in his mind the same way it had down in SoHo. The way a twig on a swirling current catches on a riverbank. He stopped walking and closed his eyes and tried to catch it. But it spun away again. He gave it up and turned onto 72nd Street. Turned in to the Dakota's lobby. The night crew doorman was a dignified old guy. He called upstairs and inclined his head like an invitation to proceed. On five Gregory was out in the corridor with the door open and ready. Reacher followed him inside and Gregory said, "Nothing yet. But we've got seven more hours."

The apartment was dead-of-night quiet and still smelled of Chinese food. Everyone was still in the living room. Except Burke. Burke wasn't back yet. Gregory looked full of energy and Lane was upright in a chair but the others were slumped in various tired poses. The lights were low and yellow and the drapes were drawn and the air was hot.

"Wait with us," Lane said.

"I need to sleep," Reacher said. "Three or four hours."

"Use Jade's room," Lane said.

Reacher nodded and headed off through the interior hallways to Jade's room. The nightlight was still burning. The room smelled faintly of baby powder and

clean skin. The bed was way too small for a guy Reacher's size. Too small for any guy, really. It was some kind of a half-sized piece, probably from a specialized children's boutique. There was an attached bathroom carved out of another maid's room. A sink, a toilet, a tub with a shower over it. The shower head was on a sliding pole. It was set about three feet above the drain hole. The shower curtain was clear plastic with yellow ducks on it.

Reacher slid the head all the way to the top and stripped and took a fast shower, with a cake of pink soap shaped like a strawberry, and baby shampoo. *No tears,* the bottle said. *I wish,* he thought. Then he dried himself on a small pink towel and put the tiny fragrant pajamas on a chair and took the pillow and the sheet and the comforter off the bed and made himself a bivouac on the floor. He cleared bears and dolls out of his way. The bears were all plush and new and the dolls looked untouched. He moved the desk a foot to one side to make room and all the papers fell off it. Drawings, in crayon on cheap paper. Trees, like bright green lollipops on brown sticks, with a big gray building beyond. The Dakota, from Central Park, maybe. There was another of three stick figures, one much smaller than the others. The family, maybe. Mother, daughter, stepfather. Mother and daughter were smiling but Lane was drawn with black holes in his mouth like someone had punched half his teeth out. There was a picture of an airplane low in the sky. Green earth below, a stripe of blue above, a yellow ball for the sun. The plane's fuselage was shaped like a sausage and had three portholes with faces in them. The wings were drawn as if from above. Like the plane was in a panic turn. The last picture was of the family again, but twice over. Two Lanes close together and side by side, two Kates, two Jades. It was like looking at the second picture again with double vision.

Reacher restacked the papers neatly and switched out the nightlight. Burrowed into the bedclothes. They covered him from his chest to his knees. He could smell baby shampoo. From his own hair, or from Jade's pillow. He wasn't sure. He set the alarm in his head for five in the morning. He closed his eyes, breathed once, breathed twice, and fell asleep, on a floor made hard and dense and solid by three feet of Central Park clay.

Reacher woke as planned at five o'clock in the morning, uncomfortable, still tired, and cold. He could smell coffee. He found Carter Groom in the kitchen,

next to a big Krups drip machine.

“Three hours to go,” Groom said. “Think they’re going to call?”

“I don’t know,” Reacher said. “Do you think they will?”

Groom didn’t reply. Just drummed his fingers on the counter as he waited for the machine to finish. Reacher waited with him. Then Burke came in. He looked like he hadn’t slept. He didn’t say anything. Nothing pleasant, nothing hostile. He just acted like the previous evening had never existed. Groom filled three mugs with coffee. Took one, and left the room. Burke took one and followed him. Reacher drank his sitting on the counter. The clock on the wall oven said five-ten. He figured it was a little slow. He felt it was closer to a quarter past.

Time for ex–Special Agent Lauren Pauling’s wake-up call.

He stopped in the living room on his way out. Lane was still in the same chair. Immobile. Still upright. Still composed. Still stoic. Real or phony, either way, it was one hell of a display of endurance. Gregory and Perez and Kowalski were asleep on sofas. Addison was awake but inert. Groom and Burke were drinking their coffee.

“I’m going out,” Reacher said.

“Another walk?” Burke asked, sourly.

“Breakfast,” Reacher said.

The old guy in the lobby was still on duty. Reacher nodded to him and turned right on 72nd and headed for Broadway. Nobody came after him. He found a pay phone and used coins from his pocket and the card from his shoe and dialed Pauling’s cell. He figured she would keep it switched on, top of her nightstand, near her pillow.

She answered on the third ring.

“Hello?” she said.

Rusty voice, not sleepy, just not yet used today. Maybe she lived alone.

Reacher asked, “You heard the name Reacher recently?”

“Should I have?” Pauling asked back.

“It will save us a lot of time if you just say yes. From Anne Lane’s sister Patti, through a cop called Brewer, am I right?”

“Yes,” Pauling said. “Late yesterday.”

“I need an early appointment,” Reacher said.

“You’re Reacher?”

“Yes, I am. Half an hour, at your office?”

“You know where it is?”

“Brewer gave me your card.”

“Half an hour,” Pauling said.

And so half an hour later Reacher was standing on a West 4th Street sidewalk, with a cup of coffee in one hand and a doughnut in the other, watching Lauren Pauling walk toward him.

CHAPTER **23**

REACHER KNEW IT was Lauren Pauling walking toward him because of the way her eyes were fixed on his face. Clearly Brewer had passed on his physical description as well as his name. So Pauling was looking for a tall, wide, blond, untidy man waiting near her office door, and Reacher was the only possibility that morning on West 4th Street.

Pauling herself was an elegant woman of about fifty. Or maybe a little more, in which case she was carrying it well. Brewer had said *she's cute too,* and he had been right. She was about an inch taller than average, dressed in a black pencil skirt that fell to her knees. Black hose, black shoes with heels. An emerald green blouse that could have been silk. A rope of big fake pearls at her neck. Hair frosted gold and blonde. It fell in big waves to her shoulders. Green eyes that smiled. A look on her face that said: *I'm very pleased to meet you but let's get straight to the good stuff.* Reacher could imagine the kind of team meetings she must have run for the Bureau.

"Jack Reacher, I presume," she said.

Reacher shoved his doughnut between his teeth and wiped his fingers on his pants and shook her hand. Then he waited at her shoulder as she unlocked her street door. Watched as she deactivated an alarm with a keypad in the lobby. The keypad was a standard three-by-three cluster with the zero alone at the bottom. She was right-handed. She used her middle finger, index finger, ring finger, index finger, without moving her hand much. Brisk, decisive motion. Like typing. *Probably 8461,* Reacher thought. *Dumb or distracted to let me see. Distracted, probably. She can't be dumb.* But it was the building's alarm. Not her personal choice of numbers. So she hadn't given away her home system or her ATM card.

"Follow me," she said.

Reacher followed her up a narrow staircase to the second floor. He finished his doughnut on the way. She unlocked a door and led him into an office. It was a two-room suite. Waiting room first, and then a back room for her desk and two visitor chairs. Very compact, but the décor was good. Good taste, careful

application. Full of the kind of expensive stuff a solo professional leases to create an impression of confidence in a client. A little bigger, it could have been a lawyer's place, or a cosmetic surgeon's.

"I spoke to Brewer," she said. "I called him at home after you called me. I woke him up. He wasn't very happy about that."

"I can imagine," Reacher said.

"He's curious about your motives."

Lauren Pauling's voice was low and husky, like she had been recovering from laryngitis for the last thirty years. Reacher could have sat and listened to it all day long.

"Therefore I'm curious, too," she said.

She pointed at a leather client chair. Reacher sat down in it. She squeezed sideways around the end of her desk. She was slender and she moved well. She turned her chair to face him. Sat down.

"I'm just looking for information," Reacher said.

"But why?"

"Let's see if it leads me to where I need to tell you."

"Brewer said you were a military cop."

"Once upon a time."

"A good one?"

"Is there any other kind?"

Pauling smiled, a little sadly, a little wistfully.

"Then you know you shouldn't be talking to me," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not a reliable witness. I'm hopelessly biased."

Because I'm not a reliable witness. I'm hopelessly biased.

"Why?"

"Think about it," she said. "Isn't it obvious? If Edward Lane didn't kill his wife, then who the hell did? Well, *I* did, that's who. Through my own carelessness."

CHAPTER **24**

REACHER MOVED IN his chair and said, “Nobody scores a hundred percent. Not in the real world. Not me, not you, not anybody. So get over it.”

“That’s your response?” Pauling said.

“I probably got more people killed than you ever met. I don’t beat myself up over them. Shit happens.”

Pauling nodded. “It’s the sister. She’s up there in that weird little aerie all the time. She’s like my conscience.”

“I met her,” Reacher said.

“She weighs on my mind.”

“Tell me about the three of clubs,” Reacher said.

Pauling paused, like a gear change.

“We concluded it was meaningless,” she said. “There had been a book or a movie or something where assassins left calling cards. So we tended to get a lot of that at the time. But usually they were picture cards. Mostly aces, mostly spades. There was nothing in the databases about threes. Not much about clubs, either. Then we thought maybe this was one of three connected things, you know, but there was never anything else similar to put with it. We studied symbolism and number theory. We checked with UCLA, talked to the people who study gang culture. Nothing there. We talked to semiotics people at Harvard and Yale and the Smithsonian. We talked to Wesleyan in Connecticut, got some linguistics person working on it. Nothing there. We had a grad student at Columbia working on it. We had people with brains the size of planets working on it. Nothing anywhere. So the three of clubs meant nothing. It was designed to make us chase our tails. Which in itself was a meaningless conclusion. Because what we needed to know was who would *want* us to chase our tails.”

“Did you look at Lane back then? Even before you heard Patti’s theories?”

Pauling nodded. “We looked at him very carefully, and all his guys. More from the point of view of threat assessment, back then. Like, who knew him? Who knew he had money? Who even knew he had a wife?”

“And?”

“He’s not a very pleasant man. He’s borderline mentally ill. He has a psychotic need to command.”

“Patti Joseph says the same things.”

“She’s right.”

“And you know what?” Reacher said. “His men are mostly a couple of sandwiches short of a picnic, too. They’ve got a psychotic need to be commanded. I’ve talked to some of them. They’re civilians, but they’re holding fast to their old military codes. Like security blankets. Even when they don’t really enjoy the results.”

“They’re a weird bunch. All Special Forces and black ops, so naturally the Pentagon wasn’t very forthcoming. But we noticed two things. Most of them had been around the block many, many times, but there were far fewer medals among them than you would normally expect to see. And most of them got general discharges. Not honorable discharges. Including Lane himself. What do you think all of that means?”

“I suspect you know exactly what it means.”

“I’d like to hear it from your professional perspective.”

“It means they were bad guys. Either low-level and irritating, or bigger deals but with charges not proven.”

“What about the lack of medals?”

“Messy campaigns,” Reacher said. “Gratuitous collateral damage, looting, prisoner abuse. Maybe prisoners got shot. Maybe buildings got burned.”

“And Lane himself?”

“Ordered abuse or failed to prevent it. Or maybe participated in it. He told me he

quit after the Gulf the first time around. I was there. There were pockets of bad behavior."

"Stuff like that can't be proved?"

"Special Forces operate on their own miles from anywhere. It's a clandestine world. There would have been rumors, that's all. Maybe a whistleblower or two. But no hard evidence."

Pauling nodded again. "Those were our conclusions. Internally generated. We employed a lot of ex-military in the Bureau."

"Employed," Reacher said. "You employed the good ones. The ones with honorable discharges and medals and recommendations."

"Is that what you got?"

"All of the above. But I had a couple of promotion hiccups, because I'm not a very cooperative guy. Gregory asked me about that. The first one of them I spoke to. The first conversation we had. He asked if I'd had career problems. He seemed happy that I had."

"Puts you in the same boat."

Reacher nodded. "And it kind of explains why they're sticking with Lane. Where else are they going to get twenty-five grand a month with their records?"

"Is that what they get? That's three hundred thousand a year."

"It was back when I learned math."

"Is that what Lane offered you? Three hundred grand?"

Reacher said nothing.

"What is he hiring you for?"

Reacher said nothing.

"What's on your mind?"

“We’re not done with the information yet.”

“Anne Lane died, five years ago, in a vacant lot near the New Jersey Turnpike. That’s all the hard data we’ll ever have.”

“Gut feeling?”

“What’s yours?”

Reacher shrugged. “Brewer said something to me. He said he just didn’t know, which was weird for him, he said, because whereas he was sometimes wrong, he always *knew*. And I’m exactly the same. I always know. Except this time I don’t know. So what’s on my mind right now is that I have nothing on my mind.”

“I think it was a genuine kidnap,” Pauling said. “I think I blew it.”

“Do you?”

She paused a beat. Shook her head.

“Not really,” she said. “Truthfully, I just don’t know. God knows I *want* Lane to have done it. Obviously. And maybe he did. But for the sake of my sanity I have to acknowledge that’s mostly wishful thinking, to excuse myself. And I have to file the whole thing somewhere, mentally. So I tend to come down on the side of avoiding self-indulgence and cheap consolation. And usually the simple option is the right option anyway. So it was a simple kidnap, not an elaborate charade. And I blew it.”

“How did you blow it?”

“I don’t know. I’ve lain awake a hundred nights going over it. I don’t see how I made a mistake.”

“So maybe you didn’t blow it. Maybe it *was* an elaborate charade.”

“What’s on your mind, Reacher?”

He looked at her.

“Whatever it was, it’s happening again,” he said.

CHAPTER **25**

LAUREN PAULING SAT forward in her chair and said, “Tell me.” So Reacher told her, everything, from the first night in the café, the first double espresso in its foam cup, the badly parked Mercedes Benz, the anonymous driver threading through the Sixth Avenue traffic on foot and then driving the Benz away. The second day, with Gregory scouting witnesses. The third day, with the unopened red door and the blue BMW. And then the nightmare electronic voice, guiding the black BMW back to the exact same fireplug.

“If that’s a charade it’s unbelievably elaborate,” Pauling said.

“My feeling exactly,” Reacher said.

“And insanely expensive.”

“Maybe not,” Reacher said.

“You mean because the money comes around in a big circle?”

“I haven’t actually seen any money. All I’ve seen are zippered bags.”

“Cut up newspaper?”

“Maybe,” Reacher said. “If it’s a charade.”

“What if it isn’t?”

“Exactly.”

“It feels real.”

“And if it isn’t real, I can’t imagine who’s doing it. He would need people he trusts, which means A-teamers, but there’s nobody AWOL.”

“Were they getting along? Man and wife?”

“Nobody says otherwise.”

“So it’s real.”

Reacher nodded. “There’s an internal consistency to it. The initial takedown must have depended on an inside tip, as to where Kate and Jade were going to be, and when. And we can prove that inside involvement two ways. First, these people know something about Lane’s operation. They know exactly what cars he’s got, for instance.”

“And second?”

“Something that was nagging at me. Something about cops. I asked Lane to repeat what was said during the first phone call. And he did, word for word. And the bad guys never said *no cops.* That’s kind of standard, isn’t it? Like, *Don’t go to the cops.* But that was never said. Which suggests these people knew the story from five years ago. They knew Lane wouldn’t go to the cops anyway. So it didn’t need saying.”

“That would suggest that five years ago was for real.”

“Not necessarily. It might only reflect what Lane put out there for public consumption.”

“If it’s real this time, does that make it more likely it was real last time?”

“Maybe, maybe not. But whatever, give yourself a break.”

“This is like a hall of fun house mirrors.”

Reacher nodded. “But there’s one thing I can’t make fit under any scenario. Which is the initial takedown itself. The only viable method would have been quick and dirty inside the car, as soon as it stopped. Everyone agrees on that. I asked a couple of Lane’s guys, theoretically, in case there was something I hadn’t thought of. But there wasn’t. And the problem is, Bloomingdale’s is a whole block long. How could anyone have predicted exactly what yard of Lexington Avenue Taylor’s Jaguar was going to stop on? And if they didn’t predict it exactly right, then the whole thing would have fallen apart immediately, there and then. Either Kate and Jade would have been out on the sidewalk already, or Taylor would have seen the takedown guy running up, in which case he would have reacted and taken off. Or at least hit the door locks.”

“So what are you saying?”

So what are you saying?

“I’m saying real or fake there’s something wrong with this whole thing. I’m saying I can’t get a handle on what happened. I can’t get traction. I’m saying for the first time in my life I just don’t know. Like Brewer said, I’ve been wrong plenty of times, but I’ve always known before.”

“You should talk to Brewer, officially.”

“No point. NYPD can’t do anything without a complaint from Lane. Or at least a missing person report from someone with an interest.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to have to do it the hard way,” Reacher said.

“What way is that?”

“It’s what we called it in the service when we didn’t catch a break. When we actually had to work for a living. You know, start over at square one, re-examine everything, sweat the details, work the clues.”

“Kate and Jade are probably already dead.”

“Then I’ll make someone pay.”

“Can I help?”

“I need to know about two guys called Hobart and Knight.”

Pauling nodded. “Knight was the driver the day Anne was taken and Hobart was in Philadelphia. Now Patti Joseph talks about them. They died overseas.”

“Maybe they didn’t die overseas. They were abandoned wounded but alive. I need to know where, when, how, and what’s likely to have happened to them.”

“You think they’re alive? You think they’re back?”

“I don’t know what to think. But at least one of Lane’s guys wasn’t sleeping too well last night.”

“I met Hobart and Knight, you know. Five years ago. During the investigation.”

Filet Hobart and Knight, you know. Five years ago. During the investigation.

“Did either of them look like the guy I saw?”

“Medium-sized and ordinary-looking? Both of them, exactly.”

“That helps.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“I’m going back to the Dakota. Maybe we’ll get a call and this whole thing will be over. But more likely we won’t, and it’s just beginning.”

“Give me three hours,” Pauling said. “Then call my cell.”

CHAPTER **26**

BY THE TIME Reacher got back to the Dakota it was seven o'clock and dawn had given way to full morning. The sky was a pale hard blue. No cloud. Just a beautiful late-summer day in the capital of the world. But inside the fifth floor apartment the air was foul and hot and the drapes were still drawn. Reacher didn't need to ask whether the phone had rung. Clearly it hadn't. The tableau was the same as it had been nine hours earlier. Lane upright in his chair. Then Gregory, Groom, Burke, Perez, Addison, Kowalski, all silent, all morose, all arrayed here and there, eyes closed, eyes open, staring into space, breathing low.

Medals not approved.

General discharges.

Bad guys.

Lane turned his head slowly and looked straight at Reacher and asked, "Where the hell have you been?"

"Breakfast," Reacher said.

"Long breakfast. What was it, five courses at the Four Seasons?"

"A diner," Reacher said. "Bad choice. Slow service."

"I pay you to work. I don't pay you to be out stuffing your face."

"You don't pay me at all," Reacher said. "I haven't seen dime one yet."

Lane kept his body facing forward and his head turned ninety degrees to the side. Like a querulous sea bird. His eyes were dark and wet and glittering.

"Is *that* your problem?" he asked. "Money?"

Reacher said nothing.

"That's easily solved," Lane said.

He kept his eyes on Reacher's face and put his hands on the chair arms, palms down, pale parchment skin ridged with tendons and veins ghostly in the yellow light. He levered himself upright, with an effort, like it was the first time he had moved in nine hours, which it probably was. He stood unsteadily and walked toward the lobby, stiffly, shuffling like he was old and infirm.

"Come," he said. Like a command. Like the colonel he had been. Reacher followed him to the master bedroom suite. The pencil post bed, the armoire, the desk. The silence. The photograph. Lane opened his closet. The narrower of the two doors. Inside was a shallow recess, and then another door. To the left of the inner door was a security keypad. It was the same type of three-by-three-plus-zero matrix as Lauren Pauling had used at her office. Lane used his left hand. Index finger, curled. Ring finger, straight. Middle finger, straight. Middle finger, curled. *3785,* Reacher thought. *Dumb or distracted to let me see.* The keypad beeped and Lane opened the inner door. Reached inside and pulled a chain. A light came on and showed a chamber maybe six feet by three. It was stacked with cube-shaped bales of something wrapped tight in heavy heat-shrunk plastic. Dust and foreign printing on the plastic. At first Reacher didn't know what he was looking at.

Then he realized: The printing was French, and it said *Banque Centrale.*

Central Bank.

Money.

U.S. dollars, bricked and banded and stacked and wrapped. Some cubes were neat and intact. One was torn open and spilling bricks. The floor was littered with empty plastic wrap. It was the kind of thick plastic that would take real effort to tear. You would have to jam a thumbnail through and hook your fingers in the hole and really strain. It would stretch. It would part reluctantly.

Lane bent at the waist and dragged the open bale out into the bedroom. Then he lifted it and swung it through a small arc and let it fall on the floor near Reacher's feet. It skidded on the shiny hardwood and two slim bricks of cash fell out.

"There you go," Lane said. "Dime one."

Reacher said nothing.

“Pick it up,” Lane said. “It’s yours.”

Reacher said nothing. Just moved away to the door.

“Take it,” Lane said.

Reacher stood still.

Lane bent down again and picked up a spilled brick. He hefted it in his hand. Ten thousand dollars. A hundred hundreds.

“Take it,” he said again.

Reacher said, “We’ll talk about a fee if I get a result.”

“Take it!” Lane screamed. Then he hurled the brick straight at Reacher’s chest. It struck above the breastbone, dense, surprisingly heavy. It bounced off and hit the floor. Lane picked up the other loose brick and threw it. It hit the same spot.

“Take it!” he screamed.

Then he bent down and plunged his hands into the plastic and started hauling out one brick after another. He threw them wildly, without pausing, without straightening, without looking, without aiming. They hit Reacher in the legs, in the stomach, in the chest, in the head. Wild random salvos, ten thousand dollars at a time. A torrent. Real agony in the force of the throws. Then there were tears streaming down Lane’s face and he was screaming uncontrollably, panting, sobbing, gasping, punctuating each wild throw with: *Take it! Take it!* Then: *Get her back! Get her back! Get her back!* Then: *Please! Please!* There was rage and pain and hurt and fear and anger and loss in every desperate yelp.

Reacher stood there smarting slightly from the multiple impacts, with hundreds of thousands of dollars littered at his feet, and he thought: *Nobody’s that good of an actor.*

He thought: *This time it’s real.*

CHAPTER **27**

REACHER WAITED IN the inner hallway and listened to Lane calm down. He heard the sink running in the bathroom. *Washing his face,* he thought. *Cold water*. He heard the scrape of paper on hardwood and the quiet crackle of plastic as the bale of cash was reassembled. He heard Lane drag the bale back into the inner closet. He heard the door close, and he heard the keypad beep to confirm it was locked. Then he walked back to the living room. Lane followed a minute later and sat down in his chair, quietly, calmly, like nothing at all had happened, and stared at the silent phone.

It rang just before seven forty-five. Lane snatched it out of the cradle and said "Yes?" in a voice that was a shout strangled to almost nothing by sheer tension. Then his face went blank and he shook his head in impatience and irritation. *Wrong caller.* He listened for ten seconds more and hung up.

"Who was it?" Gregory asked.

"Just a friend," Lane said. "A guy I reached out to earlier. He's had his ear to the ground for me. Cops found a body in the Hudson River this morning. A floater. At the 79th Street boat basin. Unidentified white male, maybe forty years old. Shot once."

"Taylor?"

"Has to be," Lane said. "The river is quiet up there. And it's an easy detour off the West Side Highway, at the boat basin. Ideal for someone heading north."

Gregory asked: "So what do we do?"

"Now?" Lane said. "Nothing. We wait here. We wait for the right phone call. The one we want."

It never came. Ten long hours of anticipation ended at eight o'clock in the morning and the phone did not ring. It did not ring at eight-fifteen, or eight-thirty, or eight forty-five. It did not ring at nine o'clock. It was like waiting for a stay of execution from the Governor's mansion that never came. Reacher thought that a defense team with an innocent client must run through the same range of emotions: puzzlement, anxiety, shock, disbelief, disappointment, hurt, anger, outrage.

Then despair.

The phone did not ring at nine-thirty.

Lane closed his eyes and said, "Not good."

Nobody replied.

By a quarter to ten in the morning all the resolve had leaked out of Lane's body like he had accepted something inevitable. He sank into the chair cushion and laid his head back and opened his eyes and stared up at the ceiling.

"It's over," he said. "She's gone."

Nobody spoke.

"She's gone," Lane said again. "Isn't she?"

Nobody answered. The room was totally silent. Like a wake, or the bloodstained site of a fatal and tragic accident, or a funeral, or a service of remembrance, or an ER trauma room after a failed operation. Like a heart monitor that had been beeping bravely and resolutely against impossible odds had just abruptly gone quiet.

Flatline.

At ten o'clock in the morning Lane raised his head off the back of the chair and said, "OK." Then he said it again: "OK." Then he said, "Now we move on. We do what we have to do. We seek and destroy. As long as it takes. But justice will be done. Our kind of justice. No cops, no lawyers, no trials. No appeals. No process, no prison, no painless lethal injections."

Nobody spoke.

"For Kate," Lane said. "And for Taylor."

Gregory said, "I'm in."

"All the way," Groom said.

"Like always," Burke said.

Perez nodded. "To the death."

"I'm there," Addison said.

"I'll make them wish they had never been born," Kowalski said.

Reacher checked their faces. Six men, less than a rifle company, but with a whole army's worth of lethal determination.

"Thank you," Lane said.

Then he sat forward, newly energized. He turned to face Reacher directly. "Almost the first thing you ever said in this room was that these guys of mine could start a war against them, but first we had to find them. Do you remember that?"

Reacher nodded.

"So find them," Lane said.

Reacher detoured via the master bedroom and picked up the framed photograph from the desk. The inferior print. The one with Jade in it. He held it carefully so as not to smudge the glass. Looked at it, long and hard. *For you*, he thought. *For both of you. Not for him.* Then he put the photograph back and walked quietly out of the apartment.

Seek and destroy.

He started at the same pay phone he had used before. Took the card out of his shoe and dialed Lauren Pauling's cell. Said, "It's real this time and they're not coming back."

She said, "Can you be at the United Nations in half an hour?"

CHAPTER **28**

REACHER COULDN'T GET close to the U.N. Building's entrance because of security, but he saw Lauren Pauling waiting for him in the middle of the First Avenue sidewalk. Clearly she had the same problem. No pass, no clearance, no magic words. She had a printed scarf around her shoulders. She looked good. She was ten years older than him, but he liked what he saw. He started toward her and then she saw him and they met in the middle.

"I called in a favor," she said. "We're meeting with an army officer from the Pentagon who liaises with one of the U.N. committees."

"On what subject?"

"Mercenaries," Pauling said. "We're supposed to be against them. We signed all kinds of treaties."

"The Pentagon loves mercenaries. It employs them all the time."

"But it likes them to go where it sends them. It doesn't like them to fill their down time with unauthorized sideshows."

"Is that where they lost Knight and Hobart? On a sideshow?"

"Somewhere in Africa," Pauling said.

"Does this guy have the details?"

"Some of them. He's reasonably senior, but he's new. He's not going to tell you his name, and you're not allowed to ask. Deal?"

"Does he know my name?"

"I didn't tell him."

"OK, that sounds fair."

Then her cell phone chimed. She answered it and listened and looked around.

“He’s in the plaza,” she said. “He can see us but he doesn’t want to walk right up to us. We have to go to a coffee shop on Second. He’ll follow.”

The coffee shop was one of those mostly brown places that survive on equal parts counter trade, booth trade, and to-go coffee in cardboard cups with Greek decoration on them. Pauling led Reacher to a booth all the way in back and sat so she could watch the door. Reacher slid in next to her. He never sat any other way than with his back to a wall. Long habit, even in a place with plenty of mirrors, which the coffee shop had. They were tinted bronze and made the narrow unit look wide. Made everyone look tan, like they were just back from the beach. Pauling waved to the waitress and mouthed *coffee* and held up three fingers. The waitress came over and dumped three heavy brown mugs on the table and filled them from a Bunn flask.

Reacher took a sip. Hot, strong, and generic.

He made the Pentagon guy before he was even in through the door. There was no doubt about what he was. Army, but not necessarily a fighting man. Maybe just a bureaucrat. Dull. Not old, not young, corn-colored buzz cut, cheap blue wool suit, white broadcloth button-down shirt, striped tie, good shoes polished to a mirror shine. A different kind of uniform. It was the kind of outfit a captain or a major would wear to his sister-in-law’s second wedding. Maybe this guy had bought it for that very purpose, long before a spell of résumé-building temporary detached duty in New York City appeared in his future.

The guy paused inside the door and looked around. *Not looking for us,* Reacher thought. *Looking for anyone else who knows him. If he sees somebody, he’ll fake a phone call and turn around and leave. Doesn’t want any awkward questions later. He’s not so dumb after all.*

Then he thought: *Pauling’s not so dumb, either. She knows people who can get in trouble just by being seen with the wrong folks.*

But the guy evidently saw nothing to worry about. He walked on back and slid in opposite Pauling and Reacher and after a brief glance at each of their faces he centered his gaze between their heads and kept his eyes on the mirror. Up close

Reacher saw that he was wearing a black subdued-order crossed-pistols lapel pin and that he had mild scarring on one side of his face. Maybe grenade or IED shrapnel at maximum range. Maybe he *had* been a fighting man. Or maybe it was a childhood shotgun accident.

“I don’t have much for you,” the guy said. “Private-enterprise Americans fighting overseas are rightly considered to be very bad news, especially when they go fight in Africa. So this stuff is very compartmentalized and need-to-know and it was before my time, so I simply don’t know very much about it. So all I can give you is what you can probably guess anyway.”

“Where was it?” Reacher asked.

“I’m not even sure of that. Burkina Faso or Mali, I think. One of those small West African places. Frankly there are so many of them in trouble it’s hard to keep track. It was the usual deal. Civil war. A scared government, a bunch of rebels ready to come out of the jungle. An unreliable military. So the government pays through the nose and buys what protection it can on the international market.”

“Does one of those countries speak French?”

“As their official language? Both of them. Why?”

“I saw some of the money. In plastic wrap printed in French. *Banque Centrale*, Central Bank.”

“How much?”

“More than you or I would earn in two lifetimes.”

“U.S. dollars?”

Reacher nodded. “Lots of them.”

“Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t.”

“Did it work this time?”

“No,” the guy said. “The story that did the rounds was that Edward Lane took the money and ran. Can’t blame him for running, I guess. They were hopelessly

outnumbered and strategically weak."

"But not everyone got out."

The guy nodded. "It seemed that way. But getting information out of those places is like trying to get a radio signal from the dark side of the moon. It's mostly silence and static. And when it isn't, it's faint and garbled. So usually we rely on the Red Cross or Doctors Without Borders. And eventually we got a solid report that two Americans had been captured. A year later we got names. It was Knight and Hobart. Recon Marines back in the day, mixed records."

"It surprises me that they stayed alive."

"The rebels won. They became the new government. They emptied the jails, because the jails were full of their buddies. But a government needs full jails, to keep the population scared. So the old good guys became the new bad guys. Anyone who had worked for the old regime was suddenly in big trouble. And a couple of Americans were like trophies. So they were kept alive. But they suffered very cruelly. The Doctors Without Borders report was horrific. Appalling. Mutilation for sport was a fact of life."

"Details?"

"I guess there are lots of bad things a man can do with a knife."

"You didn't think about a rescue attempt?"

"You're not listening," the guy said. "The State Department can't admit that there are bunches of renegade American mercenaries running wild in Africa. And like I told you, the rebels became the new government. They're in charge now. We have to be nice to them. Because all those places have got stuff that we want. There's oil, and diamonds, and uranium. Alcoa needs tin and bauxite and copper. Halliburton wants to get in there and make a buck. Corporations from Texas want to get in there and run those same damn jails."

"Anything about what happened in the end?"

"It's sketchy, but you can join the dots. One died in captivity, but the other one got out, according to the Red Cross. Some kind of humanitarian gesture that the Red Cross pushed for, to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the coup. They let out

a whole bunch. End of story. That's all the news there is from Africa. One died and one got out, relatively recently. But then, if you do some detective work and jump to the INS, you find a lone individual entering the U.S. from Africa shortly afterward on Red Cross documentation. And then, if you jump to the Veterans Administration, there's a report of someone just back from Africa getting the kind of remedial outpatient care that might be consistent with tropical diseases and some of the mutilations that DWB reported on."

Reacher asked, "Which one got out?"

"I don't know," the guy said. "All I've heard is that one got out and the other didn't."

"I need more than that."

"I told you, the initial event was before my time. I'm not specifically in the loop. All I've got is water-cooler stuff."

"I need his name," Reacher said. "And I need his address, from the VA."

"That's a tall order," the guy said. "I would have to go way beyond my remit. And I would need a very good reason to do that."

"Look at me," Reacher said.

The guy took his eyes off the mirror and glanced at Reacher.

Reacher said, "Ten-sixty-two."

No reaction.

Reacher said, "So don't be an asshole. Pony up, OK?"

The guy looked at the mirror again. Nothing in his face.

"I'll call Ms. Pauling's cell," he said. "When, I don't know. I just can't say. It could be days. But I'll get what I can as soon as I can."

Then he slid out of the booth and walked straight to the door. Opened it and made a right turn and was lost to sight. Lauren Pauling breathed out.

"You could have given me a little more than that."

¨You pushed him,´´ she said. ¨You were a little rude there.´´

“But he’s going to help.”

“Why? What was that ten-sixty-two thing?”

“He was wearing a military police lapel pin. The crossed pistols. MP is his day job. Ten-sixty-two is MP radio code for *fellow officer in trouble, requests urgent assistance.* So he’ll help. He has to. Because if one MP won’t help another, who the hell will?”

“Then that’s a lucky break. Maybe you won’t have to do it all the hard way.”

“Maybe. But he’s going to be slow. He seemed a little timid. Me, I’d have busted straight into somebody’s file cabinet. But he’s going to go through channels and ask nicely.”

“Maybe that’s why he’s getting promoted and you didn’t.”

“A timid guy like that won’t get promoted. He’s probably terminal at major.”

“He’s already a Brigadier General,” Pauling said. “Actually.”

“That guy?” Reacher stared at the door, as if it might have retained an after-image. “He was kind of young, wasn’t he?”

“No, you’re kind of old,” Pauling said. “Everything is comparative. But putting a Brigadier General on it shows how seriously the U.S. is taking this mercenary stuff.”

“It shows how seriously we’re whitewashing it.”

Silence for a moment.

“Mutilation for sport,” Pauling said. “Sounds horrible.”

“Sure does.”

Silence again. The waitress came over and offered refills of coffee. Pauling declined, Reacher accepted. Said, “NYPD found an unexplained body in the river this morning. White male, about forty. Up near the boat basin. Shot once. I just got a call.”

Lane got a call.

“Taylor?”

“Almost certainly.”

“So what next?”

“We work with what we’ve got,” Reacher said. “We adopt the theory that Knight or Hobart came home with a grudge.”

“How do we proceed?”

“With hard work,” Reacher said. “I’m not going to hold my breath on getting anything from the Pentagon. However many scars and stars he’s got, that guy’s a bureaucrat at heart.”

“Want to talk it through? I was an investigator once. A good one, too. I thought so anyway. Until, you know, what happened.”

“Talking won’t help. I need to think.”

“So think out loud. What doesn’t fit? What’s out of place? What surprised you in any way at all?”

“The initial takedown. That doesn’t work at all.”

“What else?”

“Everything. What surprises me is that I can’t get anywhere with anything. There’s either something wrong with me, or there’s something wrong with this whole situation.”

“That’s too big,” Pauling said. “Start small. Name one thing that surprised you.”

“Is this what you did? In the FBI? In your brainstorming sessions?”

“Absolutely. Didn’t you?”

“I was an MP. I was lucky to find anyone with a brain to storm.”

“Seriously. Name one thing that surprised you.”

Reacher sipped his coffee. *She's right,* he thought. *There's always something out of context even before you know what the context ought to be.*

"Just one thing," Pauling said again. "At random."

Reacher said, "I got out of the black BMW after Burke had switched the bag into the Jaguar and I was surprised how fast the guy was into the driver's seat. I figured I would have time to stroll around the corner and set up a position. But he was right there, practically on top of me. A few seconds, maximum. I barely got a glimpse of him."

"So what does that mean?"

"That he was waiting right there on the street."

"But he wouldn't risk that. If he was Knight or Hobart, Burke would have recognized him in a heartbeat."

"Maybe he was in a doorway."

"Three times running? He used that same fireplug on three separate occasions. At three different times of day. Late night, early morning, rush hour. And he might be memorable, depending on the mutilation."

"The guy I saw wasn't memorable at all. He was just a guy."

"Whatever, it was still hard to find appropriate cover each time. I've done that job. Many times. Including one special night five years ago."

Reacher said, "Give yourself a break."

But he was thinking: *Appropriate cover.*

He remembered bouncing around in the back of the car listening to the nightmare voice. Remembered thinking: *It's right there on the same damn fireplug?*

The same damn fireplug.

Appropriate cover.

He put his coffee cup down, gently, slowly, carefully, and then he picked up Pauling's left hand with his right. Brought it to his lips and kissed it tenderly. Her fingers were cool and slim and fragrant. He liked them.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you very much."

"For what?"

"He used a fireplug three times running. Why? Because a fireplug almost always guarantees a stretch of empty curb, that's why. Because of the parking prohibition. No parking next to a hydrant. Everyone knows that. But he used the *same* fireplug each time. Why? There are plenty to choose from. There's at least one on every block. So why that one? Because he liked that one, that's why. But why did he like that one? What makes a person like one fireplug more than another?"

"What?"

"Nothing," Reacher said. "They're all the same. They're mass-produced. They're identical. What this guy had was a *vantage point* that he liked. The vantage point came first, and the fireplug was merely the nearest one to it. The one most visible from it. As you so correctly pointed out, he needed cover that was reliable and unobtrusive, late night, early morning, and rush hour. And potentially he might have needed to be there for extended periods. As it happened Gregory was punctual both times, but he could have hit traffic. And who knew where Burke was going to be when he got the call on the car phone? Who knew how long he might take to get down there? So wherever this guy was waiting, he was comfortable doing it."

"But does this help us?"

"You bet your ass it does. It's the first definite link in the chain. It was a fixed, identifiable location. We need to get down to Sixth Avenue and figure out where it was. Someone might have seen him there. Someone might even know who he is."

CHAPTER **29**

REACHER AND PAULING caught a cab on Second Avenue and it took them all the way south to Houston Street and then west to Sixth. They got out on the southeast corner and glanced back at the empty sky where the Twin Towers used to be and then they turned north together into a warm breeze full of trash and grit.

“So show me the famous fireplug,” Pauling said.

They walked north until they came to it, right there on the right-hand sidewalk in the middle of the block. Fat, short, squat, upright, chipped dull paint, flanked by two protective metal posts four feet apart. The curb next to it was empty. Every other legal parking spot on the block was taken. Pauling stood near the hydrant and pirouetted a slow circle. Looked east, north, west, south.

“Where would a military mind want to be?” she asked.

Reacher recited, “A soldier knows that a satisfactory observation point provides an unobstructed view to the front and adequate security to the flanks and the rear. He knows it provides protection from the elements and concealment of the observers. He knows it offers a reasonable likelihood of undisturbed occupation for the full duration of the operation.”

“What would the duration be?”

“Say an hour maximum, each time.”

“How did it work, the first two times?”

“He watched Gregory park, and then he followed him down to Spring Street.”

“So he wasn’t waiting inside the derelict building?”

“Not if he was working alone.”

“But he still used the back door.”

“On the second occasion, at least.”

“Why not the front door?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have we definitely decided he was working alone?”

“Only one of them came back alive.”

Pauling turned the same slow circle. “So where was his observation point?”

“West of here,” Reacher said. “He will have wanted a full-on view.”

“Across the street?”

Reacher nodded. “Middle of the block, or not too far north or south of it. Nothing too oblique. Range, maybe up to a hundred feet. Not more.”

“He could have used binoculars. Like Patti Joseph does.”

“He would still need a good angle. Like Patti has. She’s more or less directly across the street.”

“So set some limits.”

“A maximum forty-five-degree arc. That’s twenty-some degrees north to twenty-some degrees south. Maximum radius, about a hundred feet.”

Pauling turned to face the curb square-on. She spread her arms out straight and forty-five degrees apart and held her hands flat and upright like mimed karate chops. Scoped out the view. A forty-five-degree bite out of a circle with a radius of a hundred feet gave her an arc of about seventy-eight feet to look at. More than three standard twenty-foot Greenwich Village storefronts, less than four. A total of five establishments to consider. The center three were possibilities. The one to the north and the one to the south were marginal. Reacher stood directly behind her and looked over her head. Her left hand was pointing at a flower store. Then came his new favorite café. Then came a picture framer. Then a double-fronted wine store, wider than the others. Her right hand was pointing at a vitamin shop.

“A flower store would be no good,” she said. “It offers a wall behind him and a window in front of him but it wouldn’t be open at eleven-forty at night.”

Reacher said nothing.

“The wine store was probably open,” she said. “But it wouldn’t have been at seven in the morning.”

Reacher said, “Can’t hang around in a flower store or a wine store for an hour at a time. Neither one of them offers a reasonable likelihood of undisturbed occupation for the full duration of the operation.”

“Same with all of them, then,” she said. “Except the café. The café would have been open all three times. And you can sit for an hour in a café.”

“The café would have been pretty risky. Three separate lengthy spells, someone would have remembered him. They remembered me after one cup of coffee.”

“Were the sidewalks crowded when you were here?”

“Fairly.”

“So maybe he *was* just out on the street. Or in a doorway. In the shadows. He might have risked it. He was on the other side from where the cars were parking.”

“No protection from the elements and no concealment. It would have been an uncomfortable hour, three times in a row.”

“He was a Recon Marine. He was in prison in Africa for five years. He’s used to discomfort.”

“I meant tactically. This part of town, he would have been afraid of getting busted for a drug dealer. Or a terrorist. South of Twenty-third Street they don’t like you to hang around at all anymore.”

“So where was he?”

Reacher looked left, looked right.

Then he looked up.

“You mentioned Patti Joseph’s place,” he said. “You called it an aerie.”

“So?”

“What’s an aerie?”

“It’s an eagle’s nest.”

“Exactly. From the Old French for *lair*. The point is that Patti is reasonably high up. Seven prewar floors, that’s a little above treetop height. An unobstructed view. A Recon Marine wants an unobstructed view. And he can’t guarantee that at street level. A panel truck could park right in front of him at the wrong moment.”

Lauren Pauling turned back to face the curb and spread her arms again, this time raised at an angle. She mimed the same karate chops with her hands. They bracketed the upper floors of the same five buildings.

“Where did he come from, the first time?” she asked.

“From south of me,” Reacher said. “From my right. I was facing a little north and east, at the end table. But he was coming back from Spring Street then. No way of knowing where he had started out from. I sat down, ordered coffee, and he was in the car before they even brought it to me.”

“But the second time, after Burke switched the bag, he must have been coming straight from the observation point, right?”

“He was almost at the car when I saw him.”

“Still moving?”

“Final two paces.”

“From what direction?”

Reacher moved up the sidewalk to where he had been after strolling around the corner from Bleecker. In his mind he put a green Jaguar beyond Pauling on the curb and pictured the guy’s last two fluid strides toward it. Then he lined up the apparent vector and checked the likely point of origin. Kept his eyes on it as he

stepped back to Pauling.

“Actually very similar to the first time,” he said to her. “North and east through the traffic. From the south of where I was sitting.”

Pauling adjusted the position of her right arm. Brought her hand south and chopped the air a fraction to the left of the café’s most northerly table. That cut the view to just a slim section of the streetscape. Half of the building with the flower store in it, and most of the building with the café in it. Above the flower store were three stories of windows with vertical blinds behind them and printers and spider plants and stacks of paper on their sills. Fluorescent tubes on the ceilings.

“Office suites,” Pauling said.

Above the café were three stories of windows filled variously with faded drapes made of red Indian cloth, or macramé hangings, or suspended discs of stained glass. One had nothing at all. One was papered over with newsprint. One had a Che Guevara poster taped face-out on the inside of the glass.

“Apartments,” Pauling said.

Jammed between the flower store and the café was a blue recessed door. To its left was a dull silver box, with buttons and nameplates and a speaker grille. Reacher said, “A person who came out that door heading for the fireplug would have to cross north and east through the traffic, right?”

Pauling said, “We found him.”

CHAPTER **30**

THE SILVER BOX to the left of the blue door had six black call buttons in a vertical array. The top nameplate had *Kublinski* written very neatly in pale faded ink. The bottom had *Super* scrawled with a black marker pen. The middle four were blank.

“Low rent,” Pauling said. “Short leases. Transients. Except for Mr. or Ms. Kublinski. Judging by that handwriting style they’ve been here forever.”

“They probably moved to Florida fifty years ago,” Reacher said. “Or died. And nobody changed the tag.”

“Shall we try the super?”

“Use one of your business cards. Put your finger over the *Ex-* part. Make out like you’re still with the Bureau.”

“Think that’ll be necessary?”

“We need all the help we can get. This is a radical building. We’ve got Che Guevara watching over us. And macramé.”

Pauling put an elegant nail on the super’s call button and pressed. She was answered a long minute later by a distorted burst of sound from the speaker. It might have been the word *yes,* or *who,* or *what.* Or just a blast of static.

“Federal agents,” Pauling called. Which was remotely true. Both she and Reacher had once worked for Uncle Sam. She slipped a business card out of her purse. There was another burst of noise from the speaker.

“He’s coming,” Reacher said. He had seen plenty of buildings like this one, back in the day, when his job had been chasing AWOL soldiers. They liked cash rents and short leases. And in his experience building superintendents usually cooperated. They liked their free accommodations well enough not to jeopardize them. Better that someone else should go to jail, and they should stay where they were.

Unless the super was the bad guy, of course.

But this one seemed to have nothing to hide. The blue door opened inward and revealed a tall gaunt man in a stained wife-beater. He had a black knit cap on his head and a flat Slavic face like a length of two by-four.

“Yes?” he said. Strong Russian accent. Almost *Da?*

Pauling waved her card long enough for some of the words to register.

“Tell us about your most recent tenant,” she said.

“Most recent?” the guy repeated. No hostility. He sounded like a fairly smart guy struggling with the nuance of a foreign language, that was all.

Reacher asked, “Did someone sign on within the last couple of weeks?”

“Number five,” the guy said. “One week ago. He responded to a newspaper advertisement I was asked to place by the management.”

“We need to see his apartment,” Pauling said.

“I’m not sure I should let you,” the guy said. “There are rules in America.”

“Homeland Security,” Reacher said. “The Patriot Act. There are no rules in America anymore.”

The guy just shrugged and turned his tall thin frame around in the narrow space. Headed for the stairs. Reacher and Pauling followed him in. Reacher could smell coffee coming through the walls from the café. There was no apartment number one or number two. Number four was the first door they came to, at the head of the stairs at the back of the building. Then number three was on the same floor, along a hallway at the front of the building. Which meant that number five was going to be directly above it, third floor, looking east across the street. Pauling glanced at Reacher, and Reacher nodded.

“The one with nothing in the window,” he said to her.

On the third floor they passed number six at the back of the building and walked forward toward number five. The smell of coffee had faded and been replaced by the universal hallway smell of boiled vegetables.

“Is he in?” Reacher asked.

The super shook his head. “I only ever saw him twice. He’s out now for sure. I was just all over the building fixing pipes.” He used a master key from a ring on his belt and unlocked the door. Pushed it open and stood back.

The apartment was what a real estate broker would have called an alcove studio. All one room, with a crooked L that was theoretically large enough for a bed if the bed was small. A kitchen corner and a tiny bathroom with an open door. But mostly what was on show was dust and floorboards.

Because the apartment was completely empty.

Except for a single upright dining chair. The chair was not old, but it was well used. It was the kind of thing you see for sale on the Bowery sidewalks where the bankrupt restaurant dealers hawk seized inventory. It was set in front of the window and turned slightly north and east. It was about twenty feet above and three feet behind the exact spot that Reacher had chosen for coffee, two nights running.

Reacher stepped over and sat down on the chair, feet planted, relaxed but alert. The way his body settled naturally put the fireplug across Sixth directly in front of him. A shallow downward angle, easily enough to clear a parked panel truck. Enough to clear a parked semi. A ninety-foot range. No problem for anyone who wasn’t clinically blind. He stood up again and turned a full circle. Saw a door that locked. Saw three solid walls. Saw a window free of drapes. *A soldier knows that a satisfactory observation point provides an unobstructed view to the front and adequate security to the flanks and the rear, provides protection from the elements and concealment of the observers, and offers a reasonable likelihood of undisturbed occupation for the full duration of the operation.*

“Feels just like Patti Joseph’s place,” Pauling said.

“You been there?”

“Brewer described it.”

“Eight million stories,” Reacher said.

Then he turned to the super and said, “Tell us about this guy.”

Then he turned to the super and said, "Tell us about this guy."

"He can't talk," the super said.

"What do you mean?"

"He can't speak."

"What, like he's a mute?"

"Not by birth. Because of a trauma."

"Like something struck him dumb?"

"Not emotional," the super said. "Physical. He communicated with me by writing on a pad of yellow paper. Full sentences, quite patiently. He wrote that he had been injured in the service. Like a war wound. But I noticed that he had no visible scarring. And I noticed that he kept his mouth tight shut all the time. Like he was embarrassed about me seeing something. And it reminded me very strongly of something I saw once before, more than twenty years ago."

"Which was?"

"I am Russian. For my sins I served with the Red Army in Afghanistan. Once we had a prisoner returned to us by the tribesmen as a warning. His tongue had been cut out."

CHAPTER **31**

THE SUPER TOOK Reacher and Pauling down to his own apartment, which was a squared-away semi-basement space in the back of the building. He opened a file cabinet and took out the current lease papers for apartment five. They had been signed exactly a week previously by a guy calling himself Leroy Clarkson. Which as expected was a blatantly phony name. Clarkson and Leroy were the first two streets coming off the West Side Highway north of Houston, just a few blocks away. At the far end of Clarkson was a topless bar. At the far end of Leroy was a car wash. In between was a tiny aluminum coach diner that Reacher had once eaten in.

“You don’t see ID?” Pauling asked.

“Not unless they want to pay by check,” the super said. “This guy paid cash.”

The signature was illegible. The Social Security number was neatly written but was no doubt just a random sequence of nine meaningless digits.

The super gave a decent physical description, but it didn’t help much because it did nothing more than match what Reacher himself had seen on two separate occasions. Late thirties, maybe forty, white, medium height and weight, clean and trim, no facial hair. Blue jeans, blue shirt, ball cap, sneakers, all of them worn and comfortable.

“How was his health?” Reacher asked.

“Apart from the fact that he couldn’t speak?” the super said. “He seemed OK.”

“Did he say if he’d been out of town for a while?”

“He didn’t *say* anything.”

“How long did he pay for?”

“A month. It’s the minimum. Renewable.”

“This guy’s not coming back,” Reacher said. “You should go ahead and call *The Village Voice* now. Get them to run your ad again.”

“What happened to your pal from the Red Army?” Pauling asked.

“He lived,” the super said. “Not happily, but he lived.”

Reacher and Pauling came out the blue door and took three paces north and stopped in for espresso. They took the end table on the sidewalk and Reacher took the same seat he had used twice before.

Pauling said, “So he wasn’t working alone.”

Reacher said nothing.

Pauling said, “Because he couldn’t have made the phone calls.”

Reacher didn’t reply.

Pauling said, “Tell me about the voice you heard.”

“American,” Reacher said. “The machine couldn’t disguise the words or the cadence or the rhythm. And he was patient. Intelligent, in command, in control, not worried. Familiar with the geography of New York City. Possibly military, from a couple of phrases. He wanted to know Burke’s name, which suggests he’s familiar with Lane’s crew or he was calibrating a lie detector. Apart from that, I’m just guessing. The distortion was huge. But I felt he wasn’t old. There was a lightness there. A kind of nimbleness in his voice. Maybe he was a small guy.”

“Like a Special Forces veteran.”

“Possibly.”

“Unworried and in command makes him sound like the prime mover here. Not like a sidekick.”

Reacher nodded. “Good point. I felt that way, listening to him. It was like he was calling the shots. Like an equal partner, at the very least.”

“So who the hell is he?”

“If your Pentagon guy hadn’t told us different I’d say it was both of Hobart and Knight, both still alive, back here together, working together.”

“But it isn’t,” Pauling said. “My Pentagon guy wouldn’t get that kind of thing wrong.”

“So whichever one came back alive picked up a new partner.”

“One that he trusts,” Pauling said. “And he did it real fast.”

Reacher gazed over at the hydrant. Traffic obscured his view in waves, held back and then released by the light at Houston.

“Would a remote clicker work at this distance?” he asked.

“For a car?” Pauling said. “Maybe. I guess it would depend on the car. Why?”

“After Burke switched the bag I heard a sound like car doors locking. I guess the guy did it from up there in his room. He was watching. He didn’t want to leave the money in an unlocked car for a second longer than he had to.”

“Sensible.”

Reacher paused a beat. “But you know what isn’t sensible? Why was he up there in the room at all?”

“We know why he was up there.”

“No, why was *he* up there and not the other guy? We’ve got two guys here, one can talk and the other can’t. Why would the guy who can’t talk go rent the apartment? Anyone who comes into contact with him isn’t going to forget him in a hurry. And what’s an observation point for anyway? It’s for command and control. As the visible situation develops the observer is supposed to issue a stream of orders and adjustments. But this guy couldn’t even get on a cell phone. What do we suppose happened exactly, the first two times with Gregory? The guy is upstairs, he sees Gregory park, what can he do? He can’t even get on the

phone and tell his partner to stand by down at Spring Street."

"Text messaging," Pauling said.

"What's that?"

"You can send written words by cell phone."

"When did *that* start?"

"Years ago."

"OK," Reacher said. "Live and learn." Then he said, "But I still don't see why they sent the guy who couldn't talk to meet with the building super."

"Neither do I," Pauling said.

"Or to run the OP. It would make more sense if he had been on the other end of the phone. He can't talk, but he can listen."

Silence for a moment.

"What next?" Pauling asked.

"Hard work," Reacher said. "You up for it?"

"Are you hiring me?"

"No, you're putting whatever else you're doing on hold and you're volunteering. Because if we do this right you'll find out what happened to Anne Lane five years ago. No more sleepless nights."

"Unless I find out five years ago was for real. Then I might never sleep again."

"Life's a gamble," Reacher said. "It wouldn't be so much fun otherwise."

Pauling was quiet for a long moment.

"OK," she said. "I'm volunteering."

Reacher said, "So go hassle our Soviet pal again. Get the chair. They bought it within the last week. We'll walk it over to the Bowery and find out where it

within the last week. We'll walk it over to the Bowery and find out where it came from. Maybe the new buddy picked it out. Maybe someone will remember him."

CHAPTER **32**

REACHER CARRIED THE chair in his hand like a bag and he and Pauling walked together east. South of Houston the Bowery had organized itself into a sequence of distinct retail areas. Like a string of unofficial malls. There were electrical supplies, and lighting fixtures, and used office gear, and industrial kitchen equipment, and restaurant front-of-house outlets. Reacher liked the Bowery. It was his kind of a street.

The chair in his hand was fairly generic, but it had a certain number of distinguishing characteristics. Impossible to describe it a moment after closing the door on it, but with it right there for direct comparison a match might be found. They started with the northernmost of six separate chaotic establishments. Less than a hundred yards of real estate, but if someone buys a used dining chair in Manhattan, chances are he buys it somewhere in that hundred yards.

Put the good stuff in the store window was the usual retail mantra. But on the Bowery the actual store windows were secondary to the sidewalk displays. And the chair in Reacher's hand wasn't the good stuff, in the sense that it couldn't have been part of a large matched set, or it wouldn't have been sold separately. Nobody with a set of twenty-four chairs leaves himself with twenty-three. So Reacher and Pauling pushed past the stuff on the sidewalk and squeezed through the narrow doors and looked at the dusty items inside. Looked at the sad leftovers, the part-sets, the singletons. They saw a lot of chairs. All the same, all different. Four legs, seats, backs, but the range of shapes and details was tremendous. None looked very comfortable. Reacher had read somewhere that there was a science to building a restaurant chair. It had to be durable, obviously, and good value for money, and it had to look reasonably inviting, but it couldn't in reality *be* too comfortable or the patrons would sit all night and a potential three-sitting evening would turn into an actual two sittings and the restaurant would lose money. Portion control and table turnover were the important factors in the restaurant trade, and Reacher figured chair manufacturers were totally on board with the turnover part.

In the first three stores they found no visual matches and nobody admitted selling the chair that Reacher was carrying.

The fourth store was where they found what they wanted.

It was a double-wide place that had chrome diner furniture out front and a bunch of Chinese owners in back. Behind the gaudy padded stools on the sidewalk were piles of old tables and sets of chairs stacked six high. Behind the piles and the stacks was a jumble of oddments. Including two chairs hung high on a wall that were exact matches for the specimen in Reacher's hand. Same style, same construction, same color, same age.

"We shoot, we score," Pauling said.

Reacher checked again, to be certain. But there was no doubt about it. The chairs were identical. Even the grime and the dust on them matched precisely. Same gray, same texture, same consistency.

"Let's get some help," he said.

He carried the Sixth Avenue chair to the back of the store where a Chinese guy was sitting behind a rickety table with a closed cash box on it. The guy was old and impassive. The owner, probably. Certainly all transactions would have to pass through his hands. He had the cash box.

"You sold this chair." Reacher held it up, and nodded back toward the wall where its siblings hung. "About a week ago."

"Five dollars," the old guy said.

"I don't want to buy it," Reacher said. "And it isn't yours to sell. You already sold it once. I want to know who you sold it to. That's all."

"Five dollars," the guy said again.

"You're not understanding me."

The old guy smiled. "No, I think I'm understanding you very well. You want information about the purchaser of that chair. And I'm telling you that information always has a price. In this case, the price is five dollars."

"How about you get the chair back? Then you can sell it twice."

"I already sold it many more times than twice. Places open, places close, assets

circulate. The world goes round."

"Who bought it, a week ago?"

"Five dollars."

"You sure you've got five dollars' worth of information?"

"I have what I have."

"Two-fifty plus the chair."

"You'll leave the chair anyway. You're sick of carrying it around."

"I could leave it next door."

For the first time the old guy's eyes moved. He glanced up at the wall. Reacher saw him think: *A set of three is better than a pair*.

"Four bucks and the chair," he said.

"Three and the chair," Reacher said.

"Three and a half and the chair."

"Three and a quarter and the chair."

No response.

"Guys, please," Pauling said.

She stepped up to the rickety desk and opened her purse. Took out a fat black wallet and snapped off a crisp ten from a wad as thick as a paperback book. Placed it on the scarred wood and spun it around and left it there.

"Ten dollars," she said. "And the damn chair. So make it good."

The old Chinese man nodded.

"Women," he said. "Always ready to focus."

"Tell us who bought the chair," Pauling said.

Tell us who bought the chair," Pauling said.

"He couldn't talk," the old man said.

CHAPTER **33**

THE OLD MAN said, “At first I thought nothing of it. An American comes in, he hears us speaking our own language, very often he assumes we can’t speak English, and he conducts the transaction with a combination of gestures and signs. It’s a little rude in that it assumes ignorance on our part, but we’re used to it. Generally I let such a customer flounder and then I pitch in with a perfectly coherent sentence as a kind of reproach.”

“Like you did with me,” Reacher said.

“Indeed. And as I did with the man you’re evidently seeking. But he was completely unable to reply in any way at all. He just kept his mouth closed and gulped like a fish. I concluded that he had a deformity that prevented speech.”

“Description?” Reacher asked.

The old guy paused a beat to gather his thoughts and then launched into the same rundown that the Sixth Avenue super had given. A white man, late thirties, maybe forty, medium height and weight, clean and neat, no beard, no mustache. Blue jeans, blue shirt, ball cap, sneakers, all of them worn and comfortable. Nothing remarkable or memorable about him except for the fact that he was mute.

“How much did he pay for the chair?” Reacher asked.

“Five dollars.”

“Wasn’t it unusual that a guy would want a single chair?”

“You think I should automatically call the police if someone who isn’t a restaurant owner shops here?”

“Who buys chairs one at a time?”

“Plenty of people,” the old man said. “People who are recently divorced, or down on their luck, or starting a lonely new life in a small East Village apartment. Some of those places are so tiny a single chair is all they want. At a

desk, maybe, that does double duty as a dining table."

"OK," Reacher said. "I can see that."

The old man turned to Pauling and asked, "Was my information helpful?"

"Maybe," Pauling said. "But it didn't add anything."

"You already knew about the man who couldn't talk?"

Pauling nodded.

"Then I'm sorry," the old man said. "You may keep the chair."

"I'm sick of carrying it around," Reacher said.

The old man inclined his head. "As I thought. In which case, feel free to leave it here."

Pauling led Reacher out to the Bowery sidewalk and the last he saw of the chair was a young guy who could have been a grandson hoisting it up on a pole and hanging it back on the wall next to its two fellows.

"The hard way," Pauling said.

"Makes no sense," Reacher said. "Why are they sending the guy that can't speak to meet with everyone?"

"There must be something even more distinctive about the other one."

"I hate to think what *that* might be."

"Lane abandoned those two guys. So why are you helping him?"

"I'm not helping him. This is for Kate and the kid now."

"They're dead. You said so yourself."

“Then they need a story. An explanation. The who, the where, the why. Everyone needs to know what happened to them. They shouldn’t be allowed to just *go,* quietly. Someone needs to stand up for them.”

“And that’s you?”

“I play the hand I’m dealt. No use whining about it.”

“And?”

“And they need to be avenged, Pauling. Because it wasn’t their fight. It wasn’t even remotely Jade’s fight, was it? If Hobart or Knight or whichever it was had come after Lane directly, maybe I’d have been on the sidelines cheering him on. But he didn’t. He came after Kate and Jade. And two wrongs don’t make a right.”

“Neither do three wrongs.”

“In this case they do,” Reacher said.

“You never even saw Kate or Jade.”

“I saw their pictures. That was enough.”

“I wouldn’t want you mad at me,” Pauling said.

“No,” Reacher said back. “You wouldn’t.”

They walked north toward Houston Street without any clear idea of where they were going next and on the way Pauling’s cell phone must have vibrated because she pulled it out of her pocket before Reacher heard it ring. Silent cell phones made Reacher nervous. He came from a world where a sudden dive for a pocket was more likely to mean a gun than a phone. Every time it happened he had to endure a little burst of unrequited adrenaline.

Pauling stopped on the sidewalk and said her name loudly over the traffic noise and then listened for a minute. Said thanks and snapped the phone shut. Turned

to Reacher and smiled.

“My Pentagon buddy,” she said. “Some solid information. Maybe he busted into someone’s file cabinet after all.”

“Did he get a name for us?” Reacher asked.

“Not yet. But he has a location. It was Burkina Faso. You ever been there?”

“I’ve never been anywhere in Africa.”

“It used to be called Upper Volta. It’s an ex–French colony. About the size of Colorado, population thirteen million, with a GDP about a quarter of what Bill Gates is worth.”

“But with enough spare cash to hire Lane’s crew.”

“Not according to my guy,” Pauling said. “That’s the weird thing. It’s where Knight and Hobart were captured, but there’s no record of their government contracting with Lane.”

“Would your guy expect there to be a record?”

“He says there’s always a record somewhere.”

“We need a name,” Reacher said. “That’s all. We don’t need the history of the world.”

“He’s working on it.”

“But not fast enough. And we can’t wait. We need to try something on our own.”

“Like what?”

“Our guy called himself Leroy Clarkson. Maybe it was a private joke or maybe it was something in his subconscious because he lives over there.”

“Near Clarkson or Leroy?”

“Maybe on Hudson or Greenwich.”

“That’s all gentrified now. A guy just back from five years in an African jail

"That's all gentrified now. A guy just back from five years in an African jail couldn't afford a closet over there."

"But a guy who was making good money before the five-year hiatus might already own a place over there."

Pauling nodded. "We should stop by my office. Start with the phone book."

There were a few Hobarts and half a page of Knights in the Manhattan White Pages but none of them were in the part of the West Village that would have made Leroy Clarkson an obvious pseudonym. Conceivably one of the Knights might have picked Horatio Gansevoort, and one of the Hobarts might have gone by Christopher Perry, but apart from those two the others lived where the streets were numbered or so far east that their subliminal choices would have been Henry Madison or Allen Eldridge. Or Stanton Rivington.

"Too much like daytime TV," Pauling said.

She had other databases, the kind of things a conscientious PI with old friends in law enforcement and an internet connection can accumulate. But no unexplained Knights or Hobarts cropped up anywhere.

"He's been away five years," Pauling said. "Effectively he'll have dropped out of sight, won't he? Disconnected phone, unpaid utilities, like that?"

"Probably," Reacher said. "But not necessarily. These guys are used to sudden travel. They always were, even back in the day. They usually set up automatic payments."

"His bank account would have emptied out."

"Depends how much was in it to start with. If he was earning then what the others are earning now he could have paid for plenty of electric bills especially when he's not even home to turn on the lights."

"Lane was a much smaller deal five years ago. They all were, before the terrorism gravy train left the station. Real or phony, Anne's ransom was only a

hundred grand, not ten and a half million. Wages will have been in proportion. This guy won't have been rich."

Reacher nodded. "He probably rented anyway. Landlord probably threw all his stuff on the sidewalk years ago."

"So what do we do?"

"I guess we wait," Reacher said. "For your bureaucratic buddy. Unless we grow old and die first."

But a minute later Pauling's phone went off again. This time it was on her desk, out in full view, and its vibration set up a soft mechanical buzz against the wood. She answered it with her name and listened for a minute. Then she closed it slowly and put it back in place.

"We're not much older," she said.

"What's he got?" Reacher asked.

"Hobart," she said. "It was Hobart who came back alive."

CHAPTER **34**

REACHER ASKED, "FIRST name?"

Pauling said, "Clay. Clay James Hobart."

Reacher asked, "Address?"

Pauling said, "We're waiting on an answer from the VA."

"So let's hit the phone books again."

"I recycle my old phone books. I don't keep an archive. I certainly don't have anything from five years ago."

"He might have family here. Who better to come back to?"

There were seven Hobarts in the book, but one of them was a duplicate. A dentist, home and office, different places, different numbers, same guy.

"Call them all," Reacher said. "Make like a VA administrator with a paperwork glitch."

Pauling put her desk phone on the speaker and got two answering machines with the first two calls and a false alarm on the third. Some old guy with his own VA benefits got all excited in case they were about to disappear. Pauling calmed him down and he said he had never heard of anyone called Clay James Hobart. The fourth and fifth calls were fruitless, too. The sixth call was to the dentist's office number. He was on vacation in Antigua. His receptionist said he had no relatives called Clay James. The absolute confidence in her answer made Reacher wonder if she was more than just a receptionist. Although she wasn't in Antigua with him. Maybe she had just worked for him a long time.

"So what now?" Pauling said.

"We'll try the first two again later," Reacher said. "Apart from that, it's back to growing old together."

But Pauling's Pentagon buddy was on some kind of a roll because eleven minutes later her cell buzzed again and the guy came through with more information. Reacher saw Pauling put it all down on a yellow pad in fast scrawled handwriting that he couldn't read upside down and from a distance. Two pages of notes. It was a long call. So long that when it was over Pauling checked the battery icon on her phone and plugged it into a charger.

"Hobart's address?" Reacher asked her.

"Not yet," Pauling said. "The VA is balking. There are confidentiality issues."

"Where he lives isn't a medical diagnosis."

"That's the point my friend is making."

"So what did he have for us?"

Pauling flipped back to the first page of her notes.

"Lane is on an official Pentagon shit list," she said.

"Why?"

"You know what Operation Just Cause was?"

"Panama," Reacher said. "Against Manuel Noriega. More than fifteen years ago. I was there, briefly."

"Lane was there, too. He was still in uniform back then. He did very well there. That's where he made full colonel. Then he went to the Gulf the first time around and then he quit under a bit of a cloud. But not enough of a cloud to stop the Pentagon hiring him on as a private contractor afterward. They sent him to Colombia, because he had a reputation as a Central and South America expert, because of his performance during Just Cause. He took the beginnings of his present crew with him to fight one of the cocaine cartels. He took our government's money to do it but when he got there he also took the target cartel's money to go wipe out one of their rival cartels instead. The Pentagon

wasn’t all that upset because one cartel is as bad as another to them, but they never really trusted Lane afterward and never hired him again.”

“His guys said they’d been to Iraq and Afghanistan.”

Pauling nodded. “After the Twin Towers all kinds of people went all kinds of places. Including Lane’s crew. But only as subcontractors. In other words the Pentagon hired someone they trusted and that someone laid off some of the work to Lane.”

“And that was acceptable?”

“Honor was observed. The Pentagon never wrote another check with Lane’s name on it after that first time in Colombia. But later on they needed all the warm bodies they could get, so they looked the other way.”

“He’s been getting steady work,” Reacher said. “Plenty of income. He lives like a king and most of the African money is still in its original wrappers.”

“That just shows you how big this whole racket has gotten. My guy says since Colombia, Lane has been living off the crumbs from other men’s tables. That’s been his only option. Big crumbs at first, but they’re getting smaller. There’s a lot of competition now. Apparently he got rich that one time in Africa, but whatever is left from that payment is basically all the capital he’s got.”

“He makes out like he’s the big dog. He told me he had no rivals or partners.”

“Then he was lying. Or maybe in a sense he was telling the truth. Because he’s at the bottom of the pile. Strictly speaking he has no equals. Only superiors.”

“Was he subcontracting in Burkina Faso, too?” Reacher asked.

“He must have been,” Pauling said. “Otherwise why isn’t he in the records as a principal?”

“Was our government involved there?”

“It’s possible. Certainly my official friend seems a little tense.”

Reacher nodded. “That’s why he’s helping, isn’t it? This is not one MP to another. This is a bureaucracy trying to control the situation. Trying to manage

another. This is a subsidiary trying to control the situation. Trying to manage the flow of information. This is someone deciding to feed us stuff privately so we don't go blundering about and making a lot of noise in public."

Pauling said nothing. Then her phone went off again. She tried to pick it up with the charger attached but the wire was too short. She unclipped it and answered. Listened for fifteen seconds and turned to a new page in her pad and wrote a dollar sign, and then two numbers, and then six zeroes. She clicked off the phone and spun the pad around so that Reacher could see what she had written.

"Twenty-one million dollars," she said. "In cash. That's how rich Lane got in Africa."

"You were right," Reacher said. "Big crumbs. Not too shabby for a subcontractor."

Pauling nodded. "The whole deal was worth a hundred and five million. U.S. dollars in cash from their government's central reserve. Lane got twenty percent in exchange for supplying half the manpower and agreeing to do most of the work."

"Beggars can't be choosers," Reacher said.

Then he said: "OK."

"OK what?"

"What's half of twenty-one?"

"Ten and a half."

"Exactly. Kate's ransom was exactly half of the Burkina Faso payment."

Silence in the room.

"Ten and a half million dollars," Reacher said. "It always was a weird amount. But now it makes some kind of sense. Lane probably skimmed fifty percent as his profit. So Hobart got home and figured he was entitled to Lane's share for his suffering."

"Reasonable," Pauling said.

“I would have wanted more,” Reacher said. “I would have wanted all of it.”

Pauling slid her fingernail down the fine print on the *H* page of the phone book and used the speaker to try the first two Hobart numbers again. She got the same two answering machines. She hung up. Her little office went quiet. Then her cell buzzed again. This time she unclipped the charger first and flipped the phone open. Said her name and listened for a moment and then turned to another fresh page in her yellow pad and wrote just three lines.

Then she closed her phone.

“We have his address,” she said.

CHAPTER **35**

PAULING SAID, "HOBART moved in with his sister. To a building on Hudson Street that I'm betting is on the block between Clarkson and Leroy."

"A married sister," Reacher said. "Otherwise we would have found her name in the phone book."

"Widowed," Pauling said. "I guess she kept her married name, but she lives alone now. Or at least she did, until her brother came home from Africa."

The widowed sister was called Dee Marie Graziano and she was right there in the phone book at an address on Hudson. Pauling dialed up a city tax database and confirmed her domicile.

"Rent-stabilized," she said. "Been there ten years. Even with the cheap lease it's going to be a small place." She copied Dee Marie's Social Security number and pasted it into a box in a different database. "Thirty-eight years old. Marginal income. Doesn't work much. Doesn't even get close to paying federal income taxes. Her late husband was a Marine, too. Lance Corporal Vincent Peter Graziano. He died three years ago."

"In Iraq?"

"I can't tell." Pauling closed the databases and opened Google and typed *Dee Marie Graziano.* Hit the *return* key. Glanced at the results and something about them made her click off Google and open LexisNexis. The screen rolled down and came up with a whole page of citations.

"Well, look at this," she said.

"Tell me," Reacher said.

"She sued the government. State and the DoD."

"For what?"

"For news about her brother."

Pauling hit the *print* button and fed Reacher the pages one by one as they came off the machine. He read the hard copy and she read the screen. Dee Marie Graziano had waged a five-year campaign to find out what had happened to her brother Clay James Hobart. It had been a long, hard, bitter campaign. That was for sure. At the outset Hobart's employer Edward Lane of Operational Security Consultants had signed an affidavit swearing that Hobart had been a subcontractor for the United States Government at the relevant time. So Dee Marie had gone ahead and petitioned her congressman and both her senators. She had called out of state to the chairmen of the Armed Services Committees in both the House and the Senate. She had written to newspapers and talked to journalists. She had been prepped for the *Larry King* show but had been canceled prior to the recording. She had hired an investigator, briefly. Finally she had found a pro bono lawyer and sued the Department of Defense. The Pentagon had denied any knowledge of Clay James Hobart's activities subsequent to his last day in a USMC uniform. Then Dee Marie had sued the Department of State. Some fifth-rung State lawyer had come back and promised that Hobart would be put on file as a tourist missing in West Africa. So Dee Marie had gone back to pestering journalists and had filed a string of Freedom of Information Act petitions. More than half of them had already been denied and the others were still choked in red tape.

"She was really going at it," Pauling said. "Wasn't she? Metaphorically she was lighting a candle for her brother every single day for five years."

"Like Patti Joseph," Reacher said. "This is a tale of two sisters."

"The Pentagon knew Hobart was alive after twelve months. And they knew where he was. But they kept quiet for four years. They let this poor woman suffer."

"What was she going to do anyway? Lock and load and go to Africa and rescue him single-handed? Bring him back to stand trial for Anne Lane's homicide?"

"There was never any evidence against him."

"Whatever, keeping her in the dark was probably the best policy."

"Spoken like a true military man."

"Like the FBI is [illegible]?"

“Like the FBI is a fount of free information?”

“She could have gone over there and petitioned the new government in Burkina Faso personally.”

“That only works in the movies.”

“You’re very cynical, you know that?”

“I don’t have a cynical bone in my body. I’m realistic, is all. Shit happens.”

Pauling went quiet.

“What?” Reacher said.

“You said lock and load. You said Dee Marie could lock and load and go to Africa.”

“No, I said she couldn’t.”

“But we agree that Hobart picked up a new partner, right?” she said. “As soon as he got back? One that he trusts, and real fast?”

“Clearly,” Reacher said.

“Could it be the sister?”

Reacher said nothing.

“The trust would be there,” Pauling said. “Wouldn’t it? Automatically? And *she* was there, which would explain the speed. And the commitment would have been there, on her part. Commitment, and a lot of anger. So is it possible that the voice you heard on the car phone was a woman?”

Reacher was quiet for a beat.

“It’s possible,” he said. “I guess. I mean, it never struck me that way. Never. But that could just be a preconception on my part. An unconscious bias. Because those machines are tough. They could make Minnie Mouse sound like Darth Vader.”

“You said there was a lightness to the voice. Like a small man.”

You said there was a lightness to the voice. Like a small man.

Reacher nodded. “Yes, I did.”

“Therefore like a woman. With the pitch altered an octave, it’s plausible.”

“It could be,” Reacher said. “Certainly whoever it was knew the West Village streets pretty well.”

“Like a ten-year resident would. Plus military jargon, from having had a husband and a brother in the Marine Corps.”

“Maybe,” Reacher said. “Gregory told me a woman showed up in the Hamptons. A fat woman.”

“Fat?”

“Gregory said heavyset.”

“Surveillance?”

“No, she and Kate talked. They went walking on the beach.”

“Maybe it was Dee Marie. Maybe she’s fat. Maybe she was asking for money. Maybe Kate blew her off and that was the last straw.”

“This is about more than money.”

“But that doesn’t mean this isn’t at least partly about money,” Pauling said. “And judging by where she’s living Dee Marie needs money. Her share would be more than five million dollars. She might think of it like compensation. For five years of stonewalling. A million dollars a year.”

“Maybe,” Reacher said again.

“It’s a hypothesis,” Pauling said. “We shouldn’t rule it out.”

“No,” Reacher said. “We shouldn’t.”

Pauling pulled a city directory off her shelf and checked the Hudson Street address.

“They’re south of Houston,” she said. “Between Vandam and Charlton. Not between Clarkson and Leroy. We were wrong.”

“Maybe they like a bar a few blocks north,” Reacher said. “He couldn’t have called himself Charlton Vandam anyway. That’s way too phony.”

“Whatever, they’re only fifteen minutes from here.”

“Don’t get your hopes up. This is another brick in the wall, that’s all. One or both of them, whichever, they must be long gone already. They’d be crazy to stick around.”

“You think?”

“They’ve got blood on their hands and money in their pockets, Pauling. They’ll be in the Caymans by now. Or Bermuda, or Venezuela, or wherever the hell people go these days.”

“So what do we do?”

“We head over to Hudson Street, and we hope like crazy that the trail is still a little bit warm.”

CHAPTER **36**

BETWEEN THEM IN their previous lives and afterward Reacher and Pauling had approached probably a thousand buildings that may or may not have contained hostile suspects. They knew exactly how to do it. There was efficient back-and-forth tactical discussion. They were coming from a position of weakness, in that neither of them was armed and Hobart had met Pauling twice before. She had interviewed Lane's whole crew at length after Anne Lane's disappearance. Chances were Hobart would remember her even after the traumatic five-year interval. Balancing those disadvantages was Reacher's strong conviction that the Hudson Street apartment would be empty. He expected to find nothing there except hastily tossed closets and one last can of rotting trash.

There was no doorman. It wasn't that kind of a building. It was a boxy five-story tenement faced with dull red brick and a black iron fire escape. It was the last hold-out on a block full of design offices and bank branches. It had a chipped black door with an aluminum squawk box chiseled sideways into the frame. Ten black buttons. Ten nametags. *Graziano* was written neatly against *4L*.

"Walk-up," Pauling said. "Central staircase. Long thin front-to-back apartments, two to a floor, one on the left, one on the right. Four-L will be on the fourth floor, on the left."

Reacher tried the door. It was locked and solid.

"What's at the back?" he asked.

"Probably an air shaft between this and the back of the building on Greenwich."

"We could rappel off the roof and come in through her kitchen window."

"I trained for that at Quantico," Pauling said. "But I never did it for real."

"Neither did I," Reacher said. "Not a kitchen. I did a bathroom window once."

"Was that fun?"

“Not really.”

“So what shall we do?”

Normally Reacher would have hit a random button and claimed to be a UPS or FedEx guy. But he wasn’t sure whether that would work with this particular building. Courier deliveries probably weren’t regular occurrences there. And he figured it was almost four o’clock in the afternoon. Not a plausible time for pizza or Chinese food. Too late for lunch, too early for dinner. So he just hit every button except 4L’s and said in a loud slurred voice, “Can’t find my key.” And at least two households must have had an errant member missing because the door buzzed twice and Pauling pushed it open.

Inside was a dim center hallway with a narrow staircase on the right. The staircase ran up one floor and then doubled back and started over again at the front of the building. It was covered in cracked linoleum. It was illuminated with low wattage bulbs. It looked like a death trap.

“Now what?” Pauling asked.

“Now we wait,” Reacher said. “At least two people are going to be sticking their heads out looking for whoever lost their key.”

So they waited. One minute. Two. Way above them in the gloom a door opened. Then closed again. Then another door opened. Closer. Second floor, maybe. Thirty seconds later it slammed shut.

“OK,” Reacher said. “Now we’re good to go.”

He put his weight on the bottom tread of the staircase and it creaked loudly. The second tread was the same. And the third. As he stepped onto the fourth Pauling started up behind him. By the time he was halfway up the whole structure was creaking and cracking like small arms fire.

They made it to the second floor hallway with no reaction from anywhere.

In front of them at the top of the stairs were two paired doors, one on the left and one on the right. 2L and 2R. Clearly these were railroad flats with front-to-back corridors that dog-legged halfway along their lengths to accommodate the entrances. Probably there were wall-mounted coat hooks just inside the doors. Straight ahead to the living rooms. Kitchens in the back. Turn back on yourself

Straight ahead to the living rooms. Kitchens in the back. Turn back on yourself at the door, you would find the bathroom, and then the bedroom at the front of the building, overlooking the street.

“Not so bad,” Reacher said, quietly.

Pauling said, “I wouldn’t want to carry my groceries up to five.”

Since childhood Reacher had never carried groceries into a home. He said, “You could throw a rope off the fire escape. Haul them up through the bedroom.”

Pauling said nothing to that. They turned one-eighty together and walked the length of the hallway to the foot of the next flight of stairs. Stepped noisily up to three. 3L and 3R were right there in front of them, identical to the situation one floor below and presumably identical to the situation one floor above.

“Let’s do it,” Reacher said.

They walked through the hallway and turned and glanced up into the fourth floor gloom. They could see 4R’s door. Not 4L’s. Reacher went first. He took the stairs two at a time to cut the number of creaks and cracks by half. Pauling followed, putting her feet near the edges of the treads where any staircase is quieter. They made it to the top. Stood there. The building hummed with the kind of subliminal background noises you find in any packed dwelling in a big city. Muted traffic sounds from the street. The blare of car horns and the wail of sirens, dulled by the thickness of walls. Ten refrigerators running, window air conditioners, room fans, TV, radio, electricity buzzing through faulty fluorescent ballasts, water flowing through pipes.

4L’s door had been painted a dull institutional green many years previously. Old, but there was nothing wrong with the job. Probably a union painter, well trained by a long and painstaking apprenticeship. The careful sheen was overlaid with years of grime. Soot from buses, grease from kitchens, rail dust from the subways. There was a clouded spy lens about level with Reacher’s chest. The *4* and the *L* were separate cast-brass items attached straight and true with brass screws.

Reacher turned sideways and bent forward from the waist. Put his ear on the crack where the door met the jamb. Listened for a moment.

Then he straightened up.

Then he straightened up.

“There’s someone in there,” he whispered.

CHAPTER **37**

REACHER BENT FORWARD and listened again. “Straight ahead. A woman, talking.” Then he straightened up and stepped back. “What’s the layout going to be?”

“A short hallway,” Pauling whispered. “Narrow for six feet, until it clears the bathroom. Then maybe it opens out to the living room. The living room will be maybe twelve feet long. The back wall will have a window on the left into the light well. Kitchen door on the right. The kitchen will be bumped out to the back. Maybe six or seven feet deep.”

Reacher nodded. Worst case, the woman was in the kitchen, a maximum twenty-five feet away down a straight and direct line of sight to the door. Worse than worst case, she had a loaded gun next to her on the countertop and she knew how to shoot.

Pauling asked, “Who’s she talking to?”

Reacher whispered, “I don’t know.”

“It’s them, isn’t it?”

“They’d be nuts to still be here.”

“Who else can it be?”

Reacher said nothing.

Pauling asked, “What do you want to do?”

“What would you do?”

“Get a warrant. Call a SWAT team. Full body armor and a battering ram.”

“Those days are gone.”

“Tell me about it.”

Reacher took another step back. Pointed at 4R's door.

"Wait there," he said. "If you hear shooting, call an ambulance. If you don't, follow me in six feet behind."

"You're just going to knock?"

"No," Reacher said. "Not exactly."

He took another step back. He was six feet five inches tall and weighed about two hundred and fifty pounds. His shoes were bench-made by a company called Cheaney, from Northampton in England. Smarter buys than Church's, which were basically the same shoes but with a premium tag for the name. The style Reacher had chosen was called Tenterden, which was a brown semi-brogue made of heavy pebbled leather. Size twelve. The soles were heavy composite items bought in from a company called Dainite. Reacher hated leather soles. They wore out too fast and stayed wet too long after rain. Dainites were better. Their heels were a five-layer stack an inch and a quarter thick. The Cheaney leather welt, the Dainite welt, two slabs of hard Cheaney leather, and a thick Dainite cap.

Each shoe on its own weighed more than two pounds.

4L's door had three keyholes. Three locks. Probably good ones. Maybe a chain inside. But door furniture is only as good as the wood it is set into. The door itself was probably hundred-year-old Douglas fir. Same for the frame. Cheap to start with, damp and swelled all through a hundred summers, dry and shrunken all through a hundred winters. A little eaten-out and wormy.

"Stand by now," Reacher whispered.

He put his weight on his back foot and stared at the door and bounced like a high jumper going for a record. Then he launched. One pace, two. He smashed his right heel into the door just above the knob and wood splintered and dust filled the air and the door smashed open and he continued running without breaking stride. Two paces put him in the center of the living room. He stopped dead there. Just stood still and stared. Lauren Pauling crowded in behind him and stopped at his shoulder.

Just stared.

The apartment was laid out exactly as Pauling had predicted. A dilapidated kitchen dead ahead, a twelve-foot living room on the left with a worn-out sofa and a dim window onto a light well. The air was hot and still and foul. In the kitchen doorway stood a heavyset woman in a shapeless cotton shift. She had long brown hair parted in the center of her head. In one hand she held an open can of soup and in the other she held a wooden spoon. Her eyes and her mouth were open wide in bewilderment and surprise. She was trying to scream, but shock had punched all the air out of her lungs.

In the living room, horizontal on the worn-out sofa, was a man.

Not a man Reacher had ever seen before.

This man was sick. Prematurely old. He was savagely emaciated. He had no teeth. His skin was yellow and glittered with fever. All that was left of his hair were long wisps of gray.

He had no hands.

He had no feet.

Pauling said, *"Hobart?"*

There was nothing left that could surprise the man on the sofa. Not anymore. With a lot of effort he just moved his head and said, "Special Agent Pauling. It's a pleasure to see you again."

He had a tongue. But with nothing else but gums in his mouth his speech was mumbled and indistinct. And weak. And faint. But he could talk. He could talk just fine.

Pauling looked at the woman and said, "Dee Marie Graziano?"

"Yes," the woman said.

"My sister," Hobart said.

Pauling turned back to him. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Africa," Hobart said. "Africa happened to me."

He was wearing stiff new denims, dark blue. Jeans, and a shirt. The sleeves and the pant legs were rolled to clear the stumps of his wrists and his shins, which were all smeared with a clear salve of some kind. The amputations were crude and brutal. Reacher could see the end of a yellow forearm bone protruding like a broken piano key. There was no stitching of the severed flesh. No reconstruction. Mostly just a thick mass of scarring. Like burns.

“What happened?” Pauling asked again.

“Long story,” Hobart said.

“We need to hear it,” Reacher said.

“Why? The FBI is here to help me now? After kicking down my sister’s door?”

“I’m not FBI,” Reacher said.

“Me either,” Pauling said. “Not anymore.”

“So what are you now?”

“A private investigator.”

Hobart’s eyes moved to Reacher’s face. “And you?”

“The same,” Reacher said. “More or less. Freelance. I don’t have a license. I used to be an MP.”

Nobody spoke for a minute.

“I was making soup,” Dee Marie Graziano said.

Pauling said, “Go ahead. Please. Don’t let us hold you up.”

Reacher stepped back through the hallway and pushed the shattered door as far shut as it would go. When he got back to the living room Dee Marie was in the kitchen with a flame under a saucepan. She was pouring the soup from the can into it. Stirring the soup with the spoon as it flowed. Pauling was still staring at the broken abbreviated man on the sofa.

“What happened to you?” she asked him for the third time.

“First he eats,” Dee Marie called.

CHAPTER **38**

HIS SISTER SAT on the sofa next to him and cradled Hobart's head and fed him the soup slowly and carefully with a spoon. Hobart licked his lips after every mouthful and from time to time started to raise one or other of his missing hands to wipe a dribble off his chin. He would look at first perplexed for a fleeting second and then rueful, as if he were amazed at how long the memory of simple physical routines endured even after they were no longer possible. Each time it happened his sister would wait patiently for his handless wrist to return to his lap and then she would wipe his chin with a cloth, tenderly, lovingly, as if he were her child and not her brother. The soup was thick and made from some kind of a light green vegetable, maybe lentils or celery or asparagus, and by the time the bowl was empty the cloth was badly stained.

Pauling said, "We need to talk."

"About what?" Hobart asked.

"About you."

"I'm not much to talk about. What you see is what you get."

"And Edward Lane," Pauling said. "We need to talk about Edward Lane."

"Where is he?"

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"Five years ago," Hobart said. "In Africa."

"What happened there?"

"I was taken alive. Not smart."

"And Knight, too?"

Hobart nodded.

“Knight too,” he said.

“How?” Reacher asked.

“You ever been to Burkina Faso?”

“I’ve never been anywhere in Africa.”

Hobart paused for a long moment. He seemed to decide to clam up, and then he seemed to change his mind and decide to talk.

“There was a civil war,” he said. “There usually is. We had a city to defend. We usually do. This time it was the capital. We couldn’t even say its name. I learned it later. It’s called Ouagadougou. But back then we called it O-Town. You were an MP. You know how that goes. The military deploys overseas and changes names. We think we’re doing it for intelligibility, but really we’re depersonalizing the place, psychologically. Making it ours, so we don’t feel so bad when we destroy it.”

“What happened there?” Pauling asked.

“O-Town was about the size of Kansas City, Missouri. All the action was to the northeast. The tree line was about a mile outside the city limit. Two roads in, radial, like spokes in a wheel. One was north of northeast and the other was east of northeast. We called them the One O’clock Road and the Two O’clock Road. Like the face of a wristwatch? If twelve o’clock was due north, there were roads at the one o’clock position and the two o’clock position. The One O’clock Road was the one we had to worry about. That’s the one the rebels were going to be using. Except they wouldn’t exactly be using it. They would be flanking it in the jungle. They would be twenty feet off the shoulder and we’d never see them. They were nothing but infantry, with nothing that wasn’t man-portable. They were going to be creeping along in the weeds, and we wouldn’t see them until they passed the tree line and came out in the open.”

“Tree line was a mile away?” Reacher said.

“Exactly,” Hobart said. “Not a problem. They had a mile of open ground to cross and we had heavy machine guns.”

“So where was the problem?”

“If you were them, what would you have done?”

“I would have moved to my left and outflanked you to the east. With at least half my force, maybe more. I would have stayed in the weeds and moved around and come out at you maybe from the four o’clock position. Coordinated attacks. Two directions. You wouldn’t have known which was your front and which was your flank.”

Hobart nodded. A small painful motion that brought out all the tendons in his scrawny neck.

“We anticipated exactly that,” he said. “We figured they’d be tracking the One O’clock Road with half their force on the right shoulder and the other half on the left shoulder. We figured about two miles out the half that was on the right shoulder as we were looking at it would wheel ninety degrees to its left and attempt an outflanking maneuver. But that meant that maybe five thousand guys would have to cross the Two O’clock Road. Spokes in a wheel, right? We’d see them. The Two O’clock Road was dead-straight. Narrow, but a clear cut through the trees for fifty miles. We could see all the way to the horizon. It was going to be like watching a crosswalk in Times Square.”

“So what happened?” Pauling asked.

“Knight and I had been together forever. And we had been Recon Marines. So we volunteered to set up forward OPs. We crawled out about three hundred yards and found a couple of good depressions. Old shell holes, from back in the day. Those places are always fighting. Knight set up with a good view of the One O’clock Road and I set up with a good view of the Two O’clock Road. Plan was if they didn’t attempt to outflank us we’d take them head-on and if we were making good progress with that our main force would come out to join us. If their attack was heavy Knight and I would fall back to the city limit and we’d set up a secondary line of defense there. And if I saw the outflanking maneuver in progress we’d fall back immediately and reorganize on two fronts.”

Reacher asked, “So where did it all go wrong?”

“I made two mistakes,” Hobart said. Just four words, but the effort of getting them out seemed to suddenly exhaust him. He closed his eyes and his lips tightened against his toothless gums and he started wheezing from the chest.

“He has malaria and tuberculosis,” his sister said. “You’re tiring him out.”

“Is he getting care?” Pauling asked.

“We have no benefits. The VA does a little. Apart from that I take him to the Saint Vincent’s ER.”

“How? How do you get him up and down the stairs?”

“I carry him,” Dee Marie said. “On my back.”

Hobart coughed hard and dribbled blood-flecked spittle down his chin. He raised his severed wrist high and wiped himself with what was left of his bicep. Then he opened his eyes.

Reacher asked him, “What two mistakes?”

“There was an early feint,” Hobart said. “About ten point men came out of the trees a mile ahead of Knight. They were going for death or glory, you know, running and firing unaimed. Knight let them run for about fifteen hundred yards and then he dropped them all with his rifle. I couldn’t see him. He was about a hundred yards away but the terrain was uneven. I crawled over to check he was OK.”

“And was he?”

“He was fine.”

“Neither of you had been wounded?”

“Wounded? Not even close.”

“But there had been small arms fire?”

“Some.”

“Go on.”

“When I got to Knight’s position I realized I could see the Two O’clock Road even better from his hole than from mine. Plus I figured when the shooting starts it’s always better to be paired up. We could cover each other for jams and

reloads. So that was my first mistake. I put myself in the same foxhole as Knight."

"And the second mistake?"

"I believed what Edward Lane told me."

CHAPTER **39**

REACHER ASKED, "WHAT did Edward Lane tell you?"

But Hobart couldn't answer for a minute. He was consumed with another bout of coughing. His caved chest heaved. His truncated limbs flailed uselessly. Blood and thick yellow mucus rimed his lips. Dee Marie ducked back to the kitchen and rinsed her cloth and filled a glass with water. Wiped Hobart's face very carefully and let him sip from the glass. Then she took him under the arms and hauled him into an upright position. He coughed twice more and then stopped as the fluid settled lower in his lungs.

"It's a balance," Dee Marie said, to nobody in particular. "We need to keep his chest clear but coughing too much wears him out."

Reacher asked, "Hobart? What did Lane tell you?"

Hobart panted for a moment and fixed his eyes on Reacher's in a mute appeal for patience. Then he said, "About thirty minutes after that first feint Lane showed up in Knight's foxhole. He seemed surprised to see me there, too. He checked that Knight was OK and told him to stay with the mission. Then he turned to me and told me he had definitive new intelligence that we *were* going to see men crossing the Two O'clock Road but that they would be government troops coming in from the bush and circling around to reinforce us through the rear. He said they had been on a night march and were taking it slow and stealthy because they were so close to the rebels. Both sides were incoming on parallel tracks less than forty yards apart. No danger of visual contact because of how thick the vegetation was, but they were worried about noise. So Lane told me to sit tight and watch the road and just count them cross it, and the higher the number was the better I should feel about it, because they were all on our side."

"And you saw them?"

"Thousands and thousands of them. Your basic ragtag army, all on foot, no transport, decent firepower, plenty of Browning automatic rifles, some M60s, some light mortars. They crossed two abreast and it took hours."

"And then?"

And then?

“We sat tight. All day, and into the night. Then all hell broke loose. We had night scopes and we could see what was happening. About five thousand guys just stepped out of the trees and assembled on the One O’clock Road and started marching straight toward us. At the same time another five thousand stepped out of the brush just south of the four o’clock position and came straight at us. They were the same guys I had counted earlier. They weren’t government troops. They were rebels. Lane’s new intelligence had been wrong. At least that’s what I thought at first. Later I realized he had lied to me.”

“What happened?” Pauling said.

“At first nothing computed. The rebels started firing from way too far away. Africa’s a big continent but most of them probably missed it. At that point Knight and I were kind of relaxed. Plans are always bullshit. Everything in war is improvisation. So we expected some suppressing fire from behind us to allow us to fall back. But it never came. I was turned around staring at the city behind me. It was just three hundred yards away. But it was all dark and silent. Then I turned back and saw these ten thousand guys coming at me. Two different directions ninety degrees apart. Dead of night. Suddenly I had the feeling Knight and I were the only two Westerners left in-country. Turns out I was probably right. The way I pieced it together afterward, Lane and all the other crews had pulled out twelve hours before. He must have gotten back from his little visit with us and just hopped straight into his jeep. Mounted everyone up and headed due south for the border with Ghana. Then to the airport at Tamale, which was where we came in.”

Reacher said, “What we need to know is why he did that.”

“That’s easy,” Hobart said. “I had plenty of time to figure it out afterward, believe me. Lane abandoned us because he wanted Knight dead. I just happened to be in the wrong foxhole, that’s all. I was collateral damage.”

“Why did Lane want Knight dead?”

“Because Knight killed Lane’s wife.”

CHAPTER **40**

PAULING ASKED, "DID Knight confess that to you directly?"

Hobart didn't answer. Just waved the stump of his right wrist, weakly, vaguely, a dismissive little gesture.

"Did Knight confess to killing Anne Lane?"

Hobart said, "He confessed to about a hundred thousand different things." Then he smiled, ruefully. "You had to be there. You had to know how it was. Knight was raving for four years. He was completely out of his mind for three. Me too, probably."

"So how was it?" Pauling asked. "Tell us."

Dee Marie Graziano said, "I don't want to hear this again. I *can't* hear this again. I'm going out."

Pauling opened her purse and took out her wallet. Peeled off part of her wad. Didn't count it. Just handed the sheaf of bills straight to Dee Marie.

"Get stuff," she said. "Food, medicine, whatever you need."

Dee Marie said, "You can't buy his testimony."

"I'm not trying to," Pauling said. "I'm trying to help, that's all."

"I don't like charity."

"Then get over it," Reacher said. "Your brother needs everything he can get."

"Take it, Dee," Hobart said. "Be sure to get something for yourself."

Dee Marie shrugged, then took the money. Jammed it in the pocket of her shift and collected her keys and walked out. Reacher heard the front door open. The hinges squealed where he had damaged them. He stepped into the hallway.

"[illegible]" Pauling said from behind him.

"We should call a carpenter," Pauling said, from behind him.

"Call that Soviet super from Sixth Avenue," Reacher said. "He looked competent and I'm sure he moonlights."

"You think?"

Reacher whispered, "He was with the Red Army in Afghanistan. He won't freak when he sees a guy with no hands and no feet."

"You talking about me?" Hobart called.

Reacher followed Pauling back to the living room and said, "You're lucky to have a sister like that."

Hobart nodded. The same slow, painful movement.

"But it's hard on her," he said. "You know, with the bathroom and all. She has to see things a sister shouldn't see."

"Tell us about Knight. Tell us about the whole damn thing."

Hobart laid his head back on the sofa cushion. Stared up at the ceiling. With his sister gone, he seemed to relax. His ruined body settled and quieted.

"It was one of those unique moments," he said. "Suddenly we were sure we were alone, outnumbered ten thousand to two, dead of night, in no man's land, in the middle of a country we had no right be in. I mean, you think you've been in deep shit before, and then you realize you have absolutely no conception of how deep shit can really be. At first we didn't do anything. Then we just looked at each other. That was the last moment of true peace I ever felt. We looked at each other and I guess we just took an unspoken decision to go down fighting. Better to die, we figured. We all have to die sometime, and that looked like as good an occasion as any. So we started firing. I guess we figured they'd lay some mortar rounds on us and that would be that. But they didn't. They just kept on coming, tens and twenties, and we just kept on firing, putting them down. Hundreds of them. But they kept on coming. Now I guess it was a tactic. We started to have equipment problems, like they knew we would. Our M60 barrels overheated. We started to run short of ammunition. We only had what we had been able to carry. When they sensed it, they all charged. OK, I thought, bring it on. I figured bullets or bayonets right there in the hole would be as good as mortar rounds

from a distance."

He closed his eyes and the little room went quiet.

"But?" Reacher said.

Hobart opened his eyes. "But it didn't happen that way. They got to the lip of the hole and stopped and just stood there. Waited in the moonlight. Watched us floundering around looking for fresh clips. We didn't have any. Then the crowd parted and some kind of an officer walked through. He looked down at us and smiled. Black face, white teeth, in the moonlight. It hit us then. We thought we'd been in deep shit *before*, but that was nothing. *This* was deep shit. We'd just killed hundreds of their guys and we were about to be captured."

"How did it go down?"

"Surprisingly well, at the beginning. They stole everything of any value immediately. Then they slapped us around a little bit for a minute, but it was really nothing. I had worse from the NCOs in boot camp. We had these little Stars and Stripes patches on our BDUs, and I thought maybe they counted for something. The first few days were chaos. We were chained all the time, but that was more out of necessity than cruelty. They had no jail facilities. They had nothing, really. They'd been living in the bush for years. No infrastructure. But they fed us. Appalling food, but it was the same as they were eating, and it's the thought that counts. Then after a week it was clear the coup had succeeded, so they all moved into O-Town proper and took us with them and put us in the city prison. We were in a separate wing for about four weeks. We figured they were maybe negotiating with Washington. They fed us and left us alone. We could hear bad stuff elsewhere in the building, but we figured we were special. So altogether the first month was a day at the beach compared to what came later."

"What came later?"

"Evidently they gave up on Washington or stopped thinking we were special because they took us out of the separate wing and tossed us in with some of the others. And that was bad. Real bad. Incredible overcrowding, filth, disease, no clean water, almost no food. We were skeletons inside a month. Savages after two. I went six months without even lying down, the first cell was so crowded. We were ankle deep in shit, literally. There were worms. At night the place crawled with them. People were dying from disease and starvation. Then they

put us on trial."

"You had a trial?"

"I guess it was a trial. War crimes, probably. I had no idea what they were saying."

"Weren't they speaking French?"

"That's for government and diplomacy. The rest of them speak tribal languages. It was just two hours of noise to me, and then they found us guilty. They took us back to the big house and we found out that the part we'd already been in was the VIP accommodations. Now we were headed for general population, which was a whole lot worse. Two months later I figured I was about as low as I could go. But I was wrong. Because then I had a birthday."

"What happened on your birthday?"

"They gave me a present."

"Which was?"

"A choice."

"Of what?"

"They hauled out about a dozen guys. I guess we all shared the same birthday. They took us to a courtyard. First thing I noticed was a big bucket of tar on a propane burner. It was bubbling away. Real hot. I remembered the smell from when I was a kid, from when they were blacktopping roads where I lived. My mother believed some old superstition that said if a kid sniffed the tar smell it would protect him from getting coughs and colds. She would send us out to chase the trucks. So I knew the smell real well. Then I saw next to the bucket was a big stone block, all black with blood. Then some big guard grabbed a machete and started screaming at the first guy in line. I had no idea what he was saying. The guy next to me spoke a little English and translated for me. He said we had a choice. Three choices, actually. To celebrate our birthdays we were going to lose a foot. First choice, left or right. Second choice, long pants or short pants. That was a kind of joke. It meant we could be cut above the knee or below. Our choice. Third choice, we could use the bucket or not. Our choice.

You plunge the stump in there, the boiling tar seals the arteries and cauterizes the wound. Choose not to, and you bleed out and die. Our choice. But the guard said we had to choose fast. We weren't allowed to mess around and hold up the queue behind us."

Silence in the tiny room. Nobody spoke. There was no sound at all, except faint incongruous New York City sirens in the far distance.

Hobart said, "I chose left, long pants, and yes to the bucket."

CHAPTER **41**

FOR A LONG time the small room stayed quiet as a tomb. Hobart rolled his head from side to side to ease his neck. Reacher sat down in a small chair near the window.

Hobart said, “Twelve months later on my next birthday I chose right, long pants, and yes to the bucket.”

Reacher said, “They did this to Knight, too?”

Hobart nodded. “We thought we had been close before. But some things really bring you together.”

Pauling was leaning up in the kitchen doorway, white as a sheet. “Knight told you about Anne Lane?”

“He told me about a lot of things. But remember, we were doing seriously hard time. We were sick and starving. We had infections. We had malaria and dysentery. We were out of our heads for weeks at a time with fevers.”

“What did he tell you?”

“He told me he shot Anne Lane in New Jersey.”

“Did he tell you why?”

“He gave me a whole bunch of different reasons. Different day, different reason. Sometimes it was that he had been having an affair with her, and she broke it off, and he got mad. Other times it was that Lane was mad at her and asked him to do it. Other times he said he was working for the CIA. Once he said she was an alien from another planet.”

“Did he kidnap her?”

Hobart nodded, slowly, painfully. “Drove her to the store, but didn’t stop there. Just pulled a gun and kept on going, all the way to New Jersey. Killed her there.”

“Immediately?” Pauling asked.

Hobart said, “Yes, immediately. She was dead a day before you ever even heard of her. There was nothing wrong with your procedures. He killed her that first morning and drove back and waited outside the store until it was time to sound the alarms.”

“Not possible,” Pauling said. “His EZ-Pass records showed he hadn’t used a bridge or a tunnel that day.”

“Give me a break,” Hobart said. “You pull the tag off the windshield and put it in the foil packet they mailed it in. Then you use a cash lane.”

“Were you really in Philadelphia?” Reacher asked.

“Yes, I really was,” Hobart said.

“Did you know what Knight was doing that day?”

“No, I really didn’t.”

“Who faked Anne’s voice on the phone?” Pauling asked. “Who set up the ransom drop?”

“Sometimes Knight would say it was a couple of his buddies. Sometimes he would say Lane took care of all of that.”

“Which version did you believe?”

Hobart’s head dropped to his chest and canted left. He stared toward the floor. Reacher asked, “Can I get you something?”

“I’m just looking at your shoes,” Hobart said. “I like nice shoes, too. Or at least I did.”

“You’ll get prosthetics. You can wear shoes with them.”

“Can’t afford them. Prosthetics, or shoes.”

Pauling said, “What was the truth about Anne Lane?”

Hobart pulled his head back to the cushion so he could look straight up at Pauling. He smiled, sadly.

“The truth about Anne Lane?” he said. “I thought about that a lot. Believe me, I obsessed over it. It became the central question of my life, because basically it was responsible for what was happening to me. The third birthday I spent in there, they took me back to the courtyard. The second choice was phrased slightly different. Long sleeves or short? Stupid question, really. Nobody ever chose short sleeves. I mean, who the hell would? I saw a thousand amputees in there and nobody ever took it above the elbow.”

Silence in the room.

“The things you remember,” Hobart said. “I remember the stink of the blood and the tar bucket and the pile of severed hands behind that big stone block. A bunch of black ones and one little white one.”

Pauling asked, “What was the truth about Anne?”

“The waiting was the hardest part. I spent a year looking at my right hand. Doing things with it. Making a fist, spreading my fingers, scratching myself with my nails.”

“Why did Knight kill Anne Lane?”

“They weren’t having an affair. Not possible. Knight wasn’t that type of a guy. I’m not saying he had scruples. He was just a little timid around women, that’s all. He did OK with trash in bars or with hookers, but Anne Lane was way out of his league. She was classy, she had personality, she had energy, she knew who she was. She was intelligent. She wouldn’t have responded to the kind of thing that Knight had to offer. Not in a million years. And Knight wouldn’t have offered anything anyway, because Anne was the CO’s wife. That’s the biggest no-no of all time for an American fighting man. In the movies they show it maybe, but not in real life. Just wouldn’t happen, and if it did, Knight would have been the last Marine on earth to try it.”

“You sure?”

“I knew him very well. And he didn’t have the kind of buddies that could have faked the voices. Certainly not a woman’s voice. He had no women friends. He

didn’t have *any* friends outside of me and the unit. Not really. Not close enough for work like that. What Marine does? That’s when I knew he was bullshitting. There was nobody he knew where he could just walk up to them and say, hey, help me out with this phony kidnap thing, why don’t you?”

“So why did he even try bullshitting you?”

“Because he understood better than me that reality was over for us. There was really no difference between truth and fantasy for us at that point. They were of absolutely equal value. He was just amusing himself. Maybe he was trying to amuse me, too. But I was still analyzing stuff. He gave me a whole rainbow of reasons and details and facts and scenarios and I checked them over very carefully in my mind for five long years and the only story I really believed was that Lane set the whole thing up because Anne wanted out of the marriage. She wanted a divorce and she wanted alimony and Lane’s ego couldn’t take it. So he had her killed.”

“Why would Lane want Knight dead if all he had done was act on Lane’s own orders?”

“Lane was covering his ass. Tying up the loose ends. And he was avoiding being in someone else’s debt. That was the main thing, really. Ultimately that was the true reason. A guy like Lane, his ego couldn’t take that, either. Being grateful to someone.”

Silence in the room.

“What happened to Knight in the end?” Reacher asked.

“His fourth birthday,” Hobart said. “He didn’t go for the bucket. He didn’t want to go on. The pussy just quit on me. Some damn jarhead he was.”

CHAPTER **42**

TEN MINUTES LATER Dee Marie Graziano got home. The squawk box in the hallway sounded and she asked for help carrying packages up the stairs. Reacher went down four flights and hauled four grocery bags back up to the apartment. Dee Marie unpacked them in the kitchen. She had bought a lot of soup, and Jell-O, and painkillers, and antiseptic creams.

Reacher said, “We heard that Kate Lane had a visitor in the Hamptons.”

Dee Marie said nothing.

“Was it you?” Reacher asked.

“I went to the Dakota first,” she said. “But the doorman told me they were away.”

“So then you went.”

“Two days later. We decided that I should. It was a long day. Very expensive.”

“You went there to warn Anne Lane’s successor.”

“We thought she should be told what her husband was capable of doing.”

“How did she react?”

“She listened. We walked on the sand and she listened to what I had to say.”

“That was all?”

“She took it all in. Didn’t react much.”

“How definite were you?”

“I said we had no proof. Equally I said we had no doubt.”

“And she didn’t react?”

“She just took it all in. Gave it a fair hearing.”

“Did you tell her about your brother?”

“It’s a part of the story. She listened to it. Didn’t say much. She’s beautiful and she’s rich. People like that are different. If it’s not happening to them, it’s not happening at all.”

“What happened to your husband?”

“Vinnie? Iraq happened to Vinnie. Fallujah. A roadside booby-trap.”

“I’m sorry.”

“They told me he was killed instantly. But they always say that.”

“Sometimes it’s true.”

“I hope it was. Just that one time.”

“The Corps or private?”

“Vinnie? The Corps. Vinnie hated private contractors.”

Reacher left Dee Marie in the kitchen and stepped back into the living room. Hobart’s head was laid back and his lips were stretched in a grimace. His neck was thin and bulging with ligaments. His torso was painfully wasted and looked bizarrely long in proportion to the stumps of his limbs.

“You need anything?” Reacher asked him.

Hobart said, “Silly question.”

“What would the three of clubs mean to you?”

“Knight.”

“How so?”

How so?

“Three was his lucky number. Club was his nickname in the Corps. Because of how he liked to party, and because of the pun on his name. Knight Club, nightclub, like that. They called him Club, back in the day.”

“He left a playing card on Anne Lane’s body. The three of clubs.”

“He did? He told me that. I didn’t believe him. I thought it was embellishment. Like a book or a movie.”

Reacher said nothing.

“I need the bathroom,” Hobart said. “Tell Dee.”

“I’ll do it,” Reacher said. “Let’s give Dee a break.”

He stepped over and bunched the front of Hobart’s shirt and hauled him upright. Slipped an arm behind his shoulders. Ducked down and caught him under the knees and lifted him up off the sofa. He was incredibly light. Probably close to a hundred pounds. Not much of him left.

Reacher carried Hobart to the bathroom and grabbed the front of his shirt again one-handed and held him vertical in the air like a rag doll. Undid his pants and eased them down.

“You’ve done this before,” Hobart said.

“I was an MP,” Reacher said. “I’ve done everything before.”

Reacher put Hobart back on the sofa and Dee Marie fed him more soup. Used the same damp cloth to clean his chin.

Reacher said, “I need to ask you both one important question. I need to know where you’ve been and what you’ve been doing for the last four days.”

Dee Marie answered. No guile, no hesitation, nothing phony or overrehearsed. Just a slightly incoherent and therefore completely convincing pieced-together

just a slightly incoherent and therefore completely convincing pieced together narrative account of four random days from an ongoing nightmare. The four days had started with Hobart in Saint Vincent's hospital. Dee Marie had taken him to the ER the night before with a severe malaria relapse. The ER doctor had admitted him for forty-eight hours of IV medication. Dee Marie had stayed with him most of the time. Then she had brought him home in a taxi and carried him on her back up the four flights of stairs. They had been alone in the apartment since then, eating what was in the kitchen cupboards, doing nothing, seeing nobody, until their door had smashed open and Reacher had ended up in the middle of their living room.

"Why are you asking?" Hobart said.

"The new Mrs. Lane was kidnapped. And her kid."

"You thought I did it?"

"For a spell."

"Think again."

"I already have."

"Why would I?"

"For revenge. For money. The ransom was exactly half the Burkina Faso payment."

"I would have wanted all of it."

"Me too."

"But I wouldn't have gone after a woman and a kid."

"Me either."

"So why pick me out?"

"We got a basic report on you and Knight. We heard about mutilations. No specific details. Then we heard about a guy with no tongue. We put two and two together and made three. We thought it was you."

“No tongue?” Hobart said. “I wish. I’d take that deal.” Then he said, “But no tongue is a South American thing. Brazil, Colombia, Peru. Maybe Sicily in Europe. Not Africa. You can’t get a machete in somebody’s mouth. Lips, maybe. I saw that, sometimes. Or ears. But not the tongue.”

“We apologize,” Pauling said.

“No harm, no foul,” Hobart said.

“We’ll have the door fixed.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

“And we’ll help you if we can.”

“I’d appreciate that, too. But see to the woman and the child first.”

“We think we’re already too late.”

“Don’t say that. It depends who took them. Where there’s hope, there’s life. Hope kept me going, five hard years.”

Reacher and Pauling left Hobart and Dee Marie right there, together on their battered sofa, the bowl of soup half-gone. They walked down four flights to the street and stepped out into the afternoon shadows of a fabulous late-summer day. Traffic ground past on the street, slow and angry. Horns blared and sirens barked. Fast pedestrians swerved by on the sidewalk.

Reacher said, “Eight million stories in the naked city.”

Pauling said, “We’re nowhere.”

CHAPTER **43**

REACHER LED PAULING north on Hudson, across Houston, to the block between Clarkson and Leroy. He said, “I think the man with no tongue lives near this spot.”

“Twenty thousand people live near this spot,” Pauling said.

Reacher didn’t reply.

“What now?” Pauling said.

“Back to the hard way. We wasted some time, that’s all. Wasted some energy. My fault entirely. I was stupid.”

“How?”

“Did you see how Hobart was dressed?”

“Cheap new denims.”

“The guy I saw driving the cars away was wearing old denims. Both times. Old, soft, washed, worn, faded, comfortable denims. The Soviet super said the same thing. And the old Chinese man. No way was the guy I saw just back from Africa. Or back from anywhere. It takes ages to get jeans and a shirt looking like that. The guy I saw has been safe at home for five years doing his laundry, not jammed up in some hellhole jail.”

Pauling said nothing.

“You can split now,” Reacher said. “You got what you wanted. Anne Lane wasn’t your fault. She was dead before you ever even heard of her. You can sleep at night.”

“But not well. Because I can’t touch Edward Lane. Hobart’s testimony is meaningless.”

“Because it’s hearsay?”

“Hearsay is sometimes OK. Knight’s dying declaration would be admissible, because the court would assume he had no motive to lie from his deathbed.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“There was no dying declaration. There were dozens of random fantasies spun over a four-year period. Hobart chose to back one of them, that’s all. And he freely admits that both he and Knight were as good as insane most of the time. I’d be laughed out of court, literally.”

“But you believed him.”

Pauling nodded. “No question.”

“So you can settle for half a loaf. Patti Joseph, too. I’ll drop by and tell her.”

“Would you be happy with half a loaf?”

“I said you can split. Not me. I’m not quitting yet. My agenda is getting longer and longer by the minute.”

“I’ll stick with it, too.”

“Your choice.”

“I know. You want me to?”

Reacher looked at her. Answered honestly. “Yes, I do.”

“Then I will.”

“Just don’t get all scrupulous on me. This thing isn’t going to be settled in any court of law with any dying declarations.”

“How is it going to be settled?”

“The first colonel I really fell out with, I shot him in the head. And so far I like Lane a lot less than that guy. That guy was practically a saint compared to Lane.”

“I’ll come with you to Patti Joseph’s.”

“No, I’ll meet you there,” Reacher said. “Two hours from now. We should travel separately.”

“Why?”

“I’m going to try to get killed.”

Pauling said she would be in the Majestic’s lobby in two hours and headed for the subway. Reacher started walking north on Hudson, not fast, not slow, center of the left-hand sidewalk. Twelve stories above him and ten yards behind his left shoulder was a north-facing window. It had heavy black cloth taped behind it. The cloth had been peeled back across a quarter of its width to make a tall narrow slit, as if a person in the room had wanted at least a partial view of the city.

Reacher crossed Morton, and Barrow, and Christopher. On West 10th he started zigzagging through the narrow tree-lined Village streets, east for a block, then north, then west, then north again. He made it to the bottom of Eighth Avenue and walked north for a spell and then started zigzagging again where the Chelsea side streets were quiet. He stopped in the lee of a brownstone’s front steps and bent down and retied his shoes. Walked on and stopped again behind a big square plastic trash bin and studied something on the ground. At West 23rd Street he turned east and then north again on Eighth. Stuck to the center of the left-hand sidewalk and slow-marched onward. Patti Joseph and the Majestic lay a little more than two miles ahead in a dead-straight line, and he had a whole hour to get there.

Thirty minutes later at Columbus Circle, Reacher entered Central Park. Daylight was fading. Shadows had been long, but now they were indistinct. The air was still warm. Reacher stuck to the paths for a spell and then he stepped off and walked a haphazard and unofficial route through the trees. He stopped and leaned against one trunk, facing north. Then another, facing east. He got back on the path and found an empty bench and sat down with his back to the stream of people walking past. He waited there until the clock in his head told him it was time to move.

Reacher found Lauren Pauling waiting in one of a group of armchairs in the Majestic's lobby. She had freshened up. She looked good. She had qualities. Reacher found himself thinking that Kate Lane might have ended up looking like that, twenty years down the road.

"I stopped by and asked that Russian super," she said. "He'll go over later tonight to fix the door."

"Good," Reacher said.

"You didn't get killed," she said.

He sat down beside her.

"Something else I got wrong," he said. "I've been assuming there was inside help from one of Lane's crew. But now I don't think there can have been. Yesterday morning Lane offered me a million bucks. This morning when he lost hope he told me to find the bad guys. Seek and destroy. He was about as serious as a man can get. Anyone watching from the inside would have to assume I was pretty well motivated. And I've shown them that I'm at least partially competent. But nobody has tried to stop me. And they would try, wouldn't they? Any kind of an inside ally would be expected to. But they haven't. I just spent two hours strolling through Manhattan. Side streets, quiet places, Central Park. I kept stopping and turning my back. I gave whoever it might be a dozen chances to

take me out. But nobody tried."

"Would they have been on your tail?"

"That's why I wanted to start between Clarkson and Leroy. That's got to be some kind of a base camp. They could have picked me up there."

"How could they have done this whole thing without inside help?"

"I have absolutely no idea."

"You'll figure it out."

"Say that again."

"Why? You need inspiration?"

"I just like the sound of your voice."

"You'll figure it out," Pauling said, low and husky, like she had been getting over laryngitis for the last thirty years.

They checked in at the desk and then rode up to seven in the elevator. Patti Joseph was out in the corridor, waiting for them. There was a little awkwardness when she and Pauling met. Patti had spent five years thinking Pauling had failed her sister, and Pauling had spent the same five years thinking pretty much the same thing. So there was ice to break. But the implied promise of news helped Patti thaw. And Reacher figured Pauling had plenty of experience with grieving relatives. Any investigator does.

"Coffee?" Patti said, before they were even in through the door.

"I thought you'd never ask," Reacher said.

Patti went to the kitchen to set up the machine and Pauling walked straight to the window. Looked at the stuff on the sill, and then checked the view. Raised her

eyebrows in Reacher's direction and gave a small shrug that said: *Weird, but I've seen weirder.*

"So what's up?" Patti called through.

Reacher said, "Let's wait until we're all sitting down." And ten minutes later they all were, with Patti Joseph in tears. Tears of grief, tears of relief, tears of closure.

Tears of anger.

"Where is Knight now?" she asked.

"Knight died," Reacher said. "And he died hard."

"Good. I'm glad."

"No argument from me."

"What are we going to do about Lane?"

"That remains to be seen."

"I should call Brewer."

"Brewer can't do anything. There's truth here, but there's no evidence. Not the kind that a cop or a prosecutor needs."

"You should tell the other guys about Hobart. Tell them what Lane did to their buddy. Send them down there to see for themselves."

"Might not work. They might not care. Guys that were likely to care wouldn't have obeyed the order in Africa in the first place. And now, even if they did care, the best way to deal with their own guilt would be to stay in denial. They've had five years' practice."

"But it might be worth it. To see with their own eyes."

"We can't risk it. Not unless we know for sure ahead of time what their reactions would be. Because Lane will assume Knight spilled the beans in prison. Therefore Lane will see Hobart as a loose end now. And a threat. Therefore Lane

will want Hobart dead now. And Lane's guys will do whatever the hell Lane tells them to. So we can't risk it. Hobart's a sitting duck, literally. A puff of wind would blow him away. And his sister would get caught in the crossfire."

"Why are you here?"

"To give you the news."

"Not *here.* In New York, in and out of the Dakota."

Reacher said nothing.

"I'm not a fool," Patti said. "I know what goes on. Who knows more than me? Who possibly could? And I know that the day after I stop seeing Kate Lane and Jade anymore, you show up and people put bags in cars and you hide in the back seat and you come here to interrogate Brewer about the last time one of Edward Lane's wives disappeared."

Reacher asked, "Why do you think I'm here?"

"I think he's done it again."

Reacher looked at Pauling and Pauling shrugged like maybe she agreed Patti deserved to hear the story. Like somehow she had earned the right through five long years of fidelity to her sister's memory. So Reacher told her everything he knew. Told her all the facts, all the guesses, all the assumptions, all the conclusions. When he finished she just stared at him.

She said: "You think it's real this time because of how good an *actor* he is?"

"No, I think nobody's that good of an actor."

"Hello? Adolf Hitler? He could work himself into all kinds of phony rages."

Patti stood up and stepped over to an armoire drawer and pulled out a packet of photographs. Checked the contents and tossed the packet into Reacher's lap. A fresh new envelope. A one-hour service. Thirty-six exposures. He thumbed through the stack. Top picture was of himself, face-on, coming out of the Dakota's lobby, preparing to turn toward the subway on Central Park West. *Early this morning,* he thought. *The B train to Pauling's office.*

“So?”

“Keep going.”

He thumbed backward and close to the end of the stack he saw Dee Marie Graziano, face on, coming out of the Dakota’s lobby. The sun in the west. Afternoon. The picture behind it showed her from the back, going in.

“That’s Hobart’s sister, am I right?” Patti said. “It has to be, according to your story. She’s in my notebook, too. Close to forty, overweight, not rich. Previously unexplained. But now I know. That’s when the Dakota doormen told her the family was in the Hamptons. Then she went out there.”

“So?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Kate Lane takes this weird woman walking on the beach, and she hears a weird and fantastical story, but there’s something about it and something about her husband that stops her from just dismissing it out of hand. Enough of a grain of truth there to make her think for a moment. Maybe enough to make her ask her husband for an explanation.”

Reacher said nothing.

Patti said, “In which case all hell would break loose. Don’t you see? Suddenly Kate is no longer a loyal and obedient wife. Suddenly she’s as bad as Anne was. And suddenly she’s a loose end, too. Maybe even a serious threat.”

“Lane would have gone after Hobart and Dee Marie, too. Not just Kate.”

“If he could find them. You only found them because of the Pentagon.”

“And the Pentagon hates Lane,” Pauling said. “They wouldn’t give him the time of day.”

“Two questions,” Reacher said. “If this is history repeating itself, Anne all over again, why is Lane pushing me to help?”

“He’s gambling,” Patti said. “He’s gambling because he’s arrogant. He’s putting on a show for his men, and he’s betting that he’s smarter than you are.”

“Second question,” Reacher said. “Who could be playing Knight’s part this time around?”

“Does that matter?”

“Yes, it matters. It’s an important detail, don’t you think?”

Patti paused. Looked away.

“It’s an inconvenient detail,” she said. “Because there’s nobody missing.” Then she said, “OK, I apologize. Maybe you’re right. Just because it was fake for Anne doesn’t mean it’s fake for Kate.” Then she said, “Just remember one thing, while you’re spending your time helping him. You’re not looking for a woman he loves. You’re looking for a prize possession. This is like somebody stole a gold watch from him, and he’s angry about it.”

Then out of what Reacher guessed was sheer habit Patti moved to the window and stood with her hands linked behind her back, staring out and down.

“It’s not over for me,” she said. “It won’t be over for me until Lane gets what he deserves.”

CHAPTER **44**

REACHER AND PAULING rode down to the Majestic's lobby in silence. They stepped out to the sidewalk. Early evening. Four lanes of traffic, and lovers in the park. Dogs on leashes, tour groups, the bass bark of fire truck horns.

Pauling asked, "Where now?"

"Take the night off," Reacher said. "I'm going back to the lions' den."

Pauling headed for the subway and Reacher headed for the Dakota. The doorman sent him up without making a call. Either Lane had put him on some kind of an approved list or the doorman had grown accustomed to his face. Either way it didn't feel good. Poor security, and Reacher didn't want to be recognized as part of Lane's crew. Not that he expected to be around the Dakota ever again. It was way above his pay grade.

There was nobody waiting for him in the corridor on five. Lane's door was closed. Reacher knocked and then found a bell button and pushed it. A minute later Kowalski opened up. The biggest of Lane's guys, but no giant. Maybe six feet, maybe two hundred pounds. He seemed to be alone. There was nothing but stillness and silence behind him. He stepped back and held the door and Reacher stepped inside.

"Where is everybody?" Reacher asked.

"Out shaking the trees," Kowalski said.

"What trees?"

"Burke has a theory. He thinks we're being visited by ghosts from the past."

"What ghosts?"

"You know what ghosts," Kowalski said. "Because Burke told you first."

"Knight and Hobart," Reacher said.

“The very same.”

“Waste of time,” Reacher said. “They died in Africa.”

“Not true,” Kowalski said. “A friend of a friend of a friend called a VA clerk. Only one of them died in Africa.”

“Which one?”

“We don’t know yet. But we’ll find out. You know what a VA clerk makes?”

“Not very much, I guess.”

“Everyone has a price. And a VA clerk’s is pretty low.”

They moved through the foyer to the deserted living room. Kate Lane’s picture still had pride of place on the table. There was a recessed light fixture in the ceiling that put a subtle glow on it.

“Did you know them?” Reacher asked. “Knight and Hobart?”

“Sure,” Kowalski said.

“Did you go to Africa?”

“Sure.”

“So whose side are you on? Theirs or Lane’s?”

“Lane pays me. They don’t.”

“So you have a price, too.”

“Only a bullshitter doesn’t.”

“What were you, back in the day?”

“Navy SEAL.”

“So you can swim.”

Reacher stepped into the interior hallway and headed for the master bedroom

Reacher stepped into the interior hallway and headed for the master bedroom. Kowalski kept close behind him.

“You going to follow me everywhere?” Reacher asked.

“Probably,” Kowalski said. “Where are you going anyway?”

“To count the money.”

“Is that OK with Lane?”

“He wouldn’t have given me the combination if it wasn’t.”

“He gave you the combination?”

I hope so, Reacher thought. *Left hand. Index finger, curled. Ring finger, straight. Middle finger, straight. Middle finger, curled. 3785. I hope.*

He pulled the closet door and entered 3785 on the security keypad. There was an agonizing second’s wait and then it beeped and the inner door’s latch clicked.

“He never gave me the combination,” Kowalski said.

“But I bet he lets you be the lifeguard out in the Hamptons.”

Reacher opened the inner door and pulled the chain for the light. The closet was about six feet deep and three wide. A narrow walk space on the left, money on the right. Bales of it. All of them were intact except for one that was opened and half-empty. That was the one Lane had thrown around the room and then repacked. Reacher dragged it out. Carried it to the bed and dumped it down. Kowalski stayed at his shoulder.

“You know how to count?” Reacher asked.

“Funny man,” Kowalski said.

“So count that.”

Reacher stepped back to the closet and eased in sideways and crouched. Hefted an intact plastic bale off the top of the pile and turned it over and over in his hands and checked all six sides. On one face under the legend *Banque Centrale*

there was smaller print that said *Gouvernement National, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso*. Under that was printed: *USD 1,000,000.* The plastic was old and thick and grimy. Reacher licked the ball of his thumb and rubbed a small circle and saw Ben Franklin's face. Hundred-dollar bills. Ten thousand of them in the bale. The heat shrink was original and untouched. A million bucks, unless the gentlemen bankers of Burkina Faso's national government in O-Town had been cheating, which they probably hadn't.

A million bucks, in a package about as heavy as a loaded carry-on suitcase.

Altogether there were ten intact bales. And ten empty wrappers.

A total of twenty million dollars, once upon a time.

"Fifty packets," Kowalski called from the bed. "Ten thousand dollars each."

"So how much is that?" Reacher called back.

Silence.

"What, you were out sick the day they taught multiplication?"

"It's a lot of money."

You got that right, Reacher thought. *It's five hundred grand. Half a million. Total of ten and a half million still here, total of ten and a half million gone.*

Original grand total, back in the day, twenty-one million dollars.

The whole of the Burkina Faso payment, Lane's capital, untouched for five years. Untouched until three days ago.

Kowalski appeared in the closet doorway with the torn wrapper. He had repacked the remaining money neatly into two equal stacks with one extra brick sideways across the top. Then he had bundled and folded the heavy plastic into a tidy package that was about half the original size and almost opaque.

Reacher said, "Were you out sick the day they taught numbers, too?"

Kowalski said nothing.

“Because I wasn’t,” Reacher said. “I showed up that day.”

Silence.

“See, there are even numbers and there are odd numbers. An even number would make two stacks the same size. I guess that’s why they call them even. But with an odd number, you’d have to lay the extra one sideways across the top.”

Kowalski said nothing.

“Fifty is an even number,” Reacher said. “Whereas, for instance, forty-nine is an odd number.”

“So what?”

“So take the ten grand you stole out of your pocket and give it to me.”

Kowalski stood still.

“Make a choice,” Reacher said. “You want to keep that ten grand, you’ll have to beat me in a fistfight. If you do, then you’ll want to take more, and you will take more, and then you’ll run. And then you’ll be on the outside, and Lane and his guys will come and shake the trees for you. You want it to be that way?”

Kowalski said nothing.

“You wouldn’t beat me anyway,” Reacher said.

“You think?”

“Demi Moore could kick your ass.”

“I’m a trained man.”

“Trained to do what? Swim? You see any water here?”

Kowalski said nothing.

“The first punch will decide it,” Reacher said. “It always does. So who are you going to back? The runt or the big guy?”

“You don’t want me for an enemy,” Kowalski said.

You don't want me for an enemy," Kowalski said.

"I wouldn't want you for a friend," Reacher said. "That's for damn sure. I wouldn't want to go with you to Africa. I wouldn't want to crawl up to a forward OP with you watching my back. I wouldn't want to turn around and see you driving off into the sunset."

"You don't know how it was."

"I know exactly how it was. You left two men three hundred yards up the line. You're disgusting."

"You weren't there."

"You're a disgrace to the uniform you once wore."

Kowalski said nothing.

"But you know which side your bread is buttered," Reacher said. "Don't you? And you don't want to get caught biting the hand that feeds you. Do you?"

Kowalski held still for a long moment and then dropped the bundled package and reached behind him to his hip pocket and came back with a banded sheaf of hundred-dollar bills. It was folded in half. He dropped it on the floor and it resumed its former flat shape like a flower opening its petals. Reacher tucked it back in the open bale and heaved the bale onto the top of the stack. Pulled the chain and killed the light and closed the door. The electronic lock clicked and beeped.

"OK?" Kowalski said. "No harm, no foul, right?"

"Whatever," Reacher said.

He led Kowalski back to the living room and then detoured to the kitchen and glanced in at the office. At the computer. At the file drawers. Something about them nagged at him. He stood in the empty silence for a second. Then a new thought struck him. Like an ice cube dropped down the back of his neck.

"What trees are they shaking?" he asked.

"Hospitals," Kowalski said. "We figure whoever is back has got to be sick."

“Which hospitals?”

“I don’t know,” Kowalski said. “All of them, presumably.”

“Hospitals don’t tell anyone anything.”

“You think? You know what an ER nurse makes?”

Silence for a moment.

“I’m going out again,” Reacher said. “You stay here.”

Three minutes later he was at the pay phone, dialing Pauling’s cell.

CHAPTER **45**

PAULING ANSWERED ON the second ring. *Or the second vibration,* Reacher thought. She said her name and Reacher asked, “You got a car?”

She said, “No.”

“Then jump in a cab and get over to Dee Marie’s place. Lane and his guys are out scouting hospitals, looking for either Knight or Hobart. They don’t know which one came back yet. But it’s only a matter of time before they hit Saint Vincent’s and get a match on Hobart’s name and buy his address. So I’ll meet you there. We’re going to have to move them.”

Then he hung up and flagged a cab of his own on Ninth Avenue. The driver was fast but the traffic was slow. It got a little better after they crossed Broadway. But not much. Reacher sprawled sideways on the seat and rested his head on the window. Breathed slow and easy. He thought: *No use fretting about what you can’t control.* And he couldn’t control Manhattan’s traffic. Red lights controlled Manhattan’s traffic. Approximately seventy-two of them between the Dakota Building and Hobart’s current billet.

Hudson Street runs one way south to north below West 14th so the cab took Bleecker and Seventh Avenue and Varick. Then it made the right into Charlton. Reacher stopped it halfway down the block and made the final approach on foot. There were three parked cars near Dee Marie’s place. But none of them was an expensive sedan with OSC plates. He glanced south at the oncoming traffic and hit 4L’s button. Pauling answered and Reacher said his name and the street door buzzed.

Up on the fourth floor the apartment door still hung open. Burst hinges, splintered frame. Beyond it were voices in the living room. Dee Marie’s, and Pauling’s. Reacher stepped inside and they stopped talking. They just glanced beyond him at the door. He knew what they were thinking. It was no kind of a secure barrier against the outside world. Dee Marie was still in her cotton shift

secure barrier against the outside world. Dee Marie was still in her cotton shirt but Pauling had changed. She was wearing jeans and a T-shirt. She looked good. Hobart himself was where Reacher had last seen him, propped up on the sofa. He looked bad. Pale and sick. But his eyes were blazing. He was angry.

“Lane’s coming here?” he asked.

“Maybe,” Reacher said. “Can’t discount the possibility.”

“So what are we going to do?”

“We’re going to be smart. We’re going to make sure he finds an empty apartment.”

Hobart said nothing. Then he nodded, a little reluctantly.

“Where should you be?” Reacher asked him. “Medically?”

“Medically?” Hobart said. “I have no idea. I guess Dee Marie did some checking.”

Dee Marie said, “Birmingham, Alabama, or Nashville, Tennessee. One of the big university hospitals down there. I got brochures. They’re good.”

“Not Walter Reed?” Reacher said.

“Walter Reed is good when they get them fresh from the battlefield. But his left foot happened nearly five years ago. And even his right wrist is completely healed. Healed all wrong, but healed all the same. So he needs a whole lot of preliminary stuff first. Bone work, and reconstruction. And that’s after the malaria and the tuberculosis are taken care of. And the malnutrition and the parasites.”

“We can’t get him to Birmingham or Nashville tonight.”

“We can’t get him there ever. The surgery alone could be over two hundred thousand dollars. The prosthetics could be even more than that.” She picked up two brochures from a small table and handed them over. There were expensive graphics and glossy photographs on the fronts. Blue skies, green lawns, warm brick buildings. Inside were details of surgical programs and prosthetics designers. There were more photographs. Kindly men with white hair and white

coats cradled mechanical limbs like babies. One-legged people in athletic vests braced themselves on sleek titanium struts at marathon start lines. The captions under the pictures were full of optimism.

“Looks good,” Reacher said. He handed the brochures back. Dee Marie put them exactly where they had been before, on the table.

“Pie in the sky,” she said.

“A motel tonight,” Pauling said. “Somewhere close. Maybe we could rent you a car. Can you drive?”

Dee Marie said nothing.

“Take the offer, Dee,” Hobart said. “Easier on you.”

“I have a license,” Dee Marie said.

“Maybe we could even rent a wheelchair.”

“That would be good,” Hobart said. “A ground floor room, and a wheelchair. Easier for you, Dee.”

“Maybe an efficiency,” Pauling said. “With a little kitchen. For the cooking.”

“I can’t afford it,” Dee Marie said.

The room went quiet and Reacher stepped out the front door and checked the hallway. Checked the stairwell. Nothing was happening. He came back inside and pulled the door as far closed as it would go. Turned left in the entry and walked past the bathroom to the bedroom. It was a small space nearly filled by a queen bed. He guessed Hobart slept there, because the night table was piled with tubes of antiseptic creams and bottles of over-the-counter painkillers. The bed was high. He pictured Dee Marie hoisting her brother on her back, turning around, reversing toward the bed, dumping him down on the mattress. He pictured her straightening him out, tucking him in. Then he pictured her heading for another night on the sofa.

The bedroom window had a wood frame and the glass was streaked with soot. There were faded drapes, three-quarters open. Ornaments on the sill, and a color photograph of a Marine Lance Corporal. Vinnie, Reacher guessed. The dead

husband. Blown to bits on a Fallujah roadside. Killed instantly, or not. He had the bill of his dress cap low on his brow and the colors in the picture were vivid and smoothed and airbrushed. An off-post photographer, Reacher guessed. Two prints for about a day's pay, two cardboard mailers included, one for the mother and one for the wife or the girlfriend. There were similar pictures of Reacher somewhere in the world. For a spell every time he got promoted he would have a picture taken and send it to his mother. She never displayed them, because he wasn't smiling. Reacher never smiled for the camera.

He stepped close to the window and glanced north. Traffic flowed away from him like a river. He glanced south. Watched the traffic coming toward him.

And saw a black Range Rover slowing and pulling in to the curb.

License plate: OSC 19.

Reacher spun around and was out of the bedroom in three long strides. Back in the living room after three more.

"They're here," he said. "Now."

Silence for a split second.

Then Pauling said, "Shit."

"What do we do?" Dee Marie said.

"Bathroom," Reacher said. "All of you. Now."

He stepped over to the sofa and grabbed the front of Hobart's denim shirt and lifted him into the air. Carried him to the bathroom and laid him gently in the tub. Dee Marie and Pauling crowded in after him. Reacher pushed his way past them and back out to the hallway.

"You can't be out there," Pauling said.

"I have to be," Reacher said. "Or they'll search the whole place."

"They shouldn't find you here."

"Lock the door," Reacher said. "Sit tight and keep quiet."

He stood in the hallway and heard a click from the bathroom door and a second later the intercom buzzed from the street. He waited a beat and hit the button and said, “Yes?” Heard amplified traffic noise and then a voice. Impossible to tell whose it was.

It said: “VA visiting nurse service.”

Reacher smiled. *Nice,* he thought.

He hit the button again and said, “Come on up.”

Then he walked back to the living room and sat down on the sofa to wait.

CHAPTER **46**

REACHER HEARD LOUD creaking from the staircase. *Three people*, he guessed. He heard them make the turn and start up toward four. Heard them stop at the head of the stairs, surprised by the broken door. Then he heard the door open. There was a quiet metallic groan from a damaged hinge and after that there was nothing but the sound of footsteps in the foyer.

First into the living room was Perez, the tiny Spanish guy.

Then Addison, with the knife scar above his eye.

Then Edward Lane himself.

Perez stepped left and stopped dead and Addison stepped right and stopped dead and Lane moved into the center of the small static arc and stood still and stared.

“The hell are you doing here?” he asked.

“I beat you to it,” Reacher said.

“How?”

“Like I told you. I used to do this for a living. I could give you guys a mirror on a stick and I’d still be hours ahead of you.”

“So where is Hobart?”

“Not here.”

“It was you who broke down the door?”

“I didn’t have a key.”

“Where is he?”

“In the hospital.”

“Bullshit. We just checked.”

Bullshit. We just checked.

“Not here. In Birmingham, Alabama, or Nashville, Tennessee.”

“How do you figure that?”

“He needs specialized care. Saint Vincent’s recommended one of those big university hospitals down south. They gave him literature.” Reacher pointed at the small table and Edward Lane broke ranks with his men and stepped over to pick up the shiny brochures. He flipped through both of them and asked, “Which one?”

Reacher said, “It doesn’t matter which one.”

“The hell it doesn’t,” Lane said.

“Hobart didn’t kidnap Kate.”

“You think?”

“No, I know.”

“How?”

“You should have bought more information than just his address. You should have asked why he was at Saint Vincent’s in the first place.”

“We did. They said malaria. He was admitted for IV chloroquine.”

“And?”

“And nothing. A guy just home from Africa can expect to have malaria.”

“You should have gotten the whole story.”

“Which is?”

Reacher said, “First, he was strapped down to a bed getting that IV chloroquine at the exact time that Kate was taken. And second, he has a pre-existing condition.”

“What condition?”

Reacher shifted his gaze and looked straight at Perez and Addison.

“He’s a quadruple amputee,” he said. “No hands, no feet, can’t walk, can’t drive, can’t hold a gun or dial a telephone.”

Nobody spoke.

“It happened in prison,” Reacher said. “Back in Burkina Faso. The new regime had a little fun. Once a year. On his birthday. Left foot, right foot, left hand, right hand. With a machete. Chop, chop, chop, chop.”

Nobody spoke.

“After you all ran away and left him behind,” Reacher said.

No reaction. No guilt, no remorse.

No anger.

Just nothing.

“You weren’t there,” Lane said. “You don’t know how it was.”

“But I know how it is now,” Reacher said. “Hobart’s not the guy you’re looking for. He’s not physically capable.”

“You sure?”

“Beyond certain.”

“I still want to find him,” Lane said.

“Why?”

No answer. *Checkmate.* Lane couldn’t say why without going all the way back and admitting what he had asked Knight to do for him five years previously, and he couldn’t do that without blowing his cover in front of his men.

“So we’re back at square one,” he said. “You know who it wasn’t. Great job, Major. You’re making real progress here.”

“Not quite square one,” Reacher said.

“How?”

“I’m close,” Reacher said. “I’ll give you the guy.”

“When?”

“When you give me the money.”

“What money?”

“You offered me a million bucks.”

“To find my wife. It’s too late now.”

“OK,” Reacher said. “So I won’t give you the guy. I’ll give you a mirror on a stick instead.”

Lane said, “Give me the guy.”

“Then meet my price.”

“You’re that kind of a man?”

“Only a bullshitter doesn’t have a price.”

“High price.”

“I’m worth it.”

“I could have it beaten out of you.”

“You couldn’t,” Reacher said. He hadn’t moved at all. He was sitting back on the sofa, relaxed, sprawled, arms resting easy along the back cushions, legs spread, six-five, two-fifty, a picture of supreme physical self-confidence. “You try that shit and I’ll bend you over and I’ll use Addison’s head to hammer Perez up your ass like a nail.”

“I don’t like threats.”

“This from the guy who said he’d have me blinded?”

This from the guy who said he'd have me blinded?

“I was upset.”

“I was broke. I still am.”

Silence in the room.

“OK,” Lane said.

“OK what?” Reacher said.

“OK, a million bucks. When do I get the name?”

“Tomorrow,” Reacher said.

Lane nodded. Turned away. Said to his men, “Let’s go.”

Addison said, “I need the bathroom.”

CHAPTER **47**

THE AIR IN the room was hot and still. Addison asked, “Where’s the bathroom?”

Reacher stood up, slowly. Said, “What am I, the architect?” But he glanced over his left shoulder, at the kitchen door. Addison followed his gaze and moved a step in that direction and Reacher moved a step the other way. Just a subtle piece of psychological choreography, but due to the small size of the living room their relative positions were reversed. Now Reacher was nearer the bathroom.

Addison said, “I think that’s the kitchen.”

“Maybe,” Reacher said. “Check it out.”

He moved into position in the mouth of the hallway and watched Addison open the kitchen door. Addison glanced inside just long enough to make sure what room it was and then he backed out. Then he stopped, in a slow-motion double-take. Checked again.

“When did Hobart go south?” he asked.

“Don’t know,” Reacher said. “Today, I guess.”

“He sure left in a hurry. There’s soup on the stove.”

“You think he should have washed the dishes?”

“Most people do.”

“Most people with no hands?”

“So how was he cooking soup at all?”

“With help,” Reacher said. “Don’t you think? Some welfare person, probably. The ambulance comes for Hobart, loads him up, you think some minimum-wage government housekeeper is going to stick around afterward and clean up? Because I don’t.”

Addison shrugged and closed the kitchen door.

“So where’s the bathroom?” he said.

Reacher said, “Go home and use yours.”

“What?”

“One day Hobart’s going to come back here with the kind of metal hands that can unzip his fly and he’s not going to want to think about you pissing in the same bowl as him.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re not fit to piss in the same bowl as him. You left him behind.”

“You weren’t there.”

“For which you can thank your lucky stars. I’d have kicked your ass and dragged you up the line by your ears.”

Edward Lane took a step forward. “The sacrifice was necessary to save the unit.”

Reacher looked straight at him. “Sacrificing and saving are two different things.”

“Don’t question my orders.”

“Don’t question mine,” Reacher said. “Get these runts out of here. Let them piss in the gutter.”

Silence for a long moment. Nothing in Perez’s face, a scowl on Addison’s, shrewd judgment in Lane’s eyes.

“The name,” Lane said. “Tomorrow.”

“I’ll be there,” Reacher said.

Lane nodded to his men and they trooped out in the same order they had come in. First Perez, then Addison, with Lane bringing up the rear. Reacher listened to their feet on the stairs and waited for the street door to bang and then he stepped back to the bedroom. Watched them climb into the black Range Rover and take

off north. He let a minute pass and when he judged they were through the light at Houston he walked back to the foyer and knocked on the bathroom door.

“They’re gone,” he said.

Reacher carried Hobart back to the sofa and sat him up like a rag doll. Dee Marie stepped into the kitchen and Pauling looked down at the floor and said, “We heard everything.”

Dee Marie said, “The soup is still warm. Lucky that guy didn’t get any closer.”

“Lucky for him,” Reacher said.

Hobart shifted his position on the sofa and said, “Don’t kid yourself. These are not pussycats. You were minutes away from getting hurt bad. Lane doesn’t hire nice people.”

“He hired you.”

“Yes, he did.”

“So?”

“I’m not a nice person,” Hobart said. “I fit right in.”

“You seem OK.”

“That’s just the sympathy vote.”

“So how bad are you?”

“I was dishonorably discharged. Kicked out of the Corps.”

“Why?”

“I refused an order. Then I beat the shit out of the guy who gave it to me.”

“What was the order?”

“To fire on a civilian vehicle. In Bosnia.”

“Sounds like an illegal order.”

Hobart shook his head. “No, my lieutenant was right. The car was full of bad guys. They wounded two of our own later that day. I screwed up.”

Reacher asked, “Suppose it had been Perez and Addison in those forward OPs in Africa? Would you have left them there?”

“A Marine’s job is to obey orders,” Hobart said. “And I had learned the hard way that sometimes officers know better.”

“Bottom line? No bullshit?”

Hobart stared into space. “I wouldn’t have left them there. No way on earth. I don’t see how anyone could. I sure as hell don’t see how they could have left me there. And I wish to God they hadn’t.”

“Soup,” Dee Marie said. “Time to stop talking and start eating.”

Pauling said, “We should move you first.”

“No need now,” Dee Marie said. “They won’t come back. Right now this is the safest place in the city.”

“It would be easier on you.”

“I’m not looking for easy. I’m looking for right.”

Then the buzzer from the street sounded and they heard a Russian accent on the intercom. The Soviet super from Sixth Avenue, come to fix the broken door. Reacher met him in the hallway. He was carrying a bag of tools and a length of spare lumber.

“Now we’re definitely OK,” Dee Marie said.

So Pauling just paid the Russian and she and Reacher walked down the stairs to the street.

Pauling was quiet and faintly hostile as they walked. She kept her distance and looked straight ahead. Avoided looking even close to Reacher's direction.

"What?" he asked.

"We heard everything from the bathroom," she said.

"And?"

"You signed on with Lane. You sold out. You're working for him now."

"I'm working for Kate and Jade."

"You could do that for free."

"I wanted to test him," Reacher said. "I still need proof it's for real this time. If it wasn't, he'd have backed off. He'd have said the money was off the table because I was too late. But he didn't. He wants the guy. Therefore there is a guy."

"I don't believe you. It's a meaningless test. Like Patti Joseph said, Lane's gambling. He's putting on a show for his men and gambling that he's smarter than you are."

"But he had just found out that he's not smarter than I am. I found Hobart before he did."

"Whatever, this is about the money, isn't it?"

"Yes," Reacher said. "It is."

"At least you might try to deny it."

Reacher smiled and kept on walking.

"You ever seen a million dollars in cash?" he asked. "Ever held a million dollars in your hands? I did, today. It's a hell of a feeling. The weight, the density. The

power. It felt warm. Like a little atom bomb."

"I'm sure it was very impressive."

"I wanted it, Pauling. I really did. And I can get it. I'm going to find the guy anyway. For Kate and Jade. I might as well sell his name to Lane. Doesn't change the basic proposition."

"It does. It makes you a mercenary. Just like them."

"Money is a great enabler."

"What are you going to do with a million dollars anyway? Buy a house? A car? A new shirt? I just don't see it."

"I'm often misunderstood," he said.

"The misunderstanding was all mine. I liked you. I thought you were better than this."

"You work for money."

"But I choose who I work for, very carefully."

"It's a lot of money."

"It's dirty money."

"It'll spend just the same."

"Well, enjoy it."

"I will."

She said nothing.

He said, "Pauling, give me a break."

"Why would I?"

"Because first I'm going to pay you for your time and your services and your expenses, and then I'm going to send Hobart down to Birmingham or Nashville

expenses, and then I'm going to send Hobart down to Birmingham or Nashville and get him fixed up right. I'm going to buy him a lifetime's supply of spare parts and I'm going to rent him a place to live and I'm going to give him some walking-around money because my guess is he's not very employable right now. At least not in his old trade. And then if there's anything left, then sure, I'll buy myself a new shirt."

"Seriously?"

"Of course. I need a new shirt."

"No, about Hobart?"

"Dead serious. He needs it. He deserves it. That's for damn sure. And it's only right that Lane should pay for it."

Pauling stopped walking. Grabbed Reacher's arm and stopped him, too.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I apologize."

"Then make it up to me."

"How?"

"Work with me. We've got a lot to do."

"You told Lane you'd give him a name tomorrow."

"I had to say something. I had to get him out of there."

"Can we do it by tomorrow?"

"I don't see why not."

"Where are we going to start?"

"I have absolutely no idea."

CHAPTER **48**

THEY STARTED IN Lauren Pauling's apartment. She lived in a small co-op on Barrow Street, near West 4th. The building had once been a factory and had vaulted brick ceilings and walls two feet thick. Her apartment was painted mostly yellow and felt warm and friendly. There was an alcove bedroom with no window, and a bathroom, and a kitchen, and a room with a sofa and a chair and a television set and a lot of books. There were muted rugs and soft textures and dark woods. It was a single woman's place. That was clear. One mind had conceived it and decorated it. There were small framed photographs of children, but Reacher knew without asking that they were nephews and nieces.

He sat on the sofa and rested his head back on the cushion and stared up at the vaulted brick above. He believed that anything could be reverse-engineered. If one human or group of humans put something together, then another human or group of humans could take it apart again. It was a basic principle. All that was required was empathy and thought and imagination. And he liked pressure. He liked deadlines. He liked a short and finite time to crack a problem. He liked a quiet space to work in. And he liked a similar mind to work with. He started out with no doubt at all that he and Pauling could get the whole thing figured before morning.

That feeling lasted about thirty minutes.

Pauling dimmed the lights and lit a candle and called out for Indian food. The clock in Reacher's head crawled around to nine-thirty. The sky outside the window turned from navy blue to black and the city lights burned bright. Barrow Street itself was quiet but the cabs on West 4th used their horns a lot. Occasionally an ambulance would scream by a couple of blocks over, heading up to Saint Vincent's. The room felt like part of the city but a little detached, too. A little insulated. A partial sanctuary.

"Do that thing again," Reacher said.

"What thing?"

"The brainstorming thing. Ask me questions."

“OK, what have we got?”

“We’ve got an impossible takedown and a guy that can’t speak.”

“And the tongue thing is culturally unrelated to Africa.”

“But the money is related to Africa, because it’s exactly half.”

Silence in the room. Nothing but a faraway siren burning past, going south on Seventh Avenue.

“Start at the very beginning,” Pauling said. “What was the very first false note? The first red flag? Anything at all, however trivial or random.”

So Reacher closed his eyes and recalled the beginning: the granular feel of the foam espresso cup in his hand, textured, temperature-neutral, neither warm nor cold. He recalled Gregory’s walk in from the curb, alert, economical. His manner while questioning the waiter, watchful, aware, like the elite veteran he was. His direct approach to the sidewalk table.

Reacher said, “Gregory asked me about the car I had seen the night before and I told him it drove away before eleven forty-five, and he said no, it must have been closer to midnight.”

“A dispute about timing?”

“Not really a dispute. Just a trivial thing, like you said.”

“What would it mean?”

“That I was wrong or he was.”

Pauling said, “You don’t wear a watch.”

“I used to. I broke it. I threw it away.”

“So he was more likely to be right.”

“Except I’m usually pretty sure what time it is.”

“Keep your eyes closed, OK?”

“OK.”

“What time is it now?”

“Nine thirty-six.”

“Not bad,” Pauling said. “My watch says nine thirty-eight.”

“Your watch is fast.”

“Are you serious?”

Reacher opened his eyes. “Absolutely.”

Pauling rooted around on her coffee table and came up with the TV remote. Turned on the Weather Channel. The time was displayed in the corner of the screen, piped in from some official meteorological source, accurate to the second. Pauling checked her watch again.

“You’re right,” she said. “I’m two minutes fast.”

Reacher said nothing.

“How do you *do* that?”

“I don’t know.”

“But it was twenty-four hours after the event that Gregory asked you about it. How precise could you have been?”

“I’m not sure.”

“What would it mean if Gregory was wrong and you were right?”

“Something,” Reacher said. “But I’m not sure what exactly.”

“What was the next thing?”

Right now more likely death than life, Gregory had said. That had been the next thing. Reacher had checked his cup again and seen less than a lukewarm eighth-inch of espresso left, all thick and scummy. He had put it down and said *OK, so*

let's go.

He said, "Something about getting into Gregory's car. The blue BMW. Something rang a bell. Not right then, but afterward. In retrospect."

"You don't know what?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"Then we arrived at the Dakota and it was off to the races." *The photograph,* Reacher thought. *After that, everything was about the photograph.*

Pauling said, "We need to take a break. We can't force these things."

"You got beer in the refrigerator?"

"I've got white wine. You want some?"

"I'm being selfish. You didn't blow it five years ago. You did everything right. We should take a minute to celebrate that."

Pauling was quiet for a moment. Then she smiled.

"We should," she said. "Because to be honest it feels really good."

Reacher went with her to the kitchen and she took a bottle out of the refrigerator and he opened it with a corkscrew from a drawer. She took two glasses from a cupboard and set them side by side on the counter. He filled them. They picked them up and clinked them together.

"Living well is the best revenge," he said.

They each took a sip and moved back to the sofa. Sat close together. He asked, "Did you quit because of Anne Lane?"

She said, "Not directly. I mean, not right away. But ultimately, yes. You know how these things are. It's like a naval convoy where one of the battleships gets holed below the waterline. No visible damage, but it falls a little behind, and then a little more, and it drifts a little off course, and then when the next big

engagement comes along it's completely out of sight. That was me."

He said nothing.

She said, "But maybe I was maxed out anyway. I love the city and I didn't want to move, and head of the New York office is an Assistant Director's job. It was always a long shot."

She took another sip of wine and pulled her legs up under her and turned a little sideways so she could see him better. He turned a little too, until they were more or less facing each other from a foot away.

"Why did you quit?" she asked him.

He said, "Because they told me I could."

"You were looking to get out?"

"No, I was looking to stay in. But as soon as they said that leaving was an option it kind of broke the spell. Made me realize I wasn't personally essential to their plans. I guess they'd have been happy enough if I stayed, but clearly it wasn't going to break their hearts if I went."

"You need to be needed?"

"Not really. It just broke the spell, is all. I can't really explain it." He stopped talking and watched her, silent. She looked great in the candlelight. Liquid eyes, soft skin. Reacher liked women as much as any guy and more than most but he was always ready to find something wrong with them. The shape of an ear, the thickness of an ankle, height, size, weight. Any random thing could ruin it for him. But there was nothing wrong with Lauren Pauling. Nothing at all. That was for sure.

"Anyway, congratulations," he said. "Sleep well tonight."

"Maybe I will," she said.

Then she said, "Maybe I won't get the chance."

He could smell her fragrance. Subtle perfume, soap, clean skin, clean cotton. Her hair fell to her collarbones. The shoulder seams on her T-shirt stood up a little

and made enticing shadowy tunnels. She was slim and toned, except where she shouldn't be.

He said, "Won't get the chance why?"

She said, "Maybe we'll be working all night."

He said, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

"You're not a dull boy," she said.

"Thank you," he said, and leaned forward and kissed her, just lightly, on the lips. Her mouth was open a little and was cool and sweet from the wine. He slid his free hand under her hair to the back of her neck. Pulled her closer and kissed her harder. She did the same thing with her free hand. They held the clinch for a whole minute, kissing, two wine glasses held approximately level in midair. Then they parted and put their glasses down on the table and Pauling asked, "What time is it?"

"Nine fifty-one."

"How do you do that?"

"I don't know."

She held the pause for another beat and then leaned in and kissed him again. Used both her hands, one behind his head, the other behind his back. He did the same thing, symmetrically. Her tongue was cool and quick. Her back was narrow. Her skin was warm. He slid his hand under her shirt. Felt her hand bunching into a tiny fist and dragging his shirt out of his waistband. Felt her nails against his skin.

"I don't usually do this," she said, her mouth hard against his. "Not to people I work with."

"We're not working," he said. "We're taking a break."

"We're celebrating."

"That's for sure."

She said, “We’re celebrating the fact that we’re not Hobart, aren’t we? Or Kate Lane.”

“I’m celebrating the fact that you’re you.”

She raised her arms over her head and held the pose and he pulled her shirt off. She was wearing a tiny black bra. He raised his arms in turn and she knelt up on the sofa and hauled his shirt up over his head. Then his T-shirt. She spread her hands like small starfish on the broad slab of his chest. Ran them south to his waist. Undid his belt. He unclipped her bra. Lifted her up and laid her down flat on the sofa and kissed her breasts. By the time the clock in his head was showing five past ten they were in her bed, naked under the sheet, locked together, making love with a kind of patience and tenderness he had never experienced before.

“Older women,” she said. “We’re worth it.”

He didn’t answer. Just smiled and ducked his head and kissed her neck below her ear, where her skin was damp and tasted of salt water.

Afterward they showered together and finished their wine and went back to bed. Reacher was too tired to think and too relaxed to care. He just floated, warm, spent, happy. Pauling snuggled against him and they fell asleep like that.

Much later Reacher felt Pauling stir and woke up to find her hands over his eyes. She asked him in a whisper, “What time is it?”

“Eighteen minutes to seven,” he said. “In the morning.”

“You’re unbelievable.”

“It’s not a very useful talent. Saves me the price of a new watch, maybe.”

“What happened to the old one?”

“I stepped on it. I put it by the bed and I stood on it when I got up.”

“And that broke it?”

“I was wearing shoes.”

“In bed?”

“Saves time getting dressed.”

“You *are* unbelievable.”

“I don’t do it all the time. It depends on the bed.”

“What would it mean if Gregory was wrong about the time and you were right?”

He took a breath and opened his mouth to say *I don’t know.*

But then he stopped.

Because suddenly he saw what it would mean.

“Wait,” he said.

He lay back on the pillow and stared up at the darkened ceiling.

“Do you like chocolate?” he asked.

“I guess.”

“You got a flashlight?”

“There’s a small Maglite in my purse.”

“Put it in your pocket,” he said. “Leave the purse home. And wear pants. The skirt is no good.”

CHAPTER **49**

THEY WALKED, BECAUSE it was a beautiful city morning and Reacher was too restless to ride the subway or take a cab. Barrow, to Bleecker, then south on Sixth Avenue. It was already warm. They took it slow, to time it right. They turned east on Spring Street at seven-thirty exactly. Crossed Sullivan, crossed Thompson.

“We’re going to the abandoned building?” Pauling asked.

“Eventually,” Reacher said.

He stopped outside the chocolate shop. Cupped his hands against the glass and peered in. There was a light in the kitchen. He could see the owner moving about, small, dark, tired, her back to him. *Sixteen-hour days,* she had said. *Regular as clockwork, seven days a week, small business, we never rest.*

He knocked on the glass, loud, and the owner stopped and turned and looked exasperated until she recognized him. Then she shrugged and admitted defeat and walked through the front of the store to the door. Undid the locks and opened the door a crack and said, “Hello.”

Air bitter with chocolate flooded out at him.

He asked, “Can we come through to the alley again?”

“Who’s your friend this time?”

Pauling stepped forward and said her name.

The owner asked, “Are you really exterminators?”

“Investigators,” Pauling said. She had a business card ready.

“What are you investigating?”

“A woman disappeared,” Reacher said. “And her child.”

Silence for a moment.

The owner asked, “You think they’re next door?”

“No,” Reacher said. “Nobody’s next door.”

“That’s good.”

“This is just routine.”

“Would you like a chocolate?”

“Not for breakfast,” Reacher said.

“I would love one,” Pauling said.

The owner held the door wide and Pauling and Reacher stepped inside. Pauling took a moment choosing a chocolate. She settled on a raspberry fondant as big as a golf ball. Took a little bite and made a noise that sounded like appreciation. Then she followed Reacher through the kitchen and down the short tiled hallway. Out through the back door to the alley.

The rear of the abandoned building was exactly as Reacher had last seen it. The dull red door, the corroded black knob, the filthy ground floor window. He turned the knob and pushed, just in case, but the door was locked, as expected. He bent down and unlaced his shoe. Took it off and held the toe in his hand and used the heel like a two-pound hammer. Used it to break the window glass, low down and on the left, close to the door lock.

He tapped a little more and widened the hole and then put his shoe back on. Put his arm through the hole in the glass up to his shoulder and hugged the wall and groped around until he found the inside door handle. He unlocked it and withdrew his arm very carefully.

“OK,” he said.

He opened the door and stood aside to let Pauling get a good look.

“Just like you told me,” Pauling said. “Uninhabitable. No floors.”

“You up for a trip down the ladder?”

“Why me?”

“Because if I’m wrong I might just give up and stay down there forever.”

Pauling craned in and took a look at the ladder. It was right there where it had been before, propped to the right, steeply angled, leaning on the narrow piece of wall that separated the window and the door.

“I did worse at Quantico,” she said. “But that was a long time ago.”

Reacher said, “It’s only ten feet if you fall.”

“Thanks.” She turned around and backed up to the void. Reacher took her right hand in his and she sidled left and swung her left foot and left hand onto the ladder. Got steady and let Reacher’s hand go and paused a beat and climbed down into the dark. The ladder bounced and rattled a little and then he heard the crunch and rustle of trash as she hit bottom and stepped off.

“It’s filthy down here,” she called.

“Sorry,” he said.

“There could be rats.”

“Use the flashlight.”

“Will that scare them off?”

“No, but you’ll see them coming.”

“Thanks a lot.”

He leaned in over the pit and saw her flashlight beam stab the gloom. She called, “Where am I going?”

“Head for the front of the building. Directly underneath the door.”

The flashlight beam leveled out and established a direction and jerked forward. The basement walls had been whitewashed years before with some kind of lime compound and they reflected a little light. Reacher could see deep drifts of garbage everywhere. Paper, cartons, piles of unidentifiable rotted matter.

Pauling reached the front wall. The flashlight beam stabbed upward and she located the door above her. She moved left a little and lined herself up directly beneath it.

“Look down now,” Reacher called. “What do you see?”

The beam stabbed downward. Short range, very bright.

“I see trash,” Pauling called.

Reacher called, “Look closer. They might have bounced.”

“What might have bounced?”

“Dig around and you’ll see. I hope.”

The flashlight beam traced a small random circle. Then a wider one. Then it stopped dead and held steady.

“OK,” Pauling called. “Now I see. But how the hell did you know?”

Reacher said nothing. Pauling held still for a second longer and then bent down. Stood up again with her hands held high. In her right hand was the flashlight. In her left hand were two sets of car keys, one for a Mercedes Benz and one for a BMW.

CHAPTER **50**

PAULING WADED THROUGH the garbage back to the base of the ladder and tossed the keys up to Reacher. He caught them one-handed, left and then right. Both sets were on chrome split rings and both had black leather fobs decorated with enamel car badges. The three-pointed Mercedes star, the blue and white BMW propeller. Both had a single large car key and a remote clicker. He blew dust and fragments of trash off them and put them in his pocket. Then he leaned in over the void and caught Pauling's arm and hauled her off the ladder to the safety of the alley. She brushed herself down and kicked the air hard to get trash off her shoes.

"So?" she said.

"We're one for one," he said.

He closed the dull red door and put his arm back through the hole in the window glass and hugged the wall again and clicked the lock from the inside. Extricated himself carefully and tested the knob. It was solid. Safe.

"This whole thing with the mail slot was a pure decoy," he said. "Just a piece of nonsense designed to distract attention. The guy already had keys. He had spares from the file cabinet in Lane's office. There was a whole bunch of car stuff in there. Some of the valet keys were filed away and some of them were missing."

"So you were right about the time."

Reacher nodded. "The guy was in the apartment above the café. Sitting on the chair, looking out the window. He watched Gregory park at eleven-forty and watched him walk away but he didn't follow him down here to Spring Street. He didn't need to. He didn't give a damn about Spring Street. He just came out his door and crossed Sixth Avenue and used the valet key from his pocket. Immediately, much closer to eleven-forty than midnight."

"Same thing with the blue BMW the second morning."

"Exactly the same thing," Reacher said. "I watched the damn door for twenty minutes and he never came anywhere near it. He never even came south of

minutes and he never came anywhere near it. He never even came south of Houston Street. He was in the BMW about two minutes after Gregory got out of it."

"And that's why he specified the cars so exactly. He needed to match them with the stolen keys."

"And that's why it bugged me when Gregory let me into his car that first night. Gregory used the remote thing from ten feet away, like anyone would. But the night before the other guy didn't do that with the Mercedes. He walked right up to it and stuck the key in the door. Who does that anymore? But he did, because he had to, because he didn't have the remote. All he had was the valet key. Which also explains why he used the Jaguar for the final installment. He wanted to be able to lock it from the other side of the street, as soon as Burke put the money in it. For safety's sake. He could do that with the Jaguar only, because the only remote he had was for the Jaguar. He inherited it at the initial takedown."

Pauling said nothing.

Reacher said, "I told Lane the guy used the Jaguar as a taunt. As a reminder. But the real reason was practical, not psychological."

Pauling was quiet for a second more. "But you're back to saying there was inside help. Aren't you? And there must have been, right? To steal the valet keys? But you already discounted inside help. You already decided there wasn't any."

"I think I've got that figured."

"Who?"

"The guy with no tongue. He's the key to the whole ballgame."

CHAPTER **51**

PAULING AND REACHER trooped back through the chocolate shop and were back on the street before eight-thirty in the morning. They were back in Pauling's office on West 4th before nine.

"We need Brewer now," Reacher said. "And Patti Joseph."

"Brewer's still asleep," Pauling said. "He works late."

"Today he's going to work early. He's going to get his ass in gear. Because we need a definitive ID on that body from the Hudson River."

"Taylor?"

"We need to know for certain it's Taylor. I'm sure Patti has got a photograph of him. I bet she's got a photograph of everyone who ever went in or out of the Dakota. If she gave a good clear shot to Brewer he could head for the morgue and make the ID for us."

"Patti's not our best buddy here. She wants to take Lane down, not help him."

"We're not helping him. You know that."

"I'm not sure Patti sees the difference."

"All we want is one lousy photograph. She can go that far."

So Pauling called Patti Joseph. Patti confirmed that she had a file of photographs of all Lane's men stretching back through the four years that she had occupied the Majestic apartment. At first she was reluctant to grant access to it. But then she saw that a positive ID of Taylor's body would put some kind of pressure on Lane, either directly or indirectly. So she agreed to pick out the best full-frontal and put it aside for Brewer to collect. Then Pauling called Brewer and woke him up. He was bad-tempered about it but he agreed to pick up the picture. There was an element of self-interest there, too. ID on an as-yet-unexplained DOA would net him some NYPD Brownie points.

“Now what?” Pauling asked.

“Breakfast,” Reacher said.

“Do we have time? Lane is expecting a name today.”

“Today lasts until midnight.”

“What after breakfast?”

“Maybe you’ll want to take a shower.”

“I’m OK. That basement wasn’t too bad.”

“I wasn’t thinking about the basement. I figured we might take coffee and croissants back to your place. Last time we were there we both ended up taking showers.”

Pauling said, “I see.”

“Only if you want to.”

“I know a great croissant shop.”

Two hours later Reacher was drying his hair with a borrowed towel and trying to decide whether or not to back a hunch. In general he wasn’t a big fan of hunches. Too often they were just wild-assed guesses that wasted time and led nowhere. But in the absence of news from Brewer he had time to waste and nowhere to go anyway. Pauling came out of the bedroom looking spectacular. Shoes, stockings, tight skirt, silk blouse, all in black. Brushed hair, light makeup. Great eyes, open, frank, intelligent.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“Eleven-thirteen,” he said. “Give or take.”

“Sometime you’re going to have to explain how you do that.”

“If I ever figure it out you’ll be the first to know.”

“Long breakfast,” she said. “But fun.”

“For me, too.”

“What next?”

“We could do lunch.”

“I’m not hungry yet.”

“We could skip the eating part.”

She smiled.

“Seriously,” she said. “We have things to do.”

“Can we go back to your office? There’s something I want to check.”

Barrow Street was quiet but West 4th was busy with the front end of the city’s lunch break envelope. The sidewalks were packed. Reacher and Pauling had to go with the flow, slower than they would have liked. But there was no alternative. Pedestrian traffic gridlocks just the same as automotive traffic. A five-minute walk took ten. The street door below Pauling’s office was already unlocked. Other tenants were open for business and had been for hours. Reacher followed Pauling up the stairs and she used her keys and they stepped into her waiting room. He walked ahead of her into the back office where the bookshelves and the computer were.

“What do you want to check?” she asked.

“The phone book first,” he said. “*T* for Taylor.”

She hauled the white pages off the shelf and opened it on the desk. There were plenty of Taylors listed. It was a reasonably common name.

She asked, “Initial?”

She asked, "Initial?"

"No idea," he said. "Work off the street addresses. Look for private individuals in the West Village."

Pauling used an optimistic realtor's definition of the target area and made pencil check marks in the phone book's margins. She ended up with seven possibilities. West 8th Street, Bank, Perry, Sullivan, West 12th, Hudson, and Waverly Place.

Reacher said, "Start with Hudson Street. Check the city directory and find out what block that address is on."

Pauling laid the directory over the phone book and slid it down until the top edge of the directory's jacket underlined the Taylor on Hudson Street. Then she flipped pages and traced the street number to a specific location on a specific block.

She looked up.

"It's exactly halfway between Clarkson and Leroy," she said.

Reacher said nothing.

"What's going on here?"

"Your best guess?"

"The guy with no tongue knew Taylor? Lived with him? Was working with him? Killed him?"

Reacher said nothing.

"Wait," Pauling said. "Taylor was the inside man, wasn't he? He stole the valet keys. He stopped the car outside Bloomingdale's exactly where the other guy wanted him to. You were always worried about the initial takedown. That's the only way it could have worked."

Reacher said nothing.

Pauling asked, "Was it really Taylor in the river?"

"We'll know that as soon as Bruno calls."

"We'll know that as soon as Brewer calls."

"The boat basin is a long way north of downtown. And downtown is where all the action seems to be."

"The Hudson is tidal all the way to the Tappan Zee. Technically it's an estuary, not a river. A floater could drift north as much as south."

"What exactly is going on here?"

"We're sweating the details and we're working the clues. That's what's going on here. We're doing it the hard way. One step at a time. Next step, we go visit the Taylor residence."

"Now?"

"It's as good a time as any."

"Will we get in?"

"Do bears shit in the woods?"

Pauling took a sheet of paper and copied *G. Taylor* and the address from the phone book. Said, "I wonder what the *G* stands for."

"He was British, don't forget," Reacher said. "Could be Geoffrey with a G. Or Gerald. Or Gareth or Glynn. Or Gervaise or Godfrey or Galahad."

They walked. The noon heat raised sour smells from the milk in dumped lattes in trash cans and gutters. Panel trucks and taxis jammed the streets. Drivers hit their horns in anticipation of potential fractional delays. Second-story air conditioners dripped condensation like fat raindrops. Vendors hawked fake watches and umbrellas and cell phone accessories. The city, in full tumult. Reacher liked New York more than most places. He liked the casual indifference of it all and the frantic hustle and the total anonymity.

Hudson Street between Clarkson and Leroy had buildings on the west side and James J. Walker Park on the east. Taylor's number matched a brick cube sixteen

James J. Walker Park on the east. Taylor's number matched a brick cube sixteen stories high. It had a plain entrance but a decent lobby. Reacher could see one lone guy behind a long desk. No separate doorman out on the sidewalk. Which made it easier. One guy was always easier than two. No witnesses.

"Approach?" Pauling asked.

"The easy way," Reacher said. "The direct approach."

They pulled the street door and stepped inside. The lobby had dark burr veneers and brushed metal accents. A granite floor. Up to the minute décor, a lot of minutes ago. Reacher walked straight to the desk and the guy behind it looked up and Reacher pointed to Pauling.

"Here's the deal," he said. "This lady will give you four hundred bucks if you let us into Mr. G. Taylor's apartment."

The easy way. The direct approach. Concierges are human. And it was a well-chosen sum. Four hundred was a slightly unusual number. It wasn't glib or run of the mill. It didn't go in one ear and out the other. It commanded attention. It was big enough to feel like serious cash. And in Reacher's experience it created an irresistible temptation to bargain upward toward five hundred. And in Reacher's experience once that temptation had taken hold the battle was won. Like prostitution. Once the principle was established, all that was left was the price.

The desk guy glanced left, glanced right. Saw nobody.

No witnesses. Easier.

"Alone?" the desk guy asked.

"I don't mind," Reacher said. "Come with us. Send a handyman."

The guy paused. Said, "OK, I'll send a handyman."

But you'll keep the cash for yourself, Reacher thought.

"Five hundred," the guy said.

Reacher said, "Deal."

Pauling opened her purse and her wallet and licked her thumb and counted off five hundred-dollar bills. Folded them around her index finger and slipped them across the desk.

“Twelfth floor,” the concierge said. “Turn left, go to the door at the end on the right. The handyman will meet you there.” He pointed toward the elevator bank and picked up a walkie-talkie to summon the guy. Reacher and Pauling stepped over and pressed the up arrow. An elevator door slid open like it had been waiting for them.

“You owe me a lot of money,” Pauling said.

“I’m good for it,” Reacher said. “I’ll be rich tonight.”

“I hope the staff in my building are better than that.”

“Dream on. I was in and out of a lot of buildings, back in the day.”

“You had a bribery budget?”

“Huge. Before the peace dividend. That dropped a rock on a lot of budgets.”

The elevator car stopped on twelve and the door slid back. The corridor was part exposed brick and part white paint and the only lighting was supplied by television screens set waist-high behind glass. They were all glowing dim purple.

“Nice,” Pauling said.

Reacher said, “I like your place better.”

They turned left and found the end door on the right. It had an integrated box mounted eye-high with a peephole lens and an apartment number and a slot with a black tape sign that said *Taylor*. Northeast corner of the building. The corridor was still and quiet and smelled faintly of air freshener or carpet cleaner.

Reacher asked, “What is he paying for a place like this?”

“Rental?” Pauling said. She glanced at the distance between doors to judge the size of the apartments and said, “Small two-bedroom, maybe four grand a month. Maybe four and a quarter in a building like this.”

“That’s a lot.”

“Not when you make twenty-five.”

To their right the elevator bell dinged and a man in a green uniform and a tan tool belt stepped off. The handyman. He walked up and pulled a keyring from his pocket. Asked no questions. Just unlocked Taylor’s door and pushed it open and stood back.

Reacher went in first. The apartment felt empty. The air inside was hot and still. There was a foyer the size of a phone booth and then a stainless-steel kitchen on the left and a coat closet on the right. Living room dead ahead, two bedrooms side by side away to the left, one of them larger than the other. The kitchen and the living room were spotlessly clean and immaculately tidy. The décor was mid-century modern, restrained, tasteful, masculine. Dark wood floors, pale walls, thick wool rugs. There was a maple desk. An Eames lounge chair and an ottoman opposite a Florence Knoll sofa. A Le Corbusier chaise and a Noguchi coffee table. Stylish. Not cheap. Classic pieces. Reacher recognized them from pictures in magazines he had read. There was an original painting on the wall. An urban scene, busy, bright, vibrant, acrylic on canvas. There were lots of books, shelved neatly and alphabetically. A small television set. Lots of CDs and a quality music system dedicated to headphones only. No loudspeakers. A considerate guy. A good neighbor.

“Very elegant,” Pauling said.

“An Englishman in New York,” Reacher said. “Probably drank tea.”

The bigger bedroom was spare, almost monastic. White walls, a king bed, gray linens, an Italian desk light on a night table, more books, another painting by the same artist. The closet had a hanging rail and a wall of open shelves. The rail was full of suits and jackets and shirts and pants grouped precisely by season and color. Each garment was clean and pressed and ironed. Each hanger was exactly one inch from the next. The shelves were stacked with piles of T-shirts and underwear and socks. Each stack was exactly vertical and the same height as all the others. The bottom shelf held shoes. They were all solid English items like Reacher’s own, black and brown, shined like mirrors. They all had cedar shoe trees in them.

“This is amazing,” Pauling said. “I want to marry this guy.”

Reacher said nothing and moved on to the second bedroom. The second bedroom was where the money or the will or the enthusiasm had run out. It was a small plain undecorated space. It felt unused. It was dark and hot and damp. There was no lightbulb in the ceiling fixture. The room held nothing but two narrow iron beds. They had been pushed together. There were used sheets on them. Dented pillows. The window was covered with a width of black fabric. It had been duct-taped to the walls, across the top, across the bottom, down both sides. But the tape had been picked away on one side and a narrow rectangle of cloth had been folded back to provide a sliver of a view, or air, or ventilation.

“This is it,” Reacher said. “This is where Kate and Jade were hidden.”

“By who? The man who can’t talk?”

“Yes,” Reacher said. “The man who can’t talk hid them here.”

CHAPTER **52**

PAULING STEPPED OVER next to the twin beds and bent to examine the pillows. “Long dark hairs,” she said. “A woman’s and a girl’s. They were tossing and turning all night.”

“I bet they were,” Reacher said.

“Maybe two nights.”

Reacher walked back to the living room and checked the desk. The handyman watched him from the doorway. The desk was as neatly organized as the closet, but there wasn’t much in it. Some personal papers, some financial papers, some lease papers for the apartment. Taylor’s first name was Graham. He was a U.K. citizen and a resident alien. He had a Social Security number. And a life insurance policy, and a retirement plan. There was a console telephone on the desk. A stylish thing, made by Siemens. It looked brand new and recently installed. It had ten speed-dial buttons with paper strips next to them under plastic. The paper strips were marked with initials only. At the top was *L.* For Lane, Reacher guessed. He hit the corresponding button and a 212 number lit up in neat alphanumeric script in a gray LCD window. Manhattan. The Dakota, presumably. He hit the other nine buttons one after the other. The gray window showed three 212 numbers, three 917 numbers, two 718s, and a long number with 01144 at the beginning. The 212s would all be Manhattan. Buddies, probably, maybe including Gregory, because there was a *G* on the paper strip. The 917s would be cell phones. Maybe for the same set of guys, for when they were on the road, or for people who didn’t have landlines. The 718s would be for Brooklyn. Probably buddies who weren’t up for Manhattan rents. The long 01144 number would be for Great Britain. Family, maybe. The corresponding initial was *S.* A mom or a dad, possibly.

Reacher kept on pressing buttons on the phone for a while and then he finished up at the desk and went back to the second bedroom. Pauling was standing at the window, half turned away, looking through the narrow slot.

“Weird,” she said. “Isn’t it? They were right here in this room. This view was maybe the last thing they ever saw.”

“They weren’t killed here. Too difficult to get the bodies out.”

“Not literally the last view. Just the last normal thing from their old lives.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Can you feel them in here?”

Reacher said, “No.”

He tapped the wall with his knuckles and then knelt and tapped the floor. The walls felt thick and solid and the floor felt like concrete under hardwood. An apartment building was an odd place to keep people prisoner but this one felt safe enough. Terrorize your captives into silence and adjacent residents wouldn’t know much. If anything. Ever. Like Patti Joseph had said: *This city is incredibly anonymous. You can go years without ever laying eyes on your neighbor.*

Or his guests, Reacher thought.

“You think there are doormen here twenty-four hours?” he asked.

“I doubt it,” Pauling said. “Not this far downtown. Mine aren’t. They’re probably part-time here. Maybe until eight.”

“Then that might explain the delays. He couldn’t bring them in past a doorman. Not kicking and struggling. The first day, he would have had to wait hours. Then he kept the intervals going for consistency.”

“And to create an impression of distance.”

“That was Gregory’s guess. He was right and I was wrong. I said the Catskills.”

“It was a reasonable assumption.”

Reacher said nothing.

Pauling asked, “What next?”

“I’d like to meet with your Pentagon buddy again.”

“I’m not sure if he’ll agree to. I don’t think he likes you.”

“I’m not crazy about him, either. But this is business. Make him an offer.”

“What can we offer him?”

“Tell him we’ll take Lane’s crew off the board if he helps us out with one small piece of information. He’ll take that deal. Ten minutes with us in a coffee shop will get him more than ten years of talking at the U.N. One whole band of real live mercenaries out of action forever.”

“Can we deliver that?”

“We’ll have to anyway. Sooner or later it’s going to be them or us.”

They walked back to Pauling’s office by their previous route in reverse. Saint Luke’s Place, Seventh Avenue, Cornelia Street, West 4th. Then Reacher lounged in one of Pauling’s visitor chairs while she played phone tag around the U.N. Building, looking for her friend. She got him after about an hour of trying. He was reluctant but he agreed to meet in the same coffee shop as before, at three o’clock in the afternoon.

“Time is moving on,” Pauling said.

“It always does. Try Brewer again. We need to hear from him.”

But Brewer wasn’t back at his desk and his cell was switched off. Reacher leaned back and closed his eyes. *No use fretting about what you can’t control.*

At two o’clock they went out to find a cab, well ahead of time, just in case. But they got one right away and were in the Second Avenue coffee shop forty minutes early. Pauling tried Brewer again. Still no answer. She closed her phone and put it on the table and spun it like a top. It came to rest with its antenna pointing straight at Reacher’s chest.

“You’ve got a theory,” she said to him. “Haven’t you? Like a physicist. A unified theory of everything.”

“No,” Reacher said. “Not everything. Not even close. It’s only partial. I’m missing a big component. But I’ve got a name for Lane.”

“What name?”

“Let’s wait for Brewer,” Reacher said. He waved to the waitress. The same one as before. He ordered coffee. Same brown mugs, same Bunn flask. Same hot, strong, generic taste.

Pauling’s phone buzzed with thirty minutes to go before the Pentagon guy was due to show. She answered it and said her name and listened for a spell and then she gave their current location. *A coffee shop, east side of Second between 44th and 45th, booth in the back.* Then she hung up.

“Brewer,” she said. “Finally. He’s meeting us here. Wants to talk face-to-face.”

“Why?”

“He didn’t say.”

“Where is he now?”

“He’s leaving the morgue.”

“It’s going to be crowded in here. He’s going to arrive at the same time as your guy.”

“My guy’s not going to like that. I don’t think he likes crowds.”

“If I see him balking I’ll talk to him outside.”

But Pauling’s Pentagon friend showed up a little early. Presumably to scope out the situation ahead of the rendezvous. Reacher saw him out on the sidewalk, looking in, checking the clientele one face at a time. He was patient about it.

Thorough. But eventually he was satisfied and he pulled the door. Walked quickly through the room and slid into the booth. He was wearing the same blue suit. Same tie. Probably a fresh shirt, although there was no real way of telling. One white button-down Oxford looks pretty much the same as another.

“I’m concerned about your offer,” he said. “I can’t condone illegality.”

Take the poker out of your ass, Reacher thought. *Be grateful for once in your miserable life. You might be a general now but you know how things are.* But he said, “I understand your concern, sir. Completely. And you have my word that no cop or prosecutor anywhere in America will think twice about anything that I do.”

“I have your word?”

“As an officer.”

The guy smiled. “And as a gentleman?”

Reacher didn’t smile back. “I can’t claim that distinction.”

“No cop or prosecutor anywhere in America?”

“I guarantee it.”

“You can do that, realistically?”

“I can do that absolutely.”

The guy paused. “So what do you want me to do?”

“Get me confirmation of something so I don’t waste my time or money.”

“Confirmation of what?”

“I need you to check a passenger name against flight manifests out of this area during the last forty-eight hours.”

“Military?”

“No, commercial.”

“That’s a Homeland Security issue.”

Reacher nodded. “Which is why I need you to do it for me. I don’t know who to call. Not anymore. But I’m guessing you do.”

“Which airport? What flight?”

“I’m not sure. You’ll have to go fishing. I’d start with JFK. British Airways, United, or American to London, England. I’d start with late evening the day before yesterday. Failing that, try flights out of Newark. No hits, try JFK again yesterday morning.”

“Definitely transatlantic?”

“That’s my assumption right now.”

“OK,” the guy said, slowly, like he was taking mental notes. Then he asked, “Who am I looking for? One of Edward Lane’s crew?”

Reacher nodded. “A recent ex-member.”

“Name?”

Reacher said, “Taylor. Graham Taylor. He’s a U.K. citizen.”

CHAPTER **53**

THE PENTAGON GUY left with a promise to liaise in due course via Lauren Pauling's cell phone. Reacher got a coffee refill and Pauling said, "You didn't find Taylor's passport in his apartment."

Reacher said, "No, I didn't."

"So either he's still alive or you think someone's impersonating him."

Reacher said nothing.

Pauling said, "Let's say Taylor was working with the guy with no tongue. Let's say they fell out over something, either what they did to Kate and Jade in the end, or the money, or both. Then let's say one of them killed the other and ran, on Taylor's passport, with all the money."

"If it's the guy with no tongue, why would he use Taylor's passport?"

"Maybe he doesn't have one of his own. Plenty of Americans don't. Or maybe he's on a watch list. Maybe he couldn't get through an airport with his own name."

"Passports have photographs."

"They're often old and generic. Do you look like your passport photograph?"

"A little."

Pauling said, "A little is sometimes all you need. Going out, they don't care as much as when you're coming in."

Reacher nodded and looked up and saw Brewer coming in the door. Big, fast, energetic. Something in his face, maybe frustration, maybe concern, Reacher couldn't tell. Or perhaps the guy was just tired. He had been woken up early. He hurried through the room and slid into the booth and sat in the same spot the Pentagon guy had just vacated.

He said, “The body in the river was not the guy in Patti’s photograph.”

“You sure?” Reacher asked.

“As sure as I’ve ever been about anything. Patti’s guy is about five-nine and athletic and the floater was six-three and wasted. Those are fairly basic differences, wouldn’t you say?”

Reacher nodded. “Fairly basic.”

Pauling asked, “Did he have a tongue?”

“A what?” Brewer said.

“A tongue. Did the floater have a tongue?”

“Doesn’t everybody? What kind of question is that?”

“We’re looking for a guy who had his tongue cut out.”

Brewer looked straight at her. “Then the floater ain’t yours. I was just at the morgue. He’s got everything except a heartbeat.”

“You sure?”

“Medical examiners tend to notice things like that.”

“OK,” Reacher said. “Thanks for your help.”

“Not so fast,” Brewer said. “Talk to me.”

“About what?”

“About why you’re interested in this guy.”

Something in his face.

Reacher asked, “Did you get an ID?”

Brewer nodded. “From his fingerprints. They were mushy, but we made them work. He was an NYPD snitch. Relatively valuable. I’ve got buddies uptown who are relatively unhappy.”

who are relatively unhappy.

“What kind of a snitch?”

“Methamphetamine out of Long Island. He was due to testify.”

“Where had he been?”

“He just got out of Rikers. They swept him up along with a bunch of others to keep his cover intact. Held him a few days, then turned him loose.”

“When?”

“He just got out. The ME figures he was dead about three hours after walking through the gates.”

“Then we don’t know anything about him,” Reacher said. “He’s completely unrelated.”

This time it was Brewer who said: “You sure?”

Reacher nodded. “I promise.”

Brewer gave him a long hard look, cop to cop. Then he just shrugged and said, “OK.”

Reacher said, “Sorry we can’t help.”

“Shit happens.”

“You still got Patti’s photograph?”

“Photographs,” Brewer said. “She gave me two. Couldn’t decide which one was better.”

“You still got them?”

“In my pocket.”

“Want to leave them with me?”

Brewer smiled, man to man. “You planning on returning them personally?”

“I could,” Reacher said. “But first I want to look at them.”

They were in a standard white letter-size envelope. Brewer pulled it from his inside pocket and laid it on the table. Reacher saw the name *Taylor* and the words *For Brewer* written on the front in blue ink and neat handwriting. Then Brewer left. Just stood up and walked back out to the street with the same kind of speed and energy and hustle he had used on the way in. Reacher watched him go and then he turned the envelope facedown and squared it on the table in front of him. Looked at it hard but left it unopened.

“What have we got?” he asked.

“We’ve got the same as we always had,” Pauling said. “We’ve got Taylor and the guy who can’t talk.”

Reacher shook his head. “Taylor *is* the guy who can’t talk.”

CHAPTER **54**

PAULING SAID, "THAT'S absurd. Lane wouldn't employ anyone who can't talk. Why would he? And nobody mentioned it. You asked about Taylor several times. They said he was a good soldier. They didn't say he was a good soldier except he can't talk. They'd have mentioned that little detail, don't you think?"

"Two words," Reacher said. "All we need to do is add two words and the whole thing makes perfect sense."

"What two words?"

"We've been saying the guy can't talk. Truth is, he can't *afford to* talk."

Pauling paused a long moment.

Then she said: "Because of his accent."

Reacher nodded. "Exactly. All along we've been saying nobody was missing, but by definition Taylor was missing from the start. And Taylor was behind this whole damn thing. He planned it, and he set it up, and he executed it. He rented the apartment and he bought the chair. He probably did other stuff we didn't catch up with yet. And everywhere he went, he couldn't risk opening his mouth. Not even once. Because he's English. Because of his accent. He was realistic. He knew he had to be leaving a trail. And if whoever was tracking him came along later and heard all about an average-looking forty-year-old man with an English accent, they would have made him in a second. It would have been a total no-brainer. Who else would anyone have thought of? Because he was the last one to see Kate and Jade alive."

"He did the same thing as Knight, five years ago. That's how the takedown worked."

"Exactly," Reacher said again. "It's the only way to explain it. Possibly he drove them to Bloomingdale's but certainly he didn't stop there. He just pulled a gun and kept on going. Maybe threatened to shoot Kate in front of the kid. That would have kept her quiet. Then he just dropped off the radar and started relying on a kind of double alibi he had created for himself. First, he was presumed

on a kind of double alibi he had created for himself. First, he was presumed dead. And second, all anyone would ever remember of him was a guy that couldn't speak. A guy with no tongue. It was a perfect piece of misdirection. Weird, exotic, absolutely guaranteed to get us chasing off in the wrong direction."

Pauling nodded. "Brilliant, in a way."

"It was all anyone remembered," Reacher said. "Like that old Chinese man? All he really recalled was the way the guy gulped like a fish. And the super on Sixth Avenue? We said, tell us about the guy, and he said he keeps his mouth tight shut all the time because he's embarrassed that he can't talk. That was the beginning and the end of his description. The obvious thing and the only thing. Everything else was trivial by comparison."

"Open the envelope," Pauling said. "Confirm it."

So Reacher lifted the envelope's flap and slid the two photographs out, facedown. He tapped the back of the top picture like a cardsharp looking for luck.

Then he flipped it over.

It was the guy he had seen twice before.

No question about it.

Taylor.

White, a little sunburned, lean, chiseled, clean-shaven, jaw clamped, not smiling, maybe forty years old. Blue jeans, blue shirt, blue ball cap, white sneakers. All the clothing worn and comfortable. It was clearly a very recent shot. Patti Joseph had caught him coming out of the Dakota one late-summer morning. It looked like he had paused on the sidewalk and lifted his gaze to check the weather. By doing so he had met the angle of Patti's long Nikon lens perfectly.

"No doubt about it," Reacher said. "That's the guy I saw getting into the Mercedes and the Jaguar."

He turned the second picture over. It was a closer shot. Maximum zoom, and therefore not quite as clear. There was a little camera shake. The focus wasn't

perfect. But it was a viable photograph. Same location, same angle, different day. Same guy. But this time his mouth was open. His lips were drawn back. He wasn't smiling. Maybe he was just grimacing against the sudden glare of the sun after stepping out of the dark Dakota lobby. He had terrible teeth. Some were missing. The rest were gappy and uneven.

"There you go," Reacher said. "There's another reason. No wonder everyone told us he kept his mouth clamped shut all the time. He's not dumb. He was concealing two pieces of evidence at the same time, not just one. His English accent, and his British dentistry. Because that's *really* a no-brainer. Someone from Lane's crew hears about a Brit with bad teeth? It would have been like wearing a nametag around his neck."

"Where is he now? England?"

"That's my guess. He flew home, where he feels safe."

"With the money?"

"Checked luggage. Three bags."

"Could he do that? With all the X-rays?"

"I don't see why not. I once had a lesson about paper money from an expert. Right here in New York City, as a matter of fact. At Columbia University. The paper isn't really paper, as such. It's mostly linen and cotton fibers. More in common with the shirt on your back than a newspaper. I think it would show up like clothing on an X-ray machine."

Pauling slid the photographs across the table and butted them together side by side in front of her. Looked at one, looked at the other. Reacher sensed her running through an explanation in her head. An analysis. A narrative.

"He's tan from the Hamptons," she said. "He was there all summer with the family. And then he was worried about someone checking his apartment from the street, afterward. That's why he took the lightbulb out of the guest room and covered the window. The place had to look empty, if anyone ever checked."

"He was very thorough."

"And very unsentimental. He walked away from that great apartment."

And very unsentimental. He walked away from that great apartment.

“He can rent ten apartments now.”

“That’s for sure.”

“It’s a shame,” Reacher said. “I liked him when I thought he was dead. Everyone spoke well of him.”

“I wouldn’t take recommendations from those guys.”

“I guess not. But I usually like Brits. Gregory seems OK.”

Pauling said, “He’s probably as bad as the rest of them.”

Then she stacked the photographs and slid them back.

“Well, you’ve got the name to give to Lane,” she said.

Reacher didn’t reply.

“A unified theory of everything,” she said. “Like a physicist. I don’t see why you say it’s only partial. Taylor did it all.”

“He didn’t,” Reacher said. “He didn’t make the phone calls. An American made the phone calls.”

CHAPTER **55**

“TAYLOR HAD A partner,” Reacher said. “Obviously. He had to, because of the accent thing again. At first I thought it might be the guy in the river. Like you said, I thought maybe they fell out afterward. Or that Taylor got greedy and wanted the whole nine yards for himself. But that won’t work now. The guy in the river was just a regular New York corpse. An unrelated homicide. He was in Rikers at the relevant time. So, I don’t know who made the phone calls. That’s why it’s only a partial theory.”

“Lane will want to know who the partner was. He won’t settle for half a loaf.”

“You bet your ass he won’t.”

“He’s not going to pay.”

“He’ll pay part. We’ll get the rest later. When we tell him who the partner was.”

“How do we find out who the partner was?”

“The only sure way is to find Taylor and ask him.”

“*Ask* him?”

“Make him tell us.”

“In England?”

“If that’s where your Pentagon buddy says he went. I guess he could check for us who Taylor was sitting next to on the flight. There’s a slim chance they flew together.”

“Unlikely.”

“Very. But it’s maybe worth a try.”

So Pauling went through ten more minutes of phone tag at the U.N. and then gave up and left a voice-mail message asking the guy to check whether Taylor

had had a traveling companion.

“What now?” she said.

“Wait for your guy to get back to you,” Reacher said. “Then book us a car to the airport and flights to London, if that’s where Taylor went, which it probably is. Tonight’s red-eye, I guess. I’m betting Lane will ask me to go over there. He’ll want me to do the advance work. Then he’ll bring his whole crew over for the kill. And we’ll deal with them there.”

Pauling looked up. “That’s why you promised no cop or prosecutor in America is going to think twice.”

Reacher nodded. “But their opposite numbers in England are going to get pretty uptight. That’s for damn sure.”

Reacher put Patti Joseph’s photographs back in their envelope and jammed it in the front pocket of his shirt. Kissed Pauling on the sidewalk and headed for the subway. He was outside the Dakota before five in the afternoon.

The name. Tomorrow.

Mission accomplished.

But he didn’t go inside. Instead he walked straight ahead and crossed Central Park West and went in through the gate to Strawberry Field. The John Lennon memorial, in the park. Near where Lennon was killed. Like most guys his age Reacher felt that The Beatles were part of his life. They were its soundtrack, its background. Maybe that was why he liked English people.

Maybe that was why he didn’t want to do what he was about to do.

He patted his shirt pocket and felt the photographs and ran through the narrative one more time the same way Pauling had. But there was no doubt about it. Taylor was the bad guy. No question. Reacher himself was an actual eyewitness. First the Mercedes, then the Jaguar.

No doubt about it.

Maybe there was just no joy in giving one bad guy to another.

But this is for Kate, Reacher thought. *For Jade. For Hobart's money.*

Not for Lane.

He took a deep breath and stood for a second with his face tilted up to catch the last of the sun before it fell away behind the buildings to the west. Then he turned around and walked back out of the park.

Edward Lane fanned the two photographs of Taylor quite delicately between his finger and his thumb and asked one simple question: "Why?"

"Greed," Reacher said. "Or malice, or jealousy, or all of the above."

"Where is he now?"

"My guess is England. I'll know soon."

"How?"

"Sources."

"You're good."

"The best you ever saw." *Or they'd have nailed you in the army.*

Lane handed back the photographs and said, "He must have had a partner."

"Obviously."

"For the phone calls. Someone with an American accent. Who was it?"

"You'll have to ask Taylor that."

"In England?"

“I don’t suppose he’ll be coming back here anytime soon.”

“I want you to find him for me.”

“I want my money.”

Lane nodded. “You’ll get it.”

“I want it now.”

“Ten percent now. The rest when I’m face-to-face with Taylor.”

“Twenty percent now.”

Lane didn’t answer.

Reacher said, “Or I’ll cut my losses and walk away. And you can stroll down to Barnes and Noble and buy a U.K. map and a pin. Or a mirror and a stick.”

Lane said, “Fifteen percent now.”

Reacher said, “Twenty.”

“Seventeen and a half.”

“Twenty. Or I’m out of here.”

“Jesus Christ,” Lane said. “OK, twenty percent now. But you’ll leave now, too. Right now, tonight. You can have one day’s start. That should be enough for a smart boy like you. Then we’ll follow you twenty-four hours later. The seven of us. Me, Gregory, Groom, Burke, Kowalski, Addison, and Perez. That should be enough. You know London?”

“I’ve been there before.”

“We’ll be at the Park Lane Hilton.”

“With the rest of the money?”

“Every penny of it,” Lane said. “I’ll show it to you when you meet us at the

hotel and you tell us where Taylor is. I'll give it to you when I've got actual visual contact with him."

"OK," Reacher said. "Deal." And ten minutes later he was back in the subway, heading south, with two hundred thousand U.S. dollars in cash wrapped in a plastic Whole Foods shopping bag.

Reacher met Pauling at her apartment and gave her the bag and said, "Take out what I owe you and hide the rest. It's enough to get Hobart started with the preliminaries at least."

Pauling took the bag and held it away from her body like it was contagious. "Is this the African money?"

Reacher nodded. "Direct from Ouagadougou. Via Edward Lane's closet."

"It's dirty."

"Show me money that isn't."

Pauling paused a beat and then opened the bag and peeled off some bills and put them on the kitchen counter. Then she refolded the bag and put it in the oven.

"I don't have a safe here," she said.

"The oven will do," Reacher said. "Just don't forget and start to cook something."

She took four bills from the stack on the counter and handed them to him.

"For clothes," she said. "You're going to need them. We leave for England tonight."

"Your guy got back to you?"

She nodded. "Taylor was on British Airways to London less than four hours after Burke put the money in the Jaguar."

“Alone?”

“Apparently. As far as we can tell. He was seated next to some British woman. Doesn’t mean he didn’t have a partner who checked in separately and sat somewhere else. That would have been a fairly basic precaution. There were sixty-seven unaccompanied adult American males on the flight.”

“Your guy is very thorough.”

“Yes, he is. He got the whole manifest. By fax. Including the baggage manifest. Taylor checked three bags.”

“Overweight charge?”

“No. He was in business class. They might have let it slide.”

Reacher said, “I don’t need four hundred dollars for clothes.”

Pauling said, “You do if you’re traveling with me.”

I was an MP, Reacher had said to Hobart. *I’ve done everything before.* But he hadn’t. Thirty minutes later he was doing something he had never done in his life. He was buying clothes in a department store. He was in Macy’s on Herald Square, in the men’s department, in front of a cash register, holding a pair of gray pants, a gray jacket, a black T-shirt, a black V-neck sweater, a pair of black socks, and a pair of white boxer shorts. His choices had been limited by the availability of suitable sizes. Inseam, arm length, and chest. He was worried that his brown shoes would be a color clash. Pauling told him to buy new shoes, too. He vetoed that idea. He couldn’t afford them. So she said brown shoes would be just fine with gray pants. He shuffled to the head of the line and paid, three hundred and ninety-six dollars and change, with tax. He showered and dressed back at Pauling’s apartment and took his creased and battered passport and Patti Joseph’s envelope of photographs out of his old pants and shoved them in his new pants. Took his folding toothbrush out of his old shirt pocket and put it in his new jacket pocket. Carried his old clothes down the corridor to the compactor room and dropped them in the garbage chute. Then he waited with

Pauling downstairs in the lobby, neither of them saying much, until the car service showed up to take them to the airport.

CHAPTER **56**

PAULING HAD BOOKED them business class on the same flight that Taylor had taken forty-eight hours previously. It was maybe even the same plane, assuming it flew a round-trip every day. But neither one of them could have been in Taylor's actual seat. They were in a window-and-aisle pair, and the Homeland Security manifest had shown that Taylor had been in the first of a block of four in the center.

The seats themselves were strange bathtub-shaped cocoons that faced alternating directions. Reacher's window seat faced aft and next to him Pauling faced forward. The seats were advertised as reclining into fully flat beds, which might have been true for her but was about twelve inches shy of being true for him. But the seats had compensations. The face-to-face thing meant that he was going to spend seven hours looking directly at her, which was no kind of a hardship.

"What's the strategy?" she asked.

"We'll find Taylor, Lane will take care of him, and then I'll take care of Lane."

"How?"

"I'll think of something. Like Hobart said, everything in war is improvisation."

"What about the others?"

"That will be a snap decision. If I think the crew will fall apart with Lane gone, then I'll leave the others alone and let it. But if one of them wants to step up to the officer class and take over, I'll do him, too. And so on and so forth, until the crew really does fall apart."

"Brutal."

"Compared to what?"

"Taylor won't be easy to find," she said.

"England's a small country," he said.

“Not that small.”

“We found Hobart.”

“With help. We were given his address.”

“We’ll get by.”

“How?”

“I’ve got a plan.”

“Tell me.”

“You know any British private investigators? Is there an international brotherhood?”

“There might be a sisterhood. I’ve got some numbers.”

“OK, then.”

“Is that your plan? Hire a London PI?”

“Local knowledge,” Reacher said. “It’s always the key.”

“We could have done that by phone.”

“We didn’t have time.”

“London alone is eight million people,” Pauling said. “Then there’s Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds. And a whole lot of countryside. The Cotswolds. Stratford upon Avon. And Scotland and Wales. Taylor stepped out the door at Heathrow two days ago. He could be anywhere by now. We don’t even know where he’s from.”

“We’ll get by,” Reacher said again.

Pauling took a pillow and a blanket from a stewardess and reclined her seat. Reacher watched her sleep for a while and then he lay down too, with his knees up and his head jammed against the bathtub wall. The cabin lighting was soft and blue and the hiss of the engines was restful. Reacher liked flying. Going to sleep in New York and waking up in London was a fantasy that could have been designed expressly for him.

The stewardess woke him to give him breakfast. *Like being in the hospital,* he thought. *They wake you up to feed you.* But the breakfast was good. Mugs of hot coffee and bacon rolls. He drank six and ate six. Pauling watched him, fascinated.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“Five to five,” he said. “In the morning. Which is five to ten in the morning in this time zone.”

Then all kinds of muted bells went off and signs went on to announce the start of their approach into Heathrow Airport. London’s northerly latitude meant that at ten in the morning in late summer the sun was high. The landscape below was lit up bright. There were small clouds in the sky that cast shadows on the fields. Reacher’s sense of direction wasn’t as good as his sense of time but he figured they had looped past the city and were approaching the airport from the east. Then the plane turned sharply and he realized they were in a holding pattern. Heathrow was notoriously busy. They were going to circle London at least once. Maybe twice.

He put his forehead against the window and stared down. Saw the Thames, glittering in the sun like polished lead. Saw Tower Bridge, white stone, recently cleaned, detailed with fresh paint on the ironwork. Then a gray warship moored in the river, some kind of a permanent exhibit. Then London Bridge. He craned his neck and looked for Saint Paul’s Cathedral, north and west. Saw the big dome, crowded by ancient winding streets. London was a low-built city. Densely and chaotically packed near the dramatic curves of the Thames, spreading infinitely into the gray distance beyond.

He saw railroad tracks fanning out into Waterloo Station. Saw the Houses of Parliament. Saw Big Ben, shorter and stumpier than he remembered it. And Westminster Cathedral, white, bulky, a thousand years old. There was some kind of a giant Ferris wheel on the opposite bank of the river. A tourist thing, maybe. Green trees, everywhere. He saw Buckingham Palace and Hyde Park. He glanced north of where the palace gardens ended and found the Park Lane Hilton. A round tower, bristling with balconies. From above it looked like a squat wedding cake. Then he glanced a little farther north and found the American Embassy. Grosvenor Square. He had once used an office there, in a windowless basement. Four weeks, for some big-deal army investigation he could barely recall. But he remembered the neighborhood. He remembered it pretty well. Too rich for his blood, until you escaped east into SoHo.

He asked Pauling, “Have you been here before?”

“We did exchange training with Scotland Yard,” she said.

“That could be useful.”

“It was a million years ago.”

“Where did you stay?”

“They put us up in a college dormitory.”

“You know any hotels?”

“Do you?”

“Not the sort where they let you in wearing four hundred dollars’ worth of clothes. Mostly the sort where you wear your shoes in bed.”

“We can’t stay anywhere close to Lane and his guys. We can’t be associated with him. Not if we’re going to do something to him.”

“That’s for sure.”

“What about somewhere really great? Like the Ritz?”

“That’s the opposite problem. Four hundred dollars is too shabby for them. And we need to stay low-profile. We need the kind of place where they don’t look at

your passport and they let you pay cash. Bayswater, maybe. West of downtown, a clear run back to the airport afterward."

Reacher turned to the window again and saw Windsor Castle slide by below. And a wide six-lane east-west highway with slow traffic driving on the left. Then suburbs, two-family houses, curving roads, tiny green back yards, garden sheds, and then acres of airport parking full of small cars, many of them red. Then the airport fence. Then the chevrons at the start of the runway. Close to the ground the plane seemed huge again after feeling cramped for seven hours. After being a narrow tube it became a two-hundred-ton monster doing two hundred miles an hour. It landed hard and roared and braked and then suddenly it was quiet and docile again, rolling slowly toward the terminal. The purser welcomed the passengers to London over the public address system and Reacher turned and looked across the cabin at the exit door. Taylor's first few steps would be easy enough to follow. After baggage claim and the taxi rank the job would get a whole lot harder. Harder, but maybe not impossible.

"We'll get by," he said, even though Pauling hadn't spoken to him.

CHAPTER **57**

THEY FILLED IN landing cards and had their passports stamped by an official in a gray suit. *My name on a piece of English paper,* Reacher thought. *Not good.* But there was no alternative. And his name was already on the airline passenger manifest, which could apparently get faxed all over the place at the drop of a hat. They waited at the carousel for Pauling's bag and then Reacher got stopped in Customs not because he had suspicious luggage but because he had none at all. Which made the guy stopping him a Special Branch cop or an MI5 agent in disguise, Reacher thought, not a real Customs guy. Traveling light was clearly a red flag. The detention was brief and the questions were casual, but the guy got a good look at his face and was all over his passport. *Not good.*

Pauling changed a wad of the O-Town dollars at a Travelex booth and they found the fast train to Paddington Station. Paddington was a good first stop, Reacher figured. His kind of an area. Convenient for the Bayswater hotels, full of trash and hookers. Not that he expected to find Taylor there. Or anywhere close. But it would make a good anonymous base camp. The railroad company promised the ride into town would be fifteen minutes, but it turned out to be closer to twenty. They came out to the street in central London just before twelve noon. West 4th Street to Eastbourne Terrace in ten short hours. Planes, trains, and automobiles.

At street level that part of London was bright and fresh and cold and to a stranger's eyes it seemed full of trees. The buildings were low and had old cores and sagging roofs but most of them had new frontages tacked on to disguise age and disrepair. Most things were chains or franchises except for the ethnic take-out food stores and the town car services, which still seemed to be mom-and-pop operations. Or cousin-and-cousin. The roads had good smooth blacktop heavily printed with instructions for drivers and pedestrians. The pedestrians were warned to *Look Left* or *Look Right* at every possible curb and the drivers were guided by elaborate lines and arrows and crosshatching and *Slow* signs anywhere the direction deviated from absolutely straight, which was just about everywhere. In some places there was more white on the road than black. *The welfare state,* Reacher thought. *It sure as hell takes care of you.*

He carried Pauling's bag for her and they walked south and east toward Sussex Gardens. From previous trips he recalled groups of row houses joined together into cheap hotels, on Westbourne Terrace, Gloucester Terrace, Lancaster Gate. The kind of places that had thick crusted carpet in the hallways and thick scarred paint on the millwork and four meaningless symbols lit up above the front doors as if some responsible standards agency had evaluated the offered services and found them to be pleasing. Pauling rejected the first two places he found before understanding that there wasn't going to be anything better just around the next corner. So she gave up and agreed to the third, which was four neighboring townhouses knocked through to make a single long sloping not-quite-aligned building with a name seemingly picked at random from a selection of London tourist-trade hot-button buzzwords: Buckingham Suites. The desk guy was from Eastern Europe and was happy to take cash. The rate was cheap for London, if expensive for anyplace else in the world. There was no register. The *Suites* part of the name seemed to be justified by the presence of a small bathroom and a small table in each room. The bed was a queen with a green nylon counterpane. Beyond the bed and the bathroom and the table there wasn't a whole lot of space left.

"We won't be here long," Reacher said.

"It's fine," Pauling said.

She didn't unpack. Just propped her suitcase open on the floor and looked like she planned to live out of it. Reacher kept his toothbrush in his pocket. He sat on the bed while Pauling washed up. Then she came out of the bathroom and moved to the window and stood with her head tilted up, looking out over the rooftops and the chimneys opposite.

"Nearly ninety-five thousand square miles," she said. "That's what's out there."

"Smaller than Oregon," he said.

"Oregon has three and a half million people. The U.K. has sixty million."

"Harder to hide here, then. You've always got a nosy neighbor."

"Where do we start?"

"With a nap."

“You want to sleep?”

“Well, afterward.”

She smiled. It was like the sun coming out.

“We’ll always have Bayswater,” she said.

Sex and jet lag kept them asleep until four. Their one day’s start, mostly gone.

“Let’s get going,” Reacher said. “Let’s call on the sisterhood.”

So Pauling got up and fetched her purse and took out a small device that Reacher hadn’t seen her use before. An electronic organizer. A Palm Pilot. She called up a directory and scrolled down a screen and found a name and an address.

“Gray’s Inn Road,” she said. “Is that near here?”

“I don’t think so,” Reacher said. “I think it’s east of here. Nearer the business district. Maybe where the lawyers are.”

“That would make sense.”

“Anyone closer?”

“These people are supposed to be good.”

“We can get there on the subway, I guess. The Central Line, I think. To Chancery Lane. I should have bought a derby and an umbrella. I would have fit right in.”

“I don’t think you would have. Those City people are very civilized.” She rolled over on the bed and dialed the phone on the night table. Reacher heard the foreign ring tone from the earpiece, a double purr instead of a single. Then he heard someone pick up and he listened to Pauling’s end of the conversation. She explained who she was, temporarily in town, a New York private investigator, ex-FBI, a member of some kind of an international organization, and she gave a

contact name, and she asked for a courtesy appointment. The person on the other end must have agreed readily enough because she asked, “How does six o’clock suit you?” and then said nothing more than “OK, thank you, six o’clock it is,” and hung up.

Reacher said, “The sisterhood comes through.”

“Brotherhood,” Pauling said. “The woman whose name I had seems to have sold the business. But they were always going to agree. Like that ten-sixty-two thing you tried with the general. What if they have to come to New York? If we don’t help each other, who will?”

Reacher said, “I hope Edward Lane doesn’t have a Palm Pilot full of London numbers.”

They showered and dressed again and walked down to the subway stop at Lancaster Gate. Or, in London English, to the tube station. It had a dirty tiled lobby that looked like a ballpark toilet, except for a flower seller. But the platform was clean and the train itself was new. And futuristic. Somehow, like its name, it was more tubular than its New York counterparts. The tunnels were rounded, like they had been sucked down to an exact fit for the cars. Like the whole system could be powered by compressed air, not electricity.

It was a crowded six-stop ride through stations with famous and romantic names. Marble Arch, Bond Street, Oxford Circus, Tottenham Court Road, Holborn. The names reminded Reacher of the cards in a British Monopoly set he had found abandoned on a NATO base as a kid. Mayfair and Park Lane had been the prize properties. Where the Park Lane Hilton was. Where Lane and his six guys were due in about eighteen hours.

They came up out of the Chancery Lane station at a quarter to six into full daylight and narrow streets that were choked with traffic. Black cabs, red buses, white vans, diesel fumes, small five-door sedans that Reacher didn’t recognize. Motorbikes, pedal bikes, sidewalks thick with people. Boldly striped pedestrian crossings, blinking lights, beeping signals. It was fairly cold but people were walking in shirtsleeves with jackets folded over their arms as if it was warm to them. There were no horns and no sirens. It was like the oldest parts of

them. There were no horns and no sirens. It was like the oldest parts of downtown Manhattan lopped off at the fifth floor and compressed in size and therefore heated up in speed but also somehow cooled down in temper and made more polite. Reacher smiled. Certainly he loved the open road and miles to go but he loved the crush of the world's great cities just as much. New York yesterday, London today. Life was good.

So far.

They walked north on Gray's Inn Road, which looked longer than they had anticipated. There were old buildings left and right, modernized on the ground floors, ancient above. A sign said that the house where Charles Dickens had lived was ahead and on the left. But for all that London was a historic city Dickens wouldn't have recognized the place. No way. Not close. Even Reacher felt that things had changed a lot in the ten or so years since he had last been in town. He remembered red phone boxes and polite unarmed coppers in pointed hats. Now most of the phone boxes he saw were plain glass cabins and everyone was using cell phones anyway. And the cops he saw were patrolling in pairs, blank-faced, dressed in flak jackets and carrying Uzi machine pistols in the ready position. There were surveillance cameras on poles everywhere.

Pauling said, "Big brother is watching you."

"I see that," Reacher said. "We're going to have to take Lane out of town. Can't do anything to him here."

Pauling didn't answer. She was checking doors for numbers. She spotted the one she wanted across the street on the right. It was a narrow maroon door with a glass fanlight. Through it Reacher could see a staircase that led to suites of rooms upstairs. Not dissimilar to Pauling's own place three thousand miles away. They crossed the street between standing traffic and checked the brass plates on the stonework. One was engraved: *Investigative Services plc.* Plain script, plain message. Reacher pulled the door and thought it was locked until he remembered that British doors worked the other way around. So he pushed and found that it was open. The staircase was old but it was covered in new linoleum. They walked up two flights until they found the right door. It was standing open onto a small square room with a desk set at a forty-five-degree angle so that its occupant could see out the door and the window at the same time. The occupant was a small man with thin hair. He was maybe fifty years old. He was wearing a sleeveless sweater over a shirt and a tie.

“You must be the Americans,” he said. For a second Reacher wondered how exactly he had known. Clothes? Teeth? Smell? A deduction, like Sherlock Holmes? But then the guy said, “I stayed open especially for you. I would have been on my way home by now if you hadn’t telephoned. I didn’t have any other appointments.”

Pauling said, “Sorry to hold you up.”

“Not a problem,” the guy said. “Always happy to help a fellow professional.”

“We’re looking for someone,” Pauling said. “He arrived from New York two days ago. He’s English, and his name is Taylor.”

The guy glanced up.

“Twice in one day,” he said. “Your Mr. Taylor is a popular person.”

“What do you mean?”

“A man telephoned directly from New York with the same inquiry. Wouldn’t give his name. I imagined he was trying all the London agencies one by one.”

“Was he American?”

“Absolutely.”

Pauling turned to Reacher and mouthed, *Lane.*

Reacher nodded. “Trying to go it alone. Trying to bilk me out of my fee.”

Pauling turned back to the desk. “What did you tell the guy on the phone?”

“That there are sixty million people in Great Britain and that possibly several hundred thousand of them are called Taylor. It’s a fairly common name. I told him that without better information I couldn’t really help him.”

“Can you help us?”

“That depends on what extra information you have.”

“We have photographs.”

“They might help eventually. But not at the outset. How long was Mr. Taylor in America?”

“Many years, I think.”

“So he has no base here? No home?”

“I’m sure he doesn’t.”

“Then it’s hopeless,” the guy said. “Don’t you see? I work with databases. Surely you do the same in New York? Bills, electoral registers, council tax, court records, credit reports, insurance policies, things like that. If your Mr. Taylor hasn’t lived here for many years he simply won’t show up anywhere.”

Pauling said nothing.

“I’m very sorry,” the guy said. “But surely you understand?”

Pauling shot Reacher a look that said: *Great plan.*

Reacher said, “I’ve got a phone number for his closest relative.”

CHAPTER **58**

REACHER SAID, "WE searched Taylor's apartment in New York and we found a desk phone that had ten speed-dials programmed. The only British number was labeled with the letter *S*. I'm guessing it's for his mother or father or his brother or sister. More likely a brother or sister because I think a guy like him would have used *M* or *D* for his mom or his dad. It'll be Sam, Sally, Sarah, Sean, something like that. And the sibling relationship will probably be fairly close, or else why bother to program a speed dial? And if the relationship is fairly close, then Taylor won't have come back to Britain without at least letting them know. Because they've probably got him on speed dial too, and they would worry if he wasn't answering his phone at home. So I'm guessing they'll have the information we need."

"What was the number?" the guy asked.

Reacher closed his eyes and recited the 01144 number he had memorized back on Hudson Street. The guy at the desk wrote it down on a pad of paper with a blunt pencil.

"OK," he said. "We delete the international prefix, and we add a zero in its place." He did exactly that, manually, with his pencil. "Then we fire up the old computer and we look in the reverse directory." He spun his chair one-eighty to a computer table behind him and tapped the space bar and unlocked the screen with a password Reacher didn't catch. Then he pointed and clicked his way to a dialog box, where he entered the number. "This will give us the address only, you understand. We'll have to go elsewhere to discover the exact identity of the person who lives there." He hit *submit* and a second later the screen redrew and came up with an address.

"Grange Farm," he said. "In Bishops Pargeter. Sounds rural."

Reacher asked, "How rural?"

"Not far from Norwich, judging by the postcode."

"Bishops Pargeter is the name of a town?"

The guy nodded. “It’ll be a small village, probably. Or a hamlet, possibly. Perhaps a dozen buildings and a thirteenth-century Norman church. That would be typical. In the county of Norfolk, in East Anglia. Farming country, very flat, windy, the Fens, that kind of thing, north and east of here, about a hundred and twenty miles away.”

“Find the name.”

“Hang on, hang on, I’m getting there.” The guy dragged and dropped the address to a temporary location elsewhere on the screen and opened up a different database. “The electoral register,” he said. “That’s always my preference. It’s in the public domain, quite legal, and it’s usually fairly comprehensive and reliable. If people take the trouble to vote, that is, which they don’t always do, of course.” He dragged the address back to a new dialog box and hit another *submit* command. There was a long, long wait. Then the screen changed. “Here we are,” the guy said. “Two voters at that address. Jackson. That’s the name. Mr. Anthony Jackson, and let’s see, yes, Mrs. Susan Jackson. So there’s your S. *S* for Susan.”

“A sister,” Pauling said. “Married. This is like Hobart all over again.”

“Now then,” the guy said. “Let’s do a little something else. Not quite legal this time, but since I’m among friends and colleagues, I might as well push the boat out.” He opened a new database that came up in old-fashioned plain DOS script. “Hacked, basically,” he said. “That’s why we don’t get the fancy graphics. But we get the information. The Department of Health and Social Security. The nanny state at work.” He entered Anthony Jackson’s name and address and then added a complex keyboard command and the screen rolled down and came back with three separate names and a mass of figures. “Anthony Jackson is thirty-nine years old and his wife Susan is thirty-eight. Her maiden name was indeed Taylor. They have one child, a daughter, age eight, and they seem to have saddled her with the unfortunate name of Melody.”

“That’s a nice name,” Pauling said.

“Not for Norfolk. I don’t suppose she’s happy at school.”

Reacher asked, “Have they been in Norfolk long? Is that where the Taylors are from? As a family?”

The guy scrolled up the screen. “The unfortunate Melody seems to have been born in London, which would suggest not.” He exited the plain DOS site and opened another. “The Land Registry,” he said. He entered the address. Hit another *submit* command. The screen redrew. “No, they bought the place in Bishops Pargeter just over a year ago. Sold a place in south London at the same time. Which would suggest they’re city folk heading back to the land. It’s a common fantasy. I give them another twelve months or so before they get tired of it.”

“Thank you,” Reacher said. “We appreciate your help.”

He picked up the guy’s blunt pencil from the desk and took Patti Joseph’s envelope out of his pocket and wrote *Anthony, Susan, Melody Jackson, Grange Farm, Bishops Pargeter, Norfolk* on it. Then he said, “Maybe you could forget all about this if the guy from New York calls again.”

“Money at stake?”

“Lots of it.”

“First come, first served,” the guy said. “The early bird catches the worm. And so on and so forth. My lips are sealed.”

“Thank you,” Reacher said again. “What do we owe you?”

“Oh, nothing at all,” the guy said. “It was my pleasure entirely. Always happy to help a fellow professional.”

Back on the street Pauling said, “All Lane has to do is check Taylor’s apartment and find the phone and he’s level with us. He could get back to a different guy in London. Or call someone in New York. Those reverse directories are available on-line.”

“He won’t find the phone,” Reacher said. “And if he did, he wouldn’t make the connection. Different skill set. Mirror on a stick.”

“Are vou sure?”

“Not entirely. So I took the precaution of erasing the number.”

“That’s called taking an unfair advantage.”

“I want to make sure I get the money.”

“Should we just go ahead and call Susan Jackson?”

“I was going to,” Reacher said. “But then you mentioned Hobart and his sister and now I’m not so sure. Suppose Susan is as protective as Dee Marie? She’d just lie to us about anything she knows.”

“We could say we were buddies passing through.”

“She’d check with Taylor before she told us anything.”

“So what next?”

“We’re going to have to go up there ourselves. To Bishops Pargeter, wherever the hell that is.”

CHAPTER **59**

OBVIOUSLY THEIR HOTEL didn't even come close to offering concierge service so Reacher and Pauling had to walk down to Marble Arch to find a car rental office. Reacher had neither a driver's license nor a credit card so he left Pauling to fill in the forms and kept on going down Oxford Street to look for a bookstore. He found a big place that had a travel section in back with a whole shelf of motoring atlases of Britain. But the first three he checked didn't show Bishops Pargeter at all. No sign of it anywhere. It wasn't in the index. *Too small*, he figured. *Not even a dot on the map.* He found London and Norfolk and Norwich. No problem with those places. He found market towns and large villages. But nothing smaller. Then he saw a cache of Ordnance Survey maps. Four shelves, low down, against a wall. A whole series. Big folded sheets, meticulously drawn, government sponsored. For hikers, he guessed. Or for serious geography freaks. There was a choice of scales. Best was a huge thing that showed detail all the way down to some individual buildings. He pulled all the Norfolk sheets off the shelf and tried them one by one. He found Bishops Pargeter on the fourth attempt. It was a crossroads hamlet about thirty miles south and west of the Norwich outskirts. Two minor roads met. Not even the roads themselves showed up on the motoring atlases.

He bought the map for detail and the cheapest atlas for basic orientation. Then he hiked back to the rental office and found Pauling waiting with the key to a Mini Cooper.

"A red one," she said. "With a white roof. Very cool."

He said, "I think Taylor might be right there. With his sister."

"Why?"

"His instinct would be to go hide somewhere lonely. Somewhere isolated. And he was a soldier, so deep down he'd want somewhere defensible. It's flat as a pool table there. I just read the map. He'd see someone coming from five miles away. If he's got a rifle he's impregnable. And if he's got four-wheel-drive he's got a three-sixty escape route. He could just take off across the fields in any direction."

“You can’t murder two people and steal more than ten million dollars and just go home to your sister.”

“He wouldn’t have to give her chapter and verse. He wouldn’t really have to tell her anything at all. And it might only be temporary. He might need a break. He’s been under a lot of stress.”

“You sound sorry for him.”

“I’m trying to think like him. He’s been planning for a long time and the last week must have been hell. He must be exhausted. He needs to hole up and sleep.”

“His sister’s place would be too risky, surely. Family is the first thing anyone thinks of. We did, with Hobart. We tried every Hobart in the book.”

“His sister is a Jackson, not a Taylor. Like Graziano wasn’t a Hobart. And Grange Farm is not an ancestral pile. The sister only just moved there. Anyone tracking his family would get bogged down in London.”

“There’s a kid up there. His niece. Would he put innocent people in physical danger?”

“He just killed two innocent people. He’s a little underdeveloped in the conscience department.”

Pauling swung the car key on her finger. Back and forth, thinking.

“It’s possible,” she said. “I guess. So what’s our play?”

“Taylor was with Lane three years,” Reacher said. “So he never met you and he sure as hell never met me. So it doesn’t really make much difference. He’s not going to shoot every stranger who comes to the house. He can’t really afford to. It’s something we should bear in mind, is all.”

“We’re going right to the house?”

Reacher nodded. “At least close enough to scope it out. If Taylor’s there, we back off and wait for Lane. If he isn’t, we go all the way in and talk to Susan.”

“When?”

“Now.”

The rental guy brought the Mini Cooper out from a garage space in back and Reacher shoved the passenger seat hard up against the rear bench and slid inside. Pauling got in the driver’s seat and started the engine. It was a cute car. It looked great in red. But it was a handful to drive. Stick shift, wrong side of the road, wheel on the right, early-evening traffic in one of the world’s most congested cities. But they made it back to the hotel OK. They double parked and Pauling ran in to get her bag. Reacher stayed in the car. His toothbrush was already in his pocket. Pauling got back after five minutes and said, “We’re on the west side here. Convenient for the airport. But now we need to exit the city from the east.”

“Northeast,” Reacher said. “On a highway called the M-11.”

“So I have to drive all the way through the center of London in rush hour.”

“No worse than Paris or Rome.”

“I’ve never been to Paris or Rome.”

“Well, now you’ll know what to expect if you ever get there.”

Heading east and north was a simple enough proposition but like any major city London was full of one-way systems and complex junctions. And it was full of lines of stalled traffic at every light. They made halting progress as far as a district called Shoreditch and then they found a wide road labeled A-10 that speared due north. Too early, but they took it anyway. They figured they would make the lateral adjustment later, away from the congestion. Then they found the M-25, which was a kind of beltway. They hit it clockwise and two exits later they were on the M-11, heading north and east for Cambridge, Newmarket, and ultimately Norfolk. Nine o’clock in the evening, and getting dark.

Pauling asked, “You know this area we’re going to?”

“Not really,” Reacher said. “It was Air Force country, not army. Bomber bases all over the place. Flat, spacious, close to Europe. Ideal.”

all over the place. Flat, spacious, close to Europe. Ideal.

England was a lit-up country. That was for damn sure. Every inch of the highway was bathed in bright vapor glow. And people drove fast. The limit was posted at seventy miles an hour, but it was widely ignored. High eighties, low nineties seemed to be the norm. Lane discipline was good. Nobody passed on the inside. The highway exits all followed the same coherent grammar. Clear signs, plenty of warning, long deceleration lanes. Reacher had read that highway fatalities were low in Britain. Safety, through infrastructure.

Pauling asked, “What’s Grange Farm going to be like?”

“I don’t know,” Reacher said. “Technically in Old English a *grange* was a large barn for grain storage. Then later it became a word for the main building in a gentleman’s arable farm. So I guess we’re going to see a big house and a bunch of smaller outbuildings. Fields all around. Maybe a hundred acres. Kind of feudal.”

“You know a lot.”

“A lot of useless information,” Reacher said. “Supposed to fire my imagination.”

“But you can’t get no satisfaction?”

“None at all. I don’t like anything about this whole situation. It feels wrong.”

“Because there are no good guys. Just bad guys and worse guys.”

“They’re all equally terrible.”

“The hard way,” Pauling said. “Sometimes things aren’t black and white.”

Reacher said, “I can’t get past the feeling that I’m making a bad mistake.”

England is a small country but East Anglia was a large empty part of it. In some ways it was like driving across the prairie states. Endless forward motion without much visible result. The little red Mini Cooper hummed along. The clock in Reacher’s head crawled around to ten in the evening. The last of the

clock in Reacher's head crawled around to ten in the evening. The last of the twilight disappeared. Beyond the bright ribbon of road was nothing but full darkness.

They bypassed a town called Thetford. Much later they blew through a town called Fenchurch Saint Mary. The road narrowed and the streetlights disappeared. They saw a sign that said *Norwich 40 Miles.* So Reacher switched maps and they started hunting the turn down to Bishops Pargeter. The road signs were clear and helpful. But they were all written with the same size lettering and there seemed to be a maximum permitted length for a fingerpost. Which meant that the longer names were abbreviated. Reacher saw a sign to *B'sh'ps P'ter* flash by and they were two hundred yards past it before he figured out what it meant. So Pauling jammed to a stop in the lonely darkness and U-turned and went back. Paused a second and then turned off the main drag onto a much smaller road. It was narrow and winding and the surface was bad. Pitch dark beyond the headlight beams.

"How far?" Pauling asked.

Reacher spanned his finger and thumb on the map.

"Maybe nine miles," he said. The motoring atlas had showed nothing but a blank white triangle between two roads that fanned out south of the city of Norwich. The Ordnance Survey sheet showed the triangle to be filled with a tracery of minor tracks and speckled here and there with small settlements. He put his finger on the Bishops Pargeter crossroad. Then he looked out the car window.

"This is pointless," he said. "It's too dark. We're not even going to see the house, let alone who's living in it." He looked back at the map. It showed buildings about four miles ahead. One was labeled *PH.* He checked the legend in the corner of the sheet.

"Public house," he said. "A pub. Maybe an inn. We should get a room. Go out again at first light."

Pauling said, "Suits me, boss."

He realized she was tired. Travel, jet lag, unfamiliar roads, driving stress. "I'm sorry," he said. "We overdid it. I should have planned better."

"No, this works," she said. "We're right on the spot for the morning. But how

much farther?"

"Four miles to the pub now, and then five more to Bishops Pargeter tomorrow."

"What time is it?"

He smiled. "Ten forty-seven."

"So you can do it in multiple time zones."

"There's a clock on the dashboard. I can see it from here. I'm practically sitting in your lap."

Eight minutes later they saw a glow in the distance that turned out to be the pub's spotlit sign. It was swinging in a gentle night breeze on a high gallows. *The Bishop's Arms.* There was a blacktopped parking lot with five cars in it and then a row of lit windows. The windows looked warm and inviting. Beyond the dark outline of the building there was absolutely nothing at all. Just endless flatness under a vast night sky.

"Maybe it was a coaching inn," Pauling said.

"Can't have been," Reacher said. "It's not on the way to anywhere. It was for farm laborers."

She turned in at the entrance of the parking lot and slotted the tiny car between a dirty Land Rover and a battered sedan of indeterminate make and age. Turned the motor off and dropped her hands off the wheel with a sigh. Silence rolled in, and with it came the smell of moist earth. The night air was cold. A little damp. Reacher carried Pauling's bag to the pub's door. There was a foyer inside, with a swaybacked staircase on the right and a low beamed ceiling and a patterned carpet and about ten thousand brass ornaments. Dead ahead was a hotel reception counter made from dark old wood varnished to an amazing shine. It was unattended. To the left was a doorway marked *Saloon Bar*. It led to a room that seemed to be empty. To the right beyond the stairs was a doorway marked *Public Bar*. Through it Reacher could see a bartender at work and the backs of four drinkers hunched on stools. In the far corner he could see the back of a man sitting alone at a table. All five customers were drinking from pint pots of ale.

Reacher stepped up to the empty reception counter and dinged the bell. A long moment later the bartender came in through a door behind the counter. He was

moment later the bartender came in through a door behind the counter. He was about sixty, large and florid. Tired. He was wiping his hands on a towel.

“We need a room,” Reacher said to him.

“Tonight?” he said back.

“Yes, tonight.”

“It’ll cost you forty pounds. But that’s with breakfast included.”

“Sounds like a bargain.”

“Which room would you like?”

“Which would you recommend?”

“You want one with a bath?”

Pauling said, “Yes, a bath. That would be nice.”

“OK, then. That’s what you can have.”

She gave him four ten-pound notes and he gave her a brass key on a tasseled fob. Then he handed Reacher a ballpoint pen and squared a register in front of him. Reacher wrote *J & L Bayswater* on the *Name* line. Then he checked a box for *Place of Business* rather than *Place of Residence* and wrote Yankee Stadium’s street address on the next line. *East 161st Street, Bronx, New York, USA.* He wished that was his place of business. He always had. In a space labeled *Make of Vehicle* he scrawled *Rolls-Royce.* He guessed *Registration Number* meant license plate and he wrote R34-CHR. Then he asked the bartender, “Can we get a meal?”

“You’re a little too late for a meal, I’m afraid,” the bartender said. “But you could have sandwiches, if you like.”

“That would be fine,” Reacher said.

“You’re Americans, aren’t you? We get a lot of them here. They come to see the old airfields. Where they were stationed.”

“Before my time,” Reacher said.

Before my time," Reacher said.

The bartender nodded sagely and said, "Go on in and have a drink. Your sandwiches will be ready soon."

Reacher left Pauling's bag at the foot of the stairs and stepped in through the door to the public bar. Five heads turned. The four guys at the bar looked like farmers. Red weathered faces, thick hands, blank uninterested expressions.

The guy alone at the table in the corner was Taylor.

CHAPTER **60**

LIKE THE GOOD soldier he was Taylor kept his eyes on Reacher long enough to assess the threat level. Pauling's arrival behind Reacher's shoulder seemed to reassure him. *A well-dressed man, a refined woman, a couple, tourists.* He looked away. Turned back to his beer. Beginning to end he had stared only a fraction of a second longer than any man would in a barroom situation. And actually shorter than the farmers. They were slow and ponderous and full of the kind of entitlement a regular patron shows to a stranger.

Reacher led Pauling to a table on the other side of the room from Taylor and sat with his back to the wall and watched the farmers turn back to the bar. They did it one by one, slowly. Then the last one picked up his glass again and the atmosphere in the room settled back to what it had been before. A moment later the bartender reappeared. He picked up a towel and started wiping glasses.

Reacher said, "We should act normally. We should buy a drink."

Pauling said, "I guess I'll try the local beer. You know, when in Rome."

So Reacher got up again and stepped over to the bar and tried to think back ten years to when he had last been in a similar situation. It was important to get the dialect right. He leaned between two of the farmers and put his knuckles on the bar and said, "A pint of best, please, and a half for the lady." It was important to get the manners right too, so he turned left and right to the four farmers and added: "And will you gentlemen join us?" Then he glanced at the bartender and said: "And can I get yours?" Then the whole dynamic in the room funneled toward Taylor as the only patron as yet uninvited. Taylor turned and looked up from his table as if compelled to and Reacher mimed a drinking action and called, "What can I get you?"

Taylor looked back at him and said, "Thanks, but I've got to go." A flat British accent, a little like Gregory's. Calculation in his eyes. But nothing in his face. No suspicion. Maybe a little awkwardness. Maybe even a hint of dour amiability. A guileless half-smile, a flash of the bad teeth. Then he drained his glass and set it back on the table and got up and headed for the door.

"Good night," he said, and was gone.

"Goodnight," he said, as he passed by.

The bartender pulled six and a half pints of best bitter and lined them up like sentries. Reacher paid for them and pushed them around a little as a gesture toward distribution. Then he picked his own up and said, "Cheers," and took a sip. He carried Pauling's half-sized glass over to her, and the four farmers and the bartender all turned toward their table and toasted them. Reacher thought: *Instant social acceptance for less than thirty bucks. Cheap at twice the price.* But he said, "I hope I didn't offend that other fellow somehow."

"Don't know him," one of the farmers said. "Never saw him before."

"He's at Grange Farm," another farmer said. "Must be, because he was in Grange Farm's Land Rover. I saw him drive up in it."

"Is he a farmer?" Reacher asked.

"He don't look like one," the first farmer said. "I never saw him before."

"Where's Grange Farm?"

"Down the road apiece. There's a family there now."

"Ask Dave Kemp," the third farmer said.

Reacher said, "Who's Dave Kemp?"

"Dave Kemp in the shop," the third farmer said, impatiently, like Reacher was an idiot. "In Bishops Pargeter. He'll know. Dave Kemp knows everything, on account of the post office. Nosy bugger."

"Is there a pub there? Why would someone from there drink here?"

"This is the only pub for miles, lad. Why else do you think it's so crowded?"

Reacher didn't answer that.

"They're offcomers at Grange Farm," the first farmer said, finally completing his earlier thought. "That family. Recent. From London, I reckon. Don't know them. Organic, they are. Don't hold with chemicals."

And that information seemed to conclude what the farmers felt they owed in

And that information seemed to conclude what the farmers felt they owed in exchange for a pint of beer because they fell to talking among themselves about the advantages and disadvantages of organic farming. It felt like a well-worn argument. According to what Reacher overheard there was absolutely nothing in its favor except for the inexplicable willingness of townsfolk to pay over the odds for the resulting produce.

“You were right,” Pauling said. “Taylor’s at the farm.”

“But will he stay there now?” Reacher said.

“I don’t see why not. Your big dumb generous American act was pretty convincing. You weren’t threatening. Maybe he thought we’re just tourists looking at where our dads were based. They get them all the time here. That guy said so.”

Reacher said nothing.

Pauling said, “I parked right next to him, didn’t I? That farmer said he was in a Land Rover and there was only one Land Rover in the lot.”

Reacher said, “I wish he hadn’t been in here.”

“This is probably one of the reasons he chose to come back. English beer.”

“You like it?”

“No, but I believe Englishmen do.”

Their sandwiches were surprisingly good. Fresh crusty home-made bread, butter, rare roast beef, creamy horseradish sauce, farmhouse cheese on the side, with thin potato chips as a garnish. They ate them and finished their beers. Then they headed upstairs to their room. It was better than their suite in Bayswater. More spacious, partly due to the fact that the bed was a full, not a queen. Four feet six, not five feet. *Not really a hardship,* Reacher thought. *Not under the circumstances.* He set the alarm in his head for six in the morning. First light. *Taylor will stay or Taylor will run, and either way we’ll watch him do it.*

CHAPTER **61**

THE VIEW OUT the window at six the next morning was one of infinite misty flatness. The land was level and gray-green all the way to the far horizon, interrupted only by straight ditches and occasional stands of trees. The trees had long thin supple trunks and round compact crowns to withstand the winds. Reacher could see them bending and tossing in the distance.

Outside it was very cold and their car was all misted over with dew. Reacher cleared the windows with the sleeve of his jacket. They climbed inside without saying much. Pauling backed out of the parking space and crunched into first gear and took off through the lot. Braked briefly and then joined the road, due east toward the morning sky. Five miles to Bishops Pargeter. Five miles to Grange Farm.

They found the farm before they found the village. It filled the upper left-hand square of the quadrant formed by the crossroad. They saw it first from the southwest. It was bounded by ditches, not fences. They were dug straight and crisp and deep. Then came flat fields, neatly plowed, dusted pale green with late crops recently planted. Then closer to the center were small stands of trees, almost decorative, like they had been artfully planted for effect. Then a large gray stone house. Larger than Reacher had imagined. Not a castle, not a stately home, but more impressive than a mere farmhouse had any right to be. Then in the distance to the north and the east of the house were five outbuildings. Barns, long, low, and tidy. Three of them made a three-sided square around some kind of a yard. Two stood alone.

The road they were driving on was flanked by the ditch that formed the farm's southern boundary. With every yard they drove their perspective rotated and changed, like the farm was an exhibit on a turntable, on display. It was a big handsome establishment. The driveway crossed the boundary ditch on a small flat bridge and then ran north into the distance, beaten earth, neatly cambered. The house itself was end-on to the road, a half-mile in. The front door faced west

and the back door faced east. The Land Rover was parked between the back of the house and one of the standalone barns, tiny in the distance, cold, inert, misted over.

“He’s still there,” Reacher said.

“Unless he has a car of his own.”

“If he had a car of his own he would have used it last night.”

Pauling slowed to a walk. There was no sign of activity around the house. None at all. There was thin smoke from a chimney, blown horizontal by the wind. A banked fire for a water heater, maybe. No lights in the windows.

Pauling said, “I thought farmers got up early.”

“I guess livestock farmers do,” Reacher said. “To milk the cows or whatever. But this place is all crops. Between plowing and harvesting I don’t see what they have to do. I guess they just sit back and let the stuff grow.”

“They need to spray it, don’t they? They should be out on tractors.”

“Not organic people. They don’t hold with chemicals. A little irrigation, maybe.”

“This is England. It rains all the time.”

“It hasn’t rained since we got here.”

“Eighteen hours,” Pauling said. “A new record. It rained all the time I was at Scotland Yard.”

She coasted to a halt and put the stick in neutral and buzzed her window down. Reacher did the same thing and cold damp air blew through the car. Outside was all silence and stillness. Just the hiss of wind in distant trees and the faint suggestion of morning shadows in the mist.

Pauling said, “I guess all the world looked like this once.”

“These were the north folk,” Reacher said. “Norfolk and Suffolk, the north folk and the south folk. Two ancient Celtic kingdoms, I think.”

Then the silence was shattered by a shotgun. A distant blast that rolled over the fields like an explosion. Enormously loud in the quiet. Reacher and Pauling both ducked instinctively. Then they scanned the horizon, looking for smoke. Looking for incoming fire.

Pauling said, “Taylor?”

Reacher said, “I don’t see him.”

“Who else would it be?”

“He was too far away to be effective.”

“Hunters?”

“Turn the motor off,” Reacher said. He listened hard. Heard nothing more. No movement, no reload.

“I think it was a bird scarer,” he said. “They just planted a winter crop. They don’t want the crows to eat the seeds. I think they have machines that fire blanks all day at random.”

“I hope that’s all it was.”

“We’ll come back,” Reacher said. “Let’s go find Dave Kemp in the shop.”

Pauling fired the engine up and took off again and Reacher twisted in his seat and watched the eastern half of the farm go by. It looked exactly the same as the western half. But in reverse. Trees near the house, then wide flat fields, then a ditch on the boundary. Then came the northern leg of the Bishops Pargeter crossroad. Then the hamlet itself, which was little more than an ancient stone church standing alone in the upper right-hand quadrant and a fifty-yard string of buildings along the shoulder of the road opposite. Most of the buildings seemed to be residential cottages but one of them was a long low multi-purpose store. It was a newspaper shop, and a grocery, and a post office. Because it sold newspapers and breakfast requisites it was already open.

“The direct approach?” Pauling asked.

“A variant,” Reacher said.

She parked opposite the store where the shoulder was graveled near the entrance to the churchyard. They got out of the car into a stiff wind that blew strong and steady out of the east. Reacher said, “Guys I knew who served here swore it blew all the way from Siberia without anything getting in its way.” The village store felt warm and snug by comparison. There was some kind of a gas heater going that put warm moisture into the air. There was a shuttered post office window and a central section that sold food and a newspaper counter at the far end. There was an old guy behind the counter. He was wearing a cardigan sweater and a muffler. He was sorting newspapers, and his fingers were gray with ink.

“Are you Dave Kemp?” Reacher asked.

“That’s my name,” the old guy said.

“We were told you’re the man to ask.”

“About what?”

“We’re here on a mission,” Reacher said.

“You’re certainly here early.”

“First come first served,” Reacher said, because the London guy had, and therefore it might sound authentic.

“What do you want?”

“We’re here to buy farms.”

“You’re Americans, aren’t you?”

“We represent a large agricultural corporation in the United States, yes. We’re looking to make investments. And we can offer very generous finders’ fees.”

The direct approach. A variant.

“How much?” Kemp asked.

“It’s usually a percentage.”

"What farms?" Kemp asked.

"You tell us. Generally we look for tidy well-run places that might have issues with ownership stability."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means we want good places that were recently bought up by amateurs. But we want them quick, before they're ruined."

"Grange Farm," Kemp said. "They're bloody amateurs. They've gone organic."

"We heard that name."

"It should be top of your list. It's exactly what you said. They've bitten off more than they can chew there. And that's when they're both at home. Which they aren't always. Just now the chap was left alone there for a few days. It's far too much for one man to run. Especially a bloody amateur. And they've got too many trees. You can't make money growing trees."

"Grange Farm sounds like a good prospect," Reacher said. "But we heard that someone else is snooping around there, too. He's been seen, recently. On the property. A rival, maybe."

"Really?" Kemp said, excited, conflict in the offing. Then his face fell, deflated. "No, I know who you mean. That's not a bloody rival. That's the woman's brother. He's moved in with them."

"Are you sure about that? Because it makes a difference to us, how many people we have to relocate."

Kemp nodded. "The chap came in here and introduced himself. Said he was back from somewhere or other and his wandering days were over. He was posting a packet to America. Airmail. We don't get much of that here. We had quite a nice chat."

"So you're sure he's going to be a long-term resident? Because it makes a difference."

"That's what he said."

Pauling asked, “What did he post to America?”

“He didn’t tell me what it was. It was going to a hotel in New York. Addressed to a room, not a person, which I thought was strange.”

Reacher asked, “Did you guess what it was?”

Dave Kemp, the farmer in the bar had said. *Nosy bugger.*

“It felt like a thin book,” Kemp said. “Not many pages. A rubber band around it. Maybe he had borrowed it. Not that I squeezed it or anything.”

“Didn’t he fill out a customs declaration?”

“We put it down as printed papers. Don’t need a form for that.”

“Thanks, Mr. Kemp,” Reacher said. “You’ve been very helpful.”

“What about the fee?”

“If we buy the farm, you’ll get it,” Reacher said.

If we buy the farm, he thought. *Unfortunate turn of phrase.* He felt suddenly cold.

Dave Kemp had no take-out coffee so they bought Coke and candy bars and stopped to eat them on the side of the road a mile west, where they could watch the front of the farmhouse. The place was still quiet. No lights, the same thin trickle of smoke catching the wind and dispersing sideways.

Reacher said, “Why did you ask about the airmail to the States?”

“An old habit,” Pauling said. “Ask about everything, especially when you’re not sure about what’s important and what isn’t. And it was kind of weird. Taylor just got out, and the first thing he does is mail something back? What could it have been?”

“Maybe something for his partner,” Reacher said. “Maybe he’s still in the city.”

"Maybe something for his partner," Reacher said. "Maybe he's still in the city."

"We should have gotten the address. But we did pretty well, overall. You were very plausible. It fit very well with last night. All that false bonhomie in the bar? Assuming Kemp spreads the word, Taylor's going to put you down as a conman looking to make a fast buck buying farms for fifty cents on the dollar."

"I can lie with the best of them," Reacher said. "Sadly."

Then he shut up fast because he caught a glimpse of movement a half-mile away. The farmhouse door was opening. There was morning mist and the sun was on the other side of the house and the distance was at the outer limit of visibility but he made out four figures emerging into the light. Two big, one slightly smaller, one very small. Probably two men, a woman, and a little child. Possibly a girl.

"They're up," he said.

Pauling said, "I see them, but only just. Four people. The bird scarer probably woke them. Louder than a rooster. It's the Jackson family and Taylor, right? Mommy, Daddy, Melody, and her loving uncle."

"Must be."

They all had things on their shoulders. Long straight poles. Comfortable for the adults, way too big for the girl.

"What are they doing?" Pauling asked.

"Those are hoes," Reacher said. "They're going out to the fields."

"To dig weeds?"

"Organic farming. They can't use herbicides."

The tiny figures grouped together and moved north, away from the road. They dwindled to nothingness, just faint remote blurs in the mist that were more ghostly illusion than reality.

"He's staying," Pauling said. "Isn't he? He must be staying. You don't go out to hoe weeds for your sister if you're thinking about running."

Reacher nodded. “We’ve seen enough. The job is done. Let’s get back to London and wait for Lane.”

CHAPTER **62**

THEY HIT COMMUTER traffic on the road to London. Lots of it. It seemed like for hundreds of miles England was one of two things: either London or a dormitory serving London. The city was like a gigantic sprawling magnet sucking inward. According to Reacher's atlas the M-11 was just one of twenty or so radial arteries that fed the capital. He guessed they were all just as busy, all full of tiny flowing corpuscles that would get spat back out at the end of the day. *The daily grind.* He had never worked nine to five, never commuted. At times he felt profoundly grateful for that fact. This was one of them.

The stick shift was hard work in the congestion. Two hours into the ride they pulled off and got gas and he changed places with Pauling, even though he wasn't on the paperwork and wasn't insured to drive. It seemed like a minor transgression compared to what they were contemplating for later. He had driven in Britain before, years earlier, in a large British sedan owned by the U.S. Army. But now the roads were busier. Much busier. It seemed to him like the whole island was packed to capacity. Until he thought back to Norfolk. That county was empty. *The island is unevenly packed*, he thought. That was the real problem. Either full or empty. No middle ground. Which was unusual for Brits, in his experience. Normally Brits fudged and muddled like champions. The middle ground was where they lived.

They came to the M-25 beltway and decided that discretion was the better part of valor. Decided to hit it for a quarter-circle counterclockwise and then head down to the West End on an easier route. But the M-25 itself was pretty much a parking lot.

"How do people stand this every day?" Pauling said.

"Houston and LA are as bad," Reacher said.

"But it kind of explains why the Jacksons escaped."

"I guess it does."

And the traffic moved on slowly, circulating like water around a bathtub drain, before yielding to the inexorable pull of the city.

before yielding to the inexorable pull of the city.

They came in through St. John's Wood, where the Abbey Road studios were, past Regent's Park, through Marylebone, past Baker Street, where Sherlock Holmes had lived, through Marble Arch again, and onto Park Lane. The Hilton hotel was at the south end, near the truly world-class automotive insanity that was Hyde Park Corner. They parked in a commercial garage underground at a quarter to eleven in the morning. Maybe an hour before Lane and his guys were due to check in.

"Want lunch?" Pauling said.

"Can't eat," Reacher said. "I'm too knotted up."

"So you're human after all."

"I feel like I'm delivering Taylor to an executioner."

"He deserves to die."

"I'd rather do it myself."

"So make the offer."

"Wouldn't be good enough. Lane wants the partner's name. I'm not up for torturing it out of the guy personally."

"So walk away."

"I can't. I want retribution for Kate and Jade and I want the money for Hobart. No other way of getting either. And we have a deal with your Pentagon buddy. He delivered, so now I have to deliver. But all things considered I think I'll skip lunch."

Pauling asked, "Where do you want me?"

"In the lobby. Watching. Then go get yourself a room somewhere else. Leave me a note at the Hilton's desk. Use the name Bayswater. I'll take Lane to

file a note at the Hilton's desk. Use the name Bayswater. I'll take Lane to Norfolk, Lane will deal with Taylor, I'll deal with Lane. Then I'll come back and get you, whenever. Then we'll go somewhere together. Bath, maybe. To the Roman spas. We'll try to get clean again."

They walked past an automobile showroom that was displaying brand-new models of the Mini Cooper they had been driving. They walked past discreet set-back entrances to blocks of mansion flats. They went up a short flight of concrete steps to the Park Lane Hilton's lobby. Pauling detoured to a distant group of armchairs and Reacher walked to the desk. He stood in line. Watched the clerks. They were busy with their phones and their computers. There were printers and Xerox machines behind them on credenzas. Above the Xerox machines was a brass plaque that said: *By statute some documents may not be photocopied. Like banknotes,* Reacher thought. They needed a law, because modern Xerox machines were just too good. Above the credenzas was a line of clocks set to world time, from Tokyo to Los Angeles. He checked New York's against the time in his head. Spot on. Then the person in front of him finished up. He moved to the head of the line.

"Edward Lane's party," he said. "Have they checked in yet?"

The clerk tapped his keyboard. "Not yet, sir."

"I'm waiting for them. When they get here, tell them I'm across the lobby."

"Your name, sir?"

"Taylor," Reacher said. He walked away, clear of the busiest areas, and found a quiet spot. He was going to be counting eight hundred thousand dollars in cash and he didn't want an audience. He dumped himself down in one of a group of four armchairs. He knew from long experience that nobody would try to join him. Nobody ever did. He radiated subliminal *stay away* signals and sane people obeyed them. Already a nearby family was watching him warily. Two kids and a mother, camped out in the next group of chairs, presumably off of an early flight and waiting for their room to be ready. The mother looked tired and the kids looked fractious. She had unpacked half their stuff, trying to keep them amused.

Toys, coloring books, battered teddy bears, a doll missing an arm, battery-driven video games. He could hear the mother's halfhearted suggestions of how to fill the time: *Why don't you do this? Why don't you do that? Why don't you draw a picture of something you're going to see?* Like therapy.

He turned away and watched the door. People came in, a constant stream. Some weary and travel-stained, some busy and bustling. Some with mountains of luggage, some with briefcases only. All kinds of nationalities. In the next group of chairs one kid threw a bear at the other kid's head. It missed and skidded across the tile and hit Reacher's foot. He leaned down and picked it up. All the stuffing was out of it. He tossed it back. Heard the mother suggesting some other pointless activity: *Why don't you do this?* He thought: *Why don't you shut the hell up and sit still like normal human beings?*

He looked back at the door and saw Perez walk in. Then Kowalski. Then Edward Lane himself, third in line. Then Gregory, and Groom, and Addison, and Burke. Roll-on bags, duffels, suit carriers. Jeans and sport coats, black nylon warm-up jackets, ball caps, sneakers. Some shades, some earphones trailing thin wires. Tired from the overnight flight. A little creased and crumpled. But awake and alert and aware. They looked exactly like what they were: a group of Special Forces soldiers trying to travel incognito.

He watched them line up at the desk. Watched them wait. Watched them shuffle up one place at a time. Watched them check in. Watched the clerk give Lane the message. Saw Lane turn around, searching. Lane's gaze moved over everybody in the lobby. Over Pauling, without stopping. Over the fractious family. Onto Reacher's own face. It stopped there. Lane nodded. Reacher nodded back. Gregory took a stack of key cards from the clerk and all seven men hoisted their luggage again and started through the lobby. They eased their way through the crowds shoulders first and stopped in a group outside the ring of armchairs. Lane dropped one bag and kept hold of another and sat down opposite Reacher. Gregory sat down too, and Carter Groom took the last chair. Kowalski and Perez and Addison and Burke were left standing, making a perimeter, with Burke and Perez facing outward. Awake and alert and aware, thorough and cautious.

"Show me the money," Reacher said.

"Tell me where Taylor is," Lane said.

"You first."

“Do you know where he is?”

Reacher nodded. “I know where he is. I made visual contact twice. Last night, and then again this morning. Just a few hours ago.”

“You’re good.”

“I know.”

“So tell me where he is.”

“Show me the money first.”

Lane said nothing. In the silence Reacher heard the harassed mother say: *Draw a picture of Buckingham Palace.* He said, “You called a bunch of London private eyes. Behind my back. You tried to get ahead of me.”

Lane said, “A man’s entitled to save himself an unnecessary expense.”

“Did you get ahead of me?”

“No.”

“Therefore the expense isn’t unnecessary.”

“I guess not.”

“So show me the money.”

“OK,” Lane said. “I’ll show you the money.” He slid the duffel off his knees and placed it on the floor and unzipped it. Reacher glanced right. Glanced left. Saw the kid about to throw the tattered bear again. Saw him catch the expression on Lane’s face and saw him shrink back toward his mother. Reacher shuffled forward on his chair and leaned down. The duffel was full of money. One of the O-Town bales, newly opened, part depleted.

“No trouble on the flight?” he asked.

Lane said, “It was X-rayed. Nobody got their panties in a wad. You’ll get it home OK. Assuming you earn it first.”

Reacher pulled back the torn plastic and put a fingernail under one of the paper bands. It was tight. Therefore full. There were four equal stacks of twenty bricks each. Total of eighty bricks, an even number. A hundred hundreds in each brick. Eighty times a hundred times a hundred was eight hundred thousand.

So far, so good.

He lifted the edge of a bill and rubbed it between his finger and thumb. Glanced across the lobby to the brass sign at the Xerox station: *By statute some documents may not be photocopied.* But these hadn't been. They were real. He could feel the engraving. He could smell the paper and the ink. Unmistakable.

"OK," he said, and sat back.

Lane leaned down and zipped the duffel. "So where is he?"

Reacher said, "First we have to talk."

"You better be kidding me."

"There are civilians there. Innocent people. Noncombatants. A family."

"So?"

"So I can't have you charging in there like maniacs. I can't allow collateral damage."

"There won't be any."

"I need to be sure of that."

"You have my word."

Reacher said, "Your word ain't worth shit."

"We won't be shooting," Lane said. "Let's be clear on that. A bullet is too good for Taylor. We'll go in and we'll get him and we'll bring him out without harming a hair on his or anyone else's head. Because that's the way I want it. I want him all in one piece. I want him alive and well and conscious and feeling everything. He'll tell us about his partner and then he'll die, long, slow, and

hard. Over a week or two. So a gunfight is no good to me. Not because I care about noncombatants, true. But because I don't want any accidents with Taylor. I would hate to give it to him easy. You can take my word on *that.*"

"OK," Reacher said.

"So where is he?"

Reacher paused. Thought about Hobart, and Birmingham, Alabama, and Nashville, Tennessee, and kindly white-haired doctors in lab coats holding artificial limbs.

"He's in Norfolk," he said.

"Where's that?"

"It's a county, north and east of here. About a hundred and twenty miles."

"Where in Norfolk?"

"A place called Grange Farm."

"He's on a farm?"

"Flat country," Reacher said. "Like a pool table. With ditches. Easy to defend."

"Nearest big city?"

"It's about thirty miles south and west of Norwich."

"Nearest town?"

Reacher didn't reply.

"Nearest town?" Lane asked again.

Reacher glanced back at the reception desk. *By statute some documents may not be photocopied.* He watched a Xerox machine at work, a ghostly stripe of green light cycling horizontally back and forth beneath a lid. He glanced at the harassed mother and heard her voice in his head: *Why don't you draw a picture of something you're going to see?* He looked at the kid's doll, missing an arm.

Heard Dave Kemp's voice, in the country store: *It felt like a thin book. Not many pages. A rubber band around it.* Recalled the tiny imperceptible impact of the kid's tattered bear skidding on the tile and landing against his shoe.

Lane said, "Reacher?"

Reacher heard Lauren Pauling's voice in his mind: *A little is sometimes all you need. Going out, they don't care as much as when you're coming in.*

Lane said, "Reacher? Hello? What's the nearest town?"

Reacher dragged his focus back from the middle distance, slowly, carefully, painfully, and he looked directly into Lane's eyes. He said, "The nearest town is called Fenchurch Saint Mary. I'll show you exactly where it is. Be ready to leave in one hour. I'll come back for you."

Then he stood up and concentrated hard on walking infinitely slowly across the lobby floor. One foot in front of the other. Left, then right. He caught Pauling's eye. Walked out the door. Down the concrete steps. He made it to the sidewalk.

Then he ran like hell for the parking garage.

CHAPTER **63**

REACHER HAD PARKED the car, so he still had the keys. He blipped the door from thirty feet away and wrenched it open and threw himself inside. Jammed the key in the ignition and started the motor and shoved the stick in reverse. Stamped on the gas and hurled the tiny car out of the parking space and braked hard and spun the wheel and took off again forward with the front tires howling and smoking. He threw a ten-pound note at the barrier guy and didn't wait for the change. Just hit the gas as soon as the pole was raised forty-five degrees. He blasted up the ramp and shot straight across two lanes of oncoming traffic and jammed to a stop on the opposite curb because he saw Pauling hurrying toward him. He threw open her door and she slid inside and he took off again and he was twenty yards down the road before she got the door closed behind her.

"North," he said. "Which way is north?"

"North? North is behind us," she said. "Go around the traffic circle."

Hyde Park Corner. He blew through two red lights and swerved the car like a dodgem from one lane to another. Came all the way around and back onto Park Lane in the other direction doing more than sixty miles an hour. Practically on two wheels.

"Where now?" he said.

"What the hell is going on?"

"Just get me out of town."

"I don't know how."

"Use the atlas. There's a city plan."

Reacher dodged buses and taxis. Pauling turned pages, frantically.

"Go straight," she said.

“Is that north?”

“It’ll get us there.”

They made it through Marble Arch with the engine screaming. They got green lights all the way past the Marylebone Road. They made it into Maida Vale. Then Reacher slowed a little. Breathed out for what felt like the first time in half an hour.

“Where next?”

“Reacher, what happened?”

“Just give me directions.”

“Make a right onto St. John’s Wood Road,” Pauling said. “That will take us back to Regent’s Park. Then make a left and go out the same way we came in. And please tell me exactly what the hell is going on.”

“I made a mistake,” Reacher said. “Remember I told you I couldn’t shake the feeling I was making a bad mistake? Well, I was wrong. It wasn’t a bad mistake. It was a catastrophic mistake. It was the biggest single mistake ever made in the history of the cosmos.”

“What mistake?”

“Tell me about the photographs in your apartment.”

“What about them?”

“Nieces and nephews, right?”

“Lots of them,” Pauling said.

“You know them well?”

“Well enough.”

“Spend time with them?”

“Plenty.”

“Tell me about their favorite toys.”

“Their toys? I don’t really know about their toys. I can’t keep up. X-boxes, video games, whatever. There’s always something new.”

“Not the new stuff. Their old favorites. Tell me about their favorite old toys. What would they have run into a fire to save? When they were eight years old?”

“When they were eight years old? I guess a teddy bear or a doll. Something they’d had since they were tiny.”

“Exactly,” Reacher said. “Something comforting and familiar. Something they loved. The kind of thing they would want to take on a journey. Like the family next to me in the lobby just now. The mother got them all out of the suitcase to quiet them down.”

“So?”

“What did those things look like?”

“Like bears and dolls, I guess.”

“No, later. When the kids were eight years old.”

“When they were eight? They’d had them forever by then. They looked like crap.”

Reacher nodded at the wheel. “The bears all worn, with the stuffing out? The dolls all chipped, with the arms off?”

“Yes, like that. All kids have toys like that.”

“Jade didn’t. That’s precisely what was missing from her room. There were new bears and new dolls. Recent things she hadn’t taken to. But there were no old favorites there.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that if Jade had been kidnapped on the way to Bloomingdale’s on a normal everyday morning I would have found all her favorite old toys still in her room afterward. But I didn’t.”

“But what does that mean?”

“It means Jade knew she was leaving. It means she packed.”

Reacher made the left at Regent’s Park and headed north, toward the M-1, which would carry them all the way back to the M-25 beltway. After the turn he drove on a little more sedately. He didn’t want to get arrested by any English traffic cops. He didn’t have time for that. He figured he was right then about two hours ahead of Edward Lane. It would take an hour for Lane to realize he had been ditched, and then it would take at least another hour for him to get hold of a car and organize a pursuit. So, two hours. Reacher would have liked more, but he figured two hours might be enough.

Might be.

Pauling said, “Jade packed?”

“Kate packed, too,” Reacher said.

“What did Kate pack?”

“Just one thing. But her most precious thing. Her best memory. The photograph with her daughter. From the bedroom. One of the most beautiful photographs I’ve ever seen.”

Pauling paused a beat.

“But you saw it,” she said. “She didn’t take it.”

Reacher shook his head. “I saw a photocopy. From Staples, color digital, laser, two bucks a sheet. Brought home and slipped into the frame. It was very good, but not quite good enough. A little vivid in the colors, a little plastic in the contours.”

“But who packs for a kidnap? I mean, who the hell gets the chance?”

“They weren’t kidnapped,” Reacher said. “That’s the thing. They were rescued. They were liberated. They were set free. They’re alive somewhere. Alive and well and happy. A little tense, maybe. But free as birds.”

They drove on, slow and steady, through the northern reaches of London, through Finchley and Swiss Cottage, toward Hendon.

“Kate believed Dee Marie,” Reacher said. “That’s what happened. Out there in the Hamptons. Dee Marie told her about Anne, and warned her, and Kate believed her. Like Patti Joseph said, there was something about the story and something about her husband that made Kate believe. Maybe she was already feeling the same kind of things that Anne had felt five years before. Maybe she was already planning to go down the same road.”

Pauling said, “You know what this means?”

“Of course I do.”

“Taylor helped them.”

“Of course he did.”

“He rescued them, and he hid them, and he sheltered them, and he risked his life for them. He’s the good guy, not the bad guy.”

Reacher nodded. “And I just told Lane where he is.”

They made it through Hendon and negotiated their last London traffic circle and joined the M-1 motorway at its southern tip. Reacher hit the gas and forced the little Mini up to ninety-five miles an hour.

Pauling said, “What about the money?”

“Always,” Reacher said. “It was the only way Kate was ever going to get away

"Alimony," Reacher said. "It was the only way Kate was ever going to get any. We thought it was half of the Burkina Faso payment, and it was, but in Kate's eyes it was also half of their community property. Half of Lane's capital. She was entitled to it. She probably put money in, way back. That's what Lane seems to want his wives for. Apart from their trophy status."

"Hell of a plan," Pauling said.

"They probably thought it was the only way. And they were probably right."

"But they made mistakes."

"They sure did. If you really want to disappear, you take nothing with you. Absolutely nothing at all. It's fatal."

"Who helped Taylor?"

"Nobody."

"He had an American partner. On the phone."

"That was Kate herself. You were half-right, days ago. It was a woman using that machine. But not Dee Marie. It was Kate herself. It must have been. They were a team. They collaborated. She did all the talking, because Taylor couldn't. Not easy for her. Every time Lane wanted to hear her voice for a proof of life she had to pull the machine off the mouthpiece and then put it back on again."

"Did you really tell Lane where Taylor is?"

"As good as. I didn't say Bishops Pargeter. I stopped myself just in time. I said Fenchurch Saint Mary instead. But that's close. And I had already said Norfolk. I had already said thirty miles from Norwich. And I had already said Grange Farm. He'll be able to work it out. Two minutes, with the right map."

"He's way behind us."

"At least two hours."

Pauling was quiet for a second.

Reacher said, "What?"

“He’s two hours behind us right now. But he won’t always be. We’re taking the long way around because we don’t know the English roads.”

“Neither does he.”

“But Gregory does.”

Reacher drove seven exits on the M-1, acutely aware that the road was taking him west of north, not east of north. Then he drove six clockwise exits on the M-25 beltway before finding the M-11. All completely dead time. If Gregory drove Lane straight through the center of London directly to the southern tip of the M-11 he would cut the two-hour deficit by an exactly corresponding amount.

Pauling said, “We should stop and call ahead. You know the number.”

“That’s a big gamble,” Reacher said. “At highway speeds it costs time to slow down, turn off, park, find a phone that works, call, and get back on the road. A lot of time, at British speeds. And suppose there’s no answer? Suppose they’re still out there hoeing the weeds? We’d end up doing it again and again.”

“We have to try to warn them. There’s the sister to think about. And Melody.”

“Susan and Melody are perfectly safe.”

“How can you say that?”

“Ask yourself where Kate and Jade are.”

“I have no idea where they are.”

“You do,” Reacher said. “You know exactly where they are. You saw them this morning.”

CHAPTER **64**

THEY TURNED OFF the highway at Newmarket and set out cross-country toward Norwich. This time the road was familiar, but that didn't make it any faster. Forward motion, without any visible result. A big sky, whipped clean by wind.

"Think about the dynamic here," Reacher said. "Why would Kate ask Taylor for help? How could she ask any of them for help? They're all insanely loyal to Lane. Did Knight help Anne? Kate had just heard that story. Why would she walk up cold to another of Lane's killers and say, hey, want to help me get out of here? Want to double-cross your boss? Help me steal his money?"

Pauling said, "They already had a thing going."

Reacher nodded at the wheel. "That's the only way to explain it. They had already started an affair. Maybe long ago."

"The CO's wife? Hobart said no fighting man would do that."

"He said no American fighting man would do that. Maybe the British SAS does things differently. And there were signs. Carter Groom is about as emotional as a fence post but he said that Kate liked Taylor and that Taylor got on well with the kid."

"Dee Marie showing up must have acted like a kind of tipping point."

Reacher nodded again. "Kate and Taylor made a plan and put it in action. But first they explained it to Jade. Maybe they thought it would be too much of a sudden trauma not to. They swore her to secrecy, as much as they could with an eight-year-old. And the kid did pretty well."

"What did they tell her?"

"That she already had one replacement daddy, now she was getting another. That she already lived in one new place, now she was moving on."

"Big secret for a kid to keep."

“She didn’t exactly keep it,” Reacher said. “She was worried about it. She straightened it out in her head by drawing it. Maybe it was an old habit. Maybe mothers always say, draw a picture of something you’re going to see.”

“What picture?”

“There were four in her room. On her desk. Kate didn’t sanitize well enough. Or maybe she just mistook them for regular clutter. There was a big gray building with trees in front. At first I thought it was the Dakota from Central Park. Now I think it was the Grange Farm farmhouse. They must have shown her photographs, to prepare her. She got the trees just right. Thin straight trunks, round crowns. To withstand the wind. Like light green lollipops on brown sticks. And then there was a picture of a family group. I thought the guy was Lane, obviously. But there was something weird about his mouth. Like half his teeth had been punched out. So it wasn’t Lane. It was Taylor, clearly. The dentistry. Jade was probably fascinated by it. She drew her new family. Taylor, Kate, and her. To internalize the idea.”

“And you think Taylor brought them here to England?”

“I think Kate wanted him to. Maybe even begged him to. They needed a safe haven. Somewhere very distant. Out of Lane’s reach. And they were having an affair. They didn’t want to be apart. So if Taylor’s here, then Kate’s here, too. Jade did a picture of three people in an airplane. That was the journey she was going to take. Then she did one of two families together. Like double vision. I had no idea what it meant. But now my guess is that was Jackson and Taylor, and Susan and Kate, and Melody and herself. Her new situation. Her new extended family. Happy ever after on Grange Farm.”

“Doesn’t work,” Pauling said. “Their passports were still in the drawer.”

“That was crude,” Reacher said. “Wasn’t it? You must have searched a thousand desks. Did you ever see passports all alone in a drawer? Kind of ostentatiously displayed like that? I never did. They were always buried under other junk. Leaving them on show like that was a message. It said, hey, we’re still in the country. Which meant actually they weren’t.”

“How do you get out without a passport?”

“You don’t. But you once said, they don’t look as closely on the way out. You said sometimes a little resemblance is all you need.”

Pauling paused a beat. “Someone else’s passport?”

“Who do we know that fits the bill? A woman in her thirties and an eight-year-old girl?”

Pauling said, “Susan and Melody.”

“Dave Kemp told us Jackson had been alone at the farm,” Reacher said. “That was because Susan and Melody had flown to the States. They got all the correct entry stamps. Then they gave their passports to Kate and Jade. Maybe in Taylor’s apartment. Maybe over dinner. Like a little ceremony. Then Taylor booked on British Airways. He was sitting next to a British woman on the plane. We know that for sure. A buck gets ten she’s on the passenger manifest as Mrs. Susan Jackson. And another buck gets ten that next to her was a little British kid called Ms. Melody Jackson. But they were really Kate and Jade Lane.”

“But that leaves Susan and Melody stuck in the States.”

“Temporarily,” Reacher said. “What did Taylor mail back?”

“A thin book. Not many pages. With a rubber band around it.”

“Who puts a rubber band around a thin book? It was actually two *very* thin books. Two passports, bundled together. Mailed to Susan’s New York City hotel room, where she and Melody are right now sitting and waiting to get them back.”

“But the stamps will be out of sequence now. When they leave they’ll be exiting without having entered.”

Reacher nodded. “It’s an irregularity. But what are the people at JFK going to do about it? Deport them? That’s exactly what they want. So they’ll get home OK.”

“Sisters,” Pauling said. “This whole thing has been about the loyalty of sisters. Patti Joseph, Dee Marie Graziano, Susan Jackson.”

Reacher drove on. Said nothing.

“Unbelievable,” Pauling said. “We saw Kate and Jade this morning.”

“Setting out with their hoes,” Reacher said. “Starting out on their new lives.”

Then he accelerated a little, because the road was widening and straightening for the bypass around the town called Thetford.

John Gregory was hitting the gas, too. He was at the wheel of a rented dark green seven-seat Toyota Land Cruiser sports utility vehicle. Edward Lane was next to him in the front passenger seat. Kowalski and Addison and Carter Groom were shoulder to shoulder on the rear bench. Burke and Perez were on the jump seats way in back. They were joining the M-11 at its southern tip, having blasted straight through central London to the northeast corner of the inner city.

CHAPTER **65**

THIS TIME IN full daylight Reacher saw the sign to *B'sh'ps P'ter* a hundred yards away and slowed well in advance and made the turn like he had been driving the back roads of Norfolk all his life. It was close to two o'clock in the afternoon. The sun was high and the wind was dropping. Blue skies, small white clouds, green fields. A perfect English late-summer day. Almost.

Pauling said, "What are you going to tell them?"

"That I'm sorry," Reacher said. "I think that might be the best place to start."

"Then what?"

"Then I'll probably say it again."

"They can't stay there."

"It's a farm. Someone's got to stay there."

"Are you volunteering?"

"I might have to."

"Do you know anything about farming?"

"Only what I've seen in the movies. Usually they get locusts. Or a fire."

"Not here. Floods, maybe."

"And idiots like me."

"Don't beat yourself up. They faked a kidnap. Don't blame yourself for taking it seriously."

"I should have seen it," Reacher said. "It was weird from the start."

They passed the Bishop's Arms. The pub. The end of the lunch hour. Five cars in the lot. The Grange Farm Land Rover was not one of them. They drove on

in the lot. The Grange Farm Land Rover was not one of them. They drove on, roughly east, and in the distance they saw the Bishops Pargeter church tower, gray, square, and squat. Only forty-some feet tall, but it dominated the flat landscape like the Empire State Building. They drove on. They passed the ditch that marked Grange Farm's western boundary. Heard the bird scarer again, a loud booming shotgun blast.

"I hate that thing," Pauling said.

Reacher said, "You might end up loving it. Camouflage like that could be our best friend."

"Could be Taylor's best friend, too. In about sixty seconds from now. He's going to think he's under attack."

Reacher nodded.

"Take a deep breath," he said.

He slowed the car well before the small flat bridge. Turned in wide and deliberate. Left it in second gear. Small vehicle, low speed. Unthreatening. He hoped.

The driveway was long and it looped through two curves. Around unseen softness in the dirt, maybe. The beaten earth was muddy and less even than it had looked from a distance. The tiny car rocked and bounced. The farmhouse's gable wall was blank. No windows. The smoke from the chimney was thicker now and straighter. Less wind. Reacher opened his window and heard nothing at all except the noise of his engine and the slow rolling crunch of his tires on gravel and small stones.

"Where is everybody?" Pauling said. "Still out hoeing?"

"You can't hoe for seven hours straight," Reacher said. "You'd break your back."

The driveway split thirty yards in front of the house. A fork in the road. West, the formal approach to the front door. East, a shabbier track toward the spot where the Land Rover had been parked, and the barns beyond. Reacher went east. The Land Rover wasn't there anymore. All the barn doors were closed. The whole place was quiet. Nothing was moving.

Reacher braked gently and backed up. Took the wider path west. There was a gravel circle with a stunted ash tree planted at its center. Around the tree was a circular wooden bench way too big for the thin trunk. Either the tree was a replacement or the carpenter had been thinking a hundred years ahead. Reacher drove around the circle clockwise, the British way. Stopped ten feet from the front door. It was closed. Nothing was moving anywhere, except the column of slow smoke rising from the chimney.

“What now?” Pauling asked.

“We knock,” Reacher said. “We move slow and we keep our hands visible.”

“You think they’re watching us?”

“Someone is. For sure. I can feel it.”

He killed the motor and sat for a moment. Then he opened his door. Unwound his huge frame slow and easy and stood still next to the car with his hands held away from his sides. Pauling did the same thing six feet away. Then they walked together to the front door. It was a large slab of ancient oak, as black as coal. There were iron bands and hinges, newly painted over pits of old rust and corrosion. There was a twisted ring hinged in the mouth of a lion and positioned to strike down on a nail head as big as an apple. Reacher used it, twice, putting heavy thumps into the oak slab. It resonated like a bass drum.

It brought no response.

“Hello?” Reacher called.

No response.

He called, “Taylor? Graham Taylor?”

No response.

“Taylor? Are you there?”

No answer.

He tried the knocker again, twice more.

Still no response.

No sound at all.

Except for the shuffle of a tiny foot, thirty feet away. The backward scrape of a thin sole on a stone. Reacher turned fast and glanced to his left. Saw a small bare knee pull back around the far corner of the house. Back into hiding.

“I saw you,” Reacher called.

No reply.

“Come on out now,” he called. “It’s OK.”

No response.

“Look at our car,” Reacher called. “Cutest thing you ever saw.”

Nothing happened.

“It’s red,” Reacher called. “Like a fire engine.”

No response.

“There’s a lady here with me,” Reacher called. “She’s cute, too.”

He stood still next to Pauling and a long moment later he saw a small dark head peer out from around the corner. A small face, pale skin, big green eyes. A serious mouth. A little girl, about eight years old.

“Hello,” Pauling called. “What’s your name?”

“Melody Jackson,” Jade Lane said.

CHAPTER **66**

THE KID WAS instantly recognizable from the imperfect Xerox Reacher had seen on the desk in the Dakota bedroom. She was about a year older than she had been in the picture but she had the same long dark hair, slightly wavy, as fine as silk, and the same green eyes, and the same porcelain skin. It had been a striking photograph, but the reality was way better. Jade Lane was a truly beautiful child.

“My name is Lauren,” Pauling said. “This man is called Reacher.”

Jade nodded her head. Grave and serious. She said nothing. Didn’t come closer. She was wearing a summer dress, sleeveless, green seersucker stripes. Maybe from Bloomingdale’s on Lexington Avenue. Maybe one of her favorite garments. Maybe part of her hasty and unwise packing. She had white socks on, and thin summer sandals. They were dusty.

Pauling said, “We’re here to talk to the grown-ups. Do you know where they are?”

Thirty feet away Jade nodded her head again. Said nothing.

Pauling asked, “Where are they?”

A voice thirty feet away in the other direction said, “One of them is right here, lady,” and Kate Lane stepped out from around the other corner of the house. She was pretty much unchanged from her photograph, too. Dark hair, green eyes, high cheekbones, a bud of a mouth. Extremely, impossibly beautiful. Maybe a little more tired than she had been in the photographer’s studio. Maybe a little more stressed. But definitively the same woman. Outside of what the portrait had shown she was maybe five feet nine inches tall, not much more than a hundred and fifteen pounds, slim and willowy. Exactly what an ex-model should look like, Reacher figured. She was wearing a man’s flannel shirt, big and clearly borrowed. She looked great in it. But then, she would have looked great in a garbage bag with holes torn for her arms and legs and head.

“I’m Susan Jackson,” she said.

Reacher shook his head. “You’re not, but I’m very glad to meet you anyway. And Jade, too. You’ll never know how glad I am.”

“I’m Susan Jackson,” she said again. “That’s Melody.”

“We don’t have time for that, Kate. And your accent isn’t real convincing anyway.”

“Who are you?”

“My name is Reacher.”

“What do you want?”

“Where’s Taylor?”

“Who?”

Reacher glanced back at Jade and then took a step toward Kate. “Can we talk? Maybe a little ways down the track?”

“Why?”

“For privacy.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t want to upset your daughter.”

“She knows what’s going on.”

“OK,” Reacher said. “We’re here to warn you.”

“About what?”

“Edward Lane is an hour behind us. Maybe less.”

“Edward is here?” Kate said. For the first time, real fear in her face. “Edward is here in England? Already?”

Reacher nodded. “Heading this way.”

“Who are you?”

“He paid me to find Taylor.”

“So why warn us?”

“Because I just figured out it wasn’t for real.”

Kate said nothing.

“Where’s Taylor?” Reacher asked again.

“He’s out,” Kate said. “With Tony.”

“Anthony Jackson? The brother-in-law?”

Kate nodded. “This is his farm.”

“Where did they go?”

“To Norwich. For a part for the backhoe. They said we need to dredge some ditches.”

“When did they leave?”

“About two hours ago.”

Reacher nodded again. Norwich. The big city. Thirty miles there, thirty miles back. About a two-hour trip. He glanced south at the road. Nothing moving on it.

“Let’s all go inside,” he said.

“I don’t even know who you are.”

“You do,” Reacher said. “Right now I’m your best friend.”

Kate stared at Pauling for a moment and seemed reassured by the presence of another woman. She blinked once and opened the front door. Led them all in. The farmhouse itself was dark and cold inside. It had low beamed ceilings and irregular stone floors. Thick walls and flowered wallpaper and small leaded windows. The kitchen was the hub of the home. That was clear. It was a large

rectangular room. There were bright copper pans hanging from hooks and sofas and armchairs and a fireplace big enough to live in and a huge old-fashioned range. There was a massive oak dining table with twelve chairs around it and a separate pine desk with a phone and stacks of papers and envelopes and jars of pens and pencils and postage stamps and rubber bands. All the furniture was old and worn and comfortable and smelled of dogs, even though there were no dogs in the house. They had belonged to the previous owners, maybe. Maybe the furniture had been included in the sale. Maybe there had been bankruptcy problems.

Reacher said, “I think you should get out, Kate. Right now. You and Jade. Until we see what happens.”

“How?” Kate asked. “The truck isn’t here.”

“Take our car.”

“I’ve never driven here before. I’ve never even been here before.”

Pauling said, “I’ll drive you.”

“Where to?”

“Anywhere you want to go. Until we see what happens.”

“Is he really here already?”

Pauling nodded. “He left London at least an hour ago.”

“Does he know?”

“That it was all a sham? Not yet.”

“OK,” Kate said. “Take us somewhere. Anywhere. Now. Please.”

She stood up and grabbed Jade’s hand. No purse, no coat. She was ready to go, right there and then. No pause, no hesitation. Just panic. Reacher tossed Pauling the Mini’s keys and followed them all outside again. Jade climbed through to the tiny car’s rear bench and Kate got in next to Pauling. Pauling adjusted the seat and the mirror and clipped her belt and started the engine.

“Wait.” Reacher said

"Wait," Reacher said.

On the road a mile to the west he could see a dark green shape moving fast behind a stand of trees. Green paint. Glinting in the watery sun. Clean and polished and shiny, not filthy like the farm truck.

A mile away. Ninety seconds. No time.

"Everybody back in the house," he said. "Right now."

CHAPTER **67**

KATE AND JADE and Pauling ran straight upstairs and Reacher headed for the southeast corner of the house. Flattened himself against the wall and crept around to where he could get a look at the bridge over the ditch. He got there just in time to see a truck turn in. It was an old-style Land Rover Defender, bluff and square, an appliance more than a car, mud-and-snow tires, a brown canvas back. Two guys in it, rocking and bouncing behind the sparkling windshield. One of them was the vague shape Reacher had seen early that morning. Tony Jackson. The farmer. The other was Taylor. The truck was the Grange Farm Land Rover, newly cleaned and polished. Unrecognizable from the night before. Clearly the Norwich itinerary had included a stop at the car wash as well as the backhoe dealership.

Reacher ducked into the kitchen and shouted an all clear up the stairs. Then he went back outside to wait. The Land Rover pulled left and right through the driveway curves and paused a second as Jackson and Taylor took a long hard look at the Mini from fifty yards away. Then it sped up again and skidded to a halt in its parking spot between the back of the house and the barns. The doors opened and Jackson and Taylor climbed out. Reacher stayed where he was and Jackson walked right up to him and said, “You’re trespassing. Dave Kemp told me what you want. You talked to him this morning. In the shop? And the answer is no. I’m not selling.”

“I’m not buying,” Reacher said.

“So why are you here?”

Jackson was a lean and compact guy, not unlike Taylor himself. Same kind of height, same kind of weight. Same kind of generic English features. Similar accent. Better teeth, and lighter hair worn a little longer. But overall they could have been brothers, not just brothers-in-law.

Reacher said, “I’m here to see Taylor.”

Taylor stepped up and said, “What for?”

“To apologize to you,” Reacher said. “And to warn you.”

"To apologize to you," Reacher said. "And to warn you."

Taylor paused a beat. Blinked once. Then his eyes flicked left, flicked right, full of intelligence and calculation.

"Lane?" he asked.

"He's less than an hour away."

"OK," Taylor said. He sounded calm. Composed. Not surprised. But Reacher didn't expect him to be surprised. Surprise was for amateurs. And Taylor was a professional. A Special Forces veteran, and a smart and a capable one. Precious seconds spent being surprised were precious seconds wasted, and Taylor was spending the precious seconds exactly like he had been trained to: thinking, planning, revising tactics, reviewing options.

"My fault," Reacher said. "I'm sorry."

"I saw you on Sixth Avenue," Taylor said. "When I was getting in the Jaguar. Didn't think much of it, but I saw you again last night. In the pub. So then I knew. I thought you'd be heading up to your room to call Lane. But it looks like he mobilized himself faster than I thought he would."

"He was already en route."

"Good of you to stop by and let me know."

"Least I could do. Under the circumstances."

"Does he have this precise location?"

"More or less. I said Grange Farm. I stopped myself saying Bishops Pargeter. I said Fenchurch Saint Mary instead."

"He'll find us in the phone book. There's no Grange Farm in Fenchurch. We're the nearest."

"I'm sorry," Reacher said again.

"When did you figure it all out?"

"Just a little bit too late."

Just a little bit too late.

“What tipped you off?”

“Toys. Jade packed her best toys.”

“Did you meet her yet?”

“Five minutes ago.”

Taylor smiled. Bad teeth, but a lot of warmth there. “She’s a great kid, isn’t she?”

“Seems to be.”

“What are you, a private cop?”

“I was a U.S. Army MP.”

“What’s your name?”

“Reacher.”

“How much did Lane pay you?”

“A million bucks.”

Taylor smiled again. “I’m flattered. And you’re good. But it was always only a matter of time. The longer nobody found my body, the more people would get to thinking. But this is a little quicker than I thought it would be. I thought I might have a couple of weeks.”

“You’ve got about sixty minutes.”

They gathered in the farmhouse kitchen for a council of war, all six of them, Taylor and Kate and Jade, and Jackson, and Pauling and Reacher. Jade was neither specifically included nor excluded. She just sat at the table and drew, crayons and butcher paper, the same bold colorful strokes Reacher had seen in

her bedroom in the Dakota, and listened to the grown-ups talk. First thing Taylor said was, “Let’s light the fire again. It’s cold in here. And let’s have a cup of tea.”

Pauling asked, “Do we have time for that?”

“The British Army,” Reacher said. “They always have time for a cup of tea.”

There was a wicker basket of kindling sticks near the hearth. Taylor stacked a bunch of them over a pyramid of crumpled newspaper and struck a match. When the flame had taken he added bigger logs. Meanwhile Jackson was at the stove, heating a kettle of water and stuffing tea bags into a pot. He didn’t seem very worried, either. Just calm and competent and unhurried.

“What were you, back in the day?” Reacher asked him.

“First Para,” Jackson replied.

Reacher nodded. The 1st Parachute Regiment. The British equivalent of the U.S. Army Rangers, roughly. Air-mobile tough guys, not quite SAS, but close. Most SAS freshmen were 1st Para graduates.

“Lane’s got six guys with him,” Reacher said.

“The A-team?” Taylor asked. “Used to be seven guys. Before I resigned.”

“Used to be nine guys,” Reacher said.

“Hobart and Knight,” Taylor said. “Kate heard that story. From Hobart’s sister.”

“Was that the trigger?”

“Partly. And partly something else.”

“What else?”

“Hobart isn’t the only one. Not even close. He’s the worst, maybe, from what his sister said, but there are others. Lane got a lot of people killed and wounded over the years.”

“I saw his Rolodex,” Reacher said.

“He doesn’t do anything for them. Or their families.”

“Is that why you wanted the money?”

“The money is Kate’s alimony. She’s entitled to it. And how she spends it is up to her. But I’m sure she’ll do the right thing.”

Tony Jackson poured the tea from the pot, hot and sweet and strong, into five chipped and unmatched mugs. Jade was working on a glass of apple juice.

“Do we have time for this?” Pauling asked again.

“Reacher?” Taylor said. “Do we have time for this?”

“That depends,” Reacher said. “On what exactly your aim is.”

“My aim is to live happily ever after.”

“OK,” Reacher said. “This is England. If it was Kansas, I’d be worried. If it was Kansas, Dave Kemp’s little store and a hundred others like it would be selling rifles and ammunition. But this isn’t Kansas. And no way did Lane bring anything in with him on the plane. So if he shows up now, he’s unarmed. He can’t do anything more than pick rocks off the driveway and throw them at us. Walls this thick and windows this small, that isn’t going to hurt us much.”

“He could burn us out,” Pauling said. “Bottles filled with gasoline, flaming rags in them, or whatever.”

Reacher said nothing. Just glanced at Taylor. Taylor said, “He wants to take me alive, Ms. Pauling. I’m sure of that. Fire might be in his plan for me eventually, but he’d want to do it slow and controlled. Something quick and easy just wouldn’t work for him.”

“So we’re just going to sit here?”

“Like Reacher said, if he shows up now he’s harmless.”

“This might be England, but there have to be weapons available somewhere.”

Taylor nodded. “All over the place, as a matter of fact. Private armorers for the British mercenary crews, bent army quartermasters, gangs of regular bad boys.

But none of them are in the Yellow Pages. It takes time to find them."

"How much time?"

"Twelve hours minimum, I would guess, depending on your connections. So like your man said, if Lane shows up now he's harmless, and if he wants to lock and load first, he can't show up until at least tomorrow. Plus, he likes dawn raids. He always has. Zero-dark-thirty, that's what Delta taught him. Attack with the first rays of the sun."

"Are you armed here?" Reacher asked.

"This is a farm," Jackson answered. "Farmers are always prepared for vermin control."

Something in his voice. Some kind of lethal determination. Reacher looked between him and Taylor. *Same kind of height, same kind of weight, same kind of generic English features. Overall they could have been brothers. Sometimes a little resemblance is all you need.* He got up out of his chair and walked over and took a look at the phone on the pine desk. It was an old-fashioned black instrument. It had a cord and a rotary dial. No memories. No speed dials.

He turned back to Taylor.

"You wanted this," he said.

"Did I?"

"You used the name Leroy Clarkson. To point the way to your apartment."

Taylor said nothing.

"You could have stopped Jade from bringing her toys. You could have told Kate to leave the photograph behind. Your sister Susan could have brought Tony's passport over for you. She could have carried it in her purse. Then there would have been three Jacksons on the airplane manifest, not two Jacksons and a Taylor. Without your real name you couldn't have been followed back to England."

Taylor said nothing.

“The phone in your apartment was new,” Reacher said. “You didn’t have it before, did you? You bought it so that you could leave Susan’s number in it.”

“Why would I do that?” Taylor asked.

“Because you wanted Lane to find you here.”

Taylor said nothing.

“You talked to Dave Kemp in the village store,” Reacher said. “You gave him all kinds of unnecessary details. And he’s the biggest gossip in the county. Then you went and hung out in the pub with a bunch of nosy farmers. I’m sure you would have rather stayed home, under the circumstances. With your new family. But you couldn’t do that. Because you wanted to lay a clear trail. Because you knew Lane would hire someone like me. And you wanted to help someone like me find you. Because you wanted to bring Lane here for a showdown.”

Silence in the room.

Reacher said, “You wanted to be on your home turf. And you figured this is an easy place to defend.”

More silence. Reacher glanced at Kate.

“You were upset,” he said. “Not that Lane was coming, but that he was coming *now.* Already. Too soon.”

Kate said nothing. But Taylor nodded. “Like I said before, he was a little faster than we expected. But yes, we wanted him to come.”

“Why?”

“You just said it. We wanted a showdown. Closure. Finality.”

“Why now?”

“I told you.”

“Reparations for the wounded aren’t urgent. Not like this.”

Kate Lane looked up from her chair by the fire.

“I’m pregnant,” she said.

CHAPTER **68**

IN THE SOFT light of the flames from the hearth, Kate's simple and vulnerable beauty was emphasized to the point of heartbreak. She said, "When Edward and I first started fighting he accused me of being unfaithful. Which wasn't actually true back then. But he was in a rage. He said if he ever caught me sleeping around he would show me how much it hurt him by doing something to Jade that would hurt me even more. He went into the kind of detail I can't repeat now. Not in front of her. But it was very frightening. It was so frightening that I persuaded myself not to take it seriously. But after hearing about Anne and Knight and Hobart I knew I had to take it seriously. By which time I really did have something to hide. So we ran. And here we are."

"With Lane right behind you."

"He deserves whatever he gets, Mr. Reacher. He's truly a monster."

Reacher turned to Jackson. "You're not fixing the backhoe to dredge ditches, are you? It's not raining and the ditches look fine anyway. And you wouldn't take time out to do something like that. Not right now. Not under these circumstances. You're fixing the backhoe to dig graves, aren't you?"

"At least one grave," Taylor said. "Maybe two or three, until the whole crew goes home and leaves us alone. You got a problem with that?"

We'll find Taylor, Reacher had said, on the plane. *Lane will take care of him, and then I'll take care of Lane.* Pauling had asked him, *What about the others?* Reacher had said: *If I think the crew will fall apart with Lane gone, then I'll leave the others alone and let it. But if one of them wants to step up and take over, I'll do him, too. And so on and so forth, until the crew really does fall apart.*

Pauling had said: *Brutal.*

Reacher had asked: *Compared to what?*

He looked straight at Taylor.

“No,” he answered. “I guess I don’t have a problem with that. Not really. No problem at all, in fact. I’m just not used to finding people on the same wavelength as me.”

“You keeping your million bucks?”

Reacher shook his head. “I was going to give it to Hobart.”

“That’s good,” Kate said. “That frees up some of our money for the others.”

Taylor said, “Ms. Pauling? What about you? Do you have a problem?”

Pauling said, “I ought to. I ought to have a huge problem. Once upon a time I swore an oath to uphold the law.”

“But?”

“I can’t get to Lane any other way. So no, I don’t have a problem.”

“So we’re in business,” Taylor said. “Welcome to the party.”

After they finished their tea Jackson took Reacher into a small mud room off the back of the kitchen and opened a double-door wall cupboard above a washing machine. In it were racked four Heckler & Koch G-36 automatic rifles. The G-36 was a very modern design that had showed up in service just before Reacher’s military career had ended. Therefore he wasn’t very familiar with it. It had a nineteen-inch barrel and an open folding stock and was basically fairly conventional apart from a huge superstructure that carried a bulky optical sight integrated into an oversized carrying handle. It was chambered for the standard 5.56mm NATO round and like most German weapons it looked very expensive and beautifully engineered.

Reacher asked, “Where did you get these from?”

“I bought them,” Jackson said. “From a bent quartermaster in Holland. Susan went over there and picked them up.”

“For this thing with Lane?”

Jackson nodded. “It’s been a heavy few weeks. Lots of planning.”

“Are they traceable?”

“The Dutch guy’s paperwork shows they were destroyed in a training accident.”

“Got ammunition?”

Jackson moved across the room and opened another cupboard, lower down. Behind a row of muddy Wellington boots Reacher could see the glint of black metal. A lot of it.

“Seventy magazines,” Jackson said. “Two thousand one hundred rounds.”

“That should do the trick.”

“We can’t use it. Not more than three or four rounds. Too noisy.”

“How close are the cops?”

“Not very. Norwich, I suppose, unless there happens to be a patrol car out. But people here have phones. Some of them even know how to use them.”

“You can turn the bird scarer off for a day.”

“Obviously. But I shouldn’t really be using that, either. An organic farm doesn’t need a bird scarer. No pesticides means plenty of insects for the birds to eat. They don’t go after the seed. Sooner or later people are going to realize that.”

“So the bird scarer is new, too?”

Jackson nodded. “Part of the planning. Set to start firing at dawn. That’s when we expect Lane to come.”

“If I had a sister and a brother-in-law I’d want them to be like you and Susan.”

“I go a long way back with Taylor. We were in Sierra Leone together. I’d do anything for him.”

“I never went to Africa.”

"I never went to Africa."

"Lucky you. We were fighting a bunch of rebels called the West Side Boys. I saw what they did to people. So I know what Hobart went through. Burkina Faso wasn't far away."

"You OK with all of this? You've got roots here, literally."

"What's the alternative?"

"Take a vacation. All of you. I'll stay."

Jackson shook his head. "We'll be OK. One round might do it. The G-36 is a pretty accurate piece."

Jackson stayed in the mud room and closed and locked both cupboards. Reacher stepped back into the kitchen and sat down next to Taylor.

"Tell me about Gregory," he said.

"What about him?"

"Is he going to stand by Lane? Or you?"

"Lane, I think."

"Even though you served together?"

"Lane bought him. When he was in uniform Gregory always wanted an officer's commission, but he never got it. It burned him up. And then Lane made him a kind of unofficial lieutenant. Status, at last. Meaningless bullshit, of course, but it's the thought that counts. So I think Gregory will stick with him. Plus he'll be offended that I didn't share my secret. He seemed to think that two Brits abroad should share everything."

"Does he know this area?"

Taylor shook his head. "He's a Londoner, like me."

Taylor shook his head. "He's a Londoner, like me."

"What about the others? Will any of them turn?"

"Not Kowalski," Taylor said. "Not Perez. Turning would require some brain activity, and those two are room-temperature IQs at best. Probably not Addison, either. But Groom and Burke aren't dumb. If they see the ship is sinking they'll get off fast enough."

"That's not the same thing as turning."

"None of them is going to come over to our side. You can forget about that. The best we can hope for is neutrality from Groom and Burke. And I wouldn't bet the farm on that."

"How good are they? All of them, as a whole?"

"They're about as good as me. Which is to say they're on a slippery slope. They used to be outstanding, but now they're well on the way to average. Plenty of experience and ability, but they don't train anymore. And training is important. Back in the day, training was ninety-nine percent of what we did."

"Why did you join them?"

"The money," Taylor said. "That's why I joined them. Then I stayed with them because of Kate. I loved her from the first moment I saw her."

"Did she love you back?"

"Eventually," Taylor said.

"Not eventually," Kate said, from her chair by the fire. "Truth is it was really pretty quick. One day I asked him why he had never had his teeth fixed and he told me that he had never even thought about it. I like that kind of self-respect and self-confidence in a man."

"You see anything wrong with my teeth?" Taylor asked.

"Plenty," Reacher said. "I'm surprised you can eat. Maybe that's why you're so small."

Taylor said, "I am what I am."

Taylor said, "Pain what Pain."

Exactly one hour after they came in and lit the fire they drew lots for the first round of look-out duty. Jackson and Pauling pulled the short straws. Jackson sat in the Land Rover at the back of the house and Pauling sat in the Mini at the front. That way each of them could cover a little more than one hundred eighty degrees. Across the flat land they could see a mile or more. Ninety seconds' warning if Lane came in by road, a little more if he came in across the fields, which would be a slower approach.

Reasonable security.

As long as the daylight lasted.

CHAPTER **69**

THE DAYLIGHT LASTED until a little after eight o'clock. By then Reacher was in the Land Rover and Kate Lane was in the Mini. The sky darkened in the east and reddened in the west. Twilight rolled in fast, and with it came an evening mist that looked picturesque but cut visibility to less than a hundred yards. The bird scarer fell silent. All afternoon and into the evening it had been firing at unpredictable random intervals between a minimum of fifteen and a maximum of forty minutes. Now its sudden silence was more noticeable than its noise.

Taylor and Jackson were in one of the barns, working on the backhoe. Pauling was in the kitchen, opening cans for dinner. Jade was still at the table, drawing.

By eight-thirty visibility was so marginal that Reacher slid out of the Land Rover and headed for the kitchen. He met Jackson on the way. Jackson was coming back from the barn. His hands were covered with grease and oil.

Reacher asked, "How's it going?"

"It'll be ready," Jackson said.

Then Taylor appeared out of the gloom.

"Ten hours to go," he said. "We're safe until dawn."

"You sure?" Reacher said.

"Not really."

"Me either."

"So what does the U.S. Army field manual say about nighttime perimeter security?"

Reacher smiled. “It says you put a shitload of Claymores about a hundred yards out. If you hear one go off you know you just killed an intruder.”

“What if you don’t have any Claymores?”

“Then you hide.”

“That’s the SAS way. But we can’t hide the house.”

“We could take Kate and Jade someplace else.”

Taylor shook his head. “Better if they stay. I don’t want my focus split.”

“How do they feel about that?”

“Ask them.”

So Reacher did. He took a shortcut through the house and went out to the Mini. Told Kate to take a break for dinner. Then he offered to drive her and Jade anyplace she wanted to go, a hotel, a resort, a spa, Norwich, Birmingham, London, anywhere. She refused. She said as long as Lane was alive she wanted Taylor close by with a gun. She said a farmhouse with stone walls three feet thick was the best place she could think of to be. Reacher didn’t argue with her. Privately he agreed with Taylor. Split focus was a bad thing. And it was possible that Lane’s guys already had covert surveillance going. Maybe even likely. If so, they would have the roads covered. They would be watching cars pass by. Looking for Taylor, primarily. But if they were given the chance to see that what was supposed to be Susan and Melody Jackson was actually Kate and Jade Lane, then the whole game would change.

Dinner was a random mixture of canned stuff that Pauling had found in cupboards. She wasn’t much of a cook. She was too accustomed to dialing her Barrow Street telephone and calling out for whatever she wanted. But nobody seemed to mind. Nobody was in the mood for a gourmet menu. They planned as they ate. Agreed to set up two two-person watches, sequential, five hours each. That would take them through until dawn. One person would patrol the blind gable wall to the south, and one would do the same thing to the north. Each

gable wall to the south, and one would do the same thing to the north. Each would be armed with a loaded G-36. The first watch would be Taylor and Jackson, and at half past one in the morning Reacher and Pauling would take over. Kate Lane would sit it out. The possibility that a hostile nighttime reconnaissance probe might identify her was too much of a risk.

Reacher cleared the table and washed the dishes and Taylor and Jackson went outside with their G-36s cocked and locked. Kate went upstairs to put Jade to bed. Pauling put logs on the fire. Watched Reacher at the sink.

“You OK?” she asked him.

“I’ve done KP before.”

“I didn’t mean that.”

He said, “We’ve got an SAS guy on one end of the house and a Parachute Regiment guy on the other. They’ve both got automatic weapons. And they’re both personally motivated. They won’t fall asleep.”

“I didn’t mean that, either. I meant with the whole thing.”

“I told you we wouldn’t be putting anybody on trial.”

Pauling nodded.

“She’s cute,” she said. “Isn’t she?”

“Who?”

“Kate. She makes me feel ancient.”

“Older women,” Reacher said. “Good for something.”

“Thanks.”

“I mean it. Give me a choice, I’d go home with you, not her.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m weird like that.”

“I’m supposed to put people on trial.”

“So was I, once. But I’m not going to this time. And I’m OK with that.”

“Me too. That’s what’s bothering me.”

“You’ll get over it. The backhoe and a plane ticket will help.”

“Distance? Six feet of earth and three thousand air miles?”

“Works every time.”

“Does it? Really?”

“We splattered a thousand bugs on our windshield yesterday. A thousand more today. One extra won’t make any difference.”

“Lane isn’t a bug.”

“No, he’s worse.”

“What about the others?”

“They’ve got a choice. The purest kind of choice there is. They can stay or they can go. Entirely up to them.”

“Where do you think they are now?”

“Somewhere out there,” Reacher said.

A half-hour later Kate Lane came downstairs again. The tails of her borrowed shirt were tied at her waist and the sleeves were rolled to her elbows.

“Jade’s asleep,” she said. She turned sideways to squeeze past a displaced dining

chair and Reacher figured it was possible to see that she was pregnant. Just. Now that he had been told.

He asked, “Is she doing OK?”

“Better than we could have hoped,” Kate said. “She’s not sleeping great. The jet lag has screwed her up. And she’s a little nervous, I guess. And she doesn’t understand why there are no animals here. She doesn’t understand arable farming. She thinks we’re hiding a whole bunch of cute little creatures from her.”

“Does she know about the new brother or sister or whatever it’s going to be?”

Kate nodded. “We waited until we were on the plane. We tried to make it all part of the adventure.”

“How was it at the airport?”

“No problem. The passports were fine. They looked at the names more than the pictures. To make sure they matched the tickets.”

Pauling said, “So much for Homeland Security.”

Kate nodded again. “We got the idea from something we read in the newspaper. Some guy left on a short-notice business trip, grabbed his passport from the drawer, and he’d been through six separate countries before he realized it was his wife’s passport that he had grabbed.”

Reacher said, “Tell me how the whole thing went down.”

“It was pretty easy, really. We did stuff in advance. Bought the voice machine, rented the room, got the chair, took the car keys.”

“Taylor did most of that, right?”

“He said people would remember me more than him.”

“He was probably right.”

“But I had to buy the voice machine. Too weird if a guy who couldn’t talk wanted one.”

wanted one."

"I guess."

"Then I copied the photograph at Staples. That was tough. I had to let Groom drive me. It would have been too suspicious to insist on Graham all the time. But after that it was easy. We left for Bloomingdale's that morning and went straight to Graham's apartment instead. Just holed up there and waited. We kept really quiet in case anyone checked with the neighbors. We kept the lights off and covered the windows in case anyone passed by on the street. Then later we started the phone calls. Right from the apartment. I was very nervous at first."

"You forgot to say no cops."

"I know. I thought I'd blown it immediately. But Edward didn't seem to notice. Then it got much easier later. With practice."

"I was in the car with Burke. You sounded great by then."

"I thought there was someone with him. There was something in his voice. And he kept narrating where he was. He was telling you, I guess. You must have been hidden."

"You asked for his name in case you slipped and used it anyway."

Kate nodded. "I knew who it was, obviously. And I thought it might sound dominating."

"You know Greenwich Village pretty well."

"I lived there before I married Edward."

"Why did you split the demands into three parts?"

"Because to ask for it all at once would have been too much of a clue. We thought we better let the stress build up a little. Then maybe Edward would miss the connection."

"I don't think he missed it. But I think he misinterpreted it. He started thinking about Hobart and the Africa connection."

"How bad is Hobart, really?"

"How bad is Hobart, really?"

"About as bad as it gets."

"That's unforgivable."

"No argument from me."

"Do you think I'm cold-blooded?"

"If I did it wouldn't be a criticism."

"Edward wanted to own me. Like a chattel. And he said if I was ever unfaithful he would rupture Jade's hymen with a potato peeler. He said he would tie me up and make me watch him do it. He said that when she was five years old."

Reacher said nothing.

Kate turned to Pauling and asked, "Do you have children?"

Pauling shook her head.

Kate said, "You blot a thing like that right out of your mind. You assume it was just the sick product of a temporary rage. Like he wasn't quite right in the head. But then I heard the story about Anne and I knew he was capable of really doing it. So now I want him dead."

Reacher said, "He's going to be. Very soon."

"They say you should never get between a lioness and her cub. I never really understood that before. Now I do. There are no limits."

The room went as quiet as only the countryside can. The flames in the fireplace flickered and danced. Strange shadows moved on the walls.

Reacher asked, "Are you planning on staying here forever?"

"I hope to," Kate said. "Organic farming is going to be a big thing. Better for people, better for the land. We can buy some more acres from the locals. Maybe expand a little."

"We?"

“I feel like a part of it.”

“What are you growing?”

“Right now, just grass. We’re in the hay business for the next five years or so. We have to work the old chemicals out of the soil. And that takes time.”

“Hard to picture you as a farmer.”

“I think I’m going to enjoy it.”

“Even when Lane is out of the picture permanently?”

“In that case I guess we would go back to New York occasionally. But downtown only. I won’t go back to the Dakota.”

“Anne’s sister lives directly opposite. In the Majestic. She’s been watching Lane every day for four years.”

Kate said, “I’d like to meet her. And I’d like to see Hobart’s sister again.”

“Like a survivors’ club,” Pauling said.

Reacher got out of his chair and walked to the window. Saw nothing but nighttime blackness. Heard nothing but silence.

“First we have to survive,” he said.

They kept the fire going and dozed quietly in the armchairs. When the clock in Reacher’s head hit one-thirty in the morning he tapped Pauling on the knee and stood up and stretched. Then they headed outside together into the dead-of-night dark and cold. Called softly and met Taylor and Jackson in a huddle outside the front door. Reacher took Taylor’s weapon and headed for the south end of the house. The gun was warm from Taylor’s hands. The safety was above and behind the trigger. It had tritium markings, which made them faintly luminous. Reacher selected single fire and raised the rifle to his shoulder and checked the

fit. It felt pretty good. It balanced pretty well. The carrying handle was like an exaggerated version of an M16's, with a neat little oval aperture in the front slope to provide a line-of-sight back to the built-in scope, which was a plain 3x monocular, which according to the laws of optics pulled the target three times closer than the naked eye but also made it three stops darker, which rendered it functionally useless at night. Three stops darker than pitch black was no use to anyone. But overall the thing was a handsome weapon. It would be fine by dawn.

He put his back against the blind gable wall and settled in and waited. He could smell woodsmoke from the kitchen chimney. After a minute his eyesight adjusted and he saw that there was a little moonlight behind heavy cloud, maybe one shade lighter than total darkness. But still comforting. Nobody would see him from a distance. He was wearing gray pants and a gray jacket and he was leaning on a gray wall holding a black gun. In turn he would see headlights miles away and he would see men on foot about ten feet away. Close quarters. But at night, vision was not the sense that counted anyway. In the darkness, hearing was primary. Sound was the best early-warning system. Reacher himself could be totally silent, because he wasn't moving. But no intruder could be. Intruders had to move.

He stepped forward two paces and stood still. Turned his head slowly left and right and scoped out a two-hundred-degree arc all around him, like a huge curved bubble of space from which he had to be aware of every sound. Assuming that Pauling was doing the same thing north of the house they had every angle of approach covered between them. At first he heard nothing. Just an absolute absence of sound. Like a vacuum. Like he was deaf. Then as he relaxed and concentrated he started to pick up tiny imperceptible sounds drifting in across the flat land. The thrill of faint breezes in distant trees. The hum of power lines a mile away. The soak of water turning earth to mud in ditches. Grains of dirt drying and falling into furrows. Field mice, in burrows. Things growing. He turned his head left and right like radar and knew that any human approach might as well be accompanied by a marching band. He would hear it clearly a hundred yards away, however quiet anyone tried to be.

Reacher, alone in the dark. Armed and dangerous. Invincible.

He stood in the same spot for five straight hours. It was cold, but bearable. Nobody came. By six-thirty in the morning the sun was showing far away to his left. There was a bright horizontal band of pink in the sky. A thick horizontal blanket of mist on the ground. Gray visibility was spreading westward slowly, like an ebb tide.

The dawn of a new day.

The time of maximum danger.

Taylor and Jackson came out of the house carrying the third and fourth rifles. Reacher didn't speak. Just took up a new station against the rear façade of the house, his shoulder against the corner, facing south. Taylor mirrored his position against the front wall. Reacher knew without looking that sixty feet behind them Jackson and Pauling were doing the same thing. Four weapons, four pairs of eyes, all trained outward.

Reasonable security.

For as long as they could bear to stay in position.

CHAPTER **70**

THEY STAYED IN position all day long. All through the morning and all through the afternoon and well into the evening. Fourteen straight hours.

Lane didn't come.

One at a time they took short meal breaks and shorter bathroom breaks. They rotated stations clockwise around the house for variety. Their eight-pound rifles started to feel like eight tons in their hands. Jackson slipped away for a minute and turned the bird scarer back on. Thereafter the stillness was periodically shattered by loud random shotgun blasts. Even though they knew for sure they were due each sentry jumped and ducked each time they arrived.

Lane didn't come.

Kate and Jade stayed in the house, out of sight. They made food and poured drinks and carried them on trays to the windows and the doors, tea for Taylor and Jackson, coffee for Reacher, orange juice for Pauling. The sun burned through the mist and the day grew warm, and then it grew cold again in the late afternoon.

Lane didn't come.

Jade drew pictures. Every twenty minutes or so she would bring a new one to a different window and ask for an opinion concerning its merit. When it was his turn to judge, Reacher would duck his head down and give the paper a look. Then he would turn back to the outward view and talk out of the side of his mouth. *Very good,* he would say. And generally the pictures merited the praise. The kid wasn't a bad little artist. She had switched from future predictions to straightforward reportage. She drew the red Mini Cooper, she drew Pauling with her gun, she drew Taylor with a mouth like a wrecked Buick's grille. She drew Reacher, huge, taller than the house. Then late in the day she switched from reportage to fantasy and drew farm animals in the barns, even though she had been told that the Jacksons didn't have any, not even a dog.

Lane didn't come.

Kate fixed sandwiches for an early dinner and Jade took to visiting the corner windows and asking everyone in turn if she could come outside and explore. Everyone in turn said no, she had to hide. On the third go-round Reacher heard her modify her request and ask Taylor if she could come out after dark, and he heard Taylor say maybe, like worn-down parents everywhere.

Lane didn't come.

By eight-thirty in the evening visibility had died away to nothing again and Reacher had been on his feet for nineteen hours. Pauling too. Taylor and Jackson had done twenty-four, spelled only by a five-hour break. They all met in a loose huddle in the gathering gloom by the front door, shaky with fatigue, frustrated, made anxious by fruitless vigilance.

Taylor said, "He's waiting us out."

"Therefore he's going to win," Jackson said. "We can't keep this up much longer."

"He's had twenty-seven hours," Pauling said. "We have to assume he's armed by now."

"He'll come tomorrow at dawn," Taylor said.

"You sure?" Reacher asked.

"Not really."

"Me either. Three or four in the morning would work just as well."

"Too dark."

"If they've bought guns they could have bought night vision, too."

"How would you do it?"

"Three guys loop around and walk in from the north. The other four come up the driveway, maybe two in a car, lights off, high speed, with the other two flanking it on foot. Two directions, seven guys, their choice of seven windows, we couldn't stop at least three of them getting inside. They'd get you or a hostage before we could react."

“You’re a real ray of sunshine,” Taylor said.

“I’m just trying to think like them.”

“We’d get them before they got anywhere near the house.”

“Only if all four of us can stay awake and alert for the next eight hours. Or the next thirty-two hours, if he delays another day. Or the next fifty-six hours, if he delays two days. Which he might. He’s in no hurry. And he’s not dumb. If he’s decided to wait us out, why not do it properly?”

Taylor said, “We’re not moving. This place is a stronghold.”

“Three-dimensionally it’s fine,” Reacher said. “But battles are fought in four dimensions, not three. Length, breadth, and height, plus time. And time is on Lane’s side, not ours. This is a siege now. We’re going to run out of food, and sooner or later all four of us are going to be asleep at the same time.”

“So we’ll halve the guard. One man north, one man south, the other two resting but ready.”

Reacher shook his head. “No, it’s time to get aggressive.”

“How?”

“I’m going to go find them. They’ve got to be holed up somewhere close. It’s time to pay them a visit. They won’t be expecting that.”

“Alone?” Pauling said. “That’s insane.”

“I have to anyway,” Reacher said. “I didn’t get Hobart’s money yet. There’s eight hundred grand out there. Can’t let it go to waste.”

Taylor and Pauling stayed on guard and Reacher fetched the big Ordnance Survey map from the Mini’s glove box. He took Jade’s latest drawings off the kitchen table and piled them on a chair and spread out the map in their place.

Then he went over it with Jackson. Jackson had a year's worth of local knowledge, which was less than Reacher would have liked, but it was better than nothing. The map clarified most of the terrain issues all by itself with its faint orange contour lines, which were very widely spaced and which curved only gently. Flat land, probably the flattest in the British Isles. Like a pool table. Grange Farm and Bishops Pargeter were roughly in the center of a wide triangle of empty space bounded to the east by the road that ran south from Norwich to Ipswich in Suffolk and to the west by the Thetford road that Reacher and Pauling had driven three times already. Elsewhere in the triangle were meandering minor tracks and isolated farm settlements. Here and there chance and history had nestled small communities in the angles of crossroads. They were shown on the map as tiny gray squares and rectangles. Some of the rectangles represented short rows of houses. Some of the larger buildings were shown individually. The only one within any kind of a reasonable distance from Bishops Pargeter and labeled *PH* was the Bishop's Arms.

This is the only pub for miles, lad, the farmer at the bar had said. *Why else do you think it's so crowded?*

"Are they there, do you think?" Reacher asked.

Jackson said, "If they stopped in Fenchurch Saint Mary first and then aimed for Bishops Pargeter afterward, then that's the only place they could have passed. But they could have gone north. Nearer Norwich there are a lot of places."

"Can't buy guns in Norwich," Reacher said. "Not if you had to call Holland."

"Shotguns up there," Jackson said. "Nothing heavier."

"So they probably didn't go there," Reacher said. He recalled the motoring atlas. The city of Norwich had been shown as a dense stain in the top-right corner of the bulge that was East Anglia. The end of the line. Not on the way to anyplace else.

"I think they stayed close," he said.

"Then the Bishop's Arms could be it," Jackson said.

Five miles, Reacher thought. *On foot, that's a three-hour round trip. Back by midnight.*

“I’m going to check it out,” he said.

He detoured via the mud room and collected two spare magazines for his G-36. Found Pauling’s purse in the kitchen and borrowed her little Maglite. Folded the map and put it in his pocket. Then he huddled with the others in the dark outside the front door and agreed on a password. He didn’t want to get shot at when he arrived back. Jackson suggested *Canaries,* which was the Norwich soccer team’s nickname, for its yellow uniforms.

“Are they any good?” Reacher asked.

“They used to be,” Jackson said. “Twenty-some years ago, they were great.”

Them and me both, Reacher thought.

“Take care,” Pauling said, and kissed him on the cheek.

“I’ll be back,” he said.

He started by walking north behind the house. Then he turned west, staying parallel to the road, about a field’s width away. There was a little leftover twilight in the sky. Just the last remnant. Torn and ragged clouds with pale stars beyond. The air was cold and a little damp. There was a knee-high blanket of thin mist clinging to the earth. The dirt was soft and heavy underfoot. He carried his G-36 by its handle, left-handed, ready to swing it up into position when needed.

Reacher, alone in the dark.

The Grange Farm boundary was a trench ten feet across with a muddy bottom six feet down. Drainage, for the flat land. Not exactly canals like in Holland, but not anything easily cleared, either. Not anything to just step across. Reacher had to slide down the near bank, struggle through the mud, and then climb up the far

bank again. A mile into the trip his pants were a real mess. And he was going to have to invest some serious shoeshine time on the trip home. Or else deduct the price of a new pair of Cheaneys from Hobart's compensation. Maybe he could detour to the source. The motoring atlas had shown Northampton about forty miles west of Cambridge. Maybe he could talk Pauling into a two-hour shopping expedition. He had let her insist on Macy's after all.

Two miles into the trip he was very tired. And slow. Behind schedule. He changed course and moved slightly south and west. Came closer to the road. Found a tractor route through the next farmer's fields. Huge tires had beaten the earth into hard ruts either side of a grassy center hump. He wiped his shoes on the grass and sped up a little. Found that the next ditch was crossed by an improvised trestle made of old railroad ties. Strong enough for a tractor, strong enough for him. He followed the tire tracks until they turned abruptly north. Then he struck off through the fields again on his own.

After four miles the clock in his head told him that it was ten-thirty at night. Twilight had gone completely but the rags of cloud had cleared a little and the moon was bright. The stars were out. Far away to his left he could see occasional cars passing by on the road. Three had gone west and two had gone east. Bright lights, sedate speeds. Theoretically the two heading east could have been Lane's guys, but he doubted it. Ten and eleven in the evening was no kind of a time to attack. He guessed rural roads saw a minor traffic peak right around then. Pubs letting out, friends going home. Too many witnesses. If he knew it, then Lane knew it, too. Certainly Gregory knew it.

He kept on going. The spare magazines in his pocket were bruising his hip. Five minutes before eleven o'clock he spotted the glow from the pub's sign. Just an electric brightness in the misty air, because the sign itself was hidden by the bulk of the building. He could smell woodsmoke from a chimney. He looped around toward the light and the smell, staying well to the north of the road, just in case Lane had watchers out. He kept to the fields until he was facing the back of the building from four hundred yards away. He saw small squares of harsh white fluorescent light. Windows. Undraped and unglamorous. Therefore kitchens and bathrooms, he guessed. Therefore frosted or pebbled glass. No view out.

He headed south, straight for the squares of light.

CHAPTER **71**

DIRECTLY BEHIND THE pub the parking lot had been closed off and turned into a service yard. It was full of crates of bottles and stacks of metal beer kegs and big commercial-sized trash receptacles. There was a broken-down old car with bricks wedged under its brake drums. No wheels. Another old car, humped under a stained tarpaulin. Behind it the building had a rear door, inconspicuous among all the chaos, almost certainly unlocked during business hours to allow easy access from the kitchen to the trash pile.

Reacher ignored the door. He circled the building in the dark, clockwise, thirty feet out from the walls, well away from the spill of light from the windows.

The small bright rooms in back were clearly bathrooms. Their windows blazed with the kind of green-tinged light that comes from cheap tubes and white tile. Around the corner in the end wall to the east of the building there were no windows at all, just an unbroken expanse of brick. Around the next corner in the front wall east of the entrance there were three windows into the public bar. From a distance Reacher peered in and saw the same four farmers he had seen two nights previously. On the same stools. And the same bartender, busy as before with his beer pumps and his towel. The lighting was dim, but there was nobody else in the room. None of the tables was occupied.

Reacher moved on.

The front door was closed. The parking lot had four cars in it, haphazardly slotted side by side. None of the cars was new. None of them was the kind of thing a Park Lane rental company could have produced in a hurry. They were all old and dirty and battered. Bald tires. Dented fenders. Streaks of mud and manure. Farmers' cars.

Reacher moved on.

West of the entrance were three more windows, into the saloon bar.

Two nights previously the saloon bar had been empty.

It wasn't empty anymore.

It wasn't empty anymore.

Now a single table was occupied.

By three men: Groom, and Burke, and Kowalski.

Reacher could see them clearly. On the table in front of them he could see the long-dead remains of a meal and half a dozen empty glasses. And three half-full glasses. Pint mugs of beer, half-gone. It was a rectangular table. Kowalski and Burke were shoulder to shoulder on one side and Groom was opposite them, alone. Kowalski was talking and Burke was listening to him. Groom had his chair tipped back and was staring into space. There was a log fire burning in a soot-stained grate beyond him. The room was lit up warm and bright and inviting.

Reacher moved on.

Around the next corner there was a single window in the end wall to the west and through it Reacher got a different version of the same view. Groom, Burke, and Kowalski at their table. Drinking. Talking. Passing time. They were all alone in the room. The door to the foyer was closed. A private party.

Reacher backtracked four short steps and then headed for the front corner of the building on an exact forty-five-degree angle. Invisible from any window. He touched the wall and dropped to his knees. He kept his right palm on the brick and shuffled north and stretched out his left arm as far as it would go and very carefully laid his rifle on the ground directly under the west-facing window. He put it tight against the base of the wall where the shadows were deep. Then he shuffled south and stood up again and backed away on the same angle and checked. He couldn't see the rifle. Nobody would find it, unless they tripped over it.

He backed away until he was clear of the light spill and looped through the lot. Headed for the front door. Opened it up and stepped into the foyer. The low beams, the patterned carpet, the ten thousand brass ornaments. The shiny reception desk.

The register.

He stepped to the desk. To his right he could hear sociable silence from the public bar. The farmers, drinking, not saying much. The bartender, working

quietly. To his left he could hear Kowalski's voice, muffled by the closed door. He couldn't make out what he was saying. He couldn't hear individual words. Just a low drone. Occasional rising intonations. Short barks of contempt. Old soldier's bullshit, probably.

He turned the register through a hundred and eighty degrees. It moved easily, leather on shiny varnish. He opened it up. Leafed through the pages until he found his own entry. Two nights previously, *J & L Bayswater, East 161st Street, Bronx, New York, USA, Rolls-Royce, R34-CHR.* Then he scanned ahead. The following night three guests had registered: C. Groom, A. Burke, L. Kowalski. They had been less shy than Reacher himself about supplying personal information. Their business address had been accurately given as One 72nd Street, New York, New York, USA, which was the Dakota Building. *Make of Vehicle* had been given as Toyota Land Cruiser. There was a plate number entered, a British seven-character mix of letters and numbers that meant nothing to Reacher beyond the fact that the car had to be a rental from London.

No Toyota Land Cruiser in the lot.

And where were Lane, Gregory, Perez, and Addison?

He leafed backward through the book and saw that on any given night the Bishop's Arms had a maximum of three rooms to let. So assuming that Groom and Burke and Kowalski had been given a room each, there had been no room at the inn for the others. They had gotten back into their rented Toyota and driven someplace else.

But where?

Reacher glanced at the saloon bar's door but went the other way. Into the public bar. The bartender looked up at him and the four farmers turned slowly on their stools and started up with their complacent who-are-you barroom stares until they recognized him. Then they nodded guarded greetings and turned back to their pint glasses. The bartender stayed poised and polite, ready for fast service. *Instant acceptance, for less than thirty bucks.*

Reacher asked, "Where did you send the other four?"

The bartender said, "Who?"

“Seven guys showed up yesterday. Three of them are here. Where did you send the other four?”

“We’ve only got three rooms,” the guy said.

“I know that,” Reacher said. “Where’s your overspill recommendation?”

“I sent them down to Maston Manor.”

“Where’s that?”

“The other side of Bishops Pargeter. About six mile beyond.”

“I didn’t see another inn on the map.”

“It’s a country house. She takes paying guests.”

One of the farmers half-turned and said, “It’s a bed and breakfast hotel. Very nice. Classier than this place. I reckon they all drew lots and the losers stayed here.”

His friends laughed, low and slow. Barroom humor, the same the world over.

“It’s more expensive there,” the bartender said, defensively.

“It should be,” the farmer said.

“Is it on this road?” Reacher asked.

The bartender nodded. “Straight through Bishops Pargeter, past the church, past Dave Kemp’s shop, keep on about six mile. You can’t miss it. She’s got a sign. Maston Manor.”

“Thanks,” Reacher said. He headed back to the foyer. Closed the door behind him. Stepped across the patterned carpet and stopped in front of the saloon bar’s door. Kowalski was still talking. Reacher could hear him. He put his hand on the knob. Paused a beat and then turned it and pushed the door open.

CHAPTER **72**

CARTER GROOM WAS facing the door on the far side of the table. He looked up just like the bartender had but Kowalski and Burke moved a lot faster than the farmers. They spun around and stared. Reacher stepped the rest of the way into the room and closed the door gently behind him. Stood completely still.

“We meet again,” he said, just to break the silence.

“You’ve got some nerve,” Groom said.

The room was decorated in the same style as the foyer. Low ceiling beams, dark varnished wood, ornate wall sconces, thousands of brass ornaments, a wall-to-wall carpet patterned in a riot of red and gold swirls. Reacher moved toward the fireplace. Tapped the toes of his shoes against the edge of the hearth to shed some mud. Took a heavy iron poker from a hook and used the end of it to scrape dirt off his heels. Then he hung the poker back up and flapped at the bottom of his pant legs with his hands. Altogether he spent more than a minute cleaning up, with his back turned, but he was watching a clear convex reflection of the table in a bright copper bucket that held kindling sticks. And nobody was moving. The three guys were just sitting there, waiting. Smart enough not to start anything in a public place.

“The situation has changed,” Reacher said. He moved on, toward the west-facing window. It had open drapes and a sliding storm pane on the inside and a regular wooden frame on the outside that would open like a door. He pulled out a chair from the table nearest to it and sat down, six feet away from the three guys, four feet and two panes of glass away from his rifle.

“Changed how?” Burke said.

“There was no kidnap,” Reacher said. “It was faked. Kate and Taylor are an item. They fell in love, they eloped. Because they wanted to be together. That was all. And they took Jade with them, obviously. But they had to dress the whole thing up, because Lane is a psychopath where his marriages are concerned. Among other things.”

“Kate’s alive?” Groom said.

Kate's alive?" Groom said.

Reacher nodded. "Jade too."

"Where?"

"Somewhere in the States, I guess."

"So why is Taylor here?"

"He wants a showdown with Lane on his own turf."

"He's going to get one."

Reacher shook his head. "I'm here to tell you that's a bad idea. He's on a farm, and it's surrounded by ditches too deep to drive through. So you'd be going in on foot. And he's got a lot of help there. He's got eight of his old SAS buddies with him, and his brother-in-law was a kind of Green Beret for the Brits, and he's brought in six of his guys, too. They've got Claymores on a hundred-yard perimeter and heavy machine guns in every window. They've got night vision and grenade launchers."

"They can't possibly use them. Not here. This is England, not Lebanon."

"He's prepared to use them. Believe it. But actually he won't have to. Because four of the SAS guys are snipers. They've got PSG1s. Heckler and Koch sniper rifles, from the black market in Belgium. They'll drop you all three hundred yards out. With their eyes shut. Seven rounds, game over. They're miles from anywhere. Nobody will hear. And if they do, they won't care. This is the back of beyond. Farm country. Somebody's always shooting something. Foxes, road signs, burglars, each other."

The room went quiet. Kowalski picked up his drink and sipped. Then Burke did, and then Groom. Kowalski was left-handed. Burke and Groom were right-handed. Reacher said, "So your best play is to just forget it and go home now. Lane is going to die. There's no doubt about that. But there's no reason why you should die with him. This isn't your fight. This is all about Lane's ego. It's between him and Kate and Taylor. Don't get yourselves killed for that kind of bullshit."

Burke said, "We can't just walk away."

“You walked away in Africa,” Reacher said. “You left Hobart and Knight behind, to save the unit. So now you should leave Lane behind, to save yourselves. You can’t win here. Taylor’s good. You know that. And his buddies are just as good. You’re outnumbered more than two to one. Which is totally upside down. You know that, too. A situation like this, you need to outnumber the defenders. You’re going to get your asses kicked.”

Nobody spoke.

“You should go home,” Reacher said again. “Hook up somewhere else. Maybe start up on your own.”

Groom asked, “Are you with Taylor?”

Reacher nodded. “And I’m good with a rifle. Back in the day, I won the Marine sniper trophy. I showed up in army green and I beat all of you miserable jarheads hands down. So maybe I’ll grab one of the PSGs. Maybe I’ll drop you all six hundred yards out, just for the fun of it. Or eight hundred, or a thousand.”

Silence in the room. No sound at all, except the shift and crackle of logs in the fire. Reacher looked straight at Kowalski.

“Five, seven, one, three,” he lied. “That’s the combination for Lane’s closet door. There’s still more than nine million dollars behind it. In cash. You should go get it, right now.”

No response.

“Walk away,” Reacher said. “Live to fight another day.”

“They stole all that money,” Burke said.

“Alimony. Easier than asking for it straight up. Asking for alimony is what got Anne Lane killed. Kate found that out.”

“That *was* a kidnap.”

Reacher shook his head. “Knight offed her. For Lane, because Anne wanted out. That’s why you all abandoned Knight in Africa. Lane was covering his ass. He sacrificed Hobart too, because he was in the same OP.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“I found Hobart. Knight told him all about it. While they were busy getting their hands and feet cut off.”

Silence.

Reacher said, “Don’t get killed for this kind of crap.”

Burke looked at Groom. Groom looked at Burke. They both looked at Kowalski. There was a long pause. Then Burke looked up.

“OK,” he said. “I guess we could sit this one out.”

Groom nodded. Kowalski shrugged. Reacher stood up.

“Smart decision,” he said. He moved toward the door. Stopped at the hearth and kicked his shoes against the stone again. Asked, “Where are Lane and the others?”

Quiet for a beat. Then Groom said, “There was no room here. They went up to Norwich. The city. Some hotel up there. The guy here recommended it.”

Reacher nodded. “And when is he locking and loading?”

Another pause.

“Dawn the day after tomorrow.”

“What did he buy?”

“Submachine guns. MP5Ks, one each plus two spares. Ammunition, night vision, flashlights, various bits and pieces.”

“Are you going to call him? As soon as I’m gone?”

“No,” Burke said. “He’s not the kind of guy you call with this kind of news.”

“OK,” Reacher said. Then he stepped fast to his left and lifted the poker off its hook. Reversed it in his hands and spun around in one smooth movement and

swung it hard and level and caught Carter Groom across the upper right arm, hard and straight and level, halfway between the elbow and the shoulder. The poker was a heavy iron bar and Reacher was a strong and angry man and Groom's humerus bone shattered like a piece of dropped china. Groom opened his mouth wide in sudden pain and shock but before any kind of a scream got out Reacher had sidestepped two paces to his left and broken Kowalski's left arm with a vicious backhanded blow. *Kowalski was left-handed. Burke and Groom were right-handed.* Reacher knocked Kowalski out of his way with his hip and wound up like an old newsreel of Mickey Mantle getting ready to hit one out of the park and smashed Burke across the right wrist with a line drive and pulverized every bone in there. Then he breathed out and turned away and stepped to the fireplace and put the poker back on its hook.

"Just making sure," he said. "You didn't entirely convince me with your answers. Especially the one about Lane's hotel."

Then he walked out of the saloon bar and closed the door quietly behind him. It was exactly eleven thirty-one in the evening, according to the clock in his head.

At exactly eleven thirty-two by the platinum Rolex on his left wrist Edward Lane closed the Toyota's rear door on nine Heckler & Koch MP5K submachine guns, sixty thirty-round magazines of 9mm Parabellums, seven sets of night-vision goggles, ten flashlights, six rolls of duct tape, and two long coils of rope. Then John Gregory started the engine. Behind him on the rear bench were Perez and Addison, quiet and pensive. Lane climbed into the front passenger seat and Gregory turned the truck around and took off west. Standard Special Forces doctrine called for dawn assaults, but it also called for the insertion of a small advance force for a lengthy period of lying-up and prior surveillance.

At exactly eleven thirty-three by the clock on her night table Jade woke up, confused and hot and feverish with time-zone confusion. She sat up in bed for a spell, dazed and quiet. Then she swung her feet to the floor. Crossed the room

slowly and pulled back her curtain. It was dark outside. And she could go outside in the dark. Taylor had said so. She could go visit the barns, and find the animals she knew had to be there.

Reacher retrieved his G-36 from under the saloon bar window at eleven thirty-four precisely and set out to walk back on the road, which he figured would make the return trip faster. Five miles, level ground, no hills, decent pace. He anticipated about seventy-five minutes total. He was tired, but content. Fairly satisfied. Three trigger fingers out of action, the opposing force degraded to about fifty-seven percent of its original capacity, the odds evened up to an attractive four-on-four, some useful intelligence gained. Groom's ingrained loyalty had led him to lie about Lane's hotel and probably about the timing of the planned attack, too. Dawn *the day after* tomorrow was almost certainly a clumsy and hasty camouflaging of the truth, which therefore in reality would be simply dawn tomorrow. But the shopping list had probably been right. Night vision was a no-brainer for nighttime surveillance and MP5Ks were pretty much what a guy like Lane would want for a subsequent fast and mobile assault. Light, accurate, reliable, familiar, available.

Forewarned is forearmed, Reacher thought. *Not bad for an evening's work.* He walked on, energy in his stride, a grim smile on his face.

Alone in the dark. Invincible.

That feeling lasted exactly an hour and a quarter. It ended just after he walked the length of the Grange Farm driveway and saw the dark and silent bulk of the house looming in front of him. He had called the password at least half a dozen separate times. At first quietly, and then louder.

Canaries, canaries, canaries.

Canaries, canaries, canaries.

He had gotten no response at all.

CHAPTER **73**

WITHOUT CONSCIOUS THOUGHT Reacher raised his rifle to the ready position. Stock nestled high against his right shoulder, safety off, right index finger inside the trigger guard, barrel just a degree or two below the horizontal. Long years of training, absorbed right down at the cellular level, permanently written in his DNA. *No point in having a weapon at all unless it's ready for instant use,* his instructors had screamed.

He stood absolutely still. Listened hard. Heard nothing at all. He moved his head left. Listened. Nothing. He moved his head right. Nothing.

He tried the password one more time, soft and low: *Canaries.*

He heard no reply.

Lane, he thought.

He wasn't surprised. Surprise was strictly for amateurs, and Reacher was a professional. He wasn't upset, either. He had learned a long time ago that the only way to keep fear and panic at bay was to concentrate ruthlessly on the job at hand. So he spent no time thinking about Lauren Pauling or Kate Lane. Or Jackson or Taylor. Or Jade. No time at all. He just walked backward and to his left. Preprogrammed. Like a machine. Silently. Away from the house. Making himself smaller as a target and improving his angle of view. He checked the windows. They were all dark. Just a faint red glow from the kitchen. The remains of the fire. The front door was closed. Near it was the faint shape of the Mini Cooper, cold and gray in the dark. It looked odd. Canted down at the front, like it was kneeling.

He walked toward it through the dark, slow and stealthy. Knelt down on the driver's side near the front fender and felt for the tire. It wasn't there. There were torn shreds of rubber and a vicious curled length of bead wire. And shards of plastic from the shattered wheel well lining. That was all. He shuffled quietly around the tiny hood to the other side. Same situation. The wheel had its alloy rim on the ground.

A front-wheel-drive car, comprehensively disabled. Both wheels. One had not

A front-wheel-drive car, comprehensively disabled. Both wheels. One had not been enough. A single tire can be changed. Two submachine gun bursts had been necessary. Twice the risk of detection. Although in Reacher's experience an MP5 set to fire bursts of three sounded more innocent than a rifle firing single shots. A single gunshot was unmistakable. It was a singularity. It was a precise pinpoint of noise. An MP5 was rated to fire 900 rounds a minute. Fifteen every second. Which meant that a burst of three lasted a fifth of a second. Not quite a singularity. Altogether a different sound. Like a brief blurred purr instead. Like a distant motorcycle heard waiting at a light.

Lane, he thought again.

But when?

Seventy-five minutes previously he had been five miles away. Audibility decays according to the inverse square law. Twice the distance, the sound gets four times as quiet. Four times the distance, sixteen times as quiet. He had heard nothing. He was sure of that. Across land as flat and featureless and in night air as thick and damp as Norfolk's he would have expected to hear MP5 bursts a couple of miles away. Therefore Lane had been gone at least thirty minutes. Maybe more.

He stood still and listened hard. Heard nothing. Headed for the front door. It was closed but unlocked. He dropped his left hand off the rifle and turned the handle. Pushed the door open. Raised the rifle. The house was dark. It felt empty. He checked the kitchen. It was warm. Dull red embers in the hearth. Jade's drawings were still on the kitchen chair where he had left them. Pauling's purse was still where he had dumped it after taking the Maglite. There were empty mugs of tea all over the place. Dishes in the sink. The room looked exactly like he had left it, except there were no people in it.

He switched on the flashlight and clamped it in his left palm under the rifle's barrel. Used it to check all the other ground floor rooms. A formal dining room, empty, cold, dark, unused. Nobody in it. A formal parlor, furnished like the Bishop's Arms saloon bar, still and quiet. Nobody in it. A powder room, a coat closet, the mud room. All empty.

He crept up the stairs. The first room he came to was clearly Jade's. He saw the green seersucker sundress folded on a chair. Drawings on the floor. The battered old toys that had been missing from the Dakota were all arrayed in a line along

the bed, leaning on the wall. A one-eyed bear with the fur worn down to its backing, sitting up. A doll, one eye open and one eye closed, a lipstick effect inexpertly applied with a red marker pen. The bed had been slept in. The pillow was dented and the sheets had been thrown back.

No sign of the child herself.

The next room belonged to the Jacksons. That was clear. There was a vanity table cluttered with British cosmetic brands and tortoiseshell hairbrushes and matching hand mirrors. There were framed photographs of a girl that wasn't Jade. Melody, Reacher guessed. On the back wall there was a bed with a high headboard and freestanding armoires in matching dark veneers, full of clothes, men's and women's. There was a backhoe catalog on one of the night tables. Tony Jackson's bedtime reading.

No sign of Jackson himself.

The next room was Kate's and Taylor's. An old queen bed, an oak night table. Austere, undecorated, like a guest room. The photograph was propped on a dresser. Kate and Jade, together. The original print. No frame. The two faces glowed in the Maglite's beam. Love, captured on film. There was an empty tote bag. Kate's luggage. No sign of the money. Just three empty leather duffels piled together in a corner. Reacher had carried one of them himself, down in the Dakota's elevator to the black BMW, with Burke restless at his side.

He moved on, looking for box rooms or bathrooms. Then he stopped, halfway along the upstairs hallway.

Because there was blood on the floor.

It was a small thin stain, a foot long, curved, like flung paint. Not a puddle. Not neat. It was dynamic, suggestive of rapid movement. Reacher stepped back to the head of the stairs. Sniffed the air. There was a faint smell of gunpowder. He sighted down the hallway with the Maglite beam and saw an open bathroom door at the far end. A smashed tile on the back wall, at chest height. A neat burst, contained by a single six-inch by six-inch ceramic square. A running target, a raised gun, a squeezed trigger, three shots, a through-and-through flesh

target, a raised gun, a squeezed trigger, three shots, a through and through flesh wound, probably to an upper arm. A short shooter, otherwise the downward angle would be more pronounced. The smashed tile would be lower. Perez, probably. Perez, firing maybe the first of at least seven bursts that night. This one, inside the house. Then the two Mini Cooper tires. Then four Land Rover tires, for sure. A four-wheel-drive vehicle would need all four tires taken out for a cautious man to be satisfied. A desperate driver might get somewhere on two.

Seven submachine gun bursts in the dead of night. Maybe more. Forty or more minutes ago. *People here have phones,* Jackson had said. *Some of them even know how to use them.* But they hadn't used them. That was for sure. The Norwich cops would have arrived in less than forty minutes. Thirty miles, empty roads, lights and sirens, they could have done it in twenty-five or less. So nobody had called. Because of the MP5's other-worldly rate of fire. Machine guns on TV or in the movies were generally old-fashioned and much slower. In order to be properly convincing. So forty or more minutes ago people wouldn't have known what they were hearing. Just a random series of inexplicable blurred purrs, like sewing machines. Like jamming your tongue on the roof of your mouth and blowing. If they had heard anything at all.

So, Reacher thought. *At least one wounded and the cavalry ain't coming.*

He eased down the stairs and back out into the night.

He circled the house, clockwise. The barns were distant and dark and quiet. The old Land Rover was collapsed on its rims, as he had been certain it would be. Four blown tires. He walked straight past it and stopped against the south gable wall. Turned the Maglite off and stared down the driveway into the darkness.

How had it happened?

He trusted Pauling because he knew her and he trusted Taylor and Jackson even without knowing them. Three professionals. Experience, savvy, plenty of active brain cells. Tired, but functioning. A long perilous approach from the intruders' point of view. No contest. He should have been looking at four riddled bodies and a wrecked rental car. Right about then Jackson should have been firing up the backhoe. Pauling should have been cracking cans of beer and Kate should

have been making toast and heating beans.

So why weren't they?

Distraction, he figured. As ever, the answer was in Jade's pictures. The animals in the barns. *She's not sleeping great,* Kate had said. *The jet lag has screwed her up.* Reacher pictured the child waking, maybe around midnight, getting out of bed, running out of the house into the imagined safety of the darkness, four adults scrambling after her, confusion, panic, a search, unseen watchers rising from the grassland and moving in. Lane, blasting up the driveway in the rented Toyota SUV. Taylor and Jackson and Pauling holding their fire in case they hit each other or Kate or Jade.

Lane, headlights on now, jamming to a stop.

Lane, headlights on now, recognizing his own stepdaughter.

His own wife.

Reacher shivered once, a violent uncontrollable spasm. He closed his eyes, and then opened them again. He clicked the Maglite on and lowered the beam to light his way and walked on down the driveway. Toward the road. Toward he knew not where.

Perez flipped his night-vision goggles into the up position on his forehead and said, "OK, Reacher's gone. He's out of here."

Edward Lane nodded. Paused a second and then backhanded Jackson across the face with his flashlight, once, twice, three times, massive blows, until Jackson fell. Gregory hauled him upright again and Addison tore the tape off his mouth.

Lane said, "Tell me about your diet."

Jackson spat blood. "My what?"

"Your diet. What you eat. What your absent wife feeds you."

“Why?”

“I want to know if you eat potatoes.”

“Everybody eats potatoes.”

“So I’ll find a peeler in the kitchen?”

CHAPTER **74**

REACHER KEPT HIS flashlight beam trained down about ten feet in front of him, a narrow bright oval dancing left and right a little and bouncing as he walked. The light showed him the ruts and the dips and the holes in the beaten earth. It made it easier to hurry. He walked through the first curve in the driveway. Then he fixed his eyes on the darkness ahead and started to run toward the road.

Lane turned to Perez and said, “Go find the kitchen. Bring me what I need. And find a telephone. Call the Bishop’s Arms. Tell the others to get here now.”

“We’ve got the truck,” Perez said.

“Tell them to walk,” Lane said.

Jackson said, “Reacher will come back, you know.” He was the only one who could talk. He was the only one without tape on his mouth.

Lane said, “I know he’ll come back. I’m counting on it. Why do you think we didn’t chase him? Worst case for us he’ll walk six miles east and find nothing and walk back here again. It will take him four hours. You’ll be dead by then. He can take your place. He can watch the child die, and then Ms. Pauling, and then I’ll kill him. Slowly.”

“You’re insane. You need help.”

“I don’t think so,” Lane said.

“He’ll hitch a lift.”

“In the dead of night? Carrying an assault rifle? I don’t think so.”

“You’re nuts,” Jackson said. “You’ve lost it completely.”

“I’m angry,” Lane said. “And I think I have a right to be.”

Perez left, to find the kitchen.

Reacher ran through the second curve in the driveway. Then he slowed a little.

Then he stopped dead.

He killed the flashlight beam and closed his eyes. Stood still in the darkness and breathed hard and concentrated on the after-image of what he had just seen.

The driveway curved twice for no apparent reason. Not practical, not aesthetic. It went left and then right for some other purpose. To avoid unseen softness in the dirt, he had guessed before. To avoid a couple of badly drained sinkhole patches. And he had seen that he had been correct. All the way through the curves the track was soft and damp. Muddy, even though it hadn’t rained for days.

And the mud showed tire tracks.

Three sets.

First, Tony Jackson’s old Land Rover. The farm truck. Blocky mud-and-snow treads. Chunky, worn, in and out many hundreds of times. The Land Rover’s tracks were all over the place. Old, faded, eroded, new, clear, recent. Everywhere. Like background noise.

Second, the Mini Cooper’s tires. A very different look. Narrow, crisp, new, aggressive treads built for good adhesion and fast cornering on pavement. Just one set. Reacher had turned in the day before, slow and wide and deliberate, second gear, a small car at a moderate speed, unthreatening. He had driven through the curves and parked the car outside the house. And he had left it there. It was still there. It hadn’t moved. It hadn’t driven out again. It probably never would. It would leave on a flatbed truck.

Hence, one set of tire tracks only.

The third set was also a single set. One pass, one way. Wider tires. A large heavy

vehicle, open treads, new and crisp. The kind of semi-serious off-road tires a prestige SUV would wear.

The kind of tires a rented Toyota Land Cruiser would wear.

One set only.

One way.

The Toyota was a very capable off-road vehicle. Reacher knew that. It was one of the best in the world. But it was inconceivable that it had entered the farm overland. Not in a million years. The farm was bounded by ditches ten feet across and six feet deep. Steep sides. Impossible approach and exit angles. A Humvee couldn't do it. A Bradley couldn't do it. An Abrams couldn't do it. The Grange Farm ditches were better than tank traps. So the Toyota hadn't come in overland. It had driven in across the little flat bridge and up the length of the driveway. No other way.

And it hadn't driven out again.

One set of tire tracks.

One way.

Lane was still on the property.

Lane hit Jackson in the head with the flashlight one more time, hard. The lens smashed and Jackson went down again.

"I need a new flashlight," Lane said. "This one seems to be broken."

Addison smiled and took a new one out of a box. Lauren Pauling stared at the door. Her mouth was taped and her hands were bound behind her. The door was still closed. But it was going to open any minute. Through it would come either Perez or Reacher. Bad news or good.

Let it be Reacher, she thought. *Please. Bugs on windshields, no scruples. Please let it be Reacher.*

Lane took the new flashlight from Addison and stepped up close to Kate. Face-to-face, six inches from her. Eye to eye. They were about the same height. He lit up the flashlight beam and held it just under her chin, shining it directly upward, turning her exquisite face into a ghastly Halloween mask.

"Till death us do part," he said. "That's a phrase I take seriously."

Kate turned her head away. Gasped behind the tape. Lane clamped her chin in his free hand and turned her head back.

"Forsaking all others," he said. "I took that part seriously, too. I'm so sorry that you didn't."

Kate closed her eyes.

Reacher kept on walking south. To the end of the driveway, over the bridge, east on the road, away from the farm, his flashlight on all the way. In case he was being watched. He figured he needed to let them see him go. Because the human mind loves continuity. To see a small spectral night-vision figure strolling south, and south, and then east, and east, and east sets up an irresistible temptation to believe that it's going to go east forever. *It's gone,* you say. *It's out of here.* And then you forget all about it, because you know where it's going, and you don't see it coming back because you're not watching it anymore.

He walked east for two hundred yards and clicked off the Maglite beam. Then he walked east for another two hundred yards in the dark. Then he stopped. Turned ninety degrees and hiked north across the shoulder and slid down the boundary ditch's nearside slope. Floundered through the thick black mud in the bottom and clawed his way up the far side with his rifle held one-handed high in the air. Then he ran, fast, straight north, stretching his stride long to hit the top of every plowed furrow.

Two minutes later he was a quarter-mile in, level with the cluster of barns, three hundred yards behind them to the east, and out of breath. He paused in the lee of

hundred yards behind them to the east, and out of breath. He paused in the lee of a stand of trees to recover. Thumbed his fire selector to single shots. Then he put the stock against his shoulder and walked forward. West. Toward the barns.

Reacher, alone in the dark. Armed and dangerous. Coming back.

Edward Lane was still face-to-face with Kate. He said, “I’m assuming you’ve been sleeping with him for years.”

Kate said nothing.

Lane said, “I hope you’ve been using condoms. You could catch a disease from a guy like that.”

Then he smiled. A new thought. A joke, to him.

“Or you could get pregnant,” he said.

Something in her terrified eyes.

He paused.

“What?” he said. “What are you telling me?”

She shook her head.

“You’re pregnant,” he said. “You’re pregnant, aren’t you? You *are*. I know it. You look different. I can tell.”

He put the flat of his hand on her belly. She pulled away, backward, hard against the pole she was tied to. He shuffled forward half a step. “Oh man, this is unbelievable. You’re going to die with another man’s child inside you.”

Then he spun away. Stopped, and turned back. Shook his head.

“Can’t allow that,” he said. “Wouldn’t be right. We’ll have to abort it first. I should have told Perez to find a coat hanger. But I didn’t. So we’ll find something else instead. There’s got to be something here. This is a farm after

all."

Kate closed her eyes.

"You're going to die anyway," Lane said, like the most reasonable man in the world.

Reacher knew they were in a barn. They had to be. That was clear. Where else could they hide their truck? He knew there were five barns in total. He had seen them in the daylight, vaguely, in the distance. Three stood around a beaten earth yard, and two stood alone. All of them had vehicle ruts heading for big doors. Storage, he had guessed, for the backhoe, and tractors, and trailers, and balers, and all kinds of other farm machinery. Now in the dark the dirt under his feet felt dry and dusty, hard and stony. It wouldn't show tire marks. No point in risking a flash of the Maglite beam.

So which barn?

He started with the nearest, hoping to get lucky. But he didn't get lucky. The nearest barn was one of the two that stood alone. It was a wide wooden structure made of weathered boards. The whole thing had been blown slightly off-kilter by two hundred years of relentless winds. It leaned to the west, beaten down. Reacher put his ear on a crack between two boards and listened hard. Heard nothing inside. He put his eye on the crack and saw nothing. Just darkness. There was a smell of cold air and damp earth and decayed burlap.

He moved on fifty yards to the second barn, hoping to get lucky. But he didn't get lucky. The second barn was just as dark and quiet as the first. Musty and cold, nothing moving inside. A sharp nitrogen smell. Old fertilizer. He moved on through the blackness, slow and stealthy, toward the three barns grouped around the yard. They were a hundred yards away. He got a quarter of the way there.

Then he stopped dead.

Because in the corner of his eye he saw light to his left and behind him. Light and movement, in the house. The kitchen window. A flashlight beam, in the

room. Fast shadows jumping and leaping across the inside of the glass.

Lane turned to Gregory and said, “Find some baling wire.”

“Before we do the kid?” Gregory asked.

“Why not? It can be like a preview for her. She’s going to get the same thing anyway as soon as Perez gets back with the potato peeler. I told her mother years ago what would happen if she cheated on me. And I always try to keep my word.”

“A man ought to,” Gregory said.

“We need an operating table,” Lane said. “Find something flat. And turn the truck’s lights on. I need to be able to see what I’m doing.”

“You’re sick,” Jackson said. “You need help.”

“Help?” Lane said. “No, I don’t think so. It was always a one-person procedure, as I understand. Old women, usually, in back alleys, I believe.”

Reacher moved fast and quiet to the back door of the house. Pressed himself tight against the wall on the far side. Waited. He could feel the rough stones against his back. He could hear a voice through the door. Very faintly, one side of a two-way conversation. A slight Hispanic accent. Perez, on the phone. Reacher reversed his rifle in his hands. Gripped the forestock in front of the carrying handle and took a practice swing.

Then he waited. Alone in the dark.

Gregory found an old door, rustic, made from lapped boards and Z-braced on the back. He pulled it out from a stack of discarded lumber and stood it upright.

“That’s perfect,” Lane called to him.

Perez stepped out into the night and turned to close the door behind him and Reacher swung, arms extended, hips twisting, driving forward off the back foot, wrists snapping. No good. Late. A foul ball for sure, left field, upper deck, off the façade, maybe out into the street. But Perez’s head was not a baseball. And the G-36 was not a bat. It was an eight-pound yard of steel. The sight block caught Perez in the temple and punched a shard of bone sideways through his left eye socket and on through the bridge of his nose and halfway through his right eye socket. Then it stopped when the top edge of the stock crushed his ear flat against the side of his skull. So, not a perfect swing. A millisecond earlier and two inches farther back a blow like that would have taken the top of the guy’s head off like opening a soft-boiled egg. Late as it was, it just plowed a deep messy lateral trench between his cheeks and his forehead.

Messy, but effective. Perez was dead long before he hit the ground. He was too small to go down like a tree. He just melted into the beaten earth like he was a part of it.

Lane turned to Addison and said, “Go find out what the hell Perez is up to. He should have been back by now. I’m getting bored. Nobody’s bleeding yet.”

“I’m bleeding,” Jackson said.

“You don’t count.”

“Taylor’s bleeding. Perez shot him.”

“Wrong,” Lane said. “Taylor’s stopped bleeding. For the moment.”

“Reacher’s out there,” Jackson said.

“I don’t think so.”

Jackson nodded. “He is. That’s why Perez isn’t back. Reacher got him.”

Lane smiled. “So what should I do? Go out and search? With my two men? Leaving you people all alone in here to organize a pathetic escape attempt behind my back? Is that what you’re trying to achieve? Not going to happen. Because right about now Reacher is walking past the Bishops Pargeter church. Or are you just trying to give your comrades a little hope in their hour of need? Is this British pluck? The famous stiff upper lip?”

Jackson said, “He’s out there. I know it.”

He was crouching outside the kitchen door, sorting through all the things that Perez had dropped. An MP5K with a thirty-round magazine and a ballistic nylon shoulder sling. A flashlight, now broken. Two black-handled kitchen knives, one long, one short, one serrated, one plain. A souvenir corkscrew from a car ferry operator.

And a potato peeler.

Its handle was a plain wooden peg. Once red, now faded. Tightly bound to it with thick wrapped string was a simple pressed-metal blade. Slightly pointed, with a raised flange and a slot. An old-fashioned design. Plain, utilitarian, well used.

Reacher stared at it for a moment. Then he put it in his pocket. He buried the longer knife to its hilt in Perez’s chest. Tucked the shorter knife in his own shoe. Kicked the corkscrew and the broken flashlight into the shadows. Used his thumb to clean Perez’s blood and frontal lobe off of the G-36’s monocular lens. Picked up the MP5 submachine gun and slung it over his left shoulder.

Then he headed back north and east toward the barns.

Reacher, alone in the dark. Doing it the hard way.

CHAPTER **75**

REACHER STEPPED INTO the beaten earth yard. It was a little more than a hundred feet square, with barns barely visible in the dark on the north side, and the east, and the south. All three barns looked to be pretty much identical. Same vintage, same construction, same materials. They had tall sliding doors and tile roofs and wood wall planks, dull gray in the starlight. They were newer than the standalone barns, and much stronger. Straight and square and solid. Which was good news if you were Jackson the farmer, Reacher guessed. But which was bad news for him. No warped boards, no gaps, no cracks, no knot holes.

No immediate way of telling which one was currently occupied.

He stood still. North or east, he guessed. Easier for the truck. Either a straight path in, or a simple ninety-degree right hook. Not the south, he thought. It would have needed a one-eighty U-turn to reach the doors, and it had its back to the house and the driveway anyway. Not a comfortable feeling. Psychologically the possibility of a direct line of sight out the door was important. Even in the pitch dark.

He crossed the yard, slow and silent. His ruined shoes helped. The thick layer of mud on the soles kept them quiet. Like sneakers. Like walking on carpet. He made it to the near left-hand corner of the north barn and disappeared into the blackness alongside it. Circled it, clockwise. Felt the walls. Tapped them, gently. Stout boards, maybe oak, maybe an inch thick. Nailed to a frame that might have been built from foot-thick timbers itself. Like an old sailing ship. Maybe there was an inner skin of inch-thick boards. He had lived in worse places.

He came all the way around to the right-hand front corner and paused. There was no way in except for the main front doors. They were made from four-inch timbers banded together with galvanized steel straps and hung from sliders at the top. U-shaped channels were bolted to the barn’s structure, and wheels the size of the Mini Cooper’s were bolted to the doors. More U-shaped channels were set in concrete at the bottom, with smaller wheels in them. Practically industrial. The doors would slide apart like theater curtains. They would open maybe forty feet. Enough to get combine harvesters in and out, he guessed.

He crept along the front wall and put his ear on the space between the door and the wall. Heard nothing. Saw no chink of light.

Wrong one, he thought.

He turned and glanced east. *Has to be*, he thought. He set off toward it. Diagonally across the square. He was twenty feet from it when the door rolled back. The door was noisy. The wheels rumbled in their tracks. A yard-wide bar of bright blue light spilled out. Xenon beams. The Toyota SUV, parked inside, its headlights on. Addison stepped out through the bar of light. His MP5 was slung over his shoulder. He cast a monstrous moving shadow westward. He turned to roll the door shut again. Both hands, bent back, big effort. He got it to within six inches of closed and left it like that. Still open a crack. The bar of blue light narrowed to a thin blade. Addison clicked on a flashlight and as he turned forward its beam swung lazily across Reacher's face. But Addison's gaze must have lagged it by a second. Because he didn't react. He just turned half-left and set off toward the house.

Reacher thought: *Decision?*

No-brainer. Take them out one at a time, and thanks for the opportunity.

He took a deep breath and stepped through the blade of light and fell in behind Addison, twenty feet back, fast and silent. Then he was fifteen feet back. Then ten. Addison knew nothing about it. He was just walking straight ahead, oblivious, the flashlight beam swinging gently in front of him.

Five feet back.

Three feet back.

Then the two figures merged in the dark. They slowed and they stopped. The flashlight hit the dirt. It rolled slowly to a halt and its yellow beam cast long grotesque shadows and made jagged boulders out of small golden stones. Addison stumbled and went down, first to his knees, then on his face, his throat ripped clean out by the knife from Reacher's shoe.

Reacher was on his way even before Addison had stopped twitching. With an automatic rifle, two submachine guns, and a knife. But he didn't head back to the barns. He walked on down to the house instead. Made his first port of call

upstairs in the master bedroom. Then he stopped in the kitchen, at the hearth, and at the desk. Then he came back out and stepped over Perez's corpse and a little later over Addison's. *They're not necessarily better fighters than people currently enlisted*, Patti Joseph had said, days ago. *Often they're worse.* Then Taylor had said: *They used to be outstanding, but now they're well on the way to average. You all got that right,* Reacher thought.

He walked onward, north and east, toward the barns.

He stopped beside the eastern barn and considered his ordnance. Rejected the G-36. It fired only single rounds or triples, and it fired the triples too slowly. Too much like the sound of a regular machine gun on the TV or in the movies. Too recognizable, in the dead of night. And it was possible that the barrel was bent. Nothing that he would be able to see with the naked eye, but he had hit Perez hard enough to do some microscopic damage. So he laid the G-36 on the ground at the base of the barn's side wall and dropped the magazine out of Perez's MP5. Nine rounds left. Twenty-one expended. Seven triples fired. Perez had been the designated trigger man. Which meant that Addison's magazine should still be full. Which it was. Thirty rounds. The fat 9mm brass winked faintly in the starlight. He put Addison's magazine in Perez's gun. A magazine he knew to be full, in a gun he knew to be working. A sensible step for a man who planned to live through the next five minutes.

He piled Addison's gun and Perez's magazine on top of the discarded G-36. Rolled his shoulders and eased his neck. Breathed in, breathed out.

Showtime.

He sat on the ground with his back against the partly open door. Assembled the things he had brought from the house. A kindling stick, from the basket on the hearth. Three rubber bands, from a jar on the desk. A tortoiseshell hand mirror, from Susan Jackson's vanity table.

The stick was a straight seventeen-inch length of an ash bough, as thick as a child's wrist, cut to fit the kitchen grate. The rubber bands were strong but short. The kind of thing the mail carrier puts around bundles of letters. The hand mirror

was probably an antique. It was round, with a handle, a little like a table tennis bat.

He fixed the tortoiseshell handle to the ash bough with the rubber bands. Then he lay down flat on his front and inched the bough forward. Toward the six-inch gap where the barn door stood open. Left-handed. He tilted the stick and turned it and manipulated it until he could see a perfect reflection of the view inside.

Reacher, with a mirror on a stick.

CHAPTER **76**

THE MIRROR SHOWED that the barn was strong and square because it had vertical poles inside that held up the roof ridge and reinforced the timber peg rafters. The poles were foot-square balks of lumber anchored in concrete. There were twelve in total. Five of them had people tied to them. From left to right in the mirror Reacher could see Taylor, then Jackson, then Pauling, then Kate, then Jade. Their arms were pulled behind them and their wrists were tied behind the poles. Their ankles were tied together. They had duct tape across their mouths. All except Jackson. He had no tape. But his mouth was a bloody mess. He had deep cuts above both eyebrows. He wasn't standing. He had slumped down into a semiconscious crouch at the base of his pole.

It was Taylor who had been wounded. His shirt was torn and soaked with blood, upper right arm. Pauling looked OK. Eyes a little wild above the slash of silver tape, hair all over the place, but she was functioning. Kate was as white as a sheet and her eyes were closed. Jade had slid down her pole and was sitting on her heels, head down, motionless. Maybe she had fainted.

The Toyota had been backed in and turned so that it was hard up against the end wall on the left. Its headlights were turned full on, high beam, shining down the long axis of the building, casting twelve harsh shadows from the poles.

Gregory had his MP5 slung across his back and was wrestling with some kind of a large flat panel. An old door, maybe. Or a tabletop. He was walking it across the floor of the barn, left bottom corner, right bottom corner, gripping it with both hands.

Lane was standing completely still in the middle of the floor, his right fist around his MP5's pistol grip and his left fist around the fore grip. His finger was on the trigger and all ten of his knuckles were showing bone white. He was facing the door, sideways on to the Toyota. Its xenon headlight beams lit up his face in bizarre relief. His eye sockets were like black holes. *Borderline mentally ill,* people had said. *Crossed that border long ago,* Reacher thought.

Gregory got the big flat panel front and center and Reacher heard him say, "Where do you want this?"

Lane answered, “We need sawhorses.” Reacher moved the mirror and followed Lane’s reflection over to where Jackson was squatting. Lane kicked Jackson in the ribs and asked him, “Do you have sawhorses here?” and Jackson said, “In the other barn,” and Lane said, “I’ll send Perez and Addison for them when they get back.”

They’re not coming back, Reacher thought.

“They’re not coming back,” Jackson said. “Reacher’s out there and he’s got them.”

“You’re annoying me,” Lane said. But Reacher saw him glance toward the door anyway. And he saw what Jackson was trying to do. He was trying to focus Lane’s attention outside of the barn. Away from the prisoners. He was trying to buy time.

Smart guy, Reacher thought.

Then he saw Lane’s reflection grow large in the mirror. He pulled the ash bough back, slowly and carefully. Aimed his MP5 at a spot an inch outside the door and five feet four inches above the ground. *Put your head out*, he thought. *Take a look. Please. I’ll put three bullets in one ear and out the other.*

But no such luck. Reacher heard Lane stop just inside the door and scream, “Reacher? You out there?”

Reacher waited.

Lane called, “Perez? Addison?”

Reacher waited.

Lane screamed, “Reacher? You there? Listen up. Ten seconds from now, I’m going to shoot Jackson. In the thighs. He’ll bleed out through his femoral arteries. Then I’ll make Lauren Pauling lick it up like a dog.”

Reacher waited.

“Ten,” Lane screamed. “Nine. Eight.” His voice faded as he stalked back to the center of the barn. Reacher slid the mirror back into place. Saw Lane stop near Jackson and heard him say, “He isn’t out there. Or if he is, he doesn’t give a shit

Jackson and heard him say, "He isn't out there. Or if he is, he doesn't give a shit about you." Then Lane turned again and yelled, "Seven. Six. Five." Gregory was standing mute with the panel held vertical in front of him. Doing nothing.

"Four," Lane screamed.

A lot can happen in a single second. In Reacher's case he ran thoughts through his head like a card player sorting a hand. He considered taking the risk of sacrificing Jackson. Maybe Lane didn't mean it. If he did, then certainly Lane was crazy enough to fire full auto and empty his weapon. Gregory was handicapped. Reacher could let Jackson take thirty rounds in the legs and wait until Lane was clicking on empty and then he could step in and put three through the flat board into Gregory's center mass and three more into Lane's head. One KIA out of five hostages wasn't excessive. Twenty percent. Reacher had once been given a medal for an outcome worse than that.

"Three," Lane screamed.

But Reacher liked Jackson, and there was Susan and Melody to consider. Susan, the loyal sister. Melody, the innocent child. And there was Kate Lane's dream to think about, the new extended family farming together, growing hay, leaching the old chemicals out of the Norfolk soil, planting wholesome vegetables five years in the future.

"Two," Lane screamed.

Reacher dropped the mirror and extended his right arm like a swimmer and hooked his fingers around the edge of the door. Crawled backward, fast, hauling the door with him. Opening it wide, staying out of sight. He dragged it through the full twenty feet of its travel.

Then he waited.

Silence inside the barn. He knew Lane's eyes were on the black void outside. Knew his ears were straining to hear something in the stillness. The oldest of all atavistic human fears, buried deep in the primeval lizard brain, still alive a hundred thousand years after leaving the caves: *There's something out there.*

Reacher heard a flat cushioned thump as Gregory dropped the panel. Then it was a footrace. From Lane's perspective the door had opened right to left, driven by some unseen agency. Therefore that agency was now outside and to the left, at

the end of the door's long travel. Reacher stood up and stepped backward and turned and ran, counterclockwise around the barn. Around the first corner and fifty feet along the south side. Then the next corner, and a hundred feet along the back wall. Then fifty feet along the north wall. He took it slower than maximum speed. Three hundred feet, a hundred yards, four turns, in about thirty seconds. An Olympic athlete would have done it in ten, but an Olympic athlete didn't need to be composed enough at the finish line to fire a submachine gun accurately.

He took the last corner. Came back down the front wall to the doorway, mouth shut, breathing hard through his nose, controlling the heaving in his chest.

Now he was outside and to the right.

Silence inside the barn. No movement. Reacher planted his feet and leaned his left shoulder on the wall, his elbow tucked in, his wrist turned, his hand on the MP5's front grip, lightly, gently. His right hand was on the pistol grip and his right index finger had already moved the trigger through its first eighth-inch of slack. His left eye was closed and his right eye had lined up both iron sights. He waited. Heard a soft footfall on the barn's concrete floor, four feet in front of him and three feet to his left. Saw a shadow in the spill of light. He waited. Saw the back of Lane's head, just a narrow arc like a crescent moon, craning out, peering left into the darkness. Saw his right shoulder. Saw his MP5's nylon strap biting deep into the bunched canvas fabric of his jacket. Reacher didn't move his gun. He wanted to fire parallel with the barn, not into it. Moving his gun would put hostages in the line of fire. Taylor specifically, from what he recalled from the tortoiseshell mirror. Maybe Jackson, too. He had to be patient. He had to let Lane come to him.

Lane came to him. He inched out, back-to, craning left, leaning forward from the waist, looking away. He moved his front foot. Inched out a little more. Reacher ignored him. Concentrated exclusively on the MP5's sights. They were dotted with tritium and implied a geometry as real to Reacher as a laser beam piercing the night. Lane inched into it. First, the right-hand edge of his skull. Then a larger sliver. Then more. Then more. Then the front sight was on the bony ridge at the back of his head. Dead-on centered. Lane was so close that Reacher could count every hair in his buzz cut.

For half a second he thought about calling Lane's name. Making him turn around, hands raised. Telling him why he was about to die. Listing his many

transgressions. Like the equivalent of a legal process.

Then he thought about a fight. Man to man. With knives, or fists. Closure. Something ceremonial. Maybe something fairer.

Then he thought about Hobart, and he pulled the trigger.

A strange blurred purr, like a sewing machine or a distant motorcycle at a light. A fifth of a second, three nine-millimeter bullets, three ejected shell cases spitting out and arcing through the spill of bright light and jangling on the stones twenty feet to Reacher's right. Lane's head blew up in a mist cloud that was turned blue by the light. It flopped backward and followed the rest of his body straight down. The empty *thump* of flesh and bone hitting concrete was clearly audible, muffled only by cotton and canvas clothing.

I hope Jade didn't see that, Reacher thought.

Then he stepped into the doorway. Gregory was halfway through a fatal split second of hesitation. He had backed up and he was looking left, but the shots that had killed Lane had come from the right. It didn't compute. His brain was locked.

"Shoot him," Jackson said.

Reacher didn't move.

"Shoot him," Jackson said again. "Don't make me tell you what that table was for."

Reacher risked a glance at Taylor. Taylor nodded. Reacher glanced at Pauling. She nodded too. So Reacher put three in the center of Gregory's chest.

CHAPTER **77**

CLEAN-UP TOOK THE rest of the night and most of the next day. Even though they were all bone-weary, by common consensus they didn't try to sleep. Except for Jade. Kate put her to bed and sat with her while she slept. The child had fainted early and had missed most of what had gone on and seemed not to have understood the rest. Except for the fact that her ex-stepfather had been cast as a bad man. But she had been told that already and so it came as nothing more than confirmation of a view she was already comfortable with. So she slept, with no apparent ill-effects. Reacher figured that if any arrived in the days to come she would work them out with crayons on butcher paper.

Kate herself looked like she had been to hell and back. And like many people she was thriving on it. Going down there had felt really bad, and therefore coming back up again felt disproportionately better than really good. She had stared down at Lane's body for a long moment. Seen that half his head was missing. Understood for sure that there was going to be no Hollywood moment where he reared up again, back to life. He was gone, utterly, completely, and definitively. And she had seen it happen. That kind of certainty helps a person. She walked away from the corpse with a spring in her step.

Taylor's right tricep was all torn up. Reacher cut his shirt away with the kitchen knife from his shoe and field-dressed the wound as best he could with a first-aid kit in the upstairs bathroom. But Taylor was going to need attention. That was clear. He volunteered to delay it by a couple of days. The wound was not necessarily recognizable as a gunshot and it was unlikely anyone in the neighborhood had heard anything, but it seemed smart to distance an ER visit from mayhem in the night.

Jackson was OK apart from cut eyebrows and some facial bruising and a split lip and a couple of loose teeth. Nothing worse than he had experienced half a dozen times before, he said, after bar fights wherever 1st Para had been posted and where the local boys always seemed to have something to prove.

Pauling was fine. Reacher had cut her ropes and she had torn the tape off her mouth herself and then kissed him hard. She seemed to have had total confidence that he would show up and work something out. He wasn't sure if

she was telling the truth or flattering him. Either way he didn't mention exactly how close he had come to walking away on a phantom pursuit. Didn't mention how lucky it was that a stray peripheral glance at the driveway's surface had fired some random synapse in his brain.

He searched the Toyota and found Lane's leather duffel. The one he had seen before, in the Park Lane Hilton. The eight hundred thousand dollars. It was all there. Untouched. He gave it to Pauling for safe keeping. Then he sat on the floor, leaning back on the post that Kate had been tied to, six feet away from Gregory's corpse. He was calm. Just another night of business as usual in his long and spectacularly violent life. He was used to it, literally. And the remorse gene was missing from his DNA. Entirely. It just wasn't there. Where some men might have retrospectively agonized over justification, he spent his energy figuring out where best to hide the bodies.

They hid them in a ten-acre field near the northwest corner of the farm. Fallow land, hidden by trees, unplowed for a year. Jackson finished fixing the backhoe and then fired it up and drove off with headlights blazing. Started work immediately on a massive pit that needed to be thirty feet long, nine feet wide, and nine feet deep. A ninety-yard excavation, because they had decided to bury the cars as well.

Reacher asked Pauling, "Did you check the box for extra insurance?"

She nodded.

He said, "Call them tomorrow. Tell them it was stolen."

Taylor was walking wounded so he was excused from heavy work. Instead he scoured the whole area for every piece of physical evidence he could find. He came up with all that anyone could think of, including all twenty-seven shell casings from Perez's MP5. Pauling scrubbed his blood off the upstairs hallway floor and replaced the shattered bathroom tile. Reacher piled the bodies inside the Toyota Land Cruiser.

The sun had been up for hours before the pit was finished. Jackson had left a neat graded slope at one end and Reacher drove the Toyota down it and smashed it hard against the earth wall at the other end. Jackson drove the backhoe to the house and used the front bucket to jack the Mini up and shove it backward. He maneuvered it all the way to the pit and rolled it down the grade and jammed it hard against the Toyota's rear bumper. Taylor showed up with all the other items and threw them in the hole. Then Jackson started to fill it. Reacher just sat and watched. The sky was pale blue and the sun was watery. There were thin high clouds and a mild breeze that felt warm. He knew that in the flat land all around him Stone Age people had been buried in long mounds called barrows, and then Bronze Age people, and Iron Age people, and Celts, and Romans, and Saxons, and Angles, and Viking invaders in longships, and Normans, and then the English themselves for a thousand years. He guessed the land could take four more dead. He watched Jackson work until the dirt hid the top of the cars, and then he walked away, slowly, back to the house.

Exactly twelve months later to the hour the ten-acre field was neatly plowed and dusted pale green with a brand-new winter crop. Tony and Susan Jackson and Graham and Kate Taylor were working the field next to it. The sun was shining. Back at the house the nine-year-old cousins and best friends Melody Jackson and Jade Taylor were watching Jade's baby brother, a healthy five-month-old boy named Jack.

Three thousand miles west of Grange Farm it was five hours earlier and Lauren Pauling was alone in her Barrow Street apartment, drinking coffee and reading the *New York Times.* She had missed a piece inside the main section that reported the deaths of three newly arrived private military contractors in Iraq. Their names were Burke, Groom, and Kowalski, and they had died two days previously when a land mine exploded under their vehicle outside of Baghdad. But she caught a piece in the Metro Section in which it was reported that the cooperative board at the Dakota Building had foreclosed on an apartment after twelve consecutive months of unpaid monthly maintenance. On entering the apartment they had found more than nine million dollars in a locked closet.

Six thousand miles west of Grange Farm it was eight hours earlier and Patti Joseph was fast asleep in a waterfront condominium in Seattle, Washington. She was ten months into a new job as a magazine copy-editor. Her perseverance and her relentless eye for detail made her good at it. She was seeing a local journalist from time to time. She was happy.

Far from Seattle, far from New York City, far from Bishops Pargeter, down in Birmingham, Alabama, Dee Marie Graziano was up early, in a hospital gymnasium, watching her brother grasp his new metal canes and walk across the floor.

Nobody knew where Jack Reacher was. He had left Grange Farm two hours after the backhoe had shut down, and there had been no news of him since.

Bad Luck & Trouble

1

The man was called Calvin Franz and the helicopter was a Bell 222. Franz had two broken legs, so he had to be loaded on board strapped to a stretcher. Not a difficult maneuver. The Bell was a roomy aircraft, twin-engined, designed for corporate travel and police departments, with space for seven passengers. The rear doors were as big as a panel van's and they opened wide. The middle row of seats had been removed. There was plenty of room for Franz on the floor.

The helicopter was idling. Two men were carrying the stretcher. They ducked low under the rotor wash and hurried, one backward, one forward. When they reached the open door the guy who had been walking backward got one handle up on the sill and ducked away. The other guy stepped forward and shoved hard and slid the stretcher all the way inside. Franz was awake and hurting. He cried out and jerked around a little, but not much, because the straps across his chest and thighs were buckled tight. The two men climbed in after him and got in their seats behind the missing row and slammed the doors.

Then they waited.

The pilot waited.

A third man came out a gray door and walked across the concrete. He bent low under the rotor and held a hand flat on his chest to stop his necktie whipping in the wind. The gesture made him look like a guilty man proclaiming his innocence. He tracked around the Bell's long nose and got in the forward seat, next to the pilot.

"Go," he said, and then he bent his head to concentrate on his harness buckle.

The pilot goosed the turbines and the lazy *whop-whop* of the idling blade slid up the scale to an urgent centripetal *whip-whip-whip* and then disappeared behind the treble blast of the exhaust. The Bell lifted straight off the ground, drifted left

a little, rotated slightly, and then retracted its wheels and climbed a thousand feet. Then it dipped its nose and hammered north, high and fast. Below it, roads and science parks and small factories and neat isolated suburban communities slid past. Brick walls and metal siding blazed red in the late sun. Tiny emerald lawns and turquoise swimming pools winked in the last of the light.

The man in the forward seat said, “You know where we’re going?”

The pilot nodded and said nothing.

The Bell clattered onward, turning east of north, climbing a little higher, heading for darkness. It crossed a highway far below, a river of white lights crawling west and red lights crawling east. A minute north of the highway the last developed acres gave way to low hills, barren and scrubby and uninhabited. They glowed orange on the slopes that faced the setting sun and showed dull tan in the valleys and the shadows. Then the low hills gave way in turn to small rounded mountains. The Bell sped on, rising and falling, following the contours below. The man in the forward seat twisted around and looked down at Franz on the floor behind him. Smiled briefly and said, “Twenty more minutes, maybe.”

Franz didn’t reply. He was in too much pain.

The Bell was rated for a 161-mph cruise, so twenty more minutes took it almost fifty-four miles, beyond the mountains, well out over the empty desert. The pilot flared the nose and slowed a little. The man in the forward seat pressed his forehead against the window and stared down into the darkness.

“Where are we?” he asked.

The pilot said, “Where we were before.”

“Exactly?”

“Roughly.”

“What’s below us now?”

“Sand.”

“Height?”

“Three thousand feet.”

“What’s the air like up here?”

“Still. A few thermals, but no wind.”

“Safe?”

“Aeronautically.”

“So let’s do it.”

The pilot slowed more and turned and came to a stationary hover, three thousand feet above the desert floor. The man in the forward seat twisted around again and signaled to the two guys way in back. Both unlocked their safety harnesses. One crouched forward, avoiding Franz’s feet, and held his loose harness tight in one hand and unlatched the door with the other. The pilot was half-turned in his own seat, watching, and he tilted the Bell a little so the door fell all the way open under its own weight. Then he brought the craft level again and put it into a slow clockwise rotation so that motion and air pressure held the door wide. The second guy from the rear crouched near Franz’s head and jacked the stretcher upward to a forty-five degree slope. The first guy jammed his shoe against the free end of the stretcher rail to stop the whole thing sliding across the floor. The second guy jerked like a weightlifter and brought the stretcher almost vertical. Franz sagged down against the straps. He was a big guy, and heavy. And determined. His legs were useless but his upper body was powerful and straining hard. His head was snapping from side to side.

The first guy took out a gravity knife and popped the blade. Used it to saw through the strap around Franz’s thighs. Then he paused a beat and sliced the strap around Franz’s chest. One quick motion. At the exact same time the second guy jerked the stretcher fully upright. Franz took an involuntary step forward. Onto his broken right leg. He screamed once, briefly, and then took a second instinctive step. Onto his broken left leg. His arms flailed and he collapsed forward and his upper-body momentum levered him over the locked pivot of his immobile hips and took him straight out through the open door, into the noisy darkness, into the gale-force rotor wash, into the night.

darkness, into the gale-force rotor wash, into the night.

Three thousand feet above the desert floor.

For a moment there was silence. Even the engine noise seemed to fade. Then the pilot reversed the Bell's rotation and rocked the other way and the door slammed neatly shut. The turbines spun up again and the rotor bit the air and the nose dropped.

The two guys clambered back to their seats.

The man in front said, "Let's go home now."

2

Seventeen days later Jack Reacher was in Portland, Oregon, short of money. In Portland, because he had to be somewhere and the bus he had ridden two days previously had stopped there. Short of money, because he had met an assistant district attorney called Samantha in a cop bar, and had twice bought her dinner before twice spending the night at her place. Now she had gone to work and he was walking away from her house, nine o'clock in the morning, heading back to the downtown bus depot, hair still wet from her shower, sated, relaxed, destination as yet unclear, with a very thin wad of bills in his pocket.

The terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, had changed Reacher's life in two practical ways. Firstly, in addition to his folding toothbrush he now carried his passport with him. Too many things in the new era required photo ID, including most forms of travel. Reacher was a drifter, not a hermit, restless, not dysfunctional, and so he had yielded gracefully.

And secondly, he had changed his banking methods. For many years after leaving the army he had operated a system whereby he would call his bank in Virginia and ask for a Western Union wire transfer to wherever he happened to be. But new worries about terrorist financing had pretty much killed telephone banking. So Reacher had gotten an ATM card. He carried it inside his passport and used 8197 as his PIN. He considered himself a man of very few talents but some varied abilities, most of which were physical and related to his abnormal size and strength, but one of which was always knowing what time it was without looking, and another of which was some kind of a junior-idiot-savant facility with arithmetic. Hence 8197. He liked 97 because it was the largest two-digit prime number, and he loved 81 because it was absolutely the only number out of all the literally infinite possibilities whose square root was also the sum of its digits. Square root of eighty-one was nine, and eight and one made nine. No other nontrivial number in the cosmos had that kind of sweet symmetry. Perfect.

His arithmetic awareness and his inherent cynicism about financial institutions always compelled him to check his balance every time he withdrew cash. He always remembered to deduct the ATM fees and every quarter he remembered to add in the bank's paltry interest payment. And despite his suspicions, he had

never been ripped off. Every time his balance came up exactly as he predicted. He had never been surprised or dismayed.

Until that morning in Portland, where he was surprised, but not exactly dismayed. Because his balance was more than a thousand dollars bigger than it should have been.

Exactly one thousand and thirty dollars bigger, according to Reacher's own blind calculation. A mistake, obviously. By the bank. A deposit into the wrong account. A mistake that would be rectified. He wouldn't be keeping the money. He was an optimist, but not a fool. He pressed another button and requested something called a *mini-statement.* A slip of thin paper came out of a slot. It had faint gray printing on it, listing the last five transactions against his account. Three of them were ATM cash withdrawals that he remembered clearly. One of them was the bank's most recent interest payment. The last was a deposit in the sum of one thousand and thirty dollars, made three days previously. So there it was. The slip of paper was too narrow to have separate staggered columns for debits and credits, so the deposit was noted inside parentheses to indicate its positive nature: (1030.00).

One thousand and thirty dollars.

1030.

Not inherently an interesting number, but Reacher stared at it for a minute. Not prime, obviously. No even number greater than two could be prime. Square root? Clearly just a hair more than thirty-two. Cube root? A hair less than ten and a tenth. Factors? Not many, but they included 5 and 206, along with the obvious 10 and 103 and the even more basic 2 and 515.

So, 1030.

A thousand and thirty.

A mistake.

Maybe.

Or, maybe not a mistake.

Reacher took fifty dollars from the machine and dug in his pocket for change

Reacher took fifty dollars from the machine and dug in his pocket for change and went in search of a pay phone.

He found a phone inside the bus depot. He dialed his bank's number from memory. Nine-forty in the West, twelve-forty in the East. Lunch time in Virginia, but someone should be there.

And someone was. Not someone Reacher had ever spoken to before, but she sounded competent. Maybe a back-office manager hauled out to cover for the meal period. She gave her name, but Reacher didn't catch it. Then she went into a long rehearsed introduction designed to make him feel like a valued customer. He waited it out and told her about the deposit. She was amazed that a customer would call about a bank error in his own favor.

"Might not be an error," Reacher said.

"Were you expecting the deposit?" she asked.

"No."

"Do third parties frequently make deposits into your account?"

"No."

"It's likely to be an error, then. Don't you think?"

"I need to know who made the deposit."

"May I ask why?"

"That would take some time to explain."

"I would need to know," the woman said. "There are confidentiality issues otherwise. If the bank's error exposes one customer's affairs to another, we could be in breach of all kinds of rules and regulations and ethical practices."

"It might be a message," Reacher said.

"A message?"

“From the past.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Back in the day I was a military policeman,” Reacher said. “Military police radio transmissions are coded. If a military policeman needs urgent assistance from a colleague he calls in a ten-thirty radio code. See what I’m saying?”

“No, not really.”

Reacher said, “I’m thinking that if I don’t know the person who made the deposit, then it’s a thousand and thirty bucks’ worth of a mistake. But if I do know the person, it might be a call for help.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“Look at how it’s written. It might be a ten-thirty radio code, not a thousand and thirty dollars. Look at it on paper.”

“Wouldn’t this person just have called you on the phone?”

“I don’t have a phone.”

“An e-mail, then? Or a telegram. Or even a letter.”

“I don’t have addresses for any of those things.”

“So how do we contact you, usually?”

“You don’t.”

“A credit into your bank would be a very odd way of communicating.”

“It might be the only way.”

“A very difficult way. Someone would have to trace your account.”

“That’s my point,” Reacher said. “It would take a smart and resourceful person to do it. And if a smart and resourceful person needs to ask for help, there’s big trouble somewhere.”

"It would be expensive, too. Someone would be out more than a thousand dollars."

"Exactly. The person would have to be smart and resourceful and desperate."

Silence on the phone. Then: "Can't you just make a list of who it might be and try them all?"

"I worked with a lot of smart people. Most of them a very long time ago. It would take me weeks to track them all down. Then it might be too late. And I don't have a phone anyway."

More silence. Except for the patter of a keyboard.

Reacher said, "You're looking, aren't you?"

The woman said, "I really shouldn't be doing this."

"I won't rat you out."

The phone went quiet. The keyboard patter stopped. Reacher knew she had the name right there in front of her on a screen.

"Tell me," he said.

"I can't just tell you. You'll have to help me out."

"How?"

"Give me clues. So I don't have to come right out with it."

"What kind of clues?"

She asked, "Well, would it be a man or a woman?"

Reacher smiled, briefly. The answer was right there in the question itself. It was a woman. Had to be. A smart, resourceful woman, capable of imagination and lateral thinking. A woman who knew about his compulsion to add and subtract.

"Let me guess," Reacher said. "The deposit was made in Chicago."

"Yes, by personal check through a Chicago bank."

"Yes, by personal check through a Chicago bank."

"Neagley," Reacher said.

"That's the name we have," the woman said. "Frances L. Neagley."

"Then forget we ever had this conversation," Reacher said. "It wasn't a bank error."

3

Reacher had served thirteen years in the army, all of them in the military police. He had known Frances Neagley for ten of those years and had worked with her from time to time for seven of them. He had been an officer, a second lieutenant, then a lieutenant, a captain, a major, then a loss of rank back to captain, then a major again. Neagley had steadfastly refused promotion beyond sergeant. She wouldn't consider Officer Candidate School. Reacher didn't really know why. There was a lot he didn't know about her, despite their ten-year association.

But there was a lot he did know about her. She was smart and resourceful and thorough. And very tough. And strangely uninhibited. Not in terms of personal relationships. She avoided personal relationships. She was intensely private and resisted any kind of closeness, physical or emotional. Her lack of inhibition was professional. If she felt something was right or necessary, then she was uncompromising. Nothing stood in her way, not politics or practicality or politeness or even what a civilian might call "the law." At one point Reacher had recruited her to a special investigations unit. She had been a big part of it for two crucial years. Most people put its occasional spectacular successes down to Reacher's leadership, but Reacher himself put them down to her presence. She impressed him, deeply. Sometimes even came close to scaring him.

If she was calling for urgent assistance, it wasn't because she had lost her car keys.

She worked for a private security provider in Chicago. He knew that. At least she had four years ago, which was the last time he had come into contact with her. She had left the army a year later than he had and gone into business with someone she knew. As a partner, he guessed, not an employee.

He dug back in his pocket and came out with more quarters. Dialed long distance information. Asked for Chicago. Gave the company name, as he remembered it. The human operator disappeared and a robot voice came on the line with a number. Reacher broke the connection and redialed. A receptionist responded and Reacher asked for Frances Neagley. He was answered politely and put on hold. Altogether his impression was of a larger operation than he had

imagined. He had pictured a single room, a grimy window, maybe two battered desks, bulging file cabinets. But the receptionist's measured voice and the telephone clicks and the quiet hold music spoke of a much bigger place. Maybe two floors, cool white corridors, wall art, an internal phone directory.

A man's voice came on the line: "Frances Neagley's office."

Reacher asked, "Is she there?"

"May I know who's calling?"

"Jack Reacher."

"Good. Thank you for getting in touch."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Ms. Neagley's assistant."

"She has an assistant?"

"Indeed."

"Is she there?"

"She's en route to Los Angeles. In the air right now, I think."

"Is there a message for me?"

"She wants to see you as soon as possible."

"In Chicago?"

"She'll be in LA a few days at least. I think you should go there."

"What's this all about?"

"I don't know."

"Not work related?"

"Can't be. She'd have started a file. Discussed it here. She wouldn't be reaching

out to strangers."

"I'm not a stranger. I've known her longer than you have."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't aware of that."

"Where is she staying in LA?"

"I don't know that either."

"So how am I supposed to find her?"

"She said you'd be able to track her down."

Reacher asked, "What is this, some kind of a test?"

"She said if you can't find her, she doesn't want you."

"Is she OK?"

"She's worried about something. But she didn't tell me what."

Reacher kept the receiver at his ear and turned away from the wall. The metal phone cord wrapped around his chest. He glanced at the idling buses and the departures board. He asked, "Who else is she reaching out to?"

The guy said, "There's a list of names. You're the first to get back to her."

"Will she call you when she lands?"

"Probably."

"Tell her I'm on my way."

4

Reacher took a shuttle from the bus depot to the Portland airport and bought a one-way ticket on United to LAX. He used his passport for ID and his ATM card as a debit card. The one-way walk-up fare was outrageous. Alaska Airlines would have been cheaper, but Reacher hated Alaska Airlines. They put a scripture card on their meal trays. Ruined his appetite.

Airport security was easy for Reacher. His carry-on baggage amounted to precisely none at all. He had no belt, no keys, no cell phone, no watch. All he had to do was dump his loose change in a plastic tray and take off his shoes and walk through the X-ray hoop. Thirty seconds, beginning to end. Then he was on his way to the gate, coins back in his pocket, shoes back on his feet, Neagley on his mind.

Not work related. Therefore, private business. But as far as he was aware she had no private business. No private life. She never had. She would have everyday trivia, he guessed, and everyday problems. Like anyone. But he couldn't conceive of her needing help with any of that kind of stuff. A noisy neighbor? Any sane man would sell his stereo after one short conversation with Frances Neagley. Or give it away to charity. Drug dealers on her corner? They would end up as a line item on an inside page of the morning newspaper, corpses found in an alley, multiple knife wounds, no suspects at this time. A stalker? A groper on the elevated train? Reacher shuddered. Neagley hated to be touched. He didn't really know why. But anything except brief accidental contact with her would earn a guy a broken arm. Maybe two broken arms.

So what was her problem?

The past, he guessed, which meant the army.

A list of names? Maybe chickens were coming home to roost. The army seemed like a long time ago to Reacher. A different era, a different world. Different rules. Maybe someone was applying today's standards to yesterday's situations, and complaining about something. Maybe a long-delayed internal inquiry had started up. Reacher's special investigations unit had cut a lot of corners and

busted a lot of heads. Someone, maybe Neagley herself, had come up with a catchphrase: You *do not mess* with the special investigators. It had been repeated endlessly, as a promise, and a warning. Deadpan, and deadly serious.

Now maybe someone *was* messing with the special investigators. Maybe subpoenas and indictments were flying around. But in that case why would Neagley compromise him? He was as close to untraceable as a human being in America could get. Wouldn't she just play dumb and leave him be?

He shook his head and gave it up and got on the plane.

He used the flight time figuring out where in LA she would hole up. Back in the day it had been part of his job to find people, and he had been pretty good at it. Success depended on empathy. Think like them, feel like them. See what they see. Put yourself in their shoes. *Be* them.

Easier with AWOL soldiers, of course. Their aimlessness gave their decisions a special kind of purity. And they were heading away from something, not toward something. Often they would adopt a kind of unconscious geographic symbolism. If their route into a city was from the east, they would hole up on the west. They would want to put mass between themselves and their pursuers. Reacher would spend an hour with a map and a bus schedule and the Yellow Pages and often he would predict the exact block he would find them on. The exact motel.

Tougher with Neagley, because she was heading *for* something. Her private business, and he didn't know where or what it was. So, first principles. What did he know about her? What would be the determining factor? Well, she was cheap. Not because she was poor or a miser, but because she didn't see the point in spending a buck on something she didn't need. And she didn't need much. She didn't need turn-down service or a mint on the pillow. She didn't need room service or tomorrow's weather forecast. She didn't need fluffy robes and complementary slippers heat-sealed in cellophane. All she needed was a bed and a door that locked. And crowds, and shadows, and the kind of anonymous low-rent transient neighborhoods where bartenders and desk clerks had short memories.

So, scratch downtown. Not Beverly Hills, either.

So where? Where in the vastness of LA would she be comfortable?

There were twenty-one thousand miles of surface streets to choose from.

Reacher asked himself, *Where would* I *go?*

Hollywood, he answered. A little ways south and east of the good stuff. The wrong stretch of Sunset.

That's where I would go, he thought.

And that's where she'll be.

The plane landed at LAX a little late, well after lunch. There had been no meal service on board and Reacher was hungry. Samantha the Portland prosecutor had served him coffee and a bran muffin for breakfast, but that seemed like a long time ago.

He didn't stop to eat. Just headed out to the taxi line and got a Korean guy in a yellow Toyota minivan who wanted to talk about boxing. Reacher knew nothing about boxing and cared less. The sport's obvious artificiality turned him off. Padded gloves and above-the-belt rules had no place in his world. And he didn't like talking. So he just sat quietly in the back and let the guy ramble on. He watched the hot brown afternoon light through the window. Palm trees, movie billboards, light gray traffic lanes striped with endless twin tracks of rubber. And cars, rivers of cars, floods of cars. He saw a new Rolls-Royce and an old Citroën DS, both black. A bloodred MGA and a pastel blue '57 Thunderbird, both open. A yellow 1960 Corvette nose-to-tail with a green 2007 model. He figured if you watched LA traffic long enough you would see one of every automobile ever manufactured.

The driver took the 101 north and exited a block from Sunset. Reacher got out on the off-ramp and paid the fare. Hiked south and turned left and faced east. He knew Sunset had a dense knot of cheap places right there, both sides of the boulevard, covering about three-quarters of a mile. The air was southern California warm and smelled of dust and gasoline fumes. He stood still. He had a potential mile-and-a-half walk ahead of him, down and back, and a dozen motel desks to canvass. An hour-long task, maybe more. He was hungry. He could see

a Denny´s sign ahead and on the right. A chain diner. He decided to eat first and work later.

He walked past parked cars and vacant lots boxed in by hurricane fencing. Stepped over trash and softball-sized tumbleweeds. Recrossed the 101 on a long bridge. Entered the Denny’s lot by cutting across a grass shoulder and the drive-through lane. Walked past a long line of windows.

Saw Frances Neagley inside, sitting alone in a booth.

5

Reacher stood for a moment in the parking lot and watched Neagley through the window. She hadn't changed much in the four years since he had last seen her. She had to be nearer forty than thirty now, but it wasn't showing. Her hair was still long and dark and shiny. Her eyes were still dark and alive. She was still slim and lithe. Still spending serious time in the gym. That was clear. She was wearing a tight white T-shirt with tiny cap sleeves and it would have taken an electron microscope to find any body fat on her arms. Or anyplace else.

She was a little tan, which looked good with her coloring. Her nails were done. Her T-shirt looked like a quality item. Overall she looked richer than he remembered her. Comfortable, at home in her world, successful, accustomed to the civilian life. For a moment he felt awkward about his own cheap clothes and his scuffed shoes and his bad barbershop haircut. Like she was making it, and he wasn't. Then the pleasure of seeing an old friend swamped the thought and he walked on through the lot to the door. Went in and stepped past the *Please Wait to Be Seated* sign and slid straight into her booth. She looked up at him across the table and smiled.

"Hello," she said.

"To you, too," he said.

"Want lunch?"

"That was my plan."

"So let's order, now you're finally here."

He said, "You sound like you were waiting for me."

"I was. And you're about on time."

"Am I?"

Neagley smiled again. "You called my office guy from Portland, Oregon. He

saw the caller ID. Traced it to a pay phone at the bus depot. We figured you'd head straight for the airport. Then I figured you'd take United. You must hate Alaska Airlines. Then a cab ride here. Your ETA was easy enough to predict."

"You knew I would come here? To this diner?"

"Like you taught me, back in the day."

"I didn't teach you anything."

"You did," Neagley said. "Remember? Think like them, *be* them. So I was being you being me. You'd figure I'd head for Hollywood. You'd start right here on Sunset. But there's no meal on United from Portland, so I figured you'd be hungry and want to eat first. There are a couple of possible places on the block but this one has the biggest sign and you're no gourmet. So I decided to meet you here."

"Meet me here? I thought I was tracking you."

"You were. And I was tracking you tracking me."

"*Are* you staying here? In Hollywood?"

She shook her head. "Beverly Hills. The Wilshire."

"So you came out here just to scoop me up?"

"I got here ten minutes ago."

"The Beverly Wilshire? You've changed."

"Not really. It's the world that has changed. Cheap motels don't do it for me anymore. I need e-mail and the internet and FedEx service now. Business centers and concierges."

"You make me feel old-fashioned."

"You're improving. You use ATMs now."

"That was a good move. The bank balance message."

"

"You taught me well."

"I didn't teach you anything."

"Like hell."

"But it was an extravagant move," Reacher said. "Ten dollars and thirty cents would have worked just as well. Maybe even better, with the period between the ten and the thirty."

Neagley said, "I thought you might need the airfare."

Reacher said nothing.

"I found your account, obviously," Neagley said. "Wasn't too much more trouble to hack in and take a look. You're not rich."

"I don't want to be rich."

"I know. But I didn't want you to have to respond to my ten-thirty on your own dime. That wouldn't have been fair."

Reacher shrugged and let it go. Truth was, he wasn't rich. Truth was, he was almost poor. His savings had eroded to the point where he was starting to think about how to boost them back up again. Maybe a couple of months of casual labor were in his future. Or some other kind of a score. The waitress came over with menus. Neagley ordered without looking, a cheeseburger and a soda. Reacher matched her for speed, tuna melt and hot coffee. The waitress retrieved the menus and went away.

Reacher said, "So are you going to tell me what your ten-thirty was for exactly?"

Neagley answered him by leaning down and pulling a black three-ring binder out of a tote bag on the floor. She passed it across the table. It was a copy of an autopsy report.

"Calvin Franz is dead," she said. "I think someone threw him out of an airplane."

6

The past, which meant the army. Calvin Franz had been an MP and Reacher's exact contemporary and pretty much his equal all the way through his thirteen years of service. They had met here and there in the way that brother officers often tended to, rubbing shoulders in different parts of the world for a day or two at a time, consulting on the phone, crossing paths when two or more investigations had tangled or collided. Then they had done a serious spell together in Panama. Quality time. It had been very short but very intense, and they had seen things in each other that left them feeling more like real brothers than brother officers. After Reacher had been rehabilitated from his temporary demotion disgrace and given the special investigations operation to build, Franz's name had been near the top of his personnel wish list. They had spent the next two years together in a real unit-within-a-unit hothouse. They had become fast friends. Then as often happened in the army, new orders had come in and the special operation had been disbanded and Reacher had never seen Franz again.

Until that moment, in an autopsy photograph punched into a three-ring binder laid flat on a sticky laminate table in a cheap diner.

In life Franz had been smaller than Reacher but bigger than most other people. Maybe six-three and two-ten. Powerful upper body, low waist, short legs. Primitive, in a way. Like a caveman. But overall he had been reasonably handsome. He had been calm, resolute, capable, relaxing to be around. His manner had tended to reassure people.

He looked awful in the autopsy photograph. He was laid out flat and naked on a stainless tray and the camera's flash had bleached his skin pale green.

Awful.

But then, dead people often looked pretty bad.

Reacher asked, "How did you get this?"

Neagley said, "I can usually get things."

Neagley said, "I can usually get things."

Reacher said nothing in reply to that and turned the page. Started in on the dense mass of technical information. The corpse had been measured at six feet three inches in length and weighed a hundred and ninety pounds. Cause of death was given as multiple organ failure due to massive impact trauma. Both legs were broken. Ribs were cracked. The bloodstream was flooded with free histamines. The body was severely dehydrated and the stomach held nothing but mucus. There was evidence of rapid recent weight loss and no evidence of recent food consumption. Trace evidence from the recovered clothing was unexceptional, apart from unexplained ferrous oxide powder ground into both pant legs, low down, on the shins, below the knee and above the ankle.

Reacher asked, "Where was he found?"

Neagley said, "In the desert about fifty miles north and east of here. Hard sand, small rocks, a hundred yards off the shoulder of a road. No footprints coming or going."

The waitress brought the food. Reacher paused as she unloaded her tray and then started his sandwich, left-handed, to keep his right grease-free for turning the autopsy pages.

Neagley said, "Two deputies in a car saw buzzards circling. Went to check. Hiked out there. They said it was like he had fallen out of the sky. The pathologist agrees."

Reacher nodded. He was reading the doctor's conclusion, which was that a free fall from maybe three thousand feet onto hard sand could have produced the right amount of impact and caused the internal injuries observed, if Franz had happened to land flat on his back, which was aerodynamically possible if he had been alive and flailing his arms during the fall. A dead weight would have fallen on its head.

Neagley said, "They made the ID through his fingerprints."

Reacher asked, "How did you find out?"

"His wife called me. Three days ago. Seems he kept all our names in his book. A special page. His buddies, from back in the day. I was the only one she could find."

“I didn’t know he was married.”

“It was recent. They have a kid, four years old.”

“Was he working?”

Neagley nodded. “He set up as a private eye. A one-man band. Originally, some strategic advice for corporations. But now mostly background checks. Database stuff. You know how thorough he was.”

“Where?”

“Here in LA.”

“Did all of you set up as private eyes?”

“Most of us, I think.”

“Except me.”

“It was the only marketable skill we had.”

“What did Franz’s wife want you to do?”

“Nothing. She was just telling me.”

“She doesn’t want answers?”

“The cops are on it. LA County sheriff, actually. Where he was found is technically part of LA County. Outside of the LAPD’s jurisdiction, so it’s down to a couple of local deputies. They’re working on the airplane thing. They figure it was maybe flying west out of Vegas. That kind of thing has happened to them before.”

Reacher said, “It wasn’t an airplane.”

Neagley said nothing.

Reacher said, “An airplane has a stall speed of, what? A hundred miles an hour? Eighty? He’d have come out the door horizontal into the slipstream. He’d have

smashed against the wing or the tail. We'd see perimortem injuries."

"He had two broken legs."

"How long does it take to freefall three thousand feet?"

"Twenty seconds?"

"His blood was full of free histamines. That's a massive pain reaction. Twenty seconds between injury and death wouldn't have even gotten it started."

"So?"

"The broken legs were old. Two, three days minimum. Maybe more. You know what ferrous oxide is?"

"Rust," Neagley said. "On iron."

Reacher nodded. "Someone broke his legs with an iron bar. Probably one at a time. Probably tied him to a post. Aimed for his shins. Hard enough to break the bone and grind rust particles into the weave of his pants. Must have hurt like hell."

Neagley said nothing.

"And they starved him," Reacher said. "Didn't let him drink. He was twenty pounds underweight. He was a prisoner, two or three days. Maybe more. They were torturing him."

Neagley said nothing.

Reacher said, "It was a helicopter. Probably at night. Stationary hover, three thousand feet up. Out the door and straight down." Then he closed his eyes and pictured his old friend, tumbling, twenty seconds in the dark, cartwheeling, flailing, not knowing where the ground was. Not knowing exactly when he would hit. Two shattered legs trailing painfully behind him.

"Therefore it probably wasn't coming from Vegas," he said. He opened his eyes. "The round-trip would be out of range for most helicopters. It was probably coming north and east out of LA. The deputies are barking up the wrong tree."

Neagley sat quiet.

“Coyote food,” Reacher said. “The perfect disposal method. No tracks. The airflow during the fall strips away hairs and fibers. No forensics at all. Which is why they threw him out alive. They could have shot him first, but they didn’t even want to risk ballistics evidence.”

Reacher was quiet for a long moment. Then he closed the black binder and reversed it and pushed it back across the table.

“But you know all this anyway,” he said. “Don’t you? You can read. You’re testing me again. Seeing if my brain still works.”

Neagley said nothing.

Reacher said, “You’re playing me like a violin.”

Neagley said nothing.

Reacher asked, “Why did you bring me here?”

“Like you said, the deputies are barking up the wrong tree.”

“So?”

“You have to do something.”

“I will do something. Believe it. There are dead men walking, as of right now. You don’t throw my friends out of helicopters and live to tell the tale.”

Neagley said, “No, I want you to do something else.”

“Like what?”

“I want you to put the old unit back together.”

7

The old unit. It had been a typical U.S. Army invention. About three years after the need for it had become blindingly obvious to everyone else, the Pentagon had started to think about it. After another year of committees and meetings, the suits and the brass had signed off on the idea. It had been dumped on someone's desk and a mad panic had started to get it going. Orders had been drawn up. Obviously no sane CO had wanted to touch it with a stick, so a new unit had been carved out of the 110th MP. Success was desirable but failure had to be deniable, so they went looking for a competent pariah to command it.

Reacher had been the obvious choice.

They thought his reward was promotion back to major again, but the real satisfaction for him was the chance to do something properly for once. His way. They had given him a free hand in personnel selection. He had enjoyed that. He had figured that a special investigations unit needed the best the army had to offer, and he had figured he knew who and where they were. He had wanted a small unit, for speed and flexibility, and no clerical support, to prevent leaks. He had figured they could do their own paperwork, or not, as they deemed necessary. In the end he had settled on eight names in addition to his own: Tony Swan, Jorge Sanchez, Calvin Franz, Frances Neagley, Stanley Lowrey, Manuel Orozco, David O'Donnell, and Karla Dixon. Dixon and Neagley were the only women and Neagley was the only NCO. The others were all officers. O'Donnell and Lowrey were captains and the rest were all majors, which was totally screwed up in terms of a coherent chain of command, but Reacher didn't care. He knew that nine people working closely would operate laterally rather than vertically, which in the event was exactly what happened. The unit had organized itself like a small-market baseball team enjoying an unlikely pennant run: talented journeymen working together, no stars, no egos, mutually supportive, and above all ruthlessly and relentlessly effective.

Reacher said, "That was all a long time ago."

"We have to do something," Neagley said. "All of us. Collectively. You *do not mess* with the special investigators. Remember that?"

“That was just a slogan.”

“No, it was true. We depended on it.”

“For morale, that was all. It was just bravado. It was whistling in the dark.”

“It was more than that. We had one another’s backs.”

“Then.”

“And now and always. It’s a karma thing. Someone killed Franz, and we can’t just let it go. How would you feel if it was you, and the rest of us didn’t react?”

“If it was me, I wouldn’t feel anything. I’d be dead.”

“You know what I mean.”

Reacher closed his eyes again and the picture came back: Calvin Franz tumbling and cartwheeling through the darkness. Maybe screaming. Or maybe not. His old friend. “I can handle it. Or you and I together. But we can’t go back to how it was. That never works.”

“We have to go back.”

Reacher opened his eyes. “Why?”

“Because the others are entitled to participate. They earned that right over two hard years. We can’t just take it away from them unilaterally. They would resent that. It would be wrong.”

“And?”

“We need them, Reacher. Because Franz was good. Very good. As good as me, as good as you. And yet someone broke his legs and threw him out of a helicopter. I think we’re going to need all the help we can get with this. So we need to find the others.”

Reacher looked at her. Heard her office guy’s voice in his head: *There’s a list of names. You’re the first to get back to her.* He said, “The others should have been a lot easier to find than me.”

Neagley nodded.

“I can’t raise any of them,” she said.

8

A list of names. Nine names. Nine people. Reacher knew where three of them were, specifically or generically. Himself and Neagley, specifically, in a Denny's on West Sunset in Hollywood. And Franz, generically, in a morgue somewhere else.

"What do you know about the other six?" he asked.

"Five," Neagley said. "Stan Lowrey is dead."

"When?"

"Years ago. Car wreck in Montana. The other guy was drunk."

"I didn't know that."

"Shit happens."

"That's for damn sure," Reacher said. "I liked Stan."

"Me too," Neagley said.

"So where are the others?"

"Tony Swan is Assistant Director of Corporate Security for a defense manufacturer here in southern California somewhere."

"Which one?"

"I'm not sure. A start-up. Something new. He's only been there about a year."

Reacher nodded. He had liked Tony Swan, too. A short, wide man. Almost cubic in shape. Affable, good-humored, intelligent.

Neagley said, "Orozco and Sanchez are out in Vegas. They run a security business together, casinos and hotels, on contract."

Reacher nodded again. He had heard that Jorge Sanchez had left the army around the same time he had, a little frustrated and embittered. He had heard that Manuel Orozco had been planning to stay in, but overall it wasn't a huge surprise to find that he had changed his mind. Both men were mavericks, lean, fast, leathery, impatient with bullshit.

Neagley said, "Dave O'Donnell is in D.C. Plain-vanilla private detective. Plenty of work for him there."

"I guess there would be," Reacher said. O'Donnell had been the meticulous one. He had done the whole unit's paperwork, pretty much single-handed. He had looked like an Ivy League gentleman, but he had always carried a switchblade in one pocket and brass knuckles in the other. A useful guy to have around.

Neagley said, "Karla Dixon is in New York. Forensic accounting. She understands money, apparently."

"She always understood numbers," Reacher said. "I remember that." Reacher and Dixon had spent the occasional hour trying to prove or disprove various famous mathematical theorems. A hopeless task, given that they were both rank amateurs, but it had passed some time. Dixon was dark and very pretty and comparatively small, a happy woman who thought the worst of people, but inevitably she had been proved right nine times out of ten.

Reacher asked, "How do you know so much about them?"

"I keep track," Neagley said. "I'm interested."

"Why can't you raise them?"

"I don't know. I put calls out, but nobody's answering."

"So is this an attack on all of us collectively?"

"Can't be," Neagley said. "I'm at least as visible as Dixon or O'Donnell and nobody has come after me."

"Yet."

"Maybe."

“You called the others the same day you put the money in my bank?”

Neagley nodded.

“It’s only been three days,” Reacher said. “Maybe they’re all busy.”

“So what do you want to do? Wait for them?”

“I want to forget all about them. You and I can stand up for Franz. Just the two of us.”

“It would be better to have the old unit back together. We were a good team. You were the best leader the army ever had.”

Reacher said nothing.

“What?” Neagley said. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that if I wanted to rewrite history I’d start a lot further back than that.”

Neagley folded her hands together and rested them on the black binder. Slim fingers, brown skin, painted nails, tendons and sinew.

“One question,” she said. “Suppose I had gotten ahold of the others. Suppose I hadn’t bothered to try that thing with your bank. Suppose you found out years from now that Franz had been murdered and the six of us had just gone ahead and fixed it without you. How would you feel then?”

Reacher shrugged. Paused a beat.

“Bad, I guess,” he said. “Cheated, maybe. Left out.”

Neagley said nothing.

Reacher said, “OK, we’ll try to find the others. But we won’t wait forever.”

Neagley had a rental car in the lot. She paid the diner check and led Reacher outside. The car was a red Mustang convertible. They climbed in together and

Neagley hit a button and dropped the top. She took a pair of sunglasses from the dash and put them on. Backed out of her slot and turned south off Sunset at the next light. Headed for Beverly Hills. Reacher sat quietly beside her and squinted in the afternoon sun.

Inside a tan Ford Crown Victoria thirty yards west of the restaurant a man called Thomas Brant watched them go. He used his cell phone and called his boss, a man named Curtis Mauney. Mauney didn't answer, so Brant left a voice mail.

He said, "She just picked up the first one of them."

Parked five cars behind Brant's Crown Victoria was a dark blue Chrysler sedan containing a man in a dark blue suit. He too watched the red Mustang disappear into the haze, and he too used a cell phone.

He said, "She just picked up the first one of them. I don't know which one it is. Big guy, looks like a bum."

Then he listened to his boss's reply, and pictured him smoothing his necktie over the front of his shirt, one-handed, while he held the phone with the other.

9

Like its name suggested, the Beverly Wilshire Hotel was on Wilshire Boulevard, in the heart of Beverly Hills, directly opposite the mouth of Rodeo Drive. It was made up of two large limestone buildings, one behind the other, one old and ornate, the other new and plain. They were separated by a valet lane that ran parallel to the boulevard. Neagley nosed the Mustang into it and stopped close to a knot of black Town Cars and Reacher said, “I can’t afford to stay here.”

“I already booked your room.”

“Booked it or paid for it?”

“It’s on my card.”

“I won’t be able to pay you back.”

“Get over it.”

“This place has got to be hundreds a night.”

“I’ll let it slide for now. Maybe we’ll take some spoils of war down the track.”

“If the bad guys are rich.”

“They are,” Neagley said. “They have to be. How else would they afford their own helicopter?”

She left the key in and the motor running and opened the heavy red door and slid out. Reacher did the same thing on his side. A guy ran up and gave Neagley a valet stub. She took it and tracked around the hood of the car and took the steps up to the back of the hotel’s main lobby. Reacher followed. Watched her move. She floated, like she was weightless. She ghosted through a crowded dogleg corridor and came out in a reception area the size and shape of a baronial hall. There was a check-in desk, a bell desk, a concierge desk, all separate. There were pale velvet armchairs with beautifully dressed guests in them.

Reacher said, “I look like a bum in here.”

“Or like a billionaire. Nowadays you can’t tell.”

She led him to the counter and checked him in. She had reserved his room under the name Thomas Shannon, who had been Stevie Ray Vaughan’s giant bass player back in the day, and one of Reacher’s favorites. He smiled. He liked to avoid paper trails, whenever possible. He always had. Pure reflex. He turned to Neagley and nodded his thanks and asked, “What are you calling yourself here?”

“My real name,” she said. “I don’t do that stuff anymore. Too complicated now.”

The clerk handed over a key card and Reacher put it in his shirt pocket. He turned away from the desk and faced the room. Stone, dim chandeliers, thick carpet, flowers in huge glass vases. Perfumed air.

“Let’s make a start,” he said.

They started in Neagley’s room, which was actually a two-room suite. The living room portion was tall and square and stately and had been done up in blues and golds. It could have been a room in Buckingham Palace. There was a desk in the window with two laptop computers on it. Next to the laptops was an empty cell phone cradle and next to that was an open spiral-bound notebook, new, letter-size, the kind of thing a high school student might buy in September. Last in line was a thin stack of printed papers. Forms. Five of them. Five names, five addresses, five telephone numbers. The old unit, less two dead and two already present.

Reacher said, “Tell me about Stan Lowrey.”

“Not much to tell. He quit the army, moved to Montana, got hit by a truck.”

“Life’s a bitch and then you die.”

“Tell me about it.”

“What was he doing in Montana?”

“Raising sheep. Churning butter.”

“Alone?”

“There was a girlfriend.”

“She still there?”

“Probably. They had a lot of acres.”

“Why sheep? Why butter?”

“No call for private eyes in Montana. And Montana was where the girlfriend was.”

Reacher nodded. At first glance Stan Lowrey had not been an obvious candidate for a rural fantasy. He had been a big-boned black guy from some scruffy factory town in Western Pennsylvania, smart as a whip and hard as a railroad tie. Dark alleys and pool halls had seemed to be his natural habitat. But somewhere in his DNA there had been a clear link with the earth. Reacher wasn’t surprised he had become a farmer. He could picture him, in a raggedy old barn coat, knee-high in prairie grass, under a huge blue sky, cold but happy.

“Why can’t we raise the others?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Neagley said.

“What was Franz working on?”

“Nobody seems to have that information.”

“Didn’t the new wife say anything?”

“She isn’t new. They were married five years.”

“She’s new to me,” Reacher said.

“I couldn’t interrogate her, exactly. She was on the phone, telling me her husband was dead. And maybe she doesn’t know anyway.”

“We’re going to have to go ask her. She’s the obvious starting point here.”

“After we try the others again,” Neagley said.

Reacher picked up the five sheets of printed paper and gave three to Neagley and kept two for himself. She used her cell phone and he used a room phone on a credenza. They started dialing. His numbers were for Dixon and O’Donnell. Karla and Dave, the East Coast residents, New York and D.C. Neither one of them answered. He got their business office machines instead, and heard their long-forgotten voices. He left the same message for both of them: “This is Jack Reacher with a ten-thirty from Frances Neagley at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in Los Angeles, California. Get off your ass and call her back.” Then he hung up and turned to where Neagley was pacing and leaving the same kind of message for Tony Swan.

“Don’t you have home numbers for them?” he asked.

“They’re all unlisted. Which is only to be expected. Mine is, too. My guy in Chicago is working on it. But it’s not easy these days. Phone company computers have gotten a lot more secure.”

“They must be carrying cell phones,” he said. “Doesn’t everyone now?”

“I don’t have those numbers either.”

“But wherever they are they can call in and check their office voice mail remotely, can’t they?”

“Easily.”

“So why haven’t they? In three whole days?”

“I don’t know,” Neagley said.

“Swan must have a secretary. He’s an assistant director of something. He must have a whole staff.”

“All they’re saying is that he’s temporarily out of the office.”

“Let me try.” He took Swan’s number from her and hit nine for a line. Dialed. Heard the connection go through, heard Swan’s phone ringing on the other end.

And ringing, and ringing.

“No answer,” he said.

“Someone answered a minute ago,” Neagley said. “It’s his direct line.”

No answer. He held the phone at his ear and listened to the patient electronic purr. Ten times, fifteen, twenty. Thirty. He hung up. Checked the number and tried again. Same result.

“Weird,” he said. “Where the hell is he?”

He checked the paper again. Name and number. The address line was blank.

“Where is this place?” he asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“Does it have a name?”

“New Age Defense Systems. That’s how they’ve been answering.”

“What kind of a name is that for a weapons manufacturer? Like they kill you with kindness? They play Pan pipe music until you save them the trouble and slit your wrists?” He dialed information. Information told him there was no listing for New Age Defense Systems anywhere in the United States. He hung up.

“Can corporations be unlisted, too?” he asked.

Neagley said, “I guess so. In the defense business, certainly. And they’re new.”

“We have to find them. They must have a physical plant somewhere. At least an office, so Uncle Sam can send them checks.”

“OK, we’ll add that to the list. After the visit to Mrs. Franz.”

“No, before,” Reacher said. “Offices close. Widows are always around.”

So Neagley called her guy in Chicago and told him to track down a physical address for New Age Defense Systems. From the half of the conversation

Reacher could hear it seemed like the best way to proceed was to hack into FedEx's computer. Or UPS's, or DHL's. Everyone received packages, and couriers needed street addresses. They couldn't use post office boxes. They had to hand stuff across the transom to actual people and get signatures in return.

"Get cell phone numbers, too," Reacher called. "For the others."

Neagley covered the phone. "He's been on that for three days. It isn't easy." Then she hung up and walked to the window. Looked out and down at the people parking cars.

"So now we wait," she said.

They waited less than twenty minutes and then one of Neagley's laptops pinged to announce an e-mail incoming from Chicago.

10

The e-mail from Neagley's guy in Chicago contained New Age's address, courtesy of UPS. Or actually, two addresses. One in Colorado, one in East LA.

"Makes sense," she said. "Distributed manufacture. Safer that way. In case of attack."

"Bullshit," Reacher said. "It's about two lots of senators. Two lots of pork. Republicans up there, Democrats down here, they get their snouts in the trough both ways around."

"Swan wouldn't have gone there if that was all they were into."

Reacher nodded. "Maybe not."

Neagley opened a map and they checked the East LA address. It was out past Echo Park, past Dodger Stadium, somewhere in the no man's land between South Pasadena and East LA proper.

"That's a long way," Neagley said. "It could take forever. Rush hour has started."

"Already?"

"Rush hour in LA started thirty years ago. It'll finish when the oil runs out. Or the oxygen. But whatever, we won't make it over there before they close. So it might be better to save New Age for tomorrow and go see Mrs. Franz today."

"Like you said in the first place. You're playing me like a violin."

"She's closer, is all. And important."

"Where is she?"

"Santa Monica."

"Franz lived in Santa Monica?"

Franz lived in Santa Monica?

“Not on the ocean. But still, I bet it’s nice.”

It was nice. Way nicer than it could have been. It was a small bungalow on a small street trapped halfway between the 10 and the Santa Monica airport, about two miles inland. On the face of it, not a prime real estate location. But it was a beautifully presented house. Neagley drove past it twice, looking for a place to park. It was a tiny symmetrical structure. Two bay windows with the front door between them. An overhanging roof with a front porch below. Twin rocking chairs on the porch. Some stone, some Tudor beams, some Arts and Crafts influences, some Frank Lloyd Wright, Spanish tiles. A real confusion of styles in one very small building, but it worked. It had a lot of charm. And it was totally immaculate. The paint was perfect. It gleamed. The windows were clean. They shone. The yard was tidy. Green lawn, clipped. Bright flowers, no weeds. Short blacktop driveway, smooth as glass and swept clean. Calvin Franz had been a thorough and meticulous man, and Reacher felt he could see an expression of his old friend’s whole personality displayed right there in a little piece of real estate.

Eventually a pretty lady two streets away pulled her Toyota Camry out of a curbside spot and Neagley swerved the Mustang right in after her. She locked it up and they walked back together. It was late afternoon but still faintly warm. Reacher could smell the ocean.

He asked, “How many widows have we been to see?”

“Too many,” Neagley said.

“Where do you live?”

“Lake Forest, Illinois.”

“I’ve heard of that. It’s supposed to be a nice place.”

“It is.”

“Congratulations.”

“I worked hard for it.”

They turned together into Franz's street, and then into his driveway. They slowed a little on the short walk to the door. Reacher wasn't sure what they were going to find. In the past he had dealt with widows a lot fresher than one of seventeen days' vintage. Very often they hadn't even known they were widows until he had shown up and told them they were. He wasn't sure what difference the seventeen days were going to make. Didn't know where in the process she was going to be.

"What's her name?" he asked.

"Angela," Neagley said.

"OK."

"The kid is called Charlie. A boy."

"OK."

"Four years old."

"OK."

They stepped up on the porch and Neagley found a bell push and laid a fingertip on it, gently, briefly, respectfully, as if the electric circuit could sense deference. Reacher heard the sound of a muted bell inside the house, and then nothing. He waited. About a minute and a half later the door was opened. Apparently by nobody. Then Reacher looked down and saw a little boy stretching up to the handle. The handle was high and the boy was small and his stretch was so extreme that the arc of the door's travel was pulling him off his tiptoes.

"You must be Charlie," Reacher said.

"I am," the boy said.

"I was a friend of your dad's."

"My dad's dead."

"I know. I'm very sad about that."

"Me too."

“Is it OK to be opening the door all by yourself?”

“Yes,” the boy said. “It’s OK.”

He looked exactly like Calvin Franz. The resemblance was uncanny. The face was the same. The body shape was the same. The short legs, the low waist, the long arms. The shoulders were just skin and bone under a child’s T-shirt but somehow they already hinted at the simian bulk they would carry later. The eyes were Franz’s own, exactly, dark, cool, calm, reassuring. Like the boy was saying, *Don’t worry, everything will turn out fine.*

Neagley asked him, “Charlie, is your mom home?”

The boy nodded.

“She’s in back,” he said. He let the handle go and stepped away to let them enter. Neagley went first. The house was too small for any one part of it to be really in back of any other part. It was like one generous room divided into four quadrants. Two small bedrooms on the right with a bathroom between, Reacher guessed. A small living room in the left front corner and a small kitchenette behind it. That was all. Tiny, but beautiful. Everything was off-white and pale yellow. There were flowers in vases. The windows were shaded with white wooden shutters. Floors were dark polished wood. Reacher turned and closed the door behind him and the street noise disappeared and silence clamped down over the house. A good feeling, once upon a time, he thought. Now maybe not so good.

A woman stepped out of the kitchen area, from behind a half-wide dividing wall so abbreviated that it couldn’t have offered accidental concealment. Reacher felt she must have gone and hidden behind it, deliberately, when the doorbell rang. She looked a lot younger than him. A little younger than Neagley.

Younger than Franz had been.

She was a tall woman, white blonde, blue-eyed like a Scandinavian, and thin. She was wearing a light V-neck sweater and the bones showed in the front of her chest. She was clean and made up and perfumed and her hair was brushed. Perfectly composed, but not relaxed. Reacher could see wild bewilderment around her eyes, like a fright mask worn under the skin.

There was awkward silence for a moment and then Neagley stepped forward and said, “Angela? I’m Frances Neagley. We spoke on the phone.”

Angela Franz smiled in an automatic way and offered her hand. Neagley took it and shook it briefly and then Reacher stepped forward and took his turn. He said, “I’m Jack Reacher. I’m very sorry for your loss.” He took her hand, which felt cold and fragile in his.

“You’ve used those words more than a few times,” she said. “Haven’t you?”

“I’m afraid so,” Reacher said.

“You’re on Calvin’s list,” she said. “You were an MP just like him.”

Reacher shook his head. “Not just like him. Not nearly as good.”

“You’re very kind.”

“It’s how it was. I admired him tremendously.”

“He told me about you. All of you, I mean. Many times. Sometimes I felt like a second wife. Like he had been married before. To all of you.”

“It’s how it was,” Reacher said again. “The service was like a family. If you were lucky, that is, and we were.”

“Calvin said the same thing.”

“I think he got even luckier afterward.”

Angela smiled again, automatically. “Maybe. But his luck ran out, didn’t it?”

Charlie was watching them, Franz’s eyes half-open, appraising. Angela said, “Thank you very much for coming.”

“Is there anything we can do for you?” Reacher asked.

“Can you raise the dead?”

Reacher said nothing.

“Th[illegible]”

¨The way he used to talk about you, I wouldn´t be surprised if you could.´´

Neagley said, “We could find out who did it. That’s what we were good at. And that’s as close as we can come to bringing him back. In a manner of speaking.”

“But it won’t actually bring him back.”

“No, it won’t. I’m very sorry.”

“Why are you here?”

“To give you our condolences.”

“But you don’t know me. I came later. I wasn’t a part of all that.” Angela moved away, toward the kitchen. Then she changed her mind and turned back and squeezed sideways between Reacher and Neagley and sat down in the living room. Laid her palms on the arms of her chair. Reacher saw her fingers moving. Just a slight imperceptible flutter, like she was typing or playing an invisible piano in her sleep.

“I wasn’t part of the group,” she said. “Sometimes I wished I had been. It meant so much to Calvin. He used to say, *You do not mess with the special investigators.* He used it like a catchphrase, all the time. He would be watching football, and the quarterback would get sacked, something real spectacular, and he would say, *Yeah baby, you do not mess with the special investigators.* He would say it to Charlie. He would tell Charlie to do something, and Charlie would moan, and Calvin would say, *Charlie, you do not mess with the special investigators.*”

Charlie looked up and smiled. “You *do not* mess,” he said, in a little piping voice, but with his father’s intonation, and then he stopped, as if the longer words were too hard for him to say.

Angela said, “You’re here because of a slogan, aren’t you?”

“Not really,” Reacher said. “We’re here because of what lay behind the slogan. We cared about one another. That’s all. I’m here because Calvin would have been there for me if the shoe was on the other foot.”

“Would he have been?”

“I think so.”

“He gave up all of that. When Charlie was born. No pressure from me. But he wanted to be a father. He gave it all up apart from the easy, safe stuff.”

“He can’t have done.”

“No, I guess not.”

“What was he working on?”

“I’m sorry,” Angela said. “I should have asked you to sit down.”

There was no sofa in the room. No space for one. Any kind of a normal-sized sofa would have blocked access to the bedrooms. There were two armchairs instead, plus a half-sized wooden rocker for Charlie. The armchairs were either side of a small fireplace that held pale dried flowers in a raw china jug. Charlie’s rocker was to the left of the chimney. His name had been branded into the wood at the top of the back, with a hot poker or a soldering iron, seven letters, neat script. Tidy, but not a professional job. Franz’s own work, probably. A gift, father to son. Reacher looked at it for a moment. Then he took the armchair opposite Angela’s and Neagley perched on the arm next to him, her thigh less than an inch from his body, but not touching it.

Charlie stepped over Reacher’s feet and sat down in his wooden chair.

“What was Calvin working on?” Reacher asked again.

Angela Franz said, “Charlie, you should go out and play.”

Charlie said, “Mom, I want to stay here.”

Reacher asked, “Angela, what was Calvin working on?”

“Since Charlie came along he only did background checks,” Angela said. “It was a good business to be in. Especially here in LA. Everyone’s worried about hiring a thief or a junkie. Or dating one, or marrying one. Someone would meet someone on the internet or in a bar and the first thing they would do is Google the person and the second thing is they would call a private detective.”

“Where did he work?”

“He had an office in Culver City. You know, just a rental, one room. Where Venice meets La Cienega. It was an easy hop on the 10. He liked it there. I guess I’ll have to go and bring his things home.”

Neagley asked, “Would you give us permission to search it first?”

“The deputies already searched it.”

“We should search it again.”

“Why?”

“Because he must have been working on something bigger than background checks.”

“Junkies kill people, don’t they? And thieves, sometimes.”

Reacher glanced at Charlie, and saw Franz looking back at him. “But not in the way that it seems to have happened.”

“OK. Search it again if you want.”

Neagley asked, “Do you have a key?”

Angela got up slowly and stepped to the kitchen. Came back with two unmarked keys, one big, one small, on a steel split ring an inch in diameter. She cradled them in her palm for a moment and then she handed them to Neagley, a little reluctantly.

“I would like them back,” she said. “This is his own personal set.”

Reacher asked, “Did he keep stuff here? Notes, files, anything like that?”

“Here?” Angela said. “How could he? He gave up wearing undershirts when we moved here, to save on drawer space.”

“When did you move here?”

Angela was still standing. A slight woman, but she seemed to fill the tiny space.

“Just after Charlie came along,” she said. “We wanted a real home. We were very happy here. Small, but it was all we needed.”

“What happened the last time you saw him?”

“He went out in the morning, same as always. But he never came back.”

“When was that?”

“Five days before the deputies came over to tell me they had found his body.”

“Did he ever talk to you about his work?”

Angela said, “Charlie, do you need a drink?”

Charlie said, “I’m OK, Mom.”

Reacher asked, “Did Calvin ever talk to you about his work?”

“Not very much,” Angela said. “Sometimes the studios would want an actor checked out, to find out what bodies were buried. He would give me the showbiz gossip. That’s all, really.”

Reacher said, “When we knew him he was a pretty blunt guy. He would say what was on his mind.”

“He stayed that way. You think he upset someone?”

“No, I just wondered whether he ever got around to toning it down. And if not, whether you liked it or not.”

“I loved it. I loved everything about him. I respect honesty and openness.”

“So would you mind if I was blunt?”

“Go right ahead.”

“I think there’s something you’re not telling us.”

11

Angela Franz sat down again and asked, “What do you think I’m not telling you?”

“Something useful,” Reacher said.

“Useful? What could possibly be useful to me now?”

“Not just to you. To us, too. Calvin was yours, because you married him, OK. But he was ours too, because we worked with him. We have a right to find out what happened to him, even if you don’t want to.”

“Why do you think I’m hiding something?”

“Because every time I get close to asking you a question, you duck it. I asked you what Calvin was working on, and you made a big fuss about sitting us down. I asked you again, and you talked to Charlie about going out to play. Not to spare him hearing your answer, because you used the time you gained to decide you don’t have an answer.”

Angela looked across the tiny room, straight at him. “Are you going to break my arm now? Calvin told me he saw you break someone’s arm in an interview. Or was that Dave O’Donnell?”

“Me, probably,” Reacher said. “O’Donnell was more of a leg breaker.”

“I promise you,” Angela said. “I’m not hiding anything. Nothing at all. I don’t know what Calvin was working on and he didn’t tell me.”

Reacher looked back at her, deep into her bewildered blue eyes, and he believed her, just a little bit. She was hiding something, but it wasn’t necessarily about Calvin Franz.

“OK,” he said. “I apologize.”

He and Neagley left shortly after that, with directions to Franz’s Culver City

office, after further brief condolences and another shake of the cold, fragile hand.

The man called Thomas Brant watched them go. He was twenty yards from his Crown Victoria, which was parked forty yards west of Franz's house. He was walking up from a corner bodega with a cup of coffee. He slowed his gait and watched Reacher and Neagley from behind until they turned the corner a hundred yards ahead. Then he sipped his coffee and speed-dialed his boss, Curtis Mauney, one-handed, and left a voice mail describing what he had seen.

At that same moment, the man in the dark blue suit was walking back to his dark blue Chrysler sedan. The sedan was parked in the Beverly Wilshire's valet lane. The man in the suit was poorer by the fifty bucks that the desk clerk had accepted as a bribe, and therefore correspondingly richer in new information, but he was puzzled by the new information's implications. He called his boss on his cell and said, "According to the hotel the big guy's name is Thomas Shannon, but there was no Thomas Shannon on our list."

His boss said, "I think we can be sure that our list was definitive."

"I guess we can."

"Therefore it's safe to assume that Thomas Shannon is a phony name. Obviously old habits die hard with these guys. So let's stay on it."

Reacher waited until they were around the corner and out of Franz's street and said, "Did you see a tan Crown Vic back there?"

"Parked," Neagley said. "Forty yards west of the house, on the opposite curb. A base model '02."

"I think I saw the same car outside of the Denny's we were in."

"You sure?"

“Not certain.”

“Old Crown Vics are common cars. Taxis, gypsy cabs, rent-a-wrecks.”

“I guess.”

“It was empty anyway,” Neagley said. “We don’t need to worry about empty cars.”

“It wasn’t empty outside of Denny’s. There was a guy in it.”

“If it was the same car.”

Reacher stopped walking.

Neagley asked, “You want to go back?”

Reacher paused a beat and shook his head and started walking again.

“No,” he said. “It was probably nothing.”

The 10 was jammed eastbound. Neither one of them knew enough about LA geography to risk taking surface streets, so they covered the five freeway miles to Culver City slower than walking. They got to where Venice Boulevard crossed La Cienega Boulevard, and from there Angela Franz’s directions were good enough to take them straight to her late husband’s office. It was a bland storefront place in a long low tan strip that was anchored by a small post office. Not a flagship USPS operation. Just a single-wide store. Reacher didn’t know the terminology. A suboffice? A satellite? A postal delivery station? Next to it was a discount pharmacy, and then a nail salon and a dry cleaner’s. Then Franz’s place. Franz’s place had the door glass and the window painted over from the inside with tan paint that reached head-high and left just a narrow strip above for light to come through. The top of the paint was banded with a gold coach line edged in black. The legend *Calvin Franz Discreet Investigations* and a telephone number had been written on the door in the same gold and black style, plain letters, three lines, chest-high, simple and to the point.

“Sad,” Reacher said. “Isn’t it? From the big green machine to this?”

“He was a father,” Neagley said. “He was taking the easy money. It was his free choice. This was all he wanted now.”

“But I’m guessing your place in Chicago doesn’t look like this.”

“No,” Neagley said. “It doesn’t.”

She took out the keyring Angela had parted with so reluctantly. She selected the bigger key and tripped the lock and pulled the door. But she didn’t go in.

Because the whole place was trashed from top to bottom.

It had been a plain square space, small for a store, large for an office. Whatever computers and telephones and other hardware it had contained were all long gone. The desk and the file cabinets had been searched and then smashed with hammers and every joint and subassembly had been torn apart in a quest for concealed hiding places. The chair had been ripped apart and the stuffing had been pulled out. The wall boards had been crowbarred off the studs and the insulation had been shredded. The ceiling had been torn down. The floor had been pulled up. The bathroom appliances had been smashed into porcelain shards. There was wreckage and paper strewn everywhere down in the crawl space, knee-high throughout and worse in places.

Trashed, from top to bottom. Like a bomb blast.

Reacher said, “LA County deputies wouldn’t be this thorough.”

“Not a chance,” Neagley said. “Not even close. This was the bad guys tying up the loose ends. Retrieving whatever Franz had on them. Before the deputies even got here. Probably days before.”

“The deputies saw this and didn’t tell Angela? She didn’t know. She said she had to come over and bring his stuff home.”

“They wouldn’t tell her. Why upset her more?”

Reacher backed away on the sidewalk. Stepped to his left and looked at the neat gold lettering on the door: *Calvin Franz Discreet Investigations.* He raised his hand and blocked out his old friend’s name and in his mind tried *David O’Donnell* in its place. Then a pair of names: *Sanchez & Orozco.* Then: *Karla*

Dixon.

“I wish those guys were answering their damn phones,” he said.

“This thing is not about us as a group,” Neagley said. “It can’t be. It’s more than seventeen days old and nobody has come after me yet.”

“Or me,” Reacher said. “But then, neither did Franz.”

“What do you mean?”

“If Franz was in trouble, who would he call? The rest of us, that’s who. But not you, because you’re way upscale now and probably too busy. And not me, because nobody apart from you could ever find me. But suppose Franz got himself in deep shit and called the other guys? Because they were all more accessible than the two of us? Suppose they all came running out here to help? Suppose they’re all in the same boat now?”

“Including Swan?”

“Swan was the closest. He would have gotten here first.”

“Possible.”

“Likely,” Reacher said. “If Franz really needed someone, who else would he trust?”

“He should have called me,” Neagley said. “I would have come.”

“Maybe you were next on the list. Maybe at first he thought six people were enough.”

“But what kind of a thing can disappear six people? Six of *our* people?”

“I hate to think,” Reacher said, and then he went quiet. In the past he would have put his people up against anyone. Many times, he had. And they had always come through, against worse opponents than you normally find among the civilian population. Worse, because military training tended to enhance a criminal’s repertoire in several important areas.

Neagley said, “No point standing here. We’re wasting time. We’re not going to

find anything. I think we can assume they got what they came for."

Reacher said, "I think we can assume they didn't."

"Why?"

"Rule of thumb," Reacher said. "This place is trashed from top to bottom and side to side. Totally. And normally, when you find what you're looking for, you stop looking. But these guys never stopped looking. So if they found what they came for, by chance they found it in the very last place they chose to look. And how likely is that? Not very. So I think they never stopped looking because they never found what they wanted."

"So where is it?"

"I don't know. What would it be?"

"Paperwork, a floppy disc, a CD-ROM, something like that."

"Small," Reacher said.

"He didn't take it home. I think he was separating home and work."

Think like them. Be them. Reacher turned around and put his back to Franz's door as if he had just stepped out to the sidewalk. He cupped his hand and looked down at his empty palm. He had done plenty of paperwork in his life, but he had never used a computer disc or burned a CD-ROM. But he knew what one was. It was a five-inch round piece of polycarbonate. Often in a thin plastic case. A floppy disc was smaller. Square, about three inches, maybe? Letter-size paperwork would tri-fold down to eight and a half inches by about four.

Small.

But vital.

Where would Calvin Franz hide something small but vital?

Neagley said, "Maybe it was in his car. He drove back and forth, apparently. So if it was a CD, he could have kept it in his auto-changer. Like hiding it in plain sight. You know, maybe the fourth slot, after the John Coltrane stuff."

“Miles Davis,” Reacher said. “He preferred Miles Davis. He only listened to John Coltrane on Miles Davis albums.”

“He could have made it look like stuff he had downloaded. You know, he could have written *Miles Davis* on it with a marker pen.”

“They’d have found it,” Reacher said. “Guys this thorough, they’d have checked everything. And I think Franz would have wanted more security than that. Plain sight means it’s right there in front of you all the time. You can’t relax. And I think Franz wanted to relax. I think he wanted to get home to Angela and Charlie and not have things on his mind.”

“So where? A safe deposit box?”

“I don’t see a bank here,” Reacher said. “And I don’t think he would have wanted to take much of a detour. Not with this traffic. Not if there was some kind of urgency. And a bank’s lobby hours don’t necessarily suit a working stiff.”

“There are two keys on the ring,” Neagley said. “Although it’s possible the smaller one was for the desk.”

Reacher turned again and looked through the gloom at the drifts of trash and wreckage. The desk lock was in there somewhere, presumably. A small steel rectangle, torn out of the wood and dumped. He turned back and stepped to the curb. Looked left, looked right. Cupped his hand again and looked down at his empty palm.

First: *What would I hide?*

“It’s a computer file,” he said. “Got to be. Because they knew to look for it. Any kind of handwritten paperwork, Franz wouldn’t have told them anything about it. But probably they took his computers first and found some kind of traces that told them he’d been copying files. That happens, right? Computers leave traces of everything. But Franz wouldn’t tell them where the copies were. Maybe that’s why they broke his legs. But he kept quiet, which is why they had to come out here on this wild-assed search.”

“So where is it?”

Reacher looked down at his hand again.

Reacher looked down at his hand again.

Where would I hide something small and vital?

“Not under any old rock,” he said. “I would want somewhere structured. Maybe somewhere kind of custodial. I would want someone to be responsible.”

“A safe deposit box,” Neagley said again. “In a bank. The small key has no markings. Banks do that.”

“I don’t like banks,” Reacher said. “I don’t like the hours and I don’t like the detour. Once, maybe, but not often. Which is the issue. Because there’s some kind of regularity involved here. Isn’t there? Isn’t that what people do with computers? They back stuff up every night. So this wouldn’t be a one-time thing. It would be a matter of routine. Which changes things somewhat. A one-time thing, you might go to extraordinary lengths. Every night, you need something safe but easy. And permanently available.”

“I e-mail stuff to myself,” Neagley said.

Reacher paused a beat. Smiled.

“There you go,” he said.

“You think that’s what Franz did?”

“Not a chance,” Reacher said. “E-mail would have come straight back to his computer, which the bad guys had. They’d have spent their time trying to break down his password instead of busting up his building.”

“So what did he do?”

Reacher turned and glanced along the row of stores. The dry cleaner, the nail salon, the pharmacy.

The post office.

“Not e-mail,” he said. “Regular mail. That’s what he did. He backed up his stuff onto some kind of a disc and every night he put it in an envelope and dropped it in the mail. Addressed to himself. To his post office box. Because that’s where he got his mail. In the post office. There’s no slot in his door. Once the envelope

was out of his hand it was safe. It was in the system. With a whole bunch of custodians looking after it all day and all night."

"Slow," Neagley said.

Reacher nodded. "He must have had three or four discs in rotation. Any particular day, two or three of them would be somewhere in the mail. But he went home every night knowing his latest stuff was safe. It's not easy to rob a mail box or make a clerk give you something that doesn't belong to you. USPS bureaucracy is about as safe as a Swiss bank."

"The small key," Neagley said. "Not his desk. Not a safe deposit box."

Reacher nodded again.

"His post office box," he said.

12

But United States Postal Service bureaucracy cut two ways. It was late in the afternoon. The dry cleaner's was still open. The nail salon was open. The pharmacy was open. But the post office was closed. Lobby hours had ended at four o'clock.

"Tomorrow," Neagley said. "We're going to be in the car all day. We have to get to Swan's place, too. Unless we separate."

"It's going to take two of us here," Reacher said. "But maybe one of the others will show up and do some work."

"I wish they would. And not because I'm lazy." For form's sake, like a little ritual, she pulled out her cell phone and checked the tiny screen.

No messages.

There were no messages at the hotel desk, either. No messages on the hotel voice mail. No e-mails on either one of Neagley's laptop computers.

Nothing.

"They can't just be ignoring us," she said.

"No," Reacher said. "They wouldn't do that."

"I'm getting a real bad feeling."

"I've had a real bad feeling ever since I went to that ATM in Portland. I spent all my money taking someone to dinner. Twice. Now I wish we had stayed in and ordered pizza. She might have paid. I wouldn't know about any of this yet."

"She?"

“Someone I met.”

“Cute?”

“As a button.”

“Cuter than Karla Dixon?”

“Comparable.”

“Cuter than me?”

“Is that even possible?”

“Did you sleep with her?”

“Who?”

“The woman in Portland.”

“Why do you want to know that?”

Neagley didn’t answer. She just shuffled the five sheets of contact information like a card player and dealt Reacher two and kept three for herself. Reacher got Tony Swan and Karla Dixon. He used the landline on the credenza and tried Swan first. Thirty, forty rings, no answer. He dabbed the cradle and tried Dixon’s number. A 212 area code, for New York City. No answer. Six rings, and straight to a machine. He listened to Dixon’s familiar voice and waited for the beep and left her the same message he had left earlier: “This is Jack Reacher with a ten-thirty from Frances Neagley at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in Los Angeles, California. Get off your ass and call her back.” Then he paused a beat and added: “Please, Karla. We really need to hear from you.” Then he hung up. Neagley was closing her cell phone and shaking her head.

“Not good,” she said.

“They could all be on vacation.”

“At the same time?”

“They could all be in jail. We were a pretty rough bunch.”

“First thing I checked. They’re not in jail.”

Reacher said nothing.

Neagley said, “You really liked Karla, didn’t you? You sounded positively tender there, on the phone.”

“I liked all of you.”

“But her especially. Did you ever sleep with her?”

Reacher said, “No.”

“Why not?”

“I recruited her. I was her CO. Wouldn’t have been right.”

“Was that the only reason?”

“Probably.”

“OK.”

Reacher asked, “What do you know about their businesses? Is there any good reason why they should all be out of contact for days at a time?”

“I guess O’Donnell could have to travel overseas,” Neagley said. “His practice is pretty general. Marital stuff could take him to hotels down in the islands, I guess. Or anyplace, if he’s chasing unpaid alimony. Child abductions or custody issues could take him anywhere. People looking to adopt sometimes send detectives to Eastern Europe or China or wherever to make sure things are kosher. There are lots of possible reasons.”

“But?”

“I’d have to talk myself into really believing one of them.”

“What about Karla?”

“She could be down in the Caymans looking for someone’s money, I guess. But I imagine she’d do that on-line from her office. It’s not like the money is actually *there*.”

“So where is it?”

“It’s notional. It’s electricity in a computer.”

“What about Sanchez and Orozco?”

“They’re in a closed world. I don’t see why they would ever have to leave Vegas. Not professionally.”

“What do we know about Swan’s company?”

“It exists. It does business. It files. It has an address. Apart from that, not much.”

“Presumably it has security issues, or Swan wouldn’t have gotten hired.”

“All defense contractors have security issues. Or they think they ought to have, because they want to think what they do is important.”

Reacher said nothing to that. Just sat and stared out the window. It was getting dark. A long day, nearly over. He said, “Franz didn’t go to his office the morning he disappeared.”

“You think?”

“We know. Angela had his set of keys. He left them home. He was going somewhere else that day.”

Neagley said nothing.

“And the landlord at the strip mall saw the bad guys,” Reacher said. “Franz’s lock wasn’t broken. They didn’t take Franz’s key from him, because he didn’t have it in his pocket. Therefore they scammed one or bought one from the owner. Therefore the owner saw them. Therefore we need to find him tomorrow, along with everything else.”

“Franz should have called me,” Neagley said. “I would have dropped everything.”

“I wish he had called you,” Reacher said. “If you had been there, none of this bad stuff would have happened.”

Reacher and Neagley ate dinner in the downstairs restaurant, front corner of the lobby, where a bottle of still water from Norway cost eight dollars. Then they said goodnight and split up and headed for their separate rooms. Reacher’s was a chintzy cube two floors below Neagley’s suite. He stripped and showered and folded his clothes and put them under the mattress to press. He got into bed and folded his hands behind his head and stared up at the ceiling. Thought about Calvin Franz for a minute, in random flashing images, the same way a political candidate’s biography is squeezed into a thirty second television commercial. His memory made some of the pictures sepia and some of them washed out, but in all of them Franz was moving, talking, laughing, full of drive and energy. Then Karla Dixon joined the parade, petite, dark, sardonic, laughing with Franz. Dave O’Donnell was there, tall, fair, handsome, like a stockbroker with a switchblade. And Jorge Sanchez, durable, eyes narrowed, with a hint of a smile that showed a gold tooth and was as close as he ever came to showing contentment. And Tony Swan, as wide as he was high. And Manuel Orozco, opening and closing a Zippo lighter because he liked the sound so much. Even Stan Lowrey was there, shaking his head, drumming his fingers on a table to a rhythm only he could hear.

Then Reacher blinked all the pictures away and closed his eyes and fell asleep, ten-thirty in the evening, a long day, over.

Ten-thirty in the evening in Los Angeles was one-thirty the next morning in New York, and the last British Airways flight from London, delayed, had just landed at JFK. The delay meant that the last immigration watch in British Airways’ own terminal had already gone off duty, so the plane taxied to Terminal Four and fed its passengers through the giant arrivals hall there. Third in the visitors’ line was a first-class passenger who had napped in seat 2K for most of the trip. He was medium height, medium weight, expensively dressed, and he radiated the kind of expansive self-confident courtesy typical of people who know how lucky they are to have been rich all their lives. He was perhaps forty years old. He had thick black hair, shiny, beautifully cut, and the kind of

mid-brown skin and regular features that could have made him Indian, or Pakistani, or Iranian, or Syrian, or Lebanese, or Algerian, or even Israeli or Italian. His passport was British, and it passed the Immigration agent's scrutiny with no trouble at all, as did its owner's manicured forefingers on the electronic fingerprint pad. Seventeen minutes after unclipping his seat belt the guy was out in the shiny New York night, walking briskly to the head of the cab line.

13

At six the next morning Reacher went up to Neagley's suite. He found her awake and showered and guessed she had been working out somewhere for an hour. Maybe in her room, maybe in the hotel gym. Maybe she had been out jogging. She looked sleek and pumped up and vital in a way that suggested there was a whole lot of oxygenated blood doing the rounds inside her.

They ordered room service breakfast and spent the waiting time on another fruitless round of phone calls. No answer from East LA, none from Nevada, none from New York, none from Washington D.C. They didn't leave messages. They didn't redial or try again. And when they hung up, they didn't talk about it. They just sat in silence until the waiter showed up and then they ate eggs and pancakes and bacon and drank coffee. Then Neagley called down to the valet station and ordered her car.

"Franz's place first?" she asked.

Reacher nodded. "Franz is the focus here."

So they rode the elevator down and got in the Mustang together and crawled south on La Cienega to the post office at the tip of Culver City.

They parked right outside Franz's trashed office and walked back past the dry cleaner and the nail salon and the discount pharmacy. The post office was empty. A sign on the door said that the lobby had been open a half-hour. Clearly whatever initial rush there had been was over.

"We can't do this when it's empty," Reacher said.

"So let's find the landlord first," Neagley said.

They asked in the pharmacy. An old man in a short white coat was standing

under an old-fashioned security camera behind the dispensing counter. He told them that the guy who owned the dry cleaner's store was the landlord. He spoke with the kind of guarded hostility that tenants always use about the people who get their rent checks. He outlined a short success story in which his neighbor had come over from Korea and opened the cleaners and used the profits to leverage the whole strip mall. The American dream in action. Reacher and Neagley thanked him and walked past the nail salon and ducked into the cleaner's and found the right guy immediately. He was rushing around in a crowded work area heavy with the stink of chemicals. Six big drum machines were churning away. Pressing tables were hissing. Racks of bagged clothes were winding around on a motorized conveyor above head height. The guy himself was sweating. Working hard. It looked like he deserved two strip malls. Or three. Maybe he already had them. Or more.

Reacher got straight to the point. Asked, "When did you last see Calvin Franz?"

"I hardly ever saw him," the guy answered. "I couldn't see him. He painted over his window, first thing he ever did." He said it like he had been annoyed about it. Like he had known he was going to have to get busy with a scraper before he could rent the unit again.

Reacher said, "You must have seen him coming and going. I bet nobody here works longer hours than you."

"I guess I saw him occasionally," the guy said.

"When do you guess you stopped seeing him occasionally?"

"Three, four weeks ago."

"Just before the guys came around and asked you for his key?"

"What guys?"

"The guys you gave his key to."

"They were cops."

"The second set of guys were cops."

"So were the first."

“Did they show you ID?”

“I’m sure they did.”

“I’m sure they didn’t,” Reacher said. “I’m sure they showed you a hundred dollar bill instead. Maybe two or three of them.”

“So what? It’s my key and it’s my building.”

“What did they look like?”

“Why should I tell you?”

“Because we were Mr. Franz’s friends.”

“Were?”

“He’s dead. Someone threw him out of a helicopter.”

The dry cleaner just shrugged his shoulders.

“I don’t remember the guys,” he said.

“They trashed your unit,” Reacher said. “Whatever they paid you for the key won’t cover the damage.”

“Fixing the unit is my problem. It’s my building.”

“Suppose it was your pile of smoldering ashes? Suppose I came back tonight and burned the whole place down?”

“You’d go to prison.”

“I don’t think so. A guy with a memory as bad as yours wouldn’t have anything to tell the police.”

The guy nodded. “They were white men. Two of them. Blue suits. A new car. They looked like everybody else I see.”

“That’s all?”

“Just white men. Not cops. Too clean and too rich.”

Just white men. Not cops. Too clean and too rich.

“Nothing special about them?”

“I’d tell you if I could. They trashed my place.”

“OK.”

“I’m sorry about your friend. He seemed like a nice guy.”

“He was,” Reacher said.

14

Reacher and Neagley walked back to the post office. It was a small, dusty place. Government décor. It had gotten moderately busy again. Normal morning business was in full swing. There was one clerk working and a short line of waiting customers. Neagley handed Reacher Franz's keys and joined the line. Reacher stepped to a shallow waist-high counter in back and took a random form out of a slot. It was a demand for confirmation of delivery. He used a pen on a chain and bent down and pretended to fill out the form. He turned his body sideways and rested his elbow on the counter and kept his hand moving. Glanced at Neagley. She was maybe three minutes from the head of the line. He used the time to survey the rows of mail boxes.

They filled the whole end wall of the lobby. They came in three sizes. Small, medium, large. Six tiers of small, then below them four tiers of medium, then three tiers of large closest to the floor. Altogether one hundred eighty of the small size, ninety-six mediums, and fifty-four large. Total, three hundred thirty boxes.

Which one was Franz's?

One of the large ones, for sure. Franz had been running a business, and it had been the kind of business that would have generated a fair amount of incoming mail. Some of it would have been in the form of thick legal-sized packages. Credit reports, financial information, court transcripts, eight-by-ten photographs. Large, stiff envelopes. Professional journals. Therefore, a large box.

But which large box?

No way of telling. If Franz had been given a free choice, he would have picked the top row, three up from the floor, right-hand end. Who wants to walk farther than he needs to from the street door and then crouch all the way down on the linoleum? But Franz wouldn't have been given a free choice. You want a post office box, you take what's available at the time. Dead men's shoes. Someone dies or moves away, their box becomes free, you inherit it. Luck of the draw. A lottery. One chance in fifty-four.

Reacher put his left hand in his pocket and fingered Franz's key. He figured it would take between two and three seconds to test it in each lock. Worst case, almost three minutes of dancing along the array. Very exposed. Worse than worst case, he could be busy trying a box right in front of its legitimate owner who had just stepped in behind him. Questions, complaints, shouts, calls to the postal police, a potential federal case. Reacher had no doubt at all that he could get out of the lobby unharmed, but he didn't want to get out empty-handed.

He heard Neagley say: "Good morning."

He glanced left and saw her at the head of the counter line. Saw her leaning forward, commanding attention. Saw the counter clerk's eyes lock in on hers. He dropped the pen and took the key from his pocket. Stepped unobtrusively to the wall of boxes and tried the first lock on the left, three up from the floor.

Failure.

He rocked the key clockwise and counterclockwise. No movement. He pulled it out and tried the lock below. Failure. The one below that. Failure.

Neagley was asking a long complicated question about air mail rates. Her elbows were on the counter. She was making the clerk feel like the most important guy in the world. Reacher shuffled right and tried again, one box over, three up from the floor.

Failure.

Four down, fifty to go. Twelve seconds consumed, odds now improved from one-point-eight-five chances in a hundred to two chances in a hundred. He tried the next box down. Failure. He crouched, and tried the box nearest to the floor.

Failure.

He stayed in a crouch and shuffled right. Started the next column from the bottom up. No luck with the lowest. No luck with the one above. No luck with the third up. Nine down, twenty-five seconds elapsed. Neagley was still talking. Then Reacher was aware of a woman squeezing in on his left. Opening her box, high up. Raking out a dense mass of curled junk. Sorting it, as she stood there. *Move*, he begged her. *Step away to the trash receptacle.* She backed away. He stepped to his right and tried the fourth row. Neagley was still talking. The clerk

was still listening. The key didn't fit the top box. It didn't fit the middle box. It didn't fit the bottom box.

Twelve down. Odds now one in forty-two. Better, but not good. The key didn't fit anything in the fifth row. Nor the sixth. Eighteen down. One-third gone. Odds improving all the time. *Look on the bright side.* Neagley was still talking. He could hear her. He knew that behind her people in the line would be getting impatient. They would be shuffling their feet. They would be looking around, bored and inquisitive.

He started on the seventh row, at the top. Rocked the key. It didn't move. No go with the middle box. Nor the lowest. He shuffled right. Neagley had stopped talking. The clerk was explaining something. She was pretending not to understand. Reacher moved right again. The eighth row. The key didn't fit the top box. The lobby was going quiet. Reacher could feel eyes on his back. He dropped his hand and tried the middle box in the eighth row.

Rocked the key. The small metallic sound was very loud.

Failure.

The lobby was silent.

Reacher tried the lowest box in the eighth row.

Rocked the key.

It moved.

The lock opened.

Reacher stepped back a foot and swung the little door all the way open and crouched down. The box was stuffed. Padded envelopes, big brown envelopes, big white envelopes, letters, catalogs, magazines wrapped in plastic, postcards.

Sound came back to the lobby.

Reacher heard Neagley say, "Thank you very much for your help." He heard her footsteps on the tile. Heard the line behind her move up. Sensed people refocusing on their chances of getting their business done before they grew old and died. He slid his hand into the box and raked the contents forward. Butted

and died. He slid his hand into the box and raked the contents forward. Butted everything together into a steady stack and clamped it between his palms and stood up. Jammed the stack under his arm and relocked the box and pocketed the key and walked away like the most natural thing in the world.

Neagley was waiting in the Mustang, three doors down. Reacher leaned in and dumped the stack of mail on the center console and then followed it inside. Sorted through the stack and pulled out four small padded envelopes self-addressed in Franz's own familiar handwriting.

"Too small for CDs," he said.

He arranged them in date order according to the postmarks. The most recent had been stamped the same morning that Franz had disappeared.

"But mailed the night before," he said.

He opened the envelope and shook out a small silver object. Metal, flat, two inches long, three-quarters of an inch wide, thin, capped with plastic. Like something that would go on a keyring. It had *128 MB* printed on it.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Flash memory," Neagley said. "The new version of floppy discs. No moving parts and a hundred times the storage capacity."

"What do we do with it?"

"We plug it into one of my computers and we see what's on it."

"Just like that?"

"Unless it's password-protected. Which it probably will be."

"Isn't there software to help with that?"

"There used to be. But not anymore. Things get better all the time. Or worse, depending on your point of view."

"So what do we do?"

“We spend the drive time making mental lists. Likely choices for his password. The old-fashioned way. My guess is we’ll get three tries before the files erase themselves.”

She started the motor and eased away from the curb. Pulled a neat U-turn in the strip mall’s fire lane and headed back north to La Cienega.

The man in the dark blue suit watched them go. He was low down behind the wheel of his dark blue Chrysler sedan, forty yards away, in a slot that belonged to the pharmacy. He opened his cell phone and dialed his boss.

“This time they ignored Franz’s place completely,” he said. “They talked to the landlord instead. Then they were in the post office a long time. I think Franz must have been mailing the stuff to himself. That’s why we couldn’t find it. And they’ve probably got it now.”

15

Neagley plugged the flash memory into a socket on the side of her laptop computer. Reacher watched the screen. Nothing happened for a second and then an icon appeared. It looked like a stylized picture of the physical object she had just attached. It was labeled *No Name.* Neagley ran her forefinger over the touch pad and then tapped it twice.

The icon blossomed into a full-screen demand for a password.

“Damn,” she said.

“Inevitable,” he said.

“Ideas?”

Reacher had busted computer passwords many times before, back in the day. As always, the technique was to consider the person and think like them. *Be* them. Serious paranoids used long complex mixes of lower-case and upper-case letters and numbers that meant nothing to anyone, including themselves. Those passwords were effectively unbreakable. But Franz had never been paranoid. He had been a relaxed guy, serious about but simultaneously a little amused by security demands. And he was a words guy, not a numbers guy. He was a man of interests and enthusiasms. Full of affections and loyalties. Middlebrow tastes. A memory like an elephant.

Reacher said, “Angela, Charlie, Miles Davis, Dodgers, Koufax, Panama, Pfeiffer, M*A*S*H, Brooklyn, Heidi, or Jennifer.”

Neagley wrote them all down on a new page in her spiral-bound notebook.

“Why those?” she asked.

“Angela and Charlie are obvious. His family.”

“Too obvious.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Miles Davis was his favorite music, the Dodgers were his favorite team, and Sandy Koufax was his favorite player.”

“Possibilities. What’s Panama?”

“Where he was deployed at the end of 1989. I think that was the place he had the most professional satisfaction. He’ll have remembered it.”

“Pfeiffer as in Michelle Pfeiffer?”

“His favorite actress.”

“Angela looks a little like her, doesn’t she?”

“There you go.”

“M*A*S*H?”

“His all-time favorite movie,” Reacher said.

“More than ten years ago, when you knew him,” Neagley said. “There have been a lot of good movies since then.”

“Passwords come from down deep.”

“It’s too short. Most software asks for a minimum of six characters now.”

“OK, scratch M*A*S*H.”

“Brooklyn?”

“Where he was born.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Not many people did. They moved west when he was little. That’s what would make it a good password.”

“Heidi?”

“His first serious girlfriend. Hot as hell, apparently. Terrific in the sack. He was crazy about her.”

crazy about her?"

"I didn't know anything about that. Clearly I was excluded from the guy talk."

"Clearly," Reacher said. "Karla Dixon was, too. We didn't want to look emotional."

"I'm crossing Heidi off the list. Only five letters, and he was too much into Angela now anyway. He wouldn't have felt right using an old girlfriend's name for a password, however hot and terrific she was. I'm crossing Pfeiffer off for the same reason. And who was Jennifer? His second girlfriend? Was she hot, too?"

"Jennifer was his dog," Reacher said. "When he was a kid. A little black mutt. Lived for eighteen years. Broke him up when it died."

"Possibility, then. But that's six. We've only got three tries."

"We've got twelve tries," Reacher said. "Four envelopes, four flash memories. If we start with the earliest postmark we can afford to burn the first three. That information is old anyway."

Neagley laid the four flash memories on the hotel desk in strict date order. "You sure he wouldn't have changed his password daily?"

"Franz?" Reacher said. "Are you kidding? A guy like Franz latches onto a word that means something to him and he sticks with it forever."

Neagley clicked the oldest memory unit into the port and waited until the corresponding icon appeared on the screen. She clicked on it and tabbed the cursor straight to the password box.

"OK," she said. "You want to nominate a priority order?"

"Do the people names first. Then the place names. I think that's how it would have worked for him."

"Is *Dodgers* a people name?"

"Of course it is. Baseball is played by people."

Of course it is. Baseball is played by people.

“OK. But we’ll start with music.” She typed *MilesDavis* and hit *enter.* There was a short pause and then the screen redrew and came back with the dialog box again and a note in red: *Your first attempt was incorrect.*

“One down,” she said. “Now sports.”

She tried *Dodgers.*

Incorrect.

“Two down.” She typed *Koufax.*

The hard drive inside her laptop chattered and the screen went blank.

“What’s happening?” Reacher asked.

“It’s dumping the data,” she said. “Erasing it. It wasn’t *Koufax.* Three down.”

She pulled the flash memory out of the port and tossed it through a long silver arc into the trash can. Inserted the second unit in its place. Typed *Jennifer.*

Incorrect.

“Four down,” she said. “Not his puppy.”

She tried *Panama.*

Incorrect.

“Five down.” She tried *Brooklyn.*

The screen went blank and the hard drive chattered.

“Six down,” she said. “Not his old hood. You’re zip for six, Reacher.”

The second unit clattered into the trash and she plugged in the third.

“Ideas?”

“Your turn. I seem to have lost my touch.”

“What about his old service number?”

“I doubt it. He was a words guy, not a numbers guy. And for me anyway my number was the same as my Social Security number. Same for him, probably, which would make it too obvious.”

“What would you use?”

“Me? I *am* a numbers guy. Top row of the keyboard, all in a line, easy to get to. No typing skills required.”

“What number would you use?”

“Six characters? I’d probably write out my birthday, month, day, year, and find the nearest prime number.” Then he thought for a second and said, “Actually, that would be a problem, because there would be two equally close, one exactly seven less and one exactly seven more. So I guess I’d use the square root instead, rounded to three decimal places. Ignore the decimal point, that would give me six numbers, all different.”

“Weird,” Neagley said. “I think we can be sure Franz wouldn’t do anything like that. Probably nobody else in the world would do anything like that.”

“Therefore it would be a good password.”

“What was his first car?”

“Some piece of shit, probably.”

“But guys like cars, right? What was his favorite car?”

“I don’t like cars.”

“Think like him, Reacher. Did he like cars?”

“He always wanted a red Jaguar XKE.”

“Would that be worth a try?”

A man of interests and enthusiasms. Full of affections and loyalties.

“Maybe,” Reacher said. “It’s certainly going to be something special to him. Something talismanic, something that would give him a feeling of warmth just recalling the word. Either an early role model or a longstanding object of desire or affection. So the XKE might work.”

“Should I try it? We’ve only got six left.”

“I’d try it for sure if we had six hundred left.”

“Wait a minute,” Neagley said. “What about what Angela told us? The way he kept on saying you do not mess with the special investigators?”

“That would make a hell of a long password.”

“So break it down. Either *special investigators*, or *do not mess*.”

A memory like an elephant. Reacher nodded. “We had a good time back then, basically, didn’t we? So remembering the old days might have given him a warm feeling. Especially stuck out there in Culver City, busy doing nothing much. People enjoy nostalgia, don’t they? Like that song, ‘The Way We Were.’”

“It was a movie, too.”

“There you go. It’s a universal feeling.”

“Which should we try first?”

Reacher heard Charlie in his mind, the little boy’s piping treble: *You do not mess.*

“Do not mess,” he said. “Nine letters.”

Neagley typed *donotmess.*

Hit *enter*.

Incorrect.

“Shit,” she said.

She typed *specialinvestigators.* Held her finger over the enter key.

“That’s very long,” Reacher said.

“Yes or no?”

“Try it.”

Incorrect.

Neagley said, “Damn,” and went quiet.

Charlie was still in Reacher’s mind. And his tiny chair, with the neat branded name at the top. He could see Franz’s steady hand at work. He could smell the smoking wood. A gift, father to son. Probably intended to be the first of many. Love, pride, commitment.

“I like Charlie,” he said.

“Me too,” Neagley said. “He’s a cute kid.”

“No, for the password.”

“Too obvious.”

“He didn’t take this kind of stuff very seriously. He was going through the motions. Easier to put in any old thing than to reprogram the software to get around it.”

“Still too obvious. And he had to be taking it seriously. At least this time. He was in big trouble and he was mailing stuff to himself.”

“So it could be a double bluff. It’s obvious but it’s the last thing anyone would think of trying. That makes for a very effective password.”

“Possible but unlikely.”

“What are we going to find on there anyway?”

“Something we really need to see.”

“Try *Charlie* for me.”

Neagley shrugged and typed *Charlie.*

Hit *enter.*

Incorrect.

The hard disc spun up and the memory unit erased itself.

“Nine down,” Neagley said. She pitched the third unit into the trash and plugged the fourth one in. The last one. “Three to go.”

Reacher asked, “Who did he love before Charlie?”

“Angela,” Neagley said. “Way too obvious.”

“Try it.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m a gambler.”

“We’re down to our last three chances.”

“Try it,” he said again.

She typed *Angela.*

Hit *enter.*

Incorrect.

“Ten down,” she said. “Two to go.”

“What about Angela Franz?”

“That’s even worse.”

“What about her unmarried name?”

“I don’t know what it was.”

“Call her and ask.”

Call her and ask.

“Are you serious?”

“At least let’s find out.”

So Neagley thumbed through her notebook and found the number and fired up her cell phone. Introduced herself again. Small-talked for a moment. Then Reacher heard her ask the question. He didn’t hear Angela’s answer. But he saw Neagley’s eyes widen a fraction, which for her was about the same thing as falling on the floor with shock.

She hung up.

“It was Pfeiffer,” she said.

“Interesting.”

“Very.”

“Are they related?”

“She didn’t say.”

“So try it. It’s a perfect twofer. He feels good twice over and doesn’t have to feel disloyal at all.”

Neagley typed *Pfeiffer*.

Hit *enter*.

Incorrect.

16

The room was hot and stuffy. No air in it. And it seemed to have gotten smaller. Neagley said, “Eleven down. One to go. Do or die. Last chance.”

Reacher asked, “What happens if we don’t do anything?”

“Then we don’t get to see what’s on the file.”

“No, I mean do we have to do it right now? Or can it keep?”

“It’s not going anywhere.”

“So we should take a break. Come back to it later. One to go, we’ve got to pay attention.”

“Weren’t we already?”

“Clearly not the right kind of attention. We’ll go out to East LA and look for Swan. If we find him, he might have ideas. If not, then at least we’ll come back to this fresh.”

Neagley called down to the valet station again and ten minutes later they were in the Mustang heading east on Wilshire. Through Wilshire Center, through Westlake, through a dogleg south that took them straight through MacArthur Park. Then north and east on the Pasadena Freeway, past the concrete bulk of Dodger Stadium all alone in acres of empty parking. Then deep into a rat’s nest of surface streets bounded by Boyle Heights, Monterey Park, Alhambra, and South Pasadena. There were science parks and business parks and strip malls and old housing and new housing. The curbs were thick with parked cars and there was traffic everywhere, moving slow. A brown sky. Neagley had an austere Rand McNally map in the glove box. Looking at it was like looking at the surface of the earth from fifty miles up. Reacher squinted and followed the faint gray lines. Matched the street names on signposts to the street names on the map and pinpointed specific junctions about thirty seconds after they blew through them. He had his thumb on New Age’s location and steered Neagley

toward it in a wide ragged spiral.

When they got there they found a low sign of chiseled granite and a big prosperous mirror-glass cube set behind a tall hurricane fence topped with coils of razor wire. The fence was impressive at first sight, but only semi-serious, in that ten seconds and a pair of bolt cutters would get a person through it unscathed. The building itself was surrounded by a wide parking lot studded with specimen trees. The way the mirror glass reflected the trees and the sky made the building look like it was there and not there simultaneously.

The main gate was lightweight and standing wide open and there was no sentry post next to it. It was just a gate. Beyond it the lot was about half-full of parked cars. Neagley paused to let a photocopier truck out and then drove in and put the Mustang in a visitor slot near the entrance lobby. She and Reacher got out and stood for a moment. It was the middle of the morning and the air was warm and heavy. The neighborhood was quiet. It sounded like a whole lot of people were concentrating very hard, or else no one was doing very much of anything.

The reception entrance had a shallow step up to double glass doors that opened for them automatically and admitted them to a large square lobby that had a slate floor and aluminum walls. There were leather chairs and a long reception counter in back. Behind the counter was a blonde woman of about thirty. She was wearing a corporate polo shirt with *New Age Defense Systems* embroidered above her small left breast. Clearly she had heard the doors open but she waited until Reacher and Neagley were halfway across the floor before she looked up.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“We’re here to see Tony Swan,” Reacher said.

The woman smiled automatically and asked, “May I know your names?”

“Jack Reacher and Frances Neagley. We were good friends of his in the service.”

“Then please take a seat.” The woman picked up her desk phone and Reacher and Neagley stepped away to the leather chairs. Neagley sat down but Reacher stayed on his feet. He watched the dull aluminum reflection of the woman on the phone and heard her say, “Two friends of Tony Swan to see him.” Then she put the phone down and smiled in Reacher’s direction even though he wasn’t

looking directly at her. Then the lobby went quiet.

It stayed quiet for about four minutes and then Reacher heard the click of shoes on slate from a corridor that entered the lobby to the side of and behind the desk. A measured stride, no hurry, a person of medium height and medium weight. He watched the mouth of the corridor and saw a woman step into view. About forty years old, slim, brown hair stylishly cut. She was in a tailored black pant suit and a white blouse. She looked swift and efficient and had an open and welcoming expression on her face. She smiled a token thank you to the receptionist and walked straight past her toward Reacher and Neagley. Held out her hand and said, “I’m Margaret Berenson.”

Neagley stood up and she and Reacher said their names and shook hands with her. Up close she had old looping car crash scars under her makeup and the chilly breath of a big-time gum chewer. She was wearing decent jewelry, but no wedding band.

“We’re looking for Tony Swan,” Reacher said.

“I know,” the woman said. “Let’s find somewhere to talk.”

One of the aluminum wall panels was a door that led to a small rectangular conference room directly off the lobby. Clearly it was designed for discussions with visitors who didn’t merit admission into the inner sanctums. It was a cool spare space with a table and four chairs and floor-to-ceiling windows that gave directly onto the parking lot. The front bumper of Neagley’s Mustang was about five feet away.

“I’m Margaret Berenson,” the woman said again. “I’m New Age’s Human Resources director. I’ll get straight to the point, which is that Mr. Swan isn’t with us anymore.”

Reacher asked, “Since when?”

“A little over three weeks ago,” Berenson said.

“What happened?”

“I’d feel more comfortable talking about it if I knew for sure you have a connection with him. Anyone can walk up to a reception counter and claim to be old friends.”

old friends.

“I’m not sure how we could prove it.”

“What did he look like?”

“About five-nine tall and about five-eight wide.”

Berenson smiled. “If I told you he used a piece of stone as a paperweight, could you tell me where that piece of stone came from?”

“The Berlin Wall,” Reacher said. “He was in Germany when it came down. I saw him there just afterward. He took the train up and got himself a souvenir. And it’s concrete, not stone. There’s a trace of graffiti on it.”

Berenson nodded.

“That’s the story I heard,” she said. “And that’s the object I’ve seen.”

“So what happened?” Reacher asked. “He quit?”

Berenson shook her head.

“Not exactly,” she said. “We had to let him go. Not just him. You have to understand, this is a new company. It was always speculative, and there was always risk. In terms of our business plan, we’re not where we want to be. Not yet, anyway. So we reached the stage where we had to revise our staffing levels. Downward, unfortunately. We operated a last-in-first-out policy, and basically that meant we had to let the whole assistant management level go. I lost my own assistant director. Mr. Swan was Assistant Director of Security, so unfortunately the policy swept him away, too. We were very sorry to see him go, because he was a real asset. If things pick up, we’ll beg him to come back. But I’m sure he’ll have secured another position by then.”

Reacher glanced through the window at the half-empty parking lot. Listened to the quiet of the building. It sounded half-empty, too.

“OK,” he said.

“Not OK,” Neagley said. “I’ve been calling his office over and over for the last three days and every time I was told he had just stepped out for a minute. That doesn’t add up.”

doesn't add up."

Berenson nodded again. "That's a professional courtesy that I insist upon. With this caliber of management it would be a disaster for an individual if his personal network of contacts heard the news secondhand. Much better if Mr. Swan can inform people himself, directly. Then he can spin it however he wants. So I insist that the remaining secretarial staff tell little white lies during the readjustment period. I don't apologize for it, but I do hope you understand. It's the least I can do for the people we've lost. If Mr. Swan can approach a new employer as if it were a voluntary move, he's in a far better position than if everyone knew he'd been let go from here."

Neagley thought about it for a moment, and then she nodded.

"OK," she said. "I can see your point."

"Especially in Mr. Swan's case," Berenson said. "We all liked him very much."

"What about the ones you didn't like?"

"There weren't any. We would never hire people we didn't believe in."

Reacher said, "I called Swan and nobody answered at all."

Berenson nodded again, still patient and professional. "We had to cut the secretarial pool, too. The ones we kept on are covering five or six phones each. Sometimes they can't get to every call."

Reacher asked, "So what's up with your business plan?"

"I really can't discuss that in detail. But I'm sure you understand. You were in the army."

"We both were."

"Then you know how many new weapons systems work straight out of the gate."

"Not many."

"Not *any*. Ours is taking a little longer than we hoped."

"What kind of a weapon is it?"

What kind of a weapon is it?

“I really can’t discuss that.”

“Where is it made?”

“Right here.”

Reacher shook his head. “No, it isn’t. You’ve got a fence a three-year-old could walk through and no guard shack at the gate and an unsecured lobby. Tony Swan wouldn’t have let you get away with that if anything sensitive was happening here.”

“I really can’t comment on our procedures.”

“Who was Swan’s boss?”

“Our Director of Security? He’s a retired LAPD lieutenant.”

“And you kept him and let Swan go? Your last-in-first-out policy didn’t do you any favors there.”

“They’re all great people, the ones who stayed and the ones who went. We hated making the cut. But it was an absolute necessity.”

Two minutes later Reacher and Neagley were back in the Mustang, sitting in New Age’s parking lot, engine idling to run the air, with the full scope of the disaster plain to both of them.

“Really bad timing,” Reacher said. “Suddenly Swan is at loose ends, Franz calls him with a problem, what else is Swan going to do? He’s going to run right over there. It’s twenty minutes down the road.”

“He’d have gone anyway, unemployed or not.”

“They all would. And I guess they all did.”

“So are they all dead now?”

“Hope for the best, plan for the worst.”

Hope for the best, plan for the worst.

“You got what you wanted, Reacher. It’s just the two of us.”

“I didn’t want it for these reasons.”

“I just can’t believe it. *All* of them?”

“Someone’s going to pay.”

“You think? We’ve got nothing. We’ve got one last chance with a password. Which by definition we’ll be too nervous to take.”

“This is no kind of a time to be getting nervous.”

“So tell me what to type.”

Reacher said nothing.

They retraced their route through the surface streets. Neagley drove in silence and Reacher pictured Tony Swan making the same drive more than three weeks earlier. Maybe with the contents of his New Age desk boxed up in his trunk, his pens and pencils and his chip of Soviet concrete. On his way to help his old buddy. Other old buddies pouring in down spokes of an invisible wheel. Sanchez and Orozco hustling over from Vegas on the 15. O’Donnell and Dixon coming in on planes from the East Coast, toting luggage, taking taxis, assembling.

Meeting and greeting.

Running into some kind of a brick wall.

Then their images faded away and he was alone again with Neagley in the car. *Just the two of us.* Facts were to be faced, not fought.

Neagley left the car with the Beverly Wilshire valets and they entered the lobby from the rear through the crooked corridor. They rode up in the elevator in silence. Neagley used her key and pushed open her door.

Then she stopped dead.

Because sitting in her chair by the window, reading Calvin Franz's autopsy report, was a man in a suit.

Tall, fair, aristocratic, relaxed.

David O'Donnell.

17

O’Donnell looked up, somber. “I was going to inquire as to the meaning of all those rude and abusive messages on my answering machine.” Then he raised the autopsy report, an explanatory gesture. “But now I understand.”

Neagley asked, “How did you get in here?”

O’Donnell just said, “Oh, please.”

“Where the hell were you?” Reacher asked.

“I was in New Jersey,” O’Donnell said. “My sister was sick.”

“How sick?”

“Very sick.”

“Did she die?”

“No, she recovered.”

“Then you should have been here days ago.”

“Thanks for your concern.”

“We were worried,” Neagley said. “We thought they got you, too.”

O’Donnell nodded. “You should be worried. You should stay worried. It’s a worrying situation. I had to wait four hours for a flight. I used the time making calls. No answer from Franz, obviously. Now I know why, of course. No answer from Swan or Dixon or Orozco or Sanchez, either. My conclusion was that one of them had gotten all the others together and they had run into a problem. Not you or Reacher, because you’re too busy in Chicago and who the hell could ever find Reacher? And not me, because I was temporarily off the grid in New Jersey.”

“I wasn’t too busy,” Neagley said. “How could anyone think that? I’d have dropped everything and come running.”

O’Donnell nodded again. “At first that was the only thing that gave me hope. I figured they would have called you.”

“So why didn’t they? Don’t they like me?”

“If they hated you they’d still have called you. Without you it would have been like fighting with one hand behind their backs. Who would do that voluntarily? But in the end it’s perception that counts, not reality. You’re very high grade now compared to the rest of us. I think they might have hesitated with you. Maybe until it was too late.”

“So what are you saying?”

“I’m saying that one of them, and now I see that it would have been Franz, was in trouble, and he called all of us that he perceived as readily available. Which excluded you and Reacher by definition, and me also, by bad luck, because I wasn’t where I normally am.”

“That’s how we saw it, too. Except you’re a bonus. Your sister being sick was a stroke of luck for us. And for you, maybe.”

“But not for her.”

“Stop whining,” Reacher said. “She’s alive, isn’t she?”

“Nice to see you, too,” O’Donnell said. “After all these years.”

“How *did* you get in here?” Neagley asked.

O’Donnell shifted in his seat and took a switchblade from one coat pocket and a set of brass knuckles from the other. “A guy who can get these through airport security can get into a hotel room, believe me.”

“How did you get those through an airport?”

“My secret,” O’Donnell said.

“Ceramic,” Reacher said. “They don’t make them anymore. Because they don’t set the metal detector off.”

“Correct,” O’Donnell said. “No metal at all, apart from the switchblade spring,

which is still steel. But that's very small."

"It's good to see you again, David," Reacher said.

"Likewise. But I wish it were under happier circumstances."

"The circumstances just got fifty percent happier. We thought it was just the two of us. Now it's the three of us."

"What have we got?"

"Very little. You've seen what's in his autopsy report. Apart from that we've got two generic white men who tossed his office. Didn't find anything, because he was mailing stuff to himself in a permanent loop. We found his mail box and picked up four flash memories and we're down to the last try at a password."

"So start thinking about computer security," Neagley said.

O'Donnell took a deep breath and held it longer than seemed humanly possible. Then he exhaled, gently. It was an old habit.

"Tell me what words you've tried so far," he said.

Neagley opened her notebook to the relevant page and handed it over. O'Donnell put a finger to his lips and read. Reacher watched him. He hadn't seen him in eleven years, but he hadn't changed much. He had the kind of corn-colored hair that would never show gray. He had the kind of greyhound's body that would never show fat. His suit was beautifully cut. In the same way as Neagley, he looked settled and prosperous and successful. Like he was making it.

"*Koufax* didn't work?" he asked.

Neagley shook her head. "That was our third try."

"Should have been your first, out of this list. Franz related to icons, gods, people he admired, performances he idolized. Koufax is the only one of these that really fits the bill. The others are merely sentimental. Miles Davis perhaps, because he loved music, but ultimately he thought music was inessential."

"Music is inessential and baseball isn't?"

“Baseball is a metaphor,” O’Donnell said. “An ace pitcher like Sandy Koufax, a man of great integrity, all alone on the mound, the World Series, stakes high, that’s how Franz wanted to see himself. He probably wouldn’t have articulated it exactly that way, but I can tell you his password would have to be a worthy repository for his devotion. And it would be expressed in a brusque, masculine fashion, which would mean a surname only.”

“So what would you vote for?”

“It’s tough, with only one try left. I’d look like a real fool if I were wrong. What are we going to find on there anyway?”

“Something he felt was worth hiding.”

Reacher said, “Something he got his legs broken for. He didn’t give up anything. He drove them into a fury. His office looks like a tornado hit it.”

“What’s our ultimate aim here?”

“Seek and destroy. Is that good enough for you?”

O’Donnell shook his head.

“No,” he said. “I want to kill their families and piss on their ancestors’ graves.”

“You haven’t changed.”

“I’ve gotten worse. Have you changed?”

“If I have I’m ready to change back.”

O’Donnell smiled, briefly. “Neagley, what don’t you do?”

Neagley said, “You don’t mess with the special investigators.”

“Correct,” O’Donnell said. “You do not. Can we get some room service coffee?”

They drank thick strong coffee out of the kind of battered electro-plated jugs

found only in old hotels. They kept pretty quiet, but each of them knew the others were tracing the same mental circles, shying away from the last attempt at the password, examining the vector, trying to find another avenue forward, failing to, and starting all over again. Finally O'Donnell put his cup down and said, "Time to shit or get off the pot. Or fish or cut bait. Or however else you want to express it. Let's hear your ideas."

Neagley said, "I don't have any."

Reacher said, "You do it, Dave. You've got something in mind. I can tell."

"Do you trust me?"

"As far as I could throw you. Which would be pretty damn far, as skinny as you are. Exactly how far, you'll find out if you screw up."

O'Donnell got out of his chair and flexed his fingers and stepped over to the laptop on the desk. Put the cursor in the box on the screen and typed seven letters.

Took a breath and held it.

Paused.

Waited.

Hit *enter*.

The laptop screen redrew.

A file directory appeared. A table of contents. Big, bold, clear and obvious.

O'Donnell breathed out.

He had typed: *Reacher*.

18

Reacher spun away from the computer like he had been slapped and said, “Ah, man, that ain’t fair.”

“He liked you,” O’Donnell said. “He admired you.”

“It’s like a voice from the grave. Like a call.”

“You were here anyway.”

“It doubles everything. Now I can’t let him down.”

“You weren’t going to in the first place.”

“Too much pressure.”

“No such thing as too much pressure. We like pressure. We thrive on pressure.”

Neagley was at the desk, fingers on the laptop’s keyboard, staring at the screen.

“Eight separate files,” she said. “Seven of them are a bunch of numbers and the eighth is a list of names.”

“Show me the names,” O’Donnell said.

Neagley clicked on an icon and a word processor page opened. It contained a vertical list of five names. At the top, typed in bold and underlined, was *Azhari Mahmoud.* Then came four Western names: *Adrian Mount, Alan Mason, Andrew MacBride,* and *Anthony Matthews.*

“Initials are all the same,” O’Donnell said. “Top one is Arab, anywhere from Morocco to Pakistan.”

“Syrian,” Neagley said. “That would be my guess.”

“Last four names feel British,” Reacher said. “Don’t you think? Rather than American? English or Scottish.”

American? English or Scottish.

“Significance?” O’Donnell asked.

Reacher said, “At first glance I would say one of Franz’s background checks came up with a Syrian guy with four known aliases. Because of the five sets of common initials. Clumsy, but indicative. Maybe he’s got monogrammed shirts. And maybe the phony names are British because the paperwork is British, which would get around the kind of scrutiny that American paperwork would invite over here.”

“Possible,” O’Donnell said.

Reacher said, “Show me the numbers.”

Neagley closed the word processor document and opened the first of seven spreadsheets. It was nothing more than a page-long vertical list of fractions. At the top was *10/12.* At the bottom was *11/12.* In between were twenty-some similar numbers, including a repeated *10/12* and a *12/13* and a *9/10.*

“Next,” Reacher said.

The next spreadsheet was essentially identical. A long vertical column, starting with *13/14* and ending with *8/9.* Twenty-some similar numbers in between.

“Next,” Reacher said.

The third spreadsheet showed more or less exactly the same thing.

“Are they dates?” O’Donnell said.

“No,” Reacher said. “Thirteen-fourteen isn’t a date whether it’s month-day or day-month.”

“So what are they? Just fractions?”

“Not really. Ten-over-twelve would be written five-over-six if it was a regular fraction.”

“They’re like box scores, then.”

“For the game from hell. Thirteen for fourteen and twelve for thirteen would

"For the game from hell. Thirteen for fourteen and twelve for thirteen would imply lots of extra innings and a three-figure final score, probably."

"So what are they?"

"Show me the next one."

The fourth spreadsheet showed the same long vertical list of fractions. The denominators were pretty much the same as in the first three, twelves and tens and thirteens. But the numerators were generally smaller. There was a *9/12*, and an *8/13*. Even a *5/14*.

O'Donnell said, "If these are box scores, someone's slumping."

"Next," Reacher said.

The trend continued. The fifth sheet had a *3/12*, and a *4/13*. The best was a *6/11*.

"Someone's heading back to the minor leagues," O'Donnell said.

The sixth list had *5/13* as its best score and *3/13* as its worst. The seventh and last was about the same, varying between *4/11* and *3/12*.

Neagley looked up at Reacher and said, "You figure it out. You're the numbers guy. And Franz addressed all of this to you, after all."

"I was his password," Reacher said. "That's all. He didn't address anything to anyone. These aren't messages. He'd have made it clearer if he was trying to communicate. These are working notes."

"Very cryptic working notes."

"Can you print them out for me? I can't think without seeing them on paper."

"I can print them in the business center downstairs. That's why I stay in places like this now."

O'Donnell asked, "Why would they trash an office to look for a list of numbers?"

"Maybe they didn't," Reacher said. "Maybe they were looking for the list of names."

Neagley shut down the spreadsheets and reopened the word processor document. *Azhari Mahmoud, Adrian Mount, Alan Mason, Andrew MacBride, Anthony Matthews.*

“So who is this guy?” Reacher said.

Three time zones away in New York City it was three hours later in the day and the dark-haired forty-year-old man who could have been Indian, or Pakistani, or Iranian, or Syrian, or Lebanese, or Algerian, or Israeli, or Italian was crouching on a bathroom floor inside an expensive Madison Avenue hotel room. The door was closed. There was no smoke detector in the bathroom, but there was an extractor fan. The British passport issued to Adrian Mount was burning in the toilet pan. As always the inside pages went up easily. The stiff red covers burned slower. Page 31 was the laminated ID page. It burned slowest of all. The plastic curled and twisted and melted. The man used the hairdryer from the bathroom wall at a distance to fan the flames. Then he used the butt-end of his toothbrush to stir the ashes and the unburned flakes of paper. He lit another match and went after anything that was still recognizable.

Five minutes later Adrian Mount was flushed away and Alan Mason was on his way down to the street in the elevator.

19

Neagley detoured to the Beverly Wilshire's basement business center and printed out all eight of Franz's secret files. Then she joined O'Donnell and Reacher for lunch in the lobby restaurant. She sat between the two of them with the kind of look on her face that made Reacher think she was reliving a hundred similar meals.

And Reacher was doing the same thing himself. But back in the day they had been in creased BDUs and they had eaten in O Clubs or grimy off-post diners or they had shared sandwiches and pizza around battered metal desks. Now the déjà vu was corrupted by the new context. The room was dim and tall and stylish and full of people who could have been movie agents or executives. Actors, even. Neagley and O'Donnell looked right at home. Neagley was wearing baggy black high-waisted pants and a cotton T-shirt that fitted her like a second skin. Her face was tan and flawless and her makeup was so subtle it was like she was wearing none at all. O'Donnell's suit was gray with a slight sheen to it and his shirt was white and crisp and immaculate even though he must have put it on three thousand miles away. His tie was striped and regimental and perfectly knotted.

Reacher was in a shirt a size too small with a tear in the sleeve and a stain on the front. His hair was long and his jeans were cheap and his shoes were scuffed and he couldn't afford to pay for the dish he had ordered. He couldn't even afford to pay for the Norwegian water he was drinking.

Sad, he had said about Franz, when he had seen the strip mall office. *From the big green machine to this?*

What were Neagley and O'Donnell thinking about him?

"Show me the pages with the numbers," he said.

Neagley passed seven sheets of paper across the table. She had marked them in pencil, top right-hand corner, to indicate their order. He scanned them all, one through seven, quickly, looking for overall impressions. A total of 183 proper

fractions, not canceled. Proper, in that the numerator, the top number, was always smaller than the denominator, the bottom number. Not canceled, in that *10/12* and *8/10* were not expressed as *5/6* and *4/5*, which they would have been if the arithmetic convention had been properly followed.

Therefore, they were not really fractions at all. They were scores, or results, or performance assessments. They were saying *ten times out of twelve* or *eight times out of ten, something happened.*

Or didn't happen.

There were consistently twenty-six scores on each page, except for the fourth sheet, where there were twenty-seven.

The scores or the results or the ratios or whatever they were on the first three sheets looked pretty healthy. Expressed like a batting average or a win percentage, they hovered between a fine .870 and an excellent .907. Then there was a dramatic fall on the fourth sheet, where the overall average looked like a .574. The fifth, sixth, and seventh sheets got progressively more and more dismal, with a .368, a .308, and a .307.

"Got it yet?" Neagley asked.

"No clue," Reacher said. "I wish Franz was here to explain it."

"If he was here, we wouldn't be here."

"We could have been. We could have all gotten together from time to time."

"Like a class reunion?"

"It might have been fun."

O'Donnell raised his glass and said, "Absent friends."

Neagley raised her glass. Reacher raised his. They drank water that had frozen at the top of a Scandinavian glacier ten thousand years ago and then inched downward over centuries, before melting into mountain springs and streams, to the memory of four friends, five including Stan Lowrey, who they assumed they would never see again.

But they assumed wrong. One of their friends had just gotten on a plane in Las Vegas.

20

A waiter brought their food. Salmon for Neagley, chicken for Reacher, tuna for O'Donnell, who said, "I assume you've been to Franz's house."

"Yesterday," Neagley said. "Santa Monica."

"Anything there?"

"A widow and a fatherless child."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing that meant anything."

"We should go to all the houses. Swan's first, because it'll be the closest."

"We don't have his address."

"Didn't you ask the New Age lady?"

"Not worth it. She wouldn't have told us. She was very correct."

"You could have broken her leg."

"Those were the days."

Reacher asked, "Was Swan married?"

"I don't think so," Neagley said.

"Too ugly," O'Donnell said.

"Are you married?" Neagley asked him.

"No."

"Well, then."

“But for the opposite reason. It would upset too many other innocent parties.”

Reacher said, “We could try that UPS thing again. Swan probably got packages at home. If he wasn’t married he probably furnished his place from catalogs. I can’t see him shopping for chairs or tables or knives and forks.”

“OK,” Neagley said. She used her cell to call Chicago, right there at the table, and looked more like a movie executive than ever. O’Donnell leaned forward and looked across her to Reacher and said, “Go over the time line for me.”

“The dragon lady at New Age said Swan got fired more than three weeks ago. Call it twenty-four or twenty-five days. Twenty-three days ago Franz went out and never came back. His wife called Neagley fourteen days after the body was found.”

“For what reason?”

“Notification, pure and simple. She’s relying on the deputies from up where it happened.”

“What’s she like?”

“She’s a civilian. She looks like Michelle Pfeiffer. She’s halfway resentful of us for having been such good friends with her husband. Their son looks just like him.”

“Poor kid.”

Neagley covered her phone with her hand and said, “We got cell numbers for Sanchez, Orozco, and Swan.” She fumbled one-handed and took paper and pen from her purse. Wrote three numbers, ten digits each.

“Use them to get addresses,” Reacher said.

Neagley shook her head. “They don’t help. Sanchez’s and Orozco’s are corporate and Swan’s comes back to New Age.” She clicked off with her guy in Chicago and dialed the numbers she had listed, one after another.

“Straight to voice mail,” she said. “Switched off, all of them.”

“Inevitable,” Reacher said. “All the batteries ran out three weeks ago.”

“I really hate hearing their voices,” she said. “You know, you record your mail-box greeting, you have absolutely no idea what’s going to happen to you.”

“A little bit of immortality,” O’Donnell said.

A busboy took their plates away. Their waiter came back with dessert menus. Reacher scanned a list of confections priced higher than a night in a motel in most parts of the United States.

“Nothing for me,” he said. He thought Neagley was going to press him, but her cell phone rang. She answered it and listened and wrote some more on her slip of paper.

“Swan’s address,” she said. “Santa Ana, near the zoo.”

O’Donnell said, “Let’s hit the road.”

They used his car, a Hertz four-door with GPS navigation, and started the slow crawl south and east to the 5.

The man called Thomas Brant watched them go. His Crown Vic was parked a block away and he was sitting on a bench in the mouth of Rodeo Drive, surrounded by two hundred tourists. He used his cell and called Curtis Mauney, his boss. Said, “There are three of them now. It’s working like a charm. It’s like the gathering of the clans.”

Forty yards west, the man in the blue suit watched them go, too. He was slumped low in his blue Chrysler in a hairdresser’s lot on Wilshire. He dialed his boss and said, “There are three of them now. I think the new one must be O’Donnell. Therefore the bum is Reacher. They look like they’ve got the bit between their teeth.”

And three thousand miles away in New York City the dark-haired forty-year-old

was in the shared airline offices at Park and 42nd. He was buying an open round-trip ticket from LaGuardia to Denver, Colorado. He was paying for it with a Visa Platinum card in the name of Alan Mason.

21

Santa Ana was way south and east, past Anaheim, down in Orange County. The township itself was twenty miles west of the Santa Ana Mountains, where the infamous winds came from. Time to time they blew in, dry, warm, steady, and they sent the whole of LA crazy. Reacher had seen their effects a couple of times. Once he had been in town after liaising with the jarheads at Camp Pendleton. Once he had been on a weekend pass from Fort Irwin. He had seen minor barroom brawls end up as multiple first-degree homicides. He had seen burnt toast end up in wife-beating and prison and divorce. He had seen a guy get bludgeoned to the ground for walking too slow on the sidewalk.

But the winds weren't blowing that day. The air was hot and still and brown and heavy. O'Donnell's rented GPS had a polite insistent female voice that took them off the 5 south of the zoo, opposite Tustin. Then it led them through the spacious grid of streets toward the Orange County Museum of Art. Before they got there it turned them left and right and left again and told them they were approaching their destination. Then it told them they had arrived.

Which they clearly had.

O'Donnell coasted to a stop next to a curbside mail box tricked out to look like a swan. The box was a standard USPS-approved metal item set on a post and painted bright white. Along the spine at the top was attached a vertical shape jigsawed from a wooden board. The shape had a long graceful neck and a scalloped back and a kicked-up tail. It was painted white too, except for the beak, which was dark orange, and the eye, which was black. With the bulk of the box suggesting the swell of the bird's body it was a pretty good representation.

O'Donnell said, "Tell me Swan didn't make that."

"Nephew or niece," Neagley said. "Probably a housewarming gift."

"Which he had to use in case they visited."

"I think it's nice."

Behind the box a cast concrete driveway led to a double gate in a four-foot fence. Parallel to the driveway was a narrower concrete walkway that led to a single gate. The fence was made of green plastic-coated wire. All four gateposts were topped with tiny alloy pineapples. Both gates were closed. Both had store-bought *Beware of the Dog* signs on them. The driveway led to an attached one-car garage. The walkway led to the front door of a small plain stucco bungalow painted a sun-baked tan. The windows had corrugated metal awnings over them, like eyebrows. The door had a similar thing, narrower, set high. As a whole the place was serious, severe, adequate, unfrivolous. Masculine.

And quiet, and still.

“Feels empty,” Neagley said. “Like there’s nobody home.”

Reacher nodded. The front yard was grass only. No plantings. No flowers. No shrubs. The grass looked dry and slightly long, like a meticulous owner had stopped watering it and mowing it about three weeks ago.

There was no visible alarm system.

“Let’s check it out,” Reacher said.

They got out of the car and walked to the single gate. It wasn’t locked or chained. They walked to the door. Reacher pushed the bell. Waited. No response. There was a slab path around the perimeter of the building. They followed it counterclockwise. There was a personnel door in the side of the garage. It was locked. There was a kitchen door in the back wall of the house. It was locked, too. The top half of it was a single glass panel. Through it was visible a small kitchen, old-fashioned, unrenovated in maybe forty years, but clean and efficient. No mess. No dirty dishes. Appliances in speckled green enamel. A small table and two chairs. Empty dog bowls neatly side by side on a green linoleum floor.

Beyond the kitchen door was a slider with a step down to a small concrete patio. The patio was empty. The slider was locked. Behind it, drapes were partially drawn. A bedroom, maybe used as a den.

The neighborhood was quiet. The house was still and silent, except for a tiny subliminal hum that raised the hairs on Reacher’s arms and sounded a faint alarm in the back of his mind.

“Kitchen door?” O’Donnell asked.

Reacher nodded. O’Donnell put his hand in his pocket and came out with his brass knuckles. Ceramic knuckles, technically. But they didn’t have much in common with cups and saucers. They were made from some kind of a complex mineral powder, molded under tremendous pressure and bound with epoxy adhesives. They were probably stronger than steel and certainly they were harder than brass. And the molding process allowed wicked shapes in the striking surfaces. Being hit by a set wielded by a guy as big as David O’Donnell would be like being hit by a bowling ball studded with sharks’ teeth.

O’Donnell fitted them to his hand and balled his fist. He stepped to the kitchen door and tapped the glass backhand, quite gently, like he was trying to attract an occupant’s attention without startling him. The glass broke and a triangular shard fell backward into the kitchen. O’Donnell’s coordination was so good that his real knuckles stopped before they reached the jagged edges. He tapped twice more and cleared a hole big enough to get a hand through. Then he slipped the knuckles off and pushed his sleeve up on his forearm and threaded his hand through and turned the inside handle.

The door sagged open.

No alarm.

Reacher went in first. Took two steps and stopped. Inside, the hum he had sensed was louder. And there was a smell in the air. Both were unmistakable. He had heard similar sounds and smelled similar smells more times than he wanted to remember.

The hum was a million flies going crazy.

The smell was dead flesh, rotting and decomposing, leaking putrid fluids and gases.

Neagley and O’Donnell crowded in behind him. And stopped.

“We knew anyway,” O’Donnell said, maybe to himself. “This is not a shock.”

“It’s always a shock,” Neagley said. “I hope it always will be.”

She covered her mouth and nose. Reacher stepped to the kitchen door. There

She covered her mouth and nose. Reacher stepped to the kitchen door. There was nothing on the hallway floor. But the smell was worse out there, and the noise was louder. There were stray flies in the air, big and blue and shiny, buzzing and darting and hitting the walls with tiny papery sounds. They were in and out of a door that was standing partially open.

“The bathroom,” Reacher said.

The house was laid out like Calvin Franz’s, but it was bigger because the lots were larger in Santa Ana than they had been in Santa Monica. Cheaper real estate, more scope. There was a center hallway and each room was a real room, not just a corner of an open plan space. Kitchen in back, living room in front, separated by a walk-in closet. On the other side of the hallway, two bedrooms separated by a bathroom.

Impossible to say where the smell was coming from. It filled the house.

But the flies were interested in the bathroom.

The air was hot and foul. No sound, except the insane thrashing of the flies. On porcelain, on tile, on papered walls, on the hollow wood of the door.

“Stay here,” Reacher said.

He walked down the hallway. Two paces. Three. He stopped outside the bathroom. Nudged the door with his foot. An angry black cloud of flies billowed out at him. He turned away and batted the air. Turned back. Used his foot again and pushed the door all the way open. Fanned the air and peered through the buzzing insects.

There was a body on the floor.

It was a dog.

Once it had been a German shepherd, big, beautiful, maybe a hundred pounds, maybe a hundred and ten. It was lying on its side. Its hair was dead and matted. Its mouth was open. Flies were feasting on its tongue and its nose and its eyes.

Reacher stepped right into the bathroom. Flies swarmed around his shins. There was nothing in the tub. The toilet was empty. All the water was gone from the throat. There were towels undisturbed on the rails. Dried brown stains on the

floor. Not blood. Just leakage from failed sphincters.

Reacher backed out of the bathroom.

“It’s his dog,” he said. “Check the other rooms and the garage.”

There was nothing in the other rooms or the garage. No signs of struggle or disturbance, no sign of Swan himself. They regrouped in the hallway. The flies had settled back to their business in the bathroom.

“What happened here?” Neagley asked.

“Swan went out,” O’Donnell said. “Didn’t come back. The dog starved to death.”

“It died of thirst,” Reacher said.

Nobody spoke.

“The water bowl in the kitchen is dry,” Reacher said. “Then it drank what it could from the toilet. Probably lasted about a week.”

“Awful,” Neagley said.

“You bet. I like dogs. If I lived anywhere I’d have three or four. We’re going to rent a helicopter and we’re going to throw these guys out one by one in little pieces.”

“When?”

“Soon.”

O’Donnell said, “We’re going to need more than we’ve got now.”

Reacher said, “So let’s start looking.”

They took scraps of paper towel from the kitchen and balled them up and shoved them up their noses to combat the smell. Settled down to a long and serious search. O’Donnell took the kitchen. Neagley took the living room. Reacher took

Swan's bedroom.

They found nothing of any significance in any of those three places. Quite apart from the dog's predicament, it was clear that Swan had gone out expecting to return. The dishwasher was half-loaded and had not been run. There was food in the refrigerator and trash in the kitchen pail. Pajamas were folded under the pillow. A half-finished book was resting on the night table. It had one of Swan's own business cards jammed in it as a placeholder: *Anthony Swan, U.S. Army (Retired), Assistant Director of Corporate Security, New Age Defense Systems, Los Angeles, California.* On the bottom of the card was an e-mail address and the same direct-line phone number that Reacher and Neagley had tried so many times.

"What exactly does New Age make?" O'Donnell asked.

"Money," Reacher said. "Although less than it used to, I guess."

"Does it have a product or is it all research?"

"The woman we saw claimed they're manufacturing something somewhere."

"What exactly?"

"We have no idea."

The three of them tackled the second bedroom together. The one at the back of the house, with the draped slider and the step down to the empty patio. The room had a bed in it but was clearly used as a den most of the time. There was a desk and a phone and a file cabinet and a wall of shelves piled high with the kind of junk that a sentimental person accumulates.

They started with the desk. Three pairs of eyes, three separate assessments. They found nothing. They moved on to the file cabinet. It was full of the kind of routine paperwork any homeowner has. Property taxes, insurance, canceled checks, paid bills, receipts. There was a personal section. Social Security, state and federal income taxes, a contract of employment from New Age Defense Systems, paycheck stubs. It looked like Swan had made a decent living. In a month he had pulled down what Reacher could make last a year and a half.

There was stuff from a veterinarian. The dog had been female. Her name had been Maisi and her shots had all been up-to-date. She had been old but in good

health. There was stuff from an organization called People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. Swan had been a contributor. Big money. Therefore a worthwhile cause, Reacher guessed. Swan was nobody's fool.

They checked the shelves. Found a shoe box full of photographs. They were random snaps from Swan's life and career. Maisi the dog was in some of them. Reacher and Neagley and O'Donnell were in others, and Franz, and Karla Dixon, and Sanchez and Orozco, and Stan Lowrey. All of them long ago in the past, younger, different in crucial ways, blazing with youth and vigor and preoccupation. There were random pairings and trios from offices and squad rooms all over the world. One was a formal group portrait, all nine of them in Class A uniforms after a ceremony for a unit citation. Reacher didn't remember who had taken the picture. An official photographer, probably. He didn't remember what the citation had been for, either.

"We need to get going," Neagley said. "Neighbors might have seen us."

"We've got probable cause," O'Donnell said. "A friend who lives alone, no answer when we knocked on the door, a bad smell from inside."

Reacher stepped to the desk and picked up the phone. Hit *redial.* There was a rapid sequence of electronic blips as the circuit remembered the last number called. Then a purring ring tone. Then Angela Franz answered. Reacher could hear Charlie in the background. He put the phone down.

"The last call he made was to Franz," he said. "At home in Santa Monica."

"Reporting for duty," O'Donnell said. "We knew that already. Doesn't help us."

"Nothing here helps us," Neagley said.

"But what isn't here might," Reacher said. "His piece of the Berlin Wall isn't here. There's no box of stuff from his desk at New Age."

"How does that help us?"

"It might establish a time line. You get canned, you box up your stuff, you throw it in the trunk of your car, how long do you leave it there before you bring it in the house and deal with it?"

¨A day or two, maybe,´´ O´Donnell said. ¨A guy like Swan, he´s extremely pissed when it happens, but fundamentally he's a squared-away personality. He'd suck it up and move on fast enough."

"Two days?"

"Max."

"So all of this went down within two days of when New Age let him go."

"How does that help us?" Neagley asked again.

"No idea," Reacher said. "But the more we know the luckier we'll get."

They left through the kitchen and closed the door but didn't relock it. No point. The broken glass made it superfluous. They followed the slab path around the side of the garage to the driveway. Headed back to the curb. It was a quiet neighborhood. A dormitory. Nothing was moving. Reacher scanned left and right for signs of nosy neighbors and saw none. No onlookers, no furtive eyes behind twitching drapes.

But he did see a tan Crown Victoria parked forty yards away.

Facing them.

A guy behind the wheel.

22

Reacher said, “Come to a casual stop and turn around like you’re taking one last look at the house. Make conversation.”

O’Donnell turned.

“Looks like the married officers’ quarters at Fort Hood,” he said.

“Apart from the mail box,” Reacher said.

Neagley turned.

“I like it,” she said. “The mail box, I mean.”

Reacher said, “There’s a tan Crown Vic parked on the curb forty yards west. It’s tailing us. Tailing Neagley, to be precise. It was there when I met her on Sunset and it was there again outside Franz’s place. Now it’s here.”

O’Donnell asked, “Any idea who it is?”

“None at all,” Reacher said. “But I think it’s time to find out.”

“Like we used to?”

Reacher nodded. “Exactly like we used to. I’ll drive.”

They took one last look at Swan’s house and then they turned and walked slowly back to the curb. They slid into O’Donnell’s rental, Reacher in the driver’s seat, Neagley next to him in the front, O’Donnell behind him in the back. No seat belts.

“Don’t hurt my car,” O’Donnell said. “I didn’t get the extra insurance.”

“You should have,” Reacher said. “Always a wise precaution.”

He started the engine and eased away from the curb. Checked the view ahead, checked the mirror

checked the mirror.

Nothing coming.

He spun the wheel and stamped on the gas and pulled a fast U-turn across the width of the road. Hit the gas again and accelerated thirty yards. Jammed on the brakes and O'Donnell jumped out a yard in front of the Crown Vic and Reacher hit the gas and then the brake again and stopped dead level with the Crown Vic's driver's door. O'Donnell was already at the passenger window. Reacher jumped out and O'Donnell shattered the passenger glass with his knuckles and chased the driver out the other side of the car straight into Reacher's arms. Reacher hit him once in the gut and then again in the face. Fast and hard. The guy slammed back against the side of his car and went down on his knees. Reacher picked his spot and hit him a third time, a solid elbow against the side of his head. The guy fell sideways, slowly, like a bulldozed tree. He finished up jammed in the space between the Crown Vic's sill and the road. Sprawled out on his back, inert, unconscious, bleeding heavily from a broken nose.

"Well, that still works," O'Donnell said.

"As long as I do the hard part," Reacher said.

Neagley took hold of the loose folds of the guy's sport coat and flipped him on his side, so that the blood from his nose would pool on the blacktop rather than in the back of his throat. No point in drowning him. Then she pulled the flap of his coat open, looking for a pocket.

And then she stopped.

Because the guy was wearing a shoulder holster. An old well-used item, made of worn black leather. There was a Glock 17 in it. He was wearing a belt. The belt had a pouch for a spare magazine on it. And a pancake holder with a pair of stainless-steel handcuffs in it.

Police issue.

Reacher glanced inside the Crown Vic. There were pebbles of broken glass all over the passenger seat. There was a radio mounted under the dash.

Not a taxicab radio.

“Shit,” Reacher said. “We just took down a cop.”

“You did the hard part,” O’Donnell said.

Reacher crouched and put his fingers against the guy’s neck. Felt for his pulse. It was there, strong and regular. The guy was breathing. His nose was busted bad, which would be an aesthetic problem later, but he hadn’t been very good-looking to start with.

“Why was he tailing us?” Neagley said.

“We’ll work that out later,” Reacher said. “When we’re a long way from here.”

“Why did you hit him so hard?”

“I was upset about the dog.”

“This guy didn’t do that.”

“I know that now.”

Neagley dug through the guy’s pockets. Came out with a leather ID folder. There was a chrome-plated badge pinned inside it, opposite a laminated card behind a milky plastic window.

“His name is Thomas Brant,” she said. “He’s an LA County deputy.”

“This is Orange County,” O’Donnell said. “He’s outside of his jurisdiction. As he was on Sunset and in Santa Monica.”

“Think that will help us?”

“Not very much.”

Reacher said, “Let’s get him comfortable and get the hell out of here.”

O’Donnell took Brant’s feet and Reacher took his shoulders and they piled him into the rear seat of his car. They stretched him out and arranged him and left him in what medics call the recovery position, on his side, one leg drawn up, able to breathe, unlikely to choke. The Crown Vic was spacious. The engine was off and there was plenty of fresh air coming in through the broken window.

“He’ll be OK,” O’Donnell said.

“He’ll have to be,” Reacher said.

They closed the door on him and turned back to O’Donnell’s rental. It was still right there in the middle of the street, three doors open, engine still running. Reacher got in the back. O’Donnell drove. Neagley sat next to him. The polite voice inside the GPS set about guiding them back toward the freeway.

“We should return this car,” Neagley said. “Right now. And then my Mustang. He’ll have gotten both the plate numbers.”

“And then do what for transport?” Reacher asked.

“Your turn to rent something.”

“I don’t have a driver’s license.”

“Then we’ll have to take cabs. We have to break the link.”

“That means changing hotels, too.”

“So be it.”

The GPS wouldn’t allow adjustment on the fly. A liability issue. O’Donnell pulled over and stopped and altered the destination from the Beverly Wilshire to the Hertz lot at LAX. The unit took the change in its stride. There was a second’s delay while a *Calculating Route* bar spooled up and then the patient voice came back and told O’Donnell to turn around and head west instead of east, toward the 405 instead of the 5. Traffic was OK through the subdivisions and heavy on the freeway. Progress was slow.

“Tell me about yesterday,” Reacher said to Neagley.

“What about it?”

“What you did.”

“I flew into LAX and rented the car. Drove to the hotel on Wilshire. Checked in.

Worked for an hour. Then I drove up to the Denny's on Sunset. Waited for you."

"You must have been tailed all the way from the airport."

"Clearly. The question is, why?"

"No, that's the second question. The first question is, *how?* Who knew when and where you were coming in?"

"The cop, obviously. He put a flag against my name and Homeland Security tipped him off as soon as I bought my ticket."

"OK, why?"

"He's working on Franz. LA County deputies. I'm a known associate."

"We all are."

"I was the first to arrive."

"So are we suspects?"

"Maybe. In the absence of any others."

"How stupid are they?"

"They're about normal. Even we looked at known associates if we struck out everywhere else."

Reacher said, "You do not mess with the special investigators."

"Correct," Neagley said. "But we just messed with the LA County deputies. Big time. I hope they don't have a similar slogan."

"You can bet your ass they do."

LAX was a gigantic, sprawling mess. Like every airport Reacher had ever seen it was permanently half-finished. O'Donnell threaded through construction zones and perimeter roads and made it to the car rental returns. The different organizations were all lined up, the red one, the green one, the blue one, and

organizations were all lined up, the red one, the green one, the blue one, and finally the Hertz yellow. O'Donnell parked on the end of a long nose-to-tail line and a guy in a company jacket rushed up and scanned a barcode in the rear window with a handheld reader. That was it, vehicle returned, rental over. Chain broken.

"Now what?" O'Donnell said.

Neagley said, "Now we take the shuttle bus to the terminal and we find a cab. Then we check out of the hotel and the two of us come back here with my Mustang. Reacher can find a new hotel and start work on those numbers. OK?"

But Reacher didn't reply. He was staring across the lot, through the rental office's plate glass windows. At the line of people inside.

He was smiling. "What?" Neagley said. "Reacher, what?" "In there," Reacher said. "Fourth in line. See her?" "Who?" "Small woman, dark hair? I'm pretty sure that's Karla Dixon."

23

Reacher and Neagley and O'Donnell hurried across the lot, getting surer with every step. By the time they were ten feet from the office windows they were absolutely certain. It was Karla Dixon. She was unmistakable. *Dark and comparatively small, a happy woman who thought the worst of people.* She was right there, now third in line. Her body language said she was simultaneously impatient with and resigned to the wait. As always she looked relaxed but never quite still, always burning energy, always giving the impression that twenty-four hours in the day were not enough for her. She was thinner than Reacher remembered. She was dressed in tight black jeans and a black leather jacket. Her thick black hair was cut short. She had a black leather Tumi roll-on next to her and a black leather briefcase slung across her shoulder.

Then as if she felt their gazes on her back she turned around and looked straight at them, nothing much in her face, as if she had last seen them minutes ago instead of years ago. She smiled a brief smile. The smile was a little sad, as if she already knew what was happening. Then she jerked her head at the clerks behind the counter as if to say, *I'll be right there but you know how it is with civilians.* Reacher pointed at himself and Neagley and O'Donnell and held up four fingers and mouthed, *Get a four-seat car.* Dixon nodded again and turned back to wait.

Neagley said, "This is kind of biblical. People keep coming back to life."

"Nothing biblical about it," Reacher said. "Our assumptions were wrong, is all."

A fourth clerk came out of a back office and took up station behind the counter. Dixon went from being third in line to being served within about thirty seconds. Reacher saw the pink flash of a New York driver's license and the platinum flash of a credit card changing hands. The clerk typed and Dixon signed a bunch of stuff and then received a fat yellow packet and a key. She hoisted her briefcase and grabbed her roll-on and headed for the exit. She stepped out to the sidewalk. She stood in front of Reacher and Neagley and O'Donnell and looked at each of them in turn with a level, serious gaze. Said, "Sorry I'm late to the party. But then, it's not really much of a party, is it?"

“What do you know so far?” Reacher asked her.

Dixon said, “I only just got your messages. I didn’t want to wait around in New York for a direct flight. I wanted to be on the move. First flight out was through Las Vegas. I had a two-hour layover there. So I made some calls and did some running around. Some checking. And I found out that Sanchez and Orozco are missing. It seems that about three weeks ago they just vanished off the face of the earth.”

24

Hertz had given Dixon a Ford 500, which was a decent-sized four-seat sedan. She put her bags in the trunk and climbed in the driver's seat. Neagley sat next to her in the front and Reacher and O'Donnell squeezed in the back. Dixon started up and left the airport heading north on Sepulveda. She talked for the first five minutes. She had been working undercover as a new hire at a Wall Street brokerage house. Her client was a major institutional investor worried about illegalities. Like all undercover operatives who want to survive, she had stuck religiously to her cover, which meant she could afford no contact with her regular life. She couldn't call her office on her brokerage-supplied cell or on her brokerage-supplied landline from her brokerage-supplied corporate apartment, or get her e-mail on her brokerage-supplied BlackBerry. Eventually she had checked in clandestinely from a Port Authority pay phone and found the long string of increasingly desperate 10-30s on her machine. So she had ditched her job and her client and headed straight for JFK and jumped on America West. From the Vegas airport she had called Sanchez and Orozco and gotten no reply. Worse, their voice mail was full, which was a bad sign. So she had cabbed over to their offices and found them deserted with three weeks' worth of mail backed up behind the door. Their neighbors hadn't seen them in a long time.

"So that's it," Reacher said. "Now we know for sure. It's just the four of us left."

Then Neagley talked for five minutes. She gave the same kind of clear concise briefing she had given a thousand times before. No wasted words, no omitted details. She covered all the hard intelligence and all the speculation from Angela Franz's first phone call onward. The autopsy report, the small house in Santa Monica, the trashed Culver City office, the flash memories, the New Age building, O'Donnell's arrival, the dead dog, the unfortunate attack on the LA County deputy outside Swan's house in Santa Ana, the subsequent decision to ditch the Hertz cars to derail the inevitable pursuit.

"Well, that part is taken care of at least," Dixon said. "Nobody is following us now, so this car is clean for the time being."

"Conclusions?" Reacher asked.

Dixon thought for three hundred yards of slow boulevard traffic. Then she slid onto the 405, the San Diego Freeway, but heading north, away from San Diego, toward Sherman Oaks and Van Nuys.

“One conclusion, mainly,” she said. “This wasn’t about Franz calling only some of us because he assumed only some of us would be available. And it wasn’t about him calling only some of us because he underestimated the extent of his problem. Franz was way too smart for that. And too cautious now, apparently, what with the kid and all. So we need to shift the paradigm. Look at who’s here and who isn’t. I think this was about Franz calling only those of us who could get to him in a big hurry. Real fast. Swan, obviously, because he was right here in town, and then Sanchez and Orozco because they were only an hour or so away in Vegas. The rest of us were no good to him. Because we were all at least a day away. So this is about speed and panic and urgency. The kind of thing where half a day makes a difference.”

“Specifically?” Reacher asked.

“No idea. It’s a shame you burned the first eleven passwords. We could have seen what information was new or different.”

O’Donnell said, “It’s got to be the names. They were the only hard data.”

“Numbers can be hard data, too,” Dixon said.

“You’ll go blind figuring them out.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Sometimes numbers speak to me.”

“These won’t.”

There was quiet in the car for a moment. Traffic was moving OK. Dixon stayed on the 405 and blew through the intersection with the 10.

“Where are we headed?” she asked.

Neagley said, “Let’s go to the Chateau Marmont. It’s out of the way and discreet.”

“And expensive,” Reacher said. Something in his tone made Dixon take her eyes off the road and glance behind her. Neagley said, “Reacher’s broke.”

on the road and glance behind her. Neagley said, "Reacher's broke."

"I'm not surprised," Dixon said. "He hasn't worked in nine years."

"He didn't do much when he was in the army, either," O'Donnell said. "Why change the habit of a lifetime?"

"He's sensitive about other people paying for him," Neagley said.

"Poor baby," Dixon said.

Reacher said, "I'm just trying to be polite."

Dixon stayed on the 405 until Santa Monica Boulevard. Then she struck out north and east, aiming to pass through Beverly Hills and West Hollywood and to hit Sunset right at the base of Laurel Canyon.

"Mission statement," she said. "You do not mess with the special investigators. The four of us here have to make that stick. On behalf of the four of us who aren't here. So we need a command structure and a plan and a budget."

Neagley said, "I'll take care of the budget."

"Can you?"

"This year alone there's seven billion dollars of Homeland Security money washing around the private system. Some of it comes our way in Chicago and I own half of whatever part of it sticks in our books."

"So are you rich?"

"Richer than I was when I was a sergeant."

"We'll get it back anyway," O'Donnell said. "People get killed for love or money, and our guys sure as hell didn't get killed for love. So there's money in this somewhere."

"So are we agreed on Neagley staking the budget?" Dixon asked.

"What is this, a democracy?" Reacher said.

"Temporarily. Are we agreed?"

Four raised hands. Two majors and a captain, letting a sergeant pick up the tab.

“OK, the plan,” Dixon said.

“Command structure first,” O’Donnell said. “Can’t put the cart before the horse.”

“OK,” Dixon said. “I nominate Reacher for CO.”

“Me too,” O’Donnell said.

“Me three,” Neagley said. “Like it always was.”

“Can’t do it,” Reacher said. “I hit that cop. If it comes to it, I’m going to have to put my hands up for it and leave the rest of you to carry on without me. Can’t have a CO in that position.”

Dixon said, “Let’s cross that bridge if we come to it.”

“We’re coming to it,” Reacher said. “For sure. Tomorrow or the next day at the latest.”

“Maybe they’ll let it go.”

“Dream on. Would we have let it go?”

“Maybe he’ll be too shamefaced to report it.”

“He doesn’t have to report it. People will notice. He’s got a busted window and a busted nose.”

“Does he even know who you are?”

“He put Neagley’s name in the machine. He was tailing us. He knows who we are.”

“You can’t put your hands up for it,” O’Donnell said. “You’ll go to jail. If it comes to it, you’ll have to get out of town.”

“Can’t do that. If they don’t get me, they’ll come after you and Neagley as

accessories. We don't want that. We need boots on the ground here."

"We'll get you a lawyer. A cheap one."

"No, a good one," Dixon said.

"Whatever, I'll still be preoccupied," Reacher said.

Nobody spoke.

Reacher said, "Neagley should be CO."

"I decline," Neagley said.

"You can't decline. It's an order."

"It can't be an order until you're CO."

"Dixon, then."

"Declined," Dixon said.

"OK, O'Donnell."

"Pass."

Dixon said, "Reacher until he goes to jail. Then Neagley. All in favor?"

Three hands went up.

"You'll regret this," Reacher said. "I'll make you regret it."

"So what's the plan, boss?" Dixon asked, and the question sent Reacher spinning nine years into the past, to the last time he had heard anyone ask it.

"Same as ever," he said. "We investigate, we prepare, we execute. We find them, we take them down, and then we piss on their ancestors' graves."

25

The Chateau Marmont was a bohemian old pile on Sunset, near the foot of Laurel Canyon. All kinds of movie stars and rock stars had stayed there. There were plenty of photographs on the walls. Errol Flynn, Clark Gable, Marilyn Monroe, Greta Garbo, James Dean, John Lennon, Mick Jagger, Bob Dylan, Jim Morrison. Led Zeppelin and Jefferson Airplane had booked in there. John Belushi had died in there, after speedballing enough heroin and cocaine to take down every guest in the hotel. There were no photographs of him.

The desk clerk wanted IDs along with Neagley's platinum card, so they all checked in under their real names. No choice. Then the guy told them there were only three rooms available. Neagley had to be alone, so Reacher and O'Donnell bunked together and let the women have a room each. Then O'Donnell drove Neagley back to the Beverly Wilshire in Dixon's car to pick up their bags and check out. Then Neagley would take the Mustang back to LAX and O'Donnell would follow her in convoy to bring her back. It would be a three-hour hiatus. Reacher and Dixon would stay behind and spend the three hours working on the numbers.

They set up in Dixon's room. According to the desk guy, Leonardo DiCaprio had been in there once, but there was no remaining sign of him. Reacher laid the seven spreadsheets side by side on the bed and watched as Dixon bent down and scanned them, the same way some people read music or poetry.

"Two key issues," she said immediately. "There are no hundred percent scores. No ten out of ten, no nine out of nine."

"And?"

"The first three sheets have twenty-six numbers, the fourth has twenty-seven, and the last three all have twenty-six again."

“Which means what?”

“I don’t know. But none of the sheets is full. Therefore the twenty-six thing and the twenty-seven thing must mean something. It’s deliberate, not accidental. It’s not just a continuous list of numbers with page breaks. If it was, Franz could have gotten them onto six sheets, not seven. So it’s seven separate categories of something.”

“Separate but similar,” Reacher said. “It’s a descriptive sequence.”

“The scores get worse,” Dixon said.

“Radically.”

“And quite suddenly. They’re OK, and then they fall off a cliff.”

“But what are they?”

“No idea.”

Reacher asked, “What can be measured like that, repetitively?”

“Anything can, I guess. Could be mental health, answers to simple questions. Could be physical performance, coordination tasks. It could be that errors are being recorded, in which case the numbers are actually getting better, not worse.”

“What are the categories? What are we looking at? Seven of what?”

Dixon nodded. “That’s the key. We need to understand that first.”

“Can’t be medical tests. Can’t be any kind of tests. Why stick twenty-seven questions in the middle of a sequence where everything else is twenty-six questions? That would destroy consistency.”

Dixon shrugged and stood up straight. She took off her jacket and dumped it on a chair. Walked to the window and pulled a faded drape aside and looked out and down. Then up at the hills.

“I like LA,” she said.

“Me too, I guess,” Reacher said.

“I like New York better.”

“Me too, probably.”

“But the contrast is nice.”

“I guess.”

“Shitty circumstances, but it’s great to see you again, Reacher. Really great.”

Reacher nodded. “Likewise. We thought we’d lost you. Didn’t feel good.”

“Can I hug you?”

“You want to hug me?”

“I wanted to hug all of you at the Hertz office. But I didn’t, because Neagley wouldn’t have liked it.”

“She shook Angela Franz’s hand. And the dragon lady’s, at New Age.”

“That’s progress,” Dixon said.

“A little,” Reacher said.

“She was abused, way back. That was always my guess.”

“She’ll never talk about it,” Reacher said.

“It’s sad.”

“You bet.”

Karla Dixon turned to him and Reacher took her in his arms and hugged her hard. She was fragrant. Her hair smelled of shampoo. He lifted her off her feet and spun her around, a complete slow circle. She felt light and thin and fragile. Her back was narrow. She was wearing a black silk shirt, and her skin felt warm underneath it. He set her back on her feet and she stretched up tall and kissed his cheek.

“I’ve missed you,” she said. “Missed you all, I mean.”

“Me too,” he said. “I didn’t realize how much.”

“You like life after the army?” she asked.

“Yes, I like it fine.”

“I don’t. But maybe you’re reacting better than me.”

“I don’t know how I’m reacting. I don’t know whether I’m reacting at all. I look at you people and I feel like I’m just treading water. Or drowning. You all are swimming.”

“Are you really broke?”

“Almost penniless.”

“Me too,” she said. “I earn three hundred grand a year and I’m on the breadline. That’s life. You’re well out of it.”

“I feel that way, usually. Until I have to get back in it. Neagley put a thousand and thirty bucks in my bank account.”

“Like a ten-thirty radio code? Smart girl.”

“And for my airfare. Without that I’d still be on my way down here, hitch-hiking.”

“You’d be walking. Nobody in their right mind would pick you up.”

Reacher glanced at himself in an old spotted mirror. Six-five, two-fifty, hands as big as frozen turkeys, hair all over the place, unshaven, torn shirtcuffs up on his forearms like Frankenstein’s monster.

A bum.

From the big green machine to this.

Dixon said, “Can I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead.”

¨Go ahead.´

“I always wished we had done more than just work together.”

“Who?”

“You and me.”

“That was a statement, not a question.”

“Did you feel the same way?”

“Honestly?”

“Please.”

“Yes, I did.”

“So why didn’t we do more?”

“Wouldn’t have been right.”

“We ignored all kinds of other regulations.”

“It would have wrecked the unit. The others would have been jealous.”

“Including Neagley?”

“In her way.”

“We could have kept it a secret.”

Reacher said, “Dream on.”

“We could keep it a secret now. We’ve got three hours.”

Reacher said nothing.

Dixon said, “I’m sorry. It’s just that all of this bad stuff makes me feel that life is so short.”

Reacher said, “And the unit is wrecked now anyway.”

“Exactly.”

“Don’t you have a boyfriend back East?”

“Not right now.”

Reacher stepped back to the bed. Karla Dixon came over and stood right next to him, her hip against his thigh. The seven sheets of paper were still laid out in a line.

“Want to look at these some more?” Reacher asked.

“Not right now,” Dixon said.

“Me either.” He gathered them up and butted them together. Placed them on the nightstand and trapped them under the phone. Asked, “You sure about this?”

“I’ve been sure for thirteen years.”

“Me too. But it has to stay a secret.”

“Agreed.”

He took her in his arms and kissed her mouth. The shape of her teeth was new to his tongue. The buttons on her shirt were small and awkward.

26

Afterward they lay in bed together and Dixon said, “We need to get back to work.” Reacher rolled over to take the stack of papers off the nightstand, but Dixon said, “No, let’s do it in our heads. We’ll see more that way.”

“Will we?”

“Total of one hundred and eighty-three numbers,” she said. “Tell me about one hundred and eighty-three, *as* a number.”

“Not prime,” Reacher said. “It’s divisible by three and sixty-one.”

“I don’t care whether it’s prime or not.”

“Multiply it by two and you get three hundred and sixty-six, which is the number of days in a leap year.”

“So is this half a leap year?”

“Not with seven lists,” Reacher said. “Half of any kind of a year would be six months and six lists.”

Dixon went quiet.

Reacher thought: *Half a year.*

Half.

More than one way to skin a cat.

Twenty-six, twenty-seven.

He said, “How many days are there in half a year?”

“A regular year? Depends which half. Either one hundred and eighty-two or one hundred and eighty-three.”

“How do you make half?”

“Divide by two.”

“Suppose you multiplied by seven over twelve?”

“That’s more than half.”

“Then again by six over seven?”

“That would bring it back to exactly half. Forty-two over eighty-four.”

“There you go.”

“I don’t follow.”

“How many weeks in a year?”

“Fifty-two.”

“How many working days?”

“Two hundred sixty for five-day weeks, three hundred twelve for six-day weeks.”

“So how many days would there be in seven months’ worth of six-day working weeks?”

Dixon thought for a second. “Depends on which seven months you pick. Depends on where the Sundays fall. Depends on what day of the week January first is. Depends on whether you’re looking at a continuous run of months or cherry-picking.”

“Run the numbers, Karla. There are only two possible answers.”

Dixon paused a beat. “One hundred and eighty-two or one hundred and eighty-three.”

“Exactly,” Reacher said. “Those seven sheets are seven months’ worth of six-day working weeks. One of the long months only had four Sundays. Hence the twenty-seven-day anomaly.”

Dixon slid out from under the sheet and walked naked to where she had left her briefcase and came back with a leather Filofax diary. She opened it and put it on the bed and took the papers off the nightstand and arranged them in a line below the diary. Her eyes flicked back and forth, seven times.

“It’s this year,” she said. “It’s the last seven calendar months. Right up to the end of last month. Take out the Sundays, you get three twenty-six-day months, then one twenty-seven-day month, and then three more twenty-six-day months.”

“There you go,” Reacher said. “Some kind of six-day-a-week figures got worse and worse over the last seven months. Some kind of results. We’re halfway there.”

“The easy half,” Dixon said. “Now tell me what the figures mean.”

“Something was supposed to happen nine or ten or twelve or thirteen times a day Monday through Saturday and didn’t always come out right.”

“What kind of something?”

“I don’t know. What kind of a thing happens ten or twelve times a day?”

“Not Model-T Ford production, that’s for sure. It’s got to be something small scale. Or professional. Like a dentist’s appointments. Or a lawyer’s. Or a hairdresser’s.”

“There was a nail salon near Franz’s office.”

“They do more than that in a day. And how would nails relate to four people disappearing and a Syrian with four aliases?”

“I don’t know,” Reacher said.

“Me either,” Dixon said.

“We should shower and get dressed.”

“After.”

“After what?”

Dixon didn’t answer. Just walked back to the bed and pinned him to the pillow and kissed him again.

Two thousand horizontal and seven vertical miles away from them the dark-haired forty-year-old currently calling himself Alan Mason was in the front cabin of a United Airlines Boeing 757, en route from LaGuardia, New York, to Denver, Colorado. He was in seat 3A, with a glass of sparkling mineral water beside him on the armrest tray and a newspaper open on his lap. But he wasn’t reading it. He was gazing out the window instead, at the bright white clouds below.

And eight miles south of them the man in the dark blue suit in the dark blue Chrysler was tailing O’Donnell and Neagley back from the LAX Hertz lot. He had picked them up leaving the Beverly Wilshire. He had guessed they were flying out, so he had positioned himself to follow them to the airport terminals. When O’Donnell had swung back north on Sepulveda he had needed to scramble fast to get behind them. As a result he was ten cars back all the way. Which was good, he figured, in terms of inconspicuous surveillance.

27

O’Donnell said, “We’re nowhere at all,” and Neagley said, “We need to face facts. The trail is stone cold and we have virtually no useful data.”

They were in Karla Dixon’s bedroom. Leonardo DiCaprio’s old crib. The bed was made. Reacher and Dixon were showered and dressed and their hair was dry. They were standing well apart from each other. The seven spreadsheets were laid out on the dresser with the diary next to them. No one disputed that they represented the last seven calendar months. But no one saw how that information helped them, either.

Dixon looked at Reacher and asked, “What do you want to do, boss?”

“Take a break,” Reacher said. “We’re missing something. We’re not thinking straight. We should take a break and come back to it.”

“We never used to take breaks.”

“We used to have five more pairs of eyes.”

The man in the dark blue suit called it in: “They moved to the Chateau Marmont. And there’s four of them now. Karla Dixon showed up. So they’re all present and correct and accounted for.” Then he listened to his boss’s reply, and pictured him smoothing his tie over the front of his shirt.

Reacher went for a walk west on Sunset, alone. Solitude was still his natural condition. He took his money out of his pocket and counted it. Not much left. He ducked into a souvenir store and found a rail of discounted shirts. Last year’s styles. Or the last decade’s. On one end of the rail was a bunch of blue items with white patterns, shiny, some kind of a man-made material. Spread collars, short sleeves, square hems. He picked one out. It was like something his father might have worn to go bowling in the 1950s. Except three sizes larger. Reacher

was much bigger than his father had been. He found a mirror and jammed the hanger up under his chin. The shirt looked like it might fit him. It was probably wide enough in the shoulders. The short sleeves would solve the problem of trying to find something to accommodate the length of his arms. His arms were like a gorilla's, only longer and thicker.

With tax, the garment cost nearly twenty-one dollars. Reacher paid the guy at the register and then bit off the tags and stripped off his old shirt and put the new one on right there and then. Left it untucked. Tugged it down at the bottom and rolled his shoulders. With the top button open it fit pretty well. The sleeves were tight around his biceps but not so bad that his blood flow was imperiled.

"Got a trash can?" he asked.

The guy ducked down and came back with a round metal canister lined with a white plastic bag. Reacher balled up his old shirt and tossed it in.

"Barbershop near here?" he asked.

"Two blocks north," the guy said. "Up the hill. Shoeshines and haircuts in the corner of the grocery store."

Reacher said nothing.

"Laurel Canyon," the guy said, like an explanation.

The grocery store sold beer out of ice chests and coffee out of press-top flasks. Reacher took a medium cup of house blend, black, and headed for the barber's chair. It was an old-fashioned thing covered in red speckled vinyl. There were straight razors on the sink and a shoeshine chair nearby. A thin guy in a white wife-beater was sitting in it. He had needle tracks up and down his arms. He looked up and concentrated, like he was assessing the size of the task ahead of him.

"Let me guess," he said. "Shave and a haircut?"

"Two bits?" Reacher said.

"Eight dollars," the guy said

"Eight dollars," the guy said.

Reacher checked his pocket again.

"Ten," he said. "To include a shoeshine and the coffee."

"That all would be twelve."

"Ten is what I've got."

The guy shrugged and said, "Whatever."

Laurel Canyon, Reacher thought. Thirty minutes later he was down to his last dollar but his shoes were clean and his face was as smooth as it had ever been. His head was shaved almost as close. He had asked for a standard army buzz cut but the guy had given him something a whole lot closer to the Marine Corps version. Clearly not a veteran. Reacher paused a beat and checked the guy's arms again.

He asked, "Where can a person score around here?"

"You're not a user," the guy said.

"For a friend."

"You don't have any money."

"I can get some."

The guy in the wife-beater shrugged and said, "There's usually a crew behind the wax museum."

Reacher walked back to the hotel by staying in the low canyon streets for two blocks and then coming on it from the rear. Along the way he passed a dark blue Chrysler 300C parked on the curb. A guy in a dark blue suit was behind the wheel. The suit matched the sheet metal, more or less exactly. The engine was off and the guy was just waiting. Reacher assumed it was a livery car. A limo. He figured some enterprising car service owner had gotten a better price from the Chrysler dealership than the Lincoln dealership and had switched away from Town Cars. Figured he had dressed the drivers in matching suits, looking for an

Town Cars. Figured he had dressed the drivers in matching suits, looking for an edge. Reacher knew that LA was a tough market, in the limousine business. He had read about it somewhere.

Dixon and Neagley were polite about his new shirt but O'Donnell laughed at it. They all laughed at his haircut. Reacher didn't care. He caught sight of it in Dixon's spotted old mirror and had to agree it was a little extreme. It was a real whitewall. And he was happy to provide a moment of levity. They weren't going to get any light relief anyplace else, that was for sure. Together they had handled two years' worth of crimes, some of them gruesome, some of them merely venal, some of them cruel, some of them appalling, and they had joked their way through like cops everywhere. Black humor. The universal refuge. One time they had found a partially decomposed dead guy with a gardening shovel buried in what was left of his head and immediately rechristened the corpse Doug and laughed like drains. Later, in the court-martial proceeding, Stan Lowrey had slipped and used the nickname instead of the real name. A JAG defender hadn't understood the reference. Lowrey had laughed all over again on the witness stand and said, *Like, dug? Shovel in his head? Get it?*

No one was laughing now. It was different when it was your own.

The spreadsheets were back on the bed. One hundred and eighty-three days over a seven-month span. A total of 2,197 events. There was a new page next to them in Dixon's handwriting. She had extrapolated the numbers out to three hundred and fourteen days and 3,766 events in a complete year. Reacher guessed she had invited the others to brainstorm about what kind of a thing happens 3,766 times over three hundred and fourteen days in a year. But the rest of the page was blank. Nobody had come up with anything. The sheet with the five names was on the pillow. It was lying at a careless angle, like someone had been studying it and then thrown it down in frustration.

"There must be more than this," O'Donnell said.

"What exactly do you want?" Reacher said back. "Cliffs Notes?"

"I'm saying there isn't enough here for four people to have died for it."

Reacher nodded.

“I agree,” he said. “It ain’t much. Because the bad guys got practically everything. His computers, his Rolodex, his client list, his phone book. All we’ve got is the tip of the iceberg. Fragments. Like archaeological remains. But we better get used to it, because this kind of thing is all we’re ever going to get.”

“So what do we do?”

“Break the habit.”

“What habit?”

“Asking me what to do. I might not be here tomorrow. I imagine those deputies are gearing up right now. You’re going to have to start thinking for yourselves.”

“Until then what do we do?”

Reacher ignored the question. Turned instead to Karla Dixon and asked, “When you rented your car, did you get the extra insurance?”

She nodded.

“OK,” Reacher said. “Take another break. Then we’ll go get some dinner. My treat. Maybe like the last supper. I’ll meet you in the lobby in an hour.”

Reacher got Dixon’s Ford from the valets and drove east on Hollywood Boulevard. He passed the Entertainment Museum and Mann’s Chinese Theatre. Made the left on Highland. He was two blocks west of Hollywood and Vine, which was where the bad stuff had traditionally been. Now the bad stuff seemed to have migrated, which was usually the way. Law enforcement never really won. It just shoved stuff around, a block here, a block there.

Reacher pulled to the curb. There was a wide alley behind the wax museum. Really a vacant half-lot, gravel surface, unfenced, colonized by cars into a turning loop, recolonized by dealers into a drive-through facility. The operation was organized in the conventional triangulated manner. A buyer would drive in and slow up. A kid not more than eleven years old would approach. The driver would place his order and hand over his cash. The kid would run the cash to a bag man and then continue to a stash man and pick up the product. Meanwhile the driver would be crawling through a slow half-circle, ready to meet the kid

the driver would be crawling through a slow half-circle, ready to meet the kid again on the other side of the lot. Whereupon the transfer would be made and the driver would leave. The kid would run back to where he began and wait to start all over again.

A smart system. Complete separation of product and money, easy instant dispersal in three different directions if necessary, and no one was seen with anything except someone way too young to be prosecuted. The stash would be refreshed often, leaving the stash man holding the bare minimum at any one time. The cash bag would be emptied frequently, reducing potential losses and the bag man's vulnerability.

A smart system.

A system Reacher had seen before.

A system he had exploited before.

The bag man was literally a bag man. He was sitting on a concrete block in the middle of the lot with a black vinyl duffel at his feet. He was wearing sunglasses and would be armed with whatever was the handgun of choice that week.

Reacher waited.

A black Mercedes ML slowed and pulled into the lot. A pretty SUV, tinted windows, California vanity plates spelling out an acronym Reacher didn't understand. It paused at the entry and the kid ran up. His head barely reached the driver's window. But his hand did. It snaked up and came back down with a folded wad. The Mercedes eased forward and the kid ran over to the bag man. The wad went into the bag and the kid headed for the stash man. The Mercedes was beginning to turn its slow half-circle.

Reacher put Dixon's Ford in gear. Checked north, checked south. Hit the gas and turned the wheel and slammed into the lot. Ignored the worn circular path and aimed straight for the center of the space.

Straight for the bag man, accelerating, front wheels spraying gravel.

The bag man froze.

Ten feet before hitting him head-on Reacher did three things. He twitched the

wheel. He stamped on the brake. And he opened his door. The car slewed right and the front wheels washed into the loose stones and the door swung out through a moving arc and caught the guy like a full-on punch. It smacked him solidly from his waist up to his face. He went over backward and the car stopped dead and Reacher leaned down and grabbed the vinyl duffel left-handed from the floor. Pitched it into the passenger seat and hit the gas and slammed his door shut and pulled a tight U-turn inside the slow Mercedes. Roared back out of the lot and bounced over the curb onto Highland. In the mirror he saw dust in the air and confusion and the bag man flat on his back and two guys running. Ten yards later he was behind the bulk of the wax museum. Then he was through the light, back on Hollywood Boulevard.

Twelve seconds, beginning to end.

No reaction. No gunshots. No pursuit.

Nor would there be any, Reacher guessed. They would have clocked the plain-vanilla Ford and the appalling shirt and the short hair and put it down to an LAPD freelance looking to supplement his pension fund. The cost of doing business. And the Mercedes driver couldn't afford to say a word to anyone.

Yeah baby, you do not mess *with the special investigators.*

Reacher slowed and caught his breath and made a right and drove a complete counterclockwise scenic circle. Nichols Canyon Road, Woodrow Wilson Drive, and back on Laurel Canyon Boulevard. Nobody was behind him. He stopped on a deserted hairpin up high and emptied the bag and ditched it on the shoulder. Then he counted the money. Close to nine hundred dollars, mostly in twenties and tens. Enough for dinner. Even with Norwegian water. And a tip.

He got out and checked the car. The driver's door was a little dented, right in the center. The bag man's face. No blood. He got back in and buckled up. Ten minutes later he was in the Chateau Marmont's lobby, sitting in a faded velvet armchair, waiting for the others.

Twelve hundred miles northeast of the Chateau Marmont, the dark-haired forty-year-old calling himself Alan Mason was riding the underground train from his arrival gate to the Denver airport's main terminal. He was alone in the car,

sitting down, tired, but smiling all the same at the crazy bursts of jug-band music that preceded the station announcements. He figured they had been specified by a psychologist to reduce travel stress. In which case they were working. He felt fine. A lot more relaxed than he had any right to be.

28

Dinner cost Reacher way less than nine hundred bucks. Either out of taste or preference or respect for the context or deference to his economic predicament, the others opted for a noisy hamburger barn on Sunset, just east of the Mondrian Hotel. There was no Norwegian water on offer. Just tap and domestic beer and thick juicy patties and pickles and loud vintage rhythm and blues. Reacher looked right at home, in a fifties kind of a way. The others looked a little out of place. They were at a round table set for four. Conversation stopped and started as the pleasure of being among old friends was overtaken by memories of the others who were missing. Reacher mostly listened. The dynamic of the round table meant that no one person was dominant. The center of attention bounced back and forth randomly. After thirty minutes of reminiscence and catch-up the talk turned back to Franz.

O'Donnell said, "Start at the very beginning. If we believe his wife, he quit everything except routine database mining more than four years ago. So why would he suddenly launch into something this serious?"

Dixon said, "Because someone asked him to."

"Exactly," O'Donnell said. "This thing starts with his client. So who was it?"

"Could have been anybody."

"No," O'Donnell said. "It was someone special. He went the extra mile here. He broke a four-year habit for this guy. Kind of broke faith with his wife and son, too."

Neagley said, "It could have been a big payer."

"Or someone he was obligated to somehow," Dixon said.

Neagley said, "Or it might have looked routine at the get-go. Maybe he had no idea where it was leading. Maybe the client didn't, either."

Reacher listened. *It had to be someone special. Someone he was obligated to somehow.* He watched as O'Donnell took the floor, then Dixon, then Neagley. The vector bounced around between them and traced a heavy triangle in the air. Something stirred in the back of his mind. Something Dixon had said, hours ago, in the car leaving LAX. He closed his eyes, but he couldn't get it. He spoke up and the triangle changed to a square, to include him.

"We should ask Angela," he said. "If he had some kind of a longstanding big-deal client, he might have mentioned him at home."

"I'd like to meet Charlie," O'Donnell said.

"We'll go tomorrow," Reacher said. "Unless the deputies come for me. In which case you can go on ahead without me."

"Look on the bright side," Dixon said. "Maybe you gave the guy a concussion. Maybe he doesn't remember who he is, let alone who you are."

They walked back to the hotel and split up in the lobby. No appetite for a nightcap. Just an unspoken agreement to get some sleep and start work again bright and early. Reacher and O'Donnell headed up together. Didn't talk much. Reacher was asleep five seconds after his head hit the pillow.

He woke up again at seven o'clock in the morning. Early sun was coming in the window. David O'Donnell was coming in the door. In a hurry. Fully dressed, a newspaper under his arm, cardboard cups of coffee in both hands.

"I went for a walk," he said.

"And?"

"You're in trouble," he said. "I think."

"Who?"

“That deputy. He’s parked a hundred yards from here.”

“The same guy?”

“The same guy and the same car. He’s got a metal splint on his face and a garbage bag taped across his window.”

“Did he see you?”

“No.”

“What’s he doing?”

“Just sitting there. Like he’s waiting.”

29

They ordered breakfast in Dixon's room. First rule, learned a long time ago: Eat when you can, because you never know when the next chance will come. Especially when you're about to disappear into the system. Reacher shoveled eggs and bacon and toast down his throat and followed it with plenty of coffee. He was calm, but frustrated.

"I should have stayed in Portland," he said. "I might as well have."

"How did they find us so fast?" Dixon asked.

"Computers," Neagley said. "Homeland Security and the Patriot Act. They can search hotel registers anytime they want now. This is a police state."

"We are the police," O'Donnell said.

"We used to be."

"I wish we still were. You'd hardly have to break a sweat anymore."

"You guys get going," Reacher said. "I don't want you to get snarled up in this. We can't spare the time. So don't let the deputy see you leave. Go visit with Angela Franz. Chase the client. I'll get back to you when I can."

He drained the last of his coffee and headed back to his room. Put his folding toothbrush in his pocket and hid his passport and his ATM card and seven hundred of his remaining eight hundred dollars in O'Donnell's suit carrier. Because certain things can go missing, after an arrest. Then he took the elevator down to the lobby. Just sat in an armchair and waited. No need to turn the whole thing into a big drama, running up and down hotel corridors. Because, second rule, learned from a lifetime of bad luck and trouble: Maintain a little dignity.

He waited.

Thirty minutes. Sixty. The lobby had three morning papers, and he read them all. Every word. Sports, features, editorials, national, international. And business.

There was a story about Homeland Security's financial impact on the private sector. It quoted the same seven-billion-dollar figure that Neagley had mentioned. A lot of money. Surpassed only, the article said, by the bonanza for the defense contractors. The Pentagon still had more cash than anyone else, and it was still spreading it around like crazy.

Ninety minutes.

Nothing happened.

At the two-hour point Reacher got up and put the papers back on the rack. Stepped to the door and looked outside. Bright sun, blue sky, not much smog. A light wind tossing exotic trees. Waxed cars rolling past, slow and glittering. A fine day. The twenty-fourth day Calvin Franz hadn't been around to see. Nearly four whole weeks. Same for Tony Swan and Jorge Sanchez and Manuel Orozco, presumably.

There are dead men walking, as of right now. You don't throw my friends out of helicopters and live to tell the tale.

Reacher stepped outside. Stood for a second, exposed, like he was expecting sniper fire. Certainly there had been time to get whole SWAT teams into position. But the sidewalk was quiet. No parked vehicles. No innocuous florists' trucks. No bogus telephone linemen. No surveillance. He turned left on Sunset. Left again on Laurel Canyon Boulevard. Walked slow and kept close to hedges and plantings. Turned left again on the winding canyon road that ran behind the hotel.

The tan Crown Vic was dead ahead.

It was parked at the far curb, alone, isolated, a hundred yards away. Still, inert, engine off. Like O'Donnell had said, its broken front passenger window was taped over with a black garbage bag, pulled taut. The driver was in the seat. Just sitting there. Not moving, except for regular turns of his head. Rearview mirror, straight ahead, door mirror. The guy had a real rhythm going. Hypnotic. Rearview mirror, straight ahead, door mirror. Reacher caught a flash of an aluminum splint fixed across his nose.

The car looked low and cold, like it hadn't been run for many hours.

The guy was on his own, just watching and waiting.

The guy was on his own, just watching and waiting.

But for what?

Reacher turned around and backtracked the way he had come. Made it back to the lobby and back to his chair. Sat down again, with the seed of a germ of a new theory in his mind.

His wife called me, Neagley had said.

What did she want you to do?

Nothing, Neagley had said. *She was just telling me.*

Just telling me.

And then: Charlie swinging on the door handle. Reacher had asked: *Is it OK to be opening the door all by yourself?* And the little boy had said: *Yes, it's OK.*

And then: *Charlie, you should go out and play.*

And then: *I think there's something you're not telling us.*

The cost of doing business.

Reacher sat in the Chateau Marmont's velvet lobby armchair, thinking, waiting to be proved right or wrong by whoever came through the street door first, his old unit or a bunch of fired-up LA County deputies.

30

His old unit came through the door first. What was left of it, anyway. The remnant. O'Donnell and Neagley and Dixon, all of them fast and anxious. They stopped dead in surprise when they saw him and he raised a hand in greeting.

"You're still here," O'Donnell said.

"No, I'm an optical illusion."

"Outstanding."

"What did Angela say?"

"Nothing. She doesn't know anything about his clients."

"How was she?"

"Like a woman whose husband just died."

"What did you think of Charlie?"

"Nice kid. Like his dad. Franz lives on, in a way."

Dixon said, "Why are you still here?"

"That's a very good question," Reacher said.

"What's the answer?"

"Is the deputy still out there?"

Dixon nodded. "We saw him from the end of the street."

"Let's go upstairs."

They used the room that Reacher and O'Donnell were in. It was a little bigger than Dixon's, because it was a double. The first thing Reacher did was retrieve his money and his passport and his ATM card from O'Donnell's bag.

O'Donnell said, "Looks like you think you're sticking around."

"I think I am," Reacher said.

"Why?"

"Because Charlie opened the door all by himself."

"Which means?"

"Seems to me that Angela is a pretty good mom. Normal, at worst. Charlie was clean, well fed, well dressed, well balanced, well cared for, well looked after. So we can conclude that Angela is doing a conscientious job with the parenting thing. Yet she let the kid open the door to a couple of complete strangers."

Dixon said, "Her husband was just killed. Maybe she was distracted."

"More likely the opposite. Her husband was killed more than three weeks ago. My guess is she's over whatever initial reaction she had. Now she's clinging to Charlie more than ever because he's all she's got left. Yet she let the kid get the door. Then she told him to go out to play. She didn't say to go play in his room. She said, *Go out*. In Santa Monica? In a yard on a busy street full of passersby? Why would she do that?"

"I don't know."

"Because she knew it was safe."

"How?"

"Because she knew that deputy was watching the house."

"You think?"

"Why did she wait fourteen days before calling Neagley?"

"She was distracted," Dixon said again.

“Possibly,” Reacher said. “But maybe there’s another reason. Maybe she wasn’t going to call us at all. We were ancient history. She liked Franz’s current life better. Naturally, because she *was* Franz’s current life. We represented the bad old days, rough, dangerous, uncouth. I think she was disapproving. Or if not, then a little jealous.”

“I agree,” Neagley said. “That’s the impression I got.”

“So why did she call you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Think about it from the deputies’ point of view. Small department, limited resources. They find a dead guy in the desert, they ID him, they set the wheels in motion. They do it by the book. First thing they do is profile the victim. Along the way they find out that he used to be a part of a shit-hot investigative team in the military. And they find out that all but one of his old buddies are supposedly still around somewhere.”

“And they suspect us?”

“No, I think they dismiss us as suspects and they move right along. But they get nowhere. No clues, no leads, no breaks. They’re stuck.”

“So?”

“So after two weeks of frustration they get an idea. Angela has told them all about the unit and the loyalty and the old slogan, and they see an opportunity. Effectively they’ve got a freelance investigative team waiting in the wings. One that’s smart and experienced and above all one that’s going to be very highly motivated. So they prompt Angela to call us. Just to tell us, nothing more. Because they know that’s the exact same thing as winding up the Energizer Bunny. They know we’re going to get down here pretty damn fast. They know we’re going to look for answers. They know they can just stay in the shadows and watch us and piggy-back on whatever we do.”

“That’s ridiculous,” O’Donnell said.

“But I think it’s exactly what happened,” Reacher said. “Angela told them it was Neagley she had gotten on the phone, they put Neagley’s name on a watch list, they picked her up when she got to town, they tailed her and lay back in the

they picked her up when she got to town, they tailed her and lay back in the weeds and watched the rest of us show up one by one. And they've been watching everything we've been doing ever since. Police work by proxy. That's what Angela wasn't telling us. The deputies asked her to set us up as stalking horses and she agreed. And that's why I'm still here. There's no other explanation. They figure a busted nose is the price of doing business."

"That's nuts."

"Only one way to find out. Take a walk around the block and talk to the deputy."

"You think?"

"Dixon should go. She wasn't with us in Santa Ana. So if I'm wrong the guy probably won't shoot her."

31

Dixon went. She left the room without a word. O'Donnell said, "I don't think Angela was hiding anything today. So I don't think Franz had a client at all."

"How hard did you press her?" Reacher asked.

"We didn't need to press her. It was all right out there. She had nothing to tell us. It's inconceivable that Franz would have gotten into a thing like this for anyone except a big-deal regular customer who went back years, and it's inconceivable he could have had such a guy without Angela at least hearing a name."

Reacher nodded. Then he smiled, briefly. He liked his old team. He could rely on them, absolutely. No second-guessing. If Neagley and Dixon and O'Donnell went out with questions, they came back with answers. Always, whatever the issue, whatever it took. He could send them to Atlanta and they would come back with the Coke recipe.

Neagley asked, "What next?"

"Let's talk to the deputies first," Reacher said. "Specifically let's see if they went out to Vegas."

"To Sanchez and Orozco's office? Dixon was just there. It hadn't been disturbed."

"She didn't check their homes."

Dixon came back thirty minutes later. Said, "He didn't shoot me."

"That's good," Reacher said.

"I certainly thought so."

"Did he 'fess up to anything?"

“He didn’t confirm or deny.”

“Is he mad about his face?”

“Livid.”

“So what’s the story?”

“He called his boss. They want to meet with us. Here, an hour from now.”

“Who’s his boss?”

“A guy called Curtis Mauney. LA County Sheriff’s Department.”

“OK,” Reacher said. “We can do that. We’ll see what the guy has got. We’ll treat him like some asshole provost marshal. All take and no give.”

They waited the hour downstairs in the lobby. No stress, no strain. Military service teaches a person how to wait. O’Donnell sprawled on a sofa and cleaned his fingernails with his switchblade. Dixon read the seven spreadsheets over and over and then put them away and closed her eyes. Neagley sat alone in a chair against a wall. Reacher sat under an old framed photograph of Raquel Welch. The picture had been taken outside the hotel late in the afternoon and the light was as golden as her skin. The magic hour, photographers called it. Brief, glowing, lovely. Like fame itself, Reacher figured.

The dark-haired forty-year-old calling himself Alan Mason was waiting, too. He was waiting to take a clandestine meeting in his room in the Brown Palace Hotel in downtown Denver. He was uncharacteristically nervous and out of sorts. Three reasons. First, his room was dim and shabby. Not at all what he had been expecting. Second, he had a suitcase stacked against the wall. It was a dark gray hard-shell Samsonite, carefully selected like all his accessories, expensive enough to blend with his air of affluence but not ostentatious enough to attract undue attention. Inside it were bearer bonds and cut diamonds and Swiss bank access codes worth a lot of money. Sixty-five million U.S. dollars, to be exact, and the people he was going to be meeting with were not the kind of people a prudent person would trust around portable and untraceable assets.

prudent person would trust around portable and untraceable assets.

And third, he hadn't slept well. The night air had been full of an unpleasant smell. He had run through a mental checklist until he had identified it as dog food. Clearly there was a factory nearby and the wind was blowing in an unfortunate direction. Then he had lain awake and worried about the dog food's ingredients. Meat, obviously. But he knew that smell was a physical mechanism that depended on the impact of actual molecules on the nasal lining. Therefore, technically, actual fragments of meat were entering his nostrils. They were in contact with his body. And there were certain meats that Azhari Mahmoud should not be in contact with, ever, under any circumstances.

He stepped to the bathroom. Washed his face for the fifth time that day. Looked at himself in the mirror. Clamped his jaw. He wasn't Azhari Mahmoud. Not right then. He was Alan Mason, a Westerner, and there was a job to be done.

First in through the Chateau Marmont's lobby door was the banged-up deputy himself, Thomas Brant. He had a vivid bruise on the side of his forehead and the sculptured metal splint on his face was taped to his cheekbones so tight that the skin around his eyes was distorted. He was walking like he hurt. He looked about one-third mad as hell that he had been taken down and one-third sheepish that he had let it happen and one-third pissed that he had to swallow his feelings for the sake of the job. He was followed in by an older guy that had to be his boss, Curtis Mauney. Mauney looked to be approaching fifty. He was short and solid and had the kind of worn look a guy gets when he has been in the same line of work too long. His hair was dyed a dull black that didn't match his eyebrows. He was carrying a battered leather briefcase. He asked, "Which one of you assholes hit my guy?"

"Does it matter?" Reacher said.

"Shouldn't have happened."

"Don't feel bad about it. He didn't stand a chance. It was three-on-one. Even though one of the three was a girl."

Neagley gave him a look that would have blinded him if looks were knives.

Mauney shook his head and said, “I’m not criticizing my guy’s self-defense capabilities. I’m saying you don’t come down here and start hitting cops.”

Reacher said, “He was outside of his jurisdiction, he hadn’t identified himself, and he was acting in a suspicious manner. He was asking for it.”

“Why are you here anyway?”

“For our friend’s funeral.”

“The body hasn’t been released yet.”

“So we’ll wait.”

“Was it you who hit my guy?”

Reacher nodded. “I apologize. But all you had to do was ask.”

“For what?”

“For our help.”

Mauney looked blank. “You think we brought you here to help?” “Didn’t you?”

Mauney shook his head. “No,” he said. “We brought you here as bait.”

32

Thomas Brant stayed on his feet, surly, unwilling to make the kind of social gesture that sitting down as part of the group would represent. But his boss, Curtis Mauney, took a chair. He sat down and tucked his briefcase between his ankles and put his elbows on his knees.

“Let’s get a couple of things straight,” he said. “We’re LA County sheriffs. We’re not hicks from the sticks, we’re not idiots, and we’re nobody’s poor relations. We’re fast and smart and proactive and light on our feet. We knew every detail of Calvin Franz’s life within twelve hours of finding his body. Including the fact that he was one of eight survivors of an elite military unit. And within twenty-four hours we knew for sure that three other members of that unit were missing also. One from right here in LA, and two from Vegas. Which calls into question exactly how elite you all were, wouldn’t you say? You’re fifty percent MIA in the blink of an eye.”

Reacher said, “I would need to know who the opposition was before I came to any performance conclusions.”

“Whoever, it wasn’t the Red Army.”

“We never fought the Red Army. We fought the U.S. Army.”

“So I’ll ask around,” Mauney said. “I’ll check if the 81st Airborne just won any major victories.”

“Your thesis is someone’s hunting all eight of us?”

“I don’t know what my thesis is. But that’s certainly a possibility. Therefore, flushing you four out was a win-win for me. If you don’t show up, maybe they’ve already got you, which adds pieces to the puzzle. If you do show up, then you’re bait, and maybe I can use you to flush *them* out.”

“What if they’re not hunting all eight of us?”

“Then you can hang around here and wait for the funerals. No skin off my nose.”

“Did you go to Vegas?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know the two from Vegas are missing?”

“Because I called,” Mauney said. “We work with the Nevada Staties a lot, and they work with the Vegas cops a lot, and your guys Sanchez and Orozco went missing three weeks ago and both their apartments have been royally trashed. So that’s how I know. The telephone system. Useful technology.”

“Trashed as bad as Franz’s office?”

“Similar handiwork.”

“They miss anything?”

“Why would they?”

“People miss things.”

“Did they miss something at Franz’s place? Did we?”

Reacher had said: *We’ll treat him like some asshole provost marshal. All take and no give.* But Mauney was better than any asshole provost marshal. That was clear. He looked like a pretty good cop. Not dumb. But maybe playable. So Reacher nodded and said, “Franz was mailing computer files back and forth to himself for security. They missed them. You missed them. We got them.”

“From out of his post office box?”

Reacher nodded.

“That’s a federal crime,” Mauney said. “You should have gotten a warrant.”

“I couldn’t have,” Reacher said. “I’m retired.”

“Then you should have butted out.”

“So arrest me.”

“I can’t,” Mauney said. “I’m not federal.”

“What did they miss in Vegas?”

“Are we trading here?”

Reacher nodded. “But you go first.”

“OK,” Mauney said. “In Vegas they missed a napkin with writing on it. It was the kind of paper napkin you get with Chinese delivery. It was balled up and greasy in Sanchez’s kitchen trash. My guess is Sanchez was eating and the phone rang. He scribbled down a note to himself and transferred it later to a book or a file that we don’t have. Then he threw the napkin in the trash because he didn’t need it anymore.”

“How do we know it’s got anything to do with anything?”

“We don’t,” Mauney said. “But the timing is suggestive. Ordering that Chinese delivery seems to be about the last thing Sanchez ever did in Las Vegas.”

“What does the note say?”

Mauney bent down and hauled his battered briefcase up on his knees and clicked the latches. Lifted the lid. Took out a clear plastic page protector with a color photocopy in it. The photocopy was edged with smudged black where the napkin hadn’t filled the platen. It showed the creases and the grease stains and the pimpled paper texture. And a scrawled half-line in Jorge Sanchez’s familiar handwriting: *650 at $100k per.* Bold, confident, forward-leaning, done with a blue fiber-tipped pen, vivid against the unbleached beige of the paper.

650 at $100k per.

Mauney asked, “What does it mean?”

Reacher said, “Your guess is as good as mine.” He was looking at the numbers, and he knew Dixon would be, too. The *k* abbreviation meant *thousand* and was fairly standard among U.S. Army personnel of Sanchez’s generation, coming either from math or engineering school or from having served long years overseas where distances were measured in kilometers instead of miles. A kilometer was nick-named a *klick* and measured a thousand meters, about sixty

percent of a mile. Therefore *$100k* meant *one hundred thousand dollars.* The *per* was a standard Latin preposition meaning *for each,* as in miles per gallon or miles per hour.

“I think it’s an offer or a bid,” Mauney said. “Like, you can have six hundred and fifty of something for a hundred grand each.”

“Or a market report,” O’Donnell said. “Like six hundred and fifty of something were sold at a hundred grand each. Overall value, sixty-five million dollars. Some kind of a fairly big deal. Certainly big enough for people to get killed over.”

“People can get killed for sixty-five cents,” Mauney said. “Doesn’t always take millions of dollars.”

Karla Dixon was silent. Still, quiet, preoccupied. Reacher knew she had seen something in the number *650* that he hadn’t. He couldn’t imagine what. It wasn’t an interesting number.

650 at $100k per.

“No bright ideas?” Mauney asked.

Nobody spoke.

Mauney said, “What did you get from Franz’s post office box?”

“A flash memory chip,” Reacher said. “For a computer.”

“What’s on it?”

“We don’t know. We can’t break the password.”

“We could try,” Mauney said. “There’s a lab we use.”

“I don’t know. We’re down to the last attempt.”

“Actually, you don’t have a choice. It’s evidence, and therefore it’s ours.”

“Will you share the information?”

Mauney nodded. “We’re in sharing mode here, apparently.”

“OK,” Reacher said. He nodded to Neagley. She put her hand in her tote bag and came out with the silver plastic sliver. Tossed it underhand to him. He caught it and passed it to Mauney.

“Good luck,” he said.

“Pointers?” Mauney asked.

“It’ll be numbers,” Reacher said. “Franz was a numbers type of guy.”

“OK.”

“It wasn’t an airplane, you know.”

“I know,” Mauney said. “That was just hick stuff to get you interested. It was a helicopter. You know how many private helicopters there are within cruise range of the place we found him?”

“No.”

“More than nine thousand.”

“Did you check Swan’s office?”

“He was canned. He didn’t have an office.”

“Did you check his house?”

“Through the windows,” Mauney said. “It hadn’t been tossed.”

“Bathroom window?”

“Pebbled glass.”

“So one last question,” Reacher said. “You checked on Swan and sent the Nevada Staties after Sanchez and Orozco. Why didn’t you call D.C. and New York and Illinois about the rest of us?”

“Because at that point I was dealing with what I had.”

“Which was what?”

“I had all four of them on tape. Franz, Swan, Sanchez, and Orozco. All four of them together. Video surveillance, the night before Franz went out and didn’t come back.”

33

Curtis Mauney didn't wait to be asked. He raised the lid of his briefcase again and took out another clear plastic page protector. In it was a copy of a still frame from a black and white surveillance tape. Four men, shoulder to shoulder in front of some kind of a store counter. Upside down and from a distance, Reacher couldn't make out much detail.

Mauney said, "I made the IDs by comparing a bunch of old snapshots from a shoe box in Franz's bedroom closet." Then he passed the photograph to his right, to Neagley. She studied it for a moment, nothing in her face except light reflected off the shiny plastic. She passed it counterclockwise, to Dixon. Dixon looked at it for ten long seconds and blinked once and passed it to O'Donnell. O'Donnell took it and studied it and shook his head and passed it to Reacher.

Manuel Orozco was on the left of the frame, glancing to his right, caught by the camera in his perpetual state of restlessness. Then came Calvin Franz, hands in his pockets, patience on his face. Then came Tony Swan, front and center, looking straight ahead. On the right was Jorge Sanchez, in a buttoned-up shirt, no tie, with a finger hooked under his collar. Reacher knew that pose. He had seen it a thousand times before. It meant that Sanchez had shaved about ten hours previously, and the stubble on his throat was growing back and beginning to irritate him. Even without the time code burned into the lower right of the shot Reacher would have known he was looking at a picture taken early in the evening.

They all looked a little older. Orozco's hair was gray at the temples and his eyes were lined and weary. Franz had maybe lost a little weight. Some of the muscle was gone from his shoulders. Swan was as wide as ever, barrel-chested, thicker in the gut. His hair was short and had crept backward maybe half an inch. Sanchez's scowl had settled into a tracery of permanent down-turned lines running from his nose to his chin and framing his mouth.

Older, but maybe a little wiser, too. There was a lot of talent and experience and capability right there in the picture. And an easy camaraderie and a mutual trust still floating on recent renewal. Four tough guys. In Reacher's opinion, four of

the best eight in the world.

Who or what had beaten them?

Behind them, running away from the camera, were narrow store aisles that looked familiar.

“Where is this?” Reacher asked.

Mauney said, “The pharmacy in Culver City. Next to Franz’s office. The guy behind the counter remembered them. Swan was buying aspirin.”

“That doesn’t sound like Swan.”

“For his dog. It had arthritis in its hips. He gave it a quarter-tab of aspirin a day. The pharmacist said that’s a pretty common practice with dogs. Especially big dogs.”

“How much aspirin did he buy?”

“The economy bottle. Ninety-six pills, generic.”

Dixon said, “At a quarter-tab a day, that’s a year and nineteen days’ worth.”

Reacher looked at the picture again. Four guys, relaxed poses, no urgency, all the time in the world, a routine purchase, a provision on behalf of a pet animal designed to stretch more than a year into the future.

They never even saw it coming.

Who or what had beaten them?

“Can I keep this picture?” he asked.

“Why?” Mauney said. “You see something in it?”

“Four of my old friends.”

Mauney nodded. “So keep it. It’s a copy.”

“What next?”

“Stay here,” Mauney said. He dropped the lid of his case and clicked the latches, loud in the silence. “Stay visible, and call me if you see anyone sniffing around. No more independent action, OK?”

“We’re just here for the funeral,” Reacher said.

“But whose funeral?”

Reacher didn’t reply to that. Just stood up and turned and looked at Raquel Welch’s picture again. The glass in the frame was reflective and behind him he saw Mauney getting out of his chair, and the others standing up with him. When a seated person stands up, he slides forward to do it, so that when a seated group stands up they all end up temporarily closer to one another than they were when they were sitting down. Therefore their next communal move is to shuffle backward, turning, dispersing, widening the circle, respecting space. Neagley was first and fastest, of course. Mauney turned toward the door and set himself to thread through the limited space between the chairs. O’Donnell stepped the other way, toward the interior of the hotel. Dixon paralleled him, small, deft, nimble, side-stepping a coffee table.

But Thomas Brant moved the other way.

Inward.

Reacher kept his eye on the glass in front of Raquel. Watched Brant’s tan reflection. He knew instantly what was going to happen. Brant was going to tap him on his right shoulder with his left hand. Whereupon Reacher was supposed to turn inquiringly and take a massive straight right to the face.

Brant stepped closer. Reacher focused on the gold ring between the two halves of Raquel’s bikini top. Brant’s left hand snaked forward and his right hand eased back. His left hand had the index finger extended and his right hand was bunched into a fist the size of a softball. Good but not great technique. Reacher sensed that Brant’s feet were not perfectly placed. Brant was a brawler, not a fighter. He was hobbling himself about fifty percent.

Brant tapped Reacher on the shoulder.

Because he was expecting it Reacher turned much faster than he might have done and caught the incoming straight right in his left palm a foot in front of his

face. Like snaring a line drive barehanded in the infield. It was a hefty blow. A lot of weight behind it. It made a hell of a smack. It stung Reacher's palm all the way down to the tendons.

Then it was all about superhuman self-control.

Every ounce of Reacher's animal instinct and muscle memory dictated a head butt to Brant's damaged nose. It was a no-brainer. Use the adrenaline. Jerk forward from the waist, plenty of snap, bury that forehead deep. A move that Reacher had perfected at the age of five. A reaction that was almost mandatory a lifetime later.

But Reacher held off.

He just stood still, gripping Brant's bunched fist. He looked into Brant's eyes, breathed out, and shook his head.

"I apologized once," he said. "And I'm apologizing again, right now. If that's not good enough for you, then wait until after this is all over, OK? I'll stick around. You can get a couple of buddies and jump me three-on-one when I'm not looking for it. That's fair, right?"

"Maybe I'll do that," Brant said.

"You should. But choose your buddies carefully. Don't pick anyone who can't afford six months in the hospital."

"Tough guy."

"I ain't the one wearing the splint here."

Curtis Mauney came over and said, "No fighting. Not now, not ever." He hauled Brant away by the collar. Reacher waited until they were both out the door and then grimaced and shook his left hand wildly and said, "Damn, that stings."

"Put some ice on it," Neagley said.

"Wrap it around a cold beer," O'Donnell said.

"Get over it and let me tell you about the number six hundred and fifty," Dixon said.

34

They went up to Dixon's room and she arranged the seven spreadsheets neatly on the bed. Said, "OK, what we have here is a sequence of seven calendar months. Some kind of a performance analysis. For simplicity's sake let's just call them hits and misses. The first three months are pretty good. Plenty of hits, not too many misses. An average success rate of approximately ninety percent. A hair over eighty-nine point five-three percent, to be precise, which I know you want me to be."

"Move along," O'Donnell said.

"Then in the fourth month we fall off a cliff and we get worse."

"We know that already," Neagley said.

"So for the sake of argument let's take the first three months as a baseline. We know they can hit ninety percent, give or take. They're capable of it. Let's say they could have or should have continued that level of performance indefinitely."

"But they didn't," O'Donnell said.

"Exactly. They could have, but they didn't. What's the result?"

Neagley said, "More misses later than earlier."

"How many more?"

"I don't know."

"I do," Dixon said. "On this volume if they had continued their baseline success rate through the final four months they would have saved themselves exactly six hundred and fifty extra misses."

"Really?"

"Really," Dixon said. "Now I don't know what to make of

"Really," Dixon said. "Numbers don't lie, and percentages are numbers. Something happened at the end of month three that went on to cost them six hundred and fifty avoidable future failures."

Reacher nodded. A total of 183 days, a total of 2,197 events, a total of 1,314 successes and 883 failures. But with markedly unequal distribution. The first three months, 897 events, 802 successes, 95 failures. The next four months, 1,300 events, a miserable 502 successes, a catastrophic 798 failures, 650 of which wouldn't have happened if something hadn't changed.

"I wish we knew what we were looking at," he said.

"Sabotage," O'Donnell said. "Someone got paid to screw up something."

"At a hundred grand a time?" Neagley said. "Six hundred and fifty times over? That's nice work if you can get it."

"Can't be sabotage," Reacher said. "You could get a whole factory or office or whatever torched for a hundred grand, easy. Probably a whole town. You wouldn't have to pay per occasion."

"So what is it?"

"I don't know."

"But it ties in," Dixon said. "Doesn't it? There was a definite mathematical relationship between what Franz knew and what Sanchez knew."

A minute later Reacher stepped to Dixon's window and looked out at the view. Asked, "Would it be fair to assume that Orozco knew whatever Sanchez knew?"

"Totally," O'Donnell said. "And vice versa, certainly. They were friends. They worked together. They must have talked all the time."

"So all we're missing is what Swan knew. We've got fragments from the other three. Nothing from him."

"His house was clean. Nothing there."

"Swan's not in office."

"So it's at his office."

"He didn't have an office. He was canned."

"But only very recently. So his office is just sitting there empty. They're shedding staff, not hiring. So there's no pressure on space. His office is mothballed. With his computer still right there on his desk. And maybe there are notes in the desk drawers, stuff like that."

Neagley said, "You want to go see the dragon lady again?"

"I think we have to."

"We should call before we drive all the way out there."

"Better if we just show up."

"I'd like to see where Swan worked," O'Donnell said.

"Me too," Dixon said.

Dixon drove. Her rental, her responsibility. She headed east on Sunset, hunting the 101. Neagley told her what she was going to have to do after that. A complex route. Slow traffic. But the ride through Hollywood itself was picturesque. Dixon seemed to enjoy it. She liked LA.

The man in the dark blue suit in the dark blue Chrysler tailed them all the way. Outside the KTLA studios, just before the freeway, he dialed his phone. Told his boss, "They're heading east. All four of them together in the car."

His boss said, "I'm still in Colorado. Watch them for me, OK?"

35

Dixon turned in through New Age's open gate and parked in the same visitor slot Neagley had used, head-on against the shiny corporate cube. The lot was still half-empty. The specimen trees were motionless in the heavy air. The same receptionist was on duty. Same polo shirt, same slow response. She heard the doors open but didn't look up until Reacher put his hand on the counter.

"Help you?" she said.

"We need to see Ms. Berenson again," Reacher said. "The Human Resources person."

"I'll see if she's available," the receptionist said. "Please take a seat."

O'Donnell and Neagley sat down but Reacher and Dixon stayed on their feet. Dixon was too restless to spend more of the day in a chair. Reacher stood because if he sat next to Neagley he would crowd her and if he sat somewhere else she would wonder why.

They waited the same four minutes before they heard the click of Berenson's heels on the slate. She came out of the corridor and around the corner and didn't hesitate. Just gave the receptionist a nod of thanks and passed her by and headed on out. She gave up two types of smiles, one kind to Reacher and Neagley because she had met them before, and another kind to O'Donnell and Dixon because she hadn't. She shook hands all around. Same scars under the makeup, same icy breath. She opened the aluminum door and stood still until everyone had filed past her into the conference room.

With five people in it the room was short one chair, so Berenson stood by the window. Polite, but also psychologically dominating. It made her visitors look upward at her and it made them squint against the light behind her. She said, "How may I help you today?" There was a little condescension in her voice. A little irritation. A slight emphasis on *today*.

"Tony Swan is missing," Reacher said.

“Missing?”

“As in, we can’t find him.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s not a difficult concept to grasp.”

“But he could be anywhere. A new job, out of state. Or a long-delayed vacation. Somewhere he always wanted to go. People sometimes do that, in Mr. Swan’s circumstances. Like a silver lining.”

O’Donnell said, “His dog died of thirst, trapped inside his house. No silver lining there. All cloud. Swan didn’t go anywhere he planned to go.”

“His dog? How awful.”

“Roger that,” Dixon said.

“Her name was Maisi,” Neagley said.

“I don’t see how I can help,” Berenson said. “Mr. Swan left here more than three weeks ago. Isn’t this a matter for the police?”

“They’re working on it,” Reacher said. “We’re working on it, too.”

“I don’t see how I can help.”

“We’d like to see his desk. And his computer. And his diary. There might be notes. Or information, or appointments.”

“Notes about what?”

“About whatever has caused him to be missing.”

“He’s not missing because of New Age.”

“Maybe not. But people have been known to conduct private business during office hours. People have been known to jot down notes about things from their outside lives.”

“No[illegible]”

"Not here."

"Why not? You're all business all the time?"

"There are no notes here. No paper at all. No pens or pencils. Basic security. This is a completely paperless environment. Much safer. It's a rule. Anyone even thinks about breaking it, they get fired. Everything is done on computers here. We have an in-house network with secure firewalls and automatic random data monitoring."

"Can we see his computer, then?" Neagley asked.

"I guess you could *see* it," Berenson said. "But it won't do you any good. Someone leaves here, within thirty minutes their desktop hard drive is taken out and destroyed. Smashed. Physically. With hammers. It's another security rule."

"With hammers?" Reacher said.

"It's the only definitive method. Data can be recovered otherwise."

"So there's no trace of him left?"

"None at all, I'm afraid."

"You've got some pretty heavy rules here."

"I know. Mr. Swan designed them himself. In his first week. They were his first major contribution."

"Did he talk to anybody?" Dixon asked. "Water cooler buddies? Is there anyone he would have shared a concern with?"

"Personal issues?" Berenson said. "I doubt it. The dynamic wouldn't have been appropriate. He had to play a cop's role here. He had to keep himself a little unapproachable, to be effective."

"What about his boss?" O'Donnell said. "They might have shared. They were in the same boat, professionally."

"I'll certainly ask him," Berenson said.

"What's his name?"

What's his name?

"I can't tell you that."

"You're very discreet."

"Mr. Swan insisted on it."

"Can we meet with the guy?"

"He's out of town right now."

"So who's minding the store?"

"Mr. Swan is, in a way. His procedures are all still in place."

"Did he talk to you?"

"About personal things? No, he really didn't."

"Was he upset or worried the week he left?"

"Not that I saw."

"Was he making a lot of phone calls?"

"I'm sure he was. We all do."

"What do you think might have happened to him?"

"Me?" Berenson said. "I really have no idea. I walked him to his car, and I said when things pick up again I'll be on the phone begging him to come back, and he said he'd look forward to my call. That was the last I saw of him."

They got back in Dixon's car and reversed away from the mirror glass. Reacher watched the Ford's reflection get smaller and smaller.

Neagley said, "Wasted trip. I told you we should have called."

Dixon said, "I wanted to see where he worked."

O’Donnell said, “*Worked* is the wrong word. They were using him there, that’s all. They picked his brains for a year and then kicked him out. They were buying his ideas, not giving him a job.”

“Sure looks that way,” Neagley said.

“They’re not making anything there. It’s an unsecured building.”

“Obviously. They must have a third place somewhere. A remote plant for manufacturing.”

“So why didn’t UPS get that address, too?”

“Maybe it’s secret. Maybe they don’t get mail there.”

“I’d like to know what they make.”

“Why?” Dixon asked.

“Just curious. The more we know, the luckier we get.”

Reacher said, “So go ahead and find out.”

“I don’t know anyone to ask.”

“I do,” Neagley said. “I know a guy in Pentagon procurement.”

Reacher said, “Call him.”

In his room in his Denver hotel the dark-haired forty-year-old calling himself Alan Mason was concluding his meeting. His guest had shown up exactly on time and had been accompanied by a single bodyguard. Mason had taken both of those facts as positive signs. He appreciated punctuality in business. And being outnumbered only two-to-one was a luxury. Often he was alone with as many as six or ten on the other side of the deal.

So, a good start. It had been followed by substantive progress. No lame excuses about late delivery or lowered numbers or other difficulties. No bait and switch

about late delivery or lowered numbers or other difficulties. No bait and switch. No attempt to renegotiate. No jacked-up prices. Just the sale as previously discussed, six hundred and fifty units at a hundred thousand dollars each.

Mason had opened his suitcase and his client had started the long process of totaling the consideration inside. The Swiss bank balances and the bearer bonds were uncontroversial. They had reliable face values. The diamonds were more subjective. Carat weight was a given, of course, but much depended on cut and clarity. Mason's people had in fact underestimated in order to build in a horse-trading margin. Mason's guest quickly understood. He pronounced himself entirely satisfied and agreed that the suitcase did indeed contain sixty-five million dollars.

At which point it became his suitcase.

In exchange Mason received a key and a piece of paper.

The key was small, old, scratched and worn, plain and unlabeled. It looked like the kind of thing a hardware store cuts while a person waits. Mason was told it was the key to a padlock currently securing a shipping container waiting at the Los Angeles docks.

The piece of paper was a bill of lading, describing the shipping container's contents as six hundred and fifty DVD players.

Mason's guest and his bodyguard left, and Mason stepped into the bathroom and set fire to his passport in the toilet pan. A half-hour later Andrew MacBride left the hotel and headed back to the airport. He was surprised to realize that he was looking forward to hearing the jug-band music again.

Frances Neagley called Chicago from the back of Dixon's car. She told her assistant to e-mail her contact at the Pentagon and explain that she was out of the office, in California, away from a secure phone, and that she had an inquiry about New Age's product. She knew her guy would feel better about responding by e-mail than talking on an unsecured cell network.

O'Donnell said, "You have secure phones in your office?"

"Sure."

“Outstanding. Who’s the guy?”

“Just a guy,” Neagley said. “Who owes me big.”

“Big enough to deliver?”

“Always.”

Dixon came off the 101 at Sunset and headed west to the hotel. The traffic was slow. Less than three miles, but a jogger could have covered them faster. When they eventually arrived they found a Crown Vic waiting out front. An unmarked cop car. Not Thomas Brant’s. This one was newer and intact and a different color.

It was Curtis Mauney’s car.

He climbed out as soon as Dixon got parked. He walked over, short, solid, worn, tired. He stopped directly in front of Reacher and paused a beat. Then he asked, “Did one of your friends have a tattoo on his back?”

A gentle tone of voice.

Quiet.

Sympathetic.

Reacher said, “Ah, Christ.”

36

Manuel Orozco had gone through four years of college on army money and had assumed he would wind up a combat infantry officer. His baby sister had gone through a major irrational panic and had assumed he would wind up KIA with serious disfiguring facial wounds such that his body would not be identified on recovery. She would never know what had happened to him. He told her about dog tags. She said they might get blown off or lost. He told her about fingerprints. She said he might lose limbs. He told her about dental identification. She said his whole jaw might get exploded. Later he realized she was worrying on a deeper level but at the time he thought the answer to her fears was to get a big tattoo across his upper back that said *Orozco, M.* in large black letters, with his service number equally large below. He had gotten home and peeled off his shirt in triumph and had been mystified when the kid had cried even harder.

Ultimately he had avoided the infantry and ended up a key part of the 110th MP, where Reacher had immediately rechristened him Kit Bag because his broad olive back looked like a GI duffel with its name-and-number stencil. Now fifteen years later Reacher stood in the Chateau Marmont's sunblasted parking lot and said, "You found another body."

"I'm afraid we did," Mauney said.

"Where?"

"Same general area. In a gully."

"Helicopter?"

"Probably."

"Orozco," Reacher said.

"That's the name on his back," Mauney said.

"So why ask?"

“We have to be sure.”

“All corpses should be so convenient.”

“Who’s the next of kin?”

“He has a sister somewhere. Younger.”

“So you should make the formal ID. If you would. This really isn’t the kind of thing a younger sister should see.”

“How long was he in the gully?”

“A long time.”

They got back in the car and Dixon followed Mauney all the way to a county facility north of Glendale. Nobody spoke. Reacher sat in the back next to O’Donnell and did what he was pretty sure O’Donnell was doing too, which was to run through a long involuntary sequence of remembered Orozco moments. The guy had been a comedian, part on purpose, part unwittingly. He had been of Mexican descent, born in Texas and raised in New Mexico, but for many years had pretended to be a white Australian. He had called everyone *mate.* As an officer his command skills had been first rate, but he had never really issued orders. He would wait until a junior officer or a grunt had grasped the general consensus and then he would say, *If you wouldn’t mind, mate, please.* It had become a group catchphrase every bit as ubiquitous as *You do not mess.*

Coffee?

If you wouldn’t mind, mate, please.

Cigarette?

If you wouldn’t mind, mate, please.

Want me to shoot this mother?

If you wouldn’t mind, mate, please.

O’Donnell said, “We knew already. This is not a surprise.”

Nobody answered him.

The county facility turned out to be a brand-new medical center with a hospital on one side of a wide new street. On the other side was a state-of-the-art receiving station for townships without morgues of their own. It was a white concrete cube set on stilts a story high. Meat wagons could roll right under the bulk of the building to hidden elevator doors. Neat, clean, discreet. Californian. Mauney parked in a line of visitor slots near some trees. Dixon parked right next to him. Everyone got out and stood for a moment, stretching, looking around, wasting time.

Nobody’s favorite trip.

Mauney led the way. There was a personnel elevator opening off a cross-hatched walkway. Mauney hit the call button and the elevator door slid back and cold chemical air spilled out. Mauney stepped on, then Reacher, then O’Donnell, then Dixon, then Neagley.

Mauney pressed 4.

The fourth floor was as cold as a meat locker. There was a miserable public viewing area with a wide internal window backed by a venetian blind. Mauney passed it by and headed through a door to a storage area. Three walls showed the fronts of refrigerated drawers. Dozens of them. The air was bitter with cold and heavy with smells and noisy from reflections off stainless steel. Mauney pulled a drawer. It came out easily on ball bearing runners. Full length. It smacked all the way open against end stops made of rubber.

Inside was a refrigerated corpse. Male. Hispanic. The wrists and the ankles were tied with rough twine that had bitten deep. The arms were behind the back. The head and the shoulders were grievously damaged. Almost unrecognizable as human.

“He fell head first,” Reacher said, softly. “He would, I guess, tied up like that. If you’re right about the helicopter.”

“No tracks to or from,” Mauney said.

No tracks to or from," Mauney said.

Further medical details were hard to discern. Decomposition was well advanced, but due to the desert heat and dryness it looked more like mummification. The body was shrunken, diminished, collapsed, leathery. It looked empty. There was some animal damage, but not much. Contact with the gully's walls had prevented more.

Mauney asked, "Do you recognize him?"

"Not really," Reacher said.

"Check the tattoo."

Reacher just stood there.

Mauney said, "Want me to call an orderly?"

Reacher shook his head and put a hand under the corpse's icy shoulder. Lifted. The body rolled awkwardly, all of a piece, stiff, like a log or a stump. It settled facedown, the arms flung upward, tied and contorted as if the desperate struggle for freedom had continued until the very last.

Which it undoubtedly had, Reacher thought.

The tattoo was a little folded and creased and wrinkled by the sloughing looseness of the skin and the unnatural inward pressure of the upper arms.

It was a little faded by time.

But it was unmistakable.

It said: *Orozco, M.*

Under it was a nine-digit service number.

"It's him," Reacher said. "It's Manuel Orozco."

Mauney said, "I'm very sorry."

There was silence for a moment. Nothing to hear, except cooled air forcing its way through aluminum vents. Reacher asked, "Are you still searching the area?"

way through aluminum vents. Reacher asked, "Are you still searching the area?"

"For the others?" Mauney said. "Not actively. It's not like we've got a missing child."

"Is Franz in here, too? In one of these damn drawers?"

"You want to see him?" Mauney asked.

"No," Reacher said. Then he looked back at Orozco and asked, "When is the autopsy?"

"Soon."

"Is the string going to tell us anything?"

"It's probably too common."

"Do we have an estimate on when he died?"

Mauney half-smiled, cop to cop. "When he hit the ground."

"Which was when?"

"Three, four weeks ago. Before Franz, we think. But we may never know for sure."

"We will," Reacher said.

"How?" Mauney asked.

"I'll ask whoever did it. And he'll tell me. By that point he'll be begging to."

"No independent action, remember?"

"In your dreams."

Mauney stayed to process paperwork and Reacher and Neagley and Dixon and O'Donnell took the elevator back down to warmth and sunlight. They stood in the lot, saying nothing. Doing nothing. Just crackling and trembling and

twitching with suppressed rage. It was a given that soldiers contemplate death. They live with it, they accept it. They expect it. Some of them even want it. But deep down they want it to be *fair*. Me against him, may the best man win. They want it to be *noble*. Win or lose, they want it to arrive with significance.

A soldier dead with his arms tied behind him was the worst kind of outrage. It was about helplessness and submission and abuse. It was about powerlessness.

It took away all the illusions.

“Let’s go,” Dixon said. “We’re wasting time.”

37

At the hotel Reacher sat for a moment with the photograph Mauney had given him. The video surveillance frame. The pharmacy. Four men in front of the counter. Manuel Orozco on the left, glancing right, restless. Then Calvin Franz, hands in his pockets, patience on his face. Then Tony Swan, looking straight ahead. Then Jorge Sanchez, on the right, his finger hooked under his collar.

Four friends.

Two down for sure.

Presumably all four down.

“Shit happens,” O’Donnell said.

Reacher nodded. “And we get over it.”

“Do we?” Neagley said. “Will we this time?”

“We always have before.”

“This never happened before.”

“My brother died.”

“I know. But this is worse.”

Reacher nodded again. “Yes, it is.”

“I was hoping the other three were still OK somehow.”

“We all were.”

“But they’re not. They’re all gone.”

“Looks that way.”

“We need to work,” Dixon said. “That’s all we’ve got now.”

They went up to Dixon’s room, but *work* was a relative term. They were dead-ended. They had nothing to go on. Those feelings didn’t improve any when they transferred to Neagley’s room and found an e-mail response from her Pentagon contact: *Sorry, no way. New Age is classified.* Just seven words, blank and dismissive.

“Seems he doesn’t owe you all that big,” O’Donnell said.

“He does,” Neagley said. “Bigger than you could imagine. This says more about New Age than him and me.”

She scrolled on through her inbox. Then she stopped. There was another message from the same guy. Different version of his name, different e-mail address.

“Disposable,” Neagley said. “That’s a one-time free account.”

She clicked on the message. It said: *Frances, great to hear from you. We should get together. Dinner and a movie? And I need to return your Hendrix CDs. Thanks so much for the loan. I loved them all. The sixth track on the second album is dynamically brilliant. Let me know when you’re next in Washington. Please call soonest.*

Reacher said, “You own CDs?”

“No,” Neagley said. “I especially don’t own Jimi Hendrix CDs. I don’t like him.”

O’Donnell said, “You’ve been to movies and dinner with this guy?”

“Never,” Neagley said.

“So he’s confusing you with some other woman.”

“Unlikely,” Reacher said.

“It’s coded,” Neagley said. “That’s what it is. It’s the answer to my question.

Got to be. A kosher reply from his official address, and then a coded follow-up from an unofficial address. His ass is covered both ways."

Dixon asked, "What's the code?"

"Something to do with the sixth track on the second Hendrix album."

Reacher said, "What was the second Hendrix album?"

O'Donnell said, "*Electric Ladyland*?"

"That was later," Dixon said. "The first was *Are You Experienced?*"

"Which one had the naked women on the cover?"

"That was *Electric Ladyland*."

"I loved that cover."

"You're disgusting. You were eight years old."

"Nearly nine."

"That's still disgusting."

Reacher said, "*Axis: Bold as Love.* That was the second album."

"What was the sixth track?" Dixon asked.

"I have no idea."

O'Donnell said, "When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping."

They walked a long way east on Sunset, until they found a record store. They went inside and found cool air and young people and loud music and the H section in the Rock/Pop aisles. There was a dense foot-and-a-half of Jimi Hendrix albums. Four old titles that Reacher recognized, plus a bunch of posthumous stuff. *Axis: Bold as Love* was right there, three copies. Reacher pulled one and flipped it. It was wrapped in plastic and the store's barcode label

was stuck over the second half of the track listings.

Same for the second copy.

Same for the third.

“Rip it off,” O’Donnell said.

“Steal it?”

“No, rip the plastic off.”

“Can’t do that. It’s not ours.”

“You smack cops around but you won’t damage a store’s wrapper?”

“It’s different.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to buy it. We can play it in the car. Cars have CD players, right?”

“For the last hundred years,” Dixon said.

Reacher took the CD and lined up behind a girl with more metal punched through her face than a grenade victim. He made it to the register and peeled off thirteen of his remaining eight hundred dollars and for the first time in his life became the owner of a digital product.

“Unwrap it,” O’Donnell said.

It was wrapped tight. Reacher used his fingernails to scrape up a corner and then his teeth to tear the plastic. When he got it all off he turned the CD over and ran his finger down the track list.

“‘Little Wing,’” he said.

O’Donnell shrugged. Neagley looked blank.

“Doesn’t help,” Dixon said.

“I know the song,” Reacher said.

"I know the song," Reacher said.

"Please don't sing it," Neagley said.

"So what does it mean?" O'Donnell said.

Reacher said, "It means New Age makes a weapons system called 'Little Wing.'"

"Obviously. But that doesn't help us if we don't know what Little Wing *is*."

"Sounds aeronautical. Like a drone plane or something."

"Nobody heard of it?" Dixon asked. "Anybody?"

O'Donnell shook his head.

"Not me," Neagley said.

"So it really is supersecret," Dixon said. "No loose lips in D.C. or on Wall Street or among all of Neagley's connections."

Reacher tried to open the CD box but found it taped shut with a title label that ran all the way across the top seam. He picked at it with his nails and it came off in small sticky fragments.

"No wonder the record business is in trouble," he said. "They don't make these things very easy to enjoy."

Dixon asked, "What are we going to do?"

"What did the e-mail say?"

"You know what it said."

"But do you?"

"What do you mean?"

"What did it say?"

"Find the sixth track on the second Hendrix album."

“And?”

“And nothing.”

“No, it said “‘Please call soonest.’”

“That’s ridiculous,” Neagley said. “If he won’t tell me by e-mail, why would he tell me on the phone?”

“It didn’t say, ‘Please call *me.*’ A coded note like that, every word counts.”

“So who am I supposed to call?”

“There must be somebody. He knows you know somebody that can help.”

“Who’s going to help with a thing like this? If he won’t?”

“Who does he know you know? Maybe from Washington, since he used that word, and every word counts?”

Neagley opened her mouth to say *Nobody.* Reacher saw the denial forming in her throat. But then she paused.

“There’s a woman,” she said. “She’s called Diana Bond. We both know her. She’s a staffer for a guy on the Hill. The guy is on the House Defense Committee.”

“There you go. Who’s the guy?”

Neagley said a familiar but unloved name.

“You’ve got a friend who works for that asshole?”

“Not exactly a friend.”

“I should hope not.”

“Everyone needs a job, Reacher. Except you, apparently.”

“Whatever, her boss is signing the checks, so he’ll have been briefed. He’ll know what Little Wing is. Therefore she will, too.”

know what Little Wing is. Therefore she will, too.

“Not if it’s secret.”

“That guy can’t spell his own name without help. Believe me, if he knows, she knows, too.”

“She’s not going to tell me.”

“She is. Because you’re going to play hardball. You’re going to call her and tell her that Little Wing’s name is out there, and you’re about to tell the papers that the leak came from her boss’s office, and the price for your silence is everything she knows about it.”

“That’s dirty.”

“That’s politics. She can’t be exactly unfamiliar with the process, working for that guy.”

“Do we really need to do this? Is it relevant?”

“The more we know the luckier we get.”

“I don’t want to involve her.”

“Your Pentagon buddy wants you to,” O’Donnell said.

“That’s just Reacher’s guess.”

“No, it’s more than that. Think about the e-mail. He said the sixth track was dynamically brilliant. That’s a weird phrase. He could have just said it was great. Or amazing. Or brilliant on its own. But he said dynamically brilliant, which is the letters *d* and *b.* Like this Diana Bond woman’s initials.”

38

Neagley insisted on making the call to Diana Bond alone. When they got back to the hotel she parked herself in a far corner of the lobby and did a whole lot of dialing and redialing. Then some serious talking. She came back a long twenty minutes later. Slight distaste on her face. Slight discomfort in her body language. But a measure of excitement, too.

“Took me some time to track her down,” she said. “Turns out she’s not far away. She’s up at Edwards Air Force Base for a few days. Some big presentation.”

O’Donnell said, “That’s why your guy said call her soonest. He knew she was in California. Every word counts.”

“What did she say?” Reacher asked.

“She’s coming down here,” Neagley said. “She wants to meet face-to-face.”

“Really?” Reacher said. “When?”

“Just as soon as she can get away.”

“That’s impressive.”

“You bet your ass it is. Little Wing must be important.”

“Feel bad about the call?”

Neagley nodded. “I feel bad about everything.”

They went up to Neagley’s room and looked at maps and figured out Diana Bond’s earliest possible arrival time. Edwards was on the other side of the San Gabriel Mountains, out in the Mojave, about seventy miles north and east, past Palmdale and Lancaster, about halfway to Fort Irwin. A two-hour wait, minimum, if Bond got away immediately. Longer if she didn’t.

“I’m going for a walk,” Reacher said.

O’Donnell said, “I’ll come with you.”

They headed east on Sunset again to where West Hollywood met regular Hollywood. It was early afternoon and Reacher felt the sun burning his head through his shaved hair. It was like the rays had extra intensity after bouncing around through glittering particles of air pollution.

“I should buy a hat,” he said.

“You should buy a better shirt,” O’Donnell said. “You can afford one now.”

“Maybe I will.”

They saw a store they had passed on the way to Tower Records. It was some kind of a popular chain. It had an artfully pale and un-crowded window, but it wasn’t expensive. It sold cotton stuff, jeans, chinos, shirts, and T-shirts. And ball caps. They were brand new but looked like they had been worn and washed a thousand times already. Reacher picked one out, blue, no writing on it. He never bought anything with writing on it. He had spent too long in uniform. Name tapes and badges and alphabet soup all over him for thirteen long years.

He loosened the strap at the back of the cap and tried it on.

“What do you think?” he asked.

O’Donnell said, “Find a mirror.”

“Doesn’t matter what I see in a mirror. You’re the one laughing at how I look.”

“It’s a nice hat.”

Reacher kept it on and moved across the store to a low table piled high with T-shirts. In the center of the table was a mannequin torso wearing two of them, one under the other, pale green and dark green. The underneath shirt showed at the hem and the sleeves and the collar. Together the two layers were reassuringly thick and hefty.

Reacher asked, “What do you think?”

“It’s a look,” O’Donnell said.

“Do they need to be different sizes?”

“Probably not.”

Reacher picked a light blue and a dark blue, both XXLs. He took off the hat and carried the three items to the register. Refused a bag and bit off the tags and stripped off his bowling shirt right there in the middle of the store. Stood and waited, naked to the waist in the chill of the air conditioning.

“Got a trash can?” he asked.

The girl behind the counter bent down and came back with a plastic item with a liner. Reacher tossed his old shirt in and put his new shirts on, one after the other. Tugged them around and rolled his shoulders to get them comfortable and jammed the cap on his head. Then he headed back to the street. Turned east.

O’Donnell asked, “What are you running from?”

“I’m not running from anything.”

“You could have kept the old shirt.”

“Slippery slope,” Reacher said. “I carry a spare shirt, pretty soon I’m carrying spare pants. Then I’d need a suitcase. Next thing I know, I’ve got a house and a car and a savings plan and I’m filling out all kinds of forms.”

“People do that.”

“Not me.”

“So like I said, what are you running from?”

“From being like people, I guess.”

“I’m like people. I’ve got a house and a car and a savings plan. I fill out forms.”

“Whatever works for you.”

“Do you think I’m ordinary?”

Reacher nodded. “In that respect.”

“Not everyone can be like you.”

“That’s ass-backward. The fact is, a few of us can’t be like you.”

“You want to be?”

“It’s not about wanting. It just can’t be done.”

“Why not?”

“OK, I’m running.”

“From what? Being like me?”

“From being different than I used to be.”

“We’re all different than we used to be.”

“We don’t all have to like it.”

“I don’t like it,” O’Donnell said. “But I deal with it.”

Reacher nodded. “You’re doing great, Dave. I mean it. It’s me that I worry about. I’ve been looking at you and Neagley and Karla and feeling like a loser.”

“Really?”

“Look at me.”

“All that we’ve got that you don’t is suitcases.”

“But what have I got that you don’t?”

O’Donnell didn’t answer. They turned north on Vine, middle of the afternoon in America’s second-largest city, and saw two guys with pistols in their hands jumping out of a moving car.

39

The car was a black Lexus sedan, brand new. It sped up and took off again immediately, leaving the two guys alone on the sidewalk maybe thirty yards ahead. They were the bag man and the stash man from the vacant lot behind the wax museum. The pistols were AMT Hardballers, which were stainless-steel copies of Colt Government 1911 .45 automatics. The hands holding them were shaking a little and moving up level and rotating through ninety degrees into flat movie-approved bad-boy grips.

O'Donnell's own hands went straight to his pockets.

"They want us?" he said.

"They want me," Reacher said. He glanced back at what was behind him. He wasn't very worried about being hit by a badly-held .45 from thirty yards away. He was a big target but statistics were on his side. Handguns were in-room weapons. Under expert control in high-pressure situations the average range for a successful engagement was about eleven feet. But even if Reacher himself wasn't hit, someone else might be. Or something else. A person a block away, or a low-flying plane, maybe. Collateral damage. The street was thick with potential targets. Men, women, children, plus other folks Reacher wasn't entirely sure how to categorize.

He turned to face front again. The two guys hadn't moved far. Not more than a couple of steps. O'Donnell's eyes were locked hard on them.

"We should take this off the street, Dave," Reacher said.

O'Donnell said, "Roger that."

"Moving left," Reacher said. He crabbed sideways and risked a glance to his left. The nearest door was a narrow tarot reader's dive. His mind was working with a kind of icy high-pressure speed. He was moving normally, but the world around him had slowed. The sidewalk had become a four-dimensional diagram. Forward, backward, sideways, time.

“Break back a yard and left, Dave,” he said.

O’Donnell was like a blind man. His eyes were tight on the two guys and wouldn’t leave them. He heard Reacher’s voice and tracked backward and left, fast. Reacher pulled the tarot reader’s door and held it open and let O’Donnell loop in around him. The two guys were following. Now twenty yards away. Reacher crowded inside after O’Donnell. The tarot parlor was empty apart from a woman of about nineteen sitting alone at a table. The table was a dining room item about seven feet long, draped to the floor with red cloth. Packs of cards all over it. The woman had long dark hair and was wearing a purple cheesecloth dress that was probably leaking vegetable dye all over her skin.

“Got a back room?” Reacher asked her.

“Just a toilet,” she said.

“Go in there and lie down on the floor, right now.”

“What’s up?”

“You tell me.”

The woman didn’t move until O’Donnell’s hands came out of his pockets. The knuckles were on his right fist like a shark’s smile. The switchblade was in his left hand. It was closed. Then it popped open with a sound like a bone breaking. The woman jumped up and fled. An Angelina, who worked on Vine. She knew the rules of the game.

O’Donnell said, “Who are these guys?”

“They just bought me these shirts.”

“Is this going to be a problem?”

“Possibly.”

“Plan?”

“You like the Hardballer?”

“Better than nothing.”

“OK, then.” Reacher flipped up the edge of the tablecloth and crouched down and backed under the table on his knees. O’Donnell followed him to his left and dragged the cloth back into position. He touched it with his knife, a short gentle sideways stroke, and a slit appeared in front of him. He widened it to the shape of an eye with his fingers. Then he did the same in front of Reacher. Reacher braced the flat of his hands against the underside of the table. O’Donnell swapped the knife into his right hand and braced his left the same way as Reacher’s.

Then they waited.

The guys were at the door within about eight seconds. They paused and peered in through the glass and then they pulled the door and came inside. Paused again, six feet in front of the table, guns pointed straight out with the butts twisted parallel to the floor.

They took a cautious step forward.

Paused again.

O’Donnell’s right hand was wrapped with the knuckles and was gripping the knife but it was the only free hand under the table. He used it to count down. Thumb, index finger, middle finger. One, two, three.

On three Reacher and O’Donnell heaved the table up and out. They powered it through an explosive quarter-circle, three feet in the air, three feet forward. The flat of the top tipped vertical and collected the guns first and then moved on and smacked the two guys full in the chests and faces. It was a heavy table. Solid wood. Maybe oak. It put the guys straight down with no trouble at all. They went over on their backs in a cloud of tarot cards and lay still under the slab in a tangle of red cloth. Reacher got up and stepped onto the upside-down table and rode it like a surfboard. Then he jumped up and down a couple of times. O’Donnell timed it for when Reacher’s weight was off it and kicked the table backward six inches until the two guys were exposed to the waist and their gun hands were accessible. He took the Hardballers and used his switchblade to slice the webs of the two guys’ thumbs. Painful, and a real disincentive against holding pistols again until they healed, which could be a long time, depending on their approach to nutrition and antisepsis. Reacher smiled, briefly. The technique had been a part of his unit’s SOP. Then he stopped smiling, because

he recalled that Jorge Sanchez had developed it, and Jorge Sanchez was dead in the desert somewhere.

“Not too much of a problem,” O’Donnell said.

“We’ve still got the good stuff,” Reacher said.

O’Donnell put his ceramic collection back in his pockets and tucked a Hardballer into his waistband under his suit coat. Handed the second gun to Reacher, who shoved it in his pants pocket and draped his T-shirts over it. Then they stepped out to the sunshine and headed north on Vine again and turned west on Hollywood Boulevard.

Karla Dixon was waiting for them in the Chateau Marmont’s lobby.

“Curtis Mauney called,” she said. “He liked that thing you did with Franz’s mail. So he got the Vegas PD to check through the stuff in Sanchez and Orozco’s office. And they found something.”

40

Mauney showed up in person thirty minutes later. He stepped through the lobby door, still tired, still carrying his battered leather briefcase. He sat down and asked, “Who is Adrian Mount?”

Reacher looked up. *Azhari Mahmoud, Adrian Mount, Alan Mason, Andrew MacBride, Anthony Matthews.* The Syrian and his four aliases. Information Mauney didn’t know they had.

“No idea,” he said.

“You sure?”

“Pretty much.”

Mauney balanced his briefcase on his knees and opened the lid and took out a sheet of paper. Handed it over. It was blurred and indistinct. It looked like a fax of a copy of a copy of a fax. At the top it said *Department of Homeland Security.* But not in the style of an official letterhead. It looked more like content hacked out of a computer file. Plain DOS script. It related to an airline booking that a guy called Adrian Mount had made on British Airways, London to New York. The booking had been finalized two weeks ago for a flight three days ago. First class, one way, Heathrow to JFK, seat 2K, last departure of the evening, expensive, paid for with a legitimate credit card. Booked through British Airways’ U.K. website, although it was impossible to say exactly where in the world the mouse had been physically clicked.

“This came in the mail?” Reacher asked.

Mauney said, “It was stored in their fax machine’s memory. It came in two weeks ago. The machine was out of paper. But we know that Sanchez and Orozco weren’t around two weeks ago. Therefore this must be a response to a request they made at least a week earlier. We think they put a bunch of names on an unofficial watch list.”

“A bunch of names?”

“We found what we think is the original request. They had notes circulating in the mail, just like Franz. Four names.” Mauney pulled a second sheet of paper from his case. It was a photocopy of a sheet of blank paper with Manuel Orozco’s spidery handwriting all over it. *Adrian Mount, Alan Mason, Andrew MacBride, Anthony Matthews, check w. DHS for arrival.* Fast untidy scrawl, written in a hurry, not that Orozco’s penmanship had ever been neat.

Four names. Not five. Azhari Mahmoud’s real name wasn’t there. Reacher figured that Orozco knew that whoever the hell Mahmoud was, he would be traveling under an alias. No point in having aliases if you didn’t use them.

“DHS,” Mauney said. “The Department of Homeland Security. You know how hard it is for a civilian to get cooperation out of Homeland Security? Your pal Orozco must have called in a shitload of favors. Or spent a shitload of bribe money. I need to know why.”

“Casino business, maybe.”

“Possible. Although Vegas security doesn’t necessarily worry if bad guys show up in New York. New York arrivals are more likely headed for Atlantic City. Someone else’s problem.”

“Maybe they share. Maybe there’s a network. Guys can hit Jersey first and Vegas second.”

“Possible,” Mauney said again.

“Did this Adrian Mount guy actually arrive in New York?”

Mauney nodded. “The INS computer has him entering through Terminal Four. Terminal Seven had already closed for the night. The flight was delayed.”

“And then what?”

“He checks in at a Madison Avenue hotel.”

“And then?”

“He disappears. No further trace.”

“But?”

“We move on down the list. Alan Mason flies to Denver, Colorado. Takes a room at a downtown hotel.”

“And then?”

“We don’t know yet. We’re still checking.”

“But you think they’re all the same guy?”

“Obviously they’re all the same guy. The initials are a dead giveaway.”

Reacher said, “That makes me Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.”

“You sure act like it.”

“So who is he?”

“I have no idea. The INS inspector won’t remember him. Those Terminal Four guys see ten thousand faces a day. The New York hotel people won’t remember him. We haven’t spoken to Denver yet. But they probably won’t remember him, either.”

“Wasn’t he photographed at Immigration?”

“We’re working on getting the picture.”

Reacher went back to the first fax. The Homeland Security data. The advance passenger information.

“He’s British,” he said.

Mauney said, “Not necessarily. He had at least one British passport, that’s all.”

“So what’s your play?”

“We start a watch list of our own. Sooner or later Andrew MacBride or Anthony Matthews will show up somewhere. Then at least we’ll know where he’s going.”

“What do you want from us?”

“You ever heard any of those names?”

“No.”

“No friends anywhere with the initials *A* and *M*?”

“Not that I recall.”

“Enemies?”

“Don’t think so.”

“Did Orozco know anyone with those initials?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t spoken to Orozco in ten years.”

“I was wrong,” Mauney said. “About the rope on his hands and feet. I had a guy take a look at it. It isn’t very common after all. It’s a sisal product from the Indian subcontinent.”

“Where would someone get it?”

“It’s not for sale anywhere in the United States. It would have to come in on whatever gets exported from there.”

“Which is what?”

“Rolled carpets, bales of unfinished cotton fabric, stuff like that.”

“Thanks for sharing.”

“No problem. I’m sorry for your loss.”

Mauney left and they went up to Dixon’s room. No real reason. They were still dead-ended. But they had to be somewhere. O’Donnell cleaned blood off his switchblade and checked over the captured Hardballers in his usual meticulous fashion. They had been manufactured by AMT not far away in Irwindale, California. They were fully loaded with jacketed .45s. They were in fine condition and fully operational. Clean, oiled, undamaged, which made it likely

that they had been very recently stolen. Dope dealers were not usually careful with weapons. The Hardballers' only limitations came from being faithful copies of a design that had been around since the year 1911. Magazine capacity was only seven rounds, which must have seemed more than OK in a world full of six-shooters, but which didn't stack up very well against modern capacities of fifteen or more.

"Pieces of shit," Neagley said.

"Better than throwing stones," O'Donnell said.

"Too big for my hand," Dixon said. "I like the Glock 19, personally."

"I like anything that works," Reacher said.

"The Glock holds seventeen rounds."

"It only takes one per head. I've never had seventeen people after me all at once."

"Could happen."

The dark-haired forty-year-old calling himself Andrew MacBride was on the underground train inside the Denver airport. He had time to kill so he was riding it back and forth over and over again between the main terminal and Concourse C, which was the last stop. He was enjoying the jug-band music. He felt lightened, unburdened, and free. His luggage was now minimal. No more heavy suitcase. Just an overnight roll-on and a briefcase. The bill of lading was inside the briefcase, folded into a hardcover book. The padlock key was zipped into a secure pocket.

The man in the blue suit in the blue Chrysler sedan dialed his cell phone.

"They're back in the hotel," he said. "All four of them."

"Are they getting close to us?" his boss asked.

“I have no way of telling.”

“Gut feeling?”

“Yes, I think they’re getting close.”

“OK, it’s time to take them down. Leave them there and come on in. We’ll make our move in a couple of hours.”

41

O’Donnell stood up and walked to Dixon’s window and asked, “What have we got?”

It was a routine question from the past. It had been a big part of the special unit’s standard operating procedure. Like an unbreakable habit. Reacher had always insisted on constant recaps. He had insisted on combing through accumulated information, restating it, testing it, re-examining it, looking at it from new angles in the light of what had come afterward. But this time nobody answered, except Dixon, who said, “All we’ve got is four dead friends.”

The room went quiet.

“Let’s get dinner,” Neagley said. “No point in the rest of us starving ourselves to death.”

Dinner. Reacher recalled the burger barn, twenty-four hours previously. Sunset Boulevard, the noise, the thick beef patties, the cold beer. The round table for four. The conversation. The way the center of attention had rotated freely between them all. Always one talker and three listeners, a shifting pyramid that had swung first one way and then another.

One talker, three listeners.

“Mistake,” he said.

Neagley said, “Eating is a mistake?”

“No, eat if you want to. But we’re making a mistake. A major conceptual error.”

“Where?”

“My fault entirely. I jumped to a false conclusion.”

“How?”

“[illegible]?”

"Why can't we find Franz's client?"

"I don't know."

"Because Franz didn't have a client. We made a mistake. His was the first body found, so we just went ahead and assumed this whole thing was about him. Like he had to have been the prime mover here. Like he was the talker and the other three were the listeners. But suppose he wasn't the talker?"

"So who was?"

"We've been saying all along he wouldn't have put himself on the line except for someone special. Someone he was obligated to somehow."

"But that's back to saying he *was* the prime mover. With a client we can't find."

"No, we're imagining the hierarchy all wrong. It doesn't necessarily go, first the client, then Franz, then the others helping Franz. I think Franz was actually lower down the pecking order. He wasn't at the top of the tree. See what I mean? Suppose he was actually helping one of the others? Suppose he was a listener, not the talker? Suppose this whole thing is basically Orozco's deal? For one of *his* clients? Or Sanchez's? If *they* needed help, who were they going to call?"

"Franz and Swan."

"Exactly. We've been wrong from the start. We need to reverse the paradigm. Suppose Franz got a panic call from Orozco or Sanchez? That's certainly someone he regards as special. That's someone he's obligated to somehow. Not a client, but he can't say no. He's got to pitch in and help, no matter what Angela or Charlie think."

Silence in the room.

Reacher said, "Orozco contacted Homeland Security. That's difficult to do. And it's the only really proactive thing we've seen so far. It's more than Franz seems to have done."

O'Donnell said, "Mauney's people think Orozco was dead before Franz. That might be significant."

"Yes," Dixon said. "If this was Franz's deal, why would he farm out the heavy-

duty inquiries to Orozco? I imagine Franz was better equipped to handle them himself. That kind of proves the dynamic was flowing the other way, doesn't it?"

"It's suggestive," Reacher said. "But let's not make the same mistake twice. It could have been Swan."

"Swan wasn't working."

"Sanchez, then, not Orozco."

"More likely both of them together."

Neagley said, "Which would mean this was something based in Vegas, not here in LA. Could those numbers be something to do with casinos?"

"Possibly," Dixon said. "They could be house win percentages taking a hit after someone worked out a system."

"What kind of thing gets played nine or ten or twelve times a day?"

"Practically anything. There's no real minimum or maximum."

"Cards?"

"Almost certainly, if we're talking about a system."

O'Donnell nodded. "Six hundred and fifty unscheduled winning hands at an average of a hundred grand a time would get anyone's attention."

Dixon said, "They wouldn't let a guy win six hundred and fifty times for four months solid."

"So maybe it's more than one guy. Maybe it's a cartel."

Neagley said, "We have to go to Vegas."

Then Dixon's room phone rang. She answered it. Her room, her phone. She listened for a second and handed the receiver to Reacher.

"Curtis Mauney," she said. "For you."

Reacher took the phone and said his name and Mauney said: “Andrew MacBride just got on a plane in Denver. He’s heading for Las Vegas. I’m telling you this purely as a courtesy. So stay exactly where you are. No independent action, remember?”

42

They decided to drive to Vegas, not fly. Faster to plan and easier to organize and no slower door to door. No way could they take the Hardballers on a plane, anyway. And they had to assume that firepower would be necessary sooner or later. So Reacher waited in the lobby while the others packed. Neagley came down first and checked them out. She didn't even look at the bill. Just signed it. Then she dumped her bag near the door and waited with Reacher. O'Donnell came down next. Then Dixon, with her Hertz key in her hand.

They loaded their bags into the trunk and slid into their seats. Dixon and Neagley up front, Reacher and O'Donnell behind them. They headed east on Sunset and fought through the tangle of clogged freeways until they found the 15. It would run them north through the mountains and then north of east out of state and all the way to Vegas.

It would also run them close to where they knew a helicopter had hovered more than three weeks previously, at least twice, three thousand feet up, dead of night, its doors open. Reacher made up his mind not to look, but he did. After the road brought them out of the hills he found himself looking west toward the flat tan badlands. He saw O'Donnell doing the same thing. And Neagley. And Dixon. She took her eyes off the road for seconds at a time and stared to her left, her face creased against the setting sun and her lips clamped and turned down at the corners.

They stopped for dinner in Barstow, California, at a miserable roadside diner that had no virtues other than it was there and the road ahead was empty. The place was dirty, the service was slow, the food was bad. Reacher was no gourmet, but even he felt cheated. In the past he or Dixon or Neagley or certainly O'Donnell might have complained or heaved a chair through a window, but none of them did that night. They just suffered through three courses and drank weak coffee and got back on the road.

The man in the blue suit called it in from the Chateau Marmont's parking lot: "They skipped out. They're gone. All four of them."

His boss asked, "Where to?"

"The clerk thinks Vegas. That's what she heard."

"Excellent. We'll do it there. Better all around. Drive, don't fly."

The dark-haired forty-year-old calling himself Andrew MacBride stepped out of the jetway inside the Las Vegas airport and the first thing he saw was a bank of slot machines. Bulky black and silver and gold boxes, with winking neon fascias. Maybe twenty of them, back to back in lines of ten. Each machine had a vinyl stool in front of it. Each machine had a narrow gray ledge at the bottom with an ashtray on the left and a cup holder on the right. Perhaps twelve of the twenty stools were occupied. The men and women on them were staring forward at the screens with a peculiar kind of fatigued concentration.

Andrew MacBride decided to try his luck. He decided to designate the result as a harbinger of his future success. If he won, everything would be fine.

And if he lost?

He smiled. He knew that if he lost he would rationalize the result away. He wasn't superstitious.

He sat on a stool and propped his briefcase against his ankle. He carried a change purse in his pocket. It made him faster through airport security, and therefore less noticeable. He took it out and poked around in it and took out all the quarters he had accumulated. There weren't many. They made a short line on the ledge, between the ashtray and the cup holder.

He fed them to the machine, one by one. They made satisfying metallic sounds as they fell through the slot. A red LED showed five credits. There was a large touch pad to start the game. It was worn and greasy from a million fingers.

He pressed it, again and again.

The first four times, he lost

The first four times, he lost.

The fifth time, he won.

A muted bell rang and a quiet *whoop-whoop* siren sounded and the machine rocked back and forth a little as a sturdy mechanism inside counted out a hundred quarters. They rattled down a chute and clattered into a pressed metal dish near his knee.

Barstow, California, to Las Vegas, Nevada, was going to be about two hundred miles. At night on the 15, with due deference to one state's Highway Patrol and the other's State Police, that was going to take a little over three hours. Dixon said she was happy to drive all the way. She lived in New York, and driving was a novelty for her. O'Donnell dozed in the back. Reacher stared out the window. Neagley said, "Damn, we forgot all about Diana Bond. She's coming down from Edwards. She's going to find us gone."

"Doesn't matter now," Dixon said.

"I should call her," Neagley said. But she couldn't get a signal on her cell phone. They were way out in the Mojave, and coverage was patchy.

They arrived in Las Vegas at midnight, which Reacher figured was exactly when the place looked its absolute best. He had been there before. In daylight, Vegas looked absurd. Inexplicable, trivial, tawdry, revealed, exposed. But at night with the lights full on, it looked like a gorgeous fantasy. They approached from the bad end of the Strip and Reacher saw a plain cement bar with peeled paint and no windows and an unpunctuated four-word sign: *Cheap Beer Dirty Girls.* Opposite was a knot of dusty swaybacked motels and a single faded high-rise hotel. That kind of neighborhood was where he would have started hunting for rooms, but Dixon drove on without a word, toward the glittering palaces a half-mile ahead. She pulled in at one with an Italian name, and a swarm of valets and bellmen came straight at them and grabbed their bags and drove their car away. The lobby was full of tile and pools and fountains and loud with the chatter of slot machines. Neagley headed to the desk and paid for four rooms. Reacher

watched over her shoulder.

“Expensive,” he said, reflexively.

“But a possible shortcut,” Neagley said back. “Maybe they knew Orozco and Sanchez here. Maybe they even gave them their security contract.”

Reacher nodded. *From the big green machine to this.* In which case, *this* had been a huge step up, at least in terms of potential salary. The whole place dripped money, literally. The pools and the fountains were symbolic. So much water in the middle of the desert spoke of breathtaking extravagance. The capital investment must have been gigantic. The cash flow must have been immense. It had been quite something if Sanchez and Orozco had been in the middle of it all, safeguarding this kind of massive enterprise. He realized he was intensely proud of his old buddies. But simultaneously puzzled by them. When he had quit the army he had been fully aware that what faced him was the beginning of the rest of his life, but he had seen ahead no further than one day at a time. He had made no plans and formed no visions.

The others had.

How?

Why?

Neagley handed out the key cards and they arranged to freshen up and meet again in ten minutes to start work. It was after midnight, but Vegas was a true twenty-four-hour town. Time had no relevance. There were famous clichés about the lack of windows and clocks in the casinos, and they were all true, as far as Reacher knew. Nothing was allowed to slow down the cash flow. Certainly nothing as mundane as a player’s bedtime. There was nothing better than a tired guy who kept on losing all night long.

Reacher’s room was on the seventeenth floor. It was a dark concrete cube tricked out to look like a centuries-old salon in Venice. Altogether it was fairly unconvincing. Reacher had been to Venice, too. He opened his folding toothbrush and stood it upright in a glass in the bathroom. That was the sum total of his unpacking. He splashed water on his face and ran a palm across his bristly head and went back downstairs to take a preliminary look around.

Even in such an upmarket joint, most of the first-floor real estate was devoted to slot machines. Patient, tireless, microprocessor-controlled, they skimmed a small but relentless percentage off the torrent of cash fed into them, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Bells were ringing and beepers were sounding. Plenty of people were winning, but slightly more were losing. There was very light security in the room. No real opportunity to steal or cheat either way around, given a slot's mechanistic nature and the Nevada Gaming Board's close scrutiny. Reacher made only two people as staff out of hundreds in the room. A man and a woman, dressed like everyone else, as bored as everyone else, but without the manic gleam of hope in their eyes.

He figured Sanchez and Orozco hadn't spent much energy on slots.

He moved onward, to huge rooms in back where roulette and poker and blackjack were being played. He looked up, and saw cameras. Looked left and right and ahead, and saw high rollers and security guards and hookers in increasing concentrations.

He stopped at a roulette table. The way he understood it, roulette was really no different than a slot. Assuming the wheel was honest. Customers supplied money, the wheel distributed it straight back to other customers, except for an in-built house percentage as relentless and reliable as a slot machine's microprocessor.

He figured Sanchez and Orozco hadn't spent much energy on roulette.

He moved on to the card tables, which was where he figured the real action was. Card games were the only casino components where human intelligence could be truly engaged. And where human intelligence was engaged, crime came soon after. But major crime would need more than a player's input. A player with self-discipline and a great memory and a rudimentary grasp of statistics could beat the odds. But beating the odds wasn't a crime. And beating the odds didn't earn a guy sixty-five million dollars in four months. The margin just wasn't there. Not unless the original stake was the size of a small country's GDP. Sixty-five million dollars over four months would need a dealer's involvement. But a dealer who lost so heavily would be fired within a week. Within a day or an hour, maybe. So a four-month winning streak would need some kind of a huge scam. Collusion. Conspiracy. Dozens of dealers, dozens of players. Maybe hundreds of each.

Maybe the whole house was playing against its investors.

Maybe the whole town was.

That would be a big enough deal for people to get killed over.

There was plenty of security in the room. There were cameras aimed at the players and the dealers. Some of the cameras were big and obvious, some were small and discreet. Probably there were others that were invisible. There were men and women patrolling in evening wear, with earpieces and wrist microphones, like Secret Service agents. There were others, undercover, in plain clothes. Reacher made five of them within a minute, and assumed there were many more that he was missing.

He threaded his way back to the lobby. Found Karla Dixon waiting by the fountains. She had showered and changed out of her jeans and leather jacket into a black pant suit. Her hair was wet and slicked back. Her suit coat was buttoned and she had no blouse under it. She looked pretty good.

“Vegas was settled by the Mormons,” she said. “Did you know that?”

“No,” Reacher said.

“Now it’s growing so fast they print the phone book twice a year.”

“I didn’t know that, either.”

“Seven hundred new houses a month.”

“They’re going to run out of water.”

“No question about that. But they’ll make hay until they do. Gambling revenues alone are close to seven billion dollars a year.”

“Sounds like you’ve been reading a guide book.”

Dixon nodded. “There was one in my room. They get thirty million visitors a year. That means each one of them is losing an average of more than two hundred bucks per visit.”

“Two hundred thirty-three dollars and thirty-three cents,” Reacher said,

automatically. “The definition of irrational behavior.”

“The definition of being human,” Dixon said. “Everybody thinks they’re going to be the one.”

Then O’Donnell showed up. Same suit, different tie, maybe a fresh shirt. His shoes shone in the lights. Maybe he had found a polishing cloth in his bathroom.

“Thirty million visitors a year,” he said.

Reacher said, “Dixon already told me. She read the same book.”

“That’s ten percent of the whole population. And look at this place.”

“You like it?”

“It’s making me see Sanchez and Orozco in a whole new light.”

Reacher nodded. “Like I said before. You all moved onward and upward.”

Then Neagley stepped out of the elevator. She was dressed the same as Dixon, in a severe black suit. Her hair was wet and combed.

“We’re swapping guide book facts,” Reacher said.

“I didn’t read mine,” Neagley said. “I called Diana Bond instead. She got there and waited an hour and went back again.”

“Was she pissed at us?”

“She’s worried. She doesn’t like Little Wing’s name out there. I said I’d get back to her.”

“Why?”

“She’s making me curious. I like to know things.”

“Me too,” Reacher said. “Right now I’d like to know if someone scammed sixty-five million bucks in this town. And how.”

“It would be a big scam,” Dixon said. “Prorated across a whole year, it would be close to three percent of the total revenue stream.”

close to three percent of the total revenue stream.

“Two point seven eight,” Reacher said, automatically.

“Let’s make a start,” O’Donnell said.

43

They started at the concierge desk, where they asked to see the duty security manager. The concierge asked if there was a problem, and Reacher said, “We think we have mutual friends.”

There was a long wait before the duty security manager showed up. Clearly social visits were low on his agenda. Eventually a medium-sized man in Italian shoes and a thousand-dollar suit walked over. He was about fifty years old, still trim and fit, in command, relaxed, but the lines around his eyes showed he must have done at least twenty years in a previous career. A harder career. He disguised his impatience well and introduced himself and shook hands all around. He said his name was Wright and suggested they talk in a quiet corner. Pure reflex, Reacher thought. His instincts and his training told him to move potential trouble well out of the way. Nothing could be allowed to slow down the cash flow.

They found a quiet corner. No chairs, of course. No Vegas casino would give guests a comfortable place to sit away from the action. For the same reason, the lights in the bedrooms had been dim. A guest upstairs reading was no use to anyone. They stood in a neat circle and O’Donnell showed his D.C. PI license and some kind of an accreditation note from the Metro PD. Dixon matched it with her license and a card from the NYPD. Neagley had a card from the FBI. Reacher produced nothing. Just tugged his shirts down over the shape of the gun in his pocket.

Wright said to Neagley, “I was with the FBI, once upon a time.”

Reacher asked him, “Did you know Manuel Orozco and Jorge Sanchez?”

“Did I?” Wright said. “Or do I?”

“Did you,” Reacher said. “Orozco’s dead for sure, and we figure Sanchez is, too.”

“Friends of yours?”

“From the army.”

“I’m very sorry.”

“We are, too.”

“Dead when?”

“Three, four weeks ago.”

“Dead how?”

“We don’t know. That’s why we’re here.”

“I knew them,” Wright said. “I knew them pretty well. Everyone in the business knew them.”

“Did you use them? Professionally?”

“Not here. We don’t contract out. We’re too big. Same with all the larger places.”

“Everything’s in-house?”

Wright nodded. “This is where FBI agents and police lieutenants come to die. We get the pick of the litter. The salaries on offer here, they’re lining up out the door. Not a day goes by that I don’t interview at least two of them, on their last vacation before retirement.”

“So how did you know Orozco and Sanchez?”

“Because the places they look after are like training camps. Someone gets a new idea, they don’t try it out here. That would be crazy. They perfect it someplace else first. So we keep people like Orozco and Sanchez sweet because we need their advance information. We all hook up once in a while, we talk, conferences, dinners, casual drinks.”

“Were they busy? Are you busy?”

“Like one-armed paperhangers.”

“You ever heard the name Azhari Mahmoud?”

“No. Who is he?”

“We don’t know. But we think he’s here under an alias.”

“Here?”

“Somewhere in Vegas. Can you check hotel registrations?”

“I can check ours, obviously. And I can call around.”

“Try Andrew MacBride and Anthony Matthews.”

“Subtle.”

Dixon asked, “How do you guys know if a card player is cheating?”

Wright said, “If he’s winning.”

“People have to win.”

“They win as much as we let them. Any more than that, they’re cheating. It’s a question of statistics. Numbers don’t lie. It’s about how, not if.”

O’Donnell said, “Sanchez had a piece of paper with a number written on it. Sixty-five million dollars. A hundred grand, times six hundred and fifty separate occasions, over a four-month period, to be precise.”

“So?”

“Are those the kind of numbers you would recognize?”

“As what?”

“As a rip-off.”

“What’s that in a year? Almost two hundred million?”

“Hundred and ninety-five,” Reacher said.

“Conceivable,” Wright said. “We try to keep wastage below eight percent.

That's like an industry target. So we lose way more than two hundred million in a year. But having said that, two hundred million in one specific scam would be a hell of a large proportion all in one go. Unless it was something new, over and above. In which case our eight percent target is shot all to hell. In which case you're starting to worry me."

"It worried them," Reacher said. "We think it killed them."

"It would be a very big deal," Wright said. "Sixty-five million in four months? They'd need to recruit dealers and pit bosses and security people. They'd need to jinx cameras and erase tapes. They'd have to keep the cashiers quiet. It would be industrial-scale scamming."

"It might have happened."

"So why aren't the cops talking to me?"

"We're a little ways ahead of them."

"The Vegas PD? The Gaming Board?"

Reacher shook his head. "Our guys died across the line, in LA County. Couple of sheriffs out there are dealing with it."

"And you're ahead of them? What does that mean?"

Reacher said nothing. Wright was quiet for a beat. Then he looked at each face in turn. First Neagley, then Dixon, then O'Donnell, then Reacher.

"Wait," he said. "Don't tell me. The army? You're the special investigators. Their old unit. They talked about it all the time."

Reacher said, "In which case you understand our interest. You worked with people."

"If you find something, will you cut me in?"

"Earn it," Reacher said.

"There's a girl," Wright said. "She works in some awful place with a fire pit. A bar, near where the Riviera used to be. She's tight with Sanchez."

“His girlfriend?”

“Not exactly. Maybe once. But they’re close. She’ll know more than I do.”

44

Wright went back to work and Reacher checked with the concierge as to where the Riviera had been. He got directions back to the cheap end of the Strip. They walked. It was a warm dry desert night. The stars were out, on the far horizon, beyond the pall of smog and the wash of the streetlights. The sidewalks were matted with discarded full-color postcards advertising prostitutes. It seemed like the free market had driven the base price down to a penny under fifty bucks. Although Reacher had no doubt that sum would inflate pretty fast once some hapless punter actually got a girl to his room. The women in the pictures were pretty, although Reacher had no doubt they weren't real. They were probably library shots of innocent swimsuit models from Rio or Miami. Vegas was a city of scams. Sanchez and Orozco must have been permanently busy. *Like one-armed paperhangers,* Wright had said, and Reacher was completely ready to believe him.

They got level with the peeling cement bar with the cheap beer and the dirty girls and turned right into a mess of curving streets flanked by one-story tan stucco buildings. Some were motels, some were grocery stores, some were restaurants, some were bars. All had the same kind of signs, white boards behind glass on tall poles, with horizontal racks for slot-in black letters. All the letters were in the same pinched vertical style, so it required concentration to tell one type of establishment from another. Groceries advertised six-packs of soda for $1.99, motels boasted about air and pools and cable, restaurants had all-you-can-eat breakfast buffets twenty-four hours a day. The bars majored on happy hours and permanent low prices for well shots. They all looked the same. They walked past five or six before they found one with a sign that said: *Fire Pit.*

The sign was outside a plain stucco shoe box short on windows. It didn't look like a bar. It could have been anything at all. It could have been an STD clinic or a fringe church. But not inside. Inside it was definitely a Vegas bar. It was a riot of décor and noise. Five hundred people drinking, shouting, laughing, talking loud, purple walls, dark red banquettes. Nothing was straight or square. The bar itself was crowded and long and curved into an S-shape. The tail of the S curled around a sunken pit. In the center of the pit was a round fake fireplace. The flames were represented by jagged lengths of orange silk blown upright by a

hidden fan. They swayed and moved and danced in beams of bright red light. Away from the fire the room was divided into plush velvet booths. All the booths were full of people. The fire pit was packed. People were standing everywhere. Music played from hidden speakers. Waitresses in abbreviated outfits threaded expertly through the crowds with trays held high.

“Lovely,” O’Donnell said.

“Call the taste police,” Dixon said.

“Let’s find the girl and take her outside,” Neagley said. She was uncomfortable in the press of people. But they couldn’t find the girl. Reacher asked at the bar for Jorge Sanchez’s friend and the woman he was talking to seemed to know exactly who he meant but said she had gone off duty at midnight. She said the girl’s name was Milena. For safety’s sake Reacher asked two of the waitresses the same question and got the same answers from both of them. Their colleague Milena was tight with a security guy called Sanchez, but she was gone for the night, home, to sleep, to get ready for another hard twelve-hour shift the next day.

Nobody would tell him where home was.

He left his name with all three women. Then he fought his way back to the others and they threaded their way out to the sidewalk. Vegas at one in the morning was still lit up and humming, but after the inside of the bar it felt as quiet and peaceful as the cold gray surface of the moon.

“Plan?” Dixon said.

“We get back here at eleven-thirty in the morning,” Reacher said. “We catch her on her way in to work.”

“Until then?”

“Nothing. We take the rest of the night off.”

They walked back to the Strip and formed up four abreast on the sidewalk for the slow stroll back to the hotel. Forty yards behind them in the traffic a dark blue Chrysler sedan braked sharply and pulled over and came to a stop by the curb.

45

The man in the dark blue suit called it in immediately: “I found them. Unbelievable. They just popped up right in front of me.”

His boss asked: “All four of them?”

“They’re right here in front of me.”

“Can you take them?”

“I think so.”

“So get it done. Don’t wait for reinforcements. Get it done and get back here.”

The guy in the suit ended the call and moved his car off the curb and swerved it across four lanes of traffic and stopped again in a side street outside a grocery that offered the cheapest cigarettes in town. He climbed out and locked up and headed down the Strip, on foot, fast, with his right hand in his coat pocket.

Las Vegas had more hotel rooms per square inch than any other place on the planet, but Azhari Mahmoud wasn’t in any of them. He was in a rented house in a suburb three miles from the Strip. The house had been leased two years ago for an operation that had been planned but not executed. It had been safe then, and it was safe now.

Mahmoud was in the kitchen, with the Yellow Pages open on the counter. He was leafing through the truck rental section, trying to figure out how big a U-Haul he was going to need.

The Strip had a permanent redevelopment tide that slopped back and forth like water in a bathtub. Once upon a time the Riviera had anchored the glamour end. It had sparked investment that had raced down the street block by block. By the

time the improvements had reached the other extremity, the stakes had been raised way high and the Riviera had suddenly looked old and dowdy by comparison with the newer stuff. So the investment had bounced right back again, racing block by block in the reverse direction. The result was a perpetually moving block-long construction site that separated the brand-new stuff that had just been built from the slightly older stuff that was just about to be demolished again. The roadway and the sidewalks were being straightened as the work progressed. The new lanes continued uninterrupted. The old route looped through rubble. The city felt briefly quiet and deserted there, like an uninhabited no man's land.

That uninhabited no man's land was exactly where the man in the blue suit came up behind his targets. They were walking four abreast, slowly, like they had a place to go but all the time in the world to get there. Neagley was on the left, Reacher and then O'Donnell were in the center, and Dixon was on the right. Close together, but not touching. Like a marching formation, across the whole width of the sidewalk. Collectively, they made a target maybe nine feet wide. It had been Neagley who had chosen the old sidewalk. She had followed it as if by arbitrary choice and the others had simply followed her.

The man in the suit took his gun out of his right-hand pocket. The gun was a Daewoo DP-51, made in South Korea, black, small, illegally obtained, unregistered, and untraceable. Its magazine held thirteen 9mm Parabellums. It was being carried in what its owner's long training had taught him was the only safe-transport mode: chamber empty, safety on.

He held the gun right-handed and dry-fired against the locked trigger and rehearsed the sequence. He decided to prioritize and put the biggest targets down first. In his experience that always worked best. So, center-mass into Reacher's back, then a small jog to the right into O'Donnell's back, then a radical swing left to Neagley, then all the way back to Dixon. Four shots, maybe three seconds, from twenty feet, which was close enough to be sure of hitting without being so close that the deflections left and right would be extreme. Maximum traverse would be a little more than twenty degrees. Simple geometry. A simple task. No problem.

He glanced all around.

Clear.

He looked behind.

Clear.

He pushed the safety down and gripped the Daewoo's barrel in his left hand and racked the slide with his right. Felt the first fat shell push upward, neatly into the chamber.

The night was not quiet. There was a lot of urban ambient noise. Traffic on the Strip, distant rooftop condensers roaring, extractors humming, the muted rumble of a hundred thousand people playing hard. But Reacher heard the rack of the slide twenty feet behind him. He heard it very clearly. It was exactly the kind of sound he had trained himself never to miss. To his ears it was a complete complex split-second symphony, and every component registered precisely. The scrape of alloy on alloy, its metallic resonance partially damped by a fleshy palm and the ball of a thumb and the side of an index finger, the grateful expansion of a magazine spring, the smack of a brass-cased shell socketing home, the return of the slide. Those sounds took about a thirtieth of a second to reach his ears and he spent maybe another thirtieth of a second processing them.

His life and his history lacked many things. He had never known stability or normality or comfort or convention. He had never counted on anything except surprise and unpredictability and danger. He took things exactly as they came, for exactly what they were. Therefore he heard the slide rack back and felt no disabling shock. No panic. No stab of disbelief. It seemed entirely natural and reasonable to him that he should be walking down a street at night and listening to a man preparing to shoot him in the back. There was no hesitation, no second-guessing, no self-doubt, no inhibition. There was just evidence of a purely mechanical problem laid out behind him like an invisible four-dimensional diagram showing time and space and targets and fast bullets and slow bodies.

And then there was reaction, another thirtieth of a second later.

He knew where the first bullet would be aimed. He knew that any reasonable attacker would want to put the biggest target down first. That was nothing more than common sense. So the first shot would be aimed at him.

Or possibly at O’Donnell.

Better safe than sorry.

He used his right arm and shoved O’Donnell hard in the left shoulder and sent him sprawling into Dixon and then fell away in the opposite direction and crashed into Neagley. They both stumbled and as he was going down to his knees he heard the gun fire behind him and felt the bullet pass through the V-shaped void of empty air where the center of his back had been just a split second before.

He had his hand on his Hardballer before he hit the sidewalk. He was calculating angles and trajectories before he had it out of the waistband of his pants. The Hardballer had two safeties. A conventional lever at the left rear of the frame, and a grip safety released when the butt was correctly held.

Before he had either one set to fire he had decided not to shoot.

Not immediately, anyway.

He had fallen on top of Neagley toward the inside edge of the sidewalk. Their attacker was in the center of the sidewalk. Any angle vectoring from the inside of the sidewalk through the center would launch a bullet out toward the roadway. If he missed the guy, he could hit a passing car. Even if he hit the guy, he could still hit a passing car. A jacketed .45 could go right through flesh and bone. Easily. Lots of power. Lots of penetration.

He made a split-second decision to wait for O’Donnell.

O’Donnell’s angle was better. Much better. He had fallen on top of Dixon, toward the curb. Toward the gutter. His line of sight was inward. Toward the construction. A miss or a through-and-through would do no harm at all. The bullet would spend itself in a pile of sand.

Better to let O’Donnell fire.

Reacher twisted as he hit the ground. He was in that zone where his mind was fast but the physical world was slow. He felt like his body was mired in a vat of molasses. He was screaming at it to *move move move* but it was responding with extreme reluctance. Beyond him Neagley was thumping dustily to earth with

slow-motion precision. In the corner of his eye he saw her shoulder hitting the ground and then her momentum moving her head like a rag doll's. He moved his own head with enormous effort, like it was strapped with heavy weights, and he saw Dixon sprawling underneath O'Donnell.

He saw O'Donnell's left arm moving with painful slowness. Saw his hand. Saw his thumb dropping the Hardballer's safety lever.

Their attacker fired again.

And missed again. With a preplanned shot into empty air where O'Donnell's back had been. The guy was following a sequence. He had rehearsed. *Fire-move-fire,* Reacher and O'Donnell first. A sound plan, but the guy was unable to react to unexpected contingencies. He was a slow, conventional thinker. His brain had vapor-locked. Good, but not good enough.

Reacher saw O'Donnell's hand tighten around the grip of his gun. Saw his finger squeeze the slack out of the trigger. Saw the gun move up, up, up.

Reacher saw O'Donnell fire.

A snapshot, taken from an untidy uncompleted sprawl on the sidewalk. Taken before his body mass had even settled.

Too low, Reacher thought. *That's a leg wound at best.*

He forced his head around. He was right. It was a leg wound. But a leg wound from a high-velocity jacketed .45 was not a pretty thing. It was like taking a high-torque power drill and fitting it with a foot-long half-inch masonry bit and drilling right through a limb. All in a lot less than a thousandth of a second. The damage was spectacular. The guy took the slug in the lower thigh and his femur exploded from the inside like it had been strapped with a bomb. Immense trauma. Paralyzing shock. Instant catastrophic blood loss from shattered arteries.

The guy stayed vertical but his gun hand dropped and O'Donnell was instantly on his feet. He scrambled up and his hand went in and out of his pocket and he covered the twenty feet full tilt and slammed the guy in the face with his knuckles. A straight right, with two hundred pounds of charging body mass behind it. Like hitting a watermelon with a sledgehammer.

The guy went down on his back. O'Donnell kicked his gun away and crouched

The guy went down on his back. O'Donnell kicked his gun away and crouched at his side and jammed the Hardballer into his throat.

Game over, right there.

46

Reacher helped Dixon up. Neagley got up on her own. O'Donnell was scooting around in a tight circle, trying to keep his feet out of the big welling puddle of blood coming from the guy's leg. Clearly his femoral artery was wide open. A healthy human heart was a pretty powerful pump and this guy's was busy dumping the whole of his blood supply onto the street. A guy his size, there had been probably fifteen pints in there at the beginning. Most of them were already gone.

"Step away, Dave," Reacher called. "Let him bleed out. No point ruining a pair of shoes."

"Who is he?" Dixon asked.

"We may never know," Neagley said. "His face is a real mess."

She was right. O'Donnell's ceramic knuckleduster had done its work well. The guy looked like he had been attacked with hammers and knives. Reacher walked a wide circle around his head and grabbed his collar and pulled him backward. The lake of blood changed to a teardrop shape. Reacher took advantage of dry pavement and squatted down and checked through his pockets.

Nothing in any of them.

No wallet, no ID, no nothing.

Just car keys and a remote clicker, on a plain steel ring.

The guy was pale and turning blue. Reacher put a finger on the pulse in his neck and felt an irregular thready beat. The blood coming out of his thigh was turning foamy. There was major air in his vascular system. Blood out, air in. Simple physics. Nature abhors a vacuum.

"He's on the way out," Reacher said.

"Good shooting, Dave," Dixon said.

“Left-handed, too,” O’Donnell said. “I hope you noticed that.”

“You’re right-handed.”

“I was falling on my right arm.”

“Outstanding,” Reacher said.

“What did you hear?”

“The slide. It’s an evolution thing. Like a predator stepping on a twig.”

“So there’s an advantage in being closer to the cavemen than the rest of us.”

“You bet there is.”

“But who does that? Attacks without a round in the chamber?”

Reacher stepped away and looked down for a full-length view.

“I think I recognize him,” he said.

“How could you?” Dixon asked. “His own mother wouldn’t know him.”

“The suit,” Reacher said. “I think I saw it before.”

“Here?”

“I don’t know. Somewhere. I can’t remember.”

“Think hard.”

O’Donnell said, “I never saw that suit before.”

“Me either,” Neagley said.

“Nor me,” Dixon said. “But whatever, it’s a good sign, isn’t it? Nobody tried to shoot us in LA. We must be getting close.”

Reacher tossed the guy’s gun and car keys to Neagley and broke down a section

Reacher tossed the guy's gun and car keys to Neagley and broke down a section of the construction site's fence. He hauled the guy through the gap as fast as he could, to minimize the blood smear. The guy was still leaking a little. Reacher dragged him across rough ground past tall piles of gravel until he found a wide trench built up with plywood formwork. The trench was about eight feet deep. The bottom was lined with gravel. The formwork was there to mold concrete for a foundation. Reacher rolled the guy into the trench. He fell eight feet and crunched on the stones and settled heavily, half on his side.

"Find shovels," Reacher said. "We need to cover him with more gravel."

Dixon said, "Is he dead yet?"

"Who cares?"

O'Donnell said, "We should put him on his back. That way we need less gravel."

"You volunteering?" Reacher said.

"I've got a good suit on. And I did all the hard work so far."

So Reacher shrugged and vaulted down into the pit. Kicked the guy onto his back and stamped him flat and got him partway embedded in the gravel that was already there. Then he hauled himself back out and O'Donnell handed him a shovel. Between them they had to make ten trips to the gravel pile before the guy was adequately hidden. Neagley found a standpipe and unrolled a hose and turned on the water. She rinsed the sidewalk and chased watery blood into the gutter. Then she waited and followed the others out backward and hosed away their footprints from the construction site's sand. Reacher pulled the fence back into shape. Turned a full circle and checked the view. *Not perfect, but reasonable.* He knew there would be plenty a competent CSI team could get its teeth into, but there was nothing that would attract anyone's attention in the short term. They had a margin of safety. A few hours, at least. Maybe longer. Maybe concrete would get poured right at the start of the work day and the guy would become just one more missing person. Not the only person missing in a building's foundation, he guessed, in Las Vegas.

He breathed out.

"OK," he said. "*Now* we take the rest of the night off."

They dusted themselves down and formed up and resumed their walk down the Strip, slowly, four abreast, ready to relax. But Wright was waiting for them in the hotel lobby. The house security manager. For a Vegas guy, he didn’t have a great poker face. It was clear that he was uptight about something.

47

Wright hurried over to them when they came in and led them away to the same quiet corner of the lobby that they had used before.

“Azhari Mahmoud isn’t in any Las Vegas hotel,” he said. “That’s definitive. Also negative on Andrew MacBride and Anthony Matthews.”

Reacher nodded.

“Thanks for checking,” he said.

Wright said, “And I made a few panic calls to my opposite numbers. Better that than lying awake all night, worrying. And you know what I found? You guys are completely full of shit. No way is this town down sixty-five million dollars in the last four months. It just isn’t happening.”

“Can you be sure?”

Wright nodded. “We all ran emergency cash-flow audits. And there’s nothing going on. The usual bits and pieces, that’s all. Nothing else. I’m going to send you my Prozac bill. I practically overdosed tonight.”

They found a bar off the lobby and bought one another beers and sat in a line in front of four idle slots. Reacher’s was simulating a big jackpot win, over and over again, like a tempting advertisement. Four reels were clicking to a stop on four cherries and lights were flashing and strobing and chasing themselves all over the front. Four reels, eight symbols on each. Astronomical odds, even without the microprocessor’s covert intervention. Reacher tried to calculate the tonnage of quarters a player would need to get through before he could expect his first win. But he didn’t know exactly how much a quarter weighed. Some small fraction of an ounce, obviously, which would add up fast. Tendon damage would be involved, muscle strain, repetitive stress injury. He wondered if casino

owners had stock in orthopedic clinics. Probably.

Dixon said, “Wright already figured it would have to be industrial-scale scamming. He came right out and said so. Dealers, pit bosses, security guys, cameras, tapes, cashiers. It’s not much more of a leap to imagine that apparent cash flow could be massaged. They could have installed a phony program that makes everything look kosher for as long as they need it to. It’s exactly what I would do.”

Reacher asked, “When would they find out?”

“When they do their books at the end of their financial year. By that point the money is either there or it’s not.”

“How would Sanchez and Orozco find out ahead of that?”

“Maybe they tapped in lower down the food chain and extrapolated backward.”

“Who would need to be involved?”

“Key people.”

“Like Wright himself?”

“Possibly,” Dixon said.

O’Donnell said, “We talked to him and a half-hour later someone was trying to shoot us in the back.”

“We need to find Sanchez’s friend,” Neagley said. “Before someone else does.”

“We can’t,” Reacher said. “No bar is going to give out a girl’s address to a bunch of complete strangers.”

“We could tell them she’s in danger.”

“Like they haven’t heard that before.”

“Some other way,” Dixon said. “The UPS thing.”

“We don’t have her second name.”

“So what do we do?”

“We suck it up and wait for morning.”

“Should we move hotels? If Wright could be a bad guy?”

“No point. He’ll have buddies all over town. Just lock your door.”

Reacher followed his own advice when he got back to his room. He clicked the security lever and put the chain on. No real defense against a determined opponent, but it would buy a second or two, and a second or two was generally all that Reacher needed.

He put the Hardballer in the bedside drawer. Put his clothes under the mattress to press and took a long hot shower. Then he started thinking about Karla Dixon.

She was alone.

Maybe she didn’t like that.

Maybe she would appreciate a little safety in numbers.

He wrapped a towel around his waist and padded over to the phone. But before he got to it there was a knock at his door. He changed course. Ignored the peephole. He didn’t like to put his eye to the glass undefended. Easiest thing in the world for an assailant in the corridor to wait for the lens to darken and then fire a large-caliber handgun straight through it. Such a move would make a hell of a mess. The bullet, plus shards and fragments of glass and steel, all of them through the eye and into the brain and out the back of the skull. Peepholes were a very bad idea, in Reacher’s opinion.

He took off the chain and undid the extra lock. Opened the door.

Karla Dixon.

She was still fully dressed. She would be, he guessed, for a walk through the corridors and a ride in the elevator. Black suit, no shirt.

“Can I come in?” she said.

“I was just about to call you,” Reacher said.

“Right.”

“I was on my way to the phone.”

“Why?”

“Lonely.”

“You?”

“Me for sure. You, I hoped.”

“So can I come in?”

He held the door wide. She came in. Within a minute he discovered a shirt wasn’t the only thing she wasn’t wearing under the suit.

Neagley called on the bedside phone at nine-thirty in the morning.

“Dixon’s not in her room,” she said.

“Maybe she’s working out,” Reacher said. “Jogging or something.”

Dixon smiled and moved at his side, warm and lazy.

Neagley said, “Dixon doesn’t work out.”

“Then maybe she’s in the shower.”

“I’ve tried her twice.”

“Relax. I’ll try her. Breakfast in a half-hour, downstairs.”

He hung up with Neagley and gave the phone to Dixon and told her to count to sixty and then call Neagley’s room and say she had just gotten out of the bath. Thirty minutes later they were all eating breakfast together in a lounge restaurant full of the noise of slot machines. An hour after that they were back on the Strip

full of the noise of slot machines. An hour after that they were back on the Strip, heading for the bar with the fire pit again.

48

Vegas in the morning looked flat and small and exposed under the hard desert sun. The light was pitiless. It showed up every fault and compromise. What by night had looked like inspired impressionism looked like silly fakery by day. The Strip itself could have been any worn-out four-lane in America. This time they walked it in a quadrant of four, two ahead, two behind, a smaller collective target, alert and always aware of who was ahead and who was behind them.

But there was nobody ahead and nobody behind. Traffic on the street was thin and the sidewalks were empty. Vegas in the morning was as close as it ever got to quiet.

The construction zone halfway down the Strip was quiet, too.

Deserted.

No activity.

“Is it Sunday today?” Reacher asked.

“No,” O’Donnell said.

“A holiday?”

“No.”

“So why aren’t they working?”

There were no cops there. No crime-scene tape. No big investigation. Just nothing. Reacher could see where he had bent the fence panel the night before. Beyond it, the dirt and the sand were muddied where Neagley had hosed them off. The old sidewalk had a huge dry stain on it. The old roadbed’s gutter had the last of a thin damp slick running to a drain. A mess, for sure, but no construction zone was ever tidy. *Not perfect, but reasonable.* There was nothing overt that could have attracted anyone’s attention.

“Weird,” Reacher said.

“Maybe they ran out of money,” O’Donnell said.

“Pity. That guy’s going to start to smell soon.”

They walked on. This time they knew exactly where they were going, and in the daylight they found a shortcut through the mess of curved streets. They came up on the bar with the fire pit from a different direction. It wasn’t open yet. They sat on a low wall and waited and squinted in the sun. It was very warm, almost hot.

“Two hundred eleven clear days a year in Vegas,” Dixon said.

“Summer high of a hundred and six degrees,” O’Donnell said.

“Winter low of thirty-six.”

“Four inches of rain a year.”

“One inch of snow, sometimes.”

“I still didn’t get to my guide book,” Neagley said.

By the time the clock in Reacher’s head hit twenty to twelve, people started showing up for work. They came down the street in loose knots, separated out into ones and twos, men and women moving slowly without visible enthusiasm. As they passed by, Reacher asked all the women if they were called Milena. They all said no.

Then the sidewalk went quiet again.

At nine minutes to twelve another bunch showed up. Reacher realized he was watching the bus timetable in action. Three women walked past. Young, tired, dressed down, with big white sneakers on their feet.

None of them was called Milena.

The clock in Reacher’s head ticked around. One minute to twelve. Neagley checked her watch.

“Worried yet?” she asked.

“No,” Reacher said, because beyond her shoulder he had seen a girl he knew had to be the one. She was fifty yards away, hurrying a little. She was short and slim and dark, dressed in faded low-rider blue jeans and a short white T-shirt. She had a winking jewel lodged in her navel. She was carrying a blue nylon backpack on one shoulder. She had long jet black hair that fell forward and framed a pretty face that looked about seventeen. But judging by the way she moved she was nearer to thirty. She looked tired and preoccupied.

She looked unhappy.

Reacher got up off the wall when she was ten feet away and said, “Milena?” She slowed with the kind of sudden wariness any woman should feel when randomly accosted in the street by a giant of a stranger. She glanced ahead at the bar’s door and then across at the opposite sidewalk as if assessing her options for a fast escape. She stumbled a little as if caught between the need to stop and the urge to run.

Reacher said, “We’re friends of Jorge’s.”

She looked at him, and then at the others, and then back at him. Some kind of slow realization dawned on her face, first puzzlement, then hope, then disbelief, and then acceptance, the same sequence Reacher imagined a poker player must experience when a fourth ace shows up in his hand.

Then there was some kind of muted satisfaction in her eyes, as if contrary to all expectations a comforting myth had proved to be true.

“You’re from the army,” she said. “He told me you’d come.”

“When?”

“All the time. He said if he ever had trouble, you’d show up sooner or later.”

“And here we are. Where can we talk?”

“Just let me tell them I’m going to be late today.” She smiled a little shyly and skirted around them all and headed inside the bar. Came out again two minutes later, moving faster, standing taller, with her shoulders straighter, like a weight had been taken off them. Like she was no longer alone. She looked young but capable. She had clear brown eyes and fine skin and the kind of thin sinewy hands a person gets after working hard for ten years.

hands a person gets after working hard for ten years.

“Let me guess,” she said. She turned to Neagley. “You must be Neagley.” Then she moved on to Dixon and said, “Which makes you Karla.” She turned to Reacher and O’Donnell and said, “Reacher and O’Donnell, right? The big one and the handsome one.” O’Donnell smiled at her and she turned back to Reacher and said, “They told me you were here last night looking for me.”

Reacher said, “We wanted to talk to you about Jorge.”

Milena took a breath and swallowed and said, “He’s dead, isn’t he?”

“Probably,” Reacher said. “We know for sure Manuel Orozco is.”

Milena said, “No.”

Reacher said, “I’m sorry.”

Dixon asked, “Where can we go to talk?”

“We should go to Jorge’s place,” Milena said. “His home. You should see it.”

“We heard it was wrecked.”

“I cleaned it up a little.”

“Is it far?”

“We can walk.”

They walked back down the Strip, all five of them, side by side. The construction zone was still deserted. No activity. But no commotion, either. No cops. Milena asked twice more whether Sanchez was dead, as if repeating the question might eventually yield the answer she wanted to hear. Both times Reacher answered, “Probably.”

“But you don’t know for sure?”

“His body hasn’t been found.”

“But Orozco’s has?”

“Yes. We saw it.”

“What about Calvin Franz and Tony Swan? Why aren’t they here?”

“Franz is dead. Swan too, probably.”

“For sure?”

“Franz for sure.”

“But not Swan?”

“Not for sure.”

“And not Jorge for sure?”

“Not for sure. But probably.”

“OK.” She walked on, refusing to surrender, refusing to give up hope. They passed the high-end hotels one by one, moving through sketched facsimiles of the world’s great cities all in the space of a few hundred yards. Then they saw apartment buildings. Milena led them through a left turn, and then a right, onto a parallel street. She stopped under the shade of an awning that led to the lobby of a building that might have been the best place in town four generations of improvements ago.

“This is it,” she said. “I have a key.”

She slipped her backpack off her shoulder and rooted through it and came out with a change purse. She unzipped it and took out a door key made of tarnished brass.

“How long did you know him?” Reacher asked.

She paused for a long moment, trapped into contemplating the use of the past tense, and trying to find a way of making it seem less than definitive.

“We met a few years ago,” she said.

She led them into the lobby. There was a doorman behind a desk. He greeted her with a degree of familiarity. She led them to the elevator. They went up to the tenth floor and turned right on a faded corridor. Stopped outside a door painted green.

She used her key.

Inside, the apartment wasn't a breathtaking spread, but it wasn't small, either. Two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen. Plain décor, mostly white, some bright colors, a little old-fashioned. Generous windows. Once the place must have had a fine view of the desert but now it looked straight at a newer development a block away.

It was a man's place, simple, unadorned, undesigned.

It was a real mess.

It had been through the same kind of trauma as Calvin Franz's office. The walls and the floor and the ceiling were solid concrete, so they hadn't been damaged. But other than that, the treatment had been similar. All the furniture was ripped up and torn apart. Chairs, sofas, a desk, a table. Books and papers had been dumped everywhere. A TV set and stereo equipment had been smashed. CDs were littered everywhere. Rugs had been lifted and thrown aside. The kitchen had been almost demolished.

Milena's cleaning up had been limited to piling some of the debris around the perimeter and stuffing some of the feathers back into a few of the cushions. She had stacked a few of the books and papers near the broken shelves they had come from.

Apart from that, there hadn't been much she could do. A hopeless task.

Reacher found the kitchen trash, where Curtis Mauney had said the crumpled napkin had been found. The pail had been torn off its mounting under the sink and booted across the room. Some stuff seemed to have fallen out, and some hadn't.

"This was more about anger than efficiency," he said. "Destruction, almost for its own sake. Like they were just as much mad as worried."

"I agree," Neagley said.

"I agree," Neagley said.

Reacher opened a door and moved on to the master bedroom. The bed was wrecked. The mattress had been destroyed. In the closet, clothes were dumped everywhere. The rails had been torn down. The shelves had been smashed. Jorge Sanchez had been a neat person to start with, and his neatness had been reinforced by years of living with military restraints and standards. There was nothing left of him in his apartment. No shred, no echo.

Milena was moving around the space, listlessly, putting more stuff in tentative piles, stopping occasionally to leaf through a book or look at a picture. She used her thigh to butt the ruined sofa back to its proper position, even though no one would ever sit on it again.

Reacher asked her, "Have the cops been here?"

"Yes," she said.

"Did they have any conclusions?"

"They think whoever came here dressed up as phony contractors. Cable, or phone."

"OK."

"But I think they bribed the doorman. That would be easier."

Reacher nodded. *Vegas, a city of scams.* "Did the cops have an opinion as to why?"

"No," she said.

He asked her, "When did you last see Jorge?"

"We had dinner," she said. "Here. Chinese takeout."

"When?"

"His last night in Vegas."

"You were here then?"

“It was just the two of us.”

Reacher said, “He wrote something on a napkin.”

Milena nodded.

“Because someone called him?”

Milena nodded again.

Reacher asked, “Who called him?”

Milena said, “Calvin Franz.”

49

Milena was looking shaky, so Reacher used his forearm to clear shards of broken china off the kitchen countertop, to give her a place to sit. She boosted herself up and sat with her elbows turned out and her hands laid flat on the laminate, palms down, trapped under her knees.

Reacher said, “We need to know what Jorge was working on. We need to know what caused all this trouble.”

“I don’t know what it was.”

“But you spent time with him.”

“A lot.”

“And you knew each other well.”

“Very well.”

“For years.”

“On and off.”

“So he must have talked to you about his work.”

“All the time.”

“So what was on his mind?”

Milena said, “Business was slow. That’s what was on his mind.”

“His business here? In Vegas?”

Milena nodded. “It was great in the beginning. Years ago, they were always busy. They had a lot of contracts. But the big places dropped them, one by one. They all set up in-house operations. Jorge said it was inevitable. Once they reach a certain size, it makes more sense.”

a certain size, it makes more sense.

“We met a guy at our hotel who said Jorge was still busy. ‘Like a one-armed paperhanger.’”

Milena smiled. “The guy was being polite. And Jorge put a brave face on it. Manuel Orozco, too. At first they used to say, *We’ll fake it until we make it.* Then they said, *We’ll fake it now we’re not making it anymore.* They kept up a front. They were too proud to beg.”

“So what are you saying? They were going down the tubes?”

“Fast. They did a bit of muscle work here and there. Doormen at some of the clubs, running cheats out of town, stuff like that. They did some consulting for the hotels. But not much anymore. Those people always think they know better, even when they don’t.”

“Did you see what Jorge wrote on the napkin?”

“Of course. I cleared dinner away after he left. He wrote numbers.”

“What did they mean?”

“I don’t know. But he was very worried about them.”

“What did he do next? After Franz’s call?”

“He called Manuel Orozco. Right away. Orozco was very worried about the numbers, too.”

“How did it all start? Who came to them?”

“Came to them?”

Reacher asked, “Who was their client?”

Milena looked straight at him. Then she turned and twisted and looked at O’Donnell, and then Dixon, and then Neagley.

“You’re not listening to me,” she said. “They didn’t really have clients. Not anymore.”

“Something must have happened,” Reacher said.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I mean, someone must have come to them with a problem. On the job somewhere, or at the office.”

“I don’t know who came to them.”

“Jorge didn’t say?”

“No. One day they were sitting around doing nothing, the next day they were as busy as blue-assed flies. That’s what they used to call it. Blue-assed flies, not one-armed paperhangers.”

“But you don’t know why?”

Milena shook her head. “They didn’t tell me.”

“Who else might know?”

“Orozco’s wife might know.”

50

The wrecked apartment went very quiet and Reacher stared straight at Milena and said, “Manuel Orozco was married?”

Milena nodded. “They have three children.”

Reacher looked at Neagley and asked, “Why didn’t we know that?”

“I don’t know everything,” Neagley said.

“We told Mauney the next of kin was the sister.”

Dixon asked, “Where did Orozco live?”

“Down the street,” Milena said. “In a building just like this.”

Milena led them another quarter mile away from the center of town to an apartment house on the other side of the same street. Orozco’s place. It was very similar to Sanchez’s. Same age, same style, same construction, same size, a blue sidewalk awning where Sanchez’s had been green.

Reacher asked, “What is Mrs. Orozco’s name?”

“Tammy,” Milena said.

“Will she be home?”

Milena nodded. “She’ll be asleep. She works nights. In the casinos. She gets home and gets the children on the school bus and then she goes right to bed.”

“We’re going to have to wake her up.”

It was the building’s doorman who woke her up. He called upstairs on the house

It was the building's doorman who woke her up. He called upstairs on the house phone. There was a long wait and then there was a reply. The doorman announced Milena's name, and then Reacher's, and Neagley's, and Dixon's, and O'Donnell's. The guy had picked up on the mood and he used a serious tone of voice. He left no doubt that the visit wasn't good news.

There was another long wait. Reacher guessed Tammy Orozco would be matching the four new names with her husband's nostalgic recollections, and putting two and two together. Then he guessed she would be putting on a housecoat. He had visited widows before. He knew how it went.

"Please go on up," the doorman said.

They rode the elevator to the eighth floor, packed tight in a small car. Turned left on a corridor and stopped at a blue door. It was already standing open. Milena knocked anyway and then led them inside.

Tammy Orozco was a small hunched figure on a sofa. Wild black hair, pale skin, a patterned housecoat. She was probably forty but right then she could have passed for a hundred. She looked up. She ignored Reacher and O'Donnell and Dixon and Neagley completely. Didn't look at them at all. There was some hostility there. Not just jealousy or vague resentment, like Angela Franz had shown. There was real anger instead. She looked directly at Milena and said, "Manuel is dead, isn't he?"

Milena sat down beside her and said, "These guys say so. I'm very sorry."

Tammy asked, "Jorge too?"

Milena said, "We don't know yet."

The two women hugged and cried. Reacher waited it out. He knew how it went. The apartment was a larger unit than Sanchez's. Maybe three bedrooms, a different layout, facing a different direction. The air was stale and smelled of fried food. The whole place was battered and untidy. Maybe because it had been tossed three weeks ago, or maybe it was always in a state of chaos with two adults and three children living in it. Reacher didn't know much about children, but he guessed Orozco's three were young, from the kind of books and toys and scattered clothing he saw lying around. There were dolls and bears and video games and complex constructions made from plastic components. Therefore the children were maybe nine, seven, and five. Approximately. But all recent. All

postservice. Orozco hadn't been married in the service. Reacher was fairly sure of that, at least.

Eventually Tammy Orozco looked up and asked, "How did it happen?"

Reacher said, "The police have all the details."

"Did he suffer?"

"It was instantaneous," Reacher said, as he had been trained to long ago. All service KIAs were said to have been killed instantly, unless it could be definitively proved otherwise. It was considered a comfort to the next of kin. And in Orozco's case it was technically true, Reacher thought. After the capture, that was, and the mistreatment and the starvation and the thirst and the helicopter ride and the writhing, screaming, twenty-second free fall.

"Why did it happen?" Tammy asked.

"That's what we're trying to find out."

"You should. It's the very least you can do."

"It's why we're here."

"But there are no answers here."

"There must be. Starting with the client."

Tammy glanced at Milena, tearstained, puzzled.

"Client?" she said. "Don't you already know who it was?"

"No," Reacher said. "Or we wouldn't be here asking."

"They didn't have clients," Milena said, as if on Tammy's behalf. "Not anymore. I told you that."

"Something started this," Reacher said. "Someone must have come to them with a problem, at their office, or out in one of the casinos. We need to know who it was."

“That didn’t happen,” Tammy said.

“Then they must have stumbled over the problem on their own. In which case we need to know where and when and how.”

There was a long silence. Then Tammy said, “You really don’t understand, do you? This was nothing to do with them. Nothing at all. It was nothing to do with Vegas.”

“It wasn’t?”

“No.”

“So how did it start?”

“They got a call for help,” Tammy said. “That’s how it started. One day, suddenly, out of the blue. From one of you guys in California. From one of their precious old army buddies.”

51

Azhari Mahmoud dropped Andrew MacBride's passport in a Dumpster and became Anthony Matthews on his way to the U-Haul depot. He had a wad of active credit cards and a valid driver's license in that name. The address on the license would withstand sustained scrutiny, too. It was an actual building, an occupied house, not just a mail drop or a vacant lot. The billing address for the credit cards matched it exactly. Mahmoud had learned a lot over the years.

He had decided to rent a medium-sized truck. In general he preferred medium options everywhere. They stood out less obviously. Clerks remembered people who demanded the biggest or the smallest of anything. And a medium truck would do the job. His science education had been meager, but he could do simple arithmetic. He knew that volume was calculated by multiplying height by width by length. Therefore he knew a pile containing six hundred and fifty boxes could be constructed by stacking them ten wide and thirteen deep and five high. At first he had thought that ten wide would be a greater dimension than any available truck could accommodate, but then he realized he could reduce the required width by stacking the boxes on their edges. It would all work out.

In fact he knew it would all work out, because he was still carrying the hundred quarters he had won in the airport.

They gave their condolences and Curtis Mauney's name to Tammy Orozco and left her alone on her sofa. Then they walked Milena back to the bar with the fire pit. She had a living to earn and she was already three hours down on the day. She said she could get fired if she missed the happy hour crush later in the afternoon. The Strip had gotten a little busier as the day had worn on. But the construction zone was still deserted. No activity at all. The slick in the gutter had finally dried. Apart from that there was no change. The sun was high. Not blazing, but it was warm enough. Reacher started thinking about how shallow the dead guy was buried. And about decomposition, and gases, and smells, and curious animals.

"You get coyotes here?" he asked

You get coyotes here?" he asked.

"In town?" Milena said. "I never saw one."

"OK."

"Why?"

"Just wondering."

They walked on. Took the same shortcut they had used before. Arrived outside the bar a little after three o'clock in the afternoon.

"Tammy's angry," Milena said. "I'm sorry about that."

"It's to be expected," Reacher said.

"She was there when the bad guys came to search. Asleep. They hit her on the head. She was unconscious for a week. She doesn't remember anything. Now she blames whoever it was who called for all her troubles."

"Understandable," Reacher said.

"But I don't blame you," Milena said. "It wasn't any of you that called. I guess half of you were involved and half of you weren't."

She ducked inside the bar without looking back. The door closed behind her. Reacher stepped away and sat down on the wall, where he had waited that morning.

"I'm sorry, people," he said. "We just wasted a lot of time. My fault, entirely."

Nobody answered.

"Neagley should take over," he said. "I'm losing my touch."

"Mahmoud came here," Dixon said. "Not LA."

"He probably made a connection. He's probably in LA right now."

"Why not fly direct?"

“Why carry four false passports? He’s cautious, whoever he is. He lays false trails.”

“We were attacked here,” Dixon said. “Not in LA. Makes no sense.”

“It was a collective decision to come here,” O’Donnell said. “Nobody argued.”

Reacher heard a siren on the Strip. Not the bass bark of a fire truck, not the frantic yelp of an ambulance. A cop car, moving fast. He glanced up, toward the construction zone a half-mile away. He stood up and moved right and shaded his eyes and watched the short length of the Strip he could see. One cop was nothing, he thought. If some construction foreman had finally showed up for work and found something, there would be a whole convoy.

He waited.

Nothing happened. No more sirens. No more cops. No convoy. Just a routine traffic stop, maybe. He took one step more, to widen his view, to be certain. Saw a wink of red and blue beyond the corner of a grocery store. A car, parked in the sun. A red plastic lens over the tail light. Dark blue paint on a fender.

A car.

Dark blue paint.

He said, “I know where I saw that guy before.”

52

They stood around the Chrysler at a cautious and respectful distance, like it was a roped-off exhibit in a modern art museum. A 300C, dark blue, California plates. It was parked tight to the curb, locked up, still and cold, a little travel-stained. Neagley took out the keys that Reacher had found in the dying guy's pocket and held them at arm's length like the guy had held the gun, and pressed the remote button once.

The blue Chrysler's lights flashed and its doors unlocked with a ragged *thunk.*

"It was behind the Chateau Marmont," Reacher said. "Just waiting. That same guy was in it. His suit matched the sheet metal exactly. I took it for a car service with a gimmick."

"The others told them we would come," O'Donnell said. "At first as a threat, I suppose. And then later as a consolation. So they sent the guy to take us out. He spotted us on the sidewalk, I guess, just after he hit town. We were right there in front of him. He got lucky."

"Real lucky," Reacher said. "May all our enemies have the same kind of extreme good fortune."

He opened the driver's door. The car smelled of new leather and plastic. The interior was unmarked. There were maps in the door pocket, crisp and folded. That was all. Nothing else on show. He slid in and stretched a long arm over to the glove-box lid. Opened it up. Came out with a wallet and a cell phone. That was all that was in there. No registration, no insurance. No instruction manuals. Just a wallet and a phone. The wallet was a slim thing designed to be carried in a trouser pocket. It was a stiff rectangle made of black leather with a money clip built in on one side and a credit card pocket built in on the other. There was a wad of folded cash in the clip. More than seven hundred dollars, mostly fifties and twenties. Reacher took it all. Just pulled it out of the clip and stuffed it in his own pants pocket.

"That's two more weeks before I need to find a job," he said. "Every cloud has a silver lining."

silver filling.

He turned the wallet over. The credit card section was jammed. There was a current California driver's license and four credit cards. Two Visas, an Amex, and a MasterCard. Expiration dates all far in the future. The license and all four cards were made out to a guy by the name of Saropian. The address on the license had a five-digit house number and a Los Angeles street name and a zip that meant nothing to Reacher.

He dropped the wallet on the passenger seat.

The cell phone was a small silver folding item with a round LCD window on the front. It was getting great reception but its battery was low. Reacher opened it up and a larger window lit up in color. There were five voice messages waiting.

He handed the phone to Neagley.

"Can you retrieve those messages?" he asked.

"Not without his code number."

"Look at the call log."

Neagley scrolled through menus and selected options.

"All the calls in and out are to and from the same number," she said. "A 310 area code. Which is Los Angeles."

"Landline or cell?"

"Could be either."

"A grunt calling his boss?"

Neagley nodded. "And vice versa. A boss issuing orders to a grunt."

"Could your guy in Chicago get a name and address for the boss?"

"Eventually."

"Get him started on it. The license plate on this car, too."

Neagley used her own cell to call her office. Reacher lifted the center armrest console and found nothing except a ballpoint pen and a car charger for the phone. He checked the rear compartment. Nothing there. He got out and checked the trunk. Spare tire, jack, wrench. Apart from that, empty.

“No luggage,” he said. “This guy didn’t plan on a long trip. He thought we were going to be easy meat.”

“We nearly were,” Dixon said.

Neagley closed the dead guy’s phone and handed it back to Reacher. Reacher dropped it on the passenger seat next to the wallet.

Then he picked it up again.

“This is an ass-backward situation,” he said. “Isn’t it? We don’t know who sent this guy, or from where, or for why.”

“But?” Dixon said.

“But whoever it was, we’ve got his number. We could call him up and say hello, if we wanted to.”

“Do we want to?”

“Yes, I think we do.”

53

They got in the parked Chrysler, for quiet. The doors were thick and heavy and closed tight and gave the kind of vacuum hush a luxury sedan was supposed to. Reacher opened the dead guy's phone and scrolled through the call log to the last call made and then pressed the green button to make it all over again. Then he cupped the phone to his ear and waited. And listened. He had never owned a cell phone but he knew how they were used. People felt them vibrate in their pockets or heard them ring and fished them out and looked at the screen to see who was calling and then decided whether or not to answer. Altogether it was a much slower process than picking up a regular phone. It could take five or six rings, at least.

The phone rang once.

Twice.

Three times.

Then it was answered in a real hurry.

A voice said, "Where the hell have you been?"

The voice was deep. A man, not young. Not small. Behind the exasperation and the urgency there was a civilized West Coast accent, professional, but with a faint remnant of streetwise edge still in it. Reacher didn't reply. He listened hard for background sounds from the phone. But there were none. None at all. Just silence, like a closed room or a quiet office.

The voice said, "Hello? Where the hell are you? What's happening?"

"Who is this?" Reacher asked, like he had every right to know. Like he had gotten an accidental wrong number.

But the guy didn't bite. He had seen the caller ID.

"No, who are you?" he asked back, slowly.

Reacher paused a beat and said, “Your boy failed last night. He’s dead and buried, literally. Now we’re coming for you.”

There was a long moment of silence. Then the voice said, “Reacher?”

“You know my name?” Reacher said. “Doesn’t seem fair that I don’t know yours.”

“Nobody ever said life was fair.”

“True. But fair or not, enjoy what’s left of it. Buy yourself a bottle of wine, rent a DVD. But not a box set. You’ve got about two days, max.”

“You’re nowhere.”

“Look out your window.”

Reacher heard sudden movement. The rustle of jacket tails, the oiled grind of a swivel chair. *An office. A guy in a suit.* A desk facing the door.

Only about a million of those in the 310 area code.

“You’re nowhere,” the voice said again.

“We’ll see you soon,” Reacher said. “We’re going to take a helicopter ride together. Just like you did before. But with one big difference. My friends were reluctant, presumably. But you won’t be. You’ll be begging to jump out. You’ll be pleading. I can absolutely promise you that.”

Then he closed the phone and dropped it in his lap.

Silence in the car.

“First impressions?” Neagley asked.

Reacher breathed out.

“An executive,” he said. “A big guy. A boss. Not dumb. An ordinary voice. A solo office with a window and a closed door.”

“Where?”

“Couldn’t tell. There were no background sounds. No traffic, no airplanes. And he didn’t seem too worried that we have his phone number. The registration is going to come back phony as hell. This car, too, I’m sure.”

“So what now?”

“We head back to LA. We never should have left.”

“This is about Swan,” O’Donnell said. “Got to be, right? We can’t make a case for it being about Franz, it’s not about Sanchez or Orozco, so what else is left? He must have gotten into something immediately after he quit New Age. Maybe he had it all lined up and waiting.”

Reacher nodded. “We need to talk to his old boss. We need to see if he shared any private concerns before he left.” He turned to Neagley. “So set up the thing with Diana Bond again. The Washington woman. About New Age and Little Wing. We need a bargaining chip. Swan’s old boss might talk more if he knows we have something solid to keep quiet about in exchange. Besides, I’m curious.”

“Me too,” Neagley said.

They stole the Chrysler. Didn’t even get out. Reacher took the key from Neagley and started it up and drove it around to the hotel. He waited in the drop-off lane while the others went inside to pack. He quite liked the car. It was quiet and powerful. He could see its exterior styling reflected in the hotel’s window. It looked good in blue. It was square and bluff and about as subtle as a hammer. His kind of machine. He checked the controls and the toys and plugged the dead guy’s phone into its charger and closed the armrest lid on it.

Dixon came out of the lobby first, trailing a bellhop carrying her luggage and a valet sprinting ahead to get her car. Then came Neagley and O’Donnell together. Neagley was stuffing a credit card receipt into her purse and closing her cell phone all at the same time.

“We got a hit on the license plate,” she said. “It traces back to a shell corporation called Walter, at a commercial mail drop in downtown LA.”

“Cute,” Reacher said. “Walter for Walter Chrysler. I bet the phone comes back to a corporation called Alexander, for Graham Bell.”

to a corporation called Alexander, for Graham Bell.

“The Walter Corporation leases a total of seven cars,” Neagley said.

Reacher nodded. “We need to bear that in mind. They’ll have major reinforcements waiting somewhere.”

Dixon said she would drive O’Donnell back in her rental. So Reacher popped the Chrysler’s trunk and Neagley heaved her bags in and then slid in beside him on the passenger seat.

“Where are we holing up?” Dixon asked, through the window.

“Somewhere different,” Reacher said. “So far they’ve seen us in the Wilshire and the Chateau Marmont. So now we need a change of pace. We need the kind of place they won’t think to look. Let’s try the Dunes on Sunset.”

“What is that?”

“A motel. My kind of place.”

“How bad is it?”

“It’s fine. It has beds. And doors that lock.”

Reacher and Neagley took off first. Traffic was slow all the way out of town and then the 15 emptied and Reacher settled in for the cruise across the desert. The car was quiet and swift and civilized. Neagley spent the first thirty minutes playing phone tag around Edwards Air Force Base, trying to get Diana Bond on the line before her cell coverage failed. Reacher tuned her out and concentrated on the road ahead. He was an adequate driver, but not great. He had learned in the army and had never received civilian instruction. Never passed a civilian test, never held a civilian license. Neagley was a much better driver than he was. And much faster. She finished her calls and fidgeted with impatience. Kept glancing over at the speedometer.

“Drive it like you stole it,” she said. “Which you did.”

So he accelerated a little. Started passing people, including a medium-sized U-

Haul truck lumbering west in the right-hand lane.

Ten miles shy of Barstow, Dixon caught up with them and flashed her lights and pulled alongside and O'Donnell made eating motions from the passenger seat. Like helpless masochists they stopped at the same diner they had used before. No alternative for miles, and they were all hungry. They hadn't eaten lunch.

The food was as bad as before and the conversation was desultory. Mostly they talked about Sanchez and Orozco. About how hard it was to keep a viable small business going. Especially about how hard it was for ex-military people. They entered the civilian world with all the wrong assumptions. They expected the same kind of certainties they had known before. The straightforwardness, the transparency, the honesty, the shared sacrifice. Reacher felt that part of the time Dixon and O'Donnell were actually talking about themselves. He wondered exactly how well they were doing, behind their facades. Exactly how it all looked on paper for them, at tax time. And how it was going to look a year from then. Dixon was in trouble because she had walked out on her last job. O'Donnell had been out for a spell with his sister. Only Neagley seemed to have no worries. She was an unqualified success. But she was one out of nine. A hit rate a fraction better than eleven percent, for some of the finest graduates the army had ever produced.

Not good.

You're well out of it, Dixon had said.

I usually feel that way, he had replied.

All that we've got that you don't is suitcases, O'Donnell had said.

But what have I got that you don't? he had replied.

He finished the meal a little closer to an answer than before.

After Barstow came Victorville and Lake Arrowhead. Then the mountains

reared in front of them. But first, this time to their right, were the badlands where the helicopter had flown. Once again Reacher told himself he wouldn't look, but once again he did. He took his eyes off the road and glanced north and west for seconds at a time. Sanchez and Swan were out there somewhere, he guessed. He saw no reason to hope otherwise.

They passed through an active cell and Neagley's phone rang. Diana Bond, all set to leave Edwards at a moment's notice. Reacher said, "Tell her to meet us at that Denny's on Sunset. Where we were before." Neagley made a face and he said, "It's going to taste like Maxim's in Paris after that place we just stopped."

So Neagley arranged the rendezvous and he kicked the transmission down and climbed onto Mount San Antonio's first low slopes. Less than an hour later they were checking in at the Dunes Motel.

The Dunes was the kind of place where no room went even close to three figures for the night and where guests were required to leave a security deposit for the TV remote, which was issued with great ceremony along with the key. Reacher paid cash from his stolen wad for all four rooms, which got around the necessity for real names and ID. They parked the cars out of sight of the street and regrouped in a dark battered lounge next to a laundry room, as anonymous as four people could get in Los Angeles County.

Reacher's kind of place.

An hour later Diana Bond called Neagley to say she was pulling into the Denny's lot.

54

They walked a short stretch of Sunset and stepped into the Denny's neon lobby and found a tall blonde woman waiting for them. She was alone. She was dressed all in black. Black jacket, black blouse, black skirt, black stockings, black high-heeled shoes. Serious East Coast style, a little out of place on the West Coast and seriously out of place in a Denny's on the West Coast. She was slim, attractive, clearly intelligent, somewhere in her late thirties.

She looked a little irritated and preoccupied.

She looked a little worried.

Neagley introduced her all around. "This is Diana Bond," she said. "From Washington D.C. via Edwards Air Force Base."

Diana Bond had nothing with her except a small crocodile purse. No briefcase, not that Reacher expected notes or blueprints. They led her through the shabby restaurant and found a round table in back. Five people wouldn't fit in a booth. A waitress came over and they ordered coffee. The waitress came back with five heavy mugs and a flask, and poured. They each took a preliminary sip, in silence. Then Diana Bond spoke. She didn't start with small talk. Instead she said, "I could have you all arrested."

Reacher nodded.

"I'm kind of surprised you haven't," he said. "I was kind of expecting to find a bunch of agents here with you."

Bond said, "One call to the Defense Intelligence Agency would have done it."

"So why didn't you make that call?"

"I'm trying to be civilized."

"And loyal," Reacher said. "To your boss."

“And to my country. I really would urge you not to pursue this line of inquiry.”

Reacher said, “That would give you another wasted journey.”

“I’d be very happy to waste another journey.”

“Our tax dollars at work.”

“I’m pleading with you.”

“Deaf ears.”

“I’m appealing to your patriotism. This is a question of national security.”

Reacher said, “Between the four of us here, we’ve got sixty years in uniform. How many have you got?”

“None.”

“How many has your boss got?”

“None.”

“Then shut up about patriotism and national security, OK? You’re not qualified.”

“Why on earth do you need to know about Little Wing?”

“We had a friend who worked for New Age. We’re trying to complete his obituary.”

“He’s dead?”

“Probably.”

“I’m very sorry.”

“Thank you.”

“But again, I would appeal to you not to press this.”

“No deal.”

Diana Bond paused a long moment. Then she nodded.

“I’ll trade,” she said. “I’ll give you outline details, and in return you swear on those sixty years in uniform that they’ll go no further.”

“Deal.”

“And after I talk to you this one time, I never hear from you again.”

“Deal.”

Another long pause. Like Bond was wrestling with her conscience.

“Little Wing is a new type of torpedo,” she said. “For the Navy’s Pacific submarine fleet. It’s fairly conventional apart from an enhanced control capability because of new electronics.”

Reacher smiled.

“Good try,” he said. “But we don’t believe you.”

“Why not?”

“We were never going to believe your first answer. Obviously you were going to try to blow us off. Plus, most of those sixty years we mentioned were spent listening to liars, so we know one when we see one. Plus, some of those sixty years were spent reading all kinds of Pentagon bullshit, so we know how they use words. A new torpedo would more likely be called ‘Little Fish.’ Plus, New Age was a clean-sheet start-up with a free choice of where to build, and if they were working for the Navy they’d have chosen San Diego or Connecticut or Newport News, Virginia. But they didn’t. They chose East LA instead. And the closest places to East LA are Air Force places, including Edwards, where you just came from, and the name is Little Wing, so it’s an airborne device.”

Diana Bond shrugged.

“I had to try,” she said.

Reacher said, “Try again.”

Another pause.

“It’s an infantry weapon,” she said. “Army, not Air Force. New Age is in East LA to be near Fort Irwin, not Edwards. But you’re right, it’s airborne.”

“Specifically?”

“It’s a man-portable shoulder-launched surface-to-air missile. The next generation.”

“What does it do?”

Diana Bond shook her head. “I can’t tell you that.”

“You’ll have to. Or your boss goes down.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Compared to what?”

“All I’ll say is that it’s a revolutionary advance.”

“We’ve heard that kind of thing before. It means it’ll be out-of-date a year from now, rather than the usual six months.”

“We think two years, actually.”

“What does it do?”

“You’re not going to call the newspapers. You’d be selling out your country.”

“Try us.”

“Are you serious?”

“As lung cancer.”

“I don’t believe this.”

“Suck it up. Or your boss needs a new job tomorrow. As far as that goes, we’d be doing our country a favor.”

“You don’t like him.”

“Does anyone?”

“The newspapers wouldn’t publish.”

“Dream on.”

Bond was quiet for a minute more.

“Promise it will go no further,” she said.

“I already have,” Reacher said.

“It’s complicated.”

“Like rocket science?”

“You know the Stinger?” Bond asked. “The current generation?”

Reacher nodded. “I’ve seen them in action. We all have.”

“What do they do?”

“They chase the heat signature of jet exhaust.”

“But from below,” Bond said. “Which is a key weakness. They have to climb and maneuver at the same time. Which makes them relatively slow and relatively cumbersome. They show up on downward-looking radar. It’s possible for a pilot to outmaneuver them. And they’re vulnerable to countermeasures, like decoy flares.”

“But?”

“Little Wing is revolutionary. Like most great ideas, it starts with a very simple premise. It completely ignores its target on the way up. It does all its work on the way down.”

“I see,” Reacher said.

Bond nodded. “Going up, it’s just a dumb rocket. Very, very fast. It reaches

about eighty thousand feet and then it slows and stops and topples. Starts to fall back down again. Then the electronics switch on and it starts hunting its target. It has boosters to maneuver with, and control surfaces, and because gravity is doing most of the work, the maneuvering can be incredibly precise."

"It falls on its prey from above," Reacher said. "Like a hawk."

Bond nodded again.

"At unbelievable speed," she said. "Way supersonic. It can't miss. And it can't be stopped. Airborne missile defense radar always looks downward. Decoy flares always launch downward. The way things have been until now, planes are very vulnerable from above. They could afford to be. Because very little came at them from above. But it's different now. That's why this is so sensitive. We've got about a two-year window in which our surface-to-air capability will be completely unbeatable. For about two years anyone using Little Wing will be able to shoot down anything that flies. Maybe longer. It depends how fast people are with new countermeasures."

Reacher said, "The speed will make countermeasures difficult."

"Almost impossible," Bond said. "Human reaction times will be too slow. So defenses will have to be automated. Which means we'll have to trust computers to tell the difference between a bird a hundred yards up and Little Wing a mile up and a satellite fifty miles up. Potentially it will be chaos. Civilian airlines will want protection, obviously, because of terrorism worries. But the skies above civilian airports are thick with stacked planes. False deployment would be the norm, not the exception. So they'd have to turn off their protection for takeoff and landing, which makes them totally vulnerable just when they can't afford to be."

"A can of worms," Dixon said.

"But a theoretical can of worms," O'Donnell said. "We understand Little Wing isn't working very well."

"This can go no further," Bond said.

"We already agreed."

"Because these are commercial secrets now."

“Much more important than defense secrets.”

“The prototypes were fine,” Bond said. “The beta testing was excellent. But they ran into problems with production.”

“Rockets or electronics or both?”

“Electronics,” Bond said. “The rocket technology is more than forty years old. They can do the rocket production in their sleep. That happens up in Denver, Colorado. It’s the electronics packs that are giving them the problems. Down here in LA. They haven’t even started mass production yet. They’re still doing bench assembly. Now even that is screwed up.”

Reacher nodded and said nothing. He stared out the window for a moment and then took a stack of napkins out of the dispenser and fanned them out and then butted them back together into a neat pile. Weighted them down with the sugar container. The restaurant had pretty much emptied out. There were two guys alone in separate booths at the far end of the room. Landscape workers, tired and hunched. Apart from them, no business. Outside on the street the afternoon light was fading. The red and yellow neon from the restaurant’s huge sign was becoming comparatively brighter and brighter. Some passing cars on the boulevard already had their headlights on.

“So Little Wing is the same old same old, really,” O’Donnell said, in the silence. “A Pentagon pipe dream that does nothing but burn dollars.”

Diana Bond said, “It wasn’t supposed to be like that.”

“It never is.”

“It’s not a total failure. Some of the units work.”

“They said the same thing about the M16 rifle. Which was a real comfort when you were out on patrol with one.”

“But the M16 was perfected eventually. Little Wing will be, too. And it will be worth waiting for. You know which is the world’s best-protected airplane?”

Dixon said, “Air Force One, probably. Politicians’ asses always come first.”

Bond said, “Little Wing could take it out without breaking a sweat.”

“Bring it on,” O’Donnell said. “Easier than voting.”

“You should read the Patriot Act. You could be arrested for even thinking that.”

“Jails aren’t big enough,” O’Donnell said.

Their waitress came back and hovered. Clearly she was hoping for something more lucrative from such a big table than five bottomless cups of coffee. Dixon and Neagley took the hint and ordered ice cream sundaes. Diana Bond passed. O’Donnell ordered a hamburger. The waitress stood and looked pointedly at Reacher. He wasn’t seeing her. He was still playing with his pile of napkins. Weighting it down with the sugar canister, lifting the sugar off, putting it back.

“Sir?” the waitress said.

Reacher looked up.

“Apple pie,” he said. “With ice cream. And more coffee.”

The waitress went away and Reacher went back to his pile of napkins. Diana Bond retrieved her purse from the floor and made a big show of dusting it off.

“I should get back,” she said.

“OK,” Reacher said. “Thank you very much for coming.”

55

Diana Bond left for the long drive back to Edwards and Reacher neatened his stack of napkins and placed the sugar container back on top of it, exactly centered. The desserts arrived and more coffee was poured and O'Donnell's burger was served. Reacher got halfway through his pie and then he stopped eating. He sat in silence for a moment, staring out the window again. Then he moved suddenly and pointed at the sugar container and looked straight at Neagley and asked, "You know what that is?"

"Sugar," she said.

"No, it's a paperweight," he said.

"So?"

"Who carries a gun with the chamber empty?"

"Someone trained that way."

"Like a cop. Or an ex-cop. Ex-LAPD, maybe."

"So?"

"The dragon lady at New Age lied to us. People take notes. They doodle. They work better with pencil and paper. There are no completely paperless environments."

O'Donnell said, "Things might have changed since you last held a job."

"The first time we talked she told us that Swan used his piece of the Berlin Wall as a paperweight. It's kind of hard to use a paperweight in a completely paperless environment, isn't it?"

O'Donnell said, "It could have been a figure of speech. Paperweight, souvenir, desk ornament, is there a difference?"

"First time we saw the gun, she had to grab it to get it out in the hot. Remember?"

"First time we were there, we had to wait to get in the lot. Remember?"

Neagley nodded. "There was a truck coming out the gate."

"What kind of a truck?"

"A photocopier truck. Repair or delivery."

"Kind of hard to use a photocopier in a completely paperless environment, right?"

Neagley said nothing.

Reacher said, "If she lied about that, she could have lied about a whole bunch of stuff."

Nobody spoke.

Reacher said, "New Age's Director of Security is ex-LAPD. I bet most of his foot soldiers are, too. Safeties on, chambers empty. Basic training."

Nobody spoke.

Reacher said, "Call Diana Bond again. Get her back here, right now."

"She only just left," Neagley said.

"Then she hasn't got far. She can turn around. I'm sure her car has a steering wheel."

"She won't want to."

"She'll have to. Tell her if she doesn't there'll be a whole lot more than her boss's name in the newspaper."

It took a little more than thirty-five minutes for Diana Bond to get back. Slow traffic, inconvenient highway exits. They saw her car pull into the lot. A minute later she was back at the table. Standing beside it, not sitting at it. Angry.

"We had a deal," she said. "I talk to you one time, you leave me alone."

"We had a deal," she said. "I talk to you one time, you leave me alone."

"Six more questions," Reacher said. "Then we leave you alone."

"Go to hell."

"This is important."

"Not to me."

"You came back. You could have kept on driving. You could have called the DIA. But you didn't. So quit pretending. You're going to answer."

Silence in the room. No sound, except tires on the boulevard and a distant hum from the kitchen. A dishwasher, maybe.

"Six questions?" Bond said. "OK, but I'll be counting carefully."

"Sit down," Reacher said. "Order dessert."

"I don't want dessert," she said. "Not here." But she sat down, in the same chair she had used before.

"First question," Reacher said. "Does New Age have a rival? A competitor somewhere with similar technology?"

Diana Bond said, "No."

"Nobody all bitter and frustrated because they were outbid?"

"No," Bond said again. "New Age's proposition was unique."

"OK, second question. Does the government really want Little Wing to work?"

"Why the hell wouldn't it?"

"Because governments can get nervous about developing new attack capabilities without having appropriate defense capabilities already in place."

"That's a concern I've never heard mentioned."

"Really? Suppose Little Wing is captured and copied? The Pentagon knows how

much damage it can do. Are we happy to face having the thing turned around against us?"

"It's not an issue," Bond said. "We would never do anything if we thought like that. The Manhattan Project would have been canceled, supersonic fighters, everything."

"OK," Reacher said. "Now tell me about New Age's bench assembly."

"Is this the third question?"

"Yes."

"What about their bench assembly?"

"Tell me what it is, basically. I never worked in the electronics business."

"It's assembly by hand," Bond said. "Women in sterile rooms at laboratory benches in shower caps using magnifying glasses and soldering irons."

"Slow," Reacher said.

"Obviously. A dozen units a day instead of hundreds or thousands."

"A dozen?"

"That's all they're averaging right now. Nine or ten or twelve or thirteen a day."

"When did they start bench assembly?"

"Is this the fourth question?"

"Yes, it is."

"They started bench assembly about seven months ago."

"How did it go?"

"Is this the fifth question?"

"No, it's a follow-up."

“It went fine for the first three months. They hit their targets.”

“Six days a week, right?”

“Yes.”

“When did they hit problems?”

“About four months ago.”

“What kind of problems?”

“Is this the last question?”

“No, it’s another follow-up.”

“After assembly the units are tested. More and more of them weren’t working.”

“Who tests them?”

“They have a quality control director.”

“Independent?”

“No. He was the original development engineer. At this stage he’s the only one who can test them because he’s the only one who knows how they’re supposed to work.”

“What happens to the rejects?”

“They get destroyed.”

Reacher said nothing.

Diana Bond said, “Now I really have to go.”

“Last question,” Reacher said. “Did you cut their funding because of their problems? Did they fire people?”

“Of course not,” Bond said. “Are you nuts? That’s not how it works. We maintained their budget. They maintained their staff. We had to. They had to. We have to make this thing work.”

We have to make this thing work.

56

Diana Bond left for the second time and Reacher went back to his pie. The apples were cold and the crust was leathery and the ice cream had melted all over the plate. But he didn't care. He wasn't really tasting anything.

O'Donnell said, "We should celebrate."

"Should we?" Reacher said.

"Of course we should. We know what happened now."

"And that means we should celebrate?"

"Well, doesn't it?"

"Lay it out for me and see for yourself."

"OK, Swan wasn't pursuing some private concern here. He was investigating his own company. He was checking why the success rate fell away so badly after the first three months. He was worried about insider involvement. Therefore he needed clerical help on the outside because of eavesdropping and random data monitoring in his office. Therefore he recruited Franz and Sanchez and Orozco. Who else would he trust?"

"And?"

"First they analyzed the production figures. Which were all those numbers we found. Seven months, six days a week. Then they ruled out sabotage. New Age had no rivals that stood to gain anything and the Pentagon wasn't working against them behind the scenes."

"So?"

"What else was there? They figured the quality control guy had falsely condemned six hundred and fifty working units and the firm was booking them in as destroyed but actually selling them out the back door for a hundred grand

apiece to someone called Azhari Mahmoud, a.k.a. whoever. Hence the list of names and the note on Sanchez's napkin."

"And?"

"They confronted New Age prematurely and got killed for it. The firm cooked up a story to cover Swan's disappearance and the dragon lady fed it to you."

"So now we should celebrate?"

"We know what happened, Reacher. We always used to celebrate."

Reacher said nothing.

"It's a home run," O'Donnell said. "Isn't it? And you know what? It's almost funny. You said we should talk to Swan's old boss? Well, I think we already did. Who else could it have been on that cell phone? That was New Age's Director of Security."

"Probably."

"So what's the problem?"

"What did you say way back in that Beverly Hills hotel room?"

"I don't know. Lots of things."

"You said you wanted to piss on their ancestors' graves."

"And I will."

"You won't," Reacher said. "And neither will I, or any of us. Which isn't going to feel good. That's why we can't celebrate."

"They're right here in town. They're sitting ducks."

"They sold six hundred and fifty working electronics packs out the back door. Which has implications. Somebody wants the technology, they buy one pack and copy it. Somebody buys six hundred and fifty, it's because they want the missiles themselves. And they don't buy the electronics down here unless they're also buying the rockets and the launch tubes up there in Colorado. That's

what we've got to face here. Some guy called Azhari Mahmoud now owns six hundred and fifty brand-new latest-generation SAMs. Whoever he is, we can guess what he wants them for. It'll be some kind of a big, big deal. So we have to tell someone, folks."

Nobody spoke.

"And a thin minute after we drop that dime, we're buried up to our armpits in federal agents. We won't be able to cross the street without permission, let alone go get these guys. We'll have to sit back and watch them get lawyers and eat three squares a day for the next ten years while they run through all their appeals."

Nobody spoke.

"So that's why we can't celebrate," Reacher said. "They messed with the special investigators and we can't lay a glove on them."

57

Reacher didn't sleep a wink that night. Not a second, not a minute. *They messed with the special investigators and we can't lay a glove on them.* He tossed and turned and lay awake, hour after hour. His eyes were jammed wide open but images and fevered hallucinations flooded at him. Calvin Franz, walking, talking, laughing, full of drive and energy and sympathy and concern. Jorge Sanchez, the narrowed eyes, the hint of a smile, the gold tooth, the endless cynicism that was ultimately as reassuring as constant good humor. Tony Swan, short, wide, bulky, sincere, a thoroughly decent man. Manuel Orozco, the absurd tattoo, the fake accent, the jokes, the metallic clunk of the ever-present Zippo.

Friends all.

Friends unavenged.

Friends abandoned.

Then others swam into sight, as real as if they were hovering just below the ceiling. Angela Franz, clean, carefully dressed, eyes wide with panic. The boy Charlie, rocking in his little wooden chair. Milena, slipping like a ghost from the harsh Vegas sun into the darkness of the bar. Tammy Orozco on her sofa. Her three children, bewildered, roaming through their wrecked apartment, looking for their father. They appeared to Reacher as two girls and a boy, nine, seven, and five, even though he had never met them. Swan's dog was there, a long swishing tail, a deep rumble of a bark. Even Swan's mail box was there, blinding in the Santa Ana light.

Reacher gave it up at five in the morning and got dressed again and went out for a walk. He turned west on Sunset and stamped his way through a whole angry mile, hoping against hope that someone would bump him or jostle him or get in his way so that he could snap and snarl and yell and ease his frustration. But the sidewalks were deserted. Nobody walked in LA, especially not at five in the morning, and certainly nowhere near a giant stranger in an obvious rage. The boulevard was quiet, too. No traffic, except occasional anonymous thirdhand sedans bearing humble employees to work, and a lone farting Harley carrying a fat gray-haired jerk in leathers. Reacher was offended by the noise and gave the

fat gray-haired jerk in leathers. Reacher was offended by the noise and gave the guy the finger. The bike slowed and for a delicious moment Reacher thought the guy was going to stop and make an issue out of it. But, no luck. The guy took one look and twisted the throttle and took off again, fast.

Up ahead on the right Reacher saw a vacant corner lot fenced with wire. At a bus bench in the side street was a small crowd of day laborers, waiting for the sun, waiting for work, tiny brown men with tired stoic faces. They were drinking coffee from a mission cart set up outside some kind of a community center. Reacher headed in that direction and paid a hundred of his stolen dollars for a cup. He said it was a donation. The women behind the cart accepted it without a question. They had seen weirder, he guessed, in Hollywood.

The coffee was good. As good as Denny's. He sipped it slowly and leaned back on the vacant lot's fence. The wire gave slightly and supported his bulk like a trampoline. He floated there, not quite upright, coffee in his mouth, fog in his brain.

Then the fog cleared, and he started thinking.

About Neagley, principally, and her mysterious contact at the Pentagon.

He owes me, she had said. *Bigger than you could imagine.*

By the time he finished the coffee and tossed the empty cup he had a faint glimmer of new hope, and the outline of a new plan. Odds of success, about fifty-fifty. Better than roulette.

He was back at the motel by six in the morning. He couldn't raise the others. No answer from their rooms. So he headed on down Sunset and found them in Denny's, in the same booth Neagley had used at the very beginning. He slid into the remaining unoccupied seat and the waitress dealt him a paper place mat and clattered a knife and a fork and a mug after it. He ordered coffee, pancakes, bacon, sausage, eggs, toast, and jelly.

"You're hungry," Dixon said.

"Starving," he said.

“Where were you?”

“Walking.”

“Didn’t sleep?”

“Not even close.”

The waitress came back and filled his mug. He took a long sip. The others went quiet. They were picking at their food. They looked tired and dispirited. He guessed that none of them had slept well, or at all.

O’Donnell asked, “When do we drop the dime?”

Reacher said, “Maybe we don’t.”

Nobody spoke.

“Ground rules,” Reacher said. “We have to agree something from the start. If Mahmoud has got the missiles, then this thing is bigger than we are. We have to suck it up and move on. There’s too much at stake. Either he’s paramilitary and wants to turn the whole Middle East into a no-fly zone, or he’s a terrorist planning a day of action that’s going to make the Twin Towers look like a day at the beach. Either way around, we’re looking at hundreds or thousands of KIA. Maybe tens of thousands. Those kind of numbers trump any interest of ours. Agreed?”

Dixon and Neagley nodded and looked away.

O’Donnell said, “There’s no if about it. We have to assume Mahmoud has got the missiles.”

“No,” Reacher said. “We have to assume he’s got the electronics. We don’t know if he’s got the rockets and the launch tubes yet. It’s even money. Fifty-fifty. Either he collected the rockets first, or the electronics first. But he’s got to have both before we drop the dime.”

“How do we find out?”

“Neagley hits up her Pentagon guy. She calls in whatever markers she’s holding. He organizes some kind of audit out in Colorado. If anything is missing up there,

then it’s game over for us. But if everything is still present and correct and accounted for, then it’s game on.”

Neagley checked her watch. Just after six in the west, just after nine in the east. The Pentagon would have been humming for an hour. She took out her phone and dialed.

58

Neagley's buddy wasn't dumb. He insisted on calling back from outside the building, and not on his own cell phone, either. And he was smart enough to realize that any pay phone within a mile radius of the Pentagon would be continuously monitored. So there was a whole hour's delay while he got himself across the river and halfway across town to a phone on a wall outside a bodega on New York Avenue.

Then the fun began.

Neagley told him what she wanted. He gave her all kinds of reasons why it wasn't possible. She started calling in her markers, one by one. The guy owed her a lot of heavy-duty favors. That was clear. Reacher felt a certain amount of sympathy for him. If your balls were in a vise, better that it wasn't Neagley's hand on the lever. The guy caved and agreed within ten minutes. Then it became a logistical discussion. How should the job be done, by whom, what should be considered proof positive. Neagley suggested Army CID should roll up unannounced and match the books with physical inventory. Her guy agreed, and asked for a week. Neagley gave him four hours.

Reacher spent the four hours asleep. Once the plan was settled and the decision was made he relaxed to the point where he couldn't keep his eyes open. He went back to his room and lay down on the bed. A maid came in after an hour. He sent her away again and went back to sleep. Next thing he knew Dixon was at his door. She told him that Neagley was waiting in the lounge, with news.

Neagley's news was neither good nor bad. It was somewhere in between. New Age had no physical plant in Colorado. Just an office. They contracted out their raw missile production, to one of the established aerospace manufacturers in Denver. That manufacturer had a number of Little Wing assemblies available for inspection. An Army CID officer had seen them all and counted them all, and his final tally was precisely what the books said it should be. Everything was

final tally was precisely what the books said it should be. Everything was present, correct, and accounted for. No problem. Except that exactly six hundred and fifty of the units were currently stored in a separate secure warehouse, crated up and awaiting transport to a facility in Nevada, where they were due to be decommissioned and destroyed.

“Why?” O’Donnell asked.

“Current production is specified as Mark Two,” Neagley said. “They’re junking what’s left of the Mark Ones.”

“Which just happens to be exactly six hundred and fifty units.”

“You got it.”

“What’s the difference?”

“The Mark Twos have a small fluorescent arrow painted on them. To make loading easier in the dark.”

“That’s all?”

“You got it.”

“It’s a scam.”

“Of course it’s a scam. It’s a way of making the paperwork look legal when Mahmoud’s people drive them through the factory gate.”

Reacher nodded. A gate guard would fight to the death to prevent the unauthorized removal of ordnance. But if he saw paperwork with a reason on it, he would pass the load through with a smile and a cheery wave. Even if the reason was the absence of a small painted arrow on something that cost more than he made in a year. Reacher had seen the Pentagon junk stuff for less.

He asked, “How do the electronics packs fit on?”

“In,” Neagley said. “Not on. There’s an access port in the side. You unscrew it and plug the pack in. Then there’s some testing and calibration.”

“Could I do it?”

“I doubt it. You’d need training. In the field it’s going to be a specialist’s job.”

“So Mahmoud couldn’t do it, either. Or his people.”

“We have to assume they’ve got a guy. They wouldn’t spend sixty-five million dollars without being shown how to put the things together.”

“Can we nix that transport order?”

“Not without raising an alarm. Which would be the same thing as dropping the dime.”

“You still got any markers left on your guy?”

“A couple.”

“Tell him to have someone call you the second those units roll out.”

“And until then?”

“Until then Mahmoud doesn’t have the missiles. Until then we have complete freedom of action.”

59

At that instant it became a race against time. When the warehouse door opened in Colorado, a door of a different kind would slam shut in LA. But there was still a lot to prepare. There was still a lot to discover. Including exact locations. Clearly New Age's glass cube in East LA wasn't the center of anything. For one thing, there was no helicopter there.

And they needed exact identities.

They needed to know who knew, and who flew.

"I want them all," Reacher said.

"Including the dragon lady?" Neagley asked.

"Starting with the dragon lady. She lied to me."

They needed equipment, clothing, communications, and alternative vehicles.

And training, Neagley thought.

"We're old, we're slow, and we're rusty," she said. "We're a million miles from what we used to be."

"We're not too bad," O'Donnell said.

"Time was when you'd have put a double tap through that guy's eyes," she said. "Not a lucky low shot to his leg."

They sat in the lounge like four out-of-towners discussing how to spend their day. As far as ordnance went, they had two Hardballers and the Daewoo DP-51 from Vegas. Thirteen rounds each for the Hardballers, eleven for the Daewoo. Not nearly good enough. O'Donnell and Dixon and Neagley had personal cell phones registered to their real names and real addresses and Reacher had nothing. Not nearly good enough. They had a Hertz Ford 500 rented in Dixon's real name and the captured Chrysler. Not nearly good enough. O'Donnell was in

a thousand-dollar suit from his East Coast tailor and Neagley and Dixon had jeans, jackets, and evening wear. Not nearly good enough.

Neagley swore that budget was not a problem. But that didn't help with the time factor. They needed four untraceable pay-as-you-go cell phones, four anonymous cars, and work clothes. That was a day's shopping right there. Then they needed guns and ammunition. Best case, a free choice for each of them and a lot of spare rounds. Worst case, one more make-do handgun and a lot of spare rounds. That was another day's shopping. Like most cities, LA had a thriving black market in untraceable weapons, but it would take time to penetrate.

Two days of material preparation.

Maybe two days of surveillance and research.

"We don't have time to train," Reacher said.

Azhari Mahmoud had time for a leisurely lunch. He took it in a sidewalk café in Laguna Beach. He was staying in a rented townhouse a short walk away. Safe enough. The lease was legitimate. The development had a large transient population. It wasn't unusual to see U-Haul trucks parked overnight. Mahmoud's was two streets away, in a lot, locked up and empty.

It wouldn't be empty for long.

His contacts at New Age had insisted that Little Wing must not be used inside the United States. He had readily agreed. He had said he planned to use the weapon in Kashmir, on the border, against the Indian Air Force. He had lied, of course. He had been amazed that they had taken him for a Pakistani. He had been amazed that they cared what his intentions were. Maybe they were patriotic. Or maybe they had relatives who flew a lot, domestically.

But it had been politic to go along to get along. Hence the temporary inconvenience of the shipping container and the dockside location. But there was an easy remedy. Southern California was full of day laborers. Mahmoud calculated that loading the U-Haul would take them a little less than thirty minutes.

They figured the clothes and the phones would be easy. Any mall would have what they needed. Guns were guns, either obtainable in time or not. Dixon wanted a Glock 19. Neagley's hands were bigger, so she nominated a Glock 17. O'Donnell was a Beretta guy, by choice. Reacher didn't care. He wasn't planning on shooting anybody. He was planning on using his bare hands. But he said he would take a Glock or a SIG or a Beretta or an H&K, or anything that used 9mm Parabellums. That way, all four of them would be using the same ammunition. More efficient.

Cars were more difficult still. It was hard to find a truly anonymous car. In the end O'Donnell suggested that the best bet would be rice rockets, small Japanese sedans and coupes tricked out with loud big-bore mufflers and lowered suspensions and cotton-reel tires and blue headlights. And black windows. Three-or four-year-old examples would be cheap, and they were everywhere on the street. Close to invisible, in southern California. And O'Donnell figured they were a very effective disguise, psychologically. They were so closely identified in the public mind with Latino gangbangers that nobody would think a white ex-soldier was inside behind the darkened glass.

They gave the cars and the phones priority over the guns. That way two or three of them could start the surveillance, at least. And if they were going to Radio Shack for the phones, they might as well duck into the Gap or a jeans store for clothes, too. After that, wired and blending in, they could separate and hit used-car lots until they found the wheels they needed.

All of which required cash money. Lots of it. Which required a visit to a teller's window by Neagley. Reacher drove her in the captured Chrysler and waited outside a bank in Beverly Hills. Fifteen minutes later she came out with fifty thousand dollars in a brown sandwich bag. Ninety minutes later they had clothes and phones. The phones were straightforward talk-only pay-as-you-go cells, no camera function, no games, no calculators. They bought car chargers and earpieces to go with them. The clothes were soft gray denim shirts and pants and black canvas windbreakers bought from an off-brand store on Santa Monica Boulevard, two sets each for O'Donnell and Dixon and Neagley and one set for Reacher, plus gloves and watch caps and boots from a hiking store on Melrose.

They changed at the motel and spent ten minutes in the lounge storing one another's numbers in their phones and learning how to set up conference calls.

Then they headed north and west to Van Nuys Boulevard, looking for cars. All cities had at least one strip full of auto dealers, and LA had more than one. LA had many. But O'Donnell had heard that Van Nuys north of the Ventura Freeway was the best of them all. And he had heard right. It was a cornucopia. Unlimited choice, new or pre-owned, cheap or expensive, no awkward questions. Four hours after they arrived, most of Neagley's automotive budget was gone and they owned four used Hondas. Two slammed Civics and two slammed Preludes, two silver and two white. All four were beat up and well on their way to being worn out. But they started and stopped and steered, and no one would give them a second glance.

Including the captured Chrysler, they had five cars to ferry back to Sunset, but only four drivers, so they had to make two trips. Then they took a Honda each and battled out to East LA for a swing past New Age's glass cube. But traffic was slow and it was late in the day when they got there. The place was locked up and deserted. Nothing to see.

They planned via a four-way mobile conference call and went out for dinner in Pasadena. They found a burger bar on a busy street and sat at a table for four, two opposite two, shoulder to shoulder in their new gray denims. A uniform, of sorts. Nobody admitted it but Reacher knew they all felt good. Focused, energized, in motion, up against high stakes. They talked about the past. Escapades, capers, scandals, outrages. Years fell away and Reacher's mind's eye swapped the gray for green and Pasadena for Heidelberg or Manila or Seoul.

The old unit, back together.

Almost.

Back on Sunset two hours later, O'Donnell and Neagley volunteered to take first watch at New Age. They planned to get there before five the next morning. Reacher and Dixon were left with the task of buying guns. Before he went to bed, Reacher took the dead guy's phone out of the captured Chrysler and redialed the number he had spoken to from Vegas. There was no answer. Just

voice mail. Reacher didn’t leave a message.

60

In Reacher's experience the best way to get hold of a random untraceable gun was to steal it from someone who had already stolen it. Or from someone who owned it illegally. That way there were no official comebacks. Sometimes there could be unofficial comebacks, like with the guys behind the wax museum, but they could be handled with minimal hassle.

But to get hold of four specific weapons was a taller order. Groups were always harder to supply than individuals. Limiting the ammunition requirement made it harder still. Concerns about condition and maintenance made it harder again. During his first cup of coffee of the day he ran an idle calculation. The 9mm Parabellum was certainly a popular load, but there were still plenty of .380s and .45s and .22s and .357s and .40s on the street, in all their many different variations. So if there was, say, a one-in-four chance that any particular robbery would yield a pistol that used 9mm Parabellums, and a one-in-three chance that the prize wasn't already trashed beyond redemption, they would have to stage forty-eight separate thefts to guarantee getting what they wanted. They would be at it all day. It would be a crime wave all its own.

Then he thought about finding a bent army quartermaster. Fort Irwin wasn't far away. Or better still, a bent Marine quartermaster. Camp Pendleton was farther away than Irwin, but the roads were better, and therefore it was closer in a sense. And there was an institutional belief among Marines that the Beretta M9 was an unreliable weapon. Armorers were very ready to condemn them as faulty. Some were, some weren't. The ones that weren't went out the back door for a hundred bucks each. Same principle as New Age's own scam. But setting up a buy could take days. Even weeks. Trust had to be gained. Not easy. Years ago he had done it undercover, several times. A lot of work for not very much of a tangible gain.

Karla Dixon thought she had a better idea. She ran through it over breakfast. Obviously she dismissed the notion of going to a store and buying guns legally. Neither she nor Reacher knew the exact details relevant to California, but they both assumed there would be registration and an ID requirement and maybe some kind of cooling-off period involved. So Dixon proposed driving out of LA County into a neighboring county heavier with Republican voters, which in

practical terms meant south into Orange. Then she proposed finding pawn shops and using generous applications of Neagley's cash to get around whatever lesser regulations might apply down there. She thought enhanced local respect for the Second Amendment plus enhanced profit margins would do the trick. And she figured there would be a big choice of merchandise. They could cherry-pick exactly what they wanted.

Reacher wasn't as confident as she was, but he agreed anyway. He suggested she change out of her denims and into her black suit. He suggested they take the blue Chrysler, not one of the beat-up Hondas. That way she would look like a concerned middle-class citizen. Fewer alarm bells would ring. She would buy one piece at a time. He would pose as her adviser. Her neighbor, maybe, calling on some relevant weapons experience from his past.

"The others got this far, didn't they?" Dixon asked.

"Further," Reacher said.

She nodded. "They knew it all. Who, what, where, why, and how. But something brought them down. What was it?"

"I don't know," Reacher said. He had been asking himself the same question for days.

They left for Orange County right after breakfast. They didn't know what time pawn shops opened for business, but they guessed they would be quieter earlier in the day than later. Reacher drove, the 101 and then the 5, the same way O'Donnell's GPS had led them down to Swan's house. But this time they stayed with the freeway a little longer and exited on the other side, to the east. Dixon wanted to try Tustin first. She had heard bad things about it. Or good things, depending on your point of view.

She asked, "What are you going to do when this is over?"

"Depends if I survive."

"You think you won't?"

"Like Neagley said, we're not what we used to be. The others weren't, for sure."

Like Reagley said, we're not what we used to be. The cities weren't, for sure.

"I think we'll be OK."

"I hope so."

"Feel like dropping by New York afterward?"

"I'd like to."

"But?"

"I don't make plans, Karla."

"Why not?"

"I already had this conversation with Dave."

"People make plans."

"I know. People like Calvin Franz. And Jorge Sanchez and Manuel Orozco. And Tony Swan. He planned to give his dog an aspirin every day for the next fifty-four and a half weeks."

They nosed around the surface streets that ran parallel with the freeway. Strip malls and gas stations and drive-through banks lay stunned and sleepy under the morning sun. Mattress dealers and tanning salons and furniture outlets were doing no business at all.

Dixon asked, "Who needs a tanning salon in southern California?"

They found their first pawn shop next to a book store in an upmarket strip mall. But it was all wrong. First, it was closed. Metal lattice shutters were down over the windows. Second, it dealt in the wrong kind of stuff. The displays were full of antique silver and jewelry. Flatware, fruit bowls, napkin rings, pins, pendants on fine chains, ornate picture frames. Not a Glock to be seen. No SIG-Sauers, no Berettas, no H&Ks.

They moved on.

Two spacious blocks east of the freeway they found the right kind of place. It was open. Its windows were full of electric guitars, and chunky men's rings made of nine-carat gold inset with small diamonds, and cheap watches.

And guns.

Not in the window itself, but clearly visible in a long glass display case that stood in for a counter. Maybe fifty handguns, revolvers and automatics, black and nickel, rubber grips and wooden, all in a neat line. The right kind of place.

But the wrong kind of owner.

He was an honest man. Law-abiding. He was white, somewhere in his thirties, a little overweight, good genes ruined by too much eating. He had a gun dealer's license displayed on the wall behind his head. He ran through the obligations it imposed on him like a priest reciting liturgy. First, a purchaser would have to obtain a handgun safety certificate, which was like a license to buy. Then she would have to submit to three separate background checks, the first of which was to confirm that she wasn't trying to buy more than one weapon in the same thirty-day period, the second of which was to comb through state records for evidence of criminality, and the third of which was to do exactly the same thing at the federal level via the NCIC computer.

Then she would have to wait ten days before collecting her purchase, just in case she was contemplating a crime of passion.

Dixon opened her purse and made sure the guy got a good look at the wad of cash inside. But he wasn't moved. He just glanced at it and glanced away.

They moved on.

Thirty miles away, north of west, Azhari Mahmoud was standing in the sun, sweating lightly, and watching as his shipping container emptied and his U-Haul filled. The boxes were smaller than he had imagined. Inevitable, he supposed, because the units they contained were no bigger than cigarette packs. To book them down as home theater components had been foolish, he thought. Unless they could be passed off as personal DVD players. The kind of thing people took on airplanes. Or MP3 players, maybe, with the white wires and the tiny

earphones. That would have been more plausible.

Then he smiled to himself. *Airplanes.*

Reacher drove east, navigating in a random zigzag from one off-brand billboard to the next, searching for the cheapest part of town. He was sure that there was plenty of financial stress all the way from Beverly Hills to Malibu, but it was hidden and discreet up there. Down in parts of Tustin it was on open display. As soon as the tire franchises started offering four radials for less than a hundred bucks he started paying closer attention. And he was rewarded almost immediately. He spotted a place on the right and Dixon saw a place on the left simultaneously. Dixon's place looked bigger so they headed for the next light to make a U and along the way they saw three more places.

"Plenty of choice," Reacher said. "We can afford to experiment."

"Experiment how?" Dixon asked.

"The direct approach. But you're going to have to stay in the car. You look too much like a cop."

"You told me to dress like this."

"Change of plan."

Reacher parked the Chrysler where it wasn't directly visible from inside the store. He took Neagley's wad from Dixon's bag and jammed it in his pocket. Then he hiked over to take a look. It was a big place for a pawn shop. Reacher was more used to dusty single-wide urban spaces. This was a double-fronted emporium the size of a carpet store. The windows were full of electronics and cameras and musical instruments and jewelry. And rifles. There were a dozen sporting guns racked horizontally behind a forest of vertical guitar necks. Decent weapons, although Reacher didn't think of them as sporting. Nothing very fair about hunting a deer by hiding a hundred yards away behind a tree with a box of high-velocity bullets. He figured it would be much more sporting to strap on a set of antlers and go at it head to head. That would give the poor dumb animal an even chance. Or maybe better than an even chance, which he figured was why hunters were too chicken to try it.

He stepped to the pawn shop's door and glanced inside. And gave it up, immediately. The place was too big. Too many staff. The direct approach only worked with a little one-on-one privacy. He walked back to the car and said, "My mistake. We need a smaller place."

"Across the street," Dixon said.

They pulled out of the lot and headed west a hundred yards and pulled a U at the light. Came back and bumped up into a cracked concrete lot in front of a beer store. Next to it was a no-name vitamin shop and then another pawnbroker. Not urban, but single-wide and dusty, for sure. Its window was full of the usual junk. Watches, drum kits, cymbals, guitars. And visible in the inside gloom, a wired-glass case all across the back wall. It was full of handguns. Maybe three hundred of them. They were all hanging upside down off nails through their trigger guards. There was a lone guy behind the counter, all on his own.

"My kind of place," Reacher said.

He went in alone. At first glance the proprietor looked very similar to the first guy they had met. White, thirties, solid. They could have been brothers. But this one would have been the black sheep of the family. Where the first one had glowing pink skin, this one had a gray pallor from unwise consumption choices and smudged blue and purple tattoos from reform school or prison. Or the Navy. He had reddened eyes that jumped around in his head like he was wired with electricity.

Easy, Reacher thought.

He pulled most of Neagley's wad from his pocket and fanned the bills out and butted them back together and dropped them on the counter from enough of a height to produce a good solid sound. Used money in decent quantities was heavier than most people thought. Paper, ink, dirt, grease. The proprietor held his vision together long enough to take a good long look at it and then he said, "Help you?"

"I'm sure you can," Reacher said. "I just had a civics lesson down the street. Seems that if a person wants to buy himself four pistols he has to jump through all kinds of hoops."

"You got that right," the guy said, and pointed behind him with his thumb. There

was a gun dealer's license on the wall, framed and hung just the same as the first guy's.

"Any way around those hoops?" Reacher asked. "Or under them, or over them?"

"No," the guy said. "Hoops is hoops." Then he smiled, like he had said something exceptionally profound. For a second Reacher thought about taking him by the neck and using his head to break the glass in the cabinet. Then the guy looked down at the money again and said, "I got to obey the California statutes." But he said it in a certain way and his eyes hit a sweet spot of focus and Reacher knew something good was coming.

"You a lawyer?" the guy asked.

"Do I look like a lawyer?" Reacher asked back.

"I talked to one once," the guy said.

Many times more than once, Reacher thought. *Mostly in locked rooms where the table and chairs are bolted to the floor.*

"There's a provision," the guy said. "In the statutes."

"Is there?" Reacher asked.

"A technicality," the guy said. It took him a couple of tries before he got the whole word out. He had trouble with the harsh consonants. "Me or you or anybody can't sell or give a gun to someone else without all the formalities."

"But?"

"Me or you or anybody is entitled to loan one out. A temporary and infrequent loan lasting less than thirty days is OK."

"Is that right?" Reacher said.

"It's in the statute."

"Interesting."

"Like between family members," the guy said. "Husband to wife, father to

daughter.”

“I can see that.”

“Or like between friends,” the guy said. “A friend can loan a gun to a friend, thirty days, temporary.”

“Are we friends?” Reacher asked.

“We could be,” the guy said.

Reacher asked, “What kind of things do friends do for one another?”

The guy said, “Maybe they loan each other things. Like one loans out a gun, and the other loans out some money.”

“But only temporarily,” Reacher said. “Thirty days.”

“Loans can go bad. Sometimes you just have to write them off. It’s a risk. People move away, they fall out. You can never tell with friends.”

Reacher left the money where it was. Stepped away to the wired glass cabinet. There was some junk in there. But some good stuff, too. About fifty-fifty revolvers and automatics. The automatics were about two-thirds cheap and one-third premium brands. The premium brands ran about one-in-four nine-millimeter.

Total choice, thirteen suitable pistols. From a stock of about three hundred. Four and a third percent. Worse than his breakfast calculation, by a factor of close to two.

Seven of the suitable pistols were Glocks. Clearly they had been fashionable once, but weren’t anymore. One of them was a 19. The other six were 17s. In terms of visual condition they ranged from good to mint.

“Suppose you loaned me four Glocks,” Reacher said.

“Suppose I didn’t,” the guy said.

Reacher turned around. The money was gone from the counter. Reacher had expected that. There was a gun in the guy’s hand. Reacher had not expected that.

We're old, we're slow, and we're rusty, Neagley had said. *We're a million miles from what we used to be.*

Roger that, Reacher thought.

The gun was a Colt Python. Blued carbon steel, walnut grips, .357 Magnum, eight-inch barrel. Not the biggest revolver in the world, but not very far from it. Certainly it wasn't the smallest revolver in the world. And it was maybe one of the most accurate.

"That isn't very friendly," Reacher said.

"We ain't friends," the guy said.

"It's also kind of dumb," Reacher said. "I'm in a very bad mood right now."

"Suck it up. And keep your hands where I can see them."

Reacher paused, and then he raised his hands, halfway, palms out, fingers spread, unthreatening. The guy said, "Don't let the door hit you in the ass on your way out."

The store was narrow. Reacher was all the way in back. The guy was behind the counter, a third of the way to the door. The aisle was cramped. The sunlight was bright in the window.

The guy said, "Leave the building, Elvis."

Reacher stood still for a moment. Listened hard. Glanced left, glanced right, checked behind him. There was a door in the back left corner. Probably just a bathroom. Not an office. There was paperwork piled behind the counter. Nobody piles paperwork behind the counter if they have a separate room for it. Therefore the guy was alone. No partner, no backup.

No more surprises.

Reacher put the kind of look on his face that he had seen in Vegas. The rueful loser. *It was worth a try, you got to be in it to win it.* Then he kept his hands up at his shoulders and stepped forward. One pace. Two. Three. His fourth pace put him directly level with the guy. Just the width of the counter between them.

Reacher was facing the door. The guy was ninety degrees to his left. The counter was maybe thirty inches deep. Two and a half feet.

Reacher's left arm moved, straight out sideways from the shoulder.

The boxer Muhammad Ali's reach was reckoned to be about forty inches and his hands were once timed at an average eighty miles an hour as they moved through it. Reacher was no Ali. Not even close. Especially not on his weaker side. His left hand moved at about sixty miles an hour, maximum. That was all. But sixty miles an hour was the same thing as a mile a minute, which was the same thing as eighty-eight feet per second. Which meant that Reacher's left hand took a little less than thirty-thousandths of a second to cross the counter. And halfway through its travel it bunched into a fist.

And thirty-thousandths of a second was way too brief an interval for the guy to pull the Python's trigger. Any revolver is a complex mechanical system and one as big as the Python is heavier in its action than most. Not very susceptible to accidental discharge. The guy's finger didn't even tighten. He took Reacher's fist in his face before his brain had even registered that it was moving. Reacher was a lot slower than Muhammad Ali but his arms were a lot longer. Which meant that the guy's head accelerated through a whole extra foot and a half before Reacher's arm was fully extended. And then the guy's head kept on accelerating. It kept on accelerating right until it crashed against the wall behind the counter and shattered the glass over the gun dealer's license.

At that point it stopped accelerating and started a slow downward slide to the floor.

Reacher was over the counter before the guy had even settled. He kicked the Python away and used his heel to break the guy's fingers. Both hands. Necessary in a weapons-rich environment, and faster than tying wrists. Then he reclaimed Neagley's cash from the guy's pocket and found his keys. Vaulted back over the counter and stepped to the back of the store and opened the wired glass cabinet. Took all seven Glocks and pulled a suitcase out of a display of used luggage and piled the guns inside. Then he wiped his fingerprints off the keys and his palm prints off the counter and headed outside to the sunshine.

They stopped at a legitimate firearms dealer in Tustin and bought ammunition.

Plenty of it. There seemed to be no restrictions on that kind of purchase. Then they headed back north. Traffic was slow. About level with Anaheim, they took a call from O'Donnell in East LA.

"Nothing's happening here," he said.

"Nothing?"

"No activity at all. You shouldn't have made that call from Vegas. It was a bad mistake. You threw them into a panic. They've gone into full-on lockdown mode."

61

Reacher and Dixon stayed on the 101 all the way to Hollywood and dumped the Chrysler in the motel lot and took a Honda each for the trek out to East LA. Reacher's was a silver Prelude coupe with a chipped and nervous four-cylinder motor. It had wide tires that tramlined on bad asphalt and a throaty muffler note that entertained him for the first three blocks and then started to annoy him. The upholstery stank of detailing fluid and there was a crack in the windshield that lengthened perceptibly every time he hit a bump. But the seat racked back far enough for him to get comfortable and the air conditioning worked. Altogether not a bad surveillance vehicle. He had driven far worse, many times.

They got a four-way conference call going on the cell phones and parked far from one another. Reacher was two blocks from the New Age building and had a partial view of the front entrance, from about sixty yards on a diagonal between a document storage facility and a plain gray warehouse. New Age's gate was shut and the lot looked pretty much empty. The reception area doors were closed. The whole place looked quiet.

"Who's in there?" Reacher asked.

"Maybe nobody," O'Donnell said. "We've been here since five and nobody's gone in."

"Not even the dragon lady?"

"Negative."

"No receptionist?"

"Negative."

"Do we have their phone number?"

Neagley said, "I have their switchboard number." She recited it and Reacher clicked off and thumbed it into his phone and hit the green button.

Ring tone.

But no reply.

He dialed back into the conference call.

“I was hoping to follow someone over to the manufacturing plant.”

“Not going to happen,” O’Donnell said.

Silence on the phones. No action at the glass cube.

Five minutes. Ten. Twenty.

“Enough,” Reacher said. “Back to base. Last one there buys lunch.”

Reacher was the last one back. He wasn’t a fast driver. The other three Hondas were already in the lot when he got there. He put his Prelude in an inconspicuous corner and took the suitcase of stolen guns out of the Chrysler’s trunk and locked it in his room. Then he walked down to Denny’s. First thing he saw there was Curtis Mauney’s unmarked car in the parking lot. The Crown Vic. The LA County sheriff. Second thing he saw was Mauney himself, through the window, inside the restaurant, sitting at a round table with Neagley and O’Donnell and Dixon. It was the same table they had shared with Diana Bond. Five chairs, one of them empty and waiting. Nothing on the table. Not even ice water or napkins or silverware. They hadn’t ordered. They hadn’t been there long. Reacher went in and sat down and there was a moment of tense silence and then Mauney said, “Hello again.”

A gentle tone of voice.

Quiet.

Sympathetic.

Reacher asked, “Sanchez or Swan?”

Mauney didn’t answer.

Reacher said, “What, both of them?”

“We’ll get to that. First tell me why you’re hiding.”

“Who says we’re hiding?”

“You left Vegas. You’re not registered at any LA hotel.”

“Doesn’t mean we’re hiding.”

“You’re in a West Hollywood dive under false names. The clerk gave you up. As a group you’re fairly distinctive, physically. It wasn’t hard to find you. And it was an easy guess that you’d come in here for lunch. If not, I was prepared to come back at dinner time. Or breakfast time tomorrow.”

Reacher said, “Jorge Sanchez or Tony Swan?”

Mauney said, “Tony Swan.”

62

Mauney said, “We’ve learned a thing or two, over the last few weeks. We let the buzzards do the work for us now. We’re out there like ornithologists, anytime we get a spare half hour. You get up on the roof of your car with your binoculars, you can usually see what you need. Two birds circling, it’s probably a snake-bit coyote. More than two, it’s probably a bigger deal.”

Reacher asked, “Where?”

“Same general area.”

“When?”

“Some time ago.”

“Helicopter?”

“No other way.”

“No doubt about the ID?”

“He was on his back. His hands were tied behind him. His fingerprints were preserved. His wallet was in his pocket. I’m very sorry.”

The waitress came over. The same one they had seen before. She paused near the table and sensed the mood and went away again.

Mauney asked, “Why are you hiding?”

“We’re not hiding,” Reacher said. “We’re just waiting for the funerals.”

“So why the false names?”

“You brought us here as bait. Whoever they are, we don’t want to make it easy for them.”

“Don’t you know who they are yet?”

Don't you know who they are yet?

"Do you?"

"No independent action, OK?"

"We're on Sunset Boulevard here," Reacher said. "Which is LAPD turf. Are you speaking for them?"

"Friendly advice," Mauney said.

"Noted."

"Andrew MacBride disappeared in Vegas. Arrived, didn't check in anywhere, didn't rent a car, didn't fly out. Dead end."

Reacher nodded. "Don't you just hate that?"

"But a guy called Anthony Matthews rented a U-Haul."

"The last name on Orozco's list."

Mauney nodded. "Endgame."

"Where did he take it?"

"I have no idea." Mauney slid four business cards out of his top pocket. He fanned them out and placed them carefully on the table. His name and two phone numbers were printed on them. "Call me. I mean it. You might need help. You're not up against amateurs here. Tony Swan looked like a real tough guy. What was left of him."

Mauney went back to work and the waitress came over again five minutes later and hovered. Reacher guessed no one was very hungry anymore, but they all ordered anyway. Old habits. Eat when you can, don't risk running out of energy later. Swan would have approved. Swan ate anywhere, anytime, all the time. Autopsies, exhumations, crime scenes. In fact Reacher was pretty sure that Swan had been eating a roast beef sandwich when they discovered Doug, the decomposed dead guy with the shovel in his head.

Nobody confirmed it.

Nobody talked at all. The sun was bright outside the window. A beautiful day. Blue sky, small white clouds. Cars passed by on the boulevard, customers came and went. Phones rang, landlines in the kitchen and cells in other people's pockets. Reacher ate methodically and mechanically without the slightest idea what was on his plate.

"Should we move?" Dixon asked. "Now that Mauney knows where we are?"

"I don't like it that the clerk gave us up," O'Donnell said. "We should steal his damn TV remotes."

"We don't need to move," Reacher said. "Mauney is no danger to us. And I want to know about it when they find Sanchez."

"So what next?" Dixon asked.

"We rest up," Reacher said. "We go out again after dark. We pay New Age a visit. We're not getting anywhere with surveillance, so it's time to go proactive."

He left ten bucks on the table for the waitress and paid the check at the register. Then they all stepped outside to the sunshine and stood blinking in the lot for a moment before heading back to the Dunes.

Reacher fetched the suitcase and they gathered in O'Donnell's room and checked over the stolen Glocks. Dixon took the 19 and said she was happy with it. O'Donnell sorted through the remaining six 17s and picked out the best three among them. He paired them with the magazines from the rejects so that he and Neagley and Reacher would have fast reloads the first time around. Dixon would have to reload manually after her first seventeen shots. Not a huge issue. If a handgun engagement wasn't over inside seventeen shots, then someone wasn't paying attention, and Reacher trusted Dixon to pay attention. She always had, in the past.

Reacher asked, "What kind of security can we expect around their building?"

“State of the art locks,” Neagley said. “An intruder alarm on the gate. I imagine the door opener at reception will be wired as a proximity sensor at night. Plus another intruder alarm, probably. Plus motion sensors all over the place inside. Plus intruder alarms on some of the individual office doors, maybe. All hard-wired out through the phone lines. Possibly with wireless backup, maybe even a satellite uplink.”

“And who’s going to respond?”

“That’s a very good question. Not the cops, I think. Too low-rent. My guess is it will all pipe straight through to their own security people.”

“Not the government?”

“That would make sense, for sure. The Pentagon is spending zillions there, you’d think the government would want to be involved. But I doubt if they are. Not everything makes sense nowadays. They gave airport security to private contractors. And the nearest DIA office is a long way away. So I think New Age’s security will be handled in-house, however cool Little Wing is.”

“How long will we have after we breach the gate?”

“Who says we’re going to? We don’t have keys and you can’t pick a lock like that with a rusty nail. I don’t think we’ll be able to beat any of the locks.”

“I’ll worry about the locks. How long will we have, after we’re inside?”

“Two minutes,” Neagley said. “A situation like that, the two-minute rule is the only thing we can rely on.”

“OK,” Reacher said. “We’ll go at one in the morning. Dinner at six. Get some rest.”

The others headed for the door. He followed them out, with the keys to the captured Chrysler in his hand. Neagley looked at him, quizzically.

“We don’t need it anymore,” he said to her. “I’m going to give it back. But first I’m going to have it washed. We should try to be civilized.”

Reacher drove the Chrysler back to Van Nuys Boulevard, north of the Ventura Freeway. The auto strip, where there were car-related enterprises of every kind lined up side by side, one after the other. Dealers, obviously, new and used, cheap and expensive, gaudy and restrained, but also tire shops, wheel shops, paintless dent repair, lube franchises, muffler-and-shock shops, and accessory stores.

And car washes.

There was a huge choice. Machine washing, brushless hand washing, underbody steam cleaning, three-stage waxing, full service detailing. He drove a mile up and a mile back and picked out four places that offered everything. He stopped at the first of them and asked for the total treatment. A swarm of guys in coveralls took over and he stood in the sun and watched them work. First the interior was vacuumed out and then the whole car was dragged through a glass tunnel on a moving chain and was sprayed by a sequence of nozzles with water and all kinds of foams and fluids. Guys with sponges washed the sheet metal and guys on plastic steps lathered the roof. Then the car passed under a roaring air dryer and was driven out to the apron, where other guys waited to attack the interior with aerosols and rags. They went over every inch and left it gleaming and immaculate and damp with oily residue. Reacher paid and tipped and pulled his gloves out of his pocket and put them on and drove the car away.

He stopped a hundred yards farther on, at the second place he had picked out, and asked for the whole process to be repeated all over again. The receptionist looked puzzled for a second and then shrugged and waved a crew over. Reacher stood in the sun again and watched the show. The vacuum, the shampoo, the interior, the aerosols, and the towels. He paid and tipped and put his gloves back on and drove back to the motel.

He left the car in a corner of the lot, in the sun, where it would dry. Then he walked a long block south to Fountain Avenue. Found a place that had started out as a pharmacy and then had become the kind of drugstore that sold all kinds of small household items. He went in and bought four flashlights. Three-cell Maglites, black, powerful enough to be useful, small enough to be maneuverable, big enough to be used as clubs. The girl at the register put them in a white bag with *I love LA* on it, three capital letters and a red heart-shaped symbol. Reacher carried the bag back to the motel, swinging it gently, listening to the quiet rustle of plastic.

They couldn't face Denny's again for dinner. They called out to Domino's instead, for pizzas, and ate them in the battered lounge next to the laundry room. They drank soda from a noisy red machine outside the door. A perfect meal, for what they had in mind. Some empty calories, some fats, some complex carbohydrates. Time-release energy, good for about twelve hours. An army doctor had explained it all to them, many years before.

"Objectives for tonight?" O'Donnell asked.

"Three," Reacher said. "First, Dixon hits the reception desk for anything useful. Second, Neagley finds the dragon lady's office and hits that. You and I hit the other offices for whatever else they've got. A hundred and twenty seconds, in and out. Then third, we ID the security people when they show up."

"We're waiting around afterward?"

"I am," Reacher said. "You guys are heading back."

Reacher went up to his room and brushed his teeth and took a long hot shower. Then he stretched out full length on the bed and took a nap. The clock in his head woke him at half past midnight. He stretched and brushed his teeth again and dressed. Gray denim pants, gray shirt, black windbreaker zipped all the way up. Boots, tightly laced. Gloves on. The Chrysler keys in one pants pocket, the spare Glock mag in the other. The captured cell phone from Vegas in one shirt pocket, his own phone in the other. The Maglite in one jacket pocket, the Glock itself in the other. Nothing else.

He walked out to the lot at ten minutes before one o'clock. The others were already there, a shadowy trio standing well away from any pools of light.

"OK," he said. He turned to O'Donnell and Neagley. "You guys drive your Hondas." He turned to Dixon. "Karla, you drive mine. You park it close, facing west, and you leave the keys in for me. Then you ride back with Dave."

Dixon said, "Are you really going to leave the Chrysler there?"

"We don't need it."

We don't need it.

“It’s full of our prints and hair and fiber.”

“Not anymore. A bunch of guys up on Van Nuys just made sure of that. Now let’s go.”

They bumped fists like ballplayers, an old ritual, and then they dispersed and climbed into their cars. Reacher slid into the Chrysler and started it up, the heavy V-8 beat slow and loud in the darkness. He heard the Hondas start, their smaller engines coughing and popping and their big-bore mufflers throbbing. He backed out of his slot and turned and headed for the exit. In his mirror he saw three pairs of bright blue headlights strung out behind him. He swung east on Sunset and south on La Brea and then east again on Wilshire and saw the others following him all the way, a ragged little convoy hanging together in the light nighttime traffic.

63

The great city went quiet after they passed MacArthur Park and hit the 110. To their right, downtown was silent and deserted. There were lights on in Chinatown, but no visible activity. In the other direction Dodger Stadium was huge and dark and empty. Then they came off the freeway and plunged into the surface streets to the east. Navigation had been difficult by day and was worse by night. But Reacher had made the trip three times before, twice as a passenger and once as a driver, and he figured he could spot the turns.

And he did, without a problem. He slowed three blocks before New Age's building and let the others close up behind him. Then he led them through a wide two-block circle, for caution's sake. Then a closer pass, on a one-block radius. There was mist in the air. The glass cube looked dark and deserted. The ornamental trees in the lot were up-lit with decorative spots and the light spilled a little and reflected off the building's mirror siding, but apart from that there was no specific illumination. The razor wire on the fence looked dull gray in the darkness and the main gate was closed. Reacher slowed next to it and dropped his window and stuck his arm out and made a circular gesture with his gloved finger in the air, like a baseball umpire signaling a home run. *One more go-round.* He led them through three-quarters of a round trip and then pointed at the curb where he wanted them to park. First Neagley, then O'Donnell behind her, then Dixon in his own silver Prelude. They slowed and stopped and he made throat-cutting gestures and they shut their motors down and climbed out. O'Donnell detoured all the way to the gate and came back and said, "It's a very big lock." Reacher was still at the wheel of the idling Chrysler. His window was still open. He said, "The bigger they are, the harder they fall."

"We doing this stealthy?"

"Not very," Reacher said. "I'll meet you at the gate."

They walked ahead and he put the Chrysler in gear and followed them, slowly. The roads all around New Age's block were standard twenty-two-foot blacktop ribbons, typical of new business park construction. No sidewalks. This was LA. Twenty-one thousand miles of surface streets, probably fewer than twenty-one

thousand yards of sidewalk. New Age´s gate was set in a curved scallop maybe twenty feet deep, so that arriving vehicles could pull off the roadway and wait. Total distance between the gate and the far curb, forty-two feet. Automatically the manic part of Reacher's mind told him that was the same as fourteen yards or 504 inches or .795 percent of a mile, or a hair over 1,280 centimeters in European terms. He turned ninety degrees into the scallop and straightened head-on and brought the Chrysler's front bumper to within an inch of the gate. Then he reversed straight back all the way until he felt the rear tires touch the far curb. He put his foot hard on the brake and slotted the transmission back into drive and dropped all four windows. Night air blew in, sharp and cold. The others looked at him and he pointed to where he wanted them, two on the left of the gate and one on the right.

"Start the clock," he called. "Two minutes."

He kept his foot on the brake and hit the gas until the transmission was wound up tight and the whole car was rocking and bucking and straining. Then he slipped his foot off the brake and stamped down on the accelerator and the car shot forward. It covered the forty-two feet of available distance with the rear tires smoking and howling and then it smashed head-on into the gate. The lock ruptured instantly and the gate smashed open and flung back and about a dozen airbags exploded inside the Chrysler, out of the steering wheel and the passenger fascia and the header rails and the seats. Reacher was ready for them. He was driving one-handed and had his other arm up in front of his face. He stopped the driver's airbag with his elbow. No problem. The four open windows defused the percussion shock and saved his eardrums. But the noise still deafened him. It was like sitting in a car and having someone fire a .44 at him. Ahead of him on the front wall of the building a blue strobe started flashing urgently. If there was an accompanying siren, he couldn't hear it.

He kept his foot hard down. The car stumbled for a split second after the impact with the gate and then it picked up the pace again and laid rubber all the way through the lot. He lined up the steering and risked a glance in the mirror and saw the others running full speed after him. Then he faced front and put both hands on the wheel and aimed for the reception area doors.

He was doing close to fifty miles an hour when he reached them. The front wheels hit the shallow step and the whole car launched and smashed through the doors about a foot off the ground. Glass shattered and the door frames tore right out of the walls and the car continued on inside more or less uninterrupted. It hit

the slate floor with the brakes locked hard and skidded straight on and demolished the reception counter completely and knocked down the wall behind it and ended up buried in rubble to the base of the windshield, with the wreckage of the reception counter strewn all around under its midsection.

Which is going to make Dixon's research difficult, Reacher thought.

Then he shut his mind to that problem and unclipped his belt and forced his door open. Spilled out onto the lobby floor and crawled away. All around him tiny white alarm strobes were flashing. His hearing was coming back. A loud siren was sounding. He got to his feet and saw the others hurdling the wreckage in the doorway and running inside from the lot. Dixon was heading straight for the back of the lobby and O'Donnell and Neagley were heading for the mouth of the corridor where the dragon lady had come out twice before. Their flashlights were already on and bright cones of light were jerking and bouncing in front of them through clouds of swirling white dust. He pulled his own flashlight out and switched it on and followed them.

Twenty-one seconds gone, he thought.

There were two elevators halfway down the corridor. Their indicator panels showed it to be a three-story building. He didn't press the call button. He figured the alarm would have already shut down the elevators. Instead he flung open an adjacent door and hit the stairs. Ran all the way up to the third floor, two steps at a time. The sound of the siren was unbearable in the stairwell. He burst out into the third-floor corridor. He didn't need his flashlight. The alarm strobes were lighting the place up like the disco from hell. The corridor was lined on both sides with maple doors twenty feet apart. Offices. The doors had nameplates on them. Long black plastic rectangles, engraved with letters cut through to a white base layer. Directly in front of him Neagley was busy kicking down a door labeled *Margaret Berenson.* The stop-motion effect of the alarm strobes made her movements weird and jerky. The door wouldn't give. She pulled out her Glock and fired three aimed shots into the lock. Three loud explosions. The spent brass kicked out of the pistol's ejection port and rolled away on the carpet, frozen by the strobes into a long golden chain. Neagley kicked the door again and it sagged open. She went inside.

Reacher moved on. *Fifty-two seconds gone,* he thought.

He passed a door labeled *Allen Lamaison.* Twenty carpeted feet farther on he saw another door: *Anthony Swan.* He braced himself against the opposite wall and wound up and delivered a mighty kick with his heel, just above the lock. The maple splintered and the door sagged but the catch held. He finished the job with a sharp blow from the flat of his gloved hand and tumbled inside.

Sixty-three seconds gone, he thought.

He stood stock-still and played his flashlight beam all around his dead friend's office. It was untouched. It was like Swan had just stepped out to the bathroom or gone out for lunch. There was a coat hanging on a hat stand. It was a khaki windbreaker, old, worn, plaid-lined like a golf jacket, short and wide. There were file cabinets. Phones. A leather chair, crushed in places by the weight of a heavy barrel-shaped man. There was a computer on the desk. And a new blank notepad. And pens, and pencils. A stapler. A clock. A small pile of papers.

And a paperweight, holding the papers down. A lump of Soviet concrete, irregular in shape, the size of a fist, gray and polished to a greasy shine by handling, one flat face with faint traces of blue and red sprayed graffiti still on it.

Reacher stepped to the desk and put the lump of concrete in his pocket. Took the pile of papers from under it and rolled them tight and put them in his other pocket. Suddenly became aware of a softness under his feet. He played the flashlight beam downward. Saw rich red colors reflected back. Ornate patterns. Thick pile. An Oriental rug. Brand new. He recalled the cord on Orozco's wrists and ankles and Curtis Mauney's words: *It's a sisal product from the Indian subcontinent. It would have to come in on whatever gets exported from there.*

Eighty-nine seconds gone, he thought. *Thirty-one to go.*

He stepped to the window. Saw Karla Dixon far below in the darkness, already on her way out of the lot. Her pants and her jacket were scuffed and coated with white dust. She looked like a ghost. From crawling around in the wallboard dust, he guessed. She was carrying papers and some kind of a white three-ring binder. She was lit up in short blue pulses by the strobe on the front of the building.

Twenty-six seconds to go.

He saw O'Donnell run out below like he was escaping from a burning house, taking giant strides, carrying stuff clutched to his chest. And then Neagley a

second later, running hard, long dark hair streaming out behind her, arms pumping, with a thick wad of green file folders gripped in each hand.

Nineteen seconds to go.

He crossed the office and touched the jacket on the hat stand, gently, on the shoulder, like Swan was still in it. Then he stepped back behind the desk and sat down in the chair. It creaked once as he settled. He heard the sound quite clearly over the siren.

Twelve seconds to go.

He looked out at the manic flashing in the corridor and knew he could just wait. Sooner or later, maybe in less than a minute, the men who had killed his friends would show up. As long as there were fewer than thirty-four of them he could sit right where he was and take them all down, one by one.

Five seconds to go.

Except that he couldn't, of course. Nobody was that dumb. After the first three or four KIAs had piled up in the doorway, the rest of them would regroup in the corridor and start thinking about tear gas and reinforcements and body armor. Maybe they would even think about calling the cops or the FBI. And Reacher knew there was no way to be sure of putting the right guys down before he lost a three-or four-day siege against a whole bunch of trained SWAT teams.

One second to go.

He exploded out of the chair and out through the broken door and jinked left into the corridor and right into the stairwell. Neagley had wedged the door open for him. He hit the first floor about ten seconds over budget. He dodged around the inert Chrysler in the lobby and was out in the lot fifteen seconds late. Through the wrecked gate and out in the street forty seconds late. Then he ran toward the pale gleam of the silver Prelude. It was a hundred yards away, distant and innocent and alone. The other two Hondas were already gone. He covered the hundred yards in twenty seconds and hurled himself inside. He slammed his door after him and struggled upright in his seat. He was breathing hard, mouth wide open. He turned his head and saw a set of headlights in the far distance, moving very fast, coming toward him, swinging around corners, then diving low from braking.

64

Altogether three cars showed up. They came in fast and stopped short all over the road outside the wrecked gate and they stayed there, parked at random angles, engines still running, headlights blazing through the night mist. They were brand-new Chrysler 300Cs, dark blue, pretty much identical to the one already parked in New Age's lobby.

Altogether five guys got out of the three cars. Two from the first, one from the second, two from the third. Reacher was a hundred yards away and watching through tinted glass and the corner of New Age's fence and he was dazzled by the six headlights, so he couldn't make out much detail. But the guy who had arrived alone in the second car seemed to be in charge. He was a slight man, wearing a short raincoat that looked to be black. Under it he had some kind of a white T-shirt. He was staring at the breached gate and gesturing the others to stay well away from it, as if it was somehow dangerous.

An ex-cop, Reacher thought. *Instinctively reluctant to contaminate a crime scene.*

Then the five guys formed up close together in a tight arrowhead formation, with the man in the raincoat closest to the wreckage. They advanced on it, slow and wary, one step at a time, leaning forward from their waists, heads thrust forward, like they were puzzled by what they were seeing. Then they stopped and backtracked fast and retreated behind their cars. The engines shut down and the headlight beams shut off and the scene went dark.

Not too dumb, Reacher thought. *They figure this could be an ambush. They think we could still be in there.*

He watched them until his night vision came back. Then he took out the cell phone he had brought back from Vegas and beeped his way through all the menus until he was on the last number the phone had dialed. He hit the call button and put the phone to his ear and watched out the window to see which of the five guys would answer.

His money was on the guy in the raincoat.

His money was on the guy in the raincoat.

Wrong.

None of the five guys answered.

None of them reacted. None of them pulled a phone from a pocket to check the caller ID. None of them even moved. The ring tone in Reacher's ear went on and on and then cut to voice mail. He clicked off and redialed and the same thing happened. He watched, and nobody moved a muscle. It was inconceivable that a Director of Security would be out on an emergency alert without his cell phone switched on. It was inconceivable that a Director of Security would ignore an incoming call in such circumstances. Therefore none of these five was the director of security. Not the guy in the raincoat. He was third man on the totem pole, at best, allowing for Swan's number-two spot. And he was acting like a guy in third place. He was slow, and ponderous. He had no instinctive grasp of tactics. Anybody with half a brain would have figured out his best course of action long ago. A small square building, potential armed hostiles inside, three solid cars at his disposal, he should have solved his problem already. All three cars go in, high speed, different directions, they circle the building, they draw fire, two guys go in the back, two guys go in the front, game over.

Civilians, Reacher thought.

He waited.

Eventually the guy in the raincoat made the right decision. Painfully slow, but he got there in the end. He ordered everyone back in their cars and they maneuvered for a spell and then burst into the lot at high speed. Reacher watched them circle the building a couple of times and then he started the Honda and headed west.

Reacher kept on the surface streets and stayed off the freeway. He had noticed that the freeways were thick with cops at night, and he hadn't seen any anywhere else. So he erred on the side of caution. He got lost near Dodger Stadium and ended up driving an aimless circle that took him right past the LA Police Academy. He stopped in Echo Park and checked in with the others by phone. They were nearly home, streaming west at circumspect speeds like bombers returning from a night raid.

returning from a night raid.

They regrouped in O'Donnell's room dead-on three o'clock in the morning. The captured paperwork was laid out on the bed in three neat piles. Reacher unrolled Swan's stuff from his pocket and added it to the line. It wasn't very interesting. Most of it was a memorandum about future overtime requirements for his secretarial staff. The rest of it was a justification for the overtime they had already worked.

O'Donnell's collection wasn't very interesting either, but it was instructive in a negative way. It proved that the glass cube was purely an administrative center. It had been relatively unsecured because it contained very little worth stealing. Some minor design work happened there, and some component sourcing, but most of the square footage was given over to management functions. Personnel stuff, corporate finance stuff, routine transport, and maintenance and bureaucracy. Nothing inherently valuable.

Which made it all the more important to find the plant location.

Which was where Dixon's stuff made all the difference. She had dug through the wreckage of the reception area and crawled under the crashed Chrysler and in about fifty seconds flat she had come up with solid gold. In the shattered remains of a locked drawer she had found New Age's internal phone directory. Now it was right there on the bed, a thick wad of loose-leaf pages punched into a white three-ring binder, a little battered and covered in dust. The cover was printed with New Age's corporate logo and most of the pages were printed with names that meant nothing, with matching four-digit telephone extensions. But right at the front of the book was a block diagram detailing the company's various divisions. Names were printed in boxes, and lines connected the boxes downward through all the various hierarchies. The Security Division was headed by a guy called Allen Lamaison. His number two had been Tony Swan. Below Swan two lines led to two other guys, and below them five more lines fanned out to five more guys, one of which had the name Saropian, and who was as dead as Tony Swan, in a Vegas hotel foundation. A total staff of nine, two down, seven survivors.

"Turn to the back," Dixon said.

The last section had account numbers for FedEx and UPS and DHL. Plus full

street addresses and landline phone numbers for two of New Age's operations, which was what courier services needed. The East LA glass cube, the contracting office up in Colorado.

And then, bizarrely, a third address, with a note printed in bold and underlined: *No deliveries to this location.*

The third address was for the electronics manufacturing plant.

It was in Highland Park, halfway between Glendale and South Pasadena. Six and a half miles north and east of downtown, nine miles east of where they were standing.

Close enough to taste.

"Now turn back a few pages," Dixon said.

Reacher leafed backward. There was a whole section showing remote telephone extensions out there in the manufacturing plant.

"Check under *P*," Dixon said.

The P section started with a guy called Pascoe and finished with a guy called Purcell. Halfway through the list was *Pilot's office.*

Dixon said, "We found the helicopter."

Reacher nodded. Then he smiled at her. Pictured her running in with her flashlight, running out fifty seconds later covered in dust. His old team. *He could send them to Atlanta and they would come back with the Coke recipe.*

Neagley had personnel files on the whole Security Division. Nine green file folders. One was Saropian's, one was Tony Swan's. Reacher didn't look at either of those. No point. He started with the top boy, Allen Lamaison. There was a Polaroid photograph clipped to the first sheet inside. Lamaison was a bulky thick-necked man with dark blank eyes and a mouth too small for his jaw. His personal information was on the next sheet and showed he had done twenty years inside the LAPD, the last twelve in Robbery-Homicide. He was forty-nine years old.

Next up were the two guys sharing the third spot in the hierarchy. The first of

Next up were the two guys sharing the third spot in the hierarchy. The first of them was called Lennox. Forty-one years old, ex-LAPD, gray buzz cut, heavy build, meaty red face.

The second was the guy in the raincoat. His name was Parker. Forty-two years old, ex-LAPD, tall, slim, a pale hard face disfigured by a broken nose.

“They’re all ex-LAPD,” Neagley said. “According to the data, they all quit around the same time.”

“After a scandal?”

“There are always scandals. It’s statistically difficult to quit the LAPD any other way.”

“Could your guy in Chicago get their histories?”

Neagley shrugged. “We might be able to get into their computer. And we know some people. We might get some word of mouth.”

“What was on Berenson’s office floor?”

“A new Oriental rug. Persian style, but almost certainly a copy from Pakistan.”

Reacher nodded. “Swan’s place, too. They must have done the whole executive floor.”

Neagley dialed her cell for the call to her Chicago guy’s voice mail and Reacher put Parker’s details on one side and checked the photographs of the four remaining foot soldiers. Then he closed their files and butted them together into a neat stack and piled it on top of Parker’s jacket, like a category.

“I saw these five tonight,” he said.

“What were they like?” O’Donnell asked.

“Lousy. Really slow and stupid.”

“Where were the other two?”

“Highland Park, presumably. That’s where the good stuff is.”

O’Donnell slid the five separated files toward him and asked, “How did we lose four guys to the Keystone Kops?”

“I don’t know,” Reacher said.

65

Eventually, as he knew he would, Reacher opened Tony Swan's New Age personnel file. He didn't get past the Polaroid photograph. It was a year old and not remotely close to studio quality but it was much clearer than Curtis Mauney's video surveillance still. Ten years after the army Swan's hair had been shorter than when he was in. Back then the craze for shaved heads had already started among enlisted men but hadn't spread upward to officers. Swan had worn a regular style, parted and brushed. But over the years it must have thinned and he had changed to an all-over half-inch Caesar. In the army it had been a chestnut brown. Now it was a dusty gray. His eyes were pouched and he had grown balls of fat and muscle at the hinges of his jaw. His neck was wider than ever. Reacher was amazed that anyone made shirts with collars that size. Like automobile tires.

"What next?" Dixon asked, in the silence. Reacher knew it wasn't a genuine inquiry. She was just trying to stop him reading. Trying to spare his feelings. He closed the file. Dropped it on the bed well away from the other files, in a category all its own. Swan deserved better than to be associated with his recent colleagues, even on paper.

"Who knew, and who flew," Reacher said. "That's what we need. Anyone else can live a little longer."

"When will we know?"

"Later today. You and Dave can go scope out Highland Park. Neagley and I are going back to East LA. In an hour. So take a nap, and make it count."

Reacher and Neagley left the motel at five in the morning, in separate Hondas, driving one-handed and talking to each other on the phone like commuters everywhere. Reacher said he guessed that when the alarm call came in, Lamaison and Lennox had headed straight for Highland Park. Standard emergency protocol, he figured, because Highland Park was the more sensitive location. The attack in East LA might have been nothing more than a decoy. But

location. The attack in East LA might have been nothing more than a decoy. But an uneventful night would allay those fears and they would head to the scene of the real crime around dawn. They would declare the glass cube unusable for normal operations and give everyone the day off. Except for department heads, who would be called in to inventory the damage and list what was missing.

Neagley agreed with his analysis. And she grasped the next part of the plan without having to ask, which was one of the reasons why Reacher liked her so much.

They parked a hundred yards apart on different streets, hiding in plain sight. The sun was over the horizon and the dawn was gray. Reacher was fifty yards from New Age's building and could see his car reflected in the mirror glass, tiny and distant and anonymous, one of hundreds dumped all around. There was a flatbed truck backed up to the wrecked reception area. A steel cable snaked inside into the gloom. The guy called Parker was still there in his raincoat. He was directing operations. He had one foot soldier with him. Reacher guessed the other three had been sent up to Highland Park to relieve Lamaison and Lennox.

The flatbed's cable jerked and tightened and started hauling. The blue Chrysler came out of the lobby backward, a lot slower than it had gone in. It had scars on the paint and some front-end damage. The windshield was starred and a little concave. But overall the car was in excellent shape. As subtle as a hammer, as vulnerable as a hammer. It came to rest on the flatbed and the driver strapped the wheels down and drove it away. As soon as it was out of the lot its undamaged twin drove in. Another blue 300C, fast and confident. It stopped just inside and Allen Lamaison climbed out to inspect the smashed gate.

Reacher recognized him instantly from his file photograph. In the flesh he was about six feet tall and could have been two hundred and forty pounds. Big shoulders, small hips, thin legs. He looked fast and agile. He was dressed in a gray suit with a white shirt and a red necktie. He was holding the necktie flat against his chest with one hand, even though the weather wasn't windy. He took a brief look at the gate and climbed back in his car and drove on through the lot. He got out again just short of the shattered doors and Parker came over in his raincoat and they started talking.

Just to be sure, Reacher took out the phone he had brought back from Vegas and redialed. Fifty yards away Lamaison's hand went straight to his pocket and came

redialed. Fifty yards away Lamaison's hand went straight to his pocket and came out with a phone. He glanced at the caller ID on the screen and froze.

Got you, Reacher thought.

He wasn't expecting an answer. But Lamaison picked up. He flicked the phone open and brought it up to his face and said, "What?"

"How's your day going?" Reacher asked.

"It only just started," Lamaison said.

"How was your night?"

"I'm going to kill you."

"Plenty of folks have tried," Reacher said. "I'm still here. They aren't."

"Where are you?"

"We got out of town. Safer that way. But we'll be back. Maybe next week, maybe next month, maybe next year. You better get used to looking over your shoulder. That's something you're going to be doing a lot of."

"I'm not scared of you."

"Then you're a fool," Reacher said, and clicked off. He saw Lamaison stare at his phone, and then dial a number. Not a call back. Reacher waited, but his phone stayed silent, and Lamaison started talking, evidently to someone else.

Ten minutes later Lennox showed up in another blue 300C. Black suit, gray buzz cut, heavy build, meaty red face. The other number three, Swan's junior, Parker's equal. He was carrying a cardboard tray of coffee and disappeared into the building. Fifty minutes after that Margaret Berenson showed up. The dragon lady. Human Resources. Seven o'clock in the morning. She was in a mid-sized silver Toyota. She made a right off the roadway and drove through the lot and parked neatly in a slot close to the door. Then she picked her way inside through the wreckage. Lamaison came out briefly and dispatched the remaining foot soldier to the gate, for sentry duty. Parker made a second line of defense at the

door. He was still in his raincoat. Two more managers showed up. Probably financial and the building super, Reacher figured. The sentry waved them through the absent gate and Parker checked them in at the door. Then some kind of a CEO showed up. An old guy, a Jaguar sedan, deference at the gate, a ramrod posture from Parker. The old guy conferred with Parker through the Jaguar's window and went away again. Clearly he had a hands-off management style.

Then the scene went quiet, and it stayed quiet for more than two hours.

Halfway through the wait Dixon called in from Highland Park. She and O'Donnell had been on station since before six in the morning. They had seen the three foot soldiers show up. They had seen Lamaison and Lennox leave. They had seen workers show up. They had driven all around the plant on a two-block radius, for a fuller picture.

"It's the real deal," Dixon said. "Multiple buildings, serious fence, excellent security. And it's got a helipad out back. With a helicopter on it. A white Bell 222."

At half past nine in the morning the dragon lady left. She picked her way through the mess and stood on the shallow step outside the reception area for a moment and then headed back toward her Toyota. Reacher's cell phone rang. The Radio Shack pay-as-you-go, not the Vegas guy's. It was Neagley.

"Both of us go?" she asked.

"Absolutely," Reacher said. "You close, me deep. Time to rock and roll."

He pulled his gloves on and started his Honda at the same time that Berenson started her Toyota. She had made a right coming in, and therefore she would make a left going out. Reacher eased off the curb and drove twenty yards and U-turned in the mouth of the next side street. He was stiff from sitting still so long. He came back slowly, along New Age's fence. Berenson was hustling through the lot. A block away he could see Neagley's Honda, riding low, trailing a cloud of white vapor. Berenson reached the wrecked gate and swept through without pausing. Made the left. Neagley made a parallel left and fell in twenty yards behind her. Reacher slowed and waited and then made his own turn and tucked

behind her. Reacher slowed and waited and then made his own turn and tucked in about seventy yards behind Neagley and ninety behind Berenson.

66

The Prelude was a low-slung coupe and therefore Reacher didn't have the best angle in the world, but most of the time he got a decent view of the silver Toyota up ahead. Berenson was driving well under the speed limit. Maybe she had points on her license. Or things on her mind. Or maybe the car-crash scars were more vivid in her memory than they were on her face. She made a right onto a road called Huntington Drive, which Reacher was pretty sure had been a part of the old Route 66. She headed north and east on it. Reacher started singing to himself, about getting his kicks. Then he stopped. Berenson was slowing and her turn signal was flashing. She was getting ready to make a left. She was heading for South Pasadena.

His phone rang. Neagley.

"I've been behind her too long," she said. "I'm taking three sides of the next block. You move up for a spell."

He kept the line open and accelerated. Berenson had turned into a road called Van Horne Avenue. He turned into it about fifty yards behind her. He couldn't see her. The road curved too much. He accelerated again and eased off and came around a final curve and spotted her about forty yards ahead. He cruised on and in his mirror he saw Neagley swing back on the road behind him.

Monterey Hills gave way to South Pasadena and at the municipal line the road changed its name to Via Del Rey. A pretty name, and a pretty place. The California dream. Low hills, curving streets, trees, perpetual spring, perpetual blossom. Reacher had grown up on grim military bases in Europe and the Pacific and people had given him picture books to show him what home was all about. Most of the pictures had looked exactly like South Pasadena.

Berenson made a left and then a right and pulled into a quiet residential cul-de-sac. Reacher glimpsed small smug houses basking in the morning sun. He didn't follow Berenson. The slammed Honda was pretty anonymous in most of LA, but not in a street like that. He braked and came to a stop thirty yards farther on. Neagley pulled in behind him.

“Now?” she asked, on the phone.

There were two main ways to engineer a visit with someone returning to their home. Either you let them settle and then gave them a compelling reason why they should let you in later, or you followed hard on their heels and rushed them while they still had their keys out or their door open.

“Now,” Reacher said.

They slid out and locked up and ran. Safe enough. A lone man running could look suspicious. A lone woman rarely did. A man and a woman running together were usually taken as jogging buddies, or a couple just out having fun.

They made it into the cul-de-sac and saw nothing at first. There was a rise, and then a curve. They made it through the curve in time to see a garage door opening next to a house about a third of the way down the street, on the right. Berenson’s silver Toyota was waiting on a blacktop driveway. The house was small and neat. Faced with brick. Painted trim. The front yard was full of rocks and gravel and all kinds of colorful blooms. There was a basketball hoop over the garage. The rising door was letting in enough light to show a tangle of kid stuff stacked against a wall inside. A bike, a skateboard, a Little League bat, knee pads, helmets, gloves.

The Toyota’s brake lights went off and it crept forward. Neagley sprinted. She was much faster than Reacher. She made it inside the garage just as the door started back down. Reacher arrived about ten seconds after her and used his foot to trip the safety mechanism. He waited until the door rose again to waist height and then he ducked under it and stepped inside.

Margaret Berenson was already out of her car. Neagley had one gloved hand in her hair and the other clamped around both of her wrists from behind. Berenson was struggling, but not much. She stopped altogether after Neagley forced her face down and tapped it twice against the Toyota’s hood. At that point she went limp and started yelling. She stopped yelling exactly a second later after Neagley straightened her up again and turned her toward Reacher and Reacher popped her in the solar plexus, once, gently, just enough to drive the air out of her lungs.

Then Reacher stepped away and hit the button and the door started down again. There was a weak bulb in the opener on the ceiling and as the sunlight cut off it was replaced by a dim yellow glow. At the right rear of the garage there was a

door to the outside, and another on the left that would lead to the interior of the house. There was an alarm pad next to it.

“Is it set?” Reacher asked.

“Yes,” Berenson said, breathlessly.

“No,” Neagley said. She nodded toward the bike and the skateboard. “The kid is about twelve years old. Mom was out early this morning. The kid made the school bus on his own for once. Probably unusual. Setting the alarm won’t be a part of his normal routine.”

“Maybe Dad set it.”

“Dad is long gone. Mom isn’t wearing a ring.”

“Boyfriend?”

“You must be kidding.”

Reacher tried the door. It was locked. He pulled the keys out of the Toyota’s ignition and thumbed through the ring and found a house key. It fit the lock and turned. The door opened. No warning beeps. Thirty seconds later, no lights, no siren.

“You tell a lot of lies, Ms. Berenson,” he said.

Berenson said nothing.

Neagley said, “She’s Human Resources. It’s what they do.”

Reacher held the door and Neagley bundled Berenson through a laundry room and into a kitchen. The house had been built before developers started making kitchens as big as aircraft hangars, so it was just a small square room full of cabinets and appliances a few years off the pace. There was a table and two chairs. Neagley forced Berenson down into one and Reacher headed back to the garage and rooted around until he found a half-used roll of duct tape on a shelf. With gloves on he couldn’t unpick the end so he stepped back to the kitchen and used a knife from a maple block. He taped Berenson tight to the chair, torso, arms, legs, fast and efficient.

“We were in the army,” he said to her. “We mentioned that, right? When we needed information, our first port of call was the company clerk. That’s you. So start talking.”

“You’re crazy,” Berenson said back.

“Tell me about the car wreck.”

“The what?”

“Your scars.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“Was it bad?”

“Awful.”

“This could be much worse.” Reacher put the kitchen knife on the table and followed it with the Glock from one pocket and Tony Swan’s lump of concrete from the other. “Stab wounds, gunshot wounds, blunt trauma. I’ll let you choose.”

Berenson started to cry. Hopeless, helpless sobs and wails. Her shoulders shook and her head dropped and tears dripped into her lap.

“Not helping,” Reacher said. “You’re crying at the wrong guy.”

Berenson lifted her head and turned and looked at Neagley. Neagley’s face was about as expressive as Swan’s lump of concrete.

“Start talking,” Reacher said.

“I can’t,” Berenson said. “He’ll hurt my son.”

“Who will?”

“I’m not allowed to say.”

“Lamaison?”

“I can’t say.”

¨I can´t say.´´

“It’s time to make up your mind, Margaret. We want to know who knew and who flew. Right now we’re including you in. You want us to include you out, you’ve got some serious talking to do.”

“He’ll hurt my son.”

“Lamaison will?”

“I can’t say who.”

“Look at it from our side, Margaret. If in doubt, we’ll take you out.”

Berenson said nothing.

“Be smart, Margaret,” Reacher said. “Whoever is threatening your son, you make a good case against him, he’ll be dead. He won’t be able to hurt anyone.”

“I can’t rely on that.”

“Just shoot her,” Neagley said. “She’s wasting our time.”

Reacher stepped to the refrigerator and opened it. Took out a plastic bottle of Evian water. Flat, French, gallon for gallon three times as expensive as gasoline. He unscrewed the top and took a long drink. Offered the bottle to Neagley. She shook her head. He emptied the rest of the water in the sink and stepped back to the table and used the kitchen knife to saw an oval hole in the bottom of the bottle. He fitted it over the Glock’s muzzle. Adjusted it neatly so that the screw neck lined up exactly with the barrel.

“A home-made silencer,” he said. “The neighbors won’t hear a thing. It only works once, but once is all it has to.”

He held the gun a foot and a half from Berenson’s face and aimed it so that she was staring straight into the bottle with her right eye.

Berenson started talking.

67

In retrospect it was a tale that Reacher could have scripted in advance. The original development engineer up at the Highland Park plant was now the quality control manager and he had started showing signs of severe stress. His name was Edward Dean and he lived way to the north, beyond the mountains. By chance his annual performance review was scheduled three weeks after he started his weird behavior. Being a trained professional, Margaret Berenson noticed his distress, and she pursued the matter.

At first Dean claimed his move north was the root of his problem. He had wanted a relaxed lifestyle and had bought acres of land out in the desert some ways south of Palmdale. The commute was killing him. Berenson didn't buy that. All Angelinos had the commute from hell. So then Dean said his neighbors were problematical. There were outlaw bikers and meth labs close by. Berenson was readier to believe that. Stories about the badlands were legion. But a pained echo in a chance remark about Dean's daughter led her to believe that the kid was in some way the problem. She was fourteen years old. Berenson put two and two together and made five. She figured maybe the kid was hanging with the bikers or experimenting with crystal and causing big problems at home.

Then she revised her opinion. The quality problems up at Highland Park became common knowledge inside the company. Berenson knew that Dean had a difficult split responsibility. As a director of the corporation he had a fiduciary duty to see it do well. But he also had a parallel responsibility to the Pentagon to make sure New Age sold it only the good stuff. Berenson figured the conflict in his mind was causing his stress. But overall he was doing the right thing according to the law, so she shelved her concerns.

Then Tony Swan disappeared.

He just vanished. One day he was there, the next day he wasn't. Being a trained professional, Margaret Berenson noticed his absence. She followed up. She had split responsibilities of her own. Swan had classified knowledge. There were national security implications. She got into it like a dog with a bone. She asked all kinds of questions of all kinds of people.

Then one day she got home and found Allen Lamaison on her driveway, playing one-on-one basketball with her son.

Berenson was afraid of Lamaison. Always had been. How much, she hadn't really realized until she saw him tousle her twelve-year-old's hair with a hand big enough to crush the child's skull. He suggested the kid stay outside and practice his foul throws while he went inside for an important chat with Mom.

The chat started with a confession. Lamaison told Berenson exactly what had happened to Swan. Every detail. And he hinted as to the reason. This time Berenson put two and two together and made four. She recalled Dean's stress. By and by Lamaison revealed that Dean was cooperating with a special project, because if he didn't his daughter would disappear and be found weeks later with blood running down to her ankles amid a happy band of bikers.

Or on the other hand, maybe she would never be found at all.

Then Lamaison said the exact same thing could happen to Berenson's son. He said a lot of outlaw bikers were happy to swing both ways. Most of them had been in prison, and prison distorted a person's tastes.

He issued a warning, and two instructions. The warning was that sooner or later two men and two women would show up and start asking questions. Old friends from Swan's service days. The first instruction was that they were to be deflected, firmly, politely, and definitively. The second instruction was that nothing of this current conversation was ever to be revealed.

Then he made Berenson take him upstairs and perform a certain sexual act on him. To seal their understanding, he said.

Then he went out and sank a few more baskets with her son.

Then he drove away.

Reacher believed her. In his life he had listened to people telling lies, and less often to people telling the truth. He knew how to distinguish between the two. He knew what to trust and what to distrust. He was a supremely cynical man, but his special talent lay in retaining a small corner of open-mindedness. He believed the basketball part, and the prison reference, and the sex act. People like

believed the basketball part, and the prison reference, and the sex act. People like Margaret Berenson didn't make up that kind of stuff. They couldn't. Their frames of reference weren't wide enough. He took the kitchen knife and cut the duct tape off her. Helped her to her feet.

"So who knew?" he asked.

"Lamaison," Berenson said. "Lennox, Parker, and Saropian."

"That's all?"

"Yes."

"What about the other four ex-LAPD?"

"They're different. From a different era and a different place. Lamaison wouldn't really trust them on a thing like this."

"So why did he hire them?"

"Warm bodies. Numbers. And he trusts them on everything else. They do what he tells them."

"Why did he hire Tony Swan? Swan was always going to be a rod for his back."

"Lamaison didn't hire Swan. He didn't want him. But I convinced our CEO we needed some diversity of background. It wasn't healthy to have all of them from the same place."

"So you hired him?"

"Basically. I'm sorry."

"Where did all the bad stuff happen?"

"Highland Park. The helicopter is there. And there are outbuildings. It's a big place."

"Is there somewhere you can go?" Reacher asked.

"Go?" Berenson said.

“For a couple of days, until this is over.”

“It won’t be over. You don’t know Lamaison. You can’t beat him.”

Reacher looked at Neagley.

“Can we beat him?” he asked.

“Like a drum,” she said.

Berenson said, “But there are four of them.”

“Three,” Reacher said. “Saropian is already down. Three of them, four of us.”

“You’re crazy.”

“They’re going to think so. That’s for damn sure. They’re going to think I’m completely psychotic.”

Berenson was quiet for a long moment.

“I could go to a hotel,” she said.

“When does your son get home?”

“I’ll go get him out of school.”

Reacher nodded. “Pack your bags.”

Berenson said, “I will.”

“Who flew?” Reacher asked.

“Lamaison, Lennox, and Parker. Just the three of them.”

“Plus the pilot,” Reacher said. “That’s four.”

Berenson went upstairs to pack and Reacher put the kitchen knife away. Then he put Swan’s rock back in his pocket and pulled the Evian bottle off the Glock.

“Would that really have worked?” Neagley asked. “As a silencer?”

“I doubt it,” Reacher said. “I read it in a book once. It worked on the page. But in the real world I imagine it would have exploded and blinded me with shards of flying plastic. But it looked good, didn’t it? It added an extra element. Better than just pointing the gun.”

Then his phone rang. His Radio Shack pay-as-you-go, not Saropian’s cell from Vegas. It was Dixon. She and O’Donnell had been on station in Highland Park for four and a half hours. They had seen all they were going to see, and they were starting to feel conspicuous.

“Head home,” Reacher said. “We’ve got what we need.”

Then Neagley’s phone rang. Her personal cell, not her pay-as-you-go. Her Chicago guy. Ten-thirty in LA, lunch time in Illinois. She listened, not moving, not asking questions, just absorbing information. Then she clicked off.

“Preliminary data from the LAPD grapevine,” she said. “In twenty years Lamaison fought eighteen Internal Affairs investigations and won all of them.”

“Charges?”

“You name it. Excessive force, bribery, corruption, missing dope, missing money. He’s a bad guy, but smart.”

“How does a guy like that get a job with a defense contractor?”

“How does he get one with the LAPD in the first place? And then promotions on top? By putting up a front and working hard to keep his record clean, that’s how. And by having a partner who knew when and how to keep quiet.”

“His partner was probably just as bad. It usually works that way.”

“You should know,” Neagley said.

Forty minutes later Berenson came downstairs with two bags. An expensive black leather carry-on, and a bright green nylon duffel with a sports logo on it. Hers, and the kid’s, Reacher guessed. She loaded them into the Toyota’s trunk.

Reacher and Neagley walked down to get their cars and drove them back and formed up into a close protection convoy. Same basic method as surveillance, different purpose. Neagley stayed tight, and Reacher hung back. After a mile he decided O'Donnell had been wrong about the tricked-out Hondas being the most invisible cars in California. The Toyota fit that bill better. He was staring right at it and could barely see it.

Berenson stopped at a school. It was a big tan spread with the kind of black-hole silence around it that schools get when all the kids are inside working. After twenty minutes she came back out with a brown-haired boy in tow. He was small. He barely reached her shoulder. He looked a little puzzled, but happy enough to be dragged away from class.

Then Berenson drove a little ways on the 110 and came off in Pasadena and headed for an inn on a quiet street. Reacher approved of her choice. The place had a lot in back where the Toyota wouldn't be seen from the road, and a bellman at the door, and two women behind a counter inside. Plenty of vigilant eyes before the elevators and the rooms. Better than a motel.

Reacher and Neagley stayed on site to give Berenson and her kid time to settle in. They figured ten minutes would do it. They used the time getting lunch, in a bar off the lobby. Club sandwiches, coffee for Reacher, soda for Neagley. Reacher liked club sandwiches. He liked the way he could pick his teeth afterward with the tasseled thing that had held the sandwich together. He didn't want to be talking to people with chicken fibers caught in there.

His phone rang as he was finishing up his coffee. Dixon again. She was back at the motel, with O'Donnell. There was an urgent message waiting at the desk. From Curtis Mauney.

"He wants us up at that place north of Glendale," Dixon said. "Right now."

"Where we went for Orozco?"

"Yes."

"Because they found Sanchez?"

"He didn't say. But Reacher, he didn't tell us to meet him at the morgue. He said meet him at the hospital across the street. So if it's Sanchez, he's still alive."

68

Dixon and O'Donnell were starting from the Dunes Motel and Reacher and Neagley were starting from the inn in Pasadena. Both locations were exactly equidistant from the hospital north of Glendale. Ten miles, along different sides of the same shallow triangle.

Reacher expected that he and Neagley would get there first. The way the freeways lined up with the flanks of the San Gabriel mountains gave them a straight shot on the 210. Dixon and O'Donnell would be heading northeast, at right angles to the freeways, a difficult trip battling surface congestion all the way.

But the 210 was jammed. Within a hundred yards of the ramp it was completely static. A river of stalled cars curved ahead into the distance, winking in the sun, burning gas, going nowhere. A classic LA panorama. Reacher checked his mirror and saw Neagley's Honda right behind him. Hers was a Civic, white, about four model-years old. He couldn't see her behind the wheel. The screen was tinted too dark. It had a band of plastic across the top, dark blue with the words *No Fear* written across it in jagged silver script. Very appropriate, he thought, for Neagley.

He called her on the phone.

"Accident up ahead," she said. "I heard it on the radio."

"Terrific."

"If Sanchez made it this far, he can make it a few minutes more."

Reacher asked, "Where did they go wrong?"

"I don't know. This wasn't the toughest thing they ever faced."

"So something tripped them up. Something unpredictable. Where would Swan have started?"

“With Dean,” Neagley said. “The quality control guy. His behavior must have been the trigger. Bad numbers on their own don’t necessarily mean much. But bad numbers plus a stressed-out quality control guy mean a lot.”

“Did he get the whole story out of Dean?”

“Probably not. But enough to join the dots. Swan was a lot smarter than Berenson.”

“What was his next step?”

“Two steps in parallel,” Neagley said. “He secured Dean’s situation, and he started the search for corroborating evidence.”

“With help from the others.”

“More than help,” Neagley said. “He was basically subcontracting. He had to, because his office situation was insecure.”

“So he didn’t talk to Lamaison at any point?”

“Not a chance. First rule, trust no one.”

“So what tripped them up?”

“I don’t know.”

“How would Swan have secured Dean’s situation?”

“He’d have talked to the local cops. Asked for protection, or at least asked for a car to swing by on a regular basis.”

“Lamaison is ex-LAPD. Maybe he still has buddies on the job. Maybe they tipped him off.”

“Doesn’t work,” Neagley said. “Swan didn’t talk to the LAPD. Dean lived over the hill. Outside of LAPD jurisdiction.”

Reacher paused a beat.

“Which actually means that Swan didn’t talk to anyone,” he said. “Because

that´s Curtis Mauney´s kingdom up there, and he didn´t know anything about Dean or New Age. Or even anything about Swan, except through Franz."

"Swan wouldn't leave Dean unprotected."

"So maybe Dean wasn't the trigger. Maybe Swan didn't know anything about him. Maybe he found a different way in."

"Which was?" Neagley asked.

"No idea," Reacher said. "Maybe Sanchez will be able to tell us."

"You think he's alive?"

"Hope for the best."

"But plan for the worst."

They clicked off. Their lane moved a little. In a minute and a quarter of conversation they had covered about five car lengths. In the next five minutes of silence they covered about ten more, six times slower than walking. All around them people were enduring. They were talking on the phone, reading, shaving, applying makeup, smoking, eating, listening to music. Some were tanning. They were hitching up their sleeves and holding their arms out their open windows.

Reacher's pay-as-you-go rang. Neagley again.

"More from Chicago," she said. "We're into parts of the LAPD mainframe. Lennox and Parker were about as bad as Lamaison. The two of them were partners together. They resigned rather than face their twelfth IA inquiry in twelve years. They must have been out of work about a week before Lamaison hired them on at New Age."

"I'm glad I don't hold New Age stock."

"You do. It's all Pentagon money. Where do you think it comes from?"

"Not from me," Reacher said.

Two hundred yards later the freeway straightened and rose in front of them and they saw the source of the delay, in the far distance, in the haze. There was a

broken-down car in the left lane. A trivial blockage, but the whole road was at a standstill. Reacher clicked off with Neagley and called Dixon.

“You there yet?” he asked.

“Maybe ten minutes away.”

“We’re stuck in traffic. Call us if there’s good news. Call us if there’s bad news too, I guess.”

It took another quarter of an hour to reach the stalled car and some bold lane changes to get past it. Then the flow freed up and everyone continued on their way at seventy miles an hour like nothing had happened. Reacher and Neagley were at the county facility ten minutes later. Ten miles in forty minutes. Average speed, fifteen miles an hour. Not great.

They ignored the morgue and parked in the hospital’s visitor lot. They walked through the sun to the main entrance. Reacher saw O’Donnell’s Honda in the lot, and then Dixon’s. The main entrance gave onto a lobby full of red plastic chairs. Some of them were occupied. Most of them weren’t. The place was fairly quiet. There was no sign of Dixon or O’Donnell. Or Curtis Mauney. There was a long desk with people behind it. Not nurses. Just clerks. Reacher asked one of them for Mauney and got no response. He asked for Jorge Sanchez and got no response. He asked about emergency John Doe admissions and got redirected to another desk around a corner.

The new desk reported no recent John Doe admissions and knew nothing about a patient named Jorge Sanchez or an LA County sheriff named Curtis Mauney. Reacher pulled out his phone but was asked not to use it inside the building in case its signal upset delicate medical equipment. He stepped out to the lot and called Dixon.

No reply.

He tried O’Donnell’s number.

No reply.

Neagley said, “Maybe they’re switched off. Because they’re in an ICU or

something."

"Who with? They never heard of Sanchez here."

"They have to be here somewhere. They just got here."

"This feels wrong," Reacher said.

Neagley took Mauney's card out of her pocket. Handed it over. Reacher dialed Mauney's cell number.

No answer.

His landline.

No answer.

Then Neagley's phone rang. Her personal cell, not her pay-as-you-go. She answered. Listened. Her face went pale. Literally bloodless, like wax.

"That was Chicago," she said. "Curtis Mauney was Allen Lamaison's partner. They were together twelve years in the LAPD."

69

Something tripped them up. Something unpredictable. Neagley had been right, but only half-right. Dean had been a major factor, but not the original trigger. Swan had gotten to him much later in the process, some different way, after the others were already on board. No other way to explain the scale of the disaster. Reacher stood in the hospital lot and closed his eyes and pictured the scene. Saw Swan talking to Dean, the final part of the puzzle, at home, north of the mountains, out in the desert near Palmdale, a city refugee's paradise, a sanctuary, a young girl moving silently past an open doorway, fear on Dean's face, concern on Swan's. Reacher saw Swan extracting the whole story, as always reassuring and solid and confident. Then Reacher saw Swan driving straight to some dusty sheriff's office, talking to Mauney, explaining, asking for help, demanding it. Then he saw Swan leaving, and Mauney picking up a phone. Sealing Swan's fate right there and then. And Franz's, and Orozco's, and Sanchez's.

Something unpredictable.

Reacher opened his eyes and said, "We're not going to lose another two. Not while I live and breathe."

They abandoned Neagley's Civic in the hospital lot and used Reacher's Prelude. They had nowhere to go. They were just moving for the sake of moving. And talking for the sake of talking. Neagley said, "They knew we'd show up sooner or later. The suspense was killing them. So they manipulated the timeline to suit themselves. Mauney pushed Angela Franz into calling me. He spun the bait story to keep Thomas Brant on board. He was tracking us every step of the way and feeding us things we already knew to keep us close and asking us what else we'd found out and waiting to see if we'd give up and get out of their hair. And when we never did, they decided to go ahead and take us out. First Vegas, and then now."

They swung back onto the 210. It was flowing fast and free.

“Plan?” Neagley asked.

“No plan,” Reacher said.

The phone directory that Dixon had captured was in O’Donnell’s room at the motel, but they didn’t want to go anywhere near Sunset Boulevard. Not at that point. So they pieced together half-remembered fragments of the manufacturing plant’s Highland Park address and headed in that direction.

They found Highland Park easily enough. It was a decent place full of streets and houses and business parks and small clean hi-tech manufacturing enterprises. It was harder to find New Age’s specific location. They weren’t expecting a billboard and didn’t get one. Instead they looked for unmarked buildings and serious fences and helipads. They found several. It was that kind of a neighborhood.

“Dixon called the helicopter a Bell 222,” Reacher said. “Could you recognize one of those if you saw one?”

“I’ve seen three in the last five minutes,” Neagley said.

“She said it was white.”

“Two in the last five minutes.”

“Where?”

“The second one was a mile back. Two lefts and a right. The first one was three places before that.”

“Both places with fences?”

“Check.”

“Outbuildings?”

“Both of them.”

Reacher braked and pulled an illegal U across the full width of the road and

headed back the way they had come. He took two lefts and a right and slowed and Neagley pointed at a collection of gray metal buildings squatting behind a fence that would have looked right at home outside a supermax prison. It was at least eight feet tall and close to four feet thick, two faces of tight barbed wire with giant coils of razor wire heaped between them and huge concertinas of the same stuff piled on top. It was one hell of a barrier. There were four buildings behind it. One was a large shed and three were smaller constructions. There was a huge concrete rectangle with a long-nosed helicopter parked on it, white, still, and quiet.

“That’s a Bell 222?” Reacher asked.

“Unmistakable,” Neagley said.

“So is this the place?”

“Hard to say.”

Next to the helipad was an orange windsock on a tall pole. It was hanging limp in the warm dry air. There was a small parking lot full of thirteen cars. Nothing expensive. No blue Chryslers.

“What would assembly workers drive?” Reacher asked.

“Cars like those,” Neagley said.

Reacher drove on, past one place, past another. The third place in line was very similar to the first. A serious fence, four blank buildings with gray metal siding, a parking lot full of cheap cars, a helipad, a parked Bell 222, white. No names, no markings, no signs.

Reacher said, “We need the exact address.”

“We don’t have time. The Dunes is a long way from here.”

“But Pasadena isn’t.”

They made the short hop east on York Boulevard and the 110. Pulled up outside the inn in Pasadena fifteen minutes later. Five minutes after that they were in Margaret Berenson's room. They told her what they needed. They didn't tell her why. They wanted to preserve an illusion of competence, for her sake.

Berenson told them the first place they had seen was the place they wanted.

Fifteen minutes later they cruised past the first place again. The fence was appalling. Brutal. A main battle tank might have breached it. A car almost certainly wouldn't. Not a Honda Prelude. Not even a big lump like the Chrysler. Not even a heavy truck. It was a question of the wire's resilience. The outer strands would stretch like guitar strings before they broke, dissipating the force of impact, slowing the vehicle, robbing its momentum. Then the inner coils would compress. Like a sponge. Like a spring. The vehicle would tangle and slow and stall. No way through on wheels. And no way through on foot. An individual with a bolt cutter would bleed to death before he was a quarter of the way in. And there was no way over the top, either. The concertinas were too broad and too loosely coiled to allow scaling by ladder.

Reacher drove all the way around the block. The whole facility occupied a couple of acres. It was roughly square, about a hundred yards on a side. Four buildings, one large, three small. Dried brown grass and cinder footpaths between them. The fence was four hundred yards long in total and had no weak spots. And only one gate. It was a wide steel assembly that slid sideways on wheels. Welded to its top rail was more concertina wire. Flanking it was a guard hut.

"Pentagon requirement," Neagley said. "Has to be."

There was a guard in the hut. An old guy, gray hair. Gray uniform. A belt around his hips, a gun in the belt. A simple job. The right pass and the right paperwork, he would hit a button and the gate would roll back. No pass and no paperwork, he wouldn't and it wouldn't. There was a lightbulb above the guy's head. It would be lit after dark. It would throw a soft yellow halo for twenty feet all around.

"No way through," Reacher said.

"Are they even in there?"

Are they even in there?

“Must be. It’s like a private jail. Safer than stashing them anywhere else. And it’s where they put the others.”

“How did it go down?”

“Mauney arrested them in the hospital lot. Maybe he had help from Lamaison’s guys. Crowded place, total surprise, what were they going to do?”

Reacher drove on. The Prelude was an unremarkable car, but he didn’t want it to be seen too many times in the same place. He turned a corner and parked a quarter of a mile away. Didn’t speak. Because he had nothing to say.

Neagley’s phone rang again. Her personal cell. She answered. Listened. Clicked off. Closed her eyes.

“My Pentagon guy,” she said. “The missiles just rolled out the gate in Colorado.”

70

If Mahmoud has got the missiles, then this thing is bigger than we are. We have to suck it up and move on. Reacher looked at Neagley. She opened her eyes and stared right back.

“How much do they weigh?” Reacher asked.

“Weigh?”

“As in weight. Pounds and ounces.”

“I don’t know. They’re new. I never saw one.”

“Guess.”

“Heavier than a Stinger. Because they do more. But still man-portable. Crated, with launch tubes and spare parts and manuals, say fifty pounds each.”

“That’s sixteen and a quarter tons.”

“A semi,” Neagley said.

“Average speed on the interstates, fifty miles an hour?”

“Probably.”

“North on I-25 to I-80, then west to Nevada, that’s about nine hundred miles. So we’ve got eighteen hours. Call it twenty-four, because the driver will take a rest period.”

“They’re not going to Nevada,” Neagley said. “Nevada is bullshit, because they’re going to use these things, not destroy them.”

“Wherever. Anywhere significant is eighteen hours from Denver.”

Neagley shook her head. “This is insane. We can’t wait twenty-four hours. Or eighteen. You said it yourself, there could be ten thousand KIAs.”

eighteen. You said it yourself, there could be ten thousand KIAs.

“But not yet.”

“We can’t wait,” Neagley said again. “Easier to stop the truck on the way out of Denver. It could be headed anywhere. It could be headed to New York. JFK, or LaGuardia. Or Chicago. You want to think about Little Wing deployed at O’Hare?”

“Not really.”

“Every minute we delay makes that truck harder to find.”

“Moral dilemma,” Reacher said. “Two people we know, or ten thousand we don’t.”

“We have to tell someone.”

Reacher said nothing.

“We have to, Reacher.”

“They might not listen. They didn’t listen about September eleventh.”

“You’re clutching at straws. They’ve changed. We have to tell someone.”

“We will,” Reacher said. “But not yet.”

“Karla and Dave will have a better chance with a couple of SWAT teams on their side.”

“You’re kidding. They’ll wind up as collateral damage in a heartbeat.”

Neagley said, “We can’t even get through the fence. Dixon will die, O’Donnell will die, ten thousand other people will die, and we’ll die.”

“You want to live forever?”

“I don’t want to die today. Do you?”

“I really don’t care one way or the other.”

“Seriously?”

“I never have. Why would I?”

“You *are* psychotic.”

“Look on the bright side.”

“Which is what?”

“Maybe none of the bad stuff will happen.”

“Why wouldn’t it?”

“Maybe we’ll win. You and me.”

“Here? Maybe. But later? Dream on. We have no idea where that truck is going.”

“We can find out later.”

“You think?”

“It’s what we’re good at.”

“Good enough to gamble ten thousand lives against two?”

“I hope so,” Reacher said.

He drove a mile south and parked again on a curving side street outside a custom Harley motorcycle shop. He could see New Age’s helicopter in the far distance.

He asked, “What is their security going to be like?”

“Normally?” Neagley said. “Motion detectors on the fence and big locks on all the doors and a guy in the sentry hut twenty-four hours a day. That’s all they need, normally. But today isn’t going to be normal. You can forget about that. They know we’re still out here. The whole of New Age security is going to be in there, locked and loaded.”

“Seven men.”

“Seven we know about. Maybe more.”

“Maybe.”

“And they’re going to be inside the fence. We’re going to be outside the fence.”

“Let me worry about the fence.”

“There’s no way through it.”

“Doesn’t need to be. There’s a gate. What time does it get full dark?”

“Say nine o’clock, to be safe.”

“They won’t fly before dark. We’ve got seven hours. Seven out of our twenty-four.”

“We never had twenty-four.”

“You elected me CO. We’ve got what I say we’ve got.”

“They could have shot them both already.”

“They didn’t shoot Franz or Orozco or Swan. They’re worried about ballistics.”

“This is insane.”

“I’m not going to lose another two,” Reacher said.

They drove around New Age’s block one more time, fast and unobtrusive, and fixed the geography in their minds. The gate was in the center of the front face of the square. The main building was front and center behind it at the end of a short driveway. In back of that the three outbuildings were scattered. One was close to the helipad. One was a little farther away. The last was standing on its own, maybe thirty yards from anything else. All four buildings were set on concrete pads. They had gray galvanized siding. No signs, no labels. It was a severe, practical establishment. There were no trees. No landscaping. Just

uneven brown grass and hard dirt paths and a parking lot.

“Where are the Chryslers?” Reacher asked.

“Out,” Neagley said. “Looking for us.”

They headed back to the hospital in Glendale. Neagley collected her car from the lot. They stopped in at a supermarket. Bought a pack of wooden kitchen matches. And two cases of Evian water. Twelve one-liter bottles, nested together in packs of six and shrink-wrapped in plastic. They stopped again down the street at an auto parts store. Bought a red plastic five-gallon gasoline can and a bag of polishing rags.

Then they stopped at a gas station and filled the cars and the can.

They headed southwest out of Glendale and ended up in Silver Lake. Reacher called Neagley on the phone and said, “We should drop by the motel now.”

Neagley said, “They might still have surveillance going.”

“Which is exactly why we should drop by. If we can take one of them out now, that’s one less to worry about later.”

“Might be more than one.”

“Bring it on. The more the merrier.”

Sunset Boulevard ran right through Silver Lake, south of the reservoir. It was a very long road. Reacher found it and headed west. Six miles later he cruised past the motel without slowing. Neagley was twenty yards behind him in her Civic. He led her through a left turn and parked a block away. There were service alleys that gave them a roundabout route into the back of the motel. They walked through the alleys fifteen feet apart. No sense in making two people into a single target. Reacher went first, with his hand wrapped around the Glock in his pocket. He entered the motel lot slowly, from the rear, through a tight passage lined with trash receptacles. The lot looked innocent enough. Eight cars, five out-of-state plates, no blue Chryslers. Nobody in the shadows. He went to the right. He knew that fifteen feet behind him Neagley would go to the left. It was their default

arrangement, established many years before. *R* for Reacher, *L* for her middle initial. He made a complete half-circuit of the building. There was nobody out of place. Nobody suspicious. Nobody in the lounge, nobody in the laundry room. Across the width of the lot he could see the clerk all alone in the office.

He stepped out to the sidewalk and checked the street. It was clear. Some activity, but nothing significant. Some cars, but none to worry about. He stepped back into the lot and waited for Neagley to complete her own half-circuit on the other side. She checked the sidewalk and checked the street and stepped back and checked the office. Nothing. She shook her head and they headed for O'Donnell's room, by different routes, still fifteen feet apart, just in case.

O'Donnell's lock was broken.

Or more accurately, O'Donnell's lock was OK, but the door jamb was broken. The wood was splintered. Someone had used a wrecking bar or a tire iron to lever the door open. Reacher slid the Glock out of his pocket and waited on the hinge side of the door and Neagley joined him on the handle side. She nodded and he slammed the door open with his foot and she dropped to her knees and spun into the doorway with her gun out in front. Another old default arrangement. Whoever was on the hinge side opened the door, whoever was on the handle side entered low to minimize the target. Generally anyone hiding in a room with a gun would then aim high, at where he expected center mass to be.

But there was nobody hiding in the room.

It was completely empty. But it was completely trashed. Searched, and wrecked. All the New Age paperwork was gone, the reject Glock 17s were gone, the spare ammunition was gone, the AMT Hardballers were gone, Saropian's Daewoo DP-51 was gone, the Maglites were gone. O'Donnell's clothes were strewn all around. His thousand-dollar suit had been torn off the closet hanger and trampled. His bathroom stuff was all over the place.

Dixon's room was the same. Empty, but trashed.

And Neagley's.

And Reacher's own. His folding toothbrush was on the floor, stepped on and crushed.

"Partner," he said.

"Bastards," he said.

They gave the whole place one more go-round, the motel itself, and then a one-block radius outside. Nobody there. Neagley said, "They're all waiting for us in Highland Park."

Reacher nodded. Between them they had two Glocks and sixty-eight rounds. Plus their recent purchases in the Prelude's trunk.

Two against seven or more.

No time.

No element of surprise.

A fortified position with no way in.

A hopeless situation.

"We're good to go," Reacher said.

71

Waiting for dark was always a long and tedious process. Sometimes the earth seemed to spin fast, and sometimes it seemed to spin slow. This was slow. They were parked in a quiet street three blocks from New Age's factory, opposite sides of the street, Neagley's Civic facing west, Reacher's Prelude facing east. They both had a view of the place. Things had changed behind the fence. The assembly workers' cars were gone from the lot. In their place were six blue Chrysler 300Cs. Clearly, operations had been abandoned for the day. The decks had been cleared for the coming battle. Beyond the cars they could see the helicopter in the distance, a quarter-mile away. It was nothing more than a small white shape, but they figured they would be able to tell if it started up. And if it started up, all bets were off.

Reacher had both his phones set to vibrate. Neagley buzzed him twice, to pass the time. She was actually close enough to roll down her window and yell, but he guessed she didn't want to attract attention.

The first time, she asked, "Have you been sleeping with Karla?"

"When?" Reacher said, buying time.

"On this trip."

"Twice," Reacher said. "That's all."

"I'm glad."

"Thank you."

"You both always wanted to."

The second time she called was fifteen minutes later.

"You made a will?" she asked.

"No point," Reacher said. "Now they broke my toothbrush, I don't own

anything.”

“How does that feel?”

“Bad. I liked that toothbrush. It’s been with me a long time.”

“No, I mean the rest of it.”

“It feels OK. I don’t see that Karla or Dave are really any happier than me.”

“Right now they’re not, for sure.”

“They know we’re coming.”

“All of us going down together will really cheer them up.”

“Better than going down alone,” Reacher said.

A big white semi labored west on I-70 in Colorado, heading for the state of Utah. It was less than half-full, a little over sixteen tons in a rig designed for a forty-ton payload. So it was running light, but it was running slow, because of the mountains. It would stay slow until the turn south on I-15. Then it would run a little easier, all the way down to California. Its driver had budgeted an average fifty miles an hour for the whole trip. Eighteen hours maximum, door-to-door. He wasn’t going to take a rest period. How could he? He was a man on a mission, with no time for frivolities.

Azhari Mahmoud checked his map for the third time. He figured he needed three hours. Or maybe more. He had to cross just about the whole of Los Angeles, south to north. He wasn’t expecting it to be easy. The U-Haul was slow and a pig to drive, and he was sure that the traffic was going to be awful. He decided to give himself four hours. If he arrived early, he could wait. No harm in that. He set his alarm and lay down on the bed and tried to will himself to sleep.

Reacher stared straight ahead at the eastern horizon, trying to judge the light. The tint on the windshield didn't help. It was overly optimistic, optically. It made the sky look darker than it really was. He buzzed his window down and leaned out. In reality, not good. There was still at least an hour of daylight left. Then maybe an hour of dusk. Then full dark. He buzzed the window up and settled back and rested. Forced his heartbeat down and slowed his breathing and relaxed.

He stayed relaxed until Allen Lamaison called him.

72

Lamaison called Reacher on his Radio Shack pay-as-you-go, not on Saropian's cell from Vegas. The caller ID showed he was using Karla Dixon's phone at his end. Openly provocative. There was a lot of smug satisfaction in his voice.

"Reacher?" he said. "We need to talk."

"So talk," Reacher said.

"You're useless."

"You think?"

"You've lost every round so far."

"Except Saropian."

"True," Lamaison said. "And I'm very unhappy about that."

"But you better get used to it. Because you're going to lose another six, and then you and I are going to go around and around."

"No," Lamaison said. "That's not going to happen. We're going to make a deal."

"Dream on."

"The terms are excellent. Want to hear them?"

"You better be quick. I'm downtown right now. I've got an appointment with the FBI. I'm going to tell them all about Little Wing."

"Tell them what?" Lamaison said. "There's nothing to tell. We had some defective units that were destroyed. It says so, in black and white, on Pentagon-approved paperwork."

Reacher said nothing.

“Anyway, you’re nowhere near the FBI,” Lamaison said. “You’re working out how to rescue your friends.”

“You think?”

“You wouldn’t trust their safety to the FBI.”

“You’re confusing me with someone who gives a shit.”

“You wouldn’t be here at all if you didn’t give a shit. Tony Swan and Calvin Franz and Manuel Orozco and Jorge Sanchez told us all about it. Before they died. Apparently we’re not supposed to mess with the special investigators.”

“That was just a slogan. It was old then, and it’s really old now.”

“They still put a lot of stock in it. So do Ms. Dixon and Mr. O’Donnell. Their faith in you is quite touching. So let’s talk about our deal. You can save your friends a world of hurt.”

“How?”

“You and Ms. Neagley come in now, we’ll hold you all for a week. Until the heat dies down. Then we’ll let you go. All four of you.”

“Or?”

“We’ll break O’Donnell’s arms and legs and use his switchblade all over Dixon. After having a little guy time with her first. Then we’ll put them both in the helicopter.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Don’t worry about Little Wing,” Lamaison said. “That’s a done deal. Can’t be stopped now. They’re going to Kashmir anyway. You ever been there? It’s a dump. A real shit hole. Bunch of towel heads fighting one another. Why should you care?”

Reacher said nothing.

Lamaison said, “Do we have a deal?”

“No.”

“You should reconsider. Dixon won’t enjoy what we’ve got in mind.”

“Why would I trust you? I’ll walk in and you’ll shoot me in the head.”

“I agree, it’s a risk,” Lamaison said. “But I think you’ll take it. Because you’re responsible for your people’s situation. You let them down. You’re their leader, and you screwed up. I’ve heard a lot about you. In fact I’m sick of hearing your name. You’ll do what it takes to help them.”

“Where are you?” Reacher asked.

“I’m sure you know.”

Reacher glanced ahead through the windshield. Factored in the effect of the window tint and tried to judge the light.

“We’re two hours away,” he said, with a little tension in his voice.

“Where are you?”

“We’re south of Palmdale.”

“Why?”

“We were going to visit with Dean. To piece it all together, the same way Swan did.”

“Turn around,” Lamaison said. “Right now. For Ms. Dixon’s sake. I bet she’s a screamer. My guys will be all over her. I’ll put her on the phone and let you listen.”

Reacher paused.

“Two hours,” he said. “We’ll talk again.”

He clicked off and dialed Neagley.

“We go in sixty minutes,” he said.

Then he leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes.

Then he leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes.

Sixty minutes later the sky in the east was a dark navy blue, almost black. Visibility was fading fast. Years before, a pedantic schoolteacher in the Pacific somewhere had explained to Reacher that first comes twilight, and then comes dusk, and then comes night. She had insisted that *twilight* and *dusk* were not the same thing. If he needed a generic word for evening darkness, he was to use *gloaming*.

Gloaming was what he had right then. Plenty of it, but not quite as much as he would have liked.

He dialed Neagley and clicked off after one ring. Her window dropped and she waved. A small pale hand in the darkness. He started his car and eased away from the curb. No lights. He headed east toward the arriving night and made a right and three blocks later he was skirting New Age's fence, clockwise, along the back line of their property. He made another right and came down the side of their lot and coasted to a stop against the curb about two-thirds of the way down. If New Age's place was a clock, he was stopped on the four. If it was a compass, he was a little ways south of east.

He got out and stood still and listened. Heard nothing. Saw nothing. Highland Park was a populated area, but New Age's place was part of a commercial zone. The work day was over. People were gone. The streets were dark and quiet.

He opened the Prelude's trunk. Used his fist to smash the courtesy light. Used his thumbnail to slit the plastic around the Evian bottles. He took one out and unscrewed the top and took a long drink. Then he poured the rest of the water away in the gutter. Stood the empty bottle upright in the trunk. He repeated the process eleven more times. Ended up with a neat line of twelve empty one-liter bottles.

Then he took out the gas can.

Five gallons, U.S. liquid measure, which added up to close to nineteen liters. He filled the bottles, very carefully. The benzene fragrance of unleaded gasoline came up at him. He liked it. It was one of the world's great smells. When the twelfth bottle was full he put the can on the ground. Seven liters still in it. Almost two gallons.

Almost two gallons.

He tore open the bag of polishing rags.

They were foot-square pieces of white cotton jersey. Like undershirts. He rolled them tight, like cigars, and eased them down into the necks of the bottles. Half-in, half-out. The gasoline soaked upward, pale and colorless.

Molotov cocktails. A crude but effective weapon, invented by Fascists during the Spanish Civil War, named by Finns during their struggle against the Red Army in 1939, as a taunt toward the Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov. *I never knew a tank could burn so long,* a Finnish veteran had once recalled.

Tanks, buildings, it was all the same to Reacher.

He rolled a thirteenth rag and laid it on the ground. Dripped gas from the can on it until it was soaked. He found the box of wooden kitchen matches and jammed them in his pocket. Lifted the twelve bottles of gas out of the trunk, one by one, carefully, and stood them upright on the road six feet behind the Prelude's rear bumper. Then he picked up the thirteenth rag and closed the trunk lid and trapped the rag in it, three-quarters out. In the darkness it looked like the car had a tiny white tail. Like a silver lamb.

Showtime, he thought.

He struck a match and held it against the rag trapped in the trunk lid until the rag was burning bright. Then he flicked the match away and picked up the first Molotov cocktail. Lit its wick off the burning rag and stepped back and hurled it high in the air, over the fence. It tumbled through a lazy blazing arc and burst against the base of the main building's end wall. Gas exploded and flared and then settled into a small burning pool.

He threw the second bomb. Same procedure. He lit the wick off the burning rag, stepped back, and threw hard. The bottle sailed through the same arc and hit the same place and burst. There was a brief white-hot flare and then the pool of flames settled and spread wider. They started to lick upward against the siding.

He threw the third bomb directly into the fire. And the fourth. He aimed the fifth a little to the left. It started a brand-new fire. He followed it with the six and the seventh. His shoulder started to ache from the effort of the giant throws. The

grass all around the building's end wall started to burn. Smoke started to drift. He threw the eighth bottle into the gap between the two fires. It fell short and burst and set fire to the grass about eight feet out. Now there was a large irregular patch of flames, maybe ten feet wide, maybe eight feet deep. Maybe four feet high, red and orange and green with chemical acceleration.

He threw the ninth bottle harder, and farther to the left. It exploded near the building's door. The tenth bottle followed it. It didn't burst. It rolled and leaked and burning gasoline welled out and flames raced and crackled through the dry grass. He paused and picked his spot and used the eleventh bottle to fill the gap on the building's corner. The twelfth and last bottle followed it. He heaved it hard and it hit the siding high up and burst into flames and burning gas spattered the whole end wall.

He opened the trunk lid and knocked the burning rag out and stamped on it. Then he stepped to the fence and peered through. The grass at the base of the building's end wall and all along the front wall as far as the door was burning fiercely. Flames were leaping high and smoke was pouring upward. The building itself was built of metal and was resisting. But it would be getting warm inside.

Soon be getting warmer, Reacher thought.

He screwed the lid on the gas can and wound up and hurled it like a discus thrower. It soared up over the fence and spun and wobbled through the air and landed dead center in the flames. Thin red flammable plastic, two gallons of gas inside. There was a split second's pause and then the can exploded in a huge white fireball. For a time it looked like the whole place was on fire. And when the fireball eventually died the flames left behind were twice as high as before and the paint on the siding was starting to burn.

Reacher got back in the Prelude and started up and pulled a ragged U-turn and headed back the way he had come. The muffler burbled. He hoped Dixon and O'Donnell could hear it, wherever they were. Three blocks later he was back where he started. He pulled in behind Neagley's Civic and killed his motor and sat still and watched out his window. He could see the glow in the distance, far to his left. Clouds of billowing smoke, drifting, up-lit by bright leaping flames below. A decent blaze, getting worse by the minute.

Impressive.

He raised an imaginary glass to Comrade Molotov.

Then he leaned back in his seat and waited for the fire department to show up.

73

The fire department showed up inside four minutes. Clearly New Age had an alarm system hard-wired straight into the precinct house. A Pentagon requirement, Reacher guessed, like the guard shack at the gate. Far to his right in the distance he heard the faint bass bark of sirens and saw blue lights flashing on the horizon. He saw Neagley start her car and put it in gear. He started his own. And then he waited. The sirens grew louder. They changed to a manic continuous shriek, once, then again, at busy intersections. Then they died back to random barking. The blue lights got brighter. The trucks were two blocks away. Headlight beams were bright in the gloom. Neagley eased off the curb. Reacher followed her. She drove ahead and waited on the stop line. Reacher was right behind her. The fire trucks were a block away, bearing down, coming on fast, honking and flashing. Neagley swooped out and made the left, right in front of the convoy. Reacher followed her, tires chirping, just yards in front of the leading truck. Its siren blared at him angrily. Neagley drove a couple of hundred yards. One block. Two. Onto New Age's block. She followed the fence along the front of the property. Reacher was behind her all the way. The sirens behind him were yelping furiously. Then Neagley pulled over, like a good citizen. Reacher tucked in behind her. The trucks lurched left and roared past them both. Then more or less immediately they braked hard and turned and headed for New Age's gate. There were three of them. A whole engine company. A priority client.

New Age's gate was rolling back. Because a fire alarm was better than any kind of pass or paperwork.

Then Neagley slammed her car twenty feet into a side street and was out of her seat and running hard through the darkness. Reacher followed her all the way. They crossed the road at maximum speed and caught up with the last truck as it slowed to turn in. They stayed on its left, on the blind side, away from the guard shack, away from the fire. Away from the center of attention. They ran hard to keep pace. They tracked the truck all the way in through the gate. Its siren was still sounding. Its engine was roaring. It was deafening. Smoke was drifting from the fire, sharp and acrid on the night air. The truck roared straight ahead. Neagley turned a hard left and ran down the inside face of the fence. Reacher

headed half-left through the grass. He gave it ten long seconds of maximum effort and then flung himself down and rolled and crammed himself flat on his front with his face hard down in the dirt.

A minute later he raised his head.

He was sixty yards from the fire. Between him and it were the three trucks, huge, noisy, blue lights flashing, headlights blazing. Beyond the trucks he could see flames. He could see people moving around. New Age security. They were over by the far fence, trying to see who or what had started the fire. They were darting forward and dropping back, beaten by the heat. Firemen were running everywhere, hauling equipment, unrolling hoses.

Chaos.

Reacher turned his head and strained hard to see through the darkness. Saw a flat humped shape in the grass forty feet away that had to be Neagley.

They were inside the fence.

Undetected.

It took eight minutes for LA's bravest to put out the fire. Then they spent another thirty-one dousing the ashes and taking notes and following up in one way or another. Total duration of their visit, thirty-nine minutes. Reacher spent the first twenty of them surveying the buildings from as close as he dared to get. Then he spent the final nineteen crawling backward as far as he could go. By the time the trucks finished up and rolled out the gate he was jammed up in the far back corner of the property, a hundred and fifty yards from the action.

The closest thing to him was the helicopter. It was still standing on its pad, about halfway along the lot's diagonal, maybe seventy yards away. Beyond it was the closest of the small outbuildings. The pilot's office, Reacher guessed. He had seen a guy in a leather jacket run out the door. Behind him in a blaze of light he had seen charts and maps pinned on a wall.

Equidistant from the helicopter and the pilot's office and thirty yards south of both was the parking lot. It was full of the six blue Chryslers, all of them cold and quiet.

and quiet.

Beyond the pilot's office was the second small outbuilding. A store room of some kind, Reacher guessed. The fire chief had been allowed to take a fast look inside.

Then came the main building. The hub of the operation. The assembly line. Where women in shower caps labored over laboratory benches. All around it people were still out in the open and moving around. Reacher was pretty sure he recognized Lamaison, by his size and his shape, stamping around in the last of the smoke, yelling orders, directing operations. Lennox and Parker were there, too. Plus others. Hard to say how many. Too much darkness and confusion and milling about. Three at least. Maybe four, or even five.

The third small outbuilding was set far back, away from everything else, toward the corner directly opposite Reacher's. Its door had not opened at any point, and nobody had gone anywhere near it. Not Lamaison or his people, not the firefighters.

That was the prison, Reacher guessed.

The main gate to the street was closed again. It had rolled back into place with a loud shrieking sound after the last fire truck was through and then it had slammed shut with an impact that had sent a shudder through the roll of concertina wire welded to its top rail. The guard was still in his shack. His silhouette was clear behind the glass. The light above his head was spilling out in a soft twenty-foot circle, perfectly round, broken only by four bars of shadow from the window frames.

Beyond the main building the security guys were still looking for something. Lamaison had four of them formed up for a briefing. He split them into two pairs and sent them off to check the fence, one pair clockwise, the other counterclockwise. Each pair walked slowly, parallel to the boundary, scuffing the grass with their feet, looking down, looking up, looking at the wire. A hundred and fifty yards away Reacher rolled onto his back. Checked the sky. It was close to full dark. The smog that was tan by day was now dull black, like a blanket. There was no moon. No light at all, except the last imperceptible taint of daylight and a little orange scatter from the city's lights.

Reacher rolled onto his front again. The security guys were still in pairs and moving slow. Lamaison was stepping back into the main building. Parker and

moving slow. Lamalson was stepping back into the main building. Parker and Lennox were nowhere to be seen. Inside already, Reacher guessed. He watched the searchers. First one pair, then the other. Two different directions. The clockwise guys were Neagley's. The counterclockwise guys were his. They had about a hundred and fifty yards to cover before they got anywhere near him. A little over four minutes, at their current pace. They were concentrating on the fence and a strip maybe fifteen feet wide just inside it. Like the warning track around a baseball field. They had no flashlights. They were searching by feel alone. They would have to fall over something to find it. Reacher crawled twenty yards inward. Found a dip behind a hummock in the grass and pressed himself down into it. No man's land. The property covered about two acres, which was 9,680 square yards. Reacher occupied roughly two of them. Neagley, roughly the same. Four square yards out of 9,680. Odds of one in 2,420 against being randomly discovered. If they stayed still and quiet, that was.

Which Reacher couldn't afford to do.

Because the clock in his head had ticked around to the two-hour mark. He got up on his elbows and pulled out his phone and dialed Dixon's cell.

74

More than a hundred yards away, Lamaison answered the call. Reacher kept his thumb over the phone's bright LCD window. He wanted to preserve his night vision and he didn't want the searchers to look up and see a tiny disembodied face bathed in a distant blue glow. He spoke as normally as he dared.

"We're stuck on the 210," he said. "There's a stalled car up ahead."

"Bullshit," Lamaison said. "You're right here in the neighborhood. You've been throwing gasoline bombs over my fence." His voice was loud and angry. Over the cellular circuits it came through edgy and penetrating. A little grating and distorted. Reacher slipped the pad of his index finger over the earpiece perforations and glanced up at the searchers. They were a hundred and twenty yards away. They hadn't reacted.

"What bombs?" he said, into the phone.

"You heard me."

"We're on the freeway. I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Bullshit, Reacher. You're right here. You started a fire. But it was pathetic. It took them all of five minutes to put it out. I'm sure you saw them do it."

Eight minutes, actually, Reacher thought. *Give me some damn credit.* But he said nothing. Just watched his pair of searchers. They were a hundred and ten yards away.

"The deal is off," Lamaison said.

"Wait," Reacher said. "I'm still thinking about the deal. But I'm not an idiot. I want a proof of life. You could have shot them already."

"They're still alive."

"Prove it."

“How?”

“I’ll call you when we’re through this traffic. You can bring them to the gate.”

“No way. They stay where they are.”

“Then we can’t do business.”

Lamaison said, “I’ll ask them a question for you.”

The searchers were ninety yards away.

“What question?” Reacher said.

“Think of a question only they can answer. We’ll ask them and call you back.”

“I’ll call you back,” Reacher said. “I don’t answer the phone when I’m driving.”

“You’re not driving. What’s the question?”

Reacher said, “Ask them who they were with before they joined the 110th MP.” Then he clicked the phone off and put it back in his pocket.

The searchers were about seventy yards away. Reacher crawled another twenty yards inward, slow and cautious, parallel with the fence. The searchers managed another ten yards while he was doing it. Now they were forty yards away, coming on slowly, five feet apart, scuffing the grass, peering outward at the fence, checking for breaches.

Reacher saw light at the front of the main building. The door, opening. A tall shape stepped out. Parker, probably. He closed the door behind him and hustled around the near gable wall and headed for the distant shack thirty yards away. He unlocked the door and went in and less than a minute later he came back out and locked up again.

The prison, Reacher thought. *Thank you.*

The searchers were twenty yards away. Eighteen and a quarter meters, sixty feet, 720 inches, one-point-one-three percent of a mile. Reacher shuffled ahead a little

and closed the gap. The searchers stumbled on. Now they were ten yards ahead, on a diagonal, maybe eight yards to Reacher's left.

His phone vibrated in his pocket.

He hauled it out and cupped it in his hand. The caller ID said Dixon, which meant Lamaison. The answers to his question, recently relayed by Parker.

I said I'd call you, Reacher thought. *Can't talk now.*

He jammed the phone back in his pocket and waited. The searchers were almost dead level with him, eight yards to his left. They moved on. Reacher squirmed around, a silent half-circle on the ground. The searchers walked on. Reacher completed the circle. Now he was behind them. He got silently to his feet. Took short quiet strides, stepping high to keep his soles from brushing the grass with telltale rustles. He fell in behind the two guys, ten feet back, then eight, then six, centered exactly between them. They were a decent size. Maybe six-two, two-ten, pale and meaty. Blue suits, white shirts, crew cuts. Broad shoulders, thick necks.

He hit the first guy with a massive straight right, dead-center in the back of the neck, two hundred and fifty pounds and days of rage behind the blow. The guy's neck snapped forward and his skull snapped back and bounced straight off Reacher's fist and smashed forward again until his chin smacked his chest. Whiplash. Like a crash test dummy rear-ended by a speeding truck. The guy went straight down in a heap and his buddy turned toward him in shock and Reacher danced through a short shuffle step and headbutted him full in the face. He knew it was a great one by the sound alone. Bone, gristle, muscle, flesh, the unmistakable crunch of serious damage. The guy stayed vertical but unconscious for a second and then went down flat.

Reacher rolled the first guy on his back and sat on his chest and pinched his nose with one hand and blocked his mouth with his other palm. Then he waited until the guy suffocated. It didn't take long. Less than a minute. Then he did the same thing with the other guy. Another minute.

Then he checked their pockets. The first guy had a cell phone and a gun and a wallet full of cash money and credit cards. Reacher took the gun and the cash money, left the cell phone and the credit cards. The gun was a SIG P226, nine-millimeter. The cash money was a little less than two hundred dollars. The

second guy had another phone, another SIG, another wallet.

Plus Dave O'Donnell's ceramic knuckleduster.

It was right there in his jacket pocket. Either a reward for good work at the hospital takedown, or a stolen souvenir. Spoils of war. Reacher put it in his own pocket and jammed the SIGs in his waistband and the cash in his back pocket. Then he wiped his hands on the second guy's jacket and crawled away, low and fast, peering into the dark where he imagined Neagley to be. He had heard nothing from that direction. Nothing at all. But he wasn't worried. Neagley against two guys in the dark was about as reliable as the sun setting in the west.

He found another broad dip in the grass and lay down on his elbows and pulled out his phone. Called Dixon's number.

"Where the hell were you?" Lamaison asked him.

"I told you," Reacher said. "I don't pick up when I'm driving."

"You're not driving."

"So why didn't I pick up?"

"Whatever," Lamaison said. "Where are you now?"

"Close by."

"Before the 110th Dixon says she was with the 53rd MP and O'Donnell says he was with the 131st."

"OK," Reacher said. "I'll call you back in ten. When we arrive."

He clicked off and sat up cross-legged in the dirt. He had his proof-of-life answers. Only problem was, neither one of them was even remotely true.

75

Reacher crawled south through the grass, looking for Neagley in the dark. He made it through fifty fast yards and found a corpse instead. He blundered right into it, hands and then knees. It was a man, cooling fast. Blue suit, white shirt. Broken neck.

“Neagley?” he whispered.

“Here,” she whispered back.

She was twenty feet away, lying on her side, propped up on one elbow.

“You OK?” he asked.

“Feeling good.”

“Was there another one?”

“Behind you,” she said. “To your right.”

Reacher turned. Same kind of guy, same kind of suit, same kind of shirt.

Same kind of injury.

“Any problems?” he asked.

“Easy,” she said. “And quieter than you. I heard that head butt all the way over here.”

They bumped fists in the dark, the old ritual, about as much physical contact as she liked to permit.

“Lamaison thinks we’re on the outside looking in,” Reacher said. “He’s trying to scam us with a deal. If we surrender they’ll lock us all up for a week and then let us go when the heat dies down.”

“Like we’d believe that.”

Like we'd believe that.

"One of my guys had Dave's knuckleduster."

"That's not a good sign."

"They're OK so far. I asked for a proof of life. Personal questions. Dixon says she was with the 53rd MP and O'Donnell says he was with the 131st."

"That's bullshit. There was no 53rd MP. And Dave was posted to the 110th straight out of Officer Candidate School."

"They're talking to us," Reacher said. "Fifty-three is a prime number. Karla knew I'd pick up on that."

"So?"

"Five and three make eight. She's telling us there are eight hostiles."

"Four left, then. Lennox, Parker, and Lamaison. Plus one. Who's the fourth?"

"That's Dave's message. He's a words guy. One-three-one. Thirteenth letter of the alphabet, first letter of the alphabet."

"*M* and *A*," Neagley said.

"Mauney," Reacher said. "Curtis Mauney is here."

"Excellent," Neagley said. "Saves hunting him down later."

They bumped fists again. Then cell phones started to ring. Loud and piercing and insistent. Two of them, different tones, unsynchronized. One each in the dead guys' pockets. Reacher had no doubt at all the same thing was happening fifty yards away. Two more dead guys, two more pockets, two more ringing phones. A conference call. Lamaison was touching base with his foot patrol.

Something unpredictable.

The phones rang six times each and stopped. Silence came back.

"What would you do now?" Reacher asked. "If you were Lamaison?"

Neagley said, “I’d get guys in those Chryslers and turn the head-lights on bright and fix myself a little motor patrol. I’d run us down in less than a minute.”

Reacher nodded. Against a man on foot, the lot felt big. Against a car, it would feel small. Against more than one car it would feel tiny. In the dark it felt safe. With xenon beams blazing away it would feel like a goldfish bowl. He pictured cars bouncing over the rough ground, pictured himself trapped in their lights, darting left, darting right, shading his eyes, one car chasing, two cars converging.

He glanced at the fence.

“Correct,” Neagley said. “The fence keeps us in just as well as it kept us out. We’re two balls on a pool table and someone’s about to turn on the lights and pick up a cue.”

“What are they going to do if they don’t find us?”

“How are they not going to find us?”

“Suppose.”

Neagley shrugged and said, “They’re going to assume we got out somehow.”

“And then?”

“They’re going to panic.”

“How?”

“They’re going to kill Karla and Dave and hunker down.”

Reacher nodded.

“That’s my guess, too,” he said.

He got up and ran. Neagley followed.

76

Reacher ran straight for the helicopter. It was sixty yards away, large and white and luminous in the city's nighttime glow. Neagley jogged at his side, patiently. Reacher was no kind of a sprinter. He was slow and heavy. And he had stuff bouncing around in his pockets. Any college athlete would have done the sixty yards in six or seven seconds. Neagley would have done it in eight. Reacher took closer to fifteen. But he got there in the end. He got there just as the main building's door burst open and light and men spilled out. He dodged left and kept the chopper between him and them. Neagley crowded in at his elbow. Three guys were heading for the parking lot, fast and urgent. Parker and Lennox. And Lamaison. They were all hurrying. For every yard they covered, Reacher and Neagley moved a corresponding inch around the Bell, clockwise, touching its belly lightly with their fingertips, using its bulk as a shield. It was cold and dewed over with night mist, like a car parked on the street. It felt slimy. It smelled of oil and kerosene.

Thirty yards away three Chryslers started up. Three V-8 engines, suddenly loud in the stillness. Three transmissions slammed into gear. Three pairs of headlights flicked on. They were unbelievably bright in the darkness. They were crisp, focused, hard-edged, and superwhite. Then they got worse. One by one they switched to high beam. New lenses lit up. Huge cones of dazzling light swayed and bounced as the cars began to move. Reacher and Neagley slid around the Bell's long pointed nose and hugged the other flank. The cars separated like a shell burst and accelerated and headed off in random changing directions.

Within ten seconds they had found all four dead guys.

The cars slewed to a stop at the two sites fifty yards apart. One car where Neagley had been, two where Reacher had been. Their lights went still and threw long grotesque quadruple shadows off the four humped shapes. Three distant figures ran around, flashing instantly from extreme brightness into total darkness as they moved through the beams.

"We can't stay here," Neagley said. "They're going to come back this way and light us up like we're on stage at the Hollywood Bowl."

“How long have we got?”

“They’re going to check the fence pretty thoroughly. Four minutes, maybe.”

“Start counting,” Reacher said. He pushed off the helicopter’s flank and ran for the main building. Forty yards, ten seconds. The door had been left ajar. Lights had been left on. Reacher paused. Then he walked straight in, very quietly, with his hand on his Glock in his pocket. Saw nobody inside. The place seemed to be deserted. There were small walled-off offices on the right and a big open-plan work area on the left, behind a floor-to-ceiling plate glass screen. The work area had long laboratory benches and bright lights and complex extraction ducts on the ceiling to control dust and a grounded metal grid on the floor to control static electricity. A sliding door in the screen was open. The air coming out smelled of warm silicon boards. Like a brand-new TV.

The offices on the right were little more than eight-by-eight cubicles with head-high walls and doors. One was labeled *Edward Dean.* The development engineer. Now the quality control guy. The next door was labeled *Margaret Berenson.* The dragon lady. A remote facility, Reacher guessed, for when she had to deal with Human Resources issues without dragging assembly personnel all the way south to the glass cube in East LA. The next door was Tony Swan’s. Same principle. Two centers, two offices.

The next door was Allen Lamaison’s.

It was standing open.

Reacher took a breath. Took his Glock out of his pocket. Stepped into the doorway. Stood still. Saw an eight-by-eight cube, desk, chair, fabric walls, phones, file cabinets, stacks of papers, memos.

Nothing unusual or out of place.

Except for Curtis Mauney behind the desk.

And a suitcase standing against a wall.

Neagley stepped into the room.

“Sixty seconds gone,” she said.

Mauney just sat there at the desk, immobile. Some kind of blank resignation on his face, like a man with a bad diagnosis waiting for a second opinion he knows will be no better. His hands were empty. They were curled together on the desktop like mating crabs.

“Lamaison was my partner,” he said, like an excuse.

Reacher nodded.

“Loyalty,” he said. “It’s a bitch, ain’t it?”

The suitcase was a dark gray hard-shell Samsonite, set neatly against the wall beside the end of the desk. Not the biggest thing Reacher had ever seen. Nothing like the giants some people wrestle through the airport. But it wasn’t small, either. It wasn’t a carry-on. It had plastic stick-on initials in shallow recesses next to the latches. The initials said: *AM*.

“Seventy seconds gone,” Neagley said.

Mauney asked, “What are you going to do?”

“With you?” Reacher asked. “Nothing yet. Relax.”

Neagley aimed her gun at Mauney’s face and Reacher stepped up beside the desk and knelt down and laid the suitcase flat on the carpet. Tried the latches. They were locked. He put his Glock on the floor and jammed the tips of his index fingers under the tips of the latches and braced his thumbs and bunched his shoulders and heaved. Reacher, against two thin pressed-metal tongues. No contest. The locks broke instantly.

He lifted the lid.

“Eighty seconds gone,” Neagley said.

“Payday,” Reacher said.

The case was full of fancy engraved paper certificates and letters from foreign banks and small suede drawstring bags that felt heavy in his hand.

“Sixty-five million dollars,” Neagley said, over his shoulder.

“At a guess,” Reacher said.

“Ninety seconds gone,” Neagley said.

Reacher turned his head and looked at Mauney and asked, “How much of this is yours?”

“Some of it,” Mauney said. “Not much, I guess.”

Reacher made neat creases and folded the paperwork and handed it to Neagley. He followed it with the drawstring bags. Neagley slid everything into her pockets. Reacher left the suitcase where it was, flat on the floor, empty, the lid up like a clam. He picked up his gun and stood and turned back to Mauney.

“Wrong,” he said. “None of it is yours.”

“Two minutes gone,” Neagley said.

“Your friends are here,” Mauney said.

“I know,” Reacher said.

“Lamaison was my partner.”

“You told me that already.”

“I’m just saying.”

“So do they know you here?”

“I’ve been here before,” Mauney said. “Many times.”

“Pick up the phone.”

“Or?”

“I’ll shoot you in the head.”

“You will anyway.”

“I should,” Reacher said. “You gave up six of my friends.”

Mauney nodded.

“I knew how this would end,” he said. “When we didn’t get you at the hospital.”

“LA traffic,” Reacher said. “It can bite you in the ass.”

“Two minutes fifteen,” Neagley said.

Mauney asked, “Are we making a deal here?”

“Pick up the phone.”

“And what?”

“Tell the gate guard to open up exactly one minute from now.”

Mauney hesitated. Reacher put the Glock’s muzzle against Mauney’s temple. Mauney picked up the phone. Dialed. Reacher listened hard and heard ring tones from the earpiece and the Chryslers idling a hundred yards away on the open ground and a muted bell forty yards away in the guard shack.

The call was answered. Mauney said, “This is Mauney. Open the gate one minute from now.” Then he hung up. Reacher turned to Neagley.

“Am I your CO?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “You are.”

“Then listen up,” he said. “When the gate opens we head for our cars and we get out of here as fast as we possibly can.”

“And then?” she asked.

“We come back later.”

“In time?”

Reacher nodded. “We’ll make it in time if we’re fast right now. They’re already in their cars. So we have to really go for it. You’re a lot faster than me, so I’ll be behind you. But don’t wait for me. Don’t even look back. We can’t afford to lose a yard, either one of us.”

“Understood,” she said. “Three minutes gone.”

Reacher grabbed Mauney’s collar and hauled him to his feet. Dragged him out from behind the desk, out of the office, down the hallway, into the open area. Over to the main doorway. And then a yard outside, into the night. The smell of wet ash was strong. The three Chryslers were moving again in the distance. They were turning tight circles on the open ground and their headlights were sweeping random patterns against the fence like searchlights in a prison movie.

“Wait for the starting gun,” Reacher said to Neagley.

He watched the gate. Saw the guard move in his booth, saw the concertina wire sway, heard the tortured screech of wheels on a metal rail. Saw the gate start to move. He put the Glock to Mauney’s temple and pulled the trigger. Mauney’s skull exploded and Neagley and Reacher took off at full speed, like sprinters out of their blocks.

Neagley was ahead after half a step. Reacher stopped dead and watched her go. She flew through the pool of light from the guard hut and dodged like a running back around the end of the moving gate. She raced out to the street. Then she was lost to sight.

Reacher turned and ran in the opposite direction. Fifteen seconds later he was back where he had started, behind the Bell’s long nose.

77

Maybe they had seen Neagley go, and assumed Reacher was ahead of her. Or maybe they had just seen the gate move, or heard its sound through their open windows. Certainly they must have heard the gunshot. Possibly they imagined the rest. But they took the bait. They reacted instantly. All three cars braked and maneuvered and turned and accelerated and headed for the street, fishtailing like crazy and spraying huge rooster tails of dirt high in the air. They went out through the gate like stock cars through a turn. Their headlights lit up the street like day.

Reacher watched them go.

He waited for the night to go dark and quiet again. Then he counted to ten and moved slowly along the Bell's starboard flank. He ignored the cockpit door. He moved right past it and put his hand on the rear door's handle.

He tried it.

It was unlocked.

He glanced over his shoulder at the pilot's hut. No movement there. He eased the handle down. The latch came free. The door opened. It was wide and light and tinny. Like a panel van's. Not at all what he was expecting. Not heavy and pneumatic like an airliner's.

He held the door two feet open and looped around it and climbed inside. Pulled the door after him and paused and then closed it against the latch with one sudden decisive click. He ducked down and peered out the window and watched the pilot's hut.

No reaction.

He turned around in a crouch and knelt on the cabin floor in the darkness. From the inside the Bell looked like a swelled-up version of a minivan. A little wider and a little longer than the kind of things soccer moms drove in television commercials. Less boxy. A little more contoured. Narrower at the front, wider at

floor level, pinched in a little more at head height, narrower at the rear. There would have been seven seats, two in the cockpit, three in the center row, two way in back, except that the center row was missing. The seats were all bulky high-backed recliners, faced with black leather. They had headrests and arms. Captains' chairs. They had safety harnesses. Below the waistline the bulkheads were lined with black carpet. Above, they were padded with black quilted vinyl. Very corporate. But a little out-of-date. Leased secondhand, Reacher guessed. The whole interior smelled faintly of jet fuel.

There was a space behind the rearmost seats. For bags, Reacher guessed. A luggage compartment. Just like a minivan. It wasn't a huge space. But it was big enough. He found the levers and flopped the seat backs forward. Climbed over and sat down on the floor, sideways, with his legs out straight and his back jammed against the side bulkhead. He took the captured SIGs out of his waistband and laid them on the floor, next to his knees. He leaned forward and hauled the seat backs upright. They clicked and locked in place. Then he slumped down to test whether he could get low enough to keep his head out of sight.

Probably, he thought.

He raised his head again. The cabin windows were misted with dew. Dark and gray and featureless. Like television screens, turned off. Nothing was happening outside. Noises were dulled. Clearly the carpet and the quilting doubled as soundproofing layers.

He waited.

Five minutes.

Ten.

Then the misted windows lit up with bright moving shapes and shadows. The cars, coming back. Three sets of headlight beams, bouncing and turning. They played on the glass for a moment and then they stopped and stabilized. Then they died altogether. The cars, back in the lot. Parked.

Reacher strained to hear.

He heard nothing except slow footsteps and low voices. Agitation, not triumph.

The unmistakable sound of failure.

The search was over.

No success.

He waited.

78

He waited and grew cold and cramped from sitting still. He pictured the scene forty yards away, Mauney's body in the doorway, the empty Samsonite in the office, discussion, argument, pacing, panic, confusion, apprehension. The side of his face was inches from the seat back in front of him. The leather was close enough to smell. Normally he would have been in severe distress. He hated confinement. Claustrophobia was as close as he ever came to fear. But right then he had other things on his mind.

He waited.

Twenty long minutes.

Then a door opened up front and the helicopter dipped and settled as its undercarriage compressed and recovered. Someone had climbed aboard. The door closed. A seat creaked. A harness buckle clicked. Switches clicked. Faint orange light jumped from dozens of instrument faces and threw sudden shadows on the roof. A fuel pump whirred and chattered. Reacher leaned forward from the waist and moved his head until one eye was lined up with the gap between the seats. He saw the pilot's leather sleeve. Nothing more. The rest of the guy was invisible behind his bulky chair. His hand was dancing over switches and touching the faces of dials one by one as he ran through preflight checks. He was talking to himself, quietly, reciting a long list of required technicalities like an incantation.

Reacher pulled his head back.

Then there was an incredibly loud noise.

It was halfway between a gunshot and a split-second blast of compressed air. It came again, and again, and again, faster and faster. The starter mechanism, forcing the rotor around. The floor shook. Then the engines fired up and gears meshed and the rotor caught and settled to a lazy *whop-whop* idle. The torque rocked and twisted the whole craft on its struts, just a little, rhythmically, like it was dancing. The interior was filled with a loud thrumming noise. Driveshafts

whirred and spun overhead. Jet exhaust whined outside, high-pitched and piercing. Reacher jammed the muzzles of the captured SIGs under his legs so that they wouldn't bounce and rattle and slide. He took his Glock from his pocket and held it down by his side.

He waited.

A minute later the rear door was wrenched open. A blast of louder noise flooded in. After the noise came the acrid smell of kerosene. After the kerosene came Karla Dixon. Reacher moved his head an inch and saw her dumped on the floor head first like a log. She came to rest on her side, facing away. Her wrists and ankles were tied with rough sisal rope. Her hands were behind her back. The last time he had seen her horizontal had been in his bed in Vegas.

Two minutes later O'Donnell was wrestled in, feet-first. He was bigger and heavier and landed harder. He was tied up the same way as Dixon. He rolled facedown alongside her, his feet next to her head. They lay there together like cordwood, moving a little, struggling against the ropes.

Then the struts bounced again and Lennox and Parker climbed aboard. They shut their doors and dumped themselves down in the rear seats. The seat back in front of Reacher sagged against a loose mechanism and touched him on the cheek. He jammed his head harder into the corner. His crew cut scraped across the carpet.

The rotor turned slowly, *whop, whop, whop.*

The suspension knelt and rose, knelt and rose, front left corner, right rear corner, less than an inch, like dancing.

Reacher waited.

Then the door up front opposite the pilot wrenched open and Allen Lamaison dumped himself in the seat and said, "Go." Reacher heard the turbines spin up and felt the thrill and shiver of vibration fill the cabin and heard the rotor note change to an urgent accelerating *whip-whip-whip* and felt the whole craft go light on its wheels.

Then they were airborne.

Reacher felt the floor come up at him. He heard the wheels pull upward into their wells. He felt rotation and drift and a long steady climb and then the floor

their wells. He felt rotation and drift and a long steady climb and then the floor tilted forward as the nose went down for speed. He braced himself against spread fingers to stop himself sliding into the seat in front of him. He heard the engine noise settle to a muted whine and then the unique pendulum sensation of helicopter transport came right back at him. He had done his fair share of fast miles in rotary aircraft, a lot of them sitting on the floor.

A familiar experience.

For now.

79

By the clock in Reacher's head the cruise lasted exactly twenty minutes, which was about what he was expecting. He had figured modern corporate machines would be a little faster than the Hueys he had been accustomed to in the service. He figured a military AH-1 might have taken twenty-plus minutes to get itself beyond the mountains, so twenty dead seemed reasonable for something with black leather seats and a carpet.

He spent the twenty minutes with his head well down. Animal instinct, a million years old and still displayed by dogs and children: *If I can't see them, they can't see me.* He kept his arms and legs moving through silent fractions of an inch and kept his muscles tensing and relaxing in a bizarre miniaturized version of a gymnasium work-out. He was no longer cold, but he didn't want to get any stiffer. The noise in the cabin was loud but not overwhelming. The engine whine was whipping away in the slipstream. The rotor noise was blending with the rush of air and could be tuned out. There was no conversation going on. No talking. Reacher heard nothing from anyone.

Until the twenty-minute cruise came to an end.

He felt the helicopter slow down. Felt the floor come level and then tip backward a couple of degrees as the nose flared upward. The craft rotated left a little. Like a horse reined in on a movie screen. The cabin got louder. Now they were moving slowly, trapped in a bubble of their own noise.

He bent forward from the waist and put an eye to the gap between the seats and saw Lamaison leaning over with his forehead pressed against his window. Saw him change direction and lean toward the pilot. Heard him speak. Or maybe he only imagined that he heard him speak. He had reconstructed the orders in his head a thousand times since opening Franz's file days before. He felt that he knew them, word for word, in all their cruel inevitability.

"Where are we?" Lamaison asked, in Reacher's mind, and maybe also in reality.

"The badlands," the pilot said.

“What’s below us now?”

“Sand.”

“Height?”

“Three thousand feet.”

“What’s the air like up here?”

“Still. A few thermals, but no wind.”

“Safe?”

“Aeronautically.”

“So let’s do it.”

Reacher felt the helicopter come to a stationary hover. The engine note dropped down to a deeper key and the rotor thrashed loudly. The floor moved in tiny unstable circles, like a spinning top come to rest. Lamaison turned in his seat and nodded once to Parker and once to Lennox. Reacher heard the click of safety-harness catches and then the weight came up off the seats in front of him. Leather cushions inhaled and tired springs recovered and moved the seat backs a precious inch farther from his face. There was no light other than the orange glow from the cockpit. Parker was on the left and Lennox was on the right. They were both in strange half-crouches, knees bent and heads ducked because of limited headroom, feet apart for stability on the moving floor, arms thrust outward for balance. One of them was going to die easy and one of them was going to die hard.

It depended on which one of them was going to open the door.

Lennox was going to open the door.

He half-turned and grabbed his trailing safety harness and held on tight with his left hand. Then he crabbed sideways and used his right to grope for the interior door release. He got there and unlatched it and pushed. The door swung half-open and wind and noise howled in. The pilot was half-turned in his own seat, watching over his shoulder, and he tilted the craft a little so the door fell the rest of the way open under its own weight. Then he brought it level again and put it

of the way open under its own weight. Then he brought it level again and put it into a slow clockwise rotation so that motion and inertia and air pressure held the door wide against its hinge.

Lennox turned back. Big, red-faced, meaty, crouched like an ape, his left hand tight on his harness strap, his right pawing the air like a man on ice.

Reacher leaned forward and used his left hand to find the seat-release lever. He put his thumb below the pivot and two fingers above it and twisted. The seat back flopped forward. He used his left hand to force it all the way horizontal. He held it there. The cushions exhaled again. He brought the Glock up in his right hand and twisted from the waist and laid his right forearm flat on the seat back. Closed one eye and picked a spot an inch above Lennox's navel.

And pulled the trigger.

The blast was muted in the general roar. Audible, but not as bad as it would have been in a library. The bullet hit Lennox low in the midsection. Reacher figured it was an instant through-and-through. Inevitable, with a nine-millimeter from a range of about four feet. Which was why he was shooting at Lennox and not at Parker. Reacher was not remotely afraid of flying, but he preferred the aircraft he was in to be undamaged. A shot through Parker's midsection might have hit a hydraulic line or an electrical cable. Through Lennox it went straight out the open door into the night, harmlessly.

Lennox stayed in his awkward half-crouch. A bloom of blood haloed the hole in his shirt. It looked black in the dim orange light. His left hand came off the harness and pawed the air, a perfect mirror image of his right. He crouched there, balanced, symmetrical, a foot from the door sill, nothing behind him except the void, catastrophic physical shock on his face.

Reacher moved the Glock a small fraction and shot him again, this time through the sternum. He figured that on a guy as big and as old as Lennox the sternum would be a well-calcified plate maybe three-eighths of an inch thick. The bullet would pass through it for sure, but not before the smashing and splintering of the bone had transferred a little forward momentum into the target. Like the effect of a tiny punch. Maybe enough effect and enough momentum to take the guy with it a little and put him down backward, rather than just dumping him in a vertical heap like a head shot would have. There was too much articulation in the human neck for a head shot to have done what Reacher wanted it to.

But it was his knees that did Lennox in, not his breastbone. He came down just a fraction in back of vertical, like a guy aiming to squat on his heels. But he was big and heavy and he was forty-one years old and his knees had stiffened. They bent a little more than ninety degrees and then they stopped bending. His upper-body mass was pitched backward by the sudden obstruction and his ass hit square on the door sill and the weight of his shoulders and his head rolled him over the pivot and took him right out the door into the night. The last Reacher saw of him was the soles of his shoes, still well apart, whipping away into the windy darkness like afterthoughts.

By that point it was much less than two seconds since he had dropped the seat, but to Reacher it seemed like two lifetimes. Franz's and Orozco's, maybe. He felt infinitely fluent and languid. He was floating in a state of grace and torment, planning his moves like chess, minutely aware of potentials and drawbacks and threats and opportunities. The others in the cabin had barely reacted at all. O'Donnell was facedown, trying to lift his head far enough to turn. Dixon was trying to roll onto her back. The pilot was half-turned, immobile in his seat. Parker was frozen in his absurd crouch. Lamaison was gazing at the empty air where Lennox had been, like he was completely unable to understand what had just happened.

Then Reacher stood up.

He dropped the second seat and climbed out over it like a nightmare apparition, a sudden giant figure from nowhere looming silently into the noisy orange glow. Then he stood still, close to fully upright, his head jammed up hard against the roof, his feet a yard apart, perfectly triangulated for maximum stability. His left hand held a SIG, pointing straight at Parker's face. His right held his Glock, pointing straight at Lamaison's. Both guns were motionless. His face was expressionless. The rotor thrashed on. The Bell continued its slow clockwise rotation. The door held wide open, pushed back like a sail. Gales of noise and wind and kerosene stink blew in.

O'Donnell arched his back and got his head high enough to turn. His eyes tracked left to Reacher's boots and closed for a second. Dixon toppled onto her back and rolled over on her bound arms and settled on her other shoulder, facing the rear.

The pilot stared. Parker stared. Lamaison stared.

The time of maximum danger.

Reacher could not afford to fire forward. The chance of hitting some essential cockpit avionics was far too great. He couldn't afford to put a gun down and work on freeing O'Donnell or Dixon, because Parker was loose in the cabin not more than four feet away. He couldn't take Parker down hand to hand, because he couldn't even move. There was no floor space. O'Donnell and Dixon were occupying it all.

Whereas Lamaison was still strapped in his seat. The pilot was still strapped in his. All the pilot had to do was throw the Bell all over the sky until everyone in the back fell out. They would sacrifice Parker that way, but Reacher couldn't see Lamaison losing sleep over that decision.

Stalemate, if they understood.

Victory, if they seized the moment.

80

They didn’t understand. They didn’t seize the moment. Instead O’Donnell got his head and his feet off the floor and porpoised desperately six inches closer to Reacher and Dixon rolled back the other way and a precious foot of free space opened up between them. Reacher stepped gratefully into it and smashed Parker in the gut with the SIG’s muzzle. The breath punched out of Parker’s lungs and he folded up at the waist and staggered one instinctive step, straight into the channel that O’Donnell and Dixon had created. Reacher dodged past him like a bullfighter and planted the sole of his boot flat on Parker’s ass and shoved him hard from behind and sent him stumbling on stiff legs straight across the cabin and blindly out the door into the night. Before his scream had died Reacher had his left arm hooked around Lamaison’s throat with the SIG pointing straight at the pilot and the Glock jammed hard into the back of Lamaison’s neck.

After that, it got easier.

The pilot stayed frozen at the controls. The Bell hung there in its noisy hover. The rotor beat loud and the whole craft kept on turning slow. The door stayed open, wide and inviting, pinned back by the airflow. Reacher clamped his elbow and hauled backward on Lamaison’s neck and pulled him up out of the seat until his shoulder straps went tight. Then he put the Glock on the floor and fished in his pocket for O’Donnell’s knuckleduster. He held it between his fingers like a tool and glanced behind him. He extended his arm and pushed Dixon onto her front and used the knuckleduster’s wicked spines to rub at the bonds on her wrists. She tensed her arms and the sisal fibers ruptured slowly, one by one. Reacher felt each success quite clearly through the hard ceramic material, tiny dull harmonic pings, sometimes two at once. Lamaison started to struggle and Reacher tightened his elbow, which had the advantage of choking Lamaison into submission but the disadvantage of aiming the SIG behind the pilot instead of straight at him. But the pilot made no attempt to take advantage. He didn’t react at all. He just sat there, hands on the stick, feet on the pedals, keeping the Bell turning slow.

Reacher kept on sawing away, blindly. One minute. Two. Dixon kept on moving her arms, offering new strands, testing progress. Lamaison struggled harder. He

was a big guy, strong and powerful, thick neck, broad shoulders. And he was scared. But Reacher was bigger, and Reacher was stronger, and Reacher was angry. More angry than Lamaison was scared. Reacher tightened his arm. Lamaison struggled on. Reacher debated taking time out to hit him, but he wanted him conscious, for later. So he just worried on at the ropes and suddenly a whole skein of sisal fibers unraveled and Dixon's wrists came free and she pushed herself up into a kneeling position. Reacher gave her the knuckleduster and his Glock and swapped the SIG from his left hand to his right.

After that, it got a whole lot easier.

Dixon did the smart thing, which was to ignore the knuckleduster and haul herself across the cabin like a mermaid to Lamaison's pockets, where she found a wallet and another SIG and O'Donnell's switchblade. Two seconds later her feet were free, and five seconds after that O'Donnell was free. Both of them had been tied up for hours, and they were stiff and cramped and their hands were shaking pretty badly. But they didn't have difficult tasks ahead of them. There was only the pilot to subdue. O'Donnell grabbed the guy's collar in one fist and jammed a SIG's muzzle up under his chin. There was no chance of him missing with a contact shot, however badly his hands were shaking. No chance at all. The pilot understood that. He stayed passive. Reacher stuck his SIG in Lamaison's ear and leaned the other way, toward the pilot, and asked, "Height?"

The pilot swallowed and said, "Three thousand feet."

"Let's take it up a little," Reacher said. "Let's try five thousand feet."

81

The climb took the Bell out of its slow rotation and the open door flapped around for a moment and then slammed itself shut. The cabin went quiet. Almost silent, by comparison. O'Donnell still had his gun to the pilot's head. Reacher still had Lamaison arched backward in his seat. Lamaison had his hands on Reacher's forearm, hauling downward, but listlessly. He had gone strangely passive and inert. Like he sensed exactly what was threatened, but couldn't believe it was really going to happen.

Like Swan couldn't, Reacher thought. *Like Orozco couldn't, and Franz couldn't, and Sanchez couldn't.*

He felt the Bell top out and level off. Heard the rotor bite stationary air, felt the turbines settle to a fast urgent whine. The pilot glanced in his direction and nodded.

"More," Reacher said. "Let's do another two hundred and eighty feet. Let's make it a whole mile."

The engine noise changed and the rotor noise changed and the craft moved upward again, slowly, precisely. It turned a little and then came back to a hover.

The pilot said, "One mile."

Reacher asked, "What's below us now?"

"Sand."

Reacher turned to Dixon and said, "Open the door."

Lamaison found some new energy. He bucked and thrashed in his seat and said, "No, please, please, no."

Reacher tightened his elbow and asked, "Did my friends beg?"

Lamaison just shook his head.

“They wouldn’t,” Reacher said. “Too proud.”

Dixon moved back in the cabin and grabbed Lennox’s seat harness in her left hand. Held on tight and groped for the door release with her right. She was smaller than Lennox had been and for her it was more of a stretch. But she got there. She clicked the release and pushed off hard with spread fingertips and the door swung open. Reacher turned to the pilot and said, “Do that spinning thing again.” The pilot set up the slow clockwise rotation and the door opened up all the way and pinned itself back against its hinge straps. Shattering noise and cold night air poured in. The mountains showed black on the horizon. Beyond them the glow of Los Angeles was visible, fifty miles away, a million bright lights trapped under air as thick as soup. Then that view rotated away and was replaced by desert blackness.

Dixon sat down on Parker’s folded seat. O’Donnell tightened his hold on the pilot’s collar. Reacher twisted Lamaison’s neck up and back with his forearm hard against his throat. Pulled him upward against the limits of the harness. Held him there. Then he reached over and used the SIG’s muzzle to hit the harness release. The belts came free. Reacher pulled Lamaison backward all the way over the top of the seat and dumped him on the floor.

Lamaison saw his chance, and he took it. He pushed himself up into a sitting position and scrabbled his heels on the carpet, trying to get his feet under him. But Reacher was ready. Readier than he had ever been. He kicked Lamaison hard in the side and swung an elbow that caught him on the ear. Wrestled him facedown on the floor and got a knee between his shoulder blades and jammed the SIG against the top of his spine. Lamaison’s head was up and Reacher knew he was staring out into the void. His feet were drumming on the carpet. He was screaming. Reacher could hear him clearly over the noise. He could feel his chest heaving.

Too late, Reacher thought. *You reap what you sow.*

Lamaison flailed weak backhand blows that didn’t come close to landing. Then he put his hands flat on the floor and tried to buck Reacher off. *No chance*, Reacher thought. *Not unless you can do a push-up with two hundred and fifty pounds riding on your back.* Some guys could. Reacher had seen it done. But Lamaison couldn’t. He was strong, but not strong enough. He strained for a spell and collapsed.

Reacher swapped the SIG into his left hand and looped his right over Lamaison's neck from behind like a pincer. Lamaison had a big neck, but Reacher had big hands. He jammed his thumb and the tip of his middle finger into the hollows behind Lamaison's ears and squeezed hard. Lamaison's arteries compressed and his brain starved for oxygen and he stopped screaming and his feet stopped drumming. Reacher kept the pressure on for a whole extra minute and then rolled him over and spun him around and sat him up like a drunk.

Grabbed his belt and his collar.

Pushed him across the floor on his ass, feet-first.

He got him as far as the door sill and held him there, arms pinned behind him. The helicopter turned, slowly. The engines whined and the rotor beat out discrete bass thumps of sound. Reacher felt every one of them in his chest, like heartbeats. Minutes passed and fresh air blew in and Lamaison came around to find himself sitting upright on the edge with his feet hanging out over the void like a guy on a high wall.

A mile above the desert floor. Five thousand, two hundred and eighty feet.

Reacher had rehearsed a speech. He had started composing it in the Denny's on Sunset, with Franz's file in his hand. He had perfected it over the following days. It was full of fine phrases about loyalty and retribution, and heartfelt eulogies for his four dead friends. But when it came to it he didn't say much. No point. Lamaison wouldn't have heard a word. He was crazy with terror and there was too much noise. A cacophony. In the end Reacher just leaned forward and put his mouth close to Lamaison's ear and said, "You made a bad mistake. You messed with the wrong people. Now it's time to pay."

Then he straightened Lamaison's arms behind his back and pushed. Lamaison slid an inch and then lunged forward to try to jack his ass backward on the sill. Reacher pushed again. Lamaison folded up and his chest met his knees. He was staring straight down into the blackness. One mile. A speeding car would take a whole minute to cover it.

Reacher pushed. Lamaison let his shoulders go slack. No leverage.

Reacher put his heel flat against the small of Lamaison's back.

Pushed.

Bent his leg.

Let go of Lamaison's arms.

Straightened his leg, fast and smooth.

Lamaison went over the edge and disappeared into the night.

There was no scream. Or maybe there was. Maybe it was lost in the rotor noise. O'Donnell nudged the pilot and the pilot yawed the craft and reversed the rotation and the door slammed neatly shut. The cabin went quiet. Silent, by comparison. Dixon hugged Reacher hard. O'Donnell said, "You certainly left it until the last minute, didn't you?"

Reacher said, "I was trying to decide whether to let them throw you out before I saved Karla. Tough decision. Took some time."

"Where's Neagley?"

"Working, I hope. The missiles rolled out of the gate in Colorado eight hours ago. And we don't know where they're going."

82

There was nothing the pilot could do to them without killing himself also, so they left him alone in the cockpit. But not before checking the fuel load. It was low. Much less than an hour's flying time. There was no cell reception. Reacher told the pilot to lose height and drift south to find a signal. Dixon and O'Donnell latched the rear seat backs upright and sat down. They didn't strap themselves in. Reacher guessed they were done with confinement. He lay on his back on the floor with his arms and legs flung wide like a snow angel. He was tired and dispirited. Lamaison was gone, but no one had come back.

O'Donnell asked, "Where would you take six hundred and fifty SAMs?"

"The Middle East," Dixon said. "And I'd send them by sea. The electronics through LA and the tubes through Seattle."

Reacher raised his head. "Lamaison said they were going to Kashmir."

"Did you believe him?"

"Yes and no. I think he was choosing to believe a lie to salve his own conscience. Whatever else he was, he was a citizen. He didn't want to know the truth."

"Which is?"

"Terrorism here in the States. Got to be. It's obvious. Kashmir is a squabble between governments. Governments have purchasing missions. They don't run around with Samsonite suitcases full of bearer bonds and bank access codes and diamonds."

Dixon asked, "Is that what you found?"

"Highland Park. Sixty-five million dollars' worth. Neagley's got it all. You're going to have to convert it for us, Karla."

"If I survive. My plane back to New York might get blown up."

Reacher nodded. “If not tomorrow, then the next day, or the next.”

“How do we find them? Eight hours at fifty miles an hour is already a radius of four hundred miles. Which is a half-million-square-mile circle.”

“Five hundred and two thousand, seven hundred and twenty,” Reacher said, automatically. “Assuming you use only three decimal places for *pi.* But that’s the bargain we made. We could stop them when the circle was small, or we could come for you guys.”

“Thanks,” O’Donnell said.

“Hey, I voted to stop the truck. Neagley overruled me.”

“So how do we do this?”

“You ever seen a really great centerfielder play baseball? He never chases the ball. He runs to where the ball is about to arrive. Like Mickey Mantle.”

“You never saw Mantle play.”

“I saw newsreels.”

“The United States is close to four million square miles. That’s bigger than center field at Yankee Stadium.”

“But not much,” Reacher said.

“So where do we run to?”

“Mahmoud isn’t dumb. In fact he strikes me as a very smart and cautious guy. He just spent sixty-five million dollars on what are basically just components. He must have insisted that part of the deal was that someone would show him how to screw the damn things together.”

“Who?”

“What did Neagley’s woman friend tell us? The politician? Diana Bond?”

“Lots of things.”

“She told us that New Age’s engineer does the quality control tests because so far he’s the only guy in the world who knows how Little Wing is supposed to work.”

Dixon said, “And Lamaison had him on a string somehow.”

“He was threatening the guy’s daughter.”

O’Donnell said, “So Lamaison was going to pimp him out. Lamaison was going to take him somewhere. And you threw Lamaison out of the damn helicopter before you asked him.”

Reacher shook his head. “Lamaison talked about the whole thing like it was firmly in the past. He said it was a done deal. There was something in his voice. Lamaison wasn’t taking anyone anywhere.”

“So who?”

“Not who,” Reacher said. “The question is, where?”

Dixon said, “If there’s only one guy, and Lamaison wasn’t planning to take him somewhere, they’ll have to bring the missiles to him.”

“Which is ridiculous,” O’Donnell said. “You can’t bring a semi full of missiles to a garden apartment in Century City or wherever.”

“The guy doesn’t live in Century City,” Reacher said. “He lives way out in the desert. The middle of nowhere. The back of beyond. Where better to bring a semi full of missiles?”

“Cell phones are up,” the pilot called.

Reacher pulled out his Radio Shack pay-as-you-go. Found Neagley’s number. Hit the green button. She answered.

“Dean’s place?” he asked.

“Dean’s place,” she said. “For sure. I’m twenty minutes away.”

83

The Bell had GPS, but not the kind that drew a road map on a screen. Not like O'Donnell's rental car. The Bell's system produced a pair of always-changing latitude and longitude readings instead, pale green numbers, plain script. Reacher told the pilot to get himself somewhere south of Palmdale and wait. The pilot was nervous about fuel. Reacher told him to lose altitude. Helicopters sometimes survived engine failures at a few hundred feet. They rarely survived at a few thousand.

Then Reacher called Neagley back. She had gotten Dean's address from Margaret Berenson in the Pasadena hotel. But she had no GPS, either. She was adrift in the dark, behind two last-generation headlights made weaker by blue paint on the lenses. And cell coverage was patchy. Reacher lost her twice. Before he lost her a third time he told her to find Dean's spread and drive in tight circles with her lights on bright.

Reacher took Lamaison's seat up front and pressed his forehead to the window the same way Lamaison had. Dixon and O'Donnell took side windows in back. Between them they covered a one-eighty panorama. Maybe more. For safety's sake Reacher had the pilot turn wide circles once in a while, in case what they wanted was way behind them.

They saw nothing.

Nothing at all, except vast featureless blackness and occasional pinpoints of orange light. Gas stations maybe, or tiny parking lots outside small grocery stores. They saw occasional cars on lonely roads, but none of them was Neagley's Civic. Yellow headlight beams, not blue. Reacher tried his phone again. No service.

"Fuel's really low," the pilot said.

"Highway on the left," Dixon called.

Reacher looked down. Not much of a highway. There were five cars on it within a linear mile, two heading south and three heading north. He closed his eyes and

a linear line, two heading south and three heading north. He closed his eyes and pictured the maps he had looked at.

“We shouldn’t be seeing a north-south highway,” he said. “We’re too far west.”

The Bell tilted and swung away east on a long fast curve and came level again.

The pilot said, “I’m going to have to set down soon.”

“You’ll set down when I tell you,” Reacher said.

North of the mountains the air was better. Some dust, some heat shimmer, but basically it was clear to the horizon. Way far ahead in the distance a tiny grid of lights winked and twinkled. Palmdale, presumably. A nice place, Reacher had heard. Expanding. Desirable. Therefore expensive. Therefore a guy looking for acres and isolation and maximum bang for the buck would stay well away from it.

“Turn south,” he said. “And climb.”

“Climbing eats fuel,” the pilot said.

“We need a better angle.”

The Bell climbed, slowly, a couple of hundred feet. The pilot dropped the nose and turned a wide circle, like he was hosing the horizon with an imaginary searchlight.

They saw nothing.

There was no cell coverage.

“Higher,” Reacher said.

“Can’t do it,” the pilot said. “Look at the dial.”

Reacher found the fuel gauge. The needle was riding the end stop. Officially the tanks were empty. He closed his eyes again and pictured the map. Berenson had said Dean had complained about the commute from hell. To Highland Park he had only two choices. Either Route 138 on the east flank of Mount San Antonio, or Route 2, to the west, past the Mount Wilson Observatory. Route 2 was probably smaller and twistier. And it joined the 210 at Glendale. Which probably

probably smaller and twistier. And it joined the 210 at Glendale. Which probably made it more hellish than the eastern approach. No reason to choose it unless it was a total no-brainer. Which meant Dean was starting from somewhere due south of Palmdale, not east of south. Reacher looked straight ahead and waited until the distant grid of lights slid back into view.

“Now pull a one-eighty and head back,” he said.

“We’re out of fuel.”

“Just do it.”

The craft turned in its own length. Dipped its nose and clattered onward.

Sixty seconds later they found Neagley.

A mile in front and four hundred feet down they saw a cone of blue light turning and pulsing like a beacon. It looked like Neagley had the Civic on maximum lock and was driving a thirty-foot circle and flashing between dipped and brights as she went. The effect was spectacular. The beams swept and leapt and threw moving shadows and cleared a couple of hundred feet where there were no obstructions. Like a lighthouse on a rocky shore. There were small buttes and mesas and gullies, thrown into dramatic relief. To the north, low buildings. Power lines to the east. To the west the fractured land fell away into a shallow arroyo maybe forty feet wide and twenty deep.

“Land there,” Reacher said. “In the ditch. And keep the wheels up.”

The pilot said, “Why?”

“Because that’s the way I want it.”

The pilot drifted west a little and dropped a couple of hundred feet and turned to line up with the arroyo. Then he took the Bell down like an elevator. A siren went off to warn that he was landing with the undercarriage up. He ignored it and kept on going. He slowed twenty feet off the ground and eased on down and pancaked gently on the arroyo’s rocky bed. Stones crunched and metal grated and the floor tipped a foot from horizontal. Out the windows Reacher could see Neagley’s lights coming toward them through a sandstorm kicked up by the

rotor wash.

Then the fuel ran out.

The engines died and the rotor shuddered to a stop.

The cabin went quiet.

Reacher was first out the door. He batted his way through clouds of warm dust and sent Dixon and O'Donnell ahead to meet with Neagley and then turned back to the Bell. He opened the cockpit door and looked in at the pilot. The guy was still strapped to his seat. He was flicking the face of the fuel gauge with his fingernail.

"Nice landing," Reacher said. "You're a good pilot."

The guy said, "Thanks."

"That thing with the rotation," Reacher said. "The way it kept the door open up there. Smart move."

"Basic aerodynamics."

"But then, you had plenty of practice."

The pilot said nothing.

"Four times," Reacher said. "That I know about, at least."

The pilot said nothing.

"Those men were my friends," Reacher said.

"Lamaison told me I had to do it."

"Or?"

"I would lose my job."

"That's all? You let them throw four live human beings out of your helicopter to save your job?"

“I’m paid to follow instructions.”

“You ever heard about a trial at Nuremberg? That excuse really doesn’t cut it anymore.”

The pilot said, “It was wrong, I know.”

“But you did it anyway.”

“What choice did I have?”

“Lots of choices,” Reacher said. Then he smiled. The pilot relaxed a little. Reacher shook his head like he was bemused by it all and leaned in and patted the guy on the cheek. Left his hand there, far side of the guy’s face, a friendly gesture. He worked his thumb up toward the guy’s eye socket, pressed his index finger on the guy’s temple, worked his other three fingers behind the guy’s ear, into his hair. Then he broke the guy’s neck, one-handed, with a single convulsive twist. Then he bounced the guy’s head around, front to back, side to side, to make sure the spinal cord was properly severed. He didn’t want the guy to wake up a paraplegic. He didn’t want the guy to wake up at all.

He walked away and left him there, still strapped in his seat. Turned back after fifty feet and checked. A helicopter in a ditch, slightly tilted, wheels up, tanks empty. A crash. The pilot still on board, impact injuries, an unfortunate accident. *Not perfect, but reasonable.*

Neagley had parked a hundred feet from the arroyo, which was about half the distance to Edward Dean’s front door. Her lights were still on bright. When Reacher got to the car he turned and looked back and checked again. The Bell was hidden pretty well. The crown of the rotor was visible, but only just. The blades themselves drooped out of sight under their own weight. The dust was settling. Neagley and Dixon and O’Donnell were standing together in a tight group of three.

“We OK?” Reacher asked.

Dixon and O’Donnell nodded. Neagley didn’t.

“You mad with me?” Reacher asked her

You mad with me?" Reacher asked her.

"Not really," she said. "I would have been if you'd screwed up."

"I needed you to work out where the missiles were headed."

"You already knew."

"I wanted a second opinion. And the address."

"Well, here we are. No missiles."

"They're still in transit."

"We hope."

"Let's go see Mr. Dean."

They piled into the tiny Civic and Neagley drove the hundred feet to Dean's door. Dean opened up on the first knock. Clearly he had been rousted by the helicopter drone and the flashing lights. He didn't look much like a rocket scientist. More like a coach at a third-rate high school. He was tall and loose-limbed and had a shock of sandy hair. He was maybe forty years old. He was barefoot and dressed in sweatpants and a T-shirt. Night attire. It was close to midnight.

"Who are you people?" he asked.

Reacher explained who they were, and why they were there.

Dean had no idea what he was talking about.

84

Reacher had been expecting some kind of a denial. Lamaison had warned Berenson to stay quiet, and clearly he would have done the same or more with Dean. But Dean's denial seemed genuine. The guy was puzzled, not evasive.

"Let's start at the beginning," Reacher said. "We know what you did with the electronics packs, and we know why you had to do it."

Suddenly there was something in Dean's face. Just like with Margaret Berenson.

Reacher said, "We know about the threat against your daughter."

"What threat?"

"Where is she?"

"Away. Her mother, too."

"School's not out."

"An urgent family matter."

Reacher nodded. "You sent them away. That was smart. "

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Reacher said, "Lamaison is dead."

There was a flash of hope in Dean's eyes, just for a split second, hard to see in the darkness.

"I threw him out of the helicopter," Reacher said.

Dean said nothing.

"You like bird watching? Wait a day and drive a mile or two south and get up on the roof of your car. Two buzzards circling, it's probably a snake-bit coyote.

the roof of your car. Two buzzards circling, it's probably a snake or a coyote. More than two, it's Lamaison. Or Parker, or Lennox. They're all out there somewhere."

"I don't believe you."

Reacher said, "Show him, Karla."

Dixon pulled out the wallet she had taken from Lamaison's pocket. Dean took it from her and turned to the light burning in his hallway. He spilled the contents into his palm and shuffled through them. Lamaison's driver's license, his credit cards, a New Age photo ID, his Social Security card.

"Lamaison is dead," Reacher said again.

Dean put the stuff back in the wallet and handed it back to Dixon.

"You got his wallet," he said. "Doesn't prove you got him."

"I can show you the pilot," Reacher said. "He's dead, too."

"He just landed."

"I just killed him."

"You're crazy."

"And you're off the hook."

Dean said nothing.

"Take your time," Reacher said. "Get used to it. But we need to know who's coming, and when."

"Nobody's coming."

"Someone has to be."

"That was never the deal."

"Wasn't it?"

“Tell me again,” Dean said. “Lamaison’s dead?”

“He killed four of my friends,” Reacher said. “If he wasn’t dead, I sure as hell wouldn’t be standing here wasting time with you.”

Dean nodded, slowly. He was getting used to it.

“But I still don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said. “OK, I signed off on phony paperwork, I admit that, six hundred and fifty times, which is terrible, but that was all I did. There was never anything about me assembling units or showing anyone else how to do it.”

“Who else knows how?”

“It’s not difficult. It’s plug and play. It’s simple. It has to be. Soldiers are going to do it. No offense. I mean, in the field, at night, under stress.”

“Simple for you.”

“Relatively simple for anyone.”

“Soldiers never do anything until they’re shown how.”

“Sure, they’ll have training.”

“From who?”

“We’ll set up a course at Fort Irwin. I guess I’ll teach the first class.”

“Lamaison knew that?”

“It’s standard practice.”

“So he pimped you out for a preview.”

Dean just shook his head. “He didn’t. He didn’t say anything about a preview. And he could have. It wasn’t like I was in a position to refuse him anything.”

“Nine hours,” Neagley said.

“Another hundred and thirty thousand square miles,” Dixon said.

A hundred thirty-three thousand five hundred thirty-five, Reacher thought, automatically. The increase alone was as big as most of California and more than half of Texas. The area of a circle was equal to *pi* times the radius squared, and it was the *squared* part that made it increase so fast.

“They’re coming here,” he said. “They have to be.”

Nobody answered.

Dean led them inside. His house was a long low shack built from concrete and timber. The concrete had been left raw and was fading to a yellowed patina. The timber was stained dark brown. There was a big living room with Navajo rugs and worn furniture and a fireplace heaped with last winter’s ash. There were plenty of books in the room. CDs were piled everywhere. There was a stereo with vacuum tube amplifiers and horn speakers. Altogether the place looked exactly like a city refugee’s dream.

Dean went to make coffee in the kitchen and Dixon said, “Nine hours twenty-six minutes.” Neagley and O’Donnell didn’t get the point, but Reacher did. Assuming three decimal places for *pi* and a speed of fifty for the truck, then nine hours and twenty-six minutes made the potential search area exactly seven hundred thousand square miles.

“Mahmoud is cautious,” Reacher said. “He’s not going to buy a pig in a poke. Either it’s his money and he doesn’t want to waste it, or it’s someone else’s money and he doesn’t want to get his head cut off for screwing up. He’s coming.”

“Dean says not.”

“Dean says he wasn’t told in advance. There’s a difference.”

Dean came back and served the coffee and nobody spoke for a quarter of an hour. Then Reacher turned to Dean and asked, “Did you do your own electrical work here?”

Dean said, “Some of it.”

“Got any plastic cable ties?”

Got any plastic cable ties?

“Lots of them. Workshop out back.”

“You should drive north,” Reacher said. “Head for Palmdale, get some breakfast.”

“Now?”

“Now. Stay for lunch. Don’t come back until the afternoon.”

“Why? What’s going to happen here?”

“I’m not sure yet. But whatever, you shouldn’t be around.”

Dean sat still for a moment. Then he got up and found his keys and left. They heard his car start up. Heard the crunch of power steering on gravel. Then the noise faded to nothing and the house went quiet again.

Dixon said, “Nine hours forty-six minutes.” Reacher nodded. The circle was now three-quarters of a million square miles in size.

“He’s coming,” Reacher said.

The circle reached a million square miles at seventeen minutes past one in the morning. Reacher found an atlas in a bookcase and traced a likely route and worked out that Denver was eighteen hours away, which made six in the morning a likely rendezvous time. Ideal, from Mahmoud’s point of view. Lamaison would have told him about the threat against the daughter, and he would figure under any circumstances the kid would be home at six in the morning. And therefore a perfect reminder of Dean’s vulnerability. Maybe Mahmoud was dropping by unannounced, but there was no doubt he expected to get what he wanted.

Reacher got up and went for a stroll, first outside, and then inside. The property consisted of the house and a garage block and the workshop that Dean had mentioned. Beyond that, there was nothing. It was pitch dark but Reacher could feel vast silent emptiness all around. Inside, the house was simple. Three bedrooms, a den, a kitchen, the living room. One of the bedrooms was the

daughter's. There were inkjet prints of photographs pinned up on a board. Groups of teenage girls, three or four at a time. The kid and her friends, presumably. By a process of elimination Reacher worked out which girl appeared in every picture. Dean's daughter, he assumed. Her camera, her room. She was a tall blonde girl, maybe fourteen, still a little awkward, braces on her teeth. But a year or two into the future she was going to be spectacular, and she was going to stay that way for thirty years. A hostage to fortune. Reacher understood Dean's distress, and wished Lamaison had screamed a little more on the way down.

People say the darkest hour is just before dawn, but people are wrong. By definition the darkest hour is in the middle of the night. By five in the morning the sky in the east was lightening. By five-thirty visibility was pretty good. Reacher took another walk. Dean had no neighbors. He was living in the middle of thousands of empty acres. The view was clear to every horizon. Worthless, sunblasted land. The power lines ran south to north and disappeared in the haze. A stony driveway came in from the southeast. It was at least a mile long, maybe more. Reacher walked a little ways down it and turned around and checked what Mahmoud would see when he arrived. The helicopter was out of sight. By chance a lone mesquite bush blocked the rotor crown from view. Reacher moved Neagley's Civic behind the garage block and checked again. *Perfect.* A somnolent group of three buildings, low and dusty, almost part of the landscape. A hundred yards out he saw a flat broken fragment of rock the size and shape of a coffin. He walked over there and took Tony Swan's lump of concrete out of his pocket and rested it on the slab, like a monument. He walked back and ducked into the workshop. The door was unlocked. The place was laid out neatly and smelled of machine oil heated by the sun. He found a tray of black plastic cable ties and took eight of the biggest. They were about two feet long, thick and stiff. For strapping heavy cable into perforated conduit boxes.

Then he went back inside the house to wait.

Six o'clock arrived, and Mahmoud didn't. Now the circle measured more than two and a half million square miles. Six-fifteen came and went, two-point-six million square miles. Six-thirty, two-point-seven million.

Then, at exactly six thirty-two, the telephone bell dinged, just once, brief and soft and muted.

“Here we go,” Reacher said. “Someone just cut the phone line.”

They moved to the windows. They waited. Then five miles south and east they saw a tiny white dot winking in the early sun. A vehicle, closing fast, trailing a cloud of khaki dust that was backlit by the dawn like a halo.

85

They moved away from the windows and waited in the living room, tense and silent. Five minutes later they heard the crunch of stones under tires and the wet muffled beat of a worn Detroit V-8. The crunching stopped and the engine died and they heard a parking brake ratchet on. A minute after that they heard a tinny door slam and the sound of random footsteps on gravel. The driver, stumbling around, yawning and stretching.

A minute after that, they heard a knock at the door.

Reacher waited.

The knock came again.

Reacher counted to twenty and walked down the hall. Opened the door. Saw a man standing on the step, framed against the light, with a mid-sized panel truck parked behind him. The truck was a rented U-Haul, white and red, top-heavy, a little ungainly. Reacher felt like he had seen it before. He had never seen the man before. He was medium height, medium weight, expensively dressed but a little rumpled. He was maybe forty years old. He had thick black hair, shiny, beautifully cut, and the kind of mid-brown skin and regular features that could have made him Indian, or Pakistani, or Iranian, or Syrian, or Lebanese, or Algerian, or even Israeli or Italian.

In turn Azhari Mahmoud saw a disheveled giant of a white man. Two meters tall, easily, a hundred and ten kilos, maybe a hundred and twenty, shaved head, wrists as wide and hard as two-by-fours, hands like shovels, dressed in dusty gray denims and work boots. *A crazy scientist,* he thought. *Right at home in a desert shack.*

“Edward Dean?” he said.

“Yes,” Reacher said. “Who are you?”

“No cell coverage here, I notice.”

“So?”

“And I took the precaution of cutting your landline ten miles down the road.”

“Who are you?”

“My name doesn’t matter. I’m a friend of Allen Lamaison’s. That’s all you need to know. You are to extend me the same courtesies that you would extend to him.”

“I don’t extend courtesies to Allen Lamaison,” Reacher said. “So get lost.”

Mahmoud nodded. “Let me put it another way. The threat that Lamaison made is still operative. And today it will benefit me, not him.”

“Threat?” Reacher said.

“Against your daughter.”

Reacher said nothing.

Mahmoud said, “You’re going to show me how to arm Little Wing.”

Reacher glanced at the U-Haul.

“I can’t,” he said. “All you have are the electronics.”

“The missiles are on their way,” Mahmoud said. “They’ll be here very soon.”

“Where are you going to use them?”

“Here and there.”

“Inside the United States?”

“It’s a target-rich environment.”

“Lamaison said Kashmir.”

“We might ship some units to select friends.”

“We?”

We?

“We’re a big organization.”

“I won’t do it.”

“You will. Like you did before. For the same reason.”

Reacher paused a beat and said, “You better come in.”

He stepped aside. Mahmoud was accustomed to deference, so he squeezed past and walked ahead into the hallway. Reacher hit him hard in the back of the head and sent him stumbling toward the living room door, where Frances Neagley stepped out and dropped him with a neat uppercut. A minute later he was hog-tied on the hallway floor with one figure-eight cable tie binding his left wrist to his right ankle and another binding his right wrist to his left ankle. The ties were zipped hard and the flesh around them was already swelling. Mahmoud was bleeding from the mouth and moaning. Reacher kicked him in the side and told him to shut up. Then he stepped back into the living room and waited for the truck from Denver.

The truck from Denver was a white eighteen-wheeler. Its driver was hog-tied next to Mahmoud a minute after climbing down from the cab. Then Reacher dragged Mahmoud out of the house and left him faceup in the sun next to his U-Haul. Mahmoud’s eyes were full of fear. He knew what was heading his way. Reacher figured he would prefer to die, which was why he left him there alive. O’Donnell dragged the driver out and dumped him next to his truck. They all stood for a moment and looked around one last time and then crammed themselves into Neagley’s Civic and headed south, fast. As soon as cell coverage kicked in they stopped and Neagley called her Pentagon buddy. Seven o’clock in the west, ten in the morning in the east. She told the guy where to look and what he would find. Then they drove on. Reacher watched out the back window and before they even hit the mountains he saw a whole squadron of choppers heading west on the horizon. Bell AH-1s, from some nearby Homeland Security base, he assumed. The sky was thick with them.

After the mountains they talked about money. Neagley gave Dixon the financial

instruments and the diamonds, and they all agreed she should carry them back to New York and convert them to cash. First call would be to repay Neagley's expense budget, second call would be to set up trust funds for Angela and Charlie Franz, and Tammy Orozco and her three children, and Sanchez's friend Milena, and the third call would be to make one last donation to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, in the name of Tony Swan's dog, Maisi.

Then it got awkward. Neagley was OK for salary, but Reacher sensed that Dixon and O'Donnell were hurting. Hurting, and tempted, but sensitive about asking. So he went ahead and admitted he was flat broke and suggested they take whatever little margin was left over and divide it up four ways between themselves, as wages. Everyone agreed.

After that, they didn't talk much at all. Lamaison was gone, Mahmoud was in the system, but no one had come back. And Reacher had gotten around to asking himself the big question: If the stalled car on the 210 had not delayed his arrival at the hospital, would he have performed any better than Dixon or O'Donnell? Than Swan, or Franz, or Sanchez, or Orozco? Maybe the others were asking themselves the same question about him. Truth was, he didn't know the answer, and he hated not knowing.

Two hours later they were at LAX. They abandoned the Civic in a fire lane and walked away from it, heading for different terminals and different airlines. Before they split up they stood on the sidewalk and bumped fists one last time, and said goodbyes they promised would be temporary. Neagley headed inside to American. Dixon went looking for America West. O'Donnell searched for United. Reacher stood in the heat with anxious people swirling all around him and watched them walk away.

Reacher left California with close to two thousand dollars in his pocket, from the dealers behind the wax museum in Hollywood, and from Saropian in Vegas, and from the two guys at New Age's place in Highland Park. As a result he didn't run low on cash for almost four weeks. Finally he stopped by an ATM in the bus depot in Santa Fe, New Mexico. As always he worked out his balance first, and then checked to see if the bank's calculation matched his own.

For the second time in his life, it didn’t.

The machine told him that the balance in his account was more than a hundred thousand dollars bigger than he was expecting. Exactly a hundred and eleven thousand, eight hundred and twenty-two dollars and eighteen cents bigger, according to his own blind calculation.

111,822.18.

Dixon, obviously. The spoils of war.

At first he was disappointed. Not with the amount. It was more money than he had seen in a long time. He was disappointed with himself, because he couldn’t perceive any message in the number. He was sure Dixon would have adjusted the total by a few dollars or cents one way or the other to give him a wry smile. But he couldn’t get it. It wasn’t prime. No even number greater than two could be prime. It had hundreds of factors. Its reciprocal was boring. Its square root was a long messy string of digits. Its cube root was worse.

111,822.18.

Then he grew disappointed with Dixon. Because the more he thought about it, the more he analyzed it, the more he was sure it really was a boring number.

Dixon’s head wasn’t in the game.

She had let him down.

Maybe.

Or maybe not.

He pressed the button for the mini-statement. A slip of thin paper came out of a slot. Faint gray printing, the last five transactions against his account. Neagley’s original deposit from Chicago was still there, first on the list. Then second, his fifty-dollar withdrawal at the Portland bus depot, up in Oregon. Then third, his airfare from Portland to LAX, way back at the beginning.

Then fourth, a new deposit in the sum of one hundred and one thousand, eight hundred ten dollars, and eighteen cents.

Then fifth, on the same day, another deposit, in the sum of ten thousand and twelve dollars exactly.

101810.18.

10012.

He smiled. Dixon's head was in the game after all. Totally, completely in the game. The first deposit was 10-18, repeated for emphasis. Military police radio code for *mission accomplished,* twice over. 10-18, 10-18. Herself and O'Donnell, rescued. Or Lamaison and Mahmoud, beaten. Or both things.

Nice, Karla, he thought.

The second deposit was her zip code: 10012. Greenwich Village. Where she lived. A geographic reference.

A hint.

She had asked: *Feel like dropping by New York afterward?*

He smiled again and balled up the slip of thin paper and dropped it in the trash. Took a hundred dollars from the machine and headed on inside the depot and bought a ticket for the first bus he saw. He had no idea where it was going.

He had answered: *I don't make plans, Karla.*

Nothing To Lose

1

The sun was only half as hot as he had known sun to be, but it was hot enough to keep him confused and dizzy. He was very weak. He had not eaten for seventy-two hours, or taken water for forty-eight.

Not weak. He was dying, and he knew it.

The images in his mind showed things drifting away. A rowboat caught in a river current, straining against a rotted rope, pulling, tugging, breaking free. His viewpoint was that of a small boy in the boat, sitting low, staring back helplessly at the bank as the dock grew smaller.

Or an airship swinging gently on a breeze, somehow breaking free of its mast, floating up and away, slowly, the boy inside seeing tiny urgent figures on the ground, waving, staring, their faces tilted upward in concern.

Then the images faded, because now words seemed more important than pictures, which was absurd, because he had never been interested in words before. But before he died he wanted to know which words were his. Which applied to him? Was he a man or a boy? He had been described both ways.*Be a man,* some had said. Others had been insistent:*The boy's not to blame.* He was old enough to vote and kill and die, which made him a man. He was too young to drink, even beer, which made him a boy. Was he brave, or a coward? He had been called both things. He had been called*unhinged, disturbed, deranged, unbalanced, delusional, traumatized*, all of which he understood and accepted, except*unhinged.* Was he supposed to be*hinged* ? Like a door? Maybe people were doors. Maybe things passed through them. Maybe they banged in the wind. He considered the question for a long moment and then he batted the air in frustration. He was babbling like a teenager in love with weed.

Which is exactly all he had been, a year and a half before.

He fell to his knees. The sand was only half as hot as he had known sand to be,

He fell to his knees. The sand was only half as hot as he had known sand to be, but it was hot enough to ease his chill. He fell facedown, exhausted, finally spent. He knew as certainly as he had ever known anything that if he closed his eyes he would never open them again.

But he was very tired.

So very, very tired.

More tired than a man or a boy had ever been.

He closed his eyes.

2

The line between Hope and Despair was exactly that: a line, in the road, formed where one town's blacktop finished and the other's started. Hope's highway department had used thick dark asphalt rolled smooth. Despair had a smaller municipal budget. That was clear. They had top-dressed a lumpy roadbed with hot tar and dumped gray gravel on it. Where the two surfaces met there was an inch-wide trench of no-man's-land filled with a black rubbery compound. An expansion joint. A boundary. A line. Jack Reacher stepped over it midstride and kept on walking. He paid it no attention at all.

But he remembered it later. Later, he was able to recall it in great detail.

Hope and Despair were both in Colorado. Reacher was in Colorado because two days previously he had been in Kansas, and Colorado was next to Kansas. He was making his way west and south. He had been in Calais, Maine, and had taken it into his head to cross the continent diagonally, all the way to San Diego in California. Calais was the last major place in the Northeast, San Diego was the last major place in the Southwest. One extreme to the other. The Atlantic to the Pacific, cool and damp to hot and dry. He took buses where there were any and hitched rides where there weren't. Where he couldn't find rides, he walked. He had arrived in Hope in the front passenger seat of a bottle-green Mercury Grand Marquis driven by a retired button salesman. He was on his way out of Hope on foot because that morning there had been no traffic heading west toward Despair.

He remembered that fact later, too. And wondered why he hadn't wondered why.

In terms of his grand diagonal design, he was slightly off course. Ideally he should have been angling directly southwest into New Mexico. But he wasn't a stickler for plans, and the Grand Marquis had been a comfortable car, and the old guy had been fixed on Hope because he had three grandchildren to see there, before heading onward to Denver to see four more. Reacher had listened patiently to the old guy's family tales and had figured that a saw-tooth itinerary first west and then south was entirely acceptable. Maybe two sides of a triangle

would be more entertaining than one. And then in Hope he had looked at a map and seen Despair seventeen miles farther west and had been unable to resist the detour. Once or twice in his life he had made the same trip metaphorically. Now he figured he should make it for real, since the opportunity was right there in front of him.

He remembered that whim later, too.

The road between the two towns was a straight two-lane. It rose very gently as it headed west. Nothing dramatic. The part of eastern Colorado that Reacher was in was pretty flat. Like Kansas. But the Rockies were visible up ahead, blue and massive and hazy. They looked very close. Then suddenly they didn't. Reacher breasted a slight rise and stopped dead and understood why one town was called Hope and the other Despair. Settlers and homesteaders struggling west a hundred and fifty years before him would have stopped over in what came to be called Hope and would have seen their last great obstacle seemingly within touching distance. Then after a day's or a week's or a month's repose they would have moved on again and breasted the same slight rise and seen that the Rockies' apparent proximity had been nothing more than a cruel trick of topography. An optical illusion. A trick of the light. From the top of the rise the great barrier seemed once again remote, even unreachably distant, across hundreds more miles of endless plains. Maybe thousands more miles, although that too was an illusion. Reacher figured that in truth the first significant peaks were about two hundred miles away. A long month's hard trekking on foot and in mule-drawn carts, across featureless wilderness and along occasional decades-old wheel ruts. Maybe six weeks' hard trekking, in the wrong season. In context, not a disaster, but certainly a bitter disappointment, a blow hard enough to drive the anxious and the impatient from hope to despair in the time between one glance at the horizon and the next.

Reacher stepped off Despair's gritty road and walked through crusted sandy earth to a table rock the size of a car. He levered himself up and lay down with his hands behind his head and stared up at the sky. It was pale blue and laced with long high feathery clouds that might once have been vapor trails from coast-to-coast red-eye planes. Back when he smoked he might have lit a cigarette to pass the time. But he didn't smoke anymore. Smoking implied carrying at least a pack and a book of matches, and Reacher had long ago quit carrying things he didn't need. There was nothing in his pockets except paper money and an expired passport and an ATM card and a clip-together toothbrush. There was nothing waiting for him anywhere else, either. No storage unit in a

distant city, nothing stashed with friends. He owned the things in his pockets and the clothes on his back and the shoes on his feet. That was all, and that was enough. Everything he needed, and nothing he didn't.

He got to his feet and stood on tiptoe, high on the rock. Behind him to the east was a shallow bowl maybe ten miles in diameter with the town of Hope roughly in its center, eight or nine miles back, maybe ten blocks by six of brick-built buildings and an outlying clutter of houses and farms and barns and other structures made of wood and corrugated metal. Together they made a warm low smudge in the haze. Ahead of him to the west were tens of thousands of flat square miles, completely empty except for ribbons of distant roads and the town of Despair about eight or nine miles ahead. Despair was harder to see than Hope. The haze was thicker in the west. The place looked larger than Hope had been, and teardrop-shaped, with a conventional plains downtown mostly south of the main drag and then a wider zone of activity beyond it, maybe industrial in nature, hence the smog. Despair looked less pleasant than Hope. Cold, where Hope had looked warm; gray, where Hope had been mellow. It looked unwelcoming. For a brief moment Reacher considered backtracking and striking out south from Hope itself, getting back on course, but he dismissed the thought even before it had fully formed. Reacher hated turning back. He liked to press on, dead ahead, whatever. Everyone's life needed an organizing principle, and relentless forward motion was Reacher's.

He was angry at himself later, for being so inflexible.

He climbed off the rock and rejoined the road twenty yards west of where he had left it. He stepped up onto the left-hand edge and continued walking, long strides, an easy pace, a little faster than three miles an hour, facing oncoming traffic, the safest way. But there was no oncoming traffic. No traffic in either direction. The road was deserted. No vehicles were using it. No cars, no trucks. Nothing. No chance of a ride. Reacher was a little puzzled, but mostly unconcerned. Many times in his life he had walked a lot more than seventeen miles at a stretch. He raked the hair off his forehead and pulled his shirt loose on his shoulders and kept on going, toward whatever lay ahead.

3

Despair's downtown area began with a vacant lot where something had been planned maybe twenty years before but never built. Then came an old motor court, shuttered, maybe permanently abandoned. Across the street and fifty yards west was a gas station. Two pumps, both of them old. Not the kind of upright rural antiques Reacher had seen in Edward Hopper's paintings, but still a couple of generations off the pace. There was a small hut in back with a grimy window full of quarts of oil arrayed in a pyramid. Reacher crossed the apron and stuck his head in the door. It was dark inside the hut and the air smelled of creosote and hot raw wood. There was a guy behind a counter, in worn blue overalls stained black with dirt. He was about thirty, and lean.

"Got coffee?" Reacher asked him.

"This is a gas station," the guy said.

"Gas stations sell coffee," Reacher said. "And water, and soda."

"Not this one," the guy said. "We sell gas."

"And oil."

"If you want it."

"Is there a coffee shop in town?"

"There's a restaurant."

"Just one?"

"One is all we need."

Reacher ducked back out to the daylight and kept on walking. A hundred yards farther west the road grew sidewalks and according to a sign on a pole changed its name to Main Street. Thirty feet later came the first developed block. It was occupied by a dour brick cube, three stories high, on the left side of the street, to

the south. It might once have been a dry goods emporium. It was still some kind of a retail enterprise. Reacher could see three customers and bolts of cloth and plastic household items through its dusty ground-floor windows. Next to it was an identical three-story brick cube, and then another, and another. The downtown area seemed to be about twelve blocks square, bulked mostly to the south of Main Street. Reacher was no kind of an architectural expert, and he knew he was way west of the Mississippi, but the whole place gave him the feel of an old Connecticut factory town, or the Cincinnati riverfront. It was plain, and severe, and unadorned, and out of date. He had seen movies about small-town America in which the sets had been artfully dressed to look a little more perfect and vibrant than reality. This place was the exact opposite. It looked like a designer and a whole team of grips had worked hard to make it dowdier and gloomier than it needed to be. Traffic on the streets was light. Sedans and pick-up trucks were moving slow and lazy. None of them was newer than three years old. There were few pedestrians on the sidewalks.

Reacher made a random left turn and set about finding the promised restaurant. He quartered a dozen blocks and passed a grocery store and a barber shop and a bar and a rooming house and a faded old hotel before he found the eatery. It took up the whole ground floor of another dull brick cube. The ceiling was high and the windows were floor-to-ceiling plate glass items filling most of the walls. The place might have been an automobile showroom in the past. The floor was tiled and the tables and chairs were plain brown wood and the air smelled of boiled vegetables. There was a register station inside the door with a*Please Wait to Be Seated* sign on a short brassed pole with a heavy base. Same sign he had seen everywhere, coast to coast. Same script, same colors, same shape. He figured there was a catering supply company somewhere turning them out by the millions. He had seen identical signs in Calais, Maine, and expected to see more in San Diego, California. He stood next to the register and waited.

And waited.

There were eleven customers eating. Three couples, a three-some, and two singletons. One waitress. No front-of-house staff. Nobody at the register. Not an unusual ratio. Reacher had eaten in a thousand similar places and he knew the rhythm, subliminally. The lone waitress would soon glance over at him and nod, as if to say*I'll be right with you.* Then she would take an order, deliver a plate, and scoot over, maybe blowing an errant strand of hair off her cheek in a gesture designed to be both an apology and an appeal for sympathy. She would collect a

menu from a stack and lead him to a table and bustle away and then revisit him in strict sequence.

But she didn’t do any of that.

She glanced over. Didn’t nod. Just looked at him for a long second and then looked away. Carried on with what she was doing. Which by that point wasn’t much. She had all her eleven customers pacified. She was just making work. She was stopping by tables and asking if everything was all right and refilling coffee cups that were less than an inch down from the rim. Reacher turned and checked the door glass to see if he had missed an opening-hours sign. To see if the place was about to close up. It wasn’t. He checked his reflection, to see if he was committing a social outrage with the way he was dressed. He wasn’t. He was wearing dark gray pants and a matching dark gray shirt, both bought two days before in a janitorial surplus store in Kansas. Janitorial supply stores were his latest discovery. Plain, strong, well-made clothing at reasonable prices. Perfect. His hair was short and tidy. He had shaved the previous morning. His fly was zipped.

He turned back to wait.

Customers turned to look at him, one after the other. They appraised him quite openly and then looked away. The waitress made another slow circuit of the room, looking everywhere except at him. He stood still, running the situation through a mental database and trying to understand it. Then he lost patience with it and stepped past the sign and moved into the room and sat down alone at a table for four. He scraped his chair in and made himself comfortable. The waitress watched him do it, and then she headed for the kitchen.

She didn’t come out again.

Reacher sat and waited. The room was silent. No talking. No sounds at all, except for the quiet metallic clash of silverware on plates and the smack of people chewing and the ceramic click of cups being lowered carefully into saucers and the wooden creak of chair legs under shifting bodies. Those tiny noises rose up and echoed around the vast tiled space until they seemed overwhelmingly loud.

Nothing happened for close to ten minutes.

Then an old crew-cab pick-up truck slid to a stop on the curb outside the door. There was a second's pause and four guys climbed out and stood together on the sidewalk outside the restaurant's door. They grouped themselves into a tight little formation and paused another beat and came inside. They paused again and scanned the room and found their target. They headed straight for Reacher's table. Three of them sat down in the empty chairs and the fourth stood at the head of the table, blocking Reacher's exit.

4

The four guys were each a useful size. The shortest was probably an inch under six feet and the lightest was maybe an ounce over two hundred pounds. They all had walnut knuckles and thick wrists and knotted forearms. Two of them had broken noses and none of them had all their teeth. They all looked pale and vaguely unhealthy. They were all grimy, with ingrained gray dirt in the folds of their skin that glittered and shone like metal. They were all dressed in canvas work shirts with their sleeves rolled to their elbows. They were all somewhere between thirty and forty. And they all looked like trouble.

“I don’t want company,” Reacher said. “I prefer to eat alone.”

The guy standing at the head of the table was the biggest of the four, by maybe an inch and ten pounds. He said, “You’re not going to eat at all.”

Reacher said, “I’m not?”

“Not here, anyway.”

“I heard this was the only show in town.”

“It is.”

“Well, then.”

“You need to get going.”

“Going?”

“Out of here.”

“Out of where?”

“Out of this restaurant.”

“You want to tell me why?”

“We don’t like strangers.”

“Me either,” Reacher said. “But I need to eat somewhere. Otherwise I’ll get all wasted and skinny like you four.”

“Funny man.”

“Just calling it like it is,” Reacher said. He put his forearms on the table. He had thirty pounds and three inches on the big guy, and more than that on the other three. And he was willing to bet he had a little more experience and a little less inhibition than any one of them. Or than all of them put together. But ultimately, if it came to it, it was going to be his two hundred and fifty pounds against their cumulative nine hundred. Not great odds. But Reacher hated turning back.

The guy who was standing said, “We don’t want you here.”

Reacher said, “You’re confusing me with someone who gives a shit what you want.”

“You won’t get served in here.”

“You could order for me.”

“And then what?”

“Then I could eat your lunch.”

“Funny man,” the guy said again. “You need to leave now.”

“Why?”

“Just leave now.”

Reacher asked, “You guys got names?”

“Not for you to know. And you need to leave.”

“You want me to leave, I’ll need to hear it from the owner. Not from you.”

“We can arrange that.” The guy who was standing nodded to one of the guys in the seats, who scraped his chair back and got up and headed for the kitchen. A

long minute later he came back out with a man in a stained apron. The man in the apron was wiping his hands on a dish towel and didn't look particularly worried or perturbed. He walked up to Reacher's table and said, "I want you to leave my restaurant."

"Why?" Reacher asked.

"I don't need to explain myself."

"You the owner?"

"Yes, I am."

Reacher said, "I'll leave when I've had a cup of coffee."

"You'll leave now."

"Black, no sugar."

"I don't want trouble."

"You already got trouble. If I get a cup of coffee, I'll walk out of here. If I don't get a cup of coffee, these guys can try to throw me out, and you'll spend the rest of the day cleaning blood off the floor and all day tomorrow shopping for new chairs and tables."

The guy in the apron said nothing.

Reacher said, "Black, no sugar."

The guy in the apron stood still for a long moment and then headed back to the kitchen. A minute later the waitress came out with a single cup balanced on a saucer. She carried it across the room and set it down in front of Reacher, hard enough to slop some of the contents out of the cup and into the saucer.

"Enjoy," she said.

Reacher lifted the cup and wiped the base on his sleeve. Set the cup down on the table and emptied the saucer into it. Set the cup back on the saucer and squared it in front of him. Then he raised it again and took a sip.

*Not bad,*he thought. A little weak, a little stewed, but at heart it was a decent commercial product. Better than most diners, worse than most franchise places. Right in the middle of the curve. The cup was a porcelain monstrosity with a lip about three-eighths of an inch thick. It was cooling the drink too fast. Too wide, too shallow, too much mass. Reacher was no big fan of fine china, but he believed a receptacle ought to serve its contents.

The four guys were still clustered all around. Two sitting, two standing now. Reacher ignored them and drank, slowly at first, and then faster as the coffee grew cold. He drained the cup and set it back on the saucer. Pushed it away, slowly and carefully, until it was exactly centered on the table. Then he moved his left arm fast and went for his pocket. The four guys jumped. Reacher came out with a dollar bill and flattened it and trapped it under the saucer.

“So let’s go,” he said.

The guy standing at the head of the table moved out of the way. Reacher scraped his chair back and stood up. Eleven customers watched him do it. He pushed his chair in neatly and stepped around the head of the table and headed for the door. He sensed the four guys behind him. Heard their boots on the tile. They were forming up in single file, threading between tables, stepping past the sign and the register. The room was silent.

Reacher pushed the door and stepped outside to the street. The air was cool, but the sun was out. The sidewalk was concrete, cast in five-by-five squares. The squares were separated by inch-wide expansion joints. The joints were filled with black compound.

Reacher turned left and took four steps until he was clear of the parked pick-up and then he stopped and turned back, with the afternoon sun behind him. The four guys formed up in front of him, with the sun in their eyes. The guy who had stood at the head of the table said, “Now you need to get out.”

Reacher said, “I am out.”

“Out of town.”

Reacher said nothing.

The guy said, “Make a left, and then Main Street is four blocks up. When you

get there, turn either left or right, west or east. We don´t care which. Just keep on walking."

Reacher asked, "You still do that here?"

"Do what?"

"Run people out of town."

"You bet we do."

"You want to tell me why you do?"

"We don't have to tell you why we do."

Reacher said, "I just got here."

"So?"

"So I'm staying."

The guy on the end of the line pushed his rolled cuffs above his elbows and took a step forward. Broken nose, missing teeth. Reacher glanced at the guy's wrists. The width of a person's wrists was the only failsafe indicator of a person's raw strength. This guy's were wider than a long-stemmed rose, narrower than a two-by-four. Closer to the two-by-four than the rose.

Reacher said, "You're picking on the wrong man."

The guy who had been doing all the talking said, "You think?"

Reacher nodded. "I have to warn you. I promised my mother, a long time ago. She said I had to give folks a chance to walk away."

"You a momma's boy?"

"She liked to see fair play."

"There are four of us. One of you."

Reacher's hands were down by his sides, relaxed, gently curled. His feet were

apart, securely planted. He could feel the hard concrete through the soles of his shoes. It was textured. It had been brushed with a yard broom just before it dried, ten years earlier. He folded the fingers of his left hand flat against his palm. Raised the hand, very slowly. Brought it level with his shoulder, palm out. The four guys stared at it. The way his fingers were folded made them think he was hiding something.*But what?* He snapped his fingers open.*Nothing there.* In the same split second he moved sideways and heaved his right fist up like a convulsion and caught the guy who had stepped forward with a colossal uppercut to the jaw. The guy had been breathing through his mouth because of his broken nose and the massive impact snapped his jaw shut and lifted him up off the ground and dumped him back down in a vertical heap on the sidewalk. Like a puppet with the strings cut. Unconscious before he got halfway there.

“Now there are only three of you,” Reacher said. “Still one of me.”

They weren’t total amateurs. They reacted pretty well and pretty fast. They sprang back and apart into a wide defensive semicircle and crouched, fists ready.

Reacher said, “You can still walk away.”

The guy who had been doing the talking said, “You got lucky.”

“Only suckers get sucker punched.”

“Won’t happen twice.”

Reacher said nothing.

The guy said, “Get out of town. You can’t take us three-on-one.”

“Try me.”

“Can’t be done. Not now.”

Reacher nodded. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe one of you will stay on your feet long enough to get to me.”

“You can count on it.”

“But the question you need to ask is, which one of you will it be? Right now you’ve got no way of knowing. One of you will be driving the other three to the

hospital for a six-month stay. You want me out of town bad enough to take those odds?"

Nobody spoke. Stalemate. Reacher rehearsed his next moves. A right-footed kick to the groin of the guy on his left, spin back with an elbow to the head for the guy in the middle, duck under the inevitable roundhouse swing incoming from the guy on the right, let him follow through, put an elbow in his kidney. One, two, three, no fundamental problem. Maybe a little cleanup afterward, more feet and elbows. Main difficulty would be limiting the damage. Careful restraint would be required. It was always wiser to stay on the right side of the line, closer to brawling than homicide.

In the distance beyond the three guys Reacher could see people going about their lawful business on the sidewalks. He could see cars and trucks driving slow on the streets, pausing at four-way stops, moving on.

Then he saw one particular car blow straight through a four-way and head in his direction. A Crown Victoria, white and gold, black push bars on the front, a light bar on the roof, antennas on the trunk lid. A shield on the door, with*DPD* scrolled across it.*Despair Police Department.* A heavyset cop in a tan jacket visible behind the glass.

"Behind you," Reacher said. "The cavalry is here." But he didn't move. And he kept his eyes on the three guys. The cop's arrival didn't necessarily guarantee anything. Not yet. The three guys looked mad enough to move straight from a verbal warning to an actual assault charge. Maybe they already had so many they figured one more wouldn't make any difference.*Small towns.* In Reacher's experience they all had a lunatic fringe.

The Crown Vic braked hard in the gutter. The door swung open. The driver took a riot gun from a holster between the seats. Climbed out. Pumped the gun and held it diagonally across his chest. He was a big guy. White, maybe forty. Black hair. Wide neck. Tan jacket, brown pants, black shoes, a groove in his forehead from a Smokey the Bear hat that was presumably now resting on his passenger seat. He stood behind the three guys and looked around. Surveyed the scene.*Not exactly rocket science,* Reacher thought.*Three guys surrounding a fourth? We're not discussing the weather here.*

The cop said, "Back off now." Deep voice. Authoritative. The three guys stepped backward. The cop stepped forward. They swapped their relative

stepped backward. The cop stepped forward. They swapped their relative positions. Now the three guys were behind the cop. The cop moved his gun. Pointed it straight at Reacher's chest.

"You're under arrest," he said.

5

Reacher stood still and asked, “On what charge?”

The cop said, “I’m sure I’ll think of something.” He swapped the gun into one hand and used the other to take the handcuffs out of the holder on his belt. He held them on the flat of his palm and one of the guys behind him stepped forward and took them from him and looped around behind Reacher’s back.

“Put your arms behind you,” the cop said.

“Are these guys deputized?” Reacher asked.

“Why would you care?”

“I don’t. But they should. They put their hands on me without a good reason, they get their arms broken.”

“They’re all deputized,” the cop said. “Especially including the one you just laid out.”

He put both hands back on his gun.

“Self-defense,” Reacher said.

“Save it for the judge,” the cop said.

The guy behind him pulled Reacher’s arms back and cuffed his wrists. The guy who had done all the talking opened the cruiser’s rear door and stood there holding it like a hotel doorman with a taxicab.

“Get in the car,” the cop said.

Reacher stood still and considered his options. Didn’t take him long. He didn’t have any options. He was handcuffed. He had a guy about three feet behind him. He had a cop about eight feet in front of him. Two more guys three feet behind the cop. The riot gun was some kind of a Mossberg. He didn’t recognize the

model, but he respected the brand.

“In the car,” the cop said.

Reacher moved forward and looped around the open door and jacked himself inside butt-first. The seat was covered in heavy vinyl and he slid across it easily. The floor was covered in pimpled rubber. The security screen was clear bulletproof plastic. He braced his feet, one in the left foot well and one in the right. Uncomfortable, with his hands cuffed behind him. He figured he was going to get bounced around.

The cop got back in the front. The suspension yielded to his weight. He reholstered the Mossberg. Slammed his door and put the transmission in drive and stamped on the gas. Reacher was thrown back against the cushion. Then the guy braked hard for a stop sign and Reacher was tossed forward. He twisted as he went and took the blow against the plastic screen with his shoulder. The cop repeated the procedure at the next four-way. And the next. But Reacher was OK with it. It was to be expected. He had driven the same way in the past, in the days when he was the guy in the front and someone else was the guy in the back. And it was a small town. Wherever the police station was, it couldn’t be far.

The police station was four blocks west and two blocks south of the restaurant. It was housed in another undistinguished brick building on a street wide enough to let the cop park nose-in to the curb on a diagonal. There was one other car there. That was all. Small town, small police department. The building had two stories. The cops had the ground floor. The town court was upstairs. Reacher guessed there were cells in the basement. His trip to the booking desk was uneventful. He didn’t make trouble. No point. No percentage in being a fugitive on foot in a town where the line was twelve miles away in one direction and maybe more in the other. The desk was manned by a patrolman who could have been the arresting officer’s kid brother. Same size and shape, same face, same hair, a little younger. Reacher was uncuffed and gave up the stuff from his pockets and his shoelaces. He had no belt. He was escorted down a winding stair and put in a six-by-eight cell fronted by ancient ironwork that had been painted maybe fifty times.

“Lawyer?” he asked.

“You know any?” the desk guy asked back.

"You know any?" the desk guy asked back.

"The public defender will do."

The desk guy nodded and locked the gate and walked away. Reacher was left on his own. The cell block was otherwise empty. Three cells in a line, a narrow corridor, no windows. Each cell had a wall-mounted iron tray for a bed and a steel toilet with a sink built into the top of the tank. Bulkhead lights burned behind wire grilles on the ceilings. Reacher ran his right hand under cold water at the sink and massaged his knuckles. They were sore, but not damaged. He lay down on the cot and closed his eyes.

*Welcome to Despair,*he thought.

6

The public defender never showed. Reacher dozed for two hours and then the cop who had arrested him clattered down the stairs and unlocked the cell and gestured for him to get up.

“The judge is ready for you,” he said.

Reacher yawned. “I haven’t seen my lawyer.”

“Take it up with the court,” the cop said. “Not with me.”

“What kind of a half-assed system have you got here?”

“The same kind we’ve always had.”

“I think I’ll stay down here.”

“I could send your three remaining buddies in for a visit.”

“Save gas and send them straight to the hospital.”

“I could put you in handcuffs first. Strap you to the bed.”

“All by yourself?”

“I could bring a stun gun.”

“You live here in town?”

“Why?”

“Maybe I’ll come visit you one day.”

“I don’t think you will.”

The cop stood there waiting. Reacher shrugged to himself and swung his feet to

the floor. Pushed himself upright and stepped out of the cell. Walking was awkward without his shoelaces. On the stairs he had to hook his toes to stop his shoes falling off altogether. He shuffled past the booking desk and followed the cop up another flight. A grander staircase. At the top was a wooden double door, closed. Alongside it was a sign on a short post with a heavy base. Same kind of thing as the restaurant sign, except this one said:*Town Court.* The cop opened the left-hand panel and stood aside. Reacher stepped into a courtroom. There was a center aisle and four rows of spectator seating. Then a bullpen rail and a prosecution table and a defense table, each with three wheelback chairs. There was a witness stand and a jury box and a judge's dais. All the furniture and all the structures were made out of pine, lacquered dark and then darkened more by age and polish. The walls were paneled with the same stuff. There were flags behind the dais, Old Glory and something Reacher guessed was the state flag of Colorado.

The room was empty. It echoed and smelled of dust. The cop walked ahead and opened the bullpen gate. Pointed Reacher toward the defense table. The cop sat down at the prosecution table. They waited. Then an inconspicuous door in the back wall opened and a man in a suit walked in. The cop jumped up and said, "All rise." Reacher stayed in his seat.

The man in the suit clumped up three steps and slid in behind the dais. He was bulky and somewhere over sixty and had a full head of white hair. His suit was cheap and badly cut. He picked up a pen and straightened a legal pad in front of him. He looked at Reacher and said, "Name?"

"I haven't been Mirandized," Reacher said.

"You haven't been charged with a crime," the old guy said. "This isn't a trial."

"So what is it?"

"A hearing."

"About what?"

"It's an administrative matter, that's all. Possibly just a technicality. But I do need to ask you some questions."

Reacher said nothing.

The guy asked, “Name?”

“I’m sure the police department copied my passport and showed it to you.”

“For the record, please.”

The guy’s tone was neutral and his manner was reasonably courteous. So Reacher shrugged and said, “Jack Reacher. No middle initial.”

The guy wrote it down. Followed up with his date of birth, and his Social Security number, and his nationality. Then he asked, “Address?”

Reacher said, “No fixed address.”

The guy wrote it down. Asked, “Occupation?”

“None.”

“Purpose of your visit to Despair?”

“Tourism.”

“How do you propose to support yourself during your visit?”

“I hadn’t really thought about it. I didn’t anticipate a major problem. This isn’t exactly London or Paris or New York City.”

“Please answer the question.”

“I have a bank balance,” Reacher said.

The guy wrote it all down. Then he sniffed and skipped his pen back over the lines he had already completed and paused. Asked, “What was your last address?”

“An APO box.”

“APO?”

“Army Post Office.”

“You’re a veteran?”

You're a veteran?

“Yes, I am.”

“How long did you serve?”

“Thirteen years.”

“Until?”

“I mustered out ten years ago.”

“Unit?”

“Military Police.”

“Final rank?”

“Major.”

“And you haven’t had a permanent address since you left the army?”

“No, I haven’t.”

The guy made a pronounced check mark against one of his lines. Reacher saw his pen move four times, twice in one direction and twice in the other. Then the guy asked, “How long have you been out of work?”

“Ten years,” Reacher said.

“You haven’t worked since you left the army?”

“Not really.”

“A retired major couldn’t find a job?”

“This retired major didn’t want to find a job.”

“Yet you have a bank balance?”

“Savings,” Reacher said. “Plus occasional casual labor.”

The guy made another big check mark. Two vertical scratches, two horizontal. Then he asked, “Where did you stay last night?”

“In Hope,” Reacher said. “In a motel.”

“And your bags are still there?”

“I don’t have any bags.”

The guy made another check mark.

“You walked here?” he asked.

“Yes,” Reacher said.

“Why?”

“No buses, and I didn’t find a ride.”

“No. Why here?”

“Tourism,” Reacher said again.

“What had you heard about our little town?”

“Nothing at all.”

“Yet you decided to visit?”

“Evidently.”

“Why?”

“I found the name intriguing.”

“That’s not a very compelling reason.”

“I have to be somewhere. And thanks for the big welcome.”

The guy made a fourth big check mark. Two vertical lines, two horizontal. Then he skipped his pen down his list, slowly and methodically, fourteen answers, plus four diversions to the margin for the check marks. He said, “I’m sorry, but I

find you to be in contravention of one of Despair's town ordinances. I'm afraid you'll have to leave."

"Leave?"

"Leave town."

"What ordinance?"

"Vagrancy," the guy said.

7

Reacher said, “There’s a vagrancy ordinance here?”

The judge nodded and said, “As there is in most Western towns.”

“I never came across one before.”

“Then you’ve been very lucky.”

“I’m not a vagrant.”

“Homeless for ten years, jobless for ten years, you ride buses or beg rides or walk from place to place performing occasional casual labor, what else would you call yourself?”

“Free,” Reacher said. “And lucky.”

The judge nodded again, and said, “I’m glad you see a silver lining.”

“What about my First Amendment right of free assembly?”

“The Supreme Court ruled long ago. Municipalities have the right to exclude undesirables.”

“Tourists are undesirable? What does the Chamber of Commerce think about that?”

“This is a quiet, old-fashioned town. People don’t lock their doors. We don’t feel the need. Most of the keys were lost years ago, in our grandparents’ time.”

“I’m not a thief.”

“But we err on the side of caution. Experience elsewhere shows that the itinerant jobless have always been a problem.”

“Suppose I don’t go? What’s the penalty?”

“Thirty days’ imprisonment.”

Reacher said nothing. The judge said, “The officer will drive you to the town line. Get a job and a home, and we’ll welcome you back with open arms. But don’t come back until you do.”

The cop took him downstairs again and gave him back his cash and his passport and his ATM card and his toothbrush. Nothing was missing. Everything was there. Then the cop handed over his shoelaces and waited at the booking desk while he threaded them through the eyelets in his shoes and pulled them tight and tied them off. Then the cop put his hand on the butt of his gun and said, “Car.” Reacher walked ahead of him through the lobby and stepped out the street door. It was late in the day, late in the year, and it was getting dark. The cop had moved his cruiser. Now it was parked nose-out.

“In the back,” the cop said.

Reacher heard a plane in the sky, far to the west. A single engine, climbing hard. A Cessna or a Beech or a Piper, small and lonely in the vastness. He pulled the car door and slid inside. Without handcuffs he was a lot more comfortable. He sprawled sideways, like he would in a taxi or a Town Car. The cop leaned in after him, one hand on the roof and one on the door, and said, “We’re serious. You come back, we’ll arrest you, and you’ll spend thirty days in that same cell. Always assuming you don’t look at us cross-eyed and we shoot you for resisting.”

“You married?” Reacher asked.

“Why?”

“I thought not. You seem to prefer jerking off.”

The cop stood still for a long moment and then slammed the door and got in the front. He took off down the street and headed north.*Six blocks to Main Street,* Reacher figured.*If he turns left, takes me onward, to the west, maybe I’ll let it go. But if he turns right, takes me back east to Hope, maybe I won’t.*

Reacher hated turning back.

Forward motion was his organizing principle.

Six blocks, six stop signs. At each one the cop braked gently and slowed and looked left and looked right and then rolled forward. At Main Street he came to a complete halt. He paused. Then he hit the gas and nosed forward and swung the wheel.

And turned right.

East.

Back toward Hope.

8

Reacher saw the dry goods emporium and the gas station and the abandoned motor court and the vacant unbuilt lot slide by and then the cop accelerated to a steady sixty miles an hour. The tires rumbled over the rough road and stray pebbles spattered the underside and bounced and skittered away to the shoulders. Twelve minutes later the car slowed and coasted and braked and came to a stop. The cop climbed out and put his hand on the butt of his gun and opened Reacher's door.

"Out," he said.

Reacher slid out and felt Despair's grit under his shoes.

The cop jerked his thumb, to the east, where it was darker.

"That way," he said.

Reacher stood still.

The cop took the gun off his belt. It was a Glock nine millimeter, boxy and dull in the gloom. No safety catch. Just a latch on the trigger, already compressed by the cop's meaty forefinger.

"Please," the cop said. "Just give me a reason."

Reacher stepped forward, three paces. Saw the moon rising on the far horizon. Saw the end of Despair's rough gravel and the start of Hope's smooth blacktop. Saw the inch-wide trench between, filled with black compound. The car was stopped with its push bars directly above it. The expansion joint. The boundary. The line. Reacher shrugged and stepped over it. One long pace, back to Hope.

The cop called, "Don't bother us again."

Reacher didn't reply. Didn't turn around. Just stood and faced east and listened as the car backed up and turned and crunched away across the stones. When the sound was all gone in the distance he shrugged again and started walking.

He walked less than twenty yards and saw headlights a mile away, coming straight at him out of Hope. The beams were widely spaced, bouncing high, dipping low. A big car, moving fast. It came at him out of the gathering darkness and when it was a hundred yards away he saw it was another cop car. Another Crown Vic, painted black and white, police spec, with push bars, lights, and antennas. It stopped short of him and a spotlight mounted on the windshield pillar lit up and swiveled jerkily and played its beam all the way up and down him twice, coming to rest on his face, blinding him. Then it clicked off again and the car crept forward, tires hissing on the smooth asphalt surface, and stopped again with the driver's door exactly alongside him. The door had a gold shield painted on it, with*HPD* scrolled across the middle.*Hope Police Department.* The window buzzed down and a hand went up and a dome light came on inside. Reacher saw a woman cop at the wheel, short blonde hair backlit by the weak yellow bulb above and behind her.

"Want a ride?" she asked.

"I'll walk," Reacher said.

"It's five miles to town."

"I walked out here, I can walk back."

"Riding is easier."

"I'm OK."

The woman was quiet for a moment. Reacher listened to the Crown Vic's engine. It was idling patiently. Belts were turning, a muffler was ticking as it cooled. Then Reacher moved on. He took three steps and heard the car's transmission go into reverse and then the car came alongside him again, driving backward, keeping pace as he walked. The window was still down. The woman said, "Give yourself a break, Zeno."

Reacher stopped. Said, "You know who Zeno was?"

The car stopped.

"Zeno of Cittium," the woman said. "The founder of Stoicism. I'm telling you to

"Zeno of Citium," the woman said. "The founder of Stoicism. I'm telling you to stop being so long-suffering."

"Stoics have to be long-suffering. Stoicism is about the unquestioning acceptance of destinies. Zeno said so."

"Your destiny is to return to Hope. Doesn't matter to Zeno whether you walk or ride."

"What are you anyway—a philosopher or a cop or a cab driver?"

"The Despair PD calls us when they're dumping someone at the line. As a courtesy."

"This happens a lot?"

"More than you'd think."

"And you come on out and pick us up?"

"We're here to serve. Says so on the badge."

Reacher looked down at the shield on her door.*HPD* was written across the scroll in the center, but*To Protect* was written at the top of the escutcheon, with*And Serve* added at the bottom.

"I see," he said.

"So get in."

"Why do they do it?"

"Get in and I'll tell you."

"You going to refuse to let me walk?"

"It's five miles. You're grumpy now, you'll be real cranky when you arrive in town. Believe me. We've seen it before. Better for all of us if you ride."

"I'm different. Walking calms me down."

The woman said, "I'm not going to beg, Reacher."

“You know my name?”

“Despair PD passed it on. As a courtesy.”

“And a warning?”

“Maybe. Right now I’m trying to decide whether to take them seriously.”

Reacher shrugged again and put his hand on the rear door handle.

“Up front, you idiot,” the woman said. “I’m helping you, not arresting you.”

So Reacher looped around the trunk and opened the front passenger door. The seat was all hemmed in with radio consoles and a laptop terminal on a bracket, but the space was clear. No hat. He crammed himself in. Not much legroom, because of the security screen behind him. Up front the car smelled of oil and coffee and perfume and warm electronics. The laptop screen showed a GPS map. A small arrow was pointing west and blinking away at the far edge of a pink shape labeled*Hope Township.* The shape was precisely rectangular, almost square. A fast and arbitrary land allocation, like the state of Colorado itself. Next to it Despair township was represented by a light purple shape. Despair was not rectangular. It was shaped like a blunt wedge. Its eastern border matched Hope’s western limit exactly, then it spread wider, like a triangle with the point cut off. Its western line was twice as long as its eastern and bordered gray emptiness. Unincorporated land, Reacher figured. Spurs came off I-70 and I-25 and ran through the unincorporated land and clipped Despair’s northwestern corner.

The woman cop buzzed her window back up and craned her neck and glanced behind her and K-turned across the road. She was slightly built under a crisp tan shirt. Probably less than five feet six, probably less than a hundred and twenty pounds, probably less than thirty-five years old. No jewelry, no wedding band. She had a Motorola radio on her collar and a tall gold badge bar pinned over her left breast. According to the badge her name was Vaughan. And according to the badge she was a pretty good cop. She seemed to have won a bunch of awards and commendations. She was good-looking, but different from regular women. She had seen stuff they hadn’t. Reacher was familiar with the concept. He had served with plenty of women, back in the MPs.

He asked, “Why did Despair run me out?”

The woman called Vaughan turned out the dome light. Now she was front-lit by red instrument lights from the dash and the pink and purple glow from the GPS screen and white scatter from the headlight beams on the road.

“Look at yourself,” she said.

“What about me?”

“What do you see?”

“Just a guy.”

“A blue-collar guy in work clothes, fit, strong, healthy, and hungry.”

“So?”

“How far did you get?”

“I saw the gas station and the restaurant. And the town court.”

“Then you didn’t see the full picture,” Vaughan said. She drove slow, about thirty miles an hour, as if she had plenty more to say. She had one hand on the wheel, with her elbow propped on the door. Her other hand lay easy in her lap. Five miles at thirty miles an hour was going to take ten minutes. Reacher wondered what she had to tell him, that less than ten minutes wouldn’t cover.

He said, “I’m more green-collar than blue.”

“Green?”

“I was in the army. Military cop.”

“When?”

“Ten years ago.”

“You working now?”

“No.”

“Well, then.”

“Well what?”

“You were a threat.”

“How?”

“West of downtown Despair is the biggest metal recycling plant in Colorado.”

“I saw the smog.”

“There’s nothing else in Despair’s economy. The metal plant is the whole ballgame.”

“A company town,” Reacher said.

Vaughan nodded at the wheel. “The guy who owns the plant owns every brick of every building. Half the population works for him full time. The other half works for him part time. The full-time people are happy enough. The part-time people are insecure. They don’t like competition from outsiders. They don’t like people showing up, looking for casual labor, willing to work for less.”

“I wasn’t willing to work at all.”

“You tell them that?”

“They didn’t ask.”

“They wouldn’t have believed you anyway. Standing around every morning waiting for a nod from the foreman does things to people. It’s kind of feudal. The whole place is feudal. The money the owner pays out in wages comes right back at him, in rents. Mortgages too. He owns the bank. No relief on Sundays, either. There’s one church and he’s the lay preacher. You want to work, you have to show up in a pew from time to time.”

“Is that fair?”

“He likes to dominate. He’ll use anything.”

“So why don’t people move on?”

“Some have. Those who haven’t never will.”

“Doesn’t this guy want people coming in to work for less?”

“He likes the people he owns, not strangers.”

“So why were those guys worried?”

“People always worry. Company towns are weird.”

“And the town judge toes their line?”

“It’s an elected position. And the vagrancy ordinance is for real. Most towns have one. We do, for sure, in Hope. No way around it, if someone complains.”

“But nobody complained in Hope. I stayed there last night.”

“We’re not a company town.”

Vaughan slowed. Hope’s first built-up block was ahead in the distance. Reacher recognized it. A mom-and-pop hardware store. That morning an old guy had been putting stepladders and wheelbarrows out on the sidewalk, building a display. Now the store was all closed up and dark.

He asked, “How big is the Hope PD?”

Vaughan said, “Me and two others and a watch commander.”

“You got sworn deputies?”

“Four of them. We don’t use them often. Traffic control, maybe, if we’ve got construction going on. Why?”

“Are they armed?”

“No. In Colorado, deputies are civilian peace officers. Why?”

“How many deputies does the Despair PD have?”

“Four, I think.”

“I met them.”

“And?”

And?

“Theoretically, what would the Hope PD do if someone showed up and got in a dispute with one of your deputies and busted his jaw?”

“We’d throw that someone’s sorry ass in jail, real quick.”

“Why?”

“You know why. Zero tolerance for assaults on peace officers, plus an obligation to look after our own, plus pride and self-respect.”

“Suppose there was a self-defense issue?”

“Civilian versus a peace officer, we’d need some kind of amazing reasonable doubt. You’d have felt the same in the MPs.”

“That’s for damn sure.”

“So why did you ask?”

Reacher didn’t answer directly. Instead he said, “I’m not a Stoic, really. Zeno preached the passive acceptance of fate. I’m not like that. I’m not very passive. I take challenges personally.”

“So?”

“I don’t like to be told where I can go and where I can’t.”

“Stubborn?”

“It annoys me.”

Vaughan slowed some more and pulled in at the curb. Put the transmission in Park and turned in her seat.

“My advice?” she said. “Get over it and move on. Despair isn’t worth it.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Go get a meal and a room for the night,” Vaughan said. “I’m sure you’re hungry.”

Reacher nodded.

“Thanks for the ride,” he said. “And it was a pleasure to meet you.”

He opened the door and slid out to the sidewalk. Hope’s version of Main Street was called First Street. He knew there was a diner a block away on Second Street. He had eaten breakfast there. He set out walking toward it and heard Vaughan’s Crown Vic move away behind him. He heard the civilized purr of its motor and the soft hiss of its tires on the asphalt. Then he turned a corner and didn’t hear it anymore.

An hour later he was still in the diner. He had eaten soup, steak, fries, beans, apple pie, and ice cream. Now he was drinking coffee. It was a better brew than at the restaurant in Despair. And it had been served in a mug that was cylindrical in shape. Still too thick at the rim, but much closer to the ideal.

He was thinking about Despair, and he was wondering why getting him out of town had been more important than keeping him there and busting him for the assault on the deputy.

9

The diner in Hope had a bottomless cup policy for its coffee and Reacher abused it mercilessly. He drank most of a Bunn flask all on his own. His waitress became fascinated by the spectacle. She didn't need to be asked for refills. She came back every time he was ready, sometimes before he was ready, as if she was willing him to break some kind of a world record for consumption. He left her a double tip, just in case the owner fined her for her generosity.

It was full dark when he left the diner. Nine o'clock in the evening. He figured it would stay dark for another ten hours. Sunrise was probably around seven, in that latitude at that time of year. He walked three blocks to where he had seen a small grocery. In a city it would have been called a bodega and in the suburbs it would have been franchised, but in Hope it was still what it had probably always been, a cramped and dusty family-run enterprise selling the things people needed when they needed them.

Reacher needed water and protein and energy. He bought three one-liter bottles of Poland Spring and six chocolate chip PowerBars and a roll of black thirteen-gallon garbage bags. The clerk at the register packed them all carefully into a paper sack and Reacher took his change and carried the sack four blocks to the same motel he had used the night before. He got the same room, at the end of the row. He went inside and put the sack on the nightstand and lay down on the bed. He planned on a short rest. Until midnight. He didn't want to walk seventeen miles twice on the same day.

Reacher got off the bed at midnight and checked the window. No more moon. There was thick cloud and patches of distant starlight. He packed his purchases into one of the black garbage bags and slung it over his shoulder. Then he left the motel and headed up to First Street in the darkness and turned west. There was no traffic. No pedestrians. Few lit windows. It was the middle of the night in

was no traffic. No pedestrians. Few lit windows. It was the middle of the night in the middle of nowhere. The sidewalk ended twenty feet west of the hardware store. He stepped off the curb onto the asphalt and kept on going. Route-march speed, four miles an hour. Not difficult on the smooth flat surface. He built up a rhythm to the point where he felt he could keep on walking forever and never stop.

But he did stop. He stopped five miles later, a hundred yards short of the line between Hope and Despair, because he sensed a shape ahead of him in the blackness. A hole in the darkness. A car, parked on the shoulder. Mostly black, some hints of white.

A police cruiser.

Vaughan.

The name settled in his mind and at the exact same time the car's lights flicked on. High beams. Very bright. He was pinned. His shadow shot out behind him, infinitely long. He shielded his eyes, left-handed, because his bag was in his right. He stood still. The lights stayed on. He stepped off the road and looped out over the crusted sand to the north. The lights died back and the spot on the windshield pillar tracked him. It wouldn't leave him. So he changed direction and headed straight for it.

Vaughan turned the light off and buzzed her window down as he approached. She was parked facing east, with two wheels on the sand and the rear bumper of the car exactly level with the expansion joint in the road. Inside her own jurisdiction, but only just. She said, "I thought I might see you here."

Reacher looked at her and said nothing.

She asked, "What are you doing?"

"Taking a stroll."

"That all?"

"No law against it."

"Not here," Vaughan said. "But there is if you take three more steps."

"N[illegible]"

"Not your law."

"You're a stubborn man."

Reacher nodded. "I wanted to see Despair and I'm going to."

"It isn't that great of a place."

"I like to make my own mind up about things like that."

"They're serious, you know. Either you'll spend thirty days in jail or they'll shoot you."

"If they find me."

"They'll find you. I found you."

"I wasn't hiding from you."

"Did you hurt a deputy over there?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I was thinking about the question you asked me."

"I don't know for sure what he was."

"I don't like the idea of deputies getting hurt."

"You wouldn't have liked the deputy. If that's what he was."

"They'll be looking for you."

"How big is their department?"

"Smaller than ours. Two cars, two guys, I think."

"They won't find me."

"Why are you going back?"

"Because they told me not to."

“Is it worth it?”

“What would you do?”

Vaughan said, “I’m an estrogen-based life-form, not testosterone. And I’m all grown up now. I’d suck it up and move on. Or stay in Hope. It’s a nice place.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Reacher said.

“You won’t. Either I’ll be picking you up right here a month from now or I’ll be reading about you in the newspaper. Beaten and shot while resisting arrest.”

“Tomorrow,” Reacher said. “I’ll buy you a late dinner.”

He moved on, one pace, two, three, and then he stepped over the line.

10

He got off the road immediately. The Hope PD had predicted that he would rise to the challenge. It was an easy guess that the Despair PD would make the same assessment. And he didn't want to blunder into a parked Despair cruiser. That event would have an altogether different conclusion than a pleasant chat with the pretty Officer Vaughan.

He looped fifty yards into the scrub north of the road. Near enough to retain a sense of direction, far enough to stay out of a driver's peripheral vision. The night was cold. The ground was uneven. No chance of getting close to four miles an hour. No chance at all. He had no flashlight. A light would hurt him more than help him. It would be visible for a mile. It would be worse than climbing up on a rock and yelling*Here I am.*

A slow mile later the clock in his head told him it was quarter to two in the morning. He heard an aero engine again, far away to the west, blipping and feathering. A single-engine plane, coming in to land. A Cessna, or a Beech, or a Piper. Maybe the same one he had heard take off, hours before. He listened to it until he imagined it had touched down and taxied. Then he started walking again.

Four hours later he was about level with the center of downtown, three hundred yards out in the scrub. He knew he must have left a healthy trail of footprints, but he didn't particularly care. He doubted that the Despair PD maintained a kennel full of bloodhounds or ran aerial surveillance from a helicopter. As long as he stayed off the roads and the sidewalks he was as good as invisible.

He sensed the bulk of another boat-sized table rock and hunkered down behind it. The night was still cold. He unwrapped his stuff and drank water and ate a PowerBar. Then he repacked his bag and stood up behind the rock and turned to study the town. He leaned against the rock with his elbows out and his forearms flat on its top surface and his chin resting on his stacked fists. At first he saw nothing. Just darkness and stillness and the hidden glow from occasional lit windows. Farther in the distance he saw more lights and sensed more activity

windows. Farther in the distance he saw more lights and sensed more activity. The residential areas, he guessed. He figured people were getting up for work.

Ten minutes later he saw headlight beams coming north. Two, three sets. Their light funneled through the cross-streets and bounced and dipped and threw long shadows straight toward him. He stayed where he was, just watching. The beams paused at Main Street and then swept west. More came after them. Soon every cross-street was lit up bright by long processions of vehicles. It was like the day was dawning in the south. There were sedans and pick-up trucks and old-model SUVs. They all drove north to Main Street and paused and jostled and swung west, toward where Vaughan had said the recycling plant was.

A company town.

Six o'clock in the morning.

The people of Despair, going to work.

Reacher followed them on foot, four hundred yards to the north. He stumbled on through the crusted scrub, tracking the road. The last truck got ahead of him and he followed the red chain of tail lights with his eyes. A mile or more ahead the horizon was lit up with an immense glow. Not dawn. That was going to happen behind him, to the east. The glow to the west was from arc lighting. There seemed to be a huge rectangle of lights on poles surrounding some kind of a massive arena. It looked to be about a mile long. Maybe a half-mile wide.*The biggest metal recycling plant in Colorado,* Vaughan had said.

*No kidding,*Reacher thought.*Looks like the biggest in the world.*

White steam and dirty black smoke drifted here and there in the glow. In front of it the long convoy of vehicles peeled off and parked in neat rows on acres of beaten scrub. Their headlights swung and bounced and then shut down, one by one. Reacher holed up again, a quarter-mile short and a quarter-mile north of the gate. Watched men file inside, shuffling forward in a long line, lunch pails in their hands. The gate was narrow. A personnel entrance, not a vehicle entrance. Reacher guessed the vehicle entrance was on the other side of the complex, convenient for the highway spurs.

The sky was lightening behind him. Landscape features were becoming visible. The terrain was basically flat, but up close it was pitted with enough humps and dips and rocks to provide decent concealment. The earth was sandy and tan

dips and rocks to provide decent concealment. The earth was sandy and tan. There were occasional scrubby bushes. There was nothing interesting anywhere. Nothing to attract hikers. Not attractive picnic territory. Reacher expected to spend the day alone.

The last worker filed inside and the personnel gate closed. Reacher moved on, staying hidden, but looking for elevation where he could find it. The recycling plant was truly enormous. It was ringed by an endless solid wall welded out of metal plates painted white. The wall was topped with a continuous horizontal cylinder six feet in diameter. Impossible to climb. Like a supermax prison. His initial estimate of the size of the place had been conservative. It looked bigger than the town itself. Like a tail that wags a dog. Despair was not a town with a plant attached. It was a factory with a dormitory outside its gates.

Work was starting inside. Reacher heard the groan of heavy machinery and the ringing sound of metal on metal and saw the flare and spark of cutting torches. He moved all the way around to the northwest corner, fifteen minutes' fast walk. The vehicle gate was right there. A section of the wall was standing open. A wide road ran from the horizon straight to it. The road looked to be smooth and solid. Built for heavy trucks.

The road was a problem. If Reacher wanted to continue his counterclockwise progress, he would have to cross it somewhere. He would be exposed. His dark clothes would stand out in the coming daylight. But to who, exactly? He guessed the Despair cops would stay in town east of the plant. And he didn't expect any roving surveillance teams out of the plant itself.

But that was exactly what he got.

Two white Chevy Tahoes came out of the vehicle gate. They drove fifty yards down the road and then plunged off it, one to the left and one to the right, onto beaten tracks of packed scrub created by endless previous excursions. The Tahoes had raised off-road suspensions and big white-lettered tires and the word*Security* stenciled in black across their doors. They drove slowly, maybe twenty miles an hour, one clockwise, one counterclockwise, as if they intended to lap the plant all day long.

Reacher hated turning back.

He struck out west, staying in the dips and washes as far as possible and keeping boulders between himself and the plant. Ten minutes later the natural terrain

boulders between himself and the plant. Ten minutes later the natural terrain gave way to where the land had been cleared and graded for the road. The near shoulder was maybe ten yards wide, made of packed sand dotted with stunted second-growth weeds. The roadbed was fifteen or sixteen yards wide. Two lanes, with a bright yellow line between. Smooth blacktop. The far shoulder was another ten yards wide.

Total distance, thirty-five yards, minimum.

Reacher was no kind of a sprinter. As any kind of a runner, he was pretty slow. His best attempt at speed was barely faster than a quick walk. He crouched just east of the last available table rock and watched for the Tahoes.

They came around much less often than he had predicted. Which was inexplicable, but good. What wasn't good was that the road itself was starting to get busy. Reacher knew he should have seen that coming. The largest recycling plant in Colorado clearly needed input, and it clearly produced output. They didn't dig stuff out of the scrub and then bury it again. They trucked scrap in and then trucked ingots out. A lot of scrap, and a lot of ingots. Shortly after seven o'clock in the morning a flat-bed semi roared out of the gate and lumbered onto the road. It had Indiana plates and was laden with bright steel bars. It drove a hundred yards and was passed by another flat-bed heading inward. This one had Oregon plates and was loaded with crushed cars, dozens of them, their chipped and battered paint layered like thin stripes. A container truck with Canadian plates left the plant and passed the Oregon semi. Then the counterclockwise Tahoe showed up and bounced across the roadbed and kept on going. Three minutes later its clockwise partner rotated in the opposite direction. Another semi left the plant and another headed in. A mile west Reacher saw a third approaching, wobbling and shimmering in the morning haze. Way behind it, a fourth.

It was like Times Square.

Inside the plant, giant gantry cranes were moving and cascades of welding sparks were showering everywhere. Smoke was rising and fierce blasts of heat from furnaces were distorting the air. There were muted noises, the chatter of air hammers, clangs of sheet metal, metallic tearing sounds, deep sonorous rings like massive impacts on a blacksmith's anvil.

Reacher drank more water and ate another PowerBar. Then he repacked his plastic sack and waited for the Tahoes to pass one more time and just got up and

plastic sack and waited for the Tahoes to pass one more time and just got up and walked across the road. He passed within forty yards of two speeding trucks, one inbound, one outbound. He accepted the risk of being seen. For one thing, he had no real choice. For another, he figured it was a question of degrees of separation. Would a truck driver tell a plant foreman he had seen a pedestrian? Would the plant foreman call the security office? Would the security office call the town cops?

Unlikely. And even if it happened, response time would be slow. Reacher would be back in the weeds well before the Crown Vics showed up. And the Crown Vics would be no good off-road. The Tahoes would stick to their own private itineraries.

Safe enough.

He made it onward to where the rocks and the humps and the dips resumed and headed south, tracking the long side of the plant. The wall continued. It was maybe fourteen feet high, welded out of what looked like the roofs of old cars. Each panel had a slight convex curve. They made the whole thing look quilted. The six-foot cylinder along the top looked to be assembled from the same material, molded in giant presses to the correct contour, and welded together in a seamless run. Then the whole assembly had been sprayed glossy white.

It took Reacher twenty-six minutes to walk the length of the plant, which made it more than a mile long. At its far southwest corner he saw why the Tahoes were so slow. There was a second walled compound. Another huge rectangle. Similar size. Tire tracks showed that the Tahoes were lapping it too, passing and repassing through a fifty-yard bottleneck in a giant distorted figure 8. Reacher was suddenly exposed. His position was good, relative to the first compound. Not so good, relative to the second. The clockwise Tahoe would sweep through the gap and make a wide turn and come pretty close. He backed off again, aiming for a low boulder. He got halfway across a shallow pan of scrub.

Then he heard tires on dirt.

He dropped flat to the ground, facedown, watching.

11

The white Tahoe came through the bottleneck at twenty miles an hour. Reacher heard its tires on the scrub. They were wide and soft, squirming on the loose surface, squelching small stones, shooting them left and right. He heard the hiss of a power-steering pump and the wet throb of a big V-8 as the vehicle turned. It came through a shallow curve, close enough for Reacher to smell its exhaust.

He lay still.

The truck drove on. Didn't stop. Didn't even slow. The driver was high up in the left-hand seat. Reacher knew like most drivers his eyes were following the turn he intended to make. He was anticipating the curve. Looking ahead and to his left, not sideways to his right.

Bad technique, for a security guard.

Reacher lay still until the Tahoe was long gone. Then he stood up and dusted himself off and headed west and sat down again behind the low boulder he had been heading for.

The second compound was walled with fieldstone, not metal. It was residential. There was ornamental planting, including screens of trees placed to block any view of industrial activity. There was a huge house visible in the distance, built out of wood in a chalet style more suitable to Vail than Despair. There were outbuildings, including an oversized barn that was probably an aircraft hangar, because inside the whole length of the far wall was a wide graded strip of dirt that could only be a runway. It had three windsocks on poles, one at each end and one in the middle.

Reacher moved on. He stayed well away from the fifty-yard bottleneck. Too easy to be spotted. Too easy to be run over. Instead, he looped west again and aimed to circle the residential compound too, as if both enclosures were one giant obstacle.

By noon he was holed up way to the south, looking back at the recycling plant from the rear. The residential compound was closer, and to his left. Far beyond it to the northwest was a small gray smudge in the distance. A low building, or a group of buildings, maybe five or six miles away. Indistinct. Maybe close to the road. Maybe a gas station or a truck stop or a motel. Probably outside of Despair's town limit. Reacher couldn't make out any detail. He turned back to the nearer sights. Work continued inside the plant. Nothing much was happening at the house. He saw the Tahoes circling and watched the trucks on the distant road. There was a continuous stream of them. Mostly flat-beds, but there were some container trucks and some box trucks. They came and went and the sky was stained dark with diesel in a long ribbon all the way to the horizon. The plant belched smoke and flame and sparks. Its noise was softened by distance, but up close it must have been fearsome. The sun was high and the day had gotten warm.

He watched and listened and then he headed east, for a look at the far side of town.

It was bright daylight, so he stayed cautious and moved slow. There was a long empty gap between the plant and the town itself. Maybe three miles. He covered them in a straight line, well out in the scrub. By the middle of the afternoon he was level with where he had been at six o'clock in the morning, but due south of the settlement, not due north, looking at the backs of houses, not the fronts of commercial buildings.

The houses were neat and uniform, cheaply but adequately built. They were mostly one-story ranches with shingle siding and asphalt roofs. Some were painted, some were stained wood. Some had garages, some didn't. Some had picket fences around their yards, some yards were open. Most had satellite dishes, tilted up and facing southwest like a regiment of expectant faces. People were visible, here and there. Mostly women, some children. Some men. The part-time workers, Reacher guessed, unlucky today. He moved along a hundred-yard arc, left and right, east and west, changing his point of view. But what he saw didn't change. Houses, in a strange little suburb, tight in to the town, but miles from anywhere else, with empty vastness all around. The skies were high and huge. The Rockies looked a million miles away. Reacher suddenly

understood that Despair had been built by people who had given up. They had come over the rise and seen the far horizon and had quit there and then. Just pitched camp and stayed where they were. And their descendants were still in town, working or not working according to the plant owner's whim.

Reacher ate his last PowerBar and drained the last of his water. He hacked a hole in the scrub with his heel and buried the wrappers and the empty bottles and his garbage bag. Then he dodged from rock to rock and got a little closer to the houses. The low noise coming from the distant plant was getting quieter. He guessed it was close to quitting time. The sun's last rays were kissing the tops of the distant mountains. The temperature was falling.

The first cars and pick-up trucks straggled back close to twelve hours after they had left. A long day. They were heading east, toward darkness, so they had their headlights on. Their beams swung south down the cross-streets, bouncing and dipping, coming Reacher's way. Then they turned again, and scattered toward driveways and garages and car ports and random patches of oil-stained earth. They stopped moving, one after another, and the beams died. Engines stopped. Doors creaked open and slammed shut. Lights were on inside houses. The blue glow of televisions was visible behind windows. The sky was darkening.

Reacher moved closer. Saw men carrying empty lunch pails into kitchens, or standing next to their cars, stretching, rubbing their eyes with the backs of their hands. He saw hopeful boys with balls and mitts looking for a last game of catch. He saw some fathers agree and some refuse. He saw small girls run out with treasures that required urgent inspection.

He saw the big guy who had blocked the end of the restaurant table. The guy who had held the police car's door like a concierge with a taxicab. The senior deputy. He got out of the old listing crew-cab pick-up truck that Reacher had seen outside the restaurant. He clutched his stomach with both hands. He passed by his kitchen door and stumbled on into his yard. There was no picket fence. The guy kept on going, past a cultivated area, out into the scrub beyond.

Straight toward Reacher.

Then the guy stopped walking and stood still on planted feet and bent from the waist and threw up in the dirt. He stayed doubled up for maybe twenty seconds

and then straightened, shaking his head and spitting.

Reacher moved closer. He got within twenty yards and then the guy bent again and threw up for a second time. Reacher heard him gasp. Not in pain, not in surprise, but in annoyance and resignation.

“You OK?” Reacher called, out of the gloom.

The guy straightened up.

“Who’s there?” he called.

Reacher said, “Me.”

“Who?”

Reacher moved closer. Stepped into a bar of light coming from a neighbor’s kitchen window.

The guy said, “You.”

Reacher nodded. “Me.”

“We threw you out.”

“Didn’t take.”

“You shouldn’t be here.”

“We could discuss that further, if you like. Right now. Right here.”

The guy shook his head. “I’m sick. Not fair.”

Reacher said, “It wouldn’t be fair if you weren’t sick.”

The guy shrugged.

“Whatever,” he said. “I’m going inside now.”

“How’s your buddy? With the jaw?”

“You bust him up good.”

You bust him up good.

“Tough,” Reacher said.

“I’m sick,” the guy said again. “I’m going inside. I didn’t see you, OK?”

“Bad food?”

The guy paused. Then he nodded.

“Must have been,” he said. “Bad food.”

He headed for his house, slow and stumbling, holding his belt one-handed, like his pants were too big for him. Reacher watched him go, and then he turned and walked back to the distant shadows.

He moved fifty yards south and fifty yards east of where he had been before, in case the sick guy changed his mind and decided he had seen something after all. He wanted some latitude, if the cops started a search in the guy’s back yard. He wanted to begin the chase outside of a flashlight beam’s maximum range.

But no cops showed up. Clearly the guy never called. Reacher waited the best part of thirty minutes. Way to the west he heard the aero engine again, straining hard, climbing. The small plane, taking off once more. Seven o’clock in the evening. Then the noise died away and the sky went full dark and the houses closed up tight. Clouds drifted in and covered the moon and the stars. Apart from the glow from draped windows the world went pitch black. The temperature dropped like a stone. Nighttime, in open country.

A long day.

Reacher stood up and loosened the neck of his shirt and set off east, back toward Hope. When the lit houses fell away he looped left into the dark and skirted where he knew the dry goods emporium and the gas station and the abandoned motor court and the vacant lot must be. He couldn’t see the line of the road. He moved toward where he figured it must be, as close as he dared. Eventually he saw a black stripe in the darkness. Indistinct, but different from the black plain that was the scrubland. He lined himself up with it and fixed its direction in his mind and retreated sideways a safe ten yards and then moved on forward.

Walking was difficult in the dark. He stumbled into bushes. He held his hands out in front of him to ward off table rocks. Twice he tripped on low football-sized boulders, and fell. Twice he got up and brushed himself off and staggered onward.

*Stubborn,*Vaughan had said.

*Stupid,*Reacher thought.

The third time he tripped was not on a rock. It was on something altogether softer and more yielding.

12

Reacher sprawled forward and some kind of a primitive instinct made him avoid landing right on top of the thing he had tripped on. He kicked his legs up and tucked his head in and rolled, like judo. He ended up on his back, winded, and hurting from having landed on sharp stones, one under his shoulder and one under his hip. He lay still for a moment and then rolled on his front and pushed himself to his knees and shuffled around until he was facing the way he had come. Then he opened his eyes wide and stared back into the blackness.

Too dark to see.

No flashlight.

He shuffled forward on both knees and one hand, with the other held low in front of him and curled into a fist. A slow yard later it touched something.

Soft.

Not fur.

Cloth.

He spread his fingers. Clamped them loosely. Rubbed his fingertips and the ball of his thumb left and right. Squeezed.

A leg. He had his hand on a human leg. The size and heft of a thigh was unmistakable. He could feel a hamstring under his fingers and a long quadriceps muscle under his thumb. The cloth was thin and soft. Probably cotton twill, worn and washed many times. Old chinos, maybe.

He moved his hand to the left and found the back of a knee. He pushed his thumb around and underneath and found the kneecap. It was jammed down in the sand. He skipped his hand three feet to the right and slid it up a back to a shoulder blade. Walked his fingers to a neck, and a nape, and an ear.

No pulse.

Cold flesh. No warmer than the nighttime air.

Below the ear was a collar. Knit, rolled, faintly abrasive. A polo shirt, maybe. He shuffled closer on his knees and opened his eyes so wide the muscles in his face hurt.

Too dark to see.

Five senses. Too dark to see, nothing to hear. He wasn't about to try tasting anything. That left smell, and touch. Reacher had smelled more than his fair share of deceased organisms. This one wasn't particularly offensive. Unwashed clothes, stale sweat, ripe hair, dry sun-baked skin, the faintest trace of methane from early decomposition. No voided bowel or bladder.

No blood.

No perfume, no cologne.

No real information.

So, touch. He used both hands and started with the hair. It was not long, not short, and tousled. Maybe an inch and a half or two inches. Wiry, with a tendency to wave. Caucasian. Impossible to say what color. Under it was a small, neat skull.

Man or woman?

He ran his thumbnail the length of the spine. No bra strap under the shirt, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. He poked and probed the back of the ribcage like a blind man reading Braille. Light skeleton, pronounced backbone, light and stringy musculature. Narrow shoulders. Either a thin boy, slightly wasted, or a fit woman. The kind who runs marathons or rides her bike for a hundred miles at a time.

So, which?

Only one way to find out.

He found folds of cloth at the hip and the shoulder and rolled the body on its side. It was reasonably heavy. The way his hands were spaced told him it was maybe five-eight in height, and the weight was probably close to one-forty

maybe five eight in height, and the weight was probably close to one forty, which made it probable it was male. A woman marathon runner would have been much lighter, maybe a hundred and five. He kept hold of the bunches of cloth and eased the body past the vertical and let it flop on its back. Then he spread his fingers and started again at the head.

A man, for sure.

The forehead was ridged and bony and the chin and the upper lip were rough with maybe four days of stubble. The cheeks and the throat were smoother.

A young man, not much more than a boy.

The cheekbones were pronounced. The eyes were hard and dry, like marbles. The facial skin was firm and shrunken. It was slightly gritty with grains of sand, but not much had stuck. The skin was too dry. The mouth was dry, inside and out. The tendons in the neck were obvious. They stood out like cords. No fat anywhere. Barely any flesh at all.

*Starved and dehydrated,*Reacher thought.

The polo shirt had two buttons, both of them undone. No pocket, but it had a small embroidered design on the left chest. Under it there was a thin pectoral muscle and hard ribs. The pants were loose at the waist. No belt. The shoes were some kind of athletic sneakers, hook-and-loop closures, thick waffle soles.

Reacher wiped his hands on his own pants and then started again from the feet upward, looking for a wound. He went at it like a conscientious airport screener starting a patient full-body search. He did the front and rolled the body again and did the back.

He found nothing.

No gashes, no gunshot wounds, no dried blood, no swellings, no contusions, no broken bones.

The hands were small and fairly delicate, but a little calloused. The nails were ragged. No rings on the fingers. No pinkie ring, no class ring, no wedding band.

He checked the pants pockets, two front, two rear.

He found nothing.

He found nothing.

No wallet, no coins, no keys, no phone. Nothing at all.

He sat back on his heels and stared up at the sky, willing a cloud to move and let some moonlight through. But nothing happened. The night stayed dark. He had been walking east, had fallen, had turned around. Therefore he was now facing west. He pushed back off his knees and stood up. Made a quarter-turn to his right. Now he was facing north. He started walking, slowly, with small steps, concentrating hard on staying straight. He bent and swept his hands flat on the scrub and found four stones the size of baseballs. Straightened again and walked on, five yards, ten, fifteen, twenty.

He found the road. The packed scrub gave way to the tarred pebbles. He used his toe to locate the edge. He bent and butted three of his stones together and stacked the fourth on top, like a miniature mountain cairn. Then he turned a careful one-eighty and walked back, counting his paces. Five yards, ten, fifteen, twenty. He stopped and squatted and felt ahead of him.

Nothing.

He shuffled forward with his arms out straight, patting downward, searching, until his right palm came down on the corpse's shoulder. He glanced up at the sky. Still solid.

Nothing more to be done.

He stood up again and turned left and blundered on through the dark, east toward Hope.

13

The closer he got to the Hope town line, the more he let himself drift left toward the road. Hope wasn't a big place, and he didn't want to miss it in the dark. Didn't want to walk on forever, all the way back to Kansas. The clock in his head said that it was midnight. He had made good progress, close to three miles an hour, despite falling four more times and detouring every thirty minutes to confirm he wasn't drastically off course.

Despair's cheap road crunched loudly under his feet but the hard level surface allowed him to speed up. He hit a good rhythm and covered what was left of the last mile in less than fifteen minutes. It was still very cold. Still pitch dark. But he sensed the new blacktop ahead. He felt it coming. Then he felt the surface change under his feet. His left foot pushed off rough stones and his right foot landed on velvet-smooth asphalt.

He was back over the line.

He stood still for a second. Held his arms wide and looked up at the black sky. Then bright headlights hit him head-on and he was trapped in their beams. A spotlight clicked on and played over him, head to foot and back again.

A cop car.

Then the beams died as suddenly as they had appeared and a dome light came on inside the car and showed a small figure at the wheel. Tan shirt, fair hair. Half a smile.

Vaughan.

She was parked head-on, with her push bars twenty yards inside her own jurisdiction, just waiting in the dark. Reacher walked toward her, moving left, skirting her hood and her fender. He stepped to the passenger door and put his hand on the handle. Opened it up and crammed himself into the space inside. The interior was full of soft radio chatter and the smell of perfume.

He asked, "So are you free for a late dinner?"

She said, “I don’t eat with jerks.”

“I’m back, like I said I would be.”

“Did you have fun?”

“Not really.”

“I’m working the graveyard shift. I don’t get off until seven.”

“Breakfast, then. Drinking coffee with jerks is not the same as eating with them.”

“I don’t drink coffee for breakfast. I need to sleep in the daytime.”

“Tea, then.”

“Tea has caffeine, too.”

“Milk shake?”

“Maybe.” She was resting easy in the seat, one elbow on the door and the other hand in her lap.

“How did you see me coming?” Reacher asked. “I didn’t see you.”

“I eat a lot of carrots,” Vaughan said. “And our video has night-vision enhancement.” She leaned forward and tapped a black box mounted high on the dash. “Traffic camera and a hard disc recorder.” She moved her hand again and hit a key on the computer. The screen changed to a ghostly green wide-angle image of the scene ahead. The road was lighter than the scrub. It had retained more of the daytime heat than its surroundings. Or less. Reacher wasn’t sure.

“I saw you half a mile away,” Vaughan said. “A little green speck.” She tapped another key and spooled back through the time code and Reacher saw himself, a luminous sliver in the dark, getting bigger, coming closer.

“Very fancy,” he said.

“Homeland Security money. Got to spend it on something.”

“How long have you been out here?”

“An hour.”

“Thanks for waiting.”

Vaughan started the motor and backed up a little and then turned across the width of the road, in a wide arc that took the front wheels off the blacktop and through the sand on the shoulder. She got straightened up and accelerated.

“Hungry?” she asked.

“Not really,” Reacher said.

“You should eat anyway.”

“Where?”

“The diner will still be open. It stays open all night.”

“In Hope? Why?”

“This is America. It’s a service economy.”

“Whatever, I might go take a nap instead. I walked a long way.”

“Go eat in the diner first.”

“Why?”

“Because I think you should. Nutrition is important.”

“What are you, my mother?”

“Someone was asking about you.”

“Who?”

“Some girl.”

“I don’t know any girls.”

“She wasn’t asking about you personally,” Vaughan said. “She was asking if anyone had been thrown out of Despair more recently than her.”

“She was thrown out?”

“Four days ago.”

“They throw women out, too?”

“Vagrancy isn’t a gender-specific offense.”

“Who is she?”

“Just some kid. I told her about you. No names, but I said you might be eating in the diner tonight. I was assuming you would get out OK. I try to live on the sunny side of the street. So I think she might come looking for you.”

“What does she want?”

“She wouldn’t tell me,” Vaughan said. “But my impression was her boyfriend is missing.”

14

Reacher got out of Vaughan's cruiser on First Street and walked straight down to Second. The diner was all lit up inside and three booths were occupied. A guy on his own, a young woman on her own, two guys together. Maybe some Hope residents commuted for work. Not to Despair, obviously, but maybe to other towns. Maybe to other states, like Kansas or Nebraska. And those were big distances. Maybe they all got back too late to face KP at home. Or maybe they were shift workers, just starting out, with long trips ahead of them.

The sidewalks close to the diner were deserted. No girls hanging around. No girls watching who was going in and coming out. No girls leaning on walls. No girls hiding in the shadows. Reacher pulled the door and went in and headed for a booth in the far corner where he could sit with his back protected and see the whole room at once. Pure habit. He never sat any other way. A waitress came over and gave him a napkin and silverware and a glass of ice water. Not the same waitress he had met before, during his caffeine marathon. This one was young, and not particularly tired, even though it was very late. She could have been a college student. Maybe the diner stayed open all night to give people jobs, as well as meals. Maybe the owner felt some kind of a civic responsibility. Hope seemed to be that kind of a town.

The menu was in a chromium clip at the end of the table. It was a laminated card with pictures of the food on it. The waitress came back and Reacher pointed to a grilled cheese sandwich and said, "And coffee." The waitress wrote it down and walked away and Reacher settled back and watched the street through the windows. He figured that the girl who was looking for him might pass by once every fifteen or twenty minutes. It was what he would have done. Longer intervals might make her miss his visit. Most diner customers were in and out pretty fast. He was sure there was a trade association somewhere with the exact data. His personal average was certainly less than half an hour. Shorter if he was in a hurry, longer if it was raining. The longest stay he could recall might be upward of two hours. The shortest in recent memory was the day before, in Despair. One fast cup of coffee, supervised by hostile glares.

But nobody passed by on the sidewalk. Nobody glanced in through the windows.

The waitress came over with his sandwich and a mug of coffee. The coffee was fresh and the sandwich was OK. The cheese was sticky in his mouth and less flavorful than a Wisconsin product would have been, but it was palatable. And Reacher was no kind of a gourmet. He rated food quality as either adequate or not adequate, and the adequate category was always by far the larger of the two. So he ate and drank and enjoyed it all well enough.

After fifteen minutes he gave up on the girl. He figured she wasn't coming. Then he changed his mind. He quit staring out at the sidewalk and started looking at the other customers inside the diner and realized she was already in there, waiting for him.

The young woman, sitting three booths away.

*Stupid, Reacher,*he thought.

He had figured that if their relative positions had been reversed he would have walked by every fifteen or twenty minutes and checked through the windows. But in reality, he wouldn't have done that. He would have come in out of the cold and sat down and waited for his mark to come to him.

Like she had.

Pure common sense.

She was maybe nineteen or twenty years old, dirty blonde hair with streaks, wearing a short denim skirt and a white sweatshirt with a word on it that might have been the name of a college football team. Her features didn't add up all the way to beauty, but she had the kind of irresistible glowing good health that he had seen before in American girls of her station and generation. Her skin was perfect. It was honey-colored with the remnant of a great summer tan. Her teeth were white and regular. Her eyes were vivid blue. Her legs were long, and neither lean nor heavy.*Shapely,* Reacher thought. An old-fashioned word, but the right one. She was wearing sneakers with tiny white socks that ended below her ankles. She had a bag. It was beside her on the bench. Not a purse, not a suitcase. A messenger bag, gray nylon, with a broad flap.

She was the one he was waiting for. He knew that because as he watched her in his peripheral vision he could see her watching him in hers. She was sizing him

his peripheral vision he could see her watching him in hers. She was sizing him up and deciding whether to approach.

Deciding against, apparently.

She had had a full fifteen minutes to make her decision. But she hadn't gotten up and walked over. Not because of good manners. Not because she hadn't wanted to disturb him while he was eating. He suspected her concept of etiquette didn't quite stretch that far, and even if it did, then a missing boyfriend would have overwhelmed it. She just didn't want to get involved with him. That was all. Reacher didn't blame her.*Look at yourself,* Vaughan had said.*What do you see?* He had no illusions about what the girl three booths away was seeing. No illusions about his appearance or his appeal, in the eyes of someone like her. It was late at night, she was looking at an old guy twice her age, huge, untidy, disheveled, somewhat dirty, and surrounded by an electric stay-away aura he had spent years cultivating, like a sign on the rear end of a fire truck:*Stay Back 200 Feet.*

So she was going to sit tight and wait him out. That was clear. He was disappointed. Primarily because of the questions surrounding the dead boy in the dark, but also because in a small corner of his mind he would have liked to be the kind of guy that pretty girls could walk up to. Not that he would have taken it anywhere. She was wholesome and he was twice her age. And her boyfriend was dead, which made her some kind of a widow.

She was still watching him. He had moved his gaze so that he could see her reflection in the window next to her. She was looking up, looking down, kneading her fingers, glancing suddenly in his direction as new thoughts came to her, and then glancing away again as she resolved them. As she found reasons to stay well away from him. He gave it five more minutes and then fished in his pocket for cash. He didn't need a check. He knew what the sandwich and the coffee cost, because the prices had been printed on the menu. He knew what the local sales tax percentage was, and he was capable of calculating it for himself in his head. He knew how to work out a fifteen percent tip, for the college-age waitress who had also stayed well away from him.

He folded small bills lengthwise and left them on the table. Got up and headed for the door. At the last minute he changed direction and stepped over to the young woman's booth and slid in opposite her.

"My name is Reacher," he said. "I think you wanted to talk to me."

"My name is Reacher," he said. "I think you wanted to talk to me."

The girl looked at him and blinked and opened her mouth and closed it again and spoke at the second attempt.

She said, "Why would you think that?"

"I met a cop called Vaughan. She told me."

"Told you what?"

"That you were looking for someone who had been to Despair."

"You're mistaken," the girl said. "It wasn't me."

She wasn't a great liar. Not great at all. Reacher had come up against some real experts, in his previous life. This one had all the tells on display. The gulps, the false starts, the stammers, the fidgets, the glances to her right. Psychologists figured that the memory center was located in the left brain, and the imagination engine in the right brain. Therefore people unconsciously glanced to the left when they were remembering things, and to the right when they were making stuff up. When they were lying. This girl was glancing right so much she was in danger of getting whiplash.

"OK," Reacher said. "I apologize for disturbing you."

But he didn't move. He stayed where he was, sitting easy, filling most of a vinyl bench made for two. Up close the girl was prettier than she had looked from a distance. She had a dusting of freckles and a mobile, expressive mouth.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Just a guy," Reacher said.

"What kind of a guy?"

"The judge in Despair called me a vagrant. So I'm that kind of a guy, I guess."

"No job?"

"Not for a long time."

She said, “They called me a vagrant, too.”

Her accent was unspecific. She wasn’t from Boston or New York or Chicago or Minnesota or the Deep South. Maybe somewhere in the Southwest. Arizona, perhaps.

He said, “In your case I imagine they were inaccurate.”

“I’m not sure of the definition, exactly.”

“It comes from the Old French word*waucrant,* ” Reacher said. “Meaning one who wanders idly from place to place without lawful or visible means of support.”

“I’m in college,” she said.

“So you were unfairly accused.”

“They just wanted me out of there.”

“Where do you go to school?”

She paused. Glanced to her right.

“Miami,” she said.

Reacher nodded. Wherever she went to school, it wasn’t Miami. Probably wasn’t anywhere in the East. Was probably somewhere on the West Coast. Southern California, possibly. Unskilled liars like her often picked a mirror image, when lying about geography.

“What’s your major?” he asked.

She looked straight at him and said, “The history of the twentieth century.” Which was probably true. Young people usually told the truth about their areas of expertise, because they were proud of them, and they were worried about getting caught out on alternatives. Often they didn’t have alternatives. Being young, it came with the territory.

“Feels like yesterday to me,” he said. “Not history.”

“What does?”

“The twentieth century.”

She didn’t reply. Didn’t understand what he meant. She remembered maybe eight or nine years of the old century, maximum, and from a kid’s perspective. He remembered slightly more of it.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

She glanced to her right. “Anne.”

Reacher nodded again. Whatever her name was, it wasn’t Anne. Anne was probably a sister’s name. Or a best friend’s. Or a cousin’s. Generally people liked to stay close to home with phony names.

The girl who wasn’t called Anne asked, “Were*you* unfairly accused?”

Reacher shook his head. “A vagrant is exactly what I am.”

“Why did you go there?”

“I liked the name. Why did*you* go there?”

She didn’t answer.

He said, “Anyway, it wasn’t much of a place.”

“How much of it did you see?”

“Most of it, the second time.”

“You went back?”

“I took a good look around, from a distance.”

“And?”

“It still wasn’t much of a place.”

The girl went quiet. Reacher saw her weighing her next question. How to ask it. Whether to ask it. She put her head on one side and looked beyond him.

Whether to ask it. She put her head on one side and looked beyond him.

“Did you see any people?” she asked.

“Lots of people,” Reacher said.

“Did you see the airplane?”

“I heard one.”

“It belongs to the guy with the big house. Every night he takes off at seven and comes back at two o’clock in the morning.”

Reacher asked, “How long were you there?”

“One day.”

“So how do you know the plane flies every night?”

She didn’t answer.

“Maybe someone told you,” Reacher said.

No reply.

Reacher said, “No law against joyriding.”

“People don’t joyride at night. There’s nothing to see.”

“Good point.”

The girl was quiet for another minute, and then she asked, “Were you in a cell?”

“Couple of hours.”

“Anyone else in there?”

“No.”

“When you went back, what people did you see?”

Reacher said, “Why don’t you just show me his picture?”

“Whose picture?”

“Your boyfriend’s.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Your boyfriend is missing. As in, you can’t find him. That was Officer Vaughan’s impression, anyway.”

“You trust cops?”

“Some of them.”

“I don’t have a picture.”

“You’ve got a big bag. Probably all kinds of things in there. Maybe a few pictures.”

She said, “Show me your wallet.”

“I don’t have a wallet.”

“Everyone has a wallet.”

“Not me.”

“Prove it.”

“I can’t prove a negative.”

“Empty your pockets.”

Reacher nodded. He understood.*The boyfriend is some kind of a fugitive. She asked about my job. She needs to know I’m not an investigator. An investigator would have compromising ID in his wallet.* He lifted his butt off the bench and dug out his cash, his old passport, his ATM card, his motel key. His toothbrush was in his room, assembled, standing upright in a plastic glass next to the sink. The girl looked at his stuff and said, “Thanks.”

He said, “Now show me his picture.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

¨He´s not my boyfriend.´´

“Isn’t he?”

“He’s my husband.”

“You’re young, to be married.”

“We’re in love.”

“You’re not wearing a ring.”

Her left hand was on the table. She withdrew it quickly, into her lap. But there had been no ring on her finger, and no tan line.

“It was kind of sudden,” she said. “Kind of hurried. We figured we’d get rings later.”

“Isn’t it a part of the ceremony?”

“No,” she said. “That’s a myth. I’m not pregnant either, just in case that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Not for a minute.”

“Good.”

“Show me the picture.”

She hauled the gray messenger bag into her lap and rooted around for a moment and came out with a fat leather wallet. There was a billfold part straining against a little strap, and a change-purse part. There was a plastic window on the outside with a California driver’s license behind it, with her picture on it. She unpopped the little strap and opened the billfold and riffled through a concertina of plastic photograph windows. Slid a slim fingertip into one of them and eased a snapshot out. She passed it across the table. It had been cut down out of a standard six-by-four one-hour print. The edges were not entirely straight. It showed the girl standing on a street with golden light and palm trees and a row of neat boutiques behind her. She was smiling widely, vibrant with love and joy and happiness, leaning forward a little as if her whole body was clenching with the onset of uncontrollable giggles. She was in the arms of a guy about her age. He was very

tall and blond and heavy. An athlete. He had blue eyes and a buzz cut and a dark tan and a wide smile.

“This is your husband?” Reacher asked.

The girl said, “Yes.”

15

Reacher squared the snapshot on the tabletop in front of him. Looked at the girl across from him and asked, “How old is this photo?”

“Recent.”

“May I see your driver’s license?”

“Why?”

“Something I need to check.”

“I don’t know.”

“I already know your name isn’t Anne. I know you don’t go to school in Miami. My guess would be UCLA. This photograph looks like it was taken somewhere around there. It has that LA kind of feel.”

The girl said nothing.

Reacher said, “I’m not here to hurt you.”

She paused and then slid her wallet across the table. He glanced at her license. Most of it was visible behind the milky plastic window. Her name was Lucy Anderson. No middle name. Anderson, hence Anne, perhaps.

“Lucy,” he said. “I’m pleased to meet you.”

“I’m sorry about not telling you the truth.”

“Don’t worry about it. Why should you?”

“My friends call me Lucky. Like a mispronunciation. Like a nickname.”

“I hope you always are.”

“Me too. I have been so far.”

Her license said she was coming up to twenty years old. It said her address was an apartment on a street he knew to be close to the main UCLA campus. He had been in LA not long before. Its geography was still familiar to him. Her sex was specified as female, which was clearly accurate, and her eyes were listed as blue, which was an understatement.

She was five feet eight inches tall.

Which made her husband at least six feet four. Maybe six feet five. He towered over her. He was huge. He looked to be well over two hundred pounds. Maybe Reacher's own size. Maybe even bigger. His arms were as thick as the palm trunks behind him.

Not the guy in the dark. Not even close. Way too big. The guy in the dark had been Lucy Anderson's size.

Reacher slid the wallet back across the table. Followed it with the photograph.

Lucy Anderson asked, "Did you see him?"

Reacher shook his head.

"No," he said. "I didn't. I'm sorry."

"He has to be there somewhere."

"What's he running from?"

She looked to the right. "Why would he be running from something?"

"Just a wild guess," Reacher said.

"Who are you?"

"Just a guy."

"How did you know my name wasn't Anne? How did you know I'm not in school in Miami?"

"A long time ago I was a cop. In the military. I still know things."

Her skin whitened behind her freckles. She fumbled the photograph back into its slot and fastened the wallet and thrust it deep into her bag.

“You don’t like cops, do you?” Reacher asked.

“Not always,” she said.

“That’s unusual, for a person like you.”

“Like me?”

“Safe, secure, middle class, well brought up.”

“Things change.”

“What did your husband do?”

She didn’t answer.

“And who did he do it to?”

No answer.

“Why did he go to Despair?”

No response.

“Were you supposed to meet him there?”

Nothing.

“Doesn’t matter, anyway,” Reacher said. “I didn’t see him. And I’m not a cop anymore. Haven’t been for a long time.”

“What would you do now? If you were me?”

“I’d wait right here in town. Your husband looks like a capable guy. He’ll probably show up, sooner or later. Or get word to you.”

“I hope so.”

“Is he in school, too?”

Lucy Anderson didn’t answer that. Just secured the flap of her bag and slid off the bench sideways and stood up and tugged the hem of her skirt down. Five-eight, maybe one-thirty, blonde and blue, straight, strong, and healthy.

“Thank you,” she said. “Good night.”

“Good luck,” he said. “Lucky.”

She hoisted her bag on her shoulder and walked to the door and pushed out to the street. He watched her huddle into her sweatshirt and step away through the cold.

He was in bed before two o’clock in the morning. The motel room was warm. There was a heater under the window and it was blasting away to good effect. He set the alarm in his head for six-thirty. He was tired, but he figured four and a half hours would be enough. In fact they would have to be enough, because he wanted time to shower before heading out for breakfast.

16

It was a cliché that cops stop in at diners for doughnuts before, during, and after every shift, but clichés were clichés only because they were so often true. Therefore Reacher slipped into the same back booth at five to seven in the morning and fully expected to see Officer Vaughan enter inside the following ten minutes.

Which she did.

He saw her cruiser pull up and park outside. Saw her climb out onto the sidewalk and press both hands into the small of her back and stretch. Saw her lock up and pirouette and head for the door. She came in and saw him and paused for a long moment and then changed direction and slid in opposite him.

He asked, “Strawberry, vanilla, or chocolate? It’s all they’ve got.”

“Of what?”

“Milk shakes.”

“I don’t drink breakfast with jerks.”

“I’m not a jerk. I’m a citizen with a problem. You’re here to help. Says so on the badge.”

“What kind of problem?”

“The girl found me.”

“And had you seen her boyfriend?”

“Her husband, actually.”

“Really?” Vaughan said. “She’s young to be married.”

“I thought so, too. She said they’re in love.”

“Cue the violins. So had you seen him?”

“No.”

“So where’s your problem?”

“I saw someone else.”

“Who?”

“Not saw, actually. It was in the pitch dark. I fell over him.”

“Who?”

“A dead guy.”

“Where?”

“On the way out of Despair.”

“Are you sure?”

“Completely,” Reacher said. “A young adult male corpse.”

“Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack.”

“Why didn’t you tell me last night?”

“I wanted time to think about it.”

“You’re yanking my chain. There’s what out there, a thousand square miles? And you just happen to trip over a dead guy in the dark? That’s a coincidence as big as a barn.”

“Not really,” Reacher said. “I figure he was doing the same thing I was doing. Walking east from Despair to Hope, staying close enough to the road to be sure of his direction, far enough away to be safe. That put him in a pretty specific channel. I might have missed him by a yard, but I was never going to miss him by a mile.”

Vaughan said nothing.

“But he didn’t make it all the way,” Reacher said. “I think he was exhausted. His knees were driven pretty deep in the sand. I think he fell on his knees and pitched forward on his front and died. He was emaciated and dehydrated. No wounds, no trauma.”

“What, you autopsied this guy? In the dark?”

“I felt around.”

“Felt?”

“Touch,” Reacher said. “It’s one of the five senses we rely on.”

“So who was this guy?”

“Caucasian, by the feel of his hair. Maybe five-eight, one-forty. Young. No ID. I don’t know if he was dark or fair.”

“This is unbelievable.”

“It happened.”

“Where exactly?”

“Maybe four miles out of town, eight miles short of the line.”

“Definitely in Despair, then.”

“No question.”

“You should call the Despair PD.”

“I wouldn’t piss on the Despair PD if it was on fire.”

“Well, I can’t help you. It’s not my jurisdiction.”

The waitress came over. The day-shift woman, the witness to the coffee marathon. She was busy and harassed. The diner was filling up fast. Small-town America, at breakfast time. Reacher ordered coffee and eggs. Vaughan ordered

coffee, too. Reacher took that as a good sign. He waited until the waitress had bustled away and said, "You*can* help me."

Vaughan said, "How?"

"I want to go back and take a look, right now, in the daylight. You can drive me. We could be in and out, real fast."

"It's not my town."

"Unofficial. Off duty. Like a tourist. You're a citizen. You're entitled to drive on their road."

"Would you be able to find the place again?"

"I left a pile of stones on the shoulder."

"I can't do it," Vaughan said. "I can't poke around over there. And I sure as hell can't take*you* there. You've been excluded. It would be unbelievably provocative."

"Nobody would know."

"You think? They've got one road in and one road out and two cars."

"Right now they're eating doughnuts in their restaurant."

"You sure you didn't dream this?"

"No dreaming involved," Reacher said. "The kid had eyeballs like marbles and the inside of his mouth was parched like shoe leather. He'd been wandering for days."

The waitress came back with the coffee and the eggs. The eggs had a sprig of fresh parsley arrayed across them. Reacher picked it off and laid it on the side of the plate.

Vaughan said, "I can't drive a Hope police cruiser in Despair."

"So what else have you got?"

She was quiet for a long moment. She sipped her coffee. Then she said, “I have an old truck.”

She made him wait on the First Street sidewalk near the hardware store. Clearly she wasn’t about to take him home while she changed her clothes and her vehicle. A wise precaution, he thought.*Look at yourself,* she had said.*What do you see?* He was getting accustomed to negative answers to that question. The hardware store was still closed. The window was full of tools and small consumer items. The aisle behind the door was piled high with the stuff that would be put out on the sidewalk later. For many years Reacher had wondered why hardware stores favored sidewalk displays. There was a lot of work involved. Repetitive physical labor, twice a day. But maybe consumer psychology dictated that large utilitarian items sold better when associated with the rugged outdoors. Or maybe it was just a question of space. He thought for a moment and came to no firm conclusion and moved away and leaned on a pole that supported a crosswalk sign. The morning had come in cold and gray. Thin cloud started at ground level. The Rockies weren’t visible at all, neither near nor far.

Close to twenty minutes later an old Chevrolet pick-up truck pulled up on the opposite curb. Not a bulbous old classic from the forties or a swooping space-age design from the fifties or a muscley El Camino from the sixties. Just a plain secondhand American vehicle about fifteen years old, worn navy blue paint, steel rims, small tires. Vaughan was at the wheel. She was wearing a red Windbreaker zipped to the chin and a khaki ball cap pulled low. A good disguise. Reacher wouldn’t have recognized her if he hadn’t been expecting her. He used the crosswalk and climbed in next to her, onto a small vinyl seat with an upright back. The cab smelled of leaked gasoline and cold exhaust. There were rubber floor mats under his feet, covered with desert dust, worn and papery with age. He slammed the door and Vaughan took off again. The truck had a wheezy four-cylinder motor.*In and out real fast,* he had said. But clearly*fast* was going to be a relative concept.

They covered Hope’s five miles of road in seven minutes. A hundred yards short of the line Vaughan said, “We see anybody at all, you duck down.” Then she pressed harder on the gas and the expansion joint thumped under the wheels and the tires set up a harsh roar over Despair’s sharp stones.

“You come here much?” Reacher asked.

“Why would I?” Vaughan said.

There was no traffic ahead. Nothing either coming or going. The road speared straight into the hazy distance, rising and falling. Vaughan was holding the truck at a steady sixty. A mile a minute, probably close to its comfortable maximum.

Seven minutes inside enemy territory, she started to slow.

“Watch the left shoulder,” Reacher said. “Four stones, piled up.”

The weather had settled to a luminous gray light. Not bright, not sunny, but everything was illuminated perfectly. No glare, no shadows. There was some trash on the shoulder. Not much, but enough that Reacher’s small cairn was not going to stand out in glorious isolation like a beacon. There were plastic water bottles, glass beer bottles, soda cans, paper, small unimportant parts of vehicles, all caught on a long ridge of pebbles that had been washed to the side of the road by the passage of tires. Reacher twisted around in his seat. Nobody behind. Nobody ahead. Vaughan slowed some more. Reacher scanned the shoulder. The stones had felt big and obvious in his hands, in the dark. But now in the impersonal daylight they were going to look puny in the vastness.

“There,” Reacher said.

He saw his little cairn thirty yards ahead on the left. Three stones butted together, the fourth balanced on top. A speck in the distance, in the middle of nowhere. To the south the land ran all the way to the horizon, flat and essentially featureless, dotted with pale bushes and dark rocks and pitted with wash holes and low ridges.

“This is the place?” Vaughan asked.

“Twenty-some yards due south,” Reacher said.

He checked the road again. Nothing ahead, nothing behind.

“We’re OK,” he said.

Vaughan passed the cairn and pulled to the right shoulder and turned a wide circle across both lanes. Came back east and stopped exactly level with the

circle across both lanes. Came back east and stopped exactly level with the stones. She put the transmission in park and left the engine running.

“Stay here,” she said.

“Bullshit,” Reacher said. He got out and stepped over the stones and waited on the shoulder. He felt tiny in the lit-up vastness. In the dark the world had shrunk to an arm’s length around him. Now it felt huge again. Vaughan stepped alongside him and he walked south with her through the scrub, at a right angle to the road, five paces, ten, fifteen. He stopped after twenty paces and confirmed his direction by glancing behind him. Then he stood still and checked all around, first on a close radius, and then wider.

He saw nothing.

He stood on tiptoe and craned his neck and searched.

There was nothing there.

17

Reacher turned a careful one-eighty and stared back at the road to make sure he hadn't drifted too far either west or east. He hadn't. He was right on target. He walked five paces south, turned east, walked five more paces, turned around, walked ten steps west.

Saw nothing.

"Well?" Vaughan called.

"It's gone," he said.

"You were just yanking my chain."

"I wasn't. Why would I?"

"How accurate could you have been, with the stones? In the dark?"

"That's what I'm wondering."

Vaughan walked a small quiet circle, all around. Shook her head.

"It isn't here," she said. "If it ever was."

Reacher stood still in the emptiness. Nothing to see. Nothing to hear, except Vaughan's truck idling patiently twenty yards away. He walked ten more yards east and started to trace a wide circle. A quarter of the way through it, he stopped.

"Look here," he said.

He pointed at the ground. At a long line of shallow crumbled oval pits in the sand, each one a yard apart.

Vaughan said, "Footprints."

"My footprints," Reacher said. "From last night. Heading home."

"My footprints," Reacher said. "From last night. Heading home."

They turned west and backtracked. Followed the trail of his old footprints back toward Despair. Ten yards later they came to the head of a small diamond-shaped clearing. The clearing was empty.

"Wait," Reacher said.

"It's not here," Vaughan said.

"But it was here. This is the spot."

The crusted sand was all churned up by multiple disturbances. There were dozens of footprints, facing in all directions. There were scrapes and slides and drag marks. There were small depressions in the scrub, some fairly precise, but most not, because of the way the dry sand had crumbled and trickled down into the holes.

Reacher said, "Tell me what you see."

"Activity," Vaughan said. "A mess."

"A story," Reacher said. "It's telling us what happened."

"Whatever happened, we can't stay here. This was supposed to be in and out, real fast."

Reacher stood up straight and scanned the road, west and east.

Nothing there.

"Nobody coming," he said.

"I should have brought a picnic," Vaughan said.

Reacher stepped into the clearing. Crouched down and pointed two-fingered at a pair of neat parallel depressions in the center of the space. Like two coconut shells had been pressed down into the sand, hard, on a north-south axis.

"The boy's knees," he said. "This is where he gave it up. He staggered to a stop and half-turned and fell over." Then he pointed to a broad messed-up stony area four feet to the east. "This is where I landed after I tripped over him. On these

four feet to the east. "This is where I landed after I tripped over him. On these stones. I could show you the bruises, if you like."

"Maybe later," Vaughan said. "We need to get going."

Reacher pointed to four sharp impressions in the sand. Each one was a rectangle about two inches by three, at the corners of a larger rectangle about two feet by five.

"Gurney feet," he said. "Folks came by and collected him. Maybe four or five of them, judging by all the footprints. Official folks, because who else carries gurneys?" He stood up and checked and pointed north and west, along a broad ragged line of footprints and crushed vegetation. "They came in that way, and carried him back out in the same direction, back to the road. Maybe to a coroner's wagon, parked a little ways west of my cairn."

"So we're OK," Vaughan said. "The proper authorities have got him. Problem solved. We should get going."

Reacher nodded vaguely and gazed due west. "What should we see over there?"

"Two sets of incoming footprints," Vaughan said. "The boy's and yours, both heading east out of town. Separated by time, but not much separated by direction."

"But it looks like there's more than that."

They skirted the clearing and formed up again west of it. They saw four separate lines of footprints, fairly close together.

"Two incoming, two outgoing," Reacher said.

"How do you know?" Vaughan asked.

"The angles. Most people walk with their toes out."

The newer of the incoming tracks showed big dents in the sand a yard or more apart, and deep. The older showed smaller dents, closer together, less regular, and shallower.

“The kid and me,” Reacher said. “Heading east. Separated in time. I was walking, he was stumbling and staggering.”

The two outgoing tracks were both brand new. The sand was less crumbled and therefore the indentations were more distinct, and fairly deep, fairly well spaced, and similar.

“Reasonably big guys,” Reacher said. “Heading back west. Recently. Not separated in time.”

“What does it mean?”

“It means they’re tracking the kid. Or me. Or both of us. Finding out where we’d been, where we’d come from.”

“Why?”

“They found the body, they were curious.”

“How did they find the body in the first place?”

“Buzzards,” Reacher said. “It’s the obvious way, on open ground.”

Vaughan stood still for a moment. Then she said, “Back to the truck, right now.”

Reacher didn’t argue. She had beaten him to the obvious conclusion, but only by a heartbeat.

18

The old Chevy was still idling patiently. The road was still empty. But they ran. They ran and they flung the truck's doors open and dumped themselves inside. Vaughan slammed the transmission into gear and hit the gas. They didn't say a word until they thumped back over the Hope town line, eight long minutes later.

"Now you're really a citizen with a problem," Vaughan said. "Aren't you? The Despair cops might be dumb, but they're still cops. Buzzards show them a dead guy, they find the dead guy's tracks, they find a second set of tracks that show some other guy caught up with the dead guy along the way, they find signs of a whole lot of falling down and rolling around, they're going to want a serious talk with the other guy. You can bet on that."

Reacher said, "So why didn't they follow my tracks forward?"

"Because they know where you were going. There's only Hope, or Kansas. They want to know where you started. And what are they going to find?"

"A massive loop. Buried PowerBar wrappers and empty water bottles, if they look hard enough."

Vaughan nodded at the wheel. "Clear physical evidence of a big guy with big feet and long legs who paid a planned clandestine visit the night after they threw a big guy with big feet and long legs out of town."

"Plus one of the deputies saw me."

"You sure?"

"We talked."

"Terrific."

"The dead guy died of natural causes."

"You sure? You felt around in the dark. They're going to put that boy on a slab."

“I’m not in Despair anymore. You can’t go there, they can’t come here.”

“Small departments don’t work homicides, you idiot. We call in the State Police. And the State Police can go anywhere in Colorado. And the State Police get cooperation anywhere in Colorado. And you’re in my logbook from yesterday. I couldn’t deny it even if I wanted to.”

“You wouldn’t want to?”

“I don’t know anything about you. Except that I’m pretty sure you beat on a deputy in Despair. You practically admitted that to me. Who knows what else you did?”

“I didn’t do anything else.”

Vaughan said nothing.

Reacher asked, “What happens next?”

“Always better to get out in front of a thing like this. You should call in and volunteer information.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I was a soldier. I never volunteer for anything.”

“Well, I can’t help you. It’s out of my hands. It was never*in* my hands.”

“You could call,” Reacher said. “You could call the State Police and find out what their thinking is.”

“They’ll be calling us soon enough.”

“So let’s get out in front, like you said. Early information is always good.”

Vaughan didn’t reply to that. Just lifted off the gas and slowed as they hit the edge of town. The hardware guy had his door open and was piling his stuff on the sidewalk. He had some kind of a trick stepladder that could be put in about eight different positions. He had set it up like a painter’s platform good for

reaching second-story walls. Vaughan made a right on the next block and then a left, past the back of the diner. The streets were broad and pleasant and the sidewalks had trees. She pulled in to a marked-off parking space outside a low brick building. The building could have been a suburban post office. But it wasn't. It was the Hope Police Department. It said so, in aluminum letters neatly fixed to the brick. Vaughan shut off the engine and Reacher followed her down a neat brick path to the police station's door. The door was locked. The station was closed. Vaughan used a key from her bunch and said, "The desk guy gets in at nine."

Inside, the place still looked like a post office. Dull, worn, institutional, bureaucratic, but somewhat friendly. Accessible. Oriented toward service. There was a public inquiry counter and a space behind it with two desks. A watch commander's office behind a solid door, in the same corner a postmaster's would be. Vaughan stepped past the counter and headed for a desk that was clearly hers. Efficient and organized, but not intimidating. There was an old-model computer front and center, and a console telephone next to it. She opened a drawer and found a number in a book. Clearly contact between the Hope PD and the State Police was rare. She didn't know the number by heart. She dialed the phone and asked for the duty desk and identified herself and said, "We have a missing person inquiry. Male, Caucasian, approximately twenty years of age, five-eight, one-forty. Can you help us with that?" Then she listened briefly and her eyes flicked left and then right and she said, "We don't have a name." She was asked another question and she glanced right and said, "Can't tell if he's dark or fair. We're working from a black-and-white photograph. It's all we have."

Then there was a pause. Reacher saw her yawn. She was tired. She had been working all night. She moved the phone a little ways from her ear and Reacher heard the faint tap of a keyboard in the distant state office. Denver, maybe, or Colorado Springs. Then a voice came back on and Vaughan clamped the phone tight and Reacher didn't hear what it had to say.

Vaughan listened and said, "Thank you."

Then she hung up.

"Nothing to report," she said. "Apparently Despair didn't call it in."

"Natural causes," Reacher said. "They agreed with me."

Vaughan shook her head. “They should have called it in anyway. An unexplained death out in open country, that’s at least a county matter. Which means it would show up on the State Police system about a minute later.”

“So why didn’t they call it in?”

“I don’t know. But that’s not our problem.”

Reacher sat down at the other desk. It was a plain government-issue piece of furniture, with steel legs and a thin six-by-three fiberboard top laminated with a printed plastic approximation of rosewood or koa. There was a modesty panel and a three-drawer pedestal bolted to the right-hand legs. The chair had wheels and was covered with gray tweed fabric. Military Police furniture had been different. The chairs had been covered with vinyl. The desks had been steel. Reacher had sat behind dozens of them, all over the world. The views from his windows had been dramatically different, but the desks had been all the same. Their contents, too. Files full of dead people and missing people. Some mourned, some not.

He thought of Lucy Anderson, called Lucky by her friends. The night before, in the diner. He recalled the way she had wrung her hands. He looked across at Vaughan and said, “It is our problem, kind of. The kid might have people worried about him.”

Vaughan nodded. Went back to her book. Reacher saw her flip forward from*C* for*Colorado State Police* to*D* for*Despair Police Department.* She dialed and he heard a loud reply in her ear, as if physical proximity made for more powerful electrical current in the wires. She ran through the same faked inquiry, missing person, Caucasian male, about twenty, five-eight, one-forty, no name, coloring unclear because of a monochrome photograph. There was a short pause and then a short reply.

Vaughan hung up.

“Nothing to report,” she said. “They never saw such a guy.”

19

Reacher sat quiet and Vaughan moved stuff around on her desk. She put her keyboard in line with her monitor and put her mouse in line with her keyboard and squared her phone behind it and then adjusted everything until all the edges were either parallel or at perfect right angles to each other. Then she put pencils away in drawers and flicked at dust and crumbs with the edge of her palm.

“The gurney marks,” she said.

“I know,” Reacher said. “Apart from them, I could have invented this whole thing.”

“If they were gurney marks.”

“What else could they have been?”

“Nothing, I guess. They were from one of those old-fashioned stretchers, with the little skids, not the wheels.”

“Why would I invent anything anyway?”

“For attention.”

“I don’t like attention.”

“Everyone likes attention. Especially retired cops. It’s a recognized pathology. You try to insinuate yourselves back into the action.”

“Are you going to do that when you retire?”

“I hope not.”

“I don’t, either.”

“So what’s going on over there?”

“Maybe the kid was local,” Reacher said. “They knew who he was, so he wasn’t

"Maybe the kid was local," Reacher said. "They knew who he was, so he wasn't a candidate for your missing persons inquiry."

Vaughan shook her head. "Still makes no sense. Any unexplained death out-of-doors has got to be reported to the county coroner. In which case it would have showed up on the state system. Purely as a statistic. The State Police would have said,*Well, hey, we heard there was a dead guy in Despair this morning, maybe you should check it out. "*

"But they didn't."

"Because nothing has been called in from Despair. Which just doesn't add up. What the hell are they doing with the corpse? There's no morgue over there. Not even any cold storage, as far as I know. Not even a meat locker."

"So they're doing something else with him," Reacher said.

"Like what?"

"Burying him, probably."

"He wasn't road kill."

"Maybe they're covering something up."

"You claim he died of natural causes."

"He did," Reacher said. "From wandering through the scrub for days. Maybe because they ran him out of town. Which might embarrass them. Always assuming they're capable of embarrassment."

Vaughan shook her head again. "They didn't run him out of town. We didn't get a call. And they always call us. Always. Then they drive them to the line and dump them. This week there's been you and the girl. That's all."

"They never dump them to the west?"

"There's nothing there. It's unincorporated land."

"Maybe they're just slow. Maybe they'll call it in later."

"Doesn't compute," Vaughan said. "You find a dead one, you put one hand on

"Doesn't compute," Vaughan said. "You find a dead one, you put one hand on your gun and the other on your radio. You call for backup, you call for the ambulance, you call the coroner. One, two, three. It's completely automatic. There and then."

"Maybe they aren't as professional as you."

"It's not about being unprofessional. It's about making a spur-of-the-moment decision to break procedure and not to call the coroner. Which would require some kind of real reason."

Reacher said nothing.

Vaughan said, "Maybe there were no cops involved. Maybe someone else found him."

"Civilians don't carry stretchers in their cars," Reacher said.

Vaughan nodded vaguely and got up. Said, "We should get out of here before the day guy gets in. And the watch commander."

"Embarrassed to be seen with me?"

"A little. And I'm a little embarrassed that I don't know what to do."

The breakfast rush at the diner was over. A degree of calm had been restored. Reacher ordered coffee. Vaughan said she was happy with tap water. She sipped her way through half a glass and drummed her fingers on the table.

"Start over," she said. "Who was this guy?"

"Caucasian male," Reacher said.

"Not Hispanic? Not foreign?"

"I think Hispanics are Caucasians, technically. Plus Arabs and some Asians. All I'm going on is his hair. He wasn't black. That's all I know for sure. He could have been from anywhere in the world."

"Dark-skinned or pale?"

“I couldn’t see anything.”

“You should have taken a flashlight.”

“I’m still glad I didn’t.”

“How did his skin feel?”

“Feel? It felt like skin.”

“You should have been able to tell something. Olive skin feels different from pale skin. A little smoother and thicker.”

“Really?”

“I think so. Don’t you?”

Reacher touched the inside of his left wrist with his right forefinger. Then he tried his cheek, under his eye.

“Hard to tell,” he said.

Vaughan stretched her arm across the table. “Now compare.”

He touched the inside of her wrist, gently.

She said, “Now try my face.”

“Really?”

“Purely for research purposes.”

He paused a beat, then touched her cheek with the ball of his thumb. He took his hand away and said, “Texture was thicker than either one of us. Smoothness was somewhere between the two of us.”

“OK.” She touched her own wrist where he had touched it, and then her face. Then she said, “Give me your wrist.”

He slid his hand across the table. She touched his wrist, with two fingers, like

she was taking his pulse. She rubbed an inch north and an inch south and then leaned over and touched his cheek with her other hand. Her fingertips were cold from her water glass and the touch startled him. He felt a tiny jolt of voltage in it.

She said, “So he wasn’t necessarily white, but he was younger than you. Less lined and wrinkled and weather-beaten. Less of a mess.”

“Thank you.”

“You should use a good moisturizer.”

“I’ll bear that advice in mind.”

“And sunscreen.”

“Likewise.”

“Do you smoke?”

“I used to.”

“That’s not good for your skin either.”

Reacher said, “He might have been Asian, with the skimpy beard.”

“Cheekbones?”

“Pronounced, but he was thin anyway.”

“Wasted, in fact.”

“Noticeably. But he was probably wiry to begin with.”

“How long does it take for a wiry person to get wasted?”

“I don’t know for sure. Maybe five or six days in a hospital bed or a cell, if you’re sick or on a hunger strike. Less if you’re moving about out-of-doors, keeping warm, burning energy. Maybe only two or three days.”

Vaughan was quiet for a moment.

“That’s a lot of wandering,” she said. “We need to know why the good folks of Despair put in two or three days sustained effort to keep him out of there.”

Reacher shook his head. “Might be more useful to know why he was trying so hard to stay. He must have had a damn good reason.”

20

Vaughan finished her water and Reacher finished his coffee and asked, “Can I borrow your truck?”

“When?”

“Now. While you sleep.”

Vaughan said, “No.”

“Why not?”

“You’ll use it to go back to Despair, you’ll get arrested, and I’ll be implicated.”

“Suppose I don’t go back to Despair?”

“Where else would you want to go?”

“I want to see what lies to the west. The dead guy must have come in that way. I’m guessing he didn’t come through Hope. You would have seen him and remembered him. Likewise with the girl’s missing husband.”

“Good point. But there’s not much west of Despair. A lot of not much, in fact.”

“Got to be something.”

Vaughan was quiet for a moment. Then she said, “It’s a long loop around. You have to go back practically all the way to Kansas.”

Reacher said, “I’ll pay for the gas.”

“Promise me you’ll stay out of Despair.”

“Where’s the line?”

“Five miles west of the metal plant.”

“Deal.”

Vaughan sighed and slid her keys across the table.

“Go,” she said. “I’ll walk home. I don’t want you to see where I live.”

The old Chevy’s seat didn’t go very far back. The runners were short. Reacher ended up driving with his back straight and his knees splayed, like he was at the wheel of a farm tractor. The steering was vague and the brakes were soft. But it was better than walking. Much better, in fact. Reacher was done with walking, for a day or two at least.

His first stop was his motel in Hope. His room was at the end of the row, which put Lucy Anderson in a room closer to the office. She couldn’t be anywhere else. He hadn’t seen any other overnight accommodation in town. And she wasn’t staying with friends, because they would have been with her in the diner the night before, in her hour of need.

The motel had its main windows all in back. The front of the row had a repeating sequence of doors and lawn chairs and head-high pebbled-glass slits that put daylight into the bathrooms. Reacher started with the room next to his own and walked down the row, looking for the white blur of underwear drying over a tub. In his experience women of Lucy Anderson’s station and generation were very particular about personal hygiene.

The twelve rooms yielded two possibilities. One had a larger blur than the other. Not necessarily more underwear. Just bigger underwear. An older or a larger woman. Reacher knocked at the other door and stepped back and waited. A long moment later Lucy Anderson opened up and stood in the inside shadows, warily, with one hand on the handle.

Reacher said, “Hello, Lucky.”

“What do you want?”

“I want to know why your husband went to Despair, and how he got there.”

She was wearing the same sneakers, and the same kind of abbreviated socks. Above them was a long expanse of leg, smooth and toned and tanned to

Above them was a long expanse of leg, smooth and toned and tanned to perfection. Maybe she played soccer for UCLA. Maybe she was a varsity star. Above the expanse of leg was a pair of cut-off denims, frayed higher on the outside of her thighs than the inside, which was to say frayed very high indeed, because the effective remaining inseam had to have been less than three-quarters of an inch.

Above the shorts was another sweatshirt, mid-blue, with nothing written on it.

She said, “I don’t want you looking for my husband.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want you to find him.”

“Why not?”

“It’s obvious.”

“Not to me,” Reacher said.

She said, “I’d like you to leave me alone now.”

“You were worried about him yesterday. Today you’re not?”

She stepped forward into the light, just a pace, and glanced left and right beyond Reacher’s shoulders. The motel’s lot was empty. Nothing there, except Vaughan’s old truck parked at Reacher’s door. Lucy Anderson’s sweatshirt was the same color as her eyes, and her eyes were full of panic.

“Just leave us alone,” she said, and stepped back into her room and closed the door.

Reacher sat a spell in Vaughan’s truck, with a map from her door pocket. The sun was out again and the cab was warm. In Reacher’s experience cars were always either warm or cold. Like a primitive calendar. Either it was summer or winter. Either the sun came through the glass and the metal, or it didn’t.

The map confirmed what Vaughan had told him. He was going to have to drive a huge three-and-a-half-sided rectangle, first east almost all the way back to the

huge three-and-a-half-sided rectangle, first east almost all the way back to the Kansas line, then north to I-70, then west again, then south on the same highway spur the metal trucks used. Total distance, close to two hundred miles. Total time, close to four hours. Plus four hours and two hundred miles back, if he obeyed Vaughan's injunction to keep her truck off Despair's roads.

Which he planned to.

Probably.

He pulled out of the lot and headed east, retracing the route he had come in on with the old guy in the Grand Marquis. The mid-morning sun was low on his right. The old truck's battered exhaust was leaking fumes, so he kept the windows cracked. No electric winders. Just old-fashioned handles, which he preferred for the precision they permitted. He had the left window down less than an inch, and the right window half as much. At a steady sixty the wind whistled in and sounded a mellifluous high-pitched chord, underpinned by the bass growl of a bad bearing and the tenor burble of the tired old motor. The truck was a pleasant traveling companion on the state roads. On I-70 it was less pleasant. Passing semis blew it all over the place. The geometry was out and it had no stability. Reacher's wrists ached after the first ten highway miles, from holding it steady. He stopped once for gas and once for coffee and both times he was happy to get a break.

The spur came off I-70 west of Despair and petered out into a heavy-duty county two-lane within thirty miles. Reacher recognized it. It was the same piece of road he had observed leaving the plant at the other end. Same sturdy construction, same width, same coarse blacktop, same sand shoulders. Exactly four hours after leaving the motel he slowed and coasted and crossed the rumble strip and came to a stop with two wheels in the sand. Traffic was light, limited to trucks of all types heading in and out of the recycling plant twenty miles ahead. They were mostly flat-bed semis, but with some container trucks and box vans mixed in. Plates were mostly from Colorado and its adjacent states, but there were some from California and Washington and New Jersey and some from Canada. They blew past and their bow waves rocked the old truck on its suspension.

Despair itself was invisible in the far distance, except for the hint of a smudge on the horizon and a thin pall of smog hanging motionless in the air. Five miles

the horizon and a thin pall of smog hanging motionless in the air. Five miles closer but still fifteen miles away was the group of low gray buildings Reacher had seen before, now on his right, a tiny indistinct blur. A gas station, maybe. Or a motel. Or both. Maybe a full-blown truck stop, with a restaurant. Maybe it was the kind of place he could get a high-calorie meal.

Maybe it was the kind of place Lucy Anderson's husband and the unidentified dead guy might have gotten a high-calorie meal, on their way into Despair. In the case of the unidentified dead guy at least, maybe his last meal ever.

Maybe someone would remember them.

Maybe the place was outside Despair's city limit.

Maybe it wasn't.

Reacher checked his mirror and put the truck in gear and bumped his right-hand wheels back onto the road and headed for the horizon. Twelve minutes later he stopped again, just short of a pole that held a small green sign that said:*Entering Despair, Pop. 2691.* A hundred yards the wrong side of the line was the group of low buildings.

They weren't gray. That had been a trick of light and haze and distance.

They were olive green.

Not a gas station.

Not a motel.

No kind of a truck stop.

21

There were six low green buildings. They were identical metal prefabrications clustered together according to exact specifications and precise regulations. They were separated by roadways of uniform width graded from raw dirt and edged with white-painted boulders of small and consistent size. They were ringed by a razor-wire fence, tall, straight, and true. The fence continued west to enclose a parking lot. The lot was filled with six up-armored Humvees. Each one had a machine-gun mount on top. Next to the parking lot there was a slender radio mast protected by a fence all its own.

Not a motel.

Not a truck stop.

A military facility.

Specifically, an army facility. More specifically, a Military Police facility. More specifically still, a temporary advanced encampment for a combat MP unit. An FOB, a forward operating base. Reacher recognized the format and the equipment mix. Confirmation was right there on a board at the gate. The gate was a white counterbalanced pole with a guard shack next to it. The board was on stilts next to the shack and was painted glossy army green and had a formal unit ID stenciled on it in white.

Not a National Guard unit.

Not reservists.

A regular army unit, and a pretty good one, too. At least it always had been, back in Reacher's day, and there was no reason to believe it had gotten sloppy in the intervening years. No reason at all.

How sloppy it hadn't gotten was proved almost immediately.

The guard shack was a metal affair with tall wide windows on all four sides. Four guys in it. Two stayed where they were, and would forever, no matter what.

The other two came out. They were dressed in desert BDUs and boots and armored vests and helmets and they were carrying M16 rifles. They ducked under the boom and formed up side by side and sloped arms and stepped out to the roadway. They executed a perfect left turn and jogged toward Reacher's truck, exactly in step, at exactly seven miles an hour, like they had been trained to. When they were thirty yards away they separated to split the target they were presenting. One guy headed for the sand and came up on Reacher's right and stood off ten yards distant and swapped his rifle into the ready position. The other guy stayed on the blacktop and looped around and checked the truck's load bed and then came back and stood off six feet from Reacher's door and called out in a loud clear voice.

He said, "Sir, please lower your window."

And keep your hands where I can see them,Reacher thought.*For your own safety.* He wound the window all the way down and glanced left.

"Sir, please keep your hands where I can see them," the guy said. "For your own safety."

Reacher put his hands high on the wheel and kept on staring left. The guy he was looking at was a specialist, young but with some years in, with pronounced squint lines either side of his eyes. He was wearing glasses with thin black frames. The name tape on the right side of his vest said*Morgan.* In the distance a truck's air horn sounded and the soldier stepped closer to the curb and a semi blasted past from behind in a howl of sound and wind and grit. There was a long whine of stressed tires and Reacher's truck rocked on its springs and then silence came down again. The soldier stepped back to where he had been before and took up the same stance, wary but challenging, in control but cautious, his M16 held barrel-down but ready.

"At ease, Corporal," Reacher said. "Nothing to see here."

The guy called Morgan said, "Sir, that's a determination I'll need to make for myself."

Reacher glanced ahead. Morgan's partner was still as a statue, the stock of his M16 tucked tight into his shoulder. He was a private first class. He was sighting with his right eye, aiming low at Reacher's front right-hand tire.

Morgan asked, “Sir, why are you stopped here?”

Reacher said, “Do I need a reason?”

“Sir, you appear to me to be surveilling a restricted military installation.”

“Well, you’re wrong. I’m not.”

“Sir, why are you stopped?”

“Stop calling me*sir*, will you?”

“Sir?”

Reacher smiled to himself. An MP with Morgan’s years in had probably read a whole foot-thick stack of orders titled*Members of the Public, Domestic, Required Forms of Address,* endlessly revised, revisited, and updated.

“Maybe I’m lost,” Reacher said.

“You’re not local?”

“No.”

“Your vehicle has Colorado plates.”

“Colorado is a big state,” Reacher said. “More than a hundred thousand square miles, soldier, the eighth largest in the Union. By land area, that is. Only the twenty-second largest by population. Maybe I come from a remote and distant corner.”

Morgan went blank for a second. Then he asked, “Sir, where are you headed?”

The question gave Reacher a problem. The spur off I-70 had been small and hard to find. No way could a driver headed for Colorado Springs or Denver or Boulder have taken it by mistake. To claim a navigation error would raise suspicion. To raise suspicion would lead to a radio check against Vaughan’s plates, which would drag her into something she was better left out of.

So Reacher said, “I’m headed for Hope.”

Morgan took his left hand off his rifle and pointed straight ahead.

Morgan took his left hand off his rifle and pointed straight ahead.

“That way, sir,” he said. “You’re on track. Twenty-two miles to downtown Hope.”

Reacher nodded. Morgan was pointing south but hadn’t taken his eyes off Reacher’s hands. He was a good soldier. Experienced. Well turned out. His BDUs were old but in good order. His boots were worn and scratched but well cared for and immaculately brushed. The top of his eyeglass frame ran exactly parallel with the lip of his helmet. Reacher liked soldiers in eyeglasses. Eyeglasses added a vulnerable human detail that balanced the alien appearance of the weapons and the armor.

The face of the modern army.

Morgan stepped in close to Reacher’s fender again and another truck blew by. This one was a New Jersey semi loaded with a closed forty-foot shipping container. Like a giant brick, doing sixty miles an hour. Noise, wind, a long tail of swirling dust. Morgan’s BDU pants flattened against his legs and skittering miniature tornadoes of dust danced all around his feet. But he didn’t blink behind his glasses.

He asked, “Sir, does this vehicle belong to you?”

Reacher said, “I’m not sure you’re entitled to information like that.”

“In the vicinity of a restricted military installation I would say I’m entitled to pretty much any information I want.”

Reacher didn’t answer that.

Morgan said, “Do you have registration and insurance?”

“Glove box,” Reacher said, which was a pretty safe guess. Vaughan was a cop. Most cops kept their paperwork straight. Too embarrassing, if they didn’t.

Morgan asked, “Sir, may I see those documents?”

Reacher said, “No.”

“Sir, now it seems to me that you’re approaching a restricted military installation

in a stolen load-bearing vehicle."

"You already checked the back. It's empty."

Morgan said nothing.

"Relax, Corporal," Reacher said. "This is Colorado, not Iraq. I'm not looking to blow anything up."

"Sir, I wish you hadn't used those words."

"At ease, Morgan. I was speaking negatively. I was telling you what I wasn't going to do."

"No laughing matter."

"I'm not laughing."

"I need to see those vehicle documents, sir."

"You're overstepping your authority."

"Sir, I need to see them real quick."

"You got a JAG lawyer on post?"

"Negative, sir."

"You happy to make this decision on your own?"

Morgan didn't answer. He stepped close to the fender again and a tanker truck blew by. It had an orange hazardous chemicals diamond on the back and a stainless-steel body polished so bright that Reacher saw himself reflected in it like a funhouse mirror. Then its slipstream died away and Morgan stepped back into position and said, "Sir, I need you to show me those documents. Just wave them at me, if you like. To prove to me you can put your hands on them."

Reacher shrugged and leaned over and opened the glove box lid. Dug through ballpoint pens and envelopes of facial tissues and other miscellaneous junk and found a small plastic wallet. The wallet was black and was printed with a silver shape resembling a steering wheel. It was the kind of cheap thing found for sale

at gas stations and car washes, alongside air fresheners shaped like conifer trees and ball compasses that attached to windshields with suction cups. The plastic was stiff and brittle with age and the black color had leached to a dusty gray.

Reacher opened the wallet, out of Morgan's sight. On the left behind a plastic window was a current insurance certificate. On the right, a current registration.

Both were made out to David Robert Vaughan, of Hope, Colorado.

Reacher kept the wallet open with his thumb and waved it in Morgan's direction, long enough for the documents to register, short enough for neither of them to be read.

Morgan said, "Sir, thank you."

Reacher put the wallet back in the glove box and slammed the lid.

Morgan said, "Sir, now it's time to be moving along."

Which gave Reacher another problem. If he moved forward, he would be in Despair township. If he U-turned, Morgan would wonder why he had suddenly gotten cold feet and abandoned Hope as a destination, and would be tempted to call in the plate.

Which was the greater danger?

Morgan, easily. A contest between the Despair PD and a combat MP unit was no kind of a contest at all. So Reacher put the truck in gear and turned the wheel.

"Have a great day, Corporal," he said, and hit the gas. A yard later he passed the little green sign and temporarily increased Despair's population by one, all the way up to 2692.

22

The sturdy two-lane continued basically straight for five miles to the recycling plant's vehicle gate. An unsignposted left fork speared off into the brush and formed the western end of Despair's only through road. Reacher paused for an approaching semi loaded with bright steel bars and then waited again for a container truck heading for Canada. Then he made the left and bounced up onto the uneven surface and drove on and saw all the same stuff he had seen the day before, but in reverse order. The plant's long end wall, welded metal, bright white paint, the sparks and the smoke coming from the activity inside, the moving cranes. He stretched a long arm across the cab and dropped the passenger window and heard the noise of clanging hammers and smelled the acrid odors of chemical compounds.

He got to the acres of parking near the personnel gate and saw the clockwise security Tahoe bouncing across the scrub in the distance far to his right. Its counterclockwise partner was right there in the lot, black tinted windows, coming on slow, looking to cross the road at a right angle. Reacher sped up and the Tahoe slowed down and crossed right behind him. Reacher saw it slide past, huge in his mirror. He drove on and then the plant was behind him and downtown Despair was looming up three miles ahead on the right. The low brick cubes, sullen in the afternoon light. The road was clear. It rose and fell and meandered gently left and right, avoiding any geological formation larger than a refrigerator. Cheap engineering, never graded or straightened since its origin as a cart track.

A mile ahead, a cop car pulled out of a side street.

It was unmistakable. A Crown Vic, white and gold, black push bars on the front, a light bar on the roof, antennas on the trunk lid. It nosed out and paused a beat and turned left.

West.

Straight toward Reacher.

Reacher checked his speed. He was doing fifty, which was all that was

Reacher checked his speed. He was doing fifty, which was all that was comfortable. He had no idea of the local limit. He dropped to forty-five, and cruised on. The cop was less than a mile away, coming on fast. Closing speed, more than a hundred miles an hour. Time to contact, approximately thirty-five seconds.

Reacher cruised on.

The sun was behind him, and therefore in the cop's eyes, which was a good thing. The old Chevy truck had a plain untinted windshield, which was a bad thing. Ten seconds before contact Reacher took his left hand off the wheel and put it against his forehead, like he was massaging his temple against a headache. He kept his speed steady and stared straight ahead.

The cop car blew past.

Reacher put his hand back on the wheel and checked his mirror.

The cop was braking hard.

Reacher kept one eye on the mirror and ran a fast calculation. He had maybe fifteen miles to go before the Hope town line and the arthritic old Chevy would top out at about seventy, max, which gave him a thirteen-minute trip. The Crown Vic was not a fantastically powerful car but the Police Interceptor option pack gave it a low axle ratio for fast acceleration and twin exhausts for better breathing. It would do ninety, comfortably. Therefore it would overhaul him within three minutes, just about level with the abandoned motor court, at the start of twelve whole miles of empty road.

Not good.

Behind him the Crown Vic was pulling through a fast U-turn.

Why?

Despair was a company town but its road had to be a public thoroughfare. Any Hope resident would use it to head home off the Interstate. Some Kansas residents would do the same. Unfamiliar vehicles in Despair could not possibly be rarities.

Reacher checked the mirror again. The Crown Vic was accelerating after him.

Nose high, tail squatting low.

Maybe the security guy in the counterclockwise Tahoe had called it in. Maybe he had seen Reacher's face and recognized it. Maybe the deputies from the family restaurant took turns as the security drivers.

Reacher drove on. He hit the first downtown block.

Ten blocks ahead, a second Crown Vic pulled out.

And stopped, dead across the road.

Reacher braked hard and hauled on the wheel and pulled a fast right into the checkerboard of downtown streets. A desperation move. He was the worst guy in the world to win a car chase. He wasn't a great driver. He had taken the evasive-driving course at Fort Rucker during the MP Officers' Basic School and had impressed nobody. He had scraped a passing grade, mostly out of charity. A year later the school had moved to Fort Leonard Wood and the obstacle course had gotten harder and he knew he would have failed it. Time and chance. Sometimes it helps a person.

Sometimes it leaves a person unprepared.

He hit three four-way stops in succession and turned left, right, left without pausing or thinking. The streets were boxed in tight by dour brick buildings but his sense of direction was better than his driving and he knew he was heading east again. Downtown traffic was light. He got held up by a woman driving slow in an old Pontiac but the blocks were short and he solved his problem by turning right and left again and bypassing her one block over.

The chase car didn't show behind him. Statistics were on his side. He figured the downtown area was about twelve blocks square, which meant there were about 288 distinct lengths of road between opportunities to turn off, which meant that if he kept moving, the chances of direct confrontation were pretty low.

But the chances of ever getting out of the maze were pretty low, too. As long as the second cop was blocking Main Street at its eastern end, then Hope was unavailable as a destination. And presumably the metal plant Tahoes were on duty to the west. And presumably Despair was full of helpful citizens with four-wheel-drive SUVs that would be a lot quicker over open ground than Vaughan's ancient Chevy. They could get up a regular posse.

ancient Chevy. They could get up a regular posse.

Reacher turned a random left, just to keep moving. The chase car flashed through the intersection, dead ahead. It moved left to right and disappeared. Reacher turned left on the same street and saw it in his mirror, moving away from him. Now he was heading west. His gas tank was more than a quarter full. He turned right at the next four-way and headed north two blocks to Main Street. He turned east there and took a look ahead.

The second Crown Vic was still parked across the road, blocking both lanes just beyond the dry goods store. Its light bar was flashing red, as a warning to oncoming traffic. It was nearly eighteen feet long. One of the last of America's full-sized sedans. A big car, but at one end it was leaving a gap of about four feet between the front of its hood and the curb, and about three feet between its trunk and the curb at the other.

No good. Vaughan's Chevy was close to six feet wide.

Back at Fort Rucker the evasive driving aces had a mantra:*Keep death off the road: Drive on the sidewalk.* Which Reacher could do. He could get past the cop with two wheels up on the curb. But then what? He would be faced with a twelve-mile high-speed chase, in a low-speed vehicle.

No good.

He turned right again and headed back to the downtown maze. Saw the first Crown Vic flash past again, this time hunting east to west, three blocks away. He turned left and headed away from it. He slowed and started looking for used-car lots. In the movies, you parked at the end of a line of similar vehicles and the cops blew past without noticing.

He found no used-car lots.

In fact he found nothing much at all. Certainly nothing useful. He saw the police station twice, and the grocery store and the barber shop and the bar and the rooming house and the faded old hotel that he had seen before, on his walk down to the restaurant he had been thrown out of. He saw a storefront church. Some kind of a strange fringe denomination, something about the end times. The only church in town, Vaughan had said, where the town's feudal boss was the lay preacher. It was an ugly one-story building, built from brick, with a squat steeple piled on top to make it taller than the neighboring buildings. The steeple had a

piled on top to make it taller than the neighboring buildings. The steeple had a copper lightning rod on it and the grounding strap that ran down to the street had weathered to a bright verdigris green. It was the most colorful thing on display in Despair, a vivid vertical slash among the dullness.

He drove on. He looked, but he saw nothing else of significance. He would have liked a tire bay, maybe, where he could get the old Chevy up on a hoist and out of sight. He could have hidden out and gotten Vaughan's bad geometry fixed, all at the same time.

He found no tire bays.

He drove on, making random turns left and right. He saw the first Crown Vic three more times in the next three minutes, twice ahead of him and once behind him in his mirrors. The fourth time he saw it was a minute later. He paused at a four-way and it came up at the exact same moment and paused in the mouth of the road directly to his right. Reacher and the cop were at right angles to each other, nose to nose, ten feet apart, immobile. The cop was the same guy who had arrested him. Big, dark, wide. Tan jacket. He looked over and smiled. Gestured*Go ahead* like he was yielding, as if he had been second to the line.

Reacher was a lousy driver, but he wasn't stupid. No way was he going to let the cop get behind him, heading in the same direction. He jammed the old Chevy into reverse and backed away. The cop darted forward, turning, aiming to follow. Reacher waited until the guy was halfway through the maneuver and jammed the stick back into Drive and snaked past him, close, flank to flank. Then he hung a left and a right and a left again until he was sure he was clear.

Then he drove on, endlessly. He concluded that his random turns weren't helping him. He was as likely to turn into trouble as away from it. So mostly he stayed straight, until he ran out of street. Then he would turn. He ended up driving in wide concentric circles, slow enough to be safe, fast enough that he could kick the speed up if necessary without the weak old motor bogging down.

He passed the church and the bar and the grocery and the faded old hotel for the third time each. Then the rooming house. Its door slid behind his shoulder and opened. In the corner of his eye he saw a guy step out.

A young guy.

A big guy.

Tall, and blond, and heavy. An athlete. Blue eyes and a buzz cut and a dark tan. Jeans and a white T-shirt under a gray V-neck sweater.

Reacher stamped on the brake and turned his head. But the guy was gone, moving fast, around the corner. Reacher shoved the stick into Reverse and backed up. A horn blared and an old SUV swerved. Reacher didn't stop. He entered the four-way going backward and stared down the side street.

No guy. Just empty sidewalk. In his mirror Reacher saw the chase car three blocks west. He shoved the stick back into Drive and took off forward. Turned left, turned right, drove more wide aimless circles.

He didn't see the young man again.

But he saw the cop twice more. The guy was nosing around through distant intersections like he had all the time in the world. Which he did. Two-thirty in the afternoon, half the population hard at work at the plant, the other half baking pies or slumped in armchairs watching daytime TV, the lone road bottlenecked at both ends of town. The cop was just amusing himself. He had Reacher trapped, and he knew it.

And Reacher knew it, too.

No way out.

Time to stand and fight.

23

Some jerk instructor at the Fort Rucker MP School had once trotted out the tired old clich*é to assume makes an ass out of you and me.* He had demonstrated at the classroom chalkboard, dividing the word into*ass, u,* and*me.* On the whole Reacher had agreed with him, even if the guy was a jerk. But sometimes assumptions just had to be made, and right then Reacher chose to assume that however half-baked the Despair cops might be, they wouldn't risk shooting with bystanders in the line of fire. So he pulled to the curb outside the family restaurant and got out of Vaughan's truck and took up a position leaning on one of the restaurant's floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows.

Behind him, the same waitress was on duty. She had nine customers eating late lunches. A trio, a couple, four singletons, equally distributed around the room.

Collateral damage, just waiting to happen.

The window glass was cold on Reacher's shoulders. He could feel it through his shirt. The sun was still out but it was low in the sky and the streets were in shadow. There was a breeze. Small eddies of grit blew here and there on the sidewalk. Reacher unbuttoned his cuffs and folded them up on his forearms. He arched his back against the cramp he had gotten from sitting in the Chevy's undersized cab for so long. He flexed his hands and rolled his head in small circles to loosen his neck.

Then he waited.

The cop showed up two minutes and forty seconds later. The Crown Vic came in from the west and stopped two intersections away and paused, like the guy was having trouble processing the information visible right in front of him.*The truck, parked. The suspect, just standing there.* Then the car leapt forward and came through the four-ways and pulled in tight behind the Chevy, its front fender eight feet from where Reacher was waiting. The cop left the engine running and opened his door and slid out into the roadway. Déjà vu all over again. Big guy, white, maybe forty, black hair, wide neck. Tan jacket, brown pants, the groove in his forehead from his hat. He took his Glock off his belt and held it straight

out two-handed and put his spread thighs against the opposite fender and stared at Reacher across the width of the hood.

Sound tactics, except for the innocents behind the glass.

The cop called out, “Freeze.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Reacher said. “Yet.”

“Get in the car.”

“Make me.”

“I’ll shoot.”

“You won’t.”

The guy went blank for a beat and then shifted his focus beyond Reacher’s face to the scene inside the restaurant. Reacher was absolutely certain that the Despair PD had no Officer Involved Shooting investigative team, or even any kind of Officer Involved Shooting protocol, so the guy’s hesitation was down to pure common sense. Or maybe the guy had relatives who liked to lunch late.

“Get in the car,” the guy said again.

Reacher said, “I’ll take a pass on that.” He stayed relaxed, leaning back, unthreatening.

“I’ll shoot,” the cop said again.

“You can’t. You’re going to need backup.”

The cop paused again. Then he shuffled to the left, back toward the driver’s door. He kept his eyes and the gun tight on Reacher and fumbled one-handed through the car window and grabbed up his Motorola microphone and pulled it all the way out until its cord went tight. He brought it to his mouth and clicked the button. Said, “Bro, the restaurant, right now.” He clicked off again and tossed the microphone back on the seat and put both hands back on the gun and shuffled back to the fender.

And the clock started ticking.

One guy would be easy.

Two might be harder.

The second guy had to move, but Reacher couldn't afford for him to arrive.

No sound, except the idling cruiser and the distant clash of plates inside the restaurant kitchen.

"Pussy," Reacher called. "A thing like this, you should have been able to handle it on your own."

The cop's lips went tight and he shuffled toward the front of the car, tracking with his gun, adjusting his aim. He reached the front bumper and felt for the push bars with his knees. Came on around, getting nearer.

He stepped up out of the gutter onto the sidewalk.

Reacher waited. The cop was now on his right, so Reacher shuffled one step left, to keep the line of fire straight and dangerous and inhibiting. The Glock tracked his move, locked in a steady two-handed grip.

The cop said, "Get in the car."

The cop took one step forward.

Now he was five feet away, one cast square of concrete sidewalk.

Reacher kept his back against the glass and moved his right heel against the base of the wall.

The cop stepped closer.

Now the Glock's muzzle was within a foot of Reacher's throat. The cop was a big guy, with long arms fully extended, and both feet planted apart in a useful combat stance.

Useful if he was prepared to fire.

Which he wasn't.

Taking a gun from a man ready to use it was not always difficult. Taking one from a man who had already decided not to use it verged on the easy. The cop took his left hand off the gun and braced to grab Reacher by the collar. Reacher slid right, his back hard on the window, washed cotton on clean glass, no friction at all, and moved inside the cop's aim. He brought his left forearm up and over, fast,*one two,* and clamped his hand right over the Glock and the cop's hand together. The cop was a big guy with big hands, but Reacher's were bigger. He clamped down and squeezed hard and forced the gun down and away in one easy movement. He got it pointing at the ground and increased the squeeze to paralyze the cop's trigger finger and then he looked him in the eye and smiled briefly and jerked forward off his planted heel and delivered a colossal head butt direct to the bridge of the cop's nose.

The cop sagged back on rubber legs.

Reacher kept tight hold of the guy's gun hand and kneed him in the groin. The cop went down more or less vertically but Reacher kept his hand twisted up and back so that the cop's own weight dislocated his elbow as he fell. The guy screamed and the Glock came free pretty easily after that.

Then it was all about getting ready in a hurry.

Reacher scrambled around the Crown Vic's hood and hauled the door open. He tossed the Glock inside and slid in the seat and buckled the seat belt and pulled it snug and tight. The seat was still warm from the cop's body and the car smelled of sweat. Reacher put the transmission in reverse and backed away from the Chevy and spun the wheel and came back level with it, in the wrong lane, facing east, just waiting.

24

The second cop showed up within thirty seconds, right on cue. Reacher saw the flare of flashing red lights a second before the Crown Vic burst around a distant corner. It fishtailed a little, then accelerated down the narrow street toward the restaurant, hard and fast and smooth.

Reacher let it get through one four-way, and another, and when it was thirty yards away he stamped on the gas and took off straight at it and smashed into it head-on. The two Crown Vics met nose to nose and their rear ends lifted off the ground and sheet metal crumpled and hoods flew open and glass burst and airbags exploded and steam jetted everywhere. Reacher was smashed forward against his seat belt. He had his hands off the wheel and his elbows up to fend off the punch of his airbag. Then the airbag collapsed again and Reacher was tossed back against the headrest. The rear of his car thumped back to earth and bounced once and came to rest at an angle. He pulled the Mossberg pump out of its between-the-seats holster and forced the door open against the crumpled fender and climbed out of the car.

The other guy hadn't been wearing his seat belt.

He had taken the impact of his airbag full in the face and was lying sideways across the front bench with blood coming out of his nose and his ears. Both cars were wrecked as far back as the windshield pillars. The passenger compartments were basically OK. Full-sized sedans, five-star crash ratings. Reacher was pretty sure both cars were undrivable but he was no kind of an automotive expert and so he made sure by racking the Mossberg twice and firing two booming shots into the rear wheel wells, shredding the tires and ripping up all kinds of other small essential components. Then he tossed the pump back through the first Crown Vic's window and walked over and climbed into Vaughan's Chevy and backed away from all the wreckage. The waitress and the nine customers inside the restaurant were all staring out through the windows, mouths wide open in shock. Two of the customers were fumbling for their cell phones.

Reacher smiled.*Who are you going to call?*

He K-turned the Chevy and made a right and headed north for Main Street and

He K-turned the Chevy and made a right and headed north for Main Street and made another right and cruised east at a steady fifty. When he hit the lonely road after the gas station he kicked it up to sixty and kept one eye on the mirror. Nobody came after him. He felt the roughness under his tires but the roar was quieter than before. He was a little deaf from the airbags and the twin Mossberg blasts.

Twelve minutes later he bumped over the expansion joint and cruised into Hope, at exactly three o'clock in the afternoon.

He didn't know how long Vaughan would sleep. He guessed she had gotten her head on the pillow a little after nine that morning, which was six hours ago. Eight hours' rest would take her to five o'clock, which was reasonable for an on-deck time of seven in the evening. Or maybe she was already up and about. Some people slept worse in the daytime than the night. Habit, degree of acclimatization, circadian rhythms. He decided to head for the diner. Either she would be there already or he could leave her keys with the cashier.

She was there already.

He pulled to the curb and saw her alone in the booth they had used before. She was dressed in her cop uniform, four hours before her watch. She had an empty plate and a full coffee cup in front of her.

He locked the truck and went in and sat down opposite her. Up close, she looked tired.

"Didn't sleep?" he asked.

"Is it that obvious?"

"I have a confession to make."

"You went to Despair. In my truck. I knew you would."

"I had to."

"Sure."

“When was the last time you drove out to the west?”

“I try to stay out of Despair.”

“There’s a military base just inside the line. Fairly new. Why would that be?”

Vaughan said, “There are military bases all over.”

“This was a combat MP unit.”

“They have to put them somewhere.”

“Overseas is where they need to put them. The army is hurting for numbers right now. They can’t afford to waste good units in the back of beyond.”

“Maybe it wasn’t a good unit.”

“It was.”

“So maybe it’s about to ship out.”

“It just shipped back in. It just spent a year under the sun. The guy I spoke to had squint lines like you wouldn’t believe. His gear was worn from the sand.”

“We have sand here.”

“Not like that.”

“So what are you saying?”

The waitress came by and Reacher ordered coffee. Vaughan’s cup was still full. Reacher said, “I’m asking why they pulled a good unit out of the Middle East and sent it here.”

Vaughan said, “I don’t know why. The Pentagon doesn’t explain itself to neighboring police departments.”

The waitress brought a cup for Reacher and filled it from a Bunn flask. Vaughan asked, “What does a combat MP unit do exactly?”

Reacher took a sip of coffee and said, “It guards things. Convoys or installations. It maintains security and repels attacks.”

It maintains security and repels attacks.

“Actual fighting?”

“When necessary.”

“Did you do that?”

“Some of the time.”

Vaughan opened her mouth and then closed it again as her mind supplied the answer to the question she was about to ask.

“Exactly,” Reacher said. “What’s to defend in Despair?”

“And you’re saying these MPs made you drive on through?”

“It was safer. They would have checked your plate if I hadn’t.”

“Did you get through OK?”

“Your truck is fine. Although it’s not exactly yours, is it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Who is David Robert Vaughan?”

She looked blank for a second. Then she said, “You looked in the glove box. The registration.”

“A man with a gun wanted to see it.”

“Good reason.”

“So who is David Robert?”

Vaughan said, “My husband.”

25

Reacher said, “I didn’t know you were married.” Vaughan turned her attention to her lukewarm coffee and took a long time to answer.

“That’s because I didn’t tell you,” she said. “Would you expect me to?”

“Not really, I suppose.”

“Don’t I look married?”

“Not one little bit.”

“You can tell just by looking?”

“Usually.”

“How?”

“Fourth finger, left hand, for a start.”

“Lucy Anderson doesn’t wear a ring either.”

Reacher nodded. “I think I saw her husband today.”

“In Despair?”

“Coming out of the rooming house.”

“That’s way off Main Street.”

“I was dodging roadblocks.”

“Terrific.”

“Not one of my main talents.”

“So how did they not catch you? They’ve got one road in and one road out.”

“Long story,” Reacher said.

“But?”

“The Despair PD is temporarily understaffed.”

“You took one of them out?”

“Both of them. And their cars.”

“You’re completely unbelievable.”

“No, I’m a man with a rule. People leave me alone, I leave them alone. If they don’t, I don’t.”

“They’ll come looking for you here.”

“No question. But not soon.”

“How long?”

“They’ll be hurting for a couple of days. Then they’ll saddle up.”

Reacher left her alone with her truck keys on the table in front of her and walked down to Third Street and bought socks and underwear and a dollar T-shirt in an old-fashioned outfitters next to a supermarket. He stopped in at a pharmacy and bought shaving gear and then headed up to the hardware store at the western end of First Street. He picked his way past ladders and wheelbarrows and wound through aisles filled with racks of tools and found a rail of canvas work pants and flannel shirts. Traditional American garments, made in China and Cambodia, respectively. He chose dark olive pants and a mud-colored check shirt. Not as cheap as he would have liked, but not outrageous. The clerk folded them up into a brown paper bag and he carried it back to the motel and shaved and took a long shower and dried off and dressed in the new stuff. He crammed his old gray janitor uniform in the trash receptacle.

Better than doing laundry.

The new clothes were as stiff as boards, to the point where walking around was difficult. Clearly the Far Eastern garment industry took durability very seriously. He did squats and bicep curls until the starch cracked and then he stepped out and walked down the row to Lucy Anderson's door. He knocked and waited. A minute later she opened up. She looked just the same. Long legs, short shorts, plain blue sweatshirt. Young, and vulnerable. And wary, and hostile. She said, "I asked you to leave me alone."

He said, "I'm pretty sure I saw your husband today."

Her face softened, just for a second.

"Where?" she asked.

"In Despair. Looks like he's got a room there."

"Was he OK?"

"He looked fine to me."

"What are you going to do about him?"

"What would you like me to do about him?"

Her face closed up again. "You should leave him alone."

"I am leaving him alone. I told you, I'm not a cop anymore. I'm a vagrant, just like you."

"So why would you go back to Despair?"

"Long story. I had to."

"I don't believe you. You're a cop."

"You saw what was in my pockets."

"You left your badge in your room."

"I didn't. You want to check? My room is right here."

She stared at him in panic and put both hands on the door jambs like he was

She stared at him in panic and put both hands on the door jambs like he was about to seize her around her waist and drag her away to his quarters. The motel clerk stepped out of the office, forty feet to Reacher's left. She was a stout woman of about fifty. She saw Reacher and saw the girl and stopped walking and watched. Then she moved again but changed direction and started heading toward them. In Reacher's experience motel clerks were either nosy about or else completely uninterested in their guests. He figured this one was the nosy kind. He stepped back a pace and gave Lucy Anderson some air and held up his hands, palms out, friendly and reassuring.

"Relax," he said. "If I was here to hurt you, you'd already be hurt by now, don't you think? You and your husband."

She didn't answer. Just turned her head and saw the clerk's approach and then ducked back to the inside shadows and slammed her door, all in one neat move. Reacher turned away but knew he wasn't going to make it in time. The clerk was already within calling distance.

"Excuse me," she said.

Reacher stopped. Turned back. Said nothing.

The woman said, "You should leave that girl alone."

"Should I?"

"If you want to stay here."

"Is that a threat?"

"I try to maintain standards."

"I'm trying to help her."

"She thinks the exact opposite."

"You've talked?"

"I hear things."

"I'm not a cop."

“You look like a cop.”

“I can’t help that.”

“You should investigate some real crimes.”

Reacher said, “I’m not investigating any kind of crimes. I told you, I’m not a cop.”

The woman didn’t answer.

Reacher asked, “What real crimes?”

“Violations.”

“Where?”

“At the metal plant in Despair.”

“What kind of violations?”

“All kinds.”

“I don’t care about violations. I’m not an EPA inspector. I’m not any kind of an inspector.”

The woman said, “Then you should ask yourself why that plane flies every night.”

26

Reacher got halfway back to his room and saw Vaughan's old pick-up turn in off the street. It was moving fast. It bounced up over the curb and headed through the lot straight at him. Vaughan was at the wheel in her cop uniform. Incongruous. And urgent. She hadn't taken time to go fetch her official cruiser. She braked hard and stopped with her radiator grille an inch away from him. She leaned out the window and said, "Get in, now."

Reacher asked, "Why?"

"Just do it."

"Do I have a choice?"

"None at all."

"Really?"

"I'm not kidding."

"Are you arresting me?"

"I'm prepared to. I'll use my gun and my cuffs if that's what it takes. Just get in the car."

Reacher studied her face through the windshield glass. She was serious about something. And determined. That was for sure. The evidence was right there in the set of her jaw. So he climbed in. Vaughan waited until he closed his door behind him and asked, "You ever done a ride-along with a cop before? All night? A whole watch?"

"Why would I? I*was* a cop."

"Well, whatever, you're doing one tonight."

"Why?"

“We got a courtesy call. From Despair. You’re a wanted man. They’re coming for you. So tonight you stay where I can see you.”

“They can’t be coming for me. They can’t even have woken up yet.”

“Their deputies are coming. All four of them.”

“Really?”

“That’s what deputies do. They deputize.”

“So I hide in your car? All night?”

“Damn straight.”

“You think I need protection?”

“My town needs protection. I don’t want trouble here.”

“Those four won’t be any trouble. One of them is already busted up and one was throwing his guts up the last time I saw him.”

“So you could take them?”

“With one hand behind my back and my head in a bag.”

“Exactly. I’m a cop. I have a responsibility. No fighting in my streets. It’s unseemly.” She pulled a tight U-turn in the motel lot and headed back the way she had come. Reacher asked, “When will they get here?”

“The plant shuts down at six. I imagine they’ll head right over.”

“How long will they stay?”

“The plant opens up again at six tomorrow morning.”

Reacher said, “You don’t want me in your car all night.”

“I’ll do what it takes. Like I said. This is a decent place. I’m not going to let it get trashed, either literally or metaphorically.”

Reacher paused and said, “I could leave town.”

Reacher paused and said, "I could leave town."

"Permanently?" Vaughan asked.

"Temporarily."

"And go where?"

"Despair, obviously. I can't get in trouble there, can I? Their cops are in the hospital and their deputies will be here all night."

Vaughan made a right and a left and headed down Second Street toward the diner. She stayed quiet for a moment and then she said, "There's another one in town today."

"Another what?"

"Another girl. Just like Lucy Anderson. But dark, not blonde. She blew in this afternoon and now she's sitting around and staring west like she's waiting for word from Despair."

"From a boyfriend or a husband?"

"Possibly."

"Possibly a dead boyfriend or husband, Caucasian, about twenty years old, five-eight and one-forty."

"Possibly."

"I should go there."

Vaughan drove past the diner and kept on driving. She drove two blocks south and came back east on Fourth Street. No real reason. Just motion, for the sake of it. Fourth Street had trees and retail establishments behind the north sidewalk and trees and a long line of neat homes behind the south. Small yards, picket fences, foundation plantings, mailboxes on poles that had settled to every angle except the truly vertical.

"I should go there," Reacher said again.

"Wait until the deputies get here. You don't want to pass them on the road."

Wait until the deputies get here. You don't want to pass them on the road.

“OK.”

“And don’t let them see you leave.”

“OK.”

“And don’t make trouble over there.”

“I’m not sure there’s anybody left to make trouble with. Unless I meet the judge.”

27

For the second time that day Vaughan gave up her pick-up truck and walked home to get her cruiser. Reacher drove the truck to a quiet side street and parked facing north in the shadow of a tree and watched the traffic on First Street directly ahead of him. He had a limited field of view. But there wasn't much to see, anyway. Whole ten-minute periods passed without visible activity. Not surprising. Residents returning from the Kansas direction would have peeled off into town down earlier streets. And no one in their right mind was returning from Despair, or heading there. The daylight was fading fast. The world was going gray and still. The clock in Reacher's head was ticking around, relentlessly.

When it hit six-thirty-two he saw an old crew-cab pick-up truck flash through his field of vision. Moving smartly, from the Despair direction. A driver, and three passengers inside. Big men, close together. They filled the cramped quarters, shoulder to shoulder.

Reacher recognized the truck.

He recognized the driver.

He recognized the passengers.

The Despair deputies, right on time.

He paused a beat and started the old Chevy's engine and moved off the curb. He eased north to First Street and turned left. Checked his mirror. The old crew-cab was already a hundred yards behind him, moving away in the opposite direction, slowing down and getting ready to turn. The road ahead was empty. He passed the hardware store and hit the gas and forced the old truck up to sixty miles an hour. Five minutes later he thumped over the expansion joint and settled in to a noisy cruise west.

Twelve miles later he coasted past the vacant lot and the shuttered motor court

and the gas station and the household goods store and then he turned left into Despair's downtown maze. First port of call was the police station. He wanted to be sure that no miraculous recoveries had been made, and that no replacement personnel had been provided.

They hadn't, and they hadn't.

The place was dark inside and quiet outside. No lights, no activity. There were no cars at the curb. No standin State Police cruisers, no newly-deputized pick-up trucks, no plain sedans with temporary*Police* signs stickered on their doors.

Nothing.

Just silence.

Reacher smiled. Open season and lawless, he thought, like a bleak view of the future in a movie. The way he liked it. He U-turned through the empty diagonal parking slots and headed back toward the rooming house. He parked on the curb out front and killed the motor and wound the window down. Heard a single aero engine in the far distance, climbing hard. Seven o'clock in the evening. The Cessna or the Beech or the Piper, taking off again.*You should ask yourself why that plane flies every night,* the motel clerk had said.

*Maybe I will,*Reacher thought.*One day.*

He climbed out of the truck. The rooming house was built of dull brick, on a corner lot. Three stories high, narrow windows, flat roof, four stone steps up to a doorway set off center in the façade. There was a wooden board on the wall next to the door, under a swan-neck lamp with a dim bulb. The board had been painted maroon way back in its history, and the words*Rooms to Rent* had been lettered in white over the maroon by a careful amateur. A plain and to-the-point announcement. Not the kind of place Reacher favored. Such establishments implied residency for longer periods than he was interested in. Generally they rented by the week, and had electric cooking rings in the rooms. Practically the same thing as setting up housekeeping.

He went up the stone steps and pushed the front door. It was open. Behind it was a square hallway with a brown linoleum floor and a steep staircase on the right. The walls were painted brown with some kind of a trick effect that matched the swirls in the linoleum. A bare bulb was burning dimly a foot below the ceiling.

The air smelled of dust and cabbage. There were four interior doors, all dull green, all closed. Two were in back and two were in front, one at the foot of the staircase and the other directly opposite it across the hallway. Two front rooms, one of which would house the owner or the super. In Reacher's experience the owner or the super always chose a ground-floor room at the front, to monitor entrances and exits. Entrances and exits were very important to owners and supers. Unauthorized guests and multiple occupancies were to be discouraged, and tenants had been known to try to sneak out quietly just before final payment of long-overdue rent had been promised.

He opted to start with the door at the foot of the staircase. Better surveillance potential. He knocked and waited. A long moment later the door opened and revealed a thin man in a white shirt and a black tie. The guy was close to seventy years old, and his hair was the same color as his shirt. The shirt wasn't clean. Neither was the tie, but it had been carefully knotted.

"Help you?" the old guy said.

"Is this your place?" Reacher asked.

The old guy nodded. "And my mother's before me. In the family for close to fifty years."

"I'm looking for a friend of mine," Reacher said. "From California. I heard he was staying here."

No reply from the old man.

"Young guy," Reacher said. "Maybe twenty. Very big. Tan, with short hair."

"Nobody like that here."

"You sure?"

"Nobody here at all."

"He was seen stepping out your door this afternoon."

"Maybe he was visiting."

"Visiting who, if there's nobody here at all?"

“Visiting me,” the old man said.

“Did he visit you?”

“I don’t know. I was out. Maybe he knocked on my door and got no reply and left again.”

“Why would he have been knocking on your door?”

The old guy thought for a moment and said, “Maybe he was at the hotel and wanted to economize. Maybe he had heard the rates were cheaper here.”

“What about another guy, shorter, wiry, about the same age?”

“No guys here at all, big or small.”

“You sure?”

“It’s my house. I know who’s in it.”

“How long has it been empty?”

“It’s not empty. I live here.”

“How long since you had tenants?”

The old guy thought for another moment and said, “A long time.”

“How long?”

“Years.”

“So how do you make a living?”

“I don’t.”

“You own this place?”

“I rent it. Like my mother did. Close to fifty years.”

Reacher said, “Can I see the rooms?”

Reacher said, "Can I see the rooms?"

"Which rooms?"

"All of them."

"Why?"

"Because I don't believe you. I think there are people here."

"You think I'm lying?"

"I'm a suspicious person."

"I should call the police."

"Go right ahead."

The old guy stepped away into the gloom and picked up a phone. Reacher crossed the hallway and tried the opposite door. It was locked. He walked back and the old guy said, "There was no answer at the police station."

"So it's just you and me," Reacher said. "Better that you lend me your passkey. Save yourself some repair work later, with the door locks."

The old guy bowed to the inevitable. He took a key from his pocket and handed it over. It was a worn brass item with a length of furred string tied through the hole. The string had an old metal eyelet on it, as if the eyelet was all that was left of a paper label.

There were three guest rooms on the ground floor, four on the second, and four on the third. All eleven were identical. All eleven were empty. Each room had a narrow iron cot against one wall. The cots were like something from an old-fashioned fever hospital or an army barracks. The sheets had been washed so many times they were almost transparent. The blankets had started out thick and rough and had worn thin and smooth. Opposite the beds were chests of drawers and freestanding towel racks. The towels were as thin as the sheets. Near the ends of the beds were pine kitchen tables with two-ring electric burners plugged into outlets with frayed old cords. At the ends of the hallways on each of the floors were shared bathrooms, tiled black and white, with iron claw-foot tubs

floors were shared bathrooms, tiled black and white, with iron claw-foot tubs and toilets with cisterns mounted high on the walls.

Basic accommodations, for sure, but they were in good order and beautifully kept. The bathroom fitments were stained with age, but not with dirt. The floors were swept shiny. The beds were made tight. A dropped quarter would have bounced two feet off the blankets. The towels on the racks were folded precisely and perfectly aligned. The electric burners were immaculately clean. No crumbs, no spills, no dried splashes of bottled sauce.

Reacher checked everywhere and then stood in the doorway of each room before leaving it, smelling the air and listening for echoes of recent hasty departures. He found nothing and sensed nothing, eleven times over. So he headed back downstairs and returned the key and apologized to the old guy. Then he asked, "Is there an ambulance service in town?"

The old guy asked, "Are you injured?"

"Suppose I was. Who would come for me?"

"How bad?"

"Suppose I couldn't walk. Suppose I needed a stretcher."

The old man said, "There's a first-aid station up at the plant. And an infirmary. In case a guy gets hurt on the job. They have a vehicle. They have a stretcher."

"Thanks," Reacher said.

He drove Vaughan's old Chevy on down the street. Paused for a moment in front of the storefront church. It had a painted sign running the whole width of the building:*Congregation of the End Times.* In one window it had a poster written in the same way that a supermarket would advertise brisket for three bucks a pound:*The Time Is at Hand.* A quotation from the Book of Revelation. Chapter one, verse three. Reacher recognized it. The other window had a similar poster:*The End Is Near.* Inside, the place was as dark and gloomy as its exterior messages. Rows of metal chairs, a wood floor, a low stage, a podium. More posters, each one predicting with confident aplomb that the clock was ticking.

Reacher read them all and then drove on, to the hotel. It was dark when he got there. He remembered the place from earlier daytime sightings as looking dowdy and faded, and by night it looked worse. It could have been an old city prison, in Prague, maybe, or Warsaw, or Leningrad. The walls were featureless and the windows were blank and unlit. Inside it had an empty and unappealing dining room on the left and a deserted bar on the right. Dead ahead in the lobby was a deserted reception desk. Behind the reception desk was a small swaybacked version of a grand staircase. It was covered with matted carpet. There was no elevator.

Hotels were required by state and federal laws and private insurance to maintain accurate guest records. In case of a fire or an earthquake or a tornado, it was in everyone's interest to know who was resident in the building, and who wasn't. Therefore Reacher had learned a long time ago that when searching a hotel the place to start was with the register. Which over the years had become increasingly difficult, with computers. There were all kinds of function keys to hit and passwords to discover. But Despair as a whole was behind the times, and its hotel was no exception. The register was a large square book bound in old red leather. Easy to grab, easy to swivel around, easy to open, easy to read.

The hotel had no guests.

According to the handwritten records the last room had rented seven months previously, to a couple from California, who had arrived in a private car and stayed two nights. Since then, nothing. No names that might have corresponded to single twenty-year-old men, either large or small. No names at all.

Reacher left the hotel without a single soul having seen him and got back in the Chevy. Next stop was two blocks over, in the town bar, which meant mixing with the locals.

28

The bar was on the ground floor of yet another dull brick cube. One long narrow room. It ran the full depth of the building and had a short corridor with restrooms and a fire door way in back. The bar itself was on the left and there were tables and chairs on the right. Low light. No music. No television. No pool table, no video games. Maybe a third of the bar stools and a quarter of the chairs were occupied. The after-work crowd. But not exactly happy hour. All the customers were men. They were all tired, all grimy, all dressed in work shirts, all sipping beer from tall glasses or long-neck bottles. Reacher had seen none of them before.

He stepped into the gloom, quietly. Every head turned and every pair of eyes came to rest on him. Some kind of universal barroom radar.*Stranger in the house.* Reacher stood still and let them take a good look.*A stranger for sure, but not the kind you want to mess with.* Then he sat down on a stool and put his elbows on the bar. He was two gaps away from the nearest guy on his left and one away from the nearest guy on his right. The stools had iron bases and iron pillars and shaped mahogany seats that turned on rough bearings. The bar itself was made from scarred mahogany that didn't match the walls, which were paneled with pine. There were mirrors all over the walls, made of plain reflective glass screen-printed with beer company advertisements. They were framed with rustic wood and were fogged with years of alcohol fumes and cigarette smoke.

The bartender was a heavy pale man of about forty. He didn't look smart and he didn't look pleasant. He was ten feet away, leaning back with his fat ass against his cash register drawer. Not moving. Not about to move, either. That was clear. Reacher raised his eyebrows and put a beckoning expression on his face and got no response at all.

A company town.

He swiveled his stool and faced the room.

"Listen up, guys," he called. "I'm not a metalworker and I'm not looking for a job."

No response.

“You couldn’t pay me enough to work here. I’m not interested. I’m just a guy passing through, looking for a beer.”

No response. Just sullen and hostile stares, with bottles and glasses frozen halfway between tables and mouths.

Reacher said, “First guy to talk to me, I’ll pay his tab.”

No response.

“For a week.”

No response.

Reacher turned back and faced the bar again. The bartender hadn’t moved. Reacher looked him in the eye and said, “Sell me a beer or I’ll start busting this place up.”

The bartender moved. But not toward his refrigerator cabinets or his draft pumps. Toward his telephone instead. It was an old-fashioned instrument next to the register. The guy picked it up and dialed a long number. Reacher waited. The guy listened to a lot of ring tone and then started to say something but then stopped and put the phone down again.

“Voice mail,” he said.

“Nobody home,” Reacher said. “So it’s just you and me. I’ll take a Budweiser, no glass.”

The guy glanced beyond Reacher’s shoulder, out into the room, to see if any ad hoc coalitions were forming to help him out. They weren’t. Reacher was already monitoring the situation in a dull mirror directly in front of him. The bartender decided not to be a hero. He shrugged and his attitude changed and his face sagged a little and he bent down and pulled a cold bottle out from under the bar. Opened it up and set it down on a napkin. Foam swelled out of the neck and ran down the side of the bottle and soaked into the paper. Reacher took a ten from his pocket and folded it lengthways so it wouldn’t curl and squared it in front of him.

“I’m looking for a guy,” he said.

The bartender said, “What guy?”

“A young guy. Maybe twenty. Suntan, short hair, as big as me.”

“Nobody like that here.”

“I saw him this afternoon. In town. Coming out of the rooming house.”

“So ask there.”

“I did.”

“I can’t help you.”

“This guy looked like a college athlete. College athletes drink beer from time to time. He was probably in here once or twice.”

“He wasn’t.”

“What about another guy? Same age, much smaller. Wiry, maybe five-eight, one-forty.”

“Didn’t see him.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“You ever work up at the plant?”

“Couple of years, way back.”

“And then?”

“He moved me here.”

“Who did?”

“Mr. Thurman. He owns the plant.”

“And this bar, too?”

“He owns everything.”

“And he moved you? He sounds like a hands-on manager.”

“He figured I’d be better working here than there.”

“And are you?”

“Not for me to say.”

Reacher took a long pull on his bottle. Asked, “Does Mr. Thurman pay you well?”

“I don’t complain.”

“Is that Mr. Thurman’s plane that flies every night?”

“Nobody else here owns a plane.”

“Where does he go?”

“I don’t ask.”

“Any rumors?”

“No.”

“You sure you never saw any young guys around here?”

“I’m sure.”

“Suppose I gave you a hundred bucks?”

The guy paused a beat and looked a little wistful, as if a hundred bucks would make a welcome change in his life. But in the end he just shrugged again and said, “I’d still be sure.”

Reacher drank a little more of his beer. It was warming up a little and tasted metallic and soapy. The bartender stayed close. Reacher glanced at the mirrors. Checked reflections of reflections. Nobody in the room was moving. He asked

Checked reflections of reflections. Nobody in the room was moving. He asked, "What happens to dead people here?"

"What do you mean?"

"You got undertakers in town?"

The bartender shook his head. "Forty miles west. There's a morgue and a funeral home and a burial ground. No consecrated land in Despair."

"The smaller guy died," Reacher said.

"What smaller guy?"

"The one I was asking you about."

"I didn't see any small guys, alive or dead."

Reacher went quiet again and the bartender said, "So, you're just passing through?" A meaningless, for-the-sake-of-it conversational gambit, which confirmed what Reacher already knew.*Bring it on*, he thought. He glanced at the fire exit in back and checked the front door in the mirrors. He said, "Yes, I'm just passing through."

"Not much to see here."

"Actually I think this is a pretty interesting place."

"You do?"

"Who hires the cops here?"

"The mayor."

"Who's the mayor?"

"Mr. Thurman."

"There's a big surprise."

"It's his town."

Reacher said, “I’d like to meet him.”

The bartender said, “He’s a very private man.”

“I’m just saying. I’m not asking for an appointment.”

*Six minutes,*Reacher thought.*I’ve been working on this beer for six minutes. Maybe ten more to go.* He asked, “Do you know the judge?”

“He doesn’t come in here.”

“I didn’t ask where he goes.”

“He’s Mr. Thurman’s lawyer, up at the plant.”

“I thought it was an elected position.”

“It is. We all voted for him.”

“How many candidates were on the ballot?”

“He was unopposed.”

Reacher said, “Does this judge have a name?”

The bartender said, “His name is Judge Gardner.”

“Does Judge Gardner live here in town?”

“Sure. You work for Mr. Thurman, you have to live in town.”

“You know Judge Gardner’s address?”

“The big house on Nickel.”

“Nickel?”

“All the residential streets here are named for metals.”

Reacher nodded. Not so very different from the way streets on army bases were named for generals or Medal of Honor winners. He went quiet again and waited for the bartender to fill the silence, like he had to. Like he had been told to. The

for the bartender to fill the silence, like he had to. Like he had been told to. The guy said, “A hundred and some years ago there were only five miles of paved road in the United States.”

Reacher said nothing.

The guy said, “Apart from city centers, of course, which were cobbled anyway, not really paved. Not with blacktop, like now. Then county roads got built, then state, then the Interstates. Towns got passed by. We were on the main road to Denver, once. Not so much anymore. People use I-70 now.”

Reacher said, “Hence the closed-down motel.”

“Exactly.”

“And the general feeling of isolation.”

“I guess.”

Reacher said, “I know those two young guys were here. It’s only a matter of time before I find out who they were and why they came.”

“I can’t help you with that.”

“One of them died.”

“You told me that already. And I still don’t know anything about it.”

*Eleven minutes,*Reacher thought.*Five to go.* He asked, “Is this the only bar in town?”

The guy said, “One is all we need.”

“Movies?”

“No.”

“So what do people do for entertainment?”

“They watch satellite television.”

“I heard there’s a first-aid station at the plant.”

“That’s right.”

“With an ambulance.”

“An old one. It’s a big plant. It covers a big area.”

“Are there a lot of accidents?”

“It’s an industrial operation. Shit happens.”

“Does the plant pay disability?”

“Mr. Thurman looks after people if they get hurt on the job.”

Reacher nodded and sipped his beer. Watched the other customers sipping theirs, directly and in the mirrors.*Three minutes,* he thought.

Unless they’re early.

Which they were.

Reacher looked to his right and saw two deputies step in through the fire door. He glanced in a mirror and saw the other two walk in the front.

29

The telephone. A useful invention, and instructive in the way it was used. Or not used. Four deputies heading east to make a surprise arrest would not tip their hand with a courtesy telephone call. Not in the real world. They would swoop down unannounced. They would aim to grab up their prey unawares. Therefore their courtesy call was a decoy. It was a move in a game. A move designed to flush Reacher westward into safer territory. It was an invitation.

Which Reacher had interpreted correctly.

And accepted.

And the bartender had not called the station house. Had not gotten voice mail. Had not made a local call at all. He had dialed too many digits. He had called a deputy's cell, and spoken just long enough to let the deputy know who he was, and therefore where Reacher was. Whereupon he had changed his attitude and turned talkative and friendly, to keep Reacher sitting tight. Like he had been told to, beforehand, should the opportunity arise.

Which is why Reacher had not left the bar. If the guy wanted to participate, he was welcome to. He could participate by cleaning up the mess.

And there was going to be a mess.

That was for damn sure.

The deputies who had come in the back walked through the short corridor past the restrooms and stopped where the main room widened out. Reacher kept his eyes on them. Didn't turn his head. A two-front attack was fairly pointless in a room full of mirrors. He could see the other guys quite clearly, smaller than life and reversed. They had stopped a yard inside the front door and were standing shoulder to shoulder, waiting.

The big guy who had thrown up the night before was one of the pair that had come in the front. With him was the guy Reacher had smacked outside the family restaurant. Neither one of them looked in great shape. The two who had

come in the back looked large and healthy enough, but manageable. Four against one, but no real cause for concern. Reacher had first fought four-on-one when he was five years old, against seven-year-olds, on his father's base in the Philippines. He had won then, easily, and he expected to win now.

But then the situation changed.

Two guys stood up from the body of the room. They put their glasses down and dabbed their lips with napkins and scraped their chairs back and stepped forward and separated. One went left, and one went right. One lined up with the guys in back, and one lined up with the guys in front. The newcomers were not the biggest people Reacher had ever seen, but they weren't the smallest, either. They could have been the deputies' brothers or cousins. They probably were. They were dressed the same and looked the same and were built the same.

So, thirteen minutes previously the bartender had not been glancing into the room in hopes of immediate short-term assistance. He had been catching the ringers' eyes and tipping them off:*Stand by, the others are on their way.* Reacher clamped his jaw and the beer in his stomach went sour.*Mistake.* A bad one. He had been smart, but not smart enough.

And now he was going to pay, big time.

Six against one.

Twelve hundred pounds against two-fifty.

No kind of excellent odds.

He realized he was holding his breath. He exhaled, long and slow. Because:*Dum spero speri.* Where there's breath, there's hope. Not an aphorism Zeno of Cittium would have understood or approved of. Zeno spoke Greek, not Latin, and preferred passive resignation to reckless optimism. But the saying worked well enough for Reacher, when all else failed. He took a last sip of Bud and set the bottle back on his napkin. Swiveled his stool and faced the room. Behind him he sensed the bartender moving away to a safe place by the register. In front of him he saw the other customers sidling backward toward the far wall, cradling their glasses and bottles, huddling together, hunkering down. Beside him guys slipped off their stools and melted across the room into the safety of the crowd.

There was movement at both ends of the bar.

Both sets of three men took long paces forward.

Now they defined the ends of an empty rectangle of space. Nothing in it, except Reacher alone on his stool, and the bare wooden floor.

The six guys weren't armed. Reacher was pretty sure about that. Vaughan had said that in Colorado police deputies were limited to civilian status. And the other two guys were just members of the public. Plenty of members of the public in Colorado had private weapons, of course, but generally people pulled weapons at the start of a fight, not later on. They wanted to display them. Show them off. Intimidate, from the get-go. Nobody in Reacher's experience had ever waited to pull a gun.

So, unarmed combat, six-on-one.

The big guy spoke, from six feet inside the front door. He said, "You're in so much trouble you couldn't dig your way out with a steam shovel."

Reacher said, "You talking to me?"

"Damn straight I am."

"Well, don't."

"You showed up one too many times, pal."

"Save your breath. Go outside and throw up. That's what you're good at."

"We're not leaving. And neither are you."

"Free country."

"Not for you. Not anymore."

Reacher stayed on his stool, tensed up and ready, but not visibly. Outwardly he was still calm and relaxed. His brother Joe had been two years older, physically very similar, but temperamentally very different. Joe had eased into fights. He had met escalation with escalation, reluctantly, slowly, rationally, patiently, a little sadly. Therefore he had been a frustrating opponent. Therefore according to

the peculiar little-boy dynamics of the era, Joe's enemies had turned on Reacher himself, the younger brother. The first time, confronted with four baiting seven-year-olds, the five-year-old Reacher had felt a jolt of real fear. The jolt of fear had sparked wildly and jumped tracks in his brain and emerged as intense aggression. He had exploded into action and the fight was over before his four assailants had really intended it to begin. When they got out of the pediatric ward they had stayed well away from him, and his brother, forever. And in his earnest childhood manner Reacher had pondered the experience and felt he had learned a valuable lesson. Years later during advanced army training that lesson had been reinforced. At the grand strategic level it even had a title:*Overwhelming Force.* At the individual level in sweaty gyms the thugs doing the training had pointed out that gentlemen who behaved decently weren't around to train anyone. They were already dead. Therefore:*Hit early, hit hard.*

Overwhelming force.

Hit early, hit hard.

Reacher called it:*Get your retaliation in first.*

He slipped forward off his stool, turned, bent, grasped the iron pillar, spun, and hurled the stool head-high as hard as he could at the three men at the back of the room. Before it hit he launched the other way and charged the new guy next to the guy with the damaged jaw. He led with his elbow and smashed it flat against the bridge of the guy's nose. The guy went down like a tree and before he hit the boards Reacher jerked sideways from the waist and put the same elbow into the big guy's ear. Then he bounced away from the impact and backed into the guy with the bad jaw and buried the elbow deep in his gut. The guy folded forward and Reacher put his hand flat on the back of the guy's head and powered it downward into his raised knee and then shoved the guy away and turned around fast.

The stool had hit one of the deputies and the other new guy neck-high. Wood and iron, thrown hard, spinning horizontally. Maybe they had raised their hands instinctively and broken their wrists, or maybe they hadn't been fast enough and the stool had connected. Reacher wasn't sure. But either way the two guys were sidelined for the moment. They were turned away, bent over, crouched, with the stool still rolling noisily at their feet.

The other deputy was untouched. He was launching forward with a wild grimace

on his face. Reacher danced two steps and took a left hook on the shoulder and put a straight right into the center of the grimace. The guy stumbled back and shook his head and Reacher's arms were clamped from behind in a bear hug. The big guy, presumably. Reacher forced him backward and dropped his chin to his chest and snapped a reverse head butt that made solid contact. Not as good as a forward-going blow, but useful. Then Reacher accelerated all the way backward and crushed the breath out of the guy against the wall. A mirror smashed and the arms loosened and Reacher pulled away and met the other deputy in the center of the room and dodged an incoming right and snapped a right of his own to the guy's jaw. Not a powerful blow, but it rocked the guy enough to open him up for a colossal left to the throat that put him down in a heap.

Eight blows delivered, one taken, one guy down for maybe a seven count, four down for maybe an eight count, the big guy still basically functional.

Not efficient.

Time to get serious.

The bartender had said:*Mr. Thurman looks after people if they get hurt on the job.* Reacher thought:*So let him. Because these guys are following Thurman's orders. Clearly nothing happens here except what Thurman wants.*

The deputy in the back of the room was rolling around and clutching his throat. Reacher kicked him in the ribs hard enough to break a couple and then forced the guy's forearm to the floor with one foot and stamped on it with the other. Then he moved on to the two guys he had hit with the stool. The second deputy, and the new guy. One was crouched down, clutching his forearm, whimpering. Reacher put the flat of his foot on the guy's backside and drove him headfirst into the wall. The other guy had maybe taken the edge of the seat in the chest, like a dull blade. He was having trouble breathing. Reacher kicked his feet out from under him and then kicked him in the head. Then he turned in time to dodge a right hook from the big guy. He took it in the shoulder. Looked for a response. But his balance wasn't good. Floor space was limited by inert assailants. The big guy threw a straight left and Reacher swatted it away and bulldozed a path back to the center of the room.

The big guy followed, fast. Threw a straight right. Reacher jerked his head to the side and took the blow on the collarbone. It was a weak punch. The guy was pale

in the face. He threw a wild breathless haymaker and Reacher stepped back out of range and glanced around.

One stool damaged, one mirror broken, five guys down, twenty spectators still passive.*So far so good.* The big guy stepped back and straightened like they were in a timeout and called, “Like you said, one of us would stay on his feet long enough to get to you.”

Reacher said, “You’re not getting to me. Not even a little bit.” Which puzzled him, deep down. He was close to winning a six-on-one bar brawl and he had nothing to show for it except two bruised shoulders and an ache in his knuckles. It had gone way better than he could have hoped.

Then it started to go way worse.

The big guy said, “Think again.” He put his hands in his pants pockets and came out with two switchblades. Neat wooden handles, plated bindings, plated buttons. He stood in the dusty panting silence and popped the first blade with a precision*click* and then paused and popped the second.

30

The two small clicks the blades made were not attractive sounds. Reacher's stomach clenched. He hated knives. He would have preferred it if the guy had pulled a pair of six-shooters. Guns can miss. In fact they usually did, given stress and pressure and trembling and confusion. After-action reports proved it. The papers were always full of DOAs gunned down with seven bullets to the body, which sounded lethal until you read down into the third paragraph and learned that a hundred and fifty shots had been fired in the first place.

Knives didn't miss. If they touched you, they cut you. The only opponents Reacher truly feared were small whippy guys with fast hands and sharp blades. The big deputy was not fast or nimble, but with knives in his hands dodged blows would not mean dull impacts to the shoulders. They would mean open wounds, pouring blood, severed ligaments and arteries.

Not good.

Reacher clubbed a spectator out of his seat and grabbed the empty chair and held it out in front of him like a lion tamer. The best defense against knives was distance. The best countermove was entanglement. A swung net or coat or blanket was often effective. The blade would hang up in the fabric. But Reacher didn't have a net or a coat or a blanket. A horizontal forest of four chair legs was all he had. He jabbed forward like a fencer and then fell back and shoved another guy out of his seat. Picked up the second empty chair and threw it overhand at the big guy's head. The big guy turned away reflexively and brought his right hand up to shield his face and took the chair on the forearm. Reacher stepped back in and jabbed hard. Got one chair leg in the guy's solar plexus and another in his gut. The guy fell back and took a breath and then came on hard, arms swinging, the blades hissing through the air and winking in the lights.

Reacher danced backward and jabbed with his chair. Made solid contact with the guy's upper arm. The guy spun one way and then the other. Reacher moved left and jabbed again. Got a chair leg into the back of the guy's head. The guy staggered one short step and then came back hard, hands low and apart, the blades moving through tiny dangerous arcs.

Reacher backed off. Shoved a third spectator out of his seat and threw the empty chair high and hard. The big guy flinched away and jerked his arms up and the chair bounced off his elbows. Reacher was ready. He stepped in and jabbed hard and caught the guy low down in the side, below the ribs, above the waist, two hundred and fifty pounds of weight punched through the blunt end of a chair leg into nothing but soft tissue.

The big guy stopped fighting.

His body froze and went rigid and his face crumpled. He dropped both knives and clamped both hands low down on his stomach. For a long moment he stood like a statue and then he jerked forward from the waist and bent down and puked a long stream of blood and mucus on the floor. He staggered away in a crouch and fell to his knees. His shoulders sagged and his face went waxy and bloodless. His stomach heaved and he puked again. More blood, more mucus. He braced his spread fingertips either side of the spreading pool and tried to push himself upward. But he didn't make it. He collapsed sideways in a heap. His eyes rolled up in his head and he rolled on his back and he started breathing fast and shallow. One hand moved back to his stomach and the other beat on the floor. He threw up again, projectile, a fountain of blood vertically into the air. Then he rolled away and curled into a fetal ball.

Game over.

The bar went silent. No sound, except ragged breathing. The air was full of dust and the stink of blood and vomit. Reacher was shaky with excess adrenaline. He forced himself back under control and put his chair down quietly and bent and picked up the fallen knives. Pressed the blades back into the handles against the wood of the bar and slipped both knives into one pocket. Then he stepped around in the silence and checked his results. The first guy he had hit was unconscious on his back. The elbow to the bridge of the nose was always an effective blow. Too hard, and it can slide shards of bone into the frontal lobes. Badly aimed, it can put splinters of cheekbone into the eye sockets. But this one had been perfectly judged. The guy would be sick and groggy for a week, but he would recover.

The guy who had started the evening with a busted jaw had added a rebroken nose and a bad headache. The new guy at the back of the room had a broken arm from the stool and maybe a concussion from being driven headfirst into the wall. The guy next to him was unconscious from the kick in the head. The deputy who

the stool had missed had busted ribs and a broken wrist and a cracked larynx.

Major damage all around, but the whole enterprise had been voluntary from the start.

So, five for five, plus some kind of a medical explanation for the sixth. The big guy had stayed in the fetal position and looked very weak and pale. Like he was hollowed out with sickness. Reacher bent down and checked the pulse in his neck and found it weak and thready. He went through the guy's pockets and found a five-pointed star in the front of the shirt. The badge was made of pewter and two lines were engraved in its center:*Township of Despair, Police Deputy.* Reacher put it in his own shirt pocket. He found a bunch of keys and a thin wad of money in a brass clip. He kept the keys and left the cash. Then he looked around until he found the bartender. The guy was where he had started, leaning back with his fat ass against his register drawer.

"Call the plant," Reacher said. "Get the ambulance down here. Take care with the big guy. He doesn't look good."

His beer was where he had left it, still upright on its napkin. He drained the last of it and set the bottle back down again and walked out the front door into the night.

31

It took ten minutes of aimless driving south of the main drag before he found Nickel Street. The road signs were small and faded and the headlights on Vaughan's old truck were weak and set low. He deciphered Iron and Chromium and Vanadium and Molybdenum and then lost metals altogether and ran through a sequence of numbered avenues before he hit Steel and Platinum and then Gold. Nickel was a dead end off Gold. It had sixteen houses, eight facing eight, fifteen of them small and one of them bigger.

Thurman's pet judge Gardner lived in the big house on Nickel, the bartender had said. Reacher paused at the curb and checked the name on the big house's mailbox and then pulled the truck into the driveway and shut it down. Climbed out and walked to the porch. The place was a medium-sized farmhouse-style structure and looked pretty good relative to its neighbors, but there was no doubt that Gardner would have done better for himself if he had gotten out of town and made it to the Supreme Court in D.C. Or to whatever Circuit included Colorado, or even to night traffic court in Denver. The porch sagged against rotted underpinnings and the paint on the clapboards had aged to dust. Millwork had dried and split. There were twin newel posts at the top of the porch steps. Both had decorative ball shapes carved into their tops and both balls had split along the grain, like they had been attacked with cleavers.

Reacher found a bell push and tapped it twice with his knuckle. An old habit, about not leaving fingerprints if not strictly necessary. Then he waited. In Reacher's experience the average delay when knocking at a suburban door in the middle of the evening was about twenty seconds. Couples looked up from the television and looked at each other and asked,*Who could that be? At this time of night?* Then they mimed their way through offer and counteroffer and finally decided which one of them should make the trip down the hall. Before nine o'clock it was usually the wife. After nine, it was usually the husband.

It was Mrs. Gardner who opened up. The wife, after a twenty-three-second delay. She looked similar to her husband, bulky and somewhere over sixty, with a full head of white hair. Only the amount of the hair and the style of her clothing distinguished her gender. She had the kind of large firm curls that

women get from big heated rollers and she was wearing a shapeless gray dress that reached her ankles. She stood there, patterned and indistinct behind a screen door. She said, “May I help you?”

Reacher said, “I need to see the judge.”

“It’s awful late,” Mrs. Gardner said, which it wasn’t. According to an old longcase clock in the hallway behind her it was eight twenty-nine, and according to the clock in Reacher’s head it was eight thirty-one, but what the woman meant was:*You’re a big ugly customer.* Reacher smiled.*Look at yourself,* Vaughan had said.*What do you see?* Reacher knew he was no kind of an ideal nighttime visitor. Nine times out of ten only Mormon missionaries were less welcome than him.

“It’s urgent,” he said.

The woman stood still and said nothing. In Reacher’s experience the husband would show up if the doorstep interview lasted any longer than thirty seconds. He would crane his neck out of the living room and call,*Who is it, dear?* And Reacher wanted the screen door open long before that happened. He wanted to be able to stop the front door from closing, if necessary.

“It’s urgent,” he said again, and pulled the screen door. It screeched on worn hinges. The woman stepped back, but didn’t try to slam the front door. Reacher stepped inside and let the screen slap shut behind him. The hallway smelled of still air and cooking. Reacher turned and closed the front door gently and clicked it against the latch. At that point the thirty seconds he had been counting in his head elapsed and the judge stepped out to the hallway.

The old guy was dressed in the same gray suit pants Reacher had seen before, but his suit coat was off and his tie was loose. He stood still for a moment, evidently searching his memory, because after ten long seconds puzzlement left his face and was replaced by an altogether different emotion, and he said, “You?”

Reacher nodded.

“Yes, me,” he said.

“What do you want? What do you mean by coming here?”

“I came here to talk to you.”

“I meant, what are you doing in Despair at all? You were excluded.”

“Didn’t take,” Reacher said. “So sue me.”

“I’m going to call the police.”

“Please do. But they won’t answer, as I’m sure you know. Neither will the deputies.”

“Where are the deputies?”

“On their way up to the first-aid station.”

“What happened to them?”

“I did.”

The judge said nothing.

Reacher said, “And Mr. Thurman is up in his little airplane right now. Out of touch for another five and a half hours. So you’re on your own. It’s initiative time for Judge Gardner.”

“What do you want?”

“I want you to invite me into your living room. I want you to ask me to sit down and whether I take cream and sugar in my coffee, which I don’t, by the way. Because so far I’m here with your implied permission, and therefore I’m not trespassing. I’d like to keep it that way.”

“You’re not only trespassing, you’re in violation of a town ordinance.”

“That’s what I’d like to talk about. I’d like you to reconsider. Consider it an appeals process.”

“Are you nuts?”

“A little unconventional, maybe. But I’m not armed and I’m not making threats. I just want to talk.”

“Get lost.”

“On the other hand I am a large stranger with nothing to lose. In a town where there is no functioning law enforcement.”

“I have a gun.”

“I’m sure you do. In fact I’m sure you have several. But you won’t use any of them.”

“You think not?”

“You’re a man of the law. You know what kind of hassle comes afterward. I don’t think you want to face that kind of thing.”

“You’re taking a risk.”

“Getting out of bed in the morning is a risk.”

The judge said nothing to that. Didn’t yield, didn’t accede. Impasse. Reacher turned to the wife and took all the amiability out of his face and replaced it with the kind of thousand-yard stare he had used years ago on recalcitrant witnesses.

He asked, “What do you think, Mrs. Gardner?”

She started to speak a couple of times but couldn’t get any words past a dry throat. Finally she said, “I think we should all sit down and talk.” But the way she said it showed she wasn’t all the way scared. She was a tough old bird. Probably had to be, to have survived sixty-some years in Despair, and marriage to the boss man’s flunky.

Her husband huffed once and turned around and led the way into the living room. A sofa, an armchair, another armchair, with a lever on the side that meant it was a recliner. There was a coffee table and a large television set wired to a satellite box. The furniture was covered in a floral pattern that was duplicated in the drapes. The drapes were closed and had a ruffled pelmet made from the same fabric. Reacher suspected that Mrs. Gardner had sewed them herself.

The judge said, “Take a seat, I guess.”

Mrs. Gardner said, “I’m not going to make coffee. I think under the

circumstances that would be a step too far."

"Your choice," Reacher said. "But I have to tell you I'd truly appreciate some." He paused a moment and then sat down in the armchair. Gardner sat in the recliner. His wife stood for a moment longer and then sighed once and headed out of the room. A minute later Reacher heard water running and the quiet metallic sound of an aluminum percolator basket being rinsed.

Gardner said, "There is no appeal."

"There has to be," Reacher said. "It's a constitutional issue. The Fifth and the Fourteenth Amendments guarantee due process. At the very least there must be the possibility of judicial review."

"Are you serious?"

"Completely."

"You want to go to federal court over a local vagrancy ordinance?"

"I'd prefer you to concede that a mistake has been made, and then go ahead and tear up whatever paperwork was generated."

"There was no mistake. You are a vagrant, as defined by law."

"I'd like you to reconsider that."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

"I'd like to understand why it's so important to you to have free rein in our town."

"And I'd like to understand why it's so important to you to keep me out."

"Where's your loss? It's not much of a place."

"It's a matter of principle."

Gardner said nothing. A moment later his wife came in, with a single mug of

coffee in her hand. She placed it carefully on the table in front of Reacher's chair and then backed away and sat down on the sofa. Reacher picked up the mug and took a sip. The coffee was hot, strong, and smooth. The mug was cylindrical, narrow in relation to its height, made of delicate bone china, and it had a thin lip.

"Excellent," Reacher said. "Thank you very much. I'm really very grateful."

Mrs. Gardner paused a beat and said, "You're really very welcome."

Reacher said, "You did a great job with the drapes, too."

Mrs. Gardner didn't reply to that. The judge said, "There's nothing I can do. There's no provision for an appeal. Sue the town, if you must."

Reacher said, "You told me you'd welcome me with open arms if I got a job."

The judge nodded. "Because that would remove the presumption of vagrancy."

"There you go."

"Have you gotten a job?"

"I have prospects. That's the other thing we need to talk about. It's not healthy that this town has no functioning law enforcement. So I want you to swear me in as a deputy."

There was silence for a moment. Reacher took the pewter star from his shirt pocket. He said, "I already have the badge. And I have a lot of relevant experience."

"You're crazy."

"Just trying to fill a hole."

"You're completely insane."

"I'm offering my services."

"Finish your coffee and get out of my home."

"The coffee is hot and it's good. I can't just gulp it down."

“Then leave it. Get the hell out. Now.”

“So you won’t swear me in?”

The judge stood up and planted his feet wide and made himself as tall as he could get, which was about five feet nine inches. His eyes narrowed as his brain ran calculations about present dangers versus future contingencies. He was silent with preoccupation for a long moment and then he said, “I’d rather deputize the entire damn population. Every last man, woman, and child in Despair. In fact, I think I will. Twenty-six hundred people. You think you can get past them all? Because I don’t. We aim to keep you out, mister, and we’re going to. You better believe it. You can take that to the bank.”

32

Reacher thumped back over the expansion joint at nine-thirty in the evening and was outside the diner before nine-thirty-five. He figured Vaughan might swing by there a couple of times during the night. He figured that if he left her truck on the curb she would see it and be reassured that he was OK. Or at least that her truck was OK.

He went inside to leave her keys at the register and saw Lucy Anderson sitting alone in a booth. Short shorts, blue sweatshirt, tiny socks, big sneakers. A lot of bare leg. She was gazing into space and smiling. The first time he had seen her he had characterized her as not quite a hundred percent pretty. Now she looked pretty damn good. She looked radiant, and taller, and straighter. She looked like a completely different person.

She had changed.

Before, she had been hobbled by worry.

Now she was happy.

He paused at the register and she noticed him and looked over and smiled. It was a curious smile. There was a lot of straightforward contentment in it, but a little triumph, too. A little superiority. Like she had won a significant victory, at his expense.

He handed Vaughan's keys to the cashier and the woman asked, "Are you eating with us tonight?" He thought about it. His stomach had settled. The adrenaline had drained away. He realized he was hungry. No sustenance since breakfast, except for coffee and some empty calories from the bottle of Bud in the bar. And he had burned plenty of calories in the bar. That was for sure. He was facing an energy deficit. So he said, "Yes, I guess I'm ready for dinner."

He walked over and slid into Lucy Anderson's booth. She looked across the table at him and smiled the same smile all over again. Contentment, triumph, superiority, victory. Up close the smile looked a lot bigger and it had a bigger effect. It was a real megawatt grin. She had great teeth. Her eyes were bright and

effect. It was a real megawatt grin. She had great teeth. Her eyes were bright and clear and blue. He said, “This afternoon you looked like Lucy. Now you look like Lucky.”

She said, “Now I feel like Lucky.”

“What changed?”

“What do you think?”

“You heard from your husband.”

She smiled again, a hundred percent happiness.

“I sure did,” she said.

“He left Despair.”

“He sure did. Now you’ll never get him.”

“I never wanted him. I never heard of him before I met you.”

“Really,” she said, in the exaggerated and sarcastic way he had heard young people use the word. As far as he understood it, the effect was intended to convey:*How big of an idiot do you think I am?*

He said, “You’re confusing me with someone else.”

“Really.”

*Look at yourself,*Vaughan had said.*What do you see?*

“I’m not a cop,” Reacher said. “I was one once, and maybe I still look like one to you, but I’m not one anymore.”

She didn’t answer. But he knew she wasn’t convinced. He said, “Your husband must have left late this afternoon. He was there at three and gone before seven.”

“You went back?”

“I’ve been there twice today.”

“Which proves you were looking for him.”

“I guess I was. But only on your behalf.”

“Really.”

“What did he do?”

“You already know.”

“If I already know, it can’t hurt to tell me again, can it?”

“I’m not stupid. My position is I don’t know about anything he’s done. Otherwise you’ll call me an accessory. We have lawyers, you know.”

“We?”

“People in our position. Which you know all about.”

“I’m not a cop, Lucky. I’m just a passing stranger. I don’t know all about anything.”

She smiled again. Happiness, triumph, victory.

Reacher asked, “Where has he gone?”

“Like I’d tell you*that.* ”

“When are you joining him, wherever he is?”

“In a couple of days.”

“I could follow you.”

She smiled again, impregnable. “Wouldn’t do you any good.”

The waitress came by and Reacher asked her for coffee and steak. When she had gone away again he looked across at Lucy Anderson and said, “There are others in the position you were in yesterday. There’s a girl in town right now, just waiting.”

“I hope there are plenty of us.”

I hope there are plenty of us.

“I think maybe she’s waiting in vain. I know that a boy died out there a day or two ago.”

Lucy Anderson shook her head.

“Not possible,” she said. “I know that none of us died. I would have heard.”

“Us?”

“People in our position.”

“Somebody died.”

“People die all the time.”

“Young people? For no apparent reason?”

She didn’t answer that, and he knew she never would. The waitress brought his coffee. He took a sip. It was not as good as Mrs. Gardner’s, either in terms of brew or receptacle. He put the mug down and looked at the girl again and said, “Whatever, Lucy. I wish you nothing but good luck, whatever the hell you’re doing and wherever the hell you’re going.”

“That’s it? No more questions?”

“I’m just here to eat.”

He ate alone, because Lucy Anderson left before his steak arrived. She smiled and slid out of the booth and walked away. More accurately, she skipped away. Light on her feet, happy, full of energy. She pushed out through the door and instead of huddling into her shirt against the chill she squared her shoulders and turned her face upward and breathed the night air like she was in an enchanted forest. Reacher watched her until she was lost to sight and then gazed into space until his food showed up.

He was through eating by ten-thirty and headed back to the motel. He dropped

He was through eating by ten thirty and headed back to the motel. He dropped by the office, to pay for another night's stay. He always rented rooms one night at a time, even when he knew he was going to hang out in a place longer. It was a reassuring habit. A comforting ritual, intended to confirm his absolute freedom to move on. The day clerk was still on duty. The stout woman. The nosy woman. He assembled a collection of small bills and waited for his change and said, "Go over what you were telling me about the metal plant."

"What was I telling you?"

"Violations. Real crimes. You were interested in why the plane flies every night."

The woman said, "So you*are* a cop."

"I used to be. Maybe I still have the old habits."

The woman shrugged and looked a little sheepish. Maybe even blushed a little.

"It's just silly amateur stuff," she said. "That's what you'll think."

"Amateur?"

"I'm a day trader. I do research on my computer. I was thinking about that operation."

"What about it?"

"It seems to make way too much money. But what do I know? I'm not an expert. I'm not a broker or a forensic accountant or anything."

"Talk me through it."

"Business sectors go up and down. There are cycles, to do with commodity prices and supply and demand and market conditions. Right now metal recycling as a whole is in a down cycle. But that place is raking it in."

"How do you know?"

"Employment seems to be way up."

"That's pretty vague."

“It files taxes, federal and state. I looked at the figures, to pass the time.”

And because you’re a nosy neighbor,Reacher thought.

“And?” he asked.

“It’s reporting great profits. If it was a public company, I’d be buying stock, big time. If I had any money, that is. If I wasn’t a motel clerk.”

“OK.”

“But it’s not a public company. It’s private. So it’s probably making more than it’s reporting.”

“So you think they’re cutting corners out there? With environmental violations?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“Would that make much difference? I thought rules were pretty slack now anyway.”

“Maybe.”

“What about the plane?”

The woman glanced away. “Just silly thoughts.”

“Try me.”

“Well, I was just thinking, if the fundamentals don’t support the profits, and it’s not about violations, then maybe there’s something else going on.”

“Like what?”

“Maybe that plane is bringing stuff in every night. To sell. Like smuggling.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“Stuff that isn’t metal.”

“From where?”

From where?

“I’m not sure.”

Reacher said nothing.

The woman said, “See? What do I know? I have too much time on my hands, that’s all. Way too much. And broadband. That can really do a person’s head in.”

She turned away and busied herself with an entry in a book and Reacher put his change in his pocket. Before he left he glanced at the row of hooks behind the clerk’s shoulder and saw that four keys were missing. Therefore four rooms were occupied. His own, Lucy Anderson’s, one for the woman with the large underwear, and one for the new girl in town, he guessed. The dark girl, who he hadn’t met yet, but who he might meet soon. He suspected that she was going to be in town longer than Lucy Anderson, and he suspected that at the end of her stay she wasn’t going to be skipping away with a smile on her face.

He went back to his room and showered, but he was too restless to sleep. So as soon as the stink of the bar fight was off him he dressed again and went out and walked. On a whim he stopped at a phone booth under a streetlight and pulled the directory and looked up David Robert Vaughan. He was right there in the book. Vaughan, D. R., with an address on Fifth Street, Hope, Colorado.

Two blocks south.

He had seen Fourth Street. Perhaps he should take a look at Fifth Street, too. Just for the sake of idle curiosity.

33

Fifth Street was more or less a replica of Fourth Street, except that it was residential on both sides. Trees, yards, picket fences, mailboxes, small neat houses resting quietly in the moonlight. A nice place to live, probably. Vaughan's house was close to the eastern limit. Nearer Kansas than Despair. It had a plain aluminum mailbox out front, mounted on a store-bought wooden post. The post had been treated against decay. The box had*Vaughan* written on both sides with stick-on italic letters. They had been carefully applied and were perfectly aligned. Rare, in Reacher's experience. Most people seemed to have trouble with stick-on letters. He imagined that the glue was too aggressive to allow the correction of mistakes. To get seven letters each side level and true spoke of meticulous planning. Maybe a straightedge had been taped in position first, and then removed.

The house and the yard had been maintained to a high standard, too. Reacher was no expert, but he could tell the difference between care and neglect. The yard had no lawn. It was covered with golden gravel, with shrubs and bushes pushing up through the stones. The driveway was paved with small riven slabs that seemed to be the same color as the gravel. The same slabs made a narrower winding walkway to the door. More slabs were set here and there in the gravel, like stepping-stones. The bushes and the shrubs were neatly pruned. Some of them had small flowers on their branches, all closed up for the night against the chill.

The house itself was a low one-story ranch maybe fifty years old. At the right-hand end was a single attached garage and at the left was a T-shaped bump-out that maybe housed the bedrooms, one front, one back. Reacher guessed the kitchen would be next to the garage and the living room would be between the kitchen and the bedrooms. There was a chimney. The siding and the roof tiles were not new, but they had been replaced within living memory and had settled and weathered into pleasant maturity.

A nice house.

An empty house.

It was dark and silent. Some drapes were halfway open, and some were all the way open. No light inside, except a tiny green glow in one window. Probably the kitchen, probably a microwave clock. Apart from that, no sign of life. Nothing. No sound, no subliminal hum, no vibe. Once upon a time Reacher had made his living storming darkened buildings, and more than once it had been a matter of life or death to decide whether they were occupied or not. He had developed a sense, and his sense right then was that Vaughan's house was empty.

So where was David Robert?

At work, possibly. Maybe they both worked nights. Some couples chose to coordinate their schedules that way. Maybe David Robert was a nurse or a doctor or worked night construction on the Interstates. Maybe he was a journalist or a print worker, involved with newspapers. Maybe he was in the food trade, getting stuff ready for morning markets. Maybe he was a radio DJ, broadcasting through the night on a powerful AM station. Or maybe he was a long-haul trucker or an actor or a musician and was on the road for lengthy spells. Maybe for months at a time. Maybe he was a sailor or an airline pilot.

Maybe he was a state policeman.

Vaughan had asked:*Don't I look married?*

*No,*Reacher thought.*You really don't. Not like some people do.*

He found a leafy cross-street and walked back north to Second Street. Vaughan's truck was still parked where he had left it. The diner's lights were spilling out all over it. He walked another block and came out on First Street. There was no cloud in the sky. Plenty of moon. To his right there was silvery flatness all the way to Kansas. To his left the Rockies were faintly visible, dim and blue and bulky, with their north-facing snow channels lit up like ghostly blades, impossibly high. The town was still and silent and lonely. Not quite eleven-thirty in the evening, and no one was out and about. No traffic. No activity at all.

Reacher was no kind of an insomniac, but he didn't feel like sleep. Too early. Too many questions. He walked a block on First Street and then headed south again, toward the diner. He was no kind of a social animal either, but right then he wanted to see people, and he figured the diner was the only place he was

going to find any.

He found four. The college-girl waitress, an old guy in a seed cap eating alone at the counter, a middle-aged guy alone in a booth with a spread of tractor catalogs in front of him, and a frightened Hispanic girl alone in a booth with nothing.

*Dark, not blonde,*Vaughan had said.*Sitting around and staring west like she's waiting for word from Despair.*

She was tiny. She was about eighteen or nineteen years old. She had long center-parted jet-black hair that framed a face that had a high forehead and enormous eyes. The eyes were brown and looked like twin pools of terror and tragedy. Under them were a small nose and a small mouth. Reacher guessed she had a pretty smile but didn't use it often and certainly hadn't used it for weeks. Her skin was mid-brown and her pose was absolutely still. Her hands were out of sight under the table but Reacher was sure they were clasped together in her lap. She was wearing a blue San Diego Padres warm-up jacket with a blue scoop-neck T-shirt under it. There was nothing on the table in front of her. No plate, no cup. But she hadn't just arrived. The way she was settled meant she must have been sitting there for ten or fifteen minutes at least. Nobody could have gotten so still any faster.

Reacher stepped to the far side of the register and the college-girl waitress joined him there. Reacher bent his head, at an angle, universal body language for:*I want to talk to you quietly.* The waitress moved a little closer and bent her own head at a parallel angle, like a co-conspirator.

"That girl," Reacher said. "Didn't she order?"

The waitress whispered, "She has no money."

"Ask her what she wants. I'll pay for it." He moved away to a different booth, where he could watch the girl without being obvious about it. He saw the waitress approach her, saw incomprehension on the girl's face, then doubt, then refusal. The waitress stepped over to Reacher's booth and whispered, "She says she can't possibly accept."

Reacher said, "Go back and tell her there are no strings attached. Tell her I'm not hitting on her. Tell her I don't even want to talk to her. Tell her I've been broke and hungry, too."

The waitress went back. This time the girl relented. She pointed to a couple of items on the menu. Reacher was sure they were the cheapest choices. The waitress went away to place the order and the girl turned a little in her seat and inclined her head in a courteous little nod, full of dignity, and the corners of her mouth softened like the beginnings of a smile. Then she turned back and went still again.

The waitress came straight back to Reacher and he asked for coffee. The waitress whispered, “Her check is going to be nine-fifty. Yours will be a dollar and a half.” Reacher peeled a ten and three ones off the roll in his pocket and slid them across the table. The waitress picked them up and thanked him for the tip and asked, “So when were you broke and hungry?”

“Never,” Reacher said. “My whole life I got three squares a day from the army and since then I’ve always had money in my pocket.”

“So you made that up just to make her feel better?”

“Sometimes people need convincing.”

“You’re a nice guy,” the waitress said.

“Not everyone agrees with that.”

“But some do.”

“Do they?”

“I hear things.”

“What things?”

But the girl just smiled at him and walked away.

From a safe distance Reacher watched the Hispanic girl eat a tuna melt sandwich and drink a chocolate milk shake. Good choices, nutritionally. Excellent value for his money. Protein, fats, carbs, some sugar. If she ate like that every day she would weigh two hundred pounds before she was thirty, but in dire need on the road it was wise to load up. After she was finished she dabbed her lips with her

napkin and pushed her plate and her glass away and then sat there, just as quiet and still as before. The clock in Reacher's head hit midnight and the clock on the diner's wall followed it a minute later. The old guy in the seed cap crept out with a creaking arthritic gait and the tractor salesman gathered his paperwork together and called for another cup of coffee.

The Hispanic girl stayed put. Reacher had seen plenty of people doing what she was doing, in cafés and diners near bus depots and railroad stations. She was staying warm, saving energy, passing time. She was enduring. He watched her profile and figured she was a lot closer to Zeno's ideal than he was.*The unquestioning acceptance of destinies.* She looked infinitely composed and patient.

The tractor salesman drained his final cup and gathered his stuff and left. The waitress backed away to a corner and picked up a paperback book. Reacher curled his fist around his mug to keep it warm.

The Hispanic girl stayed put.

Then she moved. She shifted sideways on her vinyl bench and stood up all in one smooth, delicate motion. She was extremely petite. Not more than five-nothing, not more than ninety-some pounds. Below the T-shirt she was wearing jeans and cheap shoes. She stood still and faced the door and then she turned toward Reacher's booth. There was nothing in her face. Just fear and shyness and loneliness. She came to some kind of a decision and stepped forward and stood off about a yard and said, "You can talk to me if you really want to."

Reacher shook his head. "I meant what I said."

"Thank you for my dinner." Her voice matched her physique. It was small and delicate. It was lightly accented, but English was probably her primary language. She was from southern California for sure. The Padres were probably her home team.

Reacher asked, "You OK for breakfast tomorrow?"

She was still for a moment while she fought her pride and then she shook her head.

Reacher asked, "Lunch? Dinner tomorrow?"

She shook her head.

“You OK at the motel?”

“That’s why. I paid for three nights. It took all my money.”

“You have to eat.”

The girl said nothing. Reacher thought,*Ten bucks a meal is thirty bucks a day, three days makes ninety, plus ten for contingencies or phone calls makes a hundred.* He peeled five ATM-fresh twenties off his roll and fanned them on the table. The girl said, “I can’t take your money. I couldn’t pay it back.”

“Pay it forward instead.”

The girl said nothing.

“You know what pay it forward means?”

“I’m not sure.”

“It means years from now you’ll be in a diner somewhere and you’ll see someone who needs a break. So you’ll help them out.”

The girl nodded.

“I could do that,” she said.

“So take the money.”

She stepped closer and picked up the bills.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Don’t thank me. Thank whoever helped me way back. And whoever helped him before that. And so on.”

“Have you ever been to Despair?”

“Four times in the last two days.”

“Did you see anyone there?”

Did you see anyone there?

“I saw lots of people.”

She moved closer still and put her slim hips against the end of his table. She hoisted a cheap vinyl purse and propped it on the laminate against her belly and unsnapped the clasp. She dipped her head and her hair fell forward. Her hands were small and brown and had no rings on the fingers or polish on the nails. She rooted around in her bag for a moment and came out with an envelope. It was stiff and nearly square. From a greeting card, probably. She opened the flap and pulled out a photograph. She held it neatly between her thumb and her forefinger and put her little fist on the table and adjusted its position until Reacher could see the picture at a comfortable angle.

“Did you see this man?” she asked.

It was another standard one-hour six-by-four color print. Glossy paper, no border. Shot on Fuji film, Reacher guessed. Back when it had mattered for forensic purposes he had gotten pretty good at recognizing film stock by its color biases. This print had strong greens, which was a Fuji characteristic. Kodak products favored the reds and the warmer tones. The camera had been a decent unit with a proper glass lens. There was plenty of detail. Focus was not quite perfect. The choice of aperture was not inspired. The depth of field was neither shallow nor deep. An old SLR, Reacher thought, therefore bought secondhand or borrowed from an older person. There was no retail market for decent film cameras anymore. Everyone had moved into digital technology. The print in the girl’s hand was clearly recent, but it looked like a much older product. It was a pleasant but unexceptional picture from an old SLR loaded with Fujicolor and wielded by an amateur.

He took the print from the girl and held it between his own thumb and forefinger. The bright greens in the photograph were in a background expanse of grass and a foreground expanse of T-shirt. The grass looked watered and forced and manicured and was probably in a city park somewhere. The T-shirt was a cheap cotton product being worn by a thin guy of about nineteen or twenty. The camera was looking up at him, as if the photograph was being taken by a much shorter person. The guy was posing quite formally and awkwardly. There was no spontaneity in his stance. Maybe repeated fumbles with the camera’s controls had required him to hold his position a little too long. His smile was genuine but a little frozen. He had white teeth in a brown face. He looked young, and

friendly, and amiable, and fun to be around, and completely harmless.

Not thin, exactly.

He looked lean and wiry.

Not short, not tall. About average, in terms of height.

He looked to be about five feet eight.

He looked to weigh about a hundred and forty pounds.

He was Hispanic, but as much Mayan or Aztec as Spanish. There was plenty of pure Indian blood in him. That was for sure. He had shiny black hair, not brushed, a little tousled, neither long nor short. Maybe an inch and a half or two inches, with a clear tendency to wave.

He had prominent cheekbones.

He was casually dressed, and casually turned out.

He hadn't shaved.

His chin and his upper lip were rough with black stubble.

His cheeks and his throat, not so much.

Young.

Not much more than a boy.

The girl asked, "Did you see him?"

Reacher asked, "What's your name?"

"*My*name?"

"Yes."

"Maria."

"What's his name?"

“Raphael Ramirez.”

“Is he your boyfriend?”

“Yes.”

“How old is he?”

“Twenty.”

“Did you take this picture?”

“Yes.”

“In a park in San Diego?”

“Yes.”

“With your dad’s camera?”

“My uncle’s,” the girl said. “How did you know?”

Reacher didn’t answer. He looked again at Raphael Ramirez in the photograph. Maria’s boyfriend. Twenty years old. Five-eight, one-forty. The build. The hair, the cheekbones, the stubble.

The girl asked, “Did you see him?”

Reacher shook his head.

“No,” he said. “I didn’t see him.”

34

The girl left the diner. Reacher watched her go. He thought that an offer to walk her back to the motel might be misinterpreted, as if he was after something more for his hundred bucks than a feel-good glow. And she was in no kind of danger, anyway. Hope seemed to be a safe enough place. Unlikely to be packs of malefactors roaming the streets, mainly because nobody was roaming the streets. It was the middle of the night in a quiet, decent place in the middle of nowhere. So Reacher let her walk away and sat alone in his booth and roused the college girl from her book and had her bring him more coffee.

“You’ll never sleep,” she said.

“How often does Officer Vaughan swing by during the night?” he asked.

The girl smiled the same smile she had used before, right after she said*I hear things.*

“At least once,” she said, and smiled again.

He said, “She’s married.”

She said, “I know.” She took the flask away and headed back to her book and left him with a steaming mug. He dipped his head and inhaled the smell. When he looked up again he saw Vaughan’s cruiser glide by outside. She slowed, as if she was noting that her truck was back. But she didn’t stop. She slid right by the diner’s window and drove on down Second Street.

Reacher left the diner at one o’clock in the morning and walked back to the motel. The moon was still out. The town was still quiet. The motel office had a low light burning. The rooms were all dark. He sat down in the plastic lawn

chair outside his door and stretched his legs straight out and put his hands behind his head and listened to the silence, eyes wide open, staring into the moonlight.

It didn't work. He didn't relax.

*You'll never sleep,*the waitress had said.

*But not because of the coffee,*he thought.

He got up again and walked away. Straight back to the diner. There were no customers. The waitress was reading her book. Reacher stepped straight to the register and took Vaughan's truck keys off the counter. The waitress looked up but didn't speak. Reacher stepped back to the door and caught it before it closed. Headed out across the sidewalk to the truck. Unlocked it, got in, started it up. Five minutes later he thumped over the line and was back in Despair.

The first twelve miles of empty road were predictably quiet. The town was quiet, too. Reacher slowed at the gas station and coasted down to twenty miles an hour and took a good look around. Main Street was deserted and silent. No cars on the streets, nobody on the sidewalks. The police station was dark. The rooming house was dark. The bar was closed up and shuttered. The hotel was just a blank façade, with a closed street door and a dozen dark windows. The church was empty and silent. The green grounding strap from the lightning rod was stained gray by the moonlight.

He drove on until the street petered out into half-colonized scrubland. He pulled a wide circle on the packed sand and stopped and idled with the whole town laid out north of him. It was lit up silver by the moon. It was just crouching there, silent and deserted and insignificant in the vastness.

He threaded his way back to Main Street. Turned left and headed onward, west, toward the metal plant.

The plant was shut down and dark. The wall around it glowed ghostly white in the moonlight. The personnel gate was closed. The acres of parking were deserted. Reacher followed the wall and steered the truck left and right until its weak low beams picked up the Tahoes' tracks. He followed their giant figure 8, all the way around the plant and the residential compound. The plantings were black and massive. The windsocks hung limp in the air. The plant's vehicle gate was shut. Reacher drove slowly past it and then bumped up across the truck road and drove another quarter-turn through the dirt and stopped where the figure 8's two loops met, in the throat between the plant's metal wall and the residential compound's fieldstone wall. He shut off his lights and shut down the engine and rolled down the windows and waited.

He heard the plane at five past two in the morning. A single engine, far in the distance, feathering and blipping. He craned his neck and saw a light in the sky, way to the south. A landing light. It looked motionless, like it would be suspended up there forever. Then it grew imperceptibly bigger and started hopping slightly, side to side, up and down, but mostly down. A small plane, on approach, buffeted by nighttime thermals and rocked by a firm hand on nervous controls. Its sound grew closer, but quieter, as the pilot shed power and looked for a glide path.

Lights came on beyond the fieldstone wall. A dull reflected glow. Runway markers, Reacher guessed, one at each end of the strip. He saw the plane move in the air, jumping left, correcting right, lining up with the lights. It was coming in from Reacher's left. When it was three hundred yards out he saw that it was a smallish low-wing monoplane. It was white. When it was two hundred yards out he saw that it had a fixed undercarriage, with fairings over all three wheels, called*pants* by airplane people. When it was a hundred yards out he identified it as a Piper, probably some kind of a Cherokee variant, a four-seater, durable, reliable, common, and popular. Beyond that, he had no information. He knew a little about small planes, but not a lot.

It came in low left-to-right across his windshield in a high-speed rush of light and air and sound. It cleared the fieldstone wall by six feet and dropped out of sight. The engine blipped and feathered and then a minute later changed its note to a loud angry buzzing. Reacher imagined the plane taxiing like a fat self-important insect, white in the moonlight, bumping sharply over rough ground, turning abruptly on its short wheelbase, heading for its barn. Then he heard it

turning abruptly on its short wheelbase, heading for its barn. Then he heard it shut down and stunned silence flooded in his windows, even more intense than before.

The runway lights went off.

He saw and heard nothing more.

He waited ten minutes for safety's sake and then started the truck and backed up and turned and drove away on the blind side, with the bulk of the plant between him and the house. He bumped through the acres of empty parking, skirted the short end of the plant, and joined the truck route. He put his headlights on and got comfortable in his seat and settled to a fast cruise on the firm wide surface, heading out of town westward, toward the MPs and whatever lay forty miles beyond them.

35

The MPs were all asleep, except for two on sentry duty inside the guard shack. Reacher saw them as he drove past, bulky figures in the gloom, dressed in desert camos and vests, MP brassards, no helmets. They had an orange nightlight burning near the floor, to preserve their night vision. They were standing back to back, one watching the southern approach, one the northern. Reacher slowed and waved, and then hit the gas again and kept on going.

Thirty miles later the solid truck road swung sharply to the right and speared north through the darkness toward the distant Interstate. But the old route it must have been built over meandered on straight ahead, unsignposted and apparently aimless. Reacher followed it. He bumped down off the flat coarse blacktop onto a surface as bad as Despair's own road. Lumpy, uneven, cheaply top-dressed with gravel on tar. He followed it between two ruined farms and entered an empty spectral world with nothing on his left and nothing on his right and nothing ahead of him except the wandering gray ribbon of road and the silver moonlit mountains remote in the distance. Nothing happened for four more miles. He seemed to make no progress at all through the landscape. Then he passed a lone roadside sign that said:*Halfway County Route 37.* A mile later he saw a glow in the air. He came up a long rise and the road peaked and fell away into the middle distance and suddenly laid out right in front of him was a neat checkerboard of lit streets and pale buildings. Another mile later he passed a sign that said:*Halfway Township.* He slowed and checked his mirrors and pulled to the shoulder and stopped.

The town in front of him was aptly named. Another trick of topography put the moonlit Rockies closer again. The hardy souls who had struggled onward from Despair had been rewarded for forty miles of actual travel with an apparent hundred miles of progress. But by then they would have been wise enough and bitter enough not to get carried away with enthusiasm, so they had given their next resting place the suitably cautious name of Halfway, perhaps secretly hoping that their unassuming modesty would be further rewarded by finding out that they were in fact more than halfway there.*Which they weren't,* Reacher

thought. Forty miles was forty miles, optical illusions notwithstanding. They were only a fifth of the way there. But the wagons had rolled out of Despair with only the optimists aboard, and the town of Halfway reflected their founding spirit. The place looked crisp and bright and livelier in the dead of night than Despair had in the middle of the day. It had been rebuilt, perhaps several times. There was nothing ancient visible. The structures Reacher could make out seemed to be seventies' stucco and eighties' glass, not nineteenth-century brick. In the age of fast transportation there was no real reason why one nearby town rather than another should be chosen for investment and development, except for inherited traits of vibrancy and vigor. Despair had suffered and Halfway had prospered, and the optimists had won, like they sometimes deserved to.

Reacher coasted down the rise into town. It was a quarter past three in the morning. Plenty of places were lit up but not many were actually open. A gas station and a coffee shop was about all, at first sight. But the town and the county shared the same name, which in Reacher's experience implied that certain services would be available around the clock. County police, for instance. They would have a station somewhere, manned all night. There would be a hospital, too, with a 24-7 emergency room. And to serve the gray area in between, where perhaps the county police were interested and the emergency room had failed, there would be a morgue. And it would be open for business night and day. A county town with a cluster of dependent municipalities all around it had to provide essential services. There was no morgue in Hope or Despair.*Not even a meat locker,* Vaughan had said, and presumably other local towns were in the same situation. And shit happened, and ambulances had to go somewhere. Dead folks couldn't be left out in the street until the next business day. Usually.

Morgues were normally close to hospitals, and a redeveloped county seat would normally have a new hospital, and new hospitals were normally built on the outskirts of towns, where land was empty and available and cheap. Halfway had one road in from the east, and a spider web of four roads out north and west, and Reacher found the hospital a half mile out on the second exit road he tried. It was a place the size of a university campus, long, low, and deep, with buildings like elongated ski chalets. It looked calm and friendly, like sickness and death were really no big deal. It had a vast parking lot, empty except for a cluster of battered cars near a staff entrance and a lone shiny sedan in a section marked off with ferocious warning signs:*MD Parking Only.* Steam drifted from vents from a building in back. The laundry, Reacher guessed, where sheets and towels were

being washed overnight by the drivers of the battered cars, while the guy from the shiny sedan tried to keep people alive long enough to use them in the morning.

He avoided the front entrances. He wanted dead people, not sick people, and he knew how to find them. He had visited more morgues than wards in his life, by an order of magnitude. Morgues were usually well hidden from the public. A sensitivity issue. They were often not signposted at all, or else labeled something anodyne like*Special Services.* But they were always accessible. Meat wagons had to be able to roll in and out unobstructed.

He found Halfway's county morgue in back, next to the hospital laundry, which he thought was a smart design. The laundry's drifting steam would camouflage the output of the morgue's crematorium chimney. The place was another low, wide, chalet-style building. It had a high steel fence, and a sliding gate, and a guard shack.

The fence was solid, and the gate was closed, and there was a guard in the shack.

Reacher parked off to one side and climbed out of the truck and stretched. The guard watched him do it. Reacher finished stretching and glanced around like he was getting his bearings and then headed straight for the shack. The guard slid back the bottom part of his window and ducked his head down, like he needed to line up his ears with the empty space to hear properly. He was a middle-aged guy, lean, probably competent but not ambitious. He was a rent-a-cop. He was wearing a dark generic uniform with a molded plastic shield like something from a toy store. It said*Security* on it. Nothing more. It could have done double duty at an outlet mall. Maybe it did. Maybe the guy worked two jobs, to make ends meet.

Reacher ducked his own head toward the open section of window and said, "I need to check some details on the guy Despair brought in yesterday morning."

The guard said, "The attendants are inside."

Reacher nodded as if he had received new and valuable information and waited for the guy to hit the button that would slide the gate.

The guy didn't move.

Reacher asked, "It's not open to the morning?"

Reacher asked, "Were you here yesterday morning?"

The guard said, "Everything after midnight is morning."

"This would have been daylight hours."

The guard said, "Not me, then. I get off at six."

Reacher said, "So can you let me through? To ask the attendants?"

"They change at six, too."

"They'll have paperwork in there."

The guard said, "I can't."

"Can't what?"

"Can't let you through. Law enforcement personnel only. Or paramedics with a fresh one."

Reacher said, "I am law enforcement. I'm with the Despair PD. We need to check something."

"I'd need to see some credentials."

"They don't give us much in the way of credentials. I'm only a deputy."

"I'd have to see something."

Reacher nodded and took the big guy's pewter star out of his shirt pocket. Held it face out, with the pin between his thumb and forefinger. The guard looked at it carefully.*Township of Despair, Police Deputy.*

"All they give us," Reacher said.

"Good enough for me," the guy said, and hit the button. A motor spun up and a gear engaged and drove the gate along a greased track. As soon as it was three feet open Reacher stepped through and headed across a yard through a pool of yellow sulfur light to a personnel door labeled*Receiving.* He went straight in and found a standby room like a million others he had seen. Desk, computer,

clipboards, drifts of paper, bulletin boards, low wood-and-tweed armchairs. Everything was reasonably new but already battered. There were heaters going but the air was cold. There was an internal door, closed, but Reacher could smell sharp cold chemicals through it. Two of the low armchairs were occupied by two guys. They were white, young, and lean. They looked equally equipped for either manual or clerical labor. They looked bored and a little irreverent, which is exactly what Reacher expected from people working night shifts around a cold store full of stiffs. They glanced up at him, a little put out by the intrusion into their sealed world, a little happy about the break in their routine.

“Help you?” one of them said.

Reacher held up his pewter star again and said, “I need to check something about the guy we brought in yesterday.”

The attendant who had spoken squinted at the star. “Despair?”

Reacher nodded and said, “Male DOA, young, not huge.”

One guy heaved himself out of his chair and dumped himself down in front of the desk and tapped the keyboard to wake the computer screen. The other guy swiveled in his seat and grabbed a clipboard and licked his thumb and leafed through sheets of paper. They both reached the same conclusion at the same time. They glanced at each other and the one who had spoken before said, “We didn’t get anything from Despair yesterday.”

“You sure about that?”

“Did you bring him in yourself?”

“No.”

“You sure he was DOA? Maybe he went to the ICU.”

“He was DOA. No doubt about it.”

“Well, we don’t have him.”

“No possibility of a mistake?”

“Couldn’t happen.”

“Your paperwork is always a hundred percent?”

“Has to be. Start of the shift, we eyeball the toe tags and match them against the list. Procedure. Because people get sensitive about shit like dead relatives going missing.”

“Understandable, I guess.”

“So tonight we’ve got five on the list and five in the freezer. Two female, three male. Not a one of them young. And not a one of them from Despair.”

“Anywhere else they could have taken him?”

“Not in this county. And no other county would have accepted him.” The guy tapped some more keys. “As of this exact minute the last Despair stiff we had was over a year ago. Accident at their metal plant. Adult male all chewed up, as I recall, by a machine. Not pretty. He was so spread out we had to put him in two drawers.”

Reacher nodded and the guy spun his chair and put himself back-to against the desk with his feet straight out and his elbows propped behind him.

“Sorry,” he said.

Reacher nodded again and stepped back outside to the pool of sulfur light. The door sucked shut behind him, on a spring closer.*To assume makes an ass out of you and me. Ass, u, me.* The classroom jerks at Rucker had added:*You absolutely have to verify.* Reacher walked back across the concrete and waited for the gate to grind open a yard and stepped through and climbed into Vaughan’s truck.

He had verified.

Absolutely.

36

Reacher drove a mile and stopped at Halfway's all-night coffee shop and ate a cheeseburger and drank three mugs of coffee. The burger was rare and damp and the coffee was about as good as the Hope diner's. The mug was a little worse, but acceptable. He read a ragged copy of the previous morning's newspaper all the way through and then jammed himself into the corner of his booth and dozed upright for an hour. He left the place at five in the morning, when the first of the breakfast customers came in and disturbed him with bright chatter and the smell of recent showers. He filled Vaughan's truck at the all-night gas station and then drove back out of town, heading east on the same rough road he had come in on, the mountains far behind him and the dawn waiting to happen up ahead.

He kept the speedometer needle fixed on forty and passed the MP post again fifty-two minutes later. The place was still quiet. Two guys were in the guard shack, one facing north and one facing south. Their nightlight was still burning. He figured reveille would be at six-thirty and chow at seven. The night watch would eat dinner and the day watch would eat breakfast all in the same hour. Same food, probably. Combat FOBs were light on amenities. He waved and kept on going at a steady forty miles an hour, which put him next to the metal plant at exactly six o'clock in the morning.

The start of the workday.

The arena lights were already on and the place was lit up bright and blue, like day. The parking lot was filling up fast. Headlights were streaming west out of town, dipping, turning, raking the rough ground, stopping, clicking off. Reacher parked neatly between a sagging Chrysler sedan and a battered Ford pick-up. He slid out and locked up and put the keys in his pocket and joined a converging crowd of men shuffling their way toward the personnel gate. An uneasy feeling. Same sensation as entering a baseball stadium wearing the colors of the visiting team.*Stranger in the house*. All around him guys glanced at him curiously and gave him a little more space than they were giving each other. But nothing was said. There was no overt hostility. Just wariness and covert inspection, as the

crowd shuffled along through the predawn twilight, a yard at a time.

The personnel gate was a double section of the metal wall, folded back on hinges complex enough to accommodate the quilted curves of the wall's construction. The dirt path through it was beaten dusty by a million footsteps. Close to the gate there was no jostling. No impatience. Men lined up neatly like automatons, not fast, not slow, but resigned. They all needed to clock in, but clearly none of them wanted to.

The line shuffled slowly forward, a yard, two, three.

The guy in front of Reacher stepped through the gate.

Reacher stepped through the gate.

Immediately inside there were more metal walls, head-high, like cattle chutes, dividing the crowd left and right. The right-hand chute led to a holding pen where Reacher guessed the part-time workers would wait for the call. It was already a quarter full with men standing quiet and patient. The guys going left didn't look at them.

Reacher went left.

The left-hand chute dog-legged immediately and narrowed down to four feet in width. It carried the line of shuffling men past an old-fashioned punch-clock centered in a giant slotted array of time cards. Each man pulled his card and offered it up to the machine and waited for the dull thump of the stamp and then put the card back again. The rhythm was slow and relentless. The whisk of stiff paper against metal, the thump of the stamp, the click as the card was bottomed back in its slot. The clock was showing six-fourteen, which was exactly right according to the time in Reacher's head.

Reacher walked straight past the machine. The chute turned again and he followed the guy in front for thirty feet and then stepped out into the northeast corner of the arena. The arena was vast. Just staggeringly huge. The line of lights on the far wall ran close to a mile into the distance and dimmed and shrank and blended into a tiny vanishing point in the southwest corner. The far wall itself was at least a half-mile away. The total enclosed area must have been three hundred acres. Three*hundred* football fields.

Unbelievable.

Reacher stepped aside to let the line of men get past him. Here and there in the vastness small swarms of guys were already busy. Trucks and cranes were moving. They threw harsh shadows in the stadium lights. Some of the cranes were bigger than anything Reacher had seen in a dockyard. Some of the trucks were as big as earth-moving machines. There were gigantic crushers set on enormous concrete plinths. The crushers had bright oily hydraulic rams thicker than redwood trunks. There were crucibles as big as sailboats and retorts as big as houses. There were piles of wrecked cars ten stories high. The ground was soaked with oil and rainbow puddles of diesel and littered with curled metal swarf and where it was dry it glittered with shiny dust. Steam and smoke and fumes and sharp chemical smells were drifting everywhere. There was roaring and hammering rolling outward in waves and beating against the metal perimeter and bouncing straight back in again. Bright flames danced behind open furnace doors.

Like a vision of hell.

Some guys seemed to be heading for preassigned jobs and others were milling in groups as if waiting for direction. Reacher skirted around behind them and followed the north wall, tiny and insignificant in the chaos. Way ahead of him the vehicle gate was opening. Five semi trailers were parked in a line, waiting to move out. On the road they would look huge and lumbering. Inside the plant they looked like toys. The two security Tahoes were parked side by side, tiny white dots in the vastness. Next to them was a stack of forty-foot shipping containers. They were piled five high. Each one looked tiny.

South of the vehicle gate was a long line of prefabricated metal offices. They were jacked up on short legs to make them level. They had lights on inside. At the left-hand end of the line two offices were painted white and had red crosses on their doors. The first-aid station. Next to it a white vehicle was parked. The ambulance. Next to the ambulance was a long line of fuel and chemical tanks. Beyond them a sinister platoon of men in thick aprons and black welding masks used cutting torches on a pile of twisted scrap. Blue flames threw hideous shadows. Reacher hugged the north wall and kept on moving. Men looked at him and looked away, unsure. A quarter of the way along the wall his path was blocked by a giant pyramid of old oil drums. They were painted faded red and stacked ten high, stepped like a staircase. Reacher paused and glanced around and levered himself up to the base of the tier. Glanced around again and climbed

halfway up the stack and then turned and stood precariously and held on tight and used the elevation to get an overview of the whole place.

He hadn’t seen the whole place.

Not yet.

There was more.

Much more.

What had looked like the south boundary was in fact an interior partition. Same height as the perimeter walls, same material, same color, same construction, with the sheer face and the horizontal cylinder. Same purpose, as an impregnable barrier. But it was only an internal division, with a closed gate. Beyond it the outer perimeter enclosed at least another hundred acres. Another hundred football fields. The gate was wide enough for large trucks. There were deep ruts in the ground leading to it. Beyond it there were heavy cranes and high stacks of shipping containers piled in chevron shapes. The containers looked dumped, as if casually, but they were placed and combined carefully enough to block a direct view of ground-level activity from any particular direction.

The internal gate had some kind of a control point in front of it. Reacher could make out two tiny figures stumping around in small circles, bored, their hands in their pockets. He watched them for a minute and then lifted his gaze again beyond the partition. Cranes, and screens. Some smoke, some distant sparks. Some kind of activity. Other than that, nothing to see. Plenty to hear, but none of it was useful. It was impossible to determine which noises were coming from where. He waited another minute and watched the plant’s internal traffic. Plenty of things were moving, but nothing was heading for the internal gate. It was going to stay closed. He turned east and looked at the sky. Dawn was coming.

He turned back and got his balance and climbed down the oil drum staircase. Stepped off to the rough ground and a voice behind him said, “Who the hell are you?”

37

Reacher turned slowly and saw two men. One was big and the other was a giant. The big guy was carrying a two-way radio and the giant was carrying a two-headed wrench as long as a baseball bat and probably heavier than ten of them. The guy was easily six-six and three hundred and fifty pounds. He looked like he wouldn't need a wrench to take a wrecked car apart.

The guy with the radio asked again, "Who the hell are you?"

"EPA inspector," Reacher said.

No reply.

"Just kidding," Reacher said.

"You better be."

"I am."

"So who are you?"

Reacher said, "You first. Who are you?"

"I'm the plant foreman. Now, who are you?"

Reacher pulled the pewter star from his pocket and said, "I'm with the PD. The new deputy. I'm familiarizing myself with the community."

"We didn't hear about any new deputies."

"It was sudden."

The guy raised his radio to his face and clicked a button and spoke low and fast. Names, codes, commands. Reacher didn't understand them, and didn't expect to. Every organization had its own jargon. But he recognized the tone and he guessed the general drift. He glanced west and saw the Tahoes backing up and turning and getting set to head over. He glanced south and saw groups of men

turning and getting set to head over. He glanced south and saw groups of men stopping work, standing straight, preparing to move.

The foreman said, “Let’s go visit the security office.”

Reacher stood still.

The foreman said, “A new deputy should want to visit the security office. Meet useful folks. Establish liaison. If that’s what you really are.”

Reacher didn’t move. He glanced west again and saw the Tahoes halfway through their half-mile of approach. He glanced south again and saw knots of men walking his way. The crew in the aprons and the welders’ masks was among them. Ten guys, clumping along awkwardly in heavy spark-proof boots. Plenty of others were coming in from other directions. Altogether maybe two hundred men were converging. Five minutes into the future there was going to be a big crowd by the oil drums. The giant with the wrench took a step forward. Reacher stood his ground and looked straight at him, and then checked west again, and south. The Tahoes were already close and slowing. The workers were forming up shoulder to shoulder. They were close enough that Reacher could see tools in their hands. Hammers, pry bars, cutting torches, foot-long cold chisels.

The foreman said, “You can’t fight them all.”

Reacher nodded. The giant on his own would be hard, but maybe feasible, if he missed with the first swing of the wrench. Then four-on-one or even six-on-one might be survivable. But not two-hundred-on-one. No way. Not two hundred and fifty pounds against twenty tons of muscle. He had two captured switchblades in his pocket, but they would be of limited use against maybe a couple of tons of improvised weaponry.

Not good.

Reacher said, “So let’s go. I can give you five minutes.”

The foreman said, “You’ll give us whatever we want.” He waved to the nearer Tahoe and it turned in close. Reacher heard oily stones and curly fragments of metal crushing under its tires. The giant opened its rear door and used his wrench to make a sweeping*Get in* gesture. Reacher climbed up into the back seat. The vehicle had a plain utilitarian interior. Plastic and cloth. No wood or

leather, no bells or whistles. The giant climbed in after him and crowded him against the far door panel. The foreman climbed in the front next to the driver and slammed his door and the vehicle took off again and turned and headed for the line of office buildings south of the vehicle gate. It drove through the middle of the approaching crowd, slowly, and Reacher saw faces staring in at him through the windows, gray skin smeared with grease, bad teeth, white eyes wide with fascination.

The security office was at the north end of the array, closest to the vehicle gate. The Tahoe stopped directly outside of it next to a tangled pile of webbing straps, presumably once used to tie down junk on flat-bed trailers. Reacher spilled out of the car ahead of the giant and found himself at the bottom of a short set of wooden steps that led up to the office door. He pushed through the door and found himself inside a plain metal prefabricated box that had probably been designed for use on construction sites. There were five small windows fitted with thick plastic glass and covered from the outside with heavy steel mesh. Other than that it looked a lot like the ready room he had seen at the Halfway county morgue. Desk, paper, bulletin boards, armchairs, all of it showing the signs of casual abuse a place gets when its users are not its owners.

The foreman pointed Reacher toward a chair and then left again. The giant dragged a chair of his own out of position and turned it around and dumped himself down in it so that he was blocking the door. He laid the wrench on the floor. The floor was warped plywood and the wrench made an iron clatter as it dropped. Reacher sat in a chair in a corner. Wooden arms, tweed seat and back. It was reasonably comfortable.

“Got coffee?” he asked.

The giant paused a second and said, “No.” A short word and a negative answer, but at least it was a response. In Reacher’s experience the hardest part of any adversarial conversation was the beginning. An early answer was a good sign. Answering became a habit.

He asked, “What’s your job?”

The giant said, “I help out where I’m needed.” His voice was like a normal guy’s, but muffled by having to come out of such a huge chest cavity.

“What happens here?” Reacher asked.

“Metal gets recycled.”

“What happens in the secret section?”

“What secret section?”

“To the south. Behind the partition.”

“That’s just a junkyard. For stuff that’s too far gone to use. Nothing secret about it.”

“So why is it locked and guarded?”

“To stop people getting lazy. Someone gets tired of working, dumps good stuff in there, we lose money.”

“You part of management?”

“I’m a supervisor.”

“You want to supervise my way out of here?”

“You can’t leave.”

Reacher glanced out the window. The sun was over the horizon. In five minutes it would be over the east wall.*I could leave*, he thought. The vehicle gate was open and trucks were moving out. Time it right, get past the big guy, run for the gate, hop aboard a flat-bed, game over. With the wrench on the floor the big guy was less of a problem than he had been before. He was unarmed, and down in a low chair. He was heavy, and gravity was gravity. And big guys were slow. And Reacher had knives.

“I played pro football,” the big guy said.

“But not very well,” Reacher said.

The big guy said nothing.

“Or you’d be doing color commentary on Fox, or living in a mansion in Miami,

not slaving away here."

The big guy said nothing.

"I bet you're just as bad at this job."

The big guy said nothing.

*I could leave,*Reacher thought again.

But I won't.

I'll wait and see what happens.

He waited twenty more minutes before anything happened. The giant sat still and quiet by the door and Reacher whiled the time away in the corner. He wasn't unhappy. He could kill time better than anyone. The morning sun rose higher and came streaming in through the plastic window. The rays cast a clouded beam over the desk. All the colors of the rainbow were in it.

Then the door opened and the giant sat up straight and scooted his chair out of the way and the foreman walked in again. He still had his two-way radio in his hand. Behind him in the bright rectangle of daylight Reacher could see the plant working. Trucks were moving, cranes were moving, swarms of men were beavering away, sparks were showering, loud noises were being made. The foreman stopped halfway between the door and Reacher's chair and said, "Mr. Thurman wants to see you."

*Seven o'clock,*Reacher thought. Vaughan was ending her watch. She was heading to the diner in Hope, looking for breakfast, looking for her truck, maybe looking for him. Or maybe not.

He said, "I can give Mr. Thurman five minutes."

"You'll give Mr. Thurman however long he wants."

“He might own you, but he doesn’t own me.”

“Get up,” the foreman said. “Follow me.”

38

The trailer next door was an identical metal box, but better appointed inside. There was carpet, the armchairs were leather, and the desk was mahogany. There were pictures on the walls, all of them dime-store prints of Jesus. In all of them Jesus had blue eyes and wore pale blue robes and had long blond hair and a neat blond beard. He looked more like a Malibu surfer than a Jew from two thousand years ago.

On the corner of the desk was a Bible.

Behind the desk was a man Reacher assumed was Mr. Thurman. He was wearing a three-piece suit made of wool. He looked to be close to seventy years old. He looked pink and plump and prosperous. He had white hair, worn moderately long and combed and teased into waves. He had a big patient smile on his face. He looked like he had just stepped out of a television studio. He could have been a game show host, or a televangelist. Reacher could picture him, clutching his chest and promising God would fell him with a heart attack unless the audience sent him money.

*And the audience would,*Reacher thought. With a face like that, the idiots would bury him under fives and tens.

The foreman waited for a nod, then left again. Reacher sat down in a leather armchair and said, “I’m Jack Reacher. You’ve got five minutes.”

The guy behind the desk said, “I’m Jerry Thurman. I’m very pleased to meet you.”

Reacher said, “Now you’ve got four minutes and fifty-six seconds.”

“Actually, sir, I’ve got as long as it takes.” Thurman’s voice was soft and mellifluous. His cheeks quivered as he spoke. Too much fat, not enough muscle tone. Not an attractive sight. “You’ve been making trouble in my town and now you’re trespassing on my business premises.”

“Your fault,” Reacher said. “If you hadn’t sent those goons to the restaurant I

would have eaten a quick lunch and moved on days ago. No reason to stay. You're not exactly running the Magic Kingdom here."

"I don't aim to. This is an industrial enterprise."

"So I noticed."

"But you knew that days ago. I'm sure the people in Hope were quick to tell you all about us. Why poke around?"

"I'm an inquisitive person."

"Evidently," Thurman said. "Which raised our suspicions a little. We have proprietary processes here, and methodologies of our own invention, which might all be called industrial secrets. Espionage could hurt our bottom line."

"I'm not interested in metal recycling."

"We know that now."

"You checked me out?"

Thurman nodded.

"We made inquiries," he said. "Last night, and this morning. You are exactly what you claimed to be, in Judge Gardner's vagrancy hearing. A passerby. A nobody who used to be in the army ten years ago."

"That's me."

"But you're a very persistent nobody. You made a ludicrous request to be sworn in as a deputy. After taking a badge from a man in a fight."

"Which he started. On your orders."

"So we ask ourselves, why are you so keen to know what happens here?"

"And I ask myself, why are you so keen to hide it?"

Thurman shook his great white head.

“We’re not hiding anything,” he said. “And you’re no danger to me commercially, so I’ll prove it to you. You’ve seen the town, you’ve met some of the folks who live here, and now I’m going to give you a tour of the plant. I’ll be your personal guide and escort. You can see everything and ask me anything.”

They went in Thurman’s personal vehicle, which was a Chevy Tahoe the same style and vintage as the security vehicles, but painted black, not white. Same modest interior. A working truck. The keys were already in the ignition. Habit, probably. And safe enough. Nobody would use the boss’s car without permission. Thurman drove himself and Reacher sat next to him in the front. They were alone in the vehicle. They headed to the west wall, away from the vehicle gate, moving slow. Thurman started talking immediately. He described the various office functions, which in order of appearance were operations management, and invoicing, and purchasing, and he pointed out the first-aid station, and described its facilities and capabilities, and made a mildly pointed comment about the people Reacher had put in there. Then they moved on to the line of storage tanks, and he described their capacities, which were five thousand gallons each, and their contents, which were gasoline for the Tahoes and some of the other trucks, and diesel for the cranes and the crushers and the heavier equipment, and a liquid chemical called trichloroethylene, which was an essential metal degreaser, and oxygen and acetylene for the cutting torches, and kerosene, which fueled the furnaces.

Reacher was bored rigid after sixty seconds.

He tuned Thurman out and looked at things for himself. Didn’t see much. Just metal, and people working with it. He got the general idea. Old stuff was broken up and melted down, and ingots were sold to factories, where new stuff was made, and eventually the new stuff became old stuff and showed up again to get broken up and melted down once more.

Not rocket science.

Close to a mile later they arrived at the internal partition and Reacher saw that a truck had been parked across the gate, as if to hide it. Beyond the wall no more sparks were flying and no more smoke was rising. Activity seemed to have been abandoned for the day. He asked, “What happens back there?”

Thurman said, “That’s our junkyard. Stuff that’s too far gone to work with goes in there.”

“How do you get it in, with that truck in the way?”

“We can move the truck if we need to. But we don’t need to often. Our processes have gotten very developed. Not much defeats us anymore.”

“Are you a chemist or a metallurgist or what?”

Thurman said, “I’m a born-again-Christian American and a businessman. That’s how I would describe myself, in that order of importance. But I hire the best talent I can find, at the executive level. Our research and development is excellent.”

Reacher nodded and said nothing. Thurman turned the wheel and steered a slow curve and headed back north, close to the east wall. The jaws of a giant crusher were closing on about ten wrecked cars at once. Beyond it a furnace door swung open and men ducked away from the blast of heat. A crucible moved slowly on an overhead track, full of liquid metal, all bubbling and crusting.

Thurman asked, “Are you born again?”

Reacher said, “Once was enough for me.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

“You should think about it.”

“My father used to say, why be born again, when you can just grow up?”

“Is he no longer with us?”

“He died a long time ago.”

“He’s in the other place, then, with an attitude like that.”

“He’s in a hole in the ground in Arlington Cemetery.”

“Another veteran?”

Another veteran?

“A Marine.”

“Thank you for his service.”

“Don’t thank me. I had nothing to do with it.”

Thurman said, “You should think about getting your life in order, you know, before it’s too late. Something might happen. The Book of Revelation says, the time is at hand.”

“As it has every day since it was written, nearly two thousand years ago. Why would it be true now, when it wasn’t before?”

“There are signs,” Thurman said. “And the possibility of precipitating events.” He said it primly, and smugly, and with a degree of certainty, as if he had regular access to privileged insider information.

Reacher said nothing in reply.

They drove on, past a small group of tired men wrestling with a mountain of tangled steel. Their backs were bent and their shoulders were slumped.*Not yet eight o’clock in the morning*, Reacher thought. More than ten hours still to go.

“God watches over them,” Thurman said.

“You sure?”

“He tells me so.”

“Does he watch over you, too?”

“He knows what I do.”

“Does he approve?”

“He tells me so.”

“Then why is there a lightning rod on your church?”

Thurman didn’t answer that. He just clamped his mouth shut and his cheeks

drooped lower than his jawbone. They arrived at the mouth of the cattle chute leading to the personnel gate. He stopped the truck and jiggled the stick into Park and sat back in his seat.

“Seen enough?” he asked.

“More than enough,” Reacher said.

“Then I’ll bid you goodbye,” Thurman said. “I imagine our paths won’t cross again.” He tucked his elbow in and offered his hand, sideways and awkwardly. Reacher shook it. It felt soft and warm and boneless, like a child’s balloon filled with water. Then Reacher opened his door and slid out and walked through the doglegged chute and back to the acres of parking.

Every window in Vaughan’s truck was smashed.

39

Reacher stood for a long moment and ran through his options and then unlocked the truck and swept pebbles of broken glass off the seats and the dash. He raked them out of the driver's footwell. He didn't want the brake pedal to jam halfway through its travel. Or the gas pedal. The truck was slow enough already.

Three miles back to town, twelve to the line, and then five to the center of Hope. A twenty-mile drive, cold and slow and very windy. Like riding a motorcycle without eye protection. Reacher's face was numb and his eyes were watering by the end of the trip. He parked outside the diner a little before nine o'clock in the morning. Vaughan's cruiser wasn't there. She wasn't inside. The place was three-quarters empty. The breakfast rush was over.

Reacher took the back booth and ordered coffee and breakfast from the day-shift waitress. The college girl was gone. The woman brought him a mug and filled it from a flask and he asked her, "Did Officer Vaughan stop by this morning?"

The woman said, "She left about a half-hour ago."

"Was she OK?"

"She seemed quiet."

"What about Maria? The girl from San Diego?"

"She was in before seven."

"Did she eat?"

"Plenty."

"What about Lucy? The blonde from LA?"

"Didn't see her. I think she left town."

"What does Officer Vaughan's husband do?"

The waitress said, “Well, not much anymore,” as if it was a dumb question to ask. As if that particular situation should have been plain to everybody.

That particular situation wasn’t plain to Reacher.

He said, “What, he’s unemployed?”

The woman started to answer him, and then she stopped, as if she suddenly remembered that the situation wasn’t necessarily plain to everybody, and it wasn’t her place to make it plain. As if she was on the point of revealing something that shouldn’t be revealed, like private neighborhood business. She just shook her head with embarrassment and bustled away with her flask. She didn’t speak at all when she came back five minutes later with his food.

Twenty minutes later Reacher got back in the damaged truck and drove south and crossed Third Street, and Fourth, and turned left on Fifth. Way ahead of him he could make out Vaughan’s cruiser parked at the curb. He drove on and pulled up behind it, level with the mailbox with the perfectly aligned letters. He idled in the middle of the traffic lane for a moment. Then he got out and walked ahead and put a palm on the Crown Vic’s hood. It was still very warm. She had left the diner nearly an hour ago, but clearly she had driven around a little afterward. Maybe looking for her Chevy, or looking for him. Or neither, or both. He got back in the truck and backed up and swung the wheel and bumped up onto her driveway. He parked with the grille an inch from her garage door and slid out. Didn’t lock up. There didn’t seem to be much point.

He found the winding path and followed it through the bushes to her door. He hooked her keyring on his finger and tapped the bell, briefly, just once. If she was awake, she would hear it. If she was asleep, it wouldn’t disturb her.

She was awake.

The door opened and she looked out of the gloom straight at him. Her hair was wet from the shower and combed back. She was wearing an oversized white T-shirt. Possibly nothing else. Her legs were bare. Her feet were bare. She looked younger and smaller than before.

She said, “How did you find me?”

He said, “Phone book.”

“You were here last night. Looking. A neighbor told me.”

“It’s a nice house.”

She said, “I like it.”

She saw the truck keys on his finger. He said, “I have a confession to make.”

“What now?”

“Someone broke all the windows.”

She pushed past him and stepped out to the path. Turned to face the driveway and studied the damage and said, “Shit.” Then it seemed to dawn on her that she was out in the yard barefoot in her nightwear and she pushed back inside.

“Who?” she asked.

“One of a thousand suspects.”

“When?”

“This morning.”

“Where?”

“I stopped by the metal plant.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I’ll pay for the glass.” He slipped the keys off his finger and held them out. She didn’t take them. Instead she said, “You better come in.”

The house was laid out the way he had guessed. Right to left it went garage, mudroom, kitchen, living room, bedrooms. The kitchen seemed to be the heart of the home. It was a pretty space with painted cabinets and a wallpaper border at the top of the walls. The dishwasher was running and the sink was empty and the

counters were tidy but there was enough disarray to make the room feel lived in. There was a four-place table with only three chairs. There were what Reacher's mother had called "touches." Dried flowers, bottles of virgin olive oil that would never be used, antique spoons. Reacher's mother had said such things gave a room personality. Reacher himself had been unsure how anything except a person could have personality. He had been a painfully literal child. But over the years he had come to see what his mother had meant. And Vaughan's kitchen had personality.

Her personality, he guessed.

It seemed to him that one mind had chosen everything and one pair of hands had done everything. There was no evidence of compromise or dueling tastes. He knew that way back a kitchen was considered a woman's domain. Certainly it had been that way in his mother's day, but she had been French, which had made a difference. And since then he had been led to believe that things had changed. Guys cooked now, or at least left six-packs lying around, or put oil stains on the linoleum from fixing motorcycle engines.

There was no evidence of a second person in the house. None at all. Not a trace. From his position by the sink Reacher could see into the living room through an arch that was really just a doorway with the door taken out. There was a single armchair in there, and a TV set, and a bunch of moving boxes still taped shut.

Vaughan said, "Want coffee?"

"Always."

"Did you sleep last night?"

"No."

"Don't have coffee, then."

"It keeps me awake until bedtime."

"What's the longest you ever stayed awake?"

"Seventy-two hours, maybe."

"Working?"

He nodded. “Some big deal, twenty years ago.”

“A big MP deal?”

He nodded again. “Somebody was doing something to somebody. I don’t recall the details.”

Vaughan rinsed her coffee pot and filled her machine with water. The machine was a big steel thing with*Cuisinart* embossed on it in large letters. It looked reliable. She spooned coffee into a gold basket and hit a switch. She said, “Last night the deputies from Despair headed home after an hour.”

“They found me in the bar,” Reacher said. “They flushed me west with the phone call and then came after me. It was a trap.”

“And you fell for it.”

“*They*fell for it. I knew what they were doing.”

“How?”

“Because twenty years ago I used to stay up for seventy-two hours at a time dealing with worse folks than you’ll ever find in Despair.”

“What happened to the deputies?”

“They joined their full-time buddies in the infirmary.”

“All four of them?”

“All six of them. They added some on-site moral support.”

“You’re a one-man crime wave.”

“No, I’m Alice in Wonderland.”

Now Vaughan nodded.

“I know,” she said. “Why aren’t they doing anything about it? You’ve committed assault and battery on eight individuals, six of them peace officers, and you’ve wrecked two police cars. And yet you’re still walking around.”

“That’s the point,” Reacher said. “I’m still walking around, but in Hope, not in Despair. That’s weirdness number one. All they ever want to do is keep people out of there. They’re not interested in the law or justice or punishment.”

“What’s weirdness number two?”

“They came at me six against one and I walked away with two bruises and sore knuckles from pounding on them. They’re all weak and sick. One of them even had to call it quits so he could find time to throw up.”

“So what’s that about?”

“The clerk at my motel figures they’re breaking environmental laws. Maybe there’s all kinds of poisons and pollution out there.”

“Is that what they’re hiding?”

“Possibly,” Reacher said. “But it’s kind of odd that the victims would help to hide the problem.”

“People worry about their jobs,” Vaughan said. “Especially in a company town, because they don’t have any alternatives.” She opened a cabinet and took out a mug. It was white, perfectly cylindrical, four inches high, and two and a half inches wide. It was made of fine bone china as thin as paper. She filled it from the pot and immediately from the aroma Reacher knew it was going to be a great one. She glanced at the living room but carried the mug to the kitchen table instead, and placed it down in front of one of the three chairs. Reacher glanced at the boxes and the lone armchair in the living room and said, “Just moved in?”

“A year and a half ago,” Vaughan said. “I guess I’m a little slow unpacking.”

“From where?”

“Third Street. We had a little cottage with an upstairs, but we decided we wanted a ranch.”

“We?”

“David and I.”

Reacher asked, “So where is he?”

“He’s not here right now.”

“Should I be sorry about that?”

“A little.”

“What does he do?”

“Not so much anymore.” She sat in one of the chairs without the mug in front of it and tugged the hem of her T-shirt down. Her hair was drying and going wavy again. She was naked under the shirt, and confident about it. Reacher was sure of that. She was looking straight at him, like she knew he knew.

He sat down opposite her.

She asked, “What else?”

“My motel clerk figures the plant makes way too much money.”

“That’s common knowledge. Thurman owns the bank, and bank auditors gossip. He’s a very rich man.”

“My motel clerk figures he’s smuggling dope or something with his little airplane.”

“Do you think he is?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s your conclusion?”

“Not entirely.”

“So what else?”

“A quarter of the plant is screened off. There’s a secret area. I think he’s got a contract to recycle military scrap. Hence the wealth. A Pentagon contract is the fastest way on earth to get rich these days. And hence the MP unit down the road. Thurman is breaking up classified stuff back there, and people would be interested in it. Armor thickness, materials, construction techniques, circuit

boards, all that kind of stuff."

"So that's all? Legitimate government business?"

"No," Reacher said. "That's not all."

40

Reacher took the first sip of his coffee. It was perfect. Hot, strong, smooth, and a great mug. He looked across the table at Vaughan and said, “Thank you very much.”

She said, “What else is going on there?”

“I don’t know. But there’s a hell of a vigilante effort going on about something. After the PD ended up depopulated I went to see the local judge about getting sworn in as a deputy.”

“You weren’t serious.”

“Of course not. But I pretended I was. I wanted to see the reaction. The guy panicked. He went crazy. He said he’d deputize the whole population first. They’re totally serious about keeping strangers out.”

“Because of the military stuff.”

“No,” Reacher said. “That’s the MPs’ job. Any hint of espionage, Thurman’s people would get on the radio and the MPs would lock and load and about a minute later the whole town would be swarming with Humvees. The townspeople wouldn’t be involved.”

“So what’s going on?”

“At least two other things.”

“Why two?”

“Because their responses are completely incoherent. Which means there are at least two other factions in play, separate and probably unaware of each other. Like this morning, Thurman had me checked out. He saw that my paper trail went cold ten years ago, and therefore I was no obvious danger to him, and then he ran your plate and saw that I was in some way associated with a cop from the next town, and therefore in some way untouchable, so he played nice and gave

me a guided tour. But meanwhile without all that information someone else was busy busting your windows. And nobody busts a cop's windows for the fun of it. Therefore the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing."

"Thurman gave you a tour?"

"He said he'd show me everything."

"And did he?"

"No. He stayed away from the secret area. He said it was just a junkyard."

"Are you sure it isn't?"

"I saw activity in there earlier. Smoke and sparks. Plus it's carefully screened off. Who does that, for a junkyard?"

"What are the two other factions?"

"I have no idea. But these young guys are involved somehow. Lucy Anderson's husband and the dead guy. And Lucy Anderson's husband is another example of the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing. They sheltered him and moved him on but threw his wife out of town like a pariah. How much sense does that make?"

"He moved on?"

"I saw him at the rooming house at three o'clock and he was gone by seven. No trace of him, and nobody would admit he had ever been there."

"The plane flies at seven," Vaughan said. "Is that connected?"

"I don't know."

"No trace at all?"

"No physical sign, and a lot of zipped lips."

"So what's going on?"

"When was the last time any normal person entered Despair and stayed as long

as he wanted and left of his own accord? To your certain knowledge?"

"I don't know," Vaughan said. "Months, certainly."

"There was an entry in the hotel register from seven months ago."

"That sounds about right."

"I met the new girl last night," Reacher said. "Sweet kid. Her name is Maria. I'm pretty sure the dead guy was her boyfriend. She showed me his picture. His name was Raphael Ramirez."

"Did you tell her?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"She asked me if I'd seen him. Truth is, I didn't actually see him. It was dark. And I can't give her news like that without being completely sure."

"So she's still swinging in the wind."

"I think she knows, deep down."

"What happened to the body?"

"It didn't go to the county morgue. I checked on that."

"We knew that already."

"No, we knew it didn't go straight to the morgue. That was all. So I wondered if it had been dumped somewhere out of town and found later by someone else. But it wasn't. Therefore it never left Despair. And the only meat wagon and the only stretcher in Despair belong to the metal plant. And the metal plant has furnaces that could vaporize a corpse in five minutes flat."

Vaughan got up and poured herself a glass of water, from a bottle in the refrigerator. She stood with her hips against the counter and stared out the window. Her heels were on the floor but most of her weight was on her toes. Her T-shirt had one lateral wrinkle where the base of her spine met her butt. The cotton material was very slightly translucent. The light was all behind her. Her

cotton material was very slightly translucent. The light was all behind her. Her hair was dry and there was fine golden down on her neck.

She looked spectacular.

She asked, “What else did Maria say?”

Reacher said, “Nothing. I didn’t ask her anything else.”

“Why ever not?”

“No point. The wives and the girlfriends aren’t going to tell us anything. And what they do say will be misleading.”

“Why?”

“Because they’ve got a vested interest. Their husbands and their boyfriends aren’t just hiding out in Despair on their own account. They’re aiming to get help there. They’re aiming to ride some kind of an underground railroad for fugitives. Despair is a way station, in and out. The women want to keep it all secret. Lucy Anderson was OK with me until I mentioned I used to be a cop. Then she started hating me. She thought I was still a cop. She thought I was here to bust her husband.”

“What kind of fugitives?”

“I don’t know what kind. But the Anderson guy was the right kind and Raphael Ramirez was the wrong kind.”

Vaughan took Reacher’s mug from him and refilled it from the machine. Then she refilled her glass from the refrigerator and sat down and said, “May I ask you a personal question?”

Reacher said, “Feel free.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“Caring, I suppose. Caring about what’s happening in Despair. Bad stuff

"Caring, I suppose. Caring about what's happening in Despair. Bad stuff happens everywhere, all the time. Why does this matter to you so much?"

"I'm curious, that's all."

"That's no answer."

"I have to be somewhere, doing something."

"That's still no answer."

"Maria," Reacher said. "She's the answer. She's a sweet kid, and she's hurting."

"Her boyfriend is a fugitive from the law. You said so yourself. Maybe she deserves to be hurting. Maybe Ramirez is a dope dealer or something. Or a gang member or a murderer."

"Ramirez looked like a harmless guy to me."

"You can tell by looking?"

"Sometimes. Would Maria hang out with a bad guy?"

"I haven't met her."

"Would Lucy Anderson?"

Vaughan said nothing.

"I don't like company towns," Reacher said. "I don't like feudal systems. I don't like smug fat bosses lording it over people. And I don't like people so broken down that they put up with it."

"You see something you don't like, you feel you have to tear it down?"

"Damn right I do. You got a problem with that?"

"No."

They sat in the kitchen and drank coffee and water in silence. Vaughan took her

free hand out of her lap and laid it on the table, her fingers spread and extended. They were the closest part of her to Reacher. He wondered whether it was a gesture, either conscious or subconscious. An approach, or an appeal for a connection.

No wedding band.

He's not here right now.

He put his own free hand on the table.

She asked, "How do we know they were fugitives at all? Maybe they were undercover environmental activists, checking on the pollution. Maybe the Anderson guy fooled them and Ramirez didn't."

"Fooled them how?"

"I don't know. But it worries me, if they're using poisons over there. We share the same water table."

"Thurman mentioned something called trichloroethylene. It's a metal degreaser. I don't know whether it's dangerous or not."

"I'm going to check it out."

"Why would the wife of an environmental activist be scared of cops?"

"I don't know."

"The Anderson guy wasn't fooling anyone. He was a guest there. They gave him a place to stay and protection. He was*helped.* "

"But Lucy Anderson wasn't. She was thrown out."

"Like I said, the left hand doesn't know what the right is doing."

"And Ramirez was killed."

"Not killed. Left to die."

"So why help one and shun the other?"

“Why shun him at all? Why not just round him up and dump him at the line, like they did with me and Lucy?”

Vaughan sipped her water.

“Because Ramirez was different in some way,” she said. “More specifically dangerous to them.”

“Then why not just take him out immediately? Disappear him? The end result would have been the same.”

“I don’t understand it.”

“Maybe I’m wrong,” Reacher said. “Maybe they didn’t shun him or keep him out. Maybe they never even knew he was there. Maybe he was sniffing around on the periphery, staying out of sight, trying to find a way in. Desperate enough to keep trying, not good enough to succeed.”

Vaughan took her hand off the table.

“We need to know exactly who he was,” she said. “We need to talk to Maria.”

“She won’t tell us anything.”

“We can try. We’ll find her in the diner. Meet me there, later.”

“Later than what?”

“We both need to sleep.”

Reacher said, “May I ask you a personal question?”

“Go ahead.”

“Is your husband in prison?”

Vaughan paused a beat, and then smiled, a little surprised, a little sad.

“No,” she said. “He isn’t.”

41

Reacher walked back to the motel, alone. Lucy Anderson's door was open. A maid's cart was parked outside. The bed was stripped and all the towels were on the floor. The closet was empty.*I think she left town,* the waitress had said, in the diner. Reacher watched for a moment and then he moved on.*Good luck, Lucky,* he thought,*whatever the hell you're doing and wherever the hell you're going.* He unlocked his own door and took a long hot shower and climbed into bed. He was asleep within a minute. The coffee didn't fight him at all.

He woke up in the middle of the afternoon with the MPs on his mind. The forward operating base. Its location. Its equipment mix. The place came at him like an analysis problem from the classrooms at Fort Rucker.

What was it for?

Why was it there?

The old County Route 37 wandered east to west through Hope, through Despair, through Halfway, and presumably onward. First he saw it laid out like a ribbon, like a line on a map, and then he pictured it in his head like a rotating three-dimensional diagram, like something on a computer screen, all green webs of origins and layers. Way back in its history it had been a wagon trail. Beaten earth, crushed rock, ruts and weeds. Then it had been minimally upgraded, when Model Ts had rolled out of Dearborn and flooded the country. Then Hope Township had upgraded ten miles of it again, for the sake of civic pride. They had done a conscientious job. Maybe foundation reinforcement had been involved. Certainly there had been grading and leveling. Maybe a little straightening. Possibly a little widening. Thick blacktop had been poured and rolled.

Despair Township had done none of that. Thurman and his father and his grandfather or whoever had owned the town before had ignored the road. Maybe they had grudgingly dumped tar and pebbles on it every decade or so, but fundamentally it was still the same road it had been back when Henry Ford ruled

fundamentally it was still the same road it had been back when Henry Ford ruled the world. It was narrow, weak, lumpy, and meandering.

Unfit for heavy traffic.

Except west of the metal plant. There, a thirty-five-mile stretch had been co-opted and rebuilt. Probably from the ground up. Reacher pictured a yard-deep excavation, drainage, a rock foundation, a thick concrete roadbed, rebar, a four-inch asphalt layer rolled smooth and true by heavy equipment. The shoulders were straight and the camber was good. Then after thirty-five miles the new road had been driven through virgin territory to meet the Interstate, and the old Route 37 had wound onward as before, once again in its native state, narrow, weak, and lumpy.

Weak, strong, weak.

There was no military presence east of Despair or west of the fork, across the weak parts of the road.

The MP base straddled the strong part.

The truck route.

Close to Despair, but not too close.

Not sealing the town like a trap, but guarding one direction only and leaving the other wide open.

The base was equipped with six up-armored Humvees, each one an eight-ton rhinoceros, each one reasonably fast and reasonably maneuverable, each one topped with a belt-fed 7.62-caliber M60 machine gun on a free-swinging mount.

Why all that?

Reacher lay in bed and closed his eyes and heard barking voices from the Rucker classrooms:*This is what you know. What's your conclusion?*

His conclusion was that nobody was worried about espionage.

He got out of bed at four o'clock and took another long hot shower. He knew he

He got out of bed at four o'clock and took another long hot shower. He knew he was out of step with the Western world in terms of how often he changed his clothes, but he tried to compensate by keeping his body scrupulously clean. The motel soap was white and came in a small thin paper-wrapped morsel, and he used the whole bar. The shampoo was a thick green liquid in a small plastic bottle. He used half of it. It smelled faintly of apples. He rinsed and stood under the water for a moment more and then shut it off and heard someone knocking at his door. He wrapped a towel around his waist and padded across the room and opened up.

Vaughan.

She was in uniform. Her HPD cruiser was parked neatly behind her. She was staring in at him, openly curious. Not an unusual reaction.*Look at yourself. What do you see?* He was a spectacular meso-morph, built of nothing except large quantities of bone and sinew and muscle. But with his shirt off most people saw only his scars. He had a dozen minor nicks and cuts, plus a dimpled .38 bullet hole in the left center of his chest, and a wicked spider web of white lacerations low down on the right side of his abdomen, all criss-crossed and puckered by seventy clumsy stitches done quick and dirty in a mobile army surgical hospital. Souvenirs, in the first instance of childhood mayhem, in the second of a psychopath with a small revolver, and in the third, shrapnel from a bomb blast. Survivable, because childhood mayhem was always survivable, and because the .38 that hit him had been packed with a weak load, and because the shrapnel had been someone else's bone, not white-hot metal. He had been a lucky man, and his luck was written all over his body.

Ugly, but fascinating.

Vaughan's gaze traveled upward to his face.

"Bad news," she said. "I went to the library."

"You get bad news at libraries?"

"I looked at some books and used their computer."

"And?"

"Trichloroethylene is called TCE for short. It's a metal degreaser."

“I know that.”

“It’s very dangerous. It causes cancer. Breast cancer, prostate cancer, all kinds of cancers. Plus heart disease, problems with the nervous system, strokes, liver disease, kidney disease, even diabetes. The EPA says a concentration of five parts per billion is acceptable. Some places have been measured twenty or thirty times worse than that.”

“Like where?”

“There was a case in Tennessee.”

“That’s a long way from here.”

“This is serious, Reacher.”

“People worry too much.”

“This isn’t a joke.”

He nodded.

“I know,” he said. “And Thurman uses five thousand gallons at a time.”

“And we drink the groundwater.”

“You drink bottled water.”

“Lots of people use tap.”

“The plant is twenty miles away. There’s a lot of sand. A lot of natural filtration.”

“It’s still a concern.”

Reacher nodded. “Tell me about it. I had two cups of coffee right there. One in the restaurant and one at the judge’s house.”

“You feel OK?”

“Fine. And people seem OK here.”

“So far.”

She went quiet.

He said, “What else?”

“Maria is missing. I can’t find her anywhere. The new girl.”

42

Vaughan hung around in the open doorway and Reacher grabbed his clothes and dressed in the bathroom. He called out, “Where did you look?”

“All over,” Vaughan called back. “She’s not here in the motel, she’s not in the diner, she’s not in the library, she’s not out shopping, and there isn’t anywhere else to go.”

“Did you speak to the motel clerk?”

“Not yet.”

“Then that’s where we’ll go first. She knows everything.” He came out of the bathroom, buttoning his shirt. The shirt was almost due for the trash, and the buttonholes were still difficult. He ran his fingers through his hair and checked his pockets.

“Let’s go,” he said.

The clerk was in the motel office, sitting on a high stool behind the counter, doing something with a ledger and a calculator. But she had no useful information. Maria had left her room before seven o’clock that morning, dressed as before, on foot, carrying only her purse.

“She ate breakfast before seven,” Reacher said. “The waitress in the diner told me.”

The clerk said she hadn’t come back. That was all she knew. Vaughan asked her to open Maria’s room. The clerk handed over her passkey immediately. No hesitation, no fuss about warrants or legalities or due process.*Small towns,* Reacher thought. Police work was easy. About as easy as it had been in the army.

Maria’s room was identical to Reacher’s, with only very slightly more stuff in it. A spare pair of jeans hung in the closet. They were neatly folded over the bar of a hanger. Above them on the shelf were one spare pair of cotton underpants, one

bra, and one clean cotton T-shirt, all folded together in a low pile. On the floor of the closet was an empty suitcase. It was a small, sad, battered item. Blue in color, made from fiberboard, with a crushed lid, as if it had been stored for years with something heavy on top of it.

On the shelf next to the bathroom sink was a vinyl wash bag, white, with improbable pink daisies on it. It was empty, but it had clearly been overstuffed during transit. Its contents were laid out next to it, in a long line. Soaps, shampoos, lotions and ointments and unguents of every possible kind.

No personal items. They would have been in her purse.

“Day trip,” Vaughan said. “She’s expecting to return.”

“Obviously,” Reacher said. “She paid for three nights.”

“She went to Despair. To look for Ramirez.”

“That would be my guess.”

“But how? Did she walk?”

Reacher shook his head. “I would have seen her. It’s seventeen miles. Six hours, for her. If she left at seven she wouldn’t have arrived before one in the afternoon. I was on the road between eight-thirty and nine. I didn’t pass her along the way.”

“There’s no bus or anything. There’s never any traffic.”

“Maybe there was,” Reacher said. “I came in with an old guy in a car. He was visiting family, and then he was moving on to Denver. He’d head straight west. No reason to loop around. And if he was dumb enough to give me a ride, he’d have given Maria a ride for sure.”

“If he happened to leave this morning.”

“Let’s find out.”

They returned the passkey and got into Vaughan’s cruiser. She fired it up and they headed west to the hardware store. The sidewalk was piled high with an elaborate display. Ladders, buckets, barrows, gasoline-driven machines of

various types. The owner was inside, wearing a brown coat. He confirmed that he had been building the display early that morning. He thought hard and memory dawned in his eyes and he confirmed that he had seen a small dark girl in a blue warm-up jacket. She had been standing on the far sidewalk, right at the edge of town, half-turned, looking east but clearly aiming to head west, gazing at the empty traffic lane with a mixture of optimism and hopelessness. A classic hitchhiker's pose. Then later the store owner had seen a large bottle-green car heading west, a little before eight o'clock. He described the car as looking basically similar to Vaughan's cruiser, but without all the police equipment.

"A Grand Marquis," Reacher said. "Same platform. Same car. Same guy."

The store owner had not seen the car stop or the girl get in. But the inference was clear. Vaughan and Reacher drove the five miles to the town line. No real reason. They saw nothing. Just the smooth blacktop behind and the ragged gritty ribbon ahead.

"Is she in danger?" Vaughan asked.

"I don't know," Reacher said. "But she's probably not having the best day of her life."

"How will she get back?"

"I suspect she decided to worry about that later."

"We can't go there in this car."

"So what else have you got?"

"Just the truck."

"Got sunglasses? It's breezy, without the windshield."

"Too late. I already had it towed. It's being fixed."

"And then you went to the library? Don't you ever sleep?"

"Not so much anymore."

"Since when? Since what?"

Since when? Since what?

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Your husband?”

“I said I don’t want to talk about it.”

Reacher said, “We need to find Maria.”

“I know.”

“We could walk.”

“It’s twelve miles.”

“And twelve miles back.”

“Can’t do it. I’m on duty in two hours.”

Reacher said, “She’s domiciled in Hope. At least temporarily. Now she’s missing. The HPD should be entitled to head over there in a car and make inquiries.”

“She’s from San Diego.”

“Only technically.”

“Technicalities matter, Reacher.”

“She took up residency.”

“With one change of underwear?”

“What’s the worst thing that can happen?”

“Despair could ask us for reciprocity.”

“They already grabbed it. Their deputies came by last night.”

“Two wrongs don’t make a right.”

“Says who?”

Says who?

“Are you bullying me?”

“You’re the one with the gun.”

Vaughan started to say something, then shook her head and sighed and said, “Shit.” Then she jammed her foot on the gas and the Crown Vic shot forward. The tires had traction on Hope’s blacktop but lost it on Despair’s loose gravel. The rear wheels spun and howled and the car stumbled for a second and then accelerated west in a cloud of blue smoke.

They drove eleven miles into the setting sun with nothing to show for it except eyestrain. The twelfth mile was different. Way ahead in the glare Reacher saw the familiar distant sights, all in sharp silhouette and shortened perspective. Vague smudges, on the horizon. The vacant lot, on the left. The abandoned motor court, low and forlorn. The gas station, on the right. Farther on, the dry goods store in the first brick building.

Plus something else.

From a mile away it looked like a shadow. Like a lone cloud was blocking the sun and casting a random shape on the ground. He craned his neck and looked up at the sky. Nothing there. The sky was clear. Just the gray-blue of approaching evening.

Vaughan drove on.

Three-quarters of a mile out the shape grew width, and depth, and height. The sun blazed behind it and winked around its edges. It looked like a low wide pile of something dark. Like a gigantic truck had strewn earth or asphalt right across the road, shoulder to shoulder, and beyond.

The pile looked to be fifty feet wide, maybe twenty deep, maybe six high.

From a half-mile out, it looked to be moving.

From a quarter-mile out, it was identifiable.

It was a crowd of people.

It was a crowd of people.

Vaughan slowed, instinctively. The crowd was two or three hundred strong. Men, women, and children. They were formed up in a rough triangle, facing east. Maybe six people at the front. Behind the six, twenty more. Behind the twenty, sixty more. Behind the sixty, a vast milling pool of people. The whole width of the road was blocked. The shoulders were blocked. The rearguard spilled thirty feet out into the scrub on both sides.

Vaughan stopped, fifty yards out.

The crowd compressed. People pushed inward from the sides. They made a human wedge. A solid mass. Two or three hundred people. They held together, but they didn't link arms.

They didn't link arms because they had weapons in their hands.

Baseball bats, pool cues, ax handles, broom handles, split firewood, carpenters' hammers. Two or three hundred people, pressed tight together, and moving. Moving as one. They were rocking in place from foot to foot and jabbing their weapons up and down in the air. Nothing wild. Their movements were small and rhythmic and controlled.

They were chanting.

At first Reacher heard only a primitive guttural shout, repeated over and over. Then he dropped his window an inch and heard the words*Out! Out! Out!* He hit the switch again and the glass thumped back up.

Vaughan was pale.

"Unbelievable," she said.

"Is this some weird Colorado tradition?" Reacher asked.

"I never saw it before."

"So Judge Gardner went and did it. He deputized the whole population."

"They don't look drafted. They look like true believers. What are we going to do?"

Out! Out! Out!

Reacher watched for a moment and said, “Drive on and see what happens.”

“Are you serious?”

“Try it.”

Vaughan took her foot off the brake and the car crept forward.

The crowd surged forward to meet it, short steps, crouched, weapons moving.

Vaughan stopped again, forty yards out.

Out! Out! Out!

Reacher said, “Use your siren. Scare them.”

“Scare*them* ? They’re doing a pretty good job scaring me.”

The crowd had quit rocking from side to side. Now people were rocking back and forth instead, one foot to the other, jabbing their clubs and sticks forward, whipping them back, jabbing them forward again. They were dressed in work shirts and faded sundresses and jean jackets, but collectively in terms of their actions they looked entirely primitive. Like a weird Stone Age tribe, threatened and defensive.

“Siren,” Reacher said.

Vaughan lit it up. It was a modern synthesized unit, shatteringly loud in the emptiness, sequencing randomly from a basic*whoop-whoop-whoop* to a manic*pock-pock-pock* to a hysterical digital cackling.

It had no effect.

No effect at all.

The crowd didn’t flinch, didn’t move, didn’t miss a beat.

Reacher said, “Can you get around them?”

Vaughan looked back and said, “This car is not made for the woods. We’d be stuck

Vaughan shook her head. "This car is no good on the scrub. We'd bog down and they'd be all over us."

"So fake them out. Drift left, then sneak past on the right real fast."

"You think?"

"Try it."

She took her foot off the brake again and crept forward. She turned the wheel and headed for the wrong side of the road and the crowd in front of her tracked the move, slow and infinitely fluid. Two or three hundred people, moving as one, like a pool of gray mercury, changing shape like an ameba. Like a disciplined herd. Vaughan reached the left shoulder.

"Can't do it," she said. "There's too many of them."

She stopped again, ten feet from the front rank.

She killed the siren.

The chanting grew louder.

Out! Out! Out!

Then the note dropped lower and the rhythm changed down. As one, the people started banging their clubs and sticks on the ground and shouting only every other beat.

Out!

Crash!

Out!

Crash!

They were close enough now to see clearly. Their faces jerked forward with every shouted word, gray and pink and contorted with hate and rage and fear and anger. Reacher didn't like crowds. He enjoyed solitude and was a mild agoraphobic, which didn't mean he was afraid of wide-open spaces. That was a

common misconception. He liked wide-open spaces. Instead he was mildly unsettled by the*agora*, which was an ancient Greek word for a crowded public marketplace. Random crowds were bad enough. He had seen footage of stampedes and stadium disasters. Organized crowds were worse. He had seen footage of riots and revolutions. A crowd two hundred strong was the largest animal on the face of the earth. The heaviest, the hardest to control, the hardest to stop. The hardest to kill. Big targets, but after-action reports always showed that crowds took much less than one casualty per round fired.

Crowds had nine lives.

“What now?” Vaughan asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. He especially didn’t care for angry organized crowds. He had been in Somalia and Bosnia and the Middle East, and he had seen what angry crowds could do. He had seen the herd instinct at work, the anonymity, the removal of inhibition, the implied permissions of collective action. He had seen that an angry crowd was the most dangerous animal on the face of the earth.

Out!

Crash!

Out!

Crash!

He said, quietly, “Put the shifter in Reverse.”

Vaughan moved the lever. The car settled back on its haunches, like prey ready to flee.

He said, “Back up a little.”

Vaughan backed up and steered and got straight on the center line and stopped again, thirty yards out. Ninety feet. The distance from home plate to first base.

“What now?” she asked.

The crowd had tracked the move. It had changed shape again, back to what it had been at the beginning. A dense triangle, with a blunt vanguard of six men,

and a wide base that petered out thirty feet into the scrub on both sides of the thoroughfare.

Out!

Crash!

Out!

Crash!

Reacher stared ahead through the windshield. He dropped his window again. He felt a change coming. He sensed it. He wanted to be a split second ahead of it.

Vaughan asked, “What do we do?”

Reacher said, “I’d feel better in a Humvee.”

“We’re not in a Humvee.”

“I’m just saying.”

“What do we do in a Crown Vic?”

Reacher didn’t have time to answer. The change came. The chanting stopped. There was silence for a second. Then the six men at the front of the crowd raised their weapons high, with clamped fists and straight arms.

They screamed a command.

And charged.

They bolted forward, weapons high, screaming. The crowd streamed after them. Two or three hundred people, full speed, yelling, falling, stumbling, stampeding, eyes wide, mouths open, faces contorted, weapons up, free arms pumping. They filled the windshield, a writhing mob, a frantic screaming mass of humanity coming straight at them.

They got within five feet. Then Vaughan stamped on the gas. The car shot backward, the engine screaming, the low gear whining loud, the rear tires howling and making smoke. She got up to thirty miles an hour going backward

and then she flung the car into an emergency one-eighty and smashed the shifter into Drive. Then she stamped on the gas. She accelerated east and didn’t stop for miles, top speed, engine roaring, her foot jammed down. Reacher had been wrong in his earlier assessment. Way too cautious. A Crown Vic with the Police Interceptor pack was a very fast car. Good for a hundred and twenty, easily.

43

They got airborne over the peak of the rise that put the distant Rockies close again and then Vaughan lifted off the gas and took most of the next mile to coast to a stop. She craned her neck and spent a long minute staring out the back window. They were still deep in Despair's territory. But all was quiet behind them. She slumped in her seat and dropped both hands to her lap.

"We need the State Police," she said. "We've got mob rule back there and a missing woman. And whatever exactly Ramirez was to those people, we can't assume they're going to treat his girlfriend kindly."

"We can't assume anything," Reacher said. "We don't know for sure she's there. We don't even know for sure that the dead guy was Ramirez."

"You got serious doubts?"

"The state cops will. It's a fairy tale, so far."

"So what do we do?"

"We verify."

"How?"

"We call Denver."

"What's in Denver?"

"The green car," Reacher said. "And the guy who was driving it. Three hundred miles, six hours' drive time, call it seven with a stop for lunch. If he left around eight this morning, he'll be there by now. We'll call him up, ask him if he gave Maria a ride, and if so, where exactly he let her out."

"You know his name?"

"No."

“Number?”

“No.”

“Great plan.”

“He was visiting three grandchildren in Hope. You need to get back to town and check with families that have three kids. Ask them if Grandpa just came by in his green Mercury. One of them will say yes. Then you’ll get a number for his next stop. It’ll be a brother or a sister in Denver, with four more kids for the old guy to visit.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going back to Despair.”

He got out of the car at five-thirty-five, a little more than eight miles west of Hope, a little more than eight miles east of Despair. Right in the heart of no-man’s-land. He watched Vaughan drive away and then he turned and started walking. He stayed on the road itself, for speed. He ran calculations in his head.*This is what you know.* Twenty-six hundred inhabitants, possibly a quarter of them too old or too young to be useful. Which left more than eighteen hundred people, with maximum availability after six o’clock in the evening, when the plant closed for the day. Newly deputized, newly marshaled, unsure of themselves, inexperienced. Daytime visibility had enabled deployment in large masses. In the dark, they would have to spread out, like a human perimeter. But they would want to stick fairly close together, for morale and effectiveness and mutual support. Therefore no outliers, and no sentinels. Children would be held close in family groups. Each element of the perimeter would want visual contact with the next. Which meant that groups or individuals wouldn’t want to be more than maybe ten feet apart. Some people would have flashlights. Some would have dogs. All in all, worst case, they could assemble a human chain eighteen thousand feet long, which was six thousand yards, which was the circumference of a circle a fraction more than a mile in diameter.

A circle a mile in diameter would barely enclose the town. It couldn’t enclose the town and the plant together. And it would bunch up on the road in and the road out, especially the road in, from Hope. Cover would be thin elsewhere.

Probably very thin. Possibly guys with trucks would be out in the scrub. Possibly the security Tahoes from the plant would be on the prowl. Teenage boys would be unpredictable. Excited by the adventure, and hungry for glory. But easily bored. In fact all of them would get bored. And tired, and low. Efficiency would peak during the first hour, would wane over the next two or three, would be poor before midnight, and would be nonexistent in the small hours of the night.

What's your conclusion?

*Not a huge problem,*Reacher thought. The sun was down behind the distant mountains. There was a soft orange glow on the horizon. He walked on toward it.

At seven o'clock he pictured Vaughan starting her night watch, in Hope. At seven-fifteen he was a mile from where the crowd had gathered before, in Despair. It was getting dark. He couldn't see anybody in the distance, and therefore nobody could see him in the distance. He struck off the road into the scrub, south and west, at an angle, hustling, unwilling to slow down. The town ahead was dark and quiet. Very quiet. By seven-thirty he was six hundred yards out in the sand and he realized he hadn't heard the plane take off. No aero engine, no light in the sky.

Why not?

He paused in the stillness and put together a couple of possible scenarios. Then he moved on, holding a wide radius, quiet and stealthy and invisible in the darkness.

By eight o'clock he was making his first approach. He was expected out of the east, therefore he was coming in from the southwest. Not a guarantee of safety, but better than a poke in the eye. Competent individuals would be distributed all around, but not equally. He had already outflanked most of the people he needed to worry about. He had seen one truck, a battered pick-up with four lights on a bar on its roof. It had been bouncing slowly along, over rough ground, heading away from him.

He moved up through the scrub and paused behind a rock. He was fifty yards

He moved up through the scrub and paused behind a rock. He was fifty yards from the back of a long line of workers' housing. Low one-story dwellings, well separated laterally, because desert land was cheap and septic systems didn't work with too much density. The gaps between the houses were three times as wide as the houses themselves. The sky had a minimal gray glow, moon behind cloud. There were guards in the gaps between the houses. Left to right he could make out an individual, a small group, another individual, and another. They all had sticks or clubs or bats. Together they made a chain that went: armed guard, house, armed guard, house, armed guard, house, armed guard.

They thought the houses themselves were defensive elements.

They were wrong.

He could hear dogs barking here and there in the distance, excited and unsettled by the unfamiliar evening activity. Not a problem. Dogs that barked too much were no more use than dogs that didn't bark at all. The guy second from the right between the houses had a flashlight. He was clicking it on at predictable intervals, sweeping an arc of ground in front of him, and then clicking it off again to save the battery.

Reacher moved left.

He lined himself up behind a house that was entirely dark. He dropped to the ground and low-crawled straight for it. The army record for a fifty-yard low crawl was about twenty seconds. At the other extreme, snipers could spend all day crawling fifty yards into position. On this occasion Reacher budgeted five minutes. Fast enough to get the job done, slow enough to get it done safely. Generally the human brain noticed speed and discontinuity. A tortoise heading inward worried nobody. A cheetah bounding in got everyone's attention. He kept at it, slow and steady, knees and elbows, head down. No pauses. No stop-start. He made it through ten yards. Then twenty. And thirty. And forty.

After forty-five yards he knew he was no longer visible from the spaces between the houses. The angle was wrong. But he stayed low all the way, until he crawled right into the back stoop. He stood up and listened for reaction, either outside the house or inside.

Nothing.

The stoop was a simple wooden assembly three steps high. He went up, slowly

The stoop was a simple wooden assembly three steps high. He went up, slowly, feet apart, shuffling, putting his weight where the treads were bolted to the side rails. If a stair squeaked, ninety-nine times in a hundred it squeaked in the center, where it was weakest. He put his hand on the door handle and lifted. If a door squeaked, ninety-nine times in a hundred it was because it had dropped on its hinges. Upward pressure helped.

He eased the door up and in and stepped through the opening and turned and closed it again. He was in a dark and silent kitchen. A worn linoleum floor, the smell of fried food. Counters and cabinets, ghostly in the gloom. A sink, and a faucet with a bad washer. It released a fat drip every twenty-three seconds. The drip spattered against a ceramic surface. He pictured the perfect teardrop exploding into a coronet shape, flinging tinier droplets outward in a perfect circle.

He moved through the kitchen to the hallway door. Smelled dirty carpet and worn furniture from a living room on his right. He moved through the hallway to the front of the house. The front door was a plain hollow slab, with a rectangle of painted beading on it. He turned the handle and lifted. Eased it open, silently.

There was a screen door beyond it.

He stood still. There was no way to open a screen door quietly. No way at all. Lightweight construction, tight plastic hinges, a crude spring mechanism. Guaranteed to raise a whole symphony of screeching and slapping sounds. The door had a horizontal bar in the center, designed to add strength and resist warping. The upper void was less than three feet square. The lower void, the same. Both were meshed with nylon screen. The screen had been doing its job for many years. That was clear. It was filthy with dust and insect corpses.

Reacher pulled out one of his captured switchblades. Turned back to the hallway to muffle the sound and popped the blade. He slit a large *X* in the lower screen, corner to corner. Pressed the blade back in the handle and put the knife back in his pocket and sat down on the floor. Leaned back and jacked himself off the ground, like a crab. Shuffled forward and went out through the *X* feetfirst. Headfirst would have been more intuitive. The desire to see what was out there was overwhelming. But if what was out there was an ax handle or a bullet, better that it hit him in the legs than the head. Much better.

There was nothing out there. No bullet, no ax handle. He ducked and squirmed and got his shoulders through the gap and stood up straight and alert, one swift

and got his shoulders through the gap and stood up straight and alert, one swift movement. He was standing on a front stoop made of concrete. A plain slab, four-by-four, cracked, canted down in one corner on an inadequate foundation. Ahead of him was a short path and a dark street. More houses on the other side. No guards between them. The guards were all behind him now, by a distance equal to half a house's depth. And they were all facing the wrong way.

44

Reacher threaded between houses and stayed off the roads where possible. He saw nobody on foot. Once he saw a moving vehicle two streets away. An old sedan, lights on bright. A designated supervisor, possibly, on an inspection tour. He ducked low behind a wooden fence and waited until the car was well away from him. Then he moved on and pressed up behind the first of the brick-built downtown blocks. He stood with his back against a wall and planned his moves. He was reasonably familiar with Despair's geography. He decided to stay away from the street with the restaurant on it. The restaurant was almost certainly still open for business. Close to nine in the evening, maybe late for normal supper hours, but with mass community action going on all night it was probably committed to staying open and supplying refreshments for the troops. Maybe the moving car had been a volunteer ferrying coffee.

He stayed in the shadows and used a narrow cross-street and turned and walked past the storefront church. It was empty. Maybe Thurman had been inside earlier, praying for success. In which case he was going to be sadly disappointed. Reacher moved on without a sound and turned again and headed for the police station. The streets were all dark and deserted. The whole active population was on the perimeter, staring out into the gloom, unaware of what was happening behind its back.

The street with the police station on it had one streetlight burning. It cast a weak pool of yellow light. The police station itself was dark and still. The street door was locked. Old wood, a new five-lever deadbolt inexpertly fitted. Reacher took out the keys he had taken from the deputy in the bar. He looked at the lock and looked at the keys and selected a long brass item and tried it. The lock turned, with plenty of effort. Either the key was badly cut, or the lock's tongue was binding against the striker plate, or both. But the door opened. It swung back and a smell of institutional floor polish wafted out. Reacher stepped inside and closed the door behind him and walked through the gloom the same way he had walked before, to the booking desk. Like the town's hotel, the Despair PD was still in the pen-and-paper age. Arrest records were kept in a large black ledger with gold-painted edges. Reacher carried it to a window and tilted it so that it caught what little light was coming through. Then he opened it up and flipped

forward through the pages until he found his own entry, dated three days previously and timed in the middle of the afternoon:*Reacher, J, male vagrant.* The entry had been made well in advance of the town court hearing. Reacher smiled.*So much for the presumption of innocence,* he thought.

The entry immediately before his own was three days older and said:*Anderson, L, female vagrant.*

He flipped backward, looking for Lucy Anderson's husband. He didn't expect to find him, and he didn't find him. Lucy Anderson's husband had been helped, not hindered. Then he went looking for Ramirez. No trace. Nowhere in the book. Never arrested. Therefore the guy hadn't escaped from custody. He had never been picked up at all. If he had ever been there at all. If the dead guy in the dark wasn't someone else.

He leafed backward, patiently, a random three-month sample. Saw six names,*Bridge, Churchill, White, King, Whitehouse, Andrews,* five male, one female, all vagrants, roughly one every two weeks.

He flipped ahead again, past his own entry, looking for Maria herself. She wasn't there. There was only one entry after his own. It was in new handwriting, because the desk cop had been driving Despair's second Crown Vic and was therefore currently out sick with whiplash. The new entry had been made just seven hours previously and said:*Rogers, G, male vagrant.*

Reacher closed the book and stacked it back on the desk and walked to the head of the basement stair. He felt his way down and opened the cell block door. It was very bright inside. All the bulkhead lights were burning. But all the cells were empty.

*A circle a mile in diameter would barely enclose the town.*Reacher's next stop was out of town, which meant passing through the perimeter again, this time heading in the other direction. Easy at first, hard later. Easy to sneak up to the line, relatively easy to penetrate it, hard to walk away with a thousand eyes on his back. He didn't want to be the only thing moving, in front of a static audience. Better that the line moved, and broke over him like a wave over a rock.

He sorted through the bunch of keys.

Found the one he wanted.

Then he put the keys in his pocket and moved back to the booking desk and started opening drawers. He found what he wanted in the third drawer he tried. It was full of miscellaneous junk. Rubber bands, paper clips, dry ballpoint pens, slips of paper with scratched-out notes, a plastic ruler.

And a tin ashtray, and a quarter-full pack of Camel cigarettes, and three books of matches.

He cleared a space on the floor under the booking desk and put the arrest ledger in its center, standing on its edge, open to ninety degrees, with the pages fanned out. He piled every scrap of paper he could find on it and around it. He balled up memos and posters and old newspapers and built a pyramid. He hid two matchbooks in it, with the covers bent back and the matches bent forward at varying angles.

Then he lit a cigarette, with a match from the third book. He inhaled, gratefully. Camels had been his brand, way back in history. He liked Turkish tobacco. He smoked a half-inch and folded the cigarette into the matchbook in a*T* shape and used a paper clip to keep it secure. Then he nestled the assembly into the base of his paper pyramid and walked away.

He left the street door open two inches, to set up a breeze.

He had seen the big deputy’s house from the back, the first night, when the guy got home from work and threw up in the yard. It was a five-minute walk that took him ten, due to stealth and caution. The house was another swaybacked old ranch. No landscaping, no real yard. Just beaten earth, including a foot-wide path to the door and twin ruts leading to a parking place close to the kitchen.

The old crew-cab pick-up was right there on it.

The driver’s door was unlocked. Reacher slid in behind the wheel. The seat was worn and sagging. The windows were dirty and the upholstery smelled of sweat and grease and oil. Reacher pulled the bunch of keys and found the car key. Plastic head, distinctive shape. He tried it, just to be sure. He put it in the ignition and turned two clicks. The wheel unlocked and the dials lit up. He turned it back again and climbed over the seats and lay down in the rear of the cab.

It took more than thirty minutes for the townspeople to realize their police station was on fire. By which time it was well ablaze. From his low position in the truck Reacher saw smoke and sparks and an orange glow and the tentative start of leaping flames well before anyone reacted. But eventually someone on the perimeter must have smelled something or gotten bored and shuffled a full circle in the dirt and paused long enough to study the horizon behind.

There was uncertainty and confused shouting for about a minute.

Then there was pandemonium.

Discipline broke down instantly. The perimeter collapsed inward like a leaking balloon. Reacher lay still and people streamed past him, few and hesitant at first, then many and fast. They were running, singly and in groups, yelling, shouting, fascinated, uncertain, looking at nothing except the bright glow ahead of them. Reacher craned his head and saw them coming from all directions. The cross-streets were suddenly crowded with dozens of people, then hundreds. The flow was all one way. The downtown maze swallowed them all. Reacher sat up and turned and watched the last of the backs disappear around corners and between buildings.

Newly deputized, newly marshaled, unsure of themselves, inexperienced.

He smiled.

*Like moths to a flame,*he thought.*Literally.*

Then he scrambled over the seat backs and turned the key all the way. The engine turned over once and fired. He drove away slowly, with the lights off, heading a little south of west, through the deserted scrubland. He saw headlights on the roadway to his right. Four moving vehicles. Almost certainly the security

Tahoes were coming in from the plant, plus probably the ambulance, plus maybe some firefighting equipment. He kept on going, looping west through the empty land, slowly, bouncing over washboard undulations and jarring over rocks. The wheel squirmed in his hands. He peered ahead through the dirty windshield and averaged less than twenty miles an hour. Faster than running, but even so, it took more than seven minutes before he saw the white gleam of the plant's wall in the darkness.

45

Reacher kept on going until the residential compound's fieldstone wall loomed up at him. It was hard to see in the darkness. But it was easy to climb. Plenty of toeholds, in the unmortared joints. He drove halfway around its circumference and parked the truck opposite where he guessed the oversized barn would be. He killed the engine and got out quietly and was over the wall less than ten seconds later. The runway was right in front of him. Maybe sixty feet wide, maybe nine hundred yards long, beaten flat, carefully graded, well maintained. At each end was a low hump, a concrete emplacement for a floodlight set to wash horizontally along the runway's length. Across it and directly ahead was a wide expanse of scrub, dotted here and there with landscaped areas. The plants were all sharp-leaved things that looked silver under the night sky. Native, adapted to the desert. Xeric plants, or xerophilous, drought tolerant, from the Greek prefix*xero-*, meaning dry. Hence*Xerox,* for copying without wet chemicals. Zeno of Cittium would have been puzzled by Xeroxing, but he would have approved of xeriscaping. He believed in going with the flow. The unquestioning acceptance of destiny. He believed in basking in the sun and eating green figs, instead of spending time and effort trying to change nature with irrigation.

Reacher crossed the runway. Ahead of him and behind the last planted area was the big barn. He headed straight for it. It was a three-sided building, open at the front. It was entirely filled with a white airplane. A Piper Cherokee, parked nose-out, settled dead level on its tricycle undercarriage, dormant and still and dewed over with cold. Close to ten o'clock in the evening. Close to the halfway point of its normal nightly flight plan. But that night, it was still on the ground. It hadn't flown at all.

Why not?

Reacher walked right into the barn and skirted the right-hand wing tip. Came back to the fuselage and found the step and climbed on the wing and peered in through the window. He had spent time in small planes, when the army had wanted him to get somewhere faster than a jeep or a train could have gotten him. He had found them small and trivial and somehow unserious. They were like flying cars. He had told himself they were better built than cars, but he hadn't

found much concrete evidence to convince himself with. Thin metal, bent and folded and riveted, flimsy clips and wires, coughing engines. Thurman's Cherokee was a plain four-seat workhorse, a little worn, a little stained. It had tinny doors and a divided windshield and a dash less complicated than most new sedans. One window had a small crack. The seats looked caved in and the harnesses looked tangled and frayed.

There was no paperwork in the cabin. No charts, no maps, no scribbled latitudes and longitudes. There was no real freight capacity. Just a couple of small holds in various nacelles and voids, and the three spare seats.*People don't joyride at night,* Lucy Anderson had said.*There's nothing to see.* Therefore Thurman was carrying something, somewhere, in or out. Or visiting a friend. Or a mistress. Maybe that was what*lay preacher* meant. You preached, and you got laid.

Reacher climbed down off the wing. He strolled through the gloom and took a look at the other outbuildings. There was a three-car garage, at the end of a straight quarter-mile driveway that led to an ornamental iron gate in the wall. There was another, smaller, barn. The house itself was magnificent. It was built of oiled boards that shone halfway between blond and dark. It had numerous peaked gables, like a mountain chalet. Some windows were two stories high. Paneling glowed dark inside. There were cathedral ceilings. There were fieldstone accents and rich rugs and clubby leather sofas and armchairs. It was the kind of gentleman's retreat that should always smell of cigar smoke. Reacher could still taste the part-smoked cigarette in his mouth. He walked all the way around the house, thinking about Camels, and camels, and the eyes of needles. He arrived back at the big barn, and took a last look at the airplane. Then he retraced his steps through the landscaping, across the runway, to the wall. Ten seconds later he was back in the stolen truck.

The fieldstone wall had been easy to climb, but the metal wall was going to be impossible. It was a sheer eight-foot-high vertical plane, topped with a continuous horizontal cylinder six feet in diameter. Like a toilet roll balanced on a thick hardcover book. It was a design derived from prison research. Reacher knew the theory. He had been professionally interested in prisons, back in the day. Stone walls or brick walls or wire fences could be climbed, however high they were. Broken glass set in the tops could be padded or cushioned. Rolls of barbed wire could be crushed or cut. But six-foot cylinders were unbeatable. Compared to the length of an arm or the span of a hand, their surfaces were slick

and flat and offered no grip at all. Getting over one was like trying to crawl across a ceiling.

So he drove on, through the empty acres of parking, hoping against hope that the personnel gate would be open, and if it wasn't, that one of the deputy's keys would unlock it. But it wasn't open, and none of the keys fit. Because it didn't have a keyhole. It had a gray metal box instead, set into the wall well to the right, where the gate's arc of travel wouldn't obscure it. The box was the kind of thing that normally held an outdoor electrical outlet. It opened against a spring closure. Inside was a ten-digit keypad. A combination lock. One through nine, plus zero, laid out like a telephone. A possible 3,628,800 variants. It would take seven months to try them all. A fast typist might do it in six.

Reacher drove on, tracking the north wall in the Tahoes' established ruts, hoping against hope that the vehicle gate would be open. He was slightly optimistic. The Tahoes had left in a hurry, and the ambulance. And people in a hurry didn't always clean up after themselves.

The vehicle gate was open.

It was built like a double door. Each half cantilevered outward and then swung through a hundred degrees on a wheeled track. And both halves were standing wide open. Together they made a mouth, a chute, a funnel, a V-shaped invitation leading directly to an empty forty-foot gap in the wall, and to the darkness beyond.

Reacher parked the deputy's truck nose-out, right across the wheeled track, blocking the gate's travel, and he took the keys with him. He figured maybe the gate was motorized, or on a time switch. And come what may, he wanted to keep it open. He didn't want it to close with him on the wrong side. Climbing out would be as impossible as climbing in.

He walked a hundred feet into the plant. Felt the familiar terrain underfoot, heavy and sticky with grease and oil, crunchy with shards of metal. He stood still, and sensed giant shapes ahead. The crushers, and the furnaces, and the cranes. He glanced right, and half-saw the line of offices and storage tanks. Beyond them, nearly a mile away and invisible in the night, the secret compound. He took half a step in its direction.

Then the lights came on.

There was an audible*whoomp* as electricity surged through cables thicker than wrists and in a split second the whole place lit up blue and brighter than day. A shattering sensation. Physical in its intensity. Reacher screwed his eyes shut and clamped his arms over his head and tried hard not to fall to his knees.

46

Reacher opened his eyes in a desperate hooded squint and saw Thurman walking toward him. He turned and saw the plant foreman heading in from a different direction. He turned again and saw the giant with the three-foot wrench blocking his path to the gate.

He stood still and waited, blinking, squinting, the muscles around his eyes hurting from clamping so hard. Thurman stopped ten feet away from him and then walked on and came close and took up a position alongside him, nearly shoulder to shoulder, as if they were two old buddies standing together, surveying a happy scene.

Thurman said, “I thought our paths were not going to cross again.”

Reacher said, “I can’t be responsible for what you think.”

“Did you set our police station on fire?”

“You’ve got a human wall all around the town. How could I have gotten through?”

“Why are you here again?”

Reacher paused a beat. Said, “I’m thinking about leaving the state.” Which was permanently true. Then he said, “Before I go, I thought I’d drop by the infirmary and pay my respects to my former opponents. Tell them no hard feelings.”

Thurman said, “I think the hard feelings are all on the other side.”

“Then they can tell me no hard feelings. Clearing the air is always good for a person’s mental well-being.”

“I can’t permit a visit to the infirmary. Not at this hour.”

“You can’t prevent one.”

“I’m [illegible]”

"I'm asking you to leave the premises."

"And I'm denying your request."

"There's only one patient here at the moment. The others are all home now, on bed rest."

"Which one is here?"

"Underwood."

"Which one is Underwood?"

"The senior deputy. You left him in a sorry state."

"He was sick already."

"You need to leave now."

Reacher smiled. "That should be your town motto. It's all I ever hear. Like New Hampshire, live free or die. It should be Despair, you need to leave now."

Thurman said, "I'm not joking."

"You are," Reacher said. "You're a fat old man, telling me to leave. That's pretty funny."

"I'm not alone here."

Reacher turned and checked the foreman. He was standing ten feet away, empty hands by his sides, tension in his shoulders. Reacher turned again and glanced at the giant. He was twenty feet away, holding the wrench in his right fist, resting its weight in his left palm.

Reacher said, "You've got an office boy and a broken-down old jock with a big spanner. I'm not impressed."

"Maybe they have guns."

"They don't. They'd have them out already. No one waits to pull a gun."

"They could still do you considerable harm."

They could still do you considerable harm.

“I doubt it. The first eight you sent didn’t do much.”

“Are you really willing to try?”

“Are you? If it goes the wrong way, then you’re definitely alone with me. And with your conscience. I’m here to visit the sick, and you want to have me beaten up? What kind of a Christian are you?”

“God guides my hand.”

“In the direction you want to go anyway. I’d be more impressed if you picked up a message telling you to sell up and give all your money to the poor and go to Denver to care for the homeless.”

Thurman said nothing.

Reacher said, “I’m going to the infirmary now. You are, too. Your choice whether you walk there or I carry you there in a bucket.”

Thurman’s shoulders slumped in an all-purpose sigh and shrug and he raised a palm to his two guys, one after the other, like he was telling a couple of dogs to stay. Then he set off walking, toward the line of cabins. Reacher walked at his side. They passed the security office, and Thurman’s own office, and the three other offices Reacher had seen before on his tour, the one marked Operations, the one marked Purchasing, the last marked Invoicing. They passed the first white-painted unit and stopped outside the second. Thurman heaved himself up the short flight of steps and opened the door. He went inside and Reacher followed.

It was a real sick bay. White walls, white linoleum floor, the smell of antiseptic, soft nightlights burning. There were sinks with lever taps, and medicine cabinets, and blood pressure cuffs, and sharp disposal cans on the walls. There was a rolling cart with a kidney-shaped steel dish on it. A stethoscope was curled in the dish.

There were four hospital cots. Three were empty, one was occupied, by the big deputy. He looked pretty bad. Pale, inert, listless. He looked smaller than before. His hair looked thinner. His eyes were open, dull and unfocused. His breathing was shallow and irregular. There was a medical chart clipped to the rail at the

foot of his bed. Reacher used his thumb and tilted it horizontal and scanned it. Neat handwriting. Professional notations. The guy had a whole lot of things wrong with him. He had fever, fatigue, weakness, breathlessness, headaches, rashes, blisters, sores, chronic nausea and vomiting, diarrhea, dehydration, and signs of complex internal problems. Reacher dropped the chart back into position and asked, “You have a doctor working here?”

Thurman said, “A trained paramedic.”

“Is that enough?”

“Usually.”

“For this guy?”

“We’re doing the best we can.”

Reacher stepped alongside the bed and looked down. The guy’s skin was yellow. Jaundice, or the nightlight reflected off the walls. Reacher asked him, “Can you talk?”

Thurman said, “He’s not very coherent. But we’re hoping he’ll get better.”

The big deputy rolled his head from one side to the other. Tried to speak, but got hung up with a dry tongue in a dry mouth. He smacked his lips and breathed hard and started again. He looked straight up at Reacher and his eyes focused and glittered and he said, “The…” And then he paused for breath and blinked and started over, apparently with a new thought. A new subject. He said, haltingly, “You did this to me.”

“Not entirely,” Reacher said.

The guy rolled his head again, away and back, and gasped once, and said, “No, the…” And then he stopped again, fighting for breath, his voice reduced to a meaningless rasp. Thurman grabbed Reacher’s elbow and pulled him back and said, “We need to leave now. We’re tiring him.”

Reacher said, “He needs to be in a proper hospital.”

“That’s the paramedic’s decision. I trust my people. I hire the best talent I can find.”

“Did this guy work with TCE?”

Thurman paused a beat. “What do you know about TCE?”

“A little. It’s a poison.”

“No, it’s a degreaser. It’s a standard industrial product.”

“Whatever. Did this guy work with it?”

“No. And those that do are well protected.”

“So what’s wrong with him?”

“You should know. Like he said, you did this to him.”

“You don’t get symptoms like these from a fistfight.”

“I heard it was more than a fistfight. Do you ever stop to reflect on the damage you cause? Maybe you ruptured something inside of him. His spleen, perhaps.”

Reacher closed his eyes. Saw the barroom again, the dim light, the tense silent people, the air thick with raised dust and the smell of fear and conflict.*He stepped in and jabbed hard and caught the guy low down in the side, below the ribs, above the waist, two hundred and fifty pounds of weight punched through the blunt end of a chair leg into nothing but soft tissue.* He opened his eyes again and said, “All the more reason to get him checked out properly.”

Thurman nodded. “I’ll have him taken to the hospital in Halfway tomorrow. If that’s what it takes, so that you can move on with a clear conscience.”

“My conscience is already clear,” Reacher said. “If people leave me alone, I leave them alone. If they don’t, what comes at them is their problem.”

“Even if you overreact?”

“Compared to what? There were six of them. What were they going to do to me? Pat me on the cheek and send me on my way?”

“I don’t know what their intentions were.”

“You do,” Reacher said. “Their intentions were your intentions. They were acting on your instructions.”

“And I was acting on the instructions of a higher authority.”

“I guess I’ll have to take your word for that.”

“You should join us. Come the Rapture, you don’t want to be left behind.”

“The Rapture?”

“People like me ascend to heaven. People like you stay here without us.”

“Works for me,” Reacher said. “Bring it on.”

Thurman didn’t answer that. Reacher took a last look at the guy in the bed and then stepped away and walked out the door, down the steps, back to the blazing arena. The foreman and the guy with the wrench stood where they had been before. They hadn’t moved at all. Reacher heard Thurman close the infirmary door and clatter down the steps behind him. He moved on and felt Thurman follow him toward the gate. The guy with the wrench was looking beyond Reacher’s shoulder, at Thurman, waiting for a sign, maybe hoping for a sign, slapping the free end of the wrench against his palm.

Reacher changed direction.

Headed straight for the guy.

He stopped a yard away and stood directly face-to-face and looked him in the eye and said, “You’re in my way.”

The guy glanced in Thurman’s direction and waited. Reacher said, “Have a little self-respect. You don’t owe that old fool anything.”

The guy said, “I don’t?”

“Not a thing,” Reacher said. “None of you does. He owes you. You all should wise up and take over. Organize. Have a revolution. You could lead it.”

The guy said, “I don’t think so.”

Thurman called out, “Are you leaving now, Mr. Reacher?”

“Yes,” Reacher said.

“Are you ever coming back?”

“No,” Reacher lied. “I’m done here.”

“Do I have your word?”

“You heard me.”

The giant glanced beyond Reacher’s shoulder again, hope in his eyes. But Thurman must have shaken his head or given some other kind of a negative instruction, because the guy just paused a beat and then stepped aside, one long sideways pace. Reacher walked on, back to the sick deputy’s truck. It was where he had left it, with all its windows intact.

47

From the plant to the Hope town line was fifteen miles by road, but Reacher made it into a twenty-mile excursion by looping around to the north, through the scrub. He figured that the townsfolk would have reorganized fairly fast, and there was no obvious way of winning the consequent twin confrontations at both ends of Main Street. So he avoided them altogether. He hammered the deputy's old truck across the rough ground and navigated by the glow of the fire to his right. It looked to be going strong. In his experience brick buildings always burned well. The contents went first, and then the floors and the ceilings, and then the roof, with the outer walls holding up and forming a tall chimney to enhance the air flow. And when the walls finally went, the collapse blasted sparks and embers all over the place, to start new fires. Sometimes a whole city block could be taken out by one cigarette and one book of matches.

He skirted the town on a radius he judged to be about four miles and then he shadowed the road back east a hundred yards out in the dirt. When the clock in his head hit midnight he figured he was less than a mile short of the line. He veered right and bounced up onto the tarred pebbles and finished the trip like a normal driver. He thumped over the line and Hope's thick blacktop made the ride go suddenly quiet.

Vaughan was waiting a hundred yards ahead.

She was parked on the left shoulder with her lights off. He slowed and held his arm out his window in a reassuring wave. She put her arm out her own window, hand extended, fingers spread, an answering gesture. Or a traffic signal. He coasted and feathered the brakes and the steering and came to a stop with his fingertips touching hers. To him the contact felt one-third like a mission-accomplished high-five, one-third like an expression of relief to be out of the lions' den again, and one-third just plain good. He didn't know what it felt like to her. She gave no indication. But she left her hand there a second longer than she needed to.

"Whose truck?" she asked.

"The senior deputy's," Reacher said. "His name is Underwood. He's very sick."

The senior deputy's," Reacher said. "His name is Underwood. He's very sick."

"With what?"

"He said I did it to him."

"Did you?"

"I gave a sick man a couple of contusions, which I don't feel great about. But I didn't give him diarrhea or blisters or sores and I didn't make his hair fall out."

"So is it TCE?"

"Thurman said not."

"You believe him?"

"Not necessarily."

Vaughan held up a plastic bottle of water.

Reacher said, "I'm not thirsty."

"Good," Vaughan said. "This is a sample. Tap water, from my kitchen. I called a friend of a friend of David's. He knows a guy who works at the state lab in Colorado Springs. He told me to take this in for testing. And to find out how much TCE Thurman actually uses."

"The tank holds five thousand gallons."

"But how often does it get used up and refilled?"

"I don't know."

"How can we find out?"

"There's a purchasing office, probably full of paperwork."

"Can we get in there?"

"Maybe."

Vaughan said, “Go dump that truck back over the line. I’ll drive you to town. We’ll take a doughnut break.”

So Reacher steered the truck backward into the sand and left it there, keys in. Way behind him he could see a faint red glow on the horizon. Despair was still on fire. He didn’t say anything about it. He just walked forward and crossed the line again and climbed in next to Vaughan.

“You smell of cigarettes,” she said.

“I found one,” he said. “I smoked a half-inch, for old times’ sake.”

“They give you cancer, too.”

“I heard that. You believe it?”

“Yes,” she said. “I do, absolutely.”

She took off east, at a moderate speed, one hand on the wheel and the other in her lap. He asked her, “How’s your day going?”

“A gum wrapper blew across the street in front of me. Right there in my headlights. Violation of the anti-littering ordinance. That’s about as exciting as it gets in Hope.”

“Did you call Denver? About Maria?”

She nodded.

“The old man picked her up,” she said. “By the hardware store. He confirmed her name. He knew a lot about her. They talked for half an hour.”

“Half an hour? How? It’s less than a twenty-minute drive.”

“He didn’t let her out in Despair. She wanted to go to the MP base.”

They got to the diner at twenty minutes past midnight. The college-girl waitress was on duty. She smiled when she saw them walk in together, as if some kind of a long-delayed but pleasant inevitability had finally taken place. She looked to

be about twenty years old, but she was grinning away like a smug old matchmaker from an ancient village. Reacher felt like there was a secret he wasn't privy to. He wasn't sure that Vaughan understood it either.

They sat opposite each other in the back booth. They didn't order doughnuts. Reacher ordered coffee and Vaughan ordered juice, a blend of three exotic fruits, none of which Reacher had ever encountered before.

"You're very healthy," he said.

"I try."

"Is your husband in the hospital? With cancer, from smoking?"

She shook her head.

"No," she said. "He isn't."

Their drinks arrived and they sipped them in silence for a moment and then Reacher asked, "Did the old guy know why Maria wanted to go to the MPs?"

"She didn't tell him. But it's a weird destination, isn't it?"

"Very," Reacher said. "It's an active-service forward operating base. Visitors wouldn't be permitted. Not even if she knew one of the grunts. Not even if one of the grunts was her brother or her sister."

"Combat MPs use women grunts?"

"Plenty."

"So maybe she's one of them. Maybe she was reporting back on duty, after furlough."

"Then why would she have booked two more nights in the motel and left all her stuff there?"

"I don't know. Maybe she was just checking something."

"She's not a combat MP."

¨She´s too small for a combat MP.´´

“They have a minimum size?”

“The army always has had, overall. These days, I’m not sure what it is. But even if she squeezed in, they’d put her somewhere else, covertly.”

“You sure?”

“No question. Plus she was too quiet and timid. She wasn’t military.”

“So what did she want from the MPs? And why isn’t she back yet?”

“Did the old guy actually see her get in?”

“Sure,” Vaughan said. “He waited, like an old-fashioned gentleman.”

“Therefore a better question would be, if they let her in, what did they want from her?”

Vaughan said, “Something to do with espionage.”

Reacher shook his head. “I was wrong about that. They’re not worried about espionage. They’d have the plant buttoned up, east and west, probably with a presence inside, or at least on the gates.”

“So why are they there?”

“They’re guarding the truck route. Which means they’re worried about theft, of something that would need a truck to haul away. Something heavy, too heavy for a regular car.”

“Something too heavy for a small plane, then.”

Reacher nodded. “But that plane is involved somehow. This morning I was barging around and therefore they had to shut down the secret operation for a spell, and tonight the plane didn’t fly. I didn’t hear it, and I found it later, right there in its hangar.”

“You think it only flies when they’ve been working on the military stuff?”

“I know for sure it didn’t when they hadn’t been, so maybe the obverse is true

"I know for sure it didn't when they hadn't been, so maybe the obverse is true, too."

"Carrying something? In or out?"

"Maybe both. Like trading."

"Secrets?"

"Maybe."

"People? Like Lucy Anderson's husband?"

Reacher drained his mug. Shook his head. "I can't make that work. There's a logic problem with it. Almost mathematical."

"Try me," Vaughan said. "I did four years of college."

"How long have you got?"

"I'd love to catch whoever dropped the gum wrapper. But I could put that on the back burner, if you like."

Reacher smiled. "There are three things going on over there. The military contract, plus something else, plus something else again."

"OK," Vaughan said. She moved the saltshaker, the pepper shaker, and the sugar shaker to the center of the table. "Three things."

Reacher moved the saltshaker to one side, immediately. "The military contract is what it is. Nothing controversial. Nothing to worry about, except the possibility that someone might steal something heavy. And that's the MPs' problem. They're straddling the road, they've got six Humvees, they've got thirty miles of empty space for a running battle, they can stop any truck they need to. No special vigilance required from the townspeople. No reason for the townspeople to get excited at all."

"But?"

Reacher cupped his hands and put his left around the pepper shaker and his right around the sugar shaker. "But the townspeople*are* excited about something.*All*

of them. They*are* vigilant. Today they all turned out in defense of something."

"What something?"

"I have no clue." He held up the sugar shaker, in his right hand. "But it's the bigger of the two unknowns. Because everyone is involved in it. Let's call it the right hand, as in the right hand doesn't know what the left is doing."

"What's the left hand?"

Reacher held up the pepper shaker, in his left hand. "It's smaller. It involves a subset of the population. A small, special subgroup. Everyone knows about the sugar, most*don't* know about the pepper, a few know about both the sugar*and* the pepper."

"And we don't know about either."

"But we will."

"How does this relate to Lucy Anderson's husband not being taken out by plane?"

Reacher held up the sugar shaker. A large glass item, in his right hand. "Thurman flies the plane. Thurman is the town boss. Thurman directs the larger unknown. It couldn't happen any other way. And if the Anderson guy had been a part of it, everyone would have been aware. Including the town cops and Judge Gardner. Thurman would have made sure of that. Therefore Lucy Anderson would not have been arrested, and she would not have been thrown out as a vagrant."

"So Thurman's doing something, and everyone is helping, but a few are also working on something else behind his back?"

Reacher nodded. "And that something the few are working on behind his back involves these young guys."

"And the young guys either get through or they don't, depending on who they bump into first, the many right-hand people or the few left-hand people."

"Exactly. And there's a new one now. Name of Rogers, just arrested, but I didn't see him."

see him.

“Rogers? I’ve heard that name before.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know.”

“Wherever, he was one of the unlucky ones.”

“The odds will always be against them.”

“Exactly.”

“Which was Ramirez’s problem.”

“No, Ramirez didn’t bump into anyone,” Reacher said. “I checked the records. He was neither arrested nor helped.”

“Why? What made him different?”

“Great question,” Reacher said.

“What’s the answer?”

“I don’t know.”

48

The clock in Reacher's head hit one in the morning and the clock on the diner's wall followed it a minute later. Vaughan looked at her watch and said, "I better get back in the saddle."

Reacher said, "OK."

"Go get some sleep."

"OK."

"Will you come with me to Colorado Springs? To the lab, with the water sample?"

"When?"

"Tomorrow, today, whatever it is now."

"I don't know anything about water."

"That's why we're going to the lab."

"What time?"

"Leave at ten?"

"That's early for you."

"I don't sleep anyway. And this is the end of my pattern. I'm off duty for four nights now. Ten on, four off. And we should leave early because it's a long ride, there and back."

"Still trying to keep me out of trouble? Even on your downtime?"

"I've given up on keeping you out of trouble."

"Then why?"

Vaughan said, “Because I’d like your company. That’s all.”

She put four bucks on the table for her juice. She put the salt and the pepper and the sugar back where they belonged. Then she slid out of the booth and walked away and pushed through the door and headed for her car.

Reacher showered and was in bed by two o’clock in the morning. He slept dreamlessly and woke up at eight. He showered again and walked the length of the town to the hardware store. He spent five minutes looking at ladders on the sidewalk, and then he went inside and found the racks of pants and shirts and chose a new one of each. This time he went for darker colors and a different brand. Prewashed, and therefore softer. Less durable in the long term, but he wasn’t interested in the long term.

He changed in his motel room and left his old stuff folded on the floor next to the trash can. Maybe the maid had a needy male relative his size. Maybe she would know how to launder things so they came out at least marginally flexible. He stepped out of his room and saw that Maria’s bathroom light was on. He walked to the office. The clerk was on her stool. Behind her shoulder, the hook for Maria’s room had no key on it. The clerk saw him looking and said, “She came back this morning.”

He asked, “What time?”

“Very early. About six.”

“Did you see how she got here?”

The woman looked both ways and lowered her voice and said, “In an armored car. With a soldier.”

“An armored car?”

“Like you see on the news.”

Reacher said, “A Humvee.”

The woman nodded. “Like a jeep. But with a roof. The soldier didn’t stay

The woman nodded. "Like a jeep. But with a roof. The soldier didn't stay. Which I'm glad about. I'm no prude, but I couldn't permit a thing like that. Not here."

"Don't worry," Reacher said. "She already has a boyfriend."

*Or had,*he thought.

The woman said, "She's too young to be fooling around with soldiers."

"Is there an age limit?"

"There ought to be."

Reacher paid his bill and walked back down the row, doing the math. According to the old man's telephone testimony, he had let Maria out at the MP base around eight-thirty the previous morning. She had arrived back in a Humvee at six. The Humvee wouldn't have detoured around the Interstates. It would have come straight through Despair, which was a thirty-minute drive, max. Therefore she had been held for twenty-one hours. Therefore her problem was outside of the FOB's local jurisdiction. She had been locked in a room and her story had been passed up the chain of command. Phone tag, voice mails, secure telexes. Maybe a conference call. Eventually, a decision taken elsewhere, release, the offer of a ride home.

Sympathy, but no help.

No help about what?

He stopped outside her door and listened. The shower wasn't running. He waited one minute in case she was toweling off and a second minute in case she was dressing. Then he knocked. A third minute later she opened the door. Her hair was slick with water. The weight gave it an extra inch of length. She was dressed in jeans and a blue T-shirt. No shoes. Her feet were tiny, like a child's. Her toes were straight. She had been raised by conscientious parents, who had cared about appropriate footwear.

"You OK?" he asked her, which was a dumb question. She didn't look OK. She looked small and tired and lost and bewildered.

She didn't answer.

He said, “You went to the MP base, asking about Raphael.”

She nodded.

He said, “You thought they could help you, but they didn’t.”

She nodded.

He said, “They told you it was Despair PD business.”

She didn’t answer.

He said, “Maybe I could help you. Or maybe the Hope PD could. You want to tell me what it’s all about?”

She said nothing.

He said, “I can’t help you unless I understand the problem.”

She shook her head.

“I can’t tell you,” she said. “I can’t tell anyone.”

The way she said the word*can’t* was definitive. Not surly or angry or moody or plaintive, but calm, considered, mature, and ultimately just plain informative. As if she had looked at a whole bunch of options, and boiled them down to the only one that was viable. As if a world of trouble was surely inevitable if she opened her mouth.

She couldn’t tell anyone.

Simple as that.

“OK,” Reacher said. “Hang in there.”

He walked away, to the diner, and had breakfast.

He guessed Vaughan planned to pick him up at the motel, so at five to ten he was sitting in the plastic lawn chair outside his door. She showed up three

minutes past the hour, in a plain black Crown Vic. Dull paint, worn by time and trouble. An unmarked squad car, like a detective would drive. She stopped close to him and buzzed the window down. He said, “Did you get promoted?”

“It’s my watch commander’s ride. He took pity on me and loaned it out. Since you got my truck smashed up.”

“Did you find the litterbug?”

“No. And it’s a serial crime now. I saw the silver foil later. Technically that’s two separate offenses.”

“Maria is back. The MPs brought her home early this morning.”

“Is she saying anything?”

“Not a word.” He got out of the chair and walked around the hood and slid in beside her. The car was very plain. Lots of black plastic, lots of mouse-fur upholstery of an indeterminate color. It felt like a beat-up rental. The front was full of police gear. Radios, a laptop on a bracket, a video camera on the dash, a hard-disc recorder, a red bubble light on a curly cord. But there was no security screen between the front and the rear, and therefore the seat was going to rack all the way back. It was going to be comfortable. Plenty of legroom. The water sample was on the rear seat. Vaughan was looking good. She was in old blue jeans and a white Oxford shirt, the neck open two buttons and the sleeves rolled to her elbows.

She said, “You’ve changed.”

“In what way?”

“Your clothes, you idiot.”

“New this morning,” he said. “From the hardware store.”

“Nicer than the last lot.”

“Don’t get attached to them. They’ll be gone soon.”

“What’s the longest you ever wore a set of clothes?”

“Eight months.” Reacher said, “Desert BDUs during Gulf War One. Never took

"Eight months," Reacher said. "Desert BDUs, during Gulf War One. Never took them off. We had all kinds of supply snafus. No spares, no pajamas."

"You were in the Gulf, the first time?"

"Beginning to end."

"How was it?"

"Hot."

Vaughan pulled out of the motel lot and headed north to First Street. Turned left, east, toward Kansas. Reacher said, "We're taking the long way around?"

"I think it would be better."

Reacher said, "Me too."

It was an obvious cop car and the roads were empty and Vaughan averaged ninety most of the way, charging head-on toward the mountains. Reacher knew Colorado Springs a little. Fort Carson was there, which was a major army presence, but it was really more of an Air Force town. Aside from that, it was a pleasant place. Scenery was pretty, the air was clean, it was often sunny, the view of Pikes Peak was usually spectacular. The downtown area was neat and compact. The state lab was in a stone government building. It was a satellite operation, an offshoot of the main facility in Denver, the capital. Water was a big deal all over Colorado. There wasn't much of it. Vaughan handed over her bottle and filled out a form and a guy wrapped the form around the bottle and secured it with a rubber band. Then he carried it away, ceremoniously, like that particular quart had the power to save the world, or destroy it. He came back and told Vaughan that she would be notified of the results by phone, and to please let the lab know some figures for Despair's total TCE consumption. He explained that the state used a rough rule-of-thumb formula, whereby a certain percentage of evaporation could be assumed, and a further percentage of absorption by the ground could be relied upon, so that what really mattered was how much was running off and how deep an aquifer was. The state knew the depth of Halfway County's aquifer to the inch, so the only variable would be the exact amount of TCE heading down toward it.

“What are the symptoms?” Vaughan asked. “If it’s there already?”

The lab guy glanced at Reacher.

“Prostate cancer,” he said. “That’s the early warning. Men go first.”

They got back in the car. Vaughan was distracted. A little vague. Reacher didn’t know what was on her mind. She was a cop and a conscientious member of her community, but clearly she was worrying about more than a distant chemical threat to her water table. He wasn’t sure why she had asked him to travel with her. They hadn’t spoken much. He wasn’t sure that his company was doing her any good at all.

She pulled out off the curb and drove a hundred yards on a tree-lined street and stopped at a light at a T-junction. Left was west and right was east. The light turned green and she didn’t move. She just sat there, gripping the wheel, looking left, looking right, as if she couldn’t choose. A guy honked behind her. She glanced in the mirror and then she glanced at Reacher.

She said, “Will you come with me to visit my husband?”

49

Vaughan turned left into the hills and then left again and headed south, following a sign for Pueblo. Years before, Reacher had traveled the same road. Fort Carson lay between Colorado Springs and Pueblo, south of one and north of the other, bulked a little ways west of the main drag.

“You OK with this?” Vaughan asked him.

“I’m fine with it.”

“But?”

“It’s an odd request,” he said.

She didn’t answer.

“And it’s an odd word,” he said. “You could have said, come and meet my husband. Or see him. But you said visit. And who gets visitors? You already told me he isn’t in jail. Or in the hospital. So where is he? In a rooming house, working away from home? Permanently on duty somewhere? Locked in his sister’s attic?”

“I didn’t say he wasn’t in the hospital,” Vaughan said. “I said he didn’t have cancer from smoking.”

She forked right, away from an I-25 on-ramp, and used a state four-lane that seemed way too wide for the traffic it was getting. She drove a mile between green hills and turned left through a grove of pines on a worn gray road that had no center line. There was no wire and no painted sign, but Reacher was sure the land on both sides was owned by the army. He knew there were thousands of spare acres beyond the northern tip of Fort Carson, requisitioned decades ago at the height of Hot or Cold War fever, and never really used for much. And what he was seeing out the window looked exactly like Department of Defense property. It looked the same everywhere. Nature, made uniform. A little sullen, a

little halfhearted, somewhat beaten down, neither raw nor developed.

Vaughan slowed after another mile and made a right into a half-hidden driveway. She passed between two squat brick pillars. The bricks were smooth tan items and the mortar was yellow. Standard army issue, back in the middle fifties. The pillars had hinges but no gates. Twenty yards farther on was a modern billboard on thin metal legs. The billboard had some kind of a corporate logo and the words*Olympic TBI Center* on it. Twenty yards later another billboard said:*Authorized Personnel Only.* Twenty yards after that the driveway's shoulders had been mowed, but not recently. The mown section ran on straight for a hundred yards and led to a carriage circle in front of a group of low brick buildings. Army buildings, long ago deemed surplus to requirements and sold off. Reacher recognized the architecture. Brick and tile, green metal window casements, green tubular handrails, radiused corners built back when chamfered edges had looked like the future. In the center of the carriage circle was a round patch of weedy dirt, where once a CO would have been proud of a rose garden. The change of ownership was confirmed by a repeat of the first billboard, next to the main entrance hall: the corporate logo, plus*Olympic TBI Center* again.

A section of lawn on the right had been hacked out and replaced by gravel. There were five cars on it, all of them with local plates, none of them new or clean. Vaughan parked the Crown Vic on the end of the line and shut it down, first the shifter, then the brake, then the key, a slow and deliberate sequence. She sat back in her seat and dropped her hands to her lap.

"Ready?" she asked.

"For what?" he said.

She didn't answer. Just opened her door and swiveled on the sticky mouse-fur seat and climbed out. Reacher did the same on his side. They walked together to the entrance. Three steps up, through the doors, onto the kind of mottled green tile floor Reacher had walked a thousand times before. The place was recognizably mid-fifties U.S. Army. It felt abandoned and run-down and there were new mandated smoke detectors sloppily wired through exposed plastic conduits, but otherwise it couldn't have changed much. There was an oak hutch on the right, where once a busy sergeant would have sat. Now it was occupied by a mess of what looked like medical case notes and a civilian in a gray sweatshirt. He was a thin sullen man of about forty. He had unwashed black hair

sweatshirt. He was a thin-faced man of about forty. He had unwashed black hair worn a little too long. He said, “Hello, Mrs. Vaughan.” Nothing more. No warmth in his voice. No enthusiasm.

Vaughan nodded but didn’t look at the guy or reply. She just walked to the back of the hall and turned into a large room that in the old days might have served any one of a number of different purposes. It might have been a waiting room, or a reception lounge, or an officers’ club. Now it was different. It was dirty and badly maintained. Stained walls, dull floor, dust all over it. Cobwebs on the ceiling. It smelled faintly of antiseptic and urine. It had big red waist-high panic buttons wired through more plastic conduit. It was completely empty, except for two men strapped into wheelchairs. Both men were young, both were entirely slack and still, both had open mouths, both had empty gazes focused a thousand miles in front of them.

Both had shaved heads, and misshapen skulls, and wicked scars.

Reacher stood still.

Looked at the panic buttons.

Thought back to the medical files.

He was in a clinic.

He looked at the guys in the wheelchairs.

He was in a residential home.

He looked at the dust and the dirt.

He was in a dumping ground.

He thought back to the initials on the billboard.

TBI.

Traumatic Brain Injury.

Vaughan had moved on, into a corridor. He caught up with her, halfway along its length.

“Your husband had an accident?” he said.

“Not exactly,” she said.

“Then what?”

“Figure it out.”

Reacher stopped again.

Both men were young.

An old army building, mothballed and then reused.

“War wounds,” he said. “Your husband is military. He went to Iraq.”

Vaughan nodded as she walked.

“National Guard,” she said. “His second tour. They extended his deployment. Didn’t armor his Humvee. He was blown up by an IED in Ramadi.”

She turned into another corridor. It was dirty. Dust balls had collected against the baseboards. Some were peppered with mouse droppings. The lightbulbs were dim, to save money on electricity. Some were out and had not been changed, to save money on labor.

Reacher asked, “Is this a VA facility?”

Vaughan shook her head.

“Private contractor,” she said. “Political connections. A sweetheart deal. Free real estate and big appropriations.”

She stopped at a dull green door. No doubt fifty years earlier it had been painted by a private soldier, in a color and in a manner specified by the Pentagon, with materials drawn from a quartermaster’s stores. Then the private soldier’s workmanship had been inspected by an NCO, and the NCO’s approval had been validated by an officer’s. Since then the door had received no further attention. It had dulled and faded and gotten battered and scratched. Now it had a wax pencil scrawl on it:*D. R. Vaughan,* and a string of digits that might have been his

service number, or his case number.

“Ready?” Vaughan asked.

“When you are,” Reacher said.

“I’m never ready,” she said.

She turned the handle and opened the door.

50

David Robert Vaughan's room was a twelve-foot cube, painted dark green below a narrow cream waist-high band, and light green above. It was warm. It had a small sooty window. It had a green metal cabinet and a green metal footlocker. The footlocker was open and held a single pair of clean pajamas. The cabinet was stacked with file folders and oversized brown envelopes. The envelopes were old and torn and frayed and held X-ray films.

The room had a bed. It was a narrow hospital cot with locked wheels and a hand-wound tilting mechanism that raised the head at an angle. It was set to a forty-five-degree slope. In it, under a tented sheet, leaning back in repose like he was relaxing, was a guy Reacher took to be David Robert Vaughan himself. He was a compact, narrow-shouldered man. The tented sheet made it hard to estimate his size. Maybe five-ten, maybe a hundred and eighty pounds. His skin was pink. He had blond stubble on his chin and his cheeks. He had a straight nose and blue eyes. His eyes were wide open.

Part of his skull was missing.

A saucer-sized piece of bone wasn't there. It left a wide hole above his forehead. Like he had been wearing a small cap at a jaunty angle, and someone had cut all around the edge of it with a saw.

His brain was protruding.

It swelled out like an inflated balloon, dark and purple and corrugated. It looked dry and angry. It was draped with a thin manmade membrane that stuck to the shaved skin around the hole. Like Saran Wrap.

Vaughan said, "Hello, David."

There was no response from the guy in the bed. Four IV lines snaked down toward him and disappeared under the tented sheet. They were fed from four clear plastic bags hung high on chromium stands next to the bed. A colostomy line and a urinary catheter led away to bottles mounted on a low cart parked under the bed. A breathing tube was taped to his cheek. It curved neatly into his

under the bed. A breathing tube was taped to his cheek. It curved neatly into his mouth. It was connected to a small respirator that hissed and blew with a slow, regular rhythm. There was a clock on the wall above the respirator. Original army issue, from way back. White Bakelite rim, white face, black hands, a firm, quiet, mechanical tick once a second.

Vaughan said, “David, I brought a friend to see you.”

No response. And there never would be, Reacher guessed. The guy in the bed was completely inert. Not asleep, not awake. Not anything.

Vaughan bent and kissed her husband on the forehead.

Then she stepped over to the cabinet and tugged an X-ray envelope out of the pile. It was marked*Vaughan, D. R.* in faded ink. It was creased and furred. It had been handled many times. She pulled the film out of the envelope and held it up against the light from the window. It was a composite image that showed her husband’s head from four different directions. Front, right side, back, left side. White skull, blurred gray brain matter, a matrix of bright pinpoints scattered all through it.

“Iraq’s signature injury,” Vaughan said. “Blast damage to the human brain. Severe physical trauma. Compression, decompression, twisting, shearing, tearing, impact with the wall of the skull, penetration by shrapnel. David got it all. His skull was shattered, and they cut the worst of it away. That was supposed to be a good thing. It relieves the pressure. They give them a plastic plate later, when the swelling goes down. But David’s swelling never went down.”

She put the film back in the envelope, and shuffled the envelope back into the pile. She pulled another one out. It was a chest film. White ribs, gray organs, a blinding shape that was clearly someone else’s wristwatch, and small bright pinpoints that looked like drops of liquid.

“That’s why I don’t wear my wedding band,” Vaughan said. “He wanted to take it with him, on a chain around his neck. The heat melted it and the blast drove it into his lungs.”

She put the film back in the stack.

“He wore it for good luck,” she said.

She butted the paperwork into a neat pile and moved to the foot of the bed. Reacher asked, “What was he?”

“Infantry, assigned to the First Armored Division.”

“And this was IED versus Humvee?”

She nodded. “An improvised explosive device against a tin can. He might as well have been on foot in his bathrobe. I don’t know why they call them*improvised.* They seem pretty damn professional to me.”

“When was this?”

“Almost two years ago.”

The respirator hissed on.

Reacher asked, “What was his day job?”

“He was a mechanic. For farm equipment, mostly.”

The clock ticked, relentlessly.

Reacher asked, “What’s the prognosis?”

Vaughan said, “At first it was reasonable, in theory. They thought he would be confused and uncoordinated, you know, and perhaps a little unstable and aggressive, and certainly lacking all his basic life and motor skills.”

“So you moved house,” Reacher said. “You were thinking about a wheelchair. You bought a one-story and took the door off the living room. You put three chairs in the kitchen, not four. To leave a space.”

She nodded. “I wanted to be ready. But he never woke up. The swelling never went away.”

“Why not?”

“Make a fist.”

“A what?”

“Make a fist and hold it up.”

Reacher made a fist and held it up.

Vaughan said, “OK, your forearm is your spinal cord and your fist is a bump on the end called your brain stem. Some places in the animal kingdom, that’s as good as it gets. But humans grew brains. Imagine I scooped out a pumpkin and fitted it over your fist. That’s your brain. Imagine the pumpkin goo was kind of bonded with your skin. This is how it was explained to me. I could hit the pumpkin or you could shake it a little and you’d be OK. But imagine suddenly twisting your wrist, very violently. What’s going to happen?”

“The bond is going to shear,” Reacher said. “The pumpkin goo is going to unstick from my skin.”

Vaughan nodded again. “That’s what happened to David’s head. A shearing injury. The very worst kind. His brain stem is OK but the rest of his brain doesn’t even know it’s there. It doesn’t know there’s a problem.”

“Will the bond re-form?”

“Never. That just doesn’t happen. Brains have spare capacity, but neuron cells can’t regenerate. This is all he will ever be. He’s like a brain-damaged lizard. He’s got the IQ of a goldfish. He can’t move and he can’t see and he can’t hear and he can’t think.”

Reacher said nothing.

Vaughan said, “Battlefield medicine is very good now. He was stable and in Germany within thirteen hours. In Korea or Vietnam he would have died at the scene, no question.”

She moved to the head of the bed and laid her hand on her husband’s cheek, very gently, very tenderly. Said, “We think his spinal cord is severed too, as far as we can tell. But that doesn’t really matter now, does it?”

The respirator hissed and the clock ticked and the IV lines made tiny liquid sounds and Vaughan stood quietly and then she said, “You don’t shave very often, do you?”

often, do you?

“Sometimes,” Reacher said.

“But you know how?”

“I learned at my daddy’s knee.”

“Will you shave David?”

“Don’t the orderlies do that?”

“They should, but they don’t. And I like him to look decent. It seems like the least I can do.” She took a supermarket carrier bag out of the green metal cabinet. It held men’s toiletries. Shaving gel, a half-used pack of disposable razors, soap, a washcloth. Reacher found a bathroom across the hall and stepped back and forth with the wet cloth, soaping the guy’s face, rinsing it, wetting it again. He smoothed blue gel over the guy’s chin and cheeks and lathered it with his fingertips and then set about using the razor. It was difficult. A completely instinctive sequence of actions when applied to himself became awkward on a third party. Especially on a third party who had a breathing tube in his mouth and a large part of his skull missing.

While he worked with the razor, Vaughan cleaned the room. She had a second supermarket bag in the cabinet that held cloths and sprays and a dustpan and brush. She stretched high and bent low and went through the whole twelve-foot cube very thoroughly. Her husband stared on at a point miles beyond the ceiling and the respirator hissed and blew. Reacher finished up and Vaughan stopped a minute later and stood back and looked.

“Good work,” she said.

“You too. Although you shouldn’t have to do that yourself.”

“I know.”

They repacked the supermarket bags and put them away in the cabinet. Reacher asked, “How often do you come?”

“Not very often,” Vaughan said. “It’s a Zen thing, really. If I visit and he doesn’t know I’ve visited, have I really visited at all? It’s self-indulgent to come here

just to make myself feel like a good wife. So I prefer to visit him in my memory. He's much more real there."

"How long were you married?"

"We're still married."

"I'm sorry. How long?"

"Twelve years. Eight together, then he spent two in Iraq, and the last two have been like this."

"How old is he?"

"Thirty-four. He could live another sixty years. Me too."

"Were you happy?"

"Yes and no, like everyone."

"What are you going to do?"

"Now?"

"Long term."

"I don't know. People say I should move on. And maybe I should. Maybe I should accept destiny, like Zeno. Like a true Stoic. I feel like that, sometimes. But then I panic and get defensive. I feel, first they do this to him, and now I should divorce him? But he wouldn't know anyway. So it's back to the Zen thing. What do you think I should do?"

"I think you should take a walk," Reacher said. "Right now. Alone. Walking by yourself is always good. Get some fresh air. See some trees. I'll bring the car and pick you up before you hit the four-lane."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll find some way to pass the time."

51

Vaughan said goodbye to her husband and she and Reacher walked back along the dirty corridors and through the dismal lounge to the entrance hall. The guy in the gray sweatshirt said, “Goodbye, Mrs. Vaughan.” They walked out to the carriage circle and headed for the car. Reacher leaned against its flank and Vaughan kept on going. He waited until she was small in the distance and then he pushed off the car and headed back to the entrance. Up the steps, in the door. He crossed to the hutch and asked, “Who’s in charge here?”

The guy in the gray sweatshirt said, “I am, I guess. I’m the shift supervisor.”

Reacher asked, “How many patients here?”

“Seventeen,” the guy said.

“Who are they?”

“Just patients, man. Whatever they send us.”

“You run this place according to a manual?”

“Sure. It’s a bureaucracy, like everywhere.”

“You got a copy of the manual available?”

“Somewhere.”

“You want to show me the part where it says it’s OK to keep the rooms dirty and have mouse shit in the corridors?”

The guy blinked and swallowed and said, “There’s no point*cleaning*, man. They wouldn’t*know*. How could they? This is the vegetable patch.”

“Is that what you call it?”

“It’s what it*is*, man.”

“Wrong answer,” Reacher said. “This is not the vegetable patch. This is a veterans’ clinic. And you’re a piece of shit.”

“Hey, lighten up, dude. What’s it to you?”

“David Robert Vaughan is my brother.”

“Really?”

“All veterans are my brothers.”

“He’s brain dead, man.”

“Are you?”

“No.”

“Then listen up. And listen very carefully. A person less fortunate than yourself deserves the best you can give. Because of duty, and honor, and service. You understand those words? You should do your job right, and you should do it well, simply because you can, without looking for notice or reward. The people here deserve your best, and I’m damn sure their relatives deserve it.”

“Who are you anyway?”

“I’m a concerned citizen,” Reacher said. “With a number of options. I could embarrass your corporate parent, I could call the newspapers or the TV, I could come in here with a hidden camera, I could get you fired. But I don’t do stuff like that. I offer personal choices instead, face-to-face. You want to know what your choice is?”

“What?”

“Do what I tell you, with a cheery smile.”

“Or?”

“Or become patient number eighteen.”

The guy went pale.

Reacher said, “Stand up.”

“What?”

“On your feet. Now.”

“What?”

Reacher said, “Stand up, now, or I’ll make it so you never stand up again.”

The guy paused a beat and got to his feet.

“At attention,” Reacher said. “Feet together, shoulders back, head up, gaze level, arms straight, hands by your sides, thumbs in line with the seams of your pants.” Some officers of his acquaintance had barked and yelled and shouted. He had always found it more effective to speak low and quiet, enunciating clearly and precisely as if to an idiot child, bearing down with an icy stare. That way he had found the implied menace to be unmistakable. Calm, patient voice, huge physique. The dissonance was striking. It was a case of whatever worked. It had worked then, and it was working now. The guy in the sweatshirt was swallowing hard and blinking and standing in a rough approximation of parade-ground order.

Reacher said, “Your patients are not just whatever they send you. Your patients are people. They served their country with honor and distinction. They deserve your utmost care and respect.”

The guy said nothing.

Reacher said, “This place is a disgrace. It’s filthy and chaotic. So listen up. You’re going to get off your skinny ass and you’re going to organize your people and you’re going to get it cleaned up. Starting right now. I’m going to come back, maybe tomorrow, maybe next week, maybe next month, and if I can’t see my face in the floor I’m going to turn you upside down and use you like a mop. Then I’m going to kick your ass so hard your colon is going to get tangled up in your teeth. Are we clear?”

The guy paused and shuffled and blinked. Then he said, “OK.”

“With a cheery smile,” Reacher said.

The guy forced a smile.

“Bigger,” Reacher said.

The guy forced dry lips over dry teeth.

“That’s good,” Reacher said. “And you’re going to get a haircut, and every day you’re going to shower, and every time Mrs. Vaughan comes by you’re going to stand up and welcome her warmly and you’re going to personally escort her to her husband’s room, and her husband’s room is going to be clean, and her husband is going to be shaved, and the window is going to be sparkling, and the room is going to be full of sunbeams, and the floor is going to be so shiny Mrs. Vaughan is going to be in serious danger of slipping on it and hurting herself. Are we clear?”

“OK.”

“Are we clear?”

“Yes.”

“Completely?”

“Yes.”

“Crystal?”

“Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes. Sir.”

“You’ve got sixty seconds to get started, or I’ll break your arm.”

The guy made a phone call while still standing and then used a walkie-talkie and fifty seconds later there were three guys in the hallway. Dead on sixty seconds a fourth guy joined them. A minute later they had buckets and mops out of a maintenance closet and a minute after that the buckets were full of water and all five guys were casting about, as if facing an immense and unfamiliar task. Reacher left them to it. He walked back to the car and set off in pursuit of

Vaughan.

He caught up with her a mile down the DoD road. She slid in next to him and he drove on, retracing their route, through the pines, through the hills. She said, “Thank you for coming.”

“No problem,” he said.

“You know why I wanted you to?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me.”

“You wanted someone to understand why you live like you live and do what you do.”

“And?”

“You wanted someone to understand why it’s OK to do what you’re going to do next.”

“Which is what?”

“Which is entirely up to you. And either way is good with me.”

She said, “I lied to you before.”

He said, “I know.”

“Do you?”

He nodded at the wheel. “You knew about Thurman’s military contract. And the MP base. The Pentagon told you all about them, and the Halfway PD, too. Makes sense that way. I bet it’s right there in your department phone book, in your desk drawer,*M* for military police.”

“It is.”

"But you didn't want to talk about it, which means that it's not just any old military scrap getting recycled there."

"Isn't it?"

Reacher shook his head. "It's combat wrecks from Iraq. Has to be. Hence the New Jersey plates on some of the incoming trucks. From the port facilities there. Why would they bypass Pennsylvania and Indiana for regular scrap? And why would they put regular scrap in closed shipping containers? Because Thurman's place is a specialist operation. Secret, miles from nowhere."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I understand. You didn't want to talk about it. You didn't even want to think about it. That's why you tried to stop me from ever going there. Get over it, you said. Move on. There's nothing to see."

"There are blown-up Humvees there," she said. "They're like monuments to me. Like shrines. To the people who died. Or nearly died."

Then she said, "And to the people who should have died."

They drove on, across the low slopes of the mountains, back to I-70, back toward the long loop near the Kansas line. Reacher said, "It doesn't explain Thurman's taste for secrecy."

Vaughan said, "Maybe it's a respect thing with him. Maybe he sees them as shrines, too."

"Did he ever serve?"

"I don't think so."

"Did he lose a family member?"

"I don't think so."

"Anyone sign up from Despair?"

"Not that I heard."

"Not that I heard."

"So it's not likely to be respect. And it doesn't explain the MPs, either. What's to steal? A Humvee is a car, basically. Armor is plain steel sheet, when it's fitted at all. An M60 wouldn't survive any kind of a blast."

Vaughan said nothing.

Reacher said, "And it doesn't explain the airplane."

Vaughan didn't answer.

Reacher said, "And nothing explains all these young guys."

"So you're going to stick around?"

He nodded at the wheel.

"For a spell," he said. "Because I think something is about to happen. That crowd impressed me. Would they have that much passion for the beginning of something? Or the middle of something? I don't think so. I think they were all stirred up because they're heading for the end of something."

52

They hit Hope at five in the afternoon. The sun was low. Reacher pulled off First Street and headed down to Third, to the motel. He stopped outside the office. Vaughan looked at him inquiringly and he said, “Something I should have done before.”

They went in together. The nosy clerk was at the counter. Behind her, three keys were missing from their hooks. Reacher’s own, for room twelve, plus Maria’s, room eight, plus one for the woman with the large underwear, room four.

Reacher said, “Tell me about the woman in room four.”

The clerk looked at him and paused a second, like she was gathering her thoughts, like she was under pressure to assemble an accurate capsule biography. Like she was in court, on the witness stand.

“She’s from California,” she said. “She’s been here five days. She paid cash for a week.”

Reacher said, “Anything else?”

“She’s a fuller-figured person.”

“Age?”

“Young. Maybe twenty-five or -six.”

“What’s her name?”

The clerk said, “Mrs. Rogers.”

Back in the car Vaughan said, “Another one. But a weird one. Her husband wasn’t arrested until yesterday, but she’s been here five whole days? What does that mean?”

Reacher said, “It means our hypothesis is correct. My guess is they were on the road together up until five days ago, he found the right people in Despair and went into hiding, she came directly here to wait it out, then he got flushed out by the mass mobilization yesterday and bumped into the wrong people and got picked up. The whole town was turned upside down. Every rock was turned over. He was noticed.”

“So where is he now?”

“He wasn’t in a cell. So maybe he got back with the right people again.”

Vaughan said, “I knew I had heard the name. His wife came in with the supermarket delivery guy. He drives in from Topeka, Kansas, every few days. He gave her a ride. He mentioned it to me. He told me her name.”

“Truck drivers check in with you?”

“Small towns. No secrets. Maria came in the same way. That’s how I knew about her.”

“How did Lucy Anderson come in?”

Vaughan paused a beat.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I never heard of her before the Despair PD dumped her at the line. She wasn’t here before.”

“So she came in from the west.”

“I guess some of them do. Some from the east, some from the west.”

“Which raises a question, doesn’t it? Maria came in from the east, from Kansas, but she asked the old guy in the green car to let her out at the MP base west of Despair. How did she even know it was there?”

“Maybe Lucy Anderson told her. She would have seen it.”

“I don’t think they talked at all.”

“Then maybe Ramirez told her about it. Maybe on the phone to Topeka. He came in from the west and saw it.”

“But why would he notice it? Why would he care? Why would it be a topic of conversation with his girlfriend?”

“I don’t know.”

Reacher asked, “Is your watch commander a nice guy?”

“Why?”

“Because he better be. We need to borrow his car again.”

“When?”

“Later tonight.”

“Later than what?”

“Than whatever.”

“How much later?”

“Eight hours from now.”

Vaughan said, “Eight hours is good.”

Reacher said, “First we’re going shopping.”

They got to the hardware store just as it was closing. The old guy in the brown coat was clearing his sidewalk display. He had wheeled the leaf blowers inside and was starting in on the wheelbarrows. Reacher went in and bought a slim flashlight and two batteries and a two-foot wrecking bar from the old guy’s wife. Then he went back out and bought the trick stepladder that opened to eight different positions. For storage or transport it folded into a neat package about four feet long and a foot and a half wide. It was made of aluminum and plastic and was very light. It fit easily on the Crown Vic’s rear bench.

Vaughan invited him over for dinner, at eight o´clock. She was very formal about it. She said she needed the intervening two hours to prepare. Reacher spent the time in his room. He took a nap, and then he shaved and showered and cleaned his teeth. And dressed. His clothes were new, but his underwear was past its prime, so he ditched it. He put on his pants and his shirt and raked his fingers through his hair and checked the result in the mirror and deemed it acceptable. He had no real opinion about his appearance. It was what it was. He couldn't change it. Some people liked it, and some people didn't.

Fifty yards from Vaughan's house, he couldn't see the watch commander's car. Either it was in the driveway, or Vaughan had given it back. Or gotten an emergency call. Or changed her plans for the evening. Then from thirty yards away, he saw the car right there on the curb. A hole in the darkness. Dull glass. Black paint, matte with age. Invisible in the gloom.

Perfect.

He walked through the plantings on her stepping-stone path and touched the bell.*The average delay at a suburban door in the middle of the evening, about twenty seconds.* Vaughan got there in nine flat. She was in a black knee-length sleeveless A-line dress, and black low-heel shoes, like ballet slippers. She was freshly showered. She looked young and full of energy.

She looked stunning.

He said, "Hello."

She said, "Come in."

The kitchen was full of candlelight. The table was set with two chairs and two places and an open bottle of wine and two glasses. Aromas were coming from the stove. Two appetizers were standing on the counter. Lobster meat, avocado, pink grapefruit segments, on a bed of lettuce.

She said, "The main course isn't ready. I screwed up the timing. It's something I haven't made for a while."

"Three years," Reacher said.

"Longer," she said.

“You look great,” he said.

“Do I?”

“The prettiest view in Colorado.”

“Better than Pikes Peak?”

“Considerably. You should be on the front of the guide book.”

“You’re flattering me.”

“Not really.”

She said, “You look good, too.”

“That’s flattery for sure.”

“No, you clean up well.”

“I try my best.”

She asked, “Should we be doing this?”

He said, “I think so.”

“Is it fair to David?”

“David never came back. He never lived here. He doesn’t know.”

“I want to see your scar again.”

“Because you’re wishing David had come back with one. Instead of what he got.”

“I guess.”

Reacher said, “We were both lucky. I know soldiers. I’ve been around them all my life. They fear grotesque wounds. That’s all. Amputations, mutilations, burns. I’m lucky because I didn’t get one, and David is lucky because he doesn’t know he did.”

Vaughan said nothing.

Reacher said, “And we’re both lucky because we both met you.”

Vaughan said, “Show me the scar.”

Reacher unbuttoned his shirt and slipped it off. Vaughan hesitated a second and then touched the ridged skin, very gently. Her fingertips were cool and smooth. They burned him, like electricity.

“What was it?” she asked.

“A truck bomb in Beirut.”

“Shrapnel?”

“Part of a man who was standing closer.”

“That’s awful.”

“For him. Not for me. Metal might have killed me.”

“Was it worth it?”

Reacher said, “No. Of course not. It hasn’t been worth it for a long time.”

“How long a time?”

“Since 1945.”

“Did David know that?”

“Yes,” Reacher said. “He knew. I know soldiers. There’s nothing more realistic than a soldier. You can try, but you can’t bullshit them. Not even for a minute.”

“But they keep on showing up.”

“Yes, they do. They keep on showing up.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Never have.”

"I don't know. Never have."

"How long were you in the hospital?"

"A few weeks, that's all."

"As bad a place as David is in?"

"Much worse."

"Why are the hospitals so bad?"

"Because deep down to the army a wounded soldier that can't fight anymore is garbage. So we depend on civilians, and civilians don't care either."

Vaughan put her hand flat against his scar and then slid it around his back. She did the same with her other hand, on the other side. She hugged his waist and held the flat of her cheek against his chest. Then she raised her head and craned her neck and he bent down and kissed her. She tasted of warmth and wine and toothpaste. She smelled like soap and clean skin and delicate fragrance. Her hair was soft. Her eyes were closed. He ran his tongue along the row of unfamiliar teeth and found her tongue. He cradled her head with one hand and put the other low on her back.

A long, long kiss.

She came up for air.

"We should do this," she said.

"We are doing it," he said.

"I mean, it's OK to do this."

"I think so," he said again. He could feel the end of her zipper with the little finger of his right hand. The little finger of his left hand was down on the swell of her ass.

"Because you're moving on," she said.

"Two days," he said. "Three, max."

“No complications,” she said. “Not like it might be permanent.”

“I can’t do permanent,” he said.

He bent and kissed her again. Moved his hand and caught the tag of her zipper and pulled it down. She was naked under the dress. Warm, and soft, and smooth, and lithe, and fragrant. He stooped and scooped her up, one arm under her knees and the other under her shoulders. He carried her down the hallway, to where he imagined the bedrooms must be, kissing her all the way. Two doors. Two rooms. One smelled unused, one smelled like her. Her carried her in and put her down and her dress slipped from her shoulders and fell. They kissed some more and her hands tore at the button on his pants. A minute later they were in her bed.

Afterward, they ate, first the appetizer, then pork cooked with apples and spices and brown sugar and white wine. For dessert, they went back to bed. At midnight, they showered together. Then they dressed, Reacher in his pants and shirt, Vaughan in black jeans and a black sweater and black sneakers and a slim black leather belt.

Nothing else.

“No gun?” Reacher asked.

“I don’t carry my gun off duty,” she said.

“OK,” he said.

At one o’clock, they went out.

53

Vaughan drove. She insisted on it. It was her watch commander's car. Reacher was happy to let her. She was a better driver than him. Much better. Her panic one-eighty had impressed him. Backward to forward, at full speed. He doubted if he could have done it. He figured if he had been driving the mob would have caught them and torn them apart.

"Won't they be there again?" Vaughan asked.

"Possible," he said. "But I doubt it. It's late, on the second night. And I told Thurman I wouldn't be back. I don't think it will be like yesterday."

"Why would Thurman believe you?"

"He's religious. He's accustomed to believing things that comfort him."

"We should have planned to take the long way around."

"I'm glad we didn't. It would have taken four hours. It wouldn't have left time for dinner."

She smiled and they took off, north to First Street, west toward Despair. There was thick cloud in the sky. No moon. No stars. Pitch black. Perfect. They thumped over the line and a mile before the top of the rise Reacher said, "It's time to go stealthy. Turn all the lights off."

Vaughan clicked the headlights off and the world went dark and she braked hard.

"I can't see anything," she said.

"Use the video camera," he said. "Use the night vision."

"What?"

"Like a video game," he said. "Watch the computer screen, not the windshield."

"Will that work?"

Will that work?

“It’s how tank drivers do it.”

She tapped keys and the laptop screen lit up and then stabilized into a pale green picture of the landscape ahead. Green scrub on either side, vivid boulders, a bright ribbon of road spearing into the distance. She took her foot off the brake and crawled forward, her head turned, staring at the thermal image, not the reality. At first she steered uncertainly, her hand-eye coordination disrupted. She drifted left and right and overcorrected. Then she settled in and got the hang of the new technique. She did a quarter-mile perfectly straight, and then she sped up and did the next quarter a little faster, somewhere between twenty and thirty.

“It’s killing me not to glance ahead,” she said. “It’s so automatic.”

“This is good,” Reacher said. “Stay slow.” He figured that at twenty or thirty there would be almost no engine noise. Just a low purr, and a soft burble from the pipes. There would be surface noise at any speed, from the tires on the grit, but that would get better closer to town. He leaned left and put his head on her shoulder and watched the screen. The landscape reeled itself in, silent and green and ghostly. The camera had no human reactions. It was just a dumb unblinking eye. It didn’t glance left or right or up or down or change focus. They came over the rise and the screen filled with blank cold sky for a second and then the nose of the car dipped down again and they saw the next nine miles laid out in front of them. Green scrub, scattered rocks glowing lighter, the ribbon of road, a tiny flare of heat on the horizon where the embers of the police station were still warm.

Reacher glanced ahead through the windshield a couple of times, but without headlights there was nothing to see. Nothing at all. Just darkness. Which meant that anyone waiting far ahead in the distance wasn’t seeing anything either. Not yet anyway. He recalled walking back to Hope, stepping over the line, not seeing Vaughan’s cruiser at all. And that was a newer car, shinier, with white doors and polished reflectors in the light bar on the roof. He hadn’t seen it. But she had seen him.*I saw you half a mile away,* she had said.*A little green speck.* He had seen himself on the screen afterward, a luminous sliver in the dark, getting bigger, coming closer.

*Very fancy,*he had said.

*Homeland Security money,*she had replied.*Got to spend it on something.*

He stared at the screen, watching for little green specks. The car prowled onward, slow and steady, like a black submarine loose in deep water. Two miles. Four. Still nothing ahead. Six miles. Eight. Nothing to see, nothing to hear, except the idling motor and the squelching tires and Vaughan's tense breathing as she gripped the wheel and squinted sideways at the laptop screen.

"We must be getting close," she whispered.

He nodded, on her shoulder. The screen showed buildings maybe a mile ahead. The gas station hut, slightly warmer than its surroundings. The dry goods store, with daytime heat trapped in its brick walls. A background glow from the downtown blocks. A pale blur in the air a little ways south and west, above where the police station had been.

No little green specks.

He said, "This is where they were yesterday."

She said, "So where are they now?"

She slowed a little and drifted onward. The screen held steady. Geography and architecture, nothing more. Nothing moving.

"Human nature," Reacher said. "They got all pumped up yesterday and thought they'd gotten rid of us. They don't have the stamina to do it all again."

"There could be one or two out and about."

"Possible."

"They'll call ahead and warn the plant."

"That's OK," Reacher said. "We're not going to the plant. Not yet anyway."

They drifted on, slow and dark and silent. The vacant lot and the abandoned motor court barely showed up on the screen. Thermally they were just parts of the landscape. The gas station and the household goods store shone brighter.

Beyond them the other blocks glowed mid-green. There were window-sized patches of brighter color, and heat was leaking from roofs with imperfect insulation. But there were no pinpoints of light. No little green specks. No crowds, no small groups of shuffling people, no lone sentries.

Not dead ahead anyway.

The camera's fixed angle was useless against the cross-streets. It showed their mouths to a depth of about five feet. That was all. Reacher stared sideways into the darkness as they rolled past each opening. Saw nothing. No flashlights, no match flares, no lighter sparks, no cigarette coals glowing red. The tire noise had dropped away to almost nothing. Main Street was worn down to the tar. No more pebbles. Vaughan was holding her breath. Her foot was feather light on the pedal. The car rolled onward, a little faster than walking, a lot slower than running.

Two green specks stepped out ahead.

They were maybe a quarter of a mile away, at the west end of Main Street. Two figures, emerging from a cross-street. A foot patrol. Vaughan braked gently and came to a stop, halfway through town. Six blocks behind her, six ahead.

"Can they see us?" she whispered.

"I think they're facing away," Reacher said.

"Suppose they're not?"

"They can't see us."

"There are probably more behind us."

Reacher turned and stared through the rear window. Saw nothing. Just pitch black night. He said, "We can't see them, they can't see us. Laws of physics."

The screen lit up with a white flare. Cone-shaped. Moving. Sweeping.

"Flashlight," Reacher said.

"They'll see us."

“We’re too far away. And I think they’re shining it west.”

Then they weren’t. The screen showed the beam turning through a complete circle, flat and level, like a lighthouse. Its heat burned the screen dead white as it passed. Its light lit up the night mist like fog.

Vaughan asked, “Did they see us?”

Reacher watched the screen. Thought about the reflectors in the Crown Vic’s headlights. Polished metal, like cats’ eyes. He said, “Whoever they are, they’re not moving. I don’t think they have enough candlepower.”

“What do we do?”

“We wait.”

They waited two minutes, then three, then five. The idling engine whispered. The flashlight beam snapped off. The image on the laptop screen collapsed back to two narrow vertical specks, distant, green, barely moving. There was nothing to see through the rear window. Just empty darkness.

Vaughan said, “We can’t stay here.”

Reacher said, “We have to.”

The green specks moved, from the center of the screen to the left-hand edge. Slow, blurred, a ghost trail of luminescence following behind them. Then they disappeared, into a cross-street. The screen stabilized. Geography, and architecture.

“Foot patrol,” Reacher said. “Heading downtown. Maybe worried about fires.”

“Fires?” Vaughan said.

“Their police station burned down last night.”

“Did you have something to do with that?”

“Everything,” Reacher said.

“You’re a maniac.”

“Their problem. They’re messing with the wrong guy. We should get going.”

“Now?”

“Let’s get past them while their backs are turned.”

Vaughan feathered the gas and the car rolled forward. One block. Two. The screen held steady. Geography, and architecture. Nothing more. The tires were quiet on the battered surface.

“Faster,” Reacher said.

Vaughan sped up. Twenty miles an hour. Thirty. At forty the car set up a generalized*whoosh* from the engine and the exhaust and the tires and the air. It seemed painfully loud. But it generated no reaction. Reacher stared left and right into the downtown streets and saw nothing at all. Just black voids. Vaughan gripped the wheel and held her breath and stared at the laptop screen and ten seconds later they were through the town and in open country on the other side.

Four minutes after that, they were approaching the metal plant.

54

The thermal image showed the sky above the plant to be lurid with heat. It was coming off the dormant furnaces and crucibles in waves as big as solar flares. The metal wall was warm. It showed up as a continuous horizontal band of green. It was much brighter at the southern end. Much hotter around the secret compound. It glowed like crazy on the laptop screen.

“Some junkyard,” Reacher said.

“They’ve been working hard in there,” Vaughan said. “Unfortunately.”

The acres of parking seemed to be all empty. The personnel gate seemed to be closed. Reacher didn’t look at it directly. He was getting better information below the visible spectrum, down in the infrared.

Vaughan said, “No sentries?”

Reacher said, “They trust the wall. As they should. It’s a great wall.”

They drove on, slow and dark and silent, past the lot, past the north end of the plant, onto the truck route. Fifty yards later, they stopped. The Tahoes’ beaten tracks showed up on the screen, almost imperceptibly lighter than the surrounding scrub. Compacted dirt, no microscopic air holes, therefore no ventilation, therefore slightly slower to cool at the end of the day. Reacher pointed and Vaughan turned the wheel and bumped down off the blacktop. She stared at the screen and got lined up with the ruts. The car bucked and bounced across the uneven ground. She followed the giant figure 8. The camera’s dumb eye showed nothing ahead except gray-green desert. Then it picked up the fieldstone wall. The residential compound. The stones had trapped some daytime heat. The wall showed up as a low speckled band, like a snake, fifty yards to the right, low and fluid and infinitely long.

Vaughan circled the compound in the Tahoes’ tracks, almost all the way around, to a point Reacher judged to be directly behind the airplane barn. They parked and shut down and Reacher switched the interior light to the off position and they opened their doors and climbed out. It was pitch dark. The air felt fresh and

they opened their doors and climbed out. It was pitch dark. The air felt fresh and cold. The clock in his head showed one-thirty in the morning.

Perfect.

They walked fifty yards to the fieldstone wall. They climbed it easily and dropped down on the other side. The back of the airplane barn was directly ahead of them, huge, looming, darker than the sky. They headed straight for it, past cypress trees and over stony ground. The barn was standing dark and empty. The plane was out. Reacher listened hard. Heard nothing. He signaled and Vaughan came up alongside him.

“Step one,” he whispered. “We just verified that when they work by day, the plane flies by night.”

Vaughan asked, “What’s step two?”

“We verify whether they’re bringing stuff in, or taking stuff out, or both.”

“By watching?”

“You bet.”

“How long have we got?”

“About half an hour.”

They stepped into the barn. It was vast and pitch dark. It smelled of oil and gasoline and wood treated with creosote. The floor was beaten dirt. Most of the space was completely empty, ready to receive the returning plane. They felt their way around the walls. Vaughan risked a peek with the flashlight. She clamped its head in her palm and reduced its light to a dull red glow. There were shelves on the walls, loaded with gas cans and quarts of oil and small components boxed up in cardboard. Oil filters, maybe, and air filters. Service items. In the center of the back wall was a horizontal drum wrapped with thin steel cable. The drum was set in a complex floor-mounted bracket and had an electric motor bolted to its axle. A winch. To its right the walls were lined with more shelves. There were spare tires. More components. The whole place felt halfway between tidy and chaotic. It was a workspace, nothing more. There were no obvious hiding places. And there were arc lights faintly visible, high above them in the rafters. If they were turned on, the space would be as bright as day.

Vaughan turned off the flashlight.

“No good,” she said.

Reacher nodded in the dark. Led the way back out of the barn, to the taxiway, which was a broad strip of dirt beaten and graded the same as the runway. Either side of it were patches of cultivated garden a hundred yards square, spiky silver bushes and tall slender trees set in gravel. Xeriscaping, near enough to the barn for a reasonable view, far enough away that light spill would fall short. Reacher pointed and whispered, “We’ll take one each. Hunker down and don’t move until I call you. The runway lights will come on behind you, but don’t worry about them. They’re set to shine flat, north and south.”

She nodded and he went left and she went right. She was invisible in the gloom after three paces. He crawled his way to the garden’s center and lay down on his front with bushes either side of him and a tree towering over him. Ahead at an angle he had a good oblique view into the barn. He guessed Vaughan would have a complementary view from the other direction. Together they had the whole thing covered. He pressed himself into the ground and waited.

He heard the plane at five after two in the morning. The single engine, distant, lonely, far away, feathering and blipping. He pictured the landing light as he had seen it before, hanging in the sky, hopping a little, heading down. The sound grew closer but quieter, as Thurman found his glide path and backed off the power. The runway lights came on. They were brighter than Reacher had expected. He felt suddenly vulnerable. He could see his own shadow ahead of him, tangled up with the shadows of the leaves all around him. He craned his neck and looked for Vaughan. Couldn’t see her. The engine noise grew louder. Then the hangar lights came on. They were very bright. They threw a hard edge of shadow from the barn’s roof that came within six feet of him. He looked ahead and saw the giant from the metal plant standing in the barn, his hand on a light switch, a huge shadow thrown out beyond him, almost close enough for Reacher to touch. Nine hundred yards away to his right the plane’s engine blipped and sputtered and he heard a rush of air and felt a tiny thump through the ground as the wheels touched down. The engine noise dropped to a rough idle as the plane coasted and then it ramped back up to a roar as the plane taxied. Reacher heard it coming in behind him, unbearably loud. The ground shook and trembled. The plane came in between the two garden areas and the noise

thundered and the propeller wash blasted dust off the ground. It slowed and darted right on its unstable wheelbase and the engine revved hard and it turned a tight circle and came to rest in front of its barn, facing outward. It rocked and shuddered for a second and then the engine shut down and the exhaust popped twice and the propeller jerked to a stop.

Silence came back, like a blanket.

The runway lights died.

Reacher watched.

The plane's right-hand door opened and Thurman eased himself out onto the wing step. Big, bulky, stiff, awkward. He was still in his wool suit. He climbed down and stood for a second and then walked away toward the house.

He was carrying nothing.

No bag, no valise, no briefcase, no kind of a package.

Nothing.

He stepped beyond the light spill and disappeared. The giant from the metal plant hauled the steel cable out of the barn and hooked it to an eye below the tail plane. He walked back to the winch and hit a button and the electric motor whined and the plane was pulled slowly backward into the barn. It stopped in its parked position and the giant unhooked the cable and rewound the winch all the way. Then he squeezed around the wing tip and killed the lights and walked away into the darkness.

Carrying nothing.

He had opened no compartments or cubbies, he had checked no holds or nacelles, and he had retrieved nothing from the cabin.

Reacher waited twenty long minutes, for safety's sake. He had never blundered into trouble through impatience, and he never planned to. When he was sure all was quiet he crawled out from the planted area and crossed the taxiway and called softly to Vaughan. He couldn't see her. She was well concealed. She came

called softly to Vaughan. He couldn't see her. She was well concealed. She came up from the darkness at his feet and hugged him briefly. They walked to the darkened barn and ducked under the Piper's wing and regrouped next to the fuselage.

Vaughan said, "So now we know. They're taking stuff out, not in."

Reacher said, "But what, and to where? What kind of range does this thing have?"

"With full tanks? Around seven or eight hundred miles. The state cops had a plane like this, once. It's a question of how fast you fly and how hard you climb."

"What would be normal?"

"A little over half-power might get you eight hundred miles at a hundred and twenty-five knots."

"He's gone seven hours every night. Give him an hour on the ground, call it six hours in the air, three there, three back, that's a radius of three hundred and seventy-five miles. That's a circle nearly four hundred thousand square miles in area."

"That's a lot of real estate."

"Can we tell anything from the vector he comes in on?"

Vaughan shook her head. "He has to line up with the runway and land into the wind."

"There's no big tank of gas here. Therefore he refuels at the other end. Therefore he goes where you can buy gas at ten or eleven at night."

"Which is a lot of places," Vaughan said. "Municipal airfields, flying clubs."

Reacher nodded. Pictured a map in his head and thought:*Wyoming, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, part of Oklahoma, part of Texas, New Mexico, the northeast corner of Arizona, Utah.* Always assuming Thurman didn't just fly an hour each way and spend five at dinner somewhere close by in Colorado itself. He said, "We're going to have to ask him."

“Think he’ll tell us?”

“Eventually.”

They ducked back under the wing and retraced their steps behind the barn to the wall. A minute later they were back in the car, following the ghostly green image of the Tahoes’ ruts counterclockwise, all the way around the metal plant to the place where Reacher had decided to break in.

55

The white metal wall was blazing hot in the south and cooler in the north. Vaughan followed it around and stopped halfway along its northern stretch. Then she pulled a tight left and bounced out of the ruts and nosed slowly head-on toward the wall and stopped with her front bumper almost touching it. The front half of the hood was directly below the wall's horizontal cylinder. The base of the windshield was about five feet down and two feet out from the cylinder's maximum bulge.

Reacher got out and dragged the stepladder off the rear bench. He laid it on the ground and unfolded it and adjusted it into an upside-down L-shape. Then he estimated by eye and relaxed the angle a little beyond ninety degrees and locked all the joints. He lifted it high. He jammed the feet in the gutter at the base of the Crown Vic's windshield, where the hood's lip overlapped the wipers. He let it fall forward, gently. It hit the wall with a soft metallic noise, aluminum on painted steel. The long leg of the L came to rest almost vertical. The short leg lay on top of the cylinder, almost horizontal.

"Back up about a foot," he whispered.

Vaughan moved the car and the base of the ladder pulled outward to a kinder angle and the top fell forward by a corresponding degree and ended up perfectly flat.

"I love hardware stores," Reacher said.

Vaughan said, "I thought this kind of wall was supposed to be impregnable."

"We're not over it yet."

"But we're close."

"Normally they come with guard towers and searchlights, to make sure people don't bring cars and ladders."

Vaughan shut the engine down and jammed the parking brake on tight. The

laptop screen turned itself off and they were forced back to the visible spectrum, which didn't contain anything very visible. Just darkness. Vaughan carried the flashlight and Reacher took the wrecking bar from the trunk. He levered himself up onto the hood and crouched under the swell of the cylinder. He stepped forward to the base of the windshield and turned again and started to climb the ladder. He carried the wrecking bar in his left hand and gripped the upper rungs with his right. The aluminum squirmed against the steel and set up a weird harmonic in the hollows of the wall. He slowed down to quiet the noise and made it to the angle and leaned forward and crawled along the short horizontal leg of the L on his hands and knees. He shuffled off sideways and lay like a starfish on the cylinder's top surface. Six feet in diameter, almost nineteen feet in circumference, effectively flat enough to be feasible, but still curved enough to be dangerous. And the white paint was slick and shiny. He raised his head cautiously and looked around.

He was six feet from where he wanted to be.

The pyramid of old oil drums was barely visible in the dark, two yards to the west. Its top tier was about eight feet south and eighteen inches down from the top of the wall. He swam forward and grabbed the ladder again. It shifted sideways toward him. No resistance. He called down, "Get on the bottom rung."

The ladder straightened under Vaughan's weight. He hauled himself toward it and clambered over it and turned around and lay down again on the other side. Now he was exactly where he wanted to be. He called, "Come on up."

He saw the ladder flex and sway and bounce a little and the strange harmonic keening started up again. Then Vaughan's head came into view. She paused and got her bearings and made it over the angle and climbed off and lay down in the place he had just vacated, uneasy and spread-eagled. He handed her the wrecking bar and hauled the ladder up sideways, awkwardly, crossing and uncrossing his hands until he had the thing approximately balanced on top of the curve. He glanced right, into the arena, and tugged the ladder a little closer to him and then fed it down on the other side of the wall until the short leg of the L came to rest on an oil drum two tiers down from the top. The long leg came to rest at a gentle slope, like a bridge.

"I love hardware stores," he said again.

"I love solid ground," Vaughan said.

He took the wrecking bar back from her and stretched forward and got both hands on the ladder rails. He jerked downward, hard, to make sure it was seated tight. Then he supported all his weight with his arms, like he was chinning a bar, and let his legs slide off the cylinder. He kicked and struggled until he got his feet on the ladder. Then he climbed down, backward, his ass in the air where the slope was gentle, in a more normal position after the angle. He stepped off onto the oil drum and glanced around. Nothing to see. He held his end of the ladder steady and called up to Vaughan, “Your turn.”

She came down the same way he had, backward, butt high like a monkey, then more or less vertically after the turn, ending up standing on the drum between his outstretched arms, which were still on the ladder. He left them there for a minute and then he moved and said, “Now it’s easy. Like stairs.”

They clambered down the pyramid. The empty drums boomed softly. They stepped off onto the sticky dirt and crunched out into the open.

“This way,” Reacher said.

They covered the quarter-mile to the vehicle gate in less than five minutes. The white Tahoes were parked close together near one end of it and there was a line of five flat-bed semis near the other. No tractor units attached. Just the trailers, jacked up at their fronts on their skinny parking legs. Four were facing outward, toward the gate. They were loaded with steel bars. Product, ready to go. The fifth was facing inward, toward the plant itself. It was loaded with a closed shipping container, dark in color, maybe blue, with the words*CHINA LINES* stenciled on it. Scrap, incoming. Reacher glanced at it and passed it by and headed toward the line of offices. Vaughan walked with him. They ignored the security hut, and Thurman’s own office, and Operations, and Purchasing, and Invoicing, and the first white-painted infirmary unit. They stopped outside the second. Vaughan said, “Visiting the sick again?”

Reacher nodded. “He might talk, without Thurman here.”

“The door might be locked.”

Reacher raised the wrecking bar.

“I have a key,” he said.

But the door wasn’t locked. And the sick deputy wasn’t talking. The sick deputy was dead.

The guy was still tucked tight under the sheet, but he had taken his last breath some hours previously. That was clear. And maybe he had taken it alone. He looked untended. His skin was cold and set and waxy. His eyes were clouded and open. His hair was thin and messy, like he had been tossing on the pillow, listlessly, looking for companionship or comfort. His chart had not been added to or amended since the last time Reacher had seen it. The long list of symptoms and complaints was still there, unresolved and apparently undiagnosed.

“TCE?” Vaughan said.

“Possible,” Reacher said.

*We’re doing the best we can,*Thurman had said.*We’re hoping he’ll get better. I’ll have him taken to the hospital in Halfway tomorrow.*

*Bastard,*Reacher thought.

“This could happen in Hope,” Vaughan said. “We need the data for Colorado Springs. For the lab.”

“That’s why we’re here,” Reacher said.

They stood by the bedside for a moment longer and then they backed out. They closed the door gently, as if it would make a difference to the guy, and headed down the steps and then up the line to the office marked Purchasing. Its door was secured with a padlock through a hasp. The padlock was strong and the hasp was strong but the screws securing the hasp to the jamb were weak. They yielded to little more than the weight of the wrecking bar alone. They pulled out of the wood frame and fell to the ground and the door sagged open an inch. Vaughan turned the flashlight on and hid its beam in her palm. She led the way inside. Reacher followed and closed the door and propped a chair against it.

There were three desks inside and three phones and a whole wall of file cabinets, three drawers high, maybe forty inches tall. A hundred and forty cubic feet of

three drawers high, maybe forty inches tall. A hundred and forty cubic feet of purchase orders, according to Reacher's automatic calculation.

"Where do we start?" Vaughan whispered.

"Try*T* for TCE."

The T drawers were about four-fifths of the way along the array, as common sense and the alphabet dictated they should be. They were crammed with papers. But none of the papers referred to trichloroethylene. Everything was filed according to supplier name. The T drawers were all about corporations called Tri-State and Thomas and Tomkins and Tribune. Tri-State had renewed a fire insurance policy eight months previously, Thomas was a telecommunications company that had supplied four new cell phones three months previously, Tomkins had put tires on two front-loaders six months ago, and Tribune delivered binding wire on a two-week schedule. All essential activity for the metal plant's operation, no doubt, but none of it chemical in nature.

"I'll start at*A*, " Vaughan said.

"And I'll start at*Z*, " Reacher said. "I'll see you at*M* or*N*, if not before."

Vaughan was faster than Reacher. She had the flashlight. He had to rely on stray beams spilling from the other end of the array. Some things were obviously irrelevant. Anything potentially questionable, he had to haul it out and peer at it closely. It was slow work. The clock in his head ticked around, relentlessly. He started to worry about the dawn. It wasn't far away. At one point he found something ordered in the thousands of gallons, but on close inspection it was only gasoline and diesel fuel. The supplier was Western Energy of Wyoming and the purchaser was Thurman Metals of Despair, Colorado. He crammed the paper back in place and moved left to the*V* drawers. The first file he pulled was for medical supplies. Saline solution, IV bags, IV stands, miscellaneous requisites. Small quantities, enough for a small facility.

The supplier was Vernon Medical of Houston, Texas.

The purchaser was Olympic Medical of Despair, Colorado.

Reacher held the paper out to Vaughan. An official purchase order, on an official company letterhead, complete with the same corporate logo they had seen twice on the billboards south of Colorado Springs. Main office address, inside the

metal plant, two cabins down.

“Thurman owns Olympic,” Reacher said. “Where your husband is.”

Vaughan was quiet for a long moment. Then she said, “I don’t think I like that.”

Reacher said, “I wouldn’t either.”

“I should get him out of there.”

“Or get Thurman out of there.”

“How?”

“Keep digging.”

They got back to work. Reacher got through *V,* and *U,* and skipped *T* because they had already checked it. He learned that Thurman’s oxyacetylene supplier was Utah Gases and his kerosene supplier was Union City Fuels. He found no reference to trichloroethylene. He was opening the last of the S drawers when Vaughan said, “Got it.”

“Kearny Chemical of New Jersey,” she said. “TCE purchases going back seven years.”

She lifted the whole file cradle out of the drawer and shone the flashlight on it and riffed through the papers with her thumb. Reacher saw the word trichloroethylene repeated over and over, jumping around from line to line like a kid’s badly drawn flip cartoon.

“Take the whole thing,” he said. “We’ll add up the quantities later.”

Vaughan jammed the file under her arm and pushed the drawer shut with her hip. Reacher moved the chair and opened the door and they stepped out together to the dark. Reacher stopped and used the flashlight and found the fallen screws and pushed them back into their holes with his thumb. They held loosely and made the lock look untouched. Then he followed Vaughan as she retraced their steps, past Operations, past Thurman’s digs, past the security office. She waited for him and they dodged around the China Lines container together and headed out into open space.

Then Reacher stopped again.

Turned around.

“Flashlight,” he said.

Vaughan gave up the flashlight and he switched it on and played the beam across the side of the container. It loomed up, huge and unreal in the sudden light, high on its trailer like it was suspended in midair. It was forty feet long, corrugated, boxy, metal. Completely standard in every way. It had*CHINA LINES* painted on it in large letters, dirty white, and a vertical row of Chinese characters, plus a series of ID numbers and codes stenciled low in one corner.

Plus a word, handwritten in capitals, in chalk.

The chalk was faded, as if it had been applied long ago at the other end of a voyage of many thousands of miles.

The word looked like*CARS*.

Reacher stepped closer. The business end of the container had a double door, secured in the usual way with four foot-long levers that drove four sturdy bolts that ran the whole height of the container and socketed home in the box sections top and bottom. The levers were all in the closed position. Three were merely slotted into their brackets, but the fourth was secured with a padlock and guaranteed by a tell-tale plastic tag.

Reacher said, “This is an incoming delivery.”

Vaughan said, “I guess. It’s facing inward.”

“I want to see what’s inside.”

“Why?”

“I’m curious.”

“There are cars inside. Every junkyard has cars.”

He nodded in the dark. “I’ve seen them come in. From neighboring states, tied down on open flat-beds. Not locked in closed containers.”

Vaughan was quiet for a beat. “You think this is army stuff from Iraq?”

“It’s possible.”

“I don’t want to see. It might be Humvees. They’re basically cars. You said so yourself.”

He nodded again. “They are basically cars. But no one ever calls them cars. Certainly not the people who loaded this thing.”

“If it’s from Iraq.”

“Yes, if.”

“I don’t want to see.”

“I do.”

“We need to get going. It’s late. Or early.”

“I’ll be quick,” he said. “Don’t watch, if you don’t want to.”

She stepped away, far enough into the darkness that he couldn’t see her anymore. He held the flashlight in his teeth and stretched up tall and jammed the tongue of the wrecking bar through the padlock’s hoop. Counted*one two* and on*three* he jerked down with all his strength.

No result.

Working way above his head was reducing his leverage. He got his toes on the ledge where the box was reinforced at the bottom and grabbed the vertical bolt and hauled himself up to where he could tackle the problem face-to-face. He got the wrecking bar back in place and tried again.*One, two, jerk.*

No result.

Case-hardened steel, cold rolled, thick and heavy. A fine padlock. He wished he had bought a three-foot bar. Or a six-foot pry bar. He thought about finding some chain and hooking a Tahoe up to it. The keys were probably in. But the chain would break before the padlock. He mused on it and let the frustration

build. Then he jammed the wrecking bar home for a third try.*One. Two.* On*three* he jerked downward with all the force in his frame and jumped off his ledge so that his whole bodyweight reinforced the blow. A two-fisted punch, backed up by two hundred and fifty pounds of moving mass.

The padlock broke.

He ended up sprawled in the dirt. Curved fragments of metal hit him in the head and the shoulder. The wrecking bar clanged off the ledge and caught him in the foot. He didn't care. He climbed back up and broke the tag and smacked the levers out of their slots and opened the doors. Metal squealed. He lit up the flashlight and took a look inside.

Cars.

The restlessness of a long sea voyage had shifted them neatly to the right side of the container. There were four of them, two piled on two, longitudinally. Strange makes, strange models. Dusty, sandblasted, pastel colors.

They were grievously damaged. They were opened like cans, ripped, peeled, smashed, twisted. They had holes through their sheet metal the size of telephone poles.

They had pale rectangular license plates covered with neat Arabic numbers. Off-white backgrounds, delicate backward hooks and curls, black diamond-shaped dots.

Reacher turned in the doorway and called into the darkness, "No Humvees." He heard light footsteps and Vaughan appeared in the gloom. He leaned down and took her hand and pulled her up. She stood with him and followed the flashlight beam as he played it around.

"From Iraq?" she asked.

He nodded. "Civilian vehicles."

"Suicide bombers?" she asked.

"They'd be blown up worse than this. There wouldn't be anything left at all."

"Insurgents, then," she said. "Maybe they didn't stop at the roadblocks."

"Insurgents, then," she said. "Maybe they didn't stop at the roadblocks."

"Why bring them here?"

"I don't know."

"Roadblocks are defended with machine guns. These things were hit by something else entirely. Just look at the damage."

"What did it?"

"Cannon fire, maybe. Some kind of big shells. Or wire-guided missiles."

"Ground or air?"

"Ground, I think. The trajectories look like they were pretty flat."

"Artillery versus sedans?" Vaughan said. "That's kind of extreme."

"You bet it is," Reacher said. "Exactly what the hell is going on over there?"

They closed the container and Reacher scratched around in the sand with the flashlight until he found the shattered padlock. He threw the separate pieces far into the distance. Then they hiked the quarter-mile back to the oil drum pyramid and scaled the wall in the opposite direction. Out, not in. It was just as difficult. The construction was perfectly symmetrical. But they got over. They climbed down and stepped off onto the Crown Vic's hood and slid back to solid ground. Reacher folded the ladder and packed it in the rear seat. Vaughan put the captured Kearny Chemical file in the trunk, under the mat.

She asked, "Can we take the long way home? I don't want to go through Despair again."

Reacher said, "We're not going home."

56

They found Despair's old road and followed it west to the truck route. They turned their headlights on a mile later. Four miles after that they passed the MP base, close to four o'clock in the morning. There were two guys in the guard shack. The orange nightlight lit their faces from below. Vaughan didn't slow but Reacher waved anyway. The two guys didn't wave back.

Vaughan asked, "Where to?"

"Where the old road forks. We're going to pull over there."

"Why?"

"We're going to watch the traffic. I'm working on a theory."

"What theory?"

"I can't tell you. I might be wrong, and then you wouldn't respect me anymore. And I like it better when a woman respects me in the morning."

Thirty minutes later Vaughan bumped down off the new blacktop and U-turned in the mouth of the old road and backed up on the shoulder. When the sun came up they would have a view a mile both ways. They would be far from inconspicuous, but also far from suspicious. Crown Vics were parked on strategic bends all over America, all day every day.

They cracked their windows to let some air in and reclined their seats and went to sleep. Two hours, Reacher figured, before there would be anything to see.

Reacher woke up when the first rays of the morning sun hit the left-hand corner of the windshield. Vaughan stayed asleep. She was small enough to have turned in her seat. Her cheek was pressed against the mouse fur. Her knees were up and her hands were pressed together between them. She looked peaceful.

The first truck to pass them by was heading east toward Despair. It was a flat-bed semi with Nevada plates on both ends. It was loaded with a tangle of rusted-out junk. Washing machines, tumble dryers, bicycle frames, bent rebar, road signposts all folded and looped out of shape by accidents. The truck thundered by with its exhaust cackling on the overrun as it coasted through the bend. Then it was gone, in a long tail of battered air and dancing dust.

Ten minutes later a second truck blew by, an identical flat-bed doing sixty, from Montana, heaped with wrecked cars. Its tires whined loud and Vaughan woke up and glanced ahead at it and asked, “How’s your theory doing?”

Reacher said, “Nothing to support it yet. But also nothing to disprove it.”

“Good morning.”

“To you, too.”

“Sleep long?”

“Long enough.”

The next truck was also heading east, an ugly ten-wheel army vehicle with two guys in the cab and a green box on the back, a standardized NATO payload hauler built in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, and about as pretty as an old pair of dungarees. It wasn’t small, but it was smaller than the preceding semis. And it was slower. It barreled through the curve at about fifty miles an hour and left less of a turbulent wake.

“Resupply,” Reacher said. “For the MP base. Beans, bullets, and bandages, probably from Carson.”

“Does that help?”

“It helps the MPs. The beans anyway. I don’t suppose they’re using many bullets or bandages.”

“I meant, does it help with your theory?”

“No.”

Next up was a semi coming west, out of Despair. The bed was loaded with steel bars. A dense, heavy load. The tractor unit’s engine was roaring. The exhaust note was a deep bellow and black smoke was pouring from the stack.

Vaughan said, “One of the four we saw last night.”

Reacher nodded. “The other three will be right behind it. The business day has started.”

“By now they know we broke into that container.”

“They know somebody did.”

“What will they do about it?”

“Nothing.”

The second of the outgoing semis appeared on the horizon. Then the third. Before the fourth showed up another incoming truck blew by. A container truck. A blue China Lines container on it. Heavy, by the way the tires stressed and whined.

New Jersey plates.

Vaughan said, “Combat wrecks.”

Reacher nodded and said nothing. The truck disappeared in the morning haze and the fourth outgoing load passed it. Then the dust settled and the world went quiet again. Vaughan arched her back and stretched, perfectly straight from her heels to her shoulders.

“I feel good,” she said.

“You deserve to.”

“I needed you to know about David.”

“You don’t have to explain,” Reacher said. He was turned in his seat, watching the western horizon a mile away. He could see a small shape, wobbling in the haze. A truck, far away. Small, because of the distance. Square, and rigid. A box truck, tan-colored.

He said, “Pay attention now.”

The truck took a minute to cover the mile and then it roared past. Two axles, plain, boxy. Tan paint. No logo on it. No writing of any kind.

It had Canadian plates, from Ontario.

“Prediction,” Reacher said. “We’re going to see that truck heading out again within about ninety minutes.”

“Why wouldn’t we? It’ll unload and go home.”

“Unload what?”

“Whatever is in it.”

“Which would be what?”

“Scrap metal.”

“From where?”

“Ontario’s biggest city is Toronto,” Vaughan said. “So from Toronto, according to the law of averages.”

Reacher nodded. “Route 401 in Canada, I-94 around Detroit, I-75 out of Toledo, I-70 all the way over here. That’s a long distance.”

“Relatively.”

“Especially considering that Canada probably has steel mills all its own. I know for sure they’re thick on the ground around Detroit and all over Indiana, which is practically next door. So why haul ass all the way out here?”

“Because Thurman’s place is a specialist operation. You said so yourself.”

“Canada’s army is three men and a dog. They probably keep their stuff forever.”

Canada's army is three men and a dog. They probably keep their stuff forever.

Vaughan said, "Combat wrecks."

Reacher said, "Canada isn't fighting in Iraq. Canadians had more sense."

"So what was in that truck?"

"My guess is nothing at all."

Plenty more trucks passed by in both directions, but they were all uninteresting. Semi trailers from Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah, Washington State, and California, loaded with crushed cars and bales of crushed steel and rusted industrial hulks that might once have been boilers or locomotives or parts of ships. Reacher looked at them as they passed and then looked away. He kept his focus on the eastern horizon and the clock in his head. Vaughan got out and brought the captured file from under the mat in the trunk. She took the papers out of the cardboard cradle and turned them over and squared them on her knee. Licked her thumb and started with the oldest page first. It was dated a little less than seven years previously. It was a purchase order for five thousand gallons of trichloroethylene, to be delivered prepaid by Kearny Chemical to Thurman Metals. The second-oldest page was identical. As was the third. The fourth fell into the following calendar year.

Vaughan said, "Fifteen thousand gallons in the first year. Is that a lot?"

"I don't know," Reacher said. "We'll have to let the state lab be the judge."

The second year of orders came out the same. Fifteen thousand gallons. Then the third year jumped way up, to five separate orders for a total of twenty-five thousand gallons. A refill every seventy-some days. An increase in consumption of close to sixty-seven percent.

Vaughan said, "The start of major combat operations. The first wrecks."

The fourth year held steady at twenty-five thousand gallons.

The fifth year matched it exactly.

“David’s year,” Vaughan said. “His Humvee was rinsed with some of those gallons. What was left of it.”

The sixth year she looked at jumped again. Total of six orders. Total of thirty thousand gallons. Iraq, getting worse. A twenty percent increase. And the current year looked set to exceed even that. There were already six orders in, and the year still had a whole quarter to run. Then Vaughan paused and looked at the six pages again, one by one, side by side, and she said, “No, one of these is different.”

Reacher asked, “Different how?”

“One of the orders isn’t for trichloroethylene. And it isn’t in gallons. It’s in tons, for something called trinitrotoluene. Thurman bought twenty tons of it.”

“When?”

“Three months ago. Maybe they misfiled it.”

“From Kearny?”

“Yes.”

“Then it isn’t misfiled.”

“Maybe it’s another kind of degreaser.”

“It isn’t.”

“You heard of it?”

“Everyone has heard of it. It was invented in 1863 in Germany, for use as a yellow dye.”

“I never heard of it,” Vaughan said. “I don’t like yellow.”

“A few years later they realized it decomposes in an exothermic manner.”

“What does that mean?”

“It explodes.”

Vaughan said nothing.

“Trichloroethylene is called TCE,” Reacher said. “Trinitrotoluene is called TNT.”

“I’ve heard of*that.* ”

“Everyone has heard of it.”

“Thurman bought twenty tons of dynamite? Why?”

“Dynamite is different. It’s nitroglycerine soaked into wood pulp and molded into cylinders wrapped in paper. TNT is a specific chemical compound. A yellow solid. Much more stable. Therefore much more useful.”

“OK, but why did he buy it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he busts things up with it. It melts easily, and pours. That’s how they get it into shell casings and bombs and shaped charges. Maybe he uses it like a liquid and forces it between seams he can’t cut. He was boasting to me about his advanced techniques.”

“I never heard any explosions.”

“You wouldn’t. You’re twenty miles from the plant. And maybe they’re small and controlled.”

“Is it a solvent, when it’s liquid?”

“I’m not sure. It’s a reagent, that’s all I know. Carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, and oxygen. Some complicated formula, lots of sixes and threes and twos.”

Vaughan riffled back through the pages she had already examined.

“Whatever, he never bought any before,” she said. “It’s something new.”

Reacher glanced ahead through the windshield. Saw the tan box truck heading back toward them. It was less than a mile away. He took the red bubble light off the dash and held it in his hand.

“Stand by,” he said. “We’re going to stop that truck.”

“We can’t,” Vaughan said. “We don’t have jurisdiction here.”

“The driver doesn’t know that. He’s Canadian.”

57

Vaughan was a cop from a small quiet town, but she handled the traffic stop beautifully. She started the car when the truck was still a quarter-mile away and put it in gear. Then she waited for the truck to pass and pulled out of the old road onto the new and settled in its wake. She hung back a hundred yards, to be clearly visible in its mirrors. Reacher opened his window and clamped the bubble light on the roof. Vaughan hit a switch and the light started flashing. She hit another switch and her siren quacked twice.

Nothing happened for ten long seconds.

Vaughan smiled.

“Here it comes,” she said. “The*Who, me?* moment.”

The truck started to slow. The driver lifted off and the cab pitched down a degree as weight and momentum settled on the front axle. Vaughan moved up fifty yards and drifted left to the crown of the road. The truck put its turn signal on. It rolled ahead and then braked hard and aimed for a spot where the shoulder was wide. Vaughan skipped past and tucked in again and the two vehicles came to a stop, nose-to-tail in the middle of nowhere, forty miles of empty road behind them and more than that ahead.

She said, “A search would be illegal.”

Reacher said, “I know. Just tell the guy to sit tight, five minutes. We’ll wave him on when we’re done.”

“With what?”

“We’re going to take a photograph.”

Vaughan got out and cop-walked to the driver’s window. She spoke for a moment, then walked back. Reacher said, “Back up on the other shoulder, at right angles. We need to see the whole truck, side-on with the camera.”

Vaughan checked ahead and behind and jockeyed forward and back and then reversed across the blacktop in a wide curve and came to rest sideways on the opposite shoulder, with the front of her car pointed dead-center at the side of the truck. It was a plain, simple vehicle. A stubby hood, a cab, twin rails running back from it with a box body bolted on. The box had alloy skin and was corrugated every foot for strength and rigidity. Tan paint, no writing.

Reacher said, “Camera.”

Vaughan hit laptop keys and the screen lit up with a picture of the truck.

Reacher said, “We need to see the thermal image.”

Vaughan said, “I don’t know if it works in the daytime.” She hit more keys and the screen blazed white. No detail, no definition. Everything was hot.

Reacher said, “Turn down the sensitivity.”

She toggled keys and the screen dimmed. Ahead through the windshield the real-time view stayed unchanged but the image on the laptop screen faded to nothing and then came back ghostly green. Vaughan played around until the road surface and the background scrub showed up as a baseline gray, barely visible. The truck itself glowed a hundred shades of green. The hood was warm, with a bright center where the engine was. The exhaust pipe was a vivid line, with green gases shimmering out the end in clouds. The rear differential was hot and the tires were warm. The cab was warm, a generalized green block with a slight highlight where the driver was sitting and waiting.

The box body was cold at the rear. It stayed cold until it suddenly got warmer three-quarters of the way forward. A section five feet long directly behind the cab was glowing bright.

Reacher said, “Take it down some more.”

Vaughan tapped a key until the tires went gray and merged with the road. She kept on going until the grays went black and the picture simplified to just five disembodied elements in just two shades of green. The engine, hot. The exhaust system, hot. The differential case, warm. The cab, warm.

The first five feet of the box body, warm.

Vaughan said, “It reminds me of the wall around the metal plant. Hotter at one end than the other.”

Reacher nodded. Stuck his arm out the window, waved the driver onward, and peeled the bubble light off the roof. The truck lurched as the gears caught and it pulled across the rumble strip and got straight in the traffic lane and lumbered slowly away, first gear, then second, then third. The laptop screen showed a vivid plume of hot exhaust that swelled and swirled into a lime-green cloud before cooling and dissipating and falling away into blackness.

Vaughan asked, “What did we just see?”

“A truck on its way to Canada.”

“That’s all?”

“You saw what I saw.”

“Is this part of your theory?”

“Pretty much all of it.”

“Want to tell me about it?”

“Later.”

“Than what?”

“When it’s safely across the border.”

“Why then?”

“Because I don’t want to put you in a difficult position.”

“Why would it?”

“Because you’re a cop.”

“Now you’re trying to keep*me* out of trouble?”

Reacher said, “I’m trying to keep everybody out of trouble.”

They turned around and drove back to where the old road forked. They bumped down off the new blacktop and this time they kept on going, between the two ruined farms, all the way to Halfway township. First stop was the coffee shop, for a late breakfast. Second stop was a Holiday Inn, where they rented a bland beige room and showered and made love and went to sleep. They woke up at four, and did all the same things in reverse order, like a film run backward. They made love again, showered again, checked out of the hotel, and headed back to the coffee shop for an early dinner. By five-thirty they were on the road again, heading east, back toward Despair.

Vaughan drove. The setting sun was behind her, bright in her mirror. It put a glowing rectangle of light on her face. The truck route was reasonably busy in both directions. The metal plant ahead was still sucking stuff in and spitting it out again. Reacher watched the license plates. He saw representatives from all of Colorado's neighboring states, plus a container truck from New Jersey, heading outward, presumably empty, and a flat-bed semi from Idaho heading inward, groaning under a load of rusted steel sheet.

He thought:*license plates.*

He said, "I was in the Gulf the first time around."

Vaughan nodded. "You wore the same BDUs every day for eight months. In the heat. Which is a delightful image. I felt bad enough putting these clothes back on."

"We spent most of the time in Saudi and Kuwait, of course. But there were a few covert trips into Iraq itself."

"And?"

"I remember their license plates being silver. But the ones we saw last night in the container were off-white."

"Maybe they changed them since then."

"Maybe. But maybe they didn't. Maybe they had other things to worry about."

Maybe. But maybe they didn't. Maybe they had other things to worry about.

"You think those weren't Iraqi cars?"

"I think Iran uses off-white plates."

"So what are you saying? We're fighting in Iran and nobody knows? That's not possible."

"We were fighting in Cambodia in the seventies and nobody knew. But I think it's more likely there's a bunch of Iranians heading west to Iraq to join in the fun every day. Maybe like commuting to a job. Maybe we're stopping them at the border crossings. With artillery."

"That's very dangerous."

"For the passengers, for sure."

"For the world," Vaughan said.

They passed the MP base just before six-fifteen. Neat, quiet, still, six parked Humvees, four guys in the guard shack. All in order, and recently resupplied.

For what?

They slowed for the last five miles and tried to time it right. Traffic had died away to nothing. The plant was closed. The lights were off. Presumably the last stragglers were heading home, to the east. Presumably the Tahoes were parked for the night. Vaughan made the left onto Despair's old road and then found the ruts in the gathering gloom and followed them like she had the night before, through the throat of the figure 8 and all the way to the spot behind the airplane barn. She parked there and went to pull the key but Reacher put his hand on her wrist and said, "I have to do this part alone."

Vaughan said, "Why?"

"Because this has to be face-to-face. And the whole deal here is that you're permanent and I'm not. You're a cop from the next town, with a lot of years ahead of you. You can't go trespassing and breaking and entering all over the neighborhood."

neighborhood."

"I already have."

"But nobody knew. Which made it OK. This time it won't be OK."

"You're shutting me out?"

"Wait on the road. Any hassle, take off for home. I'll make my own way back."

He left the ladder and the wrecking bar and the flashlight where they were, in the car. But he took the captured switchblades with him. He put one in each pocket, just in case.

Then he hiked the fifty yards through the scrub and climbed the fieldstone wall.

58

It was still too light to make any sense out of hiding. Reacher just leaned against the barn's board wall, near the front corner, outside, on the blind side, away from the house. He could smell the plane. Cold metal, oil, unburned hydrocarbons from the tanks. The clock in his head showed one minute before seven in the evening.

He heard footsteps at one minute past.

Long strides, a heavy tread. The big guy from the plant, hustling. Lights came on in the barn. A bright rectangle of glare spilled forward, shadowed with wings and propeller blades.

Then nothing, for two minutes.

Then more footsteps. Slower. A shorter stride. An older man with good shoes, overweight, battling stiffness and limping with joint pain.

Reacher took a breath and stepped around the corner of the barn, into the light.

The big guy from the plant was standing behind the Piper's wing, just waiting, like some kind of a servant or a butler. Thurman was on the path leading from the house. He was dressed in his wool suit. He was wearing a white shirt and a blue tie.

He was carrying a small cardboard carton.

The carton was about the size of a six-pack of beer. There was no writing on it. The top flaps were folded shut, one under the other. It wasn't heavy. Thurman was carrying it two-handed, out in front of his body, reverentially, but without strain. He stopped dead on the path but didn't speak. Reacher watched him try to find something to say, and then watched him give up. So he filled the silence himself. He said, "Good evening, folks."

Thurman said, "You told me you were leaving."

“I changed my mind.”

“You’re trespassing.”

“Probably.”

“You need to leave now.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

“I meant it before, and I mean it now.”

“I’ll leave when I’ve seen what’s in that box.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because I’m curious about what part of Uncle Sam’s property you’re smuggling out of here every night.”

The big guy from the plant squeezed around the tip of the Piper’s wing and stepped out of the barn and put himself between Reacher and Thurman, closer to Thurman than Reacher. Two against one, explicitly. Thurman looked beyond the big guy’s shoulder directly at Reacher and said, “You’re intruding.” Which struck Reacher as an odd choice of word.*Interfering*, *trespassing*, *butting in*, he would have expected.

“Intruding on what?” he asked.

The big guy asked his boss, “You want me to throw him out?”

Reacher saw Thurman thinking about his answer. There was debate in his face, some kind of a long-range calculus that went far beyond the possible positive or negative outcome of a two-minute brawl in front of an airplane hangar. Like the old guy was playing a long game, and thinking eight moves ahead.

Reacher said, “What’s in the box?”

The big guy said, “Shall I get rid of him?”

Thurman said, “No, let him stay.”

Reacher said, “What’s in the box?”

Reacher said, "What's in the box?"

Thurman said, "Not Uncle Sam's property. God's property."

"God brings you metal?"

"Not metal."

Thurman stood still for a second. Then he stepped around his underling, still carrying the box two-handed out in front of him, like a wise man bearing a gift. He knelt and laid it at Reacher's feet, and then stood up and backed away again. Reacher looked down. Theoretically the box might be booby-trapped, or he might get hit on the head while he crouched down next to it. But he felt either thing was unlikely. The instructors at Rucker had said:*be skeptical, but not too skeptical.* Too much skepticism led to paranoia and paralysis.

Reacher knelt next to the box.

Unlaced the criss-crossed flaps.

Raised them.

The box held crumpled newspaper, with a small plastic jar nested in it. The jar was a standard medical item, sterile, almost clear, with a screw lid. A sample jar, for urine or other bodily fluids. Reacher had seen many of them.

The jar was a quarter full with black powder.

The powder was coarser than talc, finer than salt.

Reacher asked, "What is it?"

Thurman said, "Ash."

"From where?"

"Come with me and find out."

"Come with you?"

"Fly with me tonight. I have nothing to hide. And I'm a patient man. I don't mind proving my innocence, over and over and over again, if I have to."

mind proving my innocence, over and over and over again, if I have to.

The big guy helped Thurman up onto the wing and watched as he folded himself in through the small door. Then he passed the box up. Thurman took it and laid it on a rear seat. The big guy stood back and let Reacher climb up by himself. Reacher ducked low and led with his legs and made it into the co-pilot's seat. He slammed the door and squirmed around until he was as comfortable as he was ever going to get, and then he buckled his harness. Beside him Thurman buckled his and hit a bunch of switches. Dials lit up and pumps whirred and the whole airframe tensed and hummed. Then Thurman hit the starter button and the exhaust coughed and the propeller blade jerked around a quarter of the way and then the engine caught with a roar and the prop spun up and the cabin filled with loud noise and furious vibration. The plane lurched forward, uncertain, earthbound, darting slightly left and right. It waddled forward out of the hangar. Dust blew up all over the place. The plane moved on, down the taxiway, the prop turning fast, the wheels turning slow. Reacher watched Thurman's hands. He was operating the controls the same way an old guy drives a car, leaning back in his seat, casual, familiar, automatic, using the kind of short abbreviated movements born of long habit.

The taxiway led through two clumsy turns to the north end of the runway. The lights were on. Thurman got centered on the graded strip and hit the power and the vibration leached forward out of the cabin into the engine and the wheels started thumping faster below. Reacher turned and saw the cardboard carton slide backward on the seat and nestle against the back cushion. He glanced ahead and saw lit dirt below and rushing darkness above. Then the plane went light and the nose lifted. The plane clawed its way into the night sky and climbed and turned and Reacher looked down and saw first the runway lights go off and then the hangar lights. Without them, there was little to see. The wall around the metal plant was faintly visible, a huge white rectangle in the gloaming.

The plane climbed hard for a minute and then leveled off and Reacher was dumped forward in his seat against his harness straps. He looked over at the dash and saw the altimeter reading two thousand feet. Airspeed was a little over a hundred and twenty. The compass reading was southeast. Fuel was more than half-full. Trim was good. The artificial horizon was level. There were plenty of green lights, and no reds.

Then he turned his head and looked at Thurman and said, "Are you afraid of flying, Mr. Reacher?"

Thurman saw him checking and asked, "Are you afraid of flying, Mr. Reacher?"

Reacher said, "No."

The engine was loud and the vibration was setting up a lot of buzzes and rattles. Wind was howling around the screens and whistling in through cracks. Altogether the little Piper reminded Reacher of the kind of old cars people used as taxis at suburban railroad stations. Sagging, worn out, clunky, but capable of making it through the ride. Maybe.

He asked, "Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

Reacher watched the compass. It was holding steady on south and east. There was an LED window below the compass with two green numbers showing. A GPS readout, latitude and longitude. They were below the fortieth parallel and more than a hundred degrees west. Both numbers were ticking downward, slowly and in step. South and east, at a modest speed. He called up maps in his mind. Empty land ahead, the corner of Colorado, the corner of Kansas, the Oklahoma panhandle. Then the compass swung a little farther south, and Reacher realized that Thurman had been skirting the airspace around Colorado Springs. An Air Force town, probably a little trigger-happy. Better to give it a wide berth.

Thurman kept the height at two thousand feet and the speed at a hundred and a quarter and the compass stayed a little south of southeast. Reacher consulted his mental maps again and figured that if they didn't land or change course they were going to exit Colorado just left of the state's bottom right-hand corner. The time readout on the dash showed seventeen minutes past seven in the evening, which was two minutes fast. Reacher thought about Vaughan, alone in her car. She would have heard the plane take off. She would be wondering why he hadn't come back over the wall.

Thurman said, "You broke into a container last night."

Reacher said, "Did I?"

"It's a fair guess. Who else would have?"

Reacher said nothing.

Reacher said nothing.

Thurman said, “You saw the cars.”

“Did I?”

“Let’s assume so, like intelligent men.”

“Why do they bring them to you?”

“There are some things any government feels it politic to conceal.”

“What do you do with them?”

“The same thing we do with the wrecks towed off I-70. We recycle them. Steel is a wonderful thing, Mr. Reacher. It goes around and around. Peugeots and Toyotas from the Gulf might once have been Fords and Chevrolets from Detroit, and they in turn might once have been Rolls-Royces from England or Holdens from Australia. Or bicycles or refrigerators. Some steel is new, of course, but surprisingly little of it. Recycling is where the action is.”

“And the bottom line.”

“Naturally.”

“So why don’t you buy yourself a better plane?”

“You don’t like this one?”

“Not much,” Reacher said.

They flew on. There was nothing but darkness ahead, relieved occasionally by tiny clusters of yellow light far below. Hamlets, farms, gas stations. At one point Reacher saw brighter lights in the distance to the left and the right. Lamar, probably, and La Junta. Small towns, made larger by comparison with the emptiness all around them. Sometimes cars were visible on roads, tiny cones of blue light crawling slowly.

Reacher asked, “How is Underwood doing? The deputy?”

Thurman paused a moment. Then he said, “He passed on.”

“In the hospital?”

“Before we could get him there.”

“Will there be an autopsy?”

“He has no next of kin to request one.”

“Did you call the coroner?”

“No need. He was old, he got sick, he died.”

“He was about forty.”

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. It’s in store for all of us.”

“You don’t sound very concerned.”

“A good Christian has nothing to fear in death. And I own a town, Mr. Reacher. I see births and deaths all the time. One door closes, another opens.”

Thurman leaned back, his gut between him and the stick, his hands held low. The engine held fast on a mid-range roar and the whole plane shivered with vibration and bucked occasionally on rough air. The latitude number counted down slowly, and the longitude number slower still. Reacher closed his eyes. Flight time to the state line would be about seventy or eighty minutes. He figured they weren’t going to land in Colorado itself. There wasn’t much left of it. Just empty grassland. He figured they were going to Oklahoma, or Texas.

They flew on. The air got steadily worse. Reacher opened his eyes. Downdrafts dropped them into troughs like a stone. Then updrafts hurled them back up again. They were sideswiped by gusts of wind. Not like in a big commercial Boeing. No juddering vibration and bouncing wings. No implacable forward motion. Just violent physical displacement, like a pinball caught between bumpers. There was no storm outside. No rain, no lightning. No thunderheads. Just roiling evening thermals coming up off the plains in giant waves, invisible, compressing, decompressing, making solid walls and empty voids. Thurman held the stick loosely and let the plane buck and dive. Reacher moved in his seat and smoothed the harness straps over his shoulders.

Thurman said, “You*are* afraid of flying.”

“Flying is fine,” Reacher said. “Crashing is another story.”

“An old joke.”

“For a reason.”

Thurman started jerking the stick and hammering the rudder. The plane rose and fell sharply and smashed from side to side. At first Reacher thought they were seeking smoother air. Then he realized Thurman was deliberately making things worse. He was diving where the downdrafts were sucking anyway and climbing with the updrafts. He was turning into the side winds and taking them like roundhouse punches. The plane was hammering all over the sky. It was being tossed around like the insignificant piece of junk it was.

Thurman said, “This is why you need to get your life in order. The end could come at any time. Maybe sooner than you expect.”

Reacher said nothing.

Thurman said, “I could end it for you now. I could roll and stall and power dive. Two thousand feet, we’d hit the deck at three hundred miles an hour. The wings would come off first. The crater would be ten feet deep.”

Reacher said, “Go right ahead.”

“You mean that?”

“I dare you.”

An updraft hit and the plane was thrown upward and then the decompression wave came in and the lift under the wings dropped away to a negative value and the plane fell again. Thurman dropped the nose and hit the throttle and the engine screamed and the Piper tilted into a forty-five-degree power dive. The artificial horizon on the dash lit up red and a warning siren sounded. It was barely audible over the scream of the engine and the battering airflow. Then Thurman pulled out of the dive. He jerked the nose up. The airframe groaned as the main spar stressed and the plane curved level and then rose again through air that was momentarily calmer.

Reacher said, “Chicken.”

Thurman said, “I have nothing to fear.”

“So why pull out?”

“When I die, I’m going to a better place.”

“I thought the big guy got to make that decision, not you.”

“I’ve been a faithful servant.”

“So go for it. Go to a better place, right now. I dare you.”

Reacher said nothing. Thurman flew on, straight and level, through air that was calming down. Two thousand feet, a hundred and twenty-five knots, south of southeast.

“Chicken,” Reacher said again. “Phony.”

Thurman said, “God wants me to complete my task.”

“What, he told you that in the last two minutes?”

“I think you’re an atheist.”

“We’re all atheists. You don’t believe in Zeus or Thor or Neptune or Augustus Caesar or Mars or Venus or Sun Ra. You reject a thousand gods. Why should it bother you if someone else rejects a thousand and one?”

Thurman didn’t answer.

Reacher said, “Just remember, it was you who was afraid to die, not me.”

They flew on, twenty more minutes. The air went still and quiet. Reacher closed his eyes again. Then dead-on an hour and a quarter total elapsed time Thurman

his eyes again. Then dead-on an hour and a quarter total elapsed time Thurman moved in his seat. Reacher opened his eyes. Thurman hit a couple of switches and fired up his radio and held the stick with his knees and clamped a headset over his ears. The headset had a microphone on a boom that came off the left-hand earpiece. Thurman flicked it with his fingernail and said, “It’s me, on approach.” Reacher heard a muffled crackling reply and far below in the distance saw lights come on. Red and white runway lights, he assumed, but they were so far away they looked like a tiny pink pinpoint. Thurman started a long slow descent. Not very smooth. The plane was too small and light for finesse. It jerked and dropped and leveled and dropped again. Laterally it was nervous. It darted left, darted right. The pink pinpoint jumped around below them and drew closer and resolved into twin lines of red and white. The lines looked short. The plane wobbled and stumbled in the air and dipped low and then settled on a shallow path all the way down. The runway lights rushed up to meet it and started blurring past, left and right. For a second Reacher thought Thurman had left it too late, but then the wheels touched down and bounced once and settled back and Thurman cut the power and the plane rolled to a walk with half the runway still ahead of it. The engine note changed to a deep roar and the walk picked up to taxiing speed and Thurman jerked left off the runway and drove a hundred yards to a deserted apron. Reacher could see the vague outlines of brick buildings in the middle distance. He saw a vehicle approaching, headlights on. Big, dark, bulky.

A Humvee.

Camouflage paint.

The Humvee parked twenty feet from the Piper and the doors opened and two guys climbed out.

Battledress uniform, woodland pattern.

Soldiers.

59

Reacher sat for a moment in the sudden silence with his ears ringing and then he opened the Piper's door and climbed out to the wing. Thurman passed him the cardboard carton. Reacher took it one-handed and slid down to the tarmac. The two soldiers snapped to attention and threw salutes and stood there like a ceremonial detail, expectantly. Thurman climbed down behind Reacher and took the box from him. One of the soldiers stepped forward. Thurman bowed slightly and offered the box. The soldier bowed slightly and took it and turned on his heel and slow-marched back to the Humvee. His partner fell in behind him, line astern. Thurman followed them. Reacher followed Thurman.

The soldiers stowed the box in the Humvee's load bed and then climbed in the front. Reacher and Thurman got in the back. Big vehicle, small seats, well separated by the massive transmission tunnel. A diesel engine. They turned a tight circle on the apron and drove toward a building that stood alone in a patch of lawn. Lights were on in two ground floor windows. The Humvee parked and the soldiers retrieved the box from the load bed and slow-marched it into the building. A minute later they came back out again without it.

Thurman said, "Job done, for tonight, at least."

Reacher asked, "What was in the jar?"

"People," Thurman said. "Men, maybe women. We scrape them off the metal. When there's been a fire, that's all that's left of them. Soot, baked onto steel. We scrape it off and collect it in twists of paper, and then we put the day's gleanings into jars. It's as close as we can get to giving them a proper burial."

"Where are we?"

"Fort Shaw, Oklahoma. Up in the panhandle. They deal with recovered remains here. Among other things. They're associated with the identification laboratory in Hawaii."

"You come here every night?"

“As often as necessary. Which is most nights, sadly.”

“What happens now?”

“They give me dinner, and they gas up my plane.”

The soldiers climbed back into the front seats and the Humvee turned again and drove a hundred yards to the main cluster of buildings. A fifties army base, one of thousands in the world. Brick, green paint, whitewashed curbs, swept blacktop. Reacher had never been there before. Had never even heard of it. The Humvee parked by a side door that had a sign that said it led to the Officers’ Club. Thurman turned to Reacher and said, “I won’t ask you to join me for dinner. They’ll have set just one place, and it would embarrass them.”

Reacher nodded. He knew how to find food on post. Probably better food than Thurman would be eating in the O Club.

“I’ll be OK,” he said. “And thanks for asking.”

Thurman climbed out and disappeared through the O Club door. The grunts in the front of the Humvee craned around, unsure about what to do next. They were both privates first class, probably stationed permanently in the States. Maybe they had a little Germany time under their belts, but nothing else of significance. No Korea time. No desert time, certainly. They didn’t have the look. Reacher said, “Remember wearing diapers, when you were two years old?”

The driver said, “Sir, not specifically, sir.”

“Back then I was a major in the MPs. So I’m going to take a stroll now, and you don’t need to worry about it. If you want to worry about it, I’ll dig out your CO and we’ll do the brother officer thing, and he’ll OK it and you’ll look stupid. How does that sound?”

The guy wasn’t totally derelict. Not totally dumb. He asked, “Sir, what unit, and where?”

Reacher said, “110th MP. HQ was in Rock Creek, Virginia.”

The guy nodded. “It still is. The 110th is still in business.”

“I certainly hope so.”

I certainly hope so.

“Sir, you have a pleasant evening. Chow in the mess until ten, if you’re interested.”

“Thanks, soldier,” Reacher said. He climbed out and the Humvee drove away and left him. He stood still for a moment in the sharp night air and then set out walking to the standalone building. Its original purpose was unclear to him. No reason to have a physically separated building unless it held infectious patients or explosives, and it didn’t look like either a hospital or an armory. Hospitals were bigger and armories were stronger.

He went in the front door and found himself in a small square hallway with stairs ahead of him and doors either side. The upstairs windows had been dark. The lit windows had been on the ground floor.*If in doubt, turn left* was his motto. So he tried the left-hand door and came up empty. An administrative office, lights blazing, nobody in it. He stepped back to the hallway and tried the right-hand door. Found a medic with the rank of captain at a desk, with Thurman’s jar in front of him. The guy was young for a captain, but medics got promoted fast. They were usually two steps ahead of everyone else.

“Help you?” the guy said.

“I flew in with Thurman. I was curious about his jar.”

“Curious how?”

“Is it what he says it is?”

“Are you authorized to know?”

“I used to be. I was an MP. I did some forensic medicine with Nash Newman, who was probably your ultimate boss back when you were a second lieutenant. Unless he had retired already. He’s probably retired now.”

The guy nodded. “He is retired now. But I heard of him.”

“So are there human remains in the jar?”

“Probably. Almost certainly, in fact.”

“Carbon?”

Carbon?

“No carbon,” the guy said. “In a hot fire all the carbon is driven off as carbon dioxide. What’s left of a person after cremation are oxides of potassium, sodium, iron, calcium, maybe a little magnesium, all inorganic.”

“And that’s what’s in the jar?”

The guy nodded again. “Entirely consistent with burned human flesh and bone.”

“What do you do with it?”

“We send it to the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii.”

“And what do they do with it?”

“Nothing,” the guy said. “There’s no DNA in it. It’s just soot, basically. The whole thing is an embarrassment, really. But Thurman keeps on showing up. He’s a sentimental old guy. We can’t turn him away, obviously. So we stage a sweet little ceremony and accept whatever he brings. Can’t trash it afterward, either. Wouldn’t be respectful. So we move it off our desks onto Hawaii’s. I imagine they stick it in a closet and forget all about it.”

“I’m sure they do. Does Thurman tell you where it comes from?”

“Iraq, obviously.”

“But what kind of vehicles?”

“Does it matter?”

“I would say so.”

“We don’t get those details.”

Reacher asked, “What was this building originally?”

“A VD clinic,” the medic said.

“You got a phone I could use?”

The guy pointed to a console on his desk.

“Have at it,” he said.

Reacher dialed 411 upside down and got the number for David Robert Vaughan, Fifth Street, Hope, Colorado. He said the number once under his breath to memorize it and then dialed it.

No answer.

He put the phone back in the cradle and asked, “Where’s the mess?”

“Follow your nose,” the medic said. Which was good advice. Reacher walked back to the main cluster and circled until he smelled the aroma of fried food coming out of a powerful extraction vent. The vent came through the wall of a low lean-to addition to a larger square one-story building. The mess kitchen, and the mess. Reacher went in and got a few questioning looks but no direct challenges. He got in line and picked up a cheeseburger the size of a softball, plus fries, plus beans, plus a mug of coffee. The burger was excellent, which was normal for the army. Mess cooks were in savage competition to produce the best patty. The coffee was excellent, too. A unique standardized blend, in Reacher’s opinion the best in the world. He had been drinking it all his life. The fries were fair and the beans were adequate. All in all, probably better than the limp piece of grilled fish the officers were getting.

He took more coffee and sat in an armchair and read the army papers. He figured the two PFCs would come get him when Thurman was ready to leave. They would drive their guests out to the flight line and salute smartly and finish their little show in style, just after midnight. Taxiing, takeoff, the climb, then ninety minutes in the air. That would get them back to Despair by two, which seemed to be the normal schedule. Three hours’ worth of free aviation fuel, plus a free four-hour dinner. Not bad, in exchange for a quarter-full jar of soot.*A born-again-Christian American and a businessman* was how Thurman had described himself. Whatever kind of a Christian he was, he was a useful businessman. That was for damn sure.

The mess kitchen closed. Reacher finished the papers and dozed. The PFCs never showed. At twelve-ten in the morning Reacher woke up and heard the Piper’s engine in the distance and by the time the sound registered in his mind it was revving hard. By the time he made it outside the little white plane was on the runway. He stood and watched as it lifted off and disappeared into the

darkness above.

60

The Humvee came back from the flight line and the two PFCs got out and nodded to Reacher like nothing was wrong. Reacher said, “I was supposed to be on that plane.”

The driver said, “No sir, Mr. Thurman told us you had a one-way ticket tonight. He told us you were heading south from here, on business of your own. He told us you were all done in Colorado.”

Reacher said, “Shit.” He thought back to Thurman, in front of the airplane barn. The deliberate pause.*Debate in his face, some kind of a long-range calculus, like he was playing a long game, thinking eight moves ahead.*

Fly with me tonight.

I won’t ask you to join me for dinner.

Reacher shook his head. He was ninety minutes’ flying time from where he needed to be, in the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere, with no airplane.

Outwitted by a seventy-year-old preacher.

Dumb.

And tense.

I think they were all stirred up because they’re heading for the end of something.

What, he had no idea.

When, he had no clue.

He checked the map in his head. There were no highways in the Oklahoma panhandle. None at all. Just a thin red tracery of state four-lanes and county two-lanes. He glanced at the Humvee and at the PFCs and said, “You guys want to

drive me out to a road?"

"Which road?"

"Any road that gets traffic more than once an hour."

"You could try 287. That goes south."

"I need to go north. Back to Colorado. Thurman wasn't entirely frank with you."

"287 goes north, too. All the way up to I-70."

"How far is that?"

"Sir, I believe it's dead-on two hundred miles."

Hitchhiking had gotten more and more difficult in the ten years since Reacher left the army. Drivers were less generous, more afraid. The West was sometimes better than the East, which helped. Day was always better than night, which didn't. The Humvee from Fort Shaw let him out at twelve-forty-five, and it was a quarter past one in the morning before he saw his first northbound vehicle, a Ford F150 that didn't even slow down to take a look. It just blew past. Ten minutes later an old Chevy Blazer did the same thing. Reacher blamed the movies. They made people scared of strangers. Although in reality most movies had the passing strangers messed up by the locals, not the other way around. Weird inbred families that hunted people for sport. But mostly Reacher blamed himself. He knew he was no kind of an attractive roadside proposition.*Look at yourself. What do you see?* Maria from San Diego was the kind of person that got rides easily. Sweet, small, unthreatening, needy. Vaughan would do OK, too. Hulks six-five in height were a riskier bet.

At ten of two a dark Toyota pick-up at least slowed and took a look before passing by, which was progress of a sort. Five after two, a twenty-year-old Cadillac swept past. It had an out-of-tune motor and a collapsed rear suspension and an old woman low down behind the wheel. White hair, thin neck. What Reacher privately called a Q-tip. Not a likely prospect. Then at a quarter past two an old Suburban heaved into view. In Reacher's experience new Suburbans were driven by uptight assholes, but old models were plain utilitarian vehicles often driven by plain utilitarian people. Their bulk often implied a kind of no-

nonsense self-confidence on the part of their owners. The kind of self-confidence that said strangers weren't necessarily a problem.

The best hope so far.

Reacher stepped off the shoulder and put one foot in the traffic lane. Cocked his thumb in a way that suggested need, but not desperation.

The Suburban's brights came on.

It slowed.

It stopped altogether fifteen feet short of where Reacher was standing. A smart move. It gave the guy behind the wheel a chance to look over his potential passenger without the kind of social pressure that face-to-face proximity would imply. Reacher couldn't see the driver. Too much dazzle from the headlights.

A decision was made. The headlights died back to low beam and the truck rolled forward and stopped again. The window came down. The driver was a fat red-faced man. He was clinging to the wheel like he would fall out of his chair if he didn't. He said, "Where are you headed?" His voice was slurred.

Reacher said, "North into Colorado. I'm trying to get to a place called Hope."

"Never heard of it."

"Me neither, until a few days ago."

"How far away?"

"Maybe four hours."

"Is it on the way to Denver?"

"It would be a slight detour."

"Are you an honest man?"

Reacher said, "Usually."

"Are you a good driver?"

“Not really.”

“Are you drunk?”

Reacher said, “Not even a little bit.”

The guy said, “Well, I am. A lot. So you drive to wherever it is you want to go, keep me out of trouble, let me sleep it off, and then point me toward Denver, OK?”

Reacher said, “Deal.”

Hitchhiking usually carried with it the promise of random personal encounters and conversations made more intense by the certainty that their durations would necessarily be limited. Not this time. The florid guy heaved himself over into the passenger seat and collapsed its back against a worn mechanism and went straight to sleep without another word. He snored and bubbled far back in his throat and he thrashed restlessly. According to the smell of his breath he had been drinking bourbon all evening. A lot of bourbon, probably with bourbon chasers. He was still going to be illegal when he woke up in four hours’ time and pressed on to Denver.

Not Reacher’s problem.

The Suburban was old and worn and grimy. Its total elapsed mileage was displayed in a window below the center of the speedometer in LED figures like a cheap watch. A lot of figures, starting with a two. The motor wasn’t in great shape. It still had power but it had a lot of weight to haul and it didn’t want to go much faster than sixty miles an hour. There was a cell phone on the center console. It was switched off. Reacher glanced at his sleeping passenger and switched it on. It wouldn’t spark up. No charge in the battery. There was a charger plugged into the cigarette lighter. Reacher steered with his knees and traced the free end of the wire and shoved it into a hole on the bottom of the phone. Tried the switch again. The phone came on with a tinkly little tune. The sleeping guy just snored on.

The phone showed no service. The middle of nowhere.

The road narrowed from four lanes to two. Reacher drove on. Five miles ahead he could see a pair of red tail lights. Small lights, set low, widely spaced. Moving north a little slower than the Suburban. The speed differential was maybe five miles an hour, which meant it took sixty whole minutes to close the gap. The lights were on a U-Haul truck. It was cruising at about fifty-five. When Reacher came up behind it, it sped up to a steady sixty. Reacher pulled out and tried to pass, but the Suburban wouldn't accelerate. It bogged down at about sixty-two, which would have put Reacher on the wrong side of the road for a long, long time. Maybe forever. So he eased off and tucked in behind the truck and battled the frustration of having to drive just a little slower than he wanted to. The cell phone was still showing no service. There was nothing to see behind. Nothing to see to the sides. The world was dark and empty. Thirty feet ahead, the U-Haul's back panel was lit up bright by the Suburban's headlights. It was like a rolling billboard. An advertisement. It had a picture of three trucks parked side by side at an angle: small, medium, and large. Each was shown in U-Haul's distinctive orange and white colors. Each had*U-Haul* painted on its front. Each promised an automatic transmission, a gentle ride, a low deck, air conditioning, and cloth seats. A price of nineteen dollars and ninety-five cents was advertised in large figures. Reacher eased the Suburban closer to check the fine print. The bargain price was for in-town use of a small truck for one day, mileage extra, subject to contract terms. Reacher eased off again and fell back.

U-Haul.

You haul. We don't. Independence, self-reliance, initiative.

In general Reacher didn't care for the corruption of written language.*U* for*you, EZ* for*easy, hi* for*high, lo* for*low* . He had spent many years in school learning to read and spell and he wanted to feel that there had been some point to it. But he couldn't get too worked up about*U-Haul.* What was the alternative?*Self-Drive Trucks?* Too clunky. Too generic. No kind of a catchy business name. He followed thirty feet behind the bright rolling billboard and the triple U-Haul logos blurred together and filled his field of view.

U*for* you.

Then he thought: You*for* U.

You did this to me.

To assume makes an ass out of u and me.

He checked the phone again.

No signal. They were in the middle of the Comanche National Grassland. Like being way out at sea. The closest cell tower was probably in Lamar, which was about an hour ahead.

The drunk guy slept noisily and Reacher followed the wallowing U-Haul truck for sixty solid minutes. Lamar showed up ahead as a faint glow on the horizon. Probably not more than a couple of streetlights, but in contrast to the black grassland all around it felt like a destination. There was a small municipal airfield to the west. And there was cell coverage. Reacher glanced down and saw two bars showing on the phone's signal strength meter. He dialed Vaughan's home number from memory.

No answer.

He clicked off and dialed information. Asked for the Hope PD. Let the phone company connect him. He figured his sleeping passenger could spring for the convenience. He heard the ring tone and then there was a click and more ring tone. Automatic call forwarding, he guessed. The Hope PD building wasn't manned at night. Vaughan had mentioned a day guy, but no night guy. Incoming calls would be rerouted out straight to the nighttime prowl car. To a cell provided by the department, or to a personal cell. Ten nights out of fourteen it would be Vaughan answering. But not tonight. She was off duty. It would be another officer out there chasing gum wrappers. Maybe a deputy.

A voice in his ear said, "Hope PD."

Reacher said, "I need to talk to Officer Vaughan."

The guy in the passenger seat stirred, but didn't wake up.

The voice in Reacher's ear said, "Officer Vaughan is off duty tonight."

Reacher said, "I know. But I need her cell number."

"I can't give that to you."

"I can't give that to you."

"Then call it yourself and ask her to call me back on this number."

"I might wake her."

"You won't."

Silence.

Reacher said, "This is important. And be quick. I'll be heading out of range in a minute."

He clicked off. The town of Lamar loomed up ahead. Low dark buildings, a tall water tower, a lit-up gas station. The U-Haul pulled off for fuel. Reacher checked the Suburban's gauge. Half-full. A big tank. But a thirsty motor and many miles to go. He followed the U-Haul to the pumps. Unplugged the phone. It showed decent battery and marginal reception. He put it in his shirt pocket.

The pumps were operational but the pay booth was closed up and dark. The guy from the U-Haul poked a credit card into a slot on the pump and pulled it out again. Reacher used his ATM card and did the same thing. The pump started up and Reacher selected regular unleaded and watched in horror as the numbers flicked around. Gas was expensive. That was for damn sure. More than three bucks for a gallon. The last time he had filled a car, the price had been a dollar. He nodded to the U-Haul guy, who nodded back. The U-Haul guy was a youngish well-built man with long hair. He was wearing a tight black short-sleeve shirt with a clerical collar. Some kind of a minister of religion. Probably played the guitar.

The phone rang in Reacher's pocket. He left the nozzle wedged in the filler neck and turned away and answered. The Hope cop said, "Vaughan didn't pick up her cell."

Reacher said, "Try your radio. She's out in the watch commander's car."

"Where?"

"I'm not sure."

"Why is she out in the watch commander's car?"

“Long story.”

“You’re the guy she’s been hanging with?”

“Just call her.”

“She’s married, you know.”

“I know. Now call her.”

The guy stayed on the line and Reacher heard him get on the radio. A call sign, a code, a request for an immediate response, all repeated once, and then again. Then the sound of dead air. Buzzing, crackling, the heterodyne whine of nighttime interference from high in the ionosphere. Plenty of random noise.

But nothing else.

No reply from Vaughan.

61

Reacher got out of the gas station ahead of the minister in the U-Haul and headed north as fast as the old Suburban would go. The drunk guy slept on next to him. He was leaking alcohol through his pores. Reacher cracked a window. The night air kept him awake and sober and the whistle masked the snoring. Cell coverage died eight miles north of Lamar. Reacher guessed it wouldn't come back until they got close to the I-70 corridor, which was two hours ahead. It was four-thirty in the morning. ETA in Hope, around dawn. A five-hour delay, which was an inconvenience, but maybe not a disaster.

Then the Suburban's engine blew.

Reacher was no kind of an automotive expert. He didn't see it coming. He saw the temperature needle nudge upward a tick, and thought nothing of it. Just stress and strain, he figured, because of the long fast cruise. But the needle didn't stop moving. It went all the way up into the red zone and didn't stop until it was hard against the peg. The motor lost power and a hot wet smell came in through the vents. Then there was a muffled thump under the hood and strings of tan emulsion blew out of the ventilation slots in front of the windshield and spattered all over the glass. The motor died altogether and the Suburban slowed hard. Reacher steered to the shoulder and coasted to a stop.

*Not good,*he thought.

The drunk guy slept on.

Reacher got out in the darkness and headed around to the front of the hood. He used the flats of his hands to bounce some glow from the headlight beams back onto the car. He saw steam. And sticky tan sludge leaking from every crevice. Thick, and foamy. A mixture of engine oil and cooling water. Blown head gaskets. Total breakdown. Repairable, but not without hundreds of dollars and a week in the shop.

Not good.

Half a mile south he could see the U-Haul's lights coming his way. He stepped around to the passenger door and leaned in over the sleeping guy and found a pen and an old service invoice in the glove compartment. He turned the invoice over and wrote:*You need to buy a new car. I borrowed your cell phone. Will mail it back.* He signed the note:*Your hitchhiker.* He took the Suburban's registration for the guy's address and folded it into his pocket. Then he ran fifty feet south and stepped into the traffic lane and held his arms high and waited to flag the U-Haul down. It picked him up in its headlights about fifty yards out. Reacher waved his arms above his head. The universal distress signal. The U-Haul's headlights flicked to bright. The truck slowed, like Reacher knew it would. A lonely road, and a disabled vehicle and a stranded driver, both of them at least fleetingly familiar to the Good Samaritan behind the wheel.

The U-Haul came to rest a yard in front of Reacher, halfway on the shoulder. The window came down and the guy in the dog collar stuck his head out.

"Need help?" he said. Then he smiled, wide and wholesome. "Dumb question, I guess."

"I need a ride," Reacher said. "The engine blew."

"Want me to take a look?"

Reacher said, "No." He didn't want the minister to see the drunk guy. From a distance he was out of sight on the reclined seat, below the window line. Close up, he was big and obvious. Abandoning a broken-down truck in the middle of nowhere was one thing. Abandoning a comatose passenger was another. "No point, believe me. I'll have to send a tow truck. Or set fire to the damn thing."

"I'm headed north to Yuma. You're welcome to join me, for all or part of the way."

Reacher nodded. Called up the map in his head. The Yuma road crossed the Hope road about two hours ahead. The same road he had come in on originally, with the old guy in the green Grand Marquis. He would need to find a third ride, for the final western leg. His ETA was now about ten in the morning, with luck. He said, "Thanks. I'll jump out about halfway to Yuma."

The guy in the dog collar smiled his wholesome smile again and said, "Hop in."

The U-Haul was a full-sized pick-up frame overwhelmed by a box body a little longer and wider and a lot taller than a pick-up's load bed. It sagged and wallowed and the extra weight and aerodynamic resistance made it slow. It struggled up close to sixty miles an hour and stayed there. Wouldn't go any faster. Inside it smelled of warm exhaust fumes and hot oil and plastic. But the seat was cloth, as advertised, and reasonably comfortable. Reacher had to fight to stay awake. He wanted to be good company. He didn't want to replicate the drunk guy's manners.

He asked, "What are you hauling?"

The guy in the collar said, "Used furniture. Donations. We run a mission in Yuma."

"We?"

"Our church."

"What kind of a mission?"

"We help the homeless and the needy."

"What kind of a church?"

"We're Anglicans, plain vanilla, middle of the road."

"Do you play the guitar?"

The guy smiled again. "We try to be inclusive."

"Where I'm going, there's an End Times Church."

The minister shook his head. "An End Times congregation, maybe. It's not a recognized denomination."

"What do you know about them?"

"Have you read the Book of Revelation?"

Reacher said, “I’ve heard of it.”

The minister said, “Its correct title is The Revelation of Saint John the Divine. Most of the original is lost, of course. It was written either in Ancient Hebrew or Aramaic, and copied by hand many times, and then translated into Koine Greek, and copied by hand many times, and then translated into Latin, and copied by hand many times, and then translated into Elizabethan English and printed, with opportunities for error and confusion at every single stage. Now it reads like a bad acid trip. I suspect it always did. Possibly all the translations and all the copying actually improved it.”

“What does it say?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Are you serious?”

“Some of our homeless people make more sense.”

“What do people think it says?”

“Broadly, the righteous ascend to heaven, the unholy are left on earth and are visited by various colorful plagues and disasters, Christ returns to battle the Antichrist in an Armageddon scenario, and no one winds up very happy.”

“Is that the same as the Rapture?”

“The Rapture is the ascending part. The plagues and the fighting are separate. They come afterward.”

“When is all this supposed to happen?”

“It’s perpetually imminent, apparently.”

Reacher thought back to Thurman’s smug little speech in the metal plant.*There are signs*, he had said.*And the possibility of precipitating events.*

Reacher asked, “What would be the trigger?”

“I’m not sure there’s a trigger, as such. Presumably a large element of divine will would be involved. One would certainly hope so.”

“Pre-echoes, then? Ways to know it’s coming?”

The minister shrugged at the wheel. “End Times people read the Bible like other people listen to Beatles records backward. There’s something about a red calf being born in the Holy Land. End Times enthusiasts are real keen on that part. They comb through ranches, looking for cattle a little more auburn than usual. They ship pairs to Israel, hoping they’ll breed a perfect redhead. They want to get things started. That’s another key characteristic. They can’t wait. Because they’re all awfully sure they’ll be among the righteous. Which makes them self-righteous, actually. Most people accept that who gets saved is God’s decision, not man’s. It’s a form of snobbery, really. They think they’re better than the rest of us.”

“That’s it? Red calves?”

“Most enthusiasts believe that a major war in the Middle East is absolutely necessary, which is why they’ve been so unhappy about Iraq. Apparently what’s happening there isn’t bad enough for them.”

“You sound skeptical.”

The guy smiled again.

“Of course I’m skeptical,” he said. “I’m an Anglican.”

There was no more conversation after that, either theological or secular. Reacher was too tired and the guy behind the wheel was too deep into night-driving survival mode, where nothing existed except the part of the road ahead that his headlights showed him. His eyes were wedged open and he was sitting forward, as if he knew that to relax would be fatal. Reacher stayed awake, too. He knew the Hope road wouldn’t be signposted and it wasn’t exactly a major highway. The guy behind the wheel wouldn’t spot it on his own.

It arrived exactly two hours into the trip, a lumpy two-lane crossing their path at an exact right angle. It had stop signs, and the main north-south drag didn’t. By the time Reacher called it and the minister reacted and the U-Haul’s overmatched brakes did their job they were two hundred yards past it. Reacher got out and waved the truck away and waited until its lights and its noise were

gone. Then he walked back through the dark empty vastness. Predawn was happening way to the east, over Kansas or Missouri. Colorado was still pitch black. There was no cell phone signal.

No traffic, either.

Reacher took up station on the west side of the junction, standing on the shoulder close to the traffic lane. East-west drivers would have to pause at the stop sign opposite, and they would get a good look at him twenty yards ahead. But there were no east-west drivers. Not for the first ten minutes. Then the first fifteen, then the first twenty. A lone car came north, trailing the U-Haul by twenty miles, but it didn't turn off. It just blasted onward. An SUV came south, and slowed, ready to turn, but it turned east, away from Hope. Its lights grew small and faint and then they disappeared.

It was cold. There was a wind coming out of the east, and it was moving rain clouds into the sky. Reacher turned his collar up and crossed his arms over his chest and trapped his hands under his biceps for warmth. Cloudy diffused streaks of pink and purple lit up the far horizon. A new day, empty, innocent, as yet unsullied. Maybe a good day. Maybe a bad day. Maybe the last day.*The end is near*, Thurman's church had promised. Maybe a meteorite the size of a moon was hurtling closer. Maybe governments had suppressed the news. Maybe rebels were right then forcing the locks on an old Ukrainian silo. Maybe in a research lab somewhere a flask had cracked or a glove had torn or a mask had leaked.

Or maybe not. Reacher stamped his feet and ducked his face into his shoulder. His nose was cold. When he looked up again he saw headlights in the east. Bright, widely spaced, far enough away that they seemed to be static. A large vehicle. A truck. Possibly a semi trailer. Coming straight toward him, with the new dawn behind it.

Four possibilities. One, it would arrive at the junction and turn right and head north. Two, it would arrive at the junction and turn left and head south. Three, it would pause at the stop sign and then continue west without picking him up. Four, it would pause and cross the main drag and then pause again to let him climb aboard.

Chances of a happy ending, twenty-five percent. Or less, if it was a corporate vehicle with a no-passenger policy because of insurance hassles.

Reacher waited.

When the truck was a quarter-mile away he saw that it was a big rigid panel van, painted white. When it was three hundred yards away he saw that it had a refrigerator unit mounted on top. Fresh food delivery, which would have reduced the odds of a happy outcome if it hadn't been for the stop signs. Food drivers usually didn't like to stop. They had schedules to keep, and stopping a big truck and then getting it back up to speed could rob a guy of measurable minutes. But the stop signs meant he had to slow anyway.

Reacher waited.

He heard the guy lift off two hundred yards short of the junction. Heard the hiss of brakes. He raised his hand high, thumb extended.*I need a ride.* Then he raised both arms and waved. The distress semaphore.*I* really*need a ride.*

The truck stopped at the line on the east side of the junction. Neither one of its direction indicators was flashing. A good sign. There was no traffic north or south, so it moved on again immediately, diesel roaring, gears grinding, heading west across the main drag, straight toward Reacher. It accelerated. The driver looked down. The truck kept on moving.

Then it slowed again.

The air brakes hissed loud and the springs squealed and the truck came to a stop with the cab forty feet west of the junction and the rear fender a yard out of the north-south traffic lane. Reacher turned and jogged back and climbed up on the step. The window came down and the driver peered out from seven feet south. He was a short, wiry man, incongruously small in the huge cab. He said, "It's going to rain."

Reacher said, "That's the least of my problems. My car broke down."

The guy at the wheel said, "My first stop is Hope."

Reacher said, "You're the supermarket guy. From Topeka."

"I left there at four this morning. You want to ride along?"

"Hope is where I'm headed."

“So quit stalling and climb aboard.”

Dawn chased the truck all the way west, and overtook it inside thirty minutes. The world lit up cloudy and pale gold and the supermarket guy killed his headlights and sat back and relaxed. He drove the same way Thurman had flown his plane, with small efficient movements and his hands held low. Reacher asked him if he often carried passengers and he said that about one morning in five he found someone looking for a ride. Reacher said he had met a couple of women who had ridden with him.

“Tourists,” the guy said.

“More than that,” Reacher said.

“You think?”

“I know.”

“How much?”

“All of it.”

“How?”

“I figured it out.”

The guy nodded at the wheel.

“Wives and girlfriends,” he said. “Looking to be close by while their husbands and boyfriends pass through the state.”

“Understandable,” Reacher said. “It’s a tense time for them.”

“So you know what their husbands and boyfriends are?”

“Yes,” Reacher said. “I do.”

“And?”

“And nothing. Not my business.”

"And nothing. Not my business."

"You're not going to tell anyone?"

"There's a cop called Vaughan," Reacher said. "I'm going to have to tell her. She has a right to know. She's involved, two ways around."

"I know her. She's not going to be happy."

Reacher said, "Maybe she will be, maybe she won't be."

"I'm not involved," the guy said. "I'm just a fellow traveler."

"You are involved," Reacher said. "We're all involved."

Then he checked his borrowed cell phone again. No signal.

There was nothing on the radio, either. The supermarket guy hit a button that scanned the whole AM spectrum from end to end, and he came up with nothing. Just static. A giant continent, mostly empty. The truck hammered on, bouncing and swaying on the rough surface. Reacher asked, "Where does Despair get its food?"

"I don't know," the guy said. "And I don't care."

"Ever been there?"

"Once. Just to take a look. And once was enough."

"Why do people stay there?"

"I don't know. Inertia, maybe."

"Are there jobs elsewhere?"

"Plenty. They could head west to Halfway. Lots of jobs there. Or Denver. That place is expanding, for sure. Hell, they could come east to Topeka. We're growing like crazy. Nice houses, great schools, good wages, right there for the taking. This is the land of opportunity."

Reacher nodded and checked his cell phone again. No signal.

They made it to Hope just before ten in the morning. The place looked calm and quiet and unchanged. Clouds were massing overhead and it was cold. Reacher got out on First Street and stood for a moment. His cell phone showed good signal. But he didn't dial. He walked down to Fifth and turned east. From fifty yards away he saw that there was nothing parked on the curb outside Vaughan's house. No cruiser, no black Crown Vic. Nothing at all. He walked on, to get an angle and check the driveway.

The old blue Chevy pick-up was in the driveway. It was parked nose-in, tight to the garage door. It had glass in its windows again. The glass was still labeled with paper barcodes and it was crisp and clear except where it was smeared in places with wax and handprints. It looked very new against the faded old paint. The ladder and the wrecking bar and the flashlight were in the load bed. Reacher walked up the stepping-stone path to the door and rang the bell. He heard it sound inside the house. The neighborhood was still and silent. He stood on the step for thirty long seconds and then the door opened.

Vaughan looked out at him and said, "Hello."

62

Vaughan was dressed in the same black clothes she had worn the night before. She looked still and calm and composed. And a little distant. A little preoccupied. Reacher said, “I was worried about you.”

Vaughan said, “Were you?”

“I tried to call you twice. Here, and in the car. Where were you?”

“Here and there. You better come in.”

The kitchen looked just the same as before. Neat, clean, decorated, three chairs at the table. There was a glass of water on the counter and coffee in the machine.

Reacher said, “I’m sorry I didn’t get right back.”

“Don’t apologize to me.”

“What’s wrong?”

“You want coffee?”

“After you tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nothing is wrong.”

“Like hell.”

“OK, we shouldn’t have done what we did the night before last.”

“Which part?”

“You know which part. You took advantage. I started to feel bad about it. So when you didn’t come back with the plane I switched off my phone and my radio and drove out to Colorado Springs and told David all about it.”

“In the middle of the night?”

in the middle of the night."

Vaughan shrugged. "They let me in. They were very nice about it, actually. They treated me very well."

"And what did David say?"

"That's cruel."

Reacher shook his head. "It isn't cruel. It's a simple question."

"What's your point?"

"That David no longer exists. Not as you knew him. Not in any meaningful sense. And that you've got a choice to make. And it's not a new choice. There have been mass casualties from the Civil War onward. There have been tens of thousands of men in David's position over more than a century. And therefore there have been tens of thousands of women in your position."

"And?"

"They all made a choice."

"David still exists."

"In your memory. Not in the world."

"He's not dead."

"He's not alive, either."

Vaughan said nothing. Just turned away and took a fine china mug from a cupboard and filled it with coffee from the machine. She handed the mug to Reacher and asked, "What was in Thurman's little box?"

"You saw the box?"

"I was over the wall ten seconds after you. Did you really think I was going to wait in the car?"

"I didn't see you."

“That was the plan. But I saw you. I saw the whole thing.*Fly with me tonight?* He ditched you somewhere, didn’t he?”

Reacher nodded. “Fort Shaw, Oklahoma. An army base.”

“You fell for it.”

“I sure did.”

“You’re not as smart as you think.”

“I never claimed to be smart.”

“What was in the box?”

“A plastic jar.”

“What was in the jar?”

“Soot,” Reacher said. “People, after a fire. They scrape it off the metal.”

Vaughan sat down at her table.

“That’s terrible,” she said.

“Worse than terrible,” Reacher said. “Complicated.”

“How?”

Reacher sat down opposite her.

“You can breathe easy,” he said. “There are no wrecked Humvees at the plant. They go someplace else.”

“How do you know?”

“Because Humvees don’t burn like that. Mostly they bust open and people spill out.”

Vaughan nodded. “David wasn’t burned.”

Reacher said. “Only tanks burn like that. No way out of a burning tank. Soot is

Reacher said, "Only tanks burn like that. No way out of a burning tank. Soot is all that's left."

"I see."

Reacher said nothing.

"But how is that complicated?" she asked.

"It's the first in a series of conclusions. Like a logical chain reaction. We're using main battle tanks over there. Which isn't a huge surprise, I guess. But we're losing some, which*is* a huge surprise. We always expected to lose a few, to the Soviets. But we sure as hell didn't expect to lose any to a bunch of ragtag terrorists with improvised explosive devices. In less than four years they've figured out how to make shaped charges good enough to take out main battle tanks belonging to the U.S. Army. That doesn't help our PR very much. I'm real glad the Cold War is over. The Red Army would be helpless with laughter. No wonder the Pentagon ships the wrecks in sealed containers to a secret location."

Vaughan got up and walked over to her counter and picked up her glass of water. She emptied it in the sink and refilled it from a bottle in her refrigerator. Took a sip.

"I got a call this morning," she said. "From the state lab. My tap water sample was very close to five parts per billion TCE. Borderline acceptable, but it's going to get a lot worse if Thurman keeps on using as much of the stuff as he uses now."

"He might stop," Reacher said.

"Why would he?"

"That's the final conclusion in the chain. We're not there yet. And it's only tentative."

"So what was the second conclusion?"

"What does Thurman do with the wrecked tanks?"

"He recycles the steel."

"Why would the Pentagon deploy MPs to guard recycled steel?"

Why would the Pentagon deploy MPs to guard recycled steel?

“I don’t know.”

“The Pentagon wouldn’t. Nobody cares about steel. The MPs are there to guard something else.”

“Like what?”

“Only one possibility. A main battle tank’s front and side armor includes a thick layer of depleted uranium. It’s a byproduct from enriching natural uranium for nuclear reactors. It’s an incredibly strong and dense metal. Absolutely ideal for armor plate. So the second conclusion is that Thurman is a uranium specialist. And that’s what the MPs are there for. Because depleted uranium is toxic and somewhat radioactive. It’s the kind of thing you want to keep track of.”

“How toxic? How radioactive?”

“Tank crews don’t get sick from sitting behind it. But after a blast or an explosion, if it turns to dust or fragments or vapor, you can get very sick from breathing it, or by being hit by shrapnel made of it. That’s why they bring the wrecks back to the States. And that’s what the MPs are worried about, even here. Terrorists could steal it and break it up into small jagged pieces and pack them into an explosive device. It would make a perfect dirty bomb.”

“It’s heavy.”

“Incredibly.”

“They’d need a truck to steal it. Like you said.”

“A big truck.”

Reacher sipped his coffee and Vaughan sipped her water and said, “They’re cutting it up at the plant. With hammers and torches. That must make dust and fragments and vapor. No wonder everyone looks sick.”

Reacher nodded.

“The deputy died from it,” he said. “All those symptoms? Hair loss, nausea and vomiting, diarrhea, blisters, sores, dehydration, organ failure? That wasn’t old

age or TCE. It was radiation poisoning."

"Are you sure?"

Reacher nodded again. "Very sure. Because he told me so. From his deathbed he said*The,* and then he stopped, and then he started again. He said,*You did this to me.* I thought it was a new sentence. I thought he was accusing me. But it was really all the same sentence. He was pausing for breath, that's all. He was saying,*The U did this to me.* Like some kind of a plea, or an explanation, or maybe a warning. He was using the chemical symbol for uranium. Metal-workers' slang, I guess. He was saying,*The uranium did this to me.* "

Vaughan said, "The air at the plant must be thick with it. And we were right there."

Reacher said, "Remember the way the wall glowed? On the infrared camera? It wasn't hot. It was radioactive."

63

Vaughan sipped her bottled water and stared into space, adjusting to a new situation that was in some ways better than she had imagined, and in some ways worse. She asked, “Why do you say there are no Humvees there?”

Reacher said, “Because the Pentagon specializes. Like I told you. It always has, and it always will. The plant in Despair is about uranium recycling. That’s all. Humvees go somewhere else. Somewhere cheaper. Because they’re easy. They’re just cars.”

“They send cars to Despair, too. We saw them. In the container. From Iraq or Iran.”

Reacher nodded.

“Exactly,” he said. “Which is the third conclusion. They sent those cars to Despair for a reason.”

“Which was what?”

“Only one logical possibility. Depleted uranium isn’t just for armor. They make artillery shells and tank shells out of it, too. Because it’s incredibly hard and dense.”

“So?”

“So the third conclusion is that those cars were hit with ammunition made from depleted uranium. They’re tainted, so they have to be processed appropriately. And they have to be hidden away. Because we’re using tanks and DU shells against thin-skinned civilian vehicles. That’s overkill. That’s*very* bad PR. Thurman said there are some things any government feels it politic to conceal, and he was right.”

“What the hell is happening over there?”

Reacher said, “Your guess is as good as mine.”

Vaughan raised her glass halfway and stopped. She looked at it like she was having second thoughts about ingesting anything and put it back down on the table. She said, “Tell me what you know about dirty bombs.”

“They’re the same as clean bombs,” Reacher said. “Except they’re dirty. A bomb detonates and creates a massive spherical pressure wave that knocks things over and pulps anything soft, like people, and small fragments of the casing are flung outward on the wave like bullets, which does further damage. That effect can be enhanced by packing extra shrapnel inside the casing around the explosive charge, like nails or ball bearings. A dirty bomb uses contaminated metal for the extra shrapnel, usually radioactive waste.”

“How bad is the result?”

“That’s debatable. With depleted uranium, the powdered oxides after a high-temperature explosion are certainly bad news. There are fertility issues, miscarriages, and birth defects. Most people think the radiation itself isn’t really a huge problem. Except that, like I said, it’s debatable. Nobody really knows for sure. Which is the exact problem. Because you can bet your ass everyone will err on the side of caution. Which multiplies the effect, psychologically. It’s classic asymmetric warfare. If a dirty bomb goes off in a city, the city will be abandoned, whether it needs to be or not.”

“How big would the bomb need to be?”

“The bigger the better.”

“How much uranium would they need to steal?”

“The more the merrier.”

Vaughan said, “I think they’re already stealing it. That truck we photographed? The front of the load compartment was glowing just like the wall.”

Reacher shook his head.

“No,” he said. “That was something else entirely.”

64

Reacher said, “Walk to town with me. To the motel.”

Vaughan said, “I don’t know if I want to be seen with you. Especially at the motel. People are talking.”

“But not in a bad way.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“Whatever, I’ll be gone tomorrow. So let them talk for one more day.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Maybe earlier. I might need to stick around to make a phone call. Apart from that, I’m done here.”

“Who do you need to call?”

“Just a number. I don’t think anyone will answer.”

“What about all this other stuff going on?”

“So far all we’ve got is the Pentagon washing its dirty linen in private. That’s not a crime.”

“What’s at the motel?”

“I’m guessing we’ll find room four is empty.”

They walked together through the damp late-morning air, two blocks north from Fifth Street to Third, and then three blocks west to the motel. They bypassed the office and headed on down the row. Room four’s door was standing open. There was a maid’s cart parked outside. The bed was stripped and the bathroom towels were dumped in a pile on the floor. The closets were empty. The maid had a

were dumped in a pile on the floor. The closets were empty. The maid had a vacuum cleaner going.

Vaughan said, “Mrs. Rogers is gone.”

Reacher nodded. “Now let’s find out when and how.”

They backtracked to the office. The clerk was on her stool behind the counter. Room four’s key was back on its hook. Now only two keys were missing. Reacher’s own, for room twelve, and Maria’s, for room eight.

The clerk slid off her stool and stood with her hands spread on the counter. Attentive, and helpful. Reacher glanced at the phone beside her and asked, “Did Mrs. Rogers get a call?”

The clerk nodded. “Six o’clock last night.”

“Good news?”

“She seemed very happy.”

“What then?”

“She checked out.”

“And went where?”

“She called a cab to take her to Burlington.”

“What’s in Burlington?”

“Mostly the airport bus to Denver.”

Reacher nodded. “Thanks for your help.”

“Is anything wrong?”

“That depends on your point of view.”

Reacher was hungry and he needed more coffee, so he led Vaughan another

block north and another block west to the diner. The place was practically empty. Too late for breakfast, too early for lunch. Reacher stood for a second and then slid into the booth that Lucy Anderson had used the night he had met her. Vaughan sat across from him, where Lucy had sat. The waitress delivered ice water and silverware. They ordered coffee, and then Vaughan asked, “What exactly is going on?”

“All those young guys,” Reacher said. “What did they have in common?”

“I don’t know.”

“They were young, and they were guys.”

“And?”

“They were from California.”

“So?”

“And the only white one we saw had a hell of a tan.”

“So?”

Reacher said, “I sat right here with Lucy Anderson. She was cautious and a little wary, but basically we were getting along. She asked to see my wallet, to check I wasn’t an investigator. Then later I said I had been a cop, and she panicked. I put two and two together and figured her husband was a fugitive. The more she thought about it, the more worried she got. She was very hostile the next day.”

“Figures.”

“Then I caught a glimpse of her husband in Despair and went back to check the rooming house where he was staying. It was empty, but it was very clean.”

“Is that important?”

“Crucial,” Reacher said. “Then I saw Lucy again, after her husband had moved on. She said they have lawyers. She talked about people in her position. She sounded like she was part of something organized. I said I could follow her to her husband and she said it wouldn’t do me any good.”

The waitress came over with the coffee. Two mugs, two spoons, a Bunn flask full of a brand-new brew. She poured and walked away and Reacher sniffed the steam and took a sip.

“But I was misremembering all along,” he said. “I didn’t tell Lucy Anderson that I had been a cop. I told her I had been a*military* cop. That’s why she panicked. And that’s why the rooming house was so clean. It was like a barracks ready for inspection. Old habits die hard. The people passing through it were all soldiers. Lucy thought I was tracking them.”

Vaughan said, “Deserters.”

Reacher nodded. “That’s why the Anderson guy had such a great tan. He had been in Iraq. But he didn’t want to go back.”

“Where is he now?”

“Canada,” Reacher said. “That’s why Lucy wasn’t worried about me following her. It wouldn’t do me any good. No jurisdiction. It’s a sovereign nation, and they’re offering asylum up there.”

“The truck,” Vaughan said. “It was from Ontario.”

Reacher nodded. “Like a taxi service. The glow on the camera wasn’t stolen uranium. It was Mrs. Rogers’s husband in a hidden compartment. Body heat, like the driver. The shade of green was the same.”

65

Vaughan sat still and quiet for a long time. The waitress came back and refilled Reacher's mug twice. Vaughan didn't touch hers.

She asked, "What was the California connection?"

Reacher said, "Some kind of an anti-war activist group out there must be running an escape line. Maybe local service families are involved. They figured out a system. They sent guys up here with legitimate metal deliveries, and then their Canadian friends took them north over the border. There was a couple at the Despair hotel seven months ago, from California. A buck gets ten they were the organizers, recruiting sympathizers. And the sympathizers policed the whole thing. They busted your truck's windows. They thought I was getting too nosy, and they were trying to move me on."

Vaughan pushed her mug out of the way and moved the salt and the pepper and the sugar in front of her. She put them in a neat line. She straightened her index finger and jabbed at the pepper shaker. Moved it out of place. Jabbed at it again, and knocked it over.

"A small subgroup," she said. "The few left-hand people, working behind Thurman's back. Helping deserters."

Reacher said nothing.

Vaughan asked, "Do you know who they are?"

"No idea."

"I want to find out."

"Why?"

"Because I want to have them arrested. I want to call the FBI with a list of names."

“OK.”

“Well, don’t you want to?”

Reacher said, “No, I don’t.”

Vaughan was too civilized and too small town to have the fight in the diner. She just threw money on the table and stalked out. Reacher followed her, like he knew he was supposed to. She headed toward the quieter area on the edge of town, or toward the motel again, or toward the police station. Reacher wasn’t sure which. Either she wanted solitude, or to demand phone records from the motel clerk, or to be in front of her computer. She was walking fast, in a fury, but Reacher caught her easily. He fell in beside her and matched her pace for pace and waited for her to speak.

She said, “You knew about this yesterday.”

He said, “Since the day before.”

“How?”

“The same way I figured the patients in David’s hospital were military. They were all young men.”

“You waited until that truck was over the border before you told me.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t want you to have it stopped.”

“Why not?”

“I wanted Rogers to get away.”

Vaughan stopped walking. “For God’s sake, you were a military cop.”

Reacher nodded. “Thirteen years.”

“You hunted guys like Rogers.”

“Yes, I did.”

“And now you’ve gone over to the dark side?”

Reacher said nothing.

Vaughan said, “Did you know Rogers?”

“Never heard of him. But I knew ten thousand just like him.”

Vaughan started walking again. Reacher kept pace. She stopped fifty yards short of the motel. Outside the police station. The brick façade looked cold in the gray light. The neat aluminum letters looked colder.

“They had a duty,” Vaughan said. “You had a duty. David*did* his duty. They should do theirs, and you should do yours.”

Reacher said nothing.

“Soldiers should go where they’re told,” she said. “They should follow orders. They don’t get to choose. And you swore an oath. You should obey it. They’re traitors to their country. They’re cowards. And you are, too. I can’t believe I slept with you. You’re*nothing.* You’re disgusting. You make my skin crawl.”

Reacher said, “Duty is a house of cards.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“I went where they told me. I followed orders. I did everything they asked, and I watched ten thousand guys do the same. And we were happy to, deep down. I mean, we bitched and pissed and moaned, like soldiers always do. But we bought the deal. Because duty is a transaction, Vaughan. It’s a two-way street. We owe them, they owe us. And what they owe us is a solemn promise to risk our lives and limbs if and only if there’s a damn good reason. Most of the time they’re wrong anyway, but we like to feel some kind of good faith somewhere. At least a little bit. And that’s all gone now. Now it’s all about political vanity and electioneering. That’s all. And guys know that. You can try, but you can’t bullshit a soldier.*They* blew it, not us. They pulled out the big card at the bottom

of the house and the whole thing fell down. And guys like Anderson and Rogers are over there watching their friends getting killed and maimed and they're thinking, Why? Why should we do this shit?"

"And you think going AWOL is the answer?"

"I think the answer is for civilians to get off their fat asses and vote the bums out. They should exercise control. That's s*their* duty. That's the next-biggest card at the bottom of the house. But that's gone, too. So don't talk to me about AWOL. Why should the grunts on the ground be the only ones who*don't* go AWOL? What kind of a two-way street is that?"

"You served thirteen years and you support deserters?"

"I understand their decision. Precisely because I served those thirteen years. I had the good times. I wish they could have had them, too. I loved the army. And I hate what happened to it. I feel the same as I would if I had a sister and she married a creep. Should she keep her marriage vows? To a point, sure, but no further."

"If you were in now, would you have deserted?"

Reacher shook his head. "I don't think I would have been brave enough."

"It takes courage?"

"For most guys, more than you would think."

"People don't want to hear that their loved ones died for no good reason."

"I know. But that doesn't change the truth."

"I hate you."

"No, you don't," Reacher said. "You hate the politicians, and the commanders, and the voters, and the Pentagon." Then he said, "And you hate that David didn't go AWOL after his first tour."

Vaughan turned and faced the street. Held still. Closed her eyes. She stood like that for a long time, pale, a small tremble in her lower lip. Then she spoke. Just a whisper. She said, "I asked him to. I begged him. I said we could start again

anywhere he wanted, anywhere in the world. I said we could change our names, anything. But he wouldn't agree. Stupid, stupid man."

Then she cried, right there on the street, outside her place of work. Her knees buckled and she staggered a step and Reacher caught her and held her tight. Her tears soaked his shirt. Her body trembled. She wrapped her arms around him. She crushed her face into his chest. She wailed and cried for her shattered life, her broken dreams, the telephone call two years before, the chaplain's visit to her door, the X-rays, the filthy hospitals, the unstoppable hiss of the respirator.

Afterward they walked up and down the block together, aimlessly, just to be moving. The sky was gray with low cloud and the air smelled like rain was on the way. Vaughan wiped her face on Reacher's shirt tail and ran her fingers through her hair. She blinked her eyes clear and swallowed and took deep breaths. They ended up outside the police station again and Reacher saw her gaze trace the line of twenty aluminum letters fixed to the brick.*Hope Police Department.* She said, "Why didn't Raphael Ramirez make it?"

Reacher said, "Because Ramirez was different."

66

Reacher said, “One phone call from your desk will explain it. We might as well go ahead and make it. Since we’re right here anyway. Maria has waited long enough.”

Vaughan said, “One call to who?”

“The MPs west of Despair. You were briefed about them, they’ll have been briefed about you. Therefore they’ll cooperate.”

“What do I ask them?”

“Ask them to fax Ramirez’s summary file. They’ll say, Who? You’ll tell them, Bullshit, you know Maria was just there, so you know they know who he is. And tell them we know Maria was there for twenty-one hours, which is enough time for them to have gotten all the paperwork in the world.”

“What are we going to find?”

“My guess is Ramirez was in prison two weeks ago.”

The Hope Police Department’s fax machine was a boxy old product standing alone on a rolling cart. It had been square and graceless to start with, and now it was grubby and worn. But it worked. Eleven minutes after Vaughan finished her call it sparked up and started whirring and sucked a blank page out of the feeder tray and fed it back out with writing on it.

Not much writing. It was a bare-bones summary. Very little result for twenty-one hours of bureaucratic pestering. But that was explained by the fact that it had been the army doing the asking and the Marines doing the answering. Inter-service cooperation wasn’t usually very cooperative.

Raphael Ramirez had been a private in the Marine Corps. At the age of eighteen he had been deployed to Iraq. At the age of nineteen he had served a second

deployment. At the age of twenty he had gone AWOL ahead of a third deployment. He had gone on the run but had been arrested five days later in Los Angeles and locked up awaiting court martial back at Pendleton.

Date of arrest, three weeks previously.

Reacher said, “Let’s go find Maria.”

They found her in her motel room. Her bed had a dent where she had been sitting, staying warm, saving energy, passing time, enduring. She answered the door tentatively, as if she was certain that all news would be bad. There was nothing in Reacher’s face to change her mind. He and Vaughan led her outside and sat her in the plastic lawn chair under her bathroom window. Reacher took room nine’s chair and Vaughan took room seven’s. They dragged them over and positioned them and made a tight little triangle on the concrete apron.

Reacher said, “Raphael was a Marine.”

Maria nodded. Said nothing.

Reacher said, “He had been to Iraq twice. He didn’t want to go back a third time. So nearly four weeks ago he went on the run. He headed up to LA. Maybe he had friends there. Did he call you?”

Maria said nothing.

Vaughan said, “You’re not in trouble, Maria. Nobody’s going to get you for anything.”

Maria said, “He called most days.”

Reacher asked, “How was he?”

“Scared. Scared to death. Scared of being AWOL, scared of going back.”

“What happened in Iraq?”

“To him? Not much, really. But he saw things. He said the people we were supposed to be helping were killing us, and we were killing the people we were

supposed to be helping. Everybody was killing everybody else. In bad ways. It was driving him crazy."

"So he ran. And he called most days."

Maria nodded.

Reacher said, "But then he didn't call, for two or three days. Is that right?"

"He lost his cell phone. He was moving a lot. To stay safe. Then he got a new phone."

"How did he sound on the new phone?"

"Still scared. Very worried. Even worse."

"Then what?"

"He called to say he had found some people. Or some people had found him. They were going to get him to Canada. Through a place called Despair, in Colorado. He said I should come here, to Hope, and wait for his call. Then I should join him in Canada."

"Did he call from Despair?"

"No."

"Why did you go to the MPs?"

"To ask if they had found him and arrested him. I was worried. But they said they had never heard of him. They were army, he was Marine Corps."

"And so you came back here to wait some more."

Maria nodded.

Reacher said, "It wasn't exactly like that. He was arrested in LA. The Marines caught up with him. He didn't lose his phone. He was in jail for two or three days."

"He didn't tell me that."

“He wasn’t allowed to.”

“Did he break out again?”

Reacher shook his head. “My guess is he made a deal. The Marine Corps offered him a choice. Five years in Leavenworth, or go undercover to bust the escape line that ran from California all the way to Canada. Names, addresses, descriptions, techniques, routes, all that kind of stuff. He agreed, and they drove him back to LA and turned him loose. That’s why the MPs didn’t respond. They found out what was going on and were told to stonewall you.”

“So where is Raphael now? Why doesn’t he call?”

Reacher said, “My father was a Marine. Marines have a code. Did Raphael tell you about it?”

Maria said, “Unit, corps, God, country.”

Reacher nodded. “It’s a list of their loyalties, in priority order. Raphael’s primary loyalty was to his unit. His company, in fact. Really just a handful of guys. Guys like him.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I think he agreed to the deal but couldn’t carry it through. He couldn’t betray guys just like him. I think he rode up to Despair but didn’t call in to the Marines. I think he hung around on the edge of town and stayed out of sight, because he was conflicted. He didn’t want to know who was involved, because he was afraid he might have to give them away later. He hung out for days, agonizing. He got thirsty and hungry. He started hallucinating and decided to walk over to Hope, and find you, and get out some other way.”

“So where is he?”

“He didn’t make it, Maria. He collapsed halfway. He died.”

“But where is his body?”

“The people in Despair took care of it.”

“I see.”

Then for the second time in an hour Reacher watched a woman cry. Vaughan held her and Reacher said, “He was a good man, Maria. He was just a kid who couldn’t take any more. And in the end he didn’t betray what he believed in.” He said those things over and over again, in different orders, and with different emphases, but they didn’t help.

Maria was all cried out after twenty minutes and Vaughan led her back inside. Then she joined Reacher again and they walked away together. She asked, “How did you know?”

Reacher said, “No other rational explanation.”

“Did he really do what you said? Agonized and then sacrificed himself?”

“Marines are good at self-sacrifice. On the other hand maybe he double-crossed the Corps from the get-go. Maybe he planned all along to head straight to Hope and grab Maria and disappear.”

“It doesn’t take four days to walk from Despair to Hope.”

“No,” Reacher said. “It doesn’t.”

“So he probably did the right thing.”

“I hope that was Maria’s impression.”

“Do you think he told them about the people in California?”

“I don’t know.”

“This will carry on if he didn’t.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It could get out of hand.”

“You could make a couple of calls. They’re in the hotel register in Despair, name and address. You could check and see who they are, and whether they’re

still around, or whether they've disappeared into federal custody."

"I'm sorry about what I said before."

"Don't worry about it."

They walked on, and then Reacher said, "And you weren't wrong, when you did what you did the night before last. Otherwise whoever killed David killed you too. You want to give them that? Because I don't. I want you to have a life."

"That sounds like the beginnings of a farewell speech."

"Does it?"

"Why stay? The Pentagon is washing its dirty linen in private, which isn't a crime. And we seem to have decided this other thing isn't a crime either."

"There's one more thing on my mind," Reacher said.

67

Reacher and Vaughan walked back to the diner, where Reacher ate for the first time since the burger he had scored in the Fort Shaw mess the night before. He topped up his caffeine level with four mugs of coffee and when he had finished he said, “We need to go see those MPs. Now you’ve established contact we might get away with a face-to-face meeting.”

Vaughan said, “We’re going to drive through Despair again?”

Reacher shook his head. “Let’s take your truck and go cross-country.”

They peeled the paper barcodes off the new glass and Vaughan fetched paper towels and Windex from her kitchen and they wiped the wax and the handprints off the screen. Then they set off, early in the afternoon. Vaughan took the wheel. They drove five miles west on Hope’s road and risked another nine on Despair’s. The air was clear and the mountains were visible ahead, first invitingly close and then impossibly distant. Three miles before Despair’s first vacant lot they slowed and bumped down off the road, onto the scrub, and started a long loop to the north. They kept the town on their left, on a three-mile radius. It was just a blur in the distance. Not possible to tell if it was guarded by mobs or sentries, or abandoned altogether.

It was slow going across the open land. Undergrowth scraped along the underside and low bushes slapped at their flanks. The ladder and the wrecking bar in the load bed bounced and rattled. The flashlight rolled from side to side. Occasionally they found dry washes and followed them through looping meanders at a higher speed. Then it was back to picking their way around table rocks bigger than the Chevy itself and keeping the sun centered on the top rail of the windshield. Four times they drove into natural corrals and had to back up and start over. After an hour the town fell away behind them and the plant showed up ahead on the left. The wall glowed white in the sun. The parking lot looked empty. No cars. There was no smoke rising from the plant. No sparks, no noise. No activity at all.

Reacher said, “What day is it?”

Vaughan said, “It’s a regular workday.”

“Not a holiday?”

“No.”

“So where is everybody?”

They steered left and narrowed the gap between themselves and the plant. The Chevy was raising a healthy dust plume in the air behind it. It would be visible to a casual observer. But there were no casual observers. They slowed and stopped two miles out and waited. Five minutes. Ten. Then fifteen. No circulating Tahoes came around.

Vaughan asked, “What exactly is on your mind?”

“I like to be able to explain things to myself,” Reacher said.

“What can’t you explain?”

“The way they were so desperate to keep people out. The way they shut down the secret compound for the day just because I was barging around within half a mile of it. The way they found Ramirez’s body and dealt with it so fast and efficiently. It was no surprise to them. It’s like they set themselves up to be constantly vigilant for intruders. To expect them, even. And they worked out procedures in advance for dealing with them. And everyone in town is involved. The first day I showed up, even the waitress in the restaurant knew exactly what to do. Why would they go to those lengths?”

“They’re playing ball with the Pentagon. Keeping private things private.”

“Maybe. But I’m not sure. Certainly the Pentagon wouldn’t ask for that. Despair is already in the middle of nowhere and the plant is three miles out of town and the bad stuff happens in a walled-off compound inside it. That’s good enough for the Pentagon. They wouldn’t ask local people to go to bat for them. Because they trust walls and distance and geography, not people.”

“Maybe Thurman asked the people himself.”

“I’m sure he did. I’m certain of it. But why? On behalf of the Pentagon, or for some other reason of his own?”

“Like what?”

“Only one logical possibility. Actually, an illogical possibility. Or a logical impossibility. One word from the MPs and we’ll know. If they talk to us at all.”

“What word?”

“Either yes or no.”

There were four guys in the guard shack, which seemed to be their usual daytime deployment. Overkill, in Reacher’s opinion, which meant the post was most likely commanded by a lieutenant, not a sergeant. A sergeant would have had two in the shack and the other two either resting up with the others or out on mobile patrol in a Humvee, depending on the perceived threat assessment. But officers had to sign off on fuel requisitions, which would nix the mobile Humvee, and officers didn’t like men sitting around with nothing to do, which is why the shack was overcrowded. But Reacher didn’t expect the grunts to be unhappy about it. Or about anything. They had been in Iraq, and now they weren’t. The only question in his mind was whether their officer had been in Iraq with them. If he had, he might be reasonable. If he hadn’t, he might be a royal pain in the ass.

Vaughan drove past the base and U-turned and came back and parked facing the right way, tight on the shoulder, close to but not blocking the gate. Like she would outside a fire station. Respectful. Unwilling to put a foot wrong in the dance that had to be coming.

Two guys came out of the guard shack immediately. They were the same two Reacher had seen before. Morgan, the bespectacled specialist with the squint lines, and his partner, the silent private first class. Reacher kept his hands clearly visible and slid out of the truck. Vaughan did the same thing on her side. She introduced herself by name, and as an officer with the Hope PD. Morgan saluted her, in a way Reacher knew meant the MPs had run her plate the first time around, despite his best efforts, and that they had found out what her husband had been, and what he was now.

Which will help,he thought.

Then Morgan turned and looked straight at him.

“Sir?” he said.

“I was an MP myself,” Reacher said. “I did your lieutenant’s job about a million years ago.”

“Sir, which unit?”

“The 110th.”

“Rock Creek, Virginia,” Morgan said. A statement, not a question.

Reacher said, “I went there a couple of times, to get my ass kicked. The rest of the time, I was on the road.”

“On the road where?”

“Everywhere you’ve ever been, and about a hundred other places.”

“Sir, that’s interesting, but I’m going to have to ask you to move your vehicle.”

“At ease, Corporal. We’ll move it as soon as we’ve talked to your lieutenant.”

“On what subject, sir?”

“That’s between him and us,” Reacher said.

“Sir, I can’t justify disturbing him on that basis.”

“Move along, soldier. I’ve read the manual, too. Let’s skip a few pages, to where you’ve already determined that this is important.”

“Is this about the missing Marine private?”

“Much more interesting.”

“Sir, it would help me to have fuller particulars.”

“It would help you to have a million dollars and a date with Miss America, too

"It would help you to have a million dollars and a date with Miss America, too. But what are the chances, soldier?"

Five minutes later Reacher and Vaughan were inside the wire, inside one of the six green metal buildings, face-to-face across a desk with a one-striper called Connor. He was a small lean man. He was maybe twenty-six years old. He had been to Iraq. That was for sure. His BDUs were beat up and sandblasted and his cheekbones were burned shiny. He looked competent, and probably was. He was still alive, and he wasn't in disgrace. In fact he was probably headed for a captain's rank, pending paperwork. Medals too, maybe. He asked, "Is this an official visit from the Hope PD?"

Vaughan said, "Yes."

"You're both members of the department?"

Vaughan said, "Mr. Reacher is a civilian adviser."

"So how can I help?"

Reacher said, "Long story short, we know about the DU salvage at Thurman's plant."

Connor said, "That bothers me a little."

Reacher said, "It bothers us a little, too. Homeland Security rules require us to maintain a register of chemically sensitive sites within twenty miles." He said it as if it was true, which it might have been. Anything was possible, with Homeland Security. "We should have been told."

"You're more than twenty miles from the plant."

"Twenty exactly to downtown," Reacher said. "Only fifteen to the town limit."

"It's classified," Connor said. "You can't put it in a register."

Reacher nodded. "We understand that. But we should have been made aware of it, privately."

"Sounds like you are aware of it."

Sounds like you are aware of it.

“But now we want to verify some details. Once bitten, twice shy.”

“Then you need to speak to the Department of Defense.”

“Better if we don’t. They’ll wonder how we got wind of it. Your guys talking will be their first guess.”

“My guys don’t talk.”

“I believe you. But do you want to take a chance on the Pentagon believing you?”

Connor said, “What details?”

“We think we’re entitled to know when and how the scrap DU gets transported out, and what route is used.”

“Worried about it rolling down First Street?”

“You bet.”

“Well, it doesn’t.”

“It all goes west?”

Connor said, “It goes nowhere.”

Vaughan said, “What do you mean?”

“You guys aren’t the only ones with your panties in a wad. Colorado’s pretty uptight. They want to close the Interstate and use an armed convoy. Which they can’t contemplate on a regular basis. Once every five years is what they’re thinking.”

“How long ago did the first convoy leave?”

“It didn’t. The first convoy will happen about two years from now.”

Reacher said, “So right now they’re stockpiling the stuff at the plant?”

Connor nodded. “The steel moves out, the DU stays.”

“How much have they got there?”

“As of right now, maybe twenty tons.”

“Have you seen it?”

Connor shook his head. “Thurman reports monthly by mail.”

“You like that?”

“What’s not to like?”

“The guy is sitting on a mountain of dangerous stuff.”

“And? What could he possibly do with it?”

68

Reacher and Vaughan got back in the truck and Vaughan said, “Was that answer a yes or a no?”

“Both,” Reacher said. “No, it doesn’t get moved out, yes, it’s all still there.”

“Is that a good both or a bad both?”

Reacher ducked his head and looked up through the screen. The sun was a dull glow behind the cloud, but it was still way above the horizon.

“Four hours until dark,” he said. “We’ve got time for a considered decision.”

“It’s going to rain.”

“Probably.”

“Which will wash more TCE into the aquifer.”

“Probably.”

“We’re not going to sit here until dark, in the rain.”

“No, we’re not. We’re going to the Holiday Inn in Halfway again.”

“Only if we get separate rooms.”

“Shut up, Vaughan. We’re going to get the same room we got before, and we’re going to do all the same things.”

The same room was not available, but they got one just like it. Same size, same décor, same colors. Indistinguishable. They did all the same things in it. Showered, went to bed, made love. Vaughan was a little reserved at first, but got into it later. Afterward she said that David had been better in bed. Reacher wasn’t offended. She needed to believe it. And it was probably true.

wasn't offended. She needed to believe it. And it was probably true.

They lay in the rucked sheets and Vaughan explored Reacher's scars. She had small hands. The bullet hole in his chest was too big for the tip of her little finger. Her ring finger fitted it better. Every woman he had been naked with was fascinated by it, except the woman he had gotten it for. She had preferred to forget. The rain started after an hour. It was heavy. It drummed on the hotel's roof and sheeted against the window. A cozy feeling, in Reacher's opinion. He liked being inside, in bed, listening to rain. After an hour Vaughan got up and went to shower. Reacher stayed in bed and leafed through the Bible that the Gideons had left in the nightstand.

Vaughan came back and asked, "Why does it matter?"

"Why does what matter?"

"That Thurman is stockpiling depleted uranium?"

Reacher said, "I don't like the combination. He's got twenty tons of radioactive waste and twenty tons of TNT. He's an End Times enthusiast. I spoke to a minister last night. He said that End Times people can't wait to get things started. Thurman himself said there might be precipitating events on the way. He said it kind of smugly, like he secretly knew it was true. And the whole town seems to be waiting for something to happen."

"Thurman can't start the Armaggedon. It'll happen when it happens."

"These people are fanatics. They seem to think they can nudge things along. They're trying to breed red cows in Israel."

"How would that help?"

"Don't ask me."

"Cows aren't dangerous."

"Another requirement seems to be a major war in the Middle East."

"We've already got one."

"Not major enough."

“How could it be worse?”

“Lots of ways.”

“Personally I don’t see any.”

“Suppose another country joined in?”

“They’d be crazy to.”

“Suppose someone fired the first shot for them?”

“How would they?”

Reacher said, “Suppose a dirty bomb went off in Manhattan or D.C. or Chicago. What would we do?”

“According to you, we’d evacuate the city.”

“And then?”

“We’d investigate.”

Reacher nodded. “We’d have people in hazmat suits crawling all over the wreckage. What would they find?”

“Evidence.”

“For sure. They’d identify the materials involved. Suppose they found TNT and depleted uranium?”

“They’d make a list of possible sources.”

“Correct. Everyone in the world can buy TNT, but DU is rarer. It’s a byproduct of an enrichment process that occurs in maybe twenty places.”

“Nuclear powers.”

“Exactly.”

“A list of twenty suspects wouldn’t help.”

“Exactly,” Reacher said again. “And the intended victim isn’t going to stand up and take responsibility, because the intended victim didn’t know anything about anything in the first place. But suppose we were nudged in the preferred direction?”

“How?”

“Remember Oklahoma City? The Federal Building? That was a big explosion, but they knew it was a Ryder truck. Within hours. They’re great at putting tiny fragments together.”

“But presumably one uranium fragment is like another.”

“But suppose you were a state-sponsored terrorist from overseas. You’d want maximum bang for the buck. So if you didn’t have quite enough uranium when you were building your bomb, you might use other stuff to pack it out.”

“What other stuff?”

“Maybe pieces of wrecked cars,” Reacher said.

Vaughan said nothing.

Reacher said, “Suppose the guys in the hazmat suits found fragments of Peugeots and Toyotas sold only in certain markets. Suppose they found fragments of Iranian license plates.”

Vaughan was quiet for a moment, working it out. “Iran is working with uranium. They’re boasting about it.”

“There you go,” Reacher said. “What would happen next?”

“We’d make certain assumptions.”

“And?”

“We’d attack Iran.”

“And after that?”

“Iran would attack Israel, Israel would retaliate, everyone would be fighting.”

“Precipitating events,” Reacher said.

“That’s insane.”

“These are people that believe red cows signal the end of the world.”

“These are people who care enough to make sure ash gets a proper burial.”

“Exactly. Because by anyone’s standards that’s a meaningless gesture. Maybe it’s just camouflage. To make sure no one looks at them too closely.”

“We have no evidence.”

“We have an End Times nutcase with technical expertise and twenty tons of TNT and twenty tons of DU and four Iranian cars and a limitless supply of shipping containers, some of which were last seen in the Middle East.”

Vaughan said, “You think it’s possible?”

“Anything is possible.”

“But no judge in America would sign off on a search warrant. Not with what we’ve got. It’s not even circumstantial. It’s just a crazy theory.”

Reacher said, “I’m not looking for a search warrant. I’m waiting for dark.”

Darkness came two hours later. With it came doubts from Vaughan. She said, “If you’re really serious about this, you should call the State Police. Or the FBI.”

Reacher said, “I would have to give my name. I don’t like to do that.”

“Then talk to that MP lieutenant. He already knows your name. And it’s his bag after all.”

“He’s looking at medals and a promotion. He won’t want to rock the boat.”

It was still raining. A steady, hard downpour.

Vaughan said, “You’re not a one-man justice department.”

“What’s on your mind?”

“Apart from legalities?”

“Yes, apart from those.”

“I don’t want you to go there. Because of the radiation.”

“It won’t hurt me.”

“OK,*I* don’t want to go there. You said there were fertility issues and birth defects.”

“You’re not pregnant.”

“I hope.”

“Me too.”

“But these things can linger. I might want children one day.”

That’s progress,Reacher thought. He said, “It’s the dust that’s the problem. And this rain will damp it down. And you don’t have to come in. Just drive me there.”

They left thirty minutes later. Halfway was a small place but it took a long time to get out of it. People were driving cautiously, like they usually did in storms in places that were normally dry. The roads were running with water, like rivers. Vaughan put her wipers on high. They batted back and forth, furiously. She found the turn east and took it. Within a minute the old Chevy was the only car on the road. The only car for miles around. Rain battered the windshield and drummed on the roof.

“This is good,” Reacher said.

“You think?”

“Everyone will be indoors. We’ll have the place to ourselves.”

They passed the MP post thirty minutes later. There were still four guys in the guard shack. They were dressed in rain capes. Their orange nightlight was on. It made a thousand dull jewels from the raindrops on the windows.

Vaughan asked, “Will Thurman fly in this weather?”

Reacher said, “He doesn’t need to. They weren’t working today.”

They drove on. Up ahead they saw a horizontal sliver of blue light. The plant, lit up. Much smaller than before. Like it had moved ten miles south, toward the horizon. But as they got closer they saw that it hadn’t moved. The glow was smaller because only the farthest quarter was illuminated. The secret compound.

Vaughan said, “Well, they’re working now.”

“Good,” Reacher said. “Maybe they left the gates open.”

They hadn’t. The personnel gate and the main vehicle gate were both closed. The bulk of the plant was dark. Nearly a mile beyond it the secret compound was bright and distant and tempting.

Vaughan said, “Are you sure about this?”

Reacher said, “Absolutely.”

“OK, where?”

“Same place as before.”

The Tahoes’ beaten ruts were soft and full of water. The little Chevy spun its wheels and fishtailed and clawed its way forward. Vaughan found the right place. Reacher said, “Back it in.” The wheels spun and the truck bumped up out of the ruts and Vaughan stopped it with its tailgate well under the curve of the metal cylinder, which put its rear window about where the base of the Crown Vic’s windshield had been.

“Good luck,” she said. “And be careful.”

“Don’t worry,” Reacher said. “My biggest risk will be pneumonia.”

He got out into the rain and was soaked to the skin even before he got his stuff out of the load bed. He knelt in the mud beside the truck and adjusted the ladder to the relaxed L-shape that had worked before. He put the flashlight in one pocket and hooked the crook of the wrecking bar in the other. Then he lifted the ladder vertically into the back of the pick-up and jammed its feet into the right angle between the load bed floor and the back wall of the cab. He let it fall forward and the short leg of the L came down flat on top of the cylinder, aluminum against steel, a strange harmonic*clonk* that sounded twice, once immediately and then once again whole seconds later, as if the impact had raced all around the miles of hollow wall and come back stronger.

Reacher climbed into the load bed. Rain lashed the metal and bounced up to his knees. It drummed on the steel cylinder above his head and sheeted down off the bulge of its maximum curvature like a thin waterfall. Reacher stepped sideways and up and started climbing. Rain hammered his back. Gravity pulled the wrecking bar vertical and it hit every tread on the ladder. Steel against aluminum against steel. The harmonics came back, a weird metallic keening modulated by the thrash of the rain. He made it over the angle of the L and stopped. The cylinder was covered in shiny paint and the paint was slick with running water. Maneuvering had been hard before. Now it was going to be very difficult.

He fumbled the flashlight out of his pocket and switched it on. He held it between his teeth and watched the water and picked the spot where half of it was sluicing one way and half the other. The geometric dead-center of the cylinder. The continental divide. He lined up with it and eased off the ladder and sat down. An uneasy feeling. Wet cotton on wet paint. Insecure. No friction. Water was dripping off him and threatening to float him away like an aquaplaning tire.

He sat still for a long moment. He needed to twist from the waist and lift the ladder and reverse it. But he couldn’t move. The slightest turn would unstick him. Newton’s Law of Motion. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. If he twisted his upper body to the left, the torque would spin his lower body to the right, and he would slide right off the cylinder.*An effective design, derived from prison research.*

Fourteen feet to the ground. He could survive a controlled fall, if he didn’t land on a tangle of jagged scrap. But without the ladder on the inside it wasn’t clear how he would ever get out again.

Perhaps the gates had simpler switches on the inside. No combination locks.

Perhaps he could improvise a ladder out of scrap metal. Perhaps he could learn to weld, and build one.

Or perhaps not.

He thought:*I'll worry about all that later*.

He sat for a moment more in the rain and then nudged himself forward and rolled over onto his stomach as he slid and his palms squealed against the wet metal and the wrecking bar thumped and banged and then ninety degrees past top dead-center he was free-falling through empty air, one split second, and two, and three.

He hit the ground a whole lot later than he thought he would. But there was no scrap metal under him and his knees were bent and he went down in a heap and rolled one way and the wrecking bar went the other. The flashlight spun away. The breath was knocked out of him. But that was all. He sat up and a fast mental inventory revealed no physical damage, beyond mud and grease and oil all over his clothes, from the sticky earth.

He got to his feet and wiped his hands on his pants. Found the flashlight. It was a yard away, still burning bright. He carried it in one hand and the wrecking bar in the other and stood for a moment behind the pyramid of old oil drums. Then he stepped out and set off walking, south and west. Dark shapes loomed up at him. Cranes, gantries, crushers, crucibles, piles of metal. Beyond them the distant inner compound was still lit up.

The lights made a T shape.

A very shallow T. The crossbar was a blazing blue line half a mile long. Above it light spill haloed in the wet air. Below it the T shape's vertical stroke was very short. Maybe fourteen feet tall. That was all. Maybe thirty feet wide. A very squat foundation for such a long horizontal line.

But it was there.

The inner gate was open.

An invitation. A trap, almost certainly.*Like moths to a flame.* Reacher looked at it for a long moment and then slogged onward. The flashlight beam showed rainbow puddles everywhere. Oil and grease, floating. Rain was washing down through the sand and capillary action was pulling waste back to the surface. Walking was difficult. Within ten paces Reacher's shoes were carrying pounds of sticky mud. He was getting taller with every step. Every time the flashlight showed him a pile of old I-beams or a tangle of old rebar he stopped and scraped his soles. He was wetter than if he had fallen into a swimming pool. His hair was plastered to his head and water was running into his eyes.

Ahead he could see the white security Tahoes, blurred and ghostly in the darkness. They were parked side by side to the left of the main vehicle gate. Three hundred yards away. He headed straight for them. The trip took him seven minutes. Half-speed, because of the soft ground. When he got there, he turned right and checked the vehicle gate. No luck. On the inside it had the same gray box as on the outside. The same keypad. The same three-million-plus combinations. He turned away from it and tracked along the wall and walked past the security office, and Thurman's office, and the operations office. He stopped outside Purchasing. Scraped his shoes and climbed the steps and used his fingernails to pull the screws out of the padlock hasp. The door sagged open. He went inside.

He headed straight for the row of file cabinets. Aimed toward the right-hand end. Opened the*T* drawer. Pulled the Thomas file. The telecoms company. The cell phone supplier. Clipped to the back of the original purchase order was a thick wad of paper. The contracts, the details, the anytime minutes, the taxes, the fees, the rebates, the makes, the models. And the numbers. He tore off the sheet with the numbers and folded it into his pants pocket. Then he headed back out to the rain.

Close to one mile and forty minutes later he was approaching the inner gate.

69

The inner gate was still open. The inner compound was still blazing with light. Up close, the light was painfully bright. It spilled out in a solid bar the width of the opening and spread and widened like a lighthouse beam that reached a hundred yards.

Reacher hugged the wall and approached from the right. He stopped in the last foot of shadow and listened hard. Heard nothing over the pelting rain. He waited one slow minute and then stepped into the light. His shadow moved behind him, fifty feet long.

No reaction.

He walked in, fast and casual. No alternative. He was as lit up and vulnerable as a stripper on a stage. The ground under his feet was rutted with deep grooves. He was up to his ankles in water. Ahead on the left was the first artful pile of shipping containers. They were stacked in an open V, point outward. To their right and thirty feet farther away was a second V. He aimed for the gap between them. Stepped through, and found himself alone in an arena within an arena within an arena.

Altogether there were eight stacks of shipping containers arranged in a giant circle. They hid an area of maybe thirty acres. The thirty acres held cranes and gantries and crushers, and parked backhoes and bulldozers, and carts and dollies and trailers loaded with smaller pieces of equipment. Coils of baling wire, cutting torches, gas bottles, air hammers, high pressure spray hoses, hand tools. All grimy and battered and well used. Here and there leather welders' aprons and dark goggles were dumped in piles.

Apart from the industrial infrastructure, there were two items of interest.

The first, on the right, was a mountain of wrecked main battle tanks.

The mountain was maybe thirty feet high and fifty across at the base. It looked like an elephants' graveyard, from a grotesque prehistoric nightmare. Bent gun barrels reared up, like giant tusks or ribs. Turret assemblies were dumped and

barrels reared up, like giant tusks of ribs. Turret assemblies were dumped and stacked haphazardly, characteristically low and wide and flat, peeled open like cans. Humped engine covers were stacked on their ends, like plates in a rack, some of them torn and shattered. Side skirts were everywhere, some of them ripped like foil. Parts of stripped hulls were tangled in the wreckage. Some of them had been taken apart by Thurman's men. Most of them had been taken apart much farther away, by different people using different methods. That was clear. There were traces of desert camouflage paint in some places. But not many. Most of the metal was scorched dull black. It looked cold in the blue light and it glistened in the rain, but Reacher felt he could see smoke still rising off it, and hear men still screaming under it.

He turned away. Looked left.

The second item of interest was a hundred yards east.

It was an eighteen-wheel semi truck.

A big rig. Ready to roll. A tractor, a trailer, a blue forty-foot China Lines container on the trailer. The tractor was a huge square Peterbilt. Old, but well maintained. The trailer was a skeletal flat-bed. The container looked like every container Reacher had ever seen. He walked toward it, a hundred yards, two minutes through mud and water. He circled the rig. The Peterbilt tractor was impressive. A fine paint job, an air filter the size of an oil drum, bunk beds behind the front seats, twin chrome smokestacks, a forest of antennas, a dozen mirrors the size of dinner plates. The container looked mundane and shabby in comparison. Dull paint, faded lettering, a few dings and dents. It was clamped tight to the trailer. It had a double door, secured with the same four foot-long levers and the same four long bolts that he had seen before. The levers were all in the closed position.

There were no padlocks.

No plastic tell-tale tags.

Reacher put the wrecking bar in one hand and pulled himself up with the other and got a precarious slippery foothold on the container's bottom ledge. Got his free hand on the nearest lever and pushed it up.

It wouldn't move.

It was welded to its bracket. An inch-long worm of metal had been melted into the gap. The three other levers were the same. And the doors had been welded to each other and to their frames. A neat patient sequence of spot welds had been applied, six inches apart, their bright newness hidden by flicks of dirty blue paint. Reacher juggled the wrecking bar and jammed the flat of the tongue into the space between two welds and pushed hard.

No result. Impossible. Like trying to lift a car with a nail file.

He climbed down, and looked again at the trailer clamps. They were turned tight. And welded.

He dropped the wrecking bar and walked away. He covered the whole of the hidden area, and the whole of the no-man's-land that lay beyond the stacks of piled containers, and the whole length of the perimeter track inside the wall. A long walk. It took him more than an hour. He came back to the inner circle the other way. From the side opposite the inner gates. They were two hundred yards away.

And they were closing.

70

The gates were motorized. Driven by electricity. That was Reacher's first absurd conclusion. They were moving slowly, but smoothly. A consistent speed. Too smooth and too consistent for manual operation. Relentless, at about a foot a second. They were already at a right angle to the wall. Each gate was fifteen feet wide. Five yards. The total remaining arc of travel for each of them was therefore about eight yards.

Twenty-four seconds.

They were two hundred yards away. No problem for a college sprinter on a track. Debatable for a college sprinter in six inches of mud. Completely impossible for Reacher. But still he started forward involuntarily, and then slowed as the arithmetic reality hit him.

He stopped altogether when he saw four figures walk in through the closing gap.

He recognized them immediately, by their size and shape and posture and movement. On the right was Thurman. On the left was the giant with the wrench. In the middle was the plant foreman. He was pushing Vaughan in front of him. The three men were walking easily. They were dressed in yellow slickers and sou'wester hats and rubber boots. Vaughan had no protection against the weather. She was soaked to the skin. Her hair was plastered against her head. She was stumbling, as if every few paces she was getting a shove in the back.

They all kept on coming.

Reacher started walking again.

The gates closed, with a metallic*clang* that sounded twice, first in real time and then again as an echo. The echo died, and Reacher heard a solenoid open and a bolt shoot home, a loud precise sound like a single shot from a distant rifle.

The four figures kept on coming.

Reacher kept on walking.

They met in the center of the hidden space. Thurman and his men stopped. They stood still five feet short of an imaginary line that ran between the pile of wrecked tanks and the eighteen-wheeler. Reacher stopped five feet on the other side. Vaughan kept on going. She picked her way through the mud and made it to Reacher's side and turned around. Put a hand on his arm.

Two against three.

Thurman called, "What are you doing here?"

Reacher could hear the rain beating against the slickers. Three guys, three sets of shoulders, three hats, stiff plastic material.

He said, "I'm looking around."

"At what?"

"At what you've got here."

Thurman said, "I'm losing patience."

Reacher said, "What's in the truck?"

"What kind of incredible arrogance makes you think you're entitled to an answer to that question?"

"No kind of arrogance," Reacher said. "Just the law of the jungle. You answer, I leave. You don't, I don't."

Thurman said, "My tolerance for you is nearly exhausted."

"What's in the truck?"

Thurman breathed in, breathed out. Glanced to his right, at his foreman, and then beyond the foreman at the giant with the wrench. He looked at Vaughan, and then back at Reacher. Reacher said, "What's in the truck?"

Thurman said, "There are gifts in the truck."

"What kind?"

“Clothes, blankets, medical supplies, eyeglasses, prosthetic limbs, dried and powdered foodstuffs, purified water, antibiotics, vitamins, sheets of construction-grade plywood. Things like that.”

“Where from?”

“They were bought with tithes from the people of Despair.”

“Why?”

“Because Jesus said, it is more blessed to give than to receive.”

“Who are the gifts for?”

“Afghanistan. For refugees and displaced persons and those living in poverty.”

“Why is the container welded shut?”

“Because it has a long and perilous journey ahead of it, through many countries and many tribal areas where warlords routinely steal. And padlocks on shipping containers can be broken. As you well know.”

“Why put it all together here? In secret?”

“Because Jesus said, when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret. We follow scripture here, Mr. Reacher. As should you.”

“Why turn out the whole town in defense of a truckful of gifts?”

“Because we believe that charity should know neither race nor creed. We give to Muslims. And not everyone in America is happy with that policy. Some feel that we should give only to fellow Christians. An element of militancy has entered the debate. Although in fact it was the prophet Muhammad himself who said a man’s first charity should be to his own family. Not Jesus. Jesus said whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them. He said love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your father who is in heaven.”

Reacher said, “Where are the cars from Iran?”

“The what?”

“The cars from Iran.”

Thurman said, “Melted down and shipped out.”

“Where is the TNT?”

“The what?”

“You bought twenty tons of TNT from Kearny Chemical. Three months ago.”

Thurman smiled.

“Oh, that,” he said. “It was a mistake. A typo. A coding error. A new girl in the office was one number off, on Kearny’s order form. We got TNT instead of TCE. They’re adjacent in Kearny’s inventory. If you were a chemist, you’d understand why. We sent it back immediately, on the same truck. Didn’t even unload. If you had troubled yourself to break into Invoicing as well as Purchasing, you would have seen our application for a credit.”

“Where is the uranium?”

“The what?”

“You pulled twenty tons of depleted uranium out of these tanks. And I just walked all over this compound and I didn’t see it.”

“You’re standing on it.”

Vaughan looked down. Reacher looked down.

Thurman said, “It’s buried. I take security extremely seriously. It could be stolen and used in a dirty bomb. The state is reluctant to let the army move it. So I keep it in the ground.”

Reacher said, “I don’t see signs of digging.”

“It’s the rain. Everything is churned up.”

Reacher said nothing.

Thurman said, “Satisfied?”

Reacher said nothing. He glanced right, at the eighteen-wheeler. Left, at the parked backhoe. Down, at the ground. The rain splashed in puddles all around and thrashed against the slickers ten feet away.

“Satisfied?” Thurman asked again.

Reacher said, “I might be. After I’ve made a phone call.”

“What phone call?”

“I think you know.”

“I don’t, actually.”

Reacher said nothing.

Thurman said, “But anyway, this is not the right time for phone calls.”

Reacher said, “Not the right place either. I’ll wait until I get back to town. Or back to Hope. Or Kansas.”

Thurman turned and glanced at the gate. Turned back. Reacher nodded. Said, “Suddenly you want to check on what numbers I know.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I think you do.”

“Tell me.”

“No.”

“I want some courtesy and respect.”

“And I want to hit a grand slam at Yankee Stadium. I think both of us are going to be disappointed.”

Thurman said, “Turn out your pockets.”

Reacher said, “Worried about those numbers? Maybe I memorized them.”

Reacher said, "Worried about those numbers? Maybe I memorized them.

"Turn out your pockets."

"Make me."

Thurman went still and his eyes narrowed and debate crossed his face, the same kind of long-range calculus that Reacher had seen before, in front of the airplane hangar. The long game, eight moves ahead. Thurman spent a second or two on it and then he stepped back, abruptly, and raised his right arm. His plastic sleeve came out into the downpour and made noise. He waved his two employees forward. They took two long strides and stopped again. The plant foreman kept his hands loose at his sides and the big guy slapped the wrench in and out of his palm, wet metal on wet skin.

Reacher said, "Not a fair fight."

Thurman said, "You should have thought about that before."

Reacher said, "Not fair to them. They've been cutting uranium. They're sick."

"They'll take their chances."

"Like Underwood did?"

"Underwood was a fool. I give them respirators. Underwood was too lazy to keep his on."

"Did these guys wear theirs?"

"They don't work in here. They're perfectly healthy."

Reacher glanced at the foreman, and then at the giant. Asked, "Is that right? You don't work in here?"

Both guys shook their heads.

Reacher asked, "Are you healthy?"

Both guys nodded.

Reacher asked, "You want that state of affairs to last more than the next two

Reacher asked, "You want that state of affairs to last more than the next two minutes?"

Both guys smiled, and moved a step closer.

Vaughan said, "Just do it, Reacher. Turn out your pockets."

"Still looking out for me?"

"It's two against one. And one of them is the same size as you and the other one is bigger."

"Two against two," Reacher said. "You're here."

"I'm no use. Let's just suck it up and move on."

Reacher shook his head and said, "What's in my pockets is my business."

The two guys took another step. The foreman was on Reacher's right and the big guy was on his left. Both of them close, but not within touching distance. The rain on their clothing was loud. Water was running out of Reacher's hair into his eyes.

He said, "You know we don't have to do this. We could walk out of here friends."

The foreman said, "I don't think so."

"Then you won't walk out of here at all."

"Brave talk."

Reacher said nothing.

The foreman glanced across at the big guy.

He said, "Let's do it."

Get your retaliation in first.

Reacher feinted left, toward the giant. The big guy rocked back, surprised, and the foreman rocked forward, toward the action. Momentum, moving west. A

perfect little ballet. Reacher planted his heel very carefully in the mud and jerked the other way, to his right, to the east, and smashed the foreman in the stomach with his elbow. A five-hundred-pound collision. One guy moving left, one guy moving right, an elbow the size of a pineapple moving fast. The stomach is high in the midsection. Behind it lies the celiac plexus, the largest autonomic nerve center in the abdominal cavity. Sometimes called the solar plexus. A heavy blow can shut the whole thing down. Result, great pain and diaphragm spasms. Consequence, a fall to the ground and a desperate struggle to breathe.

The foreman went down.

He fell facefirst into a foot-wide rut filled with water. Reacher kicked him in the side to roll him out of it. He didn't want the guy to drown. He stepped over the writhing form into clear air and glanced around through the bright blue light. Thurman had backed off twenty feet. Vaughan was rooted to the spot. The big guy was crouched eight feet away, holding his wrench like a clean-up hitter waiting on a high fastball.

Reacher kept his eyes on the big guy's eyes and said, "Vaughan, step away. This guy is going to start swinging. He could hit you by mistake." But he sensed Vaughan wasn't moving. So he danced away east, dragging the fight with him. The big guy followed, big feet in rubber boots splashing awkwardly through standing water. Reacher dodged north, toward Thurman. Thurman backed off again, keeping his distance. Reacher stopped. The big guy wound up for a swing. The huge wrench slashed horizontal, at shoulder height. Reacher stepped back a pace and the wrench missed and its wild momentum carried the big guy through a complete circle.

Reacher backed off another pace.

The big guy followed.

Reacher stopped.

The big guy swung.

Reacher stepped back.

Thirty acres. Reacher wasn't fast and he wasn't nimble but he was a lot more mobile than anyone who outweighed him by a hundred pounds. And he had the

kind of natural stamina that came from being exactly what he was born to be. He wasn't on the downside of twenty years of weight rooms and steroids. Unlike his opponent. The big guy was breathing hard and every missed swing was jacking his fury and his adrenaline rush all the way up to carelessness. Reacher kept on moving and stopping and dodging and stopping again. Eventually the big guy learned. With his fifth swing he aimed for a spot three feet behind Reacher's back. Reacher saw it coming in the guy's crazed eyes and dodged the other way. Forward. The wrench hissed through empty air and Reacher rolled around the guy's spinning back and bent his knees and smashed his elbow up into the guy's kidney. Then he stepped away, two paces, three, and stood still and shook his arms loose and rolled his shoulders. The big guy turned. His back looked stiff and his knees were weakening. He charged and swung and missed and Reacher dodged away.

Like a bullfight. Except the big guy's IQ was marginally higher than a bull's. After a dozen fruitless swings he recognized that his tactics were futile. He sent the wrench spinning away into the marshy ground and got ready to charge. Reacher smiled. Because by then the damage was done. The guy was panting and staggering a little. The violent exertions and the adrenaline overload had spent him. He was going to lose. He didn't know it. But Reacher knew it.

And Thurman knew it.

Thurman was hurrying back toward the gate. Hurrying, but slowly. An old man, a heavy coat, awkward footwear, mud on the ground. Reacher called, "Vaughan, don't let him leave. He has to stay here." He saw her move in the corner of his eye. A small soaked figure, darting north. Then he saw the giant launch himself. A crazed lunge, across fifteen feet of distance. Three hundred and fifty pounds, coming on like a train. Reacher felt small and static by comparison. The guy might have been fast on a football field but he was slow now. His boots churned in the liquid mud. No grip. No traction. He came in on a flailing run and Reacher feinted left and stepped right and tripped him. The guy splashed down in the water and slid a full yard and Reacher turned away and was hit in the back by what felt like a truck. He went down hard and got a mouthful of mud and reflexively rolled away and jacked himself back up and dodged and missed a punch from the plant foreman by about an inch and a half.

Two against one again.

Inefficient.

The foreman launched another big roundhouse swing and Reacher swatted it away and saw the giant struggling to get up. His hands and knees were scrabbling and sliding in the mud. Fifty feet north Vaughan had hold of Thurman's collar. He was struggling to get free. Maybe winning. Then the foreman swung again and Reacher moved and the foreman's fist glanced off his shoulder. But not before stinging a bruise from where he had been hit before, in the bar.

Which hurt.

OK, no more Mr. Nice Guy.

Reacher planted his back heel in the mud and leaned in and launched a flurry of heavy punches, a fast deadly rhythm, four blows, right, left, right, left,*one* to the gut,*two* to the jaw,*three* to the head, and*four,* a crushing uppercut under the chin, like he was his demented five-year-old self all over again, but five times heavier and eight times more experienced. The foreman was already on his way down when the uppercut landed. It lifted him back up and then dropped him like the earth had opened up. Reacher spun away and lined up and kicked the scrabbling giant in the head, like he was punting a football, instep against ear. The impact pinwheeled the guy's body a whole two feet and dropped him back in the mud.

The foreman lay still.

The giant lay still.

Game over.

Reacher checked his hands for broken bones and found none. He stood still and got his breathing under control and glanced north through the light. Thurman had broken free of Vaughan's grasp and was heading for the gate again, slipping and sliding and twisting and turning to fend her off. His hat was gone. His hair was wet and wild. Reacher set off in their direction. Paused to collect the giant wrench from where it had fallen. He hefted it up and carried it on his shoulder like an ax. He trudged onward, heavily. A slow-motion chase. He caught Vaughan ten yards from the gate and passed her and clamped a hand on Thurman's shoulder and pressed downward. The old guy folded up and went down on his knees. Reacher moved onward, to the gate. He found the little gray box. Flipped the lid. Saw the keypad. Swung the wrench and smashed it to splinters. Hit it again. And again. It fell out of its housing in small broken pieces.

A small metal chassis hung up on thin trailing wires. Reacher chopped downward with the wrench until the wires tore and ruptured and the chassis fell to the ground.

Thurman was still on his knees. He said, “What are you doing? Now we can’t get out of here.”

“Wrong,” Reacher said. “You can’t, but we can.”

“How?”

“Wait and see.”

“It’s not possible.”

“Would you have given me the combination?”

“Never.”

“So what’s the difference?”

Vaughan said, “Reacher, what the hell is in your pockets?”

“Lots of things,” Reacher said. “Things we’re going to need.”

71

Reacher trudged through the mud and rolled Thurman's men into what medics called the recovery position. On their sides, arms splayed, necks at a natural angle, one leg straight and the other knee drawn up. No danger of choking. A slight danger of drowning, if the puddles didn't stop filling. The rain was still hard. It thrashed against their slickers and drummed on the sides of their boots.

Thurman poked and prodded at the shattered box where the keypad had been. No result. The gates stayed closed. He gave up and slipped and slid back to the center of the hidden area. Reacher and Vaughan fought their way across to the eighteen-wheeler. It was just standing there, shut down and silent and oblivious.

Vaughan said, "You really think this is a bomb?"

Reacher said, "Don't you?"

"Thurman was mighty plausible. About the gifts for Afghanistan."

"He's a preacher. It's his job to be plausible."

"What if you're wrong?"

"What if I'm right?"

"How much damage could it do?"

"If they built it right I wouldn't want to be within three miles of it when it goes off."

"Three*miles* ?"

"Twenty tons of TNT, twenty tons of shrapnel. It won't be pretty."

"How do we get out of here?"

"Where's your truck?"

“Where we left it. They ambushed me. Opened the outer gate and drove me through the plant in Thurman’s SUV. It’s parked the other side of the inner gate. Which you just made sure will never open again.”

“No big deal.”

“You can’t climb the wall.”

“But you can,” Reacher said.

They talked for five fast minutes about what to do and how to do it. Knives, welds, the average size and thickness of a car’s roof panel, canvas straps, knots, trailer hitches, four-wheel-drive, low-range gearing. Thurman was pacing aimlessly a hundred yards away. They left him there and headed through the mud to the wall. They picked a spot ten feet left of the gate. Reacher took the two switchblades out of his pocket and handed them to Vaughan. Then he stood with his back to the wall, directly underneath the maximum radius of the horizontal cylinder above. Rain sheeted off it and soaked his head and shoulders. He bent down and curled his left palm and made a stirrup. Vaughan lined up directly in front of him, facing him, and put her right foot in the stirrup. He took her weight and she balanced with her wrists on his shoulders and straightened her leg and boosted herself up. He cupped his right hand under her left foot. She stood upright in his palms and her weight fell forward and her belt buckle hit him in the forehead.

“Sorry,” she said.

“Nothing we haven’t done before,” he said, muffled.

“I’m ready,” she said.

Reacher was six feet five inches tall and had long arms. In modest motel rooms he could put his palms flat on an eight-foot ceiling. Vaughan was about five feet four. Arms raised, she could probably stretch just shy of seven feet. Total, nearly fifteen feet. And the wall was only fourteen feet high.

He lifted. Like starting a bicep curl with a free weights bar loaded with a hundred and twenty pounds. Easy, except that his hands were turned in at an unnatural angle. And his footing was insecure, and Vaughan wasn’t a free

unnatural angle. And his footing was insecure, and Vaughan wasn't a free weights bar. She wasn't rigid and she was wobbling and struggling to balance.

"Ready?" he called.

"Wait one," she said.

He felt her weight move in his hands, left to right, right to left, shifting, equalizing, preparing.

"Now go," she said.

He did four things. He boosted her sharply upward, used her momentary weightlessness to shift his hands flat under her shoes, stepped forward half a pace, and locked his arms straight.

She fell forward and met the bulge of the cylinder with the flats of her forearms. The hollow metal construction boomed once, then again, much delayed.

"OK?" he called.

"I'm there," she said.

He felt her go up on tiptoes in his palms. Felt her reach up and straighten her arms. According to his best guess her hands should right then have been all the way up on the cylinder's top dead-center. He heard the first switchblade pop open. He swiveled his hands a little and gripped her toes. For stability. She was going to need it. He moved out another few inches. By then she should have been resting with her belly against the metal curve. Rain was streaming down all over him. He heard her stab downward with the knife. The wall clanged and boomed.

"Won't go through," she called.

"Harder," he called back.

She stabbed again. Her whole body jerked and he dodged and danced underneath her, keeping her balanced. Like acrobats in a circus. The wall boomed.

"No good," she called.

"Harder," he called.

"Harder," he called.

She stabbed again. No boom. Just a little metallic clatter, then nothing.

"The blade broke," she called.

Reacher's arms were starting to ache.

"Try the other one," he called. "Be precise with the angle. Straight downward, OK?"

"The metal is too thick."

"It's not. It's from an old piece-of-shit Buick, probably. It's like aluminum foil. And that's a good Japanese blade. Hit it hard. Who do you hate?"

"The guy that pulled the trigger on David."

"He's inside the wall. His heart is the other side of the metal."

He heard the second switchblade open. Then there was silence for a second. Then a convulsive jerk through her legs and another dull boom through the metal.

A different boom.

"It's in," she called. "All the way."

"Pull on it," he called back.

He felt her take her weight on the wooden handle. He felt her twist as she wrapped both fists around it. He felt her feet pull up out of his hands. Then he felt them come back.

"It's slicing through," she called. "It's cutting the metal."

"It will," he called back. "It'll stop when it hits a weld."

He felt it stabilize a second later. Called, "Where is it?"

"Right at the top."

“Ready?”

“On three,” she called. “One, two,*three*. ”

She jerked herself upward and he helped as much as he could, fingertips and tiptoes, and then her weight was gone. He came down in a heap and rolled away in case she was coming down on top of him. But she wasn’t. He got to his feet and walked away to get a better angle and saw her lying longitudinally on top of the cylinder, legs spread, both hands wrapped tight around the knife handle. She rested like that for a second and then shifted her weight and slid down the far side of the bulge, slowly at first, then faster, swinging around, still holding tight to the knife handle. He saw her clasped hands at the top of the curve, and then her weight started pulling the blade through the metal, fast at first where a track was already sliced and then slower as the blade bit through new metal. It would jam again at the next weld, which he figured was maybe five feet down the far side, allowing for the size of a typical car’s roof panel, minus a folded flange at both sides for assembly purposes, which would be about a quarter of the way around the cylinder’s circumference, which would mean she would be hanging off the wall at full stretch with about four feet of clear air under the soles of her shoes.

A survivable fall.

Probably.

He waited what seemed like an awful long time, and then he heard two hard thumps on the outside of the wall. They each sounded twice, once immediately and then again as the sound raced around the hollow circle and came back. He closed his eyes and smiled. Their agreed signal. Out, on her feet, no broken bones.

“Impressive,” Thurman said, from ten yards away.

Reacher turned. The old guy was still hatless. His blow-dried waves were ruined. Ninety yards beyond him his two men were still down and inert.

*Four minutes,*Reacher thought.

Thurman said, “I could do what she did.”

“In your dreams,” Reacher said. “She’s fit and agile. You’re a fat old man. And

"In your dreams," Reacher said. "She's fit and agile. You're a fat old man. And who's going to boost you up? Real life is not like the movies. Your guys aren't going to wake up and shake their heads and get right to it. They're going to be puking and falling down for a week."

"Are you proud of that?"

"I gave them a choice."

"Your lady friend can't open the gate, you know. She doesn't have the combination."

"Have faith, Mr. Thurman. A few minutes from now you're going to see me ascend."

Reacher strained to hear sounds from the main compound, but the rain was too loud. It hissed in the puddles and pattered on the mud and clanged hard against the metal of the wall. So he just waited. He took up station six feet from the wall and a yard left of where Vaughan had gone over. Thurman backed off and watched.

Three minutes passed. Then four. Then without warning a long canvas strap snaked up and over the wall and the free end landed four feet to Reacher's right. The kind of thing used for tying down scrap cars to a flat-bed trailer. Vaughan had driven Thurman's Tahoe up to the security office and had found a strap of the right length in the pile near the door and had weighted its end by tying it around a scrap of pipe. He pictured her after the drive back, twenty feet away through the metal, swinging the strap like a cowgirl with a rope, building momentum, letting it go, watching it sail over.

Reacher grabbed the strap and freed the pipe and retied the end into a generous two-foot loop. He wrapped the canvas around his right hand and walked toward the wall. Kicked it twice and backed off a step and put his foot in the loop and waited. He pictured Vaughan securing the other end to the trailer hitch on Thurman's Tahoe, climbing into the driver's seat, selecting four-wheel-drive for maximum traction across the mud, selecting the low-range transfer case for delicate throttle control. He had been insistent about that. He didn't want his arms torn off at the shoulders when she hit the gas.

He waited. Then the strap went tight above him and started to quiver. The canvas around his hand wrapped tight. He pushed down into the loop with his sole. He saw the strap pull across the girth of the cylinder. No friction. Wet canvas on painted metal, slick with rain. The canvas stretched a little. Then he felt serious pressure under his foot and he lifted smoothly into the air. Slowly, maybe twelve inches a second. Less than a mile an hour. Idle speed, for the Tahoe's big V-8. He pictured Vaughan behind the wheel, concentrating hard, her foot like a feather on the pedal.

"Goodbye, Thurman," he said. "Looks like it's you that's getting left behind this time."

Then he looked up and got his left hand on the bulge of the cylinder and pushed back and hauled with his right to stop his wrapped knuckles crushing against the metal. His hips hit the maximum curve and he unwrapped his hand and hung on and let himself be pulled up to top dead-center. Then he dropped the strap and let the loop around his foot pull his legs up sideways and then he kicked free of the loop and came to rest spread-eagled on his stomach along the top of the wall. He jerked his hips and sent his legs down the far side and squealed his palms across ninety degrees of wet metal and pushed off and fell, two long split seconds. He hit the ground and fell on his back and knocked the wind out of himself. He rolled over and forced some air into his lungs and crawled up on his knees.

Vaughan had stopped Thurman's Tahoe twenty feet away. Reacher got to his feet and walked over to it and unhooked the strap from the trailer hitch. Then he climbed into the passenger seat and slammed the door.

"Thanks," he said.

"You OK?" she asked.

"Fine. You?"

"I feel like I did when I was a kid and I fell out of an apple tree. Scared, but a good scared." She changed to high-range gearing and took off fast. Two minutes later they were at the main vehicle gate. It was standing wide open.

"We should close it," Reacher said.

"Why?"

“To help contain the damage. If I’m right.”

“Suppose you’re not?”

“Maximum of five phone calls will prove it one way or the other.”

“How do we close it? They don’t seem to have any manual override.”

They stopped just outside the gate and got out and walked over to the gray metal box on the wall. Reacher flipped the lid. One through nine, plus zero.

“Try six-six-one-three,” he said.

Vaughan looked blank but stepped up and raised her index finger. Pressed six, six, one, three, neat and rapid. There was silence for a second and then motors whined and the gates started closing. A foot a second, wheels rumbling along tracks. Vaughan asked, “How did you know?”

“Most codes are four figures,” Reacher said. “ATM cards, things like that. People are used to four-figure codes.”

“Why those four figures?”

“Lucky guess,” Reacher said. “Revelation is the sixty-sixth book in the King James Bible. Chapter one, verse three says the time is at hand. Which seems to be Thurman’s favorite part.”

“So we could have gotten out without climbing.”

“If we had, they could have, too. I want them in there. So I had to smash the lock.”

“Where to now?”

“The hotel in Despair. The first phone call is one that you get to make.”

72

They abandoned Thurman's Tahoe next to where Vaughan's old Chevy was waiting. They transferred between vehicles and bumped through the deserted parking lot and found the road. Three miles later they were in downtown Despair. It was still raining. The streets and the sidewalks were dark and wet and completely deserted. The middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere. They threaded through the cross-streets and pulled up outside the hotel. The façade was as blank and gloomy as before. The street door was closed but not locked. Inside the place looked just the same. The empty dining room on the left, the deserted bar on the right, the untended reception desk dead ahead. The register on the desk, the large square leather book. Easy to grab, easy to swivel around, easy to open, easy to read. Reacher put his fingertip under the last registered guests, the couple from California, from seven months previously. He tilted the book, so that Vaughan had a clear view of their names and addresses.

"Call them in," he said. "And if they're helping the deserters, do whatever your conscience tells you to."

"If?"

"I think they might be into something else."

Vaughan made the call from her cell and they sat in faded armchairs and waited for the call back. Vaughan said, "Gifts are a perfectly plausible explanation. Churches send foreign aid all the time. Volunteers, too. They're usually good people."

"No argument from me," Reacher said. "But my whole life has been about the people that aren't usual. The exceptions."

"Why are you so convinced?"

"The welding."

"Locks can be broken."

“The container was welded to the trailer. And that’s not how containers get shipped. They get lifted off and put on boats. By cranes. That’s the whole point of containers. The welding suggests they don’t mean for that container to leave the country.”

Vaughan’s phone rang. A three-minute wait. From a cop’s perspective, the upside of all the Homeland Security hoopla. Agencies talked, computers were linked, databases were shared. She answered and listened, four long minutes. Then she thanked her caller and clicked off.

“Can’t rule out the AWOL involvement,” she said.

“Because?” Reacher asked.

“They’re listed as activists. And activists can be into all kinds of things.”

“What kind of activists?”

“Religious conservatives.”

“What kind?”

“They run something called the Church of the Apocalypse in LA.”

“The Apocalypse is a part of the End Times story,” Reacher said.

Vaughan said nothing.

Reacher said, “Maybe they came here to recruit Thurman as a brother activist. Maybe they recognized his special potential.”

“They wouldn’t have stayed in this hotel. They’d have been guests in his house.”

“Not the first time. He didn’t know them yet. The second time, maybe. And the third and the fourth, maybe the fifth and the sixth. Depends how hard they had to work to convince him. There’s a four-month gap between their first visit and when he ordered the TNT from Kearny.”

“He said that was a bureaucratic error.”

“Did you believe him?”

Vaughan didn’t answer.

“Four phone calls,” Reacher said. “That’s all it’s going to take.”

They drove west to the edge of town. Three miles away through the rainy darkness they could see the plant’s lights, faint and blue and distant, blurred by the rain on the windshield, a fragmented sepulchral glow way out in the middle of nowhere. Empty space all around it. They parked on a curb facing out of town, level with the last of the buildings. Reacher eased his butt off the seat and took the cell phone he had borrowed out of his pocket. Then he took out the sheet of paper he had taken from the purchasing office. The new cell phone numbers. The paper was wet and soggy and he had to peel apart the folds very carefully.

“Ready?” he asked.

Vaughan said, “I don’t understand.”

He dialed the third number down. Heard ring tone in his ear, twice, four times, six times, eight. Then the call was answered. A muttered greeting, in a voice he recognized. A man’s voice, fairly normal in tone and timbre, but a little dazed, and muffled twice, first by coming from a huge chest cavity, and again by the cellular circuitry.

The big guy, from the plant.

Reacher said, “How are you? Been awake long?”

The guy said, “Go to hell.”

Reacher said, “Maybe I will, maybe I won’t. I’m not sure about the likelihood of things like that. You guys are the theologians, not me.”

No reply.

Reacher asked, “Is your buddy awake, too?”

No reply.

Reacher said, “I’ll call him and see for myself.”

He clicked off and dialed the second number on the list. It rang eight times and the plant foreman answered.

Reacher said, “Sorry, wrong number.”

He clicked off.

Vaughan asked, “What exactly are you doing?”

“How did the insurgents hurt David?”

“With a roadside bomb.”

“Detonated how?”

“Remotely, I assume.”

Reacher nodded. “Probably by radio, from the nearest ridge line. So if Thurman*has* built a bomb, how will he detonate it?”

“The same way.”

“But not from the nearest hill. He’ll probably want a lot more distance than that. He’ll probably want to be out of state somewhere. Maybe at home here in Colorado, or in his damn church. Which would take a very powerful radio. In fact, he’d probably have to build one himself, to be sure of reliability. Which is a lot of work. So my guess is he decided to use one that someone else already built. Someone like Verizon or T-Mobile or Cingular.”

“Cell phone?”

Reacher nodded again. “It’s the best way. The phone companies spend a lot of time and money building reliable networks. Look at their commercials. They’re proud of the fact that you can call anywhere from anywhere. Some of them even give you free long distance.”

“And the number is on that list?”

“It would make sense,” Reacher said. “Two things happened at the same time,

three months ago. Thurman ordered twenty tons of TNT, and four new cell phones. Sounds like a plan to me. He already had everything else he needed. My guess is he kept one phone for himself, and gave two to his inner circle, so they could have secure communications between themselves, separate from anything else they were doing. And my guess is the fourth phone is buried in the heart of that container, with the ringer wired to a primer circuit. The ringer on a cell phone puts out a decent little voltage. Maybe they fitted a standby battery, and maybe they connected an external antenna. Maybe one of those antennas on the Peterbilt was a cell antenna from Radio Shack, wired back to the trailer."

"And you're going to call that number?"

Reacher said, "Soon."

He dialed the first number on the list. It rang, and then Thurman answered, fast and impatient, like he had been waiting for the call. Reacher asked, "You guys over the wall yet?"

Thurman said, "We're still here. Why are you calling us?"

"You starting to see a pattern?"

"The last phone was Underwood's. He's dead, so he won't answer. So there's no point calling it."

Reacher said, "OK."

"How long are you going to keep us here?"

"Just a minute more," Reacher said. He clicked off and laid the phone on the Chevy's dash. Stared out through the windshield.

Vaughan said, "You can't do this. It would be murder."

Reacher said, "Live by the sword, die by the sword. Thurman should know that quotation better than anyone. It's from the Bible. Matthew, chapter twenty-six, verse fifty-two. Slightly paraphrased. Also, they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind. Hosea, chapter eight, verse seven. I'm sick of people who claim to live by the scriptures cherry-picking the parts they find convenient, and ignoring all the rest."

“You could be completely wrong about him.”

“Then there’s no problem. Gifts don’t explode. We’ve got nothing to lose.”

“But you might be right.”

“In which case he shouldn’t have lied to me. He should have confessed. I would have let him take his chance in court.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“We’ll never know now.”

“He doesn’t seem worried enough.”

“He’s used to saying things and having people believe him. And he told me he’s not afraid of dying. He told me he’s going to a better place.”

“You’re not a one-man justice department.”

“He’s no better than whoever blew up David’s Humvee. Worse, even. David was a combatant, at least. And out on the open road. Thurman is going to have that thing driven to a city somewhere. With children and old people all around. Thousands of them. And more thousands maybe not quite close enough. He’s going to put thousands more people in your situation.”

Vaughan said nothing.

“And for what?” Reacher said. “For some stupid, deluded fantasy.”

Vaughan said nothing.

Reacher checked the final number. Entered it into his phone. Held the phone flat on his palm and held it out to Vaughan.

“Your choice,” he said. “Green button to make the call, red button to cancel it.”

Vaughan didn’t move for a moment. Then she took her hand off the wheel. Folded three fingers and her thumb. Held her index finger out straight. It was small, neat, elegant, and damp, and it had a trimmed nail. She held it still, close to the phone’s LED window.

Then she moved it.

She pressed the green button.

Nothing happened. Not at first. Reacher wasn't surprised. He knew a little about cell phone technology. He had read a long article, in a trade publication abandoned on an airplane. Press the green button, and the phone in your hand sends a request by radio to the nearest cell tower, called a base transceiver station by the people who put it there. The phone says:*Hey, I want to make a call.* The base transceiver station forwards the plea to the nearest base station controller, by microwave if the bean counters got their way during the planning phase, or by fiber optic cable if the engineers got theirs. The base station controller bundles all the near-simultaneous requests it can find and moves them on to the closest mobile switching center, where the serious action starts.

Maybe at this point a ring tone starts up in your earpiece. But it means nothing. It's a placebo. It's there to reassure you. So far you're not even close to connected.

The mobile switching center identifies the destination phone. Checks if it's switched on, that it's not busy, that it's not set to call divert. Speech channels are limited in number, and therefore expensive to operate. You don't get near one unless there's a viable chance of an answer.

If all is well, a speech channel clicks in. It extends first from your local mobile switching center to its distant opposite number. Maybe by fiber optics, maybe by microwave, maybe by satellite if the distance is great. Then the distant mobile switching center hits up its closest base station controller, which hits up its closest base transceiver station, which emits a radio blast to the phone you're looking for, an 850 megahertz or a 1.9 gigahertz pulse surfing on a perfect spherical wavefront close to the speed of light. A nanosecond later, the circuit is complete. The tone in your ear morphs from phony to real and the target phone starts its urgent ringing.

Total time lag, an average of seven whole seconds.

Vaughan took her finger back and stared forward out the windshield. The Chevy's engine was still running and the wipers were still beating back and forth. The windshield smeared in perfect arcs. There was still a little protective wax on the glass.

Two seconds.

"Nothing," Vaughan said.

Reacher said, "Wait."

Four seconds.

Five.

They stared into the distance. The blue arena lights hung and shimmered in the wet air, pale and misty, fractured by intervening raindrops like twinkling starlight.

Six seconds.

Seven.

Then: The silent horizon lit up with an immense white flash that filled the windshield and bloomed instantly higher and wider. The rain all around turned to steam as the air superheated and jets of white vapor speared up and out in every direction like a hundred thousand rockets had launched simultaneously. The vapor was followed by a halo of black soot that punched instantly from a tight cap to a raging black hemisphere a mile high and a mile wide. It rolled and tore and folded back on itself and was pierced by violent trails of steam as supersonic white-hot shrapnel flung through it at more than fifteen thousand miles an hour.

No sound. Not then. Just blinding light and silence.

In still air the sound would have taken fourteen seconds to arrive from three miles away. But the air wasn't still. It was moving fast in a massive compression wave. The wave carried the sound with it. It arrived three seconds after the light. The truck rocked back against the brake and the air roared with the rolling violence of the explosion, first a crisp deafening*crump* and then a banshee

screaming from the shrapnel in the air and an otherworldly pelting sound as a million blasted fragments obliterated everything in their path and fell to earth and tore up the scrub and boiled and hissed where they lay. Then the decompression wave blew in the other way as air rushed back to fill the vacuum, and the truck rocked again, and the black cloud was pulverized to nothing by the violent wind, and then there was nothing to see except tongues of random flame and spouts of drifting steam, and nothing to hear except the steady patter of shrapnel falling back to earth from three miles up, and after ten long seconds there was not even that, just the patient rain on the Chevy’s roof.

73

Vaughan called out the whole of the Hope PD for crowd control. Within thirty minutes she had all four of her deputies and her brother officer and her watch commander and the desk guy all lined up on the western edge of Despair's last block. Nobody was allowed through. The state cops showed up next. Within an hour they had three cars there. Five more showed up within the next four hours. They had taken the long way around. Everyone knew there had been uranium at the plant. The state cops confirmed that the MPs had the road blocked to the west, on a five-mile perimeter. It was close to dawn and they were already stopping incoming trucks.

Dawn came and the rain finally stopped and the sky turned hard blue and the air turned crystal clear.*Like nerves after pain,* Reacher had read once, in a poem. The morning was too cool to raise steam off the soaked ground. The mountains looked a thousand miles away, but every detail was visible. Their rocky outcrops, their pine forests, their tree lines, their snow channels. Reacher borrowed a pair of binoculars from Vaughan's watch commander and climbed to the third floor of the last building to the west. He struggled with a jammed window and crouched and put his elbows on the sill and focused into the distance.

Not much to see.

The white metal wall was gone. Just a few rags and tatters of shredded metal remained, blown and tumbled hundreds of yards in every direction. The plant itself was mostly a black smoking pit, with cranes and gantries knocked over and smashed and bent. Crushers had been toppled off their concrete pads. Anything smaller had been smashed to pieces too small to reliably identify. The office buildings were gone entirely. Thurman's residential compound had been obliterated. The house had been smashed to matchwood. The fieldstone wall was a horizontal rock field spread south and west like grains of spilled salt on a table. The plantings were all gone. Occasional foot-high stumps were all that was left of the trees. The airplane barn had been demolished. No sign of the Piper.

Immense damage.

*Better here than somewhere else,*Reacher thought.

He came downstairs to a changed situation. Federal agencies had arrived. Gossip was flowing. Air Force radar in Colorado Springs had detected metal fifteen thousand feet up. It had hung there for a long second before falling back to earth. Radiation-sniffing drone planes had been dispatched and were closing in on wide circular paths. The rain was seen as a mercy. DU dust was believed to be strongly hygroscopic. Nothing bad would drift. Every contractor within a hundred miles, in Colorado and Nebraska and Kansas, had been contacted. A hurricane fence nearly nineteen miles long was needed. The site was going to be fenced off forever, on a three-mile radius. The fence was going to be hung with biohazard signs every six feet. The agencies already owned the signs, but not the wire.

No hard information was volunteered by the townsfolk. No hard questions were asked by the agencies. The word on everyone's lips was*accident. An accident at the plant.* It was second nature, a part of the hardscrabble culture. An accident at the mill, an accident at the mine. Consistent with history. If the agencies had doubts, they knew better than to voice them. The Pentagon had begun to stonewall even before the last fragments had cooled.

State officials arrived, with contingency plans. Food and water was to be trucked in. Buses were to be laid on, for job searches in neighboring towns. Special welfare would be provided, for the first six months. Transitional help of every kind would be afforded. After that, any stragglers would be strictly on their own.

First Reacher and then Vaughan were pushed steadily east by the official activity. By the middle of the afternoon they were sitting together in the Chevy outside the dry goods store, with nothing more to do. They took one last look to the west and then set off down the road toward Hope.

They went to Vaughan's house, and showered, and dressed again. Vaughan said, "David's hospital is going to fold."

"Someone else will step in," Reacher said. "Someone better."

"I'm not going to abandon him."

"I don't think you should."

"I don´t think you should.´´

“Even though he won’t know.”

“He knew beforehand. And it was important to him.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. I know soldiers.”

Reacher took the borrowed phone out of his pocket and dropped it on the bed. Followed it with the registration, from the old Suburban’s glove box. Asked Vaughan to mail both things back, with no return address on the package. She said, “That sounds like the start of a farewell speech.”

“It is,” Reacher said. “And the middle, and the end.”

They hugged, a little formally, like two strangers who shared many secrets. Then Reacher left. He walked down her winding path, and walked four blocks north to First Street. He got a ride very easily. A stream of vehicles was heading east, emergency workers, journalists, men in suits in plain sedans, contractors. The excitement had made them friendly. There was a real community spirit. Reacher rode with a post-hole digger from Kansas who had signed up to dig some of the sixteen thousand holes necessary for the new fence. The guy was cheerful. He was looking at months of steady work.

Reacher got out in Sharon Springs, where there was a good road south. He figured San Diego was about a thousand miles away, or more, if he followed some detours.

Gone Tomorrow

Chapter 1

Suicide bombers are easy to spot. They give out all kinds of telltale signs. Mostly because they're nervous. By definition they're all first-timers.

Israeli counterintelligence wrote the defensive playbook. They told us what to look for. They used pragmatic observation and psychological insight and came up with a list of behavioral indicators. I learned the list from an Israeli army captain twenty years ago. He swore by it. Therefore I swore by it too, because at the time I was on three weeks' detached duty mostly about a yard from his shoulder, in Israel itself, in Jerusalem, on the West Bank, in Lebanon, sometimes in Syria, sometimes in Jordan, on buses, in stores, on crowded sidewalks. I kept my eyes moving and my mind running free down the bullet points.

Twenty years later I still know the list. And my eyes still move. Pure habit. From another bunch of guys I learned another mantra: Look, don't see, listen, don't hear. The more you engage, the longer you survive.

The list is twelve points long if you're looking at a male suspect. Eleven, if you're looking at a woman. The difference is a fresh shave. Male bombers take off their beards. It helps them blend in. Makes them less suspicious. The result is paler skin on the lower half of the face. No recent exposure to the sun.

But I wasn't interested in shaves.

I was working on the eleven-point list.

I was looking at a woman.

I was riding the subway, in New York City. The 6 train, the Lexington Avenue local, heading uptown, two o'clock in the morning. I had gotten on at Bleecker Street from the south end of the platform into a car that was empty except for five people. Subway cars feel small and intimate when they're full. When they're empty they feel vast and cavernous and lonely. At night their lights feel hotter and brighter, even though they're the same lights they use in the day. They're all the lights there are. I was sprawled on a two-person bench north of the end doors on the track side of the car. The other five passengers were all south of me on the long bench seats, in profile, side on, far from each other

south of me on the long bench seats, in profile, side on, far from each other, staring blankly across the width of the car, three on the left and two on the right.

The car's number was 7622. I once rode eight stops on the 6 train next to a crazy person who talked about the car we were in with the same kind of enthusiasm that most men reserve for sports or women. Therefore I knew that car number 7622 was an R142A model, the newest on the New York system, built by Kawasaki in Kobe, Japan, shipped over, trucked to the 207th Street yards, craned onto the tracks, towed down to 180th Street and tested. I knew it could run two hundred thousand miles without major attention. I knew its automated announcement system gave instructions in a man's voice and information in a woman's, which was claimed to be a coincidence but was really because the transportation chiefs believed such a division of labor was psychologically compelling. I knew the voices came from Bloomberg TV, but years before Mike became mayor. I knew there were six hundred R142As on the tracks and that each one was a fraction over fifty-one feet long and a little more than eight feet wide. I knew that the no-cab unit like we had been in then and I was in now had been designed to carry a maximum of forty people seated and up to 148 standing. The crazy person had been clear on all that data. I could see for myself that the car's seats were blue plastic, the same shade as a late summer sky or a British Air Force uniform. I could see that its wall panels were molded from graffiti-resistant fiberglass. I could see its twin strips of advertisements running away from me where the wall panels met the roof. I could see small cheerful posters touting television shows and language instruction and easy college degrees and major earning opportunities.

I could see a police notice advising me: *If you see something, say something*.

The nearest passenger to me was a Hispanic woman. She was across the car from me, on my left, forward of the first set of doors, all alone on a bench built for eight, well off center. She was small, somewhere between thirty and fifty, and she looked very hot and very tired. She had a well-worn supermarket bag looped over her wrist and she was staring across at the empty place opposite with eyes too weary to be seeing much.

Next up was a man on the other side, maybe four feet farther down the car. He was all alone on his own eight-person bench. He could have been from the Balkans, or the Black Sea. Dark hair, lined skin. He was sinewy, worn down by work and weather. He had his feet planted and he was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. Not asleep, but close to it. Suspended animation, marking

time, rocking with the movements of the train. He was about fifty, dressed in clothes far too young for him. Baggy jeans that reached only his calves, and an oversized NBA shirt with a player's name on it that I didn't recognize.

Third up was a woman who might have been West African. She was on the left, south of the center doors. Tired, inert, her black skin made dusty and gray by fatigue and the lights. She was wearing a colorful batik dress with a matching square of cloth tied over her hair. Her eyes were closed. I know New York reasonably well. I call myself a citizen of the world and New York the capital of the world, so I can make sense of the city the same way a Brit knows London or a Frenchman knows Paris. I'm familiar but not intimate with its habits. But it was an easy guess that any three people like these already seated on a late-night northbound 6 train south of Bleecker were office cleaners heading home from evening shifts around City Hall, or restaurant service workers from Chinatown or Little Italy. They were probably set for Hunts Point in the Bronx, or maybe all the way up to Pelham Bay, ready for short fitful sleeps before more long days.

The fourth and the fifth passengers were different.

The fifth was a man. He was maybe my age, wedged at forty-five degrees on the two-person bench diagonally opposite me, all the way across and down the length of the car. He was dressed casually but not cheaply. Chinos, and a golf shirt. He was awake. His eyes were fixed somewhere in front of him. Their focus changed and narrowed constantly, like he was alert and speculating. They reminded me of a ballplayer's eyes. They had a certain canny, calculating shrewdness in them.

But it was passenger number four that I was looking at.

If you see something, say something.

She was seated on the right side of the car, all alone on the farther eight-person bench, across from and about halfway between the exhausted West African woman and the guy with the ballplayer's eyes. She was white and probably in her forties. She was plain. She had black hair, neatly but unstylishly cut and too uniformly dark to be natural. She was dressed all in black. I could see her fairly well. The guy nearest to me on the right was still sitting forward and the V-shaped void between his bent back and the wall of the car made my line of sight uninterrupted except for a forest of stainless-steel grab bars.

Not a perfect view, but good enough to ring every bell on the eleven-point list. The bullet headings lit up like cherries on a Vegas machine.

According to Israeli counterintelligence I was looking at a suicide bomber.

Chapter 2

I dismissed the thought immediately. Not because of racial profiling. White women are as capable of craziness as anyone else. I dismissed the thought because of tactical implausibility. The timing was wrong. The New York subway would make a fine target for a suicide bombing. The 6 train would be as good as any other and better than most. It stops under Grand Central Terminal. Eight in the morning, six at night, a crowded car, forty seated, 148 standing, wait until the doors open on packed platforms, push the button. A hundred dead, a couple of hundred grievously injured, panic, infrastructure damage, possibly fire, a major transportation hub shut down for days or weeks and maybe never really trusted again. A significant score, for people whose heads work in ways we can't quite understand.

But not at two o'clock in the morning.

Not in a car holding just six people. Not when Grand Central's subway platforms would hold only drifting trash and empty cups and a couple of old homeless guys on benches.

The train stopped at Astor Place. The doors hissed open. No one got on. No one got off. The doors thumped shut again and the motors whined and the train moved on.

The bullet points stayed lit up.

The first was the obvious no-brainer: inappropriate clothing. By now explosive belts are as evolved as baseball gloves. Take a three-foot by two-foot sheet of heavy canvas, fold once longitudinally, and you have a continuous pocket a foot deep. Wrap the pocket around the bomber, and sew it together in back. Zippers or snaps can lead to second thoughts. Insert a stockade of dynamite sticks into the pocket all the way around, wire them up, pack nails or ball bearings into the voids, sew the top seam shut, add crude shoulder straps to take the weight. Altogether effective, but altogether bulky. The only practical concealment, an oversized garment like a padded winter parka. Never appropriate in the Middle

East, and plausible in New York maybe three months in twelve.

But this was September, and it was as hot as summer, and ten degrees hotter underground. I was wearing a T-shirt. Passenger number four was wearing a North Face down jacket, black, puffy, shiny, a little too large and zipped to her chin.

If you see something, say something.

I took a pass on the second of the eleven points. Not immediately applicable. The second point is: a robotic walk. Significant at a checkpoint or in a crowded marketplace or outside a church or a mosque, but not relevant with a seated suspect on public transportation. Bombers walk robotically not because they're overcome with ecstasy at the thought of imminent martyrdom, but because they're carrying forty extra pounds of unaccustomed weight, which is biting into their shoulders through crude suspender straps, and because they're drugged. Martyrdom's appeal goes only so far. Most bombers are browbeaten simpletons with a slug of raw opium paste held between gum and cheek. We know this because dynamite belts explode with a characteristic doughnut-shaped pressure wave that rolls up the torso in a fraction of a nanosecond and lifts the head clean off the shoulders. The human head isn't bolted on. It just rests there by gravity, somewhat tied down by skin and muscles and tendons and ligaments, but those insubstantial biological anchors don't do much against the force of a violent chemical explosion. My Israeli mentor told me the easiest way to determine that an open-air attack was caused by a suicide bomber rather than by a car bomb or a package bomb is to search on an eighty-or ninety-foot radius and look for a severed human head, which is likely to be strangely intact and undamaged, even down to the opium plug in the cheek.

The train stopped at Union Square. No one got on. No one got off. Hot air billowed in from the platform and fought the interior air conditioning. Then the doors closed again and the train moved on.

Points three through six are variations on a subjective theme: irritability, sweating, tics, and nervous behavior. Although in my opinion sweating is as likely to be caused by physical overheating as by nerves. The inappropriate clothing, and the dynamite. Dynamite is wood pulp soaked with nitroglycerine and molded into baton-sized sticks. Wood pulp is a good thermal insulator. So sweating comes with the territory. But the irritability and the tics and the nervous behavior are valuable indicators. These people are in the last weird moments of

their lives, anxious, scared of pain, woozy with narcotics. They are irrational by definition. Believing or half-believing or not really believing at all in paradise and rivers of milk and honey and lush pastures and virgins, driven by ideological pressures or by the expectations of their peers and their families, suddenly in too deep and unable to back out. Brave talk in clandestine meetings is one thing. Action is another. Hence suppressed panic, with all its visible signs.

Passenger number four was showing them all. She looked exactly like a woman heading for the end of her life, as surely and certainly as the train was heading for the end of the line.

Therefore point seven: breathing.

She was panting, low and controlled. In, out, in, out. Like a technique to conquer the pain of childbirth, or like the result of a ghastly shock, or like a last desperate barrier against screaming with dread and fear and terror.

In, out, in, out.

Point eight: suicide bombers about to go into action stare rigidly ahead. No one knows why, but video evidence and surviving eyewitnesses have been entirely consistent in their reports. Bombers stare straight ahead. Perhaps they have screwed their commitment up to the sticking point and fear intervention. Perhaps like dogs and children they feel that if they're not seeing anyone, then no one is seeing them. Perhaps a last shred of conscience means they can't look at the people they're about to destroy. No one knows why, but they all do it.

Passenger number four was doing it. That was for sure. She was staring across at the blank window opposite so hard she was almost burning a hole in the glass.

Points one through eight, check. I shifted my weight forward in my seat.

Then I stopped. The idea was tactically absurd. The time was wrong.

Then I looked again. And moved again. Because points nine, ten, and eleven were all present and correct too, and they were the most important points of all.

Chapter 3

Point nine: mumbled prayers. To date all known attacks have been inspired, or motivated, or validated, or invigilated by religion, almost exclusively the Islamic religion, and Islamic people are accustomed to praying in public. Surviving eyewitnesses report long formulaic incantations run through and repeated endlessly and more or less inaudibly, but with visibly moving lips. Passenger number four was really going at it. Her lips were moving below her fixed stare, in a long, panting, ritualistic recitation that seemed to repeat itself every twenty seconds or so. Maybe she was already introducing herself to whatever deity she expected to meet on the other side of the line. Maybe she was trying to convince herself that there really was a deity, and a line.

The train stopped at 23rd Street. The doors opened. No one got off. No one got on. I saw the red exit signs above the platform: 22nd and Park, northeast corner, or 23rd and Park, southeast corner. Unremarkable lengths of Manhattan sidewalk, but suddenly attractive.

I stayed in my seat. The doors closed. The train moved on.

Point ten: a large bag.

Dynamite is a stable explosive, as long as it's fresh. It doesn't go off by accident. It needs to be triggered by blasting caps. Blasting caps are wired with detonator cord to an electricity supply and a switch. The big plungers in old Western movies were both things together. The first part of the handle's travel spun up a dynamo, like a field telephone, and then a switch was tripped. Not practical for portable use. For portable use you need a battery, and for a linear yard of explosive you need some volts and amps. Tiny AA cells put out a weak volt and a half. Not enough, according to prevailing rules of thumb. A nine-volt battery is better, and for a decent kick you want one of the big square soup-can-sized cells sold for serious flashlights. Too big and too heavy for a pocket, hence the bag. The battery nestles in the bottom of the bag, wires come off it to the switch, then they head on out through an unobtrusive slit in the back of the bag, and then they

loop up under the hem of the inappropriate garment.

Passenger number four was wearing a black canvas messenger bag, urban style, looped in front of one shoulder and behind the other, and hauled around into her lap. The way the stiff fabric bulged and sagged made it look empty apart from a single heavy item.

The train stopped at 28th Street. The doors opened. No one got on. No one got off. The doors closed and the train moved on.

Point eleven: hands in the bag.

Twenty years ago point eleven was a recent addition. Previously the list had ended at point ten. But things evolve. Action, and then reaction. Israeli security forces and some brave members of the public had adopted a new tactic. If your suspicions were aroused, you didn't run. No point, really. You can't run faster than shrapnel. What you did instead was grab the suspect in a desperate bear hug. You pinned their arms to their sides. You stopped them reaching the button. Several attacks were prevented that way. Many lives were saved. But the bombers learned. Now they are taught to keep their thumbs on the button at all times, to make the bear hug irrelevant. The button is in the bag, next to the battery. Hence, hands in the bag.

Passenger number four had her hands in her bag. The flap was bunched and creased between her wrists.

The train stopped at 33rd Street. The doors opened. No one got off. A lone passenger on the platform hesitated and then stepped to her right and entered the next car. I turned and looked through the little window behind my head and saw her take a seat close to me. Two stainless bulkheads, and the coupler space. I wanted to wave her away. She might survive at the other end of her car. But I didn't wave. We had no eye contact and she would have ignored me anyway. I know New York. Crazy gestures on late-night trains carry no credibility.

The doors stayed open a beat longer than normal. For a mad second I thought of trying to shepherd everyone out. But I didn't. It would have been a comedy. Surprise, incomprehension, maybe language barriers. I wasn't sure that I knew the Spanish word for bomb. *Bomba*, maybe. Or was that *lightbulb?* A crazy guy ranting about lightbulbs wasn't going to help anyone.

No, lightbulb was *bombilla*, I thought.

Maybe.

Possibly.

But certainly I didn't know any Balkan languages. And I didn't know any West African dialects. Although maybe the woman in the dress spoke French. Some of West Africa is francophone. And I speak French. *Une bombe. La femme là-bas a une bombe sous son manteau. The woman over there has a bomb under her coat.* The woman in the dress might understand. Or she might get the message some other way and simply follow us out.

If she woke up in time. If she opened her eyes.

In the end I just stayed in my seat.

The doors closed.

The train moved on.

I stared at passenger number four. Pictured her slim pale thumb on the hidden button. The button probably came from Radio Shack. An innocent component, for a hobby. Probably cost a buck and a half. I pictured a tangle of wires, red and black, taped and crimped and clamped. A thick detonator cord, exiting the bag, tucked under her coat, connecting twelve or twenty blasting caps in a long, lethal parallel ladder. Electricity moves close to the speed of light. Dynamite is unbelievably powerful. In a closed environment like a subway car the pressure wave alone would crush us all to paste. The nails and the ball bearings would be entirely gratuitous. Like bullets against ice cream. Very little of us would survive. Bone fragments, maybe, the size of grape pits. Possibly the stirrup and the anvil from the inner ear might survive intact. They are the smallest bones in the human body and therefore statistically the most likely to be missed by the shrapnel cloud.

I stared at the woman. No way of approaching her. I was thirty feet away. Her thumb was already on the button. Cheap brass contacts were maybe an eighth of an inch apart, that tiny gap perhaps narrowing and widening fractionally and rhythmically as her heart beat and her arm trembled.

She was good to go, and I wasn't

She was good to go, and I wasn't.

The train rocked onward, with its characteristic symphony of sounds. The howl of rushing air in the tunnel, the thump and clatter of the expansion joints under the iron rims, the scrape of the current collector against the live rail, the whine of the motors, the sequential squeals as the cars lurched one after the other through curves and the wheel flanges bit down.

Where was she going? What did the 6 train pass under? Could a building be brought down by a human bomb? I thought not. So what big crowds were still assembled after two o'clock in the morning? Not many. Nightclubs, maybe, but we had already left most of them behind, and she wouldn't get past a velvet rope anyway.

I stared on at her.

Too hard.

She felt it.

She turned her head, slowly, smoothly, like a preprogrammed movement.

She stared right back at me.

Our eyes met.

Her face changed.

She knew I knew.

Chapter 4

We looked straight at each other for the best part of ten seconds. Then I got to my feet. Braced against the motion and took a step. I would be killed thirty feet away, no question. I couldn't get any deader by being any closer. I passed the Hispanic woman on my left. Passed the guy in the NBA shirt on my right. Passed the West African woman on my left. Her eyes were still closed. I handed myself from one grab bar to the next, left and right, swaying. Passenger number four stared at me all the way, frightened, panting, muttering. Her hands stayed in her bag.

I stopped six feet from her.

I said, "I really want to be wrong about this."

She didn't reply. Her lips moved. Her hands moved under the thick black canvas. The large object in her bag shifted slightly.

I said, "I need to see your hands."

She didn't reply.

"I'm a cop," I lied. "I can help you."

She didn't reply.

I said, "We can talk."

She didn't reply.

I let go of the grab bars and dropped my hands to my sides. It made me smaller. Less threatening. Just a guy. I stood as still as the moving train would let me. I did nothing. I had no option. She would need a split second. I would need more than that. Except that there was absolutely nothing I could do. I could have grabbed her bag and tried to tear it away from her. But it was looped around her

body and its strap was a wide band of tightly woven cotton. The same knit as a fire hose. It was prewashed and preaged and predistressed like new stuff is now but it would still be very strong. I would have ended up jerking her off her seat and dumping her down on the floor.

Except that I wouldn't have gotten anywhere near her. She would have hit the button before my hand was halfway there.

I could have tried to jerk the bag upward and swipe behind it with my other hand to rip the detonator cord out of its terminals. Except that for the sake of her easy movement there would be enough spare length in the cord that I would have needed to haul it through a giant two-foot arc before I met any resistance. By which time she would have hit the button, if only in involuntary shock.

I could have grabbed at her jacket and tried to tear some other wires loose. But there were fat pockets of goose feathers between me and the wires. A slippery nylon shell. No touch, no feel.

No hope.

I could have tried to incapacitate her. Hit her hard in the head, knock her out, one punch, instantaneous. But as fast as I still am, a decent swing from six feet away would have taken most of half a second. She had to move the ball of her thumb an eighth of an inch.

She would have gotten there first.

I asked, "Can I sit down? Next to you?"

She said, "No, stay away from me."

A neutral, toneless voice. No obvious accent. American, but she could have been from anywhere. Up close she didn't look really wild or deranged. Just resigned, and grave, and scared, and tired. She was staring up at me with the same intensity she had been using on the opposite window. She looked completely alert and aware. I felt completely scrutinized. I couldn't move. I couldn't do anything.

"It's late," I said. "You should wait for rush hour."

She didn't reply

She didn't reply.

“Six more hours,” I said. “It will work much better then.”

Her hands moved, inside her bag.

I said, “Not now.”

She said nothing.

“Just one,” I said. “Show me one hand. You don’t need both of them in there.”

The train slowed hard. I staggered backward and stepped forward again and reached up to the grab bar close to the roof. My hands were damp. The steel felt hot. Grand Central, I thought. But it wasn’t. I glanced out the window expecting lights and white tile and saw the glow of a dim blue lamp instead. We were stopping in the tunnel. Maintenance, or signaling.

I turned back.

“Show me one hand,” I said again.

The woman didn’t answer. She was staring at my waist. With my hands high my T-shirt had ridden up and the scar low on my stomach was visible above the waistband of my pants. Raised white skin, hard and lumpy. Big crude stitches, like a cartoon. Shrapnel, from a truck bomb in Beirut, a long time ago. I had been a hundred yards from the explosion.

I was ninety-eight yards closer to the woman on the bench.

She stared on. Most people ask how I had gotten the scar. I didn’t want her to. I didn’t want to talk about bombs. Not with her.

I said, “Show me one hand.”

She asked, “Why?”

“You don’t need two in there.”

“Then what good can it do you?”

“I don’t know.” I said. I had no real idea what I was doing. I’m not a hostage

negotiator. I was just talking for the sake of it. Which is uncharacteristic. Mostly I'm a very silent person. It would be statistically very unlikely for me to die halfway through a sentence.

Maybe that's why I was talking.

The woman moved her hands. I saw her take a solo grip inside her bag with her right and she brought her left out slowly. Small, pale, faintly ridged with veins and tendons. Middle-aged skin. Plain nails, trimmed short. No rings. Not married, not engaged to be. She turned her hand over, to show me the other side. Empty palm, red because she was hot.

"Thank you," I said.

She laid her hand palm-down on the seat next to her and left it there, like it was nothing to do with the rest of her. Which it wasn't, at that point. The train stopped in the darkness. I lowered my hands. The hem of my shirt fell back into place.

I said, "Now show me what's in the bag."

"Why?"

"I just want to see it. Whatever it is."

She didn't reply.

She didn't move.

I said, "I won't try to take it away from you. I promise. I just want to see it. I'm sure you can understand that."

The train moved on again. Slow acceleration, no jerk, low speed. A gentle cruise into the station. A slow roll. Maybe two hundred yards, I thought.

I said, "I think I'm entitled to at least see it. Wouldn't you agree?"

She made a face, like she didn't understand.

She said, "I don't see why you're entitled to see it."

“You don’t?”

“No.”

“Because I’m involved here. And maybe I can check it’s fixed right. For later. Because you need to do this later. Not now.”

“You said you were a cop.”

“We can work this out,” I said. “I can help you.” I glanced over my shoulder. The train was creeping along. White light up ahead. I turned back. The woman’s right hand was moving. She was juggling it into a firmer grip and slowly shaking it free of the bag, all at once.

I watched. The bag snagged on her wrist and she used her left hand to free it up. Her right hand came out.

Not a battery. No wires. No switch, no button, no plunger.

Something else entirely.

Chapter 5

The woman had a gun in her hand. She was pointing it straight at me. Low down, dead center, on a line between my groin and my navel. All kinds of necessary stuff in that region. Organs, spine, intestines, various arteries and veins. The gun was a Ruger Speed-Six. A big old .357 Magnum revolver with a short four-inch barrel, capable of blowing a hole in me big enough to see daylight through.

But overall I was a lot more cheerful than I had been a second before. Many reasons. Bombs kill people all at once, guns kill one at a time. Bombs don't need aiming, and guns do. The Speed-Six weighs north of two pounds fully loaded. A lot of mass for a slender wrist to control. And Magnum rounds produce searing muzzle flash and punishing recoil. If she had used the gun before, she would know that. She would have what shooters call Magnum flinch. A split second before pulling the trigger her arm would clench and her eyes would close and her head would turn away. She had a decent chance of missing, even from six feet. Most handguns miss. Maybe not on the range, with ear defenders and eye protection and time and calm and nothing at stake. But in the real world, with panic and stress and the shakes and a thumping heart, handguns are all about luck, good or bad. Mine or hers.

If she missed, she wouldn't get a second shot.

I said, "Take it easy." Just to be making sounds. Her finger was bone-white on the trigger, but she hadn't moved it yet. The Speed-Six is a double-action revolver, which means that the first half of the trigger's pull moves the hammer back and rotates the cylinder. The second half drops the hammer and fires the gun. Complex mechanics, which take time. Not much, but some. I stared at her finger. Sensed the guy with the ballplayer's eyes, watching. I guessed my back was blocking the view from farther up the car.

I said, "You've got no beef with me, lady. You don't even know me. Put the gun down and talk."

She didn’t reply. Maybe something passed across her face, but I wasn’t watching her face. I was watching her finger. It was the only part of her that interested me. And I was concentrating on the vibrations coming up through the floor. Waiting for the car to stop. My crazy fellow passenger had told me that the R142As weigh thirty-five tons each. They can do sixty-two miles an hour. Therefore their brakes are very powerful. Too powerful for finesse at low speeds. No feathering is possible. They clamp and jerk and grind. Trains often skid the last yard on locked wheels. Hence the characteristic screech as they stop.

I figured the same would apply even after our slow crawl. Maybe more so, relatively speaking. The gun was essentially a weight on the end of a pendulum. A long thin arm, two pounds of steel. When the brakes bit down, momentum would carry the gun onward. Uptown. Newton’s Law of Motion. I was ready to fight my own momentum and push off the bars the other way and jump downtown. If the gun jerked just five inches north and I jerked just five inches south I would be in the clear.

Maybe four inches would do it.

Or four and a half, for safety’s sake.

The woman asked, “Where did you get your scar?”

I didn’t answer.

“Were you gut shot?”

“Bomb,” I said.

She moved the muzzle, to her left and my right. She aimed at where the scar was hidden by the hem of my shirt.

The train rolled on. Into the station. Infinitely slow. Barely walking pace. Grand Central’s platforms are long. The lead car was heading all the way to the end. I waited for the brakes to bite. I figured there would be a nice little lurch.

We never got there.

The gun barrel moved back to my center mass. Then it moved vertical. For a split second I thought the woman was surrendering. But the barrel kept on moving. The woman raised her chin high, like a proud, obstinate gesture. She

moving. The woman raised her chin high, like a proud, obstinate gesture. She tucked the muzzle into the soft flesh beneath it. Squeezed the trigger halfway. The cylinder turned and the hammer scraped back across the nylon of her coat.

Then she pulled the trigger the rest of the way and blew her own head off.

Chapter 6

The doors didn’t open for a long time. Maybe someone had used the emergency intercom or maybe the conductor had heard the shot. But whatever, the system went into full-on lockdown mode. It was undoubtedly something they rehearsed. And the procedure made a lot of sense. Better that a crazed gunman was contained in a single car, rather than being allowed to run around all over town.

But the waiting wasn’t pleasant. The .357 Magnum round was invented in 1935. *Magnum* is Latin for *big*. Heavier bullet, and a lot more propellant charge. Technically the propellant charge does not explode. It deflagrates, which is a chemical process halfway between burning and exploding. The idea is to create a huge bubble of hot gas that accelerates the bullet down the barrel, like a pent-up spring. Normally the gas follows the bullet out of the muzzle and sets fire to the oxygen in the air close by. Hence muzzle flash. But with a hard contact shot to the head like passenger number four had chosen, the bullet makes a hole in the skin and the gas pumps itself straight in after it. It expands violently under the skin and either rips itself a huge star-shaped exit wound, or it blows all the flesh and skin right off the bone and unwraps the skull completely, like peeling a banana upside down.

That was what had happened in this case. The woman’s face was reduced to rags and tatters of bloody flesh hanging off shattered bone. The bullet had traveled vertically through her mouth and had dumped its massive kinetic energy in her brain pan, and the sudden huge pressure had sought relief and found it where the plates of her skull had sealed themselves way back in childhood. They had burst open again and the pressure had pasted three or four large fragments of bone all over the wall above and behind her. One way or the other her head was basically gone. But the graffiti-resistant fiberglass was doing its job. White bone and dark blood and gray tissue was running down the slick surface, not sticking, leaving thin snail trails behind. The woman’s body had collapsed into a slumped position on the bench. Her right index finger was still hooked through the trigger guard. The gun had bounced off her thigh and was resting on the seat next to her.

The sound of the shot was still ringing in my ears. Behind me I could hear muted sounds. I could smell the woman's blood. I ducked forward and checked her bag. Empty. I unzipped her jacket and opened it up. Nothing there. Just a white cotton blouse and the stink of voided bowel and bladder.

I found the emergency panel and called through to the conductor myself. I said, "Suicide by gunshot. Last-but-one car. It's all over now. We're secure. No further threat." I didn't want to wait until the NYPD assembled SWAT teams and body armor and rifles and came in all stealthy. That could take a long time.

I didn't get a reply from the conductor. But a minute later his voice came through the train PA. He said, "Passengers are advised that the doors will remain closed for a few minutes due to an evolving incident." He spoke slowly. He was probably reading from a card. His voice was shaky. Not at all like the smooth tones of the Bloomberg anchors.

I took a last look around the car and sat down three feet from the headless corpse and waited.

Whole episodes of TV cop shows could have run before the real-life cops even arrived. DNA could have been extracted and analyzed, matches could have been made, perpetrators could have been hunted and caught and tried and sentenced. But eventually six officers came down the stairs. They were in caps and vests and they had drawn their weapons. NYPD patrolmen on the night shift, probably out of the 14th Precinct on West 35th Street, the famous Midtown South. They ran along the platform and started checking the train from the front. I got up again and watched through the windows above the couplers, down the whole length of the train, like peering into a long lit-up stainless-steel tunnel. The view got murky farther down, due to dirt and green impurities in the layers of glass. But I could see the cops opening doors car by car, checking, clearing, turning the passengers out and hustling them upstairs to the street. It was a lightly loaded night train and it didn't take long for them to reach us. They checked through the windows and saw the body and the gun and tensed up. The doors hissed open and they swarmed onboard, two through each set of doors. We all raised our hands, like a reflex.

One cop blocked each of the doorways and the other three moved straight toward the dead woman. They stopped and stood off about six feet. Didn't check for a pulse or any other sign of life. Didn't hold a mirror under her nose, to check for breathing. Partly because it was obvious she wasn't breathing, and

partly because she didn't have a nose. The cartilage had torn away, leaving jagged splinters of bone between where the internal pressure had popped her eyeballs out.

A big cop with sergeant's stripes turned around. He had gone a little pale but was otherwise well into a pretty good impersonation of just another night's work. He asked, "Who saw what happened here?"

There was silence at the front of the car. The Hispanic woman, the man in the NBA shirt, and the African lady. They were all sitting tight and saying nothing. Point eight: a rigid stare ahead. They were all doing it. *If I can't see you, you can't see me*. The guy in the golf shirt said nothing. So I said, "She took the gun out of her bag and shot herself."

"Just like that?"

"More or less."

"Why?"

"How would I know?"

"Where and when?"

"On the run-in to the station. Whenever that was."

The guy processed the information. Suicide by gunshot. The subway was the NYPD's responsibility. The deceleration zone between 41st and 42nd was the 14th Precinct's turf. His case. No question. He nodded. Said, "OK, please all of you exit the car and wait on the platform. We'll need names and addresses and statements from you."

Then he keyed his collar microphone and was answered by a loud blast of static. He answered that in turn with a long stream of codes and numbers. I guessed he was calling for paramedics and an ambulance. After that it would be up to the transportation people to get the car unhooked and cleaned and the schedule back on track. Not difficult, I thought. There was plenty of time before the morning rush hour.

We got out into a gathering crowd on the platform. Transport cops, more regular

cops arriving, subway workers clustering all around, Grand Central personnel showing up. Five minutes later an FDNY paramedic crew clattered down the stairs with a gurney. They came through the barrier and stepped on the train and the first-response cops stepped off. I didn't see what happened after that because the cops started moving through the crowd, looking around, making ready to find a passenger each and walk them away for further inquiries. The big sergeant came for me. I had answered his questions on the train. Therefore he made me first in line. He led me deep into the station and put me in a hot stale white-tiled room that could have been part of the transport police facility. He sat me down alone in a wooden chair and asked me for my name.

"Jack Reacher," I said.

He wrote it down and didn't speak again. Just hung around in the doorway and watched me. And waited. For a detective to show up, I guessed.

Chapter 7

The detective who showed up was a woman and she came alone. She was wearing pants and a gray short-sleeve shirt. Maybe silk, maybe man-made. Shiny, anyway. It was untucked and I guessed the tails were hiding her gun and her cuffs and whatever else she was carrying. Inside the shirt she was small and slim. Above the shirt she had dark hair tied back and a small oval face. No jewelry. Not even a wedding band. She was somewhere in her late thirties. Maybe forty. An attractive woman. I liked her immediately. She looked relaxed and friendly. She showed me her gold shield and handed me her business card. It had numbers on it for her office and her cell. It had an NYPD e-mail address. She said the name on it out loud for me. The name was Theresa Lee, with the *t* and the *h* pronounced together, like *the* or *theme or therapy. Theresa*. She wasn't Asian. Maybe the Lee came from an old marriage or was an Ellis Island version of Leigh, or some other longer and more complicated name. Or maybe she was descended from Robert E.

She said, "Can you tell me exactly what happened?"

She spoke softly, with raised eyebrows and in a breathy voice brimming with care and consideration, like her primary concern was my own post-traumatic stress. *Can you tell me? Can you?* Like, *can you bear to relive it?* I smiled, briefly. Midtown South was down to low single-digit homicides per year, and even if she had dealt with all of them by herself since the first day she came on the job, I had still seen many more corpses than she had. By a big multiple. The woman on the train hadn't been the most pleasant of them, but she had been a very long way from the worst.

So I told her exactly what had happened, all the way up from Bleecker Street, all the way through the eleven-point list, my tentative approach, the fractured conversation, the gun, the suicide.

Theresa Lee wanted to talk about the list.

"We have a copy," she said. "It's supposed to be confidential."

“It’s been out in the world for twenty years,” I said. “Everyone has a copy. It’s hardly confidential.”

“Where did you see it?”

“In Israel,” I said. “Just after it was written.”

“How?”

So I ran through my résumé for her. The abridged version. The U.S. Army, thirteen years a military policeman, the elite 110th investigative unit, service all over the world, plus detached duty here and there, as and when ordered. Then the Soviet collapse, the peace dividend, the smaller defense budget, suddenly getting cut loose.

“Officer or enlisted man?” she asked.

“Final rank of major,” I said.

“And now?”

“I’m retired.”

“You’re young to be retired.”

“I figured I should enjoy it while I can.”

“And are you?”

“Never better.”

“What were you doing tonight? Down there in the Village?”

“Music,” I said. “Those blues clubs on Bleecker.”

“And where were you headed on the 6 train?”

“I was going to get a room somewhere or head over to the Port Authority to get a bus.”

“To where?”

“Wherever.”

“Short visit?”

“The best kind.”

“Where do you live?”

“Nowhere. My year is one short visit after another.”

“Where’s your luggage?”

“I don’t have any.”

Most people ask follow-up questions after that, but Theresa Lee didn’t. Instead her eyes changed focus again and she said, “I’m not happy that the list was wrong. I thought it was supposed to be definitive.” She spoke inclusively, cop to cop, as if my old job made a difference to her.

“It was only half-wrong,” I said. “The suicide part was right.”

“I suppose so,” she said. “The signs would be the same, I guess. But it was still a false positive.”

“Better than a false negative.”

“I suppose so,” she said again.

I asked, “Do we know who she was?”

“Not yet. But we’ll find out. They tell me they found keys and a wallet at the scene. They’ll probably be definitive. But what was up with the winter jacket?”

I said, “I have no idea.”

She went quiet, like she was profoundly disappointed. I said, “These things are always works in progress. Personally I think we should add a twelfth point to the women’s list, too. If a woman bomber takes off her head scarf, there’s going to be a suntan clue, the same as the men.”

“Good point,” she said.

“And I read a book that figured the part about the virgins is a mistranslation. The word is ambiguous. It comes in a passage full of food imagery. Milk and honey. It probably means raisins. Plump, and possibly candied or sugared.”

“They kill themselves for raisins?”

“I’d love to see their faces.”

“Are you a linguist?”

“I speak English,” I said. “And French. And why would a woman bomber want virgins anyway? A lot of sacred texts are mistranslated. Especially where virgins are concerned. Even the New Testament, probably. Some people say Mary was a first-time mother, that’s all. From the Hebrew word. Not a virgin. The original writers would laugh, seeing what we made of it all.”

Theresa Lee didn’t comment on that. Instead she asked, “Are you OK?”

I took it to be an inquiry as to whether I was shaken up. As to whether I should be offered counseling. Maybe because she took me for a taciturn man who was talking too much. But I was wrong. I said, “I’m fine,” and she looked a little surprised and said, “I would be regretting the approach, myself. On the train. I think you tipped her over the edge. Another couple of stops and she might have gotten over whatever was upsetting her.”

We sat in silence for a minute after that and then the big sergeant stuck his head in and nodded Lee out to the corridor. I heard a short whispered conversation and then Lee came back in and asked me to head over to West 35th Street with her. To the precinct house.

I asked, “Why?”

She hesitated.

“Formality,” she said. “To get your statement typed up, to close the file.”

“Do I get a choice in the matter?”

“Don’t go there,” she said. “The Israeli list is involved. We could call this whole thing a matter of national security. You’re a material witness, we could keep you until you grew old and died. Better just to play ball like a good citizen.”

until you grew old and died. Better just to play ball like a good citizen.

So I shrugged and followed her out of the Grand Central labyrinth to Vanderbilt Avenue, where her car was parked. It was an unmarked Ford Crown Victoria, battered and grimy, but it worked OK. It got us over to West 35th just fine. We went in through the grand old portal and she led me upstairs to an interview room. She stepped back and waited in the corridor and let me go in ahead of her. Then she stayed in the corridor and closed the door behind me and locked it from the outside.

Chapter 8

Theresa Lee came back twenty minutes later with the beginnings of an official file and another guy. She put the file on the table and introduced the other guy as her partner. She said his name was Docherty. She said he had come up with a bunch of questions that maybe should have been asked and answered at the outset.

“What questions?” I asked.

First she offered me coffee and the bathroom. I said yes to both. Docherty escorted me down the corridor and when we got back there were three foam cups on the table, next to the file. Two coffees, one tea. I took a coffee and tried it. It was OK. Lee took the tea. Docherty took the second coffee and said, “Run through it all again.”

So I did, concisely, bare bones, and Docherty fussed a bit about how the Israeli list had produced a false positive, the same way that Lee had. I answered him the same way I had answered her, that a false positive was better than a false negative, and that looking at it from the dead woman’s point of view, whether she was heading for a solo exit or planning to take a crowd with her might not alter the personal symptoms she would be displaying. For five minutes we had a collegiate atmosphere going, three reasonable people discussing an interesting phenomenon.

Then the tone changed.

Docherty asked, “How did you feel?”

I asked, “About what?”

“While she was killing herself.”

“Glad that she wasn’t killing me.”

Docherty said, “We’re homicide detectives. We have to look at all violent

Docherty said, "We're homicide detectives. We have to look at all violent deaths. You understand that, right? Just in case."

I said, "Just in case of what?"

"Just in case there's more than meets the eye."

"There isn't. She shot herself."

"Says you."

"No one can say different. Because that's what happened."

Docherty said, "There are always alternative scenarios."

"You think?"

"Maybe *you* shot her."

Theresa Lee gave me a sympathetic look.

I said, "I didn't."

Docherty said, "Maybe it was your gun."

I said, "It wasn't. It was a two-pound piece. I don't have a bag."

"You're a big guy. Big pants. Big pockets."

Theresa Lee gave me another sympathetic look. Like she was saying, *I'm sorry*.

I said, "What is this? Good cop, dumb cop?"

Docherty said, "You think I'm dumb?"

"You just proved it. If I shot her with a .357 Magnum, I'd have residue on me up to my elbow. But you just stood outside the men's room while I washed my hands. You're full of shit. You haven't fingerprinted me and you haven't Mirandized me. You're blowing smoke."

"We're obliged to make certain."

“What does the medical examiner say?”

“We don’t know yet.”

“There were witnesses.”

Lee shook her head. “No use. They didn’t see anything.”

“They must have.”

“Their view was blocked by your back. Plus they weren’t looking, plus they were half-asleep, and plus they don’t speak much English. They had nothing to offer. Basically I think they wanted to get going before we started checking green cards.”

“What about the other guy? He was in front of me. He was wide awake. And he looked like a citizen and an English speaker.”

“What other guy?”

“The fifth passenger. Chinos and a golf shirt.”

Lee opened the file. Shook her head. “There were only four passengers, plus the woman.”

Chapter 9

Lee took a sheet of paper out of the file and reversed it and slid it halfway across the table. It was a handwritten list of witnesses. Four names. Mine, plus a Rodriguez, a Frlujlov, and an Mbele.

“Four passengers,” she said again.

I said, “I was on the train. I can count. I know how many passengers there were.” Then I reran the scene in my head. Stepping off the train, waiting among the small milling crowd. The arrival of the paramedic crew. The cops, stepping off the train in turn, moving through the throng, taking an elbow each, leading the witnesses away to separate rooms. I had gotten grabbed first, by the big sergeant. Impossible to say whether four cops had followed behind us, or only three.

I said, “He must have slipped away.”

Docherty asked, “Who was he?”

“Just a guy. Alert, but nothing special about him. My age, not poor.”

“Did he interact in any way with the woman?”

“Not that I saw.”

“Did he shoot her?”

“She shot herself.”

Docherty shrugged. “So he’s just a reluctant witness. Doesn’t want paperwork showing he was out and about at two in the morning. Probably cheating on his wife. Happens all the time.”

“He ran. But you’re giving him a free pass and looking at me instead?”

“You just testified that he wasn’t involved.”

“I wasn’t involved, either.”

“Says you.”

“You believe me about the other guy but not about myself?”

“Why would you lie about the other guy?”

I said, “This is a waste of time.” And it was. It was such an extreme, clumsy waste of time that I suddenly realized it wasn’t for real. It was stage-managed. I realized that, in fact, in their own peculiar way, Lee and Docherty were doing me a small favor.

There’s more than meets the eye.

I said, “Who was she?”

Docherty said, “Why should she be someone?”

“Because you made the ID and the computers lit up like Christmas trees. Someone called you and told you to hold on to me until they get here. You didn’t want to put an arrest on my record so you’re stalling me with all this bullshit.”

“We didn’t particularly care about your record. We just didn’t want to do the paperwork.”

“So who was she?”

“Apparently she worked for the government. A federal agency is on its way to question you. We’re not allowed to say which one.”

They left me locked in the room. It was an OK space. Grimy, hot, battered, no windows, out-of-date crime prevention posters on the walls and the smell of sweat and anxiety and burnt coffee in the air. The table, and three chairs. Two for the detectives, one for the suspect. Back in the day maybe the suspect got smacked around and tumbled out of the chair. Maybe he still did. It’s hard to say exactly what happens, in a room with no windows.

I timed the delay in my head. The clock had already been running about an hour, since Theresa Lee's whispered talk in the Grand Central corridor. So I knew it wasn't the FBI coming for me. Their New York field office is the largest in the nation, based down in Federal Plaza, near City Hall. Ten minutes to react, ten minutes to assemble a team, ten minutes to drive uptown with lights and sirens. The FBI would have arrived long ago. But that left a whole bunch of other three-letter agencies. I made a bet with myself that whoever was heading my way would have *IA* as the last two letters on their badges. CIA, DIA. Central Intelligence Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency. Maybe others recently invented and hitherto unpublicized. Middle-of-the-night panics were very much their style.

After a second hour tacked on to the first I figured they must be coming all the way from D.C., which implied a small specialist outfit. Anyone else would have a field office closer to hand. I gave up speculating and tipped my chair back and put my feet on the table and went to sleep.

I didn't find out exactly who they were. Not then. They wouldn't tell me. At five in the morning three men in suits came in and woke me up. They were polite and businesslike. Their suits were mid-priced and clean and pressed. Their shoes were polished. Their eyes were bright. Their haircuts were fresh and short. Their faces were pink and ruddy. Their bodies were stocky but toned. They looked like they could run half-marathons without much trouble, but without much enjoyment, either. My first impression was recent ex-military. Gung-ho staff officers, head-hunted into some limestone building inside the Beltway. True believers, doing important work. I asked to see ID and badges and credentials, but they quoted the Patriot Act at me and said they weren't obliged to identify themselves. Probably true, and they certainly enjoyed saying so. I considered clamming up in retaliation, but they saw me considering, and quoted some more of the Act at me, which left me in no doubt at all that a world of trouble lay at the end of that particular road. I am afraid of very little, but hassle with today's security apparatus is always best avoided. Franz Kafka and George Orwell would have given me the same advice. So I shrugged and told them to go ahead and ask their questions.

They started out by saying that they were aware of my military service and very respectful of it, which was either a bullshit boilerplate platitude, or meant that they had been recruited out of the MPs themselves. Nobody respects an MP except another MP. Then they said that they would be observing me very closely and would know whether I was telling the truth or lying. Which was total

and would know whether I was telling the truth or lying. Which was total bullshit, because only the best of us can do that, and these guys weren't the best of us, otherwise they would have been in very senior positions, meaning that right then they would have been home and asleep in a Virginia suburb, rather than running up and down I-95 in the middle of the night.

But I didn't have anything to hide, so I told them again to go ahead.

They had three areas of concern. The first: Did I know the woman who had killed herself on the train? Had I ever seen her before?

I said, "No." Short and sweet, quiet but firm.

They didn't follow up with supplementaries. Which told me roughly who they were and exactly what they were doing. They were somebody's B-team, sent north to dead-end an open investigation. They were walling it off, burying it, drawing a line under something somebody had been only half-suspicious about to begin with. They wanted a negative answer to every question, so that the file could be closed and the matter put to bed. They wanted a positive absence of loose ends, and they didn't want to draw attention to the issue by making it a big drama. They wanted to get back on the road with the whole thing forgotten.

The second question was: Did I know a woman called Lila Hoth?

I said, "No," because I didn't. Not then.

The third question was more of a sustained dialog. The lead agent opened it. The main man. He was a little older and a little smaller than the other two. Maybe a little smarter, too. He said, "You approached the woman on the train."

I didn't reply. I was there to answer questions, not to comment on statements.

The guy asked, "How close did you get?"

"Six feet," I said. "Give or take."

"Close enough to touch her?"

"No."

"If you had extended your arm, and she had extended hers, could you have

touched hands?"

"Maybe," I said.

"Is that a yes or a no?"

"It's a maybe. I know how long my arms are. I don't know how long hers were."

"Did she pass anything to you?"

"No."

"Did you accept anything from her?"

"No."

"Did you take anything from her after she was dead?"

"No."

"Did anyone else?"

"Not that I saw."

"Did you see anything fall from her hand, or her bag, or her clothing?"

"No."

"Did she tell you anything?"

"Nothing of substance."

"Did she speak to anyone else?"

"No."

The guy asked, "Would you mind turning out your pockets?"

I shrugged. I had nothing to hide. I went through each pocket in turn and dumped the contents on the battered table. A folded wad of cash money, and a few coins. My old passport. My ATM card. My clip-together toothbrush. The Metrocard that had gotten me into the subway in the first place. And Theresa

Lee's business card.

The guy stirred through my stuff with a single extended finger and nodded to one of his underlings, who stepped up close to pat me down. He did a semi-expert job and found nothing more and shook his head.

The main guy said, "Thank you, Mr. Reacher."

And then they left, all three of them, as quickly as they had come in. I was a little surprised, but happy enough. I put my stuff back in my pockets and waited for them to clear the corridor and then I wandered out. The place was quiet. I saw Theresa Lee doing nothing at a desk and her partner Docherty walking a guy across the squad room to a cubicle in back. The guy was a worn-out mid-sized forty-something. He had on a creased gray T-shirt and a pair of red sweatpants. He had left home without combing his hair. That was clear. It was gray and sticking up all over the place. Theresa Lee saw me looking and said, "Family member."

"The woman's?"

Lee nodded. "She had contact details in her wallet. That's her brother. He's a cop himself. Small town in New Jersey. He drove straight over."

"Poor guy."

"I know. We didn't ask him to make the formal ID. She's too messed up. We told him that a closed casket is the way to go. He got the message."

"So are you sure it's her?"

Lee nodded again. "Fingerprints."

"Who was she?"

"I'm not allowed to say."

"Am I done here?"

"The feds finished with you?"

"Apparently."

“Then beat it. You’re done.”

I made it to the top of the stairs and she called after me. She said, “I didn’t mean it about tipping her over the edge.”

“Yes, you did,” I said. “And you might have been right.”

*

I stepped out to the dawn cool and turned left on 35th Street and headed east. *You’re done*. But I wasn’t. Right there on the corner were four more guys waiting to talk to me. Similar types as before, but not federal agents. Their suits were too expensive.

Chapter 10

The world is the same jungle all over, but New York is its purest distillation. What is useful elsewhere is vital in the big city. You see four guys bunched on a corner waiting for you, you either run like hell in the opposite direction without hesitation, or you keep on walking without slowing down or speeding up or breaking stride. You look ahead with studied neutrality, you check their faces, you look away, like you're saying, *Is that all you got?*

Truth is, it's smarter to run. The best fight is the one you don't have. But I have never claimed to be smart. Just obstinate, and occasionally bad-tempered. Some guys kick cats. I keep walking.

The suits were all midnight blue and looked like they came from the kind of store that has a foreign person's name above the door. The men inside the suits looked capable. Like NCOs. Wise to the ways of the world, proud of their ability to get the job done. They were certainly ex-military or ex–law enforcement, or ex–both. They were the kind of guys who had taken a step up in salary and a step away from rules and regulations, and who regarded both moves as equally valuable.

They separated into two pairs when I was still four paces away. Left me room to pass if I wanted to, but the front guy on the left raised both palms a little and patted the air, in a kind of dual-purpose *please stop* and *we're no threat* gesture. I spent the next step deciding. You can't let yourself get caught in the middle of four guys. Either you stop early or you barge on through. At that point my options were still open. Easy to stop, easy to keep going. If they closed ranks while I was still moving, they would go down like bowling pins. I weigh two-fifty and was moving at four miles an hour. They didn't, and weren't.

Two steps out, the lead guy said, "Can we talk?"

I stopped walking. Said, "About what?"

"You're the witness, right?"

“But who are you?”

The guy answered by peeling back the flap of his suit coat, slow and unthreatening, showing me nothing except a red satin lining and a shirt. No gun, no holster, no belt. He put his right fingers into his left inside pocket and came out with a business card. Leaned forward and handed it to me. It was a cheap product. The first line said: *Sure and Certain, Inc*. The second line said: *Protection, Investigation, Intervention*. The third line had a telephone number, with a 212 area code. Manhattan.

“Kinko’s is a wonderful place,” I said. “Isn’t it? Maybe I’ll get some cards that say John Smith, King of the World.”

“The card is legit,” the guy said. “And we’re legit.”

“Who are you working for?”

“We can’t say.”

“Then I can’t help you.”

“Better that you talk to us than our principal. We can keep things civilized.”

“Now I’m really scared.”

“Just a couple of questions. That’s all. Help us out. We’re just working stiffs, trying to get paid. Like you.”

“I’m not a working stiff. I’m a gentleman of leisure.”

“Then look down on us from your lofty perch and take pity.”

“What questions?”

“Did she give anything to you?”

“Who?”

“You know who. Did you take anything from her?”

“And? What’s the next question?”

“Did she say anything?”

“She said plenty. She was talking all the way from Bleecker to Grand Central.”

“Saying what?”

“I didn’t hear very much of it.”

“Information?”

“I didn’t hear.”

“Did she mention names?”

“She might have.”

“Did she say the name Lila Hoth?”

“Not that I heard.”

“Did she say John Sansom?”

I didn’t answer. The guy asked, “What?”

I said, “I heard that name somewhere.”

“From her?”

“No.”

“Did she give you anything?”

“What kind of a thing?”

“Anything at all.”

“Tell me what difference it would make.”

“Our principal wants to know.”

“Tell him to come ask me himself.”

“Better to talk to us.”

I smiled and walked on, through the alley they had created. But one of the guys on the right side-stepped and tried to push me back. I caught him shoulder-to-chest and spun him out of my way. He came after me again and I stopped and started and feinted left and right and slid in behind him and shoved him hard in the back so that he stumbled on ahead of me. His jacket had a single center vent. French tailoring. British suits favor twin side vents and Italian suits favor none at all. I leaned down and caught a coat tail in each hand and heaved and tore the seam all the way up the back. Then I shoved him again. He stumbled ahead and veered right. His coat was hanging off him by the collar. Unbuttoned at the front, open at the back, like a hospital gown.

Then I ran three steps and stopped and turned around. It would have been much more stylish to just keep on walking slowly, but also much dumber. Insouciance is good, but being ready is better. The four of them were caught in a moment of real indecision. They wanted to come get me. That was for sure. But they were on West 35th Street at dawn. At that hour virtually all the traffic would be cops. So in the end they just gave me hard looks and moved away. They crossed 35th in single file and headed south at the corner.

You’re done.

But I wasn’t. I turned to move away and a guy came out of the precinct house and ran after me. Creased gray T-shirt, red sweatpants, gray hair sticking up all over the place. The family member. The brother. The small-town cop from Jersey. He caught up with me and grabbed my elbow in a wiry grip and told me he had seen me inside and had guessed I was the witness. Then he told me his sister hadn’t committed suicide.

Chapter 11

I took the guy to a coffee shop on Eighth Avenue. A long time ago I was sent on a one-day MP seminar at Fort Rucker, to learn sensitivity around the recently bereaved. Sometimes MPs had to deliver bad news to relatives. We called them death messages. My skills were widely held to be deficient. I used to walk in and just tell them. I thought that was the nature of a message. But apparently I was wrong. So I was sent to Rucker. I learned good stuff there. I learned to take emotions seriously. Above all I learned that cafés and diners and coffee shops were good environments for bad news. The public atmosphere limits the likelihood of falling apart, and the process of ordering and waiting and sipping punctuates the flow of information in a way that makes it easier to absorb.

We took a booth next to a mirror. That helps, too. You can look at each other in the glass. Face-to-face, but not really. The place was about half-full. Cops from the precinct, taxi drivers on their way to the West Side garages. We ordered coffee. I wanted food too, but I wasn't going to eat if he didn't. Not respectful. He said he wasn't hungry. I sat quiet and waited. Let them talk first, the Rucker psychologists had said.

He told me that his name was Jacob Mark. Originally Markakis in his grandfather's day, back when a Greek name was no good to anyone, except if you were in the diner business, which his grandfather wasn't. His grandfather was in the construction business. Hence the change. He said I could call him Jake. I said he could call me Reacher. He told me he was a cop. I told him I had been one once, in the military. He told me he wasn't married and lived alone. I said the same went for me. Establish common ground, the teachers at Rucker had said. Up close and looking past his physical disarray he was a squared-away guy. He had any cop's weary gloss, but under it lay a normal suburban man. With a different guidance counselor he might have become a science teacher or a dentist or an auto parts manager. He was in his forties, already very gray, but his face was youthful and unlined. His eyes were dark and wide and staring, but that was temporary. Some hours ago, when he went to bed, he must have been a handsome man. I liked him on sight, and I felt sorry for his situation.

He took a breath and told me his sister's name was Susan Mark. At one time Susan Molina, but many years divorced and reverted. Now living alone. He talked about her in the present tense. He was a long way from acceptance.

He said, "She can't have killed herself. It's just not possible."

I said, "Jake, I was there."

The waitress brought our coffee and we sipped in silence for a moment. Passing time, letting reality sink in just a little more. The Rucker psychologists had been explicit: The suddenly bereaved have the IQ of labradors. Indelicate, because they were army, but accurate, because they were psychologists.

Jake said, "So tell me what happened."

I asked him, "Where are you from?"

He named a small town in northern New Jersey, well inside the New York Metro area, full of commuters and soccer moms, prosperous, safe, contented. He said the police department was well funded, well equipped, and generally understretched. I asked him if his department had a copy of the Israeli list. He said that after the Twin Towers every police department in the country had been buried under paper, and every officer had been required to learn every point on every list.

I said, "Your sister was behaving strangely, Jake. She rang every bell. She looked like a suicide bomber."

"Bullshit," he said, like a good brother should.

"Obviously she wasn't," I said. "But you would have thought the same thing. You would have had to, with your training."

"So the list is more about suicide than bombing."

"Apparently."

"She wasn't an unhappy person."

"She must have been."

He didn’t reply. We sipped a little more. People came and went. Checks were paid, tips were left. Traffic built up on Eighth.

I said, “Tell me about her.”

He asked, “What gun did she use?”

“An old Ruger Speed-Six.”

“Our dad’s gun. She inherited it.”

“Where did she live? Here, in the city?”

He shook his head. “Annandale, Virginia.”

“Did you know she was up here?”

He shook his head again.

“Why would she come?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why would she be wearing a winter coat?”

“I don’t know.”

I said, “Some federal agents came and asked me questions. Then some private guys found me, just before you did. They were all talking about a woman called Lila Hoth. You ever hear that name from your sister?”

“No.”

“What about John Sansom?”

“He’s a congressman from North Carolina. Wants to be a senator. Some kind of hard-ass.”

I nodded. I remembered, vaguely. Election season was gearing up. I had seen newspaper stories and television coverage. Sansom had been a late entrant to politics and was a rising star. He was seen as tough and uncompromising. And

ambitious. He had done well in business for a spell and before that he had done well in the army. He hinted at a glamorous Special Forces career, without supplying details. Special Forces careers are good for that kind of thing. Most of what they do is secret, or can be claimed to be.

I asked, “Did your sister ever mention Sansom?”

He said, “I don’t think so.”

“Did she know him?”

“I can’t see how.”

I asked, “What did she do for a living?”

He wouldn’t tell me.

Chapter 12

He didn’t need to tell me. I already knew enough for a ballpark guess. Her fingerprints were on file and three shiny pink ex–staff officers had hustled up the highway but had left again within minutes. Which put Susan Mark somewhere in the defense business, but not in an elevated position. And she lived in Annandale, Virginia. Southwest of Arlington, as I recalled. Probably changed since I was last there. But probably still a decent place to live, and still an easy commute to the world’s largest office building. Route 244, one end to the other.

“She worked at the Pentagon,” I said.

Jake said, “She wasn’t supposed to talk about her job.”

I shook my head. “If it was really a secret, she would have told you she worked at Wal-Mart.”

He didn’t answer. I said, “I had an office in the Pentagon once. I’m familiar with the place. Try me.”

He paused a beat and then he shrugged and said, “She was a civilian clerk. But she made it sound exciting. She worked for an outfit called CGUSAHRC. She never told me much about it. She made it sound like a hush-hush thing. People can’t talk so much now, after the Twin Towers.”

“It’s not an outfit,” I said. “It’s a guy. CGUSAHRC means Commanding General, United States Army, Human Resources Command. And it’s not very exciting. It’s a personnel department. Paperwork and records.”

Jake didn’t reply. I thought I had offended him, by belittling his sister’s career. Maybe the Rucker seminar hadn’t taught me enough. Maybe I should have paid more attention. The silence went on a beat too long and grew awkward. I asked, “Did she tell you anything about it at all?”

“Not really. Maybe there wasn’t much to tell.” He said it with a hint of bitterness, as if his sister had been caught in a lie. I said, “People dress things up

bitterness, as if his sister had been caught in a lie. I said, "People dress things up, Jake. It's human nature. And usually there's no harm in it. Maybe she just wanted to compete, with you being a cop."

"We weren't close."

"You were still family."

"I guess."

"Did she enjoy her job?"

"She seemed to. And it must have suited her. She had the right skills, for a records department. Great memory, meticulous, very organized. She was good with computers."

The silence came back. I started to think about Annandale again. A pleasant but unremarkable community. A dormitory, basically. Under the present circumstances it had just one significant characteristic.

It was a very long way from New York City.

She wasn't an unhappy person.

Jake said, "What?"

I said, "Nothing. None of my business."

"But what?"

"Just thinking."

"About what?"

There's more than meets the eye.

I asked, "How long have you been a cop?"

"Eighteen years."

"All in the same place?"

“I trained with the State Troopers. Then I moved over. Like a farm system.”

“Have you seen many suicides in Jersey?”

“One or two a year, maybe.”

“Anyone see any of them coming?”

“Not really. They’re usually a big surprise.”

“Like this one.”

“You got that right.”

“But behind each one of them there must have been a reason.”

“Always. Financial, sexual, some kind of shit about to hit the fan.”

“So your sister must have had a reason.”

“I don’t know what.”

I went quiet again. Jake said, “Just say it. Tell me.”

“Not my place.”

“You were a cop,” he said. “You’re seeing something.”

I nodded. Said, “My guess is that out of the suicides you’ve seen, maybe seven out of ten happened at home, and three out of ten, they drove to some local lane and hitched up the hosepipe.”

“More or less.”

“But always somewhere familiar. Somewhere quiet and alone. Always at some kind of a destination. You get there, you compose yourself, you do it.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I never heard of a suicide where the person travels hundreds of miles from home and does it while the journey is still in progress.”

“I told you.”

“You told me she didn’t kill herself. But she did. I saw her do it. But I’m saying she did it in a very unconventional manner. In fact I don’t think I ever heard of a suicide inside a subway car before. Under one, maybe, but not inside. Did you ever hear of a suicide on public transportation, during the ride?”

“So?”

“So nothing. I’m just asking, that’s all.”

“Why?”

“Because. Think like a cop, Jake. Not like a brother. What do you do when something is way out of line?”

“You dig deeper.”

“So do it.”

“It won’t bring her back.”

“But understanding a thing helps a lot.” Which was also a concept they taught at Fort Rucker. But not in the psychology class.

I got a refill of coffee and Jacob Mark picked up a packet of sugar and turned it over and over in his fingers so that the powder fell from one end of the paper rectangle to the other, repeatedly, like an hourglass. I could see his head working like a cop and his heart working like a brother. It was all right there in his face. *Dig deeper. It won’t bring her back.*

He asked, “What else?”

“There was a passenger who took off before the NYPD got to him.”

“Who?”

“Just a guy. The cops figured he didn’t want his name in the system. They figured he was maybe cheating on his wife.”

“Possible.”

“Yes,” I said. “Possible.”

“And?”

“Both the feds and the private guys asked me if your sister had handed me anything.”

“What kind of anything?”

“They didn’t specify. I’m guessing something small.”

“Who were the feds?”

“They wouldn’t say.”

“Who were the private guys?”

I hitched up off the bench and took the business card out of my back pocket. Cheap stock, already creased, and already rubbed a little blue from my jeans. New pants, fresh dye. I put it on the table and reversed it and slid it across. Jake read it slowly, maybe twice. *Sure and Certain, Inc. Protection, Investigation, Intervention.* The telephone number. He took out a cell and dialed. I heard a delay and a chirpy little three-note ding-dong tone and a recorded message. Jake closed his phone and said, “Not in service. Phony number.”

Chapter 13

I took a second refill of coffee. Jake just stared at the waitress like he had never heard of the concept. Eventually she lost interest and moved away. Jake slid the business card back to me. I picked it up and put it in my pocket and he said, “I don’t like this.”

I said, “I wouldn’t like it, either.”

“We should go back and talk to the NYPD.”

“She killed herself, Jake. That’s the bottom line. That’s all they need to know. They don’t care how or where or why.”

“They should.”

“Maybe so. But they don’t. Would you?”

“Probably not,” he said. I saw his eyes go blank. Maybe he was rerunning old cases in his head. Big houses, leafy roads, lawyers living the high life on their clients’ escrow money, unable to make good, ducking out ahead of shame and scandal and disbarment. Or teachers, with pregnant students. Or family men, with boyfriends in Chelsea or the West Village. The local cops, full of tact and rough sympathy, large and intrusive in the neat quiet dwellings, checking the scenes, establishing the facts, typing reports, closing files, forgetting, moving on to the next thing, not caring how or where or why.

He said, “You got a theory?”

I said, “It’s too early for a theory. All we got so far is facts.”

“What facts?”

“The Pentagon didn’t entirely trust your sister.”

“That’s a hell of a thing to say.”

“She was on a watch list, Jake. She must have been. As soon as her name hit the wires, those feds saddled up. Three of them. That was a procedure.”

“They didn’t stay long.”

I nodded. “Which means they weren’t very suspicious. They were being cautious, that’s all. Maybe they had some small thing on their minds, but they didn’t really believe it. They came up here to rule it out.”

“What kind of thing?”

“Information,” I said. “That’s all the Human Resources Command has got.”

“They thought she was passing information?”

“They wanted to rule it out.”

“Which means at some point they must have ruled it in.”

I nodded again. “Maybe she was seen in the wrong office, opening the wrong file cabinet. Maybe they figured there was an innocent explanation, but they wanted to be sure. Or maybe something went missing and they didn’t know who to watch, so they were watching them all.”

“What kind of information?”

“I have no idea.”

“Like a copied file?”

“Smaller,” I said. “A folded note, a computer memory. Something that could be passed from hand to hand in a subway car.”

“She was a patriot. She loved her country. She wouldn’t do that.”

“And she didn’t do that. She didn’t pass anything to anyone.”

“So we’ve got nothing.”

“We’ve got your sister hundreds of miles from home with a loaded gun.”

“And afraid,” Jake said.

“Wearing a winter jacket in ninety-degree weather.”

“With two names floating around,” he said. “John Sansom and Lila Hoth, whoever the hell she is. And Hoth sounds foreign.”

“So did Markakis, once upon a time.”

He went quiet again and I sipped coffee. Traffic was getting slower on Eighth. The morning rush was building. The sun was up, a little south of east. Its rays were not aligned with the street grid. They came in at a low angle and threw long diagonal shadows.

Jake said, “Give me somewhere to start.”

I said, “We don’t know enough.”

“Speculate.”

“I can’t. I could make up a story, but it would be full of holes. And it might be completely the wrong story to begin with.”

“Try it. Give me something. Like brainstorming.”

I shrugged. “You ever met any ex–Special Forces guys?”

“Two or three. Maybe four or five, counting the Troopers I knew.”

“You probably didn’t. Most Special Forces careers never happened. It’s like people who claim to have been at Woodstock. Believe them all, the crowd must have been ten million strong. Or like New Yorkers who saw the planes hit the towers. They all did, to listen to them. No one was looking the wrong way at the time. People who say they were Special Forces are usually bullshitting. Most of them never made it out of the infantry. Some of them were never in the army at all. People dress things up.”

“Like my sister.”

“It’s human nature.”

“What’s your point?”

“I’m working with what we’ve got. We’ve got two random names, and election season starting up, and your sister in HRC.”

“You think John Sansom is lying about his past?”

“Probably not,” I said. “But it’s a common area of exaggeration. And politics is a dirty business. You can bet that right now someone is checking on the guy who did Sansom’s dry cleaning twenty years ago, wanting to know if he had a green card. So it’s a no-brainer to assume that people are fact-checking his actual biography. It’s a national sport.”

“So maybe Lila Hoth is a journalist. Or a researcher. Cable news, or something. Or talk radio.”

“Maybe she’s Sansom’s opponent.”

“Not with a name like that. Not in North Carolina.”

“OK, let’s say she’s a journalist or a researcher. Maybe she put the squeeze on an HRC clerk for Sansom’s service record. Maybe she picked your sister.”

“Where was her leverage?”

I said, “That’s the first big hole in the story.” Which it was. Susan Mark had been desperate and terrified. It was hard to imagine a journalist finding that kind of leverage. Journalists can be manipulative and persuasive, but no one is particularly afraid of them.

“Was Susan political?” I asked.

“Why?”

“Maybe she didn’t like Sansom. Didn’t like what he stood for. Maybe she was cooperating. Or volunteering.”

“Then why would she be so scared?”

“Because she was breaking the law,” I said. “Her heart would have been in her mouth.”

“And why was she carrying the gun?”

“Didn’t she normally carry it?”

“Never. It was an heirloom. She kept it in her sock drawer, like people do.”

I shrugged. The gun was the second big hole in the story. People take their guns out of their sock drawers for a variety of reasons. Protection, aggression. But never just in case they feel a spur-of-the-moment impulse to off themselves far from home.

Jake said, “Susan wasn’t very political.”

“OK.”

“Therefore there can’t be a connection with Sansom.”

“Then why did his name come up?”

“I don’t know.”

I said, “Susan must have driven up. Can’t take a gun on a plane. Her car is probably getting towed right now. She must have come through the Holland Tunnel and parked way downtown.”

Jake didn’t reply. My coffee was cold. The waitress had given up on refills. We were an unprofitable table. The rest of the clientele had changed twice over. Working people, moving fast, fueling up, getting ready for a busy day. I pictured Susan Mark twelve hours earlier, getting ready for a busy night. Dressing. Finding her father’s gun, loading it, packing it into the black bag. Climbing into her car, taking 236 to the Beltway, going clockwise, maybe getting gas, hitting 95, heading north, eyes wide and desperate, drilling the darkness ahead.

Speculate, Jake had said. But suddenly I didn’t want to. Because I could hear Theresa Lee in my head. The detective. *You tipped her over the edge*. Jake saw me thinking and asked, “What?”

“Let’s assume the leverage,” I said. “Let’s assume it was totally compelling. So let’s assume Susan was on her way to deliver whatever information she was told to get. And let’s assume these were bad people. She didn’t trust them to release whatever hold they had over her. Probably she thought they were going to up the

whatever hold they had over her. Probably she thought they were going to up the stakes and ask for more. She was in, and she didn't see a way of getting out. And, above all, she was very afraid of them. So she was desperate. So she took the gun. Possibly she thought she could fight her way out, but she wasn't optimistic about her chances. All in all, she didn't think things were going to end well."

"So?"

"She had business to attend to. She was almost there. She never intended to shoot herself."

"But what about the list? The behaviors?"

"Same difference," I said. "She was on the way to where she expected someone else to end her life, maybe some other way, either literally or figuratively."

Chapter 14

Jacob Mark said, “It doesn’t explain the coat.” But I thought he was wrong. I thought it explained the coat pretty well. And it explained the fact that she parked downtown and rode up on the subway. I figured she was looking to come upon whoever she was meeting from an unexpected angle, out of a hole in the ground, armed, dressed all in black, ready for some conflict in the dark. Maybe the winter parka was the only black coat she owned.

And it explained everything else, too. The dread, the sense of doom. Maybe the mumbling had been her way of rehearsing pleas, or exculpations, or arguments, or maybe even threats. Maybe repeating them over and over again had made them more convincing to her. More plausible. More reassuring.

Jake said, “She can’t have been on her way to deliver something, because she didn’t have anything with her.”

“She might have had something,” I said. “In her head. You told me she had a great memory. Units, dates, time lines, whatever they needed.”

He paused, and tried to find a reason to disagree.

He failed.

“Classified information,” he said. “Army secrets. Jesus, I can’t believe it.”

“She was under pressure, Jake.”

“What kind of secrets does a personnel department have anyway, that are worth getting killed for?”

I didn’t answer. Because I had no idea. In my day HRC had been called PERSCOM. Personnel Command, not Human Resources Command. I had served thirteen years without ever thinking about it. Not even once. Paperwork and records. All the interesting information had been somewhere else.

Jake moved in his seat. He ran his fingers through his unwashed hair and clamped his palms on his ears and moved his head through a complete oval, like he was easing stiffness in his neck, or acting out some kind of inner turmoil that was bringing him full circle, back to his most basic question.

He said, “So why? Why did she just up and kill herself before she got where she was going?”

I paused a beat. Café noises went on all around us. The squeak of sneakers on linoleum, the clink and scrape of crockery, the sound of TV news from sets high on the walls, the ding of the short-order bell.

“She was breaking the law,” I said. “She was in breach of all kinds of trusts and professional obligations. And she must have suspected some kind of surveillance. Maybe she had even been warned. So she was tense, right from the moment she got in her car. All the way up she was watching for red lights in her mirror. Every cop at every toll was a potential danger. Every guy she saw in a suit could have been a federal agent. And on the train, any one of us could have been getting ready to bust her.”

Jake didn’t reply.

I said, “And then I approached her.”

“And?”

“She flipped. She thought I was about to arrest her. Right then and there, the game was over. She was at the end of the road. She was damned if she did, and damned if she didn’t. She couldn’t go forward, couldn’t go back. She was trapped. Whatever threats they were using against her were going to come to pass, and she was going to jail.”

“Why would she think you were going to arrest her?”

“She must have thought I was a cop.”

“Why would she think you were a cop?”

I’m a cop, I had said. *I can help you. We can talk.*

“She was paranoid,” I said. “Understandably.”

She was paranoid," I said. "Understandably."

"You don't look like a cop. You look like a bum. She would more likely have thought you were hustling her for spare change."

"Maybe she thought I was undercover."

"She was a records clerk, according to you. She wouldn't have known what undercover cops look like."

"Jake, I'm sorry, but I told her I was a cop."

"Why?"

"I thought she was a bomber. I was just trying to get through the next three seconds without her pushing the button. I was ready to say anything."

He asked, "What exactly did you say?" So I told him, and he said, "Jesus, that even sounds like Internal Affairs bullshit."

I think you tipped her over the edge.

"I'm sorry," I said again.

For the next few minutes I was getting it from all sides. Jacob Mark was glaring at me because I had killed his sister. The waitress was angry because she could have sold about eight breakfasts in the time we had lingered over two cups of coffee. I took out a twenty-dollar bill and trapped it under my saucer. She saw me do it. Eight breakfasts' worth of tips, right there. That solved the waitress problem. The Jacob Mark problem was tougher. He was still and silent and bristling. I saw him glance away, twice. Getting ready to disengage. Eventually he said, "I got to go. I got things to do. I have to find a way to tell her family."

I said, "Family?"

"Molina, the ex–husband. And they have a son, Peter. My nephew."

"Susan had a son?"

"What's it to you?"

The IQ of labradors.

I said, “Jake, we’ve been sitting here talking about leverage, and you didn’t think to mention that Susan had a kid?”

He went blank for a second. Said, “He’s not a kid. He’s twenty-two years old. He’s a senior at USC. He plays football. He’s bigger than you are. And he’s not close with his mother. He lived with his father after the divorce.”

I said, “Call him.”

“It’s four o’clock in the morning in California.”

“Call him now.”

“I’ll wake him up.”

“I sure hope you will.”

“He needs to be prepared for this.”

“First he needs to be answering his phone.”

So Jake took out his cell again and beeped through his address book and hit the green button against a name pretty low down on the list. Alphabetical order, I guessed. *P* for *Peter*. Jake held the phone against his ear and looked one kind of worried through the first five rings, and then another kind after the sixth. He kept the phone up a little while longer and then lowered it slowly and said, “Voice mail.”

Chapter 15

I said, "Go to work. Call the LAPD or the USC campus cops and ask for some favors, blue to blue. Get someone to head over and check whether he's home."

"They'll laugh at me. It's a college jock not answering his phone at four in the morning."

I said, "Just do it."

Jake said, "Come with me."

I shook my head. "I'm staying here. I want to talk to those private guys again."

"You'll never find them."

"They'll find me. I never answered their question, about whether Susan gave me anything. I think they'll want to ask it again."

We arranged to meet in five hours' time, in the same coffee shop. I watched him get back in his car and then I walked south on Eighth, slowly, like I had nowhere special to go, which I didn't. I was tired from not sleeping much but wired from all the coffee, so overall I figured it was a wash in terms of alertness and energy. And I figured the private guys would be in the same boat. We had all been up all night. Which fact got me thinking about time. Just as two in the morning was the wrong time for a suicide bombing, it was also a weird time for Susan Mark to be heading for a rendezvous and delivering information. So I stood for a spell at the newspaper rack outside a deli and leafed through the tabloids. I found what I was half-expecting buried deep inside the *Daily News*. The New Jersey Turnpike had been closed northbound for four hours the previous evening. A tanker wreck, in fog. An acid spill. Multiple fatalities.

I pictured Susan Mark trapped on the road between exits. A four-hour jam. A four-hour delay. Disbelief. Mounting tension. No way forward, no way back. A rock and a hard place. Time, ticking away. A deadline, approaching. A deadline,

missed. Threats and sanctions and penalties, now presumed live and operational. The 6 train had seemed fast to me. It must have felt awful slow to her. *You tipped her over the edge*. Maybe so, but she hadn't needed a whole lot of tipping.

I butted the newspapers back into saleable condition and set off strolling again. I figured the guy with the torn jacket would have gone home to change, but the other three would be close by. They would have watched me enter the coffee shop, and they would have picked me up when I came out. I couldn't see them on the street, but I wasn't really looking for them. No point in looking for something when you know for sure it's there.

Back in the day Eighth Avenue had been a dangerous thoroughfare. Broken streetlights, vacant lots, shuttered stores, crack, hookers, muggers. I had seen all kinds of things there. I had never been attacked personally. Which was no big surprise. To make me a potential victim, the world's population would have to be reduced all the way down to two. Me and a mugger, and I would have won. Now Eighth was as safe as anywhere else. It bustled with commercial activity and there were people all over the place. So I didn't care exactly where the three guys approached me. I made no attempt to channel them to a place of my choosing. I just walked. Their call. The day was on its way from warm to hot and sidewalk smells were rising up all around me, like a crude calendar: Garbage stinks in the summer and doesn't in the winter.

*

They approached me a block south of Madison Square Garden and the big old post office. Construction on a corner lot shunted pedestrians along a narrow fenced-off lane in the gutter. I got a yard into it and one guy stepped ahead of me and one fell in behind and the leader came alongside me. Neat moves. The leader said, "We're prepared to forget the thing with the coat."

"That's good," I said. "Because I already did."

"But we need to know if you have something that belongs to us."

"To you?"

"To our principal."

"Who are you guys?"

“I gave you our card.”

“And at first I was very impressed by it. It looked like a work of art, arithmetically. There are more than three million possible combinations for a seven-digit phone number. But you didn’t choose randomly. You picked one you knew was disconnected. I imagined that’s tough to do. So I was impressed. But then I figured in fact that’s impossible to do, given Manhattan’s population. Someone dies or moves away, their number gets recycled pretty fast. So then I guessed you had access to a list of numbers that never work. Phone companies keep a few, for when a number shows up in the movies or on TV. Can’t use real numbers for that, because customers might get harassed. So then I guessed you know people in the movie and TV business. Probably because most of the week you rent out as sidewalk security when there’s a show in town. Therefore the closest you get to action is fending off autograph hunters. Which must be a disappointment to guys like you. I’m sure you had something better in mind when you set up in business. And worse, it implies a certain erosion of abilities, through lack of practice. So now I’m even less worried about you than I was before. So all in all I’d say the card was a mistake, in terms of image management.”

The guy said, “Can we buy you a cup of coffee?”

*

I never say no to a cup of coffee, but I was all done with sitting down, so I agreed to go-cups only. We could sip and talk as we walked. We stopped in at the next Starbucks we saw, which as in most cities was half a block away. I ignored the fancy brews and got a tall house blend, black, no room for cream. My standard order, at Starbucks. A fine bean, in my opinion. Not that I really care. It’s all about the caffeine for me, not the taste.

We came out and carried on down Eighth. But four people made an awkward group for mobile conversation and the traffic was loud, so we ended up ten yards into the mouth of a cross street, static, with me in the shade, leaning on a railing, and the other three in the sun in front of me and leaning toward me like they had points to make. At our feet a burst garbage bag leaked cheerful sections of the Sunday newspaper on the sidewalk. The guy who did all the talking said, “You’re seriously underestimating us, not that we want to get into a pissing contest.”

“OK,” I said.

“You’re ex-military, right?”

“Army,” I said.

“You’ve still got the look.”

“You too. Special Forces?”

“No. We didn’t get that far.”

I smiled. An honest man.

The guy said, “We got hired as the local end for a temporary operation. The dead woman was carrying an item of value. It’s up to us to recover it.”

“What item? What value?”

“Information.”

I said, “I can’t help you.”

“Our principal was expecting digital data, on a computer chip, like a USB flash memory stick. We said no, that’s too hard to get out of the Pentagon. We said it would be verbal. Like, read and memorized.”

I said nothing. Thought back to Susan Mark on the train. The mumbling. Maybe she wasn’t rehearsing pleas or exculpations or threats or arguments. Maybe she was running through the details she was supposed to deliver, over and over again, so she wouldn’t forget them or get them confused in her stress and her panic. Learning by rote. And saying to herself, *I’m obeying, I’m obeying, I’m obeying*. Reassuring herself. Hoping that it would all turn out right.

I asked, “Who is your principal?”

“We can’t say.”

“What was his leverage?”

“We don’t know. We don’t want to know.”

I sipped my coffee. Said nothing.

The guy said, “The woman spoke to you on the train.”

“Yes,” I said. “She did.”

“So now the operational assumption is that whatever she knew, you know.”

“Possible,” I said.

“Our principal is convinced of it. Which gives you a problem. Data on a computer chip, no big deal. We could hit you over the head and turn out your pockets. But something in your head would need to be extracted some other way.”

I said nothing.

The guy said, “So you really need to tell us what you know.”

“So you’ll look competent?”

The guy shook his head. “So you’ll stay whole.”

I took another sip of coffee and the guy said, “I’m appealing to you, man to man. Soldier to soldier. This is not about us. We go back empty, sure, we’ll get fired. But Monday morning we’ll be working again, for someone else. But if we’re out of the picture, you’re exposed. Our principal brought a whole crew. Right now they’re on a leash, because they don’t fit in here. But if we’re gone, they’re off the leash. No alternative. And you really don’t want them talking to you.”

“I don’t want anyone talking to me. Not them, not you. I don’t like talking.”

“This is not a joke.”

“You got that right. A woman died.”

“Suicide is not a crime.”

“But whatever drove her to it might be. The woman worked at the Pentagon. That’s national security, right there. You need to get out in front of this. You should talk to the NYPD.”

The guy shook his head. “I’d go to jail before I crossed these people. You hear what I’m saying?”

“I hear you,” I said. “You’ve gotten comfortable with your autograph hunters.”

“We’re the kid gloves here. You should take advantage.”

“You’re no kind of gloves at all.”

“What were you, in the service?”

“MPs,” I said.

“Then you’re a dead man. You never saw anything like this.”

“Who is he?”

The guy just shook his head.

“How many?”

The guy shook his head again.

“Give me something.”

“You’re not listening. If I won’t talk to the NYPD, why the hell would I talk to you?”

I shrugged and drained my cup and pushed off the railing. Took three steps and tossed the cup into a trash basket. I said, “Call your principal and tell him he was right and you were wrong. Tell him the woman’s information was all on a memory stick, which is right now in my pocket. Then resign by phone and go home and stay the hell out of my way.”

I crossed the street between two moving cars and headed for Eighth. The leader called after me, loud. He said my name. I turned and saw him holding his cell phone at arm’s length. It was pointing at me and he was staring at its screen. Then he lowered it and all three guys moved away and a white truck passed between us and they were out of sight before I realized I had been photographed.

Chapter 16

Radio Shacks are about a tenth as common as Starbucks, but they're never more than a few blocks away. And they open early. I stopped in at the next one I saw and a guy from the Indian subcontinent stepped forward to help me. He seemed keen. Maybe I was the first customer of the day. I asked him about cell phones with cameras. He said practically all of them had cameras. Some of them even had video. I told him I wanted to see how good the still pictures came out. He picked up a random phone and I stood in the back of the store and he snapped me from the register. The resulting image was small and lacked definition. My features were indistinct. But my overall size and shape and posture were captured fairly well. Well enough to be a problem, anyway. Truth is, my face is plain and ordinary. Very forgettable. My guess is most people recognize me by my silhouette, which is not ordinary.

I told the guy I didn't want the phone. He tried to sell me a digital camera instead. It was full of megapixels. It would take a better picture. I said I didn't want a camera, either. But I bought a memory stick from him. A USB device, for computer data. Smallest capacity he had, lowest price. It was for window dressing only, and I didn't want to spend a fortune. It was a tiny thing, in a big package made of tough plastic. I had the guy open it up with scissors. You can ruin your teeth on stuff like that. The stick came with a choice of two soft neoprene sleeves, blue or pink. I used the pink. Susan Mark hadn't looked particularly like a pink type of woman, but people see what they want to see. A pink sleeve equals a woman's property. I put the stick in my pocket next to my toothbrush and thanked the guy for his help and left him to ditch the trash.

I walked two and a half blocks east on 28th Street. Plenty of people were behind me all the way, but I didn't know any of them, and none of them seemed to know me. I went down into the subway at Broadway and swiped my card. Then I missed the next nine downtown trains. I just sat in the heat on a wooden bench and let them all go. Partly to take a break, partly to kill time until the rest of the city's businesses opened up, and partly to check I hadn't been followed. Nine sets of passengers came and went, and nine times I was all alone on the platform

for a second or two. No one showed the slightest interest in me. When I was done with watching for people I started watching for rats instead. I like rats. There are a lot of myths about them. Sightings are rarer than people think. Rats are shy. Visible rats are usually young or sick or starving. They don't bite sleeping babies' faces for the fun of it. They're tempted by traces of food, that's all. Wash your kid's mouth before you put it to bed and it'll be OK. And there are no giant rats as big as cats. All rats are the same size.

I saw no rats at all, and eventually I got restless. I stood up and turned my back on the track and looked at the posters on the wall. One of them was a map of the whole subway system. Two were advertisements for Broadway musicals. One was an official notice prohibiting something called subway surfing. There was a black-and-white illustration of a guy clamped like a starfish on the outside of a subway car's door. Apparently the older stock on the New York system had toe boards under the doors, designed to bridge part of the gap between the car and the platform, and small rain gutters above the doors, designed to stop dripping water getting in. I knew the new R142As had neither feature. My crazy co-rider had told me so. But with the older cars it was possible to wait on the platform until the doors closed, and then jam your toes on the toe board, and hook your fingertips in the rain gutter, and hug the car, and get carried through the tunnels on the outside. Subway surfing. A lot of fun for some, maybe, but now illegal.

I turned back to the track and got on the tenth train to pull in. It was an R train. It had toe boards and rain gutters. But I rode inside, two stops to the big station at Union Square.

I came up in the northwest corner of Union Square and headed for a huge bookstore I remembered on 17th Street. Campaigning politicians usually publish biographies ahead of election season, and news magazines are always full of coverage. I could have looked for an internet café instead, but I'm not proficient with the technology and anyway internet cafés are much rarer than they were. Now everyone carries small electronic devices named after fruits or trees. Internet cafés are going the same way as phone booths, killed by new wireless inventions.

The bookstore had tables at the front of the ground floor. They were piled high with new titles. I found the nonfiction releases and came up empty. History, biography, economics, but no politics. I moved on and found what I wanted on the back side of the second table. Commentary and opinion from the left and the

right, plus ghosted candidate autobiographies with shiny jackets and glossy air brushed photographs. John Sansom's book was about a half-inch thick and was called *Always on a Mission*. I took it with me and rode up on the escalator to the third floor, where the store directory told me the magazines were. I picked out all the news weeklies and carried them with the book to the military history shelves. I spent a moment there with some nonfiction publications and confirmed what I had suspected, which was that the army's Human Resources Command didn't do anything that the Personnel Command hadn't done before it. It was a change of name only. A rebranding. No new functions. Paperwork and records, like always.

Then I sat on a window sill and settled in to read the stuff I had picked up. My back was hot from the sun coming in through the glass, and my front was cold from an air conditioning vent directly above me. I used to feel bad about reading stuff in stores, with no intention to buy. But the stores themselves seem happy enough about it. They even encourage it. Some of them provide armchairs for the purpose. A new business model, apparently. And everyone does it. The store was only just open, but already the whole place looked like a refugee center. There were people everywhere, sitting or sprawled on the floor, surrounded by piles of merchandise much bigger than mine.

The news weeklies all had campaign reports, squeezed in between advertisements and stories about medical breakthroughs and technology updates. Most of the coverage was top-ticket stuff, but the House and Senate contests got a few lines each. We were four months ahead of the first primaries and fourteen months ahead of the elections themselves, and some candidates were already lame ducks, but Sansom was still solidly in his race. He was polling well throughout his state, he was raising lots of money, his blunt manner was seen as refreshing, and his military background was held to qualify him for just about everything. Although in my opinion that's like saying a sanitation worker could be mayor. Maybe so, maybe not. There's no logic in the assumption. But clearly most journalists liked the guy. And clearly they had him earmarked for bigger things. He was seen as a potential presidential candidate either four or eight years down the line. One writer even hinted he could be airlifted out of his Senate race to become his party's vice-presidential nominee this time around. He was already some kind of a celebrity.

His book cover was stylish. It was made up of his name and the title and two photographs. The larger was a blurred and grainy action picture blown up big enough to form a background to the whole thing. It showed a young man in worn

enough to form a background to the whole thing. It showed a young man in worn and unbuttoned battledress and full camouflage face paint under a beanie hat. Laid over it was a newer studio portrait of the same guy, many years farther down the road, in a business suit. Sansom, obviously, then and now. His whole pitch, in a single visual.

The recent picture was well lit and perfectly focused and artfully posed and showed him to be a small lean guy, maybe five-nine and a hundred and fifty pounds. A whippet or a terrier rather than a pit bull, full of endurance and wiry stamina, like the best Special Forces soldiers always are. Although the older picture was probably from an earlier time in a regular unit. The Rangers, maybe. In my experience Delta guys of his vintage favored beards and sunglasses and kaffiyeh scarves pulled down to their throats. Partly because of where they were likely to serve, and partly because they liked to appear disguised and anonymous, which in itself was part necessity and part dramatic fantasy. But probably his campaign manager had selected the photograph himself, accepting the junior unit in exchange for a picture that was recognizable, and recognizably American. Maybe people who looked like weird Palestinian hippies wouldn't go down well in North Carolina.

The stuff inside the cover flap featured his full name and military rank, written out with a degree of formality: Major John T. Sansom, U.S. Army, Retired. Then it said he was the winner of the Distinguished Service Cross, the Distinguished Service Medal, and two Silver Stars. Then it said he had been a successful CEO, of something called Sansom Consulting. Again, his whole pitch, right there. I wondered what the rest of the book was for.

I skimmed it and found it fell into five main sections: his early life, his time in the service, his subsequent marriage and family, his time in business, and his political vision for the future. The early stuff was conventional for the genre. Hardscrabble local youth, no money, no frills, his mom a pillar of strength, his dad working two jobs to make ends meet. Almost certainly exaggerated. If you take political candidates as a population sample, then the United States is a Third World country. Everyone grows up poor, running water is a luxury, shoes are rare, a square meal is cause for jubilant celebration.

I skipped ahead to where he met his wife and found more of the same platitudes. She was wonderful, their kids were great. End of story. I didn't understand much of the business part. Sansom Consulting had been a bunch of consultants, which made sense, but I couldn't work out exactly what they had done. They had made

suggestions, basically, and then bought into the corporations they were advising, and then sold their stakes and gotten rich. Sansom himself had made what he described as a fortune. I wasn't sure how much he meant. I feel pretty good with a couple hundred bucks in my pocket. I suspected Sansom came out with more than that, but he didn't specify how much more. Another four zeroes? Five? Six?

I looked at the part about his political vision for the future and didn't find much I hadn't already gleaned from the news magazines. It boiled down to giving the voters everything they wanted. Low taxes, you got it. Public services, have at it. It made no sense to me. But all in all Sansom came across as a decent guy. I felt he would try to do the right thing, as much as any of them can. I felt he was in it for all the right reasons.

There were photographs in the middle of the book. All except one were bland snapshots tracing Sansom's life from the age of three months to the present day. They were the kind of things that I imagine most guys could dig out of a shoebox in the back of a closet. Parents, childhood, schooldays, his service years, his bride-to-be, their kids, business portraits. Normal stuff, probably interchangeable with the pictures in all the other candidate biographies.

But the photograph that was different was bizarre.

Chapter 17

The photograph that was different was a news picture I had seen before. It was of an American politician called Donald Rumsfeld, in Baghdad, shaking hands with Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi dictator, back in 1983. Donald Rumsfeld had twice been Secretary of Defense, but at the time of the picture had been a special Presidential envoy for Ronald Reagan. He had gone to Baghdad to kiss Saddam's ass and pat him on the back and give him a pair of solid gold spurs as a gift and a symbol of America's everlasting gratitude. Eight years later we had been kicking Saddam's ass, not kissing it. Sixteen years after that, we killed him. Sansom had captioned the picture *Sometimes our friends become our enemies, and sometimes our enemies become our friends*. Political commentary, I supposed. Or a business homily, although I could find no mention of the actual episode in the text itself.

I turned back to his service career, and prepared to read about it carefully. That was my area of expertise, after all. Sansom joined the army in 1975 and left in 1992. A seventeen-year window, four years longer than mine, by virtue of starting nine years earlier and quitting five years earlier. A good era, basically, compared to most. The Vietnam paroxysm was over, and the new professional all-volunteer army was well established and still well funded. It looked like Sansom had enjoyed it. His narrative was coherent. He described basic training accurately, described Officer Candidate School well, was entertaining about his early infantry service. He was open about being ambitious. He picked up every qualification available to him and moved to the Rangers and then the nascent Delta Force. As usual he dramatized Delta's induction process, the hell weeks, the attrition, the endurance, the exhaustion. As usual he didn't criticize its incompleteness. Delta is full of guys who can stay awake for a week and walk a hundred miles and shoot the balls off a tsetse fly, but it's relatively empty of guys who can do all that and then tell you the difference between a Shiite and a trip to the latrine.

But overall I felt Sansom was pretty honest. Truth is, most Delta missions are aborted before they even start, and most that do start fail. Some guys never see

action. Sansom didn't dress it up. He was straightforward about the patchy excitement, and frank about the failures. Above all he didn't mention goatherds, not even once. Most Special Forces after-action reports blame mission failures on itinerant goat tenders. Guys are infiltrated into what they claim are inhospitable and virtually uninhabited regions, and are immediately discovered by local peasants with large herds of goats. Statistically unlikely. Nutritionally unlikely, given the barren terrain. Goats have to eat something. Maybe it was true one time, but since then it has become a code. Much more palliative to say, *We were hunkered down and a goatherd stumbled over us* than to say, *We screwed up*. But Sansom never mentioned either the ruminant animals or their attendant agricultural personnel, which was a big point in his favor.

In fact, he didn't mention much of anything. Certainly not a whole lot in the success column. There was what must have been fairly routine stuff in West Africa, plus Panama, plus some SCUD hunting in Iraq during the first Gulf War in 1991. Apart from that, nothing. Just a lot of training and standing by, which was always followed by standing down and then more training. His was maybe the first unexaggerated Special Forces memoir that I had ever seen. More than that, even. Not just unexaggerated. It was downplayed. Minimized, and de-emphasized. Dressed down, not up.

Which was interesting.

Chapter 18

I took a lot of care getting back to the coffee shop on Eighth. *Our principal brought a whole crew*. And by now they all knew roughly what I looked like. The Radio Shack guy had told me how pictures and video could be phoned through from one person to another. For my part I had no idea what the opposition looked like, but if their principal had been forced to hire guys in nice suits as local camouflage, then his own crew probably looked somewhat different themselves. Otherwise, no point. I saw lots of different-looking people. Maybe a couple hundred thousand. You always do, in New York City. But none of them showed any interest in me. None of them stayed with me. Not that I made it easy. I took the 4 train to Grand Central, walked two circuits through the crowds, took the shuttle to Times Square, walked a long and illogical loop from there to Ninth Avenue, and came on the diner from the west, straight past the 14th Precinct.

Jacob Mark was already inside.

He was in a back booth, cleaned up, hair brushed, wearing dark pants and a white shirt and a navy windbreaker. He could have had *off-duty cop* tattooed across his forehead. He looked unhappy but not frightened. I slid in opposite him and sat sideways, so I could watch the street through the windows.

“Did you talk to Peter?” I asked him.

He shook his head.

“But?”

“I think he’s OK.”

“You think or you know?”

He didn’t answer, because the waitress came by. The same woman from the morning. I was too hungry to be sensitive about whether or not Jake was going to eat. I ordered a big platter, tuna salad with eggs and a bunch of other stuff

to eat. I ordered a big platter, tuna salad with eggs and a bunch of other stuff. Plus coffee to drink. Jake followed my lead and got a grilled cheese sandwich and water.

I said, “Tell me what happened.”

He said, “The campus cops helped me out. They were happy to. Peter’s a football star. He wasn’t home. So they rousted his buddies and got the story. Turns out Peter is away somewhere with a woman.”

“Where?”

“We don’t know.”

“What woman?”

“A girl from a bar. Peter and the guys were out four nights ago. The girl was in the place. Peter left with her.”

I said nothing.

Jake said, “What?”

I asked, “Who picked up who?”

He nodded. “This is what makes me feel OK. He did all the work. His buddies said it was a four-hour project. He had to put everything into it. Like a championship game, the guys said. So it wasn’t Mata Hari or anything.”

“Description?”

“A total babe. And these are jocks talking, so they mean it. A little older, but not much. Maybe twenty-five or -six. You’re a college senior, that’s an irresistible challenge, right there.”

“Name?”

Jake shook his head. “The others kept their distance. It’s an etiquette thing.”

“Their regular place?”

“On their circuit.”

On their circuit.

“Hooker? Decoy?”

“No way. These guys get around. They ain’t dumb. They can tell. And Peter did all the work, anyway. Four hours, everything he had ever learned.”

“It would have been over in four minutes if she had wanted it to be.”

Jake nodded again. “Believe me, I’ve been through it a hundred times. Any funny business, an hour would have been enough to make it look kosher. Two, tops. Nobody would stretch it to four. So it’s OK. More than OK, from Peter’s point of view. Four days with a total babe? What were you doing when you were twenty-two?”

“I hear you,” I said. When I was twenty-two I had the same kind of priorities. Although a four-day relationship would have seemed long to me. Practically like engagement, or marriage.

Jake said, “But?”

“Susan was delayed four hours on the Turnpike. I’m wondering what kind of a deadline could have passed, to make a mother feel like killing herself.”

“Peter’s OK. Don’t worry about it. He’ll be home soon, weak at the knees but happy.”

I said nothing more. The waitress came by with the food. It looked pretty good, and there was a lot of it. Jake asked, “Did the private guys find you?”

I nodded and told him the story between forkfuls of tuna.

He said, “They knew your name? That’s not good.”

“Not ideal, no. And they knew I talked to Susan on the train.”

“How?”

“They’re ex–cops. They’ve still got friends on the job. No other explanation.”

“Lee and Docherty?”

“Maybe. Or maybe some day guy who came in and read the file.”

“And they took your picture? That’s not good, either.”

“Not ideal,” I said again.

“Any sign of this other crew they were talking about?” he asked.

I checked the window and said, “So far, nothing.”

“What else?”

“John Sansom isn’t exaggerating about his career. He seems to have done nothing very special. And that kind of a claim isn’t really worth refuting.”

“Dead end, then.”

“Maybe not,” I said. “He was a major. That’s one automatic promotion plus two on merit. He must have done something they liked. I was a major too. I know how it works.”

“What did you do that they liked?”

“Something they regretted later, probably.”

“Length of service,” Jake said. “You stick around, you get promoted.”

I shook my head. “That’s not how it works. Plus this guy won three of the top four medals available to him, one of them twice. So he must have done something special. Four somethings, in fact.”

“Everybody gets medals.”

“Not those medals. I got a Silver Star myself, which is pocket change to this guy, and I know for a fact they don’t fall out of the box with the breakfast cereal. And I got a Purple Heart too, which Sansom apparently didn’t. He doesn’t mention one in his book. And no politician would forget about a wound in action. Not in a million years. But it’s relatively unusual to win a gallantry medal without a wound. Normally the two things go hand in hand.”

“So maybe he’s bullshitting about the medals.”

I shook my head again. “Can’t be done. Maybe with a combat pip on a Vietnam ribbon, something like that, but these are heavy-duty awards. This guy’s got everything except the Medal of Honor.”

“So?”

“So I think he is bullshitting about his career, but in reverse. He’s leaving stuff out, not putting stuff in.”

“Why would he?”

“Because he was on at least four secret missions, and he still can’t talk about them. Which makes them very secret indeed, because the guy is in the middle of an election campaign, and the urge to talk must be huge.”

“What kind of secret missions?”

“Could be anything. Black ops, covert actions, against anybody.”

“So maybe Susan was asked for details.”

“Impossible,” I said. “Delta’s orders and operational logs and after-action reports aren’t anywhere near HRC. They’re either destroyed or locked up for sixty years at Fort Bragg. No disrespect, but your sister couldn’t have gotten within a million miles of them.”

“So how does this help us?”

“It eliminates Sansom’s combat career, that’s how. If Sansom is involved at all, it’s in some other capacity.”

“Is he involved?”

“Why else would his name have been mentioned?”

“What capacity?”

I put my fork down and drained my cup and said, “I don’t want to stay in here. It’s ground zero for this other crew. It’s the first place they’ll check.”

I left a tip on the table and headed for the register. This time the waitress was

pleased. We were in and out in record time.

Manhattan is both the best and the worst place in the world to be hunted. The best, because it is teeming with people, and every square yard of it has literally hundreds of witnesses all around. The worst, because it is teeming with people, and you have to check each and every one of them, just in case, which is tiring, and frustrating, and fatiguing, and which eventually drives you crazy, or makes you lazy. So for the sake of convenience we went back to West 35th and walked the shady side of the street, up and down opposite the row of parked cop cars, which seemed like the safest stretch of sidewalk in the city.

“What capacity?” Jake asked again.

“What did you tell me were the reasons behind the suicides you saw in Jersey?”

“Financial or sexual.”

“And Sansom didn’t make his money in the army.” “You think he was having an affair with Susan?” “Possible,” I said. “He could have met her at work. He’s the kind of guy who is always in and out of the place. Photo opportunities, stuff like that.”

“He’s married.”

“Exactly. And it’s election season.”

“I don’t see it. Susan wasn’t like that. So suppose he wasn’t having an affair with her.”

“Then maybe he was having one with another HRC staffer, and Susan was a witness.”

“I still don’t see it.”

“Me either,” I said. “Because I don’t see how information would be involved. *Information* is a big word. An affair is a yes-no answer.”

“Maybe Susan was working with Sansom. Not against him. Maybe Sansom wanted dirt on someone else.”

“Then why would Susan come to New York, instead of D.C. or North

Carolina?”

Jake said, “I don’t know.”

“And why would Sansom ask Susan for anything, anyway? He’s got a hundred better sources than an HRC clerk he didn’t know.”

“So where’s the connection?”

“Maybe Sansom had an affair long ago, with someone else, when he was still in the army.”

“He wasn’t married then.”

“But there were rules. Maybe he was banging a subordinate. That resonates now, in politics.”

“Did that happen?”

“All the time,” I said.

“To you?”

“As often as possible. Both ways around. Sometimes I was the subordinate.”

“Did you get in trouble?”

“Not then. But there would be questions now, if I was running for office.”

“So you think there are rumors about Sansom, and Susan was asked to confirm them?”

“She couldn’t confirm the behavior. That kind of stuff is in a different set of files. But maybe she could confirm that person A and person B served in the same place at the same time. That’s exactly what HRC is good for.”

“So maybe Lila Hoth was in the army with him. Maybe someone is trying to link the two names, for a big scandal.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “It all sounds pretty good. But I’ve got a local tough guy too scared to talk to the NYPD, and I’ve got all kinds of dire threats, and I’ve got

a story about some barbarian crew ready to slip the leash. Politics is a dirty business, but is it that bad?”

Jake didn’t answer.

I said, “And we don’t know where Peter is.”

“Don’t worry about Peter. He’s a grown-up. He’s a defensive tackle. He’s going to the NFL. He’s three hundred pounds of muscle. He can take care of himself. Remember the name. Peter Molina. One day you’re going to read about him in the paper.”

“But not soon, I hope.”

“Relax.”

I said, “So what do you want to do now?”

Jake shrugged and stumped around, up and down on the sidewalk, an inarticulate man further stymied by the complexity of his emotions. He stopped, and leaned on a wall, directly across the street from the 14th Precinct’s door. He looked at all the parked vehicles, left to right, the Impalas and the Crown Vics, marked and unmarked, and the strange little traffic carts.

“She’s dead,” he said. “Nothing is going to bring her back.”

I didn’t speak.

“So I’m going to call the funeral director,” he said.

“And then?”

“Nothing. She shot herself. Knowing the reason won’t help. Most of the time you never really know the reason, anyway. Even when you think you do.”

I said, “I want to know the reason.”

“Why? She was my sister, not yours.”

“You didn’t see it happen.”

He said nothing. Just gazed at the parked cars opposite. I saw the vehicle that Theresa Lee had used. It was fourth from the left. One of the unmarked Crown Vics farther along the row was newer than the others. Shinier. It winked in the sun. It was black, with two short thin antennas on the trunk lid, like needles. Federal, I thought. Some big-budget agency with the pick of the litter when it came to transportation choices. And communications devices.

Jake said, “I’m going to tell her family, and we’re going to bury her, and we’re going to move on. Life’s a bitch and then you die. Maybe there’s a reason we don’t care how or where or why. Better not to know. No good can come of it. Just more pain. Just something bad about to hit the fan.”

“Your choice,” I said.

He nodded and said nothing more. Just shook my hand and moved away. I saw him walk into a garage on the block west of Ninth, and four minutes later I saw a small green Toyota SUV drive out. It went west with the traffic. I guessed he was heading for the Lincoln Tunnel, and home. I wondered when I would see him again. Between three days and a week, I thought.

I was wrong.

Chapter 19

I was still directly across the street from the 14th Precinct's door when Theresa Lee came out with two guys in blue suits and white button-down shirts. She looked tired. She had caught the call at two in the morning, which put her on the night watch, so she should have quit around seven and been home in bed by eight. She was way into overtime. Good for her bank balance, not so good for anything else. She stood in the sunlight and blinked and stretched and then she saw me on the far sidewalk and did a classic double take. She smacked the guy next to her on the elbow and said something and pointed straight at me. I was too far away to hear her words, but her body language screamed, *Hey, that's him right there,* with a big exclamation point in the vehemence of her physical gesture.

The guys in the suits automatically checked left for traffic, which told me they were based in town. Odd-numbered streets run east to west, even numbers run west to east. They knew that, in their bones. Therefore they were local. But they were more used to driving than walking, because they didn't check for bicycle messengers coming the wrong way. They just hustled across the street, dodging cars, scrambling, splitting up and coming at me from the left and the right simultaneously, which told me they were field-trained to some degree, and in a hurry. I guessed the Crown Vic with the needle antennas was theirs. I stood in the shade and waited for them. They had black shoes and blue ties and their undershirts showed through at the neck, white under white. The left sides of their suit coats bulged more than the right. Right-handed agents with shoulder holsters. They were late thirties, early forties. In their prime. Not rookies, not out to pasture.

They saw that I wasn't going anywhere, so they slowed up a little and approached me at a fast walk. FBI, I thought, closer to cops than paramilitaries. They didn't show me ID. They just assumed I knew what they were.

"We need to talk to you," the left-hand guy said.

"I know," I said.

“How?”

“Because you just ran through traffic to get here.”

“Do you know why?”

“No idea. Unless it’s to offer me counseling because of my traumatic experience.”

The guy’s mouth set in an impatient scowl, like he was ready to bawl me out for my sarcasm. Then his expression changed a little to a wry smile, and he said, “OK, here’s my counsel. Answer some questions and then forget you were ever on that train.”

“What train?”

The guy started to reply, and then stopped, late to catch on that I was yanking his chain, and embarrassed about looking slow.

I said, “What questions?”

He asked, “What’s your phone number?”

I said, “I don’t have a phone number.”

“Not even a cell?”

“Especially not even,” I said.

“Really?”

“I’m that guy,” I said. “Congratulations. You found me.”

“What guy?”

“The only guy in the world who doesn’t have a cell phone.”

“Are you Canadian?”

“Why would I be Canadian?”

“The detective told us you speak French.”

“Lots of people speak French. There’s a whole country in Europe.”

“Are you French?”

“My mother was.”

“When were you last in Canada?”

“I don’t recall. Years ago, probably.”

“You sure?”

“Pretty much.”

“You got any Canadian friends or associates?”

“No.”

The guy went quiet. Theresa Lee was still on the sidewalk outside the 14th Precinct’s door. She was standing in the sun and watching us from across the street. The other guy said, “It was just a suicide on a train. Upsetting, but no big deal. Shit happens. Are we clear?”

I said, “Are we done?”

“Did she give you anything?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Completely. Are we done?”

The guy asked, “You got plans?”

“I’m leaving town.”

“Heading where?”

“Someplace else.”

Someplace else."

The guy nodded. "OK, we're done. Now beat it."

I stayed where I was. I let them walk away, back to their car. They got in and waited for a gap in the traffic and eased out and drove away. I guessed they would take the West Side Highway all the way downtown, back to their desks.

Theresa Lee was still on the sidewalk.

I crossed the street and threaded between two parked blue-and-white prowl cars and stepped up on the curb and stood near her, far enough away to be respectful, close enough to be heard, facing the building so I wouldn't have the sun in my eyes. I asked, "What was that all about?"

She said, "They found Susan Mark's car. It was parked way down in SoHo. It was towed this morning."

"And?"

"They searched it, obviously."

"Why obviously? They're making a lot of fuss about something they claim is no big deal."

"They don't explain their thinking. Not to us, anyway."

"What did they find?"

"A piece of paper, with what they think is a phone number on it. Like a scribbled note. Screwed up, like trash."

"What was the number?"

"It had a 600 area code, which they say is a Canadian cellular service. Some special network. Then a number, then the letter *D*, like an initial."

"Means nothing to me," I said.

"Me either. Except I don't think it's a phone number at all. There's no exchange number and then it has one too many digits."

“If it’s a special network maybe it doesn’t need an exchange number.”

“It doesn’t look right.”

“So what was it?”

She answered me by reaching behind her and pulling a small notebook out of her back pocket. Not official police issue. It had a stiff black board cover and an elastic strap that held it closed. The whole book was slightly curled, like it spent a lot of time in her pocket. She slipped the strap and opened it up and showed me a fawn-colored page with *600-82219-D* written on it in neat handwriting. Her handwriting, I guessed. Information only, not a facsimile. Not an exact reproduction of a scribbled note.

600-82219-D.

“See anything?” she asked.

I said, “Maybe Canadian cell phones have more numbers.” I knew that phone companies the world over were worried about running out. Adding an extra digit would increase an area code’s capacity by a factor of ten. Thirty million, not three. Although Canada had a small population. A big land mass, but most of it was empty. About thirty-three million people, I thought. Smaller than California. And California got by with regular phone numbers.

Lee said, “It’s not a phone number. It’s something else. Like a code or a serial number. Or a file number. Those guys are wasting their time.”

“Maybe it’s not connected. Trash in a car, it could be anything.”

“Not my problem.”

I asked, “Was there luggage in the car?”

“No. Nothing except the usual kind of crap that piles up in a car.”

“So it was supposed to be a quick trip. In and out.”

Lee didn’t answer. She yawned and said nothing. She was tired.

I asked, “Did those guys talk to Susan’s brother?”

“I don’t know.”

“He seems to want to sweep it all under the rug.”

“Understandable,” Lee said. “There’s always a reason, and it’s never very attractive. That’s been my experience, anyway.”

“Are you closing the file?”

“It’s already closed.”

“You happy with that?”

“Why shouldn’t I be?”

“Statistics,” I said. “Eighty percent of suicides are men. Suicide is much rarer in the East than the West. And where she did it was weird.”

“But she did it. You saw her. There’s no doubt about it. There’s no dispute. It wasn’t a homicide, cleverly disguised.”

“Maybe she was driven to it. Maybe it was a homicide by proxy.”

“Then all suicides are.”

She glanced up and down the street, wanting to go, too polite to say so. I said, “Well, it was a pleasure meeting you.”

“You leaving town?”

I nodded. “I’m going to Washington, D.C.”

Chapter 20

I took the train from Penn Station. More public transportation. Getting there was tense. Just a three-block walk through the crowds, but I was watching for people checking faces against their cell phone screens, and it seemed like the entire world had some kind of an electronic device out and open. But I arrived intact and bought a ticket with cash.

The train itself was full and very different from the subway. All the passengers faced forward, and they were all hidden behind high-backed chairs. The only people I could see were alongside me. A woman in the seat next to me, and two guys across the aisle. I figured all three of them for lawyers. Not major leaguers. Double-or Triple-A players, probably, senior associates with busy lives. Not suicide bombers, anyway. The two men had fresh shaves and all three of them were irritable, but apart from that nothing rang a bell. Not that the D.C. Amtrak would attract suicide bombers anyway. It was tailor-made for a suitcase bomb instead. At Penn the track is announced at the last minute. The crowd mills around on the concourse and then rushes down and piles on. No security. Identical black roll-ons are stacked on the luggage racks. Easy enough for a guy to get off in Philadelphia and leave his bag behind, and then explode it a little later, by cell phone, as the train pulls into Union Station without him, right in the heart of the capital.

But we got there OK and I made it out to Delaware Avenue unharmed. D.C. was as hot as New York had been, and damper. The sidewalks ahead of me were dotted with knots of tourists. Family groups, mostly, from far and wide. Dutiful parents, sullen children, all dressed in gaudy shorts and T-shirts, maps in their hands, cameras at the ready. Not that I was either well dressed or a frequent visitor. I had worked in the area from time to time, but always on the left of the river. But I knew where I was going. My destination was unmistakable and right there in front of me. The U.S. Capitol. It had been built to impress. Foreign diplomats were supposed to visit during the fledgling days of the Republic and come away convinced that the new nation was a player. The design had succeeded. Beyond it across Independence Avenue were the House offices. At one time I had a rudimentary grasp of Congressional politics. Investigations had

sometimes led all the way to committees. I knew that the Rayburn Building was full of bloated old hacks who had been in Washington forever. I figured a relatively new guy like Sansom would have been given space in the Cannon Building instead. Prestigious, but not top drawer.

The Cannon Building was on Independence and First, crouching opposite the far corner of the Capitol like it was paying homage or mounting a threat. It had all kinds of security at the door. I asked a guy in a uniform if Mr. Sansom of North Carolina was inside. The guy checked a list and said yes, he was. I asked if I could messenger a note to his office. The guy said yes, I could. He supplied a pencil and special House notepaper and an envelope. I addressed the envelope to: *Major John T. Sansom, U.S. Army, Retired*, and added the date and the time. On the paper I wrote: *Early this morning I saw a woman die with your name on her lips*. Not true, but close enough. I added: *Library of Congress steps in one hour*. I signed it: *Major Jack-none-Reacher, U.S. Army, Retired*. There was a box to check at the bottom. It asked: *Are you my constituent?* I checked the box. Not strictly true. I didn't live in Sansom's district, but no more so than I didn't live in any of the other 434 districts. And I had served in North Carolina, three separate times. So I felt I was entitled. I sealed the envelope and handed it in and went back outside to wait.

Chapter 21

I walked in the heat on Independence as far as the Air and Space Museum and then about-turned and headed for the library. I sat down on the steps fifty minutes into the hour. The stone was warm. There were men in uniform behind the doors above me, but none of them came out. Threat assessment exercises must have placed the library low on the list.

I waited.

I didn't expect Sansom himself to show. I figured I would get staffers instead. Maybe campaign workers. How old and how many, I couldn't guess. Between one and four, maybe, between postgrad and professional. I was interested to find out. One youngster would show that Sansom wasn't taking my note very seriously. Four senior people would suggest he had sensitivity on the issue. And maybe something to hide.

The sixty-minute deadline came and went and I got no staffers and no campaign workers, neither young nor old. Instead I got Sansom's wife, and his head of security. Ten minutes after the hour was up I saw a mismatched couple climb out of a Town Car and pause at the foot of the steps and look around. I recognized the woman from the pictures in Sansom's book. In person she looked exactly like a millionaire's wife should. She had expensive salon hair and good bones and a lot of tone and was probably two inches taller than her husband. Four, in heels. The guy with her looked like a Delta veteran in a suit. He was small, but hard and wiry and tough. The same physical type as Sansom himself, but rougher than Sansom had looked in his photographs. His suit was conservatively tailored out of good material, but he had it all bunched and creased like well-worn battledress.

The two of them stood together and glanced around at the people in the vicinity and eliminated one possibility after another. When I was all that was left I raised a hand in greeting. I didn't stand. I figured they would walk up and stop below me, so if I stood I would be looking about three feet over their heads. Less threatening to stay seated. More conducive to conversation. And more practical,

in terms of energy expenditure. I was tired.

They came up toward me, Mrs. Sansom in good shoes, taking precise delicate steps, and the Delta guy pacing himself alongside her. They stopped two levels below me and introduced themselves. Mrs. Sansom called herself Elspeth, and the guy called himself Browning, and said it was spelled like the automatic rifle, which I guessed was supposed to put it in some kind of a menacing context. He was news to me. He wasn't in Sansom's book. He went on to list his whole pedigree, which started out with military service at Sansom's side, and which went on to include civilian service as head of security during Sansom's business years, and then head of security during Sansom's House terms, and which was projected to include the same kind of duty during Sansom's Senate terms and beyond. The whole presentation was about loyalty. The wife, and the faithful retainer. I guessed I was supposed to be in no doubt at all about where their interests lay. Overkill, possibly. Although I felt that sending the wife from the get-go was a smart move, politically. Most scandals go sour when a guy is dealing with something his wife doesn't know about. Putting her in the loop from the start was a statement.

She said, "We've won plenty of elections so far and we're going to win plenty more. People have tried what you're trying a dozen times. They didn't succeed and you won't, either."

I said, "I'm not trying anything. And I don't care about who wins elections. A woman died, that's all, and I want to know why."

"What woman?"

"A Pentagon clerk. She shot herself in the head, last night, on the New York subway."

Elspeth Sansom glanced at Browning and Browning nodded and said, "I saw it on-line. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. It happened too late for the printed papers."

"A little after two o'clock in the morning," I said.

Elspeth Sansom looked back at me and asked, "What was your involvement?"

"Witness," I said.

“And she mentioned my husband’s name?”

“That’s something I’ll need to discuss with him. Or with the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post.”*

“Is that a threat?” Browning asked.

“I guess it is,” I said. “What are you going to do about it?”

“Always remember,” he said. “You don’t do what John Sansom has done in his life if you’re soft. And I’m not soft, either. And neither is Mrs. Sansom.”

“Terrific,” I said. “We’ve established that none of us is soft. In fact we’re all as hard as rocks. Now let’s move on. When do I get to see your boss?”

“What were you in the service?”

“The kind of guy even you should have been scared of. Although you probably weren’t. Not that it matters. I’m not looking to hurt anyone. Unless someone needs to get hurt, that is.”

Elspeth Sansom said, “Seven o’clock, this evening.” She named what I guessed was a restaurant, on Dupont Circle. “My husband will give you five minutes.” Then she looked at me again and said, “Don’t come dressed like that, or you won’t get in.”

They got back in the Town Car and drove away. I had three hours to kill. I caught a cab to the corner of 18th Street and Mass Avenue and found a store and bought a pair of plain blue pants and a blue checked shirt with a collar. Then I walked on down to a hotel I saw two blocks south on 18th. It was a big place, and quite grand, but big grand places are usually the best for a little off-the-books convenience. I nodded my way past the lobby staff and took an elevator up to a random floor and walked the corridor until I found a maid servicing an empty room. It was past four o’clock in the afternoon. Check-in time was two. Therefore the room was going to stay empty that night. Maybe the next night, too. Big hotels are rarely a hundred percent full. And big hotels never treat their maids very well. Therefore the woman was happy to take thirty bucks in cash and a thirty-minute break. I guessed she would move on to the next room on her list and come back later.

She hadn’t gotten to the bathroom yet, but there were two sleep sets still on

She hadn't gotten to the bathroom yet, but there were two clean towels still on the rack. Nobody could possibly use all the towels that a big hotel provides. There was a cake of soap still wrapped next to the sink and half a bottle of shampoo in the stall. I brushed my teeth and took a long shower. I dried off and put on my new pants and shirt. I swapped my pocket contents over and left my old garments in the bathroom trash. Thirty bucks for the room. Cheaper than a spa. And faster. I was back on the street inside twenty-eight minutes.

I walked up to Dupont and spied out the restaurant. Afghan cuisine, outside tables in a front courtyard, inside tables behind a wooden door. It looked like the kind of place that would fill up with power players willing to drop twenty bucks for an appetizer worth twenty cents on the streets of Kabul. I was OK with the food but not with the prices. I figured I would talk to Sansom and then go eat somewhere else.

I walked on P Street west to Rock Creek Park, and clambered down close to the water. I sat on a broad flat stone and listened to the stream below me and the traffic above. Over time the traffic got louder and the water got quieter. When the clock in my head hit five to seven I scrambled back up and headed for the restaurant.

Chapter 22

At seven in the evening D.C. was going dark and all the Dupont establishments had their lights on. The Afghan place had paper lanterns strung out all over the courtyard. The curb was clogged with limousines. Most of the courtyard tables were already full. But not with Sansom and his party. All I saw were young men in suits and young women in skirts. They were gathered in pairs and trios and quartets, talking, making calls from their cells, reading e-mails on handheld devices, taking papers from briefcases and stuffing them back. I guessed Sansom was inside, behind the wooden door.

There was a hostess podium close to the sidewalk but before I got to it Browning pushed through a knot of people and stepped in front of me. He nodded toward a black Town Car twenty yards away and said, “Let’s go.”

I said, “Where? I thought Sansom was here.”

“Think again. He wouldn’t eat in a place like this. And we wouldn’t let him even if he wanted to. Wrong demographic, too insecure.”

“Then why bring me here?”

“We had to bring you somewhere.” He stood there like it meant absolutely nothing to him whether I went along or walked away. I said, “So where is he?”

“Close by. He’s got a meeting. He can give you five minutes before it starts.”

“OK,” I said. “Let’s go.”

There was a driver already in the Town Car. The engine was already running. Browning and I climbed in the back and the driver pulled out and drove most of the way around the circle and then peeled off south and west down New Hampshire Avenue. We passed the Historical Society. As I recalled New Hampshire Avenue there wasn’t much ahead of us except for a string of hotels and then George Washington University.

We didn’t stop at any of the hotels. We didn’t stop at George Washington University. Instead we swept a fast right onto Virginia Avenue and drove a couple hundred yards and pulled into the Watergate. The famous old complex. The scene of the crime. Hotel rooms, apartments, offices, the Potomac dark and slow beyond them. The driver stopped outside an office building. Browning stayed in his seat. He said, “These are the ground rules. I’ll take you up. You’ll go in alone. But I’ll be right outside the door. Are we clear?”

I nodded. We were clear. We got out. There was a security guy in a uniform at a desk inside the door, but he paid us no attention. We got in the elevator. Browning hit four. We rode up in silence. We got out of the elevator and walked twenty feet across gray carpet to a door marked *Universal Research*. A bland title and an unremarkable slab of wood. Browning opened it and ushered me inside. I saw a waiting room, medium budget. An unoccupied reception desk, four low leather chairs, inner offices to the left and the right. Browning pointed me left and said, “Knock and enter. I’ll wait for you here.”

I stepped over to the left-hand door and knocked and entered.

There were three men waiting for me in the inner office.

None of them was Sansom.

Chapter 23

The room was a plain spare space mostly empty of furniture. The three guys were the three federal agents who had made the trip up to the 14th Precinct in New York City. They didn't seem pleased to see me again. They didn't speak at first. Instead their leader took a small silver object out of his pocket. A voice recorder. Digital. Office equipment, made by Olympus. He pressed a button and there was a short pause and then I heard his voice ask, "Did she tell you anything?" The words were fuzzy with distortion and clouded by echo, but I recognized them. From the interview, at five o'clock that morning, me in the chair, sleepy, them alert and standing, the smell of sweat and anxiety and burnt coffee in the air.

I heard myself reply, "Nothing of substance."

The guy clicked another button and the recorded sound died away. He put the device back in his pocket and pulled a folded sheet of paper from another. I recognized it. It was the House notepaper the Capitol guard had given me at the door of the Cannon Office Building. The guy unfolded it and read out loud, "Early this morning I saw a woman die with your name on her lips." He held the paper out toward me so that I could see my own handwriting.

He said, "She told you something of substance. You lied to federal investigators. People go to prison for that."

"But not me," I said.

"You think? What makes you special?"

"Nothing makes me special. But what makes you federal investigators?"

The guy didn't answer.

I said, "You can't have it both ways around. You want to play all cloak and dagger and refuse to show ID, then how should I know who you are? Maybe you were NYPD file clerks, showing up early for work, looking to pass the time

were NYPD file clerks, showing up early for work, looking to pass the time. And there's no law about lying to civilians. Or your bosses would all be in jail."

"We told you who we were."

"People claim all kind of things."

"Do we look like file clerks?"

"Pretty much. And maybe I didn't lie to you, anyway. Maybe I lied to Sansom."

"So which was it?"

"That's my business. I still haven't seen ID."

"What exactly are you doing here in Washington? With Sansom?"

"That's my business too."

"You want to ask him questions?"

"You got a law against asking people questions?"

"You were a witness. Now you're investigating?"

"Free country," I said.

"Sansom can't afford to tell you anything."

"Maybe so," I said. "Maybe not."

The guy paused a beat and said, "You like tennis?"

I said, "No."

"You heard of Jimmy Connors? Bjorn Borg? John McEnroe?"

I said, "Tennis players, from way back."

"What would happen if they played the U.S. Open next year?"

"I have no idea."

“They would get their asses kicked all over the court. They would get their heads handed to them on a plate. Even the women would beat them. Great champions in their day, but they’re old men now and they come from a whole different era. Time moves on. The game changes. You understand what I’m telling you?”

I said, “No.”

“We’ve seen your record. You were hot shit back in prehistory. But this is a new world now. You’re out of your depth.”

I turned and glanced at the door. “Is Browning still out there? Or did he dump me?”

“Who is Browning?”

“The guy who delivered me here. Sansom’s guy.”

“He’s gone. And his name isn’t Browning. You’re a babe in the woods.”

I said nothing. Just heard the word *babe* and thought about Jacob Mark, and his nephew Peter. *A girl from a bar. A total babe. Peter left with her*.

One of the other two guys in the room said, “We need you to forget all about being an investigator, OK? We need you to stick to being a witness. We need to know how Sansom’s name is linked with the dead woman. You’re not going to leave this room until we find out.”

I said, “I’ll leave this room exactly when I decide to. It will take more than three file clerks to keep me somewhere I don’t want to be.”

“Big talk.”

I said, “Sansom’s name is already way out there, anyway. I heard it from four private investigators in New York City.”

“Who were they?”

“Four guys in suits with a phony business card.”

“Is that the best you can do? That’s a pretty thin story. I think you heard it from Susan Mark herself.”

“Why do you even care? What could an HRC clerk know that would hurt a guy like Sansom?”

Nobody spoke, but the silence was very strange. It seemed to carry in it an unstated answer that spiraled and ballooned crazily upward and outward, like: It’s not just Sansom we’re worried about, it’s the army, it’s the military, it’s the past, it’s the future, it’s the government, it’s the country, it’s the whole wide world, it’s the entire damn universe.

I asked, “Who are you guys?”

No answer.

I said, “What the hell did Sansom do back then?”

“Back when?”

“During his seventeen years.”

“What do you think he did?”

“Four secret missions.”

The room went quiet.

The lead agent asked, “How do you know about Sansom’s missions?”

I said, “I read his book.”

“They’re not in his book.”

“But his promotions and his medals are. With no clear explanation of where else they came from.”

Nobody spoke.

I said, “Susan Mark didn’t know anything. She can’t have. It’s just not possible. She could have turned HRC upside down for a year without finding the slightest mention.”

“But you guys should know.”

"But someone asked her."

"So what? No harm, no foul."

"We want to know who it was, that's all. We like to keep track of things like that."

"I don't know who it was."

"But clearly you want to know. Otherwise why would you be here?"

"I saw her shoot herself. It wasn't pretty."

"It never is. But that's no reason to get sentimental. Or in trouble."

"You worried about me?"

No one answered.

"Or are you worried I'll find out something?"

The third guy said, "What makes you think the two worries are different? Maybe they're the same thing. You find out something, you'll be locked up for life. Or caught in the crossfire."

I said nothing. The room went quiet again.

The lead agent said, "Last chance. Stick to being a witness. Did the woman mention Sansom's name or not?"

"No," I said. "She didn't."

"But his name is out there anyway."

"Yes," I said. "It is."

"And you don't know who's asking."

"No," I said. "I don't."

"OK," the guy said. "Now forget all about us and move on. We have no desire to complicate your life."

“But?”

“We will if we have to. Remember the trouble you could make for people, back in the 110th? It’s much worse now. A hundred times worse. So do the smart thing. If you want to play, stick to the senior circuit. Stay away from this. The game has changed.”

They let me go. I went down in the elevator and walked past the guy at the door and stood on a broad paved area and looked at the river flowing slowly by. Reflected lights moved with the current. I thought about Elspeth Sansom. She impressed me. *Don’t come dressed like that, or you won’t get in*. Perfect misdirection. She had suckered me completely. I had bought a shirt I didn’t need or want.

Not soft.

That was for damn sure.

The night was warm. The air was heavy and full of waterborne smells. I headed back toward Dupont Circle. A mile and a quarter, I figured. Twenty minutes on foot, maybe less.

Chapter 24

Restaurant meals in D.C. rarely run shorter than an hour or longer than two. That had been my experience. So I expected to find Sansom finishing up his entrée or ordering his dessert. Maybe already drinking coffee and thinking about a cigar.

Back at the restaurant about half the courtyard tables had turned over their clientele. There were new boys in suits, and new girls in skirts. More pairs now than threesomes or quartets, and more romance than work. More bright chatter designed to impress, and less scanning of electronic devices. I walked past the hostess station and the woman there called after me and I said, “I’m with the Congressman.” I pushed through the wooden door and scanned the inside room. It was a low rectangular space full of dim light and spicy smells and loud conversation and occasional laughter.

Sansom wasn’t in it.

No sign of him, no sign of his wife, no sign of the guy who had called himself Browning, no pack of eager staffers or campaign volunteers.

I backed out again and the woman at the hostess station looked at me quizzically and asked, “Who were you joining?”

I said, “John Sansom.”

“He isn’t here.”

“Evidently.”

A kid at a table next to my elbow said, “North Carolina Fourteenth? He left town. He’s got a fundraiser breakfast tomorrow in Greensboro. Banking and insurance, no tobacco. I heard him tell my guy all about it.” His last sentence was directed at the girl opposite him, not at me. Maybe the whole speech was. My guy. Clearly the kid was a hell of an important player, or wanted to be.

I stepped back to the sidewalk and stood still for a second and then set out for Greensboro, North Carolina.

I got there on a late bus that was scheduled to stop first in Richmond, Virginia, and then in Raleigh, and then in Durham, and then in Burlington. I didn't notice the itinerary. I slept all the way. We arrived in Greensboro close to four o'clock in the morning. I walked past bail bond offices and shuttered pawn shops and ignored a couple of greasy spoon eateries until I found the kind of diner I wanted. I wasn't choosing on the basis of food. All diner food tastes the same to me. I was looking for phone books and racks of free local newspapers and it took a long walk to find them. The place I picked was just opening for business. A guy in an undershirt was greasing a griddle. Coffee was dripping into a flask. I hauled the Yellow Pages to a booth and checked H for hotels. Greensboro had plenty. It was a decent-sized place. Maybe a quarter-million people.

I figured a fundraising breakfast would take place in a fairly upscale location. Donors are rich, and they don't go to the Red Roof Inn for five hundred dollars a plate. Not if they work in banking and insurance. I guessed the Hyatt or the Sheraton. Greensboro had both. Fifty-fifty. I closed the Yellow Pages and started leafing through the free papers, looking for confirmation. Free papers carry all kinds of local coverage.

I found a story about the breakfast in the second paper I opened. But I was wrong about the hotels. Not the Hyatt, not the Sheraton. Instead Sansom was fixed up at a place called the O. Henry Hotel, which I guessed was named for the famous North Carolina writer. There was an address given. The event was planned to start at seven in the morning. I tore out the story and folded it small and put it in my pocket. The guy behind the counter finished his preparations and brought me a mug of coffee without asking. I took a sip. Nothing better than a fresh brew in the first minute of its life. Then I ordered the biggest combo on the menu and sat back and watched the guy cook it.

I took a cab to the O. Henry Hotel. I could have walked, and it took longer to find the cab than to make the drive, but I wanted to arrive in style. I got there at a quarter after six. The hotel was a modern facsimile of a stylish old place. It looked like an independent establishment, but probably wasn't. Few hotels are. The lobby was rich and dim and full of clubby leather armchairs. I walked past them to the reception desk with as much panache and confidence as was possible for a guy in a creased nineteen-dollar shirt. There was a young woman on duty

behind the counter. She looked tentative, as if she had just come in and wasn't settled yet. She looked up at me and I said, "I'm here for the Sansom breakfast."

The young woman didn't reply. She struggled to find a reaction, like I was embarrassing her with too much information. I said, "They were supposed to leave my ticket here."

"Your ticket?"

"My invitation."

"Who was?"

"Elspeth," I said. "Mrs. Sansom, I mean. Or their guy."

"Which guy?"

"Their security person."

"Mr. Springfield?"

I smiled to myself. Springfield was a manufacturer of autoloader rifles, the same as Browning was. The guy liked word games, which was fun, but dumb. False names work better if they're completely unconnected with reality.

I asked, "Have you seen them yet this morning?" It was an attempt at finesse. I was guessing Greensboro wasn't in Sansom's own Congressional district. A Senate campaign needed statewide funding and exposure. I figured Sansom's own patch was already sewn up tight, and that by now he would be trawling farther afield. Therefore he had probably stayed in the hotel overnight, to be ready for the early start. But I couldn't be sure. To ask if he had come down from his room yet would make me look like an idiot if he lived five minutes away. To ask if he had arrived yet would make me look just as bad, if he lived two hundred miles away. So I aimed for neutrality.

The woman said, "They're still upstairs, as far as I know."

I said, "Thanks," and walked back into the lobby, away from the elevators, so she wouldn't have anything to worry about. I waited until her phone rang and she started tapping on her keyboard and concentrating on her computer screen, and then I drifted around the edge of the room and hit the up button.

and then I drifted around the edge of the room and hit the up button.

I figured that Sansom would be in a big suite, and that the big suites would all be on the top floor, so I hit the highest number the elevator had to offer. A long moment later I stepped out into a hushed carpeted corridor and saw a uniformed cop standing easy outside a double mahogany door. A patrolman, from the Greensboro PD. Not young. A veteran, with first dibs on some effortless overtime. A token presence. I walked toward him with a rueful smile on my face, like *Hey, you're working, I'm working, what's a guy to do*? I figured he must have processed a few visitors already. Room service coffee, staffers with legitimate reasons to be there, maybe journalists. I nodded to him and said, "Jack Reacher for Mr. Sansom," and leaned beyond him and knocked on the door. He didn't react. Didn't complain. Just stood there, like the window-dressing he was. Whatever Sansom was going to be next, right then he was still only a Congressman from the sticks, and he was a long way from getting serious protection.

There was a short delay, and then the suite door opened. Sansom's wife stood there with her hand on the inside handle. She was dressed, coiffed, made up, and ready for the day.

"Hello, Elspeth," I said. "Can I come in?"

Chapter 25

I saw a fast, expert, politician's-wife calculation run behind Elspeth Sansom's eyes. First instinct: Throw the bum out. But: There was a cop in the corridor, and probably media in the building, and almost certainly hotel staff within earshot. And local people talk. So she swallowed once and said, "Major Reacher, how nice to see you again," and stood back to give me room to pass.

The suite was large and dark because of draped windows and full of heavy furniture in rich and muted colors. There was a living room with a breakfast bar and an open door that must have led to a bedroom. Elspeth Sansom walked me to the middle of the space and stopped, like she didn't know what to do with me next. Then John Sansom stepped out of the bedroom to see what the fuss was all about.

He was in pants and a shirt and a tie and socks. No shoes. He looked small, like a miniature man. Wiry build, narrow through the shoulders. His head was a little large compared to the rest of his body. His hair was cut short and neatly brushed. His skin was tanned, but in a creased, active, outdoors kind of a way. Rugged. No sun lamps for this guy. He glowed with wealth, and power, and energy, and charisma. It was easy to see how he had won plenty of elections. Easy to see why the news weeklies were in love with him. He looked at me and then looked at his wife and asked, "Where's Springfield?"

Elspeth said, "He went downstairs to check on things. They must have passed in the elevators."

Sansom nodded, not much more than a fast up-and-down with his eyelids. A practiced decision maker, and a pragmatic man, not much given to crying over spilled milk. He glanced at me and said, "You don't give up."

I said, "I never have."

"Didn't you listen to those federal boys in Washington?"

"[illegible]?"

"Who were they, exactly?"

"Those guys? You know how it is. I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you. But whatever, they were supposed to warn you off."

"Didn't resonate."

"They copied me on your record. I told them they'd fail."

"They talked to me like I was a moron. And they called me too old. Which makes you way too old."

"I am way too old. For most of this shit, anyway."

"You got ten minutes?"

"I can give you five."

"You got coffee?"

"You're wasting time."

"We've got plenty of time. More than five minutes, anyway. More than ten, even. You need to lace your shoes and put a jacket on. How long can that take?"

Sansom shrugged and stepped over to the breakfast bar and poured me a cup of coffee. He carried it back and gave it to me and said, "Now cut to the chase. I know who you are and why you're here."

"Did you know Susan Mark?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "Never met her, never even heard of her before last night."

I was watching his eyes, and I believed him. I asked, "Why would an HRC clerk be coerced into checking you out?"

"Is that what was happening?"

"Best guess."

"Then I have no idea. HRC is the new PERSCOM, right? What did you ever get from PERSCOM? What did anyone? What have they got there? Dates and units

from PERSCOM? What did anyone? What have they got there? Dates and units, that's all. And my life is public record anyway. I've been on CNN a hundred times. I joined the army, I went to OCS, I was commissioned, I was promoted three times, and I left. No secrets there."

"Your Delta missions were secrets."

The room went a little quieter. Sansom asked, "How do you know that?"

"You got four good medals. You don't explain why."

Sansom nodded.

"That damn book," he said. "The medals are a matter of record, too. I couldn't disown them. It wouldn't have been respectful. Politics is a minefield. Damned if you do, damned if you don't. Either way around, they can always get to you."

I said nothing. He looked at me and asked, "How many people are going to make the connection? Besides you, I mean?"

"About three million," I said. "Maybe more. Everyone in the army, and all the vets with enough eyesight left to read. They know how things work."

He shook his head. "Not that many. Most people don't have inquiring minds. And even if they do, most people respect secrecy in matters like that. I don't think there's a problem."

"There's a problem somewhere. Otherwise why was Susan Mark being asked questions?"

"Did she actually mention my name?"

I shook my head. "That was to get your attention. I heard your name from a bunch of guys I'm assuming were employed by the person asking the questions."

"And what's in this for you?"

"Nothing. But she looked like a nice person, caught between a rock and a hard place."

"And you care?"

“You do too, if only a little bit. You’re not in politics just for what you can get out of it for yourself. At least I sincerely hope you’re not.”

“Are you actually my constituent?”

“Not until they elect you President.”

Sansom was quiet for a beat and then he said, “The FBI briefed me, too. I’m in a position where I can do favors for them, so they make a point of keeping me in the loop. They say the NYPD feels you’re reacting to this whole thing with a measure of guilt. Like you pushed too hard on the train. And guilt is never a sound basis for good decisions.”

I said, “That’s just one woman’s opinion.”

“Was she wrong?”

I said nothing.

Sansom said, “I’m not going to tell you a damn thing about the missions.”

I said, “I don’t expect you to.”

“But?”

“How much could come back and bite you in the ass?”

“Nothing in this life is entirely black and white. You know that. But no crimes were committed. And no one could get to the truth through an HRC clerk, anyway. This is a fishing expedition. This is half-baked amateur muck-raking journalism at its worst.”

“I don’t think it is,” I said. “Susan Mark was terrified and her son is missing.”

Sansom glanced at his wife. Back at me. He said, “We didn’t know that.”

“It hasn’t been reported. He’s a jock at USC. He left a bar with a girl five days ago. Hasn’t been seen since. He’s presumed AWOL, having the time of his life.”

“And you know this how?”

“Through Susan Mark’s brother. The boy’s uncle.”

“And you don’t buy the story?”

“Too coincidental.”

“Not necessarily. Boys leave bars with girls all the time.”

“You’re a parent,” I said. “What would make you shoot yourself, and what would make you not?”

The room went quieter still. Elspeth Sansom said, “Shit.” John Sansom got the kind of faraway look in his eyes that I had seen before from good field officers reacting to a tactical setback. Rethink, redeploy, reorganize, all in a fast second or two. I saw him scanning back through history and coming to a firm conclusion. He said, “I’m sorry about the Mark family’s situation. I really am. And I would help if I could, but I can’t. There’s nothing in my Delta career that could be accessed through HRC. Nothing at all. Either this is about something else entirely, or someone is looking in the wrong place.”

“Where else would they look?”

“You know where. And you know they wouldn’t even get close. And someone who knew enough to want Delta records would know where to look for them, and where not to, surely. So this is not about Special Forces. Can’t be.”

“So what else could it be about?”

“Nothing. I’m spotless.”

“Really?”

“Completely. One hundred percent. I’m not an idiot. I wouldn’t have gotten into politics if I had the tiniest thing to hide. Not the way things are now. I never even had a parking ticket.”

“OK,” I said.

“I’m sorry about the woman on the subway.”

“OK,” I said again.

“But now we really have to go. We have some serious begging to do.”

I asked, “You ever heard the name Lila Hoth?”

“Lila Hoth?” Sansom said. “No, I never heard that name.”

I was watching his eyes, and I felt he was telling the absolute truth. And lying through his teeth. Both at the same time.

Chapter 26

I passed Springfield on my return trip through the hotel lobby. I was heading for the street door, he was coming out of a dining room. Beyond him I saw round tables with snowy white tablecloths and large floral decorations in their centers. Springfield looked at me with no surprise in his face. It was as if he was judging my performance, and finding it satisfactory. As if I had gotten to his principals in about the span of time he had expected. Not fast, not slow, but right there in the middle of the window he had allowed. He gave me a look of professional appraisal and moved on without a word.

I went back to New York the same way I had left it, but in reverse. Cab to the Greensboro depot, bus to D.C., and then the train. The trip took all day and some of the evening. The bus schedule and the train schedule were not well integrated, and the first two trains from D.C. were sold out. I spent the travel time thinking, firstly about what Sansom had said, and what he hadn't. *Nothing in this life is entirely black and white. But no crimes were committed. And no one could get to the truth through an HRC clerk, anyway*. No denial of questionable activity. Almost the opposite. Practically a confession. But he felt he hadn't strayed outside the envelope. *No crimes*. And he had absolute confidence that the details were locked away forever. Altogether a common position, among sharp-end ex-military. *Questionable* was a big word for all of us. Twelve letters, and a textbook's worth of implications. Certainly my own career would not withstand extended scrutiny. I don't lose sleep over it. But in general I'm happy that the details stay locked away. And so was Sansom, clearly. I know my details. But what were his? Something damaging to him, obviously. Either personally, or to his election bid. Or both, inevitably. The feds had made that perfectly clear. *Sansom can't afford to tell you anything*. But damaging in a wider context too, or why else would the feds be involved in the first place?

And who the hell was Lila Hoth?

I asked myself these questions all the way through the jolting bus ride, and all the way through the long layover at Union Station, and then I gave them up when the train I made rolled north through Baltimore. I had gotten nowhere with

them, and by then I was thinking about something else, anyway. I was thinking about where exactly in New York City Susan Mark had been headed. She had driven in from the south and had planned to ditch her car and arrive at her destination by subway. Tactically smart, and no other choice, probably. She wouldn't have worn her winter coat in the car. Too hot. She probably had it on the back seat, or more likely in the trunk, with the bag and the gun, where the gun would be safe from prying eyes. Therefore she chose to park, and get out, and get herself battle-ready at a distance and in relative privacy.

But not at too much of a distance. Not too far from her ultimate destination. Because she had been delayed. She was seriously late. Therefore if she was headed way uptown, she would have parked in midtown. But she had parked downtown. In SoHo. Probably joined the train at Spring Street, one stop before I had. She was still sitting tight past 33rd Street. Then things had unraveled. If they hadn't, I figured she would have stayed on the train through Grand Central and gotten out at 51st Street. Maybe 59th. But no farther, surely. Sixty-eighth was a stop too far. Well into the Upper East Side. A whole new neighborhood. If she was headed all the way up there, she would have used the Lincoln Tunnel, not the Holland, and she would have driven farther north before she parked. Because time was tight for her. So the 59th Street station was her upper limit. But having gotten wherever she was going, I felt she would have aimed to double back, even if just a little. Amateur psychology. Approach from the south, overshoot, come back from the north. And hope her opponents were facing the wrong way.

So I drew a box in my head, 42nd Street to 59th, and Fifth Avenue to Third. Sixty-eight square blocks. Containing what?

About eight million different things.

I stopped counting them well before we hit Philadelphia. By then I was distracted by the girl across the aisle. She was in her middle twenties, and completely spectacular. Maybe a model, maybe an actress, maybe just a great-looking lawyer or lobbyist. A total babe, as a USC jock might say. Which got me thinking about Peter Molina again, and the apparent contradiction in someone expert enough to use him for leverage against a source that was worthless.

Our principal brought *a whole crew*. New York City has six main public transportation gateways: the Newark, LaGuardia, and JFK airports, plus Penn

Station and Grand Central Terminal, plus the Port Authority bus depot. Newark has three terminals, LaGuardia has three plus the shuttle terminal, JFK has eight, Penn Station is big, Grand Central is huge, and the Port Authority is a warren. Total manpower required to make a sensible attempt at surveillance would run close to forty people. Eighty or more, to allow for round-the-clock coverage. And eighty people was an army, not a crew. So I got off the train with no more than normal caution. Which, fortunately, was enough.

Chapter 27

I saw the watcher immediately. He was leaning on a pillar in the center of the Penn Station concourse, inert, with the kind of complete physical immobility that comes from being settled in for a long period of duty. He was stock-still, and the world was moving busily past him, like a river flows around a rock. He had a clamshell phone in his hand, open, held low down against his thigh. He was a tall guy, but reedy. Young, maybe thirty. At first sight, not impressive. He had pale skin with a shaved head and a dusting of ginger stubble. Not a great look. Scarier than an autograph hunter, maybe, but not by much. He was dressed in a shirt with a floral pattern and over it was a short tight leather jacket that was probably brown, but which looked lurid orange under the lights. He was staring at the oncoming crowd with eyes that had long ago grown tired, and then bored.

The concourse was full of people. I moved with the flow, slowly, hemmed in. I was carried along on the current. The watcher was about thirty feet away, ahead and on my left. His eyes were not moving. He was letting people walk through a fixed field of vision. I was about ten feet away from it. It was going to be like stepping through a metal detector hoop at the airport.

I slowed a little, and someone bumped into my back. I turned briefly, to check that they weren't tag-teaming me. They weren't. The person behind me was a woman with a stroller the size of an SUV, with two babies in it, maybe twins. There are a lot of twins in New York City. Plenty of older mothers, therefore plenty of laboratory fertilization. The twins in the stroller behind me were both crying, maybe because it was late and they were tired, or maybe they were just confused and bewildered by the forest of legs all around them. Their noise blended with the general hubbub. The concourse was tiled and full of echoes.

I drifted left, aiming to move six lateral feet in the next ten forward. I got near the edge of the stream and passed through the watcher's point of focus. His eyes were bright blue, but filmed with fatigue. He didn't react. Not at first. Then after a long second's delay his eyes opened wider and he raised his phone and flicked the lid to light the screen. He glanced at it. Glanced back at me. His mouth opened in surprise. By that point I was about four feet away from him.

Then he fainted. I lunged forward and caught him and lowered him gently to the ground. A Good Samaritan, helping out with a sudden medical emergency. That was what people saw, anyway. But only because people see what they want to see. If they had replayed the brief sequence in their heads and scrutinized it very carefully they might have noticed that I had lunged slightly before the guy had started to fall. They might have noticed that whereas my right hand was certainly moving to catch him by the collar, it was only moving a split second after my left hand had already stabbed him in the solar plexus, very hard, but close in to our bodies, hidden and surreptitious.

But people see what they want to see. They always have, and they always will. I crouched over the guy like the responsible member of the public I was pretending to be, and the woman with the stroller trundled on behind me. After that, a small crowd gathered, full of concern. New York's hostile reputation is undeserved. People are generally very helpful. A woman crouched down next to me. Other people stood close and looked down. I could see their legs and their shoes. The guy in the leather jacket was flat on the floor, twitching with chest spasms and gasping desperately for air. A hard blow to the solar plexus will do that to a person. But so will a heart attack and any number of other medical conditions.

The woman next to me asked, "What happened?"

I said, "I don't know. He just keeled over. His eyes rolled up."

"We should call the ambulance."

I said, "I dropped my phone."

The woman started to fumble in her purse. I said, "Wait. He might have had an episode. We need to check if he's carrying a card."

"An episode?"

"An attack. Like a seizure. Like epilepsy, or something."

"What kind of a card?"

"People carry them. With instructions. We might have to stop him biting his

tongue. And maybe he has medication with him. Check his pockets.´´

The woman reached out and patted the guy's jacket pockets, on the outside. She had small hands, long fingers, lots of rings. The guy's outside pockets were empty. Nothing there. The woman folded the jacket back and checked inside. I watched, carefully. The shirt was unlike anything I had ever seen. Acrylic, floral, a riot of pastel colors. The jacket was cheap and stiff. Lined with nylon. There was an inside label, quite ornate, with Cyrillic writing on it.

The guy's inside pockets were empty, too.

"Try his pants," I said. "Quick."

The woman said, "I can't do that."

So some take-charge executive dropped down next to us and stuck his fingers in the guy's front pants pockets. Nothing there. He used the pocket flaps to roll the guy first one way and then the other, to check the back pockets. Nothing there, either.

Nothing anywhere. No wallet, no ID, no nothing at all.

"OK, we better call the ambulance," I said. "Do you see my phone?"

The woman looked around and then burrowed under the guy's arm and came back with the clamshell cell. The lid got moved on the way and the screen lit up. My picture was right there on it, big and obvious. Better quality than I thought it would be. Better than the Radio Shack guy's attempt. The woman glanced at it. I knew people kept pictures on their phones. I've seen them. Their partners, their dogs, their cats, their kids. Like a home page, or wallpaper. Maybe the woman thought I was a big-time egotist who used a picture of himself. But she handed me the phone anyway. By that time the take-charge executive was already dialing the emergency call. So I backed away and said, "I'll go find a cop."

I forced my way into the tide of people again and let it carry me onward, out the door, to the sidewalk, into the dark, and away.

Chapter 28

Now I wasn't that guy anymore. No longer the only man in the world without a cell phone. I stopped in the hot darkness three blocks away on Seventh Avenue and looked over my prize. It was made by Motorola. Gray plastic, somehow treated and polished to make it look like metal. I fiddled my way through the menus and found no pictures other than my own. It had come out quite well. The cross street west of Eighth, the bright morning sun, me frozen in the act of turning around in response to my shouted name. There was plenty of detail, from head to toe. Clearly huge numbers of megapixels had been involved. I could make out my features fairly well. And I thought I looked pretty good, considering I had hardly slept. There were cars and a dozen bystanders nearby, to give a sense of scale, like the ruler painted on the wall behind a police mug shot. My posture looked exactly like what I see in the mirror. Very characteristic.

I had been nailed but good, photographically.

That was for damn sure.

I went back to the call register menu and checked for calls dialed. There were none recorded. I checked calls received, and found only three, all within the last three hours, all from the same number. I guessed the watcher was supposed to delete information on a regular basis, maybe even after every call, but had gotten lazy about three hours ago, which was certainly consistent with his demeanor and his reaction time. I guessed the number the calls had come in from represented some kind of an organizer or dispatcher. Maybe even the big boss himself. If it had been a cell phone number, it would have been no good to me. No good at all. Cell phones can be anywhere. That's the point of cell phones.

But it wasn't a cell phone number. It was a 212 number.

A Manhattan landline.

Which would have a fixed location. That's the nature of landlines.

The best method of working backward from a phone number depends on how high up the food chain you are. Cops and private eyes have reverse telephone directories. Look up the number, get a name, get an address. The FBI has all kinds of sophisticated databases. The same kind of thing, but more expensive. The CIA probably owns the phone companies.

I don't have any of that stuff. So I take the low-tech approach.

I dial the number and see who answers.

I hit the green button and the phone brought up the number for me. I hit the green button again and the phone started dialing. There was ring tone. It cut off fairly fast and a woman's voice said, "This is the Four Seasons, and how may I help you?"

I said, "The hotel?"

"Yes, and how may I direct your call?"

I said, "I'm sorry, I have the wrong number."

I clicked off.

The Four Seasons Hotel. I had seen it. I had never been in it. It was a little above my current pay grade. It was on 57th Street between Madison Avenue and Park Avenue. Right there in my sixty-eight square-block box, a little west and a lot north of its geographic center. But a short walk for someone getting off the 6 train at 59th Street. Hundreds of rooms, hundreds of telephone extensions, all routed out through the main switchboard, all carrying the main switchboard's caller ID.

Helpful, but not very.

I thought for a moment and looked around very carefully and then reversed direction and headed for the 14th Precinct.

*

I had no idea what time an NYPD detective would show up for a night watch, but I expected Theresa Lee to be there within about an hour. I expected to have

to wait for her in the downstairs lobby. What I didn't expect was to find Jacob Mark already in there ahead of me. He was sitting on an upright chair against a wall and drumming his fingers on his knees. He looked at me with no surprise at all and said, "Peter didn't show up for practice."

Chapter 29

Right there in the precinct lobby Jacob Mark talked for about five straight minutes, with the kind of rambling fluency that is typical of the truly anxious. He said that the USC football people had waited four hours and then called Peter's father, who had called him. He said that for a star senior on a full scholarship to miss practice was completely unthinkable. In fact to make practice no matter what else was going on was a major part of the culture. Earthquakes, riots, wars, deaths in the family, mortal disease, everyone showed up. It emphasized to the world how important football was, and by implication how important the players were to the university. Because jocks were respected by most, but disrespected by some. And there was an unspoken mandate to live up to the majority's ideals and change the minority's minds. Then there were the straightforward machismo issues. To miss practice was like a firefighter declining a turn-out, like a hit-by-pitch batter rubbing his arm, like a gunslinger staying inside the saloon. Unthinkable. Unheard of. Doesn't happen. Hangovers, broken bones, torn muscles, bruises, it didn't matter. You showed up. Plus Peter was going to the NFL, and increasingly pro teams look for character. They've been burned too many times. So missing practice was the same thing as trashing his meal ticket. Inexplicable. Incomprehensible.

I listened without paying close attention. I was counting hours instead. Close to forty-eight since Susan Mark had missed her deadline. Why hadn't Peter's body been found?

Then Theresa Lee showed up with news.

But first Lee had to deal with Jacob Mark's situation. She took us up to the second floor squad room and heard him out and asked, "Has Peter been officially reported missing?"

Jake said, "I want to do that right now."

"You can't," Lee said. "At least, not to me. He's missing in LA, not in New York."

“Susan was killed here.”

“She committed suicide here.”

“The USC people don’t take missing persons reports. And the LAPD won’t take it seriously. They don’t understand.”

“Peter’s twenty-two years old. It’s not like he’s a child.”

“He’s been missing more than five days.”

“Duration isn’t significant. He doesn’t live at home. And who is to say he’s missing? Who is to say what his normal pattern might be? Presumably he goes for long periods without contact with his family.”

“This is different.”

“What’s your policy over there in Jersey?”

Jake didn’t answer.

Lee said, “He’s an independent adult. It’s like he got on a plane and went on vacation. It’s like his friends were at the airport and watched him go. I can see where the LAPD is coming from on this.”

“But he missed football practice. That doesn’t happen.”

“It just did, apparently.”

“Susan was being threatened,” Jake said.

“By who?”

Jake looked at me. “Tell her, Reacher.”

I said, “Something to do with her job. There was a lot of leverage. Had to be. I think a threat against her son would be consistent.”

“OK,” Lee said. She looked around the squad room and found her partner, Docherty. He was working at one of a pair of twinned desks in the back of the space. She looked back at Jake and said, “Go make a full report. Everything you

know, and everything you think you know."

Jake nodded gratefully and headed toward Docherty. I waited until he was gone and asked, "Are you reopening the file now?"

Lee said, "No. The file is closed and it's staying closed. Because as it happens there's nothing to worry about. But the guy's a cop and we have to be courteous. And I want him out of the way for an hour."

"Why is there nothing to worry about?"

So she told me her news.

She said, "We know why Susan Mark came up here."

"How?"

"*We* got a missing persons report," she said. "Apparently Susan was helping someone with an inquiry, and when she didn't show, the individual concerned got worried and came in to report her missing."

"What kind of inquiry?"

"Something personal, I think. I wasn't here. The day guys said it all sounded innocent enough. And it must have been, really, or why else come to the police station?"

"And Jacob Mark shouldn't know this why?"

"We need a lot more detail. And getting it will be easier without him there. He's too involved. He's a family member. He'll scream and yell. I've seen it before."

"Who was the individual concerned?"

"A foreign national briefly here in town for the purpose of conducting the research that Susan was helping with."

"Wait," I said. "Briefly here in town? Staying in a hotel?"

"Yes," Lee said.

"The Four Seasons?"

The Four Seasons?

“Yes,” Lee said.

“What’s his name?”

“It’s a her, not a him,” Lee said. “Her name is Lila Hoth.”

Chapter 30

It was very late in the evening but Lee called anyway and Lila Hoth agreed to meet with us at the Four Seasons, right away, no hesitation. We drove over in Lee's unmarked car and parked in the hotel's curbside loading zone. The lobby was magnificent. All pale sandstone and brass and tan paint and golden marble, suspended halfway between dim intimacy and bright modernism. Lee showed her badge at the desk and the clerk called upstairs and then pointed us toward the elevators. We were headed for another high floor and the way the clerk had spoken made me feel that Lila Hoth's room wasn't going to be the smallest or the cheapest in the place.

In fact Lila Hoth's room was another suite. It had a double door, like Sansom's in North Carolina, but no cop outside. Just a quiet empty corridor. There were used room service trays here and there, and some of the doorknobs had *Do Not Disturb* signs or breakfast orders on them. Theresa Lee paused and double-checked the number and knocked. Nothing happened for a minute. Then the right-hand panel opened and we saw a woman standing inside the doorway, with soft yellow light directly behind her. She was easily sixty, maybe more, short and thick and heavy, with steel-gray hair cut plain and blunt. Dark eyes, lined and hooded. A white slab of a face, meaty, immobile, and bleak. A guarded, unreadable expression. She was wearing an ugly brown housedress made of thick man-made material.

Lee asked, "Ms. Hoth?"

The woman ducked her head and blinked and moved her hands and made a kind of all-purpose apologetic sound. The universal dumb show for not understanding. I said, "She doesn't speak English." Lee said, "She spoke English fifteen minutes ago." The light behind the woman was coming from a table lamp set deep inside the room. Its glow dimmed briefly as a second figure stepped in front of it and headed our way. Another woman. But much younger. Maybe twenty-five or twenty-six. Very elegant. And very, very beautiful. Rare, and exotic. Like a model. She smiled a little shyly and said, "It was me speaking English fifteen minutes ago. I'm Lila Hoth. This is my mother."

She bent and spoke fast in a foreign language, Eastern European, quietly, more or less straight into the older woman's ear. Explanation, context, inclusion. The older woman brightened and smiled. We introduced ourselves by name. Lila Hoth spoke for her mother. She said her name was Svetlana Hoth. We all shook hands, back and forth, quite formally, crossing wrists, two people on our side and two on theirs. Lila Hoth was stunning. And very natural. She made the girl I had seen on the train look contrived in comparison. She was tall but not too tall, and she was slender but not too slender. She had dark skin, like a perfect beach tan. She had long dark hair. No makeup. Huge, hypnotic eyes, the brightest blue I had ever seen. As if they were lit from within. She moved with a kind of lithe economy. Half the time she looked young and leggy and gamine, and half the time she looked all grown up and self-possessed. Half the time she seemed unaware of how good she looked, and half the time she seemed a little bashful about it. She was wearing a simple black cocktail dress that probably came from Paris and cost more than a car. But she didn't need it. She could have been in something stitched together from old potato sacks without diminishing the effect.

We followed her inside and her mother followed us. The suite was made up of three rooms. A living room in the center, and bedrooms either side. The living room had a full set of furniture, including a dining table. There were the remnants of a room service supper on it. There were shopping bags in the corners of the room. Two from Bergdorf Goodman, and two from Tiffany. Theresa Lee pulled her badge and Lila Hoth stepped away to a credenza under a mirror and came back with two slim booklets which she handed to her. Their passports. She thought official visitors in New York needed to see papers. The passports were maroon and each had an eagle graphic printed in gold in the center of the cover and words in Cyrillic above and below it that looked like *NACHOPT YKPAIHA* in English. Lee flipped through them and stepped away and put them back on the credenza.

Then we all sat down. Svetlana Hoth stared straight ahead, blank, excluded by language. Lila Hoth looked at the two of us, carefully, establishing our identities in her mind. A cop from the precinct, and the witness from the train. She ended up looking straight at me, maybe because she thought I had been the more seriously affected by events. I wasn't complaining. I couldn't take my eyes off her.

She said, "I am so very sorry about what happened to Susan Mark."

She said, "I am so very sorry about what happened to Susan Mark."

Her voice was low. Her diction was precise. She spoke English very well. A little accented, a little formal. As if she had learned the language from black and white movies, both American and British.

Theresa Lee didn't speak. I said, "We don't know what happened to Susan Mark. Not really. Beyond the obvious facts, I mean."

Lila Hoth nodded, courteously, delicately, and a little contritely. She said, "You want to understand my involvement."

"Yes, we do."

"It's a long story. But let me say at the very beginning that nothing in it could possibly explain the events on the subway train."

Theresa Lee said, "So let's hear the story."

And so we heard it. The first part of it was background information. Purely biographical. Lila Hoth was twenty-six years old. She was Ukrainian. She had been married at the age of eighteen to a Russian. The Russian had been knee-deep in nineties-style Moscow entrepreneurship. He had grabbed oil leases and coal and uranium rights from the crumbling state. He had become a single-figure billionaire. Next step was to become a double-figure billionaire. He didn't make it. It was a tight bottleneck. Everyone wanted to squeeze through, and there wasn't room for everyone to succeed. A rival had shot the Russian in the head, one year ago, outside a nightclub. The body had lain in the snow on the sidewalk all the next day. A message, Moscow style. The newly-widowed Lila Hoth had taken the hint and cashed out and moved to London with her mother. She liked London and planned on living there forever, awash with money but with nothing much to do.

She said, "There's a presumption that young people who get rich will do things for their parents. You see it all the time with pop stars and movie stars and athletes. And such a thing is a very Ukrainian sentiment. My father died before I was born. My mother is all I have left. So, of course, I offered her anything she wanted. Houses, cars, holidays, cruises. She refused them all. All she wanted was a favor. She wanted me to help her track down a man from her past. It was like the dust had settled after a long and turbulent life, and at last she was free to concentrate on what meant most to her."

concentrate on what meant most to her.

I asked, “Who was the man?”

“An American soldier named John. That was all we knew. At first my mother claimed him only as an acquaintance. But then it emerged that he had been very kind to her, at a particular time and place.”

“Where and when?”

“In Berlin, for a short period in the early eighties.”

“That’s vague.”

“It was before I was born. It was in 1983. Privately I thought trying to find the man was a hopeless task. I thought my mother was becoming a silly old woman. But I was happy to go through the motions. And, don’t worry, she doesn’t understand what we’re saying.”

Svetlana Hoth smiled and nodded at nothing in particular.

I asked, “Why was your mother in Berlin?”

“She was with the Red Army,” her daughter said.

“Doing what?”

“She was with an infantry regiment.”

“As what?”

“She was a political commissar. All regiments had one. In fact, all regiments had several.”

I asked, “So what did you do about tracing the American?”

“My mother was clear that her friend John had been in the army, not the Marines. That was my starting point. So I telephoned from London to your Department of Defense and asked what I should do. After many explanations I was transferred to the Human Resources Command. They have a press office. The man I spoke to was quite touched. He thought it was a sweet story. Possibly

he saw a public relations aspect, I don't know. Some good news at last, perhaps, instead of all the bad. He said he would make inquiries. Personally I thought he was wasting his time. John is a very common name. And as I understand it, most American soldiers rotate through Germany, and most visit Berlin. So I thought the pool of possibilities would grow enormous. Which apparently it did. The next thing I knew was weeks later when a clerk called Susan Mark telephoned me. I wasn't home. She left a message. She said she had been assigned the task. She told me that some names that sound like John are actually contractions of Jonathan, spelled without the letter *h*. She wanted to know if my mother had ever seen the name written down, perhaps on a note. I asked my mother and called Susan Mark back and told her we were sure it was John with the letter *h*. The conversation with Susan turned out to be very pleasant, and we had many more. We almost became friends, I think, the way you sometimes can on the phone. Like pen-pals, but talking instead of writing. She told me a lot about herself. She was a very lonely woman, and I think our conversations brightened her days."

Lee asked, "And then what?"

"Eventually I received news from Susan. She said she had arrived at some preliminary conclusions. I suggested we meet here in New York, almost as a way to consummate our friendship. You know, dinner and maybe a show. As a way of saying thank you for her efforts, certainly. But she never arrived."

I asked, "What time were you expecting her?"

"About ten o'clock. She said she would leave after work."

"Too late for dinner and a show."

"She planned to stay over. I booked a room for her."

"When did you get here?"

"Three days ago."

"How?"

"British Airways from London."

I said, "You hired a local crew."

Lila Hoth nodded.

I asked, “When?”

“Just before we got here.”

“Why?”

“It’s expected,” she said. “And sometimes useful.”

“Where did you find them?”

“They advertise. In the Moscow papers, and in the expatriate papers in London. It’s good business for them, and it’s a kind of status check for us. If you go overseas unassisted, you look weak. And it’s better not to do that.”

“They told me you brought a crew of your own.”

She looked surprised.

“I don’t have a crew of my own,” she said. “Why on earth would they say that? I don’t understand it.”

“They said you brought a bunch of scary types.”

For a second she looked mystified and a little annoyed. Then some kind of comprehension dawned in her face. She seemed to be a fast analyst. She said, “Perhaps they were inventive, strategically. When Susan didn’t arrive, I sent them out looking. I thought, I’m paying them, they might as well do some work. And my mother has a lot of hope invested in this business. So I didn’t want to come all this way, and then fail at the last minute. So I offered them a bonus. We grow up believing that money talks loudest, in America. So perhaps those men were making up a story for you. Perhaps they were inventing a scary alternative. To make sure they got their extra money. So that you would be tempted to talk to them.”

I said nothing.

Then something else dawned in her face. Some new realization. She said, “I have no crew, as you call it. Just one man. Leonid, one of my husband’s old team. He couldn’t get a new job. He’s a bit of a lame duck, I’m afraid. So I kept

him on. Right now he's at Penn Station. He's waiting for you. The police told me that the witness had gone to Washington. I assumed you would take the train, and come back the same way. Did you not?"

I said, "Yes, I came back on the train."

"Then Leonid must have missed you. He had your picture. He was supposed to ask you to telephone me. Poor man, he must still be there."

She stood up and headed for the credenza. For the room phone. Which gave me a temporary tactical problem. Because Leonid's cell was in my pocket.

Chapter 31

In principle I know how to turn off a cell phone. I have seen it done, and I have done it myself on more than one occasion. On most models you hold down the red button for two long seconds. But the phone was in my pocket. No room to open it, and no chance of finding the red button by feel alone. Too suspicious to take it out and turn it off in full view of everyone.

Lila Hoth hit nine for a line and dialed.

I put my hand in my pocket and used my thumbnail and found the catch and unlatched the battery. Separated it from the phone and turned it sideways to avoid any chance of accidental electrical contact.

Lila Hoth waited, and then she sighed and hung up.

“He’s hopeless,” she said. “But very loyal.”

I tried to track Leonid’s likely progress in my head. Cops, paramedics, probably an obligatory trip to the Saint Vincent’s emergency room, no ID, possibly no English, maybe worries and questions and detention. Then the trip back uptown.

How long of a detention, I didn’t know.

How fast of a trip, I couldn’t predict.

I said, “The local crew mentioned John Sansom’s name.”

Lila Hoth sighed again and shook her head in a tiny display of exasperation. She said, “I briefed them when we arrived, obviously. I told them the story. And we all got along quite well. I think all of us felt that we were wasting our time, humoring my mother. We shared jokes about it, frankly. One of the men was reading the newspaper about Sansom. He said, here’s an American soldier called John, of roughly the right vintage. He said, maybe Sansom is the guy you’re looking for. For a day or two it became a kind of catchphrase. An in-joke, I

suppose. We would say, let's just call John Sansom and have done with it. I was really only joking, of course, because what are the chances? A million to one, perhaps. And they were joking too, really, but later they became somehow quite earnest about it. Perhaps because of the impact it would have, because he is such a famous politician."

"What impact? What did your mother do with this guy called John?"

Svetlana Hoth stared on into space, uncomprehending. Lila Hoth sat down again. She said, "My mother has never spoken in detail about it. Certainly it can't have been espionage. My mother was not a traitor. I say that not as a loyal daughter, but as a realist. She is still alive. Therefore she was never suspected. And her American friend was not a traitor, either. Liaising with foreign traitors was a KGB function, not army. And personally I doubt that her interest was romantic. It was more likely aid of some sort, personal help, either financial or political. Possibly covert. Those were bad times for the Soviet Union. But possibly it was romantic. All she has ever said is that the man was very kind to her. She plays her cards close to her chest."

"Ask her again, now."

"I have asked her many times, as you can imagine. She's reluctant to say."

"But you think Sansom isn't actually involved?"

"No, not at all. That was a joke that got out of hand. That's all. Unless, of course, it really is a million-to-one thing. Which would be extraordinary, don't you think? To joke about something and have it turn out to be true?"

I said nothing.

Lila Hoth said, "Now may I ask you a question? Did Susan Mark give you the information intended for my mother?"

Svetlana Hoth smiled and nodded again. I began to suspect she recognized the words *my mother*. Like a dog that wags its tail when it hears its name. I said, "Why would you think Susan Mark gave me information?"

"Because the people I hired here told me you told them that she had. Computerized, on a USB memory stick. They gave me that message, and transmitted your photograph, and resigned their commission. I'm not sure why. I

transmitted your photograph, and resigned their commission. I'm not sure why. I was paying them very well."

I moved in my chair and stuck my hand in my pocket. Scrabbled down past the disassembled phone and found the Radio Shack stick. I felt the soft pink neoprene sleeve against my fingernails. I pulled it out and held it up and watched Lila Hoth's eyes very carefully.

She looked at the stick the way a cat looks at a bird.

She asked, "Is that really it?"

Theresa Lee moved in her chair and looked at me. Like she was asking, *Are you going to say it, or am I?* Lila Hoth caught the glance and asked, "What?"

I said, "The whole thing looked very different to me, I'm afraid. Susan Mark was terrified on the train. She was in big trouble. She didn't look like a person coming to town to meet a friend for dinner and a show."

Lila Hoth said, "I told you at the beginning, I can't explain that."

I put the memory stick back in my pocket. Said, "Susan didn't bring an overnight bag."

"I can't explain it."

"And she dumped her car and approached by subway. Which is weird. If you were prepared to book a room for her, I'm sure you would have sprung for valet parking."

"Sprung?"

"Paid for."

"Of course."

"And she was carrying a loaded gun."

"She lived in Virginia. I heard it's compulsory there."

"It's legal there," I said. "Not compulsory."

“I can’t explain it. I’m sorry.”

“And her son is missing. Last seen leaving a bar, with a woman of your age and roughly your description.”

“Missing?”

“Disappeared.”

“A woman of my description?”

“A total babe.”

“What does that mean?”

“A good-looking young woman.”

“What bar?”

“Somewhere in LA.”

“Los Angeles?”

“In California.”

“I haven’t been to Los Angeles. Never in my life. I have only been in New York.”

I said nothing.

She said, “Look around you. I have been here in New York three days on a tourist visa and I occupy three rooms in a commercial hotel. I have no crew, as you call it. I have never been to California.”

I said nothing.

She said, “Looks are subjective. And I’m not the only woman my age. There are six billion people in the world. Trending young, for sure. Half of them are fifteen or younger. Which means there are still three billion people sixteen or older. Following the curve, perhaps twelve percent of them are in their middle twenties. That’s three hundred and sixty million people. About half are women.

That’s a hundred and eighty million. Even if only one in a hundred of them might be judged good-looking, in a bar in California, then it’s still ten times more likely that John Sansom was my mother’s friend than I had anything to do with Susan Mark’s son.”

I nodded. Arithmetically, Lila Hoth was right on the money. She said, “And it’s probably true that Peter is away somewhere with a girl, anyway. Yes, I know his name. In fact I know all about him. Susan told me. On the phone. We talked about all our problems. She hated her son. She despised what he is. He is everything she disliked. He is just a shallow fraternity boy with immature attitudes. He rejected her in favor of his father. And do you know why? Because he was obsessed with his ancestry. And Susan was adopted. Did you even know that? Her son thought of her only as a person conceived out of wedlock. He hated her for it. I know more about Susan than anybody. I talked to her many times. I listened to her. She was a lonely, isolated woman. I was her friend. She was excited to come here and meet me.”

At that point I sensed that Theresa Lee needed to get going and I certainly wanted to be out of there before young Leonid showed up again. So I nodded and shrugged as if I had nothing more to say and no further issues to pursue. Lila Hoth asked if I would give her the stick that Susan Mark had given to me. I didn’t say yes and I didn’t say no. I didn’t answer at all. We just shook hands all around once more, and then we made an exit. The door closed behind us and we walked through the silent corridor and the elevator chimed open. We stepped in and we looked at each other in the mirrored walls and Lee said, “Well, what did you think?”

“I thought she was beautiful,” I said. “One of the most beautiful women I have ever seen.”

“Apart from that.”

“Amazing eyes.”

“Apart from her eyes.”

“I thought she was lonely too. Lonely and isolated. She was talking about Susan, but she could have been talking about herself.”

“What about her story?”

“Do good-looking people automatically get more credibility?”

“Not from me, pal. And get over it, anyway. Thirty years from now she’ll look just like her mother. Did you believe her?”

“Did you?”

Lee nodded. “I believed her. Because a story like that is ridiculously easy to check. Only a fool would give us so many chances to prove her wrong. Like, does the army really have press officers?”

“Hundreds of them.”

“So all we have to do is find the one she spoke to, and ask. We could even track the phone calls from London. I could liaise with Scotland Yard. I’d love to do that. Can you imagine? Docherty interrupts me, I say, Butt out, pal, I’m on the phone with Scotland Yard here. It’s every detective’s dream.”

“NSA will have the calls,” I said. “A foreign number into the DoD? They’re already part of an intelligence analysis somewhere.”

“And we could track Susan Mark’s calls out of the Pentagon. If they talked as often as Lila claimed, we’d see them easily. International to the U.K., they’re probably flagged up separately.”

“So go for it. Check.”

“I guess I will,” she said. “And she must know I could. She struck me as an intelligent woman. She knows British Airways and Homeland Security can track her in and out of the country. She knows we can tell if she ever flew to LA. She knows we can just go ahead and ask Jacob Mark whether his sister was adopted. It’s all so easy to confirm. It would be crazy to lie about stuff like that. Plus she came in to the precinct house and involved herself voluntarily. And she just showed me her passport. Which is the exact opposite of suspicious behavior. Those are big points in her favor.”

I took the cell phone from my pocket and reassembled the battery. I hit the on switch and the screen lit up. It was showing a missed call. Lila Hoth, presumably, from her room, ten minutes ago. I saw Lee looking at the phone and I said, “It’s Leonid’s. I took it from him.”

“He actually found you?”

“I found him. Which is why I had gotten as far as this hotel.”

“Where is he now?”

“Walking home from Saint Vincent’s Hospital, probably.”

“Is this something you really want to be telling to an NYPD detective?”

“He fainted. I helped. That’s all. Talk to the witnesses.”

“Whatever, it’s going to put the cat among the pigeons with Lila.”

“She thinks gun ownership is compulsory in Virginia. She probably thinks mugging is compulsory in New York. She grew up with propaganda.”

We got out of the elevator in the lobby and headed for the street door. Lee asked, “But if all of this is so innocent, why are there feds involved?”

“If the story is true, then an American soldier met with a Red Army political commissar back during the Cold War. The feds want to be absolutely sure it’s innocent. That’s why HRC’s response was delayed by weeks. They were taking policy decisions and putting surveillance in place.”

We got into Lee’s car. She said, “You aren’t agreeing with me all the way, are you?”

I said, “If the Hoth family business is innocent, so be it. But something wasn’t innocent. That’s for damn sure. And we’re saying that other something brought Susan Mark to the exact same place at the exact same time. Which is a hell of a coincidence.”

“And?”

“How many times have you known a million-to-one chance turn out a winner?”

“Never.”

“Me either. But I think it’s happening here. John Sansom is a million-to-one against, but I think he’s involved.”

“Why?”

“I spoke to him.”

“In Washington?”

“Actually I had to follow him to North Carolina.”

“You don’t give up, do you?”

“That’s what he said. Then I asked him if he had heard the name Lila Hoth. He said no. I was watching his face. I believed him, and I thought he was lying, too. Both at the same time. And maybe he was.”

“How?”

“Maybe he had heard the name Hoth, but not Lila. So technically, no, he hadn’t heard the name Lila Hoth. But maybe he had heard the name Svetlana Hoth. Maybe he was very familiar with it.”

“What would that mean?”

“Maybe more than we think. Because if Lila Hoth is telling the truth, then there’s a kind of weird logic working here. Why would Susan Mark bust a gut on a case like this?”

“She had sympathy.”

“Why would she in particular?”

“I don’t know.”

“Because she was adopted. Born out of wedlock, presumably wondering about her real folks from time to time. Sympathetic to other people in the same situation. Like Lila Hoth, maybe. Some guy was very kind to her mother before she was born? There are a lot of ways to interpret a phrase like that.”

“For example?”

“Best case, he gave her a warm coat in winter.”

“And worst case?”

“Maybe John Sansom is Lila Hoth’s father.”

Chapter 32

Lee and I went straight back to the precinct. Jacob Mark had finished his business with Docherty. That was clear. And something had changed. That was clear too. They were sitting opposite each other across Docherty's desk. Not talking anymore. Jake looked happier. Docherty had a patient expression on his face, like he had just wasted an hour. He didn't look resentful about it. Cops are accustomed to wasting time. Statistically most of what they do leads nowhere. Lee and I walked over to them and Jake said, "Peter called his coach."

I asked, "When?"

"Two hours ago. The coach called Molina and Molina called me."

"So where is he?"

"He didn't say. He had to leave a message. His coach never answers his phone over dinner. Family time."

"But Peter's OK?"

"He said he won't be back anytime soon. Maybe ever. He's thinking about quitting football. There was a girl giggling in the background."

Docherty said, "She must be some girl."

I asked Jake, "You OK with that?"

Jake said, "Hell no. But it's his life. And he'll change his mind, anyway. The only question is how fast."

"I meant, are you happy that the message was for real?"

"The coach knows his voice. Better than I do, probably."

"Anyone try calling him back?"

“All of us. But his phone is off again.”

Theresa Lee said, “So we’re satisfied?”

“I guess.”

“Feeling better?”

“Relieved.”

“May I ask you a question about another subject?”

“Shoot.”

“Was your sister adopted?”

Jake paused. Switched gears. Nodded. “We both were. As babies. Separately, three years apart. Susan first.” Then he asked, “Why?”

Lee said, “I’m corroborating some new information received.”

“What new information?”

“It seems that Susan came up here to meet a friend.”

“What friend?”

“A Ukrainian woman called Lila Hoth.”

Jake glanced at me. “We’ve been through this. I never heard that name from Susan.”

Lee asked him, “Would you expect to? How close were you? It seems to be a fairly recent friendship.”

“We weren’t very close.”

“When was the last time you talked?”

“A few months ago, I guess.”

“So you’re not completely up-to-date with her social life.”

Jake said, “I guess not.”

Lee asked, “How many people knew that Susan was adopted?”

“I guess she didn’t advertise it. But it wasn’t a secret.”

“How fast would a new friend find out?”

“Fast enough, probably. Friends talk about stuff like that.”

“How would you describe Susan’s relationship with her son?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“An important one.”

Jake hesitated. He clammed up and turned away, physically, like he was literally dodging the issue. Like he was flinching from a blow. Maybe because he was reluctant to wash dirty linen in public, in which case his body language was really all the answer we needed. But Theresa Lee wanted chapter and verse. She said, “Talk to me, Jake. Cop to cop. This is something I need to know about.”

Jake was quiet for a spell. Then he shrugged and said, “I guess you could call it a love-hate relationship.”

“In what way exactly?”

“Susan loved Peter, Peter hated her.”

“Why?”

More hesitation. Another shrug. “It’s complicated.”

“How?”

“Peter went through a phase, like most kids do. Like girls want to be long-lost princesses, or boys want their grandfathers to have been admirals or generals or famous explorers. For a spell everyone wants to be something they’re not. Peter wanted to live in a Ralph Lauren advertisement, basically. He wanted to be Peter

Molina the Fourth, or at least the Third. He wanted his father to have an estate in Kennebunkport, and his mother to have the remnants of an old fortune. Susan didn't handle it well. She was the daughter of a drug-addicted teenage whore from Baltimore, and she made no secret of it. She thought honesty was the best policy. Peter handled it badly. They never really got past it, and then the divorce came, and Peter chose up sides, and they never got over it."

"How did you feel about it?"

"I could see both points of view. I never inquired about my real mother. I didn't want to know. But I went through a spell where I wished she was a grand old lady with diamonds. I got over it. But Peter didn't, which is stupid, I know, but understandable."

"Did Susan like Peter as a person, as opposed to loving him as a son?"

Jake shook his head. "No. Which made things even worse. Susan had no sympathy for jocks and letter jackets and all that stuff. I guess in school and college she had bad experiences with people like that. She didn't like that her son was turning into one of them. But that stuff was important to Peter, in its own right at first, and then later as a weapon against her. It was a dysfunctional family, no question."

"Who knows this story?"

"You mean, would a friend know?"

Lee nodded.

Jake said, "A close friend might."

"A close friend she met quite recently?"

"There's no timetable. It's about trust, isn't it?"

I said, "You told me Susan wasn't an unhappy person."

Jake said, "And she wasn't. I know that sounds weird. But adopted people have a different view of family. They have different expectations. Believe me, I know. Susan was at peace with it. It was a fact of life, that's all."

“Was she lonely?”

“I’m sure she was.”

“Did she feel isolated?”

“I’m sure she did.”

“Did she like to talk on the phone?”

“Most women do.”

Lee asked him, “Have you got kids?”

Jake shook his head again.

“No,” he said. “I don’t have kids. I’m not even married. I tried to learn from my big sister’s experience.”

Lee stayed quiet for a spell and then she said, “Thanks, Jake. I’m happy that Peter’s OK. And I’m sorry I had to bring all that bad stuff up.” Then she walked away and I followed her and she said, “I’ll check the other things too, but it will take time, because those channels are always slow, but right now my guess is that Lila Hoth will pan out just fine. She’s two for two so far, on the adoption thing and the mother-son thing. She knows stuff only a genuine friend would know.”

I nodded agreement. “You interested in the other thing? Whatever it was that got Susan so scared?”

“Not until I see actual evidence of a crime committed in New York City, somewhere between Ninth Avenue and Park, and 30th Street and 45th.”

“That’s this precinct?”

She nodded. “Anything else would be volunteer work.”

“You interested in Sansom?”

“Not even a little bit. Are you?”

“I feel like I should be working on it.”

“I feel like I should warn him, maybe.”

“About what? A million-to-one possibility?”

“It’s actually much shorter odds than a million to one. There are five million men called John in America. Second only to James, for popularity. That’s one in thirty guys. Which means that in 1983 there could have been about thirty-three thousand Johns in the U.S. Army. Discount it maybe ten percent for military demographics, the chances are about one in thirty thousand.”

“Those are still very big odds.”

“I think Sansom should know, that’s all.”

“Why?”

“Call it a brother officer thing. Maybe I’ll head back to D.C.”

“No need. Save yourself the trip. He’s coming here. Tomorrow mid-day, for a fundraiser lunch at the Sheraton. With all the heavy hitters from Wall Street. Seventh Avenue and 52nd Street. We got a memo.”

“Why? He wasn’t getting much protection in Greensboro.”

“He isn’t getting much protection here, either. In fact he isn’t getting any. But we get memos about everything. That’s how it is now. That’s the new NYPD.” Then she walked away, leaving me all alone in the middle of the empty squad room. And leaving me feeling a little uneasy. Maybe Lila Hoth really was as pure as the driven snow, but I couldn’t shake the sensation that Sansom was walking into a trap, just by coming to the city.

Chapter 33

It has been a long time since you could sleep well in New York for five dollars a night, but you can still do it for fifty, if you know how. The key is starting late. I walked down to a hotel I had used before, near Madison Square Garden. It was a big place, once grand, now just a faded old pile, perpetually close to renovation or demolition but never actually getting there. After midnight the front-of-house staff shrinks down to a lone night porter responsible for everything including the desk. I walked up to him and asked if he had a room available. He made a show of tapping on a keyboard and looking at a screen and then he said yes, he did have a room available. He quoted a price of a hundred and eighty-five dollars, plus tax. I asked if I could see the room before I committed. It was the kind of hotel where that kind of request seemed reasonable. And sensible. Mandatory, even. The guy came out from behind the desk and took me up in the elevator and along a corridor. He opened a door with a pass card attached to his belt by a curly plastic cord and stood back to let me enter.

The room was OK. It had a bed in it, and a bathroom. Everything I needed, and nothing I didn't. I took two twenties out of my pocket and said, "Suppose we don't worry about that whole registration process downstairs?"

The guy said nothing. They never do, at that point. I took out another ten and said, "For the maid, tomorrow."

The guy shuffled a little like I was putting him on the spot, but then his hand came out and he took the money. He said, "Be out by eight," and he walked away. The door closed behind him. Maybe a central computer would show that his pass card had unlocked the room, and when, but he would claim that he had shown me the accommodations, and that I had been unmoved by their attractions, and that I had left again immediately. It was probably a claim he made on a regular basis. I was probably the fourth guy he had stowed away that week. Maybe the fifth, or the sixth. All kinds of things happen in city hotels, after the day staff has quit.

I slept well and woke up feeling good and I was out five minutes before eight. I forced my way through the crowds heading in and out of Penn Station and got breakfast in the back booth of a place on 33rd. Coffee, eggs, bacon, pancakes, and more coffee, all for six bucks, plus tax, plus tip. More expensive than North Carolina, but only slightly. The battery on Leonid's cell was still about half-charged. An icon was showing some bars blank and some bars lit. I figured I had enough juice for a few calls. I dialed 600 and then aimed to dial 82219 but before I got halfway through the sequence the earpiece started up with a fast little triplet trill pitched somewhere between a siren and a xylophone. A voice came on and told me my call could not be completed as dialed. It asked me to check and try again. I tried 1–600 and got exactly the same result. I tried 011 for an international line, and then 1 for North America, and then 600. A circuitous route, but the outcome was no better. I tried 001 as the international code in case the phone thought it was still in London. No result. I tried 8**101, which was the Eastern European international code for America, in case the phone had been hauled all the way from Moscow a year ago. No result. I looked at the phone's keypad and thought about using a 3 in place of the D, but the system was already beeping at me well before I got there.

So, 600-82219D was not a phone number, Canadian or otherwise. Which the FBI must have known. Maybe they had considered the possibility for about a minute, and then dismissed it out of hand. The FBI is a lot of things, but dumb isn't one of them. So back on 35th Street they had buried their real questions for me behind a smokescreen.

What else had they asked me?

They had gauged my level of interest, they had asked yet again if Susan had given me anything, and they had confirmed that I was leaving town. They had wanted me incurious, and empty-handed, and gone.

Why?

I had no idea.

And what exactly was 600-82219D, if it wasn't a phone number?

I sat another ten minutes with a final cup of coffee, sipping slowly, eyes open but not seeing much, trying to sneak up on the answer from below. Like Susan Mark had planned to sneak up out of the subway. I visualized the numbers in my

mind, strung out, separately, together, different combinations, spaces, hyphens, groups.

The 600 part rang a faint bell.

Susan Mark.

600.

But I couldn't get it.

I finished my coffee and put Leonid's cell back in my pocket and headed north toward the Sheraton.

The hotel was a huge glass pillar with a plasma screen in the lobby that listed all the day's events. The main ballroom was booked for lunch by a group calling itself FT. Fair Tax, or Free Trade, or maybe even the *Financial Times* itself. Plausible cover for a bunch of Wall Street fat cats looking to buy yet more influence. Their affair was due to start at noon. I figured Sansom would try to arrive by eleven. He would want some time and space and calm beforehand, to prepare. This was a big meeting for him. These were his people, and they had deep pockets. He would need sixty minutes, minimum. Which gave me two more hours to kill. I walked over to Broadway and found a clothing store two blocks north. I wanted another new shirt. I didn't like the one I was in. It was a symbol of defeat. *Don't come dressed like that, or you won't get in*. If I was going to see Elspeth Sansom again I didn't want to be wearing a badge of my failure and her success.

I chose an insubstantial thing made from thin khaki poplin and paid eleven bucks for it. Cheap, and it should have been. It had no pockets and the sleeves ended halfway down my forearms. With the cuffs folded back they hit my elbows. But I liked it well enough. It was a satisfactory garment. And it was purchased voluntarily, at least.

By ten-thirty I was back in the Sheraton's lobby. I sat in a chair with people all around me. They had suitcases. Half of them were heading out, waiting for cars. Half of them were heading in, waiting for rooms.

By ten-forty I had figured out what 600-82219D meant.

Chapter 34

I got up out of my chair and followed engraved brass signs to the Sheraton's business center. I couldn't get in. You needed a room key. I hung around at the door for three minutes and then another guy showed up. He was in a suit and he looked impatient. I put on a big display of hunting through my pants pockets and then I stepped aside with an apology. The other guy pushed ahead of me and used his key and opened the door and I stepped in after him.

There were four identical work stations in the room. Each had a desk, a chair, a computer, and a printer. I sat down far from the other guy and killed the computer's screen saver by tapping on the keyboard's space bar. So far, so good. I checked the screen icons and couldn't make much sense of them. But I found that if I held the mouse pointer over them, as if hesitating or ruminating, then a label popped up next to them. I identified the Internet Explorer application that way and clicked on it twice. The hard drive chattered and the browser opened up. Much faster than the last time I had used a computer. Maybe technology really was moving on. Right there on the home page was a shortcut to Google. I clicked on it, and Google's search page appeared. Again, very fast. I typed *army regulations* in the dialog box and hit enter. The screen redrew in an instant and gave me whole pages of options.

For the next five minutes I clicked and scrolled and read.

I got back to the lobby ten minutes before eleven. My chair had been taken. I went out to the sidewalk and stood in the sun. I figured Sansom would arrive by Town Car and come in through the front door. He wasn't a rock star. He wasn't the President. He wouldn't come in through the kitchen or the loading dock. The whole point was for him to be seen. The need to enter places undercover was a prize he had not yet won.

The day was hot. But the street was clean. It didn't smell. There were a pair of cops on the corner south of me, and another pair on the corner to the north. Standard NYPD deployment, in midtown. Proactive, and reassuring. But not necessarily useful, given the range of potential threats. Alongside me, departing

hotel guests climbed into taxis. The city's rhythm ground on relentlessly. Traffic on Seventh Avenue flowed, and stopped at the light, and flowed again. Traffic from the cross-streets flowed, and stopped, and started. Pedestrians bunched on the corners and struck out for the opposite sidewalks. Horns honked, trucks roared, the sun bounced off high glass and beat down hard.

Sansom arrived in a Town Car at five past eleven. Local plates, which meant he had ridden up most of the way on the train. Less convenient for him, but a smaller carbon footprint than driving all the way, or flying. Every detail mattered, in a campaign. *Politics is a minefield*. Springfield climbed out of the front passenger seat even before the car had stopped, and then Sansom and his wife climbed out of the back. They stood for a second on the sidewalk, ready to be gracious if there were people to greet them, ready not to be disappointed if there weren't. They scanned faces and saw mine and Sansom looked a little quizzical and his wife looked a little worried. Springfield headed in my direction but Elspeth waved him off with a small gesture. I guessed she had appointed herself damage control officer as far as I was concerned. She shook my hand like I was an old friend. She didn't comment on my shirt. Instead she leaned in close and asked, "Do you need to talk to us?"

It was a perfect politician's-wife inquiry. She freighted the word *need* with all kinds of meanings. Her emphasis cast me both as an opponent and a collaborator. She was saying, *We know you have information that might hurt us, and we hate you for it, but we would be truly grateful if you would be kind enough to discuss it with us first, before you make it public*.

Practically a whole essay, all in one short syllable.

I said, "Yes, we need to talk."

Springfield scowled but Elspeth smiled like I had just promised her a hundred thousand votes and took my arm and led me inside. The hotel staff didn't know or care who Sansom was, except that he was the speaker for the group that was paying a hefty fee for the ballroom, so they summoned up a whole lot of artificial enthusiasm and showed us to a private lounge and bustled about with bottles of lukewarm sparkling water and pots of weak coffee. Elspeth played host. Springfield didn't speak. Sansom took a call on his cell from his chief of staff back in D.C. They talked for four minutes about economic policy, and then for a further two about their afternoon agenda. It was clear from the context that Sansom was heading back to the office directly after lunch, for a long

Sansom was heading back to the office directly after lunch, for a long afternoon's work. The New York event was a fast hit-and-run, nothing more. Like a drive-by robbery.

The hotel people finished up and left and Sansom clicked off and the room went quiet. Canned air hissed in through vents and kept the temperature lower than I would have liked. For a moment we sipped water and coffee in silence. Then Elspeth Sansom opened the bidding. She asked, "Is there any news on the missing boy?"

I said, "A little. He skipped football practice, which apparently is rare."

"At USC?" Sansom said. He had a good memory. I had mentioned USC only once, and in passing. "Yes, that's rare."

"But then he called his coach and left a message."

"When?"

"Last night. Dinnertime on the Coast."

"And?"

"Apparently he's with a woman."

Elspeth said, "That's OK, then."

"I would have preferred a live real-time conversation. Or a face-to-face meeting."

"A message isn't good enough for you?"

"I'm a suspicious person."

"So what do you need to talk about?"

I turned to Sansom and asked him, "Where were you in 1983?"

He paused, just a fraction of a beat, and something flickered behind his eyes. Not shock, I thought. Not surprise. Resignation, possibly. He said, "I was a captain in 1983."

“That’s not what I asked you. I asked where you were.”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Were you in Berlin?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“You told me you were spotless. You still stand by that?”

“Completely.”

“Is there anything your wife doesn’t know about you?”

“Plenty of things. But nothing personal.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“You ever heard the name Lila Hoth?”

“I already told you I haven’t.”

“You ever heard the name Svetlana Hoth?”

“Never,” Sansom said. I was watching his face. It was very composed. He looked a little uncomfortable, but apart from that he was communicating nothing.

I asked him, “Did you know about Susan Mark before this week?”

“I already told you I didn’t.”

“Did you win a medal in 1983?”

He didn’t answer. The room went quiet again. Then Leonid’s cell rang in my pocket. I felt a vibration and heard a loud electronic tune. I fumbled the phone out and looked at the small window on the front. A 212 number. The same number that was already in the call register. The Four Seasons Hotel. Lila Hoth, presumably. I wondered whether Leonid was still missing, or whether he had

gotten back and told his story and now Lila was calling me specifically.

I pressed random buttons until the ringing stopped and I put the phone back in my pocket. I looked at Sansom and said, “I’m sorry about that.”

He shrugged, as if apologies were unnecessary.

I asked, “Did you win a medal in 1983?”

He said, “Why is that important?”

“You know what 600-8-22 is?”

“An army regulation, probably. I don’t know all of them verbatim.”

I said, “We figured all along that only a dumb person would expect HRC to have meaningful information about Delta operations. And I think we were largely right. But a little bit wrong, too. I think a really smart person might legitimately expect it, with a little lateral thinking.”

“In what way?”

“Suppose someone knew for sure that a Delta operation had taken place. Suppose they knew for sure it had succeeded.”

“Then they wouldn’t need information, because they’ve already got it.”

“Suppose they wanted to confirm the identity of the officer who led the operation?”

“They couldn’t get that from HRC. Just not possible. Orders and deployment records and after-action reports are classified and retained at Fort Bragg under lock and key.”

“But what happens to officers who lead successful missions?”

“You tell me.”

“They get medals,” I said. “The bigger the mission, the bigger the medal. And army regulation 600-8-22, section one, paragraph nine, subsection D, requires the Human Resources Command to maintain an accurate historical record of

each and every award recommendation, and the resulting decision."

"Maybe so," Sansom said. "But if it was a Delta mission, all the details would be omitted. The citation would be redacted, the location would be redacted, and the meritorious conduct would not be described."

I nodded. "All the record would show is a name, a date, and an award. Nothing else."

"Exactly."

"Which is all a smart person thinking laterally really needs, right? An award proves a mission succeeded, the lack of a citation proves it was a covert mission. Pick any random month, say early in 1983. How many medals were awarded?"

"Thousands. Hundreds and hundreds of Good Conduct Medals alone."

"How many Silver Stars?"

"Not so many."

"If any," I said. "Not much was happening early in 1983. How many DSMs were handed out? How many DSCs? I bet they were as rare as hens' teeth early in 1983."

Elspeth Sansom moved in her chair and looked at me and said, "I don't understand."

I turned toward her but Sansom raised a hand and cut me off. He answered for me. There were no secrets between them. No wariness. He said, "It's a kind of back door. Direct information is completely unavailable, but indirect information is out there. If someone knew that a Delta mission had taken place and succeeded, and when, then whoever got the biggest unexplained medal that month probably led it. Wouldn't work in wartime, because big medals would be too common. But in peacetime, when nothing else is going on, a big award would stick out like a sore thumb."

"We invaded Grenada in 1983," Elspeth said. "Delta was there."

"October," Sansom said. "Which would add some background noise later in the year. But the first nine months were pretty quiet."

Elspeth Sansom looked away. She didn't know what her husband had been doing during the first nine months of 1983. Perhaps she never would. She said, "So who is asking?"

I said, "An old battleaxe called Svetlana Hoth, who claims to have been a Red Army political commissar. No real details, but she says she knew an American soldier named John in Berlin in 1983. She says he was very kind to her. And the only way that inquiring about it through Susan Mark makes any sense is if there was a mission involved and the guy named John led it and got a medal for it. The FBI found a note in Susan's car. Someone had fed her the regulation and the section and the paragraph to tell her exactly where to look."

Elspeth glanced at Sansom, involuntarily, with a question in her face that she knew would never be answered: *Did you get a medal for something you did in Berlin in 1983?* Sansom didn't respond. So I tried. I asked him straight out, "Were you on a mission in Berlin in 1983?"

Sansom said, "You know I can't tell you that." Then he seemed to lose patience with me, and he said, "You seem like a smart guy. Think about it. What possible kind of operation could Delta have been running in Berlin in 1983, for God's sake?"

I said, "I don't know. As I recall, you guys worked very hard to stop people like me knowing what you were doing. And I don't really care, anyway. I'm trying to do you a favor here. That's all. One brother officer to another. Because my guess is something is going to come back and bite you in the ass and I thought you might appreciate a warning."

Sansom calmed down pretty fast. He breathed in and out a couple of times and said, "I do appreciate the warning. And I'm sure you understand that I'm not really allowed to deny anything. Because logically, denying something is the same as confirming something else. If I deny Berlin and every other place I wasn't, then eventually by a process of elimination you could work out where I was. But I'll go out on a limb just a little, because I think we're all on the same side here. So listen up, soldier. I was not in Berlin at any point in 1983. I never met any Russian women in 1983. I don't think I was very kind to anyone, the whole year long. There were a lot of guys in the army called John. Berlin was a popular destination for sightseeing. This person you have been talking to is looking for someone else. It's as simple as that."

looking for someone else. It's as simple as that.

*

Sansom's little speech hung in the air for a moment. We all sipped our drinks and sat quiet. Then Elspeth Sansom checked her watch and her husband saw her do it and said, "You'll have to excuse us now. Today we have some really serious begging to do. Springfield will be happy to see you out." Which I thought was an odd proposal. It was a public hotel. It was my space as much as Sansom's. I could find my own way out, and I was entitled to. I wasn't going to steal the spoons, and even if I did, they weren't Sansom's spoons. But then I figured he wanted to set up a little quiet time for Springfield and me, in a lonely corridor somewhere. For further discussion, perhaps, or for a message. So I stood up and headed for the door. Didn't shake hands or say goodbye. It didn't seem to be that kind of a parting.

Springfield followed me to the lobby. He didn't speak. He seemed to be rehearsing something. I stopped and waited and he caught up to me and said, "You really need to leave this whole thing alone."

I asked, "Why, if he wasn't even there?"

"Because to prove that he wasn't there you'll start asking where he was instead. Better that you never know."

I nodded. "This is personal to you too, isn't it? Because you were right there with him. You went wherever he went."

He nodded back. "Just let it go. You really can't afford to turn over the wrong rock."

"Why not?"

"Because you'll be erased, if you do. You won't exist anymore. You'll just disappear, physically and bureaucratically. That can happen now, you know. This is a whole new world. I'd like to say I would help with the process, but I wouldn't get the chance. Not even close. Because a whole bunch of other people would come for you first. I would be so far back in line that even your birth certificate would be blank before I got anywhere near you."

"What other people?"

He didn’t answer.

“Government?”

He didn’t answer.

“Those federal guys?”

He didn’t answer. Just turned back and headed for the elevators. I stepped out to the Seventh Avenue sidewalk and Leonid’s phone started ringing in my pocket again.

Chapter 35

I stood on Seventh Avenue with my back to the traffic and answered Leonid's phone. I heard Lila Hoth's voice, soft in my ear. Precise diction, quaint phrasing. She said, "Reacher?"

I said, "Yes."

She said, "I need to see you, quite urgently."

"About what?"

"I think my mother might be in danger. Myself also, possibly."

"From what?"

"Three men were downstairs, asking questions at the desk. While we were out. I think our rooms have been searched, too."

"What three men?"

"I don't know who they were. Apparently they wouldn't say."

"Why talk to me about it?"

"Because they were asking about you too. Please come and see us."

I asked, "You're not upset about Leonid?"

She said, "Under the circumstances, no. I think that was just an unfortunate misunderstanding. Please come."

I didn't answer.

She said, "I would very much appreciate your help." She spoke politely, appealingly, a little submissively, even diffidently, like a supplicant. But not

with standing all of that something extra in her voice made me fully aware that she was so beautiful that the last time any guy had said no to her was probably a decade in the past. She sounded vaguely commanding, like everything was already a done deal, like to ask was to get. *Just let it go*, Springfield had said, and of course I should have listened to him. But instead I told Lila Hoth, "I'll meet you in your hotel lobby, fifteen minutes from now." I thought that avoiding her suite would be enough of a safeguard, against whatever complications might ensue. Then I closed the phone and headed straight for the Sheraton's taxi line.

The Four Seasons's lobby was divided into a number of separate areas on two separate levels. I found Lila Hoth and her mother at a corner table in a dim paneled space that seemed to be a tea room during the day and might have been a bar by night. They were alone. Leonid wasn't there. I checked carefully all around and saw no one else worth worrying about. No unexplained men in mid-priced suits, nobody lingering over the morning newspaper. No apparent surveillance at all. So I slid into a seat, next to Lila, across from her mother. Lila was wearing a black skirt and a white shirt. Like a cocktail waitress, except that the fabrics and the cut and the fit were like nothing a cocktail waitress could afford. Her eyes were twin points of light in the gloom, as blue as a tropical sea. Svetlana was in another shapeless housedress, this time muddy maroon. Her eyes were dull. She nodded uncomprehendingly as I sat down. Lila extended her hand and shook mine quite formally. The contrast between the two women was enormous, in every way. In terms of age and looks, obviously, but also in terms of energy, vivacity, manners, and disposition.

I settled in and Lila got straight to the point. She asked, "Did you bring the memory stick?"

I said, "No," although I had. It was in my pocket, with my toothbrush and Leonid's phone.

"Where is it?"

"Somewhere else."

"Somewhere safe?"

"Completely."

She asked, "Why did those men come here?"

I said, “Because you’re poking around in something that’s still a secret.”

“But the press officer at the Human Resources Command was enthusiastic about it.”

“That’s because you lied to him.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You told him it was about Berlin. But it wasn’t. Berlin in 1983 was no kind of fun, but it was stable. It was a Cold War tableau, frozen in time. Maybe there was a little back and forth between the CIA and the KGB and the Brits and the Stasi, but there was no real U.S. Army involvement. For our guys it was just a tourist destination. Take the train, see the Wall. Great bars, and great hookers. Probably ten thousand guys called John passed through, but they didn’t do anything except spend money and catch the clap. Certainly they didn’t fight and they didn’t win medals. So tracking one of them down would be next to impossible. Maybe HRC was prepared to waste a little time, just in case something good came of it. But from the beginning it was a ridiculous task. So you can’t have gotten a positive outcome from Susan Mark. She can’t have told you anything about Berlin that made it worth coming over here. Just not possible.”

“So why did we come?”

“Because during those first few phone calls you softened her up and you made her your friend and then when you judged the time was right you told her what you really wanted. And exactly how to find it. For her ears only. Not Berlin. Something else entirely.”

An unguarded person with nothing to hide would have responded instantly and openly. Probably with outrage, possibly with hurt feelings. An amateur bluffer would have faked it, with bluster and noise. Lila Hoth just sat quiet for a beat. Her eyes showed the same kind of fast response as John Sansom’s had, back in his room in the O. Henry Hotel. Rethink, redeploy, reorganize, all in a brief couple of seconds.

She said, “It’s very complicated.”

I didn’t answer.

She said, “But it’s entirely innocent.”

I said, “Tell that to Susan Mark.”

She inclined her head. The same gesture I had seen before. Courteous, delicate, and a little contrite. She said, “I asked Susan for help. She agreed, quite willingly. Clearly her actions created difficulties for her with other parties. So, yes, I suppose I was the indirect cause of her troubles. But not the direct cause. And I regret what happened, very, very much. Please believe me, if I had known beforehand, I would have said no to my mother.”

Svetlana Hoth nodded and smiled.

I said, “What other parties?”

Lila Hoth said, “Her own government, I think. Your government.”

“Why? What did your mother really want?”

Lila said she needed to explain the background first.

Chapter 36

Lila Hoth had been just seven years old when the Soviet Union had fallen apart, so she spoke with a kind of historical detachment. She had the same kind of distance from former realities that I had from the Jim Crow years in America. She told me that the Red Army had deployed political commissars very widely. Every infantry company had one. She said that command and discipline were shared uneasily between the commissar and a field officer. She said that rivalry was common and bitter, not necessarily between the two as individuals, but between tactical common sense and ideological purity. She made sure I understood the general background, and then she moved on to specifics.

Svetlana Hoth had been a political commissar assigned to an infantry company. Her company had gone to Afghanistan soon after the Soviet invasion of 1979. Initial combat operations had been satisfactory for the infantry. Then they had turned disastrous. Attritional losses had become heavy and constant. At first there had been denial. Then Moscow had reacted, belatedly. The order of battle had been reorganized. Companies had been merged. Tactical common sense had suggested retrenchment. Ideology had required renewed offensives. Morale had required unity of ethnicity and geographical origin. Companies had been reconstituted to include sniper teams. Expert marksmen were brought in, with their companion spotters. Thus pairs of ragged men used to living off the land had arrived.

Svetlana’s sniper was her husband.

His spotter was Svetlana’s younger brother.

The situation had improved, both in military and in personal terms. Svetlana’s and other family and regional groupings had spent down time together very happily. Companies had dug in and settled down and achieved acceptable safety and security. Offensive requirements were satisfied by regular nighttime sniper operations. The results were excellent. Soviet snipers had long been the best in the world. The Afghan mujahideen had no answer to them. Late in 1981 Moscow had reinforced a winning hand by shipping new weapons. A new-model

rifle had been issued. It was recently developed and still top secret. It was called the VAL Silent Sniper.

I nodded. Said, “I saw one once.”

Lila Hoth smiled, briefly, with a hint of shyness. And with a hint of national pride, perhaps, for a country that no longer existed. Probably just a shadow of the pride her mother had felt, way back when. Because the VAL was a great weapon. It was a very accurate silenced semi-automatic rifle. It fired a heavy nine-millimeter bullet at a subsonic velocity, and could defeat all types of contemporary body armor and thin-skinned military vehicles at ranges out to about four hundred yards. It came with a choice of powerful day telescopes or electronic night scopes. It was a nightmare, from an opponent’s point of view. You could be killed with no warning at all, silently, suddenly, and randomly, asleep in bed in a tent, in the latrines, eating, dressing, walking around, in the light, in the dark.

I said, “It was a fine piece.”

Lila Hoth smiled again. But then the smile faded. The bad news started. The stable situation lasted a year, and then it ended. The Soviet infantry’s inevitable military reward for good performance was to be handed ever more dangerous tasks. The same the world over, the same throughout history. You don’t get a pat on the back and a ride home. You get a map instead. Svetlana’s company was one of many ordered to push north and east up the Korengal Valley. The valley was six miles long. It was the only navigable route out of Pakistan. The Hindu Kush mountains reared up on the far left, impossibly barren and high, and the Abas Ghar range blocked the right flank. The six-mile trail in between was a major mujahideen supply line out of the North West Frontier, and it had to be cut.

Lila said, “The British wrote the book over a hundred years ago, about operations in Afghanistan. Because of their empire. They said, when contemplating an offensive, the very first thing you must plan is your inevitable retreat. And they said, you must save the last bullet for yourself, because you do not want to be taken alive, especially by the women. The company commanders had read that book. The political commissars had been told not to. They had been told that the British had failed only because of their political un-soundness. Soviet ideology was pure, and therefore success was guaranteed. With that delusion our very own Vietnam began.”

delusion our very own Vietnam began.

The push up the Korengal Valley had been backed by air and artillery power and had succeeded for the first three miles. A fourth had been won yard by yard against opposition that had seemed ferocious to the grunts but strangely muted to the officers.

The officers were right.

It was a trap.

The mujahideen waited until Soviet supply lines were stretched four miles long and then they dropped the hammer. Helicopter resupply was largely interdicted by a constant barrage of U.S.-supplied shoulder-launched ground-to-air missiles. Coordinated attacks pinched off the salient at its origin. Late in 1982 thousands of Red Army troops were essentially abandoned in a long thin chain of inadequate and improvised encampments. The winter weather was awful. Freezing blasts of wind howled constantly along the pass between the mountain ranges. And there were evergreen holly bushes everywhere. Pretty and picturesque in the right context, but not for soldiers forced to work among them. They were gratingly noisy in the wind and they limited mobility and they tore skin and shredded uniforms.

Then harassment raids had started.

Prisoners had been taken, in ones and twos.

Their fate was appalling.

Lila quoted lines that the old British writer Rudyard Kipling had put in a doom-laden poem about failed offensives and groaning abandoned battlefield casualties and cruel Afghan tribeswomen with knives: *When you're wounded on Afghanistan's plains, and the women come out to cut up what remains, just roll to your rifle and blow out your brains, and go to your God like a soldier*. Then she said what had been true even at the zenith of the British Empire's power was still true, and worse. Soviet infantrymen would go missing and hours later in the dark the winter wind would carry the sound of their screaming, from unseen enemy camps close by. The screaming would start at a desperate pitch and move slowly and surely upward into insane banshee wailing. Sometimes it would last ten or twelve hours. Most corpses were never recovered. But sometimes bodies

would be returned, missing hands and feet, or whole limbs, or heads, or ears, or eyes, or noses, or penises.

Or skin.

“Some were flayed alive,” Lila said. “Their eyelids would be cut away, and their heads forced down in a frame so they would have no choice but to watch their skin being peeled back, first from their faces, and then from their bodies. The cold anesthetized their wounds to some extent and stopped them dying of shock too soon. Sometimes the process lasted a very long time. Or sometimes they would be roasted alive on fires. Parcels of cooked meat would show up near our emplacements. At first the men thought they were gifts of food, perhaps from sympathetic locals. But then they realized.”

Svetlana Hoth stared on into the room, not seeing anything, looking even bleaker than before. Maybe the tone of her daughter’s voice was prompting memories. Certainly the tone of her daughter’s voice was very compelling. Lila had not lived through or witnessed the events she was describing, but it sounded like she had. It sounded like she had witnessed them yesterday. She had moved on from historical detachment. It struck me that she would make a fine storyteller. She had the gift of narrative.

She said, “They liked to capture our snipers best of all. They hated our snipers. I think snipers are always hated, perhaps because of the way they kill. My mother was very worried about my father, obviously. And her baby brother. They went out most nights, into the low hills, with the electronic scope. Not too far. Maybe a thousand yards, to find an angle. Maybe a little more. Far enough to be effective, but close enough to feel safe. But nowhere was really safe. Everywhere was vulnerable. And they had to go. Their orders were to shoot the enemy. Their intention was to shoot the prisoners. They thought it would be a mercy. It was an awful time. And my mother was pregnant by then. With me. I was conceived in a rock trench hacked out of the Korengal floor, under a greatcoat that dated back to the end of World War Two, and on top of two others that were possibly even older. My mother said they had old bullet holes in them, maybe from Stalingrad.”

I said nothing. Svetlana stared on. Lila put her hands on the table and tangled her fingers loosely together. She said, “For the first month or so my father and my uncle came back every morning, safe. They were a good team. Perhaps the best.”

Svetlana stared on. Lila took her hands off the table and paused a beat. Then she sat up straight and squared her shoulders. A change of pace. A change of subject. She said, “There were Americans in Afghanistan at that time.”

I said, “Were there?”

She nodded.

I said, “What Americans?”

“Soldiers. Not many, but some. Not always, but sometimes.”

“You think?”

She nodded again. “The U.S. Army was definitely there. The Soviet Union was their enemy, and the mujahideen were their allies. It was the Cold War by proxy. It suited President Reagan very well to have the Red Army worn down. It was a part of his anti-communist strategy. And he enjoyed the chance to capture some of our new weapons for intelligence purposes. So teams were sent. Special Forces. They were in and out on a regular basis. And one night in March of 1983, one of those teams found my father and my uncle and stole their VAL rifle.”

I said nothing.

Lila said, “The loss of the rifle was a defeat, of course. But what was worse was that the Americans gave my father and my uncle to the tribeswomen. There was no need for that. Obviously they had to be silenced, because the American presence was entirely covert and had to be concealed. But the Americans could have killed my father and my uncle themselves, quickly and quietly and easily. They chose not to. My mother heard their screams all the next day and far into the night. Her husband, and her brother. Sixteen, eighteen hours. She said even screaming that badly she could still tell them apart, by the sound of their voices.”

Chapter 37

I glanced around the Four Seasons's dim tea room and moved in my chair and said, "I'm sorry, but I don't believe you."

Lila Hoth said, "I'm telling you the truth."

I shook my head. "I was in the U.S. Army. I was a military cop. Broadly speaking I knew where people went, and where they didn't. And there were no U.S. boots on the ground in Afghanistan. Not back then. Not during that conflict. It was purely a local affair."

"But you had a dog in the fight."

"Of course we did. Like you did when we were in Vietnam. Was the Red Army in-country there?" It was a rhetorical question, designed to make a point, but Lila Hoth took it seriously. She leaned forward across the table and spoke to her mother, low and fast, in a foreign language that I presumed was Ukrainian. Svetlana's eyes opened a little and she cocked her head to one side as if she was recalling some small matter of arcane historical detail. She spoke back to her daughter, low and fast, and long, and then Lila paused a second to marshal her translation and said, "No, we sent no troops to Vietnam, because we had confidence that our socialist brothers from the People's Republic could complete their task unaided. Which, my mother says, apparently they did, quite splendidly. Little men in pajamas defeated the big green machine."

Svetlana Hoth smiled and nodded.

I said, "Just like a bunch of goatherders kicked her ass."

"Undisputedly. But with a lot of help."

"Didn't happen."

"But you admit that material help was provided, surely. To the mujahideen. Money, and weapons. Especially surface-to-air missiles, and things of that

Money, and weapons. Especially surface-to-air missiles, and things of that nature."

"Like in Vietnam, only the other way around."

"And Vietnam is an excellent example. Because, to your certain knowledge, whenever did the United States provide military aid anywhere in the world without also sending what they called military advisers?"

I didn't answer.

She asked, "For instance, how many countries have you served in?"

I said nothing.

She asked, "When did you join the army?"

"In 1984," I said.

"Then these events of 1982 and 1983 were all before your time."

"Only just," I said. "And there is such a thing as institutional memory."

"Wrong," she said. "Secrets were kept and institutional memories were conveniently erased. There's a long history of illegal American military involvements all around the world. Especially during Mr. Reagan's presidency."

"You learn that in high school?"

"Yes, I did. And remember, the communists were gone long before I was in high school. Thanks, in part, to Mr. Reagan himself."

I said, "Even if you're right, why assume Americans were involved on that particular night? Presumably your mother didn't see it happen. Why not assume your father and your uncle were captured directly by the mujahideen?"

"Because their rifle was never found. And my mother's position was never fired on at night by a sniper. My father had twenty rounds in his magazine, and he was carrying twenty spare. If the mujahideen had captured him directly, then they would have used his rifle against us. They would have killed forty of our men, or tried to, and then they would have run out of ammunition and abandoned the

gun. My mother's company would have found it eventually. There was a lot of back-and-forth skirmishing. Our side overran their positions, and vice versa. It was like a crazy circular chase. The mujahideen were intelligent. They had a habit of doubling back to positions we had previously written off as abandoned. But over a period of time our people saw all their places. They would have found the VAL, empty and rusting, maybe in use as a fence post. They accounted for all their other captured weapons that way. But not that VAL. The only logical conclusion is that it was carried straight to America, by Americans."

I said nothing.

Lila Hoth said, "I'm telling you the truth."

I said, "I once saw a VAL Silent Sniper."

"You told me that already."

"I saw it in 1994," I said. "We were told it had just been captured. Eleven whole years after you claim it was. There was a big urgent panic, because of its capabilities. The army wouldn't wait eleven years to get in a panic."

"Yes, it would," she said. "To unveil the rifle immediately after its capture might have started World War Three. It would have been a direct admission that your soldiers were in direct face-to-face contact with ours, without any declaration of hostilities. Illegal at the very least, and completely disastrous in geopolitical terms. America would have lost the moral high ground. Support inside the Soviet Union would have been strengthened. The fall of communism would have been delayed, perhaps for years."

I said nothing.

She said, "Tell me, what happened in your army, in 1994, after the big urgent panic?"

I paused, in the same way that Svetlana Hoth had. I recalled the historical details. They were surprising. I checked and rechecked. Then I said, "Not very much happened, actually."

"No new body armor? No new camouflage? No tactical reaction of any kind?"

"No."

No.

“Is that logical, even for an army?”

“Not especially.”

“When was the last equipment upgrade before that?”

I paused again. Sought more historical details. Recalled the PASGT, introduced to much excitement and fanfare and acclaim during my early years in uniform. The Personal Armor System, Ground Troops. A brand-new Kevlar helmet, rated to withstand all manner of assault by small arms fire. A thick new body-armor vest, to be worn either over or under the battledress blouse, rated safe even against long guns. Specifically, as I recalled, rated safe against incoming nine-millimeter rounds. Plus new camouflage patterns, carefully designed to work better, and available in two flavors, woodland and desert. The Marines got a third option, blue and gray, for urban environments.

I said nothing.

Lila Hoth asked, “When was the upgrade?”

I said, “In the late eighties.”

“Even with a big urgent panic, how long does it take to design and manufacture an upgrade like that?”

I said, “A few years.”

“So let’s review what we know. In the late eighties you received upgraded equipment, explicitly designed for better personal protection. Do you think it is possible that was the result of a direct stimulus derived from an unrevealed source in 1983?”

I didn’t answer.

We all sat quiet for a moment. A silent and discreet waiter came by and offered us tea. He recited a long list of exotic blends. Lila asked for a flavor I had never heard of, and then she translated for her mother, who asked for the same thing. I asked for regular coffee, black. The waiter inclined his head about a quarter of an inch, as if the Four Seasons was willing to accommodate all and any requests,

however appallingly proletarian they might be. I waited until the guy had retreated again and asked, “How did you figure out who you are looking for?”

Lila said, “My mother’s generation expected to fight a land war with you in Europe, and they expected to win. Their ideology was pure, and yours wasn’t. After a swift and certain victory, they expected to take many of you prisoner, possibly millions of you. In that phase, part of a political commissar’s duties would have been to classify enemy combatants, to cull the ideologically irretrievable from the herd. To aid them in that task, they were made familiar with the structure of your military.”

“Made familiar by who?”

“By the KGB. It was an ongoing program. There was a lot of information available. They knew who did what. In the case of elite units, they even knew names. Not just the officers, but the enlisted men too. Like a true soccer fan knows the personnel and the strengths and the weaknesses of all the other teams in the league, bench players included. For incursions into the Korengal Valley, my mother reasoned that there were only three realistic options. Either SEALs from the Navy, or Recon Marines from the Corps, or Delta Force from the army. Contemporary intelligence argued against the SEALs or the Marines. There was no circumstantial evidence of their involvement. No specific information. The KGB had people throughout your organizations, and they reported nothing. But there was significant radio traffic out of Delta bases in Turkey, and out of staging posts in Oman. Our radar picked up unexplained flights. It was a logical conclusion that Delta was running the operations.”

The waiter came back with a tray. He was a tall dark guy, quite old, probably foreign. He had an air about him. The Four Seasons probably put him front and center because of it. His bearing suggested he might once have been a tea expert in some dark paneled place in Vienna or Salzburg. In reality he had probably been unemployed in Estonia. Maybe he had been drafted along with the rest of Svetlana’s generation. Maybe he had endured the Korengal winters along with her, somewhere down the line in an ethnic grouping of his own. He made a big show of serving the tea and arranging the lemons on a plate. My coffee came in a nice cup. He put it down in front of me with elegantly disguised disapproval. When he was gone again Lila said, “My mother estimated that the raid would have been led by a captain. A lieutenant would have been too junior and a major would have been too senior. The KGB had personnel lists. There were a lot of

captains assigned to Delta at the time. But there had been some radio analysis. Someone had heard the name John. That narrowed the field."

I nodded. Pictured a massive dish antenna somewhere, maybe in Armenia or Azerbaijan, a guy in a hut, headphones on, rubber cups clamped tight on his ears, sifting through the frequencies, hearing the whine and screech of scrambled channels, stumbling on a fragment of plain speech, writing the word *John* on a pad of coarse brown paper. A lot of stuff is snatched from the ether. Most of it is useless. A word that you understand is like a nugget of gold in a pan, or like a diamond in a rock. And a word that *they* understand is like a bullet in the back.

Lila said, "My mother knew all about your army's medals. They were held to be important, as criteria for classifying prisoners. Badges of honor, that would become badges of dishonor immediately upon capture. She knew that the VAL rifle would be worth a major award. But which award? Remember, there had been no declaration of hostilities. And most of your major awards specify gallantry or heroism while in action against an armed enemy of the United States. Technically whoever stole the VAL from my father was not eligible for any of those awards, because technically the Soviet Union was not an enemy of the United States. Not in the military sense. Not in a formal political way. There had been no declaration of war."

I nodded again. We had never been at war with the Soviet Union. On the contrary, for four long years we had been allies in a desperate struggle against a common foe. We had cooperated, extensively. The World War Two-era Red Army greatcoat that Lila Hoth claimed to have been conceived under had almost certainly been made in America, as part of the Lend-Lease program. We had shipped a hundred million tons of woolen and cotton goods to the Russians. Plus fifteen million pairs of leather boots, four million rubber tires, two thousand railroad locomotives, and eleven thousand freight cars, as well as all the obvious heavy metal, like fifteen thousand airplanes, seven thousand tanks, and 375,000 army trucks. All free, gratis, and for nothing. Winston Churchill had called the program the least sordid in all of history. Legends had grown up around it. The Soviets were said to have asked for condoms, and in an attempt to impress and intimidate, they had specified that they should be eighteen inches long. The United States had duly shipped them, in cartons stamped *Size: Medium*.

So went the story.

Lila asked. "Are you listening?"

I nodded. “The Superior Service Medal would have fit the bill. Or the Legion of Merit, or the Soldier’s Medal.”

“Not big enough.”

“Thanks. I won all three.”

“Capturing the VAL was a really big coup. A sensation. It was a completely unknown weapon. Its acquisition would have been rewarded with a really big medal.”

“But which one?”

“My mother concluded it would be the Distinguished Service Medal. That one is big, but different. The applicable standard is exceptionally meritorious service to the United States Government in a duty of great responsibility. It is completely independent of formal declared combat activities. It is normally awarded to politically pliable Brigadier Generals and above. My mother was under orders to execute all holders of the DSM immediately. Below the rank of Brigadier General it is awarded only very rarely. But it’s the only significant medal a Delta captain could have won that night in the Korengal Valley.”

I nodded. I agreed. I figured Svetlana Hoth was a pretty good analyst. Clearly she had been well trained, and well informed. The KGB had done a decent job. I said, “So you went looking for a guy called John who had been a Delta captain and won a DSM, both in March of 1983.”

Lila nodded. “And to be certain, the DSM had to come without a citation.”

“And you made Susan Mark help.”

“I didn’t *make* her. She was happy to help.”

“Why?”

“Because she was upset by my mother’s story.”

Svetlana Hoth smiled and nodded.

Lila said, “And she was a little upset by my story, too. I’m a fatherless child, the

Lila said, "And she was a little upset by my story, too. I'm a ruthless child, the same as her."

I asked, "How did John Sansom's name come up even before Susan reported back? I don't believe that it was from a bunch of New York private eyes sitting around reading the newspaper and making jokes."

"It's a very rare combination," Lila said. "John, Delta, DSM, but never a one-star general. We noticed it in the *Herald Tribune*, when his Senate ambitions were announced. We were in London. You can buy that paper all over the world. It's a version of the *New York Times*. John Sansom might well be the only man in your army's history who matches those criteria four for four. But we wanted to be absolutely sure. We needed final confirmation."

"Before what? What do you want to do to the guy?"

Lila Hoth looked surprised.

"Do?" she said. "We don't want to *do* anything. We just want to talk to him, that's all. We want to ask him, why? Why would he do that, to two other human beings?"

Chapter 38

Lila Hoth finished her tea, and put her cup down on her saucer. Bone china clinked politely on bone china. She asked, “Will you go get Susan’s information for me?”

I didn’t answer.

She said, “My mother has waited a long time.”

I asked, “Why has she?”

“Time, chance, means, opportunity. Money, mostly, I suppose. Her horizons have been very narrow, until recently.”

I asked, “Why was your husband killed?”

“My husband?”

“Back in Moscow.”

Lila paused, and said, “It was the times.”

“Same for your mother’s husband.”

“No. I told you, if Sansom had shot him in the head, like what happened to my husband, or stabbed him in the brain, or broken his neck, or whatever else Delta soldiers were taught to do, it would have been different. But he didn’t. He was cruel instead. Inhuman. My father couldn’t even roll to his rifle, because they had stolen his rifle.”

I said nothing.

She said, “You want a man like that in your Senate?”

“As opposed to what?”

“Will you give me Susan’s confirmation?”

“No point,” I said.

“Why not?”

“Because you wouldn’t get anywhere near John Sansom. If any of what you say actually happened, then it’s a secret, and it’s going to stay a secret for a very long time. And secrets are protected, especially now. There are already two federal agencies at work on this. You just had three guys asking questions. At best, you’ll be deported. Your feet won’t touch the ground, all the way back to the airport. They’ll put you on the plane in handcuffs. In coach. The Brits will pull you off the plane at the other end and you’ll spend the rest of your life under surveillance.”

Svetlana Hoth stared into space.

I said, “And at worst, you’ll just disappear. Right here. One minute you’ll be on the street, and then you won’t be. You’ll be rotting in Guantanamo, or you’ll be on your way to Syria or Egypt so they can kill you there.”

Lila Hoth didn’t speak.

“My advice?” I said. “Forget all about it. Your father and your uncle were killed in a war. They weren’t the first, and they won’t be the last. Shit happens.”

“We just want to ask him why.”

“You already know why. There had been no declaration of hostilities, therefore he couldn’t kill your guys. It’s about the rules of engagement. There’s a heavy-duty briefing before every mission.”

“So he let someone else do it for him.”

“It was the times. Like you said, it might have started World War Three. It was in everyone’s interest to avoid that.”

“Have you looked at the file? Did Susan really have the confirmation? Just tell me, yes or no. I won’t do anything without actually seeing it. I can’t.”

“You won’t do anything, period.”

“It wasn’t right.”

“Invading Afghanistan in the first place wasn’t right. You should have stayed home.”

“Then so should you, from all the places you went.”

“No argument from me.”

“What about freedom of information?”

“What about it?”

“America is a country of laws.”

“True. But do you know what the laws actually say now? You should read the *Herald Tribune* more carefully.”

“Are you going to help us?”

“I’ll ask the concierge to call you a cab to the airport.”

“Is that all?”

“That’s the best help anyone could give you.”

“Is there anything I can do to change your mind?”

I didn’t answer.

“Anything at all?”

“No,” I said.

We all went quiet after that. The tea expert brought the check. It was in a padded leather wallet. Lila Hoth signed it. She said, “Sansom should be called to account.”

“If it was him,” I said. “If it was anybody.” I took Leonid’s phone out of my pocket and dumped it on the table. I pushed my chair back and got ready to

leave.

Lila said, “Please keep the phone.”

I said, “Why?”

“Because my mother and I are staying. Just a few more days. And I would really like to be able to call you, if I wanted to.” She wasn’t coy in the way she said it. Not coquettish. No lowered eyelids, no batted lashes. No hand on my arm, no attempt to seduce, no attempt to change my mind. It was just a plain statement, neutrally delivered.

Then she said, “Even if you’re not a friend,” and I heard the tiniest bat-squeak of a threat in her voice. Just a faint far-off chime of menace, a hint of danger, barely audible behind the words, accompanied by an imperceptible chill in her amazing blue eyes. Like a warm summer sea changing to sunlit winter ice. Same color, different temperature.

Or maybe she was just sad, or anxious, or determined.

I looked at her with a level gaze and put the phone back in my pocket and stood up and walked away. There were plenty of cabs on 57th Street, but none of them was empty. So I walked. The Sheraton was three blocks west and five blocks south. Twenty minutes, max. I figured I could get there before Sansom finished his lunch.

Chapter 39

I didn't get to the Sheraton before Sansom finished his lunch, partly because the sidewalks were clogged with people moving slow in the heat, and partly because it had been a short lunch. Which I guessed made sense. Sansom's Wall Street audience wanted to spend maximum time making money and minimum time giving it away. I didn't make it onto the same Amtrak as him, either. I missed a D.C. train by five minutes, which meant I trailed him back to the capital a whole hour and a half in arrears.

The same guard was on duty at the Cannon Building's door. He didn't recognize me. But he let me in anyway, mainly because of the Constitution. Because of the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights. *Congress shall make no law abridging the right of the people to petition the Government*. My pocket junk inched through an X-ray machine and I stepped through a metal detector and was patted down even though I knew the light had flashed green. There was a gaggle of House pages inside the lobby and one of them called ahead and then walked me to Sansom's quarters. The corridors were wide and generous and confusing. The individual offices seemed small but handsome. Maybe they had once been large and handsome, but now they were broken up into reception anterooms and multiple inner spaces, partly for senior staff to use, I guessed, and partly to make eventual labyrinthine access to the big guy seem more of a gift than it really was.

Sansom's place looked the same as all the others. A door off the corridor, lots of flags, lots of eagles, some oil paintings of old guys in wigs, a reception desk with a young woman behind it. Maybe a staffer, maybe an intern. Springfield was leaning on the corner of her desk. He saw me and nodded without a smile and pushed off the desk and came to the door to meet me and jerked his thumb farther along the corridor.

"Cafeteria," he said.

We got there down a flight of stairs. It was a wide low room full of tables and chairs. Sansom was nowhere in it. Springfield grunted like he wasn't surprised

and concluded that Sansom had returned to his office while we were out looking for him, by an alternate route, possibly via a colleague's billet. He said the place was a warren and that there were always conversations to be had and favors to be sought and deals to be struck and votes to be traded. We walked back the same way we had come and Springfield stuck his head around an inner door and then backed away and motioned me inside.

Sansom's inner office was a rectangular space larger than a closet and smaller than a thirty-dollar motel room. It had a window and paneled walls covered with framed photographs and framed newspaper headlines and souvenirs on shelves. Sansom himself was in a red leather chair behind a desk, with a fountain pen in his hand and a whole lot of papers spread out in front of him. He had his jacket off. He had the weary, airless look of a man who had been sitting still for a long time. He hadn't been out. The cafeteria detour had been a charade, presumably designed to allow someone to make an exit without me seeing him. Who, I didn't know. Why, I didn't know. But I sat down in the visitor chair and found it still warm from someone else's body. Behind Sansom's head was a large framed print of the same picture I had seen in his book. Donald Rumsfeld and Saddam Hussein, in Baghdad. *Sometimes our friends become our enemies, and sometimes our enemies become our friends*. Next to it was a cluster of smaller pictures, some of Sansom standing with groups of people, some of him alone and shaking hands and smiling with other individuals. Some of the group shots were formal, and some were of wide smiles and confetti-strewn stages after election victories. I saw Elspeth in most of them. Her hair had changed a lot over the years. I saw Springfield in some of the others, his small wary shape easily recognizable even though the images were tiny. The two-shots were what news photographers call grip-and-grins. Some of the individuals in them I recognized, and some I didn't. Some had autographed the pictures with extravagant dedications, and some hadn't.

Sansom said, "So?"

I said, "I know about the DSM in March of 1983."

"How?"

"Because of the VAL Silent Sniper. The battleaxe I told you about is the widow of the guy you took it from. Which is why you reacted to the name. Maybe you never heard of Lila Hoth or Svetlana Hoth, but you met with some other guy called Hoth back in the day. That's for damn sure. It was obvious. You probably

called Hoth back in the day? That's for damn sure. It was obvious. You probably took his dog tags and had them translated. You've probably still got them, as souvenirs."

There was no surprise. No denial. Sansom just said, "No, actually those tags were locked up with the after-action reports, and everything else."

I said nothing.

Sansom said, "His name was Grigori Hoth. He was about my age at the time. He seemed competent. His spotter, not so much. He should have heard us coming."

I didn't reply. There was a long silence. Then the situation seemed to hit home and Sansom's shoulders fell and he sighed and he said, "What a way to get found out, right? Medals are supposed to be rewards, not penalties. They're not supposed to screw you up. They're not supposed to follow you around the rest of your life like a damn ball and chain."

I said nothing.

He asked, "What are you going to do?"

I said, "Nothing."

"Really?"

"I don't care what happened in 1983. And they lied to me. First about Berlin, and they're still lying to me now. They claim to be mother and daughter. But I don't believe them. The alleged daughter is the cutest thing you ever saw. The alleged mother fell out of the ugly tree and hit every branch. I first met them with a cop from the NYPD. She said thirty years from now the daughter will look just like the mother. But she was wrong. The younger one will never look like the older one. Not in a million years."

"So who are they?"

"I'm prepared to accept that the older one is for real. She was a Red Army political commissar who lost her husband and her brother in Afghanistan."

"Her brother?"

"The spotter."

The spotter.

“But the younger woman is posing?”

I nodded. “As a billionaire expatriate widow from London. She says her husband was an entrepreneur who didn’t make the cut.”

“And she’s not convincing?”

“She dresses the part. She acts it well. Maybe she lost a husband somewhere along the line.”

“But? What is she really?”

“I think she’s a journalist.”

“Why?”

“She knows things. She’s got the right kind of inquiring mind. She’s analytical. She monitors the *Herald Tribune*. She’s a hell of a storyteller. But she talks too much. She’s in love with words and she embroiders details. She can’t help herself.”

“For example?”

“She went for some extra pathos. She made out that the political commissars were in the trenches along with the grunts. She claims she was conceived on a rock floor under a Red Army greatcoat. Which is bullshit. Commissars were big-time rear-echelon pussies. They stayed well away from the action. They clustered together back at HQ, writing pamphlets. Occasionally they would visit up the line, but never if there was any danger involved.”

“And you know this how?”

“You know how I know it. We expected to fight a land war with them in Europe. We expected to win. We expected to take millions of them prisoner. MPs were trained to handle them all. The 110th was going to direct operations. Delusional, maybe, but the Pentagon took it very seriously. We were taught more about the Red Army than we were about the U.S. Army. Certainly we were told exactly where to find the commissars. We were under orders to execute them all immediately.”

“What kind of journalist?”

“Television, probably. The local crew she hired was tied to the television business. And have you ever seen Eastern European television? All the anchors are women, and they all look sensational.”

“What country?”

“Ukraine.”

“What angle?”

“Investigative, historical, with a little human interest mixed in. The younger one probably heard the older one’s story and decided to run with it.”

“Like the History Channel in Russian?”

“In Ukrainian,” I said.

“Why? What’s the message? They want to embarrass us now? After more than twenty-five years?”

“No, I think they want to embarrass the Russians. There’s a lot of tension right now between Russia and the Ukraine. I think they’re taking America’s evil for granted, and saying that big bad Moscow shouldn’t have put poor helpless Ukrainians in harm’s way.”

“So why haven’t we seen the story already?”

“Because they’re way behind the times,” I said. “They’re looking for confirmation. They still seem to have some kind of journalistic scruples over there.”

“Are they going to get confirmation?”

“Not from you, presumably. And no one else knows anything for sure. Susan Mark didn’t live long enough to say yea or nay. So the lid is back on. I advised them to forget all about it and head home.”

“Why are they posing as mother and daughter?”

“Because it’s a great con,” I said. “It’s appealing. It’s like reality TV. Or those magazines they sell in the supermarket. Clearly they studied our culture.”

“Why wait so long?”

“It takes time to build a mature television industry. They probably wasted years on important stuff.”

Sansom nodded vaguely, and said, “It’s not true that no one knows anything for sure. You seem to know plenty.”

“But I’m not going to say anything.”

“Can I trust you on that?”

“I served thirteen years. I know all kinds of things. I don’t talk about them.”

“I’m not happy about how easy it was for them to approach Susan Mark. And I’m not happy we didn’t know about her from the get-go. We never even heard of her before the morning after. This whole thing was like an ambush. We were always behind the curve.”

I was looking at the photographs on the wall behind him. Looking at the tiny figures. Their shapes, their postures, their silhouettes. I said, “Really?”

“We should have been told.”

I said, “Have a word with the Pentagon. And with those guys from the Watergate.”

Sansom said, “I will.” Then he went quiet, as if he was rethinking and reassessing, more calmly and at a slower pace than his usual fast field-officer style. *The lid is back on*. He seemed to examine that proposition for a spell, from all kinds of different angles. Then he shrugged, and got a slightly sheepish look on his face, and he asked, “So what do you think of me now?”

“Is that important?”

“I’m a politician. It’s a reflex inquiry.”

“I think you should have shot them in the head.”

He paused and said, “We had no silenced weapons.”

“You did. You had just taken one from them.”

“Rules of engagement.”

“You should have ignored them. The Red Army didn’t travel with forensics labs. They would have had no idea who shot who.”

“So what do you think of me?”

“I think you shouldn’t have handed them over. That was uncalled for. That was going to be the point of the story, as a matter of fact, on Ukrainian TV. The idea was to get the old woman next to you and let her ask you why.”

Sansom shrugged again. “I wish she could. Because the truth is, we didn’t hand them over. We turned them loose instead. It was a calculated risk. A kind of double bluff. They’d lost their rifle. Everyone would have assumed that the mujahideen had taken it. Which was a sorry outcome and a major disgrace. It was clear to me that they were very scared of their officers and their political commissars. So they would have been falling over themselves to tell the truth, that it was Americans, not Afghans. It would have been a kind of exculpation. But their officers and their commissars knew how scared they were of them, so the truth would have sounded like a bullshit story. Like a pathetic excuse. It would have been discounted immediately, as a fantasy. So I felt it was safe enough to let them go. The truth would have been out there in plain sight, but unrecognized.”

I said, “So what happened?”

Sansom said, “I guess they were more scared than I thought. Too scared to go back at all. I guess they just wandered, until the tribes-people found them. Grigori Hoth was married to a political commissar. He was scared of her. That’s what happened. And that’s what killed him.”

I said nothing.

He said, “Not that I expect anyone to believe me.”

I didn’t reply.

He said, “You’re right about tension between Russia and the Ukraine. But there’s tension between Russia and ourselves, too. Right now there’s plenty of it. If the Korengal part of the story gets out, things could blow up big. It’s like the Cold War all over again. Except different. At least the Soviets were sane, in their way. This bunch, not so much.”

After that we sat in silence for what felt like a long time, and then Sansom’s desk phone rang. It was his receptionist on the line. I could hear her voice through the earpiece, and through the door. She rattled off a list of things that needed urgent attention. Sansom hung up and said, “I have to go. I’ll call a page to see you out.” He stood up and came around the desk and walked out of the room. Just like an innocent man with nothing to hide. He left me all alone, sitting in my chair, with the door open. Springfield had gone, too. I could see no one in the outer office except the woman at the desk. She smiled at me. I smiled at her. No page showed up.

We were always behind the curve, Sansom had said. I waited a long minute and then started squirming around like I was restless. Then after a plausible interval I got out of my chair. I stumped around with my hands clasped behind my back, like an innocent man with nothing to hide, just waiting around on turf that was not his own. I headed over to the wall behind the desk, like it was a completely random destination. I studied the pictures. I counted faces I knew. My initial total came to twenty-four. Four presidents, nine other politicians, five athletes, two actors, Donald Rumsfeld, Saddam Hussein, Elspeth, and Springfield.

Plus someone else.

I knew a twenty-fifth face.

In all of the celebratory election-night victory pictures, right next to Sansom himself, was a guy smiling just as widely, as if he was basking in the glow of a job well done, as if he was not-very-modestly claiming his full share of the credit. A strategist. A tactician. A Svengali. A behind-the-scenes political fixer.

Sansom’s chief of staff, presumably.

He was about my age. In all of the pictures he was dusted with confetti or tangled with streamers or knee-deep in balloons and he was grinning like an idiot, but his eyes were cold. They had a canny, calculating shrewdness in them.

They reminded me of a ballplayer’s eyes.

I knew why the cafeteria charade had been staged.

I knew who had been sitting in Sansom’s visitor chair before me.

We were always behind the curve.

Liar.

I knew Sansom’s chief of staff.

I had seen him before.

I had seen him wearing chinos and a golf shirt, riding the 6 train late at night in New York City.

Chapter 40

I checked all the celebration pictures, very carefully. The guy from the subway was in all of them. Different angles, different years, different victories, but it was definitely the same guy, literally at Sansom's right hand. Then a page bustled into the office and two minutes later I was back on the Independence Avenue sidewalk. Fourteen minutes after that I was back inside the railroad station, waiting for the next train back to New York. Fifty-eight minutes after that I was on it, sitting comfortably, leaving town, watching the dismal rail yards through the window. Far to my left a gang of men wearing hard hats and orange high-visibility vests was working on a section of track. Their vests glowed through the smog. The fabric must have had tiny beads of reflective glass mixed into the plastic weave. Safety, through chemistry. The vests were more than highly visible. They were attention-getting. They drew the eye. I watched the guys work until they were just tiny orange dots in the distance, and then until they were completely lost to sight, which was more than a mile later. And at that point I had everything I was ever going to get. I knew everything I was ever going to know. But I didn't know that I knew. Not then.

*

The train rolled into Penn and I got a late dinner in a place directly across the street from where I had gotten breakfast. Then I walked up to the 14th Precinct on West 35th. The night watch had started. Theresa Lee and her partner Docherty were already in place. The squad room was quiet, like all the air had been sucked out of it. Like there had been bad news. But no one was rushing around. Therefore the bad news had happened somewhere else.

The receptionist at the bullpen gate had seen me before. She turned on her swivel chair and glanced at Lee, who made a face like it wouldn't kill her one way or the other whether she ever spoke to me again, or not. So the receptionist turned back and made a face of her own, like the choice to stay or to go was entirely mine. I squeaked the hinge and threaded my way between desks to the back of the room. Docherty was on the phone, mostly listening. Lee was just sitting there, doing nothing. She looked up as I approached and she said, "I'm

not in the mood."

"For what?"

"Susan Mark," she said.

"Any news?"

"None at all."

"Nothing more on the boy?"

"You sure are worried about that boy."

"And you're not?"

"Not even a little bit."

"Is the file still closed?"

"Tighter than a fish's asshole."

"OK," I said.

She paused a beat and sighed and said, "What have you got?"

"I know who the fifth passenger was."

"There were only four passengers."

"And the earth is flat and the moon is made of cheese."

"Did this alleged fifth passenger commit a crime somewhere between 30th Street and 45th?"

"No," I said.

"Then the file stays closed."

Docherty put his phone down and glanced at his partner with an eloquent look on his face. I knew what the look meant. I had been a cop of sorts for thirteen

years and had seen that kind of look many times before. It meant that someone else had caught a big case, and that Docherty was basically glad that he wasn't involved, but a little wistful too, because even if being at the heart of the action was a pain in the neck bureaucratically, it was maybe a whole lot better than watching from the sidelines.

I asked, "What happened?"

Lee said, "Multiple homicide over in the 17th. A nasty one. Four guys under the FDR Drive, beaten and killed."

"With hammers," Docherty said.

I said, "Hammers?"

"Carpentry tools. From the Home Depot on 23rd Street. Just purchased. They were found at the scene. The price tags are still on them, under the blood."

I asked, "Who were the four guys?"

"No one knows," Docherty said. "That seems to have been the point of the hammers. Their faces are pulped, their teeth are smashed out, and their fingertips are ruined."

"Old, young, black, white?"

"White," Docherty said. "Not old. In suits. Nothing to go on, except they had phony business cards in their pockets, with some corporate name that isn't registered anywhere in New York State, and a phone number that is permanently disconnected because it belongs to a movie company."

Chapter 41

Docherty's desk phone rang and he picked it up and started listening again. A friend in the 17th, presumably, with more details to share. I looked at Lee and said, "Now you're going to have to reopen the file."

She asked, "Why?"

"Because those guys were the local crew that Lila Hoth hired."

She looked at me and said, "What are you? Telepathic?"

"I met with them twice."

"You met some crew twice. Nothing says these are the same guys."

"They gave me one of those phony business cards."

"All those crews use phony business cards."

"With the same kind of phone number?"

"Movies and TV are the only places to get those numbers."

"They were ex–cops. Doesn't that matter to you?"

"I care about cops, not ex–cops."

"They said Lila Hoth's name."

"No, some crew said her name. Doesn't mean these dead guys did."

"You think this is a coincidence?"

"They could be anybody's crew."

"Like who else's?"

Like who else's?

"Anybody in the whole wide world. This is New York. New York is full of private guys. They roam in packs. They all look the same and they all do the same stuff."

"They said John Sansom's name, too."

"No, some crew said his name."

"In fact they were the first place I heard his name."

"Then maybe they were his crew, not Lila's. Would he have been worried enough to have his own people up here?"

"He had his chief of staff on the train. That's who the fifth passenger was."

"There you go, then."

"You're not going to do anything?"

"I'll inform the 17th, for background."

"You're not going to reopen your file?"

"Not until I hear about a crime my side of Park Avenue."

I said, "I'm going to the Four Seasons."

It was late and I was pretty far west and I didn't find a cab until I hit Sixth Avenue. After that it was a fast trip to the hotel. The lobby was quiet. I walked in like I had a right to be there and rode the elevator to Lila Hoth's floor. Walked the silent corridor and paused outside her suite.

Her door was open an inch.

The tongue of the security deadbolt was out and the spring closer had trapped it against the jamb. I paused another second and knocked.

No response.

I pushed the door and felt the mechanism push back. I held it open forty-five

degrees against my spread fingers and listened.

No sound inside.

I opened the door all the way and stepped in. Ahead of me the living room was dim. The lights were off but the drapes were open and there was enough of a glow from the city outside to show me that the room was empty. Empty, as in no people in it. Also empty as in checked-out-of and abandoned. No shopping bags in the corners, no personal items stowed either carefully or carelessly, no coats over chairs, no shoes on the floor. No signs of life at all.

The bedrooms were the same. The beds were still made, but they had suitcase-sized dents and rucks on them. The closets were empty. The bathrooms were strewn with used towels. The shower stalls were dry. I caught a faint trace of Lila Hoth's perfume in the air, but that was all.

I walked through all three rooms one more time and then stepped back to the corridor. The door closed behind me. I heard the spring inside the hinge doing its work and I heard the deadbolt tongue settle against the jamb, metal on wood. I walked away to the elevator and hit the down button and the door slid back immediately. The car had waited for me. A nighttime protocol. No unnecessary elevator movement. No unnecessary noise. I rode back to the lobby and walked to the desk. There was a whole night staff on duty. Not as many people as during the day, but way too many for the fifty-dollar trick to have worked. The Four Seasons wasn't that kind of a place. A guy looked up from a screen and asked how he could help me. I asked him when exactly the Hoths had checked out.

"The who, sir?" he asked back. He spoke in a quiet, measured, nighttime voice, like he was worried about waking the guests stacked high above him.

"Lila Hoth and Svetlana Hoth," I said.

The guy got a look on his face like he didn't know what I was talking about and refocused on his screen and hit a couple of keys on his keyboard. He scrolled up and down and hit a couple more keys and said, "I'm sorry, sir, but I can't find a record of any guests under that name."

I told him the suite number. He hit a couple more keys and his mouth turned down in puzzled surprise and he said, "That suite hasn't been used at all this week. It's very expensive and quite hard to rent."

I double-checked the number in my head and I said, “I was in it last night. It was being used then. And I met the occupants again today, in the tea room. There’s a signature on a check.”

The guy tried again. He called up tea room checks that had been charged to guest accounts. He half-turned his screen so that I could see it too, in the sharing gesture that clerks use when they want to convince you of something. We had had tea for two plus a cup of coffee. There was no record of any such charge.

Then I heard small sounds behind me. The scuff of soles on carpet, the rattle of drawn breath, the sigh of fabric moving through the air. And the clink of metal. I turned around and found myself facing a perfect semicircle of seven men. Four of them were uniformed NYPD patrolmen. Three of them were the federal agents I had met before.

The cops had shotguns.

The feds had something else.

Chapter 42

Seven men. Seven weapons. The police shotguns were Franchi SPAS-12s. From Italy. Probably not standard NYPD issue. The SPAS-12 is a futuristic, fearsome-looking item, a semi-automatic 12-gauge smooth-bore weapon with a pistol grip and a folding stock. Advantages, many. Drawbacks, two. Cost was the first, but clearly some specialist division inside the police department had been happy to sign off on the purchase. Semi-automatic operation was the second drawback. It was held to be theoretically unreliable in a powerful shotgun. People who have to shoot or die worry about it. Mechanical failure happens. But I wasn't about to bet on four mechanical failures happening all at once, for the same reason I don't buy lottery tickets. Optimism is good. Blind faith is not.

Two of the feds had Glock 17s in their hands. Nine-millimeter automatic pistols from Austria, square, boxy, reliable, well proven through more than twenty years of useful service. I had retained a mild personal preference for the Beretta M9, like the Franchi also from Italy, but a million times out of a million-and-one the Glock would get the job done just as well as the Beretta.

Right then the job was to keep me standing still, ready for the main attraction.

The fed leader was in the exact center of the semicircle. Three men on his left, three on his right. He was holding a weapon I had seen before only on television. I remembered it well. A cable channel, in a motel room in Florence, Texas. Not the Military Channel. The National Geographic Channel. A program about Africa. Not civil wars and mayhem and disease and starvation. A wildlife documentary. Gorillas, not guerillas. A bunch of zoological researchers was tracking an adult male silverback. They wanted to put a radio tag in its ear. The creature weighed close to five hundred pounds. A quarter of a ton. They put it down with a dart gun loaded with primate tranquillizer.

That was what the fed leader was pointing at me.

A dart gun.

The National Geographic people had taken great pains to reassure their viewers that the procedure was humane. They had shown detailed diagrams and computer simulations. The dart was a tiny feathered cone, with a surgical steel shaft. The tip of the shaft was a sterile ceramic honeycomb laced with anesthetic. The dart fired at high velocity and the shaft buried itself a half-inch into the gorilla. And stopped. The tip wanted to keep on going. Momentum. Newton's Law of Motion. The shock and the inertia exploded the ceramic matrix and the potion contained in the honeycomb flung itself onward, not quite droplets, not quite an aerosol. Like a heavy mist spreading under the skin, flooding tissue the way a paper towel soaks up a spilled drop of coffee. The gun itself was a one-shot deal. It had to be loaded with a single dart, and a single tiny bottle of compressed gas to power it. Nitrogen, as I recalled. Reloading was laborious. It was better to hit first time.

The researchers had hit first time in the documentary film. The gorilla had been groggy after eight seconds, and in a coma after twenty. Then it had woken up in perfect health ten hours later.

But it had weighed twice what I weigh.

Behind me was the hotel's reception counter. I could feel it against my back. It had a ledge about fourteen inches wide set probably forty-two inches off the floor. Bar height. Convenient for a customer to spread his papers on. Convenient to sign things on. Behind that was a drop to a regular desk-height counter for the clerks. It was maybe thirty inches deep. Or more. I wasn't sure. But the total obstacle was a high and wide hurdle impossible to clear from a standing start. Especially when facing the wrong way. And pointless, anyway. Clearing the counter would not put me in another room. I would still be right there, just behind the counter rather than in front of it. No net gain, and maybe a big net loss if I landed awkwardly on a rolling chair or got tangled up in a telephone wire.

I turned my head and glanced behind me. No one there. The desk people had filed out, left and right. They had been coached. Maybe even rehearsed. The seven men in front of me had a clear field of fire.

No way forward, no way back.

I stood still.

The fed leader was sighting down the barrel of his dart gun and aiming directly at my left thigh. My left thigh made a moderately large target. No fat under the skin. Just hard flesh, full of capillaries and other aids to rapid and efficient blood circulation. Completely unprotected, except for my new blue pants, which were made of thin summer-weight cotton. *Don't come dressed like that, or you won't get in*. I tensed up, as if muscle tone would make the damn thing bounce off. Then I relaxed again. Muscle tone hadn't helped the gorilla, and it wouldn't help me. Way behind the seven men I could see a paramedic crew in a gloomy corner. Fire department uniforms. Three men, one woman. They were standing and waiting. They had a wheeled gurney ready.

When all else fails, start talking.

I said, "If you guys have more questions, I'm quite happy to sit down for a conversation. We could get some coffee, keep things civilized. Decaf, if you prefer. Since it's late. They'll make fresh, I'm sure. This is the Four Seasons, after all."

The fed leader didn't answer. He shot me instead. With the dart gun, from about eight feet, straight into the meat of my thigh. I heard a blast of compressed gas and felt pain in my leg. Not a sting. A dull, thumping blow, like a knife wound. Then a split second of nothing, like disbelief. Then a sharp, angry reaction. I thought if I was a gorilla I would want to tell the damn researchers to stay home and leave my ears alone.

The fed leader lowered the gun.

Nothing happened for a second. Then I felt my heart accelerate and my blood pressure spike and fall. I heard rushing in my temples, like Chinese food twenty years ago. I looked down. The dart's feathered butt was tight against my pants. I pulled it out. The shaft was smeared with blood. But the tip was gone. The ceramic material had fragmented to powder and the liquid it had held in suspension was already inside me, doing its work. A fat dot of blood welled out of the wound and soaked into the cotton fabric of my pants, following the warp and the weft like a map of an epidemic spreading through city streets. My heart was beating hard. I could feel blood rushing around inside me. I wanted to stop it. No practical way to do that. I leaned back against the counter. Just temporary, I figured. For relief. The seven men in front of me seemed to slide suddenly sideways. Like a wheel play in baseball. I wasn't sure if they had moved or if I had moved my head. Or perhaps the room had moved. Certainly there was a

whole lot of fast rotation going on. Some kind of a spinning sensation. The edge of the counter hit me under the shoulder blades. Either it was rising up or I was sliding down. I put my hands back and flat on its surface. I tried to steady it. Or myself. No luck. The edge hit me in the back of the head. My internal clock wasn't working right. I was trying to count seconds. I wanted to get to nine. I wanted to outlast the silverback. Some last vestige of pride. I wasn't sure if I was succeeding.

My ass hit the ground. My vision went. It didn't go dim or dark. It brightened instead. It got full of mad whirling silver shapes, flashing horizontally right to left. Like a fairground ride running a thousand times too fast. Then I started a sequence of crazy dreams, urgent and breathless and vivid. Full of action and color. Afterward I realized that the start of the dreams marked the point where I officially lost consciousness, lying there on the Four Seasons's lobby floor.

Chapter 43

I don’t know when exactly I woke up. The clock in my head still wasn’t running right. But I surfaced eventually. I was on a cot. My wrists and my ankles were fastened to the rails with plastic handcuffs. I was still fully dressed. Apart from my shoes. Those were gone. In my fuddled state I heard my dead brother’s voice in my head. A line he liked to use as a kid: *Before you criticize someone, you should walk a mile in his shoes. Then when you start criticizing him, you’re a mile away and he’s got to run after you in his socks*. I moved my toes. Then I moved my hips. I could feel that my pockets were empty. They had taken my stuff. Maybe they had listed it all on a form and bagged it up.

I ducked my head to my shoulder and scraped my chin across my shirt. Stubble, a little more than I remembered. Maybe eight hours’ worth. The gorilla on the National Geographic Channel had slept for ten. Score one for Reacher, except they had probably used a lighter dose on me. At least I hoped they had. That huge primate had crashed down like a tree.

I raised my head again and looked around. I was inside a cell, and the cell was inside a room. No window. Bright electric light. New construction inside old construction. A row of three simple cages made of bright new spot-welded steel, sitting in a line inside a big old room made of brick. The cells were each about eight feet square and eight feet tall. They were roofed with bars, the same as their sides. They were floored with steel tread plate. The tread plate was folded up at the edges, to make a shallow inch-deep tray. To contain spilled liquids, I guessed. All kinds of liquids can get spilled in cells. The tray was spot-welded inside a horizontal rail that ran around the bottom of all the vertical bars. There were no bolts through the floors. The cells were not fixed down. They were just sitting there, three freestanding structures parked in a big old room.

The big old room itself had a high barreled ceiling. The brick was all painted fresh white, but it looked soft and worn. There are guys who can look at the dimensions of bricks and the bricklaying patterns they make and tell you exactly where a building is and exactly when it was constructed. I am not one of them. But even so the place looked like the East Coast to me. Nineteenth century, built

by hand. Immigrant labor, working fast and dirty. I was probably still in New York. And I was probably underground. The place felt like a basement. Not damp, not cool, but somehow stabilized in terms of temperature and humidity by virtue of being buried.

I was in the center cage of the three. I had the cot I was strapped to, and a toilet. That was all. Nothing else. The toilet was enclosed by a three-sided U-shaped privacy screen about three feet high. The toilet tank had a dished top that made a sink. I could see a faucet. Just one. Cold water only. The other two cages looked the same. Cots, toilets, nothing else. Leading away from each of the cells were recent excavations in the outer room's floor. Narrow trenches, three of them, exactly parallel, dug up and refilled and smoothed over with new concrete. Sewer lines to the toilets, I guessed, and water lines to the faucets.

The other two cages were empty. I was all alone.

In the far corner of the outer room where the walls met the roof there was a surveillance camera. A beady glass eye. A wide-angle lens, presumably, to see the whole room at once. To see into all three cells. I guessed there would be microphones, too. Many more than one, probably, some of them close by. Electronic eavesdropping is hard. Clarity is important. Room echo can ruin everything.

My left leg hurt a little. A puncture wound and a bruise, right where the dart had hit. The blood on my pants had dried. There wasn't much of it. I tested the strength of the cuffs around my wrists and my ankles. Unbreakable. I bucked and jerked against them for half a minute. Not trying to get free. Just checking whether I would pass out again from the effort, and aiming to attract attention from whoever was watching through the surveillance camera and listening through the microphones.

I didn't pass out again. My head ached a little as it cleared, and the exertion didn't make my leg throb any less. But apart from those minor symptoms I felt pretty good. The attention I attracted was delayed well over a minute and took the form of a guy I had never seen before walking in with a hypodermic syringe. Some kind of a medical technician. He had a wet cotton ball in his other hand, ready to swab my elbow. He stopped outside my cage and looked in at me through the bars.

I asked him, "Is that a lethal dose?"

I asked him, "Is that a lethal dose?"

The guy said, "No."

"Are you authorized to give a lethal dose?"

"No."

"Then you better back off. Because however many times you shoot me up, I'm always going to wake up later. And one of those times, I'm going to come and get you. Either I'll make you eat that thing, or I'll stick it up your ass and inject you from the inside."

"It's a painkiller," the guy said. "An analgesic. For your leg."

"My leg is fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Just back off."

So he did. He went out through a stout wooden door painted the same white as the walls. The door looked old. It was vaguely gothic in shape. I had seen similar doors in old public buildings. City schools, and police stations.

I dropped my head back to the cot. I had no pillow. I stared up through the bars at the ceiling and prepared to settle in. But less than a minute later two of the men I knew came in through the wooden door. Two of the federal agents. The two sidekicks, not the leader. One of them had a Franchi 12 with him. It looked loaded and cocked and ready. The other guy had some kind of a tool in his hand and a bunch of thin chains looped over his arm. The guy with the shotgun stepped up close to my bars and poked the barrel through and jammed the muzzle into my throat and kept it there. The guy with the chains unlocked my gate. Not with a key, but by spinning a dial left and right. A combination lock. He opened the gate and came inside and stopped beside my cot. The tool in his hand was like a pair of pliers, but with blades instead of milled grips. Some kind of a cutter. He saw me looking at it and smiled. He leaned forward, above my waist. The shotgun muzzle pressed harder into my throat. A wise precaution. Even with my hands strapped down I could have folded forward from the waist and delivered a pretty good head butt. Not my best, maybe, but with plenty of snap from the neck I could have put the guy to sleep for longer than I had been

out. Longer than the silverback, perhaps. I already had a headache. Another big impact wouldn't have made it much worse.

But the Franchi muzzle stayed firmly in place and I was reduced to the status of a spectator. The guy with the chains untangled them and laid them in place, like a trial run. One would cuff my wrists to my waist, one would chain my ankles, and the third would connect the first two together. Standard-issue prison restraints. I would be able to shuffle along a foot at a time and lift my hands as far as my hips, but that was all. The guy got the chains all locked and fastened and tested, and then he used the tool to cut off the plastic cuffs. He backed out of the cage and left the gate open and his partner pulled the Franchi away.

I guessed I was supposed to slide off the cot and stand up. So I stayed where I was. You have to ration your opponents' victories. You have to mete them out, slowly and meanly. You have to make your opponents subliminally grateful for every little bit of compliance. That way maybe you get away with giving up ten small losses a day, rather than ten big ones.

But the two feds had had the same training I'd had. That was clear. They didn't stand there getting all beaten and frustrated. They just walked away, and the guy who had fitted the chains called back from the door and said, "Coffee and muffins through here, any old time you want them." Which put the onus right back on me, exactly like it was designed to. Not stylish to wait an hour and then hobble through and wolf stuff down like I was desperate. That would be getting beat in public, by my own hunger and thirst. Not stylish at all. So I waited just a token interval and then I slid off the cot and shuffled out of the cage.

The wooden door led to a room about the same size and shape as the one the cages were in. Same construction, same color paint. No window. There was a large wooden table in the center of the floor. Three chairs on the far side, full of the three feds. One chair on my side, empty. Waiting for me. On the table, all lined up neatly, was the stuff from my pockets. My roll of cash, flattened out and trapped under a sprinkling of coins. My old passport. My ATM card. My toothbrush. The Metrocard I had bought for use on the subway. Theresa Lee's NYPD business card, that she had given to me in the white-tiled room under Grand Central Terminal. The phony business card that Lila Hoth's local crew had given to me on the corner of Eighth Avenue and 35th Street. The computer memory I had bought at Radio Shack, with its loud pink neoprene sleeve. Plus Leonid's clamshell cell phone. Nine separate items, each one of them stark and lonely under the bright bulbs on the ceiling.

lonely under the bright bulbs on the ceiling.

To the left of the table was another door. Same gothic shape, same wooden construction, same new paint. I guessed it led onward to another room, the third of three in an L-shaped chain. Or the first of three, depending on your point of view. Depending on whether you were a captive or a captor. To the right of the table was a low chest of drawers that looked like it belonged in a bedroom. On it were a pile of napkins and a tube of nested foam cups and a steel vacuum bottle and a paper plate with two blueberry muffins. I shuffled over in my socks and poured a cup of coffee from the bottle. The operation was easier than it might have been, because the chest was low. My chained hands didn't hamper me much. I carried the cup low and two-handed to the table. Sat down in the vacant chair. Dipped my head and sipped from the cup. The action made me look like I was yielding, like it was designed to. Or bowing, or deferring. The coffee was pretty bad too, and only lukewarm.

The fed leader cupped his hand and held it behind my stack of money, as if he was considering picking it up. Then he shook his head, as if money was too prosaic a subject for him. Too mundane. He moved his hand onward and stopped it behind my passport.

He asked, "Why is it expired?"

I said, "Because no one can make time stand still."

"I meant, why haven't you renewed it?"

"No imminent need. Like you don't carry a condom in your wallet."

The guy paused a beat and asked, "When was the last time you left the country?"

I said, "I would have sat down and talked to you, you know. You didn't need to shoot me with a dart like I was something escaped from the zoo."

"You had been warned many times. And you had been markedly uncooperative."

"You could have put my eye out."

"But I didn't. No harm, no foul."

"I still have your ID. I don't [illegible]"

¨I still haven´t seen ID. I don´t even know your name.´´

The guy said nothing.

I said, “No ID, no names, no Miranda, no charges, no lawyer. Brave new world, right?”

“You got it.”

“Well, good luck with that,” I said. I glanced at my passport, as if I had suddenly remembered something. I raised my hands as far as they would go and leaned forward. I shuffled my coffee cup well out of my way, which left it in the space between my passport and my ATM card. I picked up my passport and squinted down at it and leafed through the pages at the back. I shrugged, like my memory had been playing tricks on me. I went to put the passport back. But I was inexact with its placement. A little hampered by the chains. The stiff edge of the little booklet caught my coffee cup and tipped it over. Coffee spilled out and splashed on the table and flowed right over the far edge and into the fed leader’s lap. He did the thing that everyone does. He jumped back, half-stood, and batted at the air as if he could divert the liquid one molecule at a time.

“Sorry,” I said.

His pants were soaked. So now the onus was on him. Two choices: either disrupt the rhythm of the interrogation by taking a break to change, or continue with wet pants. I saw the guy debating. He wasn’t quite as inscrutable as he thought he was.

He chose to continue with wet pants. He detoured to the chest of drawers and dabbed at himself with napkins. Then he brought some back and dried the table. He made a big effort not to react, which was a reaction in itself.

He asked again, “When was the last time you left the country?”

I said, “I don’t recall.”

“Where were you born?”

“I don’t recall.”

“Everyone knows where they were born.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“We’ll sit here all day, if necessary.”

“I was born in West Berlin,” I said.

“And your mother is French?”

“She was French.”

“What is she now?”

“Dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“Are you sure you’re an American citizen?”

“What kind of a question is that?”

“A straightforward one.”

“The State Department gave me a passport.”

“Was your application truthful?”

“Did I sign it?”

“I imagine you did.”

“Then I imagine it was truthful.”

“How? Were you naturalized? You were born overseas to a foreign parent.”

“I was born on a military base. That counts as U.S. sovereign territory. My parents were married. My father was an American citizen. He was a Marine.”

“Can you prove all of that?”

“Do I have to?”

“It’s important. Whether or not you’re a citizen could affect what happens to you next.”

“No, how much patience I have will affect what happens to me next.”

The guy on the left stood up. He was the one who had held the Franchi’s muzzle hard against my throat. He went directly left from behind the table and walked out, through the wooden door, into the third room. I glimpsed desks, computers, cabinets, and lockers. No other people. The door closed softly behind him and the room we were in went quiet.

The main guy asked, “Was your mother Algerian?”

I said, “I just got through telling you she was French.”

“Some French people are Algerian.”

“No, French people are French and Algerian people are Algerian. It’s not rocket science.”

“OK, some French people were originally immigrants from Algeria. Or from Morocco, or Tunisia, or elsewhere in North Africa.”

“My mother wasn’t.”

“Was she a Muslim?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“I’m making inquiries.”

I nodded. “Safer to inquire about my mother than yours, probably.”

“What do you mean?”

“Susan Mark’s mother was a teenage crack whore. Maybe yours worked with her. Maybe they turned tricks together.”

“Are you trying to make me mad?”

“No, I’m succeeding. You’re all red in the face and you’ve got wet pants. And you’re getting absolutely nowhere. All in all I don’t think this particular session will be written up for the training manual.”

“This isn’t a joke.”

“But it’s heading that way.”

The guy paused and regrouped. He used his index finger to realign the nine items in front of him. He got them straight and then he pushed the computer memory an inch toward me. He said, “You concealed this from us when we searched you. Susan Mark gave it to you on the train.”

I said, “Did I? Did she?”

The guy nodded. “But it’s empty, and it’s too small anyway. Where is the other one?”

“What other one?”

“This one is obviously a decoy. Where is the real one?”

“Susan Mark gave me nothing. I bought that thing at Radio Shack.”

“Why?”

“I liked the look of it.”

“With the pink sleeve? Bullshit.”

I said nothing.

He said, “You like the color pink?”

“In the right place.”

“What place would that be?”

“A place you haven’t been in a long time.”

“Where did you conceal it?”

I didn’t answer.

“Was it in a body cavity?”

“You better hope not. You just touched it.”

“Do you enjoy that kind of thing? Are you a fairy?”

“That kind of question might work down at Guantanamo, but it won’t work with me.”

The guy shrugged and used his fingertip and pulled the stick back into line, and then he moved the phony business card and Leonid’s cell phone both forward an inch, like he was moving pawns on a chessboard. He said, “You’ve been working for Lila Hoth. The card proves you were in communication with the crew she hired, and your phone proves she called you at least six times. The Four Seasons’s number is in the memory.”

“It’s not my phone.”

“We found it in your pocket.”

“Lila Hoth didn’t stay at the Four Seasons, according to them.”

“Only because we told them to cooperate. We both know she was there. You met her there twice, and then she broke the third rendezvous.”

“Who is she, exactly?”

“That’s a question you should have asked before you agreed to work for her.”

“I wasn’t working for her.”

“Your phone proves that you were. It’s not rocket science.”

I didn’t answer.

He asked, “Where is Lila Hoth now?”

“Don’t you know?”

“H[illegible]?”

¨How would I know?´´

“I assumed you scooped her up when she checked out. Before you started shooting darts at me.”

The guy said nothing.

I said, “You were there earlier in the day. You searched her room. I assumed you were watching her.”

The guy said nothing.

I said, “You missed her, right? She walked right past you. That’s terrific. You guys are an example to us all. A foreign national with some kind of weird Pentagon involvement, and you let her go?”

“It’s a setback,” the guy said. He seemed a little embarrassed, but I figured he need not have been. Because leaving a hotel under surveillance is relatively easy to do. You do it by not doing it. By not leaving immediately. You send your bags down with the bellman in the service elevator, the agents cluster in the lobby, you leave the passenger elevator at a different floor and you hole up somewhere for two hours until the agents give up and leave. Then you walk out. It takes nerve, but it’s easy to do, especially if you have booked another room under another name, which Lila Hoth certainly had, for Leonid, at least.

The guy asked, “Where is she now?”

I asked, “Who is she?”

“The most dangerous person you ever met.”

“She didn’t look it.”

“That’s why.”

I said, “I have no idea where she is.”

There was a long pause and then the guy moved the phony business card and the cell phone back into line and advanced Theresa Lee’s card in their place. He asked, “How much does the detective know?”

“[illegible]?”

"What does it matter?"

"We have a fairly simple sequence of tasks in front of us. We need to find the Hoths, we need to recover the real memory stick, but above all we need to contain the leak. So we need to know how far it has spread. So we need to know who knows what."

"Nobody knows anything. Least of all me."

"This is not a contest. You don't get points for resisting. We're all on the same side here."

"Doesn't feel that way to me."

"You need to take this seriously."

"Believe me, I am."

"Then tell us who knows what."

"I'm not a mind reader. I don't know who knows what."

I heard the door on my left open again. The leader looked across and nodded some kind of consent. I turned in my seat and saw the guy from the left-hand chair. He had a gun in his hand. Not the Franchi 12. The dart gun. He raised it and fired. I spun away, but far too late. The dart caught me high in the upper arm.

Chapter 44

I woke up all over again, but I didn't open my eyes immediately. I felt like the clock in my head was back on track, and I wanted to let it calibrate and settle in undisturbed. Right then it was showing six o'clock in the evening. Which meant I had been out about another eight hours. I was very hungry and very thirsty. My arm hurt the same way my leg had. A hot little bruise, right up there at the top. I could feel that I still had no shoes. But my wrists and my ankles were no longer fastened to the rails of the cot. Which was a relief. I stretched lazily and rubbed a palm across my face. More stubble. I was heading for a regular beard.

I opened my eyes. Looked around. Discovered two things. One: Theresa Lee was in the cage to my right. Two: Jacob Mark was in the cage to my left.

Both of them were cops.

Neither one of them had shoes on.

That was when I started to worry.

If I was right and it was six o'clock in the evening, then Theresa Lee had been hauled in from home. And Jacob Mark had been brought in from work. They were both looking at me. Lee was standing behind her bars, about five feet away. She was wearing blue jeans and a white shirt. She had bare feet. Jake was sitting on his cot. He was wearing a police officer's uniform, minus the belt and the gun and the radio and the shoes. I sat up on my cot and swung my feet to the floor and ran my hands through my hair. Then I stood up and stepped over to the sink and drank from the faucet. New York City, for sure. I recognized the taste of the water. I looked at Theresa Lee and asked her, "Do you know exactly where we are?"

She said, "Don't you?"

I shook my head.

She said, "We have to assume this place is wired for sound."

She said, "We have to assume this place is wired for sound."

"I'm sure it is. But they already know where we are. So we won't be giving them anything they don't already have."

"I don't think we should say anything."

"We can discuss geographic facts. I don't think the Patriot Act prohibits street addresses, at least not yet."

Lee said nothing.

I said, "What?"

She looked uneasy.

I said, "You think I'm playing games with you?"

She didn't answer.

I said, "You think I'm here to trap you into saying something on tape?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything about you."

"What's on your mind?"

"Those clubs on Bleecker are nearer Sixth Avenue than Broadway. You had the A train right there. Or the B or the C or the D. So why were you on the 6 train at all?"

"Law of nature," I said. "We're hardwired. In our brains. Middle of the night, full dark, all mammals head east instinctively."

"Really?"

"No, I just made that up. I had nowhere to go. I came out of a bar and turned left and walked. I can't explain it any better than that."

Lee said nothing.

I said, "What else?"

She said, “You have no bags. I never saw a homeless person with nothing. Most of them haul more stuff around than I own. They use shopping carts.”

“I’m different,” I said. “And I’m not a homeless person. Not like them.”

She said nothing.

I asked her, “Were you blindfolded when they brought you here?”

She looked at me for a long moment and then she shook her head and sighed. She said, “We’re in a closed firehouse in Greenwich Village. On West 3rd. Street level and above is disused. We’re in the basement.”

“Do you know exactly who these guys are?”

She didn’t speak. Just glanced up at the camera. I said, “Same principle. They know who they are. At least I hope they do. Doesn’t hurt for them to know that we know, too.”

“You think?”

“That’s the point. They can’t stop us thinking. Do you know who they are?”

“They didn’t show ID. Not today, and not that first night either, when they came to talk to you at the precinct.”

“But?”

“Not showing ID can be the same thing as showing it, if you’re the only bunch that never does. We’ve heard some stories.”

“So who are they?”

“They work directly for the Secretary of Defense.”

“That figures,” I said. “The Secretary of Defense is usually the dumbest guy in the government.”

Lee glanced up at the camera again, as if I had insulted it. As if she had caused it to be insulted. I said, “Don’t worry. These guys look ex-military to me, in which case they already know how dumb the Secretary of Defense is. But even so,

Defense is a Cabinet position, which means ultimately these guys are working for the White House."

Lee paused a beat and asked, "Do you know what they want?"

"Some of it."

"Don't tell us."

"I won't," I said.

"But is it big enough for the White House?"

"Potentially, I guess."

"Shit."

"When did they come for you?"

"This afternoon. Two o'clock. I was still asleep."

"Did they have the NYPD with them?"

Lee nodded, and a little hurt showed in her eyes.

I asked, "Did you know the patrolmen?"

She shook her head. "Hotshot counterterrorism guys. They write their own rules and keep themselves separate. They ride around in special cars all day long. Fake taxis, sometimes. One in the front, two in the back. Did you know that? Big circles, up on Tenth, down on Second. Like the B-52s used to patrol the skies."

"What time is it now? About six after six?"

She looked at her watch, and looked surprised.

"Dead-on," she said.

I turned the other way.

"Jake?" I said. "What about you?"

“They came for me first. I’ve been here since noon. Watching you sleep.”

“Any word from Peter?”

“Nothing.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You snore, you know that?”

“I was full of gorilla tranquillizer. From a dart gun.”

“You’re kidding.”

I showed him the bloodstain on my pants, and then the one on my shoulder.

“That’s insane,” he said.

“Were you at work?”

He nodded. “The dispatcher called my car back to base, and they were waiting for me.”

“So your department knows where you are?”

“Not specifically,” he said. “But they know who took me away.”

“That’s something,” I said.

“Not really,” he said. “The department won’t do anything for me. Guys like these come for you, suddenly you’re tainted. You’re presumed guilty of something. People were already inching away from me.”

Lee said, “Like when Internal Affairs comes calling.”

I asked her, “Why isn’t Docherty here?”

“He knows less than me. In fact he went out of his way to know less than me. Didn’t you notice that? He’s an old hand.”

“He’s your partner.”

“Today he is. By next week he’ll have forgotten he ever had a partner. You know how these things work.”

Jake said, “There are only three cells here. Maybe Docherty is somewhere else.”

I asked, “Have these guys talked to you yet?”

Both of them shook their heads.

I asked, “Are you worried?”

Both of them nodded. Lee asked, “Are you?”

“I’m sleeping well,” I said. “But I think that’s mostly because of the tranquillizers.”

At six-thirty they brought us food. Deli sandwiches, in plastic clamshell packs that were turned sideways and pushed through the bars. Plus bottles of water. I drank my water first and refilled the bottle from the tap. My sandwich was salami and cheese. Finest meal I ever ate.

At seven o’clock they took Jacob Mark away for questioning. No restraints. No chains. Theresa Lee and I sat on our cots, about eight feet apart, separated by bars. We didn’t talk much. Lee seemed depressed. At one point she said, “I lost some good friends when the towers came down. Not just cops. Firefighters, too. People that I had worked with. People that I had known for years.” She said it as if she thought those truths should insulate her from the craziness that came afterward. I didn’t answer her. Mostly I sat quiet and reran conversations in my head. All kinds of people had been talking at me. For hours. John Sansom, Lila Hoth, the guys in the next room. I was running through what they had all said, the same way a cabinet maker runs his palm over a length of planed wood, looking for the rough spots. There were a few. There were strange half-comments, odd nuances, little off-key implications. I didn’t know what any of them meant. Not then. But knowing that they were there was useful in itself.

At seven-thirty they brought Jacob Mark back and took Theresa Lee away in his place. No restraints. No chains. Jake got on his cot and sat cross-legged with his back to the camera. I looked at him. An inquiry. He gave a millimetric shrug and rolled his eyes. Then he kept his hands in his lap, out of sight of the camera, and made a gun with his right thumb and forefinger. He tapped his thigh and

looked at mine. I nodded. The dart gun. He put two fingers down between his knees and held a third in front and to the left. I nodded again. Two guys behind the table, and the third to the left with the gun. Probably in the doorway to the third room. On guard. Hence no restraints and no chains. I massaged my temples and while my hands were still up I mouthed, “Where are our shoes?” Jake mouthed back, “I don’t know.”

After that we sat in silence. I didn’t know what Jake was thinking about. His sister, probably. Or Peter. I was considering a binary choice. There are two ways to fight something. From the inside, or from the outside. I was an outside type of guy. Always had been.

At eight o’clock they brought Theresa Lee back and took me away again.

Chapter 45

No restraints. No chains. Clearly they thought I was afraid of the dart gun. Which I was, to a degree. Not because I fear small puncture wounds. And not because I have anything against sleep, in and of itself. I like sleep as much as the next guy. But I didn't want to waste any more time. I felt like I couldn't afford another eight hours on my back.

The room was populated exactly as Jacob Mark had semaphored it. The main guy was already sitting in the center chair. The guy who had fitted the chains that morning was the one who had brought me in, and he left me in the middle of the room and went to take his place at the table on the main guy's right. The guy who had wielded the Franchi was standing off to the left with the dart gun in his hands. My possessions were still on the table. Or, they were back on the table. I doubted that they had been there while Jake or Lee had been in the room. No point. No reason. No relevance. They had been laid out all over again, especially for me. Cash, passport, bank card, toothbrush, Metrocard, Lee's business card, the phony business card, the memory stick, and the cell phone. Nine items. All present and correct. Which was good, because I needed to take at least seven of them with me.

The guy in the center chair said, "Sit down, Mr. Reacher."

I moved toward my chair and I felt all three of them relax. They had been working all night and all day. Now they were into their third straight hour of interrogation. And interrogation is heavy work. It demands close attention and mental flexibility. It wears you out. So the three guys were tired. Tired enough to have lost their edge. As soon as I headed for my chair, they moved out of the present and into the future. They thought their troubles were over. They started thinking about their approach. Their first question. They assumed I would get to my chair and sit down and be ready to hear it. Be ready to answer it.

They were wrong.

Half a step short of my destination I raised my foot to the edge of the table and

straightened my leg and shoved. Shoved, not kicked, because I had no shoes on. The table jerked back and the far edge hit the two seated guys in the stomach and pinned them against their chair backs. By that point I was already moving to my left. I came up from a crouch at the third guy and tore the dart gun up and out of his hands and while he was all straight and exposed I kneed him hard in the groin. He gave up on the gun and folded forward and I high-stepped and changed feet and kneed him in the face. Like a folk dance from Ireland. I spun away and leveled the gun and pulled the trigger and shot the main guy in the chest. Then I went over the table and battered the other guy in the head with the dart gun's butt, once, twice, three times, hard and vicious, until he went quiet and stopped moving.

Four noisy violent seconds, from beginning to end. Four discrete units of action and time, separately packaged, separately unleashed. The table, the dart gun, the main guy, the second guy. One, two, three, four. Smooth and easy. The two guys I had hit were unconscious and bleeding. The guy on the floor from a shattered nose, and the guy at the table from a gash to his scalp. Next to him the main guy was on his way under, chemically assisted, the same way I had been twice before. It was interesting to watch. There was some kind of muscle paralysis involved. The guy was sliding down in his chair, helpless, but his eyes were moving like he was still aware of things. I remembered the whirling shapes, and I wondered if he was seeing them too.

Then I turned and watched the door to the third room. There was still the medical technician unaccounted for. Maybe others. Maybe lots of others. But the door stayed closed. The third room stayed quiet. I knelt and checked under the third guy's jacket. No Glock. He had a shoulder holster but it was empty. Standard procedure, probably. No firearms in any closed room with a prisoner present. I checked the other two guys. Same result. Government-issue nylon shoulder rigs, both of them empty.

The third room stayed quiet.

I checked pockets. They were all empty. All sanitized. Nothing there at all, except neutral items like tissues and lonely dimes and pennies trapped down in the seams. No house keys, no car keys, no phones. Certainly no wallets, no badge holders, and no IDs.

I picked up the dart gun again and held it one-handed, out and ready. Moved to the third room's door. Swung it open and raised the gun and pretended to aim. A

gun is a gun, even if it's empty and the wrong kind. It's all about first impressions and subliminal reactions.

The third room was unoccupied.

No medical technician, no backup agents, no support staff. Nobody at all. Nothing there, except gray office furniture and fluorescent light. The room itself was the same as the first two, an old brick basement chamber painted flat white. Same size, same proportions. It had another door, which I guessed led onward, either to a fourth room or a stairwell. I crossed to it and eased it open.

A stairwell. No paint, beyond an ancient peeling layer of institutional green. I closed the door again and checked the office furniture. Three desks, five cabinets, four lockers, all gray, all plain and functional, all made of steel, all locked. With combination locks, like the cells, which made sense, because there had been no keys in the agents' pockets. The desks held no piles of paper. Just three sleeping computers and three console telephones. I hit space bars and woke up each screen in turn. Each one asked for a password. I lifted receivers and hit redial buttons and got the operator every time. Extremely conscientious security. Painstaking, and consistent. Finish a call, dab the cradle, dial zero, hang up. The three guys weren't perfect, but they weren't idiots, either.

I stood still for a long moment. I was disappointed about the combination locks. I wanted to find their stores and reload the dart gun and shoot the other two agents with it. And I wanted my shoes.

I wasn't going to get either satisfaction.

I padded my way back to the cells. Jacob Mark and Theresa Lee looked up, looked away, looked back. Classic double-takes, because I was alone and I had the dart gun in my hands. I guessed they had heard the noises and assumed I was getting smacked around. I guessed they hadn't expected me back so soon, or at all.

Lee asked, "What happened?"

I said, "They fell asleep."

"How?"

“I guess my conversation bored them.”

“So now you’re really in trouble.”

“As opposed to what?”

“You were innocent before.”

I said, “Grow up, Theresa.”

She didn’t answer. I checked the locks on the cell gates. They were fine items. They looked high quality and very precise. They had milled top-hat knobs graduated with neat engraving all around the edges, from the number one to the number thirty-six. The knobs turned both ways. I spun them and felt nothing at all in my fingers except the purr of slight and consistent mechanical resistance. The feel of great engineering. Certainly I didn’t feel any tumblers falling.

I asked, “Do you want me to get you out?”

Lee said, “You can’t.”

“If I could, would you want me to?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because then you’d really be in trouble. If you stay, you’re playing their game.”

She didn’t answer.

I said, “Jake? What about you?”

He asked, “Did you find our shoes?”

I shook my head. “But you could borrow theirs. They’re about your size.”

“What about you?”

“There are shoe stores on Eighth Street.”

“You going to walk there barefoot?”

“This is Greenwich Village. If I can’t walk around barefoot here, where can I?”

This is Greenwich Village. I can't walk around barefoot here, where can I?

"How can you get us out?"

"Nineteenth-century problems and solutions, versus twenty-first century expediency. But it will be difficult. So I need to know whether to start. And you need to make up your mind real fast. Because we don't have much time."

"Before they wake up?"

"Before the Home Depot closes."

Jake said, "OK, I want out."

I looked at Theresa Lee.

She said, "I don't know. I didn't do anything."

"Feel like sticking around and proving that? Because that's hard to do. Proving a negative always is."

She didn't answer.

I said, "I was telling Sansom about how we studied the Red Army. You know what they were most afraid of? Not us. They were most afraid of their own people. Their worst torment was spending their whole lives proving their own innocence, over and over again."

Lee nodded.

"I want out," she said.

"OK," I said. I checked the things I needed to check. Estimated dimensions and weights by eye.

"Sit tight," I said. "I'll be back in less than an hour."

First stop was the next room. The three federal agents were still out cold. The main guy would stay that way for eight solid hours. Or maybe much longer, because his body mass was less than two-thirds of mine. For a bad second it struck me that I might have killed him. A dose calibrated for a man of my size

might have been dangerous for a smaller person. But the guy was breathing steadily right then. And he had started it, so the risk was his.

The other two would be waking up much earlier. Maybe fairly soon. Concussion was unpredictable. So I ducked through to the anteroom and tore all of the computer cords out of the walls and carried them back and used them to truss the two guys up like chickens. Wrists, elbows, ankles, necks, all tight and interconnected. Multi-strand copper cores, tough plastic sheathing, unbreakable. I peeled my socks off and tied them together in line and used them for a gag on the guy with the head wound. Unpleasant for him, but I figured he was getting a hazardous duty supplement in his pay, and he might as well earn it. I left the other guy's mouth alone. His nose was smashed, and gagging him would have been the same thing as suffocating him. I hoped he would appreciate my benevolence in the fullness of time.

I checked my work and reloaded my pockets with my possessions from the table and then I left the building.

Chapter 46

The staircase led up to the first floor and came out in back of what had once been the place where the fire trucks parked. There was a wide empty floor full of rat shit and the kind of mysterious random trash that accumulates in abandoned buildings. The big vehicle doors were locked shut with rusted iron bars and old padlocks. But there was a personnel door in the left-hand wall. Getting to it wasn't easy. There was a half-cleared path. The trash on the floor had been mostly kicked to the side by the passage of feet, but there was still enough debris left around to make barefoot walking difficult. I ended up sweeping stuff out of the way with the side of my foot and stepping into the spaces I had made, one pace at a time. Slow progress. But I got there in the end.

The personnel door was fitted with a new lock, but it was designed to keep people out, not in. On the inside was just a simple lever. On the outside was a combination dial. I found a heavy brass hose coupler on the floor and used it to wedge the door open a crack. I left it that way for my return and stepped out to an alley and two careful paces later I was on the West 3rd Street sidewalk.

I headed straight for Sixth Avenue. Nobody looked at my feet. It was a hot night and there was plenty more attractive skin on display. I looked at some of it myself. Then I flagged down a cab and it took me twenty blocks north and half a block east to the Home Depot on 23rd Street. Docherty had mentioned the address. Hammers had been bought there, prior to the attack under the FDR Drive. The store was getting ready to close up, but they let me in anyway. I found a five-foot pry bar in the contractor section. Cold rolled steel, thick and strong. The trip back to the registers took me through the gardening section and I decided to kill two birds with one stone by picking up a pair of rubber gardening clogs. They were ugly, but better than literally nothing. I paid with my ATM card, which I knew would leave a computer trail, but there was no reason to conceal the fact that I was out buying tools. That purchase was about to become obvious in other ways.

Cabs cruised the street outside like vultures, looking for people with stuff too awkward to carry. Which made no sense economically. Save five bucks at the

big-box store, spend eight hauling it home. But the arrangement suited me fine right then. Within a minute I was on my way back south. I got out on 3rd near but not right next to the firehouse.

Ten feet ahead of me I saw the medical tech step into the alley.

The guy looked clean and rested. He was wearing chinos and a white T-shirt and basketball shoes. Staff rotation, I figured. The agents held the fort all day, and then the medical guy took over at night. To make sure the prisoners were still alive in the morning. Efficient, rather than humane. I imagined that the flow of information was considered more important than any individual's rights or welfare.

I put the pry bar in my left hand and hustled hard in my loose rubber shoes and made it to the personnel door before the guy was all the way through it. I didn't want him to kick the hose coupler away and let it close behind him. That would give me a problem I didn't need. The guy heard me and turned in the doorway and his hands came up defensively and I shoved him hard and tumbled him inside. He slid on the trash and went down on one knee. I picked him up by the neck and held him at arm's length and eased the brass coupler aside with my toe and let the door close until it clicked. Then I turned back and was about to explain the guy's options to him but I saw that he already understood them. Be good, or get hit. He chose to be good. He went into a crouch and raised his hands in a small abbreviated gesture of surrender. I hefted the pry bar in my left hand and straight-armed the guy onward toward the head of the stairs. He was meek all the way down to the basement. He gave me no trouble on the way through the office room. Then we got to the second room and he saw the three guys on the floor and sensed what was in store for him. He tensed up. Adrenaline kicked in. Fight or flight. Then he looked at me again, a huge determined man in ludicrous shoes, holding a big metal bar.

He went quiet.

I asked him, "Do you know the combinations for the cells?"

He said, "No."

"So how do you give painkiller injections?"

"Through the bars."

“What happens if someone has a seizure and you can’t get in the cell?”

“I have to call.”

“Where is your equipment?”

“In my locker.”

“Show me,” I said. “Open it.”

We went back to the anteroom and he led me to a locker and spun the combination dial. The door swung open. I asked him, “Can you open any of the other cabinets?”

He said, “No, just this one.”

His locker had a bunch of shelves inside, piled high with all kinds of medical stuff. Wrapped syringes, a stethoscope, small phials of colorless liquids, packs of cotton balls, pills, bandages, gauze, tape.

Plus a shallow box of tiny nitrogen capsules.

And a box of wrapped darts.

Which made some kind of bureaucratic sense. I imagined the management conference back when they were writing the operations manual. The Pentagon. Staff officers in charge. Some junior ranks present. An agenda. Some DoD counsel insisting that the dart gun’s ammunition be held by a qualified medical officer. Because anesthetic was a drug. And so on and so forth. Then some other active-duty type saying that compressed nitrogen wasn’t medical. A third guy pointing out it made no sense at all to keep the propellant separate from the load. Around and around. I imagined exasperated agents eventually giving up and giving in. *OK, whatever, let’s move on*.

I asked, “What exactly is in the darts?”

The guy said, “Local anesthetic to help the wound site, plus a lot of barbiturate.”

“How much barbiturate?”

“Enough.”

“For a gorilla?”

The guy shook his head. “Reduced dose. Calculated for a normal human.”

“Who did the calculation?”

“The manufacturer.”

“Knowing what it was for?”

“Of course.”

“With specifications and purchase orders and everything?”

“Yes.”

“And tests?”

“Down at Guantánamo.”

“Is this a great country, or what?”

The guy said nothing.

I asked him, “Are there side effects?”

“None.”

“You sure? You know why I’m asking, right?”

The guy nodded. He knew why I was asking. I was fresh out of computer cords, so I had to keep half an eye on him while I found the gun and loaded it. Loading it was a jigsaw puzzle. I wasn’t familiar with the technology. I had to proceed on common sense and logic alone. Clearly the trigger mechanism tripped the gas release. Clearly the gas propelled the dart. But guns are basically simple machines. They have fronts and backs. Cause and effect happens in a rational sequence. I got the thing charged up inside forty seconds.

I said, “You want to lie down on the floor?”

The guy didn’t answer.

I said, “You know, to save bumping your head.”

The guy got down on the floor.

I asked him, “Any preference as to where? Arm? Leg?”

He said, “It works best into muscle mass.”

“So roll over.”

He rolled over and I shot him in the ass.

I reloaded the thing twice more and put darts into the two agents that were liable to wake up. Which gave me at least an eight-hour margin, unless there were other unanticipated arrivals on the horizon. Or unless the agents were supposed to call in with status checks every hour. Or unless there was a car already on its way to take us back to D.C. Which conflicting thoughts made me feel half-relaxed and half-urgent. I carried the pry bar through to the cell block. Jacob Mark looked at me and said nothing. Theresa Lee looked at me and said, “They sell shoes like that on Eighth Street now?”

I didn’t answer. Just stepped around to the back of her cell and jammed the flat end of the pry bar under the bottom of the structure. Then I leaned my weight on the bar and felt the whole thing move, just a little. Just a fraction of an inch. Not much more than the natural flex of the metal.

“That’s stupid,” Lee said. “This thing is a self-contained freestanding cube. You might be able to tip it over, but I’ll still be inside.”

I said, “Actually it’s not freestanding.”

“It’s not bolted to the floor.”

“But it’s clamped down by the sewer connection. Under the toilet.”

“Will that help?”

“I hope so. If I tip it up and the sewer connection holds, then the floor will tear off, and you can crawl out.”

“Will it hold?”

“It’s a gamble. It’s a kind of competition.”

“Between what?”

“Nineteenth-century legislation and a sleazy twenty-first-century welding shop with a government contract. See how the floor isn’t welded all the way around? Just in some places?”

“That’s the nature of spot welding.”

“How strong is it?”

“Plenty strong. Stronger than the toilet pipe, probably.”

“Maybe not. There was cholera in New York in the nineteenth century. A big epidemic. It killed lots of people. Eventually the city fathers figured out what was causing it, which was cesspools mixing with the drinking water. So they built proper sewers. And they specified all kinds of standards for the pipes and the connectors. Those standards are still in the building code, all these years later. A pipe like this has a flange lapping over the floor. I’m betting it’s fixed stronger than the spot welds. Those nineteenth-century public works guys erred on the side of caution. More so than some modern corporation wanting Homeland Security money.”

Lee paused a beat. Then she smiled, briefly. “So either I get illegally busted out of a government jail cell, or the sewer pipe gets torn out of the floor. Either way I’m in the shit.”

“You got it.”

“Great choice.”

“Your call,” I said.

“Go for it.”

Two rooms away I heard a telephone start to ring.

I knelt down and eased the tip of the pry bar into the position it needed to be in, which was under the bottom horizontal rail of the cell, but not so far under that it also caught the edge of the floor tray. Then I kicked it sideways a little until it was directly below one of the upside-down T-welds, where the force would be carried upward through one of the vertical bars.

Two rooms away the telephone stopped ringing.

I looked at Lee and said, “Stand on the toilet seat. Let’s give it all the help we can.”

She climbed up and balanced. I took up all the slack in the pry bar and then leaned down hard and bounced, once, twice, three times. Two hundred and fifty pounds of moving mass, multiplied by sixty inches of leverage. Three things happened. First, the pry bar dug itself a shallow channel in the concrete under the cage, which was mechanically inefficient. Second, the whole assemblage of bars distorted out of shape a little, which was also inefficient. But third, a bright bead of metal pinged loose and skittered away.

“That was a spot,” Lee called. “As in spot-weld.”

I moved the pry bar and found a similar position twelve inches to the left. Wedged the bar tight, took up the slack, and bounced. Same three results. The grind of powdered concrete, the screech of bending bars, and the ping of another metal bead torn loose.

Two rooms away a second phone started to ring. A different tone. More urgent.

I stood back and caught my breath. Moved the pry bar again, this time two feet to the right. Repeated the procedure, and was rewarded with another broken weld. Three down, many more to go. But now I had approximate hand-holds in the bottom rail, where the pry bar had forced shallow U-shaped bends into the metal. I put the pry bar down and squatted facing the cell and shoved my hands palms-up into the holds. Grasped hard and breathed hard and prepared to lift. When I quit watching the Olympics the weightlifters were moving more than five hundred pounds. I figured I was capable of much less than that. But I figured much less than that might do the trick.

Two rooms away the second telephone stopped ringing.

And then I started

And a third started.

I heaved upward.

I got the side of the cell about a foot off the ground. The tread plate floor shrieked and bent like paper. But the welds held. The third telephone stopped ringing. I looked up at Lee and mouthed, “Jump.” She got the message. She was a smart woman. She jumped high off the toilet and smashed her bare feet down together right where two welds were under pressure. I felt nothing through my hands. No impact. No shock. Because the welds broke immediately and the floor bent down into a radical V-shaped chute. Like a mouth. The opening was about a foot wide and a foot deep. Good, but not good enough. A kid might have gotten through it, but Lee wasn’t going to.

But at least we had proved the principle. Score one for the nineteenth-century city fathers.

Two rooms away all three phones started to ring simultaneously. Competing tones, fast and urgent.

I caught my breath again and after that it was just a question of repeating the triple procedures over and over again, two welds at a time. The pry bar, the weightlifting, the jump. Lee wasn’t a big woman, but even so we needed to tear free a line of welds nearly six feet long before the floor would bend down enough to let her out. It was a question of simple arithmetic. The straight edge of the floor became part of a curved circumference, in a ratio of one-to-three against us. It took us a long time to get the job done. Close to eight minutes. But we got it done eventually. Lee came out on her back, feetfirst, like a limbo dancer. Her shirt got caught and rode up to reveal a smooth tan stomach. Then she wriggled free and crabbed clear and stood up and hugged me hard. And longer than she needed to. Then she broke away and I rested for a minute and wiped my hands on my pants.

Then I repeated the whole procedure all over again, for Jacob Mark.

Two rooms away phones rang and stopped, rang and stopped.

Chapter 47

We got out fast. Theresa Lee took the lead agent's shoes. They were big on her, but not by much. Jacob Mark took the medical technician's whole outfit. He figured that an incomplete out-of-town cop's uniform would be conspicuous on the street, and he was probably right. The change was worth the delay. He looked much better in the chinos and the T-shirt and the basketball sneakers. They fit close to perfectly. There was a nickel-sized bloodstain on the back of the pants, but that was the only disadvantage. We left the medical guy sleeping in his underwear.

Then we headed out. Up the stairs, across the littered floor, through the alley, to the 3rd Street sidewalk. It was crowded. It was still hot. We turned left. No real reason. Just a random choice. But a lucky one. We got about five steps away and I heard the blare of a horn behind us and the yelp of tires and I glanced back and saw a black car jamming to a stop ten feet the other side of the firehouse. A Crown Vic, new and shiny. Two guys spilled out. I had seen them before. And I knew for sure that Theresa Lee had seen them before. Blue suits, blue ties. The FBI. They had talked to Lee in the precinct house, and they had talked to me on 35th Street. They had asked me questions about Canadian phone numbers. Now twenty feet behind us they ran for the alley and ducked in. They didn't see us at all. But if we had turned right we would have collided head-on with them as they got out of their car. So we had been lucky. We celebrated by hustling hard, straight for Sixth Avenue. Jacob Mark got there first. He was the only one of us with decent shoes.

We crossed Sixth Avenue and followed Bleecker for a spell and then found refuge on Cornelia Street, which was narrow and dark and relatively quiet, except for diners at sidewalk café tables. We stayed well away from them and they paid no attention to us. They were more interested in their food. I didn't blame them. It smelled good. I was still very hungry, even after the salami and cheese. We headed up to the quiet end of the street and took inventory there. Lee and Jake had nothing. All their stuff was locked away in the firehouse basement. I had what I had reclaimed from the table in the second room, the important

components of which were my cash, my ATM card, my Metrocard, and Leonid's cell phone. The cash amounted to forty-three dollars and change. The Metrocard had four rides left on it. Leonid's cell was almost out of battery. We agreed it was beyond certain that my ATM number and Leonid's phone number were already flagged up in various computer systems. If we used either one, someone would know within seconds. But I wasn't too worried. Information has to be useful to be damaging. If we escaped from West 3rd and days later withdrew cash in Oklahoma City or New Orleans or San Francisco, then that data would be significant. If we withdrew cash immediately a couple of blocks from the firehouse, then that data was useless. It told them nothing they didn't already know. And there are so many cell antennas in New York that triangulation is difficult. A ballpark location is helpful out in the sticks. Not so much in the city. A target area two blocks wide and two deep can contain fifty thousand people and take days to search.

So we moved on and found an ATM in a bright blue bank lobby and I withdrew all the cash I could, which was three hundred bucks. Apparently I had a daily limit. And the machine was slow. Probably on purpose. Banks cooperate with law enforcement. They sound the alarm and then slow down the transaction. The idea is to give the cops time to show up. Maybe possible, in some places. Not very likely, with city traffic to deal with. The machine waited and waited and waited and then it coughed up the bills. I took them and smiled at the machine. Most of them have surveillance cameras built in, connected to digital recorders.

We moved on again and Lee spent ten of my new dollars in a deli. She bought an emergency cell phone charger. It operated off a penlight battery. She plugged it into Leonid's phone and called Docherty, her partner. It was ten after ten, and he would be getting ready for work. He didn't pick up the call. Lee left a message and then switched off the phone. She said cell phones had GPS chips in them. I didn't know that. She said the chips bleeped away every fifteen seconds and could be pinned down within fifteen feet. She said GPS satellites were much more precise than antenna triangulation. She said the way to use a cell on the run was to keep it switched off except for brief moments just before leaving one location and moving on to the next. That way the GPS trackers were always one step behind.

So we moved on again. We were all aware of cop cars on the streets. We saw plenty of them. The NYPD is a big operation. The largest police department in America. Maybe the largest in the world. We found a noisy bistro in the heart of NYU territory after skirting north of Washington Square Park and then heading

NYU territory after skirting north of Washington Square Park and then heading east. The place was dark and packed with undergraduate students. Some of the food it sold was recognizable. I was hungry and still dehydrated. I guessed my systems had been working overtime to flush out the double dose of barbiturate. I drank whole glasses of tap water and ordered a kind of shake made of yogurt and fruit. Plus a burger, and coffee. Jake and Lee ordered nothing. They said they were too shaken to eat. Then Lee turned to me and said, “You better tell us what exactly is going on.”

I said, “I thought you didn’t want to know.”

“We just crossed that line.”

“They didn’t show ID. You were entitled to assume the detention was illegal. In which case busting out wasn’t a crime. In fact it was probably your duty.”

She shook her head. “I knew who they were, ID or no ID. And it’s not the busting out that I’m worried about. It’s the shoes. That’s what’s going to screw me. I stood over the guy and stole his footwear. I was looking right at him. That’s premeditation. They’ll say I had time to reflect and react appropriately.”

I looked at Jake, to see whether he wanted to be included, or whether he still figured that innocence was bliss. He shrugged, as if to say in for a penny, in for a pound. So I let the waitress finish up serving my order and then I told them what I knew. March of 1983, Sansom, the Korengal Valley. All the details, and all the implications.

Lee said, “There are American troops in the Korengal Valley right now. I just read about it. In a magazine. I guess it never stops. I hope they’re doing better than the Russians did.”

“They were Ukrainians,” I said.

“Is there a difference?”

“I’m sure the Ukrainians think so. The Russians put their minorities out front, and their minorities didn’t like it.”

Jake said, “I get it about World War Three. At the time, I mean. But this is a quarter-century later. The Soviet Union isn’t even a country anymore. How can a country be aggrieved about something, if it doesn’t even exist today?”

“Geopolitics,” Lee said. “It’s about the future, not the past. Maybe we want to do similar stuff again, in Pakistan or Iran or wherever. It makes a difference if the world knows we did it before. It sets up preconceptions. You know that. You’re a cop. You like it when we can’t mention prior convictions in court?”

Jake said, “So how big of a deal do you think this is?”

“Huge,” Lee said. “As big as can be. For us, anyway. Because overall it’s still small. Which is ironic, right? You see what I mean? If three thousand people knew, there’s not much anyone could do about it. Or three hundred, even. Or thirty. It would be out there, end of story. But right now only the three of us know. And three is a small number. Small enough to be contained. They can make three people disappear without anyone noticing.”

“How?”

“It happens, believe me. Who’s going to pay attention? You’re not married. Me either.” She looked at me and asked, “Reacher, are you married?”

I shook my head.

She paused a second. She said, “No one left behind to ask questions.”

Jake said, “What about people where we work?”

“Police departments do what they’re told.”

“This is insane.”

“This is the new world.”

“Are they serious?”

“It’s a cost-benefit analysis. Three innocent people versus a big geopolitical deal? What would you do?”

“We have rights.”

“We used to.”

Jake said nothing in reply to that. I finished my coffee and washed it down with another glass of tap water. Lee called for the check and waited until it had arrived and I had paid it, and then she turned Leonid's phone back on. It came to life with a merry little tune and locked on to its network and ten seconds after that its network recognized it and told it there was a text message waiting. Lee hit the appropriate button and started scrolling.

"It's from Docherty," she said. "He hasn't dumped me yet."

Then she read and scrolled, read and scrolled. I counted fifteen-second intervals in my head, and imagined the GPS chip sending out a little burst of data for every one of them, saying, *Here we are! Here we are!* I got up to ten. A hundred and fifty seconds. Two and a half minutes. It was a long message. And it was full of bad news, according to Lee's face. Her lips compressed and her eyes narrowed. She checked back on a couple of paragraphs and then she shut the thing down again and handed it back to me. I put it in my pocket. She looked straight at me and said, "You were right. The dead guys under the FDR Drive were Lila Hoth's crew. I guess the 17th called everyone in the phone book and checked out the only one that didn't answer. They broke into their offices and found billing records made out to Lila Hoth, in care of the Four Seasons Hotel."

I didn't answer.

She said, "But here's the thing. Those billing records go back three months, not three days. And the other data is in. Homeland Security has no record of two women called Hoth ever entering the country. Certainly not three days ago on British Airways. And Susan Mark never called London, either from work or from home."

Chapter 48

Use the phone and move on immediately was the rule. We took Broadway north. Taxis and police cruisers sped past us. Headlight beams washed over us. We hustled as far as Astor Place and then ducked underground and burned three of my four remaining Metrocard rides on the 6 train north. Where it all began. Another bright new R142A car. It was eleven in the evening and there were eighteen passengers in addition to ourselves. We got three spaces together on one of the eight-person benches. Lee sat in the middle. On her left Jake half-turned and bent his head, ready for quiet talk. On her right I did the same thing. Jake asked, “So which is it? Are the Hoths phony or is the government already covering its ass by erasing data?”

Lee said, “Could be either.”

I said, “The Hoths are phony.”

“You think or you know?”

“It was too easy at Penn Station.”

“How?”

“They sucked me in. Leonid let me see him. He was wearing a jacket that looked bright orange under the lights. It was practically the same as the safety vests I saw some railroad workers wearing. It drew my eye. I was supposed to notice it. Then he let me hit him. Because I was supposed to take the phone from him and find out about the Four Seasons. They manipulated me. There are layers upon layers here. They needed to talk to me but they didn’t want me to see everything. They didn’t want to show their whole hand. So they set up a way in for me. They lured me to the hotel and tried a sweet, easy approach. Just one guy acting incompetent at the railroad station, and then the soft soap. They even had a backup plan, which was coming to the precinct house and making the missing persons report. Either way I would have showed up eventually.”

“[illegible]?”

"What do they want from you?"

"Susan's information."

"Which was what?"

"I don't know."

"Who are they?"

"Not journalists," I said. "I guess I was wrong about that. Lila was acting one thing, acting another thing. I don't know what she really is."

"Is the old woman for real?"

"I don't know."

"Where are they now? They bailed out of the hotel."

"They always had somewhere else. They had two tracks running. Public consumption, and private business. So I don't know where they are now. Their alternative place, obviously. Some long-term secure location, I guess. Here in the city, probably. Maybe a town-house. Because they have a crew with them. People of their own. Bad people. Those private guys were right. How bad, they just found out the hard way. With the hammers."

Lee said, "So the Hoths are covering their asses too."

"Wrong tense," I said. "They already covered them. They're hunkered down someplace and anyone who might have known where is dead."

The train stopped at 23rd Street. The doors opened. No one got on. No one got off. Theresa Lee stared at the floor. Jacob Mark looked across her at me and said, "If Homeland Security can't even track Lila Hoth into the country, then they also can't tell if she went to California or not. Which means it could have been her, with Peter."

"Yes," I said. "It could have been."

The doors closed. The train moved on.

Theresa Lee looked up from the floor and turned to me and said, "What

Theresa Lee looked up from the floor and turned to me and said, "What happened to those four guys was our fault, you know. With the hammers. Your fault, specifically. You told Lila you knew about them. You turned them into a loose end."

I said, "Thanks for pointing that out."

You tipped her over the edge.

Your fault, specifically.

The train rattled into the 28th Street station.

We got out at 33rd Street. None of us wanted to hit Grand Central. Too many cops, and in Jacob Mark's case at least, maybe too many negative associations. At street level Park Avenue was busy. Two cop cars came past in the first minute. To the west was the Empire State Building. Too many cops. We doubled back south and took a quiet cross-street toward Madison. I was feeling pretty good by then. I had spent sixteen hours out of seventeen fast asleep, and I was full of food and fluids. But Lee and Jake looked beat. They had nowhere to go and weren't used to it. Obviously they couldn't go home. They couldn't go to friends, either. We had to assume all their known haunts were being watched.

Lee said, "We need a plan."

I liked the look of the block we were on. New York has hundreds of separate micro-neighborhoods. Flavor and nuance vary street by street, sometimes building by building. Park and Madison in the high 20s are slightly seedy. The cross-streets are a little down at the heel. Maybe once they were high end, and maybe one day they will be again, but right then they were comfortable. We hid out under sidewalk scaffolding for a spell and watched drunks staggering home from bars, and people from nearby apartment houses walking their dogs before bed. We saw a guy with a Great Dane the size of a pony, and a girl with a rat terrier the size of the Great Dane's head. Overall I preferred the rat terrier. Small dog, big personality. The little guy thought he was boss of the world. We waited until the clock passed midnight and then we snaked back and forth west and east until we found the right kind of hotel. It was a narrow place with an out-of-date illuminated sign backed with low-wattage bulbs. It looked a little run-down and grimy. Smaller than I would have liked. Bigger places work much better. Greater chance of empty rooms, more anonymity, less supervision. But all in all the

place we were looking at was feasible.

It was a decent target for the fifty-dollar trick.

Or maybe we could even get away with forty.

In the end we had to bid our way up to seventy-five, probably because the night porter suspected we had some kind of a sexual threesome in mind. Maybe because of the way Theresa Lee was looking at me. There was something going on in her eyes. I wasn't sure what. But clearly the night porter saw an opportunity to raise his rate. The room he gave us was small. It was in back of the building and had twin beds and a narrow window on an air shaft. It was never going to show up in a tourist brochure, but it felt secure and clandestine and I could tell that Lee and Jake felt good about spending the night in it. But equally I could tell that neither one of them felt good about spending two nights in it, or five, or ten.

"We need help," Lee said. "We can't live like this indefinitely."

"We can if we want to," I said. "I've lived like this for ten years."

"OK, a normal person can't live like this indefinitely. We need help. This problem isn't going to go away."

"It could," Jake said. "From how you were figuring it before. If three thousand people knew, it wouldn't be a problem anymore. So all we have to do is tell three thousand people."

"One at a time?"

"No, we should call the newspapers."

"Would they believe us?"

"If we were convincing."

"Would they print the story?"

"Why wouldn't they?"

"Who knows what goes on with newspapers now? Maybe they would check with

the government about a thing like this. Maybe the government would tell them to sit on it."

"What about freedom of the press?"

Lee said, "Yes, I remember that."

"So who the hell will help us?"

"Sansom," I said. "Sansom will help us. He's got the biggest investment here."

"Sansom is the government. He had his own guy trailing Susan."

"Because he has a lot to lose. We can use that." I took Leonid's phone out of my pocket and dropped it on the bed next to Theresa Lee. "Text Docherty in the morning. Get the number for the Cannon House Office Building in D.C. Call Sansom's office and demand to speak with him personally. Tell him you're a police officer in New York and that you're with me. Tell him we know his guy was on the train. Then tell him we know the DSM wasn't for the VAL rifle. Tell him we know there's more."

Chapter 49

Theresa Lee picked up the phone and held it for a moment like it was a rare and precious jewel. Then she put it on the night stand and asked, “What makes you think there’s more?”

I said, “Overall there has to be more. Sansom won four medals, not just one. He was a regular go-to guy. He must have done all kinds of things.”

“Like what?”

“Whatever needed doing. For whoever needed it done. Not just the army. Delta guys were loaned out, from time to time. To the CIA, on occasion.”

“To do what?”

“Covert interventions. Coups. Assassinations.”

“Marshal Tito died in 1980. In Yugoslavia. You think Sansom did that?”

“No, I think Tito got sick. But I wouldn’t be surprised if there was a backup plan, in case he stayed healthy.”

“Brezhnev died in 1982. In Russia. Then Andropov, pretty soon after that. Then Chernenko, real quick. It was like an epidemic.”

“What are you? A historian?”

“Amateur. But whatever, all that led to Gorbachev, and progress. You think that was us? You think that was Sansom?”

“Maybe,” I said. “I don’t know.”

“But whatever, none of that kind of stuff relates to March of 1983 in Afghanistan.”

“But think about it. Stumbling into a Soviet sniper team in the dark was a totally random chance. Would they have sent a go-to ace like Sansom walking around in the hills, hoping for the best? A hundred times out of a hundred-and-one he would have come up empty. That’s a massive risk for very little reward. That’s no kind of mission planning. A mission needs an achievable objective.”

“A lot of them fail.”

“Of course they do. But they all start out with a realistic target. More realistic than blundering around in a thousand square miles of empty mountains hoping for a random face-to-face encounter. So there must have been something else going on.”

“That’s pretty vague.”

“There’s more,” I said. “And it’s not so vague. People have been talking to me for days. And I’ve been listening. Some of what I heard doesn’t make much sense. Those federal guys snarled me up at the Watergate in D.C. I asked them what was going on. Their reaction was weird. It was like the sky was about to fall. It was way out of proportion for some technical trespass twenty-five years ago.”

“Geopolitics isn’t simple.”

“I agree. And I’m the first to admit I’m no kind of an expert. But even so it seemed way over the top.”

“That’s still vague.”

“I spoke to Sansom in D.C. At his office. He seemed sour about the whole thing. Gloomy, and kind of troubled.”

“It’s election season.”

“But grabbing up the rifle was kind of cool, wasn’t it? Nothing to be ashamed of. It was all about what the army used to call dash and daring. So his reaction was wrong.”

“Still vague.”

“He knew the sniper’s name. Grigori Hoth. From his dog tags. I figured he had the tags as souvenirs. He said, no, those tags were locked up with the after-action reports and everything else. It was like a slip of the tongue. And everything else? What did that mean?”

Lee said nothing.

I said, “We talked about the fate of the sniper and the spotter. Sansom said he had no silenced weapons. Which was like another slip of the tongue. Delta would never set up for clandestine nighttime incursions without silenced weapons. They’re particular about stuff like that. Which suggests to me that the whole VAL episode was an accidental byproduct of something else entirely. I thought the rifle was the story. But this thing is like an iceberg. Most of it is still hidden.”

Lee said nothing.

I said, “Then we talked about the geopolitics. He saw a danger, for sure. He’s worried about Russia, or the Russian Federation, or whatever it is they call themselves now. He thinks they’re unstable. He said things could blow up big, if the Korengal part of the story gets out. You hear that? The Korengal *part of* the story? It was like a third slip of the tongue. It was effectively a direct admission that there’s more. Direct from the horse’s mouth.”

Lee didn’t answer. Jacob Mark asked, “What kind of more?”

“I don’t know. But whatever it is, it’s information-intensive. Right from the start Lila Hoth was looking for a USB memory. And the feds assume there’s one out there somewhere. They said their task is to recover the real memory stick. Real, because they took a look at the one I bought and assumed it was a decoy. They said, it’s empty and it’s too small anyway. Hear that? Too small? Which means there are some big files in play. Lots of information.”

“But Susan didn’t have anything with her.”

“True. But everybody assumes she did.”

“What kind of information?”

“I have no idea. Except that Springfield talked to me here in New York. Sansom’s security guy, at the Sheraton. In a quiet corridor. He was very uptight

Sansom's security guy, at the Sheraton. In a quiet corridor. He was very uptight. He was warning me off. He chose a specific metaphor. He said, you can't afford to turn over the wrong rock."

"So?"

"What happens when you turn over a rock?"

"Things crawl out."

"Exactly. Present tense. Things crawl out. This is not about things just lying there, that died twenty-five years ago. This is about things that are squirming and wriggling right now. This is about things that are alive today."

I saw Theresa Lee thinking it through. She glanced at the phone on the night table. Her eyes narrowed. I guessed she was rehearsing the morning call to Sansom. She said, "He's kind of careless, isn't he? He made three slips of the tongue."

I said, "He was a Delta officer the best part of seventeen years."

"And?"

"You don't last seventeen days if you're careless."

"So?"

"He seems very engaged to me. He's aware of everything to do with his campaign. How he looks, what he says, how he travels. Every last little implication."

"So?"

"So I don't think he's careless."

"He made three slips of the tongue."

"Did he? I'm not so sure. I wonder if he was setting a trap instead. He read my record. I was a good MP, and pretty close to his generation. I think maybe he was looking for help, any old place he could get it."

"You think he was recruiting you?"

You think he was recruiting you?

“Maybe,” I said. “I think maybe he was dropping a couple of breadcrumbs, and waiting to see if I would follow them.”

“Because?”

“Because he wants the lid back on, and he’s not sure who can do it for him.”

“He doesn’t trust the DoD guys?”

“Would you?”

“That’s not my world. Would you trust them?”

“About as far as I can spit.”

“Doesn’t he trust Springfield?”

“With his life. But Springfield is just one guy. And Sansom has a big problem. So maybe he figures if some other guy is in, he might as well stay in. The more the merrier.”

“So he’s bound to help us.”

“Not bound,” I said. “His jurisdiction is strictly limited. But he might be inclined. Which is why I want you to call him.”

“Why don’t you call him?”

“Because I’m not going to be here at start of business tomorrow.”

“You’re not?”

“I’ll meet you at ten, in Madison Square Park. A couple of blocks south of here. Be careful getting there.”

“Where are you going?”

“Out.”

“Where?”

“To look for Lila Hoth.”

“You won’t find her.”

“Probably not. But she’s got a crew. Maybe they’ll find me. I’m sure they’re out looking for me. And they’ve got my picture.”

“You’re going to use yourself as bait?”

“Whatever works.”

“I’m sure the cops are out looking for you too. And the Defense Department, and the FBI. Maybe people we’ve never even heard of.”

“Busy night all around.”

“Take care, OK?”

“Always.”

“When are you leaving?”

“Now.”

Chapter 50

New York City. One o'clock in the morning. The best place and the worst place in the world to be hunted. The streets were still warm. Traffic was light. Whole ten-second intervals went by with no cars on Madison. There were still people around. Some of them were asleep, in doorways or on benches. Some of them were walking, either purposefully or aimlessly. I took the aimless route. I chose 30th Street and crossed to Park, and then Lex. I was never trained in the art of staying invisible. They picked smaller guys for that. The normal-sized people. They took one look at me and gave up on the whole proposition. They assumed that a guy my size would always be too easy to make. But I get by. I taught myself a few techniques. Some of them are counterintuitive. Night is better than day, because places are lonelier. When places are lonelier, I stand out less, not more. Because when people look for me, they look for a big guy. And size is easier to judge when there are handy comparisons all around. Put me in a crowd of fifty civilians, and I stand out, literally head and shoulders above the rest. On my own, people are less sure. No benchmarks. People are bad at judging height in isolation. We know that from experiments with eyewitness testimony. Stage an incident, ask for first impressions, and the same guy can be described as anywhere between five-eight and six-four. People see, but they don't look.

Except for people trained to look.

I paid a lot of attention to cars. No way to find an individual in New York City except by cruising the streets. The place is just too big for any alternative method. The NYPD's blue and white cruisers were easy to spot. Their light bars made a distinctive silhouette even far in the distance. Every time I saw one coming I paused in the nearest doorway and laid myself down. Just another homeless guy. Unconvincing in winter, because I didn't have a mound of old blankets over me. But the weather was still hot. The real homeless people were still in T-shirts.

Unmarked cop cars were harder to make. Their front-end silhouettes were the same as everything else's, which was the point. But domestic politics and law enforcement budgets restrict choice to a specific handful of makes and models.

And most individual vehicles are characteristically neglected. They're dirty, they sag, they wallow.

Except for unmarked federal cars. Same makes, same models, but often new and clean and waxed and polished. Easy enough to spot, but not easy to distinguish from certain car service rides. Limousine companies use some of the same makes and models. Crown Vics, and their Mercury equivalents. And livery drivers keep their cars clean. I spent some time horizontal in doorways only to see T&LC plates flash past. Taxi and Limousine Commission. Which frustrated me, until I remembered Theresa Lee's comment about the NYPD's counterterrorism squad cruising around in fake cabs. After that I erred on the side of caution.

I figured Lila Hoth's crew would have rentals. Hertz, Avis, Enterprise, or whoever else was new on the scene. Again, a fairly specific handful of makes and models, mostly domestic pieces-of-shit, but new and clean and well maintained. I saw plenty of vehicles that fit the bill, and plenty that didn't. I took all reasonable precautions to stay out of law enforcement's way, and I made all reasonable efforts to let Lila Hoth's people see me. The late hour helped. It simplified things. It categorized the population. Innocent bystanders were mostly home in bed.

I walked for half an hour, but nothing happened.

Until one-thirty in the morning.

Until I looped around to 22nd and Broadway.

Chapter 51

By chance I saw the girl with the rat terrier again. She was walking south on Broadway, heading for 22nd. The little guy was peeing on some posts and ignoring others. I passed them by and the dog noticed me and barked. I turned around to reassure it that I was no kind of a major danger and I saw in the corner of my eye a black Crown Vic come through the 23rd Street light. Clean, shiny, the spike of needle antennas on the trunk lid shown up by the headlights of a car thirty yards behind it.

It slowed to a walk.

Broadway is double-wide on that block. Six lanes, all headed south, divided after the light by a short pedestrian refuge in the middle. I was on the left-hand sidewalk. Next to me, an apartment house. Beyond that, retail stores. On my right, six lanes away, the Flatiron Building. Beyond that, retail stores.

Dead ahead, a subway entrance.

The girl with the dog turned left behind me and entered the apartment building. I saw a doorman behind a desk. The Crown Vic stopped in the second of the six lanes. The car behind it pulled past and the wash of its headlights showed me two guys silhouetted in the Crown Vic's front seats. They were sitting still. Maybe checking a photograph, maybe calling in for instructions, maybe calling for backup.

I sat down on a low brick wall that ran around a planted area in front of the apartment house. The subway entrance was ten feet away.

The Crown Vic stayed where it was.

Far south of me the Broadway sidewalk was wide. Adjacent to the retail operations it was cast from concrete. The half next to the curb was a long subway grate. The subway entrance ten feet from me was a narrow staircase. The south end of the 23rd Street station. The N and the R and the W trains. The

uptown platform.

I made a bet with myself that it was a HEET entrance. A high entry-exit turnstile. Not a money wager. Something far more important. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

I waited.

The guys in the car sat still.

At one-thirty in the morning the subway was well into its nighttime hours. Twenty-minute gaps between trains. I heard no rumbling or roaring from below. There was no rush of air. The trash on the distant sidewalk grates lay still.

The Crown Vic turned its front wheels. I heard the hiss of its power steering pump and the squelch of its tires on the road. It turned sharply across four lanes and straightened through a tight S and stopped on the curb alongside me.

The two guys stayed inside.

I waited.

It was a federal car, for sure. A pool car. Standard LX specification, not the Police Interceptor model. Black paint, plastic wheel covers. The sidewalk wasn't busy, but it wasn't deserted, either. People were hurrying home alone, or strolling slower in couples. There were clubs on the cross streets to the south. I could tell, because small random knots of dazed people appeared from time to time and craned out into the traffic lanes, looking for cruising cabs.

The guys in the car moved. One tilted right and one tilted left, the way two people do in a car when they are both groping for the interior door handles at the same time.

I watched the subway grates in the sidewalk, forty yards south of me.

Nothing doing. Still air. No moving trash.

The two guys got out of their car. They were both in dark suits. Their jackets were creased low down in back, from driving. The passenger came around and stood with the driver in the gutter close to the Crown Vic's hood. They were level with me, maybe twenty feet away across the width of the sidewalk. They

had their shields already clipped on their breast pockets. FBI, I guessed, although I wasn't close enough to be sure. All those civilian shields look the same to me. The passenger called, "Federal agents." As if he needed to.

I didn't respond.

They stayed in the gutter. Didn't step up on the curb. A subliminal defense mechanism, I guessed. The curb was like a tiny rampart. It offered no real protection, but once they breached it they would have to commit. They would have to act, and they weren't sure how that would go.

The subway grates stayed still and silent.

The passenger called, "Jack Reacher?"

I didn't answer. When all else fails, play dumb.

The driver called, "Stay right where you are."

My shoes were made of rubber, and much less tight and firm than I am used to. But even so I felt the first faint pre-echo of subway rumble through them. A train, either starting downtown from 28th Street, or heading uptown from 14th. A fifty-fifty chance. A downtown train was no good to me. I was on the wrong side of Broadway. An uptown train was what I wanted.

I watched the distant sidewalk grates.

The trash lay still.

The passenger called, "Keep your hands where I can see them."

I put one hand in my pocket. Partly to locate my Metrocard, and partly to see what would happen next. I knew that Quantico training placed great emphasis on public safety. Agents are instructed to draw their weapons only in situations of dire emergency. Many never draw their weapons at all, all the way from graduation to retirement, not even once. There were innocent people all around. An apartment house lobby directly behind me. The field of fire was high and wide and handsome, and full of collateral tragedies just waiting to happen. Passersby, traffic, babies asleep in low-floor bedrooms.

The two agents drew their weapons

The two agents drew their weapons.

Two identical moves. Two identical weapons. Glock pistols, taken smooth and fast and easy from shoulder holsters. Both guys were right-handed.

The passenger called, “Don’t move.”

Far to my left the trash on the subway grates stirred. An uptown train, heading my way. The dam of air in front of it moving fast, building pressure, finding escape. I stood up and walked around the railing to the head of the stairs. Not fast, not slow. I went down one step at a time. Behind me I heard the agents coming after me. Hard soles on concrete. They had better shoes than me. I turned my Metrocard in my pocket and pulled it out facing the right way around.

The fare control was high. Floor-to-ceiling bars, like a jail cell. There were two turnstiles, one on the left, one on the right. Both were narrow and full-height. No supervision necessary. No need for a manned booth. I slid my card and the last credit on it lit up the go light green and I pushed on through. Behind me the agents came to a dead stop. A regular turnstile, they would have jumped right over and explained later. But the unmanned HEET entrance took away that option. And they weren’t carrying Metrocards of their own. They probably lived out on Long Island and drove to work. Spent their days at desks or in cars. They stood helplessly behind the bars. No opportunity for shouted threats or negotiations, either. I had timed it just right. The dam of air was already there in the station, skittering dust and rolling empty cups around. The first three cars were already around the curve. The train yelped and groaned and stopped and I stepped right on without even breaking stride. The doors closed and the train bore me away and the last I saw of the agents was the two of them standing there on the wrong side of the turnstile with their guns down by their sides.

Chapter 52

I was on an R train. The R train follows Broadway to Times Square and then straightens a little until 57th Street and Seventh Avenue, where it hangs a tight right and stops at 59th and Fifth and then 60th and Lex before heading on under the river and east to Queens. I didn't want to go to Queens. A fine borough, no question, but unexciting at night, and anyway I felt in my gut that the action lay elsewhere. In Manhattan, for sure. On the East Side, probably, and not far from 57th Street. Lila Hoth had used the Four Seasons as a decoy. Which put her real base somewhere close by, almost certainly. Not adjacent, but comfortably proximate.

And her real base was a townhouse, not an apartment or another hotel. Because she had a crew with her, and they had to be able to come and go undetected.

There are a lot of townhouses on the east side of Manhattan.

I stayed on the train through Times Square. A bunch of people got on there. For the minute it took to get up to 49th Street we had twenty-seven passengers on board. Then five people got out at 49th and the population started to decline. I got out at 59th and Fifth. Didn't leave the station. I just stood on the platform and watched the train go onward without me. Then I sat on a bench and waited. I figured the agents at 22nd Street would have gotten on their radio. I figured cops might be heading for the R train stations in a long sequential cascade. I pictured them sitting in their cars or standing on the sidewalks, timing the train's underground progress, tensing up, then relaxing again as they assumed I had passed by beneath them and was headed farther up the line. I pictured them staying around for five minutes or so, and then giving it up. So I waited. Ten whole minutes. Then I left. I came up from under the ground and found no one looking for me. I was alone on a deserted corner with the famous old Plaza Hotel directly in front of me, all lit up, and the park behind me, all dark.

I was two blocks north and a block and a half west of the Four Seasons.

I was exactly three blocks west of where Susan Mark would have come up out of

the 6 train, right back at the beginning.

And right then I understood that Susan Mark had never been headed to the Four Seasons Hotel. Not dressed in black and ready for combat. No combat was possible in a hotel lobby or corridor or suite. No advantage was won by wearing black where there were lights. So Susan had been headed somewhere else. Directly to the secret location, presumably, which had to be on a dark, discreet cross-street. But which still had to be in the original sixty-eight-block box, between 42nd Street and 59th, between Fifth Avenue and Third. Most likely in one of the upper quadrants, given the nature of the area. Either the upper left, or the upper right. One of two sixteen-block sub-boxes, maybe.

Which would contain what?

About two million different things.

Which was four times better than eight million different things, but not so much better that I started jumping for joy. Instead I headed east across Fifth Avenue and resumed my aimless walking, watching for cars, staying in the shadows. There were many fewer homeless people than down in the 20s, and I figured that lying in doorways would be more provocative than not. So I watched the traffic and prepared either to run or to fight, depending on who found me first.

*

I crossed Madison Avenue and headed for Park. Now I was directly behind the Four Seasons, which was two blocks due south. The street was quiet. Mostly flagship retail and boutique commercial, all closed up. I turned south on Park and then east again on 58th. Didn't see much. Some townhouses, but each one looked the same as all the others. Blank five-and six-story brownstone façades, barred windows low down, shuttered windows above, no lights. Some of them were consulates belonging to small nations. Some of them were trophy offices for charitable foundations and small corporations. Some of them were residential, but broken up into multiple apartments. Some of them were definitely single-family homes, but all the single families appeared to be fast asleep behind locked doors.

I crossed Park and headed for Lex. Sutton Place was up ahead. Quiet, and very residential. Mostly apartments, but some houses. Historically the neighborhood was centered more to the south and the east, but optimistic brokers had pushed

its borders north and especially west, all the way to Third Avenue. The new fringes were fairly anonymous.

Ideal territory for a hideout.

I strolled on, west and east, north and south, 58th, 57th, 56th, Lexington, Third, Second. I quartered a lot of blocks. Nothing jumped out at me. And no one jumped out at me. I saw plenty of cars, but all of them were barreling happily from A to B. None of them was showing the characteristic hesitant half-pace of a car whose driver is also making visual sweeps of the sidewalks. I saw plenty of people, but most of them were far in the distance and entirely innocent. Insomniac dog walkers, medical personnel heading home from the East Side hospitals, garbage workers, apartment house doormen out taking the air. One of the dog walkers came close enough to speak. The dog was an elderly gray mutt and the walker was an elderly white woman of about eighty. Her hair was done and she was fully made up. She was wearing an old-fashioned summer dress that really needed long white gloves to be complete. The dog paused and looked at me mournfully and the woman took that to be a sufficient social introduction. She said, “Good evening.”

It was close to three o’clock, and therefore technically morning. But I didn’t want to appear quarrelsome. So I just said, “Hello.”

She said, “Did you know that word is a recent invention?”

I said, “What word?”

“Hello,” she said. “It was developed as a greeting only after the invention of the telephone. People felt they needed something to say when they picked up the receiver. It was a corruption of the old word *halloo*. Which was really an expression of temporary shock or surprise. You would come upon something unexpected, and you would go, *Halloo!* Perhaps people were startled by the shrillness of the telephone bell.”

“Yes,” I said. “Perhaps they were.”

“Do you have a telephone?”

“I’ve used them,” I said. “Certainly I’ve heard them ring.”

“Do you find the sound to be disturbing?”

Do you find the sound to be disturbing?

“I always assumed that was the point.”

“Well, goodbye,” the woman said. “It has been most pleasant chatting with you.”

Only in New York, I thought. The woman moved on, with her old dog by her side. I watched her go. She headed east and then south on Second Avenue and was lost to sight. I turned around and got set to head west again. But twenty feet ahead of me a gold Chevy Impala jammed to a stop in the gutter and Leonid climbed out of the back.

Chapter 53

Leonid stood on the curb and the car took off again and then stopped again twenty feet behind me. The driver got out. Good moves. I was boxed on the sidewalk, one guy in front of me, another guy behind. Leonid looked the same but different. Still tall, still thin, still bald apart from the ginger stubble, but now he was in sensible clothes and he had shed his sleepy demeanor. He was in black shoes, black knit pants, and a black hooded sweatshirt. He looked alive and alert and very dangerous. He looked like more than a gangster. More than a brawler or a hoodlum. He looked like a professional. Trained, and experienced.

He looked like an ex–soldier.

I backed up against the wall of the building next to me so that I could watch both guys at once. Leonid on my left, and the other guy on my right. The other guy was a squat man somewhere in his thirties. He looked more Middle Eastern than East European. Dark hair, no neck. Not huge. Like Leonid, but compressed vertically and therefore expanded laterally. He was dressed the same, in cheap black sweats. I looked at the knit pants and a word lodged in my mind.

The word was: *disposable*.

The guy took a step toward me.

Leonid did the same.

Two choices, as always: fight or flight. We were on 56th Street's southern sidewalk. I could have run straight across the road and tried to get away. But Leonid and his pal were probably faster than me. The law of averages. Most humans are faster than me. The old lady in the summer dress was probably faster than me. Her old gray mutt was probably faster than me.

And running away was bad enough. Running away and then getting caught immediately was totally undignified.

So I stayed where I was.

So I stayed where I was.

On my left, Leonid took another step closer.

On my right, the short guy did the same thing.

Whatever the army had failed to teach me about staying out of sight, they had made up for by teaching me a lot about fighting. They had taken one look at me and sent me straight to the gym. I was like a lot of military children. We had weird backgrounds. We had lived all over the world. Part of our culture was to learn from the locals. Not history or language or political concerns. We learned fighting from them. Their favored techniques. Martial arts from the Far East, full-on brawling from the seamier parts of Europe, blades and rocks and bottles from the seamier parts of the States. By the age of twelve we had it all boiled down to a kind of composite uninhibited ferocity. Especially uninhibited. We had learned that inhibitions will hurt you faster than anything else. *Just do it* was our motto, well before Nike started making shoes. Those of us who signed up for military careers of our own were recognized and mentored and offered further tuition, where we were taken apart and put back together again. We thought we were tough when we were twelve. At eighteen, we thought we were unbeatable. We weren't. But we were very close to it, by the age of twenty-five.

Leonid took another step.

The other guy did the same.

I looked back at Leonid and saw brass knuckles on his hand.

Same for the short guy.

They had slipped them on, fast and easy. Leonid side-stepped. So did the other guy. They were perfecting their angles. I was backed up against a building, which gave me a hundred and eighty degrees of empty space in front of me. Each one of them wanted forty-five degrees of that space on his right and forty-five on his left. That way, if I bolted, they had every exit direction equally covered. Like doubles players, in tennis. Long practice, mutual support, and instinctive understanding.

They were both right-handed.

First rule when you're fighting against brass knuckles: Don't get hit. Especially

not in the head. But even blows against arms or ribs can break bones and paralyze muscles.

The best way not to get hit is to pull out a gun and shoot your opponents from a distance of about ten feet. Close enough not to miss, far enough to remain untouched. Game over. But I didn't have that option. I was unarmed. The next best way is either to keep your opponents far away or crush them real close. Far away, they can swing all night and never connect. Real close, they can't swing at all. The way to keep them far away is to exploit superior reach, if you have it, or use your feet. My reach is spectacular. I have very long arms. The silverback on the television show looked stumpy in comparison to me. My instructors in the army were always making puns about my reach, based on my name. But I was facing two guys, and I wasn't sure if kicking was an option I could add in. For one thing, I had lousy shoes. Rubber gardening clogs. They were loose on my feet. They would come off. And kicking with bare feet leads to broken bones. Feet are even punier than hands. Except in karate school, where there are rules. There are no rules on the street. Second thing, as soon as one foot is off the ground, you're unbalanced and potentially vulnerable. Next thing you know, you're on the floor, and then you're dead. I had seen it happen. I had made it happen.

I braced my right heel against the wall behind me.

I waited.

I figured they would pile on together. Simultaneous launches, ninety degrees apart. Arrowing inward, more or less in step. The good news was they wouldn't be trying to kill me. Lila Hoth would have forbade that. She wanted things from me, and corpses have nothing to offer.

The bad news was that plenty of serious injuries fall short of fatal.

I waited.

Leonid said, "You don't have to get hurt, you know. You can just come with us, if you like, and talk to Lila." His English was less upmarket than hers. His accent was rough. But he knew all the words.

I said, "Go with you where?"

“You know I can’t tell you that. You would have to wear a blindfold.”

I said, “I’ll take a pass on the blindfold. But you don’t have to get hurt, either. You can just move on, and tell Lila you never saw me.”

“But that wouldn’t be true.”

“Don’t be a slave to the truth, Leonid. Sometimes the truth hurts. Sometimes it bites you right in the ass.”

The upside of a concerted attack by two opponents is that they have to communicate a start signal. Maybe it’s just a glance or a nod, but it’s always there. It’s a split second of warning. I figured Leonid for the main man. The one who speaks first usually is. He would announce the attack. I watched his eyes, very carefully.

I said, “Are you mad about what happened at the railroad station?”

Leonid shook his head. “I let you hit me. It was necessary. Lila said so.”

I watched his eyes.

I said, “Tell me about Lila.”

“What do you want to know?”

“I want to know who she is.”

“Come with us, and ask her.”

“I’m asking you.”

“She’s a woman with a job to do.”

“What kind of a job?”

“Come with us, and ask her.”

“I’m asking you.”

“An important job. A necessary job.”

“Which involves what?”

“Come with us, and ask her.”

“I’m asking you.”

No answer. No further conversation. I sensed them tensing up. I watched Leonid’s face. Saw his eyes widen and his head duck forward in a tiny nod. They came straight for me, together. I pushed off the wall behind me and put my fists against my chest and stuck my elbows out like airplane wings and charged them as hard as they were charging me. We met at a singular point like a collapsing triangle and my elbows caught both of them full in the face. On my right I felt the short guy’s upper teeth punch out and on my left I felt Leonid’s lower jaw give way. Impact equals mass times velocity squared. I had plenty of mass, but my shoes were spongy and my feet were slick inside them from the heat and so my velocity was slower than it might have been.

Which reduced the impact a little.

Which left them both on their feet.

Which gave me a little more work to do.

I spun back instantly and clubbed the short guy with an enormous roundhouse right to the ear. No style. No finesse. Just a big ugly punch. His ear flattened against his head and took some of the force away, but plenty more went straight on through the crushed gristle into his skull. His neck snapped sideways and he hit his other ear with his own far shoulder. By that point I was squelching back the other way in my lousy footwear and driving my elbow deep into Leonid’s gut. Same place I had hit him in Penn Station, but ten times harder. I almost popped his spine out of his back. I used the bounce to jump in the other direction, to the short guy again. He was hunching away and ready for a standing eight count. I put a low right in his kidney. That straightened him up and spun him around toward me. I bent my knees and drove forward and butted him between the eyes. Explosive. Whatever bones my elbow hadn’t broken gave way and he went down like a sack. Leonid tapped me on the shoulder with his knuckleduster. He thought it was a punch, but in his depleted state a tap was all he could manage. I took my time and wound up and aimed carefully and dropped him with an uppercut to the jaw. His jaw was already broken from my elbow. Now it got broken a little more. Bone and flesh spattered out in a lazy red

arc and showed up quite clearly in the streetlights. Teeth, I figured, and maybe part of his tongue.

I was a little shaken. As always. Excess adrenaline was burning me up. The adrenal gland is a slow son of a bitch. Then it overcom-pensates. Too much, too late. I took ten seconds to get my breath. Ten more to calm down. Then I hauled both guys across the sidewalk and into a sitting position against the wall where I had been standing. Their hooded sweatshirts stretched a yard long as I was hauling on them. Cheap clothes. Disposable, in case they had gotten soaked with my blood. I got the two guys positioned so they wouldn't fall over and choke and then I dislocated their right elbows. They were both right-handed, and the odds were that I would be seeing them again. In which case I wanted them out of action. No permanent damage. Three weeks in a light cast would fix them up, good as new.

They had cell phones in their pockets. I took both of them. Both had my picture. Both call registers were blank. There was nothing else. No money. No keys. No material evidence. No clue as to where they had come from. No likelihood that they would be in a position to tell me anytime soon, either. I had hit them too hard. They were out for the count. And even when they woke up there was no guarantee they would remember anything anyway. Maybe not even their names. Concussion has unpredictable effects. Paramedics aren't kidding around when they ask concussion victims what day it is and who the president is.

No regrets on my part. Better to err on the side of safety. Guys in fights who think ahead to the aftermath usually don't get that far. They become the aftermath. So no regrets. But no net gain, either. Which was frustrating. Not even the brass knuckles fit my hand. I tried both sets on, and they were way too small. I dropped them down a storm drain twenty feet away.

Their car was still idling at the curb. It had New York plates. No navigation system. Therefore no digital memory with a base location. I found a rental agreement in the door pocket made out to a name I had never heard and a London address that I assumed was fake. In the glove box I found instruction manuals for the car and a small spiral notebook and a ballpoint pen. The notebook had nothing written in it. I took the pen and walked back to the two guys and held Leonid's head steady with my left palm clamped down hard. Then I wrote on his forehead with the ballpoint, digging deep in his skin and tracing big letters over and over again for clarity.

I wrote: *Lila, call me*.

Then I stole their car and drove away.

Chapter 54

I drove south on Second Avenue and took 50th Street all the way east to the end and dumped the car on a hydrant half a block from the FDR Drive. I hoped the guys from the 17th Precinct would find it and get suspicious and run some tests. Clothes are disposable. Cars, not so much. If Lila's people had used that Impala to drive away from the hammer attack, then there would be some trace evidence inside. I couldn't see any with the naked eye, but CSI units don't rely on human vision alone.

I wiped the wheel and the shifter and the door handles with the tail of my shirt. Then I dropped the keys down a grate and walked back to Second and stood in a shadow and looked for a cab. There was a decent river of traffic flowing downtown and each car was lit up by the headlights behind it. I could see how many people were inside each vehicle. I was mindful of Theresa Lee's information: fake taxis, circling uptown on Tenth, down on Second, one guy in the front, two in the back. I waited for a cab that was definitively empty apart from its driver and I stepped out and flagged it down. The driver was a Sikh from India with a turban and a full beard and very little English. Not a cop. He took me south to Union Square. I got out there and sat on a bench in the dark and watched the rats. Union Square is the best place in the city to see them. By day the Parks Department dumps blood-and-bone fertilizer on the flower beds. By night the rats come out and feast on it.

At four o'clock I fell asleep.

At five o'clock one of the captured phones vibrated in my pocket.

I woke up and spent a second checking left and right and behind, and then I fumbled the phone out of my pants. It wasn't ringing. Just buzzing away to itself. Silent mode. The small monochrome window on the front said: *Restricted Call*. I opened it up and the big color screen on the inside said the same thing. I put the phone to my ear and said, "Hello." A new word, recently invented. Lila Hoth answered me. Her voice, her accent, her diction. She said, "So, you

decided to declare war. Clearly there are no rules of engagement for you."

I said, "Who are you exactly?"

"You'll find out."

"I need to know now."

"I'm your worst nightmare. As of about two hours ago. And you still have something that belongs to me."

"So come and get it. Better still, send some more of your guys. Give me some more light exercise."

"You got lucky tonight, that's all."

I said, "I'm always lucky."

She asked, "Where are you?"

"Right outside your house."

There was a pause. "No, you're not."

"Correct," I said. "But you just confirmed that you're living in a house. And that right now you're at a window. Thank you for that information."

"Where are you really?"

"Federal Plaza," I said. "With the FBI."

"I don't believe you."

"Your call."

"Tell me where you are."

"Close to you," I said. "Third Avenue and 56th Street."

She started to reply, and then she stopped herself immediately. She got no further than an inchoate little *th* sound. A voiced dental fricative. The start of a

sentence that was going to be impatient and querulous and a little smug. Like, *That's not close to me*.

She wasn't anywhere near Third and 56th.

"Last chance," she said. "I want my property." Her voice softened. "We can make arrangements, if you like. Just leave it somewhere safe, and tell me where. I'll have it picked up. We don't need to meet. You could even get paid."

"I'm not looking for work."

"Are you looking to stay alive?"

"I'm not afraid of you, Lila."

"That's what Peter Molina said."

"Where is he?"

"Right here with us."

"Alive?"

"Come over and find out."

"He left a message with his coach."

"Or maybe I played a tape he made before he died. Maybe he told me his coach never answers the phone at dinnertime. Maybe he told me a lot of things. Maybe I forced him to."

I asked, "Where are you, Lila?"

"I can't tell you that," she said. "But I could have you picked up."

A hundred feet away I saw a police car cruising 14th Street. Moving slow. Pink flashes at the window as the driver moved his head right and left.

I asked, "How long have you known Peter Molina?"

"Since I picked him up in the bar."

“Is he still alive?”

“Come over and find out.”

I said, “You’re on borrowed time, Lila. You killed four Americans in New York. No one is going to ignore that.”

“I killed nobody.”

“Your people did.”

“People that have already left the country. We’re fireproof.”

“We?”

“You ask too many questions.”

“If your people acted on your orders, then you’re not fireproof. That’s a conspiracy.”

“This is a nation of laws and trials. There’s no evidence.”

“Car?”

“No longer exists.”

“You’ll never be fireproof from me. I’ll find you.”

“I hope you do.”

A hundred feet away the police car slowed to a crawl.

I said, “Come out and meet with me, Lila. Or go home. One or the other. But either way you’re beaten here.”

She said, “We’re never beaten.”

“Who is we?”

But there was no answer. The phone went dead. Nothing there, except the dumb silence of an empty line.

A hundred feet away the police car stopped.

I closed the phone and put it back in my pocket.

Two cops climbed out of the car and headed into the square.

I stayed where I was. Too suspicious to get up and run. Better to sit tight. I wasn't alone in the park. There were maybe forty people in there with me. Some of them seemed to be a permanent population. Others were temporary strays. New York is a big city. Five boroughs. Journeys home are long. Often easier to rest along the way.

The cops shone a flashlight beam in a sleeping guy's face.

They moved on. Lit up the next guy.

And the next.

Not good.

Not good at all.

But I was not the only person to reach that conclusion. Here and there around the square I saw shapes rising up from benches and shuffling away in different directions. Maybe people with outstanding warrants, dealers with stuff in their backpacks, surly loners who didn't want contact, helpless paranoids wary of the system.

Two cops, an acre of ground, maybe thirty people still on benches, maybe ten newly mobile.

I watched.

The cops kept on coming. Their flashlight beams jerked through the nighttime haze. Long shadows were thrown. They checked a third guy, and then a fourth. Then a fifth. More people stood up. Some left altogether, and others simply moved from bench to bench. The square was full of shapes, some inert, some moving. Everything was in slow motion. A tired, lazy dance.

I watched.

New indecision in the cops' body language. Like herding cats. They approached the people still on benches. They turned away and jerked their beams on the people moving out. They kept on walking, bending, turning. No pattern. Just random movement. They kept on coming. They got within ten yards of me.

Then they quit.

They played their flashlight beams one last time around a token circle and then they headed back to their car. I watched it drive away. I stayed on my bench and breathed out and started thinking about the GPS chips in the captured cell phones in my pockets. Part of me said it was impossible that Lila Hoth would have access to tracking satellites. But another part of me focused on her saying, *We're never beaten*. And *we* is a big word. Only two letters, but a large implication. Maybe the bad guys from the Eastern bloc had grabbed more than oil and gas leases. Maybe they had taken over other kinds of infrastructure. The old Soviet intelligence machine had to have gone somewhere. I thought about laptop computers and broadband connections and all kinds of technology I didn't fully understand.

I kept the phones in my pockets, but I got up off the bench and headed for the subway.

Which was a bad mistake to make.

Chapter 55

The Union Square subway station is a major hub. It has an entrance hall as big as an underground plaza. Multiple entrances, multiple exits, multiple lines, multiple tracks. Stairs, booths, long rows of turnstiles. Plus long banks of machines for refreshing Metrocards, or buying new ones. I used cash and bought a new card. I fed two twenty-dollar bills edge-first into the slot and was rewarded with twenty rides plus three free as a bonus. I collected my card and turned around and moved away. It was close to six o'clock in the morning. The station was filling up with people. The work day was starting. I passed a newsstand. It had a thousand different magazines. And squat bales of fresh tabloids ready for sale. Thick papers, piled high. Two separate titles. Both headlines were huge. One had three words, big letters, plenty of powdery black ink: FEDS SEEK TRIO. The other had three words too: FEDS HUNT TRIO. Practically a consensus. On balance I preferred *seek* to *hunt*. More passive, less committed. Almost benign. I figured anyone would prefer to be sought than hunted.

I turned away.

And saw two cops watching me carefully.

Two mistakes in one. First theirs, which was then compounded by mine. Their mistake was conventional. The federal agents at 22nd and Broadway had put the word out that I had escaped by subway. Whereupon law enforcement generally had assumed that I would escape by subway again. Because given the choice, law enforcement always fights the last battle one more time.

My mistake was to walk straight into their lazy trap.

Because there were booths, there were supervisors. Because there were supervisors, there were no high entry-exit turnstiles. Just regular thigh-high bars. I swiped my new card and pushed on through. The plaza changed shape to a long wide walkway. Arrows pointed left and right and up and down, for different lines and different directions. I passed by a guy playing a violin. He had

positioned himself where the echoes would help him. He was pretty good. His instrument had a solid, gutty tone. He was playing a mournful old piece I recognized from a movie about the Vietnam War. Perhaps not an inspired choice for early commuters. His violin case was open at his feet and not very full of contributions. I turned casually as if I was checking him out and saw the two cops step over the turnstile behind me.

I turned a random corner and followed a narrower passageway and found myself on an uptown platform. It was crowded with people. And it was part of a symmetrical pair. Ahead of me was the platform edge, and then the line, and then a row of iron pillars holding up the street above, and then the downtown line, and then the downtown platform. Two sets of everything, including two sets of commuters. Tired people, facing each other numbly, waiting to head out in opposite directions.

The live rails were back to back either side of the central iron pillars. They were shrouded, like live rails are in stations. The shrouds were three-sided box sections, open on the sides that faced the trains.

Behind me and far to my left, the cops pushed their way onto the platform. I checked the other way. To my right. Two more cops pushed into the crowd. They were wide and bulky with equipment. They moved people gently out of their way, palms against shoulders, short backhand moves, rhythmic, like swimming.

I moved to the middle of the platform. I edged forward until my feet were on the yellow warning stripe. I moved laterally until I had a pillar directly behind me. I looked left. Looked right. No trains were coming.

The cops kept moving. Behind them four more showed up. Two on one side of me, two on the other, threading through the crowd slowly and surely.

I craned forward.

No headlights in the tunnels.

The crowd moved and bunched beside me, pushed on by new arrivals, disturbed by the ripples of the cops' relentless progress, pulled forward by the subliminal certainty any subway rider feels that the train must be coming soon.

I checked the tracks once more and looked left and right.

I checked again, over my shoulders, left and right.

Cops on my platform.

Eight of them.

No cops at all on the platform opposite.

Chapter 56

People are scared of the third rail. No reason to be, unless you plan on touching it. Hundreds of volts, but they don't jump out at you. You have to go looking for them, to get in trouble.

Easy enough to step over, even in lousy shoes. I figured whatever my rubber footwear would subtract in terms of precision control, it would add in terms of electrical insulation. But even so, I planned my moves very carefully, like stage choreography. Jump down, land two-footed in the center of the uptown line, right foot on the second rail, left foot beyond the third rail, squeeze through the gap between two pillars, right foot over the next third rail, left foot on the downtown track, small careful mincing steps, then a sigh of relief and a scramble up onto the downtown platform and away.

Easy enough to do.

Easy enough for the cops to do right behind me.

They had probably done it before.

I hadn't.

I waited. Checked behind me, left and right. The cops were close. Close enough to be slowing down and forming up and deciding exactly how they were going to do what would need to be done next. I didn't know what their approach would be. But whatever, they were going to take it slow. They didn't want a big stampede. The platform was crowded and any kind of sudden activity would put people over the edge. Which would lead to lawsuits.

I checked left. Checked right. No trains were coming. I wondered if the cops had stopped them. Presumably there was a well-rehearsed procedure. I took a half-step forward. People slipped in behind me, between me and the pillar. They started pressing against my back. I braced the other way against them. The warning strip at the edge of the platform was yellow paint over raised circular

bumps. No danger of slipping or sliding.

The cops had formed up into a shallow semicircle. They were about eight feet from me. They were moving inward, shoveling people outward, collapsing their perimeter, slow and cautious. People were watching from the downtown platform opposite. They were nudging each other and pointing at me and going up on tiptoe.

I waited.

I heard a train. On my left. A moving glow in the tunnel. It was coming on fast. Our train. Uptown. Behind me the crowd stirred. I heard the rush of air and the squeal of iron rims. Saw the lighted cab sway and jerk through the curve. I figured it was doing about thirty miles an hour. About forty-four feet per second. I wanted two seconds. I figured that would be enough. So I would have to go when the train was eighty-eight feet away. The cops wouldn't follow. Their reaction time would rob them of the margin they needed. And they were eight feet back from the platform edge to start with. And they had different priorities from me. They had wives and families and ambitions and pensions. They had houses and yards and lawns to mow and bulbs to plant.

I took another tiny step forward.

The headlight was coming straight at me. Head-on. Rocking and jerking. It made it hard to judge distance.

Then: I heard a train on my right.

A downtown train, approaching fast from the other direction. Symmetrical, but not perfectly synchronized. Like a pair of drapes closing, with the left-hand drape leading the right.

By how much?

I needed a three-second lag, for a total gap of five, because climbing up the downtown platform was going to take me a whole lot longer than jumping off the uptown.

I paused a whole second, guessing, estimating, feeling it, trying to judge.

The trains howled inward, one from the left, then one from the right.

Five hundred tons, and five hundred tons.

Closing speed, maybe sixty miles an hour.

The cops edged closer.

Decision time.

I went.

I jumped down, with the uptown train a hundred feet away. I landed two-footed between the rails and got steady and minced through the steps I had planned. Like a dance diagram in a book. Right foot, left foot high over the live rail, hands on the pillars. I paused a split second and checked right. The downtown train was very close. Behind me the uptown train slammed past. Its brakes were shrieking and grinding. A furious wind tore at my shirt. Lighted windows strobed by in the corner of my eye.

I stared right.

The downtown train looked huge.

Decision time.

I went.

Right foot high over the live rail, left foot down in the rail bed. The downtown train was almost on me. Just yards away. It was rocking and jerking. Its brakes were clamping hard. I could see the driver. His mouth was wide open. I could feel the air damming ahead of his cab.

I abandoned the choreography. Just flung myself toward the far platform. It was less than five feet away, but it felt infinitely distant. Like the plains horizon. But I got there. I stared right and saw every rivet and bolt on the front of the downtown train. It was coming right at me. I got my palms flat on the platform edge and vaulted up. I thought the dense press of people was going to knock me right back down. But hands grabbed at me and pulled me up. The train slammed past my shoulder and the wash of air spun me around. Windows flashed past. Oblivious passengers read books and papers or stood and swayed. Hands hauled

on me and dragged me into the crowd. People all around me were screaming. I saw their mouths open in panic but I couldn’t hear them. The yelp of the train’s brakes was drowning them out. I put my head down and barged on through the crowd. People stepped left and right to let me pass. Some of them slapped me on the back as I went by. A ragged cheer followed me out.

Only in New York.

I pushed through an exit turnstile and headed for the street.

Chapter 57

Madison Square Park was seven blocks north. I had the best part of four hours to kill. I spent the time shopping and eating on Park Avenue South. Not because I had things to buy. Not because I was especially hungry. But because it's always best to give pursuers what they don't expect. Fugitives are supposed to run far and fast. They're not supposed to dawdle through the immediate neighborhood, in and out of stores and cafés.

It was just after six in the morning. Delis and supermarkets and diners and coffee shops were all that was open. I started in a Food Emporium that had an entrance on 14th Street and an exit on 15th. I spent forty-five minutes in there. I took a basket and wandered the aisles and pretended to choose stuff. Less conspicuous than just hanging out. Less conspicuous than wandering the aisles without a basket. I didn't want an alert manager to call anything in. I developed a fantasy where I had an apartment nearby. I stocked its imaginary kitchen with enough stuff to last two whole days. Coffee, of course. Plus pancake mix, eggs, bacon, a loaf of bread, butter, some jam, a pack of salami, a quarter-pound of cheese. When I got bored and the basket got heavy I left it in a deserted aisle and slipped out the back of the store.

Next stop was a diner four blocks north. I walked on the right-hand sidewalk with my back to the traffic. In the diner I ate pancakes and bacon that someone else had shopped for and cooked. More my style. I spent another forty minutes in there. Then I moved on half a block to a French brasserie. More coffee, and a croissant. Someone had left a *New York Times* on the chair across from me. I read it from end to end. No mention of a manhunt in the city. No mention of Sansom's Senate race in the national section.

I split the final two hours four separate ways. I moved from a supermarket on the corner of Park and 22nd to a Duane Reade drugstore opposite and then to a CVS pharmacy on Park and 23rd. Visible evidence suggested that the nation spent more on hair care than food. Then at twenty-five minutes to ten I stopped shopping and stepped out to the bright new morning and looped around and took a good long careful look at my destination from the mouth of 24th Street, which

was a shadowed anonymous canyon between two huge buildings. I saw nothing that worried me. No unexplained cars, no parked vans, no pairs or trios of dressed-down people with wires in their ears.

So at ten o'clock exactly I stepped into Madison Square Park.

I found Theresa Lee and Jacob Mark side by side on a bench near a dog run. They looked rested but nervous, and stressed, each in their own way. Each for their own reasons, presumably. They were two of maybe a hundred people sitting peacefully in the sun. The park was a rectangle of trees and lawns and paths. It was a small oasis, one block wide and three tall, fenced, surrounded by four busy sidewalks. Parks are reasonably good places for a clandestine rendezvous. Most hunters are attracted by moving targets. Most believe that fugitives stay in motion. Three of a hundred people sitting still while the city swirls around them attract less attention than three of a hundred hustling hard down the street.

Not perfect, but an acceptable risk.

I checked all around one last time and sat down next to Lee. She handed me a newspaper. One of the tabloids I had already seen. The HUNT headline. She said, "It claims we shot three federal agents."

"We shot four," I said. "Don't forget the medical guy."

"But they make it sound like we used real guns. They make it sound like the guys died."

"They want to sell papers."

"We're in trouble."

"We knew that already. We didn't need a journalist to tell us."

She said, "Docherty came through again. He was texting messages to me all night long, while the phone was off."

She lifted up off the bench and took a sheaf of paper out of her back pocket. Three sheets of yellowed hotel stationery, folded four ways.

I said, "You took notes?"

I said, "You took notes?"

She said, "They were long messages. I didn't want to keep the phone on if there were things I needed to review."

"So what do we know?"

"The 17th Precinct checked transportation gateways. Standard procedure, after a major crime. Four men left the country three hours after the likely time of death. Through JFK. The 17th is calling them potential suspects. It's a plausible scenario."

I nodded.

"The 17th Precinct is right," I said. "Lila Hoth told me so."

"You met with her?"

"She called me."

"On what?"

"Another phone I took from Leonid. He and a pal found me. It didn't work out exactly how I wanted, but I made some limited contact."

"She confessed?"

"More or less."

"So where is she now?"

"I don't know exactly. I'm guessing somewhere east of Fifth, south of 59th."

"Why?"

"She used the Four Seasons as a front. Why travel?"

Lee said, "There was a burnt-out rental car in Queens. The 17th thinks the four guys used it to get out of Manhattan. Then they ditched it and used that elevated train thing to get to the airport."

I nodded again. “Lila said the car they used no longer exists.”

“But here’s the thing,” Lee said. “The four guys didn’t head back to London or Ukraine or Russia. They were routed through to Tajikistan.”

“Which is where?”

“Don’t you know?”

“Those new places confuse me.”

“Tajikistan is right next to Afghanistan. They share a border. Also with Pakistan.”

“You can fly direct to Pakistan.”

“Correct. Therefore either those guys were from Tajikistan, or from Afghanistan itself. Tajikistan is where you go to get into Afghanistan without being too obvious about it. You cross the border in a pick-up truck. Roads are bad, but Kabul is not too far away.”

“OK.”

“And here’s the other thing. Homeland Security has a protocol. Some kind of computer algorithm. They can trace groups of people through similar itineraries and linked bookings. Turns out those four guys entered the country three months ago from Tajikistan, along with some other folks, including two women with passports from Turkmenistan. One was sixty, and the other was twenty-six. They came through immigration together and claimed to be mother and daughter. And Homeland Security is prepared to swear their passports were genuine.”

“OK.”

“So the Hoths were not Ukrainian. Everything they told us was a lie.”

We all chewed on that for twenty long seconds, in silence. I went through all the stuff Lila had told us and deleted it, item by item. Like pulling files from a drawer, and leafing through them, and then pitching them in the trash.

I said, “We saw their passports at the Four Seasons. They looked Ukrainian to me.”

Lee said, “They were phony. Or they would have used them at immigration.”

I said, “Lila had blue eyes.”

Lee said, “I noticed.”

“Where exactly is Turkmenistan?”

“Also next to Afghanistan. A longer border. Afghanistan is surrounded by Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan, clockwise from the Gulf.”

“Easier when it was all the Soviet Union.”

“Unless you lived there.”

“Are Turkmenistan and Afghanistan ethnically similar?”

“Probably. All those borders are completely arbitrary. They’re accidents of history. What matters are the tribal divisions. Lines on a map have got nothing to do with it.”

“Are you an expert?”

“The NYPD knows more about that region than the CIA. We have to. We’ve got people over there. We’ve got better intelligence than anyone.”

“Could a person from Afghanistan get a passport from Turkmenistan?”

“By relocating?”

“By asking for help and getting it.”

“From an ethnic sympathizer?”

I nodded. “Maybe under the counter.”

“Why do you ask?”

“Some Afghan people have bright blue eyes. Especially the women. Some weird genetic strand in the population.”

“You think the Hoths are from Afghanistan?”

“They knew a hell of a lot about the conflict with the Soviets. A little dressed up, but they got most of the details right.”

“Maybe they read books.”

“No, they got the feelings right. And the atmosphere. Like the ancient greatcoats. Details like that were not widely available. That’s insider information. In public the Red Army made out it was superbly equipped, for obvious reasons. Our propaganda said the same thing about them, for equally obvious reasons. But it wasn’t true. The Red Army was falling apart. A lot of what the Hoths said sounded like firsthand information to me.”

“So?”

“Maybe Svetlana really did fight there. But on the other side.”

Lee paused a beat. “You think the Hoths are Afghan tribeswomen?”

“If Svetlana fought there, but not for the Soviets, then they must be.”

Lee paused again. “In which case Svetlana was telling the whole story from the other side. Everything was inverted. Including the atrocities.”

“Yes,” I said. “She didn’t suffer them. She committed them.”

We all went quiet again, another twenty seconds. I kept my eyes moving all around the park. *Look, don’t see, listen, don’t hear. The more you engage, the longer you survive*. But nothing jumped out at me. Nothing untoward was happening. People were coming and going, people were taking dogs to the run, a line was forming at a hamburger stand. Early, but every hour of the day or night is lunchtime for someone. It depends on when the day starts. Lee was going through her notes. Jacob Mark was staring at the ground, but his gaze was focused somewhere far below the surface. Finally he leaned forward and turned his head and looked at me. I thought: *Here it comes*. The big question. The bump in the road.

He asked, “When Lila Hoth called you, did she mention Peter?”

I nodded. “She picked him up in the bar.”

I nodded. "She picked him up in the bar."

"Why spend four hours doing that?"

"Tradecraft. And for fun and finesse. Because she could."

"Where is he now?"

"She said he's here in the city."

"Is he OK?"

"She wouldn't tell me."

"Do you think he's OK?"

I didn't answer.

He said, "Talk to me, Reacher."

I said, "No."

"No you won't talk to me?"

"No, I don't think he's OK."

"But he might be."

"I could be wrong."

"What did she tell you?"

"I said I wasn't scared of her, and she said that's what Peter Molina had said, too. I asked if he was OK, and she said I should come over and find out for myself."

"So he could be OK."

"It's possible. But I think you should be realistic."

"About what? Why would two Afghan tribeswomen want to mess with Peter?"

"To get to Susan, of course."

To get to Susan, of course.

“For what? The Pentagon is supposed to be helping Afghanistan.”

I said, “If Svetlana was a fighting tribeswoman, then she was one of the mujahideen. And when the Russians went home, the mujahideen did not go back to tending their goats. They moved right along. Some of them became the Taliban, and the rest of them became Al Qaeda.”

Chapter 58

Jacob Mark said, “I have to go to the cops about Peter.” He got halfway off the bench before I leaned across Theresa Lee and put my hand on his arm.

“Think hard,” I said.

“What’s to think about? My nephew is a kidnapping victim. He’s a hostage. The woman confessed.”

“Think about what the cops will do. They’ll call the feds immediately. The feds will lock you up again and put Peter on the back burner, because they’ve got bigger fish to fry.”

“I have to try.”

“Peter’s dead, Jake. I’m sorry, but you’ve got to face it.”

“There’s still a chance.”

“Then the fastest way to find him is to find Lila. And we can do that better than those feds.”

“You think?”

“Look at their track record. They missed her once, and they let us break out of jail. I wouldn’t send them to look for a book in a library.”

“How the hell do we find her on our own?”

I looked at Theresa Lee. “Did you speak to Sansom?”

She shrugged, like she had good news and bad. She said, “I spoke to him briefly. He said he might want to come up here personally. He said he would call me back to coordinate the where and the when. I said he couldn’t do that, because I

was keeping the phone switched off. So he said he would call Docherty's cell instead, and I should call Docherty and pick up the message. So I did, and Docherty didn't answer. So I tried the precinct switchboard. The dispatcher said Docherty was unavailable."

"What does that mean?"

"I think it means he just got arrested."

Which changed everything. I understood that even before Lee got around to spelling it out. She handed me her folded notes. I took them, like receiving the baton in a relay race. I was to go onward, as fast as I could. She was spilling off the track, her race finished. She said, "You understand, right? I have to turn myself in now. He's my partner. I can't let him face this madness alone."

I said, "You thought he would ditch you in a heartbeat."

"But he didn't. And I have my own standards, anyway."

"It won't do any good."

"Maybe not. But I won't turn my back on my partner." "You're just taking yourself off the board. You can't help anyone from a jail cell. Outside is always better than inside."

"It's different for you. You can be gone tomorrow. I can't. I live here."

"What about Sansom? I need a time and a place." "I don't have that information. And you should take care with Sansom, anyway. He sounded weird on the phone. I couldn't tell whether he was real mad or real worried. It's hard to say whose side he's going to be on, when and if he gets here."

Then she gave me Leonid's first cell phone, and the emergency charger. She put her hand on my arm and squeezed, just briefly, just a little. An all-purpose substitute for a hug and a good-luck gesture. And right after that our temporary three-way partnership fell apart completely. Jacob Mark was on his feet even before Lee had started to get up. He said, "I owe it to Peter. OK, they might put me back in a cell, but at least they'll be out looking for him."

"We could look for him," I said.

“We have no resources.”

I looked at them both and asked, “Are you sure about this?”

They were sure about it. They walked away from me, out of the park, to the Fifth Avenue sidewalk, where they stood and craned their necks, looking for a police car, the same way people stand when they are trying to hail a cab. I sat alone for a minute, and then I got up and walked the other way.

Next stop, somewhere east of Fifth and south of 59th.

Chapter 59

Madison Square Park nestles against the south end of Madison Avenue, right where it starts at 23rd Street. Madison Avenue runs straight for a hundred fifteen blocks, to the Madison Avenue Bridge, which leads to the Bronx. You can get to Yankee Stadium that way, although other routes are better. I planned on covering maybe a third of its length, to 59th Street, which was a little north and west of where Lila Hoth had said she wasn't, on Third and 56th.

It was as good a place to start as any.

I took the bus, which was a slow, lumbering vehicle, which made it a counterintuitive choice for a wild-eyed fugitive, which made it perfect cover for me. Traffic was heavy and we passed plenty of cops, some on foot, some in cars. I looked out the window at them. None of them looked back in at me. A man on a bus is close to invisible.

I stopped being invisible when I got out at 59th Street. Prime retail territory, therefore prime tourist territory, therefore reassuring pairs of policemen on every corner. I took a cross-street over to Fifth and found a line of vendors at the base of Central Park and bought a black T-shirt with *New York City* written on it, and a pair of counterfeit sunglasses, and a black baseball cap with a red apple on it. I changed shirts in a restroom in a hotel lobby and came back to Madison looking a little different. It was four hours since any on-duty cop had spoken to his watch commander. And people forget a lot in four hours. I figured that *tall* and *khaki shirt* would be all that anyone remembered. Nothing I could do about my height, but the new black upper body might let me slide by. Plus the writing on the shirt, and the shades, and the hat, all of which made me look like a regular out-of-town idiot.

Which I was, basically. I had no real clue as to what I was doing. Finding any concealed hideout is difficult. Finding one in a densely-populated big city is close to impossible. I was just quartering random blocks, following a geographic hunch that could have been completely wrong to start with, trying to find reasons

to narrow it further. *The Four Seasons Hotel. Not adjacent, but comfortably proximate*. Which meant what? A two-minute drive? A five-minute walk? In which direction? Not south, I thought. Not across 57th Street, which is a major cross-town thoroughfare. Two-way, six lanes. Always busy. In the micro-geography of Manhattan, 57th Street was like the Mississippi River. An obstacle. A boundary. Much more inviting to slip away to the north, to the quieter, darker blocks beyond.

I watched the traffic and thought: not a two-minute drive. Driving implied a lack of control, a lack of flexibility, and delays, and one-way streets and avenues, and parking difficulties, and potentially memorable vehicles waiting in loading zones, and license plates that could be traced and checked.

Walking was better than driving, in the city, whoever you were.

I took 58th Street, and walked to the hotel's back entrance. It was just as splendid as the front entrance. There was brass and stone and there were flags flying and porters in uniform and doormen in top hats. There was a long line of limousines waiting at the curb. Lincolns, Mercedes, Maybachs, Rolls-Royces. Well over a million dollars' worth of automotive product, all crammed into about eighty feet. There was a loading dock, with a gray roll-up door, closed.

I stood next to a bell boy, with my back to the hotel door. Where would I go? Across the street was nothing but a solid line of high buildings. Mostly apartment houses, with the ground floors leased to prestige clients. Directly opposite was an art gallery. I squeezed between two chrome bumpers and crossed the street and glanced at some of the paintings in the window. Then I turned and looked back from the far sidewalk.

To the left of the hotel, on the side nearer Park Avenue, there was nothing very interesting.

Then I looked to the right, along the block as it approached Madison, and I got a new idea.

The hotel itself was recent construction on an insane budget. Neighboring buildings were all quiet and prosperous and solid, some of them old, some of them new. But at the western end of the block there were three old piles in a row. Narrow, single-front, five-story brick, weathered, peeling, spalling, stained, somewhat decrepit. Dirty windows, sagging lintels, flat roofs, weeds along the

cornice, old iron fire escapes zigzagging down the top four floors. The three buildings looked like three rotten teeth in a bright smile. One had an old out-of-business restaurant for a ground-floor tenant. One had a hardware store. The third had an enterprise abandoned so long ago I couldn't tell what it had been. Each had a narrow door set unobtrusively alongside its commercial operation. Two of the doors had multiple bell pushes, signifying apartments. The door next to the old restaurant had a single bell push, signifying a sole occupier for the upper four floors.

Lila Hoth was not a Ukrainian billionaire from London. That had been a lie. So whoever she really was, she had a budget. A generous budget, certainly, to allow for suites in the Four Seasons as and when necessary. But presumably not an infinite budget. And townhouses in Manhattan run to twenty or more million dollars to buy, minimum. And multiple tens of thousands of dollars a month to rent.

Privacy could be achieved much more cheaply in tumbledown mixed-use buildings like the three I was looking at. And maybe there would be other advantages, too. No doormen nearby, fewer prying eyes. Plus maybe a presumption that an operation like a restaurant or a hardware store would get deliveries at all hours of the night and day. Maybe all kinds of random comings and goings could happen without attracting much notice at all.

I moved down the street and stood on the curb opposite the three old piles and stared up at them. People pushed past me in a continuous stream on the sidewalk. I stepped into the gutter, to get out of the way. There were two cops on the far corner of Madison and 57th. Fifty yards away, on a diagonal. They were not looking my way. I looked back at the buildings and reviewed my assumptions in my head. The 6 train at 59th and Lexington was close by. The Four Seasons was close by. Third Avenue and 56th Street was not close by. *That's not close to me*. Anonymity was guaranteed. Cost was limited. Five for five. Perfect. So I figured maybe I was looking for a place just like one of the three right in front of me, located somewhere within a fan-shaped five-minute radius east or west of the hotel's back door. Not north, or Susan Mark would have parked in midtown and aimed to get out of the subway at 68th Street. Not south, because of 57th Street's psychological barrier. Not somewhere else entirely, because they had used the Four Seasons as a front. Somewhere else entirely, they would have used a different hotel. New York City does not lack for impressive establishments.

Impeccable logic. Maybe too impeccable. Confining, certainly. Because if I stuck with the assumption that Susan Mark would have gotten out at 59th Street and aimed to approach from the north, and that 57th Street was a conceptual barrier to the south, then 58th Street was the whole ballgame, right there. And cross-town blocks in Manhattan take about five minutes to walk. Therefore a five-minute radius left or right out of the hotel's back door would end on either the exact block where I was currently loitering, or the next one to the east, between Park and Lex. And tumbledown mixed-use properties are rare on blocks like those. Big money chased them away long ago. It was entirely possible I was looking at the only three left standing in the whole of the zip code.

Therefore it was entirely possible I was looking at Lila Hoth's hideout.

Entirely possible, but most unlikely. I believe in luck as much as the next guy, but I'm not insane.

But I believe in logic too, probably more so than the next guy, and logic had led me to the spot. I went over it all again, and ended up believing myself.

Because of one extra factor.

Which was that the same logic led someone else there, too.

Springfield stepped down into the gutter next to me and said, "You think?"

Chapter 60

Springfield was wearing the same suit I had seen him in before. Gray summer-weight wool, with a silky weave and a slight sheen. It was creased and crumpled, like he slept in it. Which maybe he did.

He said, “You think this is the place?”

I didn’t answer. I was too busy checking all around me. I looked at hundreds of people and dozens of cars. But I saw nothing to worry about. Springfield was alone.

I turned back.

Springfield asked the question again. “You think this is it?”

I asked, “Where’s Sansom?”

“He stayed home.”

“Why?”

“Because this kind of thing is difficult, and I’m better than he is.”

I nodded. It was an article of faith with NCOs that they were better than their officers. And they were usually right. Certainly I had been happy with mine. They had done plenty of good work for me.

I asked, “So what’s the deal?”

“What deal?”

“Between you and me.”

“We don’t have a deal,” he said. “Yet.”

“Are we going to have a deal?”

“We should talk, maybe.”

“Where?”

“Your call,” he said. Which was a good sign. It meant that if there was going to be a trap or an ambush in my immediate future, it was going to be improvised, and therefore not optimally efficient. Maybe even to the point of being survivable.

I asked him, “How well do you know the city?”

“I get by.”

“Make two lefts and go to 57 East 57th. I’ll be ten minutes behind you. I’ll meet you inside.”

“What kind of a place is that?”

“We can get coffee there.”

“OK,” he said. He took one more look at the building with the old restaurant at its base and then he crossed the street diagonally through the traffic and turned left onto Madison Avenue. I went the other way, just as far as the Four Seasons’s back door. The Four Seasons’s back door was right there on 58th Street. It was a block-through building. Which meant its front door was on 57th Street. At 57 East 57th, to be precise. I would be inside about four minutes ahead of Springfield. I would know if he had brought a crew. I would see whether anyone came in before him, or with him, or after him. I walked through to the lobby from the rear and took off my hat and my glasses and stood in a quiet corner and waited.

Springfield came in alone, right on time, which was four minutes later. No time for hurried deployment out on the street. No time for conversation. Probably no time even for a cell phone call. Most people slow their walk a little, dialing and talking.

There was a guy in formal morning dress near the door. A black tail coat, and a silver tie. Not a concierge, not a bell captain. Some kind of a greeter, although his title was probably much grander. He started toward Springfield and

Springfield glanced at him once and the guy ducked away like he had been slapped. Springfield had that kind of a face.

He paused a moment and got his bearings and headed for the tea room, where I had once met the Hoths. I stayed in my corner and watched the street door. There was no backup. No plain sedans stopped outside. I gave it ten minutes, and then added two more, just in case. Nothing happened. Just the regular ebb and flow of a high-end city hotel. Rich people came, rich people went. Poor people scurried around and did things for them.

I walked into the tea room and found Springfield in the same chair that Lila Hoth had used. The same dignified old waiter was on duty. He came over. Springfield asked for mineral water. I asked for coffee. The waiter nodded imperceptibly and went away again.

Springfield said, “You met the Hoths here, twice.”

I said, “Once at this exact table.”

“Which is technically a problem. Associating with them in any way at all could be classed as a felony.”

“Because?”

“Because of the Patriot Act.”

“Who are the Hoths, exactly?”

“And running across the subway tracks was also a felony. You could get up to five years in the state pen for that, technically. So they tell me.”

“I also shot four federal agents with darts.”

“No one cares about them.”

“Who are the Hoths?”

“I can’t volunteer information.”

“So why are we here?”

“You help us, we’ll help you.”

“How can you help me?”

“We can make all your felonies disappear.”

“And how can I help you?”

“You can help us find what we lost.”

“The memory stick?”

Springfield nodded. The waiter came back with his tray. Mineral water, and coffee. He arranged things carefully on the table and backed away.

I said, “I don’t know where the memory stick is.”

“I’m sure you don’t. But you got as close to Susan Mark as anyone. And she left the Pentagon with it, and it isn’t in her house or her car or anywhere else she ever went. So we’re hoping you saw something. Maybe it didn’t mean anything to you, but it might to us.”

“I saw her shoot herself. That was about all.”

“There must have been more.”

“You had your chief of staff on the train. What did he see?”

“Nothing.”

“What was on the memory stick?”

“I can’t volunteer information.”

“Then I can’t help you.”

“Why do you need to know?”

I said, “I like to know at least the basic shape of the trouble I’m about to get myself into.”

“Then you should ask yourself a question.”

Then you should ask yourself a question.

“What question?”

“The one you haven’t asked yet, and the one you should have, right at the start. The key question, you dumbass.”

“What is this? A contest? NCOs against officers?”

“That battle was over long ago.”

So I spooled backward to the beginning, looking for the question I had never asked. The beginning was the 6 train, and passenger number four, on the right side of the car, alone on her eight-person bench, white, in her forties, plain, black hair, black clothes, black bag. Susan Mark, citizen, ex–wife, mother, sister, adoptee, resident of Annandale, Virginia.

Susan Mark, civilian worker at the Pentagon.

I asked, “What exactly was her job?”

Chapter 61

Springfield took a long drink of water and then smiled briefly and said, “Slow, but you got there in the end.”

“So what was her job?”

“She was a systems administrator with responsibility for a certain amount of information technology.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It means she knew a bunch of master passwords for the computers.”

“Which computers?”

“Not the important ones. She couldn’t launch missiles or anything. But obviously she was authorized for HRC records. And some of the archives.”

“But not the Delta archives, right? They’re in North Carolina. At Fort Bragg. Not the Pentagon.”

“Computers are networked. Everything is everywhere and nowhere now.”

“And she had access?”

“Human error.”

“What?”

“There was a measure of human error.”

“A measure?”

“There are a lot of systems administrators. They share common problems. They help each other. They have their own chat room, and their own message board.

Apparently there was a defective line of code which made individual passwords less opaque than they should have been. So there was some leakage. We think they knew all about it, actually, but they liked it that way. One person could get in and help another person with minimum fuss. Even if the code had been correct, they would probably have deleted it."

I remembered Jacob Mark saying, *She was good with computers*.

I said, "So she had access to Delta's archives?"

Springfield just nodded.

I said, "But you and Sansom quit five years before I did. Nothing was computerized back then. Certainly not the archives."

"Times change," Springfield said. "The U.S. Army as we know it is about ninety years old. We've got ninety years' worth of crap all built up. Rusty old weapons that somebody's grandfather brought back as souvenirs, captured flags and uniforms all moldering away, you name it. Plus literally thousands and thousands of tons of paper. Maybe millions of tons. It's a practical problem. Fire risk, mice, real estate."

"So?"

"So they've been cleaning house for the last ten years. The artifacts are either sent to museums or trashed, and the documents are scanned and preserved on computers."

I nodded. "And Susan Mark got in and copied one."

"More than copied one," Springfield said. "She extracted one. Transferred it to an external drive, and then deleted the original."

"The external drive being the memory stick?"

Springfield nodded. "And we don't know where it is."

"Why her?"

"Because she fit the bill. The relevant part of the archive was traced through the medal award. HRC people keep the medal records. Like you said. She was the

systems administrator. And she was vulnerable through her son."

"Why did she delete the original?"

"I don't know."

"It must have increased the risk."

"Significantly."

"What was the document?"

"I can't volunteer information."

"When was it dug out of the box room and scanned?"

"A little over three months ago. It's a slow process. Ten years into the program and they're only up to the early 1980s."

"Who does the work?"

"There's a specialist staff."

"With a leak. The Hoths were over here more or less immediately."

"Evidently."

"Do you know who it was?"

"Steps are being taken."

"What was the document?"

"I can't volunteer information."

"But it was a big file."

"Big enough."

"And the Hoths want it."

"I think that's clear."

I think that's clear."

"Why do they want it?"

"I can't volunteer information."

"You say that a lot."

"I mean it a lot."

"Who are the Hoths?"

He just smiled and made a circular *once again* gesture with his hand. *I can't volunteer information*. A great NCO's answer. Four words, the third of which was perhaps the most significant.

I said, "You could ask me questions. I could volunteer guesses. You could comment on them."

He said, "Who do you think the Hoths are?"

"I think they're native Afghans."

He said, "Go on."

"That's not much of a comment."

"Go on."

"Probably Taliban or Al Qaeda sympathizers, or operatives, or flunkies."

No reaction.

"Al Qaeda," I said. "The Taliban mostly stay home."

"Go on."

"Operatives," I said.

No reaction.

"Leaders?"

“Go on.”

“Al Qaeda is using women leaders?”

“They’re using whatever works.”

“Doesn’t seem plausible.”

“That’s what they want us to think. They want us searching for men that don’t exist.”

I said nothing.

“Go on,” he said.

“OK, the one who calls herself Svetlana fought with the mujahideen and knew you captured the VAL rifle from Grigori Hoth. They used Hoth’s name and his story to get sympathy over here.”

“Because?”

“Because now Al Qaeda wants documentary proof of whatever else it was that you guys were doing that night.”

“Go on.”

“Which Sansom got a big medal for. So it must have looked pretty good, once upon a time, way back when. But now you’re worried about exposure. So I’m assuming it wouldn’t look so good anymore.”

“Go on.”

“Sansom is miserable, but the government has got its panties in a wad, too. So it’s both personal and political.”

“Go on.”

“Did you get a medal that night?”

“The Superior Service Medal.”

“Which you gave up from the Secretary of Defense.”

¨Which comes directly from the Secretary of Defense.´´

Springfield nodded. “A nice little bauble, for a lowly sergeant.”

“So the trip was more political than military.”

“Obviously. We weren’t officially at war with anyone at the time.”

“You know the Hoths killed four people, and probably Susan Mark’s son too, right?”

“We don’t know it. But we suspect it.”

“So why haven’t you busted them?”

“I work security for a Congressman. I can’t bust anyone.”

“Those feds could.”

“Those feds work in mysterious ways. Apparently they consider the Hoths to be A-grade enemy combatants, and a very significant target, and extremely dangerous, but not currently operational.”

“Which means what?”

“Which means that right now there’s more to be gained by leaving them in place.”

“Which actually means they can’t find them.”

“Of course.”

“You happy about that?”

“The Hoths don’t have the memory stick, or they wouldn’t still be looking for it. So I don’t really care either way.”

“I think you should,” I said.

“You think that’s their place? Where you were?”

“This block or the next.”

“I think this one,” he said. “Those feds searched their hotel suite. While they were out.”

“Lila told me.”

“They had shopping bags. Like window dressing. To make the place look right.”

“I saw them.”

“Two from Bergdorf Goodman, and two from Tiffany. Those stores are close together, about a block from those old buildings. If their base was on the block east of Park, they’d have gone to Bloomingdales instead. Because they weren’t really shopping. They just wanted accessories in their suite, to fool people.”

“Good point,” I said.

“Don’t go looking for the Hoths,” Springfield said.

“You worried about me now?”

“You could lose two ways around. They’re going to think the same as us, that even if you don’t have the stick, then somehow you know where it went. And they might be even more vicious and persuasive than we are.”

“And?”

“They might actually tell you what’s on it. In which case from our point of view you would become a loose end.”

“How bad is it?”

“I’m not ashamed. But Major Sansom would be embarrassed.”

“And the United States.”

“That too.”

The waiter came back and inquired as to whether we needed anything else. Springfield said yes. He reordered for both of us. Which meant he had more to talk about. He said, “Run down exactly what happened on the train.”

“Why weren’t you there, instead of the chief of staff? It was more like your line of work than his.”

“It came on us fast. I was in Texas, with Sansom. Raising money. We didn’t have time for proper deployment.”

“Why didn’t the feds have someone on the train?”

“They did. They had two people on the train. Two women. Undercover, borrowed from the FBI. Special Agents Rodriguez and Mbele. You blundered into the wrong car and rode with them all the way.”

“They were good,” I said. And they were. The Hispanic woman, small, hot, tired, her supermarket bag wrapped around her wrist. The West African woman in the batik dress. “They were very good. But how did you all know she was going to take that train?”

“We didn’t,” Springfield said. “It was a huge operation. A big scramble. We knew she was in a car. So we had people waiting at the tunnels. The idea was to follow her from there, to wherever she was going.”

“Why wasn’t she arrested on the Pentagon steps?”

“There was a short debate. Those feds won it. They wanted to roll up the whole chain in one go. And they might have.”

“If I hadn’t screwed it up.”

“You said it.”

“She didn’t have the memory stick. So nothing was going to get rolled up anyway.”

“She left the Pentagon with it, and it isn’t in her house or her car.”

“You sure about that?”

“Her house has been torn down to the slab and I could eat the largest remaining part of her car.”

“How well did they search the subway train?”

“Car number 7622 is still in the yards at 207th Street. They say it might take a month or more to rebuild.”

“What the hell was on that memory stick?”

Springfield didn’t answer.

One of the captured phones in my pocket started to vibrate.

Chapter 62

I pulled all three phones out of my pocket and laid them on the table. One of them was skittering around, an eighth of an inch at a time. Vigorous vibration. Its window said *Restricted Call*. I opened it up and put it to my ear and said, "Hello?"

Lila Hoth asked, "Are you still in New York?"

I said, "Yes."

"Are you near the Four Seasons?"

I said, "Not very."

"Go there now. I left a package for you at the desk."

I asked, "When?"

But the line went dead.

I glanced at Springfield and said, "Wait here." Then I hustled out to the lobby. Saw no retreating back heading for the door. The scene was tranquil. The greeter in the tail coat was standing idle. I walked to the desk and gave my name and asked if they were holding anything for me. A minute later I had an envelope in my hands. It had my name handwritten across the front in thick black letters. It had Lila Hoth's name up in the top left corner, where the return address would be. I asked the desk clerk when it had been delivered. He said more than an hour ago.

I asked, "Did you see who dropped it off?"

"A foreign gentleman."

"Did you recognize him?"

“No, sir.”

The envelope was padded, about six inches by nine. It was light. It had something stiff in it. Round, and maybe five inches in diameter. I carried it back to the tea room and sat down again with Springfield. He said, “From the Hoths?”

I nodded.

He said, “It could be full of anthrax spores.”

“Feels more like a CD,” I said.

“Of what?”

“Afghan folk music, maybe.”

“I hope not,” he said. “I’ve heard Afghan folk music. At length and up close.”

“You want me to wait to open it?”

“Until when?”

“Until you’re out of range.”

“I’ll take the risk.”

So I tore open the envelope and shook it. A single disc spilled out and made a plastic sound against the wood of the table.

“A CD,” I said.

“A DVD actually,” Springfield said.

It was home-made. It was a blank disc manufactured by Memorex. The words *Watch This* had been written across the label side with a black permanent marker. Same handwriting as the envelope. Same pen. Lila Hoth’s handwriting and Lila Hoth’s pen, presumably.

I said, “I don’t have a DVD player.”

“So don’t watch it.”

“I think I have to.”

“What happened on the train?”

“I don’t know.”

“You can play DVDs on a computer. Like people watch movies on their laptops on airplanes.”

“I don’t have a computer.”

“Hotels have computers.”

“I don’t want to stay here.”

“There are other hotels in the city.”

“Where are you staying?”

“The Sheraton. Where we were before.”

So Springfield paid our tea-room bill with a platinum credit card and we walked from the Four Seasons to the Sheraton. The second time I had made that trip. It took just as long. Crowded sidewalks, people moving slow in the heat. It was one o’clock in the afternoon, and very warm. I was watching for cops the whole way, which didn’t aid our progress. But we got there in the end. The plasma screen in the lobby listed a whole bunch of events. The ballroom was booked by a trade association. Something to do with cable television. Which made me think of the National Geographic Channel, and the silverback gorilla.

Springfield opened the door to the business center with his key card. He didn’t come in with me. He told me he would wait in the lobby, and then he walked away. Three of the four work stations were occupied. Two women, one man, all of them in dark suits, all of them with leather briefcases propped open and spilling paper. I took the empty chair and set about trying to figure out how to play a DVD on a computer. I found a slot on the tower unit that looked fit for the purpose. I pushed the disc in and met with some temporary resistance and then a motor whirred and the unit sucked at the disc and pulled it from my grasp.

Nothing much happened for five seconds. Just a lot of stopping and starting and whirring. Then a big window opened on the screen. It was blank. But it had a

whirring. Then a big window opened on the screen. It was blank. But it had a graphic in the bottom corner. Like a picture of a DVD player's buttons. Play, pause, fast forward, rewind, skip. I moved the mouse and the pointer arrow changed to a chubby little hand as it passed over the buttons.

The phone in my pocket started to vibrate.

Chapter 63

I took the phone out of my pocket and opened it up. Glanced around the room. My three temporary colleagues were all hard at work. One had a bar chart on her screen. Columns of bold bright colors, some of them high, some of them low. The man was reading e-mail. The other woman was typing fast.

I put the phone to my ear and said, “Hello.”

Lila Hoth asked, “Have you got it yet?”

I said, “Yes.”

“Have you watched it yet?”

“No.”

“I think you should.”

“Why?”

“You’ll find it educational.”

I glanced again at the occupants of the room and asked, “Is there sound on it?”

“No, it’s a silent movie. Unfortunately. It would be better with sound.”

I didn’t answer.

She asked, “Where are you?”

“In a hotel business center.”

“The Four Seasons?”

“No.”

“Are there computers in the business center?”

“Yes.”

“You can play a DVD on a computer, you know.”

“So I was told.”

“Can anyone else see the screen?”

I didn’t answer.

“Play it,” she said. “I’ll stay on the line. I’ll do a commentary. Like a special edition.”

I didn’t answer.

She said, “Like a director’s cut,” and laughed a little.

I moved the mouse and put the chubby little hand over the play button. It waited there, patiently.

I clicked the mouse.

The tower unit made more whirring sounds and the blank window on the screen lit up and showed two distorted horizontal lines. They flashed twice and then the picture settled to a wide-angle view of an open outdoor space. It was night. The camera was steady. Mounted high on a tripod, I guessed. The scene was brightly lit by harsh halogen lights just out of shot. The color was raw. The space looked foreign. Beaten earth, a dark khaki tone. Small stones and one large rock. The rock was flat, bigger than a king-sized bed. It had been drilled and fitted with four iron rings. One at each corner.

There was a naked man tied to the rings. He was short and thin and wiry. He had olive skin and a black beard. He was maybe thirty years old. He was on his back, stretched into a wide X shape. The camera was positioned maybe a yard from his feet. At the top of the picture his head was jerking from side to side. His eyes were closed. His mouth was open. Tendons in his neck stood out like ropes.

He was screaming, but I couldn’t hear him.

It was a silent movie.

Lila Hoth spoke in my ear.

She asked, “What are you seeing?”

I said, “A guy on a slab.”

“Keep watching.”

“Who is he?”

“He *was* a taxi driver who ran an errand for an American journalist.”

The camera angle was about forty-five degrees, I guessed. It made the taxi driver’s feet look large and his head look small. He thrashed and bucked for a whole minute. He was raising his head and banging it down on the rock. Trying to knock himself out. Or trying to kill himself, maybe. No luck. A slender figure ducked into the shot at the top of the frame and slipped a folded square of cloth under the guy’s head. The figure was Lila Hoth. No question about it. The video definition was not great, but there was no mistaking her. The hair, the eyes, the way she moved.

The square of cloth was probably a towel.

I said, “I just saw you.”

“With the pad? It’s necessary, to avoid self-inflicted injury. And it puts their heads at an angle. It tempts them to look.”

“At what?”

“Keep watching.”

I glanced around the room. My three temporary colleagues were all still working. They were all focused hard on their own business.

On my screen nothing happened for close to twenty seconds. The taxi driver wailed away, silently. Then Svetlana Hoth stepped into the frame from the side. She was unmistakable, too. The fireplug body, the blunt steel-gray hair.

She had a knife in her hand.

She crawled up on the rock and squatted beside the guy. She stared up at the camera for a long second. Not vanity. She was judging its angle, trying not to block its view. She adjusted her position until she was crouching unobtrusively in the angle made by the guy's left arm and the side of his chest.

The guy was staring at the knife.

Svetlana leaned forward and to her right and placed the tip of the blade on a spot about half-way between the guy's groin and his navel. She pressed down. The guy jerked uncontrollably. A fat worm of blood welled out of the cut. The blood looked black under the lights. The guy screamed on and on. I could see that his mouth was forming words. *No!* and *Please!* are clear in any language.

"Where was this?" I asked.

Lila Hoth said, "Not far from Kabul."

Svetlana moved the blade up toward the guy's navel. Blood chased it all the way. She kept it moving. Like a surgeon or a wholesale butcher, casual and practiced and expert. She had made similar cuts many times before. The blade kept on moving. It stopped above the guy's sternum.

Svetlana put the knife down.

She used her index finger and traced the line of the cut. Blood lubricated its progress. She pressed down and put her finger right in the cut, to the first knuckle. She slid it up and down. She paused occasionally.

Lila Hoth said, "She's checking that she's all the way through the muscle wall."

I said, "How do you know? You can't see these pictures."

"I can hear your breathing."

Svetlana picked up the knife again and returned to the places where her finger had paused. She used the tip of the blade quite delicately and nicked through what seemed to be minor obstructions.

Then she sat back.

The taxi driver's belly was open, like a zipper had been pulled. The long straight cut gaped a little. The wall of muscle was ruptured. It was no longer able to hold back the pressure from inside.

Svetlana rocked forward again. She used both hands. She worked them into the cut and parted the skin quite carefully and rooted around inside. She was in there up to her wrists. She tensed and squared her shoulders.

She lifted out the guy's intestines.

They made a shining, glistening pink mass about the size of a soft soccer ball. Coiled, sloppy, moving, wet and steaming.

She laid the mass on the guy's chest, quite gently.

Then she slid off the rock and stepped out of the frame.

The camera's unblinking eye stared on.

The taxi driver looked down in horror.

Lila Hoth said, "Now it's just a matter of time. The cut doesn't kill them. We don't sever any important vessels. The bleeding stops quite fast. It's about pain and shock and infection. The strong ones resist all three. They die of hypothermia, we think. Their core temperature is compromised, obviously. It depends on the weather. Our record is eighteen hours. People say they've seen two full days, but I don't believe them."

"You're crazy, you know that?"

"That's what Peter Molina said."

"He saw this?"

"He's on it. Keep watching. Fast forward, if you like. Without the sound it's not so much fun anyway."

I checked all around the room again. Three people, working hard. I put the fat hand on the fast forward button and clicked. The picture leapt into fast motion. The taxi driver's head moved back and forth through a tiny jerky arc.

Lila Hoth said, “Normally we don’t do this one at a time. It’s better to have a sequence. The second guy waits until the first guy dies, and so on. It builds up the dread. You should see them, just willing the previous guy to live a minute longer. But eventually they die, and the spotlight moves on. That’s when they have heart attacks. You know, if they’re going to. If they’re susceptible. But we can’t always arrange a live sequence. That’s why we use the video now, for an approximation.”

I wanted to tell her she was crazy again, but I didn’t, because she would have told me about Peter Molina again.

“Keep watching,” she said.

The picture spooled onward. The taxi driver’s arms and legs twitched. Strange brittle movements, at double speed. His head rolled left and right.

Lila Hoth said, “Peter Molina saw all of this. He was willing the guy to hold on. Which was strange, because of course the guy died months ago. But that’s the effect. Like I told you, the video is a fair equivalent.”

“You’re sick,” I said. “You’re also dead. You know that? Like you just stepped out in the road. The truck hasn’t hit you yet, but it’s going to.”

“Are you the truck?”

“You bet your ass.”

“I’m glad. Keep watching.”

I clicked the fast forward button again and again, and the picture sped up to four times normal speed, then eight, then sixteen, then thirty-two. Time rushed by. An hour. Ninety minutes. Then the image went perfectly still. The taxi driver stopped moving. He lay completely inert for a long time and then Lila Hoth rushed into the frame. I hit the play button to get back to normal speed. Lila bent near the guy’s head and felt for a pulse. Then she raised her head and smiled a happy smile.

Straight at the camera.

Straight at me.

Straight at me.

On the phone she asked, “Is it over yet?”

I said, “Yes.”

“A disappointment. He didn’t last long. He was sick. He had parasites. Worms. We could see them writhing in his guts the whole time. It was disgusting. I guess they died too. Parasites die if their host dies.”

“Like you’re going to die.”

“We’re all going to die, Reacher. The only questions are when and how.”

Behind me one of the business executives got up and headed for the door. I turned in my chair and tried to keep my body between him and the screen. I don’t think I succeeded. He looked at me strangely and left the room.

Or maybe he had heard my end of the phone conversation.

“Keep watching,” Lila said in my ear.

I hit fast forward again. The taxi driver lay dead near Kabul for a spell and then the picture shut down and was replaced by a flurry of video noise. Then it opened up on a new scene. I hit play. Normal speed. An interior. Same kind of harsh light. Impossible to say whether it was night or day. Impossible to say where it was. A basement, maybe. Floor and walls seemed to be painted white. There was a broad stone slab, like a table. Smaller than the Afghan rock. Rectangular, manufactured for a purpose. Part of an old kitchen, possibly.

A huge young man was tied to the slab.

He was maybe half my age and twenty percent bigger all around.

He’s three hundred pounds of muscle, Jacob Mark had said. *He’s going to the NFL*.

Lila Hoth asked, “Do you see him yet?”

“I see him.”

He was naked. Very white under the lights. Different in every way from the Kabul taxi driver. Pale skin, tousled fair hair. No beard. But he was moving just the same. His head was jerking back and forth and he was screaming words. *No!* and *Please!* are recognizable in any language. And this was English. I could lip read quite easily. I could even sense the tone. Disbelief, mainly. The kind of tone a person uses when what was assumed to be an empty threat or even a cruel joke turns out to have been deadly serious.

I said, “I’m not going to watch this.”

Lila Hoth said, “You should. Or you’ll never be sure. Maybe we let him go.”

“When was this?”

“We set a deadline and we kept it.”

I didn’t reply.

“Watch it.”

“No.”

She said, “But I want you to watch it. I need you to watch it. It’s a question of maintaining the sequence. Because I think you’re going to be next.”

“Think again.”

“Watch it.”

I watched it. *Maybe we let him go. You’ll never be sure*.

They didn’t let him go.

Chapter 64

Afterward I hung up the phone and put the DVD in my pocket and made it to the lobby restroom and threw up in a stall. Not really because of the pictures. I have seen worse. But because of anger and fury and frustration. All those corrosive emotions boiled up inside me and had to find some release. I rinsed my mouth and washed my face and drank some water from the tap and stood for a moment in front of the mirror.

Then I emptied my pockets. I kept my cash, and my passport, and my ATM card, and my subway card, and Theresa Lee's NYPD business card. I kept my toothbrush. I kept the phone that had rung. I dumped the other two phones in the trash, with the emergency charger, and the business card from the four dead guys, and the notes Theresa Lee had made from her partner's messages.

I dumped the DVD, too.

And the Radio Shack memory stick, pink sleeve and all.

I didn't need a decoy anymore.

Then, cleansed, I headed out to see if Springfield was still around.

He was. He was in the lobby bar, in a chair, with his back to a right-angle corner. He had a glass of water on the table in front of him. He was relaxed, but he was watching everything. You can take the man out of Special Forces, and so on and so forth. He saw me coming. I sat down next to him. He asked, "Was it folk music?"

"Yes," I said. "It was folk music."

"On a DVD?"

"There was some dancing, too."

"I don't believe you. You've gone all pale. Afghan folk dancing is pretty bad. I

"I don't believe you. You've gone all pale. Afghan folk dancing is pretty bad, I know, but it ain't that bad."

"It was two guys," I said. "They had their bellies slit open and their guts lifted out."

"Live on camera?"

"And then dead on camera."

"Soundtrack?"

"Silent."

"Who were the guys?"

"One was a taxi driver from Kabul and the other was Susan Mark's son."

"I don't take taxis in Kabul. I prefer my own transportation. But it sucks for USC. They're down a defensive tackle. Hard to find. I checked him out. Great feet, they say."

"Not anymore."

"Are the Hoths on the tape?"

I nodded. "Like a confession."

"Doesn't matter. They know we're going to kill them anyway. Doesn't really matter what we kill them for."

"It matters to me."

"Wise up, Reacher. That was the whole point of sending you the package. They want to make you mad and suck you in. They can't find you. So they want you to come find them."

"Which I will."

"Your future plans are your business. But you need to take care. You need to understand. Because this has been their tactic for two hundred years. That's why their abuse was always within earshot of the front lines. They wanted to bring

out the rescue parties. Or provoke revenge attacks. They wanted a never-ending supply of prisoners. Ask the British. Or the Russians."

"I'll take plenty of care."

"I'm sure you'll try. But you're not going anywhere until we've finished with you, about the train."

"Your guy saw what I saw."

"It's in your interests to help us."

"Not so far. All I have is promises."

"All charges will be dropped when we have the memory stick in our possession."

"Not good enough."

"You want it in writing?"

"No, I want the charges dropped now. I need some freedom of action here. I can't be looking out for cops the whole time."

"Freedom of action for what?"

"You know what."

"OK, I'll do what I can."

"Not good enough."

"I can't give you guarantees. All I can do is try."

"What are the chances you can succeed?"

"None at all. But Sansom can."

"Are you authorized to speak for him?"

"I'll have to call him."

“Tell him no more bullshit, OK? We’re past that stage now.”

“OK.”

“And talk to him about Theresa Lee and Jacob Mark, too. And Docherty. I want a clean slate for all of them.”

“OK.”

“And Jacob Mark is going to need counseling. Especially if he sees a copy of that DVD.”

“He won’t.”

“But I want him looked after. The ex–husband, as well. Molina.”

“OK.”

“Two more things,” I said.

“You drive a hard bargain, for a guy with nothing to offer.”

“Homeland Security traced the Hoths coming in from Tajikistan with their crew. Three months ago. Some kind of a computer algorithm. I want to know how many people were in the party.”

“To estimate the size of the opposing force?” “Exactly.” “And?”

“I want to meet with Sansom again.” “Why?”

“I want him to tell me what is on that memory stick.” “Not going to happen.”

“Then he doesn’t get it back. I’ll keep it and take a look for myself.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“You’ve actually got the stick?”

“No,” I said. “But I know where it is.”

Chapter 65

Springfield asked, “Where is it?”

I said, “I can’t volunteer information.”

“You’re full of shit.”

I shook my head. “Not this time.”

“You sure? You can take us there?”

“I can get you within fifteen feet. The rest is up to you.”

“Why? Is it buried? In a bank vault? In a house?”

“None of the above.”

“So where is it?”

“Call Sansom,” I said. “Set up a meeting.”

Springfield finished what was left of his water and a waiter came by with the check. Springfield paid with his platinum card, the same way he had for both of us at the Four Seasons. Which I had taken to be a good sign. It had indicated a positive dynamic. So I chose to push my luck a little further.

“Want to get me a room?” I asked.

“Why?”

“Because it’s going to take time for Sansom to get me off the most-wanted list. And I’m tired. I was up all night. I want to take a nap.”

Ten minutes later we were on a high floor, in a room with a queen-sized bed. A nice space, but tactically unsatisfactory. Like all high-floor hotel rooms it had a

window that was no good to me and therefore only one way out. I could see that Springfield was thinking the same thing. He was thinking I was a lunatic to put myself in there.

I asked him, “Can I trust you?”

He said, “Yes.”

“Prove it.”

“How?”

“Give me your gun.”

“I’m not armed.”

“Answers like that don’t help with the trust thing.”

“Why do you want it?”

“You know why. So if you bring the wrong people to my door I can defend myself.”

“I won’t.”

“Reassure me.”

He stood still for a long moment. I knew he would rather stick a needle in his eye than give up his weapon. But he ran some calculations in his head and reached around under his suit coat to the small of his back and came out with a nine-millimeter Steyr GB pistol. The Steyr GB had been the sidearm of choice for 1980s-era U.S. Special Forces. He reversed it and handed it to me butt-first. It was a fine old piece, well worn but well maintained. It had eighteen rounds in the magazine and one in the chamber.

“Thank you,” I said.

He didn’t reply. Just walked out of the room. I double-locked the door after him, and put the chain on, and propped a chair under the handle. I emptied my pockets on the night stand. I put my clothes under the mattress to press. I took a long hot shower.

Then I lay down and went to sleep, with Springfield's gun under the pillow.

I was woken up four hours later by a knock at the door. I don't like to look through spy holes in hotel doors. Too vulnerable. All an assailant in the corridor has to do is wait until the lens darkens and then fire a gun straight through it. Even a silenced .22 would be completely lethal. There is nothing very substantial between the cornea and the brain stem. But there was a full-length mirror on the wall inside the door. For last-minute clothing checks, I guessed, before going out. I took a towel from the bathroom and wrapped it around my waist and collected the gun from under the pillow. I moved the chair and opened the door against the chain. Stood back on the hinge side and checked the view in the mirror.

Springfield, and Sansom.

It was a narrow crack and the image was reversed by the mirror and the corridor lighting was dim, but I recognized them easily enough. They were alone, as far as I could tell. And they were going to stay alone, unless they had brought more than nineteen people with them. No safety catch on the Steyr. Just a hefty double-action pull for the first shot, and then eighteen more. I took the slack out of the trigger and the chain off the door.

They were alone.

They came in, Sansom first, and then Springfield. Sansom looked the same as the morning I first saw him. Tanned, rich, powerful, full of energy and charisma. He was in a navy suit with a white shirt and a red tie and he looked as fresh as a daisy. He took the chair I had been using under the door handle and carried it back to the table near the window and sat down. Springfield closed the door and put the chain back on. I kept hold of the gun. I nudged the mattress off the box spring with my knee and pulled my clothes out one-handed.

"Two minutes," I said. "Talk among yourselves."

I dressed in the bathroom and came back out and Sansom asked, "Do you really know where that memory stick is?"

"Yes," I said. "I really do."

"Why do you want to know what's on it?"

"Why do you want to know what's on it?"

"Because I want to know how embarrassing it is."

"You don't want me in the Senate?"

"I don't care how you spend your time. I'm curious, that's all."

He asked, "Why won't you tell me where it is right now?"

"Because I have something else to do first. And I need you to keep the cops out of my hair while I'm doing it. So I need a way of keeping your mind on the job."

"You could be conning me."

"I could be, but I'm not."

He said nothing back.

I asked, "Why do you want to be in the Senate anyway?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"You were a good soldier and now you're richer than God. Why not go live on the beach?"

"These things are a way of keeping score. I'm sure you have your own way of keeping score."

I nodded. "I compare the number of answers I get to the number of questions I ask."

"And how are you doing with that?"

"Lifetime average close to a thousand."

"Why ask at all? If you know where the stick is, just go get it."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

“It’s going to take more resources than I could mobilize.”

“Where is it?”

I didn’t answer.

“Is it here in New York?”

I didn’t answer.

He asked, “Is it secure?”

I said, “It’s safe enough.”

“Can I trust you?”

“Plenty of people have.”

“And?”

“I think most of them would be willing to give me a character reference.”

“And the others?”

“There’s no pleasing some folks.”

He said, “I saw your service record.”

I said, “You told me that.”

“It was mixed.”

“I tried my best. But I had a mind of my own.”

“Why did you quit?”

“I got bored. You?”

“I got old.”

“What is on that stick?”

He didn’t answer. Springfield was standing mute, in the lee of the TV cabinet, closer to the door than the window. Pure habit, I guessed. Simple reflex. He was invisible to a potential external sniper and close enough to the corridor to be all over an intruder the second the door swung open. Training stays with a person. Especially Delta training. I stepped over and gave him his gun back. He took it without a word and put it in his waistband.

Sansom said, “Tell me what you know so far.”

I said, “You were airlifted from Bragg to Turkey, and then Oman. Then India, probably. Then Pakistan, and the North West Frontier.”

He nodded and said nothing. He had a faraway look in his eyes. I guessed he was reliving the journey in his mind. Transport planes, helicopters, trucks, long miles on foot.

All long ago.

“Then Afghanistan,” I said.

“Go on,” he said.

“Probably you stayed on the flank of the Abas Ghar and headed south and west, following the line of the Korengal Valley, maybe a thousand feet from the floor.”

“Go on.”

“You stumbled over Grigori Hoth and took his rifle and let him wander away.”

“Go on.”

“Then you kept on walking, to wherever it was you had been ordered to go.”

He nodded.

I said, “That’s all I know so far.”

He asked, “Where were you in March of 1983?”

“West Point.”

“What was the big news?”

“The Red Army was trying to stop the bleeding.”

He nodded again. “It was an insane campaign. No one has ever beaten the tribesmen in the North West Frontier. Not in the whole of history. And they had our own experience in Vietnam to study. Some things just can’t be done. It was a slow-motion meat grinder. Like getting pecked to death by birds. We were very happy about it, obviously.”

“We helped,” I said.

“We sure did. We gave the mujahideen everything they wanted. For free.”

“Like Lend-Lease.”

“Worse,” Sansom said. “Lend-Lease was about helping friends that happened to be bankrupt at the time. The mujahideen were not bankrupt. Quite the reverse. There were all kinds of weird tribal alliances that stretched all the way to Saudi. The mujahideen had more money than we did, practically.”

“And?”

“When you’re in the habit of giving people everything they want, it’s very hard to stop.”

“What more did they want?”

“Recognition,” he said. “Tribute. Acknowledgment. Courtesy. Face time. It’s hard to know exactly how to characterize it.”

“So what was the mission?”

“Can we trust you?”

“You want to get the file back?”

“Yes.”

“So what was the mission?”

“We went to see the mujahideen’s top boy. Bearing gifts. All kinds of gaudy trinkets, from Ronald Reagan himself. We were his personal envoys. We had a White House briefing. We were told to pucker up and kiss ass at every possible opportunity.”

“And did you?”

“You bet.”

“It was twenty-five years ago.”

“So?”

“So who cares anymore? It’s a detail of history. And it worked, anyway. It was the end of Communism.”

“But it wasn’t the end of the mujahideen. They stayed in business.”

“I know,” I said. “They became the Taliban and Al Qaeda. But that’s a detail, too. Voters in North Carolina aren’t going to remember the history. Most voters can’t remember what they had for breakfast.”

“Depends,” Sansom said.

“On what?”

“Name recognition.”

“What name?”

“The Korengal was where the action was. Just a small salient, but that was where the Red Army met its end. The mujahideen there were doing a really fine job. Therefore the local mujahideen leader there was a really big deal. He was a rising star. He was the one we were sent to meet. And we did. We met with him.”

“And you kissed his ass?”

“Every which way we could.”

“Who was he?”

“He was a fairly impressive guy, initially. Young, tall, good-looking, very intelligent, very committed. And very rich, by the way. Very connected. He came from a billionaire family in Saudi. His father was a friend of Reagan’s Vice President. But the guy himself was a revolutionary. He quit the easy life for the cause.”

“Who was he?”

“Osama bin Laden.”

Chapter 66

The room stayed quiet for a long moment. Just muted city sounds from the window, and the hiss of air from a vent above the bathroom. Springfield moved away from his position by the TV cabinet and sat down on the bed.

I said, “Name recognition.”

Sansom said, “It’s a bitch.”

“You got that right.”

“Tell me about it.”

“But it’s a big file,” I said.

“So?”

“So it’s a long report. And we’ve all read army reports.”

“And?”

“They’re very dry.” Which they were. Take Springfield’s Steyr GB, for instance. The army had tested it. It was a miracle of modern engineering. Not only did it work exactly like it should, it also worked exactly like it shouldn’t. It had a complex gas-delayed blow-back system that meant it could be loaded with substandard or elderly or badly assembled rounds and still fire. Most guns have problems with variable gas pressures. Either they blow up with too much or fail to cycle with too little. But the Steyr could handle anything. Which was why Special Forces loved it. They were often far from home with no logistics, forced to rely on whatever they could scrounge up locally. The Steyr GB was a metal marvel.

The army report called it *technically acceptable*.

I said, “Maybe they didn’t mention you by name. Maybe they didn’t mention *him* by name. Maybe it was all acronyms, for Delta leader and local commander, all buried in three hundred pages of map references.”

Sansom said nothing.

Springfield looked away.

I asked, “What was he like?”

Sansom said, “See? This is exactly what I’m talking about. My whole life counts for nothing now, except I’m the guy who kissed Osama bin Laden’s ass. That’s all anyone will ever remember.”

“But what was he like?”

“He was a creep. He was clearly committed to killing Russians, which we were happy about at first, but pretty soon we realized he was committed to killing everyone who wasn’t exactly the same as him. He was weird. He was a psychopath. He smelled bad. It was a very uncomfortable weekend. My skin was crawling the whole time.”

“You were there a whole weekend?”

“Honored guests. Except not really. He was an arrogant son of a bitch. He lorded it over us the whole time. He lectured us on tactics and strategy. Told us how he would have won in Vietnam. We had to pretend to be impressed.”

“What gifts did you give him?”

“I don’t know what they were. They were wrapped. He didn’t open them. Just tossed them in a corner. He didn’t care. Like they say at weddings, our presence was present enough. He thought he was proving something to the world. The Great Satan was bending its knee before him. I nearly puked a dozen times. And not just because of the food.”

“You ate with him?”

“We were staying in his tent.”

“Which will be called their HQ in the report. The language will be very neutral. The ass-kissing won’t be mentioned. It will be three hundred tedious pages about a rendezvous attempted and a rendezvous kept. People will die of boredom before you’re halfway over the Atlantic. Why are you so worried?”

“The politics is awful. The Lend-Lease thing. Inasmuch as bin Laden wasn’t dipping into his own personal fortune, it’s like we were subsidizing him. Paying him, almost.”

“Not your fault. That’s White House stuff. Did any sea captain get it in the neck for delivering Lend-Lease stuff to the Soviets during World War Two? They didn’t stay our friends, either.”

Sansom said nothing.

I said, “It’s just words on a page. They won’t resonate. People don’t read.”

Sansom said, “It’s a big file.”

“The bigger the better. The bigger it is, the more buried the bad parts will be. And it will be very dated. I think we used to spell his name differently back then. With a *u*. It was Usama. Or UBL. Maybe people won’t even notice. Or you could say it was someone else entirely.”

“You sure you know where that stick is?”

“Certain.”

“Because you sound like you don’t. You sound like you’re trying to console me, because you know it’s staying out there for the world to see.”

“I know where it is. I’m just trying to get a handle on why you’re so uptight. People have survived worse.”

“You ever used a computer?”

“I used one today.”

“What makes for the biggest files?”

“I don’t know.”

“Take a guess.”

“Long documents?”

“Wrong. Large numbers of pixels make for the biggest files.”

“Pixels?” I said.

He didn’t answer.

“OK,” I said. “I see. It’s not a report. It’s a photograph.”

Chapter 67

The room went quiet again. The city sounds, the forced air. Sansom got up and used the bathroom. Springfield moved back to his former position by the TV cabinet. There were bottles of water on the cabinet, with paper collars that said if you drank the water you would be charged eight dollars.

Sansom came out of the bathroom.

“Reagan wanted the photograph,” he said. “Partly because he was a sentimental old geezer, and partly because he was a suspicious old man. He wanted to check we had followed his orders. The way I remember it, I’m standing next to bin Laden with the mother of all shit-eating grins on my face.”

Springfield said, “With me on the other side.”

Sansom said, “Bin Laden knocked down the Twin Towers. He attacked the Pentagon. He’s the world’s worst terrorist. He’s a very, very recognizable figure. He’s completely unmistakable. That photograph will kill me in politics. Stone dead. Forever.”

I asked, “Is that why the Hoths want it?”

He nodded. “So that Al Qaeda can humiliate me, and the United States along with me. Or vice versa.”

I stepped over to the TV cabinet and took a bottle of water. Unscrewed the cap and took a long drink. The room was on Springfield’s card, which meant that Sansom was paying. And Sansom could afford eight bucks.

Then I smiled, briefly.

“Hence the photograph in your book,” I said. “And on your office wall. Donald Rumsfeld with Saddam Hussein, in Baghdad.”

“Yes,” Sansom said.

"Yes," Sansom said.

"Just in case. To show that someone else had done the very same thing. Like a trump card, just lying there in the weeds. No one knew it was a trump. No one even knew it was a card."

"It's not a trump," Sansom said. "It's not even close. It's like a lousy four of clubs. Because bin Laden is way worse than Saddam ever was. And Rumsfeld wasn't looking to get elected to anything afterward. He was appointed to everything he did after that, by his friends. He had to be. No sane person would have voted for him."

"You got friends?"

"Not many."

"No one ever said much about Rumsfeld's photograph."

"Because he wasn't running for office. If he had ever gotten into an election campaign, that would have been the most famous photograph in the world."

"You're a better man than Rumsfeld."

"You don't know me."

"Educated guess."

"OK, maybe. But bin Laden is worse than Saddam. And that image is poison. It doesn't even need a caption. There I am, grinning up at the world's most evil man like a puppy dog. People fake pictures like that for attack ads. And this one is real."

"You'll get it back."

"When?"

"How are we doing with the felony charges?"

"Slow."

"But sure?"

“Not very. There’s good news and bad news.”

“Give me the bad news first.”

“It’s very unlikely that the FBI will want to play ball. And it’s certain the Department of Defense won’t.”

“Those three guys?”

“They’re off the case. Apparently they’re injured. One has a broken nose and one has a cut head. But they’ve been replaced. The DoD is still hot to trot.”

“They should be grateful. They need all the help they can get.”

“Doesn’t work like that. There are turf wars to be won.”

“So what’s the good news?”

“We think the NYPD is prepared to be relaxed about the subway.”

“Terrific,” I said. “That’s like canceling a parking ticket for Charles Manson.”

Sansom didn’t reply.

I asked him, “What about Theresa Lee and Jacob Mark? And Docherty?”

“They’re back at work. With federal paper on file commending them for helping Homeland Security with a sensitive investigation.”

“So they’re OK and I’m not?”

“They didn’t hit anybody. They didn’t bruise any egos.”

“What are you going to do with the memory stick when you get it back?”

“I’m going to check it’s right, then I’m going to smash it up, and burn the pieces, and grind the ash to dust, and flush it down about eight separate toilets.”

“Suppose I asked you not to do that?”

“Why would you?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

Depending on your point of view it was either late in the afternoon or early in the evening. But I had just woken up, so I figured it was time for breakfast. I called down to room service and ordered a big tray. About fifty bucks’ worth, at Sheraton New York prices, with taxes and tips and charges and fees. Sansom didn’t bat an eye. He was sitting forward in his chair, seething with frustration and impatience. Springfield was much more relaxed. He had shared that mountain journey a quarter of a century earlier, and he had shared the ignominy. *Sometimes our friends become our enemies, and sometimes our enemies become our friends*. But Springfield had nothing riding on it. No aims, no plans, no ambitions. And it showed. He was still exactly what he had been back then, just a guy doing his job.

I asked, “Could you have killed him?”

“He had bodyguards,” Sansom said. “Like an inner circle. Loyalties over there are fanatical. Think of the Marines, or the Teamsters, and multiply by a thousand. We were disarmed a hundred yards from the camp. We were never alone with him. There were always people milling about. Plus kids and animals. They lived like the Stone Age.”

“He was a long lanky streak of piss,” Springfield said. “I could have reached up and snapped his scrawny neck any old time I wanted to.”

“Did you want to?”

“You bet I did. Because I knew. Right from the start. Maybe I should have done it right when the flashbulb went off. Like a bread-stick in an Italian restaurant. That would have made a better picture.”

I said, “Suicide mission.”

“But it would have saved a lot of lives later.”

I nodded. “Just like if Rumsfeld had stuck a shiv in Saddam.”

The room service guy brought my meal and I moved Sansom out of his chair and ate at the table. Sansom took a cell phone call and confirmed that as of that moment I was off the hook for the subway transgression. I was no longer a

person of interest as far as the NYPD was concerned. But then he made a second call and told me the jury was still out at the FBI, and the signs did not look good at all. Then he made a third call and confirmed that the DoD brass definitely would not let go. They were like dogs with a bone. I was in all kinds of trouble at the federal level. Obstruction of justice, assault and battery, wounding with a deadly weapon.

“End of story,” Sansom said. “I would have to go to the Secretary direct.”

“Or the President,” I said.

“I can’t do either. On the face of it the DoD is currently in hot pursuit of an active Al Qaeda cell. Can’t argue against that, in today’s climate.”

Politics is a minefield. Damned if you do, damned if you don’t.

“OK,” I said. “Just as long as I know the shape of the battlefield.”

“It’s not your battle, strictly speaking.”

“Jacob Mark will feel better with a little closure.”

“You’re doing this for Jacob Mark? The feds can give him all the closure he needs.”

“You think? The feds are nowhere. How long do you want to drag this out?”

“So are you doing it for Jacob Mark or for me?”

“I’m doing it for myself.”

“You’re not involved.”

“I like a challenge.”

“There are lots of other challenges in the world.”

“They made it personal. They sent me that DVD.”

“Which was tactical. If you react, they win.”

“N[illegible]”

"No, if I react, they lose."

"This isn't the Wild West."

"You got that right. This is the timid West. We need to roll the clock back."

"Do you even know where they are?"

Springfield glanced at me.

I said, "I'm working on a couple of ideas."

"Do you still have an open channel of communication?"

"She hasn't called me since the DVD."

"Since she set you up, you mean."

"But I think she's going to call again."

"Why?"

"Because she wants to."

"She might win. One false step, and you're her prisoner. You'll end up telling her what she wants to know."

I asked him, "How many times have you flown commercial since September eleventh?"

He said, "Hundreds."

"And I bet every single time some small corner of your mind was hoping there were hijackers on board. So you could see them marching up the aisle, so you could jump up and beat the shit out of them. Or die trying."

Sansom inclined his head and his mouth turned down in a rueful little smile. The first I had seen from him for a long time.

"You're right," he said. "Every single time."

"Why?"

“I would want to protect the airplane.”

“And you would want to unload your frustrations. And burn off your hate. I know I would. I liked the Twin Towers. I liked the way the world used to be. You know, before. I have no political skills. I’m not a diplomat or a strategist. I know my weaknesses, and I know my strengths. So all in all for a guy like me the chance to meet an active Al Qaeda cell seems pretty much like all my birthdays and Christmases rolled into one.”

“You’re crazy. This is not a thing to be done alone.”

“What’s the alternative?”

“Homeland Security will find them eventually. Then they’ll put something together. NYPD, FBI, SWAT teams, equipment, hundreds of guys.”

“A huge operation with lots of disparate components.”

“But carefully planned.”

“You been on operations like that before?”

“Couple of times.”

“How did they work out for you?”

Sansom didn’t answer.

I said, “Alone is always better.”

“Maybe not,” Springfield said. “We checked on Homeland Security’s computer algorithm. The Hoths brought a large party with them.”

“How many?”

“Nineteen men.”

Chapter 68

I finished my breakfast. The coffee pot was empty. So I finished my eight-dollar bottle of water and lobbed it end over end toward the trash can. It struck the rim with a hollow plastic sound and bounced out and rolled away across the carpet. Not a good sign, if I were superstitious. But I'm not.

"Total of nineteen men," I said. "Four left the country already and two are walking wounded with broken jaws and elbows. That leaves thirteen on active service."

Sansom said, "Broken jaws and elbows? How did that happen?"

"They were out looking for me. They might be hot shit in the hills with grenade launchers, but scuffling on the street seems not to be their main strength."

"Did you write on their foreheads?"

"One of them. Why?"

"The FBI got a call from the Bellevue emergency room. Two unidentified foreigners were dumped there after a beating. One of them had writing on his forehead."

"Punishment," I said. "The Hoths must have been displeased with their performance. So they gave them up, to encourage the others."

"Ruthless people."

"Where are they now?"

"Secure rooms in the hospital. Because one of them was there before. Some previous emergency at Penn Station. He's not saying anything. The FBI is trying to work out who the hell he is."

“What’s taking them so long? I wrote Lila’s name on his head. I wrote, *Lila, call me*. How many people named Lila is the Bureau interested in right now?”

Sansom shook his head. “Give them some credit. The part with the name had been skinned off with a knife.”

I stepped over and opened the second bottle of eight-dollar water. Took a sip. It tasted good. But no better than two-dollar water. Or free water, from the tap.

“Thirteen people,” I said.

“Plus the Hoths themselves,” Springfield said.

“OK, fifteen.”

“Suicide mission.”

“We’re all going to die,” I said. “The only questions are how and when.”

“We can’t actively help you,” Sansom said. “You understand that, right? This is going to end with a minimum of one and a maximum of fifteen homicides on the streets of New York City. We can’t be a part of that. We can’t be within a million miles of it.”

“Because of politics?”

“Because of a lot of reasons.”

“I’m not asking for help.”

“You’re a maniac.”

“They’re going to think so.”

“You got a schedule in mind?”

“Soon. No sense in waiting.”

“The minimum one homicide would be you, of course. In which case I wouldn’t know where to look for my photograph.”

“S[illegible]”

"So keep your fingers crossed for me."

"The responsible thing would be for you to tell me now."

"No, the responsible thing would be for me to get a job as a school bus driver."

"Can I trust you?"

"To survive?"

"To keep your word."

"What did you learn in Officer Candidate School?"

"That brother officers are to be trusted. Especially brother officers of equal rank."

"There you go, then."

"But we weren't really brothers. We were in very different branches of the service."

"You got that right. I was working hard while you were flying all over the world kissing terrorist ass. You didn't even get a Purple Heart."

He didn't answer.

"Just kidding," I said. "But you better hope I'm not the first homicide, or you might be hearing that kind of thing all the time."

"So tell me now."

"I need you watching my back."

He said, "I read your record."

"You told me that."

"You got your Purple Heart for being blown up by that truck bomb in Beirut. The Marine barracks."

"I remember it well."

“You got a disfiguring scar.”

“Want to see it?”

“No. But you need to remember, that wasn’t the Hoths.”

“What are you, my therapist?”

“No. But that doesn’t make my statement any the less true.”

“I don’t know who it was in Beirut. Nobody does, for sure. But whoever, they were the Hoths’ brother officers.”

“You’re motivated by revenge. And you still feel guilty about Susan Mark.”

“So?”

“So you might not be operating at peak efficiency.”

“Worried about me?”

“About myself, mainly. I want my photograph back.”

“You’ll get it.”

“At least give me a clue where it is.”

“You know what I know. I figured it out. So you’ll figure it out.”

“You were a cop. Different skill set.”

“So you’ll be slower. But it ain’t rocket science.”

“So what kind of science is it?”

“Think like a regular person for once. Not like a soldier or a politician.”

He tried. He failed. He said, “At least tell me why I shouldn’t destroy it.”

“You know what I know.”

“What does that mean?”

“Or maybe you don’t know what I know. Because you’re too close to yourself. Me, I’m just a member of the public.”

“So?”

“I’m sure you’re a hell of a guy, Sansom. I’m sure you’d be a great senator. But at the end of the day any senator is just one out of a hundred. They’re all fairly interchangeable. Can you give me a name? Of one individual senator who truly made a difference to anything?”

Sansom didn’t answer.

“Can you tell me how you personally are going to screw Al Qaeda?”

He started to talk about the Armed Services Committee, and Foreign Relations, and Intelligence, and budgets, and oversight. Like a boilerplate speech. Like he was out on the stump. I asked him, “What part of all that wouldn’t be done by whoever else might get the job, assuming you don’t?”

He didn’t answer. I asked him, “Imagine a cave in the north west of Pakistan. Imagine the Al Qaeda brass sitting there, right now. Are they tearing their hair out and saying, holy shit, we better not let John Sansom make it to the U.S. Senate? Are you top of their agenda?”

He said, “Probably not.”

“So why do they want the photograph?”

“Small victories,” he said. “Better than nothing.”

“It’s a lot of work for a small victory, don’t you think? Two agents plus nineteen men plus three months?”

“The United States would be embarrassed.”

“But not very. Look at the Rumsfeld photograph. Nobody cared. Times change, things move on. People understand that, if they even notice at all. Americans are either very mature and sensible, or very oblivious. I’m never quite sure which. But either way, that picture would be a damp squib. It might destroy you

personally, but destroying one American at a time isn't how Al Qaeda operates."

"It would hurt Reagan's memory."

"Who cares? Most Americans don't even remember him. Most Americans think Reagan is an airport in Washington."

"I think you're underestimating."

"And I think you're overestimating. You're too close to the process."

"I think that photograph would hurt."

"But who would it hurt? What does the government think?"

"You know that the Defense Department is trying like crazy to get it back."

"Is it? Then why did they give the job to their B-team?"

"You think those guys were their B-team?"

"I sincerely hope so. If that was their A-team, we should all move to Canada."

Sansom didn't answer.

I said, "The picture might do you some local damage in North Carolina. But apparently that's all. We're not seeing any kind of maximum effort from the DoD. Because there's no real national downside."

"That's not an accurate read."

"OK, it's bad for us. It's evidence of a strategic error. It's awkward, it's embarrassing, and it's going to put egg on our face. But that's all. It's not the end of the world. We're not going to fall apart."

"So Al Qaeda's expectations are too high? You're saying they're wrong too? They don't understand the American people the way you do?"

"No, I'm saying this whole thing is a little lopsided. It's slightly asymmetric. Al Qaeda fielded an A-team and we fielded a B-team. Therefore their desire to grab that photograph is just a little bit stronger than our desire to hold on to it."

Sansom said nothing.

“And we have to ask, why wasn’t Susan Mark just told to copy it? If their aim was to embarrass us, then copying it would have been a better idea. Because when it came to light, and skeptics claimed it had been faked, which they would, then the original would still be on file, and we couldn’t have denied it with a straight face.”

“OK.”

“But Susan Mark wasn’t told to copy it. She was told to steal it, effectively. To take it away from us. With no trace left behind. Which added considerable risk and visibility.”

“Which means what?”

“Which means they want to have it, and equally they want us *not* to have it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You need to cast your mind back. You need to figure out exactly what that camera saw. Because Al Qaeda doesn’t want to publicize that photograph. They stole it because they want to suppress it.”

“Why would they?”

“Because however bad it is for you, there’s something in it that’s even worse for Osama bin Laden.”

Chapter 69

Sansom and Springfield went quiet, like I knew they would. They were casting their minds back a quarter of a century, to a dim tent above the Korengal Valley floor. They were stiffening and straightening, subconsciously repeating their formal poses. One on the left, one on the right, with their host between them. The camera lens, trained on them, aimed, zoomed, adjusted, focused. The strobe, charging, then popping, bathing the scene with light.

What exactly did the camera see?

Sansom said, “I don’t remember.”

“Maybe it was us,” Springfield said. “Simple as that. Maybe meeting with Americans looks like bad karma now.”

“No,” I said. “That’s good PR. It makes bin Laden look powerful and triumphant, and it makes us look like patsies. It has to be something else.”

“It was a zoo in there. Chaos and mayhem.”

“It has to be something fatally inappropriate. Little boys, little girls, animals.”

Sansom said, “I don’t know what they would regard as inappropriate. They have a thousand rules over there. Could be something he was eating, even.”

“Or smoking.”

“Or drinking.”

“There was no alcohol there,” Springfield said. “I remember that.”

“Women?” I asked.

“No women, either.”

“Has to be something. Were there other visitors there?”

“Only tribal.”

“No foreigners?”

“Only us.”

“It has to be something that makes him look compromised, or weak, or deviant. Was he healthy?”

“He seemed to be.”

“So what else?”

“Deviant from their laws or deviant like we mean it?”

“Al Qaeda HQ,” I said. “Where the men are men and the goats are scared.”

“I don’t remember. It was a long time ago. We were tired. We had just walked a hundred miles through the front lines.”

Sansom had gone quiet. Like I knew he would. Eventually he said, “This is a real bitch.”

I said, “I know it is.”

“I’m going to have to make a big decision.”

“I know you are.”

“If that picture hurts him more than it hurts me, I’m going to have to release it.”

“No, if it hurts him at all, even a little bit, you’re going to have to release it. And then you’re going to have to suck it up and face the consequences.”

“Where is it?”

I didn’t answer.

“OK,” he said. “I have to watch your back. But I know what you know. And you figured it out. Which means I can figure it out. But slower. Because it ain’t

figured it out. Which means I can figure it out. But slower. Because it ain't rocket science. Which means the Hoths can figure it out too. Are they going to be slower? Maybe not. Maybe they're picking it up right now."

"Yes," I said. "Maybe they are."

"And if they're going to suppress it, maybe I should just go ahead and let them."

"If they're going to suppress it, that means it's a valuable weapon that could be used against them."

Sansom said nothing.

I said, "Remember Officer Candidate School? Something about all enemies, foreign and domestic?"

"We take the same oath in Congress."

"So should you let the Hoths suppress the picture?"

He was quiet for a very long time.

Then he spoke.

"Go," he said. "Go get the Hoths before they get the picture."

I didn't go. Not right then. Not immediately. I had things to think about, and plans to make. And deficiencies to overcome. I wasn't equipped. I was wearing rubber gardening clogs and blue pants. I was unarmed. None of those things was good. I wanted to go in the dead of night, properly dressed in black. With proper shoes. And weapons. The more the merrier.

The outfit would be easy.

The weapons, not so much. New York City is not the best place on the planet to get hold of a private arsenal at the drop of a hat. There were probably places in the outer boroughs selling overpriced junk under the counter, but there were places in the outer boroughs selling used cars too, and fastidious drivers were well advised to stay away from them.

Problem.

I looked at Sansom and said, “You can’t actively help me, right?”

He said, “No.”

I looked at Springfield and said, “I’m heading out to a clothing store now. I figure on getting black pants and a black T-shirt and black shoes. With a black windbreaker, maybe triple-XL, kind of baggy. What do you think?”

Springfield said, “We don’t care. We’ll be gone when you get back.”

*

I went to the store on Broadway where I bought the khaki shirt prior to Elspeth Sansom’s visit. It was doing a little business and had plenty of items in stock. I found everything I needed there apart from socks and shoes. Black jeans, plain black T-shirt, and a black cotton zip-up windbreaker made for a guy with a much bigger gut than mine. I tried it on and as expected it fit OK in the arms and the shoulders and ballooned way out in front like a maternity smock.

Perfect, if Springfield had taken the hint.

I dressed in the changing cubicle and trashed my old stuff and paid the clerk fifty-nine dollars. Then I took her recommendation and moved on three blocks to a shoe store. I bought a pair of sturdy black lace-ups and a pair of black socks. Close to a hundred bucks. I heard my mother’s voice in my head, from long ago: *At a price like that, you better make them last. Don’t scuff them up*. I stepped out of the store and stamped down on the sidewalk a couple of times to settle the fit. I stopped in at a drugstore and bought a pair of generic white boxers. I figured that since everything else was new I should complete the ensemble.

Then I started back to the hotel.

Three paces later the phone in my pocket started to vibrate.

Chapter 70

I backed up against a building on the corner of 55th Street and pulled the phone out of my pocket. *Restricted Call*. I opened the phone and raised it to my ear.

Lila Hoth said, “Reacher?”

I said, “Yes?”

“I’m still standing out in the road. I’m still waiting for the truck to hit me.”

“It’s coming.”

“But when will it arrive?”

“You can sweat a spell. I’ll be with you inside a couple of days.”

“I can’t wait.”

“I know where you are.”

“Good. That will simplify things.”

“And I know where the memory stick is, too.”

“Again, good. We’ll keep you alive long enough for you to tell us. And then maybe a few more hours, just for the fun of it.”

“You’re a babe in the woods, Lila. You should have stayed home and tended your goats. You’re going to die and that photograph is going all around the world.”

“We have a fresh blank DVD,” she said. “The camera is charged up and ready for your starring role.”

“You talk too much, Lila.”

She didn’t answer.

I closed the phone and headed back through the gathering evening darkness to the hotel. I went up in the elevator and unlocked my room and sat down on the bed to wait. I waited for a long time. Close to four hours. I thought I was waiting for Springfield. But in the end it was Theresa Lee who showed up.

She knocked on the door eight minutes before midnight. I did the thing with the chain and the mirror again and let her in. She was dressed in a version of the first outfit I had ever seen her in. Pants, and a silk short-sleeve shirt. Untucked. Dark gray, not mid-gray. Less silvery. More serious.

She was carrying a black gymnasium bag. Ballistic nylon. The way it hung from her hand I guessed it held heavy items. The way the heavy items moved and clinked I guessed they were made of metal. She put the bag on the floor near the bathroom and asked, “Are you OK?”

“Are you?”

She nodded. “It’s like nothing ever happened. We’re all back on the job.”

“What’s in the bag?”

“I have no idea. A man I never saw before delivered it to the precinct.”

“Springfield?”

“No, the name he gave was Browning. He gave me the bag and said in the interests of crime prevention I should make sure you never got your hands on it.”

“But you brought it anyway?”

“I’m guarding it personally. Safer than leaving it around.”

“OK.”

“You would have to overpower me. And assaulting police officers is against the law.”

“True.”

She sat down on the bed. A yard from me. Maybe less.

She said, “We raided those three old buildings on 58th Street.”

“Springfield told you about them?”

“He said his name was Browning. Our counterterrorism people went in two hours ago. The Hoths aren’t there.”

“I know.”

“They were, but they aren’t anymore.”

“I know.”

“How do you know?”

“They turned in Leonid and his buddy. Therefore they’ve moved somewhere Leonid and his buddy don’t know. Layers upon layers.”

“Why did they turn in Leonid and his buddy?”

“To encourage the other thirteen. And to feed the machine. We’ll rough them up a little, the Arab media will call it torture, they’ll get ten new recruits. Net gain of eight. And Leonid and his pal are no big loss, anyway. They were hopeless.”

“Will the other thirteen be better?”

“Law of averages says yes.”

“Thirteen is an insane number.”

“Fifteen, including the Hoths themselves.”

“You shouldn’t do it.”

“Especially unarmed.”

She glanced at the bag. Then she looked back at me. “Can you find them?”

“What are they doing for money?”

“We can’t trace them that way. They stopped using credit cards and ATMs six days ago.”

“Which makes sense.”

“Which makes them hard to find.”

I asked, “Is Jacob Mark safely back in Jersey?”

“You think he shouldn’t be involved?”

“No.”

“But I should?”

“You are,” I said. “You brought me the bag.”

“I’m guarding it.”

“What else are your counterterrorism people doing?”

“Searching,” she said. “With the FBI and the Department of Defense. There are six hundred people on the street right now.”

“Where are they looking?”

“Anywhere bought or rented inside the last three months. The city is cooperating. Plus they’re inspecting hotel registers and business apartment leases and warehouse operations, across all five boroughs.”

“OK.”

“Word on the street is it’s all about a Pentagon file on a USB memory stick.”

“Close enough.”

“Do you know where it is?”

“Close enough.”

“Where is it?”

“Nowhere between Ninth Avenue and Park and 30th Street and 45th.”

“I suppose I deserve that.”

“You’ll figure it out.”

“Do you really know? Docherty figures you don’t. He figures you’re trying to bluff your way out of trouble.”

“Docherty is clearly a very cynical man.”

“Cynical or right?”

“I know where it is.”

“So go get it. Leave the Hoths for someone else.”

I didn’t answer that. Instead I said, “Do you spend time in the gym?”

“Not much,” she said. “Why?”

“I’m wondering how hard it would be to overpower you.”

“Not very,” she said.

I didn’t answer.

She asked, “When are you planning on setting out?”

“Two hours,” I said. “Then another two hours to find them, and attack at four in the morning. My favorite time. Something we learned from the Soviets. They had doctors working on it. People hit a low at four in the morning. It’s a universal truth.”

“You’re making that up.”

“I’m not.”

“You won’t find them in two hours.”

“I think I will.”

“The missing file is about Sansom, right?”

“Partially.”

“Does he know you’ve got it?”

“I haven’t got it. But I know where it is.”

“Does he know that?”

I nodded.

Lee said, “So you made a bargain with him. Get me and Docherty and Jacob Mark out of trouble, and you’ll lead him to it.”

“The bargain was designed to get myself out of trouble, first and foremost.”

“Didn’t work for you. You’re still on the hook with the feds.”

“It worked for me as far as the NYPD is concerned.”

“And it worked for the rest of us all around. For which I thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

She asked, “How are the Hoths planning to get out of the country?”

“I don’t think they are. I think that option disappeared a few days ago. I think they expected things to go more smoothly than they have. Now it’s about finishing the job, do or die.”

“Like a suicide mission?”

“That’s what they’re good at.”

“Which makes it worse for you.”

“If they like suicide, I’m happy to help.”

Lee moved on the bed and the tail of her shirt got trapped underneath her and the silk pulled tight over the shape of the gun on her hip. A Glock 17, I figured, in a pancake holster.

pancake holster.

I asked her, “Who knows you’re here?”

“Docherty,” she said.

“When is he expecting you back?”

“Tomorrow,” she said.

I said nothing.

She said, “What do you want to do right now?”

“Honest answer?”

“Please.”

“I want to unbutton your shirt.”

“You say that to a lot of police officers?”

“I used to. Police officers were all the people I knew.”

“Danger makes you horny?”

“Women make me horny.”

“All women?”

“No,” I said. “Not all women.”

She was quiet for a long moment and then she said, “Not a good idea.”

I said, “OK.”

“You’re taking no for an answer?”

“Aren’t I supposed to?”

She was quiet for another long moment and then she said, “I’ve changed my mind.”

“About what?”

“About it not being a good idea.”

“Excellent.”

“But I worked Vice for a year. Entrapment stings. We needed proof that that guy had a reasonable expectation of what he thought he was going to get. So we made him take his shirt off first. As proof of intent.”

“I could do that,” I said.

“I think you should.”

“You going to arrest me?”

“No.”

I peeled my new T-shirt off. Tossed it across the room. It landed on the table. Lee spent a moment staring at my scar, the same way Susan Mark had on the train. The awful raised tracery of stitches from the shrapnel from the truck bomb at the Beirut barracks. I let her look for a minute and then I said, “Your turn. With the shirt.”

She said, “I’m a traditional kind of girl.”

“What does that mean?”

“You would have to kiss me first.”

“I could do that,” I said. And I did. Slowly and gently and a little tentatively at first, in a way that felt exploratory, and in a way that gave me time to savor the new mouth, the new taste, the new teeth, the new tongue. It was all good. Then we passed some kind of a threshold and got into it harder. A short minute later we were completely out of control.

Afterward she showered, and then I showered. She dressed, and I dressed. She kissed me one more time, and told me to call her if I needed her, and wished me luck, and walked out through the door. She left the black bag on the floor near the bathroom.

Chapter 71

I hefted the bag over to the bed. About eight pounds, I figured. It hit the rucked sheet and made a satisfying metallic sound. I unzipped it and parted the flaps like a mouth and looked inside.

First thing I saw was a file folder.

It was legal-sized, and khaki in color, and made of thick paper or thin card, depending on your point of view. It held twenty-one printed-out sheets. Immigration records, for twenty-one separate people. Two women, nineteen men. Citizens of Turkmenistan. They had entered the United States from Tajikistan three months ago. Linked itineraries. There were digital photographs and digital fingerprints, from the immigration booths at JFK. The photographs had a slight fish-eye distortion. They were in color. I recognized Lila and Svetlana easily. And Leonid and his buddy. I didn't know the other seventeen. Four of them already had exit notations. They were the four who had left. I dropped their sheets in the trash and laid out the unknown thirteen on the bed for a better look.

All thirteen faces looked bored and tired. Local flights, connections, a long transatlantic flight, jet lag, a long wait in JFK's immigration hall. Sullen glances at the camera, faces held level, eyes swiveling up toward the lens. Which told me all thirteen were somewhat short in stature. I cross-checked with Leonid's sheet. His gaze was just as bored and tired as the others, but it was level. He was the tallest of the party. I checked Svetlana Hoth's sheet. She was the shortest. The others were all somewhere in between, small wiry Middle Eastern men worn down to bone and muscle and sinew by climate and diet and culture. I looked hard at them, one through thirteen, over and over again, until I had their expressions fixed firmly in my mind.

Then I turned back to the bag.

At the minimum I was hoping for a decent handgun. At best I was hoping for a short submachine gun. My point to Springfield about the baggy jacket was to

make him see that I would have room to carry something under it, slung high on my chest on a shortened strap and then concealed by the excess fabric zipped over it. I had hoped he would get the message.

He had. He had gotten the message. He had come through in fine style.

Better than the minimum.

Better even than the best case.

He had given me a *silenced* short submachine gun. A Heckler & Koch MP5SD. The suppressed version of the classic MP5. No butt or stock. Just a pistol grip, a trigger, a housing for a curved thirty-round magazine, and then a six-inch barrel radically fattened by a double-layered silencer casing. Nine-millimeter, fast, accurate, and quiet. A fine weapon. It was fitted with a black nylon strap. The strap had already been tightened up and reduced in length to its practical minimum. As if Springfield was saying, *I heard you, pal*.

I laid the gun on the bed.

He had supplied ammunition, too. It was right there in the bag. A single curved magazine. Thirty rounds. Short and fat, shiny brass cases winking in the light, polished lead noses nearly as bright. Nine-millimeter Parabellums. From the Latin motto *si vis pacem para bellum. If you wish for peace, prepare for war*. A wise saying. But thirty rounds was not a lot. Not against fifteen people. But New York City is not easy. Not for me, not for Springfield.

I lined up the magazine next to the gun.

Checked the bag again, in case there was more.

There wasn't.

But there was a bonus of a kind.

A knife.

A Benchmade 3300. A black machined handle. An auto-opening mechanism. Illegal in all fifty states unless you were active-service military or law enforcement, which I wasn't. I thumbed the release and the blade snicked out, fast and hard. A double-edged dagger with a spear point. Four inches long. I am

fast and hard. It double-edged dagger with a spear point. Four inches long. I am no kind of a knife fetishist. I don't have favorites. I don't really like any of them. But if you asked me to rely on one for combat, I would pick something close to what Springfield had supplied. The automatic mechanism, the point, the two-edged blade. Ambidextrous, good for stabbing, good for slashing either coming or going.

I closed it up and put it on the bed next to the H&K.

There were two final items in the bag. A single leather glove, black, sized and shaped for a large man's left hand. And a roll of black duct tape. I put them on the bed, in line with the gun and the magazine and the knife.

Thirty minutes later I was all dressed up and locked and loaded and riding south on the R train.

Chapter 72

The R train uses older cars with some front-and rear-facing seats. But I was on a side bench, all alone. It was two o'clock in the morning. There were three other passengers. I had my elbows on my knees and I was staring at myself in the glass opposite.

I was counting bullet points.

Inappropriate clothing, check. The windbreaker was zipped to my chin and looked way too hot and way too big on me. Under it the MP5's strap was looped around my neck and the gun itself was resting diagonally grip-high and barrel-low across my body and it didn't show at all.

A robotic walk: not immediately applicable with a seated suspect on public transportation.

Points three through six: irritability, sweating, tics, and nervous behavior. I was sweating, for sure, maybe a little more than the temperature and the jacket called for. I was feeling irritable too, maybe even a little more than usual. But I looked at myself hard in the glass and saw no tics. My eyes were steady and my face was composed. I saw no nervous behavior, either. But behavior is about external display. I was a little nervous inside. That was for damn sure.

Point seven: breathing. I wasn't panting. But I was prepared to accept that I was breathing a little harder and steadier than normal. Most of the time I am not aware of breathing at all. It just happens, automatically. An involuntary reflex, deep in the brain. But now I could feel a relentless in-through-the-nose, out-through-the-mouth rhythm. In, out, in, out. Like a machine. Like a man using equipment, underwater. I couldn't slow it down. I wasn't feeling much oxygen in the air. It was going in and coming out like an inert gas. Like argon or xenon. It wasn't doing me any good at all.

Point eight: a rigid forward stare. Check, but I excused myself because I was using it to assess all the other points. Or because it was a symbol of pure focus.

Or concentration. Normally I would be gazing around, and not rigidly.

Point nine: mumbled prayers. Not happening. I was still and silent. My mouth was closed and not moving at all. In fact my mouth was closed so hard my back teeth were hurting and the muscles in the corners of my jaw were standing out like golf balls.

Point ten: a large bag. Not present.

Point eleven: hands in the bag. Not relevant.

Point twelve: a fresh shave. Hadn't happened. I hadn't shaved for days.

So, six for twelve. I might or might not be a suicide bomber.

And I might or might not be a suicide. I stared at my reflection and thought back to my first sight of Susan Mark: *a woman heading for the end of her life, as surely and certainly as the train was heading for the end of the line*.

I took my elbows off my knees and sat back. I looked at my fellow passengers. Two men, one woman. Nothing special about any of them. The train rocked on south, with all its sounds. The rushing air, the clatter of expansion joints under the wheels, the scrape of the current collector, the whine of the motors, the squeals as the cars lurched one after the other through the long gentle curves. I looked back at myself in the dark window opposite and smiled.

Me against them.

Not the first time.

And not the last.

*

I got out at 34th Street and stayed in the station. Just sat in the heat on a wooden bench and walked myself through my theories one more time. I replayed Lila Hoth's history lesson from the days of the British Empire: *When contemplating an offensive, the very first thing you must plan is your inevitable retreat*. Had her superiors back home followed that excellent advice? I was betting not. For two reasons. First, fanaticism. Ideological organizations can't afford rational

considerations. Start thinking rationally, and the whole thing falls apart. And ideological organizations like to force their foot soldiers into no-way-out operations. To encourage persistence. The same way explosive belts are sewn together in back, not zippered or snapped.

And second, a plan for retreat carried with it the seeds of its own destruction. Inevitably. A third or a fourth or a fifth bolt-hole bought or rented three months ago would show up in the city records. Just-in-case reservations at hotels would show up, too. Same-day reservations would show up. Six hundred agents were combing the streets. I guessed they would find nothing at all, because the planners back in the hills would have anticipated their moves. They would have known that all trails would be exhausted as soon as the scent was caught. They would have known that by definition the only safe destination is an unplanned destination.

So now the Hoths were out in the cold. With their whole crew. Two women, thirteen men. They had quit their place on 58th Street and they were scuffling, and improvising, and crawling below the radar.

Which was exactly where I lived. They were in my world.

It takes one to find one.

I came up from under the ground into Herald Square, which is where Sixth Avenue and Broadway and 34th Street all meet. By day it's a zoo. Macy's is there. At night it's not deserted, but it's quiet. I walked south on Sixth and west on 33rd and came up along the flank of the faded old pile where I had bought my only uninterrupted night of the week. The MP5 was hard and heavy against my chest. The Hoths had only two choices: sleep on the street, or pay off a night porter. Manhattan has hundreds of hotels, but they break down quite easily into separate categories. Most of them are mid-market or better, where staffs are large and scams don't work. Most of the down-market dumps are small. And the Hoths had fifteen people to accommodate. Five rooms, minimum. To find five empty unobtrusive rooms called for a big place. With a bent night porter working alone. I know New York reasonably well. I can make sense of the city, especially from the kind of angles most normal people don't consider. And I can count the number of big old Manhattan hotels with bent night porters working alone on my thumbs. One was way west on 23rd Street. Far from the action, which was an advantage, but also a disadvantage. More of a disadvantage than

an advantage, overall.

Second choice, I figured.

I was standing right next to the only other option.

The clock in my head was ticking past two-thirty in the morning. I stood in the shadows and waited. I wanted to be neither early nor late. I wanted to time it right. Left and right I could see traffic heading up on Sixth and down on Seventh. Taxis, trucks, some civilians, some cop cars, some dark sedans. The cross-street itself was quiet.

At a quarter to three I pushed off the wall and turned the corner and walked to the hotel door.

Chapter 73

The same night porter was on duty. Alone. He was slumped on a chair behind the desk, staring morosely into space. There were fogged old mirrors in the lobby. My jacket was puffed out in front of me. I felt I could see the shape of the MP5's pistol grip and the curve of its magazine and the tip of its muzzle. But I knew what I was looking at. I assumed the night porter didn't.

I walked up to him and said, "Remember me?"

He didn't say yes. Didn't say no. Just gave a kind of all-purpose shrug that I took to be an invitation to open negotiations.

"I don't need a room," I said.

"So what do you need?"

I took five twenties out of my pocket. A hundred bucks. Most of what I had left. I fanned the bills so he could see all five double-digits and laid them on his counter.

I said, "I need to know the room numbers where you put the people who came in around midnight."

"What people?"

"Two women, thirteen men."

"Nobody came in around midnight."

"One of the women was a babe. Young. Bright blue eyes. Not easy to forget."

"Nobody came in."

"You sure?" "Nobody came in."

I pushed the five bills toward him. “You totally sure?” He pushed the bills right back.

He said, “I’d like to take your money, believe me. But nobody came in tonight.”

I didn’t take the subway. I walked instead. A calculated risk. It exposed me to however many of the six hundred federal agents happened to be in the vicinity, but I wanted my cell phone to work. I had concluded that cell phones don’t work in the subway. I had never seen anyone using one down there. Presumably not because of etiquette. Presumably because of a lack of signal. So I walked. I used 32nd Street to get over to Broadway, and then I followed Broadway south, past luggage outlets and junk jewelry stores and counterfeit perfume wholesalers, all of them closed up and shuttered for the night. It was dark down there, and messy. A micro-neighborhood. I could have been in Lagos, or Saigon.

I paused at the corner of 28th Street to let a taxi slide by.

The phone in my pocket started to vibrate.

I backed into 28th and sat down on a shadowed stoop and opened the phone.

Lila Hoth said, “Well?”

I said, “I can’t find you.”

“I know.”

“So I’ll deal.”

“You will?”

“How much cash have you got?”

“How much do you want?”

“All of it.”

“Have you got the stick?”

“I can tell you exactly where it is.”

“But you don’t actually have it?”

“No.”

“So what was the thing you showed us in the hotel?”

“A decoy.”

“Fifty thousand dollars.”

“A hundred.”

“I don’t have a hundred thousand dollars.”

I said, “You can’t get on a bus or a train or a plane. You can’t get out. You’re trapped, Lila. You’re going to die here. Don’t you want to die a success? Don’t you want to be able to send that coded e-mail home? Mission accomplished?”

“Seventy-five thousand.”

“A hundred.”

“OK, but only half tonight.”

“I don’t trust you.”

“You’ll have to.”

I said, “Seventy-five, all of it tonight.”

“Sixty.”

“Deal.”

“Where are you?”

“Way uptown,” I lied. “But I’m on the move. I’ll meet you in Union Square in forty minutes.”

“Where is that?”

“Broadway, between 14th Street and 17th.”

Broadway, between 14th Street and 17th.

“Is it safe?”

“Safe enough.”

“I’ll be there,” she said.

“Just you,” I said. “Alone.”

She clicked off.

I moved on two blocks to the north end of Madison Square Park and sat on a bench a yard from a homeless woman who had a shopping cart piled high like a dump truck. I fished in my pocket for Theresa Lee’s NYPD business card. I read it in the dim glow of a streetlight. I dialed her cell number. She answered after five rings.

“This is Reacher,” I said. “You told me to call you if I needed you.”

“What can I do for you?”

“Am I still off the hook with the NYPD?”

“Absolutely.”

“So tell your counterterrorism people that forty minutes from now I’ll be in Union Square and I’ll be approached by a minimum of two and a maximum of maybe six of Lila Hoth’s crew. Tell your guys they’re theirs for the taking. But tell them to leave me alone.”

“Descriptions?”

“You looked in the bag, right? Before you delivered it?”

“Of course.”

“Then you’ve seen their pictures.”

“Where in the square?”

“I’ll aim for the southwest corner.”

“So you found her?”

“First place I looked. She’s in a hotel. She paid off the night porter. And put a scare in him. He denied everything and called her room from the desk the minute I was out of the lobby.”

“How do you know?”

“Because she called me less than a minute later. I like coincidences as much as the next guy, but that kind of timing is too good to be true.”

“Why are you meeting with her crew?”

“I set up a deal with her. I told her to come alone. But she’ll double-cross me and send some of her people instead. It will help me if your guys grab them up. I don’t want to have to shoot them all.”

“Got a conscience?”

“No, I’ve got thirty rounds of ammunition. Which isn’t really enough. I need to parcel it out.”

*

Nine blocks later I entered Union Square. I walked all around it once and crossed it on both diagonals. Saw nothing that worried me. Just somnolent shapes on benches. One of New York City’s zero-dollar hotels. I sat down near the statue of Gandhi and waited for the rats to come out.

Chapter 74

Twenty minutes into my forty I saw the NYPD's counterterrorism squad begin to assemble. Good moves. They came in beat-up unmarked sedans and confiscated minivans full of dents and scrapes. I saw an off-duty taxicab park outside a coffee shop on 16th Street. I saw two guys climb out of the back and cross the road. Altogether I counted sixteen men, and I was prepared to accept that I had missed maybe four or five others. If I didn't know better I would have suspected that a long late session in a martial arts gym had just let out. All the guys were young and fit and bulky and moved like trained athletes. They were all carrying gym bags. They were all inappropriately dressed. They had on Yankees warm-up jackets, or dark windbreakers like mine, or thin fleece parkas, like it was already November. To hide their Kevlar vests, I guessed, and maybe their badges, which would be on chains around their necks.

None of them eyeballed me directly but I could tell they had spotted me and identified me. They formed up in ones and twos and threes all around me and then they stepped back in the dark and disappeared. They just melted into the scenery. Some sat on benches, some lay in nearby doorways, some went places I didn't see.

Good moves.

Thirty minutes into my forty I was feeling pretty optimistic.

Five minutes later, I wasn't.

Because the feds showed up.

Two more cars stopped, right on Union Square West. Black Crown Vics, waxed and bright and shiny. Eight men stepped out. I sensed the NYPD guys stirring. Sensed them staring through the dark, sensed them glancing at each other, sensed them asking, *Why the hell are those guys here?*

I was good with the NYPD. Not so, with the FBI and the Department of

Defense.

I glanced at Gandhi. He told me nothing at all.

I pulled out the phone again and hit the green button to bring up Theresa Lee's number. She was the last call I had made. I hit the green button again to dial. She answered immediately.

I said, "The feds are here. How did that happen?"

"Shit," she said. "Either they're monitoring our dispatcher or one of our guys is looking for a better job."

"Who takes precedence tonight?"

"They do. Always. You should get the hell out of there."

I closed the phone and put it back in my pocket. The eight guys from the Crown Vics stepped into the shadows. The square went quiet. There was a faulty letter in a lit-up sign to my left. It sputtered on and off at random intervals. I heard rats in the mulch behind me.

I waited.

Two minutes. Three.

Then thirty-nine minutes into my forty I sensed human movement far to my right. Footfalls, disturbed air, holes in the darkness. I watched and saw figures moving through shadows and dim light.

Seven men.

Which was good news. The more now, the fewer later.

And which was flattering. Lila was risking more than half her force, because she thought I would be hard to take.

All seven men were small, and neat, and wary. They were all dressed like me, in dark clothes baggy enough to conceal weapons. But they weren't going to shoot me. Lila's need to know was like body armor. They saw me and paused thirty yards away.

I sat still.

In theory this should have been the easy part. They approach me, the NYPD guys move in, I walk away and go about my business.

But not with the feds on the scene. At best they would want all of us. At worst they would want me more than them. I knew where the memory stick was. Lila's people didn't.

I sat still.

Thirty yards away the seven men separated. Two stood still, anchored half-right of my position. Two scooted left and looped around and headed for my other flank. Three walked on, to get around behind me.

I stood up. The two men on my right started to move in. The two on my left were halfway through their flanking maneuver. The three behind me were out of sight. I guessed the NYPD guys were already on their feet. I guessed the feds were moving too.

A fluid situation.

I ran.

Straight ahead, to the subway gazebo twenty feet in front of me. Down the stairs. I heard feet clattering after me. Loud echoes. A big crowd. Probably close to forty people, all strung out in a crazy Pied Piper chase.

I made it into a tiled corridor and out again into the underground plaza. No violinist this time. Just stale air and trash and one old guy pushing a broom with a threadbare head a yard wide. I ran past him and stopped and skidded on my new soles and changed direction and headed for the uptown R train. I jumped the turnstile and ran onto the platform and all the way to the end.

And stopped.

And turned.

Behind me three separate groups followed one after the other. First came Lila Hoth's seven men. They raced toward me. They saw I had nowhere to go. They

stopped. I saw looks of wolfish satisfaction on their faces. Then I saw their inevitable conclusion: too good to be true. Some thoughts are clear in any language. They turned suddenly and saw the NYPD counterterrorism squad hustling right behind them.

And right behind the NYPD guys were four of the eight federal agents.

No one else on the platform. No civilians. On the downtown platform opposite was a lone guy on a bench. Young. Maybe drunk. Maybe worse. He was staring across at the sudden commotion. It was twenty minutes to four in the morning. The guy looked dazed. Like he wasn't making much sense out of what he was seeing.

It looked like a gang war. But what he was actually seeing was a fast and efficient takedown by the NYPD. None of their guys stopped running. They all piled in yelling with weapons drawn and badges visible and they exploited their big physiques and their three-to-one numerical advantage and simply swamped the seven men. No contest. No contest at all. They clubbed all seven to the ground and threw them on their fronts and slammed cuffs on their wrists and hauled them away. No pauses. No delays. No Miranda warnings. Just maximum speed and brutality. Perfect tactics. Literally seconds later they were gone again. Echoes clattered and died. The station went quiet. The guy opposite was still staring but suddenly he was seeing nothing except a silent platform with me standing alone at one end and the four federal agents about thirty feet from me. Nothing between us. Nothing at all. Just harsh white light and empty space.

Nothing happened for the best part of a minute. Then across the tracks I saw the other four federal agents arrive on the downtown platform. They took up position directly opposite me and stood still. They all smiled a little, like they had made a smart move in a game of chess. Which they had. No point in more cross-track exploits. The four agents on my side were between me and the exit. At my back was a blank white wall and the mouth of the tunnel.

Checkmate.

I stood still. Breathed the tainted underground air and listened to the faint roar of ventilation and the rumble of distant trains elsewhere in the system.

The agent nearest me took a gun out from under his coat.

He took a step toward me.

He said, “Raise your hands.”

Chapter 75

Nighttime schedules. Twenty-minute gaps between trains. We had been down there maybe four minutes. Therefore arithmetically the maximum delay before the next train would be sixteen minutes. The minimum would be no delay at all.

The minimum delay didn't happen. The tunnel stayed dark and quiet.

"Raise your hands," the lead agent called again. He was a white man of about forty. Certainly ex-military. DoD, not FBI. Similar type to the three I had already met. But maybe a little older. Maybe a little wiser. Maybe a little better. Maybe this was an A-team, not a B-team.

"I'll shoot," the lead agent called. But he wouldn't. Empty threat. They wanted the memory stick. I knew where it was. They didn't.

Median delay before the next train, eight minutes. As likely to be more than less. The guy with the gun took another step forward. His three colleagues followed. Across the tracks the other four stood still. The young guy on the bench was watching, vacantly.

The tunnel stayed dark and quiet.

The lead agent said, "All this hassle could be over a minute from now. Just tell us where it is."

I said, "Where what is?"

"You know what."

"What hassle?"

"We're running out of patience. And you're missing one important factor."

"Which is?"

“Whatever intellectual gifts you have, they’re hardly likely to be unique. In fact they’re probably fairly ordinary. Which means that if you figured it out, we can figure it out too. Which means your continued existence would become surplus to requirements.”

“So go ahead,” I said. “Figure it out.”

He raised his gun higher and straighter. It was a Glock 17. Maybe twenty-five ounces fully loaded. By far the lightest service pistol on the market. Made partly from plastic. The guy had short, thick arms. He could probably hold the pose indefinitely.

“Last chance,” he said.

Across the tracks the young guy got off his bench and walked away. Long inconsistent strides, not entirely in a straight line. He was prepared to waste a two-dollar Metrocard swipe in exchange for a quiet life. He made it to the exit and disappeared from sight.

No witnesses.

Median delay before the next train, maybe six minutes.

I said, “I don’t know who you are.”

The guy said, “Federal agents.”

“Prove it.”

The guy kept his gun aimed at my center mass but nodded over his shoulder at the agent behind him, who stepped out and moved forward into the no-man’s-land between us. He paused there and put his hand in his inside jacket pocket and came back with a leather badge holder. He held it eye-height to me and let it fall open. There were two separate pieces of ID in it. I couldn’t read either one of them. They were too far away, and both of them were behind scratched plastic windows.

I stepped forward.

He stepped forward.

I got within four feet of him and saw a standard Defense Intelligence Agency ID in the upper window of the wallet. It looked genuine and it was in date. In the lower window was some kind of a warrant or commission that stated the holder was to be afforded every assistance because he was acting directly for the President of the United States.

“Very nice,” I said. “Beats working for a living.”

I stepped back.

He stepped back.

The lead agent said, “No different than you were doing, back in the day.”

“Back in prehistory,” I said.

“What is this, an ego thing?”

Median delay before the next train, five minutes.

“It’s a practical thing,” I said. “If you want something done properly, you do it yourself.”

The guy dropped the angle of his arm below the horizontal. Now he was aiming at my knees.

“I’ll shoot,” he said. “You don’t think or talk or remember with your legs.”

No witnesses.

If all else fails, start talking.

I asked, “Why do you want it?”

“Want what?”

“You know what.”

“National security.”

“Offense or defense?”

“Defense, of course. It would ruin our credibility. It would set us back years.”

“You think?”

“We know.”

I said, “Keep working on those intellectual gifts.”

He aimed his gun more precisely. At my left shin.

He said, “I’ll count to three.”

I said, “Good luck with that. Tell me if you get stuck along the way.”

He said, “One.”

Then: The rails hissed in the track bed next to me. Strange metallic harmonic sounds speeding ahead of a train way back in the tunnel. The harmonics were chased all the way by the push of hot air and a deeper rumbling. A curve in the tunnel wall was lit up by a headlight. Nothing happened for a long second. Then the train rushed into view, moving fast, canted over by the camber of the curve. It rocked and straightened and came on at speed and then the brakes bit down and moaned and shrieked and the train slowed and pulled in right alongside us, all bright shining stainless steel and hot light, hissing, grinding, and groaning.

An uptown R train.

Maybe fifteen cars, each one of them dotted with a small handful of passengers.

Witnesses.

I glanced back at the lead agent. His Glock was back under his coat.

We were at the north end of the platform. The R train uses older cars. Each car has four sets of doors. The lead car was halted right next to us. I was more or less in line with the first set of doors. The DoD guys were closer to sets three and four.

The doors opened, the whole length of the train.

Way down at the back end two people got out. They walked away and were

gone.

The doors stayed open.

I turned to face the train.

The DoD guys turned to face the train.

I stepped forward.

They stepped forward.

I stopped.

They stopped.

Choices: I could get on through door one, whereupon they would get on through doors three and four. Into the same car. We could ride together all night long. Or I could let the train go without me and spend a minimum twenty more minutes trapped with them on the same platform as before.

The doors stayed open.

I stepped forward.

They stepped forward.

I stepped into the car.

They stepped into the car.

I paused a beat and backed right out again. Back to the platform.

They backed out.

We all stood still.

The doors closed in front of me. Like a final curtain. The rubber bumpers thumped together.

I felt the draw of electricity in the air. Volts and amps. Massive demand. The motors spun up and whined. Five hundred tons of steel started to roll.

motors spun up and whined. Five hundred tons of steel started to roll.

The R train uses older cars. They have toe boards and rain gutters. I ducked forward and hooked my fingers into the gutter and jammed my right toes onto the board. Then my left. I flattened myself against the metal and the glass. I hugged the car's exterior curve like a starfish. The MP5 dug into my chest. I clung on, fingers and toes. The train moved. Breeze tugged at me. The hard edge of the tunnel came right at me. I held my breath and spread my hands and feet wider and ducked my head and laid my cheek against the glass. The train sucked me sideways into the tunnel with about six inches to spare. I glanced back past my locked elbow and saw the lead agent standing still on the platform, one hand in his hair, the other raising his Glock and then lowering it again.

Chapter 76

It was a nightmare ride. Incredible speed, howling blackness, battering noise, unseen obstructions hurtling straight at me, extreme physical violence. The whole train swayed and bounced and bucked and jerked and rocked under me. Every single expansion joint threatened to tear me loose. I dug all eight fingers hard into the shallow gutter and pressed upward with the balls of my thumbs and downward with my toes and held on desperately. Wind tore at my clothes. The door panels swayed and juddered. My head bounced against them like a jackhammer.

I rode nine blocks like that. Then we hit 23rd Street and the train braked hard. I was pitched forward against my left hand's grip and my right foot's resistance. I hung on tight and was carried sideways straight into the station's dazzling brightness at thirty miles an hour. The platform rushed past. I was clamped on the lead car like a limpet. It stopped right at the north end of the station. I arched my body and the doors slid open under me. I stepped inside and collapsed into the nearest seat.

Nine blocks. Maybe a minute. Enough to cure me of subway surfing for life.

There were three other passengers in my car. None of them even looked at me. The doors sucked shut. The train moved on.

*

I got out at Herald Square. Where 34th Street meets Broadway and Sixth. Ten to four in the morning. Still on schedule. I was twenty blocks and maybe four minutes north of where I got on the train in Union Square. Too far and too fast for organized DoD resistance. I came up from under the ground and walked east to west along Macy's imposing flank. Then I headed south on Seventh all the way to the door of Lila Hoth's chosen hotel.

The night porter was behind the counter. I didn't unzip my jacket for him. I didn't think it would be necessary. I just walked up to him and leaned over and

slapped him on the ear. He fell off his stool. I vaulted over the counter and caught him by the throat and hauled him upright.

I said, “Tell me the room numbers.”

And he did. Five separate rooms, not adjacent, all of them on the eighth floor. He told me which one the women were in. The men were spread out over the other four. Originally thirteen guys, and eight available beds. Five short straws.

Or five on sentry duty.

I took the roll of black duct tape out of my pocket and used about eight yards of it to bind the porter’s arms and legs. A dollar and a half from any hardware store, but as much a part of standard-issue Special Forces equipment as the thousand-dollar rifles and the satellite radios and the navigation systems. I stuck a final six-inch length across his mouth. I stole his pass card. Just tore it right off its curly cord. Then I left him out of sight on the floor behind the counter and headed for the elevator bank. Got in and pressed the highest number available, which was eleven. The doors slid shut and the car bore me upward.

At that point I unzipped my jacket.

I settled the gun at a nice angle on its strap and I took the leather glove out of my other pocket and slipped it on my left hand. The MP5SD has no fore grip. Not like the stubby K variant, which has a fat little handle under the muzzle. With the SD you use your right hand on the pistol grip and your left hand supports the barrel casing. The inner barrel has thirty holes drilled in it. The powder in the round neither burns nor explodes. It does both. It deflagrates. It creates a bubble of superheated gas. Some of the gas escapes through the thirty holes, which quiets the noise and slows the bullet to a subsonic velocity. No point in silencing a gun if its bullet is going to create a supersonic snap all its own. A slow bullet is a quiet bullet. Just like the VAL Silent Sniper. The escaping gas comes through the thirty holes and expands and swirls around in the inner silencer chamber. Then it passes to the second chamber and expands some more and swirls some more. Expanding cools the gas. Basic physics. But not by much. Maybe it reduces from superheated to extremely hot. And the outer barrel casing is metal. Hence the glove. No one uses an MP5SD without one. Springfield was the kind of guy who thinks of everything.

On the left side of the gun was a combined safety and fire selector switch. The

older versions of the SD that I remembered had a three-position lever. *S*, *E*, and *F*. *S* for safe, *E* for single shots, and *F* for automatic fire. German abbreviations, presumably. E for *ein*, or one, and so on and so forth, even though Heckler & Koch had been owned by a British corporation for many years. I guessed they decided that tradition counts. But Springfield had given me a newer model. The SD4. It had a four-position selector switch. No abbreviations. Just pictograms. For foreign convenience, or illiterate users. A plain white dot for safe, one little white bullet shape for single shots, three bullet shapes for three-round bursts, and a long string of bullet shapes for continuous automatic fire.

I chose three-round bursts. My favorite. One pull of the trigger, three nine-millimeter rounds inside a quarter of a second. An inevitable degree of muzzle climb, minimized by careful control and the weight of the silencer, resulting in a neat little stitch of three fatal wounds climbing a vertical line maybe an inch and a half high.

Works for me.

Thirty rounds. Ten bursts. Eight targets. One burst each, plus two left over for emergencies.

The elevator chimed open on the eleventh floor, and I heard Lila Hoth's voice in my head, talking about old campaigns long ago in the Korengal: *You must save the last bullet for yourself, because you do not want to be taken alive, especially by the women*.

I stepped out of the elevator into a silent corridor.

Standard tactical doctrine for any assault: Attack from the high ground. The eighth floor was three below me. Two ways down: stairs or elevator. I preferred the stairs, especially with a silenced weapon. The smart defensive tactic would be to put a man in the stairwell. Early warning for them. Easy pickings for me. He could be dealt with quietly and at leisure.

The stairwell had a battered door set next to the elevator core. I eased it open and started down. The stairs were dusty concrete. Each floor was marked with a large number painted by hand in green paint. I was quiet all the way down to nine. Supersilent after that. I paused and peered over the metal rail.

No sentry in the stairwell.

The landing inside the eighth floor door was empty. Which was a disappointment. It made the job on the other side of the door twenty-five percent harder. Five men in the corridor, not four. And the way the rooms were distributed meant that some of them would be on my left, and some on my right. Three and two, or two and three. A long second spent facing the wrong way, and then a crucial spin.

Not easy.

But it was four in the morning. The lowest ebb. A universal truth. The Soviets had studied it, with doctors.

I paused on the stairwell side of the door and took a deep breath. Then another. I put my gloved hand on the handle. I took the slack out of the MP5's trigger.

I pulled the door.

I held it at forty-five degrees with my foot. Cradled the MP5's barrel in my glove. Looked and listened. No sound. Nothing to see. I stepped into the corridor. Whipped one way. Whipped the other.

No one there.

No sentries, no guards, no nothing. Just a length of dirty matted carpet and dim yellow light and two rows of closed doors. Nothing to hear, except the subliminal hum and shudder of the city and muted faraway sirens.

I closed the stairwell door behind me.

I checked numbers and walked quickly to Lila's door. Put my ear on the crack and listened hard.

I heard nothing.

I waited. Five whole minutes. Ten. No sound. No one can stay still and silent longer than me.

I dipped the porter's pass card into the slot. A tiny light flashed red. Then green. There was a click. I smashed the handle down and was inside a split second later.

The room was empty.

The bathroom was empty.

There were signs of recent occupation. The toilet roll was loose and ragged. The sink was wet. A towel was used. The bed was rucked. The chairs were out of position.

I checked the other four rooms. All empty. All abandoned. Nothing left behind. No evidence pointing toward an imminent return.

Lila Hoth, one step ahead.

Jack Reacher, one step behind.

I took my glove off and zipped up again and rode down to the lobby. I hauled the night porter into a sitting position against the back of his counter and tore the tape off his mouth.

He said, “Don’t hit me again.”

I said, “Why shouldn’t I?”

“Not my fault,” he said. “I told you the truth. You asked what rooms I put them in. Past tense.”

“When did they leave?”

“About ten minutes after you came the first time.”

“You called them?”

“I had to, man.”

“Where did they go?”

“I have no idea.”

“What did they pay you?”

“A thousand,” he said.

“Not bad.”

“Per room.”

“Insane,” I said. Which it was. For that kind of money they could have gone back to the Four Seasons. Except they couldn’t. Which was the point.

I paused in the shadows on the Seventh Avenue sidewalk. *Where did they go?* But first, *how* did they go? Not in cars. On the way in they had fifteen people. They would have needed three cars, minimum. And faded old piles with night porters working alone don’t have valet parking.

Taxis? Possible, on the way in, late in the evening from midtown. Going out again, at three in the morning on Seventh Avenue? Eight people would have required at least two simultaneous empty cabs.

Unlikely.

Subway? Possible. Probable, even. There were three lines within a block’s walk. Nighttime schedules, a maximum twenty-minute wait on the platform, but then escape either uptown or downtown. But to where? Nowhere that needed a long walk at the other end. A gaggle of eight people hustling hard on the sidewalk was very noticeable. There were six hundred agents on the streets. The only other hotel option I knew was way west of even the Eighth Avenue line. A fifteen-minute walk, maybe more. Too big a risk of exposure.

So, the subway, but to where?

New York City. Three hundred and twenty square miles. Two hundred and five thousand acres. Eight million separate addresses. I stood there and sorted possibilities like a machine.

I drew a blank.

Then I smiled.

You talk too much, Lila.

I heard her voice in my head again. From the tea room at the Four Seasons. She was talking about the old Afghan fighters. Complaining about them, from her

pretended perspective. In reality she was boasting about her own people, and the Red Army's fruitless back-and-forth skirmishing against them. She had said: *The mujahideen were intelligent. They had a habit of doubling back to positions we had previously written off as abandoned*.

I set off back to Herald Square. To the R train. I could get out at Fifth and 59th. From there it was a short walk to the old buildings on 58th Street.

Chapter 77

The old buildings on 58th Street were all dark and quiet. Four-thirty in the morning, in a neighborhood that does little business before ten. I was watching from fifty yards away. From a shadowed doorway on the far sidewalk across Madison Avenue. There was crime-scene tape across the door with the single bell push. The left-hand building of the three. The one with the abandoned restaurant on the ground floor.

No lights in the windows.

No signs of activity.

The crime-scene tape looked unbroken. And inevitably it would have been accompanied by an official NYPD seal. A small rectangle of paper, glued across the gap between door and jamb, at keyhole height. It was probably still there, untorn.

Which meant there was a back door.

Which was likely, with a restaurant on the premises. Restaurants generate all kinds of unpleasant garbage. All day long. It smells, and it attracts rats. Not acceptable to pile it on the sidewalk. Better to dump it in sealed cans outside the kitchen door, and then wheel the cans to the curb for the nighttime pick-up.

I moved twenty yards south to widen my angle. Saw no open alleys. The buildings were all cheek-by-jowl, all along the block. Next to the door with the crime-scene tape was the old restaurant's window. But next to that was another door. Architecturally it was part of the restaurant building's neighbor. It was set into the ground floor of the next building along. But it was plain, it was black, it was unlabeled, it was a little scarred, it had no step, and it was a lot wider than a normal door. It had no handle on the outside. Just a keyhole. Without a key it opened only from the inside. I made a bet with myself that it let out of a covered alley. I figured that the restaurant's neighbor was two rooms wide on the ground floor, and three rooms wide above. At the second floor level the block was solid.

But below that, at street level, there were passageways leading to rear entrances, all of them discreetly boxed in and built over. Air rights in Manhattan are worth a fortune. The city sells itself up and down, as well as side to side.

I moved back to my shadowed doorway. I was counting time in my head. Forty-four minutes from the time Lila's guys had been due to grab me up. Maybe thirty-four from the time Lila had expected their mission-accomplished call. Maybe twenty-four from the time she had finally accepted that things had not gone well. Maybe fourteen from the time she had first been tempted to call me.

Lila, you talk too much.

I pressed back in the darkness and waited. The scene in front of me was absolutely deserted. Occasional cars or taxicabs on Madison. No traffic at all on 58th. No pedestrians anywhere. No dog walkers, no partygoers staggering home. Garbage collection was over. Bagel deliveries hadn't started.

The dead of night.

The city that doesn't sleep was at least resting comfortably.

I waited.

Three minutes later the phone in my pocket started to vibrate.

I kept my eyes on the restaurant building and opened the phone. Raised it to my ear and said, "Yes?"

She asked, "What happened?"

"You didn't show."

"Did you expect me to?"

"I didn't give it much thought."

"What happened to my people?"

"They're in the system."

"We can still deal."

“How? You can’t afford to lose any more men.”

“We can work something out.”

“OK. But the price just went up.”

“How much?”

“Seventy-five.”

“Where are you now?”

“Right outside your house.”

There was a pause.

There was movement at a window. Fourth floor, the left-hand of two. A darkened room. Faint, ghostly, barely perceptible from fifty yards.

Maybe the shift of a drape.

Maybe a white shirt.

Maybe imaginary.

She said, “No, you’re not outside my house.”

But she didn’t sound sure.

She said, “Where do you want to meet?”

I said, “What does it matter? You won’t show.”

“I’ll send someone.”

“You can’t afford to. You’re down to your last six guys.”

She started to say something, and stopped.

I said, “Times Square.”

“OK.”

“Tomorrow morning at ten.”

“Why?”

“I want people around.”

“That’s too late.”

“For what?”

“I want it now.”

“Tomorrow at ten. Take it or leave it.”

She said, “Stay on the line.”

“Why?”

“I have to count my money. To check that I have seventy-five.”

I unzipped my jacket.

I put my glove on.

I heard Lila Hoth, breathing.

Fifty yards away the black door opened. The covered alley. A man stepped out. Small, dark, wiry. And wary. He checked the sidewalk, left and right. He peered across the street.

I put the phone in my pocket. Still open. Still live.

I raised the MP5.

Submachine guns were developed for close-quarters combat, but many of them are as accurate as rifles out to medium ranges. Certainly the H&K was reliable out to at least a hundred yards. Mine was fitted with iron sights. I moved the selector lever to single shot and put the front sight square on the guy’s center mass.

Fifty yards away he stepped to the curb. Scanned right, scanned left, scanned ahead. He saw the same nothing I was seeing. Just cool air and a thin night mist.

He stepped back to the door.

A taxicab passed by in front of me.

Fifty yards away the guy pushed the door.

I waited until I judged his momentum was all set to move forward. Then I pulled the trigger and shot him in the back. Bull's-eye. A slow bullet. A perceptible delay. Fire, hit. The SD is advertised as silent. It isn't. It makes a sound. Louder than the polite little spit you would get in a movie. But not worse than the kind of thump you would get from dropping a phone book on a table from about a yard. Noticeable in any environment, but not remarkable in a city.

Fifty yards away the guy pitched forward and went down with his torso in the alley and his legs on the sidewalk. I put a second bullet into him for safety's sake and let the gun fall against its strap and took the phone back out of my pocket.

I said, "You still there?"

She said, "We're still counting."

You're one short, I thought.

I zipped my jacket. Started walking. I hugged the far side of Madison and overshot 58th by a couple of yards. I crossed the avenue and came around the corner with my shoulder tight against the frontage of the buildings. I needed to keep below her line of sight. I passed the first old building. Passed the second.

I said from forty feet below her, "I have to go now. I'm tired. Times Square, tomorrow morning at ten, OK?"

She answered from forty feet above me. She said, "OK, I'll send someone."

I clicked off and put the phone back in my pocket and dragged the dead guy all the way into the alley. I closed the door behind us, slowly and quietly.

Chapter 78

There was a light in the alley. A single dim bulb, in a dirty bulkhead fixture. I recognized the dead guy from the photographs in Springfield's Homeland Security folder. He had been number seven of the original nineteen. I didn't remember his name. I dragged him the length of the space. The floor was old concrete, worn to a shine. I searched him. Nothing in his pockets. No ID. No weapon. I left him by a small wheeled trash receptacle covered in baked-on grime so old it didn't smell anymore.

Then I found the inner door to the building, and unzipped my jacket, and waited. I wondered how long it would take for them to get worried about the missing guy. Less than five minutes, I figured. I wondered how many there would be in the search party. Just one, probably, but I hoped for more.

They waited seven minutes and sent two men. The inner door opened and the first guy stepped out. Number fourteen on Springfield's list. He took a pace toward the alley door and the second guy stepped out after him. Number eight on Springfield's list.

Then three things happened.

First, the first guy stopped. He saw that the alley door was closed. Which did not compute. It could not be opened from the outside without the key. Therefore the original searcher would have left it standing open while he prowled the sidewalk. But it was closed. Therefore the original searcher was already back inside.

The first guy turned around.

Second thing, the second guy also turned around. To close the inner door quietly and precisely. I let him get it done.

Then he raised his eyes and saw me.

The first guy saw me

The first guy saw me.

Third thing, I shot them both. Two three-round bursts, brief muted purring explosions each a quarter of a second long. I aimed for the base of their throats and let the muzzle climb stitch upward toward their chins. They were small men. Their necks were narrow and mostly full of arteries and spinal cords. Ideal targets. The noise of the gun was much louder in the roofed alley than it had been out in the open. Loud enough for me to worry about it. But the inner door was closed. And it was a stout piece of wood. Once upon a time it had been an outer door, before some earlier owner had sold his air rights.

The two guys went down.

My spent shell cases rattled away across the concrete.

I waited.

No immediate reaction.

Eight rounds gone. Twenty-two remaining. Seven men captured, three more down, three still walking and talking.

Plus the Hoths themselves.

I searched the new dead guys. No ID. No weapons. No keys, which meant the inner door wasn't locked.

I left the two new bodies next to the first one, in the shadow of the trash can.

Then I waited. I didn't expect anyone else to come through the door. Presumably the old Brits on the North West Frontier had eventually gotten wise about sending out rescue parties. Presumably the Red Army had. Presumably the Hoths knew their history. They ought to have. Svetlana had written some of it.

I waited.

The phone vibrated in my pocket.

I pulled it out and checked the window on the front. *Restricted Call*. Lila. I ignored her. I was all done talking. I put the phone back in my pocket. It stopped vibrating.

I put my gloved fingers on the inner door's handle. I eased it down. I felt the latch let go. I was fairly relaxed. Three men had gone out. Conceivable that any one of them might return. Or all three of them. If anyone was inside, watching and waiting, there would be a fatal split second of delay for recognition and a decision, friend or foe. Like a Major League batter sorting a fastball from a curveball. A fifth of a second, maybe more.

But no delay for me. Anyone I saw was my enemy.

Anyone at all.

I opened the door.

No one there.

I was looking at an empty room. The abandoned restaurant's kitchen. It was dark and dismantled. There were shells of old cabinets and gaps in the countertops where appliances had been hauled away to the secondhand stores on the Bowery. There were old pipes in the walls where once faucets had been attached. There were hooks in the ceiling, where once saucepans had hung. There was a large stone table in the center of the room. Cool, smooth, slightly dished from years of wear. Maybe once pastry had been rolled on it.

More recently Peter Molina had been murdered on it.

There was no doubt in my mind that it was the table I had seen in the DVD. No doubt at all. I could see where the camera must have been positioned. I could see where the lights had been set. I could see knots of frayed rope on the table legs, where Peter's wrists and ankles had been tied.

The phone vibrated in my pocket.

I ignored it.

I moved on.

There were two swinging doors leading to the dining room. One in, one out. Standard restaurant practice. No collisions. The doors had porthole windows set eye-high to an average man of fifty years ago. I ducked down and peered through. An empty room, large and rectangular. Nothing in it except a lone

orphan chair. Dust and rat shit on the floor. Yellow light coming in from the street through the big filthy window.

I pushed the out door with my foot. Its hinges yelped a little but it opened. I stepped into the dining room. Turned left and left again. Found a back hallway with restrooms. Two doors, labeled *Ladies* and *Gentlemen*. Brass signs, proper words. No pictograms. No stick figures in skirts or pants.

Plus two more doors, one in each of the side walls. Brass signs: *Private*. One would lead back to the kitchen. The other would lead to the stairwell, and the upper floors.

The phone vibrated in my pocket.

I ignored it.

Standard tactical doctrine for any assault: Attack from the high ground. Couldn't do it. Not an available option. Around the time the Israeli list was being written the SAS in Britain had been developing a tactic of rappelling off roofs into upper-story windows, or smashing through the roof tile itself, or blowing through directly from one adjacent attic to another. Fast, dramatic, and usually very successful. Nice work if you could get it. I couldn't. I was stuck with the pedestrian approach.

For the time being, at least.

I opened the stairwell door. It swept an arc through a tiny thirty-inch by thirty-inch ground floor hallway. Directly across from me, close enough to touch, was the door that led out to the residential entrance. To the street door with the single bell push and the crime-scene tape.

Directly out of the tiny hallway rose a single narrow staircase. It turned back on itself halfway up and rose the rest of the way to the second floor out of sight.

The phone vibrated in my pocket.

I pulled it out and checked it. *Restricted Call*. I put it back in my pocket. It stopped vibrating.

I started up the stairs.

Chapter 79

The safest way up the first half of a dog-legged staircase is to walk backward, looking upward, with your feet spread wide. Backward and looking upward, because if overhead resistance comes your way, you need to be facing it. Feet spread wide, because if stairs are going to creak, they're going to creak most in the middle and least at the edges.

I shuffled up like that to the halfway break and then sidled sideways and went up the second half going forward. I came out in a second floor hallway that was twice the size of the first floor version but still tiny. Thirty inches by sixty. One room to the left, one to the right, and two dead ahead. Doors all closed.

I stood still. If I was Lila I would have one guy in each of the two rooms dead ahead. I would have them listening hard with weapons drawn. I would have them ready to fling open their doors and start up two parallel fields of fire. They could get me going up or coming down. But I wasn't Lila and she wasn't me. I had no idea of her likely deployment. Except that as her numbers diminished I felt she would want to keep her remaining guys reasonably close. Which would put them on the third floor, not the second. Because the flutter I had seen had been at a fourth floor window.

At the fourth floor window on the left, to be precise, looking at the building from the outside. Which meant her room was the room on the right, looking at it from the inside. I doubted that there would be any significant difference in the floor plans as I went up. It was a cheap, utilitarian structure. No call for custom features. Therefore a walk through the second floor room on the right would be the same thing as a walk through Lila's room two floors above. It would give me the lie of the land.

I squeezed the slack out of the MP5's trigger and put my gloved fingers on the door handle. Pushed down. Felt the latch let go.

I opened the door.

An empty room.

In fact, an empty and part-demolished studio apartment. It was as deep as but half the width of the restaurant dining room below. A long, narrow space. A closet in back, a bathroom, a kitchenette, and a living area. I could see the layout at a single glance because all the dividing walls had been torn back to the studs. The bathroom fitments were all still there, odd and naked behind a vertical array of old two-by-twos, like ribs, like the spaced bars of a cage. The kitchen equipment was intact. The floors were pine boards, except for ragged-edged old-fashioned mosaic in the bathroom and linoleum tile in the kitchen. The whole place smelled of vermin and rotten plaster. The window over the street was black with soot. It was bisected diagonally by the bottom of the fire escape.

I walked quietly to the window. The fire escape was a standard design. A narrow iron ladder came down from the floor above and gave onto a narrow iron walkway under the windows themselves. Beyond the walkway a counterbalanced section lay ready to fold down toward the sidewalk under the weight of a fleeing person.

The window was a sash design. The lower pane was designed to slide upward inside the upper pane. Where the panes met they were locked together with a simple brass tongue in a slot. The lower pane had brass handles, like the ones you see on old file cabinets. The handles had been painted over many times. So had the window frames.

I undid the lock and put three fingers into each of the handles and heaved. The frame moved an inch, and stuck. I increased the pressure. I got close to the force I had used on the barred cages in the firehouse basement. The frame shuddered upward, an inch at a time, sticking on the left, sticking on the right, fighting me all the way. I got my shoulder under the bottom rail and straightened my legs. The frame moved another eight inches and jammed solid. I stepped back. Night air came in at me. Total gap, about twenty inches.

More than enough.

I got one leg out, bent at the waist, ducked through, got the other leg out.

The phone vibrated in my pocket.

I ignored it.

I went up the iron ladder, one slow quiet step after another. Halfway up my head was at the level of the third floor sills and I could see both front room windows.

Both had closed drapes. Old soot-colored cotton material behind soot-stained glass. No apparent light inside. No sounds. No evidence of activity. I turned and looked down at the street. No pedestrians. No passersby. No traffic.

I moved on upward. To the fourth story. Same result. Dirty glass, closed drapes. I paused a long time under the window where I had seen movement. Or imagined movement. I heard nothing and sensed nothing.

I moved up to the fifth floor. The fifth floor was different. No drapes. Empty rooms. The floors were stained and the ceilings sagged and bowed. Rainwater leaks.

The fifth floor windows were locked. The same simple brass tongue-and-slot mechanisms I had seen below, but there was nothing I could do about them without busting the glass. Which would make noise. Which I was prepared to do, but not yet. I wanted to time it right.

I hauled the strap around until the MP5 hung down my back and I got a foot up on the window sill. I stepped up and grabbed the crumbling cornice high above my head. I heaved myself over it. Not an elegant process. I am no kind of a graceful gymnast. I finished up panting and sprawled facedown on the roof with a face full of weeds. I lay there for a second to get my breath and then I got to my knees and looked around for a trapdoor. I found one about forty feet back, right above where I judged the stairwell hallway would be. It was a simple shallow upside-down wooden box sheathed in lead and hinged on one side. Presumably locked from below, probably with a hasp and a padlock. The padlock would be strong, but the hasp would be screwed into the frame, and the frame would be weak from age and rot and water damage.

No contest.

Standard tactical doctrine for any assault: Attack from the high ground.

Chapter 80

The lead sheath around the trapdoor lid had been beaten with felt hammers into gentle curves. No sharp corners. I got my gloved fingers under the edge opposite the hinge and yanked hard. No result. So I got serious. Two hands, eight fingers, bent legs, deep breath. I closed my eyes. I didn't want to think about Peter Molina. So instead I pictured Lila Hoth's insane smile at the camera right after she checked the Kabul taxi driver's departed pulse.

I jerked the lid.

And the night started to unravel, right there and then.

I had hoped that the hasp's screws would pull out of either the door or the frame. But they pulled out of both together. The padlock with the hasp still attached free-fell ten feet and thumped hard on the bare wooden floor below. A loud, emphatic, tympanic sound. Deep, resonant, and clear, followed immediately by the tinkle of the hasp itself and the patter of six separate screws.

Not good.

Not good at all.

I laid the trapdoor lid back and squatted on the roof and watched and listened.

Nothing happened for a second.

Then I heard a door open down on the fourth floor.

I aimed the MP5.

Nothing happened for another second. Then a head came into view up the stairs. Dark hair. A man. He had a gun in his hand. He saw the padlock on the floor. I saw the wheels turning in his head. *Padlock, floor, screws, vertical fall*. He peered upward. I saw his face. Number eleven on Springfield's list. He saw me.

The cloud above me was all lit up by the city's glow. I guessed I was silhouetted quite clearly. He hesitated. I didn't. I shot him more or less vertically through the top of his head. A burst of three. A triple tap. A brief muted purr. He went down with a loud clatter of shoes and hands and limbs, with two final big thumps as first the remains of his head and then his gun hit the boards. I watched the stairs for another long second and then vaulted through the open trapdoor and fell through the air and landed feetfirst next to the guy, which made another loud noise.

We were all through with secrecy.

Eleven rounds gone, nineteen remaining, four men down, two still up.

Plus the Hoths.

The phone vibrated in my pocket.

Not now, Lila.

I picked up the guy's gun and opened the door to the front room on the left and backed into the shadow. Rested my shoulder on the wall and looked out at the stairs.

No one came up.

Stalemate.

The gun I had taken from the dead guy was a Sig-Sauer P220, with a fat silencer on it. Swiss manufacture. Nine-millimeter Parabellum, nine rounds in a detachable box magazine. The same ammunition I was using. I thumbed the rounds out and dropped them loose into my pocket. I put the empty gun on the floor. Then I stepped back to the hallway and ducked into the front room on the right. It was bare and empty. I paced out the studio layout as I remembered it from below. Closet, bathroom, kitchen, living room. I made it to what I guessed was the center of the living room and stamped down hard. One man's ceiling is another man's floor. I figured Lila was directly below me, listening. I wanted to shake her up, way back in the lizard part of her brain. The scariest feeling of all. *There's something up there*.

I stamped again.

I got a response.

The response came in the form of a bullet smashing up through the boards three feet to my right. It tore a splintered hole and buried itself in the ceiling above me and left dust and traces of smoke in the air.

No gunshot. They all had silencers.

I fired back, a triple tap vertically downward, straight through the same hole. Then I stepped away to where I guessed their kitchen was.

Fourteen rounds gone. Sixteen remaining. Nine loose in my pocket.

Another shot came up through the floor. Seven feet from me. I fired back. They fired back. I fired back one more time and figured they were starting to understand the pattern, so I crept out to the hallway and the head of the stairs.

Where I found that they had been figuring exactly the same thing: that I was getting into the rhythm. A guy was sneaking up on me. Number two on Springfield's list. He had another Sig P220 in his hand. With a silencer. He saw me first. Fired once, and missed. I didn't. I put a triple tap into the bridge of his nose and it climbed to the middle of his forehead and blood and brain spattered on the wall behind him and he went back down where he had come from in a heap.

His gun went with him.

My spent brass tinkled away across the pine.

Twenty-three rounds gone. Seven left, plus nine loose.

One guy up, plus the Hoths themselves.

The phone vibrated in my pocket.

Too late for bargains, Lila.

I ignored her. I pictured her crouching one floor below. Svetlana at her side. One last guy between them and me. How would they use him? They weren't dumb. They were the heirs of a long and tough tradition. They had dodged and weaved

and feinted through the hills for two hundred years. They knew what they were doing. They wouldn't send the guy up the stairs. Not again. That was fruitless. They would try to outflank me. They would send the guy up the fire escape. They would distract me with the phone and let the guy line up through the glass and shoot me in the back.

When?

Either immediately or much later. No middle ground. They would want me either surprised or bored.

They chose immediately.

The phone vibrated in my pocket.

I stepped back into the left-hand room and checked the view. The iron ladder rose right-to-left from my perspective. I would see the guy's head as he came up from below. Which was good. But my angle wasn't good. The street was narrow. Nine-millimeter Parabellums are handgun rounds. They are considered suitable for urban environments. They are much more likely than a rifle round to stick in the target and go no farther. Subsonic Parabellums, more likely still. But nothing is guaranteed. And there were innocent non-combatants across the street. Bedroom windows, slumbering children. Through-and-through bull's-eyes could reach them. Wild deflections could reach them. And ricochets, or fragments. Certainly out-and-out misses could reach them.

Collateral damage, just waiting to happen.

I crept through the room and flattened myself against the window wall. Glanced out. Nothing there. I extended my arm and flipped the window latch. Tried the handles. The window was stuck. I glanced out again. Nothing there. I stepped in front of the glass and grabbed the handles and heaved. The window moved and stuck and moved again and then shot up in the frame and slammed open so hard the pane cracked end to end.

I backed up against the wall again.

Listened hard.

Heard the dull muted clang of rubber soles on iron. A steady little rhythm. He

was coming up fast, but he wasn't running. I let him come. I let him get all the way up. I let him get his head and shoulders in the room. Dark hair, dark skin. He was number fifteen on Springfield's list. I lined up parallel with the front wall of the building. He glanced left. He glanced right. He saw me. I pulled the trigger. A triple tap. He moved his head.

I missed. Maybe the first or the last of the three bullets tore his ear off but he stayed alive and conscious and fired back wildly and then ducked back outside. I heard him fall against the narrow iron walkway.

Now or never.

I went out after him. He was scrambling headfirst down the stairs. He made it back to the fourth floor and rolled on his back and raised his gun like it was a hundred-pound weight. I came down the ladder after him and leaned away from the building and stitched a triple tap into the center of his face. His gun spun and clanged end over end two floors down and lodged ten feet above the sidewalk.

I breathed in.

I breathed out.

Six men down. Seven arrested. Four back home. Two in a locked ward.

Nineteen for nineteen.

The fourth floor window was open. The drapes were drawn back. A studio apartment. Derelict, but not demolished. Lila and Svetlana Hoth were standing together behind the kitchenette counter.

Twenty-nine rounds gone.

One left.

I heard Lila's voice in my head again: *You must save the last bullet for yourself, because you do not want to be taken alive, especially by the women*.

I climbed over the sill and stepped into the room.

Chapter 81

The apartment was laid out the same as the ruined place on the second floor. Living room at the front, then the kitchenette, then the bathroom, then the closet in back. The walls were still up. The plaster was all still in place. There were two lights burning. There was a folded-up bed against the wall in the living room. Plus two hard chairs. Nothing else. The kitchenette had two parallel counters and one wall cupboard. A tiny space. Lila and Svetlana were crammed hip-to-hip in it. Svetlana on the left, Lila on the right. Svetlana was in a brown housedress. Lila was in black cargo pants and a white T-shirt. The shirt was cotton. The pants were made of rip-stop nylon. I guessed they would rustle as she moved. She looked as beautiful as ever. Long dark hair, bright blue eyes, perfect skin. A quizzical half-smile. It was a bizarre scene. Like a radical fashion photographer had posed his best model in a gritty urban setting.

I aimed the MP5. Black and wicked. It was hot. It stank of gunpowder and oil and smoke. I could smell it quite clearly.

I said, “Put your hands on the counter.”

They complied. Four hands appeared. Two brown and gnarled, two paler and slim. They spread them like starfish, two blunt and square, two longer and more delicate.

I said, “Step back and lean on them.”

They complied. It made them more immobile. Safer.

I said, “You’re not mother and daughter.”

Lila said, “No, we’re not.”

“So what are you?”

“Teacher and pupil.”

“Good. I wouldn’t want to shoot a daughter in front of her mother. Or a mother in front of her daughter.”

“But you would shoot a pupil in front of her teacher?”

“Maybe the teacher first.”

“So do it.”

I stood still.

Lila said, “If you mean it, this is where you do it.”

I watched their hands. Watched for tension, or effort, or moving tendons, or increased pressure on their fingertips. For signs they were about to go somewhere.

There were no such signs.

The phone vibrated in my pocket.

In the silent room it made a tiny sound. A whir, a hum, a grind. A rhythmic little pulse. It jumped and buzzed against my thigh.

I stared at Lila’s hands. Flat. Still. Empty. No phone.

She said, “Perhaps you should answer that.”

I juggled the MP5’s grip into my left hand and pulled out the phone. *Restricted Call*. I opened it and put it to my ear.

Theresa Lee said, “Reacher?”

I said, “What?”

“Where the hell have you been? I’ve been trying to call you for twenty minutes.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Where are you?”

“How did you get this number?”

How did you get this number?

“You called my cell, remember? Your number is in the call log.”

“Why is your number blocked?”

“Precinct switchboard. I’m on the landline now. Where the hell are you?”

“What’s up?”

“Listen carefully. You have bad information. Homeland Security got back to us again. One of the Tajikistan party missed a connection in Istanbul. He came in through London and Washington instead. There are twenty men, not nineteen.”

Lila Hoth moved and the twentieth man stepped out of the bathroom.

Chapter 82

Scientists measure time all the way down to the picosecond. A trillionth of a regular second. They figure all kinds of things can happen in that small interval. Universes can be born, particles can accelerate, atoms can be split. What happened to me in the first few picoseconds was a whole bunch of different things. First, I dropped the phone, still open, still live. By the time it was down level with my shoulder whole lines of conversation with Lila were screaming in my head. On the same phone, minutes ago, from Madison Avenue. I had said, *You're down to your last six guys*. She had started to reply, and then she had stopped. She had been about to say, *No, I've got seven*. Like earlier, when she had started to say, *That's not close to me*. The voiced dental fricative. But she had stopped herself. She had learned.

For once, she hadn't talked too much.

And I hadn't listened enough.

By the time the phone was down level with my waist I was focusing on the twentieth guy himself. He looked just like the previous four or five. He could have been their brother or their cousin, and probably was. Certainly he looked familiar. Small, sinewy, dark hair, lined skin, body language bridging wariness and aggression. He was dressed in a pair of dark knit sweatpants. A dark knit sweatshirt. He was right-handed. He was holding a silenced hand-gun. He was sweeping it through a long upward arc. He was aiming to bring it level. His finger was tightening on the trigger. He was going to shoot me in the chest.

I was holding the MP5 left-handed. The magazine was empty. The last round was already chambered. It had to count. I wanted to change hands. I didn't want to fire from my weaker side, under my weaker eye.

No choice. To change hands would take half a second. Five hundred billion picoseconds. Too long. The other guy's arm was nearly there. By the time the phone was down around my knees my right palm was slapping upward to meet the barrel. I was turning and straightening and tucking the grip back toward my

chest. My right palm stopped and cradled the barrel and my left index finger squeezed the trigger with exaggerated calm. Lila was moving on my left. She was stepping out into the room. My finger completed its squeeze and the gun fired and my last round hit the twentieth guy in the face.

The phone hit the floor. It sounded like the padlock. A loud wooden thump.

My last spent shell case ejected and rattled away across the room.

The twentieth guy went down in a clatter of limbs and head and gun, dead before he hit the boards, shot through the base of the brain.

A head shot. A hit. Not bad for my left hand. Except that I had been aiming for his center mass.

Lila kept on moving. Gliding, swooping, ducking down.

She came back up with the dead guy's gun. Another Sig P220, another silencer.

Swiss manufacture.

A nine-round detachable box magazine.

If Lila was scrambling for the gun, it was the only one in the apartment. In which case it had been fired at least three times, through the ceiling.

Maximum six rounds left.

Six versus zero.

Lila pointed the gun at me.

I pointed mine at her.

She said, "I'm faster."

I said, "You think?"

Way off to my left Svetlana said, "Your gun is empty."

I glanced at her. "You speak English?"

“Fairly well.”

“I reloaded upstairs.”

“Bullshit. I can see from here. You’re set to three-round bursts. But you fired only once. Therefore that was your last bullet.”

We stood like that for what seemed like a long time. The P220 was as steady as a rock in Lila’s hand. She was fifteen feet from me. Behind her the dead guy was leaking fluid all over the floor. Svetlana was in the kitchen. There were all kinds of smells in the air. There was a draft from the open window. Air was moving in and stirring through the room and funneling up the staircase and out through the hole in the roof.

Svetlana said, “Put your gun down.”

I said, “You want the memory stick.”

“You don’t have it.”

“But I know where it is.”

“So do we.”

I said nothing.

Svetlana said, “You don’t have it but you know where it is. Therefore you employed a deductive process. Do you think you are uniquely talented? Do you think that deductive processes are unavailable to others? We all share the same facts. We can all arrive at the same conclusions.”

I said nothing.

She said, “As soon as you told us you knew where it was, we set about thinking. You spurred us on. You talk too much, Reacher. You made yourself disposable.”

Lila said, “Put the gun down. Have a little dignity. Don’t stand there like an idiot, holding an empty gun.”

I stood still.

Lila dropped her arm maybe ten degrees and fired into the floor between my feet. She hit a spot level with and exactly equidistant between the toecaps of my shoes. Not an easy shot. She was a great markswoman. The floorboard splintered. I flinched a little. The Sig's silencer was louder than the H&K's. Like a phone book smashed down, not dropped. A wisp of wood smoke drifted upward, where the friction of the bullet had burned the pine. The spent shell case ejected in a brassy arc and tinkled away.

Five rounds left.

Lila said, "Put the gun down."

I looped the strap up over my head. Held the gun by the grip down by my side. It was no longer any use to me, except as a seven-pound metal club. And I doubted that I would get near enough to either one of them for a club to be effective. And if I did, I would prefer bare-knuckle hand-to-hand combat. A seven-pound metal club is good. But a two-hundred-fifty-pound human club is better.

Svetlana said, "Throw it over here. But carefully. If you hit one of us, you die."

I swung the gun slowly and let it go. It cartwheeled lazily through the air and bounced off its muzzle and clattered against the far wall.

Svetlana said, "Now take off your jacket."

Lila pointed her gun at my head.

I complied. I shrugged the jacket off and threw it across the room. It landed next to the MP5. Svetlana came out from behind the kitchen counter and rooted through the pockets. She found the nine loose Parabellum rounds and the part-used roll of duct tape. She stood the nine loose rounds upright on the counter, in a neat little line. She put the roll of tape next to it.

She said, "Glove."

I complied. I bit the glove off and tossed it after the jacket.

"Shoes and socks."

I hopped from foot to foot and leaned back against the wall to steady myself and

undid my laces and eased my shoes off and peeled my socks down. I threw them one after the other toward the pile.

Lila said, “Take your shirt off.”

I said, “I will if you will.”

She dropped her arm ten degrees and put another round into the floor between my feet. The bang of the silencer, the splintering wood, the smoke, the hard tinkle of the spent case.

Four left.

Lila said, “Next time I’ll shoot you in the leg.”

Svetlana said, “Your shirt.”

So for the second time in five hours I peeled my T-shirt off at a woman’s request. I kept my back against the wall and threw the shirt overhand into the pile. Lila and Svetlana spent a moment looking at my scars. They seemed to like them. Especially the shrapnel wound. The tip of Lila’s tongue came out, pink and moist and pointed between her lips.

Svetlana said, “Now your pants.”

I looked at Lila and said, “I think your gun is empty.”

She said, “It isn’t. I have four left. Two legs and two arms.”

Svetlana said, “Take your pants off.”

I unbuttoned. I unzipped. I pushed the stiff denim down. I stepped out. I kept my back against the wall and kicked the pants toward the pile. Svetlana picked them up. Went through the pockets. Made a pile of my possessions on the kitchen counter next to the nine loose rounds and the roll of tape. My cash, plus a few coins. My old expired passport. My ATM card. My subway card. Theresa Lee’s NYPD business card. And my clip-together toothbrush.

“Not much,” Svetlana said.

“Everything I need,” I said. “Nothing I don’t.”

“You’re a poor man.”

“No, I’m a rich man. To have everything you need is the definition of affluence.”

“The American dream, then. To die rich.”

“Opportunity for all.”

“We have more than you, where we come from.”

“I don’t like goats.”

The room went quiet. It felt damp and cold. I stood there in nothing except my new white boxers. The P220 was rock steady in Lila’s hand. Muscles like thin cords stood out in her arm. Next to the bathroom the dead guy continued to leak. Outside the window it was five o’clock in the morning and the city was starting to stir.

Svetlana bustled about and balled up my gun and my shoes and my clothes into a tidy bundle and threw it behind the kitchen counter. She followed it with the two hard chairs. She picked up my phone, and shut it off, and tossed it away. She was clearing the space. She was emptying it. The living room part of the studio was about twenty feet by twelve. I was backed up against the center of one of the long walls. Lila tracked around in front of me, keeping her distance, pointing the gun. She stopped in the far corner, by the window. Now she was facing me at a shallow angle.

Svetlana went into the kitchen. I heard a drawer rattle open. Heard it close. Saw Svetlana come back.

With two knives.

They were long butcher’s tools. For gutting or filleting or boning. They had black handles. Steel blades. Wicked wafer-thin cutting edges. Svetlana threw one of them to Lila. She caught it expertly by the handle with her free hand. Svetlana moved to the corner opposite her. They had me triangulated. Lila was forty-five degrees to my left, Svetlana was forty-five degrees to my right.

Lila twisted her upper body and jammed the P220’s silencer hard into the angle

Lila twisted her upper body and jammed the P220's slide-rear hard into the angle where the front wall met the side. She found the catch at the heel of the butt with her thumb and dropped the magazine. It fell out and hit the floor in the corner of the room. Three rounds showed in the slot. Therefore one was still chambered. She threw the gun itself into the other corner, behind Svetlana. The gun and the magazine were now twenty feet apart, one behind one woman, and the other behind the other.

"Like a treasure hunt," Lila said. "The gun won't fire without the magazine in place. To prevent an accidental discharge if a round is mistakenly left in the chamber. The Swiss are very cautious people. So you need to pick up the gun, and then pick up the magazine. Or vice versa. But first, of course, you need to get past us."

I said nothing.

She said, "If you should succeed, in a mad wounded scramble, then I recommend you use the first round on yourself."

And then she smiled, and stepped forward a pace. Svetlana did the same. They held their knives low, fingers below the handle, thumbs above. Like street fighters. Like experts.

The long blades winked in the light.

I stood still.

Lila said, "We're going to enjoy this more than you could possibly imagine."

I did nothing.

Lila said, "A delay is good. It heightens the anticipation."

I stood still.

Lila said, "But if we get bored waiting, we'll come and get you."

I said nothing. Stood still.

Then I reached behind me and came out with my Benchmade 3300, from where it had been duct-taped to the small of my back.

Chapter 83

I thumbed the release and the blade snapped out with a sound that was halfway between a click and a thump. A loud sound, in the silent room. And an unhappy sound. I don't like knives. I never have. I have no real talent with them.

But I have as much of an instinct for self-preservation as any guy.

Maybe more than most.

And by that point I had been scuffling since the age of five, and all of my defeats had been minor. And I'm the kind of guy who watches and learns. I had seen knife fights all over the world. The Far East, Europe, the hardscrabble scrublands outside army bases in the southern United States, in streets, in alleys, outside bars and pool halls.

First rule: Don't get cut early. Nothing weakens you faster than blood loss.

Svetlana was more than a foot shorter than me and she was thick and wide and her arms were proportional. Lila was taller, more loose-limbed, more graceful. But all in all I figured that even against blades six inches longer than mine, I still had the advantage.

Plus I had just changed the game, and they were still dealing with the surprise.

Plus they were fighting for fun, and I was fighting for my life.

I wanted to get to the kitchen, so I danced toward Svetlana, who was between me and it. She was up on her toes, knife down at her knees, feinting left, feinting right. I kept my blade down low, to match hers. She swung. I arched back. Her blade hissed past my thigh. I jammed my ass back and my shoulders forward and clubbed her with an overarm left hook. It grazed her eyebrow and then caught her full on the side of the nose.

She looked astonished. Like most knife fighters she thought it was all about the steel. She forgot that people have two hands.

steel. She forgot that people have two hands.

She rocked back on her heels and Lila came in from my left. Blade low. Darting, jabbing. Mouth open in an ugly grimace. Concentrating hard. She understood. This was no longer a game. No longer fun. She ducked in, she ducked out, feinting, backing off, always working. For a time we all danced like that. Frantic, breathless, abrupt abbreviated movements, dust and sweat and fear in the air, their eyes locked on my blade, mine switching constantly between theirs.

Svetlana stepped in. Stepped out. Lila came at me, balanced, up on her toes. I kept my hips back and my shoulders forward. I swung my blade hard for Lila's face. Huge. Convulsive. Like I was aiming to throw a ball four hundred feet. Lila ducked back. She knew the swing was going to miss, because she was going to make it miss. Svetlana knew it was going to miss, because she trusted Lila.

I knew it was going to miss, because I planned not to let it hit.

I stopped the violent maneuver halfway through and reversed direction and aimed a vicious surprise backhand straight at Svetlana. I sliced her forehead. A solid blow. I felt the blade hit bone. A lock of her hair hit her chest. The Benchmade worked exactly the way it should. D2 steel. You could have dropped a ten-dollar bill on it and gotten two fives in exchange. I put a six-inch horizontal gash halfway between Svetlana's hairline and her eyebrows. Open to the bone.

She rocked back and stood still.

No pain. Not yet.

Forehead cuts are never fatal. But they bleed a lot. Within seconds blood was sheeting down into her eyes. Blinding her. If I had been wearing shoes I could have killed her there and then. Bring her down with a blow to the knees, and then kick her head to pulp. But I wasn't about to risk the bones in my feet against her fireplug body. Lack of mobility would have killed me just as fast.

I danced back.

Lila came straight after me.

I kept my hips back and dodged the hissing arc of her blade. Left, right. I hit the wall behind me. I timed it and waited until her arm was across her body and turned sideways and shoulder-charged her and bounced her away. I spun onward

to where Svetlana was tottering around and trying to wipe the pouring blood from her eyes. I swatted her knife arm away and stepped in and nicked her neck above her collar bone and dodged back out.

Then Lila cut me.

She had figured out the reach issue. She was holding her knife in her fingertips way at the end of the handle. She lunged in. Her hair was flying. Her shoulders were hunched forward. She was looking for every half-inch of advantage she could get. She stopped on a stiff front leg and bent low and leaned in and slashed wildly at my stomach.

And hit it.

A bad cut. A wild swing, a strong arm, a razor-sharp blade. Very bad. It was a long diagonal slice below my navel and above the waistband of my boxers. No pain. Not yet. Just a brief strange signal from my skin, telling me it was no longer all connected together.

I paused a beat. Disbelief. Then I did what I always do when someone hurts me. I stepped in, not away. Her momentum had carried her knife beyond my hip. My blade was low. I slashed backhand at her thigh and cut her deep and then pushed off my back foot and hit her in the face with my left fist. Bull's-eye. A major, stunning blow. She spun away and I barged on toward Svetlana. Her face was a mask of blood. She swung her blade right. Then left. She opened up. I stepped in and slashed down on the inside of her right forearm. I cut her to the bone. Veins, tendons, ligaments. She howled. Not from pain. That would come later. Or not. She howled from fear, because she was done. Her arm was useless. I spun her around with a blow to the shoulder and stabbed her in the kidney. All four inches, with a savage sideways jerk. Safe to do. No ribs in that region. No chance of hitting bone and jamming the blade. Lots of blood flows through the kidneys. All kinds of arteries. Ask any dialysis patient. All of a person's blood passes through the kidneys many times a day. Pints of it. Gallons of it. Now in Svetlana's case it was going in and it wasn't coming back out.

She went down to her knees. Lila was trying to clear her head. Her nose was broken. Her flawless face was ruined. She charged me. I feinted left and moved right. We danced around Svetlana's kneeling form. A whole circle. I got back to where I had started and ducked away to the kitchenette. Stepped between the counters. Grabbed one of the hard chairs that Svetlana had piled there. I threw it

left-handed at Lila. She ducked away and hunched and it smashed against her back.

I came out of the kitchen and stepped behind Svetlana and put a hand in her hair and hauled her head back. Leaned around and cut her throat. Ear to ear. Hard work, even with the Benchmade's great blade. I had to pull and tug and saw. Muscle, fat, hard flesh, ligaments. The steel scraped across bone. Weird tubercular sounds came up at me out of her severed windpipe. Wheezing and gasping. There were fountains of blood as her arteries went. It pulsed and sprayed way out in front of her. It hit the far wall. It soaked my hand and made it slippery. I let go of her hair and she pitched forward. Her face hit the boards with a thump.

I stepped away, panting.

Lila faced me, panting.

The room felt burning hot and it smelled of coppery blood.

I said, "One down."

She said, "One still up."

I nodded. "Looks like the pupil was better than the teacher."

She said, "Who says I was the pupil?"

Her thigh was bleeding badly. There was a neat slice in the black nylon of her pants and blood was running down her leg. Her shoe was already soaked. My boxers were soaked. They had turned from white to red. I looked down and saw blood welling out of me. A lot of it. It was bad. But my old scar had saved me. My shrapnel wound, from Beirut, long ago. The ridged white skin from the clumsy MASH stitches was tough and gnarled and it had slowed Lila's blade and deflected it shallower. Without it the tail of the cut would have been much longer and deeper. For years I had resented the hasty work by the emergency surgeons. Now I was grateful for it.

Lila's busted nose started to bleed. The blood ran down to her mouth and she coughed and spat. Looked down at the floor. Saw Svetlana's knife. It was mired in a spreading pool of blood. The blood was already thickening. It was soaking

into the old boards. It was running into the cracks between them. Lila's left arm moved. Then it stopped. To bend down and pick up Svetlana's knife would make her vulnerable. Likewise for me. I was five feet from the P220. She was five feet from the magazine.

The pain started. My head spun and buzzed. My blood pressure was falling.

Lila said, "If you ask nicely I'll let you walk away."

"I'm not asking."

"You can't win."

"Dream on."

"I'm prepared to fight to the death."

"You don't have a choice in the matter. That decision has already been made."

"You could kill a woman?"

"I just did."

"One like me?"

"Especially one like you."

She spat again and breathed hard through her mouth. She coughed. She looked down at her leg. She nodded and said, "OK." She looked up at me with her amazing eyes.

I stood still.

She said, "If you mean it, this is where you do it."

I nodded. I meant it. So I did it. I was weak, but it was easy. Her leg was slowing her down. She was having trouble with her breathing. Her sinuses were smashed. Blood was pooling in the back of her throat. She was dazed and dizzy, from when I had hit her. I took the second chair from the kitchen and charged her with it. Now my reach was unbeatable. I backed her into the corner with it and hit her with it twice until she dropped her knife and fell. I sat down beside her and

strangled her. Slowly, because I was fading fast. But I didn't want to use the blade. I don't like knives.

Afterward I crawled back to the kitchen and rinsed the Benchmade under the tap. Then I used its dagger point to cut butterfly shapes out of the black duct tape. I pinched my wound together with my fingers and used the butterflies to hold it together. A dollar and a half. Any hardware store. Essential equipment. I struggled back into my clothes. I reloaded my pockets. I put my shoes back on.

Then I sat down on the floor. Just for a minute. But it turned out longer. A medical man would say I passed out. I prefer to think I just went to sleep.

Chapter 84

I woke up in a hospital bed. I was wearing a paper gown. The clock in my head told me it was four in the afternoon. Ten hours. The taste in my mouth told me most of them had been chemically assisted. I had a clip on my finger. It had a wire. The wire must have been connected to a nurses' station. The clip must have detected some kind of an altered heartbeat pattern, because about a minute after I woke up a whole bunch of people came in. A doctor, a nurse, then Jacob Mark, then Theresa Lee, then Springfield, then Sansom. The doctor was a woman and the nurse was a man.

The doctor fussed around for a minute, checking charts and staring at monitors. Then she picked up my wrist and checked my pulse, which seemed a little superfluous with all the high technology at her disposal. Then in answer to questions I hadn't asked, she told me I was in Bellevue Hospital and that my condition was very satisfactory. Her ER people had cleaned the wound and sutured it and filled me full of antibiotics and tetanus injections and given me three units of blood. She told me to avoid heavy lifting for a month. Then she left. The nurse went with her.

I looked at Theresa Lee and asked, "What happened to me?"

"You don't remember?"

"Of course I remember. But what's the official version?"

"You were found on the street in the East Village. Unexplained knife wound. Happens all the time. They ran a tox screen and found traces of barbiturate. They put you down as a dope deal gone bad."

"Did they tell the cops?"

"I am the cops."

"How did I get to the East Village?"

“You didn’t. We brought you straight here.”

“We?”

“Me and Mr. Springfield.”

“How did you find me?”

“We triangulated the cell phone. Which led us to the general area. The exact address was Mr. Springfield’s idea.”

Springfield said, “A certain mujahideen leader told us all about doubling back to abandoned hideouts twenty-five years ago.”

I asked, “Is there going to be any comeback?”

John Sansom said, “No.”

Simple as that.

I said, “Are you sure? There are nine corpses in that house.”

“The DoD guys are there right now. They’ll issue a loud no comment. With a knowing smirk. Designed to make everyone give them the credit.”

“Suppose the wind changes direction? That happens from time to time. As you know.”

“As a crime scene, it’s a mess.”

“I left blood there.”

“There’s a lot of blood there. It’s an old building. If anyone runs tests they’ll come up with rat DNA, mostly.”

“There’s blood on my clothes.”

Theresa Lee said, “The hospital burned your clothes.”

“Why?”

“Biohazard.”

Biohazard.

“They were brand-new.”

“They were soaked with blood. No one takes a risk with blood anymore.”

“Right-hand fingerprints,” I said. “Inside the window handles and on the trapdoor.”

“Old building,” Sansom said. “It will be torn down and redeveloped before the wind changes.”

“Shell cases,” I said.

Springfield said, “Standard DoD issue. I’m sure they’re delighted. They’ll probably leak one to the media.”

“Are they still looking for me?”

“They can’t. It would confuse the narrative.”

“Turf wars,” I said.

“Which they just won, apparently.”

I nodded.

Sansom asked, “Where is the memory stick?”

I looked at Jacob Mark. “You OK?”

He said, “Not really.”

I said, “You’re going to have to hear some stuff.”

He said, “OK.”

I hauled myself into a sitting position. Didn’t hurt at all. I guessed I was full of painkiller. I pulled my knees up and tented the sheet and moved the hem of my paper gown and took a peek at the cut. Couldn’t see it. I was wrapped with bandages from my hips to my ribcage.

Sansom said, “You told us you could get us within fifteen feet.”

I shook my head. “Not anymore. Time has moved on. We’re going to have to do it by dead reckoning.”

“Great. You were bullshitting all along. You don’t know where it is.”

“We know the general shape of it,” I said. “They planned for the best part of three months and then executed during the final week. They coerced Susan by using Peter as leverage. She drove up from Annandale, got stuck in a four-hour traffic jam, say from nine in the evening until one in the morning, and then she arrived in Manhattan just before two in the morning. I assume we know exactly when she came out of the Holland Tunnel. So what we have to do is work backward and figure out exactly where her car was jammed up at midnight.”

“How does that help us?”

“Because at midnight she threw the memory stick out her car window.”

“How can you possibly know that?”

“Because when she arrived she didn’t have a cell phone with her.”

Sansom glanced at Lee. Lee nodded. Said, “Keys and a wallet. That was all. Not in her car, either. The FBI inventoried the contents.”

Sansom said, “Not everyone uses a cell phone.”

“True,” I said. “And I’m that guy. The only guy in the world without a cell phone. Certainly a person like Susan would have had one.”

Jacob Mark said, “She had one.”

Sansom said, “So?”

“The Hoths set a deadline. Almost certainly midnight. Susan didn’t show, the Hoths went to work. They made a threat, and they carried it out. And they proved it. They phoned through a cell phone picture. Maybe a live video clip. Peter on the slab, that long first cut. Susan’s life changed, effectively, on the stroke of midnight. She was helpless in a traffic jam. The phone in her hand was suddenly appalling and repugnant. She threw it out the window. Followed it with

the memory stick, which was the symbol of all her troubles. They're both still there, in the trash on the side of I-95. No other explanation."

Nobody spoke.

I said, "The median, probably. Subconsciously Susan would have put herself in the overtaking lane, because she was in a hurry. We could have triangulated the cell phone, but I think it's too late now. The battery will be dead."

Silence in the room. A whole minute. Just the hum and beep of medical equipment.

Sansom said, "That's insane. The Hoths must have known they were losing control of the stick as soon as they phoned the picture through. They were giving up their leverage. Susan could have driven straight to the police."

"Two answers," I said. "The Hoths *were* insane, in a way. They were fundamentalists. They could act the part in public, but underneath it was all black and white for them. No nuance. A threat was a threat. Midnight was midnight. But anyway, their risk was minimal. They had a guy tailing Susan all the way. He could have stopped her going off message."

"Who?"

"The twentieth guy. I don't think going to Washington was a mistake. It wasn't a missed connection in Istanbul. It was a last-minute change of plan. They suddenly realized that for a thing like this they needed someone on the ground in D.C. Or across the river, more likely, in one of the Pentagon dormitories. So the twentieth guy went straight there. Then he followed Susan all the way up. Five or ten cars back, like you do. Which was fine, until the traffic jammed up. Five or ten cars back in a traffic jam is as bad as a mile. All boxed in, maybe a big SUV in front of you, blocking the view. He didn't see what happened. But he stayed with her. He was on the train, wearing an NBA shirt. I thought he looked familiar, when I saw him again. But I couldn't confirm it, because I shot him in the face a split second later. He got all messed up."

More silence. Then Sansom asked, "So where was Susan at midnight?"

I said, "You figure it out. Time, distance, average speed. Get a map and a ruler and paper and pencil."

Jacob Mark was from Jersey. He started talking about Troopers he knew. About how the Troopers could help. They patrolled I-95 night and day. They knew it like the backs of their hands. They had traffic cameras. Their recorded pictures could calibrate the paper calculations. The highway department would cooperate. Everyone got into a big conversation. They paid me no more attention. I lay back on my pillow and they all started edging out of the room. Last out was Springfield. He paused in the doorway and looked back and asked, "How do you feel about Lila Hoth?"

I said, "I feel fine."

"Really? I wouldn't. You nearly got taken down by two girls. It was sloppy work. Things like that, you do them properly or not at all."

"I didn't have much ammunition."

"You had thirty rounds. You should have used single shots. Those triple taps were all about anger. You let emotion get in the way. I warned you about that."

He looked at me for a long second with nothing in his face. Then he stepped out to the corridor and I never saw him again.

Theresa Lee came back two hours later. She had a shopping bag with her. She told me the hospital wanted its bed, so the NYPD was putting me in a hotel. She had bought clothes for me. She showed me. Shoes, socks, jeans, boxers, and a shirt, all sized the same as the items the ER staff had burned. The shoes and the socks and the jeans and the boxers were fine. The shirt was weird. It was made of soft, worn white cotton. It was almost furry, down at a microscopic level. It was long-sleeved and tight. It had three buttons at the neck. It was like an old-fashioned undershirt. I was going to look like my grandfather. Or like a gold miner in California, way back in 1849.

"Thank you," I said.

She told me the others were working on the math problem. She told me they were arguing about the route Susan would have used from the Turnpike to the Holland Tunnel. Locals used shortcuts through surface streets that looked wrong according to the road signs.

I said, "Susan wasn't a local."

She agreed. She felt that Susan would have used the obvious signposted route.

Then she said, “They won’t find the picture, you know.”

I said, “You think?”

“Oh, they’ll find the stick, for sure. But they’ll say it was unreadable, or run over and damaged or broken, or there was nothing sinister on it after all.”

I didn’t answer.

“Count on it,” she said. “I know politicians, and I know the government.”

Then she asked, “How do you feel about Lila Hoth?”

I said, “All in all I’m regretting the approach on the train. With Susan. I wish I had given her a couple more stops.”

“I was wrong. She couldn’t possibly have gotten over it.”

“The opposite,” I said. “Was there a sock in her car?”

Lee thought back to the FBI inventory. Nodded.

“Clean?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“So think about Susan setting out. She’s living a nightmare. But she’s not sure exactly how bad it is. She can’t bring herself to believe it’s as bad as she suspects. Maybe it’s all a sick joke or an empty threat. Or a bluff. But she’s not sure. She’s dressed in what she wore for work. Black pants, white blouse. She’s heading for an unknown situation in the big bad city. She’s a woman on her own, she lives in Virginia, she’s been around the military for years. So she takes her gun. It’s probably still wrapped in a sock, like she stores it in her drawer. She puts it in her bag. She leaves. She gets stuck in the jam. She calls ahead. Maybe the Hoths call her. They won’t listen. They’re fanatics and they’re foreign. They don’t understand. They think a traffic jam is a dog-ate-my-homework kind of thing.”

“Then she gets the midnight message.”

“And she changes. The point is, she has time to change. She’s stuck in traffic. She can’t take off. She can’t go to the cops. She can’t drive into a telephone pole at ninety miles an hour. She’s trapped. She has to sit there and think. No alternative. And she arrives at a decision. She’s going to avenge her son. She makes a plan. She takes the gun out of the sock. Stares at it. She sees an old black jacket dumped on the back seat. Maybe it was there since the winter. She wants dark clothing. She puts it on. Eventually the traffic moves. She drives on to New York.”

“What about the list?”

“She was a normal person. Maybe working around to killing someone else produces the same feelings as working around to killing yourself. That’s what she was doing. She was climbing up on the plateau. But she wasn’t quite there yet. I disturbed her too early. So she quit. She took the other way out. Maybe by 59th Street she would have been ready.”

“Better that she was spared that fight.”

“Maybe she would have won. Lila would have been expecting her to take something out of her pocket or her bag. There would have been an element of surprise.”

“She had a six-shooter. There were twenty-two of them.”

I nodded. “She’d have died, for sure. But maybe she would have died satisfied.”

A day later in the hotel Theresa Lee came back to visit. She told me that Sansom had scoped out a likely target area about half a mile long and the Jersey highway people had closed it off with orange barrels. Three hours into the search they found Susan’s cell phone. A second later, four feet away, they found the memory stick. It had been run over. It was crushed. It was unreadable.

I left New York the next day. I moved south. I spent a large part of the next two weeks obsessing over what might have been in that picture. I came up with all kinds of speculations, some involving technical breaches of Sharia law, some involving domesticated animals. Alternating with the lurid imagined scenarios from the Korengal tent were repeated flashback memories of hitting Lila Hoth in the face. The straight left, the crunch of bone and cartilage under my fist. The

ruined appearance. The episode replayed constantly in my mind. I didn't know why. I had just cut her with a knife and later I strangled her, and I could barely remember those acts at all. Maybe hitting women ran counter to my subliminal values. Which was entirely illogical.

But eventually the images faded and I grew bored with imagining Osama bin Laden having his way with goats. By the time a month had passed I had forgotten all of it. My cut had healed very nicely. The scar was thin and white. The stitches were neat and tiny. My lower body was like a textbook illustration: This one is how it should be done, and that one is how it shouldn't. But I never forgot how those earlier, clumsier stitches had saved me. What goes around comes around. A benign legacy, from the truck bomb in Beirut, planned and paid for and driven there by persons unknown.

61 Hours

ONE

FIVE MINUTES TO THREE IN THE AFTERNOON. EXACTLY SIXTY-ONE hours before it happened. The lawyer drove in and parked in the empty lot. There was an inch of new snow on the ground, so he spent a minute fumbling in the foot well until his overshoes were secure. Then he got out and turned his collar up and walked to the visitors' entrance. There was a bitter wind out of the north. It was thick with fat lazy flakes. There was a storm sixty miles away. The radio had been full of it.

The lawyer got in through the door and stamped the snow off his feet. There was no line. It was not a regular visiting day. There was nothing ahead of him except an empty room and an empty X-ray belt and a metal detector hoop and three prison guards standing around doing nothing. He nodded to them, even though he didn't know them. But he considered himself on their side, and they on his. Prison was a binary world. Either you were locked up, or you weren't. They weren't. He wasn't.

Yet.

He took a grey plastic bin off the top of a teetering stack and folded his overcoat into it. He took off his suit jacket and folded it and laid it on top of the overcoat. It was hot in the prison. Cheaper to burn a little extra oil than to give the inmates two sets of clothes, one for the summer and one for the winter. He could hear their noise ahead of him, the clatter of metal and concrete and the random crazy yells and the screams and the low grumble of other disaffected voices, all muted by doglegged corridors and many closed doors.

He emptied his trouser pockets of keys, and wallet, and cell phone, and coins, and nested those clean warm personal items on top of his jacket. He picked up the grey plastic bin. Didn't carry it to the X-ray belt. Instead he hefted it across the room to a small window in a wall. He waited there and a woman in uniform took it and gave him a numbered ticket in exchange for it.

He braced himself in front of the metal detector hoop. He patted his pockets and glanced ahead, expectantly, as if waiting for an invitation. Learned behaviour, from air travel. The guards let him stand there for a minute, a small, nervous man in his shirtsleeves, empty-handed. No briefcase. No notebook. Not even a pen. He was not there to advise. He was there to be advised. Not to talk, but to listen, and he sure as hell wasn't going to put what he heard anywhere near a piece of paper.

The guards beckoned him through. A green light and no beep, but still the first guard wanded him and the second patted him down. The third escorted him deeper into the complex, through doors designed never to be open unless the last and the next were closed, and around tight corners designed to slow a running man's progress, and past thick green glass windows with watchful faces behind.

The lobby had been institutional, with linoleum on the floor and mint green paint on the walls and fluorescent tubes on the ceiling. And the lobby had been connected to the outside, with gusts of cold air blowing in when the door was opened, and salt stains and puddles of snowmelt on the floor. The prison proper was different. It had no connection to the outside. No sky, no weather. No attempt at décor. It was all raw concrete, already rubbed greasy where sleeves and shoulders had touched it, still pale and dusty where they hadn't. Underfoot was grippy grey paint, like the floor of an auto enthusiast's garage. The lawyer's overshoes squeaked on it.

There were four interview rooms. Each was a windowless concrete cube divided exactly in half by a wall-to-wall desk-height counter with safety glass above. Caged lights burned on the ceiling above the counter. The counter was cast from concrete. The grain of the formwork lumber was still visible in it. The safety glass was thick and slightly green and was divided into three overlapping panes, to give two sideways listening slots. The centre pane had a cut-out slot at the bottom, for documents. Like a bank. Each half of the room had its own chair, and its own door. Perfectly symmetrical. The lawyers entered one way, and the inmates entered the other. Later they left the same way they had come, each to a different destination.

The guard opened the door from the corridor and stepped a yard into the room for a visual check that all was as it should be. Then he stood aside and let the lawyer enter. The lawyer stepped in and waited until the guard closed the door behind him and left him alone. Then he sat down and checked his watch. He was

behind him and left him alone. Then he sat down and checked his watch. He was eight minutes late. He had driven slowly because of the weather. Normally he would have regarded it as a failure to be late for an appointment. Unprofessional, and disrespectful. But prison visits were different. Time meant nothing to prisoners.

Another eight minutes later the other door opened, in the wall behind the glass. A different guard stepped in and checked and then stepped back out and a prisoner shuffled in. The lawyer's client. He was white, and enormously overweight, marbled with fat, and completely hairless. He was dressed in an orange jumpsuit. He had wrist and waist and ankle chains that looked as delicate as jewellery. His eyes were dull and his face was docile and vacant, but his mouth was moving a little, like a simpleminded person struggling to retain complex information.

The door in the wall behind the glass closed.

The prisoner sat down.

The lawyer hitched his chair close to the counter.

The prisoner did the same.

Symmetrical.

The lawyer said, 'I'm sorry I'm late.'

The prisoner didn't answer.

The lawyer asked, 'How are you?'

The prisoner didn't answer. The lawyer went quiet. The air in the room was hot. A minute later the prisoner started talking, reciting, working his way through lists and instructions and sentences and paragraphs he had committed to memory. From time to time the lawyer said, 'Slow down a bit,' and on each occasion the guy paused and waited and then started up again at the head of the previous sentence with no change in his pace and no alteration to his singsong delivery. It was as if he had no other way of communicating.

The lawyer had what he considered to be a pretty good memory, especially for detail, like most lawyers, and he was paying a lot of attention, because to

concentrate on the process of remembering distracted him from the actual content of the instructions he was getting. But even so some small corner of his mind had counted fourteen separate criminal proposals before the prisoner finally finished up and sat back.

The lawyer said nothing.

The prisoner said, ‘Got all that?’

The lawyer nodded and the prisoner lapsed into a bovine stillness. Or equine, like a donkey in a field, infinitely patient. Time meant nothing to prisoners. Especially this one. The lawyer pushed his chair back and stood up. His door was unlocked. He stepped out to the corridor.

Five minutes to four in the afternoon.

Sixty hours to go.

The lawyer found the same guard waiting for him. He was back in the parking lot two minutes later. He was fully dressed again and his stuff was back in his pockets, all reassuringly weighty and present and normal. It was snowing harder by then and the air was colder and the wind was wilder. It was going dark, fast and early. The lawyer sat for a moment with his seat heating and his engine running and his wipers pushing berms of snow left and right on the windshield glass. Then he took off, a wide slow turn with his tyres squeaking against the fresh fall and his headlight beams cutting bright arcs through the white swirl. He headed for the exit, the wire gates, the wait, the trunk check, and then the long straight road that led through town to the highway.

Fourteen criminal proposals. Fourteen actual crimes, if he relayed the proposals and they were acted upon, which they surely would be. Or fifteen crimes, because he himself would then become a co-conspirator. Or twenty-eight crimes, if a prosecutor chose to call each separate issue a separate conspiracy, which a prosecutor might, just for the fun of it. Or just for the glory. Twenty-eight separate paths to shame and ignominy and disbarment, and trial and conviction and imprisonment. Life imprisonment, almost certainly, given the nature of one of the fourteen proposals, and then only after a successful plea bargain. A failed plea bargain was too awful to contemplate.

The lawyer made it around the highway cloverleaf and merged into the slow lane. All around him was the thick grey of falling snow in the late afternoon. Not

lane. All around him was the thick grey of falling snow in the late afternoon. Not much traffic. Just occasional cars and trucks going his way, some of them faster and some of them slower, answered by occasional cars and trucks going the other way, across the divider. He drove one-handed and jacked up off the seat and took out his cell phone. Weighed it in his hand. He had three choices. One, do nothing. Two, call the number he had been told to call. Three, call the number he really should call, which in the circumstances was 911, with hasty back-ups to the local PD and the Highway Patrol and the county sheriffs and the Bar Association, and then a lawyer of his own.

He chose the second option, like he knew he would. Choice number one would get him nowhere, except a little later, when they came to find him. Choice number three would get him dead, slowly and eventually, after what he was sure would be hours or even days of hideous agony. He was a small nervous man. No kind of a hero.

He dialled the number he had been told to dial.

He checked it twice and hit the green button. He raised the phone to his ear, which in many states would be a twenty-ninth crime all its own.

But not in South Dakota.

Not yet.

Small mercies.

The voice that answered was one he had heard four times before. Coarse, and rough, and laced with a kind of rude animal menace. A voice from what the lawyer thought of as another world entirely. It said, ‘Shoot, buddy,’ with a smile and an overtone of cruel enjoyment, as if the speaker was enjoying his absolute power and control, and the lawyer’s own consequent discomfort and fear and revulsion.

The lawyer swallowed once and started talking, reciting the lists and the instructions and the sentences and the paragraphs in much the same way they had been relayed to him. He started talking seven miles and seven minutes from a highway bridge. The bridge didn’t look much like a bridge. The roadbed continued absolutely level but the land below it fell away a little into a wide shallow gulch. The gulch was dry most of the year, but in five months’ time

spring meltwater would rage through it in a torrent. The highway engineers had smoothed the gulch into a neat culvert and packed forty giant concrete tubes under the roadbed, all to stop the foundation getting washed away once a year. It was a system that worked well in the spring. It had only one drawback, which showed up in the winter. To counter it the engineers had placed signs ahead in both directions. The signs said: Bridge Freezes Before Road.

The lawyer drove and talked. Seven minutes into his monologue he reached the most obviously naked and blunt and brutal and egregious of the fourteen proposals. He recited it into the phone the same way he had heard it in the prison, which was neutrally and without emotion. The coarse voice on the other end of the phone laughed. Which made the lawyer shudder. A core moral spasm came up literally from deep inside him. It jerked his shoulders noticeably and ground the phone across his ear.

And moved his hand on the wheel.

His front tyres slipped a little on the bridge ice and he corrected clumsily and his rear tyres swung the other way and fishtailed once, twice, three times. He slid across all three lanes. Saw a bus coming the opposite way through the falling snow. It was white. It was huge. It was moving fast. It was coming straight at him. The back part of his brain told him a collision was inevitable. The front part of his brain told him no, he had space and time and a grass median and two stout metal barriers between him and any kind of oncoming traffic. He bit his lip and relaxed his grip and straightened up and the bus blew past him exactly parallel and twenty feet away.

He breathed out.

The voice on the phone asked, ‘What?’

The lawyer said, ‘I skidded.’

The voice said, ‘Finish the report, asshole.’

The lawyer swallowed again and resumed talking, at the head of the previous sentence.

The man driving the white bus in the opposite direction was a twelve-year veteran of his trade. In the small world of his specialized profession he was

about as good as it got. He was properly licensed and well trained and adequately experienced. He was no longer young, and not yet old. Mentally and physically he was up there on a broad plateau of common sense and maturity and peak capability. He was not behind schedule. He was not speeding. He was not drunk. He was not high.

But he was tired.

He had been staring into featureless horizontal snow for the best part of two hours. He saw the fishtailing car a hundred yards ahead. Saw it dart diagonally straight at him. His fatigue produced a split second of dull delay. Then the numb tension in his tired body produced an overreaction. He yanked the wheel like he was flinching from a blow. Too much, too late. And unnecessary, anyway. The sliding car had straightened and was already behind him before his own front tyres bit. Or tried to. They hit the bridge ice just as the steering told them to turn. They lost grip and skated. All the weight was in the rear of the bus. The huge cast iron engine block. The water tank. The toilet.

Like a pendulum, way back there. The rear of the bus set about trying to overtake the front of the bus. It didn't get far. Just a few crucial degrees. The driver did everything right. He fought the skid. But the steering was feather light and the front tyres had lost traction. There was no feedback. The back of the bus came back in line and then swung out the other way.

The driver fought hard for three hundred yards. Twelve long seconds. They felt like twelve long hours. He spun the big plastic wheel left, spun it right, tried to catch the skid, tried to stop it building. But it built anyway. It gathered momentum. The big pendulum weight at the back slammed one way, slammed the other. The soft springs crushed and bounced. The tall body tilted and yawed. The back of the bus swung forty-five degrees left, then forty-five right. Bridge Freezes Before Road. The bus passed over the last of the concrete tubes and the front tyres bit again. But they bit while they were turned diagonally towards the shoulder. The whole bus turned in that direction, as if following a legitimate command. As if it was suddenly obedient again. The driver braked hard. Fresh snow dammed in front of the tyres. The bus held its new line. It slowed.

But not enough.

The front tyres crossed the rumble strip, crossed the shoulder, and thumped down off the blacktop into a shallow ditch full of snow and frozen mud. The

underbody crashed and banged and scraped on the pavement edge for ten long feet before all momentum was spent. The bus came to rest at an angle, tilted a little, the front third in the ditch, the rear two-thirds still on the shoulder, and the engine compartment hanging out in the traffic lane. The front wheels hung down to the limit of their travel. The engine had stalled out and there was no sound beyond hot components hissing against the snow, and the air brake gently exhaling, and the passengers screaming, then gasping, then going very quiet.

The passengers were a homogeneous bunch, all except for one. Twenty white-haired seniors plus a younger man, in a bus that could seat forty. Twelve of the seniors were widowed women.

The other eight made up four old married couples. They were from Seattle. They were a church group on a cultural tour. They had seen the Little Town on the Prairie. Now they were on the long haul west to Mount Rushmore. A side trip to the geographic centre of the United States had been promised. National parks and grasslands would be visited along the way. A fine itinerary, but the wrong season. South Dakota weather in the winter was not famously hospitable. Hence the fifty per cent take up on the tickets, even though the tickets were cheap.

The odd passenger out was a man at least thirty years younger than the youngest of the others. He was sitting alone three rows behind the last of the seniors. They thought of him as a kind of stowaway. He had joined the bus that same day, at a rest stop just east of a town called Cavour. After the Little Town on the Prairie, before the Dakotaland Museum. There had been no explanation. He had just gotten on the bus. Some had seen him in prior conversation with the driver. Some said money had changed hands. No one was sure what to think. If he had paid for his passage, then he was more like a steerage passenger than a stowaway. Like a hitchhiker, but not quite.

But in any case he was considered a nice enough fellow. He was quiet and polite. He was a foot taller than any of the other passengers and evidently very strong. Not handsome like a movie star, but not ugly, either. Like a just-retired athlete, maybe. Perhaps a football player. Not the best dressed of individuals. He was wearing a creased untucked shirt under a padded canvas jacket. He had no bag, which was strange. But overall it was vaguely reassuring to have such a man on board, especially after he had proved himself civilized and not in any way threatening. Threatening behaviour from a man that size would have been unseemly. Good manners from a man that size were charming. Some of the bolder widowed ladies had thought about striking up a conversation. But the

man himself seemed to discourage any such attempt. He slept through most of the drive time and all his responses to conversational gambits had so far been entirely courteous but brief, and completely devoid of substance.

But at least they knew his name. One of the men had introduced himself, on his way back down the aisle from the toilet. The tall stranger had looked up from his seat and paused, just a beat, as if assessing the costs and benefits of a response. Then he had taken the proffered hand and said, ‘Jack Reacher.’

TWO

REACHER WOKE UP WHEN THE MOMENTUM OF THE SKID SMASHED his head against the window. He knew where he was, instantly. On a bus. He spent the next split second calculating the odds. Snow, ice, reasonable speed, not much traffic. We're going to either hit the divider or fall off the shoulder. Worst case, we're going to tip over. OK for him. Maybe not so good for the old folks in front of him. But probably survivable. He was more worried about the aftermath. Twenty old people, shaken up, maybe injured, cuts, bruises, broken bones, stranded miles from anywhere in a gathering winter storm.

Not good.

Then he spent the next eleven and a half seconds holding on, gently resisting the alternating inertia of the fishtails. He was the rearmost passenger, so he was feeling it worst. The folks nearer the front were swinging through smaller arcs. But they were fragile. He could see their necks snapping from side to side. He could see the driver's face in the rear-view mirror. The guy was hanging in there. Not bad. But he was going to lose. A luxury bus was a very unwieldy type of vehicle. Be careful what you wish for. He had been in Marshall, Minnesota, for no very memorable reason, and he had hitched a ride with a guy heading west to Huron, South Dakota, but for some private reason the guy wouldn't take him all the way and had dumped him at a rest stop outside of a place called Cavour. Which had seemed like bad luck, initially, because Cavour was not exactly teeming with transcontinental traffic. But two cups of coffee later a white luxury forty-seat bus had pulled in and only twenty people had gotten out, which meant empty places were there to be had. The driver looked like a straightforward kind of a guy, so Reacher had approached him in a straightforward kind of a fashion. Twenty bucks for a ride to Rapid City? The guy asked for forty and settled for thirty and Reacher had climbed aboard and been very comfortable all day long. But the comfort had come from soft springs and vague steering, neither one of which was doing anyone any favours at the current moment.

But seven seconds in, Reacher was getting optimistic. With no foot on the gas, the bus was slowing. Didn't feel like it, but it had to be true. Simple physics. Newton's Laws of Motion. As long as no other traffic hit them, they would wobble around for a spell and then come to rest, maybe side-on, maybe facing the wrong way, but still right side up and drivable. Then he felt the front tyres

bite again and saw they were going to drive straight off the road. Which was bad. But the driver braked hard and held tight through a whole lot of thumping and banging and scraping and they ended up half on and half off the blacktop, which was OK, except they had their asses hanging out in the traffic lane, which was not OK, and there were suddenly no active mechanical sounds at all, like the bus was dead, which was definitely not OK.

Reacher glanced back and saw no oncoming headlights. Not right then. He got up and walked to the front of the bus and saw flat land ahead, all white with snow. No cliffs. No embankment. Therefore no danger from a weight transfer. So he ducked back and started encouraging the geezers to move up the bus towards the front. That way if an eighteen-wheeler slammed into them it might just shear off the rear of the bus without killing anyone. But the geezers were shaken and reluctant to move. They just sat there. So Reacher moved back up front. The driver was inert in his seat, blinking a little and swallowing down his adrenalin rush.

Reacher said to him, ‘Good work, pal.’

The guy nodded. ‘Thanks.’

Reacher said, ‘Can you get us out of this ditch?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Best guess?’

‘Probably not.’

Reacher said, ‘OK, have you got flares?’

‘What?’

‘Flares. Right now the back of the bus is sticking out in the traffic lane.’

The guy was unresponsive for a moment. Dazed. Then he leaned down and unlatched a locker beside his feet and came out with three warning flares, dull red cardboard tubes with steel spikes on the end. Reacher took them from him and said, ‘Got a first-aid kit?’

The guy nodded again.

The guy nodded again.

Reacher said, ‘Take it and check the passengers for cuts and bruises. Encourage them to move up front as far as they can. Preferably all together in the aisle. If we get hit, it’s going to be in the ass.’

The driver nodded for a third time and then shook himself like a dog and got into gear. He took a first-aid kit from another latched compartment and got up out of his seat.

Reacher said, ‘Open the door first.’

The guy hit a button and the door sucked open. Freezing air blew in, with thick swirls of snow on it. Like a regular blizzard. Reacher said, ‘Close the door after me. Stay warm.’

Then he jumped down into the ditch and fought through the ice and the mud to the shoulder. He stepped up on the blacktop and ran to the rear corner of the vehicle. Blowing snow pelted his face. He lined up on the lane markers and ran thirty paces back the way they had come. A curved trajectory. Thirty paces, thirty yards. Ninety feet. Near enough to eighty-eight. Eighty-eight feet per second was the same thing as sixty miles an hour, and plenty of lunatics would be driving sixty even in a snowstorm. He leaned down and jabbed a flare spike into the blacktop. The crimson flame ignited automatically and burned fiercely. He continued the curve and ran another thirty paces. Used the second flare. Ran another thirty and used the third to complete a warning sequence: three seconds, two, one, move the hell over.

Then he ran back and floundered through the ditch again and hammered on the door until the driver broke off his medical ministrations and opened up. Reacher climbed back inside. He brought a flurry of snow in with him. He was already seriously cold. His face was numb. His feet were freezing. And the interior of the bus itself was already cooling. The windows all along one side were already pasted with clumps of white. He said, ‘You should keep the engine running. Keep the heaters going.’

The driver said, ‘Can’t. The fuel line could be cracked. From where we scraped.’

Reacher said, ‘I didn’t smell anything when I was outside.’

‘I can’t take the risk. Everyone is alive right now. I don’t want to burn them up

in a fire.’

‘You want to freeze them to death instead?’

‘Take over with the first aid. I’ll try to make some calls.’

So Reacher ducked back and started checking the old folks. The driver had gotten through the first two rows. That was clear. All four of the window-seat passengers were sporting Band-Aids over cuts from the metal edges around the glass. Be careful what you wish for. Better view, but higher risk. One woman had a second Band-Aid on the aisle side of her face, presumably from where her husband’s head had hit her after bouncing around like a rag doll.

The first broken bone was in row three. A delicate old lady, built like a bird. She had been swinging right when the bus changed direction and swung left. The window had tapped her hard on the shoulder. The blow had bust her collar bone. Reacher could see it in the way she was cradling her arm. He said, ‘Ma’am, may I take a look at that?’

She said, ‘You’re not a doctor.’

‘I had some training in the army.’

‘Were you a medic?’

‘I was a military cop. We got some medical training.’

‘I’m cold.’

‘Shock,’ Reacher said. ‘And it’s snowing.’

She turned her upper body towards him. Implied consent. He put his fingertips on her collar bone, through her blouse. The bone was as delicate as a pencil. It was snapped halfway along its length. A clean break. Not compound.

She asked, ‘Is it bad?’

‘It’s good,’ Reacher said. ‘It did its job. A collar bone is like a circuit breaker. It breaks so that your shoulder and your neck stay OK. It heals fast and easy.’

‘I need to go to the hospital.’

Reacher nodded. ‘We’ll get you there.’

He moved on. There was a sprained wrist in row four, and a broken wrist in row five. Plus a total of thirteen cuts, many minor contusions, and a lot of shock reaction.

The temperature was dropping like a stone.

Reacher could see the flares out the rear side windows. They were still burning, three distinct crimson puffballs glowing in the swirling snow. No headlights coming. None at all. No traffic. He walked up the aisle, head bent, and found the driver. The guy was in his seat, holding an open cell phone in his right hand, staring through the windshield, drumming his left-hand fingertips on the wheel.

He said, ‘We’ve got a problem.’

‘What kind of a problem?’

‘I called 911. The Highway Patrol is all either sixty miles north of here or sixty miles east. There are two big storms coming in. One from Canada, one off the Lakes. There’s all kinds of mayhem. All the tow trucks went with them. They’ve got hundred-car pile-ups. This highway is closed behind us. And up ahead.’

No traffic.

‘Where are we?’

‘South Dakota.’

‘I know that.’

‘Then you know what I mean. If we’re not in Sioux Falls or Rapid City, we’re in the middle of nowhere. And we’re not in Sioux Falls or Rapid City.’

‘We have to be somewhere.’

‘GPS shows a town nearby. Name of Bolton. Maybe twenty miles. But it’s small. Just a dot on the map.’

‘Can you get a replacement bus?’

‘I’m out of Seattle. I could get one maybe four days after the snow stops.’

‘Does the town of Bolton have a police department?’

‘I’m waiting on a call.’

‘Maybe they have tow trucks.’

‘I’m sure they do. At least one. Maybe at the corner gas station, good for hauling broken-down half-ton pick-up trucks. Not so good for vehicles this size.’

‘Maybe they have farm tractors.’

‘They’d need about eight of them. And some serious chains.’

‘Maybe they have a school bus. We could transfer.’

‘The Highway Patrol won’t abandon us. They’ll get here.’

Reacher asked, ‘What’s your name?’

‘Jay Knox.’

‘You need to think ahead, Mr Knox. The Highway Patrol is an hour away under the best of circumstances. Two hours, in this weather. Three hours, given what they’re likely dealing with. So we need to get a jump. Because an hour from now this bus is going to be an icebox. Two hours from now these wrinklies are going to be dropping like flies. Maybe sooner.’

‘So what gets your vote?’

Reacher was about to answer when Knox’s cell phone rang. The guy answered it and his face lightened a little. Then it fell again. He said, ‘Thanks,’ and closed the phone. He looked at Reacher and said, ‘Apparently the town of Bolton has a police department. They’re sending a guy. But they’ve got problems of their own and it will take some time.’

‘How much time?’

‘At least an hour.’

‘What kind of problems?’

‘They didn’t say.’

‘You’re going to have to start the engine.’

‘They’ve got coats.’

‘Not good enough.’

‘I’m worried about a fire.’

‘Diesel fuel is a lot less volatile than gasoline.’

‘What are you, an expert?’

‘I was in the army. Trucks and Humvees were all diesel. For a reason.’ Reacher glanced back down the aisle. ‘Got a flashlight? Got an extinguisher?’

‘Why?’

‘I’ll check the underbody. If it looks all clear I’ll knock twice on the floor. You start up, if anything goes on fire I’ll put it out and knock again and you can shut it down.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Best we can do. And we have to do something.’

Knox was quiet for a spell and then he shrugged and opened up a couple more compartments and came out with a silver Maglite and an extinguisher bottle. Reacher took them and waited for the door to open and climbed out into the spectral crimson world of the flares. Down into the ditch again. This time he trudged counterclockwise around the front of the bus because the oblique angle put more of the left side above the blacktop than the right. Crawling around in the freezing ditch was not an attractive prospect. Crawling around on the shoulder was marginally better.

He found the fuel filler door and sat down in the snow and then swivelled around and lay on his back and wriggled into position with his head under the side of the bus. He switched the flashlight on. Found the fat tube running from the filler

mouth to the tank. It looked intact. The tank itself was a huge squared-off cylinder. It was a little dented and scraped from the impact. But nothing was leaking out of it. The fuel line running back towards the engine compartment looked OK. Snow soaked through Reacher's jacket and his shirt and freezing damp hit his skin.

He shivered.

He used the butt end of the Maglite and banged twice on a frame spar.

He heard relays clicking and a fuel pump start up. It wheezed and whined. He checked the tank. Checked the line, as far as the flashlight beam would let him. He kicked against the snow and pushed himself further under the bus.

No leaks.

The starter motor turned over.

The engine started. It clattered and rattled and settled to a hammer-heavy beat.

No leaks.

No fire.

No fumes.

He fought the cold and gave it another minute and used the time to check other things. The big tyres looked OK. Some of the front suspension members were a little banged up. The floor of the luggage hold was dented here and there. A few small tubes and hoses were crushed and torn and split. Some Seattle insurer was about to get a fair-sized bill.

He scrabbled out and stood up and brushed off. His clothes were soaked. Snow swirled all around him. Fat, heavy flakes. There were two fresh inches on the ground. His footsteps from four minutes ago were already dusted white. He followed them back to the ditch and floundered around to the door. Knox was waiting for him. The door opened and he climbed aboard. Blowing snow howled in after him. He shivered. The door closed.

The engine stopped.

Knox sat down in his seat and hit the starter button. Way at the back of the bus Reacher heard the starter motor turning, churning, straining, wheezing, over and over again.

Nothing happened.

Knox asked, ‘What did you see down there?’

‘Damage,’ Reacher said. ‘Lots of things all banged up.’

‘Crushed tubes?’

‘Some.’

Knox nodded. ‘The fuel line is pinched off. We just used up what was left in the pipe, and now no more is getting through. Plus the brakes could be shot. Maybe it’s just as well the engine won’t run.’

‘Call the Bolton PD again,’ Reacher said. ‘This is serious.’

Knox dialled and Reacher headed back towards the passengers. He hauled coats off the overhead racks and told the old folks to put them on. Plus hats and gloves and scarves and mufflers and anything else they had.

He had nothing. Just what he stood up in, and what he stood up in was soaked and freezing. His body heat was leaching away. He was shivering, just a little, but continuously. Small crawling thrills, all over his skin. Be careful what you wish for. A life without baggage had many advantages. But crucial disadvantages, too.

He headed back to Knox’s seat. The door was leaking air. The bus was colder at the front than the back. He said, ‘Well?’

Knox said, ‘They’re sending a car as soon as possible.’

‘A car won’t do it.’

‘I told them that. I described the problem. They said they’ll work something out.’

‘You seen storms like this before?’

‘This is not a storm. The storm is sixty miles away. This is the edge.’

Reacher shivered. ‘Is it coming our way?’

‘No question.’

‘How fast?’

‘Don’t ask.’

Reacher left him there and walked down the aisle, all the way past the last of the seats. He sat on the floor outside the toilet, with his back pressed hard against the rear bulkhead, hoping to feel some residual heat coming in from the cooling engine.

He waited.

Five minutes to five in the afternoon.

Fifty-nine hours to go.

THREE

FORTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER THE LAWYER GOT HOME. A LONG, SLOW trip. His driveway was unploughed and he worried for a moment that his garage door would be frozen shut. But he hit the remote and the half-horsepower motor on the ceiling inside did its job and the door rose up in its track and he drove in. Then the door wouldn't shut after him, because the clumps of snow his tyres had pushed in triggered the door's child safety feature. So he fussed with his overshoes once more and took a shovel and pushed the snow back out again. The door closed. The lawyer took off his overshoes again and stood for a moment at the mud room door, composing himself, cleansing himself, taking a mental shower. Twenty minutes to six. He walked through to the warmth of his kitchen and greeted his family, as if it was just another day.

By twenty minutes to six the inside of the bus was dark and icy and Reacher was hugging himself hard and shivering violently. Ahead of him the twenty old people and Knox the driver were all doing pretty much the same thing. The windows on the windward side of the bus were all black with stuck snow. The windows on the leeward side showed a grey panorama. A blizzard, blowing in from the north and the east, driven hard and relentlessly by the winter wind, hitting the aerodynamic interruption of the dead vehicle, boiling over it and under it and around it and swirling into the vacuum behind it, huge weightless flakes dancing randomly up and down and left and right.

Then: faint lights in the grey panorama.

White lights, and red, and blue, pale luminous spheres snapping and popping and moving through the gloom. The faint patter of snow chains in the eerie padded silence. A cop car, coming towards them on the wrong side of the divided highway, nosing slow and cautious through the weather.

A long minute later a cop was inside the bus. He had come through the ditch and in through the door, but he had just gotten out of a heated car and he was wearing winter boots and waterproof pants and gloves and a parka and a plastic rain shield over a fur hat with ear flaps, so he was in pretty good shape. He was tall and lean and had lined blue eyes in a face that had seen plenty of summer sun and winter wind. He said his name was Andrew Peterson and that he was second-in-command over at the Bolton PD. He took off his gloves and moved

through the aisle, shaking hands and introducing himself by name and rank over and over again, to each individual and each couple, in a manner designed to appear guileless and frank and enthusiastic, like a good old country boy just plain delighted to help out in an emergency. But Reacher was watching those lined blue eyes and thinking that his front was false. Reacher was thinking that Peterson was actually a fairly shrewd man with more things on his mind than a simple road rescue.

That impression was reinforced when Peterson started asking questions. Who were they all? Where were they from? Where had they started today? Where were they headed tonight? Did they have hotel reservations up ahead? Easy answers for Knox and the twenty old folks, a tour group, from Seattle, hustling from one scheduled stop at the Dakotaland Museum to the next at Mount Rushmore, and yes, they had confirmed reservations at a tourist motel near the monument, thirteen rooms, for the four married couples, plus four pairs who were sharing, plus four individuals who had paid a singles supplement, plus one for Knox himself.

All true information, but not exactly necessary, in the circumstances.

Peterson made Knox show him the motel paperwork.

Then he turned to Reacher. Smiled and said, ‘Sir, I’m Andrew Peterson, from the Bolton PD, deputy chief. Would you mind telling me who you are?’

Plenty of heartland cops were ex-military, but Reacher didn’t think Peterson was. He wasn’t getting the vibe. He figured him for a guy who hadn’t travelled much, a straight-arrow kid who had done well in a local high school and who had stuck around afterwards to serve his community. Expert in a casual way with all the local stuff, a little out of his depth with anything else, but determined to do his best with whatever came his way.

‘Sir?’ Peterson said again.

Reacher gave his name. Peterson asked him whether he was part of the group. Reacher said no. So Peterson asked him what he was doing on the bus. Reacher said he was heading west out of Minnesota, hoping to turn south before too long, hoping to find better weather.

‘You don’t like our weather?’

‘Not so far.’

‘And you hitched a ride on a tour bus?’

‘I paid.’

Peterson looked at Knox, and Knox nodded.

Peterson looked back at Reacher and asked, ‘Are you on vacation?’

Reacher said, ‘No.’

‘Then what exactly is your situation?’

‘My situation doesn’t matter. None of this matters. None of us expected to be where we are right now. This whole thing was entirely unpredictable. It was an accident. Therefore there’s no connection between us and whatever it is that’s on your mind. There can’t be.’

‘Who says I have something on my mind?’

‘I do.’

Peterson looked at Reacher, long and hard. ‘What happened with the bus?’

‘Ice, I guess,’ Reacher said. ‘I was asleep at the time.’

Peterson nodded. ‘There’s a bridge that doesn’t look like a bridge. But there are warning signs.’

Knox said, ‘A car coming the other way was sliding all over the place. I twitched.’ His tone was slightly defensive. Peterson gave him a look full of sympathy and empty of judgement and nodded again. He said, ‘A twitch will usually do it. It’s happened to lots of people. Me included.’

Reacher said, ‘We need to get these people off this bus. They’re going to freeze to death. I am, too.’

Peterson was quiet for a long second. There’s no connection between us and whatever it is that’s on your mind. Then he nodded again, definitively, like his mind was made up, and he called out, ‘Listen up, folks. We’re going to get you

to town, where we can look after you properly. The lady with the collar bone and the lady with the wrist will come with me in the car, and there will be alternative transportation right along for the rest of you.'

The step down into the ditch was too much for the injured women, so Peterson carried one and Reacher carried the other. The car was about ten yards away, but the snow was so thick by then that Reacher could barely see it, and when he turned back after Peterson had driven away he couldn't see the bus at all. He felt completely alone in the white emptiness. The snow was in his face, in his eyes, in his ears, on his neck, swirling all around him, blinding him. He was very cold. He felt a split second of panic. If for some reason he got turned around and headed in the wrong direction, he wouldn't know it. He would walk until he froze and died.

But he took a long step sideways and saw the crimson haloes of the flares. They were still burning valiantly. He used them to work out where the bus must be and headed for it. Came up against its leeward side and tracked around the front, back into the wind, through the ditch to the door. Knox let him in and they crouched together in the aisle and peered out into the darkness, waiting to see what kind of a ride had been sent for them.

Five to six in the evening.

Fifty-eight hours to go.

At six o'clock the fourteen criminal proposals finally made it to paper. The guy who had answered the lawyer's call was plenty bright in a street-smart kind of way, but he had always figured that the best part of intelligence was to know your limitations, and his included a tendency to get a little hazy about detail when under pressure. And he was going to face some pressure now. That was for damn sure. Turning proposals into actions was going to require the sanction of some seriously cautious people.

So he wrote everything down, fourteen separate paragraphs, and then he unplugged a brand-new untraceable pay-as-you-go cell from its charger and started to dial.

The ride that had been sent for them was a school bus, but not exactly. Definitely a standard Blue Bird vehicle, normal size, normal shape, regular proportions, but grey, not yellow, with heavy metal mesh welded over the windows, and the

words Department of Corrections stencilled along the flanks.

It looked almost new.

Knox said, ‘Better than nothing.’

Reacher said, ‘I’d go in a hearse if it had a heater.’

The prison vehicle K-turned across all three lanes and sawed back and forth for a while until it was lined up exactly parallel with the dead bus, with its entrance step about halfway down the dead bus’s length. Reacher saw why. The dead bus had an emergency exit, which was a window panel ready to pop out. Peterson had seen the ditch and the passengers and the panel, and had made a good decision and called ahead. Peterson was a reasonably smart guy.

Normally eighteen random seniors might have needed an amount of coaxing before stepping through an open hatch into a blizzard and the arms of a stranger, but the bitter cold had quieted their inhibitions. Knox helped them up top, and Reacher lifted them down. Easy work, apart from the cold and the snow. The lightest among the passengers was an old guy not more than ninety-five pounds. The heaviest was a woman closer to two hundred. The men all wanted to walk the short distance between the two vehicles. The women were happy to be carried.

The prison bus might have been almost new, but it was far from luxurious. The passenger area was separated from the driver by a bright steel cage. The seats were narrow and hard and faced with shiny plastic. The floor was rubber. The mesh over the windows was menacing. But there was heat. Not necessarily a kindness from the state to its convicts. But the bus manufacturer had built it in, for the school kids that the vehicle was designed to carry. And the state had not ripped it out. That was all. A kind of passive benevolence. The driver had the temperature turned up high and the blower on max. Peterson was a good advance man.

Reacher and Knox got the passengers seated and then they ducked back out into the cold and hauled suitcases out of the dead bus’s luggage hold. The old folks would need nightwear and prescriptions and toiletries and changes of clothes. There were a lot of suitcases. They filled the prison bus’s spare seats and most of the aisle. Knox sat down on one. Reacher rode standing next to the driver, as close to a heater vent as he could get.

The wind buffeted the bus but the tyres had chains and progress was steady. They came off the highway after seven miles and rumbled past a rusted yield sign that had been peppered by a shotgun blast. They hit a long straight county two-lane. They passed a sign that said Correctional Facility Ahead. Do Not Stop For Hitchhikers. The sign was brand new, crisp and shiny with reflective paint. Reacher was not pleased to see it. It would make moving on in the morning a little harder than it needed to be.

The inevitable question was asked less than a minute later. A woman in the front seat looked left, looked right, looked a little embarrassed, but spoke anyway. She said, 'We're not going to be put in jail, are we?'

'No, ma'am,' Reacher said. 'A motel, probably. I expect this was the only bus free tonight.'

The prison driver said, 'Motels are all full,' and didn't speak again.

Five to seven in the evening.

Fifty-seven hours to go.

The county two-lane ran straight for more than ten miles. Visibility was never more than ten yards at a time. The falling snow was bright in the headlight beams, and beyond it was guesswork. Flat land, Reacher figured, judging by the unchanging engine note. No hills, no dales. Just prairie, flattened further by what was surely going to be a whole extra foot of snow by the morning.

Then they passed a sign: Bolton City Limit. Pop. 12,261. Not such a small place after all. Not just a dot on the map. The driver didn't slow. The chains chattered onward, another mile, then another. Then there was the glow of a street lamp in the air. Then another. Then a cop car, parked sideways across the mouth of a side street, blocking it. The car had its red roof lights turning lazily. The car had been stationary for a long time. That was clear. Its tyre tracks were half full of fresh snow.

The bus clattered on for another quarter-mile and then slowed and turned three times. Right, left, right again. Then Reacher saw a low wall, with a loaf of snow on top and a lit sign along its length: Bolton Police Department. Behind the wall was a big parking lot half full with civilian vehicles. Sedans, trucks, crew-cab pick-ups. They all looked recently driven and recently parked. Fresh tyre tracks,

clear windshields, melting slush on their hoods. The bus eased past them and slowed and came to a stop opposite a lit entrance lobby. The engine settled to a noisy idle. The heater kept on going. The police station was long and low. Not a small operation. The roof was flat and had a forest of antennas poking up through the snow. The lobby door was flanked by a pair of trash cans. Like two proud sentinels.

The lobby looked warm.

The prison driver hauled on a handle and opened the bus door and a guy in a police parka came out of the lobby with a snow shovel and started clearing the path between the trash cans. Reacher and Knox started hauling suitcases out of the aisle, out of the bus, into the police station. The snow was letting up a little but the air was colder than ever.

Then the passengers made the transfer. Knox helped them down the step, Reacher helped them along the path, the guy in the parka saw them in through the door. Some sat down on benches, some stayed standing, some milled around. The lobby was a plain square space with dull linoleum on the floor and shiny paint on the walls. There was a reception counter in back and the wall behind it was covered with cork boards and the cork boards were covered with thumbtacked notices of different sizes and types. Sitting in front of them on a stool was an old guy in civilian clothes. Not a cop. An aide of some kind.

The guy in the parka disappeared for a moment and came back with a man Reacher took to be Bolton's chief of police. He was wearing a gun belt and a uniform with two metal bars stuck through the fabric on both peaks of his shirt collar. Like an army captain's insignia. The guy himself was what Peterson was going to be about fifteen years into the future, a tall lean plainsman going a little stooped and soft with age. He looked tired and preoccupied, and beset by problems, and a little wistful, like a guy more content with the past than the present, but also temporarily happy, because he had been handed a simple problem that could be easily solved. He took up a position with his back against the counter and raised his hands for quiet, even though no one was talking.

He said, 'Welcome to Bolton, folks. My name is Chief Tom Holland, and I'm here to see that you all get comfortable and taken care of tonight. The bad news is that the motels are all full, but the good news is that the people of Bolton are not the kind of folks who would let a group of stranded travellers such as yourselves sleep a night on cots in the high school gymnasium. So the call went

out for empty guest rooms and I'm glad to say we got a good response and we have more than a dozen people right here, right now, ready to invite you into their homes just like honoured visitors and long-lost friends.'

There was a little low talking after that. A little surprise, a little uncertainty, then a lot of contentment. The old folks brightened and smiled and stood taller. Chief Holland ushered their hosts in from a side room, five local couples and four local men and four local women who had come alone. The lobby was suddenly crowded. People were milling about and shaking hands and introducing themselves and grouping together and hunting through the pile for their suitcases.

Reacher kept count in his head. Thirteen knots of people, which implied thirteen empty guest rooms, which exactly mirrored the thirteen Mount Rushmore motel rooms on Knox's official paperwork. Peterson was a good advance man.

Reacher wasn't on Knox's official paperwork.

He watched as the lobby emptied. Suitcases were hoisted, arms were offered, the doors were opened, pairs and threesomes and foursomes walked out to the waiting vehicles. It was all over inside five minutes. Reacher was left standing alone. Then the guy in the parka came back in and closed the doors. He disappeared down a doglegged corridor. Chief Holland came back. He looked at Reacher and said, 'Let's wait in my office.'

Five to eight in the evening.

Fifty-six hours to go.

FOUR

HOLLAND'S OFFICE WAS LIKE A THOUSAND REACHER HAD SEEN before. Plain municipal décor, tendered out, the job won by the underbidder. Sloppy gloss paint all over the place, thick and puckered and wrinkled, vinyl tile on the floor, a veneered desk, six last-generation file cabinets in an imperfect line against the wall under an institutional clock. There was a framed photograph centred on the cabinets under the clock. It showed Chief Holland as a straighter, stronger, younger man, standing and smiling with a woman and a child. A family portrait, maybe ten or more years old. The woman was attractive in a pale, fair-haired, strong-featured way. Holland's wife, presumably. The child was a girl, maybe eight or nine, her face white and indistinct and unformed. Their daughter, presumably. There was a pair of dice on the desk. Big old bone cubes, worn from use and age, the dots rubbed and faded, the material itself veined where soft calcium had gone and harder minerals had remained. But apart from the photograph and the dice there was nothing personal in the room. Everything else was business.

Holland sat down behind the desk in a worn leather chair. There was an undraped picture window behind his head, triple-glazed against the cold. Clean glass. Darkness outside. Snow on the outer sill, a heater under the inner sill.

Reacher took a visitor chair in front of the desk.

Holland didn't speak.

Reacher asked, 'What am I waiting for?'

'We wanted to offer you the same hospitality we offered the others.'

'But I was a harder sell?'

Holland smiled a tired smile. 'Not really. Andrew Peterson volunteered to take you in himself. But he's busy right now. So you'll have to wait.'

'Busy doing what?'

'What cops do.'

Reacher said, ‘This is a bigger place than I expected. The tour bus GPS showed it as a dot on the map.’

‘We grew. That GPS data is a little out of date, I guess.’

The office was overheated. Reacher had stopped shivering and was starting to sweat. His clothes were drying, stiff and dirty. He said, ‘You grew because you got a prison built here.’

‘How do you figure that?’

‘New prison bus. New sign after the highway.’

Holland nodded. ‘We got a brand-new federal facility. We competed for it. Everybody wanted it. It’s like getting Toyota to open an assembly plant. Or Honda. Lots of jobs, lots of dollars. Then the state put their new penitentiary in the same compound, which was more jobs and more dollars, and the county jail is there too.’

‘Which is why the motels are full tonight? Visiting day tomorrow?’

‘Total of three visiting days a week, all told. And the way the bus lines run, most people have to spend two nights in town. Heads on beds six nights a week. Motel owners are like pigs in shit. And the diners, and the pizza parlours, and the shuttle bus people. Like I told you, jobs and dollars.’

‘Where’s the compound?’

‘Five miles north. The gift that keeps on giving.’

‘Lucky you,’ Reacher said.

Holland was quiet for a beat. Then he said, ‘I learned a long time ago, you don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.’

The guy in the parka knocked and walked straight in and handed Holland a closed file folder. The clock on the wall showed eight in the evening, which was about right according to the clock in Reacher’s head. Holland swivelled his chair and opened the file folder ninety degrees and kept it tilted up at an awkward angle, to stop Reacher seeing the contents. But they were clearly reflected in the window glass behind Holland’s head. They were crime scene photographs

window glass behind Holland's head. They were crime scene photographs, glossy colour eight-by-tens with printed labels pasted in their bottom corners. Holland leafed through them. An establishing shot, then a progressive sequence of close-ups. A sprawled black-clad body, large, probably male, probably dead, snow on the ground, blunt force trauma to the right temple. No blood.

In the tour bus Knox had closed his cell phone and said: The town of Bolton has a police department. They're sending a guy. But they've got problems of their own and it will take some time.

Holland closed the file. Said nothing. A reserved, taciturn man. Like Reacher himself. In the end they just sat opposite each other without speaking. Not a hostile silence, but even so there was an undercurrent to it. Holland kept his palm on the closed file and glanced from time to time between it and his visitor, as if he wasn't yet sure which represented his bigger problem.

Eight o'clock in the evening in Bolton, South Dakota, was nine o'clock in the evening in Mexico City. Seventeen hundred miles south, sixty degrees warmer. The man who had taken the call from the untraceable pay-as-you-go cell was about to make a call of his own, from his walled city villa to a walled rural compound a hundred miles away. There another man would listen without comment and then promise a decision within twelve hours. That was how it usually went. Nothing worthwhile was achieved without reflection and rumination. With reflection and rumination impulsive mistakes could be avoided, and bold strokes could be formulated.

Holland's office was quiet and still and the door was closed, but Reacher heard noise in the rest of the station house. Comings and goings, close to thirty minutes' worth. Then silence again. A watch change, he guessed. Unlikely timing for a three-shift system. More likely a two-shift system. The day watch clocking off, the night watch coming on, twelve hours and twelve hours, maybe half past eight in the morning until half past eight at night. Unusual, and probably not permanent. Probably indicative of some kind of short-term stress.

They've got problems of their own.

Andrew Peterson came back to the station house just before nine twenty in the evening. He ducked his head into Holland's office and Holland joined him in the corridor with the file of crime scene photographs. The impromptu conference didn't last long. Less than five minutes. Reacher assumed that Peterson had seen the dead guy in situ and therefore didn't need to study pictures of him. The two

the dead guy in situ and therefore didn't need to study pictures of him. The two cops came back into the office and stood in the centre of the floor with quitting time written all through their body language. A long day, and another long day tomorrow, but until then, nothing. It was a feeling Reacher recognized from the years he had held a job. It was a feeling he had shared on some days. But not on days when dead guys had shown up in his jurisdiction.

Peterson said, 'Let's go.'

Twenty-five past nine in the evening.

Fifty-four and a half hours to go.

Twenty-five past nine in the evening in South Dakota was twenty-five past ten in the evening in the walled compound a hundred miles from Mexico City. The compound's owner was an exceptionally short man who went by the name of Plato. Some people assumed that Plato was Brazilian, and had followed the Brazilian habit of picking a short catchy name to stand in for whatever long sequence of patronymics littered his birth certificate. Like the way the soccer star Edson Arantes do Nascimento had called himself Pelé. Or the way another named Ricardo Izecson dos Santos Leite had called himself Kaká. Others claimed that Plato was Colombian, which would have been in many ways more logical, given his chosen trade. Others insisted he was indeed Mexican. But all agreed that Plato was short, not that anyone would dare say so to his face. His local driver's licence claimed five feet three inches. The reality was five feet one in elevator shoes, and four feet eleven without them.

The reason no one dared mention his stature to his face was a former associate named Martinez. Martinez had argued with Plato and lost his temper and called him a midget. Martinez had been delivered to the best hospital in Mexico City, unconscious. There he had been taken to an operating room and laid on the table and anaesthetized. He had been measured from the top of his scalp downward, and where the tape showed four feet and ten inches, lines had been drawn on his shins, a little closer to his knees than his ankles. Then a full team of surgeons and nurses had performed a double amputation, neatly and carefully and properly. Martinez had been kept in the hospital for two days, and then delivered home in an ambulance. Plato had delivered a get-well gift, with a card expressing the wish that the gift be appreciated and valued and kept permanently on display. Under the circumstances the wish was correctly interpreted as a command. Martinez's people had thought the gift was a tank of tropical fish, from its size and apparent weight and because it was clearly full of sloshing

from its size and apparent weight and because it was clearly full of sloshing liquid. When they unwrapped it they saw that it was indeed a fish tank. But it contained no fish. It was full of formaldehyde and contained Martinez's feet and ankles and part of his shins, ten inches' worth in total.

Thus no one ever again mentioned Plato's height.

He had taken the call from the walled villa in the city and had promised a decision within twelve hours, but it really wasn't worth investing that much time on a relatively minor issue concerning a relatively minor outpost of a large and complex international organization. So after just an hour and a half his mind was made up: he would authorize the silencing of the witness. He would send his man in as soon as was practical.

And he would go one step further. He would add a fifteenth item to the list. He was a little dismayed that it had not already been proposed. But then, he was Plato, and they weren't.

He would break the chain, for safety's sake.

He would have the lawyer silenced, too.

FIVE

PETERSON LED REACHER OUT INTO THE FREEZING NIGHT AND asked if he was hungry. Reacher said yes, he was starving. So Peterson drove to a chain restaurant next to a gas station on the main route out to the highway. His car was a standard police specification Ford Crown Victoria, with winter tyres on the front and chains on the back. Inside it smelled of heat and rubber and hamburger grease and warm circuit boards. Outside it had nearly stopped snowing.

‘Getting too cold to snow,’ Peterson said. Which seemed to be true. The night sky had partially cleared and a vast frigid bowl of arctic air had clamped down. It struck through Reacher’s inadequate clothing and set him shivering again on the short walk through the restaurant lot.

He said, ‘I thought there was supposed to be a big storm coming.’

Peterson said, ‘There are two big storms coming. This is what happens. They’re pushing cold air ahead of them.’

‘How long before they get here?’

‘Soon enough.’

‘And then it’s going to warm up?’

‘Just a little. Enough to let it snow.’

‘Good. I’ll take snow over cold.’

Peterson said, ‘You think this is cold?’

‘It ain’t warm.’

‘This is nothing.’

‘I know,’ Reacher said. ‘I spent a winter in Korea. Colder than this.’

‘But?’

‘The army gave me a decent coat.’

‘And?’

‘At least Korea was interesting.’ Which needled Peterson a little. The restaurant was empty and looked ready to close up. But they went in anyway. They took a table for two, a thirty-inch square of laminate that looked undersized between them.

Peterson said, ‘The town of Bolton is plenty interesting.’

‘The dead guy?’

‘Yes,’ Peterson said. Then he paused. ‘What dead guy?’

Reacher smiled. ‘Too late to take it back.’

‘Don’t tell me Chief Holland told you.’

‘No. But I was in his office a long time.’

‘Alone?’

‘Not for a minute.’

‘But he let you see the photographs?’

‘He tried hard not to. But your cleaning staff did a good job on his window.’

‘You saw them all?’

‘I couldn’t tell if the guy was dead or unconscious.’

‘So you suckered me with that jab about Korea.’

‘I like to know things. I’m hungry for knowledge.’

A waitress came by, a tired woman in her forties wearing sneakers under a uniform that featured a knotted necktie over a khaki shirt. Peterson ordered pot roast. Reacher followed his lead, and asked for coffee to drink.

Peterson asked, ‘How long were you in the army?’

Peterson asked, 'How long were you in the army?'

'Thirteen years.'

'And you were an MP?'

Reacher nodded.

'With medical training?'

'You've been talking to the bus passengers.'

'And the driver.'

'You've been checking me out.'

'Of course I have. Like crazy. What else do you think I was doing?'

'And you want me in your house tonight.'

'You got a better place to go?'

'Where you can keep an eye on me.'

'If you say so.'

'Why?'

'There are reasons.'

'Want to tell me what they are?'

'Just because you're hungry for knowledge?'

'I guess.'

'All I'll say is right now we need to know who's coming and going.'

Peterson said nothing more, and a minute later dinner arrived. Plates piled high, mashed potatoes, plenty of gravy. The coffee was an hour old, and it had suffered in terms of taste but gained in terms of strength.

Peterson asked, ‘What exactly did you do in the MPs?’

Reacher said, ‘Whatever they told me to.’

‘Serious crimes?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘Homicides?’

‘Everything from attempted to multiple.’

‘How much medical training did you get?’

‘Worried about the food here?’

‘I like to know things too.’

‘I didn’t get much medical training, really. I was trying to make the old folks feel better, that’s all.’

‘They spoke well of you.’

‘Don’t trust them. They don’t know me.’

Peterson didn’t reply.

Reacher asked, ‘Where was the dead guy found? Where the police car was blocking the side street?’

‘No. That was different. The dead guy was somewhere else.’

‘He wasn’t killed there.’

‘How do you know?’

‘No blood in the snow. Hit someone hard enough in the head to kill them, the scalp splits. It’s inevitable. And scalps bleed like crazy. There should have been a pool of blood a yard across.’

Peterson ate in silence for a minute. Then he asked: ‘Where do you live?’

Which was a difficult question. Not for Reacher himself. There was a simple answer. He lived nowhere, and always had. He had been born the son of a serving military officer, in a Berlin infirmary, and since the day he had been carried out of it swaddled in blankets he had been dragged all over the world, through an endless blur of military bases and cheap off-post accommodations, and then he had joined up himself and lived the same way on his own account. Four years at West Point was his longest period of residential stability, and he had enjoyed neither West Point nor stability. Now that he was out of the service, he continued the transience. It was all he knew and it was a habit he couldn't break.

Not that he had ever really tried.

He said, 'I'm a nomad.'

Peterson said, 'Nomads have animals. They move around to find pasture. That's the definition.'

'OK, I'm a nomad without the animals part.'

'You're a bum.'

'Possibly.'

'You got no bags.'

'You got a problem with that?'

'It's weird behaviour. Cops don't like weird behaviour.'

'Why is it weirder to move around than spend every day in the same place?'

Peterson was quiet for a spell and then he said, 'Everyone has possessions.'

'I've got no use for them. Travel light, travel far.'

Peterson didn't answer.

Reacher said, 'Whatever, I'm no concern of yours. I never heard of Bolton before. If the bus driver hadn't twitched I'd have been at Mount Rushmore tonight.'

Peterson nodded, reluctantly.

‘Can’t argue with that,’ he said.

Five minutes to ten in the evening.

Fifty-four hours to go.

Seventeen hundred miles to the south, inside the walled compound a hundred miles from Mexico City, Plato was eating too, a rib eye steak flown in all the way from Argentina. Nearly eleven in the evening local time. A late dinner. Plato was dressed in chinos and a white button-down shirt and black leather penny loafer shoes, all from the Brooks Brothers’ boys’ collection. The shoes and the clothes fit very well, but he looked odd in them. They were made for fat white middle-class American children, and Plato was old and brown and squat and had a shaved bullet head. But it was important to him to be able to buy clothes that fit right out of the box. Made-to-measure was obviously out of the question. Tailors would wield the tape and go quiet and then call out small numbers with studied and artificial neutrality. Alteration of off-the-rack items was just as bad. Visits from nervous local seamstresses and the furtive disposal of lengths of surplus fabric upset him mightily.

He put down his knife and his fork and dabbed his lips with a large white napkin. He picked up his cell phone and hit the green button twice, to return the last call he had received. When it was answered he said, ‘We don’t need to wait. Send the guy in and hit the witness.’

The man in the city villa asked, ‘When?’

‘As soon as would be prudent.’

‘OK.’

‘And hit the lawyer, too. To break the chain.’

‘OK.’

‘And make sure those idiots know they owe me big.’

‘OK.’

‘And tell them they better not bother me with this kind of shit ever again.’

Halfway through the pot roast Reacher asked, ‘So why was that street blocked off?’

Peterson said, ‘Maybe there was a power line down.’

‘I hope not. Because that would be a strange sense of priorities. You leave twenty seniors freezing on the highway for an hour to guard a power line on a side street?’

‘Maybe there was a fender bender.’

‘Same answer.’

‘Does it matter? You were already on your way into town by that point.’

‘That car had been there two hours or more. Its tracks were full of snow. But you told us no one was available.’

‘Which was true. That officer wasn’t available. He was doing a job.’

‘What job?’

‘None of your business.’

‘How big is your department?’

‘Big enough.’

‘And they were all busy?’

‘Correct.’

‘How many of them were busy sitting around doing nothing in parked cars?’

‘You got concerns, I suggest you move here and start paying taxes and then talk to the mayor or Chief Holland.’

‘I could have caught a chill.’

‘But you didn’t.’

‘Too early to say.’

They went back to eating. Until Peterson’s cell phone rang. He answered and listened and hung up and pushed his plate to one side.

‘Got to go,’ he said. ‘You wait here.’

‘I can’t,’ Reacher said. ‘This place is closing up. It’s ten o’clock. The waitress wants us out of here. She wants to go home.’

Peterson said nothing.

Reacher said, ‘I can’t walk. I don’t know where I’m supposed to go and it’s too cold to walk anyway.’

Peterson said nothing.

Reacher said, ‘I’ll stay in the car. Just ignore me.’

‘OK,’ Peterson said, but he didn’t look happy about it. Reacher left a twenty dollar bill on the table. The waitress smiled at him. Which she should, Reacher thought. Two pot roasts and a cup of coffee at South Dakota prices, he was leaving her a sixty per cent tip. Or maybe it was all tip, if Bolton was one of those towns where cops ate for free.

The Crown Vic was still faintly warm inside. Peterson hit the gas and the chains bit down and the car pushed through the snow on the ground. There was no other traffic except for snowploughs taking advantage of the lull in the fall. Reacher had a problem with snowploughs. Not the machines themselves, but the compound word. A plough turned earth over and left it in place. Snowploughs didn’t do that with snow. Snowploughs were more properly bulldozers. But whatever, Peterson overtook them all, didn’t pause at corners, didn’t yield, didn’t wait for green lights.

Reacher asked, ‘Where are we going?’

‘Western suburbs.’

‘Why?’

‘Intruders.’

‘In a house?’

‘On the street. It’s a Neighbourhood Watch thing.’ No further explanation. Peterson just drove, hunched forward over the wheel, tense and anxious. Reacher sprawled in the seat beside him, wondering what kind of intruders could get a police department’s deputy chief to respond so urgently to a busybody’s call.

Seventeen hundred miles south the man in the walled Mexico City villa dialled long distance to the United States. His final task of the day. Eleven o’clock local time, ten o’clock Central Time in the big country to the north. The call was answered and the man in the villa relayed Plato’s instructions, slowly and precisely. No room for misunderstanding. No room for error. He waited for confirmation and then he hung up. He didn’t call Plato back. No point. Plato didn’t understand the concept of confirmation. For Plato, obedience followed command the same way night followed day. It was inevitable. The only way it wouldn’t happen was if the world had stopped spinning on its axis.

SIX

PETERSON HAD HIS DASHBOARD RADIO TURNED UP HIGH AND Reacher picked out four separate voices from four separate cars. All of them were prowling the western suburbs and none of them had seen the reported intruders. Peterson aimed his own car down the streets they hadn't checked yet. He turned right, turned left, nosed into dead ends, backed out again, moved on. There was a moon low in the sky and Reacher saw neat suburban developments, small houses in straight rows, warm lights behind windows, all the sidewalks and driveways and yards rendered blue and flat and uniform by the thick blanket of snow. Roofs were piled high with white. Some streets had been visited by the ploughs and had high banks of snow in the gutters. Some were still covered with an undisturbed fresh layer, deep but not as deep as the yards and the driveways. Clearly this current fall was the second or the third in a week or so. Roads were covered and cleared, covered and cleared, in an endless winter rhythm.

Reacher asked, 'How many intruders?'

Peterson said, 'Two reported.'

'In a vehicle?'

'On foot.'

'Doing what?'

'Just walking around.'

'So stick to the ploughed streets. Nobody walks around in six inches of snow for the fun of it.'

Peterson slowed for a second and thought about it. Then he turned without a word and picked up a ploughed trail and retraced it. The plough had zigzagged through main drags and cross streets. The snow had been sheared thin and low and white. The excess was piled high to the sides, still soft and clean.

They found the intruders four minutes later.

There were two of them, shoulder to shoulder in a close standoff with a third

man. The third man was Chief Holland. His car was parked twenty feet away. It was an unmarked Crown Vic. Either navy blue or black. It was hard to say, in the moonlight. Police specification, with antennas on the trunk lid and concealed emergency lights peeping up out of the rear parcel shelf. The driver's door was open and the engine was running. Twin puddles of black vapour had condensed and pooled in the thin snow beneath the twin exhausts. Holland had gotten out and stepped ahead and confronted the two guys head on. That was clear.

The two guys were tall and heavyset and unkempt. White males, in black Frye boots, black jeans, black denim shirts, black leather vests, fingerless black gloves, black leather bandannas. Each had an unzipped black parka thrown over everything else. They looked exactly like the dead guy in the crime scene photographs.

Peterson braked and stopped and stood off and idled thirty feet back. His headlights illuminated the scene. The standoff looked like it wasn't going well for Holland. He looked nervous. The two guys didn't. They had Holland crowded back with a snow bank behind him. They were in his space, leaning forward. Holland looked beaten. Helpless.

Reacher saw why.

The holster on Holland's belt was unsnapped and empty, but there was no gun in his hand. He was glancing down and to his left.

He had dropped his pistol in the snow bank.

Or had it knocked from his hand.

Either way, not good.

Reacher asked, 'Who are they?'

Peterson said, 'Undesirables.'

'So undesirable that the chief of police joins the hunt?'

'You see what I see.'

'What do you want to do?'

‘It’s tricky. They’re probably armed.’

‘So are you.’

‘I can’t make Chief Holland look like an idiot.’

Reacher said, ‘Not his fault. Cold hands.’

‘He just got out of his car.’

‘Not recently. That car has been idling in place for ten minutes. Look at the puddles under the exhaust pipes.’

Peterson didn’t reply. And didn’t move.

Reacher asked again, ‘Who are they?’

‘What’s it to you?’

‘Just curious. They’re scaring you.’

‘You think?’

‘If they weren’t they’d be cuffed in the back of this car by now.’

‘They’re bikers.’

‘I don’t see any bikes.’

‘It’s winter,’ Peterson said. ‘They use pick-up trucks in winter.’

‘That’s illegal now?’

‘They’re tweakers.’

‘What are tweakers?’

‘Crystal meth users.’

‘Amphetamines?’

‘Methylated amphetamine. Smoked. Or to be technically accurate, vaporized and

'Methylated amphetamine. Smoked. Or to be technically accurate, vaporized and inhaled. Off of glass pipes or busted light bulbs or aluminum foil spoons. You heat it up and sniff away. Makes you erratic and unpredictable.'

'People are always erratic and unpredictable.'

'Not like these guys.'

'You know them?'

'Not specifically. But generically.'

'They live in town?'

'Five miles west. There are a lot of them. Kind of camping out. Generally they keep themselves to themselves, but people don't like them.'

Reacher said, 'The dead guy was one of them.'

Peterson said, 'Apparently.'

'So maybe they're looking for their buddy.'

'Or for justice.' Peterson watched and waited. Thirty feet ahead the body language ballet continued as before. Chief Holland was shivering. With cold, or fear.

Or both.

Reacher said, 'You better do something.'

Peterson did nothing.

Reacher said, 'Interesting strategy. You're going to wait until they freeze to death.'

Peterson said nothing.

Reacher said, 'Only problem is, Holland will freeze first.'

Peterson said nothing.

‘I’ll come with you, if you like.’

‘You’re a civilian.’

‘Only technically.’

‘You’re not properly dressed. It’s cold out.’

‘How long can it take?’

‘You’re unarmed.’

‘Against guys like that, I don’t need to be armed.’

‘Crystal meth is not a joke. No inhibitions.’

‘That just makes us even.’

‘Users don’t feel pain.’

‘They don’t need to feel pain. All they need to feel is conscious or unconscious.’

Peterson said nothing.

Reacher said, ‘You go left and I’ll go right. I’ll turn them around and you get in behind them.’

Thirty feet ahead Holland said something and the two guys crowded forward and Holland backed off and tripped and sat down heavily in the snow bank. Now he was more than an arm’s length from where his gun must have fallen.

Half past ten in the evening.

Reacher said, ‘This won’t wait.’

Peterson nodded. Opened his door.

‘Don’t touch them,’ he said. ‘Don’t start anything. Right now they’re innocent parties.’

‘With Holland down on his ass?’

‘Innocent until proven guilty. That’s the law. I mean it. Don’t touch them.’ Peterson climbed out of the car. Stood for a second behind his open door and then stepped around it and started forward. Reacher matched him, pace for pace.

The two guys saw them coming.

Reacher went right and Peterson went left. The car had been a comfortable seventy degrees. The evening air was sixty degrees colder. Maybe more. Reacher zipped his jacket all the way and shoved his hands deep in his pockets and hunched his shoulders so that his collar rode up on his neck. Even so he was shivering after five paces. It was beyond cold. The air felt deeply refrigerated. The two guys ahead stepped back, away from Holland. They gave him room. Holland struggled to his feet. Peterson stepped alongside him. His gun was still holstered. Reacher tracked around over the thin white glaze and stopped six feet behind the two guys. Holland stepped forward and dug around in the snow bank and retrieved his weapon. He brushed it clean and checked the muzzle for slush and stuck it back in his holster.

Everyone stood still.

The shaved snow on the street was part bright white powder and part ice crystals. They shone and glittered in the moonlight. Peterson and Holland were staring straight at the two guys and even though he was behind them Reacher was pretty sure the two guys were staring right back. He was shivering hard and his teeth were starting to chatter and his breath was fogging in front of him.

Nobody spoke.

The guy on Reacher’s right was more than six feet tall and close to four feet wide. Some of the bulk was goose-feather insulation in the black winter parka, but most of it was flesh and bone. The guy on Reacher’s left was a little smaller in both directions, and more active. He was restless, moving from foot to foot, twisting at the waist, rolling his shoulders. Cold, for sure, but not actively shivering. Reacher guessed the twitching was all about chemistry, not temperature.

Nobody spoke.

Reacher said, ‘Guys, either you need to move right along, or one of you needs to loan me a coat.’

The two men turned around, slowly. The big guy on the right had a white slab of a face buried deep in a beard. The beard was rimed with frost. Like a polar explorer, or a mountaineer. The smaller guy on the left had two days of stubble and jumpy eyes. His mouth was opening and closing like a goldfish pecking at the surface. Thin mobile lips, bad teeth.

The big guy on the right asked, ‘Who are you?’

Reacher said, ‘Go home. It’s too cold for foolishness on the street.’

No reply.

Behind the two guys Peterson and Holland did nothing. Their guns were holstered and their holsters were snapped shut. Reacher planned his next moves. Always better to be prepared. He anticipated no major difficulty. He would have preferred the bigger guy to be on his left, because that would have maximized the impact from a right-handed blow by allowing a marginally longer swing, and he always liked to put the larger of a pair down first. But he was prepared to be flexible. Maybe the jittery guy should go down first. The bigger guy was likely to be slower, and maybe less committed, without the chemical assistance.

Reacher said, ‘Coat or float, guys.’

No answer from the two men. Then behind them Chief Holland came to life. He stepped forward one angry pace and said, ‘Get the hell out of my town.’

Then he shoved the smaller guy in the back.

The smaller guy stumbled towards Reacher and then braced against the motion and spun back and started to whirl a fast one-eighty towards Holland with his fist cocking behind him like a pitcher aiming to break the radar gun. Reacher caught the guy by the wrist and held on for a split second and then let go again and the guy staggered through the rest of his turn all unbalanced and uncoordinated and ineffectual and ended with a weak late swing that missed Holland entirely.

But then he turned right back and aimed a second swing straight at Reacher. Which in Reacher’s opinion took the whole innocent-until-proven-guilty thing right off the table. He stepped left and the incoming fist buzzed by an inch from his chin. The force behind it spun the guy onward and Reacher kicked his feet out from under him and dumped him face down on the ice. Whereupon the

bigger guy started wading in, huge thighs, short choppy steps, fists like hams, trumpets of steam from his nose like an angry bull in a kid's picture book.

Easy meat.

Reacher matched the guy's charge with momentum of his own and smashed his elbow horizontally into the middle of the white space between the guy's beard and his hairline. Like running full tilt into a scaffolding pipe. Game over, except the smaller guy was already up on his knees and scrabbling for grip, hands and feet, like a sprinter in the blocks. So Reacher kicked him hard in the head. The guy's eyes rolled up and he toppled sideways and lay still with his legs folded under him.

Reacher put his hands back in his pockets.

Peterson said, 'Jesus.'

The two guys lay close together, black humps on the moonlit ice, steam rising off them in a cloud. Peterson said nothing more. Holland stalked back to his unmarked car and used the radio and came back a long minute later and said, 'I just called for two ambulances.'

He was looking straight at Reacher.

Reacher didn't respond.

Holland asked, 'You want to explain why I had to call for two ambulances?'

Reacher said, 'Because I slipped.'

'What?'

'On the ice.'

'That's your story? You slipped and just kind of blundered into them?'

'No, I slipped when I was hitting the big guy. It softened the blow. If I hadn't slipped you wouldn't be calling for two ambulances. You'd be calling for one ambulance and one coroner's wagon.'

Holland looked away.

Peterson said, ‘Go wait in the car.’

The lawyer went to bed at a quarter to eleven. His children had preceded him by two hours and his wife was still in the kitchen. He put his shoes on a rack and his tie in a drawer and his suit on a hanger. He tossed his shirt and his socks and his underwear in the laundry hamper. He put on his pyjamas and took a leak and brushed his teeth and climbed under the covers and stared at the ceiling. He could still hear the laugh in his head, from the phone call just before he spun out on the highway. A bark, a yelp, full of excitement. Full of anticipation. Full of glee. Eliminate the witness, he had recited, and the man on the phone had laughed with happiness.

Reacher got back in Peterson’s car and closed the door. His face was numb with cold. He angled the heater vents up and turned the fan to maximum. He waited. Five minutes later the ambulances showed up, with flashing lights pulsing bright red and blue against the snow. They hauled the two guys away. They were still out cold. Concussions, and probably some minor maxillary damage. No big deal. Three days in bed and a cautious week’s convalescence would fix them up good as new. Plus painkillers.

Reacher waited in the car. Thirty feet ahead of him through the clear frigid air he could see Holland and Peterson talking. They were standing close together, half turned away, speaking low. Judging by the way they never glanced back, Reacher guessed they were talking about him.

Chief Holland was asking: ‘Could he be the guy?’

Peterson was saying, ‘If he’s the guy, he just put two of his presumptive allies in the hospital. Which would be strange.’

‘Maybe that was a decoy. Maybe they staged it. Or maybe one of them was about to say something compromising. So he had to shut them up.’

‘He was protecting you, chief.’

‘At first he was.’

‘And then it was self-defence.’

‘How sure are you he’s not the guy?’

‘One hundred per cent. It’s just not feasible. It’s a million-to-one chance he’s here at all.’

‘No way he could have caused the bus to crash right there?’

‘Not without running up the aisle and physically attacking the driver. And no one said he did. Not the driver, not the passengers.’

‘OK,’ Holland said. ‘So could the driver be the guy? Did he crash on purpose?’

‘Hell of a risk.’

‘Not necessarily. Let’s say he knows the road because he’s driven it before, summer and winter. He knows where it ices up. So he throws the bus into a deliberate skid.’

‘A car was coming right at him.’

‘So he says now.’

‘But he could have been injured. He could have killed people. He could have ended up in the hospital or in jail for manslaughter, not walking around.’

‘Maybe not. Those modern vehicles have all kinds of electronic systems. Traction control, antilock brakes, stuff like that. All he did was fishtail around a little and drive off the shoulder. No big deal. And then we welcomed him with open arms, like the Good Samaritan.’

Peterson said, ‘I could talk to Reacher tonight. He was a witness on the bus. I could talk to him and get a better picture.’

Holland said, ‘He’s a psychopath. I want him gone.’

‘The roads are closed.’

‘Then I want him locked up.’

‘Really?’ Peterson said. ‘Tell the truth, chief, he strikes me as a smart guy. Think about it. He saved you from a busted nose and he saved me from having to shoot two people. He did us both a big favour with what he did tonight.’

‘Accidentally.’

‘Maybe on purpose.’

‘You think he knew what he was doing? Right there and then?’

‘Yes, I think he did. I think he’s the sort of guy who sees things five seconds before the rest of the world.’

‘Are you serious?’

‘Yes, sir. I’ve spent a little time with him.’

Holland shrugged.

‘OK,’ he said. ‘Talk to him. If you really want to.’

‘Can we use him for more? He’s ex-military. He might know something.’

‘About what?’

‘About what’s out there to the west.’

‘You like him?’

‘Doesn’t matter if we like him. We can use him. It would be negligent not to, in the current circumstances.’

‘That’s an admission of defeat.’

‘No, sir, it’s common sense. Better to ask for help beforehand than get our asses kicked afterwards.’

‘How much would we have to tell him?’

‘Most of it,’ Peterson said. ‘Maybe all of it. He’d probably figure it out anyway.’

‘Is this what you would do if you were chief?’

‘Yes, sir, it is.’

Holland thought about it. Nodded.

Holland thought about it. Nodded.

‘OK,’ he said again. ‘Good enough for me. Talk to him.’ Five minutes to eleven in the evening.

Fifty-three hours to go.

SEVEN

PETERSON DROVE HOME IN HIS SQUAD CAR. WHICH REACHER thought was unusual. In his experience town cops dumped their squads in a motor pool and rode home in their personal vehicles. Then the next watch climbed in and drove away while the motors and the seats were still warm. But Peterson said the Bolton PD had a lot of cars. Every member of the department was issued with one. And every member of the department was required to live within ten minutes' drive of the station house.

Peterson lived within two minutes' drive, a mile out of town to the east, in a house sitting on a remnant of an old farm. The house was a solid wooden thing shaped like a pound cake, painted red with white trim, with warm yellow light in some of the windows. There was a matching barn. Both roofs were piled high with snow. The surrounding land was white and frozen and flat and silent. The lot was square. Maybe an acre. It was bounded by barbed wire strung on wizened posts. Maybe a foot of the fence showed above the fall.

The driveway was ploughed in a Y-shape. One leg led to the barn and the other led to the front of the house. Peterson parked in the barn. It was a big old open-fronted structure with three bays. One was occupied by a Ford pick-up truck with a plough blade on it, and one was full of stacked firewood. Reacher climbed out of the car and Peterson joined him and they backtracked down the ploughed strip and turned the tight angle and headed for the house.

The front door was a plain slab of wood painted the same red as the siding. It opened up just as Peterson and Reacher got close enough to touch it. A woman stood in the hallway with warm air and warm light behind her. She was about Peterson's age, well above medium height, and slender. She had fair hair pulled back into a ponytail and was wearing black pants and a wool sweater with a complex pattern knitted into it.

Peterson's wife, presumably.

All three of them paused in a mute pantomime of politeness, Peterson anxious to get in from the cold, his wife anxious not to let the heat out of the house, Reacher not wanting to just barge in uninvited. After a long second's hesitation the woman swung the door wider and Peterson put a hand on Reacher's back and

he stepped inside. The hallway had a polished board floor and a low ceiling and wallpapered walls. On the left was a parlour and on the right was a dining room. Straight ahead in the back of the house was a kitchen. There was a wood stove going hard somewhere. Reacher could smell it, hot iron and a trace of smoke.

Peterson made the introductions. He spoke quietly, which made Reacher think there must be sleeping children upstairs. Peterson's wife was called Kim and she seemed to know all about the accident with the bus and the need for emergency quarters. She said she had made up a pull-out bed in the den. She said it apologetically, as if a real bedroom would have been better.

Reacher said, 'Ma'am, the floor would have been fine. I'm very sorry to put you to any trouble at all.'

She said, 'It's no trouble.'

'I hope to move on in the morning.'

'I don't think you'll be able to. It will be snowing hard before dawn.'

'Maybe later in the day, then.'

'They'll keep the highway closed, I'm afraid. Won't they, Andrew?'

Peterson said, 'Probably.'

His wife said, 'You're welcome to stay as long as you need to.'

Reacher said, 'Ma'am, that's very generous. Thank you.'

'Did you leave your bags in the car?'

Peterson said, 'He doesn't have bags. He claims he has no use for possessions.'

Kim said nothing. Her face was blank, as if she was having difficulty processing such information. Then she glanced at Reacher's jacket, his shirt, his pants. Reacher said, 'I'll head out to a store in the morning. It's what I do. I buy new every few days.'

'Instead of laundry?'

'Yes.'

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it’s logical.’

‘You’ll need a warm coat.’

‘Apparently.’

‘Don’t buy one. Too expensive, for just a few days. We can lend you one. My dad is your size. He keeps a coat here, for when he visits. And a hat and gloves.’ She turned away and opened a closet door and leaned in to the back and wrestled a hanger off the rail. Came out with an enormous tan parka, the colour of mud. It had fat horizontal quilts of down the size of inner tubes. It was old and worn and had darker tan shapes all over it where patches and badges had been unpicked from it. The shapes on the sleeves were chevrons.

‘Retired cop?’ Reacher asked.

‘Highway Patrol,’ Kim Peterson said. ‘They get to keep the clothes if they take the insignia off.’

The coat had a fur-trimmed hood, and it had a fur hat jammed in one pocket and a pair of gloves jammed in the other.

‘Try it on,’ she said.

It turned out that her father was not Reacher’s size. He was bigger. The coat was a size too large. But too big is always better than too small. Reacher pulled it into position and looked down at where the stripes had been. He smiled. They made him feel efficient. He had always liked his sergeants. They did good work.

The coat smelled of mothballs. The hat smelled of another man’s hair. It was made of tan nylon and rabbit fur.

‘Thank you,’ Reacher said. ‘You’re very kind.’ He shrugged the coat off again and she took it from him and hung it on a hook on the hallway wall, just inside the entrance, next to where Peterson was hanging his own police-issue parka. Then they all headed for the kitchen. It ran left to right across most of the width of the house. There was all the usual kind of kitchen stuff in it, plus a beat-up

table and six chairs, and a family-room area with a battered sofa and two armchairs and a television set. The wood stove was at the far end of the room. It was roaring like a locomotive. Beyond it was a closed door.

‘That’s the den,’ Kim said. ‘Go straight in.’

Reacher assumed he was being dismissed for the night, so he turned to say thanks once again, but found that Peterson was following right behind him. Kim said, ‘He wants to talk to you. I can tell, because he isn’t talking to me.’

The man who had been told to kill the witness and the lawyer set about cleaning the gun he had been given for the job. It was a Glock 17, not old, not new, well proved, well maintained. He stripped it, brushed it out, oiled it, and reassembled it. The cheeks of the grip were stippled, and there was some accumulated grime in the microscopic valleys. He worked it out with a Q-tip soaked in solvent. The maker’s name was embossed near the heel, an overcomplicated and rather amateur graphic featuring a large letter G surrounding the rest of the word. It was easy to see the G merely as an outline, and therefore to overlook it. At first glance the name appeared to be LOCK. There was dirt over the whole thing. The man soaked the Q-tip again and started work and had it clean a minute later.

Peterson’s den was a small, dark, square, masculine space. It was in the back corner of the house and had two outside walls with two windows. The drapes were made of thick plaid material and were drawn back, open. The other two walls had three doors in them. The door back to the family room, plus maybe a closet and a small bathroom. The remainder of the wall space was lined with yard-sale cabinets and an old wooden desk with a small refrigerator on it. On top of the refrigerator was an old-fashioned alarm clock with a loud tick and two metal bells. Out in the body of the room there was a low-slung leather chair that looked Scandinavian, and a two-seat sofa that had been pulled out and made up into a narrow bed.

Reacher sat down on the bed. Peterson took two bottles of beer from the refrigerator and twisted the tops off and pitched the caps into a trash basket and handed one of the bottles to Reacher. Then he lowered himself into the leather chair.

He said, ‘We have a situation here.’

Reacher said, ‘I know.’

‘How much do you know?’

‘I know you’re pussyfooting around a bunch of meth-using bikers. Like you’re scared of them.’

‘We’re not scared of them.’

‘So why pussyfoot around?’

‘We’ll get to that. What else do you know?’

‘I know you’ve got a pretty big police station.’

‘OK.’

‘Which implies a pretty big police department.’

‘Sixty officers.’

‘And you were working at full capacity all day and all evening, even to the point where the off-duty chief and the off-duty deputy chief had to respond to a citizen’s call at ten o’clock in the evening. Which seems to be because most of your guys are on roadblock duty. Basically you’ve got your whole town locked down.’

‘Because?’

‘Because you’re worried about someone coming in from the outside.’

Peterson took a long pull on his beer and asked, ‘Was the bus crash for real?’

Reacher said, ‘I’m not your guy.’

‘We know you’re not. You had no control. But maybe the driver is our guy.’

Reacher shook his head. ‘Too elaborate, surely. Could have gone wrong a thousand different ways.’

‘Was he really fighting the skid?’

‘As opposed to what?’

‘Causing it, maybe.’

‘Wouldn’t he have just killed the engine and faked a breakdown? Nearer the cloverleaf?’

‘Too obvious.’

‘I was asleep. But what I saw after I woke up looked real to me. I don’t think he’s your guy.’

‘But he could be.’

‘Anything’s possible. But if it was me, I would have come in as a prison visitor. Chief Holland told me you get plenty of them. Heads on beds, six nights a week.’

‘We know them all pretty well. Not too many short sentences out there. The faces don’t change. And we watch them. Anyone we don’t know, we call the prison to check they’re on the list. And they’re mostly women and children anyway. We’re expecting a man.’

Reacher shrugged. Took a pull from his bottle. The beer was Miller. Next to him the refrigerator started humming. Warm air had gotten in when Peterson had opened the door. Now the machinery was fighting it.

Peterson said, ‘The prison took two years to build. There were hundreds of construction workers. They built a camp for them, five miles west of us. Public land. There was an old army facility there. They added more huts and trailers. It was like a little village. Then they left.’

‘When?’

‘A year ago.’

‘And?’

‘The bikers moved in. They took the place over.’

‘How many?’

‘There are more than a hundred now.’

‘And?’

‘They’re selling methamphetamine. Lots of it. East and west, because of the highway. It’s a big business.’

‘So bust them.’

‘We’re trying to. It isn’t easy. We have no probable cause for a search out there. Which isn’t normally a problem. A meth lab in a trailer, life expectancy is usually a day or two. They blow up. All you need to do is follow the fire department. All kinds of volatile chemicals. But these guys are very careful. No accidents yet.’

‘But?’

‘We caught a break. A big-time guy out of Chicago came west to negotiate a bulk purchase. He met with their top boy right here in Bolton. Neutral ground, and civilized. He bought a sample out the back of a pick-up truck in the restaurant parking lot, right where we had dinner.’

‘And?’

‘We have a witness who saw the whole transaction. The Chicago guy got away, but we grabbed the dope and the money and busted the biker. He’s in the county lock-up right now, awaiting trial.’

‘Their top boy? Didn’t that give you probable cause to search his place?’

‘His truck is registered in Kentucky. His driver’s licence is from Alabama. He claims that he drove up here. He says he doesn’t live here. We had nothing to link him to. We can’t get a warrant based on the fact that he dresses like some other guys we’ve seen. Judges don’t work that way. They want more.’

‘So what’s the plan?’

‘We’re going to roll him. We’ll offer him a plea bargain and he’ll give us what we need to clean out the whole mess.’

‘Has he agreed?’

‘Not yet. He’s waiting us out. Waiting to see if the witness forgets stuff. Or dies.’

‘Who’s the witness?’

‘A nice old lady, here in town. She’s seventy-plus. Used to be a teacher and a librarian. Perfect credibility.’

‘Is she likely to forget stuff or die?’

‘Of course she is. That’s how these people do it. They scare the witnesses. Or kill them.’

‘Which is why you’re worried about strangers coming to town. You think they’re coming for her.’

Peterson nodded. Said nothing.

Reacher took a long pull on his bottle and asked, ‘Why assume it will be a stranger? Couldn’t the bikers come over and take care of it for themselves?’

Peterson shook his head. ‘We’re all over any biker who shows up in town. As you saw tonight. Everyone watches for them. So it won’t be a biker. It would be self-defeating. Their whole strategy is to deny us probable cause.’

‘OK.’

Peterson said, ‘Someone else is on his way. Has to be. On their behalf. Someone we won’t recognize when he gets here.’

EIGHT

REACHER TOOK A THIRD LONG PULL ON HIS BOT TLE AND SAID, ‘IT’S not the bus driver.’

Peterson asked, ‘How sure are you?’

‘How much money are these guys getting for their meth?’

‘Two hundred bucks a gram, as far as we know, and we guess they’re moving it in pick-up trucks, which is a whole lot of grams. They could be making millions.’

‘In which case they can afford professionals. A professional hit man with a day job as a bus driver is an unlikely combination.’

Peterson nodded. ‘OK, it’s not the bus driver. Mr Jay Knox is innocent.’

‘And you can vouch for all the prison visitors?’

‘We watch them. They hit the motels, they get on the shuttle buses to the prison, they come back, they leave the next day. Any change to that pattern, we’d be all over them, too.’

‘Where’s the witness?’

‘At home. Her name is Janet Salter. She’s a real sweetie. Like a storybook grandma. She lives on a dead-end street, fortunately. We have a car blocking the turn, all day and all night. You saw it.’

‘Not enough.’

‘We know. We have a second car outside her house and a third parked one street over, watching the back. Plus women officers in the house, the best we’ve got, minimum of four at all times, two awake, two asleep.’

‘When is the trial?’

‘A month if we’re lucky.’

‘And she won’t leave? You could stash her in a hotel. Maybe in the Caribbean. That’s a deal I would take right now.’

‘She won’t leave.’

‘Does she know the danger she’s in?’

‘We explained the situation to her. But she wants to do the right thing. She says it’s a matter of principle.’

‘Good for her.’

Peterson nodded. ‘Good for us, too. Because we’ll nail the whole lot of them. But hard on us, also. Because we’re using a lot of resources.’

Reacher nodded in turn. ‘Which is why you’re pussyfooting. Why you’re not confronting the bikers. Because an all-out war right now would stretch you too thin.’

‘And because we have to sell this thing to a jury. We can’t let defence counsel make out it’s all part of a harassment campaign. Plus, the bikers aren’t dumb. They keep their noses clean. Technically as individuals they haven’t done anything wrong yet. At least not in public.’

‘In fact the opposite seems to be true. I saw the photographs.’

‘Exactly,’ Peterson said. ‘It looks like one of our good citizens beat one of theirs to death.’

The clock on the refrigerator ticked on and hit five to midnight. Fifty-two hours to go. Outside the window the moon had crept higher. The fallen snow was bright. The air was still. No wind. The cold was so intense Reacher could feel it striking through the farmhouse walls. There was a buffer zone about a foot deep, where the cold came creeping in before the heat from the iron stove overwhelmed it and beat it back.

Reacher asked, ‘Is Chief Holland up to the job?’

Peterson said, ‘Why do you ask?’

‘First impressions. He looks a little overmatched to me.’

‘Holland is a good man.’

‘That’s not an answer to my question.’

‘Did you discuss your superiors when you were in the army?’

‘All the time. With people of equal rank.’

‘Are we of equal rank?’

‘Approximately.’

‘So what were your superiors like?’

‘Some of them were good, and some of them were assholes.’

‘Holland’s OK,’ Peterson said. ‘But he’s tired. His wife died. Then his daughter grew up and left home. He’s all alone, and he feels a little beaten down.’

‘I saw the photograph in his office.’

‘Happier days. They made a nice family.’

‘So is he up to the job?’

‘Enough to ask for help when he needs it.’

‘Who’s he asking?’

‘You.’

Reacher finished his Miller. He was warm, and comfortable, and tired. He said, ‘What could I possibly do for him?’

Peterson said, ‘There was an old army facility where they built the construction camp.’

‘You told me that already.’

‘We need to understand exactly what it was.’

‘Don’t you know?’

Peterson shook his head. ‘It was put in a long time ago. There’s a single stone building, about the size of a house.’

‘Is that all?’

Peterson nodded. ‘A long straight road leading to a single small building all alone on the prairie.’

‘And it’s the size of a house?’

‘Smaller than this one.’

‘What shape?’

‘Square. Rectangular. Like a house.’

‘With a roof?’

‘Of course.’

‘Because I’m wondering if it was a missile silo. There are plenty of them in the Dakotas.’

‘It’s not a silo.’

‘Then it could be anything. Could be something they started and didn’t finish.’

‘We don’t think so. There’s a kind of folk memory with the older people. They say there were hundreds of engineers out there for months. And a security cordon. And a lot of coming and going. That’s a lot of effort for a thing the size of a house.’

‘I’ve heard of stranger things.’

‘We need to know. Chances are we’re going to need to go out there and make a hundred arrests. We need to know what we’re dealing with.’

‘Call somebody. Call the Department of the Army.’

‘We have. We’ve called, the county board has called, the state government has called.’

‘And?’

‘Nobody ever got a reply.’

‘How old are your older people?’

‘Does that matter?’

‘I’m asking when the place was built. Did they see all these engineers for themselves? Or just hear stories about them from their parents or grandparents?’

‘The place is about fifty years old.’

‘How long since soldiers were seen out there?’

‘Never. The place was never used.’

Reacher shrugged. ‘So it’s an abandoned Cold War facility. Maybe never even completed. One day it seemed like a good idea, the next day it didn’t. That kind of thing happened all the time, way back when, because strategy was fluid. Or because nobody had the faintest idea what they were doing. But it’s no big deal. A stone house is going to be more resistant to small-arms fire than a hut or a trailer, but I’m assuming you’re not planning on a shooting war out there anyway.’

‘We need to know for sure.’

‘I can’t help you. I never served here. Never heard any talk.’

‘You could make some back-channel calls. Maybe you still know people.’

‘I’ve been out a very long time.’

‘You could go west and take a look.’

‘It’s a stone building. Army stone is the same as anyone else’s.’

‘Then why the hundreds of engineers?’

‘What’s on your mind?’

‘We’re wondering if it’s an underground facility. Maybe the stone building is just a stair head. It could be a warren down there. Their lab could be down there. Which would explain the lack of fires and explosions in the trailers. They could have turned the whole place into a fortress. There could be food and water and weapons down there. This whole thing could turn into a siege. We don’t want that.’

Peterson stood up and stepped over to the desk and took two fresh bottles from the refrigerator. Which told Reacher they were only halfway through their conversation. Maybe only a third of the way through, if there was a six-pack in there.

Peterson said, ‘There’s more.’

‘No kidding,’ Reacher said.

‘We’ve got their top boy locked up, but command and control is still happening. They’re still functioning.’

‘So he’s got a deputy.’

‘Gangs don’t work like that.’

‘So he’s still communicating. Cell phone or smuggled notes.’

‘Not happening.’

‘You know that for sure?’

‘Definitely.’

‘Then it’s through his lawyer. A private conference every day, they’re pretending to discuss the case, your guy is really issuing verbal instructions, his lawyer is passing them on.’

‘That’s what we guessed. But that’s not happening either.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Because they have concealed video and audio in the conference rooms.’

‘For privileged discussions between lawyers and clients? Is that legal?’

‘Maybe. It’s a brand-new prison. And there’s a lot of fine print in some of the new federal legislation.’

‘He’s not a federal prisoner.’

‘OK, so no, it’s probably not entirely legal.’

‘But you’re doing it anyway?’

‘Yes,’ Peterson said. ‘And we haven’t heard a single instruction or business detail. No notes passed, nothing written down.’

‘You ever heard of the Fourth Amendment? This could screw your case.’

‘We’re not planning on using anything we hear. The prosecutor doesn’t even know we’re doing it. We just want advance warning, that’s all, in the police department, in case they decide to move against the witness.’

‘She’ll be OK. You’ve got her buttoned up tight. It’s only a month. You’re on the hook for a little overtime, but that’s all.’

‘We competed for that prison.’

‘Holland told me. Like a Toyota plant. Or Honda.’

‘It was a give and take process.’

‘It always is.’

‘Correctional staff get tax breaks, we built houses, we expanded the school.’

‘And?’

‘Final item was we had to sign on to their crisis plan.’

‘Which is what?’

‘If there’s an escape, we have a preassigned role.’

If there's an escape, we have a preassigned role.'

'Which is what?'

'The whole of the Bolton PD moves up to a prearranged perimeter a mile out.'

'All of you?'

'Every last one of us. On duty or off. Awake or asleep. Healthy or sick.'

'Are you serious?'

'It's what we had to agree. For the good of the town.'

'Not good,' Reacher said. 'Not good at all,' Peterson said. 'If that siren goes off, we drop everything and head north. All of us. Which means if that siren goes off any time in the next month, we leave Janet Salter completely unprotected.'

NINE

REACHER FINISHED MOST OF HIS SECOND BEER AND SAID, ‘THAT’S insane.’

‘Only in reality,’ Peterson said. ‘Not on paper. The Highway Patrol is theoretically available to us as back-up. And the feds offered us witness protection for Mrs Salter. But the Highway Patrol is usually hours away all winter long, and Mrs Salter refused the protection. She says the bikers are the ones who should be locked up miles from home, not her.’

‘Problem,’ Reacher said.

‘Tell me about it,’ Peterson said.

Reacher glanced at the moonlit view out the window and said, ‘But it’s not exactly ideal escaping weather, is it? Not right now. Maybe not for months. There’s two feet of virgin snow on the ground for five miles all around. If someone gets through whatever kind of a fence they have out there, they’ll die of exposure inside an hour. Or get tracked by a helicopter. Their footsteps will be highly visible.’

Peterson said, ‘No one escapes on foot any more. They stow away on a food truck or something.’

‘So why form a perimeter a mile out?’

‘Nobody said their crisis plan makes any sense.’

‘So fake it. Leave some folks in place. At least the women in the house.’

‘We can’t. There will be a head count. We’ll be audited. We don’t comply to the letter, we’ll get hit with federal supervision for the next ten years. The town signed a contract. We took their money.’

‘For the extra cars?’

Peterson nodded. ‘And for housing. Everyone lives within ten minutes, everyone gets a car, everyone keeps his radio on, everyone responds instantaneously.’

‘Can’t you stick Mrs Salter in a car and take her with you?’

‘We’re supposed to keep civilians away. We certainly can’t take one with us.’

‘Has anyone escaped so far?’

‘No. It’s a brand-new prison. They’re doing OK.’

‘So hope for the best.’

‘You don’t get it. We would hope for the best. If this was about random chance or coincidence, we wouldn’t be sweating it. But it isn’t. Because the same guy who wants us out of Janet Salter’s house has the actual personal power to make that happen, any old time he wants to.’

‘By escaping on cue?’ Reacher said. ‘I don’t think so. I know prisons. Escapes take a long time to organize. He would have to scope things out, make a plan, find a truck driver, build trust, get money, make arrangements.’

‘There’s more. It gets worse.’

‘Tell me.’

‘Part two of the crisis plan is for a prison riot. The corrections people move in off the fence and we take over the towers and the gate.’

‘All of you?’

‘Same as part one of the plan. And prison riots don’t take a long time to organize. They can start in a split second. Prisons are riots just waiting to happen, believe me.’

There was no third bottle of beer. No more substantive conversation. Just a few loose ends to tie up, and a little reiteration. Peterson said, ‘You see? The guy can time it almost to the minute. The wrong thing gets said to the wrong person, a minute later a fight breaks out, a minute after that there’s a full-blown riot brewing, we get the call, ten minutes after that we’re all more than five miles from Janet Salter’s house.’

‘He’s in lock-up,’ Reacher said. ‘The county jail, right? Which is a separate facility. Nobody riots in lock-up. They’re all awaiting trial. They’re all busy

making out like they're innocent.'

'He's a biker. He'll have friends in the main house. Or friends of friends. That's how prison gangs work. They look after their own. And there are lots of ways of communicating.'

'Not good,' Reacher said again.

'Not good at all,' Peterson said. 'When the siren sounds, we leave the old-timer civilian on the desk, and that's it. He's supposed to call us back if there's a terrorist alert, but short of that, our hands are tied.'

'You expecting a terrorist alert?'

'Not here. Mount Rushmore has symbolic value, but that's Rapid City's problem.'

Reacher asked, 'Did you expand the police department too? Like the schools?'

Peterson nodded. 'We had to. Because the town grew.'

'How much did you expand?'

'We doubled in size. By which time we were competing with the prison for staff. It was hard to keep standards up. Which is a big part of Chief Holland's problem. It's like half of us are his from the old days, and half of us aren't.'

'I can't help him,' Reacher said. 'I'm just a guy passing through.'

'You can make those calls to the army. That would help him.

If we get through the next month, we're going to need that information.'

'I've been out too long. It's a new generation now. They'll hang up on me.'

'You could try.'

'I wouldn't get past the switchboard.'

'Back when I came on the job we had a special emergency number for the FBI office in Pierre. The system changed years ago, but I still remember the number.'

‘So?’

‘I’m guessing there’s a number you remember, too. Maybe not for a switchboard.’

Reacher said nothing.

Peterson said, ‘Make the calls for us. That’s all, I promise. We’ll handle the rest, and then you can get on your way.’

Reacher said nothing.

‘We can offer you a desk and chair.’

‘Where?’

‘At the police station. Tomorrow.’

‘You want me to come to work with you? To the police station? You don’t quite trust me yet, do you?’

‘You’re in my house. With my wife and children sleeping in it.’

Reacher nodded.

‘Can’t argue with that,’ he said.

But Kim Peterson wasn’t sleeping. Not right then. Ten minutes after Andrew Peterson left him alone Reacher got tired of the stale hop smell from the four empty beer bottles, so he trapped their necks between his knuckles and carried them two in each hand out to the kitchen, hoping to find a trash bin. Instead he found Kim Peterson tidying her refrigerator. The room was dark but the light inside the appliance was bright. She was bathed in a yellow glow. She was wearing an old candlewick bathrobe. Her hair was down. Reacher held up the four bottles, as a mute inquiry.

‘Under the sink,’ Kim Peterson said.

Reacher bent down and opened the cabinet door. Lined up the bottles neatly with six others already there.

‘Got everything you need?’ she asked him.

‘Yes, thanks.’

‘Did Andrew ask you to do something for him?’

‘He wants me to make some calls.’

‘About the army camp?’

Reacher nodded.

‘Are you going to do it?’

Reacher said, ‘I’m going to try.’

‘Good. That place drives him crazy.’

‘I’ll do my best.’

‘Promise?’

‘Ma’am?’

‘Promise me, if he asks, would you help him any way you can? He works too hard. He’s responsible for everything now. Chief Holland is overwhelmed. He barely knows half his department. Andrew has to do everything.’

There was a tiny bathroom off the den and Reacher used it to take a long hot shower. Then he folded his clothes over the back of the chair that Peterson had used and climbed under the covers. The sofa springs creaked and twanged under his weight. He rolled one way, rolled the other, listened to the loud tick of the clock, and was asleep a minute later.

Five to one in the morning.

Fifty-one hours to go.

TEN

REACHER WOKE UP AT TEN TO SEVEN, TO A SILENT SEPULCHRAL world. Outside the den windows the air was thick with heavy flakes. They were falling gently but relentlessly on to a fresh accumulation that was already close to a foot deep. There was no wind. Each one of the billions of flakes came parachuting straight down, sometimes wavering a little, sometimes spiralling, sometimes sidestepping an inch or two, each one disturbed by nothing except its own featherweight instability. Most added their tiny individual masses to the thick white quilt they landed on. Some stuck to fantastic vertical feathered shapes on power lines and fence wires, and made the shapes taller.

The bed was warm but the room was cold. Reacher guessed that the iron stove had been banked overnight, its embers hoarded, its air supply cut off. He wondered for a moment about the correct protocol for a house guest in such circumstances. Should he get up and open the dampers and add some wood? Would that be helpful? Or would it be presumptuous? Would it upset a delicate and long-established combustion schedule and condemn his hosts to an inconvenient midnight visit to the woodpile two weeks down the road?

In the end Reacher did nothing. Just kept the covers pulled up to his chin and closed his eyes again.

Five to seven in the morning.

Forty-five hours to go.

Seventeen hundred miles to the south the day was already an hour older. Plato was eating breakfast in the smaller of his two outdoor dining rooms. The larger was reserved for formal dinners, and therefore little used, because formal dinners meant business dinners, and most of his current business associates were Russians, and Russians didn't much care for the evening heat a hundred miles from Mexico City. They preferred air conditioning. Plato supposed it was a question of what they were accustomed to. He had heard that parts of Russia were so cold you could spit, and the saliva would freeze and bounce off the ground like a marble. Personally he didn't believe it. He was prepared to accept that parts of Russia recorded very low temperatures, and certainly some of the extreme numbers he had seen in almanacs and weather reports might indeed

freeze a small volume of organic liquid in the space and time between mouth and ground. But to survive in such an environment he was sure a human would have to wear a ski mask, possibly made from silk or a more modern synthetic material, and spitting was categorically impossible while wearing a ski mask. And he understood that in general extremely low temperatures went hand in hand with extremely low humidity, which would discourage spitting anyway, maybe even to the point of impracticability. Thus the anecdote was illustrative without being functionally true.

Plato was proud of his analytical abilities.

He was thinking about Russians because he had received an intriguing proposal from one of them, an hour ago by telephone. It was the usual kind of thing. A cousin of a friend of a brother-in-law wanted a bulk quantity of a certain substance, and could Plato help the man? Naturally Plato's first priority was to help Plato, so he had viewed the proposal through that lens, and he had arrived at an interesting conclusion, which might, with a little honing and salesmanship, be turned into an advantageous deal. Dramatically advantageous, in fact, and completely one-sided in his own favour, of course, but then, he was Plato, and the unnamed Russian cousin wasn't.

There were three main factors.

First, the deal would require a fundamental shift in the Russian's initial baseline assumption, in that the bulk quantity would not be transported to the Russian, but the Russian would be transported to the bulk quantity.

Second, the deal would require complete faith on Plato's part in the notion that a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush.

And third, the deal would change things a little, up in South Dakota. Therefore the situation up there had to remain pristine, and viable, and immaculate, and perfectly attractive. Perfectly marketable, in other words. Which meant the witness and the lawyer had to be dealt with sooner rather than later.

Plato reached for his phone.

At fourteen minutes past seven the old farmhouse was still quiet. At fifteen minutes past, it burst into life. Reacher heard the thin beep and wail of alarm clocks through walls and ceilings, and then the stumbling tread of footsteps on the second floor. Four sets. Parents, and two children. Two boys. Reacher

the second floor. Four sets. Parents, and two children. Two boys, Reacher figured, judging by the uninhibited clumsiness of their progress. Doors opened and closed, toilets flushed, showers ran. Ten minutes later there was noise in the kitchen. The gulp and hiss of a coffee machine, the padded slam of the refrigerator door, the scrape of chair legs on floorboards. Again, Reacher wondered about applicable protocol. Should he just come out and join the family at breakfast? Or would that scare the children? He supposed it would depend on their ages and their constitutions. Should he wait to be invited? Or should he wait until the children had left for school? Would they be going to school at all, with a foot of new snow on the ground?

He showered fast and dressed in the tiny bathroom and made the bed and sat on it. A minute later he heard the scrape of a chair and small fast feet on the boards and an inexpert knock on his door. It opened immediately and a boy stuck his head inside. The kid was maybe seven years old. He was a miniature version of Andrew Peterson. His face was equal parts resentment at being sent to do a chore, and apprehension for what he might find, and open curiosity about what he had actually found.

He stared for a second and said, ‘Mama says come get a cup of coffee.’

Then he disappeared.

By the time Reacher got through the door both children had left the kitchen. He could hear them running up the stairs. He imagined he could see disturbances in the air behind them, dust and vortexes, like a cartoon. Their parents were sitting quietly at the table. They were dressed the same as the day before, Peterson in uniform, his wife in sweater and pants. They weren’t talking. Any kind of conversation would have been drowned out by running feet above. Reacher took coffee from the pot and by the time he was back at the table Peterson had gotten up and was on his way out to the barn to start the pick-up to plough his way out to the street. His wife was on her way upstairs to make sure the children were ready. A minute later both boys ran down the stairs and crashed out through the door. Reacher heard the rattle of a heavy diesel engine and saw a glimpse of yellow through the snow. The school bus, apparently right on schedule, undeterred by the weather.

A minute after that, the house was completely silent. Kim didn’t come back to the kitchen. Reacher got nothing to eat. No big deal. He was used to being hungry. He sat alone until Peterson stuck his head in the hallway and called for

him. He took the borrowed Highway Patrol coat from the hook and headed out.

Five to eight in the morning.

Forty-four hours to go.

The lawyer was wrestling with his garage door again. There was a new foot of snow out on the driveway and it had drifted a little against the door, jamming it in its tracks. He had his overshoes on, and his shovel in his hand. The motor on the garage ceiling was straining. He grabbed the inside handle and jerked upward. The mechanism's chains bucked and bounced and the door came up in a rush and the peak of the snowdrift outside fell inward. He shovelled it back out and then started his car and got ready to face his day.

His day began with breakfast. He had taken to eating it out. In some ways, normal small-town behaviour. A coffee shop, some banter, some networking, some connections. All valuable. But not worth more than a half-hour's investment. Forty-five minutes at the most. Now he was spending at least an hour in his booth. Sometimes, an hour and a half.

He was afraid to go to work.

The message forms his firm used were yellow. Every morning his secretary handed him a wad. Most were innocent. But some said Client requests conference re case # 517713. There was no case with that number. No file. Nothing written down. Such a note was a code. An instruction, really, to head up to the prison and take mental dictation.

Most days he got no such note. Some days he did. There was no way of predicting it. It was a part of his morning ritual now, to stand in front of his secretary's desk, with his hand out and his heart in his mouth, waiting to see what his life would do to him next.

Reacher saw nothing on the ride downtown except snow. Snow on the ground, snow in the air. Snow everywhere. The world was slow and silent and shrunken. Traffic was light and was huddled together in narrow rutted lanes in the middle of roads. Small waffles of snow pelted up off tyres in cautious rooster tails. Small convoys joined up and crept along like slow trains, doing twenty miles an hour, or less. But Peterson's cruiser was warm and safe and solid. A heavy car on flat land, with chains on the back and winter tyres on the front. No problem.

By day through the snow the police station looked longer and lower than it had by night. It was a sprawling one-storey building built of white brick. It had a flat roof with microwave dishes and radio antennas bolted to steel superstructures. It reminded Reacher of a classic State Police barracks. Maybe it had been built from a standardized blueprint. There were plenty of squad cars in the lot, still warm, just parked. Day watch personnel, presumably, coming in from home for briefing ahead of their eight-thirty start. There was a small front-loader working between the cars, bustling around on rubber caterpillar tracks, shovelling snow into a pile that was already eight feet high. Peterson seemed relaxed. Reacher figured he was feeling good about the snow. It limited fast access to anywhere, including Janet Salter's house. Intruders would wait for a better day. Stealthy approaches were hard to make through thigh-high drifts.

Reacher took the parka but left the gloves and the hat in the car. Too personal. He would replace them with items of his own. Inside the lobby there was a different old guy on the stool behind the counter. The day watch aide. Same kind of age as the guy the night before, same kind of civilian clothing, but a different individual. Peterson led Reacher right past him and down a corridor into a large open-plan squad room. It was full of noise and talk and men and women in uniform. They had go-cups of coffee, they were making notes, they were reading bulletins, they were getting ready to head out. There were close to thirty of them. A sixty-strong department, split equally between day and night duty. Some were young, some were old, some were neat, some were a mess. A real mixed bag. We doubled in size, Peterson had said. It was hard to keep standards up. Reacher saw the proof right there in front of him. It was easy enough to pick out the new hires from the old hands, and easy to see the friction between them. Unit cohesion had been disrupted, and professionalism had been compromised. Us and them. Reacher saw Chief Holland's problem. He was dealing with two departments in one. And he didn't have the energy for it. He should have retired. Or the mayor should have canned him, before the ink was dry on the prison deal.

But new or old, all the cops were punctual. By eight thirty the room was almost completely deserted. Clearly the roadblocks were eating manpower, and presumably snow days brought fender benders by the dozen. Only two cops stayed behind. Both were in uniform. One had a name badge that said Kapler. The other had a name badge that said Lowell. Neither one was wearing a belt. No guns, no radios, no cuffs. Both were somewhere in their mid-thirties. Kapler was dark, with the remnant of a fading tan. Lowell was fair and red-faced, like a local boy. Both looked fit and strong and active. Neither looked happy. Kapler

went clockwise and Lowell went counterclockwise and they emptied out-trays all around the room and carried the resulting piles of paper away through a blank door further down the corridor.

Reacher asked, ‘What’s that all about?’

Peterson said, ‘Normal clerical duties.’

‘While you’re hurting for manpower? I don’t think so.’

‘So what’s your guess?’

‘Disciplinary. They did something wrong and they’ve been grounded. Holland took their guns away.’

‘I can’t talk about it.’

‘Are they new or old?’

‘Lowell has been here a spell. He’s local. An old Bolton family. Kapler’s new, but not too new. He came up from Florida two years ago.’

‘Why? For the weather? I thought that worked the other way around.’

‘He needed a job.’

‘Because? What went wrong for him down there?’

‘Why should something have gone wrong?’

‘Because with the greatest possible respect, if you’re in Florida law enforcement, South Dakota is the kind of place you go when you run out of alternatives.’

‘I don’t know the details. He was hired by Chief Holland and the mayor.’

‘So what did Lowell do to deserve him as a partner?’

‘Lowell’s an odd duck,’ Peterson said. ‘He’s a loner. He reads books.’

‘What did they do to get themselves grounded?’

‘I can’t talk about it. And you’ve got work to do. Pick any desk you like.’

I can't talk about it. And you've got work to do. Pick any desk you like.

Reacher picked a desk way in the back corner. An old habit. It was a plain laminate thing, and the chair was adjusted for a small person. It was still warm. There was a keyboard and a screen on the desk, and a console telephone. The screen was blank. Switched off. The phone had buttons for six lines and ten speed dials.

Peterson said, 'Dial nine for a line.'

I'm guessing there's a number you remember, too. Maybe not for a switchboard.

Reacher dialled. Nine for a line, then a Virginia area code, then seven more digits. A number he remembered.

He got a recording, which was not what he remembered.

The recording featured a man's voice, speaking slowly and ponderously, with undue emphasis on his first three words. His message said, 'You have reached the Bureau of Labor Statistics. If you know your party's extension, you may dial it at any time. Otherwise, please choose from the following menu.' Then came a long droning list, press one for this, press two for that, three for the other thing, agriculture, manufacturing, non-food service industries.

Reacher hung up.

'You know another number?' Peterson said.

'No.'

'Who were you calling?'

'A special unit. An investigative department. Kind of elite. Like the army's own FBI, but much smaller.'

'Who did you get instead?'

'Some government office. Something about labour statistics.'

'I guess things change.'

I guess things change.'

'I guess they do,' Reacher said.

Then he said, 'Or maybe they don't. At least, not fundamentally.'

He dialled again. The same number. He got the same recording. If you know your party's extension, you may dial it at any time. He dialled 110. Heard a click and a purr and a new dial tone. A new voice, live, after just one ring.

It said, 'Yes?' A Southern accent, a man, probably late twenties, almost certainly a captain, unless the world had gone mad and they were letting lieutenants or NCOs answer that particular phone now, or, worse still, civilians.

Reacher said, 'I need to speak to your commanding officer.'

'Whose commanding officer?'

'Yours.'

'Who exactly do you think you're speaking with?'

'You're the 110th MP HQ in Rock Creek, Virginia.'

'Are we?'

'Unless you changed your phone number. There used to be a live operator. You had to ask for room 110.'

'Who exactly am I speaking to?'

'I used to work for the 110th.'

'In what capacity?'

'I was its first CO.'

'Name?'

'Reacher.'

Silence for a moment.

Reacher asked, ‘Does anyone go ahead and actually choose from that menu?’

‘Sir, if you worked for the 110th, you’ll know that this is an active and open emergency channel. I’ll have to ask you to state your business immediately.’

‘I want to talk to your commanding officer.’

‘Concerning?’

‘A favour I need. Tell him to look me up in the files and call me back.’ Reacher read out the number from a label stuck to the console in front of him.

The guy on the other end hung up without a word.

Five to nine in the morning.

Forty-three hours to go.

ELEVEN

AT NINE THIRTY THE PHONE ON REACHER'S BORROWED DESK rang, but the call was not for him. He stretched the cord and passed the handset to Peterson. Peterson gave his name and rank and then listened for the best part of a minute. He asked whoever it was on the other end to stay in touch, and then he passed the handset back. Reacher hung it up. Peterson said, 'We need your information just as soon as you can get it.'

Reacher pointed at the console in front of him. 'You know how it is with kids today. They never write, they never call.'

'I'm serious.'

'What changed?'

'That was the DEA on the line. The actual Drug Enforcement Administration. The actual federal bureau. From Washington D.C. A courtesy call. Turns out they have a wiretap on a guy they think is a Russian dope dealer. New to the scene, trying to make a name, trawling for deals, out of Brooklyn, New York. A guy in Mexico called Plato just called him about a property for sale five miles west of a town called Bolton, in South Dakota.'

'A property for sale?'

'Those were the words they used.'

'So what is this? Real estate or dope dealing?'

'If there's an underground lab out there, then it's both, isn't it? And that's going to be the DEA's next question. It's a nobrainer. They'll be building their file and they'll call us to ask what exactly that place is.'

'Tell them to call the Department of the Army direct. Quicker all around.'

'But that would make us look like idiots. We can't admit we've had a place next to us for fifty years and we don't even know what it is.'

Reacher shrugged. Pointed at the phone again. 'You'll know as soon as I do.

Which might be never.’

‘You were their commanding officer? An elite unit?’

Reacher nodded. ‘For a spell.’ Then he said: ‘Plato is a weird name for a Mexican, don’t you think? Sounds more like a Brazilian name to me.’

‘No, Yugoslavian,’ Peterson said. ‘Like that old dictator.’

‘That was Tito.’

‘I thought he was a South African bishop.’

‘That was Tutu.’

‘So who was Plato?’

‘An ancient Greek philosopher. The pupil of Socrates, the teacher of Aristotle.’

‘So what has Brazil got to do with all of that?’

‘Don’t ask,’ Reacher said.

Kapler and Lowell came back to the squad room. They distributed memos still hot and curled from the photocopier, one into every in-tray, and then they slouched out again. Peterson said, ‘That’s their day’s work done, right there. Now comes a five-hour lunch break, probably. What a waste.’

‘What did they do?’

‘I can’t talk about it.’

‘That bad?’

‘No, not really.’

‘So what was it?’

‘I can’t talk about it.’

‘Yes you can.’

‘OK, three days ago they were out of radio contact for an hour. Wouldn’t say why or how or what they were doing. We can’t allow that. Because of the prison plan.’

The phone rang again at twenty minutes to ten. Reacher picked it up and said, ‘Yes?’

A woman’s voice asked, ‘Major Reacher?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you know who I am?’

‘Keep talking.’

‘You taught a class in your last year in the service.’

‘Did I?’

‘About integrating military and federal investigations. I took the class. Don’t you recognize my voice?’

‘Keep talking.’

‘What do you want me to say?’ Right then Reacher wanted her to say plenty, because she had a great voice. It was warm, slightly husky, a little breathy, a little intimate. He liked the way it whispered in his ear. He liked it a lot. In his mind he pictured its owner as blonde, not more than thirty-five years old, not less than thirty. Probably tall, probably a looker. Altogether a terrific voice, for sure.

But not a voice he recognized, and he said so.

The voice said, ‘I’m very disappointed. Maybe even a little hurt. Are you sure you don’t remember me?’

‘I need to speak to your CO.’

‘That will have to wait. I can’t believe you don’t know who I am.’

‘Can I take a guess?’

‘Go ahead.’

‘I think you’re some kind of a bullshit filter. I think your CO wants to know if I’m for real. If I say I remember you, I fail the test. Because I don’t. We never met. Maybe I wish we had, but we didn’t.’

‘But I took your class.’

‘You didn’t. You read my file, that’s all. The course title was for public consumption only. The class was about screwing the feds, not cooperating with them. If you had been in the room with me, you’d know that.’

A smile in the voice. ‘Good work. You just passed the test.’

‘So who are you, really?’

‘I’m you.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘I’m CO of the 110th Special Unit.’

‘Really?’

‘Really and truly.’

‘Outstanding. Congratulations. How is it?’

‘I’m sure you can imagine. I’m sitting at your old desk, right now, both metaphorically and literally. Do you remember your desk?’

‘I had a lot of desks.’

‘Here at Rock Creek.’

Actually Reacher remembered it pretty well. An old-style government desk, made of steel, painted green, the finish on the edges already worn back to bright metal by the time he inherited it.

The voice said, ‘There’s a big dent on the right-hand side. People say you made it, with someone’s head.’

‘People say?’

‘Like a folk legend. Is it true?’

‘I think the movers did it.’

‘It’s perfectly concave.’

‘Maybe they dropped a bowling ball.’

‘I prefer the legend.’

Reacher asked, ‘What’s your name?’

The voice said, ‘Make one up for me.’

‘What?’

‘Let’s keep this off the record. Give me a code name.’

‘This is a private conversation.’

‘Not really. Our system shows you’re calling from a police station. I’m sure it has a switchboard and recording devices.’

Reacher said, ‘OK, keep talking. I should try to make the name fit the person.’

‘What do you want me to say?’

‘Read the phone book. That would work for me.’

Another smile in the voice. ‘People say the dent in the desk came from a colonel’s head. They say that’s why you got canned from the 110th.’

‘I didn’t get canned. I got new orders, that’s all.’

‘Only because no one liked that particular colonel. But you definitely walked the plank. That’s what people say.’

‘Amanda.’

‘Amanda? OK, that’s who I am. You need me again, call the number and ask for

‘Amanda? OK, that’s who I am. You need me again, call the number and ask for Amanda. Now, what can I do for you today?’

‘There’s a small town in South Dakota called Bolton. Roughly in the middle of the state, twelve or thirteen miles north of I-90.’

‘I know where it is. Our system includes your coordinates. I’m looking at Bolton right now.’

‘Looking at it how?’

‘On my laptop. With Google Earth.’

‘You guys have it easy.’

‘Technology is indeed a wonderful thing. How can I help you?’

‘Five miles west of town is an abandoned Cold War installation. I need to know what it was.’

‘Can’t you tell what it was?’

‘I haven’t seen it. And apparently there isn’t much to see. It could be nothing. But I want you to check it out for me.’

‘You sure it isn’t a missile silo? The Dakotas are full of them.’

‘They say it isn’t a silo. Doesn’t sound like one, either.’

‘OK, hold on. I’m zooming and scrolling. According to the most recent image the only thing west of town looks like a prison camp. Fifteen huts and an older building, in two lines of eight. Plus a long straight road. Maybe two miles of it.’

‘Does the older building look like a house?’

‘From above it looks exactly like a house.’

‘OK, but I need more than that.’

‘You want me to come all the way up to South Dakota and go out there and look at it with you?’

‘Since I’m stuck here in a snowstorm with nothing much else to do, that would be great. But a records check will do it. It’ll show up somewhere. I need to know its purpose, its scope, and its architecture.’

‘Call me back at close of business.’

Then there was a click, and the voice was gone. Five to ten in the morning.

Forty-two hours to go.

TWELVE

THE LAWYER PARKED HIS CAR IN HIS OFFICE LOT AND PUT ON HIS overshoes. He took them off again inside his building's lobby and placed them in a plastic grocery bag and carried the bag with his briefcase to the elevator. His secretary greeted him at her cubicle outside his door. He didn't answer. He didn't yet know whether it was or wasn't a good morning. He just held out his hand for his message slips.

There were eight of them.

Three were trivial inter-office issues.

Four were legitimate legal matters.

The last was a request for a client conference at the prison, on an urgent matter relating to case number 517713, at noon.

Reacher sat alone for a spell and then wandered out and found Peterson in an empty office off the corridor near the entrance to the squad room. The office had four desks boxed together in the centre of the space. The walls had long horizontal pin boards extending waist-high to head-high. Peterson was tacking yesterday's crime scene photographs to the boards. The dead guy, dressed in black. The establishing shot, the close-ups. Snow on the ground, blunt force trauma to the right temple. No blood.

Peterson said, 'We just got the autopsy report. He was definitely moved.'

Reacher asked, 'Were there other injuries?'

'Some perimortem bruising.'

'Are there bad parts of town?'

'Some are worse than others.'

'Have you checked the bars?'

'For what?'

‘Newly cleaned floors, suspicious stains.’

‘You think this was a bar fight?’

‘Somewhere in the low rent district, but not in the war zone.’

‘Why?’

‘Tell me what the pathologist said about the weapon.’

‘It was round, fairly smooth, probably machined metal or wood, maybe a fence post or a rainwater pipe.’

‘Neither one of those,’ Reacher said. ‘A fence post or a rainwater pipe has a uniform diameter. Too wide to grip hard enough to swing hard enough. My guess is it was a baseball bat. And baseball bats are relatively hard to find in the winter. They’re in closets or garages or basements or attics. Except sometimes they’re under bars, where the bartender can grab them real quick. Not in the good part of town, of course, and in the war zone they’d probably want a shotgun.’

Peterson said nothing.

Reacher asked, ‘Where do the prison guards drink?’

‘You think it was one of them?’

‘It takes two to tango. Prison guards are used to the rough and tumble.’

Peterson was quiet for a beat. ‘Anything else?’

Reacher shook his head. ‘I’m going out. I’ll be back later.’

The snow was still heavy. Peterson’s car was already just a humped white shape in the lot. Reacher turned up the hood of his borrowed coat and walked straight past it. He made it out to the sidewalk and peered left, peered right. The snow swirled around him and blew in under his hood and clogged his hair and his eyelashes and drifted down his neck. Directly opposite him was some kind of a public square or town park and beyond that was an array of commercial establishments. The distance was too great and the snow was too thick to make out exactly what they were. But one of them had a plume of steam coming out of

a vent on the roof, which made it likely that it was either a dry cleaner or a restaurant, which made it a fifty-fifty chance that a late breakfast could be gotten there.

Reacher headed over, floundering through ploughed snow, slipping and sliding through the square. His ears and nose and chin went numb. He kept his hands in his pockets. The place with the steam was a coffee shop. He stepped inside, to hot wet air. A counter, and four tables. Jay Knox was alone at one of them. The bus driver. Judging by the state of his table he had finished a large meal some time ago. Reacher stepped up opposite him and put his hand on a chair back, ready to pull it out, like a request. Knox seemed neither pleased nor displeased to see him. Just preoccupied, and a little sullen.

Reacher sat down anyway and asked, ‘You making out OK?’

Knox shrugged. ‘They put me with some people.’

‘And?’

‘I suppose they’re nice enough.’

‘But you came out for a long slow breakfast.’

‘I don’t like to impose.’

‘Didn’t they offer?’

‘I don’t particularly like them, OK?’

Reacher said nothing.

Knox asked, ‘Where did they put you?’

‘With the cop who came to the bus.’

‘So why are you here? Didn’t the cop give you breakfast?’

Reacher didn’t answer. Just said: ‘Any news?’

‘The tow trucks got here this morning. They pulled the bus off the highway. We’re leasing a replacement out of Minneapolis. Should be here soon after the

storm passes.’

‘Not so bad.’

‘Except that it will come with its own driver. Which means I’ll be a passenger all the way back to Seattle. Which means I won’t get paid, effective four o’clock yesterday afternoon.’

‘Not so good.’

‘They should do something about that damn bridge.’

‘Have you seen anything of the passengers?’

‘They’re scattered here and there. One of them has her arm in a sling and one of them has a cast on her wrist. But generally they’re not bitching too much. I don’t think any of them has called a lawyer yet. Actually some of them are looking on the bright side, like this whole thing is a magical mystery tour.’

‘Not so bad,’ Reacher said again.

Knox didn’t answer. Just got up suddenly and took stuff off a nearby hook and jammed a hat on his head, and wound a muffler around his neck, and struggled into a heavy coat, all borrowed, judging by the sizes and the colours. He nodded once at Reacher, a slightly bad-tempered farewell, and then he walked to the door and stepped out into the snow.

A waitress came by and Reacher ordered the biggest breakfast on the menu.

Plus coffee.

Five to eleven in the morning. Forty-one hours to go.

The lawyer left his briefcase in his office but carried his overshoes in their grocery bag. He put them on in his building’s lobby and retraced his steps through the lot to his car. He buckled up, started the engine, heated the seat, turned on the wipers. He knew that the highway was still closed. But there were alternative routes. Long, straight South Dakota roads, stretching all the way to the horizon.

He fumbled his overshoes off and put a leather sole on the brake pedal and

He rubbed his overshoes on and put a leather boot on the brake pedal and moved the shifter to Drive.

Reacher was halfway through a heaping plate of breakfast when Peterson came in. He was dressed in his full-on outdoors gear.

It was clear that Reacher was supposed to be impressed by how easily Peterson had found him. Which Reacher might or might not have been, depending on how many other places Peterson had tried first.

Peterson put his hand on the chair that Knox had used, and Reacher invited him to sit with a gesture from his loaded fork. Peterson sat down and said, ‘I’m sorry you didn’t get breakfast at the house.’

Reacher chewed and swallowed and said, ‘No problem. You’re being more than generous as it is.’

‘Kim suffers from loneliness, that’s all. It isn’t her favourite time of day, when the boys and I leave the house. She usually hides out in her room.’

Reacher said nothing.

Peterson asked, ‘Have you ever been lonely?’

Reacher said, ‘Sometimes.’

‘Kim would say you haven’t. Not unless you had sat on a back porch day after day in South Dakota and looked all around and seen nothing for a hundred miles in any direction.’

‘Isn’t she local?’

‘She is. But being used to something doesn’t mean you have to like it.’

‘I guess not.’

‘We checked the bars. We found one with a very clean floor.’

‘Where?’

‘North. Where the prison guards drink.’

‘Any cooperative witnesses?’

‘No, but the bartender is missing. Lit out in his truck yesterday.’

‘OK,’ Reacher said.

‘Thank you,’ Peterson said. ‘You’re welcome.’ Reacher speared half a slice of bacon and a half-circle of set egg yolk and ate it.

‘Any other thoughts?’ Peterson asked.

‘I know how the guy you put in jail is communicating.’

‘How?’

‘He made a friend on the inside. Or coerced somebody. Your guy is briefing the second guy, and the second guy is briefing his own lawyer. Like a parallel track. You’re bugging the wrong room.’

‘There are dozens of lawyer visits every day.’

‘Then you better start sifting through them.’

Peterson was quiet for a beat. ‘Anything else?’

Reacher nodded. ‘I need to find a clothing store. I more or less promised your wife. Cheap, and nothing fancy. You know somewhere like that?’

The clothing store that Peterson recommended was a long block west of the public square. It carried sturdy garments for sturdy farmers. There were summer and winter sections, without many obvious differences between the two. Some of the items were off-brand makes, and others had recognizable labels but visible defects. There was a limited choice of dull colours. Prices were low, even for footwear. Reacher started from the ground up with a pair of black waterproof boots. Then he started in on the garments. His rule when confronted with a choice was to take either olive green or blue. Olive green, because he had been in the army. Blue, because a girl had once told him it picked out his eyes. He went with olive green, because it almost matched his borrowed coat, which was tan. He chose pants with a flannel lining, a T-shirt, a flannel shirt, and a sweater made of thick cotton. He added white underwear and a pair of black gloves and a khaki watch cap. Total damage was a hundred and thirty bucks. The store owner

knit watch cap. Total damage was a hundred and thirty bucks. The store owner took a hundred and twenty for cash. Four days of wear, probably, at the rate of thirty dollars a day. Which added up to more than ten grand a year, just for clothes. Insane, some would say. But Reacher liked the deal. He knew that most folks spent much less than ten grand a year on clothes. They had a small number of good items that they kept in closets and laundered in basements. But the closets and basements were surrounded by houses, and houses cost a whole lot more than ten grand a year, to buy or to rent, and to maintain and repair and insure.

So who was really nuts?

He dressed in a changing cubicle and dumped his old stuff in a trash barrel behind the counter. He jammed the hat on his head and tugged it down over his ears. He covered it with the borrowed parka's hood. He zipped up. He put on the gloves. He stepped out to the sidewalk.

And was still cold.

The air was meat-locker chilled. He felt it in his gut, his ribs, his legs, his ass, his eyes, his face, his lungs. Like the worst of Korea, but in Korea he had been younger, and he had been there under orders, and he had been getting paid. This was different. The snow danced and swirled all around him. A freshening wind pushed at him. His nose started running. His vision blurred. He took breaks in doorways. He turned a ten-minute walk to the police station into a twenty-minute winter odyssey.

When he arrived, he found full-on mayhem.

Five minutes before noon.

Forty hours to go.

It sounded like half the phones in the place were ringing. The old guy behind the reception counter had one in each hand and was talking into both of them. Peterson was alone in the squad room, on his feet behind a desk, a phone trapped between his ear and his shoulder, the cord bucking and swaying as he moved. He was gesticulating with both hands, short, sharp, decisive motions, like a general moving troops, as if the town of Bolton was laid out in front of him on the desk top, like a map.

Reacher watched and listened. The situation made itself clear. No rocket science was involved. A major crime against a person had been committed and Peterson was moving people out to deal with it while making sure his existing obligations were adequately covered. The crime scene seemed to be on the right hand edge of the desk, which was presumably Bolton's eastern limit. The existing obligations seemed to be slightly south and west of downtown, which was presumably where Janet Salter lived. The vulnerable witness. Peterson was putting more resources around her than at the scene, which indicated either proper caution or that the victim at the scene was already beyond help.

Or both.

A minute later Peterson stopped talking and hung up. He looked worried. Expert in a casual way with all the local stuff, a little out of his depth with anything else. He said, 'We've got a guy shot to death in a car.'

Reacher said, 'Who?'

'The plates come back to a lawyer from the next county. He's had five client conferences up at the jail. All of them since we busted the biker. Like you said. He's their parallel track. And now their plan is made. So they're cleaning house and breaking the chain.'

'Worse than that,' Reacher said.

Peterson nodded. 'I know. Their guy isn't on his way. We missed him. He's already here.'

THIRTEEN

TWICE PETERSON TRIED TO GET OUT OF THE SQUAD ROOM AND twice he had to duck back to answer a phone. Eventually he made it to the corridor. He looked back at Reacher and said, ‘You want to ride along with me?’

Reacher asked, ‘You want me there?’

‘If you like.’

‘I really need to be somewhere else.’

‘Where?’

‘I should go introduce myself to Mrs Salter.’

‘What for?’

‘I want to know the lie of the land. Just in case.’

Peterson said, ‘Mrs Salter is covered. I made sure of that. Don’t worry about it.’ Then he paused and said, ‘What? You think they’re going to move on her today? You think this dead lawyer is a diversion?’

‘No, I think they’re breaking the chain. But it looks like I’m going to be here a couple of days. Because of the snow. If that escape siren goes off any time soon, then I’m all you’ve got. But I should introduce myself to the lady first.’

Peterson said nothing.

Reacher said, ‘I’m trying to be helpful, that’s all. To repay your hospitality.’

Peterson said nothing.

Reacher said, ‘I’m not your guy.’

‘I know that.’

‘But?’

‘You could be helpful at the crime scene.’

‘You’ll be OK. You know what to do, right? Take plenty of photographs and pay attention to tyre tracks and footprints. Look for shell cases.’

‘OK.’

‘But first call your officers in Mrs Salter’s house. I don’t want a big panic when I walk up the driveway.’

‘You don’t know where she lives.’

‘I’ll find it.’

In summer it might have taken ten minutes to find Mrs Salter’s house. In the snow it took closer to thirty, because lines of sight were limited and walking was slow. Reacher retraced the turns that the prison bus had made, struggling through drifts, slogging through unploughed areas, slipping and sliding along vehicle ruts. It was still snowing hard. The big white flakes came down on him, came up at him, whipped all around him. He found the main drag south. He knew that ahead of him was the restaurant. Beyond that was the parked cop car. He kept on going. He was very cold, but he was still functioning. The new clothes were doing their job, but nothing more.

There were cars heading north and south, lights on, wipers thrashing. Not many of them, but enough to keep him on the shoulder and out of the tyre tracks, which would have been easier going. He guessed the roadway under the snow was wide, but right then traffic was confining itself to two narrow lanes near the centre, made of four separate parallel ruts. Each passing car confirmed the collective decision not to wander. With each passing tyre the ruts grew a little deeper and their side walls grew a little higher. The snow was dry and firm. The ruts were lined on the bottom with broken lattices of tread prints, smooth and greasy and stained brown in places.

Reacher passed the restaurant. The lunch hour was in full swing. The windows were fogged with steam. Reacher struggled on. Four hundred yards later he saw the parked cop car. It had pulled out of the southbound ruts and broken through the little walls and made smaller ruts of its own, like a railroad switch. It had parked parallel with the traffic and was completely blocking the side street. Its motor was turned off but its roof lights were turning. The cop in the driver’s seat

was not moving his head. He was just staring through the windshield, looking neither alert nor enthusiastic. Reacher slogged through a wide turn and approached him from his front left side. He didn't want to surprise the guy.

The cop buzzed the window down. Called out, 'Are you Reacher?'

Reacher nodded. His face felt too cold for coherent speech. The cop's name plate said Montgomery. He was unshaven and overweight. Somewhere in his late twenties. In the army his ass would have been kicked to hell and back a hundred times. He said, 'The Salter house is ahead on the left. You can't miss it.'

Reacher struggled on. There were no big ruts in the side street. Just two lone tracks, one car coming, one car going. The tracks were already mostly refilled with snow. The change of watch, some hours earlier. The night guy going home, the day guy coming in. The day guy had gunned it a little after the turn. His tracks slalomed through a minor fishtail before straightening.

The street curved gently and was lined on both sides by big old houses in big flat lots. The houses looked Victorian. They could have been a hundred years old. They had all been prosperous once and most of them still were. Clearly they had been built during an earlier boom. They predated the federal prison dollars by a century. Their details were obscured by snow, but they had heft and solidity and gingerbread trim. Peterson had called Janet Salter a storybook grandma, and Reacher had expected a storybook grandma's house to be a small cottage with gingham curtains. Especially considering this storybook grandma had been a teacher and a librarian. Maybe Janet Salter had a different kind of story. Reacher was looking forward to meeting her. He had never known either one of his own grandmothers. He had seen a black and white photograph of himself as a baby on a stern woman's knee. His father's mother, he had been told. His mother's mother had died when he was four, before ever having visited.

The second cop car was parked up ahead. No lights. It was facing him. The cop inside was watching him closely. Reacher floundered onward and stopped ten feet short. The cop opened his door and climbed out and tracked around. His boots set powder flying and small snowballs skittering. He said, 'Are you Reacher?'

Reacher nodded.

‘I have to search you.’

‘Says who?’

‘The deputy chief.’

‘Search me for what?’

‘Weapons.’

‘She’s more than seventy years old. I wouldn’t need weapons.’

‘True. But you’d need weapons to get past the officers in the house.’

This cop was a sharp-looking guy the right side of middle age. Compact, muscled, competent. A department of two halves, one better, one worse. A new hire at the end of the street, an old hand outside the house. Reacher planted his feet and unzipped his coat and stood with his arms held wide. Cold air rushed in under his coat. The cop patted him down and squeezed his coat pockets from both sides at once.

‘Go ahead,’ he said. ‘They’re expecting you.’

The driveway was long and the house was ornate. It could have been airlifted straight from Charleston or San Francisco. It had all the bells and whistles. A wraparound rocking-chair porch, dozens of windows, fish scale siding. It had turrets, and more stained glass than a church. Reacher made it up the steps on to the porch and clumped across the boards and stamped the snow off his boots. The front door was a carved multi-panelled thing. It had a bell pull next to it, a cast weight on the end of a wire that looped over pulleys and entered the house through a small bronze eye. Probably ordered by mail from Sears Roebuck a century ago, and delivered by wagon in a wooden box packed with straw, and fitted by a man more used to cart wheels and horseshoes.

Reacher pulled on it. He heard a chime deep inside the house, delayed by a second, low and polite and sonorous. Another second later a policewoman opened the door. She was small and dark and young and was in full uniform. Her gun was in its holster. But the holster was unsnapped, and she looked to be fully on the ball. Women officers in the house, Peterson had said, the best we’ve got, minimum of four at all times, two awake, two asleep.

The woman asked, ‘Are you Reacher?’

Reacher nodded.

‘Come on in.’

The hallway was dark and panelled and fairly magnificent. There were oil paintings on the walls. Ahead was a substantial staircase that rose out of sight. All around were closed doors, maybe chestnut, each of them polished to a shine by a century of labour. There was a large Persian carpet. There were antiquated steam radiators connected with fat pipes. The radiators were working. The room was warm. There was a bentwood hat stand, loaded down with four new police-issue winter parkas. Reacher shrugged off his unzipped coat and hung it on a spare peg. It looked like he felt, an old battered item surrounded by current models.

The woman cop said, ‘Mrs Salter is in the library. She’s expecting you.’

Reacher said, ‘Which one is the library?’

‘Follow me.’ The cop stepped ahead like a butler. Reacher followed her to a door on the left. She knocked and entered. The library was a large square room with a high ceiling. It had a fireplace and a pair of glass doors to the garden. Everything else was books on shelves, thousands of them. There was a second woman cop in front of the glass doors. She was standing easy with her hands folded behind her back, looking outward. She didn’t move. Just glanced back, got a nod from her partner, and looked away again.

There was an older woman in an armchair. Mrs Salter, presumably. The retired teacher. The librarian. The witness. She looked at Reacher and smiled politely.

She said, ‘I was just about to take some lunch. Would you care to join me?’

Five to one in the afternoon.

Thirty-nine hours to go.

FOURTEEN

JANET SALTER PREPARED THE LUNCH HERSELF. REACHER WATCHED her do it. He sat in a spacious kitchen while she moved from refrigerator to counter to stove to sink. The impression he had formed from Peterson's casual description did not match the reality. She was more than seventy years old, for sure, grey-haired, not tall, not short, not fat, not thin, and she certainly looked kind and not in the least forbidding, but as well as all of that she was ramrod straight and her bearing was vaguely aristocratic. She looked like a person used to respect and obedience, possibly from a large and important staff. And Reacher doubted that she was a real grandmother. She wore no wedding band and the house looked like no children had set foot in it for at least fifty years.

She said, 'You were one of the unfortunates on the bus.'

Reacher said, 'I think the others were more unfortunate than me.'

'I volunteered this house, of course. I have plenty of space here. But Chief Holland wouldn't hear of it. Not under the circumstances.'

'I think he was wise.'

'Because extra bodies in the house would have complicated his officers' operations?'

'No, because extra bodies in the house could have become collateral damage in the event of an attack.'

'Well, that's an honest answer, at least. But then, they tell me you're an expert. You were in the army. A commanding officer, I believe.'

'For a spell.'

'Of an elite unit.'

'So we told ourselves.'

'Do you think I am wise?' she asked. 'Or foolish?'

‘Ma’am, in what respect?’

‘In agreeing to testify at the trial.’

‘It depends on what you saw.’

‘In what way?’

‘If you saw enough to nail the guy, then I think you’re doing the right thing. But if what you saw was inconclusive, then I think it’s an unnecessary risk.’

‘I saw what I saw. I am assured by all concerned that it was sufficient to secure a conviction. Or to nail the guy, as you put it. I saw the conversation, I saw the inspection of the goods, I saw the counting and transfer of money.’

‘At what distance?’

‘Perhaps twenty yards.’

‘Through a window?’

‘From inside the restaurant, yes.’

‘Was the glass clean? Steamed up?’

‘Yes and no.’

‘Direct line of sight?’

‘Yes.’

‘Weather?’

‘Cool and clear.’

‘Time?’

‘It was the middle of the evening.’

‘Was the lot lit up?’

‘Brightly.’

Brightly.

‘Is your eyesight OK?’

‘I’m a little long-sighted. I sometimes wear spectacles to read. But never otherwise.’

‘What were the goods?’

‘A brick of white powder sealed tight in a wax paper wrap. The paper was slightly yellowed with age. There was a pictorial device stencilled on it, in the form of a crown, a headband with three points, and each point had a ball on it, presumably to represent a jewel.’

‘You saw that from twenty yards?’

‘It’s a benefit of being long-sighted. And the device was large.’

‘No doubts whatsoever? No interpretation, no gaps, no guesswork?’

‘None.’

‘I think you’ll make a great witness.’

She brought lunch to the table. It was a salad in a wooden bowl. The bowl was dark with age and oil, and the salad was made of leaves and vegetables of various kinds, plus tuna from a can, and hard boiled eggs that were still faintly warm. Janet Salter’s hands were small. Pale, papery skin. Trimmed nails, no jewellery at all.

Reacher asked her, ‘How many other people were in the restaurant at the time?’

She said, ‘Five, plus the waitress.’

‘Did anyone else see what was happening?’

‘I think they all did.’

‘But?’

‘Afterwards they pretended not to have. Those who dwell in the community to

our west are well known here. They frighten people. Simply by being there, I think, and by being different. They are the other. Which is inherently disturbing, apparently. In practice, they do us no overt harm. We exist together in an uneasy standoff. But I can't deny an undercurrent of menace.'

Reacher asked, 'Do you remember the army camp being built out there?'

Janet Salter shook her head. 'Chief Holland and Mr Peterson have asked me the same question endlessly. But I know no more than they do. I was away in school when it was built.'

'People say it took months to build. Longer than a semester, probably. Didn't you hear anything when you were back in town?'

'I went to school overseas. International travel was expensive. I didn't return during the vacations. In fact I didn't return for thirty years.'

'Where overseas?'

'Oxford University, in England.'

Reacher said nothing.

Janet Salter asked, 'Have I surprised you?'

Reacher shrugged. 'Peterson said you were a teacher and a librarian. I guess I pictured a local school.'

'Mr Peterson has any South Dakotan's aversion to grandeur. And he's quite right, anyway. I was a teacher and a librarian. I was Professor of Library Science at Oxford, and then I helped run the Bodleian Library there, and then I came back to the United States to run the library at Yale, and then I retired and came home to Bolton.'

'What's your favourite book?'

'I don't have one. What's yours?'

'I don't have one either.'

Janet Salter said, 'I know all about the crisis plan at the prison.'

‘They tell me it has never been used.’

‘But as with all things, one imagines there will be a first time, and that it will come sooner or later.’

Plato skipped lunch, which was unusual for him. Normally he liked the ritual and ceremony of three meals a day. His staff duly prepared a dish, but he didn’t show up to eat it. Instead he walked on a serpentine path through the scrub on his property, moving fast, talking on his cell phone, his shirt going dark with sweat.

His guy in the American DEA had made a routine scan through all their wiretap transcripts and had called with a warning. Plato didn’t like warnings. He liked solutions, not problems. His DEA guy knew that, and had already reached out to a colleague. No way to stop the hapless Russian getting busted, but things could be delayed until after the deal was done, so that the money could disappear safely into the ether and Plato could walk away enriched and unscathed. All it would cost was four years of college tuition. The colleague had a sixteen-year-old and no savings. Plato had asked how much college cost, and had been mildly shocked at the answer. A person could buy a decent car for that kind of money.

Plato had only one remaining problem. The place in South Dakota was a multipurpose facility. Most of its contents could be sold, but not all of them. Some of them had to be moved out first. Like selling a house. You left the stove, you took the sofa.

He trusted no one. Which helped, most of the time. But at other times it gave him difficulties. Like now. Who could he ask to pack and ship? He couldn’t call Allied Van Lines. FedEx or UPS were no good.

His reluctant conclusion was that if you wanted something done properly, you had to do it yourself.

Janet Salter patted the air to make Reacher stay where he was and started to clear the table around him. She asked, ‘How much do you know about methamphetamine?’

Reacher said, ‘Less than you, probably.’

‘I’m not that kind of girl.’

‘I’m not that kind of girl.’

‘But you’re that kind of librarian. I’m sure you’ve researched it extensively.’

‘You first.’

‘I was in the military.’

‘Which implies?’

‘Certain situations and certain operations called for what the field manuals described as alertness, focus, motivation, and mental clarity, for extended periods. The doctors had all kinds of pep pills available. Straight meth was on its way out when I came on the job, but it had been around before that, for decades.’

Janet Salter nodded. ‘It was called Pervitin. A German refinement of a Japanese discovery. It was in widespread use during World War Two. It was baked into candy bars. Fliegerschokolade, which means flyers’ chocolate, and Panzerschokolade, which means tankers’ chocolate. The Allies had it, also. Just as much, actually. Maybe more. They called it Desoxyn. I’m surprised anyone ever slept.’

‘They had morphine for sleeping.’

‘But now it’s controlled. Because it causes terrible damage to those who abuse it. So it has to be manufactured illegally. Which is relatively easy to do, in small home laboratories. But the manufacture of anything requires raw materials. For methamphetamine you need ephedrine or pseudoephedrine. You can buy it in bulk, if you can get past the regulations. Or you can extract it from over-the-counter decongestant medicines. To do that you need red phosphorus and iodine. Or lithium, from certain types of batteries. That’s an alternative method, called the Birch reduction.’

‘You can get it direct from acacia trees in west Texas,’ Reacher said. ‘Plus mescaline and nicotine. A wonderful tree, the acacia.’

‘But this is not west Texas,’ Janet Salter said. ‘This is South Dakota. My point is, you can’t make bricks without straw. If they’re shipping out vast quantities of finished product, they must be shipping in vast quantities of raw materials. Which must be visible. There must be truckloads involved. Why can’t Chief Holland get at them that way, without involving me?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I think Chief Holland has gotten lazy.’

‘Peterson claimed they gave you the option of backing out.’

‘But don’t you see? That’s no option at all. I couldn’t live with myself. It’s a matter of principle.’

‘Peterson claims you were offered federal protection.’

‘And perhaps I should have accepted it. But I much preferred to stay in my own home. The justice system is supposed to penalize perpetrators, not witnesses. That’s a matter of principle, too.’

Reacher glanced at the kitchen door. A cop in the hallway, a cop at the rear window, two more sleeping upstairs ready for the night watch, a car outside, another car one block over, a third at the end of the street. Plus alert townsfolk, and a paranoid police HQ. Plus snow all over the place.

All good, unless the siren sounded.

Reacher asked, ‘Are you a grandmother?’

Janet Salter shook her head. ‘We didn’t have children. We waited, and then my husband died. He was English, and much older than me. Why do you ask?’

‘Peterson was talking about your credibility on the stand. He said you look like a storybook grandma.’

‘Do I?’

‘I don’t know. I guess I didn’t have those storybooks.’

‘Where were you raised?’

‘On Marine Corps bases.’

‘Which ones?’

‘It felt like all of them.’

‘I was raised here in South Dakota. My father was the last in a long line of robber barons. We traded, we bought land from the native inhabitants at twelve cents an acre, we bought thousands of government stakes through surrogates, we mined gold, we invested in the railroad. At insider rates, of course.’

Reacher said, ‘Hence this house.’

Janet Salter smiled. ‘No, this is where we came when we hit hard times.’

Out in the hallway the bell chimed once, quiet and civilized. Reacher stood up and stepped to the door and watched. The policewoman on duty was sitting on the bottom stair. She got up and crossed the dim space and opened the front door. Chief Holland came in, with a soft flurry of snow and a cloud of cold air. He stamped his feet on the mat and shivered as the warmth hit him. He took off his parka. The policewoman hung it up for him, right on top of Reacher’s borrowed coat.

Holland crossed the hallway and nodded to Reacher and pushed past him to the kitchen door. He told Janet Salter that he had no significant news for her, and that he was dropping by merely to pay his respects. She asked him to wait in the library. She said she would make coffee and bring it in. Reacher watched her fill an old percolator made of thick dull aluminum. It had a cord insulated with fabric. It was practically an antique. It could have been melted down from a surplus B-24 Liberator after World War Two. Reacher stood ready to help, but she waved him away and said, ‘Go and wait with the chief in the library.’ So Reacher joined Holland in the book-lined room and asked, ‘How are things?’

Holland said, ‘What things?’

‘The car out on the eastern town limit. With the dead guy in it.’

‘We’re not sure if our initial assumption was correct. About breaking the chain, I mean. It could have been a simple robbery gone wrong.’

‘How so?’

‘The guy was a lawyer, but there was no briefcase in the car. You ever heard of that? A lawyer without a briefcase? Maybe someone took it.’

‘Was there a wallet in his pocket?’

‘Yes.’

‘A watch on his wrist?’

‘Yes.’

‘Was he expected up at the jail?’

‘Not according to the visitor lists. His client made no request. But his office claims he got a call.’

‘Then it wasn’t a simple robbery. He was decoyed out there. He had no briefcase because he wasn’t planning on writing anything down. Not in his current line of work.’

‘Maybe. We’ll keep the line of inquiry open.’

‘Who made the call to his office?’

‘A male voice. Same as the first five times. From a cell phone we can’t trace.’

‘Who was the client he saw at the jail?’

‘Some deadbeat simpleton we’ll never get anything out of. We arrested him eight weeks ago for setting fire to a house. We’re still waiting for a psychological evaluation. Because he won’t speak to anyone he doesn’t want to. Not a word.’

‘Sounds like your biker friend chose well.’

The percolator started burping and gulping out in the kitchen. It was loud. Reacher could hear it quite clearly. The smell of brewing coffee drifted in and filled the air. Colombian, Reacher figured, ground coarse, reasonably fresh. He said, ‘Mrs Salter and I were talking about raw material supply to the lab you figure they’ve got out there.’

‘You think we’re negligent? You think we’re putting her at risk when we have a viable alternative?’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘We’ve tried, believe me. Nothing comes through Bolton. We’re damn sure of that. Therefore they’re being supplied from the west. The Highway Patrol is responsible for the highway. We have no jurisdiction there. All we control is the county two-lane that runs north to the camp. We put cars there on a random basis. Literally random. I roll actual dice on my desk.’

Reacher said, ‘I saw them there.’

Holland nodded. ‘I do it like that because we can’t afford for the pattern to be predictable in any way at all. But so far we haven’t been lucky. They watch us pretty carefully, I suppose.’

‘OK.’

‘The trial will do it for us. Or the plea bargain the night before. It won’t come any earlier than that. One more month, that’s all.’

‘Peterson told me there’s no way to fudge the crisis plan.’

‘He’s right. We objected, of course, but the deal was done by the mayor. Lots of money, lots of strings attached. We’d have Justice Department monitors all over us for ever.’

‘A gift horse.’

‘More trouble than it’s worth,’ Holland said. ‘But then, I don’t own a motel.’

Plato’s walled compound extended across a hundred acres. His walking path through the scrub was more than three miles long. He got his next idea at the furthest point from the house. It was characteristically bold. The DEA was going to bust the Russian. That was a given. Plato wasn’t going to stand in their way. The agents had to see the guy take possession. But possession of what, exactly? Enough to make the charges stick, for sure. But not necessarily everything the guy was about to pay for. That would be excessively generous, under the circumstances. A small margin could be retained. A large margin, in fact. Possibly most of the agreed amount. Because what the hell could the Russian guy do? Rant and rave in a supermax cell somewhere, about the unfairness of life? He would be doing that anyway. So Plato could take the guy’s money, and then sell the stuff all over again to someone else. Like selling a house, except

then sell the stuff all over again to someone else. Like selling a house, except this time you take the stove and the light bulbs and the glass from the windows.

The scheme would more than double his transportation problem, but he could deal with that. He was sure a solution would present itself. The details would fall into place.

Because he was Plato, and they weren't.

Janet Salter brought the coffee to the library on a silver tray. A china pot, some cream, some sugar, three tiny cups, three saucers, three spoons. Clearly the on-duty policewomen were not included. Probably there had been prior discussion about separation of professional and social obligations. Probably the policewomen were happy with the final outcome. Reacher had been in their situation many times. Always better to compartmentalize and focus.

Janet Salter poured the coffee. The cup was far too small for Reacher's hand, but the coffee was good. He sniffed the steam and took a sip. Then Chief Holland's cell phone rang. Holland balanced his cup and dragged the phone from his pocket and checked the window. He opened the phone one-handed and answered. He listened to the caller for eight seconds. Then he hung up and smiled, widely and gratefully and happily.

He said, 'We just caught the guy who shot the lawyer.'

Five minutes to two in the afternoon.

Thirty-eight hours to go.

FIFTEEN

REACHER RODE BACK TO THE STATION WITH HOLLAND. THE unmarked Crown Vic churned its way out of the side street and locked into the established ruts and headed home smooth and easy. Peterson was waiting in the squad room. He was smiling, too, just as widely and gratefully and happily as Holland was. Reacher wasn't smiling. He had serious doubts. Based in bitter experience. A fast and easy resolution to a major problem was too good to be true. And things that were too good to be true usually weren't. A basic law of nature.

He asked, 'So who was the shooter?'

Peterson said, 'Jay Knox. The bus driver.'

Reacher got the story secondhand by standing off to one side and listening as Peterson briefed Holland. Forty minutes earlier a cop in a patrol car had seen a pedestrian floundering through deep snow alongside a rural road a mile out of town. Peterson named the cop in the car and called him one of ours. An old hand, presumably. From the good half of the department. Maybe someone Holland actually knew. As instructed, the cop in the car was operating at a level of high alert, but even so he thought the guy on foot was more likely a stranded driver than a murderer. He stopped and offered the guy a ride. There was something off about the guy's response. He was surly, and uncooperative, and evasive. The cop therefore cuffed him and searched him.

And found a Glock 17 nine-millimetre pistol in his pocket. It smelled like it had been recently fired and its magazine was one round short of full.

The cop arrested the pedestrian and drove him to the station. At the booking desk he was recognized as the bus driver. His hands and his clothing were swabbed for gunshot residue. The tests came up positive. Jay Knox had fired a gun at some point in the past few hours. His prints were all over the Glock. His rights had been read to him. He was in a holding cell. He hadn't asked for a lawyer. But he wasn't talking, either.

Holland left to take a look at Knox in his cell. It was an urge that Reacher had seen before. It was like going to the zoo. After a big capture people would show up just to stare at the guy. They would stand in front of the bars for a moment

up just to stare at the guy. They would stand in front of the bars for a moment and take it all in. Afterwards they would claim there was something in the guy's face they always knew was wrong. If not, they would talk about the banality of evil. About how there were no reliable signs.

Peterson stayed in the squad room. He was tying up the loose ends in his head. Another urge Reacher had seen before. A dangerous urge. If you work backwards, you see what you want to see.

Reacher asked, 'How many rounds in the victim?'

'One,' Peterson said. 'In the head.'

'Nine millimetre?'

'Almost certainly.'

'It's a common round.'

'I know.'

'Does the geography work?'

'Knox was picked up about four miles from the scene.'

'On foot? That's too far, surely.'

'There has to have been a vehicle involved.'

'Why?'

'Wait until you see the photographs.'

The photographs were delivered thirty minutes later. They were in the same kind of file folder Reacher had seen the night before in Holland's office. They were the same kind of photographs. Glossy eight-by-tens, with printed labels pasted in their bottom corners. There were plenty of them. They were colour prints, but they were mostly grey and white. Snow on the ground, snow in the air. The camera shutter had frozen the falling flakes in strange dark suspended shapes, like ash from a volcano, like specks and impurities.

The first picture was an establishing shot taken from a distance, looking west to

The first picture was an establishing shot taken from a distance, looking west to east. It showed a snowbound road with two pairs of ruts clustered close to the crown of the camber. A lone car was sitting dead centre in the westbound ruts. Its headlights were on. It hadn't veered or swerved. It had just rolled to a halt, like a train on a track.

The second picture had been taken about a hundred feet closer. Three things were apparent. First, there was a figure in the driver's seat. A man, held upright by a tight seat belt, his head lolling forward. Second, the glass in the rear passenger-side window was misted with a large pink stain. And third, there was absolutely nothing on the road itself except virgin snow and four wheel ruts. No other disturbance at all.

The third photograph confirmed that fact. For the third shot, the camera had ignored the car completely. The lens had been trained directly west to east along the road right above where the yellow line was buried under the snow. It was a featureless picture. Nothing to see. Passing tyres had dug trenches, the base of the ruts had been crushed downward, small side walls had been thrown upward, tiny avalanches had fallen outward from the top of the side walls, and those small fallen fragments had been smoothed over by a crust of fresh snow.

Nothing else.

'Good pictures,' Reacher said.

'I did my best,' Peterson said.

'Fine work.'

'Thank you.'

'No footprints,' Reacher said.

'Agreed,' Peterson said.

The fourth photograph was a close-up of one of the eastbound ruts. Nothing to see there either, except broken and confused pieces of tread marks, the same small waffles and lattices Reacher had seen all over town. No way to reconstruct anything worth sending to a lab.

The fifth picture was a close-up of the car, taken from the front right side. It was

a small neat sedan, a make Reacher didn't recognize.

'Infiniti,' Peterson said. 'It's Japanese. Nissan's luxury division. That model has a V-6 engine and full-time four-wheel drive. There are snow tyres on it, all around. It's practical, and it's about as showy as a South Dakota lawyer wants to get.'

It was painted a light silver colour. It was basically clean, but grimed over by several recent winter trips. The way the light reflected off the snow and played over the paint made it look ghostly and insubstantial. The driver's window was all the way open. The dead guy was pinned upright against the seat back by the belt. Some snow had blown in on him. His chin was on his chest. He could have been asleep, except for the hole in his head.

The hole was the subject of photograph number five. It was in the centre of the guy's forehead. Like a third eye. Clearly the guy had been looking out the window, halfway between sideways and straight ahead. He had been shot right down his line of sight. He had been looking at the gun. The exit wound had spattered stuff all over the window diagonally behind him. His head had then slumped down and rotated back to a central position.

The rest of the photographs were of the body and the interior of the vehicle from every conceivable angle. Take plenty of photographs, Reacher had said, and Peterson had complied to the letter. There was a pair of rubber overshoes neatly placed in the passenger foot well. There was a small multi-purpose chrome hammer mounted centrally on the dash. Reacher had seen them advertised in mail order brochures on aeroplanes. They could tap the windshield out if the doors were jammed after a wreck. They had a blade concealed in the handle to cut seat belts. Ideal accessories for cautious, meticulous, organized people interested in cars. But Reacher wondered whether one had actually ever been used in earnest in the whole history of automotive transport. He suspected not.

The Infiniti's shifter was in Park. Its ignition key was turned to the run position. The tachometer showed an 800-rpm idle. The odometer showed fewer than ten thousand miles. Cabin temperature was set at sixty-nine degrees. The radio was tuned to a local AM station. The tick on the volume knob was all the way over at the eight o'clock position. Turned down low. The gas dial showed the tank to be close to full.

Reacher said, 'Tell me the story.'

Peterson said, ‘OK, Knox is in a vehicle. He’s driving. He’s heading east. The lawyer is heading west. They’re both driving slow, because the road is bad. Knox sees the lawyer coming. He winds his window down. Puts his arm out and flags the lawyer down. The lawyer slows and stops. He winds his own window down. Maybe he thinks that Knox is going to warn him about a danger up ahead. Driver to driver, like people do in adverse conditions. Instead, Knox shoots him and drives on.’

‘Who found the body?’

‘Another guy heading east. Maybe five or ten minutes after it happened. He slowed, took a look, and called us from a gas station two miles farther on. No cell phone.’

‘Is Knox right-handed?’

‘I don’t know. But most people are.’

‘Did you find a shell case?’

‘No.’

‘If Knox is right-handed, then he was shooting diagonally across his body. He would want reasonable arm extension. The muzzle was probably out the window, just a little. The ejection port on a Glock is on the right side of the gun. So he had to be very careful with his position. He had to keep the ejection port inside the car. Kind of cramped. No opportunity to aim down the barrel. Yet he hit the guy right between the eyes. Not easy. Is Knox that good a shot?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You should try to find out.’

Peterson said, ‘I figure the shell case hit the door frame or the windshield, at an angle, and bounced away inside Knox’s vehicle.’

‘So tell me about Knox’s vehicle.’

‘Prearranged. He got to town yesterday and met someone today. Maybe a biker. The biker handed over a vehicle, maybe a pick-up truck. Knox did the deed and

returned the vehicle and was walking home when we arrested him.'

Reacher said nothing.

Peterson said, 'The people where we put him last night said he made a point of being out all day. They say he wasn't very good company. Like he had things on his mind.'

'I met him this morning in the coffee shop.'

'How was he?'

'Not very good company. He said because he wasn't getting paid as of yesterday. Maybe he was worried about losing his job.'

'He was nervous about his mission.'

'How did he know what the lawyer was driving?'

'Whoever delivered the car told him.'

'How did he know the lawyer was going to be on that road at that time?'

'Simple arithmetic. The decoy appointment was for noon. Easy enough to work backwards in terms of the clock. Easy enough in terms of location, too, given that everyone knew the highway was closed.'

'I just don't buy how he got here in the first place. It was way too complicated. And he said a car was heading straight at him. He couldn't prearrange that. He couldn't invent it, either. He had twenty-one potential witnesses on board.'

'None of them saw it.'

'He couldn't know that in advance.'

Peterson said, 'Maybe there really was a car coming at him. Maybe he made a split second decision to exploit it, instead of faking a breakdown nearer the cloverleaf. Was there any delay before he reacted?'

Reacher said, 'I don't know. I was asleep.'

Peterson said nothing.

Reacher said, ‘I think you’ve got the wrong guy.’

‘Not what cops like to hear.’

‘I know. I was a cop. Doesn’t make it any less true.’

‘He had a gun in his pocket and he fired it.’

Reacher asked, ‘Case closed?’

‘That’s a big step.’

‘But?’

‘Right now, yes, I think it is.’

‘So put your money where your mouth is. Pull those cops out of Janet Salter’s house.’

Peterson paused. ‘Not my decision.’

‘What would you do if it was?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Will Holland do it?’

‘We’ll have to wait and see.’

Five minutes to three in the afternoon.

Thirty-seven hours to go.

SIXTEEN

HOLLAND DIDN'T DO IT. NOT, HE SAID, BECAUSE HE BELIEVED Knox to be innocent. But because the stakes were high enough for the bad guys to justify a second attempt, and a third, and if necessary a fourth and a fifth. Therefore Janet Salter's protection would stay in place until the trial had run its course.

Then Jay Knox started talking, and things changed again.

Knox said he carried the gun for his own personal protection, and always had. He said he was down and depressed and frustrated about the incident with the bus, and annoyed that his employers were going to dock his pay. He didn't like the creeps he had been billeted with. He had lingered over his breakfast in the coffee shop as long as he could, but Reacher had disturbed him, so he had set out on a long angry walk. He was trying to burn off his feelings. But he had arrived at a small trestle bridge over an icy stream and seen a road sign: Bridge Freezes Before Road. He had lost his temper and pulled out the Glock and shot the sign. For which he was prepared to apologize, but he added that pretty much every damn road sign he had seen in the area was pockmarked by bullet holes or shotgun pellets.

He remembered where the bridge was. He remembered where he had been standing. He was fairly exact about it. He could make a pretty good guess about where his spent shell case must have gone.

Peterson knew where the trestle bridge was, obviously. Its location made geographic sense, given the site of Knox's arrest. He figured that if Knox had really been out there, then his footprints might still be vaguely visible as smooth dents under the new accumulation. Certainly nobody else would have been walking there. Locals had more sense. He sent a patrol car to check. It had a metal detector in the trunk. Standard equipment, in jurisdictions that had gun crime and snow.

Ten minutes later the cop from the patrol car called in from the trestle bridge. He had found footprints. And he had found the shell case. It was buried in the snow at the end of a short furrow the length of a finger. It had hissed and burned its way in there. The furrow had been lightly covered by new fall, but was still

visible, if you knew what you were looking for. And the cop confirmed that there was a new bullet hole in the warning sign, raw and bright, almost certainly a nine millimetre, in the space between the F of Freezes and the R of Road.

Peterson conferred with Holland and they agreed the man they were looking for was both still unidentified and already located in the vicinity.

And only halfway through his business.

Jay Knox was a free man five minutes later. But he was told his Glock would stay in the police station, just in case, until he was ready to leave town. It was a deal Knox agreed to readily enough. Reacher saw him walk out of the lobby into the snow, reprieved but still defeated, relieved but still frustrated. Peterson and Holland conferred again and put the department on emergency alert. Even Kapler and Lowell were sent back to active duty.

The entire force was ordered into cars and told to cruise the streets and look for odd faces, odd vehicles, odd behaviour, a mobile expression of any police department's primal fear: there's someone out there.

Peterson pinned the new crime scene photographs to the boards in the small office off the corridor outside the squad room. He put them on the wall opposite the pictures of the black-clad guy lying dead in the snow. Reacher found him in there. Peterson said, 'We just made fools of ourselves and wasted a lot of time.'

Reacher said, 'Not really a lot of time.'

'What would your elite unit do next?'

'We'd speculate about automobile transmissions and cautious people.'

'What does that mean?'

'Apart from Knox not being the guy, I think you were exactly right about how it went down. The absence of footprints in the snow pretty much proves it. Two cars stopped cheek to cheek, just shy of exactly level. The bad guy waved the lawyer down. The lawyer stopped. The question is, why did he stop?'

'It's the obvious thing to do.'

Reacher nodded. 'I agree, on a road like that. In summer, at normal speeds, it

Reacher nodded. 'I agree, on a road like that. In summer, at normal speeds, it wouldn't happen. But in the snow, sure. You're crawling along, you figure the other guy either needs your help or has some necessary information for you. So you stop. But if you're the kind of guy who's cautious enough to fuss with overshoes and mount an emergency hammer on your dash and listen to AM radio for the weather report and keep your gas tank full at all times, then you're probably a little wary about that whole kind of thing. You'd keep the transmission in gear and your foot on the brake. So you can take off again right away, if necessary. Maybe you would open your window just a crack. But your lawyer didn't do that. He put his shift lever in Park and opened his window all the way.'

'Which means what?'

'Which means he was ready for a full-blown transaction. A conversation, a discussion, the whole nine yards. He turned his radio down, ready for it. Which means maybe he knew the guy who stopped him. Which is possibly plausible, given the kind of people he seems to have been mixing with.'

'So what would you do now?'

'We'd already be tearing his life apart.'

'Difficult for us to do. He lived in the next county. Outside of our jurisdiction.'

'You need to get on the phone and cooperate.'

'Like you used to with the feds?'

'Not exactly,' Reacher said.

Plato finished his afternoon walk with a visit to his prisoner. The guy was chained in the open, by his ankle, to a steel post anchored deep in the earth. He was a thief. He had gotten greedy. Plato's operations were cash businesses, obviously, and vast quantities of bills had to be stored for long periods, in the ground, in cellars, hidden here and there, to the point where damp and rodent damage claimed a ballpark figure of ten per cent of incoming assets. A hundred grand out of every million just fell apart and rotted away. Except this guy's division was claiming wastage closer to twelve per cent. Which was an anomaly. Which on examination turned out to be caused by the guy skimming, a quarter-million here, a half-million there. To some extent Plato was tolerant of mistakes,

but not of disloyalty.

Hence the guy, chained to the post by the ankle.

Winter weather a hundred miles from Mexico City was not fiercely hot. There were no biting insects in the air or in the ground, and the snakes were asleep, and the small night mammals were generally timid. So the guy would die of either thirst or starvation, depending on the rains.

Unless he chose not to.

There was a hatchet within easy reach. The blade was keen, and the guy's shin bone was right there. He hadn't used it yet. But Plato thought he would. It was usually about fifty-fifty. Proof of that proposition was all over the area, some widows, equal numbers of broken men hopping around on crutches.

In the South Dakota squad room the clock ticked around to five to four in the afternoon. Thirty-six hours to go. Peterson said, 'Five to four here is five to five in the East. Close of business. Time to call your old unit back. We still need that information.'

Reacher wandered over to the desk in the corner of the squad room. He sat down. Didn't dial the phone. Close of business in Virginia was five o'clock, not five to. Precision was important. It had mattered to him, and he had no doubt it mattered to his current successor.

Peterson asked, 'What did you think of Mrs Salter?'

'She's probably very well read.'

'As a witness?'

'Excellent.'

'Is she holding up?'

'She's scared.'

'Can't blame her.'

‘What about raw material supply to the lab? For that matter, what about intercepting the finished product as they ship it out?’

‘We’re trying. But to guarantee anything we’d have to be on that road all day and all night and all week.’

‘With the right people, too,’ Reacher said. ‘Some of your guys look asleep at the switch. But whatever, you need to tell Mrs Salter you’re doing everything you can. Right now she feels all the weight is on her shoulders.’

‘We told her nothing is obligatory.’

‘Some people see obligation in their own way.’ Reacher picked up the phone. Hit nine for a line. Dialled the number he remembered and waited for the start of the recording. If you know your party’s extension, you may dial it at any time. He hit 110. The same male voice answered. The captain, from the South. The same one-word greeting.

‘Yes?’

Reacher said, ‘Amanda, please.’

There was a click and a purr and a second of dial tone and the voice came on. Warm, husky, breathy, intimate. It said, ‘You’re a pain in the ass.’

Reacher said, ‘Am I?’

‘As if I don’t have enough to do.’

‘What’s the problem?’

‘Your place five miles west of Bolton isn’t exactly front and centre in the records. There’s nothing listed in the establishments register.’

‘There wouldn’t be. It’s abandoned. Maybe never even used in the first place.’

‘Was it sold?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe just yielded back. It’s on what the cops here call public land.’

‘I went back fifty years in the title register and found no transfers.’

‘So maybe it’s still ours.’

‘In which case it would be costing us something. Biannual inspections and a little maintenance at the least. But there’s no expenditure record.’

‘There has got to be something. Not even the army builds places and then forgets all about them.’

‘Is it fenced?’

‘I don’t know. I’m five miles away. Why?’

‘Because not even the army builds places and then forgets all about them. Therefore the absence of records could mean it’s on a different list. It could have been a secret installation.’

Reacher said, ‘They all were.’

‘Some more than others.’

‘The old folks here remember a security cordon.’

‘There was always a security cordon.’

‘How secret could it be? They put construction workers on the site.’

‘Secret then, abandoned now. Maybe because it was very weird. Which could be important to you. But if you really want to know, I’m going to have to do some digging.’

‘Can you?’

‘It’ll cost you.’

‘Cost me what?’

Warm, husky, breathy, intimate. ‘I want to know the story behind the dent in the desk.’

‘You don’t have time. You’ve got enough to do.’

You don't have time. You've got enough to do.

'Right now I'm just hanging out, waiting on a call.'

'Something interesting?'

'It's pretty good.'

'Tell me about it.'

'That's not the deal. This is about you telling me.'

'I don't want to talk through a switchboard.'

'You've got nothing to worry about. Obviously the colonel's head was righteous, or you would have been busted at the time. And the statute of limitations ran out long ago on damage to government property.'

'How hard will you dig?'

'As hard as you want me to.'

'When is your call coming through?'

'Soon, I hope.'

'Then we don't have time for the story. Get me what I need by tomorrow, and I'll tell you then.'

'You drive a hard bargain.'

'I was hoping for something for nothing.'

'At least give me a hint.'

'OK,' Reacher said. 'It wasn't a colonel. It was a one-star general.'

Plato decided on an early dinner, because he was hungry, because he had skipped lunch. So he showed up in his kitchen. It was something he liked to do occasionally. He felt it demonstrated solidarity with the people who worked for him. He felt it was inclusive and democratic. But it always came out feudal. His people would bob and bow and scrape and get all flushed and flustered. Probably

because they were afraid of him. But they had no reason. He had never victimized his domestic staff. None of them had ever suffered. Not the current generation, anyway. Two of their predecessors were buried on the property, but no one presently in his employ knew anything about that.

He ordered a cold appetizer and a hot entrée and took a beer from the refrigerator and went to wait in the smaller outdoor dining area. He took out his cell and dialled the walled villa a hundred miles away in the city. He asked, 'How are we doing in South Dakota?'

The man in the villa said, 'The lawyer was taken care of six hours ago.'

'And the witness?'

'Not yet.'

'So when?'

'Soon.'

'How soon?'

'Very soon.'

Plato felt his blood pressure build behind his temples. He looked at the next twenty-four hours in his mind. He liked to think visually. He liked to see chronological intervals laid out in a linear fashion, like ticks on a ruler. He inspected them at close quarters, like a bird swooping low over the sea, and he filled some of them in, and left others blank. He said, 'Call the guy and tell him the thing with the witness can't wait.'

The man in the villa said, 'I will.'

Plato hung up and redialled. The airfield. He put his plane on standby. It was to be fuelled and ready for takeoff at a moment's notice. The flight plan should show Canada, but that would be a decoy. The reality would be seventeen hundred miles there and seventeen hundred miles back. Fuel was to be made available at the midpoint for the return leg.

Then he made a third call. He needed six men to go with him. Good men, but not so good he couldn't afford to leave them behind. If it came to that.

so good he couldn't afford to leave them behind. If it came to that.

Which, he hoped, it would.

Reacher stopped thinking about the woman with the voice when he heard shouting in the police station lobby. One-sided shouting. A phone call. It had started out formal, gotten polite, then gotten a little defensive, and then gotten exasperated. It had ended with yelling. It had been followed by a three-way back and forth. The old guy from the desk to Holland's office, Peterson to Holland's office, the old guy back to the lobby, Peterson back to the squad room.

Peterson said, 'Biker trouble. One of them just called. Three of their people are missing over here, and why aren't we doing anything about it?'

Reacher said, 'What did you tell them?'

'We said we're working on it.'

'And?'

'They said we better work harder, or they'll come to town and work on it themselves. They said they'll give us until tomorrow.'

Five to five in the afternoon.

Thirty-five hours to go.

SEVENTEEN

PETERSON LEFT AGAIN AND REACHER SAT ALONE IN THE EMPTY squad room and looked out the window. It was still snowing. The flakes came down through pools of yellow sodium light. The sky was dark. The day was ending. Twelve thousand nearby souls were huddling in houses, staying warm, looking at the television, getting ready to eat. To the north the prison was seething. To the west the bikers were doing who knew what. And somewhere an unknown marksman was rehearsing a second shot.

Peterson came back and said, ‘Chief Holland thinks they’re bluffing. He says their whole strategy all along has been to stay inside the law and deny us probable cause.’

Reacher said nothing.

Peterson asked, ‘What do you think?’

‘Only one way to find out.’

‘Which is what?’

‘Reconnaissance.’

‘You want us to go over there?’

‘No, I’ll go,’ Reacher said. ‘I need to see the place anyway. To find out what it is.’

‘You have people working on that.’

‘No substitute for a live eyeball.’

‘You’re just going to show up there?’

‘I’ll say I’m from the army. A biannual inspection of our property.’

‘On your own?’

‘Why not?’

Why not?

‘Won’t work. They’ll want to see ID.’

‘They won’t. These are not regular citizens.’

Peterson asked, ‘When would you go?’

‘As soon as possible,’ Reacher said. ‘No point in the dark. Let’s say first light tomorrow.’

Peterson said the department had a spare unmarked car. Reacher could use it. First light would depend on the weather, but it would be somewhere between seven and eight o’clock. So Peterson said, ‘I’ll drive you home now. You should get some rest.’

Reacher shook his head. ‘You should drive me to Janet Salter’s instead. She has rooms to spare. She told me she volunteered them after the bus crash. Then she told me she knew about the crisis plan at the prison. It was like a coded message. She wants someone there who won’t leave if the siren sounds. Imagine how that would feel.’

Peterson thought about it for a second, and nodded. Started to say something, and stopped. ‘I was going to say I’ll bring your bags over. But you don’t have any.’

‘Tell Kim I got new clothes. Tell her you saw me in them. I think she was a little worried. And tell her I’ll look after her dad’s parka. And tell her thanks again for her hospitality.’

It was still snowing but the roads between the police station and Janet Salter’s house were still passable. They had been ploughed at least once during the day. The plough blades had thrown up steep banks either side, so that the wheel ruts were now four small trenches inside one giant trench. Sound was absorbed. The world was silent. The flakes came down invisible until they hit the headlight beams. They settled vertically and implacably ahead of the creeping car.

The way the ploughs had narrowed the roads meant that Peterson couldn’t turn into Janet Salter’s street. The parked cop car filled its whole width. The car’s red lights turned lazily and made the falling flakes pink, like garnets, or blood spatter. Reacher climbed out of Peterson’s ride and zipped up and squeezed

awkwardly between the parked cruiser's trunk and the snow bank behind it. The cop in the cruiser paid no attention. Reacher trudged alone down the centre of the street. The tracks from the change of watch that morning were long gone, smoothed over and obscured. The air was bitter. A cold day was slipping away, and a savage night was moving in to replace it.

Reacher climbed up on Janet Salter's porch and pulled the bell wire. Pictured the cop inside getting up off her perch on the bottom stair and stepping across the Persian rug. The door opened. The cops had swapped their positions. This was the one from the library window. She was tall and had fair hair pulled back in an athletic ponytail. Her hand was resting on her gun. She was alert, but not tense. Professionally cautious, but happy about the tiny break in routine.

Reacher hung his borrowed coat on the hat stand and headed for the library. Janet Salter was in the same armchair as before. She wasn't reading. She was just sitting there. The other woman cop was behind her. The one that had been in the hallway earlier. The small, dark one. She was staring out the window. The drapes were wide open.

Janet Salter said, 'You had to rush off before you finished your coffee. Would you like me to make some more?'

'Always,' Reacher said. He followed her to the kitchen and watched her fill the antique percolator. The faucets over the sink were just as old. But nothing in the room was decrepit or dowdy. Good stuff was good stuff, however long ago it had been installed.

She said, 'I understand you'll stay here tonight.'

He said, 'Only if it's convenient.'

'Were you not comfortable at the Peterson place?'

'I was fine. But I don't like to impose too long.'

'One night was too long?'

'They have enough on their plate.'

'You travel light.'

‘What you see is what you get.’

‘Mr Peterson told me.’

‘Told you, or warned you?’

‘Is it a phobia? Or a philia? Or a consciously existential decision?’

‘I’m not sure I ever inquired that deeply.’

‘A phobia would be a fear, of course, possibly of commitment or entanglement. A philia would imply love, possibly of freedom or opportunity. Although technically a philia shades towards issues of abnormal appetite, in your case possibly for secrecy. We must ask of people who fly beneath the radar, why, exactly? Is radar in itself unacceptable, or is the terrain down there uniquely attractive?’

‘Maybe it’s the third thing,’ Reacher said. ‘Existential.’

‘Your disavowal of possessions is a little extreme. History tells us that asceticism has powerful attractions, but even so most ascetics owned clothes, at least. Shirts, anyway, even if they were only made of hair.’

‘Are you making fun of me?’

‘You could afford to carry a small bag, I think. It wouldn’t change who you are.’

‘I’m afraid it would. Unless it was empty, which would be pointless. To fill a small bag means selecting, and choosing, and evaluating. There’s no logical end to that process. Pretty soon I would have a big bag, and then two or three. A month later I’d be like the rest of you.’

‘And that horrifies you?’

‘No, I think to be like everyone else would be comfortable and reassuring. But some things just can’t be done. I was born different.’

‘That’s your answer? You were born different?’

‘I think it’s clear we’re not all born the same.’

Janet Salter poured the coffee, this time straight into tall china mugs, as if she thought silver trays and ceremony were inappropriate for an ascetic, and as if she had noticed his earlier discomfort with the undersized cup.

She said, ‘Well, whatever your precise diagnosis might be, I’m glad to have you here. You’re welcome to stay as long as you like.’

Five to six in the evening.

Thirty-four hours to go.

After the coffee was finished Janet Salter started to make dinner. Reacher offered to eat out, but she said it was as easy to cook for six as five, which told him the two cops on night watch would be getting up and forming a foursome for most of the evening. Which was reassuring.

With her permission he used the food preparation time to inspect the house. He wasn’t interested in the first floor or the second floor. He wanted to see the basement. South Dakota had tornadoes, and he was pretty sure a house of any quality would have been planned with an underground safety zone. He went down a flight of stairs from a small back hallway off the kitchen and found a satisfactory situation. The prairie topsoil had been too deep for the excavation to reach bedrock, so the whole space was basically a huge six-sided wooden box built from massive baulks of timber banded with iron. The walls and floor were thick to provide stability, and the ceiling was thick to prevent the rest of the house from crashing through after a direct hit. There was a thicket of floor-to-ceiling posts throughout the space, not more than six feet apart, each one hewn and smoothed from the trunk of a tree. Four of them were panelled with wallboard, to form a furnace room. The furnace was a stained green appliance. It was fed by a thin fuel line, presumably from an oil tank buried outside in the yard. It had a pump and a complicated matrix of wide iron pipes that led out and up through the ceiling. An old installation. Maybe the first in town. But it was working fine. The burner was roaring and the pump was whirring and the pipes were hissing. It was keeping the whole basement warm.

The stairs leading upward could be closed off at the bottom with a stout door that opened outward. It could be secured from the inside with an iron bar propped across iron brackets. It was a fine tornado shelter, no question. Probably an adequate bomb shelter. Almost certainly resistant to any kind of small arms fire. Reacher had seen .50 calibre machine guns chew through most things, but

hundred-year-old foot-thick close-grain hard-wood would probably hold up until their barrels overheated and warped.

He came back upstairs encouraged and found the night watch cops up and about. They were with their daytime partners in the kitchen. Janet Salter was moving around inside their cordon. There was an atmosphere of custom and comfort. Clearly the strange little household was becoming used to getting along together. The oven was on and it was warming the room. The glass in the window was fogged with moisture. Reacher stepped into the library and checked the view to the rear. Nothing to see. Just a vague sense of flat land receding into the frigid distance. The snow was easing. The falling flakes themselves seemed stunned by the cold.

Reacher turned back from the window and found Janet Salter stepping in through the door. She said, ‘May we talk?’

Reacher said, ‘Sure.’

She said, ‘I know the real reason why you’re here, of course. I know why you’re inspecting the house. You have volunteered to defend me, if the siren should happen to sound, and you’re making yourself familiar with the terrain. And I’m very grateful for your kindness. Even though your psychological imperatives may mean you won’t be here for quite long enough. The trial might not happen for a month. How many new shirts would that be?’

‘Eight,’ Reacher said.

She didn’t reply.

Reacher said, ‘There would be no shame in bowing out, you know. No one could blame you. And those guys will get nailed for something else, sooner or later.’

‘There would be considerable shame in it,’ she said. ‘And I won’t do it.’

‘Then don’t talk to me about psychological imperatives,’ Reacher said.

She smiled. Asked, ‘Are you armed?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

Why not?

‘Do retired plumbers carry wrenches the rest of their lives?’ She pointed to a low shelf. ‘There’s a book that might interest you. A work of history. The large volume, with the leather binding.’

It was a big old thing about a foot and a half high and about four inches thick. It had a leather spine with raised horizontal ribs and a quaint title embossed in gold: An Accurate Illustrated History of Mr Smith’s & Mr Wesson’s Hand Guns. Which sounded Victorian, which did not compute. Smith & Wesson had made plenty of handguns in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, but not nearly enough to fill a book four inches thick.

Janet Salter said, ‘Take a look at it.’

Reacher pulled the book off the shelf. It was heavy.

She said, ‘I think you should read it in bed tonight.’

It was heavy because it wasn’t a book. Reacher opened the leather-bound cover and expected to see faded pages with half-tone engravings or hand-tinted line drawings, maybe alternated with tissue paper leaves to protect the art. Instead the cover was a lid and inside was a box with two moulded velvet cavities. The velvet was brown. Nested neatly in the two cavities was a matched pair of Smith & Wesson revolvers, one reversed with respect to the other, cradled butt to muzzle, like quotation marks either end of a sentence. The revolvers were Smith & Wesson’s Military and Police models. Four-inch barrels. They could have been a hundred years old, or fifty. Plain simple steel machines, chequered walnut grips, chambered for the .38 Special, lanyard eyelets on the bottom of the butts, put there for officers either military or civil.

Janet Salter said, ‘They were my grandfather’s.’

Reacher asked, ‘Did he serve?’

‘He was an honorary commissioner, back when Bolton first got a police department. He was presented with the guns. Do you think they still work?’

Reacher nodded. Revolvers were usually reliable for ever. They had to be seriously banged up or rusted solid to fail. He asked, ‘Have they ever been used?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Do you have any oil?’

‘I have sewing-machine oil.’

‘That will do.’

‘Do we need anything else?’

‘Ammunition would help.’

‘I have some.’

‘How old?’

‘About a week.’

‘You’re well prepared.’

‘It seemed the right time to be.’

‘How many rounds?’

‘A box of a hundred.’

‘Good work.’

‘Put the book back now,’ she said. ‘The policewomen need not know. In my experience professionals are offended by amateur plans.’

After dinner the phone rang. It was Peterson, at the police station. He told Janet Salter that the phone on the back corner desk had rung. The 110th MP. The woman wouldn’t talk to him. She wanted Reacher to call her back.

Janet Salter’s phone was in the hallway. It was newer than the house, but not recently installed. It had a push-button dial, but it also had a cord and was about the size of a portable typewriter. It was on a small table with a chair next to it. Like phones used to be, back when one instrument was enough for a household and using it was a kind of ceremony.

Reacher dialled the number he remembered. He waited for the recording and dialled 110.

‘Yes?’

‘Amanda, please.’

There was a click. Then the voice. No dial tone. She already had the phone in her hand. She said, ‘Either you’re crazy or the world is.’

Reacher said, ‘Or both.’

‘Whichever, I’m about ready to give up on you.’

‘Why?’

‘Because the place you’re pestering me about doesn’t exist.’

Five to seven in the evening.

Thirty-three hours to go.

EIGHTEEN

REACHER MOVED ON THE HALLWAY CHAIR AND SAID, ‘THE PLACE exists. For sure. I’d believe stone and eyewitness reports before I believed army paperwork.’

The voice said, ‘But you haven’t actually seen the stone for yourself.’

‘Not yet. But why would anyone invent a story like that?’

‘Then the place must have been unbelievably secret. They built it but never listed it anywhere.’

‘And then they let a construction camp get built right over it? How does that work?’

‘Everything changed, that’s how. It was top secret fifty years ago, and it was totally defunct by five years ago. Typical Cold War scenario. Probably declassified in the early nineties.’

‘I don’t care when it was declassified. I just want to know what it is.’

‘I could get on a plane. But you’re closer.’

Reacher asked, ‘How’s your case?’

‘Still waiting. Which doesn’t encourage me. It will probably fall apart by morning.’

‘You working all night?’

‘You know how it is.’

‘So use the down time. Check Congressional appropriations for me. The purpose will be redacted, but the money will be listed. It always is. We can make a start that way.’

‘You know how big the defence budget was fifty years ago? You know how many line items there were?’

‘You’ve got all night. Look for South Dakota involvement, House or Senate. I don’t see any real strategic value up here, so it could have been a pork barrel project.’

‘Checking those records is a lot of work.’

‘What did you expect? A life of leisure? You should have joined the navy.’

‘We have a deal, Reacher. Remember? So tell me about the one-star general.’

‘You’re wasting time.’

‘I’ve got time to waste. Sounds like you’re the one who hasn’t.’

‘It’s a long story.’

‘The best stories always are. Summarize if you like, but make sure you hit all the main points.’

‘I’m on someone else’s phone here. I can’t run up a big bill.’

The voice said, ‘Wait one.’ There was a click and a second of dead air and then the voice came back. ‘Now you’re on the government’s dime.’

‘You could be working the money for me.’

‘I am. I already put a guy on it thirty-five minutes ago. I maintain standards here, believe me. However good you were, I’m better.’

‘I sincerely hope so.’

‘So, once upon a time, what happened?’

Reacher paused.

‘I went to Russia,’ he said. ‘Well after the fall of communism. We got a weird invitation to go inspect their military prisons. Nobody had the faintest idea why. But the general feeling was, why not? So we flew to Moscow and took a train way east. It was a big old Soviet-era thing with bunks and a dining car. We were on it for days. The food was awful. But awful in a way that felt familiar. So one night I went for a stroll up and down the train and stopped in at the kitchen. They

were serving us American MREs. Our very own meals, ready to eat.'

'U.S. Army rations? On a Soviet train?'

'A Russian train by then, technically. They had coal-fired stoves in the kitchen car. Samovars and everything. They were heating pans of water and ripping open MRE packs and mixing them together. They had boxes and boxes of them.'

'Did they try to hide them?'

'The cooks didn't know what they were. They couldn't read English. Probably couldn't read anything.'

'So how had our MREs gotten there?'

'That's tomorrow's instalment. You need to get back to work.'

'I'm just waiting on a call.'

'From where?'

'I can't say.'

'You know you want to tell me.'

'Fort Hood.'

'What about?'

'An infantry captain killed his wife. Which happens. But this wasn't any old wife. She had a job with Homeland Security. It's possible the guy has ties overseas. It's possible he was stealing documents from her and killed her to cover it up.'

'Where overseas?'

'What we call non-state actors.'

'Terrorists?'

'Terrorist organizations, anyway.'

‘Nice. That’s a Bronze Star right there.’

‘If I get the guy. Right now he’s in the wind.’

‘Tell me if he heads for South Dakota.’

She laughed. ‘How old are you, anyway?’

‘Younger than your desk.’

Five miles away in the prison mess hall all traces of the evening meal had been cleared away. But more than fifty men were still seated on the long benches. Some were white, some were brown, and some were black. All wore orange jumpsuits. They were sitting in three segregated groups, far from each other, like three island nations in a sea of linoleum.

Until a white man got up and walked across the room and spoke to a black man.

The white man was white in name only. His skin was mostly blue with tattoos. He was built like a house. He had hair to his waist and a beard that reached his chest. The black man was a little shorter, but probably heavier. He had biceps the size of footballs and a scalp shaved so close it gleamed.

The white man said, ‘The Mexicans owe us two cartons of smokes.’

The black man didn’t react in any way at all. Why would he? White and brown had nothing to do with him.

The white man said, ‘The Mexicans say you owe them two cartons of smokes.’

No reaction.

‘So we’ll collect direct from you. What goes around comes around.’

Which was a technically acceptable proposition. A prison was an economy. Cigarettes were currency. Like dollar bills earned selling a car in New York could be used for buying a TV in Los Angeles. But economic cooperation implied the existence of laws and treaties and détente, and all three were in short supply between black and white.

Then the white man said, ‘We’ll collect in the form of ass. Something tender. The youngest and sweetest you got. Two nights, and then you’ll get her back.’

In Janet Salter’s house the four women cops were handing over. The day watch was going off duty, and the night watch was coming on. One of the night watch came out of the kitchen and took up her post in the hallway. The other headed for the library. The day watch climbed the stairs. Janet Salter herself said she was headed for the parlour. Reacher guessed she wanted to spend some time on her own. Being protected around the clock was socially exhausting for all parties concerned. But she invited him in with her.

The parlour was different from the library in no significant way at all. Similar furniture, similar décor, similar shelves, thousands more books. The window gave a view across the porch to the front. It had almost stopped snowing. The cop in the car on the street had gotten out from time to time to scrape his windows. There was a loaf of snow a foot high on the roof and the hood and the trunk, but the glass was clear. The cop was still awake and alert. Reacher could see his head turning. He was checking ahead, in the mirror, half left, half right. Not bad, for what must have been the twelfth hour of twelve. The good half of the Bolton PD made for a decent unit.

Janet Salter was wearing a cardigan sweater. It was long on her and the pockets were bagged. By, it turned out, a rag and a can of oil. She took them out and put them on a side table. The rag was white and the can was a small old green thing with Singer printed on it.

She said, ‘Go get the book I showed you.’

The night watch cop in the library turned around when Reacher came in. She was a small neat round-shouldered person made wider by her equipment belt. Her eyes flicked up, flicked down, flicked away. No threat. She turned back to the window. Behind her Reacher took the fake book off the shelf and hefted it under his arm. He carried it back to the parlour. Janet Salter closed the door behind him. He opened the leather box on the floor and lifted out the first revolver.

The Smith & Wesson Military and Police model had been first produced in 1899 and last modified three years later in 1902. The average height of American men in 1902 had been five feet seven inches, and their hands had been proportionately sized. Reacher was six feet five inches tall and had hands the

size of supermarket chickens, so the gun was small for him. But his trigger finger fit through the guard, which was all that mattered. He pressed the thumb catch and swung the cylinder out. It was empty. He locked it back in and dry fired. Everything worked. But he felt the microscopic grind and scrape of steel that had been greased in the factory many decades earlier and never touched since. So he went to work with the rag and the can and tried again five minutes later and was much happier with the result. He repeated the process on the second gun. He capped the oil and folded the rag. Asked, ‘Where is the ammunition?’

Janet Salter said, ‘Upstairs in my medicine cabinet.’

‘Not a logical place, given that the guns were in the library.’

‘I thought I might have time, if it came to it.’

‘Lots of dead people thought that.’

‘You’re serious, aren’t you?’

‘This is a serious business.’

She didn’t answer. Just got up and left the room. Reacher heard the creak of the stairs. She came back with a crisp new box of a hundred Federal .38 Specials. Semi-wadcutters with hollow points. A good choice. She had been well advised by somebody. The 158-grain load was not the most powerful in the world, but the mushrooming effect of the hollow points would more than make up for it.

Reacher loaded six rounds into the first gun and kept the second empty. He said, ‘Look away and then look back and point your finger straight at me.’

Janet Salter said, ‘What?’

‘Just do it. Like I’m talking in class.’

‘I wasn’t that kind of teacher.’

‘Pretend you were.’

So she did. She made a good job of it. Maybe undergraduate students at Oxford University hadn’t been exactly what the world imagined. Her finger ended up

University hadn't been exactly what she'd imagined. Her finger ended up pointing straight between his eyes.

'Good,' he said. 'Now do it again, but point at my chest.'

She did it again. Ended up pointing straight at his centre mass.

'OK,' he said. 'That's how to shoot. The gun barrel is your finger. Don't try to aim. Don't even think about it. Just do it, instinctively. Point at the chest, because that's the biggest target. Even if you don't kill him, you'll ruin his day.'

Janet Salter said nothing. Reacher handed her the empty gun.

'Try the trigger,' he said.

She did. The hammer rose, the cylinder turned, the hammer fell. Nice and easy. She said, 'I suppose there will be a certain amount of recoil.'

Reacher nodded. 'Unless the laws of physics changed overnight.'

'Will it be bad?'

Reacher shook his head. 'The .38 Special is a fairly friendly round. For the shooter, I mean. Not much bang, not much kick.'

She tried the trigger again. The hammer rose, the cylinder turned, the hammer fell.

'Now do it over and over,' he said.

She did. Four, five, six times.

She said, 'It's tiring.'

'It won't be if it comes to it. And that's what you've got to do. Put six rounds in the guy. Don't stop until the gun is empty.'

'This is awful,' she said.

'It won't be if it comes to it. It'll be you or him. You'll be surprised how fast that changes your perspective.'

She passed the gun back to him. He asked her, ‘Where are you going to keep it?’

‘In the book, I guess.’

‘Wrong answer. You’re going to keep it in your pocket. At night you’re going to keep it under your pillow.’ He loaded six rounds into it. Locked the cylinder in place and passed it back. He said, ‘Don’t touch the trigger until you’re ready to kill the guy.’

‘I won’t be able to.’

‘I think you will.’

She asked, ‘Are you going to keep the other one?’

He nodded. ‘I’ll be sure to turn it in before I leave.’

Five to eight in the evening.

Thirty-two hours to go.

The prison siren started to wail.

NINETEEN

THE SIREN WAS FIVE MILES AWAY TO THE NORTH, BUT ITS SOUND came through the frigid night very clearly. It was somewhere between loud and distant, somewhere between mournful and urgent, somewhere between everyday and alien. It shrieked and howled, it rose and fell, it screamed and whispered. It rolled across the flat land and down the silent snowy streets and shattered the crystal air it passed through.

The cops in the house reacted instantly. They had rehearsed, probably physically, certainly mentally. They had prepared themselves for the tough choice. The woman from the hallway ducked her head into the parlour. Conflict was all over her face. There was the sound of footsteps from the floor above. The day watch was scrambling. The woman from the library ran straight for her parka on the hat rack. Outside on the street the nearest cop car was already turning around. Broken slabs of snow were sliding off its roof and its hood and its trunk. The car from the mouth of the road was backing up fast. There were running feet on the stairs.

The woman from the hallway said, ‘Sorry.’

Then she was gone. She grabbed her coat and spilled out the door, the last to leave. The cop cars had their doors open. Reacher could hear furious radio chatter. The cops from the house threw themselves into the cars and the cars spun their wheels and slewed and churned away down the street. Reacher watched them go. Then he stepped back and closed the front door. His borrowed coat had fallen to the floor in the scramble. He put it back on a hook. It hung all alone on the rack.

The siren wailed on.

But the house went absolutely silent.

The house stayed silent for less than a minute. Then over the sound of the siren Reacher heard the patter of chains on snow and the grind of a big engine revving fast and urgent in a low gear. He checked the parlour window. Bright headlights. A Crown Vic. Unmarked. Black or dark blue. Hard to say, in the moonlight. It crunched to a stop at the end of the driveway and Chief Holland climbed out. Parka, hat, boots. Reacher tucked his gun in his waistband at the back and

Parka, hat, boots. Reacher tucked his gun in his waistband at the back and draped his sweater over it. He stepped out to the hallway. He opened the front door just as Holland made it up on the porch.

Holland looked surprised.

He said, ‘I didn’t know you were here.’

Reacher said, ‘It made more sense. There are empty beds here and Kim Peterson doesn’t need protection.’

‘Was this Andrew’s idea or yours?’

‘Mine.’

‘Is Mrs Salter OK?’

‘She’s fine.’

‘Let me see her.’

Reacher stepped back and Holland stepped in and closed the door. Janet Salter came out of the parlour. Holland asked her, ‘Are you OK?’

She nodded. She said, ‘I’m fine. And I’m very grateful that you came. I appreciate it very much. But really you should be on your way to the prison.’

Holland nodded. ‘I was. But I didn’t want you to be alone.’

‘Rules are rules.’

‘Even so.’

‘I’ll be fine. I’m sure Mr Reacher will prove more than capable.’

Holland glanced back at Reacher. Wretched conflict in his face, just like the cop from the hallway. Reacher asked him, ‘What’s happening up there?’

Holland said, ‘Blacks and whites having at it. A regular prison riot.’

‘First ever?’

‘Correct.’

‘Great timing.’

‘Tell me about it.’

‘Bottom line, what happens if you don’t go?’

‘The department is disgraced, and I get fired. After that, no one really knows.’

‘So go.’

‘I don’t want to.’ A simple statement. The way Holland said it and the way he stood there afterwards made Reacher think he had more on his mind than his duty to Mrs Salter. He wanted to stay indoors, comfortable, in the warm, where he was safe.

Holland was scared.

Reacher asked him, ‘Have you ever worked a prison before?’

Holland said, ‘No.’

‘There’s nothing to it. You’ll be on the fence and in the towers. Anyone tries to get through, you shoot them dead. Simple as that. They know the rules. And they won’t try, anyway. Not at a moment’s notice in this kind of weather. They’ll stay inside, fighting. They’ll burn out eventually. They always do. You’re going to get cold and bored, but that’s all.’

‘Have you worked prisons?’

‘I’ve worked everything. Including personal protection. And with all due respect, I can do at least as good a job as you. So you should let me. That way everyone wins.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I can look after the situation here, you can take care of your people up there.’

‘It could last for hours. Even days.’

‘Actually it could last for weeks. But if it looks like it’s going to, then you can regroup.’

‘You think?’

Reacher nodded. ‘You can’t work around the clock for days on end. Not all of you. No one could expect that. You can establish some flexibility after the first panic is over.’

Holland didn’t answer. Outside the siren suddenly died. It just cut off mid-wail and absolute silence came crashing back. A total absence of sound, like the air itself was refreezing.

Reacher said, ‘That probably means you’re all supposed to be up there by now.’

Holland nodded, slow and unsure, once, then twice. He looked at Janet Salter and said, ‘At least come with me in the car. I need to know you’re safe.’

Janet Salter said, ‘That’s not permitted, Chief Holland. Rules are rules. But don’t worry. I’ll be safe here, with Mr Reacher.’

Holland stood still a moment longer. Then he nodded a third time, more decisively. His mind was made up. He turned abruptly and headed out the door. His car was still running. A thin cloud of exhaust was pooling behind the trunk. He climbed in and K-turned and drove away and out of sight. White vapour trailed after him and hung and dispersed. The small sound of his chains on the packed snow died back to nothing.

Reacher closed the door.

The house went quiet again.

Tactically the best move would have been to lock Janet Salter in the basement. But she refused to go. She just stood in the hallway with her hand on the butt of the gun in her pocket. She looked all around, one point of the compass, then the next, as if she suddenly understood that the four walls that were supposed to protect her were really just four different ways in. There were doors and windows all over the place. Any one of them could be forced or busted in an instant.

Second best would have been to stash her in her bedroom. Second-floor break-

ins were much less common than first-floor. But she wouldn't go upstairs, either. She said she would feel she had nowhere to run.

'You won't be running,' Reacher said. 'You'll be shooting.'

'Not while you're here, surely.'

'Twelve holes in the guy are better than six.'

She was quiet for a beat. She looked at him like he was an alien.

She asked, 'Shouldn't you be patrolling outside?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'It would take me far too long to get from front to back, if I had to. And my finger wouldn't fit in the trigger guard with gloves on. And it's too cold to go out without gloves.'

'So we just wait in here?'

Reacher nodded. 'That's right. We wait in here.'

They waited in the parlour. Reacher figured it was the best choice. It overlooked the front, and given the snow on the ground, frontal approach was the most likely. And even if an actual approach was not attempted, the parlour was still the best room. The way it looked out under the lip of the porch roof and across the whole of its depth meant that a potential sniper would have to line up front and centre to get a shot. He would be spotted twenty paces before he even raised the rifle to his eye.

There were many other possible dangers. Bombs or fire bombs were top of the list. But if that kind of thing was coming their way, it didn't really matter which room they were in.

The clock ticked past nine and marked the end of their first hour alone. The street outside was deserted. Reacher made a careful sweep of the interior perimeter. The front door, locked. The first floor windows, all closed. The French doors in the library, locked. The back door, locked. Second storey

French doors in the library, locked. The back door, locked. Second story windows, all good. Most of them were inaccessible without a ladder. The only viable possibility was a bedroom window at the front, which had the back edge of the porch roof directly under its sill. But there was a lot of snow out there. The porch roof itself would be slippery and treacherous. Safe enough.

The weather was changing. A light wind was getting up. The night sky was clearing. The moon was bright and stars were visible. The temperature felt like it was dropping. Every window Reacher checked had a layer of air in front of it that was pulsing with cold. The wind didn't help. It found invisible cracks and made invisible draughts and sucked heat out of the whole structure.

The wind didn't help safety, either. It made strange sounds. Rustling, cracking, crackling noises, the brittle chafing of frozen foliage, hollow clicks and clonks from frozen tree limbs, a faint keening from the weird shapes on the power lines. In absolute terms the sounds were quiet, but Reacher could have done without them. He was depending on hearing the soft crunch and slide of feet on snow, and the chances of doing that were diminishing. And Janet Salter was talking from time to time, which made things worse, but he didn't want to shut her up. She was nervous, understandably, and talking seemed to help her. He got back from a circuit of the house and she asked him, 'How many times have you done this kind of thing before?'

He kept his eyes on the window and said, 'Once or twice.'

'And clearly you survived.'

He nodded. 'So far.'

'What's your secret of success?'

'I don't like getting beaten. Better for all concerned that it just doesn't happen.'

'That's a heavy burden to carry, psychologically. That kind of burning need for dominance, I mean.'

'Are there people who enjoy getting beaten?'

'It's not black and white. You wouldn't have to enjoy it. But you could be at peace with whatever comes your way. You know, win some, lose some.'

‘Doesn’t work that way. Not in my line of work. You win some, and then you lose one. And then it’s game over.’

‘You’re still in the army, aren’t you?’

‘No, I’ve been out for years.’

‘In your head, I mean.’

‘Not really.’

‘Don’t you miss it?’

‘Not really.’

‘I heard you on the phone, with the woman in Virginia. You sounded alive.’

‘That was because of her. Not the army. She’s got a great voice.’

‘You’re lonely.’

‘Aren’t you?’

She didn’t answer. The clock ticked on. Nobody approached the house.

After an hour and a half Reacher had made four security sweeps and felt he knew the house pretty well. It had been built for an earlier generation, which had been in some ways tougher, and in some ways gentler. The windows had catches and the doors had locks, all solid well-machined pieces of brass, but nothing like the armour on sale at any modern hardware store. Which meant that there were forty-three possible ways in, of which fifteen were realistically practical, of which eight might be anticipated by a solo opponent of normal intelligence, of which six would be easy to defeat. The remaining two would be difficult to beat, but feasible, made harder by Janet Salter’s wandering presence. Lines of fire were always complicated. He thought again about insisting she lock herself downstairs, but she saw him thinking and started talking again, as if to head him off. He was at the parlour window, craning left, craning right, and she asked, ‘Was it your mother or your father who was a Marine?’

He said, ‘Excuse me?’

‘You told me you grew up on Marine Corps bases. I was wondering which of your parents made that necessary. Although I suppose it could have been both of them. Was that permitted? A husband and wife serving together?’

‘I don’t imagine so.’

‘So which one was it?’

‘It was my father.’

‘Tell me about him.’

‘Not much to tell. Nice guy, but busy.’

‘Distant?’

‘He probably thought I was. There were a hundred kids on every base. We ran around all day. We were in a world of our own.’

‘Is he still alive?’

‘He died a long time ago. My mother, too.’

‘It was the same for me,’ Janet Salter said. ‘I made myself distant. I was always reading.’

He didn’t reply, and she went quiet again. He watched the street. Nothing happening. He moved to the library and checked the yard. Nothing happening. The last of the cloud was moving away and the moon was brightening. It was a blue, cold, empty world out there.

Except that it wasn’t empty.

But nobody came.

Hide and seek. Maybe the oldest game in the world. Because of ancient thrills and fears buried deep in the back of every human’s brain. Predator and prey. The irresistible shiver of delight, crouching in the dark, hearing the footsteps pass by. The rush of pleasure in doubling back and wrenching open the closet door and discovering the victim. The instant translation of primeval terrors into modern-day laughter.

This was different.

There would be no laughter. There would be short seconds of furious gunfire and the stink of smoke and blood and then sudden deafened silence and a world-stands-still pause to look down and check yourself for damage. Then another pause to check your people. Then the shakes and the gulps and the need to throw up.

No laughter.

And this wasn't hide and seek. Nobody was really hiding, and nobody was really seeking. Whoever was out there knew full well where Janet Salter was. An exact address would have been provided. Maybe turn-by-turn directions, maybe GPS coordinates. And she was just sitting right there, waiting for him. No art. Just brutality. Which disappointed Reacher a little. He was good at hide and seek. The real-world version, not the children's game. Good at hiding, better at seeking. His former professional obligations had led him in that direction. He had been a good hunter of people. Fugitives, mainly. He had learned that empathy was the key. Understand their motives, their circumstances, their goals, their aims, their fears, their needs. Think like them. See what they see. Be them. He had gotten to the point where he could spend an hour with a case file, a second hour thinking, a third with maps and phone books, and then predict pretty much the exact building the guy would be found in.

He checked the view to the front.

No one there.

Just an empty white world that seemed to be frozen solid.

He glanced back at Janet Salter and said, 'I need you to watch the front for me.'

'OK.'

'I'll be in the hallway for a spell. Anyone comes in through the kitchen or the library, I can get them in the corridor.'

'OK.'

'Stay back in the shadows, but keep your eyes peeled.'

‘OK.’

‘You see anything at all, you call out to me, loud and clear, with concise information. Numbers, location, direction, and description.’

‘OK.’

‘And do it standing up.’

‘Why?’

‘So if you fall asleep on the job I’ll hear you fall down.’

She took up a good position, well back in the room, invisible from outside, but with a decent angle. Her hand was still on the gun in her pocket. He stepped out to the hallway and moved the chair to the other side of the telephone table, so he could sit facing the rear of the house. He put his gun in his lap. Picked up the phone. Dialled the number he remembered.

‘Yes?’

‘Amanda, please.’

A pause. A click. The voice. It said, ‘You have got to be kidding me. Two hours ago you gave me two weeks’ worth of work, and already you’re calling me for a result?’

‘No, I’m not, but I can’t give you two weeks anyway. I need something by tomorrow at the latest.’

‘What are you, nuts?’

‘You said you were better than me, and I could have done it in a day. So a night should be good enough for you.’

‘What is that, psychology? You took motivation classes up at West Point?’

Reacher kept his hand on his gun and his eyes on the kitchen door. He asked, ‘Did you catch your guy yet?’

‘No, can’t you tell?’

‘Where are you looking?’

‘All the airports, plus boats on the Gulf Coast between Corpus Christi and New Orleans.’

‘He’s in a motel a little ways north of Austin. Almost certainly Georgetown. Almost certainly the second motel north of the bus depot.’

‘What, he’s wearing a secret ankle bracelet I don’t know about?’

‘No, he’s scared and alone. He needs help. Can’t get it anyplace except the overseas folks he’s in bed with. But he’s waiting to call them. They’ll help him if he’s clean, they’ll ditch him if he’s compromised. Maybe they’ll even kill him. He knows that. A fugitive from the law, that’s OK with them. A political fugitive, not so much. They’d worry about us tracking him all the way home, wherever home is. So he needs to know the news. He needs a media market that covers Fort Hood’s business. If it stays a plain vanilla domestic homicide, he’ll make the call. If it doesn’t, he’ll end up putting his gun in his mouth.’

‘We haven’t released the background.’

‘Then he’ll take a day or two to be sure, and then he’ll call them.’

‘But he could have gone anywhere for that. Waco, Dallas, Abilene, even.’

‘No, he made a careful choice. Abilene is too far and too small. And Waco and Dallas are too patriotic. He thinks that TV and radio there might sit on the espionage angle. What is he, Fourth Infantry? Audiences in Waco and Dallas don’t want to hear about a Fourth Infantry captain going bad. He knows that. But Austin is much more liberal. And it’s the state capital, so the news stations are a little looser. He needs the real skinny, and he knows that Austin is where he’s going to get it.’

‘You said Georgetown.’

‘He’s afraid of the actual city. Too many cops, too much going on. He didn’t drive, did he? Too afraid of cops on the highway. His car is still on the post, right?’

‘Yes, it is.’

‘So he took the bus from Hood and stopped short. Georgetown is right there, close to Austin, but not too close. He watched out the window, all the way in. One motel after another. He mapped them in his head. He got out at the depot and walked back the way he came. Didn’t want unfamiliar territory. Didn’t want to walk too far, either. Too exposed. Too vulnerable. But even so he didn’t like the place nearest the depot. It felt too obvious. So he picked the second place. He’s there right now, in his room with the chain on, watching all the local channels.’

The voice didn’t answer.

Reacher said, ‘Wait one.’ He laid the phone gently on the table and got up. Checked the kitchen, checked the library. Nothing doing. He checked the parlour. Janet Salter was still on her feet, rock solid, deep in the shadows.

Nothing to see on the street.

No one coming.

Reacher went back to the hallway and sat down again in the chair and picked up the phone. The voice asked, ‘Anything else?’

‘Not that it matters, but he sat in the front third of the bus.’

‘You’re full of shit.’

‘It was a kind of camouflage. He didn’t want to give himself away as a fugitive. He thinks bad boys sit in back. He’s a Fourth Infantry captain. Probably a strait-laced kind of a guy. He remembers his school bus. The greasers sat in back. He didn’t.’

No answer. ‘Georgetown,’ Reacher said. ‘Second motel north of the bus depot. Check it out.’

No answer.

Reacher asked, ‘Where are your nearest people?’

‘I have people at Hood.’

‘So send them down. It’s about fifty miles. What can it cost you?’

No answer.

Reacher said, ‘And don’t forget, I need my information by tomorrow.’

He hung up. He put the chair back where it was supposed to be and stepped across the hallway and into the parlour. He checked the window.

Nothing to see.

No one coming.

Five to ten in the evening.

Thirty hours to go.

TWENTY

THE CLOCK TICKED ON. REACHER TOOK EVERY COMPLETED MINUTE to be a small victory. A prison riot could not last for ever. Its initial phase would be relatively short. Hostages would be taken, territory would be seized, a standoff would ensue. Tactical adjustments would be made. The corrections officers would regroup. The cops would be released from duty. Reacher knew that.

Therefore the guy knew that, too.

Reacher didn't understand why he didn't come. His target was an old woman in a house. What was he waiting for?

At half past ten Janet Salter volunteered to make coffee. Reacher wouldn't let her. Maybe that was what the guy was waiting for. The percolator needed water. Water came from the faucet. The faucet was over the sink. The sink was under the window. A preoccupied grey head two feet the other side of the glass might be a tempting target. So he made the coffee himself, after a duly cautious inspection of the vicinity. An unnecessary inspection, as it turned out. He stepped out the back door without coat, gloves, or hat. The cold hit him like a fist. It was raging. It was searching. It stunned him. Way below zero. Too far below to even guess at a number.

He stepped back in. Nobody was waiting out there for a target of opportunity. Impossible. After a minute you would be shaking too hard to see, let alone shoot. After an hour you would be in a coma. After two, you would be dead.

Which thoughts clarified things a little. There would be no long stealthy approach on foot through the snow. The danger would come from the front. The guy would have to drive up, jump out, and move fast. So after the percolator finished gulping and hissing Reacher poured two mugs and carried them back to the parlour, where he told Janet Salter they would alternate spells at the window, ten minutes on, ten minutes off, all through the next hour.

The next hour passed slowly. No one approached the house. The world outside was dead. Deep frozen. Nothing was moving, except the wind. It was blowing steadily out of the west. It was scouring powder into small stunted drifts and exposing ridges of ice that glittered blue in the moonlight. A spectral, elemental

exposing ridges of ice that glittered blue in the moonlight. A spectral, elemental scene. Janet Salter did something with a dial on a wall and turned the heat up. Not good, in Reacher's opinion. Warmth made people sleepy. But he didn't want her to freeze. He had read about old folks, dead in their homes, overcome by hypothermia.

She asked, 'Have you ever been here in winter before?'

He said, 'I've never been here in any season.'

'North Dakota, perhaps?'

'I've been in the Dakota Building in New York City.'

'Which was named for here,' she said. 'At the time it was built, the city didn't extend much past 34th Street. It seemed lunatic to build fancy apartments all the way up on 72nd Street, and on the West Side, too. People said, you might as well put them in the Dakota Territory. The name stuck. The man who built it owned part of the Singer Sewing Machine Company, which brings us full circle, really, doesn't it, back to that can of oil.'

She was talking for the sake of talking. Reacher let her. He kept his eye on the street and filtered most of it out. She got into a long disquisition on the state's history. Explorers and traders, Lewis and Clark, the Sioux Nation, Fort Pierre, sodbusters and pioneers, the gold rush, Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Custer, the Black Hills, Wounded Knee, the Dust Bowl, some guy called Brokaw she claimed had been on network TV.

Five to eleven in the evening.

Twenty-nine hours to go.

Reacher completed his eighth circuit of the interior perimeter. He saw nothing to get concerned about. Nothing to see from any window except frozen moonlit emptiness. Nothing to hear except the rush of water in the heating pipes and a faint creaking as the ice outside got colder. It was clamping down. The earth was in its grip. He thought back to the sodbusters and the pioneers that Janet Salter had talked about. Why the hell had they stayed?

He was on his way back down the stairs when she called out.

She said, ‘Someone’s coming.’

She spoke loud and clear. But she added no information. No numbers, no location, no direction, no description. He stepped into the parlour and eased past her to the window. Saw a guy approaching on foot in the middle of the road, from the left. He was small, but swaddled in an enormous coat with a hood. He had a ski mask on. Plus a muffler, plus gloves, plus boots. Nothing in his hands. His hands were held out to the sides, for balance, and they were empty.

The guy moved on, slowly, tentatively, unsure of his footing. He stopped directly opposite the end of Janet Salter’s driveway. Just stood there.

Reacher asked, ‘Do you know who he is?’

She said, ‘Wait.’

The guy turned around, a stiff and ungainly half-circle, and faced the other way. A dog trotted up to him. A big white thing. Lots of fur. The guy turned around again, and man and dog walked on.

Janet Salter said, ‘A neighbour. A she, actually. Mrs Lowell. But it was hard to be sure, the way she was dressed.’

Reacher breathed out and said, ‘Is she the cop’s wife?’

‘Ex-wife. Officer Lowell moved out a year ago. There was some kind of unpleasantness.’

‘What kind?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I saw Lowell today. Peterson called him an odd duck. Said he read books.’

‘He does. He comes over and borrows some of mine from time to time. My family and his go way back.’

‘Do you know his partner?’

‘Officer Kapler? I’ve met him, certainly.’

‘And?’

‘He moved here from Florida. Which struck me as odd.’

‘Me too,’ Reacher said. He stayed at the window and watched Mrs Lowell and her dog round a curve and move out of sight.

They didn’t speak again for thirty minutes. The clock in Reacher’s head ticked on towards midnight. He asked, ‘Are you tired?’

Janet Salter said, ‘I haven’t really thought about it.’

‘You could go to bed, if you like. I can take care of things down here.’

‘Would you take care of things standing up? So if you fell asleep I would hear you fall down?’

Reacher smiled. ‘I won’t fall asleep.’

‘And I won’t go to bed. This is my responsibility. I shouldn’t be involving you at all.’

‘A problem shared is a problem halved.’

‘You could be killed.’

‘Unlikely.’

She asked, ‘Are you married?’

Reacher kept his eyes on the window and said, ‘No.’

‘Were you ever?’

‘No.’

‘Were you an only child?’

‘I had a brother two years older. He worked for the Treasury Department. He was killed in the line of duty.’

‘I’m sorry.’

I'm sorry.'

'Not your fault.'

'Do you always deflect sympathy that way?'

'Usually.'

'So you're the last of your family's line.'

'I suppose so. But it wasn't much of a line in the first place.'

'Just like me. Scoundrels, all of them.'

'Where were your gold mines?'

'The Black Hills. Why?'

'Peterson thinks the army place west of here could be mostly underground. I was wondering if there were old workings they could have used.'

'No mines here. Just prairie topsoil and rock.'

'Were your parents alive when you went off to college?'

'Why?'

'Because if they were, they probably wrote you with all the local news. Maybe rumour and gossip, too. They must have told you something about that place. Maybe not exact enough for your scholarly mind to pass on as fact, but you must have heard some little thing.'

'Nothing worth repeating.'

'Try me.'

'All I know is that it was built and never used. Apparently because its purpose was too revolting. There was a minor scandal about it.'

'What was its purpose?'

'I don't know. No one spoke of it to me.'

Five minutes to midnight.

Twenty-eight hours to go.

Nobody came.

A thousand miles away down in Texas two fast cars covered the fifty miles south from Hood in less than forty minutes. Six men in the cars, all warrant officers working for the 110th Special Unit, all currently W3s, all wanting to be W4s, all well aware that this kind of assignment could get them their promotions. They pulled off the main drag south and wheeled through the centre of Georgetown and found the bus depot. It was middle-of-the-night quiet. Cool air, trash, the stink of spilled diesel. Nothing coming in, nothing going out. They parked their cars a block farther on next to pawn shops and bail bond offices and hustled back the way they had come. They counted the motels. The first was a brick place behind a parking lot that was covered with broken blacktop. The second was right next to it, set end-on to the street, made of red wood, twelve rooms, a sign on a pole advertising free cable and free breakfast and no vacancies.

An office, first door on the left.

A clerk in the office, half awake.

A pass key, in the desk drawer.

The six W3s split up, three to the rear, three to the front. One of the front guys stood back, ready for anything. The other two entered every room, bold as you like, guns drawn, for close-up in-their-face flashlight examinations of the somnolent forms they found.

All twelve rooms.

Their man wasn’t there.

Reacher prowled through Janet Salter’s house one more time. By that point he was totally accustomed to its sounds. The creak of the boards, the creak of the stairs, an occluded right-angle joint in a steam pipe that hissed louder than all the others, a window sash that trembled a little in its frame because of the freshening wind. The smell of the air was changing. Tiny eddying draughts were stirring odours out of the rugs and the drapes. They were not unpleasant. Just old. Dyed wool, dusty velvet, mothballs, beeswax furniture polish, cigar smoke, pipe

wool, dusty velvet, mothballs, beeswax furniture polish, cigar smoke, pipe tobacco. Ancient, deep aromas, like an olfactory portrait of how prosperous frontier families used to live. Reacher sensed them behind the local mineral smell from the new oil on the gun he was carrying with him everywhere.

He came back to the parlour. Janet Salter's gun was still in her pocket. Her hand was still resting on its butt. He asked her, 'You still OK?'

She said with great formality, 'I have reached the conclusion that I am privileged.'

'In what way?'

'I'm experiencing the chance to live out my principles. I believe that ordinary citizens must confront wickedness. But I believe in due process, too. I believe in an accused's right to a fair trial and I believe in his right to confront the witnesses against him. But it's so easy to talk the talk, isn't it? Not everyone gets the opportunity to walk the walk. But now I am.'

'You're doing great,' Reacher said.

He eased past her to the window.

Saw the wild bounce of headlight beams on the street.

A car, coming on fast.

TWENTY-ONE

IT WAS PETERSON, LEADING WHAT LOOKED LIKE MOST OF THE BOLTON PD. Six cars, seven, eight. Then a ninth. They jammed and slid and crunched to a stop all over the road. Twelve cops spilled out, then thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. They drew their weapons and formed up for an approach driven partly by desperate haste and partly by extreme caution. Because they had no idea what they were going to find.

Either tranquillity, or a double homicide.

Reacher stepped out to the hallway and lined up on the hinge side of the front door. He flung it open and stayed well out of sight. He didn't want to get fired on by mistake. Fifteen nervous cops made for an unpredictable situation.

He called, 'Peterson? This is Reacher. We're all clear.'

No answer.

He tried again. 'Peterson?'

Icy air flooded in. Peterson's voice came with it. 'Reacher?'

Reacher called back, 'All clear in here. Holster your weapons and come on in.'

They came in at a run, all fifteen of them, Peterson first, then the four women, then the three guys from the stake-out cars, then seven more bodies Reacher didn't know. They brought gusts and billows of freezing air in with them. They all had red, chapped faces. The warm inside air hit them and they all started wrenching open their parkas and pulling the gloves from their hands and the hats from their heads.

The four women formed up around Janet Salter like a cordon and bustled her off to the kitchen. Peterson ordered the three night watch cars to their positions and sent the remaining seven men back to the station. Reacher watched normality restored from the parlour window. Within five minutes all was as it had been five hours earlier.

Peterson asked, 'So what happened here?'

‘Nothing at all,’ Reacher said. ‘What happened there?’

‘A riot. Not that we saw much of anything. They shut it down very fast.’

‘Because it was phoney. It was a diversion.’

Peterson nodded. ‘But their guy never came here.’

‘And the big question is, why the hell not?’

‘Because he saw you.’

‘But I didn’t see him. Which begs another big question. If he’s good enough to see me without me seeing him, why didn’t he just go for it?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘I saw a woman with a big white dog.’

‘When?’

‘A little after eleven.’

‘Mrs Lowell. She’s a neighbour. She walks her dog every night.’

‘You should have told me that. I might have shot her.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Peterson clamped his palms tight on his nose. It must have been hurting. His skin temperature had vaulted sixty degrees in sixty seconds. Then he ran his fingers through his hair. ‘Bad thing to say, I guess, but I kind of wish the guy had come tonight. I’m not sure we can take another month of this.’

Reacher said, ‘I don’t think you’ll have to. I think they’re fresh out of diversions.’

‘They can start another riot any old time they want to.’

‘They can’t. That’s the point. Prison riots need a critical mass. About a third of the population would riot every day of the week, given the chance. Another third never would. It’s the middle third that counts. The swing votes. Like an election.

And they're spent now. Their passion has gone. It will take a year before they're back in the game.'

Peterson said nothing.

Reacher said, 'And your biker pal can't organize an escape fast enough. So you're in the clear now. You're safe.'

'You think?'

'You might never hear that siren again.'

Five to one in the morning.

Twenty-seven hours to go.

At a quarter past one the phone in the hallway rang. Janet Salter came out of the kitchen to answer it. She passed the receiver to Peterson. Peterson listened for a second and went to find Reacher in the parlour.

'It's the woman from the 110th MP,' he said. 'How does she know this number?'

'She has a caller ID system,' Reacher said. 'With coordinates. She's probably watching this house right now, on Google Earth.'

'But it's dark.'

'Don't ask me how it works.' He stepped out to the hallway and sat down in the chair. Picked up the receiver. Asked, 'You got my answers for me?'

The voice said, 'Not yet.'

'So why are you calling so late? I could have been fast asleep.'

'I just wanted to tell you I got my guy.'

'Was I right?'

'I'm not going to answer that question. I'm not going to give you the satisfaction.'

‘So I was right.’

‘Actually, not quite. He was in the third motel north of the bus depot.’

‘Because the first two were close together? He had to go on to the third, for distance?’

‘You’re good.’

‘I used to do this for a living.’

‘I’m duly impressed.’

‘How was he?’

‘You tell me.’

Reacher said, ‘He was awake. He had a loaded firearm and shoes on. His bag was packed and his jacket was on the back of a chair. He struggled for less than ten seconds and then he gave it up.’

‘You’re very good.’

‘Not good enough to survive the general’s head.’

‘I still want to hear that story.’

‘Then get me my answers. A fair exchange is no robbery.’

‘We’re close. We can see the money coming out of Congress. But we can’t see it arriving at the Department of the Army. It’s dropping out of sight somewhere along the way. We’re narrowing it down. We’ll get there.’

‘When?’

‘Give me the rest of the night. Call me at eight o’clock in the morning.’

‘You’re good, too.’

‘I try.’

Reacher said, ‘There’s a local rumour about a scandal. Word on the street is the

Reacher said, ‘There’s a local rumour about a scandal. Word on the street is the place was never used because its purpose was too revolting.’

‘On the street?’

‘In an old lady’s parlour, anyway.’

‘OK. But old ladies get revolted by all kinds of things.’

‘I guess.’

‘Anything else?’

‘You can search with your Google thing, right?’

‘That’s what it’s for.’

‘Check a Florida cop called Kapler for me. He left the state two years ago. I want to know why.’

‘Why?’

‘I like to know things. He moved from Florida to South Dakota. Who does that?’

‘First name?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘That’s helpful.’

‘How many Florida cops called Kapler can there be?’

‘Probably more than ten, and less than a hundred.’

‘With employment problems two years ago?’

‘Anything else?’

Reacher asked, ‘What are you wearing?’

‘What is this, a dirty phone call now?’

Reacher smiled. ‘No, I’m just trying to picture the scene. For old times’ sake. I know the desk. Same office?’

‘I assume so. Upstairs, third on the left.’

‘That’s the one.’ Reacher saw it in his mind. Stone stairs, a metal handrail, a narrow corridor floored with linoleum, lines of doors left and right with fluted glass windows in them, offices behind each one, each office equipped according to some complex DoD protocol. His had had the metal desk, two phones with a total of three lines, a vinyl chair on casters, file cabinets, and two visitor chairs with springy bent-tube legs. Plus a glass light shade shaped like a bowl and hung from the ceiling on three metal chains. Plus an out-of-date map of the United States on the wall, made after Hawaii and Alaska had joined the Union but before the interstate highway system had been completed.

Made, in fact, around the same time that the strange installation near Bolton, South Dakota, was being put in.

The voice said, ‘I’m wearing my ACUs with a T-shirt. I’ve got the jacket on, because it’s cold tonight.’

Reacher said, ‘You’re in Virginia. You don’t know what cold is.’

‘Quit whining. You’re still in double figures up there. Negative, but hey. Minus eleven degrees. But the radar shows colder air moving in from the west.’

‘How could it get colder?’

‘You’re going to get what Wyoming just had, that’s how.’

‘You talking to meteorologists?’

‘No, I’m looking at the Weather Channel.’

‘What did Wyoming just have?’

‘They were thirty below zero.’

‘Terrific.’

‘You can take it. You’re a big guy. Probably a Norseman way back, by the look

of you.’

‘What, Google Earth can see through roof tiles now?’

‘No, there’s a photo of you in your file.’

‘What about you?’

‘Yes, there’s a photo of me in my file, too.’

‘Not what I meant, smartass. I don’t have your file.’

‘I’m a one-eyed fifty-year-old hunchback.’

‘I thought so, judging by your voice.’

‘Asshole.’

‘I’m thinking maybe five-six or five-seven, but thin. Your voice is all in your throat.’

‘You saying I’m flat-chested?’

‘34A at best.’

‘Damn.’

‘Blond hair, probably short. Blue eyes. From northern California.’

She asked, ‘Age?’

Reacher had been thirty-two years old, the first time he sat behind that battered desk. Which was both old and young for a command of that importance. Young, because he had been something of a star, but old, too, in that he had gotten there a little later than a star should, because he wasn’t an organization man and hadn’t been entirely trusted. He said, ‘You’re thirty or thirty-one,’ because he knew that when it came to a woman’s age it was always better to err on the side of caution.

She said, ‘Flattery will get you everywhere.’ Then she said, ‘Got to go. Call me later.’

The household got right back into its settled routine. Peterson left, and the two day watch women went up to bed. Janet Salter showed Reacher to the front upstairs room with the window over the porch roof. In principle the most vulnerable, but he wasn’t worried. Sheer rage would overcome any theoretical tactical disadvantage. He hated to be woken in the night. An intruder came through that window, he would go straight back out like a spear.

Five to two in the morning.

Twenty-six hours to go.

TWENTY-TWO

REACHER HAD PLANNED ON SLEEPING UNTIL EIGHT, BUT HE WAS woken at half past six. By Peterson. The guy came into the bedroom and some primal instinct must have made him pause and kick the bed frame and then step smartly back. He must have figured that was the safest thing to do. He must have figured if he leaned over and shook Reacher gently by the shoulder he could get his arm broken.

And he might have been right.

Reacher said, ‘What?’

Peterson said, ‘First light is less than an hour away.’

‘And?’

‘You need to get going.’

‘Where?’

‘The biker camp. Remember? You offered.’

Janet Salter was already in her kitchen. Reacher found her there. She was dressed for the day. She had coffee going. The old percolator was slurping and rattling. He said, ‘I have to go out.’

She nodded. ‘Mr Peterson told me. Will you be OK?’

‘I hope so.’

‘I don’t see how. There are a hundred people out there, and all you have is a six-shooter.’

‘We need information.’

‘Even so.’

‘I’ve got the Fourth Amendment. That’s all the protection I need. If I get hurt or don’t come back, the cops get probable cause for a search. The bikers don’t want

don't come back, the cops get probable cause for a search. The bikers don't want that. They'll treat me with kid gloves.'

'That's hard to imagine.'

'Will you be OK here?'

'I hope so.'

'If the cops leave again, take your gun and lock yourself in the basement. Don't open the door to anyone except me.'

'Should we have a password?'

'You can ask about my favourite book.'

'You don't have one. You told me that.'

'I know. So that will be the correct answer.' The percolator finished and Reacher poured a generous measure into one of six white mugs standing on the counter.

Janet Salter asked, 'Will the police leave again?'

'Probably not.'

'There could be another riot.'

'Unlikely. Prison riots are rare. Like revolutions in a nation's history. The conditions have to be exactly right.'

'An escape, then.'

'Even less likely. Escapes are hard. The prison people make sure of that.'

'Are you saying my problems are over?'

'It's possible.'

'So are you going to come back here or not?'

'I think the highway is still closed.'

‘When it opens again, where will you go next?’

‘I don’t know.’

Janet Salter said, ‘I think you’ll head for Virginia.’

‘She might be married.’

‘You should ask her.’

Reacher smiled. Said, ‘Maybe I will.’

Peterson briefed him in the hallway. He said the spare unmarked car was outside, warmed up and running. It was reliable. It had been recently serviced. It had a full tank. It had chains on the back and winter tyres on the front. There was no direct route to the camp. The way to go was to head south towards the highway, but turn west a mile short of the cloverleaf on the old road that ran parallel.

‘The road the lawyer was killed on,’ Reacher said.

‘That was all the way to the east,’ Peterson said. ‘But still, perhaps you shouldn’t stop if someone tries to flag you down.’

‘I won’t,’ Reacher said. ‘Count on it.’

He was to keep on the old road for five miles, and then make a right and head back north on a county two-lane that wandered a little for about eight miles before hitting the ruler-straight section that the army engineers had put in fifty years before. That section was two miles long, and it ran right up to the camp, where he would find the fifteen wooden huts and the old stone building, laid out in two neat lines of eight, running precisely east to west.

‘The stone building is in the back left corner,’ Peterson said.

Five to seven in the morning.

Twenty-one hours to go.

Seventeen hundred miles south it was five to eight in the morning. Plato had finished his breakfast and was about to break the habit of a lifetime. He was

about to cut out his middleman in the walled city villa and call his guy in the States direct.

He dialled.

He got an answer.

He asked, ‘Is the witness dead yet?’

There was a pause on the line. His guy said, ‘You know there was always going to be a delay between the two.’

‘How long has that delay been so far?’

His guy knew what to say. ‘Too long.’

‘Correct,’ Plato said. ‘I arranged a riot at the prison last night.’

‘I know.’

‘Evidently you didn’t make use of it.’

‘There was a man in the house.’

‘And?’

‘I had no instructions.’

‘That’s your answer? You needed instructions?’

‘I thought perhaps there were complexities I wasn’t grasping.’

Plato breathed out. ‘How can I hurt you?’

His guy knew what to say. ‘In ways I don’t want to be hurt.’

‘Correct,’ Plato said. ‘But I need you to be more specific. I need you to focus on what’s at stake.’

His guy said, ‘You’ll kill the person nearest and dearest to me.’

‘Yes. I will, eventually. But first there will be a delay, which seems to be a

‘Yes, I will, eventually. But first there will be a delay, which seems to be a concept you’re very familiar with. I’ll cripple her and mutilate her and let her live for a year or so. Then I’ll kill her. Do you understand me?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘So for your own sake, get the job done. I don’t care about bystanders. Wipe out the entire damn town if you have to. The entire state, for all I care. How many people live in South Dakota anyway?’

‘About eight hundred thousand.’

‘OK. That’s your upper limit for collateral damage. Get it done.’

‘I will. I promise.’

Plato hung up and poured himself another cup of coffee.

The spare unmarked was another dark Crown Vic. It smelled dusty and tired inside. Its heater was set to seventy degrees and the fan was blowing hard in a desperate attempt to get there. The weather was way down in a whole new dimension. The temperature was dropping fast. The ground was bone hard and the air was solid with microscopic nubs of snowflakes borne on the wind. They were chilled and shrivelled to sharp fragments. They hurled themselves against the windshield and made complex frozen traceries. The wipers wouldn’t shift them. The blades just scraped over them. Reacher set the heater on defrost and waited until the blown air melted oval holes of clarity.

Then he left.

He K-turned across the width of Janet Salter’s street. The ruts were frozen solid. The Crown Vic’s tyres bumped up and down. The stake-out car at the end of the road backed up to let him squeeze by. He turned right and drove away from town. The wheel ruts that had been soft the day before were now as hard as concrete trenches. It was like driving a train on a track. He didn’t need to steer. The chains on the back dug in and splintered the ice and the front tyres hammered left and right and kept him basically straight. The world outside was entirely white. There was pale light in the sky but no sun. The air was too full of ice. It was like dust. Like mist. The wind was blowing right to left in front of him. Small streamlined drifts had built up and frozen solid, against fence posts and power poles. The weird shapes on the power lines had shifted to the east, as

if the whole world was tilted.

Reacher found the turn a mile short of the cloverleaf. Getting out of the frozen ruts was difficult. He had to slow to a walk and turn the wheel way over and churn his way out one tyre at a time, four separate climbs, four separate drops. He found new ruts running west and settled in for five more miles of autopilot. He repeated the escape manoeuvre at the next turn and headed north towards the camp. The new road was different. It hadn't seen much traffic. There were no established ruts. It was just a narrow ribbon of frozen snow. The front wheels skated and wandered a little. The blowing ice pattered left to right against the driver's window. The road humped and dipped and curved left and right for no apparent reason. The camber tilted one way, then the other. Not a great piece of civil engineering. Reacher slowed a little and concentrated hard. To slide into a ditch would be fatal. No chance of a tow before he froze. Even a blown tyre would be a disaster. The wheel nuts were probably frozen solid.

Five slow careful miles, then six, then seven. Then the horizon changed. Up ahead the road widened and straightened and flattened. Dramatically. Radically. In the murky distance it looked as broad and flat as a freeway. Maybe even broader and flatter. It looked like a sixteen-lane superhighway. It was a magnificent, surreal piece of road. It was built up slightly proud of the land around it, it was absolutely flat, and it was absolutely straight, for two whole miles.

And it was ploughed.

There was not a speck of snow on it. Just smooth grey concrete, scraped and brushed and salted. High piles of snow had been pushed to the sides, and smoothed, and shaped, so that the frozen prairie wind was launching off the western berm and not landing again until it was past the eastern. The tiny fragments of ice were howling past five feet in the air. The road surface itself was clear and dry, like the middle of summer.

Reacher slowed and bumped up on to it. The chains thumped and chattered. The front end tracked straight and true. He kept to a steady thirty and peered ahead. He could make out blond smudges on the horizon. Wooden huts, in a neat row. Two miles away. The car pattered and juddered. The chains were not good on dry concrete.

He kept on going.

Half a mile out he saw activity ahead. A hundred yards out he saw what it was. Pick-up trucks with plough blades lowered were grinding back and forth. A lot of them. Maybe thirty or forty. Beyond them bulky black-clad figures with shovels were working in a line. Other bulky figures were walking backwards, hurling stuff from their cupped hands in long arcs, like farm labourers feeding chaff to chickens. Salt, presumably. Or grit, or sand, or some other kind of de-icing chemical. Or all of the above. They were clearing the whole camp. They wanted the whole place immaculate. As good as the road.

The huts were raw lumber, bleached and faded a little, but not much. Not brand new, but not old either. On the left behind the first row of huts Reacher saw the roof of the old stone building. It was tall and peaked and made of slate. It was covered with a foot of snow. It had twin ornate chimneys. The huts themselves were roofed with tarpaper. They had stove pipe vents. There were power lines running from gable to gable. There were concrete paths running from door to door. All were swept clear of snow. What had not been removed completely was piled neatly left and right. In front of the huts was a long line of shapes under black tarpaulins, side by side, like dominoes. Motorcycles, presumably. Big ones. Maybe thirty of them. Harleys, probably, laid up for winter.

Reacher slowed and came to a stop fifty yards out. People had stopped working and were staring at his car. Gloved hands were stacked on shovel handles. Chins were resting on the hands. The salt throwers had paused. One after the other the pick-up trucks came to rest. Their idling exhaust was carried away on the wind.

Reacher took his foot off the brake and inched forward. Nobody moved. Reacher kept on coming, ten yards, then twenty. He stopped again. He was close enough. He didn’t switch off. The Crown Vic’s dash was showing the outside temperature at twelve degrees below zero. If he switched the engine off he might never get it started again. He had read a book set above the Arctic Circle where you had to thaw the engine block with blowlamps.

He jammed his watch cap down on his ears and pulled his hood up. Zipped his coat to his chin. Put his gloves on, left and then right.

He climbed out of the car.

Twenty yards ahead the crowd had gotten larger. Men, women, and children. Maybe a hundred people in total. As advertised. They were all shapeless and

hidden in coats and hats and mufflers. Their breath was condensing around their heads, an unbroken cloud that hung motionless and then rose and whipped away in the wind. The cold was stunning. It was getting worse. It seemed to attack from the inside out. Reacher was shivering after five seconds of exposure. His face was numb after ten. He walked ten paces and stopped. Olive green pants, a tan coat, an obvious police car behind him, South Dakota plates. Not even remotely convincing.

Twenty yards ahead a guy threaded through the crowd. Sidestepping, shuffling, leading with his left shoulder, then his right. Black coat, hat, gloves. His body language was like every interrupted workman in the world. Irritated, but curious. He swiped his padded forearm across his brow and paused and thought and moved forward again. He stepped out of the ranks and stopped a yard in front of the crowd.

Reacher said, ‘Who the hell are you?’

The guy said, ‘Piss off.’

Reacher stepped forward. One pace, two, three.

‘You’re not very polite,’ he said.

‘Show me where it says I have to be.’

‘Well, you’re walking around on my property.’

‘How so?’

‘I’m from the army. I’m here to check on our real estate. A two-year maintenance inspection. Your tax dollars at work.’

‘That’s a joke.’

Reacher said, ‘Whatever, I need to take a look around.’

‘I told you to piss off.’

‘I know. But what are the odds I’m going to take you seriously?’

‘You can’t fight a hundred people.’

‘I won’t need to. Looks like two-thirds of you are women and children. That leaves maybe thirty guys. Or forty, say. But half of them look too fat to move. They pitch in, they’re going to get all kinds of coronaries. The others, maybe half of them are pussies. They’ll run away. That leaves maybe eight or ten guys, max. And one of me is worth eight or ten of you, easy.’

No answer.

‘Plus, I’m from the army. You mess with me, the next guy you see will be driving a tank.’

Silence for a beat. Just the scouring howl of the wind, and the rattle of ice particles against wood. The guy in front looked at Reacher, at his clothes, at his car, and came to some kind of a decision. He asked, ‘What do you need to see?’

Reacher said, ‘The stone building.’

‘That’s not ours.’

‘None of this is yours.’

‘I mean, we’re not using it.’

‘You shouldn’t be using anything.’

‘Squatters’ rights. It’s an abandoned facility. We know the law.’

Reacher said nothing. Just stepped left and skirted the crowd. They all stood still and let him by. No move to block him. A policy decision. He glanced at the corner hut. It was a plain, utilitarian structure. Maybe fifty feet long, its blank slab siding pierced only by two small square windows. It had a door in its narrow end. All around it the snow had been cleared away meticulously. Directly behind it was the stone building. There was no snow around it, either. Just clear, swept paths.

Reacher turned around.

He said, ‘If you’re not using it, why clear the snow?’

The same guy came out of the crowd again.

He said, ‘For the satisfaction of a job well done.’

The stone building was a strange little thing. It could have been copied from the plans for a small but fairly ornate and old-fashioned suburban house. It had all kinds of details and mouldings and curlicues and gables and rain gutters and eaves. Like a Gothic folly a rich man might put in his garden for guests.

But there were crucial differences, too. Where a guest house in a garden would have windows, the stone building had recesses only. Like an optical illusion. The right size and shape, but not filled with glass. Filled instead by unbroken expanses of stone, the same neat mortared blocks as the rest of the walls. There was a portico, but the front door under it made no attempt at illusion. It was just a meaty steel slab, completely plain. It had huge hinges. It would open outward, not inward. Like a blast door. A pressure wave outside would hold it shut, not burst it open. It had a handle and a keyhole. Reacher tried the handle. It didn’t move. The keyhole was large. Smaller than the hole for a church key, bigger than the hole for a house key. The steel around it was rimed with frost. Reacher rubbed it away with his gloved thumb, and saw no nicks or scratches in the metal. The lock was not in regular use. No key had been inserted and withdrawn, day in and day out.

He asked, ‘You know what this place is?’

The guy who had followed him said, ‘Don’t you?’

‘Of course I do. But I need to know how our security is holding up.’

The guy said, ‘We heard things.’

‘From who?’

‘The construction guys that were here before.’

‘What things?’

‘About atomic bombs.’

‘They said there were nuclear weapons in here?’

‘No. They said it was a clinic.’

'No. They said it was a clinic.'

'What kind of a clinic?'

'They said if we had been attacked in winter, in a city, like New York or Chicago, people would have been in coats and gloves, so only their faces would have been burned. You know, miles from the centre. Closer in, you would have been vaporized. But if you survived, you could come here and get a new face.'

'Like plastic surgery?'

'No, like prosthetics. Like masks. They said that's what's in there, thousands and thousands of plastic faces.'

Reacher walked on around the strange little structure. It was the same on all four sides. Heavy stone, fake windows, details, mouldings. A bizarre parody. Entertaining, but not instructive without getting inside. Which wasn't going to happen.

He walked away. Then on a sudden whim he stopped at the nearest hut. The first in the back row, which was in line with the second in the front row. The crowd had followed him in a long untidy straggle that looped all the way back to where he had started. Like a thin question mark, curling through the gaps and the passages. Steam hung above it. Nearest to him was the guy who had done all the talking. He was about six feet away.

Reacher pushed the hut's door. It swung halfway open.

The guy close to him said, 'That's not yours.'

'It's bolted down on army concrete. That's good enough for me.'

'You got no warrant.'

Reacher didn't answer. He was all done talking. It was too cold. His face was numb and his teeth were hurting. He just pushed the door all the way open and took a look inside.

The hut was dark. And warm. There was a paraffin stove going. Reacher could smell the sweet wet kerosene. There were twelve cots in the room, six to a side, and a boxed-in section at the far end that might have been a bathroom. Plain grey

blankets on the cots, cardboard shipping cartons filled with folded clothes, burlap drapes at the small square windows.

There was a young woman sitting on the furthest cot on the right. No coat, because of the heat. No hat. She was maybe eighteen or twenty. She looked a little sullen and grimy, but behind that she was pretty. Long fair hair, strong vivid features. Tall, and slender. For a second Reacher thought he had seen her before. But he hadn't. She was a type, that was all. Like Kim Peterson. A South Dakotan. Wherever this bunch was from, they had picked up local recruits.

Reacher backed out and pulled the door shut behind him. Turned to the guy six feet away and said, 'Want to show me the other huts?'

'Whatever.' No reluctance. The guy just started his limbs moving inside his heavy clothing and trudged on down the paths and pushed open one door after another. Fourteen of the fifteen huts were the same. Rows of cots, crude drapes, paraffin stoves, grey blankets, shipping boxes, folded clothes. No benches, no work tables, no glass vessels, no gas rings, no laboratory equipment of any kind. No people, either. The girl in the first hut was the only one not outside and working. Maybe she was sick.

The last hut in the back row was a kitchen. It had two domestic stoves shoved side by side for cooking, and plain deal tables pushed against the walls for use as work surfaces, and crude shelves stacked with plates and bowls and mugs, and more shelves lined with a few meagre supplies. Jars almost empty of flour and sugar and coffee, single boxes of cereal and pasta standing alone in spaces that could have taken dozens.

There was no laboratory equipment.

Reacher hunched down in his coat and came out between two huts. His car was still there, idling faithfully. Beyond it the ploughed road narrowed into the distance, high, wide, and handsome. As flat as glass. Fifty summers, fifty winters, it hadn't heaved or cracked at all. The voice from Virginia had asked: You know how big the defence budget was fifty years ago? They had poured maybe four hundred thousand yards of concrete, and then forgotten all about them.

'Have a nice day,' Reacher said, and headed for his car.

Five minutes to nine in the morning

Five minutes to nine in the morning.

Nineteen hours to go.

TWENTY-THREE

THE DRIVE BACK WAS THE SAME AS THE DRIVE OUT, EXCEPT FOR A strange slow-motion near-collision at the first turn. Reacher had driven the wide ploughed road fast and the next eight narrow snow-bound miles slow, and then he had coasted and tried to work out a trajectory to get himself through the left turn and into the eastbound ruts on the old road that ran parallel with the highway. But at the same time a fuel tanker was trying to get out of those same ruts for a left turn of its own up towards the camp. It was a squat vehicle with a company name painted along its flank. Paraffin for the heaters, maybe, or gasoline for the pick-up trucks, or diesel for a generator. It changed down to a low gear and turned very early and came right across Reacher's lane. He braked hard, hoping his chains would bite, but the Crown Vic's onboard electronics wouldn't allow the wheels to lock. The car rolled on with all kinds of thumping and banging coming from the brake pistons. The fuel truck kept on coming. Reacher yanked the wheel. The front tyres lost their grip and skated. The Crown Vic's front left corner missed the back of the truck by an inch. The truck roared on, low gear, walking pace, oblivious. Reacher watched it go in his mirror. He had ended up stationary at a right angle across the old road, with his front wheels in one of the eastbound ruts and his back wheels in one of the westbound. He had to rock between Drive and Reverse and hit the gas hard to break free.

But after that it was plain sailing all the way.

The cop in the stake-out car at the end of Janet Salter's street was Kapler. Better than Montgomery, from the day before. Kapler looked Reacher over very carefully and then backed up to let him by. Reacher parked nose to tail with the second stake-out car and hustled up the driveway. The day watch cop in the hallway let him in. He asked, 'All quiet?'

She said, 'So far.'

'Is Mrs Salter OK?'

'She's fine.'

'Let me see her.' Just like Chief Holland the night before, and just as pointless. If anything bad had happened, the cops wouldn't be sitting around doing nothing.

nothing.

The day watch woman said, ‘She’s in the library.’

Reacher found her there, in her usual chair. This time she was reading, an old book with no dust jacket and a title too small to read from a distance. Her gun was still in her pocket. Reacher could make out its shape. She looked up and said, ‘Kid gloves?’

He said, ‘Plastic. Less classy than kid. But nothing to complain about.’

‘Did you learn anything?’

‘Plenty.’

He got back in the car and headed for the police station. Found Peterson in the squad room. Reacher said, ‘Holland was right. They weren’t coming over here. They were bluffing. Or someone was bluffing on their behalf. We have no idea who actually called here. Could have been the shooter himself, trying to create time and space, trying to point you in the wrong direction.’

‘Well, whoever, they failed. And now we’re going to bust them all.’

‘Then you better do it quickly. They’re about to move out.’

‘They told you that?’

‘Think back to that call from the DEA. Have you ever sold a house?’

‘Once.’

‘You cleaned it up, right? Made it look real good?’

‘I painted the siding.’

‘They’ve got the snow all ploughed. Everything is immaculate. They’ve got their stuff in shipping boxes. They’ve run down their food supplies to nothing. Whoever owns the place is selling it out from under them.’

‘When are they going?’

‘Soon.’

soon.

‘Did they give you any trouble?’

‘Not really.’

‘Did they believe you were from the army?’

‘Not for a minute. But they’ve been told to keep their noses clean, as of right now. The place needs to be a controversy-free zone. Whoever owns the place doesn’t want the title damaged. So they didn’t give me a hard time.’

‘Nobody owns that place. It’s all public land.’

‘It makes a profit for somebody. Therefore somebody thinks he owns it. The bikers are his employees, that’s all. Worker bees. And now they’ve got their marching orders. They’re moving on to the next project.’

‘Plato the Mexican.’

‘Whoever.’

Peterson asked, ‘Did you find a lab?’

Reacher said, ‘I want to see the product from the restaurant parking lot.’

‘Why?’

‘Because that’s the way my mind works. One step at a time.’ Peterson shrugged and led the way back to the corridor, around a corner, to an evidence room. There was a half-width counter outside it, unoccupied. Peterson stepped past it and took a bunch of keys from his pocket and unlocked the door.

‘Wait there,’ he said.

He went in and came out ten seconds later with a clear plastic evidence bag. It was big. Stapled to it was a chain-of-custody form with four separate dates and times and locations and signatures on it. Inside it was the package that Janet Salter had described. The brick of white powder, hard and smooth under the wax paper wrap. The picture stencilled on it, the crown, the headband, the three points, the three balls representing jewels.

Reacher asked, ‘Did you test it?’

‘Of course,’ Peterson said. ‘It’s meth. No question. Just short of a kilo, very high purity, almost clinical. Good stuff, if you like that kind of thing.’

‘Two hundred grand’s worth, right there.’

‘A million on the streets of Chicago, after they cut it and retail it.’

‘Any idea what the picture means?’

‘No. They always put some kind of logo on. This is a brand-conscious market.’

‘You got the money in there too, that the Chicago guy paid?’

‘Of course.’

‘Can I see it?’

‘Don’t you believe me?’

‘I just like looking at stuff like that.’

So Peterson ducked back in and came back out with another evidence bag. Same size. Same kind of form stapled to it. Full of bricks of bills, all banded together.

‘OK?’ Peterson asked.

‘How long would it take you to earn that much?’

‘After taxes? I don’t want to think about it.’

‘Is that really wax paper on the dope?’

‘No, it’s some kind of cellophane or glassine. It’s a little yellowed because it’s old stock. But it’s proper pharmaceutical quality. This is a very high-end operation.’

‘OK.’

‘So did you find their lab?’

‘No.’

‘Did you see the stone building?’

‘Only from the outside.’

‘Do you know what it is?’

‘No, but I know what it isn’t.’

Reacher headed for the squad room. For the desk in the back corner. He picked up the phone, dialled nine for a line, and then the number he remembered.

‘Yes?’

‘Amanda, please.’

A click. A purr. The voice. It sounded tired. A little frustrated. It said, ‘I could be in Afghanistan right now. In fact if you don’t stop calling me I might just put in for a transfer.’

Reacher said, ‘The food might be better. Can’t beat a goat’s eyeballs in yogurt.’

‘You ever been there?’

‘No, but I met someone who had.’

‘I’ve got no news for you.’

‘I know. You can’t see the money hitting the Department of the Army.’

‘I tried and failed.’

‘You didn’t. The money never went to the army.’

‘Why not?’

‘Garbage in, garbage out.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘We started with a false assumption. They told me about an army facility. A

‘We started with a false assumption. They told me about an army facility. A small stone building with a two-mile road. I just went out there. It’s not a road. It’s a runway. It’s an air force place, not army.’

TWENTY-FOUR

THE VOICE FROM VIRGINIA SAID, ‘WELL, THAT CHANGES THINGS A little.’

Reacher said, ‘There’s another local rumour about prosthetic faces.’

‘Yes, I saw a note about that. There’s a file. Apparently the Pentagon got some calls from local folks in South Dakota. County and state government. But it’s bullshit. The plastic face places were always nearer the metro areas. Why put one out in the middle of nowhere?’

‘Why have them at all? If everyone is burned the same, why would anyone care?’

No reply.

Reacher asked, ‘Do you know anyone in the air force?’

‘Not for secrets.’

‘Might not be a secret. Could be entirely routine. We’re back at square one, as far as assumptions are concerned.’

‘OK, I’ll make some calls. But first I’m going to take a nap.’

‘You can sleep when you’re dead. This is urgent. The runway is ploughed. Two whole miles. Nobody does that for fun. Therefore someone or something is due to show up. And I saw a fuel tanker. Maybe for the return trip. Maybe someone’s planning on some heavy lifting.’

Silence for a beat. ‘Anything else?’

He asked, ‘Are you married?’

She asked, ‘Are you?’

‘No.’

‘Were you ever?’

Were you ever?

‘No.’

‘Why am I not surprised?’

She hung up.

Five minutes to ten in the morning.

Eighteen hours to go.

Peterson was two desks away, hanging up on a call of his own. He said, ‘The DEA is blowing me off. Their guy wasn’t interested.’

Reacher asked, ‘Why not?’

‘He said there’s no lab out there.’

‘How does he know?’

‘They have satellites and thermal imaging. They’ve reviewed the data and can’t see any heat. Therefore as far as they’re concerned it’s just a real estate deal. Until proved otherwise.’

‘The lab is underground.’

‘The DEA says not. Their imaging can see into basements. They say there’s nothing down there.’

‘They’re wrong.’

‘You didn’t see a lab.’

‘They have meth, they must have a lab.’

‘We don’t know that there’s anything under the ground at all. Not for sure.’

‘We do,’ Reacher said. ‘Nobody builds a two-mile runway for nothing. That’s long enough to land any kind of plane. Any kind of bomber, any kind of transport. And nobody lands bombers or transports next to a building smaller than a house. You were right. The building is a stair head. Which means there’s

something under it. Probably very big and very deep.'

'But what exactly?'

Reacher pointed at his phone. 'You'll know when I know.'

A half-hour later Peterson got a call to say that the highway had reopened. The weather radar was showing nothing incoming from the west except supercooled air, and all across the state the snowploughs and the salt spreaders had finished their work, and the Highway Patrol had conferred with the Department of Transportation, and traffic was flowing again. Then Jay Knox called to say he had been told the replacement bus was about three hours out. So Peterson lit up the phone tree and set up a two o'clock rendezvous for the passengers in the police station lobby. All twenty of them. The ladies with the broken bones were fit to travel. A two o'clock departure would get the group to Mount Rushmore a little less than two days late. Not bad, all in all, for South Dakota in the winter.

Then he looked at Reacher and asked, 'Are you going with them?'

Reacher said, 'I paid my money.'

'So are you going?'

'I'm a restless man.'

'Yes or no?'

'Depends what happens before two o'clock, I guess.'

What happened before two o'clock was that Janet Salter decided to go out for a walk.

Peterson took the call from one of the women cops in the house. Mrs Salter was going stir crazy. She had cabin fever. She felt cooped up. She was accustomed to taking walks, to the grocery, to the drugstore, to the restaurant, sometimes just for the fun of it. She had already been a prisoner in her own home for close to a week. She was taking her civic responsibilities seriously, but with responsibilities came rights, and stepping out like a free woman was one of them.

'She's crazy,' Reacher said. 'It's freezing cold.'

‘She’s crazy,’ Reacher said. ‘It’s freezing cold.’

‘She’s a native,’ Peterson said. ‘This is nothing to her.’

‘It must be twenty degrees below zero.’

Peterson smiled, like an insider against an outsider. He said, ‘The coldest day we ever had was minus fifty-eight. Back in February of 1936. Then less than five months later in July we had the hottest day we ever had, a hundred and twenty exactly.’

‘Whatever, she’s still crazy.’

‘You want to try to talk her out of it?’

Reacher tried. He drove over there with Peterson. Janet Salter was in her kitchen with the two day watch cops. Her percolator was all fired up. Reacher could smell fresh coffee and hot aluminum. She poured him a mug and said, ‘The officers tell me you told Mr Peterson that the bikers are preparing to leave.’

Reacher nodded. ‘That’s how it looked to me.’

‘Therefore it should be safe enough to take a little stroll.’

‘The guy with the gun is not a biker. Never was.’

‘But whoever he is, he won’t be waiting outside. You said so yourself, last night. It’s too cold.’

‘It’s also too cold to go for a walk.’

‘Nonsense. If we keep up a brisk pace, we’ll enjoy it.’

‘We?’

‘I certainly hope you’ll accompany me.’

Five to eleven in the morning.

Seventeen hours to go.

Peterson improvised a plan that looked a lot like the Secret Service taking the

president for a walk. He deployed the three stake-out cars to the town's southern, western, and eastern approaches, and told them to stand by to move like a rolling cordon if necessary. He and the two day watch women would be on foot, boxing in Mrs Salter at an appropriate tactical distance. Reacher would walk with her, always keeping himself between her and any passing traffic. A human shield, although Peterson didn't put it that way.

They all wrapped up in all the clothes they had and stepped through the door. The wind was steady out of the west. All the way from Wyoming. It was bitter. Reacher had been in Wyoming in the winter, and survived. He made a mental note never to risk it again. Peterson ranged ahead and one of the day watch women trailed behind and the other kept pace on the opposite sidewalk. Reacher stayed at Janet Salter's shoulder. She had a scarf wrapped around the lower portion of her face. Reacher didn't. As long as the wind was on his back, the situation was tolerable. But when they turned and headed north to town, his nose and cheeks and chin went numb and his eyes started to water. He pulled his hood forward and shielded his face as much as was prudent. He felt he needed some kind of peripheral vision. The sidewalk was humped and ridged with glazed snow. Walking on it was difficult.

Janet Salter asked him, 'What are you thinking about?'

Her voice was muffled, literally. Her words came out thick and soft and then froze and whipped away on the wind.

'I'm thinking about February of 1936,' Reacher said. 'Minus fifty-eight degrees, the height of the Depression, dust storms, droughts, blizzards, why the hell didn't you all move to California?'

'Lots of folks did. The others had no choice but to stay. And that year had a warm summer, anyway.'

'Peterson told me. A hundred-seventy-eight-degree swing.'

'Did he tell you about the chinooks?'

'No.'

'Chinooks are hot winds out of the Black Hills. One day in January of 1943 it was minus four degrees, and then literally two minutes later it was plus forty-

five. A forty-nine-degree swing in a hundred and twenty seconds. The most dramatic ever recorded in America. Everyone had broken windows from the thermal shock.'

'Wartime,' Reacher said.

'The hinge of fate,' Janet Salter said. 'That exact day the Germans lost control of the airfields at Stalingrad, many thousands of miles away. It was the beginning of the end for them. Maybe the wind knew.'

They trudged onward. Peterson stayed well ahead, one of the women cops stayed well behind, the other kept pace directly across the street. They got level with the restaurant parking lot. It was full of people heading in and out. Most of them were inadequately dressed and all of them looked thoroughly miserable.

'Prison visitors,' Janet Salter said. 'We seem to get more passing trade now than anywhere in the state except Mount Rushmore.' Which made Reacher think about the replacement bus from Minneapolis, due to leave town at two o'clock. He had no particular interest in oversized sculptures, but he knew there was a road there that led south. And south was Nebraska, then Kansas, then Oklahoma, then Texas, where it was warm. Or alternatively a person could turn left in Kansas, and then cross Missouri, and the southern tip of Illinois, and Kentucky, and end up in Virginia.

Janet Salter said, 'You're thinking about her, aren't you?'

Reacher said, 'No.'

He turned left and right from the waist. Scanned all around. There were more people up ahead than he had seen in a long time. And more cars. They were snuffling slowly along the frozen roads. Huge sheets of ice were creaking and cracking under their weight. Multiple threats, but all of them were trapped into ponderous slow motion by the weather. And there were cop cars among them. Every tenth or twelfth vehicle was a police cruiser, driving slow on a random endless loop, cautious and vigilant.

Reacher asked, 'Where are we going?'

Janet Salter asked, 'Where would you like to go?'

'This is your trip.'

‘This is your trip.’

‘Bolton is a relatively dull town. We lack exciting destinations.’

‘We could get lunch.’

‘It’s too early.’

‘Brunch, then.’

‘Brunch is a combination of breakfast and lunch, and I’ve already had breakfast. Therefore brunch is no longer an option today.’

‘Cup of coffee?’

‘Everywhere is full up. Visiting days are difficult. We’d never get a table for five.’

‘Then let’s head back.’

‘Already?’

Reacher didn’t answer. For a moment it looked like she would keep on going, maybe for ever, but then she stopped and nodded. Reacher tried to whistle ahead to Peterson, but his lips were too cold and cracked to make a sound. So they waited side by side until Peterson turned around to check. Reacher waved, everyone turned back, and the little procession retraced its steps, with the woman cop now in the lead and Peterson trailing behind.

Five minutes to noon.

Sixteen hours to go.

Seventeen hundred miles south it was lunch time. For the second day in succession Plato wasn’t eating. And for the second time in succession he was breaking the habit of a lifetime. He was dialling his guy in South Dakota. And his guy was answering. Which annoyed Plato considerably, because it meant his guy had his phone switched on, which meant his guy wasn’t at that very moment in the act of killing the damn witness.

His guy said, ‘She wasn’t in the house.’

Plato said, ‘Find her.’

Heading back put the westerly wind on Reacher’s other cheek, which was a wash in terms of comfort. Otherwise the inbound trip compared to the outbound was both better and worse. Better, because they were moving away from the populated areas, and fewer people meant fewer threats. Worse, because whatever threats remained were behind Reacher’s back. He couldn’t easily check over his shoulder. His torso tended to move independently inside the giant coat. A backward glance merely put his whole face inside his hood. So he was forced to rely on Peterson’s vigilance behind him. He walked on, regarding each completed safe step as a separate minor triumph.

Janet Salter said, ‘I’m sorry.’

‘For what?’

‘I was inconsiderate. I’ve put you all to a lot of trouble.’

‘All part of a day’s work. No reason why you shouldn’t go out once in a while.’

They crunched onward, slipping and sliding occasionally, forming up in single file where the footstep trail narrowed around obstacles. Reacher had a high pile of ploughed snow between himself and the roadway. After most steps his left foot came down on its lower slope. It was like limping. He kept his eyes on the oncoming traffic. There wasn’t much. A few pick-up trucks, a few old-model SUVs, a few salt-caked cars. Nothing to worry about. Then Lowell drove by in his squad car, and slowed in surprise, and waved. Janet Salter waved back. Lowell speeded up again. Then came nothing for a spell, and then came a big dark sedan, heading north towards them. A Ford Crown Victoria. Navy blue. Easy to be sure in the bright clear light. Chief Holland’s car. The guy stopped the width of a traffic lane away and rolled down his window. He ignored Reacher completely. Looked straight at Janet Salter, some kind of concern in his face. She stopped and faced him. She said, ‘I’m out for a walk. That’s all. Nothing to worry about. Mr Peterson is doing a fine job.’

Holland said, ‘You heading home now?’

‘We’re on our way.’

‘Can I offer you a ride?’

‘Thank you, but I would rather walk. A measure of fresh air and exercise was the point of this little adventure.’

‘OK.’

‘But please join us back at the house, for coffee, if you like.’

‘OK,’ Holland said again.

He checked his mirrors and U-turned across the width of the road. Frozen ruts splintered under his wheels. He got lined up in the southbound lane but didn’t race on ahead. He kept pace instead, crawling slowly, holding a lateral line with himself on the left behind the wheel, then his empty passenger seat, then the berm of ploughed snow, then Reacher, then Janet Salter. His front tyres were made of hard winter compound, and they crunched and scrabbled slowly. He had chains on the back. Each link rotated into position and made its own distinct sound. He put his flashing lights on, to warn the traffic behind him of his low speed. He had strobes concealed in the rear parcel shelf, matched by more behind the radiator grille. Reacher guessed they would do the job. From a distance the unmarked car would look like a regular police cruiser.

Janet Salter said, ‘This is ridiculous.’

Reacher said, ‘He’s just doing his job.’

‘I don’t like the attention.’

‘You’re important to him.’

‘Only because he can use me.’

‘You’re a prominent citizen. You’re the kind of person a chief of police worries about.’

Janet Salter said, ‘The only prominent citizens in this town are the prison staff. Believe me. That’s how it works now.’

They walked on, with the idling car crunching slowly alongside them. Where there were no buildings on their right the wind blew in hard and strong and uninterrupted, a mass of frozen air whistling relentlessly over the flat land, with nothing in its path to roil it up or make it turbulent. It was still carrying tiny

nothing in its path to roll it up or make it turbulent. It was still carrying tiny spicules of ice. They came in horizontal and pattered against the side of Reacher's hood. They could have been airborne for hundreds of miles, maybe all the way from the Rocky Mountains.

Janet Salter asked, 'Are you cold?'

Reacher smiled, as much as his numb face would let him.

'I know,' he said. 'This is nothing.'

They got back in the house and peeled off layers and endured the pain of thawing. Reacher's ears burned and his nose and chin prickled and itched. Peterson and the two women cops had to have been feeling the same, but they showed no signs of distress. Probably a matter of local South Dakota pride. Chief Holland was entirely OK. He had been riding in a heated car, out of the wind. But still he gave a theatrical shiver as soon as he stepped into the hallway. Relief, Reacher figured, now that Janet Salter's exposure was over and they had gotten away with it.

The two women cops took up their established positions. Janet Salter went to work with her percolator. Reacher and Peterson and Holland watched her from the hallway. Then the phone rang. Janet Salter asked someone to pick it up. Peterson got it. He listened for a second and held the receiver out to Reacher.

'For you,' he said. 'It's the woman from the 110th MP.'

Reacher took the phone. Peterson and Holland trooped into the kitchen and left him alone. Instinctive politeness. Reacher put the phone to his ear and the voice from Virginia said, 'I called a guy in the air force.'

'And?'

'We're getting there. Slowly, but not because it's a secret. Quite the opposite. Because the place was abandoned and forgotten years ago. It fell off the active list when God's dog was still a puppy. Nobody can remember a thing about it.'

'Not even what it was?'

'All the details are archived. All my guy has seen so far is a report about how hard it was to build. The design was compromised several times during

construction because of the kind of terrain they found. Some kind of schist. You know what that is?'

'Bedrock, I guess,' Reacher said. 'Probably hard, if it caused difficulties.'

'It proves they were excavating underground.'

'That's for sure. Not a bad result, for the first two hours.'

'One hour,' the voice said. 'I took a nap first.'

'You're a bad person.'

'Last time I checked, you're not my boss.'

'Anything else?'

'I got a hit on a Florida cop called Kapler. Miami PD, born there thirty-six years ago, upped and quit two years ago for no apparent reason. No health issues, not in debt. I'll get more when I'm in the Miami PD records.'

'You can do that with Google?'

'No, I'm using a few other resources. I'll let you know.'

'Thanks,' Reacher said. 'Anything else?'

There was a pause. 'My guy isn't talking.'

'From Fort Hood?'

'Not a word.'

'Where is he?'

'Back on post, in a cell.'

'Did he live on-post or off-post?'

'Off.'

'So he's looking at Texas law for the homicide or the Uniform Code for the

treason. That's a rock and a hard place. Either way he's going to fry. He doesn't have an incentive to talk.'

'What would you do?'

'What's your goal?'

'The non-state actors. Who he's talking to, and how, and why.'

'The why is easy. He probably served in Iraq or Afghanistan and got seduced by all the humanitarian bullshit and made friends and got played like a fish. The how will be cell phone or e-mail or an encrypted web site. The who will be very interesting, I agree.'

'So how do I get him to talk?'

'Order him to. You outrank him. He's trained to obey.'

'That won't be enough. It never is.'

'Are his parents still alive?'

'Yes.'

'Siblings?'

'A younger brother, training with the navy SEALs.'

'That's good. That's close to perfect, in fact. You need to bring your boy north, and sit him down, and offer him a deal.'

'I can't do that.'

'You can, in terms of publicity. Tell him he's going to fry, no question, but for what is up to him. Domestic violence by returning officers is up what, a thousand per cent? Nobody condones it, but most folks kind of understand it. So tell him if he cooperates, that's all the world will know about him. But tell him if he doesn't cooperate, then you'll do the treason thing out in the open. His parents will be ashamed and mortified, his brother will have to quit the SEALs, his old high school will disown him.'

‘Will that work?’

‘All he’s got left is his name. He’s Fourth Infantry. That stuff matters over there.’

No reply.

‘Believe me,’ Reacher said. ‘Let him get out with honour.’

‘Domestic violence is honourable?’

‘Compared to the alternative.’

‘OK, I’ll give it a try.’

‘Don’t forget about me,’ Reacher said. ‘I need to know what the air force built here. The scope, purpose and architecture, same as I always did. As soon as possible.’

‘Anything else?’

‘Are you married?’

She hung up without answering.

All six people that were awake and in the house had coffee. Janet Salter herself, Holland, Peterson, Reacher, and the two women cops. Maybe they joined in because they needed to get warm. They all got halfway through their first cup, and then Holland’s cell phone rang. He balanced his mug and opened the phone one-handed and listened for a minute. Then he closed the phone again and stuffed it back in his pocket.

‘Highway Patrol,’ he said. ‘The bikers are leaving. Right now. Thirty-six pick-up trucks just hit the highway.’

Five to one in the afternoon.

Fifteen hours to go.

TWENTY-FIVE

REACHER RODE BACK TO THE STATION HOUSE WITH HOLLAND and got the story on the way. The Highway Patrol was out in force on the highway to check that there were no remaining weather problems. One of their number had been parked on the eastbound shoulder. He had been watching the traffic coming and going, but then in the left corner of his eye had seen a long fast convoy heading down the snowy ribbon that led from the construction camp. It was quite a sight. Between thirty and forty pick-up trucks driving nose to tail, each one with three people in the cab and a tarp-covered motorbike and piles of boxes strapped down in the load bed. They had slowed and turned and then streamed and snaked and swooped around the cloverleaf and merged on to the highway and accelerated west. Like a train, the officer had said. Like the Northern Pacific itself. The convoy looked a quarter-mile long and was taking twenty whole seconds to pass any given point.

The desk sergeant confirmed the news. Highway Patrol cruisers were calling in reports, one after the other. The convoy was now ten miles west of Bolton, and still moving fast. But not fast enough to get ticketed. They were holding to an easy sixty-five, driving straight and true, still steadfastly keeping their noses clean.

They used the office with the crime scene photographs. Four desks boxed together, four chairs. Holland and Peterson sat side by side, and Reacher sat facing Holland, with his back to the pictures of the dead guy dressed in black. He asked, ‘You happy to just let them go?’

Holland asked, ‘Why wouldn’t I be?’

‘They were selling meth.’

‘This is a small town at heart,’ Holland said. ‘We operate under small town rules. If I see the back of a thing, that’s generally as good as solving it.’

Peterson said, ‘End of problem.’

‘Not really,’ Reacher said. ‘They cleaned up and got out because the real estate closing is about to happen. And a closing needs a good title. Janet Salter is the last little smudge on it. She’s in more danger now than she ever was. She’s the

last little smidge on it. She's in more danger now than she ever was. She's the only thing standing between someone and a lot of money.'

'Plato the Mexican.'

'Whoever.'

'We're doing everything we can,' Holland said. 'We have seven officers in place, and they're staying there. We'll be OK.'

'Unless the siren goes off again.'

'You say it won't.'

Reacher said, 'An educated guess is still a guess. Just remember, this is the time to start worrying, not to stop.'

Holland said, 'You see me relaxing, I hereby give you permission to kick my butt. We may have our problems, and we may not be the U.S. Army, but we've struggled along so far. You should remember that.'

Reacher nodded. 'I know. I'm sorry. Not your fault. It's the mayor's fault. Who would sign off on a plan like that?'

'Anyone would,' Holland said. 'Those are jobs that can't be shipped overseas. Which is the name of the game right now.'

The room went quiet for a moment.

Peterson said, 'The motels are all full.'

Reacher said, 'I know that.'

'So where is the bad guy sleeping?'

'In his car. Or in the next county.'

'Where is he eating?'

'Same answer.'

'So should we use roadblocks? There are only three ways in.'

‘No,’ Holland said. ‘False premise. We set up a static perimeter, he might be already behind us. We have to stay mobile.’ Then he went quiet again, as if he was running through a mental agenda and checking that all the items on it had been covered. Which they must have been, because his next move was to stand up and walk out of the room without another word. Reacher heard the slap of his boot soles against the linoleum and then the slam of a door. His office, presumably. Work to do.

Peterson said, ‘We should get lunch. You could come back to the house. You could be company for Kim. She would like that.’

‘Because she’s lonely?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then you and I shouldn’t be the only human specimens she sees all day. Go pick her up and we’ll have lunch in town, the three of us.’

‘Hard to get a table.’

‘I’ll wait on line while you’re on the road.’

‘Where?’

‘The coffee shop where you found me yesterday. Across the square.’

Peterson said, ‘But,’ and then nothing more.

‘I know,’ Reacher said. ‘I can see the police station from there. I can see when the bus is ready to leave.’

The walk across the square to the coffee shop was short, but it was straight into the wind. The blowing ice hurt for the first few steps, like tiny needles, but then Reacher’s face went numb and he didn’t feel them any more. The line for a table was out the door. Reacher took his place behind a woman and a child wrapped in comforters that were probably borrowed from their motel beds. A guy commits a federal crime in Florida or Arizona, ends up in prison in South Dakota, the family has to follow. For the first year or two, anyway. After that, maybe not. A lot to lose.

The line moved slowly but steadily and Reacher got level with the steamed window. Inside he could see vague shapes bustling about. Two waitresses. Steady wages, maybe not much in tips. Families of prisoners didn't have much money. If they did, they weren't families of prisoners. Or, worst case, their guy was in a Club Fed somewhere, doing woodwork for a year, or reading books.

The mother and child squeezed their motel comforters in through the door. Reacher waited his turn on the sidewalk. He was pressed up against the building and out of the wind. Then a woman with three kids straggled out and Reacher ducked in. He waited at the register until a waitress glanced at him. He mouthed the word three and held up three fingers. The waitress nodded and swiped a rag across a table and beckoned him over. He dumped his coat on the back of a chair and peeled off his hat and gloves. He sat down and saw Peterson's car stop outside on the kerb, a long black and white shape through the fog on the glass. He saw Peterson cross the sidewalk. His wife wasn't with him. Peterson cut to the head of the line and stepped in through the door. No one complained. Peterson was in uniform.

Reacher stayed in his seat and Peterson shed his coat and sat down to an awkward silence that was broken only by the arrival of the waitress with an order pad in her hand. Not the kind of place that offered extra minutes for study of the menu. Peterson ordered a hamburger and water and Reacher got grilled cheese and coffee. Reacher was facing the window, and Peterson turned around to look at it, and then turned back with a satisfied smile.

'I know,' Reacher said. 'It's all steamed up. But a bus is a pretty big thing. I'll be able to make it out.'

'You won't leave.'

'I haven't decided yet.'

'Kim didn't want to come. She doesn't care much for crowds, either.'

'Crowds, or this kind of crowd?'

'Both.'

They were two people at a table for four, and the line was still out the door, but nobody wanted to sit with them. People came in, glanced over, maybe took half

a step, and then stopped and looked away. The world was divided into two halves, people who liked cops and people who didn't. The military had been exactly the same. Reacher had eaten next to empty chairs, many, many times.

Peterson asked, 'What would you do, if you were me?'

'About what?'

'The department.'

'It's not yours.'

'I'm next in line.'

'I would start some serious training. Then I would renegotiate the deal with the prison. Their crisis plan is completely unsustainable.'

'It worked OK last night, apart from the thing with Mrs Salter.'

'That's the point. That's like saying it worked OK, except it didn't. You have to plan for the contingencies.'

'I'm not much of a politician.'

'Please tell me there's a review period built in.'

'There is. But they'll say it's rare that our help is needed. And if we get through this month with Mrs Salter we won't have any negatives to show them.'

There was no more conversation. Peterson kept quiet, and Reacher had nothing more to say. Without Kim there, the whole thing was a bust. But the food was OK. The coffee was fresh. No real alternative, given the turnover of customers. There were three flasks behind the counter and all three of them were constantly dripping and emptying. The sandwich was nicely fried, and Reacher was ready for the calories. Like throwing coal into a furnace. Being cold was like being on a diet. He understood why all the locals he met looked basically the same, all lean and fair and slender. Fair, because of their genetic inheritance. Lean and slender, because they were freezing their asses off for half the year.

First Reacher and then Peterson finished eating, and immediately they felt the covetous stares from the people lining up inside the door. So Reacher paid, and

left a generous tip, which earned him a tired smile from the waitress. Then he and Peterson stepped out to the sidewalk, just in time to see a big yellow bus pull up in the police station lot.

Five to two in the afternoon.

Fourteen hours to go.

The bus was the same size and shape and style as the vehicle that had crashed two days earlier. Same amenities. It had blanked-out windows at the rear, where the washroom was. Same number of seats. Same kind of door. It had entered the lot from the north, so the door was facing away from the police station lobby. Reacher stood with Peterson in the square with the wind on his back and watched a thin line of wrapped-up old folks come out and walk around. There were all kinds of grateful farewells going on. The locals, shaking hands, getting hugged, giving out addresses and phone numbers. He saw the lady with the busted collar bone. She was in a coat with one empty sleeve. He saw the woman with the cracked wrist. She was cradling one hand and someone else was carrying her bag. Most of the others had their Band-Aids off. Their cuts were all healed up. The new driver was crouching down and slotting suitcases into the hold under the floor. The old folks were detouring around him one after the other and gripping the handrails carefully and climbing slowly up the step. Reacher saw them inside through the windows, white cotton-ball heads moving down the aisle, pausing, choosing their places, getting settled.

Last aboard was Jay Knox himself, once the driver, now just a passenger. He walked down the aisle and dumped himself in a window seat three rows behind the last of the seniors. Reacher's seat. Near the rear wheels, where the ride was roughest. No point in travelling, if you're not feeling it.

The new driver latched the hold compartments and bounced up the step. A second later the door sucked shut behind him. The engine started. Reacher heard the heavy diesel rattle. Heard the air brake release and the snick of a gear. The engine roared and the bus moved away, out of the lot, on to the road. The icy wind battered at it. It headed south towards the highway. Reacher watched it go, until it was lost to sight.

Peterson clapped him on the back.

Reacher said, 'A viable mode of transportation just left town without me on it. I

just broke the habit of a lifetime.'

Plato dialled his guy again. Direct. A risk, but he was enough of an analyst to know that caution sometimes had to be abandoned. To know that chronology couldn't be beaten. To know that timing was everything. The clock ticked on, whoever you were. Even if you were Plato.

His guy answered.

Plato asked, 'Do you have news for me?'

'Not yet. I'm sorry.'

Plato paused. 'It almost seems like it would be easier just to do the job than find new ways of delaying it.'

'It's not like that.'

'It seems like you're working very hard to save the wrong life.'

'I'm not.'

'Focus on the life you really want to save.'

'I will. I am.'

'You have a deadline. Please don't let me down.'

Reacher walked back to the station. Peterson drove. They met in the silent lobby and stood there for a second. They had nothing to do, and both of them knew it. Then Holland came out of his office and said, 'We should go up to the camp. To take a look around. Now that it's empty. While we've still got daylight.'

TWENTY-SIX

THEY WENT IN HOLLAND'S CAR. IT WAS A BET TER FIT FOR THREE people than Peterson's cruiser, because it had no security screen between the front seats and the rear. Reacher rode in the back, sprawled sideways, comfortable, watching the roads he had driven that morning. Conditions were still bad. The wind was still strong. The snow was frozen so hard it looked like part of the earth, and it was being scoured into long sharp ridges and runnels. It was blinding white under the pale afternoon sun. Like the Ice Age.

They turned on to the old road parallel with the highway and again on to the wandering two-lane up towards the camp. The first eight miles were as bad as before. Icy humps and dips, reversed cambers, constant deviations from straight. Then, as before, the horizon changed. The clear grey concrete, massively wide, infinitely long, the aerodynamic berms of snow, the visible wind howling above the surface.

Holland slowed and bumped up on the new level and stopped and kept his foot on the brake, like a plane waiting to launch. He said, 'You see what you want to see, don't you? I was here a dozen times in my life and thought this was just a road. Kind of fancy, maybe, but I guess I figured hey, that's the military for you.'

'It used to be narrower,' Peterson said. 'That's what made it hard to see. The winds put dirt all over it. Only the middle part was ever used. These guys ploughed it for the first time in fifty years. Not just snow. They pushed the dirt off.'

'It's a piece of work,' Holland said. 'That's for sure.'

'That's for damn sure,' Reacher said. 'It's got to be a yard thick. By volume it's probably the largest manmade object in South Dakota.'

They all looked a minute longer and then Holland took his foot off the brake and the snow chains chattered and the car rolled on. Two whole miles. The tan shapes of the huts loomed up, with the slate roof of the stone building standing tall behind them, under its cap of snow. Holland parked about where Reacher had. The scene ahead was different. No people. No trucks. No bikes. Just the empty ploughed spaces, and the wooden huts all forlorn and abandoned among

empty ploughed spaces, and the wooden huts all forlorn and abandoned among them.

They all got out of the car. Put their hats on, put their gloves on, zipped up their coats. The temperature was still dropping. Way below zero degrees, and the wind made it worse. The cold struck upward through the soles of Reacher's boots. His face went numb after seconds. Holland and Peterson were putting on a show of taking it in their stride, but Reacher knew they had to be hurting. Their faces were mottled red and white, and they were blinking, and they were coughing and gasping a little.

They all headed straight for the stone building. It looked no different from how it had in the morning. Partly forbidding, partly just plain weird. Peterson tried the door. It didn't move. He rubbed the new frost off the keyhole with his thumb, the same way Reacher had. He said, 'There are no scratches here. The lock wasn't in regular use.'

'Didn't need to be,' Reacher said. 'They unlocked it a year ago and relocked it this morning.'

'So where's the key?'

'That's a good question.'

Holland said, 'They took it with them.'

Reacher said, 'I don't think they did.'

'Why wouldn't they?'

'Because this place is getting sold. Wouldn't they have been told to leave the key for the new owner?'

'So where is it?'

'Under the mat, probably.'

'There is no mat.'

'Under a flowerpot, then.'

'What flowerpot?'

‘What flowerpot?’

‘Figure of speech,’ Reacher said. ‘People leave keys in prearranged locations.’

All three of them turned a slow circle, looking at everything there was to see. Which wasn’t much. Just snow, and concrete, and the huts, and the building itself.

‘What’s it going to look like?’ Peterson asked. ‘Just a key?’

‘Big,’ Reacher said. ‘It’s a blast door, so the lock will be complex. Lots of moving parts. Hard to turn. So the key will be big and strong. Probably T-shaped, like a clock key, probably made out of some kind of fancy steel. Probably cost the Pentagon a thousand bucks all on its own.’

‘Maybe they buried it in the snow. We have a metal detector in the car.’

‘But I’m guessing the Russian guy from Brooklyn doesn’t. Which means it isn’t in the snow. That’s no kind of customer relations. You can’t ask a guy to dig around in a snow bank for an hour.’

‘So where is it?’

There were stone ledges and carved mouldings and Gothic features all over the building. Eye-level and below was too obvious. Reacher walked a circuit and ran his hands along everything up to about eight feet off the ground. Nothing there. And anything higher would be inaccessible, unless the Russian was figuring on bringing a folding ladder.

Reacher stopped walking and looked around all over again and said, ‘It has to be somewhere definite. Like under the third thing from the left or the fourth thing from the right.’

Peterson said, ‘What kind of thing?’

‘Hut, bed, anything.’

‘Can’t we just jimmy the door with a tyre iron?’

‘It’s a blast door. Designed to stand up to a big pressure wave.’

‘Peterson’ll be calling us a bunch of chickenshits.’

‘But we’d be pulling outward, not pushing inward.’

‘Pressure waves are followed by vacuums. Compression and then rarefaction. Compression pushes in, rarefaction sucks back out, and just as hard. Both ways around, that’s a strong door.’

Peterson said, ‘So we better start searching.’

‘What’s your lucky number?’

‘Three.’

‘So start with the third hut, under the third mattress.’

‘Counting from where?’

Reacher paused. ‘That’s another good question. Front row, from the left, probably. But ultimately any counting system could be called subjective. And therefore potentially confusing. The only real objectivity would be in saying the nearest or the farthest.’

‘From where?’

‘Here. The locked door.’

‘That’s assuming it’s in a hut at all.’

‘It’s not in the snow and it can’t be in the building itself. What else is there?’

Peterson headed for the nearest hut. The first in the back row, opposite the second in the front row. The first one Reacher had checked that morning. The door was unlocked. Peterson pushed it open and stepped inside. Reacher and Holland followed him. The burlap drapes were still at the windows. Everything else portable was gone. There was nothing to see except the twelve cots, now stripped back to striped blue mattress ticking and dull iron frames. The place looked sad and abandoned and empty.

But it was warm.

The paraffin heater had its burner turned to the off position, but it was still giving out plenty of residual heat. It was glorious. Reacher stripped off his

gloves and held his hands out to it. Simple physics meant that it had to be cooling all the time, and maybe in three hours' time it would be merely lukewarm, and three hours after that it would be stone cold, but right then it was completely magnificent. Still too hot to touch, in fact. The combination of cast iron and recent hydrocarbon combustion was a wonderful thing. Reacher said, 'You guys go search somewhere else. I'm staying right here.'

Peterson said, 'With a bit of luck they'll all be the same.'

They were. All three of them hustled to the farthest hut to check it out, and they found the same situation. Empty room, stripped beds, warm stove. They started the serious search right there. The warmth made them patient and painstaking. They checked every mattress, every cot frame, every nook, and every cranny. They checked the toilet tank in the bathroom area. They looked for loose boards, listened for hollows in the walls, and opened every bulkhead light fixture.

They found nothing.

Five to three in the afternoon.

Thirteen hours to go.

They searched the kitchen next. Reacher figured it was a strong possibility. A kitchen was an unambiguous location. A singularity. There was only one of them. Even more definite than the first hut or the last. But the key wasn't in it. The jars of flour and sugar and coffee were still there, but too empty to hide a metal object from even the most cursory of shakes. It wasn't shoved to the back of the shelves, it wasn't taped to the underside of a table, it wasn't in the cornflake dregs like a toy, it wasn't nested in a pile of bowls.

After the kitchen they worked back towards the stone building, hut by hut. They got better and faster at searching each step of the way, from sheer practice and repetition, because each hut was identical to all the others. They got to where they could have done it blindfold, or asleep. But even so, they got the same result everywhere. Which was no result at all.

They arrived back where they had begun, in the hut nearest the stone building. They were reluctant to start searching it, because they felt sure they would be disappointed, and drawing a blank in the last of fifteen places carried with it some kind of finality. Reacher walked through the space, stopping at the stove, moving on to the last bed on the right.

moving on to the last bed on the right.

He said, ‘There was a girl sitting here this morning.’

Holland stepped alongside him. ‘What girl?’

‘Just a biker, maybe nineteen or twenty. The only one I saw inside. The others were all out working on the snow.’

‘Was she sick?’

‘She looked OK to me.’

‘Was she locked up?’

‘No, the door was open.’

‘Maybe she was guarding the key. Like that was her function.’

‘Maybe she was. But where did she leave it?’

‘What did she look like?’

‘Tall and thin and blond, like the rest of you.’

‘You think she was local?’

‘Meth is a rural thing,’ Reacher said. Then he thought: Tall and thin and blond. He asked, ‘Are you getting a cell signal out here?’

‘Sure,’ Holland said. ‘Flat land all around. Wind and dust and microwaves, they’re all the same to us.’

‘Let me use your phone.’

Holland handed it over and Reacher dialled the number he remembered.

‘Yes?’

‘Amanda, please.’

A click. A purr. The voice. It said, ‘Where the hell are you?’

Reacher said, ‘What? Now you’re my mother?’

‘I’ve been trying to get hold of you.’

‘I’m out at the air force place. Trying to get in. Looking for the key. I need to know the top twenty ingenious places you’ve ever found a small hidden object.’

‘VCR slot, kettle, shoe, inside a TV set, the battery compartment of a transistor radio, a hollowed-out book, cut into the foam inside the seat of a car, in a bar of soap, in a tub of cream cheese.’

‘That’s only nine. You’re hopeless.’

‘Give me time.’

‘There isn’t any of that kind of stuff here.’

‘So what is there?’

Reacher walked around the hut and described everything he was seeing.

The voice said, ‘The toilet tank.’

‘Checked them all.’

‘Any torn mattresses?’

‘No.’

‘Loose boards?’

‘No.’

‘So burn the place down and sift the ashes. An air force key is probably made of the same stuff as warheads. It would survive, easy.’

‘Why were you trying to get hold of me?’

‘Because I know what that place is.’

TWENTY-SEVEN

PETERSON AND HOLLAND HAD HEARD THE THIN SQUAWK OF HER words from the earpiece. They stepped closer. Reacher sat down on the bed, where the biker girl had been. The voice on the phone said, ‘That place was built as an orphanage.’

Reacher said, ‘Underground?’

‘It was fifty years ago. The height of the Cold War. Everyone was going nuts. My guy faxed me the file. The casualty predictions were horrendous. The Soviets were assumed to have missiles to spare, by the hundreds. A full-scale launch, they’d have been scratching their heads for targets. We ran scenarios, and it all came down to the day of the week and the time of the year. Saturday or Sunday or during the school vacations, it was assumed everyone would get it pretty much equally. But weekdays during the semester, they predicted a significant separation between the adult population and the juvenile, in terms of physical location. Parents would be in one place, their kids would be in another, maybe in a shelter under a school.’

‘Or under their desks,’ Reacher said.

‘Wherever,’ the voice said. ‘The point is that the survival numbers two weeks after the launch were very skewed. They showed a lot more kids than adults. Some guy on House Appropriations started obsessing about it. He wanted places for these kids to go. He figured they might be able to get to undamaged regional airports and be flown out to remote areas. He wanted combination radiation shelters and living accommodations built. He talked to the air force. He scratched their backs, they scratched his. He was from South Dakota, so that’s where they started.’

‘The local scuttlebutt is about a scandal,’ Reacher said. ‘Building an orphanage doesn’t sound especially scandalous.’

‘You don’t understand. The assumption was there would be no adults left. Maybe a sick and dying pilot or two, that’s all. Some harassed bureaucrat with a clipboard. The idea was that these kids would be dumped out of the planes and left alone to lock themselves underground and manage the best they could. On their own. Like feral animals. It wasn’t a pretty picture. They got reports from

their own. Like feral animals. It wasn't a pretty picture. They got reports from psychologists saying there would be tribalism, fighting, killing, maybe even cannibalism. And the median age of the survivors was supposed to be seven. Then the psychologists talked to the grown-ups, and it turned out that their worst fear was that they would die and their kids would live on without them. They needed to hear that things would be OK, you know, with doctors and nurses and clean sheets on the bed. They didn't want to hear about how things were really going to be. So there was a lot of fuss and then the idea was dropped, as a matter of civilian morale.'

'So this place just stood here for fifty years?'

'Something about the construction compromises made it useless for anything else.'

'Do we know what the compromises were?'

'No. The plans are missing.'

'So is the place empty?'

'They filled it with junk they needed to store and then they forgot all about it.'

'Is the stuff still in there?'

'I'm assuming so.'

'What is it?'

'I don't know yet. That's in another file. But it can't be very exciting. It's something that was already surplus to requirements fifty years ago.'

'Are you going to find out?'

'My guy has requested the file.'

'How's my weather?'

'Stick your head out the door.'

'I mean, what's coming my way?'

A pause. ‘It’ll be snowing again tomorrow. Clear and cold until then.’

‘Where would a bunch of bikers have hidden a key?’

‘I don’t know. I can’t help you.’

Five minutes to four in the afternoon.

Twelve hours to go.

Reacher handed the phone back to Holland. The light from the window was dimming. The sun was way in the west and the stone building was casting a long shadow. They set about searching the hut. Their last chance. Every mattress, every bed frame, the toilet tank, the floorboards, the walls, the light fixtures. They did it slowly and thoroughly, and got even slower and more thorough as they approached the end of the room and started running out of options.

They found nothing.

Peterson said, ‘We could get a locksmith, maybe from Pierre.’

Reacher said, ‘A bank robber would be better. A safe cracker. Maybe they’ve got one up at the prison.’

‘I can’t believe they never used the place. It must have cost a fortune.’

‘The defence budget was practically unlimited back then.’

‘I can’t believe they couldn’t find an alternative use for it.’

‘The design was compromised somehow.’

‘Even so. Somebody could have used it.’

‘Too landlocked for the navy. We’re close to the geographic centre of the United States. Or so they said on the bus tour.’

‘The Marines could have used it for winter training.’

‘Not with South in the name of the state. Too chicken. The Marines would have insisted on North Dakota. Or the North Pole.’

‘Maybe they didn’t want to sleep underground.’

‘Marines sleep where they’re told. And when.’

‘Actually I heard they do their winter training near San Diego.’

‘I was in the army,’ Reacher said. ‘Marine training makes no sense to me.’

They braved the cold again and took a last look at the stone building and its stubborn door. Then they walked back to the car and climbed in and drove away. Two miles along the runway, where battered planes were to have spilled ragged children. Then eight miles on the old two-lane, up which no adult would have come to the rescue. The Cold War. A bad time. In retrospect, probably less dangerous than people imagined. Some Soviet missiles were mere fictions, some were painted tree trunks, some were faulty. And the Soviets had psychologists too, preparing reports in the Cyrillic alphabet about seven-year-olds of their own, and about tribalism and fighting and killing and cannibalism. But at the time things had seemed very real. Reacher had been two years old at the time of the Cuban missile crisis. In the Pacific. He had known nothing about it. But later his mother had told him how she and his father had calculated the southern drift of the poisoned wind. Two weeks, they thought. There were guns in the house. And on the base there were corpsmen with pills.

Reacher asked, ‘How accurate are your weather reports?’

Peterson said, ‘Usually pretty good.’

‘They’re calling for snow again tomorrow.’

‘That sounds about right.’

‘Then someone’s going to show up soon. They didn’t plough that runway for nothing.’

Far to the east and a little to the south a plane was landing on another long runway, at Andrews Air Force Base in the state of Maryland. Not a large plane. A business jet, leased by the army, assigned to an MP prisoner escort company. It was carrying six people. A pilot, a copilot, three prisoner escorts, and a prisoner. The prisoner was the Fourth Infantry captain from Fort Hood. He was

prisoner. The prisoner was the Fourth Infantry captain from Fort Hood. He was in civilian clothes and was hobbled by standard restraint chains around his wrists and waist and ankles, all interconnected. The plane taxied and the steps were lowered and the prisoner was hustled down them to a car parked on the apron. He was put in the back seat. Waiting for him there was a woman officer in a Class A army uniform. An MP major. She was a little above average height. She was slender. She had long dark hair tied back. Tanned skin, deep brown eyes. She had intelligence and authority and youth and mischief in her face, all at the same time. She was wearing ribbons for a Silver Star and two Purple Hearts.

There was no driver in the front of the car.

The woman said, ‘Good afternoon, captain.’

The captain didn’t speak.

The woman said, ‘My name is Susan Turner. My rank is major, and I command the 110th MP, and I’m handling your case. You and I are going to talk for a minute, and then you’re going to get back on the plane, and you’re either going to head back to Texas, or straight over to Fort Leavenworth. One or the other. You understand?’

Her voice was warm. It was a little husky, a little breathy, a little intimate. All in her throat. It was the kind of voice that could tease out all kinds of confidences.

The infantry captain knew it.

He said, ‘I want a lawyer.’

Susan Turner nodded.

‘You’ll get one,’ she said. ‘You’ll get plenty. Believe me, before long you’re going to be completely up to your ass in lawyers. It’s going to be like you wandered into a Bar Association convention with a hundred dollar bill tied around your neck.’

‘You can’t talk to me without a lawyer.’

‘That’s not quite accurate. You don’t have to say anything to me without a lawyer. I can talk to you all I want. See the difference?’

The guy said nothing.

The guy said nothing.

‘I have some bad news,’ Susan Turner said. ‘You’re going to die. You know that, right? You are completely busted. You are more busted than the most busted person who ever lived. There’s no way anyone can save you. That’s exactly what you’re going to hear from the lawyers. No matter how many you get. They’re all going to say the same thing. You’re going to be executed, and probably very soon. I won’t give you false hope. You’re a dead man walking.’

The guy said nothing.

Turner said, ‘Actually you’re a dead man sitting, at this point. Sitting in a car, and listening to me. Which you should do, because you’ve got two very important choices coming up. The second is what you eat for your last meal. Steak and ice cream are the most popular picks. I don’t know why. Not that I give a shit about dietary issues. It’s your first choice I’m interested in. Want to guess what that is?’

The guy said nothing.

‘Your first choice is what you go down for. Either Texas will kill you for killing your wife, or Leavenworth will kill you for betraying your country. I’ll be frank with you, in my opinion neither one does you much credit. But the Texas issue, maybe people will understand it a little bit. Combat stress, multiple tours of duty, all that kind of thing. All that post-traumatic stuff. Some people might even call you a kind of victim.’

The guy said nothing.

Turner said, ‘But the treason issue, that’s different. There’s no excuse for that. Your mom and your dad, they’re going to have to sell their house and move. Maybe change their name. Maybe they won’t be able to sell, and they’ll just hang themselves in the basement.’

The guy said nothing.

Turner said, ‘Not much ceiling height in a basement. It’ll be slow. Like strangulation. Maybe they’ll hold hands.’

The guy said nothing.

Turner moved in her seat. Long legs, sheathed in dark nylon. ‘And think about your kid brother. All those years of looking up to you? All gone. He’ll have to leave the navy. Who would trust him on their team? The brother of a traitor? That’s a life sentence for him, too. He’ll end up working construction. He’ll drink. He’ll curse your rotten name every day of his life. Maybe he’ll kill himself too. Gunshot, probably. In the mouth or behind the ear.’

The guy said nothing.

Turner said, ‘So here’s the deal. Talk to me now, answer all my questions, full and complete disclosure, all the details, and we’ll keep the treason absolutely private.’

The guy said nothing.

Turner said, ‘But if you don’t talk to me, we’ll do the investigation in public. Right out in the open. We’ll tell CNN where your folks live, and we’ll call the navy about your brother. Not the officers. We’ll call his buddies first.’

Silence for a long moment.

Then the guy said, ‘OK.’

‘OK what?’

‘OK, I’ll talk to you.’

‘OK you’ll talk to me what?’

‘OK, I’ll talk to you, ma’am.’

Turner rolled her window down. She called out, ‘Tell the pilot to go get his dinner.’

Plato put the phone down on his pilot. The guy had called to say the weather in the north was due to take a turn for the worse at some point within the next twenty-four hours. More snow. Which Plato already knew. He had satellite television. He had a huge mesh dish bolted to a concrete pad right next to his house. The dish was connected to a box, and the box was connected to an enormous Sony LCD screen on the end wall of the living room. It was tuned to the Weather Channel.

the Weather Channel.

The Sony screen was not the only thing on the end wall. There were eighteen oil paintings next to it, all jostling for space. There were forty-three more on the two long walls. Twenty on the other end wall. A total of eighty-one works of art. Mostly second-rate pieces by fourth-rate painters. Or third-rate pieces by third-rate painters. Or fourth-rate pieces by second-rate painters. One was a Monet, supposedly, but Plato knew it had to be a forgery. Monet was a prolific artist. Widely distributed, often copied. Someone had once said that of the two thousand pictures Monet had painted in his lifetime, six thousand were in the United States alone. Plato wasn't a fool. He knew what he had. And he knew why he had it. He didn't much care for art. Not his thing. Each canvas was a souvenir, that was all, of a ruined life.

In the spaces between the paintings he had nailed small inverted horseshoe-shaped arrays of thin brass pins. Dozens of them, maybe even hundreds. He hadn't counted for a long time. Over each array was draped as many necklaces or bracelets as would fit. He had diamonds, emeralds, rubies, and sapphires. Gold chains, silver chains, platinum chains. He had earrings hung from single pins. He had finger rings looped over single pins. Wedding bands, engagement rings, signet rings, class rings, big diamond solitaires.

Hundreds and hundreds of them.

Maybe even thousands.

It was all a question of time.

It was a subject that interested him. It was dominated by class. How long could people last, after running out of cash, before they had to start selling their bodies? How many layers did people have, between defeat and surrender, between problem and ruin? For poor people, really no time at all, and no layers at all. They needed his product, so as soon as their meagre paycheques ran out, which was usually payday itself, they would start fighting and stealing and cheating, and then they would take to the streets, and they would do whatever it was they had to do. He got nothing but money from them.

Rich people were different. Bigger paycheques, which lasted longer, but not for ever. Then would start the slow depletion of savings accounts, stocks, bonds, investments of all kinds. Then desperate hands would root through drawers and jewellery boxes. First would come forgotten pieces, pieces that were not liked,

jewellery boxes. That would come forgotten pieces, pieces that were not listed, pieces that had been inherited. Those items would find their way to him after long slow journeys, from nice suburbs in Chicago and Minneapolis and Milwaukee and Des Moines and Indianapolis. They would be followed by paintings snatched from walls, rings pulled from fingers, chains unlatched from necks. A second wave would follow, as parents were looted, then a third, as grandparents were visited. When nothing was left, the rich people would succumb, too. Maybe at first in hotels, fooling themselves, but always eventually out on the street, in the cold, kneeling in filthy alleyways, men and women alike, doing what needed to be done.

All a matter of time.

Holland parked in the lot and headed for his office. Peterson and Reacher headed for the squad room. It was deserted, as usual. No messages on the back corner desk, nothing in voice mail. Reacher picked up the phone and then put it back. He tapped the space bar on the keyboard and the computer screen lit up and showed a graphic of a police shield that had Bolton Police Department written across it. The graphic was large and a little ragged. A little digital. A tower unit a yard away was humming and whirring and chattering. A hard drive, getting up to speed.

Reacher asked, ‘Have you got databases in here?’

Peterson asked, ‘Why?’

‘We could check on Plato. He seems to be the prime mover here, whoever he is.’

Peterson sat down at the next desk along and tapped his own keyboard. Clicked here, clicked there, typed a password. Then some kind of dialogue box must have come up, because Reacher saw him use his left forefinger on the shift key, his right forefinger on a capital P, then on a lower case l, then an a, a t, and an o.

Plato.

‘Nothing,’ Peterson said. ‘Just a redirect to Google, who says he’s a Greek philosopher.’

‘Got a list of known aliases?’

Peterson typed some more. Nine keystrokes. Presumably aka, then a space, then

Plato.

‘South American,’ he said. ‘Citizenship unknown. Real name unknown. Age unknown. Believed to live in Mexico. Believed to own pawn shops in five United States cities, suspected narcotics trafficker, suspected involvement in prostitution.’

‘Nice guy.’

‘No arrest record. Nothing in Mexico, either.’

‘Is that it?’

‘The federal databases will have more. But I can’t access them.’

Reacher picked up the phone again, and then put it back. Rock Creek had more on its plate than his trivial business. He wondered if he was becoming an embarrassment. Or a bore. Like the grizzled old noncoms who still lived close to army posts and sat in grunt bars all night, full of piss and wind and out-of-date bullshit and nonsense. Or like retired city cops, the ones who hadn’t saved enough to move south, still patronizing the same old saloons and butting in on every conversation.

Peterson said, ‘We could go up to the prison. It’s in the federal system. They’ve got computers. I know some of the guys there.’

Five minutes to five in the afternoon.

Eleven hours to go.

TWENTY-EIGHT

THE PRISON WAS FIVE MILES DUE NORTH, AT THE END OF A continuation of the same road that led up to town from the highway. The road was straight, as if a planner had laid a ruler on a map. It was ploughed and salted and pretty much clear from constant use. Visiting day. The shuttle buses had been busy.

The five miles took eight minutes. For the first seven Reacher saw nothing ahead except a late gloomy sky and ice in the air. Then he saw the prison. There was a diffuse glow on the far horizon that resolved itself into hundreds of separate puffballs of blue-white light high above a glittering razor-wire fence. The fence was long and maybe twelve feet tall. Maybe twelve feet thick. It had inner and outer screens of taut wire. The space in between was piled high with loose coils. More loose coils were fixed along the top. They were moving and swaying in the wind, flashing and winking in the light. The light came from stadium fixtures on tall poles set every thirty feet. Huge upside-down metal bowls in groups of four, with powerful bulbs in them. There were watchtowers set every hundred feet, tall splay-legged structures with lit-up glassed-in cabins and outside walkways. There were searchlights on the walkways. The lights on the poles were blazing, and their glow came back up off the undisturbed snow seemingly twice as bright. Behind the fence was a three-hundred-yard expanse of lit-up snow-covered yard, and then huddled in the centre of the giant rectangle was a cluster of new concrete buildings. They covered an area the size of a large village. Or a small town. The buildings were all lit up, inside and out. They had small mean windows in heavy blank façades, like the portholes in the side of a ship. Their roofs were all covered with snow, like a thick uniform blanket.

‘The gift horse,’ Peterson said. ‘The cash cow.’

‘Impressive,’ Reacher said.

And it was. As a whole the place was huge. Many hundreds of acres. The vast pool of bright light set against the prairie darkness made it look like an alien spacecraft, just hovering there, unsure whether to land or to whisk away again to a more hospitable location.

At its far end the road broadened out into a wide square plaza in front of the

main gate. The plaza was lined at its edges with bus benches and trash cans. Peterson drove straight through it. The gate was really a tunnel, walled and roofed with wire, tall enough for prison buses, wide enough to form two separated lanes, one in, one out. Each lane had three gates forming two pens. Peterson drove into the first and was momentarily locked in, a closed gate behind him, a closed gate ahead. A guard in cold-weather gear came out of a door, looked them over, stepped back inside, and the gate ahead opened. Peterson rolled forward thirty feet. The whole procedure was repeated. Then the last gate opened and Peterson drove out and headed for the buildings on a thoroughfare that was both rutted by vehicles and beaten flat by footsteps. Clearly the shuttle buses discharged their passengers outside the gate. Reacher pictured the woman and the child he had seen at the coffee shop, wrapped in their borrowed motel comforters, trudging through the snow, trudging back.

Peterson parked as close to the visitor door as he could get. Behind the door was an empty lobby, sad and institutional, with wet linoleum on the floor and mint green paint on the walls and fluorescent tubes on the ceiling. There was an idle X-ray belt and a metal detector hoop and three prison guards standing around and not doing much of anything. Peterson knew them. They knew him. A minute later he and Reacher had been hustled through a side door into a ready room. New construction, but it was already a little trashed and battered. It was hot. It smelled of old coffee, and new sweat, and wet wool coats, and cheap polyester uniforms. There were five low chairs in it, and a desk with a computer on it. A guard fired it up and typed in a password and then left the room.

‘Federal prison, federal databases,’ Peterson said. Those databases were evidently a little unfamiliar to him, because it took a whole lot of pointing and clicking and typing before he got anywhere. A whole lot of pursed lips and sudden inhalations and exhalations. But eventually he took his hands off the keyboard and sat back to read.

‘Same stuff at first,’ he said. ‘South American, exact origins unknown, real identity unknown, exact age unknown but believed to be in his forties, believed to live in Mexico, pawn shops in Chicago, Minneapolis, Milwaukee, Des Moines and Indianapolis, suspected dope in the same five cities, suspected prostitution in the same five cities.’

Reacher asked, ‘Anything new?’

‘We didn’t have the names of those cities before.’

‘Apart from that.’

‘Nothing proven. There’s a standard warning about how tough he is. He made it to the top tier, and you don’t do that by being a choirboy. They figure he must have killed hundreds of people. That seems to be an entry-level requirement. Des Moines doesn’t impress anybody, but Chicago surely does. He’s not an amateur.’

Then Peterson started clicking and scrolling again. More pursed lips, more deliberate breathing. He said, ‘The guy owns his own plane.’

‘So do plenty of people.’

‘It’s a Boeing 737. A regular airliner, converted for private use. Supposedly purchased from a bankrupt Mexican airline.’

Reacher said nothing.

Peterson clicked and scrolled.

‘He’s very small,’ he said. ‘Four feet eleven inches.’

‘Really?’

‘What are you?’

‘Six feet five.’

‘You’ve got eighteen inches on him. That’s a foot and a half.’

Reacher said, ‘He’s practically a midget.’

Peterson said, ‘Someone else once called him a midget, and woke up in the hospital with his legs cut off.’

Susan Turner made it back to her office in Rock Creek after a long slow drive through rush hour traffic. She parked in her reserved space and went in through the front door and up the stone stairs. The handrail was still metal. The second-floor corridor was still narrow. The floor was still linoleum. There were still lines of doors left and right, with fluted glass windows in them, with offices behind each one. All unchanged, she thought, since Reacher’s day. Repainted,

possibly, but not fundamentally altered. Each office was still equipped according to the current DoD protocol. Hers had the famous metal desk, three phones with a total of thirty lines, an ergonomic task chair on casters, file cabinets, and two visitor chairs with springy bent-tube legs. Her light shade was made of glass and shaped like a bowl and was hung from the ceiling on three metal chains. It was fitted with an energy-saving bulb. She had a desktop computer with a fast and secure government intranet connection. She had a laptop wirelessly connected to a separate network. She had an up-to-date map of the world on the wall.

She sat down. No messages. Nothing from the air force. Reacher hadn't called again. She plugged her digital voice recorder into her USB hub. Her conversation with her prisoner uploaded to an audio file. Voice recognition software would turn it into a written document. Both new files would be forwarded to the proper destinations. Arrests would be made in Texas and Florida and New York City. A unit citation would follow, plus a Bronze Star recommendation for herself, like night follows day.

Reacher had won a Bronze Star, way back when. She knew that, because she had his personal file on her desk. It was a thick old thing, straining against a furred cardboard jacket. She had been through it many times. Jack-none-Reacher, born October 29th. A military family, but not a legacy career, because his father had been a Marine. His mother had been French. He had graduated West Point. He had served thirteen years. He had been an MP from the start, which as far as Susan was concerned put him on the side of the angels, but even so he had been in and out of trouble the whole time. He had said what needed to be said, and he hadn't cared who he said it to. He had done what needed to be done, and he hadn't cared who he did it to. He had cut corners, and cut heads. He had been busted back to captain for busting a civilian's leg. Demotion was always a coded message. Time to move on, buddy. But he had stayed in. He had stayed in and battled back to major again. Which had to be the biggest comeback of all time. Then he had led the 110th. Its first CO. Its founder, in effect.

Her predecessor, but no kind of role model.

Yet at intervals through his thirteen years he had won a Silver Star, the Defense Superior Service Medal, the Legion of Merit, a Soldier's Medal, a Purple Heart, and the Bronze Star. Clearly he had talent to burn. Which meant that with a more corporate attitude and an army father and an American mother, he could have been Chief of Staff by now.

A bizarre career.

The Silver Star and the Purple Heart came from Beirut. Reacher had been an army liaison officer serving with the Marine Corps at the time of the barracks bombing. He had been badly wounded in the attack, and then heroic in the immediate aftermath. All the other medal citations were redacted, which meant they involved secrets.

He had been hospitalized in Beirut and then airlifted to Germany for convalescence. His medical summary was in the file. He was a healthy person. The wound had healed fast and completely. It had left what the army called a disfiguring scar, which implied a real mess. He was six feet five inches tall and at the time of the report from Germany had weighed two hundred and forty pounds. No internal weaknesses had been detected. His eyesight was rated excellent.

He had many formal qualifications. He was rated expert on all small arms. He had won an inter-service thousand-yard rifle competition with a record score. Anecdotally his fitness reports rated him well above average in the classroom, excellent in the field, fluently bilingual in English and French, passable in Spanish, outstanding on all man-portable weaponry, and beyond outstanding at hand-to-hand combat. Susan knew what that last rating meant. Like having a running chainsaw thrown at you.

A hard man, but intelligent.

His photograph was stapled to the inside cover of the file. It was a colour picture, a little faded by the intervening years. His hair was short and unruly. He had bright blue eyes, a little hooded. His gaze was direct and unflinching. He had two noticeable scars. One was at the corner of his left eye. The other was on his upper lip. His face looked like it had been chipped out of rock by a sculptor who had ability but not much time. All flat hard planes. He had a neck. Thick, for sure, but it was there. His shoulders were broad. His arms were long, and his hands were large.

His mouth was set in a wry smile that was halfway between patient and exasperated. Like he knew he had to get his picture taken, but like he had just gotten through telling the photographer the guy had three more seconds before his camera got rammed down his throat.

Jack-none-Reacher.

Altogether Susan felt that he would be interesting to know, possibly rewarding as a friend, certainly dangerous as an enemy.

She picked up her phone and dialled her guy in the air force. Asked him if there was news. There wasn't. She asked when it would come through. Her guy said soon. She said soon wasn't soon enough.

Her guy said, 'Trying to impress someone?'

She said, 'No,' and hung up.

The last page of Reacher's file was a standard cross-reference index that listed related mentions in other files. There were seventy-three citations. They were all classified, which was no big deal. Virtually all military paper was classified. The first seventy-two citations were dated at various points during his thirteen years of service and were classified at a level which would make them awkward for her to get hold of. Operational reports, obviously. The seventy-third citation was classified at a lower level, but it was ancient. Dated way back. So far back, in fact, that Jack-none-Reacher would have been just six years old at the time. A little boy. Which was strange. A contemporary report about family issues would be in the Marine Corps archives, not army. Because of his father.

So why was the army holding paper on a six-year-old kid?

She e-mailed the Human Resources Command for a one-time password that would grant her temporary access to the record.

The process for leaving the prison involved all the same moves in reverse, with the addition of a thorough physical inspection of the departing vehicle. Peterson stopped in the first locked cage and two guards came out with flashlights and one checked the trunk and the other checked the back seat. Then they swapped responsibilities and did it all over again. The centre gate opened and Peterson rolled forward into the second cage. A third guard checked their IDs and waved them away.

Peterson asked, 'What do you think?'

Reacher asked, 'About what?'

‘Their security.’

‘Adequate.’

‘Is that all?’

‘That’s all it needs to be.’

‘I think it’s pretty good.’

‘Human nature will get them in the end. They’re only a year or so into it. All it will take is for two guards to get lazy at the same time. Bound to happen sooner or later. It always does.’

‘Pessimist.’

‘Realist.’

Peterson smiled and his car rolled on through the snow towards town.

Seventeen hundred miles south a small convoy of three black Range Rovers rolled through the heat towards Plato’s compound. The trucks were all less than a month old, they all had blacked-out windows, and they were all the Sport model, which was really a rebodied Land Rover LR3 with a supercharged Jaguar engine under the hood. Fine trucks for rough but unchallenging roads, which were what Plato’s part of the Michoacán was all about. Each truck was carrying two men, for a total of six. All of them were local thirty-somethings with twenty years’ experience, all of them were dressed in dark suits, and all of them were heavily armed.

And all of them had worked for Plato before.

Which meant that all of them were a little afraid.

The three cars made the last turn and started the last dusty mile to the gate. All three drivers knew they were already being tracked with binoculars. They had passed the point of no return. They held a steady fifty and maintained a tight formation and then slowed far enough out to be unthreatening. People said Plato’s gatemen had anti-tank missiles. Or rocket-propelled grenades, at the very least. Plus surface-to-air missiles for government helicopters. Maybe true, maybe not, but no one was in the mood to find out for sure.

not, but no one was in the mood to find out for sure.

The three cars stopped well short of the gate and the six men climbed out from behind their black windows and stood still in the early-evening heat. No one approached them. They knew that they were being identified at a distance. Beyond that there would be no intervention. They knew that their good behaviour was guaranteed not by a physical search, but by the fact that they all had sisters and mothers and grandmothers and female cousins all within easy reach. Watching a relative's skin being peeled off her face was not pleasant. Living with her afterwards was worse.

A gasoline engine started and a gear engaged and the gate was driven back. A minute later the last of the cars was inside the compound and the gear reversed and the gate closed again.

Peterson let Reacher out at Janet Salter's house. It was his new default destination, night and day. He crunched up the driveway and the woman cop from the hallway let him in. Janet Salter was in the library, in her usual chair, in a pool of light, reading. The other woman cop was at the window, with her back to the room. Situation normal. All quiet.

Janet Salter held up her book and said, 'I'm reading Sherlock Holmes.'

Reacher said, 'The dog that didn't bark in the night?'

'Exactly.'

'I already thought about that. Your neighbour lives upwind. Doesn't mean no one was here, just because her dog didn't get a sniff.'

'There's a companion volume you should see, in the parlour,' Janet Salter said. She put her book down and got up out of her chair. Reacher followed her to the front room. She closed the door. Didn't show him a book. Instead she asked, 'Are the bikers really gone?'

Reacher said, 'Yes.'

'Are they coming back?'

'I don't think so.'

'So am I safe now?'

‘So am I safe now?’

‘Not really.’

‘Why did Chief Holland let them go?’

‘Small town rules,’ Reacher said.

‘Which now mean that if I go ahead and testify as planned, only one man will, as you put it, get nailed.’

‘That’s true.’

‘Which absolutely wasn’t the deal. The idea was to nail them all. Now they’ll just become some other town’s problem.’

‘And then the next, and the next.’

‘It isn’t right.’

‘It’s how things work.’

‘I mean it isn’t right to put me at so much risk for so little reward.’

‘You want to pull out?’

‘Yes, I think I do.’

Five minutes to six in the evening.

Ten hours to go.

TWENTY-NINE

JANET SALTER SAT DOWN IN A PARLOUR CHAIR. REACHER CHECKED the view from the window. Nothing there. Just the cop in his car, a good one, his head moving left, moving right, checking the mirror.

Reacher said, ‘I think it’s too late to make a practical difference.’

Janet Salter asked, ‘Why?’

‘You could talk to Holland right now, but Holland can’t talk to the prosecutor before tomorrow, and the prosecutor can’t file the papers until maybe the next day, and the news might take another day to filter through. But the bad guys are in a hurry. That place makes money for them. They can’t afford any downtime.’

Janet Salter said, ‘So I’m in, and I can’t get out?’

‘Hang tough,’ Reacher said. ‘You’ll be OK.’

‘I wouldn’t have been OK last night, except for you. And you won’t be here for ever.’

‘I won’t need to be,’ Reacher said. ‘The bad guys won’t wait for ever.’

Janet Salter went to make dinner. She said cooking relaxed her. The night watch cops got up and came downstairs. The house felt safe. Dark and cold outside, bright and warm inside. Pots and pans on the stove top fogged the kitchen windows, so Reacher prowled between the library and the parlour and the hallway. He saw nothing from the windows except snow and ice and moving shadows. The wind was still blowing. Not ideal conditions for careful surveillance, but Reacher felt the situation was acceptable. Seven cops on the case, with himself as backup. Safe enough.

Then the phone rang.

Reacher was in the hallway at the time and Janet Salter called through from the kitchen and asked him to answer it. It was Peterson. He said, ‘I have something I

need you to see.’

‘Where?’

‘At the station, on a computer.’

‘Can you bring it over?’

‘No.’

‘I can’t leave here.’

‘You said we might never hear that siren again. No escapes, no more riots.’

‘An educated guess is still a guess.’

‘I’ll pick you up and bring you straight back.’

‘You can’t promise that. Suppose the siren sounds while I’m over there?’

‘I’ll still bring you back. I swear, on the lives of my children.’

‘You’d get in trouble.’

‘I’ll fight it. And I’ll win.’

‘You should get the department, you know that?’ Reacher said. ‘The sooner the better.’

Peterson arrived five minutes later. He spoke to his people and then he found Janet Salter and told her he was borrowing Reacher for a quarter of an hour. He looked her in the eye and promised her that none of his officers would leave the house until Reacher was back. She was uneasy, but she seemed to believe him. Reacher put his coat on and climbed into Peterson’s car and five minutes after that he was back in the squad room.

Peterson sat down at a desk with a computer and started pointing and clicking and pursing his lips and inhaling and exhaling. He came up with a blank grey square in the middle of the screen. The square had a play arrow laid over its centre portion.

‘Surveillance video,’ Peterson said. ‘From the prison interview room. It’s digital

‘Surveillance video,’ Peterson said. ‘From the prison interview room. It’s digital. They e-mail it to us.’

‘OK.’

‘It’s the biker and his lawyer. Earlier this afternoon. We never cancelled the surveillance. You know why?’

‘Why?’

‘Inefficiency.’ Peterson moved the mouse and clicked on the play arrow. The grey square changed to a grainy colour picture of the interview room shot from above. The camera was presumably hidden in a light fixture, on the lawyer’s side of the glass partition. It showed a man in a grey suit sitting forward in his chair with his elbows on the concrete counter and his face a foot from the glass. Opposite him on the other side of the barrier was a guy in an orange jumpsuit. He was tall and solidly built. He had long black hair and a greying beard. His pose mirrored his lawyer’s. Elbows on the counter, face a foot from the glass.

Conspiratorial.

‘Now listen,’ Peterson said.

The lawyer said something in a whisper. Reacher couldn’t hear it.

‘Where’s the mike?’ he asked.

‘In the light with the camera.’ Peterson stabbed a key and the computer beeped the volume all the way up. Then he dragged a red dot backwards a fraction and the segment played again. Reacher craned closer. The audio quality was very poor, but this time the lawyer’s sentence was at least intelligible.

The lawyer had said, ‘You know, the ancient Greeks tell us that a six-hour wait solves all our problems.’

Peterson paused the replay. ‘Ancient Greeks, right? Like ancient Greek philosophers? You said Plato was an ancient Greek philosopher. It’s a code. It’s a message.’

Reacher nodded. ‘When was this?’

‘Two o’clock this afternoon. So a six-hour wait would take us to eight o’clock. It’s six o’clock now. Which gives them two more hours. They’ve already wasted two-thirds of their time.’

Reacher stared at the screen.

‘Play it again,’ he said.

Peterson dragged the red dot back. Hit play. The lawyer’s head, moving forward an inch. The scratchy, whispery sound. The ancient Greeks tell us that a six-hour wait solves all our problems.

Reacher said, ‘I don’t hear it that way. He’s not saying we have a six-hour period during which at some random point all our problems might be solved. I think he’s saying that six hours from then something specific is going to happen in order to solve them.’

‘You think?’

‘Just my opinion.’

‘What kind of thing will happen?’

‘The siren will sound. It’s their only way to get at Mrs Salter.’

‘How can a lawyer make the siren sound?’

‘He can’t. But maybe they can together.’

‘How?’

‘What happens up there at eight o’clock? Are they eating? Feeding time at the zoo is always a good time for a riot.’

‘They eat earlier.’

‘TV time? An argument about CBS or NBC?’

‘You said another riot won’t happen.’

‘Something is going to happen. That lawyer is talking about a future event with a fairly high degree of confidence.’

fairly high degree of confidence.

Peterson went pale. Papery white, under his reddened winter skin.

‘Jesus,’ he said. ‘Eight o’clock is head-count time. They lock them in their cells for the night and check them off. Suppose that guy got out this afternoon and they don’t know it yet? They’re going to be one short. One minute past eight, they’re going to hit the panic button.’

They drove straight back to Janet Salter’s house. Dinner was almost ready. About ten minutes away. Spaghetti and sauce and cheese, with salad in the old wooden bowl. Janet Salter offered to set an extra place for Peterson. Peterson said yes. But nothing more. He just accepted the invitation and then stepped away from the kitchen activity and took Reacher by the elbow and dragged him into the parlour. He said, ‘I’m staying right here when the siren goes off.’

Reacher said, ‘Good.’

‘Two are better than one.’

‘Always.’

‘Are you armed?’

‘Yes. And so is Mrs Salter.’

‘How will their guy arrive?’

‘From the front, in a car. Too cold for anything else.’

‘Anything we can do ahead of time?’

Reacher said, ‘No.’

Peterson said, ‘We could warn the prison, I suppose. If the siren went off right now, their guy might be out of position.’

‘We don’t want him out of position,’ Reacher said. ‘We want him walking up the driveway at two minutes past eight. Exactly when and where we expect him. You said it yourself, we need this thing to be over.’

You said it yourself, we need this thing to be over.

Seventeen hundred miles south Plato came out of his house and found the three idling Range Rovers parked in a neat nose-to-tail line. The six men who had come with them were standing easy in pairs, heads up, sunglasses on, hands clasped behind their backs. Plato looked at them carefully. He knew them. He had used them before. They were solid but unspectacular performers. Competent, but uninspired. Not the best in the world. Second-rate, B-students, adequate. There were a lot of words with which to describe them.

He looked at the trucks. Three of them, all identical. British. Each the cost of a college education. Maybe not Harvard. He counted them from the front, one, two, three. Then from the back, three, two, one. He had to choose. He never occupied the same relative position in a convoy two times in a row. Too predictable. Too dangerous. He wanted a two-in-three chance of surviving the first incoming round, if there was to be one. He figured a second round would miss. The supercharged engines had great acceleration. Better than turbocharged. No lag.

He chose car number three. A double bluff, in a way. Slightly counterintuitive. If number one or number two was blown up, number three might get trapped by the flaming wreckage. He would be expected to expect that. He would be presumed to be in car number one, for that very reason. Which burnished his two-in-three chances a little. Convoys opened up at speed. Rack and pinion steering, fast reactions, number three's driver could swerve with plenty of time to spare.

He inclined his head, towards the third car. One of the men standing next to it stepped up smartly and opened the rear door. Plato climbed in. There was a step. Which was necessary, given his stature. He got settled on the rear seat. Cream leather, piped with black. An armrest on the door to his right, an armrest pulled down in the centre of the bench. Air conditioning, set low. Very comfortable.

The two men climbed into the front. Doors closed, a forward gear was engaged. The convoy moved off. The gate was grinding back as they approached it. They slowed, slipped through, sped up. They cruised through the first dusty mile.

Plato looked at the men in front of him.

Many words to describe them.

The best was: disposable.

Janet Salter's kitchen table was cramped for seven people. Peterson and the four women cops had guns on their hips, which made them wide. Reacher himself was not narrow, elbow to elbow. But perhaps as a consequence the atmosphere was cosy. At first Janet Salter was tense, as were Reacher and Peterson for other reasons. The four women cops were happy to talk. Then Janet Salter began to relax, and Reacher and Peterson took a mutual unspoken decision to save it for when it was going to count. They joined in. Everyone told stories. Janet Salter had attended a small local elementary school, a long time ago. The farm boys had been sewn into their winter underwear in November and not released until March. By January the smell was awful. By February it was unbearable.

Peterson's experience had been different. He was half Janet Salter's age. His school was exactly the same as he saw in all the TV shows he watched. He felt part of America, until he looked at a map. Seven hundred miles from the nearest Major League team. A long way from anywhere. Something timid in his head had told him he would never leave. He confessed it quite openly.

Two of the women cops were from North Dakota. They had come south for jobs. And for warmer weather, one said with a smile. Their educations had been similar to Peterson's. Reacher didn't say much. But he knew what they were talking about. Lockers, the gym, the principal's office. He had been to seven elementary schools, all of them overseas on foreign bases, but all of them imported direct from the U.S. as standardized kits of parts. Outside he had been in the steamy heat of Manila or Leyte, or the damp cold of Germany or Belgium, but inside he could have been in North Dakota or South Dakota or Maine or Florida. At times he had been twelve thousand miles from the nearest Major League team. Something in his head had told him he would never stay still.

They had fruit for dessert and coffee and then they cleared the table and washed the dishes, all of them together, part professional, part collegial. Then the day watch women went off duty, and went upstairs. The night watch women headed for the hallway and the library. Janet Salter picked up her book. Reacher and Peterson went to the parlour to wait.

Five minutes to seven in the evening.

Nine hours to go.

THIRTY

PETERSON KEPT CHECKING HIS WATCH. REACHER KEPT TIME IN his head. Seven o'clock. Five past. Ten past. A quarter past. No activity on the street. The view out from under the lip of the porch stayed the same. Snow, ice, wind, Peterson's parked car, the lookout police cruiser, its vigilant driver. Peterson took the Glock out of his holster and checked it over and put it back. Reacher had the Smith & Wesson in his trouser pocket. He didn't need to check it was there. He could feel its weight.

Peterson was at the window. Reacher sat down, in Janet Salter's chair. He was thinking about the runway, and the old stone building, and the wooden huts.

The first wooden hut, in particular.

He asked, 'Does Kim have a sister?'

Peterson said, 'No.'

'A niece or a cousin?'

'No nieces. Some cousins. Why?'

'That girl I saw in the hut, sitting on the bed. She looked familiar. At first I thought I had seen her before. But I don't see how. So now I'm trying to pin it down. Either she was just a local type, or she looks like someone else I saw.'

'There's no real local type here.'

'You think? You and Chief Holland look the same.'

'He's older.'

'Apart from that.'

'A little, maybe. But there's no local type.'

'Then that girl looked like someone I saw. On my first night here, I think. And the only woman I saw on my first night here was Kim.'

‘And the old ladies on the bus.’

‘No resemblance.’

‘The waitress in the restaurant?’

‘Not her.’

‘Kim doesn’t have sisters. Or nieces. And I think all her cousins are boys.’

‘OK,’ Reacher said.

‘Maybe you saw a guy. Brothers and sisters can look alike. Lowell has a sister who looks just like him. Remember him? The officer you met?’

‘Tough on her,’ Reacher said.

‘What did this mystery girl look like anyway?’

‘Tall and thin and blond.’

‘We’re all tall and thin and blond.’

‘My point exactly.’

‘But you can tell us apart.’

Reacher said, ‘If I concentrate.’

Peterson smiled briefly and turned back to the window. Reacher joined him there. Twenty past seven. All quiet.

Far to the east and a little to the south Susan Turner dialled her phone again. Her guy in the air force answered on the first ring. He said he had been about to pick up the phone and call her himself. Because he had news. The relevant file had just come through.

‘So what’s down there under the ground?’ Susan asked.

He told her. ‘That’s vague,’ she said. ‘Is there any way you can get more detail?’

‘You told me this was private and off the record.’

You told me this was private and off the record.

‘It is.’

‘You sound like your next promotion depends on it.’

‘I’m trying to help someone, that’s all. And vagueness won’t do it.’

‘Who are you trying to help?’

Susan Turner paused.

‘A friend,’ she said.

‘How good of a friend?’

‘I don’t know yet.’

‘How good do you want him to be?’

‘Good enough to be worth checking some more.’

Her guy said, ‘OK, I’ll check some more. I’ll get back to you.’

At seven thirty Janet Salter started moving around. Reacher heard her in the hallway. He heard the cop on the bottom stair say that dinner had been great. He heard Janet Salter reply politely. Then she came into the parlour. Reacher wanted to put her in the basement, but he decided to wait until the siren sounded. That would be the time she would be most likely to comply, he thought, when she heard that banshee wail again.

She asked, ‘What is about to happen?’

Peterson asked, ‘Why do you think something is about to happen?’

‘Because you’re here, Mr Peterson, instead of being home with Mrs Peterson and your children. And because Mr Reacher has gone even quieter than usual.’

Peterson said, ‘Nothing is going to happen.’

Reacher said, ‘There’s an eight o’clock head count up at the jail. We think they’re going to come out one short. They’re going to hit the panic button.’

‘At eight o’clock?’

‘Maybe one minute past.’

‘An escape?’

Peterson said, ‘We think it might have already happened. They’ll find out when they count heads.’

‘I see.’

‘I won’t leave,’ Peterson said.

‘I’m grateful for your concern. But I shall make you leave. You’re our next chief of police. For the town’s sake, nothing must stand in the way of that.’

‘That’s crazy.’

‘No, it’s how good decisions are made. One must take oneself out of the equation.’

‘I can’t do it.’

‘A deal is a deal, even if Chief Holland didn’t stick to his with me.’

‘I won’t go.’

‘You will.’

The United States Air Force Security Forces were headquartered at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas. They had no direct equivalent of the army’s MP Corps 110th Special Unit. The closest they came was the Phoenix Raven programme, which was an integrated set of specialized teams. One of those teams was led by a guy who had just gotten off the phone with Susan Turner in Virginia, and gotten back on the phone with a file clerk a thousand miles away in a records depository.

The clerk said, ‘What I gave you is all I have.’

‘Too vague.’

‘It is what it is.’

‘There has got to be more.’

‘There isn’t.’

‘How hard have you looked?’

‘Staring at a piece of paper won’t make words appear on it.’

‘Where did the delivery originate?’

‘You want me to trace one particular cargo flight from fifty years ago?’

‘Can you?’

‘Not a hope. I’m sorry, major. But we’re talking ancient history here. You might as well ask me what Neanderthal Man had for lunch a million years ago last Thursday.’

By ten to eight Janet Salter’s house had gone absolutely silent. Some kind of drumbeat of dread had passed between one inhabitant and the next. The cop in the hallway had gotten up off the bottom stair and was standing behind the door. The cop in the library had stepped closer to the window. Peterson was watching the street. Janet Salter was straightening books on the parlour shelves. She was butting their spines into line. Small, nervous, exact movements with the knuckles of her right hand.

Reacher was lounging in a chair. Eyes closed. Nothing could happen before the siren sounded.

The clock ticked on.

Five to eight in the evening.

Eight hours to go.

THIRTY-ONE

THE CLOCK IN REACHER'S HEAD HIT EIGHT EXACTLY. NOTHING happened. The world outside stayed icy and quiet. Nothing to hear except the sound of the wind, and the brush and rattle of frozen evergreens, and the creaking and stirring of tree limbs, and the primeval tectonic shudders as the earth itself got colder.

One minute past eight.

Nothing happened.

Two minutes past eight.

Nothing happened.

No sound.

No siren.

No one came.

Peterson glanced at Reacher. Reacher shrugged. Janet Salter looked out the window. No action on the street. The cop in the hallway moved. Reacher heard the boards creak under her feet.

Three minutes past eight.

Nothing happened.

Four minutes past.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

Nothing happened.

No sound, no siren.

Nothing at all.

At a quarter past eight they gave it up and stopped worrying. Peterson was certain the head count could not have been delayed. Prisons ran on strict routines. If the cells weren't locked for the night at eight exactly, there would be entries to be made in operational logs, and reports to be filed in triplicate, and supervisors called upon to explain. Way too much trouble for any reason short of a riot in progress, and if a riot was in progress the siren would have sounded anyway. Therefore the bid had failed. Or the lawyer had been blowing smoke.

All clear.

'You sure?' Reacher asked.

'Absolutely,' Peterson said.

'So prove it. Put your money where your mouth is.'

'How?'

'Go home.'

And Peterson did. He spun it out until twenty past, and then he put his coat on and crunched down the driveway and climbed in his car and drove away. Janet Salter stopped straightening books and started reading one instead. The cop in the hallway went back to her perch on the bottom stair. The cop in the library stepped back from the glass. Reacher sat in the kitchen and tried to decide whether to disturb Janet Salter by asking permission, or whether just to go ahead and make more coffee himself. He knew how to work a percolator. His mother had had one, even though she was French. In the end he went ahead and fired it up unbidden. He listened to it gulp and hiss and when it quieted down he poured himself a mug. He raised it in a mock salute to his reflection in the window and took a sip.

At eight thirty the phone rang in the hallway. The cop got up from the bottom stair and answered it. It was for Reacher. The voice from Virginia. The cop put

two forked fingers under her eyes and then pointed them at the door. You watch the front, and I'll give you some privacy. Reacher nodded and sat down and picked up the phone.

The voice said, 'Forty tons of surplus aircrew requirements left over from World War Two.'

'That's vague.'

'Tell me about it. My guy did his best for me, but that's all he knows.'

'What kind of surpluses did they have after World War Two?'

'Are you kidding? All kinds of things. The atom bomb changed everything. They went from having lots of planes carrying small bombs to a few planes carrying big bombs. They could have had forty spare tons of pilots' underwear alone. Plus they changed from prop planes to jets. They got helmets. It could be forty tons of those old-style leather hats.'

'I wish I had one of those right now.'

'Quit whining.'

'What's the temperature here?'

A pause. 'Minus fourteen degrees.'

'Feels worse.'

'It's going to get worse. The Weather Channel radar looks horrible.'

'Thanks for sharing.'

'Hey, you asked.'

'Hats and underwear?'

'Got to be something to do with a generational change of equipment or a reduced number of aircrew. Or both.'

'Anything on the size or architecture of the place itself?'

‘That stuff disappeared a long time ago.’

‘OK,’ Reacher said. ‘Thanks.’

‘My guy talked. From Fort Hood. Like you said he would.’

‘I’m glad.’

‘I owe you.’

‘No, we’re even.’

‘No, I do. It’s my first major score.’

‘Really? How long have you been in the job?’

‘Two weeks.’

‘I had no idea. You sound like you’ve been there for ever.’

‘I’m not sure that’s a compliment.’

‘It was meant as one,’ Reacher said. ‘Then I thank you.’

‘You should be out celebrating.’

‘I sent my people out.’

‘Good move. Give them all the credit. They’ll appreciate it, but the brass will always know who really did the work. You’ll win both ways around.’

‘Is that how you did it?’

‘Always. I made out that I did nothing much. A lot of the time that was true, of course.’

‘Not what your file suggests.’

‘You still looking at that old thing?’

‘It’s a saga.’

‘Not fair. This is a very asymmetrical relationship in terms of information.’

‘Dude, life sucks.’

‘What did you just call me?’

‘I was trying to sound blond and Californian.’

‘I see.’

‘Do you?’

‘You’re not blond or Californian.’

‘Is that OK?’

‘Brunette could work for me. Brown eyes?’

‘You got it.’

‘Long hair, right?’

‘Longer than it should be.’

‘Excellent.’

‘You want to revisit the A-cup thing too?’

‘Got to be honest. I’m just not hearing it.’

She laughed. ‘OK, I confess. You’re right.’

‘Height?’

‘Five feet seven.’

‘Pale or dark?’

‘Neither, really. But I tan well.’

‘You want to see South Dakota in the winter?’

She laughed again. ‘I prefer the beach.’

‘Me too. Where are you from?’

‘Montana. A small town you never heard of.’

‘Try me. I’ve been to Montana.’

‘Hungry Horse?’

‘Never heard of it.’

‘Told you,’ she said. ‘It’s near Whitefish.’

‘You like the army?’

‘Did you?’

‘You’ve got my file,’ Reacher said.

‘And half the time I’m thinking, man, if you hated it that bad, you should have just gotten out while the getting was good.’

‘I never hated it. Not for a minute. I just wanted to fix what was wrong with it.’

‘Above your pay grade.’

‘I learned that, eventually.’ Reacher looked around the hallway. The closed door, the dark panelling, the oil paintings, the Persian carpet. The rare woods, the wax, the polish, the patina. He had all the information he was ever going to get from or through the 110th. No real reason to keep on talking.

The voice asked, ‘What are you doing in South Dakota anyway?’

He said, ‘I was on a bus that crashed. I got hung up here.’

‘Life is a gamble.’

‘But the deck is stacked. No bus that I was on ever crashed in a warm place.’

‘You behaving yourself up there?’

‘Why wouldn’t I be?’

‘These files get tagged if an outside agency asks to take a look. You know, the FBI or a local police department or something. And yours is tagged to hell and back. Folks have been all over you for the last twelve years.’

‘Anything from here in the last two days?’

‘A transcript went out to someone called Thomas Holland at the Bolton PD.’

‘The Chief of Police. Probably routine. He wanted to know I was qualified, because he wanted my help. Back when he thought the stone building was an army place. Any follow-up?’

‘No.’

‘That’s because I’m behaving myself.’

A long pause.

Time to go.

He asked, ‘What’s your name?’

‘Does it matter?’

‘I could find out. The way the army is now, you’re probably on a web site somewhere.’

‘Are you kidding? The 110th? No way. We don’t exist.’

‘So what’s your name?’

‘Susan.’

‘Nice name.’

‘I think so too.’

Another long pause.

Time to go.

Time to go.

He asked, ‘Is your air force guy at Lackland?’

‘Yes. Talking to their records guys in Colorado.’

‘Ask him to try one more time. Obviously that stuff was flown in. There has to be a cargo manifest somewhere.’

‘I’ll try.’

‘Call me back?’ he asked.

‘You bet,’ she said.

Reacher went back to the kitchen and took another cup of coffee. The house was quiet. No significant sound from the outside. No significant sound from the inside either, except for the subliminal vibe of calm alert people concentrating hard on the business at hand. It was the kind of silence Reacher had heard a hundred times before. He carried his mug to the parlour and found Janet Salter reading there. She looked up from her book and said, ‘You’re drinking coffee.’

Reacher said, ‘I hope you don’t mind.’

‘Not at all. But doesn’t it keep you awake?’

He nodded. ‘Until I want to go to sleep.’

‘How was she?’

‘Who?’

‘The woman in Virginia.’

‘She was fine.’ Reacher stepped to the window and took a look at the street. Snow, ice, the parked cruiser, frozen foliage moving stiffly in the wind. A little moonlight, a little high cloud, a distant orange glow from vapour lamps on the streets to the north and the east. He said, ‘All quiet.’

Janet Salter asked, ‘Do you think the state penitentiary and the federal prison have the same lock-down time as the county jail?’

‘I imagine so.’

‘Then we’re safe for a spell, aren’t we? Heads have been counted and there’s no opportunity for mass disturbance until the morning.’

‘In principle.’

‘But?’

‘Hope for the best, plan for the worst.’

‘Is that your motto?’

‘One of many.’

‘What are the others?’

‘Never forgive, never forget. Do it once and do it right. You reap what you sow. Plans go to hell as soon as the first shot is fired. Protect and serve. Never off duty.’

‘You’re as hard on yourself as you are on others.’

‘Cruel but fair.’

‘I can’t stand this kind of tension much longer.’

‘I hope you won’t have to.’

‘For the first time in my life I’m afraid. It’s a very elemental thing, isn’t it?’

‘It’s a choice,’ Reacher said. ‘That’s all.’

‘Surely everyone’s afraid of death.’

‘That was another motto. I’m not afraid of death. Death’s afraid of me.’

‘You sound like you were trying to convince yourself.’

‘We were. All the time. Believe me.’

‘So you are afraid of death.’

‘So you are afraid of death.’

‘We all have to go sometime. Depends what form it takes, I guess.’

Janet Salter went quiet for a moment. Then she said, ‘I met my successor at Yale two years ago. At a library conference. It was an interesting experience. I imagine you feel the same way, talking to the woman in Virginia.’

‘She isn’t my successor. Not directly. There could have been six or seven other people in between me and her. Maybe more. It’s a distant connection. Almost archaeological.’

‘Is she better than you?’

‘Probably.’

‘That’s how I felt, too. At first I was depressed about it. Then I realized actually I should feel encouraged about it. Progress is being maintained. The world is still moving forward.’

‘How long have you been retired?’

‘A little more than ten years.’

‘So you got back here before the prison was built.’

‘Years before. It was a different town then. But not too different, I suppose. The real change is still to come. We’re still in a transitional phase. The real change will come when we get used to it. At the moment we’re a town with a prison in it. Soon we’ll be a prison town.’

‘So what was it like?’

‘Gentle,’ Janet Salter said. ‘Quiet. Half the size. No fast food, only one motel. Chief Holland was a young man with a family. Like Andrew Peterson is now. I don’t know why, but that symbolizes the change for me. Everything felt cheerful and young and lighthearted. Not old and tired and bitter, like it is now.’

‘What happened to Holland’s wife?’

‘Cancer. But mercifully quick. Their daughter Liz was fifteen at the time. Which could have been awkward, but she seemed to handle it quite well. She was

could have been awkward, but she seemed to handle it quite well. She was named for her mother. Her mother went by Betty, and she went by Liz. They were very similar in every way. Which could have been awkward for the chief, too, but he got past it. He was already involved in the early stages of planning the prison by then, which took his mind off it.'

'And what was the Lowell divorce all about?'

'I told you, I don't know. But the fact that no one speaks of it invites speculation, doesn't it?'

'His fault or hers?

'Oh, his, I think.'

'Peterson said he has a sister who looks just like him.'

'In a way. Much younger than him. More like a niece.'

'Are you going to stay here, even when it's a prison town?'

'Me? I'm far too old to start over somewhere else. What about you?'

'I couldn't stay here. It's too cold.'

'Eventually you'll want to stay somewhere.'

'Hasn't happened so far.'

'See how you feel thirty years from now.'

'That's a far horizon.'

'It will come faster than you expect.'

Reacher put his empty mug on a low table. He wasn't sure whether to stay in the room or to leave her alone to read. He wasn't sure which she would prefer.

'Sit,' she said. 'I'll have plenty of time to read after all this fuss is over.'

He sat.

She asked, ‘Are you warm enough?’

He said, ‘I’m fine.’ Which he was. The ancient radiator under the window was putting out plenty of heat. The hot water in the pipes was coursing around the house relentlessly. He could hear it. He could hear the occluded right-angle joint at the top of the stairs, hissing a little louder than the others. He pictured the burner in the basement, roaring, and the pump, running hard. Unlimited heat, available around the clock. Much better than the arrangement in Andrew Peterson’s farmhouse. The old iron wood stove, banked and cooling all night, barely warm by morning.

He stared into space for a second.

He said, ‘Stupid.’

Janet Salter asked him, ‘Who or what?’

‘Me.’

‘Why?’

‘I need to make a phone call.’ He got up and stepped out to the hallway. Spoke to the cop sitting on the bottom stair. Said, ‘I need Andrew Peterson’s home number.’

The cop said, ‘I’m not sure I’m at liberty to give it to you.’

‘Then dial it for me. I won’t look.’

She dialled it for him. Checked that she was getting ring tone, and then handed the receiver to him. Kim Peterson answered. Reacher introduced himself and said, ‘I’m very sorry to disturb you, but I need to speak with Andrew.’

‘He just got home.’

‘I know. I’m sorry. But it’s important.’

There was a long delay. Maybe Kim had to go drag Peterson out of his den. But he came on the line eventually.

‘Problem?’ he asked. ‘The opposite,’ Reacher said. ‘I know where the key is.

For the stone building.’

Five to nine in the evening.

Seven hours to go.

THIRTY-TWO

REACHER STAYED ON THE LINE AND PETERSON SPENT A MINUTE talking to himself about what to do next. Like he was thinking out loud. He said, ‘The prison was locked down an hour ago, so the siren is not going to sound. It can’t, really, can it? There’s no opportunity. The guy could come without the siren, I suppose, but in that case we’ll still have plenty of bodies in the way. Four in the house, three on the street. All of them are good people. I made sure of that. So right now it doesn’t really matter whether you’re there or not, does it? You’re superfluous. In a temporary sense. So it’s safe enough for you to come out. Do you agree?’

‘Safe enough,’ Reacher said.

‘I’ll pick you up in ten minutes.’

Reacher went back to the parlour. Janet Salter looked up at him. He told her he was going out, and where, and why. He said, ‘If the cops have to leave, what do you do?’

She said, ‘Lock myself in the basement.’

‘With?’

‘My gun.’

‘When?’

‘Straight away, I suppose.’

‘Correct,’ Reacher said. ‘Straight away, immediately, instantly, no delay at all, before the cops are even out through the door. You lock yourself in, and you stay there until I get back.’

‘With the password.’

‘Correct,’ Reacher said again. ‘And even if the cops don’t actually leave, you go down there if you sense any kind of commotion at all. Any kind of uneasiness, any kind of extra nervousness, any kind of heightened alert, OK?’

‘You think the man might come with the police still in the house?’

‘Hope for the best, plan for the worst. If the cops get a bad feeling, they won’t tell you right away. They won’t want to look stupid afterwards, if it turns out to be nothing. So it’s up to you to figure it out. Trust your gut. Any doubt at all, get the hell down there, fast. A stray bullet can kill you just the same as one that was aimed.’

‘How long will you be gone?’

‘Two hours, maybe.’

‘I’ll be fine.’

‘You will if you do what I say.’

‘I will. I promise. I’ll go down and lock the door and wait for the password.’

Reacher nodded. Said nothing.

Safe enough.

Reacher went out to the hallway and climbed into his giant coat. Checked the pockets for hat and gloves and gun. All present and correct. The telephone rang. The woman from the bottom stair answered it. She handed the receiver to Reacher without a word.

‘Yes?’ he said, expecting Peterson.

The voice from Virginia said, ‘We got a partial cargo manifest.’

‘And?’

‘And I’m going to spend the rest of my life paying off the favour. You know how hard it must have been to find? An irrelevant piece of paper from fifty years ago?’

‘They’ve got clerks, the same as we did. What else have they got to do?’

‘They claim plenty.’

‘Don’t believe them. What’s on the manifest?’

‘Forty tons of war surplus flown in from the old Eighth Air Force bases in the United Kingdom. From the old World War Two bomber fields in East Anglia. They closed a bunch down in the middle fifties. Runways weren’t long enough any more.’

‘Does it specify what kind of surplus?’

‘Yes and no. Generically it says aircrew requirements, and specifically there’s a manufacturer’s name that no one remembers, and a code that no one understands any more.’

‘Not even the Lackland guys?’

‘Not even them. This is ancient history we’re dealing with here.’

‘The way I remember my ancient history, we didn’t bring World War Two surplus back from Europe. We either junked it over there or sold it off over there. Kept the money in the local currencies and used it for Fulbright scholarships. Two birds with one stone. We got rid of a lot of old crap and we spread peace and brotherhood and understanding all at the same time. Through educational exchange.’

‘Those were the days.’

‘What was the code?’

‘N06BA03.’

‘Means nothing to me.’

‘Means nothing to anyone. Could be underwear. Or hats.’

‘We wouldn’t have flown forty tons of underwear or hats all the way back from Europe. No sense in that. Cheaper just to give them away, or burn them.’

‘So maybe it was something we couldn’t give away. Or sell. Or burn. For security reasons. Sidearms, maybe. I think World War Two pilots carried them. In case they were shot down over enemy territory.’

‘What was the manufacturer’s name?’

‘Some outfit called Crown Laboratories.’

‘Say again?’

‘Crown Laboratories.’

Reacher said, ‘Oh, shit.’

‘What?’

‘Forty tons? They have got to be kidding me.’

‘Reacher, what?’

‘I got to go.’

As soon as he saw the leading edge of Peterson’s headlight beams on the street he stepped out the door and crossed the porch and hustled down the driveway. The cold hit him like a hammer. Peterson’s tyres crunched and crackled over the frozen snow. The car pulled up and Reacher climbed in. The heater was blowing lukewarm air. Reacher kept his hat and gloves on. Peterson K-turned and bounced across the ruts and headed back to the main drag. Turned right and drove south, slower than he would in summer, faster than he would in traffic. There was nothing else on the road. Only nine in the evening, but the whole state seemed closed up for the night. People were all huddled inside, and Peterson’s car was the only thing moving across the landscape.

They made the turn ten miles later and drove on, parallel with the highway. The cloud was thin and high and there was plenty of moonlight. There was still ice on the wind, coming steadily at them out of the west. It crusted on the windshield, a thin abrasive layer that the wipers couldn’t shift. Like diamond dust. Peterson put the heater on defrost and ducked his head to look through warmed circles that got smaller with every mile.

They turned right again on the wandering county two-lane. Now the wind was on their left hand side and the screen cleared again. The old runway loomed up ahead, grey and massive in the night. It was still clear. They bumped up on it and the tyre chains ground and rattled.

They drove two fast miles.

Saw red tail lights ahead.

A parked car. Its tail lights faced them and beyond its dark end-on bulk was a pool of white from its headlights. There was a swirl of exhaust from its pipes, pooling, eddying, drifting, then blowing away.

Peterson slowed and put his lights on bright. The parked car was empty. It was a Ford Crown Victoria. No markings. Either dark blue or black. Hard to say, in the glare.

‘Chief Holland’s car,’ Peterson said.

They parked alongside it and climbed out into the stunning cold and found Holland himself at the first hut’s door. Fur hat, zipped parka, thick gloves, heavy boots, moving stiff and clumsy in all the clothing, his breath clouding in front of him.

Holland wasn’t pleased to see them.

He said, ‘What the hell are you doing here?’

He sounded angry.

Peterson said, ‘Reacher figured out where the key is.’

‘I don’t care who figured out what. You shouldn’t have come. Neither one of you. It’s completely irresponsible. Suppose the siren goes off?’

‘It won’t.’

‘You think?’

‘It can’t. Can it? The cells are locked and the head counts are done.’

‘You trust their procedures?’

‘Of course.’

‘You’re an idiot, Andrew. You need to stop drinking the damn Kool-Aid. That

place is a complete mess. Especially the county lock-up, which is what we're interested in right now. If you think they do a proper head count every night, then I've got a beachfront lot to sell you. Fifty bucks an acre, about a mile from here.'

'It's a brand new place.'

'Brand new metal and concrete. Same old human beings working there.'

'So what are you saying? The head count could be faulty?'

'I'm saying dollars to doughnuts there was no head count at all. I'm saying at five to eight they sound a horn and expect everyone to wander home and then at eight the cell doors lock up electronically.'

'Even if that's true, there's no danger until morning.'

'They do night patrols, son. Ten scheduled, one an hour. I'm guessing they skip nine of them. But at some point they walk around with flashlights, checking beds, doing what they were supposed to do at eight o'clock.'

'Are you serious?'

'Human nature, Andrew. Get used to it.'

'Should we go back?'

Holland paused a beat. 'No, we have to go back that way anyway. Worst case, Mrs Salter will be alone for five minutes. Maybe ten. It's a gamble. We'll take it. But I wish you hadn't come in the first place.'

Reacher asked, 'Why are you here?'

Holland looked at him. 'Because I figured out where the key is.'

'Good work.'

'Not really. Anyone with a brain could figure it out on a night like this.'

'Where is it?' Peterson asked.

It was inside the paraffin stove in the first hut. A fine hiding place, with built-in time-delayed access. Too hot to think about searching earlier, now cool to the touch. Like Peterson's own banked wood stove. The voice from Virginia had said, Burn the place down and sift the ashes. An air force key is probably made of the same stuff as warheads. It would survive, easy. And the voice had been right. The key had survived. It was fine. It had been dropped on the burner core and it had heated and cooled with no bad consequences. It was a large T-shaped device about three inches across. Complex teeth, the dull glitter of rare and exotic metal. Titanium, maybe.

From way back, when paranoia permitted no sceptical questions about cost.

Reacher fished it out of the stove. He handed it to Holland. Holland carried it to the stone building's door. He slipped it into the lock. Turned it. The lock sprang back.

THIRTY-THREE

REACHER TRIED THE HANDLE. IT TURNED DOWNWARD SIXTY degrees with a hefty motion that was halfway between precise and physical. Like an old-fashioned bank vault. The door itself was very heavy. It felt like it weighed a ton, literally. Its outer skin was a two-inch-thick steel plate. Inset by two inches in every direction on the back was a ten-inch-deep rectangular protuberance that socketed home between the jambs and the lintel and the floor saddle. The protuberance was like a welded steel box. Probably packed with ceramics. When closed, the whole thing would make a seamless foot-thick part of the wall. The hinges were massive. But not recently oiled. They shrieked and squeaked and protested. But the door came open. Reacher hauled it through a short two-foot arc and then slipped in behind it and leaned into it and pushed it the rest of the way. Like pushing a broken-down truck.

Nothing but darkness inside the stone building.

‘Flashlights,’ Holland said.

Peterson hustled back and visited both cars and returned with three flashlights. They clicked on one after the other and beams played around and showed a bare concrete bunker maybe twenty feet deep and thirty feet wide. Two storeys high. The stone was outside veneer only. For appearances. Underneath it the building was brutal and utilitarian and simple and to the point. In the centre of the space it had the head of a spiral stair that dropped straight down through the floor into a round vertical shaft. The air coming up out of it smelled still and dry and ancient. Like a tomb. Like a pharaoh’s chamber in a pyramid. The hole for the stairwell was perfectly circular. The floor was cast from concrete two feet thick. The stairs themselves were welded from simple steel profiles. They wound round and down into distant blackness.

‘No elevator,’ Peterson said.

‘Takes too much power,’ Reacher said. He was fighting the pedantic part of his brain that was busy pointing out that a spiral was a plane figure. Two dimensions only. Thus a spiral staircase was a contradiction in terms. It was a helical staircase. A helix was a three-dimensional figure. But he didn’t say so. He had learned not to. Maybe Susan in Virginia would have understood. Or maybe not.

‘Can you imagine?’ Holland said, in the silence. ‘You’re seven years old and you’re looking to head down there and you know you won’t be coming back up until you’re grown?’

‘If you got here at all,’ Reacher said. ‘Which you wouldn’t have. The whole concept was crazy. They built the world’s most expensive storage facility, that’s all.’

Close to the stairwell shaft there were two wide metal ventilation pipes coming up through the floor. Maybe two feet in diameter. They came up about a yard and stopped, like broad chimneys on a flat roof. Directly above both of them were circular holes in the concrete ceiling. One shaft would have been planned as an intake, connected to one of the building’s fake chimneys, fitted with fans and filters and scrubbers to clean the poisoned air. The other would have been the exhaust, to be vented up and out through the second fake chimney. An incomplete installation. Never finished. Presumably the fake chimneys were capped internally. Some temporary fix that had lasted fifty years. There was no sign of rain or snow inside the bunker.

Reacher stepped over to one of the pipes and shone his flashlight beam straight down. Like looking down a well. He couldn’t see bottom. The pipe was lined on the inside with stainless steel. Smooth and shiny. Efficient air movement. No turbulence. No furring, no accumulation of dirt. Regular cleaning had not been on the agenda. There would have been no one left alive to do it.

Reacher stepped back and leaned over the stair rail and shone his flashlight beam straight down the stairwell. Saw nothing except stairs. They wound on endlessly, wrapped around a simple steel pipe. No hand rail on the outer circumference. The space was too tight.

‘This place is very deep,’ he said.

His voice echoed back at him.

‘Probably needed to be,’ Holland said.

The stairs had once been painted black, but their edges were worn back to dull metal by the passage of many feet. The safety rail around the opening was scuffed and greasy.

Peterson said, 'I'll go first.'

Five to ten in the evening.

Six hours to go.

Reacher waited until Peterson's head was seven feet down, and then he followed. The stairs were in a perfectly round vertical shaft lined with smooth concrete. Space was cramped. There had been construction difficulties. The voice from Virginia had read him notes from faxed files: The design was compromised several times during construction because of the kind of terrain they found. Clearly the terrain had meant they hadn't drilled beyond the bare minimum. The diameter was tight. Reacher's shoulders brushed the concrete on one side and the central pipe on the other. But it was his feet that were the major problem. They were too big. A helical staircase has treads that narrow from the outside to the inside. Reacher was walking on his heels the whole way. Coming back up, he would be walking on his toes.

They went down, and down, and down, Peterson first, then Reacher, then Holland. Fifty feet, then seventy-five, then a hundred. Their flashlight beams jerked and stabbed through the gloom. The steel under their feet clanged and boomed. The air was still and dry. And warm. Like a mine, insulated from the surface extremes.

Reacher called, 'See anything yet?'

Peterson called back, 'No.'

They kept on going, corkscrewing down, and down, and down, their flashlight beams turning perpetually clockwise, washing the trowelled concrete wall. They passed through strange acoustic nodes where the whole shaft resonated like the bore of an oboe and the sound of their feet on the metal set up weird harmonic chords, as if the earth's core was singing to them.

Two hundred feet.

Then more.

Then Peterson called, 'I'm there, I think.'

Reacher clattered on after him, two more full turns.

Then he came to a dead stop, deep underground.

He sat down, on the second to last step.

He used his flashlight, left, right, up, down.

Not good.

He heard the voice from Virginia in his head again: Something about the construction compromises made it useless for anything else.

Damn straight they did.

The stairwell shaft ended in an underground chamber made of concrete. It was perfectly circular. Like a hub. Maybe twenty feet in diameter. The size of a living room. But round. Like a living room in a movie about the future. It had eight open doorways leading off to eight horizontal corridors, one at each point of the compass, like bicycle spokes. The corridors were dark. Deep in shadow. The doorways were straight and square and true. The chamber's floor was hard and flat and dry and smooth. The walls were hard and flat and dry and smooth. The ceiling was hard and flat and dry and smooth. Altogether the whole place was a neat, crisp, exact piece of construction. Well designed, well engineered, well built. Ideal for its intended purpose.

Which was an orphanage.

For children.

What made it useless for anything else was that the ceiling was only five feet six inches above the floor. That was all. Bad terrain. The round chamber and the accompanying spoked corridors had been burrowed laterally into a thin and ungenerous seam between upper and lower plates of unyielding hard rock. The low ceiling was a necessary concession to reality. And a professional disappointment, probably. But theoretically adequate for a pack of unaccompanied kids, all runty and starving. Reacher could picture the engineers confronting the unexpected problem, poring over geological surveys, looking up tables of average height versus age, shrugging their shoulders, revising their plans, signing off on the inevitable. Technically acceptable, they would have said, which was the only standard military engineers understood.

But the place was not acceptable for anything else, technically or otherwise. Not even close. Not acceptable for Marine training or any other kind of military purpose. Not acceptable for any kind of full grown adult. Peterson had advanced maybe ten feet into the space and he was buckled at the knees and his head was ducked way down. He was crouching. His shoulders were on the ceiling. He was waddling painfully, ludicrously stooped, like a Russian folk dancer.

And Peterson was three inches shorter than Reacher.

Reacher stood up again. He was on the bottom step. Nine inches above the round chamber's floor. Its ceiling was level with his waist. His whole upper body was still inside the shaft.

Not good.

Holland came on down and crowded in behind him. Said, 'We won't hear the siren way down here.'

'Does your cell phone work?'

'Not a chance.'

'Then we better be quick.'

'After you,' Holland said. 'Mind your head.'

Reacher had a choice. He could shuffle along on his knees or scoot along on his butt. He chose to scoot on his butt. Slow and undignified, but less painful. He snaked downward off the last stair like a clumsy gymnast and sat down and scuttled a cautious yard, heels and knuckles and ass, like a kid playing at being a crab. Ahead of him the two ventilation shafts came down through the low ceiling and ended a stubby foot below the concrete. Three separate parallel bores, one wide for the stairs, two narrow for the pipes, all ending the prescribed distance below the surface in a ludicrous horizontal slot burrowed laterally and grudgingly into the rock.

Reacher said, 'I was already taller than this when I was seven.'

His voice came back to him with a strange humming echo. The acoustics were weird. The concrete he was sitting on was neither warm nor cold. There was a faint smell of kerosene in the air. And a draught. Air was coming down the

faint smell of kerosene in the air. And a draught. Air was coming down the stairwell shaft and circulating back up through the ventilation shafts. A venturi effect. The stone building's door was open more than two hundred feet above them and the wind was blowing hard across it and sucking air out of the bunker. The same way a spray gun sucks paint out of a reservoir or a carburettor sucks gas out of a fuel line. But nature abhors a vacuum, so some circulatory layer was feeding air right back in, just as fast.

'Move,' Holland said.

Reacher scuttled another yard. Holland ducked down and stepped off the last stair and came after him, crouching like Peterson, spinning slowly, playing his flashlight beam around a whole wide circle.

'Eight doorways,' he said. 'Eight choices. Which one has the lab?'

The same strange, humming echo, like Holland's voice was everywhere and nowhere.

Reacher said, 'There is no lab.'

'Has to be. Where there's meth there's a lab.'

'There was a lab,' Reacher said. 'Once upon a time. But it wasn't here. It was a big place in New Jersey or California or somewhere. It had a sign outside.'

'What are you talking about?'

Reacher played his flashlight beam low across the floor. Started at the bottom step and followed a faint track of dirt and scuffs that curled counterclockwise across the concrete to a doorway more or less opposite where he was sitting. South, if he was north, or north, if he was south. He had been turned around so many times by the staircase he had lost his bearings.

'Follow me,' he said.

He scooted off. He found it faster to turn around and travel backwards. Push with his feet, pivot on his hands, dump down on his ass, and repeat. And repeat. And repeat. It was warm work. He pulled off his hat and his gloves and unzipped his coat. Then he resumed. Holland and Peterson followed him all the way, bent over, crouching, waddling, always in his view. He could hear knee joints

popping and cracking. Ligaments, and fluid. Holland's, he guessed. Peterson was younger and in better shape.

He made it to the doorway and swivelled around and shone his flashlight down the length of the corridor. It was a tunnel maybe a hundred feet long, perfectly horizontal, like a coal seam. It was five feet six inches high, and about the same in width. The left hand half was an unobstructed hundred-foot walkway. The right hand half was built up into a long low continuous concrete shelf, a hundred feet long, about two feet off the floor. A sleeping shelf, he guessed. He imagined bedrolls laid head to toe all along its length, maybe twenty of them. Twenty sleeping children. Five feet each.

But the place had never been used. There were no bedrolls. No sleeping children. What was on the shelf instead was the war surplus flown back fifty years earlier from the old U.S. bomber bases in Europe. Aircrew requirements. Hundreds and hundreds of bricks of white powder, wrapped smooth and tight in yellowing glassine, each packet printed with the crown device, the headband, the three points, the three balls representing jewels. A registered trademark, presumably, for a now defunct but once entirely legitimate and government-contracted outfit called Crown Laboratories, whoever and wherever they had been.

Peterson said, 'I don't believe it.'

The packs looked to be stacked ten high and ten deep in groups of a hundred and there were maybe a hundred and fifty groups along the whole length of the shelf. A total of fifteen thousand, minus those already removed. The stack was a little depleted at the near end. It looked like a brick wall in the process of patient demolition.

Holland asked, 'Is this forty tons?'

'No,' Reacher said. 'Not even close. This is only about a third of it. There should be another two stacks just like this.'

'How many packs in forty tons?' Peterson asked.

'Nearly forty-five thousand.'

'That's insane. That's forty-five billion in street value.'

'Your granddaddy's tax dollars at work.'

Your granddaddy's tax dollars at work.

'What was it for?'

'World War Two aircrew,' Reacher said. 'Bombers, mostly. None of us have any idea what that war was like for them. Towards the end they were flying twelve-hour trips, sometimes more, Berlin and back, deep into Germany, day after day after day. Every trip they were doing stuff that had never been done before, in terms of precision and endurance. And they were in mortal danger, every single minute. Every second. Casualties were terrible. They would have been permanently terrified and demoralized, except they were always too exhausted to think. Pep pills were the only way to keep them in the air.'

'These aren't pills.'

'Delivery method was up to the medical officers. Some made it up into pills, some preferred drinking it dissolved in water, some recommended inhaling it, some liked suppositories. Probably some prescribed all four ways at once.'

'I had no idea.'

'It was general issue, like boots or ammunition. Like food.'

'Can't have been good for them.'

'Some of the planes had little wires soldered near the end of the throttle travel. The last quarter inch. War boost, it was called. If you needed it, you hauled the throttle back and busted the wire and got maximum power. It strained the engine, which wasn't good, but it saved your life, which was good. Same exact principle with the dope.'

'How much did they get through?'

'Way more than we can guess. The air force in Europe was hundreds of thousands strong back then. And demand was pretty strong, too. It was a tough gig. I'm sure I would have snorted my body weight before my first tour was half done.'

'And this much was left over?'

'This could have been a month's supply. Suddenly not needed any more.

Shutting down production was pretty haphazard at the end.’

‘Why is it here?’

‘Couldn’t just junk it. Couldn’t sell it. Certainly couldn’t burn it. The whole of Europe would have gotten high as kites off the smoke.’

They went quiet. Just stared.

Then Holland said, ‘Let’s find the rest.’

The rest was shared between the next two tunnels to the left. The same hundred-foot shelves, the same meticulous stacks of packets, the same dull flashlight reflections off the yellowed glassine. A full fifteen thousand bricks in the second tunnel, another full fifteen thousand in the third.

Holland dropped to his knees. Clenched his fists. Smiled wide.

‘Close to ninety thousand pounds, all told,’ he said. ‘The damn DEA will have to listen to us now. This has got to be the biggest drug bust in history. And we did it. Little old us. The Bolton PD, in South Dakota. We’re going to be famous. We’re going to be legends. No more poor relations. The damn prison staff can kiss my ass.’

‘Congratulations,’ Reacher said.

‘Thank you.’

‘But it’s not all good. Plato found it a year before you did.’

‘How?’

‘Rumour and logic, I guess. He knew it had been used in the war, and he knew there was likely to be surplus stock somewhere, so he tracked it down. He’s probably got guys in the air force. That’s probably why we found the cargo manifest. It was on top of a pile somewhere, because someone else had been looking for it already.’

Peterson said, ‘I can’t believe the bikers left it all sitting here. The temptation to take some with them must have been huge.’

Reacher said, ‘I get the impression that if Plato tells you to leave something, you leave it.’ He shuffled a little further into the tunnel, picturing a long line of sweating men fifty years ago passing the two-pound packets hand to hand to hand and then stacking them neatly like craftsmen. Probably the shortest guys had been detailed for the work. He didn’t know what the air force’s height requirement had been fifty years earlier. But probably some of the guys had been standing straight, and some of them hadn’t. They had probably roped the packs down the ventilation tubes in kitbags. Five or ten at a time, maybe more. Trestles and pulleys on the surface. Some kind of an improvised system. Too laborious to carry them all down the stairs one by one. Probably the bikers had brought them back up the same way. The fact that the ventilation pipes were unfinished and open at both ends must have been too obvious to ignore.

He shuffled a little further in and made another discovery.

There was a lateral link feeding sideways off the main tunnel. Like part of a circle’s circumference butting up against its radius. He squeezed down it and came out in the next tunnel along. He shuffled deeper in and found two more lateral links, one to the left, one to the right. The whole place was a warren. A maze. There was a total of eight spokes, and three separate incomplete rings. Each ring had its own curved shelf. Lots more linear feet for sleeping children. Lots of corners. Some turned only left, some turned only right. There were no four-way junctions. Everything was a T, upright at the far end of the spokes, rotated randomly left or right at the other turns. A bizarre layout. The plan view on the blueprint must have looked like a Celtic brooch. Maybe there had been more construction compromises than just the ceiling height. Possibly the whole thing was supposed to be like an odd truncated underground version of the Pentagon itself, but rounded off, not angular, and with some of the links between rings and spokes not made.

The wedges of solid rock separating the spokes and the rings had been hollowed out in ten separate places. Bathrooms, maybe, never installed, or kitchens, never installed, or storerooms for subsistence rations, never supplied. Everything was faced with smooth crisp concrete. It was dry and dusty. The air smelled old. The whole place was absolutely silent.

Peterson called, ‘Take a look at this.’

Reacher couldn’t locate his voice. It came through all the tunnels at once, from everywhere, humming and singing and fluttering and riding the walls.

Reacher called, ‘Where are you?’

Peterson said, ‘Here.’

Which didn’t help. Reacher threaded his way back to the main circular hall and asked again. Peterson was in the next tunnel along. Reacher scooted over and joined him there. Peterson was looking at a fuel tank. It was a big ugly thing that had been welded together out of curved sections of steel small enough to have been dropped down the ventilation shafts. It was sitting on a shelf. It was maybe forty feet long. It was big enough to hold maybe five thousand gallons. It was sweating slightly and it smelled of kerosene. Not original to the place. The welds were crude. Technically unacceptable. Air force mechanics would have done better work.

Peterson stooped forward and rapped it with his knuckles. The sound came back dull and liquid. Reacher thought back to the fuel truck that had nearly creamed him in the snow at the bottom of the old county two-lane.

‘Great,’ he said. ‘We’re two hundred feet underground with five thousand gallons of jet fuel in a home-made tank.’

‘Why jet fuel? It smells like kerosene.’

‘Jet fuel is kerosene, basically. So it’s one or the other. And there’s way more here than they need for the heaters in the huts. And they just got it. After they already knew they were leaving. And after ploughing the runway. So a plane is coming in. Probably soon. It’s going to refuel. Holland needs to tell the DEA about that. They’re going to need to be fast.’

‘It won’t come in the dark. There are no runway lights.’

‘Even so. Time is tight. How far away is the nearest DEA field office?’

Peterson didn’t answer. Instead he asked, ‘How did they fill a tank all the way down here?’

‘They backed the fuel truck to the door and dropped the hose down the air shaft.’

‘That would need a long hose.’

‘They have long hoses for houses with big yards.’

Then Holland called out, ‘Guys, take a look at this.’

His voice reached them with a strange hissing echo, all around the circular room, like a whispering gallery. He was in a tunnel directly opposite. Reacher scooted and Peterson stooped and scuffled and they made their way over to him. He was playing his flashlight beam close and then far, all the way down the hundred-foot length and back again.

It was like something out of a fairy tale.

Like Aladdin’s cave.

THIRTY-FOUR

HOLLAND'S FLASHLIGHT BEAM THREW BACK BRIGHT REFLECTIONS off gold, off silver, off platinum. It set up glitter and refraction and sparkle off brilliant diamonds and deep green emeralds and rich red rubies and bright blue sapphires. It showed old muted colours, landscapes, portraits, oils on canvas, yellow gilt frames. There were chains and lockets and pins and necklaces and bracelets and rings. They were coiled and piled and tangled and tossed all the way along the shelf. Yellow gold, rose gold, white gold. Old things. New things. A hundred linear feet of loot. Paintings, jewellery, candlesticks, silver trays, watches. Small gold clocks, tiny suede bags with drawstrings, a cut-glass bowl entirely filled with wedding bands.

'Unredeemed pledges,' Peterson said. 'In transit, from Plato's pawn shops.'

'Barter,' Reacher said. 'For his dope.'

'Maybe both,' Holland said. 'Maybe both things are the same in the end.'

They all shuffled down the tunnel. They were unable to resist.

The shelf was a hundred feet long and maybe thirty-two inches wide. More than two hundred and fifty square feet of real estate. The size of a decent room. There was no space on it large enough to put a hand. It was more or less completely covered. Some of the jewellery was exquisite. Some of the paintings were fine. All of the items were sad. The fruits of desperation. The flotsam and jetsam of ruined lives. Hard times, addiction, burglary, loss. Under the triple flashlight beams the whole array flashed and danced and glittered and looked simultaneously fabulous and awful. Someone's dreams, someone else's nightmares, all secret and buried two hundred feet down.

A hundred pounds' weight, or a thousand.

A million dollars' worth, or ten.

'Let's go,' Reacher said. 'We've got better things to do. We shouldn't waste time here.'

The climb back to the surface was long and hard and tiring. Reacher counted the

steps. There were two hundred and eighty of them. Like walking up a twenty-storey building. He had to take each step on his toes. Good exercise, he guessed, but right then he wasn't looking for exercise. The air got colder all the way. It had been maybe thirty degrees underground. It was about minus twenty on the surface. A fifty-degree drop. One degree every five or six steps. Fast enough to notice, but no sudden shock. Reacher zipped his coat and put on his hat and his gloves about a third of the way up. Holland surrendered next. Peterson made it halfway up before he succumbed.

They rested inside the stone building for a minute. Outside the moonlight was still bright. Peterson collected the flashlights and shut them down. Holland stood with his hand on the stair rail. He was red in the face from exertion and breathing hard.

Reacher said to him, 'You need to make a call.'

'Do I?'

'The siren could have come and gone while we were downstairs.'

'In which case we're already too late.' Holland pulled out his cell and dialled. Identified himself, asked a question, listened to the reply.

And smiled.

'All clear,' he said. 'Sometimes you gamble and win.'

Then he waited until Peterson left to carry the flashlights back to the cars. He watched him go and turned back to Reacher and said, 'You and I figured out the key. You knew the meth was there. But I want to give Andrew the credit. He's going to be the next chief. A thing like this, it would help him with the guys. And the town. A thing like this, it would set him up right.'

'No question,' Reacher said.

'So would you be OK with that?'

'Fine with me,' Reacher said.

'Good.'

Reacher pushed the door closed against the yowling hinges and Holland locked it up and pocketed the key. They walked together back to the cars and Holland pulled his right glove off in the freezing air and offered his hand to Peterson. Peterson snatched his own glove off and shook.

‘Now listen up,’ Holland said.

He leaned into his car and unhooked his radio mike from the dash and pulled it out all the way until the cord went straight and tight. He thumbed the key and called in an all-points code and spoke.

He said, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, tonight Deputy Chief Peterson broke open what I’m sure will prove to be our country’s largest ever drug bust. Start of business tomorrow he’ll be calling the DEA in Washington with the details and about thirty seconds after that this department will be among the most celebrated in the nation. He has my congratulations. As do you all. Just another fine night’s work in a long and distinguished tradition.’

He clicked off and tossed the mike on his seat.

Peterson said, ‘Thank you, chief.’

Holland said, ‘You’re welcome. But you still shouldn’t have come.’

Five minutes to eleven in the evening.

Five hours to go.

Seventeen hundred miles south Plato’s three-car convoy waited at an inconspicuous gate in a hurricane fence around an airfield. The gate was a battered, saggy affair, chained and padlocked. The fence was matted with trash and weeds at its base. But the airfield itself was fit for its purpose. It had been military, then civilian, then military again, then civilian again. It had a long runway and hangars and offices and apron parking for hobby planes. They were all lined up neatly, hooded and blinded in the dark by canvas covers.

Plato’s was not a hobby plane. It was a Boeing 737. The largest craft on the field by far. It was twenty years old and Plato was its third owner. Not that anyone knew. Only geeks could date planes, and geeks knew better than to broadcast

knew. Only geeks could date planes, and geeks knew better than to broadcast their conclusions. Plato told the world it had been custom built for him a year ago, up there in Washington state. In reality it had been flown to a facility in Arizona and stripped back to its aluminum skin and the paint had been replaced by a grey-tinted wash that made the bare metal look dark and shiny and evil. People who owed him services regularly spent days and weeks going over it with clay bars and carnauba wax. It was polished like a show car. Plato was proud of it. He was the first in his family to own a Boeing.

A dusty pick-up truck with one headlight drove around the perimeter track inside the fence and stopped short of the gate. A guy got out and clicked open the padlock and clattered the chain out of the way. He lifted and pulled and swung the gate open. The three-car convoy drove through.

Plato was Plato and Range Rovers were Range Rovers, so they didn't stick to the perimeter road. Instead they drove in a straight line, across bumpy grass, across smooth taxiways, across the runway, across the apron. They held a wide respectful curve around the Boeing and parked side by side between two Cessnas and a Piper. The six men climbed out and formed a loose cordon. Plato got out into it. He was in no danger, but it helped to appear as if he was, in terms of both caution and reputation. There was an old-fashioned set of rolling stairs set next to the Boeing's forward door. The word Mexicana was still visible on it, peeled and fading. Three men went up. After a minute one stuck his head back out and nodded. All clear.

Plato went up and took his seat, which was 1A, front row on the left. Leg room against the bulkhead was not an issue for him. The old first class cabin was intact. Four rows of four wide leather seats. Behind them economy class had been removed. There was just empty space back there. The plane was rated for a hundred and eighty passengers, and twenty years ago an average passenger was reckoned to weigh two hundred pounds including checked bags. Which gave a total lift capacity of thirtysix thousand pounds, which was about sixteen tons.

Plato sat while his men inspected their equipment. It had been supplied and loaded on to the plane by a guy who owed Plato a favour. Therefore it was all present and correct, on pain of death. But his guys checked anyway. Cold-weather clothing, aluminum ladders, flashlights, automatic weapons, ammunition, some food and water. Anything else necessary would be supplied at the destination.

The pilots had finished their pre-flight checks. The first officer stepped out of the

The pilots had finished their pre-flight checks. The first officer stepped out of the cockpit and waited in the aisle. Plato caught his eye and nodded. Like a guy telling a butler when to serve the soup. The first officer went back to the flight deck and the engines started up. The plane taxied, lined up with the runway, paused, shuddered against the brakes, rolled forward, accelerated, and then rose majestically into the night.

Reacher rode back to town in Peterson's car. Holland followed them in his own car. Reacher got out at the end of Janet Salter's street and waved them both away. Then he eased past the parked cruiser and walked through the snow to the house. Janet Salter was still up when he walked in. She looked him up and down and side to side like she was inspecting him for damage. Then she asked, 'Successful?'

Reacher said, 'So far so good.'

'Then you should call the girl in Virginia and tell her. You were awfully abrupt before. You hung up on her, basically.'

'She's probably off duty. It's late.'

'Try her.'

So Reacher wrestled his way out of his coat and hung it up and sat down in the hallway chair. He dialled the number he remembered. Asked for Amanda.

She was still on duty.

He said, 'N06BA03 is clearly a pharmaceutical code for methamphetamine.'

She said, 'Forty tons?'

'Almost intact.'

'Jesus.'

'That's what we thought.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Nothing. The local cops are on it.'

‘What does forty tons look like?’

‘Repetitive.’

‘How the hell can forty tons of methamphetamine get lost in the system?’

‘I don’t know. Stuff gets lost all the time. Shit happens. Maybe they weren’t very proud of it. Values change all of a sudden, wartime to peacetime. Maybe that’s why they hid it behind the code. And as soon as everyone forgot what the code meant, they forgot the stuff was there. Out of sight and out of mind.’

She didn’t reply.

He said, ‘Thanks for your help, Susan.’

‘You’re most welcome.’

‘Tell your buddy at Lackland there are records clerks taking money for combing the archives. That stuff wasn’t found by accident. Maybe you can pay off the favour that way.’

‘Bronze Stars all around. Anything else?’

‘Nothing on Kapler?’

‘He resigned for no reason. That’s all there is. Which is strange, I agree, but there’s no hard data anywhere. Either he’s clean, or someone cleaned up after him.’

‘OK,’ Reacher said. ‘Thanks.’

‘Anything else?’

Reacher said, ‘No, I guess we’re all done here.’

She said, ‘So this is goodbye?’

He said, ‘I guess it is.’

‘It’s been nice talking to you.’

‘For a retired Staff Sergeant. And then she stopped.’

'For me too. Stay lucky, Susan. And thanks again.'

'You bet.'

She hung up. He sat in the chair for a moment with his eyes closed and the receiver on his lap. When it started beeping at him he put it back in the cradle and got up and walked to the kitchen.

Janet Salter was in the kitchen with a book under her arm. Reacher found her there. She was filling a glass with water from the tap. She was on her way to bed. Reacher stood aside and she passed him and headed for the stairs. Reacher waited a moment and went to make one last check of the house. The cop in the library was standing easy, six feet from the window, alert and implacable. The cop in the hallway was in the telephone chair, sitting forward, her elbows on her knees. Reacher checked the view from the parlour and then headed upstairs to his room. He kept the lights off and the drapes open. The snow on the porch roof was thick and glazed and frozen. The street was empty. Just the parked cruiser, the cop inside, and ruts and ice and the relentless wind.

All quiet.

In Virginia Susan Turner's desktop computer made a sound like a bell. The secure government intranet. An incoming e-mail. The temporary password, from the Human Resources Command. She copied and pasted it to a dialogue box in the relevant database. The ancient report came up as an Adobe document. Like an online photocopy. The seventy-third citation from the cross-reference index in the back of Jack Reacher's service file.

It was the history of an experiment run by an army psychological unit, of which she knew there had been many, way back when. So many, in fact, that they had mostly sat around on their fat butts until inspiration had struck. This bunch had been interested in genetic mutation. The science was well understood by that point. DNA had been discovered. Then anecdotal evidence had come in about a kids' movie being shown on service bases. It was a cheap SF flick about a monster. Some rubber puppet filmed in extreme close-up. The creature's first appearance was held to be a cinematographic masterpiece. It came up out of a lagoon. Shock was total. Children in the audience screamed and recoiled physically. The reaction seemed to be universal.

The psychologists agreed that to recoil from a source of extreme danger was a rational response derived from evolution. But they knew about mutation

rational response derived from evolution. But they knew about mutation. Giraffes were sometimes born with longer or shorter necks than their parents', for instance. Either useful or not, depending on circumstances. Time would tell. Evolution would judge. So they wondered if children were ever born without the recoil reflex. Counterproductive, in terms of the survival of the species. But possibly useful to the military.

They sent prints of the movie to remote bases in the Pacific. Army, navy, air force, and Marine Corps, because they wanted the largest possible test sample. The Pacific, because they wanted children not yet exposed to the movie, or even rumours of it. They set up inconspicuous cameras above the cinema screens. The cameras were focused on the front rows of the audience. The shutters were triggered by the film sprockets, timed to snap just after the monster emerged from the murk. Hundreds of children were invited to showings in batches, four- to seven-year-olds, which was an age group apparently considered mature in terms of emotional response but not yet socialized out of honest and unguarded expression.

There was a long illustrative sequence of still photographs in the document. A little blurred, a little dark, but they all showed the same thing. Small children, eyes wide, mouths open, slamming back against their seats, some of them launching themselves right over their seat backs, arms thrown up around their heads, ducking away in fear and panic.

Then came an exception.

One photograph was focused on a front row of fifteen seats. Fifteen children. All boys. They all looked about six years old. Fourteen of them were slamming backward. One was jumping forward. He was larger than the others. He had short tousled hair, light in colour. He was diving up and out, trying to get to the screen. His right arm was raised aggressively. There was something in his hand.

Susan Turner was pretty sure it was an open switchblade.

The aggressive boy was not formally named in the document. He had been studied briefly but then his father had been cut new orders and the boy had gotten lost in the system. The experiment had petered out shortly afterwards. But the results gleaned to that point had been retained as a completed file. The aggressive boy had been labelled with long words, none of which meant anything to Susan.

The last page of the file was its own cross-reference index. There were no backward links to any other personnel file than Reacher's.

Susan returned to the technical preamble. The delay between the appearance of the monster and the click of the shutter had been set at eighteen frames, which was three-quarters of a second. She was impressed. Not so much with the forward leap. She knew people like that. She was one herself. But for a six-year-old to have gotten a switchblade up and open in his hand in less than a second was something else.

Janet Salter's house stayed all quiet for less than ten seconds. Then first one, then two, then three, then four police radios burst to life with loud static and codes and urgent words, and cell phones rang, and the hall phone rang, and stumbling footsteps crossed the floor in the day watch's bedroom, and doors opened, and there were tramping feet on the stairs, and people started talking all at once, loud and scared and horrified.

Reacher stepped out of his room and hustled down to the hallway. The four women cops were standing all together on the rug, two in uniform, two in night clothes, all talking on phones, all white and shocked and looking around wide-eyed in helpless restless panic, all full of adrenalin, all with nowhere to go.

Reacher said, 'What?'

One of the cops said, 'It's Andrew Peterson.'

'What about him?'

'He's been shot and killed.'

THIRTY-FIVE

THE GUY FROM THE CAR ON THE STREET CAME IN AND JOINED the confusion. Reacher had no doubt the guys in the other two cars were equally distracted. For the moment Janet Salter's security was worth exactly less than jack shit. So he kept half his attention on the parlour window and used the other half to piece the story together from the babble of voices. It wasn't difficult. The hard facts seemed to be: following Chief Holland's most recent orders, the department was still on high alert. Therefore mobile patrols were constant, and vigilance was high. No street was visited less than every twenty minutes. Every pedestrian was eyeballed, as was every car and every truck. Every lot was checked regularly, every alley, every approach.

A unit driven solo by the new guy Montgomery had nosed into a snowbound parking lot north and east of downtown and Montgomery had seen Peterson's car apparently empty and idling with its driver's window all the way down and its nudge bars pushed up hard against a blank brick wall. On closer inspection Montgomery had found the car not to be empty. Peterson was sprawled across the front seats, dead from a gunshot wound to the head.

Reacher stayed at the parlour window, watching the silent street, thinking about Peterson, leaving the cops to their private grief in the hallway. He could hear their voices. They were passing through a short phase of denial. Maybe the story was wrong. Which Reacher considered theoretically plausible, but very unlikely. Operational reports called in from the field were occasionally unreliable. And head wounds sometimes produced misleading impressions. Deep comas could be mistaken for death. But ninety-nine times out of a hundred hoping for the best was a waste of time. Reacher knew that. He was an optimist, but not a fool.

The bad news was confirmed five minutes later by Chief Holland himself. He drove up and parked and came in through the cold. Three items on his agenda. First, he wanted to break the news to his crew personally. Second, he wanted to make sure they got their minds back on their job. He sent the lone male officer back to his car on the street, he sent the day watch women back to bed, he sent one of the night watch women back to the library, and he told the other to focus hard on the front door. His voice was quiet and firm and his manner was controlled. He was a decent CO. Out of his league, perhaps, in over his head, no question, but he was still walking and talking. Which was more than Reacher

had seen from some COs he had known, when the shit had hit the fan.

The third item on Holland's agenda was something halfway between an invitation and a command. He stepped into the parlour and looked straight at Reacher and asked him to come out and take a look at the crime scene.

Janet Salter had gotten up because of the noise and was hiding out in the kitchen. Reacher found her there. She was still fully dressed. She had her gun in her pocket. She knew exactly what he was about to tell her. She waved it away impatiently and said, 'I know what to do.'

He said, 'Do you?'

She nodded. 'The basement, the gun, the password.'

'When?'

'Immediately anything happens.' Then she said, 'Or before. Perhaps now.'

'Not a bad idea,' Reacher said. 'The guy is out there, and close by.'

'I know what to do,' she said again.

Reacher climbed into the front passenger seat of Holland's unmarked sedan. Holland backed up and turned and drove towards town. He made a left at the park and a right that led past the coffee shop and onward past the clothing store that Reacher had used. Then he threaded right and left and right again through back streets to a long block of two-storey brick buildings. They were plain and square. Maybe once they had been stores or offices or warehouses. Maybe once they had been the hub of Bolton's commercial district. Now they were decrepit. Most of them looked abandoned. Three in a line had been demolished to make an empty space. A gap, perhaps a hundred feet by forty. It seemed to be in use as a temporary parking lot, maybe busy by day but now empty at night. It was humped with frozen snow and rutted by tyre tracks made days ago when the surface had still been soft.

The empty lot was guarded by two police cruisers. Their red lights were turning. Their beams danced crazily and rhythmically across surfaces far, then near, then far, then near. Each car held a lone cop. Reacher didn't know either of them. They were just sitting there. There were no crowds to hold back. It was way too late and way too cold for rubberneckers.

late and way too cold for rubbernecks.

Peterson's car was all the way on the left side of the lot. It was still idling. Its driver's window was still down. The short vertical nudge bars on its front bumper were pressed up hard against a blank brick wall. Which was the side of the next building along.

Holland parked at the kerb and climbed out. Reacher followed him and zipped his coat and pulled his hat down over his ears. The side street they were on ran north to south and they were out of the wind. It was cold, but not impossible. They walked together into the lot. No danger of messing up any evidence on the ground. No danger of obscuring tyre tracks or footprints. There weren't any. The rutted snow was like corrugated iron, but harder. And it was glazed and slippery. They struggled on and approached Peterson's car from the rear. Its exhaust pipes were burbling patiently. The whole vehicle was just sitting there, like a faithful servant waiting for its master's next command.

Sheets of ice creaked under their feet as Reacher and Holland walked to the driver's door. They looked in through the open window. Peterson's feet were in the driver's foot well, and his body was twisted at the waist. He had fallen sideways. His gun was still in its holster. His head was flung back, his neck bent, one cheek pressed down on the upholstery, as if he was staring at an item of great interest on the inside panel of the passenger door.

Reacher tracked back around the trunk, his knees passing through the small white cloud of exhaust, and back along the far flank of the car, to the front passenger door. He put his gloved hand on the handle and opened it up. Crouched down. Peterson stared at him through sightless eyes. He had a third eye in the centre of his forehead. An entry wound, perfectly placed, just like the lawyer on the two-lane to the east. Nine millimetre, almost certainly. Fairly close range. There were faint burns on the skin, and faint powder tattoos. About five feet, probably.

There was no exit wound. The bullet was still inside Peterson's head, crushed and deformed and tumbled. Unusual, for a nine-millimetre at close range. But not impossible. Clearly Peterson's skull had been thick.

There was no doubt he was dead. Reacher knew enough about ballistics and human biology and he had seen enough dead people to be absolutely sure. But still he checked. He took off his glove and put warm twinned fingers on the cold skin behind Peterson's ear. No pulse. Nothing at all, except the waxy feel of a

skin behind Peterson's ear. No pulse. Nothing at all, except the waxy feel of a corpse, part soft, part hard, both solid and insubstantial, already completely alien to a living touch.

Reacher put his glove back on.

The car's transmission was controlled by a lever on the steering column. It was still in Drive. The heater was set at seventy degrees. The radio volume was turned down very low. There were regular gasps of quiet static and occasional murmuring voices, all of them unintelligible.

'OK,' Reacher said.

'Seen enough?' Holland asked.

'Yes.'

'So what happened?'

'I don't know.'

'Why didn't he drive straight home?'

'I don't know.'

'He was looking for the shooter,' Holland said.

'You all are.'

'But that wasn't his job tonight. So he was freelancing. You know why?'

'No.'

'He was trying to impress you.'

'Me?'

'You were practically mentoring him. You were helping him. Maybe you were even pushing him.'

'Was I?'

‘You told him what to do about the dead lawyer. All those photographs? You told him what to do about the dead biker. You discussed things. He was going to be the next chief. He wanted to be a good one. He was ready to listen to anybody.’

‘I didn’t tell him to go searching for the shooter all alone in the middle of the night.’

‘He wanted to break the case.’

‘You all do.’

‘He wanted your respect.’

‘Or yours,’ Reacher said. ‘Maybe he was trying to live up to the bullshit you put on the radio tonight. About the meth? You made him feel like a fraud.’

Silence for a beat.

Holland asked, ‘What happened here?’

Reacher said, ‘He saw someone in the lot. Almost certainly in a car or a truck. Too cold to be on foot. He drove in. A wide circle. He stopped, cheek to cheek. Pretty close. He turned down his radio and opened his window, ready to talk. But the guy just went ahead and shot him. He fell over and died and his foot slipped off the brake. The car drove itself into the wall.’

‘Same basic setup as the lawyer.’

‘Pretty much.’

‘Was it quick?’

‘Head shots usually are.’

They went quiet. Just stood and shivered in the freezing air. Holland said, ‘Should we look for a shell case?’

Reacher shook his head. ‘Same deal as the lawyer. The shell case ejected inside the shooter’s vehicle.’

Holland didn’t speak. Reacher could see the question in his face. Who was the guy? It was right there in his eyes.

An awkward question, with an unappealing answer.

Reacher said, ‘Now I see why you wanted me here. You wanted me to be the one to reach the conclusion. And say it out loud. Me, not you. An independent voice.’

Holland didn’t speak.

Reacher said, ‘OK, let’s not go there. Not just yet. Let’s think for a minute.’

They went back to the station house. Holland parked in the slot reserved for him and they walked between the garbage cans to the door. They went to the squad room, to the desk that Peterson had used. Holland said, ‘You should check his messages. Voice mail and e-mail. Something might have come in that led him there.’

Reacher said, ‘You’re clutching at straws.’

‘Allow me the privilege.’

‘Did he even come here first?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Did he even have time?’

‘Probably not. But we should check the messages anyway. Because we need to be sure, with a thing like this.’

‘You should do the checking. It’s your department. I’m just a civilian.’

Holland said, ‘I don’t know how. I never learned. I’m not good with technology. I’m old school. Everyone knows that. I’m the past. Andrew was the future.’

So Reacher puzzled his way through the telephone console and the computer keyboard. No passwords were required. No PINs. Everything was set up for fast and casual access. There was only one voice mail message. It was from Kim Peterson, much earlier in the evening, just after six o’clock, just after Reacher

and her husband had hustled back to Janet Salter's house after watching the surveillance video from the prison.

Kim's recorded voice was suspended somewhere between panicked and brave and resigned and querulous.

She had asked, 'When are you coming home?'

Reacher moved on to e-mail. He opened the application. Two messages downloaded. The first was from the DEA in Washington D.C. An agent there was confirming his belief that there was no meth lab under the facility west of Bolton, South Dakota. Expensive satellite surveillance time proved it. Peterson was thanked for his interest and asked to get back in touch should new information come to light.

The second e-mail was a routine nightly round robin BOLO bulletin from the Highway Patrol. Statewide coordination. Be on the lookout. For, in this instance, a whole bunch of stuff, including any or all of three stolen cars and four stolen trucks taken that day from random locations around the state, a stolen snowplough taken from a highway maintenance depot east of Mitchell, a thing called an Isuzu N-series pump and a de-icing truck stolen by two absconded employees from a commercial airfield east of Rapid City, a stolen Ithaca shotgun from Pierre, four suspects believed to be at large in a 1979 Chevrolet Suburban after a messy and aborted burglary in Sioux Falls, and finally Peterson's own contribution, a bartender fleeing a suspected Bolton homicide in a 2005 Ford pick-up truck.

Reacher said, 'Nothing.'

Holland sat down.

'So say it,' he said. 'Let's go there now.'

'Three questions,' Reacher said. 'Why did the lawyer stop on the road with such total confidence? Why did Peterson stop in the lot? And why was he killed tonight of all nights?'

'Answers?'

'Because the lawyer felt safe to do so. Because Peterson felt safe to do so. And because you announced the meth bust on the police department radio net.'

because you announced the meth bust on the police department radio net.'

Holland nodded.

'The shooter is one of us,' he said. 'He's a cop.'

Five minutes to midnight.

Four hours to go.

THIRTY-SIX

HOLLAND AND REACHER HASHED IT OUT BETWEEN THEM, LIKE people do, searching for weaknesses in a theory, finding none, and thereby strengthening it to the point of certainty. A bent cop already in town explained why the watch for incoming strangers had proved fruitless. A bent cop in a car, flashing his lights, maybe patting the air with a gloved hand out a window, explained why a cautious lawyer would come to a dead stop on a lonely road in the middle of nowhere. A bent cop, hearing Holland's triumphant radio message earlier that night, explained why Peterson had died so soon afterwards. The guy would have realized the need for action before morning. Start of business tomorrow he'll be calling the DEA in Washington with the details, Holland had said. A no-brainer. And a bent cop parked in a lot, maybe waving urgently, explained why Peterson had come straight to his side, completely unsuspecting, completely unready.

And a bent cop hauled unwillingly away by the siren and the crisis plan explained why Janet Salter had lived through the prison riot, all five hours of it.

Holland said, 'It's my fault. What I said on the radio got Andrew killed.'

'I might have done the same,' Reacher said. 'In fact, sometimes I did do the same.'

'I was trying to help him.'

'Unintended consequences. Don't blame yourself.'

'How can I not?'

'Why did he even go there? He wasn't on duty. He wasn't just passing by, because it wasn't on his way home.'

'He was always on duty, in his head, at least. And it could have been on his way home. More or less. I mean, it was a very minor detour. Two extra minutes, maybe. And that was Andrew, through and through. Always willing to give a little extra to the cause. Always ready to try one last thing, check one last place.'

Reacher said nothing.

Holland said, ‘I’m assuming the Mexican is behind all of this. The one we keep hearing about.’

Reacher said, ‘Plato.’

Holland asked, ‘How long ago do you suppose he turned our guy around?’

‘A year,’ Reacher said. ‘This whole business seems to be a year old.’

‘Was it money?’

‘Most things are.’

‘Who is it?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘A new guy, I’m guessing. I hardly know them. Not enough to trust any of them, anyway. The department is a mess. Which is my fault too, I guess. I couldn’t keep up.’

Reacher said nothing.

Holland asked, ‘Where do we start?’

‘Tell me about Kapler.’

‘He had problems in Miami. Nothing was proved against him. But there were rumours. It was Miami, and there was drug money around.’

‘Terrific.’

‘They were just rumours.’

‘You should look at him. And Lowell. What happened to him a year ago? You should look at this guy Montgomery, too. People who are all alone when they discover crimes are sometimes the same people that committed them.’

‘Should I bring them in?’

‘Safest thing to do would be to bring everyone in. The whole damn department. Sit them down right here in this room, and you’d know for sure your guy was right in front of you.’

Holland said, ‘Can I do that?’

‘Sure you can.’

‘Should I do it?’

Reacher said nothing. Any cop’s most basic question: Suppose we’re wrong?

Holland said, ‘The crew at Mrs Salter’s must be OK. They didn’t go anywhere tonight. Did they? They weren’t waiting in abandoned lots. They have alibis. Each other, and you.’

‘True.’

‘So I could leave them in place.’

‘But you should warn them first,’ Reacher said. ‘If our guy senses the net is tightening, he might make one last attempt.’

‘They’d nail him.’

‘Not if you don’t warn them first. A fellow cop comes to their door, what are they going to do? Shoot first and ask questions later?’

‘They’d nail him afterwards.’

‘Which would be too late.’

‘It would be a suicide mission.’

‘Maybe he’s ready for one. He must know he’s going to get nailed sooner or later. He must know he’s dead whatever happens. He’s between a rock and a hard place. Two homicides or three, either way he’s going to fry.’

‘He might not come in at all. He might disobey my order.’

‘Then he’ll identify himself for you. He’ll paint a target on his own back. He’ll save you the trouble.’

save you the trouble.

‘So should I do it? Should I call them in?’

‘I would,’ Reacher said. ‘It’s any police department’s basic duty. Get criminals off the streets.’

Holland made the calls. First came seven individual conversations, with the four women and the three men stationed with Mrs Salter. The subtext was awkward. One of your fellow officers is a killer. Trust no one except yourselves. Then he made a general all-points call on the radio net and ordered all other officers, whoever they were, wherever they were, whatever they were doing, on duty or not, to report to base exactly thirty minutes from then. Which Reacher thought was a minor tactical error. Better to have required their immediate presence. Which might not have gotten them there any faster in practice, but to set even a short deadline gave the bad guy the sense he still had time and space to act, to finish his work, and in ideal conditions of chaos and confusion, too, with cops running around all over the place. It was going to be a risky half-hour.

Holland put the microphone back on its rest, and picked up the phone again. He said, ‘Kim Peterson hasn’t been informed yet.’

Reacher said, ‘Don’t do it by phone. That’s not right.’

‘I know. I’m calling the front desk. Because I want you to do it. The desk guy can drive you. He can pick you up again in an hour. An hour should do it.’

‘Are you serious?’

‘I don’t have time to do it myself. I’ll be busy here.’

‘I don’t have standing,’ Reacher said. ‘I’m just a stranger passing through.’

‘You met her,’ Holland said. ‘You spent a night in her house.’

‘It’s your job, not mine.’

‘I’m sure you’ve done it before.’

‘That’s not the point.’

‘I’m sure you were good at it.’

I'm sure you were good at it.

‘Not very.’

‘You have to do it,’ Holland said. ‘I just can’t, OK? Don’t make me, OK?’

Plato spent an hour in seat 1A, front of the cabin, left hand side, and then he got restless. Air travel at night bored him. By day there was a view, even from seven miles up. Mostly empty and brown, to be sure, but with enough roads and houses and towns to remind him there were new customers down there, just waiting to be recruited and served. But at night he couldn’t see them. There was nothing except darkness and strings of distant lights.

He got up and walked down the aisle, past his men, past the last first class seat, into the empty space where economy class had been. He looked at the equipment on the floor. His men had checked it. He checked it again, because he was Plato and they weren’t.

Food, water, all uninteresting. Seven coats, seven hats, seven pairs of gloves. All new, all adequate. The coats were big puffy things filled with goose feathers. North Face, a popular make, all black. Six were medium, and one was a boy’s size. The sub-machine guns were H&K MP5Ks. Short, stubby, futuristic, lethal. His favourite. There were seven small backpacks, each containing spare magazines and flashlights.

Immediately Plato diagnosed a problem. The backpack straps would have to be let out close to their maximum length, to fit over the bulky coats. An obvious conclusion. Simply a question of thinking ahead. But it hadn’t been done.

He was Plato, and they weren’t.

The ladders were made by an American company called Werner. Aluminum, thirty-two feet long at their maximum extension, rated for two hundred and fifty pounds. They were all plastered with yellow warning stickers. They rattled slightly. They were picking up vibrations from the engines. They probably weighed about twenty pounds each. There were four of them. Eighty pounds. They would be left behind. Better to use the airlift capacity for forty extra glassine bricks than four useless ladders.

The same with the six useless men, of course. They would be left behind too. Nine hundred pounds of replaceable flesh and blood, versus four hundred and fifty extra bricks of meth? No contest.

Plato was already visualizing the return trip. He knew he would succeed. He had many advantages. Most of them were innate and overwhelming. His man on the ground was insurance, nothing more.

Caleb Carter was considered low man on the totem pole. Which he thought was richly ironic. He knew a little about totem poles, and Native American culture in general. He knew a little about a lot of things, but in a random unstructured way that had paid no dividends in terms of high school grades or employment opportunities. So he had turned to the Department of Corrections. The default choice, for his graduating class. Probably the default choice for many graduating classes to come. He had been trained and equipped with a radio and a polyester uniform and assigned to the night watch at the county lock-up. He was the youngest and newest member of a four-man team. Hence, low man on the totem pole.

Except that calling a new guy the low man on the totem pole was completely ass-backward. Totem poles were what? Twenty, thirty feet high? Native Americans weren't dumb. They put the most important guy at the bottom. At eye level. What important guy wanted to be twenty or thirty feet off the ground, where no one could see him? Like supermarkets. The eye-level shelf was reserved for the best stuff. The high-margin items. The big corporations hired experts to figure out stuff like that. Eye level was what it was all about. Thus the low man was really the high man, and the high man was really the low man. In a manner of speaking. A common misperception. A kind of linguistic inversion. Caleb Carter didn't know how it had come about.

Night watch was an easy job. The cells were locked before they came on duty, and weren't unlocked until after they had left. In practice Caleb's team had only one real responsibility, which was to monitor the population for medical emergencies. Guys could start foaming at the mouth or banging their heads on the wall. Some of them weren't fully aware of what prescriptions they should be taking. Some of them tried to hang themselves with jumpsuit legs, all twisted up and knotted. They were a sorry bunch.

The monitoring process involved ten tours of inspection, one every hour. Naturally most of them got blown off. Sometimes all of them. Easier to sit in the

ready room, playing poker for pennies or looking at porn on the computer or chilling with the ear buds in. At first Caleb had been disconcerted by the negligence. New job, new life, he had started out with a measure of energy and drive. He had been prepared to take it seriously. But any new guy's first duty was to fit in. So he did. After a month he couldn't remember what he had been upset about. What did the department want, for their lousy ten bucks per?

But the riot in the big house the night before had shaken things up a little. The watch leader had mandated three tours in the aftermath. He had even done one of them himself. Tonight he was looking for two, but four hours into the shift they hadn't even done the first of them, so clearly they were really on track for one only. Which was about due right then, and naturally Caleb would get to do it, because he was high man on the totem pole. Which he was OK with. He would do it, real soon, but not immediately, because right then he was occupied with clicking through a bunch of sites featuring naked fat girls and barnyard animals. Work could wait.

Reacher slipped out of a battered sedan at the end of the Petersons' driveway and stood and watched the desk guy drive away. Then he headed for the house. It was like walking into a white tunnel. Ploughed snow was piled five feet high, left and right. Up ahead was the Y-shaped junction, right to the barn, left to the house. The wind was strong. The land was flat and open. Reacher had never been colder. He knew that with certainty. A superlative had been achieved. One day in Saudi Arabia at the start of Desert Shield the noontime temperature had hit a hundred and forty degrees. Now in South Dakota he was suffering through minus thirty, which was more like minus fifty with the wind chill. Neither extreme had been comfortable. But he knew which one he preferred.

He made it to the Y-shaped split. He turned left, towards the house. The path was OK. The underfoot surface had been salted and sprinkled with grit. Maybe the last domestic chore Andrew Peterson had ever done. Ten minutes' work. He had made it easier to inform his widow of his death.

The house loomed up ahead. Red boards, red door, made brown by the blue of the moon. Soft yellow light behind the window glass. A faint smell of wood smoke from the chimney. Reacher walked on. It was so cold he felt like he had forgotten how. Like a stroke victim. He had to concentrate. Left foot, right foot, one step, the next, consciously and deliberately. Like he was learning a brand new skill.

He made it to the door. He paused a second and coughed freezing air from his lungs and raised his hand and knocked. The thickness of his glove and the way he was shaking turned what was supposed to be a crisp double tap into a ragged sequence of dull padded thumps. The worst sound in the world. After midnight, a cop's family alone in a house, a knock at the door. No possibility of good news. Kim would understand that in the first split second. The only issue was how hard and how long she was going to fight it. Reacher knew how it would be. He had knocked on plenty of different doors, after midnight.

She opened up. One glance, and the last absurd hope drained from her face. It wasn't her husband. He hadn't dropped his keys in the snow. He hadn't gotten inexplicably drunk and couldn't find the keyhole.

She fell down, like a trapdoor had opened under her.

Caleb Carter took a black four-cell Mag-lite from the rack at the door and checked his radio. It was turned on and working. The Mag-lite gave a decent beam. Batteries were OK. There was a clipboard screwed to the wall. There was a pen tied to it with a ratty piece of string. Caleb pre-signed for the fifth tour. The first four notations were bogus. No one looked up. He left the ready room and headed down the corridor.

In terms of jurisdiction the county lock-up was entirely separate from the state penitentiary, which in turn was entirely separate from the federal prison. But all three facilities shared the same site and the same architecture. Economy of scale, ease of operation. The lock-up was mostly filled with arrested local folks who either couldn't get or couldn't make bail. Pre-trial. Innocent until proven guilty. Caleb knew some of them from high school. About a quarter of the inmates were post-trial, found guilty and sentenced, waiting out a few days until the system moved them to their next destination.

A sorry bunch.

There were sixty cells, laid out in a two-storey V, fifteen cells to a section. East wing lower, east wing upper, west wing lower, west wing upper. At the point of the V there was a metal staircase, and beyond it was a single-storey mess hall and rec room, so that the lower floor was actually shaped like a Y.

All sixty cells had occupants. They always did. The money had come from outside of Bolton, and it was like the politicians in Pierre or Washington or

wherever wanted their investment to be well used. It was widely accepted around the town that laws got tighter if there was a vacancy. And vice versa. If there was an empty bed, an ounce of herb in your car would get you hauled in. But if all sixty beds were taken, two ounces would get you nothing more than a smack on the head.

Law enforcement. Caleb's chosen career.

He started at the far end of the east wing lower. Walked all the way to the end wall, turned around, clicked his flashlight on, and came back slower. The cells were on his left. He overhanded the flashlight up on his shoulder, which not only looked cool but put the beam in line with his eyes. The cells had bars at the front, cots on the right, combined sinks and toilets in the back left corner, desks no wider than shelves opposite the cots. The cots had men in them. Most were asleep, rumbling, mumbling, and snoring under thin grey sheets. Some were awake, their narrow furtive eyes reflecting back like rats.

He turned the corner of the V and checked the west wing lower. Fifteen cells, fifteen cots, fifteen men in them, twelve sleeping, three awake, none in distress.

He climbed the stairs to the east wing upper. Same result. He didn't know why they bothered. The place was a warehouse, that was all. A kind of cheap hotel. Did hotel staff check their guests every hour? He didn't think so.

Procedure was such bullshit.

He passed the head of the stairs to the west wing upper. He walked it a little faster than normal. The shadows of the bars moved as his Mag-lite beam passed over them. Cell one, empty space on the left, humped form under the sheet on the right, awake, cell two, empty space on the left, humped form under the sheet on the right, asleep, cell three, the same.

And so on, and so on, all the way down the row. Cell six had the fat guy in it. The one who wouldn't talk. Except to the biker in cell seven.

But the biker wasn't in cell seven.

Cell seven, west wing upper, was empty.

THIRTY-SEVEN

REACHER WAS TOO SLOW TO CATCH KIM PETERSON BEFORE SHE hit the deck. He bent down awkwardly in his big coat and slid an arm under her shoulders and sat her up. She was gone. Fainted clean away. Absurdly his main worry was that the door was open and heat was leaking out of the house. So he jammed his other arm under her knees and lifted her up. He turned away and kicked the door shut behind him and carried her through to the family room and laid her on the battered sofa near the stove.

He had seen women faint before. He had knocked on plenty of doors after midnight. He knew what to do. Like everything else in the army it had been thoroughly explained. Fainting after a shock was a simple vasovagal reflex. The heart rate drops, the blood vessels dilate, the hydraulic power that forces blood to the brain falls away. There were five points in the treatment plan. First, catch the victim. He had already blown that. Second, lay her down with her feet high and her head low, so that gravity could help her blood get back to her brain. Which he did. He swivelled her so that her feet were up on the sofa arm and her head was below them on the cushion. Third, check her pulse. Which he did, in her wrist. He took off his gloves and touched his fingers to her skin, just like he had with her husband. The result was different. Her pulse was tapping away just fine.

Fourth point in the treatment plan: stimulate the victim, with loud yells or light slaps. Which had always felt unbearably cruel to him, with new widows. But he gave it a go. He spoke in her ear and touched her cheek and patted her hand gently.

No response.

He tried again, a little more firmly. Louder voice, a heavier touch. Nothing happened, except that above his head the floor-boards creaked. One of the boys, turning over in his sleep. He went quiet for a moment. Stayed still. Silence came back. The family room was warm but not hot. The stove was banked. He took off his hat and unzipped his coat. Bent down and spoke again. Touched her cheek, touched her hand.

Kim Peterson opened her eyes.

Point five in the treatment plan: persuade the victim to lie still for fifteen or twenty minutes. In this case, easy. No persuasion necessary. Kim Peterson didn't move. She just lay on her back and stared up at the ceiling, inquiringly, speculatively, her eyes moving and narrowing and widening, as if there was something written up there, something complex and difficult to understand.

He asked, 'Do you remember me?'

She said, 'Of course.'

'I'm afraid I have bad news.'

'Andrew's dead.'

'I'm afraid he is. I'm sorry.'

'When?'

'Within the last hour.'

'How?'

'He was shot. It was instantaneous.'

'Who shot him?'

'We think the guy they've all been looking for.'

'Where?'

'In the head.'

Her eyes narrowed. 'No, I mean whereabouts did it happen?'

'I'm sorry. It was downtown. In a vacant lot.'

'What was he doing there?'

'His duty. He was checking something out.'

She said, 'He was a good man, you know.'

‘I know.’

‘I have two boys.’

‘I know.’

‘What am I going to do?’

‘You’re going to take it one step at a time. One day at a time, one hour at a time, one minute at a time. One second at a time.’

‘OK.’

‘Starting now.’

‘OK.’

‘First thing is, we need to get someone here. Right now. Someone who can help. Someone who can be with you. Because you shouldn’t be alone. Is there someone I can call?’

‘Why didn’t Chief Holland come?’

‘He wanted to. But he has a big investigation to start.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘He can’t just let it go.’

‘No, I mean I don’t believe he wanted to come.’

‘He feels responsible. A good chief always does.’

‘He should have come.’

‘Who can I call for you?’

‘Neighbour.’

‘What’s her name?’

‘Alice.’

Alice.

‘What’s her number?’

‘Button number three on the telephone.’

Reacher looked around. There was a phone on the wall at the kitchen end of the room. A cordless handset and a black console. All kinds of buttons, and a big red LED zero in a window. No messages. He said, ‘Stay right there, OK?’

He moved away from her and walked into the kitchen. Picked up the phone. It had a regular keypad, for dialling regular numbers. It had a memory button. Presumably the memory button allowed the keypad to recall speed dials. Presumably buttons one and two were Andrew, office and cell. He pressed memory and three. The phone dialled itself and he heard ring tone. It lasted a good long spell. Then a voice answered. A woman, sleepy but concerned. A little worried. Maybe her husband was on the road. Maybe she had grown kids in another town. Late night phone calls were as bad as knocks on the door.

Reacher asked, ‘Is this Alice?’

‘Yes, it is. Who are you?’

Reacher said, ‘I’m with Kim Peterson. Your neighbour. She needs you to come right over. Her husband was killed tonight.’

There was silence on the line. Then Alice spoke. But Reacher didn’t hear what she said. Her words were drowned out by another sound. Sudden. Loud. From outside. Wailing and howling. Screaming and whispering. Rising and falling. The new sound rolled in across the frozen fields like a wave. It smashed against the side of the house and battered against the windows.

The prison siren.

Five minutes to one in the morning.

Three hours to go.

THIRTY-EIGHT

REACHER SAW A CRAZY DIAGRAM IN HIS MIND, EXPLODING IN four dimensions, time and space and distance: cops all over town, all moving randomly north, south, east, west, all answering Holland's summons, all heading for the station house, all hearing the siren, all changing direction at once, the seven on duty with Janet Salter rushing straight out into the night, joining the confusion, getting set, heading for the prison, leaving Janet Salter all alone behind them.

All alone and wide open and vulnerable to a last-ditch swing by the bad guy before he either ran for his life or tried to blend back in.

I know what to do, Janet Salter had said.

Reacher hung up the phone and called softly to Kim.

'I got to go,' he said. 'Alice is on her way.'

He got the front door open and stopped. The siren howled on. It was deafening. The ploughed path was right there in front of him. Fifty feet to the split in the Y, fifty more to the street. Then a mile to town and another mile to the Salter house.

He was on foot.

No car.

He closed the door behind him and moved out and slipped and skidded and made the tight turn and headed for the barn. The old Ford pick-up was still in there. With the plough blade.

No key in it.

He hustled all the way back to the house. Pounded on the door. A long, long wait. He pounded some more. Then Kim Peterson opened up again. Shock was over. She was deep into her nightmare. She was slouched, vacant, detached. She was crying hard.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'But I need the key for the pick-up truck.'

She didn’t answer.

‘Kim, I’m sorry, but I really need the key.’

She said, ‘It’s on Andrew’s key ring. In his pocket.’

‘Is there a spare?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘It’s a very old truck.’

‘There has to be a spare.’

‘I think it was lost.’ She looked away and turned and walked back down the hallway. She staggered and put out a hand and steadied herself against the wall. Reacher put the door on the latch and stepped outside to wait. For Alice. The neighbour. South Dakota farm country was big and empty. Houses were not adjacent. Not even close together. Alice would drive. He could borrow her vehicle.

He waited.

The siren howled on.

Alice came on foot.

He saw her a hundred yards away in the moonlight. She was a tall woman, dishevelled after hasty dressing, hurrying, slipping and sliding on the ice, gloved hands out like a tightrope walker, wild hair spilling from under a knitted cap. She came right to left along the road, a pale face glancing anxiously at the Peterson house, arms and legs jerky and uncoordinated by treacherous conditions underfoot. Reacher moved away from the door, into the cold, down the path, to the split in the Y, and on towards the street. He met her at the bottom of the driveway. Asked, ‘Don’t you have a car?’

She said, ‘It wouldn’t start.’

He glanced left, towards the road to town.

She glanced ahead, at the house.

She asked, ‘How’s Kim?’

He said, ‘Bad.’

‘What happened?’

‘Andrew was shot and killed. Some guy in a vacant lot.’

‘That’s awful.’

‘You better go in. It’s going to be a long night.’

‘It will be longer than a night.’

‘You OK with that?’

‘I’ll have to be.’

‘Call her dad. She said he sometimes comes to visit.’

‘I will.’

‘Good luck.’

She moved on up the driveway.

He headed left down the street.

I know what to do, Janet Salter had said.

A minute later Reacher was a hundred yards short of the corner that would put him on the main east–west county two-lane. To his right, the centre of town. To his left, the boondocks. He wanted a cop to be living way out there. The maximum ten minutes. Someone he could trust. Not Kapler or Lowell or Montgomery. He wanted one of the majority. He wanted the guy at home, off duty, asleep, then waking up, getting dressed, stumbling out into the cold, firing up his cruiser, heading west.

He wanted to flag the guy down and demand a ride.

He wanted to flag the guy down and demand a ride.

He got part of what he wanted.

When he was still seventy yards short of the turn he saw lights in the east. Pulsing red and blue strobes, a mile away, coming on fast. The reflectivity of the snow made it look like there was a whole lit-up acre on the move. Like a UFO gliding in to land. A huge bright dancing circle of horizontal light. He hustled hard to meet it. His feet slipped and skated. His arms thrashed and windmilled. His face was already frozen. It felt like it had been beaten with a bat and then anaesthetized by a dentist. The cop car was doing sixty miles an hour, on chains and winter tyres. He was doing three miles an hour, on legs that were stiff and slow and unresponsive. He was slipping and sliding, like running in place. Like a slapstick movie. The corner was still fifty yards away.

He wasn't going to make it.

He didn't need to make it.

The cop saw him.

The car slowed and turned into Peterson's street and came north towards him. Bright headlights, electric blue flashers, deep red flashers, painful white strobes popping right in his eyes. He came to a stop and planted his feet and stood still and raised his arms and waved. The universal distress semaphore. Big overlapping half circles with each hand.

The cop car slowed.

At the last minute he sidestepped and the car slid to a stop alongside him. The driver's window came down. A woman at the wheel. Her face was pale and swollen with sleep. Her hair was a mess. Her eyes were red. He didn't know her.

He said, 'I have to get to the Salter house.' His words were unclear. His lips were numb. The upper part of his face was a frozen slab. The lower half was just as bad. The hinge in his jaw was hardly working at all.

The cop said, 'What?'

'I need a ride.'

‘Where?’

‘Janet Salter’s house.’

Five miles away the prison siren howled on. There was radio chatter in the car. A dispatcher’s voice, low and fast, trying not to sound urgent. Probably the old guy already back at the police station desk. There was alcohol on the woman’s breath. Maybe bourbon. A nightcap. Maybe two or three of them.

She asked, ‘Who the hell are you?’

Reacher said, ‘I’ve been working with Holland and Peterson.’

‘Peterson’s dead.’

‘I know that.’

‘Are you the MP?’

‘Yes. And I need a ride.’

She said, ‘Can’t do it.’

‘So why did you turn in for me?’

‘I didn’t. I’m heading for my position.’

‘The prison isn’t this way.’

‘We make a perimeter a mile out. I get the northeast corner. This is how I’m supposed to get to it.’

‘What happened?’

‘The biker escaped. His cell is empty.’

‘No,’ Reacher said. ‘What do you mean, no?’

‘Not possible. It’s a fake. It’s a decoy.’

‘He’s either in there or not, pal. And they say not.’

‘He’s hiding out in there. In a broom closet or something. It’s a fake.’

‘Bullshit.’

‘I’ve seen it before. Two problems with escaping. Getting out, and then beating the manhunt. The smart ones hide first. Inside. Until the manhunt dies. Then they go. But this guy isn’t going anywhere. He’s doing the first part only. As a decoy.’

The cop didn’t answer.

‘Think about it,’ Reacher said. ‘Escaping is harder than it looks. I promise you, he’s still in there. Tomorrow he’ll get hungry and come on out from wherever he holed up. Big smile on his face. Because it will be too late by then.’

‘You’re nuts.’

‘He’s still in there. Believe me. Take a chance. Be the one.’

‘You’re crazy.’

‘OK, suppose I am. Suppose the guy really is out. He was gone more than five hours ago. You know that. So what the hell is the point of a one-mile perimeter now?’

The cop didn’t answer.

The siren howled on.

‘Five minutes,’ Reacher said. ‘Please. That’s all I need from you.’

The cop didn’t answer. Just hit the button and the gas and her window thumped back up and the car moved off. He leaned towards it and it accelerated and the rear three-quarter panel smacked him in the hip and spun him around and dumped him down hard on his back. He lay breathless in the frozen snow and watched the acre of lights move away into the distance.

I know what to do, Janet Salter had said.

Reacher got up and struggled onward to the corner and the siren died. It cut off mid-wail and tiny brittle echoes of its last howl came back off the ice and then

night-time silence swarmed in. Not the dull padded silence of fresh snowfall, but the weird keening, crackling, scouring, rustling hiss of a deep-frozen world. The thump of his footsteps ran ahead of him through veins and sheets of ice. The wind was still out of the west, in his face, hurling tiny frozen needles at him. He looked back. He had made it through a hundred and fifty yards. That was all. He had two miles ahead of him. There was nothing on the road. He was completely alone.

He was very cold.

He half walked, half ran, in the wheel ruts, his heels sliding wildly after every step until they locked into the next broken fissure, where a tyre chain had cracked the surface. He was breathing hard, freezing air burning down his windpipe and searing his lungs. He was coughing and gasping.

Two miles to go. Maybe thirty whole minutes. Too long. He thought, surely one of them had the balls to stay with her. One of the seven. One of the women. Damn the rules. Damn the plan. Peterson was dead. Still warm. Enough justification right there. Surely one of them would gut it out and tell the feds to go to hell. At least one. Maybe more. Maybe two or three.

Maybe all of them.

Or maybe none of them.

I know what to do, Janet Salter had said.

Did she?

Had she done it?

Reacher pounded on. One step, and another, and another. The wind pushed back at him. Ice fragments pattered against his coat. All the feeling had gone out of his feet and his hands. The water in his eyes felt like it was freezing solid.

Dead ahead was a bank. It stood alone in a small parking lot. The edge of town. The first building. It had a sign on a tall concrete pillar. Red numbers. Time and temperature. Twenty past one in the morning. Minus thirty degrees.

He struggled on, faster. He felt he was getting somewhere. Left and right there was one building after another. A grocery store, a pharmacy, party favours, DVD

was one building after another. A grocery store, a pharmacy, party favours, DVD rental. Auto parts, UPS, a package store, a dry cleaner. All with parking lots. All spread out. All for customers with cars. He hurried on. He was sweating and shivering, all at the same time. The buildings closed in. They grew second storeys. Downtown. The big four-way was a hundred yards ahead. Right to the prison, left to the highway. He cut the corner on a cross street. Turned south at the police station. The wind was howling through the forest of antennas on its roof.

A mile to go.

He ran alone down the centre of the main drag. A solitary figure. Ungainly. Short, choppy steps. He was bringing his feet up and dropping them down more or less vertically. It was the only way to stay upright. No fluid, loping stride. The ice didn't allow it. His vision was blurring. His throat burned. All around him every window was dark and blank. He was the only thing moving, in a white empty world.

Reacher passed the family restaurant. It was closed up and quiet. Dark inside. Ghostly inverted chairs were stacked on tables like a silent anxious crowd all with upraised arms. Four hundred yards to Janet Salter's street. Forty seconds, for a decent athlete. Reacher took two minutes. The roadblock car was long gone. Just its ruts remained. Empty, like a railroad switch. Reacher picked his way over them. Headed on down the street. Past one house, past the next. The wind hissed through evergreens. The earth creaked and groaned under his feet.

Janet Salter's driveway.

Lights in the house.

No movement.

No sound.

Nothing out of place.

All quiet.

He rested for a second, his hands on his knees, his chest heaving.

Then he hurried up towards the house.

THIRTY-NINE

REACHER STEPPED UP ON JANET SALTER'S PORCH. HER DOOR WAS locked. He pulled the handle for the bell. The wire spooled out of the little bronze eye. It spooled back in. The bell bonged, a second later, quiet and polite and discreet, deep inside the silent house.

No response.

Which was good. She wouldn't hear it in the basement. And even if she did, she wouldn't come out to answer it.

He hoped.

I know what to do, she had said. The basement, the gun, the password.

He peered in through a stained glass panel. The hallway lights were still on. He got a blue distorted view of the room. The chair. The telephone table. The stairs, the rug, the paintings. The empty hat stand.

No movement. No one there. No sign of disturbance.

All quiet.

Forty-three possible ways in, according to his earlier calculation, fifteen of them practical, eight of them easy. He backed away from the door and recrossed the porch. Stepped down and floundered through deep crusty snow alongside foundation plantings, around the side of the house, to the rear. He knew from his earlier inspection that the lock on the kitchen door was a sturdy brass item with a tongue neatly fitted into a heavy escutcheon plate. The plate was set into the jamb, which was a strip of century-old softwood. It was painted, whereas the front door's jamb was a piece of lacquered chestnut, fine-grained and milled and exquisite. Harder to replace. All things considered, breaking in at the rear would be the considerate thing to do.

He stepped back and took a breath and raised his boot and smashed his heel into the wood directly under the lock. No second attempt necessary. He was a big man, and he was anxious, and he was too cold for patience. The door stayed whole, but the escutcheon plate tore out of the jamb and clattered to the floor and

the door swung open.

‘It’s me,’ he called. ‘Reacher.’ She might not have heard the bell, but she might have heard the splintering wood. He didn’t want her to have a heart attack.

‘It’s me,’ he called again.

He stepped into the kitchen. Pushed the door shut behind him. It hung within an inch of fully closed. All the familiar sounds and smells came back to him. The hissing of the pipes. The percolator, now cold. He stepped into the small back hallway. He clicked on the light. The door at the bottom of the stairs was closed.

‘Janet?’ he called. ‘It’s me, Reacher.’

No response.

He tried again, louder. ‘Janet?’

No response.

He went down the back stairs. Knocked hard on the basement door.

He called, ‘Janet?’

No response.

He tried the handle.

The door opened.

He took off his glove and got his gun out of his pocket. He stepped into the basement. It was dark. He listened. No sound, except the roar of the furnace and the squeal of the pump. He fumbled his left hand across the wall and found the switch and clicked on the light.

The basement was empty. Nothing but sudden shadows from the vertical baulks of timber jumping across a bare expanse of floor. He walked through to the furnace room. Empty. Nothing there, except the old green appliance loudly burning oil.

He walked back to the door. Stared back up the stairs over the front sight of his

gun. No one there. No movement, no sound.

He called, ‘Janet?’

No response.

Not good.

He climbed back up to the kitchen. Walked through it to the hallway. It was the same as he had seen it through the stained glass panel from the front. All quiet. The chair, the table, the rug, the paintings, the hat stand. No movement. No disturbance.

He found her in the library. She was in her favourite chair. She had a book in her lap. Her eyes were open. There was a bullet hole in the centre of her forehead.

Like a third eye.

Nine millimetre, almost certainly.

Reacher’s mind stayed blank for a long, long time. It was his body that hurt. From thawing. His ears burned like someone was holding a blowlamp on them. Then his nose, then his cheeks, then his lips, then his chin, then his hands. He sat in the chair in the hallway and rocked back and forth and hugged himself in agony. His feet started hurting, then his ribs, then the long bones in his arms and his legs. It felt like they were all broken and crushed.

Janet Salter had not had a thick skull. The back of it was blown all over her favourite chair, driven deep into the split the exiting bullet had made in the stuffing.

I’ll have plenty of time to read, she had said, after all this fuss is over.

Reacher cradled his head in his hands. Put his elbows on his knees and stared down at the floor.

I am privileged, she had said. Not everyone gets the opportunity to walk the walk.

Reacher rubbed his eyes. His hands came away bloody. The ice spicules driven on the wind had peppered his face with a thousand tiny pinpricks. Unnoticeable,

the wind had peppered his face with a thousand tiny pinpricks. Unnoticeable, when his flesh had been frozen. Now they were raising a thousand tiny beads of blood. He rubbed both palms over every inch of his face, like he was washing. He wiped his palms on his pants. He stared down at the floor. Traced each whorl of muted colour in the rug, one by one. When he reached the centre of each meandering pattern he stopped and raised his eyes. Janet Salter stared back at him. She was diagonally opposite him. A straight line. A vector. Left of the stair post, in through the library door, across its width, to her chair. A small comma had formed below the bullet hole in her forehead. Not really blood. Just ooze. Leakage.

Each time he looked at her for as long as he could bear, and then he dropped his gaze again, back to the rug.

I don't like getting beaten, he had said. Better for all concerned that it just doesn't happen.

Protect and serve.

Never off duty.

Empty words.

He was a fraud and a fake and a failure.

He always had been.

He sat in the chair. No one came. The house hummed on around him. It didn't know. It made its noises, oblivious. Water moved in the pipes, a sash rattled in a frame, the busted back door creaked back and forth as it moved in the wind. Outside the foliage hissed and the whole frozen planet shuddered and groaned.

He picked up the phone.

He dialled the number he remembered.

You have reached the Bureau of Labor Statistics. If you know your party's extension, you may dial it at any time.

He dialled 110.

A click. A purr. 'Yes?'

A click. A purr. 'Yes?'

Reacher said, 'Susan, please.'

'Who?'

'Amanda.'

A click. A purr.

Susan said, 'Reacher?'

He didn't answer.

'Reacher? You OK?'

He said nothing.

She said, 'Talk to me. Or hang up.'

He asked her, 'Have you ever been hungry?'

'Hungry? Of course. Sometimes.'

'I was once hungry for six straight months. In the Gulf. Desert Shield and Desert Storm. When we had to go throw Saddam out of Kuwait. We got there right at the beginning. We stayed there right to the end. We were hungry the whole time. There was nothing to eat. My unit, I mean. And some of the other rear echelon people. Which we thought was OK. We sucked it up. A big deal like that, there had to be snafus. Supply chains are always a problem. Better that whatever there was went to the guys doing the fighting. So no one made a big fuss. But it was no kind of fun. I got thin. It was miserable. Then we went home and I ate like a pig and I forgot all about it.'

'And then?'

'And then years later we were on that Russian train. They had American rations. I was bored at the time. We got back and I made it a little project to find out what had been going on. Like a hobby. One thing led to another and I traced it all back. Turned out a logistics guy had been selling our food for ten years. You know, a bit here, a bit there, all over the world. Africa, Russia, India, China, anyone who would pay for crap like that. He was pretty careful. No one noticed

anyone who would pay for crap like that. He was pretty careful. No one noticed, the way the stockpiles were. But the Gulf caught him out. Suddenly there was a huge demand, and the stockpiles just weren't there any more. He was shipping it to us on paper, but we were starving in the desert.'

'The general?'

'Recent promotion. He was a colonel most of the time. Not the sharpest knife in the drawer, but he was reasonably cautious. His tracks were well covered. But I wouldn't let it go. It was him against me. It was personal. My people had been hungry because of him. I was in his bank accounts and everything. You know what he spent the money on?'

'What?'

'Not much. He saved most of it. For his retirement. But he bought a 1980 Corvette. He thought it was a classic. Like a collector's item. But the 1980 Corvette was the worst Corvette ever made. It was a piece of shit. They junked the three-fifty and put in a three-oh-five, for emissions. It was making a hundred eighty horsepower. I could run faster than a 1980 Corvette. Something just went off in my head. I mean, starving for some kind of a criminal mastermind would be one thing. Doing it for a complete idiot was something else. A complete, tasteless, clueless, sordid, pathetic little idiot.'

'So you hauled him in?'

'I built that case like it was Ethel Rosenberg. I was out of my mind. I checked it forward and backward and forward again. I could have taken it to the Supreme Court. I brought him in. I told him I was upset. He was in a Class A uniform. He had all kinds of busywork medals. He laughed at me. A kind of patronizing sneer. Like he was better than me. I thought, you bought a 1980 Corvette, asshole. Not me. So who's better? Then I hit him. I popped him in the gut to fold him over and then I banged his head on my desk.'

'What happened?'

'I broke his skull. He was in a coma for six months. He was never quite all there afterwards. And you were right. I was canned, basically. No more 110th for me. Only the strength of the case saved me. They didn't want it in the newspaper. I would have been busted big time otherwise. So I moved on.'

‘Where to?’

‘I don’t remember. I was too ashamed of myself. I did a bad thing. And I blew the best command I ever had.’

Susan didn’t answer.

Reacher said, ‘I got to thinking about it afterwards. You know, why had I done it? I couldn’t answer. Still can’t.’

‘You did it for your guys.’

‘Maybe.’

‘You were putting the world to rights.’

‘Not really. I don’t want to put the world to rights. Maybe I should, but I don’t.’

She said nothing.

He said, ‘I just don’t like people who put the world to wrongs. Is that a phrase?’

‘It should be. What happened?’

‘Nothing more, really. That’s the story. You should ask for a new desk. There’s no honour in that old one.’

‘I mean, what happened tonight?’

Reacher didn’t answer.

Susan said, ‘Tell me. I know something happened.’

‘How?’

‘Because you called me.’

‘I’ve called you plenty.’

‘When you needed something. So you need something now.’

‘I’m OK.’

I'm OK.'

'It's in your voice.'

'I'm losing two-zip.'

'How?'

'Two KIA.'

'Who?'

'A cop and an old woman.'

'Two-zip? It isn't a game.'

'You know damn well it's a game.'

'It's people.'

'I know it's people. I'm looking at one of them right now. And the only thing stopping me putting my gun to my head is pretending it's a game.'

'You got a gun?'

'In my pocket. A nice old .38.'

'Leave it in your pocket, OK?'

Reacher said nothing.

Susan said, 'Don't touch it, OK?'

'Give me a good reason.'

'A .38 won't necessarily get the job done. You know that. We've all seen it happen. You could end up like the general.'

'I'll aim carefully. Square on. I'll make sure.'

'Don't do it, Reacher.'

'Relax. I'm not going to shoot myself. Not yet, anyway. I'm going to wait

‘Relax. I’m not going to shoot myself. Not my style. I’m just going to sit here until my head explodes all on its own.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Not your fault.’

‘It’s just that I don’t like to think of it as a game.’

‘You know it’s a game. It has to be a game. That’s the only way to make it bearable.’

‘OK, it’s a game. What are we in? The final quarter?’

‘Overtime.’

‘So give me the play by play so far. Brief me. Bring me up to date. Like we were working together.’

‘I wish we were.’

‘We are. What have we got?’

He didn’t answer.

She said, ‘Reacher, what have we got?’

So Reacher took a breath and began to tell her what they had, slowly at first, and then faster as he picked up on the old shorthand rhythms he remembered from years of talking to people who understood what he understood, and saw what he saw, and grasped what didn’t need to be spelled out. He told her about the bus, and the meth, and the trial, and the jail, and the police department, and the crisis plan, and the lawyer, and the witness protection, and the riot, and Plato, and the underground storage, and Peterson, and Janet Salter.

Her first response was: ‘Put your hand in your pocket.’

He asked, ‘Why?’

‘Take out your gun.’

‘Now that’s OK?’

‘Now that’s OK?

‘More than OK. It’s necessary. The bad guy saw you.’

‘When?’

‘While you were alone with Salter in the house. He had five hours.’

‘He didn’t come. He was up at the prison the whole time.’

‘That’s an assumption. We don’t know that for sure. He could have checked in, dropped off the radio net, slipped away, gone back. And do we even know that they really called the roll at all? A thing like that, sure, it’s in the plan as written, but who’s to say it actually gets done, you know, in real life, in a situation like that, right when the shit is hitting the fan?’

‘Whatever, I didn’t see him.’

‘He doesn’t know that. If he saw you, he’s going to assume you saw him. He’s going to come after you.’

‘That’s a lot of ifs and assumptions.’

‘Reacher, think about it. What’s to stop this guy getting away with it? He popped the lawyer, and Peterson, and Salter, three rounds from a throw-down pistol. He’s saving a fourth for you, and then he’s home free. Nobody will ever know who he was.’

‘I already don’t know who he was.’

‘He’s not sure of that. And he’s not sure you won’t figure it out eventually. You’re his last obstacle.’

‘Why hasn’t he come after me already?’

‘No safe opportunity yet. That’s the only possible reason. He’s going to be cautious with you. More so than with the others. The lawyer was a patsy, Peterson was a bumpkin, and Salter was a harmless old lady. You’re different.’

‘Not so very different.’

‘You need to pull back to Rapid City. Hole up somewhere and talk to the FBI.’

‘You need to pull back to Rapid City. Hole up somewhere and talk to the FBI.’

‘I don’t have a vehicle.’

‘You have a telephone. You’re talking on it right now. Put it down and then call the FBI. Keep your guard up until they get there.’

He didn’t answer.

She asked, ‘Are you going to do that?’

‘I doubt it.’

‘You weren’t responsible for those people, you know.’

‘Says who?’

‘All of this would have happened just the same without you. It’s a million-to-one chance you were there at all.’

‘Peterson was a nice guy. And a good cop. He wanted to be a better cop. He was one of those guys who knew enough to know he didn’t know everything. I liked him.’

Susan said nothing.

‘I liked Mrs Salter, too. She was a noble old bird.’

‘You need to get out of there. You’re outnumbered. Plato won’t come alone.’

‘I hope he doesn’t.’

‘It’s dangerous.’

Reacher said, ‘For him.’

Susan said, ‘Do you remember as a kid, watching a movie about a creature in a lagoon?’

‘Is that thing still in my file?’

‘In the back index.’

‘And you read it?’

‘I was interested.’

‘They got it wrong. And they took away my blade, which pissed me off.’

‘How did they get it wrong?’

‘I wasn’t some kind of a genetic freak. I was born as scared as anyone. Maybe more so. I lay awake crying with the best of them. But I got tired of it. I trained myself out of it. An act of will. I re-routed fear into aggression. It was easy enough to do.’

‘At the age of six?’

‘No, I was an old hand by then. I was four when I started. I had the job done by the time I was five.’

‘Is that what you’re doing now? Re-routing guilt into aggression?’

‘I took an oath. Same as you did. All enemies, foreign and domestic. Looks like I’ve got one of each here. Plato, and whoever his bent cop is.’

‘Your oath lapsed.’

‘It never lapses.’

She asked, ‘How does a six-year-old have his own switchblade anyway?’

‘Didn’t you have one?’

‘Of course not.’

‘Do you have one now?’

‘No.’

‘You should get one.’

She said, ‘And you should go to Rapid City and do this thing properly.’

‘We’re short of time.’

We're short of time.

‘You have no legal standing.’

‘So put another tag on my file. Or save them all some effort. Just Xerox it. Three copies, FBI, DEA, and the local South Dakota people. Send them out overnight.’

‘You’re not thinking straight. You’re punishing yourself. You can’t win them all. You don’t have to win them all.’

‘They put you in charge of the 110th?’

‘And I’ll stay in charge. As long as I want.’

‘This time it was really important.’

‘They’re all important.’

‘Not like this. I’m staring at a nice old lady with a hole in her head. She mattered more to me than being hungry.’

‘Stop looking at her.’

Reacher looked down at the floor.

Susan said, ‘You can’t change the past.’

‘I know.’

‘You can’t atone. And you don’t need to, anyway. That guy deserved to be in a coma, maybe for ever.’

‘Maybe.’

‘Go to Rapid City.’

‘No.’

‘Then come to Virginia. We’ll deal with this together.’

Reacher said nothing.

‘Don’t you want to come to Virginia?’

‘Sure I do.’

‘So do it.’

‘I will. Tomorrow.’

‘Do it now.’

‘It’s the middle of the night.’

‘There was a question you used to ask me.’

‘Was there?’

‘You stopped asking it.’

‘What was it?’

‘You used to ask if I was married.’

‘Are you?’

‘No.’

Reacher looked up again. Janet Salter stared right back at him.

He said, ‘I’ll leave tomorrow.’

He hung up the phone.

Five minutes to two in the morning. Two hours to go.

FORTY

THREE HOURS INTO THE FLIGHT, AND PLATO WAS GET TING TENSE. Unsurprisingly. His life was like a video game. One thing popped up at him after another. Each thing had to be dealt with efficiently and comprehensively. From the most important to the least. Not that even the least important thing was trivial. He spent fifteen hundred dollars a month on rubber bands alone. Just to bind up all the cash that he took to the bank. There were no small problems. And plenty of big ones. And his performance was judged not only on substance, but also on style. Drama was weakness. Especially for him.

The irony was that he had been large as a child. Until he was seven he was as big as or bigger than anyone else. At eight he was still fully competitive. At nine he was in the ballpark. Then he had stopped growing. No one knew why. No one knew if it was genetic, or a disease, or an environmental factor. Maybe mercury, or lead, or some other heavy metal. Certainly it was not a lack of food or proper care. His parents had always been present and competent. At first they had turned a blind eye. The assumption was that such a thing would correct itself. But it didn't. So first his father had turned away, and then his mother.

Now no one turned away.

His cell phone was switched on. Normal rules did not apply to him. It rang and he answered it. His man on the ground. Some fellow cop had found out too much and had been taken out. Plato didn't care. Collateral damage. Unimportant. Some other guy was sniffing around, too, and would have to be dealt with. An exmilitary cop. Plato didn't care about that, either. Unimportant. Not his problem.

But then, finally, the big news: the witness was dead.

Plato smiled.

He said, 'You just saved a life.'

Then he made a call of his own. Brooklyn, New York. He announced the news. The last obstacle had been removed. South Dakota was now definitively a trouble-free zone. The title was impregnable. Absolutely guaranteed. The Russian agreed to wire the money immediately. Plato listened hard and imagined

Russian agreed to wire the money immediately. Plato listened hard and imagined he heard the click of the mouse.

He smiled again.

A done deal.

He closed his phone and looked out his window. Seat 1A, the best on the plane. His plane. He looked down at America spread out below. Dark and massive. Strings of lights. He checked his watch. Fifty-seven more minutes. Then, once again, and as always, show time. Another challenge. Another triumph.

Reacher went upstairs and found Janet Salter's bedroom. It was at the back of the house, directly above the library. It was a pleasant, fragrant room that smelled of talcum powder and lavender. Its bathroom was directly above half of the kitchen. There was a medicine cabinet above the sink. In it was an array of basic toiletry items, plus the box of .38 ammunition, eighty-eight rounds remaining of the original hundred.

Reacher put the box in his coat pocket and closed the mirror. He went back down the stairs and stepped into the library and stood over Janet Salter and moved her book and one soft arm and took her gun out of her cardigan pocket. It was still fully loaded. It had not been fired. He put it in his own pocket and replaced the book and the arm and stepped away.

The cop who had killed the lawyer and the deputy chief and Mrs Salter sat in his car and stared out the windshield. He was in his designated position on the makeshift perimeter, personally responsible for the eighth of a mile of snow on his left and the eighth of a mile of snow on his right. Not that any escaper would use anything except the road, even in summer. In any season the terrain was too flat and featureless for concealment. The dogs would run him down in a minute. Going cross-country and hiding in ditches and culverts was strictly for the kind of old black and white chain-gang movie that gets shown late at night on the minor satellite channels. No, these days any sane fugitive would come straight down the road, strapped to the chassis of an empty delivery truck.

Not that there actually was a fugitive. Plato had been clear about that. There were all kinds of voids in the prison architecture. Overhead plenum chambers where ducts branched, underfloor matrices where pipes split. All kinds of inspection panels. All perfectly safe, because none of the voids actually led anywhere. But useful for purposes short of an actual break-out. A sandwich and

anywhere. But useful for purposes short of an actual break-out. A sandwich and a bottle to pee in, a guy could hold out ten or twelve hours.

Which would be enough.

The cop checked his guns. Habit. Instinct. First his official piece, in his holster, and then his other piece, in his pocket. Loaded. A round in the chamber, and fourteen more in the magazine.

He wouldn't need the fourteen in the magazine.

Reacher took one last careful tour through Janet Salter's house. He was fairly sure he wouldn't be coming back to it, and there were certain things he needed to fix in his mind. He looked at the front door, the back door, the basement door, the kitchen, the hallway, the library, Janet Salter's position in it, and the book on her lap. Somewhere between five and eight minutes, he thought, for her to get as comfortable as she looked, given that she had been starting out from a state of extreme panic. It would have taken her that kind of time to relax, even in the safe and reassuring company of a trusted figure like a town cop.

So, allowing a minute's margin for her protective detail to clear the area, someone had been between six and nine minutes late to the roll call up at the prison.

Someone would remember.

Maybe.

If there had been a roll call at all.

If the guy had even gone.

Reacher zipped his coat and jammed his hat down over his ears and covered it with his hood. Put his gloves on, opened the front door, and stepped out once again into the cold. It crowded in on him, battered at him, tormented him, froze him. But he ignored it. An act of will. He closed the door and walked down the driveway and made the turns and headed back towards the station. He stayed vigilant all the way, right up there in the kind of hyper-alert zone that made him feel he could draw and fire a thousand times faster than any opponent. The kind of zone that made him feel he could mine the ore and smelt the metal and draw the blueprint and cast the parts and build his own gun, all before any opponent

got the drop on him.

I’m not afraid of death.

Death’s afraid of me.

Fear into aggression.

Guilt into aggression.

The police station was completely deserted apart from the civilian aide back on duty behind the reception counter. He was a tall creaky individual about seventy years old. He was sitting glumly on his stool. Reacher asked for the news. The guy said there wasn’t any. Reacher asked how long the department would stay deployed. The guy said he didn’t know. The department had no experience of such a thing. There had never been an escape before.

‘There was no escape tonight,’ Reacher said. ‘The guy is hiding out inside.’

‘That’s your opinion?’

‘Yes, it is.’

‘Based on what?’

‘Common sense,’ Reacher said.

‘Then I should think they’ll give it another hour or so. The perimeter is a mile out. Two hours is long enough to decide the guy is already through, or maybe not coming at all.’

‘Tell me how the roll call works. For the department, at the prison.’

‘I do it from here. By radio. I work through the list, they answer me from their cars or their collar mikes, I check them off.’

‘How did it go tonight?’

‘All present and correct.’

‘No absentees?’

‘None at all.’

‘Misfires? Hesitations?’

‘None.’

‘When did you do it?’

‘I started when I heard the siren. It takes about five minutes, beginning to end.’

‘So they’re self-certifying, aren’t they?’

‘I don’t follow.’

Reacher said, ‘You don’t really know where they are or what they’re doing. All you know is if they answer your call or not.’

‘I ask them where they are. They tell me. Either they’re in position or close to it. And the prison warden is entitled to check.’

‘How?’

‘He can go up in a tower and eyeball. The land is flat. Or he can tap into our radio net and call the roll himself, if he wants.’

‘Did he tonight?’

‘I don’t know.’

Reacher asked, ‘Who was last into position tonight?’

‘I can’t say. Early in the alphabet, they’re all still in motion. Late in the alphabet, they’re all already on station.’

‘So they tell you.’

‘Why would I doubt them?’

‘You need to call Chief Holland,’ Reacher said. ‘Mrs Salter is dead.’

Reacher wandered through the silent station, the squad room, Holland’s office, the bathrooms, and he came to rest in the room with the crime scene photographs

the bathrooms, and he came to rest in the room with the crime scene photographs pinned to the walls. The biker, and the lawyer. He sat with his back to the biker and looked at the lawyer. He didn't know the guy's name. Didn't know much about him at all. But he knew enough to know the guy was basically the same as Janet Salter. A man, not a woman, a frozen road, not a warm book-lined room, but they were both half-wise, half-unworldly people lulled into a false sense of security, tricked into relaxing. The shift lever in Park and the window all the way down in the door were the same things as Janet Salter's comfortable posture and the book on her lap.

Understand their motives, their circumstances, their goals, their aims, their fears, their needs. Think like them. See what they see. Be them.

They were both all the way there. Not partway, not halfway. They were completely trusting. They had opened up, literally. Doors, windows, hearts, minds. Not half worried, not half formal, not half suspicious.

They were all the way there.

Not just any cop could do that to them.

It was a cop they both knew, had met before, were familiar with.

Peterson had asked: What would your elite unit do now?

Answer: Reacher or Susan or any of the other 110th Special Unit COs in between them would put their feet up on the damaged desk and send a pair of eager lieutenants to map out both lives, to list all known acquaintances in the Bolton PD in order of intimacy. Then he or she or any of the others would cross-reference the lists, and a name would show up in common.

Reacher had no pair of eager lieutenants.

But there were other approaches.

A minute later Reacher heard footsteps in the corridor. Arrhythmic. The slap of one sole, followed by the scrape of the other. The old guy from the counter. He had a slight limp. He stuck his head in the door and said, 'Chief Holland is on his way. He's leaving his post up there. He shouldn't, but he is.'

Reacher nodded. Said nothing.

The old guy said, ‘It’s a terrible thing that happened to Mrs Salter.’

‘I know.’

‘Do you know who did it?’

‘Not yet. Did anyone call anything in?’

‘Like who?’

‘A neighbour, maybe. A shot was fired.’

‘Inside the house?’

‘In her library.’

The old guy shrugged. ‘Houses are far apart. Everyone has storm windows. Most of them are triple-glazed and on a night like this all of them are shut tight.’

Reacher said nothing.

The old guy asked, ‘Is it one of us?’

‘Why would it be?’

‘Chief Holland called a meeting. Just before the siren. Can’t see any other reason for it. Can’t see any other way of doing it, either. The lawyer, I mean, then Mr Peterson and now Mrs Salter. The three of them, fast and easy, just like that. It has to be one of us. And then you asked who was last in position tonight.’

‘Were you a cop?’

‘I was with this department thirty years.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I’d like to get my hands on the guy.’

‘You spoke to him tonight. At some point. Either just before or just after.’

‘They all sounded normal to me.’

‘Do you know them well?’

‘Not the new guys.’

‘Was anybody particularly close with Mrs Salter?’

‘A lot of them were. She’s a fixture. Was a fixture.’

Seven miles up and four hundred miles south Plato’s cell phone rang again. The money he had taken from the Russian was hammering its way around the world. From one jurisdiction to another, shady and untraceable, an automated all-night trip that was scheduled to take seven hours in total. But it was always banking hours somewhere. The deposit flashed across a screen in Hong Kong and tripped a code that meant the account holder should be notified. So the clerk who saw it dialled a number that bounced through five separate call forwarding triggers before ringing out inside the Boeing high above Nebraska. Plato answered and listened without comment. He was already the richest man he had ever met. He always would be. He was Plato, and they weren’t. Not his parents, not the Russian, not his old associate Martinez, not anybody.

The bank clerk in Hong Kong hung up with Plato and dialled another number. Brooklyn, New York. After three in the morning over there, but the call was answered immediately, by the Russian, who was paying more than Plato was.

A lot more.

The clerk said, ‘I told him the money was in his account.’

The Russian said, ‘So now reverse the transaction.’

The clerk clicked and scrolled.

‘Done,’ he said.

The Russian said, ‘Thank you.’

From Brooklyn the Russian dialled Mexico City, a number deep inside a local law enforcement agency with a long name he couldn’t begin to translate. A colonel answered. The Russian told him that all was proceeding exactly

according to plan.

The colonel said, ‘Plato is already in the air. He took off more than three hours ago.’

The Russian said, ‘I know.’

The colonel said, ‘I want fifteen per cent.’

The Russian went quiet for a moment. He pretended to be annoyed. He had promised ten per cent. A ninety-ten split was what had been discussed all along. But privately he had budgeted for eighty-twenty. Eighty per cent of Plato’s business had been his aim. To get eighty-five per cent would be an unexpected bonus. A free gift. The colonel was a shallow, unambitious man. Limited in every way. Which was why he was a colonel, and not a general.

The Russian said, ‘You drive a hard bargain.’

The colonel said, ‘Take it or leave it.’

‘You make it sound like I don’t have a choice.’

‘You don’t.’

A long silence, purely for effect.

‘OK,’ the Russian said. ‘You get fifteen per cent.’

The colonel said, ‘Thank you.’

The Russian hung up and dialled again, a number he knew belonged to an untraceable cell currently located on a night table in a Virginia bedroom. After three in the morning down there, the same as Brooklyn. The same time zone. The untraceable cell belonged to a tame DEA agent who belonged to the Russian’s cousin’s friend’s brother-in-law. The guy answered in Virginia and the Russian told him all was going exactly according to plan.

The guy asked, ‘Do I have your word?’

The Russian smiled to himself. Office politics at their very best. The cousin’s friend’s brother-in-law’s bent DEA guy had overruled Plato’s bent DEA guy and

had agreed that the Russian could take over the rest of Plato's U.S. operations just as long as he didn't take the government meth out of the hole in the ground in South Dakota. In fact if the government meth could just disappear altogether, then so much the better. Too embarrassing all around. Embarrassing that it was still there, embarrassing that it had been forgotten about, embarrassing that it even existed at all. Even bent guys had departmental loyalties.

The Russian said, 'You have my word on that.'

The guy in Virginia said, 'Thank you.'

The Russian smiled again at the absurdity of it all. But he would comply. Why wouldn't he? It was a treasure trove, for sure, but he had longer-term goals. And he wouldn't miss what he never had. And it wasn't as if he had paid for it, anyway.

He hung up again and composed a text message on another phone, and hit send.

Seven miles above Nebraska, three rows behind Plato, in seat 4A, a silent phone vibrated once in a pocket, a solid mechanical thrill against the muscle of a thigh. The fifth of the six disposable Mexicans pulled out the phone and checked the screen. He was the guy who had driven Plato in the Range Rover to the airfield. He showed it to the man sitting next to him, in seat 4B, who was the sixth of the six, and who had sat with him earlier in the front of the truck. Both men nodded. Neither man spoke. Neither man even smiled. They were both way too tense.

The text said: Do it.

A minute later Reacher heard Holland's car in the frozen stillness. He heard the low mutter of its engine and the soft crunch of its tyres on the ice. Then the sigh and the silence as it shut down, and the creak and slam of the door, and the sound of Holland's boots on the snow. He heard the lobby door open and imagined he felt the pulse of cold air coming in from the lot. He heard Holland's steps in the corridor and then he arrived and filled the doorway, stooped, bent, defeated, like he was right at the end of something.

Holland said, 'Are you sure?'

Reacher nodded. 'No doubt about it.'

‘Because sometimes they can still be alive.’

‘Not this time.’

‘Should we check?’

‘No point.’

‘What was it?’

‘Nine millimetre between the eyes. Same as the other two.’

‘Anything left behind?’

‘Nothing.’

‘So we’re no closer. We still don’t know who it is.’

Reacher nodded.

‘But I know how to find out,’ he said.

FORTY-ONE

REACHER SAID, ‘IT’S GOING TO SNOW AGAIN SOON. THE RUNWAY is going to get covered again and the bikers aren’t there to plough it any more. Weather is unpredictable, therefore time is tight. Therefore Plato is on his way, probably right now. Because he needs to get his jewellery out before the sale goes through. He’s probably going to double-cross the Russian and take some of the meth, too. Maybe most of it. He’s got a big plane. So my guess is he told his guy to be there to help. So the guy will pull off the perimeter at some point and head up there. Maybe real soon. All we have to do is get there before him. We’ll hide out and see who shows up. He’ll walk straight into our arms.’

Holland said, ‘You think?’

‘For sure.’

‘We could be waiting there for hours.’

‘I don’t think so. Plato needs to get in and get out. He can’t afford to get trapped in a storm. A big plane on the ground, no proper facilities, he could be stuck until the start of summer.’

‘What kind of help would he need, anyway?’

‘Got to be something.’

‘He’ll bring people with him. It’s just walking up and down a staircase.’

‘You don’t buy a dog and bark yourself.’

‘You sure?’

‘They’re going to land a big plane in the middle of nowhere. Someone might hear it. Anything might happen. A local cop is always useful.’

‘We have to hide out up there? It’s very cold.’

‘Cold?’ Reacher said. ‘This is nothing.’

Holland thought about it for a minute. Reacher watched him carefully. Holland's mouth worked silently and his eyes danced left and right. He started out reluctant, and then he got right into it.

'OK,' he said. 'Let's do it.'

Five minutes to three in the morning.

One hour to go.

Holland drove. His unmarked car was still warm inside. The roads were still frozen and empty. The middle of the night, in the middle of winter, in the middle of nowhere. Nothing was moving, except the wind. They passed the end of Janet Salter's street. It was deserted. Holland was sitting close to the wheel, belted in his seat, his parka still zipped, its material stiff and awkward against him. Reacher was sprawled in the passenger seat, no belt, his coat open, its tails hauled around into his lap, his gloves off, his hands in his pockets. The ruts on the road were worn and wizened by the cold. The front tyres hopped left and right, just a little. The chains on the back whirred and clattered. There was a moon high in the sky, close to full, pale and wan, behind thin tattered ribbons of frozen cloud.

Reacher asked, 'How long are you guys supposed to stay deployed on the perimeter?'

Holland said, 'There's no set time. It will be a gut call by the warden.'

'Best guess?'

'Another hour.'

'So any cop we see before then is our boy.'

'If we see one at all.'

'I think we will,' Reacher said.

They made the turn on the old county two-lane parallel with the highway and headed west. Five miles, not fast, not slow. Wind and ice in the air. Then they turned again, north, on the narrow wandering ribbon, eight long miles. Then the runway loomed up, spectacular as always, imposing, massive, wide, flat,

infinitely long in the headlight beams, still clear and dry. Holland didn't slow down. He just thumped straight up on the moonlit concrete and held his line and held his speed. There was nothing but grey darkness ahead. No lights. No activity. Nothing moving. No one there. The wooden huts looked black in the distance, and behind them loomed the stone building, larger and blacker still.

Two hundred yards out Holland took his foot off the gas and coasted. He was still upright, still close to the wheel, still belted in, still trapped and mummified by the stiff nylon of his coat.

'Where should I put the car?' he asked.

'Doesn't matter,' Reacher said. He was still sprawled out, no belt, his hands in his pockets.

'We should hide it. The guy will see it. If he comes.'

Reacher said, 'He's already here.'

'What?'

'He just arrived.'

The car coasted and slowed. It rolled to a stop thirty yards from the first line of huts. Holland kept his foot on the floor. Not on the brake. The lever was still in gear. The engine's idle speed was not enough to push through the resistance of the snow chains. The whole car just hung there, trembling a little, not quite moving, not quite inert, right on the cusp.

Holland asked, 'How long have you known?'

Reacher said, 'For sure, about three minutes. Beyond a reasonable doubt, about thirty minutes. Retrospectively, about thirty-one hours. But back then I didn't know I knew.'

'Something I said?'

'Stuff you didn't say. Stuff you didn't do.'

'Like what?'

‘Most recently you didn’t slow down and kill your headlights when we hit the runway. The guy could have been here already. But you knew he wasn’t. Because you’re the guy.’

Holland said, ‘You’re wrong.’

Reacher said, ‘I’m afraid not. We spent an hour underground earlier tonight, and the first thing you should have done when we got back to the surface was call the Salter house. But you didn’t. I had to remind you. Turned out she was OK, because the guy hadn’t gotten to her during that hour. And you knew that in advance, because you’re the guy. Which is why you didn’t think to call. You should have faked it better.’

Holland said nothing.

Reacher said, ‘I had a conversation with Peterson last night. He came over at eight o’clock, when we thought the head count at the jail was going to come up one short. We were worried. We were tense. He took me to one side and asked me, was I armed? I said yes. I told him Mrs Salter was, too. Obvious questions, in a situation like that. You didn’t ask those questions the night before. You should have.’

Holland said, ‘Maybe I assumed. I knew Mrs Salter had guns in the house. She asked me for advice about ammunition.’

‘And it was good advice you gave. But you should have made absolutely sure those guns weren’t still in the box that night. Verbally at least, if not visually. Anyone would have done that, except a guy who knew for sure they weren’t going to be needed.’

Holland said nothing.

Reacher said, ‘Right back at the beginning, we found you confronting those bikers on the street. But you weren’t really confronting them, were you? You were listening to them. You were getting your instructions. A regular ten-minute lecture. Plato had decided. Kill the lawyer, kill Janet Salter. They were passing on the message. Then you heard Peterson’s car behind you and you threw your gun down in the snow, just to give yourself a reason to be standing there so long. Then you shoved one of them and started a fight. All staged, for Peterson’s benefit. And mine, I guess. And that thing about rolling the dice? No way could

they have avoided random checks so long, unless you were calling them and tipping them off. You were all working for the same guy. Which is why you let them leave town without a word.'

Holland said nothing.

Reacher said, 'Then much later Peterson and I put you on the spot. We showed up here just when it was safe for you to get the key out of the stove. You knew where it was. But you hadn't figured it out. You had been told. You were there to set things up. But we all went downstairs together. Because you couldn't think of a convincing way of stopping that from happening. And so Peterson saw stuff he was obviously going to react to. So you put that crap on the radio so when you killed him straight afterwards there would be sixty suspects in the frame, and not just you. And then you lied to me about Kapler. You tried to point me in the wrong direction. There were no rumours about drug money in Miami. If there were, my friend in Virginia would have found them long ago.'

Holland said, 'I could have killed Peterson here. At the time. Underground.'

'True. But not me too. You knew that. You're scared of me. You checked my record with the army. The woman in Virginia told me that. Your tag is on my file. So you knew the lawyer and Peterson and Janet Salter were one thing, and you knew I was another thing. They were easy. You waited on the road and put your strobes on and waved him down and the lawyer stopped right there. Why wouldn't he? He probably knew you. A chief of police from the next county? You've probably had breakfast together half a dozen times. And Peterson would follow you anywhere. And Janet Salter was probably thrilled to see you. Until you pulled your gun.'

Holland said nothing.

Reacher said, 'Three shell cases. Two of them right inside this car, and the third picked up off Janet Salter's floor. I'm guessing you dumped them in the trash cans right outside the police station. Should I call the old guy on the desk and ask him to take a look?'

Holland said nothing.

Reacher said, 'I'm guessing the fourth round is chambered right now. My round. Some kind of an old throw-down pistol. Maybe lost property, maybe a cold case.

Or maybe the bikers supplied it. Want to empty your pockets and prove me wrong?'

Holland said nothing.

Reacher said, 'But my round is going to stay right there in the chamber. Because I'm not like the other three. You knew that. You sensed it, maybe, and then you confirmed it with the army. So you were cautious with me. As you should be. I notice things. You've been trying to get to me for the last three hours. Dragging me here, dragging me there, always talking to me, always trying to figure out how much I knew, always biding your time, always waiting for your moment. Like right now. Back in the station house, you were debating with yourself. You didn't want to bring me here, and then you did want to bring me here. Because maybe your moment might just come out here. But it hasn't, and it didn't, and it never will. You're a smart guy and a good shot, Holland, but I'm smarter and better. Believe me. Deep down you're just a worn-out old country mouse. You can't compete. Like right now. You're all zipped up and belted in, and I'm not. I could shoot your eyes out before you even got your hand on your gun. It's been that way for the last three hours. Not because I really knew yet. But because that's just the way I am.'

Holland said nothing.

'But I should have known,' Reacher said. 'I should have known thirty-one hours ago. The first time the siren went off. It was staring me in the face. I couldn't understand how the guy had seen me without me seeing him. And I knew he would have to show up in a car, on the street, from the front. Because of the cold. And he did exactly that. And I saw him. I saw you. A minute after everyone else left, you showed up. Bold as brass, fast and easy, in a car, from the front. You came to kill Janet Salter.'

'I came to guard her.'

'I'm afraid not. The riot could have lasted hours. Even days. You said so yourself. But you left your motor running.'

Holland said nothing.

Reacher said, 'You left your motor running because you planned to be in and out real fast. You figured you could afford to be a little late up at the prison. Like you were tonight, presumably. But I was in the house. You were surprised to see

you were tonight, presumably. But I was in the house. You were surprised to see me there. You needed time to think. So you hung around, all conflicted. Mrs Salter and I thought you were conflicted about two competing duties. But really you were trying to decide whether I had one of Mrs Salter's guns in my belt, and if so, whether you could draw faster than me. You concluded that I did, and you couldn't. So eventually you left. You decided to try again another day. I'm sure Plato was upset about that. He was probably very impatient. But you did the job for him in the end.'

Holland was quiet for a long time. Then he said, 'You know why, right?'

Reacher said, 'Yes.'

'How?'

'I finally figured it out. I saw the photograph in your office. She looks just like her mother.'

'Then you understand.'

'She wasn't a prisoner. They made a half-assed attempt at hiding her, but she was there out of choice. That was clear. I guess she liked the lifestyle.'

'Didn't make her any less vulnerable.'

'No excuse. There were other ways of dealing with it.'

Holland said, 'I know. I'm sorry.'

'That's it? Three dead and you're sorry?'

Holland didn't answer. He just sat still for a moment longer. Then he took his foot off the floor and stamped down on the gas. The car leapt forward. Dry concrete under the wheels, a big V-8, twin exhausts, plenty of torque, heavy-duty suspension, not much squat, a fast rear axle, good for zero to sixty in eight seconds. Reacher was hurled back against the seat. They were thirty yards from the side of the hut. Ninety feet. That was all. The headlights blazed against it. It filled the windshield. It was coming right at them. The engine roared.

After thirty of the ninety feet Reacher had a Smith & Wesson out of his pocket. After sixty he had its muzzle jammed hard in Holland's ear. Before they hit he

had his left hand hooked over Holland's seat back, his arm rigid, his shoulder locked. The front end of the car punched straight through the wooden siding. The airbags exploded. The windshield shattered. The front wheels kicked up on the hut floor and the whole car went airborne. The front bumper hit a bed frame and smacked it like a cue ball and drove it into the paraffin stove. The stove tore out from under its pipe connection and clanged away like a barrel and the car fell to earth and ploughed on and hit the bed again and smashed it into the next bed across the aisle. The header rail above the windshield hit the unmoored stovepipe and bent it with a shriek and its raw end scraped the length of the car's roof and then the car was all the way inside the hut, still moving fast, the chains on the back thrashing and grinding across the wooden floor. Reacher kicked Holland in the knee and forced his foot off the gas. The car crushed beds two deep against the far wall and punched out the other side into the moonlight and landed hard and came to rest nose down half in and half out of the hut in a tangle of bent iron frames and tumbling plywood sheets. Both headlights were out and there was all kinds of grinding and rattling coming from under the hood. There was hissing and wheezing and ticking from stressed components. There was dust and splinters all around and frigid air was pouring in through the shattered front glass like liquid.

The Smith's muzzle was still hard in Holland's ear.

Reacher was still upright in his seat, still braced easily against the back of Holland's chair. The passenger airbag had inflated against his squared shoulder, and then it had collapsed again.

He said, 'I told you, Holland, you can't compete.'

Holland didn't answer.

Reacher said, 'You damaged the car. How am I going to get back to town?'

Holland asked, 'What are you going to do with me?'

Reacher said, 'Let's take a walk. Keep your hands where I can see them.'

I'll have plenty of time to read, Janet Salter had said, after all this fuss is over.

You reap what you sow.

They climbed out of the wrecked car into the cold and the wind and stepped

They climbed out of the wrecked car into the cold and the wind and stepped away into the narrow lane that separated the first row of huts from the second. Holland walked ahead and Reacher followed ten feet behind with the old .38 six-shooter held low and easy. It was the one Janet Salter had cradled through so many hours.

Reacher said, ‘Tell me about Plato.’

Holland stopped and turned around and said, ‘I never met him. It was all on the phone, or through the bikers.’

‘Is he as bad as he sounds?’

‘Worse.’

‘What’s supposed to happen tonight?’

‘Like you figured. He’s going to take the jewellery out and steal back some of the meth.’

‘And you were supposed to help?’

‘I was supposed to be here, yes. I have some equipment for him, and the key to the door.’

‘OK,’ Reacher said. Then he raised the .38 and pulled the trigger and shot Holland between the eyes. The gun kicked gently in his hand and the sound was the same as a 158-grain .38 always was outdoors in quiet cold air, a fractured spitting crack that rolled away across the flat land and faded fast, because it had nothing to bounce back from. Holland went down with a loud rustle of heavy nylon and the stiffness of his coat pitched him half sideways and left him lying on one shoulder with his face turned up to the moon. Thirty-eight hundredths of an inch was mathematically a little larger than nine millimetres, so the third eye in his forehead was a little larger than Janet Salter’s had been, but his face was a little larger too, so overall the effect was proportional.

Chief Thomas Holland, RIP.

His body settled and his blood leaked out and his cell phone started ringing in his pocket.

FORTY-TWO

REACHER GOT TO THE PHONE BY THE THIRD RING. IT WAS IN Holland's parka, in a chest pocket. It was faintly warm. Reacher hit the green button and raised it to his ear and said, 'Yes?'

'Holland?' Practically a yell. A bad connection, very loud background noise, a Spanish accent, nasal and not deep.

A small man.

Plato.

Reacher didn't answer.

'Holland?'

Reacher said, 'Yes.'

'We're fifteen minutes out. We need the landing lights.'

Then the phone went dead.

We? How many? Landing lights? What landing lights? Reacher stood still for a second. He had seen no electricity supply out to the runway. No humped glass lenses along its length. It was just a flat slab of concrete. It was possible the Crown Vic's headlights were supposed to do the job, in which case Plato was shit out of luck, because the Crown Vic's headlights were both busted. But then, headlights couldn't stretch two miles. Not even halogen, not even on bright.

Fifteen minutes.

Now fourteen and change.

Reacher put the phone in his own pocket and then checked through the rest of Holland's pockets. Found the T-shaped key to the stone building's door, and a scuffed old Glock 17. The throw-down pistol. There were fourteen rounds in the magazine and one in the chamber.

Hi

His round.

He put the key and the Glock in his pocket and took another Glock out of Holland's holster. His official piece. It was newer. Fully loaded. He put his gloves back on and bunched Holland's shirt collar and jacket collar and parka collar all together in his fist and dragged the body to the nearest hut and all the way inside. Left it dumped in the centre of the floor. Then he hustled back to the car.

Thirteen minutes and change.

The car was canted down at the front, half in and half out of the hut. He squeezed along its flank and in through the hole in the shattered wall and stood where the stove had been and opened the trunk.

All kinds of stuff in there. But three basic categories: normal car stuff where the Ford Motor Company had planned it to be, regular cop gear neatly stowed in plastic trays, and then other things thrown in on top of everything else. In the first category: a spare tyre and a scissor jack. In the second category: a fluorescent traffic jacket, four red road flares, three nested traffic cones, a first-aid kit, a green tackle box for small items, two tarps, three rolls of crime scene tape, a bag of white rags, a lockbox for a handgun. In the third category: a long coil of greasy rope, an engine hoist with pulleys and tripod legs, unopened boxes of big heavy-duty garbage bags.

Nothing even remotely resembling a landing light.

Twelve minutes and change.

He pictured the scene from a pilot's point of view. An airliner, a Boeing 737, descending, on approach, dim blue-grey moonlit tundra ahead and below. Visible to some degree, but uniform, and featureless. The guy would have GPS navigation, but he would need help from the ground. That was clear. But he wouldn't be expecting any kind of mainstream FAA-approved bullshit. That was clear, too. Nothing was going to be done by the book.

What would he need?

Something improvised, obviously.

Fire, maybe?

World War Two bomber pilots landing in East Anglian fog were guided in by long parallel trenches pumped full of gasoline and set ablaze. Small planes landing secret agents in occupied Europe looked for fields with three bonfires arranged in an L-shape.

Was Holland supposed to have set fires?

Eleven minutes and change.

No, not fires.

Reacher slammed the trunk lid and kicked away debris from behind the car. He squeezed around to the front and hauled away tangled bed frames from under the fenders and dragged splintered plywood off the hood. The engine was still running. It smelled hot and oily and the bearings were knocking loudly. He squeezed back and opened the driver's door and dumped himself in Holland's seat and put the transmission in Reverse. Hit the gas and the car jerked and sputtered and dragged itself backwards the way it had come. In through the hole in the far wall, across the floor, out through the hole in the near wall. It thumped down tail first and Reacher spun the wheel and jammed the lever into Drive and headed for the northeastern corner of the runway. The top right corner, from the Boeing's point of view. He braked to a stop and slid out and opened the trunk again and grabbed the four red road flares from the plastic tray. He tossed three into the passenger seat as he passed and spiked the fourth into the concrete. It ignited automatically and burned fiercely. A bright crimson puffball. Visible from a long way on a road, presumably even further from the air.

He got back in the car and headed for the opposite corner. The top left. He had no headlights, but the moonlight was enough. Just. A hundred yards. He used the second flare. Then he set off down the length of the two-mile stretch. No fun at all. The windshield glass was gone and the wind was biting. And the car was slow. And getting slower. It felt close to stalling out. It smelled of burning oil. The engine was knocking and vibrating. The temperature gauge in the dash was climbing steadily towards the red.

Not good.

Nine minutes and change.

Two miles should have taken two minutes, but the wounded car took more than four. Reacher used the third flare in the southwestern corner. The bottom left, from the pilot's point of view. He got back in the car. Backed up, turned the wheel, headed out. The car started juddering uncontrollably. It started losing all its power. The temperature needle jammed hard against its end stop. Steam and black smoke started coming out from under the hood. Thick clouds of it.

A hundred yards to go. That was all. One more corner.

The car made fifty yards and died. It just ground to a stop and stayed there, refusing to go on, hissing and inert, right in the middle of the runway's southern edge. The transmission was gone, or the oil pressure, or the water, or something, or everything.

Reacher got out and ran the rest of the way.

He spiked the last flare and stood back.

The crimson glow in the four distant corners was way brighter than anything else around it. And it came back off the shaped berms of ploughed snow twice as bright. Adequate, from the Boeing's flight deck. Looking forward and down from an oblique angle there would be no doubt about the shape and location of the landing strip. The car was dark and dead right across the middle of the near end, but it was no worse than an airport fence.

Two minutes and change.

Job done.

Except that Reacher was stuck two whole miles from where he needed to be, and it was a cold night for walking. Except that he was pretty sure he wouldn't need to be walking. He was pretty sure he could get a ride, if he wanted one, before too long. Maybe even before he froze. Which was good. Except that given the state of his current information it was highly likely his ride would get him to the stone building a little after Plato got there. Which was not good. Not good at all. And not even remotely what he had intended.

Plans go to hell as soon as the first shot is fired.

He hustled back through the frigid air to the dead car, and he leaned on its flank and watched the night sky in the south.

and watched the night sky in the south.

And waited.

A minute later Reacher saw lights above the horizon. Like stars that weren't stars. Tiny electric pinpricks that hung and twinkled and grew and danced a little, up and down, side to side. Spotlights in an airplane's landing gear, for sure, approaching head on, maybe ten miles out.

Then he saw lights below the horizon, too. Yellower, weaker, pooled on the ground, less stable, bouncing, moving much slower. Headlights. A road vehicle. Two of them, in fact, one behind the other on the wandering snowbound two-lane, approaching head on, crawling along, doing maybe thirty, maybe five miles out.

His ride.

Close, but not close enough.

He leaned back in the cold and waited and watched.

The Boeing got there first. It started out small and silent, and then it got bigger and noisier. It came in low and flat, all broad supportive wings and swirling heat shimmer and deafening jet whine and stabbing beams of light. Its nose was up and its undercarriage was down, the trailing wheels hanging lower than the leading wheels, like talons on a giant bird of prey ready to swoop in and seize the crippled car like an eagle takes a lamb. Reacher ducked and the plane passed right over his head, huge and almost close enough to touch, and the roiled air and shattering noise that trailed behind it threatened to knock him flat. He straightened again and turned and watched over the roof of the car as the plane skimmed and hung and deliberated and floated, a hundred yards, two, three, and then it put down decisively with a loud yelp of rubber and a puff of black smoke and then its nose tipped down and it ran fast and flat and true before the reverse thrusters cut in and slowed it in a bellowing scream.

Reacher turned back and faced south.

The road vehicles were still heading his way. They were moving slowly and carefully along the moonlit two-lane, cautious because of the curves and the ice and the bad surface, but relentless, a miniature convoy with a destination in mind. Their headlight beams swung left, swung right, bounced up, dipped down,

The first vehicle was a strange open-frame truck, with a big coil of heavy flexible pipe wrapped over a drum immediately behind the cab, and then a pump built into a square steel frame, and then a second coil of pipe on a second drum. The vehicle right behind it was the same general size and type, but behind the cab it had a big white tank, and a cherry-picker bucket, and a long articulated boom arm folded up and tied down for travel.

The first truck was painted in the colours of the Shell Oil Company.

It had the word Isuzu across its grille.

The statewide BOLO bulletin: an Isuzu N-series pump and a de-icing truck stolen by two absconded employees from a commercial airfield east of Rapid City. Stolen on Plato's orders, presumably, so that his 737 could be refuelled from the underground tank and then flown away safely through bitter night skies.

Reacher pushed off the flank of the car and waited. The pump truck's headlights hit him, and it slowed, and then its lights flicked up to bright, and then it stopped dead. For a second Reacher was conscious of his dark pants and khaki hat and tan coat. The coat was old, but it still looked like Highway Patrol issue. And the dead Crown Vic was parked crosswise, as if to block access to the runway. And no one uses plain Crown Vics except law enforcement. But the Rapid City guys must have been told that a bent cop would be waiting there to meet them, because after just a brief pause the pump truck moved on again, with the de-icer close behind. Reacher raised his hand, partly like a greeting, partly like a traffic stop, and a minute later he was sitting in the warmth inside the pump truck's cab, riding up the runway towards whatever was waiting for him at the other end.

Twenty-seven minutes past three in the morning.

Twenty-eight minutes to go.

FORTY-THREE

THE BOEING HAD TAXIED AND TURNED AND WAS PARKED AS NEAR as it could get to the first line of huts. Up close, it looked gigantic. A huge plane, high and wide and long, at temporary rest in the middle of nowhere, towering over the silent buildings behind it, hissing and whistling, an active, living presence in a passive, frozen landscape. Its engines were still spooling noisily and its belly light was still flashing red and its forward door was latched wide open. Lights were on inside. An aluminum housepainter's ladder had been extended down from the cabin to the runway surface below. It looked thin and puny and insubstantial next to the giant plane.

There were seven men on the ground. Or what looked like six men and a boy. There was no mistaking Plato. Four feet and eleven inches tall, but that abstract measurement did not convey the reality. He had a big man's heft and thickness and muscularity, and a big man's stiffness and posture and movement, but a small child's stature. He was not dwarfish. He was not a freak. His limbs and his torso and his neck and his head were all reasonably well proportioned. He was like an NFL linebacker reduced in size by exactly twenty-five per cent. That was all. He was a miniature tough guy. Like a toy.

He looked to be somewhere between forty and fifty years old. He was wearing a black goose-down jacket, and a black woollen watch cap, and black gloves. He looked very cold. The six men with him were younger. In their thirties, maybe. They were dressed the same as him. Black down jackets, black hats, black gloves. They were normal-sized Hispanic men, Spanish not Indian, neither short nor tall, and they looked very cold, too.

The pump truck drove around and parked close to the Boeing's wing and the de-icer parked behind it. Both drivers got out. They had no visible reaction to the abject temperature. They were Rapid City guys. They knew about cold. They had down jackets of their own. They were both white, medium height, and lean. Hardscrabble people, rural roots, worn down to the bare essentials. Arms, legs, heads, bodies. Maybe thirty years old, but they looked forty. Maybe a couple of generations off the farm.

Reacher stayed in his seat for a moment, keeping warm, and watching.

Plato was moving around inside a loose cordon formed by his six guys. No real reason for that. Maybe habit, maybe appearances. And Plato and his six guys were armed. They all had Heckler & Koch MP5Ks slung around their necks on nylon straps. Short stubby weapons, black and wicked. Thirty-round magazines. They rested raised and proud and prominent on the puffy coats. Butts to the right, muzzles to the left. All seven guys were right-handed. All seven guys had backpacks, too. Black nylon. The backpacks looked mostly empty apart from small heavy loads at the bottom. Flashlights, Reacher assumed. For deep underground. And spare magazines, presumably. For the guns. Always good to have. On full auto thirty rounds came out of an MP5 in two short seconds.

Sub-machine guns. A bullet manufacturer's very best friends.

Reacher climbed out of the pump truck's cab. Into the cold and the wind. The Rapid City guys were still doing OK with it, but all seven Mexicans were shivering hard. They had expressions of total disbelief on their faces. They had left a balmy evening knowing they were heading for somewhere cold, but understanding the word and feeling the feeling were two completely different things. Plato's gun was bouncing a little on his chest because his whole body was trembling. He was walking small tight circles and stamping his feet. But part of that might have been plain annoyance. He was clearly tense. He had a hard brown face and his mouth was set down in a grimace.

The Rapid City guys didn't read it right.

The guy who had driven the pump truck stepped up and spread his hands and smiled what he clearly hoped was a cunning smile, and he said, 'Here we are.'

A self-evident statement. Plato looked at him blankly and said, 'And?'

'We want more money.' A plan, obviously. Clearly discussed and pre-agreed with his buddy. Bar talk. Irresistible, over a third beer. Or a fourth. Show the guy the prize, and then yank it back and ask for more.

Can't fail.

Plato asked, 'How much more?'

Good English, lightly accented, a little slow and indistinct because of a cold face and the jet whine in the background.

The pump driver was used to talking over jet whine. He worked at an airport.

He said, ‘The same again.’

‘Double?’

‘You got it.’

Plato’s eyes flicked across three of his guys and came to rest on a fourth. He asked in Spanish, which because of the cold was slow enough for Reacher to follow: ‘Do you know how to work this equipment?’

The fourth guy said, ‘I think so.’

‘Think or know?’

‘I’ve done it before. With the fuel, I mean. Many times. The de-icing, not so much. No call for it. But how hard can it be? It’s just a spray, for the wings.’

‘Tell me yes or no.’

‘Yes.’

Plato turned back to the Rapid City guys. Put his gloved hands on his gun and raised it up and machine-gunned them both in the chest. Just like that. Full auto. First one, and then the other. Two brief bursts of fire, barely separated at all. Nine or ten rounds each. An impossibly fast cyclic rate. Shattering noise. Searing, vivid, foot-long muzzle flash. A hosing stream of ejected brass. The spent cases bounced and skittered away. The two guys went down in a mist of blood from their ripped bodies and a cloud of feathers from their torn jackets, first one, then immediately the other, with ragged bloody holes in their chests big enough to plunge a fist in. They fell side by side, dead before they hit the ground, their hearts torn apart. They thumped down and settled at once, rags and flesh, two small mounds close together.

The gunsmoke whipped away in the wind and the sudden noise faded and the jet whine came back, low and steady.

Twenty feet above them the pilot looked out the Boeing’s door.

Reacher was impressed. Long bursts, tightly grouped. Great trigger control, great

aim, and no muzzle climb at all. With gloves on, too. Plato had done this before. No question about that.

No one spoke.

Plato moved his thumb and tripped the release and the part-used magazine fell out and plinked against the concrete. Then he held his hand palm up and waited. The guy nearest to him scurried around and dug down in Plato's own backpack and came out with a fresh magazine. He slapped it into Plato's waiting palm. Plato clicked it into its housing, and tugged on it once to check it was secure, and then he turned to Reacher.

He said, 'You must be Chief Holland.'

Reacher said, 'Yes.'

'Finally we meet.'

'Yes.'

'Why isn't the door open and the equipment set up for me?'

Reacher didn't answer. He was thinking: what equipment?

Plato said, 'Your daughter is still under my direct control, you know.'

Reacher said, 'Where is she?'

'She moved on with the rest of them. She's living her dream.'

'Is she OK?'

'So far. But my threat against her still stands.'

Reacher said, 'My car broke down. The equipment is still in the trunk.'

'Where's your car?'

'At the other end of the runway.'

Plato didn't answer directly. The sign of a good leader. No sense in fussing

about what couldn’t be changed. He just turned to one of his men and said in Spanish, ‘Take the de-icing truck and fetch the equipment we need from the trunk of Chief Holland’s car.’

The guy headed for the de-icer’s cab and Plato turned back to Reacher and asked, ‘Where is the key for the building?’

Reacher took it out of his pocket and held it up. Plato stepped through his human cordon. Reacher rehearsed two possible moves. Drive the key through Plato’s eye, or drop it on the ground and drive a massive uppercut through Plato’s chin and snap his puny neck.

He did neither thing. Plato had five MP5Ks right behind him. Within a split second seventy-five nine-millimetre rounds would be in the air. Most of them would miss. But not all of them.

The de-icer truck crunched into gear and moved away.

Plato stepped up next to Reacher. The top of his head was exactly level with Reacher’s breastbone. His chin was exactly level with Reacher’s waistband. A tiny man. A miniature tough guy. A toy. Reacher reassessed the uppercut. Bad idea. Almost impossible to launch a blow from so low down. Better to drive an elbow vertically through the crown of his skull.

Or shoot him.

Plato took the key.

He said, ‘Now take your coat off.’

Reacher said, ‘What?’

‘Take your coat off.’

‘Why?’

‘Are you arguing with me?’

Six hands on six sub-machine guns.

Reacher said, ‘I’m asking you a question.’

Plato said, ‘You and I are going underground.’

‘Why me?’

‘Because you’ve been down there before. None of us have. You’re our local guide.’

‘I can go down there with my coat on.’

‘True. But you’re in civilian clothing. Therefore, no gun belt. The weather is cold and your coat is closed at the front. Therefore, your guns are in your outer pockets. I’m a smart guy. Therefore, I don’t wish to enter an unfamiliar environment with an armed adversary.’

‘Am I your adversary?’

‘I’m a smart guy,’ Plato said again. ‘The safe assumption is that everyone is my adversary.’

Reacher said, ‘It’s cold.’

Plato said, ‘Your daughter’s grave will be colder.’

Six hands on six sub-machine guns.

Reacher unzipped his coat. He shrugged it off and dropped it. It hit the ground with a padded clank. The Glocks, the Smiths, the box of rounds, the cell phone. Plastic and metal and cardboard. Thirty degrees below zero. Windy. A cotton sweater. Within seconds he was shivering worse than any of them.

Plato stood still. Not long, Reacher thought, before the de-icer truck got back and the driver described the smashed-up Ford. Therefore not long before someone looked down the row and found the damaged hut. Not long before someone searched the other huts. Not long before someone started asking awkward questions.

Time to get going.

‘Let’s do it,’ he said.

Twenty-seven minutes to four in the morning.

Twenty-two minutes to go.

FORTY-FOUR

THEY WALKED OVER TO THE STONE BUILDING, SEVEN MEN, SINGLE file, a strange little procession. Plato first, four feet eleven, then Reacher, six feet five, then Plato's five guys, all of them halfway between the two extremes. Plato's sixth guy was still safely away in the de-icer truck, looting Holland's dead car. The stone building was standing there waiting for them, quiet and indifferent in the moonlit gloom, the same way it had stood for fifty long years. The stone, the slate, the blind windows, the chimneys, the mouldings and the curlicues and the details.

The portico, and the steel slab door.

Plato put the key in the lock. Turned it. The lock sprang back. Then he stood still and waited. Reacher took the hint. He turned the handle down sixty degrees, precise and physical, like a bank vault. He pulled the door through a short arc. The hinges squealed. He stepped in behind it and pushed it all the way open, like pushing a truck.

Plato stood still and raised his hand, palm up. The man behind him stepped up and dug down in his backpack and came out with a flashlight. He slapped it into Plato's palm, the way an OR nurse feeds tools to a surgeon. Plato clicked it on and transferred it to his other hand and snapped his fingers and pointed at Reacher. The guy behind him swung his own backpack off his shoulder and took out his flashlight and handed it over.

It was a four-cell Mag-lite. From Ontario, California. The de facto gold standard for man-portable illumination. Alloy construction. Reliable and practically indestructible. Reacher clicked it on. He played the beam around the bare concrete chamber.

No change.

The place was exactly as he and two dead men had left it more than four and a half hours earlier. The circular stair head, the two unfinished ventilation pipes jutting up through the floor. The stale dry air, the stirring breeze, the smell of old fears long forgotten.

'After you, Mr Holland,' Plato said.

'After you, Mr Holland,' Plato said.

Which disappointed Reacher a little. He had lost his coat, but he still had his boots. He had entertained the idea of letting Plato go first, and then kicking his head off about a hundred feet down.

But, obviously, so had Plato. A smart guy.

So Reacher went first, as awkward as before. Big boot heels, small steps, clanging metal. The sound of the whining jets faded as he went down, and he heard Plato issuing a stream of instructions in Spanish: 'Wait until the de-icer gets back, then set up the equipment, then start the refuelling. Get the other three doors open on the plane, and get the other three ladders in position. Figure out how the de-icer works and figure out how close to take-off we need to use it. And put a man on lookout a hundred feet south. That's the only direction we have to worry about. Rotate every twenty minutes. Or more often, if you want. Your call. I want the lookout alert at all times, not frozen to death.'

Then Plato stopped talking and Reacher heard his feet on the stairs above him. Smaller steps, more precise. The metal still clanged, but quieter. The two flashlight beams went down and around, down and around, always clockwise, separated vertically by twenty feet, and not synchronized. Reacher took it slow. He was Holland now, in more than name. He was improvising, and hoping his moment would come.

On the surface the de-icer truck got back with the necessary equipment all piled on and around the passenger seat. The engine hoist, the rope, the garbage bags. The hoist was a sturdy metal thing, with three legs and a boom arm like the jib of a small crane. It was designed to be set up at the front of a car, with the jib leaning in over the engine compartment. The pulleys would produce multiplication of effort, according to ancient mechanical principles, allowing a lone operator to lift a heavy iron block.

Three of Plato's guys carried the hoist into the bunker and set it up with the jib leaning in over one of the ventilation shafts. Like fishing from a barrel. They started threading the rope through the pulleys. No free lunch. More weight meant less speed. Pull the rope a yard, and with one pulley in play a light weight would move the same yard, but with two pulleys in play a heavier weight would move just eighteen inches, and with three pulleys in play a heavier weight still would move just twelve inches. And so on. A tradeoff.

They chose to thread two pulleys. A balance of speed and capacity.

The guy who had driven the truck said nothing about the Ford.

Two hundred and eighty awkward steps. Reacher completed seventy of them, a quarter of the way down, and then he began to speed up. He saw a window of opportunity ahead. Set up the equipment, then start the refuelling, Plato had said. Which meant that there would be some busywork up top before one of his guys came down to connect the pump truck's hose to the fuel tank. Five minutes, maybe. Possibly ten. And five or ten minutes alone with Plato deep underground could be productive. So he aimed to get to the bottom as far ahead as possible. To prepare. So he speeded up as much as he could. Which wasn't much.

And which wasn't nearly enough.

Plato matched him step for step. Gained on him, even. For a man of Plato's stature, the winding stair was broad and palatial. Like something from a Hollywood production. And his feet were dainty. He was nimble and agile in comparison.

Reacher slowed down again. Better to save energy and avoid busting an ankle.

The guy who had sat in seat 4A was standing with the guy from seat 4B in the lee of the pump truck, out of sight of the stone building, hidden from the Boeing's flight deck windows, invisible to the sentry a hundred feet down the runway. The guy from 4A had texted the Russian: Cop car damaged. No getaway possible.

The Russian had replied: I will double your money.

The guy from 4B glanced over at the de-icer truck. The guy from 4A followed his gaze. A diesel engine, a little clumsy, not fast, distinctive in appearance, and stolen. But it was a vehicle.

He said nothing.

The phone buzzed again against his palm.

The Russian had offered: I will triple your money. Do it.

Triple the money was a fortune beyond comprehension. But even that paled

Triple the money was a fortune beyond comprehension. But even that paled against the prospect of a life without Plato in it.

The guy from 4B nodded. He had just driven the truck. He knew it worked.

The guy from 4A texted: OK.

Reacher passed through the second of the oboe nodes. Two-thirds of the way down. The individual sounds of four separate feet on metal merged and melded into a keening ghostly song that pulsed up and down the shaft and hung and oscillated in the still dead air, like an elegy for a tragedy about to happen. Reacher shivered and kept on going down into the darkness, his flashlight held between gloved thumb and forefinger, his other three fingers spread and brushing the wall. Above him Plato's beam turned and jumped and stabbed. Reacher's heel hit the two hundredth step. Eighty more to go.

The pump truck was basically a simple device. A relatively recent invention. In the old days tankers refuelled planes directly. In the modern world airports put fuel tanks underground, and skeletal trucks drove out on the tarmac and linked nozzles under manholes to nozzles under airplane wings. The hose on the reel directly behind the cab spooled out and connected to the underground source, and the hose on the reel at the other end of the truck spooled out and connected to the plane. In between was a pump, to suck fuel out of the ground and push it onward into the aeroplane's tanks. A simple, linear proposition.

The guys from seats 4A and 4B manoeuvred the truck as close as they could get it to the stone building's door, which put it about halfway between the tank far below them and the thirsty Boeing. One jacked the first nozzle on his shoulder and the other operated the electric motor that unwound the drum. The one with the nozzle on his shoulder walked the hose into the building and fed it down the second ventilation shaft, the one that the guys with the rope weren't using.

Reacher made it to the bottom. Same situation as before. He rested on the last step, nine inches off the round chamber's floor, its ceiling level with his waist, his upper body still inside the shaft, his face an inch from the curved concrete wall. Plato crowded in behind him, the same way Holland had before. Reacher felt the H&K's muzzle on his back.

Plato said, 'Move.'

Reacher ducked way down and got his shoulders under the ceiling and waddled forward, painfully, his legs hurting, his neck bent at ninety degrees. He dropped to his knees and folded himself sideways and sat down. He shuffled through half a turn and scooted away backwards, undignified, slow and awkward and claustrophobic, heels and knuckles and ass, once, then twice.

Plato stepped off the bottom stair and just walked straight into the chamber.

He took three confident strides and then stopped and looked around, erect, upright, with four clear inches between the top of his head and the concrete.

He said, ‘So where’s my stuff?’

Reacher didn’t answer. He was adrift. The world had flipped underneath him. All his life, to be taller had been to be better. More dominant, more powerful, more noticed, more advantaged. You got credibility, you got treated with respect, you got promoted faster, you earned more, you got elected to things. Statistics bore it out.

You won fights, you got less hassle, you ruled the yard.

To be born tall was to win life’s lottery.

Born small, two strikes against.

But not down there.

Down there to be tall was a losing ticket.

Down there was a world where the small guy could win.

‘Where’s my stuff?’ Plato said again, with his hand on his gun.

Reacher took his own hand off the floor and started to point, but then there were twin ragged thumps behind him, and a slap, and another thump. He shuffled around and saw that three packs of garbage bags had been dropped down the ventilation shaft, plus the tail end of a greasy coil of rope. Things he had seen before, in the trunk of Holland’s car.

Plato said, ‘We have work to do. It’s not exactly rocket science. We put the stuff

in the bags, we tie the bags to the rope, they haul them up.'

Reacher asked, 'How much stuff?'

'The plane will carry sixteen tons.'

'You'll be here all week.'

'I don't think so. I have about ten hours. The biker will come out of his little hidey-hole in the jail just after lunch time. And I arranged with the warden that he will keep your whole department on station right up to that point. So we'll be undisturbed. And a ton and a half an hour should be possible. Especially with you down here to help. But don't worry. The hard work will be done on the surface.'

Reacher said nothing.

Plato said, 'But we'll do the jewellery first. Where is it?'

Reacher started to point again, but then a brass collar on the end of a thick black hose dropped through the other ventilation shaft, right next to him. It thumped down on the floor and excess hose came tumbling down after it and coiled all around it. Then he heard feet on the steps way above. Distant tinkling and pattering in the stair shaft, getting louder, getting nearer. A man on his way down.

Refuelling was about to begin.

Plato asked, 'Where's the jewellery?'

Reacher didn't answer. He was estimating time. Two hundred and eighty steps. Somewhere between two and three minutes before the refuelling guy arrived, however fast he moved. And two or three minutes should be enough. It was a long time since Reacher had been in a fight that had lasted longer than two or three minutes.

A window of opportunity.

'Where's the jewellery?' Plato said again.

Reacher said. 'Find it yourself.'

The sound of feet on the stairs got a little louder.

Plato smiled. He pushed back his cuff and made a show of checking the time on the watch on his wrist, slow and nonchalant. Then he darted forward, fast and nimble and agile, and he aimed a kick at Reacher's side. From a sitting position Reacher swatted Plato's foot aside and came up on his knees and Plato stumbled away and Reacher pivoted up and lunged after him.

And hit his head hard on the ceiling, and scraped his knuckles, and collapsed back to his knees. Plato righted himself after a step and danced in and delivered the belated kick, a decent hard blow to the ribs on Reacher's back.

Then he stepped away and smiled again.

He said, 'Where's the jewellery?'

Reacher didn't answer. His knuckles were bleeding and he was pretty sure his scalp was torn. The ceiling crowded down on him.

Plato put both hands on his gun.

He said, 'You get one free pass. And that was it. Where's the jewellery?'

So Reacher used his flashlight beam and found the right corridor. Even from a distance the reflection came back bright and lurid. Plato walked towards it, fast and jaunty, no problem at all, right up on his toes, like he was outside on the street with just the sky above him.

He called over his shoulder, 'Bring some bags.'

Reacher shuffled over and grabbed a pack of bags, and then he shuffled after Plato, hobbled, restricted, constrained, humiliated, following the little man like a giant caged ape.

Plato was in the right corridor. He was doing what Holland had done. He was playing his flashlight beam the length of the shelf and back again, over the gold and the silver and the platinum, and the diamonds and the rubies and the sapphires and the emeralds, and the clocks and the paintings and the platters and the candlesticks. But not with greed or wonderment in his face. He was assessing the size of the packaging task, that was all.

the size of the packaging task, that was all.

He said, ‘You can start bagging this shit up. But first show me the powder.’

Reacher led him across the chamber, heels and knuckles and ass, low and deferential, all the way to the third of the three tunnels packed with meth. Still a staggering sight. Bricks stacked ten high, ten deep, a whole solid wall of them a hundred feet long, undisturbed for fifty years, old yellowing glassine glowing dull in the flashlight beams. Fifteen thousand packs. More than thirteen tons.

‘Is this all of it?’ Plato asked.

‘A third of it,’ Reacher said.

The feet on the staircase grew louder. The fuel guy was hustling.

Plato said, ‘We’ll take what’s here. Plus more. Until the plane is full.’

Reacher said, ‘I thought you sold it to the Russian.’

Plato said, ‘I did.’

‘But you’re going to take it anyway?’

‘Only some of it.’

‘That’s a double-cross.’

Plato laughed. ‘You killed three people for me and now you’re upset that I’m stealing? From some dumb Russian you never met?’

‘I would prefer you to be true to your word, that’s all.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I want my daughter to be OK.’

‘She’s with those guys out of choice. And ten hours from now I’ll have no further use for her, anyway. I’m never doing business here again.’

‘You’ll have no further use for me, either,’ Reacher said.

‘I’ll let you live,’ Plato said. ‘You did well for me. Slow, but you got there in the end.’

Reacher said nothing.

‘I am true to my word,’ Plato said. ‘Just not with Russians.’

Behind them they heard the last loud footstep on the last metal stair and then the first quiet footstep on the concrete floor. They turned and saw one of Plato’s men arrive, like all of them about five seven in height, therefore stooped but not too much. He had his gun on his chest and a flashlight in his hand. He was looking all around. Not curious. Just a guy getting the job done. He found the fuel line and picked it up one-handed and pulled it out straight and jerked it and heaved serpentine waves into it to work out the kinks. He asked in Spanish where the tank was and Reacher waited until Plato translated the question and then he pointed his flashlight beam at the relevant corridor. The guy hauled the heavy hose after him and disappeared.

Plato said, ‘Go start bagging the jewellery.’

Reacher left him communing with his stock in trade and shuffled the long way around. Five thousand gallons in a homemade tank. He wanted to be sure the connection was secure. He was going to be down there until Plato died, which was a minimum of a few more minutes and a maximum of ten more hours, and he preferred one thing to worry about at a time.

He found Plato’s guy finishing up. The brass end of the hose was neatly socketed into a matching brass fitment brazed into the end wall of the tank. The guy was nudging it one way, nudging it the other, feeling for looseness or play. He seemed to find none, so he opened a tap on the tank side of the joint. Reacher heard the fuel flow into the hose. Not much of it. Three gallons, maybe four. That was all. Gravity only, into the length of hose that lay on the floor at a lower level than the tank itself. For the rest, the pump would have to prime itself and then suck hard and haul it all up and out.

Reacher watched the joint. A single fat drop of kerosene formed where two fibre washers were compressed. It beaded large and waited and then fell to the floor and made a tiny wet stain.

That was all.

No more.

Safe enough.

Plato’s guy crouched a little and duck-walked back to the stairs and headed upward. Reacher shuffled on around the perimeter of the circular chamber and disappeared into a corridor far from the jewellery and far from the meth.

FORTY-FIVE

DO IT. SHORT SIMPLE WORDS, A SHORT SIMPLE COMMAND. OR A short simple plea, or a short simple request. Or a short simple half of a bargain. A very attractive bargain. Do it, and get extremely rich, and live happily for ever with respect and veneration from your whole community. They would be the men who took down Plato. Saints. Heroes. Songs would be sung, tales would be told.

The guy from seat 4A looked at the guy from seat 4B. They both swallowed hard. They were getting very close to doing it. Dangerously close. A hundred feet south a new sentry had just rotated into position. He was facing away, alert and on guard. Way far beyond him the flares still burned at the distant end of the runway. Fifty yards the other side of the Boeing's tail the third flare still burned. Fifty yards beyond the de-icer truck in the other direction the fourth flare was still a bright crimson puffball. Blue moon, white snow, red flame.

The other three guys were working in the plane. Opening the doors, setting the ladders, working out a system for hauling the stuff hand-to-hand along a human chain and then getting it up into the plane and stacking it safely on the floor of the old economy section.

The guy from seat 4A hoisted the end of the second hose on his shoulder. The guy from seat 4B hit the switch and the drum began to unwind.

Sixteen minutes to four in the morning.

Eleven minutes to go.

Reacher heard Plato moving about. Heard him step out of the corridor into the round chamber. Reacher was sitting on the floor in the first of the curved connecting tunnels. In what he was calling the B-ring. Like a miniature Pentagon, but round and underground. The central chamber was the A-ring. Then came the B-ring, and then the C-ring, and around the outside was the D-ring. All partially interconnected by the eight straight spokes. More than seventeen hundred linear feet of tunnel. Twenty-four separate junctions. Twelve random left turns, twelve random right turns. Plus a total of ten hollowed-out bathrooms and kitchens and storage chambers.

A warren.

A maze.

Reacher had been in it before, and Plato hadn't.

No cell signal, his guys all busy on the surface, no possibility of reinforcement.

Reacher waited.

Plato called, 'Holland?'

The sound of the word boomed and echoed and took unpredictable paths and seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere.

Reacher waited.

Plato called, 'Holland? Get your ass over here. Our deal isn't finished yet. Remember, I'll cripple her and mutilate her and let her live for a year before I finish her off.'

Reacher said nothing.

Plato called, 'Holland?'

No response from Reacher. Five seconds. Ten.

'Holland?'

Reacher said nothing. The big gamble came right then. Right at that exact moment in time. Fifty-fifty. Live or die. A smart guy with a dawning problem would hustle straight up the stairs and send foot soldiers down in his place. A dumb guy would stay to fight it out.

But so might a smart guy overcome by ego, and arrogance, and a sense of superiority, and a need never to appear weak because he was only four feet eleven inches tall.

Fifty-fifty.

Live or die.

Plato stayed.

He called, ‘Holland? Where are you?’

A trace of worry in his voice.

Reacher put his mouth close to the curved concrete and said, ‘Holland’s dead.’

The sound rode the walls and went all around and came back to him, a quiet-spoken sentence, everywhere and nowhere, conversational, but full of menace. Reacher heard Plato’s feet scuffling on the concrete floor. He was spinning in place, trying to locate the voice.

Plato’s feet went quiet and he called out, ‘What did you say?’

Reacher moved along an empty spoke into the C-ring. A slow, silent shuffle. No sound at all, except the whisper of fabric when the seat of his pants hit the floor. Which didn’t matter anyway. All sounds were everywhere. They hissed and sang and branched and travelled.

Reacher put his mouth to the wall and said, ‘I shot Holland in the head. Now I’m coming for you.’

‘Who are you?’

‘Does it matter?’

‘Tell me.’

‘I was a friend of Janet Salter’s.’

‘Who?’

‘The witness. Didn’t you even know her name?’

‘Are you the military cop?’

‘You’re about to find out who I am.’

A smart guy would have run for the stairs.

Plato stayed.

Plato stayed.

He called out, ‘Do you think you can beat me?’

Reacher called back, ‘Do you think bears shit in the woods?’

‘You think you can beat me down here?’

‘I can beat you anywhere.’

A long pause.

‘Where are you?’ Plato called.

‘Right behind you,’ Reacher said. Loud voice, booming echo. Fast feet scuffling on concrete. No answer. Reacher moved on, in the dark, his flashlight off. He heard Plato enter a corridor. A straight spoke. The sound of his feet narrowed and then bloomed and the tap of his heels came back from the right and the left simultaneously. Reacher scooted left, then right. Into a straight spoke of his own. Adjacent to Plato’s, apparently. He saw the glow of Plato’s flashlight as it passed the mouth of the C-ring. He moved on and stopped and lay down on his side, curled like a letter S, in the mouth of the straight spoke, just three feet from the main chamber. Down on the floor, to show a small target. Away from the vertical surfaces, because bullets rode walls, too. Not just sound. Any combat veteran would say the same. Narrow alleys, confined spaces, near-misses didn’t ricochet at gaudy angles. They buzzed and burrowed close to the brick or the stone. Flattening yourself against a hard surface did the other guy a favour, not you. Counterintuitive, and difficult to resist, but true.

He heard Plato stop in the mouth of his corridor. Saw the glow from his light. He was facing into the main chamber. Two possibilities. One, he would turn right, away from the tunnel where Reacher was waiting. Or two, he would turn left, towards it.

Hide and seek. Maybe the oldest game in the world.

The guy from seat 4A walked the second hose into the stone building. He wrestled it across the floor and around the stair head and pulled it over to the same ventilation shaft the first hose was in. He put it up on his shoulder again and faced the void and kicked with his knee until the nozzle fell into the shaft.

Then he fed the hose down after it, yard by yard, ten feet, twenty, thirty, forty, like he was chinning himself backward along an endless monkey bar. When he had a good sixty feet in the shaft he ducked out from under it and laid it down against the lip. He kicked it straight on the floor and checked it for kinks.

All good.

Up the shaft from the tank, through the pump, and straight back down the same shaft again.

A simple, linear proposition.

Do it.

He walked back out to the cold and found his friend. Asked him, ‘Can you hit the sentry from here?’

The guy from seat 4B looked down at his H&K. A four and a half inch barrel. A great weapon, but no more accurate than a fine handgun. And he was shivering hard. And not just from the cold.

He said, ‘No.’

‘So sneak up on him. If he sees you, tell him you’re there to relieve him. Keep him talking. I’ll hit the others as soon as they come this way out of the plane. Wait until you hear me fire, and let him have it.’

The guy from seat 4B said nothing.

‘For your mother. And your sisters. And the daughters you’ll have one day.’

The guy from seat 4B nodded. He turned around. He headed south. Slowly at first, and then faster.

Plato turned right. Away from where Reacher was waiting. A disappointment. Or perhaps not. Perhaps just a delay, and then eventually a benefit. Because the flashlight glow was dimming and brightening, then dimming and brightening, slowly and regularly and rhythmically. Which told Reacher that Plato was walking slowly around the circumference of the chamber, counterclockwise, playing the beam into one corridor at a time, pausing, checking carefully, and then moving on. No net loss. After all, in a circular space, turning right was

then moving on. No net loss. After all, in a circular space, turning right was ultimately the same thing as turning left. And counterclockwise was better than clockwise. Much better. For a number of reasons, which were about to be made plain.

To Plato, especially.

Reacher waited.

The flashlight beam moved on.

Then: from far above Reacher heard tiny sounds. Brief muted purrs. Four of them. Quiet enough to be close to the point of not being audible at all. Maybe the pump truck's starter motor turning over. Maybe the de-icer. Maybe something to do with the plane.

Maybe anything.

But if Reacher had been forced to guess worst case, he would have pegged them as triple taps from fast sub-machine guns.

Of which there were six on the surface.

Plato heard them too. His flashlight beam stopped dead. Silence.

Nothing more.

A long wait.

Then the flashlight beam moved on.

Reacher saw Plato from the back through the circular lattice of steel that was the bottom five and a half feet of the staircase. He was twenty feet away. A hundred and eighty degrees opposite. His flashlight beam was horizontal in the corridor directly across from Reacher's.

Reacher moved his right arm. He cocked it behind him, ready.

Plato moved on, still counterclockwise, still slow. His body was facing forward, walking a perfect circuit. His head was turned. He was looking to his right at a square ninety degree angle down each of the radial spokes. The flashlight was in his left hand, the beam across his body. Which meant that the gun was in his

his left hand, the beam across his body. Which meant that the gun was in his right hand. The gun was still strapped around his neck. Which meant that the muzzle was facing left, which was fundamentally the wrong way, for a right-handed guy walking a counterclockwise circle. It was facing inward, not outward. A bad mistake. It would take a fast awkward flex of the elbow and a complicated tangle in the strap to correct in a hurry.

Reacher smiled.

Not such a smart guy after all.

Plato kept on coming.

A quarter-turn to go. Two more spokes.

One more spoke.

Then: vibration in the hose that led away from the fuel tank. The pump had started, way up there on the surface. Reacher heard the swish and rush of liquid as the pump primed itself and sucked air and created a vacuum and fuel moved in to fill it. He heard a hiss of air from the tank as it began to empty, quiet at first, then louder.

The flashlight beam moved on.

It arrived.

It played down the long tunnel, concentrated just above Reacher's curled form. But scatter from the lens picked him up. Plato froze, a yard away. Just a split second. Reacher sensed it. And used it to whip his right arm forward. Like a desperate throw from the outfield, bottom of the ninth, the opposition's winning run heading for the plate. The Mag-lite was a foot and a half long. Heavy alloy, four D cells. Cross-hatching on the body. Great grip. Ferocious acceleration. Tremendous leverage. Muscle, fury, anger. Geometry and physics.

Reacher's flashlight hit Plato butt-end-first square on the forehead. A solid punch. Reacher spun on his hip and scythed with his legs and kicked Plato's feet out from under him. Plato crashed down, flat on the floor. Reacher rolled on to his back, rolled on to his other side, rolled right on top of Plato.

And the world flipped again. Now the horizontal was vertical and the vertical

was horizontal. No disadvantage in being tall. In fact, just the opposite. On the floor, the big guy always wins.

Reacher started hammering heavy blows into Plato's face, one, two, three, hard and vicious. Then he scrabbled for the H&K and got his hand on it just as Plato did. The two of them started a desperate tug of war. Plato was strong. Unbelievably, phenomenally strong for a man of his size. And impervious to pain. Reacher had his left hand on the gun and was using his right to hammer more blows to Plato's head. Four, five, six, seven. Plato was bucking and writhing and tossing left, tossing right. Reacher was on top of him, smothering him, all two hundred and fifty pounds, and he was in danger of getting thrown off. Plato was snarling and biting, curling and rearing. Reacher jammed the heel of his hand under Plato's nose and smashed his head down on the concrete, one, two, three. Then four.

No result.

Plato started kicking for Reacher's groin, bucking, thrashing, like he was swimming backstroke. Reacher pinned the H&K and clambered off and smashed a right to Plato's ribs. Plato coughed once, coughed twice, and blood foamed on his lips. He jerked up from the waist and tried to get Reacher with a head butt. Reacher clamped a giant palm over Plato's moving teeth and smashed his head back down on the floor.

Plato's eyes stayed open.

Then suddenly: sloshing, gushing, pouring liquid. Loud, forceful, relentless. Like a fire hose. Like ten fire hoses. Like a hundred. Like a waterfall. Roaring. The stink of kerosene. Reacher kept his left hand on the gun and scrabbled with his right and found Plato's flashlight and jammed his elbow in Plato's throat and played the beam towards the sound.

Liquid was sheeting out of the nearer ventilation shaft. A flooding, drenching, torrential flow. Hundreds of gallons. A deluge. It hammered on the concrete and bounced and spattered and pooled and raced across the floor. Like a lake. Like a tide. Within seconds the floor was soaked. The air was full of fumes. The flashlight beam danced and shivered and swam through them.

Kerosene.

Jet fuel

Jet fuel.

And it kept on coming. Like a giant faucet. Unstoppable. Like a burst dam. Gushing, sheeting, rushing, pouring, drenching. Plato bucked and jerked and twisted and got his throat out from under Reacher's elbow and said, 'What the hell is it? A leak?'

'Not a leak,' Reacher said.

'Then what?'

Reacher watched the flow. Relentless and powerful. And pulsing. It was the pump on the surface, running hard. Two hoses in the same shaft. One up, one down. One emptying the tank, the other wide open and dumping the contents straight back underground.

'What is it?' Plato said.

'It's a triple-cross,' Reacher said. His head was already aching from the fumes. His eyes were starting to sting.

'What?' Plato said.

'The Russian bought some of your guys. You're out of business.'

'They think they can drown me?'

'No,' Reacher said. 'They're not going to drown you.'

There was no possibility of drowning. There was too much floor area. Five thousand gallons would level out less than two inches deep.

He said, 'They're going to burn you to death.'

'Bullshit,' Plato said.

Reacher said nothing.

'How?' Plato said. 'They're going to drop a match down the stairs? It would go out on the way.'

Reacher said nothing. Plato wrenched away. Got to his knees. His nose was

Reacher said nothing. Plato wrenched away. Got to his knees. His nose was broken and leaking blood. Blood was coming out of his mouth. His teeth were smashed. One eye was closed. Both eyebrows were cut.

He put his hands on the H&K.

Then he took them off again.

Reacher nodded.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ he said. ‘The muzzle flash on that thing? With these fumes in the air? You want to do their work for them?’

Plato said, ‘How are they going to do it?’

Reacher said nothing. He was thinking. Picturing the scene on the surface, running options through his head.

See what they see.

Be them.

Not a match.

Plato was right.

A match would go out.

The guy from 4B gunned the de-icer truck and spun the wheel and took off east towards the top right corner of the runway. Fifty yards. Forty. Thirty. Twenty. He spun the wheel again and slewed through a tight circle and the guy from 4A jumped out of the passenger seat and ducked down and grabbed the burning flare at its base and pulled its spike out of the concrete. He held it away from his body and climbed back in the truck and kept the door open and held the flare at arm’s length in the slipstream. It burned brighter and it smoked and flickered. But it didn’t go out. The truck raced back. Fifty yards. Forty. Thirty.

The deluge kept on coming. It was never-ending. It poured and sheeted and hammered. The ventilation shaft was like a bathtub faucet increased in size by a factor of a hundred. Reacher was on his knees. His pants were soaked. The fuel

factor of a hundred. Reacher was on his knees. His pants were soaked. The fuel was already a good half-inch deep. The fumes were thick. Breathing was hard.

Plato said, ‘So what do we do?’

Reacher said, ‘How fast can you run up a flight of stairs?’

Plato got to his feet.

‘Faster than you,’ he said.

They were face to face, nose to nose, Reacher on his knees, Plato on his feet.

‘I don’t think so,’ Reacher said.

I’ll have plenty of time to read after all this fuss is over.

Reacher unleashed the uppercut from his knees. A colossal, primitive, primeval blow, driven all the way from the centre of the earth, pulsing through the wet concrete, through his knee, his thigh, his waist, his upper body, his shoulder, his arm, his wrist, his fist, every muscle and every fibre twitching just once, rippling fast in perfect propulsive sequence and harmony.

Plato’s jaw shattered and his head snapped back like a rag doll. He hung motionless for a split second and then he splashed down, hard and vertical.

Reacher was pretty sure he was dead when he hit the floor.

Then he made absolutely certain of it.

He clamped his hands on Plato’s ears and jerked his head one way and then the other until he felt the vertebrae pull apart and then he kept on doing it until he was sure the spinal cord was torn all the way to mush.

The deluge kept on coming, rushing, sheeting, torrential. The round chamber, once still and dry and ancient, was soaked with chemical stink and boiling with fumes, the fuel suddenly close to an inch deep, with small urgent waves racing outward from a frothing maelstrom directly under the roaring pipe.

Surely everyone’s afraid of death, Janet Salter had said.

Depends what form it takes, he had answered.

He ran.

He splashed across the floor on his knees and ducked his shoulders down and got his head up inside the stair shaft and crawled and clawed and scrabbled to his feet. He leaned in towards the centre pole and took the stairs three at a time, galloping madly, his left hand sliding up over the steel, his right hand pawing crazily at the wall, batting and clutching and grasping at every extra second. The sound of his feet on the metal was drowned out by the waterfall roar of the fuel from below. He charged on, three at a time, four at a time, not breathing, anaerobic, up and up and up, round and round and round, not counting, just running, running, running, climbing, churning, hammering, straining, hurling himself towards the surface.

The de-icer truck jammed to a stop and K-turned and backed up and straightened. Directly behind it, the stone building. Directly ahead of it, the runway. The guy from 4A got out and ran crouched with his arm straight and the flare in his hand. He stopped in the doorway and turned and held the flare behind him and paused for a second and then swung his arm and lobbed it in. The flare tumbled end over end, a bright pink firework hissing through the air. It hit the unfinished lip of the ventilation shaft and kicked up and turned over once more and then dropped straight down and out of sight.

Five minutes to four in the morning.

Sixty-one hours gone.

FORTY-SIX

IT WAS FOUR DAYS BEFORE THE SITE WAS COOL ENOUGH TO INSPECT. By that point there was a long line of agencies waiting to join the hunt. First on the scene were Homeland Security, the air force, the FBI, the Highway Patrol, and a group of specialist arson investigators drafted in by the government. The incident had attracted intense interest. The North American Air Defense Command had been the first to spot it. Their satellites had seen a bloom of amazing heat and their computers had interpreted it as either a missile launch or a missile strike. Their Russian equivalents had seen the same thing. Within seconds the White House had been on the phone, reassuring, and receiving matching reassurances. There were launch silos in South Dakota, yes, but not at that location. And in turn, no Russian missile had been fired at America.

The National Guard was sent in to secure a wide perimeter. Through it crept the waiting agencies, one by one. They set up forward operating bases five miles out. They sent patrols forward, as close as they dared. Then came news from the nearby town of Bolton of a strange toxic cloud borne on the westerly wind. The patrols were pulled back. Hazmat gear was issued. Doctors were dispatched to Bolton. Reported symptoms were confusing. It was as if a light dose of a psychostimulant drug had been administered to the entire population. Temporary euphoria and excitement were reported, as was difficulty in sleeping and enhanced sexual appetite. The air was tested. No conclusion was reached. The wind had been blowing strongly for days, all the way from Wyoming. No symptoms were reported further east in the state.

The patrols crept inward again.

Their first discovery was a crashed vehicle four miles south of the epicentre. It was an airport de-icing truck reported as stolen from a commercial airfield east of Rapid City. It seemed to have been driving south on the old county two-lane leading away from the site. The road was snowbound and the surface was bad. It seemed that the truck had skidded off the road and turned over at least twice. It was an ungainly vehicle.

Two bodies were found close by. Two unidentified men of Hispanic origin, wearing dark suits apparently purchased in Mexico, under brand new winter parkas. The men had severe perimortem injuries, presumably caused by the

crash, but they had died of exposure, presumably after crawling away from the wreckage. They were both carrying illegal fully automatic weapons. One gun seemed to have fired three rounds, and the other, nine. With that news, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms joined the roster of waiting agencies.

The patrols crept closer. By the middle of the second day the forward operating bases had been moved up to the southern edge of an old air force runway. At that new location they discovered a damaged and undriveable unmarked police car. It was positively identified by locals as the Bolton PD's property. It had been issued to the department's chief, Tom Holland. Holland had disappeared on the night of the fire. The Bolton PD was in disarray. It was dealing with three recent homicides, one of the victims being its own deputy chief, Andrew Peterson.

An observant fire officer taking a walk found the burned-out husks of two road flares, one in each corner of the old runway, apparently carefully placed. Which suggested the possibility of an unauthorized night landing. No flight plan had been recorded with the FAA. But through binoculars some agents claimed to see twisted wreckage just south of the epicentre that might or might not have been the remains of a large airliner. With that news, the National Transportation Safety Board joined the queue.

By the middle of the third day the Air Defense satellites showed the outer perimeter to have cooled to seventy degrees. The patrols moved up. The outer perimeter seemed to be about a hundred yards in diameter. Clearly some kind of fireball had bloomed, burned, and died back, but it had been brief compared to the main fire. The arson theorists began to run simulations on their laptops. Close inspection of the area inside the perimeter showed grievous damage. There was a dusting of ash a hundred feet out that might have been the remains of a human being. There was scorched and twisted aluminum that the NTSB claimed was the remains of an airliner, possibly a Boeing, possibly a 737.

The patrols moved up, into a dead world of twisted smoking fragments, some made of iron, some made of steel, some possibly from a vehicle, some smaller pieces possibly from weapons. Piled everywhere was debris from the plane. No attempt was made to quantify human remains. It would have been a hopeless task. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes, literally.

The only remotely intact structure was a small concrete stair head bunker disguised to look like a stone house. The air force claimed ownership. The original plans were lost, but anecdotally it was known to have been built fifty

years previously, to contemporary blast-proof construction standards. It had stood up well. The roof was damaged. The interior concrete was blistered and spalled and calcified, but still reasonably solid. There were three circular shafts dropping down through the floor. It was surmised that once there had been steel casings for two ventilation ducts, and a spiral staircase probably also made of steel, but they had first melted and then vaporized.

Which proved, the arson people said, that the fire had started underground.

They donned protective gear and were lowered what turned out to be a total of two hundred and ten feet into the earth. They found a sequence of small tunnels and chambers, more blistered and spalled and calcified concrete, some ash that might once have been organic, and, amazingly, more than one thousand intact diamonds.

The arson specialists set up shop in the Bolton police station and connected their laptops wirelessly to their mainframes back home. They started work. They drew three-dimensional models of the underground facility. They made some guesses and assumptions. They knew from police records that a pump truck had been stolen along with the de-icer. So, if the aluminum had been an aeroplane, and if there had been an underground storage tank, then the accelerant might have been jet fuel. Which was consistent with their estimates of the fire's temperature, the upper limit of which they felt was defined by the survival of the diamonds, and the lower limit by the fact that the snow on the ground had been melted for two miles in every direction.

Major Susan Turner saw the news every evening on the television, and read it every morning in the papers, and followed it all day on line. She stayed in her office in Rock Creek, waiting by the phone. She slept in her visitor chairs, leaning back in one, her feet up on the other. The phone never rang.

After a week the arson theorists presented their best guesses. The fire had been a refuelling accident. Possibly due to undischarged static electricity arcing between the plane and the hose, more likely due to vapour build-up underground and a spark from a boot heel on concrete. The fire had burned mostly two hundred and ten feet below the surface, with enhanced thermodynamic characteristics due to a strange aerodynamic stasis in which a gale of air had howled down the stair shaft and the products of combustion had blasted up the twin ventilation shafts, in exactly opposite directions but with perfectly equal masses and velocities, in what amounted to a controlled and everlasting

masses and velocities, in what amounted to a controlled and everlasting explosion in a narrow vertical cylinder made of fireproof material. Like a rocket blasting off, but upside down, heading for the centre of the earth, not the sky. The roof damage was felt to prove it. Two temporary caps placed in the fake chimneys fifty years earlier had blown out and were found six hundred yards away. It was estimated that the narrow cone of flame might have reached a thousand feet above ground level, thereby mimicking the heat signature of a launching missile.

It was felt the initial phase of the fire might have lasted four hours. Then when the fuel load had depleted below a certain critical point the stasis had collapsed and a fireball had bloomed upward and outward, at a lower but still tremendous temperature, and had burned for an hour or so before collapsing again and finally burning out.

The toxic cloud in Bolton could not be explained. The air force admitted to storing surplus aircrew requirements from World War Two in the facility, all of it tanned leather in the form of helmets and boots and flying jackets, and it was felt that chemical residue from the tanning process might have been responsible for temporary adverse medical effects.

The presence of the diamonds was not explained, either. A theory was advanced that they had been stolen in Europe in the last days of the war, and entrusted to a quartermaster to be smuggled home, but had been mislaid and routed to the wrong destination.

After a series of discreet phone calls from the Pentagon, both the FBI and the local agencies in South Dakota concluded that in the absence of remains positively identifiable as human, no homicide investigation could be opened.

Two weeks later Kim Peterson moved with her children to a small rented house in Sioux Falls, to be nearer her father and their grandfather. Not exactly a teeming metropolis, but at least there were things to be seen from her kitchen window.

Four weeks later Susan Turner was deployed to Afghanistan. Elements of the 110th were operating there, and her presence was required. On her last day in Virginia she put Jack Reacher’s old service file in a khaki envelope and marked it Return to Human Resources Command. She left it front and centre on the damaged desk. Then she walked out of the old Rock Creek office, and closed the

door with the fluted glass window, and walked along the narrow linoleum corridor, and down the stone stairs, and out to her waiting car.

To be continued
30/9/10

Worth Dying For

ONE

ELDRIDGE TYLER WAS DRIVING A LONG STRAIGHT TWO-LANE ROAD in Nebraska when his cell phone rang. It was very late in the afternoon. He was taking his granddaughter home after buying her shoes. His truck was a crew-cab Silverado the colour of a day-old newspaper, and the kid was flat on her back on the small rear seat. She was not asleep. She was lying there wide awake with her legs held up. She was staring fascinated at the huge white sneakers wobbling around in the air two feet above her face. She was making strange sounds with her mouth. She was eight years old. Tyler figured she was a late developer.

Tyler's phone was basic enough to be nothing fancy, but complex enough to have different ringtones against different numbers. Most played the manufacturer's default tune, but four were set to sound a low urgent note halfway between a fire truck siren and a submarine's dive klaxon. And that sound was what Tyler heard, in the late afternoon, on the long straight two-lane road in Nebraska, ten miles south of the outlet store and twenty miles north of home. So he fumbled the phone up from the console and hit the button and raised it to his ear and said, 'Yes?'

A voice said, 'We might need you.'

Tyler said, 'Me?'

'Well, you and your rifle. Like before.'

Tyler said, 'Might?'

'At this stage it's only a precaution.'

'What's going on?'

'There's a guy sniffing around.'

There's a guy sniffing around.

'Close?'

'Hard to say.'

'How much does he know?'

'Some of it. Not all of it yet.'

'Who is he?'

'Nobody. A stranger. Just a guy. But he got involved. We think he was in the service. We think he was a military cop. Maybe he didn't lose the cop habit.'

'How long ago was he in the service?'

'Ancient history.'

'Connections?'

'None at all, that we can see. He won't be missed. He's a drifter. Like a hobo. He blew in like a tumbleweed. Now he needs to blow out again.'

'Description?'

'He's a big guy,' the voice said. 'Six-five at least, probably two-fifty. Last seen wearing a big old brown parka and a wool cap. He moves funny, like he's stiff. Like he's hurting.'

'OK,' Tyler said. 'So where and when?'

'We want you to watch the barn,' the voice said. 'All day tomorrow. We can't let him see the barn. Not now. If we don't get him tonight, he's going to figure it out eventually. He's going to head over there and take a look.'

'He's going to walk right into it, just like that?'

'He thinks there are four of us. He doesn't know there are five.'

'That's good.'

‘Shoot him if you see him.’

‘I will.’

‘Don’t miss.’

‘Do I ever?’ Tyler said. He clicked off the call and dumped the phone back on the console and drove on, the little girl’s new shoes waving in his mirror, dead winter fields ahead, dead winter fields behind, darkness to his left, the setting sun to his right.

The barn had been built long ago, when moderate size and wooden construction had been appropriate for Nebraska agriculture. Its function had since been supplanted by huge metal sheds built in distant locations chosen solely on the basis of logistical studies. But the old place had endured, warping slowly, rotting slowly, leaning and weathering. All around it was an apron of ancient blacktop that had been heaved by winter frosts and cracked by summer sun and laced with wiry weeds. The main door was a slider built of great baulks of timber banded together with iron, hung off an iron rail by iron wheels, but the gradual tilt of the building had jammed it solid in its tracks. The only way in was the judas hole, which was a small conventional door inset in the slider, a little left of its centre, a little smaller than man-sized.

Eldridge Tyler was staring at that small door through the scope on his rifle. He had been in position an hour early, well before dawn, a precaution he considered prudent. He was a patient man. And thorough. And meticulous. He had driven his truck off the road and followed winding tractor ruts through the dark, and he had parked in an ancient three-sided shelter designed long ago to keep spring rain off burlap fertilizer sacks. The ground was frozen hard and he had raised no dust and left no sign. He had shut down the big V-8 and stepped back to the shelter’s entrance and tied a tripwire across it, made of thin electric cable insulated with black plastic, set shin-high to a tall man.

Then he had walked back to his truck, and he had climbed into the load bed, and he had stepped on the roof of the cab, and he had passed his rifle and a canvas tote bag up on to a half-loft built like a shelf under the shelter’s peaked roof. He had levered himself up after them, and crawled forward, and eased a loose louvre out of the ventilation hole in the loft’s gable wall, which would give him a clear view of the barn exactly a hundred and twenty yards north, just as soon as there was light in the sky. No luck involved. He had scouted the location many

years before, the first time his four friends had called on him for help, and he had prepared well, driving in the nails for the tripwire, pacing out the distance to the barn, and loosening the louvre. Now he had once again gotten comfortable up on the half-loft, and he had kept as warm as he could, and he had waited for the sun to come up, which it had eventually, pale and wan.

His rifle was the Grand Alaskan model built in America by the Arnold Arms Company. It was chambered for the .338 Magnum and fitted with a 26-inch barrel and had a stock carved from exhibition-grade English walnut. It was a seven-thousand-dollar item, good against most anything on four legs, better than good against anything on two. The scope was by Leica, a nine-hundred-dollar Ultravid with a standard crosshairs engraving on the reticle. Tyler had it zoomed through about two-thirds of its magnification so that at a hundred and twenty yards it showed a circular slice of life about ten feet high and ten feet across. The pale morning sun was low in the east, and its soft grey light was coming in almost horizontal across the dormant land. Later it would rise a little and swing south, and then it would fall away into the west, all of which was good, because it meant even a target wearing a brown coat would stand out well against the brown of the faded timber baulks, all day long.

Tyler worked on the assumption that most people were right-handed, and therefore his target would stand a little left of centre so that his right hand when extended would meet the handle in the middle of the judas hole's narrow panel. He further figured that a man who was stiff and hurting would stand in close, to limit his required range of movement to what was most comfortable. The door itself was less than six feet high, but because it was inset in the larger slider its lower edge was about nine inches above the grade. A man six feet five inches tall had the centre of his skull about seventy-three inches off the ground, which in terms of the vertical axis put the optimum aiming point about six inches below the top of the judas hole. And a man who weighed 250 pounds would be broad in the shoulders, which at the moment of trying to open the door would put the centre of his skull maybe a foot and a half left of his right hand, which in terms of the horizontal axis would put the aiming point about six inches beyond the left edge of the door.

Six inches down, six inches left. Tyler reached back and pulled two plastic packages of long-grain rice from his canvas tote bag. Brand new from the grocery store, five pounds each. He stacked them under the rifle's forestock and tamped the fine walnut down into them. He snuggled behind the butt and put his eye back to the scope and laid the crosshairs on the top left corner of the door.

eye back to the scope and laid the crosshairs on the top left corner of the door. He eased them down, and eased them left. He laid his finger gently against the trigger. He breathed in, and breathed out. Below him his truck ticked and cooled and the living smells of gasoline and cold exhaust drifted up and mixed with the dead smells of dust and old wood. Outside, the sun continued to climb and the light grew a little stronger. The air was damp and heavy, cold and dense, the kind of air that keeps a baseball inside the park, the kind of air that cradles a bullet and holds it straight and true.

Tyler waited. He knew he might have to wait all day, and he was prepared to. He was a patient man. He used the dead time visualizing the sequence of possible events. He imagined the big man in the brown coat stepping into the scope's field of view, stopping, standing still, turning his back, putting his hand on the handle.

A hundred and twenty yards.

A single high velocity round.

The end of the road.

TWO

JACK REACHER WAS THE BIG MAN IN THE BROWN COAT, AND FOR HIM that particular road had started four miles away, in the middle of an evening, with a ringing telephone in a motel lounge at a crossroads, where a driver who had given him a ride had let him out before turning in a direction Reacher didn't want to go. The land all around was dark and flat and dead and empty. The motel was the only living thing in sight. It looked like it had been built forty or fifty years earlier in a burst of commercial enthusiasm. Perhaps great possibilities had been anticipated for that location. But clearly the great possibilities had never materialized, or perhaps they had been illusions to begin with. One of the four crossroads lots held the abandoned shell of a gas station. Another had a poured foundation, perhaps for a large store or even a small mall, with nothing ever built on it. One was completely empty.

But the motel had endured. It was an adventurous design. It looked like the drawings Reacher had seen as a kid in boys' comic books, of space colonies set up on the moon or on Mars. The main building was perfectly round, with a domed roof. Beyond it each cabin was a circular domed structure of its own, trailing away from the mothership in a lazy curl, getting smaller as they went to exaggerate the perspective. Family rooms near the office, individual accommodations down the line. All the siding was painted silver, and there were vertical aluminium accents spaced to frame the windows and the doors. Concealed neon lighting in the eaves of the circular roofs cast a ghostly blue glow. The paths all around were made of grey gravel boxed in with timbers that were also painted silver. The pole the motel sign was set on was disguised with painted plywood to look like a space rocket resting on a tripod of slim fins. The motel's name was the Apollo Inn, and it was written in letters that looked like the numbers on the bottom of a bank cheque.

Inside, the main building was mostly an open space, except for a slice boxed off for a back office and what Reacher guessed were two restrooms. There was a curved reception counter and a hundred feet opposite there was a curved bar. The place was basically a lounge, with a pie-shaped parquet dance floor and huddles of red velvet chairs set around cocktail tables equipped with lamps with tasselled shades. The interior of the domed roof was a concave cyclorama washed by red neon. There was plenty more indirect lighting everywhere else, all of it red or pink. There was tinkly piano music playing softly over hidden

loudspeakers. The whole place was bizarre, like a 1960s vision of Las Vegas transplanted to outer space.

And the whole place was deserted, apart from one guy at the bar and one guy behind it. Reacher waited at the reception counter and the guy behind the bar hustled over and seemed genuinely surprised when Reacher asked him for a room, as if such requests were rare. But he stepped to it smartly enough and coughed up a key in exchange for thirty dollars in cash. He was more than middle-aged, maybe fifty-five or sixty, not tall, not lean, with a full head of hair dyed a lively russet colour that Reacher was more used to seeing on Frenchwomen of a certain age. He put Reacher's thirty bucks in a drawer and made a fussy notation in a book. Probably the heir of the lunatics who had built the place. Probably worked nowhere else his whole life, probably making ends meet by pulling quintuple duty as manager, desk clerk, barman, handyman and maid. He closed the book and put it in a different drawer and set off back towards the bar.

'Got coffee over there?' Reacher asked him.

The guy turned and said, 'Sure,' with a smile and a measure of satisfaction in his voice, as if an ancient decision to set a Bunn flask going every night had been finally vindicated. Reacher followed him through the neon wash and propped himself on a stool three spaces away from the other customer. The other customer was a man of about forty. He was wearing a thick tweed sports coat with leather patches at the elbows. He had those elbows on the bar, and his hands were curled protectively around a rocks glass full of ice and amber liquid. He was staring down at it with an unfocused gaze. Probably not his first glass of the evening. Maybe not even his third or his fourth. His skin was damp. He looked pretty far gone.

The guy with the dyed hair poured coffee into a china mug decorated with the NASA logo and slid it across the bar with great pride and ceremony. Maybe a priceless antique.

'Cream?' he asked. 'Sugar?'

'Neither,' Reacher said.

'Passing through?'

‘Aiming to turn east as soon as I can.’

‘How far east?’

‘All the way east,’ Reacher said. ‘Virginia.’

The guy with the hair nodded sagely. ‘Then you’ll need to go south first. Until you hit the Interstate.’

‘That’s the plan,’ Reacher said.

‘Where did you start out today?’

‘North of here,’ Reacher said.

‘Driving?’

‘Hitching rides.’

The guy with the hair said nothing more, because there was nothing more to say. Bartenders like to stay cheerful, and there was no cheerful direction for the conversation to go. Hitching a ride on a back road in the dead of winter in the forty-first least densely populated state of America’s fifty was not going to be easy, and the guy was too polite to say so. Reacher picked up the mug and tried to hold it steady. A test. The result was not good. Every tendon and ligament and muscle from his fingertips to his ribcage burned and quivered and the microscopic motion in his hand set up small concentric ripples in the coffee. He concentrated hard and brought the mug to his lips, aiming for smoothness, achieving lurching, erratic movement. The drunk guy watched him for a moment and then looked away. The coffee was hot and a little stewed, but it had caffeine in it, which was really all it needed. The drunk guy took a sip from his glass and put it back on its coaster and stared at it miserably. His lips were parted slightly and bubbles of moisture were forming in their corners. He sipped again. Reacher sipped again, slower. Nobody spoke. The drunk guy finished up and got a refill. Jim Beam. Bourbon, at least a triple. Reacher’s arm started to feel a little better. Coffee, good for what ails you.

Then the phone rang.

Actually, two phones rang. One number, two instruments, one over on the reception desk, the other on a shelf behind the bar. Quintuple duty. The guy with

reception desk, the other on a shelf behind the bar. Quintuple duty. The guy with the hair couldn't be everywhere at once. He picked up and said, 'This is the Apollo Inn,' just as proudly and brightly and enthusiastically as if it was the establishment's first-ever call on opening night. Then he listened for a spell and pressed the mouthpiece to his chest and said, 'Doctor, it's for you.'

Automatically Reacher glanced backward, looking for a doctor. No one there. Beside him the drunk guy said, 'Who is it?'

The bartender said, 'It's Mrs Duncan.'

The drunk guy said, 'What's her problem?'

'Her nose is bleeding. Won't stop.'

The drunk guy said, 'Tell her you haven't seen me.'

The guy with the hair relayed the lie and put the phone down. The drunk guy slumped and his face dropped almost level with the rim of his glass.

'You're a doctor?' Reacher asked him.

'What do you care?'

'Is Mrs Duncan your patient?'

'Technically.'

'And you're blowing her off?'

'What are you, the ethics board? It's a nosebleed.'

'That won't stop. Could be serious.'

'She's thirty-three years old and healthy. No history of hypertension or blood disorders. She's not a drug user. No reason to get alarmed.' The guy picked up his glass. A gulp, a swallow, a gulp, a swallow.

Reacher asked, 'Is she married?'

'What, marriage causes nosebleeds now?'

‘Sometimes,’ Reacher said. ‘I was a military cop. Sometimes we would get called off-post, or to the married quarters. Women who get hit a lot take a lot of aspirin, because of the pain. But aspirin thins the blood, so the next time they get hit, they don’t stop bleeding.’

The drunk guy said nothing.

The barman looked away.

Reacher said, ‘What? This happens a lot?’

The drunk guy said, ‘It’s a nosebleed.’

Reacher said, ‘You’re afraid of getting in the middle of a domestic dispute?’

No one spoke.

‘There could be other injuries,’ Reacher said. ‘Maybe less visible. She’s your patient.’

No one spoke.

Reacher said, ‘Bleeding from the nose is the same as bleeding from anyplace else. If it doesn’t stop, she’s going to pass out. Like a knife wound. You wouldn’t leave her sitting there with a knife wound, would you?’

No one spoke.

‘Whatever,’ Reacher said. ‘Not my business. And you’d be no good anyway. You’re not even fit to drive out there, wherever she is. But you should call someone.’

The drunk guy said, ‘There isn’t anyone. There’s an emergency room sixty miles away. But they’re not going to send an ambulance sixty miles for a nosebleed.’

Reacher took another sip of coffee. The drunk guy left his glass alone. He said, ‘Sure, I would have a problem driving. But I’d be OK when I got there. I’m a good doctor.’

‘Then I’d hate to see a bad one,’ Reacher said.

‘I know what’s wrong with you, for instance. Physically, I mean. Mentally, I can’t comment.’

‘Don’t push it, pal.’

‘Or what?’

Reacher said nothing.

‘It’s a nosebleed,’ the doctor said again.

‘How would you treat it?’ Reacher asked.

‘A little local anaesthetic. Pack the nasal cavities with gauze. The pressure would stop the bleeding, aspirin or no aspirin.’

Reacher nodded. He’d seen it done that way before, in the army. He said, ‘So let’s go, doctor. I’ll drive.’

THREE

THE DOCTOR WAS UNSTEADY ON HIS FEET. HE DID THE USUAL drunk-guy thing of walking across a flat floor and making it look like he was walking up a hill. But he got out to the lot OK and then the cold air hit him and he got some temporary focus. Enough to find his car keys, anyway. He patted one pocket after another and eventually came out with a big bunch on a worn leather fob that had Duncan Transportation printed on it in flaking gold.

‘Same Duncan?’ Reacher asked.

The guy said, ‘There’s only one Duncan family in this county.’

‘You treat all of them?’

‘Only the daughter-in-law. The son goes to Denver. The father and the uncles treat themselves with roots and berries, for all I know.’

The car was a Subaru wagon. It was the only vehicle in the lot. It was reasonably new and reasonably clean. Reacher found the remote on the fob and clicked it open. The doctor made a big show of heading for the driver’s door and then ruefully changing direction. Reacher got in and racked the seat back and started the engine and found the lights.

‘Head south,’ the doctor said.

Reacher coughed.

‘Try not to breathe on me,’ he said. ‘Or the patient.’

He put his hands on the wheel the same way a person might manoeuvre two baseball gloves on the end of two long sticks. When they got there he clamped his fingers and held on tight, to relieve the pressure on his shoulders. He eased out of the lot and turned south. It was full dark. Nothing to see, but he knew the land was flat and infinite all around.

‘What grows here?’ he asked, just to keep the doctor awake.

‘Corn, of course,’ the guy said. ‘Corn and more corn. Lots and lots of corn. More

corn than a sane man ever wants to see.’

‘You local?’

‘From Idaho originally.’

‘Potatoes.’

‘Better than corn.’

‘So what brought you to Nebraska?’

‘My wife,’ the guy said. ‘Born and raised right here.’

They were quiet for a moment, and then Reacher asked, ‘What’s wrong with me?’

The doctor said, ‘What?’

‘You claimed you knew what’s wrong with me. Physically, at least. So let’s hear it.’

‘What is this, an audition?’

‘Don’t pretend you don’t need one.’

‘Go to hell. I’m functioning.’

‘Prove it.’

‘I know what you did,’ the guy said. ‘I don’t know how.’

‘What did I do?’

‘You strained everything from your flexor digiti minimi brevis to your quadratus lumborum, both sides of your body, just about symmetrically.’

‘Try English, not Latin.’

‘You damaged every muscle, tendon and ligament associated with moving your arms, all the way from your little fingers to the anchor on your twelfth rib. You’ve got pain and discomfort and your fine motor control is screwed up

You've got pain and discomfort and your fine motor control is screwed up because every system is barking.'

'Prognosis?'

'You'll heal.'

'When?'

'A few days. Maybe a week. You could try aspirin.'

Reacher drove on. He cracked his window an inch, to suck out the bourbon fumes. They passed a small cluster of three large homes, set close together a hundred yards off the two-lane road at the end of a long shared driveway. They were all hemmed in together by a post-and-rail fence. They were old places, once fine, still sturdy, now maybe a little neglected. The doctor turned his head and took a long hard look at them, and then he faced front again.

'How did you do it?' he asked.

'Do what?' Reacher said.

'How did you hurt your arms?'

'You're the doctor,' Reacher said. 'You tell me.'

'I've seen the same kind of symptoms twice before. I volunteered in Florida after one of the hurricanes. A few years ago. I'm not such a bad guy.'

'And?'

'People who get caught outside in a hundred-mile-an-hour wind either get bowled along the street, or they catch on to a cyclone fence and try to haul themselves to safety. Like dragging their own bodyweight against the resistance of a gale. Unbelievable stress. That's how the injuries happen. But yours aren't more than a couple of days old, judging by the way you look. And you said you came in from the north. No hurricanes north of here. And it's the wrong season for hurricanes, anyway. I bet there wasn't a hurricane anywhere in the world this week. Not a single one. So I don't know how you hurt yourself. But I wish you well for a speedy recovery. I really do.'

Reacher said nothing.

Reacher said nothing.

The doctor said, ‘Left at the next crossroads.’

*

They got to the Duncan house five minutes later. It had exterior lighting, including a pair of spots angled up at a white mailbox, one from each side. The mailbox had Duncan written on it. The house itself looked like a restored farmhouse. It was modest in terms of size but immaculate in terms of condition. There was a front lawn of hibernating grass with an antique horse buggy parked on it. Tall spoked wheels, long empty shafts. There was a long straight driveway leading to an outbuilding big enough to have been a working barn back when work was done around the place. Now it was a garage. It had three sets of doors. One set was standing open, as if someone had left in a hurry.

Reacher stopped the car level with a path that led to the front door.

‘Show time, doctor,’ he said. ‘If she’s still here.’

‘She will be,’ the guy said.

‘So let’s go.’

They got out of the car.

FOUR

THE DOCTOR TOOK A LEATHER BAG FROM THE BACK OF THE CAR. Then he repeated his uphill drunk-guy stumble all the way along the path, this time with more reason, because the gravel surface was difficult. But he made it unassisted to the door, which was a fine piece of old wood with glassy white paint carefully applied to it. Reacher found a brass button and laid a knuckle on it. Inside he heard the sound of an electric bell, and then nothing for a minute, and then the sound of slow feet on floorboards. Then the door opened a crack and a face looked out.

Quite a face. It was framed by black hair and had pale skin and frightened eyes at the top, and then a red-soaked handkerchief pressed tight at the apex of a triangular red gush that had flooded downward past the mouth and neck to the blouse below. There was a string of blood-soaked pearls. The blouse was silk and it was wet to the waist. The woman took the handkerchief away from her nose. She had split lips and blood-rimed teeth. Her nose was still leaking, a steady stream.

‘You came,’ she said.

The doctor blinked twice and focused hard and turned down his mouth in a frown and nodded. He said, ‘We should take a look at that.’

‘You’ve been drinking,’ the woman said. Then she looked at Reacher and asked, ‘Who are you?’

‘I drove,’ Reacher said.

‘Because he’s drunk?’

‘He’ll be OK. I wouldn’t let him do brain surgery, but he can stop the bleeding.’

The woman thought about it for a moment and then she nodded and put the handkerchief back to her face and opened the door wide.

They used the kitchen. The doctor was drunk as a skunk but the procedure was simple and the guy retained enough muscle memory to get himself through it. Reacher soaked cloths in warm water and passed them across and the doctor

cleaned the woman's face and jammed her nostrils solid with gauze and used butterfly closures on her cut lips. The anaesthetic took the pain away and she settled into a calm and dreamy state. It was hard to say exactly what she looked like. Her nose had been busted before. That was clear. Apart from that she had good skin and fine bone structure and pretty eyes. She was slim and fairly tall, well dressed and solidly prosperous. As was the house itself. It was warm. The floors were wide planks, lustrous with a hundred years of wax. There was a lot of millwork and fine detail and subtle pastel shades. Books on the shelves, paintings on the walls, rugs on the floors. In the living room there was a wedding photograph in a silver frame. It showed a younger and intact version of the woman with a tall reedy man in a grey morning suit. He had dark hair and a long nose and bright eyes and he looked very smug. Not an athlete or a manual worker, not a professor or a poet. Not a farmer, either. A businessman, probably. An executive of some kind. An indoors type of guy, soft, with energy but no vigour.

Reacher headed back to the kitchen and found the doctor washing his hands in the sink and the woman brushing her hair without the help of a mirror. He asked her, 'You OK now?'

She said, 'Not too bad,' slow and nasal and indistinct.

'Your husband's not here?'

'He decided to go out for dinner. With his friends.'

'What's his name?'

'His name is Seth.'

'And what's your name?'

'My name is Eleanor.'

'You been taking aspirin, Eleanor?'

'Yes.'

'Because Seth does this a lot?'

She paused a long, long time, and then she shook her head.

She paused a long, long time, and then she shook her head.

‘I tripped,’ she said. ‘On the edge of the rug.’

‘More than once, all in a few days? The same rug?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’d change that rug, if I were you.’

‘I’m sure it won’t happen again.’

They waited ten minutes in the kitchen while she went upstairs to take a shower and change. They heard the water run and stop and heard her call down that she was OK and on her way to bed. So they left. The front door clicked behind them. The doctor staggered to the car and dumped himself in the passenger seat with his bag between his feet. Reacher started up and reversed down the driveway to the road. He spun the wheel and hit the gas and took off, back the way they had come.

‘Thank God,’ the doctor said.

‘That she was OK?’

‘No, that Seth Duncan wasn’t there.’

‘I saw his picture. He doesn’t look like much to me. I bet his dog’s a poodle.’

‘They don’t have a dog.’

‘Figure of speech. I can see a country doctor being worried about getting in the middle of a domestic dispute where the guy drinks beer and wears a sleeveless T-shirt and has a couple of pit bull terriers in the yard, with broken-down appliances and cars. But apparently Seth Duncan doesn’t.’

The doctor said nothing.

Reacher said, ‘But you’re scared of him anyway. So his power comes from somewhere else. Financial or political, maybe. He has a nice house.’

The doctor said nothing.

Reacher asked, ‘Was it him?’

‘Yes.’

‘You know that for sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘And he’s done it before?’

‘Yes.’

‘How many times?’

‘A lot. Sometimes it’s her ribs.’

‘Has she told the cops?’

‘We don’t have cops. We depend on the county. They’re usually sixty miles away.’

‘She could call.’

‘She’s not going to press charges. They never do. If they let it go the first time, that’s it.’

‘Where does a guy like Duncan go to eat dinner with his friends?’

The doctor didn’t answer, and Reacher didn’t ask again.

The doctor said, ‘Are we heading back to the lounge?’

‘No, I’m taking you home.’

‘Thanks. That’s good of you. But it’s a long walk back to the motel.’

‘Your problem, not mine,’ Reacher said. ‘I’m keeping the car. You can hike over and pick it up in the morning.’

Five miles south of the motel the doctor stared all over again at the three old houses standing alone at the end of their driveway, and then he faced front and directed Reacher left and right and left along the boundaries of dark empty fields

directed Reacher left and right and left along the boundaries of dark empty fields to a new ranch house set on a couple of flat acres bounded by a post-and-rail fence.

‘Got your key?’ Reacher asked him.

‘On the ring.’

‘Got another key?’

‘My wife will let me in.’

‘You hope,’ Reacher said. ‘Goodnight.’

He watched the doctor stumble through the first twenty feet of his driveway and then he K-turned and threaded back to the main north-south two-lane. If in doubt turn left, was his motto, so he headed north a mile and then he pulled over and thought. Where would a guy like Seth Duncan go for dinner with his friends?

FIVE

A STEAKHOUSE, WAS REACHER'S CONCLUSION. A RURAL AREA, FARM country, a bunch of prosperous types playing good-old-boy, rolling their sleeves, loosening their ties, ordering a pitcher of domestic beer, getting sirloins cooked rare, smirking about the coastal pussies who worried about cholesterol. Nebraska counties were presumably huge and thinly populated, which could put thirty or more miles between restaurants. But the night was dark and steakhouses always had lit signs. Part of the culture. Either the word Steakhouse in antique script along the spine of the roof, all outlined in neon, or an upmarket name-board all blasted with spotlights.

Reacher killed his headlights and climbed out of the Subaru and grabbed one of the roof rails and stepped up on the hood and then crouched and eased himself up on the roof. He stood tall, his eye line eleven feet above the grade in a flat part of the world. He turned a full 360 and peered into the darkness. Saw the ghostly blue glow of the motel far off to the north, and then a distant pink halo maybe ten miles south and west. Maybe just a gas station, but it was the only other light to be seen. So Reacher drove south and then west. He stopped twice more to fix his bearings. The glow in the air grew brighter as he homed in on it. Red neon, made slightly pink by the night mist. Could be anything. A liquor store, another motel, Exxon.

It was a steakhouse. He came up on it end-on. It was a long low place with candles in the windows and siding like a barn and a swaybacked roof like an old mare in a field. It was standing alone in an acre of beaten dirt. It had a bright sign along its ridgeline, a bird's nest of glass tubing and metal supports spelling out the word Steakhouse in antique script and red light. It was ringed with parked cars, all of them nose-in like sucking pigs or jets at a terminal. There were sedans and pick-up trucks and SUVs, some of them new, some of them old, most of them domestic.

Reacher parked the doctor's Subaru on its own near the road. He climbed out and stood for a moment in the cold, rolling his shoulders, trying to get his upper body comfortable. He had never taken aspirin and wasn't about to start. He had been banged up in the hospital a couple of times, with IV morphine drips in his arms, and he remembered that experience quite fondly. But outside of the ICU he was going to rely on time and willpower. No other option.

He walked to the steakhouse door. Inside it was a small square lobby with another door. Inside that was an unattended maître d' lectern with a reading light and a reservations book. To the right was a small dining room with two couples finishing up their meals. To the left, the exact same thing. Ahead, a short corridor with a larger room at the end of it. Low ceilings, unfinished wood on the walls, brass accents. A warm, intimate place.

Reacher stepped past the lectern and checked the larger room. Directly inside the arch was a table for two. It had one guy at it, eating, wearing a red Cornhuskers football jacket. The University of Nebraska. In the main body of the room was a table for eight. It was occupied by seven men, coats and ties, three facing three plus the guy from the wedding photograph at the head. He was a little older than the picture, a little bonier, even more smug, but it was the same guy. No question. He was unmistakable. The table held the wreckage of a big meal. Plates, glasses, serrated knives with worn wooden handles.

Reacher stepped into the room. As he moved the guy alone at the table for two stood up smoothly and sidestepped into Reacher's path. He raised his hand like a traffic cop. Then he placed that hand on Reacher's chest. He was a big man. Nearly as tall as Reacher himself, a whole lot younger, maybe a little heavier, in good shape, with some level of mute intelligence in his eyes. Strength and brains. A dangerous mixture. Reacher preferred the old days, when muscle was dumb. He blamed education. The end of social promotion. There was a genetic price to be paid for making athletes attend class.

Nobody looked over from the big table.

Reacher said, 'What's your name, fat boy?'

The guy said, 'My name?'

'It's not a difficult question.'

'Brett.'

Reacher said, 'So here's the thing, Brett. Either you take your hand off my chest, or I'll take it off your wrist.'

The guy dropped his hand. But he didn't move out of the way.

'What?' Reacher asked

What?' Reacher asked.

The guy asked, ‘Are you here to see Mr Duncan?’

‘What do you care?’

‘I work for Mr Duncan.’

‘Really?’ Reacher said. ‘What do you do for him?’

‘I schedule his appointments.’

‘And?’

‘You don’t have one.’

‘When can I get one?’

‘How does never work for you?’

‘Not real well, Brett.’

‘Sir, you need to leave.’

‘What are you, security? A bodyguard? What the hell is he?’

‘He’s a private citizen. I’m one of his assistants, that’s all. And now we need to get you back to your car.’

‘You want to walk me out to the lot?’

‘Sir, I’m just doing my job.’

The seven men at the big table were all hunched forward on their elbows, conspiratorial, six of them listening to a story Duncan was telling, laughing on cue, having a hell of a time. Elsewhere in the building there were kitchen noises and the sharp sounds of silverware on plates and the thump of glasses going down on wooden tabletops.

Reacher said, ‘Are you sure about this?’

The young man said, ‘I’d appreciate it.’

Reacher shrugged.

‘OK,’ he said. ‘Let’s go.’ He turned and threaded his way back around the lectern and through the first door and through the second and out to the cold night air. The big guy followed him all the way. Reacher squeezed between two trucks and headed across open ground towards the Subaru. The big guy followed him all the way. Reacher stopped ten feet short of the car and turned around. The big guy stopped too, face to face. He waited, standing easy, relaxed, patient, competent.

Reacher said, ‘Can I give you some advice?’

‘About what?’

‘You’re smart, but you’re not a genius. You just swapped a good tactical situation for a much worse one. Inside, there were crowded quarters and witnesses and telephones and possible interventions, but out here there’s nothing at all. You just gave away a big advantage. Out here I could take my sweet time kicking your ass and there’s no one to help you.’

‘Nobody’s ass needs to get kicked tonight.’

‘I agree. But whatever, I still need to give Mr Duncan a message.’

‘What message?’

‘He hits his wife. I need to explain to him why that’s a bad idea.’

‘I’m sure you’re mistaken.’

‘I’ve seen the evidence. Now I need to see Duncan.’

‘Sir, get real. You won’t be seeing anything. Only one of us is going back in there tonight, and it won’t be you.’

‘You enjoy working for a guy like that?’

‘I have no complaints.’

‘You might, later. Someone told me the nearest ambulance is sixty miles away.

You could be lying out here for an hour.’

‘Sir, you need to get in your car and move right along.’

Reacher put his hands in his coat pockets, to immobilize his arms, to protect them from further damage. He said, ‘Last chance, Brett. You can still walk away. You don’t need to get hurt for scum like that.’

‘I have a job to do.’

Reacher nodded, and said ‘Listen, kid’ very quietly, and the big guy leaned in fractionally to hear the next part of the sentence, and Reacher kicked him hard in the groin, right-footed, a heavy boot on the end of a driving leg, and then he stepped back while the guy jackknifed ninety degrees and puked and retched and gasped and spluttered. Then Reacher kicked him again, a solid blow to the side of the head, like a soccer player pivoting to drive a volleyed crossfield pass into the goal. The guy pinwheeled on the balls of his feet and went down like he was trying to screw himself into the ground.

Reacher kept his hands in his pockets and headed for the steakhouse door again.

SIX

THE PARTY WAS STILL IN FULL SWING IN THE BACK ROOM. NO more elbows on tables. Now all seven men were leaning back expansively, enjoying themselves, spreading out, owning the space. They were all a little red in the face from the warmth and the beer, six of them half listening to the seventh boasting about something and getting ready to one-up him with the next anecdote. Reacher strolled in and stepped behind Duncan's chair and took his hands out of his pockets. He put them on Duncan's shoulders. The room went absolutely silent. Reacher leaned on his hands and pulled them back a little until Duncan's chair was balanced uneasily, up on two legs. Then he let go and the chair thumped forward again and Duncan scrambled up out of it and stood straight and turned around, equal parts fear and anger in his face, plus an attempt to play it cool for his pals. Then he looked around and couldn't find his guy, which took out some of the cool and some of the anger and left all of the fear.

Reacher asked, 'Seth Duncan?'

The bony man didn't answer.

Reacher said, 'I have a message for you, pal.'

Duncan said, 'Who from?'

'The National Association of Marriage Counselors.'

'Is there such a thing?'

'Probably.'

'What's the message?'

'It's more of a question.'

'OK, what's the question?'

'The question is, how do you like it?' Reacher hit him, a straight right to the nose, a big vicious blow, his knuckles driving through cartilage and bone and crushing it all flat. Duncan went over backward and landed on the table. He

bounced once and plates broke and glasses tipped over and knives skittered away and fell to the floor.

Duncan made no attempt to get up.

Reacher walked away, down the corridor, past the lectern, back to the lot.

The key the red-headed guy had given him was marked with a big figure six, so Reacher parked next to the sixth cabin and went inside and found a miniature version of the lounge, a purely circular space except for a straight section boxed off for a bathroom and a closet. The ceiling was domed and washed with light. The bed was against the wall, on a platform that had been custom built to fit the curve. There was a tub-shaped armchair and a small round table next to it, with an old-fashioned glass television on a larger table nearby. There was an old-fashioned telephone next to the bed. It had a rotary dial. The bathroom was small but adequate, with a shower head over a tub, and the closet was about the same size as the bathroom.

Everything he needed, and nothing he didn't.

He undressed and left his clothes on the bed and took a shower. He ran the water as hot as he could stand and let it play over his neck, his shoulders, his arms, his ribs. He raised one arm, then the other, then both of them together. They moved, but they moved like a newly constructed machine in need of some further development. The good news was that his knuckles didn't hurt at all.

Seth Duncan's doctor was more than two hundred miles away in Denver, Colorado. A first-class medical man, no question, but obviously impractical for emergency services. And the nearest ER was an hour away. And no one in his right mind would go near the local quack. So Duncan had a friend drive him to his uncle Jasper Duncan's place. Because his uncle Jasper Duncan was the kind of guy who could handle odd things at odd hours. He lived five miles south of the motel crossroads, in the northernmost of the three old houses that stood all alone at the end of their long shared driveway. The house was a warren, filled with all kinds of things saved against the day they might be useful. Uncle Jasper himself was more than sixty years old, built like the bole of an oak, a man of various arcane skills, a reservoir of folk wisdom and backwoods knowledge.

Jasper sat Seth Duncan in a kitchen chair and took a look at the injury. Then he went away and rooted around and came back with a syringe and some local

anaesthetic. It was a veterinary product, designed for hogs, but mammals were mammals, and it worked. When the site was properly numb, Jasper used a strong thumb and a strong forefinger to set the bone and then went away again and rooted around and came back with an old aluminium facial splint. It was the kind of thing he could be counted on to have at hand. He worked at it and reshaped it to fit and taped it over his nephew's nose. He stopped up the nostrils with wads of gauze and used warm water to sponge away the blood.

Then he got on the phone and called his neighbours.

Next to him lived his brother Jonas Duncan, and next to Jonas lived their brother Jacob Duncan, who was Seth Duncan's father. Five minutes later all four men were sitting around Jasper's kitchen table, and a council of war had started.

Jacob Duncan said, 'First things first, son. Who was the guy?'

Seth Duncan said, 'I never saw him before.'

Jonas said, 'No, first things first, where the hell was your boy Brett?'

'The guy jumped him in the parking lot. Brett was escorting him out. The guy kicked him in the balls and then kicked him in the head. Just left him lying there.'

'Is he OK?'

'He's got a concussion. Doesn't know what day it is. Useless piece of shit. I want him replaced.'

'Plenty more where he came from,' Jonas said.

Jasper asked, 'So who was this guy?'

'He was a big man in a brown coat. With a watch cap on his head. That's all I saw. That's all I remember. He just came in and hit me.'

'Why would he?'

'I don't know.'

'Didn't he say anything?'

‘Just some bullshit. But Brett said he was driving the doctor’s car.’

‘He doesn’t know what day it is but he remembers what car the guy was in?’

‘I guess concussions are unpredictable.’

‘And you’re sure it wasn’t the doctor who hit you?’

‘I told you, I never saw the guy before. I know the doctor. And the damn doctor wouldn’t hit me, anyway. He wouldn’t dare.’

Jacob Duncan said, ‘What aren’t you telling us, son?’

‘I have a bad headache.’

‘I’m sure you do. But you know that’s not what I mean.’

‘I don’t want to talk.’

‘But you know you have to. We can’t let a thing like this go by.’

Seth Duncan looked left, looked right. He said, ‘OK, I had a dispute with Eleanor tonight. Before I went out. No big deal. But I had to slap her.’

‘How hard?’

‘I might have made her nose bleed.’

‘How bad?’

‘You know she’s delicate.’

The kitchen went quiet for a moment. Jonas Duncan said, ‘So let’s try to piece it together. Your wife called the doctor.’

‘She’s been told not to do that.’

‘But maybe she did anyway. Because she’s delicate. And maybe the doctor wasn’t home. Maybe he was in the motel lounge, like he usually is, halfway through a bottle of Jim Beam, like he usually is. Maybe Eleanor reached him there.’

there.

‘He’s been told to stay away from her.’

‘But maybe he didn’t obey. Sometimes doctors have strange notions. And perhaps he was too drunk to drive. He usually is. Because of the bourbon. So perhaps he asked someone else to drive him. Because of his level of concern.’

‘Who else?’

‘Another guy in the lounge.’

‘Nobody would dare do that.’

‘Nobody who lives here, I agree. Nobody who knows not to. But a stranger might do it. And it’s a motel, after all. That’s what motels are for. Strangers, passing through.’

‘OK, so then what?’

‘Maybe the stranger didn’t like what he saw at your house, and he came to find you.’

‘Eleanor gave me up?’

‘She must have. How else would the guy have known where to look? He can’t know his way around, if he’s a stranger.’

Jacob Duncan asked, ‘What exactly did he say to you?’

‘Some bullshit about marriage counselling.’

Jonas Duncan nodded and said, ‘There you go. That’s how it played out. We’ve got a passer-by full of moral outrage. A guest in the motel.’

Seth Duncan said, ‘I want him hurt bad.’

His father said, ‘He will be, son. He’ll be hurt bad and sent on his way. Who have we got?’

Jasper said, ‘Not Brett, I guess.’

Jonas said, ‘Plenty more where he came from.’

Jacob Duncan said, ‘Send two of them. Have them call me for orders before they deploy.’

SEVEN

REACHER DRESSED AGAIN AFTER HIS SHOWER, COAT AND ALL because the room was cold, and then he turned the lights off and sat in the tub armchair and waited. He didn't expect Seth Duncan to call the cops. Apparently the cops were a county department, sixty miles away. No local ties. No local loyalties. And calling the cops would require a story, and a story would unravel straight to a confession about beating his wife. No smug guy would head down that route.

But a smug guy who had just lost a bodyguard might have access to a replacement, or two or three. And whereas bodyguarding was generally a reactive profession, those two or three substitutes might be persuaded to go proactive for one night only, especially if they were Brett's friends. And Reacher knew it wouldn't be hard to track him down. The Apollo Inn was probably the only public accommodation in two hundred square miles. And if the doctor's drinking habits were well known in the neighbourhood, it wouldn't be difficult to puzzle out the chain of causation. The phone call, the treatment, the intervention.

So Reacher dressed again and laced his boots and sat in the dark and kept his ears open for tyres on gravel.

More than four hundred and fifty miles due north of where Reacher was sitting, the United States finished and Canada began. The world's longest land border followed the 49th Parallel, over mountains and roads and rivers and streams, and through towns and fields and woods, its western portion running perfectly straight for nearly nineteen hundred miles, all the way from Washington State to Minnesota, every inch of it undefended in the military sense, most of it unfenced and unmarked, but much of it surveilled more closely than people knew. Between Washington State and Minnesota there were fifty-four official crossings, seventeen manned around the clock, thirty-six manned through daylight hours only, and one entirely unstaffed but equipped with telephones connected to remote customs offices. Elsewhere the line was randomly patrolled by a classified number of agents, and more isolated spots had cameras, and great lengths of it had motion sensors buried in the earth. The governments on both sides of the line had a pretty good idea of what was happening along its length.

A pretty good idea, but not perfect knowledge. In the state of Montana, east of the Rockies, below the tree line, the land spent a hundred miles flattening from jagged peaks to gentle plains, most of it thickly forested with conifers, the woods interrupted only by sparkling streams and freshwater lakes and occasional sandy needle-strewn paths. One of those paths connected through labyrinthine miles of twists and turns to a dirt fire road, which ran south and in turn connected to a wandering gravel road, which many miles later ended as an inconspicuous left-hand turn off a minor county two-lane far to the north of a small no-account town called Hogg Parish.

A grey panel truck made that left-hand turn. It rolled slowly along the gravel, crunching quietly, getting bounced left and right by the ruts and the bad camber, its springs creaking, its headlights off and its parking lights on. It burrowed ever deeper into the bitter cold and the darkness, endlessly. Then eventually it turned on to the fire road, beaten dirt now under its wheels, bare frozen trunks to the left and right, a narrow slice of night sky visible overhead, plenty of stars, no moon, the GPS satellites thousands of miles up connecting perfectly, guiding it, showing it the limits of safety.

It crawled onward, many miles, and then the fire road petered out and the sandy track began. The truck slowed to a walk and locked into the ruts it had made on its many previous trips. It followed them left and right through arbitrary turns and curves, between scarred trees where the clearance was tight, with stubs of low branches scraping the sides. It drove for more than an hour and then came to a stop in a location chosen long before, exactly two miles south of the border. No one was certain where the motion sensors had been buried, but most assumed that a belt a mile either side of the line was the practical limit. Like a minefield. Another mile had been added as a safety margin, and a small area of underbrush had been hacked out to allow the truck to turn.

The truck backed up and turned and stopped astride the sandy track, facing south, in position, ready. It shut down and settled and its lights went off.

It waited.

Reacher waited in the dark in his tub armchair, forty minutes, an hour, tracing the next day’s intended route in his head. South to the Interstate, and then east. The Interstate would be easy. He had hitchhiked most of the network before. There were on-ramps and rest areas and a vast travelling population, some of it commercial, some of it private, a fair proportion of it lonely and ready for

company. The problem would come before the Interstate, on the middle-of-nowhere trek down to it. Since climbing out of the car that had dumped him at the crossroads he had heard no traffic at all. Night-time was always worse than daytime, but even so it was rare in America to be close to a road and hear nothing go by. In fact he had heard nothing at all, no wind, no night sounds, and he had been listening hard, for tyres on gravel. It was like he had gone deaf. He raised his hand awkwardly and clicked his fingers near his ear, just to be sure. He wasn't deaf. It was just the middle of the night, in the countryside. That was all. He got up and used the bathroom and sat back down.

Then he heard something.

Not a passing vehicle, not wind, not night sounds.

Not tyres on gravel.

Footsteps on gravel.

EIGHT

FOOTSTEPS ON GRAVEL. ONE PAIR. A LIGHT, HESITANT TREAD, approaching. Reacher watched the window and saw a shape flit across it. Small, slight, head ducked down into the collar of a coat.

A woman.

There was a knock at the door, soft and tentative and padded. A small nervous hand, wearing a glove. A decoy, possibly. Not beyond the wit of man to send someone on ahead, all innocent and unthreatening, to get the door open and lull the target into a sense of false security. Not unlikely that such a person would be nervous and hesitant about her role.

Reacher crossed the floor silently and headed back to the bathroom. He eased the window up and clipped out the screen and rested it in the bathtub. Then he ducked his head and climbed out, scissoring his legs over the sill, stepping down to the gravel. He walked one of the silver timbers that boxed the path, like a tightrope, silently. He went counterclockwise around the circular cabin and came up on the woman from behind.

She was alone.

No cars on the road, nobody in the lot, nobody flattened either side of his door, nobody crouched under his window. Just the woman, standing there on her own. She looked cold. She was wearing a wool coat and a scarf. No hat. She was maybe forty, small, dark, and worried. She raised her hand and knocked again.

Reacher said, ‘I’m here.’

She gasped and spun around and put her hand on her chest. Her mouth stayed open and made a tiny O. He said, ‘I’m sorry if I startled you, but I wasn’t expecting visitors.’

She said, ‘Perhaps you should have been.’

‘Well, in fact, perhaps I was. But not you.’

‘Can we go inside?’

‘Who are you?’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I’m the doctor’s wife.’

‘I’m pleased to meet you,’ Reacher said.

‘Can we go inside?’

Reacher found the key in his pocket and unlocked the door from the outside. The doctor’s wife stepped in and he followed her and locked the door again behind them. He crossed the room and closed the bathroom door against the night air coming in through the open window. He turned back to find her standing in the middle of the space. He indicated the armchair and said, ‘Please.’

She sat down. Didn’t unbutton her coat. She was still nervous. If she had been carrying a purse, she would have had it clamped hard on her knees, defensively. She said, ‘I walked all the way over here.’

‘To pick up the car? You should have let your husband do that, in the morning. That’s what I arranged with him.’

‘He’s too drunk to drive.’

‘He’ll be OK by morning, surely.’

‘Morning’s too late. You have to get going. Right now. You’re not safe here.’

‘You think?’

‘My husband said you’re heading south to the Interstate. I’ll drive you there.’

‘Now? It’s got to be a hundred miles.’

‘A hundred and twenty.’

‘It’s the middle of the night.’

‘You’re not safe here. My husband told me what happened. You interfered with the Duncans. You saw. They’ll punish him for sure, and we think they’ll come after you too.’

‘They?’

‘The Duncans. There are four of them.’

‘Punish him how?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. Last time they wouldn’t let him come here for a month.’

‘Here? To the lounge?’

‘It’s his favourite place.’

‘How could they stop him coming here?’

‘They told Mr Vincent not to serve him. The owner.’

‘Why would the owner of this place do what the Duncans tell him?’

‘The Duncans run a trucking business. All of Mr Vincent’s supplies come through them. He signed a contract. He kind of had to. That’s how the Duncans work. So if Mr Vincent doesn’t play ball, a couple of deliveries will be late, a couple lost, a couple damaged. He knows that. He’ll go out of business.’

Reacher asked, ‘What will they figure to do to me?’

The woman said, ‘They hire football players right out of college. Cornhuskers. The ones who were good enough to get scholarships, but not good enough to go to the NFL. Guards and tackles. Big guys.’

Brett, Reacher thought.

The woman said, ‘They’ll connect the dots and figure out where you are. I mean, where else could you be? They’ll pay you a visit. Maybe they’re already on their way.’

‘From where?’

‘The Duncan depot is twenty miles from here. Most of their people live close to it.’

‘How many football players have they got?’

‘Ten.’

Reacher said nothing.

The woman said, ‘My husband heard you say you’re headed for Virginia.’

‘That’s the plan.’

‘Is that where you live?’

‘As much as anywhere else.’

‘We should get going. You’re in big trouble.’

‘Not unless they send all nine at once,’ Reacher said.

‘All nine what?’

‘Football players.’

‘I said there were ten.’

‘I already met one of them. He’s currently indisposed. They’re one short, as of tonight.’

‘What?’

‘He got between me and Seth Duncan.’

‘What did you do to Seth Duncan?’

‘I broke his nose.’

‘Oh, sweet Jesus. Why?’

‘Why not?’

‘Oh sweet, sweet Jesus. Where are the car keys?’

‘What will happen to Mrs Duncan?’

‘We need to get going. Right this minute.’

‘We need to get going. Right this minute.’

‘First answer the question.’

‘Mrs Duncan will be punished too. For calling my husband. She’s been told not to do that. Just like he’s been told not to go treat her.’

‘He’s a doctor. He doesn’t get a choice. They take an oath, don’t they?’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Jack Reacher.’

‘We have to go, Mr Reacher. Right now.’

‘What will they do to Mrs Duncan?’

‘This isn’t your business,’ the woman said. Which, strictly speaking, was fairly close to Reacher’s own opinion at that point. His business was to get himself to Virginia, and he was being offered a ride through the hardest part of the journey, fast and free. I-80 awaited, two hours away. An on-ramp, the last of the night drivers, the first stirrings of morning traffic. Maybe breakfast. Maybe there was a rest area or a truck stop with a greasy spoon café. Bacon, eggs, coffee.

‘What will they do to her?’ he asked again.

The woman said, ‘Probably nothing much.’

‘What kind of nothing much?’

‘Well, they might put her on a coagulant. One of the uncles seems to have medical supplies. Or maybe they’ll just stop her taking so much aspirin. So she doesn’t bleed so bad next time. And they’ll probably ground her for a month. That’s all. Nothing too serious. Nothing for you to worry about. They’ve been married ten years, after all. She’s not a prisoner. She could leave if she wanted to.’

‘Except this time she inadvertently got her husband’s nose broken. He might take that out on her, if he can’t take it out on me.’

The doctor’s wife said nothing. But it sounded like she was agreeing. The strange round room went quiet. Then Reacher heard tyres on gravel.

strange round room went quiet. Then Reacher heard tyres on gravel.

NINE

REACHER CHECKED THE WINDOW. THERE WERE FOUR TYRES IN total, big knobbly off-road things, all of them on a Ford pick-up truck. The truck had a jacked suspension and lights on a roof bar and a snorkel air intake and a winch on the front. There were two large shapes in the gloom inside. The shapes had thick necks and huge shoulders. The truck nosed slowly down the row of cabins and stopped twenty feet behind the parked Subaru. The headlights stayed on. The engine idled. The doors opened. Two guys climbed out.

They both looked like Brett, only bigger. Late twenties, easily six-six or six-seven, probably close to three hundred pounds each, big waists made tiny by huge chests and arms and shoulders. They had cropped hair and small eyes and fleshy faces. They were the kind of guys who ate two dinners and were still hungry afterwards. They were wearing red Cornhuskers football jackets made grey by the blue light from the cabin's eaves.

The doctor's wife joined Reacher at the window.

'Sweet Jesus,' she said.

Reacher said nothing.

The two guys closed the truck's doors and stepped back in unison to the load bed and unlatched a tool locker bolted across its width behind the cab. They lifted the lid and one took out an engineer's ball-peen hammer and the other took out a two-headed wrench at least a foot and a half long. They left the lid open and walked forward into the truck's headlight wash and their shadows jumped ahead of them. They were light on their feet and nimble for their size, like football players usually were. They paused for a moment and looked at the cabin's door, and then they turned away.

Towards the Subaru.

They attacked it in a violent frenzy, an absolute blitzkrieg, two or three minutes of uncontrolled smashing and pounding. The noise was deafening. They smashed every shard of glass out of the windshield, they smashed the side windows, the back window, the headlights, the tail lights. They hammered jagged dents into the hood, into the doors, into the roof, into the fenders, into the

jagged dents into the hood, into the doors, into the roof, into the fenders, into the tailgate. They put their arms through the absent glass and smashed up the dials and the switches and the radio.

Shit, Reacher thought. There goes my ride.

‘My husband’s punishment,’ the doctor’s wife whispered. ‘Worse this time.’

The two guys stopped as suddenly as they had started. They stood there, one each side of the wrecked wagon, and they breathed hard and rolled their shoulders and let their weapons hang down by their sides. Pebbles of broken automotive glass glittered in the neon and the boom and clang of battered sheet metal echoed away to absolute silence.

Reacher took off his coat and dumped it on the bed.

The two guys formed up shoulder to shoulder and headed for the cabin’s door. Reacher opened it up and stepped out to meet them head on. Win or lose, fighting inside would bust up the room, and Vincent the motel owner had enough problems already.

The two guys stopped ten feet away and stood there, side by side, symmetrical, their weapons in their outside hands, four cubic yards of bone and muscle, six hundred pounds of beef, all flushed and sweating in the chill.

Reacher said, ‘Pop quiz, guys. You spent four years in college learning how to play a game. I spent thirteen years in the army learning how to kill people. So how scared am I?’

No answer.

‘And you were so bad at it you couldn’t even get drafted afterwards. I was so good at it I got all kinds of medals and promotions. So how scared are you?’

‘Not very,’ said the guy with the wrench.

Wrong answer. But understandable. Being a good enough guard or tackle in high school to get a full-boat free ride to the big school in Lincoln was no mean achievement. Playing even a cameo role on the field in Memorial Stadium made a guy close to the best of the best. And failing to make the National Football League was no kind of real disgrace. The dividing line between success and

failure in the world of sports was often very narrow, and the reasons for falling on one side or the other were often very arbitrary. These guys had been the elite for most of twenty years, the greatest thing their neighbourhood had ever seen, then their town, then their county, maybe their state. They had been popular, they had been feted, they had gotten the girls. And they probably hadn't lost a fight since they were eight years old.

Except they had never had a fight. Not in the sense meant by people paid to fight or die. Pushing and shoving at the schoolyard gate or on the sidewalk outside the soda shop or late at night after a start-of-summer keg party was as far from fighting as two fat guys tossing lame spirals in the park were from the Superbowl. These guys were amateurs, and worse, they were complacent amateurs, accustomed to getting by on bulk and reputation alone. In the real world, they would be dead before they even landed a blow.

Case in point: bad choice of weapons. Best are shooting weapons, second best are stabbing weapons, third best are slashing weapons. Blunt instruments are way down the list. They slow hand speed. Their uncontrolled momentum is disadvantageous after a miss. And: if you have to use them, the backhand is the only way to go, so that you accelerate and strike in the same sudden fluid motion. But these guys were shoulder to shoulder with their weapons in their outer hands, which promised forehand swings, which meant that the hammer or the wrench would have to be swung backward first, then stopped, then brought forward again. The first part of the move would be a clear telegraph. All the warning in the world. No surprise. They might as well put a notice in the newspaper, or send a cable by Western Union.

Reacher smiled. He had been raised on military bases all around the world, battling hardcore Marine progeny, honing his skills against gangs of resentful native youths in dusty Pacific streets and damp European alleys. Whatever hardscrabble town in Texas or Arkansas or Nebraska these guys had come up in had been a feather bed by comparison. And while they had been studying the playbook and learning to run and jump and catch, he had been broken down and built back up by the kind of experts who could snap your neck so fast you never knew it had happened until you went to nod your head and it rolled away down the street without you.

The guy with the wrench said, 'We've got a message for you, pal.'

Reacher said, 'Really?'

‘Actually it’s more of a question.’

‘Any difficult words? You need more time?’ Reacher stepped forward and a little to his right. He put himself directly in front of the two guys, equidistant, seven feet away, so that if he was six on a clock face, they were eleven and one. The guy with the wrench was on his left, and the guy with the hammer was on his right.

The guy with the wrench moved first. He dumped his weight on his right foot and started a short, compact backswing with the heavy metal tool, a backswing that looked designed to bounce off tensed muscles after perhaps forty degrees or a couple of feet, and then snap forward again through a low horizontal arc, aiming to break Reacher’s left arm between the shoulder and the elbow. The guy wasn’t a total idiot. It was a decent first try.

But it was uncompleted.

Reacher had his weight on his left foot, and he had his right foot moving a split second after the wrench, driving the same way at the same speed, maybe even a little faster, and before the wrench stopped moving backward and started moving forward the heel of Reacher’s boot met the big guy’s knee and drove right through it, smashing the kneecap deep into the joint, bursting it, rupturing ligaments, tearing tendons, dislocating the joint, turning it inside out, making it fold forward the way no knee is designed to go. The guy started to drop and before he was past the first vertical inch and before the first howl was starting in his throat Reacher was stepping past him, on the outside, shouldering him aside, deleting him from memory, forgetting all about him. He was now essentially an unarmed one-legged man, and one-legged men had never featured near the top of Reacher’s concerns.

The guy with the hammer had a split-second choice to make. He could spin on the forehand, but that would give him almost a full circle to move through, because Reacher was now almost behind him, and anyway his crippled buddy was in the way of the spin, just waiting helplessly for a face to face collision. Or the guy could flail on the backhand, a Hail Mary blind swing into the void behind him, hoping for surprise, hoping for a lucky contact.

He chose to flail behind him.

Which Reacher was half expecting and wholly rooting for. He watched the lunge, the arm moving, the wrist flicking back, the elbow turning inside out, and he planted his feet and jerked from the waist and drove the heel of his hand into the knob of the guy's elbow, that huge force jabbing one way, the weight of the swinging hammer pulling the other way, the elbow joint cracking, the wrist overextending, the hammer falling, the guy instantly crumpling and dancing and hopping and trying to force his body to a place where his elbow stayed bent the right way around, which pulled him through a tight counterclockwise circle and left him unsteady and unbalanced and face to face with Reacher, who paused less time than it took for the hammer to hit the floor and then head-butted him hard in the face, a savage, snapping movement, solid bone-to-bone contact, and then Reacher danced away towards the wrecked Subaru and turned and planned the next second and a half.

The guy who had held the wrench was down, rolling around, in Reacher's judgement stunned not so much by the pain, most of which would be still to come, but by the awful dawning knowledge that life as he knew it was over, the momentary fears he might have experienced as an athlete after a bad on-field collision finally come true, his future now holding nothing but canes and braces and limps and pain and frustration and unemployment. The guy who had held the hammer was still on his feet, back on his heels, blinking, his nose pouring blood, one arm limp and numb, his eyes unfocused, not a whole lot going on in his head.

Enough, a person might say, if that person lived in the civilized world, the world of movies and television and fair play and decent restraint. But Reacher didn't live there. He lived in a world where you don't start fights but you sure as hell finish them, and you don't lose them either, and he was the inheritor of generations of hard-won wisdom that said the best way to lose them was to assume they were over when they weren't yet. So he stepped back to the guy who had held the hammer and risked his hands and his arms and crashed a low right hook into the skinny triangle below the guy's pectorals and above his six-pack abdominals, a huge blow, timed and jerked and delivered to perfection, straight into the solar plexus, hitting it like a switch, and the guy went into all kinds of temporary distress and sagged forward and down. Reacher waited until he was bent low enough for the finishing kick to the face, delivered hard but with a degree of mercy, in that smashed teeth and a busted jaw were better than out-and-out brain damage.

Then he turned to the guy who had held the wrench and waited until he rolled the right way and put him to sleep with a kick to the forehead. He picked up the wrench and broke the guy's wrist with it, one, and then the other wrist, two, and turned back and did the same to the guy who had held the hammer, three, four. The two men were somebody's weapons, consciously deployed, and no soldier left an enemy's abandoned ordnance on the field in working order.

The doctor's wife was watching from the cabin door, all kinds of terror in her face.

'What?' Reacher asked her.

TEN

THE FORD PICK-UP TRUCK WAS STILL IDLING PATIENTLY. ITS headlights were still on. The two guys lay slack and heaped in the gloom beyond the bright beams, steaming slightly, four cubic yards of bone and muscle, six hundred pounds of beef, now horizontal, not vertical. They were going to be very hard to move. The doctor's wife said, 'Now what the hell are we going to do?'

Reacher said, 'About what?'

'I wish you hadn't done that.'

'Why?'

'Because nothing good can possibly come of it.'

'Why not? What the hell is going on here? Who are these people?'

'I told you. Football players.'

'Not them,' Reacher said. 'The Duncans. The people who sent them.'

'Did they see me?'

'These two? I doubt it.'

'That's good. I really can't get involved in this.'

'Why not? What's going on here?'

'This isn't your business.'

'Tell that to them.'

'You seemed so angry.'

'Me?' Reacher said. 'I wasn't angry. I was barely interested. If I had been angry, we'd be cleaning up with a fire hose. As it is we're going to need a forklift truck.'

truck.

‘What are you going to do with them?’

‘Tell me about the Duncans.’

‘They’re a family. That’s all. Seth, and his father, and two uncles. They used to farm. Now they run a trucking business.’

‘Which one of them hires the football players?’

‘I don’t know who makes the decisions. Maybe it’s a majority thing. Or maybe they all have to agree.’

‘Where do they live?’

‘You know where Seth lives.’

‘What about the other three? The old guys?’

‘Just south of here. Three houses all alone. One each.’

‘I saw them. Your husband was staring at them.’

‘Did you see his hands?’

‘Why?’

‘He was probably crossing his fingers for luck. Whistling past the graveyard.’

‘Why? Who the hell are they?’

‘They’re a hornets’ nest, that’s what. And you just poked it with a stick and now you’re going to leave.’

‘What was I supposed to do? Let them hit me with shop tools?’

‘That’s what we do. We take our punishments and we keep smiles on our faces and our heads down. We go along to get along.’

‘What the hell are you talking about?’

She paused. Shook her head.

‘It’s not a big deal,’ she said. ‘Not really. So we tell ourselves. If you throw a frog in hot water, he’ll jump right out again. Put him in cold water and heat it up slowly, he’ll let himself get boiled to death without ever noticing.’

‘And that’s you?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘That’s us.’

‘Give me the details.’

She paused again. She shook her head again.

‘No,’ she said. ‘No, no, no. You won’t hear anything bad about the Duncans from me. I want that on the record. I’m a local girl, and I’ve known them all my life. They’re a fine family. There’s nothing wrong with them. Nothing at all.’

The doctor’s wife took a long hard look at the wrecked Subaru and then she set off walking home. Reacher offered her a ride in the pick-up truck, but she wouldn’t hear of it. He watched her out of the motel lot until she was swallowed by the dark and lost to sight. Then he turned back to the two guys on the gravel outside his door. No way could he lift an unconscious human weighing three hundred pounds. Three hundred pounds of free weights on a bar, maybe. But not three hundred pounds of inert flesh and blood the size of a refrigerator.

He opened the pick-up’s door and climbed into the cab. It smelled of pine disinfectant and hot oil. He found the gearshift and took off forward on a curve and then stopped and backed up until the tailgate was in line with where the two guys lay. He got out again and stepped around the hood and looked at the winch that was bolted to the frame at the front. It was electric. It had a motor connected to a drum wrapped with thin steel cable. The cable had a snap hook on the end. There was a release ratchet and a winding button.

He hit the ratchet and unwound the cable, ten feet, twenty, thirty. He flipped it up over the hood, over the roof of the cab, between two lights on the light bar, over the load bed, and down to where the guys were lying behind the truck. He dropped the tailgate flat and bent and fastened the hook on to the front of the first guy’s belt. He walked back to the front of the truck and found the winding button and pressed.

The motor started and the drum turned and the slack pulled out of the cable. Then the cable went tight and quivered like a bowstring and burred a groove into the front edge of the hood and pulled a crease into the light bar on the roof. The drum slowed, and then it dug in and kept on turning. The truck squatted low on its springs. Reacher walked back and saw the first guy getting dragged by his belt towards the load bed, scuffling along the ground, waist first, arms and legs trailing. The guy dragged all the way to the edge of the tailgate. Then the cable came up vertically and shrieked against the sheet metal and the guy's belt stretched oval and he started up into the air, spinning a little, his back arched, his head and legs and arms hanging down. Reacher waited and timed it and pulled and pushed and shoved and got him up over the angle and watched as he dragged onward into the load bed. Reacher stepped back to the front and waited a beat and then stopped the winch. He came back and leaned into the load bed and released the hook, and then he did the same things all over again for the second guy, like a veterinarian called out to a couple of dead heifers.

Reacher drove five miles south and slowed and stopped just before the shared driveway that ran west towards the three houses huddled together. They had been painted white a generation ago and still managed a grey gleam in the moonlight. They were substantial buildings, arranged along a short arc without much space between them. There was no landscaping. Just threadbare gravel and weeds and three parked cars, and then a heavy post-and-rail fence, and then flat empty fields running away into the darkness.

There was a light behind a ground floor window in the house on the right. No other signs of activity.

Reacher pulled thirty feet ahead and then backed up and turned and reversed into the driveway. Gravel crunched and scrabbled under his tyres. A noisy approach. He risked fifty yards, which was about halfway. Then he stopped and slid out and unlatched the tailgate. He climbed up into the load bed and grabbed the first guy by the belt and the collar and heaved and hauled and half dragged and half rolled him to the edge and then put the sole of his boot against the guy's hip and shoved him over. The guy fell three feet and thumped down on his side and settled on his back.

Return to sender.

Reacher went back for the second guy and pushed and pulled and hauled and rolled him out of the truck right on top of his buddy. Then he latched the tailgate

again and vaulted over the side to the ground and got behind the wheel and took off fast.

The four Duncans were still around the table in Jasper's kitchen. Not a planned meeting, but they had a permanently long agenda and they were taking advantage of circumstances. Foremost in their minds was an emerging delay on the Canadian border. Jacob said, 'We're getting pressure from our friend to the south.'

Jonas said, 'We can't control what we can't control.'

'Try telling that to him.'

'He'll get his shipment.'

'When?'

'Whenever.'

'He paid upfront.'

'He always does.'

'A lot of money.'

'It always is.'

'But this time he's agitated. He wants action. And here's the thing. It was very strange. He called me, and it was like jumping into the conversation halfway through.'

'What?'

'He was frustrated, obviously. But also a little surly, like we weren't taking him seriously. Like he had made prior communications that had gone unheeded. Like we had ignored warnings. I felt like he was on page three and I was on page one.'

'He's losing his mind.'

'Unless.'

‘Unless what?’

‘Unless one of us took a couple of his calls already.’

Jonas Duncan said, ‘Well, I didn’t.’

‘Me either,’ Jasper Duncan said.

‘You sure?’

‘Of course.’

‘Because there’s really no other explanation here. And remember, this is a guy we can’t afford to mess with. This is a deeply unpleasant person.’

Jacob’s brothers both shrugged. Two men in their sixties, gnarled, battered, built like fireplugs. Jonas said, ‘Don’t look at me.’

‘Me either,’ Jasper said again.

Only Seth Duncan hadn’t spoken. Not a word. Jacob’s son.

His father asked, ‘What aren’t you telling us, boy?’

Seth looked down at the table. Then he looked up, awkwardly, the aluminium plate huge on his face. His father and his two uncles stared right back at him. He said, ‘It wasn’t me who broke Eleanor’s nose tonight.’

ELEVEN

JASPER DUNCAN TOOK A PART-USED BOTTLE OF KNOB CREEK whiskey from his kitchen cabinet and stuck three gnarled fingers and a blunt thumb in four chipped glasses. He put them on the table and pulled the cork from the bottle and poured four generous measures. He slid the glasses across the scarred wood, a little ceremony, focused and precise. He sat down again and each man took an initial sip, and then the four glasses went back to the table, a ragged little volley of four separate thumps in the quiet of the night.

Jacob Duncan said, ‘From the beginning, son.’

Seth Duncan said, ‘I’m dealing with it.’

‘But not very well, by the sound of it.’

‘He’s my customer.’

Jacob shook his head. ‘He was your contact, back in the day, but we’re a family. We do everything together, and nothing apart. There’s no such thing as a side deal.’

‘We were leaving money on the table.’

‘You don’t need to go over ancient history. You found a guy willing to pay more for the same merchandise, and we surely appreciate that. But rewards bring risks. There’s no such thing as something for nothing. No free lunch. So what happened?’

‘We’re a week late.’

‘We aren’t. We don’t specify dates.’

Seth Duncan said nothing.

Jacob said, ‘What? You guaranteed a date?’

Seth Duncan nodded.

Jacob said, ‘That was [illegible]

Jacob said, 'That was dumb, son. We never specify dates. You know we can't afford to. There are a hundred factors outside of our control. The weather, for one.'

'I used a worst-case analysis.'

'You think too much. There's always something worse than the worst. Count on it. So what happened?'

'Two guys showed up. At my house. Two days ago. His people. Tough guys.'

'Where was Brett?'

'I had to tell him I was expecting them.'

'Were you?'

'More or less.'

'Why didn't you tell us?'

'Because I'm dealing with it.'

'Not very well, son. Apparently. What did they do?'

'They said they were there to deliver a message from their boss. An expression of displeasure. I said I understood. I explained. I apologized. They said that wasn't good enough. They said they had been told to leave marks. I said they couldn't. I said I have to be out and about. I have a business to run. So they hit Eleanor instead. To make their point.'

'Just like that?'

'They asked first. They made me agree. They made her agree, too. They made me hold her. They took turns. I told her sorry afterwards. She said, what's the difference? Them then or you later? Because she knew I was agitated.'

'And then what?'

'I asked for another week. They gave me forty-eight hours.'

'So they came back again? Tonight?'

‘So they came back again? Tonight?’

‘Yes. They did it all over again.’

‘So who was the guy in the restaurant? One of them?’

‘No, he wasn’t one of them. I told you, I never saw him before.’

Jonas Duncan said, ‘He was a passer-by. Like we figured. From what he said at the time, to the boy. A passer-by full of the wrong end of the stick on this occasion.’

Jacob said, ‘Well, at least he’s out of our hair.’

Then they heard faint sounds outside. Tyres on gravel. A vehicle, on their driveway. It came slow, whining in a low gear. It seemed to stop halfway. The engine kept on running. There was a pause, and then a ragged thump, dull, percussive, somehow mixed with the sound of breath expelled, and then another pause, and another sound. Then the vehicle drove away, faster this time, with acceleration and gear changes, and the world went quiet again.

Jonas Duncan was first out the door. From fifty yards he could see strange humped shapes in the moonlight. From twenty he saw what they were. From five he saw what condition they were in. He said, ‘Not out of our hair. Not exactly. Not yet.’

Jacob Duncan said, ‘Who the hell is this guy?’

Seth Duncan and his uncle Jasper didn’t speak.

Reacher parked the pick-up truck next to the wrecked Subaru and found the motel owner waiting at his door. Mr Vincent. His hair looked black in the light.

‘Changing the locks?’ Reacher asked him.

The guy said, ‘I hope I won’t have to.’

‘But?’

‘I can’t let you stay here.’

Reacher said, ‘I paid thirty dollars.’

Reacher said, 'I paid thirty dollars.'

'I'll refund it, of course.'

'That's not the point. A deal is a deal. I didn't damage anything.'

Vincent said nothing.

Reacher said, 'They already know I'm here. Where else could I be?'

'It was OK before.'

'Before what?'

'Before they told me not to let you stay here. Ignorance of the law is no offence. But I can't defy them now. Not after they informed me.'

'When did they inform you?'

'Two minutes ago. By phone.'

'You always do what they tell you?'

Vincent didn't answer.

'Dumb question, I suppose,' Reacher said.

'I'd lose everything I've worked for. And my family before me. All those years.'

'Since 1969?' Reacher asked.

'How did you know that?'

'Just a lucky guess. The moon landing and all. The Apollo programme.'

'Do you remember 1969?'

'Vaguely.'

'I loved it. So many things were going on. I don't know what happened afterwards. It really seemed like the start of a new era.'

'It was,' Reacher said. 'Just not the one you expected.'

'It was,' Reacher said. 'Just not the era you expected.'

'I'm sorry about this.'

'You going to offer to drive me down to the Interstate now?'

'I can't do that either. We're not supposed to help you in any way at all.'

'We?'

'Any of us. They're putting the word out.'

'Well, I seem to have inherited a truck,' Reacher said. 'I can drive myself.'

'Don't,' Vincent said. 'They'll report it stolen. The county police will stop you. You won't get halfway there.'

'The Duncans control the cops too?'

'No, not really. But a stolen truck is a stolen truck, isn't it?'

'They want me to stay here?'

'They do now. You started a war. They want to finish it.'

TWELVE

REACHER STOOD IN THE COLD BETWEEN THE TRUCK AND THE motel cabin and looked all around. There was nothing much to see. The blue glow of the neon reached only as far as the dead Subaru, and then it faded away. Overhead was a moon and a billion chilly stars.

Reacher said, ‘You still got coffee in the pot?’

Vincent said, ‘I can’t serve you.’

‘I won’t rat you out.’

‘They might be watching.’

‘They’re driving two guys sixty miles to the hospital.’

‘Not all of them.’

‘This is the last place they’ll look. They told you to move me on. They’ll assume you obeyed.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Let’s make a deal,’ Reacher said. ‘I’ll move on, to spare you the embarrassment. You can keep the thirty bucks, because this isn’t your fault. In return I want a cup of coffee and some answers.’

*

The lounge was dark, except for a lone work light behind the bar. No more soft reds and pinks. Just a harsh fluorescent tube, with a pronounced flicker and a green colour cast and a noisy component. The music was off and the room was silent, apart from the buzz of the light and the rush of air in the heating system. Vincent filled the Bunn machine with water and spooned ground coffee from a can the size of a drum into a paper filter the size of a hat. He set it going and Reacher listened to the water gulping and hissing and watched the precious brown liquid streaming down into the flask.

Reacher said, ‘Start at the beginning.’

Vincent said, ‘The beginning is a long time ago.’

‘It always is.’

‘They’re an old family.’

‘They always are.’

‘The first one I knew was old man Duncan. He was a farmer, from a long line of farmers. I guess the first one came here on a land grant. Maybe after the Civil War. They grew corn and beans and built up a big acreage. The old man inherited it all. He had three sons, Jacob, Jasper, and Jonas. It was an open secret that the boys hated farming. But they kept the place going until the old man died. So as not to break his heart. Then they sold up. They went into the trucking business. Much less work. They split up their place and sold it off to their neighbours. Which made sense all around. What was a big spread back in the days of horses and mules wasn’t so big any more, with tractors and all, and economies of scale. Land prices were high back then, but the boys sweetened the deals. They gave discounts, if their neighbours signed up to use Duncan Transportation to haul away their harvests. Which again made sense all around. Everyone was getting what they wanted. Everyone was happy.’

‘Until?’

‘Things went sour kind of slowly. There was a dispute with one of the neighbours. Ancient history now. This was twenty-five years ago, probably. But it was an acrimonious situation. It festered all one summer, and then that guy didn’t get his crop hauled away. The Duncans just wouldn’t do it. It rotted on the ground. The guy didn’t get paid that year.’

‘He couldn’t find someone else to haul it?’

‘By then the Duncans had the county all sewn up. Not worth it for some other outfit to come all the way here just for one load.’

‘The guy couldn’t haul it himself?’

‘They had all sold their trucks. No need for them, as far as they could see, because of the contracts, and they needed the money for mortgages anyway.’

‘The guy could have rented. One time only.’

‘He wouldn’t have gotten out of his gate. The fine print said only a Duncan truck could haul anything off a farm. No way to contest it, not in court, and definitely not on the ground, because the football players were on the scene by then. The first generation. They must be old men themselves by now.’

‘Total control,’ Reacher said.

Vincent nodded.

‘And very simple,’ he said. ‘You can work all year, but you need your harvest trucked away, or it’s the same thing as sitting on your butt and growing nothing. Farmers live season to season. They can’t afford to lose a whole crop. The Duncans found the perfect pinch-point. Whether by accident or design, I don’t really know. But as soon as they realized what they had, they sure started enjoying it.’

‘How?’

‘Nothing real bad. People pay a little over the odds, and they mind their manners. That’s about all, really.’

‘You too, right?’

Vincent nodded again. ‘This place needed some fixing, ten years ago. The Duncans loaned me the money, interest free, if I signed up with them for my deliveries.’

‘And you’re still paying.’

‘We’re all still paying.’

‘Why sit still and take it?’

‘You want a revolution? That’s not going to happen. People have got to eat. And the Duncans are smart. No one thing is really that bad. You understand?’

‘Like a frog in warm water,’ Reacher said. ‘That’s how the doctor’s wife described it to me.’

described it to me.

‘That’s how we all describe it.’

‘You still get boiled to death in the end.’

‘Long time coming.’ Vincent turned away and filled a mug with coffee. Another NASA logo. He pushed it across the bar. He said, ‘My mother was related to Neil Armstrong. The first man on the moon. Fifteenth cousin or something.’

Reacher sniffed the steam and tried the coffee. It was excellent. It was fresh, hot, and strong. Vincent said, ‘President Nixon had a speech prepared, you know, just in case they got stuck up there. In case they couldn’t lift off the surface. Can you imagine? Just sitting there, looking up at Earth in the sky, waiting for the air to run out?’

Reacher said, ‘Aren’t there laws? Monopolies, or restraint of trade or something?’

Vincent said, ‘Going to a lawyer is the same thing as going bankrupt. A lawsuit takes what? Two, three years? Two or three years without your crop getting hauled is suicide. And have you ever worked on a farm? Or run a motel? Believe me, at the end of the day you don’t feel like cracking the law books. You feel like getting some sleep.’

Reacher said, ‘Wrecking the doctor’s car wasn’t a small thing.’

Vincent said, ‘I agree. It was worse than usual. We’re all a little unsettled by that.’

‘All?’

‘We all talk to each other. There’s a phone tree. You know, for when something happens. We share information.’

‘And what are people saying?’

‘The feeling is maybe the doctor deserved it. He was way out of line.’

‘For treating his patient?’

‘She wasn’t sick. It was an intervention.’

She wasn't sick. It was an intervention.

‘I think you’re all sick,’ Reacher said. ‘I think you’re all a bunch of spineless cowards. How hard would it be to do something? One guy on his own, I agree, that’s difficult. But if everyone banded together and called another trucker, they’d come. Why wouldn’t they? If there’s enough business here for the Duncans, there’s enough for someone else.’

‘The Duncans might sue.’

‘Let them. Then they’ve got three years of legal bills and no income. The shoe would be on the other foot.’

‘I don’t think another trucker would take the business. They carve things up. They don’t poach, in a place like this.’

‘You could try.’

Vincent didn’t answer.

‘Whatever,’ Reacher said. ‘I really don’t care who gets an ear of corn hauled away, or how, or if, or when. Or a bushel of beans. Or a peck or a quart or however the hell you measure beans. You can sort it out for yourselves. Or not. It’s up to you. I’m on my way to Virginia.’

‘It’s not that easy,’ Vincent said. ‘Not here. People have been scared so long they can’t even remember what it’s like not to be scared any more.’

Reacher said nothing.

Vincent asked, ‘What are you going to do?’

Reacher said, ‘That depends on the Duncans. Plan A is to hitch a ride out of here. But if they want a war, then plan B is to win it. I’ll keep on dumping football players on their driveway until they got none left. Then I’ll walk on up and pay them a visit. Their choice.’

‘Stick to plan A. Just go. That’s my advice.’

‘Show me some traffic and I might.’

‘I need something from you.’

‘I need something from you.’

‘Like what?’

‘Your room key. I’m sorry.’

Reacher dug it out of his pocket and placed it on the bar. A big brass item, marked with a figure six.

Vincent said, ‘Where are you going to sleep tonight?’

‘Better that you don’t know,’ Reacher said. ‘The Duncans might ask you. And you’d tell them, wouldn’t you?’

‘I’d have to,’ Vincent said.

*

There was no more conversation. Reacher finished his coffee and walked out of the lounge, back to the truck. The winch cable had bent the light bar on the roof, so that from the front the whole thing looked a little cross-eyed. But the key turned and the engine started. Reacher drove out of the motel lot. If in doubt, turn left, was his motto. So he headed south, rolling slow, lights off, letting his eyes adjust to the night-time gloom, looking for a direction to follow.

THIRTEEN

THE ROAD WAS A NARROW STRAIGHT RIBBON, WITH DARK EMPTY fields to the right, and dark empty fields to the left. There was enough moonlight and enough starlight to make out shapes, but there weren't many shapes to make out. There was an occasional tree here and there, but mostly the land had been ploughed flat all the way to the horizon. Then three miles out Reacher saw two buildings far to the west, one large, one small, both standing alone in a field. Even at a distance and even in the dark he could tell both buildings were old and made of wood. They were no longer quite square, no longer quite upright, as if the earth was sucking them back down into itself, an inch a time, a corner at a time.

Reacher slowed and turned into a track that was nothing more than a pair of deep parallel ruts put there by the passage of tractor tyres. There was a raised hump of grass between them. The grass was frozen solid, like wire. The pick-up truck lurched and bounced and pattered. Small stones scrabbled under the wheels and skittered away. The track ran straight, then turned, then turned again, following the chequerboard pattern of the fields. The ground was bone hard. No dust came up. The two old buildings got nearer, and larger. One was a barn. The other was a smaller structure. They were about a hundred yards apart. Maybe a hundred and twenty. They were both fringed with dormant vegetation, where errant seeds had blown against their sides, and then fallen and taken root. In the winter the vegetation was nothing more than dry tangled sticks. In the summer it might be a riot of colourful vines.

Reacher looked at the barn first. It stood alone, surrounded by worn-out blacktop. It was built of timbers that looked as hard as iron, but it was rotting and leaning. The door was a slider big enough to admit some serious farm machinery. But the tilt of the building had jammed it in its tracks. The lower right-hand corner was wedged deep in the earth. The iron wheel on the rail above it had lifted off its seat.

There was a judas hole in the slider. A small regular door, inset. It was locked. There were no windows.

Reacher got back in the truck and headed for the smaller shed. It was three-sided, open at the narrow end that faced away from the barn. The tractor ruts ran

all the way inside. It was for storage of some kind. Or it had been, once upon a time, long ago. It was about twice as long and a little wider than the truck.

Perfect.

Reacher drove in, all the way, and stopped with the hood of the truck under a kind of mezzanine half-loft built like a shelf under the peak of the roof. He shut the engine down and climbed out and walked back the way he had come, out of the shed, then twenty yards more. He turned and checked. The truck was completely hidden.

He smiled.

He thought: time for bed.

He set out walking.

He walked in the tractor ruts. The ground under his feet was uneven and hard, and progress was slower than it would have been on the grassy hump in the centre of the track, but even frozen grass can bruise and show footsteps, and Reacher always preferred to leave no trail. He made it back to the road and turned north and walked where the centre line would have been, if anyone had ever painted one. The night was still and quiet, the air frigid, the stars still bright overhead. Nothing else was moving. Up ahead there was no blue glow. The motel's lights had been turned off for the night.

He walked three fast road miles, less than an hour, and came up on the crossroads from the south. He stopped a hundred yards out and checked. On his left, the abandoned mall foundation. Beyond it, the abandoned gas station. On his right, nothing, and beyond that, the motel, dark and silent, just shapes and shadows.

No parked cars.

No parked trucks.

No watchers.

No ambush.

Reacher moved on. He came up on the motel from the rear, at the end of the curl

of cabins, behind the smallest of them. All was quiet. He stayed off the gravel and minced along the silver timbers to his bathroom window. It was still open. The screen was still in the bathtub. He sat on the sill and ducked his head and swivelled his legs up and slid inside. He closed the window against the cold and turned and looked around.

His towels were where he had left them after his shower. Vincent hadn't made up the room. Reacher guessed that was tomorrow's task. No great urgency. No one was expecting a sudden demand for accommodation. Not in the wilds of Nebraska, not in the depths of winter.

Reacher stepped through to the main room and found an undisturbed situation. All was exactly as he had left it. He kept the lights off and the drapes open. He untucked the bed all around and slid in, fully dressed, boots and all. Not the first time he had slept that way. Sometimes it paid to be ready. Hence the boots, and the untucked bedding. He rolled left, rolled right, got as comfortable as he could, and a minute later he was fast asleep.

*

He woke up five hours later and found out he had been wrong. Vincent was not pulling quintuple duty. Only quadruple. He employed a maid. A housekeeper. Reacher was woken by the sound of her feet on the gravel. He saw her through the window. She was heading for his door, getting ready to make up his room. He threw aside the covers and sat up, feet on the floor, blinking. His arms felt a little better. Or maybe they were still numb from sleep. There was mist and cold grey light outside, a bitter winter morning, not long after dawn.

People see what they expect to see. The housekeeper used a pass key and pushed the door wide open and stepped into what she thought was a vacant room. Her eyes passed over Reacher's shape on the bed and moved on and it was a whole long second before they came back again. She didn't really react. She showed no big surprise. No yelp, no scream. She looked like a solid, capable woman. She was about sixty years old, maybe more, white, blunt and square, with blond hair fading slowly to yellow and grey. Plenty of old German genes in there, or Scandinavian.

'Excuse me,' she said. 'But Mr Vincent believed this room to be empty.'

'That was the plan,' Reacher said. 'Better for him that way. What you don't

know can't hurt you.'

'You're the fellow the Duncans told him to turn out,' she said. Not a question. Just a statement, a conclusion derived from shared intelligence on the phone tree.

'I'll move on today,' Reacher said. 'I don't want to cause him any trouble.'

'I'm afraid it's you that will have the trouble. How do you plan to move on?'

'I'll hitch a ride. I'll set up south of the crossroads. I've done it before.'

'Will the first car you see stop?'

'It might.'

'What are the chances?'

'Low.'

'The first car you see won't stop. Because almost certainly the first car you see will be a local resident, and that person will get straight on the phone and tell the Duncans exactly where you are. We've had our instructions. The word is out. So the second car you see will be full of the Duncans' people. And the third, and the fourth. You're in trouble, sir. The land is flat here and it's wintertime. There's nowhere to hide.'

FOURTEEN

THE HOUSEKEEPER MOVED THROUGH THE ROOM IN AN ORDERLY, preprogrammed way, following a set routine, ignoring the anomaly represented by an illicit guest seated on the bed. She checked the bathroom, as if assessing the size of the task ahead of her, and then she butted the tub armchair with her thigh, moving it back an inch to the position decreed for it by the dents in the carpet.

Reacher asked, ‘You got a cell phone?’

The woman said, ‘Sure. Some minutes on it, too.’

‘You going to rat me out?’

‘Rat who out? This is an empty room.’

Reacher asked, ‘What’s to the east of here?’

‘Nothing worth a lick to you,’ the woman said. ‘The road goes to gravel after a mile, and doesn’t really take you anywhere.’

‘West?’

‘Same thing.’

‘Why have a crossroads that doesn’t lead anywhere, east or west?’

‘Some crazy plan,’ the woman said. ‘About fifty years ago. There was supposed to be a strip right here, all commercial, a mile long, with houses east and west. A couple of farms were sold for the land, but that’s about all that happened. Even the gas station went out of business, which is pretty much the kiss of death, wouldn’t you say?’

‘This motel is still here.’

‘By the skin of its teeth. Most of what Mr Vincent earns comes from feeding whiskey to the doctor.’

‘Right, that’s what I was about to say.’

‘Big cash flow right there, from what I saw last night.’

‘A bar needs more than one customer.’

‘He’s paying you.’

The woman nodded. ‘Mr Vincent is a good man. He helps where he can. I’m a farmer, really. I work the winters here, because I need the money. To pay the Duncans, basically.’

‘Haulage fees?’

‘Mine are higher than most.’

‘Why?’

‘Ancient history. I wouldn’t give up.’

‘On what?’

‘I can’t talk about it,’ the woman said. ‘It’s a forbidden subject. It was the start of everything bad. And I was wrong, anyway. It was a false allegation.’

Reacher got up off the bed. He headed for the bathroom and rinsed his face with cold water and brushed his teeth. Behind him the woman stripped the bed with fast practised movements of her wrists, sheets going one way, blankets the other. She said, ‘You’re heading for Virginia.’

Reacher said, ‘You know my Social Security number too?’

‘The doctor told his wife you were a military cop.’

‘Were, as in used to be. Not any more.’

‘So what are you now?’

‘Hungry.’

‘No breakfast here.’

‘So where?’

‘There’s a diner an hour or so south. In town. Where the county cops get their morning coffee and doughnuts.’

‘Terrific.’

The housekeeper stepped out to the path and took fresh linens from a cart. Bottom sheet, top sheet, pillowcases. Reacher asked her, ‘What does Vincent pay you?’

‘Minimum wage,’ she said. ‘That’s all he can afford.’

‘I could pay you more than that to cook me breakfast.’

‘Where?’

‘Your place.’

‘Risky.’

‘Why? You a terrible cook?’

She smiled, briefly. ‘Do you tip well?’

‘If the coffee’s good.’

‘I use my mother’s percolator.’

‘Was her coffee good?’

‘The best.’

‘So we’re in business.’

‘I don’t know,’ the woman said.

‘They’re not going to be conducting house-to-house searches. They expect to find me out in the open.’

‘And when they don’t?’

‘Nothing for you to worry about. I’ll be long gone. I like breakfast as much as the next guy, but I don’t take hours to eat it.’

the next guy, but I don't take hours to eat it.

The woman stood there for a minute, unsure, a crisp white pillowcase held flat across her chest like a sign, or a flag, or a defence. Then she said, 'OK.'

Four hundred and fifty miles due north, because of the latitude, dawn came a little later. The grey panel truck sat astride the sandy path, hidden, inert, dewed over with cold. Its driver woke up in the dark and climbed down and took a leak against a tree, and then he drank some water and ate a candy bar and got back in his sleeping bag and watched the pale morning light filter down through the needles. He knew at best he would be there most of the day, or most of two days, and at worst most of three or four days. But then would come his share, of money and fun, and both things were worth waiting for.

He was patient by nature.

And obedient.

*

Reacher stood still in the middle of the room and the housekeeper finished up around him. She made the bed tight enough to bounce a dime, she changed the towels, she replaced a tiny vial of shampoo, she put out a new morsel of paper-wrapped soap, she folded an arrowhead into the toilet roll. Then she went to get her truck. It was a pick-up, a battered old item, very plain, with rust and skinny tyres and a sagging suspension. She looped around the wrecked Subaru and parked with the passenger door next to the cabin door. She checked front and rear, long and hard, and then she paused. Reacher could see she wanted to forget the whole thing and take off without him. It was right there in her face. But she didn't. She leaned across the width of the cab and opened the door and flapped her hand. Hurry up.

Reacher stepped out of the cabin and into the truck. The woman said, 'If we see anyone, you have to duck down and hide, OK?'

Reacher agreed, although it would be hard to do. It was a small truck. A Chevrolet, grimy and dusty inside, all worn plastic and vinyl, with the dash tight against his knees and the window into the load bed tight against the back of his seat.

'Got a bag?' he asked.

‘Why?’

‘I could put it on my head.’

‘This isn’t funny,’ she said. She drove off, the worn old transmission taking a second to process her foot’s command, something rattling under the hood, a holed muffler banging away like a motorcycle. She turned left out of the lot and drove through the crossroads and headed south. There was no other traffic. In the daylight the land all around looked flat and featureless and immense. It was all dusted white with frost. The sky was high and blank. After five minutes Reacher saw the two old buildings in the west, the sagging barn and the smaller shed with the captured pick-up in it. Then three minutes later they passed the Duncans’ three houses standing alone at the end of their long shared driveway. The woman’s hands went tight on the wheel and Reacher saw she had crossed her fingers. The truck rattled onward and she watched the mirror more than the road ahead and then a mile later she breathed out and relaxed.

Reacher said, ‘They’re only people. Three old guys and a skinny kid. They don’t have magic powers.’

‘They’re evil,’ the woman said.

They were in Jonas Duncan’s kitchen, eating breakfast, biding their time, waiting for Jacob to come out with it. He had a pronouncement to make. A decision. They all knew the signs. Many times Jacob had sat quiet and distracted and contemplative, and then eventually he had delivered a nugget of wisdom, or an analysis that had cut to the heart of the matter, or a proposal that had killed three or four birds with one stone. So they waited for it, Jonas and Jasper patiently enjoying their meal, Seth struggling with it a little because chewing had become painful for him. Bruising was spreading out from under his aluminium mask. He had woken up with two black eyes the size and colour of rotting pears.

Jacob put down his knife and his fork. He dabbed his lips with his cuff. He folded his hands in front of him. He said, ‘We have to ask ourselves something.’

Jonas was hosting, so he was entitled to the first response.

‘What something?’ he asked.

‘We have to consider whether it might be worth trading a little dignity and self-respect for a useful outcome.’

‘In what way?’

‘We have a provocation and a threat. The provocation comes from the stranger in the motel throwing his weight around in matters that don’t concern him. The threat comes from our friend to the south getting impatient. The first thing must be punished, and the second thing shouldn’t have happened at all. No date should have been guaranteed. But it was, so we have to deal with it, and without judgement either. No doubt Seth was doing what he thought was best for all of us.’

Jonas asked, ‘How do we deal with it?’

‘Let’s think about the other thing first. The stranger from the motel.’

Seth said, ‘I want him hurt bad.’

‘We all do, son. And we tried, didn’t we? Didn’t work out so well.’

‘What, now we’re afraid of him?’

‘We are, a little bit, son. We lost three guys. We’d be stupid not to be at least a little concerned. And we’re not stupid, are we? That’s one thing a Duncan will never be accused of. Hence my question about self-respect.’

‘You want to let him walk?’

‘No, I want to tell our friend to the south that the stranger is the problem. That he’s somehow the reason for the delay. Then we point out to our friend that he’s already got two of his boys up here, and if he wants a bit of giddy-up in the shipment process, then maybe those two boys could be turned against the stranger. That’s a win all around, isn’t it? Three separate ways. First, those two boys are off Seth’s back, as of right now, and second, the stranger gets hurt or killed, and third, some of the sting goes out of our friend’s recent attitude, because he comes to see that the delay isn’t really our fault at all. He comes to see that we’re beleaguered, by outside forces, in ways that he’ll readily understand, because no doubt he’s beleaguered too, from time to time, in similar ways. In other words, we make common cause.’

Silence for a moment.

Then Jasper Duncan said, ‘I like it.’

Jacob said, ‘I like it too. Otherwise I wouldn’t be proposing it. The only downside is a slight blow to our self-respect and dignity, in that it won’t be our own hands on the man who transgressed against us, and we’ll be admitting to our friend to the south that there are problems in this world that we can’t solve all by ourselves.’

‘No shame in that,’ Jonas said. ‘This is a very complicated business.’

Seth asked, ‘You figure his boys are better than our boys?’

‘Of course they are, son,’ Jacob said. ‘As good as our boys are, his are in a different league. There’s no comparison. Which we need to bear in mind. Our friend to the south needs to remain our friend, because he would make a very unpleasant enemy.’

‘But suppose the delay doesn’t go away?’ Jasper asked. ‘Suppose nothing changes? Suppose the stranger gets nailed today and we still can’t deliver for a week? Then our friend to the south knows we were lying to him.’

‘I don’t think the stranger will get nailed in one day,’ Jacob said.

‘Why not?’

‘Because he seems to be a very capable person. All the evidence so far points in that direction. It could take a few days, by which time our truck could well be on its way. And even if it isn’t, we could say that we thought it prudent to keep the merchandise out of the country until the matter was finally resolved. Our friend might believe that. Or, of course, he might not.’

‘It’s a gamble, then.’

‘Indeed it is. But it’s probably the best we can do. Are we in or out?’

‘We should offer assistance,’ Jasper said. ‘And information. We should require compliance from the population.’

Jacob said, ‘Naturally. Our friend would expect nothing less. Instructions will be

issued, and sanctions will be advertised.'

'And our boys should be out there too. Ears and eyes open. We need to feel we made some contribution, at least.'

'Naturally,' Jacob said again. 'So are we in or out?'

No one spoke for a long moment. Then Jasper said, 'I'm in.'

'Me too,' Jonas said.

Jacob Duncan nodded and unfolded his hands.

'That's a majority, then,' he said. 'Which I'm mighty relieved to have, because I took the liberty of calling our friend to the south two hours ago. Our boys and his are already on the hunt.'

'I want to be there,' Seth said. 'When the stranger gets it.'

FIFTEEN

REACHER WAS HALF EXPECTING SOMETHING NAILED TOGETHER from sod and rotten boards, like a Dust Bowl photograph, but the woman drove him down a long gravel farm track to a neat two-storey dwelling standing alone in the corner of a spread that might have covered a thousand acres. The woman parked behind the house, next to a line of old tumbledown barns and sheds. Reacher could hear chickens in a coop, and he could smell pigs in a sty. And earth, and air, and weather. The countryside, in all its winter glory. The woman said, ‘I don’t mean to be rude, but how much are you planning to pay me?’

Reacher smiled. ‘Deciding how much food to give me?’

‘Something like that.’

‘My breakfast average west of the Mississippi is about fifteen bucks with tip.’

The woman looked surprised. And satisfied.

‘That’s a lot of money,’ she said. ‘That’s two hours’ wages. That’s like having a nine-day work week.’

‘Not all profit,’ Reacher said. ‘I’m hungry, don’t forget.’

She led him inside through a door to a back hallway. The house was what Seth Duncan’s place might have been before the expensive renovations. Low ceilings overhead, small panes of wavy glass in the windows, uneven floors underfoot, the whole place old and antique and outdated in every possible way, but cleaned and tidied and well maintained for a hundred consecutive years. The kitchen was immaculate. The stove was cold.

‘You didn’t eat yet?’ Reacher asked.

‘I don’t eat,’ the woman said. ‘Not breakfast, at least.’

‘Dieting?’

The woman didn’t answer, and Reacher immediately felt stupid.

‘I’m buying,’ he said. ‘Thirty bucks. Let’s both have some fun.’

‘I don’t want charity.’

‘It isn’t charity. I’m returning a favour, that’s all. You stuck your neck out bringing me here.’

‘I was just trying to be a decent person.’

‘Me too,’ Reacher said. ‘Take it or leave it.’

She said, ‘I’ll take it.’

He said, ‘What’s your name? Most times when I have breakfast with a lady, I know her name at least.’

‘My name is Dorothy.’

‘I’m pleased to meet you, Dorothy. You married?’

‘I was. Now I’m not.’

‘You know my name?’

‘Your name is Jack Reacher. We’ve all been informed. The word is out.’

‘I told the doctor’s wife.’

‘And she told the Duncans. Don’t blame her for it. It’s automatic. She’s trying to pay down her debt, like all of us.’

‘What does she owe them?’

‘She sided with me, twenty-five years ago.’

Roberto Cassano and Angelo Mancini were driving north in a rented Impala. They were based in a Courtyard Marriott, which was the only hotel in the county seat, which was nothing more than a token grid of streets set in the middle of what felt like a billion square miles of absolutely nothing at all. They had learned to watch their fuel gauge. Nebraska was that kind of place. It paid to fill up at every gas station you saw. The next one could be a million miles away.

They were from Vegas, which as always meant they were really from somewhere else. New York, in Cassano's case, and Philadelphia, in Mancini's. They had paid their dues in their home towns, and then they had gotten hired together in Miami, like playing triple-A ball, and then they had moved up to the big show out in the Nevada desert. Tourists were told that what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, but that wasn't true as far as Cassano and Mancini were concerned. They were travelling men, always on the move, tasked to roam around and deal with the first faint pre-echoes of trouble long before it rolled in and hit their boss where he lived.

Hence the trip to the vast agricultural wastelands, nearly eight hundred miles north and east of the glitter and the glamour. There was a snafu in the supply chain, and it was a day or two away from getting extremely embarrassing. Their boss had promised certain specific things to certain specific people, and it would do him no good at all if he couldn't deliver. So Cassano and Mancini had so far been on the scene for seventy-two hours straight, and they had smacked some beanpole yokel's wife around, just to make their point. Then some other related yokel had called with a claim that the snafu was being caused by a stranger poking his nose in where it didn't belong. Bullshit, possibly. Quite probably entirely unconnected. Just an excuse. But Cassano and Mancini were only sixty miles away, so their boss was sending them north to help, because if the yokel's statement was indeed a lie, then it indicated vulnerability, and therefore minor assistance rendered now would leverage a better deal later. An obvious move. This was American business, after all. Forcing down the wholesale price was the name of the game.

They came up the crappy two-lane and rolled through the crappy crossroads and pulled in at the motel. They had seen it before. It looked OK at night. Not so good in the daylight. In the daylight it looked sad and botched and half-hearted. They saw a damaged Subaru standing near one of the cabins. It was all smashed up. There was nothing else to see. They parked in the lot outside the lounge and got out of the rental car and stood and stretched. Two city boys, yawning, scoured by the endless wind. Cassano was medium height, dark, muscled, blank-eyed. Mancini was pretty much the same. They both wore good shoes and dark suits and coloured shirts and no ties and wool overcoats. They were often mistaken for each other.

They went inside, to find the motel owner. Which they did, immediately. They found him behind the bar, using a rag, wiping a bunch of sticky overlapping rings off the wood. Some kind of a sadsack loser, with dyed red hair.

flags on the wood. Some kind of a sadsack loser, with dyed red hair.

Cassano said, ‘We represent the Duncan family,’ which he had been promised would produce results. And it did. The guy with the hair dropped the rag and stepped back and almost came to attention and saluted, like he was in the army, like a superior officer had just yelled at him.

Cassano said, ‘You sheltered a guy here last night.’

The guy with the hair said, ‘No, sir, I did not. I tossed him out.’

Mancini said, ‘It’s cold.’

The guy behind the bar said nothing, not following.

Cassano said, ‘If he didn’t sleep here, where the hell did he sleep? You got no local competition. And he didn’t sleep out under a hedge. For one thing, there don’t seem to be any hedges in Nebraska. For another, he’d have frozen his ass off.’

‘I don’t know where he went.’

‘You sure?’

‘He wouldn’t tell me.’

‘Any kindly souls here, who would take a stranger in?’

‘Not if the Duncans told them not to.’

‘Then he must have stayed here.’

‘Sir, I told you, he didn’t.’

‘You checked his room?’

‘He returned the key before he left.’

‘More than one way into a room, asshole. Did you check it?’

‘The housekeeper already made it up.’

‘She say anything?’

‘No.’

‘Where is she?’

‘She finished. She left. She went home.’

‘What’s her name?’

‘Dorothy.’

Mancini said, ‘Tell us where Dorothy lives.’

SIXTEEN

DOROTHY'S IDEA OF A FIFTEEN-DOLLAR BREAKFAST TURNED OUT to be a regular feast. Coffee first, while the rest of it was cooking, which was oatmeal, and bacon, and eggs, and toast, big heaping portions, lots of everything, all the food groups, all piping hot, served on thick china plates that must have been fifty years old, and eaten with ancient silverware that had heavy square Georgian handles.

'Fabulous,' Reacher said. 'Thank you very much.'

'You're welcome. Thank you for mine.'

'It isn't right, you know. People not eating because of the Duncans.'

'People do all kinds of things because of the Duncans.'

'I know what I'd do.'

She smiled. 'We all talked like that, once upon a time, long ago. But they kept us poor and tired, and then we got old.'

'What do the young people do here?'

'They leave, just as soon as they can. The adventurous ones go all over the place. It's a big country. The others stay closer to home, in Lincoln or Omaha.'

'Doing what?'

'There are jobs there. Some boys join the State Police. That's always popular.'

'Someone should call those boys.'

She didn't answer.

He asked, 'What happened twenty-five years ago?'

'I can't talk about it.'

'You can, to me. No one will know. If I ever meet the Duncans, we'll be

‘You can, to me. No one will know. If I ever meet the Duncans, we’ll be discussing the present day, not ancient history.’

‘I was wrong anyway.’

‘About what?’

She wouldn’t answer.

He asked, ‘Were you the neighbour with the dispute?’

She wouldn’t answer.

He asked, ‘You want help cleaning up?’

She shook her head. ‘You don’t wash the dishes in a restaurant, do you?’

‘Not so far.’

‘Where were you, twenty-five years ago?’

‘I don’t remember,’ he said. ‘Somewhere in the world.’

‘Were you in the army then?’

‘Probably.’

‘People say you beat up three Cornhuskers yesterday.’

‘Not all at once,’ he said.

‘You want more coffee?’

‘Sure,’ he said, and she recharged the percolator and set it going again. He asked, ‘How many farms contracted with the Duncans?’

‘All of us,’ she said. ‘This whole corner of the county. Forty farms.’

‘That’s a lot of corn.’

‘And soybeans and alfalfa. We rotate the crops.’

‘Did you know any of the old Duncans?’

‘Did you buy part of the old Duncan place?’

‘A hundred acres. A nice little parcel. It squared off a corner. It made sense.’

‘How long ago was that?’

‘It must be thirty years.’

‘So things were good for the first five years?’

‘I’m not going to tell you what happened.’

‘I think you should,’ he said. ‘I think you want to.’

‘Why do you want to know?’

‘Like you said, I had three football players sent after me. I’d like to understand why, at least.’

‘It was because you busted Seth Duncan’s nose.’

‘I’ve busted lots of noses. Nobody ever retaliated with retired athletes before.’

She poured the coffee. She placed his mug in front of him. The kitchen was warm from the stove. It felt like it would stay warm all day long. She said, ‘Twenty-five years ago Seth Duncan was eight years old.’

‘And?’

‘This corner of the county was like a little community. We were all spread out and isolated, of course, but the school bus kind of defined it. Everybody knew everybody else. Children would play together, big groups of them, at one house, then another.’

‘And?’

‘No one liked going to Seth Duncan’s place. Girls especially. And Seth played with girls a lot. More so than with boys.’

‘Why didn’t they like it?’

‘No one spelled it out. A place like this, a time like that, such things were not

‘No one spelled it out. A place like this, a time like that, such things were not discussed. But something unpleasant was going on. Or nearly going on. Or in the air. My daughter was eight years old at the time. Same age as Seth. Almost the same birthday, as a matter of fact. She didn’t want to play there. She made that clear.’

‘What was going on?’

‘I told you, no one said.’

‘But you knew,’ Reacher said. ‘Didn’t you? You had a daughter. Maybe you couldn’t prove anything, but you knew.’

‘Have you got kids?’

‘None that I know about. But I was a cop of sorts for thirteen years. And I’ve been human all my life. Sometimes people just know things.’

The woman nodded. Sixty years old, blunt and square, her face flushed from the heat and the food. She said, ‘I suppose today they would call it inappropriate touching.’

‘On Seth’s part?’

She nodded again. ‘And his father’s, and both his uncles’.’

‘That’s awful.’

‘Yes, it was.’

‘What did you do?’

‘My daughter never went there again.’

‘Did you talk to people?’

‘Not at first,’ she said. ‘Then it all came out in a rush. Everyone was talking to everyone else. Nobody’s girl wanted to go there.’

‘Did anyone talk to Seth’s mother?’

‘Seth didn’t have a mother.’

Reacher said, ‘Why not? Had she left?’

‘No.’

‘Had she died?’

‘She never existed.’

‘She must have.’

‘Biologically, I suppose. But Jacob Duncan was never married. He was never seen with a woman. No woman was ever seen with any of them. Their own mother had passed on years before. It was just old man Duncan and the three of them. Then the three of them on their own. Then all of a sudden Jacob was bringing a little boy to kindergarten.’

‘Didn’t anyone ask where the kid came from?’

‘People talked a little, but they didn’t ask. Too polite. Too inhibited. I suppose we all thought Seth was a relative. You know, maybe orphaned or something.’

‘So what happened next? You all stopped your kids from going there to play, and that’s what caused the trouble?’

‘That’s how it started. There was a lot of talk and whispers. The Duncans were all alone in their little compound. They were shunned. They resented it.’

‘So they retaliated?’

‘Not at first.’

‘So when?’

‘After a little girl went missing.’

*

Roberto Cassano and Angelo Mancini got back in their rented Impala and fired up the engine. The car had a bolt-on navigation system, a couple of extra dollars a day, but it was useless. The screen came up with nothing more than a few thin

red lines, like doodles on a pad. None of the roads had names. Just numbers, or else nothing at all. Most of the map was blank. And it was either inaccurate or incomplete, anyway. The crossroads wasn't even marked. Just like Vegas, to be honest. Vegas was growing so fast no GPS company could keep up with it. So Cassano and Mancini were used to navigating the old-fashioned way, which was to scribble down turn-by-turn directions freely given by a source who was anxious to be accurate, in order to avoid a worse beating than he was getting along with the initial questions. And the motel guy had been more anxious than most, right after the first two smacks. He was no kind of hero. That was for sure.

'Left out of the lot,' Mancini read out loud.

Cassano turned left out of the lot.

Dorothy the housekeeper made a third pot of coffee. She rinsed the percolator and filled it again and set it going. She said, 'Seth Duncan had a hard time in school. He got bullied. Eight-year-old boys can be very tribal. I guess they felt they had permission to go after him, because of the whispers at home. And none of the girls stuck with him. They wouldn't go to his house, and they wouldn't even talk to him. That's how children are. That's how it was. All except one girl. Her parents had raised her to be decent and compassionate. She wouldn't go to his house, but she still talked to him. Then one day that little girl just disappeared.'

Reacher said, 'And?'

'It's a horrible thing, when that happens. You have no idea. There's a kind of crazy period at first, when everyone is mad and worried but can't bring themselves to believe the worst. You know, a couple of hours, maybe three or four, you think she's playing somewhere, maybe out picking flowers, she's lost track of the time, she'll be home soon, right as rain. No one had cell phones back then, of course. Some people didn't even have regular phones. Then you think the girl has gotten lost, and everyone starts driving around, looking for her. Then it goes dark, and then you call the cops.'

Reacher asked, 'What did the cops do?'

'Everything they could. They did a fine job. They went house to house, they used flashlights, they used loudhailers to tell everyone to search their barns and outbuildings, they drove around all night, then at first light they got dogs and

called in the State Police and the State Police called in the National Guard and they got a helicopter.'

'Nothing?'

The woman nodded.

'Nothing,' she said. 'Then I told them about the Duncans.'

'You did?'

'Someone had to. As soon as I spoke up, others joined in. We were all pointing our fingers. The State Police took us very seriously. I guess they couldn't afford not to. They took the Duncans to a barracks over near Lincoln and questioned them for days. They searched their houses. They got help from the FBI. All kinds of laboratory people were there.'

'Did they find anything?'

'Not a trace.'

'Nothing at all?'

'Every test was negative. They said the child hadn't been there.'

'So what happened next?'

'Nothing. It all fizzled out. The Duncans came home. The little girl was never seen again. The case was never solved. The Duncans were very bitter. They asked me to apologize, for naming names, but I wouldn't. I couldn't give it up. My husband, neither. Some folks were on our side, like the doctor's wife. But most weren't, really. They saw which way the wind was blowing. The Duncans withdrew into themselves. Then they started punishing us. Like revenge. We didn't get our crop hauled that year. We lost it all. My husband killed himself. He sat right in that chair where you're sitting and he put his shotgun under his chin.'

'I'm sorry.'

The woman said nothing.

Reacher asked, ‘Who was the girl?’

No reply.

‘Yours, right?’

‘Yes,’ the woman said. ‘It was my daughter. She was eight years old. She’ll always be eight years old.’

She started to cry, and then her phone started to ring.

SEVENTEEN

THE PHONE WAS A CLUNKY OLD NOKIA. IT WAS ON THE KITCHEN counter. It hopped and buzzed and trilled the old Nokia tune that Reacher had heard a thousand times before, in bars, on buses, on the street. Dorothy snatched it up and answered. She said hello and then she listened, to what sounded like a fast slurred message of some kind, maybe a warning, and then she clicked off and dropped the phone like it was scalding hot.

‘That was Mr Vincent,’ she said. ‘Over at the motel.’

Reacher said, ‘And?’

‘Two men were there. They’re coming here. Right now.’

‘Who?’

‘We don’t know. Men we’ve never seen before.’ She opened the kitchen door and glanced down a hallway towards the front of the house. There was silence for a second and then Reacher heard the distant hiss of tyres on blacktop, the moan of a slowing engine, the sound of brakes, and then the crunch of a wheel on gravel, then another, then two more together, as a car turned in and bumped on to the track.

The woman said, ‘Get out of here. Please. They can’t know you’re here.’

‘We don’t know who they are.’

‘They’re Duncan people. Who else would they be? I can’t let them find you here. It’s more than my life is worth.’

Reacher said, ‘I can’t get out of here. They’re already on the track.’

‘Hide out back. Please. I’m begging you. They can’t find you here. I mean it.’ She stepped out to the hallway, ready to meet them head on at the front door. They were close, and moving fast. The gravel was loud. She said, ‘They might search. If they find you, tell them you snuck in the yard. Over the fields. Please. Tell them I didn’t know. Make them believe you. Tell them you’re nothing to do with me.’ Then she closed the door on him and was gone.

Angelo Mancini folded the sheet of handwritten directions and put it in his pocket. They were on some lumpy, bumpy, piece-of-shit farm track, heading for some broken-down old woebegone piece-of-shit farmhouse that belonged in a museum or a history book. The navigation screen showed nothing at all. Just white space. Roberto Cassano was at the wheel, hitting every pothole. What did he care? They were Hertz's tyres, not his. Up ahead the front door opened and an old woman appeared on the step, clutching the jamb, like she would fall over if she let go.

Mancini said, 'That's a woman with a guilty secret, right there. Count on it.'

'Looks that way,' Cassano said.

Reacher checked the view across the yard at the back. Maybe sixty feet to the parked pick-up, maybe sixty more to the line of barns and sheds and coops and sties. He eased the door open. He turned back and checked the door to the front hallway. It was closed, but he could hear the car. It was crunching to a stop. Its doors were opening. He sensed the woman out there, staring at it, fearful and panicking. He shrugged and turned again to leave. His gaze passed over the kitchen table.

Not good.

They might search.

Tell them I didn't know.

The table held the remains of two breakfasts.

Two oatmeal bowls, two plates all smeared with egg, two plates all full of toast crumbs, two spoons, two knives, two forks, two coffee mugs.

He put his toast plate on his egg plate, and he put his oatmeal bowl on his toast plate, and he put his coffee mug in his oatmeal bowl, and he put his knife and fork and spoon in his pocket. He picked up the teetering stack of china and carried it with him, across the kitchen, out the door. He held the stack one-handed and pulled the door shut after him and set off across the yard. The ground was beaten dirt mixed with crushed stone and matted with winter weeds. It was reasonably quiet underfoot. But the shakes in his arm were rattling the mug in the bowl. He was making a tinkling noise with every step he took. It

mug in the bowl. He was making a tinkling noise with every step he took. It sounded as loud as a fire alarm. He passed the pick-up truck. Headed onward to a barn. It was an old swaybacked thing made from thin tarred boards. It was in poor condition. It had twin doors. Hinged in the conventional way, not sliders. The hinges were shot and the doors were warped. He hooked a heel behind one of them and forced his butt into the gap and pushed with his hip and scraped his way inside, back first, then his shoulders, then the stack of crockery.

It was dark inside. No light in there, except blinding sparkles from chinks between the boards. They threw thin lines and spots of illumination across the floor. The floor was earth, soaked in old oil, matted with flakes of rust. The air smelled of creosote. He put the stack of china down. All around him was old machinery, uniformly brown and scaly with decay. He didn't know what any of it was. There were tines and blades and wheels and metal all bent and welded into fantastical shapes. Farm stuff. Not his area of expertise. Not even close.

He stepped back to the leaning doors and peered through a crack and looked and listened, and drew up rules of engagement in his head. He couldn't touch these guys, not unless he was prepared to go all the way and make them disappear for ever, and their car, and then force Vincent at the motel to hold his tongue, also for ever. Anything less than that, and it would all come back to Dorothy sooner or later. So prudence dictated he should stay quiet and out of sight, which he was prepared to do, maybe, just possibly, depending on what he heard from the house. One scream might be nerves or fright. Two screams, and he was going in there, come what may.

He heard nothing.

And he saw nothing, for ten long minutes. Then a guy stepped out the back door, into the yard, and another came out behind him. They walked ten paces and stopped and stood there side by side like they owned the place. They gazed left, gazed ahead, gazed right. City boys. They had shined shoes and wool pants and wool overcoats. They were both on the short side of six feet, both heavy in the chest and shoulders, both dark. Both regular little tough guys, like something out of a television show.

They tracked left a little, towards the pick-up truck. They checked the load bed. They opened a door and checked the cab. They moved on, towards the line of barns and sheds and coops and sties.

Directly towards Reacher.

They came pretty close.

Reacher rolled his shoulders and snapped his elbows and flapped his wrists and tried to work some feeling into his arms. He made a fist with his right hand, and then his left.

The two guys walked on, closer still.

They looked left. They looked right. They sniffed the air.

They stopped.

Shiny shoes, wool coats. City boys. They didn't want to be wading through pigshit and chicken feathers and turning over piles of old crap. They looked at each other and then the one on the right turned back to the house and called out, 'Hey, old lady, get your fat ass out here right now.'

Forty yards away, Dorothy stepped out the door. She paused a beat and then walked towards the two guys, slow and hesitant. The two guys walked back towards her, just as slow. They all met near the pick-up truck. The guy on the left stood still. The guy on the right caught Dorothy by the upper arm with one hand and used the other to take a pistol out from under his coat. A shoulder holster. The gun was some kind of a nickel-plated semi-automatic. Or stainless steel. Reacher was too far away to make out the brand. Maybe a Colt. Or maybe a copy. The guy raised it across his body and laid its muzzle against Dorothy's temple. He held the gun flat, like a punk in a movie. His thumb and three fingers were wrapped tight around the grip. The fourth finger was on the trigger. Dorothy flinched away. The guy hauled on her arm and pulled her back.

He called out, 'Reacher? Is that your name? You there? You hiding somewhere? You listening to me? I'm going to count to three. Then you come on out. If you don't, I'm going to shoot the old cow. I've got a gun to her head. Tell him, grandma.'

Dorothy said, 'There's no one here.'

The yard went quiet. Three people, all alone in a thousand acres.

Reacher stood still, right where he was, on his own in the dark.

He saw Dorothy close her eyes.

The guy with the gun said, ‘One.’

Reacher stood still.

The guy said, ‘Two.’

Reacher stood still.

The guy said, ‘Three.’

EIGHTEEN

REACHER STOOD STILL AND WATCHED THROUGH THE CRACK. There was a long second's pause. Then the guy who had been counting dropped his hand and stuffed the gun back under his coat. He let go of the woman's arm. She staggered away a step. The two guys looked left, looked right, looked at each other. They shrugged. A test, passed. A precaution, properly explored. They turned and headed away around the side of the house and disappeared from sight. A minute later Reacher heard doors slam and an engine start and the crunch and whine of a car backing down the track. He heard it make the blacktop, he heard it change gear, he heard it drive away.

The world went quiet again.

Reacher stayed right where he was, on his own in the dark. He wasn't dumb. Easiest thing in the world for one of the guys to be hiding behind the corner of the house, while his buddy drove away like a big loud decoy. Reacher knew all the tricks. He had used most of them. He had invented some of them himself.

Dorothy stood in the yard with one hand on the side of her truck, steadying herself. Reacher watched her. He guessed she was about thirty seconds away from gathering her wits and taking a breath and shouting that the guys were gone and he could come out now. Then he saw twenty-five years of habitual caution get the better of her. She pushed off the truck and walked the same path the two guys had taken. She was gone a whole minute. Then she came back, around the other side of the house. A full circle. Flat land all around. Wintertime. No place to hide.

She called, 'They're gone.'

He picked up the stack of plates and shouldered his way out between the barn's warped doors. He blinked in the light and shivered in the cold. He walked on and met her near the pick-up truck. She took the plates from him. He said, 'You OK?'

She said, 'I was a little worried there for a minute.'

'The safety catch was on. The guy never moved his thumb. I was watching. It was a bluff.'

was a bluff.

‘Suppose it hadn’t been a bluff? Would you have come out?’

‘Probably,’ Reacher said.

‘You did good with these plates. I suddenly remembered them, and thought I was a goner for sure. Those guys looked like they wouldn’t miss much.’

‘What else did they look like?’

‘Rough,’ she said. ‘Menacing. They said they were here representing the Duncans. Representing them, not working for them. That’s something new. The Duncans never used outsiders before.’

‘Where will they go next?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t think they know, either. Nowhere to hide is pretty much the same as nowhere to look, isn’t it?’

‘The doctor’s, maybe?’

‘They might. The Duncans know you had contact.’

‘Maybe I should head over there.’

‘And maybe I should get back to the motel. I think they hurt Mr Vincent. He didn’t sound too good on the phone.’

‘There’s an old barn and an old shed south of the motel. Off the road, to the west. Made of wood. All alone in a field. Whose are they?’

‘They’re nobody’s. They were on one of the farms that got sold for the development that never happened. Fifty years ago.’

‘I have a truck in there. I took it from the football players last night. Give me a ride?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘I’m not driving you past the Duncan place again.’

‘They don’t have X-ray vision.’

‘They do. They have a hundred pairs of eyes.’

‘So you want me to walk past their place?’

‘You don’t have to. Head west across the fields until you see a cell tower. One of my neighbours leases half an acre to the phone company. That’s how he pays his haulage. Turn north there and skirt the Duncan place on the blind side and then you’ll see the barns.’

‘How far is it?’

‘It’s a morning’s walk.’

‘I’ll burn up all that breakfast.’

‘That’s what breakfast is for. Make sure you turn north, OK? South takes you near Seth Duncan’s house, and you really don’t want to go there. You know the difference between north and south?’

‘I walk south, I get warmer. North, I get colder. I should be able to figure it out.’

‘I’m serious.’

‘What was your daughter’s name?’

‘Margaret,’ the woman said. ‘Her name was Margaret.’

So Reacher walked around the back of the barns and the sheds and the coops and the sties and struck out across the fields. The sun was nothing more than a bright patch of luminescence in the high grey sky, but it was enough to navigate by. After ten o’clock in the morning in Nebraska in the wintertime, and it was solidly east of south, behind his left shoulder. He kept it there for forty minutes, and then he saw a cell phone tower looming insubstantial in the mist. It was tall and skeletal, with a microwave receptor the shape of a bass drum, and cell antennas the shape of fungo bats. It had a tangle of dead brown weeds at its base, and it was surrounded by a token barbed wire fence. In the far distance beyond it was a farmhouse similar to Dorothy’s. The neighbour’s, presumably. The ground underfoot was hard and lumpy, all softball-sized clods and clarts of frozen earth, the wreckage from the last year’s harvest. They rolled away either left or right or crushed under his heels as he walked.

He turned north at the tower. The sun had moved on. Now it was high and almost behind him, an hour before the season's drab version of noon. There was no warmth in it. Just light, a little brighter than the rest of the day. Far ahead, to the right, he could see a smudge on the horizon. The three Duncan houses, he guessed, grouped together at the end of their long shared driveway. He couldn't make out any detail. Certainly nothing man-sized. Which meant no one there could make out any man-sized detail either, in reverse. Same number of miles east to west as west to east, same grey gloom, same mist. But even so, he tracked left a little, following a curve, maintaining his distance, making sure.

Dorothy the housekeeper sat Mr Vincent down in a red velvet chair and sponged the blood off his face. He had a split lip and a cut brow and a lump the size of an egg under his eye. He had apologized for being so slow with his warning call. He had passed out, he said, and had scrambled for the phone as soon as he came around.

Dorothy told him to hush up.

On the other side of the circular room one of the bar stools was lying on its side and a mirrored panel on the bar back had been shattered. Shards of silvered glass had fallen among the bottles like daggers. One of the NASA mugs was broken. Its handle had come right off.

*

Angelo Mancini had the doctor's shirt collar bunched in his left hand and he had his right hand bunched into a fist. The doctor's wife was sitting in Roberto Cassano's lap. She had been ordered to, and she had refused. So Mancini had hit her husband, hard, in the face. She had refused again. Mancini had hit her husband again, harder. She had complied. Cassano had his hand on her thigh, his thumb an inch under the hem of her skirt. She was rigid with fear and shuddering with revulsion.

'Talk to me, baby,' Cassano whispered, in her ear. 'Tell me where you told Jack Reacher to hide.'

'I didn't tell him anything.'

'You were with him twenty minutes. Last night. The weirdo at the motel told us so.'

‘I didn’t tell him anything.’

‘So what were you doing there for twenty minutes? Did you have sex with him?’

‘No.’

‘You want to have sex with me?’

She didn’t answer.

‘Shy?’ Cassano asked. ‘Bashful? Cat got your tongue?’

He moved his hand another inch, upward. He licked the woman’s ear. She ducked away. Just twisted at the waist and leaned right over, away from him.

He said, ‘Come back, baby.’

She didn’t move.

He said, ‘Come back,’ a little louder.

She straightened up. He got the impression she was about to puke. He didn’t want that. Not all over his good clothes. But he licked her ear one more time anyway, just to show her who was boss. Mancini hit the doctor one more time, just for fun. Travelling men, roaming around, getting the job done. But wasting their time in Nebraska, that was for sure. No one knew a damn thing. The whole place was as barren as the surface of the moon, with much less to do. Who would stay? This guy Reacher was long gone, obviously, totally in the wind, probably halfway to Omaha by the time the sun came up, rumbling along in the stolen truck, completely unnoticed by the county cops, who clearly sat around all night with their thumbs up their butts, because hadn’t they missed every single one of the deliveries roaring through from Canada to Vegas? For months? Hadn’t they? Every single one?

Assholes.

Yokels.

Retards.

All of them.

Cassano jerked upright and spilled the doctor's wife off his lap. She sprawled on the floor. Mancini punched the doctor one more time, and then they left, back to the rented Impala parked outside.

Reacher kept the three smudged shapes far to his right and tracked onward. He was used to walking. All soldiers were. Sometimes there was no alternative to a long fast advance on foot, so soldiers trained for it. It had been that way since the Romans, and it was still that way, and it would stay that way for ever. So he kept on going, satisfied with his progress, enjoying the small compensations that fresh air and country smells brought with them.

Then he smelled something else.

Up ahead was a tangle of low bushes, like a miniature grove. Wild raspberries or wild roses, maybe, a remnant, somehow spared by the ploughs, now bare and dormant but still thick and dense with thorns. There was a thin plume of smoke coming from them, from right in the middle, horizontal and almost invisible on the wind. It smelled distinctive. Not a wood fire. Not a cigarette.

Marijuana.

Reacher was familiar with the smell. All cops are, even military cops. Grunts get high like anyone else, off duty. Sometimes even on duty. Reacher guessed what he was smelling was a fine sativa, probably not imported junk from Mexico, probably a good home-grown strain. And why not, in Nebraska? Corn country was ideal for a little clandestine farming. Corn grew as high as an elephant's eye, and dense, and a twenty-foot clearing carved out a hundred yards from the edge of a field was as secret a garden as could be planted anywhere. More profitable than corn, too, even with all the federal subsidies. And these people had their haulage fees to meet. Maybe someone was sampling his recent harvest, judging its quality, setting its price in his mind.

It was a kid. A boy. Maybe fifteen years old, maybe sixteen. Reacher walked on and looked down into the chest-high thicket and found him there. He was quite tall, quite thin, with the kind of long centre-parted hair Reacher hadn't seen on a boy for a long time. He was wearing thick pants and a surplus parka from the old West German army. He was sitting on a spread-out plastic grocery bag, his knees drawn up, his back against a large granite rock that jutted up from the ground. The rock was wedge-shaped, as if it had been broken out of a bigger

boulder and rolled into a different position far from its source. And the rock was why the ploughs had spared the thicket. Big tractors with vague steering had given it a wide berth, and nature had taken advantage. Now the boy was taking advantage in turn, hiding from the world, getting through his day. Maybe not a semi-commercial grower after all. Maybe just an amateur enthusiast, with mail-order seeds from Boulder or San Francisco.

‘Hello,’ Reacher said.

‘Dude,’ the boy said. He sounded mellow. Not high as a kite. Just cruising gently a couple of feet off the ground. An experienced user, probably, who knew how much was too much and how little was too little. His thought processes were slow, and right there in his face. First: Am I busted? Then: No way.

‘Dude,’ he said again. ‘You’re the man. You’re the guy the Duncans are looking for.’

Reacher said, ‘Am I?’

The kid nodded. ‘You’re Jack Reacher. Six-five, two-fifty, brown coat. They want you, man. They want you real bad.’

‘Do they?’

‘We had Cornhuskers at the house this morning. We’re supposed to keep our eyes peeled. And here you are, man. You snuck right up on me. I guess your eyes were peeled, not mine. Am I right?’ Then he lapsed into a fit of helpless giggles. He was maybe a little higher than Reacher had thought.

Reacher said, ‘You got a cell phone?’

‘Hell yes. I’m going to text my buddies. I’m going to tell them I’ve seen the man, large as life, twice as natural. Hey, maybe I could put you on the line with them. That would be a kick, wouldn’t it? Would you do that? Would you talk to my buds? So they know I’m not shitting them?’

‘No,’ Reacher said.

The kid went instantly serious. ‘Hey, I’m with you, man. You got to lie low. I can dig that. But dude, don’t worry. We’re not going to rat you out. Me and my buds, I mean. We’re on your side. You’re putting it to the Duncans, we’re with

buds, I mean. We're on your side. You're putting it to the Duncans, we're with you all the way.'

Reacher said nothing. The kid concentrated hard and lifted his arm high out of the brambles and held out his joint.

'Share?' he said. 'That would be a kick too. Smoking with the man.'

The joint was fat and well rolled, in yellow paper. It was about half gone.

'No, thanks,' Reacher said.

'Everyone hates them,' the kid said. 'The Duncans, I mean. They've got this whole county by the balls.'

'Show me a county where someone doesn't.'

'Dude, I hear you. The system stinks. No argument from me on that score. But the Duncans are worse than usual. They killed a kid. Did you know that? A little girl. Eight years old. They took her and messed her up real bad and killed her.'

'Did they?'

'Hell yes. Definitely.'

'You sure?'

'No question, my friend.'

'It was twenty-five years ago. You're what, fifteen?'

'It happened.'

'The FBI said different.'

'You believe them?'

'As opposed to who? A stoner who wasn't even born yet?'

'The FBI didn't hear what I hear, man.'

'What do you hear?'

‘Her ghost, man. Still here, after twenty-five years. Sometimes I sit out here at night and I hear that poor ghost screaming, man, screaming and wailing and moaning and crying, right here in the dark.’

NINETEEN

OUR SHIP HAS COME IN. AN OLD, OLD PHRASE, FROM OLD SEA-faring days, full of hope and wonder. An investor could spend all he had, building a ship, fitting it out, hiring a crew, or more than all he had, if he was borrowing. Then the ship would sail into a years-long void, unimaginable distances, unfathomable depths, incalculable dangers. There was no communication with it. No radio, no phone, no telegraph, no mail. No news at all. Then, maybe, just maybe, one chance day the ship would come back, weather-beaten, its sails heaving into view, its hull riding low in the channel waters, loaded with spices from India, or silks from China, or tea, or coffee, or rum, or sugar. Enough profit to repay the costs and the loans in one fell swoop, with enough left over to live generously for a decade. Subsequent voyages were all profit, enough to make a man rich beyond his dreams. Our ship has come in.

Jacob Duncan used that phrase, at eleven-thirty that morning. He was with his brothers, in a small dark room at the back of his house. His son Seth had gone home. Just the three elders were there, stoic, patient, and reflective.

‘I got the call from Vancouver,’ Jacob said. ‘Our man in the port. Our ship has come in. The delay was about weather in the Luzon Strait.’

‘Where’s that?’ Jasper asked.

‘Where the South China Sea meets the Pacific Ocean. But now our goods have arrived. They’re here. Our truck could be rolling tonight. Tomorrow morning, at the very latest.’

‘That’s good,’ Jasper said.

‘Is it?’

‘Why wouldn’t it be?’

‘You were worried before, in case the stranger got nailed before the delay went away. You said that would prove us liars.’

‘True. But now that problem is gone.’

‘Is it? Seems to me that problem has merely turned itself inside out. Suppose the truck gets here before the stranger gets nailed? That would prove us liars, too.’

‘We could hold the truck up there.’

‘We couldn’t. We’re a transportation company, not a storage company. We have no facilities.’

‘So what do we do?’

‘We think. That’s what we do. Where is that guy?’

‘We don’t know.’

‘We know he hasn’t slept or eaten since yesterday. We know we’ve had our boys out driving the roads all morning and they haven’t seen a damn thing. So where is he?’

Jonas Duncan said, ‘Either he’s snuck in a chicken coop somewhere, or he’s out walking the fields.’

‘Exactly,’ Jacob said. ‘I think it’s time to turn our boys off the nice smooth roads. I think it’s time they drove out across the land, big circles, sweeping and beating.’

‘We only have seven of them left.’

‘They all have cell phones. First sight of the guy, they can call the boys from the south and turn the problem over to the professionals. If they need to, that is. Or at least they can get some coordinated action going. Let’s turn them loose.’

*

By that point Reacher was starting to hurry. He was about four hundred yards due west of the three Duncan houses, which was about as close as he intended to get. He was walking parallel to the road. He could already see the wooden buildings ahead. They were tiny brown pinpricks on the far horizon. Nothing between him and them. Flat land. He was watching for trucks. He knew they would be coming. By now his hunters would have checked the roads, and found nothing. Therefore they would have concluded he was travelling cross-country. They would be putting trucks in the fields, and soon, if they hadn’t already. It

They would be putting trucks in the fields, and soon, if they hadn't already. It was predictable. Fast, mobile patrols, cell phone communications, maybe even radios, the whole nine yards. Not good.

He slogged onward, another five minutes, then ten, then twenty. The three Duncan houses fell away behind his shoulder. The wooden buildings up ahead stayed resolutely on the horizon, but they got a little larger, because they were getting a little closer. Four hundred yards away was another bramble thicket, spreading wide and chest-high, but apart from that there was nothing in sight taller than an inch. Reacher was dangerously exposed, and he knew it.

In Las Vegas a Lebanese man named Safir took out his phone and dialled a number. The call was answered six blocks away by an Italian man named Rossi. There were no pleasantries. No time for any. The first thing Safir said was, 'You're making me angry.'

Rossi said nothing in reply. He couldn't really afford to. It was a question of protocol. He was absolutely at the top of his own particular tree, and it was a big tree, high, wide, and handsome, with roots and branches spreading everywhere, but there were bigger trees in the forest, and Safir's was one of them.

Safir said, 'I favoured you with my business.'

Rossi said, 'And I'm grateful for that.'

'But now you're embarrassing me,' Safir said. Which, Rossi thought, was a mistake. It was an admission of weakness. It made it clear that however big Safir was, he was worried about someone bigger still. A food chain thing. At the bottom were the Duncans, then came Rossi, then came Safir, and at the top came someone else. It didn't matter who. The mere existence of such a person put Safir and Rossi in the same boat. For all their graduated wealth and power and glory, they were both intermediaries. Both scufflers. Common cause.

Rossi said, 'You know that merchandise of this quality is hard to source.'

Safir said, 'I expect promises to be kept.'

'So do I. We're both victims here. The difference between us is that I'm doing something about it. I've got boots on the ground up in Nebraska.'

'What's the problem there?'

‘They claim a guy is poking around.’

‘What, a cop?’

‘No,’ Rossi said. ‘Absolutely not a cop. The chain is as secure as ever. Just a passer-by, that’s all. A stranger.’

‘Who?’

‘Nobody. Just a busybody.’

‘So how is this nobody busybody stranger holding things up?’

‘I don’t think he is, really. I think they’re lying to me. I think they’re just making excuses. They’re late, that’s all.’

‘Unsatisfactory.’

‘I agree. But this is a sellers’ market.’

‘Who have you got up there?’

‘Two of my boys.’

‘I’m going to send two of mine.’

‘No point,’ Rossi said. ‘I’m already taking care of it.’

‘Not to Nebraska, you idiot,’ Safir said. ‘I’m going to send two of my boys across town to babysit you. To keep the pressure on. I want you to be very aware of what happens to people who let me down.’

The Port of Vancouver had been combined with the Fraser River Port Authority and the North Fraser Port Authority and the shiny new three-in-one business had been renamed Port Metro Vancouver. It was the largest port in Canada, the largest port in the Pacific Northwest, the fourth largest port on the west coast of North America, and the fifth largest port in North America overall. It occupied 375 miles of coastline, and had twenty-five separate terminals, and handled three thousand vessel arrivals every year, for a total annual cargo throughput of a hundred million tons, which averaged out to considerably more than a quarter-million tons every day. Almost all of those tons were packed into intermodal

shipping containers, which, like a lot of things, traced their origins all the way back to United States Department of Defense drawings made in the 1950s, because in the 1950s the U.S. DoD had been one of the few agencies in the world with the will and the energy to make drawings at all, and the only one with the power to make them stick.

Intermodal shipping containers were corrugated metal boxes. They could be easily swapped between different modes of transport, like ships, or railroad flatcars, or semi trucks. Hence, intermodal. They were all a little more than eight feet high and eight feet wide. The shortest and rarest were twenty feet long. Most were forty feet long, or forty-five, or forty-eight, or fifty-three. But traffic was always measured by reference to the basic minimum length, in multiples called twenty-foot-equivalent-units, or TEUs. A twenty-foot container was scored as a one, and a forty-foot as a two, and so on. Port Metro Vancouver handled two million TEUs a year.

The Duncans' shipment came in a twenty-foot container. The smallest available. One TEU. Gross weight was 6,110 pounds, and net weight was 4,850 pounds, which meant that there were 1,260 pounds of cargo inside, in a space designed to handle more than sixty thousand. In other words, the box was about 98 per cent empty. But that proposition was not as wasteful or as inefficient as it first appeared. Each of the pounds that the container carried was worth more than gold.

It was lifted off a South Korean ship by a gantry crane, and it was placed gently on Canadian soil, and then it was immediately picked up again by another crane, which shuttled it to an inspection site where a camera read its BIC code. BIC was the Bureau International des Containers, which was headquartered in Paris, France, and the code was a combination of four letters from the Latin alphabet and seven numbers. Together they told Port Metro Vancouver's computers who owned the container, and where it had come from, and what was in it, and that those contents had been pre-cleared by Canadian customs, none of which information was in the least little bit true. The code also told the computers where the container was going, and when, which was true, to a limited extent. It was going onward into the interior of Canada, and it was to be loaded immediately, without delay, on to a semi truck that was already waiting for it. So it was shuttled on ahead, through a sniffer designed to detect smuggled nuclear material, a test that it passed very easily, and then out to the marshalling yard. At that point the port computers generated an automatic text message to the waiting driver, who fired up his truck and swung into position. The container was

driver, who fired up his truck and swung into position. The container was lowered on to his flatbed and clamped down. A minute later it was rolling, and ten minutes after that it was through the port gates, heading east, sitting high and proud and alone on a trailer more than twice its length, its minimal weight barely noticed by the roaring diesel.

Reacher walked on through the dirt, another hundred yards, and then he stopped and turned a full circle and checked all around. There was no activity ahead of him. Nothing to the west. Nothing to the east. Just flat, empty land. But behind him, way far to the south, there was a truck. Maybe a mile away, maybe more. It was driving across the fields, bumping and lurching and pattering across the rough ground, faint light glinting off its dull chrome bumper.

TWENTY

REACHER DROPPED INTO A CROUCH. HE WAS DRESSED IN OLIVE and brown and tan, and the acres of winter dirt all around him were olive and brown and tan, too. Decomposing stalks and leaves, lumps of fertile earth, some of them cracked and powdered by frosts and winds. There was still mist in the air. It hung motionless and invisible, an atmospheric layer like the finest gauze.

The truck a mile to the south kept on moving. The field was immense and rectangular and the truck was roughly in the middle of it. It was following an endless series of S-shaped curves, steering sequentially half-left, then straight ahead, then half-right, then straight ahead, then half-left. Rhythmic and regular and relentless, the driver's view sweeping the horizon like a searchlight beam.

Reacher stayed down in his crouch. Static targets attract the eye much less than moving targets. But he knew that sooner or later the truck was going to get close to him. That was inevitable. At some point he was going to have to move on. But where? There was no natural cover. No hills, no woods, no streams, no rivers. Nothing at all. And he was a slow runner, and not very agile. Not that anyone was fast enough or agile enough to win a game of man-versus-truck on flat and infinitely spacious land.

The truck kept on coming, tiny in the distance, slow and patient and methodical. Half-left, straight ahead, half-right. Its half-right turns aimed it directly at him. Now it was about a thousand yards away. He couldn't make out the driver. Therefore in return the driver couldn't make him out. Not yet, anyway. But it was only a matter of time. It would be at a distance of about two hundred yards, he figured, when his vague crouching shape resolved itself. Maybe a hundred and fifty, if the windshield was grimy. Maybe a hundred, if the driver was shortsighted or bored or lazy. Then there would be a blank moment of dawning realization, and then there would be acceleration. Maximum speed over the rough ground would be about thirty miles an hour. Somewhere between seven and fifteen seconds, he figured, between launch and arrival.

Not enough.

Better to go sooner than later.

But where?

But where?

He turned around, slow and cautious. Nothing to the east. Nothing to the west. But three hundred yards due north was the bramble thicket he had noted before. The second such thing he had seen within a two-mile span. A tangle of chest-high bushes, a miniature grove, wild raspberries or wild roses, bare and dormant, thick and dense with thorns. Spared by the ploughs. The first had been spared because of a large rock in its centre. There was no possible reason for the second to be any different. No farmer on earth would spare wild flowers year after year through a hundred seasons just for sentiment alone.

The thicket was the place to go.

Three hundred yards for Reacher. Slow as he was, maybe sixty seconds.

A thousand yards for the truck. Fast as it was, maybe seventy seconds.

A ten-second margin.

No brainer.

Reacher ran.

He came up out of his crouch and started pounding away, stiff clumsy strides, arms pumping, mouth open, breathing hard. Ten yards, twenty, then thirty. Then forty, then fifty. Far behind him he heard the sudden muffled roar of an engine. He didn't look back. Just kept on going, slipping and sliding, feeling painfully slow.

Two hundred yards to go.

He kept on running, maximum speed. He heard the truck behind him all the way. Still muffled. Still comfortably distant. But moving fast. Revving motor, whistling belts, sucking air, juddering springs, pattering tyres.

A hundred yards to go.

He risked a glance back. Clearly the truck had gotten a late jump. It was still further away than it might have been. But even so it was gaining handily. It was coming on fast. It was an SUV, not a pick-up. Domestic, not foreign. GMC, maybe. Dark red. Not new. A high blunt snout and a chrome bumper the size of

a bathtub.

Fifty yards to go. Ten seconds. He stopped twenty yards out and turned in place. Faced south. He stood still, panting hard. He raised his arms level with his shoulders.

Come and get me.

The truck hammered on. Straight at him. He sidestepped right, one long pace, two, three. He lined it up perfectly. The truck directly ahead of him, the hidden rock directly behind him. The truck kept on coming. He walked backward, then ran backward, up on his toes, dainty, watching all the way. The truck kept on coming, lurching, hopping, bouncing, roaring. Twenty yards away, then ten, then five. Reacher moved with it. Then when he felt the first brambles against the backs of his legs he jerked sideways and flung himself out of the truck's path and rolled away and waited for the truck to smash through the thicket and wreck itself on the rock.

Didn't happen.

The guy at the wheel braked hard and slewed to a stop with his front bumper a yard into the brush. A local boy. He knew what was in there. Reacher heard the gearbox smack into reverse and the truck backed up and the front wheels turned and the gear changed again and the truck came straight at him, fast and enormous. The tyres were big off-road items with dirty white letters and savage tread. They were squirming and churning and clods of earth were spattering up off all of them equally. Four-wheel-drive. The motor was roaring. A big V-8. Reacher was on the ground and he could see suspension members and shock absorbers and exhaust headers and differential casings the size of soccer balls. He got up and feinted right and flung himself left. He rolled away and the truck turned tight but missed him, crunching over the clods of earth a foot from his face. He could smell hot oil and gasoline and exhaust fumes. There was a cacophony of sound. The motor, grinding gears, yelping springs. The truck slammed into reverse again and came at Reacher backwards. By that point he was up on his knees, deciding. Where next? In or out? In the thicket, or out in the open?

No choice at all.

Out in the open was suicide. At close quarters the truck was relatively clumsy,

but he couldn’t run and jink and dodge for ever. No one could. Exhaustion would tell in the end. So he got to his feet and waded into the brambles. The thorns tore at his pants. The truck came after him, driving backwards, narrowing its radius. The driver was staring over his shoulder. A big guy. Big neck. Big shoulders. Short hair. Reacher headed straight for the centre of the thicket. Long thorny tendrils latched together and tugged at his ankles. He ripped his way onward. The driver turned the wheel as far as it would go. The truck’s radius tightened, but not enough. Reacher ducked inside its turn and barged on.

He made it to the rock.

It was a hell of a rock. Much bigger than the first one he had seen. Maybe the parent of the first one he had seen. The first one had been wedge-shaped, as if it had been busted out of a larger boulder. This second rock looked like that larger boulder. It was shaped like a pie with a broad piece broken out of it, but not flat like a pie. It was humped and round. Like an orange, with three or four segments missing, half buried in the earth. Maybe fifty thousand years ago an Ice Age glacier had rolled it all the way down from Canada, and the weight of a billion tons of frozen snow had cracked it apart, and the smaller fragment had been pushed onward two more miles before grinding to a stop and weathering gently over the next countless centuries. The larger fragment had stayed right in place, and it was still there, waist-deep in the rich dirt, itself gently weathered, a huge granite ball with a worn and shallow triangular notch in it, like a bite, like an open mouth, facing south towards its smaller relation. The bite was maybe ten feet wide at the opening, and it narrowed down to a point maybe five feet later.

Reacher came to rest with his back against the boulder, on the east side, the bite a quarter-circle away, behind his right shoulder. The truck turned and drove out of the thicket and for a crazy moment Reacher thought the guy was giving up and going home, but then the truck turned again, a wide lazy circle out on the dirt, and it came back, slow and menacing, head-on, straight at him. The driver was smiling behind the windshield glass, a wide feral grin of triumph. The first of the brambles collapsed under the chrome bumper. The driver was holding the wheel carefully, two-handed, aiming precisely.

Aiming to pin Reacher by the legs against the rock.

Reacher scrambled up on to the granite slope, backward, palms and soles, like a crab. He worked and scuffled and stood upright on the top of the dome, balanced uneasily maybe five feet in the air. The truck came to rest with its front bumper

an inch from the rock, its hood a little below the level of Reacher's feet, its roof a little above. The motor calmed to an idle and Reacher heard four ragged thumps as the doors locked from the inside. The driver was worried. Didn't want to be dragged out of his seat for a fistfight. Smart guy. Now Reacher's options were reduced. He could step down on the hood and try to kick the windshield in, but automotive glass was tougher than it looked, and all the guy had to do was take off suddenly and Reacher would be thrown clear, unless he grabbed the roof bars, but his arms were hurting too much to survive a wild-ass ride all the way across Nebraska, clinging to the top of a bouncing truck at thirty or more miles an hour.

Impasse.

Or maybe not. The guy had laid out his tactics for all to see. He hadn't used his phone. He wanted to capture Reacher all by himself, for the glory of it. He intended to do it by using his truck like a hammer and the rock like an anvil. But he wouldn't wait for ever. He would dial his buddies just as soon as frustration got the better of him.

Time to go.

Reacher scrambled down the far side of the rock and waded into the thorny growth. He heard the truck back up and swing around after him. It appeared on his right, crunching through the brambles, holding a tight curve as if it was rounding a traffic circle, driving slow, staying deliberate. Reacher faked a break for the open land and the driver bought it and steered maybe ten degrees out of the circle, and then Reacher ducked back towards the rock and slid around the granite circumference and tucked himself into the shallow triangular bite, right at the point of the V, shoulders tight against the converging walls. The truck paused a second and then leapt ahead and steered a tight loop out on the dirt and came right back at him, head-on again, the same low gear, the same low menacing speed, closer and closer, ten feet, five feet, three feet, then two feet.

Then simultaneously the left end and the right end of the truck's front bumper jammed hard against the narrowing walls of rock, and the truck came to a stop, immobile, right where Reacher wanted it, the big chrome bumper making a new boundary, closing off the shallow triangle a foot from Reacher's thighs. He could feel the heat from the radiator, and the idling beat of the motor resonated in his chest. He could smell oil and gas and rubber and exhaust fumes. He put his hands on the bulbous chrome and started easing down towards a sitting position.

hands on the bulbous chrome and started easing down towards a sitting position, intending to slide feet-first underneath the vehicle and wriggle away on his back.

Didn’t work.

The driver wanted Reacher more than he wanted an undamaged front bumper.

Reacher got halfway to the ground and then he heard a snick and a crunch as the transfer box changed down to low-range gearing. Ideal for pulling stumps. Or for crushing chrome. The engine roared and all four tyres bit down hard and the truck pushed forward against nothing except the resistance of its own sheet metal. Both ends of the bumper shrieked and deformed and then crumpled and flattened and the truck kept on coming, one inch, then two, then three. The tyres turned slowly but relentlessly, one knob of tread at a time. The bumper crushed from the outside in, grinding and scraping, as the massive V-8 torque turned the bulbous cosmetic panel into a piece of flattened junk.

Now the centre of the bumper was six inches from Reacher’s chest.

And it kept on coming. The bumper flattened all the way to where the steel brackets bolted it to the frame. Sterner stuff. The engine roared louder and the truck dug in hard and squatted and strained on its suspension. One front tyre lost traction for a second and spun wildly and spattered dirt and stones and shredded pieces of bramble into the wheel well. The whole truck rocked and bucked and danced in place and then the tyre bit again and the tailpipes bellowed and the steel brackets collapsed and gave an inch and the truck lurched forward.

Four inches from Reacher’s chest.

Then three.

Then the brackets gave a little more and the hot metal touched Reacher’s coat.

Time to go.

He turned his head sideways and pushed up on the chrome with his hands and forced himself downward, like immersing himself in water. He got halfway there, and then the sheet metal itself behind the bumper started giving way, shrieking and bending and crushing, the curves inverting, the contours flattening. The engine roared and the pipes bellowed louder and the truck lurched forward another inch and the centre of the bumper tapped Reacher on the side of his face.

He scraped on down, one ear on the hot chrome and the other on the cold granite. He kicked and scrabbled with his heels and got his feet out from under him and he forced his butt through the brambles and got down on his back. Right above his face the last tiny triangle of clear air disappeared as the fenders gave way and what was left of the bumper folded violently into a forward-facing point and hit the granite.

The driver didn't let up.

The guy kept his foot down hard. Clearly he didn't know exactly where Reacher was. Because he couldn't see. Clearly he hoped he had him pinned by the chest. The truck bucked and squatted and pushed. Reacher was flat on his back underneath it, straining tyres to his left, straining tyres to his right, throbbing exhaust pipes above him, all kinds of ribbed and dirty metal components inches from his face. Things were racing and whirring and turning. There were nuts and bolts and tubes and belts. Reacher didn't know much about cars. Didn't know how to fix them, didn't know how to break them. And he had no tools, anyway.

Or did he?

He patted his pockets, habit and desperation, and felt hard metal inside. Dorothy's silverware. From breakfast. The knife, the fork, the spoon. Heavy old items, hastily concealed, never returned. He pulled them out. They had long thick handles, some kind of early stainless steel.

Right above his nose was a broad flat pan, on the bottom of the engine block. Like a shallow square container, seen from below. Black and dirty. The sump, he figured. For the engine oil. He saw a hexagonal bolt head right in the centre of it. For changing the oil. The guy at the service station would undo the bolt, and the oil would come out. The new oil would go in the top.

The guy at the service station would have a wrench.

Reacher didn't.

The engine roared and strained. The truck shook and juddered. Reacher scuttled backward a yard and got his hands way up above his head and he clamped the knife handle on one side of the hex bolt and the fork handle on the other. He held them tight with thumbs and forefingers and used half his strength to keep them hard together and the other half to turn them counterclockwise.

Nothing.

He took a breath and clamped his teeth and ignored the pain in his arms and tried again. Still nothing. He changed his technique. He clamped the bolt with the very ends of the silverware handles held between his right thumb and forefingers, and he used his left hand to rotate the whole assembly.

The bolt moved.

Just a little. He took another breath and held it and clamped hard until the flesh on his fingers was crushed white and flat and he eased the knife and the fork around. The bolt was set very tight and it turned and grated reluctantly, and grit and dirt in the threads threatened to stick it fast, but he kept on going, smooth and steady, breathing hard, concentrating, and after two and a half turns the oil inside must have started seeping out and flushing the threads, because all of a sudden resistance gave way and the bolt started moving fast and smooth and easy. Reacher dropped the silverware and scooted further out of the way and used his fingertips high above his head to spin the bolt right out. The engine was still revving hard and as soon as the bolt was out of the hole the enormous pressure inside just dumped the oil out on the ground in a half-inch jet. It hissed and hosed and splattered on the frozen dirt and bounced back up and coated the nearby brambles slick and black, hot and smoking.

Reacher got his arms back down by his sides and wriggled out under the rear of the truck, feet first, on his back, the undergrowth impeding him, tearing at him, scratching him. He grasped the rear bumper and hauled and pulled and twisted himself up in a crouch. He wanted a fist-sized rock to bust the rear window, but he couldn’t find one, so he contented himself with banging on it with his hand, once, twice, hard, and harder, and then he turned and ran.

TWENTY-ONE

REACHER RAN THIRTY YARDS ACROSS THE WINTER DIRT AND stopped. Inside the truck the driver was twisted around in his seat, staring back at him, pawing and fumbling blindly at the wheel and the gearshift. The truck backed up, straining, still locked in low-range, the engine revving fast and the ground speed grinding slow. Reacher had no idea how long it would take for a hard-worked engine with no oil in it to seize up and die.

Not long, he hoped.

He danced sideways, left, and left, and left, and the truck tracked him all the way, coming on slow, the crushed bumper plastered across the front like an ugly afterthought, the axles locked up for maximum traction, the tyres squirming and hopping and grinding out new ruts all their own. The driver hit the gas and jerked the wheel to his left, aiming to decode Reacher's decoy dance and hit him after the inevitable sudden change of direction at its end, but Reacher double-bluffed him and jumped to his own left, and the truck missed him by ten whole feet.

The truck stopped dead and Reacher saw the guy tugging on levers and heard the transmission change back to normal-speed road duty. The truck made a big forty-foot loop out on the dirt and headed back in. Reacher stood still and watched it and sidestepped right, and right, and right, and then he triple-bluffed and jumped right again while the truck slammed left and missed him again. The truck ended up with its battered nose deep in the thicket. All kinds of unpleasant noises were coming out of it. Deep banging sounds, like tuneless church bells. Bearings, Reacher thought. The big ends. He knew some terminology. He had heard car guys talking, on military bases. He saw the driver glance down in alarm, as if red warning lights were blazing on the dash. There was steam in the air. And blue smoke.

The truck backed up, one more time.

Then it died.

It swung through a short backward arc and stopped, ready for a change of gear, which happened, but it didn't move on again. It just bounced forward a foot against the slack in its suspension and seized up solid. The engine noise shut off

against the slack in its suspension and seized up solid. The engine noise shut off and Reacher heard wheezing and hissing and ticking and saw steam jetting out and a final fine black spray from underneath, like a cough, like a death rattle.

The driver stayed where he was, in his seat, behind locked doors.

Reacher looked again for a rock, and couldn't find one.

Impasse.

But not for long.

Reacher saw them first. He had a better vantage point. Flames, coming out of the seams between the hood and the fenders, low down at the front of the vehicle. The flames were small and colourless at first, boiling the air above them, spreading fast, blistering the paint around them. Then they got bigger and turned blue and yellow and started spilling black smoke from their edges. The hood was a big square pressing and within a minute all four seams surrounding it were alive with flame and the paint all over it was cooking and bubbling and splitting from the heat underneath.

The driver just sat there.

Reacher ran over and tried his door. Still locked. He banged on the window glass, dull padded thumps from his fist, and he pointed urgently at the hood. But it was impossible that the guy didn't already know he was on fire. His wiper blades were alight. Black smoke was rolling off them and swirling up the windshield in coils. The guy was looking right at them, then looking at Reacher, back and forth, panic in his eyes.

He was as worried about Reacher as he was about the fire.

So Reacher backed off ten feet and the door opened up and the guy jumped out, a big slabby white boy, very young, maybe six-six, close to three hundred pounds. He ran five feet and stopped dead. His hands bunched into fists. Behind him the flames started shooting out of the wheel wells at the front of the truck, starting downward, curling back up around the sheet metal, burning hard. The front tyres were smoking. The guy just stood there, rooted. So Reacher ran in again, and the guy swung at him, and missed. Reacher ducked under the blow and popped the guy in the gut and then grabbed him by the collar. The guy went straight down in a crouch and cradled his head, defensively. Reacher pulled him

straight down in a crouch and cradled his head, defensively. Reacher pulled him back to his feet and hauled him away across the field, fast, thirty feet, forty, then fifty. He stopped and the guy swung again and missed again. Reacher feinted with a left jab and threw in a huge right hook that caught the guy on the ear. The guy wobbled for a second and then went down on his butt. Just sat there, blinking, in the middle of a field in the middle of nowhere. Twenty yards away the truck was burning fiercely, all the way back to the windshield pillars. The front tyres were alight and the hood was buckled.

Reacher asked, ‘How much gas is in the tank?’

The guy said, ‘Don’t hit me again.’

‘Answer my question.’

‘I filled it this morning.’

So Reacher grabbed him again and pulled him up and hauled him further away, another thirty feet, then ten more. The guy stumbled all the way and eventually resisted and said, ‘Please don’t hit me again.’

‘Why shouldn’t I? You just tried to kill me with a truck.’

‘I’m sorry about that.’

‘You’re sorry about that?’

‘I had to do it.’

‘Just following orders?’

‘I’m surrendering, OK? I’m out of the fight now. Like a POW.’

‘You’re bigger than me. And younger.’

‘But you’re a crazy man.’

‘Says who?’

‘We were told. About last night. You put three of us in the hospital.’

Reacher asked, ‘What’s your name?’

The guy said, ‘Brett.’

‘What is this, the Twilight Zone? You’ve all got the same name?’

‘Only three of us.’

‘Out of ten, right?’

‘Yes.’

‘Thirty per cent. What are the odds?’

The guy didn’t answer.

Reacher asked, ‘Who’s in charge here?’

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Who told you to come out this morning and kill me with a truck?’

‘Jacob Duncan.’

‘Seth Duncan’s father?’

‘Yes.’

‘You know where he lives?’

The guy nodded and pointed into the distance, south and east, beyond the burning vehicle. The flames had moved inside it. The glass had shattered and the seats were on fire. There was a column of black smoke in the air, thick and dirty. It was going straight up and then hitting a low atmospheric layer and spreading sideways. Like a miniature mushroom cloud.

Then the gas tank exploded.

An orange fireball kicked the rear of the truck clear off the ground and a split second later a dull boom rolled across the dirt on a pressure wave hard enough to make Reacher stagger a step and hot enough to make him flinch away. Flames leapt fifty feet in the air and died instantly and the truck crashed back to earth,

now all black and skeletal inside a hot new fire that roiled the air a hundred feet above it.

Reacher watched for a second. Then he said, ‘OK, Brett, this is what you’re going to do. You’re going to jog over to Jacob Duncan’s place, and you’re going to tell him three things. You listening to me?’

The big guy looked away from the fire and said, ‘Yes.’

‘OK, first, if Duncan wants to, he can send his six remaining boys after me, and each one will delay me a couple of minutes, but then I’ll come right over and kick his ass. Got that?’

‘Yes.’

‘Second, if he prefers, he can skip getting the six boys hurt, and he can come out and meet with me face to face, right away. Got that?’

‘Yes.’

‘And third, if I see those two out-of-towners again, they’ll be going home in a bucket. Is that clear? Got all that?’

‘Yes.’

‘You got a cell phone?’

‘Yes,’ the guy said.

‘Give it to me.’

The guy dug in a pocket and came back with a phone, black and tiny in his giant red paw. He handed it over and Reacher pulled it apart. He had seen cell phones dropped on sidewalks, and he knew what was in there. A battery, and a SIM card. He pulled off the cover and clipped out the battery and tossed it twenty feet in one direction, and he took out the SIM card and threw the rest of the phone twenty feet in the other direction. He balanced the SIM card on his palm and held it out, a tiny silicon wafer with gold tracks on it.

‘Eat it,’ he said.

The guy said, ‘What?’

‘Eat it. That’s your forfeit. For being a useless tub of lard.’

The guy paused a second and then he took it, delicately, finger and thumb, and he opened his mouth and placed it on his tongue. He closed his mouth and worked up some saliva and swallowed.

‘Show me,’ Reacher said.

The guy opened his mouth again and stuck out his tongue. Like a kid at the clinic. The card was gone.

‘Now sit down,’ Reacher said.

‘What?’

‘Like you were before.’

‘I thought you wanted me to head for the Duncans’ place.’

‘I do,’ Reacher said. ‘But not yet. Not while I’m still in the neighbourhood.’

The guy sat down, a little worried, facing south, his legs straight out and his hands on his knees and his upper body curled forward a little.

‘Arms behind you,’ Reacher said. ‘Lean back on your hands.’

‘Why?’

Enemy ordnance.

‘Just do it,’ Reacher said.

The guy got his arms behind him and put his weight on his hands. Reacher stepped behind him and crashed the sole of his boot through the guy’s right elbow. The guy went down flat and shrieked and rolled and whimpered. Then he sat up again and cradled his broken arm and stared at Reacher accusingly. Reacher stepped around behind him again and kicked him hard in the back of the head. The guy toppled slowly, forward at first, and then he twisted sideways as his gut got in the way of further progress. He sprawled out and landed softly on

one shoulder and lay still, like a large letter L on a dirty brown page. Reacher turned away and slogged on north, towards the two wooden buildings on the horizon.

TWENTY-TWO

THE CANADIAN SEMI TRUCK WITH THE DUNCANS' SHIPMENT aboard was making good time, heading due east on Route 3 in British Columbia, driving mostly parallel to the die-straight international border, with Alberta up ahead. Route 3 was a lonely road, mountainous, with steep grades and tight turns. Not ideal for a large vehicle. Most drivers took Route 1, which looped north out of Vancouver before turning east later. A better road, all things considered. Route 3 was quiet by comparison. It had long stretches of nothing but asphalt ribbon and wild scenery. And very little traffic. And occasional gravel turnouts, for rest and recuperation.

One of the gravel turnouts was located a mile or so before the Waterton Lakes National Park. In U.S. terms it was directly above the Washington–Idaho state line, about halfway between Spokane and Coeur d'Alene, about a hundred miles north of both. The turnout had an amazing view. Endless forest to the south, the snowy bulk of the Rockies to the east, magnificent lakes to the north. The truck driver pulled off and parked there, but not for the view. He parked there because it was a prearranged location, and because a white panel van was waiting there for him. The Duncans had been in business a long time, because of luck and caution, and one of their cautionary principles was to transfer their cargo between vehicles as soon as possible after import. Shipping containers could be tracked. Indeed they were designed to be tracked, by the BIC code. Better not to risk a delayed alert from a suspicious Customs agent. Better to move the goods within hours, into something anonymous and forgettable and untraceable, and white panel vans were the most anonymous and forgettable and untraceable vehicles on earth.

The semi truck parked and the panel van K-turned on the gravel and backed up to it and stopped rear to rear with it. Both drivers got out. They didn't speak. They just stepped out into the roadway and craned their necks and checked what was coming, one east, one west. Nothing was coming, which was not unusual for Route 3, so they jogged back to their vehicles and got to work. The van driver opened his rear doors, and the truck driver climbed up on his flatbed and cut the plastic security seal and smacked the bolts and levers out of their brackets and opened the container's doors.

One minute later the cargo was transferred, all 1,260 pounds of it, and another

minute after that the white van had K-turned again and was heading east, and the semi truck was trailing behind it for a spell, its driver intending to turn north on 95 and then loop back west on Route 1, a better road, back to Vancouver for his next job, which was likely to be legitimate, and therefore better for his blood pressure but worse for his wallet.

In Las Vegas the Lebanese man named Safir selected his two best guys and dispatched them to babysit the Italian man named Rossi. An unwise decision, as it turned out. Its unwisdom was made clear within the hour. Safir's phone rang and he answered it, and found himself talking to an Iranian man named Mahmeini. Mahmeini was Safir's customer, but there was no transactional equality in their business relationship. Mahmeini was Safir's customer in the same way a king might have been a boot maker's customer. Much more powerful, imperious, superior, dismissive, and likely to be lethally angry if the boots were defective.

Or late.

Mahmeini said, 'I should have received my items a week ago.'

Safir couldn't speak. His mouth was dry.

Mahmeini said, 'Please look at it from my point of view. Those items are already allocated, to certain people in certain places, for certain date-specific uses. If they are not delivered in time, I'll take a loss.'

'I'll make good,' Safir said.

'I know you will. That's the purpose of my call. We have much to discuss. Because my loss won't be a one-time thing. It will be ongoing. My reputation will be ruined. Why would my contacts trust me again? I'll lose their business for ever. Which means you'll have to compensate me for ever. In effect I will own you for the rest of your life. Do you see my point?'

All Safir could say was, 'I believe the shipment is actually on its way, as of right now.'

'A week late.'

'I'm suffering too. And I'm trying to do something about it. I made my contact send two of his men up there. And then I sent two of my men over to him, to

send two of his men up there. And then I sent two of my men over to him, to make sure he concentrates.'

'Men?' Mahmeini said. 'You employ men? Or boys?'

'They're good people.'

'You're about to find out what men are. I'm sending two of mine. To you. To make sure you concentrate.'

Then the phone went dead, and Safir was left sitting there, awaiting the arrival of two Iranian tough guys in an office that had, just an hour ago, been stripped of the better half of its security.

Reacher made it to the two wooden buildings without further trouble, which was no big surprise to him. Six remaining football players and two out-of-towners made a total of just eight warm bodies, and he guessed the out-of-towners would be riding together, which made a total of just seven roving vehicles loose in a county that must have covered many hundreds of square miles. One random encounter had been fortuitous in the extreme. Two would be incalculably unlikely.

The old barn was still locked and listing, and the pick-up truck was still hidden in the smaller shelter. Undiscovered and undisturbed, as far as Reacher could tell. It was cold and inert. The air in the shelter was dry, and it smelled of dust and mouse droppings. The countryside all around was empty and silent.

Reacher opened up the tool locker in the pick-up's load bed and took a look at the contents. The biggest thing left in there was an adjustable wrench about a foot long. Some kind of polished steel alloy. It weighed about a pound and a half. Made in the U.S.A. Not the greatest weapon in the world, but better than nothing. Reacher put it in his coat pocket and rooted around for more. He came up with two screwdrivers, one a stubby Phillips cross-head design with a rubber handle, and one a long slender thing with a regular blade for a regular slotted screw. He put them in his other pocket and closed the locker and climbed in the cab. He started up and backed out and then he followed the deep tractor ruts all the way east to the road, where he turned north and headed for the motel.

Safir's two tough guys arrived in Rossi's office carrying guns in shoulder holsters and black nylon bags in their hands. They unpacked the bags on Rossi's desk, right in front of him. The first bag carried just one item, and the second

desk, right in front of him. The first bag carried just one item, and the second bag carried two items. From the first bag came a belt sander, already loaded with a fresh loop of coarse-grain abrasive. From the second bag came a propane blowtorch and a roll of duct tape.

Tools of the trade.

And therefore an unmistakable message, to a guy in Rossi's world. In Rossi's world victims were taped naked to chairs, and belt sanders were fired up and applied to tender areas like knees or elbows or chests. Or faces, even. Then blowtorches were sparked to life for a little extra fun.

Nobody spoke.

Rossi dialled his phone. Three rings, and Roberto Cassano answered, in Nebraska. Rossi said, 'What the hell is happening up there? This thing really can't wait.'

Cassano said, 'We're chasing shadows.'

'Chase them harder.'

'What's the point? Who knows whether this guy has anything to do with anything? You told us you figure he's an excuse. So whatever happens to him isn't going to make the shipment show up any faster.'

'Have you ever told a lie?'

'Not to you, boss.'

'To anyone else?'

'Sure.'

'Then you know how it goes. You arrange things to make sure you don't get caught out. And I think that's what those Duncan bastards are going to do. They're going to hold the shipment somewhere until the guy gets caught. To make it look like they were telling the truth all along. Like cause and effect. So whether we want to or not, we're going to have to play their game their way. So find this asshole, will you? And fast. This thing can't wait.'

Rossi clicked off the call. One of the Lebanese guys had been unrolling the belt

Rossi clicked off the call. One of the Lebanese guys had been unrolling the belt sander's cord. Now he bent down and plugged it in. He flicked the switch, just a blip, just a second, and the machine started and whirred and stopped.

A test.

A message.

Reacher drove to the motel and parked next to the doctor's wrecked Subaru. It was still there, outside cabin six. He got out and squatted down front and rear and used the smaller screwdriver from his pocket to take the plates off the pick-up truck. Then he took the plates off the Subaru and put them on the pick-up. He tossed the pick-up's plates into the load bed and put the screwdriver back in his pocket and headed for the lounge.

Vincent was in there, behind the bar, wiping it with a rag. He had a black eye and a thick lip and a swelling the size of a mouse's back on his cheek. One of the mirrors behind him was broken. Pieces of glass the shape of lightning bolts had fallen out. Old wallboard was exposed, taped and yellowing, earthbound and prosaic. The room's cheerful illusion was diminished.

Reacher said, 'I'm sorry I got you in trouble.'

Vincent asked, 'Did you spend the night here?'

'Do you really want to know?'

'No, I guess I don't.'

Reacher checked himself in the broken mirror. One ear was scabbing over, where he had scraped it on the rock. His face had scratches from the thorns. His hands, too, and his back, where his coat and shirt and sweater had ridden up. He asked, 'Did those guys have a list of places they were looking?'

Vincent said, 'I imagine they'll go house to house.'

'What are they driving?'

'A rental.'

'Colour?'

‘It was something dark. Dark blue, maybe? A Chevrolet, I think.’

‘Did they say who they were?’

‘Just that they were representing the Duncans. That’s how they put it. I’m sorry I told them about Dorothy.’

‘She did OK,’ Reacher said. ‘Don’t worry about it. She’s had bigger troubles in her life.’

‘I know.’

‘You think the Duncans killed her kid?’

‘I would like to. It would fit with what we think we know about them.’

‘But?’

‘There was no evidence. Absolutely none at all. And it was a very thorough investigation. Lots of different agencies. Very professional. I doubt if they missed anything.’

‘So it was just a coincidence?’

‘It must have been.’

Reacher said nothing.

Vincent asked, ‘What are you going to do now?’

‘A couple of things,’ Reacher said. ‘Maybe three. Then I’m out of here. I’m going to Virginia.’

He walked back out to the lot and climbed into the pick-up truck. He fired it up and took off, out to the road, towards the doctor’s house.

TWENTY-THREE

MAHMEINI'S TWO TOUGH GUYS ARRIVED IN SAFIR'S LAS VEGAS office about an hour after Safir's own two tough guys had left it. Mahmeini's men were not physically impressive. No straining shirt collars, no bulging muscles. They were small and wiry, dark and dead-eyed, rumpled, and not very clean. Safir was Lebanese and he knew plenty of Iranians. Most of them were the nicest people in the world, especially when they lived somewhere else. But some of them were the worst. These two had brought nothing with them. No bags, no tools, no equipment. They didn't need any. Safir knew they would have guns under their arms and knives in their pockets. It was the knives he was worried about. Guns were fast. Knives were slow. And these two Iranians could be very slow with knives. And very inventive. Safir knew that for a fact. He had seen one of their victims, out in the desert. A little decomposed, but even so the cops had taken longer than they should even to determine the sex of the corpse. Which was no surprise. There had been no external evidence of gender. None at all.

Safir dialled his phone. Three rings, and one of his guys answered, six blocks away. Safir said, 'Give me a progress report.'

His guy said, 'It's all messed up.'

'Evidently. But I need more than that.'

'OK, it turns out Rossi's contacts are a bunch of Nebraska people called Duncan. They're all in an uproar over some guy poking around. Nothing to do with anything, probably, but Rossi thinks the Duncans are going to stall until the guy is down, to save face, because they've been claiming the guy is the cause of the delay. Which Rossi thinks is most likely bullshit, but the whole thing has gone completely circular. Rossi thinks nothing is going to happen now until the guy is captured. He's got boys up there, working on it.'

'How hard?'

'As hard as they can, I guess.'

'Tell Rossi to tell them to work harder. Much, much harder. And make sure he knows I'm serious, OK? Tell him I've got people in my office too, and if I'm

knows I'm serious, OK? Tell him I've got people in my office too, and if I'm going to get hurt over this, then he's going to get hurt first, and twice as bad.'

Reacher remembered the way to the doctor's house from the night before. In daylight the roads looked different. More open, less secret. More exposed. They were just narrow ribbons of blacktop, built up a little higher than the surrounding dirt, unprotected by hedgerows, unshaded by trees. The morning mist had risen up and was now a layer of low cloud at about five hundred feet. The whole sky was like a flat lit panel, casting baleful illumination everywhere. No glare, no shadows.

But Reacher arrived OK. The plain ranch house, the couple of flat acres, the post-and-rail fence. In the daylight the house looked raw and new. There was a satellite dish on the roof. There were no cars on the driveway. No dark blue Chevrolet. No neighbours, either. The nearest house might have been a mile away. On three sides there was nothing beyond the doctor's fence except dirt, tired and hibernating, waiting for ploughing and seeding in the spring. On the fourth side was the road, and then more dirt, flat and featureless all the way to the horizon. The doctor and his wife were not gardeners. That was clear. Their lot was all grass, from the base of the fence posts to the foundation of the house. No bushes, no evergreens, no flowerbeds.

Reacher parked on the driveway and walked to the door. It had a spy hole. A little glass lens, like a fat drop of water. Common in a city. Unusual in a rural area. He rang the bell. There was a long delay. He guessed he wasn't the first visitor of the day. More likely the third. Hence the reluctance on the part of the doctor and his wife to open up. But open up they did, eventually. The spy hole darkened and then lightened again and the door swung back slowly and Reacher saw the woman he had met the night before, standing there in the hallway, looking a little surprised but plenty relieved.

'You,' she said.

'Yes, me,' Reacher said. 'Not them.'

'Thank God.'

'When were they here?'

'This morning.'

‘What happened?’

The woman didn’t answer. She just stepped back. A mute invitation. Reacher stepped in and walked down the hallway and found out pretty much what had happened when he came face to face with the doctor. The guy was a little damaged, in much the same way that Vincent was, over at the motel. Bruising around the eyes, swellings, blood in the nostrils, splits in the lips. Loose teeth too, probably, judging by the way the guy was pursing his mouth and moving his tongue, as if he was pressing them home, or counting how many were left. Four blows, Reacher figured, each one hard but subtly different in placement. Expert blows.

Reacher asked, ‘Do you know who they are?’

The doctor said, ‘No. They’re not from around here.’ His words were thick and indistinct and hard to decipher. Loose teeth, split lips. And a hangover, presumably. ‘They said they were representing the Duncans. Not working for them. So they’re not hired hands. We don’t know who they are or what their connection is.’

‘What did they want?’

‘You, of course.’

Reacher said, ‘I’m very sorry for your trouble.’

The doctor said, ‘It is what it is.’

Reacher turned back to the doctor’s wife. ‘Are you OK?’

She said, ‘They didn’t hit me.’

‘But?’

‘I don’t want to talk about it. Why are you here?’

‘I need medical treatment,’ Reacher said.

‘What kind?’

‘I got scratched by thorns. I want to get the cuts cleaned.’

‘Really?’

‘No, not really,’ Reacher said. ‘I need some painkillers, that’s all. I haven’t been able to rest my arms like I hoped.’

‘What do you really want?’

‘I want to talk,’ Reacher said.

They started in the kitchen. They cleaned his cuts, purely as a way of occupying themselves. The doctor’s wife said she had trained as a nurse. She poured some thin stinging liquid into a bowl and used cotton balls. She started on his face and neck and then did his hands. She made him take off his shirt. His back was all ripped up by the long scrabbling escape from under the truck. He said, ‘I had breakfast with Dorothy this morning. At her place.’

The doctor’s wife said, ‘You shouldn’t be telling us that. It could get her in trouble.’

‘Only if you rat her out to the Duncans.’

‘We might have to.’

‘She said she’s a friend of yours.’

‘Not really a friend. She’s much older.’

‘She said you stood by her, twenty-five years ago.’

The woman said nothing. Just continued her careful ministrations behind his back. She was thorough. She was opening each scratch with thumb and forefinger, and swabbing extensively. The doctor said, ‘Would you like a drink?’

‘Too early for me,’ Reacher said.

‘I meant coffee,’ the doctor said. ‘You were drinking coffee last night.’

Reacher smiled. The guy was trying to prove he could remember something. Trying to prove he hadn’t been really drunk, trying to prove he wasn’t really hung over.

‘A cup of coffee is always welcome,’ Reacher said.

The doctor stepped away to the sink and got a drip machine going. Then he came back and took Reacher’s arm, like doctors do, his fingertips in Reacher’s palm, lifting, turning, manipulating. The doctor was small and Reacher’s arm was big. The guy was struggling like a butcher with a side of beef. He dug the fingers of his other hand deep into Reacher’s shoulder joint, poking, feeling, probing.

‘I could give you cortisone,’ he said.

‘Do I need it?’

‘It would help.’

‘How much?’

‘A little. Maybe more than a little. You should think about it. It would ease the discomfort. Right now it’s nagging at you. Probably making you tired.’

‘OK,’ Reacher said. ‘Go for it.’

‘I will,’ the doctor said. ‘In exchange for some information.’

‘Like what?’

‘How did you hurt yourself?’

‘Why do you want to know?’

‘Call it professional interest.’

The doctor’s wife finished her work. She tossed the last cotton ball on the table and handed Reacher his shirt. He shrugged it on and started buttoning it. He said, ‘It was like you figured. I was caught in a hurricane.’

The doctor said, ‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Not a natural weather event. I was in an underground chamber. It caught on fire. There was a stair shaft and two ventilation shafts. I was lucky. The flames went up the ventilation shafts. I was on the stairs. So I wasn’t burned. But air to feed the fire was coming down the stair shaft just as hard as the flames were going

back up the ventilation shafts. So it was like climbing through a hurricane. It blew me back down twice. I couldn't keep my feet. In the end I had to haul myself up by the arms.'

'How far?'

'Two hundred and eighty steps.'

'Wow. That would do it. Where was this?'

'That's outside of your professional interest.'

'Then what happened?'

'That's outside of your professional interest, too.'

'Recent event, yes?'

'Feels like yesterday,' Reacher said. 'Now go get the needle.'

It was a long needle. The doctor went away and came back with a stainless steel syringe that looked big enough for a horse. He made Reacher take his shirt off again and sit forward with his elbow on the table. He eased the sharp point deep into the joint, from the back. Reacher felt it pushing and popping through all kinds of tendons and muscles. The doctor pressed the plunger, slow and steady. Reacher felt the fluid flood the joint. Felt the joint loosen and relax, in real time, immediately, like healing insanely accelerated. Then the doctor did the other shoulder. Same procedure. Same result.

'Wonderful,' Reacher said.

The doctor asked, 'What did you want to talk about?'

'A time long ago,' Reacher said. 'When your wife was a kid.'

TWENTY-FOUR

REACHER DRESSED AGAIN AND ALL THREE OF THEM TOOK MUGS OF fresh coffee to the living room, which was a narrow rectangular space with furniture arranged in an L-shape along two walls, and a huge flat screen television on a third wall. Under the screen was a rack loaded with audio-visual components all interconnected with thick wires. Flanking the screen were two serious loudspeakers. Set into the fourth wall was an undraped picture window that gave a great view of a thousand acres of absolutely nothing at all. Dormant lawn, the post-and-rail fence, then dirt all the way to the horizon. No hills, no dales, no trees, no streams. But no trucks or patrols, either. No activity of any kind. Reacher took an armchair where he could see the door and the view both at the same time. The doctor sat on a sofa. His wife sat next to him. She didn't look enthusiastic about talking.

Reacher asked her, 'How old were you when Dorothy's kid went missing?'

She said, 'I was fourteen.'

'Six years older than Seth Duncan.'

'About.'

'Not quite in his generation.'

'No.'

'Do you remember when he first showed up?'

'Not really. I was ten or eleven. There was some talk. I'm probably remembering the talk, rather than the event.'

'What did people say?'

'What could they say? No one knew anything. There was no information. People assumed he was a relative. Maybe orphaned. Maybe there had been a car wreck in another state.'

'And the Duncans never explained?'

‘Why would they? It was nobody’s business but theirs.’

‘What happened when Dorothy’s little girl went missing?’

‘It was awful. Almost like a betrayal. It changed people. A thing like that, OK, it puts a scare in you, but it’s supposed to have a happy ending. It’s supposed to turn out right. But it didn’t.’

‘Dorothy thought the Duncans did it.’

‘I know.’

‘She said you stood by her.’

‘I did.’

‘Why?’

‘Why not?’

Reacher said, ‘You were fourteen. She was what? Thirty? Thirty-five? More than twice your age. So it wasn’t about solidarity between two women or two mothers or two neighbours. Not in the normal sense. It was because you knew something, wasn’t it?’

‘Why are you asking?’

‘Call it professional interest.’

‘It was a quarter of a century ago.’

‘It was yesterday, as far as Dorothy is concerned.’

‘You’re not from here.’

‘I know,’ Reacher said. ‘I’m on my way to Virginia.’

‘So go there.’

‘I can’t. Not yet. Not if I think the Duncans did it and got away with it.’

‘Why does it matter to you?’

Why does it matter to you?

‘I don’t know. I can’t explain it. But it does.’

‘The Duncans get away with plenty, believe me. Every single day.’

‘But I don’t care about that other stuff. I don’t care who gets their harvest hauled or when or how much they pay for it. You all can take care of that for yourselves. It’s not rocket science.’

The doctor’s wife said, ‘I was the Duncans’ babysitter that year.’

‘And?’

‘They didn’t really need one. They rarely went out. Or actually they went out a lot, but then they came right back. Like a trick or a subterfuge. Then they would be real slow about driving me home. It was like they were paying me to be there with them. With all four of them, I mean, not just with Seth.’

‘How often did you work for them?’

‘About six times.’

‘And what happened?’

‘In what way?’

‘Anything bad?’

She looked straight at him. ‘You mean, was I interfered with?’

He asked, ‘Were you?’

‘No.’

‘Did you feel in any danger?’

‘A little.’

‘Was there any inappropriate behaviour at all?’

‘Not really.’

‘So what was it made you stand by Dorothy when the kid went missing?’

‘Just a feeling.’

‘What kind of a feeling?’

‘I was fourteen, OK? I didn’t really understand anything. But I knew I felt uncomfortable.’

‘Did you know why?’

‘It dawned on me slowly.’

‘What was it?’

‘They were disappointed that I wasn’t younger. They made me feel I was too old for them. It creeped me out.’

‘You felt too old for them at fourteen?’

‘Yes. And I wasn’t, you know, very mature. I was a small girl.’

‘What did you feel would have happened if you had been younger?’

‘I really don’t want to think about it.’

‘And you told the cops about how you felt?’

‘Sure. We all told them everything. The cops were great. It was twenty-five years ago, but they were very modern. They took us very seriously, even the kids. They listened to everybody. They told us we could say anything, big or small, important or not, truth or rumour. So it all came out.’

‘But nothing was proved.’

The doctor’s wife shook her head. ‘The Duncans were clean as a whistle. Pure as the driven snow. I’m surprised they didn’t get the Nobel prize.’

‘But still you stood by Dorothy.’

‘I knew what I felt.’

I knew what I felt.

‘Did you think the investigation was OK?’

‘I was fourteen. What did I know? I saw dogs and guys in FBI jackets. It was like a television show. So yes, I thought it was OK.’

‘And now? Looking back?’

‘They never found her bike.’

The doctor’s wife said that most farm kids started driving their parents’ beat-up pick-up trucks around the age of fifteen, or even a little earlier, if they were tall enough. Younger or shorter than that, they rode bikes. Big old Schwinn cruisers, baseball cards in the spokes, tassels on the handlebars. It was a big county. Walking was too slow. The eight-year-old Margaret had ridden away from the house Reacher had seen, down the track Reacher had seen, all knees and elbows and excitement, on a pink bicycle bigger than she was. Neither she nor the bike was ever seen again.

The doctor’s wife said, ‘I kept on expecting them to find the bike. You know, maybe on the side of a road somewhere. In the tall grass. Just lying there. That’s what happens on the television shows. Like a clue. With a footprint, or maybe the guy had dropped a piece of paper or something. But it didn’t happen that way. Everything was a dead end.’

‘So what was your bottom line at the time?’ Reacher asked. ‘On the Duncans? Guilty or not guilty?’

‘Not guilty,’ the woman said. ‘Because facts are facts, aren’t they?’

‘Yet you still stood by Dorothy.’

‘Partly because of the way I felt. Feelings are different than facts. And partly because of the aftermath. It was horrible for her. The Duncans were very self-righteous. And people were starting to wake up to the power they had over them. It was like the thought police. First Dorothy was supposed to apologize, which she wouldn’t, and then she was supposed to just shut up and carry on like nothing had ever happened. She couldn’t even grieve, because somehow that would have been like accusing the Duncans all over again. The whole county was uneasy about it. It was like Dorothy was supposed to take one for the team.

Like one of those old legends, where she had to sacrifice her child to the monster, for the good of the village.'

There was no more talk. Reacher collected the three empty coffee cups and carried them out to the kitchen, partly to be polite, partly because he wanted to check the view through a different window. The landscape was still clear. Nothing coming. Nothing happening. After a minute the doctor joined him in the room, and asked, 'So what are you going to do now?'

Reacher said, 'I'm going to Virginia.'

'OK.'

'With two stops along the way.'

'Where?'

'I'm going to drop in on the county cops. Sixty miles south of here. I want to see their paperwork.'

'Will they still have it?'

Reacher nodded. 'A thing like that, lots of different departments cooperating, everyone on best behaviour, they'll have built a pretty big file. And they won't have junked it yet. Because technically it's still an open case. Their notes will be in storage somewhere. Probably a whole cubic yard of them.'

'Will they let you see them? Just like that?'

'I was a cop of sorts myself, thirteen years. I can usually talk my way past file clerks.'

'Why do you want to see it?'

'To check it for holes. If it's OK, I'll keep on running. If it's not, I might come back.'

'To do what?'

'To fill in the holes.'

‘How will you get down there?’

‘Drive.’

‘Showing up in a stolen truck won’t help your cause.’

‘It’s got your plates on it now. They won’t know.’

‘My plates?’

‘Don’t worry, I’ll swap them back again. If the paperwork’s OK, then I’ll leave the truck right there near the police station with the proper plates on it, and sooner or later someone will figure out whose it is, and word will get back to the Duncans, and they’ll know I’m gone for good, and they’ll start leaving you people alone again.’

‘That would be nice. What’s your second stop?’

‘The cops are the second stop. First stop is closer to home.’

‘Where?’

‘We’re going to drop in on Seth Duncan’s wife. You and me. A house call. To make sure she’s healing right.’

TWENTY-FIVE

THE DOCTOR WAS IMMEDIATELY DEAD SET AGAINST THE IDEA. IT was a house call he didn't want to make. He looked away and paced the kitchen and traced his facial injuries with his fingertips and pursed his lips and ran his tongue over his teeth. Then eventually he said, 'But Seth might be there.'

Reacher said, 'I hope he is. We can check he's healing right, too. And if he is, I can hit him again.'

'He'll have Cornhuskers with him.'

'He won't. They're all out in the fields, looking for me. The few that remain, that is.'

'I don't know about this.'

'You're a doctor. You took an oath. You have obligations.'

'It's dangerous.'

'Getting out of bed in the morning is dangerous.'

'You're a crazy man, you know that?'

'I prefer to think of myself as conscientious.'

Reacher and the doctor climbed into the pick-up truck and headed back to the county two-lane and turned right. They came out on the road a couple of miles south of the motel and a couple of miles north of the three Duncan houses. Two minutes later the doctor stared at them as they passed by. Reacher took a look, too. Enemy territory. Three white houses, three parked vehicles, no obvious activity. By that point Reacher assumed the second Brett had delivered his messages. He assumed they had been heard and then immediately dismissed as bravado. Although the burned-out truck should have counted for something. The Duncans were losing, steadily and badly, and they had to know it.

Reacher made the left where he had the night before in the Subaru wagon, and then he threaded through the turns until Seth Duncan's house appeared ahead on

his right. It looked much the same lit by daylight as it had by electricity. The white mailbox with Duncan on it, the hibernating lawn, the antique horse buggy. The long straight driveway, the outbuilding, the three sets of doors. This time two of them were standing open. The back ends of two cars were visible in the gloom inside. One was a small red sports car, maybe a Mazda, very feminine, and the other was a big black Cadillac sedan, very masculine.

The doctor said, ‘That’s Seth’s car.’

Reacher smiled. ‘Which one?’

‘The Cadillac.’

‘Nice car,’ Reacher said. ‘Maybe I should go smash it up. I’ve got a wrench of my own now. Want me to do that?’

‘No,’ the doctor said. ‘For God’s sake.’

Reacher smiled again and parked where he had the night before and they climbed out together and stood for a moment in the chill. The cloud was still low and flat, and mist was peeling off the underside of it and drifting back down to earth, ready for afternoon, ready for evening. The mist made the air itself look visible, grey and pearlescent, shimmering like a fluid.

‘Show time,’ Reacher said, and headed for the door. The doctor trailed him by a yard or two. Reacher knocked and waited and a long minute later he heard feet on the boards inside. A light tread, slow and a little hesitant. Eleanor.

She opened up and stood there, with her left hand cupping the edge of the door and her right-hand fingers spidered against the opposite wall, as if she needed help with stability, or as if she thought her horizontal arm was protecting the inside of the house from the outside. She was wearing a black skirt and a black sweater. No necklace. Her lips had scabbed over, dark and thick, and her nose was swollen, the white skin tight over yellow contusions that were not quite hidden by her make-up.

‘You,’ she said.

‘I brought the doctor,’ Reacher said. ‘To check on how you’re doing.’

Eleanor Duncan glanced at the doctor’s face and said, ‘He looks as bad as I do

Eleanor Duncan glanced at the doctor's face and said, 'He looks as bad as I do. Was that Seth? Or one of the Cornhuskers? Either way, I apologize.'

'None of the above,' Reacher said. 'It seems we have a couple of tough guys in town.'

Eleanor Duncan didn't answer that. She just took her right hand off the wall and trailed it through a courtly gesture and invited them in. Reacher asked, 'Is Seth home?'

'No, thank goodness,' Eleanor said.

'His car is here,' the doctor said.

'His father picked him up.'

Reacher asked, 'How long will he be gone?'

'I don't know,' Eleanor said. 'But it seems they have much to discuss.' She led the way to the kitchen, where she had been treated the night before, and maybe on many previous occasions. She sat down in a chair and tilted her face to the light. The doctor stepped up and took a look. He touched the wounds very lightly and asked questions about pain and headaches and teeth. She gave the kinds of answers Reacher had heard from many people in her situation. She was brave and somewhat self-deprecating. She said yes, her nose and mouth still hurt a little, and yes, she had a slight headache, and no, her teeth didn't feel entirely OK. But her diction was reasonably clear and she had no loss of memory and her pupils were reacting properly to light, so the doctor was satisfied. He said she would be OK.

'And how is Seth?' Reacher asked.

'Very angry at you,' Eleanor said.

'What goes around comes around.'

'You're much bigger than him.'

'He's much bigger than you.'

She didn't answer. She just looked at Reacher for another long second, and then she looked away, seemingly very unsure of herself, an expression of complete

she looked away, seemingly very unsure of herself, an expression of complete uncertainty on her face, its extent limited only by the immobility caused by the stiff scabs on her lips and the frozen ache in her nose. She was hurting bad, Reacher thought. She had taken two blows, he figured, probably the first to her nose and the second aimed lower, at her mouth. The first had been hard enough to do damage without breaking the bone, and the second had been hard enough to draw blood without smashing her teeth.

Two blows, carefully aimed, carefully calculated, carefully delivered.

Expert blows.

Reacher said, ‘It wasn’t Seth, was it?’

She said, ‘No, it wasn’t.’

‘So who was it?’

‘I’ll quote your earlier conclusion. It seems we have a couple of tough guys in town.’

‘They were here?’

‘Twice.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Who are they?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘They’ve been saying they represent the Duncans.’

‘Well, they don’t. The Duncans don’t need to hire people to beat me. They’re perfectly capable of doing that themselves.’

‘How many times has Seth hit you?’

‘A thousand, maybe.’

‘That’s good. Not from your point of view, of course.’

‘But good from the point of view of your own clear conscience?’

‘Something like that.’

She said, ‘Have at Seth all you like. All day, every day. Beat him to a pulp. Break every bone in his body. Be my guest. I mean it.’

‘Why do you stay?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘Whole books have been written on that subject. I’ve read most of them. Ultimately, where else would I go?’

‘Anywhere else.’

‘It’s not that simple. It never is.’

‘Why not?’

‘Trust me, OK?’

‘So what happened?’

She said, ‘Four days ago two men showed up here. They had East Coast accents. They were kind of Italian. They were wearing expensive suits and cashmere overcoats. Seth took them into his den. I didn’t hear any of the discussion. But I knew we were in trouble. There was a real animal stink in the house. After twenty minutes they all trooped out. Seth was looking sheepish. One of the men said their instructions were to hurt Seth, but Seth had bargained it down to hurting me. At first I thought I was going to be raped in front of my husband. That was what the atmosphere was like. The animal stink. But, no. Seth held me in front of him and they took turns hitting me. Once each. Nose, and then mouth. Then yesterday evening they came back and did all the same things over again. Then Seth went out for a steak. That’s what happened.’

‘I’m very sorry,’ Reacher said.

‘So am I.’

‘Seth didn’t tell you who they were? Or what they wanted?’

‘No. Seth tells me nothing.’

‘Any ideas?’

‘They were investors,’ she said. ‘I mean, they were here on behalf of investors. That’s the only sense I can make out of it.’

‘Duncan Transportation has investors?’

‘I suppose so. I imagine it’s not a wonderfully profitable business. Gas is very expensive right now, isn’t it? Or diesel, or whatever it is they use. And it’s wintertime, which must hurt their cash flow. There’s nothing to haul. Although, really, what do I know? Except that they’re always complaining about something. And I see on the news that apparently ordinary banks are difficult right now, for small businesses. So maybe they had to find a loan through unconventional sources.’

‘Very unconventional,’ Reacher said. ‘But if this is all about some financial issue with Duncan Transportation, why are those guys looking for me?’

‘Are they looking for you?’

‘Yes,’ the doctor said. ‘They are. They were at my house this morning. They hit me four times and threatened to do much worse to my wife. And all they ever asked was where Reacher was. It was the same at the motel, apparently. Mr Vincent was visited. And Dorothy, the woman who works for him. His housekeeper.’

‘That’s awful,’ Eleanor said. ‘Is she OK?’

‘She survived.’

‘Is your wife OK?’

‘A little shaken.’

‘I can’t explain it,’ Eleanor said. ‘I know nothing about Seth’s business.’

Reacher asked, ‘Do you know anything about Seth himself?’

‘Like what?’

‘Like who he is, and where he came from.’

‘Do you guys want a drink?’

‘No, thank you,’ Reacher said. ‘Tell me where Seth came from.’

‘That old question? He’s adopted, like a lot of people.’

‘Where from?’

‘He doesn’t know, and I don’t think his father knows for sure, either. It was some kind of charity network. There was a degree of anonymity involved.’

‘No stories at all?’

‘None.’

‘Doesn’t Seth remember anything? People say he was ready for kindergarten when he got here. He should have some memories of where he was before.’

‘He won’t talk about it.’

‘What about the missing girl?’

‘That other old question? Lord knows I’m not blind to Seth’s faults, or his family’s, but as I understand it they were cleared after an investigation by a federal agency. Isn’t that good enough for people?’

‘You weren’t here at the time?’

‘No, I grew up in Illinois. Just outside of Chicago. Seth was twenty-two when I met him. I was trying to be a journalist. The only job I could find was at a paper out of Lincoln. I was doing a story about corn prices, of course. That’s all that was in that paper, that and college sports. Seth was the new CEO of Duncan Transportation. I interviewed him for the story. Then we had a cocktail. At first, I was bowled over. Later, not so much.’

‘Are you going to be OK?’

‘Are you? With two tough guys looking for you?’

‘I’m leaving,’ Reacher said. ‘Heading south and then east, to Virginia. You want to ride along? You could hit the Interstate and never come back.’

Eleanor Duncan said, ‘No.’

‘You sure?’

‘I am.’

‘Then I can’t help you.’

‘You helped me already. More than I can say. You broke his nose. I was so happy.’

Reacher said, ‘You should come with me. You should get the hell out. It’s crazy to stay, talking like that. Feeling like that.’

‘I’ll outlast him,’ the woman said. ‘That’s my mission, I think, to outlast them all.’

Reacher said nothing more. He just looked around the kitchen, at the stuff she would inherit if she succeeded in outlasting them all. There was a lot of stuff, all of it expensive and high quality, a lot of it Italian, some of it German, some of it American. Including a Cadillac key in a glass bowl.

‘Is that Seth’s key?’ Reacher asked.

Eleanor said, ‘Yes, it is.’

‘Does he keep his car gassed up?’

‘Usually. Why?’

‘I’m going to steal it,’ Reacher said.

TWENTY-SIX

REACHER SAID, ‘I’VE GOT AT LEAST AN HOUR’S DRIVE AHEAD OF ME. I could use something more comfortable than a truck. And the doctor should keep the truck, anyway. He might need it around here. For his job.’

Eleanor Duncan said, ‘You won’t get away with it. You’ll be driving a stolen car straight through where the county police are based.’

‘They won’t know it’s stolen. Not if Seth doesn’t tell them.’

‘But he will.’

‘Tell him not to. Tell him if he does, I’ll come back here and break his arms. Tell him to keep quiet and pick it up tomorrow. I’ll leave it somewhere along the way.’

‘He won’t listen.’

‘He will.’

‘He doesn’t listen to anyone.’

‘He listens to those two out-of-towners.’

‘Because he’s scared of them.’

‘He’s scared of me, too. He’s scared of everybody. Believe me, that’s how Seth is.’

Nobody spoke. Reacher took the Cadillac key from the bowl, and gave the pick-up key to the doctor, and headed for the door.

Seth Duncan was at his father’s kitchen table, opposite the old man himself, elbow to elbow with his uncle Jonas on one side and his uncle Jasper on the other. The four men were still and subdued, because they weren’t alone in the room. Roberto Cassano was there, leaning on the sink, and Angelo Mancini was there, leaning on the door. Cassano had made a point of smoothing his shirt into the waistband of his pants, even though it was already immaculate, and Mancini

had opened his coat and pressed the heels of his hands into the small of his back, as if it was aching from driving, but really both men's gestures had been designed to show off their pistols in their shoulder holsters. The pistols were Colt Double Eagles. Stainless steel semi-automatics. A matched pair. The Duncans had seen the weapons and gotten the point, and so they were sitting quiet and saying nothing.

Cassano said, 'Tell me again. Explain it to me. Convince me. How is this stranger disrupting the shipment?'

Jacob Duncan said, 'Do I tell your boss how to run his business?'

'I guess not.'

'Because it's his business. Presumably it has a thousand subtleties that I don't fully understand. So I stay well out of it.'

'And Mr Rossi stays well out of your business. Until he gets inconvenienced.'

'He's welcome to find an alternative source.'

'I'm sure he will. But right now there's a live contract.'

'We'll deliver.'

'When?'

'As soon as this stranger is out of our hair.'

Cassano just shook his head in frustration.

Mancini said, 'You guys need to change your tactics. The stranger was in the fields, OK, no question, but now he's not any more. He's back in the truck he took from those two donkeys last night. He had it stashed somewhere. You should be looking for it. You should be checking the roads again.'

*

Seth Duncan's Cadillac was new enough to have all the bells and whistles, but old enough to be a straight-up turnpike cruiser. It wasn't competing against BMW and Mercedes Benz for yuppie money, like the current models were. It

was competing against planes and trains for long-distance comfort, like traditional full-boat Caddies always had. Reacher liked it a lot. It was a fine automobile. It was long and wide and weighed about two tons. It was smooth and silent. It was relaxed. It was a one-finger, one-toe kind of car, designed for sprawling. It had black paint and black leather and black glass. And a warm-toned radio and a three-quarters-full tank of gas.

Reacher had got in it and racked its seat back and eased it out of the garage and K-turned it behind the house and nosed it cautiously back to the two-lane. He had turned left, south, and wafted on down the road in a rolling cocoon of calm and quiet. The landscape didn't change at all. Straight road ahead, dirt to the right, dirt to the left, clouds overhead. He saw no other traffic. Ten miles south of where he started there was an old roadhouse standing alone in the weedy remnant of a beaten-earth parking lot. It was closed down and boarded up, with a bad roof and ancient Pabst Blue Ribbon and Miller High Life signs on the walls, barely visible behind layers of mud. After that there was nothing, all the way to the horizon.

Roberto Cassano stepped out of Jacob Duncan's back door and walked across weedy gravel to where he couldn't be overheard. A thin plume of black smoke rose far to the north. The burned-out truck, still smouldering. The stranger's work.

Cassano dialled his cell and got Rossi after three rings. He said, 'They're sticking to their story, boss. We're not going to get the shipment until they get the stranger.'

Rossi said, 'That makes no sense.'

'Tell me about it. It's Alice in Wonderland.'

'How much pressure have you applied?'

'To the Duncans themselves? That's my next question. How much pressure do you want us to apply?'

There was a long pause, with a breath, like a sigh, resigned. Rossi said, 'The problem is, they sell great stuff. I won't find better. I won't find anything half as good. So I can't burn them. Because I'm going to need them again, in the future. Over and over. No question about that.'

‘So?’

‘So play their game. Find the damn stranger.’

The doctor stepped out of Eleanor Duncan’s door and stared hard at the pick-up truck. He didn’t want to get in it. Didn’t want to drive it. Didn’t want to be seen with it. Didn’t want to be anywhere near it. It was a Duncan vehicle. It had been misappropriated, and the manner of its misappropriation had been a major humiliation for the Duncans. Two Cornhuskers, tossed aside, contemptuously. Therefore to be involved with the truck in any way at all would be an outrageous provocation. Insane. He would be punished, severely and for ever.

But he was a doctor.

And sober, unfortunately.

Therefore clear-headed.

He had patients. He had responsibilities. To Vincent at the motel, for one. To Dorothy the housekeeper, for another. Both were shaken up. And he was a married man. His wife was eight miles away, scared and alone.

He looked at the key in his hand and the truck on the driveway. He mapped out a route in his head. He could park behind Dorothy’s house and keep the truck out of sight. He could park on the wrong side of the motel office and achieve the same result. Then he could dump the truck to the north and hike across the fields to home.

Total exposure, maybe two miles on minor tracks, and four on the two-lane road.

Ten minutes.

That was all.

Safe enough.

Maybe.

He climbed in the cab and started the engine.

*

The anonymous white van was still on Route 3, still in Canada, but it had left British Columbia behind and had entered Alberta. It was making steady progress, heading east, completely unnoticed. Its driver was making no calls. His phone was switched off. The assumption was that cell towers close to the 49th Parallel were monitored for activity. Perhaps conversations were recorded and analysed. Homeland Security departments on both sides of the border had computer programs with sophisticated software. Individual words could trigger alerts. And even without compromising language, an electronic record of where a guy had been, and when, was always best avoided. For the same reason, all gas purchases were made with cash, in the local currency, and at every stop the driver turned his collar up and pulled his hat down low, in case there were cameras connected to digital recorders or distant control rooms.

The van rolled on, making steady progress, heading east.

Rossi clicked off the call with Cassano and thought hard for five minutes, and then he dialled Safir, six blocks away. He took a breath and held it and asked, ‘Have you ever seen better merchandise?’

Safir said, ‘You don’t have to play the salesman. I already fell for your pitch.’

‘And you’ve always been satisfied, right?’

‘I’m not satisfied now.’

‘I understand,’ Rossi said. ‘But I want to discuss something with you.’

‘Equals discuss,’ Safir said. ‘We’re not equals. I tell, you ask.’

‘OK, I want to ask you something. I want to ask you to take a step back and consider something.’

‘For example?’

‘I need this shipment, you need this shipment, everyone needs this shipment. So I want to ask you to put our differences aside and make common cause. Just for a day or two.’

‘How?’

How?’

‘My contacts in Nebraska have a bug up their ass.’

‘I know all about that,’ Safir said. ‘My men gave me a full report.’

‘I want you to send them up there to help.’

‘Send who? Up where?’

‘Your men. To Nebraska. There’s no point in having them here in my office. Your interests are my interests, and I’m already working as hard as I can on this. So I’m thinking your guys could go help my guys and between us we could solve this problem.’

The doctor made it to Dorothy’s farmhouse unobserved and parked in the yard behind it, nose to tail with Dorothy’s own pick-up. He found her in her kitchen, washing dishes. Breakfast dishes, presumably. Hers and Reacher’s. Which had been a crazy risk.

He asked, ‘How are you holding up?’

She said, ‘I’m OK. You look worse than me.’

‘I’ll survive.’

‘You’re in a Duncan truck.’

‘I know.’

‘That’s dumb.’

‘Like cooking breakfast for the guy was dumb.’

‘He was hungry.’

The doctor asked, ‘You need anything?’

‘I need to know how this is going to end.’

‘Not well, probably. He’s one guy, on his own. And there’s no guarantee he’ll even stick around.’

‘You know where he is right now?’

‘Yes. More or less.’

‘Don’t tell me.’

‘I won’t.’

Dorothy said, ‘You should go check on Mr Vincent. He was hurt pretty bad.’

‘That’s where I’m headed next,’ the doctor said.

Safir clicked off the call with Rossi and thought hard for ten long minutes, and then he dialled his customer Mahmeini, eight blocks across town. He took a breath and held it and asked, ‘Have you ever seen better merchandise?’

Mahmeini said, ‘Get to the damn point.’

‘There’s a kink in the chain.’

‘Chains don’t have kinks. Hoses have kinks. Chains have weak links. Are you confessing? You’re the weak link?’

‘I’m just saying. There’s a speed bump. A Catch-22. It’s crazy, but it’s there.’

‘And?’

‘We all have a common goal. We all want that shipment. And we’re not going to get it until the speed bump disappears. That’s a fact, unfortunately. There’s nothing any of us can do about it. We’re all victims here. So I’m asking you to put our differences aside and make common cause, just for a day or two.’

‘How?’

‘I want you to take your guys out of my office and send them up to Nebraska. I’m sending my guys. We could all work together and solve this problem.’

Mahmeini went quiet. Truth was, he was nothing more than a link in a chain, too, the same as Safir, the same as Rossi, who he knew all about, the same as the Duncans, who he knew all about too, and Vancouver. He knew the lie of the land. He had exercised due diligence. He had done the research. They were all

links in a chain, except that he was the penultimate link, the second to last, and therefore he was under the greatest strain. Because right next to him at the top were Saudis, unbelievably rich and beyond vicious. A bad combination.

Mahmeini said, ‘Ten per cent discount.’

Safir said, ‘Of course.’

Mahmeini said, ‘Call me back with the arrangements.’

The doctor parked to the rear of the motel lounge, between its curved wall and a circular stockade that hid the trash cans and the propane tanks, nose to tail with Vincent’s own car, which was an old Pontiac sedan. Not a perfect spot. The truck would be clearly visible from certain angles, both north and south. But it was the best he could do. He got out and paused in the chill and checked the road. Nothing coming.

He found Vincent in the lounge, just sitting there in one of his red velvet armchairs, doing absolutely nothing at all. He had a black eye and a split lip and a swelling the size of a hen’s egg on his cheek. Exactly like the doctor himself, in fact. They were a matched pair. Like looking in a mirror.

The doctor asked, ‘You need anything?’

Vincent said, ‘I have a terrible headache.’

‘Want painkillers?’

‘Painkillers won’t help. I want this to be over. That’s what I want. I want that guy to finish what he started.’

‘He’s on his way to Virginia.’

‘Great.’

‘He said he’s going to check in with the county cops along the way. He said he’s going to come back if there’s something wrong with the case file from twenty-five years ago.’

‘Ancient history. They’ll have junked the file.’

‘He says not.’

‘Then they won’t let him see it.’

‘He says they will.’

‘But what can he find now, that they didn’t find then? Saying all that just means he’s never coming back. He’s softening the blow, that’s all he’s doing. He’s slipping away, with an excuse. He’s leaving us in the lurch.’

The strange round room went quiet.

‘You need anything?’ the doctor asked again.

‘Do you?’ Vincent asked back. ‘You want a drink?’

‘Are you allowed to serve me?’

‘It’s a little late to worry about that kind of thing, don’t you think? You want one?’

‘No,’ the doctor said. ‘I better not.’ Then he paused and said, ‘Well, maybe just one, for the road.’

Safir called Rossi back and said, ‘I want a twenty per cent discount.’

Rossi said, ‘In exchange for what?’

‘Helping you. Sending my boys up there.’

‘Fifteen per cent. Because you’ll be helping yourself too.’

‘Twenty,’ Safir said. ‘Because I’m talking about sending more boys than just mine.’

‘How so?’

‘I’ve got guys babysitting me too. Two of them. Right here, right now. I told you that, didn’t I? So you think I’m taking my guys out of your office while I’ve still got guys in my own office? Well, dream on. That’s not going to happen any time soon, believe me. So I got my customer to agree to send his guys, too. Like a

shared sacrifice. And anyway, a thing like this, we'll all want our fingers in the pie.'

Rossi paused.

'OK,' he said. 'That's good. That's real good. Between us we'll have six men up there. We can take care of this thing real fast. We'll be out of the woods in no time at all.'

'Arrangements?'

Rossi said, 'The nearest civilization is sixty miles south. Where the county offices are. The only accommodation is a Courtyard Marriott. My guys are based there. I'll tell them to pull back there right now and I'll book a couple more rooms. Then everyone can meet up as soon as possible, and then they can all get going.'

The two-lane road stayed arrow-straight the whole way. Reacher kept the Cadillac rolling along at a steady sixty per, covering a mile a minute, no stress at all. Fifty minutes from where he started he passed a lonely bar on the right shoulder. It was a small hunched building made of wood, with dirty windows with beer signs in them, and three cars in its lot, and a name board that said Cell Block. Which was marginally appropriate. Reacher figured that if he squinted the place might look like a jail from an old Western movie. He blew past it and a mile later the far horizon changed. A water tower and a Texaco sign loomed up out of the afternoon gloom. Civilization. But not much of it. The place looked small. It was just a chequerboard of a dozen low-rise blocks dumped down on the dirt in the middle of nowhere.

Eight hundred yards out there was a Chamber of Commerce billboard that listed five different ways a traveller could spend his money. If he wanted to eat, there were two restaurants. One was a diner, and one wasn't. Reacher recognized neither name. Not chains. If a traveller needed to fix his car, there was a service station and a tyre shop. If he wanted to sleep, the only choice was a Courtyard Marriott.

TWENTY-SEVEN

REACHER BLEW STRAIGHT PAST THE BILLBOARD AND THEN SLOWED and checked ahead. In his experience most places reserved the main drag for profit-and-loss businesses. Municipal enterprises like cops and county offices would be a block or two over. Maybe more. Something to do with tax revenues. A town couldn't charge as much for a lot on a back street.

He slowed a little more and passed the first building. It was on the left. It was an aluminium coach diner, as advertised on the billboard, as mentioned by Dorothy the housekeeper. It was the place where the county cops got their morning coffee and doughnuts. And their afternoon snacks, apparently. There was a black-and-white Dodge police cruiser parked outside. Plus two working pick-up trucks, both of them farm vehicles, both of them dented and dirty. Next up in terms of infrastructure was a gas station across the street, Texaco, with three service bays attached. Then came a long sequence of miscellaneous enterprises, on the left and the right, a hardware store, a liquor store, a bank, tyre bays, a John Deere dealership, a grocery, a pharmacy. The street was broad and muddy and had diagonal parking on both sides.

Reacher drove all the way through town. At the end of it was a genuine crossroads, signposted left to an ethanol plant and right to a hospital and straight ahead to I-80, another sixty miles farther on. He U-turned shoulder-to-shoulder and came back again, north on the main drag. There were three side streets on the right, and three on the left. They all had names that sounded like people. Maybe original Nebraska settlers, or famous football players, or coaches, or champion corn growers. He made the first right, on a street named McNally, and saw the Marriott hotel up ahead. It was four o'clock in the afternoon, which was awkward. The old files would be in the police station or a county storeroom, and either way the file clerks would be quitting at five. He had one hour. That was all. Access alone might take thirty minutes to arrange, and there was probably plenty of paper, which would take much more than the other thirty to read. He was going to have to wait for the morning.

Or, maybe not.

Worth a try.

He rolled ahead and took a look at the hotel on the way. He wasn´t sure what the difference was between a regular Marriott and a Courtyard Marriott. Maybe one was high-rise and the other was low-rise. This was a low-rise, just two storeys, H-shaped, a lobby flanked by two modest wings of bedrooms. There was a parking lot out front with marked spaces for about twenty cars, only two of them occupied. Same again at the rear of the building. Twenty spaces, only two of them occupied. Plenty of vacancies. Wintertime, in the middle of nowhere.

He made a left and came back north again, parallel to the main drag, three blocks over. He saw the second restaurant. It was a rib shack. It boasted a dry rub recipe direct from Kansas. He turned left again just beyond it and came back to the main street and pulled in at the diner. The cop car was still there. Still parked. The diner wasn't busy. Reacher could see in through the windows. Two cops, three civilians, a waitress, and a cook behind a hatch.

Reacher locked the Cadillac and walked in. The cops were face to face in a booth, each of them wide and bulky, each of them taking up most of a two-person bench. One of them was about Reacher's age, and one of them was younger. They had grey uniforms, with badges and insignia, and nameplates. The older cop was called Hoag. Reacher walked past him and stopped and pantomimed a big double take and said, 'You're Hoag, right? I don't believe it.'

The cop said, 'Excuse me?'

'I remember you from Desert Storm. Don't I? The Gulf, in 1991? Am I right?'

The cop said, 'I'm sorry, my friend, but you'll have to help me out here. There's been a lot of water over the dam since 1991.'

Reacher offered his hand. He said, 'Reacher, 110th MP.'

The cop wiped his hand on his pants and shook. He said, 'I'm not sure I was ever in contact with you guys.'

'Really? I could have sworn. Saudi, maybe? Just before? During Desert Shield?'

'I was in Germany just before.'

'I don't think it was Germany. But I remember the name. And the face, kind of. Did you have a brother in the Gulf? Or a cousin or something?'

‘A cousin, sure.’

‘Looks just like you?’

‘Back then, I guess. A little.’

‘There you go. Nice guy, right?’

‘Nice enough.’

‘And a fine soldier, as I recall.’

‘He came home with a Bronze Star.’

‘I knew it. VII Corps, right?’

‘Second Armored Cavalry.’

‘Third Squadron?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘I knew it,’ Reacher said again. An old, old process, exploited by fortune tellers everywhere. Steer a guy through an endless series of yes-no, right-wrong questions, and in no time at all a convincing illusion of intimacy built itself up. A simple psychological trick, sharpened by listening carefully to answers, feeling the way, and playing the odds. Most people who wore name tags every day forgot they had them on, at least initially. And a lot of heartland cops were ex-military. Way more than the average. And even if they weren’t, most of them had big families. Lots of brothers and cousins. Virtually certain that at least one of them would have been in the army. And Desert Storm had been the main engagement for that whole generation, and VII Corps had been by far its largest component, and a Bronze Star winner from the Second Armored Cavalry was almost certainly from the Third Squadron, which had been the tip of the spear. An algorithm. Playing the odds. No-brainers all the way.

Reacher asked, ‘So what’s your cousin doing now?’

‘Tony? He’s back in Lincoln. He got out before the second go-round, thank God. He’s working for the railroad. Two kids, one in junior high and one in college.’

‘That’s terrific. You see him much?’

‘Now and then.’

‘Be sure to remember me to him, OK? Jack Reacher, 110th MP. One desert rat to another.’

‘So what are you doing now? He’s bound to ask.’

‘Me? Oh, the same old, same old.’

‘What, you’re still in?’

‘No, I mean I was an investigator, and I’m still an investigator. But private now. My own man, not Uncle Sam’s.’

‘Here in Nebraska?’

‘Just temporarily,’ Reacher said. Then he paused. ‘You know what? Maybe you could help me out. If you don’t mind me asking.’

‘What do you need?’

‘You guys going on duty or going off?’

‘We’re coming on. We got the night shift ahead of us.’

‘Mind if I sit down?’

The cop called Hoag scooted over, all swishing vinyl and creaking leather. Reacher perched on the part of the bench he had vacated. It was warm. He said, ‘I knew this other guy, name of McNally. Another Second Armored guy, as a matter of fact. Turns out he has a friend of a friend who has an aunt in this county. She’s a farmer. Her daughter disappeared twenty-five years ago. Eight years old, never seen again. The woman never really got over it. Your department handled it, with the FBI as the icing on the cake. McNally’s friend of a friend thinks the FBI screwed up. So McNally hired me to review the paperwork.’

‘Twenty-five years ago?’ Hoag said. ‘Before my time.’

‘Right,’ Reacher said. ‘I guess we were both in basic back then.’

‘And the kid was never seen again? That means it’s an open case. Cold, but open. Which means the paperwork should still exist. And someone should remember it.’

‘That’s exactly what McNally was hoping.’

‘And he’s looking to screw the FBI? Not us?’

‘The story is you guys did a fine job.’

‘And what did the FBI do wrong?’

‘They didn’t find the kid.’

‘What good will all this do?’

‘I don’t know,’ Reacher said. ‘You tell me. You know how it is with people. It might put some minds at rest, I guess.’

‘OK,’ Hoag said. ‘I’ll put the word out at the station house. Someone will get you in, first thing tomorrow morning.’

‘Any chance of doing something tonight? If I could get this done by midnight, it would cut McNally’s bill by one day. He doesn’t have much money.’

‘You turning down a bigger pay cheque?’

‘One veteran to another. You know how it is. Plus I’ve got business elsewhere. I need to get to Virginia as soon as I can.’

Hoag checked his watch. Twenty minutes past four. He said, ‘All that old stuff is in the basement under the county clerk’s office. You can’t be in there after five o’clock.’

‘Any way of getting it out?’

‘Oh, man, that’s asking a lot.’

‘I don’t need court exhibits. I don’t want the physical evidence, assuming there

is any. I just want the paperwork.'

'I could get my ass kicked real bad.'

'I just want to read it. Where's the harm in that? In and out in one night, who's even going to know?'

'There's probably a lot of it. Boxes and boxes.'

'I'll help with the grunt work.'

'McNally was Second Armored? Same as Tony?'

Reacher nodded. 'But Second Squadron, not Third. Not quite in Tony's class.'

'Where are you staying?'

'The Marriott. Where else?'

There was a long pause. The younger cop looked on. Hoag was well aware of his scrutiny. Reacher watched the dynamic unfold. Hoag cycled through proper civil caution to a kind of nostalgic old-school can-do soldier-to-soldier recklessness. He looked at Reacher and said, 'OK, I know a guy. We'll get this done. But it's better that you're not there. So go wait for us. We'll deliver.'

So Reacher drove back to the Courtyard Marriott and put the Cadillac way in the rear, behind the building itself, where it couldn't be seen from the front. Safer that way, in case Seth Duncan couldn't be stopped from getting on the horn and spreading the word. Then he walked back and waited at the lobby desk for the clerk to finish on the phone. He seemed to be taking a couple of bookings from someone. When he was done Reacher bought a night in a ground floor room, which turned out to be way in the back of the H, very quiet and very adequate, very clean and very well equipped, all green and tan colours and brass accents and pale wood. Then forty minutes later Hoag and his partner showed up in a borrowed K-9 van loaded with eleven cardboard cartons of files. Five minutes after that, all eleven cartons were in Reacher's room.

And five minutes after that, but sixty miles to the north, the doctor left the motel lounge. He had talked with Vincent a bit, just shooting the shit, but mostly he had drunk three triples of Jim Beam. Nine measures of bourbon, in a little more than an hour. And it was cloudy and going dark, which meant that his glance up

and down the road didn’t reveal what it would have if the sun had been brighter. He climbed into the pick-up truck and started the motor and backed out from his place of concealment. He swung the wheel and crossed the lot and turned right on the two-lane.

TWENTY-EIGHT

THE SIX REMAINING CORNHUSKERS HAD SPLIT UP AND WERE operating solo. Two were parked north on the two-lane, two were parked south, one was out cruising the tangle of lanes to the southeast, and the sixth was out cruising the tangle of lanes to the southwest.

The doctor ran into the two to the north.

Almost literally. His plan was to dump the truck as soon as he found some neutral no-man's-land and then walk home cross-country. He was getting his bearings and looking around as he drove, staring left and right, the bourbon making him slow and numb. His gaze came back to the traffic lane and he saw he was about one second away from colliding head-on with another truck parked half on and half off the shoulder. It was just sitting there, facing the wrong way, with its lights off. Eyes to brain to hands, everything buffered by the bourbon fog, a split second of delay, a wrench of the wheel, and suddenly he was heading diagonally for another truck parked on the other shoulder, thirty yards farther on. He stamped on the brake and all four wheels locked up and he skidded and came to a stop more or less sideways.

The second truck pulled out and blocked the road ahead of him.

The first truck pulled out and blocked the road behind him.

In Las Vegas Mahmeini dialled his phone. His main guy answered, eight blocks away, in Safir's office. Mahmeini said, 'Change of plan. You two are going to Nebraska, right now. Use the company plane. The pilot will have the details.'

His guy said, 'OK.'

Mahmeini said, 'It's a two-part mission. First, find this stranger everybody is talking about and take him out. Second, get close to the Duncans. Build up some trust. Then take out Safir's guys, and Rossi's too, so that from this point onward we're bypassing two links in the chain. In future we can deal direct. Much more profit that way. Much more control, too.'

His guy said, 'OK.'

The doctor sat still behind the wheel, shaking with shock and fear and adrenalin. The Cornhuskers climbed out of their vehicles. Big guys. Red jackets. They walked towards the doctor's stalled truck, taking it slow and easy, one from the left, one from the right. They stood for a second, one each side of the pick-up's cab, still and quiet in the afternoon gloom. Then the first guy opened the passenger door, and the second guy opened the driver's door. The guy at the passenger door stood ready to block an escape, and the guy at the driver's door reached inside and hauled the doctor out by the collar of his coat. The doctor went down like a dead weight, straight to the blacktop, and the guy hauled him up again and hit him hard in the gut and then turned him around and hit him twice more, low in the back, right over his kidneys. The doctor fell to his knees and puked bourbon on the road.

The guy who had been waiting at the passenger door walked back to his vehicle and parked it where it had been before. Then he put the doctor's truck right behind it. He rejoined his buddy and between them they wrestled the doctor up into the cab of the first guy's truck. Then they drove away, one on the right, one on the left, with the doctor jammed between them on the three-person bench, shaking and shivering, his chin on his chest.

In Las Vegas Safir dialled his phone, and his guy answered, in Rossi's office, six blocks away. Safir said, 'New developments. I'm sending you two to Nebraska. I'll fax the details to the airport.'

His guy said, 'OK.'

Safir said, 'Rossi's guys will meet you at the hotel. Mahmeini is sending guys too. The six of you will work together until the stranger is down. In the meantime try and get something going with the Duncans. Build a relationship. Then take Rossi's guys out. That way we're one step closer to the motherlode. We can double our margin.'

His guy said, 'OK.'

'And if you get the chance, take Mahmeini's guys out too. I think I can get next to his customer. I mean, where else can he get stuff like this? We could maybe quadruple our margin.'

His guy said, 'OK, boss.'

The Cornhuskers drove south, five fast miles, and then they slowed and turned in on the Duncans' shared driveway. The doctor looked up at the change of speed and direction and moaned a strangled inarticulate sigh and closed his eyes and dropped his head again. The guy on his right smacked an elbow in his ribs. He said, 'You need to get that voice working better, my friend. Because you've got some explaining to do.'

They took it slow all the way up to the houses, formal and ceremonial, mission accomplished, and they parked out front and got out and hauled their prize out after them. They marched him to Jacob Duncan's door and knocked. A minute later Jacob Duncan opened it up and one of the Cornhuskers put his hand flat on the doctor's back and shoved him inside, and said, 'We found this guy using the truck we lost. He put his own damn plates on it.'

Jacob Duncan looked at the doctor for ten long seconds. He raised his hand and patted him gently on the cheek. Pale skin, damp and clammy, lumps and bruises. Then he bunched the front of the doctor's shirt in his fist and dragged him farther into the hallway. He turned and pushed him onward, through the dark depths of the house, towards the kitchen in back. Their prisoner, in the system.

Jacob Duncan turned back to the Cornhuskers.

'Good work, boys,' he said. 'Now go finish the job. Find Reacher. He's on foot again, clearly. If the doctor knows where he is, he's sure to tell us soon, and we'll let you know. But in the meantime, keep looking.'

Roberto Cassano was still in Jacob Duncan's kitchen. Angelo Mancini was still in there with him. They saw the sadsack doctor stumble in from the hallway, all drunk and raggedy and terrified, with Mancini's earlier handiwork still clearly visible all over his face. Then Cassano's phone rang. He checked the screen and saw that it was Rossi calling and he stepped out the back door and walked across the weedy gravel. He hit the button and raised the phone and Rossi said, 'Complications.'

Cassano said, 'Such as?'

'I had to calm things down at this end. It was getting out of control. I had to talk to people, change a few perceptions. Long story short, you're getting reinforcements. Two of Safir's guys, and two of Mahmeini's.'

'That should be enough,'

‘That should shorten the process.’

‘Initially,’ Rossi said. ‘But then it’s going to get very difficult. A buck gets ten they’re coming with instructions to cut us out of the chain. Mahmeini is probably looking to cut Safir out too. So don’t let any of them get close to the Duncans. Not for a minute. Don’t let the Duncans make any new friends. And watch your step as soon as the stranger is down. You’re going to have four guys gunning for you.’

‘What do you want us to do?’

‘I want you to stay alive. And in control.’

‘Rules of engagement?’

‘Put Safir’s guys down for sure. That way we remove the link above us. We can sell direct to Mahmeini, at Safir’s prices.’

‘OK.’

‘And put Mahmeini’s guys down too, if you have to, for self-defence. But make sure to make it look like Safir’s guys or the Duncans did it. I still need Mahmeini himself. There’s no wiggle room there. I have no access to the ultimate buyer without him.’

‘OK.’

‘So leave right now. Pull back to the hotel and lie low. You’ll meet the others there, probably very soon. Make contact and make a plan.’

‘Who’s in charge?’

‘The Iranians will claim they are. But they can stick that where the sun don’t shine. You know the people and the terrain. Keep on top of it and be very careful.’

‘OK, boss,’ Cassano said. And two minutes later he and Mancini were back in their rented blue Impala, heading south on the arrow-straight two-lane, sixty miles to go.

The white van was still on Route 3, still in Canada, still heading east, more than

halfway across Alberta, with Saskatchewan up ahead. It had just skipped a right turn on Route 4, which led south to the border, where the modest Canadian blacktop ribbon changed to the full-blown majesty of U.S. Interstate 15, which ran all the way to Las Vegas and then Los Angeles. The change of status in what had once been the same horse trail was emblematic of the two nations' sense of self, and as well as that it was taken to be a very dangerous road. It was an obvious artery, with two big prizes at the end of it, and so it was assumed to be monitored very carefully. Which was why the white van had passed up the chance of its speed and convenience and was still labouring east on the minor thoroughfare, towards a small town called Medicine Hat, where it intended to finally turn south and lose itself in the wild country around Pakowki Lake, before finding a nameless rutted track that ran deep into the woods, and all the way to America.

*

The Duncans made the doctor stand upright at the head of the table. They sat and looked at him and said nothing for a minute, Jacob and Seth on one side, Jasper and Jonas on the other. Finally Jacob asked, 'Was it an act of deliberate rebellion?'

The doctor didn't answer. His throat was swollen and painful from vomiting, and he didn't understand the question anyway.

Jacob asked, 'Or was it some imagined sense of entitlement?'

The doctor didn't answer.

'We need to know,' Jacob said. 'You must tell us. This is a fascinating subject. It needs to be thoroughly explored.'

The doctor said, 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'But perhaps your wife does,' Jacob said. 'Should we go pick her up and bring her here and ask her?'

'Leave her out of it.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Please. Please leave her alone.'

Please. Please leave her alone.

‘She could entertain us. She used to, you know. We knew her long before you did. She came here half a dozen times. To this very house. She was happy to. Of course, we were paying her, which might have influenced her attitude. You should ask her, about what she used to do for money.’

‘She babysat.’

‘Is that what she says? I suppose she would, now.’

‘That’s what she did.’

‘Ask her again sometime. Catch her in an unguarded moment. She was a girl of many talents, your wife, once upon a time. She might tell you all about it. You might enjoy it.’

‘What do you want?’

Jacob Duncan said, ‘We want to know the psychology behind what you did.’

‘What did I do?’

‘You put your licence plates on our truck.’

The doctor said nothing.

Jacob Duncan said, ‘We want to know why. That’s all. It’s not much to ask. Was it just impertinence? Or was it a message? Were you retaliating for our having disabled your own vehicle? Were you claiming a right? Were you making a point? Were you scolding us for having gone too far?’

‘I don’t know,’ the doctor said.

‘Or did someone else change the plates?’

‘I don’t know who changed them.’

‘But it wasn’t you?’

‘No.’

‘Where did you find the truck?’

‘At the motel. This afternoon. It was next to my car. With my plates on it.’

‘Why didn’t you change them back?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘To drive with phoney plates is a criminal offence, isn’t it? A misdemeanour at best. Should medical practitioners indulge in criminal behaviour?’

‘I guess not.’

‘But you did.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t apologize to us. We’re not a court of law. Or a state board. But you should rehearse an excuse. You might lose your job. Then what would your wife do for money? She might have to return to her old ways. A comeback tour, of sorts. Not that we would have her back. I mean, who would? A raddled old bitch like that?’

The doctor said nothing.

‘And you treated my daughter-in-law,’ Jacob Duncan said. ‘After being told not to.’

‘I’m a doctor. I had to.’

‘The Hippocratic oath?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Which says, first, do no harm.’

‘I didn’t do any harm.’

‘Look at my son’s face.’

The doctor looked.

‘You did that,’ Jacob said.

‘I didn’t.’

‘You caused it to be done. Which is the same thing. You did harm.’

‘That wasn’t me.’

‘So who was it?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I think you do. The word is out. Surely you’ve heard it? We know you people talk about us all the time. On the phone tree. Did you think it was a secret?’

‘It was Reacher.’

‘Finally,’ Jacob said. ‘We get to the point. You were his coconspirator.’

‘I wasn’t.’

‘You asked him to drive you to my son’s house.’

‘I didn’t. He made me go.’

‘Whatever,’ Jacob said. ‘There’s no use crying over spilt milk. But we have a question for you.’

‘What is it?’

‘Where is Reacher now?’

TWENTY-NINE

REACHER WAS IN HIS GROUND FLOOR ROOM AT THE COURTYARD Marriott, knee deep in old police reports. He had used the flat-bladed screwdriver from his pocket to slit the tape on all eleven cartons, and he had sampled the first page out of every box to establish the correct date order. He had shuffled the cartons into a line, and then he had started a quick-and-dirty overview of the records, right from the very beginning.

As expected, the notes were comprehensive. It had been a high-profile case with many sensitivities, and there had been three other agencies on the job, the State Police, the National Guard, and the FBI. The county PD had taken pains to be very professional. Multi-agency cases were essentially competitions, and the county PD hadn't wanted to lose. The department had recorded every move and covered every base and covered every ass. In some ways the files were slices of history. They had been nowhere near a computer. They were old-fashioned, human, and basic. They were typewritten, probably on old IBM electric machines. They had misaligned lines and corrections made with white fluid. The paper itself was foxed and brown, thin and brittle, and musty. There were no reams of cell phone records, because no one had had cell phones back then, not even the cops. No DNA samples had been taken. There were no GPS coordinates.

The files were exactly like the files Reacher himself had created, way back at the start of his army career.

Dorothy had called the cops from a neighbour's house, at eight in the evening on an early summer Sunday. Not 911, but the local switchboard number. There was a transcript of the call, by the look of it probably not from a recording. Probably reconstructed from the desk sergeant's memory. Dorothy's last name was Coe. Her only child Margaret had last been seen more than six hours previously. She was a good girl. No problems. No troubles. No reasons. She had been wearing a green dress and had ridden away on a pink bicycle.

The desk sergeant had called the captain and the captain had called a detective who had just gotten off the day shift. The detective was called Miles Carson. Carson had sent squad cars north and the hunt had begun. The weather had been good and there had been an hour of twilight and then darkness had fallen. Carson

himself had arrived on scene within forty minutes. The next twelve hours had unfolded pretty much the way Dorothy had described over breakfast, the house to house canvass, the flashlight searches, the loudhailer appeals to check every barn and outbuilding, the all-night motor patrols, the arrival of the dogs at first light, the State Police contribution, the National Guard's loan of a helicopter.

Miles Carson was a thorough man, but he had gotten no result.

In principle Reacher might have criticized a couple of things. No reason to wait until dawn to call in the dogs, for instance. Dogs could work in the dark. But it was a moot point anyway, because as soon as Margaret had gotten on her bicycle, her scent had disappeared, suspended in the air, whisked away by the breeze, insulated by rubber tyres. The dogs tracked her to her own driveway, and that was all. The loudhailer appeals for folks to search their own property were curiously circular too, because what was a guilty party going to do? Turn himself in? Although in Carson's defence, foul play was not yet suspected. The first Carson had heard about local suspicions had come at nine the next morning, when Dorothy Coe had broken down and spilled the beans about the Duncans. That interview had lasted an hour and filled nine pages of notes. Then Carson had gotten right on it.

But from the start, the Duncans had looked innocent.

They even had an alibi. Five years earlier they had sold the family farm, retaining only a T-shaped acre that encompassed their driveway and their three houses, and in the country way of things they had never gotten around to marking off their new boundaries. Their neighbours' last ploughed furrows were their property line. But eventually they decided to put up a post-and-rail fence. It was a big production, much heavier and sturdier than was standard. They hired four local teenagers to come do the work. The four boys had been there all day on that Sunday, dawn to dusk, measuring, sawing, digging deep holes for the posts. The three Duncans and the eight-year-old Seth had been right there with them, all day, dawn to dusk, supervising, directing, checking up, helping out. The four boys confirmed that the Duncans had never left the property, and no one had stopped by, least of all a little girl in a green dress on a pink bicycle.

Even so, Carson had hauled the Duncans in for questioning. By that point a hint of foul play was definitely in the air, so the State Police had to be involved, because of jurisdiction issues, so the Duncans were taken to a State barracks over near Lincoln. Seth went with them and was questioned by female officers,

but had nothing to say. The three adults were grilled for days. Nebraska, in the 1980s. Rules and procedures were pretty loose where child kidnapping was suspected. But the Duncans admitted nothing. They allowed their property to be searched, voluntarily. Carson's people did the job thoroughly, which wasn't hard because there wasn't much property. Just the T-shaped acre of land, bounded by the unfinished post-and-rail fence, and the three houses themselves. Carson's people found nothing. Carson called the FBI, who sent a team equipped with the latest 1980s technology. The FBI found nothing. The Duncans were released, driven home, and the case went cold.

Reacher crawled across the room, back to the first carton, hands and knees, overview completed, ready to start in on the fine details.

The doctor didn't answer. He just stood there, bruised, sore, shaking, sweating. Jacob Duncan repeated the question: 'Where is Reacher now?'

The doctor said, 'I would like to sit down.'

'Have you been drinking?'

'A little.'

'At the motel?'

'No,' the doctor said. 'I figured Mr Vincent wouldn't serve me.'

'So where were you drinking?'

'At home.'

'And then you walked to the motel?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'I needed something from my car. Some medical equipment.'

'So you were already drunk when you stole our truck?'

'Yes. I wouldn't have done it if I was sober.'

‘Where is Reacher now?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Would you like a drink?’

The doctor said, ‘A drink?’

‘You’re familiar with the concept, I think.’

‘Yes, I would like a drink.’

Jacob Duncan got up and stepped across his kitchen to a cabinet on the wall. He opened it up and took out a bottle of Wild Turkey, almost full. From another cabinet he took a glass. He carried both back to the table and set them down. He took stuff off a chair in the corner, a pair of boots, old mail, a ball of string, and he carried the chair across the room and placed it behind the doctor.

He said, ‘Sit down, please. And help yourself.’

The doctor sat down and shuffled the chair closer to the table and uncorked the bottle. He poured himself a generous measure and drank it all in one go. He poured a second glass.

Jacob Duncan asked, ‘Where is Reacher now?’

The doctor said, ‘I don’t know.’

‘I think you do. And it’s time to make your choice. You can sit here with us and drink my fine bourbon and pass the time of day in pleasant conversation. Or we could do it another way. We could have Seth break your nose, for instance. I’m pretty certain he would like to. Or we could have your wife join us, and we could subject her to petty humiliations. My guess is she wouldn’t put up much of a fight, having known us all these years. No marks, no overt damage. But the shared experience might have an effect on your marriage, in the years to come, you having shown yourself unable to defend her. Because she’ll see it as unwilling, not unable. You should think about it.’

‘Reacher’s gone,’ the doctor said.

‘Gone?’

‘He left this afternoon.’

‘How?’

‘He got a ride.’

‘Impossible,’ Jacob said. ‘We blocked the road, north and south.’

‘Not in time.’

‘Did you see him go?’

‘He was at the motel. I think he changed the plates because he was going to use your truck. But someone else came along and he hitched a ride, which was better.’

‘Who came along?’

‘Not one of us. Just someone driving through.’

‘What kind of car?’

‘I’m not good with cars. I think it was white.’

‘Did he say where he was going?’

The doctor drank most of his second glass. Gulp, swallow, gulp, swallow. He said, ‘He’s going to Virginia.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know,’ the doctor said. He filled his glass again. ‘But that’s all he’s ever talked about, right from the first moment he got here. He’s on his way to Virginia, and always was.’

‘What’s in Virginia?’

‘He didn’t say. A woman, perhaps. That’s the impression I got.’

‘From what?’

‘Just a feeling.’

Jacob Duncan said, ‘You’re nervous.’

The doctor said, ‘Of course I am.’

‘Why? You’re just sharing a drink with your neighbours.’

The doctor said nothing.

Jacob Duncan said, ‘You think he’s coming back.’

‘I don’t.’

‘Is he coming back?’

The doctor said nothing.

‘Tell us.’

The doctor said, ‘He was a military cop. He knows how to do things.’

‘What things?’

‘He said he’s going to visit with the county police. Tomorrow morning, I suppose. He said he’s going to look at the file from twenty-five years ago. If it’s OK, he’s going to Virginia. If it’s not, he’s coming back here.’

‘Why would he?’

‘To get you, that’s why.’

Up in Canada, the white van had made the right turn just shy of the town called Medicine Hat, and was heading south on the lonely road that led down towards Pakowki Lake. It was already full dark up there. No lights at all, and no moon or stars either, because of the cloud. The road was bad. It was pitted with potholes. It twisted and it wandered, and it rose and it fell. It was hard going, and not entirely safe. It was dangerous, even, because at that stage a broken axle or a busted half-shaft would ruin everything. So the driver turned left, on a rough grassy track he had used before, and bumped and bounced two hundred yards to a picnic spot provided for summer visitors. In winter it was always deserted. The

driver had seen bears there, and coyotes, and red foxes, and moose, and twice he thought he had seen elk, although they might have been shadows, and once he thought he had seen a wolf, but it might have been just another coyote. But he had never seen people. Not in winter. Not even once.

He parked under a towering pine and shut down for the night.

Roberto Cassano and Angelo Mancini pulled their rented Impala around the back of the Marriott and slotted it next to a black Cadillac that was standing alone in the rear of the lot. They got out and stretched and checked their watches. They figured they had time for a quick dinner before their reinforcements arrived. The diner or the rib shack? They liked neither one. Why would they? They had taste, and the retard local yokels sure as hell didn't. But they were hungry, and they had to eat somewhere.

They pondered for a second and decided on the diner. They turned away from the hotel lobby and headed for the main drag.

The Duncans let the doctor finish a third glass of Wild Turkey, and then they sent him on his way. They pushed him out the door and told him to walk home. They watched him down the driveway, and then they turned and strolled back and regrouped in Jacob's kitchen. Jacob put the bottle back in the cupboard, and put the glass in the sink, and returned the chair to the corner of the room. His brother Jasper asked, 'So what do you think?'

Jacob said, 'About what?'

'Should we call the county and stop them showing Reacher the files?'

'I don't see how we could do that.'

'We could try.'

'It would draw attention.'

Jonas asked, 'Should we call Eldridge Tyler? Strictly as a backup?'

'Then we would owe him something.'

'It would be a wise investment, if Reacher is coming back.'

‘I don’t think he’s coming back,’ Jacob said. ‘That’s my first thought, certainly.’

‘But?’

‘Ultimately I guess it depends on what he finds, and what he doesn’t find.’

THIRTY

REACHER FOUND A STATEMENT FROM THE LITTLE GIRL'S FATHER. IT was long and detailed. Cops weren't dumb. Fathers were automatic suspects when little girls disappeared. Margaret's father had been Arthur Coe, universally known as Artie. At the time of his daughter's disappearance he was thirty-seven years old. Relatively ancient for a father of an eight-year-old, back in the 1980s. He was a local man. He was a Vietnam veteran. He had refused an offer from the local Selective Service board to classify his farm work as an essential occupation. He had served, and he had come back. A brave man. A patriot. He had been fixing machinery in an outbuilding when Margaret had ridden away, and he had still been fixing it four hours later, when his wife came to tell him that the kid was still out. He had dropped everything and started the search. His statement was full of the same kinds of feelings Dorothy had described over breakfast, the unreality, the hope against hope, the belief that the kid was just out playing somewhere, surely to God, maybe picking flowers, that she had lost track of time, that she would be home soon, right as rain. Even after twenty-five years the typewritten words still reeked of shock and pain and misery.

Arthur Coe was an innocent man, Reacher thought.

He moved on, to a packet marked by hand Margaret Coe Biography. Just a regular manila envelope, quite thin, as would befit an eight-year-old's short life story. The gummed flap had never been licked, but it was stuck down anyway, from dampness in the storage facility. Reacher eased it open. There were sheets of paper inside, plus a photograph in a yellowed glassine jacket. Reacher eased it out. And was surprised.

Margaret Coe was Asian.

Vietnamese, possibly, or Thai, or Cambodian, or Chinese, or Japanese, or Korean. Dorothy wasn't. Arthur probably hadn't been, either. Not a native Nebraskan farm worker. Therefore Margaret was adopted. She had been a sweet little thing. The photograph was dated on the back, in a woman's handwriting, with an added note: Nearly eight! Beautiful as ever! It was a colour picture, probably amateur, but proficient. Better than a snapshot. It had been thought about and composed, and taken with a decent camera. A good likeness, obviously, to have been given to the police. It showed a little Asian girl, standing

still, posing, smiling. She was small and slight and slender. She had trust and merriment in her eyes. She was wearing a plaid skirt and a white blouse.

She was a lovely child.

Reacher heard the stoner's voice in his mind, from earlier in the day: I hear that poor ghost screaming, man, screaming and wailing and moaning and crying, right here in the dark.

And at that point Reacher took a break.

Sixty miles north Dorothy Coe took a pork chop from her refrigerator. The chop was part of a pig a friend had slaughtered a mile away, part of a loose cooperative designed to get people through tough times. Dorothy trimmed the fat, and put a little pepper on the meat, and a little mustard, and a little brown sugar. She put the chop in an open dish and put the dish in the oven. She set her table, one place, a knife, a fork, and a plate. She took a glass and filled it with water and put it next to the plate. She folded a square of paper towel for a napkin. Dinner, for one.

Reacher was hungry. He had eaten no lunch. He called the desk and asked for room service and the guy who had booked him in told him there was no room service. He apologized for the lack. Then he went ahead and mentioned the two restaurants named on the billboard Reacher had already seen. The guy promised a really excellent meal could be gotten at either one of them. Maybe he was on a retainer from the Chamber of Commerce.

Reacher put his coat on and headed down the hallway to the lobby. Two more guests were checking in. Both men. They looked Middle Eastern. Iranian, possibly. They were small and rumpled and unshaven and not very clean. One of them glanced at Reacher and Reacher nodded politely and headed for the door. It was dark outside, and cold. Reacher figured he would use the diner for breakfast, and therefore the rib shack for dinner. So he turned right on the back street and hustled.

The doctor walked fast to beat the cold and made it home inside an hour. His wife was waiting for him. She was worried. He had some explaining to do. He started talking and got through the whole story before she spoke a word. At the end he went quiet and she said, 'So it's a gamble, isn't it? Is that what you're saying? Like a horse race. Will Reacher come back before Seth gets home and

finds out that you just sat there and watched his car get stolen?'

The doctor said, 'Will Reacher come back at all?'

'I think he will.'

'Why would he?'

'Because the Duncans took that kid. Who else do you think did it?'

'I don't know. I wasn't here. I was in Idaho. I was a kid myself. So were you.'

'Believe me.'

'I do. But I wish you would tell me exactly why I should.'

She said nothing.

The doctor said, 'Maybe Seth won't go home. Maybe he'll spend the night at his father's place.'

'That's possible. People say he often does. But we shouldn't assume.' She started moving around the house, checking the window locks, checking the door locks, front and back. She said, 'We should wedge the doors with furniture.'

'Then they'll come in the window.'

'Tornado glass. It's pretty strong.'

'Those guys weigh three hundred pounds. You saw what they did to my car.'

'We have to do something.'

'They'll burn us out. Or they'll just stand on the step and tell us to open up. Then what are we going to do? Disobey them?'

'We could hold out a day or two. We have food and water.'

'Might be longer than a day or two. Might be for ever. Even if you're right, there's no guarantee Reacher will find the proof. There probably isn't any proof. How can there be? The FBI would have found it at the time.'

‘We have to hope.’

Reacher ordered baby back ribs with coleslaw and a cup of coffee. The place was dim and dirty and the walls were covered with old signs and advertisements. Probably all fake. Probably all ordered in bulk from a restaurant supplier, probably all painted in a Taiwanese factory and then scuffed and scratched and battered by the next guy along on the production line. But the ribs turned out to be good. The rub was subtle and the meat was tender. The coleslaw was crisp. The coffee was hot. And the check was tiny. Tip money, any place east of the Mississippi or south of Sacramento.

Reacher paid and left and walked back to the hotel. Two guys were in the lot, hauling bags out of the trunk of a red Ford Taurus. More guests. The Marriott was experiencing a regular wintertime bonanza. The Taurus was new and plain. Probably a rental. The guys were big. Arabs of some kind. Syrians, maybe, or Lebanese. Reacher was familiar with that part of the world. The two guys looked at him as he passed and he nodded politely and walked on. A minute later he was back in his room, with faded and brittle paper in his hands.

That night the Duncans ate lamb, in Jonas Duncan’s kitchen. Jonas fancied himself a hell of a cook. And in truth he wasn’t too bad. His roast usually came in on the right side of OK, and he served it with potatoes and vegetables and a lot of gravy, which helped. And a lot of liquor, which helped even more. All four Duncans ate and drank together, two facing two across the table, and then they cleaned up together, and then Jasper looked at his brother Jacob and said, ‘We still have six boys capable of walking and talking. We need to decide how to deploy them tonight.’

Jacob said, ‘Reacher won’t come back tonight.’

‘Can we guarantee that?’

‘We can’t really guarantee anything at all, except that the sun will rise in the east and set in the west.’

‘Therefore it’s better to err on the side of caution.’

‘OK,’ Jacob said. ‘Put one to the south and tell the other five to get some rest.’

Jasper got on the phone and issued the instructions. Then he hung up and the

room went quiet and Seth Duncan looked at his father and said, 'Drive me home?'

His father said, 'No, stay a little longer, son. We have things to talk about. Our shipment could be here this time tomorrow. Which means we have preparations to make.'

Cassano and Mancini got back from the diner and went straight to Cassano's room. Cassano called the desk and asked if any pairs of guests had just checked in. He was told yes, two pairs had just arrived, separately, one after the other. Cassano asked to be connected with their rooms. He spoke first to Mahmeini's men, and then to Safir's, and he set up an immediate rendezvous in his own room. He figured he could establish some dominance by keeping the others off balance, by denying them any kind of thinking time, and by bringing them to his own turf, not that he would want anyone to think that a shitty flophouse room in Nebraska was his kind of place. But he knew psychology, and he knew no one gets the upper hand without working on the details.

The Iranians arrived first. Mahmeini's men. Only one of them spoke, which Cassano thought was OK, given that he spoke for Rossi, and Mancini didn't. No names were exchanged. Again, OK. It was that kind of business. The Iranians were not physically impressive. They were small and ragged and rumpled, and they seemed quiet and furtive and secretive. And strange. Cassano opened the minibar door and told them to help themselves. Whatever they wanted. But neither man took a thing.

The Lebanese arrived five minutes later. Safir's men. Arabs, for sure, but they were big, and they looked plenty tough. Again, only one of them spoke, and he gave no names. Cassano indicated that they should sit on the bed, but they didn't. They leaned on the wall instead. They were trying for menace, Cassano figured. And nearly succeeding. A little psychology of their own. Cassano let the room go quiet and he looked at them all for a minute, one after the other, four men he had only just met, and who would soon be trying to kill him.

He said, 'It's a fairly simple job. Sixty miles north of here there's a corner of the county with forty farms. There's a guy running around causing trouble. Truth is, it's not really very important, but our supplier is taking it personally. Business is on hold until the guy goes down.'

Mahmeini's man said, 'We know all that. Next?'

‘OK,’ Cassano said. ‘Next is we all move up there and work together and take care of the problem.’

‘Starting when?’

‘Let’s say tomorrow morning, first light.’

‘Have you seen the guy?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Got a name?’

‘Reacher.’

‘What kind of name is that?’

‘It’s an American name. What’s yours?’

‘My name doesn’t matter. Got a description?’

‘Big guy, blue eyes, white, six-five, two-fifty, brown coat.’

Mahmeini’s man said, ‘That’s worthless. This is America. This is farm country. It’s full of settlers and peasants. They all look like that. I mean, we just saw a guy exactly like that.’

Safir’s guy said, ‘He’s right. We saw one too. We’re going to need a much better description.’

Cassano said, ‘We don’t have one. But it will be easier when we get up there. He stands out, apparently. And the local population is prepared to help us. They’ve been told to phone in with sightings. And there’s no cover up there.’

Mahmeini’s man said, ‘So where is he hiding out?’

‘We don’t know. There’s a motel, but he’s not in it. Maybe he’s sleeping rough.’

‘In this weather? Is that likely?’

‘There are sheds and barns. I’m sure we’ll find him.’

‘And then what?’

‘We put him down.’

‘Risky.’

‘I know. He’s tough. So far he’s taken out four of the local people.’

Mahmeini’s man said, ‘I don’t care how tough he thinks he is. And I don’t care how many local people he’s taken out either. Because I’m sure they’re all idiots up there. I mean it’s risky because this isn’t the Wild West any more. Do we have a safe exit strategy?’

Cassano said, ‘They tell me he’s a kind of hobo. So nobody is going to miss him. There’s not going to be an investigation. There aren’t even any cops up there.’

‘That helps.’

‘And it’s farm country. Like you said. There must be backhoes all over the place. We’ll bury him. Alive, preferably, the way our supplier is talking.’

THIRTY-ONE

THE PHYSICAL SEARCH OF THE AREA WAS DESCRIBED FOUR separate ways, in four separate files, the first from the county PD, the second from the State Police, the third from the National Guard's helicopter unit, and the fourth from the FBI. The helicopter report was thin and useless. Margaret Coe had been wearing a green dress, which didn't help in corn country in early summer. And the pilot had stayed above a thousand feet, to stop his downdraught damaging the young plants. Priorities had to be observed in a farm state, even when a kid was missing. Nothing significant had been seen from the air. No freshly turned earth, no flash of pink or chrome from the bike, no flattened stalks in any of the fields. Nothing at all, in fact, except an ocean of corn.

A waste of time and aviation fuel.

Both the county PD and the State Police had covered the forty farms at ground level. First had come the loudhailer appeals in the dark, and the next day every house had been visited and every occupant had been asked to verify that they hadn't seen the kid and that they had searched their outbuildings thoroughly. There was near-universal cooperation. Only one old couple confessed they hadn't checked properly, so the cops searched their place for themselves. Nothing was found. The motel had been visited, every cabin checked, the Dumpster emptied, the lot searched for evidence. Nothing was found.

The Duncan compound showed up in three files. Everyone except the helicopter unit had been there. First the county PD had gone in, then the county PD and the State Police together, then the State Police on its own, and then finally the FBI, which had been a lot of visits and a lot of people for such a small place. The searches had been intense, because the smallness of the place had struck people as somehow sinister in itself. Reacher could sense it between the lines, quite clearly, even a quarter-century later. Rural cops. They had been confused and disconcerted. It was almost like the Duncans hated the land. They had stripped away every inch of it they could. They had kept a single track driveway, plus token shoulders, plus a grudging five or ten yards beyond the foundations of their three houses. That was all. That was the whole extent of the place.

But the smallness had made it easy to search. The reports were meticulous. The

piles of heavy lumber for the half-built fence had been taken apart and examined. Gravel had been raked up, and lines of men had walked slow and bent over, staring at the ground, and the dogs had covered literally every square inch ten times each.

Nothing was found.

The search moved indoors. As intense as it had been outside, it was twice as thorough inside. Absolutely painstaking. Reacher had searched a lot of places, a lot of times, and he knew how hard it was. But four times in quick succession not a single corner had been cut, and not a single effort had been spared. Stuff had been taken apart, and voids in walls had been opened up, and floors had been lifted. Reacher knew why. Nothing was stated on paper, and nothing was admitted, but again, he could read it right there between the lines. They were looking for a kid, certainly, but by that point they were also looking for parts of a kid.

Nothing was found.

The FBI contribution was a full-on forensics sweep, 1980s style. It was documented and described at meticulous length on sheets of Bureau paper that had been photocopied and collated and stapled and passed on as a courtesy. Hairs and fibres had been collected, every flat surface had been fingerprinted, all kinds of magic lights and devices and gadgets had been deployed. A corpse-sniffing dog had been flown in from Denver and then sent back again after producing a null result. Technicians with a dozen different specialist expertises had been in and out for twelve solid hours.

Nothing was found.

Reacher closed the file. He could hear it in his head right then, the same way they must have heard it all those years ago: the sound of a case going cold.

Sixty miles north Dorothy Coe was standing at her sink, washing her plate and her knife and her fork and her glass, and scrubbing the oven dish that her chop had cooked in. She dried it all with a thin linen towel and put it all away, the plate and the glass in a cupboard, the silverware in a drawer, the oven dish in another cupboard. She put her napkin in the trash and wiped her table with a rag and pushed her chair in neatly. Then she stepped out to her front parlour. She intended to sit a spell, and then go to bed, and then get up early and drive to the

motel. Maybe she could help Mr Vincent fix the mirror behind his bar. Maybe she could even glue the handle back on his NASA mug.

Reacher sat a spell on the floor in his Marriott room, thinking. It was ten o'clock in the evening. His job was done, two hours ahead of his pretended midnight schedule. He got to his feet and packed up all eleven cartons and folded their flaps into place. He stacked them neatly in the centre of the floor, two piles of four and one of three. He dialled nine for a line, from the bedside table, and then he dialled the switchboard number he remembered from the transcript of Dorothy Coe's original panic call, twenty-five years earlier. It was still an active number. It was answered. Reacher asked for Hoag, not really expecting to get him, but there was a click and a second of dead air and then the guy himself came on.

'I'm done,' Reacher told him.

'Find anything?'

'You guys did a fine job. Nothing for you to worry about. So I'm moving out.'

'So soon? You're not staying for the nightlife?'

'I'm a simple soul. I like peace and quiet.'

'OK, leave the stuff right there. We'll swing by and pick it up. We'll have it back in the basement before the file jockeys even get in tomorrow. They'll never know a thing. Mission accomplished.'

'I owe you,' Reacher said.

'Forget it,' Hoag said. 'Be all you can be, and all that shit.'

'The chance would be a fine thing,' Reacher said. He hung up and grabbed his coat and headed for the door. He was way in the back of the H-shaped layout, and he had to walk all the way forward to the lobby before getting outside and looping back around to where his car was parked. The stairs came down from the second floor just before the lobby, in a space that would have been another room in the wing, if it had been a one-storey structure. Just as Reacher got to them, a guy stepped off the last stair and fell in alongside him, heading the same way, to the lobby, to the door. He was one of the guys Reacher had seen checking in at the desk. Small and rumpled. Unshaven. Iranian, possibly. The

checking in at the desk. Small and rumpled. Unshaven. Iranian, possibly. The guy glanced across. Reacher nodded politely. The guy nodded back. They walked on together. The guy had car keys swinging from his finger. A red tag. Avis. The guy glanced at Reacher again, up and across. Reacher glanced back. He held the door. The guy stepped out. Reacher followed. The guy looked at him again. Some kind of speculation in his eyes. Some kind of intense curiosity.

Reacher stepped left, to loop around the length of the H on the outside. The Iranian guy stayed with him. Which made some kind of possible sense, after Reacher glanced ahead and saw two cars parked back there. Seth Duncan's Cadillac, and a dark blue Chevrolet. Prime rental material. Avis probably had thousands of them.

A dark blue Chevrolet.

Reacher stopped.

The other guy stopped.

THIRTY-TWO

NOBODY KNOWS HOW LONG IT TAKES FOR THOUGHTS TO FORM. People talk about electrical impulses racing through nerves at a substantial fraction of the speed of light, but that's mere transmission. That's mail delivery. The letter is written in the brain, sparked to life by some sudden damp chemical reaction, two compounds arcing across synapses and reacting like lead and acid in an automobile battery, but instead of sending twelve dumb volts to a turn signal the brain floods the body with all kinds of subtle adjustments all at once, because thoughts don't necessarily happen one at a time. They come in starbursts and waterfalls and explosions and they race away on parallel tracks, jostling, competing, fighting for supremacy.

Reacher saw the dark blue Chevrolet and instantly linked it through Vincent's testimony back at the motel to the two men he had seen from Dorothy Coe's barn, while simultaneously critiquing the connection, in that Chevrolets were very common cars and dark blue was a very common colour, while simultaneously recalling the two matched Iranians and the two matched Arabs he had seen, and asking himself whether the rendezvous of two separate pairs of strange men in winter in a Nebraska hotel could be just a coincidence, and if indeed it wasn't, whether it might then reasonably imply the presence of a third pair of men, which might or might not be the two tough guys from Dorothy's farm, however inexplicable those six men's association might be, however mysterious their purpose, while simultaneously watching the man in front of him dropping his car key, and moving his arm, and putting his hand in his coat pocket, while simultaneously realizing that the guys he had seen on Dorothy's farm had not been staying at Vincent's motel, and that there was nowhere else to stay except right there, sixty miles south at the Marriott, which meant that the Chevrolet was likely theirs, at least within the bounds of reasonable possibility, which meant that the Iranian with the moving arm was likely connected with them in some way, which made the guy an enemy, although Reacher had no idea how or why, while simultaneously knowing that likely didn't mean shit in terms of civilian jurisprudence, while simultaneously recalling years of hard-won experience that told him men like this Iranian went for their pockets in dark parking lots for one of only four reasons, either to pull out a cell phone to call for help, or to pull out a wallet or a passport or an ID to prove their innocence or their authority, or to pull out a knife, or to pull out a gun. Reacher knew all that,

while also knowing that violent reaction ahead of the first two reasons would be inexcusable, but that violent reaction ahead of the latter two reasons would be the only way to save his life.

Starbursts and waterfalls and explosions of thoughts, all jostling and competing and fighting for supremacy.

Better safe than sorry.

Reacher reacted.

He twisted from the waist in a violent spasm and started a low sidearm punch aimed at the centre of the Iranian's chest. Chemical reaction in his brain, instantaneous transmission of the impulse, chemical reaction in every muscle system from his left foot to his right fist, total elapsed time a small fraction of a second, total distance to target less than a yard, total time to target another small fraction of a second, which was good to know right then, because the guy's hand was all the way in his pocket by that point, his own nervous system reacting just as fast as Reacher's, his elbow jerking up and back and trying to free whatever the hell it was he wanted, be it a knife, or a gun, or a phone, or a driver's licence, or a passport, or a government ID, or a perfectly innocent letter from the University of Tehran proving he was a world expert on plant genetics and an honoured guest in Nebraska just days away from increasing local profits a hundredfold and eliminating world hunger at one fell swoop. But right or wrong Reacher's fist was homing in regardless and the guy's eyes were going wide and panicked in the gloom and his arm was jerking harder and the brown skin and the black hair on the back of his moving hand was showing above the hem of his pocket, and then came his knuckles, all five of them bunched and knotted because his fingers were clamping hard around something big and black.

Then Reacher's blow landed.

Two hundred and fifty pounds of moving mass, a huge fist, a huge impact, the zipper of the guy's coat driving backward into his breastbone, his breastbone driving backward into his chest cavity, the natural elasticity of his ribcage letting it yield whole inches, the resulting violent compression driving the air from his lungs, the hydrostatic shock driving blood back into his heart, his head snapping forward like a crash test dummy, his shoulders driving backward, his weight coming up off the ground, his head whipping backward again and hitting a plate glass window behind him with a dull boom like a kettle drum, his arms and legs

and torso all going down like a rag doll, his body falling, sprawling, the hard polycarbonate click and clatter of something black skittering away on the ground, Reacher tracking it all the way in the corner of his eye, not a wallet, not a phone, not a knife, but a Glock 17 semi-automatic pistol, all dark and boxy and wicked. It ended up six or eight feet away from the guy, completely out of his reach, safe, not retrievable, partly because of the distance itself and partly because the guy was down and he wasn't moving at all.

In fact he was looking like he might never move again.

Something Reacher had heard about, but never actually seen.

His army medic friends had called it commotio cordis, their name for low-energy trauma to the chest wall. Low energy only in the sense that the damage wasn't done by a car wreck or a shotgun blast, but by a line drive in baseball or a football collision or a punch in a fight or a bad fall on to a blunt object. Gruesome research on laboratory animals proved it was all about luck and timing. Electrocardiograms showed waveforms associated with the beating of the heart, one of which was called the T-wave, and the experiments showed that if the blow landed when the T-wave was between fifteen and thirty milliseconds short of its peak, then lethal cardiac dysrhythmia could occur, stopping the heart just like a regular heart attack. And in a high-stress environment like a confrontation in a parking lot, a guy's heart was pounding away much harder than normal and therefore it was bringing those T-wave peaks around much faster than usual, as many as two or possibly three times a second, thereby dramatically increasing the odds that the luck and the timing would be bad, not good.

The Iranian lay completely still.

Not breathing.

No visible pulse.

No signs of life.

The standard first-aid remedies taught by the army medics were artificial respiration and external chest compressions, eighty beats a minute, as long as it took, but Reacher's personal rule of thumb was never to revive a guy who had just pulled a gun on him. He was fairly inflexible on the matter. So he let nature

take its course for a minute, and then he helped it along a little with heavy pressure from his finger and thumb on the big arteries in the guy's neck. Four minutes without oxygen to the brain was reckoned to be the practical limit. Reacher gave it five, just to be certain, squatting there, looking around, listening hard. No one reacted. No one came. The Iranian died, the slack tensions of deep unconsciousness fading away, the absolute soft limpness of recent death replacing them. Reacher stood up and found the car key and picked up the Glock. The key was marked with the Chevrolet stove bolt logo, but it wasn't for the blue car. Reacher stabbed the unlock button and nothing happened. The Glock was close to new and fully loaded, seventeen bright nine-millimetre Parabellums in the magazine and one in the chamber. Reacher put it in his pocket with his screwdrivers.

He walked back to the front lot and tried again with the key. A yellow Chevy Malibu answered him. It flashed all four of its turn signals and unlocked all four of its doors. It was new and plain and clean. An obvious rental. He got in and pushed the seat back and started it up. The tank was close to full. There were rental papers in the door pocket, dated that day and made out to a Las Vegas corporation under a name that communicated nothing. There were bottles of water in the cup holders, one part-used, one unopened. Reacher backed out of the slot and drove around to the back of the H and stopped with the dead guy between the wall and the car. He found the remote button and popped the trunk. He got out and checked the space. It was not a very big opening and not a very big trunk, but then, the Iranian was not a very big guy.

Reacher bent down and went through the Iranian's pockets. He found a phone and a knife and a wallet and a handkerchief and about a dollar in coins. He left the coins and stripped the battery out of the phone and put the battery back in one of the dead guy's pockets and the rest of the phone in another. The knife was a switchblade with a pearl handle. Heavy, solid, and sharp. A decent implement. He put it in his own pocket, with his adjustable wrench. He checked the wallet. It held close to four hundred bucks in cash, plus three credit cards, plus a driver's licence from the state of Nevada made out to a guy named Asghar Arad Sepehr at a Las Vegas address. The photograph was plausible. The credit cards were in the same name. The cash was mostly twenties, crisp and fresh and fragrant, straight from an ATM. Reacher kept the cash and wiped the wallet with the handkerchief and put it back in the dead guy's pocket. Then he hoisted him up, two hands, collar and belt, and turned and made ready to fold him into the yellow Malibu's trunk.

Then he stopped.

He got a better idea.

He carried the guy over to Seth Duncan's Cadillac and laid him gently on the ground. He found the Cadillac key in his pocket and opened the trunk and picked the guy up again and put him inside. An old-fashioned turnpike cruiser. A big trunk. Plenty of space. He closed the lid on the guy. He opened the driver's door and used the handkerchief to wipe everything he had touched that day, the wheel, the gearshift, the mirror, the radio knobs, the door handles inside and out. Then he blipped the remote and locked up again and walked away, back to the Malibu. It was yellow, but apart from that it was fairly anonymous. Domestic brand, local plates, conventional shape. Probably less conspicuous out on the open road than the Cadillac, despite the garish colour. And probably less likely to be reported stolen. Out-of-state guys with guns and knives in their pockets generally kept a lot quieter than outraged local citizens.

He checked left, checked right, checked behind, checked ahead. All quiet. Just cold air and silence and stillness and a night mist falling. He got back in the Malibu and kept the headlights off and turned around and nosed slowly out of the lot. He drove the length of McNally Street and paused. To the left was I-80, sixty miles south, a fast six-lane highway, a straight shot east all the way to Virginia. To the right were the forty farms, and the Duncans, and the Apollo Inn, and Eleanor, and the doctor and his wife, and Dorothy Coe, all of them sixty miles north.

Decision time.

Left or right? South or north?

He flicked the headlights on and turned right and headed back north.

THIRTY-THREE

THE DUNCANS HAD MOVED FROM JONAS DUNCAN'S KITCHEN TO Jasper's, because Jasper still had a mostly full bottle of Knob Creek in his cupboard. All four men were around the table, elbow to elbow, amber half-inches of bourbon in thick chipped glasses set out in front of them. They were sipping slow and talking low. Their latest shipment was somewhere between twelve and twenty-four hours away. Usually a time for celebration. Like the night before Christmas. But this time they were a little subdued.

Jonas asked, 'Where do you suppose it is right now?'

'Parked up for the night,' Jacob said. 'At least I hope so. Close to the border, but waiting for daylight. Prudence is the key now.'

'Five hundred miles,' Jonas said. 'Crossing time plus ten hours, maybe. Plus contingencies.'

Jasper asked, 'How long do you suppose it takes to read a police file?'

'Good question,' Jacob said. 'I've been giving it a little thought, naturally. It must be a very big file. And it must be stored away somewhere. Let's say government workers start at nine in the morning. Let's say they quit at five. Let's say there's some measure of bureaucracy involved in gaining access to the file. So let's say noon tomorrow would be a practical starting point. That would give him five hours tomorrow, and maybe the full eight on the day after. That might be enough.'

'So he won't come back for forty-eight hours at least.'

'I'm only guessing. I can't be sure.'

'Even so. We'll have plenty of margin.'

Seth Duncan said, 'He won't come back at all. Why would he? A hundred people read that file and said there was nothing wrong with it. And this guy isn't a hundred times smarter than anyone else. He can't be.'

Nobody spoke.

Seth said, ‘What?’

His father said, ‘He doesn’t have to be smarter than anyone else, son. Certainly not a hundred times smarter. He just has to be smart in a different way. Lateral, is what they call it.’

‘But there’s no evidence. We all know that.’

‘I agree,’ Jacob said. ‘But that’s the damn point. It’s not about what’s in the file. It’s about what isn’t in the file.’

The Malibu was like half a Cadillac. Four cylinders instead of eight, one ton instead of two, and about half as long. But it worked OK. It was cruising nicely. Not that Reacher was paying much attention to it. He was thinking about the dead Iranian, and the odds against hitting a T-wave window. The guy had been small, built like a bird, and Reacher tended to assume that people opposite him on the physical spectrum were also opposite him on the personality spectrum, so that in place of his own placid nature he imagined the guy was all strung out and nervous, which might have meant that back there in the parking lot the guy’s heart was going as fast as 180 beats a minute, which meant those T-waves were coming around fast and furious, three times a second, which meant that the odds of hitting one of those crucial fifteen-millisecond windows ahead of a peak were about forty-five in a thousand, or a little better than one in twenty.

Unlucky. For the Iranian, certainly. But no cause for major regret. Most likely Reacher would have had to put him down anyway, one way or another, sooner or later, probably within just a few more heartbeats. It would have been practically inevitable. Once a gun was pulled, there were very few other available options. But still, it had been a first. And a last, probably, at least for a spell. Because Reacher was pretty sure the next guy he met would be a football player. He figured the Duncans knew he had gone out of town, possibly for a day, possibly for ever. He figured they would have gotten hold of the doctor long ago and squeezed that news out of him. And they were realistic but cautious people. They would have stood down five of their boys for the night, and left just one lone sentry to the south. And that one lone sentry would have to be dealt with. But not via commotio cordis. Reacher wasn’t about to aim a wild punch at a Cornhusker’s centre mass. Not in this lifetime. He would break his hand.

He kept the Malibu humming along, eight miles, nine, and then he started

looking ahead for the bar he had seen on the shoulder. The small wooden building. The Cell Block. Maybe just outside the city limit. Unincorporated land. Maybe a question of licensing or regulation. There was mist in the air and the Malibu's headlights made crisp little tunnels. Then they were answered by a glow in the air. A halo, far ahead on the left. Neon, in kelly green, and red, and blue. Beer signs. Plus yellow tungsten from a couple of token spots in the parking lot.

Reacher slowed and pulled in and parked his yellow car next to a pick-up that was mostly brown with corrosion. He got out and locked up and headed for the door. From close up the place looked nothing at all like a prison. It was just a shack. It could once have been a house or a store. Even the sign was written wrong. The words Cell Block were stencilled like a notation on an electrician's blueprint. Like something technological. There was noise inside, the warm low hubbub and hoo-hah of a half-empty late-evening bar in full swing, plus a little music under it, probably from a jukebox, a tune Reacher didn't recognize but was prepared to like.

He went in. The door opened directly in the left front corner of the main public room. The bar ran front to back on the right, and there were tables and chairs on the left. There were maybe twenty people in the room, mostly men. The decoration scheme was really no scheme at all. Wooden tables, wheelback chairs, bar stools, board floor. There was no prison theme. In fact the electronic visuals from outside were continued inside. The stencilled words Cell Block were repeated on the bar back, flanked by foil-covered cut-outs of radio towers with lightning bolts coming out of them.

Reacher threaded sideways between tables and caught the barman's eye and the barman shuffled left to meet him. The guy was young, and his face was open and friendly. He said, 'You look confused.'

Reacher said, 'I guess I was expecting bars on the windows, maybe booths in the old cells. I thought maybe you would be wearing a suit with arrows all over it.'

The guy didn't answer.

'Like an old prison,' Reacher said. 'Like a cell block.'

The guy stayed blank for a second, and then he smiled.

‘Not that kind of cell block,’ he said. ‘Take out your phone.’

‘I don’t have a phone.’

‘Well, if you did, you’d find it wouldn’t work here. No signal. There’s a null zone about a mile wide. That’s why people come here. For a little undisturbed peace and quiet.’

‘They can’t just not answer?’

‘Human nature doesn’t really work that way, does it? People can’t ignore a ringing phone. It’s about guilty consciences. You know, wives or bosses. All kinds of hassle. Better that their phones don’t ring at all.’

‘So do you have a pay phone here? Strictly for emergencies?’

The guy pointed. ‘Back corridor.’

‘Thanks,’ Reacher said. ‘That’s why I came in.’

He threaded down the line of stools, some of them occupied, some of them not, and he found an opening that led to the restrooms and a rear door. There was a pay phone on the wall opposite the ladies’ room. It was mounted on a cork rectangle that was dark and stained with age and marked with scribbled numbers in faded ink. He checked his pockets for quarters and found five. He wished he had kept the Iranian’s coins. He dialled the same number he had used a quarter of an hour ago, and Dorothy Coe had used a quarter of a century ago. The call was answered and he asked for Hoag, and he was connected inside ten short seconds.

‘One more favour,’ he said. ‘You got phone books for the whole county, right?’

Hoag said, ‘Yes.’

‘I need a number for a guy called Seth Duncan, about sixty miles north of you.’

‘Wait one,’ Hoag said. Reacher heard the click and patter of a keyboard. A computer database, not a paper book. Hoag said, ‘That’s an unlisted number.’

‘Unlisted as in you don’t have it, or as in you can see it but you won’t tell me?’

‘Unlisted as in please don’t ask me, because you’ll be putting me on the spot.’

‘OK, I won’t ask you. Anything under Eleanor Duncan?’

‘No. There are four Duncans, all male names. All unlisted.’

‘So give me the doctor instead.’

‘What doctor?’

‘The local guy up there.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘I don’t know,’ Reacher said. ‘I don’t have his name.’

‘Then I can’t help you. This thing is purely alphabetical by last name. It’s going to say Smith, Dr Bill, or whatever. Something like that. In very small letters.’

‘Got to be a contact number for a doctor. There might be an emergency. Got to be some way of getting hold of the guy.’

‘I don’t see anything.’

‘Wait,’ Reacher said. ‘I know how. Give me the Apollo Inn.’

‘Apollo like the space rocket?’

‘Exactly like the space rocket.’

The keyboard pattered and Hoag read out a number, a 308 area code for the western part of the state, and then seven more digits. Reacher repeated them once in his head and said, ‘Thanks,’ and hung up and redialled.

*

Ten miles south, Mahmeini’s man was dialling too, calling home. He got Mahmeini on his cell, and said, ‘We have a problem.’

Mahmeini said, ‘Specifically?’

‘Asghar has run out on us.’

Asghar has run out on us.'

'Impossible.'

'Well, he has. I sent him down to the car to get me a bottle of water. He didn't come back, so I checked. The car is gone, and he's gone too.'

'Call him.'

'I tried ten times. His phone is off.'

'I don't believe it.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'I want you to find him.'

'I have no idea where to look.'

Mahmeini said, 'He drinks, you know.'

'I know. But there's no bar in town. Just a liquor store. And it will be closed by now. And he wouldn't have driven to the liquor store anyway. He would have walked. It's only about three blocks away.'

'There must be a bar. This is America. Ask the concierge.'

'There is no concierge. This isn't the Bellagio. They don't even put water in the rooms.'

'There must be someone at the desk. Ask him.'

'I can't go anywhere. I don't have a car. And I can't ask the others for help. Not now. That would be an admission of weakness.'

'Find a way,' Mahmeini said. 'Find a bar, and find a way of getting there. That's an order.'

Reacher listened to the ring tone. It was loud and sonorous and resonant in his ear, the product of a big old-fashioned earpiece maybe an inch and a half across, buried deep inside a big old-fashioned plastic handset that probably weighed a pound. He pictured the two phones ringing in the motel, fifty miles north, one at

the desk, one behind the bar. Or maybe there were more than two phones. Maybe there was a third extension in a back office, and a fourth in Vincent's private quarters. Maybe the whole place was a regular rats' nest of wiring, just like the inside of a lunar module. But however many phones there were, they all rang for a long period, and then one of them was answered. Vincent came on and said, 'This is the Apollo Inn,' just like Reacher had heard him say it before, very brightly and enthusiastically, like it was a brand new establishment taking its first-ever call on its first-ever night in business.

Reacher said, 'I need Eleanor Duncan's phone number.'

Vincent said, 'Reacher? Where are you?'

'Still out of town. I need Eleanor's number.'

'Are you coming back?'

'What could possibly keep me away?'

'Are you not going to Virginia?'

'Eventually, I hope.'

'I don't have Eleanor's number.'

'Isn't she on the phone tree?'

'No, how could she be? Seth might answer.'

'OK, is the doctor there?'

'Not right now.'

'Slow night, then.'

'Unfortunately.'

'Do you have his number?'

'Hold the line,' Vincent said. There was a thump as he put the handset down, maybe on the bar, and then a pause, just about long enough for him to walk

across the lounge, and then the sound of a second handset being raised, maybe at the desk. The two open lines picked up on each other and Reacher heard the room's slow echo hissing and bouncing off the round domed ceiling. Vincent read out a number, the area code and seven more digits, and Reacher repeated them once in his head and said, 'Thanks,' and hung up and redialled.

The guy at the Marriott's desk told Mahmeini's man that yes, there was a bar, not exactly in town but ten miles north, just outside the city limit, on the left shoulder of the two-lane, called the Cell Block, a pleasant place, reasonably priced, and that yes, it was usually open late, and that yes, there was a taxi service in town, and that yes, he would be happy to call a cab immediately.

And so less than five minutes later Mahmeini's man was sliding across stained vinyl into the rear seat of an ancient Chevy Caprice, and the driver was pulling out of the lot, and heading down McNally Street, and making the right at the end.

The doctor answered a lot faster than Vincent had. Reacher said, 'I need Eleanor Duncan's phone number.'

The doctor said, 'Reacher? Where are you?'

'Still out of town.'

'Are you coming back?'

'What, are you missing me?'

'I didn't tell the Duncans about the Cadillac.'

'Good man. Has Seth gone home yet?'

'He was still with his father when I left.'

'Will he stay?'

'People say he often does.'

'You OK?'

'Not too bad. I was in the truck. The Cornhuskers got me.'

‘And?’

‘Nothing much. Just words, really.’

Reacher pictured the guy, maybe standing in his hallway or his kitchen, quaking, shaking, watching the windows, checking the doors. He asked, ‘Are you sober?’

The doctor said, ‘A little.’

‘A little?’

‘That’s about as good as it gets these days, I’m afraid.’

‘I need Eleanor Duncan’s number.’

‘She’s not listed.’

‘I know that.’

‘She’s not on the phone tree.’

‘But she’s your patient.’

‘I can’t.’

‘How much more trouble could you be in?’

‘It’s not just that. There are confidentiality issues too. I’m a doctor. Like you said, I took an oath.’

‘We’re making an omelette here,’ Reacher said. ‘We’re going to have to break some eggs.’

‘They’ll know it came from me.’

‘If it comes to it I’ll tell them different.’

The doctor went quiet, and then he sighed, and then he recited a number.

‘Thanks,’ Reacher said. ‘Take care. Best to your wife.’ He hung up and redialled and listened to yet more ring tone, the same languid electronic purr, but this time

and listened to yet more ring tone, the same languid electronic purr, but this time from a different place, from somewhere inside the restored farmhouse, among the pastel colours and the fancy rugs and the oil paintings. He figured that if Seth was home, then Seth would answer. It seemed to be that kind of a relationship. But he bet himself a buck Seth wasn't home. The Duncans were in two kinds of trouble, and Reacher's experience told him they would huddle together until it passed. So Eleanor was probably home alone, and would pick up. Or not. Maybe she would just ignore the bell, whatever the barman thirty feet away thought about human nature.

She picked up.

'Hello?' she said.

Reacher asked, 'Is Seth there?'

'Reacher? Where are you?'

'Doesn't matter where I am. Where's Seth?'

'He's at his father's. I don't expect him home tonight.'

'That's good. You still up and dressed?'

'Why?'

'I want you to do something for me.'

THIRTY-FOUR

THE OLD CAPRICE'S REAR BENCH WAS CONTOURED LIKE TWO separate bucket seats, not by design but by age and relentless wear and tear. Mahmeini's man settled into the right-hand pit, behind the front passenger seat, and cocked his head to the left so he could see out the windshield. He saw the blank back of a billboard in the headlight beams, and then he saw nothing. The road ahead was straight and empty. No oncoming lights, which was a disappointment. One drink on Asghar's part might be overlooked. Or even two. Or three, followed by a prompt return. But a night of it would be considered desertion.

The wheezing old motor had the needle trembling over the sixty mark. A mile a minute. Nine more miles to go. Nine minutes.

Reacher said, 'Exactly one hour and ten minutes from now, I want you to take a drive. In your little red sports car.'

Eleanor Duncan said, 'A drive? Where?'

'South on the two-lane,' Reacher said. 'Just drive. Eleven miles. As fast as you want. Then turn around and go home again.'

'Eleven miles?'

'Or twelve. Or more. But not less than ten.'

'Why?'

'Doesn't matter why. Will you do it?'

'Are you going to do something to the house? You want me out of the way?'

'I won't come near the house. I promise. No one will ever know. Will you do it?'

'I can't. Seth took my car key. I'm grounded.'

'Is there a spare?'

‘He took that too.’

Reacher said, ‘He’s not carrying them around in his pocket. Not if he keeps his own key in a bowl in the kitchen.’

Eleanor said nothing.

Reacher asked, ‘Do you know where they are?’

‘Yes. They’re on his desk.’

‘On or in?’

‘On. Just sitting there. Like a test for me. He says obedience without temptation is meaningless.’

‘Why the hell are you still there?’

‘Where else could I go?’

‘Just take the damn keys, will you? Stand up for yourself.’

‘Will this hurt Seth?’

‘I don’t know how you want me to answer that question.’

‘I want you to answer it honestly.’

‘It might hurt him indirectly. And eventually. Possibly.’

There was a long pause. Then Eleanor said, ‘OK, I’ll do it. I’ll drive south eleven miles on the two-lane and come back again. An hour and ten minutes from now.’

‘No,’ Reacher said. ‘An hour and six minutes from now. We’ve just been talking for four minutes.’

He hung up and stepped back to the main public room. The barman was working like a good barman should, using fast efficient movements, thinking ahead, watching the room. He caught Reacher’s eye and Reacher detoured towards him and the guy said, ‘I should get you to sign a napkin or something. Like a

memento. You're the only guy who ever came in here to use a phone, not avoid one. You want a drink?'

Reacher scanned what the guy had to offer. Liquor of all kinds, beer on tap, beer in bottles, sodas. No sign of coffee. He said, 'No thanks, I'm good. I should hit the road.' He moved on, shuffling sideways between the tables, and he pushed out the door and walked back to his car. He got in, started up, backed out and drove away north.

Mahmeini's man saw a glow in the air, far ahead on the left. Neon, green and red and blue. The driver kept his foot down for a minute more, and then he lifted off and coasted. The engine coughed and the exhaust popped and sputtered and the taxi slowed. Way far up the road in the distance were a pair of red tail lights. Very faint and far away. Almost not there at all. The taxi braked. Mahmeini's man saw the bar. Just a simple wooden building. There were two weak spotlights under the eaves at the front. They threw two pools of token light into the lot. There were plenty of parked vehicles. But no yellow rental.

The taxi pulled in and stopped. The driver looked back over his shoulder. Mahmeini's man said, 'Wait for me.'

The driver said, 'How long?'

'A minute.' Mahmeini's man got out and stood still. The tail lights in the north had disappeared. Mahmeini's man watched the darkness where they had been, just for a second. Then he walked to the wooden building's door. He entered. He saw a large room, with chairs and tables on the left and a bar on the right. There were about twenty customers in the room, mostly men, none of them Asghar Arad Sepehr. There was a barman behind the bar, serving a customer, lining up the next, glancing over at the new arrival. Mahmeini's man threaded between the tables towards him. He felt that everyone was watching him. A small man, foreign, unshaven, rumpled, and not very clean. The barman's customer peeled away, holding two foaming glasses of beer. The barman moved on, to the next customer, serving him, but glancing beyond him for the next in line, as if he was planning two moves ahead.

Mahmeini's man said, 'I'm looking for someone.'

The barman said, 'I guess we all are, sir. That's the very essence of human nature, isn't it? It's an eternal quest.'

‘No, I’m looking for someone I know. A friend of mine.’

‘A lady or a gentleman?’

‘He looks like me.’

‘Then I haven’t seen him. I’m sorry.’

‘He has a yellow car.’

‘Cars are outside. I’m inside.’

Mahmeini’s man turned and scanned the room, and thought about the red tail lights in the north, and turned back and asked, ‘Are you sure?’

The barman said, ‘I don’t want to be rude, sir, but really, if two of you had been in here tonight, someone would have called Homeland Security already. Don’t you think?’

Mahmeini’s man said nothing.

‘Just saying,’ the barman said. ‘This is Nebraska. There are military installations here.’

Mahmeini’s man asked, ‘Then was someone else just here?’

‘This is a bar, my friend. People are in and out all night long. That’s kind of the point of the place.’

The barman turned back to his current customer. Interaction over. Mahmeini’s man turned and scanned the room, one more time. Then he gave it up and moved away, between the tables, back to the door. He stepped into the lot and took out his phone. No signal. He stood still for a second and glanced north at where the red lights had gone, and then he climbed back into the taxi. He closed the door against a yowling hinge and said, ‘Thank you for waiting.’

The driver looked back over his shoulder and asked, ‘Where to now?’

Mahmeini’s man said, ‘Let me think about that for a minute.’

Reacher kept the Malibu at a steady sixty. A mile a minute. Hypnotic. Power

line poles flashed past, the tyres sang, the motor hummed. Reacher took the fresh bottle of water from the cup holder and opened it and drank from it one-handed. He switched his headlights to bright. Nothing to see ahead of him. A straight road, then mist, then darkness. He checked the mirror. Nothing to see behind him. He checked the dials and the gauges. All good.

Eleanor Duncan checked her watch. It was a small Rolex, a present from Seth, but probably real. She had counted ahead an hour and six minutes from when she had hung up the phone, and she had forty-five minutes still to go. She stepped out of the living room into the hallway, and stepped out of the hallway into her husband's den. It was a small square space. She had no idea of its original purpose. Maybe a gun room. Now it was set up as a home office, but with an emphasis on gentlemanly style, not clerical function. There was a club chair made of leather. The desk was yew. It had a light with a green glass shade. There were bookshelves. There was a rug. The air in the room smelled like Seth.

There was a shallow glass bowl on the desk. From Murano, near Venice, in Italy. It was green. A souvenir. It had paperclips in it. And her car keys, just sitting there, two small serrated lances with big black heads. For her Mazda Miata. A tiny red two-seat convertible. A fun car. Carefree. Like the old British MGs and Lotuses used to be, but reliable.

She took one of the keys.

She stepped back to the hallway. Eleven miles. She thought she knew what Reacher had in mind. So she opened the coat closet and took out a silk headscarf. Pure white. She folded it into a triangle and tied it over her hair. She checked the mirror. Just like an old-fashioned movie star. Or an old-fashioned movie star after a knockout round with an old-fashioned heavyweight champion.

She left by the back door and walked through the cold to the garage, Seth's empty bay to the right, hers in the middle, the doors all open. She got in her car and unlatched the clips above the windshield and dropped the top. She started up and backed out and turned and waited on the driveway, the motor running, the heater warming, her heart beating hard. She checked her watch. Twenty-nine minutes to go.

*

Reacher cruised onward, sixty miles an hour, three more minutes, and then he

slowed down and put his lights back on bright. He watched the right shoulder. The old abandoned roadhouse loomed up at him, right on cue, pinned and stark in his headlight beams. The bad roof, the beer signs on the walls behind the mud, the bruised earth all around where cars had once parked. He pulled off the road and into the lot. Loose stones popped and crunched and slithered under his tyres. He drove a full circuit.

The building was long and low and plain, like a barn cut off at the knees. Rectangular, except for two separate square bump-outs added at the back, one at each end of the structure, the first for restrooms, probably, and the second for a kitchen. Efficient, in terms of plumbing lines. Between the bump-outs was a shallow U-shaped space, like a bay, empty apart from a little windblown trash, enclosed on three sides, open only to the dark empty fields to the east. It was maybe thirty feet long and twelve feet deep.

Perfect, for later.

Reacher came back around to the south gable wall and parked thirty feet from it, out of sight from the north, facing the road at a slight diagonal angle, like a cop on speed trap duty. He killed the lights and kept the motor running. He got out into the cold and looped around the hood and walked to the corner of the building. He leaned on the old boards. They felt thin and veined, frozen by a hundred winters, baked by a hundred summers. They smelled of dust and age. He watched the darkness in the north, where he knew the road must be.

He waited.

THIRTY-FIVE

REACHER WAITED TWENTY LONG MINUTES, AND THEN HE SAW light in the north. Very faint, maybe five or six miles away, really just a high hemispherical glow in the mist, trembling a little, bouncing, weakening and strengthening and weakening again. A moving bubble of light. Very white. Almost blue. A car, coming south towards him, pretty fast.

Eleanor Duncan, presumably, right on time.

Reacher waited.

Two minutes later she was two miles closer, and the high hemispherical glow was bigger, and stronger, still bouncing, still trembling, but now it had a strange asynchronous pulse inside it, the bouncing now going two ways at once, the strengthening and the weakening now random and out of phase.

There were two cars on the road, not one.

Reacher smiled. The sentry. The football player, posted to the south. A college graduate. Not a dumb guy. He knew his five buddies had been sent home to bed because absolutely nothing was going to happen. He knew he had been posted as a precaution only, just for the sake of it. He knew he was facing a long night of boredom, staring into the dark, no chance of glory. So what's a guy going to do, when Eleanor Duncan suddenly blasts past him from behind, in her little red sports car? He's going to see major brownie points on the table, that's what. He's going to give up on the blank hours ahead, and he's going to pull out and follow her, and he's going to dream of a promotion to the inner circle, and he's going to imagine a scene and he's going to rehearse a speech, because he's going to pull Seth Duncan aside tomorrow, first thing in the morning, very discreetly, like an old friend or a trusted aide, and he's going to whisper, Yes, sir, I followed her all the way and I can show you exactly where she went. Then he's going to add, No, sir, I told no one else, but I thought you should know. Then he's going to hop and shuffle in a modest and self-deprecating way and he's going to say, Well yes, sir, I thought it was much more important than sentry duty, and I'm glad you agree I did the right thing.

Reacher smiled again.

Human nature.

Reacher waited.

Two more minutes, and the travelling bubble of light was another two miles closer, now much flatter and more elongated. Two cars, with some little distance between them. Predator and prey, some hundreds of yards apart. There was no red glow in the bubble. The football player's headlights were falling short of the Mazda's paint. The guy was maybe a quarter of a mile back, following the Mazda's tail lights, no doubt thinking he was doing a hell of a job of staying inconspicuous. Maybe not such a smart guy. The Mazda had a mirror, and halogen headlights on a Nebraska winter night were probably visible from outer space.

Reacher moved.

He pushed off the corner of the building and looped around the Malibu's hood and got in the driver's seat. He locked the selector in first gear and put his left foot hard on the brake and his right foot on the gas. He goosed the pedal until the transmission was straining against the brake and the whole car was wound up tight and ready to launch. He kept one hand on the wheel and the other on the headlight switch.

He waited.

Sixty seconds.

Ninety seconds.

Then the Mazda flashed past, right to left, instantaneously, a tiny dark shape chasing a huge pool of bright light, its top down, a woman in a headscarf at the wheel, all chased in turn by tyre roar and engine noise and the red flare of tail lights. Then it was gone. Reacher counted one and flicked his headlights on and took his foot off the brake and stamped on the gas and shot forward and braked hard and stopped again sideways across the crown of the road. He wrenched open the door and spilled out and danced back towards the Malibu's trunk, towards the shoulder he had just left. Two hundred yards to his right a big SUV was starting a panic stop. Its headlights flared yellow against the Malibu's paint and then they nosedived into the blacktop as the truck's front suspension crushed under the force of violent braking. Huge tyres howled and the truck lost its line

and slewed to its right and went into a four-wheel slide and its nearside wheels tucked under and its high centre of gravity tipped over and its offside wheels came up in the air. Then they crashed back to earth and the rear end fishtailed violently a full ninety degrees and the truck snapped around and came to rest parallel with the Malibu, less than ten feet away, stalled out and silent, the scream of stressed rubber dying away, thin drifts of moving blue smoke following it and catching it and stopping and rising all around it and billowing away into the cold night air.

Reacher pulled the Iranian's Glock from his pocket and stormed the driver's door and wrenched it open and danced back and pointed the gun. In general he was not a big fan of dramatic arrests, but he knew from long experience what worked and what didn't with shocked and unpredictable subjects, so he screamed GET OUT OF THE CAR GET OUT OF THE CAR GET OUT OF THE CAR as loud as he could, which was plenty loud, and the guy behind the wheel more or less tumbled out, and then Reacher was on him, forcing him down, flipping him, jamming him face down into the blacktop, his knee in the small of the guy's back, the Glock's muzzle hard in the back of the guy's neck, all the time screaming STAY DOWN STAY DOWN STAY DOWN, all the while watching the sky over his shoulder for more lights.

There were no more lights. No one else was coming. No backup. The guy hadn't called it in. He was planning a solo enterprise. All the glory for himself. As expected.

Reacher smiled.

Human nature.

The scene went quiet. Nothing to hear, except the Malibu's patient idle. Nothing to see, except four high beams stabbing the far shoulder. The air was full of the smell of burned rubber and hot brakes, and gas, and oil. The Cornhusker lay completely still. Hard not to, with 250 pounds on his back, and a gun to his head, and television images of SWAT arrests in his mind. Maybe real images. Country boys get arrested from time to time, the same as anyone else. And things had happened fast, all dark and noise and blur and panic, enough that maybe the guy hadn't really seen Reacher's face yet, or recognized his description from the Duncans' warnings. Maybe the guy hadn't put two and two together. Maybe he was waiting it out like a civilian, waiting to explain to a cop that he was innocent, like people do. Which gave Reacher a minor problem. He was about to

transition away from what the guy might have taken to be a legitimate law enforcement takedown, straight to what the guy was going to know for sure was a wholly illegitimate kidnap attempt. And the guy was big. Six-six or a little more, two-ninety or a little more. He had on a large red football jacket and baggy jeans. His feet were the size of boats.

Reacher said, ‘Tell me your name.’

The guy’s chin and his lips and his nose were all jammed hard down on the blacktop. He said, ‘John,’ like a gasp, like a grunt, just a soft expulsion of breath, quiet and indistinct.

‘Not Brett?’ Reacher asked.

‘No.’

‘That’s good.’ Reacher shifted his weight, turned the guy’s head, jammed the Glock in his ear, saw the whites of his eyes. ‘Do you know who I am?’

The guy on the ground said, ‘I do now.’

‘You know the two things you really need to understand?’

‘What are they?’

‘Whoever you think you are, I’m tougher than you, and I’m more ruthless than you. You have absolutely no idea. I’m worse than your worst nightmare. Do you believe that?’

‘Yes.’

‘Really believe it? Like you believe in mom and apple pie?’

‘Yes.’

‘You know what I did to your buddies?’

‘Yes.’

‘What did I do?’

‘You finished them.’

‘Correct. But here’s the thing, John. I’m prepared to work with you, to save your life. We can do this, if we try. But if you step half an inch out of line, I’ll kill you and walk away and I’ll never think about you again and I’ll sleep like a baby the whole rest of my life. We clear on that?’

‘Yes.’

‘So you want to try?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you thinking about some stupid move? Are you quarter-backing it right now? You planning to wait until my attention wanders?’

‘No.’

‘Good answer, John. Because my attention never wanders. You ever seen someone get shot?’

‘No.’

‘It’s not like the movies, John. Big chunks of disgusting stuff come flying out. Even a flesh wound, you never really recover. Not a hundred per cent. You get infections. You’re weak and hurting, for ever.’

‘OK.’

‘So stand up now.’ Reacher got up out of his crouch and moved away, pointing the gun, aiming it two-handed at arm’s length for theatrical effect, tracking the guy’s head, a big pale target. First the guy went foetal for a second, and then he gathered himself and got his hands under him and jacked himself to his knees. Reacher said, ‘See the yellow car? You’re going to go stand next to the driver’s door.’

The guy said, ‘OK,’ and got to his feet, a little unsteady at first, then firmer, taller, squarer. Reacher said, ‘Feeling good now, John? Feeling brave? Getting ready? Going to rush over and get me?’

The guy said, ‘No.’

‘Good answer, John. I’ll put a double tap in you before you move the first muscle. Believe me, I’ve done it before. I used to get paid to do it. I’m very good at it. So move over to the yellow car and stand next to the driver’s door.’ Reacher tracked him all the way around the Malibu’s hood. The driver’s door was still open. Reacher had left it that way, for the sake of a speedy exit. The guy stood in its angle. Reacher aimed the gun across the roof of the car and opened the passenger door. The two men stood there, one on each side, both doors open like little wings.

Reacher said, ‘Now get in.’

The guy ducked and bent and slid into the seat. Reacher backed off a step and aimed the gun down inside the car, a low trajectory, straight at the guy’s hips and thighs. He said, ‘Don’t touch the wheel. Don’t touch the pedals. Don’t put your seat belt on.’

The guy sat still, with his hands in his lap.

Reacher said, ‘Now close your door.’

The guy closed his door.

Reacher asked, ‘Feeling heroic yet, John?’

The guy said, ‘No.’

‘Good answer, my friend. We can do this. Just remember, the Chevrolet Malibu is an OK mid-range product, especially for Detroit, but it doesn’t accelerate for shit. Not like a bullet, anyway. This gun of mine is full of nine-millimetre Parabellums. They come out of the barrel doing nine hundred miles an hour. Think a four-cylinder GM motor can outrun that?’

‘No.’

‘Good, John,’ Reacher said. ‘I’m glad to see all that education didn’t go to waste.’

Then he looked up across the roof of the car, and he saw light in the mist to the south. A high hemispherical glow, trembling a little, bouncing, weakening and strengthening and weakening again. Very white. Almost blue.

strengthening and weakening again. Very white. Almost blue.

A car, coming north towards him, pretty fast.

THIRTY-SIX

THE ONCOMING CAR WAS ABOUT TWO MILES AWAY. DOING ABOUT sixty, Reacher figured. Sixty was about all the road was good for. Two minutes. He said, ‘Sit tight, John. Stop thinking. This is your time of maximum danger. I’m going to play it very safe. I’ll shoot first and ask questions later. Don’t think I won’t.’

The guy sat still behind the Malibu’s wheel. Reacher watched across the roof of the car. The bubble of light in the south was still moving, still bouncing and trembling and strengthening and weakening, but coherently this time, naturally, in phase. Just one car. Now about a mile away. One minute.

Reacher waited. The glow resolved itself to a fierce source low down above the blacktop, then twin fierce sources spaced feet apart, both of them oval in shape, both of them low to the ground, both of them blue-white and intense. They kept on coming, flickering and floating and jittering ahead of a firm front suspension and fast go-kart steering, at first small because of the distance, and then small because they were small, because they were mounted low down on a small low car, because the car was a Mazda Miata, tiny, red in colour, slowing now, coming to a stop, its headlights unbearably bright against the Malibu’s yellow paint.

Then Eleanor Duncan killed her lights and manoeuvred around the Malibu’s trunk, half on the road and half on the shoulder, and came to a stop with her elbow on the door and her head turned towards Reacher. She asked, ‘Did I do it right?’

Reacher said, ‘You did it perfectly. The headscarf was a great touch.’

‘I decided against sunglasses. Too much of a risk at night.’

‘Probably.’

‘But you took a risk. That’s for sure. You could have gotten creamed here.’

‘He’s an athlete. And young. Good eyesight, good hand-eye coordination, lots of fast-twitch muscles. I figured I’d have time to jump clear.’

‘Even so. He could have wrecked both vehicles. Then what would you have done?’

‘Plan B was shoot him and ride back with you.’

She was quiet for a second. Then she said, ‘Need anything else?’

‘No, thanks. Go on home now.’

‘This guy will tell Seth, you know. About what I did.’

‘He won’t,’ Reacher said. ‘He and I are going to work something out.’

Eleanor Duncan said nothing more. She just put her lights back on and her car in gear and drove away, fast and crisp, the sound of her exhaust ripping the night air behind her. Reacher glanced back twice, once when she was half a mile away and again when she was gone altogether. Then he slid into the Malibu’s passenger seat, alongside the guy called John, and closed his door. He held the Glock right-handed across his body. He said, ‘Now you’re going to park this car around the back of this old roadhouse. If the speedo gets above five miles an hour, I’m going to shoot you in the side. Without immediate medical attention you’ll live about twenty minutes. Then you’ll die, in hideous agony. Believe me, I’ve seen it happen. Truth is, John, I’ve made it happen, more than once. We clear?’

‘Yes.’

‘Say it, John. Say we’re clear.’

‘We’re clear.’

‘How clear are we?’

‘I don’t know what you want me to say.’

‘I want you to say we’re crystal clear.’

‘You got it. Crystal.’

‘OK, so let’s do it.’

The guy fumbled the lever into gear and turned the wheel and drove a wide circle, painfully slow, bumping up on the far shoulder, coming around to the near shoulder, bumping down on to the beaten earth of the old lot, passing the south gable wall, turning sharply behind the building. Reacher said, ‘Pull ahead and then back in, between the two bump-outs, like parallel parking. Do they ask for that in the Nebraska test?’

The guy said, ‘I passed in Kentucky. In high school.’

‘Does that mean you need me to explain it to you?’

‘I know how to do it.’

‘OK, show me.’

The guy pulled ahead of the second square bump-out and lined up and backed into the shallow U-shaped bay. Reacher said, ‘All the way, now. I want the back bumper hard against the wood and I want your side of the car hard against the building. I want you to trash your door mirror, John. Totally trash it. Can you do that for me?’

The guy paused and then turned the wheel harder. He did pretty well. He got the rear bumper hard against the bump-out and he trashed his door mirror good, but he left about an inch between his flank of the car and the back of the building. He checked behind him, checked left, and then looked at Reacher like he was expecting praise.

‘Close enough,’ Reacher said. ‘Now shut it down.’

The guy killed the lights and turned off the motor.

Reacher said, ‘Leave the key.’

The guy said, ‘I can’t get out. I can’t open my door.’

Reacher said, ‘Crawl out after me.’ He opened his own door and slid out and backed off and stood tall and aimed the gun two-handed. The guy came out after him, hands and knees, huge and awkward, feet first, butt high up in the air. He got straight and turned around and said, ‘Want me to close the door?’

Reacher said, ‘You’re thinking again, aren’t you, John? You’re thinking it’s dark

out here, now the lights are off, and maybe I can't see too well. You're figuring maybe this would be a good time. But it isn't. I can see just fine. An owl has got nothing on me in the eyesight department, John. An owl with night-vision goggles sees worse. Believe it, kid. Just hang in there. You can get through this.'

'I'm not thinking anything,' the guy said.

'So close the door.'

The guy closed the door.

'Now step away from the car.'

The guy stepped away. The car was crammed tight in the back southwest quarter of the shallow bay, occupying a fifteen-by-six footprint within the total thirty-by-twelve space. It would be invisible from the road, either north or south, and no one was going to be in the fields to the east until spring ploughing. Safe enough.

Reacher said, 'Now move to your right.'

'Where?'

'So when I aim the gun at you I'm aiming parallel with the road.'

The guy moved, two steps, three, and then he stopped and turned and faced front, with his back to the forty empty miles between him and the Cell Block bar.

Reacher asked him, 'How close is the nearest house?'

He said, 'Miles away.'

'Close enough to hear a gunshot in the night?'

'Maybe.'

'What would they think if they did?'

'Varmint. This is farm country.'

Reacher said, ‘I’d be happier if you heard the gun go off, John. At least once. I’d be happier if you knew what it was like to have a bullet coming your way. It might help you with all that thinking. It might help you reach sensible conclusions.’

‘I won’t try anything.’

‘Do I have your word on that?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘So we’re bonded now, John. I’m trusting you. Am I wise to do that?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘OK, turn around and walk back to your truck.’ Reacher kept ten feet behind the guy all the way, around the back corner of the building, along the face of the south gable wall, across the old lot, back to the two-lane. Reacher said, ‘Now get in the truck the same way you got out of the car.’

The guy closed the driver’s door and tracked around the hood and opened the passenger door. Reacher watched him all the way. The guy climbed into the passenger seat and lifted his feet one at a time into the driver’s foot well, and then he jacked himself up and over the console between the seats, on the heels of his hands, squirming, scraping, ducking his head. Reacher watched him all the way. When he was settled Reacher climbed into the passenger seat and closed the door. He swapped the gun into his left hand for a second and put his seat belt on. Then he swapped the gun back to his right and said, ‘I’ve got my seat belt on, John, but you’re not going to put yours on, OK? Just in case you’re getting ideas. Just in case you’re thinking about driving into a telephone pole. See the point? You do that, and I’ll be fine, but you’ll be hurt bad, and then I’ll shoot you anyway. We clear on that?’

The guy said, ‘Yes.’

‘Say it, John.’

‘I’m clear on that.’

‘How clear?’

‘Crystal.’

‘And we’re bonded, right? I have your word, don’t I?’

‘Yes.’

‘Promise?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where do you live?’

‘At the Duncan Transportation depot.’

‘Where is that?’

‘From here? About thirty miles, give or take, north and then west.’

‘OK, John,’ Reacher said. ‘Take me there.’

THIRTY-SEVEN

MAHMEINI'S MAN WAS IN HIS ROOM AT THE COURTYARD Marriott. He was on the phone with Mahmeini himself. The conversation had not started well. Mahmeini had been reluctant to accept that Sepehr had lit out. It was inconceivable to him. It was like being told the guy had grown a third arm. Just not humanly possible.

Mahmeini's man said, 'He definitely wasn't in the bar.'

'By the time you got there.'

'He was never there. It was a most unpleasant place. I didn't like it at all. They looked at me like I was dirt. Like I was a terrorist. I doubt if they would even have served me. Asghar wouldn't have lasted five minutes without getting in a fight. And there was no sign of trouble. There was no blood on the floor. Which there would have been. Asghar is armed, and he's fast, and he doesn't suffer fools gladly.'

Mahmeini said, 'Then he went somewhere else.'

'I checked all over town. Which didn't take long. The sidewalks roll up when it gets dark. There's nowhere to hide. He isn't here.'

'Women?'

'Are you kidding me? Here?'

'Did you try his phone again?'

'Over and over.'

There was a long, long pause. Mahmeini, in his Las Vegas office, processing data, changing gears, improvising. He said, 'OK, let's move on. This business is important. It has to be taken care of tomorrow. So you'll have to manage on your own. You can do that. You're good enough.'

'But I don't have a car.'

‘Get a ride from Safir’s boys.’

‘I thought of that. But the dynamic would be weird. I wouldn’t be in charge. I would be a passenger, literally. And how would I explain why I let Asghar take off somewhere and leave me high and dry? We can’t afford to look like idiots here. Or weak. Not in front of these people.’

‘So get another car. Tell the others you told Asghar to go on ahead, or somewhere else entirely, for some other purpose.’

‘Get another car? From where?’

Mahmeini said, ‘Rent one.’

‘Boss, this isn’t Vegas. They don’t even have room service here. The nearest Hertz is back at the airport. I’m sure it’s closed until the morning. And I can’t get there anyway.’

Another long, long pause. Mahmeini, recalibrating, re-evaluating, reassessing, planning on the fly. He asked, ‘Did the others see the first car you were in?’

His guy said, ‘No. I’m sure they didn’t. We all arrived separately, at different times.’

Mahmeini said, ‘OK. You’re right about the dynamic. We need to be visibly in charge. And we need to keep the others off balance. So here’s what you’re going to do. Find a suitable car, within the hour. Steal one, if you have to. Then call the others, in their rooms. I don’t care what time it is. Midnight, one o’clock, whatever. Tell them we’ve decided to start the party early. Tell them you’re leaving for the north immediately. Give them five minutes, or you’re going without them. They’ll be in disarray, packing up and running down to the parking lot. You’ll be waiting in your new car. But they won’t know it’s new. And they won’t even notice that Asghar isn’t with you. Not in the dark. Not in all the confusion. Then drive fast. Like a bat out of hell. Be the first one up there. When the others get there, tell them you turned Asghar loose, on foot, behind the lines. That will worry them. It will keep them even more off balance. They’ll be looking over their shoulders all the time. That’s it. That’s what you’re going to do. That’s pretty much a silk purse out of a sow’s ear, wouldn’t you say?’

Mahmeini’s man put his coat on and carried his bag down to the lobby. The desk guy had gone off duty. Presumably there was an all-purpose night porter holed

guy had gone off duty. Presumably there was an all-purpose night porter holed up in a back room somewhere, but Mahmeini's man didn't see any sign of him. He just walked out, bag in hand, looking for a car to steal. Which in many ways was a backward step and an affront to his dignity. Guys in his position had left car theft behind a long time ago. But, needs must. And he still remembered how. There would be no technical difficulty. He would perform with his usual precision. The difficulty would come from being forced to work with such a meagre pool of potential targets.

He had two requirements. First, he needed a vehicle with a degree of prestige. Not necessarily much, but at least some. He couldn't be seen in a rusted and listing pick-up truck, for instance. That would not be remotely appropriate or plausible for a Mahmeini operative, especially one tasked to impress the Duncans. Image was by no means everything, but it greased the skids. Perception was reality, at least half the time.

Second, he needed a car that wasn't brand new. Late-model cars had too much security built in. Computers, microchips in the keys, matching microchips in the keyholes. Nothing was unbeatable, of course, but a quick-and-dirty street job had its practical limits. Newer cars were best tackled with tow trucks or flatbeds, and then patient hours hidden away with ethernet cables and laptop computers. Lone men in the dark needed something easier.

So, a clean sedan from a mainstream manufacturer, not new, but not too old either. Easy to find in Vegas. Five minutes, tops. But not in rural Nebraska. Not in farm country. He had just walked all over town looking for Asghar, and 90 per cent of what he had seen had been utilitarian, either pick-up trucks or ancient four-wheel-drives, and 99 per cent of those had been worn out, all battered and corroded and failing. Apparently Nebraskans didn't have much money, and even if they did they seemed to favour an ostentatiously blue-collar lifestyle.

He stood in the cold and reviewed his options. He mapped out the blocks he had quartered before, and he tried to identify the kind of density he needed, and he came up with nothing. He had seen a sign to a hospital, and hospital parking lots were often good, because doctors bought new cars and sold their lightly used cast-offs to nurses and medical students, but for all he knew the hospital was miles away, certainly too far to walk without a guarantee of success.

So he started in the Marriott lot.

And finished there.

And finished there.

He walked all around the H-shaped hotel and saw three pickup trucks, two with fitted camper beds, and an old Chrysler sedan with Arizona plates and a dented fender and sun-rotted paint, and a blue Chevrolet Impala, and a red Ford Taurus, and a black Cadillac. The pickups and the old Chrysler were out of the question for obvious reasons. The Impala and the Taurus were out of the question because they were too new, and they were obviously rentals, because they had barcode stickers in the rear side windows, which meant that almost certainly they belonged to Safir's guys and Rossi's guys, and he couldn't call them down to the lot and have them find him sitting in one of their own cars.

Which left the Cadillac. Right age, right style. Local plates, neat, discreet, well looked after, clean and polished. Black glass. Practically perfect. A no-brainer. He put his bag on the ground right next to it and dropped flat and shuffled on his back until his head was underneath the engine. He had a tiny LED Mag-lite on his key chain, and he fumbled it out and lit it up and went hunting. Cars of that generation had a module bolted to the frame designed to detect a frontal impact. A simple accelerometer, with a two-stage function. Worst case, it would trigger the airbags. Short of that, it would unlock the doors, so that first responders could drag dazed drivers to safety. A gift to car thieves everywhere, therefore not much publicized, and replaced almost immediately with more sophisticated systems.

He found the module. It was a simple tin can, square and small, cheap and basic, all caked in dry dirt, with wires coming out of it. He took out his knife and used the butt end of the handle and banged hard on the module. Dirt flaked off, but nothing else happened. He thought the dirt was maybe insulating the force of the blow, so he popped the blade on his knife and scraped the front of the module clean. Then he closed the blade and tried again. Nothing happened. He tried a third time, hard enough to worry about the noise he was making, bang, and the message got through. The Cadillac's dim electronic brain thought it had just suffered a minor frontal impact, not serious enough for the airbags, but serious enough to consider the first responders. There were four ragged thumps from above, and the doors unlocked.

Technology. A wonderful thing.

Mahmeini's man scrambled out and stood up. A minute later his bag was on the back seat and he was in the driver's seat. It was set way back. There was enough

leg room for a giant. More proof, as if he needed any. Like he had told Rossi's guy, American peasants were all huge. He found the button and buzzed the cushion forward, on and on, about a foot, and then he jacked the seat back upright and got to work.

He used the tip of his blade to force the steering lock, and then he pulled off the column shroud and stripped the wires he needed with the knife and touched them together. The engine started and a chime told him he didn't have his seat belt on. He buckled up and backed out and turned around and waited in the narrow lane parallel to the long side of the H, the engine idling silently, the climate control already warming.

Then he pulled out his phone and went through the Marriott switchboard, first to Safir's guys, then to Rossi's, in both cases following Mahmeini's script exactly, telling them that plans had changed, that the party was starting early, that he and Asghar were leaving for the north immediately, and that they had five minutes to get their asses in gear, no more, or they would be left behind.

The SUV was a GMC Yukon, metallic gold in colour, equipped to a high standard with a couple of option packs. It had beige leather inside. It was a nice truck. Certainly the kid called John seemed proud of it, and Reacher could see why. He was looking forward to owning it for the next twelve hours, or however long his remaining business in Nebraska might take.

He said, 'Got a cell phone, John?'

The guy paused a fatal beat and said, 'No.'

Reacher said, 'And you were doing so well. But now you're screwing up. Of course you've got a cell phone. You're part of an organization. You were on sentry duty. And you're under thirty, which means you were probably born with a minutes plan.'

The guy said, 'You're going to do to me what you did to the others.'

'What did I do?'

'You crippled them.'

'What were they going to do to me?'

The guy didn’t answer that. They were on the two-lane road, north of the motel, well out in featureless farm country, rolling steadily along, nothing to see beyond the headlight beams. Reacher was half turned in his seat, his left hand on his knee, his right wrist resting on his left forearm, the Glock held easy in his right hand.

Reacher said, ‘Give me your cell phone, John.’ He saw movement in the guy’s eyes, a flash of speculation, a narrowing of the lids. Fair warning. The guy jacked his butt off the seat and took one hand off the wheel and dug in his pants pocket. He came out with a phone, slim and black, like a candy bar. He went to hand it over, but he lost his grip on it for a moment and juggled it and dropped it in the passenger foot well.

‘Shit,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry.’

Reacher smiled. ‘Good try, John,’ he said. ‘Now I bend over to pick it up, right? And you cave the back of my skull in with your right fist. I wasn’t born yesterday, you know.’

The guy said nothing.

Reacher said, ‘So I guess we’ll leave it right where it is. If it rings, we’ll let it go to voice mail.’

‘I had to try.’

‘Is that an apology? You promised me.’

‘You’re going to break my legs and dump me on the side of the road.’

‘That’s a little pessimistic. Why would I break both of them?’

‘It’s not a joke. Those four guys you hurt will never work again.’

‘They’ll never work for the Duncans again. But there are other things to do in life. Better things.’

‘Like what?’

‘You could shovel shit on a chicken farm. You could whore yourself out in Tijuana. With a donkey. Either thing would be better than working for the

Duncans.'

The guy said nothing. Just drove.

Reacher asked, 'How much do the Duncans pay you?'

'More than I could get back in Kentucky.'

'In exchange for what, precisely?'

'Just being around, mostly.'

Reacher asked, 'Who are those Italian guys in the overcoats?'

'I don't know.'

'What do they want?'

'I don't know.'

'Where are they now?'

'I don't know.'

They were in the blue Impala, already ten miles north of the Marriott, Roberto Cassano at the wheel, Angelo Mancini sitting right beside him. Cassano was working hard to stay behind Safir's boys in their red Ford, and both drivers were working hard to keep Mahmeini's guys in sight. The big black Cadillac was really hustling. It was doing more than eighty miles an hour. It was way far outside of its comfort zone. It was bouncing and wallowing and floating. It was quite a sight. Angelo Mancini was staring ahead at it. He was obsessed with it.

He asked, 'Is it a rental?'

Cassano was much quieter. Occupied by driving, certainly, concentrating on the crazy high-speed dash up the road, definitely, but thinking, too. Thinking hard.

He said, 'I don't think it's a rental.'

'So what is it? I mean, what? Those guys have their own cars standing by in every state? Just in case? How is that possible?'

‘I don’t know,’ Cassano said.

‘I thought at first maybe it’s a limo. You know, like a car service. But it isn’t. I saw the little squirt driving it himself. Not a car service driver. Just a glimpse, but it was him. The one who mouthed off at you.’

Cassano said, ‘I didn’t like him.’

‘Me either. And even less now. They’re way bigger than we are. Way bigger than we thought. I mean, they have their own cars on standby in every state? They fly in on the casino plane, and there’s a car there for them, wherever? What’s that about?’

‘I don’t know,’ Cassano said again.

‘Is it a funeral car? Do the Iranians run funeral parlours now? That could work, right? Mahmeini could call the nearest parlour and say, send us one of your cars.’

‘I don’t think the Iranians took over the funeral business.’

‘So what else? I mean, how many states are there? Fifty, right? That’s at least fifty cars standing by.’

‘Not even Mahmeini can be active in all fifty states.’

‘Maybe not Alaska and Hawaii. But he’s got cars in Nebraska, apparently. How far up the list is Nebraska likely to be?’

‘I don’t know,’ Cassano said again.

‘OK,’ Mancini said. ‘You’re right. It has to be a rental.’

‘I told you it’s not a rental,’ Cassano said. ‘It can’t be. It’s not a current model.’

‘Times are tough. Maybe they rent older cars now.’

‘It’s not even last year’s model. Or the year before. That’s practically an antique. That’s an old-guy car. That’s your neighbour’s granddad’s Cadillac.’

‘Maybe they have rent-a-wreck here.’

‘Why would Mahmeini need that?’

‘So what is it?’

‘It doesn’t really matter what it is. You’re not looking at the big picture. You’re missing the point.’

‘Which is what?’

‘That car was already at the hotel. We parked right next to it, remember? Late afternoon, when we got back. Those guys were there before us. And you know what that means? It means they were on their way before Mahmeini was even asked to send them. Something really weird is going on here.’

The metallic gold GMC Yukon turned left off the north-south two-lane and headed west towards Wyoming on another two-lane that was just as straight and featureless as the first. Reacher pictured planners and engineers a century before, hard at work, leaning over parchment maps and charts with long rulers and sharp pencils, drawing roads, dispatching crews, opening up the interior. He asked, ‘How far now, John?’

The kid said, ‘We’re real close,’ which as always turned out to be a relative statement. Real close in some places meant fifty yards, or a hundred. In Nebraska it meant ten miles and fifteen minutes. Then Reacher saw a group of dim lights, off to the right, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. The truck slowed and turned, another precise ninety-degree right angle, and headed north on a blacktop strip engineered in a different way from the standard county product. A private approach road, leading towards what looked like a half-built or half-demolished industrial facility of some kind. There was a concrete rectangle the size of a football field, possibly an old parking lot but more likely the floor slab of a factory that had either never been completed or had been later dismantled. It was enclosed on all four sides by a head-high hurricane fence that was topped by a mean and token allocation of razor wire. Here and there the fence posts carried lights, like domestic backyard fixtures, containing what must have been regular sixty-or hundred-watt bulbs. The whole enormous space was empty, apart from two grey panel vans in a marked-off bay big enough to handle three.

The approach road was scalloped out at one point to allow access in and out of the concrete rectangle through a pair of gates. Then it ran onward towards a long

low one-storey building built of brick in an unmistakable style. Classic 1940s industrial architecture. The building was an office block, built to serve the factory it once stood next to. The factory would have been a defence plant, almost certainly. Give a government a choice of where to build in wartime, and it will seek the safe centre of a land mass, away from coastal shelling and marauding aircraft and potential invasion sites. Nebraska and other heartland states had been full of such places. The ones lucky enough to be engaged on fantasy Cold War systems were probably still in business. The ones built to produce basic war-fighting items like boots and bullets and bandages had perished before the ink was dry on the armistice papers.

The kid called John said, ‘This is it. We live in the office building.’

The building had a flat roof with a brick parapet, and a long line of identical windows, small panes framed with white-painted steel. In the centre was an unimpressive double door with a lobby behind it and dim bulkhead lights either side of it. In front of the doors was a short concrete path that led from an empty rectangle made of cracked and weedy paving stones, the size of two tennis courts laid end to end. Managerial parking, presumably, back in the day. There were no lights on inside the building. It just stood there, dead to the world.

Reacher asked, ‘Where are the bedrooms?’

John said, ‘To the right.’

‘And your buddies are in there now?’

‘Yes. Five of them.’

‘Plus you, that’s six legs to break. Let’s go do it.’

THIRTY-EIGHT

REACHER MADE THE GUY GET OUT OF THE TRUCK THE SAME WAY he had before, through the passenger door, awkward and unbalanced and unable to spring any surprises. He tracked him with the Glock and glanced beyond the wire and asked, ‘Where are all the harvest trucks?’

The guy said, ‘They’re in Ohio. Back at the factory, for refurbishment. They’re specialist vehicles, and some of them are thirty years old.’

‘What are the two grey vans for?’

‘This and that. Service and repairs, tyres, things like that.’

‘Are there supposed to be three?’

‘One is out. It’s been gone a few days.’

‘Doing what?’

‘I don’t know.’

Reacher asked, ‘When do the big trucks get back?’

The guy said, ‘Spring.’

‘What’s this place like in the early summer?’

‘Pretty busy. The first alfalfa crop gets harvested early. There’s a lot of preparation ahead of time and a lot of maintenance afterwards. This place is humming.’

‘Five days a week?’

‘Seven, usually. We’re talking forty thousand acres here. That’s a lot of output.’ The guy closed the passenger door and took a step. Then he stopped dead, because Reacher had stopped dead. Reacher was staring ahead at the empty rectangle in front of the building. The cracked stones. The managerial parking lot. Nothing in it.

Reacher asked, ‘Where do you normally park your truck, John?’

‘Right out front there, by the doors.’

‘Where do your buddies park?’

‘Same place.’

‘So where are they?’

The night-time silence clamped down and the young man’s mouth came open a little, and he whirled around as if he was expecting his friends to be hiding somewhere behind him. Like a practical joke. But they weren’t. He turned back and said, ‘I guess they’re out. They must have gotten a call.’

‘From you?’ Reacher asked. ‘When you saw Mrs Duncan?’

‘No, I swear. I didn’t call. You can check my phone.’

‘So who called them?’

‘Mr Duncan, I guess. Mr Jacob, I mean.’

‘Why would he?’

‘I don’t know. Nothing was supposed to happen tonight.’

‘He called them but he didn’t call you?’

‘No, he didn’t call me. I swear. Check my phone. He wouldn’t call me anyway. I’m on sentry duty. I was supposed to stay put.’

‘So what’s going on, John?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Best guess?’

‘The doctor. Or his wife. Or both of them together. They’re always seen as the weakest link. Because of the drinking. Maybe the Duncans think they have information.’

‘About what?’

‘You, of course. About where you are and what you’re doing and whether you’re coming back. That’s what’s on their minds.’

‘It takes five guys to ask those questions?’

‘Show of force,’ the kid said. ‘That’s what we’re here for. A surprise raid in the middle of the night can shake people up.’

‘OK, John,’ Reacher said. ‘You stay here.’

‘Here?’

‘Go to bed.’

‘You’re not going to hurt me?’

‘You already hurt yourself. You showed no fight at all against a smaller, older man. You’re a coward. You know that now. That’s as good to me as a dislocated elbow.’

‘Easy for you to say. You’ve got a gun.’

Reacher put the Glock back in his pocket. He folded the flap down and stood with his arms out, hands empty, palms forward, fingers spread.

He said, ‘Now I don’t. So bring it on, fat boy.’

The guy didn’t move.

‘Go for it,’ Reacher said. ‘Show me what you’ve got.’

The guy didn’t move.

‘You’re a coward,’ Reacher said again. ‘You’re pathetic. You’re a waste of good food. You’re a useless three-hundred-pound sack of shit. And you’re ugly, too.’

The guy said nothing.

‘Last chance,’ Reacher said. ‘Step up and be a hero.’

The guy walked away, head down, shoulders slumped, towards the dark building. He stopped twenty feet later and looked back. Reacher looped around the rear of the Yukon, to the driver's door. He got in. The seat was too far back. The kid was huge. But Reacher wasn't about to adjust it in front of the guy. Some stupid male inhibition, way in the back of his brain. He just started up and turned and drove away, and fixed it on the fly.

The Yukon drove OK, but the brakes were a little spongy. The result of the panic stop, probably, back at the old roadhouse. Five years' wear and tear, all in one split second. But Reacher didn't care. He wasn't braking much. He was hustling hard, concentrating on speeding up, not slowing down. Twenty miles was a long distance, through the empty rural darkness.

He saw nothing the whole way. No lights, no other vehicles. No activity of any kind. He got back to the main two-lane north of the motel and five minutes later he passed the place. It was all closed up and dark. No blue neon. No activity. No cars, except the wrecked Subaru. It was still there, beaded over with dew, low down on slowly softening tyres, sad and inert, like road kill. Reacher charged onward past it, and then he made the right and the left and the right, along the boundaries of the dark empty fields, like twice before, to the plain ranch house with the post-and-rail fence and the flat, featureless yard.

There were lights on in the house. Plenty of them. Like a cruise ship at night on the open ocean. But there was no sign of uproar. There were no cars on the driveway. No pick-up trucks, no SUVs. No large figures in the shadows. No sound, no movement. Nothing. The front door was closed. The windows were intact.

Reacher turned in and parked on the driveway and walked to the door. He stood right in front of the spy hole and rang the bell. There was a whole minute's delay. Then the spy hole darkened and lightened and locks and chains rattled and the doctor opened up. He looked tired and battered and worried. His wife was standing behind him in the hallway, in the bright light, with the phone to her ear. The phone was the old-fashioned kind, big and black on a table, with a dial and a curly wire. The doctor's wife was not talking. She was just listening, concentrating hard, her eyes narrowing and widening.

The doctor said, 'You came back.'

Reacher said, 'Yes, I did.'

‘Why?’

‘Are you OK? The Cornhuskers are out and about.’

‘We know,’ the doctor said. ‘We just heard. We’re on the phone tree right now.’

‘They didn’t come here?’

‘Not yet.’

‘So where are they?’

‘We’re not sure.’

Reacher said, ‘Can I come in?’

‘Of course,’ the doctor said. ‘I’m sorry.’ He stepped back and Reacher stepped in. The hallway was very warm. The whole house was warm, but it felt smaller than before, like a desperate little fortress. The doctor closed the door and turned two keys and put the chain back on. He asked, ‘Did you see the police files?’

Reacher said, ‘Yes.’

‘And?’

‘They’re inconclusive,’ Reacher said. He moved on into the kitchen. He heard the doctor’s wife say, ‘What?’ She sounded puzzled. Maybe a little shocked. He glanced back at her. The doctor glanced back at her. She said nothing more. Just continued to listen, eyes moving, taking mental notes. The doctor followed Reacher into the kitchen.

‘Want coffee?’ he asked.

I’m not drunk, he meant.

Reacher said, ‘Sure. Lots of it.’

The doctor set about filling the machine. The kitchen was even warmer than the hallway. Reacher took off his coat and hung it on the back of a chair.

The doctor asked, ‘What do you mean, inconclusive?’

Reacher said, ‘I mean I could make up a story about how the Duncans did it, but there’s really no proof either way.’

‘Can you find proof? Is that why you came back?’

Reacher said, ‘I came back because those two Italian guys who were after me seem to have joined up with a regular United Nations of other guys. Not a peacekeeping force, either. I think they’re all coming here. I want to know why.’

‘Pride,’ the doctor said. ‘You messed with the Duncans, and they won’t tolerate that. Their people can’t handle you, so they’ve called in reinforcements.’

‘Doesn’t make sense,’ Reacher said. ‘Those Italians were here before me. You know that. You heard what Eleanor Duncan said. So there’s some other reason. They have some kind of a dispute with the Duncans.’

‘Then why would they help the Duncans in their own dispute with you?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘How many of them are coming?’ the doctor asked.

From the hallway his wife said, ‘Five of them.’ She had just gotten off the phone. She stepped into the kitchen and said, ‘And they’re not coming. They’re already here. That was the message on the phone tree. The Italians are back. With three other men. Three cars in total. The Italians in their blue Chevy, plus two guys in a red Ford, and one guy in a black car that everyone swears is Seth Duncan’s Cadillac.’

THIRTY-NINE

REACHER POURED HIMSELF A CUP OF COFFEE AND THOUGHT FOR a long moment and said, ‘I left Seth Duncan’s Cadillac at the Marriott.’

The doctor’s wife asked, ‘So how did you get back here?’

‘I took a Chevy Malibu from one of the bad guys.’

‘That thing on the driveway?’

‘No, that’s a GMC Yukon I took from a football player.’

‘So what happened with the Cadillac?’

‘I left a guy stranded. I stole his car, and then I guess he stole mine. Probably not deliberate tit for tat. Probably just coincidental, because there wasn’t really an infinite choice down there. He didn’t want some piece-of-shit pick-up truck, obviously, and he didn’t want anything with big-time security built in. The Cadillac fit the bill. Probably the only thing that did. Or else he was just plain lazy, and didn’t want to look around too long. The Cadillac was right there. We were all in the same hotel.’

‘Did you see the guys?’

‘I didn’t see the Italians. But I saw the other four.’

‘That makes six, not five. Where’s the other one?’

‘I promise you something,’ Reacher said. ‘The guy who took the Cadillac put his bag on the back seat, not in the trunk.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Because that’s where the sixth guy is. In the trunk. I put him there.’

‘Does he have air?’

‘He doesn’t need air. Not any more.’

‘Sweet Jesus. What happened?’

Reacher said, ‘I think whatever else they’re doing, they’re coming here to get me first. Like a side issue of some kind. Like mission creep. I don’t know why, but that’s the only way I can explain it. The way I see it, they all assembled tonight in the Marriott and the Italians announced the mission and gave the others a description, probably vague and definitely secondhand, because they haven’t actually laid eyes on me yet, and then I bumped into one of the others after that, in the lobby, and he was looking at me, like he was asking himself, is that the guy? Can it be? Can it? I could see him thinking. We got out to the lot and he put his hand in his pocket and I hit him. You ever heard of commotio cordis?’

‘Chest wall trauma,’ the doctor said. ‘Causes fatal cardiac dysrhythmia.’

‘Ever seen it?’

‘No.’

‘Neither had I. But I’m here to tell you, it works real good.’

‘What was in his pocket?’

‘A knife and a gun and an ID from Vegas.’

‘Vegas?’ the doctor said. ‘Do the Duncans have gambling debts? Is that the dispute?’

‘Possible,’ Reacher said. ‘No question the Duncans have been living beyond their means for a long time. They’ve been getting some extra income from somewhere.’

‘Why say that? They’ve been extorting forty farms for thirty years. And a motel. That’s a lot of money.’

‘No, it isn’t,’ Reacher said. ‘Not really. This isn’t the wealthiest area in the world. They could be taking half of what everyone earns, and that wouldn’t buy them a pot to piss in. But Seth lives like a king and they pay ten football players just to be here. They couldn’t do all that on the back of a seasonal enterprise.’

The doctor’s wife said, ‘We should worry about that later. Right now the Cornhuskers are on the loose, and we don’t know where or why. That’s what’s

Commandos are on the loose, and we don't know where or why. That's what's important tonight. Dorothy Coe might be coming over.'

'Here?' Reacher asked. 'Now?'

The doctor said, 'That's what happens sometimes. With the women, mostly. It's a support thing. Like a sisterhood. Whoever feels the most vulnerable clusters together.'

His wife said, 'Which is always Dorothy and me, and sometimes others too, depending on exactly what the panic is.'

'Not a good idea,' Reacher said. 'From a tactical point of view, I mean. It gives them one target instead of multiple targets.'

'It's strength in numbers. It works. Sometimes those boys can act a little inhibited. They don't necessarily like witnesses around, when they're sent after women.'

They took cups of coffee and waited in the dining room, which had a view of the road. The road was dark. There was nothing moving on it. It was indistinguishable from the rest of the nighttime terrain. They sat quiet for a spell, on hard upright chairs, with the lights off to preserve their view out the window, and then the doctor said, 'Tell us about the files.'

'I saw a photograph,' Reacher said. 'Dorothy's kid was Asian.'

'Vietnamese,' the doctor's wife said. 'Artie Coe did a tour over there. Something about it affected him, I guess. When the boat people thing started, they stepped up and adopted.'

'Did many people from here go to Vietnam?'

'A fair number.'

'Did the Duncans go?'

'I don't think so. They were in an essential occupation.'

'So was Arthur Coe.'

'Different strokes for different folks.'

Different strokes for different folks.

‘Who was chairman of the local draft board?’

‘Their father. Old man Duncan.’

‘So the boys didn’t keep on farming to please him. They kept on to keep their asses out of the war.’

‘I suppose.’

‘Good to know,’ Reacher said. ‘They’re cowards, too, apart from anything else.’

The doctor said, ‘Tell us about the investigation.’

‘Long story,’ Reacher said. ‘There were eleven boxes of paper.’

‘And?’

‘The investigation had problems,’ Reacher said.

‘Like what?’

‘One was a conceptual problem, and the others were details. The lead detective was a guy called Carson, and the ground kind of shifted under his feet over a twelve-hour period. It started out as a straightforward missing persons issue, and then it slowly changed to a potential homicide. And Carson didn’t really revisit the early phase in the light of the later phase. The first night, he had people checking their own outbuildings. Which was reasonable, frankly, with a missing kid. But later he never really searched those outbuildings independently. Only one of them, basically, for an old couple who hadn’t done it themselves. Everyone else self-certified, really. In effect they said no sir, the kid ain’t here, and she never was, I promise. At some point Carson should have started over and treated everyone as a potential suspect. But he didn’t. He focused on the Duncans only, based on information received. And the Duncans came out clean.’

‘You think it was someone else?’

‘Could have been anyone else in the world, just passing through. If not, it could have been any of the local residents. Probably not Dorothy or Arthur Coe themselves, but that still leaves thirty-nine possibilities.’

The doctor’s wife said, ‘I think it was the Duncans.’

‘Three different agencies disagree with you.’

‘They might be wrong.’

Reacher nodded in the dark, his gesture unobserved.

‘They might be,’ he said. ‘There might have been another conceptual error. A failure of imagination, anyway. It’s clear that the Duncans never left their compound, and it’s clear that the kid never showed up there. There are reliable witnesses to both of those facts. Four boys were building a fence. And the science came up negative, too. But the Duncans could have had an accomplice. A fifth man, essentially. He could have scooped up the kid and taken her somewhere else. Carson never even thought about that. He never checked known associates. And he should have, probably. You wait five years to build a fence, and you happen to be doing it on the exact same day a kid disappears? Could have been a prefabricated alibi. Carson should have wondered, at least. I would have, for sure.’

‘Who would the fifth man have been?’

‘Anyone,’ Reacher said. ‘A friend, maybe. One of their drivers, perhaps. It’s clear a vehicle was involved, otherwise why was the bike never found?’

‘I always wondered about the bike.’

‘Did they have a friend? Did you ever see one, when you were babysitting?’

‘I saw a few people, I guess.’

‘Anyone close? This would have been a very intimate type of relationship. Shared enthusiasms, shared passions, absolute trust. Someone into the same kind of thing they were into.’

‘A man?’

‘Almost certainly. The same kind of creep.’

‘I’m not sure. I can’t remember. Where would he have taken her?’

‘Anywhere, theoretically. And that was another major mistake. Carson never really looked anywhere else, apart from the Duncans’ compound. It was crazy not to search the transportation depot, for instance. As a matter of fact I don’t think that was a real problem, because it seems like that place is real busy in the early part of the summer, seven days a week. Something to do with alfalfa, whatever that is. No one would take an abducted kid to a work site full of witnesses. But there was one other place Carson should have checked for sure. And he didn’t. He ignored it completely. Possibly because of ignorance or confusion.’

‘Which was where?’

But Reacher didn’t get time to answer, because right then the window blazed bright and the room filled with moving lights and shadows. They played over the walls, the ceiling, their faces, alternately stark white and deep black.

Headlight beams, strobing through the posts of the fence.

A car, coming in fast from the east.

FORTY

IT WAS DOROTHY COE COMING IN FROM THE EAST, IN HER RATTY OLD pick-up truck. Reacher knew it a second after he saw her lights. He could hear her holed muffler banging away like a motorcycle. Like a Harley Davidson moving away from a stoplight. She came on fast and then she braked hard and stopped dead and stood off just short of the house. She had seen the gold Yukon on the driveway. She had recognized it, presumably. A Cornhusker's car. She probably knew it well. The doctor's wife stepped out to the hallway and undid the locks and the chain and opened the front door and waved. Dorothy Coe didn't move an inch. Twenty-five years of habitual caution. She thought it could be a trick or a decoy. Reacher joined the doctor's wife on the step. He pointed to the Yukon and then to himself. Big gestures, like semaphore. My truck. Dorothy Coe moved on again and turned in. She shut down and got out and walked to the door. She had a wool hat pulled down over her ears and she was wearing a quilted coat open over a grey dress. She asked, 'Did the Cornhuskers come here?'

The doctor's wife said, 'Not yet.'

'What do you think they want?'

'We don't know.'

They all stepped back inside and the doctor closed up after them, locks and chain, and they went back to the dining room, now four of them. Dorothy Coe took off her coat, because of the heat. They sat in a line and watched the window like a movie screen. Dorothy Coe was next to Reacher. He asked her, 'They didn't go to your place?'

She said, 'No. But Mr Vincent saw one, passing the motel. About twenty minutes ago. He was watching out the window.'

Reacher said, 'That was me. I came in that way, in the truck I took. There are only five of them left now.'

'OK. I understand. But that concerns me a little.'

'Why?'

‘Why?’

‘I would expect at least one of us to have seen at least one of them, roaming around somewhere. But no one has. Which means they aren’t all spread out. They’re all bunched up. They’re hunting in a pack.’

‘Looking for me?’

‘Possibly.’

‘Then I don’t want to bring them here. Want me to leave?’

‘Maybe,’ Dorothy said.

‘Yes,’ the doctor said.

‘No,’ his wife said.

Impasse. No decision. They all turned back to the window and watched the road. It stayed dark. The cloud was clearing a little. There was faint moonlight in the sky. It was almost one o’clock in the morning.

The motel was closed down for the night, but Vincent was still in the lounge. He was still watching out the window. He had seen the gold Yukon go by. He had recognized it. He had seen it before, many times. It belonged to a young man called John. A very unpleasant person. A bully, even by Duncan standards. Once he had made Vincent get down on his knees and beg not to be beaten. Beg, like a dog, with limp hands held up, pleading and howling, five whole minutes.

Vincent had called in the Yukon sighting, to the phone tree, and then he had gone back to the window and watched some more. Twenty minutes had gone by without incident. Then he saw the five men everyone was talking about. Their strange little convoy pulled into his lot. The blue Chevrolet, the red Ford, Seth Duncan’s black Cadillac. He knew from the phone tree that someone else was using Seth’s car. No one knew how or why. But he saw the guy. A small man slid out of the driver’s seat, rumpled and unshaven, foreign, like people from the Middle East he had seen on the news. Then the two men who had roughed him up climbed out of the Chevrolet. Then two more got out of the Ford, tall, heavy, dark-skinned. Also foreign. They all stood together in the gloom.

Vincent didn’t automatically think the five men were there for him. There could

be other reasons. His lot was the only stopping place for miles. Plenty of drivers used it, for all kinds of purposes, passers-by checking their maps, taking off their coats, getting things from the trunk, sometimes just stretching their legs. It was private property, no question, properly deeded, but it was used almost like a public facility, like a regular roadside turnout.

He watched. The five men were talking. His windows were ordinary commercial items, chosen by his parents in 1969. They were screened on the inside and opened outward, with little winding handles. Vincent thought about opening the one he was standing behind. Just a crack. It was almost an obligation. He might hear what the five men were saying. He might get valuable information, for the phone tree. Everyone was expected to contribute. That was how the system worked. So he started to turn the handle, slowly, a little at a time. At first it went easily. But then it went stiff. The casement was stuck to the insulating strip. Paint and grime and long disuse. He used finger and thumb, and tried to ease some steady pressure into it. He wanted to pop it loose gently. He didn't want to make a loud plastic sound. The five men were still talking. Or rather, the man from the Cadillac was talking, and the other four were listening.

*

Mahmeini's man was saying, 'I let my partner out a mile back. He's going to work behind the lines. He's more use to me that way. Pincer movements are always best.'

Roberto Cassano said, 'Is he going to coordinate with the rest of us?'

'Of course he is. What else would he do? We're a team, aren't we?'

'You should have kept him around. We need to make a plan first.'

'For this? We don't need to make a plan. It's just flushing a guy out. How hard can it be? You said it yourself, the locals will help.'

'They're all asleep.'

'We'll wake them up. With a bit of luck we'll get it done before morning.'

'And then what?'

'Then we'll spend the day leaning on the Duncans. We all need that delivery,

and since we all had to drag ourselves up here, we might as well all spend our time on what's important.'

'So where do we start?'

'You tell me. You've spent time here.'

'The doctor,' Cassano said. 'He's the weakest link.'

Mahmeini's man said, 'So where's the doctor?'

'South and west of here.'

'OK, go talk to him. I'll go somewhere else.'

'Why?'

'Because if you know he's the weakest link, then so does Reacher. Dollars to doughnuts, he ain't there. So you go waste your time, and I'll go do some work.'

Vincent gave up on cracking the window. He could tell there was no way it would open without a ripping sound, and drawing attention right then would not be a good idea. And the impromptu conference in his lot was breaking up anyway. The small rumpled man slid back into Seth Duncan's Cadillac and the big black car crunched through a wide arc over the gravel. Its headlight beams swept across Vincent's window. He ducked just in time. Then the Cadillac turned left on the two-lane and took off south.

The other four men stayed right where they were. They watched until the Cadillac's tail lights were lost to sight, and then they turned back and started talking again, face to face in pairs, each one of them with his right hand in his right-hand coat pocket, for some strange reason, all four of them symmetrical, like a formal tableau.

Roberto Cassano watched the Cadillac go and said, 'He doesn't have a partner. There's nobody working behind the lines. What lines, anyway? It's all bullshit.'

Safir's main man said, 'Of course he has a partner. We all saw him, right there in your room.'

'He's gone. He ran out. He took whatever car they rented. That guy is on his

'He's gone. He ran out. He took whatever car they rented. That guy is on his own now. He stole that Cadillac from the lot. We saw it there earlier.'

No reply.

Cassano said, 'Unless one of you had a hand in it. Or both of you.'

'What are you saying?'

'We're all grown-ups here,' Cassano said. 'We know how the world works. So let's not pretend we don't. Mahmeini told his guys to take the rest of us out, and Safir told you guys to take the rest of us out, and Rossi sure as hell told us to take the rest of you out. I'm being honest here. Mahmeini and Safir and Rossi are all the same. They all want the whole pie. We all know that.'

Safir's guy said, 'We didn't do anything. We figured you did. We were talking about it all the way up here. It was obvious that Cadillac isn't a rental.'

'We didn't do anything to the guy. We were going to wait for later.'

'Us too.'

'You sure?'

'Yes.'

'Swear?'

'You swear first.'

Cassano said, 'On my mother's grave.'

Safir's guy said, 'On mine too. So what happened?'

'He ran out. Must have. Maybe chicken. Or short on discipline. Maybe Mahmeini isn't what we think he is. Which raises possibilities.'

Nobody spoke.

Cassano said, 'We have a vote here, don't you think? The four of us? We could take out Mahmeini's other boy, and leave each other alone. That way Rossi and Safir end up with fifty per cent more pie each. They could live with that. And we

sure as hell could.'

'Like a truce?'

'Truces are temporary. Call it an alliance. That's permanent.' Nobody spoke. Safir's guys glanced at each other. Not a difficult decision. A two-front war, or a one-front war? History was positively littered with examples of smart people choosing the latter over the former.

Vincent was still watching out the window. He saw quiet conversation, low tones, some major tension there, then some easing, the body language relaxing, some speculative looks, some tentative smiles. Then all four men took their hands out of their pockets and shook, four separate ways, wrists crossing, some pats on the back, some slaps on the shoulder. Four new friends, all suddenly getting along just great.

There was a little more talk after that, all of it fast and breezy, like simple obvious steps were being planned and confirmed, and then there were more pats on the back and slaps on the shoulder, all shuffling mobile catch you later kind of stuff, and then the two big dark-skinned men climbed back into their red Ford. They closed their doors and got set to go and then the Italian who had done all the talking suddenly remembered something and turned back and tapped on the driver's glass.

The window came down.

The Italian had a gun in his hand.

The Italian leaned in and there were two bright flashes, one hard after the other, like orange camera strobes right there inside the car, behind the glass, all six windows lighting up, and two loud explosions, then a pause, then two more, two more bright flashes, two more loud explosions, evenly spaced, carefully placed.

Then the Italian stepped away and Vincent saw the two dark-skinned men all slumped down in their seats, somehow suddenly much smaller, deflated, diminished, smeared with dark matter, their heads lolling down on their chests, their heads altered and misshapen, parts of their heads actually missing.

Vincent fell to the floor under the inside sill of his window and vomited in his throat. Then he ran for the phone.

Angelo Mancini opened the red Ford's trunk and found two nylon roll-aboard suitcases, which more or less confirmed a personal theory of his. Real men carried their bags. They didn't wheel them around like women. He unzipped one of the bags and rooted around and came up with a bunch of shirts on wire hangers, all folded together concertina-style. He took one and tore it off the hanger and crushed the hanger flat and opened the Ford's filler neck and used the hanger to poke the shirt down into the tube, one sleeve in, the body all bunched up, the other sleeve trailing out. He lit the trailing cuff with a paper match from a book he had taken from the diner near the Marriott. Then he walked away and got in the blue Chevrolet's passenger seat and Roberto Cassano drove him away.

The road beyond the post-and-rail fence outside the dining room window stayed dark. The doctor got up and left the room and came back with four mugs of fresh coffee on a plastic tray. His wife sat quiet. Next to her Dorothy Coe sat quiet. The sisterhood, enduring, waiting it out. Just one long night out of more than nine thousand in the last twenty-five years, most of them tranquil, presumably, but some of them not. Nine thousand separate sunsets, each one of them heralding who knew what.

Reacher was waiting it out, too. He knew that Dorothy wanted to ask what he had found in the county archive. But she was taking her time getting around to it, and that was OK with him. He wasn't about to bring it up unannounced. He had dealt with his fair share of other people's tragedy, all of it bad, none of it easy, but he figured there was nothing worse than the Coe family story. Nothing at all. So he waited, ten silent minutes, then fifteen, and finally she asked, 'Did they still have the files?'

He answered, 'Yes, they did.'

'Did you see them?'

'Yes, I did.'

'Did you see her photograph?'

'She was very beautiful.'

'Wasn't she?' Dorothy said, smiling, not with pride, because the kid's beauty was not her achievement, but with simple wonderment. She said, 'I still miss

her. Which I think is strange, really, because the things I miss are the things I actually had, and they would be gone now anyway. The things I didn't get to see would have happened afterwards. She would be thirty-three now. All grown up. And I don't miss those things, because I don't have a clear picture of what they might have been. I don't know what she might have become. I don't know if she would have been a mother herself, and stayed around here, or if she would have been a career girl, maybe a lawyer or a scientist, living far away in a big city.'

'Did she do well in school?'

'Very well.'

'Any favourite subjects?'

'All of them.'

'Where was she going that day?'

'She loved flowers. I like to think she was going searching for some.'

'Did she roam around often?'

'Most days, when she wasn't in school. Sundays especially. She loved her bike. She was always going somewhere. Those were innocent times. She did the same things I did, when I was eight.'

Reacher paused a beat and said, 'I was a cop of sorts for a long time. So may I ask you a serious question?'

She said, 'Yes.'

'Do you really want to know what happened to her?'

'Can't be worse than what I imagine.'

Reacher said, 'I'm afraid it can. And it sometimes is. That's why I asked. Sometimes it's better not to know.'

She didn't speak for a long moment.

Then she said, 'My neighbour's son hears her ghost screaming.'

‘I met him,’ Reacher said. ‘He smokes a lot of weed.’

‘I hear it too, sometimes. Or I think I do. It makes me wonder.’

‘I don’t believe in ghosts.’

‘Neither do I, really. I mean, look at me.’

Reacher did. A solid, capable woman, about sixty years old, blunt and square, worn down by work, worn down by hardship, fading slowly to grey.

She said, ‘Yes, I really want to know what happened to her.’

Reacher said, ‘OK.’

Two minutes later the phone rang. An old-fashioned instrument. The slow peal of a mechanical bell, a low sonorous sound, doleful and not at all urgent. The doctor’s wife jumped up and ran out to the hallway to answer. She said hello, but nothing more. She just listened. The phone tree again. The others heard the thin distorted crackle of a loud panicked voice from the earpiece, and they sensed a gasping shuffle out there in the hallway. Some kind of surprising news. Dorothy Coe fidgeted in her chair. The doctor got to his feet. Reacher watched the window. The road stayed dark.

The doctor’s wife came back in, more puzzled than worried, more amazed than frightened. She said, ‘Mr Vincent just saw the Italians shoot the men from the red car. With a gun. They’re dead. Then they set the car on fire. Right outside his window. In the motel lot.’

Nobody spoke, until Reacher said, ‘Well, that changes things a little.’

‘How?’

‘I thought maybe we had six guys working for the same organization, with some kind of a two-way relationship, them and the Duncans. But we don’t. They’re three pairs. Three separate organizations, plus the Duncans make four. Which makes it a food chain. The Duncans owe somebody something, and that somebody owes somebody else, and so on, all the way up the line. They’re all invested, and they’re all here to safeguard their investment. And as long as they’re all here, they’re all trying to cut each other out. They’re all trying to shorten the chain.’

shorten the chain.

‘So we’re caught in the middle of a gang war?’

‘Look on the bright side. Six guys showed up this afternoon, and now there are only three of them left. Fifty per cent attrition. That works for me.’

The doctor said, ‘We should call the police.’

His wife said, ‘No, the police are sixty miles away. And the Cornhuskers are right here, right now. That’s what we need to worry about tonight. We need to know what they’re doing.’

Reacher asked, ‘How do they normally communicate?’

‘Cell phone.’

‘I’ve got one,’ Reacher said. ‘In the truck I took. Maybe we could listen in. Then we’d know for sure what they’re doing.’

The doctor undid the locks and unlatched the chain and they all crowded out to the driveway. Reacher opened the Yukon’s passenger door and rooted around in the foot well and came out with the cell phone, slim and black, like a candy bar. He stood in the angle of the door and flipped it open and said, ‘They’ll use conference calls, right? This thing will ring and all five of them will be on?’

‘More likely vibrate, not ring,’ the doctor said. ‘Check the settings and the call register and the address book. You should be able to find an access number.’

‘You check,’ Reacher said. ‘I’m not familiar with cell phones.’ He tracked around the back of the truck and handed the phone to the doctor. Then he looked to his left and saw light in the mist to the east. A high hemispherical glow, trembling, bouncing, weakening and strengthening and weakening, very white, almost blue.

A car, coming west towards them, pretty fast.

It was about half a mile away. Just like before, the misty glow resolved itself to a fierce source low down above the surface of the road, then to twin fierce sources, spaced just feet apart, oval in shape, low to the ground, blue-white and intense. And just like before, the ovals kept on coming, getting closer, flickering and

jittering because of firm suspension and fast steering. They looked small at first, because of the distance, and they stayed small because they were small, because the car was a Mazda Miata, low and tiny and red. Reacher recognized it about two hundred feet out.

Eleanor Duncan.

The sisterhood, clustering together.

A hundred feet out the Mazda slowed a little. Its top was up this time, like a tight little hat. Cold weather, no further need for instant identification. No more sentries to distract.

Fifty feet out, it braked hard, ready for the turn in, and red light flared in the mist behind it.

Twenty feet out, it swung wide and started to turn.

Ten feet out, Reacher remembered three things.

First, Eleanor Duncan was not on the phone tree.

Second, his gun was in his coat.

Third, his coat was in the kitchen.

The Mazda swung in fast and crunched over the gravel and jammed to a stop right behind Dorothy Coe’s pick-up. The door opened wide and Seth Duncan unfolded his lanky frame and stepped out.

He was holding a shotgun.

FORTY-ONE

SETH DUNCAN HAD A HUGE ALUMINIUM SPLINT ON HIS FACE, LIKE a dull metal patch taped to a large piece of rotten fruit. All kinds of sick moonlit colours were spreading out from under it. Yellows, and browns, and purples. He was wearing dark pants and a dark sweater with a new parka over it. The shotgun in his hands was an old Remington 870 pump. Probably a twelve-gauge, probably a twenty-inch barrel. A walnut stock, a seven-round tubular magazine, altogether a fine all-purpose weapon, well proven, more than four million built and sold, used by the Navy for shipboard security, used by the Marines for close-quarters combat, used by the army for heavy short-range firepower, used by civilians for hunting, used by cops as a riot gun, used by cranky homeowners as a get-off-my-lawn deterrent.

Nobody moved.

Reacher watched carefully and saw that Seth Duncan was holding the Remington pretty steady. His finger was on the trigger. He was aiming it from the hip, straight back at Reacher, which meant he was aiming it at Dorothy Coe and the doctor and his wife, too, because buckshot spreads a little, and all four of them were clustered tight together, on the driveway ten feet from the doctor's front door. All kinds of collateral damage, just waiting to happen.

Nobody spoke.

The Mazda idled. Its door was still open. Seth Duncan started to move up the driveway. He raised the Remington's stock to his shoulder and closed one eye and squinted along the barrel and walked forward, slow and steady. A useless manoeuvre on rough terrain. But feasible on smooth gravel. The Remington stayed dead on target.

He stopped thirty feet away. He said, 'All of you sit down. Right where you are. Cross-legged on the ground.'

Nobody moved.

Reacher asked, 'Is that thing loaded?'

Duncan said, 'You bet your ass it is.'

Duncan said, 'You bet your ass it is.'

'Take care it doesn't go off by accident.'

'It won't,' Duncan said, all nasal and inarticulate, because of his injury, and because his cheek was pressed hard against the Remington's walnut stock.

Nobody moved. Reacher watched and thought. Behind him he heard the doctor stir and heard him ask, 'Can we talk?'

Duncan said, 'Sit down.'

The doctor said, 'We should discuss this. Like reasonable people.'

'Sit down.'

'No, tell us what you want.'

A brave try, but in Reacher's estimation the wrong tactic. The doctor thought there was something to be gained by spinning things out, by using up the clock. Reacher thought the exact opposite was true. He thought there was no time to waste. None at all. He said, 'It's cold.'

Duncan said, 'So?'

'Too cold to sit down outside. Too cold to stand up outside. Let's go inside.'

'I want you outside.'

'Why?'

'Because I do.'

'Then let them go get their coats.'

'Why should I?'

'Self-respect,' Reacher said. 'You're wearing a coat. If it's warm enough not to need one, then you're a pussy. If it's cold enough to bundle up, then you're making innocent people suffer unnecessarily. If you think you've got a beef with me, OK, but these folks have never hurt you.'

Seth Duncan thought about it for a second, the gun still up at his shoulder, his head still bent down to it, one eye still closed. He said, ‘OK, one at a time. The others stay here, like hostages. Mrs Coe goes first. Get your coat. Nothing else. Don’t touch the phone.’

Nobody moved for a beat, and then Dorothy Coe peeled out of the cluster and walked to the door and stepped inside. She was gone a minute, and then she came back wearing her coat, this time buttoned over her dress. She resumed her position.

Duncan said, ‘Sit down, Mrs Coe.’

Dorothy tugged her coat down and sat, not cross-legged, but with her knees drawn up to one side.

Reacher said, ‘Now the doctor’s wife.’

Duncan said, ‘Don’t tell me what to do.’

‘I’m just saying. Ladies first, right?’

‘OK, the doctor’s wife. Go. Same rules. Just the coat. Don’t touch the phone. Don’t forget I have hostages here. Including your beloved husband.’

The doctor’s wife peeled out of the cluster. A minute later she was back, wearing her wool coat, and a hat, and gloves, and a muffler.

‘Sit down,’ Duncan said.

She sat down, right next to Dorothy Coe, cross-legged, her back straight, her hands on her knees, her gaze level and aimed at a faraway spot in the fields. Nothing there, but Reacher guessed it was better than looking at her tormentor.

Reacher said, ‘Now the doctor.’

‘OK, go,’ Duncan said.

The doctor peeled out and was gone a minute. He came back in a blue parka, all kinds of nylon and Gore-tex and zippered compartments. He sat down without waiting to be told.

Reacher said, ‘Now me.’

Duncan said, ‘No, not you. Not now, not ever. You stay right there. I don’t trust you.’

‘That’s not very nice.’

‘Sit down.’

‘Make me.’

Duncan leaned into the gun, the final per cent, like he was ready to fire.

He said, ‘Sit down.’

Reacher didn’t move. Then he glanced to his right and saw lights in the mist, and he knew that his chance had gone.

The Cornhuskers came on fast, five of them in five separate vehicles, a tight little high-speed convoy, three pick-up trucks and two SUVs. They all jammed to a stop on the road in line with the fence, five vehicles all nose to tail, and five doors flung open, and five guys spilled out, all of them in red jackets, all of them moving fast, the smallest of them the size of a house. They swarmed straight in, climbing the fence in unison, moving across the dormant lawn on a broad front, coming in wide of the Remington’s potential trajectory. The Remington stayed rock steady in Seth Duncan’s hands. Reacher was watching its muzzle. It wasn’t moving at all, its blued steel dark in the moonlight, trained dead on his chest from thirty feet, the smooth bore at its centre looking big enough to stick a thumb in.

Duncan said, ‘Take the three others inside, and keep them there.’

Rough hands grabbed at the doctor, and his wife, and Dorothy Coe, hauling them back to their feet, by their arms and shoulders, pulling them away, hustling them across the last of the gravel, pushing them in through the door. Eight people went in, and a minute later four came out, all of them football players, all of them crunching back to where Reacher was standing.

Duncan said, ‘Hold him.’

Reacher was spending no time on regret or recrimination. No time at all. The

Reacher was spending no time on regret or recrimination. No time at all. The time for rueing mistakes and learning from them came later. As always he was focused in the present and the immediate future. People who wasted time and energy cursing recent errors were certain losers. Not that Reacher saw an easy path to certain victory. Not right then. Not in the short term. Right then he saw nothing ahead but a world of hurt.

The four big guys stepped up close. No opportunity. The Remington stayed trained on its target and two guys came in from wide positions, never getting between Reacher and the gun. They stepped alongside him and grabbed an arm each, big strong hands on his elbows from behind, on his wrists from in front, pushing one, pulling the other, straightening his arms, bending his elbows back, kicking his feet apart, hooking their ankles in front of his ankles, holding him immobile. A third guy came up behind him and stood between his spread feet and wrapped massive arms around his chest. The fourth backed off and stood ten feet from Duncan.

Reacher didn't struggle. No point. Absolutely no point at all. Each of the three men holding him was taller than him by inches and outweighed him by fifty pounds. No doubt they were all slow and stupid and untutored, but right then sheer dumb bulk was doing the job just fine. He could move his feet a little, and he could move his head a little, but that was all, and all he could do with his feet was move them backward, which would pitch him forward on his face, except that the guy who had him in the bear hug from behind would hold him upright. And all he could do with his head was duck his chin to his chest, or jerk it back a couple of inches. Not enough to hurt the guy behind him.

He was stuck, and he knew it.

Seth Duncan lowered the gun to his hip again. He walked forward with it and then handed it off to the fourth guy. He walked on without it and stopped face to face with Reacher, a yard away. His eyes were bloodshot and his breathing was low and shallow. He was quivering a little. Some kind of fury or excitement. He said, 'I have a message for you, pal.'

Reacher said, 'Who from? The National Association of Assholes?'

'No, from me personally.'

'What, you let your membership lapse?'

‘Ten seconds from now we’ll know who’s a member of that club, and who isn’t.’

‘So what’s the message?’

‘It’s more of a question.’

‘OK, so what’s the question?’

‘The question is, how do you like it?’

Reacher had been fighting since he was five years old, and he had never had his nose broken. Not even once. Partly good luck, and partly good management. Plenty of people had tried, over the years, either deliberately or in a flurry of savage unaimed blows, but none had ever succeeded. Not one. Not ever. Not even close. It was a fact Reacher was proud of, in a peculiar way. It was a symbol. A talisman. A badge of honour. He had all kinds of nicks and cuts and scars on his face and his arms and his body, but he felt that the distinctive but intact bone in his nose made up for them.

It said: I’m still standing.

The blow came in exactly as he expected it to, a clenched fist, a straight right, hard and heavy, riding up a little, aiming high, as if Duncan subconsciously expected Reacher to flinch up and back, like his wife Eleanor probably did every single time. But Reacher didn’t flinch up and back. He started with his head up and back, his eyes open, watching down his nose, timing it, then jerking forward from the neck, smashing a perfect improvised head-butt straight into Duncan’s knuckles, an instant high-speed high-impact collision between the thick ridge in Reacher’s brow and the delicate bones in Duncan’s hand. No contest. No contest at all. Reacher had a skull like concrete, and an arch was the strongest structure known to man, and hands were the most fragile parts of the body. Duncan screamed and snatched his hand away and cradled it limp against his chest and hopped a whole yowling circle, looking up, looking down, stunned and whimpering. He had three or four busted phalanges, Reacher figured, certainly a couple of proximals, and maybe a couple of cracked distals too, from the fingers folding much tighter than nature intended, under the force of the sudden massive compression.

‘Asshole,’ Reacher said.

Duncan clamped his right wrist under his left armpit and huffed and blew and stomped around. He came to rest a whole minute later, a little cramped and crouched and bent, and he glowered up and out from either side of his splint, hurting and angry and humiliated, looking first at Reacher, and then at his fourth guy, who was standing there stock-still, holding the shotgun. Duncan jerked his head, from the guy to Reacher, a gesture full of silent fury and impatience.

Get him.

The fourth guy stepped up. Reacher was pretty sure he wasn't going to shoot. No one fires a shotgun at a group of four people, three of which are his friends.

Reacher was pretty sure it was going to be worse than shooting.

The guy reversed the gun. Right hand on the barrel, left hand on the stock.

The guy behind Reacher moved. He wrapped his left forearm tight around Reacher's throat, and he clamped his right palm tight on Reacher's forehead.

Immobile.

The fourth guy raised the gun horizontal, butt first, two-handed, and cocked it back over his right shoulder, ready to go, lining it up like a spear, and then he rocked forward and took a step and aimed carefully and jabbed the butt straight at the centre of Reacher's face and

CRACK

BLACK

FORTY-TWO

JACOB DUNCAN CONVENED AN UNSCHEDULED MIDDLE-OF-THE-NIGHT meeting with his brothers, in his own kitchen, not Jonas's or Jasper's, with Wild Turkey, not Knob Creek, and plenty of it, because his mood was celebratory.

'I just got off the phone,' he said. 'You'll be pleased to hear my boy has redeemed himself.'

Jasper asked, 'How?'

'He captured Jack Reacher.'

Jonas asked, 'How?'

Jacob Duncan leaned back in his chair and shot his feet straight out in front of him, relaxed, expansive, a man at ease, a man with a story to tell. He said, 'I drove Seth home, as you know, but I let him out at the end of his road, because he was a little down, and he wanted to walk a spell in the night air. He got within a hundred yards of his house, and he was nearly run over by a car. His car, as it happens. His own Cadillac, going like a bat out of hell. Naturally he hurried home. His wife was induced to reveal all the details. It turns out Reacher stole the Cadillac earlier in the afternoon. It turns out the doctor was with him. Misguided, of course, but it seems the poor fellow has formed an alliance of sorts with our Mr Reacher. So Seth took his old Remington pump and set off in Eleanor's car and sure enough, Reacher was indeed at the doctor's house, large as life and twice as natural.'

'Where is he now?'

'In a safe place. It seems like the capture was mostly uneventful.'

'Is he alive?'

'So far,' Jacob Duncan said. 'But how long he stays alive is what we need to discuss.'

The room went quiet. The others sat and waited, as they had so many times

before, for their brother Jacob, the eldest, a contemplative man, always ready with a pronouncement, or a decision, or a nugget of wisdom, or an analysis, or a proposal.

Jacob said, ‘Seth wants to finesse the whole thing, right down to the wire, and frankly I’m tempted to let him try. He wants to rebuild his credibility with us, which of course I told him isn’t necessary, but it remains true that all of us need to pay some attention to our own credibility, in a collective sense, with Mr Rossi, our good friend to the south.’

Jasper asked, ‘What does Seth want to do?’

‘He wants to stage things so that our prior hedging is shown to have been entirely justified. He wants to wait until our shipment is about an hour away, whereupon he wants to unveil Reacher to Mr Rossi’s boys, whereupon he wants to fake a phone call and have the truck arrive within the next sixty minutes, as if what we’ve been saying all along about the delay was indeed true and legitimate.’

‘Too risky,’ Jonas said. ‘Reacher is a dangerous man. We shouldn’t keep him around a minute longer than we have to. That’s just asking for trouble.’

‘As I said, he’s in a safe place. Plus, in the end, if we do it Seth’s way, we’ll have been seen to have solved our own problems with our own hands, without any outside assistance at all, and therefore whatever small shred of vulnerability we displayed will evaporate completely.’

‘Even so. It’s still risky.’

‘There are other factors,’ Jacob said.

The room went quiet again.

Jacob said, ‘We’ve never really known or cared what happens to our shipments once they’re in Mr Rossi’s hands, except that I imagine we always vaguely supposed they pass down a lengthy chain of commerce, sale and resale, to an ultimate destination. And now that chain, or at least a large part of it, has become visible. As of tonight, it seems that three separate participants have representation here. Probably they’re all desperate. It’s clear to me they have agreed to work together to break up the logjam. And once that is done, it’s

equally clear to me they will be under instructions to eliminate one another, so that the last man standing triples his profit.'

Jonas said, 'That's not relevant to us.'

'Except that Mr Rossi's boys seem to be jumping the gun. It was inevitable that one of them would seize the initiative. Our stooges on the phone tree tell me that two men are already dead. Mr Rossi's boys killed them outside Mr Vincent's motel. So my idea is to give Mr Rossi's boys enough time to shorten the chain a little more, so that by the end of tomorrow Mr Rossi himself will be the last man standing, whereupon he and we can have a little talk about splitting the extra profit equally. The way it works mathematically is that we'll all double our shares. Mr Rossi will be happy to live with that, I imagine, and so will we, I'm sure.'

'Still risky.'

'You don't like money, brother?'

'I don't like risk.'

'Everything's a risk. We know that, don't we? We've lived with risk for a long time. It's part of the thrill.'

A long silence.

Jonas said, 'The doctor lied to us. He told us Reacher hitched a ride in a white sedan.'

Jacob nodded. 'He has apologized for that, most sincerely. I'm told he's being a model of cooperation now. His wife is with him, of course. I'm sure that's a factor. He also claims Reacher left Seth's Cadillac sixty miles south of here, and that it was re-stolen quite independently by an operative from further up the chain. A small Middle Eastern person, according to reports on the phone tree. It appears he was the one who nearly ran Seth over.'

'Anything else?'

'The doctor says Reacher saw the police files.'

Silence in the room.

Then Jonas said, ‘And?’

‘Inconclusive, the doctor says.’

‘Conclusive enough to come back.’

‘The doctor says he came back because of the men in the cars.’

Nobody spoke.

Jacob said, ‘But in the interests of full disclosure, the doctor also claims Reacher asked Mrs Coe if she really wants to be told what happened to her daughter.’

‘Reacher can’t possibly know. Not yet.’

‘I agree. But he might be beginning to pull on threads.’

‘Then we have to kill him now. We have to.’

‘It’s just one more day. He’s locked up. Escape is impossible.’

More silence.

Nobody spoke.

Then Jonas asked, ‘Anything else?’

‘Eleanor helped Reacher get past the sentry,’ Jacob said. ‘She defied her husband and left his house, quite brazenly. She and Reacher conspired together to decoy the boy away from his post. He didn’t perform well. We’ll have to fire him, of course. We’ll leave Seth to decide what happens to his wife. And it seems that Seth has broken his hand. He’ll need some attention. It appears Reacher has a very hard head. And that’s all the news I have.’

Nobody spoke.

Jacob said, ‘We need to make a decision about the immediate matter at hand. Life or death. Always the ultimate choice.’

No reply.

Jacob asked, ‘Who wants to go first?’

Nobody spoke.

Jacob said, ‘Then I’ll go first. I vote to let my boy do it his way. I vote to keep Reacher concealed until our truck is close by. It’s a minor increase in risk. One more day, that’s all. Overall, it’s insignificant. And I like finesse. I like a measure of elegance in a solution.’

A long pause.

Then Jasper said, ‘I’m in.’

And Jonas said, ‘OK,’ a little reluctantly.

Reacher woke up in a concrete room full of bright light. He was on his back on the floor, at the foot of a flight of steep stairs. He had been carried down, he figured, not thrown or fallen. Because the back of his skull was OK. He had no sprains or bruises. His limbs were intact, all four of them. He could see and hear and move. His face hurt like hell, but that was to be expected.

The lights were regular incandescent household bulbs, six or eight of them, randomly placed, maybe a hundred watts each. No shades. The concrete was smooth and pale grey. Very fine. Not dusty. It was like an engineering product. High strength. It had been poured with great precision. There were no seams. The angles where the walls met each other and the floor were chamfered and radiused, just slightly. Like a swimming pool, ready for tiling. Reacher had dug swimming pools once. Temporary employment, many years ago. He had seen them in all their different stages of completion.

His face hurt like hell.

Was he in a half-finished swimming pool? Unlikely. Unless it had a temporary roof. The roof was boards laid over heavy joists. The joists were made of multi-ply wood. Manufactured articles. Very strong. Layers of exotic hardwoods, probably glued together with resins under enormous pressure in a giant press in a factory. Probably cut with computer-controlled saws. Delivered on a flat-bed truck. Craned into place. Each one probably weighed a lot.

His face hurt.

He felt confused. He had no idea what time it was. The clock in his head had stopped. He was breathing through his mouth. His nose was jammed solid with blood and swellings. He could feel blood on his lips and his chin. It was thick and almost dry. A nosebleed. Not surprising. Maybe thirty minutes old. Not like Eleanor Duncan's. His own blood clotted fast. It always had. He was the exact opposite of a haemophiliac. A good thing, from time to time. An evolutionary trait, no doubt bred into him through many generations of natural-born survivors.

His face hurt.

There were other things in the concrete room. There were pipes of all different diameters. There were green metal boxes a little crusted with mineral stains. Some wires, some in steel conduit, some loose. There were no windows. Just the walls. And the stairs, with a closed door at the top.

He was underground.

Was he in a bunker of some sort?

He didn't know.

His face hurt like hell. And it was getting worse. Much, much worse. Huge waves of pain were pulsing out between his eyes, behind his nose, boring straight back into his head, one with every heartbeat, bumping and grinding, lapping out into his skull and bouncing around and then fading and receding just in time to be replaced by the next. Bad pain. But he could fight it. He could fight anything. He had been fighting since he was five years old. If there was nothing to fight, he would fight himself. Not that there had ever been a shortage of targets. He had fought his own battles, and his brother's. A family responsibility. Not that his brother had been a coward. Far from it. Nor weak. His brother had been big too. But he had been a rational boy. Gentle, even. Always a disadvantage. Someone would start something, and Joe would waste the first precious second thinking, Why? Reacher never did that. Never. He used the first precious second landing the first precious blow. Fight, and win. Fight, and win.

His face hurt like hell. He looked at the pain, and he set himself apart from it. He saw it, examined it, identified it, corralled it. He isolated it. He challenged it. You against me? Dream on, pal. He built borders for it. Then walls. He built walls and forced the pain behind them and then he moved the walls inward, compressing the pain, crushing it, boxing it in, limiting it, beating it.

Not beating it.

It was beating him.

It was exploding, like bombs on timers, one, two, three. Relentlessly. Everlastingly, with every beat of his heart. It was never going to stop, until his heart stopped. It was insane. In the past he had been wounded with shrapnel and shot in the chest and cut with knives. This was worse. Much worse. This was worse than all of his previous sufferings put together.

Which made no sense. No sense at all. Something was wrong. He had seen busted noses before. Many times. No fun, but nobody made a gigantic fuss about them. Nobody looked like grenades were going off in his head. Not even Seth Duncan. People got up, maybe spat a little, winced, walked it off.

He raised his hand to his face. Slowly. He knew it would be like shooting himself in the head. But he had to know. Because something was wrong. He touched his nose. He gasped, loud and sudden, like an explosive curse, pain and fury and disgust.

The ridge of bone on the front of his nose was broken clean off. It had been driven around under the tight web of skin and cartilage to the side. It was pinned there, like a mountaintop sliced off and reattached to a lower slope.

It hurt like hell.

Maybe the Remington's butt had a metal binding. Brass, or steel. Reinforcement against wear and tear. He hadn't noticed. He knew he had turned his head at the last split second, as much as he could against the resistance of the sweaty palm clamped on his forehead. He had wanted as much of a side-on impact as he could get. Better than head-on. A head-on impact could drive shards of loose bone into the brain.

He closed his eyes.

He opened them again.

He knew what he had to do.

He had to reset the break. He knew that. He knew the costs and the benefits. The pain would lessen, and he would end up with a normal-looking nose. Almost

pain would lessen, and he would end up with a normal-looking nose. Almost. But he would pass out again. No question about that. Touching the injury with a gentle fingertip had nearly taken his head off at the neck. Like shooting himself. Fixing it would be like machine-gunning himself.

He closed his eyes. The pain battered at him. He laid his head gently on the concrete. No point in falling back and cracking his skull as well. He raised his hand. He grasped the knob of bone, finger and thumb. Atom bombs went off in his head. He pushed and pulled.

No result. The cartilage was clamping too hard. Like a web of miniature elastic straps, holding the damn thing in place. In completely the wrong place. He blinked water out of his eyes and tried again. He pushed and pulled. Thermonuclear devices exploded.

No result.

He knew what he had to do. Steady pressure was not working. He had to smack the knob of bone back into place with the heel of his hand. He had to think hard and set it up and be decisive. Like a chiropractor wrestling a spine, jerking suddenly, listening for the sudden click.

He rehearsed the move. He needed to hit low down on the angle of cheek and nose, with the side of his hand, the lower part, opposite the ball of his thumb, like a karate chop, a semi-glancing blow, upward and sideways and outward. He needed to drive the peak back up the mountainside. It would settle OK. Once it arrived, the skin and the cartilage would keep it in place.

He opened his eyes. He couldn’t get an angle. Not down there on the floor. His elbow got in the way. He dragged himself across the smooth concrete, palms and heels pushing, five feet, ten, and he sat up against a wall, half reclining, his neck bent, space for his elbows in the void under his angled back. He squared his shoulders and his hips and he got as settled and as stable as he could, so that he wouldn’t fall far, or even at all.

Show time.

He touched the heel of his hand to where it had to go. He let it feel what it had to do. He practised the move. The top of his palm would skim his eyebrow. Like a guide.

On three, he thought.

One.

Two.

CRACK

BLACK

FORTY-THREE

MAHMEINI'S MAN WAS AFRAID. HE HAD DRIVEN AROUND FOR twenty minutes and he had seen nothing at all, and then he had come to a house with a white mailbox with Duncan written on it, all proud and spotlit. The house was a decent place, expensively restored. Their HQ, he had assumed. But no. All it contained was a woman who claimed she knew nothing. She was relatively young. She had been beaten recently. She said there were four Duncans, a father and a son and two uncles. She was married to the son. They were all currently elsewhere. She gave directions to a cluster of three houses that Mahmeini's man had already seen and dismissed from his mind. They were unimpressive places, all meanly hemmed in by an old post-and-rail fence, unlikely homes for men of significance.

But he had set off back in that direction anyway, driving fast, almost running down some idiot pedestrian who loomed up at him out of the dark, and then from the two-lane he had seen a gasoline fire blazing to the north. He had ignored the three houses and hustled onward towards the fire and found it was in the motel lot. It was a car. Or, it had been a car. Now it was just a superheated cherry-red shell inside an inferno. Judging by the shape it had been the Ford that Safir's boys had been driving. They were still inside it. Or, what was left of them was still inside it. They were now just shrunken and hideous shapes, still burning and melting and peeling, their ligaments shrivelled, their hands forced up by the heat like ghastly claws, the furious roiled air in which they were sitting making it look like they were dancing and waving in their seats.

Rossi's boys had killed them, obviously. Which meant they had killed Asghar too, almost certainly, hours ago. Rossi's plan was clear. He already had a firm connection with the Duncans, at the bottom end of the chain. Now he intended to leapfrog both Safir and Mahmeini and sell to the Saudis direct, at the top end of the chain. An obvious move, displaying sound business sense, but Rossi had had his boys start early. They had seized the initiative. A real coup. Their timing was impressive. As were their skills. They had lain in wait for Asghar and taken him down and disposed of his car, all within thirty short minutes. Which was an excellent performance. Asghar was tough and wary, always thinking, not easy to beat. A good wingman. A good friend, too, now crying out for vengeance. Mahmeini's man could sense his presence, very strongly, like he was still close by. All of which made him feel alone and adrift in hostile territory, and very

much on the defensive. All of which were unusual feelings for him, and all of which therefore made him a little afraid. And all of which made him change his plan. He had sudden new priorities. The giant stranger could wait. His primary targets were now Rossi's boys.

Mahmeini's man started right there at the motel. He had seen someone earlier, lurking behind a window, watching. A man with strange hair. A local. Possibly the motel owner. At least he would know which way Rossi's boys had gone.

Roberto Cassano and Angelo Mancini were parked four miles north, with their lights off and their engine running. Cassano was on the phone with Rossi. Nearly two o'clock in the morning, but there were important matters to discuss.

Cassano asked, 'You and Seth Duncan made this deal, right?'

Rossi said, 'He was my initial contact, back in the day. It turned into a family affair pretty soon after that. It seems like nothing much happens up there without unanimous consent.'

'But as far as you know it's still your deal?'

'As opposed to what?'

'As opposed to someone else's deal.'

'Of course it's still my deal,' Rossi said. 'No question about that. It always was my deal, and it always will be my deal. Why are you even asking? What the hell is going on?'

'Seth Duncan lent his car to Mahmeini's guy, that's what.'

Silence on the line.

Cassano said, 'There was a Cadillac at the Marriott when we got down there this afternoon. Too old for a rental. Later we saw Mahmeini's guy using it. At first we thought he stole it, but no. The locals up here say it's Seth Duncan's personal ride. Therefore Seth Duncan must have provided him with it. He must have driven it down there and left it ready for him. And then after the initial contact we made, Mahmeini's guy seemed to start operating solo. At first we thought Safir's boys had taken out his partner, or maybe the guy just ran out, but now we think he must have come straight up here in their rental. He's probably hanging

think he must have come straight up here in their rental. He's probably hanging out with the Duncans right now. Maybe they both are, like best friends forever. We're getting royally screwed here, boss. We're getting squeezed out.'

'Can't be happening.'

'Boss, your contact lent his car to your rival. They're in bed together. How else do you want to interpret it?'

'I can't get close to the ultimate buyer.'

'You're going to have to try.'

More silence on the line. Then Rossi said, 'OK, I guess nothing is impossible. So go ahead and deal with Mahmeini's boys. Do that first. Make it like they were never born. Then show Seth Duncan the error of his ways. Find some way to get his attention. Through his wife, maybe. And then move in on the three old guys. Tell them if they step out of line again we'll take over the whole thing, all the way up to Vancouver. An hour from now I want them pissing in their pants.'

'What about Reacher?'

'Find him and cut his head off and put it in a box. Show the Duncans we can do anything we want. Show them we can reach out and touch anyone, anywhere, any time. Make sure they understand they could be next.'

Reacher woke up for the second time and knew instantly it was two in the morning. The clock in his head had started up again. And he knew instantly he was in the basement of a house. Not an unfinished swimming pool, not an underground bunker. The concrete was smooth and strong because Nebraska was tornado country, and either zoning laws or construction standards or insurance requirements or just a conscientious architect had demanded an adequate shelter. Which made it the basement of the doctor's house, almost certainly, partly because not enough time had elapsed for a move to another location, and partly because the doctor's house was the only house Reacher had seen that was new enough to be both designed by an architect and be subject to laws and standards and requirements. In the old days people just built things themselves and crossed their fingers and hoped for the best.

Therefore the pipes of various diameters were for water and the sewer and heating. The green metal boxes with the mineral stains were the furnace and the

water heater. There was an electrical panel, presumably full of circuit breakers. The stairs came down and the door at the top would open outward into the hallway. Not inward. No one let doors open inward at the top of a staircase. Careless residents would go tumbling down like a slapstick movie. And tornadoes could blow at three hundred miles an hour. Better that a shelter door be pressed more firmly shut, not blown wide open.

Reacher sat up. Evidently he had come to rest in the angle of wall and floor, with his head bent. His neck was a little sore, which he took to be a very good sign. It meant the pain from his nose was relegated to background noise. He raised his hand and checked. His nose was still very tender, and there were open cuts on it, and big pillowy swellings, but the chip of bone was back in the right place. Basically. Almost. More or less. Not pretty, presumably, but then, he hadn't been pretty to start with. He spat in his palm and tried to wipe dried blood off his mouth and his chin.

Then he got to his feet. There was nothing stored in the basement. No crowded shelves, no piles of dusty boxes, no workbench, no peg boards full of tools. Reacher figured all that stuff was in the garage. It had to be somewhere. Every household had stuff like that. But the basement was a tornado shelter, pure and simple. Nothing else. Not even a rec room. There was no battered sofa, no last-generation TV, no old refrigerator, no pool table, no hidden bottles of bourbon. There was nothing down there at all, except the house's essential mechanical systems. The furnace was running hard, and it was making noise. It was a little too loud to hear anything else over. So Reacher crept up the stairs and put his ear to the door. He heard voices, low and indistinct, first one and then another, in a fixed and regular rhythm. Call and response. A man and a woman. Seth Duncan, he thought, asking questions, and either Dorothy Coe or the doctor's wife answering them, with short syllables and no sibilants. Negative answers. No real stress. No pain or panic. Just resignation. Either Dorothy Coe or the doctor's wife was saying No, quite calmly and patiently and resolutely, over and over again, to each new question. And whichever one of them it was, she had an audience. Reacher could sense the low physical vibe of other people in the house, breathing, stirring, moving their feet. The doctor himself, he thought, and two of the football players.

Reacher tried the door handle, slowly and carefully. It turned, but the door didn't open. It was locked, as expected. The door was a stout item, set tight and square in a wall that felt very firm and solid. Because of tornadoes, and laws and

standards and requirements, and conscientious architects. He let go of the handle and crept back downstairs. For a moment he wondered if the laws and the standards and the requirements and the conscientious architects had mandated a second way in. Maybe a trapdoor, from the master bedroom. He figured such a thing would make a lot of sense. Storms moved fast, and a sleeping couple might not have time to get along the hallway to the stairs. So he walked the whole floor, looking up, his sore neck protesting, but he saw no trapdoors. No second way in, and therefore no second way out. Just solid unbroken floorboards, laid neatly over the strong multi-ply joists.

He came to rest in the middle of the space. He had a number of options, none of them guaranteed to succeed, some of them complete non-starters. He could turn off the hot water, but that would be a slow-motion provocation. Presumably no one was intending to take a shower in the next few hours. Equally he could turn off the heat, which would be more serious, given the season, but response time would still be slow, and he would be victimizing the innocent as well as the guilty. He could kill all the lights, at the electrical panel, one click of a circuit breaker, but there was at least one shotgun upstairs, and maybe flashlights too. He was on the wrong side of a locked door, unarmed, attacking from the low ground.

Not good.

Not good at all.

FORTY-FOUR

SETH DUNCAN HAD HIS RIGHT HAND FLAT ON THE DOCTOR'S DINING table, with a bag of peas from the freezer laid over it. The icy cold was numbing the pain, but not very effectively. He needed another shot of his uncle Jasper's pig anaesthetic, and he was about to go get one, but before he attended to himself he was determined to attend to his plan, which was working pretty well at that point. So well, in fact, that he had permitted himself to think ahead to the endgame. His long experience in the county had taught him that reality was whatever people said it was. If no one ever mentioned an event, then it had never happened. If no one ever mentioned a person, then that person had never existed.

Duncan was alone on one side of the table, with the dark window behind him and the doctor and his wife and Dorothy Coe opposite him, lined up on three hard chairs, upright and attentive. He was leading them one by one through a series of questions, listening to their answers, judging their sincerity, establishing the foundations of the story as it would be told in the future. He had finished with the doctor, and he had finished with the doctor's wife, and he was about to start in on Dorothy Coe. He had a Cornhusker standing mute and menacing in the doorway, holding the old Remington pump, and he had another out in the hallway, leaning on the basement door. The other three were out somewhere in their cars, driving around in the dark, pretending to hunt for Reacher. The illusion had to be maintained, for the sake of Rossi's boys. Reacher's capture was scheduled for much later in the day. Reality was what people said it was.

Duncan asked, 'Did you ever meet a man named Reacher?'

Dorothy Coe didn't answer. She just glanced to her left, out to the hallway. A stubborn woman, hung up on quaint old notions of objectivity.

Duncan said, 'That's a very strong basement door. I know, because I installed the same one myself, when we remodelled. It has a steel core, and it fits into a steel frame, and it has oversized hinges and a burst-proof lock. It's rated for a category five storm. It can withstand a three-hundred-mile-an-hour gust. It carries a FEMA seal of approval. So if, just hypothetically, there was a person in the basement right now, you may rest assured that he's staying there. Such a person could not possibly escape. Such a person might as well not exist at all.'

Dorothy Coe asked, ‘If the door is so good, why do you have a football player leaning on it?’

‘He has to be somewhere,’ Duncan said. Then he smiled. ‘Would you prefer it if he was in the bedroom? Maybe he could kill some time in there, with your little friend, while you answer my questions.’

Dorothy Coe glanced the other way, at the doctor’s wife.

Duncan asked, ‘Did you ever meet a man named Reacher?’

Dorothy Coe didn’t answer.

Duncan said, ‘The calendar rolls on. It will be spring before you know it. You’ll be ploughing and planting. With a bit of luck the rains will be right and you’ll have a good harvest. But then what? Do you want it hauled? Or do you want to put a gun in your mouth, like your worthless husband?’

Dorothy Coe said nothing.

Duncan asked, ‘Did you ever meet a man named Reacher?’

Dorothy Coe said, ‘No.’

‘Did you ever hear of a man named Reacher?’

‘No.’

‘Was he ever at your house?’

‘No.’

‘Did you ever give him breakfast?’

‘No.’

‘Was he here when you arrived tonight?’

‘No.’

Out in the hallway, three inches from the second Cornhusker’s hip, the handle on

the basement door turned, a quarter circle, and paused a beat, and turned back.

No one noticed.

In the dining room, Duncan asked, ‘Did any kind of stranger come here this winter?’

Dorothy Coe said, ‘No.’

‘Anyone at all?’

‘No.’

‘Any local troubles here?’

‘No.’

‘Did anything change?’

‘No.’

‘Do you want anything to change?’

‘No.’

‘That’s good,’ Duncan said. ‘I like the status quo, very much, and I’m glad you do too. It benefits all of us. No reason why we can’t all get along.’ He got up, leaving the bag of peas on the table, a little meltwater beading on the wax. He said, ‘You three stay here. My boys will look after you. Don’t attempt to leave the house, and don’t attempt to use the phone. Don’t even answer it. The phone tree is off-limits tonight. You’re out of the loop. Punishments for non-compliance will be swift and severe.’

Then Duncan put his parka on, awkwardly, leading with his left hand, and he stepped past the guy with the Remington and headed for the front door. The others heard it open and close and a minute later they heard the Mazda drive away, the sound of its exhaust ripping the night air behind it.

*

Mahmeini’s man drove the Cadillac south on the two-lane, five gentle miles, and then he turned the lights off and slowed to a walk. The big engine whispered and

then he turned the lights off and slowed to a walk. The big engine whispered and the soft tyres rustled over the pavement. He saw the three old houses on his right. There was a light burning in one of the downstairs windows. Beyond that, there were no signs of life. There were three vehicles parked out front, vague moonlit shapes, all of them old, all of them rustic and utilitarian pick-up trucks, none of them a new blue Chevrolet. But the Chevrolet would come. Mahmeini's man was absolutely sure of that. Half of Rossi's attention was fixed on leapfrogging Safir and Mahmeini himself, which meant the other half was fixed on securing his rear. His relationship with the Duncans had to be protected. Which meant his boys would be checking in with them often, calming them, stroking them, reassuring them, and above all making sure no one else was getting close to them. Standard commonsense precautions, straight out of the textbook.

Mahmeini's man rolled past the end of the Duncans' driveway and U-turned and parked a hundred yards south on the opposite shoulder, half on the blacktop, half on the dirt, his lights off, the big black car nestled in a slight natural dip, about as invisible as it was possible to get without a camouflage net. There would be a dull moonlit glow from some of the chrome, he figured, but there was mist in the air, and anyway Rossi's boys would be looking at the mouth of the driveway ahead of their turn, not at anything else. Drivers always did that. Human nature. Steering a car was as much a mental as a physical process. Heads turned, eyes sought their target, and the hands followed automatically.

Mahmeini's man waited. He was facing north, because on balance he expected Rossi's boys to come from the north, but it was always possible they would come from the south, so he adjusted his mirror to get a view in that direction. The mist that was helping to hide him was fogging his rear window a little. Nothing serious, but an approaching car with its lights off might be difficult to see. But then, why would Rossi's boys be driving with their lights off? They were three-for-three on the night, and therefore probably very confident.

Five miles north the orange glow of the gasoline fire was still visible, but it was dying back a little. Nothing burns for ever. Above the glow the moon was smudged with smoke. Apart from that the night-time landscape lay dark and quiet and still and uneventful, like it must have done for a century or more. Mahmeini's man stared at the road ahead, and saw nothing.

He waited.

Then he saw something.

Way ahead and off to his left he saw a blue glow in the mist, a high round bubble of light, moving fast from west to east. A car, coming in at him at a right angle, aiming to hit the two-lane a mile or two north of him, aiming to turn either left and away from him, or right and towards him. He took his gun from his pocket and laid it on the passenger seat next to him. The moving bubble of light slowed, and stopped, and started again, and flared bright. The car had turned right, towards him. Immediately he knew it was not the Chevrolet. The way the light moved told him it was too small, too low, too nimble. Porsches and Ferraris in Vegas moved the same way at night, their front ends rigidly connected to the pavement, their headlights jittering and hopping. Big dumb domestic sedans looked anaesthetized in comparison. They moved like lumps, swaying, dull and damped and padded and disconnected.

He watched and waited, and he saw the bubble of light resolve itself to twin nervous beams and then twin oval shapes close together and low to the ground. He saw the car slow two hundred yards away and then he saw it turn one hundred yards away, straight into the mouth of the driveway. It was the tiny red Mazda Miata he had seen parked at the restored Duncan farmhouse. The daughter-in-law's car. She was visiting. Not a social occasion, presumably. Not so late at night. She had called ahead on the phone, probably. She had reported the encounter with the strange Iranian man, and she had been told to come on in, for safety's sake. Probably the Duncans knew certain things were due to be settled before dawn, and they didn't want one of their own caught in the crossfire.

Mahmeini's man watched the Mazda bump and bounce down the driveway. He watched it park alongside the old pick-up trucks. He saw its lights go off. Ten seconds later he saw a doorway flare bright in the distance as a figure went inside, and then the scene went dark again.

Mahmeini's man watched the road, and waited. The night mist was getting worse. It was becoming a problem. The Cadillac's windshield was going opaque. He fumbled around and found the wiper stalk and flicked the blades right, left, right, left, and cleared it. Which made the rear screen all the worse in comparison. It was completely dewed over. Even a car with its headlights on would be hard to recognize. Its lights would be atomized into a million separate shards, into a single blinding mess. Worse than useless.

Mahmeini’s man kept one eye on the road ahead and groped around for the rear defogger button. It was hard to find. With the lights off outside, the dash and all the consoles were unlit inside. And there were a lot of buttons. It was a luxury car, fully equipped. He ducked his head and found a button with zigzag symbols on it. It looked like something to do with heating. And it had a red warning lens laid into it. He pressed it, and waited. Nothing happened to the rear window, but his ass got hot. It was the seat warmer, not the defogger. He turned it off and found another button, one eye on the console, one eye on the road ahead. He pressed the button. The radio came on, very loud. He shut it down in a hurry and tried again, another button close by, a satisfying tactile click under his fingertip.

The trunk lid clunked and popped and raised itself up, slowly and smoothly, damped and hydraulic, all the way open, completely vertical.

Now he had no view at all out the back.

Not good.

And presumably there was a courtesy light in the trunk, in reality quite weak and yellow, but no doubt looking like a million-watt searchlight in the dark of the night.

Not good at all.

He pressed the button again, not really thinking. Afterwards he realized he had half expected the trunk lid to close again, slowly and obediently, like the seat warmer and the radio had gone off again. But of course the trunk lid didn’t close again. The release mechanism merely clicked and whirred one more time, and the trunk lid stayed exactly where it was.

Wide open.

Blocking his view.

He was going to have to get out and close it by hand.

FORTY-FIVE

ROBERTO CASSANO AND ANGELO MANCINI HAD BEEN IN THE AREA three whole days, and they figured their one real solid-gold advantage over Mahmeini's crew was their local knowledge. They knew the lie of the land, literally. Most of all, they knew it was flat and empty. Like a gigantic pool table, with brown felt. Big fields, for efficiency's sake, no ditches, no hedges, no other natural obstacles, the ground frozen firm and hard. So even though their car was a regular street sedan, they could drive it cross-country without a major problem, pretty much like sailing a small boat on a calm open sea. And they had seen the Duncan compound up close. They had been in it. They knew it well. They could loop around behind it in the car, slow and quiet, lights off, inky blue and invisible in the dark, and then they could get out and climb the crappy post-and-rail fence, and storm the place from the rear. Surprise was everything. There might be eyeballs to the front, but in back there would be nothing at all except the Duncans and Mahmeini's guys all sitting around in one of the kitchens, probably toasting each other with cheap bourbon and sniggering about their newly streamlined commercial arrangements.

Two handgun rounds would take care of that happy conversation.

Cassano came south on the two-lane and switched off his lights level with the motel. The Ford was still burning in the lot, but only just. The remains of the tyres were still giving off coils of greasy rubber smoke, and small flames were licking out of the gravel all around where oil had spilled. Safir's boys were dark shrunken shapes about half their original size, both fused to the zigzag springs that were all that was left of the seats, their mouths forced open like awful shrieks, their heads burned smooth, their hands up like talons. Mancini smiled and Cassano rolled slowly past them and headed on down the road, cautiously, navigating by the light of the moon.

Four miles south of the motel and one mile north of the Duncan place he slowed some more and turned the wheel and bumped across the shoulder and struck out across the open land. The car lurched and pattered. In a geological sense the ground was dead flat, but down there where the rubber met the dirt it was rutted and lumpy. The springs creaked and bounced and the wheel jumped and chattered in Cassano's hands. But he made steady progress. He kept it to about twenty miles an hour and held a wide curve, aiming to arrive about half a mile

behind the compound. Two minutes, he figured. At one point he had to brake hard and steer around a bramble thicket. Just beyond it they saw the burned-out shell of an SUV. It loomed up at them out of the dark, all black and ashen grey. Reacher's work, from earlier in the day. But after that it was easy all the way. They could see a pool of faint yellow light ahead, like a homing beacon. A kitchen window, almost certainly, spilling warmth. The southernmost house, probably. Jacob Duncan's place. The big cheese.

Mahmeini's man climbed out of the Cadillac and stood for a second in the night-time cold. He looked all around, east, west, north, south, and he saw nothing stirring. He closed his door, to kill the interior light. He took a step towards the trunk. He had been right. There was a light in the trunk. It was throwing a pale sphere of yellow glow into the mist. Not serious from the front, but a problem from behind. The human eye was very sensitive.

He took another step, past the rear passenger door, and he raised his left hand, palm flat, somehow already feeling the familiar sensations associated with an action he had performed a thousand times before, his palm on the metal maybe a foot from the edge of the lid, so that the force of his push would act on both hinges equally, so that the panel would not buckle, so that both calibrated springs would stretch together with soft creaks, whereupon the lid would go down smooth and easy until the upmarket mechanism grabbed at it and sucked it all the way shut.

He got as far as putting his palm on the panel.

Subconsciously he leaned into the motion, not really intending to slam the lid, not at all bad-tempered, just seeking a little physical leverage, and his change of position hunched his shoulders a little, which brought his head forward a little, which changed his eye line a little, which meant he had to look somewhere, and given the choice of the lit interior of a previously closed space or a featureless length of dark blacktop, well, any human eye would opt for the former over the latter.

Asghar Arad Sepehr stared back at him.

His sightless eyes were wide open. His olive skin was pale with death and yellow in the light. Forces from braking and accelerating and turning had jammed him awkwardly into the far rear corner of the trunk. His limbs were in disarray. His neck was bent. His look was quizzical.

Mahmeini’s man stood absolutely still, his hand on the cold metal, his mouth open, not really breathing, his heart hardly beating. He forced himself to look away. Then he looked back. He wasn’t hallucinating. Nothing had changed. He started breathing again. Then he started panting. His heart started thumping. He started to shake and shiver.

Asghar Arad Sepehr stared up at him.

Mahmeini’s man took his hand off the trunk lid and shuffled all the way around to the rear of the car. He stood there with the idling exhaust pooling around his knees and with his fingers steepled against his forehead, looking down, not understanding. Asghar was stone dead, but there was no blood. No gunshot wound between the eyes. No blunt-force trauma, no caved-in skull, no signs of strangulation or suffocation, no knife wounds, no defensive injuries. Nothing at all, except his friend, dead in the trunk, all slack and undignified, all thrown about and jumbled up.

Mahmeini’s man walked away, ten feet, then twenty, and then he turned back and raised his head and raised his arms and howled silently at the moon, his eyes screwed tight shut, his mouth wide open in a desperate snarl, his feet stamping alternately like he was running in place, all alone in the vast empty darkness.

Then he stopped and swiped his hands over his face, one after the other, and he started thinking. But the subtleties were almost completely beyond him. His friend had been killed sixty miles away, by an unknown person and an unknown method with no visible signs, and then locked in the trunk of a car that could have absolutely nothing at all to do with either Rossi’s boys, or Safir’s. Then his own rental had been taken away, so that he had been forced to steal the very same car, the only possible choice in an entire town, inevitably and inexorably, like a puppet being manipulated from afar by a grinning intelligence much greater than his own.

It was incomprehensible.

But, facts were facts. He walked back to the trunk and steeled himself to investigate further. He pushed and pulled and hauled Asghar into the centre of the space and began a detailed examination, like a pathologist leaning over a mortuary table. The trunk light burned bright and hot, but it revealed nothing. Asghar had no broken bones, and no bruises. His neck was intact. He had no

wounds, no cuts, no scrapes, no scratches, and there was nothing under his fingernails. His gun and his knife and his money were missing, which was interesting. And all around him in the trunk were the usual kinds of things a person might expect to find in a trunk, which was odd. No attempt had been made to clean it up. No incriminating evidence had been removed. There was an empty grocery bag with a week-old register receipt inside, and a month-old local newspaper never read and still neatly folded, and some browned and curled leaves and some crumbs of dirt as if items had been hauled home from a plant nursery. Clearly the car belonged to someone who used it in a fairly normal manner, and who had not prepared it in any special way for its current gruesome task.

So, whose car was it? That was the first question. The licence plates would reveal the answer, of course, assuming they were genuine. But there might be a faster way to find out, given the fact that nothing seemed to have been sanitized. Mahmeini's man stepped away to the front passenger door, and opened it, and leaned in, and opened the glove box. He found a black leather wallet the size of a hardcover book, stamped on the front with the Cadillac shield in gold. Inside it he found two instruction books, one thick, one thin, one for the car and one for the radio, and a salesman's business card clipped into four angled slots, and a registration document, and an insurance document. He pulled out both documents and dropped the wallet in the foot well and held the documents close to the light inside the glove box.

The car was Seth Duncan's.

Which was logical, in a sudden, awful, spectacular way. Because everything had been utterly, utterly miscalculated, right from the start. There was no other possible explanation. There was no giant stranger on the rampage. No one had seen him and no one could describe him, because he didn't exist. He was an invention. He was imaginary. He was bait. He was a ruse. The whole delivery delay was bullshit. It had been staged, from beginning to end. The purpose had been to lure everyone to Nebraska, to be cut out, to be eliminated, to be killed. The Duncans were removing links, severing the chain, intending to remake it with nobody between themselves at the bottom and the Saudis at the top, with a truly massive increase in profit as their prize. Audacious, but obvious, and clearly feasible, clearly within their grasp, because clearly their abilities had been grotesquely underestimated by everyone. They were not the clueless rural hicks everyone thought they were. They were ruthless strategists of stunning and genuine quality, subtle, sophisticated, capable of great insight and penetrating

genuine quality, subtle, sophisticated, capable of great insight and penetrating analysis. They had foreseen Mahmeini as their strongest opponent, quite correctly and accurately and realistically, and they had absolutely crippled his response from the get-go by taking Asghar down, somehow, mysteriously, before the bell had even sounded, and then by leaving his untouched body in a car they knew for sure would be found and identified as one of their own.

So, not just a coup, but a message too, brazenly and artfully and subtly delivered. A message that said: We can do anything we want. We can reach out and touch anyone, anywhere, any time, and you won't even begin to understand how we did it. And in case subtlety didn't impress, they had reached out and burned Safir's guys to death in the motel lot, in a brutal demonstration of range and power. Rossi's boys hadn't done that. Rossi's boys were probably already dead themselves, somewhere else, somehow else, maybe dismembered or bled out or even crucified. Or buried alive. Rossi's spokesman had used those very words, on the subject of the Duncans' tastes.

Mahmeini's man felt completely alone. He was completely alone. He was the last survivor. He had no friends, no allies, no familiarity with the terrain. And no idea what to do next, except to lash out, to fight back, to seek revenge.

No desire to do anything else, either.

He stared through the darkness at the three Duncan houses. He closed the trunk lid on Asghar, reverently, with soft pressure from eight gentle fingertips, like a sad chord on a church organ. Then he walked along the dirt on the shoulder, back to the passenger door, and he leaned in and picked up his Glock from where it lay on the seat. He closed the door, and skirted the hood, and crossed the road, and stepped on to the dirt of someone's fallow field, and walked a straight line, parallel with the Duncans' fenced driveway, their three houses a hundred yards ahead of him, his gun in his right hand, his knife in his left.

*

Half a mile behind the Duncan houses, Roberto Cassano slowed and hauled the Chevrolet through a tight turn and let it coast onward towards the compound. A hundred yards out he brought it to a stop with the parking brake. He reached up and switched the dome light so it would stay off when the doors opened. He looked at Angelo Mancini next to him, and they both paused and then nodded and climbed out into the night. They drew their Colts and held them behind their backs, so that the moon glinting off the shiny steel would not be visible from the

backs, so that the moon glinting off the shiny steel would not be visible from the front. They walked forward together, shoulder to shoulder, a hundred yards to go.

FORTY-SIX

THE DOCTOR AND HIS WIFE AND DOROTHY COE WERE SITTING quiet in the dining room, but the football player with the shotgun had moved out of the doorway and gone into the living room, where he was sprawled out full-length on the sofa, watching recorded NFL highlights in high definition on the doctor's big new television set. His partner had moved off the basement door and was leaning comfortably on the hallway wall, watching the screen at an angle, from a distance. They were both absorbed in the programme. The sound was low but distinct, grumbling richly and urgently through the big loudspeakers. The room lights were off, and bright colours from the screen were dancing and bouncing off the walls. Outside the window, the night was dark and still. The phone had rung three times, but no one had answered. Apart from that, all was peaceful. It could have been the day after Christmas, or late on a Thanksgiving afternoon.

Then all the power in the house went out.

The TV picture died abruptly and the sound faded away and the subliminal hum of the heating system disappeared. Silence clamped down, elemental and absolute, and the temperature seemed to drop, and the walls seemed to dissolve, as if there was no longer a difference between inside and out, as if the house's tiny footprint had suddenly blended with the vast emptiness on which it stood.

The football player in the hallway pushed off the wall and stood still in the centre of the space. His partner in the living room swivelled his feet to the floor and sat up straight. He said, 'What happened?'

The other guy said, 'I don't know.'

'Doctor?'

The doctor got up from behind the dining table and fumbled his way to the door. He said, 'The power went out.'

'No shit, Sherlock. Did you pay your bill?'

'It's not that.'

‘Then what is it?’

‘Could be the whole area.’

The guy in the living room found his way to the window and peered into the blackness outside. He said, ‘How the hell would anyone know?’

The guy in the hallway asked, ‘Where are the circuit breakers?’

The doctor said, ‘In the basement.’

‘Terrific. Reacher’s awake. And he’s playing games.’ The guy crept through the dark to the basement door, feeling his way with his fingertips on the hallway wall. He identified the door by touch and pounded on it. He called, ‘Turn it back on, asshole.’

No response.

Pitch black throughout the house. Not even a glimmer, anywhere.

‘Turn the power back on, Reacher.’

No response.

Cold, and silence.

The guy from the living room found his way out to the hallway. ‘Maybe he isn’t awake. Maybe it’s a real outage.’

His partner asked, ‘Got a flashlight, doctor?’

The doctor said, ‘In the garage.’

‘Go get it.’

‘I can’t see.’

‘Do your best, OK?’

The doctor shuffled down the hallway, hesitantly, fingers brushing the wall, colliding with the first guy, sensing the second guy’s hulking presence and

avoiding it, making it to the kitchen, stumbling against a chair with a hollow rattle of wood, hitting the edge of the table with his thighs. The world of the blind. Not easy. He trailed his fingers along the countertops, passing the sink, passing the stove, making it to the mud room lobby in back. He turned ninety degrees with his hands out in front of him and found the door to the garage. He groped for the knob and opened the door and stepped down into the chill space beyond. He found the workbench and reached up and traced his fingers over the items clipped neatly above it. A hammer, good for hitting. Screwdrivers, good for stabbing. Wrenches, stone cold to the touch. He found the flashlight's plastic barrel and pulled it out from its clip. He thumbed the switch and a weak yellow beam jumped out. He rapped the head against his palm and the beam sparked a little brighter. He turned and found a football player standing right next to him. The one from the living room.

The football player smiled and took the flashlight out of his hand and held it under his chin and made a face, like a Halloween lantern. He said, 'Good work, doc,' and turned away and used the beam up and down and side to side to paint his way back into the house. The doctor followed, using the same lit memories a second later. The football player said, 'Go back in the dining room now,' and shone the beam ahead, showing the doctor the way. The doctor went back to the table and the football player said, 'All of you stay right where you are, and don't move a muscle,' and then he closed the door on them.

His partner said, 'So what now?'

The guy with the flashlight said, 'We need to know if Reacher is awake or asleep.'

'We hit him pretty hard.'

'Best guess?'

'What's yours?'

The guy with the flashlight didn't answer. He stepped back down the hallway to the basement door. He pounded on it with the flat of his hand. He called, 'Reacher, turn the power back on, or something bad is going to happen up here.'

No response.

Silence

Silence.

The guy with the flashlight hit the door again and said, ‘I’m not kidding, Reacher. Turn the damn power back on.’

No response.

Silence.

The other guy asked again, ‘So what now?’

The guy with the flashlight said, ‘Go get the doctor’s wife.’ He aimed the beam at the dining room door and his partner went in and came back out holding the doctor’s wife by the elbow. The guy with the flashlight said, ‘Scream.’

She said, ‘What?’

‘Scream, or I’ll make you.’

She paused a beat and blinked in the light of the beam, and then she screamed, long and high and loud. Then she stopped and dead silence came back and the guy with the flashlight hammered on the basement door again and called, ‘You hear that, asshole?’

No response.

Silence.

The guy with the flashlight jerked the beam back towards the dining room and his partner led the doctor’s wife back down the hallway and pushed her inside and closed the door on her again. He said, ‘So?’

The guy with the flashlight said, ‘We wait for daylight.’

‘That’s four hours away.’

‘You got a better idea?’

‘We could call the mothership.’

‘They’ll just tell us to handle it.’

‘I’m not going down there. Not with him.’

‘Me either.’

‘So what do we do?’

‘We wait him out. He thinks he’s smart, but he isn’t. We can sit in the dark. Anyone can. It ain’t exactly rocket science.’

They followed the dancing beam back to the living room and sat side by side on the sofa with the old Remington propped between them. They clicked off the flashlight, to save the battery, and the room went pitch dark again, and cold, and silent.

Mahmeini’s man walked parallel with the driveway for a hundred yards and then came up against a length of fence that ran south directly across his path. It defined the lower left-hand part of the crossbar of the hollow T that was the Duncans’ compound. It was made of five-inch rails, all of them a little gnarled and warped, but easy enough to climb. He got over it without any difficulty and paused for a second with the three pick-up trucks and the Mazda parked to his left, and the southernmost house straight in front of him. The centre house was the only one that was dark. The southernmost and the northernmost houses both had light in them, faint and a little secondhand, as if only back rooms were in use and stray illumination was finding its way out to the front windows through internal passageways and open doors. There was the smell of wood smoke in the air. But no sound, not even talking. Mahmeini’s man hesitated, choosing, deciding, making up his mind. Left or right?

Cassano and Mancini came on the compound from the rear, out of the dark and dormant field, and they stopped on the far side of the fence opposite the centre house, which was Jonas’s, as far as they knew. It was closed up and dark, but both its neighbours had light in their kitchen windows, spilling out in bright bars across the weedy backyard gravel. The gravel was matted down into the dirt, but it was still marginally noisy, Cassano knew. He had walked across it earlier in the day, to find undisturbed locations for his phone conversations with Rossi. Their best play would be to stay on the wrong side of the fence, in the last of the field, and then head directly for their chosen point of entry. That would reduce the sound of their approach to a minimum. But which would be their chosen point of entry? Left or right? Jasper’s place, or Jacob’s?

All four Duncans were in Jasper's basement, hunting through old cartons for more veterinary anaesthetic. The last of the hog dope had been used on Seth's nose, and his busted hand was going to need something stronger anyway. Two fingers were already swollen so hard the skin was fit to burst. Jasper figured he had something designed for horses, and he planned to find it and flood Seth's wrist joint with it. He was no anatomist, but he figured the affected nerves had to pass through there somewhere. Where else could they go?

Seth was not complaining at the delay. Jasper figured he was taking it very well. He was growing up. He had been petulant after the broken nose, but now he was standing tall. Because he had captured his assailant all by himself, obviously. And because he was planning what to do with the guy next. The glow of achievement and the prospect of revenge were anaesthetics all by themselves.

Jonas asked, 'Is this it?' He was holding up a round pint bottle made of brown glass. Its label was stained and covered in long technical words, some of them Latin. Jasper squinted across the dim space and said, 'Good man. You found it.'

Then they heard footsteps on the floor above their heads.

FORTY-SEVEN

JACOB WAS FIRST UP THE CELLAR STAIRS. HIS FIRST THOUGHT WAS that a football player was checking in, but the floors in their houses were typical of old-style construction in rural America, built of boards cut from the hearts of old pines, thick and dense and heavy, capable of transmitting noise but not detail. So it was not possible to say who was in the house by sound alone. He saw no one in the hallway, but when he got to the kitchen he found a man in there, standing still, small and wiry, dark and dead-eyed, rumpled, not very clean, wearing a buttoned shirt without a tie, holding a knife in his left hand and a gun in his right. The knife was held low, but the gun was pointing straight at the centre of Jacob's chest.

Jacob stood still.

The man put his knife on the kitchen table and raised his forefinger to his lips.

Jacob made no sound.

Behind him his son and his brothers crowded into the kitchen, too soon to be stopped. The man moved the muzzle of his gun, left and right, back and forth. The four Duncans lined up, shoulder to shoulder. The man turned his wrist and moved the muzzle down and up, down and up, patting the air with it. No one moved.

The man said, 'Get on your knees.'

Jacob asked, 'Who are you?'

The man said, 'You killed my friend.'

'I didn't.'

'One of you Duncans did.'

'We didn't. We don't even know who you are.'

'Get on your knees.'

‘Who are you?’

The little man picked up his knife again and asked, ‘Which one of you is Seth?’

Seth Duncan paused a beat and then raised his good hand, like a kid in class.

The little man said, ‘You killed my friend and you put his body in the trunk of your Cadillac.’

Jacob said, ‘No, Reacher stole that car this afternoon. It was him.’

‘Reacher doesn’t exist.’

‘He does. He broke my son’s nose. And his hand.’

The gun didn’t move, but the little man turned his head and looked at Seth. The aluminium splint, the swollen fingers. Jacob said, ‘We haven’t left here all day. But Reacher was at the Marriott. This afternoon, and this evening. We know that. He left the Cadillac there.’

‘Where is he now?’

‘We’re not sure. Close by, we think.’

‘How did he get back?’

‘Perhaps he took your rental car. Did your friend have the key?’

The little man didn’t answer.

Jacob asked, ‘Who are you?’

‘I represent Mahmeini.’

‘We don’t know who that is.’

‘He buys your merchandise from Safir.’

‘We don’t know anyone of that name either. We sell to an Italian gentleman in Las Vegas, name of Mr Rossi, and after that we have no further interest.’

‘You’re trying to cut everyone out.’

‘You’re trying to cut everyone out.’

‘We’re not. We’re trying to get our shipment home, that’s all.’

‘Where is it?’

‘On its way. But we can’t bring it in until Reacher is down.’

‘Why not?’

‘You know why not. This kind of business can’t be done in public. You should be helping us, not pointing guns at us.’

The little man didn’t answer.

Jacob said, ‘Put the gun away, and let’s all sit down and talk. We’re all on the same side here.’

The little man kept the gun straight and level and said, ‘Safir’s men are dead too.’

‘Reacher,’ Jacob said. ‘He’s on the loose.’

‘What about Rossi’s boys?’

‘We haven’t seen them recently.’

‘Really?’

‘I swear.’

The little man was quiet for a long moment. Then he said, ‘OK. Things change. Life moves on, for all of us. From now on you will sell direct to Mahmeini.’

Jacob Duncan said, ‘Our arrangement is with Mr Rossi.’

The little man said, ‘Not any more.’

Jacob Duncan didn’t answer.

Cassano and Mancini opted to try Jacob Duncan’s place first. A logical choice, given that Jacob was clearly the head of the family. They backed off the fence a

couple of paces and walked parallel with it to a spot opposite Jacob's kitchen window. The bar of yellow light coming out of it laid a bright rectangle on the gravel, but it fell six feet short of the base of the fence. They climbed the fence and skirted the rectangle, quietly across the gravel, Cassano to the right, Mancini to the left, and then they flattened themselves against the back wall of the house and peered in.

No one there.

Mancini eased open the door and Cassano went in ahead of him. The house was silent. No sound at all. No one awake, no one asleep. Cassano and Mancini had searched plenty of places, plenty of times, and they knew what to listen for.

They slipped back out to the yard and retraced their steps. They climbed back into the field and walked north in the dark and lined up again opposite Jasper's window. They climbed the fence and skirted the light. They flattened themselves against the wall and peered inside.

Not what they expected.

Not even close.

There was only one Iranian, not two. There was no happy conversation. No smiles. No bourbon toasts. Instead, Mahmeini's man was standing there with a gun in one hand and a knife in the other, and all four Duncans were cowering away from him. The glass in the window was wavy and thin in places, and Jacob Duncan's urgent voice was faintly audible.

Jacob Duncan was saying, 'We have been in business a long time, sir, based on trust and loyalty, and we can't change things now. Our arrangement is with Mr Rossi, and Mr Rossi alone. Perhaps he can sell direct to you, in the future, now that Mr Safir seems to be out of the picture. Perhaps that might be of advantage. But that's all we can offer, not that such a thing is even ours to offer.'

The little man said, 'Mahmeini won't take half a pie when the whole thing is on the table.'

'But it isn't on the table. I repeat, we deal with Mr Rossi only.'

'Do you really?' the little man asked. He changed his position and stood sideways, and raised his arm level with his shoulder, and closed one eye, and

sideways, and raised his arm level with his shoulder, and closed one eye, and tracked the gun slowly and mechanically back and forth, left and right along the line of men, like a great battleship turret traversing, pausing first on Seth, then on Jasper, then on Jonas, then on Jacob, and then back again, to Jonas, to Jasper, to Seth, and then back again once more. Finally the gun came to rest aimed square at Jonas. Right between his eyes. The little man's finger whitened on the trigger.

Then simultaneously the window and the little man's head exploded, and the crowded room filled with powdered glass and smoke and the massive barking roar of a .45 gunshot, and blood and bone and brain slapped and spattered against the far wall, and the little man fell to the floor, and first Mancini and then Cassano stepped in from the yard.

After less than an hour the two football players were thoroughly bored with sitting in the dark. And not just bored, either, but unsettled and a little anxious, too, and irritated, and exasperated, and humiliated, because they were very aware that they were being beaten on a minute-to-minute basis, and being beaten on any basis did not come easy to them. They were not submissive people. They never came second. They were the big dogs, and being denied heat and light and NFL highlights was both insulting and totally inappropriate.

One said, 'We have a shotgun, damn it.'

The other said, 'It's a big basement. He could be anywhere.'

'We have a flashlight.'

'Pretty weak.'

'Maybe he's still unconscious. It could be an actual fault, and we're sitting here like idiots.'

'He has to be awake by now.'

'So what if he is? He's one guy, and we have a shotgun and a flashlight.'

'He was a soldier.'

'That doesn't give him magic powers.'

'[illegible]'

‘How would we do it?’

‘We could tape the flashlight to the shotgun barrel. Go down, single file, like they do in the movies. We’d see him before he sees us.’

‘We’re not supposed to kill him. Seth wants to do that himself, later.’

‘We could aim low. Wound him in the legs.’

‘Or make him surrender. That would be better. And he’d have to, wouldn’t he? With the shotgun and all? We could tape him up, with the tape we use for the flashlight. Then he couldn’t mess with the power again. We should have done that in the first place.’

‘We don’t have any tape, for either thing.’

‘Let’s look in the garage. If we find some tape, we’ll think about doing it.’

They found some tape. They followed the flashlight beam through the hallway, through the kitchen, through the mud room, all the way to the garage, and right there on the workbench was a fat new roll of silver duct tape, still wrapped up, fresh from the store. They carried it back with them, not really sure if they were pleased or not. But they had promised themselves in a way, so they pulled off the plastic wrap and picked at the end of the tape and unwound a short length. They tried the flashlight against the shotgun barrel, working in the dim light of reflections off the walls. The flashlight fit pretty well, ahead of the forestock, and underslung because of the front sight above the muzzle, and jutting out a little because of its length. The plastic lens was about an inch in front of the gun. Satisfactory. But to get it secure they were going to have to wrap tape right over the thumb switch, which was a point of no return, of sorts. If they were going to do that, then they were going to have to act. No point in leaving the light burning and running the battery down all for nothing.

One asked, ‘Well?’

Three hours before daylight. Boredom, irritation, exasperation, humiliation.

The other said, ‘Let’s do it.’

He propped the gun across his knees and held the flashlight in place. The first guy juggled the roll of tape, making sticky tearing noises, winding it around and

around, like he was binding broken ribs with a bandage, until the whole assembly was fat and mummified. He ducked his head and bit off a nine-inch tail and pressed it down securely, and then he squeezed everything hard between his palms, and smoothed the edges of the tape with his fingers. The other guy lifted the gun off his knees and swung it left and right and up and down. The flashlight stayed solidly in place, its beam moving faithfully with the muzzle.

‘OK,’ he said. ‘Cool. We’re good to go. The light is like a laser sight. Can’t miss.’

The first guy said, ‘Remember, aim low. If you see him, jerk the barrel down and fire at his feet.’

‘If he doesn’t surrender first.’

‘Exactly. First choice is to immobilize him. But if he moves, shoot him.’

‘Where will he be?’

‘Could be anywhere. Probably out of sight at the bottom of the stairs. Or hiding behind the water heater. It’s big enough.’

They followed the light out to the hallway and stopped near the basement door. The guy with the gun said, ‘You open it and step back and then get behind me. I’ll go down slowly and I’ll move the light around as much as I can. Tell me if you see him. We need to talk each other through this.’

‘OK,’ the first guy said. He put his hand on the knob. ‘We sure about this?’

‘I’m ready.’

‘OK, on three. Your count.’

The guy with the gun said, ‘One.’

Then, ‘Two.’

The first guy said, ‘Wait. He could be right behind the door.’

‘At the top of the stairs?’

‘Just waiting to jump out at us before we’re ready.’

‘You think? That would mean he’s been waiting there a whole hour.’

‘Sometimes they wait all day.’

‘Snipers do. This guy wasn’t a sniper.’

‘But it’s possible.’

‘He’s probably behind the water heater.’

‘But he might not be.’

‘I could fire through the door.’

‘If he isn’t there, that would alert him.’

‘He’ll be alerted anyway, as soon as he sees the flashlight beam coming down.’

‘The door has a steel core. You heard what Seth said.’

The guy with the gun asked, ‘So what do we do?’

The first guy said, ‘We could wait for daylight.’

Boredom, irritation, exasperation, humiliation.

The guy with the gun said, ‘No.’

‘OK, so I’ll open up real fast, and you fire one round immediately, right where his feet are. Or where they would be. Just in case. Don’t wait and see. Just pull the trigger, whatever, right away.’

‘OK. But then we’ll have to go down real fast.’

‘We will. He’ll be in shock. I bet that gun is pretty loud. Ready?’

‘I’m ready.’ The guy with the gun estimated the arc of the swinging door and shuffled a foot closer and braced himself, the stock to his shoulder, one eye closed, his finger tight on the trigger.

The first guy said, ‘Aim low.’

The oval of light settled on the bottom quarter of the door.

‘On three. Your count.’

‘One.’

‘Two.’

‘Three.’

The first guy turned the knob and flung the door wide open and the second guy fired instantly, with a long tongue of flame and a huge roaring twelve-gauge boom.

FORTY-EIGHT

REACHER HAD STUDIED THE ELECTRICAL PANEL AND HAD DECIDED to cut all the circuits at once, because of human nature. He was pretty sure that the football players would turn out to be less than perfect sentries. Practically all sentries were less than perfect. It was any army's most persistent problem. Boredom set in, and attention wandered, and discipline eroded. Military history was littered with catastrophes caused by poor sentry performance. And football players weren't even military. Reacher figured the two in the house above him would stay on the ball for about ten or fifteen minutes, and then they would get lazy. Maybe they would make coffee or turn on the television, and relax, and get comfortable. So he gave them half an hour to settle in, and then he cut all the power at once, to be sure of killing whatever form of entertainment they had chosen.

Whereupon human nature would take over once again. The two in the house above him were used to dominance, used to getting their own way, used to having what they wanted, and accustomed to winning. Being denied television or warmth or coffee wasn't a major defeat or the end of the world, but for guys like that it was a proxy version of a poke in the chest on a sidewalk outside a bar. It was a provocation. It would eat away at them, and it would not be ignored for ever. Ultimately they would respond, because of ego. The response would start with anger, and then threats, and then intervention, which would be inexpert and badly thought out.

Human nature.

Reacher hit the circuit breakers and found the stairs in the dark and crept up to the top step and listened. The door was thick and tight in its frame, so he didn't hear much, except the bouts of hammering an inch from his ear, and then the scream from the doctor's wife, which he discounted immediately, because it was clearly staged. He had heard people scream before, and he knew the difference between real and fake.

Then he waited in the dark. All went quiet for the best part of an hour, which was longer than he expected. All bullies are cowards, but these two had a little more pussy in them than he had guessed. They had a shotgun, for God's sake, and he assumed they had found a flashlight. What the hell were they waiting for?

Permission? Their mommies?

He waited.

Then eventually he sensed movement and deliberation on the other side of the door. He imagined that one guy would be holding the shotgun, and the other would be holding the flashlight. He guessed they would plan to shuffle down slowly behind the gun, like they had seen in the movies. He figured their primary intention would be to capture him and restrain him, not to kill him, partly because there was a large conceptual gap between sacking a quarterback and murdering a fellow human being, and partly because Seth Duncan would want him alive for later entertainment. So if they were going to shoot, they were going to aim low. And if they were smart, they were going to shoot immediately, because sooner or later they would have to realize that his own best move would be to be waiting right there at the top of the stairs, for the sake of surprise.

He felt the doorknob move, and then there was a pause. He put his back flat on the wall, on the hinge side of the door, and he put one foot on the opposite wall, at waist height, and he straightened his leg a little, and he clamped himself tight, and then he lifted his other foot into place, and he walked himself upward, palms and soles, until his head was bent against the stairwell ceiling and his butt was jammed four feet off the ground.

He waited.

Then the door flung open away from him and he got a split-second glimpse of a flashlight taped to a shotgun barrel, and then the shotgun fired instantly, at point-blank range and a downward angle, right under his bent knees, and the stairwell was instantly full of deafening noise and flame and smoke and dust and wood splinters from the stairs and shards of plastic from where the muzzle blast blew the protruding flashlight apart. Then the muzzle flash died and the house went pitch dark again and Reacher vaulted out of his clamped position, his right foot landing on the top stair, his left foot on the second, balanced, ready, using the bright fragment of visual memory his eyes had retained, leaning down to where he knew the shotgun must be, grabbing it two-handed, tearing it away from the guy holding it, backhanding it hard into where he knew the guy's face must be, achieving two results in one, making the guy disappear backward and recycling the shotgun's pump action both at once, loudly, CRUNCH-crunch, and then shouldering the swinging door away and feeling it crash against the second guy,

and bursting out of the stairwell and firing into the floor, not really seeking to hit anyone but needing the brief light from the muzzle flash, seeing one guy down on his left and the other still up on his right, launching himself at that new target, clubbing the gun at the guy, cycling the action again against his face, CRUNCH-crunch, bringing him down, kicking hard against his fallen form, head, ribs, arms, legs, whatever he could find, then dancing back and kicking and stamping on the first guy in the dark, head, stomach, hands, then back to the second guy, then the first again, all unaimed and wild, overwhelming force indiscriminately applied, not giving up on it until well after he was sure no more was required.

Then he finally stopped and stepped back and stood still and listened. Most of what he heard was panicked breathing from the room on his left. The dining room. He called, ‘Doctor? This is Reacher. I’m OK. No one got shot. Everything is under control now. But I need the power back on.’

No response.

Pitch dark.

‘Doctor? The sooner the better, OK?’

He heard movement in the dining room. A chair scraping back, a hand touching a wall, a stray foot kicking a table leg. Then the door opened and the doctor came out, more sensed than seen, a presence in the dark. Reacher asked him, ‘Do you have another flashlight?’

The doctor said, ‘No.’

‘OK, go switch on the circuit breakers for me. Take care on the stairs. They might be a little busted up.’

The doctor said, ‘Now?’

‘In a minute,’ Reacher said. Then he called out, ‘You two on the floor? Can you hear me? You listening?’

No response. Pitch dark. Reacher moved forward, carefully, sliding his feet flat on the floor, feeling his way with the toes of his boots. He came up against the first guy’s head, and worked out where his gut must be, and jammed the shotgun muzzle down into it, hard. Then he pivoted onward, like pole vaulting, and found the second guy a yard away. They were on their backs, roughly in a

found the second guy a yard away. They were on their backs, roughly in a straight line, lying symmetrically, feet to feet. Reacher stood between them and kicked the side of his left boot against one guy's sole and his right boot against the other's. He got set and aimed the shotgun at the floor in front of him and rehearsed a short arc, left and then right and back again, like a batter in the box loosening up his swing ahead of a pitch. He said, 'If you guys move at all, I'm going to shoot you both in the nuts, one after the other.'

No response.

Nothing at all.

Reacher said, 'OK, doctor, go ahead. Take care now.' He heard the doctor feel his way along the wall, heard his feet on the stairs, slow cautious steps, fingertips trailing, the creak and crack of splintered boards underfoot, and then the confident click of a heel on the solid concrete below.

Ten seconds later the lights came back on, and the television picture jumped back to life, and the excited announcers started up again, and the heating system clicked and caught and hummed and whirred. Reacher screwed his eyes shut against the sudden dazzle and then forced them open to narrow slits and looked down. The two guys on the floor were battered and bleeding. One was out cold, and the other was dazed. Reacher fixed that with another kick to the head, and then he looked around and saw the roll of duct tape on the sofa. Five minutes later both guys were trussed up like chickens and bound together back to back by their necks and their waists and their ankles. Together they were far too heavy to move, so Reacher left them right where they were, on the hallway floor, hiding the ruined patch of parquet where he had fired into the ground.

Job done, he thought.

Job done, Jacob Duncan thought. Seth's Cadillac had been retrieved from the road, and both dead Iranians had been stripped to the skin and their clothes had been dumped in the kitchen woodstove. Their bodies had been hauled to the door and left in the yard for later disposal. Then the kitchen wall and the floor had been wiped clean, and the broken glass had been swept up, and the busted window had been patched with tape and wax paper, and Seth's hand had been taken care of, and then Jasper had dragged extra chairs in from another room, and now all six men were sitting close together around the table, the four Duncans plus Cassano and Mancini, all of them tight and collegial and elbow to

elbow. The Knob Creek had been brought out, and toasts had been drunk, to each other, and to success, and to future partnership.

Jacob Duncan had leaned back and drunk with considerable private satisfaction and personal triumph, because he felt fully vindicated. He had glimpsed Cassano at the window, had seen the aimed .45, and had talked a little longer and louder than was strictly necessary, proclaiming his undying loyalty to Rossi, cementing the relationship beyond a reasonable doubt, all the while keeping his nerve and waiting for Cassano to shoot, which he had eventually. Quick thinking, courage under pressure, and a perfect result. Doubled profits stretched ahead in perpetuity. Reacher was locked safely underground, with two good men on guard. And the shipment was on its way, which was the most wonderful thing of all, because as always a small portion of it would be retained for the family's personal use. A kind of benign shrinkage. It made the whole crazy operation worthwhile.

Jacob raised his glass and said, 'Here's to us,' because life was good.

Reacher found a paring knife in a kitchen drawer and cut the decapitated remains of the flashlight off the shotgun barrel. Laymen misunderstood gunpowder. A charge powerful enough to propel a heavy projectile through the air at hundreds of miles an hour did so by creating a shaped bubble of exploding gas energetic enough to destroy anything it met on its way out of the barrel. Which was why military flashlights were made of metal and mounted with the lens behind the muzzle, not in front of it. He tossed the shattered plastic in the trash, and then he looked around the kitchen and asked, 'Where's my coat?'

The doctor's wife said, 'In the closet. When we came back in I took all the coats and hung them up. I kind of scooped yours up along the way. I thought I should hide it. I thought you might have useful stuff in it.'

Reacher glanced into the hallway. 'Those guys didn't search my pockets?'

'No.'

'I should kick them in the head again. It might raise their IQ.'

The doctor's wife told him to sit down in a chair. He did, and she examined him carefully, and said, 'Your nose looks really terrible.'

'I know,' Reacher said. He could see it between his eyes, purple and swollen, out of focus, an unexpected presence. He had never seen his own nose before, except in a mirror.

'My husband should take a look at it.'

'Nothing he can do.'

'It needs to be set.'

'I already did that.'

'No, seriously.'

'Believe me, it's as set as it's ever going to get. But you could clean the cuts, if you like. With that stuff you used before.'

Dorothy Coe helped her. They started with warm water, to sponge the crusted blood off his face. Then they got to work with the cotton balls and the thin astringent liquid. The skin had split in big U-shaped gashes. The open edges stung like crazy. The doctor's wife was thorough. It was not a fun five minutes. But finally the job was done, and Dorothy Coe rinsed his face with more water, and then patted it dry with a paper towel.

The doctor's wife asked, 'Do you have a headache?'

'A little bit,' Reacher said.

'Do you know what day it is?'

'Yes.'

'Who's the president?'

'Of what?'

'The Nebraska Corn Growers.'

'I have no idea.'

'I should bandage your face.'

‘No need,’ Reacher said. ‘Just lend me a pair of scissors.’

‘What for?’

‘You’ll see.’

She found scissors and he found the roll of duct tape. He cut a neat eight-inch length and laid it glue-side up on the table. Then he cut a two-inch length and trimmed it to the shape of a triangle. He stuck the triangle glue-side to glue-side in the centre of the eight-inch length, and then he picked the whole thing up and smoothed it into place across his face, hard and tight, a broad silver slash that ran from one cheekbone to the other, right under his eyes. He said, ‘This is the finest field dressing in the world. The Marines once flew me from the Lebanon to Germany with nothing but duct tape keeping my lower intestine in.’

‘It’s not sterile.’

‘It’s close enough.’

‘It can’t be very comfortable.’

‘But I can see past it. That’s the main thing.’

Dorothy Coe said, ‘It looks like war paint.’

‘That’s another point in its favour.’

The doctor came in and stared for a second. But he didn’t comment. Instead he asked, ‘What happens next?’

FORTY-NINE

THEY WENT BACK TO THE DINING ROOM AND SAT IN THE DARK, SO they could watch the road. There were three more Cornhuskers out there somewhere, and it was possible they would come in and out on rotation, swapping duties, spelling each other. Like shift work. Reacher hoped they all showed up sooner or later. He kept the duct tape and the Remington close by.

The doctor said, ‘We haven’t heard any news.’

Reacher nodded. ‘Because you weren’t allowed to use the phone. But it rang, and so you think something new has happened.’

‘We think three new things have happened. Because it rang three times.’

‘Best guess?’

‘The gang war. Three men left, three phone calls. Maybe they’re all dead now.’

‘They can’t all be dead. The winner must still be alive, at least. Murder-suicide isn’t normally a feature of gang fights.’

‘OK, then maybe it’s two dead. Maybe the man in the Cadillac got the Italians.’

Reacher shook his head. ‘More likely the other way around. The man in the Cadillac will get picked off very easily. Because he’s alone, and because he’s new up here. This terrain is very weird. It takes some getting used to. The Italians have been here longer than him. In fact they’ve been here longer than me, and I feel like I’ve been here for ever.’

The doctor’s wife said, ‘I don’t see how this is a gang war at all. Why would a criminal in Las Vegas or wherever just step aside because two of his men got hurt in Nebraska?’

Reacher said, ‘The two at the motel got more than hurt.’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘Think about it,’ Reacher said. ‘Suppose the big guy is at home in Vegas, taking

it easy by the pool, smoking a cigar, and his supplier calls him up and says he's cutting him out of the chain. What does the big guy do? He sends his boys over, that's what. But his boys just got beat. So he's bankrupt now. He's fresh out of threats. He's powerless. It's over for him.'

'He must have more boys.'

'They all have more boys. They can choose to fight two on two, or ten on ten, or twenty on twenty, and there's always a winner and there's always a loser. They accept the referee's decision and they move on. They're like rutting stags. It's in their DNA.'

'So what kind of gangs are they?'

'The usual kind. The kind that makes big money out of something illegal.'

'What kind of something?'

'I don't know. But it's not gambling debts. It's not something theoretical on paper. It's something real. Something physical. With weight, and dimensions. It has to be. That's what the Duncans do. They run a transportation company. So they're trucking something in, and it's getting passed along from A to B to C to D.'

'Drugs?'

'I don't think so. You don't need to truck drugs south to Vegas. You can get them direct from Mexico or South America. Or California.'

'Drug money, then. To be laundered in the casinos. From the big cities in the East, maybe coming through Chicago.'

'Possible,' Reacher said. 'Certainly it's something very valuable, which is why they're all in such an uproar. It has to be the kind of thing where you smile and rub your hands when you see it rolling in through the gate. And it's late now, possibly, which is why there are so many boots on the ground up here. They're all anxious. They all want to see it arrive, because it's physical, and valuable. They all want to put their hands on it and babysit their share. But first of all, they want to help bust up the logjam.'

'Which is what?'

‘Me, I think. Either the Duncans are late for some other reason and they’re using me as an excuse, or this is something a stranger absolutely can’t be allowed to see. Maybe the area has to be sanitized before it can come in. Have you ever been told to stay away from anywhere for periods of time?’

‘Not really.’

‘Have you ever seen any weird stuff arrive? Any big unexplained vehicles?’

‘We see Duncan trucks all the time. Not so much in the winter.’

‘I heard the harvest trucks are all in Ohio.’

‘They are. Nothing more than vans here now.’

Reacher nodded. ‘One of which was missing from the depot. Three spaces, two vans. So what kind of a thing is valuable and fits in a van?’

Jacob Duncan saw that Roberto Cassano’s mind had been changed once and for all by the dead man in the Cadillac’s trunk. Mancini’s, too. Now they both accepted that Reacher was a genuine threat. How else could they react? The dead man had no marks on him. None at all. So what had Reacher done to him? Frightened him to death? Jacob could see both Cassano and Mancini thinking about it. So he waited patiently and eventually Cassano looked across the table at him and said, ‘I apologize, most sincerely.’

Jacob looked back and said, ‘For what, sir?’

‘For before. For not taking you seriously about Reacher.’

‘Your apology is accepted.’

‘Thank you.’

‘But the situation remains the same,’ Jacob said. ‘Reacher is still a problem. He’s still on the loose. And nothing can happen until he’s accounted for. We have three men looking for him. They’ll work all night and all day if necessary. Just as long as it takes. Because we don’t want Mr Rossi to feel we’re in any way the junior partner in this new relationship. That’s very important to us.’

Cassano said, ‘We should go out too.’

‘All of us?’

‘I meant me and Mancini.’

‘Indeed,’ Jacob Duncan said. ‘Perhaps you should. Perhaps we should turn the whole thing into a competition. Perhaps the prize should be to speak first when we sit down to renegotiate the profit share.’

‘There are more of you than us.’

‘But you are professionals.’

‘You know the neighbourhood.’

‘You want a fairer fight? Very well. We’ll send our three boys home to bed, and I’ll send my son out in their place. Alone. That’s one against two. As long as it takes. May the best man win. To the victor, the spoils, and so on, and so forth. Shall I do that?’

‘I don’t care,’ Cassano said. ‘Do whatever you want. We’ll beat all of you, however many you put out there.’ He drained his glass and set it back on the table and stood up with Mancini. They walked out together, through the back door, to their car, which was still parked in the field, on the other side of the fence. Jacob Duncan watched them go, and then he sat back in his chair and relaxed. They would waste some long and fruitless hours, and then all in good time Reacher would be revealed, and Rossi would take the small subliminal hit, and the playing field would tilt, just a little, but enough. Jacob smiled. Success, triumph, and vindication. Subtlety, and finesse.

*

The road outside the dining room window stayed dark. Nothing moved on it. The two Cornhusker vehicles were still parked on the shoulder beyond the fence. One was an SUV and one was a pick-up truck. Both looked cold and inert. Overhead the moon came and went, first shining faintly through thin cloud, and then disappearing completely behind thicker layers.

The doctor said, ‘I don’t like just sitting here.’

‘So don’t,’ Reacher said. ‘Go to bed. Take a nap.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Nothing. I’m waiting for daylight.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you don’t have street lights here.’

‘You’re going out?’

‘Eventually.’

‘Why?’

‘Places to go, things to see.’

‘One of us should stay awake. To keep an eye on things.’

‘I’ll do that,’ Reacher said.

‘You must be tired.’

‘I’ll be OK. You guys go get some rest.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Positive.’

They didn’t need much more persuading. The doctor looked at his wife and they headed off together, and then Dorothy Coe followed them, presumably to a spare room somewhere. Doors opened and closed and water ran and toilets flushed, and then the house went quiet. The heating system whirred and the taped-up football players muttered and grunted and snored on the hallway floor, but apart from that Reacher heard nothing at all. He sat upright on the hard chair and kept his eyes open and stared out into the dark. The duct tape bandage itched his face. He did OK for ten or twenty minutes, and then he slipped a little, like he knew he would, like he often had before, into a kind of trance, like suspended animation, half awake and half asleep, half effective and half useless. He was a less than perfect sentry, and he knew it. But then, practically all sentries were

less than perfect. It was any army’s most persistent problem.

Half awake and half asleep. Half effective and half useless. He heard the car and he saw its lights, but it was a whole stubborn second before he understood he wasn’t dreaming.

FIFTY

THE CAR CAME IN FROM THE RIGHT, FROM THE EAST, PRECEDED BY headlight beams and road noise. It slowed to a walk and passed behind the parked Cornhusker pick-up, and then it rolled on and passed behind the parked SUV. Then it turned and nosed into the driveway, with a crunch and a squelch from its wheels on the gravel, and then it stopped.

And then Reacher saw it.

There was enough light scatter and enough reflection to identify it. It was the dark blue Chevrolet. The Italians. Reacher picked up the Remington. The car stayed where it was. No one got out. It was sixty yards away, half in and half out of the driveway mouth. Just sitting there, lights on, idling. A tactical problem. Reacher had three innocent non-combatants in a wood-frame house. There were two parked cars on the driveway and two on the road, for cover. There were two opponents and the house had windows and a door both front and back.

Not ideal conditions for a gun battle.

Best hope would be for the Italians to approach the front door on foot. Game over, right there. Reacher could swing the door open and fire point blank. But the Italians weren't approaching on foot. They were just sitting in the car. Doing nothing. Talking, maybe. And scouting around. Reacher could see dim flashes of white as necks craned and heads turned. They were discussing something.

Angelo Mancini was saying, 'This is a waste of time. He ain't in there. He can't be. Not unless he's hanging out with three of their football players.'

Roberto Cassano nodded. He glanced over his shoulder at the pick-up truck and the SUV on the shoulder, and then he glanced ahead at the gold GMC Yukon on the driveway. It was parked in front of an older truck. He said, 'That's the old woman's ride, from the farm.'

Mancini said, 'Sleepover time.'

'I guess Mahmeini's boy was right about something. They know the doctor is the weak link. They've got him staked out.'

‘Not much of a trap, all things considered. Not with their cars parked out front. No one is going to walk into that.’

‘Which is good for us, in a way. They’re wasting their resources. Which gives us a better chance somewhere else.’

‘Do you want to check here? Just in case?’

‘What’s the point? If he’s in there, he’s already their prisoner.’

‘That’s what I was thinking. But then I thought, not necessarily. They could be his prisoner.’

‘One against three?’

‘You saw what he did to the guy in the Cadillac’s trunk.’

‘I don’t know. I kind of want to check, I guess. And maybe we should. But you heard the man. This is a competition now. We can’t waste time.’

‘Wouldn’t take much time.’

‘I know. But we’ll look like idiots if he’s not in there. The football players will be straight on the phone to the Duncans, all yukking it up about how we came looking in a place he couldn’t possibly be.’

‘No one said there are style points involved.’

‘But there are. There are always style points involved. This is a long game. There’s a lot of money involved. If we lose face we’ll never get it back.’

‘So where?’

Cassano looked again at the old woman’s truck. ‘If she’s here, then her house is empty tonight. And people looking for places to hide love empty houses.’

Reacher saw them back out and drive away again. At first he didn’t understand why. Then he concluded they were looking for Seth Duncan. They had pulled up, they had eyeballed the parked cars, they had seen that the Mazda wasn’t among them, and they had gone away again. Logical. He put the Remington back on the floor, and planted his feet, and straightened his back, and stared out

into the darkness.

Nothing else happened for ninety long minutes. No one came, no one stirred. Then pale streaks of dawn started showing in the sky to Reacher's right. They came in low and silver and purple, and the land slowly lightened from black to grey, and the world once again took solid shape, all the way to the far horizon. Rags of tattered cloud lit up bright overhead, and a knee-high mist rose up off the dirt. A new day. But not a good one, Reacher thought. It was going to be a day full of pain, both for those who deserved it, and for those who didn't.

He waited.

He couldn't get his Yukon out, because he had no key for Dorothy Coe's pick-up truck. It was possibly in her coat, but he wasn't inclined to go look for it. He was in no hurry. It was wintertime. Full daylight was still an hour away.

Five hundred miles due north, up in Canada, just above the 49th Parallel, because of the latitude, dawn came a little later. The first of the morning light filtered down through the needles of the towering pine and touched the white van in its summer picnic spot at the end of the rough grassy track. The driver woke in his seat, and blinked, and stretched. He had heard nothing all night long. He had seen nothing. No bears, no coyotes, no red foxes, no moose, no elk, no wolves. No people. He had been warm, because he had a sleeping bag filled with down, but he had been very uncomfortable, because panel vans had small cabs, and he had spent the night folded into a seat that didn't recline very far. It was always on his mind that the cargo in the back was treated better than he was. It rode more comfortably. But then, it was expensive and hard to get, and he wasn't. He was a realistic man. He knew how things worked.

He climbed out and took a leak against the pine's ancient trunk. Then he ate and drank from his meagre supplies, and he pushed his palms against his aching back, and he stretched again to work out the kinks. The sky was brightening. It was his favourite time for a run to the border. Light enough to see, too early for company. Ideal. He had just twenty miles to go, most of them on an unmapped forest track, to a point a little less than four thousand yards north of the line. The transfer zone, he called it. The end of the road for him, but not for his cargo.

He climbed back in the cab and started the engine. He let it warm and settle for a minute while he checked the dials and the gauges. Then he selected first gear, and released the parking brake, and turned the wheel, and moved away slowly, at

walking speed, lurching and bouncing down the rough grassy track.

Reacher heard sounds at the end of the hallway. A toilet flushing, a faucet running, a door opening, a door closing. Then the doctor came limping past the dining room, stiff with sleep, mute with morning. He nodded as he passed, and he skirted the football players, and he headed for the kitchen. A minute later Reacher heard the gulp and hiss of the coffee machine. The sun was up enough to show a reflection in the window of the SUV parked beyond the fence. Webs of frost were glinting and glittering in the fields.

The doctor came in with two mugs of coffee. He was dressed in a sweater over pyjamas. His hair was uncombed. The damage on his face was lost in general redness. He put one mug in front of Reacher and threaded his way around and sat in a chair on the opposite side of the table.

He said, ‘Good morning.’

Reacher said nothing.

The doctor asked, ‘How’s your nose?’

Reacher said, ‘Terrific.’

The doctor said, ‘There’s something you never told me.’

Reacher said, ‘There are many things I never told you.’

‘You said twenty-five years ago the detective neglected to search somewhere. You said because of ignorance or confusion.’

Reacher nodded, and took a sip of his coffee.

The doctor asked, ‘Is that where you’re going this morning?’

‘Yes, it is.’

‘Will you find anything there after twenty-five years?’

‘Probably not.’

‘Then why are you going?’

‘Because I don’t believe in ghosts.’

‘I don’t follow.’

‘I hope you never have to. I hope I’m wrong.’

‘Where is this place we’re talking about?’

‘Mrs Coe told me that fifty years ago two farms were sold for a development that never happened. The outbuildings from one of them are still there. Way out in a field. A barn, and a smaller shed.’

The doctor nodded. ‘I know where they are.’

‘People plough right up to them.’

‘I know,’ the doctor said. ‘I guess they shouldn’t, but why let good land go to waste? The subdivisions were never built, and they’re never going to be. So it’s something for nothing, and God knows these people need it. It’s yield that doesn’t show up on their mortgages.’

‘So when Detective Carson came up here twenty-five years ago, what did he see? In the early summer? He saw about a million acres of waist-high corn, and he saw some houses dotted around here and there, and he saw some outbuildings dotted around here and there. He stopped in at every house, and every occupant said they’d searched their outbuildings. So Carson went away again, and that old barn and that old shed fell right between the cracks. Because Carson’s question was, did you search your outbuildings? Everyone said yes, probably quite truthfully. And Carson saw the old barn and the old shed and quite naturally assumed they must belong to someone, and that therefore they had indeed been looked at, as promised. But they didn’t belong to anyone, and they hadn’t been looked at.’

‘You think that was the scene of the crime?’

‘I think Carson should have asked that question twenty-five years ago.’

‘There won’t be anything there. There can’t be. Those buildings are ruins now, and they must have been ruins then. They’ve been sitting there empty for fifty years, in the middle of nowhere, just mouldering away.’

years, in the middle of nowhere, just moldering away.'

'Have they?'

'Of course. You said it yourself, they don't belong to anyone.'

'Then why have they got wheel ruts all the way to the door?'

'Have they?'

Reacher nodded. 'I hid a truck in the smaller shed my first night. No problem getting there. I've seen worse roads in New York City.'

'Old ruts? Or new ruts?'

'Hard to tell. Both, probably. Many years' worth, I would say. Quite deep, quite well established. No weeds. Not much traffic, probably, but some. Some kind of regularity. Enough to keep the ruts in shape, anyway.'

'I don't understand. Who would use those places now? And for what?'

Reacher said nothing. He was looking out the window. The light was getting stronger. The fields were turning from grey to brown. The parked pick-up beyond the fence was all lit up by a low ray.

The doctor asked, 'So you think someone scooped the kid up and drove her to that barn?'

'I'm not sure any more,' Reacher said. 'They were harvesting alfalfa at the time, and there will have been plenty of trucks on the road. And I'm guessing this whole place felt a bit happier back then. More energetic. People doing this and that, going here and there. The roads were probably a little busier than they are now. Probably a lot busier. Maybe even too busy to risk scooping a kid up against her will in broad daylight.'

'So what do you think happened to her?'

Reacher didn't answer. He was still looking out the window. He could see the knots in the fence timbers. He could see clumps of frozen weeds at the base of the posts. The front lawn was dry and brittle with cold.

Reacher said, 'You're not much of a gardener.'

Reacher said, 'You're not much of a gardener.'

'No talent,' the doctor said. 'No time.'

'Does anyone garden?'

'Not really. People are too tired. And working farmers hardly ever garden. They grow stuff to sell, not to look at.'

'OK.'

'Why do you want to know?'

'I'm asking myself, if I was a little girl with a bicycle, and I loved flowers, where would I go to see some? No point coming to a house like this, for instance. Or any house, probably. Or anywhere at all, really, because every last inch of ground is ploughed for cash crops. I can think of just three possibilities. I saw two big rocks in the fields, with brambles around them. Nice wild flowers in the early summer, probably. There may be more just like them, but it doesn't matter anyway, because in the early summer they would be completely inaccessible, because you'd have to wade a mile through growing corn just to get to them. But there was one other place I saw the same kind of brambles.'

'Where was that?'

'Around the base of that old barn. Windblown seeds, I guess. People plough close, but they leave some space.'

'You think she rode there on her own?'

'I think it's possible. Maybe she knew the one place she was sure to see flowers. And maybe someone knew she knew.'

FIFTY-ONE

THE DUNCANS HAD MOVED ON TO JONAS'S KITCHEN, BECAUSE the taped window in Jasper's was leaking cold air, and the burning fabric in the stove was making smoke and smells. They had stopped drinking bourbon and had started drinking coffee. The sun was up and the day was already forty minutes old. Jacob Duncan checked the clock on the wall and said, 'The sun is up in Canada too. Dawn was about ten minutes ago. I bet the shipment is already rolling. I know that boy. He likes an early start. He's a good man. He doesn't waste time. The transfer will be happening soon.'

The road that led south from Medicine Hat petered out after Pakowki Lake. The blacktop surface finished with a ragged edge, and then there was a quarter-mile of exposed roadbed, just crushed stone bound with tar, and then that finished too, in a forest clearing with no apparent exit. But the white van lined up between two pines and drove over stunted underbrush and found itself on a rutted track, once wide, now neglected, a firebreak running due south, designed with flames and westerly winds in mind. The van rolled slowly, tipping left and right, its wheels moving up and down independently, like walking. Ahead of it was nothing but trees, and then the Montana town of Hogg Parish. But the van would stop halfway there, a little more than two miles short of the border, at the northern limit of the safe zone, exactly symmetrical with its opposite number in America, which was no doubt already in place and waiting, all fresh and energetic and ready for the last leg of the journey.

The doctor went back to the kitchen and returned with more coffee. He said, 'It could have been an accident. Maybe she went inside the barn.'

Reacher said, 'With her bicycle?'

'It's possible. We don't know enough about her. Some kids would dump a bike on the track, and others would wheel it inside. It's a matter of personality. Then she might have injured herself on something in there. Or gotten stuck. The door is jammed now. Maybe it was baulky then. She could have gotten trapped. No one would have heard her shouting.'

'And then what?'

'An eight-year-old without food or water, she wouldn't have lasted long.'

An eight-year-old without food or water, she wouldn't have lasted long.

‘Not a pleasant thought,’ Reacher said.

‘But preferable to some of the alternatives.’

‘Maybe.’

‘Or she might have gotten hit by a truck. Or a car. On the way over there. You said it yourself, the roads could have been busy. Maybe the driver panicked and hid the body. And the bike with it.’

‘Where?’

‘Anywhere. In that barn, or miles away. In another county. Another state, even. Maybe that’s why nothing was ever found.’

‘Maybe,’ Reacher said again.

The doctor went quiet.

Reacher said, ‘Now there’s something you’re not telling me.’

‘There’s time.’

‘How much?’

‘Probably half an hour.’

‘Before what?’

‘The other three Cornhuskers will come here for breakfast. Their buddies are here, so this is their temporary base. They’ll make my wife cook for them. They enjoy feudal stuff like that.’

‘I figured,’ Reacher said. ‘I’ll be ready.’

‘One of them is the guy who broke your nose.’

‘I know.’

The doctor said nothing.

Reacher said, ‘Can I ask you a question?’

‘What?’

‘Is your garage like your garden or like your television set?’

‘More like my television set.’

‘That’s good. So turn around and watch the road. I’ll be back in ten.’ Reacher picked up the Remington and found his way through the kitchen to the mud room lobby. He found the door that led to the garage. It was a big space, empty because the Subaru was still at the motel, and neat and clean, with a swept floor and no visible chaos. There were shelving racks all along one wall, loaded with the stuff that hadn’t been in the basement. There was a workbench along a second wall, well organized, again neat and clean, with a vice, and a full-width pegboard above, loaded with tools logically arrayed.

Reacher unloaded the Remington, five remaining shells from the magazine and one from the breech. He turned the gun upside down and clamped it in the vice. He found an electric jigsaw and fitted a woodcutting blade. He plugged it in and fired it up and put the dancing blade on the walnut and sawed off the shoulder stock, first with a straight cut across the narrowest point, and then again along a curving line that mirrored the front contour of the pistol grip. Two more passes put a rough chamfer on each raw edge, and then he found a rasp and cleaned the whole thing up, with twists of walnut falling away like grated chocolate, and then he finished the job with a foam pad covered with coarse abrasive. He blew off the dust and rubbed his palm along the result, and he figured it was satisfactory.

He swapped the jigsaw blade for a metal cutter, a fine blued thing with tiny teeth, and he laid it against the barrel an inch in front of the forestock. The saw screeched and screamed and howled and the last foot of the barrel fell off and rang like a bell against the floor. He found a metal file and cleaned the burrs of steel off the new muzzle, inside and out. He released the vice and lifted the gun out and pumped it twice, crunch-crunch, crunch-crunch, and then he reloaded it, five in the magazine and one in the breech. A sawn-off with a pistol grip, not much longer than his forearm.

He found the coat closet on his way back through the house and retrieved his

winter parka. The Glock and the switchblade were still in the pockets, along with the two screwdrivers and the wrench. He used the switchblade to slit the lining inside the left-hand pocket, so the sawn-off would go all the way in. He put the coat on. Then he unlocked the front door, and went back to the dining room to wait.

The Cornhuskers came in separately, one by one, the first of them right on time, exactly thirty minutes after the doctor had spoken, in a black pick-up truck he left on the road. He jogged up the driveway and pushed in through the door like he owned the place, and Reacher laid him out with a vicious blow to the back of the head, from behind, with the wrench. The guy dropped to his knees and toppled forward on his face. Reacher invested a little time and effort in dragging him onward across the shiny wood, and then he taped him up, quick and dirty, not a permanent job, but enough for the moment. The crunch of the wrench and the thump of the guy falling and Reacher's grunting and groaning woke the doctor's wife and Dorothy Coe. They came out of their rooms wearing bathrobes. The doctor's wife looked at the new guy on the floor and said, 'I guess they're coming in for breakfast.'

Reacher said, 'But today they're not getting any.'

Dorothy Coe asked, 'What about tomorrow?'

'Tomorrow is a new day. How well do you know Eleanor Duncan?'

'She's not to blame for anything.'

'She'll be hauling your harvest this year. She's going to be in charge.'

Dorothy Coe said nothing.

The doctor's wife said, 'You want us to stay out of the way?'

'Might be safer,' Reacher said. 'You don't want one of these guys falling on you.'

'Another one coming,' the doctor called from the dining room, soft and urgent.

The second guy went down exactly the same as the first, and in the same place. There was no room left to drag him forward. Reacher folded his legs at the knees so the door would close, and then he taped him up right there

so the door would close, and then he taped him up right there.

The last to arrive was the guy who had broken Reacher’s nose.

And he didn’t come alone.

FIFTY-TWO

AWHITE SUV PARKED ON THE ROAD BEYOND THE FENCE, AND THE guy who had broken Reacher's nose climbed out of the driver's seat. Then the passenger door opened and the kid called John got out. The kid Reacher had left at the depot. Go to bed, Reacher had said. But the kid hadn't gone to bed. He had hung out until he heard that things were safe, and then he had come out to claim his share of the fun.

Dumb, dumb, dumb.

The hallway was almost too crowded to move. It was full of football players, four of them lying around like carcasses, like beached whales, limbs taped, heads flopping. Reacher picked his way around them and watched out a window. The two late arrivals were making their way past Dorothy Coe's pick-up, past John's own Yukon, hustling through the damp and the cold, heading for the door, full of high spirits.

Reacher opened the door and stepped out to meet them head on. He drew his sawn-off across his body, a long high exaggerated movement like a pirate drawing an ancient flintlock pistol, and he held it right-handed, elbow bent and comfortable, and he aimed it at the guy who had hit him. But he looked at John.

'You let me down,' he said.

Both guys came to a dead stop and stared at him a little more urgently than he thought was warranted, until he remembered the duct tape on his face. Like war paint. He smiled and felt it pucker. He looked back at the guy who had hit him and said, 'It was nothing that couldn't be fixed. But I'm not certain you'll be able to say the same.'

Neither guy spoke. Reacher kept his eyes on the guy who had hit him and said, 'Take out your car keys and toss them to me.'

The guy said, 'What?'

'I'm bored with John's Yukon. I'm going to use your truck the rest of the day.'

'You think?'

‘I’m pretty sure.’

No response.

Reacher said, ‘It’s make-your-mind-up time, boys. Either do what I tell you, or get shot.’

The guy dipped into his pocket and came out with a bunch of keys. He held them up briefly, to prove what they were, and then he tossed them underhand to Reacher, who made no attempt to catch them. They bounced off his coat and landed on the gravel. Reacher wanted his left hand free and his attention all in one place. He looked at the guy again and asked, ‘So how does your nose feel right now?’

The guy said, ‘It feels OK.’

‘It looks like it has been busted before.’

The guy said, ‘Two times.’

Reacher said, ‘Well, they say three is a lucky number. They say the third time’s the charm.’

Nobody spoke.

Reacher said, ‘John, lie face down on the ground.’

John didn’t move.

Reacher fired into the ground at John’s feet. The gun boomed and kicked and the sound rolled away across the land, loud and dull, like a quarry explosion. John howled and danced. Not hit, but stung in the shins by fragments of gravel kicked up by the blast. Reacher waited for quiet and pumped the gun, a solid crunch-crunch, probably the most intimidating sound in the world. The husk of the spent cartridge ejected and flew through the air and landed near the car keys and skittered away.

John got down on the ground. First he got on his knees, awkwardly, like he was in church, and then he spread his hands and lowered himself face down, reluctantly, like a bad-tempered coach had demanded a hundred push-ups

reluctantly, like a bad-tempered coach had demanded a hundred push-ups. Reacher called over his shoulder, ‘Doctor? Bring me the duct tape, would you?’

No response from inside the house.

Reacher called, ‘Don’t worry, doctor. There won’t be any comebacks. Never again. This is the last day. Tomorrow you’ll be living like normal people. These guys will be unemployed, heading back where they came from, looking for new jobs.’

There was a long, tense pause. Then a minute later the doctor came out with the tape. He didn’t look at the two guys. He kept his face averted and his eyes down. Old habits. He gave the roll to Reacher and ducked back inside. Reacher tossed the tape to the guy who had hit him and said, ‘Make it so your buddy can’t move his arms or legs. Or I will, by some other method, probably including spinal injury.’

The guy caught the roll of tape and got to work. He wrapped John’s wrists with a tight three-layer figure of eight, and then he wrapped the waist of the eight in the other direction, around and around. Plastic handcuffs. Reacher had no idea of the tensile strength of duct tape in terms of engineering numbers, but he knew no human could pull it apart lengthways. The guy did the same to John’s ankles, and Reacher said, ‘Now hog-tie him. Join it all up.’

The guy folded John’s feet up towards his butt and wrapped tape between the wrist restraints and the ankle restraints, four turns, each about a foot long. He squeezed it all tight and stood back. Reacher took out his wrench and held it up. There was a little blood and hair on it, from the previous two guys. He dropped it on the ground behind him. He took out his switchblade. He dropped it on the ground behind him. He took out his Glock pistol. He dropped it on the ground behind him. Then he turned and laid the sawn-off next to it. He shrugged out of his coat and let it fall. It covered all four weapons. He looked at the guy who had hit him and said, ‘Fair fight. You against me. Second-string Nebraska football against the U.S. Army. Bare knuckles. No rules. If you can get past me, you’re welcome to use anything you can find under my coat.’

The guy looked blank for a second, and then he smiled a little, as if the sun had come out, as if an unbelievable circumstance had unveiled itself right in front of him, as if a hole had opened up in a tight defence, as if suddenly he had a straight shot to the end zone. He came up on his toes, and angled his body, and bunched his right fist up under his chin, and got ready to lead with his left

bunched his right fist up under his chin, and got ready to lead with his left.

Reacher smiled too, just a little. The guy was dancing around like the Marquess of Queensberry. He had no idea. No idea at all. Maybe the last fight he had seen was in a Rocky movie. He was six-seven and three hundred pounds, but he was nothing more than a prize ox, big and dumb and shiny, going up against a gutter rat.

A 250-pound gutter rat.

The guy stepped in and bobbed and weaved for a minute, up on his toes, jiggling around, ducking and diving, wasting time and energy. Reacher stood perfectly still and gazed at him, wide-eyed with peripheral vision, focusing nowhere and everywhere at once, hyper-alert, watching the guy's eyes and his hands and his feet. And soon enough the left jab came in. The obvious first move, for a right-handed man who thought he was in a boxing ring. Any guy's left jab followed the same basic trajectory as his straight left, but much less forcefully, because it was powered by the arm only, snapping out from the elbow, with no real contribution from the legs or the upper body or the shoulders. No real power. Reacher watched the big pink knuckles getting closer, and then he moved his own left hand, fast, a blur, whipping it in and up and out like a man flailing backhanded at a wasp, and he slapped at the inside of the guy's wrist, hard enough to alter the line of the incoming jab, hard enough to deflect it away from his face and send it buzzing harmlessly over his moving shoulder.

His shoulder was moving because he was already driving hard off his back foot, jerking forward, twisting at the waist, building torque, hurling his right elbow into the gap created by turning the guy counterclockwise an inch, aiming to hit him with the elbow right on the outer edge of his left eye socket, hoping to crack his skull along the line of his temple. No rules. The blow landed with all 250 pounds of moving mass behind it, a solid, jarring impact Reacher felt all the way down to his toes. The guy staggered back. He stayed on his feet. Evidently his skull hadn't cracked, but he was feeling it. He was feeling it bad, and his mouth was opening ready to howl, so Reacher shut it again for him with a vicious uppercut under the chin, convulsive, far from elegant, but effective. The guy's head snapped back in a mist of blood and bounced forward again off his massive deltoids and Reacher tried for his other eye socket with his left elbow, a ferocious in-and-out snap from the waist, and then he put a forearm smash from the right into the guy's throat, a real home run swing, and then he kneed him in the groin, and danced behind him and kicked him hard in the back of the knees, a

sweeping, scything action, so that the guy's legs folded up under him and he went down heavily on his back on the path.

Six blows, three seconds.

No rules.

Second-string Nebraska football against the U.S. Army.

But the guy was tough. Or afraid. Or both. Either way, he didn't quit. He started scrabbling around on his back, like a turtle, trying to get up again, making botched snow angels in the gravel, his head snapping left and right. Maybe the decent thing would have been to let him take an eight-count, but having your opponent on the floor is gutter rat heaven, the absolute object of the exercise, a precious gift never to be spurned, so Reacher stilled him by kicking him hard in the ear, and then he stamped down hard with his heel in the guy's face, like an appalled homeowner stomping a cockroach, and the crunch of the guy's shattering nose was clearly audible over all the generalized panting and grunting and groaning and moaning.

Game over. Eight blows in six seconds, which was grievously slow and laborious by Reacher's standards, but then, the guy was huge, and he had an athlete's tone and stamina, and he was accustomed to a certain amount of physical punishment. He had been competitive, just barely. In the ballpark, almost. Not the worst Reacher had ever seen. Four years of college ball was probably equivalent to four days of Ranger training, and plenty of people Reacher had known hadn't even made day three.

He taped the guy up where he lay, with plastic handcuffs linked to four turns around the guy's own neck and ankle restraints linked to four turns around John's neck. Then he stepped back into the hallway and did a better job on the two who had come in first. He slid them around on the shiny parquet and taped them together, back to back, like the two from the middle of the night. He stood up and caught his breath.

Then a phone rang, muted and distant.

The phone turned out to be Dorothy Coe's cell. Its ring was muted and distant because it was with her, behind a closed door, in her room. She came out with it in her hand, and looked between it and the four taped guys on the hallway floor,

and then she smiled, as if at a hidden irony, as if normality was intruding on a thoroughly abnormal day. She said, ‘That was Mr Vincent at the motel. He wants me to work this morning. He has guests.’

Reacher asked, ‘Who are they?’

‘He didn’t say.’

Reacher thought for a moment, and said, ‘OK.’ He told the doctor to keep a medical eye on all six of the captured football players, and then he went back out to the gravel path and put his coat back on. He reloaded the pockets with his improvised arsenal, and he found the car keys where they lay on the stones, and then he headed down the driveway to the white SUV parked beyond the fence.

Eldridge Tyler moved, just a little, but enough to keep himself comfortable. He was into his second hour of daylight. He was a patient man. His eye was still on the scope. The scope was still trained on the barn door, six inches left of the judas hole, six inches down. The rifle’s forestock was still bedded securely on the bags of rice. The air was wet and thick, but the sun was bright and the view was good.

But the big man in the brown coat hadn’t come.

Not yet.

And perhaps he never would, if the Duncans had been successful during the night. But Tyler was still fully on the ball, because he was cautious by nature, and he always took his tasks seriously, and maybe the Duncans hadn’t been successful during the night. In which case the big man would show up very soon. Why would he wait? Daylight was all he needed.

Tyler took his finger off the trigger, and he flexed his hand, once, twice, and then he put his finger back.

FIFTY-THREE

THE WHITE SUV TURNED OUT TO BE A CHEVY TAHOE, WHICH seemed to Reacher's untutored eye the exact same thing as a GMC Yukon. The cabin was the same. All the controls were the same. All the dials were the same. It drove just the same, big and sloppy and inexact, all the way back to the two-lane, where Reacher turned right and headed south. There was mist, but the sun was well up in the east. The day was close to two hours old.

He slowed and coasted and then parked on the shoulder, two hundred yards short of the motel. From the north he could see nothing of it except the rocket sign and the big round lounge. He got out of the truck and walked on the blacktop, slow and quiet. His angle changed with every step. First he saw the burned-out Ford. It was in the main lot, down on its rims, black and skeletal, with two shapes behind the glassless windows, both of them burned as smooth and small as seals. Then he saw the doctor's Subaru, outside room six, jagged and damaged, but still a living thing in comparison to the Ford.

Then he saw the dark blue Chevrolet.

It was parked beyond the Subaru, outside room seven, or eight, or both, at a careless angle, at the end of four short gouges in the gravel. Frustrated men, tired and angry, jamming to a stop, ready for rest.

Reacher came in off the road and walked to the lounge door, as quietly as he could on the loose stones, past the Ford. It was still warm. The heat of the fire had scorched fantastic whorls into the metal. The lounge door was unlocked. Reacher stepped inside and saw Vincent behind the reception desk. He was in the act of hanging up the telephone. He stopped and stared at Reacher's duct-tape bandage. He asked, 'What the hell happened to you?'

'Just a scratch,' Reacher said. 'Who was on the phone?'

'It was the morning call. The same as always. Like clockwork.'

'The phone tree?' Reacher asked.

Vincent nodded.

‘And?’

‘Nothing to report. Three Cornhusker vehicles were tooling around all night, kind of aimlessly. Now they’ve gone somewhere else. All four Duncans are in Jacob’s house.’

‘You have guests here,’ Reacher said.

‘The Italians,’ Vincent said. ‘I put them in seven and eight.’

‘Did they ask about me?’

Vincent nodded. ‘They asked if you were here. They asked if I had seen you. They’re definitely looking for you.’

‘When did they get here?’

‘About five this morning.’

Reacher nodded in turn. A wild goose chase all night long, no success, eventual fatigue, no desire to drive an hour south to the Marriott and an hour back again, hence the local option. They had probably planned to nap for a couple of hours, and then saddle up once more, but they were oversleeping. Human nature.

‘They woke me up,’ Vincent said. ‘They were very bad-tempered. I don’t think I’m going to get paid.’

‘Which one of them shot the guys in the Ford?’

‘I can’t tell them apart. One did the shooting, and the other one set fire to the car.’

‘And you saw that with your own eyes?’

‘Yes.’

‘Would you go to court and say so?’

‘No, because the Duncans are involved.’

‘Would you if the Duncans weren’t involved?’

‘I don’t have that much imagination.’

‘You told me.’

‘Privately.’

‘Tell me again.’

‘One of them shot the guys and the other one burned their car.’

‘OK,’ Reacher said. ‘That’s good enough.’

‘For what?’

‘Call them,’ Reacher said. ‘One minute from now. In their rooms. Talk in a whisper. Tell them I’m in your lot, right outside your window, looking at the wreck.’

‘I can’t be involved in this.’

‘This is the last day,’ Reacher said. ‘Tomorrow will be different.’

‘Forgive me if I prefer to wait and see.’

‘Tomorrow there are going to be three kinds of people here,’ Reacher said. ‘Some dead, some sheepish, and some with a little self-respect. You need to get yourself in that third group.’

Vincent said nothing.

‘You know Eleanor Duncan?’ Reacher asked.

‘She’s OK,’ Vincent said. ‘She was never part of this.’

‘She’ll be taking over. She’ll be hauling your stuff tomorrow.’

Vincent said nothing.

‘Call the Italians one minute from now,’ Reacher said. He stepped back out to the lot and walked on the silver baulks of timber, past room one, past room two, past three and four and five and six, and then he looped around behind room

seven and room eight, and came out again near room nine. He stood in a narrow gap shaped like an hourglass, the circular bulk of room eight right there in front of him, close enough to touch, room seven one building along, the Chevy and the Subaru and the burned-out Ford trailing away from him, south to north, in a line. He took out the dead Iranian's Glock and checked the chamber.

All set.

He waited.

He heard the room phones ring, first one, then the other, both of them faint behind walls and closed doors. He pictured men rolling over on beds, struggling awake, sitting up, blinking, checking the time, looking around the unfamiliar spaces, finding the phones on the nightstands, answering them, listening to Vincent's urgent whispered messages.

He waited.

He knew what was going to happen. Whoever opened up first would wait in the doorway, half in and half out, gun drawn, leaning, craning his neck, watching for his partner to emerge. Then there would be gestures, sign language, and a cautious joint approach.

He waited.

Room eight opened up first. Reacher saw a hand on the jamb, then a pistol pointing almost vertical, then a forearm, then an elbow, then the back of a head. The pistol was a Colt Double Eagle. The forearm and the elbow were covered with a wrinkled shirtsleeve. The head was covered in uncombed black hair.

Reacher backed off a step and waited. He heard room seven's door open. He sensed more than heard the rustle of starched cotton, the silent debate, the pointing and the tapped chests assigning roles, the raised arms indicating directions, the spread fingers indicating timings. The obvious move would be for the guy from room eight to leapfrog ahead and then duck around behind room six and circle the lounge on the blind side and hit the lot from the north, while the guy from room seven waited a beat and then crept up directly from the south. A no-brainer.

They went for it. Reacher heard the farther guy step out and wait, and the nearer guy step out and walk. Eight paces, Reacher thought, before the latter passed the

guy step out and walk. Eight paces, Reacher thought, before the latter passed the former. He counted in his head, and on six he stepped out, and on seven he raised the Glock, and on eight he screamed FREEZE FREEZE FREEZE and both men froze, already surrendering, guns held low near their thighs, tired, just woken up, confused and disoriented. Reacher stayed with the full-on experience and screamed DROP YOUR WEAPONS PUT YOUR WEAPONS ON THE GROUND and both men complied instantly, the heavy stainless pieces hitting the gravel in unison. Reacher screamed STEP AWAY STEP AWAY STEP AWAY and both men stepped away, out into the lot, isolated, far from their rooms, far from their car.

Reacher breathed in and looked at them from behind. They were both in pants and shirts and shoes. No jackets, no coats. Reacher said, ‘Turn around.’

They turned around.

The one on the left said, ‘You.’

Reacher said, ‘Finally we meet. How’s your day going so far?’

No answer.

Reacher said, ‘Now turn out your pants pockets. All the way. Pull the linings right out.’

They obeyed. Quarters and dimes and bright new pennies rained down, and tissues fluttered, and cell phones hit the gravel. Plus a car key, with a bulbous black head and a plastic fob shaped liked a big number one. Reacher said, ‘Now back away. Keep going until I tell you to stop.’

They walked backward, and Reacher walked forward with them, keeping pace, eight steps, ten, and then Reacher arrived at where their Colts had fallen and said, ‘OK, stop.’ He ducked down and picked up one of the guns. He ejected the magazine and it fell to the ground and he saw it was full. He picked up the other gun. Its magazine was one short.

‘Who?’ he asked.

The guy on the left said, ‘The other one.’

‘The other what?’

‘The Iranians. You got one, we got the other. We’re on the same side here.’

‘I don’t think so,’ Reacher said. He moved on towards the small pile of pocket junk and picked up the car key. He pressed the button set in the head and he heard the Chevy’s doors unlock. He said, ‘Get in the back seat.’

The guy on the left asked, ‘Do you know who we are?’

‘Yes,’ Reacher said. ‘You’re two jerks who just got beat.’

‘We work for a guy named Rossi, in Las Vegas. He’s connected. He’s the kind of guy you can’t mess with.’

‘Forgive me if I don’t immediately faint with terror.’

‘He’s got money, too. Lots of money. Maybe we could work something out.’

‘Like what?’

‘There’s a deal going down here. We could cut you in. Make you rich.’

‘I’m already rich.’

‘You don’t look it. I’m serious. Lots of money.’

‘I’ve got everything I need. That’s the definition of affluence.’

The guy paused a beat, and then he started up again, like a salesman. He said, ‘Tell me what I can do to make this right for you.’

‘You can get in the back seat of your car.’

‘Why?’

‘Because my arms are sore and I don’t want to drag you.’

‘No, why do you want us in the car?’

‘Because we’re going for a drive.’

‘Where?’

‘I’ll tell you after you get in.’

The two men glanced at a spot in the air halfway between them, not daring to let their eyes meet, not daring to believe their luck. An opportunity. Them in the back, a solo driver in the front. Reacher tracked them with the Glock, all the way to the car. One got in on the near side, and the other looped around the trunk. Reacher saw him glance onward, at the road, at the open fields beyond, and then Reacher saw him give up on the impulse to run. Flat land. Nowhere to hide. A modern nine-millimetre sidearm, accurate out to fifty feet or more. The guy opened his door and ducked his head and folded himself inside. The Impala was not a small car, but it was no limousine in the rear. Both guys had their feet trapped under the front seats, and even though they were neither large nor tall, they were both cramped and close together.

Reacher opened the driver’s door. He put his knee on the seat and leaned inside. The guy who had spoken before asked, ‘So where are we going?’

‘Not far,’ Reacher said.

‘Can’t you tell us?’

‘I’m going to park next to the Ford you burned.’

‘What, just up there?’

‘I said not far.’

‘And then what?’

‘Then I’m going to set this car on fire.’

The two men glanced at each other, not understanding. The one who had spoken before said, ‘You’re going to drive with us in the back? Like, loose?’

‘You can put your seat belts on if you like. But it’s hardly worth it. It’s not very far. And I’m a careful driver. I won’t have an accident.’

The guy said, ‘But,’ and then nothing more.

‘I know,’ Reacher said. ‘I’ll have my back turned. You could jump me.’

‘Well, yes.’

‘But you won’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘You just won’t. I know it.’

‘Why wouldn’t we?’

‘Because you’ll be dead,’ Reacher said, and he shot the first guy in the forehead, and then the second, a brisk double tap, no pause, bang bang, no separation at all. The rear window shattered and blood and bone and brain hit the remains of the glass, delayed, slower than the bullets, and the two guys settled peacefully, slower still, like afterthoughts, like old people falling asleep, but with open eyes and fat beads of purple welling out of the neat holes in their brows, welling and lengthening and becoming slow lazy trickles that ran down to the bridges of their noses.

Reacher backed out of the car and straightened up and looked north. Nine-millimetre Parabellums. Fine ammunition. The two slugs were probably hitting the ground right about then, a mile farther on, burning their way into the frigid dirt.

Reacher checked room seven and found a wallet in a coat. There was a Nevada driver’s licence in it, made out in the name of Roberto Cassano, at a local Las Vegas address. There were four credit cards and a little more than ninety dollars in cash. Reacher took sixty and got in the Impala and drove forty yards and parked tight up against the shell of the Ford. He gave the sixty bucks to Vincent in the lounge, two rooms, one night, and then he borrowed rags and matches, and as soon as the fuse was set in the Chevy’s filler neck he hustled back to the Tahoe he had left on the shoulder. The first major flames were showing as he drove by, and he saw the fuel tank go up in his mirror, about four hundred yards later. The angle he was at and the way the fireball rose and then smoked and died made the motel sign look real, like it was a genuine working rocket, like it was blasting off for the infinite emptiness of space.

Eldridge Tyler heard the gunshots. Two faint pops, rapid, a double tap, very distant, really nothing more than vague percussive holes in the winter air. Not a rifle. Not a shotgun. Tyler knew firearms, and he knew the way their sounds

travelled across the land. A handgun, he thought, three or four miles away. Maybe the hunt was over. Maybe the big man was down. He moved again, easing one leg, easing the other, stretching one arm, stretching the other, rolling his shoulders, rotating his neck. He dug into his canvas tote bag and came out with a bottle of water and a brown-bread sandwich. He put both items within easy reach. Then he peered out through the space left by the missing louvre, and took a careful look around. Because maybe the big man wasn't down. Tyler took nothing for granted. He was a cautious man. His job was to watch and wait, and watch and wait he would, until he was told different.

He leaned up on his hands and craned around and looked behind him. The sun had moved a little south of east and low slanting light was falling on the shelter's entrance. The tripwire's plastic insulation had dewed over with dawn mist and was glistening faintly. Ten minutes, Tyler thought, before it dried and went invisible again.

He turned back and lay flat and snuggled behind the scope again, and he put his finger on the trigger.

FIFTY-FOUR

DOROTHY COE USED THE GUEST BATHROOM AND SHOWERED fast, ready for work at the motel. She stopped in the kitchen to drink coffee and eat toast with the doctor and his wife, and then she changed her mind about her destination. She asked, ‘Where did Reacher go?’

The doctor said, ‘I’m not sure.’

‘He must have told you.’

‘He’s working on a theory.’

‘He knows something now. I can feel it.’

The doctor said nothing.

Dorothy Coe asked, ‘Where did he go?’

The doctor said, ‘The old barn.’

Dorothy Coe said, ‘Then that’s where I’m going too.’

The doctor said, ‘Don’t.’

Reacher drove south on the two-lane road and coasted to a stop a thousand yards beyond the barn. It stood on the dirt a mile away to the west, close to its smaller companion, crisp in the light, canted down at one corner like it was kneeling. Reacher got out and grasped the roof bar and stood on the seat and hauled himself up and stood straight, like he had before on the doctor’s Subaru, but higher this time, because the Tahoe was taller. He turned a slow circle, the sun in his eyes one way, his shadow immense the other. He saw the motel in the distance to the north, and the three Duncan houses in the distance to the south. Nothing else. No people, no vehicles. Nothing was stirring.

He stepped down on the hood and jumped down to the ground. He ignored the tractor ruts and walked straight across the dirt, a direct line, homing in, aiming for the gap between the barn and the smaller shelter.

Eldridge Tyler heard the truck. Just the whisper of faraway tyres on coarse blacktop, the hiss of exhaust through a catalytic converter, the muted thrash of turning components, all barely audible in the absolute rural silence. He heard it stop. He heard it stay where it was. It was a mile away, he thought. It was not one of the Duncans with a message. They would come all the way, or call on the phone. It was not the shipment, either. Not yet. The shipment was still hours away.

He rolled on his side and looked back at the tripwire. He rehearsed the necessary moves in his head, should someone come: snatch back the rifle, roll on his hip, sit up, swivel around, and fire point blank. No problem.

He faced front again and put his eye on the scope and his finger on the trigger.

Ten minutes later Reacher was halfway to the barn, assessing, evaluating, counting in his head. He was alone. He was the last man standing. All ten football players were down, the Italians were down, the Arabs in the Ford were down, the remaining Iranian was accounted for, and all four Duncans were holed up in one of their houses. Reacher felt he could trust that last piece of information. The local phone tree seemed to be an impeccable source of human intelligence. Humint, the army called it, and the army Reacher had known would have been crazy with jealousy at such vigilance.

He walked on, bending his line a little to centre himself in the gap between the buildings. The barn was on his right, and the smaller shelter was on his left. The brambles at their bases looked like hasty freehand shading on a pencil drawing. Dry sticks in the winter, possibly a riot of colour and petals in the summer. Possibly an attraction. Kids' bikes could handle the tractor ruts. Balloon tyres, sturdy frames.

He walked on.

Eldridge Tyler stilled his breathing and concentrated hard and strained to hear whatever sounds there were to be heard. He knew the land. The earth was always moving, heating, cooling, vibrating, suffering tiny tremors and microscopic upheavals, forcing small stones upward through its many layers to the broken surfaces above, where they lay in the ruts and the furrows, waiting to be stepped on, to be kicked, to be crunched together, to be sent clicking one against the other. It was not possible to walk silently across open land. Tyler knew that. He kept his eye to the scope, his finger on the trigger, and his ears wide open.

Reacher stopped fifty yards out and stood absolutely still, looking at the buildings in front of him and juggling circular thoughts in his head. His theory was either all the way right or all the way wrong. The eight-year-old Margaret Coe had come for the flowers, but she hadn't gotten trapped by accident. The bike proved the proposition. A child impulsive enough to drop a bike on a path might have dashed inside a derelict structure and injured herself badly. But a child earnest and serious enough to wheel her bike in with her would have taken care and not gotten hurt at all. Human nature. Logic. If there had been an accident, the bike would have been found outside. The bike had not been found outside, therefore there had been no accident.

And: she had gone to the barn voluntarily, but she had not gone inside the barn voluntarily. Why would a child looking for flowers have gone inside a barn? Barns held no secrets for farm children. No mysteries. A kid interested in colours and nature and freshness would have felt no attraction for a dark and gloomy space full of decaying smells. Had the slider even worked twenty-five years ago? Could a kid have moved it? The building was a century old, and it had been rotting since the day it was finished. The slider was jammed now, and it might have been jammed then, and in any case it was heavy. Alternatively, could an eight-year-old kid have lifted a bike through the judas hole? A bike with big tyres and a sturdy frame and awkward pedals and handlebars?

No, someone had done it for her.

A fifth man.

Because the theory didn't work without the existence of a fifth man. The barn was irrelevant without a fifth man. The flowers were meaningless without a fifth man. The Duncans were alibied, but Margaret Coe had disappeared even so. Therefore someone else had been there, either by chance or on purpose.

Or not.

Circular logic.

All the way right, or all the way wrong.

To be all the way wrong would be frustrating, but no big deal. To be all the way right meant the fifth man existed, and had to be considered. He would be bound to the Duncans, by a common purpose, by a terrible shared secret, always and

for ever. His cooperation could be assumed. His loyalty and service were guaranteed, either by mutual interest or by coercion. In an emergency, he would help out.

Reacher looked at the barn, and the smaller shelter.

If the theory was right, the fifth man would be there.

If the fifth man was there, the theory was right.

Circular logic.

Reacher had seen the buildings twice before, once by night, and once by day. He was an observant man. He had made his living by noticing details. He was living because he noticed details. But there was nothing much to be seen from fifty yards. Just a side view of two old structures. Best move would be for the guy to be inside the barn, off centre, maybe six feet from the door, sitting easy in a lawn chair with a shotgun across his knees, just waiting for his target to step through in a bar of bright light. Second-best move would put the guy in the smaller shelter a hundred and twenty yards away, prone with a rifle on the mezzanine half-loft, his eye to a scope, watching through the ventilation louvres Reacher had noticed on both his previous visits. A harder shot, but maybe the guy thought of himself more as a rifleman than a close-quarters brawler. And maybe the inside of the barn was sacrosanct, never to be seen by an outsider, even one about to die. But in either case, the smaller shelter would have to be checked first, as a matter of simple logic.

Reacher headed left, straight for the long east wall of the smaller shelter, not fast, not slow, using an easy cadence halfway between a march and a stroll, which overall was quieter than either rushing or creeping. He stopped six feet out, where the dry brambles started, and thought about percentages. Chances were good the fifth man had served, or at least had been exposed to military culture through friends and relatives. A heartland state, big families, brothers and cousins. Probably not a specialist sniper, maybe not even an infantryman, but he might know the basics, foremost among which was that when a guy lay down and aimed forward, he got increasingly paranoid about what was happening behind him. Human nature. Irresistible. Which was why snipers operated in two-man teams, with spotters. Spotters were supposed to acquire targets and calculate range and windage, but their real value was as a second pair of eyes, and as a security blanket. All things being equal, a sniper’s performance

depended on his breathing and his heart rate, and anything that helped quiet either one was invaluable.

So would the fifth man have brought a spotter of his own? A sixth man? Probably not, because there was already a sixth man away driving the grey van, so a spotter would be a seventh man, and seven was a large and unwieldy number for a local conspiracy. So the fifth man was most likely on his own, and therefore at the minimum he would have set up a physical early-warning system, either fresh gravel or broken glass scattered along the approaches, or possibly a tripwire at the shelter's entrance, something noisy, something definitive, something to help him relax.

Reacher stepped back from the brambles and walked towards the entrance. He stopped a foot short of level, and listened hard, but he heard nothing at all. He breathed the air, hoping to detect the kind of faint chemical tang that would betray the presence of a parked vehicle, benzenes and cold hydrocarbons riding the earthier organic odours of dirt and old wood, but his broken nose was blocked with clots of blood and he had no sense of smell. None at all. So he just drew the sawn-off with his right hand and the Glock with his left and inched forward and peered right.

And saw a tripwire.

It was a length of thin electrical cable, low voltage, like something a hobbyist would buy at Radio Shack, insulated with black plastic, tied tight and shin-high across the open end of the structure. It was filmy with the part-dried remains of the morning dew, which meant it had been in place for at least two hours, since before dawn, which in turn meant the fifth man was a serious, cautious person, and patient, and committed, and fully invested. And it meant he had been contacted the day before, by the Duncans, maybe in the late afternoon, as a belt-and-suspenders back-up plan, which confirmed, finally, that the barn was indeed important.

Reacher smiled.

All the way right.

He stayed clear of the tangled vine and walked a silent exaggerated curve. He worked on the assumption that most people were right-handed, so he wanted to be on the guy's left before he announced himself, because that would give the

guy’s rifle a longer and more awkward traverse before it came to bear on target. He watched the ground and saw nothing noisy there. He saw a truck deep inside the shelter, parked halfway under the mezzanine floor. Its tailgate was open, the dirty white paint on its edge pale in the gloom. He approached within six inches of the wire and stood absolutely still, letting his eyes adjust. The inside of the shelter was dark, except for thin random bars of sunlight coming through gaps between warped boards. The truck was still and inert. It was a Chevy Silverado. Above it, a long step up from its crew-cab roof, was the loft, and there was a humped shape up there, butt and legs and back and elbows, all preceded by the soles of a pair of boots, all brightly backlit by daylight coming in through the ventilation louvres. The fifth man, prone with a rifle.

Reacher stepped over the tripwire, left foot, then right, high and careful, and eased into the shadows. He inched along the left-hand tyre track, where the earth was beaten smooth, like walking a tightrope, slow and cautious, holding his breath. He made it to the back of the truck. From there he could see the fifth man’s feet, but nothing more. He needed a better angle. He needed to be up in the truck’s load bed, which meant that a silent approach was no longer an option. The sheet metal would clang and the suspension would creak and from that point onward the morning would get very noisy very fast.

He took a deep breath, through his mouth, in and out.

FIFTY-FIVE

ELDRIDGE TYLER HEARD NOTHING AT ALL UNTIL A SUDDEN shattering cacophony erupted ten feet behind him and eight feet below. There was some kind of heavy metal implement beating on the side of his truck and then footsteps were thumping into the load bed and a loud nasal voice was screaming STAY STILL STAY STILL and then a shotgun fired into the roof above his back with a pulverizing blast in the closed space and the voice yelled STAY STILL STAY STILL again and the shotgun crunch-crunched ready for the next round and hot spent buckshot pattered down on him and wormy sawdust drifted off the damaged boards above him and settled all around him like fine khaki snow.

Then the shelter went quiet again.

The voice said, ‘Take your hands off your gun, or I’ll shoot you in the ass.’

Tyler took his right forefinger off the trigger and eased his left hand out from under the barrel. The voice was behind him, to the left. He jacked up on his palms and turned a little, arching his back, craning his neck. He saw a big guy, six-five at least, probably two-fifty, wearing a big brown parka and a wool cap. He was holding himself awkwardly, like he was stiff. Like he was hurting, exactly as advertised, except for a length of duct tape stuck to his face. Nobody had mentioned that. He was holding a sawn-off shotgun and a big metal wrench. He was right-handed. His shoulders were broad. The centre of his skull was about seventy-three inches off the floor of the Silverado’s load bed. Exactly as calculated.

Tyler closed his eyes.

Reacher saw a man somewhere between sixty and seventy years old, broad and not tall, with thin grey hair and a seamed, weather-beaten face. He was dressed in multiple layers topped by an old flannel shirt and wool pants. Beyond him and beneath him was the gleam of fine walnut and smooth gunmetal. An expensive hunting rifle, resting on what looked like stacked bags of rice. There was a bottle of water next to the rice, and what looked like a sandwich.

Reacher said, ‘Your tripwire worked real well, didn’t it?’

The guy didn’t answer.

Reacher asked, ‘What’s your name?’

The guy didn’t answer.

Reacher said, ‘Come down from there. Leave your rifle where it is.’

The guy didn’t move. His eyes were closed. He was thinking. Reacher saw him running through the same basic calculation any busted man makes: How much do they know?

Reacher told him, ‘I know most of it. I just need the last few details.’

The guy said nothing.

Reacher said, ‘Twenty-five years ago a little girl came here to see flowers. Probably she came every Sunday. One particular Sunday you were here too. I want to know if you were here by chance or on purpose.’

The guy opened his eyes. Said nothing.

Reacher said, ‘I’m going to assume you were here on purpose.’

The guy didn’t answer.

Reacher said, ‘It was early summer. I don’t know much about flowers. Maybe they hadn’t been open long. I want to know how fast the Duncans picked up on the pattern. Three weeks? Two?’

The guy moved a little. His head stayed where it was, but his hands crept back towards the gun. Reacher said, ‘Fair warning. I’ll shoot you if that muzzle starts turning towards me.’

The guy stopped moving, but he didn’t bring his hands back.

Reacher said, ‘I’m going to assume two weeks. They noticed her the first Sunday, they watched for her the second Sunday, they had you in place for the third go-round.’

No response.

Reacher said, ‘I want you to confirm it for me. I want to know when the Duncans called you. I want to know when they called those boys to build the fence. I want to hear about the plan.’

No response.

Reacher said, ‘You want to tell me you don’t know what I’m talking about?’

No reply.

‘OK,’ Reacher said. ‘I’m going to assume you do know what I’m talking about.’

No comment.

Reacher said, ‘I want to know how you knew the Duncans in the first place. Was it a matter of shared enthusiasms? Were you all members of the same disgusting little club?’

The guy didn’t answer.

Reacher asked, ‘Had you done it before somewhere?’

No reply.

Reacher asked, ‘Or was it your first time?’

No reply.

Reacher said, ‘You need to talk to me. It’s your only way of staying alive.’

The guy said nothing. He closed his eyes again, and his hands started creeping back under his body again, blindly, all twisted and awkward. He was up on one hip and one elbow, curled around, the bottom of his ribcage facing Reacher like the open mouth of a bucket. The muzzle of the rifle jerked left a little. The guy had his hand on the forestock. He didn’t want to stay alive. He was going to commit suicide. Not with the rifle, but by moving the rifle. Reacher knew the signs. Suicide by cop, it was called. Not uncommon, after arrests for certain kinds of crimes.

Reacher said, ‘It had to come to an end sometime, right?’

The guy nodded. Just a tiny movement of his head, almost not there at all. The rifle kept on moving, sudden inch after sudden inch, pulling and snagging, trapped between the wooden boards and the guy's awkward clothing.

Reacher said, 'Open your eyes. I want you to see it coming.'

The guy opened his eyes. Reacher let him fumble the rifle through ninety degrees, and then he shot him with the sawn-off, in the gut, another tremendous twelve-gauge blast in the stillness, at an angle that drove the small steel buckshot balls upward through the guy's stomach and deep into his chest cavity. He died more or less instantly, which was a privilege Reacher figured had not been offered to young Margaret Coe.

Reacher waited a long moment and then he stepped up on the roof of the Silverado's cab and climbed on to the half-loft shelf and squatted next to the dead man. He rolled him off the rifle and climbed down with it. It was a fancy toy, custom built around a standard Winchester bolt action. Very expensive, probably, but as good a way of wasting money as any other. There was a .338 Magnum in the breech and five more in the magazine. Reacher thought the .338 was overkill at a hundred and twenty yards against a human target, but he figured the firepower was about to be useful.

He carried the rifle to the mouth of the shelter and stepped over the tripwire again and stood with the cold sun on his face. Then he looped around and headed for the barn.

The judas hole was hinged to open outward and was secured with the kind of lock normally seen on a suburban front door. There was a corroded brass keyhole plate the diameter of an espresso cup, and there would be a steel tongue behind it, which would be snicked into a pressed steel receptacle, which would be rabbeted into the jamb and held by two screws. The jamb was the main slider itself, which was a sturdy item. Reacher aimed the fancy rifle from a foot away and fired twice, at where he thought the screws might be, and then twice more, at a different angle. The Magnums did a pretty good job. The door sagged open half an inch before catching on splinters. Reacher jammed his fingertips in the crack and pulled hard. A jagged piece of wood the length of his arm split off and fell to the floor and the door came free. Reacher folded the door all the way back, and then he stood in the sun for a second, and then he stepped inside the barn.

FIFTY-SIX

REACHER STEPPED OUT OF THE BARN AGAIN ELEVEN MINUTES later, and saw Dorothy Coe's truck driving up the track towards him. There were three people in the cab. Dorothy herself was at the wheel, and the doctor was in the passenger seat, and the doctor's wife was jammed in the space between them. Reacher stood absolutely still, completely numb, blinking in the sun, the captured rifle in one hand, the other hand hanging free. Dorothy Coe slowed and stopped and waited thirty feet away, a cautious distance, as if she already knew.

A long minute later the truck doors opened and the doctor climbed out. His wife slid across the vinyl and joined him. Then Dorothy Coe got out on her side. She stood still, shielded by the open door, one hand on its frame. Reacher blinked one last time and ran his free hand over his taped face and walked down to meet her. She was quiet for a moment, and then she started the same question twice, and stopped twice, before getting it all the way out on the third attempt.

She asked, 'Is she in there?'

Reacher said, 'Yes.'

'Are you sure?'

'Her bike is in there.'

'Still? After all these years? Are you sure it's hers?'

'It's as described in the police report.'

'It must be all rusted.'

'A little. It's dry in there.'

Dorothy Coe went quiet. She was staring at the western horizon, a degree or two south of the barn, as if she couldn't look directly at it. She was completely still, but her hand was clenched hard on the truck's door frame. Her knuckles were white.

She asked, 'Can you tell what happened to her?'

Reacher said, ‘No,’ which was technically true. He was no pathologist. But he had been a cop for a long time, and he knew a thing or two, and he could guess.

She said, ‘I should go look.’

He said, ‘Don’t.’

‘I have to.’

‘Not really.’

‘I want to.’

‘Better if you don’t.’

‘You can’t stop me.’

‘I know.’

‘You have no right to stop me.’

‘I’m asking you, that’s all. Please don’t look.’

‘I have to.’

‘Better not.’

‘I don’t have to listen to you.’

‘Then listen to her instead. Listen to Margaret. Pretend she grew up. Imagine what she would have become. She wouldn’t have been a lawyer or a scientist. She loved flowers. She loved colours and forms. She would have been a painter or a poet. An artist. A smart, creative person. In love with life, and full of common sense, and full of concern for you, and full of wisdom. She’d look at you and she’d shake her head and smile and she’d say, come on, mom, do what the man says.’

‘You think?’

‘She’d say, mom, trust me on this.’

‘But I don’t see. After all the years of not knowing.’

'But I have to see. After all these years of not knowing.'

'Better if you don't.'

'It's just her bones.'

'It's not just her bones.'

'What else can be left?'

'No,' Reacher said. 'I mean, it's not just her bones.'

Up on the 49th Parallel, the transfer was going exactly to plan. The white van had driven slowly south, through the last of Canada, and it had parked for the final time in a rough forest clearing a little more than two miles north of the border. The driver had gotten out and stretched and then taken a long coil of rope from the passenger foot well and walked around to the rear doors. He had opened them up and gestured urgently and the women and the girls had come on out immediately, with no reluctance, with no hesitation at all, because passage to America was what they wanted, what they had dreamed about, and what they had paid for.

There were sixteen of them, all from rural Thailand, six women and ten female children, average weight close to eighty pounds each, for a total payload of 1,260 pounds. The women were slim and attractive, and the girls were all eight years old or younger. They all stood and blinked in the morning light and looked up and around at the tall trees, and shuffled their feet a little, stiff and weary but excited and full of wonderment.

The driver herded them into a rough semicircle. He couldn't speak Thai and they couldn't understand English, so he started the same dumb show he had performed many times before. It was probably faster than talking anyway. First he patted the air to calm them down and get their attention. Then he raised a finger to his lips and twisted left, twisted right, tracking the whole length of the semicircle, a big exaggerated pantomime, so that they all saw, so that they all understood they had to be silent. He pointed at a spot on the ground and then cupped a hand behind his ear. There are sensors. The earth listens. The women nodded, deferential, keen to let him know they understood. He pointed to himself, and then to all of them, and then pointed south, and wiggled his fingers. Now we all have to walk. The women nodded again. They knew. They had been

told at the outset. He used both hands, one and then the other, palms down, stepping on the air gently and delicately. He kept the gesture going and looked along the semicircle, making eye contact with each of his charges. We have to walk softly and keep very quiet. The women nodded eagerly, and the girls looked back at him shyly from behind their hair.

The driver uncoiled his rope and measured off six feet from the end and wrapped that point around the first woman's hand. He measured another six feet and wrapped the rope around the first girl's hand, and then the next, and then the second woman, and so on, until he had all sixteen joined together safely. The rope was a guide, that was all, not a restraint. Like a mobile hand-rail. It kept them all moving at the same pace in the same direction and it prevented any of them from wandering off and getting lost. The forest transfer was dangerous enough without having to double back and crash around, hunting for stragglers.

The driver picked up the free end of the rope and wrapped it around his own hand. Then he led them off, like a train, snaking south between bushes and trees. He walked slowly and softly and listened out for commotion behind him. There was none, as usual. Asian people knew how to keep quiet, especially illegals, especially women and girls.

But as quiet as they were, twenty minutes later they were clearly heard, in two separate locations, both more than six hundred miles away, first in Fargo, North Dakota, and then in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Or more accurately they were seen in both places, in that remote seismograph needles flickered a little as they passed over a buried sensor. But the deflection was minor, barely above the level of background noise. In Fargo, an employee of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security checked back on his graph and thought: Deer. Maybe whitetails. Maybe a whole family. His counterpart in Canada checked his own graph and thought: A breeze, bringing clumps of snow down off the trees.

*

They walked on, slowly and carefully, treading lightly, patiently enduring the third of the four parts of their adventure. First had come the shipping container, and then had come the white van. Now came the hike, and then there would be another van. Everything had been explained beforehand, in great detail, in a small shipping office above a store in a town near their home. There were many such offices, and many such operations, but the one they had used was widely considered the best. The price was high, but the facilities were excellent. Their

contact had assured them his only concern was that they arrive in America in the best of condition, as fresh as daisies. To that end, the shipping container, which would be their home for the longest of the four phases, was equipped with everything necessary. There were lamps inside with bulbs that simulated daylight, wired to automobile batteries. There were mattresses and blankets. There was plenty of food and water and there were chemical toilets. There was medicine. There were ventilation slots disguised as rust holes, and in case they weren't enough there was a fan that ran off the same batteries as the lights, and there were oxygen cylinders that could be bled slowly if the air got stuffy. There was an exercise machine, so they could keep in shape for the four-mile hike across the border itself. There were washing facilities, and lotions and moisturizers for their skin. They were told that the vans were equipped with the same kind of stuff, but less of it, because the road trips would be shorter than the sea voyage.

An excellent organization, that thought of everything.

And the best thing was that there was no bias shown against families with girl children. Some organizations would smuggle adults only, because adults could work immediately, and some allowed children, but older boys only, because they could work too, but this organization welcomed girls, and wasn't even upset if they were young, which was considered a very humane attitude. The only downside was that the sexes always had to travel separately, for the sake of decorum, so fathers were separated from mothers, and brothers from sisters, and then on this particular occasion they were told at the very last minute that the ship the men and the boys were due to sail on was delayed for some reason, so the women and the girls had been obliged to go on ahead. Which would be OK, they were told, because they would be well looked after at their destination, for as long as it took for the second ship to arrive.

They had been warned that the four-mile hike would be the hardest part of the whole trip, but it wasn't, really. It felt good to be out in the air, moving around. It was cold, but they were used to cold, because winter in Thailand was cold, and they had warm clothes to wear. The best part was when their guide stopped and raised his finger to his lips again and then traced an imaginary sideways line on the ground. He pointed beyond it and mouthed, 'America.' They walked on and passed the line one after the other and smiled happily and picked their way onward, across American soil at last, slowly and delicately, like ballet dancers.

The Duncan driver in the grey van on the Montana side of the border saw them

The Duncan driver in the grey van on the Montana side of the border saw them coming about a hundred yards away. As always his Canadian counterpart was leading the procession, setting the pace, holding the rope. Behind him the shipment floated along, seemingly weightless, curving and snaking through the gaps between the trees. The Duncan driver opened his rear doors and stood ready to receive them. The Canadian handed over the free end of the rope, like he always did, like the baton in a relay race, and then he turned about and walked back into the forest and was lost to sight. The Duncan driver gestured into the truck, but before each of his passengers climbed aboard he looked at their faces and smiled and shook their hands, in a way his passengers took to be a formal welcome to their new country. In fact the Duncan driver was a gambling man, and he was trying to guess ahead of time which kid the Duncans would choose to keep. The women would go straight to the Vegas escort agencies, and nine of the girls would end up somewhere farther on down the line, but one of them would stay in the county, at least for a spell, or actually for ever, technically. Buy ten and sell nine, was the Duncan way, and the driver liked to look over the candidates and make a guess about which one was the lucky one. He saw four real possibilities, and then felt a little jolt of excitement about a fifth, not that she would be remotely recognizable by the time she was passed on to him.

Dorothy Coe stood behind her truck's open door for ten whole minutes. Reacher stood in front of her, watching her, hoping he was blocking her view of the barn, happy to keep on standing there as long as it took, ten hours or ten days or ten years, or for ever, anything to stop her going inside. Her gaze was a thousand miles away, and her lips were moving a little, as if she was rehearsing arguments with someone, look or don't look, know or don't know.

Eventually she asked, 'How many are in there?'

Reacher said, 'About sixty.'

'Oh my God.'

'Two or three a year, probably,' Reacher said. 'They got a taste for it. An addiction. There are no ghosts. Ghosts don't exist. What the stoner kid heard from time to time was real.'

'Who were they all?'

'Asian girls, I think.'

‘You can tell that from their bones?’

‘The last one isn’t bones yet.’

‘Where were they all from?’

‘From immigrant families, probably. Illegals, almost certainly, smuggled in, for the sex trade. That’s what the Duncans were doing. That’s how they were making their money.’

‘Were they all young?’

‘About eight years old.’

‘Are they buried?’

Reacher said, ‘No.’

‘They’re just dumped in there?’

‘Not dumped,’ Reacher said. ‘They’re displayed. It’s like a shrine.’

There was a long, long pause.

Dorothy Coe said, ‘I should look.’

‘Don’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘There are photographs. Like a record. Like mementos. In silver frames.’

‘I should look.’

‘You’ll regret it. All your life. You’ll wish you hadn’t.’

‘You looked.’

‘And I regret it. I wish I hadn’t.’

Dorothy Coe went quiet again. She breathed in, and breathed out, and watched the horizon. Then she asked, ‘What should we do now?’

the horizon. Then she asked, 'What should we do now?'

Reacher said, 'I'm going to head over to the Duncan houses. They're all in there, sitting around, thinking everything is going just fine. It's time they found out it isn't.'

Dorothy Coe said, 'I want to come with you.'

Reacher said, 'Not a good idea.'

'I need to.'

'Could be dangerous.'

'I hope it is. Some things are worth dying for.'

The doctor's wife said, 'We're coming too. Both of us. Let's go, right now.'

FIFTY-SEVEN

DOROTHY COE GOT BEHIND THE WHEEL OF HER TRUCK AGAIN AND the doctor and his wife slid in beside her. Reacher rode in the load bed, with the captured rifle, holding tight over the tractor ruts, a long slow mile, back to where he had left the white Tahoe he had taken from the football player who had broken his nose. It was still there, parked and untouched. Reacher got in and drove it and the other three followed behind. They went south on the two-lane and then coasted and stopped half a mile shy of the Duncan compound. The view from there was good. Reacher unscrewed the Leica scope from the rifle and used it like a miniature telescope. All three houses were clearly visible. There were five parked vehicles. Three old pick-up trucks, plus Seth Duncan's black Cadillac, and Eleanor Duncan's red Mazda. All of them were standing in a neat line on the dirt to the left of the southernmost house, which was Jacob's. All of them were cold and inert and dewed over, like they had been parked for a long time, which meant the Duncans were holed up and isolated, which was pretty much the way Reacher wanted it.

He climbed out of the Tahoe and walked back to meet the others. He took the sawn-off from his pocket and handed it to Dorothy Coe. He said, 'You all head back and get car keys from the football players. Then bring me two more vehicles. Choose the ones with the most gas in the tank. Get back here as fast as you can.'

Dorothy Coe backed up a yard and turned across the width of the road and took off north. Reacher got back in the Tahoe and waited.

Three isolated houses. Wintertime. Flat land all around. Nowhere to hide. A classic tactical problem. Standard infantry doctrine would be to sit back and call in an artillery strike, or a bombing run. The guerilla approach would be to split up and attack with rocket-propelled grenades from four sides simultaneously, with the main assault from the north, where there were fewest facing windows. But Reacher had no forces to divide, and no grenades or artillery or air support. He was on his own, with a middle-aged alcoholic man and two middle-aged women, one of whom was in shock. Together they were equipped with a bolt-action rifle with two rounds in it, and a Glock nine-millimetre pistol with sixteen rounds, and a sawn-off twelve-gauge shotgun with three rounds, and a switchblade, and an adjustable wrench, and two screwdrivers, and a book of

matches. Not exactly overwhelming force.

But time was on their side. They had all day. And the terrain was on their side. They had forty thousand unobstructed acres. And the Duncans' fence was on their side. The fence, built a quarter of a century before, as an alibi, still strong and sturdy. The law of unintended consequences. The fence was about to come right back and bite the Duncans in the ass.

Reacher put the Leica to his eye again. Nothing was happening in the compound. It was still and quiet. Nothing was moving, except smoke coming from the chimneys on the first house and the last. The smoke was curling south. A breeze, not a wind, but the air was definitely in motion.

Reacher waited.

*

Fifteen minutes later Reacher checked the Tahoe's mirror and saw a little convoy heading straight for him. First in line was Dorothy Coe's truck, and then came the gold Yukon Reacher had taken from the kid called John. It had the doctor at the wheel. Last in line was the doctor's wife, driving the black pickup the first Cornhusker of the morning had arrived in. They all slowed and parked nose to tail behind the Tahoe. They all looked left, away from the Duncan compound, studiously averting their eyes. Old habits.

Reacher climbed out of the Tahoe and the other three gathered around and he told them what they had to do. He told Dorothy Coe to keep the sawn-off, and he gave the Leica scope to the doctor's wife, and he took her scarf and her cell phone in exchange. As soon as they understood their roles, he waved them away. They climbed into Dorothy Coe's truck and headed south. Reacher was left alone on the shoulder of the two-lane, with the white Tahoe, and the gold Yukon, and the black pick-up, with the keys for all of them in his pocket. He counted to ten, and then he got to work.

The black pick-up truck was the longest of the three vehicles, by about a foot, so Reacher decided to use it second. The white Tahoe had the most gas in it, so Reacher decided to use it first. Which left John's gold Yukon to use third, which Reacher was happy about, because he knew it drove OK.

He walked back and forth along the line and started all three vehicles and left

them running. Then he started leapfrogging them forward, moving them closer to the mouth of the Duncan driveway, a hundred yards at a time, getting them in the right order, hoping to delay detection for as long as possible. Without the scope, his view of the compound was much less detailed, but it still looked quiet. He got the black pick-up within fifty yards, and he left the gold Yukon waiting right behind it, and then he jogged back and got in the white Tahoe and drove it all the way forward. He turned it into the mouth of the driveway and lined it up straight and eased it to a stop.

He slid out of the seat and crouched down and clamped the jaws of his adjustable wrench across the width of the gas pedal. He corrected the angle so that the stem of the wrench stuck up above the horizontal, and then he turned the knurled knob tight. He ducked back and hustled around the tailgate and opened the fuel filler door and took off the gas cap. He poked the end of the borrowed scarf down the filler neck with the longer screwdriver, and then he lit the free end of the scarf with his matches. Then he hustled back to the driver's door and leaned in and put the truck in gear. The engine's idle speed rolled it forward. He kept pace and put his finger on the button and powered the driver's seat forward. The cushion moved, slowly, an inch at a time, through its whole range, past the point where a person of average height would want it, on towards where a short person would want it, and then the front of the cushion touched the end of the wrench, and the engine note changed and the truck sped up a little. Reacher kept pace and kept his finger where it was and the seat kept on moving, and the truck kept on accelerating, and Reacher started running alongside, and then the seat arrived at the limit of its travel and Reacher stepped away and let the truck go on without him. It was rolling at maybe ten miles an hour, maybe less, not very fast at all, but enough to overcome the wash of gravel under its tyres. The ruts in the driveway were holding it reasonably straight. The scarf in the filler neck was burning pretty well.

Reacher turned and jogged back to the road, to the black pickup, and he got in and drove it forward beyond the mouth of the driveway, and then he backed it up and in and parallel-parked it across the width of the space, between the fences, sawing it back and forth until he had it at a perfect ninety degrees, with just a couple of feet of open space at either end. The white Tahoe was rolling steadily, already halfway to its target, tramlining left and right in the ruts, trailing a bright plume of flame. Reacher pulled the black pick-up's keys and jogged back to the road. He leaned on the blind side of the gold Yukon's hood and watched.

The white Tahoe was well ablaze. It rolled on through its final twenty yards,

The white Tahoe was well ablaze. It rolled on through its final twenty yards, dumbly, unflinchingly, and it hit the front of the centre house and stopped dead. Two tons, some momentum, but no kind of a major crash. The wood on the house split and splintered, and the front wall bowed inward a little, and glass fell out of a ground floor window, and that was all.

But that was enough.

The flames at the rear of the truck swayed forward and came back and settled in to burn. They roiled the air around them and licked out horizontally under the sills and climbed up the doors. They spilled out of the rear wheel wells and fat coils of black smoke came off the tyres. The smoke boiled upward and caught the breeze and drifted away south and west.

Reacher leaned into the Yukon and took the rifle off the seat.

The flames crept onward towards the front of the Tahoe, slow but urgent, busy, seeking release, curling out and up. The rear tyres started to burn and the front tyres started to smoke. Then the fuel line must have ruptured because suddenly there was a wide fan of flame, a new colour, a fierce lateral spray that beat against the front of the house and rose up all around the Tahoe's hood, surging left and right, licking the house, lighting it, bubbling the paint in a fast black semicircle. Then finally flames started chasing the bubbling paint, small at first, then larger, like a map of an army swarming through broken defences, fanning out, seeking new ground. Air sucked in and out of the broken window and the flames started licking at its frame.

Reacher dialled his borrowed cell.

He said, 'The centre house is alight.'

Dorothy Coe answered, from her position half a mile west, out in the fields.

She said, 'That's Jonas's house. We can see the smoke.'

'Anyone moving?'

'Not yet.' Then she said, 'Wait. Jonas is coming out his back door. Turning left. He's going to head around to the front.'

'Positive ID?'

‘A hundred per cent. We’re using the telescope.’

‘OK,’ Reacher said. ‘Stay on the line.’

He laid the open cell phone on the Yukon’s hood and picked up the rifle. It had a rear iron sight just ahead of the scope mount, and a front iron sight at the muzzle. Reacher raised it to his eye and leaned forward and rested his elbows on the sheet metal and aimed at the gap between the centre house and the southernmost house. Distance, maybe a hundred and forty yards.

He waited.

He saw a stocky figure enter the gap from the rear. A man, short and wide, maybe sixty years old or more. Round red face, thinning grey hair. Reacher’s first live sighting of a Duncan elder. The guy hustled stiffly between the blank ends of the two homes and came out in the light and stopped dead. He stared at the burning Tahoe and started towards it and stopped again and then turned and faced front and stared at the pick-up truck parked across the far end of the driveway.

Reacher laid the front sight on the guy’s centre mass and pulled the trigger.

FIFTY-EIGHT

THE .338 HIT HIGH, A FOOT ABOVE JONAS DUNCAN'S CENTRE mass, halfway between his lower lip and the point of his chin. The bullet drove through the roots of his front incisors, through the soft tissue of his mouth and his throat, through his third vertebra, through his spinal cord, through the fat on the back of his neck, and onward into the corner of Jacob Duncan's house. Jonas went down vertically, claimed by gravity, his stiff fireplug body suddenly loose and malleable, and he ended up sprawled in a grotesque tangle of limbs, face up, eyes open, the last of his brain's oxygenated blood leaking from his wound, and then he died.

Reacher shot the rifle's bolt and the spent shell case clanged against the Yukon's hood and rolled down its contour and fell to the ground. Reacher picked up the cell phone and said, 'Jonas is down.'

Dorothy Coe said, 'We heard the shot.'

'Any activity?'

'Not yet.'

Reacher kept the phone against his ear. Jonas's house was burning nicely. The whole front wall was on fire, and there were flames inside, throwing orange light and shadows all around, curling flat and angry against the ceilings, gleaming wetly behind intact panes of glass, spilling out through the broken windows and leaping up and merging into the general conflagration. Smoke was still blowing south, and heat too, towards the southernmost building.

Dorothy Coe's voice came back: 'Jasper is out. He has a weapon. A long gun. He sees us. He's looking right at us.'

Reacher asked, 'How far back are you?'

'About six hundred yards.'

'Stand your ground. If he fires, he'll miss.'

'We think it's a shotgun.'

‘Even better. The round won’t even reach you.’

‘He’s running. He’s past Jonas’s house. He’s heading for Jacob’s.’

Reacher saw him, flitting right to left across the narrow gap between Jonas’s house and Jacob’s, a short wide man very similar to his brother. On the phone Dorothy Coe said, ‘He’s gone inside. We see him in Jacob’s kitchen. Through the window. Jacob and Seth are in there too.’

Reacher waited. The fire in Jonas’s house was burning out of control. In front of it the white Tahoe was a blackened wreck inside a ball of flame. Glass was punching out of the house’s windows ahead of flames that followed horizontally like arms and fists before boiling upward. The roof was alight. Then there was a loud sound and the air inside the house seemed to shudder and cough and a hot blue shimmer gasped out through the ground floor, like an expelled breath, clearly visible, like a force, and it rose slowly upward, one second, two, three, and then the flames came back even stronger behind it.

Dorothy Coe said, ‘Something just blew up in Jonas’s kitchen. The propane tank, maybe. The back wall is burning hard.’

Reacher waited.

Then the ground floor itself burned through and there was another cough and shudder as the flaming timbers tumbled through to the basement. The left-hand gable tilted inward and the right-hand gable fell outward, across the gap to Jasper’s house. Sparks showered all around and thermals caught them and sent them shooting a hundred feet in the air. Jonas’s right-hand wall collapsed into the gap and piled high against Jasper’s left-hand wall, and gales of new air hit fresh unburned surfaces and vivid new flames leapt up.

Reacher said, ‘This is going very well.’

Then Jonas’s second floor fell in with an explosion of sparks and his left-hand wall came unmoored and folded slowly and neatly in half, the top part falling inward into the fire and the bottom part angling outward and propping itself against Jacob’s house. Burning timbers and bright red embers spilled and settled and sucked oxygen towards them and huge new flames started licking upward and outward and sideways. Even the weeds in the gravel were on fire.

Reacher said, ‘I think we’re three for three. I think we got them all.’

Dorothy Coe said, ‘Jasper is out again. He’s heading for his truck.’

Reacher watched over the front sight of his rifle. He saw Jasper run for the line of cars. Saw him slide into a white pickup. Saw him start it up and back it out. It stopped and turned and aimed straight for the driveway. It blew through a shower of sparks, right past Jonas’s body, and headed straight towards the two-lane. Straight towards Reacher. Straight towards the parked black truck. It braked hard and stopped short just behind it, and Jasper scrambled out. He opened the black truck’s passenger door and ducked inside.

Then a second later he ducked out again.

No key.

The key was in Reacher’s pocket.

Reacher put the phone on the Yukon’s hood.

Jasper Duncan stood still, momentarily unsure. Distance, maybe forty yards. Which was really no distance at all.

Reacher shot him through the head and he went straight down the same way his brother had before him, leaving a small pink cloud in the air above him, made of pulverized blood and bone, which drifted an inch and then disappeared in the breeze.

Reacher picked up the phone and said, ‘Jasper is down.’

Then he dropped the empty gun on the road behind him and climbed inside the Yukon. Lack of replacement ammunition meant that phase one was over, and that phase two was about to begin.

FIFTY-NINE

REACHER DROVE THE YUKONA HUNDRED YARDS BEYOND THE mouth of the driveway, and then he turned right, on to the open dirt. Lumps and stones squirmed and pattered under his tyres. He drove a wide circle until he was level with the compound itself and then he stopped, facing the houses, the engine idling, his foot on the brake. From his new angle he saw that Jacob's south wall was so far untouched by the fire, but judging by the backdrop of smoke and flame the north end of the house was burning. Ahead and far to the left he could see Dorothy Coe's truck, waiting six hundred yards west in the fields, similarly nose-in and pent-up and expectant, like a gundog panting and crouching.

He raised the phone to his ear and said, 'I'm end-on now. What do you see?'

Dorothy Coe said, 'Jonas's house is about gone. All that's left is the chimney, really. The bricks are glowing red. And Jasper's house is on its way. His propane just blew up.'

'How about Jacob's?'

'It's burning north to south. Pretty fierce. Has to be getting hot in there.'

'Stand by, then. It won't be long now.'

It was less than a minute. Dorothy Coe said, 'They're out,' and a second later Reacher saw Jacob and Seth Duncan spill around the back corner of the house. They ran ducked down and bent over, zigzagging, afraid of the rifle they thought was still out there. They made it to one of the remaining pick-up trucks and Reacher saw them open the doors from a crouch and then climb in and hunker down low. Behind them the north end of Jacob's house swelled and bellied and came down, quite slowly and gracefully, with sparks shooting up and out like fireworks, with burning timbers tumbling and spreading like lava from a volcano, reaching almost to the boundary fence, a vertical mass made horizontal, and then the south end of the house fell slowly backward and collapsed into the fire, leaving only the chimney upright.

Reacher asked, 'How does it look?'

Dorothy Coe answered, 'Just like you said it would.'

Dorothy Coe answered, 'Just like you said it would.'

Reacher saw Jacob Duncan at the wheel of the pick-up, shorter and broader than Seth in the passenger seat. Seth still had his splint taped to his face. The truck backed up ten yards, almost into the fire behind it, and then it drove forward and hit the fence, butting against it, trying to break through. The pick-up's front bumper bent out of shape and the hood crumpled a little, and the fence shuddered and rattled, but it held. Deep holes for the posts, sturdy timbers, strong rails. A big production. The law of unintended consequences.

Jacob Duncan tried again. He backed up, much less than ten yards this time because the fire was spreading behind him, and then he shot forward once more. The truck hit the fence and he and Seth bounced around in the cab like rag dolls, but the fence held. Reacher saw Jacob glance backward again. There was no space for a longer run-up. The fire and the mean allocation of land did not permit it.

Jacob changed his tactics. He manoeuvred until the nose of the truck was exactly halfway between two posts, and then he came in slow, in a low gear, pushing the grille into the rails, firming up the contact, then easing down on the gas, pushing harder and harder, hoping that sustained pressure would achieve what a sharp blow had not.

It didn't. The rails bent, and they bowed, and they trembled, but they held. Then the pick-up's rear tyres lost traction and spun and howled in the dirt and the fence pushed back and the truck eased off six inches.

The doors opened up again and Jacob and Seth spilled out and hustled over and tried the Cadillac instead. A heavier car, better torque, better power. But worse tyres, built for quiet and comfort out on the open road, not for traction over loose surfaces. Seth drove, hardly backing up at all for fear of putting his gas tank right in the flames behind him. Then he rolled four feet forward and the chrome grille hit the rails and the tyres spun almost immediately.

Game over.

'Here they come,' Reacher said.

Behind them the last vestigial support under the blazing structure gave way and the burning pile settled slowly and gently into a lower and wider shape, blowing gales of sparks and gases outward. Big curled flames danced free, burning the air

itself, twisting and splitting and then vanishing. Heat distorted the air and gouts of fire hurled themselves a hundred feet up. Jacob and Seth shrank back and shielded their faces with their arms and ducked away.

They climbed the fence.

They dropped into the field.

They ran.

SIXTY

JACOB AND SETH DUNCAN RAN THIRTY YARDS, A STRAIGHT LINE AWAY from the fire, pure animal instinct, and then they stopped and glanced back and spun in place, alone and insignificant in the empty acres. They saw the parked Yukon as if for the first time, and they stared at it in confusion, because it was one of theirs, driven by one of their own damn boys, and the guy wasn't coming to help them. Then they saw Dorothy Coe's truck far off in another direction and they glanced back at the Yukon and they understood. They looked at each other one last time, and they ran again, in different directions, Jacob one way, and Seth another.

Reacher raised his phone.

He said, 'If I'm nine o'clock on a dial and you're twelve, then Jacob is heading for ten and Seth is heading for seven. Seth is mine. Jacob is yours.'

Dorothy Coe said, 'Understood.'

Reacher took his foot off the brake and steered one-handed, following a lazy clockwise curve, heading first north and then east, bumping across the washboard surface, feeling the heat of the fires on the glass next to his face. Ahead of him Seth was stumbling through the dirt, heading for the road, still seventy yards short of getting there. Reacher saw something in his right hand, and then he heard Dorothy Coe's voice on the phone: 'Jacob has a gun.'

Reacher asked, 'What kind?'

'A handgun. A revolver, I think. We can't see. We're bouncing around too much.'

'Slow down and take a good look.'

Ten long seconds later: 'We think it's a regular six-shooter.'

'Has he fired it yet?'

'No.'

‘OK, back off, but keep him in sight. He’s got nowhere to go. Let him get tired.’

‘Understood.’

Reacher laid the phone on the seat next to him and followed Seth south, staying thirty yards back. The guy was really hustling. His arms were pumping. Reacher had no scope, but he was prepared to bet the thing in Seth’s right hand was a revolver too, probably half of a matched pair his father had shared.

Reacher steered and accelerated and pushed on to within twenty yards. Seth was racing hard, knees pumping, arms pumping, his head thrown back. The thing in his hand was definitely a gun. The barrel was short, no longer than a finger. The two-lane road was forty yards away. Reacher had no idea why Seth wanted to get there. No point in it. The road was just a blacktop ribbon with no traffic on it and nothing but more dirt beyond. Maybe it was a generational thing. Maybe the youngest Duncan thought municipal infrastructure was going to save him. Or maybe he was heading home. Maybe he had more weapons in the house. He was going in roughly the right direction. In which case he was either terminally desperate or the world’s biggest optimist. He had more than two miles to go, and he was being chased by a motor vehicle.

Reacher stayed twenty yards back and watched. Way behind his left shoulder a last propane tank cooked off with a dull thump. The Yukon’s mirror filled with sparks. Up ahead, Seth kept on running.

Then he stopped running and whirled around and planted his feet and aimed his revolver two-handed, eye-high, with his aluminium mask right behind it. His chest was heaving and all four of his limbs were trembling and despite the two-handed grip the muzzle was jerking through a circle roughly the size of a basketball. Reacher slowed and changed gear and backed up and stood thirty yards off. He felt safe enough. He had a big V-8 engine block between himself and the gun, and anyway the chances of a panting untrained man even hitting the truck itself with a short-barrelled handgun at ninety feet were slight. The chances of a successful head shot through a windshield were less than zero. The chances of putting the round in the right zip code were debatable.

Seth fired, three times, well spaced, with a jerky trigger action and plenty of muzzle climb and no lateral control at all. Reacher didn’t even blink. He just watched the three muzzle flashes with professional interest and tried to identify the gun, but he couldn’t at thirty yards. Too far away. He knew there were

seven-and eight-shot revolvers in the world, but they weren't common, so he assumed it was a six-shooter and that therefore there were now three rounds left in it. Beside him the phone squawked with concern and he picked it up and Dorothy Coe asked, 'Are you OK? We heard shots fired.'

'I'm good,' Reacher said. 'Are you OK? He's as likely to hit you as me. Wherever you are.'

'We're good.'

'Where's Jacob?'

'Still heading south and west. He's slowing down.'

'Stay on him,' Reacher said. He put the phone back on the seat. He kept his Glock in his pocket. The problem with being a right-handed man in a left-hand-drive truck was that he would have to bust out the windshield to fire, which used to be easy enough back in the days of pebbly safety glass, but modern automotive windshields were tough, because they were laminated with strong plastic layers, and anyway his heavy wrench was in the burned-out Tahoe, probably all melted back to ore.

Seth rested, bending forward from the waist, his head coming down almost to his shins, and he forced air into his lungs, and he panted once, then twice, and he straightened up and held his breath and aimed the gun again, this time with much more concentration and much better control. Now the muzzle was moving through a circle the size of a baseball. Reacher turned the wheel and stamped on the gas and took off to his right, in a fast tight circle, and then he feinted to come back on his original line but wrenched the wheel the other way and rocked the truck through a figure eight. Seth fired once into empty space and then aimed again and fired again. A round smacked into the top of the Yukon's windshield surround, on the passenger side, six feet from Reacher's head.

One round left, Reacher thought.

But there were no rounds left. Reacher saw Seth thrashing at the trigger and he saw the gun's wheel turning and turning to no effect at all. Either the gun was a six-shooter that hadn't been fully loaded, or it was a five-shooter. Maybe a Smith 60, Reacher thought. Eventually Seth gave up on it and looked around desperately and then just hurled the empty gun at the Yukon. Finally, a decent

aim. The guy would have been better off throwing rocks. The gun hit the windshield dead in front of Reacher's face. Reacher flinched and ducked involuntarily. The gun bounced off the glass and fell away. Then Seth turned and ran again, and the rest of it was easy.

Reacher stamped on the gas and accelerated and lined up carefully and hit Seth from behind doing close to forty miles an hour. A car might have scooped him up and tossed him in the air and sent him cartwheeling backward over the hood and the roof, but the Yukon wasn't a car. It was a big truck with a high blunt nose. It was about as subtle as a sledgehammer. It caught Seth flat on his back, everywhere from his knees to his shoulders, like a two-ton bludgeon, and Reacher felt the impact and Seth's head whipped away out of view, instantaneously, like it had been sucked down by amazing gravity, and the truck bucked once, like there was something passing under the rear left wheel, and then the going got as smooth as the dirt would let it.

Reacher slowed and steered a wide circle and came back to check if any further attention was required. But it wasn't. No question about it. Reacher had seen plenty of dead people, and Seth Duncan was more dead than most of them.

Reacher took the phone off the passenger seat and said, 'Seth is down,' and then he lined up again and drove away fast, south and west across the field.

SIXTY-ONE

JACOB DUNCAN HAD GOTTEN ABOUT TWO HUNDRED YARDS FROM HIS house. That was all. Reacher saw him up ahead, all alone in the vastness, with nothing but open space all around. He saw Dorothy Coe's truck a hundred yards farther on, well beyond the running man to the north and the west. It was holding a wide slow curve, like a vigilant sheepdog, like a destroyer guaranteeing a shipping lane.

On the phone Dorothy said, 'I'm worried about the gun.'

Reacher said, 'Seth was a lousy shot.'

'Doesn't mean Jacob is.'

'OK,' Reacher said. 'Pull over and wait for me. We'll do this together.'

He clicked off the call and changed course and crossed Jacob's path a hundred yards back and headed straight for Dorothy Coe. When he arrived she got out of her truck and headed for his passenger door. He dropped the window with the switch on his side and said, 'No, you drive. I'll ride shotgun.'

He got out and stepped around and they met where the front of the Yukon's hood was dented. No words were exchanged. Dorothy's face was set with determination. She was halfway between calm and nervous. She got in the driver's seat and motored it forward and checked the mirror, like it was a normal morning and she was heading out to the store for milk. Reacher climbed in beside her and freed the Glock from his pocket.

She said, 'Tell me about the photographs. In their silver frames.'

'I don't want to,' Reacher said.

'No, I mean, I need to know there's no doubt they implicate the Duncans. Jacob in particular. Like evidence. I need you to tell me. Before we do this.'

'There's no doubt,' Reacher said. 'No doubt at all.'

Dorothy Coe nodded and said nothing. She fiddled the selector into gear and the

truck took off, rolling slow, jiggling and pattering across the ground. She said, ‘We were talking about what comes next.’

Reacher said, ‘Call a trucker from the next county. Or do business with Eleanor.’

‘No, about the barn. The doctor thinks we should burn it down. But I’m not sure I want to do that.’

‘Your call, I think.’

‘What would you do?’

‘Not my decision.’

‘Tell me.’

Reacher said, ‘I would nail the judas hole shut, and I would leave it alone and never go there again. I would let the flowers grow right over it.’

There was no more conversation. They got within fifty yards of Jacob Duncan and switched to operational shorthand. Jacob was still running, but not fast. He was just about spent. He was stumbling and staggering, a short wide man limited by bad lungs and stiff legs and the aches and pains that come with age. He had a revolver in his hand, the same dull stainless and the same stubby barrel as Seth’s. Probably another Smith 60, and likely to be just as ineffective if used by a weak man all wheezing and gasping and trembling from exertion.

Dorothy Coe asked, ‘How do I do this?’

Reacher said, ‘Pass him on the left. Let’s see if he stands and fights.’

He didn’t. Reacher buzzed his window down and hung the Glock out in the breeze and Dorothy swooped fast and close to Jacob’s left and he didn’t turn and fire. He just flinched away and stumbled onward, a degree or two right of where he had been heading before.

Reacher said, ‘Now come around in a big wide circle and aim right for him from behind.’

‘OK,’ Dorothy said. ‘For Margaret.’

She continued the long leftward curve, winding it tighter and tighter until she came back to her original line. She coasted for a second and straightened up and then she hit the gas and the truck leapt forward, ten yards, twenty, thirty, and Jacob Duncan glanced back in horror and darted left, and Dorothy Coe flinched right, involuntarily, a civilian with forty years of safe driving behind her, and she hit Jacob a heavy glancing blow with the left headlight, hard in his back and his right shoulder, sending the gun flying, sending him tumbling, spinning him around, hurling him to the ground.

‘Get back quick,’ Reacher said.

But Jacob Duncan wasn’t getting up. He was on his back, one leg pounding away like a dog dreaming, one arm scrabbling uselessly in the dirt, his head jerking, his eyes open and staring, up and down, left and right. His gun was ten feet away.

Dorothy Coe drove back and stopped and stood off ten yards away. She asked, ‘What now?’

Reacher said, ‘I would leave him there. I think you broke his back. He’ll die slowly.’

‘How long?’

‘An hour, maybe two.’

‘I don’t know.’

Reacher gave her the Glock. ‘Or go shoot him in the head. It would be a mercy, not that he deserves it.’

‘Will you do it?’

‘Gladly. But you should. You’ve wanted to for twenty-five years.’

She nodded slowly. She stared down at the Glock, laid flat like an open book on both her hands, like she had never seen such a thing before. She asked, ‘Is there a safety catch?’

Reacher shook his head.

‘No safety on a Glock,’ he said.

She opened the door. She climbed down, to the sill step, to the ground. She looked back at Reacher.

‘For Margaret,’ she said again.

‘And the others,’ Reacher said.

‘And for Artie,’ she said. ‘My husband.’

She stepped sideways around her open door, touching it with one hand as she went, slowly, with reluctance, and then she crossed the open ground, small neat strides on the dirt, ten of them, twelve, turning a short distance into a long journey. Jacob Duncan went still and watched her approach. She stepped up close and pointed the gun straight down and to one side, holding it a little away from herself, making it not part of herself, separating herself from it, and then she said some words Reacher didn’t hear, and then she pulled the trigger, once, twice, three four five six times, and then she stepped away.

SIXTY-TWO

THE DOCTOR AND HIS WIFE WERE WAITING IN DOROTHY COE'S truck, back on the two-lane road. Reacher and Dorothy parked ahead of them and they all got out and stood together. The Duncan compound was reduced to three vertical chimneys and a wide horizontal spread of ashy grey timbers that were still burning steadily, but no longer fiercely. Smoke was coming up and gathering into a wide column that seemed to rise for ever. It was the only thing moving. The sun was as high as it was going to get, and the rest of the sky was blue.

Reacher said, 'You've got a lot of work to do. Get everyone on it. Get backhoes and bucket loaders and dig some big holes. Really big holes. Then gather the trash and bury it deep. But save some space for later. Their van will arrive at some point, and the driver is just as guilty as the rest of them.'

The doctor said, 'We have to kill him?'

'You can bury him alive, for all I care.'

'You're leaving now?'

Reacher nodded.

'I'm going to Virginia,' he said.

'Can't you stay a day or two?'

'You all are in charge now, not me.'

'What about the football players at my house?'

'Turn them loose and tell them to get out of town. They'll be happy to. There's nothing left for them here.'

The doctor said, 'But they might tell someone. Or someone might have seen the smoke. From far away. The cops might come.'

Reacher said, 'If they do, blame everything on me. Give them my name. By the

time they figure out where I am, I'll be somewhere else.'

Dorothy Coe drove Reacher the first part of the way. They climbed back in the Yukon together and checked the gas gauge. There was enough for maybe sixty miles. They agreed she would take him thirty miles south, and then she would drive the same thirty miles back, and then after that filling the tank would be John's own problem.

They drove the first ten miles in silence. Then they passed the abandoned roadhouse and the two-lane speared onward and empty ahead of them and Dorothy asked, 'What's in Virginia?'

'A woman,' Reacher said.

'Your girlfriend?'

'Someone I talked to on the phone, that's all. I wanted to meet her in person. Although now I'm not so sure. Not yet, anyway. Not looking like this.'

'What's the matter with the way you look?'

'My nose,' Reacher said. He touched the tape, and smoothed it down, two-handed. He said, 'It's going to be a couple of weeks before it's presentable.'

'What's her name, this woman in Virginia?'

'Susan.'

'Well, I think you should go. I think if Susan objects to the way you look, then she isn't worth meeting.'

They stopped at a featureless point on the road that had to be almost exactly halfway between the Apollo Inn and the Cell Block bar. Reacher opened his door and Dorothy Coe asked him, 'Will you be OK here?'

He nodded.

He said, 'I'll be OK wherever I am. Will you be OK back there?'

'No,' she said. 'But I'll be better than I was.'

She sat there behind the wheel, a solid, capable woman, about sixty years old, blunt and square, worn down by work, worn down by hardship, fading slowly to grey, but better than she had been before. Reacher said nothing, and climbed out to the shoulder, and closed his door. She looked at him once, through the window, and then she looked away and turned across the width of the road and drove back north. Reacher pulled his hat down over his ears and jammed his hands in his pockets against the cold, and got set to wait for a ride.

He waited a long, long time. For the first hour nothing came by at all. Then a vehicle appeared on the horizon, and a whole minute later it was close enough to make out some detail. It was a small import, probably Japanese, a Honda or a Toyota, old, with blue paint faded by the weather. A sixth-hand purchase. Reacher stood up and stuck out his thumb. The car slowed, which didn't necessarily mean much. Pure reflex. A driver's eyes swivel right, and his foot lifts off the gas, automatically. In this case the driver was a woman, young, probably a college student. She had long fair hair. Her car was piled high inside with all kinds of stuff.

She looked for less than a second and then accelerated and drove by at sixty, trailing cold air and whirling grit and tyre whine. Reacher watched her go. A good decision, probably. Lone women shouldn't stop in the middle of nowhere for giant unkempt strangers with duct tape on their faces.

He sat down again on the shoulder. He was tired. He had woken up in Vincent's motel room early the previous morning, when Dorothy Coe came in to service it, and he hadn't slept since. He pulled his hood up over his hat and lay down on the dirt. He crossed his ankles and crossed his arms over his chest and went to sleep.

*

It was going dark when he woke. The sun was gone in the west and the pale remains of a winter sunset were all that was lighting the sky. He sat up, and then he stood. No traffic. But he was a patient man. He was good at waiting.

He waited ten more minutes, and saw another vehicle on the horizon. It had its lights on against the gloaming. He flipped his hood down to reduce his apparent bulk and stood easy, one foot on the dirt, one on the blacktop, and he stuck his thumb out. The approaching vehicle was bigger than a car. He could tell by the way the headlights were spaced. It was tall and relatively narrow. It had a big windshield. It was a panel van.

It was a grey panel van.

It was the same kind of grey panel van as the two grey panel vans he had seen at the Duncan depot.

It slowed a hundred yards away, the automatic reflex, but then it kept on slowing, and it came to a stop right next to him. The driver leaned way over and opened the passenger door and a light came on inside.

The driver was Eleanor Duncan.

She was wearing black jeans and an insulated parka. The parka was covered in zips and pockets and it gleamed and glittered in the light. Its threads had been nowhere near any living thing, either plant or animal.

She said, ‘Hello.’

Reacher didn’t answer. He was looking at the truck, inside and out. It was travel-stained. It had salt and dirt on it, all streaked and dried and dusty. It had been on a long journey.

He said, ‘This was the shipment, right? This is the truck they used.’

Eleanor Duncan nodded.

He asked, ‘Who was in it?’

Eleanor Duncan said, ‘Six young women and ten young girls. From Thailand.’

‘Were they OK?’

‘They were fine. Not surprisingly. It seems that a lot of trouble had been taken to make sure they arrived in marketable condition.’

‘What did you do with them?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Then where are they?’

‘They’re still in the back of this truck.’

‘What?’

‘We didn’t know what to do. They were lured here under false pretences, obviously. They were separated from their families. We decided we have to get them home again.’

‘How are you going to do that?’

‘I’m driving them to Denver.’

‘What’s in Denver?’

‘There are Thai restaurants.’

‘That’s your solution? Thai restaurants?’

‘It isn’t nearly as dumb as it sounds. Think about it, Reacher. We can’t go to the police. These women are illegal. They’ll be detained for months, in a government jail. That would be awful for them. We thought at least they should be with people who speak their own language. Like a supportive community. And restaurant workers are connected, aren’t they? Some of them were smuggled in themselves. We thought perhaps they could use the same organizations, but in reverse, to get out again.’

‘Whose idea was this?’

‘Everybody’s. We discussed it all day, and then we voted.’

‘Terrific.’

‘You got a better idea?’

Reacher said nothing. He just looked at the blank grey side of the van, and its salt stains, all dried in long feathered aerodynamic patterns. He put his palm on the cold metal.

Eleanor Duncan asked, ‘You want to meet them?’

Reacher said, ‘No.’

‘You saved them.’

Reacher said, ‘Luck and happenstance saved them. Therefore I don’t want to meet them. I don’t want to see their faces, because then I’ll get to thinking about what would have happened to them if luck and happenstance hadn’t come along.’

There was a long pause. The van idled, the breeze blew, the sky darkened, the air grew colder.

Then Eleanor Duncan said, ‘You want a ride to the highway at least?’

Reacher nodded and climbed in.

They didn’t talk for twenty miles. Then they rumbled past the Cell Block bar and Reacher said, ‘You knew, didn’t you?’

Eleanor Duncan said, ‘No.’ Then she said, ‘Yes.’ Then she said, ‘I thought I knew the exact opposite. I really did. I thought I knew it for absolute sure. I knew it so intensely that eventually I realized I was just trying to convince myself.’

‘You knew where Seth came from.’

‘I told you I didn’t. Just before you stole his car.’

‘And I didn’t believe you. Up to that point you had answered fourteen consecutive questions with no hesitation at all. Then I asked you about Seth, and you stalled. You offered us a drink. You were evasive. You were buying time to think.’

‘Do you know where Seth came from?’

‘I figured it out eventually.’

She said, ‘So tell me your version.’

Reacher said, ‘The Duncans liked little girls. They always had. It was their lifelong hobby. People like that form communities. Back in the days before the internet they did it by mail and clandestine face to face meetings. Photo swaps, and things like that. Maybe conventions. Maybe guest participation. There were alliances between interest groups. My guess is a group that liked little boys was feeling some heat. They went to ground. They fostered the evidence with their

feeling some heat. They went to ground. They fostered the evidence with their pals. It was supposed to be temporary, until the heat went away, but no one came back for Seth. The guy was probably beaten to death in jail. Or by the cops, in a back room. So the Duncans were stuck. But they were OK with it. Maybe they thought it was kind of cute, to get a son without the involvement of a real grown woman. So they kept him. Jacob adopted him.'

Eleanor Duncan nodded. 'Seth told me he had been rescued. Back when we still talked. He said Jacob had rescued him out of an abusive situation. Like an act of altruism and charity. And principle. I believed him. Then over the years I sensed the Duncans were doing something bad, but what turned out to be the truth was always the last thing on my mental list. Always, I promise you. Because I felt they were so opposed to that kind of thing. I felt that rescuing Seth had proved it. I was blind for a long time. I thought they were shipping something else, like drugs or guns, or bombs, even.'

'What changed?'

'Things I heard. Just snippets. It became clear to me they were shipping people. Even then I thought it was just regular illegals. Like restaurant workers and so on.'

'Until?'

'Until nothing. I never knew for sure, until today. I promise you that. But I was getting more and more suspicious. There was too much money. And too much excitement. They were practically drooling. Even then I didn't believe it. Especially with Seth. I thought he would find that kind of thing totally repulsive, because he had suffered it himself. I didn't want to think it could cut the other way. But I guess it did. I suppose ultimately it was all he knew. And all he ever enjoyed.'

Reacher said, 'I'm no psychologist either.'

'I'm so ashamed,' Eleanor said. 'I'm not going back. They think I am, but I'm not. I can't face them. I can't be there ever again.'

'So what are you going to do?'

'I'm going to give this truck to whoever helps the people in it. Like a donation. Like a bribe. Then I'm going somewhere else. California, maybe.'

‘How?’

‘I’m going to hitchhike, like you. Then I’m going to start over.’

‘Take care on the road. It can be dangerous.’

‘I know. But I don’t care. I feel like I deserve whatever I get.’

‘Don’t be too hard on yourself. At least you called the cops.’

She said, ‘But they never came.’

Reacher didn’t answer.

She said, ‘How do you know I called the cops?’

‘Because they came,’ Reacher said. ‘In a manner of speaking. That’s the one thing no one ever asked me. No one put two and two together. Everyone knew I was hitchhiking, but no one ever wondered why I had been let out at a crossroads that didn’t lead anywhere. Why would a driver stop there? Either he wouldn’t have gotten there at all, or he would have carried on south for another sixty miles at least.’

‘So who was he?’

‘He was a cop,’ Reacher said. ‘State Police, in an unmarked car. He didn’t say so, but it was pretty obvious. Nice enough guy. He picked me up way to the north. Almost in South Dakota. He told me he would have to drop me off in the middle of nowhere, because all he was doing was heading down and back. We didn’t talk about reasons, and I didn’t know he meant he was going back immediately. But that’s what he did. He pulled over, he let me out, and then two seconds later he turned around and took off again, right back the way we had come.’

‘Why would he?’

‘GPS and politics,’ Reacher said. ‘That was my first guess. A big state like Nebraska, I figured there could be bitching and moaning about which parts get attention, and which don’t. So I thought maybe they were defending themselves in advance. They could come out with still frames from their GPS systems to

show they've been everywhere in the state at one time or another. Cop cars all have trackers now, and all that kind of stuff can be subpoenaed if they get called in front of a committee. Then a little later on I changed my mind. I wondered if they'd had a bullshit call from someone, and they knew they weren't going to do anything about it, but they still needed to cover their asses by being able to prove they had showed up, at least. Then later still I wondered if it hadn't been such a bullshit call after all, and whether it was you who had made it.'

'It was me. Four days ago. And it wasn't a bullshit call. I told them everything I was thinking. Why didn't the guy even get out of his car?'

'Prejudice and local knowledge,' Reacher said. 'I bet you mentioned Seth beat you.'

'Well, yes, I did. Because he did.'

'Therefore they ignored everything else you said. They put it down to a wronged wife making stuff up to get her husband in trouble. Cops can be like that sometimes. It ain't right, but that's how it is. And they certainly weren't going to tackle the domestic issue itself. Not against the Duncans. Because of local knowledge. Dorothy Coe told me some neighbourhood kids join the State Police. So either they were asked, or else the story had already gotten around some other way, but in either case the message was the same, which was, in that corner of that county, you can't mess with the Duncans.'

'I don't believe it.'

'You tried,' Reacher said. 'Along with everything else, you have to remember that. You tried to do the right thing.'

They drove on and blew through what counted as the downtown area, past the Chamber of Commerce billboard, past the aluminium coach diner, past the gas station with its Texaco sign and its three service bays, past the hardware store, and the liquor store, and the bank, and the tyre shop and the John Deere dealership and the grocery and the pharmacy, past the water tower, past McNally Street, past the signpost to the hospital, and onward into territory Reacher hadn't seen before. The van's engine muttered low, and the tyres hummed, and from time to time Reacher thought he heard sounds from the load space behind him, people moving around, talking occasionally, even laughing. Beside him Eleanor Duncan concentrated on the dark road ahead, and he watched her in the corner of

his eye.

Then an hour and sixty miles later they saw bright vapour lights at the highway cloverleaf, and big green signs pointing west and east. Eleanor slowed and stopped and Reacher got out and waved her away. She used the first ramp, west towards Denver and Salt Lake City, and he walked under the bridge and set up on the eastbound ramp, one foot on the shoulder and one in the traffic lane, and he stuck out his thumb and smiled and tried to look friendly.

The Affair

Chapter

1

The Pentagon is the world's largest office building, six and a half million square feet, thirty thousand people, more than seventeen miles of corridors, but it was built with just three street doors, each one of them opening into a guarded pedestrian lobby. I chose the southeast option, the main concourse entrance, the one nearest the Metro and the bus station, because it was the busiest and the most popular with civilian workers, and I wanted plenty of civilian workers around, preferably a whole long unending stream of them, for insurance purposes, mostly against getting shot on sight. Arrests go bad all the time, sometimes accidentally, sometimes on purpose, so I wanted witnesses. I wanted independent eyeballs on me, at least at the beginning. I remember the date, of course. It was Tuesday, the eleventh of March, 1997, and it was the last day I walked into that place as a legal employee of the people who built it.

A long time ago.

The eleventh of March 1997 was also by chance exactly four and a half years before the world changed, on that other future Tuesday, and so like a lot of things in the old days the security at the main concourse entrance was serious without being hysterical. Not that I invited hysteria. Not from a distance. I was wearing my Class A uniform, all of it clean, pressed, polished, and spit-shined, all of it covered with thirteen years' worth of medal ribbons, badges, insignia, and citations. I was thirty-six years old, standing tall and walking ramrod straight, a totally squared away U.S. Army Military Police major in every respect, except that my hair was too long and I hadn't shaved for five days.

Back then Pentagon security was run by the Defense Protective Service, and from forty yards I saw ten of their guys in the lobby, which I thought was far too

many, which made me wonder whether they were all theirs or whether some of them were actually ours, working undercover, waiting for me. Most of our skilled work is done by Warrant Officers, and they do a lot of it by pretending to be someone else. They impersonate colonels and generals and enlisted men, and anyone else they need to, and they're good at it. All in a day's work for them to throw on DPS uniforms and wait for their target. From thirty yards I didn't recognize any of them, but then, the army is a very big institution, and they would have chosen men I had never met before.

I walked on, part of a broad wash of people heading across the concourse to the doors, some men and women in uniform, either Class As like my own or the old woodland-pattern BDUs we had back then, and some men and women obviously military but out of uniform, in suits or work clothes, and some obvious civilians, some of each category carrying bags or briefcases or packages, all of each category slowing and sidestepping and shuffling as the broad wash of people narrowed to a tight arrowhead and then narrowed further still to lonely single file or collegial two-by-two, as folks got ready to stream inside. I lined up with them, on my own, single file, behind a woman with pale unworn hands and ahead of a guy in a suit that had gone shiny at the elbows. Civilians, both of them, desk workers, probably analysts of some kind, which was exactly what I wanted. Independent eyeballs. It was close to noon. There was sun in the sky and the March air had a little warmth in it. Spring, in Virginia. Across the river the cherry trees were about to wake up. The famous blossom was about to break out. All over the innocent nation airline tickets and SLR cameras lay on hall tables, ready for sightseeing trips to the capital.

I waited in line. Way ahead of me the DPS guys were doing what security guys do. Four of them were occupied with specific tasks, two manning an inquiry counter and two checking official badge holders and then waving them through an open turnstile. Two were standing directly behind the glass inside the doors, looking out, heads high, eyes front, scanning the approaching crowd. Four were hanging back in the shadows behind the turnstiles, just clumped together, shooting the shit. All ten were armed.

It was the four behind the turnstiles that worried me. No question that back in 1997 the Department of Defense was seriously puffed up and overmanned in relation to the threats we faced then, but even so it was unusual to see four on-duty guys with absolutely nothing to do. Most commands at least made their surplus personnel look busy. But these four had no obvious role. I stretched up tall and peered ahead and tried to get a look at their shoes. You can learn a lot

from shoes. Undercover disguises often don't get that far, especially in a uniformed environment. The DPS was basically a beat cop role, so to the extent that a choice was available, DPS guys would go for cop shoes, big comfortable things appropriate for walking and standing all day. Undercover MP Warrant Officers might use their own shoes, which would be subtly different.

But I couldn't see their shoes. It was too dark inside, and too far away.

The line shuffled along, at a decent pre-9/11 clip. No sullen impatience, no frustration, no fear. Just old-style routine. The woman in front of me was wearing perfume. I could smell it coming off the nape of her neck. I liked it. The two guys behind the glass noticed me about ten yards out. Their gaze moved off the woman and onto me. It rested on me a beat longer than it needed to, and then it moved on to the guy behind.

Then it came back. Both men looked me over quite openly, up and down, side to side, four or five seconds, and then I shuffled forward and their attention moved behind me again. They didn't say anything to each other. Didn't say anything to anyone else, either. No warnings, no alerts. Two possible interpretations. One, best case, I was just a guy they hadn't seen before. Or maybe I stood out because I was bigger and taller than anyone within a hundred yards. Or because I was wearing a major's gold oak leaves and ribbons for some heavy-duty medals, including a Silver Star, like a real poster boy, but because of the hair and the beard I also looked like a real caveman, which visual dissonance might have been enough reason for the long second glance, just purely out of interest. Sentry duty can be boring, and unusual sights are always welcome.

Or two, worst case, they were merely confirming to themselves that some expected event had indeed happened, and that all was going according to plan. Like they had prepared and studied photographs and were saying to themselves: *OK, he's here, right on time, so now we just wait two more minutes until he steps inside, and then we take him down*.

Because I was expected, and I was right on time. I had a twelve o'clock appointment and matters to discuss with a particular colonel in a third-floor office in the C ring, and I was certain I would never get there. To walk head-on into a hard arrest was a pretty blunt tactic, but sometimes if you want to know for sure whether the stove is hot, the only way to find out is to touch it.

The guy ahead of the woman ahead of me stepped inside the doors and held up a badge that was attached to his neck by a lanyard. He was waved onward. The woman in front of me moved and then stopped short, because right at that moment the two DPS watchers chose to come out from behind the glass. The woman paused in place and let them squeeze out in front of her, against the pressing flow. Then she resumed her progress and stepped inside, and the two guys stopped and stood exactly where she had been, three feet in front of me, but facing in the opposite direction, toward me, not away from me.

They were blocking the door. They were looking right at me. I was pretty sure they were genuine DPS personnel. They were wearing cop shoes, and their uniforms had eased and stretched and molded themselves to their individual physiques over a long period of time. These were not disguises, snatched from a locker and put on for the first time that morning. I looked beyond the two guys, inside, at their four partners who were doing nothing, and I tried to judge the fit of their clothes, by way of comparison. It was hard to tell.

In front of me the guy on my right said, “Sir, may we help you?”

I asked, “With what?”

“Where are you headed today?”

“Do I need to tell you that?”

“No sir, absolutely not,” the guy said. “But we could speed you along a little, if you like.”

Probably via an inconspicuous door into a small locked room, I thought. I figured they had civilian witnesses on their mind too, the same way I did. I said, “I’m happy to wait my turn. I’m almost there, anyway.”

The two guys said nothing in reply to that. Stalemate. Amateur hour. To try to start the arrest outside was dumb. I could push and shove and turn and run and be lost in the crowd in the blink of an eye. And they wouldn’t shoot. Not outside. There were too many people on the concourse. Too much collateral damage. This was 1997, remember. March eleventh. Four and a half years before the new rules. Much better to wait until I was inside the lobby. The two stooges could close the doors behind me and form up shoulder to shoulder in front of them while I was getting the bad news at the desk. At that point theoretically I could

turn back and fight my way past them again, but it would take me a second or two, and in that second or two the four guys with nothing to do could shoot me in the back about a thousand times.

And if I charged forward they could shoot me in the front. And where would I go anyway? To escape *into* the Pentagon was no kind of a good idea. The world's largest office building. Thirty thousand people. Five floors. Two basements. Seventeen miles of corridors. There are ten radial hallways between the rings, and they say a person can make it between any two random points inside a maximum seven minutes, which was presumably calculated with reference to the army's official quick-march pace of four miles an hour, which meant if I was running hard I could be anywhere within about three minutes. But where? I could find a broom closet and steal bag lunches and hold out a day or two, but that would be all. Or I could take hostages and try to argue my case, but I had never seen that kind of thing succeed.

So I waited.

The DPS guy in front of me on my right said, "Sir, you be sure and have a nice day now," and then he moved past me, and his partner moved past me on my other side, both of them just strolling slow, two guys happy to be out in the air, patrolling, varying their viewpoint. Maybe not so dumb after all. They were doing their jobs and following their plan. They had tried to decoy me into a small locked room, but they had failed, no harm, no foul, so now they were turning the page straight to plan B. They would wait until I was inside and the doors were closed, and then they would jump into crowd control mode, dispersing the incoming people, keeping them safe in case shots had to be fired inside. I assumed the lobby glass was supposed to be bulletproof, but the smart money never bets on the DoD having gotten exactly what it paid for.

The door was right in front of me. It was open. I took a breath and stepped into the lobby. *Sometimes if you want to know for sure whether the stove is hot, the only way to find out is to touch it.*

Chapter

2

The woman with the perfume and the pale hands was already deep into the corridor beyond the open turnstile. She had been waved through. Straight ahead of me was the two-man inquiry desk. To my left were the two guys checking badges. The open turnstile was between their hips. The four spare guys were still doing nothing beyond it. They were still clustered together, quiet and watchful, like an independent team. I still couldn't see their shoes.

I took another breath and stepped up to the counter.

Like a lamb to the slaughter.

The desk guy on the left looked at me and said, "Yes, sir." Fatigue and resignation in his voice. A response, not a question, as if I had already spoken. He looked young and reasonably smart. Genuine DPS, presumably. MP Warrant Officers are quick studies, but they wouldn't be running a Pentagon inquiry desk, however deeply under they were supposed to be.

The desk guy looked at me again, expectantly, and I said, "I have a twelve o'clock appointment."

"Who with?"

"Colonel Frazer," I said.

The guy made out like he didn't recognize the name. The world's largest office building. Thirty thousand people. He leafed through a book the size of a telephone directory and asked, "Would that be Colonel John James Frazer? Senate Liaison?"

I said, "Yes."

Or: *Guilty as charged*.

Way to my left the four spare guys were watching me. But not moving. Yet.

The guy at the desk didn't ask my name. Partly because he had been briefed, presumably, and shown photographs, and partly because my Class A uniform included my name on a nameplate, worn as per regulations on my right breast pocket flap, exactly centered, its upper edge exactly a quarter of an inch below the top seam.

Seven letters: *REACHER*.

Or, eleven letters: *Arrest me now*.

The guy at the inquiry desk said, "Colonel John James Frazer is in 3C315. You know how to get there?"

I said, "Yes." Third floor, C ring, nearest to radial corridor number three, bay number fifteen. The Pentagon's version of map coordinates, which it needed, given that it covered twenty-nine whole acres of floor space.

The guy said, "Sir, you have a great day," and his guileless gaze moved past my shoulder to the next in line. I stood still for a moment. They were tying it up with a bow. They were making it perfect. The general common law test for criminal culpability is expressed by the Latin *actus non facit reum nisi mens sit rea*, which means, roughly, doing things won't necessarily get you in trouble unless you actually mean to do them. Action plus intention is the standard. They were waiting for me to prove my intention. They were waiting for me to step through the turnstile and into the labyrinth. Which explained why the four spare guys were on their side of the gate, not mine. Crossing the line would make it real. Maybe there were jurisdiction issues. Maybe lawyers had been consulted. Frazer wanted my ass gone for sure, but he wanted his own ass covered just as much.

I took another breath and crossed the line and made it real. I walked between the two badge checkers and squeezed between the cold alloy flanks of the turnstile. The bar was retracted. There was nothing to hit with my thighs. I stepped out on the far side and paused. The four spare guys were on my right. I looked at their shoes. Army regulations are surprisingly vague about shoes. Plain black lace-up oxfords or close equivalents, conservative, no designs on them, minimum of three pairs of eyelets, closed toe, maximum two-inch heel. That's all the fine print says. The four guys on my right were all in compliance, but they weren't wearing cop shoes. Not like the two guys outside. They were sporting four

variations on the same classic theme. High shines, tight laces, a little creasing and wear here and there. Maybe they were genuine DPS. Maybe they weren't. No way of telling. Not right then.

I was looking at them, and they were looking at me, but no one spoke. I looped around them and headed deeper into the building. I used the E ring counterclockwise and turned left at the first radial hallway.

The four guys followed.

They stayed about sixty feet behind me, close enough to keep me in sight, far enough back not to crowd me. A maximum seven minutes between any two points. I was the meat in a sandwich. I figured there would be another crew waiting outside 3C315, or as close to it as they decided to let me get. I was heading straight for them. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

I used some stairs on the D ring and went up two flights to the third floor. I changed to a clockwise direction, just for the fun of it, and passed radial corridor number five, and then four. The D ring was busy. People were bustling from place to place with armfuls of khaki files. Blank-eyed men and women in uniform were stepping smartly. The place was congested. I dodged and sidestepped and kept on going. People looked at me every step of the way. The hair, and the beard. I stopped at a water fountain and bent down and took a drink. People passed me by. Sixty feet behind me the four spare DPS guys were nowhere to be seen. But then, they didn't really need to tail me. They knew where I was going, and they knew what time I was supposed to get there.

I straightened up and got going again and turned right into radial number three. I made it to the C ring. The air smelled of uniform wool and linoleum polish and very faintly of cigars. The paint on the walls was thick and institutional. I looked left and right. There were people in the corridor, but no big cluster outside bay fifteen. Maybe they were waiting for me inside. I was already five minutes late.

I didn't turn. I stuck with radial three and walked all the way across the B ring to the A ring. The heart of the building, where the radial corridors finish. Or start, depending on your rank and perspective. Beyond the A ring is nothing but a five-acre pentagonal open courtyard, like the hole in an angular doughnut. Back in the day people called it Ground Zero, because they figured the Soviets had their biggest and best missile permanently targeted on it, like a big fat bull's-eye. I think they were wrong. I think the Soviets had their five biggest and best

missiles targeted on it, just in case strikes one through four didn’t work. The smart money says the Soviets didn’t always get what they paid for, either.

I waited in the A ring until I was ten minutes late. Better to keep them guessing. Maybe they were already searching. Maybe the four spare guys were already getting their butts kicked for losing me. I took another big breath and pushed off a wall and tracked back along radial three, across the B ring, to the C. I turned without breaking stride and headed for bay fifteen.

Chapter

3

There was no one waiting outside bay fifteen. No special crew. No one at all. The corridor was entirely empty, too, both ways, as far as the eye could see. And quiet. I guessed everyone else was already where they wanted to be. Twelve o'clock meetings were in full swing.

Bay fifteen's door was open. I knocked on it once, as a courtesy, as an announcement, as a warning, and then I stepped inside. Originally most of the Pentagon's office space was open plan, boxed off by file cabinets and furniture into bays, hence the name, but over the years walls had gone up and private spaces had been created. Frazer's billet in 3C315 was pretty typical. It was a small square space with a window without a view, and a rug on the floor, and photographs on the walls, and a metal DoD desk, and a chair with arms and two without, and a credenza and a double-wide storage unit.

And it was a small square space entirely empty of people, apart from Frazer himself in the chair behind the desk. He looked up at me and smiled.

He said, "Hello, Reacher."

I looked left and right. No one there. No one at all. There was no private bathroom. No large closet. No other door of any kind. The corridor behind me was empty. The giant building was quiet.

Frazer said, "Close the door."

I closed the door.

Frazer said, "Sit down, if you like."

I sat down.

Frazer said, "You're late."

"I apologize," I said. "I got hung up."

Frazer nodded. “This place is a nightmare at twelve o’clock. Lunch breaks, shift changes, you name it. It’s a zoo. I never plan to go anywhere at twelve o’clock. I just hunker down in here.” He was about five-ten, maybe two hundred pounds, wide in the shoulders, solid through the chest, red-faced, black-haired, in his middle forties. Plenty of old Scottish blood in his veins, filtered through the rich earth of Tennessee, which was where he was from. He had been in Vietnam as a teenager and the Gulf as an older man. He had combat pips all over him like a rash. He was an old-fashioned warrior, but unfortunately for him he could talk and smile as well as he could fight, so he had been posted to Senate Liaison, because the guys with the purse strings were now the real enemy.

He said, “So what have you got for me?”

I said nothing. I had nothing to say. I hadn’t expected to get that far.

He said, “Good news, I hope.”

“No news,” I said.

“Nothing?”

I nodded. “Nothing.”

“You told me you had the name. That’s what your message said.”

“I don’t have the name.”

“Then why say so? Why ask to see me?”

I paused a beat.

“It was a shortcut,” I said.

“In what way?”

“I put it around that I had the name. I wondered who might crawl out from under a rock, to shut me up.”

“And no one has?”

“Not so far. But ten minutes ago I thought it was a different story. There were four spare men in the lobby. In DPS uniforms. They followed me. I thought they were an arrest team.”

“Followed you where?”

“Around the E ring to the D. Then I lost them on the stairs.”

Frazer smiled again.

“You’re paranoid,” he said. “You didn’t lose them. I told you, there are shift changes at twelve o’clock. They come in on the Metro like everyone else, they shoot the shit for a minute or two, and then they head for their squad room. It’s on the B ring. They weren’t following you.”

I said nothing.

He said, “There are always groups of them hanging around. There are always groups of everyone hanging around. We’re seriously overmanned. Something is going to have to be done. It’s inevitable. That’s all I hear about on the Hill, all day, every day. There’s nothing we can do to stop it. We should all bear that in mind. People like you, especially.”

“Like me?” I said.

“There are lots of majors in this man’s army. Too many, probably.”

“Lots of colonels too,” I said.

“Fewer colonels than majors.”

I said nothing.

He asked, “Was I on your list of things that might crawl out from under a rock?”

You were the list, I thought.

He said, “Was I?”

“No,” I lied.

He smiled again. "Good answer. If I had a beef with you, I'd have you killed down there in Mississippi. Maybe I'd come on down and take care of it myself."

I said nothing. He looked at me for a moment, and then a smile started on his face, and the smile turned into a laugh, which he tried very hard to suppress, but he couldn't. It came out like a bark, like a sneeze, and he had to lean back and look up at the ceiling.

I said, "What?"

His gaze came back level. He was still smiling. He said, "I'm sorry. I was thinking about that phrase people use. You know, they say, that guy? He couldn't even get arrested."

I said nothing.

He said, "You look terrible. There are barbershops here, you know. You should go use one."

"I can't," I said. "I'm supposed to look like this."

Five days earlier my hair had been five days shorter, but apparently still long enough to attract attention. Leon Garber, who at that point was once again my commanding officer, summoned me to his office, and because his message read in part *without, repeat, without attending to any matters of personal grooming* I figured he wanted to strike while the iron was hot and dress me down right then, while the evidence was still in existence, right there on my head. And that was exactly how the meeting started out. He asked me, "Which army regulation covers a soldier's personal appearance?"

Which I thought was a pretty rich question, coming from him. Garber was without a doubt the scruffiest officer I had ever seen. He could take a brand new Class A coat from the quartermaster's stores and an hour later it would look like he had fought two wars in it, then slept in it, then survived three bar fights in it.

I said, "I can't remember which regulation covers a soldier's personal appearance."

He said, "Neither can I. But I seem to recall that whichever, the hair and the fingernail standards and the grooming policies are in chapter one, section eight. I can picture it all quite clearly, right there on the page. Can you remember what it

can picture it all quite clearly, right there on the page. Can you remember what it says?"

I said, "No."

"It tells us that hair grooming standards are necessary to maintain uniformity within a military population."

"Understood."

"It mandates those standards. Do you know what they are?"

"I've been very busy," I said. "I just got back from Korea."

"I heard Japan."

"That was a stopover on the way."

"How long?"

"Twelve hours."

"Do they have barbers in Japan?"

"I'm sure they do."

"Do Japanese barbers take more than twelve hours to cut a man's hair?"

"I'm sure they don't."

"Chapter one, section eight, paragraph two, says the hair on the top of the head must be neatly groomed, and that the length and the bulk of the hair may not be excessive or present a ragged, unkempt, or extreme appearance. It says that instead, the hair must present a tapered appearance."

I said, "I'm not sure what that means."

"It says a tapered appearance is one where the outline of the soldier's hair conforms to the shape of his head, curving inward to a natural termination point at the base of his neck."

I said, "I'll get it taken care of."

“These are mandates, you understand. Not suggestions.”

“OK,” I said.

“Section two says that when the hair is combed, it *will not* fall over the ears or the eyebrows, and it *will not* touch the collar.”

“OK,” I said again.

“Would you not describe your current hairstyle as ragged, unkempt, or extreme?”

“Compared to what?”

“And how are you doing in relation to the thing with the comb and the ears and the eyebrows and the collar?”

“I’ll get it taken care of,” I said again.

Then Garber smiled, and the tone of the meeting changed completely.

He asked, “How fast does your hair grow, anyway?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “A normal kind of speed, I suppose. Same as anyone else, probably. Why?”

“We have a problem,” he said. “Down in Mississippi.”

Chapter

4

Garber said the problem down in Mississippi concerned a twenty-seven-year-old woman named Janice May Chapman. She was a problem because she was dead. She had been unlawfully killed a block behind the main street of a town called Carter Crossing.

“Was she one of ours?” I asked.

“No,” Garber said. “She was a civilian.”

“So how is she a problem?”

“I’ll get to that,” Garber said. “But first you need the story. It’s the back of beyond down there. Northeastern corner of the state, over near the Alabama line, and Tennessee. There’s a north–south railroad track, and a little backwoods dirt road that crosses it east–west near a place that has a spring. The locomotives would stop there to take on water, and the passengers would get out to eat, so the town grew up. But since the end of World War Two there’s only been about two trains a day, both freight, no passengers, so the town was on its way back down again.”

“Until?”

“Federal spending. You know how it was. Washington couldn’t let large parts of the South turn into the Third World, so we threw some money down there. A lot of money, actually. You ever notice how the folks who talk loudest about small government always seem to live in the states with the biggest subsidies? Small government would kill them dead.”

I asked, “What did Carter Crossing get?”

Garber said, “Carter Crossing got an army base called Fort Kelham.”

“OK,” I said. “I’ve heard of Kelham. Never knew where it was, exactly.”

“It used to be huge,” Garber said. “Ground was broken in about 1950, I think. It could have ended up as big as Fort Hood, but ultimately it was too far east of I-55 and too far west of I-65 to be useful. You have to drive a long way on small roads just to get there. Or maybe Texas politicians have louder voices than Mississippi politicians. Either way, Hood got the attention and Kelham withered on the vine. It struggled on until the end of Vietnam, and then they turned it into a Ranger school. Which it still is.”

“I thought Ranger training was at Benning.”

“The 75th sends their best guys to Kelham for a time. It’s not far. Something to do with the terrain.”

“The 75th is a special ops regiment.”

“So they tell me.”

“Are there enough special ops Rangers in training to keep a whole town going?”

“Almost,” Garber said. “It’s not a very big town.”

“So what are we saying? An Army Ranger killed Janice May Chapman?”

“I doubt it,” Garber said. “It was probably some local hillbilly thing.”

“Do they have hillbillies in Mississippi? Do they even have hills?”

“Backwoodsmen, then. They have a lot of trees.”

“Whichever, why are we even talking about it?”

At that point Garber got up and came out from behind his desk and crossed the room and closed the door. He was older than me, naturally, and much shorter, but about as wide. And he was worried. It was rare for him to close his door, and rarer still for him to go more than five minutes without a tortured little homily or aphorism or slogan, designed to sum up a point he was trying to make in an easily remembered form. He stepped back and sat down again with a hiss of air from his cushion, and he asked, “Have you ever heard of a place called Kosovo?”

“Balkans,” I said. “Like Serbia and Croatia.”

“There’s going to be a war there. Apparently we’re going to try to stop it. Apparently we’ll probably fail, and we’ll end up just bombing the shit out of one side or the other instead.”

“OK,” I said. “Always good to have a plan B.”

“The Serbo-Croat thing was a disaster. Like Rwanda. A total embarrassment. This is the twentieth century, for God’s sake.”

“Seemed to me to fit right in with the twentieth century.”

“It’s supposed to be different now.”

“Wait for the twenty-first. That’s my advice.”

“We’re not going to wait for anything. We’re going to try to do Kosovo right.”

“Well, good luck with that. Don’t come to me for help. I’m just a policeman.”

“We’ve already got people over there. You know, intermittently, in and out.”

I asked, “Who?”

Garber said, “Peacekeepers.”

“What, the United Nations?”

“Not exactly. Our guys only.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“You didn’t know because nobody is supposed to know.”

“How long has this been happening?”

“Twelve months.”

I said, “We’ve been deploying ground troops to the Balkans in secret for a whole year?”

“It’s not such a big deal,” Garber said. “It’s about reconnaissance, partly. In case

"It's not such a big deal," Garber said. "It's about reconnaissance, partly. In case something has to happen later. But mostly it's about calming things down. There are a lot of factions over there. If anyone asks, we always say it was the other guy who invited us. That way everyone thinks everyone else has got our backing. It's a deterrent."

I asked, "Who did we send?"

Garber said, "Army Rangers."

*

Garber told me that Fort Kelham was still operating as a legitimate Ranger training school, but in addition was being used to house two full companies of grown-up Rangers, both hand picked from the 75th Ranger Regiment, designated Alpha Company and Bravo Company, who deployed covertly to Kosovo on a rotating basis, a month at a time. Kelham's relative isolation made it a perfect clandestine location. Not, Garber said, that we should really feel the need to hide anything. Very few personnel were involved, and it was a humanitarian mission driven by the purest of motives. But Washington was Washington, and some things were better left unsaid.

I asked, "Does Carter Crossing have a police department?"

Garber said, "Yes, it does."

"So let me guess. They're getting nowhere with their homicide investigation, so they want to go fishing. They want to list some Kelham personnel in their suspect pool."

Garber said, "Yes, they do."

"Including members of Alpha Company and Bravo Company."

Garber said, "Yes."

"They want to ask them all kinds of questions."

"Yes."

"But we can't afford to let them ask anyone any questions, because we have to

hide all the covert comings and goings.”

“Correct.”

“Do they have probable cause?”

I hoped Garber was going to say no, but instead he said, “Slightly circumstantial.”

I said, “Slightly?”

He said, “The timing is unfortunate. Janice May Chapman was killed three days after Bravo Company got back from Kosovo, after their latest trip. They fly in direct from overseas. Kelham has an airstrip. I told you, it’s a big place. They land under cover of darkness, for secrecy’s sake. Then a returning company spends the first two days locked down and debriefing.”

“And then?”

“And then on the third day a returning company gets a week’s leave.”

“And they all go out on the town.”

“Generally.”

“Including Main Street and the blocks behind.”

“That’s where the bars are.”

“And the bars are where they meet the local women.”

“As always.”

“And Janice May Chapman was a local woman.”

“And known to be friendly.”

I said, “Terrific.”

Garber said, “She was raped and mutilated.”

“Mutilated how?”

“I didn’t ask. I didn’t want to know. She was twenty-seven years old. Jodie is twenty-seven years old, too.”

His only daughter. His only child. Much loved.

I asked, “How is she?”

“She’s fine.”

“Where is she now?”

“She’s a lawyer,” he said, like it was a location, not an occupation. Then in turn he asked, “How’s your brother?”

I said, “He’s OK, as far as I know.”

“Still at Treasury?”

“As far as I know.”

“He was a good man,” Garber said, like leaving the army was the same thing as dying.

I said nothing.

Garber asked, “So what would you do, down there in Mississippi?”

This was 1997, remember. I said, “We can’t shut out the local PD. Not under those circumstances. But we can’t assume any level of expertise or resources on their part, either. So we should offer some help. We should send someone down there. We can do all the work on the base. If some Kelham guy did it, we’ll serve him up on a platter. That way justice is done, but we can hide what we need to hide.”

“Not that simple,” Garber said. “It gets worse.”

“How?”

“Bravo Company’s commander is a guy called Reed Riley. You know him?”

“The name rings a bell.”

“And so it should. His father is Carlton Riley.”

I said, “Shit.”

Garber nodded. “The senator. The chairman of the Armed Services Committee. About to be either our best friend or our worst enemy, depending on which way the wind is going to blow. And you know how it is with guys like that. Having an infantry captain for a son is worth a million votes to him. Having a hero for a son is worth twice that. I don’t want to think about what happens if one of young Reed’s guys turns out to be a killer.”

I said, “We need someone at Kelham right now.”

Garber said, “That’s why you and I are having this meeting.”

“When do you want me there?”

“I don’t want you there,” Garber said.

Chapter

5

Garber told me his top pick for the Kelham job wasn't me. It was a newly minted MP major named Duncan Munro. Military family, Silver Star, Purple Heart, and so on and so forth. He had recently completed some good work in Korea, and was currently doing some great work in Germany. He was five years younger than me, and from what I was hearing he was exactly what I had been five years in the past. I had never met him.

Garber said, "He's in the air right now. Heading straight down there. ETA late morning tomorrow."

"Your call," I said. "I guess."

"It's a delicate situation," he said.

"Evidently," I said. "Too delicate for me, anyway."

"Don't get your panties in a wad. I need you for something else. Something I hope you'll see as just as important."

"Like what?"

"Undercover work," he said. "That's why I'm happy about your hair. Ragged and unkempt. There are two things we do very badly when we're undercover. Hair, and shoes. Shoes, you can buy at Goodwill. You can't buy messy hair at a moment's notice."

"Undercover where?"

"Carter Crossing, of course. Down in Mississippi. Off post. You're going to blow into town like some kind of aimless ex-military bum. You know the type. You're going to be the kind of guy who feels right at home there, because it's the kind of environment he's familiar with. So you're going to stay put a spell. You're going to develop a relationship with local law enforcement, and you're

going to use that relationship in a clandestine fashion to make sure that both they and Munro are doing this thing absolutely right."

"You want me to impersonate a civilian?"

"It's not that hard. We're all members of the same species, more or less. You'll figure it out."

"Will I be actively investigating?"

"No. You'll be there to observe and report only. Like a training assessment. You've done it before. My eyes and ears. This thing has got to be done absolutely right."

"OK," I said.

"Any other questions?"

"When do I leave?"

"Tomorrow morning, first light."

"And what's your definition of doing this thing absolutely right?"

Garber paused and shuffled in his chair and didn't answer that question.

I went back to my quarters and took a shower, but I didn't shave. Going undercover is like method acting, and Garber was right. I knew the type. Any soldier does. Towns near bases are full of guys who washed out for some reason or other and never got further than a mile. Some stay, and some are forced to move on, and the ones who move on end up in some other town near some other base. The same, but different. It's what they know. It's what they're comfortable with. They retain some kind of ingrained, deep-down military discipline, like old habits, like stray strands of DNA, but they abandon regular grooming. Chapter one, section eight, paragraph two no longer rules their lives. So I didn't shave, and I didn't comb my hair either. I just let it dry.

Then I laid stuff out on my bed. I didn't need to go to the Goodwill for shoes. I had a pair that would do. About twelve years previously I had been in the U.K. and I had bought a pair of brown brogues at an old-fashioned gentleman's store

in a village miles from anywhere. They were big, heavy, substantial things. They were well cared for, but a little worn and creased. Down at heel, literally.

I put them on my bed, and they sat there alone. I had no other personal clothing. None at all. Not even socks. I found an old army T-shirt in a drawer, olive drab, cotton, originally of a hefty grade, now washed pale and as thin as silk. I figured it was the kind of thing a guy might keep around. I put it next to the shoes. Then I hiked over to the PX and poked around the aisles I usually don't frequent. I found a pair of mud-colored canvas pants and a long-sleeved shirt that was basically maroon, but it had been prewashed so that the seams had faded to a kind of pink. I wasn't thrilled with it, but it was the only choice in my size. It was reduced in price, which made sense to me, and it looked basically civilian. I had seen people wearing worse things. And it was versatile. I wasn't sure what the temperatures were going to be, in March in the northeastern corner of Mississippi. If it was warm, I could roll the sleeves up. If it was cold, I could roll them down.

I chose white underwear and khaki socks and then stopped in the toiletries section and found a kind of half-sized travel toothbrush. I liked it. The business end was nested in a clear plastic case, and it pulled out and reversed and clipped back in, to make it full-length and ready to use. It was obviously designed for a pocket. It would be easy to carry and the bristle part would stay clean. A very neat idea.

I sent the clothing straight to the laundry, to age it a little. Nothing ages stuff like on-base laundries. Then I walked off post to a hamburger place for a late lunch. I found an old friend in there, an MP colleague, a guy called Stan Lowrey. We had worked together many times. He was sitting at a table in front of a tray holding the wreckage of a half-pounder and fries. I got my meal and slid in opposite him. He said, "I hear you're on your way to Mississippi."

I asked, "Where did you hear that?"

"My sergeant got it from a sergeant in Garber's office."

"When?"

"About two hours ago."

"Terrific," I said. "I didn't even know two hours ago. So much for secrecy."

“My sergeant says you’re going as second fiddle.”

“Your sergeant is right.”

“My sergeant says the lead investigator is some kid.” I nodded. “I’m babysitting.”

“That sucks, Reacher. That blows big time.”

“Only if the kid does it right.”

“Which he might.”

I took a bite of my burger, and a sip of my coffee. I said, “Actually I don’t know if anyone could do it right. There are sensitivities involved. There may be no right way of doing it at all. It could be that Garber is protecting me and sacrificing the kid.”

Lowrey said, “Dream on, my friend. You’re an old horse and Garber is pinch hitting for you in the bottom of the ninth with the bases loaded. A new star is about to be born. You’re history.”

“You too, then,” I said. “If I’m an old horse, you’re already waiting at the glue factory gate.”

“Exactly,” Lowrey said. “That’s what I’m worried about. I’m going to start looking at the want ads tonight.”

Nothing much happened during the rest of the afternoon. My laundry came back, a little bleached and battered by the giant machines. It was steam-pressed, but a day’s traveling would correct that. I left it on the floor, piled neatly on my shoes. Then my phone rang, and a switchboard operator patched me in to a call from the Pentagon, and I found myself talking to a colonel named John James Frazer. He said he was currently with Senate Liaison, but he preceded that embarrassing announcement with his whole prior combat bio, so I wouldn’t write him off as a jerk. Then he said, “I need to know immediately if there’s the slightest shred or scintilla of a hint or a rumor about anyone in Bravo Company. Immediately, OK? Night or day.”

I said, “And I need to know how the local PD even knows Bravo Company is based at Kelham. I thought it’s supposed to be a secret.”

based at Kelham. I thought it's supposed to be a secret."

"They fly in and out on C-5 transports. Noisy airplanes."

"In the dead of night. So they could be supply runs, for all anyone knows. Beans and bullets."

"There was a weather problem a month ago. Storms over the Atlantic. They were late. They landed after dawn. They were observed. And it's a base town anyway. You know how it is. The locals pick up on the patterns. Faces they know, there one month, gone the next. People aren't dumb."

"There already are hints and rumors," I said. "The timing is suggestive. Like you said, people aren't dumb."

"The timing could be entirely coincidental."

"Could be," I said. "Let's hope it is."

Frazer said, "I need to know immediately if there's anything Captain Riley could have, or should have, or might have, or ought to have known. Anything at all, OK? No delay."

"Is that an order?"

"It's a request from a senior officer. Is there a difference?"

"Are you in my chain of command?"

"Consider that I am."

"OK," I said.

"Anything at all," he said again. "To me, immediately and personally. My ears only. Night or day."

"OK," I said again.

"There's a lot riding on this. Do you understand? The stakes are very high."

"OK," I said, for the third time.

Then Frazer said, “But I don’t want you to do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable.”

I went to bed early, my hair matted, my unshaven face scratchy on the pillow, and the clock in my head woke me at five, two hours before dawn, on Friday, March 7th, 1997. The first day of the rest of my life.

Chapter

6

I showered and dressed in the dark, socks, boxers, pants, my old T, my new shirt. I laced my shoes and put my toothbrush in my pocket with a pack of gum and a roll of bills. I left everything else behind. No ID, no wallet, no watch, no nothing. Method acting. I figured that was how I would do it, if I was doing it for real.

Then I headed out. I walked up the post's main drag and got to the guardhouse and Garber came out to meet me in the open. He had been waiting for me. Six o'clock in the morning. Not yet light. Garber was in BDUs, presumably fresh on less than an hour ago, but he looked like he had spent that hour rolling around in the dirt on a farm. We stood under the glow of a yellow vapor light. The air was very cold.

Garber said, "You don't have a bag?"

I said, "Why would I have a bag?"

"People carry bags."

"What for?"

"For their spare clothing."

"I don't own spare clothing. I had to buy these things especially."

"You *chose* that shirt?"

"What's wrong with it?"

"It's pink."

"Only in places."

"You're going to Mississippi. They'll think you're queer. They'll beat you to

death.”

“I doubt it,” I said.

“What are you going to do when those clothes get dirty?”

“I don’t know. Buy some more, I suppose.”

“How are you planning to get to Kelham?”

“I figured I’d walk into town and get a Greyhound bus to Memphis. Then hitchhike the rest of the way. I imagine that’s how people do these things.”

“Have you eaten breakfast?”

“I’m sure I’ll find a diner.”

Garber paused a beat and asked, “Did John James Frazer get you on the phone yesterday? From Senate Liaison?”

I said, “Yes, he did.”

“How did he sound?”

“Like we’re in big trouble unless Janice May Chapman was killed by another civilian.”

“Then let’s hope she was.”

“Is Frazer in my chain of command?”

“Probably safest to assume he is.”

“What kind of a guy is he?”

“He’s a guy under a whole lot of stress right now. Five years’ work could go down the pan, just when it gets important.”

“He told me not to do anything that makes me feel uncomfortable.”

“Bullshit,” Garber said. “You’re not in the army to feel comfortable.”

I said, “What some guy on leave does after he gets drunk in a bar is not a company commander’s fault.”

“Only in the real world,” Garber said. “But this is politics we’re talking about.” Then he went quiet again, just for a moment, as if he had many more points to make and was trying to decide which one of them to start with. But in the end all he said was, “Well, have a safe trip, Reacher. Stay in touch, OK?”

*

The walk to the Greyhound depot was long but not difficult. Just a case of putting one foot in front of the other. I was passed by a few vehicles. None of them stopped to offer me a ride. They might have if I had been in uniform. Off-post citizens are usually well disposed toward their military neighbors, in the heartland of America. I took their neglect as proof that my civilian disguise was convincing. I was glad to pass the test. I had never posed as a civilian before. It was unknown territory. Something new for me. I had never even been a civilian. I suppose technically I was, for eighteen years between birth and West Point, but those years had been spent inside a blur of Marine Corps bases, one after another, because of my father’s career, and living on post as part of a military family had nothing to do with civilian life. Absolutely nothing at all. So that morning’s walk felt fresh and experimental to me. The sun came up behind me and the air went warm and dewy and a ground mist rose off the road to my knees. I walked on through it and thought of my old pal Stan Lowrey, back on the base. I wondered if he had looked at the want ads. I wondered if he needed to. I wondered if I needed to.

There was a coach diner a half-mile short of downtown and I stopped there for breakfast. I had coffee, of course, and scrambled eggs. I felt I integrated pretty well, visually and behaviorally. There were six other customers in there. All of them were civilians, all of them were men, and all of them were ragged and unkempt by the standards required to maintain uniformity within a military population. All six of them were wearing hats on their heads. Six mesh caps, printed with the names of what I took to be agricultural equipment manufacturers, or seed merchants. I wondered if I should have gotten such a hat. I hadn’t thought about it, and I hadn’t seen any in the PX.

I finished my meal and paid the waitress and walked on bareheaded to where the Greyhounds came and went. I bought a ticket and sat on a bench and thirty minutes later I was in the back of a bus, heading south and west.

Chapter

7

The bus ride was magnificent, in its way. Not a radical distance, no more than a small portion of the giant continent, no more than an inch on a one-page map, but it took six hours. The view out the window changed so slowly it seemed never to change at all, but even so the landscape at the end of the journey was very different than at the beginning. Memphis was a slick city, laced with wet streets, boxed in by low buildings painted muted pastel colors, heaving and bustling with furtive unexplained activity. I got out at the depot and stood a moment in the bright afternoon and listened to the hum and throb of people at work and at play. Then I kept the sun on my right shoulder and walked south and east. First priority was the mouth of a wide road leading out of town, and second priority was something to eat.

I found myself in a built-up and insalubrious quarter full of pawn shops and porn shops and bail bond offices, and I figured getting a ride there would be next to impossible. The same driver that might stop on the open road would never stop in that part of town. So I put my second priority first and fueled up at a greasy spoon café, and resigned myself to a lengthy hike thereafter. I wanted a corner with a road sign, a big green rectangle marked with an arrow and *Oxford* or *Tupelo* or *Columbus*. In my experience a guy standing under such a sign with his thumb out left no doubt about what he wanted and where he was going. No explanation was required. No need for a driver to stop and ask, which helped a lot. People are bad at saying no face to face. Often they just drive on by, purely to avoid the possibility. Always better to reduce confusion.

I found such a corner and such a sign at the end of a thirty-minute walk, on the front edge of what I took to be a leafy suburb, which would mean ninety percent of passing drivers would be respectable matrons returning home, which would mean they would ignore me completely. No suburban matron would stop for a stranger, and no driver with just a mile more to go would offer a ride. But to walk on would have been illusory progress. A false economy. Better to waste time standing still than to waste it walking and burning energy. Even with nine cars out of ten wafting on by, I figured I would be mobile within an hour.

And I was. Less than twenty minutes later an old pick-up truck eased to a stop next to me and the driver told me he was heading for a lumberyard out past Germantown. It must have been clear that I didn't grasp the local geography, so the guy told me if I rode with him I would end up outside of the urban tangle with nothing but a straight shot into northeastern Mississippi ahead of me. So I climbed aboard and another twenty minutes later I was alone again, on the shoulder of a dusty two-lane that headed unambiguously in the direction I wanted to go. A guy in a sagging Buick sedan picked me up and we crossed the state line together and drove forty miles east. Then a guy in a stately old Chevy truck took me twenty miles south on a minor road and let me out at what he said was the turn I wanted. By that point it was late in the afternoon and the sun was heading for the far horizon, pretty fast. The road ahead was die-straight with low forest on both sides and nothing but darkness in the distance. I figured Carter Crossing straddled that road, perhaps thirty or forty miles away to the east, which put me close to completing the first part of my mission, which was simply to get there. The second part was to make contact with the local cops, which might be harder. There was no cogent reason for a transient bum to pal up with people in police uniforms. No obvious mechanism either, short of getting arrested, which would start the whole relationship on the wrong foot.

But in the event both objectives were achieved in one fell swoop, because the first eastbound car I saw was a police cruiser heading home. I had my thumb out, and the guy stopped for me. He was a talker and I was a listener, and within minutes I found out that some of what Garber had told me was wrong.

Chapter

8

The cop's name was Pellegrino, like the sparkling water, although he didn't say that. I got the impression that people drank from the tap in that part of Mississippi. On reflection it was no surprise he stopped for me. Small-town cops are always interested in unexplained strangers heading into their territory. The easiest way to find out who they are is simply to ask, which he did, immediately. I told him my name and spent a minute on my cover story. I said I was recent ex-military, heading to Carter Crossing to look for a friend who might be living there. I said the friend had last served at Kelham and might have stuck around. Pellegrino had nothing to say in response to that. He just took his eyes off the empty road for a second and looked me up and down, calibrating, and then he nodded and faced front again. He was moderately short and very overweight, maybe French or Italian way back, with black hair buzzed short and olive skin and broken veins on both sides of his nose. He was somewhere between thirty and forty, and I guessed if he didn't stop eating and drinking he wasn't going to make it much beyond fifty or sixty.

I finished saying my piece and he started talking, and the first thing I found out was that he wasn't a small-town cop. Garber had been wrong, technically. Carter Crossing had no police department. Carter Crossing was in Carter County, and Carter County had a County Sheriff's Department, which had jurisdiction over everything inside an area close to five hundred square miles. But there wasn't much inside those five hundred square miles except Fort Kelham and the town, which was where the Sheriff's Department was based, which made Garber right again, in a sense. But Pellegrino was indisputably a deputy sheriff, not a police officer, and he seemed very proud of the distinction.

I asked him, "How big is your department?"

Pellegrino said, "Not very. We got the sheriff, who we call the chief, we got a sheriff's detective, we got me and another deputy in uniform, we got a civilian on the desk, we got a woman on the phones, but the detective is out sick long term with his kidneys, so it's just the three of us, really."

I asked him, “How many people live in Carter County?”

“About twelve hundred,” he said. Which I thought was a lot, for three functioning cops. Apples to apples, it would be like policing New York City with a half-sized NYPD. I asked, “Does that include Fort Kelham?”

“No, they’re separate,” he said. “And they have their own cops.”

I said, “But still, you guys must be busy. I mean, twelve hundred citizens, five hundred square miles.”

“Right now we’re real busy,” he said, but he didn’t mention anything about Janice May Chapman. Instead he talked about a more recent event. Late in the evening the day before, under cover of darkness, someone had parked a car on the train track. Garber was wrong again. He had said there were two trains a day, but Pellegrino told me in reality there was only one. It rumbled through at midnight exactly, a mile-long giant hauling freight north from Biloxi on the Gulf Coast. That midnight train had smashed into the parked vehicle, wrecking it completely, hurling it way far up the line, bouncing it into the woods. The train had not stopped. As far as anyone could tell it hadn’t even slowed down. Which meant the engineer had not even noticed. He was obliged to stop if he struck something on the line. Railroad policy. Pellegrino thought it was certainly possible the guy hadn’t noticed. So did I. Thousands of tons against one, moving fast, no contest. Pellegrino seemed captivated by the senselessness of it all. He said, “I mean, who would do that? Who would park an automobile on the train track? And why?”

“Kids?” I said. “For fun?”

“Never happened before. And we’ve always had kids.”

“No one in the car?”

“No, thank God. Like I said, as far as we know it was just parked there.”

“Stolen?”

“Don’t know yet. There’s not much of it left. We think it might have been blue. It set on fire. Burned some trees with it.”

“No one called in a missing car?”

"No one called in a missing car."

"Not yet."

I asked, "What else are you busy with?"

And at that point Pellegrino went quiet and didn't answer, and I wondered if I had pushed it too far. But I reviewed the back-and-forth in my head and figured it was a reasonable question. Just making conversation. A guy says he's real busy but mentions only a wrecked car, another guy is entitled to ask for more, right? Especially while riding through the dusk in a companionable fashion.

But it turned out Pellegrino's hesitation was based purely on courtesy and old-fashioned Southern hospitality. That was all. He said, "Well, I don't want to give you a bad impression, seeing as you're here for the first time. But we had a woman murdered."

"Really?" I said.

"Two days ago," he said.

"Murdered how?"

And it turned out that Garber's information was inaccurate again. Janice May Chapman had not been mutilated. Her throat had been cut, that was all. And delivery of a fatal wound was not the same thing as mutilation. Not the same thing at all. Not even close.

Pellegrino said, "Ear to ear. Real deep. One big slice. Not pretty."

I said, "You saw it, I guess."

"Up close and personal. I could see the bones inside her neck. She was all bled out. Like a lake. It was real bad. A good looking woman, real pretty, all dressed up for a night out, neat as a pin, just lying there on her back in a pool of blood. Not right at all."

I said nothing, out of respect for something Pellegrino's tone seemed to demand.

He said, "She was raped, too. The doctor found that out when he got her clothes off and got her on the slab. Unless you could say she'd been into it enough at some point to throw herself down and scratch up her ass on the gravel. Which I

some point to throw herself down and scratch up her ass on the gravel. Which I don't think she would be."

"You knew her?"

"We saw her around."

I asked, "Who did it?"

He said, "We don't know. A guy off the base, probably. That's what we think."

"Why?"

"Because those are who she spent her time with."

I asked, "If your detective is out sick, who is working the case?"

Pellegrino said, "The chief."

"Does he have much experience with homicides?"

"She," Pellegrino said. "The chief is a woman."

"Really?"

"It's an elected position. She got the votes." There was a little resignation in his voice. The kind of tone a guy uses when his team loses a big game. *It is what it is*.

"Did you run for the job?" I asked.

"We all did," he said. "Except the detective. He was already bad with his kidneys."

I said nothing. The car rocked and swayed. Pellegrino's tires sounded worn and soft. They set up a dull baritone roar on the blacktop. Up ahead the evening gloom had gone completely. Pellegrino's headlights lit the way fifty yards in front. Beyond that was nothing but darkness. The road was straight, like a tunnel through the trees. The trees were twisted and opportunistic, like weeds competing for light and air and minerals, like they had seeded themselves a hundred years ago on abandoned arable land. They flashed past in the light spill,

like they were frozen in motion. I saw a tin sign on the shoulder, lopsided and faded and pocked with rusty coin-sized spots where the enamel had flaked loose. It advertised a hotel called Toussaint's. It promised the convenience of a Main Street location, and rooms of the highest quality.

Pellegrino said, "She got elected because of her name."

"The sheriff?"

"That's who we were talking about."

"Why? What's her name?"

"Elizabeth Deveraux," he said.

"Nice name," I said. "But no better than Pellegrino, for instance."

"Her daddy was sheriff before her. He was a well-liked man, in certain quarters. We think some folks voted out of loyalty. Or maybe they thought they were voting for the old guy himself. Maybe they didn't know he was dead. Things take time to catch on, in certain quarters."

I asked, "Is Carter Crossing big enough to have quarters?"

Pellegrino said, "Halves, I guess. Two of them. West of the railroad track, or east."

"Right side, wrong side?"

"Like everywhere."

"Which side is Kelham?"

"East. You have to drive three miles. Through the wrong side."

"Which side is the Toussaint's hotel?"

"Won't you be staying with your friend?"

"When I find him. If I find him. Until then I need a place."

"[illegible] OK," Pellegrino said. "I'll [illegible]"

¨Toussaint´s is OK,´´ Pellegrino said. ¨I´ll let you out there.´´

And he did. We drove out of the tunnel through the trees and the road broadened and the forest itself died back to stunted saplings left and right, all choked with weeds and trash. The road became an asphalt ribbon laid through a wide flat area of earth the size of a football field. It led through a right turn to a straight street between low buildings. Main Street, presumably. There was no architecture. Just construction, a lot of it old, most of it wood, with some stone at the foundation level. We passed a building marked *Carter County Sheriff's Department*, and then a vacant lot, and then a diner, and then we arrived at the Toussaint's hotel. It had been a fancy place once. It had green paint and trim and moldings and iron railings on the second-floor balconies. It looked like it had been copied from a New Orleans design. It had a faded signboard with its name on it, and a row of dim lights washing the exterior facade, three of which were out.

Pellegrino eased the cruiser to a stop and I thanked him for the ride and got out. He pulled a wide U-turn behind me and headed back the way we had come, presumably to park in the Sheriff's Department lot. I used a set of wormy wooden steps and crossed a bouncy wooden veranda and pushed in through the hotel door.

Chapter

9

Inside the hotel I found a small square lobby and an unattended reception desk. The floor was worn boards partially covered by a threadbare rug of Middle Eastern design. The desk was a counter made of hardwood polished to a high shine by years of wear and labor. There was a matrix of pigeonholes on the wall behind it. Four high, seven wide. Twenty-eight rooms. Twenty-seven of them had their keys hanging in place. None of the pigeonholes contained letters or notes or any other kind of communication.

There was a bell on the desk, a small brass thing going green around the edges. I hit it twice, and a polite *ding ding* echoed around for a spell, but it produced no results. None at all. No one came. There was a closed door next to the pigeonholes, and it stayed closed. A back office, I guessed. Empty, presumably. I saw no reason why a hotel owner would deliberately avoid doubling his occupancy rate.

I stood still for a moment and then checked a door on the left of the lobby. It opened to an unlit lounge that smelled of damp and dust and mildew. There were humped shapes in the dark that I took to be armchairs. No activity. No people. I stepped back to the desk and hit the bell again.

No response.

I called out, “Hello?”

No response.

So I gave up for the time being and went back out, across the shaky veranda, down the worn steps, and I stood in a shadow on the sidewalk under one of the busted lamps. There was nothing much to see. Across Main Street was a long row of low buildings. Stores, presumably. All of them were dark. Beyond them was blackness. The night air was clear and dry and faintly warm. March, in Mississippi. Meteorologically I could have been anywhere. I could hear the thrill of breeze in distant leaves, and tiny granular sounds, like moving dust, or like

termites eating wood. I could hear an extractor fan in the wall of the diner next door. Beyond that, nothing. No human sounds. No voices. No revelry, no traffic, no music.

Tuesday night, near an army base.

Not typical.

I had eaten nothing since lunch in Memphis, so I headed for the diner. It was a narrow building, but deep, set end-on to Main Street. The kitchen entrance was probably on the block behind. Inside the front door was a pay phone on the wall and a register and a hostess station. Beyond that was a long straight aisle with tables for four on the left and tables for two on the right. Tables, not booths, with freestanding chairs. Like a café. The only customers in the place were a couple about twice my age. They were face to face at a table for four. The guy had a newspaper and the woman had a book. They were settled in, like they were happy to linger over their meal. The only staff on view was a waitress. She was close to the swing door in back that led to the kitchen. She saw me step in and she hustled the whole length of the aisle to greet me. She put me at a table for two, about halfway into the room. I sat facing the front, with my back to the kitchen. Not possible to watch both entrances at once, which would have been my preference.

“Something to drink?” the waitress asked me.

“Black coffee,” I said. “Please.”

She went away and came back again, with coffee in a mug, and a menu.

I said, “Quiet night.”

She nodded, unhappy, probably worried about her tips.

She said, “They closed the base.”

“Kelham?” I said. “They closed it?”

She nodded again. “They locked it down this afternoon. They’re all in there, eating army chow tonight.”

“Does that happen a lot?”

"Does that happen a lot?"

"Never happened before."

"I'm sorry," I said. "What do you recommend?"

"For what?"

"To eat."

"Here? It's all good."

"Cheeseburger," I said.

"Five minutes," she said. She went away and I took my coffee with me and headed back past the hostess station to the pay phone. I dug in my pocket and found three quarters from my lunch-time change, which were enough for a short conversation, which was the kind I liked. I dialed Garber's office and a duty lieutenant put him on the line and he asked, "Are you there yet?"

I said, "Yes."

"Trip OK?"

"It was fine."

"Got a place to stay?"

"Don't worry about me. I've got seventy-five cents and four minutes before I eat. I need to ask you something."

"Fire away."

"Who briefed you on this?"

Garber paused.

"I can't tell you that," he said.

"Well, whoever it was, he's kind of hazy about the details."

"That can happen."

“And Kelham is locked down.”

“Munro did that, as soon as he got there.”

“Why?”

“You know how it is. There’s a risk of bad feeling between the town and the base. It was a common-sense move.”

“It was an admission of guilt.”

“Well, maybe Munro knows something you don’t. Don’t worry about him. Your only job is to eavesdrop on the local cops.”

“I’m on it. I rode in with one.”

“Did he buy the civilian act?”

“He seemed to.”

“Good. They’ll clam up if they know you’re connected.”

“I need you to find out if anyone from Bravo Company owns a blue car.”

“Why?”

“The cop said someone parked a blue car on the railroad track. The midnight train wrecked it. Could have been an attempt to hide evidence.”

“He’d have burned it out, surely.”

“Maybe it was the kind of evidence that burning wouldn’t conceal. Maybe a big dent in the fender or something.”

“How would that relate to a woman getting carved up in an alley?”

“She wasn’t carved up. Her throat was cut. That was all. Deep and wide. One pass, probably. The cop I talked to said he saw bone.”

Garber paused a beat.

He said, “That’s how Rangers are taught to do it.”

He said, "That's how Rangers are taught to do it."

I said nothing.

He asked, "But how would that relate to a car?"

"I don't know. Maybe it doesn't relate. But let's find out, OK?"

"There are two hundred guys in Bravo Company. Law of averages says there's going to be about fifty blue cars."

"And all fifty of them should be parked on the base. Let's find out if one isn't."

"It was probably a civilian vehicle."

"Let's hope it was. I'll work that end. But either way, I need to know."

"This is Munro's investigation," Garber said. "Not yours."

I said, "And we need to know if someone got a gravel rash. Hands, knees, and elbows, maybe. From the rape. The cop said Chapman had matching injuries."

"This is Munro's investigation," Garber said again.

I didn't answer that. I saw the waitress push in through the kitchen door. She was carrying a plate piled high with an enormous burger in a bun and a tangle of shoelace fries as big and untidy as a squirrel's nest. I said, "I have to go, boss. I'll call you tomorrow," and I hung up and carried my coffee back to my table. The waitress put my plate down with a degree of ceremony. The meal looked good and smelled good.

"Thanks," I said.

"Can I get you anything else?"

"You can tell me about the hotel," I said. "I need a room, but there was nobody home."

The waitress half-turned and I followed her gaze to the old couple settled in at their table for four. They were still reading. The waitress said, "They usually sit a spell in here, and then they go back. That would be the best time to catch them."

them.

Then she went away and left me to it. I ate slowly and enjoyed every bite. The old couple sat still and read. The woman turned a page every couple of minutes. Much less often the guy made a big loud production out of snapping the spine of his paper and refolding it ready for the next section. He was studying it intently. He was practically reading the print off it.

Later the waitress came back and picked up my plate and offered me dessert. She said she had great pies. I said, “I’m going to take a walk. I’ll look in again on my way back and if those two are still here, then I’ll stop in for pie. I guess there’s no hurrying them.”

“Not usually,” the waitress said.

I paid for the burger and the coffee and added a tip that didn’t compare to a roomful of hungry Rangers, but it was enough to make her smile a little. Then I headed back to the street. The night was turning cold and there was a little mist in the air. I turned right and strolled past the vacant lot and the Sheriff’s Department building. Pellegrino’s car was parked outside and there was a glow in one window suggesting an interior room was occupied. I kept on going and came to the T where we had turned. To the left was the way Pellegrino had brought me in, through the forest. To the right that road continued east into the darkness. Presumably it crossed the railroad line and then led onward through the wrong side of town to Kelham. Garber had described it as a dirt track, which it might have been once. Now it was a standard rural road, with a stony surface bound with tar. It was dead straight and unlit. There were deep ditches either side of it. There was a thin moon in the sky, and a little light to see by. I turned right and walked on into the gloom.

Chapter

10

Two minutes and two hundred yards later I found the railroad track. First came the warning sign on the shoulder of the road, two diagonal arms bolted together at ninety degrees, one marked *RAILROAD* and the other marked *CROSSING*. There were red lights attached to the pole and somewhere beyond it there would be an electric bell in a box. Twenty yards farther on the ditches either side of the road ended abruptly, and the track itself was up on a hump, gleaming faintly in the moonlight, two parallel rails running not very level and not completely straight north and south, looking old and worn and short on maintenance. The gravel bed was lumpy and compacted and matted with weeds. I stood on a tie between the rails and looked first one way and then the other. Twenty yards to the north, on the left, was the shadowy bulk of an old ruined water tower, still with a wide soft hose like an elephant's trunk, which once must have been connected to Carter Crossing's freshwater spring, and which once must have stood ready to replenish the greedy steam locomotives that halted there.

I turned a full 360 in the dark. There was absolute stillness and silence everywhere. I could smell charcoal on the night air, maybe from where the blue car had burned the trees to the north. I could smell barbecue faintly in the east, where I guessed the rest of the township was, on the wrong side of the tracks. But I could see only darkness in that direction. Just the suggestion of a hole through the woods, where the road ran, and then nothing more.

I turned back the way I had come, the hard road under my feet, thinking about pie, and I saw headlights in the distance. A large car or a small truck, coming straight at me, moving slow. At one point it looked ready to make the turn into Main Street, and then it seemed to change its mind. Maybe it had picked me up in its beams. It straightened again and kept on coming. I kept on walking. It was a blunt-nosed pick-up truck. It dipped and wallowed over the humps in the road. Its lights rose and fell in the mist. I could hear a low wet burble from a worn V-8 motor.

It came over into the wrong lane and stopped twenty feet from me and idled. I

couldn’t see who was in it. Too much glare. I walked on. I wasn’t about to step into the weeds, and the shoulder was narrow anyway, because of the ditch on my right, so I held my course, which was going to take me close to the driver’s door. The driver saw me coming, and when I was ten feet out he dropped his window and put his left wrist on the door and his left elbow in my path. By that point there was enough light spill to make him out. He was a civilian, white, heavy, wearing a T-shirt with the sleeve rolled above a thick arm covered in fur and ink. He had long hair that hadn’t been washed for a week or more.

Three choices.

First, stop and chat.

Second, step into the weeds between the pavement and the ditch, and pass him by.

Third, break his arm.

I chose the first option. I stopped. But I didn’t chat. Not immediately. I just stood there.

There was a second man in the passenger seat. Same type of a guy. Fur, ink, hair, dirt, grease. But not identical. A cousin, maybe, not a brother. Both men looked right at me, with the kind of smug, low-wattage insolence some kinds of strangers get in some kinds of bars. I looked right back at them. I’m not that kind of stranger.

The driver said, “Who are you and where are you going?”

I said nothing. I’m good at saying nothing. I don’t like talking. I could go the rest of my life without saying another word, if I had to.

The driver said, “I asked you a question.”

I thought: *two questions, actually*. But I said nothing. I didn’t want to have to hit the guy. Not with my hands. I’m no hygiene freak, but even so, with a guy like that, I would feel the need to wash up afterward, extensively, with good soap, especially if there was pie in my future. So I planned on kicking him instead. I saw the moves in my head: he opens his door, he steps out, he comes around the door toward me, and then he goes down, puking and retching and clutching his

groin.

No major difficulty.

He said, “Do you speak English?”

I said nothing.

The guy in the passenger seat said, “Maybe he’s a Mexican.”

The driver asked me, “Are you a Mexican?”

I didn’t answer.

The driver said, “He doesn’t look like a Mexican. He’s too big.”

Which was true in a general sense, although I had heard of a guy from Mexico called José Calderón Torres, who had stood seven feet six and a quarter inches, which was more than a foot taller than me. And I remembered a Mexican guy called José Garces from the LA Olympics, who had cleaned-and-jerked more than four hundred and twenty pounds, which was probably what the two guys in the truck weighed both together.

The driver asked, “Are you coming in from Kelham?”

There’s a risk of bad feeling between the town and the base, Garber had said. People are always tribal, when it comes right down to it. Maybe these guys had known Janice May Chapman. Maybe they couldn’t understand why she had dated soldiers, and not them. Maybe they had never looked in a mirror.

I said nothing. But I didn’t walk on. I didn’t want the truck loose behind me. Not in a lonely spot, not on a dark country road. I just stood there, looking directly at the two guys, at their faces, first one, then the other, with nothing much in my own face except frankness and skepticism and a little amusement. It’s a look that usually works. It usually provokes something, out of a certain type of person.

It provoked the passenger first.

He wound his window down and reared up through it, almost all the way out to his waist, twisting and leaning so he could face me directly across the hood of

the truck. He held on to the pillar with one hand and moved the other through a fast violent arc, like he was cracking a whip or throwing something at me. He said, “We’re *talking* to you, asshole.”

I said nothing.

He said, “Is there a reason I don’t get out of this truck and kick your butt?”

I said, “Two hundred and six reasons.”

He said, “What?”

“That’s how many bones you got in your body. I could break them all before you put a glove on me.”

Which got his buddy going. His instinct was to stick up for his friend and face down a challenge. He leaned further out his own window and said, “You think?”

I said, “Often all day long. It’s a good habit to have.” Which shut the guy up, while he tried to piece together what I meant. He went back over our conversation in his head. His lips were moving.

I said, “Let’s all go about our legitimate business and leave each other alone. Where are you guys staying?”

Now I was asking the questions, and they weren’t answering.

I said, “It looked to me like you were about to turn into Main Street. Is that your way home?”

No answer.

I said, “What, you’re homeless?”

The driver said, “We got a place.”

“Where?”

“A mile past Main Street.”

“So go there. Watch TV, drink beer. Don’t worry about me.”

“Are you from Kelham?”

“No,” I said. “I’m not from Kelham.”

The two guys went quiet and kind of deflated themselves, like parade balloons, back through their windows, back into the cab, back into their seats. I heard the truck’s transmission engage, and then it took off backward, fast, and then it slewed and lurched through a 180 turn, with dust coming up and tire squeal, and then it drove away and braked hard and turned into Main Street. Then it was lost to sight behind the dark bulk of the Sheriff’s Department. I breathed out and started walking again. No damage done. *The best fights are the ones you don’t have*, a wise man once said to me. It was not advice I always followed, but on that occasion I was pleased to walk away with clean hands, both literally and figuratively.

Then I saw another car coming toward me. It did the same thing the truck had done. It went to turn, and then it paused and straightened and headed in my direction. It was a cop car. I could tell by the shape and the size, and I could make out the silhouette of a light bar on the roof. At first I thought it was Pellegrino out on patrol, but when the car got closer it killed its lights and I saw a woman behind the wheel, and Mississippi suddenly got a lot more interesting.

Chapter

11

The car came over into the wrong lane and stopped alongside me. It was an old Chevy Caprice police cruiser painted up in the Carter County Sheriff's Department colors. The woman behind the wheel had an unruly mass of dark hair, somewhere between wavy and curly, tied back in an approximate ponytail. Her face was pale and flawless. She was low in the seat, which meant either she was short or the seat was caved in by long years of use. I decided the seat must be caved in, because her arms looked long and the set of her shoulders didn't suggest a short person. I pegged her at somewhere in her middle thirties, old enough to show some mileage, young enough to still find some amusement in the world. She was smiling slightly, and the smile was reaching her eyes, which were big and dark and liquid and seemed to have some kind of a glow in them. Although that might have been a reflection from the Chevy's instrument panel.

She wound down her window and looked straight at me, first my face, then a careful up-and-down, side-to-side appraisal all the way from my shoes to my hair, with nothing but frankness in her gaze. I stepped in closer to give her a better look, and to take a better look. She was more than flawless. She was spectacular. She had a revolver in a holster on her right hip, and next to it was a shotgun stuffed muzzle-down in a scabbard mounted between the seats. There was a big radio slung under the dash on the passenger side, and a microphone on a curly wire in a clip near the steering wheel. The car was old and worn, almost certainly bought secondhand from a richer municipality.

She said, "You're the guy Pellegrino brought in."

Her voice was quiet but clear, warm but not soft, and her accent sounded local.

I said, "Yes, ma'am, I am."

She said, "You're Reacher, right?"

I said, "Yes, ma'am, I am."

She said, "I'm Elizabeth Deveraux. I'm the sheriff here."

She said, "I'm Elizabeth Deveraux. I'm the sheriff here."

I said, "I'm very pleased to meet you."

She paused a beat and said, "Did you eat dinner yet?"

I nodded.

"But not dessert," I said. "As a matter of fact I'm heading back to the diner for pie right now."

"Do you usually take a walk between courses?"

"I was waiting out the hotel people. They didn't seem in much of a hurry."

"Is that where you're staying tonight? The hotel?"

"I'm hoping to."

"You're not staying with the friend you came to find?"

"I haven't found him yet." She nodded in turn.

"I need to talk to you," she said. "Find me in the diner. Five minutes, OK?"

There was authority but no menace in her voice. No agenda. Just the kind of easy command I guessed came from being first a sheriff's daughter and then a sheriff herself.

"OK," I said. "Five minutes."

She wound up her window again and reversed away and turned around, in a slower version of the same maneuver the two guys in the truck had used. She switched her headlights back on and drove away. I saw her brake lights flare red and she turned into Main Street. I followed on foot, in the weeds, between the pavement and the ditch.

*

I got to the diner well inside the five minutes I had been given and found Elizabeth Deveraux's cruiser parked at the curb outside. She herself was at the

same table I had used. The old couple from the hotel had finally decamped. The place was empty apart from Deveraux and the waitress.

I went in and Deveraux said nothing specific but used one foot under the table to shove the facing chair out a little. An invitation. Almost a command. The waitress got the message. She didn't try to seat me elsewhere. Clearly Deveraux had already ordered. I asked the waitress for a slice of her best pie and another cup of coffee. She went through to the kitchen and silence claimed the room.

Up close and personal I was prepared to concede that Elizabeth Deveraux was a seriously good looking woman. Truly beautiful. Out of the car she was relatively tall, and her hair was amazing. There must have been five pounds of it in her ponytail alone. She had all the right parts in all the right proportions. She looked great in her uniform. But then, I liked women in uniform, possibly because I had known very few of the other kind. But best of all was her mouth. And her eyes. Together they put a kind of wry, amused animation into her face, as if whatever happened to her she would stay cool and calm and collected through it all, and then she would find some quality in it to make her smile. There was still light in her eyes. Not just a reflection from the Caprice's speedometer.

She said, "Pellegrino told me you've been in the army."

I paused a beat. Undercover work is all about lying, and I hadn't minded lying to Pellegrino. But for some unknown reason I found myself not wanting to lie to Deveraux. So I said, "Six weeks ago I was in the army," which was technically true.

"What branch?"

"I was with an outfit called the 110th, mostly," I said. Also true.

"Infantry?"

"It was a special unit. Combined operations, basically." Which was true, technically.

"Who's your local friend?"

"A guy called Hayder," I said. An outright invention.

Deveraux said, “He must have been infantry. Kelham is all infantry.”

I nodded.

“The 75th Ranger Regiment,” I said.

“Was he an instructor?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

She nodded. “They’re the only ones who are here long enough to want to stick around afterward.”

I said nothing.

She said, “I’ve never heard of him.”

“Then maybe he moved on again.”

“When might he have done that?”

“I’m not sure. How long have you been sheriff?”

“Two years,” she said. “Long enough to get to know the locals, anyway.”

“Pellegrino said you’d been here all your life. I mean, as far as getting to know the locals is concerned.”

“Not true,” she said. “I haven’t been here all my life. I was here as a kid, and I’m here now. But there were years in between.”

There was something wistful about her tone. *There were years in between*. I asked her, “How did you spend those years?”

“I had a rich uncle,” she said. “I toured the world at his expense.”

And at that point I suspected I was in trouble. At that point I suspected my mission was about to fail. Because I had heard that answer before.

Chapter

12

The waitress brought out Elizabeth Deveraux's main course and my dessert both together. Deveraux had ordered the same thing I had eaten, the fat cheeseburger and the squirrel's nest of fries. My pie was peach and the slice I got was about half the size of a Major League home plate. It was bigger than the dish it was in. My coffee was in a tall stoneware mug. Deveraux had plain water in a chipped glass.

It's easier to let a pie go cold than a cheeseburger, so I figured I had a chance to talk while Deveraux had no choice but to eat and listen and comment briefly. So I said, "Pellegrino told me you guys are real busy."

Deveraux chewed and nodded.

I said, "A wrecked car and a dead woman."

She nodded again and chased an errant pearl of mayonnaise back into her mouth with the tip of her little finger. An elegant gesture, for an inelegant act. She had short nails, nicely trimmed and polished. She had slender hands, a little tanned and sinewy. Good skin. No rings. None at all. Especially not on her left ring finger.

I asked, "Any progress on any of that?"

She swallowed and smiled and held her hand up like a traffic cop. *Stop. Wait.* She said, "Give me a minute, OK? No more talking."

So I ate my pie, which was good. The crust was sweet and the peaches were soft. Probably local. Or maybe from Georgia. I didn't know much about the cultivation of fruit. She ate, with the burger in her right hand, her left taking fries one by one from her plate, her eyes on mine most of the time. The grease from the meat made her lips glisten. She was a slim woman. She must have had a metabolism like a nuclear reactor. She took occasional long sips of water. I drained my mug. The coffee was OK, but not as good as the pie.

She asked, “Doesn’t coffee keep you awake?”

I nodded. “Until I want to go to sleep. That’s what it’s for.”

She took a last sip of water and left a rind of bun and six or seven fries on her plate. She wiped her mouth and then her hands on her napkin. She folded her napkin and laid it down next to her plate. Dinner was over.

I asked, “So are you making progress?”

She smiled at some inner amusement and then leaned sideways away from the table, hands braced to increase her angle, and she looked me over again, slowly, a crooked path, all the way from my feet in the shadows to my head. She said, “You’re pretty good. Nothing to be ashamed about, really. It’s not your fault.”

I asked, “What isn’t?”

She leaned back in her chair. She kept her eyes on mine. She said, “My daddy was sheriff here before me. Since before I was born, actually. He won about twenty consecutive elections. He was firm, but fair. And honest. No fear or favor. He was a good public servant.”

I said, “I’m sure he was.”

“But I didn’t like it here very much. Not as a kid. I mean, can you imagine? It’s the back of beyond. We got books in the mail. I knew there was a big wide world out there. So I had to get away.”

I said, “I don’t blame you.”

She said, “But some ideas get ingrained. Like public service. Like law enforcement. It starts to feel like a family business, the same as any other.”

I nodded. She was right. Kids follow their parents into law enforcement far more than most other professions. Except baseball. The son of a pro ballplayer is eight hundred times more likely to make the Majors than some other random kid.

She said, “So look at it from my point of view. What do you think I did when I turned eighteen?”

I said, “I don’t know,” although by that point I was pretty sure I did know, more

or less, and I wasn't happy about it.

She said, "I went to South Carolina and joined the Marine Corps."

I nodded. Worse than I had expected. For some reason I had been betting on the Air Force.

I asked her, "How long were you in?"

"Sixteen years."

Which made her thirty-six years old. Eighteen years at home, plus sixteen as a jarhead, plus two as Carter County Sheriff. Same age as me.

I asked her, "What branch of the Corps?"

"Provost Marshal's office." I looked away.

I said, "You were a military cop."

She said, "Public service and law enforcement. I killed two birds with one stone."

I looked back, beaten.

I asked her, "Terminal rank?"

"CWO5," she said.

Chief Warrant Officer 5. An expert in a specific specialized field. The sweet spot, where the real work was done.

I asked her, "Why did you leave?"

"Rumblings," she said. "The Soviets are gone, reductions in force are coming. I figured it would feel better to step up than be thrown out. Plus my daddy died, and I couldn't let some idiot like Pellegrino take over."

I asked her, "Where did you serve?"

"All over," she said. "Uncle Sam was my rich uncle. He showed me the world.

Some parts of it were worth seeing, and some parts of it weren't."

I said nothing. The waitress came back and took away our empty plates.

"Anyway," Deveraux said. "I was expecting you. It's exactly what we would have done, frankly, under the same circumstances. A homicide behind a bar near a base? Some kind of big secrecy or sensitivity *on* the base? We would have put an investigator on the post, and we would have sent another into town, undercover."

I said nothing.

She said, "The idea being, of course, that the undercover guy in town would keep his ear to the ground and then step in and stop the locals embarrassing the Corps. If strictly necessary, that is. It was a policy I supported back then, naturally. But now I *am* the locals, so I can't really support it anymore."

I said nothing.

"Don't feel bad," she said. "You were doing it better than some of our guys did. I love the shoes, for instance. And the hair. You're fairly convincing. You ran into a bit of bad luck, that's all, with me being who I am. Although the timing wasn't subtle, was it? But then, it never is. I don't see how it ever could be. And to be honest, you're not a very fluent liar. You shouldn't have said the 110th. I know about the 110th, of course. You were nearly as good as we were. But really, *Hayder*? Far too uncommon a name. And the khaki socks were a mistake. Obvious PX. You probably bought them yesterday. I wore socks just like them."

"I didn't want to lie," I said. "Didn't seem right. My father was a Marine. Maybe I sensed it in you."

"He was a Marine but you joined the army? What was that, mutiny?"

"I don't know what it was," I said. "But it felt right at the time."

"How does it feel now?"

"Right this minute? Not so great."

"Don't feel bad," she said again. "You gave it a good try."

I said nothing.

She asked, “What rank are you?”

I said, “Major.”

“Should I salute?”

“Only if you want to.”

“Still with the 110th?”

“Temporarily. Home base right now is the 396th MP. The Criminal Investigation Division.”

“How many years in?”

“Thirteen. Plus West Point.”

“I’m honored. Maybe I *should* salute. Who did they send to Kelham?”

“A guy called Munro. Same rank as me.”

“That’s confusing,” she said.

I said, “Are you making progress?”

She said, “You don’t give up, do you?”

“Giving up was not in the mission statement. You know how it is.”

“OK, I’ll trade,” she said. “One answer for one answer. And then you ship back out. You hit the road at first light. In fact I’ll get Pellegrino to drive you back to where he picked you up. Do we have a deal?”

What choice did I have? I said, “We have a deal.”

“No,” she said. “We’re not making progress. Absolutely none at all.”

“OK,” I said. “Thanks. Your turn.”

“Obviously it would give me an insight to know if you’re the ace, or if the guy

"Obviously it would give me an insight to know if you're the ace, or if the guy they sent to Kelham is the ace. I mean, in terms of the army's current thinking. About the balance of probabilities here. As in, do they think the problem is inside the gates or outside? So, are you the big dog? Or is the other guy?"

"Honest answer?"

"That's what I would expect from the son of a fellow Marine."

"The honest answer is I don't know," I said.

Chapter

13

Elizabeth Deveraux paid for her burger and my pie and coffee, which I thought was generous, so I left the tip, which made the waitress smile again. We stepped out to the sidewalk together and stood for a moment next to the old Caprice. The moon had gotten brighter. A thin layer of high cloud had moved away. There were stars out.

I said, “Can I ask you another question?”

Deveraux was immediately guarded. She said, “About what?”

“Hair,” I said. “Ours is supposed to conform to the shape of our heads. Tapered, they call it. Curving inward to a natural termination point at the base of the neck. What about yours?”

“I wore a buzz cut for fifteen years,” she said. “I started growing it out when I knew I was going to quit.”

I looked at her in the moonlight and the spill from the diner window. I pictured her with a buzz cut. She must have looked sensational. I said, “Good to know. Thanks.”

She said, “I had no chance, right from the beginning. The regulation for women in the Corps required what they called a non-eccentric style. Your hair could touch your collar, but it couldn’t fall below the bottom edge. You were allowed to pin it up, but then I couldn’t get my hat on.”

“Sacrifices,” I said.

“It was worth it,” she said. “I loved being a Marine.”

“You still are,” I said. “Once a Marine, always a Marine.”

“Is that what your daddy said?”

“He never got the chance. He died in harness.”

She asked, “Is your mom still alive?”

“She died a few years later.”

“Mine died when I was in boot camp. Cancer.”

“Really? Mine too. Cancer, I mean. Not boot camp.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault,” I said, automatically. “She was in Paris.”

“So was I. Parris Island, anyway. Did she emigrate?”

“She was French.”

“Do you speak French?”

I said, “*Un peu, mais doucement.*”

“What does that mean?”

“A little, and slowly.”

She nodded and put her hand on the Caprice’s door. I took the hint and said, “OK, goodnight, Chief Deveraux. It was a pleasure meeting you.”

She just smiled.

I turned left and walked down toward the hotel. I heard the big Chevy motor start up, and I heard the tires start to roll, and then the car passed me, going slow, and then it pulled a wide U-turn across the width of the street and stopped again, just ahead of me, facing me, at the curb right next to the Toussaint’s hotel. I walked on and got there just as Deveraux opened her door and got out again. Naturally I assumed she had something more to say to me, so I stopped walking and waited politely.

“I live here,” she said. “Goodnight.”

She had already gone upstairs before I got into the lobby. The old guy I had seen in the diner was behind the reception counter. He was open for business. I could tell he was disconcerted by my lack of luggage, but cash money is cash money, and he took eighteen dollars of mine and in return he gave me the key to room twenty-one. He told me it was on the second floor, at the front of the building, overlooking the street, which he said was quieter than the back, which made no sense at all until I remembered the railroad track.

On the second floor the staircase came up in the center of a long north–south corridor, which was uncarpeted and dimly lit by four mean and ungenerous bulbs. It had eight doors off the back side and nine off the street side. There was a slim bar of brighter yellow light showing through the crack under room seventeen's door, which was on the street side. Deveraux, presumably, getting ready for bed. My room was four doors further north. I unlocked it and went in and turned on the light and found the kind of still air and dusty chill that indicates long disuse. It was a rectangular space with a high ceiling and what would have been pleasant proportions, except that at some point in the last decade an attached bathroom had been shoehorned into one corner. The window was a pair of glazed doors that gave out on the iron balcony I had seen from the street. There was a bed and a chair and a dressing table, and on the floor there was a threadbare Persian rug worn thin by use and beating.

I pulled the drapes closed and unpacked, which consisted solely of assembling my new toothbrush and propping it upright in a milky glass on the bathroom shelf. I had no toothpaste, but then, I had never been convinced toothpaste was anything more than a pleasant-tasting lubricant. An army dentist I had known swore that the mechanical action of the brush's bristles was all that was needed for perfect oral health. And I had chewing gum for freshness. And I still had all my teeth, apart from a top-row molar knocked out many years before by a lucky knuckle in a street fight in Cleveland, Ohio.

The clock in my head said it was about twenty after eleven. I sat on the bed for a spell. I had been up early and was moderately tired, but not exhausted. And I had things to do, and limited time to do them in, so I waited long enough to let an average person get off to sleep, and then I went out to the corridor again. Deveraux's light was off. There was nothing showing under her door. I crept down the stairs to the lobby. The reception desk was once again unattended. I went out to the street and turned left, toward territory as yet unexplored.

Chapter

14

I looked at the whole length of Main Street as carefully as was possible in the gray moonlight. It ran on south for about two hundred yards, as straight as a die, and then it narrowed a little and started to meander and became residential, with modest homes randomly spaced in yards of varying sizes. The west side of the straight downtown stretch had stores and commercial operations of various kinds, punctuated with narrow alleys, some of which led onward into the scrub and had more small houses on the left and the right. Those stores and commercial operations were matched by similar establishments on the east side of Main Street, neatly in line with the diner and the hotel, and the alleys to the west were matched by broader paved passageways opposite, which linked all the way through to a one-sided street built parallel to and behind Main Street. I guessed that one-sided street had been the whole point of the town in the early days, and was certainly the point in my being there that night.

It ran north and south and had a long line of establishments that faced the railroad track across nothing but a blank width of beaten earth. I imagined old passenger trains wheezing to a stop, with their panting locomotives next to the water tower a little ways up the line, the trains' long windowed sides stretching south. I imagined restaurant staff and café owners running across the beaten earth and placing wooden steps below the train doors. I imagined passengers stepping down, spilling out, dry and hungry from their long haul, hundreds of them eagerly crossing the width of earth, and then eating and drinking their fill. I imagined coins clattering, cash registers ringing, the train whistles blowing, the passengers returning, the trains moving onward, the wooden steps being retrieved, then stillness returning for an hour, then the next train easing in, and the whole process repeating itself endlessly.

That single-sided street had powered the local economy, and it still did.

The passenger trains were long gone, of course, and so were the cafés and the restaurants. But the cafés and the restaurants had been replaced by bars, and auto parts stores, and bars, and loan offices, and bars, and gun shops, and bars, and secondhand stereo stores, and bars, and the trains had been replaced by streams

of cars coming in from Kelham. I imagined the cars parking on the beaten earth, and small groups of Rangers-in-training spilling out and spending Uncle Sam's money up and down the row. A captive market, miles from anywhere, like Garber had said, just like the railroad passengers back in the day. I had seen the proposition repeated at a hundred bases all around the world. The cars would be old Mustangs or Gran Torinos or GTOs, or secondhand BMWs or Mercedes in Germany, or strange Toyota Crowns or Datsuns in the Far East, and the beer would be different brands and different strengths, and the loans would be in different currencies, and the guns would be chambered for different loads in different calibers, and the used stereo equipment would operate on different voltages, but other than that the give and take was exactly the same everywhere.

I found the spot where Janice May Chapman had been killed easily enough. Pellegrino had said she had bled out like a lake, which meant sand would have been used to soak up the spill, and I found a fresh spreading pile of it in a paved alley near the rear left-hand corner of a bar called Brannan's. Brannan's was about in the center of the one-sided street, and the alley in question ran along its left flank before dog-legging twice and exiting on Main Street between an old-style pharmacy and a hardware store. Maybe the hardware store was where the sand had come from. Three or four sixty-pound bags would have done the job. It was spread in a neat teardrop shape over the smooth flagstones, about three or four inches deep.

The spot was not directly overlooked. Brannan's rear door was about fifteen feet away, and the bar had no side windows. The back of the pharmacy was a blank wall. Brannan's neighbor was a loan office with a Western Union franchise, and its right flank had a window toward the rear, but the place would have been closed at night. No witnesses. Not that there would have been much to witness. Cutting a throat doesn't take much time. Given a decent blade and enough weight and force, it takes as long as it takes to move your hand eight inches. That's all.

I stepped out of the alley and walked halfway to the railroad track and stood on the beaten earth and judged the light. No point in looking for things I wouldn't be able to see. But the moon was still high and the sky was still clear, so I kept on going and stepped over the first rail and turned left and hiked north, walking on the ties like guys used to way back, when they were leaving the land and heading to Chicago or New York. I passed over the road crossing, and I passed the old water tower.

Then the ground began to shake.

Just faintly at first, a mild constant tremor, like the edge of a distant earthquake. I stopped walking. The tie under my feet trembled. The rails either side of me started to sing. I turned around and saw a tiny pinpoint of light far in the distance. A single headlight. The midnight train, a couple of miles south of me, coming on fast.

I stood there. The rails hummed and keened. The ties hammered up and down through tiny microscopic distances. The gravel under them clicked and hopped. The ground tremors deepened to big bass shudders. The distant headlight twinkled like a star, jumping minutely left and right through hard constrained limits.

I stepped off the track and looped back to the old water tower and leaned against a tarred wooden upright. It shook against my shoulder. The ground shook under my feet. The rails howled. The train whistle blew, long and loud and forlorn in the distance. The warning bells at the roadside twenty yards away started ringing. The red lights started flashing.

The train kept on coming toward me, for a long time resolutely distant, then all of a sudden right next to me, right on top of me, huge, just insanely massive, and impossibly loud. The ground shook so hard that the old water tower next to me danced mutely in place and I was bounced up and down whole inches. Moving air whipped and battered at me. The locomotive flashed past, and then began an endless sequence of cars, hammering, juddering, strobing in the moonlight, hurtling north without pause, ten of them, twenty, fifty, a hundred. I clung to the tarred pole for a whole long minute, sixty long seconds, deafened by squealing metal, beaten numb by the throbbing ground, scoured by the slipstream.

Then the train was gone.

The butt end of a bulk silo car rolled away from me at sixty miles an hour, and the howl of the wind dropped a half tone, and the earthquake subsided to mild tremors again, and then to nothing, and the screaming rails quieted to a low hiss. The manic bells stopped dead.

Silence came back.

The first thing I did was change my mind about how far I was going to have to

walk to find the wreckage of the blue car. I had assumed it would be close by. But after that awesome display of power I figured it might be somewhere in New Jersey. Or Canada.

Chapter

15

In the end I found most of the car about two hundred yards north. It was preceded by a debris field that stretched most of the intervening distance. There were pebbles of broken windshield glass, glistening and glinting in the dew and the moonlight. The glass had been flung along random curved trajectories, as if by a giant hand. There was a chrome bumper, torn off and folded capriciously in half, a tight V, like a drinking straw. It had embedded itself in the ground, like a lawn dart. There was a wheel with no hub cap. The impact had been colossal. The car had been smashed forward like a baseball off a tee. Zero to sixty, instantaneously.

I guessed it had been parked on the track about twenty yards north of the water tower. That was where the first of the glass was located. The locomotive had hit the car, and it had flown fifty or more yards through the air, and then it had landed and cartwheeled. Maybe wheels to roof to wheels to roof, or end over end. I guessed the initial impact had more or less disassembled it. Like an explosion. Then the rolling action had flung its constituent parts all over the place. Including its fuel, which had ignited. There were narrow black tongues of burned scrub all over the last fifty yards, and what was left of the vehicle itself was nested against the trees in the epicenter of a starburst of blackened trunks and branches. Arson investigators I had met could have worked out its rate of rotation from the fuel splatter alone.

Pellegrino had seen the car in daylight and called it blue. In the moonlight it looked ash gray to me. I couldn't find an intact painted surface. I couldn't find an intact anything larger than a square inch. It was a burned-out mess, crushed and crumpled to the point of being virtually unrecognizable. I was prepared to accept it was a car, but only because I couldn't imagine what else it could be.

If someone's intention had been to conceal evidence, then that someone had succeeded, big time, and comprehensively.

I got back to the hotel at one o'clock exactly, and went straight to bed. I set the alarm in my head for seven in the morning, which was when I figured Deveraux

would be getting up for work. I figured her day would start at eight. Clearly she was not neglectful of her appearance, but she was a Marine and a pragmatic person, so she wouldn't budget more than an hour to get ready. I figured I could match her shower time with my own, and then I could find her in the diner for breakfast. Which was as far ahead as my planning extended. I wasn't sure what I was going to say to her.

But I didn't sleep until seven in the morning. I was woken up at six. By someone knocking loudly on my door. I wasn't thrilled. I rolled out of bed and pulled on my pants and opened up. It was the old guy. The hotel keeper.

He said, "Mr. Reacher?"

I said, "Yes?"

He said, "Good. I'm glad I got the right person. At this hour, I mean. It's always better to be sure."

"What do you want?"

"Well, initially, as I said, I'm confirming who you are."

"I sincerely hope there's more to it than that. At this hour. You only have two guests. And the other one isn't *mister* anything."

"You have a phone call."

"Who from?"

"Your uncle."

"My *uncle*?"

"Your uncle Leon Garber. He said it was urgent. And judging by his tone, it's important, too."

I put my T-shirt on and followed the guy downstairs, barefoot. He led me through a side door into the office behind the counter. There was a worn mahogany desk with a phone on it. The handset was off the hook, resting on the desk top.

The old guy said, “Please make yourself at home,” and left, and closed the door on me. I sat down in his chair and picked up the phone.

I said, “What?”

Garber said, “You OK?”

“I’m fine. How did you find me?”

“Phone book. There’s only one hotel in Carter Crossing. Everything going well?”

“Terrific.”

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

“Because you’re supposed to check in every morning at six.”

“Am I?”

“That’s what we agreed.”

“When?”

“We spoke yesterday at six. As you were leaving.”

“I know,” I said. “I remember. But we didn’t agree we’d talk at six every day.”

“You called me yesterday. At dinner time. You said you would call again today.”

“I didn’t specify the time.”

“I think you did.”

“Well, you’re wrong, you old coot. What do you want?”

“You’re cranky this morning.”

“I was up late last night.”

I was up late last night.

“Doing what?”

“Looking around.”

“And?”

“There are a couple of things,” I said.

“Like what?”

“Just two specific items. Matters of interest.”

“Do they represent progress?”

“At this point they’re just questions. The answers might represent progress, eventually. If I ever get them.”

Garber said, “Munro is getting nowhere at Kelham. Not so far. This whole thing might be more complicated than we thought.”

I didn’t answer that. Garber was quiet for a beat.

“Wait,” he said. “What do you mean, *if* you ever get the answers?”

I didn’t answer.

Garber said, “And why were you looking around in the dark? Wouldn’t it have been better to wait for first light?”

I said, “I met the chief here.”

“And?”

“Different from what you might expect.”

“How?” Garber asked. “Is he honest?”

“He’s a she,” I said. “Her father was sheriff before her.”

Garber paused again.

“Don’t tell me,” he said. “She figured you out.”

I didn’t answer.

“Christ on a bike,” he said. “This has got to be a new world record. How long did it take her? Ten minutes? Five?”

“She was a Marine MP,” I said. “One of us, practically. She knew all along. She was expecting me. To her it was a predictable move.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is she going to shut you out?”

“Worse. She wants to throw me out.”

“Well, you can’t let her do that. No way. You have to stay there. That’s for damn sure. In fact, I’m ordering you not to come back. You hear me? Your orders are to stay. She can’t throw you out anyway. It’s a question of civil rights. The First Amendment, or something. Free association. Mississippi is part of the Union, same as anywhere else. It’s a free country. So stay there, OK?”

I hung up with Garber and sat in the little office for a moment. I found a dollar bill in my pocket and left it on the desk, to cover the cost of an outgoing call, and I dialed the Pentagon. The Pentagon has a lot of numbers and a lot of operators, and I chose one that always answered. I asked the guy to try John James Frazer’s billet, just on the off chance. The Senate Liaison guy. I wasn’t expecting him to be there not long after six in the morning, but he was. Which told me something. I introduced myself and told him I had no news.

“You must have something,” he said. “Or you wouldn’t have called.”

“I have a warning,” I said.

“What kind?”

“I’ve seen a couple of things, and they’re enough to tell me this situation is going to turn out bad. It’s going to turn out sick and weird and it’s going to be all over every newspaper for a month. Even if it’s nothing to do with Kelham, we

could end up tainted. Just because of the proximity."

Frazer paused. "How sick?"

"Potentially very sick."

"Gut feeling? *Is* it anything to do with Kelham?"

"Too early to say."

"Help me out here, Reacher. Best guess?"

"At this stage, I'd say no. No military involvement."

"That's good to hear."

"It's only a guess," I said. "Don't break out the cigars just yet."

I didn't go back to bed. No point. Too late. I just brushed my teeth and showered and chewed some gum and got fully dressed. Then I stood by my window and watched the dawn. The creeping daylight enlarged the world. I saw Main Street in all its detailed glory. I saw scrub and fields and forest extending in every direction.

Then I sat in my chair to wait. I figured I would hear Deveraux go out to her car. I was more or less right above where it was parked at the curb.

Chapter

16

I heard Deveraux leave the hotel at twenty past seven exactly. First the street door creaked open and slammed shut, and then her car door creaked open and slammed shut. I got up and looked out the window. She was behind the wheel, low in the seat, in what looked like a clean version of the same uniform she had worn the day before. Her riot of hair was still wet from the shower. She was talking on the radio. Probably telling Pellegrino that job one for the day was to haul my ass halfway back to Memphis.

I went down the stairs and stepped out to the sidewalk. The morning air was fresh and cold. I looked up the street and saw that Deveraux's car was parked again, right outside the diner. So far, so good. I walked in that direction and pushed in through the door, past the pay phone, past the hostess station. There were six customers inside, including Deveraux. The other five were men, four of them in work clothes and the fifth in a pale-colored suit. A professional gentleman. Maybe a country lawyer or a country doctor, or the guy that ran the loan office next to Brannan's bar. The waitress was the same woman as the night before. She was busy toting plates of food, so I didn't wait for her. I just walked up to Deveraux's table and said, "Would you mind if I joined you?"

She was sipping coffee. She didn't have her food yet. She smiled and said, "Good morning."

Her tone was warm. She seemed happy to see me.

I said, "Yes, good morning."

She said, "Have you come to say goodbye? That's very polite and very formal."

I said nothing in reply to that. She did her thing with her foot again, under the table, and kicked the facing chair out. I sat down. She asked, "Did you sleep well?"

I said, "Fine."

“The train didn’t wake you at midnight? It takes some getting used to.”

“I was still up,” I said.

“Doing what?”

“This and that,” I said.

“Inside or out?”

“Out,” I said.

“You found the crime scene?”

I nodded.

She nodded in turn.

“And you found two things of note,” she said. “So you thought you’d stop by and make sure I appreciated their significance before you got on your way. That’s very public-spirited of you.”

The waitress came by and put a heaping plate of French toast on the table. Then she turned to me and I ordered the same thing, with coffee. Deveraux waited until she was gone, and asked, “Or was it entirely private-spirited? Is this your one last attempt to protect the army before you go?”

“I’m not going,” I said.

She smiled again. “Are you going to give me your civil rights speech now? Free country, and all that bullshit?”

“Something like that.”

She paused a beat.

“I’m all for civil rights,” she said. “And certainly there’s room at the inn, as they say. So sure, by all means, please stay. Enjoy yourself. There are trails to hike, and there are things to hunt, and there are sights to see. Knock yourself out. Do whatever you want to. Just don’t get between me and my investigation.”

I asked her, “How do you explain the two things?”

“Do I need to? To you?”

“Two heads are better than one.”

“I can’t trust you,” she said. “You’re here to steer me wrong, if you have to.”

“No, I’m here to warn the army if things start to look bad. Which I will, if I have to. But we’re a long way from any kind of a conclusion here. We’ve barely even started. It’s too early to steer anybody anywhere, even if I was going to. Which I’m not.”

“We?” she said. “*We’re* a long way from a conclusion? What is this, a democracy?”

“OK, you,” I said.

“Yes,” she said. “Me.”

At that point the waitress came back with my meal. And my coffee. I sniffed the steam and took a long first sip. A little ritual. Nothing better than just-made coffee, early in the morning. Across the table from me Deveraux continued eating. She was cleaning her plate. A metabolism like a nuclear plant.

She said, “OK, time out. Convince me. Put your cards on the table. Tell me about the first thing, and spin it so it looks bad for the army. Which it does, by the way, spin or no spin.”

I looked straight at her. “Have you been on the base?”

“All over it.”

“I haven’t. Therefore apparently you know what I’m only guessing.”

She nodded. “So bear that in mind. Tread carefully. Don’t blow smoke.”

I said, “Janice May Chapman was not raped in that alley.”

“Because?”

“Because Pellegrino reported gravel abrasions on the corpse. And there’s no gravel in that alley. Nor anywhere else that I could see. It’s all dirt or blacktop or smooth paving stones for miles around.”

“The railroad track has gravel,” she said.

A test. She wanted me to jump all over it.

“Not really gravel,” I said. “The railroad track has larger stones. Ballast, they call it, in a rail bed. Pieces of granite, bigger than a pebble, smaller than a fist. The injuries would look completely different. They wouldn’t look like gravel rash.”

“The roads are gravel.”

Another test.

“Bound with tar and rolled,” I said. “Not the same at all.”

“So?”

The final test.

Spin it so it looks bad for the army.

“Kelham is for the elite,” I said. “It’s a finishing school for the 75th, which is special ops support. It’s a big place. They must have all kinds of simulated terrain. Sand, to simulate the desert. Concrete, like the frozen steppes. Fake villages, all that kind of shit. I’m sure they have plenty of gravel there, for one reason or another.”

Deveraux nodded again. “They have a running track made of gravel. For endurance training. Ten laps is like ten hours on a road surface. Plus low-scoring individuals get to rake it smooth every morning. As a punishment. Two birds with one stone.”

I said nothing.

Deveraux said, “She was raped on the base.”

I said, “Not impossible.”

Deveraux said, “You’re an honest man, Reacher. The son of a Marine.”

“Marines have got nothing to do with it. I’m a commissioned officer in the United States Army. We have standards too.”

I started to eat my breakfast just as she finished hers. She said, “The second thing is more problematical, though. I can’t make it fit.”

“Really?” I said. “Isn’t it basically the same as the first thing?”

She looked at me, blankly.

She said, “I don’t see how.”

I stopped eating and looked back at her.

I said, “Talk me through it.”

“It’s a simple question,” she said. “How did she get there? She left her car at home, and she didn’t walk. For one thing, she was wearing four-inch heels, and for another thing, no one walks anywhere anymore. But she wasn’t picked up from home either. Her neighbors are the worst busybodies in the world, and both of them swear no one came calling on her. And I believe them. And no one saw her arrive in town with a soldier. Or with a civilian, for that matter. Or even on her own. And trust me, those barkeeps watch the traffic. All of them. It’s a habit. They want to know if they can afford to eat tomorrow. So she just materialized in that alley, unexplained.”

I was quiet for a second.

Then I said, “That wasn’t my second thing.”

“Wasn’t it?”

“Your two things and my two things are not the same two things. Which means there are three things in total.”

“So what’s your second thing?”

I said, “She wasn’t killed in that alley, either.”

Chapter

17

I finished my breakfast before I spoke again. French toast, maple syrup, coffee. Protein, fiber, carbohydrates. And caffeine. All the essential food groups, except nicotine, but I had already quit by then. I put my silverware down and said, “There’s really only one obvious way to cut a woman’s throat. You stand behind her and use one hand in her hair to pull her head back. Or you hook your fingers in her eye sockets, or if you’re sure your hands are steady you could use your palm under her chin. But whichever, you expose her throat and you put some tension in the ligaments and the blood vessels. Then you get busy with the blade. You’re taught to expect major resistance to the cut, because there’s some pretty tough stuff in there. And you’re taught to start an inch earlier and finish an inch later than you think is really necessary. Just to be absolutely sure.”

Deveraux said, “I’m assuming that’s exactly what happened in the alley. But suddenly, I hope. So it was over before she realized it was happening at all.”

I said, “It didn’t happen in the alley. It can’t have.”

“Why not?”

“One of the side benefits of doing it from behind is you don’t get covered in blood. And there’s a lot of blood. You’re talking about carotids and jugulars, and a young healthy person suddenly agitated and struggling, maybe even fighting. Her blood pressure must have been spiking sky high.”

“I know there’s a lot of blood. I saw it. There was a huge pool of it. She was all bled out. As white as a sheet. I assume you saw the sand. That’s how big the pool was. It looked like a gallon or more.”

“You ever cut a throat?”

“No.”

“You ever seen it done?”

She shook her head.

“No,” she said.

“The blood doesn’t just seep out like you slit your wrists in the bathtub. It comes out like a fire hose. It sprays everywhere, ten feet or more, great gouts of it, splattering all over the place. I’ve seen it on ceilings, even. Crazy patterns, like someone took a paint can and threw it around. Like that guy, Jackson Pollock. The painter.”

Deveraux said nothing.

I said, “There would have been blood all over the alley. On the loan office’s wall, for sure. And on the bar’s wall, and maybe on the pharmacy’s wall. On the floor, too, yards away. Crazy thin patterns. Not a neat pool right underneath her. That’s just not possible. She wasn’t killed there.”

Deveraux linked her hands on the table and bowed her head over them. She was doing something I had never seen a person do before. Not literally. She was hanging her head. She breathed in, breathed out, and five seconds later she looked up again and said, “I’m an idiot. I suppose I must have known all that, but I didn’t remember it. I just didn’t see it.”

“Don’t feel bad,” I said. “You never saw it happen, so you don’t have anything to remember.”

“No, it’s basic,” she said. “I’m an idiot. I’ve wasted days.”

“It gets worse,” I said. “There’s more.”

She didn’t want to hear about how it got worse. She didn’t want more. Not immediately. Not right then. She was still beating herself up for missing the thing with the blood. I had seen that kind of reaction many times. I had *had* that kind of reaction many times. Smart, conscientious people hate making mistakes. Not just because of ego. Because mistakes of a certain type have the kind of consequences that people with consciences don’t like to live with.

She frowned and ground her teeth and growled at herself for a minute, and then she shook her head and stopped and came up with a brave smile, tighter and grimmer than her normal sunny radiance. She said, “OK, tell me more. Tell me how it gets worse. But not in here. I have to eat here three times a day. I don’t

how it gets worse. But not in here. I have to eat here three times a day. I don't want the associations."

So we paid for our breakfasts and stepped out to the sidewalk. We stood there for a long moment, near her car, saying nothing. I could tell by her body language she wasn't going to invite me to her office. She didn't want me near the Sheriff's Department. This wasn't a democracy. In the end she said, "Let's go back to the hotel. We can use the lounge. We're guaranteed privacy there, after all. Since we're the only two guests."

We walked back down the street, and up the shaky steps, and across the old veranda. We went in and used the door on the left of the lobby. I smelled the same damp and dust and mildew as the night before. In the daylight the humped shapes I had seen in the dark turned out to be armchairs, as I had thought. There were twelve of them, grouped in various combinations, twos and fours. We took a matched pair, either side of a cold fireplace.

I asked her, "Why do you live here?"

"Good question," she said. "I thought it would be a month or two. But it extended."

"What about your old man's house?"

"Rented," she said. "The lease died with him."

"You could rent another one. Or buy one. Isn't that what people do?"

She nodded. "I looked at some. Couldn't pull the trigger. Have you seen the houses around here?"

I said, "Some of them look OK."

"Not to me," she said. "I wasn't ready, anyway. I hadn't decided how long I was going to stay. Still haven't, really. No doubt it will turn out to be the rest of my life, but I guess I don't want to admit that to myself. I'd rather let it creep up on me day by day, I suppose."

I thought about my pal Stan Lowrey, and his want ads. There was a lot more to leaving the service than getting a job. There were houses, and cars, and clothes. There were a hundred strange, unknown details, like the customs of a remote

foreign tribe, glimpsed only in passing, and never fully understood.

Deveraux said, “So let’s hear it.”

I said, “Her throat *was* cut, right? We’re clear on that?”

“Definitely. Unmistakably.”

“And that was the only wound?”

“The doctor says so.”

“So somewhere there’s blood all over the place. Wherever it was actually done. In a room, maybe, or out in the woods. It’s impossible to clean up properly. Literally impossible. So there’s evidence out there, just waiting for you.”

“I can’t search the base. They won’t let me. It’s a jurisdiction thing.”

“You don’t know for sure it happened on the base.”

“She was raped on the base.”

“It’s not impossible she was raped on the base. That’s not quite the same thing.”

“I can’t search five hundred square miles of Mississippi, either.”

“So zoom in on the perpetrator. Narrow it down.”

“How?”

“No woman can bleed out twice,” I said. “Her throat was cut in some unknown location, blood sprayed everywhere, she died, and that’s all she wrote. Then she was dumped in the alley. But whose blood was she lying in? Not her own, because she’d left it all back in the unknown location.”

“Oh, God,” Deveraux said. “Don’t tell me the guy collected it and brought it with him.”

“Possible,” I said. “But a little unlikely. It would be tricky to cut someone’s throat while simultaneously dancing around with a bucket, trying to catch the spray.”

“There could have been two guys.”

“Possible,” I said again. “But still unlikely. It’s like a fire hose, flipping all around. Here, there, and everywhere. The second guy would be lucky to gather a pint.”

“So what are you saying? Whose blood was it?”

“An animal’s, possibly. Maybe a deer. Freshly slaughtered, but not quite fresh enough. There was some time lag. That blood was already congealing. A gallon of liquid blood would have spread much farther than that pile of sand. A little goes a long way, where blood is concerned.”

“A hunter?”

“That’s my guess.”

“Based on not very much. You didn’t see the blood. You didn’t test it. It could have been fake blood from a joke store. Or it *could* have been hers. Someone might have figured out a way to collect it. Just because you can’t see a way doesn’t mean a way doesn’t exist. Or they could have bled her out first and then cut her throat afterward.”

“Still a hunter,” I said.

“Why?”

“There’s more,” I said. “It continues to get worse.”

Chapter

18

At that point the old lady I had seen in the diner stuck her head in the door. The hotel's co-owner. She asked if she could bring us anything. Elizabeth Deveraux shook her head. I asked for coffee. The old lady said sorry, she didn't have any. She said I could get it to go from the diner, if I really needed it. I wondered what exactly she was offering, therefore, if anything. But I didn't ask. The old lady left again, and Deveraux said, "Why are you fixated on hunters?"

"Pellegrino told me she was all dressed up for a night out, as neat as a pin, just lying there on her back in a pool of blood. Those were his words. Is that a fair summary?"

Deveraux nodded. "That's exactly what I saw. Pellegrino is an idiot, but a reliable one."

"That's more proof she wasn't killed there. She would have fallen forward on her face, not on her back."

"Yes, I missed that too. Don't rub it in."

"What was she wearing?"

"A dark blue sheath dress with a low white collar. Underwear and pantyhose. Dark blue shoes with spike heels."

"Clothes in disarray?"

"No. They looked neat as a pin. Like Pellegrino told you."

"So she wasn't put into those clothes postmortem. You can always tell. Clothes never go on a corpse just right. Especially not pantyhose. So she was still dressed when she was killed."

"I accept that."

“Was there blood on the white collar? At the front?”

Deveraux closed her eyes, presumably to recall the scene. She said, “No, it was immaculate.”

“Was there blood anywhere on her front?”

“No.”

“OK,” I said. “So her throat was cut in an unknown location, while she was dressed in those clothes. But she had gotten no blood on her, until she was dumped on her back in a pool that was separately transported. Tell me how that isn’t a hunter.”

“Tell me how it is. If you can. You can help the army all you want, but you don’t have to believe your own bullshit.”

“I’m not helping the army. Soldiers can be hunters too. Many of them are.”

“Why is it a hunter at all?”

“Tell me how you cut a woman’s throat without getting a drop of blood on her front.”

“I don’t know how.”

“You string her up on a deer trestle. That’s how. By her ankles. Upside down. You tie her hands behind her. You haul her arms up until her back is arched and her throat is presented as the lowest point.”

We sat in the shadowed silence for a minute, not saying a word. I guessed Deveraux was picturing the scene. I sure was. A clearing in the woods somewhere, remote and lonely, or a room far from anywhere, with improvised equipment, or a hut or a shack with roof beams, Janice May Chapman hanging upside down, her hands hauled up behind her back, toward her feet, her shoulders straining, her back curving painfully. She was probably gagged, too, the gag tied to a third rope looped over the trestle’s top rail. That third rope must have been pulled tight, arching her head up and back, keeping it well out of the way, leaving her throat completely accessible.

I asked, “How did she wear her hair?”

I asked, "How did she wear her hair?"

"Short," Deveraux said. "It wouldn't have gotten in the way."

I said nothing.

Deveraux asked, "Do you really think that's how it was done?"

I nodded. "Any other method, she wouldn't have bled out all the way. Not white as a sheet. She would have died, and her heart would have stopped pumping, and there would have been something left inside her. Two, three pints, maybe. It was being upside down that finished the job. Gravity, plain and simple."

"The ropes would have left marks, wouldn't they?"

"What did the medical examiner say? Have you had his report?"

"We don't have a medical examiner. Just the local doctor. One step up from when all we had was the local undertaker, but not a very big step."

Not a democracy. I said, "You should go take a look for yourself."

She said, "Will you come with me?"

We walked back to the diner and took Deveraux's car from the curb and U-turned and headed back down Main Street, past the hotel again, past the pharmacy and the hardware store, and onward to where Main Street turned into a wandering rural route. The doctor's place was half a mile south of the town. It was a regular clapboard house, painted white, set in a large untidy yard, with a shingle next to the mailbox at the end of the driveway. The name on the shingle was Merriam, and it was lettered crisply in black over a rectangle of white paint that was brighter and newer than the surrounding surface. A new arrival, not long in town, new to the community.

The house had its ground floor given over to the medical practice. The front parlor was a waiting room, and the back room was where patients were examined and treated. We found Merriam in there, at a desk, doing paperwork. He was a florid man close to sixty. New in town, perhaps, but not new to doctoring. His greeting was languid and his pace was slow. I got the impression he regarded the Carter Crossing position as semi-retirement, maybe after a pressurized career in a big-city practice. I didn't like him much. A snap

judgment, maybe, but generally those are as good as any other kind.

Deveraux told the guy what we wanted to see and he got up slowly and led us through the house to what might once have been a kitchen. It was now tiled in cold white, and it had no-nonsense medical-style sinks and cupboards all over it. In the center of the floor it had a stainless steel mortuary table, and on the table was a corpse. The light over it was bright.

The corpse was Janice May Chapman. She had a tag on her toe with her name written on it in a spidery hand. She was naked. Pellegrino had called her as white as a sheet, but by that point she was pale blue and light purple, blotched and mottled with the characteristic marbling of the truly bloodless. She had been perhaps five feet seven inches tall, and she might once have weighed about a hundred and twenty pounds, neither fat nor excessively thin. She had dark hair bobbed short. It was thick and heavy, well cut, and still in good condition. Pellegrino had called her pretty, and it didn't require much imagination to agree. The flesh on her face was collapsed and empty, but her bone structure was good. Her teeth were white and even.

Her throat was a mess. It was laid open from side to side and the wound had dried to a rubbery gape. Flesh and muscle had shrunk back, and tendons and ligaments had curled, and empty veins and arteries had retracted. White bone was visible, and I could see a single horizontal score mark on it.

The knife had been substantial, the blade had been sharp, and the killing stroke had been forceful, confident, and fast.

Deveraux said, "We need to examine her wrists and ankles."

The doctor made a *have at it* gesture.

Deveraux took Chapman's left arm and I took her right. Her wrist bones were light and delicate. The skin lying over them had no abrasions. No rope burns. But there was faint residual marking. There was a two-inch-wide band that was slightly bluer than the rest. Very slightly bluer. Almost not there at all. But perceptible. And very slightly swollen, compared to the rest of her forearm. Definitely raised. The exact opposite of a compression.

I looked at Merriam and asked, "What do you make of this?"

"The cause of death was exsanguination through severed carotid arteries," he

"The cause of death was exsanguination through severed carotid arteries," he said. "That was what I was paid to determine."

"How much were you paid?"

"The fee structure was agreed between my predecessor and the county."

"Was it more than fifty cents?"

"Why?"

"Because fifty cents is all that conclusion is worth. Cause of death is totally obvious. So now you can earn your corn by helping us out a little."

Deveraux looked at me and I shrugged. Better that I had said it than her. She had to live with the guy afterward. I didn't.

Merriam said, "I don't like your attitude."

I said, "And I don't like twenty-seven-year-old women lying dead on a slab. You want to help or not?"

He said, "I'm not a pathologist."

I said, "Neither am I."

The guy stood still for a moment, and then he sighed and stepped forward. He took Janice May Chapman's limp and lifeless arm from me. He looked at the wrist very closely, and then ran his fingers up and down, gently, from the back of her hand to the middle of her forearm, feeling the swelling. He asked, "Do you have a hypothesis?"

I said, "I think she was tied up tight. Wrists and ankles. The bindings started to bruise her, but she didn't live long enough for the bruises to develop very much. But they definitely started. A little blood leaked into her tissues, and it stayed there when the rest of it drained out. Which is why we're seeing compression injuries as raised welts."

"Tied up with what?"

"Not ropes," I said. "Maybe belts or straps. Something wide and flat. Maybe silk scarves. Something padded, perhaps. To disguise what had been done."

scarves. Something padded, perhaps. To disguise what had been done.

Merriam said nothing. He moved past me to the end of the table and looked at Chapman's ankles. He said, "She was wearing pantyhose when she was brought in. The nylon was undamaged. Not torn or laddered at all."

"Because of the padding. Maybe it was foam rubber. Something like that. But she was tied up."

Merriam was quiet for another moment.

Then he said, "Not impossible."

I asked, "How plausible?"

"Postmortem examination has its limits, you know. You'd need an eyewitness to be certain."

"How do you explain the complete exsanguination?"

"She could have been a hemophiliac."

"Suppose she wasn't?"

"Then gravity would be the only explanation. She was hung upside down."

"By belts or straps, or ropes over some kind of padding?"

"Not impossible," Merriam said again. "Turn her over," I said.

"Why?"

"I want to see the gravel rash."

"You'll have to help me," he said, so I did.

Chapter

19

The human body is a self-healing machine, and it doesn't waste time. Skin is crushed or split or cut, and blood immediately rushes to the site, the red cells scabbing and knitting a fibrous matrix to bind the parted edges together, the white cells seeking out and destroying germs and pathogens below. The process is underway within minutes, and it lasts as many hours or days as are necessary to return the skin to its previous unbroken integrity. The process causes a bell curve of inflammation, peaking as the suffusion of blood peaks, and as the scab grows thickest, and as the fight against infection reaches its most intense state.

The small of Janice May Chapman's back was peppered with tiny cuts, as was the whole of her butt, and as were her upper arms just above her elbows. The cuts were small, thinly scabbed incisions, all surrounded by small areas of crushing, which were colorless due to her bloodlessness. The cuts were all inflicted in random directions, as if by loose and rolling items of similar size and nature, small and hard and neither razor-sharp nor completely blunt.

Classic gravel rash.

I looked at Merriam and asked, "How old do you think these injuries are?"

He said, "I have no idea."

"Come on, doctor," I said. "You've treated cuts and grazes before. Or have you? What were you before? A psychiatrist?"

"I was a pediatrician," he said. "I have no idea what I'm doing here. None at all. Not in this area of medicine."

"Kids get cuts and grazes all the time. You must have seen hundreds."

"This is a serious business. I can't risk unsupported guesses."

"Try educated guesses."

“Four hours,” he said.

I nodded. I figured four hours was about right, judging by the scabs, which were more than nascent, but not yet fully mature. They had been developing steadily, and then their development had stopped abruptly when the throat was cut and the heart had stopped and the brain had died and all metabolism had ceased.

I asked, “Did you determine the time of death?”

Merriam said, “That’s very hard to know. Impossible, really. The exsanguination interferes with normal biological processes.”

“Best guess?”

“Some hours before she was brought to me.”

“How many hours?”

“More than four.”

“That’s obvious from the gravel rash. How many more than four?”

“I don’t know. Fewer than twenty-four. That’s the best I can do.”

I said, “No other injuries. No bruising. No sign of a defensive struggle.”

Merriam said, “I agree.”

Deveraux said, “Maybe she didn’t fight. Maybe she had a gun to her head. Or a knife to her throat.”

“Maybe,” I said. I looked at Merriam again and asked, “Did you do a vaginal examination?”

“Of course.”

“And?”

“I judged she had had recent sexual intercourse.”

“Any bruising or tearing in that area?”

“None visible.”

“Then why did you conclude she was raped?”

“You think it was consensual? Would you lie down on gravel to make love?”

“I might,” I said. “Depending on who I was with.”

“She had a home,” Merriam said. “With a bed in it. And a car, with a back seat. Any putative boyfriend would have a home and a car, too. And there’s a hotel here in town. And there are other towns, with other hotels. No one needs to conduct a tryst outdoors.”

“Especially not in March,” Deveraux said.

The small room went quiet, and it stayed quiet until Merriam asked, “Are we done here?”

“We’re done,” Deveraux said.

“Well, good luck, chief,” Merriam said. “I hope this one turns out better than the last two.”

Deveraux and I walked down the doctor’s driveway, past the mailbox, past the shingle, to the sidewalk, where we stood next to Deveraux’s car. I knew she was not going to give me a ride. This was not a democracy. Not yet. I said, “Did you ever see a rape victim with intact pantyhose?”

“You think that’s significant?”

“Of course it is. She was attacked on gravel. Her pantyhose should have been shredded.”

“Maybe she was forced to undress first. Slowly and carefully.”

“The gravel rash had edges. She was wearing something. Pulled up, pulled down, whatever, but she was partially clothed. And then she changed afterward. Which is possible. She had four hours.”

“Don’t go there,” Deveraux said.

“Go where?”

“You’re trying to plead the army down to rape only. You’re going to say she was killed by someone else, separately, later.”

I said nothing.

“And that dog won’t hunt,” Deveraux said. “You stumble into someone and get raped, and then within the next four hours you stumble into someone else completely different and get your throat cut? That’s a really bad day, isn’t it? That’s the worst day ever. It’s too coincidental. No, it was the same guy. But he had himself an all-day session. He took hours. He had plans and equipment. He had access to her clothes. He made her change. This was all highly premeditated.”

“Possible,” I said.

“They teach effective tactical planning in the army. So they claim, anyway.”

“True,” I said. “But they don’t give you all day off very often. Not in a training environment. Not usually.”

Deveraux said, “But Kelham is not just about training, is it? Not from what I’ve been able to piece together. There are a couple of rifle companies there. In and out on rotation. And they get leave when they come back. Days off. Plenty of them. All in a row. One after the other.”

I said nothing.

Deveraux said, “You should call your CO. Tell him it’s looking bad.”

I said, “He already knows. That’s why I’m here.”

She paused a long moment and said, “I want you to do me a favor.”

“Like what?”

“Go look at the car wreck again. See if you can find a license plate or identify the vehicle. Pellegrino got nowhere with it.”

“Why would you trust me?”

“Because you’re the son of a Marine. And because you know if you conceal or destroy evidence I’ll put you in jail.”

I asked, “What did Merriam mean, when he wished you better luck with this one than the other two?”

She didn’t answer.

I said, “The other two what?”

She paused a beat and her beautiful face fell a little and she said, “Two girls were killed last year. Same MO. Throats cut. I got nowhere with them. They’re cold cases now. Janice May Chapman is the third in nine months.”

Chapter

20

Elizabeth Deveraux said nothing more. She just climbed into her Caprice and drove away. She pulled a wide U-turn in front of me and headed north, back to town. I lost sight of her after the first curve. I stood still for a long moment and then set off walking. Ten minutes later I was through the last of the rural meanders and the road widened and straightened in front of me. Main Street, in fact as well as name. Some daytime activity was starting up. The stores were opening. I saw two cars and two pedestrians. But that was all. Carter Crossing was no kind of a bustling metropolis. That was for damn sure.

I walked on the right-hand sidewalk and passed the hardware store, and the pharmacy, and the hotel, and the diner, and the empty space next to it. Deveraux's car was not parked in the Sheriff's Department lot. No police vehicles were. There were two civilian pick-up trucks there, both of them old and battered and modest. The desk clerk and the dispatcher, presumably. Locally recruited, no union, no benefits. I thought again about my friend Stan Lowrey and his want ads. He would aim higher, I guessed. He would have to. He had girlfriends. Plural. He had mouths to feed.

I made it to the T-junction and turned right. In the daylight the road speared dead straight ahead of me. Narrow shoulders, deep ditches. The traffic lanes banked up and over the rail crossing and then the shoulders and the ditches resumed and the road ran onward through the trees.

There was a truck parked my side of the crossing. Facing me. A big, blunt-nosed thing. Brush-painted in a dark color. Two guys in it. Staring at me. Fur, ink, hair, dirt, grease.

My two pals, from the night before.

I walked on, not fast, not slow, just strolling. I got within about twenty yards. Close enough for me to see detail in their faces. Close enough for them to see detail in mine.

This time the [illegible]

This time they got out of their truck. The doors opened as one and they climbed out and down. They skirted the hood and stood together in front of the grille. Same height, same build. Like cousins. They were each about six-two and around two hundred or two hundred and ten pounds. They had long knotted arms and big hands. Work boots on their feet.

I walked on. I stopped ten feet away. I could smell them from there. Beer, cigarettes, rancid sweat, dirty clothes.

The guy on my right said, “Hello again, soldier boy.”

He was the alpha dog. Both times he had been driving, and both times he was the first to speak. Unless the other guy was some kind of a silent mastermind, which seemed unlikely.

I said nothing, of course.

The guy asked, “Where are you going?”

I didn’t answer.

The guy said, “You’re going to Kelham. I mean, where the hell else does this road go?”

He turned and swept his arm through an extravagant gesture, indicating the road, and its relentless straightness, and its lack of alternative destinations. He turned back and said, “Last night you told us you weren’t from Kelham. You lied to us.”

I said, “Maybe I live on that side of town.”

“No,” the guy said. “If you’d tried living on that side of town, we’d have visited you before.”

“For what purpose?”

“To explain the facts of life. Different places are for different folks.” He came a little closer. His buddy came with him. The smell grew stronger.

I said, “You guys need to take a bath. Not necessarily together.”

The guy on my right looked “What are you doing on this road?”

The guy on my right asked, "What have you been doing this morning?"

I said, "You don't want to know."

"Yes, we do."

"No, you really don't."

"You're not welcome here. Not anymore. None of you."

"It's a free country," I said.

"Not for people like you." Then he paused, and his gaze suddenly shifted and focused into the far distance over my shoulder. The oldest trick in the book. Except this time he wasn't faking. I didn't turn, but I heard a car on the road behind me. Far away. A big car, quiet, with wide highway tires. Not a cop car, because no recognition dawned in the guy's eyes. No familiarity. It was a car he hadn't seen before. A car he couldn't explain.

I waited and it swept past us. It was going fast. It was a black town car. Urban. Dark windows. It thumped up the rise, pattered across the tracks, and thumped back down again. Then it kept on going straight. A minute later it was tiny in the haze. Effectively lost to sight.

An official visitor, heading to Kelham. Rank and prestige.

Or panic.

The guy on my right said, "You need to get back on the base. And then stay there."

I said nothing.

"But first you need to tell us what you've been doing. And who you've been seeing. Maybe we should go check she's still alive."

I said, "I'm not from Kelham."

The guy took a step forward.

He said, "Liar."

I took a breath and made like I was going to speak. Then I head-butted the guy full in the face. No warning. I just braced my feet and snapped forward from the waist and crashed my forehead into his nose. *Bang*. It was perfectly done. Timing, force, impact. It was all there in full measure. Plus surprise. No one expects a head butt. Humans don't hit things with their heads. Some inbuilt atavistic instinct says so. A head butt changes the game. It adds a kind of unhinged savagery to the mix. An unprovoked head butt is like bringing a sawed-off shotgun to a knife fight.

The guy went down like an empty suit. His brain told his knees it was out of business and he folded up and fell over backward. He was unconscious before he hit the floor. I could tell by the way the back of his head hit the road. No attempt to soften the blow. It just smacked down with a thud. Maybe he added some fractures in back, to match the ones I had given him in front. His nose was bleeding badly. It was already starting to swell. The human body is a self-healing machine, and it doesn't waste time.

The other guy just stood there. The silent mastermind. Or the beta dog. He was staring at me. I took a long step to my left and head-butted him too. *Bang*. Like a double bluff. He was completely unprepared. He was expecting a fist. He went down in the same kind of heap. I left him there, on his back, six feet from his buddy. I would have taken their truck, to save myself some time and effort, but I couldn't stand the stink in the cab. So I walked on, to the railroad track, where I turned left on the ties and headed north.

I came off the track a little earlier than I had the night before and traced the wreck's debris field from its very beginning. The smaller and lighter pieces had traveled shorter distances. Less momentum, I supposed. Less kinetic energy. Or more air resistance. Or something. But the smaller beads of glass and the smaller flakes of metal were the first to be found. They had stalled and fluttered and fallen to earth and come to rest well before the heavier items, which had barreled onward.

It had been a fairly old car. The collision had exploded it, like a diagram, but some parts hadn't put up much of a fight. There were squares and flakes of rust, from the underbody. They were layered and scaly and caked with dirt.

An old car, with significant time spent in cold climates where they salt the roads in winter. Not a Mississippi native. A car that had been hauled from pillar to

post, six months here, six months there, regularly, unpredictably.

A soldier's car, probably.

I walked on and turned and tried to gauge the general vector. Debris had sprayed through a fan shape, narrow at first, widening later. I pictured a license plate, a small rectangle of thin featherweight alloy, bursting free of its bolts, sailing through the nighttime air, stalling, falling, maybe end over end. I tried to figure out where it might have landed. I couldn't see it anywhere, not inside the fan shape, not on its edges, not beyond its edges. Then I remembered the howling gale that had accompanied the train, and I widened my area of search. I pictured the plate caught in a miniature tornado, whipping and spiraling through the roiled air, going high, maybe even going backward.

In the end I found it still attached to the chrome bumper I had seen the night before. The bumper had folded up just left of the plate, and made a point, which had half buried itself in the scrub. Like a spear. I rocked it loose and pulled it out and turned it over and saw the plate hanging from a single black bolt.

It was an Oregon plate. It featured a drawing of a salmon behind the number. Some kind of a wildlife initiative. Protect the natural environment. The tags were current and up to date. I memorized the number and reburied the bent bumper in its hole. Then I walked on, to where the bulk of the wreck had burned against the trees.

By bright daylight I agreed with Pellegrino. The car had been blue, a light powdery shade like a winter sky. Maybe it had started life that way, or maybe it had faded a little with age. But either way I found enough unblemished paint to be sure. There was an intact patch inside what had been the glove box. There was an overspray stripe under melted plastic trim inside one of the doors. Not much else had survived. No personal items. No paperwork of any kind. No discarded material. No hairs, no fibers. No ropes, no belts, no straps, no knives.

I wiped my hands on my pants and walked back the way I had come. The two guys and their truck had gone. I guessed the silent mastermind had woken up first. The beta dog. I had hit him less hard. I guessed he had hauled his buddy into the truck and taken off, slow and shaky. No harm done. No major harm, anyway. Nothing permanent. For him, at least. The other one would have a headache, for six months or so.

I stood on the spot where they had gone down and saw another black car coming toward me from the west. Another town car, fast and purposeful, wallowing and wandering a little on the uneven road. It had a good wax shine and black window glass. It blew past me at speed, thumped up, pattered over the rail line, thumped down again, and rushed onward toward Kelham. I turned and watched it, and then I turned back and started walking again. No particular place to go, except I was hungry by that point, so I headed for Main Street and the diner. The place was empty. I was the only customer. The same waitress was on duty. She met me at the hostess station and asked, “Is your name Jack Reacher?”

I said, “Yes, ma’am, it is.”

She said, “There was a woman in here an hour ago, looking for you.”

Chapter

21

The waitress was a typical eyewitness. She was completely unable to describe the woman who had been looking for me. Tall, short, heavy, slender, old, young, she had no reliable recollection. She hadn't gotten a name. She had formed no impression of the woman's status or profession or her relationship to me. She hadn't seen a car or any other mode of transportation. All she could remember was a smile and the question. Was there a new guy in town, very big, very tall, answering to the name Jack Reacher?

I thanked her for the information and she sat me at my usual table. I ordered a piece of pie and a cup of coffee and I asked her for coins for the phone. She opened the register and gave me a wrapped roll of quarters in exchange for a ten dollar bill. She brought my coffee and told me my pie would be right along in a moment. I walked across the silent room to the phone by the door and split the roll with my thumbnail and dialed Garber's office. He answered the phone himself, instantly.

I asked, "Have you sent another agent down here?"

"No," he said. "Why?"

"There's a woman asking for me by name."

"Who?"

"I don't know who. She hasn't found me yet."

"Not one of mine," Garber said.

"And I saw two cars heading for Kelham. Limousines. DoD or politicians, probably."

"Is there a difference?"

I asked, "Have you heard anything from Kelham?"

“Nothing about the Department of Defense or politicians,” he said. “I heard that Munro is pursuing something medical.”

“Medical? Like what?”

“I don’t know. Is there a medical dimension here?”

“With a potential perpetrator? Not that I’ve seen. Apart from the gravel rash question I asked before. The victim is covered in it. The perp should have some too.”

“They’ve all got gravel rash. Apparently there’s some crazy running track there. They run till they drop.”

“Even Bravo Company right after they get back?”

“Especially Bravo Company right after they get back. There’s some serious self-image at work there. These are seriously hard men. Or so they like to think.”

“I got the license plate off the wreck. Light blue car, from Oregon.” I recited the number from memory, and I heard him write it down.

He said, “Call me back in ten minutes. Don’t speak to a soul before that. No one, OK? Not a word.”

I ignored the letter of the law by speaking to the waitress. I thanked her for my pie and coffee. She hung around a beat longer than she needed to. She had something on her mind. Turned out she was worried she might have gotten me in trouble by telling a stranger she had seen me. She was prepared to feel guilty about it. I got the impression Carter Crossing was the kind of place where private business stayed private. Where a small slice of the population didn’t want to be found.

I told her not to worry. By that point I was pretty sure who the mystery woman was. A process of elimination. Who else had the information and the imagination to find me?

The pie was good. Blueberries, pastry, sugar, and cream. Nothing healthy. No vegetable matter. It hit the spot. I took the full ten minutes to eat it, a little at a

time. I finished my coffee. Then I walked over to the phone again and called Garber back.

He said, “We traced the car.”

I said, “And?”

“And what?”

“Whose is it?”

He said, “I can’t tell you that.”

“Really?”

“Classified information, as of five minutes ago.”

“Bravo Company, right?”

“I can’t tell you that. I can’t confirm or deny. Did you write the number down?”

“No.”

“Where’s the plate?”

“Where I found it.”

“Who have you told?”

“Nobody.”

“You sure?”

“Completely.”

“OK,” Garber said. “Here are your orders. Firstly, do not, repeat, do *not* give that number to local law enforcement. Not under any circumstances. Secondly, return to the wreck and destroy that plate immediately.”

Chapter

22

I obeyed the first part of Garber's order, by not immediately rushing around to the Sheriff's Department and passing on the news. I disobeyed the second part, by not immediately rushing back to the debris field. I just sat in the diner and drank coffee and thought. I wasn't even sure how to destroy a license plate. Burning it would conceal the state of origin, but not the number itself, which was embossed. In the end I figured I could fold it twice and stamp it flat and bury it.

But I didn't go do that. I just sat there. I figured if I sat in a diner long enough, drinking coffee, my mystery woman would surely find me.

Which she did, five minutes later.

I saw her before she saw me. I was looking out at a bright street, and she was looking in at a dim room. She was on foot. She was wearing black pants and black leather shoes, a black T-shirt, and a leather jacket the color and texture of an old baseball glove. She was carrying a briefcase made of the same kind of material. She was lean and lithe and limber, and she seemed to be moving slower than the rest of the world, like fit strong people always do. Her hair was still dark, still cut short, and her face was still full of fast intelligence and rapid glances. Frances Neagley, First Sergeant, United States Army. We had worked together many times, tough cases and easy, long hauls and short. She was as close to a friend as I had, back in 1997, and I hadn't seen her in more than a year.

She came in scanning for the waitress, ready to ask for an update. She saw me at my table and changed course immediately. No surprise in her face. Just fast assimilation of new information, and satisfaction that her method had worked. She knew the state and she knew the town, and she knew I drank a lot of coffee, and therefore a diner was where she would find me.

I used my toe and poked the facing chair out, like Deveraux had twice done for me. Neagley sat down, smooth and easy. She put her briefcase on the floor by her feet. No greeting, no salute, no handshake, no peck on the cheek. There were

two things people needed to understand about Neagley. Despite her personal warmth she couldn't bear to be physically touched, and despite her considerable talents she refused to become an officer. She had never given reasons for either thing. Some folks thought she was smart, and some folks thought she was crazy, but all agreed that with Neagley, no one would ever know for sure.

"Ghost town," she said.

"The base is closed," I said.

"I know. I'm up to speed. Closing the base was their first mistake. It's as good as a confession."

"Story is, they were worried about tension with the town."

Neagley nodded. "Wouldn't take much to start some, either way around. I saw the street behind this one. All those stores, lined up like a row of teeth, facing the base? Very predatory. Our people must be sick of getting laughed at and ripped off."

"Seen anything else?"

"Everything. I've been here two hours."

"How are you, anyway?"

"We have no time for social chit-chat."

"What do you need?"

"Nothing," she said. "It's you that needs."

"What do I need?"

"You need to get a damn clue," she said. "This is a suicide mission, Reacher. Stan Lowrey called me. He's worried. So I asked around. And Lowrey was right. You should have turned this whole thing down."

"I'm in the army," I said. "I go where I'm told."

"I'm in the army too. But I avoid sticking my head in a noose."

“Kelham is the noose. Munro is the one risking his neck. I’m on the sidelines here.”

“I don’t know Munro,” she said. “Never met him. Never even heard of him before. But dollars to doughnuts he’ll do what he’s told. He’ll cover it up and swear black is white. But you won’t.”

“A woman was killed. We can’t ignore that.”

“Three women were killed.”

“You know about that already?”

“I told you, I’ve been here two hours. I’m up to speed.”

“How did you find out?”

“I met the sheriff. Chief Deveraux herself.”

“When?”

“She dropped by her office. I happened to be there. I was asking for you.”

“And she told you stuff?”

“I gave her the look.”

“What look?”

Neagley blinked and composed herself and then tilted her face down a little and looked up at me, her eyes on mine, her eyes open wide and serious and frank and sympathetic and understanding and encouraging, her lips parted a fraction as if imminently ready to exhale a murmur of absolute empathy, her whole demeanor astonished and marveling at how bravely I was bearing the many heavy burdens my lot in life had brought me. She said, “This is the look. Works great with women. Kind of conspiratorial, right? Like we’re in the same boat?”

I nodded. It was a hell of a look. But I found myself disappointed that Deveraux had fallen for it. Some damn jarhead she was. I asked, “What else did she tell you?”

“Something about a car. She’s assuming it’s critical to the case and that it belonged to a Kelham guy.”

“She’s right. I just found the plate. Garber ran it and told me to sit on it.”

“And are you going to?”

“I don’t know. Might not be a lawful order.”

“See what I mean? You’re going to commit suicide. I knew it. I’m going to stick around and keep you out of trouble. That’s why I came.”

“Aren’t you deployed?”

“I’m in D.C. At a desk. They won’t miss me for a day or two.”

I shook my head.

“No,” I said. “I don’t need help. I know what I’m doing. I know how the game is played. I won’t sell myself cheap. But I don’t want to bring you down with me. If that’s the way it has to turn out.”

“Nothing *has* to turn out any which way, Reacher. It’s a choice.”

“You don’t really believe that.”

She made a face. “At least pick your battles.”

“I always do. And this one is as good as any.”

At that point the waitress came out of the kitchen. She saw me, saw Neagley, recognized her from before, saw that we weren’t rolling around on the floor tearing each other’s eyes out, and her earlier guilt evaporated. She refilled my coffee mug. Neagley ordered tea, Lipton’s breakfast blend, water properly boiling. We sat in silence until the order was filled. Then the waitress went away again and Neagley said, “Chief Deveraux is a very beautiful woman.”

I said, “I agree.”

“Have you slept with her yet?”

“Cut it out.”

"Certainly not."

"Are you going to?"

"I guess I can dream. Hope dies last, right?"

"Don't. There's something wrong with her."

"Like what?"

"She doesn't care. She's got three unsolved homicides and her pulse is as slow as a bear in winter."

"She was a Marine MP. She's been digging the same ditch we have, all her life. How excited do you get about three dead people?"

"I get professionally excited."

"She thinks a Kelham guy did it. Therefore she has no jurisdiction. Therefore she has no role. Therefore she can't get professionally excited."

"Whatever, there's a bad vibe there. That's all I'm saying. Trust me."

"Don't worry."

"I mentioned your name and she looked at me like you owe her money."

"I don't."

"Then she's crazy about you. I could tell."

"You say that about every woman I meet."

"But this time it's true. I mean it. Her cold little heart was going pitter patter. Be warned, OK?"

"Thanks anyway," I said. "But I don't need a big sister on this occasion."

"Which reminds me," she said. "Garber is asking about your brother."

"My brother?"

“Scuttlebutt on the sergeants’ network. Garber has put a watch on your office, for notes or calls from your brother. He wants to know if you’re in regular contact.”

“Why would he?”

“Money,” Neagley said. “That’s all I can think of. Your brother is still at Treasury, right? Maybe there’s a financial issue with Kosovo. Got to be warlords and gangsters over there. Maybe Bravo Company is bringing money home for them. You know, laundering it. Or stealing it.”

“How would that tie in with a woman named Janice May Chapman, from the armpit of Mississippi?”

“Maybe she found out. Maybe she wanted some for herself. Maybe she was a Bravo Company girlfriend.”

I didn’t reply.

“Last chance,” Neagley said. “Do I stay or do I go?”

“Go,” I said. “This is my problem, not yours. Live long and prosper.”

“Parting gift,” she said. She leaned down and opened her briefcase and came out with a slim green file folder. It was printed on the outside with the words *Carter County Sheriff’s Department*. She laid it on the table and put her hand flat on it, ready to slide it across. She said, “You’ll find this interesting.”

I asked, “What is it?”

“Photographs of the three dead women. They’ve all got something in common.”

“Deveraux gave this to you?”

“Not exactly. She left it unattended.”

“You stole it?”

“Borrowed it. You can return it when you’re done. I’m sure you’ll find a way.” She slid the file across to me, she stood up, and she walked away. No handshake, no kiss, no touch. I watched her push out through the door, watched her turn

right on Main Street, and watched her disappear.

The waitress heard the door as Neagley left. Maybe there was a repeater bell in the kitchen. She came out to check if there was a new arrival and saw that there wasn't. She contented herself with refilling my mug for the second time, and then she went back to the kitchen. I squared the green file in front of me and opened it up.

Three women. Three victims. Three photographs, all taken in the last weeks or months of their lives. Nothing sadder. Cops ask for a recent likeness, and distraught relatives scurry to choose from what they have. Usually they come up with joy and smiles, prom pictures or studio portraits or vacation snapshots, because joy and smiles are what they want to remember. They want the long grim record to start with life and energy.

Janice May Chapman had showed plenty of both. Her photograph was a waist-up color shot taken at what looked like a party. She was half-turned toward the camera, looking directly into the lens, smiling in the first seconds of spontaneity. A well-timed click. The photographer had not caught her unawares, but neither had he made her pose too long.

Pellegrino had been wrong. He had called her real pretty, but that was like calling America fairly big. Real pretty was a serious underestimate. In life Chapman had been absolutely spectacular. It was hard to imagine a more beautiful woman. Hair, eyes, face, smile, shoulders, figure, everything. Janice May Chapman had had it all going on, that was for sure.

I shuffled her to the bottom of the pack and looked at the second woman. She had died in November 1996. Four months ago. A note pasted to the bottom corner of the photograph told me so. The photograph was one of those rushed, semi-formal color portraits like you see from a college service at the start of the academic year, or from a hard-worked hack on a cruise ship. A murky canvas background, a stool, a couple of umbrella flashes, three, two, one, *pop*, thank you. The woman in the picture was black, probably in her middle twenties, and was every bit as spectacular as Janice May Chapman. Maybe even more so. She had flawless skin and the kind of smile that starts the AC running. She had the kind of eyes that start wars. Dark, liquid, radiant. She wasn't looking at the camera. She was looking right through it. Right at me. Like she was sitting across the table.

The third woman had died in June 1996. Nine months ago. She was also black. Also young. Also spectacular. *Truly* spectacular. She had been photographed outside, in a yard, in the shade, with late-afternoon light coming off a white clapboard wall and bathing her in its glow. She had a short natural hairstyle and a white blouse with three buttons undone. She had liquid eyes and a shy smile. She had magnificent cheekbones. I just stared. If some white-coated lab guy had fed an IBM supercomputer with all we had ever known about beauty, from Cleopatra to the present day, the circuits would have hummed for an hour and then printed this exact image.

I moved my mug and laid all three pictures side by side on the table. *They've all got something in common*, Neagley had said. They were all roughly the same age. Two or three years might have covered them all. But Chapman was white, and the other two were black. Chapman was at least economically comfortable, judging by her dress and her jewelry, and the first black woman looked less so, and the second looked close to marginal, in a rural way, judging by her clothes and her unadorned neck and ears, and by the yard she was sitting in.

Three lives, lived in close geographic proximity, but separated by vast gulfs. They may never have met or spoken. They may never have even laid eyes on each other. They had absolutely nothing in common.

Except that all three were amazingly beautiful.

Chapter

23

I repacked the file and tucked it in the back of my pants under my shirt. I paid my bill and left a tip and walked out to the street. I figured I would walk up to the Sheriff's Department. I figured it was time for some reconnaissance. Time for an initial foray. Time for an exploratory penetration. A toe in the water. Not a democracy, but it was a public building. And I had a legitimate reason to be there. I had lost property to return. I figured if Deveraux was out, I could leave the file with the desk clerk. And if Deveraux was in, I could play it by ear.

She was in.

Her old Caprice was in the lot, slotted neatly in the parking bay closest to the door. A privilege of rank, presumably. Office cultures all work the same way. I walked past it and hauled open a heavy glass door and found myself in a dowdy, beat-up lobby. Plastic tile on the floor, scarred paint on the walls, and an inquiry desk facing me, with an old guy behind it. He had no hair and a toothless, caved-in face, and he was wearing a suit vest with no coat, like an old-time newspaperman. As soon as he saw me he picked up a phone and hit a button and said, "He's here." He listened to a reply and then he pointed with the phone, using it like a baton, stretching its cord, and he said, "End of the corridor on the right. She's expecting you."

I walked the corridor and got a glimpse through a half-closed door of a stout woman at a telephone switchboard, and then I arrived at Deveraux's billet. Her door was open. I knocked on it once as a courtesy and went in.

It was a plain square space in no better condition than the lobby. Same tile, same battered paint, same grime. It was full of stuff bought cheap at the end of the last geological era. Desk, chairs, file cabinets, all plain and municipal and well out of date. There were grip-and-grin pictures on the wall, of an old guy in uniform that I took to be Deveraux's father, the previous incumbent. There was a stand-up hat rack with an old cardigan sweater on one of the pegs. It had hung there so long it looked crusted and rigid with age.

At first glance, not a wonderful room.

But it had Deveraux in it. I had pictures of three stunning women digging into my back, but she held her own with any of them. She was right up there. Maybe she even beat them all. *A very beautiful woman*, Neagley had said, and I was glad my subjectivity had been confirmed by someone else's objectivity. She looked small in the desk chair, slender in the shoulders, lithe and relaxed. As usual, she was smiling.

She asked, "Did you ID the car for me?"

I didn't answer that question, and her phone rang. She picked it up and listened for a moment, and then she said, "OK, but it's still a felony assault. Keep it on the front burner, OK?" Then she put the phone down and said, "Pellegrino," by way of explanation.

I said, "Busy day?"

"Two guys were beaten up this morning by someone they swear was a soldier from Kelham. But the army says the base is still closed. I don't know what's going on. The doctor is working overtime. Concussions, he says. But it's my budget that's going to be concussed."

I said nothing.

Deveraux smiled again and said, "Anyway, first of all, tell me about your friend."

"My friend?"

"I met her. Frances Neagley. I'm guessing she's your sergeant. She was very army."

"She was my sergeant once. Many years, on and off."

"I'm wondering why she came."

"Maybe I asked her to come."

"No, in that case she'd have known where and when to meet you. It would have been prearranged. She wouldn't have had to ask all over town."

I nodded. “She came to warn me. Apparently I’m in a lose-lose situation. She called it a suicide mission.”

“She’s right,” Deveraux said. “She’s a smart woman. I liked her. She was good. She does this thing with her face. Like a special look, all collegial and confiding. I bet she’s a great interrogator. Did she give you the photographs?”

“You meant her to take them?”

“I hoped she would. I left them accessible, and ducked out for a minute.”

“Why?”

“It’s complicated,” Deveraux said. “I wanted you to see them, alone and on your own time. Like a controlled experiment. No pressure from me, and especially no influence from me. No context. I wanted a completely unguarded first impression.”

“From me?”

“Yes.”

“Is this a democracy now?”

“Not yet. But any port in a storm, as they say.”

“OK,” I said.

“So what was it? Your first impression?”

“All three of them were amazingly beautiful.”

“Is that all they had in common?”

“I imagine so. Apart from all being women.”

Deveraux nodded.

“Good,” she said. “I agree. They were all amazingly beautiful. I’m very glad to have confirmation from an independent point of view. It was a hard thing for me to articulate, even to myself. And I’d certainly avoid saying it out loud. It would

sound very weird, like some gay thing."

"Is that an issue for you?"

"I live in Mississippi," she said. "I was in the Marine Corps and I'm not married."

"OK," I said.

"And I'm not currently dating."

"OK," I said.

"I'm not gay," she said.

"Understood."

"But even so, for a woman cop to be seen obsessing over a female victim's looks never goes down well."

"Understood," I said again. I leaned forward to let my back clear the chair, and I pulled the file out of my waistband. I laid it on the desk.

"Mission accomplished," I said. "Nice moves, by the way. Not many people beat Neagley in a mind game."

"Takes one to know one," she said. She slid the file closer and ran her palm over it, left and right, and her hand came to rest at one end, and she kept it there. Maybe where it was warm from the small of my back.

She asked, "Did you ID the car?"

Chapter

24

She kept her palm pressed on the file folder, and looked straight at me. Her question hung in the air between us. *Did you ID the car?* In my head I heard Garber's emphatic squawk in my ear, on the phone in the diner: *Do not, repeat, do not give that number to local law enforcement.*

My commanding officer.

Orders are orders.

Deveraux said, "Did you?"

I said, "Yes."

"And?"

"I can't tell you."

"Can't or won't?"

"Both. Classified information, as of five minutes after I called it in."

She didn't respond.

I said, "Well, what would you do in this situation?"

"Now?"

"Not now. Then. When you were in the Corps."

"As a Marine I would have done exactly what you're doing."

"I'm glad you understand."

She nodded. She kept her hand on the file. She said, "I didn't tell you the truth

before. Not the whole truth, anyway. About my father's house. It wasn't always rented. He owned it, from when he was married. But when my mother got sick, they found out they didn't have insurance. They were supposed to. It was supposed to come with the job. But the county guy who was responsible had run into trouble and had been stealing the premiums. Just a two-year hiatus, but that happened to be when my mother got sick. After that, it was a pre-existing condition. My father refinanced, things got worse, and he defaulted. The bank took the title, but they let him live there as a renter. I admired both parties. The bank did the right thing, as far as it could, and my daddy kept on serving his community, even though it had kicked him in the teeth. Honor and obligation are things I appreciate."

"Semper Fi," I said.

"You bet your ass. And you answered my question anyway, as I'm sure you intended. If the ID is classified, then it's a Kelham car. That's all I really need to know."

"Only if there's a connection," I said. "Between the car and the homicide."

"Unlikely to be a coincidence."

I said, "I'm sorry about your father."

"Me too. He was a nice man, and he deserved better."

I said, "It was me who beat on those civilians."

Deveraux said, "Really? How on earth did you get there?"

"I walked."

"You can't have. You didn't have time, surely. It's more than twelve miles. Almost past Kelham's northern limit. Practically in Tennessee."

"What happened there?"

"Two guys were out doing something. Maybe just taking a walk. They could see the woods around Kelham's fence, but they weren't particularly close to it. A guy came out of the woods, the two hikers got rousted, it turned bad, they got hit. They claim the guy that hit them was a soldier."

hit. They claim the guy that hit them was a soldier.

“Was he in uniform?”

“No. But he had the look, and he had an M16 rifle.”

“That’s bizarre.”

“I know. It’s like they’re establishing a quarantine zone.”

“Why would they? They’ve already got about a million acres all to themselves.”

“I don’t know why. But what else are they doing? They’re chasing anyone that gets anywhere near the fence.”

I said nothing.

Deveraux said, “Wait. Who did *you* beat on?”

“Two guys in a pick-up truck. They harassed me last night, they harassed me again this morning. Once too often.”

“Description?”

“Dirt, grease, hair, and tattoos.”

“In an old black truck painted with a housepainter’s brush?”

“Yes.”

“Those are the McKinney cousins. In an ideal world they should be beat on at least once a week, regular as clockwork. So I thank you for your full and frank confession, but I propose to take no action at this time.”

“But?”

“Don’t do it again. And watch your back. I’m sure that right now they’re planning to get the whole family together and come looking for you.”

“There are more of them?”

“There are dozens of McKinneys. But don’t worry. Not yet, at least. It will take

time for them to assemble. None of them has a phone. None of them knows how to use a phone."

And at that point phones started ringing all throughout the building. And I heard urgent radio chatter from the dispatcher's hutch, where the stout woman sat. Ten seconds later she appeared in the doorway, out of breath, holding both jambs to steady herself, and she said, "Pellegrino is calling in from near the Clancy place. Near the split oak. He says we got ourselves another homicide."

Chapter

25

Both Deveraux and I glanced instinctively at the file folder on her desk. Three photographs. Soon to be four. Another sad visit to grieving relatives. Another request for a good recent likeness. The worst part of the job.

Then Deveraux glanced at me, and hesitated. *Not a democracy*. I said, "You owe it to me. I need to see this. I need to know what I'm committing suicide over."

She hesitated another second, and then she said, "OK," and we ran for her car.

The Clancy place turned out to be more than ten miles north and east of the town. We crossed the silent railroad and headed toward Kelham for a mile, deep into the hidden half of Carter Crossing. The wrong side of the tracks. Over there the road had no shoulders and no ditches. I guessed the ditches had silted up and the shoulders had been plowed. Flat fields full of dirt came right up to the edge of the blacktop. I saw old frame houses standing in yards, and low barns, and swaybacked sheds, and tumbledown shacks. I saw old women on porches and raggedy kids on bikes. I saw old trucks moving slow and a solitary shopper with a straw hat and a straw basket. Every face I saw was black. *Different places are for different folks*, the McKinney cousins had told me. Rural Mississippi, in 1997.

Then Deveraux turned due north on a washboard two-lane and left the dwellings behind us. She hit the gas. The car responded. The Chevy Caprice was every working cop's favorite car for a reason. It was a perfect *what if* proposition. What if we took a roomy sedan and put a Corvette motor in it? What if we beefed up the suspension a little? What if we used four disc brakes? What if we gave it a top speed of 130 miles an hour? Deveraux's example was well used and worn, but it still motored along. The rough surface pattered under the tires, and the body wallowed and shuddered, but we got where we were going pretty fast.

Where we were going turned out to be a large hardscrabble acreage with a battered house in its center. We turned in and used a two-rut driveway that became a plain farm track as it passed the house. Deveraux blipped her siren

once as a courtesy. I saw an answering wave from a window. An old man. A black face. We headed onward across flat barren land. Way far in the distance I could see a lone tree, chopped vertically by lightning down two-thirds of its height. Each half was leaning away from the other in a dramatic Y shape. Both halves were dusted with pale green springtime leaves. The split oak, I assumed. Still alive and in business. Still enduring. Near it was parked a police cruiser, right out on the dirt. Pellegrino's, I assumed.

Deveraux put her car next to his and we got out. Pellegrino himself was fifty yards away, just standing there, at ease, facing us, with his hands clasped behind his back.

Like a sentry.

Ten yards farther on was a shape on the ground.

We hiked across the fifty yards of dirt. There were turkey vultures in the air, three of them, looping lazily high above us, just waiting for us to be gone. Far to my right I could see a line of trees, thick in parts, and thin in others. Through the thin parts I could see a wire fence. Kelham's northwestern boundary, I guessed. The left shoulder of whatever vast acreage the DoD had requisitioned fifty years before. And a small portion of what some well-connected fencing contractor had been overpaid to install.

Halfway to Pellegrino I could see some details in the shape behind him. A back, facing toward me. A short brown jacket. A suggestion of dark hair and white skin. The empty slump of a corpse. The absolute stillness of the recently dead. The impossible relaxation. Unmistakable.

Deveraux did not pause for a verbal report. She walked straight past Pellegrino and kept on going. She looped around wide and approached the collapsed shape from the far side. I stopped five yards short and hung back. Her case. Not a democracy.

She shuffled closer to the shape, slowly and carefully, watching where she was putting her feet. She got close enough to touch and squatted down with her elbows on her knees and her hands clasped together. She looked right to left, at the head, the torso, the arms, the legs. Then she looked left to right, the same sequence all over again, but in reverse.

Then she looked up and said, “What the hell *is* this?”

Chapter

26

I followed the same long loop Deveraux had used and tiptoed in from the north side. I squatted down next to her. I put my elbows on my knees. I clasped my hands together.

I looked, right to left, and then left to right.

The corpse was male.

And white.

Forty-five years old, maybe a little less, maybe a little more.

Maybe five-ten, maybe a hundred and eighty pounds. Dark hair, going mousy. Two or three days' stubble, going white. A green work shirt, a brown canvas windbreaker jacket. Blue jeans. Brown engineer boots, creased and cracked and starved of polish and caked with dirt.

I asked Deveraux, "Do you know him?"

She said, "I never saw him before."

He had bled to death. He had taken what I guessed was a high-velocity rifle round through the meat of his right thigh. His pants were soaked with blood. Almost certainly the round had torn his femoral artery. The femoral artery is a high-capacity vessel. Absolutely crucial. Any significant breach will be fatal within minutes, absent prompt and effective emergency treatment.

But what was extraordinary about the scene in front of us was that prompt and effective emergency treatment had been attempted. The guy's pants leg had been slit with a knife. The wound was partially covered with an absorbent bandage pad.

The absorbent bandage pad was a general-issue military field dressing.

Deveraux stood up and backed away, short mincing tiptoe steps, her eyes on the corpse, until she got ten or twelve feet away. I did the same thing and joined her. She talked low, as if noise was disrespectful. As if the corpse could hear us. She asked, “What do you make of that?”

“There was a dispute,” I said. “A shot was fired. Probably a warning shot that went astray. Or a giddy-up shot that came too close.”

“Why not a killing shot that missed?”

“Because the shooter would have tried again right away. He would have stepped in closer and put one through the guy’s head. But he didn’t do that. He tried to help the guy instead.”

“And?”

“And he saw that he was failing in his attempt. So he panicked and ran away. He left the guy to die. Won’t have taken long.”

“The shooter was a soldier.”

“Not necessarily.”

“Who else carries GI field dressings?”

“Anyone who shops at surplus stores.”

Deveraux turned around. Turned her back on the corpse. She raised her arm and pointed at the horizon on our right. A short sweep of her arm.

She asked, “What do you see?”

I said, “Kelham’s perimeter.”

“I told you,” she said. “They’re enforcing a quarantine zone.”

Deveraux headed back to her car for something and I stood still and looked at the ground around my feet. The earth was soft and there were plenty of footprints. The dead guy’s looped and staggered, some of them backward like an old-fashioned dance chart. Their curving sequence ended where he lay. All

around the lower half of his body were toe marks and round depressions from knees, where his assailant had first squatted and then knelt to work on him. Those marks were at the head of a long straight line of partial prints, mostly toe, not much heel, all widely spaced. The shooter had run in fast. A reasonably tall person. Not a giant. Not especially heavy. There were identical prints facing the other way, where the shooter had run away again. I didn't recognize the tread patterns. They were unlike any army boot I had ever seen.

Deveraux came back from her car with a camera. It was a silver SLR. She got ready to take her crime-scene pictures and I followed the line of panicked running prints away from the area. I kept them three feet to my right and tracked them a hundred yards, and then they petered out on a broad vein of bone-hard dirt. Some kind of a geological issue, or an irrigation thing, or I had reached the limit of what old man Clancy liked to plow. I saw no reason why a fleeing man would change direction at that point, so I kept on going straight, hoping to pick up the prints again, but I didn't. Within fifty yards the ground became matted with low wiry weeds of some description. Ahead of me they grew a little taller, and then they shaded into the brush that had grown up at the base of Kelham's fence. I saw no bruised stalks, but it was tough vegetation and I wouldn't have expected it to show much damage.

I turned back and took a step and saw a glint of light twelve feet to my right. Metallic. Brassy. I detoured and bent down and saw a cartridge case lying on the dirt. Bright and fresh. New. Long, from a rifle. Best case, it was a .223 Remington, made for a sporting gun. Worst case, it was a 5.56 millimeter NATO round, made for the military. Hard to tell the difference, with the naked eye. The Remington case has thinner brass. The NATO case is heavier.

I picked it up and weighed it in my palm.

Dollars to doughnuts, it was a military round.

*

I looked ahead at Deveraux and Pellegrino and the dead guy in the distance. They were about a hundred and forty yards away. Practically touching distance, for a rifleman. The 5.56 NATO round was designed to penetrate one side of a steel helmet at six hundred meters, which works out to about six hundred and fifty yards. The dead guy was more than four times closer than that. An easy

shot. Hard to miss, which was my only real consolation. The kind of guy that gets sent from Benning to Kelham for finishing school isn't the kind of guy that misplaces a round at point-blank range. Yet this was clearly an unintentional hit. The bandage proved it. It was a warning shot gone wrong. Or a giddy-up shot. But the kind of guy that gets sent from Benning to Kelham has worked out his testosterone issues long ago. He puts his warning shots high and wide. And his giddy-up shots. All the subject needs is to see the muzzle flash and hear the noise of the gun. That's all the situation requires. And no soldier does more than he has to. No soldier ever has, since Alexander the Great first put his army together. Initiative in the ranks usually ends in tears. Especially where live ammunition is involved. And civilians.

I put the brass in my pocket and hiked back. I saw nothing else of significance. Deveraux had snapped a whole roll of film, and she rewound it and took it out of her camera and sent Pellegrino back to the pharmacy to get it printed. She told him to ask for rush service, and then she told him to bring the doctor back with him, with the mortuary wagon. He departed on cue and Deveraux and I were left standing together in a thousand acres of emptiness, with nothing for company except a corpse and a blasted tree.

I asked, "Did anyone hear a shot?"

She said, "Mr. Clancy is the only one who could. Pellegrino talked to him already. He claims not to have heard anything."

"Any yelling? A warning shot presupposes some yelling first."

"If he didn't hear a shot, he wouldn't have heard yelling."

"A single NATO round far away and outdoors isn't necessarily loud. The yelling could have been louder. Especially if it was two-way yelling, which it might have been, back and forth. You know, if there was a dispute or an argument."

"You accept it was a NATO round now?"

I put my hand in my pocket and came out with the shell case. I held it in my open palm. I said, "I found it a hundred and forty yards out, twelve feet off the straight vector. Exactly where an M16 ejection port would have put it."

Deveraux said, "It could be a Remington .223," which was kind of her. Then she

took it from me. Her nails felt sharp on the skin of my palm. It was the first time we had touched. The first physical contact. We hadn't shaken hands when we met.

She did what I had done. She weighed the brass in her palm. Unscientific, but long familiarity can be as accurate as a laboratory instrument. She said, "NATO for sure. I've fired a lot of these, and picked them up afterward."

"Me too," I said.

"I'm going to raise hell," she said. "Soldiers against civilians, on American soil? I'll go all the way to the Pentagon. The White House, if I have to."

"Don't," I said.

"Why the hell not?"

"You're a country sheriff. They'll crush you like a bug."

She said nothing.

"Believe me," I said. "If they've gotten as far as deploying soldiers against civilians, they've gotten as far as working out ways to beat local law enforcement."

Chapter

27

The guy was finally pronounced dead thirty minutes later, at one o'clock in the afternoon, when the doctor showed up with Pellegrino. Pellegrino was in his cruiser and the doctor was in a fifth-hand meat wagon that looked like something out of a history book. I guessed it was a riff on a 1960s hearse, but built on a Chevrolet platform, not Cadillac, and devoid of viewing windows or other funereal hoo-hah of any kind. It was like a half-height panel van, painted dirty white.

Merriam checked pulse and heartbeat and poked around the wound for a minute. He said, "This man bled out through his femoral artery. Death by gunshot." Which was obvious, but then he added something interesting. He teased up the slit edge of the guy's pants leg and said, "Wet denim is not easy to cut. Someone used a very sharp knife."

I helped Merriam put the guy on a canvas gurney, and then we loaded him in the back of the truck. Merriam drove him away, and Deveraux spent five minutes on the radio in her car. I stood around with Pellegrino. He didn't say anything, and neither did I. Then Deveraux got out of her car again and sent him about his business. He drove away, and Deveraux and I were alone once more, except for the blasted tree and a patch of dark tone on the ground, where the dead guy's blood had soaked into the soil.

Deveraux said, "Butler claims no one came out of Kelham's main gate at any time this morning."

I said, "Who's Butler?"

"My other deputy. Pellegrino's opposite number. I've had him stationed outside the base. I wanted a quick warning, in case they cancel the lockdown. There's going to be all kinds of tension. People are very upset about Chapman."

"But not about the first two?"

"Depends who you ask, and where. But the soldiers never stop short of the

"Depends who you ask, and where. But the soldiers never stop short of the tracks. The bars are all on the other side."

I said nothing.

She said, "There must be more gates. Or holes in the fence. It's got to be, what? Thirty miles long? And it's fifty years old. Got to be weak spots. Someone came out somewhere, that's for sure."

"And went back in again," I said. "If you're right, that is. Someone went back in bloody to the elbows, with a dirty knife, and at least one round short in his magazine."

"I am right," she said.

"I never heard of a quarantine zone before," I said. "Not inside the United States, anyway. I just don't buy it."

"I buy it," she said.

Something in her tone. Something in her face.

I said, "What? Did the Marines do this once?"

"It was no big thing."

"Tell me all about it."

"Classified information," she said.

"Where was it?"

"I can't tell you that."

"When was it?"

"I can't tell you that either."

I paused a beat and asked, "Have you spoken to Munro yet? The guy they sent to the base?"

She nodded. “He called and left a message when he arrived. First thing. As a courtesy. He gave me a number to reach him.”

“Good,” I said. “Because now I need to speak to him.”

We drove back together, across Clancy’s land, out his gate, south on the washboard two-lane, then west through the black half of town, away from Kelham, toward the railroad. I saw the same old women on the same front porches, and the same kids on the same bikes, and men of various ages moving slow between unknown starting points and unknown destinations. The houses leaned and sagged. There were abandoned work sites. Slabs laid, with no structures built on them. Tangles of rusted rebar. Weedy piles of bricks and sand. All around was flat tilled dirt and trees. There was a kind of hopeless crushed torpor in the air, like there probably had been every day for the last hundred years.

“My people,” Deveraux said. “My base. They all voted for me. I mean it, practically a hundred percent. Because of my father. He was fair to them. They were voting for him, really.”

I asked, “How did you do with the white folks?”

“Close to a hundred percent with them too. But that’s all going to change, on both ends of the deal. Unless I get some answers for all concerned.”

“Tell me about the first two women.”

Her response to that was to brake sharply and twist in her seat and back up twenty yards. Then she nosed into the turning she had just passed. It was a dirt track, well smoothed and well scoured. It had a humped camber and shallow bar ditches left and right. It ran straight north, and was lined on both sides with what might once have been slave shacks. Deveraux passed by the first ten or so, passed by a gap where one had burned out, and then she turned into a yard I recognized from the third photograph I had seen. The poor girl’s house. The unadorned neck and ears. The amazing beauty. I recognized the shade tree she had been sitting under, and the white wall that had reflected the setting sun softly and obliquely into her face.

We parked on a patch of grass and got out. A dog barked somewhere, and its chain rattled. We walked under the limbs of the shade tree and knocked on the

back door. The house was small, not much bigger than a cabin, but it was well tended. The white siding was not new, but it had been frequently painted. It was stained auburn at the bottom, the color of hair, where heavy rains had bounced up out of the mud.

The back door was opened by a woman not much older than either Deveraux or me. She was tall and thin and she moved slow, with a kind of sun-beat languor, and with the kind of iron stoicism I imagined all her neighbors shared. She smiled a resigned smile at Deveraux, and shook her hand, and asked her, “Any news about my baby?”

Deveraux said, “We’re still working on it. We’ll get there in the end.”

The bereaved mother was too polite to respond to that. She just smiled her wan smile again and turned to me. She said, “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

I said, “Jack Reacher, ma’am,” and shook her hand. She said, “I’m Emmeline McClatchy. I’m delighted to meet you, sir. Are you working with the Sheriff’s Department?”

“The army sent me to help.”

“Now they did,” she said. “Not nine months ago.”

I didn’t answer that.

The woman said, “I have some deer meat in the pot. And some tea in the pitcher. Would you two care to join me for lunch?”

Deveraux said, “Emmeline, I’m sure that’s your dinner, not your lunch. We’ll be OK. We’ll eat in town. But thanks anyway.”

It was the answer the woman seemed to have been expecting. She smiled again and backed away into the gloom behind her. We walked back to the car. Deveraux backed out to the street, and we drove away. Further down the row was a shack much like the others, but it had electric beer signs in the windows. A bar of some kind. Maybe music. We threaded through a matrix of dirt streets. I saw another abandoned construction project. Knee-high foundation walls had been built out of cinder blocks, and four vertical wooden posts had been raised at the corners. But that was all. Building materials were scattered around the rest of

the lot in untidy piles. There were surplus cinder blocks, there were bricks, there was a pile of sand, there was a stack of bagged cement, gone all smooth and rigid with dew and rain.

There was also a pile of gravel.

I turned and looked at it as we drove past. Maybe two yards of it, the small sharp gray kind they mix with sand and cement to make into concrete. The pile had spread and wandered into a low hump about the size of a double bed, all weedy at the edges. It had pockmarks and divots in its top surface, as if kids had walked on it.

I didn't say anything. Deveraux's mind was already made up. She drove on and turned left into a broader street. Bigger houses, bigger yards. Picket fences, not hurricane wire. Cement paths to the doors, not beaten earth. She slowed and then eased to a stop outside a place twice the size of the shack we had just left. A decent one-story house. Expensive, if it had been in California. But shabby. The paint was peeling and the gutters were broken-backed. The roof was asphalt and some of the tiles had slipped. There was a boy in the yard, maybe sixteen years old. He was standing still and doing nothing. Just watching us.

Deveraux said, "This is the other one. Shawna Lindsay was her name. That's her baby brother right there, staring at us."

The baby brother was no oil painting. He had lucked out with the genetic lottery. That was for damn sure. He was nothing like his sister. Nothing at all. He had fallen out of the ugly tree, and hit every branch. He had a head like a bowling ball, and eyes like the finger holes, and about as close together.

I asked, "Are we going in?"

Deveraux shook her head. "Shawna's mom told me not to come back until I could tell her who slit her first-born's throat. Those were her words. And I can't blame her for them. Losing a child is a terrible thing. Especially for people like this. Not that they thought their girls would grow up to be models and buy them a house in Beverly Hills. But to have something truly special meant a lot to them. You know, after having nothing else, ever."

The boy was still staring. Quiet, baleful, and patient.

"So, I guess," I said, "I guess we're going in."

"So let´s go," I said. "I need to use the phone."

Chapter

28

Deveraux let me use the phone in her office. Not a democracy, not yet, but we were getting there. She found the number Munro had left for her, and she dialed it for me, and she told whoever answered that Sheriff Elizabeth Deveraux was on the line for Major Duncan Munro. Then she handed the receiver to me and vacated her chair and the room.

I sat down behind her desk with nothing but dead air in my ear and the remnant of her body heat on my back. I waited. The silence hissed at me. The army did not play hold music. Not back in 1997. Then a minute later there was a plastic click and clatter as a handset was scooped up off a desk, and a voice said, "Sheriff Deveraux? This is Major Munro. How are you?"

The voice was hard, and brisk, and hyper-competent, but it had an undertone of good cheer in it. But then, I figured anyone would be happy to get a call from Elizabeth Deveraux.

I said, "Munro?"

He said, "I'm sorry, I was expecting Elizabeth Deveraux."

"Well, sadly you didn't get her," I said. "My name is Reacher. I'm using the sheriff's phone right now. I'm with the 396th, currently TDY with the 110th. We're of equal rank."

Munro said, "Jack Reacher? I've heard of you, of course. How can I help you?"

"Did Garber tell you he was sending an undercover guy to town?"

"No, but I guessed he would. That would be you, right? Tasked to snoop on the locals? Which must be going pretty well, seeing as you're calling from the sheriff's phone. Which must be fun, in a way. People here say she's a real looker. Although they also say she's a lesbian. You got an opinion on any of that?"

“That stuff is none of your business, Munro.”

“Call me Duncan, OK?”

“No, thanks. I’ll call you Munro.”

“Sure. How can I help you?”

“We’ve got shit happening out here. There was a guy shot to death this morning, close to your fence, northwestern quadrant. Unknown assailant, but probably a military round, and definitely a half-assed attempt to patch the fatal wound with a GI field dressing.”

“What, someone shot a guy and then gave him first aid? Sounds like a civilian accident to me.”

“I hoped you weren’t going to be that predictable. How do you explain the round and the dressing?”

“Remington .223 and a surplus store.”

“And two guys were beat up before that, by someone they swear was a soldier.”

“Not a soldier based at Kelham.”

“Really? How many Kelham personnel can you vouch for? In terms of their exact whereabouts this morning?”

“All of them,” Munro said.

“Literally?”

“Yes, literally,” he said. “We’ve got Alpha Company overseas as of five days ago, and I’ve got everyone else confined to quarters, or else sitting in the mess hall or the officers’ club. There’s a good MP staff here, and they’re watching everyone, while also watching each other. I can guarantee no one left the base this morning. Or since I got here, for that matter.”

“Is that your standard operating procedure?”

“It’s my secret weapon. Sitting down all day, no reading, no television, no

nothing. Sooner or later someone talks, out of sheer boredom. Never fails. My arm-breaking days are over. I learned that time is my friend."

"Tell me again," I said. "This is very important. You're absolutely sure no one left the base this morning? Or last night? Not even under secret orders, maybe local, or from Benning, or maybe even from the Pentagon? I'm serious here. And don't bullshit a bullshitter."

"I'm sure," Munro said. "I guarantee it. On my mother's grave. I know how to do this stuff, you know. Give me that, at least."

"OK," I said.

Munro asked, "Who was the dead guy?"

"No ID at this time. Civilian, almost certainly."

"Near the fence?"

"Same as the guys that got beat up. Like a quarantine zone."

"That's ridiculous. That's not happening. I know that for sure."

We both went quiet for a second, and then I asked, "What else do you know for sure?"

"I can't tell you. Orders are to keep this thing tighter than a fish's butt."

"Let's play Twenty Questions."

"Let's not."

"The short version. Three questions. Yes or no answers."

"Don't put me on the spot, OK?"

"We're both on the spot already. Don't you see that? We've got a real mess here. And either it's in there with you or it's out here with me. So sooner or later one of us is going to have to help the other. We might as well start now."

Silence. Then: "OK, Jesus, three questions."

“Did they tell you about the car?”

“Yes.”

“Did anyone mention money from Kosovo as a possible motive?”

“Yes.”

“Did they tell you about two other dead women?”

“No. What other dead women?”

“Last year. Local. Same MO. Cut throats.”

“Connected?”

“Probably.”

“Jesus. No, nobody said a word.”

“Do you have written records of Bravo Company’s movements? June and November last year?”

“That’s your fourth question.”

“We’re just chatting now. Two officers, equal rank, just shooting the shit. The game is over.”

“There are no records of Bravo Company’s movements here. They’re operating under special ops protocols. Therefore everything is filed at Fort Bragg. It would take the biggest subpoena you ever saw just to get a look at the outside of the file cabinet.”

I asked, “You making any general progress there?”

No answer.

I asked, “How long does it normally take for your secret weapon to work?”

He said, “It’s usually much faster than this.”

I didn’t answer, and there was more dead air, and some quiet breathing, and then

I didn't answer, and there was more dead air, and some quiet breathing, and then Munro said, "Listen, Reacher, I guess this is hardly worth talking about, because you're just going to think, well, what else would I say, because we both know I was sent here to cover someone's ass. But I'm not like that. Never have been."

"And?"

"From what I know so far, none of our guys killed any women. Not this month, or November, or June. That's how it looks right now."

Chapter

29

I put the phone down on Munro, and Deveraux came back into the office immediately. Maybe she had been watching a light on the switchboard. She said, “Well?”

“No quarantine patrols. No one has left Kelham since Munro arrived.”

“He would say that, though, wouldn’t he?”

“And he’s not smelling anything. He thinks the perp is not on the base.”

“Ditto.”

I nodded. Smoke and mirrors. Politics and the real world. Utter confusion. I said, “You want to get lunch?”

She said, “After.”

“After what?”

“You have a problem to deal with. The McKinney cousins are out on the street. They’re waiting for you. And they’ve brought reinforcements.”

Deveraux led me across the corridor to a dim corner room with windows in two walls. The view across Main Street was empty. Nothing happening. But the view north toward the T-junction showed four figures. My two old friends, plus two more similar guys. Dirt, hair, fur, and ink. They were standing around in the wide area where the two roads met, hands in pockets, kicking the dirt, doing nothing at all.

My first reaction was a kind of dumbfounded admiration. A head butt is a serious blow, especially one of mine. To be walking and talking just a few hours later was impressive. My second reaction was annoyance. With myself. I had been too gentle. Too new in town, too reluctant, too proper, too ready to see mitigating circumstances in sheer animal stupidity. I looked at Deveraux and

asked, “What do you want me to do?”

She said, “You could apologize and make them go away.”

“What’s my second choice?”

“You could let them hit you first. Then I could arrest them for unprovoked assault. I’d love to get the chance to do that.”

“They won’t hit me at all if you’re there.”

“I’ll stay out of sight.”

“I’m not sure I want to do either thing.”

“One or the other, Reacher. Your choice.”

I stepped out to Main Street like some guy in an old movie. There should have been music playing. I turned right and faced north. I stood still. The four guys saw me. They showed a moment of surprise, and then a moment of warm anticipation. They formed up in a side-to-side line, all four of them strung out west to east, about four feet apart. They all took a step toward me, and then they all stopped and waited. There were two trucks parked on the Kelham road, behind them and to the right. There was the brush-painted pick-up I had seen before, and in front of it was another one just as bad.

I walked on, like a fish toward a net. The sun was about as high as it was going to get in March. The air was warm. I could feel heat on my skin. I could feel the road surface under the soles of my shoes. I put my hands in my pockets. Nothing in there, except most of the roll of quarters I had gotten in the diner. I closed my fist around the paper tube. A ten dollar punch, less what I had spent on the phone.

I walked on and stopped ten feet from the skirmish line. The two guys I had met before were on the left. The silent mastermind was on the outside, and the alpha dog was in second position. Both of them had noses like spoiled eggplants. Both of them had two black eyes. Both of them had crusted blood on their lips. Neither one of them exhibited much in the way of balance or focus. Right of the alpha dog was a guy slightly smaller than the others, and next to him was a big guy in a biker vest.

I looked at the alpha dog and said, “This is your plan?”

He didn’t answer.

I said, “Four guys? Is that all?”

He didn’t answer.

I said, “I was told there were dozens of you.”

No answer.

“But I guess logistics and communications were difficult. So you settled on a lighter force, quickly assembled and rapidly deployed. Which is very up to date, actually. You should go to the Pentagon and sit in on some seminars. You’d feel right at home with their thinking.”

The new guy second from the right was drunk. He had a low level buzz going on. It was oozing from his pores. I could practically smell it. Beer for breakfast. Maybe with chasers. A decade-long diet, judging by the look of him. So he would be slow to react, and then wild and unaimed afterward. No big problem. The new guy with the biker vest was carrying some kind of back pain. Low down, base of his spine. I could tell because he was standing with his pelvis rolled forward, taking the pressure off. Some kind of rupture or strain. A dozen possible causes. He was a country boy. He could have lifted a bale, or fallen off a horse. No major threat. He would defeat himself. One enthusiastic swing, and all kinds of things would tear loose inside. He would hobble away like a cripple. By which time his drunken friend would already be down. And the other two were already in no kind of good shape. The two I knew. The two that knew me. The alpha dog was slightly on my left, and I’m a right-handed fighter. He was practically volunteering.

Overall, an encouraging situation.

I said, “It’s a shame one of you isn’t bigger. Or two or three of you. Or all of you, actually.”

No answer.

I said, “But hey, a plan’s a plan. Did it take long to work out?”

No answer.

I said, “You know what we used to say about plans, up at West Point?”

“What?”

“Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.”

No answer. No movement. I unwrapped my hand from around the roll of quarters. I wasn’t going to need them. I took my hands out of my pockets. I said, “The problem with light forces is if things go bad, they go real bad real quick. Look at what happened in Somalia. So you should think very carefully about this choice. You’re at a fork in the road here. You have to decide which way to go. You could wade in, just the four of you, right now. But the next stop after that will be the hospital. That’s a promise. That’s a cast iron guarantee. You’ll get hit harder than you’ve ever been hit before. I’m talking broken bones. I can’t promise brain damage. Looks like someone already beat me to that.”

No response.

I said, “Or you could attempt a tactical withdrawal now, and then you could take your time putting that big force together. You could come back in a couple of days. Dozens of you. You could find your granddaddy’s varmint gun. You could start the painkillers early.”

No response. Nothing verbal, anyway. But shoulders slumped a fraction, and feet started shuffling.

“Good decision,” I said. “Overwhelming force is always better. You really should go to the Pentagon. You could walk them through your reasoning. They’d listen to you. They’re listening to everyone except us.”

The alpha dog said, “We’ll be back.”

“I’ll be here,” I said. “Whenever you’re ready.”

They walked away, trying to be casual about it, trying to salvage some dignity. They climbed into their trucks and made a big show of revving their engines and squealing their tires through tight 180 turns. They drove off west into the forest, toward Memphis, toward the rest of the world. I watched them go, and then I walked back to the Sheriff’s Department.

walked back to the Sheriff's Department.

*

Deveraux had seen the whole thing from the window in the dim corner room. Like a silent movie. No dialogue. She said, "You made them go away. You apologized. I can't believe it."

"Not exactly," I said. "I took a rain check. They're coming back later, dozens of them."

"Why did you do that?"

"More arrests for you. They'll look good for your reelection campaign."

"You're crazy."

"You want to get lunch now?"

"I already have a lunch date," she said.

"Since when?"

"Five minutes ago. Major Duncan Munro called back and asked me to dine with him in the Kelham Officers' Club."

Chapter

30

Deveraux left for Kelham in her car and I was left alone on the sidewalk. I walked past the vacant lot to the diner. Lunch, for one. I ordered the cheeseburger again, and then stepped over to the phone by the door and called the Pentagon. Colonel John James Frazer. Senate Liaison. He answered on the first ring. I asked him, “What genius decided to classify that plate number?”

He said, “I can’t tell you that.”

“Whoever, it was a bad mistake. All it did was confirm the car belongs to a Kelham guy. It was practically a public announcement.”

“We had no alternative. We couldn’t put it in the public domain. Journalists would have gotten it five minutes after local law enforcement. We couldn’t allow that.”

“Now it sounds like you’re telling me it belonged to a Bravo Company guy.”

“I’m not telling you anything. But believe me, we had no choice. The consequences would have been catastrophic.”

Something in his voice.

“Please tell me you’re kidding,” I said. “Because right now you’re making it sound like it was Reed Riley’s own personal vehicle.”

No response.

I asked, “Was it?”

No answer.

“Was it?”

“I can’t confirm or deny,” Frazer said. “And don’t ask again. And don’t use that

name again, either. Not on an unsecured line."

"Does the officer in question have an explanation?"

"I can't comment on that."

I said, "This is getting out of control, Frazer. You need to rethink. The cover up is always worse than the crime. You need to stop it now."

"Negative on that, Reacher. There's a plan in place, and it will stay in place."

"Does the plan include an exclusion zone around Kelham? Maybe for journalists especially?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I've got circumstantial evidence here of boots on the ground outside of Kelham's fence. Part of the circumstantial evidence is a corpse. I'm telling you, this thing is out of control now."

"Who's the corpse?"

"A scrappy middle-aged guy."

"A journalist?"

"I don't know how to recognize a journalist by sight alone. Maybe that's a skill they teach to the infantry, but they don't teach it to MPs."

"No ID on him?"

"We haven't looked yet. The doctor hasn't finished with him."

Frazer said, "There is no exclusion zone around Fort Kelham. That would be a major policy shift."

"And illegal."

"Agreed. And stupid. And counterproductive. It isn't happening. It never has."

"I think the Marine Corps did it once."

“When?”

“Within the last twenty years.”

“Well, Marines. They do all kinds of things.”

“You should check it out.”

“How? You think they put it in their official history?”

“Do it obliquely. Look for an officer who got canned overnight with no other explanation. Maybe a colonel.”

*

I hung up with Frazer and ate my burger and drank some coffee and then I set out to do what Garber had ordered me to do mid-morning, which was to return to the wreck and destroy the offending license plate. I turned east on the Kelham road and then north on the railroad ties. I passed by the old water tower. Its elephant’s trunk was made from some kind of black rubberized canvas, gone all perished and patchy with age. The whole thing was swaying a little in a soft southerly breeze. I walked on fifty yards and then stepped off the line and headed for where I had seen the half-buried bumper.

The half-buried bumper was gone.

It was nowhere to be seen. It had been dug up and taken away. The hole its lance-like point had made had been filled with earth, which had been stamped down by boot soles and then tamped flat by the backs of shovels.

The boot prints were like nothing I had ever seen in the military. But the shovel marks could have been made by GI entrenching tools. It was difficult to be sure. Couldn’t rule it out, couldn’t rule it in.

I walked on, deeper into the debris field. It had all been tampered with. It had been sifted, and examined, and turned over, and checked, and evaluated. Almost two hundred linear yards. Maybe a thousand individual fragments had been displaced. No doubt ten times as many smaller items had been eyeballed. A wide area. A big task. A lot of work. Slow and painstaking. Six men, I figured. Maybe eight. I pictured them advancing in a line, under effective command, working with great precision.

with great precision.

With military precision.

I walked back the way I had come. I got to the middle of the railroad crossing and saw a car in the east, coming from the direction of Kelham. It was still far away on the straight road. Small to the eye, but not a small car. At first I thought it might be Deveraux coming back after lunch, but it wasn't. It was a black car, and big, and fast, and smooth. A town car. A limousine. It was right out on the crown of the road, straddling the line, staying well away from the ragged shoulders. It was swaying and wafting and wandering.

I came off the track on the Kelham side and stood in the middle of the road, feet apart, arms out, big and obvious. I let the car get within a hundred yards and then I crossed my arms above my head and waved the universal distress semaphore. I knew the driver would stop. This was 1997, remember. Four and a half years before the new rules. A long time ago. A much less suspicious world.

The car slowed and stopped in front of me. I went to my right, around the hood, down the flank, toward the driver's window, holding back a little, trying to perfect my angle. I wanted to get a look at the passenger. I figured he would be in the back, on the far side, with the front passenger seat scooted forward for leg room. I knew how these things were done. I had been in town cars before. Once or twice.

The driver's window came down. I bent forward from the waist. Took a look. The driver was a big fat guy with the kind of belly that forced his knees wide apart. He was wearing a black chauffeur's cap and a black jacket and a black tie. He had watery eyes. He said, "Can we help you?"

I said, "I'm sorry. My mistake. I thought you were someone else. But thanks anyway for stopping."

"Sure," the guy said. "No problem." His window went back up and I stepped aside and the car drove on.

The passenger had been male, older than me, gray haired, prosperous, in a fine suit made of wool. There had been a leather briefcase on the seat beside him.

He was a lawyer, I thought.

Chapter

31

I was facing east, toward the black part of town, and there were things over there that I wanted to see again, so I set off walking in that direction. The road felt good under my feet. I guessed once upon a time during the glory days of the railroad it had been a simple dirt track, but it had been updated since then, almost certainly in the 1950s, almost certainly on the DoD's dime. The foundation had been dug down, for armor on flat-bed transporters, and the line had been straightened, because if an army engineer sees a ruled line on a map, then a straight road is what appears on the ground. I had walked on many DoD roads. There are a lot of them, all around the world, all built a lifetime ago, during the long and spectacular blaze of American military power and self confidence, when there was nothing we couldn't or wouldn't do. I was a product of that era, but not a part of it. I was nostalgic for something I had never experienced.

Then I thought about my old pal Stan Lowrey, talking about want ads in the hamburger place near where we were based. Changes were coming, for sure, but I wasn't unhappy. That straight road through the low Mississippi forest was helping me. The sun was out, and the air was warm. There were miles behind me, and miles ahead, and plenty of time on the clock. I had no ambitions and very few needs. I would be OK, whatever came next. No choice. I would have to be.

*

I made the same turn Deveraux had made in her car, south on the dirt road between the bar ditches and the slave shacks. Toward Emmeline McClatchy's place. At walking speed I was seeing different things than from the car. Poverty, mostly, and up close. There were patched clothes on lines, washed so thin they were almost transparent. There were no new cars. There were chickens in some of the yards, and goats, and the occasional pig. There were mangy dogs on chains. There were duct tape and baling wire fixes everywhere, to electric lines, to rain gutters, to plumbing outlets. And I was seeing suspicion too, to a degree.

There were barefoot children briefly visible, staring at me, their fingers in their mouths, until they were snatched back out of sight by anxious mothers who wouldn't meet my eye.

I kept on going and passed by Emmeline McClatchy's place. I didn't see her. I didn't see anybody on that stretch of the road. No kids, no adults. Nobody. I passed by the house with the beer signs in the window. I followed the same turns Deveraux had steered me through before, left and right and left, until I found the abandoned work site and its pile of gravel.

The house planned for the lot was small, and its foundation was set at an angle according to ancient practice and wisdom, to take advantage of prevailing breezes and to avoid the full impact of the southwestern sun in the summer. The foundation itself was built of recycled blocks and sand-heavy cement. A sewer pipe and a water line had been roughed in. The corner posts were already weathering. Nothing else had been completed. Money had run out, I supposed.

The gravel in the pile was waiting to be made into concrete, I assumed. Maybe the ground floor of the new place was supposed to be a solid slab, not boards. Maybe there were advantages to doing it that way, perhaps related to termites. I had no idea. I had never built a house. I had never had to consider housing-related issues.

The gravel pile itself had spread and settled during the idle months. Weeds were showing through the edges where it was thin. It was knee-high over most of its area, and up close it was about the size of a queen bed. The divots and the pockmarks in its top surface were like a Rorschach test. It was entirely possible to see them as the result of innocent children running and jumping and stomping. It was equally possible to see them as the result of a grown woman being thrown down and raped, in a violent flurry of knees and elbows and backs.

I squatted down and ran a fingertip through the tiny stones. They were surprisingly hard to move. They were packed down tight, and some kind of a dusty residue on them seemed to have mixed with rain or dew to form a weak adhesive. I made a furrow about an inch wide and an inch deep, and then I turned my hand over.

I pressed the back of my hand into the pile and held it there for a minute. Then I looked at the result. Small white marks, but no indentations, because there was no real flesh on the back of my hand. So I pulled up my sleeve and pressed the

inside of my forearm against the pile. I put the flat of my other hand on it and leaned on it hard. I bounced it up and down a couple of times, and scrabbled it around. Then I looked at it.

The result was some small red marks, some small white marks, and a whole lot of dust, dirt, and mud. I spat on my arm and wiped it on my pants and the resulting clean stripe looked both very like and very unlike the small of Janice May Chapman's back. Another Rorschach test. Inconclusive.

But I did come to one minor conclusion. I cleaned up my arm as well as I could, which was not perfectly, and I decided that whatever gravel patch Chapman had been raped on, she had not only dressed afterward, but showered too.

I walked on and found the wider street where Shawna Lindsay had lived. The second victim. The middle class girl, comparatively. Her baby brother was still in his yard. Sixteen years old. The ugly boy. He was just standing there. Doing nothing. Watching the street. Watching me approach. His eyes tracked me all the way. I stepped up on the shoulder and came to a stop face to face with him, with only his low picket fence between us.

I said, "How's life, kid?"

He said, "My mom's out."

"Good to know," I said. "But that wasn't what I asked."

"Life's a bitch," he said.

"And then you die," I said. Which I regretted, instantly. Insensitive, given his family's recent history. But he took no notice. Which I was glad about. I said, "I need to talk to you."

"Why? You earning a whitey merit badge? You need to find a black person to talk with today?"

"I'm in the army," I said. "Which means half my friends are black, and more importantly it means half my bosses are black. I talk to black people all the time, and they talk to me. So don't give me that ghetto shit."

The boy was quiet for a second. Then he asked, "What part of the army are you in?"

in?

“Military Police.”

“Is that a tough job?”

“Tougher than tough,” I said. “Think about it logically. Any soldier could kick your ass, and I could kick any soldier’s ass.”

“For real?”

“More than real,” I said. “Real is for other people. Not for us.”

He asked, “What do you want to talk about?”

“A hunch.”

“What kind?”

I said, “My guess is no one ever talked to you about your sister’s death.”

He looked down.

I said, “Normally with a homicide victim, they talk to everyone who knew her. They ask for insights and opinions. They want to know what kinds of things she did, where she went, who she hung with. Did they ever talk to you about that kind of stuff?”

“No,” he said. “Nobody ever talked to me.”

“They should have,” I said. “I would have. Because brothers know things about sisters. Especially at the ages you two were. I bet you knew things about Shawna that no one else did. I bet she told you things she couldn’t tell your mom. And I bet you figured out some stuff on your own.”

The kid shuffled in place a little. Bashful, and a little proud. Like saying: *Yeah, maybe I did figure some things out*. Out loud he said, “No one ever talks to me about anything.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m deformed. They think I’m slow, too.”

Because I'm deformed. They think I'm slow, too.

"Who says you're deformed?"

"Everybody."

"Even your mom?"

"She doesn't say it, but she thinks it."

"Even your friends?"

"I don't have any friends. Who would want to be friends with me?"

"They're all wrong," I said. "You're not deformed. You're ugly, but you're not deformed. There's a difference."

He smiled. "That's what Shawna used to tell me."

I pictured the two of them together. Beauty and the beast. A tough life, for both of them. Tough for him, with the endless implied comparisons. Tough for her, with the endless need for tact and patience. I said, "You should join the army. You'd look like a movie star compared to half the people I know. You should see the guy that sent me here."

"I'm going to join the army," he said. "I talked to someone about it."

"Who did you talk to?"

"Shawna's last boyfriend," he said. "He was a soldier."

Chapter

32

The kid invited me inside. His mom was out, and there was a pitcher of iced tea in the refrigerator. The house was dim and shuttered. It smelled stale. It was mean and narrow inside, but it had plenty of rooms. An eat-in kitchen, a living room, and what I guessed were three bedrooms in back. Space for two parents and two kids, except I saw no sign of a father, and Shawna was never coming home again.

The kid told me his name was Bruce. We took glasses of tea and sat at the kitchen table. There was an old wall phone next to the refrigerator. Pale yellow plastic. Its cord had been stretched about twelve feet long. There was an old television set on the countertop. Small, but color, with chrome accents on the cabinet. Practically an antique, probably rescued from a trash pile somewhere and polished up like an old Cadillac.

Up close and personal the kid was no better looking than he had been outside. But if you ignored his head, then the rest of him was in pretty good shape. He was all bone and muscle, broad through the chest and the shoulders, thick in the arms. Deep down he seemed patient and cheerful. I liked him, basically.

He asked me, “Would they really let me join the army?”

“Who is they?”

“The army, I mean. The army itself. Would they let me in?”

“Do you have felony convictions?”

“No, sir.”

“An arrest record of any kind?”

“No, sir.”

“Then of course they’ll let you in. They’d take you today if you were old

enough."

"The others would laugh at me."

"Probably," I said. "But not for the reason you think. Soldiers aren't like that. They'd find something else. Something you never even thought of yet."

"I could wear my helmet all the time."

"Only if they find one big enough."

"And night vision goggles."

"Maybe a bomb disposal hood," I said. I figured bomb disposal was the coming thing. Small wars and booby traps. But I didn't say so. Not the kind of message a potential recruit wants to hear.

I sipped my tea.

The boy asked me, "Do you watch television?"

"Not much," I said. "Why?"

"They have commercials," he said. "Which means they have to fit an hour's story into forty-some minutes. So they get right to it."

"You think that's what I should do now?"

"That's what I'm saying."

"So who do you think killed your sister?"

The boy took a sip of tea and a serious breath and then he started in on everything he had been thinking about, and everything he had never been asked about. It all came tumbling out, fast, coherent, responsive, and thoughtful. He said, "Well, her throat was cut, so we need to think about who is trained to do that kind of thing, or experienced with that kind of thing, or both."

That kind of thing. His sister's throat.

I asked, "So who fits the bill?"

“Soldiers,” he said. “Especially here. And ex-soldiers, especially here. Fort Kelham is field training for special ops guys. They know those skills. And hunters. And most people in town, to be honest. Including me.”

“You? Are you a hunter?”

“No, but I have to eat. People keep pigs.”

“And?”

“You think pigs commit suicide? We cut their throats.”

“You’ve done that?”

“Dozens of times. Sometimes I get a dollar.”

I asked, “When and where did you last see Shawna alive?”

“It was the day she was killed. It was a Friday in November. She left here about seven o’clock. After dark, anyway. She was all dressed up.”

“Where was she going?”

“Across the tracks. To Brannan’s bar, probably. That’s where she usually went.”

“Is Brannan’s the most popular bar?”

“They’re all popular. But Brannan’s is where most folk start out and finish up.”

“Who did Shawna go with that night?”

“She left on her own. Probably she was going to meet her boyfriend at the bar.”

“Did she ever get there?”

“No. She was found two streets from here. Where someone started to build a house.”

“The place with the gravel pile?”

The boy nodded. “She was dumped right on it. Like a human sacrifice in a history book.”

history book.

We got up from the table and poked around the kitchen for a minute. Then we took more tea and sat down again. I said, “Tell me about Shawna’s last boyfriend.”

“First white boyfriend she ever had.”

“Did she like him?”

“Pretty much.”

“Did they get along?”

“Pretty good.”

“No problems?”

“Didn’t see any.”

“Did he kill her?”

“He might have.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Can’t rule him out.”

“Gut feeling?”

“I want to say no, but someone killed her. It could have been him.”

“What was his name?”

“Reed. That was all Shawna ever said. Reed this, Reed that. Reed, Reed, Reed.”

“Last name?”

“I don’t know.”

“We wear name tapes,” I said. “Battledress uniform, above the right breast pocket.”

“I never saw him in uniform. They all wear jeans and T-shirts to town. Jackets, sometimes.”

“Officer or enlisted man?”

“I don’t know.”

“You talked to him. Didn’t he say?”

The kid shook his head. “He said his name was Reed. That’s all.”

“Was he an asshole?”

“A bit.”

“Did he look like he worked hard for a living?”

“Not really. He didn’t take things very seriously.”

“Probably an officer, then,” I said. “What did he tell you about joining the army?”

“He said serving your country was a noble thing to do.”

“Definitely an officer.”

“He said I could learn a skill. He said I might make specialist.”

“You could do better than that.”

“He said they would explain it all at the recruiting office. He said there’s a good one in Memphis.”

“Don’t go there,” I said. “Way too dangerous. Recruiting offices are shared between all four branches of the service. The Marines might grab you first. Fate worse than death.”

“So where should I go?”

“Go straight to Kelham. There are recruiters on every post.”

“Will that work?”

Will that work?

“Sure it will. As soon as you’ve got something in your hand that proves you’re eighteen years old, they’ll let you in and never let you out again.”

“But they say the army is getting smaller.”

“Thanks for pointing that out, kid.”

“So why would they want me?”

“They’re still going to have hundreds of thousands of people. Tens of thousands will still leave every year. They’ll always need to be replaced.”

“What’s wrong with the Marines?”

“Nothing really. It’s a traditional rivalry. They say stuff, we say stuff.”

“They do amphibious landings.”

“History shows the army has done many more all on its own.”

“Sheriff Deveraux was a Marine.”

“Is a Marine,” I said. “They never stop being Marines, even after they leave. It’s one of their things.”

“You like her,” the kid said. “I could tell. I saw you riding in her car.”

“She’s OK,” I said. “Did Reed have a car? Shawna’s boyfriend?”

The kid nodded. “They all have cars. I’m going to have a car too, after I join.”

“What kind of car did Reed have?”

“He had a 1957 Chevy Bel Air two-door hardtop. Not really a classic. It was kind of beat up.”

“What color was it?”

The kid said, “It was blue.”

Chapter

33

The kid showed me his sister's room. It was clean and tidy. Not preserved as a shrine, but not yet cleared out, either. It spoke of loss, and bewilderment, and lack of energy. The bed was made and small piles of clothes were neatly folded. No decision had been taken about its future fate.

There was none of Shawna Lindsay's personality on display. She had been a grown woman, not a teenager. There were no posters on the walls, no souvenirs of anything, no breathless diary. No keepsakes. She had owned some clothes, some shoes, and two books. That was all. One book was a thin thing explaining how to become a notary public. The other was an out-of-date tourist guide to Los Angeles.

"Did she want to be in the movies?" I asked.

"No," the kid said. "She wanted to travel, that's all."

"To LA specifically?"

"Anywhere."

"Did she have a job?"

"She worked part time at the loan office. Next to Brannan's bar. She could do her numbers pretty good."

"What did she tell you that she couldn't tell your mom?"

"That she hated it here. That she wanted to get out."

"Your mom didn't want to hear that stuff?"

"She wanted to keep Shawna safe. My mom is afraid of the world."

"Where does your mom work?"

“She’s a cleaner. At the bars in town. She gets them ready for happy hour.”

“What else do you know about Shawna?”

The kid started to say something, and then he stopped. In the end he just shrugged and said nothing. He moved toward the center of the plain square space and stood there, as if he was soaking something up. Something in the still air. I got the feeling he had rarely been in that room. Not often before Shawna’s death, and not often since.

He said, “I know I really miss her.”

We went back to the kitchen and I asked, “If I left money, do you think your mom would mind if I used her phone?”

“You need to make a call?” the kid asked back, as if that was an extraordinary thing.

“Two calls,” I said. “One I need to make, and one I want to make.”

“I don’t know how much it costs.”

“Pay phones cost a quarter,” I said. “Suppose I left a dollar a call?”

“That would be too much.”

“Long distance,” I said.

“Whatever you think is right. I’m going outside again.”

I waited until I saw him emerge in the front yard. He took up a position near the fence, just standing there, watching the street, infinitely patient. Some kind of a perpetual vigil. I tucked a dollar bill between the phone’s plastic casing and the wall and took the receiver off the hook. I dialed the call I needed to make. Stan Lowrey, back on our shared home base. I went through his sergeant and a minute later he came on the line.

I said, “Well, there’s a surprise. You’re still there. You’ve still got a job.”

He said, “I think I’m safer than you are right now. Frances Neagley just reported back.”

“She worries too much.”

“You don’t worry enough.”

“Is Karla Dixon still working financial stuff?”

“I could find out.”

“Ask her a question for me. I want to know if I should be concerned about money coming in from a place called Kosovo. Like gangsters laundering bales of cash. That kind of a thing.”

“Doesn’t sound very likely. That’s the Balkans, right? They’re middle class if they own a goat. Rich, if they own two. Not like America.”

I looked out the window and said, “Not so very different from parts of it.”

Lowrey said, “I wish I was working financial stuff. I might have picked up some necessary skills. Like how to have savings.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “You’ll get unemployment. For a spell, at least.”

“You sound cheerful.”

“I’ve got a lot to be cheerful about.”

“Why? What’s going on down there?”

“All kinds of wonderful things,” I said, and hung up. Then I trapped a second dollar bill between the phone and the wall and dialed the call I wanted to make. I used the Treasury Department’s main switchboard and got a woman who sounded middle-aged and elegant. She asked, “How may I direct your inquiry?”

I said, “Joe Reacher, please.”

There was some scratching and clicking and a minute of dead air. No hold music at Treasury, either, back in 1997. Then a woman picked up and said, “Mr. Reacher’s office.” She sounded young and bright. Probably a magna cum laude graduate from a prestigious college, full of shining eyes and idealism. Probably good looking, too. Probably wearing a short plaid skirt and a white turtleneck

sweater. My brother knew how to pick them.

I asked, “Is Mr. Reacher there?”

“I’m afraid he’s out of the office for a few days. He had to go to Georgia.” She said it like she would have said *Saturn* or *Neptune*. An incomprehensible distance, and barren when you got there. She asked, “May I take a message?”

“Tell him his brother called.”

“How exciting. He never mentioned he had brothers. But actually, you sound just like him, did you know that?”

“So people say. There’s no message. Tell him I just wanted to say hello. To touch base, you know. To see how he is.”

“Will he know which brother?”

“I hope so,” I said. “He’s only got one.”

I left immediately after that. Shawna’s brother did not break his lonely vigil. I waved and he waved back, but he didn’t move. He just kept on watching the far horizon. I hiked back to the Kelham road and turned left for town. I got some of the way toward the railroad and heard a car behind me, and a blip of a siren, like a courtesy. I turned and Deveraux pulled up right alongside me, neat and smooth. A short moment later I was in her front passenger seat, with nothing between us except her holstered shotgun.

Chapter

34

The first thing I said was, “Long lunch.” Which was supposed to be just a descriptive comment, but she took it as more. She said, “Jealous?”

“Depends what you ate. I had a cheeseburger.”

“We had rare roast beef and horseradish sauce. With roast potatoes. It was very good. But you must know that. You must eat in the OC all the time.”

“How was the conversation?”

“Challenging.”

“In what way?”

“First tell me what you’ve been doing.”

“Me? I’ve been eating humble pie. Metaphorically, at least.”

“How so?”

“I went back to the wrecked car. I was under orders to destroy the license plate. But it was already gone. The debris field had been picked clean, very methodically. There was a big force out there at some point this morning. So I think you’re right. There are boots on the ground outside Kelham’s fence. They’re operating an exclusion zone. They were diverted to the clean up because someone at the Pentagon didn’t trust me to do it.”

Deveraux didn’t answer.

“Then I took a long walk,” I said.

Deveraux asked, “Did you see the gravel pile?”

“I saw it this morning,” I said. “I went back for a closer look.”

“Thinking about Janice May Chapman?”

“Obviously.”

“It’s a coincidence,” she said. “Black-on-white rapes are incredibly rare in Mississippi. No matter what folks want to believe.”

“A white guy could have taken her there.”

“Unlikely. He’d have stuck out like a sore thumb. He’d have been risking a hundred witnesses.”

“Shawna Lindsay’s body was found there. I talked to her kid brother.”

“Where else would it be found? It’s a vacant lot. That’s where bodies get dumped.”

“Was she killed there?”

“I don’t think so. There was no blood.”

“At the scene or inside her?”

“Neither one.”

“What do you make of that?”

“Same guy.”

“And?”

“Addiction to risk,” she said. “June, November, March, the bottom of the socioeconomic scale, then the middle, then the top. By Carter County standards, that is. He started safe and got progressively riskier. No one cares about poor black girls. Chapman was the first really visible victim.”

“You care about poor black girls.”

“But you know how it is. An investigation can’t sustain itself all on its own. It needs an external source of energy. It needs outrage.”

“And the news media’s gone?”

¨And there wasn´t any?´´

“There was pain, obviously. And sorrow, and suffering. But mostly there was resignation. And familiarity. Business as usual. If all the murdered women of Mississippi rose up tonight and marched through town, you’d notice two things. It would be a very long parade, and most of the marchers would be black. Poor black girls have been getting killed here forever. White women with money, not so often.”

“What was the McClatchy girl’s name?”

“Rosemary.”

“Where was her body found?”

“In the ditch near the crossing. The other side of the tracks.”

“Any blood?”

“None at all.”

“Was she raped?”

“No.”

“Was Shawna Lindsay?”

“No.”

“So Janice May Chapman was another kind of escalation.”

“Apparently.”

“Did Rosemary McClatchy have a connection with Kelham?”

“Of course she did. You saw her photograph. Kelham guys were lining up at her door with their tongues hanging out. She stepped out with a string of them.”

“Black guys or white guys?”

“Both.”

“Officers or enlisted men?”

“Both.”

“Any suspects?”

“I had no probable cause even to ask questions. She wasn’t seen with anyone from Kelham for at least two weeks before she was killed. My jurisdiction ends at Kelham’s fence. They wouldn’t have let me through the gate.”

“They let you through the gate today.”

“Yes,” she said. “They did.”

“What is Munro like?” I asked.

“Challenging,” she said again.

We thumped up over the tracks and parked just beyond them, with the straight road west in front of us, and the ditch where Rosemary McClatchy had been found on our right, and the turn into Main Street ahead and on our left. A standard cop instinct. If in doubt, pull over and park where people can see you. It feels like doing something, even when it isn’t.

Deveraux said, “Obviously I started out with the baseline assumption that Munro would be lying through his teeth. Job one for him is to cover the army’s ass. I understand that, and I don’t blame him for it. He’s under orders, the same way you are.”

“And?”

“I asked him about the exclusion zone. He denied it, of course.”

“He would have to,” I said.

She nodded. “But then he went ahead and tried to prove it to me. He toured me all over. That’s why I was gone so long. He’s running a very tight ship. Every last man is confined to quarters. There are MPs everywhere. The MPs are watching each other, as well as everyone else. The armory is under guard. The logs show no weapons in or out for two solid days.”

“And?”

“Well, naturally I assumed I was getting conned big time. And sure enough, there were two hundred empty beds. So naturally I assumed they’ve got a shadow force bivouacked in the woods somewhere. But Munro said no, that’s a full company currently deployed elsewhere for a month. He swore blind. And I believed him, ultimately, because like everyone else I’ve heard the planes come in and out, and I’ve seen the faces come and go.”

I nodded. *Alpha Company*, I thought. *Kosovo*.

She said, “So in the end it all added up. Munro showed me a lot of evidence and it was all very consistent. And no one can run a con that perfect. So there is no exclusion zone. I was wrong. And you must be wrong about the debris field. It must have been local kids, scavenging.”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “It looked like a very organized search.”

She paused a beat. “Then maybe the 75th is sending people directly from Benning. Which is entirely possible. Maybe they’re living in the woods around the fence. All Munro proved is that no one is leaving Kelham. He could be one of those guys who tells you a small truth in order to hide a bigger lie.”

“Sounds like you didn’t like him much.”

“I liked him well enough. He’s smart and he’s loyal to the army. But if we’d both been Marine MPs at the same time I’d have been worried. I’d have seen him as a serious rival. There’s something about him. He’s the type of guy you don’t want to see moving into your office. He’s too ambitious. And too good.”

“What did he say about Janice May Chapman?”

“He gave me what appeared to be a very expert summary of what appeared to be a very expert investigation which appeared to prove no one from Kelham was ever involved with anything.”

“But you didn’t believe it?”

“I almost did,” she said.

“But?”

But.

“He couldn’t hide the rivalry. He made it clear. It’s him against me. It’s the army against the local sheriff. That’s the challenge. He wants the world to think the bad guy is on my side of the fence. But I wasn’t born yesterday. What the hell else would he want the world to think?”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

“What do you want to do?”

“He doesn’t respect the Marines, either. Him against me means the army against the Corps. Which is a bad fight to pick. So if he wants rivalry, I want to give it right back. I want to take him on. I want to beat him like a rented mule. I want to find the truth somehow and stick it up his ass.”

“Do you think you can do that?”

She said, “I can if you help me.”

Chapter

35

We sat in the idling Caprice for a long minute, saying nothing. The car must have had ten thousand hours of stake-out duty on it. From its previous life, in Chicago or New Orleans or wherever. Every pore of every interior surface was thick with sweat and odor and exhaustion. Grime was crusted everywhere. The floor mats had separated into hard tufts of fiber, each one like a flattened pearl.

Deveraux said, “I apologize.”

I said, “For what?”

“For asking you to help me. It wasn’t fair. Forget I said anything.”

“OK.”

“Can I let you out somewhere?”

I said, “Let’s go talk to Janice May Chapman’s nosy neighbors.”

“No,” she said. “I can’t let you do that. I can’t let you turn against your own people.”

“Maybe I wouldn’t be turning against my own people,” I said. “Maybe I would be doing exactly what my own people wanted me to do all along. Because maybe I would be helping Munro, not you. Because he might be right, you know. We still have no idea who did what here.”

We. She didn’t correct me. Instead she said, “But what’s your best guess?”

I thought about the limousines scurrying in and out of Fort Kelham, carrying expensive lawyers. I thought about the exclusion zone, and the panic in John James Frazer’s voice, on the phone from the Pentagon. Senate Liaison. I said, “My best guess is it was a Kelham guy.”

“You sure you want to take the risk of finding out for sure?”

“Talking to a man with a gun is a risk. Asking questions isn’t.”

I believed that then, back in 1997.

Janice May Chapman’s house was a hundred yards from the railroad track, one of the last three dwellings on a dead-end lane a mile south and east of Main Street. It was a small place, set back in a wedge-shaped yard off of a circular bulge where traffic could turn around at the end of the street. It was facing two other houses, as if it was nine o’clock on a dial and they were two and four. It was maybe fifty years old, but it had been updated with new siding and a new roof and some diligent landscaping. Both of its neighbors were in a similar state of good repair, as had been all the previous houses on the street. Clearly this was Carter Crossing’s middle class enclave. Lawns were green and weed free. Driveways were paved and uncracked. Mailbox posts were exactly vertical. The only real-estate negative was the train, but there was only one of those a day. One minute out of fourteen hundred and forty. Not a bad deal.

Chapman’s house had a full-width front porch, roofed over for shade, railed in with fancy millwork spindles, and equipped with a matched pair of white rocking chairs and a rag mat in various muted colors. Both her neighbors had the exact same thing going on, the only difference being that both their porches were occupied, each by a white-haired old lady wearing a floral-print housedress and sitting bolt upright in a rocker and staring at us.

We sat in the car for a minute and then Deveraux rolled forward and parked right in the middle of the turnaround. We got out and stood for a second in the afternoon light.

“Which one first?” I asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Deveraux said. “Whichever, the other one will be right over within about thirty seconds.”

Which is exactly what happened. We chose the right-hand house, the one at four o’clock on the dial, and before we were three steps onto its porch the neighbor from the two o’clock house was right behind us. Deveraux made the introductions. She gave the ladies my name and said I was an investigator from the army. Up close the ladies were slightly different from one another. One was older, the other was thinner. But they were broadly similar. Thin necks, pursed

lips, haloes of white hair. They welcomed me respectfully. They were from a generation that liked the army, and knew something about it. No question they had had husbands or brothers or sons in uniform, World War Two, Korea, Vietnam.

I turned and checked the view from the porch. Chapman's house was neatly triangulated by her two neighbors. Like a focal point. Like a target. The two neighbors' porches were exactly where the infantry would set up machine gun nests for effective enfilade fire.

I turned back and Deveraux ran through what she had already discussed. She asked for confirmation of every point and got it. All negative. No, neither of the two ladies had seen Chapman leave her house on the day she had died. Not in the morning, not in the afternoon, not in the evening. Not on foot, not in her car, not in anybody else's car. No, nothing new had come to either one of them. They had nothing to add.

The next question was tactically difficult, so Deveraux left it to me. I asked, "Were there intervals when something could have happened that you didn't see?" In other words: *Just exactly how nosy are you? Were there moments when you weren't staring at your neighbor?*

Both ladies saw the implication, of course, and they clucked and pursed and fussed for a minute, but the gravity of the situation meant more to them than their wounded feelings, and they came out and admitted that no, they had the situation pretty much sewn up around the clock. Both liked to sit on their porches when they weren't otherwise occupied, and they tended to be otherwise occupied at different times. Both had bedrooms at the front of their houses, and neither tried to sleep until the midnight train had passed, and then afterward both were light sleepers anyway, so not much escaped them at night, either.

I asked, "Was there usually much coming and going over there?"

The ladies conferred and launched a long, complicated narrative that threatened to go all the way back to the American Revolution. I started to tune it out until I realized they were describing a fairly active social calendar that about half a year ago had settled into a month-on, month-off pattern, first of social frenzy, and then of complete inactivity. Feast or famine. Chapman was either never out, or always out, first four or five weeks in one condition, and then four or five weeks in the other.

Bravo Company, in Kosovo.

Bravo Company, at home.

Not good.

I asked, “Did she have a boyfriend?”

She had several, they said, with prim delight. Sometimes all at once. Practically a parade. They listed sequential glimpsed sightings, all of polite young men with short hair, all in what they called dungaree pants, all in what they called undershirts, some in what they called motorcycle coats.

Jeans, T-shirts, leather jackets.

Soldiers, obviously, off duty.

Not good.

I asked, “Was there anyone in particular? Anyone special?”

They conferred again and agreed a period of relative stability had commenced three or perhaps four months earlier. The parade of suitors had slowed, first to a trickle, and then it had stopped altogether and been replaced by the attentions of a lone man, once again described as polite, young, short-haired, but always inappropriately dressed on the many occasions they had seen him. Jeans, T-shirts, leather jackets. In their day, a gentleman called on his belle in a suit and a tie.

I asked, “What did they do together?”

They went out, the ladies said. Sometimes in the afternoons, but most often in the evenings. Probably to bars. There was very little in the way of alternative entertainment in that corner of the state. The nearest picture house was in a town called Corinth. There had been a vaudeville theater in Tupelo, but it had closed many years ago. The couple tended to come back late, sometimes after midnight, after the train had passed. Sometimes the suitor would stay an hour or two, but to their certain knowledge he had never spent the night.

I asked, “When was the last time you saw her?”

I asked, "When was the last time you saw her?"

The day before she died, they said. She had left her house at seven o'clock in the evening. The same suitor had come calling for her, right at the top of the hour, quite formally.

"What was Janice wearing that night?" I asked.

A yellow dress, they said, knee length but low cut.

"Did her friend show up in his own car?" I asked.

Yes, they said, he did.

"What kind of a car was it?"

It was a blue car, they said.

Chapter

36

We left both ladies on one porch and crossed the street to take a closer look at Chapman's house. It was very much the same as the neighbors' places. It was classic tract housing, built fast in uniform batches for returning military and their new baby boom families right after the end of World War Two. Then each individual example had grown slightly different from all the others over the passing years, the same way identical triplets might evolve differently with age. Chapman's choice had ended up modest and unassuming, but pleasant. Someone had put neat gingerbread trim all over it, and the front door had been replaced.

We stood on the porch and I looked in a window and saw a small square living room, full of furniture that looked pretty new. There was a loveseat and an armchair and a small television set on a low chest of drawers. There was a VHS player and some tapes next to it. The living room door was open and I could see part of a narrow hallway beyond. I shifted position and craned my neck for a better look.

"Go inside if you want," Deveraux said, behind me.

"Really?"

"The door is unlocked. It was unlocked when we got here."

"Is that usual?"

"Not unusual. We never found her key."

"Not in her pocketbook?"

"She didn't have a pocketbook with her. She seems to have left it in the kitchen."

"Is *that* usual?"

"She didn't smoke," Deveraux said. "She certainly didn't pay for drinks. Why

would she need a pocketbook?"

"Makeup?" I said.

"Twenty-seven-year-olds don't powder their noses halfway through the evening. Not like they used to. Not anymore."

I opened the front door and stepped inside the house. It was neat and clean, but the air was still and heavy. The floors and the rugs and the paint and the furniture was all fresh, but not brand new. There was an eat-in kitchen across the hall from the living room, with two bedrooms behind, and presumably a bathroom.

"Nice place," I said. "You could buy it. It would be better than the Toussaint's hotel."

Deveraux said, "With those old biddies across the street, watching me all the time? I'd go crazy inside a week."

I smiled. She had a point.

She said, "I wouldn't buy it even without the biddies. I wouldn't want to live like this. Not at all what I'm used to."

I nodded. Said nothing.

Then she said, "Actually I couldn't buy it even if I wanted to. We don't know who the next of kin is. I wouldn't know who to talk to."

"No will?"

"She was twenty-seven years old."

"No paperwork anywhere?"

"We haven't found any so far."

"No mortgage?"

"Nothing on record with the county."

“No family?”

“No one recalls her mentioning any.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

I moved on down the hallway.

“Look around,” Deveraux called after me. “Feel free. Make yourself at home. But tell me if you find something I should see.”

I walked from room to room, feeling the kind of trespass feelings I get every time I walk through a dead person’s house. There were minor examples of disarray here and there, the kind of things that would have been cleaned up and tidied away before an expected guest’s arrival. They humanized the place a little, but on the whole it was a bland and soulless home. There was too much uniformity. All the furniture matched. It looked like it had been selected from the same range from the same manufacturer, all at the same time. All the rugs went well together. All the paint was the same color. There were no pictures on the walls, no photographs on the shelves. No books. No souvenirs, no prized possessions.

The bathroom was clean. The tub and the towels were dry. The medicine cabinet above the sink had a mirrored door, and behind it were over-the-counter analgesics, and toothpaste, and tampons, and dental floss, and spare soap and shampoo. The main bedroom had nothing of interest in it except a bed, which was made, but not well. The second bedroom had a narrower bed that looked like it had never been used.

The kitchen was fitted out with a range of useful stuff, but on balance I doubted that Chapman had been a gourmet cook. Her pocketbook was stowed neatly on the counter, resting upright against the side of the refrigerator. It was basically a small leather pouch, with a flap lid designed to close magnetically. It was navy blue in color, which might or might not have been the reason it had been left behind. I wasn’t sure of the current protocol involved in matching a blue bag with a yellow dress. Maybe not permitted. Although plenty of medals had blue and yellow in their ribbons, and the women soldiers I knew would have killed to get one, literally.

I opened the flap and looked in the bag. There was a slim leather wallet, dark red, and a convenience pack of tissues, unopened, and a pen, and some coins, and some crumbs, and a car key. The car key had a long serrated shaft, and a black plastic head molded to feel good to the thumbs, and embossed with a large letter *H*.

"Honda," Deveraux said, beside me. "A Honda Civic. Bought new three years ago from a dealer in Tupelo. All up to date in terms of maintenance."

"Where is it?" I asked.

Deveraux pointed to a door. "In her garage."

I took the wallet out of the bag. It had nothing in it except cash money and a Mississippi driver's license, issued three years before. The picture on it dimmed about half of Chapman's allure, but it was still well worth looking at. The money added up to less than thirty dollars.

I put the wallet back and restacked the bag where it had been, next to the refrigerator. I opened the door Deveraux had pointed out, and behind it I found a tiny mud room that had two more doors in it, one letting out to the back yard on my left, and another to the garage straight ahead. The garage was completely empty apart from the car. The Honda. A small import, silver in color, clean and undamaged, sitting there cold and patient and smelling faintly of oil and unburned hydrocarbons. All around it was nothing but empty swept concrete. No unopened moving boxes, no chairs with the stuffing coming out, no abandoned projects, no junk, no clutter.

Nothing at all.

Unusual.

I opened the door to the back yard and stepped out. Deveraux came out with me and asked, "So, was there anything in there I should have seen?"

"Yes," I said. "There were things in there anyone should have seen."

"So what did I miss?"

"Nothing," I said. "They weren't there to *be* seen. That's my point. We should

have seen certain things, but we didn’t. Because certain things were missing.”

“What things?” she asked.

“Later,” I said, because by that point I had seen something else.

Chapter

37

Janice May Chapman's back yard was not maintained to the same standard as her front yard. In fact it was barely maintained at all. It was almost completely neglected. It was mostly lawn, and it looked a little sad and sunken. It was mowed, but what had been mowed was basically weed, not grass. At the far end was a low panel fence, made of wood, starved of stain or protection, with the center panel fallen out and laid aside.

What I had seen from the door was a faint narrow path through the mowed weeds. It was almost imperceptible. Almost not there at all. Only the late-afternoon sun made it visible. The light came in low from one side and showed a ghostly trail, where the weeds were a little brushed and crushed and bruised. A little darker than the rest of the lawn. The path led through a curved trajectory straight to the hole in the fence. It had been made by feet, going back and forth.

I got two steps along it and stopped again. The ground was crunching under my soles. I looked down. Deveraux bumped into my back.

The second time we had ever touched.

"What?" she said.

I looked up again.

"One thing at a time," I said, and started walking again.

The path led off the weeds, through the gap in the fence, and out into a barren abandoned field about a hundred yards in width. At the far edge of the field was the railroad track. Halfway along the right-hand edge of the field were two tumbled gateposts, and beyond them was a dirt road that ran east and west. West, I guessed, toward more old field entrances and a link to the winding continuation of Main Street, and east toward the railroad track, where it dead-ended.

The old field had tire tracks all the way across it. They came in between the ruined gateposts and ran through a wide right-angle turn straight toward the gap

ruined gateposts and ran through a wide right-angle turn straight toward the gap in Chapman's fence. They ended close to where I was standing, in a wide looping triangle, where cars had backed up and turned, ready for the return trip.

"She got sick of the old biddies," I said. "She was playing games with them. Sometimes she came out the front, and sometimes she came out the back. And I bet sometimes the boyfriends said goodnight and drove right around the block for more."

Deveraux said, "Shit."

"Can't blame her. Or the boyfriends. Or the biddies, really. People do what they do."

"But it makes their evidence meaningless."

"That's what she wanted. She didn't know it was ever going to be important."

"Now we don't know when she came and went on that last day."

I stood in the silence and looked all around. Nothing to see. No other houses, no other people. An empty landscape. Total privacy.

Then I turned and looked back at the weed patch that passed for a lawn.

"What?" Deveraux said again.

"She bought this place three years ago, right?"

"Yes."

"She was twenty-four at the time."

"Yes."

"Is that usual? Twenty-four-year-olds owning real estate?"

"Maybe not very usual."

"With no mortgage?"

"Definitely not very usual. But what has that got to do with her yard?"

“She wasn’t much of a gardener.”

“That’s not a crime.”

“The previous owner wasn’t much of a gardener either. Did you know him? Or her?”

“I was still in the Corps three years ago.”

“Not a long-time resident, that you remember from being a kid? Maybe a third old biddy, like a matched set?”

“Why?”

“No reason. Not important. But whoever, they didn’t like mowing their lawn. So they dug it up and replaced it with something else.”

“With what?”

“Go take a look.”

She backtracked through the gap in the fence and walked halfway along the path and squatted down. She parted the weedy stalks and dug her fingertips into the surface underneath. She raked them back and forth and then she looked up at me and said, “Gravel.”

The previous owner had tired of lawn care and opted for raked stones. Like a Japanese garden, maybe, or like the low-water-use yards conscientious Californians were starting to put in. Maybe there had been earthenware tubs here and there, full of cheerful flowers. Or maybe not. It was impossible to tell. But it was clear the gravel had not been a total success. Not a labor-saving cure-all. It had been laid thin. The subsoil had been full of weed roots. Regular applications of herbicide had been called for.

Janice May Chapman had not continued the herbicide applications. That was clear. No hosepipe in her garage. No watering can. Rural Mississippi. Agricultural land. Rain and sun. Those weeds had come boiling up like madmen. Some boyfriend had brought over a gasoline mower and hacked them back. Some nice guy with plenty of energy. The kind of guy who doesn’t like mess and disarray. A soldier, almost certainly. The kind of guy who does things for

and disarray? A soldier, almost certainly? The kind of guy who does things for people, gets things neat, and then keeps them neat.

Deveraux asked, “So what are you saying? She was raped here?”

“Maybe she wasn’t raped at all.”

Deveraux said nothing.

“It’s possible she wasn’t,” I said. “Think about it. A sunny afternoon, total privacy. They’re sitting out back because they don’t want to sit on the front porch with the old biddies watching every move. They’re on the stoop, they’re feeling good, they get right to it.”

“On the lawn?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

She looked right at me and said, “Like you told the doctor, it would depend on who I was with.”

We spent the next few minutes talking about injuries. I did the thing with my forearm again. I pressed it down and mashed it around. I simulated the throes of passion. I came up with plenty of green chlorophyll stains and a smear of dry stony mud. When I wiped off the dirt we both saw the same kind of small red marks we had seen on Janice May Chapman’s corpse. They were superficial and there was no broken skin, but we both agreed Chapman might have been at it longer, and harder, with more weight and force. “We need to go inside again,” I said.

We found Chapman’s laundry basket in the bathroom. It was a rectangular wicker thing, with a lid. Painted white. On top of the pile inside was a short sundress. It had cap sleeves and was printed with red and white pinstripes. It was rucked and creased at the waist. It had grass stains on the upper back. Next item down in the laundry pile was a hand towel. Then a white blouse.

“No underwear,” Deveraux said.

“Evidently,” I said.

“The rapist kept a souvenir.”

“She wasn’t wearing any. Her boyfriend was coming over.”

“It’s March.”

“What was the weather like that day?”

“It was warm,” Deveraux said. “And sunny. It was a nice day.”

“Rosemary McClatchy wasn’t raped,” I said. “Nor was Shawna Lindsay. Escalation is one thing. A complete change in MO is another.”

Deveraux didn’t answer that. She stepped out of the bathroom into the hallway. The center point of the little house. She looked all around. She asked, “What did I miss here? What should be here that isn’t?”

“Something more than three years old,” I said. “She moved here from somewhere else, and she should have brought things with her. At least a few things. Books, maybe. Or photographs. Maybe a favorite chair or something.”

“Twenty-four-year-olds aren’t very sentimental.”

“They keep some little thing.”

“What did you keep when you were twenty-four?”

“I’m different. You’re different.”

“So what are you saying?”

“I’m saying she showed up here three years ago out of the blue and brought nothing with her. She bought a house and a car and got a local driver’s license. She bought a houseful of new furniture. All for cash. She doesn’t have a rich daddy or his picture would be next to the TV in a silver frame. I want to know who she was.”

Chapter

38

I followed Deveraux from room to room while she checked for herself. Paint on the walls, still fresh. Loveseat and armchair in the living room, still new. A recent television set. A fancy VHS player. Even the pots and pans and knives and forks in the kitchen showed no nicks or scratches from long-term use.

There were no clothes in the closet older than a couple of seasons. No old prom dress wrapped in plastic. No old cheerleader outfit. No photographs of family. No keepsakes. No old letters. No softball trophies, no jewelry box with a busted ballerina. No battered stuffed animals preserved from childhood years.

“Does it matter?” Deveraux said. “She was just a random victim, after all.”

“She’s a loose end,” I said. “I don’t like loose ends.”

“She was already here when I got back to town. I never thought about it. I mean, people come and go all the time. This is America.”

“Did you ever hear anything about her background?”

“Nothing.”

“No rumors or assumptions?”

“None at all.”

“Did she have a job?”

“No.”

“Accent?”

“The Midwest, maybe. Or just south of it. The heartland, anyway. I only spoke to her once.”

“Did you fingerprint the corpse?”

“No. Why would we? We knew who she was.”

“Did you know?”

“Too late now.”

I nodded. By now Chapman’s skin would be sloughing off her fingers like a soft old glove. It would be wrinkling and tearing like a wet paper bag. I asked, “Do you have a fingerprint kit in the car?”

She shook her head. “Butler does the fingerprinting here. The other deputy. He took a course with the Jackson PD.”

“You should get him here. He can take prints from the house.”

“They won’t all be hers.”

“Nine out of ten will be. He should start with the tampon box.”

“She won’t be on file anywhere. Why would she be? She was a kid. She didn’t serve and she wasn’t a cop.”

I said, “Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

Deveraux used the radio in her car out in the middle of the turnaround. She had chess pieces to move. Pellegrino had to replace Butler at Kelham’s gate. She came back in and said, “Twenty minutes. I have to get back. I have work to do. You wait here. But don’t worry. Butler should do it right. He’s a reasonably smart guy.”

“Smarter than Pellegrino?”

“Everyone is smarter than Pellegrino. My car is smarter than Pellegrino.”

I asked, “Will you have dinner with me?”

She said, “I have to work pretty late.”

“How late?”

“Nine o’clock, maybe.”

“Nine would be fine.”

“Are you paying?”

“Absolutely.”

She paused a beat.

“Like a date?” she asked.

“We might as well,” I said. “There’s only one restaurant in town. We’d probably end up eating together anyway.”

“OK,” she said. “Dinner. Nine o’clock. Thank you.”

Then she said, “Don’t shave, OK?”

I said, “Why not?”

She said, “You look good like that.”

And then she left.

I waited on Janice May Chapman’s front porch, in one of her rocking chairs. Both old ladies watched me from across the street. Deputy Butler showed up just inside his allotted twenty minutes. He was in a car like Pellegrino’s. He left it where Deveraux had left hers, and unfolded himself from the seat, and stepped around to the trunk. He was a tall guy, and well put together, somewhere in his middle thirties. He had long hair for a cop, and a square, solid face. First glance, he wouldn’t be the easiest guy in the world to manage. But maybe not impossible.

He took a black plastic box out of his trunk and walked up Chapman’s driveway toward me. I got out of my chair and held out my hand. Always better to be polite. I said, “Jack Reacher. I’m pleased to meet you.”

He said, “Geezer Butler.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“You play bass guitar?”

“Like I haven’t heard that one before.”

“Was your dad a Black Sabbath fan?”

“My mom too.”

“Are you?”

He nodded. “I’ve got all their records.”

I led him inside. He stood in the hallway, looking around. I said, “The challenge here is to get her prints and no one else’s.”

“To avoid confusion?” he said.

No, I thought. *To avoid a Bravo Company guy lighting up the system. Better safe than sorry*.

I said, “Yes, to avoid confusion.”

“The chief said I should start in the bathroom.”

“Good plan,” I said. “Toothbrush, toothpaste, tampon box, personal things like that. Things that were boxed up or wrapped in cellophane in the store. No one else will have touched them.”

I hung back so as not to crowd him, but I watched him pretty carefully. He was extremely competent. He took twenty minutes and got twenty good prints, all small neat ovals, all obviously a woman’s. We agreed that was an adequate sample, and he packed up his gear and gave me a ride back to town.

I got out of Butler’s car outside the Sheriff’s Department and walked south to the hotel, where I stood on the sidewalk and wrestled with a dilemma. I felt I should go buy a new shirt, but I didn’t want Deveraux to feel that dinner was supposed to be more than just dinner. Or in reality I did want her to feel dinner could be more than just dinner, but I didn’t want her to see me wanting it. I

didn’t want her to feel pushed into anything, and I didn’t want to appear overeager.

But in the end I decided a shirt was just a shirt, so I hiked across to the other side of Main Street and looked at the stores. Most of them were about to close. It was after five o’clock. I found a men’s outfitters three enterprises south of where I started. It didn’t look promising. In the window was a jacket made from some kind of synthetic denim. It glittered and shone in the lights. It looked like it had been knitted out of atomic waste. But the only other shopping choice was the pharmacy, and I didn’t want to show up at dinner wearing a dollar T. So I went in and looked around.

There was plenty more stuff pieced together from dubious fabrics, but there was plenty of plainer stuff too. There was an old guy behind the counter who seemed happy to let me poke around. He had a tape measure draped around his neck. Like a badge of office. Like a doctor wears a stethoscope. He didn’t say anything, but he seemed to understand I was looking for shirts and he either frowned and tutted or beamed and nodded as I moved around from pile to pile, as if I was playing a parlor game, getting warmer and colder in my search.

Eventually I found a white button-down made of heavy cotton. The collar was an eighteen and the sleeves were thirty-seven inches long, which was about my size. I hauled my choice to the counter and asked, “Would this be OK for a job in an office?”

The old guy said, “Yes, sir, it would.”

“Would it impress a person at dinner?”

“I think you’d want something finer, sir. Maybe a pinpoint.”

“So it’s not what you’d call formal?”

“No, sir. Not by a long chalk.”

“OK, I’ll take it.”

It cost me less than the pink shirt from the PX. The old guy wrapped it in brown paper and taped it up into a little parcel. I carried it back across the street. I planned to dump it in my room. I made it into the hotel lobby just in time to see the server setting off up the stairs in a big hurry. He turned when he heard the

the owner setting off up the stairs in a big hurry. He turned when he heard the door, and he saw it was me and he stopped. He was out of breath. He said, “Your uncle is on the phone again.”

Chapter

39

I took the call alone in the back office, as before. Garber was tentative from the get-go, which made me uneasy. His first question was, “How are you?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “You?”

“How’s it going down there?”

“Bad,” I said.

“With the sheriff?”

“No, she’s OK.”

“Elizabeth Deveraux, right? We’re having her checked out.”

“How?”

“We’re having a quiet word with the Marine Corps.”

“Why?”

“Maybe we can get you something you can use against her. You might need leverage at some point.”

“Save your effort. She’s not the problem.”

“So what is?”

“We are,” I said. “Or you are. Or whoever. The army, I mean. They’re patrolling outside of Kelham’s fence and shooting people.”

“That’s categorically impossible.”

“I’ve seen the blood. And the car wreck has been sanitized.”

“That can’t be happening.”

“It is happening. And you need to stop it happening. Because right now you’ve got a big problem, but you’re going to turn it into World War Three.”

“You must be mistaken.”

“There are two guys beat up and one guy dead down here. I’m not mistaken.”

“Dead?”

“As in no longer alive.”

“How?”

“He bled out through a gunshot wound to the thigh. There was a half-assed attempt to patch it up with a GI field dressing. And I found a NATO shell case at the scene.”

“That’s not us. I would know.”

“Would you?” I said. “Or would I? You’re up there guessing and I’m down here looking.”

“It’s not legal.”

“Tell me about it. Worst case, it’s a policy decision. Best case, someone’s gone rogue. You need to find out which and get it stopped.”

“How?” Garber said. “You want me to walk up to a random selection of senior officers and accuse them of an egregious breach of the law? Maybe the worst ever in American military history? I’d be locked up before lunch and court-martialed the next morning.”

I paused. Breathed. Asked, “Are there names I shouldn’t say on an open line?”

Garber said, “There are names you shouldn’t even know.”

“This whole thing is drifting out of control. It’s going from bad to worse. I’ve seen three lawyers heading in and out of Kelham. Someone needs to make a decision. The officer in question needs to be pulled out and redeployed. Right

now.”

“That’s not going to happen. Not as long as Kosovo is important. This guy could stop a war singlehanded and all by himself.”

“He’s one of four hundred men, for Christ’s sake.”

“Not according to the political ad campaigns two years from now. Think about it. He’s going to be the Lone Ranger.”

“He’s going to be locked up in Leavenworth.”

“Munro doesn’t think so. He says the officer in question is likely innocent.”

“Then we should act like it. We should stop with the lawyers and we should stop patrolling outside the fence.”

“We’re not patrolling outside the fence.”

I gave up. “Anything else?”

“One thing,” Garber said. “I have to do this. I hope you understand.”

“Try me.”

“You got a postcard from your brother.”

“Where?”

“At your office.”

“And you read it?”

“An army officer has no reasonable expectation of privacy.”

“Is that in the regulations too? Along with the hairstyles?”

“You need to explain the message to me.”

“Why? What does it say?”

“The picture on the front is downtown Atlanta. The card was mailed from the

"The picture on the front is downtown Atlanta. The card was mailed from the Atlanta airport eleven days ago. The text reads: Heading to a town called Margrave, south of here, business, but heard a story Blind Blake died there, will let you know. Then it's signed Joe, his name."

"I know my brother's name."

"What does the message mean?"

"It's a personal note."

"I'm ordering you to explain it to me. I apologize, but I have to do this."

"You went to elementary school. You can read."

"What does it mean?"

"It means what it says. He's heading south of Atlanta to a town called Margrave."

"Who was Blind Blake?"

"A guitar player, from way back. Blues music. One of the first legends."

"Why would Joe make a point of informing you about that?"

"Shared interest."

"What does Joe mean when he says he will let you know?"

"He means what he says."

"Let you know about what?"

"About the Blind Blake legend, of course. About whether he died there."

"Why does it matter where this man died?"

"It doesn't matter. It's just a thing. Like collecting baseball cards."

"So this is really about baseball cards?"

"[illegible]?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Is this a code for something else?"

"A code? Why the hell would it be a code?"

Garber said, "You called his office today."

"You know about that?"

"There's a reporting mechanism in place."

"That kid? The girl in his office?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss the details. But I need to know why you called him."

"He's my brother."

"But why now? Were you going to ask him something?"

"Yes," I said. "I was going to ask him how he's doing. Purely social."

"Why now? Did something at Kelham provoke the inquiry?"

"This is none of your business."

"Everything is my business. Help me out here, Reacher."

I said, "Two black women were killed here before Janice May Chapman. Did you even know that? Because that's something you should be bearing in mind, if you're thinking about political campaigns. We ignored them and then our heads exploded when a white woman got killed."

"How does this relate to Joe?"

"I met the second victim's brother. Made me think about family. That's all it was."

"Did Joe tell you anything about money from Kosovo?"

"I didn't get him. He was out of the office. He was in Georgia."

“Atlanta again? Or Margrave?”

“I have no idea. Georgia is a big state.”

“OK,” Garber said. “I apologize for the intrusion.”

I asked, “Who exactly is worried about money from Kosovo?”

He said, “I’m not at liberty to discuss that.”

I hung up with Garber and breathed in and out for a spell, and then I carried my new shirt upstairs and left it on my bed. I started to think about dinner with Elizabeth Deveraux. Three hours to go, and only one more thing to do beforehand.

Chapter

40

I came out of the front of the hotel and looped back through the dog-leg alley between the pharmacy and the hardware store and came out the other end between the loan office and Brannan's bar. Where Janice May Chapman's body had been found. The sand pile was still there, dry and crusted and powdery and a little redistributed by the breeze. I stepped around it and checked activity on the one-sided street. Not much was going on. Some of the bars were closed, because the base was closed. No point in opening without customers. A simple economic calculation.

But Brannan's bar was open. Defiantly optimistic, or maybe just maintaining some longstanding tradition. I went in and found nobody there except two similar guys fussing with stuff in the drinks well. They looked like brothers. Middle thirties, maybe two years apart, like Joe and me. Wise to the ways of the world, which was going to give me the advantage. Their place was like a thousand base-town bars I had seen before, a complex boxed-in machine designed to turn boredom into cash. It was a decent size. I guessed it had been a small restaurant in the past, but small restaurants make big bars. The decor was maybe a little better than most. There were travel posters on the walls, of the world's great cities photographed at night. No local stuff, which was smart. If you're stuck for six months in the back of beyond, you don't want to be reminded of it at every turn.

"Got coffee?" I asked.

They said no, which didn't surprise me very much.

I said, "My name is Jack Reacher and I'm an MP with a dinner date coming up."

They didn't follow.

I said, "Which means that usually I'd have time to hang around all night and weasel stuff out of you in the normal course of conversation, but I don't have time for that on this occasion, so we'll have to rely on a straightforward [illegible] OK?"

question-and-answer session, OK?"

They got the message. Base-town bar owners worry about MPs. Easiest thing in the world to put a particular establishment on a local no-go list, for a week, or a month. Or forever. They introduced themselves as Jonathan and Hunter Brannan, brothers, inheritors of a business started by their grandmother back in the railroad days. She had sold tea and fancy cakes, and she had made a nice living. Their father had switched to alcohol when the trains stopped and the army arrived. They were a nice enough pair of guys. And realistic. They ran the best bar in town, so they couldn't deny they saw everybody from time to time.

"Janice Chapman came here," I said. "The woman who got killed."

They agreed that yes, she did. No evasion. Everyone comes to Brannan's.

I asked, "With the same guy every recent time?"

They agreed that yes, that was the case.

I asked, "Who was he?"

Hunter Brannan said, "His name was Reed. Don't know much about him apart from that. But he was a big dog. You can always tell, by the way the others react."

"Was he a regular customer?"

"They all are."

"Was he in here that night?"

"That's a tough question. This place is usually packed."

"Try to remember."

"I would say he was. For the early part of the evening, at least. I don't recall seeing him later."

"What car does he drive?"

"Some old thing. Blue, I think."

I asked, “How long has he been coming here?”

“A year or so, I guess. But he’s one of the in-and-out guys.”

“What does that mean?”

“They’ve got a couple of squads over there. They go somewhere, and then they come back. A month on, a month off.”

“Did you see him with previous girlfriends?”

Jonathan Brannan said, “A guy like that, he always has arm candy.”

“Who in particular?”

“Whoever was the prettiest. Whoever was willing to put out, I guess.”

“Black or white?”

“Both. He’s pretty much an equal opportunities type of guy.”

“Remember any names?”

“No,” Hunter Brannan said. “But I remember feeling pretty jealous a couple of times.”

I went back to the hotel. Two hours until dinner. I spent the first hour taking a nap, because I was tired, and because I was figuring I wouldn’t be sleeping again too soon. Hoping I wouldn’t be, anyway. Hope springs eternal. I woke myself up at eight o’clock and unpacked my new shirt. I brushed my teeth with water and chewed some gum. Then I took a long hot shower, plenty of soap, plenty of shampoo.

I put on my new shirt and rolled the sleeves level with my elbows. The shirt was tight across the shoulders, so I left the top two buttons undone. I tucked the tails into my pants and put my shoes on and shined them one at a time against the backs of my calves.

I checked the mirror.

I looked exactly like a guy who wants to get laid. Which I was. There was

nothing to be done about it.

I dumped my old shirts in the trash can and left my room and went down the stairs and stepped out to the darkness of the street. A voice from the shadows behind me said, “Hello again, soldier boy.”

Chapter

41

Ahead of me across the street were three pick-up trucks parked at the curb. Two that I recognized, and one that I didn't. All the doors were open. Legs were dangling. Cigarettes were glowing. Smoke was drifting. I stepped left and half-turned and saw the alpha dog. The McKinney cousin. His face was still a mess. He was standing under one of the hotel's busted lamps. His arms were down by his sides, and his hands were away from his hips, and his thumbs were away from his fingers. He was all fired up and ready.

Across the street five guys slipped out of the pick-up trucks. They started toward me. I saw the beta dog, and the beer-for-breakfast guy, and the biker with the bad back, and two guys I hadn't seen before, each of them looking like the other four. Same region, same family, or both.

I stayed on the sidewalk. With six guys, I didn't want any of them behind me. I wanted a wall at my back. The alpha dog stepped off the sidewalk into the gutter and met the others as the right-hand item in a neat six-man arc. They all stayed in the street, eight or ten feet from me. Out of reach, but I could smell them. They were all doing the ape thing with their arms and hands and thumbs. Like gunfighters with no guns.

"Six of you?" I said. "Is that it?"

No answer.

"That's kind of incremental, isn't it?" I said. "I was hoping for something a little more radical. Like the difference between an airborne company and an armored division. I guess we were thinking along different lines. I have to say, I'm kind of disappointed."

No answer.

I said, "Anyway, guys, I'm sorry, but I have a dinner date."

They all took a step forward, bringing them closer to each other and closer to

They all took a step forward, bringing them closer to each other and closer to me. Six pale faces, sallow in what little light there was.

I said, “I’m wearing a brand new shirt.”

No answer.

Basic rule of thumb with six guys: you have to be quick. You can’t spend more than the bare minimum of time on any one individual. Which means you have to hit each of them one time only. Because that’s the minimum. You can’t hit a guy less than once.

I rehearsed my moves. I figured I would start in the middle. One two three, bang bang bang. The third hit would be the hardest. The third guy would be moving. The first two wouldn’t. They would be rooted to the spot. Shock and surprise. They would go down easy. But the third guy would be reacting by the time I got to him. And unpredictably. He might have a coherent plan in mind, but it wouldn’t be in motion yet. He would still be jerking around with uncontrolled reflex panic.

So I was prepared to miss out on the third guy. Maybe jump straight to the fourth. The third guy might run. Certainly at least one of them would. I have never seen a pack that stayed together after the first few heads hit the pavement.

I said, “Guys, please, I just took a shower.”

There was no answer, which was what I had privately predicted. They all stepped forward again, which is what I expected them to do. So I met them halfway, which seemed polite. I took two long strides, the second of them powering off the edge of the curbstone, two hundred and fifty pounds of moving mass, and I hit the third guy from the left with a straight right that would have taken his teeth out if he’d had any to start with. As it was it snapped his head back and turned his spine and shoulders to jelly and he was gone, from the fight and from my vision, because by then I was already jerking left and scything my right elbow into the second guy, horizontal across the bridge of his nose, a colossal blow full of torque from my waist and full of force from the fact that I was basically falling into him. I saw blood in the air and stamped down hard and reversed my momentum and used the same elbow backward on a guy I sensed behind me. I could tell by the impact he was flinching away and I had caught him on the ear, so I made an instantaneous mental note he might need more

attention later, and then I jerked forward again and changed the angle of attack by kicking the fourth guy full-on in the groin, a satisfying bone-and-flesh *crunch* that simultaneously folded him in half and lifted him off his feet.

Three seconds, three down, one taking an eight count.

Nobody ran.

Another mental note: Mississippi hooligans are made of sterner stuff than most. Or else they're just plain dumber.

The fifth guy got as far as scrabbling at my shoulder. Some kind of an attempt at a punch, or maybe he was going for a choke hold. Maybe he planned to keep me still while the sixth guy landed some blows. I couldn't tell. But whatever, he was sorely disappointed in his ambitions. I exploded backward at him, my whole body moving, my torso twisting, my elbow whipping back, and I caught him in the cheek, and then I used the bounce to jam forward once more, in search of the lone survivor. The sixth guy. He caught his heel on the curb and his arms came up like a scarecrow, which I took as an invitation to pop him in the chest, right in the solar plexus, which was like plugging him into an electrical outlet. He hopped and danced and went down in a heap.

The guy I had hit on the ear was pawing at it like it was coming off. His eyes were closed, which made it not much of a fair fight, but those are always my favorite kind. I lined up and smacked a left hook into his chin.

He went down like a dropped marionette.

I breathed out.

Six for six.

End of story.

I coughed twice and spat on the ground. Then I hustled north. I had a block to go and the clock in my head said it was already one minute past nine.

Chapter

42

I pushed in through the diner door and found the place empty apart from the waitress and the old couple from Toussaint's. They looked to be about halfway through their nightly marathon. The woman had a book, the man had a paper. Deveraux wasn't there yet.

I told the waitress I was expecting company. I asked her for a table for four. I figured the tables for two would be cramped for a long social engagement. She set me up in a spot near the front and I headed for the bathroom.

I rinsed my face and washed my hands and forearms and elbows with hot water and soap. I ran wet fingers through my hair. I breathed in and breathed out. Adrenaline is a bitch. It doesn't know when to quit. I flapped my hands and rolled my shoulders. I took a look in the mirror. My hair was OK. My face was clean.

There was blood on my shirt.

On the pocket. And above. And below. Not much, but some. A definite comma-shaped curl of droplets. Like it had been flung at me. Or like I had walked into a mist. Which I had. The second guy. I had hit him on the bridge of his nose. His nose had bled like a flushing toilet.

I said, "Shit," quietly, to myself.

My old shirts were in the trash in my room.

The stores were all closed.

I edged closer to the sink and took another look in the mirror. The droplets were already drying. Turning brown. Maybe they would end up looking deliberate. Like a logo. Or a pattern. Like a single element taken from a swirling fabric. I had seen similar things. I wasn't sure what they were called. Paisley?

I breathed in, breathed out.

I breathed in, breathed out.

Nothing to be done.

I headed back to the dining room and got there just as Deveraux stepped in through the door.

She wasn't in uniform. She had changed her clothes. She was wearing a silver silk shirt and a black knee-length skirt. High heeled shoes. A silver necklace. The shirt was thin and tight and tiny. It was open at the top. The skirt sat at her waist. I could have spanned her waist with my hands. Her legs were bare. And slim. And long. Her hair was wet from the shower. It was loose on her shoulders. It was spilling down her back. No ponytail. No elastic band. She was smiling, all the way up to her amazing eyes.

I showed her to our table and we sat down facing each other. She was small and neat, centered on her bench. She was wearing perfume. Something faint and subtle. I liked it.

She said, "I'm sorry I'm late."

I said, "No problem."

She said, "You have blood on your shirt."

I said, "Is that what it is?"

"Where did you get it?"

"Across the street from the hotel. There's a store."

"Not the shirt," she said. "The blood. You didn't cut yourself shaving."

"You told me not to."

"I know," she said. "I like you like that."

"You look great too."

"Thank you. I decided to quit early. I went home to change."

"I see that."

“I live in the hotel.”

“I know.”

“Room seventeen.”

“I know.”

“Which has a balcony overlooking the street.”

“You saw?”

“Everything,” she said.

“Then I’m surprised you didn’t break the date.”

“Is it a date?”

“It’s a dinner date.”

She said, “You didn’t let them hit you first.”

“I wouldn’t be here if I had.”

“True,” she said, and smiled. “You were pretty good.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“But you’re killing my budget. Pellegrino and Butler are getting overtime to haul them away. I wanted them gone before the hotel folks finish their dinner. Voters don’t like mayhem in the streets.”

The waitress came by. She brought no menus. Deveraux had been eating there three times a day for two years. She knew the menu. She asked for the cheeseburger. So did I, with coffee to drink. The waitress made a note and went away.

I said, “You had the cheeseburger yesterday.”

Deveraux said, “I have it every day.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “Every day I do the same things and eat the same things.”

“How do you stay thin?”

“Mental energy,” she said. “I worry a lot.”

“About what?”

“Right now about a guy from Oxford, Mississippi. That’s the guy who got shot in the thigh. The doctor brought his personal effects to my office. There was a wallet and a notebook. The guy was a journalist.”

“Big paper?”

“No, freelance. Struggling, probably. His last press pass was two years old. But Oxford has a couple of alternative papers. He was probably trying to sell something to one of them.”

“There’s a school in Oxford, right?”

Deveraux nodded again.

“Ole Miss,” she said. “About as radical as this state gets.”

“Why did the guy come here?”

“I would have loved the chance to ask him. He might have had something I could use.”

The waitress came back with my coffee and a glass of water for Deveraux. Behind my back I heard the old guy from the hotel grunt and turn a page in his paper.

I said, “My CO still denies there are boots on the ground outside the fence.”

Deveraux asked, “How does that make you feel?”

“I don’t know. If he’s lying to me, it will be the first time ever.”

“M[illegible]”

"Maybe someone's lying to him."

"Such cynicism in one so young."

"But don't you think?"

"More than likely."

"So how does *that* make you feel?"

"What are you, a psychiatrist now?"

She smiled. "Just interested. Because I've been there. Does it make you angry?"

"I never get angry. I'm a very placid type of a guy."

"You looked angry twenty minutes ago. With the McKinney family."

"That was just a technical problem. Space and time. I didn't want to be late for dinner. I wasn't angry, really. Well, not at first. I got a bit frustrated later. You know, mentally. I mean, when there were four of them, I gave them the chance to come back in numbers. And what did they do? They added two more guys. That's all. They showed up with a total of six. What is *that* about? It's deliberate disrespect."

Deveraux said, "I think most people would consider six against one to be fairly respectful."

"But I warned them. I told them they'd need more. I was trying to be fair. But they wouldn't listen. It was like talking to the Pentagon."

"How's that going, by the way?"

"Not good. They're as bad as the McKinney family."

"Are you worried?"

"Some people are."

"They should be. The army is going to change."

"The Marines too, then."

"The Marines too, then."

She smiled. "A little, maybe. But not much. The army is the big target. And the easy target. Because the army is boring. The Marines aren't."

"You think?"

"Come on," she said. "We're glamorous. We have a great dress uniform. We do great close-order drill. We do great funerals. You know why we do all that? Because Marines are very good at PR. And we get good advice. Our consultants are better than yours, basically. That's what I'm saying. That's what it comes down to. So you'll lose a lot, and we'll lose a little."

"You have consultants?" I said.

"And lobbyists," she said. "Don't you?"

"I don't think so," I said. I thought about my old pal Stan Lowrey, and his want ads. The waitress brought our meals. Just like the night before. Two big cheeseburgers, two big tangles of fries. I had had the same thing for lunch. I hadn't remembered that. But I was hungry. So I ate. And I watched Deveraux eat. Which was some kind of a threshold. It has to mean something, if you can stand to watch another person eat.

She chewed and swallowed and said, "Anyway, what else did your CO tell you?"

"That he's having you checked out."

She stopped eating. "Why would he?"

"To give me something to use against you."

She smiled. "There's not much there, I'm afraid. I was a good little jarhead. But don't you see? They're proving my case for me. The more desperate they get, the more I know for sure it's some Kelham guy's ass on the line."

She started eating again.

I said, "My CO was also quizzing me on my mail."

"They're reading your letters?"

"They're reading your letters?"

"A postcard from my brother."

"Why?"

"They must think it might help."

"Did it?"

"Not in the least. It was nothing."

"They *are* desperate, aren't they?"

"My CO kept apologizing about it."

"So he should."

"He asked if there was a code in the postcard. But really I think *he* was talking in code. I think he has been all along. Right back at the beginning he wasted ten minutes giving me a hard time about my hair. That's not like him, which I think was the point. He's telling me this isn't him. He's telling me he's in the dark, under orders, doing something he doesn't want to do."

"Nice of him to dump his problems on you. He could have sent someone else."

"Could he, though? Maybe this whole thing was a package deal, soup to nuts, planned up above. Like when the owner picks the team. Me and Munro. Maybe they're getting ready to thin the herd, and we're being given a loyalty test."

"Munro told me he knows you by reputation."

I nodded. "We've never met."

"Reputations are dangerous things to have, in times like these."

I said nothing.

She said, "If I asked my old buddies to check *you* out, what would they find?"

"Parts of it aren't pretty," I said.

“So this is payback time,” she said. “It’s a win-win for somebody. Either they break you or they get rid of you. You’ve got an enemy somewhere. Any idea who?”

“No,” I said.

We ate in silence for a moment, and finished up. Clean plates. Meat, bread, cheese, potatoes, all gone. I felt full. Deveraux was half my size. Or less. I didn’t know how she did it. She said, “Anyway, tell me about your brother.”

“I’d rather talk about you.”

“Me? There’s nothing to say. Carter Crossing, the Marine Corps, Carter Crossing again. That’s the story of my life. No sisters, no brothers. How many do you have?”

“Just the one.”

“Older or younger?”

“Two years older. Born way far away in the Pacific. I haven’t seen him for a long time.”

“Is he like you?”

“We’re like two alternative versions of the same person. We look alike. He’s smarter than me. I get things done better. He’s more cerebral, I’m more physical. He was good and I was bad, according to our parents. Like that.”

“What does he do for a living?”

I paused.

“I can’t tell you that,” I said.

“His job is classified?”

“Not really,” I said. “But it might give you a clue about one of the things the army is worried about here.”

She smiled. She was a very tolerant woman. She said, “Should we get pie?”

We ordered two peach pies, the same as I had eaten the night before. And coffee, for both of us, which I took to be a good sign. She wasn't worried about being kept awake. Maybe she was planning on it. The old couple from the hotel got up and left while the waitress was still in the kitchen. They stopped by our table. No real conversation. Just a lot of nodding and smiling. They were determined to be polite. Simple economics. Deveraux was their meal ticket, and I was temporarily the icing on their cake.

The clock in my head hit ten in the evening. The pies arrived, and so did the coffee. I didn't pay much attention to either. I spent most of my time looking at the third button on Deveraux's shirt. I had noticed it before. It was the first one that was done up. Therefore it was the first one that would need to be undone. It was a tiny mother-of-pearl thing, silvery gray. Behind it was skin, neither pale nor dark, and very three dimensional. Left to right it curved toward me, then away from me, then toward me again. It was rising and falling as she breathed.

The waitress came by and offered more coffee. For possibly the first time in my life I turned it down. Deveraux said no, too. The waitress put the check on the table, face down, next to me. I flipped it over. Not bad. You could still eat well on a soldier's pay, back in 1997. I dropped some bills on it and looked across at Deveraux and said, "Can I walk you home?"

She said, "I thought you'd never ask."

Chapter

43

Pellegrino and Butler had done their work. They had earned their overtime payments. The McKinney boys were gone. Main Street was silent and completely deserted. The moon was out and the air was soft. Deveraux was taller in her heels. We walked side by side, close enough for me to hear the whisper of silk on skin, and to catch the scent of her perfume.

We got to the hotel and went up the worn steps and crossed the porch. I held the door for her. The old guy was working behind the counter. We nodded goodnight to him and headed for the stairs. At the top Deveraux paused and said, “Well, goodnight, Mr. Reacher, and thanks again for your company at dinner.”

Loud and clear.

I just stood there.

She crossed the corridor.

She took out her key.

She put it in room seventeen’s lock.

She opened the door.

Then she closed it again loudly and tiptoed back to me and stretched up and put her hand on my shoulder. She put her lips close to my ear and whispered, “That was for the old man downstairs. I have to think about my reputation. Mustn’t shock the voters.”

I breathed out.

I took her hand and we headed for my room.

We were both thirty-six years old. All grown up. Not teenagers. We didn’t

rush. We didn't fumble. We took our time, and what a time it was. Maybe the best ever.

We kissed as soon as my door was closed. Her lips were cool and wet. Her teeth were small. Her tongue was agile. It was a great kiss. I had one hand in her hair, and one on the small of her back. She was jammed hard against me, and moving. Her eyes were open. So were mine. We kept that first kiss going for whole minutes. Five of them, or maybe ten. We were patient. We took it slow. We were very good at it. I think we both understood that the first time happens only once. We both wanted to savor it.

Eventually we came up for air. I took my shirt off. I didn't want McKinney blood between us. I have a big shrapnel scar low down on my front. It looks like a pale octopus crawling up out of my waistband. Ugly white stitches. Usually a conversation starter. Deveraux saw it and ignored it. She moved right along. She was a Marine. She had seen worse. Her hand went to her top button.

I said, "No, let me."

She smiled and said, "That's your thing? You like undressing women?"

"More than anything in the world," I said. "And I've been staring at that particular button since a quarter past nine."

"Since ten past nine," she said. "I paid attention to the time line. I'm a cop."

I took her left hand and got her to hold it out, palm up. She kept it there, patiently. I undid her cuff button. I did the same with her right hand. The silk fell back over slim wrists. She put her hands on my chest. She slid them up behind my head. We kissed again, five whole minutes. Another great kiss. Better than the first.

We came up for air again and I moved on to the button on the front of her shirt. Like all the others it was small. And slippery. My fingers are big. But I got the job done. The button popped open, helped on its way by the swell of her breasts. I moved down to the fourth button. Then the fifth. I eased the silk out of the waistband of her skirt, all the way around, little by little, slowly and carefully. She was looking at me and smiling the whole time. Her shirt fell open. She was wearing a bra. A tiny black thing, with lace, and delicate straps. It barely covered her nipples. Her breasts were fantastic.

I eased the shirt back off her shoulders and it sighed and parachuted to the floor behind her. Her scent came up at me. We kissed again, long and hard. I kissed the curve where her neck met her shoulder. She had a cleft down her back. Her bra strap spanned it like a little bridge. She put her head back and her hair spilled everywhere. I kissed her throat.

“Now your shoes,” she said, and her throat buzzed against my lips.

She turned me around and pushed me backward and sat me down on the edge of the bed. She knelt in front of me. She untied my right shoe, and then my left. She eased them off. She hooked her thumbs in my socks and peeled them down.

“PX for sure,” she said.

“Less than a dollar,” I said. “Couldn’t resist.”

We stood up again and kissed again. By that point in my life I had kissed hundreds of girls, but I was ready to admit Deveraux was the finest of them all. She was spectacular. She moved and quivered and trembled. She was strong, but gentle. Passionate, but not aggressive. Hungry, but not demanding. The clock in my head took a break. We had all the time in the world, and we were going to use every last minute of it.

She hooked her fingers behind the front of my waistband. She tugged on it. She undid the button, one finger, one thumb. We kept on kissing. She found my zipper tab and eased it down, slowly, slowly, small hand, neat thumb, precise finger. She put her hands flat on my shoulder blades and slid them side to side, warm, dry, soft, and then she moved them down, slowly, to my waist, and then down again. She slid the tips of her fingers under my loosened waistband and tented the fabric. She went deeper. She pushed back and down and my pants slid over my hips. We were still kissing.

We came up for air and she turned me around and sat me down again. She pulled my pants off and dumped them on top of her shirt. She left me on the bed and stepped back a pace and held her arms out wide and said, “Tell me what to take off next.”

“I get to pick?”

She nodded. “Your choice.”

I smiled. A hell of a choice. Bra, skirt, shoes. I figured she could keep her shoes on. For a spell, anyway. Maybe all night long.

I said, “Skirt.”

She obliged. There was a button and a zipper at the side. She popped the button and slid the zipper down, slowly, an inch, two inches, three, four. I heard its sound quite clearly in the silence. The skirt fell to the ground. She stepped out of it, one foot, then the other. Her legs were long and smooth and toned. She was wearing tiny black panties. Not much to them. Just a wisp of dark fabric.

Bra, panties, shoes. I was still sitting on the bed. She climbed into my lap. I lifted her hair away and kissed her ear. I traced its shape with my tongue. I could feel her cheek against mine. I could feel the smile. I kissed her mouth, she kissed my ear. We spent twenty minutes learning every contour above our necks.

Then we moved lower.

I unsnapped her bra. It fell away, insubstantial. I ducked my head. Her head went back, arching her breasts toward me. They were firm and round and smooth. Her nipples were sensitive. She moaned a little. So did I. She moved and kissed my chest. I lifted her off my lap and rolled her on her back on the bed. Then she rolled me. Twenty fabulous minutes, spent getting to know each other above the waist.

Then we moved lower.

I was on my back. She knelt over me and slid my boxers down. She smiled. So did I. Ten amazing minutes later we changed places. Her panties came down over her hips, and then she lifted her knees to let me finish the job. I buried my face between her thighs. She was wet and sweet. She moved, uninhibited. She rolled her head from side to side and squirmed her shoulders and pressed herself down on the mattress. She ran her fingers through my hair.

Then it was time. We started tenderly. Long and slow, long and slow. Deep and easy. She flushed and gasped. So did I. Long and slow, long and slow.

Then faster and harder.

Then we were panting.

Faster, harder, faster, harder.

Panting.

“Wait,” she said.

“What?”

“Wait, wait,” she said. “Not now. Not yet. Slow down.”

Long and slow, long and slow.

Breathing hard.

Panting.

Long and slow.

“OK,” she said. “OK. Now. Now. *Now!*”

Faster and harder.

Faster, harder, faster, harder.

The room began to shake.

Just very faintly at first, like a mild constant tremor, like the edge of a far distant earthquake. The French door ticked in its frame. A glass rattled on the bathroom shelf. The floor quivered. The hall door creaked and stuttered. My shoes hopped and moved. The bed head hammered against the wall. The floor shook hard. The walls boomed. Coins in my abandoned pocket tinkled. The bed shook and bounced and walked tiny fractions across the moving floor.

Then the midnight train was gone, and so were we.

Chapter

44

Afterward we lay side by side, naked, breathing hard, sweat pooling, holding hands. I stared up at the ceiling. Deveraux said, “I’ve wanted to do that for two whole years. That damn train. Might as well make use of it.”

I said, “If I ever buy a house it’s going to be next to a railroad track. That’s for damn sure.”

She moved her position and snuggled next to me. I put my arm around her. We lay quiet, and spent, and satisfied. I heard Blind Blake in my head. I had once listened to a cassette tape of all his songs, transferred from beat-up old 78s, the absurd roar and scratch of ancient shellac surface noise almost drowning out the quiet, wistful voice and the agile guitar, as it picked out the rhythms of the railroad. A blind man. Blind from birth. He had never seen a train. But he had heard plenty. That was clear.

Deveraux asked me what I was thinking about, and I told her. I said, “That’s the guy my brother’s note was about.”

“Are you still mad about it?”

“I’m sad about it,” I said.

“Why?”

“This mission was a mistake,” I said. “They shouldn’t have put me on the outside. Not for this kind of thing. It’s making me think of them as … *them*. Not *us* anymore.”

*

Later we had a languid conversation about whether she should go back to her own room. Reputations. Voters. I said the old guy had come upstairs for me when Garber had called. He had gotten a good look inside the room. She said if

that happened again I could delay a second and she could hide in the bathroom. She said they rarely knocked on her door. And if by some chance they did the next morning and there was no reply, they would assume she was out on a case. Which would be entirely plausible. She wasn't short of work to do, after all.

Then she said, "Maybe Janice Chapman was doing what we just did. With the gravel scratches, I mean. With her boyfriend, whoever he was. Out in her back yard, at midnight. Under the stars. The railroad track is pretty close by. Must be amazing out of doors."

"It must be," I said. "I was right next to the track at midnight last night. It's like the end of the world."

"Would the timing work? With the scabs?"

"If she had sex at midnight she was killed about four in the morning. What time was she found?"

"Ten the next evening. That's eighteen hours. I guess there would have been some decomposition by then."

"Probably. But bled-out bodies can look pretty weird. It would have been fairly hard to tell. And your department doctor isn't exactly Sherlock Holmes."

"So it's possible?"

"We'd have to explain why she put on a nice dress and pantyhose sometime between midnight and four in the morning."

We pondered that for a moment. Then we surrendered to inertia. We said nothing more, about dresses or pantyhose, or voters or rooms or reputations, and then we fell asleep, in each other's arms, outside the covers, naked, in the still silence of the Mississippi night.

Four hours later I was awake again and confirming my longest-held belief: there is no better time than the second time. All the first time's semi-formal niceties can be forgotten. All the first time tricks we use to impress each other can be abandoned. There's new familiarity, and no loss of excitement. There's a general sense of what works and what doesn't. Second time around, you're ready to rock and roll.

And we did.

Afterward Deveraux yawned and stretched and said, “You’re not bad for a soldier boy.”

I said, “You’re excellent for a Marine.”

“We better be careful. We might develop feelings for each other.”

“What are those?”

“What are what?”

“Feelings.”

She paused a beat.

She said, “Men should be more in touch with their feelings.”

I said, “If I ever have one, you’ll be the first to know, I promise.”

She paused again. Then she laughed. Which was good. This was already 1997, remember. It was touch and go in those days.

I woke up for the second time at seven o’clock in the morning, thinking about pregnancy.

Chapter

45

Elizabeth Deveraux was sitting upright in the bed when I woke. She was on my left, in the center of her space, facing me, back straight, legs crossed, like yoga. She was naked and unselfconscious. She was very beautiful. Just spectacularly good looking. One of the best looking women I had ever seen, and certainly the best looking I had ever seen naked, and definitely the best looking I had ever slept with.

But by that point she was mentally preoccupied. Seven o'clock in the morning. The start of the work day. No third time lucky for me. Not right then. She said, "They must have had something else in common. Those three women, I mean."

I said nothing.

"Beauty is too nebulous," she said. "It's too subjective. It's just an opinion."

I said nothing.

She said, "What?"

"It's not just an opinion," I said. "Not with those three."

"Then we're looking for two factors. Two things that interacted. They were beautiful and they were also something else."

"Maybe they were pregnant," I said.

*

We examined the proposition. They were girlfriend material. It was a base town. These things happen. Mostly by accident, but sometimes on purpose. Sometimes women think that moving from one base town to another with a baby is better than living alone in the base town where they were born. A mistake, probably, but not for all of them. My own mother had been OK with it, for

instance.

I said, “Shawna Lindsay was desperate to get out, according to her kid brother.”

Deveraux said, “But I can’t see why Janice May Chapman would have been. She wasn’t born here. She chose this place. And she wouldn’t have needed a guy to get her out anyway. She could have just sold up and driven away in her Honda.”

“Accident, then,” I said. “With her, anyway. One other thing we didn’t see in her house was birth control. Nothing in the medicine cabinet.”

No response.

I asked, “Where do you keep yours?”

“Bathroom shelf,” she said. “There are no medicine cabinets here.”

“Did Rosemary McClatchy want to get out of town?”

“I don’t know. Probably. Why wouldn’t she?”

“Did the doctor test for pregnancy?”

“No,” Deveraux said. “I’m sure they would have in a big city. But not here. Merriam signed the certificate and gave us the cause of death, that’s all. The fifty-cent opinion.”

I said, “Chapman didn’t look pregnant.”

“Some women don’t, for months.”

“Would Rosemary McClatchy have told her mother?”

“I can’t ask her,” Deveraux said. “Absolutely not. No way. I can’t put that possibility into Emmeline’s mind. Because suppose Rosemary wasn’t pregnant? It would taint her memory.”

“There was something Shawna Lindsay’s brother wasn’t telling me. I’m sure of it. Maybe something big. You should talk to him. His name is Bruce. He wants to join the army, by the way.”

“Not the Marines?”

“Apparently not.”

“Why? Did you trash the Marines to him?”

“I was very fair.”

“Would he talk to me? He seems very hostile.”

“He’s OK,” I said. “Ugly, but OK. He seems drawn toward the military. He seems to understand command structure. You’re a Marine and a sheriff. Approach it right and he might stand up and salute.”

“OK,” she said. “Maybe I’ll try it. Maybe I’ll go see him today.”

“All three of them could have been accidental,” I said. “The big decisions might have come afterward. About what to do, I mean. If they all three liked the status quo they might have chosen a different route. Or they might have been persuaded.”

“Abortion?”

“Why not?”

“Where would they get an abortion in Mississippi? You’d have to drive north for hours.”

“Which is maybe why Janice Chapman got dressed before four in the morning. An early start. Maybe she had a long trip ahead of her. Maybe her boyfriend was driving her somewhere. For an afternoon appointment, perhaps. Then an overnight stay. Maybe she was thinking ahead, to the reception counter. The waiting room. So she put on something appropriate. Stylish, but reasonably demure. And maybe she packed a bag. That’s something else we didn’t see in her house. Suitcases.”

“We’ll never know for sure,” Deveraux said. “Unless we find the boyfriends.”

“Or the boyfriend, singular,” I said. “It might have been the same guy.”

“With all three of them?”

“It’s possible.”

“But it makes no sense. Why would he set up an appointment at an abortion clinic for them and then murder them before they got a mile down the road? Why not just go through with the appointment?”

“Maybe he’s the kind of guy who can’t afford either a pregnant girlfriend or an association with an abortion clinic.”

“He’s a soldier. Not a preacher. Or a politician.”

I said nothing.

Deveraux said, “Maybe he wants to be a preacher or a politician later.”

I said nothing.

“Or maybe he’s got preachers or politicians in the family. Maybe he has to avoid embarrassing them.”

There was a creak from a floorboard outside in the hall, and then a soft knock on my door. I recognized the sound immediately. The same as the morning before. The old guy. I pictured his slow shuffling tread, the slow tentative movement of his arm, the muted low-energy impact of his papery knuckles on the wood.

Deveraux whispered, “Oh, shit.”

Now we *were* like teenagers. Now we were rushing and fumbling. Deveraux rolled off the bed and grabbed an armful of clothing, which happened to include my pants, so I had to wrestle them back from her, which spilled the other garments all over the place. She tried to collect them and I tried to get my pants on. I got tangled up and fell back on the bed and she made it to the bathroom but left a breadcrumb trail of socks and underwear behind her. I got my pants more or less straight and the old guy knocked again. I limped across the floor and kicked clothes toward the bathroom as I went. Deveraux darted out and collected them up. Then she ducked back in again and I opened the door.

The old guy said, “Your fiancée is on the phone for you.”

Loud and clear.

Chapter

46

I padded downstairs barefoot, wearing only my pants. I took the call alone in the back office behind the reception counter, as before. It was Karla Dixon on the line. My old colleague. The financial wizard. She had been a founding member of the original 110th Special Unit. My second pick, after Frances Neagley. I guessed Stan Lowrey had passed on my question about money from Kosovo, and Dixon was calling back direct, to save time.

I asked, “Why did you have to say you were my fiancée?”

She asked back, “Why, did I interrupt something?”

“Not exactly. But she heard.”

“Elizabeth Deveraux? Neagley told us about her. You two are getting it on already?”

“And now I’ve got some explaining to do.”

“You need to take care there, Reacher.”

“Neagley always thinks that.”

“This time she’s right. The sergeants’ network is all lit up. Red hot. Deveraux is being checked out, big time.”

“I know that,” I said. “Garber already told me. Waste of time.”

“I don’t think so. It all suddenly went quiet.”

“Because there’s nothing there.”

“No, because there is. You know how bureaucracy works. It’s easy to say no. Silence means yes.”

“What would they find if they checked you out?”

“Plenty.”

“Or me?”

“I hate to think.”

“So there you go,” I said. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Believe me, there’s something wrong there, Reacher. I mean it. Maybe something real big. My advice would be to stay away from her.”

“Too late for that. I don’t buy it, anyway. She was a good little jarhead.”

“Who told you that?”

“She did.”

Silence on the line.

I said, “What else?”

Dixon said, “There’s no money coming out of Kosovo. None at all. Whoever’s worrying about that is on a wild goose chase. It’s not a factor.”

“You sure?”

“Completely.”

“They’re wondering if Joe is telling me anything.”

“Wild goose chase,” she said again. “Treasury wouldn’t know, anyway. Unless it was billions and billions. Which it isn’t. It isn’t even dollars and cents. It’s nothing. Someone’s panicking, that’s all. They’re thrashing around. They’re looking for something that isn’t there.”

“OK, good to know,” I said. “Thanks.”

“That was the good news,” she said.

“What’s the bad news?”

What's the bad news?

"Related information," she said. "A friend of a friend got into the Kosovo files, and they're plenty thick right now."

"With what?"

"Among other things, two local women disappeared without a trace."

Dixon told me that over the last year two Kosovan women had simply vanished. There was no local explanation. No family troubles. Both were unmarried. Both had been within range of the U.S. Army's local footprint. Both had fraternized.

"Girlfriend material," Dixon said.

"Good looking?" I asked.

"I didn't see photographs."

I asked, "Was there an investigation?"

"Under the radar," Dixon said. "We're not there at all, remember, as far as the rest of the world is concerned. So they flew a guy in from Germany. Supposedly on his way to Italy for some NATO crap, but Kosovo was the real destination. The travel arrangements are still on file."

"And?"

"As a patriotic American you'll be glad to hear that every last member of the U.S. armed forces was as innocent as a newborn baby. No crimes were committed by anyone in uniform."

"So the case was closed?"

"Tighter than a trout's asshole."

"Who was the investigator?"

"Major Duncan Munro."

I finished the call with Dixon and went back upstairs. Deveraux wasn't in my room. I padded back to hers and found the door locked. I heard the shower running. I knocked but got no response. So I showered and dressed and went back fifteen minutes later and found nothing but silence. I walked up to the diner, but she wasn't there either. Her car was not in the department lot. So I just stood there on the sidewalk, with nowhere to go, and no one to talk to, and nothing to do, completely unaware that the hour that would change everything had just ticked down from sixty minutes to fifty-nine.

Chapter

47

I loitered on the sidewalk for half of that hour. Mostly I leaned on a wall and didn't move. A professional skill. Necessary in my line of work. I'm good at it. But I know people who are better. I know people who have waited hours or days or weeks for something to happen.

I was waiting for the old guy with the tape measure to show up and open the shirt shop. Which he did, eventually. I pushed off my wall and crossed the street and followed him inside. He fussed with locks and lights and I made straight for his pile of button-downs. I found the same thing I was wearing and took it to the counter.

The old guy said, "Stocking up?"

I said, "No, the first one got dirty."

He leaned in and peered at my pocket. I saw his eyes trace the curl of blood. Down and up. He said, "I'm sure that would wash out. Cold water, maybe a little salt."

"Salt?"

"Salt helps with bloodstains. With cold water. Hot water sets them."

"I don't think the Toussaint's hotel offers a very sophisticated laundry service," I said. "Actually I don't think they offer any kind of laundry service at all. They don't even offer coffee in the lounge."

"You could take the shirt home with you, sir."

"How?"

"Well, in your suitcase."

"Easier just to replace it."

“But that would be very expensive.”

“Compared to what? How much do suitcases cost?”

“But you would keep a suitcase forever. You would use it over and over again for many years.”

I said, “I think I’ll just take the new shirt. No need to wrap it.”

I paid the guy and then ducked into his changing cubicle and pulled the curtain. I took off the old shirt, put on the new, and came back out.

“Got a trash can?” I asked.

The guy paused a beat in surprise and then ducked down and came back up with a knee-high metal canister. He held it out uncertainly. I balled up the dirty shirt and hit a three-pointer from about ten feet. The guy looked horrified. Then I headed back across the street to the diner for breakfast. And for a little more purposeful loitering. I knew my best chance of running into Deveraux would be right there. A woman who ate like she did couldn’t stay away for long. It was just a matter of time.

In the end it was a matter of less than twenty minutes. I ate eggs and was halfway through my third cup of coffee when she came in. She saw me from the doorway and paused. The whole world paused. The atmosphere went solid. She was in uniform again, and her hair was tied back. Her face was a little set in place. A little immobile. She looked wonderful.

I took a breath and kicked the facing chair out. She didn’t react. I saw her eyes move as she considered her options. She looked at all the tables. Most of them were unoccupied. But evidently she decided that to sit on her own might cause a scene. She was worried about voters. Worried about her reputation. So she came over to me. She pulled the chair out another foot and sat down, quiet and reserved, knees tight together, hands in her lap.

I said, “I don’t have a fiancée. I don’t have any kind of other girlfriend.”

She didn’t answer.

I said, “It was just an MP colleague on the phone. They’re all playing a game

I said, "It was just an MP colleague on the phone. They're all playing a game with the undercover thing. Apparently it amuses them. My CO calls himself my uncle."

No answer.

"I can't prove a negative," I said.

"I'm hungry," she said. "This is the first time in two years I've missed breakfast."

"I apologize for that," I said.

"Why? There's no need, if what you're saying is true."

"It is true. I'm apologizing on behalf of my colleague."

"Was it your sergeant? Neagley?"

"No, it was a woman called Karla Dixon."

"What did she want?"

"To tell me that no one is running a financial scam out of Fort Kelham."

"How would she know?"

"She knows everything about anything with a dollar sign in front of it."

"Who thought there was a financial scam out of Kelham?"

"The brass. I suppose it was a theoretical possibility. Like you said, they're desperate."

"If you had a fiancée, would you cheat on her?"

"Probably not," I said. "But I'd want to, with you."

"I've been burned before."

"Hard to believe."

"Not my fault."

"Yet true. Not a good feeling."

"I understand," I said. "But you weren't being burned last night."

She went quiet. I saw her thinking. *Last night*. She waved to the waitress and ordered French toast. The same as the day before.

"I called Bruce Lindsay," she said. "Shawna Lindsay's little brother. Did you know they have a phone?"

"Yes," I said. "I've used it. Karla Dixon was returning a call I made from it."

"I'm heading over there this afternoon. I think you're right. He has something to tell me."

Me. Not us.

I said, "It was a fellow officer's lame joke. That's all."

She said, "I'm afraid there's a problem with the fingerprints. From Janice Chapman's house, I mean. My own fault, as a matter of fact."

"What kind of problem?"

"Deputy Butler has a friend over there at the Jackson PD. From back when he took the course. I encourage him to get her to do our processing for us, on the quiet, to save ourselves the money. We don't have the budget here. But Butler's friend screwed up this time, and I can't ask him to ask her to do it over. That would be a step too far."

"Screwed up how?"

"She got her file numbers mixed. Chapman's data went to a case about a woman called Audrey Shaw, and we got Audrey Shaw's data. The wrong person entirely. Some kind of federal government worker. Which Chapman definitely wasn't, because there's no federal government work here, and Chapman didn't work anyway. Unless Audrey Shaw was the previous owner of Chapman's house, in which case it was Butler's own screw-up, looking for prints in the wrong places, or yours, for letting him."

"No, Butler did a good job," I said. "He looked in all the right places. Those

prints weren't from a previous owner, not unless she sneaked back in and used Chapman's toothbrush in the middle of the night. So it's just one of those things, I guess. Shit happens."

"Tell me again," she said. "About that phone call."

"It was Major Karla Dixon of the 329th," I said. "With information for me. That's all."

"And the fiancée thing was a joke?"

"Don't tell me the Marines are better comedians, too."

"Is she good looking?"

"Pretty nice."

"Was she ever your girlfriend?"

"No."

Deveraux went quiet again. I could see a decision coming. It was almost there. And I was pretty sure it was going to turn out OK. But I didn't find out. Not right then. Because before she could speak again the stout woman from the department's switchboard room crashed in through the diner door and stopped dead with one hand on the knob and one on the jamb. She was out of breath. She was panting. Her chest was heaving. She had run all the way. She called out, "There's another one."

Chapter

48

Deputy Butler had been on his way to relieve Pellegrino for the middle watch at Fort Kelham's gate, and a mile out he had happened to glance to his left, and he had seen a forlorn shape low down in the scrub perhaps a hundred yards north of the road. Five minutes after that he had been on the horn to HQ with the bad news, and ninety seconds after taking the message the dispatcher had made it to the diner. Deveraux and I were in her car twenty seconds after that, and she put her foot down hard and drove fast all the way, so we were on the scene less than ten minutes after Butler had first chanced to turn his head.

Not that speed made any difference.

We parked nose to tail behind Butler's car and got out. We were on the main east–west road, two miles beyond the last of Carter Crossing itself, one mile short of Kelham, out in an open belt of scrubland, with the forest that bordered Kelham's fence well ahead of us and the forest that flanked the railroad track well behind us. It was the middle of the day and the sky was clear and blue. The air was warm and the breeze was still.

I could see what Butler had seen. It could have been a rock, or it could have been trash, but it wasn't. It was small in the distance, dark, slightly humped, slightly elongated, pressed down, deflated. It was unmistakable. Judging its size was difficult, because judging the exact distance was difficult. If it was eighty yards away, it was a small woman. If it was a hundred and twenty yards away, it was a large man.

Deveraux said, "I hate this job."

Butler was standing out in the scrub, halfway between the dark shape and us. We set out walking toward him, and then we passed him without a word. I figured the overall distance was going to be close to dead-on a hundred yards, which made the shape neither a small woman nor a large man. It was going to be something in between. A tall woman, or a short man.

Or a teenager, maybe.

Then I recognized the distorted proportions.

And I started to run.

At twenty yards out I was sure. At ten yards out I was certain. At ten feet out I had absolute visual confirmation. No possible doubt. It was Bruce Lindsay. The ugly boy. Sixteen years old. Shawna Lindsay's little brother. He was on his front. His feet were apart. His hands were down by his sides. His giant head was turned toward me. His mouth was open. His deep-set eyes were dark and dead.

We followed no kind of crime-scene protocol. Deveraux and I trampled the area and touched the corpse. We rolled it over and found an entry wound on the left side of the rib cage, up high, close to the armpit. No exit wound. The bullet had come in, shattered the heart, shattered the spine, and had deflected and tumbled and was still in there somewhere.

I knelt up and scanned the horizon. If the kid had been walking east, he had been shot from the north, almost certainly by a rifleman who had exited Kelham's fence line woods and had been patrolling the open belt of scrub. The quarantine zone.

Deveraux said, "I talked to him this morning. Just a few hours ago. We had an appointment at his house. So why was he here?"

Which was a question I didn't want to answer. Not even to myself. I said, "He had a secret to keep, I guess. About Shawna. He knew you'd get it out of him. So he decided to be somewhere else this afternoon."

"Where? Where was he going?"

"Kelham," I said.

"This is open country. If he was heading for Kelham he would have been on the road."

"He was shy about strangers seeing him. Because of the way he looked. I bet he never walked on the roads."

"If he was shy with strangers, why would he risk going to Kelham? There must

be a dozen strangers in the guardhouse alone."

I said, "He went because I told him it would be OK. I told him soldiers would be different. I told him he'd be welcome there."

"Welcome there for what? They don't offer guided tours."

The kid was wearing canvas pants, a little like mine, and a plain sweatshirt in navy blue, with a dark warm-up jacket over it. The jacket had fallen open when we rolled him. I saw folded paper in the inside pocket.

I said, "Take a look at that."

Deveraux slid the paper out of the pocket. It looked like an official document, heavy stock, folded three times. It looked old, and I was sure it was. About sixteen years old, almost certainly. Deveraux unfolded it and scanned it and said, "It's his birth certificate."

I nodded and took it from her. The State of Mississippi, a male child, family name Lindsay, given name Bruce, born in Carter Crossing. Born eighteen years ago, apparently. It might have withstood a hasty glance, but not further scrutiny. The alteration was not skillful, but it had been patient. Two digits had been carefully rubbed away, and then two others had been drawn in to replace them. The ink matched well, and the style matched well. Only the breached surface of the paper gave it away, but that was enough. It stood out. It drew the eye.

"My fault," I said. "My fault entirely."

"How?"

Go straight to Kelham, I had said. *There are recruiters on every post. As soon as you've got something in your hand that proves you're eighteen years old, they'll let you in and never let you out again.*

The kid had taken it literally. I had meant he would have to wait. But he had gone ahead and made himself eighteen years old, right there and then. He had manufactured something to have in his hand. Probably at the same kitchen table where I had sat and talked and drank iced tea. I pictured him, head down, concentrating, tongue between his teeth, maybe wetting the paper with a drop of water, scraping the old numbers off with the tip of a dinner knife, blotting the

damp patch, waiting for it to dry, finding the right pen, calculating, practicing, and then drawing in the new numbers. The numbers that would get him through Kelham's gate. The numbers that would get him accepted.

All on my dime.

I started walking back toward the road.

Deveraux came after me. I told her, "I need a gun."

She said, "Why?"

I stopped again and turned and looked east and scoped it out. Fort Kelham was a giant rectangle north of the road and its fence ran through a broad belt of trees that extended a couple hundred yards each side of the wire. It looked like the whole place had been hacked out of the same kind of old forest that lay south of the road, but I guessed the opposite was true. I guessed Kelham had been laid out on open ground fifty years before, and then farmers had stopped plowing short of the fence, so the trees had come afterward. Like new weeds. Not like the old woods to the south. The new trees thinned here and there, but mostly they provided deep cover wherever it was needed. Easy enough for a small force to stay concealed among them, slipping outward into the open belt of scrub when necessary, then slipping back inward and on through the fence for rest or resupply.

I started walking again. I said, "I'm going to find this quarantine squad that everyone claims doesn't exist."

"Suppose you do?" Deveraux said. "It will be your word against theirs. Your word against the Pentagon's, basically. You'll say the squad existed, they'll say it didn't. And the Pentagon has the bigger microphone."

"They can't argue with physical evidence. I'll bring back enough body parts to convince anyone."

"I can't let you do that."

"They shouldn't have shot the kid, Elizabeth. That was way out of line, whoever they are. They opened the wrong door there. That's for damn sure. What lies on the other side is their problem, not ours."

“You don’t even know where they are.”

“They’re in the woods.”

“In camouflage with binoculars. How would you even get near them?”

“They have a blind spot.”

“Where?”

“Close to Kelham’s gate. They’re looking for the kind of intruder who already knows he can’t get through the gate. So they’re not looking there. They’re looking farther afield.”

“The guardhouse watches the gate.”

“No, the guardhouse watches what approaches the gate. I’m not going to approach the gate. I’m going to find the gap. Too far in the rear of the mobile force, too far in advance of the guardhouse.”

“They’re shooting people, Reacher.”

“They’re shooting the people they see. They won’t see me.”

“I’ll give you a ride back to town.”

“I’m not going back to town. I want a ride in the other direction. And a firearm.”

She didn’t answer.

I said, “I’m prepared to do it without either thing if necessary. Slower and harder, but I’ll get it done.”

She said, “Get in the car, Reacher.”

No indication where she planned to take me.

We got in the car and Deveraux backed it away from Butler’s cruiser and then she took off forward, east, toward Kelham. The right direction, as far as I was concerned. We covered most of the last mile and I said, “Now head off across the grass. To the edge of the woods. Like you just saw something.”

She said, “Straight at them?”

“They’re not here. They’re north and west of here. And they wouldn’t shoot at a police vehicle anyway.”

“You sure about that?”

“Only one way to find out.”

She slowed and turned the wheel and thumped down off the road onto hard-packed dirt. The road was in a gap shaped like an hourglass. Two hundred yards north of it Kelham’s new trees ran away from us in a gentle curve, and two hundred yards south of it the old woods ran away from us in a symmetrical pattern. Deveraux headed north and east, at an angle of forty-five degrees relative to the pavement, bucking and bouncing, and then she steered through a wide turn across the dirt and came to a stop with the flank of the car right next to the woods. My door was six feet from the nearest tree.

I said, “Gun?”

“Jesus,” she said. “This whole thing is illegal on so many different levels.”

“But like you told me, it’s their word against mine. If there’s anyone to shoot, they’ll say there wasn’t. The more shooting, the more denying.”

She took a breath and let it out and pulled the shotgun from its scabbard between our seats. It was an old Winchester Model 12, forty inches long, seven pounds in weight. It was nicked and worn but dewy with oil and polish. It could have been fifty years old, but it seemed well looked after. Even so, I worry about guns I have never fired. Nothing worse than pulling a trigger and having nothing happen. Or missing.

I asked her, “Does it work?”

She said, “It works perfectly.”

“When did you last fire it?”

“Two weeks ago.”

“At what?”

“At a target. I make the whole department requalify every year. And I need to be able to kick their butts, so I practice.”

“Did you hit the target?”

“I destroyed the target.”

I asked, “Did you reload?”

She smiled and said, “There are six in the magazine and one in the breech. I have spares in the trunk. I’ll give you as many as you can carry.”

“Thank you.”

“It was my father’s gun. Take care of it.”

“I will.”

“Take care of yourself, too.”

“Always.”

We got out of the car and she stepped around to the trunk and opened the lid. It was a messy trunk. There was dirt in it. Some kind of earth. But I spent no time worrying about tidiness, because there was a metal box bolted to the floor behind the seat-back bulkhead. For a woman built like Deveraux, it was a long way forward. She went up on tiptoes and bent at the waist and leaned in. Which maneuver looked fabulous from behind. Absolutely, truly spectacular. She flipped up the lid of the box and scrabbled with her fingernails and came back out with a carton of twelve-gauge shells. She straightened up and handed it to me. Fifteen rounds remaining. I put five in each pants pocket and five in my shirt pocket. She watched me do it. Then her eyes went wide and she said, “You washed your shirt.”

I said, “No, I bought a new one.”

“Why?”

“It seemed polite.”

“No, why did you buy a new one instead of washing the old one?”

“I went through this already. With the guy in the store. It seemed logical to me.”

“OK,” she said.

“You have a great ass, by the way.”

“OK,” she said again.

“I just thought I’d mention it.”

“Thank you.”

“We good now? You and me?”

She smiled.

“We always were,” she said. “I was just yanking your chain, that’s all. If she’d said she was your girlfriend I might have taken it seriously. But fiancée? That’s ridiculous.”

“Why?”

“No woman would agree to marry you.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re not marriage material.”

“Why not?”

“How long have you got? The laundry issue alone could take an hour.”

“How do you do yours?”

“There’s a pay launderette in the next alley past the hardware store.”

“With detergent and stuff?”

“It’s not rocket science.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said. “I’ll see you later.”

“Make sure you do, OK? We have a train to catch tonight.”

I smiled and nodded once and took a last look around, and then I stepped into the trees.

Chapter

49

At forty inches the Winchester was too long for easy transport through a forest. I had to carry it two-handed, upright in front of me. But I was glad to have it. It was a fine old piece. And fairly definitive. Twelve-gauge lead shot settles most disputes at the first time of asking.

It was March in Mississippi and there were enough new leaves on the trees to deny me a clear view of the sky. So I navigated by guesswork. Or dead reckoning, as some people prefer to call it. Which is hard to do, in a forest. Most right-handed people end up walking wide counterclockwise circles, because most right-handed people have left legs fractionally shorter than their right legs. Basic biology and geometry. I avoided that particular peril by stepping to the right of every tenth tree I came to, whether I thought I needed to or not.

The vegetation was dense, but not impossible. There was some underbrush and a lot of leaf litter. The trees were deciduous. I have no idea what kind they were. I don't know much about trees. The trunks were of various thicknesses and mostly three or four feet apart. Most of their lower limbs had died back in the gloom. There wasn't much light down there. There were no paths. No sign of recent disturbance.

I had one circumstance working in my favor and two against. The negatives were that I was making a lot of noise, and I was wearing a bright white shirt. I was far from inconspicuous. No camouflage. No silent approach. The positive was that I had to be approaching them from their rear. They had to be hunkered down just inside the edge of the woods. They had to be looking outward. They were looking for journalists and busybodies and other unexplained strangers. Anyone walking purposefully toward them was fair game. But I would be coming up on them from behind.

And I figured I wouldn't be dealing with too many guys all at once. They would be split into small units. Minimum of two, maximum of four men in each. They would be mobile. No hides or bivouacs. They would be sitting on fallen logs or leaning on trees or squatting on the floor, looking out past the last of the growth

into the bright daylight, always ready to move left or right to change their angle, always ready to range outward to meet a threat.

And I figured the small mobile units would be widely scattered. Thirty miles of fence is a lot of ground to defend. You could put a full-strength company in those woods, and one four-man unit would end up a thousand yards from its nearest neighbor. And a thousand yards in a wood is the same thing as a thousand miles. No possibility of immediate support or reinforcement. No covering fire. Basic rule of thumb: rifles and artillery are useless in a wood. Too many trees in the way.

I slowed down after advancing two hundred paces roughly north and west. I figured I must be approaching the first obvious viewpoint, at about nine o'clock on a notional dial, well above the road funnel, just inside a bulge that commanded a sweeping view west and south. Almost certainly it was the viewpoint that Bruce Lindsay had been seen from. He would have been on their left, easily visible from more than a mile away. They had stepped out, and advanced, and stood off maybe a couple of hundred yards from him. Maybe they had shouted a warning or an instruction. Maybe his response had been slow or confused or contradictory. So they had shot him.

I looped away wide to my right and then crept in on what I hoped was a straight line behind where I thought the first viewpoint would be. I moved through the trees like I was slipping through a crowd, easing left, easing right, leading with one shoulder, and then the other. I kept my eyes moving, side to side, and up and down. I watched the floor pretty carefully. Nothing I could do to avoid most of the stuff down there, but I didn't want to trip, and I didn't want to step on anything thicker than a broom handle. Dry wood can crack very loud when it breaks.

I kept on going until I sensed daylight ahead. Almost the edge of the wood. I looked left, looked right, and moved a cautious pace onward and found myself to be partly right and partly wrong. Right, because where I was standing was indeed an excellent viewpoint, and wrong, because it was unoccupied.

I stood a yard back from the last of the trees and found myself looking southwest. The field of view was wide and wedge-shaped. The road to Carter Crossing ran diagonally across it at a distance. Nothing was moving on it, but if something had been I would have seen it very clearly. Likewise I would have seen anything in the fields up to a quarter-mile either side of the road. It was a

great viewpoint. No question about that. I couldn't understand why it was abandoned. It made no tactical sense. There were many hours of daylight left. And as far as I knew nothing had changed at Kelham. No new strategic imperative had presented itself. If anything the situation was worse than ever for Bravo Company.

The state of the ground betrayed deep unseriousness too. There were cigarette butts stamped into the earth. There was a candy bar wrapper, balled up and tossed. There were clear footprints, similar to the ones I had seen alongside the bled-out journalist on old man Clancy's land. I wasn't impressed. Army Rangers are trained to leave no sign behind. They're supposed to move through landscapes like ghosts. Especially when tasked to a sensitive mission of dubious legality.

I backed away, deep into the trees again, and I got myself all lined up and moved on north. I stuck to a route maybe fifty yards inside the edge of the wood. I watched for lateral paths leading back in toward Kelham's fence. I didn't see any. No real surprise. Covert entry and exit was probably arranged way to the north, at a remote spot at the tip of the reservation, far from any location in regular use.

I detoured again two hundred yards later, back to where the trees thinned, to a spot with a worse view of the road but a better view of the fields. Again, an excellent vantage point. Again, unoccupied. And never occupied, as far as I could tell. No cigarette butts. No candy wrappers. No footprints.

I backed away once more, to my original line, and tried again two hundred yards later. Still nothing. I began to wonder if I was dealing with less than a full company. But to put fewer men on a thirty-mile perimeter made no sense to me. I would want more. Two full companies. Or three. And I'm a cheapskate, compared to the Pentagon. If I wanted five hundred men, the brass would want five thousand. Any kind of normal planning, that wood should have been crowded. Like Times Square. I should have been shot in the back long ago.

Then I began to wonder about watch changes and meal times. Possibly the apparent undermanning left certain spots unoccupied at certain times. But I was sure those spots would be occupied most of the time. They were too good to waste. If the mission was to detect potential hostiles approaching Kelham's perimeter, then the full 360 would have to be broken down into useful vantage points, and any of the three I had seen would qualify. So I guessed sooner or

points, and any of the three I had seen would qualify. So I guessed sooner or later I would find someone coming or going.

I turned around and moved deeper into the woods again. I got halfway back to my original line, and stopped walking. I just stood still and waited. For ten whole minutes I heard nothing at all. Then twenty. Then thirty. The breeze rattled leaves, and tree trunks moved and groaned, and tiny animals scuttled. Nothing else.

Then I heard footsteps and voices, far ahead and on my left.

Chapter

50

I moved west and got behind an inadequate tree about as wide as my leg. I leaned my left shoulder on it. I leveled the shotgun. I aimed down the barrel at the approaching sounds. I kept both eyes open. I went completely quiet and still.

There were three men coming, I thought. Slow, relaxed, undisciplined. They were strolling. They were shooting the shit. I heard ragged scuffling from their feet in the leaves. I heard their voices, low and conversational and bored. I couldn't make out their words, but their tone betrayed no stress and no caution. I heard brambles wrenching and tearing, and twigs crunching and snapping, and I heard hollow *clonks* that I took to be plastic M16 stocks hitting trunks as the guys squeezed themselves through narrow gaps between trees. This was no kind of an orderly advance. These were not first-rate infantry soldiers. My mind ran on, like it does at times, and I saw myself writing an after-action memo criticizing their demeanor. I saw myself in a meeting at Benning, enumerating their deficiencies to a panel of senior officers.

The three men seemed to be tracking south, staying parallel to the edge of the wood, maybe twenty yards from it. No question that they were heading back to one of the viewpoints I had already scoped out. I couldn't see the men. Too many trees. But I could hear them pretty well. They were reasonably close. They were coming level with me, about thirty yards away, to my left.

I rolled around the skinny tree I was leaning on and kept myself behind them. I didn't follow them. Not immediately. I wanted to be sure there were no more of them coming. I didn't want to insert myself into a moving column. I didn't want to be the fourth guy in a big procession, with three guys ahead of me and an unknown number behind. So I stayed where I was, standing still and listening hard. But I was hearing nothing except the three guys wandering south. Nothing in the north. Nothing at all. Just natural sounds. Wind, leaves, insects.

The three guys were on their own.

I let their sound get about thirty yards down the track and then I moved after

them. I picked up their physical trail easily enough. They were on an informal route that had been beaten through the underbrush by the passage of feet, back and forth, over a couple of days. There were damp turned-over leaves, and broken twigs. There was a general wash of organic matter to the margins of a meandering path about twelve inches wide. Faint, but noticeable. Very noticeable, in fact, compared to the rest of the forest floor. Compared to what I had seen elsewhere, that path looked like I-95.

I followed them all the way. I matched their pace easily enough. I didn't worry about making noise, as a matter of logic. As long as I was quieter than any two of them, then none of the three would hear me. And it was easy to be quieter than any two of them. It would have been hard to be noisier, in fact, short of firing the Winchester a couple of times and singing the National Anthem.

I let myself get a little closer. I put a spurt on and got within twenty yards of them. Still no visual contact, except for one fleeting glimpse of a narrow back in camouflage BDUs, and a black glint of what I took to be an M16 barrel. But I could hear them clearly. There were definitely three of them. One was older than the others, by the sound of it, and possibly in command. One wasn't saying much, and the third was nasal and hyped up. I still couldn't make out words, but I knew they weren't saying anything worth listening to. The tenor and rhythm of their conversation told me so. There were low sarcastic murmurs, and rejoinders, and occasional barks of cheap laughter. Just three guys, passing the time.

They did not detour over to the third of the three viewpoints I had seen. They kept on going right past it, ambling, almost certainly in single file. I heard the first guy's voice louder, as he tossed comments back over his shoulder to the next two in line behind him, whose replies I could hardly hear at all, as they were projected forward and away from me. But I still sensed that nothing of importance was being said. They were bored, possibly tired, and mired in a routine task they were already familiar with. They anticipated no danger and no hazard.

They passed the second viewpoint, too. They strolled on south, and I followed them, two hundred yards along the trail, and then I heard them turn right and crash onward toward the first viewpoint. Nine o'clock on the notional dial. The place where Bruce Lindsay's killers had been hiding out, almost certainly.

I made it to the turn they had taken, and I waited there, on the main track. I heard them stop twenty yards west of me, which was exactly where I had been before,

just inside the edge of the wood, where the candy wrapper and the footprints and the cigarette butts were. I moved toward them, five yards, ten, and then I stopped again. I heard one of them belch, which produced laughter and general hilarity, and I guessed they had indeed moved north for their scheduled meal, and were now back on station again. I heard one of them take a leak behind a tree. I heard splashing against the kind of leathery, hairy leaves that grew down on the forest floor. I heard rifle barrels parting thin eye-level branches, as they peered out west at the open land ahead of them. I heard the scratch and clunk of a Zippo lighter, and a moment later I smelled tobacco smoke.

I took a breath and moved on, closer and closer, left and right through the trees, five more yards, then six, then seven, leading with my left elbow, then my right, swimming through the crowded space, the Winchester shotgun held upright in front of me. The three guys had no idea I was there. I could sense them ahead of me, unaware, standing still, looking outward, going quiet, settling in, their lunch hour excitement over. I held my breath and moved up one tree closer to them, silently, then another tree, then another, and then finally I got my first clear sight of them.

And I had no clue what I was looking at.

Chapter

51

There were three men, as I had thought. They were fifteen feet from me. The width of a room. They all had their backs to me. One was gray-haired and heavy. He was wearing Vietnam-era olive drab fatigues. They were too tight on him. He was carrying an M16 rifle and I could see the butt of a Beretta M9 semi-automatic pistol in a webbing holster on his belt. A nine-millimeter handgun. Standard U.S. Army issue, as was the M16. The guy had old paratrooper boots on his feet, and no hat on his head.

The second guy was younger and a little taller but not much thinner. He was sandy haired, and he was wearing what I was sure were Italian army combat fatigues. Similar to ours, but different. Better cut. He was carrying an M16 by its top handle. Right-handed. No sidearm. He was wearing black athletic sneakers. No hat. He had a small backpack in non-matching camouflage.

The third guy was wearing 1980s-issue U.S. Army woodland pattern camouflage BDUs. He wasn't fat. Far from it. He was a runt. Maybe five feet six, maybe a hundred and forty pounds. Lean and wiry and hardscrabble and nervous. He was carrying an M16 too. Civilian shoes on his feet, no hat, no sidearm. He was the smoker. There was a lit cigarette between the first two fingers of his left hand.

At first the Italian battledress made me wonder if they were some kind of a weird NATO force. But the first guy's Vietnam fatigues didn't fit with any current 1997 scenario, however screwed up international politics might have been by then, and neither did the third guy's street shoes, nor did their collective lack of combat headgear, or their lack of portable lunch rations, or their completely unprofessional behavior. I didn't know what they were. My mind ran through random possibilities, like a departures board runs through flights at an airport. I was surprised they didn't hear the clacking and ticking from inside my head.

I looked at them again, left to right, and then right to left.

I couldn't figure it out.

Then finally I understood: they were amateurs.

The Mississippi backwoods, next to Tennessee and Alabama. Civilian militias. Pretend soldiers. Men who like to run around in the woods with guns, but who like to say they're defending some vital thing or other. Men who like to shoot the shit in the surplus store, right after their bulk purchase of old fatigues and Italian battledress.

And men who like to buy their guns at country gun stores. At certain country gun stores in particular. Because certain country gun stores are near military bases, and therefore some of them have something special for sale under the counter. All it takes is someone on the inside, and believe me, there is always someone on the inside. A steady stream of M16s and Berettas and worse is written off every year as lost or damaged or otherwise unusable, whereupon it is destroyed, except it isn't. It's hustled out the back door in the dead of night and an hour later it's under the counter at the gun shop.

I have arrested many people, often in groups larger than the one in front of me, but I have never been very good at it. The best arrests run on pure bluster, and I get self-conscious if I have to rant and rave. Better for me to land an early sucker punch, to shut them down right at the very beginning. Except that shouting *freeze freeze freeze* makes me a little self-conscious too. The words come out a little tentative. Almost like a request.

But I had with me the greatest conversation-stopper ever made: a pump-action shotgun. At the cost of one unfired shell, I could make the kind of sound that would freeze any three men to any three spots in the world.

The most intimidating noise ever heard.

Crunch crunch.

My ejected shell hit the leaves at my feet and the three guys froze solid.

I said, "Now the rifles hit the deck."

Normal voice, normal pitch, normal tone.

The sandy-haired guy dropped his rifle first. He was pretty damn quick about it. Then went the older guy, and last of the three came the wiry one.

“Stand still now,” I said. “Don’t give me a reason.”

Normal voice, normal pitch, normal tone.

They stood reasonably still. Their arms came up a little, out from their sides, slowly, and they ended up a small distance from their bodies, where they held them. They spread their fingers. No doubt they spread their toes inside their boots and sneakers and shoes. Anything to appear unarmed and undangerous.

I said, “And now you take three big paces backward.”

They complied, all three guys, all three taking exaggerated stumbling steps, and all three ending up more than a body’s length from their rifles.

I said, “And now you turn around.”

Chapter

52

I had never seen any of them before. After the slow spin the older guy had ended up facing me on my left. He was completely unknown to me. He was just a guy, not very significant, a little pouchy and worn. The guy in the middle was the sandy-haired one. He was like the older man would have been, had he grown up twenty years later and in better circumstances. Just a guy, a little soft and civilized. The third guy was different. He was what you get when you eat squirrels for four generations. Smarter than a rat and tougher than a goat, and jumpier than either one.

I tucked the Winchester's stock up in my right armpit and pulled my elbow back and held the gun one-handed. I aimed it less than perfectly at the guys on the right. But then, it was a twelve-gauge shotgun. My aim didn't need to be perfect.

I used my left arm as a communications aid and looked at the older guy and said, "Now comes the part where you take out your sidearm and hand it to me."

He didn't respond.

I said, "And here's how you're going to do it. You're going to pull it out of the holster with one finger and one thumb, and then you're going to juggle it around and reverse it in your hand, and you're going to point it at yourself, OK?"

No response.

I said, "Second prize is I shoot you in the legs."

Normal voice, normal pitch, normal tone.

No response. Not at first. I thought about wasting another shell and pumping the gun again, but in the end I didn't need to. The old guy wasn't a hero. He hopped right to it after a second's thought. He did the finger and thumb thing, and he got the gun reversed in his hand, and he pressed its muzzle to his belly.

I said, "Now find the safety and set it to fire."

I said, "Now find the safety and set it to fire."

It was hard to do backward, but the guy succeeded.

I said, "Hold the barrel with your thumb and first two fingers. Get your ring finger loose. Now get it back there in the trigger guard. Right back there. Pressing backward on the trigger."

The guy did it.

I asked, "Now what do you know?"

He didn't answer.

I said, "Any kind of struggle, you get a bullet in the gut. That's what you know. Any kind of struggle at all. We clear on that? You understand?"

The guy nodded.

I said, "Now move your arm and bring the gun out toward me. Slowly and carefully. Keep it on the same line all the way. Keep it pointing right at yourself. Keep your ring finger hard on the trigger."

The guy did it. He got the gun a couple of feet out from his center mass, and I stepped in and took it from him. Just pulled it right out of his hand, as smooth as you like. I stepped back and he dropped his arm and I swapped hands. The Winchester went to my left, and I held the Beretta in my right.

And breathed out.

And smiled.

Three prisoners taken and disarmed, all without a shot being fired.

I looked at the old guy and asked, "Who are you people?"

He swallowed twice and then he got some kind of backbone back, and he said, "We're on a mission, and it's the kind of mission civilians should stay away from, if they know what's good for them."

"Civilians as opposed to what?"

“As opposed to military personnel.”

“Are you military personnel?”

The old guy said, “Yes, we are.”

I said, “No, you’re not. You’re a shower of make-believe shit.”

He said, “It’s an authorized mission.”

“Authorized by who?”

“By our commander.”

“Who authorized him?”

The guy started to hem and haw and bluster. He started talking and stopped again a couple of times. I crossed the Winchester’s barrel with the Beretta and pointed the handgun straight at the guy. I wasn’t sure it worked. I never trust a gun I haven’t fired myself. But it felt right and it weighed right. The safety catch was off. I knew that for sure. And the guy was flinching pretty good. And he should know better than anyone whether the piece worked. Because it was his. I laid my finger hard on the trigger. The guy saw me do it. But still he didn’t say anything.

Then the sandy-haired guy spoke up. The soft one. He said, “He doesn’t know who authorized the mission, and he’s too embarrassed to admit it. That’s why he isn’t saying anything. Can’t you see that?”

“He’d rather get shot than be embarrassed?”

“None of us knows who authorized anything. Why would we?”

I asked, “Where are you from?”

“First tell me who you are.”

“I’m a commissioned officer in the United States Army,” I said. “Which means that if your so-called mission was authorized by the military, then you must currently be under my command, as the senior officer present. Right? That would be logical, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where are you from?”

“Tennessee,” the guy said. “We’re the Tennessee Free Citizens.”

“You don’t look very free to me,” I said. “Right now you look kind of detained.”

No answer.

I asked, “Why did you come down here?”

“We got word.”

“What word?”

“That we were needed here.”

“How many of you came?”

“There are sixty of us.”

“Twenty teams for thirty miles?”

“Yes, sir.”

I asked, “What instructions did you get when you got here?”

“We were told to keep people away.”

“Why?”

“Because it was time to step up and help the nation’s military. Which is every patriot’s duty.”

“Why did the nation’s military need your help?”

“We weren’t told why.”

“Rules of engagement?”

“We were supposed to keep people away, however we had to do it.”

“Did you kill that kid this morning?”

Silence for a long, long moment.

Then the runt on my right spoke up.

He said, “You mean the black boy?”

The old guy said, “This mission is *fully* authorized.”

I said, “I mean the African-American teenage male, yes.”

The guy with the sandy hair glanced urgently at his buddies. First one, then the other. Rapid movements of his head. He said, “None of us should answer questions about that.”

I said, “At least one of you should.”

The old guy said, “This mission is fully authorized at the very highest level possible. There is no higher level than the level that authorized this mission. Whoever you are, mister, you are making a very big mistake.”

I said, “Shut up.”

The guy with the sandy hair looked straight at the runt and said, “Don’t say anything.”

I looked at the runt and said, “Say what you like. No one will believe you anyway. Everyone knows a pussy like you is just there for the ride.”

I turned away. Back to the old guy.

The runt said, “I shot the black boy.”

I turned back.

I asked him, “Why?”

“He was acting aggressive.”

I shook my head.

“I saw the corpse,” I said. “The bullet hit high under his arm. No damage to the arm itself. I think he had his hands up. I think he was surrendering.”

The runt sniffed and said, “I suppose it could have looked that way.”

I uncrossed the Winchester and the Beretta. I raised the handgun. I pointed it at the little guy’s face.

I said, “Tell me about yesterday.”

He looked straight at me.

Calculation in his little rat eyes.

He decided I wasn’t going to shoot.

He said, “We were north of here yesterday.”

“And?”

“I guess you could say I’m two for two this season.”

“Who applied the field dressing?”

The sandy-haired guy said, “I did. It was an accident. We were just following orders.”

I turned back to the runt and said, “Tell me again. About sighting in on a sixteen-year-old boy with his hands up.”

I moved my aim half an inch upward. The exact center of his forehead.

The guy grinned and said, “I suppose he might have been waving.”

I pulled the trigger.

The gun worked fine. Just fine. Exactly as it should. The sound of the shot cracked and hissed and rolled. Birds flew up in the sky. The spent case ejected and bounced off a tree and hit me hard in the thigh. The runt’s head blew apart

and wet-slapped the leaves behind him, and he went down vertically, his skinny butt to his heels, and then he bounced slackly and spilled over in the kind of boneless tangle only the recently and violently dead can achieve.

*

I waited for the sound to die away and for my hearing to come back and I looked at the two survivors and I said, “Your alleged mission has just been terminated. As of right now. And the Tennessee Free Citizens has just been disbanded. As of this moment. They’re totally out of business now. You two run along and spread that news. You’ve got thirty minutes to haul your sorry asses out of my woods. You’ve got an hour to get out of this state altogether. All of you. Any slower than that, I’ll send a Ranger company after you. Now beat it.”

The two survivors just stood there for a second, completely still, pale and shocked and afraid. Then they came to. And they ran. They really hustled. I listened to them go until their noise faded away to nothing. It took a long time, but then they were gone and I knew they wouldn’t be back. They had taken a casualty, and they had no appetite for that kind of thing. I was sure they would make a martyr of the guy, but I was equally sure they would take great pains to avoid sharing his glorious fate. Blood and brains are realities, and realities are unwelcome visitors in the world of make-believe.

I clicked the safety on the Beretta and put it in my pants pocket. I untucked my shirt and let the tails hide it. Then I headed back the way I had come, leading with one shoulder and then the other, as I slipped between the trees with the Winchester upright in front of me.

Chapter

53

Elizabeth Deveraux was waiting exactly where she had left me, right next to her car, six feet from the tree line. I stepped out of the woods right in front of her and she jumped a little, but then she gathered herself pretty quickly. I guessed she didn't want to insult me by being surprised I had made it. Or she didn't want to show she had been anxious. Or both. I kissed her on the lips and handed back the Winchester and she asked, "What happened?"

I said, "They're some kind of a citizens' council from Tennessee. Some kind of a half-assed amateur backwoods militia. They're leaving now."

"I heard a handgun."

"One of them was so overcome with regret he committed suicide."

"Did he have things to regret?"

"More than most."

"Who brought them here?"

I said, "That's the big question, isn't it?"

I returned her spare shotgun ammunition from my pockets. She made me put it in the trunk myself. Then we drove back to town. My new Beretta dug into my thigh and my stomach all the way. We passed through the black half of Carter Crossing, and then we thumped over the railroad track, and then we pulled into the Sheriff's Department's lot. Home base for Deveraux. Safety. She said, "Go get a cup of coffee. I'll be back soon."

"Where are you going?"

"I have to give Mrs. Lindsay the news about her son."

"That won't be easy."

“No, it won’t.”

“Want me to come with you?”

“No,” she said. “That wouldn’t be appropriate.”

I watched her drive away, and then I headed to the diner for coffee. And for the phone. I kept my mug close at hand on the hostess station and dialed Stan Lowrey’s office. He picked up himself. I said, “You’re still there. You’ve still got a job. I don’t believe it.”

He said, “That stuff is getting old, Reacher.”

“You’ll look back on it like the dying embers of a happy time.”

“What do you want?”

“From life in general? That’s a big question.”

“From me.”

“I want many things from you,” I said. “Specifically I want you to check some names for me. In every database you can find. Mostly civilian, if you can, including government stuff. Call the D.C. police and try to get them to help. The FBI too, if there’s anyone over there still speaking to you.”

“On the up and up or on the quiet?”

“On the very quiet.”

“What names?”

“Janice May Chapman,” I said.

“That’s the dead woman, right?”

“One of several.”

“And?”

“Audrey Shaw,” I said.

Audrey Shaw," I said.

"Who is she?"

"I don't know. That's why I want you to check her out."

"In connection with what?"

"She's a loose end connected to another loose end."

"Audrey Shaw," he said, slowly, as if he was writing it down.

Then he said, "What else?"

I asked, "How far away is Garber's office from yours?"

"It's on the other side of the stairwell."

"I need him on the line. So go get him and drag him over by the scruff of his raggedy old neck."

"Why not just call him direct?"

"Because I want him on your line, not his."

No answer, except a plastic thump as he laid down the phone on his desk, and a grunt as he stood up, and a hiss as his chair cushion recovered its shape. Then silence, which was expensive, because I was on a pay phone. I fed it another quarter and waited. Whole minutes passed. I started to think Garber was sitting tight. Refusing to come. But then I heard the phone lift up off the desk and the familiar voice asked, "What the hell do you want now?"

"I want to talk to you," I said.

"So call me. We have switchboards now. And extensions."

"They're listening to your line. I think that's pretty obvious, isn't it? You're a pawn here, the same as me. Therefore someone else's line is safer."

Garber was quiet for a beat.

"Possible," he said. "What have you got for me?"

“The boots on the ground outside of Kelham were an unofficial force. A local citizens’ militia. Evidently part of some weirdo network of true patriots. Apparently they were here to defend the army from unjustified harassment.”

“Well, Mississippi,” he said. “What do you expect?”

“They were from Tennessee, actually,” I said. “And you’re missing the point. They didn’t just happen to be here. They weren’t just passing by on a whim. They weren’t here for a vacation. They were deployed here. They have a contact somewhere, who knew exactly when, and exactly where, and exactly how, and exactly why they would be needed. Who would have that kind of information?”

“Someone who had all the facts from the get-go.”

“And where would we find such a person?”

“Somewhere high up.”

“I agree,” I said. “Any idea who?”

“None at all.”

“You sure? You need to put me in the loop here if you can.”

“I’m sure. You’re already in the loop as much as I am.”

“OK, go back to your office. Five minutes from now I’m going to call you. You can ignore what I say, because it won’t mean much. But stay on the line long enough to let the tape recorders roll.”

“Wait,” Garber said. “There’s something I have to tell you.”

“Like what?”

“News from the Marine Corps.”

“What kind of news?”

“There’s some kind of issue with Elizabeth Deveraux.”

“What kind of issue?”

“I don’t know yet. They’re playing hard to get. They’re making a real big deal about access. The file she’s in is apparently some super-toxic thing. Highest category, biggest deal in the world, and similar bullshit. But word is there was some big scandal about five years ago. The story is Deveraux got some other Marine MP fired for no good reason. Rumors say it was personal jealousy.”

“Five years ago is three years before she quit. Was she honorably discharged?”

“Yes, she was.”

“Voluntary separation or involuntary?”

“Voluntary.”

“Then there’s nothing there,” I said. “Don’t worry about it.”

“You’re thinking with the wrong part of your body, Reacher.”

“Five minutes,” I said. “Be back at your desk.”

The waitress freshened my cup and I drank most of the new brew while I counted three hundred seconds in my head. Then I stepped back to the phone and dialed Garber direct. He answered and I said, “Sir, this is Major Reacher reporting from Mississippi. Can you hear me?”

Garber said, “Loud and clear.”

I said, “I have the name of the individual who ordered the Tennessee Free Citizens to Kelham. That order became part of a criminal conspiracy in that it resulted in two homicides and two felony assaults. I have an appointment I need to keep at the Pentagon the day after tomorrow, and then I’ll return to base immediately afterward and I’ll get JAG Corps involved at that point in time.”

Garber was on the ball. He caught on fast and played his part well. He asked, “Who was the individual?”

I said, “I’ll keep that strictly to myself for the next forty-eight hours, if you don’t mind.”

Garber said, “Understood.”

I dabbed the cradle to end the call, and then I dialed a new number. Colonel John James Frazer’s billet, deep inside the Pentagon. The Senate Liaison guy. I got his scheduler and made a twelve o’clock appointment with him, in his office, for the day after next. I didn’t say why, because I couldn’t. I didn’t have a real reason. I just needed to be somewhere in the giant building. As bait in a trap.

Then I sat at a table and waited for Deveraux. I knew a woman who ate like she did wouldn’t be long.

Chapter

54

Deveraux came in thirty minutes later, looking pale and drawn. Death messages are never pleasant. Especially when lightning strikes twice, against a mother who is already angry. But it's all part of the job. Bereaved relatives are always angry. Why wouldn't they be?

Deveraux sat down and blew a long sad breath at me.

"Bad?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Terrible," she said. "She's not going to vote for me ever again, that's for sure. I think if I had a house, she'd burn it down. If I had a dog, she'd poison it."

"Can't blame her," I said. "Two for two."

"It will be three for three soon. That woman is going to take a midnight stroll on the railroad tracks. I guarantee it. Within a week, probably."

"Has that happened before?"

"Not often. But the train is always there, once a night. Like a reminder that there's a way out if you need one."

I said nothing. I wanted to remember the midnight train in a happier context.

She said, "I want to ask you a question, but I'm not going to."

"What question?"

"Who put those idiots in the woods?"

"Why aren't you going to ask it?"

"Because I'm assuming there's a whole bunch of things here, all interconnected

"Because I'm assuming there's a whole bunch of things here, all interconnected. Some big crisis on the base. A part answer wouldn't make sense. You'd have to tell me everything. And I don't want to ask you to do that."

"I couldn't tell you everything even if I wanted to. I don't know everything. If I knew everything I wouldn't be here anymore. The job would be done. I'd be back on post doing the next thing."

"Are you looking forward to that?"

"Are you fishing?"

"No, I'm just asking. I've been there myself, don't forget. Sooner or later we all hit the moment when the light goes out. I'm wondering if it's happened to you yet. Or if it's still to come."

I said, "No, I don't really want to get back on post. But that's mostly because of the sex, not the work."

She smiled. "So who put those idiots in the woods?"

"I don't know," I said. "Could have been a number of people. Kelham is a pie the same as any other pie, and there are lots of folks with their fingers in it. Lots of interests, lots of angles. Some of them are professional, and some of them are personal. Maybe five or six of them pass the crazy test. Which means there are five or six different chains of command terminating in five or six very senior officers somewhere. Any one of them could feel threatened in some way bad enough to pull a stunt like this. And any one of them would be quite capable of doing it. You don't get to be a very senior officer in this man's army by being a sweet guy."

"Who are the five or six?"

"I wouldn't have the faintest idea. That's not my world. From where they are, I'm just a grunt. I'm indistinguishable from a private first class."

"But you're going to nail him."

"Of course I'm going to nail him."

"When?"

“Day after tomorrow, I hope. I have to go to D.C. Just for a night, maybe.”

“Why?”

“I got on a line I knew to be tapped and said I knew a name. So now I have to go hang out up there and walk the walk and see what comes out of the woodwork.”

“You made yourself the bait in a trap?”

“It’s like a theory of relativity. Same difference if I go to them or they come to me.”

“Especially when you don’t even know who they are, let alone which one of them is guilty.”

I said nothing.

She said, “I agree. It’s time to shake something loose. If you want to know if the stove is hot, sometimes the only way to find out is to touch it.”

“You must have been a pretty good cop.”

“I still am a pretty good cop.”

“So when did your light go out? With the Marines, I mean. When did you stop enjoying it?”

“About where you are now,” she said. “For years you’ve laughed off the small things, but they come so thick and fast that eventually you realize an avalanche is made up of small things. Snowflakes, right? Things don’t get much smaller than that. Suddenly you realize that small things *are* big things.”

“No single specific thing?”

“No, I got through fine. I never had any trouble.”

“What, all sixteen years?”

“I had some minor speed bumps here and there. I dated the wrong guy once or twice. But nothing worth talking about. I made it to CWO5, after all, which is as high as it goes for some of us.”

“You did well.”

“Not bad for a country girl from Carter Crossing.”

“Not bad at all.”

She asked, “When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow morning, I guess. It will take me all day to get there.”

“I’ll have Pellegrino drive you to Memphis.”

“No need,” I said.

“Agree for my sake,” she said. “I like to get Pellegrino out of the county as often as possible. Let him wreck his car and kill a pedestrian in some other jurisdiction.”

“Has he done that here?”

“We don’t have pedestrians here. This is a very quiet town. Quieter than ever right now.”

“Because of Kelham?”

“This place is dying, Reacher. We need that base open, and fast.”

“Maybe I’ll make some headway in D.C.”

“I hope you do,” she said. “We should have lunch now.”

“That’s why I came in.”

Deveraux’s lunch staple was chicken pie. We ordered a matched pair and were halfway through eating them when the old couple from the hotel came in. The woman had a book, and the man had a newspaper. A routine pit stop, like dinner. Then the old guy saw me and detoured to our table. He told me my wife’s brother had just called. Something very urgent. I looked blank for a second. The old guy must have thought my wife came from a very large family. “Your brother-in-law Stanley,” he said.

“OK,” I said. “Thanks.”

The old guy shuffled off and I said, “Major Stan Lowrey. A friend of mine. He and I have been TDY at the same place for a couple of weeks.”

Deveraux smiled. “I think the verdict is in. Marines were better comedians.”

I started eating again, but she said, “You should call him back if it’s very urgent, don’t you think?”

I put my fork down.

“Probably,” I said. “But don’t eat my pie.”

I went back to the phone for the third time and dialed. Lowrey answered on the first ring and asked, “Are you sitting down?”

I said, “No, I’m standing up. I’m on a pay phone in a diner.”

“Well, hold on tight. I have a story for you. About a girl called Audrey.”

Chapter

55

I leaned on the wall next to the phone. Not because I was necessarily worried about falling down with shock or surprise. But because Lowrey's stories were usually very long. He fancied himself a raconteur. And he liked background. And context. Deep background, and deep context. Normally he liked to trace everything back to a seminal point just before random swirls of gas from the chartless wastes of the universe happened to get together and form the earth itself.

He said, "Audrey is a very ancient name, apparently."

The only way to knock Lowrey off his discursive stride was to get your retaliation in first. I said, "Audrey was an Anglo-Saxon name. It's a diminutive of Aethelthryt or Etheldreda. It means noble strength. There was a Saint Audrey in the seventh century. She's the patron saint of throat complaints."

"How do you know shit like this? I had to look it up."

"I know a guy whose mother is called Audrey. He told me."

"My point is, it's no longer a very common name."

"It was number 173 on the hit parade at the last census. It's slightly more popular in France, Belgium, and Canada. Mostly because of Audrey Hepburn."

"You know this because of a guy's mother?"

"His grandmother too, actually. They were both called Audrey."

"So you got a double ration of knowledge?"

"It felt like a double ration of something."

"Audrey Hepburn wasn't from Europe."

“Canada isn’t in Europe.”

“They speak French there. I’ve heard them.”

“Of course Audrey Hepburn was from Europe. English father, Dutch mother, born in Belgium. She had a U.K. passport.”

“Whatever, what I’m saying is, if you would ever let a guy get a word in edgewise, if you search for Audreys you don’t get too many hits.”

“So you found Audrey Shaw for me?”

“I think so.”

“That was fast.”

“I know a guy who works at a bank. Corporations have the best information.”

“Still fast.”

“Thank you. I’m a diligent worker. I’m going to be the most diligent unemployed guy in history.”

“So what do we know about Audrey Shaw?”

“She’s an American citizen,” Lowrey said.

“Is that all we know?”

“Caucasian female, born in Kansas City, Missouri, educated locally, went to college at Tulane in Louisiana. The Southern Ivy League. She was a liberal arts student and a party girl. Middling GPA. No health problems, which I imagine means slightly more than it says, for a party girl from Tulane. She graduated on schedule.”

“And?”

“After graduation she used family connections to get an intern’s job in D.C.”

“What kind of intern’s job?”

“Political. In a Senate office. Working for one of her home-state Missouri guys.

"Political. In a Senate office. Working for one of her home-state Missouri guys. Probably just carrying coffee, but she was called an assistant to an assistant executive director of something or other."

"And?"

"She was beautiful, apparently. She made strong men weak at the knees. So guess what happened?"

"She got laid," I said.

"She had an affair," Lowrey said. "With a married man. All those late nights, all that glamour. The thrill of working out the fine print in trade deals with Bolivia. You know how it is. I don't know how those people stand the excitement."

"Who was the guy?"

"The senator himself," Lowrey said. "The big dog. The record gets a little hazy from that point onward, because obviously the whole thing was covered up like crazy. But between the lines it was a torrid business. Between the sheets too, probably. A real big thing. People say she was in love."

"Where are you getting this from, if the record is hazy?"

"The FBI," Lowrey said. "Plenty of them still talk to me. And you better believe they keep track of things like this. For leverage. You notice how the FBI budget never goes down? They know too many things about too many politicians for that to ever happen."

"How long did the affair last?"

"Senators have to run for reelection every six years, so generally they spend the first four rolling around on the couch and the last two cleaning up their act. Young Ms. Shaw got the last two of the good years and then she was patted on the butt and sent on her way."

"And where is she now?"

"This is where it gets interesting," Lowrey said.

I pushed off the wall and looked over at Deveraux. She seemed OK. She was

eating what was left of my pie. She was craning across the table and picking at it. Demolishing it, actually. In my ear Lowrey said, “I’ve got rumors and hard facts. The rumors come from the FBI and the hard facts come from the databases. Which do you want first?”

I settled back against the wall again.

“The rumors,” I said. “Always much more interesting.”

“OK, the rumors say young Ms. Shaw felt very unhappy about being discarded in the way she was. She felt used and cheap. Like a Kleenex. She felt like a hooker leaving a hotel suite. She began to look like the kind of intern that could cause serious trouble. That was the FBI’s opinion, anyway. They keep track of that stuff too, for different reasons.”

“So what happened?”

“In the end nothing happened. The parties must have reached some kind of mutual accommodation. Everything went quiet. The senator was duly reelected and Audrey Shaw was never heard from again.”

“Where is she now?”

“This is where you ask me what the hard facts say.”

“What do the hard facts say?”

“The hard facts say Audrey Shaw isn’t anywhere anymore. The databases are completely blank. No records of anything. No transactions, no taxes, no purchases, no cars or houses or boats or trailers, no snowmobiles, no loans or liens or warrants or judgments or arrests or convictions. It’s like she ceased to exist three years ago.”

“Three years ago?”

“Even the bank agrees.”

“How old was she then?”

“She was twenty-four then. She’d be twenty-seven now.”

“Did you check the other name for me? Janice May Chapman?”

“You just spoiled my surprise. You just ruined my story.”

“Let me guess,” I said. “Chapman is the exact reverse. There’s nothing there more than three years old.”

“Correct.”

“They were the same person,” I said. “Shaw changed her identity. Part of the deal, presumably. A big bag of cash and a stack of new paperwork. Like a witness protection program. Maybe the real witness protection program. Those guys would help a senator out. It would give them an IOU to put in their back pocket.”

“And now she’s dead. End of story. Anything else?”

“Of course there’s something else,” I said. There was one last question. Big and obvious. But I hardly needed to ask it. I was sure I knew the answer. I felt it coming right at me, hissing through the air like an incoming mortar round. Like an artillery shell, aimed and ranged and fused for an air burst right next to my head.

I asked, “Who was the senator?”

“Carlton Riley,” Lowrey said. “Mr. Riley of Missouri. The man himself. The chairman of the Armed Services Committee.”

Chapter

56

I got back to the table just as the waitress was putting down two slices of peach pie and two cups of coffee. Deveraux started eating immediately. She was a whole chicken pie ahead of me, and she was still hungry. I gave her a lightly edited recap of Lowrey's information. Everything, really, except for the words *Missouri, Carlton,* and *Riley*.

She asked, "What made you give him Audrey Shaw's name in the first place?"

"Flip of a coin," I said. "A fifty-fifty chance. Either Butler's buddy screwed up her case numbers or she didn't. I didn't want to assume one way or the other."

"Does this stuff help us?"

Small words, but big concepts. *Help,* and *us*. It didn't help me. Not with Janice May Chapman, anyway. With Rosemary McClatchy and Shawna Lindsay, I wasn't so sure anymore. Lowrey's news cast a strange new light on them. But Lowrey's news helped Deveraux, that was for damn sure. With Chapman, at least. It decreased the chances about a billionfold that her local population was involved with her in any way at all. Because it increased the chances about a billionfold that mine was.

I said, "It might help us. It might narrow things down a little. I mean, if a senator has a problem, which of the five or six chains of command is going to react?"

"Senate Liaison," she said.

"That's where I'm going. The day after tomorrow."

"How did you know?"

"I didn't."

"You must have."

“It was just a random choice. I needed a reason to be there, that’s all.”

“Wait,” she said. “This makes no sense. Why would the army get involved if a senator had a problem with a girl? That’s a civilian matter. I mean, Senate Liaison doesn’t get involved every time a politician loses his car keys. There would have to be a military connection. And there’s no military connection between a civilian senator and his civilian ex-girlfriend, no matter where she lives.”

I didn’t answer.

She looked at me. “Are you saying there *is* a connection?”

I said, “I’m not saying anything. Literally. Watch my lips. They aren’t moving.”

“There can’t be a connection. Chapman wasn’t in the army, and there certainly aren’t any senators in the army.”

I said nothing.

“Did Chapman have a brother in the army? Is that it? A cousin? A relative of some kind? Jesus, is her *father* in the army? What would he be now, mid-fifties? The only reason to stay in at that age is if you’re having fun, and the only way to have fun at that age is to be a very senior officer. Is that what we’re saying here? Chapman was a general’s daughter? Or Shaw, or whatever her real name was?”

I said nothing.

She said, “Lowrey told you she got the intern job because of family connections, right? So what else can that mean? We’re talking about having an actual senator who owes you favors here. That’s a big deal. Her father must be a two-star at least.”

I said nothing.

She looked straight at me.

“I can tell what you’re thinking,” she said.

I said nothing.

“I didn’t get it right,” she said. “That’s what you’re thinking. I’m on the wrong track. Chapman had no relatives in uniform. It’s something else.”

I said nothing.

She said, “Maybe it’s the other way around. Maybe the senator is the one with a relative in uniform.”

“You’re missing the point,” I said. “If Janice May Chapman was a sudden short-term problem who required a sudden short-term solution, why was she killed in exactly the same way as two other unconnected women four and nine months previously?”

“Are you saying it’s a coincidence? Nothing to do with the senator connection?”

“It could be that way,” I said.

“Then why the big panic?”

“Because they’re worried about blowback. In general. They don’t want any kind of taint coming near a particular unit.”

“The one with the senator’s relative in it?”

“Let’s not go there.”

“But they weren’t worried about blowback before? Four and nine months ago?”

“They didn’t know about four and nine months ago. Why would they? But Chapman jumped out at them. She had two kinds of extra visibility. Her name was in the files, and she was white.”

“Suppose it wasn’t a coincidence?”

“Then someone was very smart,” I said. “They took care of a sudden short-term problem by copycatting an MO that had been used before in two unconnected cases. Excellent camouflage.”

“So you’re saying there could be two killers here?”

“Possible,” I said. “Maybe McClatchy and Lindsay were regular everyday

homicides, and Chapman was made to look like them. By someone else."

*

We finished our desserts and drank our cups of coffee. Deveraux told me she had work to do. I asked her if she would mind if I went to see Emmeline McClatchy one more time.

"Why?" she asked.

"Boyfriends," I said. "Apparently both Lindsay and Chapman were stepping out with a soldier who owned a blue car. I'm wondering if McClatchy is going to make it a trifecta."

"That's a long walk."

"I'll find a shortcut," I said. I was beginning to piece together the local geography in my head. No need to walk three sides of a square, first north to the Kelham road, then east, then south again to the McClatchy shack. I was already roughly on the same latitude. I figured I could find a way across the railroad track well short of the official crossing. A straight shot east. One side of the square.

Deveraux said, "Be gentle with her. She's still very upset."

"I'm sure she always will be," I said. "I imagine these things don't fade too fast."

"And don't say anything about pregnancy."

"I won't," I said.

I headed south on Main Street, in the general direction of Dr. Merriam's office, but I planned to turn east well before I got there. And I found a place to do just that within about three hundred yards. I saw the mouth of a dirt road nested in the trees. It had a rusted fire hydrant ten yards in, which meant there had to be houses somewhere farther on. I found the first one a hundred feet later. It was a tumbledown, swaybacked affair, but it had people living in it. At first I thought they were the McKinney cousins, because it was that kind of a place, and because it had a black brush-painted pick-up truck standing on a patch of dirt

that might once have been a lawn. But it was a different make of truck. Different age, different size, but the same approach to maintenance. Clearly northeastern Mississippi was not fertile ground for spray-painting franchises.

I passed two more places that were similar in every way. The fourth house I came to was worse. It was abandoned. It had a mailbox entirely hidden by tall grass. Its driveway was overgrown. It had bushes and brambles up against the door and the windows. It had weeds in the gutters, and green slime on the walls, and a cracked foundation pierced by creeper tendrils thicker than my wrists. It was standing alone in a couple of acres of what once might have been meadow or pasture, but which was now nothing more than a briar patch crowded with sapling trees about six feet tall. The place must have been empty for a long time. More than months. A couple of years, maybe.

But it had fresh tire tracks across its turn-in.

Seasonal rains had washed dirt down various small slopes and left a mirror-smooth puddle of mud in the dip between the road and the driveway. Seasonal heat had baked the mud to powder, like cement straight from the bag. A four-wheeled vehicle had crossed it twice, in and out. Broad tires, with treads designed for use on regular pavement. Not new, but well inflated. The tread pattern was exactly captured. The marks were recent. Certainly put there after the last time it had rained.

I detoured a couple of steps to avoid leaving footprints next to the tire marks. I jumped over the dip and fought through a tangle of waist-high crap until I got next to the driveway. I could see where the tires had crushed the weeds. There were broken stalks. They had bled dark green juice. Some of the stronger plants had not broken. They had whipped back upright, and some of them were smeared with oil from the underside of an engine.

Whoever had rolled down the driveway had not entered the house. That was clear. None of the rampant growth around the doors or the windows had been disturbed. So I walked on, past the house, past a small tractor barn, out to the space behind. There was a belt of trees ahead of me, and another to my left, and another to my right. It was a lonely spot. Not directly overlooked, except by birds, of which there were two in the air above me. They were turkey vultures. They were floating and looping endlessly.

I moved on. There was a long-abandoned vegetable garden, ringed by a rusted rabbit fence. An archaeologist might have been able to tell what had been grown there. I couldn’t. Further on was a long high mound of something green and vigorous. An old hedge, maybe, untrimmed for a decade and run to seed. Behind it were two utilitarian structures, placed there so as not to be visible from the house, presumably. The first structure was an old wooden shed, rotting and listing and down at one corner.

The other structure was a deer trestle.

Chapter

57

The deer trestle was a big thing, built in an old-fashioned A-frame style from solid timbers. It was at least seven feet tall. I could have walked under the top rail with no trouble at all. I guessed the idea was to back up a pick-up truck and dump a dead animal out of the bed onto the dirt between the A-frames, and then to tie ropes to the animal's hind legs, and then to flip the ropes up over the top rail, and then to use muscle power or the pick-up itself to haul the animal up in the air so that it hung vertically and upside down, ready for the butcher's knife. Age-old technology, but not one I had ever used. If I wanted a steak, I went to the Officers' Club. Much less work.

The trestle could have been fifty years old or more. Its timbers were mature, seasoned, and solid. Some kind of native hardwood. There was a little green moss growing on its northern exposures, which faced me. Its top rail had been worn to a smooth polish over the years by the ropes that had run over it. There was no way of knowing how long ago it had last been used. Or how recently.

But the dirt between its spread legs had been disturbed, and recently. That was clear. The top two or three inches had been dug up and removed. What should have been beaten and blackened earth as old as the frame itself was now a shallow pit about three feet square.

*

There was no other useful evidence in the yard. None at all, except for the missing dirt, and the tire marks that had not come from a pick-up truck or any other kind of utilitarian vehicle. The shed next to the trestle was empty. And I checked the house again as I passed by on the trip back to the road, just to be sure, but it had not been entered. The windows were filmed with gray organic scum, which also lay less visibly on the siding and the doors and the door handles. Nothing had been touched. No marks, no smears. There were misty spider webs everywhere, unbroken. There was vegetation of every kind, some of it thorned and brawny, some of it limp and delicate, all of it growing exactly where it wanted to, up stoops, across doorways, none of it pushed aside or cut

back or otherwise disturbed.

I stopped at the mouth of the driveway and parted the long grass around the mailbox with my hands. The mailbox was a standard Postal Service item, standard size, once painted gray, now no color at all, flecked with rust in fine lines where the curve of the sheet metal had stressed the enamel finish. It was set on a post that had started its service as a six-by-six, but was now wizened away to a twisted balk that retained only its core. There had been a name on the box, spelled out in stick-on letters printed on forward-leaning rectangles, in a style popular long ago. They had been peeled off, possibly as a last gesture when the home was abandoned, but they had left dry webs of adhesive residue behind, like fingerprints.

There had been eight letters on the box.

I jumped the ditch again and continued east. I passed two more houses, widely spaced, occupied, but in no kind of good condition. After the last one the road narrowed and its surface went pitted and lumpy. It burrowed into a wall of trees and ran on straight. The trees crowded in from the sides and left a thoroughfare barely a yard wide. I pressed on regardless, whipped and clawed by branches. Fifty paces later I came out the other side and found the railroad track right there in front of me, running left to right, blocking my path. At that location it was up on a raised earth berm about a yard high. The terrain in that part of Mississippi looked pretty flat to the human eye, but straining locomotives see things differently. They want every dip filled in, and every peak shaved level.

I scrambled up the yard of earth and crunched over the ballast stones and stood on a tie. To my right the track ran straight all the way south to the Gulf. To my left it ran straight north, all the way to wherever it went. I could see the road crossing far in the distance, and the old water tower. The rails either side of me were burnished bright by the passage of iron wheels. Ahead of me were more low trees and bushes, and beyond them was a field, and beyond the field were houses.

I heard a helicopter, somewhere east and a little north. I scanned the horizon and saw a Blackhawk in the air, about three miles away. Heading for Kelham, I assumed. I listened to the *whap-whap-whap* of its rotor and the whine of its turbine, and I watched it maintain direction but lose height as it came in to land. Then I scrambled down the far side of the earth berm and headed onward

through the next belt of trees.

I hiked across the field that came next and stepped over a wire and found myself on a street I figured was parallel with Emmeline McClatchy's. In fact I could see the back of the house with the beer signs in the windows. The ad-hoc bar. But between it and me were other houses, all surrounded by yards. Private property. In the yard dead ahead of me two guys were sitting in white plastic chairs. Old men. They were watching me. By the look of them they were taking a break from some kind of hard physical labor. I stopped at their fence line and asked, "Would you do me a favor?"

They didn't answer in words, but they cocked their chins up like they were listening. I said, "Would you let me walk through your yard? I need to get to the next street."

The guy on the left asked, "Why?" He had a fringe of white beard, but no mustache.

I said, "I'm visiting with a person who lives there."

"Who?"

"Emmeline McClatchy."

"You with the army?"

I said, "Yes, I am."

"Then Emmeline doesn't want a visit from you. Nor does anyone else around here."

"Why not?"

"Because of Bruce Lindsay, most recently."

"Was he a friend of yours?"

"He surely was."

"Bullshit," I said. "He told me he had no friends. You all called him deformed and shunned him and made his life a misery. So don't get up on your high horse

now.”

“You got some mouth on you, son.”

“More than just a mouth.”

“You going to shoot us too?”

“I’m sorely tempted.”

The old guy cracked a grin. “Come on through. But be nice to Emmeline. This thing with Bruce Lindsay shook her up all over again.”

I walked the depth of their yard and heard the Blackhawk again, taking off from Kelham, far in the distance. A short visit for somebody, or a delivery, or a pickup. I saw it rise above the treetops, a distant speck, nose down, accelerating north.

I stepped over a wire fence at the end of the yard. Now I was in the bar’s lot. Still private, technically, but in principle bars welcome passersby rather than run them off. And the place was deserted, anyway. I looped past the building and made it out to the street unmolested.

And saw an army Humvee easing to a stop outside the McClatchy house.

Chapter

58

A Humvee is a very wide vehicle, and it was on a very narrow dirt road. It almost filled it, ditch to ditch. It was painted in standard green and black camouflage colors, and it was very clean. Maybe brand new.

I walked toward it and it came to a stop and the motor shut off. The driver's door opened and a guy climbed down. He was in woodland-pattern BDUs and clean boots. Since before the start of my career, battledress uniform had been worn with subdued name tapes and badges of rank, and like everything else in the army the definition of *subdued* had been specified within an inch of its life, to the point where names and ranks were unreadable from more than three or four feet away. An officer-led initiative, for sure. Officers worried about snipers picking them off first. The result was I had no idea who had just gotten out of the Humvee. Could have been a private first class, could have been a two-star general. Three-stars and above don't drive themselves. Not usually. Not on business. Not off duty either. They don't do much of anything themselves.

But I had a clear premonition about who the guy was. An easy conclusion, actually. Who else was authorized to be out and about? He even looked like me. Same kind of height, same kind of build, similar coloring. It was like looking in a mirror, except he was five years my junior, and it showed in the way he moved. He was bouncing around with plenty of energy. An impartial judge would have said he looked young and overexuberant. The same judge would have said I looked old and overtired. Such was the contrast between us.

He watched me approach, curious about who I was, curious about a white man in a black neighborhood. I let him gawp until I was six feet away. My eyesight is as good as it ever was, and I can read subdued tapes from further than I should, especially on bright sunlit Mississippi afternoons.

His tapes said: *Munro. U.S. Army*.

He had little black oak leaves on his collar, to show he was a major. He had a field cap on his head, the same camouflage pattern as his blouse and his pants.

He had fine lines around his eyes, which were about the only evidence he wasn't born yesterday.

I had the advantage, because my shirt was plain. Civilian issue. No name tape. So I stood there for a moment in silence. I could smell diesel from his ride, and rubber from its tires. I could hear its engine tick as it cooled. I could hear the breeze in Emmeline McClatchy's shade tree.

Then I stuck out my hand and said, "Jack Reacher."

He took it and said, "Duncan Munro."

I asked, "What brings you here?"

He said, "Let's sit in the truck a spell."

A Humvee is equally wide inside, but most of the space is taken up by a gigantic transmission tunnel. The front seats are small and far apart. It was like sitting in adjacent traffic lanes. I think the separation suited both our moods.

Munro said, "The situation is changing."

I said, "The situation is always changing. Get used to it."

"The officer in question has been relieved of his command."

"Reed Riley?"

"We're not supposed to use that name."

"Who's going to know? You think this truck is wired for sound?"

"I'm just trying to maintain protocol."

"Was that him in the Blackhawk?"

Munro nodded. "He's on his way back to Benning. Then they're going to move him on and hide him away somewhere."

"Why?"

"There was some big panic two hours ago. The phone lines were burning up. I

"There was some big panic two hours ago. The phone lines were burning up. I don't know why."

"Kelham just lost its quarantine force, that's why."

"That again? There never was a quarantine force. I told you that."

"I just met them. Bunch of civilian yahoos."

"Like Ruby Ridge?"

"But less professional."

"Why do people do stupid shit like that?"

"They envy our glamorous lives."

"What happened to them?"

"I chased them away."

"So then someone felt he had to withdraw Riley. You're not going to be popular."

"I don't want to be popular. I want to get the job done. This is the army, not high school."

"He's a senator's son. He's making his name. Did you know the Marine Corps employs lobbyists?"

I said, "I heard that."

"This was our version."

I looked out my window at the McClatchy place, at its low roof, its mud-stained siding, its mean windows, its spreading tree. I asked, "Why did you come here?"

"Same reason you chased the yahoos away," Munro said. "I'm trying to get the job done."

"In what way?"

“I checked out the other two women you mentioned. There were FYI memos in the XO’s files. Then I cross-referenced bits and pieces of information I picked up along the way. It seems like Captain Riley is something of a ladies’ man. Since he got here he’s had a string of girlfriends longer than my dick. It’s likely both Janice Chapman and Shawna Lindsay were on the list. I want to see if Rosemary McClatchy will make it three for three.”

“That’s why I’m here, too.”

“Great minds think alike,” Munro said. “Or fools never differ.”

“Did you bring his picture?”

He unbuttoned his right breast pocket, just below his name. He pulled out a slim black notebook and opened it and slid a photograph from between its pages. He handed it to me, arm’s length across the transmission tunnel.

Captain Reed Riley. The first time I had seen his face. The photograph was in color, possibly taken for a passport or some other civilian document that prohibited headgear or other visual obstructions. He looked to be in his late twenties. He was broad but chiseled, somewhere halfway between bulky and slender. He was tan and had very white teeth, some of which were on display behind an easy grin. He had brown hair buzzed short, and wise empty eyes creased at the corners with webs of fine lines. He looked steady, competent, hard, and full of shit. He looked exactly like every infantry captain I had ever seen.

I handed the picture back, arm’s length across the transmission tunnel.

I said, “We’ll be lucky to get a definitive ID. I bet all Rangers look the same to old Mrs. McClatchy.”

“Only one way to find out,” Munro said, and opened his door. I got out on my side and waited while he looped around the stubby hood. He said, “I’ll tell you something else that came up with the cross-referencing. Something you might like to know. Sheriff Deveraux is not a lesbian. She’s a notch on Riley’s bedpost too. Apparently they were dating less than a year ago.”

And then he walked on ahead of me, to Emmeline McClatchy’s door.

Emmeline McClatchy opened up after Munro's second knock. She greeted us with polite reserve. She remembered me from before. She paid close attention as Munro introduced himself, and then she invited us inside, to a small room that had two wooden wheelback chairs either side of a fireplace, and a rag rug on the floor. The ceiling was low and the dimensions were cramped and the air smelled of cooked food. There were three framed photographs on the wall. One was Martin Luther King, and one was President Clinton, and the third was Rosemary McClatchy, from the same series as the picture I had seen in the Sheriff's Department's file, but possibly even more spectacular. A friend with a camera, one roll of film, a sunny afternoon, a frame, a hammer, and a nail, and that was all that was left of a life.

Emmeline and I took the chairs by the fireplace and left Munro standing on the rug. In the tiny room he looked as big as I felt, and just as awkward, and just as clumsy, and just as alien. He took the photograph from his pocket again and held it face down against his chest. He said, "Mrs. McClatchy, we need to ask you about your daughter Rosemary's friends."

Emmeline McClatchy said, "My daughter Rosemary had lots of friends."

Munro said, "In particular one young man from the base she might have been seeing."

"Seeing?"

"Stepping out with. Dating, in other words."

"Let me see the picture."

Munro bent down and handed it over. She held it this way and that in the light from the window. She studied it. She asked, "Is this man suspected of killing the white girl?"

Munro said, "We're not sure. We can't rule him out."

"Nobody brought pictures to me when Rosemary was killed. Nobody brought pictures to Mrs. Lindsay when Shawna was killed. Why is that?"

Munro said, "Because the army made a bad mistake. There's no excuse for it. All I can say is it would have been different if I had been involved back then. Or Major Reacher here. Beyond that, all I can do is apologize."

Major Reacher here. Beyond that, all I can do is apologize.

She looked at him, and so did I. Then she looked at the picture again and said, "This man's name is Reed Riley. He's a captain in the 75th Ranger Regiment. Rosemary said he commanded Bravo Company, whatever that is."

"So they were dating?"

"Almost four months. She was talking about a life together."

"Was he?"

"Men will say anything to get what they want."

"When did it end?"

"Two weeks before she was killed."

"Why did it end?"

"She didn't tell me."

"Did you have an opinion?"

Emmeline McClatchy said, "I think she got pregnant."

Chapter

59

There was silence in the small room for a moment, and then Emmeline McClatchy said, “A mother can always tell. She looked different. She acted different. She even smelled different. At first she was happy, and then later she was miserable. I didn’t ask her anything. I thought she would come to me on her own. You know, in her own good time. But she didn’t get the chance.”

Munro was quiet for a beat, like a mark of respect, and then he asked, “Did you ever see Captain Riley again after that?”

Emmeline McClatchy nodded. “He came by to offer his condolences, a week after her body was found.”

“Do you think he killed her?”

“You’re the policeman, young man, not me.”

“I think a mother can always tell.”

“Rosemary said his father was an important man. She wasn’t sure where or how. Politics, perhaps. Something where image matters. I think a black girlfriend was a good thing for Captain Riley, but a pregnant girlfriend wasn’t.”

Emmeline McClatchy wouldn’t be pushed any further. We said our goodbyes and walked back to the Humvee. Munro said, “This is looking real bad.”

I asked him, “Did you speak to Shawna Lindsay’s mother too?”

“She wouldn’t say a word to me. She chased me away with a stick.”

“How solid is the information about Sheriff Deveraux?”

“Rock solid. They dated, he ended it, she wasn’t happy. Then Rosemary McClatchy was next up, as far as I can piece it together.”

“Was it his car that got wrecked on the track?”

“According to the Oregon DMV it was. Via the plate you found. A blue ’57 Chevy. A piece of shit, not a show car.”

“Did he have an explanation?”

“No, he had a lawyer.”

“Can you prove he was Janice Chapman’s boyfriend too?”

“Not beyond a reasonable doubt. She was a party girl. She was seen with a lot of guys. She can’t have been dating all of them.”

“She was known as a party girl at Tulane, too.”

“Is that where she went?”

“Apparently.”

He smiled. “If all the Tulane coeds were laid end to end, I wouldn’t be in the least surprised.”

“Did you know she wasn’t really Janice Chapman?”

“What do you mean?”

“She was born Audrey Shaw. She changed her name three years ago.”

“Why?”

“Politics,” I said. “She was coming off a two-year affair with Carlton Riley.”

I left him with that piece of information, and walked away south. He drove away north. This time I didn’t cut through anyone’s yard. I walked around the block, like a responsible citizen, and stepped over the wire and hiked across the field and found the dirt track through the trees. I was back on Main Street less than twenty minutes later. Five minutes after that I was inside the Sheriff’s Department. One minute after that I was in Deveraux’s office. She was behind her desk. The desk was covered in a sea of paper.

I said, “We need to talk.”

I said, ¨We need to talk.´´

Chapter

60

Deveraux looked up at me, a little alarmed. Something in my voice, maybe. She said, “Talk about what?”

I asked her, “Did you ever date a guy from the base?”

“What base? You mean Kelham?”

“Yes, Kelham.”

“That’s kind of personal, isn’t it?”

“Did you?”

“Of course not. Are you crazy? Those guys are my biggest problem. You know how it is between a military population and local law enforcement. It would have been the worst kind of conflict of interest.”

“Do you socialize with any of them?”

“No, for the same reason.”

“Do you know any of them?”

“Barely,” she said. “I’ve toured the base and met some of the senior officers, in a formal way. Which is to be expected. They’re trying to deal with the same kind of problems I am.”

“OK,” I said.

“Why are you asking?”

“Munro was at the McClatchy place. Rosemary McClatchy and Shawna Lindsay seem to have dated the same guy. Janice Chapman also, probably. Munro heard you had dated the guy too.”

“That’s bullshit. I haven’t dated a guy in two years. Couldn’t you tell?”

I sat down.

“I had to ask,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“Who was the guy?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“You have to tell me. Don’t you think? McClatchy and Lindsay are my cases. Therefore it’s relevant information. And I have a right to know if some guy is taking my name in vain.”

“Reed Riley,” I said.

“Never heard of him,” she said.

Then she said, “Wait a minute. Did you say Riley?”

I didn’t answer.

She said, “Oh my God. Carlton Riley’s son? He’s at Kelham? I had no idea.”

I said nothing.

“Oh my God,” she said again. “That explains a whole lot.”

I said, “It was his car on the railroad track. And Emmeline McClatchy thinks he got Rosemary pregnant. I didn’t ask her. She came right out with it.”

“I need to talk to him.”

“You can’t. They just choppered him out of there.”

“To where?”

“What’s the most remote army post in the world?”

“I don’t know.”

“Neither do I. But a buck gets ten that’s where he’ll be tonight.”

Neither do I. But a buck gets ten that's where he'll be tonight."

"Why would he say he dated me?"

"Ego," I said. "Maybe he wanted his pals to believe he had collected the whole set. The four most beautiful women in Carter Crossing. The Brannan brothers at the bar told me he was a big dog and always had arm candy."

"I'm not arm candy."

"Maybe not on the inside."

"His father probably knows the guy Janice Chapman had the affair with. They're right there in the Senate together."

I said nothing.

She looked right at me.

She said, "Oh, no."

I said, "Oh, yes."

"The same woman? Father and son? That's seriously messed up."

"Munro can't prove it. Neither can we."

"We can infer it. This all is way too much hoopla for a theoretical worry about blowback in general."

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe not. Who knows how these people think?"

"Whatever, you can't go to D.C. Not now. It's far too dangerous. You'll be walking around with the world's biggest target on your back. Senate Liaison has got a lot invested in Carlton Riley. They won't let you screw things up. Believe me, you're nothing to them compared to a good relationship with the Armed Services Committee."

She said all that and then her phone rang and she picked up and listened for a minute. She covered the mouthpiece with her palm and said, "This is the Oxford PD asking about the dead journalist. I want to tell them the proven perpetrator was shot to death by police after resisting arrest, case closed."

was shot to death by police after resisting arrest, case closed.

I said, “Fine with me.”

So she told them that, and then she had to call a whole long list of state departments and county authorities, so I wandered out of her office and she got so busy I didn’t talk to her again until dinner at nine o’clock.

At dinner we talked about her father’s house. She ordered her cheeseburger and I got a roast beef sandwich and I asked her, “What was it like growing up here?”

“It was weird,” she said. “Obviously I didn’t have anything to compare it to, and we didn’t get television until I was ten, and we never went to the movies, but even so I sensed there had to be more out there. We all did. We all had island fever.”

Then she asked where I grew up, so I went through as much of the long list as I could remember. Conceived in the Pacific, born in West Berlin when my father was assigned to the embassy there, a dozen different bases before elementary school, education all over the world, cuts and bruises picked up fighting in hot wet alleys in Manila healing days later in cold wet quarters in Belgium, near NATO headquarters, then running across the original assailants a month later in San Diego and resuming the conflict. Then eventually West Point, and a restless, always-moving career of my own, in some of the same places but in many new and different places too, in that the army’s global footprint was not identical to the Marine Corps’.

She asked, “What’s the longest you were ever in one spot?”

I said, “Less than six months, probably.”

“What was your dad like?”

“He was quiet,” I said. “He was a birdwatcher. But his job was to kill people as fast and efficiently as possible, and he was always aware of it.”

“Was he good to you?”

“Yes, in an old-fashioned way. Was yours?”

She nodded. “Old-fashioned would be a good way to describe it. He thought I’d get married and he’d have to come all the way to Tupelo or Oxford to visit me.”

get married and he'd have to come all the way to Tupelo or Oxford to visit me."

"Where was your house?"

"South on Main Street until it curves, and then first on the left. A little dirt road. Fourth house on the right."

"Is it still there?"

"Just about."

"Didn't it rent again?"

"No, my dad was sick for a spell before he died, and he let the place go. The bank that owned it wasn't paying attention. It's more or less a ruin now."

"All overgrown, with slime on the walls and a cracked foundation? A big old hedge in back? Eight letters on the mailbox?"

"How do you know all that?"

"I was there," I said. "I passed by on my way to the McClatchy place."

She didn't answer.

I said, "I saw the deer trestle."

She didn't answer.

I said, "And I saw the dirt in the trunk of your car. When you gave me the shotgun shells."

Chapter

61

The waitress came by and picked up our empty plates and took our orders for pie. Then she went away again and Deveraux was left looking at me, a little crestfallen. A little embarrassed, I thought. She said, “I did a stupid thing.”

I said, “What kind of stupid thing?”

“I hunt,” she said. “Now and then. Just for fun. Deer, mostly. Just for something to do. I give the meat to the old folks, like Emmeline McClatchy. They don’t eat well otherwise. Pork, sometimes, if a neighbor is butchering a pig. If the neighbor thinks to share. But that doesn’t always happen. Sometimes the neighbors can’t afford to share.”

“I remember,” I said. “Emmeline had deer meat in the pot when we were there the first time. She offered us lunch. You declined.”

She nodded. “No point in giving and then taking away. I got that deer a week ago. I couldn’t take it back to the hotel, obviously. So I used my dad’s place. I always have, since I came back here. That’s a good trestle. But then you came up with your theory about Janice Chapman. I didn’t know you very well at that point. I thought you might get on the phone to HQ. I had visions of Blackhawks in the air, finding every trestle in the county. So I sent you off to ID the wrecked car so you would be out of the way for an hour, and I went over and dug up the blood.”

“Tests would have proved it came from an animal.”

“I know,” she said. “But how long would that have taken? I don’t even know where the nearest lab is. Atlanta, maybe. It could have taken two weeks or more. And I can’t afford to be under a cloud for two weeks or more. I literally can’t afford it. This is the only job I have. I don’t know where I’d get another one. And voters are weird. They always remember the suspicion, and they never remember the outcome.”

I thought about my old pal Stan Lowrey, back on post, with his want ads. A

I thought about my old pal Stan Lowrey, back on post, with his want ads. A brave new world, for all of us.

“OK,” I said. “But it was a fairly dumb thing to do.”

“I know it was. I panicked a little bit.”

“Do you know other hunters? And other trestles?”

“Some.”

“Because I still think that’s how those women were killed. I don’t see how it could be done any other way.”

“I agree. Which is why I panicked.”

“So sooner or later we might need to get those Blackhawks in the air.”

“Unless we find Reed Riley first and ask him some questions.”

“Reed Riley is gone,” I said. “He’s probably army liaison at Thule Air Force Base by now.”

“Which is where?”

“Northern Greenland,” I said. “The top of the world. It’s certainly the Air Force’s most remote place. I was there once. I was on a C-5 that had a problem. We had to land there. It’s part of the distant early-warning system. No sunlight for four months of the year. They’ve got radar that can see a tennis serve three thousand miles away.”

“Did you get their phone number?”

I smiled. “We’re going to have to do it another way. I’ll see what comes out of the woodwork the day after tomorrow.”

She said nothing in reply to that. We ate our pie slowly. We had time to kill. At that point the midnight train was probably just easing its way out of the yards in Biloxi.

*

Deveraux was still worried about the old man in the hotel, and she didn't want to repeat her charade at the top of the stairs, so I gave her my key and we left the diner separately, ten minutes apart, which left me with the check and time for a third cup of coffee. Then I strolled down the street and nodded to the guy behind the desk and headed up the stairs and tapped on my own door. Deveraux opened up instantly and I stepped inside. She had taken her shoes and her gun belt off, but everything else was still in place. Uniform shirt, uniform pants, ponytail. All good.

We went at it like a junkie heats a spoon, half-fast, half-slow, full of intense anticipation, willing to make the investment, barely able to wait for the payoff. She started by taking the elastic out of her hair, shaking it loose, smiling at me from behind its thick dark curtain. She undid the first three buttons on her shirt, and the weight of her name plate and badges and stars dragged the loose material askew and showed me a deep triangle of bare skin. I took off my shoes and my socks and pulled my shirt tails out of my pants. She put one hand on the fourth button on her shirt, and the other on the button on the waistband of her pants, and she said, "Your choice."

Which was a tough choice to make, but I thought long and hard about it and came to a firm conclusion. I said, "Pants," and she popped the button and a long minute later she was barefoot and bare-legged in just her tan uniform shirt. I said, "Now you get the same choice," and she went the other way and I took off my shirt. This time she asked about my shrapnel scar, and I gave her the short version, which was all about unfortunate timing at the start of my career, and a routine liaison visit to a Marine encampment in Beirut, Lebanon, and being passed by a truck which then blew itself up near the barracks entrance, a hundred yards from where I was standing.

She said, "I heard about an army MP there. That was you?"

I said, "I'm not sure who else was there."

"You went into the ruin and helped people."

"Only by accident," I said. "I was looking for a medic. For myself. I could see what I had eaten for dinner the night before."

"You got the Silver Star."

“And blood poisoning,” I said. “I could have done without either thing.”

I undid my waistband button and she undid the last of her shirt buttons and then we were in nothing but our underwear. That state of affairs did not endure long. We set my shower running and climbed into the tub together and pulled the curtain. We grabbed soap and shampoo and lathered up and washed each other up and down, side to side, inside and out. No one on earth could have faulted our standards of hygiene, or our approach to insuring them. We stayed in the shower until Toussaint’s tank ran cool, and then we grabbed enough towels to make sure we wouldn’t put puddles in my bed, and then the serious business began. She tasted warm and slick and soapy, and I’m sure I did too. She was lithe and strong and full of energy. We were very patient. I figured the midnight train was by then north of Columbus, south of Aberdeen, maybe forty miles and forty minutes away.

And forty minutes is a good long time. Halfway through it there was precious little we didn’t know about each other. I knew the way she moved, and what she liked, and what she loved. She knew the same about me. I got to know the way her heart hammered against her ribs, and the way her ribs moved as she panted, and the difference between one kind of panting and another. She got to know equivalent facts about me, the early-warning catch in my throat, the things to do to make my skin flush red, where I liked to be touched, and what drove me absolutely crazy.

Then we began, a long slow build-up, with a time certain in mind, like an invading army approaching a D-Day H-Hour, like infantrymen watching the beach come closer, like pilots seeing the target grow large in the bomb sights. Long and slow, closer and closer, long and slow, for five whole minutes. Then eventually faster and harder, faster and harder, faster and harder. The glass on my bathroom shelf began to tinkle right on cue. It shook and rattled. The pipes in the walls made muffled metallic sounds. The French doors shook, one sound from the wood, another from the glass, a third from the latch. The floorboards vibrated like drum skins, a discarded shoe rolled right side up, her sheriff’s star beat a tiny tattoo against the wood, the Beretta in my pocket thumped and bounced, the bed head beat on the wall in a rhythm not our own.

The midnight train.

Right on time.

All aboard.

But this time it was different.

And wrong.

Not us, but the train. Its sound was not the same. Its pitch was low. It was suddenly slowing hard. Its distant rumble was overlaid with the binding, grinding, screeching howl of brakes. I saw in my mind iron blocks jammed against the rims, locked wheels, long showers of superheated sparks in the nighttime air, one car after the other slamming and buffeting the next in front, as the mile-long length telescoped together behind the slowing locomotive. Deveraux slipped out from under me and sat up straight, her eyes nowhere, listening hard. The grinding howl kept on going, loud, mournful, primitive, impossibly long, and then eventually it started to fade, partly because the train's momentum had carried it far beyond the crossing, and partly because it was finally almost at a stop.

By my side Deveraux whispered, "Oh, no."

Chapter

62

We dressed fast and were out on the street two minutes later. Deveraux stopped and took two flashlights from her trunk. She lit one up and gave one to me. We used the alley between the hardware store and the pharmacy, past Janice Chapman's sad pile of sand, between the loan office and Brannan's bar, and out to the beaten earth beyond. She walked on ahead of me. Almost limping. Which didn't surprise me. I was on my knees. But she kept on going, dogged, committed, reluctant but determined to serve.

She was going to the railroad track, of course. She scrambled up the packed stones and stepped over the bright steel onto the ties. She turned south. I followed her. I figured the engineer would be about twenty minutes behind us. I figured his train would weigh about eight thousand tons. And I knew a little about trains that weigh eight thousand tons. Sometimes MPs are traffic cops like any other cops, but our traffic is specialized, in that it includes tank trains, which usually weigh about eight thousand tons, and part of directing traffic at that level is understanding it takes a tank train about a mile to stop even in a panic. And it takes an average man twenty minutes to walk a mile, so we would get there twenty minutes before the engineer did.

Which was not a privilege.

Although I doubted there would be much left to find.

We pressed on, almost jogging, trying to match awkward strides to the intervals between the ties. Our flashlight beams bounced and swung, through a fading cloud of smoke left behind by the train's tortured brakes. I figured we were headed right where I had already walked twice that day, where the path through the field to the east crossed the track before heading into the woods to the west. Deveraux's own childhood street, in effect, more or less. She must have been thinking about the same place, because as we approached the spot she slowed right down and started playing her flashlight beam carefully left and right.

I did the same thing, and it fell to me to find it. All that was left. Except, I

supposed, a red pulverized mist that must have filled the air and touched everything within a hundred yards, a molecule here, a molecule there.

It was a human foot, amputated just above the ankle. The cut was clean and straight. Not ripped or torn or ragged. It was a neat straight line. That line had been hit by some unbelievable instantaneous shockwave, some kind of savage subsonic pulse, like an acoustic weapon. I had seen such a thing before. And so had Deveraux. Most traffic cops have.

The shoe was still in place. A polished black item, plain and modest, with a low heel and a strap and a button. The stocking was still in place under it. Its top edge looked like it had been trimmed with scissors. Under its beige opacity was dark ebony skin, ending neatly in what looked like a plaster-cast cross-section displayed in a medical school lecture hall. Bone, veins, flesh.

“Those were her church shoes,” Deveraux said. “She was a nice woman at heart. I am so, so sorry this happened.”

“I never met her,” I said. “She was out. That was the first thing the kid ever said to me. My mom’s out, he said.”

We sat on a tie about five yards north of the foot and waited for the engineer. He joined us fifteen minutes later. There wasn’t much he could tell us. Just the lonely glare of the headlight, and the briefest subliminal flash of a white lining inside a black coat falling open, and then it was all over long ago.

“Her church suit,” Deveraux said. “Black gabardine, white lining.”

Then the engineer had slammed on the brakes, as he was required to by railroad policy and federal regulations and state laws, all of which were a totally pointless waste of time, in his opinion. Stress on the train, stress on the track, and for what? A mile’s walk, and nothing when he got there. It had happened to him before.

He and Deveraux exchanged various reference numbers and names and addresses, again as per regulations, and Deveraux asked him if he was OK or wanted help in any way, but he brushed the concerns aside and set off walking north again, a mile back to his cab, not at all shaken up, just weary with routine.

We walked back to Main Street, past the hotel, to the Sheriff’s Department. No

one was on duty at night, so Deveraux let us in with a key and turned on the lights. She called Pellegrino and told him to come back in on overtime, and she called the doctor and told him he had more duties to perform. Neither one was happy, but both were quick. They arrived almost together within a matter of minutes. Maybe they had heard the train too.

Deveraux sent them off together to collect the remains. We waited, not saying much, and they were back within half an hour. The doctor left again for his office, and Deveraux told Pellegrino to drive me to Memphis. Much earlier than I had planned, but I would have wanted it no other way.

Chapter

63

I didn’t go back to the hotel. I left directly from the Sheriff’s Department, with nothing except cash in one pocket and the Beretta in the other. We saw no passing traffic. No big surprise. It was the dead of night, and we were far from anywhere. Pellegrino didn’t talk. He was mute with fatigue, or resentment, or something. He just drove. He used the same route I had come in on, first the straight-shot east–west road through the forest, and then the minor road I had ridden in the old Chevy truck, and then the dusty two-lane I had ridden in the sagging Buick sedan. We crossed the state line into Tennessee, and passed by Germantown, where I had gotten out of the lumber guy’s pick-up, and then we headed through the sleeping southeast suburb and arrived in downtown Memphis, still well before dawn. I got out at the bus depot and Pellegrino drove away without a word. He went around a block and I heard his motor beating between buildings, and then it faded to nothing and he was gone.

The early start gave me a big choice of buses, but the first of them didn’t leave for an hour. So I quartered the surrounding low-rent blocks, looking for an all-night diner, and I found a choice of two. I picked the same place I had used for lunch three days previously. It was cheap, and it hadn’t killed me. I got coffee from a crusted pot, and bacon and eggs from pans that had been hot since the Nixon administration. Fifty minutes later I was in the back of a bus, heading north and east.

I watched the sun come up through the window on my right, and then I slept for the rest of the six-hour ride. I got out at the same place I had gotten in three days before, at the depot on the edge of the town close to the post where I was based. The town bore no obvious similarity to Carter Crossing, but all the same elements were there. Bars, loan offices, auto parts, gun shops, used stereo stores, each one of them thriving on the supportive stream of Uncle Sam’s military dollars. I walked past them all and headed into open country, stopping at the diner half a mile out for lunch, then continuing onward. I was back on post and in my quarters before two o’clock in the afternoon, which was much earlier than I had expected, and which gave me the chance to improve my plan a little.

The first thing I did was take a long hot shower. Deveraux's scent came up at me in the steam. I dried off and dressed in full-on Class A uniform, soup to nuts. Then I called Stan Lowrey and asked him for a ride back to the bus depot. I figured if I hurried I could get to D.C. by dinner time, which was about twelve hours ahead of schedule. And I told Lowrey to make no secret of where I was going. I figured the more people who knew, and the longer I was there, the better chance things would have to come crawling out of the woodwork.

Washington D.C. at seven o'clock on a Monday evening was going quiet. A company town, where the company was America, and where work never really stopped, but where it moved into quiet confidential locations after five in the afternoon. Salons, bars, fancy restaurants, townhouse parlors, those locations were unknown to me, but I knew the neighborhoods most likely to contain them. So I skipped the kind of distant chain hotels a lowly O-4 like me would normally use, and I headed for the brighter lights and the cleaner streets and the higher prices south of Dupont Circle. Not that I was intending to pay for anything. Legend had it there was a fancy place on Connecticut Avenue with a glitch in its back office, whereby uniformed guests were automatically billed to the Department of the Army. Some one-time conference arrangement that had never been canceled, or some embittered veteran in charge of the ledgers, no one knew. But the legend said you could be in Arlington Cemetery before the charges caught up with you.

I walked there slowly, in the center of every sidewalk I used. I was vigilant without appearing to be so. I used store windows as mirrors and gazed around innocently at every crosswalk light. No one was paying me any attention. I was crowded and jostled at times, but only by normal busy people rushing ahead to the next thing on their long agendas. I got to the hotel without any trouble and checked in under my real name and rank, and the legend held up, in that I was asked for no charge card or deposit. All I had to do was sign a piece of paper, which I did, as clearly and legibly as possible. No point in being the bait in a trap, and then hiding your light under a bushel. Not that I had ever been sure what a bushel was. Some kind of a small barrel, I assumed. In which case the light would go out anyway, for want of oxygen.

I rode the elevator to my room and hung my Class A coat on a hanger and called down and asked for dinner to be delivered. Thirty minutes later I was eating a sirloin steak, which would also be billed to the Pentagon. Thirty minutes after that I left the tray in the corridor and went out for a walk, just trawling, just seeing if my passage would pull anyone out of the shadows behind me. But no

seeing if my passage would pull anyone out of the shadows behind me. But no one reacted, and no one followed. I walked around the Circle and then quartered the blocks beyond it, passing the Iraqi Embassy at one extreme and the Colombian at the other. I saw men and women I took to be federal agents of various kinds, and men and women out of uniform but clearly military, and men and women in uniform, from all four branches of the service, and numerous private citizens in serious suits, but none of them made a move against me. None of them was even slightly interested. I was part of the furniture.

So I went back to the hotel, and I went to bed in my luxurious room, and I waited to see what would happen the next day, which would be Tuesday, the eleventh of March, 1997.

Chapter

64

I woke up at seven and let the Department of the Army buy me a room service breakfast. By eight I was showered and dressed and out on the street. I figured this was when the serious business would begin. A noon appointment at the Pentagon for a guy based as far away as I was made it likely I would have stayed in town the night before, and Washington hotels were easily monitored. It was that kind of a city. And I wasn't hiding my light under any kind of small barrels. So I half-expected opposition in the lobby, or right outside the street door. I found it in neither place. It was a fresh spring morning, the sun was out, the air was warm, and everything I saw was benign and innocent.

I made a show of strolling out to a newspaper kiosk, even though the hotel supplied publications of every type. I bought a *Post*, and a *Times*, and I lingered and loitered over making change, all slow and unconcerned, but there was no approach and no attack. I carried the papers to a coffee shop and sat at an outside table, in full view of the whole world.

No one looked at me.

By ten o'clock I was full of coffee and had read the ink off both broadsheets and no passerby had shown any interest in me. I began to think I had outsmarted myself with my choice of hotel. A transient O-4 would normally stay in a different kind of place, of which there were simply too many to call. So I began to think it likely the opposition would be focusing on the end of my journey, not a stop along the way. Which would be more efficient for them, anyway. They knew exactly where I was going, and exactly when.

Which meant they would be waiting for me in or around the Pentagon, at or before twelve o'clock. The belly of the beast. Much more dangerous. Less than three miles away, but a different planet in terms of how they would do things.

It was still a beautiful morning, so I walked. Any day could be the last of life or liberty, so small pleasures were always worth pursuing. I went south on 17th Street, past the Executive Office Building next to the White House, down the

side of the Ellipse, and onto the Mall. I turned away from George Washington's monument and headed for Abraham Lincoln's. I looped left of the old guy and found my way onto the Arlington Memorial Bridge and stepped out over the broad waters of the Potomac. Plenty of people were making the same trip by car. No one else was doing it on foot. The morning joggers were long gone, and the afternoon joggers were still at work.

I stopped halfway across and leaned on the rail. Always a wise precaution on a bridge. Nowhere for a follower to hide. They had to keep on coming. But there was no one behind me. No one ahead of me, either. I gave it five minutes, resting on my elbows like a contemplative soul, but no one came. So I moved on again, another three hundred yards, and I arrived in Virginia. Straight ahead of me in the distance was Arlington National Cemetery. The main gate. I was there five minutes later. I walked into the sea of white stones. Immediately there were graves all around me. Always the best way to approach the Department of Defense. Through the graveyard. For purposes of perspective.

I detoured once to pay my respects to JFK, and again to pay my respects to the Unknown Soldier. I walked behind Henderson Hall, which was a high-level Marine place, and I came out the cemetery's south gate, and there it was: the Pentagon. The world's largest office building. Six and a half million square feet, thirty thousand people, more than seventeen miles of corridors, but just three street doors. Naturally I wanted the southeast entrance. For obvious reasons. So I looped around, staying alert, keeping my distance, until I was able to join the thin stream of people coming in from the Metro station. The stream got thicker as it funneled toward the doors. It turned out to be a decent crowd. The right kind of people, for my particular purposes. I wanted witnesses. Arrests go bad all the time, sometimes accidentally, sometimes on purpose.

But I got in OK, despite a little uncertainty in the lobby. What I thought was an arrest team turned out to be a new watch coming on duty. A temporary manpower surplus. That was all. So I made it to 3C315 unmolested. Third floor, C ring, nearest to radial corridor number three, bay number fifteen. John James Frazer's office. Senate Liaison. There was no one in there with him. He was all alone. He told me to close the door. I did. He told me to sit down. I did.

He said, "So what have you got for me?"

I said nothing. I had nothing to say. I hadn't expected to get that far.

He said, “Good news, I hope.”

“No news,” I said.

“You told me you had the name. That’s what your message said.”

“I don’t have the name.”

“Then why say so? Why ask to see me?”

I paused a beat.

“It was a shortcut,” I said.

And right there the meeting died on its feet. There was really nothing more to say. Frazer put on a big show of being tolerant. And patient. He called me paranoid. Then he laughed a little. About how I couldn’t even get arrested. Then he tried to look concerned. About my state of health, maybe. And certainly about my appearance. The hair and the stubble. He put on the kind of brusque and manly voice an uncle uses with a favorite nephew.

He said, “You look terrible. There are barbershops here, you know. You should go use one.”

“I can’t,” I said. “I’m supposed to look like this.”

“Because of the undercover role?”

“Yes.”

“But you’re not really undercover, are you? I heard the local sheriff rumbled you immediately.”

“I think it’s worth continuing for the general population. The army is not real popular with them at the moment.”

“Anyway, I expect you’ll be withdrawn now. In fact I’m surprised you haven’t been withdrawn already. When did you last get orders?”

“Why would I be withdrawn?”

“Because matters appear to be resolved in Mississippi.”

“Do they?”

“I think so. The shootings outside of Kelham were clearly a case of an excess of zeal from an unofficial and unauthorized paramilitary force from another state. The authorities in Tennessee will take care of all that. We can’t really stand in their way. Our powers are limited.”

“They were ordered there.”

“No, I don’t really think so. Those groups have extensive underground communications. We think it will prove to be a civilian initiative.”

“I don’t agree.”

“This is not debate class. Facts are facts. This country is overrun with groups like that. Their agendas are decided internally. There’s really no doubt about that.”

“What about the three dead women?”

“The perpetrator has been identified, I believe.”

“When?”

“The news became public three hours ago, I think.”

“Who is it?”

“I don’t have all the details.”

“One of ours?”

“No, I believe it was a local person. Down there in Mississippi.” I said nothing.

Frazer said, “Anyway, thank you for coming in.”

I said nothing.

Frazer said, “This meeting is over, major.”

I said, “No, colonel, it isn’t.”

Chapter

65

The Pentagon was built because World War Two was coming, and because World War Two was coming it was built without much steel. Steel was needed elsewhere, as always in wartime. Thus the giant building was a monument to the strength and mass of concrete. So much sand was needed for the mix it was dredged right out of the Potomac River, not far from the rising walls themselves. Nearly a million tons of it. The result was extreme solidity. And silence.

There were thirty thousand people the other side of Frazer's closed door, but I couldn't hear any of them. I couldn't hear anything at all. Just the kind of hissing quiet typical of a C ring office.

Frazer said, "Don't forget you're talking to an officer senior to you in rank."

I said, "Don't forget you're talking to an MP authorized to arrest anyone from a newborn private to a five-star general."

"What's your point?"

"The Tennessee Free Citizens were ordered to Kelham. That's clear, I think. And I agree, they acted with an excess of zeal when they got there. But that's on the guy who gave the order, as much as it's on them. More so, in fact. Responsibility starts at the top."

"No one gave any orders."

"They were dispatched at the same moment I was. And Munro. We all converged. It was one single integrated decision. Because Reed Riley was there. Who knew that?"

"Perhaps it was a local decision."

"What was your personal position?"

"Purely passive. And reactive. I was ready to handle the fallout, if any. Nothing

more."

"You sure?"

"Senate Liaison is always passive. It's about putting out fires."

"Is it never proactive? Never about cutting firebreaks ahead of time?"

"How could I have done that?"

"You could have seen the danger coming. You could have made a plan. You could have decided to defend Kelham's fence from pesky civilians asking awkward questions. But you couldn't ask the Rangers to do that themselves. No commander on earth would recognize that as a legal order. So you could have called some unofficial buddies. From Tennessee, say, which is your home state. Where you know people. That's possible, isn't it?"

"No, that's ridiculous."

"And then to integrate your whole approach you could have decided to tap MP phones, to monitor things, and to give yourself an early warning in case anything seemed to be heading in the wrong direction."

"That's ridiculous too."

"Do you deny it?"

"Of course I deny it."

"So humor me," I said. "Let's talk theoretically. If a person did those two things, what would you think?"

"What two things?"

"Called Tennessee, and tapped phones. What would you think?"

"That laws were broken."

"Would a person do one thing and not the other? Speaking as a professional soldier?"

“He couldn’t afford to. He couldn’t afford to have an unauthorized force in the field without a way of knowing if it was close to being discovered.”

“I agree,” I said. “So whoever deployed the yahoos also tapped the phones, and whoever tapped the phones also deployed the yahoos. Am I making sense? Theoretically?”

“I suppose so.”

“Yes or no, colonel?”

“Yes.”

I asked, “How good is your short-term memory?”

“Good enough.”

“What was the first thing you said to me when I came in here today?”

“I told you to close the door.”

“No, you said hello. Then you told me to close the door.”

“And then I told you to sit down.”

“And then?”

He said, “I don’t recall.”

“We had a minor discussion about how busy this place is at noon.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“And then you asked me what news I had.”

“And you didn’t have any.”

“Which surprised you. Because I had left a message in which I told you I had the name.”

“I was surprised, yes.”

“What name?”

“I wasn’t sure. It might have concerned anything.”

“In which case you would have said *a* name. Not *the* name.”

“Perhaps I was humoring your delusion that someone did in fact send those amateurs to Mississippi. Because it seemed important to you.”

“It was important to me. Because it was true.”

“OK, I respect your convictions. I suggest you find out who.”

“I have found out who.”

He didn’t reply.

“You slipped up,” I said.

He didn’t answer.

“I didn’t leave you a message,” I said. “I made an appointment. With your scheduler. That was all. I didn’t give a reason for it. I just said I needed to see you at noon today. The only time I mentioned anything about names and the Tennessee Free Citizens was on a completely separate call with General Garber. Which evidently you were listening to.”

The hissing quiet in the little office seemed to change in pitch. It went low and ominous, like a real thrumming silence.

Frazer said, “Some things are too big for you to understand, son.”

“Probably,” I said. “I’m not too clear about what happened in the first trillionth of a second after the Big Bang. I can’t make the quantum physics work. But I can get by with a lot of other things. For instance, I understand the Constitution of the United States pretty well. You ever heard of the First Amendment? It guarantees the freedom of the press. Which means any old journalist is entitled to approach any old fence he likes.”

“That guy was from some radical pinko rag in a college town.”

“And I understand you’re lazy. You’ve spent years kissing Carlton Riley’s ass, and you don’t want to start over with a new guy. Not now. Because that would involve actually doing your damn job.”

No reply.

I said, “The second human being your boys killed was an underage recruit. He was on his way to try to join the army. His mother killed herself the same night. I understand both of those things. Because I saw what was left. First one, and then the other.”

No reply.

I said, “And I understand you’re doubly arrogant. First you thought I wouldn’t figure out your genius scheme, and then when I did, you thought you could deal with me all by yourself. No help, no backup, no arrest teams. Just you and me, here and now. I have to ask, how dumb are you?”

“And I have to ask, are you armed?”

“I’m in Class A uniform,” I said. “No sidearm is carried with Class A uniform. You’ll find that in the regulations.”

“So how dumb are you?”

“I didn’t expect to be in this situation. I didn’t expect to get this far.”

“Take my advice, son. Hope for the best, plan for the worst.”

“You got a gun in your desk?”

“I have two guns in my desk.”

“You going to shoot me?”

“If I have to.”

“This is the Pentagon. There are thirty thousand military personnel outside your door. They’re all trained to run toward the sound of gunfire. You better have a story ready.”

“You attacked me.”

“Why would I?”

“Because you’re obsessed about who shot some ugly black kid in the back of beyond.”

“I never told anyone he was ugly. Or black. Not on the phone. You must have gotten that from your Tennessee buddies.”

“Whatever, you’re obsessed. I ordered you to leave but you attacked me.”

I leaned back in his visitor chair. I stretched my legs out in front of me. I let my arms hang down. I got good and relaxed. I could have fallen asleep. I said, “This doesn’t look like a very threatening posture, does it? And I weigh about 250. You’ll have a problem moving me before 3C314 and 3C316 get in here. Which will take them about a second and a half. And then you’ll have to deal with the MPs. You kill one of their own in dubious circumstances, they’ll tear you apart.”

“My neighbors won’t hear. No one will hear a thing.”

“Why? You got suppressors on those guns?”

“I don’t need suppressors. Or guns.”

Then he did a very strange thing. He stepped over and took a picture off his wall. A black and white photograph. Himself and Senator Carlton Riley. It was signed. By the senator, I assumed. Not by him. He stepped away from the wall and laid the picture on his desk. Then he stepped back again and pincered his fingertips and worried the nail out of the plaster.

“Is that it?” I said. “You’re going to prick me to death with a pin?”

He put the nail next to the photograph.

He opened a drawer and took out a hammer.

He said, “I was in the middle of rehanging the picture when you attacked me. Fortunately I was able to grab the hammer, which was still close at hand.”

I said nothing.

“It will be very quiet,” he said. “One solid blow should do it. I’ll have plenty of time to arrange your body whatever way I need to.”

“You’re insane,” I said.

“No, I’m committed,” he said. “To the future of the army.”

Chapter

66

Hammers are very evolved items. They haven't changed for years. Why would they change? Nails haven't changed. Nails have been the same forever. Therefore a hammer's necessary features were worked out long ago. A heavy metal head, and a handle. All you need, and nothing you don't. Frazer's was a claw design, a framing hammer, maybe twenty-eight ounces. A big ugly thing. Total overkill for picture hanging, but such mismatches of tool and purpose are common in the real world.

It made for a decent weapon, though.

He came at me with it cocked in his right hand like a nightstick. I scrambled up out of my chair pretty fast, any idea of embarrassing him with an inappropriate postmortem position abandoned long ago. Sheer instinct. I don't scare easy, but humans are very evolved too. A lot of what we do is hard-wired right back to the mists of time. Right back to where my pal Stan Lowrey liked to start a story.

Frazer's office was small. Its free floor space was smaller still. Like fighting in a phone booth. How it was going to go would depend on how smart Frazer was. And I figured he was plenty smart. He had survived Vietnam, and the Gulf, and years of Pentagon bullshit. You don't do any of that without brains. I figured he was an easy seven out of ten. Maybe an eight. In no imminent danger of winning the Nobel Prize, but definitely smarter than the average bear.

Which helped me. Fighting morons is harder. You can't guess what they're going to do. But smart people are predictable.

He swung the hammer right to left, waist height, a standard opening gambit. I arched back and it missed me. I figured next he would slash back the other way, left to right, same height, and he did, and I arched back again, and he missed again. An exploratory exchange. Like moving pawns on a chess board. He was breathing strangely. Ferocity, not a throat problem. Nothing for Saint Audrey to worry about. It was ferocity, and excitement. He was a warrior at heart, and warriors love nothing more than the fight itself. It consumes them. They live for

it. He was smiling, too, in a feral way, and his eyes were seeing nothing except the hammer head and my midsection beyond it. There was a sharp tang of sweat in the air, something primitive, like a nighttime rodent's lair.

I dodged forward half a step, and he matched it with a backward move of his own that left us in the middle of the floor, which was important. To me. He wanted me back against the wall, and I didn't want to be there.

Not yet, anyway.

He swung the hammer a third time, scything it hard, making it look like he meant it, which he didn't. Not yet. I could read the pattern. It was in his eyes. I arched back and the hammer head buzzed by an inch from my coat. Twenty-eight ounces, on a long handle. The momentum of the miss carried it way around. His shoulders turned ninety degrees and he twisted at the waist. He used the torque to come right back at me. With some arm extension this time. He forced me back. I ended up close to the wall.

I watched his eyes.

Not yet.

He was a warrior. I wasn't. I was a brawler. He lived for the tactical victory. I lived to piss on the other guy's grave. Not the same thing. Not the same thing at all. A different focus. He swung for the fourth time, same angle, same height. He was like a fastball pitcher, getting me used to one thing before unleashing another thing entirely. Inside, inside, inside, and then the splitter away. But Frazer wouldn't go low. He would go high. Low would be better, but he was only a seven out of ten. Maybe an eight. But not a nine.

He swung a fifth time, same height, same angle, so hard that the tines of the claw made a raw thrumming sound as they moved through the air, stopping dead as the hammer stopped dead. He swung a sixth time, same height, same sound, more extension. I was very close to the wall. No real place to go. Then came the seventh swing, same height, same angle, same sound.

Then came his eyes.

They flicked upward, and the eighth swing aimed high, right at the side of my head. Right at my temple. I saw a glint off the hammer's inch-wide striking face. Twenty-eight ounces. Nearly two pounds in weight. It would have punched a

Twenty-eight ounces. Nearly two pounds in weight. It would have punched a very neat hole through the bone.

But it didn't, because my head wasn't there when it arrived.

I dropped vertically, eight inches onto bent and pre-set knees, four inches so the swing would miss me, and another four as a margin of safety, and I heard the rush of air above me, and I felt the miss drag him around in a wild part-circle, and I started back up, and then we were into a whole new set of calculations. We had done the three dimensions. We had done in and out, back and forth, and up and down. Now we were ready for the fourth dimension. Time. The only remaining questions were how fast could I hit him, and how fast was he spinning?

And they were crucial questions. For him especially. I was twisting as I rose and my elbow was already moving fast and it was a certainty I was going to hit him with it in the neck. A mathematical certainty. But which part of the neck? The answer was, whichever part was there when the blow landed. Front, side, back, it was all the same to me. But not to him. For him, some parts would be worse than others.

The twenty-eight ounces had first pulled his arms away from his shoulders, in a kind of Olympic hammer-throwing way, and then they had pulled his trailing shoulder hard, in a kind of whip-cracking way, so he was well into a serious but uncontrolled spin by then. And my elbow was doing pretty well by that point. A muscle memory thing. It happens automatically. If in doubt, throw the elbow. Maybe a childhood thing. My weight was behind it, my foot was braced, and it was going to land, and it was going to land hard. In fact it was going to land very hard. It was already scything and clubbing downward. And it was accelerating. It was going to be a vicious blow. It was going to be the kind of vicious blow he might survive if he took it on the side of the neck, but not on the back. A blow like that on the back of the neck would be fatal. No question. Something to do with how the skull joins the vertebrae.

So it was all about time, and speed, and rotation, and eccentric orbits. It was impossible to predict. Too many moving parts. At first I thought he was going to take it mostly on the side. On the angle, really, but with the ratio tilted toward maybe surviving it. Then I saw it was going to be closer to fifty-fifty, but the twenty-eight ounces suddenly pulled him off in some new direction, and from that point onward there was no doubt he was going to take it on the back of the

neck and nowhere else. No doubt at all. The guy was going to die.

Which I didn’t regret.

Except in a practical sense.

Chapter

67

Frazer went down by his desk, not hitting it, making a sound no louder than a fat guy sitting down on a sofa. Which was safe enough. No one calls the cops when a fat guy sits down on a sofa. There was carpet on the floor, some kind of a Persian thing most likely left behind by a previous occupant long dead of a heart attack. Under the carpet would be pad, and under that was solid Pentagon concrete. So sound transmission was strictly contained. *No one will hear a thing*, Frazer had said. *You got that right*, I thought. *Asshole*.

I pulled the illicit Beretta from my Class A coat pocket and held it on him for a long moment. Just in case. Hope for the best, plan for the worst. But he didn't move. No way could he. Maybe his eyelids. His neck was loose right at the top. He had taken no vertebrae with him. His skull was attached to the rest of him by nothing but skin.

I left him where he was for the time being and was about to step into the center of the room to start scoping things out when the door opened.

And in walked Frances Neagley.

She was in woodland-pattern BDUs and she was wearing latex gloves. She glanced around the room once, twice, and she said, "We need to move him near where the picture was."

I just stood there.

"Quickly," she said.

So I got myself going and I hauled him over to where he might plausibly have fallen while he was hanging the picture. He could have gone over backward and hit his head on the edge of the desk. The distances were about right.

"But why would he?" I said.

"He was banging in the nail," Neagley said. "He flinched when he saw the claw

"He was hanging in the rain," Neagley said. "He flinched when he saw the claw coming at him on the backswing. Some knee-jerk reaction. A reflex. He couldn't help it. He got his feet tangled up in the rug and over he went."

"So where's the nail now?"

She took it off the desk and dropped it at the base of the wall. It tinkled faintly against the gutter of tile beyond the edge of the rug.

"And where's the hammer?"

"It's near enough," she said. "Time to go."

"I have to erase my appointment."

She showed me diary pages from her pocket.

"Already in the bag," she said. "Let's go."

Neagley led me down two flights of stairs and through the corridors at a pace somewhere between moderate and brisk. We used the southeast entrance to get outside and then we headed straight for the parking lot, where we stopped among the reserved spaces, and where Neagley unlocked a large Buick sedan. It was a Park Avenue. Dark blue. Very clean. Maybe new.

Neagley said, "Get in."

So I got in, onto soft beige leather. Neagley backed up and swung the wheel and headed for the exit, and then we were through the barrier, and pretty soon after that we were on a bunch of highway ramps, and then we were through the last of them and on a six-lane road heading south, just one car among a rolling thousand.

I said, "The inquiry desk has a record of me coming in."

"Wrong tense," Neagley said. "It had a record. It doesn't anymore."

"When did you do all that?"

"I figured you were OK as soon as you were one-on-one with the guy. Although I wish you hadn't talked so much. You should have moved to the physical much

sooner. You have talents, honey, but talking ain't top of the list."

"Why are you even here?"

"I got word."

"What word?"

"The story of this crazy trap. Walking into the Pentagon like that."

"Word from where?"

"From way down in Mississippi. From Sheriff Deveraux herself. She asked for my help."

"She called you?"

"No, we had a séance."

"Why would she call you?"

"Because she was worried, you idiot. As was I, as soon as I heard."

"There was nothing to worry about."

"There could have been."

I asked, "What did she want you to do?"

"She wanted me to watch your back. To make sure you were OK."

"I don't think I told her what time the appointment was."

"She knew what bus you were on. Her deputy told her what time he'd gotten you to Memphis, and so it was easy enough to figure out what line you would take."

"How did that help you this morning?"

"It didn't help me this morning. It helped me yesterday evening. I've been on you since you left the bus depot. Every minute. Nice hotel, by the way. If they ever catch up with me for the room service, you owe me big money."

I said, “Whose car is this?”

“It belongs to the motor pool. As per procedure.”

“What procedure?”

“When a senior staff officer passes away, his Department-owned car is returned to the motor pool. Where it is immediately road tested to determine what remedial work needs to be done before it can be reissued. This is the road test.”

“How long will it last?”

“About two years, probably.”

“Who was the officer?”

“It’s a fairly new car, isn’t it? Must have been a fairly recent death.”

“Frazer?”

“It’s easier for the motor pool to do the paperwork first thing in the morning. We were all counting on you. If anything had gone wrong we’d all have had red faces.”

“I might have arrested him instead.”

“Same thing. Dead or busted, it makes no difference to the motor pool.”

“Where are we going?”

“You’re due on post. Garber wants to see you.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s three hours away.”

“So sit back and relax. This might be the last rest you get for a spell.”

“I thought you didn’t like Deveraux.”

“Doesn’t mean I wouldn’t help her if she was worried. I think there’s something wrong with her, that’s all. How long have you known her?”

“Four days,” I said.

“And I bet you could already tell me four weird things about her.”

I said, “I should try to call her, if she’s worried.”

“I already tried,” Neagley said. “From the scheduler’s phone. While you were giving Frazer all that theoretical shit. I was going to tell her you were nearly home and dry. But she didn’t answer. A whole Sheriff’s Department, and no one picked up.”

“Perhaps they’re busy.”

“Perhaps they are. Because there’s something else you need to know. I checked a rumor from the sergeants’ network. The ground crew at Benning says the Blackhawk that came in from Kelham on Sunday was empty. Apart from the pilots, of course. No passenger, is what they meant. Reed Riley didn’t go anywhere. He’s still on the post.”

Chapter

68

I took Neagley's advice and relaxed through the rest of the ride. It took a lot less than three hours. The Buick was much faster than a bus. And Neagley pushed it much harder than a bus driver would. I was back on post by three-thirty. I had been gone exactly twenty-four hours.

I went straight to my quarters and took off the fancy Class As and cleaned my teeth and took a shower. Then I put on BDUs with a T-shirt and went to see what Garber wanted.

Garber wanted to show me a confidential file from the Marine Corps. That was the purpose of his summons. But first came a short question-and-answer session. It didn't go well. It was very unsatisfactory. I asked the questions, and he refused to answer them.

And he refused to make eye contact.

I asked, "Who did they arrest in Mississippi?"

He said, "Read the file."

"I would like to know."

"Read the file first."

"Do they have a good case or is it bullshit?"

"Read the file."

"Was it the same guy for all three women?"

"Read the file first."

"Civilian, right?"

"Read the damn file, Reacher."

He wouldn't let me take the file away. It had to remain under his personal control at all times. Under his eye throughout, technically, but he didn't follow the letter of the law on that point. He stepped out of his office and closed the door quietly and left me alone with it.

It was about a quarter of an inch thick, cased in a jacket that was a different shade of khaki than the army uses. Better quality, too. It was smooth and crisp, only a little scraped and scuffed by the passage of time. It had red chevrons on all four edges, presumably denoting some elevated level of secrecy. It had a white stick-on label with a USMC file number printed on it, and a date five years in the past.

It had a second label with a name printed on it.

DEVERAUX, E.

Her name was followed by her rank, which was CWO5, and her service number, and her date of birth, which was fairly close to mine. Near the bottom edge of the jacket was a third stick-on, slightly misaligned, taken from a long roll of preprinted tape. I guessed it was supposed to say *Do Not Open Unless Authorized* but it had been cut at the wrong interval so that in reality it said *Open Unless Authorized Do Not*. Bureaucracy can be full of accidental humor.

But the contents of the file were not funny.

The contents started with her photograph. It was in color, and maybe a little more than five years old. Her hair was buzzed very short, like she had told me. Probably a number two clipper, grown out a week or so, like a soft dark halo. Like moss. She looked very beautiful. Very small and delicate. The short hair made her eyes enormous. She looked full of life, full of vigor, in control, in command. Some kind of a mental and physical plateau. Late twenties, early thirties. I remembered them well.

I laid the photograph face down on my left and looked at the first sheet of printed words. They were typewritten. An IBM machine, I guessed, with the golf ball. Common in 1992. And there were still plenty around in 1997. Computer word processing was happening, but like everything else in the military it was happening slowly and cautiously, with a great deal of doubt and suspicion.

I started reading. Immediately it was clear that the file was a summary of an investigation conducted by a USMC Brigadier General from their Provost Marshal's office, which oversaw their MP business. The one-star's name was James Dyer. A very senior man, for what appeared to be nothing more than a personnel issue. A personal dispute, in fact, between two Marine MPs of equal rank. Or, technically, a dispute between one Marine MP and two others, for a total of three. On one side of the issue were a woman named Alice Bouton and a man named Paul Evers, and on the other side of the issue was Elizabeth Deveraux.

Like every summary I had ever read this one began with a bald narrative of events, written neutrally and patiently, without implication or interpretation, in language anxious to be clear. The story was fairly simple. Like a subplot from daytime TV. Elizabeth Deveraux and Paul Evers were dating, and then they weren't, and then Paul Evers and Alice Bouton were dating, and then Paul's car got trashed, and then Alice got dishonorably discharged after a financial irregularity came to light.

That was the narrative of events.

Next came a digression into Alice Bouton's situation. Like a sidebar. Alice was indisputably guilty, in General Dyer's opinion. The facts were clear. The evidence was there. The case was solid. The prosecution had been fair. The defense had been conscientious. The verdict had been unanimous. The amount in question had been less than four hundred dollars. In cash, taken from an evidence locker. Proceeds from an illegal weapons sale, confiscated, bagged up, logged in, and awaiting exhibition in an upcoming court martial. Alice Bouton had taken it and spent it on a dress, a purse, and a pair of shoes, in a store close to where she was based. The store remembered her. Four hundred bucks was a lot of money for a jarhead to spend on an outfit, back in 1992. Some of the larger denomination bills were still in the store's register when the MPs came calling, and the serial numbers matched the evidence log.

Case closed.

Sidebar over.

Next up was General Dyer's interpretation of the three-way turmoil. It was painstaking. It was prefaced with a cast-iron guarantee that all conclusions were amply supported by data. Conversations had been had, interviews had been

conducted, information had been gathered, witnesses had been consulted, and then everything had been cross-referenced and cross-checked, and anything supported by fewer than two independent sources had been omitted. A full court press, in other words. You could take it to the bank. The guarantee ended with a long emphasized paragraph. I could picture the IBM machine bucking and rocking on the desk as the golf ball slammed back and forth, supplying the furious underline. The paragraph confirmed Dyer's belief that everything about to be described was courtroom-ready, should further action be deemed necessary or desirable.

I turned the page and started in on the analysis. Dyer wrote in a plain style, and did not inject himself into the narrative. Given the preceding page, any reader would understand that the content might not be one-hundred-percent forensically proven fact, but that equally it was very far from scuttlebutt or rumor. It was solid information. It was known as much as anything was knowable. Hence Dyer never wrote *I believe* or *I think* or *It seems likely*. He just told the story.

Which went like this: Elizabeth Deveraux had been seriously pissed when Paul Evers dumped her for Alice Bouton. She had felt slighted, disregarded, disrespected, and insulted. She was a woman scorned, and her subsequent behavior seemed determined to prove the cliché true in every respect. She victimized the new couple by bad-mouthing them everywhere she could, and by manipulating workloads whenever she could, to stop them getting down time together.

Then she drove Paul Evers's car off a bridge.

Evers's car was nothing special, but it represented a significant investment on his part, and it was essential to his social life, given that no one wants to stay on post all the time. Deveraux had retained a key for it, and late one night had driven it away and steered it carefully beyond a bridge abutment and let it roll over a thirty-foot drop into a concrete flood sluice. The impact had almost totaled the car, and heavy rain later that night had finished the job.

Then Deveraux had turned her attention to Alice Bouton.

She had started by breaking her arm.

General Dyer's two-independent-sources rule meant that the circumstances were not precisely described, because the attack had not been witnessed, but Bouton

claimed Deveraux had been the assailant, and Deveraux had never denied it. The medical facts were beyond dispute. Bouton's left elbow had been dislocated and both bones in her left forearm had been snapped. She had been in a hard cast for six long weeks.

And Deveraux had spent those six long weeks pursuing the theft allegation with demonic intensity. Except that *pursuing* was the wrong word, initially, because at the outset there was nothing to pursue. No one knew anything had been stolen. Deveraux had first inventoried the evidence lockers and audited the paperwork. Only then had she discovered the discrepancy. And then she had made the allegation. And then she had pursued it, like an obsession, with the ultimate result being as described in General Dyer's sidebar. The court martial, and the guilty verdict.

There was a huge uproar in the Marine MP community, of course, but Bouton's guilty verdict had insulated Deveraux from any kind of formal criticism. What would have looked like a vendetta had the verdict been different was left looking like a good piece of police work entirely in keeping with the Marine Corps' sense of ethics and honor. But it was a fine line. General Dyer had been in no doubt that the case involved major elements of personal retribution.

And, unusually for such reports, he had attempted to explain why.

Again, he confirmed that conversations had been had, and interviews had been conducted, and information had been gathered, and witnesses had been consulted. The participants in these new discussions had included friends and enemies, acquaintances and associates, and doctors and psychiatrists.

The salient factor was held by all to be Alice Bouton's unusual physical beauty.

All were agreed that Bouton had been an exceptionally good looking woman. Words quoted included *gorgeous, stunning, spectacular, heart-breaking, knockout,* and *incredible*.

All the same words applied equally to Deveraux too, of course. All were agreed on that point also. No question. The psychiatrists had concluded that therein lay the explanation. General Dyer had translated their clinical language for the casual reader. He said Deveraux couldn't take the competition. She couldn't stand not to be clearly and definitively the most beautiful woman on the post. So she had taken steps to make sure she was.

I read the whole thing one more time, front to back, and then I butted all the pages neatly together and closed the jacket on them, and Garber came back into the room.

Chapter

69

The first thing Garber said was, “We just heard from the Pentagon. John James Frazer was found dead in his office.”

I said, “Dead how?”

“Looks like a freak accident. Apparently he fell and hit his head on the desk. His staff got back from lunch and found him on the floor. He was doing something with a picture of Carlton Riley.”

“That’s bad.”

“Why?”

“This is not a great time to lose our Senate Liaison.”

“Did you read the file?”

I said, “Yes, I did.”

“Then you know we don’t need to worry about the Senate anymore. Whoever replaces Frazer will have plenty of time to learn the job before the next thing comes along.”

“Is that going to be the official line?”

“It’s the truth. She was a Marine, Reacher. Sixteen years in. She knew all about cutting throats. She knew how to do it, and she knew how to pretend she didn’t. And the car alone proves it. Right there, what more is there to say? She wrecks Paul Evers’s car, and she wrecks Reed Riley’s. Same MO. Same exact reason. Except this time she’s only one of four beautiful women. And Munro says Riley dates her and then dumps her for the other three in succession. So this time she’s three times as mad. This time she goes beyond breaking arms. This time she has her own private deer trestle behind an empty house.”

“Is that going to be the official line?”

“It’s what happened.”

“So what next?”

“It’s purely a Mississippi matter now. We have no dog in the fight, and we have no way of knowing what will happen. Most likely nothing will happen. My guess is she won’t arrest herself, and she won’t give the State Police any reason to either.”

“So we’re going to walk away?”

“All three of them were civilians. They’re nothing to do with us.”

“So the mission is terminated?”

“As of this morning.”

“Is Kelham open again?”

“As of this morning.”

“She denies dating Riley, you know.”

“She would, wouldn’t she?”

“Do we know anything about General Dyer?”

“He died two years ago after a long and exemplary career. He never put a foot wrong. The man was stainless.”

“OK,” I said. “I’ll take steps.”

“Toward what?”

“Toward wrapping up my involvement.”

“Your involvement is already wrapped up. As of this morning.”

“I have private property to recover.”

“You left something there?”

“I thought I was heading right back.”

“What did you leave?”

“My toothbrush.”

“That’s not important.”

“Will the DoD reimburse me?”

“For a toothbrush? Of course not.”

“Then I have a right to recover it. They can’t have it both ways.”

He said, “Reacher, if you draw one iota more attention to this thing there won’t be anything I can do to help you. Right now some very senior people are holding their breath. We’re one inch away from news stories about a senator’s son dating a three-time killer. Except neither one of them can afford to say anything about it. Not him, for one reason, and not her, for another. So we’ll probably get away with it. But we don’t know yet. Not for sure. Right now it’s still in the balance.”

I said nothing.

He said, “You know she’s good for it, Reacher. A man with your instincts? She was only pretending to investigate. I mean, did she get anywhere with it? And she was playing you like a violin. First she was trying to get rid of you, and when you wouldn’t go, she switched to keeping you close. So she could monitor your progress. Or the lack of it. Why else would she even talk to you?”

I said nothing.

He said, “The bus is long gone, anyway. To Memphis. You’d have to wait until tomorrow now. And you’ll see things differently tomorrow.”

I asked, “Is Neagley still on the post?”

He said, “Yes, she is. I just made a date to have a drink with her.”

“Tell her she’s taking the bus home. Tell her I’m taking the company car.”

He asked, “Do you have a bank account?”

I said, “How else would I get paid?”

“Where is it?”

“New York. From when I was at West Point.”

“Move it to somewhere nearer the Pentagon.”

“Why?”

“Involuntary separation money comes through quicker if you bank in Virginia.”

“You think it will come to that?”

“The Joint Chiefs think war is over. They’re singing along with Yoko Ono. There are big cuts coming. Most of them will fall on the army. Because the Marines have better PR, and because the Navy and the Air Force are a whole different thing altogether. So the people right above us are making lists, and they’re making them right now.”

“Am I on those lists?”

“You will be. And there will be nothing I can do to stop it.”

“You could order me not to go back to Mississippi.”

“I could, but I won’t. Not you. I trust you to do the right thing.”

Chapter

70

I met Stan Lowrey on my way off the post. My old friend. He was locking his car just as I was unlocking the Buick.

I said, “Goodbye, old pal.”

He said, “That sounds final.”

“You may never see me again.”

“Why? Are you in trouble?”

“Me?” I said. “No, I’m fine. But I heard your job is vulnerable. You might be gone when I get back.”

He just shook his head and smiled and walked on.

The Buick was an old lady’s car. If my grandfather had had a sister, she would have been my great aunt, and she would have driven a Buick Park Avenue. But she would have driven it slower than me. The thing was as soft as a marshmallow and twice as buttery inside, but it had a big motor. And government plates. So it was useful on the highway. And I got on the highway as soon as I could. On I-65, to be precise. Heading south, down the eastern edge of a notional corridor, not down the western edge through Memphis. I would be approaching from a side I had never seen before, but it was a straighter shot. And therefore faster. Five hours, I figured. Maybe five and a half. I would be in Carter Crossing by ten-thirty at the latest.

*

I went south all the way through Kentucky in the last of the daylight, and then it got dark pretty quickly as I drove through Tennessee. I hunted around for a mile and found the switch and turned on my headlights. The broad road took me through the bright neon of Nashville, fast and above the fray, and then it took me

onward through open country, where it was dark and lonely again. I drove like I was hypnotized, automatically, not thinking anything, not noticing anything, surprised every time I came to by the hundred-mile bites I had been taking out of the journey.

I crossed the line into Alabama and stopped at the second place I saw, for gas and a map. I knew I would need to head west off an early Alabama exit and I needed a map with local details to show me where. Not the kind of large-scale plan you can buy ahead of time. The sheet I bought unfolded neatly and showed me every farm track in the state. But it showed me nothing more than that. Mississippi was just a blank white space on the edge of the paper. I narrowed down my target area and found a choice of four east–west routes. Any one of them might have been the road that led onward past Kelham's gate to Carter Crossing. Or none of them might. There could have been all kinds of dog-leg turns waiting for me on the other side of the line. A regular maze. No way of knowing.

Except that Kelham had been built in the 1950s, which was still a time of big wars and mass mobilizations. And DoD planners have always been a cautious bunch. They didn't want some reservist convoy from New Jersey or Nebraska getting lost in unfamiliar parts. So they put discreet and coded signs here and there, marking the way to and from every major installation in the nation. Their efforts intensified after the Interstate system was begun. The Interstate system was formally named for President Eisenhower, for a very good reason. Eisenhower had been Supreme Allied Commander in Europe during World War Two, and his biggest problem had not been Germans. It had been getting men and matériel from point A to point B across lousy and unmarked roads. He was determined his successors should not face similar problems should land war ever come to America. Hence the Interstate system. Not for vacations. Not for commerce. For war. And hence the signs. And if those signs had not been shot up or trashed or stolen by the locals, I could use them like homing beacons.

I found the first of the signs at the next exit I came to. I came off the ramp and struck out west on a concrete ribbon lined here and there with low-rent malls and auto dealers. After a time the commercial enterprises died back and the road reverted to what I guessed it had been before, which was a meandering rural route through what looked like pretty country. There were trees and fields and the occasional lake. There were summer camps and vacation villages and the occasional inn. There was a bright moon high in the sky, and it was all very picturesque.

picturesque.

I drove on but saw no more DoD signs until I was in Mississippi, and only one more after that. But it was a bold and confident arrow pointing straight ahead, with the number 17 embedded in the code below it, indicating just seventeen more miles to go. The clock in my head said five past ten. If I hustled, I would arrive ahead of schedule.

Chapter

71

Evidently the DoD engineers had been just as concerned about the westward approach to Kelham as the eastward. The road was the same in both directions. Same width, same material, same camber, same construction. I recognized it ten miles out. Then I sensed the trees and the fence in the darkness to my right. Kelham's southeastern corner. Bottom right on a map.

The southern perimeter slid by my window, and I waited for the gate to arrive. I saw no reason why it wouldn't be at the exact mid-point of the fence. The DoD liked neatness. If there had been a hill in the way, army engineers would have removed it. If there had been a swamp in the way, army engineers would have drained it.

In the end I guessed that actually there had been a small valley in the way, because after a couple of miles the road stayed level only by mounting a causeway about six feet high. The land all around was lower. Then the causeway widened dramatically on my right and became a huge fan-shaped concrete elevation floating above the grade. Like a gigantic turn-in, like the mouth of a wide new road. It started out about the size of an end-on football field. Maybe more, but then it got a little narrower. It met the old road at a right angle, but there were no sharp edges. No sharp turns. The turns were shallow, easing gently through graceful, generous curves. To accommodate tracked vehicles, not Buicks, however lumbering.

But if the fan shape was the mouth of a new road, then that new road dead-ended fifty yards later, at Fort Kelham's gate. And Fort Kelham's gate was a heavy-duty affair. That was for damn sure. Physically it was stronger than anything I had seen outside a combat zone. It was flanked by fortifications and the guardhouse, which was also a serious affair. It had nine personnel in it. The county's interests were represented by the lone figure of Deputy Geezer Butler. He was sitting in his car, which was parked at an angle on the cusp of the farther curve, in a kind of no-man's-land, where the county's road became the army's.

But the army's heavy steel barriers were wide open, and the army's road was in

use. The base was all lit up and alive, and the whole scene looked exactly like business as usual. People were coming and going, not a big crowd, but no one was lonely. Most were driving, but some were on motorbikes. More were coming than going, because it was close to ten-thirty, and there were early starts tomorrow. But some hardy souls were still venturing out. Instructors, probably. And officers. Those who had it easy. I braked behind two slower cars and someone came out the gate and pulled in behind me and I found myself stuck in a little four-car convoy. We were swimming against the tide, going west, heading for the other side of the tracks. Possibly the last of many such convoys that evening.

I sensed the bottom-left corner coming up, Kelham's southwestern limit, and I tried to identify the blind spot I had used two days before, but it was too dark to see. Then we were out in the open scrub. I saw Pellegrino in his cruiser, coming the other way, driving slow, trying to calm the returning traffic with his presence alone. Then we were rolling through the black half of town, and then we were bouncing over the railroad track, and then we were pulling a tight left in behind Main Street, and then we were parking on the beaten earth in front of the bars, and the auto parts places, and the loan offices, and the gun shops, and the secondhand stereo stores.

I got out of the Buick and stood on the open ground halfway between Brannan's bar and the lines of parked cars. The open ground was being used as a kind of common thoroughfare. There were guys in transit from one bar to another, and there were guys standing around talking and laughing, and both groups were merging and separating according to some complex dynamic. No one was walking directly from place to place. Everyone was looping back toward the cars, pausing, shooting the shit, slapping backs, comparing notes, shedding one buddy and picking up another.

And there were plenty of women, too. More than I would have believed possible. I had no idea where they had all come from. Miles around, probably. Some were paired off with soldiers, others were in larger mixed groups, and some were in groups of their own. I could see about a hundred guys in total, and maybe eighty women, and I guessed there might be similar numbers inside. The men were from Bravo Company, I assumed, still on leave and anxious to make up for lost time. They were exactly what I would have expected to see. Good guys, well trained, by day performing at a hundred percent of their considerable capacities, by night full of energy, full of goodwill, and full of high spirits. They were all in their unofficial off-duty uniform of jeans, jackets, and T-shirts. Here or there a

their unofficial off-duty uniform of jeans, jackets, and T-shirts. Here or there a guy would look a little pinched and wary compared to the others, which most likely meant he was on the promotion track, and clearly some guys needed the spotlight more than others, but overall they were precisely what a good infantry unit looks like when it comes out to play. There was plenty of buzz going on, and plenty of noise, but I sensed no frustration or hostility. There was nothing negative in the air. They didn't blame the town for their recent incarceration. They were just glad to get back to it.

But even so I was sure local law enforcement would be holding its breath. In particular I was sure Elizabeth Deveraux would still be on duty. And I was definitely sure where I would find her. She needed a central location, and a chair and a table and a window, and something to do as time ticked away. Where else would she be?

I eased my way through the thin crowd and stepped left of Brannan's bar and into the alley. I skirted Janice Chapman's pile of sand and followed the dog-leg and came out onto Main Street between the hardware store and the pharmacy. Then I turned right and walked up to the diner.

*

The diner was almost completely full that night. It was practically heaving, compared to how I had seen it before. Like Times Square. There were twenty-six customers. Nineteen of them were Rangers, sixteen of them in four groups of four at four separate tables, big guys sitting tight together, shoulder to shoulder. They were talking loud, and calling back and forth to each other. They were keeping the waitress busy. She was running in and out of the kitchen, and she probably had been all day long, dealing with the pent-up demand for something other than army chow. But she looked happy. The gates were finally open. The river of dollars was flowing again. She was getting her tips.

The other three Rangers were dining with their girlfriends, face to face at tables for two, leaning in, heads together. All three men looked happy, and so did all three women. And why not? What could be finer than a romantic dinner at the best restaurant in town?

The old couple from the hotel were in there too, at their usual table for four, almost hidden by the groups of Rangers all around them. The old lady had her book, and the old guy had his paper. They were staying later than normal, and I guessed they were the only service workers in town not at that very moment

guessed they were the only service workers in town not at that very moment camped out behind their cash registers. But none of the guys from Kelham needed a bed for the night, and Toussaint's offered no other facilities. Not even coffee. So it made sense for the owners to wait out the noise and the disruption somewhere safe and familiar, rather than listen to it all out their back windows.

Then deeper into the room and right of the aisle and alone at the rearmost table for two was Major Duncan Munro. He was in BDUs and his head was bent over a meal. On the spot, just in case, even though his involvement in Kelham's affairs had been terminated hours before, presumably. He was a good MP. Professional to the end. I guessed he was on his way back to Germany, and was waiting for transport.

And Elizabeth Deveraux was there, of course. She was on her own at a table closer to the window than I had seen her choose before. On the spot, vigilant, just in case, paying attention, not willing to let the mayhem filter out from behind Main Street onto Main Street itself. Because of the voters. She was in uniform, and her hair was up in its ponytail. She looked tired, but still spectacular. I watched her for a beat, and then she looked up and saw me and smiled happily and kicked a chair out for me.

I paused another beat, thinking hard, and then I stepped over and sat down opposite her.

Chapter

72

Deveraux didn’t speak at first. She just looked me over, top to bottom, head to toe, maybe checking me for damage, maybe adjusting to the sight of me in uniform. I was still in the BDUs I had put on that afternoon, after getting back from D.C. A whole new look.

I said, “Busy day?”

She said, “Real busy since ten o’clock this morning. They opened the gates and out they came. Like a flood.”

“Any trouble?”

“None of them would pass a field sobriety test on their way home, but apart from that everything’s cool. I’ve got Butler and Pellegrino out and about, just to show the flag. Just in case.”

“I saw them,” I said.

“So how did it go up there?”

“Inconclusive,” I said. “Very bad timing on my part, I’m afraid. Just one of those freak things. The guy I went to see died in an accident. So I got nothing done.”

“I figured,” she said. “I was getting regular updates from Frances Neagley, until things got busy here. From eight until ten this morning you were drinking coffee and reading the newspaper. But something must have happened during those hours. My guess would be around nine o’clock. Mail call, maybe. But whatever, somebody must have reached a conclusion about something, because an hour later it all let loose. It was back to business as usual here.”

I nodded.

“I agree,” I said. “I think new information was released this morning. Something definitive, I guess.”

“Do you know what it was?”

I said, “By the way, thank you for worrying. I was very touched.”

“Neagley was just as worried as I was,” she said. “Once I told her what you were doing, that is. She didn’t need much persuading.”

“In the end it was safe enough,” I said. “It got a little tense around the Pentagon. That was the worst of it. I hung around there for quite a time. I came in through the cemetery. Behind Henderson Hall. You know that place?”

“Of course I do. I was there a hundred times. They have a great PX. It feels like Saks Fifth Avenue.”

“I got talking with a guy there. About you and a one-star called James Dyer. This guy said Dyer knew you.”

“Dyer?” she said. “Really? I knew him, but I doubt if he knew me. If he did, then I’m flattered. He was a real big deal. Who was the guy you were talking to?”

“His name was Paul Evers.”

“Paul?” she said. “You’re kidding. We worked together for years. In fact we even dated once. One of my mistakes, I’m afraid. But how amazing that you bumped into him. It’s a small world, right?”

“Why was he a mistake? He seemed OK to me.”

“He was fine. He was a really nice guy. But we didn’t really click.”

“So you dumped him?”

“More or less. But it felt close to mutual. We both knew it wasn’t going to work. It was just a question of who was going to speak first. He wasn’t upset, anyway.”

“When was this?”

She paused to calculate.

“Five years ago,” she said. “Feels like yesterday. Doesn’t time fly?”

“Then he said something about a woman called Alice Bouton. His next girlfriend after you, apparently.”

“I don’t think I knew her. I don’t recall the name. Did Paul seem happy?”

“He mentioned something about car trouble.”

Deveraux smiled.

“Girls and cars,” she said. “Is that all guys ever talk about?”

I said, “Reopening Kelham means they’re sure the problem is on your side of the fence, you know. They wouldn’t have done it otherwise. It’s a Mississippi matter now. That will be the official line, from this point forward. It’s not one of us. It’s one of you. You got any thoughts on that?”

“I think the army should share its information,” she said. “If it’s good enough for them, it would be good enough for me too.”

“The army is moving on,” I said. “The army won’t be sharing anything.”

She paused a beat.

“Munro told me he got new orders,” she said. “I suppose you have, too.”

I nodded. “I came back to tie up a loose end. That’s all, really.”

“And then you’ll be moving on. To the next thing. That’s what I’m thinking about right now. I’ll think about Janice Chapman tomorrow.”

“And Rosemary McClatchy, and Shawna Lindsay.”

“And Bruce Lindsay, and his mother. I’ll do my best for all of them.”

I said nothing.

She asked, “Are you tired?”

I said, “Not very.”

“I have to go help Butler and Pellegrino. They’ve been working since dawn. And anyway, I want to be on the road when the last of the stragglers start to head home. They’re always the toughest guys, and the drunkest.”

“Will you be back by midnight?”

She shook her head.

“Probably not,” she said. “We’ll have to manage without the train tonight.”

I said nothing in reply to that, and she smiled once more, a little sadly, and then she got up and left.

The waitress finally got to me five minutes later and I ordered coffee. And pie, as an afterthought. She treated me a little differently than before. A little more formally. She worked near a base, and she knew what the black oak leaves on my collar meant. I asked her how her day had gone. She said it had gone very well, thank you.

“No trouble at all?” I asked.

“None,” she said.

“Even from that guy in back? The other major? I heard he could be a handful.”

She turned and looked at Munro. She said, “I’m sure he’s a perfect gentleman.”

“Would you ask him to join me? Get him some pie, too.”

She detoured via his table, and she delivered my invitation, which involved a lot of elaborate pointing, as if I was inconspicuous and hard to find in the crowd. Munro looked over quizzically, and then he shrugged and got up. Each of the four Ranger tables fell silent as he passed, one after the other. Munro was not popular with those guys. He had had them sitting on their thumbs for four solid days.

He sat down in Deveraux’s chair and I asked him, “How much have they told you?”

“Bare minimum,” he said. “Classified, need to know, eyes only, the whole nine yards.”

“No names?”

“No,” he said. “But I’m assuming that Sheriff Deveraux must have given them solid information that clears our guys. I mean, what else could have happened? But she hasn’t arrested anybody. I’ve been watching her all day.”

“What has she been doing?”

“Crowd control,” he said. “Watching for signs of friction. But it’s all good. No one is mad at her or the town. It’s me they’re gunning for.”

“When are you leaving?”

“First light,” he said. “I get a ride to Birmingham, Alabama, and then a bus to Atlanta, Georgia, and then I fly Delta back to Germany.”

“Did you know Reed Riley never left the base?”

“Yes,” he said.

“What do you make of that?”

“It puzzles me a little.”

“In what way?”

“Timing,” he said. “At first I thought it was a decoy move, like politics as usual, but then I got real. They wouldn’t burn a hundred gallons of Jet A on a decoy move, senator’s son or not. So he was still scheduled to leave when the Blackhawk departed Benning, but by the time it arrived at Kelham, the orders had changed. Which means some big piece of decisive information came in literally while the chopper was in the air. Which was two days ago, on Sunday, right after lunch. But they didn’t act on it in any other way until this morning, which is Tuesday.”

“Why wouldn’t they?”

“I don’t know. I see no reason for a delay. It feels to me like they were evaluating the new data for a couple of days. Which is usually wise. Except in this instance it makes no sense at all. If the new data was strong enough to make

a snap decision to keep Riley on the post Sunday afternoon, why wasn't it strong enough to open the gates Sunday afternoon? It doesn't add up. It's as if they were ready to act privately on Sunday, but they weren't ready to act publicly until this morning. In which case, what changed? What was the difference between Sunday and today?"

"Beats me," I said. Which was disingenuous. Because there was really only one answer to that question. The only material difference between Sunday afternoon and Tuesday morning was that I had been in Carter Crossing on Sunday afternoon, and I had been eight hundred miles away on Tuesday morning.

And no one had expected me to come back again.

What that meant, I had no idea.

Chapter

73

The waitress was overworked and slow, so I left Munro to receive the pies alone and I headed back to the dog-leg alley. I came out between Brannan's bar and the loan office and saw that a few cars had left and the crowd on the open ground had thinned considerably, much more so than the few absent cars could explain, so I figured people were inside at that point, drinking away their last precious minutes of freedom before heading home for the night.

I found most of them inside Brannan's bar itself. The place was packed. It was seriously overcrowded. I wasn't sure if Carter County had a fire marshal, but if it did, the guy would have been having a panic attack. There must have been a hundred Rangers and fifty women in there, back to back, chest to chest, holding their drinks up neck-high to avoid the crush. There was a roar of sound, a loud generalized amalgam of talk and laughter, and behind it all I could hear the cash drawer slamming in and out of the register. The river of dollars was back in full flow.

I spent five minutes fighting my way to the bar, on a random route left and right through the crowd, checking faces as I went, some up close, some from afar, but I didn't see Reed Riley. The Brannan brothers were hard at work, dealing beer in bottles, taking money, making change, dumping wet dollar bills into their tip jar, passing and repassing each other in their cramped space with moves like dancers. One of them saw me and did the busy-barman thing with his chin and his eyes and the angle of his head, and then he recognized me from our earlier conversation, and then he remembered I was an MP, and then he leaned in fast like he was prepared to give me a couple of seconds. I couldn't remember if he was Jonathan or Hunter.

I asked him, "Have you seen that guy Reed? The guy we were talking about before?"

He said, "He was in here two hours ago. By now he'll be wherever the shots are cheapest."

“Which is where?”

“Can’t say for sure. Not here, anyway.”

Then he ducked away to continue his marathon and I fought my way back to the door.

I got back to the diner sixteen minutes after I left it and found that the pies had been delivered in my absence and that Munro was halfway through eating his. I picked up my fork and he apologized for not waiting. He said, “I thought you were gone.”

I said, “I often take a walk between courses. It’s a Mississippi thing, apparently. Always good to blend in with the local population.”

He said nothing in reply to that. He just looked a little bemused.

I asked, “What are you doing in Germany?”

“Generally?”

“No, specifically. As in, when you get there first thing in the morning the day after tomorrow, what’s on your desk?”

“Not very much.”

“Nothing urgent?”

“Why?”

“Three women were killed here,” I said. “And the perp is running around free as a bird.”

“We have no jurisdiction.”

“Remember that picture in Emmeline McClatchy’s parlor? Martin Luther King? He said all that needs to happen for evil to prevail is that good men do nothing.”

“I’m a military cop, not a good man.”

“He also said the day we see the truth and cease to speak is the day we begin to die.”

die.

“That stuff is way above my pay grade.”

“He also said that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to stay here,” I said. “One more day.”

Then I finished my pie and went looking for Elizabeth Deveraux again.

It was eleven thirty-one when I left the diner for the second time. I turned right and walked up to the Sheriff’s Department. It was locked up and dark. No vehicles in the lot. I kept on going and turned the corner onto the Kelham road. There was a stream of traffic coming out from behind Main Street. One car after another. Some were full of women and turning left. Most were full of Rangers and turning right, at least three and sometimes four guys in each car. Bravo Company, going home. Maybe they had a midnight curfew. I glanced down to the acre of beaten dirt and saw every single car except my Buick in motion. Some were just starting up and backing out. Others were maneuvering for position, getting in line, getting ready to join the convoy.

I kept on walking, on the left-hand shoulder, keeping my distance from the traffic heading for Kelham. A lot of beer had been consumed, and the designated driver concept was not big in 1997. Not in the army, anyway. Dust was coming up off the road, and bright headlight beams were cutting through it, and motors were roaring. Two hundred yards ahead of me cars were thumping over the railroad track and then accelerating away into the darkness.

Deveraux was right there, sitting in her car on the far side of the crossing. She was facing me. She was parked with her wheels on the shoulder of the road. I walked toward her, with Bravo Company overtaking me all the way, maybe ninety of them in thirty cars in the minute it took me to reach the railroad. By the time I got there the stream was already thinning behind me. The last of the stragglers were passing me by, five and ten and twenty seconds between each one. They were driving fast, chasing after their more punctual friends.

I waited for a break in the traffic long enough to get me safely over the track, and Deveraux opened her door and got out to meet me. We stood there together, lit up bright by the oncoming headlights. She said, “Five more minutes and

lit up bright by the oncoming headlights. She said, "Five more minutes and they'll all be gone. But I have to wait until Butler and Pellegrino get back. I can't go off duty before they do. That wouldn't be fair."

I asked, "When will they get back?"

"The train takes a whole minute to pass a given point. Which doesn't sound like much, but it feels like an hour when you've been working all evening. So they'll try to make it before midnight."

"How long before midnight?"

She smiled. "Not long enough, I'm afraid. Five to, maybe. We wouldn't get home in time."

I said, "Pity."

She smiled wider.

She said, "Get in the car, Reacher."

She started the motor and waited a moment as the last of the Bravo Company stragglers sped by. Then she eased off the shoulder, and maneuvered out to the humped crown of the pavement, and then she turned a tight right that put us up on the crossing, sideways to the road, facing north up the railroad track, directly in line with it. She put a light foot on the gas and steered carefully and got her right-hand wheels up on the right-hand rail. Her left-hand wheels were down on the ties. The whole car was tilted at a decent angle. She drove on, not fast, not slow, but decisive and confident. She went straight, one hand on the wheel, one hand in her lap, past the water tower, then onward. Her left-hand wheels pattered over the ties. Her right-hand wheels ran smooth. A fine piece of car control. Then she braked gently, one side up, one side down, and she came to a neat stop.

On the track.

Twenty yards north of the water tower.

Right where Reed Riley's car had waited for the train.

Where the broken glass began.

I said, "You've done this before."

I said, "You've done this before."

She said, "Yes, I have."

Chapter

74

She said, “This is the tricky part. It’s all about momentum now.” She turned the wheel hard to the left and just as the front right-hand tire came down off the right-hand rail she hit the gas and the pulse of acceleration popped the front left-hand tire up over the left-hand rail. The whole car squirmed for a second, and she kept her foot light on the pedal, and the other wheels followed suit, two, three, four, with separate squelching sounds, sidewall rubber against steel, and then she stopped again and parked in the dirt very close to and exactly parallel with the track. The first of the ballast stones were about five feet from my window.

She said, “I love this spot. No other way to get to it, because of the ditch. But it’s worth the trouble. I come here quite often.”

“At midnight?” I asked.

“Always,” she said.

I turned and looked out the back window. I could see the road. More than forty yards away, less than fifty. At first there was nothing happening. No traffic. Then a car flashed past east to west, left to right, away from Kelham, toward town, moving fast. A big car, with lights on its roof and a shield on its door.

“Pellegrino,” she said. She was watching too now. Right at my side. She said, “He was probably holed up a hundred yards away, and as soon as that last straggler passed him he counted to ten and hightailed it for home.”

I said, “Butler was parked right at Kelham’s gate.”

“Yes, Butler is the one with a race on his hands. And our fate *in* his hands. As soon as he passes us, I guarantee we’re alone in the world. This is a small town, Reacher, and I know where everyone is.”

The clock in my head said eleven forty-nine. Butler’s plight involved a complex calculation. He was three miles away and wouldn’t hesitate to drive at sixty

calculation. He was three miles away and wouldn't hesitate to drive at sixty, which meant he could be home in three minutes. But he couldn't start that three-minute dash until the last straggler got at least within headlight range of Kelham. And that last straggler might be driving pretty slow at that point, having had a skinful of beer and having seen Pellegrino parked menacingly on the side of the road. My guess was Butler would be through in eleven minutes, which would be midnight exactly, and I said so.

"No, he'll have jumped the gun," Deveraux said. "The last ten minutes have been fairly quiet. He'll have moved off the gate five minutes ago. That's my guess. He might not be far behind Pellegrino."

We watched the road.

All quiet.

I opened my door and got out of the car. I stepped right on the edge of the rail bed. The left-hand rail was no more than a yard away. It was gleaming in the moonlight. I figured the train was ten miles south of us. Passing through Marietta, maybe, right at that moment.

Deveraux got out on her side and we met behind the Caprice's trunk. Eleven fifty-one. Nine minutes to go. We watched the road.

All quiet.

Deveraux stepped back around and opened a rear door. She checked the back seat. She said, "Just in case. We might as well be ready."

"Too cramped," I said.

"You don't like doing it in cars?"

"They don't make them wide enough."

She checked her watch.

She said, "We won't make it back to Toussaint's in time."

I said, "Let's do it right here. On the ground."

She smiled.

Then wider.

“Sounds good to me,” she said. “Like Janice Chapman.”

“If she did,” I said. I took off my BDU jacket and spread it out on the weeds, as long and wide as it would go.

We watched the road.

All quiet.

She took off her gun belt and stowed it on the rear seat of the car. Eleven fifty-four. Six minutes. I knelt down and put my ear on the rail. I heard a faint metallic whisper. Almost not there at all. The train, six miles south.

We watched the road.

We saw a hint of a glow in the east.

Headlights.

Deveraux said, “Good old Butler.”

The glow grew brighter, and we heard rushing tires and a straining engine in the silence of the night. Then the glow changed to delineated beams and the noise grew louder and a second later Butler’s car flashed left-to-right in front of us and *thwacked* over the crossing without slowing down at all. He went airborne on the lee side and crashed back to earth with a yelp of rubber and a cloud of dust. Then he was gone.

Four minutes to go.

We were neither refined nor elegant. We wrenched our shoes off and pulled our pants down and abandoned all adult sophistication in favor of pure animal instinct. Deveraux hit the deck and got comfortable on my jacket and I went down right on top of her and propped myself up on my palms and watched for the glimmer of the train’s headlight in the distance. Not there yet. Three minutes to go.

She wrapped her legs around my hips and we got going, fast and hard from the first moment, anxious, desperate, insanely energetic. She was gasping and panting and rolling her head from side to side and grabbing fistfuls of my T-shirt and hauling on it. Then we were kissing and breathing both at the same time, and then she was arching her back and grinding her head on the ground, straining her neck, opening her eyes, looking at the world behind her upside down.

Then the ground began to shake.

As before, just faintly at first, the same mild constant tremor, like the beginning of a distant earthquake. The stones in the rail bed next to us started to scratch and click. The rails themselves started to sing, humming and keening and whispering. The ties jumped and shuddered. The ballast stones crunched and hopped. The ground under my hands and knees danced with big bass shudders. I looked up and gasped and blinked and squinted and saw the distant headlight. Twenty yards south of us the old water tower started to shake and its elephant's trunk started to sway. The ground beat on us from below. The rails screamed and howled. The train whistle blew, long and loud and forlorn. The warning bells at the crossing forty yards away started to ring. The train kept on coming, unstoppable, still distant, still distant, then right next to us, then right on top of us, just as insanely massive as before, and just as impossibly loud.

Like the end of the world.

The ground shook hard under us and we bounced and bucketed whole inches in the air. A bow wave of air battered us. Then the locomotive flashed past, its giant wheels five feet from our faces, followed by the endless sequence of cars, all of them hammering, juddering, strobing in the moonlight. We clung together, the whole long minute, sixty long seconds, deafened by the squealing metal, beaten numb by the throbbing ground, scoured by dust from the slipstream. Deveraux threw her head back under me and screamed soundlessly and jammed her head from side to side and beat on my back with her fists.

Then the train was gone.

I turned my head and saw the cars rolling away from me into the distance at a steady sixty miles an hour. The wind dropped, and the earthquake quieted down, first to gentle tremors again, and then to nothing at all, and the bells stopped dead, and the rails stopped hissing, and the nighttime silence came back. We rolled apart and lay on our backs in the weeds, panting, sweating, spent, deaf,

completely overwhelmed by sensations internal and external. My jacket had gotten balled up and crumpled under us. My knees and hands were torn and scraped. I imagined Deveraux was in an even worse state. I turned my head to check and saw she had my Beretta in her hand.

Chapter

75

The Marine Corps never liked the Beretta as much as the army did, so Deveraux was handling mine with proficiency but less than total enthusiasm. She dumped the magazine, ejected an unfired round, checked the chamber, racked the slide, and then put the whole thing back together again. She said, "I'm sorry. It was in your jacket pocket. I wondered what it was. It was digging into my ass. I'm going to have a bruise."

"In which case it's me that's sorry," I said. "Your ass deserves nothing but the best. It's a national treasure. Or a regional attraction, at the very least."

She smiled at me and stood up, unsteady, and went in search of her pants. Her shirt tail hung down, but not far enough. No bruise yet. She asked, "Why did you bring a gun?"

"Habit," I said.

"Were you expecting trouble?"

"Anything's possible."

"I left mine in the car."

"So did lots of dead people."

"It's just the two of us here."

"As far as we know."

"You're paranoid."

"But alive," I said. "And you haven't arrested anyone yet."

"The army can't prove a negative," she said. "Therefore they must know who it was. They should tell me."

I said nothing in reply to that. I followed her lead and staggered to my feet and picked up my pants. We got dressed, hopping from foot to foot together, and then we perched side by side on the Caprice's rear bumper and laced our shoes. Getting back to the road was no real problem. Deveraux did it in reverse, backing up onto the track like parallel parking, then backing all the way to the crossing, and then turning the wheel and taking off forward. We were in my hotel room five minutes later. In bed. She went straight to sleep. I didn't. I lay in the dark and stared at the ceiling and thought.

Mostly I thought about my last conversation with Leon Garber. My commanding officer. An honest man, and my friend, as far as I knew. But cryptic. *It's the truth*, he had said. *She was a Marine, Reacher. Sixteen years in. She knew all about cutting throats. She knew how to do it, and she knew how to pretend she didn't.* Then he had gotten a little impatient. *A man with your instincts*, he had said, about me. Later I had pushed the issue. *You could order me not to go back to Mississippi*, I had said. *I could*, he had said. *But I won't. Not you. I trust you to do the right thing*.

The conversation replayed endlessly in my head.

The truth.

Instincts.

The right thing.

In the end I fell asleep very late and completely unsure whether Garber had been telling me something, or asking me something.

My long-held belief that there is no better time than the second time was put to a severe test when we woke up, because the fifth time was also pretty terrific. We were both a little stiff and sore after our outdoor extravaganza, so we took it gently, long and slow, and the warmth and the comfort of the bed helped a lot. Plus neither one of us knew whether there would ever be a sixth time, which added a little poignancy to the occasion. Afterward we lay quiet for a while, and then she asked me when I was leaving, and I said I didn't know.

We ate breakfast together in the diner, and then she went to work, and I went to use the phone. I tried to call Frances Neagley at her desk in D.C., but she wasn't back yet. Probably still on an all-night bus somewhere. So I dialed Stan Lowrey

instead, and got him right away. I said, “I need you to do something else for me.”

He said, “No jokes this morning? About how you’re surprised I’m still here?”

“I didn’t have time to think of any. I wanted Neagley, not you. You should try to get hold of her as soon as you can. She’s better than you at this kind of stuff.”

“Better than you, too. What do you need?”

“Fast answers,” I said.

“To what questions?”

“Statistically speaking, where would we be most likely to find U.S. Marines and concrete flood sluices in close proximity?”

“Southern California,” Lowrey said. “Statistically speaking, almost certainly Camp Pendleton, north of San Diego.”

“Correct,” I said. “I need to trace a jarhead MP who was there five years ago. His name is Paul Evers.”

“Why?”

“Because his parents were Mr. and Mrs. Evers and they liked the name Paul, I guess.”

“No, why do you want to trace him?”

“I want to ask him a question.”

Lowrey said, “You’re forgetting something.”

“Like what?”

“I’m in the army, not the Marine Corps. I can’t get into their files.”

“That’s why you need to call Neagley. She’ll know how to do it.”

“Paul Evers,” he said, slowly, like he was writing it down.

“Call Neagley,” I said again. “This is urgent. I’ll get back to you.”

*

I hung up with Lowrey and shoveled more coins into the slot and called the Kelham number Munro had given Deveraux, right back at the beginning. The call went through to some guy who wasn’t Munro. He told me Munro had left at first light, in a car to Birmingham, Alabama. I said I knew that had been the plan. I asked the guy to check if it had actually happened. So the guy called the visiting officers’ quarters and came back to me and said no, it hadn’t actually happened. Munro was still on the post. The guy gave me a number for his room and I hung up and redialed.

Munro answered and I said, “Thank you for sticking around.”

He said, “But what am I sticking around for? Right now I’m just hiding out in my room. I’m not very popular here, you know.”

“You didn’t join the army to be popular.”

“What do you need?”

“I need to know Reed Riley’s movements today.”

“Why?”

“I want to ask him a question.”

“That could be difficult. As far as I know he’s going to be pretty much tied up all day. You might be able to grab him over lunch. If he gets time for lunch, that is. And if he does, it will be very early.”

“No, I need him to come to me. In town.”

“You don’t understand. The mood has changed here. Bravo Company is out from under the cloud. Riley’s father is flying in for a visit.”

“The senator? Today?”

“ETA close to one o’clock this afternoon. Billed as an off-the-record celebration of what the guys are doing in Kosovo.”

“How long will it last?”

“You know what politicians are like. The old guy is supposed to watch some training crap in the afternoon, but dollars to doughnuts he’ll get a real hard-on and want to hang around all night drinking with the boys.”

“OK,” I said. “I’ll figure something out.”

“Anything else?”

“Well, since you’ve got nothing to do except sit around all day, you could tell me a couple of things.”

“What things?”

The phone started beeping at me and I said, “Why don’t you call me back on the government’s dime?” I read out the number from the dial and hung up. I walked to my table to pay the breakfast check and by the time I got back to the phone it was ringing.

“What things?” Munro said again.

“Impressions, mainly. About Kelham. As in, is there a good reason for Alpha Company and Bravo Company to be based there?”

“As opposed to where else?”

“Anywhere else east of the Mississippi River.”

“Kelham is pretty isolated,” Munro said. “Helps with the secrecy thing.”

“That’s what they told me, too. But I don’t buy it. There are secrets on every base. They could keep the lid on this thing anywhere. Kosovo is not even interesting. Who would even listen? But they chose Kelham a year ago. Why did they do that? Have you seen anything about Kelham that would make it the only choice?”

“No,” Munro said. “Not really. It’s adequate, no question. But not essential. I assume it was about sending four hundred extra wallets to a dying town.”

“Exactly,” I said. “It was political.”

“What isn’t?”

“One more thing,” I said. “You’re clear about how Janice Chapman ended up in that alley, right?”

“I hope so,” he said. “Based on what I saw last night, Chief Deveraux operates an exclusion zone in terms of Main Street itself. She makes sure all the action happens between the bars and the railroad track. Therefore both Main Street and the alley would have been deserted. Therefore the perp must have stopped on Main Street and carried the corpse in from that direction.”

“How long would it have taken?”

“Doesn’t matter. No one was there to see. Could have been a minute, could have been twenty.”

“But why there? Why not somewhere else, ten miles away?”

“The body was supposed to be found, I guess.”

“Plenty of lonelier places it would still have been found. So why there?”

“I don’t know,” Munro said. “Maybe the perp was constrained in some way. Maybe he had company, somewhere close by. Like the diner, or one of the bars. Maybe he had to duck out and take care of it real fast. Maybe he couldn’t be gone for long without somebody noticing. So maybe he had to trade safety for speed. Which would dictate a nearby location.”

“Can you give me another day?” I said. “Can you be here tomorrow?”

“No,” he said. “I’m going to get my butt kicked bad for being one day late. I can’t risk two.”

“Pussy,” I said.

He laughed. “Sorry, man, but if you don’t get it done today you’re on your own.”

Chapter

76

Senator Carlton Riley's impending visit kept the town very quiet. It was as if Kelham's gates were locked again. I doubted that the leave order had been formally rescinded, but Rangers are good soldiers, and I was sure the base commander had dropped heavy hints about hundred-percent participation in the hoopla. I left the diner and found Main Street back to its previous torpor. My borrowed Buick was the only car parked on the block behind. It looked lonely and abandoned. I unlocked it and drove it around to the hotel and retrieved my toothbrush and settled my account at the desk. Then I got back behind the wheel and went exploring.

I started opposite the vacant lot between the diner and the Sheriff's Department. I headed south from there for two hundred yards, to where Main Street started to bend, driving fast but not stupid fast. I made the left into Deveraux's childhood street, and hustled along to her old house, fourth on the right. Total elapsed time, forty-five seconds.

I turned in over the dried mud puddle and drove down the overgrown driveway, past the tumbledown house, through the back yard, past the wild hedge, to the deer trestle. I swung left and backed up and popped the trunk and got out.

Total elapsed time, a minute and fifteen seconds.

There were trees to my left and trees to my right and trees ahead of me. A lonely spot, even in the bright daylight. I mimed supporting a body's weight, cutting the wrist straps, cutting the ankle ties, carrying the body to the car, lowering it into the trunk. I fiddled around four more times, taking off imaginary pads and straps and belts and scarves from two wrists and two ankles. I stepped back to the trestle and picked up an imaginary bucket of blood and heaved it over to the car and wedged it in the trunk alongside the body.

I closed the trunk lid and got back in the driver's seat.

Total elapsed time, three minutes and ten seconds.

I backed up and turned and drove the length of the driveway again and headed back to Main Street. I drove the same two hundred yards I had driven before and stopped on the curb between the hardware store and the pharmacy. Right at the mouth of the alley.

Total elapsed time, four minutes and twenty-five seconds.

Plus one minute to put the blood in the alley.

Plus another minute to put Janice May Chapman in the alley.

Plus fifteen seconds to get back where I started.

Total elapsed time, six minutes and forty seconds.

Touch and go.

Maybe long enough to stick in someone's mind, in a social situation, or maybe not.

I rewound the clock in my head to four minutes and twenty-five seconds and drove on north and then east, to the railroad crossing. I came to a stop right on top of it. New total, four minutes and fifty-five seconds. Plus a minute to carry Rosemary McClatchy to the ditch, and thirty seconds to get back to the car, and twenty seconds to get back where I started.

Total elapsed time, six minutes and forty-five seconds.

Fractionally longer, but in the same ballpark.

I didn't drive up to where Shawna Lindsay had been dumped, on the pile of gravel. No point. That destination was in a whole different category. That was a twenty-minute excursion, right there. It was the sole exception to the hurry-up rule. Therefore it had been undertaken under different circumstances. No company. No social situation. Plenty of time to thread cautiously along dark dirt roads between ditches, turning right, turning left, doing the deed, and then coming back again, just as slow, just as cautious.

But what was interesting about Shawna Lindsay's resting place was the car that carried her there. What kind of car could get through that neighborhood twice, without attracting notice or comment? What kind of car was entitled to be there

without attracting notice or comment? What kind of car was entitled to be there at that time of night?

I sat in the Buick for a spell and then I parked it outside the diner and went in and bought a new roll of quarters for the phone. I tried Neagley first and found her at her desk.

I said, “You’re late to work today.”

She said, “But not by much. I’ve been here half an hour.”

“I’m sorry about the bus.”

“It was OK,” she said. Public transportation was tough for Neagley. Too much chance of inadvertent human contact.

I asked, “Did you get a message from Stan Lowrey?”

“Yes, and I already traced the name for you.”

“In half an hour?”

“It was easy, I’m afraid. Paul Evers died a year ago.”

“How?”

“Nothing dramatic. It was an accident. A helicopter crashed at Lejeune. It was in the newspaper, actually. A Sea Hawk lost a rotor blade. Two pilots and three passengers died, one of which was Evers.”

I said, “OK, plan B. The other name I want is Alice Bouton.” I spelled it out. I said, “She’s been a civilian for the last five years. She was discharged from the Corps without honor. So you better call Stan back. He’s better than you at this kind of stuff.”

“The only thing Lowrey has that I don’t is a friend at a bank.”

“Exactly,” I said. “That’s why you need to call him. Corporations know about civilians better than we do.”

“Why are we doing this?”

“I’m checking a story.”

“No, you’re clutching at straws. That’s what you’re doing.”

“You think?”

“Elizabeth Deveraux is as guilty as sin, Reacher.”

“You’ve seen the file?”

“Only the carbons.”

I said, “But with a thing like this, you have to flip a coin.”

“As in?”

“As in, maybe she did it, maybe she didn’t. We don’t know yet.”

“We know, Reacher.”

“Not for sure.”

Neagley said, “It’s a good thing you don’t own a car.”

I hung up with her and before I was a step away the phone rang on the wall, with the first good news of the day.

Chapter

77

It was Munro on the phone, and he wanted to tell me he had had a cup of coffee. Or more specifically he wanted to tell me he had talked to the steward who had brought him the cup of coffee. The conversation had been on the subject of the day's upcoming festivities, and Munro said the stewards expected to be very busy until after dinner, but no later than that, because the mess bar would be deserted all evening, because the last time the senator visited he had hosted everybody in town, at Brannan's bar, because politically it seemed more authentic, and no doubt the old guy would do the same thing again.

"OK," I said. "That's good. Riley will come to me after all. And his father. What time will dinner finish?"

"Scheduled to be over by eight o'clock, according to the steward."

"OK," I said again. "I'm sure father and son will leave the base together. I want you on them from the moment they drive through the gate. But unobtrusively. Can you do that?"

"Could you?"

"Probably."

"Then what makes you doubt I could?"

"Innate skepticism, I suppose," I said. "But whatever, keep your ear to the ground until eight tonight, and use this phone number as a contact if you need me. I'll be in and out of this diner all day long."

"OK," Munro said. "I'll see you later. But whether or not you'll see me is a different question altogether."

I hung up with Munro, and I asked the waitress to answer the phone for me if it rang again. I asked her to write down the callers' names on her order pad. Then

it was all about waiting. For information, and for face to face encounters, and for decisive conclusions. I stepped out to the Main Street sidewalk and stood in the sun. Across the street the guy from the shirt store was doing the same thing. Taking a break, and tasting the air. On my left two old guys were on a bench outside the pharmacy, four hands piled on two canes between two sets of knees. Apart from the four of us the town was deserted. No hustle, no bustle, no traffic.

All quiet.

Until the goon squad from Kelham showed up.

There were four of them in total. They were Kelham's own local version of Senate Liaison, I guessed, preparing the ground the same way a Secret Service advance team prepares the ground ahead of a presidential visit. They came out of the mouth of the alley beyond the two old guys on the bench. I guessed they had just called on the Brannan brothers and alerted them to what was going to happen that night. Maybe they had made invoicing arrangements. In which case I wished the Brannan brothers the very best of luck. I imagined billing a Senate office was a long and frustrating experience.

The four guys were all officers. Two lieutenants, a captain, and a light colonel in the lead. He was fiftyish and fat. He was the kind of soft staff officer who looks ludicrous in battledress uniform. Like a civilian at a fancy dress party. He stopped on the sidewalk and put his knuckles on his hips. He looked all around. He saw me. I was in battledress uniform too. On the face of it, I was one of his. He spoke over his shoulder to a lieutenant behind him. Too far to hear his voice, but I could read his lips. He said, *Tell that man to get his ass over here double-quick*. I guessed he would want to know why I wasn't back on the base, getting myself ready for hundred-percent participation in the hoopla.

The lieutenant's eyesight was not as good as mine. He approached most of the way full of one kind of body language, which changed fast when he got close enough to read my rank insignia. He stopped a respectful four feet away and saluted and said, "Sir, the colonel would like a word with you."

Normally I treat lieutenants well. I was one myself, not so very long ago. But right then I wasn't in the mood for nonsense. So I just nodded and said, "OK, kid, tell him to step right up."

The kid said, "Sir, I think he would prefer it if you went to him."

“You must be confusing me with someone who gives a shit what he prefers.”

The kid went a little pale and blinked twice and about-turned and headed back. He must have spent the walk time translating my response into acceptable terms, because there was no instant explosion. Instead the colonel paused a beat and then set off waddling in my direction. He stopped three feet away, and I saluted him very smartly, just to keep him confused.

He returned the salute and asked, “Do I know you, major?”

I said, “That depends on how much trouble you’ve been in, colonel. Have you ever been arrested?”

He said, “You’re the other MP. You’re Major Munro’s opposite number.”

“Or he’s mine,” I said. “Either way, I’m sure we both hope you have a great day.”

“Why are you still here?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I was told all issues had been resolved.”

“The issues will be resolved when I say they are. That’s the nature of police work.”

“When did you last get orders?”

“Some days ago,” I said. “They came from Colonel John James Frazer at the Pentagon, I believe.”

“He died.”

“I’m sure his successor will have new orders for me in due course.”

“It could take weeks to install a successor.”

“Then I guess I’m stuck here.”

Silence.

Then the fat guy said, “Well, stay out of sight tonight. Understand? The senator must not see a CID presence here. There are to be no reminders of recent suspicions. None at all. Is that clear?”

I said, “Request noted.”

“It’s more than a request.”

“Next up from a request is an order. But you’re not in my chain of command.”

The guy rehearsed a reply, but in the end he didn’t come out with anything. He just turned on his heel and waddled back to his pals. And at that point I heard the phone ring inside the diner, very faintly through the door, and I beat the waitress to it by a step.

Chapter

78

It was Frances Neagley on the line, from her desk in D.C. She said, “Bouton is a very uncommon name, apparently.”

I said, “Did Stan Lowrey tell you to say that?”

“No, Stan wants to know if she’s related to Jim Bouton, the baseball pitcher. Which she probably is, at least distantly, given how rare the name is. I, however, am basing my conclusion on an hour’s solid work, which turned up no Boutons at all, much less any Alice Boutons. Having said that, right now I can’t get any further than three years back with the Marines, which would miss her anyway, and if she was dishonorably discharged she probably didn’t get the kind of job or income that would show up in too many other places.”

“She probably lives in a trailer park,” I said. “Nowhere near Pendleton, either. Southern California is too expensive. She must have moved.”

“I have a call in to the FBI. And to a pal in USMC personnel command, for the ancient history. And Stan is hassling his banker friend, for the civilian stuff. Although she might not have had a bank account. Not if she lived in a trailer park. But whatever, I just wanted to let you know we’re on it, that’s all. We’ll have more later.”

“How much later?”

“Tonight, I hope.”

“Before eight o’clock would be good.”

“I’ll do my best.”

I hung up the phone and decided to stay in the diner, for lunch.

And inevitably Deveraux came in less than ten minutes later, in search of her

own lunch, and, possibly, in search of me. She stepped inside and paused in front of the window, with the light behind her. Her hair lit up like a halo. Her shirt was very slightly translucent. I could see the curve of her waist. Or sense it, at least. Because I was familiar with it. I could see the swell of her breast.

She saw me staring, and she started toward me, and I kicked the opposite chair out an inch. She sat down and brought the backlight with her. She smiled and said, “How was your morning?”

I said, “No, how was yours?”

“Busy,” she said.

“Making any progress?”

“With what?”

“Your three unsolved homicides.”

“Apparently the army solved those homicides,” she said. “And I’ll be happy to do something about them as soon as the army shares its information.”

I said nothing.

She said, “What?”

“You don’t seem very interested in finding out who did it, that’s all.”

“How can I be interested?”

“The army says it was a civilian.”

“I understand that.”

“Do you know who it was?”

“What?”

“Do you know who it was?”

“Are you saying I do?”

I said, “I’m saying I know how these things work. There are some people you just can’t arrest. Mrs. Lindsay would have been one of them, for instance. Suppose she’d gone the other way and gotten tooled up and gone and shot somebody. You wouldn’t have arrested her for it.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying in any town there are people the sheriff won’t arrest.”

She was quiet a long moment.

“Maybe,” she said. “Old man Clancy might be one of them. But he didn’t cut any throats. And I’d arrest anyone else, whoever they were.”

“OK,” I said.

“Maybe you think I’m bad at my job.”

I said nothing.

“Or maybe you think I’ve lost my edge because we have no crime here.”

“I know you have crime here,” I said. “I know you always did. I’m sure your father saw crimes I can’t even imagine.”

“But?”

“You don’t have investigation here. And you never did. I bet ninety-nine times out of a hundred your father knew exactly who did what, right down to the details. Whether he could do anything about it was a different issue. And I bet the one case in a hundred where he didn’t know who did it went unsolved.”

“You’re saying I’m a bad investigator.”

“I’m saying County Sheriff is not an investigator’s job. It needs other skills. All kinds of community stuff. And you’re good at it. You have a detective for the other things. Except right now you don’t.”

“Any other issues, before we order?”

“Just one,” I said.

“Which is?”

“Tell me again. You never dated Reed Riley, right?”

“Reacher, what is this?”

“It’s a question.”

“No, I never dated Reed Riley.”

“Are you sure?”

“Reacher, please.”

“Are you?”

“I didn’t even know he was here. I told you that.”

“OK,” I said. “Let’s order.”

She was mad at me, obviously, but she was hungry, too. More hungry than mad, clearly, because she stayed at the table. Changing tables wouldn’t have been enough. She would have had to storm out emphatically, and she wasn’t prepared to do that on an empty stomach.

She ordered the chicken pie, of course.

I ordered grilled cheese.

She said, “There are things you aren’t telling me.”

I said, “You think?”

“You know who it is.”

I said nothing.

“You do, don’t you? You know who it is. So this whole thing wasn’t about me knowing who it is. It was about you knowing who it is.”

I said nothing.

“Who is it?”

I didn’t answer.

“Are you saying it’s someone I won’t arrest? Who won’t I arrest? It makes no sense. I mean, obviously it’s a great idea for the army to dump the blame on someone they know will never be arrested. I get that. Because if there’s no arrest, there can be no charge, no interview, no trial, and no verdict. Hence no facts. So everyone can just walk away and live happily ever after. But how could the army know who I wouldn’t arrest? Which is nobody, by the way. So this whole thing is crazy.”

“I don’t know who it is,” I said. “Not for sure. Not yet.”

Chapter

79

We finished our lunch without saying much more. Then we had pie. Peach, naturally. And coffee. I asked her, “Did the Kelham PR squad come see you?”

She nodded. “Just before I came out for lunch.”

“So you know what’s happening tonight.”

“Eight o’clock,” she said. “Everyone on best behavior.”

“You OK with that?”

“They know the rules. If they stick to them, I won’t give them any trouble.”

Then the phone rang. Deveraux whipped around and stared at it, as if she had never heard it ring before. Which was possible. I said, “It’s for me.”

I walked over and picked up. It was Munro. He said, “I have the transportation details, if you’re interested. Reed Riley doesn’t own a car anymore, as you know, so he’s borrowing a plain olive drab staff car. He’ll be driving with his father as his only passenger. The motor pool has been told to have the car ready at eight o’clock exactly.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Good to know. Is there a return ETA?”

“There’s an eleven o’clock curfew tonight. Unofficial, all done in whispers, but it’ll happen. A few beers is authentic. Too many is embarrassing. That’s the thinking. So people will be leaving town from ten-thirty onwards. The senator’s plane is scheduled to be wheels-up at midnight.”

“Good to know,” I said again. “Thanks. Has he arrived yet?”

“Twenty minutes ago, in an army Lear.”

“Has the hoopla started yet?”

“First pitch in about an hour.”

“Will you bring me your interview notes?”

“Why?”

“There are a couple of things I want to check. As soon as the senator looks like he’s going to stay put for ten minutes, would you bring them down to me in the diner?”

Munro agreed to do that, so I hung up the phone and walked back to the table, but by then Deveraux was already getting up to leave. She said, “I’m sorry, I have to get back to work. I’ve got a lot to do. I have three homicides to solve.”

Then she pushed past me and walked out the door.

Waiting. I passed some of the time by taking a walk. I looped around the Sheriff’s Department building and entered the acre of beaten earth behind Main Street from the top. The railroad track on my left was silent. The stores and bars on my right were all open, but they had no customers. The bars all had cleaners working in them, all of them black women over forty, all of them bent low over mops and pails, all of them supervised by anxious owners well aware that a U.S. senator would be passing by, and maybe even dropping in. Brannan’s was getting more attention than most. Furniture was being moved, refrigerators were being topped off, trash was being hauled out. Even the windows were being wiped.

Across the alley from Brannan’s the loan office was doing no business at all. Shawna Lindsay had worked there before she died, and evidently she had been replaced by another young woman, less beautiful, but possibly just as good with her numbers. She was sitting on a high stool behind a counter, with a lit-up Western Union sign behind her head. I had time to kill, so on a whim I went inside. The woman looked up as the door opened, and she smiled like she was happy to see me. Maybe I was the only customer of the day so far.

I asked her how the system worked, and after a little back and forth I understood I could call my bank on the phone and order money to be sent to any such office in America. I would need a password for the bank, and either ID or the same password for the office. This was 1997, remember. Things were still pretty casual back then. I knew there were all kinds of banks close to the Pentagon,

because thirty thousand people all in one place was a big market to exploit. I decided next time I was in D.C. I would move my account to one of them, and find out its phone number, and register a password. Just in case.

I thanked the young woman and moved on, to the next place in line, which was a gun shop. I bought spare ammunition for the Beretta, nine-millimeter Parabellums in a box of twenty, and a spare magazine to put fifteen of them in. I checked that it fit and worked, which it did. Most guys who don't check new equipment are still alive, but by no means all of them. I replaced the round I had put through the skinny runt's head, and then I put the gun back in one pocket and the new magazine and the four loose rounds in the other.

And that was it for shopping. I didn't need a used stereo, and I didn't need auto parts. So I dog-legged through Janice Chapman's alley and walked back to the diner. The waitress met me at the door and told me she had taken no calls for me. I stood there for a second, unsure, and then I picked up the phone, fed it a quarter, and dialed the Treasury Department switchboard. The same number I had called from the old yellow phone in the Lindsay kitchen. The same woman answered. Middle-aged, and elegant.

She asked, "How may I direct your inquiry?"

I said, "Joe Reacher's office, please."

I heard the same scratching and clicking, and the same minute of dead air. Then the young woman I was sure wore a plaid skirt and a white sweater picked up and said, "Mr. Reacher's office."

I asked, "Is Mr. Reacher there?"

She recognized my voice immediately, probably because it was just like Joe's. She said, "No, I'm sorry, he's not back yet. He's still in Georgia. I think. At least, I hope."

"You sound worried," I said.

"I am, a little."

"Don't be," I said. "Joe's a big boy. He can handle whatever Georgia throws at him. I don't even think he's allergic to peanuts."

Then I hung up and walked deep into the room and holed up at the rearmost table for two. I just sat there, waiting for Munro, counting off the time in my head.

Munro showed up more or less exactly as promised, an hour after our earlier phone call, plus five minutes for the drive. He parked a plain car on the curb and came in and found me in the gloom at the back of the room. He unbuttoned his top pocket and slid out the slim black notebook I had seen before. He put it on the table and said, “Keep it. No one else is going to want it. No one is saving a permanent place for it in the National Archives.”

I nodded. “Some colonel just told me there are to be no reminders of recent suspicions.”

Munro nodded in turn. “I just got the same speech. And that guy is real mad at you, by the way. Did you offend him somehow?”

“I certainly hope so.”

“He’s writing a report for Garber.”

“We always need toilet paper.”

“Plus copies all over. You’re going to be famous.” He looked straight at me for a second, perhaps regretfully, and then he headed back to his car. I opened the little black book and started to read.

Chapter

80

Munro's handwriting was cramped and neat and meticulous. It filled about fifty of the small pages. His method was to record two or three conversations at a time, and then to summarize them before moving on to the next two or three. That way both his raw materials and his conclusions were preserved side by side, the latter for ease of reference, the former for reconfirming the latter. A circular system, safe, diligent, and conscientious. He was a good cop. Reed Riley's photograph was still in the book, wedged tight into the spine after the last note and before the first blank page. I realized he had been using it as a bookmark.

The focus of all fifty pages was Janice May Chapman. It had emerged early on that she and Riley had been dating. Not that Riley had said anything about her. Or about anything else, either. He had lawyered up at the start and confined his answers to name, rank, and number. No big deal for an investigator of Munro's quality. He had spoken to every man in Bravo Company and teased out the facts from the blind sides and the unguarded rear. He had taken fragments of passing mentions and put them all together and woven them into a solid and reliable narrative.

Riley's men had talked about him in a way I had heard many times before. He was too young to be a legend, too unproven to be a star, but he had some kind of celebrity charisma, partly because of who his father was, and partly because of his own personality. But he wasn't liked. The conversations as recorded were loyal to a fault, but it was institutional loyalty, not personal loyalty, all of it filtered through any soldier's traditional hatred for the military police. No one had a bad thing to say about the guy, but no one had a good thing to say either. By reading between the lines of what was and wasn't said I saw that Riley was a grandstander and a show pony, and that he was impatient, reckless, careless, and full of entitlement. No big deal in a low-temperature environment like Kosovo, but he would have been accidentally shot in the back or blown up with a faulty grenade on his first day if he had been a generation older in Vietnam. That was for damn sure. Better men than Riley had suffered that fate.

Before Chapman it was clear he had dated Shawna Lindsay. They had been seen

together many times. And before Lindsay he had dated Rosemary McClatchy. They too had been seen together many times, in the bars, in the diner, riding around in the blue ’57 Chevy. There was a faint twice-removed reek of testosterone in Munro’s notes, as one young man after another had chortled about the big dog mowing them down in sequence, all the best looking women in town, just like that, wham bam, thank you ma’am.

And according to Bravo Company, that prestigious sequence had begun with Elizabeth Deveraux. She was well known at Kelham, because of an early courtesy visit at the start of the mission. Back then training had been intense, and there had been no leave or down time, but the big dog had snuck out at night and nailed the prize. That triumph had been revealed one evening during Bravo Company’s first tour to Kosovo, over drinks around a fire. Again, I could almost hear the voices first-hand, full of chuckling delight at the way the rest of the regular 75th training grunts thought Deveraux was a lesbian, and at the way the boys of Bravo Company secretly knew better, because of their big dog, their alpha male, and his irresistible ways. They didn’t like the guy, but they admired him. Personality, and charisma. And hormones too, I guessed.

There was nothing else of interest in the notebook. I spent some time looking at Riley’s picture again, and then I squared the whole thing away in my own top pocket, and I went back to waiting.

*

The rest of the afternoon was long and fruitless. The hours passed, and no one called, and no one came, and the town stayed quiet. At one point I heard some faint live-firing noise from the east, and I guessed the hoopla at Kelham was going swimmingly. From time to time I drank a cup of coffee and ate a slice of pie, but mostly I just rested in a semi-vegetative state, eyes open but half-asleep, breathing low, saving energy, like hibernation. Local people came and went in ones and twos, and at six o’clock Jonathan and Hunter Brannan came in for an early dinner, to fuel up ahead of their busy evening, which I thought was wise, and two or three others I took to be bar owners did the same thing, and some of what I took to be their cleaners stopped by before heading home, and at seven o’clock Main Street went dark outside the window, and at seven-thirty the old couple from the hotel came in for their meal, she with her book, he with his paper.

Then a minute later Stan Lowrey called on the phone, and the evening began to

Then a minute later Stan Lowrey called on the phone, and the evening began to unravel.

Chapter

81

Lowrey started out by apologizing for the extreme lateness of his warning, and then he said he had just heard from an MP friend at Fort Benning in Georgia, where the 75th Ranger Regiment was based. Apparently a lieutenant colonel from their remote detachment at Kelham had phoned home and told his bosses there were still two CID majors on the scene locally, one on the post itself and one in town, the latter a prize pain in the ass, and because his bosses were determined that Senator Riley be shown nothing but a good time, they had dispatched a babysitting squad to muzzle the said CID majors for the remaining duration of the senator's visit. Just in case. Lowrey said the squad had left Benning in a Blackhawk helicopter some time ago, and therefore might well have already arrived at Kelham.

"MPs?" I said. "They won't mess with me."

"Not MPs," Lowrey said. "Regular Rangers. Real tough guys."

"How many?"

"Six," Lowrey said. "Three for you and three for Munro, I guess."

"Rules of engagement?"

"I don't know. What does it take to muzzle you?"

"More than three Rangers," I said. I scanned the street out the window and saw nothing moving. No vehicles, no pedestrians. I said, "Don't worry about me, Stan. It's Munro I'm concerned about. I need two pairs of hands tonight. It's going to make it harder if he gets hung up."

"Which he will," Lowrey said. "You will too, probably. Word is these guys aren't kidding around."

"Would you call him for me and give him the same warning?" I asked. "If they haven't already gotten to him, that is." I recited Munro's VOQ number, and I

haven't already gotten to him, that is." I recited Munro's POTUS number, and I heard the scratch of a pencil as Lowrey wrote it down. Then I asked, "Has your pet banker come through on Alice Bouton yet?"

"Negative," Lowrey said. "He's been busy all day. But Neagley is still on it."

"Call her and tell her to take her thumb out of her ass and get me some results. Tell her if I'm busy with the GI Joes when she calls she's authorized to leave a message with the waitress."

"OK, and good luck," Lowrey said, and hung up. I stepped out to the sidewalk and looked up and down the street. Nothing doing. I guessed the Rangers would look for me first in one of the bars. Probably Brannan's. If I was planning to make trouble, that was where I would be. So I looped around through the dog-leg alley and scanned the acre of ground from deep in the shadows.

And sure enough, there was a Humvee parked right there, big and green and obvious. I guessed the plan was to frog march me over to it and throw me in the back and drive me out to Kelham, and then to stash me in whatever room Munro was already locked up in. Then the plan would be to wait until the senator's Lear left at midnight, and let us out again, and apologize most sincerely for the misunderstanding.

Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.

I eased out around the corner of Brannan's bar and looked in through the window. The place was sparkling clean. Tables and chairs were neatly arrayed, all around a focal point I assumed would be occupied by the senator and his son. Acolytes would sit close by, and there was plenty of open space where the less well connected could stand. Jonathan and Hunter Brannan were behind the bar, looking well rested and well nourished after their early dinner.

Three guys in BDUs were talking to them.

They were Rangers, each one of them a decent size, and none of them a rookie. One of them was a sergeant, and two of them were specialists. Their uniforms had seen plenty of wear, and their boots were clean but creased. Their faces were tanned and lined and blank. They were professional soldiers, pure and simple. Which was a dumb expression, because professional soldiers were all kinds of things, none of which was pure, and none of which was simple. But ultimately it

didn’t matter exactly what two of them were, because the sergeant was in charge. And I had never met a sergeant who was less than well aware that there were eighteen ranks above him in the hierarchy, all the way up to the commander-in-chief, and that they all made more money than he did, in exchange for making policy decisions.

In other words, whatever a sergeant did, there were eighteen groups of people ready, willing, and waiting to criticize him.

I eased back into the shadows and headed back to the diner.

There were three customers still in the place, including the old couple from Toussaint’s and the guy in the pale suit I had seen once before. Three was a good number, but not a great number. On the other hand the demographics were close to perfect. Local business people, solid citizens, mature, easily outraged. And the old couple at least were guaranteed to stay for hours, which was good, because I might need hours, depending on Neagley’s progress, or the lack of it.

I came in the door and stopped by the phone and the waitress shook her head at me, to tell me there had been no incoming calls. I used the phone book and found the number for Brannan’s bar, and then I put a quarter in the slot and dialed. One of the Brannan brothers answered and I said, “Let me speak to the sergeant.”

I heard a second of surprise and uncertainty, and then I heard the phone being reversed on the bar, and I heard the click of nails and the thump of palms as the receiver was passed from hand to hand, and then a voice said, “Who is this?”

I said, “This is the guy you’re looking for. I’m in the diner.”

No answer.

I said, “This is the part where you want to put your hand over the mouthpiece long enough to ask the barmen where the diner is, so you can send your guys to check while you keep me talking on the phone. But I’ll save you the trouble. The diner is about twenty yards west of you and about fifty yards north. Send one guy through the alley on your left and the other counterclockwise out of the lot and around the Sheriff’s Department building. You personally can come in through the kitchen door, which should be pretty close to where you parked your truck. That way you’ve got me covered in every direction. But don’t worry. I’m

not going anywhere. I'll wait for you right here. You'll find me at a table in back."

Then I hung up and walked to the rearmost table for four.

Chapter

82

The sergeant was the first in. Shortest distance, biggest investment. He came through the kitchen door slowly and cautiously and let it swing shut behind him. I raised my hand in greeting. I was about seven feet away from him. Then one of the specialists came in the front. From the alley, I assumed. Second shortest distance. A minute later the third guy was there, a little out of breath. Longest distance, biggest hurry.

They stood there, filling the aisle, two to my right and one to my left.

“Sit down,” I said. “Please.”

The sergeant said, “Our orders are to take you to Kelham.”

I said, “That isn’t going to happen, sergeant.”

No answer.

The clock in my head showed a quarter to eight.

I said, “Here’s the thing, guys. To take me out of here against my will would involve a considerable amount of physical commotion. At a rough guess we would bust up at least three or four tables and chairs. There might be personal injuries too. And the waitress will assume we’re Bravo Company personnel. Because no one else from Kelham has leave right now. Believe me, she keeps track of stuff like that, because her income depends on it. And she knows Bravo’s company commander is expected right there in Brannan’s bar at any minute. So it would be entirely natural for her to head around there to complain. And to get that done she’d almost certainly have to interrupt a moment of intimacy between father and son. Which would be a big embarrassment for all concerned, especially you.”

No answer.

“Sit down, guys,” I said.

"Sit down, guys," I said.

They sat down. But not where I wanted them to. They weren't dumb. That was the problem with a volunteer army. There were selection criteria. I was in an aisle seat at my table for four, facing forward. If they had all joined me at the same table, I would have had freedom of movement. But they didn't all join me at the same table. The sergeant sat down face to face with me, but the specialists sat across the aisle, one each side of a table for two. They pulled their chairs out at an angle, one of them ready to intervene if I made a break one way, and the other ready if I broke the other way.

"You should try the pie," I said. "It's really good."

"No pie," the sergeant said.

"You better order something. Or the waitress might throw you out for loitering. And if you refuse to go, she knows who to call."

No answer.

I said, "There are members of the public here, too. You really can't afford to attract attention."

Stalemate.

Ten minutes to eight.

The phone by the door stayed silent.

The waitress came by and the sergeant shrugged and ordered three pies and three cups of coffee. Two more people came in the door, both of them civilians, one of them a young woman in a nice dress, the other a young man in jeans and a sport coat. They took a table for two, three along from the specialists and directly opposite the old couple from the hotel. They didn't look much like the kind of folks who would get straight on the phone with their congressman because of a little public mayhem, but the more warm bodies in the room the better.

The sergeant said, "We're happy to sit here all night, if that's what it takes."

"Good to know," I said. "I'm going to sit here until the phone rings, and then I'm going to leave."

“I’m sorry, but I can’t let you communicate with anyone. Those are my orders.”

I said nothing.

“And I can’t let you leave. Unless you agree to go to Kelham.”

I said, “Didn’t we just have this discussion?”

No response.

The phone didn’t ring.

Five minutes to eight.

At eight o’clock the guy in the pale suit paid his check and left, and the old lady from the hotel turned a page in her book. Nothing else happened. The phone stayed quiet. At five past eight I began to hear noise outside, behind us, the sound of cars and crunching tires, and I sensed a change in the nighttime air, like pressure building, as Bravo Company started to arrive in town, first in ones and twos, then by the dozens. I assumed Reed Riley had led the parade in his borrowed staff car, with his father in the seat beside him. I assumed the old guy was at that moment stationed at Brannan’s door, greeting his son’s men, ushering them in, grinning like an idiot.

The three Rangers boxing me in had eaten their pies one at a time, with the other two always alert and watchful. They were pretty good. By no means the worst I had ever seen. The waitress collected their plates. She seemed to sense what was going on. Every time she passed by she gave me a concerned look. There was no doubt whose side she was on. She knew me, and she didn’t know them. I had tipped her many times, and they hadn’t, not even once.

The noise from outside continued to build.

The phone didn’t ring.

I spent the next few minutes thinking about their Humvee. I knew that like every other Humvee in the world it would have a big General Motors diesel in it, and I knew that like every other Humvee in the world it would have a three-speed automatic transmission in it, and I knew that like every other Humvee in the world it would weigh north of four tons, all of which I knew would make it good

for about sixty miles an hour, tops. Which I knew wasn't race-car fast, but which I knew was fifteen times faster than walking, which I knew was a good thing.

I waited.

Then, just after eight-thirty, three things happened. The first was unfortunate, and the second was unprecedented, and the third was therefore awkward.

First, the young couple left. The girl in the nice dress, and the boy in the sport coat. He laid money on the table, and they got up together and walked out holding hands, fast enough to suggest that an evening prayer meeting was not the next item on their agenda.

And second, the old couple left. She closed her book, he folded his paper, and they got up and shuffled out the door. Back to the hotel, presumably. Far earlier than ever before. No obvious reason, except possibly a sudden hopeless intuition that old man Riley would cancel the Lear and decide on an early night in town.

At that point the waitress was in the kitchen, which left just four people in the room, one of which was me, and three of which were my babysitters.

The sergeant smiled and said, "Just us now."

I didn't answer.

He said, "No members of the public."

I didn't answer.

He said, "And I don't think the waitress is the complaining type. Not really. She knows this place could end up on the shit list easy as anything. For a month. Or two. Or for however long it takes to put her on welfare."

He was leaning forward across the table. Closer to me than before. Looking straight at me. His two men were leaning forward across the aisle, elbows on knees, hands loose, feet planted, watching me.

Then the third thing happened.

The phone rang.

Chapter

83

The three Rangers were good. Very good. The phone was a traditional old item with a big metal bell inside, which rang for a whole lazy second before adding a reverberation tail that took another whole lazy second to die away, whereupon the sequence would repeat itself endlessly until either the call was answered or the caller gave up. An old-fashioned, comforting sound, familiar for a hundred years. But on this occasion before the first ring was halfway over all three Rangers were in motion. The guy directly to my left was instantly on his feet, lunging behind me, putting big hands on my shoulders, pressing me down into my seat, hauling me back past the vertical, keeping me in a weak and inefficient position. The sergeant opposite me was instantly leaning forward, grabbing my wrists, pressing them into the tabletop with the flat of his hands. The third guy came up out of his chair and balled his fists and blocked the aisle, ready to hit me anywhere he could if I moved.

A fine performance.

I offered no resistance.

I just sat there.

Everyone has a plan, me included.

The phone rang on.

Three rings later the waitress came out of the kitchen. She paused a beat and took one look and then pushed past the Ranger in the aisle and headed for the phone. She picked up and listened and glanced my way and started talking, looking at me the whole time, as if she was describing my current predicament to someone.

To Frances Neagley, I assumed.

Or I hoped.

The waitress listened again for a moment and then trapped the phone between her ear and her shoulder and took out her order pad and her pen. She started writing. And kept on writing. Practically an essay. She started a second page. The guy behind me kept the pressure on. The sergeant kept hold of my wrists. The third guy moved closer. The waitress made shapes with her mouth as she concentrated on spelling unfamiliar words. Then she stopped writing and checked back through what she had, and she swallowed once and blinked twice as if the next part of her task was going to be difficult.

She hung up the phone. She tore out her two written pages and held them as if they were hot. She took a step toward us. The guy behind me took his weight off my shoulders. The sergeant let go of my wrists. The third guy sat down again.

The waitress walked the length of the aisle, right into our little group, a fifth member, and she shuffled one written page on top of the other, and she checked the three guys' collars, and she focused on the sergeant. The man in charge.

She said, "I have a two-part message for you, sir."

The guy nodded at her and she started reading.

She said, "First, whoever you are, you should let this man go immediately, for both your own sake and the army's, because second, whoever you are and whatever your orders and whatever you think on this occasion, he's likely to be right and you're likely to be wrong. This message comes from an NCO of equal rank, with nothing but the army's and your best interests at heart."

Silence.

The sergeant said, "Noted."

Nothing more.

Neagley, I thought. *Good try*.

Then the waitress leaned forward and put her second handwritten page face down on the table and slid it toward me, fast and easy, the same way she had slid a million diner checks before. I trapped it under my left palm and kept my right hand ready.

No one moved

No one moved.

The waitress stood still for a second, and then she walked back to the kitchen.

I used the ball of my left thumb and curled the top of the paper upward, like a guy playing poker, and I read the first two lines of my message. Seven words. The first of them was a Latin preposition. Typical Neagley. *Per*. Meaning in this context *According to*. The next six words were *United States Marine Corps Personnel Command*. Which meant that whatever information was contained in the rest of the note had come straight from the horse's mouth. It would be reliable. It would be definitive. It would be solid gold.

It would be good enough for me.

I let the top of the paper slap back down against the tabletop. I spread my thumb and my first two fingers and pincered them together and folded the note one-handed, blank side out, message side in. I crisped the fold with my right thumbnail and jammed the note in my right top pocket, behind Munro's little black book, below my name tape.

Ten minutes to nine in the evening.

I looked at the Ranger sergeant and said, "OK, you win. Let's go to Kelham."

Chapter

84

We went out through the kitchen, single file, and we used the diner's rear door, because that was the fastest route back to their Humvee. The sergeant led the way. I was sandwiched between the two specialists. One of them kept his hand flat on my back, pushing, and the other had hold of the front of my jacket, pulling. The night air felt sharp, neither warm nor cold. The acre of bare ground was jammed with parked cars. There were people fifty yards to my right, all of them men, all of them in uniform, all of them quiet and on best behavior, all of them clustered in a rough semicircle around the front of Brannan's bar, like a living halo behind the head of a saint, or an overspill crowd watching a prize fight. Most had bottles of beer in their hands, probably purchased elsewhere and carried back within sight of the main attraction. I guessed the senator was loving the attention, and I guessed his son was pretending not to.

The Humvee looked wide and massive in among the regular rides. Which it was. Parked next to it at a respectful interval was a plain sedan painted flat green. Reed Riley's borrowed staff car, I assumed, second into the lot and put next to the truck for the sake of the tough-guy image. Instinctive, for a politician.

The sergeant slowed a step and the rest of us bunched up behind him, and then we struck off again on a new vector, straight toward the truck, not fast, not slow. No one paid us any attention. We were just four dark figures, and everyone else was facing in the other direction.

The Humvee was not locked. The sergeant opened the left rear door and the specialists crowded behind me and left me no option but to get in. The interior smelled of canvas and sweat. The sergeant waited until the specialists were on board, one of them in the front passenger seat, the other across the wide transmission tunnel next to me in the back, both of them turned watchfully toward me, and then he climbed into the driver's seat and hit the button and started the engine. It idled for a second with a hammer-heavy diesel rattle, and he squirmed in his seat, and he got ready to move off. He turned the headlights on. He put the transmission in gear. He rolled forward, the ride lumpy, the steering vague, the speed low. He headed north across the rough ground, toward

the Kelham road, past the ranks of parked cars, past the back of the Sheriff's Department building. He checked his mirror out of sheer habit, and he glanced left, and he prepared to turn right thirty yards ahead.

I asked, "What are you guys trained for?"

He said, "Man-portable shoulder-launch surface-to-air defense."

"Not police work?"

"No."

"I could tell," I said. "You didn't search me. You should have."

I came out with my Beretta in my right hand. I reached forward and bunched his collar in my left hand tight enough to choke him. I hauled him back hard against his seat. I jammed the muzzle of the gun hard into the back of his right shoulder, directly above his armpit. Humvees are built pretty solid, including the seat frames. I had the guy pulled and pushed rigid against an immovable object. He wasn't going anywhere. He wasn't even going to breathe, unless I let him.

I said, "Let's all sit still and stay calm."

They all did both things, because of where I had the gun. His ear or his neck would not have worked. They would not have believed I was prepared to shoot the guy dead. Not one soldier against another, however desperate I was supposed to be. But a non-fatal wound through the soft flesh just to the right of his shoulder blade was plausible. And terrible. It would have ended his career. It would have ended his life as he knew it, with nothing ahead of him but crippling pain and disability checks and left-handed household utensils.

I let out half an inch of his collar but kept him tight against the seat back.

I said, "Turn left."

He turned left, onto the east–west road.

I said, "Drive on."

He drove on, into the die-straight tunnel through the trees, away from Kelham, toward Memphis.

I said, “Faster.”

He sped up, and pretty soon the big truck was rattling and straining close to sixty miles an hour. And at that point we entered the realm of simple arithmetic. It was nine o’clock in the evening, and that road was about forty miles long, and the chances of meeting traffic on it were low. I figured a thirty-minute, thirty-mile drive would meet all our needs.

“Keep on going,” I said.

The guy kept on going.

Thirty minutes later we were at some featureless point thirty miles west of Carter Crossing and maybe ten miles short of the minor road that led up toward Memphis. I said, “OK, this is far enough. Let’s stop here.”

I kept on hauling his collar one way and I kept on pushing the other way with the gun and the guy stepped off the gas and coasted and braked to a stop. He put the transmission in Park and took his hands off the wheel and sat there like he knew what was coming next, which maybe he did, and maybe he didn’t. I turned my head and looked at the guy next to me and said, “Take your boots off.”

And at that point they all knew what was coming next, and there was a pause, like a mutiny brewing, but I waited it out until the guy next to me shrugged and bent to his task.

I said, “Now your socks.”

The guy peeled them off and balled them up and stowed them in his boots, like a good soldier should.

I said, “Now your jacket.”

He took his jacket off.

I said, “Now your pants.”

There was another long, long pause, but then the guy hitched his butt up off the seat and slid his pants down over his hips. I looked at the guy in the front passenger seat and said, “Same four things for you.”

passenger seat and said, "Same four things for you."

He got right to it, and then I made him help his sergeant out. I wasn't about to let the guy fold forward and away from me. Not at that point. When they were done I turned back to the guy next to me and I said, "Now get out of the truck and walk forward twenty paces."

His sergeant said, "You better hope we never meet again, Reacher."

"No, I hope we do," I said. "Because after suitable reflection I'm sure you'll want to thank me for not hurting you in any way at all. Which I could have, you hopeless amateur."

No reply.

"Get out of the truck," I said again.

And a minute later all three of them were standing on the road in my headlight beams, barefoot, pantless, in nothing but T-shirts and boxers. They were thirty miles from where they wanted to be, which under the best of conditions was a seven-or eight-hour walk, and going barefoot on a rural road was no one's definition of the best of conditions. And even if by some miracle there was passing traffic, they stood no chance of hitching a ride. No chance at all. No one in his right mind would stop in the dark for three wildly gesticulating bare-legged men.

I climbed through to the driver's seat and reversed a hundred yards and then turned around and headed back the way we had come, with nothing but engine noise and the sour smell of boots and socks for company. The clock in my head showed nine thirty-five, and I figured if the reduced payload let the Humvee hit sixty-five miles an hour I would be in Carter Crossing again at three minutes past ten.

Chapter

85

In the event the big GM diesel gave me a little better than sixty-five miles an hour, and two minutes short of ten o'clock I pulled up and hid the truck in the last of the trees and walked the rest of the way. A man on foot can be a lot stealthier than a four-ton military vehicle, and safety is always the best policy.

But there was nothing to hide from. Main Street was quiet. There was nothing to see except light in the diner's window and my borrowed Buick and Deveraux's Caprice parked nose to tail in front of it. I guessed Deveraux was keeping half an eye on the situation but not worrying too much about it. The senator's presence all but guaranteed a quiet and untypical night.

I stayed on the Kelham road and skipped Main Street itself and looped around behind it on a wide and cautious radius. I kept myself concealed behind the last row of parked cars and walked down level with Brannan's bar. The crowd at the door was still there. I could see maybe fifty guys clustered in the same semicircle I had seen before. Past them I could see a big crowd inside the bar itself, some guys standing and some, I assumed, sitting at the tables further into the room, although I had no direct view of the latter group. I moved closer, squeezing between parked cars and pick-up trucks, with the hubbub ahead of me getting a little louder with each step. But not much louder. The noise was a lot lower in level and a lot more polite and restrained than it would have been on any other night. Best behavior.

I crossed an open lane between the first row of cars and the second and eased onward between a twenty-year-old Cadillac and a beat-up GMC Jimmy and a soft voice right next to me said, "Hello, Reacher."

I turned and saw Munro leaning against the far side of the Jimmy, neatly in the shadow, nearly invisible, relaxed and patient and vigilant.

"Hello, Munro," I said. "It's good to see you. Although I have to say I didn't expect to."

He said, "I'd assumed ..."

He said, "Likewise."

"Did Stan Lowrey call you?"

He nodded. "But a little too late."

"Three guys?"

He nodded again. "Mortarmen from the 75th."

"Where are they now?"

"Tied up with telephone wire, gagged with their own T-shirts, locked in my room."

"Good work," I said. Which it was. One against three, no warning, taken by surprise, but a satisfactory result nonetheless. I was impressed. Munro was nobody's fool. That was clear.

He asked, "Who did you get?"

"An anti-aircraft crew."

"Where are they?"

"Walking back from halfway to Memphis with no shoes and no pants."

He smiled, white teeth in the dark.

He said, "I hope I never get posted to Benning."

I asked, "Is Riley in the bar?"

"First to arrive, with his dad. They're holding court big time. Tab must be three hundred bucks by now."

"Curfew still in place?"

He nodded. "But it's going to be a last-minute rush. You know how it is. The mood turned out to be pretty good, and no one will want to be the first to leave."

“OK,” I said. “Your job is to make sure Riley is the last to leave. I need him to be the very last car out of here. And not by a second or two, either. By a minute at least. Do whatever it takes to make that happen, will you? I’m depending on it.”

With anyone else I might then have gone ahead and sketched out a few alternative ways to accomplish that goal, like suggestions, anything from puncturing a tire to asking for the old guy’s autograph, but by then I was beginning to realize Munro didn’t need help. He would think of all the same things I could, and maybe a few more besides.

He said, “Understood.”

“And then your job is to go sit on Elizabeth Deveraux. I need her to be under your eye throughout. In the diner, or wherever. Again, whatever it takes.”

“Understood,” he said again. “She’s in the diner right now, as it happens.”

“Keep her there,” I said. “Don’t let her go out on traffic patrol tonight. Tell her with the senator behind them the guys will behave.”

“She knows that. She gave her deputies the night off.”

“Good to know,” I said. “And good luck. And thanks.”

I squeezed back between the Cadillac and the Jimmy and crossed the open lane and threaded through the rearmost rank of cars and walked out of the lot the same way I had come in. Five minutes later I was just past the railroad crossing, hidden in the trees on the side of the road that led to Kelham, waiting again.

Munro’s assessment of the collective mood turned out to be correct. No one left as early as ten-thirty, because of the weird dynamic surrounding the senator. I had seen similar things before. I was pretty sure no one from Bravo Company would have pissed on the guy if he was on fire, but everyone seemed fascinated by his alien presence, and no doubt everyone still had the base commander’s instructions ringing in his ears. *Be nice to the VIP. Show him some respect.* So no one peeled away early. No one wanted to go first. No one wanted to stand out. So ten-thirty came and went with no movement on the road. None at all.

As did ten thirty-five.

Ten-forty, likewise.

Then at ten forty-five the dam broke and they came in droves.

I heard noise like a muted version of an armored division firing up and I saw exhaust smoke and crisscross headlight beams far in the distance as they all started jockeying for position and funneling out of the lot. Lights swung toward me in an endless chain and thirty seconds later the lead car thumped over the crossing and sped on by. It was followed by all the others in sequence, too many to count, each just yards from the one in front, like stock cars on a racetrack straightaway. Engines roared and wheezed and worn tires pattered over the rails and I smelled the sweet sharp tang of unleaded gasoline. I saw the old Cadillac and the GMC sport utility I had squeezed between, and I saw Chevys and Dodges and Fords and Plymouths and Jeeps and Chryslers, sedans and pick-up trucks and four-wheel-drives and coupes and two-seaters. They kept on coming, an unbroken stream, heading home, relieved, exuberant, their duty done.

Ten minutes later the stream was thinning and the gaps between cars were lengthening and in the distance I could see late stragglers moving out. The last dozen vehicles took a whole minute to pass me by. None of them was a flat green staff car. The final tail-end charlie was an old Pontiac sedan, scarred and sagging. I watched it approach. *As soon as he passes us, I guarantee we're alone in the world*, Deveraux had said. Then the old Pontiac thumped quietly over the track on soft tires, and then it was gone.

I stepped out of the trees and faced east and saw tiny red tail lights disappearing into the darkness. The noise faded behind them and the exhaust smoke drifted and cleared. I turned the other way and far in the distance and right on cue I saw a lone pair of headlights click on. I saw their beams bounce and swing, side to side, up and down, and I saw them lead the way north, out through the lot, and then I saw them swing toward me and bounce twice more as the wheels behind them climbed up off the dirt and onto the blacktop.

The clock in my head showed one minute to eleven.

I walked west, back over the railroad crossing, ten yards toward the town, and then I stopped and stepped out to the crown of the road and raised my hand high, palm out, like a traffic cop.

Chapter

86

The headlight beams picked me up maybe a hundred yards out. I felt the hot light on my face and on my palm and I knew Reed Riley could see me. I heard him lift off the gas and slow down. Pure habit. Infantrymen spend a lot of time riding in vehicles, and many of their journeys are enabled or directed or otherwise interrupted by guys in BDUs waving them through or pointing them left or pointing them right or bringing them to a temporary standstill.

I stayed right where I was, my hand still raised, and the flat green staff car came to a stop with its front bumper a yard from my knees. By then my eye line was high above the headlights, and I could see Riley and his father side by side behind the windshield glass. Neither one looked surprised or impatient. Both looked prepared to waste a minute on a matter of routine. Riley looked exactly like his photograph, and his father was an older version, a little thinner, a little larger in the ears and the nose, a little more powdered and presentable. He was dressed like a jerk, like every other visiting politician I had ever seen. He was wearing a khaki canvas Ike jacket over a formal shirt with no tie. The jacket had a United States Senate roundel on it, as if that safe and insulated branch of the legislature was a combat unit.

I stepped around to Reed Riley's door, and he wound his window down. His face started out one way, and then it changed when he saw the oak leaves on my collar. He said, "Sir?"

I didn't answer. I took one more step and opened the rear door and got in the back seat behind him. I closed the door after me and shuffled over to the center of the bench and both men craned around to look at me.

"Sir?" Riley said again.

"What's going on here?" his father asked.

"Change of plan," I said.

I could smell beer on their breath and smoke and sweat in their clothing

I could smell beer on their breath and smoke and sweat in their clothing.

“I have a plane to catch,” the senator said.

“At midnight,” I said. “No one will look for you before then.”

“What the hell does that mean? Do you know who I am?”

“Yes,” I said. “I do.”

“What do you want?”

“Instant obedience,” I said. I took out the Beretta for the second time that evening, fast, swift, like a magician. One minute my hand was empty, and the next it was full of dull steel. I clicked the safety to fire, a small sound, but ominous in the silence.

The senator said, “You’re making a very serious mistake, young man. As of right now your military career is over. Whether it gets any worse than that is entirely up to you.”

“Be quiet,” I said. I leaned forward and bunched Reed Riley’s collar in my hand, the same way I had with the sergeant from Benning. But this time I put the muzzle of the gun in the hollow behind his right ear. Soft flesh, no bone. Just the right size.

“Drive on,” I said. “Very slowly. Turn left on the crossing. Head up the railroad line.”

Riley said, “What?”

“You heard me.”

“But the train is coming.”

“At midnight,” I said. “Now hop to it, soldier.”

It was a difficult task. Instinctively he wanted to lean forward over the wheel for a better view out the front. But I wouldn’t let him. I had him hauled back hard against the seat, pulled and pushed. But even so, he did OK. He rolled forward and spun the wheel hard and crabbed diagonally up onto the rise. He lined it up

and felt his right front tire hit the groove in the pavement. He eased forward, dead straight, and the edge of the blacktop fell away under us. His right-hand tires stayed up on the rail. His left-hand wheels were down on the ties. A fine job. As good as Deveraux.

“You’ve done this before,” I said.

He didn’t answer.

We rolled on, less than walking pace, radically tilted, the right side of the car up and running smooth, the left side down and rising and falling over the ties like a boat on a swell. We rolled past the old water tower, then ten more yards, and then I said, “Stop.”

“Here?”

“It’s a good spot,” I said.

He braked gently and the car stopped, right on the line, still tilted over. I kept hold of his collar and kept the gun in place. Ahead of me through the windshield the rails ran straight north to a vanishing point far in the distance, like slim silver streaks in the moonlight.

I said, “Captain, use your left hand and open all the windows.”

“Why?”

“Because you guys already stink. And it’s only going to get worse, believe me.”

Riley scrabbled blindly with his fingers and first his father’s window came down, then mine, then the one opposite me.

Fresh night air came in on the breeze.

I said, “Senator, lean over and turn the lights off.”

It took him a second to find the switch, but he did it.

I said, “Now turn the engine off and give me the key.”

He said, “But we’re parked on the railroad track.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“Do you know who I am?”

“You asked me that before. And I answered. Now do what you’re told. Or do I have to make a campaign contribution first? In which case please consider my contribution to be not shooting your son through the knee.”

The old guy made a small sound in his throat, the kind of thing I had heard once or twice before, when jokes turned out not to be jokes, when dire situations turned from bad to worse, when nightmares were revealed to be waking realities. He leaned sideways and twisted the key and pulled it and held it out to me.

“Toss it on the back seat,” I said.

He did so, and it landed next to me and skittered down the slope in the cushion made by the tilt of the car.

I said, “Now both of you put your hands on your head.”

The senator went first, and I pulled the Beretta back to let his son follow suit. I let go of his collar and sat back in my seat and said, “What’s the muzzle velocity on a Beretta M9?”

The senator said, “I have no idea.”

“But your boy should. We spent a lot of time and money training him.”

“I don’t remember,” Riley said.

“Close to thirteen hundred feet per second,” I said. “And your spinal cords are about three feet from me. Therefore about two-thousandths of a second after either one of you moves a single muscle, you’re either dead or crippled. Get it?”

No response.

I said, “I need an answer.”

“We get it,” Riley said.

His father said, “What do you want?”

“Confirmation,” I said. “I want to be sure I have this thing straight.”

Chapter

87

I picked up the car key and put it in my pocket. I spread my left leg wide and braced my foot and got comfortable on the tilted bench. I said, “Captain, you lied to your men about dating Sheriff Deveraux, am I right?”

Riley’s father said, “What possible basis do you have for interrogating us?”

“Forty-nine minutes,” I said. “Then the train gets here.”

“Are you mad?”

“A little grumpy, that’s all.”

He said, “Son, don’t say a word to this man.”

I said, “Captain, answer my question.”

Riley said, “Yes, I lied about Deveraux.”

“Why?”

“Command strategy,” he said. “My men like to look up to me.”

I said, “Senator, why were Alpha Company and Bravo Company moved from Benning to Kelham?”

The old guy huffed and puffed for a minute, trying to convince himself to hold fast, but in the end he said, “It was politically convenient. Mississippi always has its hand out. Or in someone else’s pocket.”

“Not because of Audrey Shaw? Not because you thought your boy deserved a little gift to celebrate his new command?”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“But it happened.”

"But it happened."

"Purely a coincidence."

"Bullshit."

"OK, it was a side benefit. I thought it might be fun. But nothing more. Decisions of that magnitude are not based on trivialities."

I said, "Captain, tell me about Rosemary McClatchy."

Riley said, "We dated, we broke up."

"Was she pregnant?"

"If she was, she never said anything to me about it."

"Did she want to get married?"

"Come on, major, you know any one of them would marry any one of us."

"What was she like?"

"Insecure," he said. "She drove me nuts."

"How did you feel when she was killed?"

"Bad," he said. "It was a bad thing to happen."

"Now tell me about Shawna Lindsay."

But at that point the senator decided they had taken all the shit they were going to take from me. He twisted around to dress me down, and then he remembered he was not supposed to move, and so he bounced back again like a stupid old mare against a new electric fence. He stared forward and breathed hard. His son didn't move. So they were taking a little shit from me, at least. Mainly the part nine millimeters wide. Thirty-five hundredths of an inch, in real money. A little smaller than a .38, a lot bigger than a .25. That's how much shit they were taking.

The old man took another breath.

He said, “That matter has been resolved, I believe. The Lindsay girl. And the other one.”

I said, “Captain, tell me about the dead women in Kosovo.”

His father said, “There are no dead women in Kosovo.”

I said, “Seriously? What, they live forever?”

“Obviously they don’t live forever.”

“Do they all die in their sleep?”

“They were Kosovan women and it happened in Kosovo. It’s a local matter. Just like this is a local matter, right here, right now. A local person has been identified. The army is not under a cloud. That’s what we were celebrating tonight. You should have been there. Success is something to be happy about. I wish more people understood that.”

I said, “Captain, how old are you?”

Riley said, “I’m twenty-eight.”

I said, “Senator, how would you feel if your son was still a captain at thirty-three?”

The old guy said, “I would be very unhappy.”

“Why?”

“It would represent failure. No one stays five years at the same rank. You’d have to be an idiot.”

I said, “That was their first mistake.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“What do you mean, *their*? Who are they?”

“D[illegible]”

"Do you have a grandfather?"

"Way back."

"So did I. He was my granddad. But of course he was also lots of other kids' granddad too. There were about ten of us, I think. Four separate families. It always came as a surprise to me, even though I knew."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"It's the same thing with Senate Liaison. There's us, and there's the brass in Washington, and there's you. Like a grandfather. Except you're the Marine Corps' grandfather too. And they have their own Senate Liaison. They're probably a lot better than ours. They're probably willing to do whatever it takes. So you turned to them for help. But they made a number of mistakes."

"I read the report. There were no mistakes."

"Five years in the same rank? Deveraux is not the kind of person who spends five years in the same rank. Like you said, you'd have to be an idiot. And Deveraux is not an idiot. My guess is she was a CWO3 five years ago. My guess is she got two promotions since then. But your Marine Corps boys went ahead and wrote *CWO5* on a file that was supposed to be five years old. They used an old picture but they didn't back off her terminal rank. Which was a mistake. They were in too much of a rush."

"What rush?"

"Janice Chapman was white. Finally you had one people were going to take seriously. And she was linked to you. There was no time to waste."

"What are you talking about?"

"This whole thing was about too much rush. You worked like crazy, and teased us about access to give yourself more time. But finally you got it done just after lunch on Sunday. The file was complete. The word came through while the chopper was in the air. So it went back empty. But then you waited until Tuesday before you released it for public scrutiny. I had a rather egotistical explanation for that. I thought it was because I was here on Sunday but not on Tuesday. But that wasn't the reason. You needed two days to make it look old. That was the reason. You had to scrape it up and scuff it around."

“Are you saying that file was a forgery?”

“I know, you’re shocked. Maybe you’ve known for nine months, or six, or maybe just a week or so, but we all know now.”

“Know what?” Reed Riley said.

I turned toward him. He was staring forward too, but he knew I was talking to him. I said, “Maybe Rosemary McClatchy was insecure because her beauty was all she had, so maybe she got jealous, and maybe that’s where you got the idea for the vengeful woman. And she was pregnant anyway, and you’d already checked out the local sheriff, because that’s what an ambitious company commander does, and it was easier for you than most, because of your connections, so you knew about her father and the empty house, and you’re a sick bastard, so you took poor pregnant Rosemary McClatchy there and you butchered her.”

No response.

“And you liked it,” I said.

No response.

“So you did it again. And you got better at it. No more dumping them in the ditch by the railroad track. You were ready for something more adventurous. Maybe something more appropriate. Maybe Shawna Lindsay also had delusions of marriage, and maybe she was talking about living in a little house together, so you dumped her on a construction site. You could drive through that neighborhood anytime you liked. You always had. The big dog, out on the prowl, in his old blue car. Part of the scenery.”

He said, “I broke up with Shawna weeks before she died. How do you explain that?”

“You ask them back, they come running, right?”

No answer.

I said, “And you put Janice Chapman behind a bar for the same reason. She was a party girl. And maybe you set yourself a little extra challenge that night. Third

a party girl. And maybe you set yourself a little extra challenge that night. Third time lucky. Variety is the spice of life. Maybe you told the guys you were hitting the head, and you snuck out and did it in the same time you need to take a leak. Six minutes and forty seconds would be my guess. Which is not plausible. Not for Deveraux. That's where the alternative theory starts to falter. Did nobody think about how she's built? She couldn't lift a full-grown woman off a deer trestle. She couldn't carry a corpse to a car."

Senator Riley said, "The file is genuine."

I said, "It started out with its feet on the ground. Someone thought up a neat little story. The jealous woman, the broken arm. The missing four hundred dollars. It was quite subtle. Conclusions would be drawn by the reader. But then someone chickened out. They didn't want subtle anymore. They wanted a flashing red light. So you retyped the whole thing to include a car. Then you got on the phone and told your son to go put his own car on the train track."

"That's crazy."

"There was no other reason behind the stuff with the car. The car was senseless. It served no other purpose. Other than to nail the lid shut on Deveraux as soon as anyone opened that file."

"That file is genuine."

"They went too far with the dead people. James Dyer, maybe. We could buy that. He was a senior officer. Health maybe not the best. But Paul Evers? Too convenient. As if you were scared of people asking questions. Dead people can't answer. Which brings us to Alice Bouton. Is she going to be dead too? Or is she going to be still alive? In which case, what would she tell us if we asked her about her broken arm?"

"The file is completely genuine, Reacher."

"Can you read, senator? If so, read this for me." I slid the folded diner check from my pocket and tossed it in his lap.

He said, "I'm not allowed to move."

I said, "You can pick it up."

He picked it up. It shook in his hand. He looked at the back. He looked at the front. He turned it right way up. He took a breath. He asked, “Have you read it? Do you know what it says?”

I said, “No, I haven’t looked at it. I don’t need to know. Either way I’ve got enough to nail you.”

He hesitated.

I said, “But don’t fake anything. I’ll read it right after you, just to check.”

He took a breath.

He read out, “Per United States Marine Corps Personnel Command.”

He stopped.

He said, “I need to know this is not classified material.”

“Does it matter?”

“You’re not cleared for classified material. Neither is my son.”

“It’s not classified material,” I said. “Keep reading.”

He said, “Per United States Marine Corps Personnel Command there was no Marine named Alice Bouton.”

I smiled.

“They invented her,” I said. “She didn’t exist. Very sloppy work. It makes me wonder if I was wrong. Maybe you watered down the subtlety in two separate stages. And maybe the car came first. Maybe it was Alice Bouton you wrote in at the last minute. Without enough time to steal a real identity.”

The old guy said, “The army had to be protected. You must understand that.”

“The army’s loss is the Marine Corps’ gain. And you’re their granddaddy too. So professionally you didn’t give a damn. It was your son you were protecting.”

“It could have been anyone in his unit. We’d do this for anyone at all.”

“Bullshit,” I said. “This was a fantastic amount of corruption. This was exceptional. This was unprecedented. This was about the two of you, and no one else.”

No answer.

I said, “By the way, it’s me who’s protecting the army.”

I didn’t want to shoot them, obviously. Not that there would be much left for the pathologist to examine, but a cautious man takes no unnecessary risks. So I dropped the gun on the seat beside me and came forward with my right hand open, and I got it flat on the back of the senator’s head, and I heaved it forward and bounced it off the dashboard rail. Pretty hard. The human arm can pitch a baseball at a hundred miles an hour, so it might get close to thirty with a human head. And the seat belt people tell us that an untethered impact at thirty miles an hour can kill you. Not that I needed the senator dead. I just needed him out of action for a minute and a half.

I moved my right hand over and got it under Reed Riley’s chin. His hands came down off his head to tear at my wrist and I replaced them with my own left hand, open, jamming down hard on the top of his head. Push and pull, up and down, left hand and right hand, like a vise. I was crushing his head. Then I slid my right hand up over his chiseled chin until the heel of my hand lodged there and I clamped my palm over his mouth. His skin was like fine sandpaper. He had shaved early that morning, and now it was close to midnight. I slid my left hand over his brow until its heel caught on the ridge below his hairline. I stretched down and clamped his nose between my finger and thumb.

And then it was all about human nature.

He thought he was suffocating. First he tried to bite my palm, but he couldn’t get his mouth open. I was clamping too hard. Jaw muscles are strong, but only when they’re closing. Opening was never an evolutionary priority. I waited him out. He clawed at my hands. I waited him out. He scrabbled in his seat and drummed his heels. I waited him out. He arched his back. I waited him out. He stretched his head up toward me.

I changed my grip and twisted hard and broke his neck.

It was a move I had learned from Leon Garber. Maybe he had seen it

somewhere. Maybe he had done it somewhere. He was capable of it. The suffocation part makes it easy. They always stretch their heads up. Some kind of a bad instinct. They put their necks on the line all by themselves. Garber said it never fails, and it never has for me.

And it succeeded again a minute later, with the senator. He was weaker, but his face was slick with blood from where I had broken his nose on the dashboard rail, so the effort expended was very much the same.

Chapter

88

I got out of the car at eleven twenty-eight exactly. The train was thirty-two miles south of us. Maybe just crossing under Route 78 east of Tupelo. I closed my door but left all the windows open. I tossed the key into Reed Riley's lap. I turned away.

And sensed a figure wide on my left.

And another, wide on my right.

Good moves by someone. I had the Beretta, and I could hit one or the other of them, but not both of them. Too much lateral travel between rounds.

I waited.

Then the figure on my right spoke.

She said, "Reacher?"

I said, "Deveraux?"

The figure on my left said, "And Munro."

I said, "What the hell are you two doing here?"

They converged on me, and I tried to push them away from the car. I said, "Why are you here?"

Deveraux said, "Did you really think I was going to let him keep me in the diner?"

"I wish he had," I said. "I didn't want either of you to hear anything about this."

"You made Riley open the windows. You wanted us to hear."

“No, I wanted fresh air. I didn’t know you were there.”

“Why shouldn’t we hear?”

“I didn’t want you to know what they were saying about you. And I wanted Munro to go back to Germany with a clear conscience.”

Munro said, “My conscience is always clear.”

“But it’s easier to play dumb if you really don’t know the answer.”

“I never had a problem playing dumb. Some folks think I am.”

Deveraux said, “I’m glad I heard what they were saying about me.”

Eleven thirty-one. The train was twenty-nine miles south of us. We walked away, on the ties, between the rails, leaving the flat green staff car and its passengers behind us. We walked past the old water tower and made it to the crossing. We turned west. Forty yards away Deveraux’s cruiser was parked on the shoulder. Munro wouldn’t get in. He said he would walk on down to Brannan’s bar, where he had left a car he had borrowed. He said he needed to get back to Kelham as soon as possible, to square things away with the captured mortarmen, and then to hit the sack ahead of his early start the next morning. We shook hands quite formally, and I thanked him most sincerely for his help, and then he moved away and within ten paces he was lost to sight in the dark.

Deveraux drove me back to Main Street and parked outside the hotel. Eleven thirty-six in the evening. The train was twenty-four miles away.

I said, “I checked out of my room.”

She said, “I still have mine.”

“I need to make a phone call first.”

We used the office behind the reception counter. I put a dollar bill on the desk and dialed Garber’s office. Maybe the tap was still in place, and maybe it wasn’t. It made no difference to me. I got a lieutenant on the line. He said he was the senior person on duty. He said in fact he was the only person on duty. Night crew. I asked him if he had paper and pencil handy. He said yes to both. I told him to stand by to take dictation. I told him to mark the finished product urgent

him to stand by to take dictation. I told him to mark the finished product urgent and to leave it front and center on Garber's desk, for immediate attention first thing in the morning.

"Ready?" I asked him.

He said he was.

I said, "A tragedy occurred late last night in sleepy Carter Crossing, Mississippi, when a car carrying United States Senator Carlton Riley was struck by a passing train. The car was being driven by the senator's son, U.S. Army Captain Reed Riley, who was based at nearby Fort Kelham, Mississippi. Senator Riley, of Missouri, was chairman of the Senate's Armed Services Committee, and Captain Riley, described by the army as a rising star, was in command of an infantry unit regularly deployed on missions of great sensitivity. Both men died instantly in the accident. Carter County Sheriff Elizabeth Deveraux confirmed that local drivers regularly attempt to beat the train across the road junction, in order to avoid a long and inconvenient delay, and it is believed that Captain Riley, recently posted to the area and adventurous in spirit, simply mistimed his approach to the crossing."

I paused.

"Got that," the lieutenant said, in my ear.

"Second paragraph," I said. "The senator and his son were returning to Fort Kelham after helping the nearby town celebrate Sheriff Deveraux's successful resolution of a local homicide investigation. The killing spree had lasted nine months and the five victims included three local women in their twenties, a local teenage boy, and a journalist from nearby Oxford, Mississippi. The male perpetrator, responsible for all five deaths, is described as a militia member and a white supremacist from neighboring Tennessee, and was shot to death earlier in the week, in a wooded area close to Fort Kelham, by local police, while resisting arrest."

"Got that," the lieutenant said again.

"Start typing," I said, and hung up.

Eleven forty-two in the evening. The train was eighteen miles away.

Room seventeen was as plain as room twenty-one had been. Deveraux had made no attempt to personalize it. She had two battered suitcases propped open for clothes storage, and a spare uniform was hanging off the curtain rail, and there was a book on the night table. And that was it.

We sat side by side on her bed, a little shell shocked, and she said, “You did everything you could. Justice is done all around, and the army doesn’t suffer. You’re a good soldier.”

I said, “I’m sure they’ll find something to complain about.”

“But I’m disappointed with the Marine Corps. They shouldn’t have cooperated. They stabbed me in the back.”

“Not really,” I said. “They tried their best. They were under tremendous pressure. They pretended to play ball, but they put in a bunch of coded messages. Two dead people and an invented one? That thing with your rank? Those mistakes had to be deliberate. They made it so the file wouldn’t stand up. Not for long. Same with Garber. He was ranting and raving about you, but really he was acting a part. He was acting out what the reaction was supposed to be. He was challenging me to think.”

“Did you believe the file, when you first saw it?”

“Honest answer?”

“That’s what I expect from you.”

“I didn’t instantly reject it. It took me a few hours.”

“That’s slow for you.”

“Very,” I said.

“You asked me all kinds of weird questions.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

Silence.

The train was fifteen miles away.

She said, “Don’t be sorry. I might have believed it myself.”

Which was kind of her. She leaned over and kissed me. I went and washed the last dry traces of Carlton Riley’s blood off my hands, and then we made love for the sixth time, and it worked out perfectly. The room began to shake right on cue, and the glass on her bathroom shelf began to tinkle, and her floor quivered, and her room door creaked, and our abandoned shoes hopped and moved, and her bed shook and bounced and walked tiny fractions. And at the very end of it I was sure I heard a sound like a cymbal crash, vanishingly brief and faint and distant, like an instant metallic explosion, like molecules reduced to atoms, and then the midnight train was gone.

Afterward we showered together, and then I dressed and got ready to head home, to face the music. Deveraux smiled bravely and asked me to drop by anytime I was in the area, and I smiled bravely and said I would. I left the hotel and walked up to the silent diner and climbed into the borrowed Buick and drove east, past Fort Kelham’s impressive gate, and then onward into Alabama, and then north, no traffic, nighttime hours all the way, and I was back on post before dawn.

I hid out and slept four hours and emerged to find that my hasty dictation to Garber’s night crew had been adopted by the army more or less word for word as the official version of events. Tones everywhere were hushed and reverent. There was talk of a posthumous Distinguished Service Medal for Reed Riley, to recognize his time in an unspecified foreign country, and his father was to have a memorial service in a grand D.C. church the following week, to recognize who knew what.

I got neither medal nor memorial. I got thirty minutes with Leon Garber. He told me right away the news was not good. The fat staff officer from Kelham’s PR squad had done the damage. His call to Benning had bounced around, mostly upward, at a very bad time, and it had been followed by a written report, and as a result of both I was on the involuntary separation list. Garber said under the circumstances it would be the work of a moment to get me taken off again. No doubt about that. I could extract a price for my silence. He would broker the deal, gladly.

Then he went quiet.

I said, “What?”

He said, “But your life wouldn’t be worth living. You’d never get promoted again. You’d be terminal at major if you lived to be a hundred. You’d be deployed to a storage depot in New Jersey. You can get off the separation list, but you’ll never get off the shit list. That’s how the army works. You know that.”

“I covered the army’s ass.”

“And the army will be reminded of that every time it sees you.”

“I have a Purple Heart and a Silver Star.”

“But what have you done for me lately?”

Garber’s clerk gave me a sheet of paper explaining the procedure. I could do it in person at the Pentagon, or I could do it by mail. So I got back in the Buick and headed for D.C. I had to return the car to Neagley anyway. I got there a half hour before the banks closed, and I picked one at random and moved my account. They offered me my choice of a toaster oven or a CD player. I took neither one, but I asked for their phone number and I registered a password.

Then I headed over to the Pentagon. I chose the main concourse entrance, and I got halfway to the door, and then I stopped. The crowd carried on around me, oblivious. I didn’t want to go in. I borrowed a pen from an impatient passerby and I signed my form and I dropped it in a mailbox. Then I walked through the graveyard and out the main gate to the tangle of roads between it and the river.

I was thirty-six years old, a citizen of a country I had barely seen, and there were places to go, and there were things to do. There were cities, and there was countryside. There were mountains, and there were valleys. There were rivers. There were museums, and music, and motels, and clubs, and diners, and bars, and buses. There were battlefields and birthplaces, and legends, and roads. There was company if I wanted it, and there was solitude if I didn’t.

I picked a road at random, and I put one foot on the curb and one in the traffic lane, and I stuck out my thumb.